

# MOTHER AND SON

By Joan D. Vinge

Scanned & Proofed By MadMaxAU

\* \* \* \*

## Part 1: The Smith

All day I have lain below the cliff. I can't move, except to turn my head or twitch two fingers; I think my back is broken. I feel as if my body is already dead, but my head aches, and grief and shame are all the pain I can bear. Remembering Etaa . . .

Perhaps the elders are almost right when they say death is the return to the Mother's womb, and in dying we go back along our lives to be reborn. Between wakings I dream, not of my whole life, but sweet dreams of the time when I had Etaa, my beloved. As though it still happened I see our first summer together herding shenn, warm days in fragrant up-land meadows. We didn't love each other then; she was still a child, I was hardly more, and for our different reasons we kept ourselves separated from the world.

My reason was bitterness, for I was *neaa*, motherless. The winter before, I had lost my parents to a pack of kharks as they hunted. My mother's sister's family took me in, as was the custom, but I still ached with my own wounds of loss, and was always an outsider, as much from my own sullenness as from any fault of my kin. I questioned every belief, and could find no comfort. Sometimes, alone with just the grazing shenn, I sat and wept.

Until one day I looked up from my weeping to see a girl, with eyes the color of new-turned earth and short curly hair as dark as my own. She stood watching me somberly as I wiped at my eyes, ashamed and angry.

—What do you want? I signed, looking fierce and hoping she would run away.

—I felt you crying. Are you lonely?

—No. Go away. She didn't. I frowned. —Where did you come from, anyway? Why are you spying on me?

—I wasn't spying. I was across the stream, with my shenn. I am Etaa. She looked as if that explained everything.

And it did; I recognized her then. She belonged to another clan, but everyone

talked about her: Etaa, her name-sign, meant “blessed by the Mother,” and she had the keenest eyesight in the village. She could see a bird on a branch across a field, and thread the finest needle; but more than that, she had been born with the second sight, she felt the Mother’s presence in all natural things. She could know the feeling and touch the souls of every living creature, some-times even predict when rain would fall. Others in the village had the second sight, but not as clearly as she did, and most people thought she would be the next priestess when she came of age. But now she was still a child, minding the flocks, and I wished she would leave me alone. —Your shenn will stray, O blessed one.

Old hurt pinched her sun-browned face, and then she was running back toward the stream.

—Wait! I stood up, startled, but she didn’t see my sign. I threw a stone; it skimmed past her through the grass. She stopped and turned. I waved her back, guilty that my grief had made me hurt somebody else.

She came back, her face too full of mixed feeling to read.

—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you unhappy too. I’m Hywel. I sat down, gesturing.

Her smile was as sudden and bright as her disappointment, and passed as quickly. She dropped down beside me like a hound, smoothing her striped kilt. —I wasn’t showing off ... I don’t *mean* to. ... Her shoulders drooped; I had never thought before that blessedness could be a burden like any-thing else. —I just wanted to— Her fingers hesitated in mid-sign. —To know if you were all right. She looked up at me through her long lashes, with a kind of yearning.

I glanced away uncomfortably across the pasture. —Can you watch your shenn from here? They were only a gray-white shifting blot to me, even when my eyes were clear, and now my eyes were blurred again.

She nodded.

—You have perfect vision, don’t you? My hands jerked with pent-up frustration. —I wish I did!

She blinked. —Why? Do you want to be a warrior, like in the old tales? Some of our people want to take the heads of the Neaane beyond the hills for what they do to us. I think in the south some of them *have*. Her eyes widened.

The thought of the Neaane, the Motherless ones, made me flinch; we called them Neaane because they didn’t believe in the Mother Earth as we did, but in gods they claimed had come down from the sky. We are the Kotaane, the Mother’s children, and to be *neaa* was to be both pitiful and accursed, whether you were one

boy or a whole people. —I don't want to kill people. I want to be farsighted so I can be a hunter and kill kharks, like they killed my parents!

—Oh. She brushed my cheek with her fingers, to show her sorrow. —When did it happen?

—At the end of winter, while they were hunting.

She leaned back on her elbows and glanced up into the dull blue sky, where the Sun, the Mother's consort, was strug-gling to free his shining robes once more from the Cyclops. The Cyclops' rolling bloodshot Eye looked down on us ma-levolently, out of the wide greenness of her face. —If was the doing of the Cyclops, probably.

Etaa sighed. —Her strength is always greatest at the Dark Noons, big Uglyface; she always brings pain with the cold! But the Mother sees all—

—The Mother didn't see the kharks. She didn't save my parents; She could have. She gives us pain too, the Great Bitch!

Etaa's hands covered her eyes; then slowly they slid down again. —Hywel, that's blasphemy! Don't say that or She will punish you. If She let your parents die, they must have offended Her, She lifted her head with childish self-righteous-ness.

—My parents never did anything wrong! Never! My mind saw them as they always were, bickering constantly... They stayed together because they had managed to have one child, and though they'd lost two others, they were fertile together and might someday have had a fourth. But they didn't like each other anyway, and maybe their resentment was an offense. I hit Etaa hard on the arm and leaped up. —The Mother is a bitch and you are a brat! May you be sterile!

She gasped and made the warding sign. Then she stood up and kicked me in the shins with her rough sandals, her face flushed with anger, before she ran off again across the pasture.

After she was gone I stood throwing rocks furiously at the shenn, watching them run in stupid terror around and around the field.

And because of it, when I had worn out my rage, I discovered one of my shenn had disappeared. Searching and cursing, I finally found the stubborn old ewe up on the scarp at the field's end. She was scrabbling clumsily over the ragged black boulders, cutting her tender feet and leaving tufts of her silky wool on every rock and thorn bush. I caught her with my crook at last and dragged her back down by her flopping ears, while she butted at me and stepped on my bare feet with her claws out. I cursed her mentally now, not having a hand to spare, and cursed my own idiocy, but mostly I cursed the Mother Herself, because all my troubles seemed to

come from Her.

Scratched and aching all over, I got the ewe down the crumbling hill to the field at last, whacked her with my crook, and watched her trot indignantly away to rejoin the flock. I started toward the stream to wash my smarting body, but Etaa was ahead of me, going down to drink. Afraid that she would see me for the fool I was, I threw myself down in the shade of the hillside instead and pretended to be resting. I couldn't tell if she was even looking at me, though I squinted and stretched my eyes with my fingers.

But then suddenly she was on her feet running toward me, waving her arms. I got up on my knees, wondering what crazy thing—

And then a piece of the hill gave way above me and buried me in blackness.

I woke spitting, with black dirt in my eyes, my nose, my mouth, to see Etaa at my side still clawing frantically at the earth and rubble that had buried my legs. All through her life, though she wasn't large even among women, she had strength to match that of many men. And all through my life I remembered the wild, burning look on her face, as she turned to see me alive. But she didn't make a sign, only kept at her digging until I was free.

She helped me stand, and as I looked up at the slumped hillside the full realization of what had been done came to me. I dropped to my knees again and rubbed fistfuls of the tumbled earth into my hair, praising Her Body and begging Her forgiveness. Never again did I question the Mother's wisdom or doubt Her strength. I saw Etaa kneel beside me and do the same.

As we shared supper by my tent, I asked Etaa how she'd known when she tried to warn me. —Did you see it happening?

She shook her head. —I *felt* it, first ... but the Mother didn't give me enough time to warn you.

—Because She was punishing me. She should have killed me for the things I thought today!

—But it was me who made her angry. It was my fault. I shouldn't have said that about your parents. It was awful, it was—cruel.

I looked at her mournful face, shadowed by the greening twilight. —But it was true. I sighed. —And it wasn't just today that *I* have cursed the Mother. But I'll never do it again. She must have been right, to let my parents die. They hated staying together; they didn't appreciate the blessing of their fertility, when others pray for children but can't make any.

—Hywel...maybe they're happier now, did you ever think? She looked down self-consciously. —To return to the Mother's Womb is to find peace, my mother says. Maybe She knew they were unhappy in life, so She let them come back, to be born again.

—Do you really think so? I leaned forward, not knowing why this strange girl's words should touch me so.

She wrinkled her face with thought. —I really think so.

And I felt the passing of the second shadow that had darkened my mind for so long, as though for me it was finally Midsummer's Day and I stood in the light again.

Etaa insisted on staying with me that night; her mother was a healer, and she informed me that I might have "hidden injuries," so gravely that I laughed. I lay awake a long time, aching but at peace, looking up past the leather roof into the green-lit night. I could see pallid Laa Merth, the Earth's Grieving Sister, fleeing wraithlike into the outer darkness in her endless effort to escape her mother, the Cyclops, who always drew her back. The Cyclops had turned her lurid Eye away from us, and the shining bands of her robe made me think for once of good things, like the banded melons ripen-ing in the village fields below.

I looked back at Etaa, her short dark curls falling across her cheek and her bare chest showing only the softest hint of curves under her fortune-seed necklace. I found myself wish-ing that she would somehow magically become a woman, because I was just old enough to be interested; and then suddenly I wished that then she would have me for her man, something I'd never thought about anyone else before. But if she were a woman, she would become our priestess and have her pick of men and not want one without the second sight...I remembered the look she'd given me as she dug me out of the landslide, and felt my face redden, thinking that maybe I might have a chance, after all.

\* \* \* \*

Through the summer and the seasons that followed I spent much time with Etaa and slowly got used to her strange skills. I had never known what it was like to feel the Mother's touch, or even another human's, on my own soul; and since I had few close friends, I didn't know the ways of those who had the second sight. To be with Etaa was to be with some-one who saw into other worlds. Often she started at nothing, or told me what we'd find around the next turn of the path; she even knew my feelings sometimes, when she couldn't see my face. She felt what the Earth feels, the touch of every creature on Her skin.

Etaa's second sight made her like a creature of the forest (for all animals know the will of the Mother), and, solitary like me, she spent much time with only the wild

things for company. Often she tried to take me to see them, but they always bolted at my coming. Etaa would wince and tell me to move more slowly, step more softly, breaking branches offends the Earth...but I could never really tell what I was doing wrong.

The next year on Midsummer's Eve I was initiated into manhood. During the feast that followed, while I sat dripping and content after my ducking in the sacred spring, Etaa sat proudly at my side. But when midnight came I left the celebration to walk in the fields with Hegga, because for that one could only ask a woman, and Etaa was still a child. Which she proved, by sticking her tongue out at Hegga as we passed. But it made me smile, since it meant she was closer to being a woman, too.

Now that I was a man, Teleth, who was the village smith, asked me to be his apprentice. Smithing is a gift of the Sun to the Fire clan, and a man of that clan is always the smith, whatever clan he marries into. Teleth, my mother's cousin, had a son who would have followed him, but his son was farsighted, and not much good at the close work smithing required. I was Teleth's closest nearsighted kin; but he signed that I was good with my hands and quick with my mind too, which pleased him more. And pleased me too, more than I could tell him; because besides the honor, it meant that I'd have a better chance of impressing Etaa.

Though she was still a child, whenever I saw her passing in the village, or watched her sign to the people who came to see her, the grace of her manner and her words left me amazed; especially since for me words never came easy, and my hands showed my feelings better by what they made from metal and wood. But often I saw her, from the smithy, going off alone on the path to the Mother's Glen, and I remembered the burden she always carried with her, and how she had lightened mine. And then I'd go back to work, and work twice as hard, hoping Teleth would take pity on me and let me go early.

But usually Teleth kept me working every spare minute; he was young, but he had a lung sickness that made him cough up blood, and he was afraid he wouldn't live long. When I could be with Etaa at last, my hands tangled with excitement while I tried to set free the things I could never share with anyone else. With me Etaa was free to be the child she couldn't be with anyone else; and though sometimes it annoyed me, and I thought she would never grow up, I endured it, because I saw it was something she needed; and because she would pull my head down and kiss me sometimes as lightly as the touch of a rainbow fly, before she ran away.

We were always together at the Four Feasts and for other rituals, because until she became a woman she wouldn't be our priestess. We saw each other in the fields at planting and harvest too, when everyone worked together, and sometimes in the summer she'd come foraging and berry picking with me. Having eyes that saw both near and far, she could choose whatever task she liked; and, she said, she liked to be with me.

Usually our berry picking went crazy with freedom, and more berries got eaten and stepped on than ever went into our baskets. But one windless, muggy day in the second summer after my initiation, we went in search of red burrberries and Mother's moss for healing. All through the morning Etaa was strangely reserved and solemn, as though she were practicing her formal face in front of me now too. I tried to draw her out, and when I couldn't, I began to feel desperate at the thought that I'd offended her by something I didn't know I'd done—or worse, that she was finally losing interest in me.

—Mother's Tits! I jerked back from a thorn, cursing and fumbling all at once, and lost another handful of berries.

Etaa looked back from the stream bank, where she was peeling up moss, sensing sharp emotions as she always did. —Hywel, are you all right?

I nodded, barely able to make out her signs from where I stood. —Just save some of that moss for me. I'm being stabbed to death.

She came scrambling up the bank. —Let me pick, then, and you get the moss. It will soothe your hands while you work.

—I'm all right. I felt my old sullenness rise up in me.

—I don't mind. My scratches are better already...Look! There's a rubit. It's the Mother's bird; She wants you to change places with me.

—How do you know what it means? You're not the priest-ess yet. I squinted along her pointing finger. —And that's not a rubit, it's a follower bird.

—Yes, it is a rubit, I can feel its—

—It is not! I crossed my arms.

—Hywel— She stared at me. —What's wrong with, you today?

—What's wrong with *you!* All day you've acted like you barely know me! I turned away, to hide the things my face couldn't.

At last she touched my shoulder; I turned back, to see her blushing as red as the burrberries and her hands twitching at her waist. —I didn't mean to ... but I couldn't tell you ... I thought...Oh, Hywel, will you walk in the fields with me on Midsummer's Eve? Her face burned even redder, her eyes as bright as the Sun.

Laughter burst out of me, full of relief and joy. I caught her up in my arms and swung her, my body saying *yes* and *yes* and *yes*, while she hung on and I felt her laugh her own relief away. I set her down, and straightened the links of my belt to

cover my speechlessness. Then I looked her over, grinning, and signed, —So, brat, you’ve finally grown up?

She stretched her face indignantly. —I certainly have. So please don’t call me “brat” anymore. As a matter of fact, my mother hasn’t cut my hair for nearly six months, and you never even noticed!

I touched the dark curls that reached almost down to her shoulders now. —Oh. I guess I didn’t. I’ll have to make you a headband, to go with your necklace.

Her hand rose to the string of jet and silver beads I had made for her. —My necklace doesn’t hang straight anymore, either.

—I noticed that. I grinned again, moving closer.

She caught my head and pulled it down to kiss me, as she always did; but this time she didn’t pull away, and her kiss was more like fire than a rainbow fly’s wing.

I jerked away instead. —Hai, I never taught you that! Who have you been with?

—Nobody. Hegga told me you liked that! She danced away, and hands waving wildly, slipped and fell down the bank into the bed of moss.

I leaped down the bank after her, landing beside her in the soft, gray-green moss. —Gossip about me, will you? I signed. And then I taught her a few things Hegga hadn’t told her about.

It seemed to me that Midsummer’s Eve would never come. But it came at last, and I found myself laying my cape out on the soft earth between the rows of wheat. I drew Etaa down beside me, her woman’s tunic still clinging wetly against her. And then we made love together for the first time, asking fertility for the fields and for ourselves, while I wondered if I was dreaming, because I’d dreamed it often enough.

After, we lay together in the gentle warm night, seeing each other’s smiles bathed in green glow, watching the Cy-clops like a great striped melon overhead. I gave her the earrings I’d made for her, silver bells shaped like winket blossoms, the symbol of a priestess of the Mother. She took them almost with awe, stroking them with her fingers, and signed that they had a beautiful soul. And I thought of how she would become our priestess tomorrow on Midsummer’s Day, and pulled her close again, wondering what would happen between us then. Etaa wiggled her hands free, and asked if she was really a woman now, in my eyes. I kissed her forehead and signed, —In every way, feeling her heart beating hard against me. And then, proudly, as if she had read my mind, she asked me to be her husband. . . .

We didn’t return to the village until dawn; and the harvest that year was



bountiful.

\* \* \* \*

But cold drizzling rain falls now, the sky is gray with grief, I lie below the cliff and even yesterday is beyond the reach of my crippled hands. Only yesterday . . . yesterday Midsum-mer's Day came again, the Day of Fruitfulness, the greatest of the Mother's sacred feasts—and the day that should have been our joy, Etaa's and mine. Yesterday our Mother Earth escaped the shadow of the envious Cyclops, and was united again with her shining lover the Sun, once more defying darkness and barren night. And yesterday the priestess of our village took the Mother's part in ritual, and a man of the appointed clan was her consort, to ensure a safe passage through the seasons of Dark Noons and a better future for our people. Because the priestess of a village is the woman most blessed by the Mother, each Midsummer's Day by tradition she joins with a man of a different clan, in celebration, and in the hope of creating a child blessed as she is, who will strengthen the blood of its father's clan.

This year, as in the past seven years, Etaa was our priest-ess; but this year my own clan had chosen her consort, and they had chosen me. Etaa's face mirrored my own joy when I told her; because though I was smith now, and though I was her husband, that highest honor usually went to the clansman most gifted with the second sight.

And then on Midsummer's Day Etaa shook me awake at dawn, her eyes filled with love. She wore only her shift, and already her Midsummer garlands twined in the wild dark curls of her hair. She smelled of summer flowers. —Hywel, it's Midsummer!

I felt myself laugh, half a yawn. —I know, I know, priest-ess! I could hardly forget—

—Hywel, I have a surprise. She glanced down suddenly, and her hands trembled as she signed. I saw her silver ear-rings flash in the light. —I missed my monthly time, and I think—I think—

—Etaa! I touched her stomach, still flat and firm beneath the thin linen of her shift.

—Yes! Her smile broke into laughter as I pulled her down beside me into the hammock. Eight years of marriage and seven Midsummer's Days had passed, and we had begun to think Etaa was barren, like so many others; until now—

I held her tightly in the soft clasp of our hammock, swaying gently side by side. —We're truly blessed, Etaa. Maybe the Mother was waiting for this day. I began to kiss her, pulling at her shift, but all at once she pushed me away.

—No, Hywel, today we have to wait!

I grinned. —You take me for an old man, me, the father of your child? I won't slight the Mother today—but neither will I slight my wife!

Yesterday was all it could have been, the Sun's glory dazzling the sky, the bright fields of grain . . . Etaa's radiant face in the Mother's Glen, on the day when she became Wife and Mother to us all, and I was her chosen.

But then, this morning, she asked me to let her ride with us when I went to trade with the Neaane. We have traded with the Neaane since we first settled on their border, longer ago than anybody can remember. They are a strange, inward people who have lost all understanding of the Mother. Their lives are grim and joyless because of it; they even persecute their people who are blessed with the second sight, calling them witches. They believe in gods who live in the sky, who abandoned them, and, they say, caused the plague that took the Blessed Time from all people.

We never liked their beliefs, but we liked their possessions: soft-footed palfers to carry burdens or pull a plow, new kinds of seed for our fields—even a way to keep the fields fertile over many years, which gave us a more settled life. They wanted our metalwork and jewelry, and the hides of wild animals, because they like to show wealth even more than we do, especially the ones who have most of it. Settled farming has given them time to develop many strange customs, including setting some people above all others, often for no good reason as far as we could see, not wisdom or courage or even good vision.

Still, our trade was good for both of us, and so we lived together in peace until, in the time the elders still remember, the Neaane's gods returned to them—or so they believed. With the gods' return the Neaane turned against us, saying it proved their beliefs were the only truth, and we, the Kotaane, were an abomination to their gods. Ugly rumors had come to the village of incidents farther south, and even here ill-feeling hurt our dealings with the local lord and his people at Barys-town. I didn't want to see it grow into war, because I had never wanted to kill anyone, and because a war with the powerful Neaane could only bring us death and pain. I also didn't want to expose my priestess-wife with her unborn child to the hostility and insults I'd gotten used to in Barys-town.

But she insisted, saying she wanted adventure. She was as irresistible as the summer day, and as beautiful, and I gave in, because I wanted to share it with her.

When we reached Barys-town, we found it choked with the soldiers of the king, the most powerful lord in their land. He was making a rare visit to his borderlands, probably to make certain they were secure against us. I saw the king himself, not thirty feet away but hardly more than a blur to my eyes; he sat on his sharp-footed horse, watching with his nobles as we began to barter. But then his

soldiers crowded around us, waving at Etaa and mocking her, calling her “witch” and “whore.” One tried to pull her from her palfer, but she hit him with an iron pot. The king made no sign to stop them, and angrily I ordered my goods taken up, not caring who my nervous palfer stepped on in the crowd. I had taken too many insults from the people of Barys-town in the past, and while they gathered sullenly around I told them this insult to my wife was the last one, and they would get no more metal from me. We turned and rode away, passing the fat local priest of the sky-gods, who had come for the jeweled god-sign he had commissioned from me. Seeing him, I threw it onto a dung-hill. I didn’t look back to see whether he ran to fetch it out. Etaa was very pale, riding beside me; she signed that it was an evil place behind us, and begged me to keep my promise and never go back, because she’d seen hatred in too many eyes.

Then horror froze her face, though I didn’t see anything; she turned in her saddle, looking wildly back at the town. —Hywel!

My palfer lunged sideways as an arrow struck its flank. I jerked its head back, saw the mounted men coming fast behind us, the sunlight sparkling on chain mail. Etaa pulled at my arm and we kicked our palfers into a gallop, getting drenched with spray as we plunged through the stream that crossed the trail.

We rode for the hills that separated our village from the Neaane, hoping to lose the soldiers in the rough brush where our palfers were surer-footed. But the Neaane seemed to know our every move; again and again we lost sight of them, but they never lost us, and always they cut us off from escape. We knew nothing about the broken uplands. Soon we were lost and scattered until only Etaa and I still rode together; but the soldiers followed like hounds on a trail.

Until at last the rigid black-striped hands of a stream-cut gorge brought us to the end of our run—the edge of a cliff where the snow water dashed itself down, down to oblivion, and there was nowhere left to go. My palfer sank to its knees as I slid from its back and went to look down. The drop was sheer, a hundred feet or more onto the wet-silvered rocks below. I turned back, stunned with despair. —They still follow?

—Yes! Etaa threw herself off her palfer, her dappled gown mud-smeared, the summer blossoms torn from her hair. She clung to me, breathing hard, and then turned back to face the brush-filled gorge. —Mother, they’re coming, they still come! How can they follow us, when they can’t *see*? She trembled like a trapped beast. —Why, Hywel? Why are they doing this?

I touched her cheek, bloody with scratches, with my own scratched hand. —I don’t know! But ... My hands tried to close over the words. —But you know what they’ll do, if they take us.

Her eyes closed. —I know...Her arms closed in fear around her body.

—And burn us alive then, so that our souls can never rest. I glanced toward the cliff, trembling now too. —Etaa— Her eyes were open again and following my gaze.

—Must we— Her hands pressed her stomach, caressed our child.

I saw the riders now, a shifting blur down the shadowed canyon. —We have to; we can't let them take us.

We went together to the cliff's edge and stood looking down, clinging together, dizzy with the drop and fear. Etaa threw out a quick handful of dirt and prayed to the Mother, as it drifted down, that She would know and receive us. And then she looked up at me, shaking so that I could barely understand her. —Oh, Hywel, I'm so afraid of heights...Her mouth quivered; she might have laughed. She drew my head down then and we kissed, long and sweetly. —I love you only, now and always.

—Now and always— I signed. I saw in her eyes that there was no more time. —Now! I fumbled for her hand, seeing soldiers at the mouth of the gorge, her stricken face, and then—nothing. I leaped.

And felt her hand jerk free from mine at the last instant. I saw her face fall upward, framed in dark hair, through cold rushing eternity; and then my body smashed on the rocks below, and tore the bitter anguish from my mind.

\* \* \* \*

Why I ever woke again at all I don't know; or why I still live now, when I would gladly die and be done with my pain. But I woke into nightmare, trapped in this broken body with my shame: knowing I had jumped and Etaa had not. I had let her be taken by the Neaane. I tortured my eyes for some sign, some movement above the face of the black-striped cliff; but there was nothing, only the glaring edge of day, the red Eye of the Cyclops. Etaa was gone. The falling river leaped and foamed beside me, mocking my grief and my aching mouth with cold silver drops. I strained my head until my metal collar cut into my throat, but nothing moved. And so I lay still finally, and prayed, half in dreams and half in madness, and couldn't even form her name: Etaa, Etaa...forgive me.

Overhead the clouds gathered purple-gray, darkening the noon; the Mother in Her grief drew Her garments close and rejected Her Lover. The crops will fail. She had cursed Her children for this abomination; for the unbearable sacrilege of the Neaane, for the pitiful weakness of Hywel, Her Lover and son. She tears the clouds with knives of light, crying vengeance, and Her tears fall cold and blinding on my face. I drown in Her tears, I drown in sorrow...Mother! If I could move one more finger, to make Your sign...Giver of Life, let me live! Give me back my body, and I

will give You the heads of the Neaane. I will avenge this desecration, avenge Your priestess ... my Etaa...Mother, hear me—

Who touches my face? Work, eyes, damn you...Smil-ing, because I'm still alive...they wear black and red. They are the king's men! And they will take my soul. Mother, let me die first. No. Let me join my Etaa, on the wind. And have pity on us.

...

\* \* \* \*

## Part 2: The King

It's hardly an army fit for a king...But Archbishop Shappistre tells my people openly these days that King Meron is bewitched—and they believe him. They believe anything the Church tells them. My poor people! Though with my only child lost, and the Kedonny eating away Tramaine while the Gods do nothing, who can blame them? But if I angered the Gods by wanting the Kedonny Witch, if I brought myself ruin, it wasn't because my mind was not my own. It was because it was too much my own, and I knew exactly what I was doing.

And yet, when I look back and remember how I came to this, perhaps there was a kind of bewitchment about it. For it was on the day I first saw her that the plan came into my mind, as I watched her ride into the border village with the Kedonny traders: my Black Witch, my Etaa...The Earl of Barys' priest pointed her out to me, signing she was a pagan priestess, his fat hands trembling at how these godless Kedonny worshipped wantonness and *hearing*; at which point he spat religiously. I fumbled for my lenses to get a better look, and was surprised to see, not some debauched crone, but a fresh-faced girl with masses of dark hair falling loose across her shoulders.

The Kedonny believe that hearing is a godly blessing, and not a curse, as our Church considers it to be; and for my own part, all my life I've questioned the practices that teach us to suppress it. Why should any gods who had our best interests in mind ask us to weaken ourselves? Why, when my own father had passing good vision, had he felt guilty about it, and chosen for my mother a woman who could barely see his face—so that without the lenses so kindly presented me by the Gods, I must stumble into doorframes in a most unkingly manner? Now, watching the Kedonny priestess, revered as the most gifted of her people, my old discontent was trans-formed. Suddenly I realized that my own heirs didn't need to suffer the same weakness and dependency. I would get them a mother who could give them the strengths I could not. . . .

I snapped out of my thoughts to see the Kedonny traders riding abruptly away, their faces set in anger, while my men-at-arms gestured curses and the villagers shuffled sul-lenly between them. Almost without thinking, I summoned my carriage and gave orders to my men for pursuit.

As my carriage rose into the air over the heads of the gaping locals, I looked down on the earl's priest digging inexplicably in a dunghill. If I were a religious man, I might have taken it for a sign.

My carriage was made by the Gods, a smooth sphere with a texture like ivory that not only moved over land without using palfers but could take to the sky like a bird. From the air I could track the fleeing Kedonny easily, and guide my men in separating the woman from the rest—all except one man, who stayed stubbornly at

her side even when we drove them into a trap. But in the end he was no problem, because he flung himself from the cliff, apparently afraid of being burned alive. I saw his body smashed on the rocks below, and turned away with a shudder, thinking how close I had come to losing what I sought—for my men said that the woman had pulled back from the edge at the last second, and they had barely gotten to her in time. Some of them had thrown her down on the ground, with obvious intent, and I disciplined those with the flat of my sword, in a fury edged with shame. Then I took her up myself, her face the color of hearth ash, and carried her to my carriage.

Being king, I had no need to explain my behavior to anyone at Barys Castle, though there was a flutter of knowing amusement among the nobles as I said an early good-night. I went directly to my chambers, where the Kedonny priestess waited, and left orders with my watch that they were not to disturb me.

The woman sat huddled at the window slit, staring out into the sodden twilight; but as I entered she jerked around, fixing her wide, burning eyes on me. I smiled, because it proved she could hear, and because I saw again that she was a beauty. But seeing me, she pressed back against the cold stone slit as though she wanted to throw herself out.

“Your lover is dead—”

She hesitated, her face blank, and I realized she couldn't read lips. I repeated with my hands, —Your lover is dead. You tried to follow him, and failed. I wouldn't try it again.

She understood the common sign-speech at least, for she sank back down on the seat with her face in her hands. I brought my own hands together sharply, and she glanced up again, startled. I noticed a meal, untouched, on my carven chest beside her. —Will you eat?

She shook her head, her face still frozen.

—Stand up.

She rose stiffly, her hands clutching at her torn gown, her slender arms bare except for bracelets and burned as dark as any peasant's. Her unbound hair gleamed black in the flicker-ing firelight, tangled with wilting flowers and twigs. On her face the dust of flight was smeared and tracked by tears, but I was relieved to see she wasn't the dirt-encrusted barbarian I had half expected; she looked cleaner than some members of my own court. Her ragged dress was coarsely woven and dull-colored, but somehow it brought to my mind the pattern of green leaves and the muted light of deep woods... This was my wanton priestess, the fertile Earth incarnate, who would strengthen the royal line. And even now her witchy beauty went to my head like wine.

It must have shown, for she shrank back again. I pulled off my cloak, amused. —What, priestess, am I so hard to look at? They say a Kedonny priestess will lie with any man who wants her. I touched my crown. —Well, I'm king in this land; surely that makes me as good as any Kedonny shennherd. I caught her arms, and suddenly she came to life, fighting with a strength that stunned me. She struck at my face, knocking off my lenses, and I felt more than saw them shatter on the floor. Angry, I dragged her to the bed and threw her down, pulling off the rags of her dress.

And then I forced her, ruthlessly, in the way I thought befitted a whore of the uncivilized Kedonny. On the bed she did not struggle, but lay limp as a corpse under me, biting her lips while fresh tears of humiliation ran down her face, staining the satin pillows. Her eyes were as brown as peat, the only part of her that showed life, and they tore at me in grief and outrage and supplication. But I looked away, too angry and too eager to admit I had no right to make her mine.

And whatever else may come to pass, that is the one thing I will never forgive myself. Because I did not use a pagan slut that night: I raped a gentle woman, on the day she saw her husband die. Because later I came to love her; but I could never undo the wrong, or hope to change the bitterness I had caused in her heart.

She slept far into the next day, the sleep of exhaustion; but she sat waiting, clad in her rags, when I came back to my chamber after making ready for our departure. She looked as if she hadn't slept at all, or as if she had wakened to find herself still caught up in a nightmare. But she lifted her hands and made the first words I had seen from her, strangely accented: —Will you let me go now?

It took me a moment to realize that she thought I had done all this merely for a night's pleasure. —No. I'm taking you with me to Newham.

—What do you want of me? Her hands trembled slightly.

I pushed my new lenses higher on my nose. —I want your child.

Her hands pressed her stomach in an odd gesture of fear, then leaped into a series of words that meant nothing to me; I guessed she was pleading with me in her own language.

I shook my head and signed patiently, —I want you to bear me sons. I want your—your “blessings” for them. They will be princes, heirs to the throne of Tramaine. They'll have luxuries you can't imagine—and so will you, if you obey me.

She twisted away hopelessly to gaze out the window slit. I could see the line of hills that separated us from the Kedonny, gray land merging into gray sky in the silver rain. Her hands pressed her stomach again.



I clapped and she looked back at me. —What is your sign, priestess?

—Etaa.

—The serving women will bring you new clothes, Etaa. My fingers tangled on the unfamiliar word. —We leave within the hour.

\* \* \* \*

We returned to the palace at Newham, since continuing in the marches would only have made an incident likely; our return took several days, because my carriage had to go more slowly than usual for the sake of my retinue. But we outdistanced the rain at last, and though the roads were mired, the fresh rolling green of the land, the fertile fields and dappled groves of horwoods filled me with pride. Looming Cyclops, which the peasants called the Godseye, merged its banded greens with the green of the earth, and to one side I could see the gibbous outer moon paled by its magnificence. The outer moon was swirled with white that the court astronomer said was clouds, like the ones on Earth. When I was young I had thought of taking the Gods' carriage and flying out to see it, having been told that men once lived there too. But the Gods said the air grew thin as you went higher, and told me I would suffocate if I tried. I tried anyway, and found they were right.

The Kedonny woman accepted the matter of flight without the terror I had expected, only asking, —How does it do this?

—The Gods give it power. It was a gift to my grandfather on their return to Earth.

—There are no gods; there is only the Goddess. A small defiance flickered on her face.

I glanced briefly at the forward compartment, where my coachman tended our flight. —I agree: there are no Gods. But never say it again, priestess, since you know well enough what happens to heretics. You're under my protection, but my archbishop will not welcome a pagan at court.

She settled back into the velvet cushions, and into her quiet resignation, confined and incongruous in the stiff, brocaded gown and the modesty of her headdress. Small silver bells shaped like winket blossoms dangled from wires piercing her ears; she toyed with them constantly. Sometimes as she did she would almost smile, her eyes fixed on nothing.

As I watched her, the image came to me of a pitiful wild child I had seen as a boy, kept in a cage at a fair. The kharks had stolen human children and raised them as their own, until the Gods came and destroyed the kharks. The wild humans could never adjust to normal life again, and I had wondered if there was something about

being wild that was better than being a prince, and it saddened me to think that all the kharks were gone. I looked away from Etaa, falling into another memory of my childhood and the Gods: of the time I had inadvertently spied on them during hide-and-hunt with the pages—and seen the grotesque, inhuman thing they treated as a brother. And somehow I knew that this *thing* was the Gods' true form, and that the too-perfect faces they showed to us were only enchantments. I slipped away and ran to tell my father, but he was furious at my blasphemy, and beat me for it, forbidding me ever to speak against our Gods again. I never did, for I realized quickly enough that whatever they weren't, they had powers even a king dared not question. I often wondered if my father had realized that too. But privately I never gave up my heresies, and because of that I found less and less that was deserving of reverence in the teachings of the Church. Which is why my cousin, Arch-bishop Shappistre, and I have never been much in accord. Why, indeed, he would gladly see me dead and damned.

The archbishop was quick to inform me of his displeasure in the latest instance, after my arrival at the palace at Newham. My good wife, the queen, did not come out to meet us, sending word that she was indisposed. I wondered if she had heard that I was bringing back a mistress; but since through fifteen years of marriage she had rarely been disposed to come and greet me, it hardly mattered. I espied her brother the archbishop among the nobles, however, marking my progress across the banner-bright courtyard from the carriage, with Etaa at my side. He alone was not amused; but then, like his sister, he rarely was. I anticipated a visit from him before the day was out.

I was not disappointed, for early in the evening my watch-man entered the room, standing patiently with his face to the door until I should happen to notice and acknowledge him. Etaa started at his entrance, and I caught her motion in the mirror I had fixed at the side of my lenses; it occurred to me that her very presence could be a useful thing. I went to touch the watchman's shoulder, giving him audience, and was informed that the archbishop desired to speak with me. I sent for him, and returned to the table where I was laboriously reviewing the reports sent to me by my advisers. Etaa watched from the long bench where she befriended the fire, avoiding me. Even though she did, after so many years alone I found that the constant presence of a woman was oddly comforting.

The archbishop did not appear to share my feelings, however. His gaunt, ascetic face had always seemed at odds with the flaming richness of his robes; but the look of pious indignation that he affected on seeing Etaa touched on the absurd. "Your majesty." The modish sleeves of his outer robe swept the flags as he bowed low. "I had hoped I might speak with you—alone."

I smiled. "Etaa does not read lips, my lord. You may speak freely in her presence." I gained a certain pleasure at his discomfort, having been made uncomfortable by him often enough in my youth . . . and more recently.

“It is about—this woman—that I’ve come to your majesty. I strongly protest her presence at court; it’s hardly fitting for our king to take a pagan priestess for a leman. Indeed, it smacks of blasphemy.” I fancied seeing hungry flames leap behind his eyes; or perhaps it was only firelight reflecting on his lenses. “The Gods have expressed their displeasure to me. And the queen, your lawful wife, is extremely upset.”

“I daresay the queen, your sister, has little reason to be upset with me. I have allowed her all the lovers she wants, and the Gods know she has enough of them.”

The archbishop stiffened. “Are you saying she is not within her right?”

“Not at all.” Divorce was forbidden by the Church, which places duty far above pleasure. As a result, it was common that childless couples would seek an heir from formalized liaisons; though most of the queen’s were far from being that. “But we were married, as you know, when I was six-teen, and in all the years since she has not produced a child. If I couldn’t give her one, I would gladly acknowledge some-one else’s. But she is ten years my senior—frankly, my lord, I’ve begun to give up hope.” I didn’t add that I’d even given up trying—our marriage had been arranged to bind factions, and it had never been a love match. “This woman pleases me, and I must have an heir. Her beliefs will not affect her childbearing.”

“But she is not of noble breeding—”

“She is not a Shappistre by blood, you mean? You would do well to contemplate the scriptures and the law, my lord. The relationship between church and state is a two-edged blade; take care that you don’t cut yourself on it.”

He bowed low again, his bald head reddening to match his jeweled cap. “Your majesty ...” Abruptly he glanced at Etaa and clapped his hands. Etaa, who had returned to her fire watching, started visibly and turned. A smile of triumph crossed his face. —She hears. I must request that your majesty have her ears put out as soon as possible ... in accordance with the scriptures, and the law. His hands moved carefully in the common signing.

My fists clenched over an angry retort. Then, evenly and also by hand, I replied, —She is a foreigner. While under my protection she is subject to neither the religion nor the laws of Tramaine. And now, good night, Archbishop; I am very weary after my long journey. I crossed my arms.

My archbishop turned without another word and left the room.

I joined Etaa by the fire, noting how she drew away as I sat down, and asked if she had understood us.

Her eyes met mine briefly, and wounded me with their misery, before she

signed, —He would hurt me. He fears the blessings of the Mother.

I nodded, reminding her that here her “blessings” were sins, but assuring her that she would not be hurt while she was under my protection. —Tell me, Etaa, what did you think of the archbishop? He’s the high priest of my people.

—He does not like you.

It surprised a laugh out of me.

—And he is a poor man to be priest, who cannot feel another creature’s soul. To deny the second sight is to deny one’s—gods.

—But the Gods say they wish it that way.

—Then they are false gods, who do not love you.

Then they are false Gods. ... I watched the flames eat darkness for a long moment. —But they’re here, Etaa, and powerful; and so is their Church. The archbishop would gladly see you burn as a witch, and so would almost anyone. But I believe as you do, that hearing is a blessing—and I want to share it. You will give my children the “second sight.” And you can give it to me.

—From now on, if you hear anyone come into my presence you will tell me immediately, wherever we are. It’s not an easy thing to be king in these times, or any times. I need your help . . . and you need mine. If anything should happen to me, there’s no one who would protect you. You’d be burned alive, and suffer terrible agony, and your soul would be lost to your Goddess forever. Do you understand me? I knew that she had understood everything, from the changes that crossed her face. Slowly she nodded, her hands pressing the stiff, gold-embroidered russet that covered her stomach.

Unthinking, and somehow ashamed, I reached out in a gesture of comfort, only to have her wither under my touch like a blossom in the frost. Gently I went on touching her, but to no avail, and when at last I took her to the bedchamber, she lay as limp and deathly unresponsive as ever. As she turned her face from a final kiss I caught her shoulders and shook her, saying, “Damn you, you heathen bitch!” I let her fall back against the pillows, remembering that she didn’t understand me, and raised my hands into the lamplight. She lifted her own defensively, as though she thought I was going to strike her, and I brushed them aside. —Watch me! Do you think a man enjoys taking a corpse to bed? I know what you are with your own people; why should you turn away from me? I’ll have an heir from you whatever you do; you’re mine now, so why not enjoy it—

Her fist flew out and struck me across the jaw. I jerked back in painful disbelief, while her hands leaped in hysterical fury.

—I serve my Goddess in holiness, I am not a Neaane whore! You have stolen a priestess, you have defiled Her, murderer, and She will never give you heirs. Neaa, you murdered my husband, whom I loved. Soul-stealer, I would burn a thousand times and weep forever in the wind before I would give you pleasure! Never will I ... never...Hywel...She crumpled into sobbing and meaningless gestures, and buried her face in the cover.

Slowly I rose from the bed, and groping for my lenses, forgave the only woman who had ever struck a king of Tramaine.

\* \* \* \*

I still took her to my bed as often as I could, although her wretchedness had driven all the pleasure from it; for, priestess of fertility though she might be, and king though I might be, children are a rare gift of fortune since the plague. And the Gods have done nothing to change that. I was away from her much of the time after our arrival in Newham, though, being engrossed as usual in affairs of state. And so I could scarcely believe my eyes when fat old Mabis, whom I had sent to serve Etaa, informed me gleefully of seeing signs that I was going to be a father. She was my nurse as a child (and so accepted most of my quirks, including a godless mistress), and assured me that if anyone could tell, it was Mabis. Giddy with pride, I forgot the quarreling of my nobles and the complaints of the burghers; I left even my watchman behind and ran like a boy to find Etaa.

She sat as she so often did, gazing out the high windows, her hair hanging at her back in a heavy plait, for Mabis couldn't get her to wear a covering. She looked up in amazement as I entered; composing myself with an effort, I managed to keep from destroying the moment by lifting her up in my arms. She seemed to know why I had come, and I thought, relieved, that maybe traces of pride hid behind her dark eyes as I bent my knee before her. I gave her my heartfelt thanks and asked what gift I could give her, in return for the one she had given me.

She glanced out the open window for a moment, her face lit with rainbows from the colored glass; when she looked back, her hands were stiff with emotion. —Let me go outside.

—That's all you want?

She nodded.

—Then you shall have it. Carefully I took her hand, and ordering my watch to keep well behind, led her outside into the palace gardens. Etaa somehow belonged in the beauty of roses and pale marisettes, her own wild grace set free from the gray stone confines of the palace walls. I took her to the limit of the green slopes overlooking the placid Aton and the edge of Newhamtown on the river's farther

shore. I tried to describe for her the city that was the heart of Tramaine, the bright, swarming mass of humanity, the marketplaces, the pageantry of New Year's and the celebrations of Armageddon Day. She gazed and questioned with a hesitant wonder that pleased me, but I thought she seemed glad when the peaceful bowers closed her in again.

We made our way along drowsy, dappled paths heavy with the heat of a late summer's afternoon, and I found it hard to believe the sun was already half hidden as it sank behind Cyclops. And as we walked I saw the drawn, anguished look fade from Etaa's face for the first time since midsummer. At one point, we unexpectedly came upon young Lord Tolper and his sweetheart, in a compromising position on the grass. I took Etaa's arm and led her quickly away, before the blushing lord felt required to rise and make a bow; as we turned to go I saw a quick, sweet smile of remembrance touch her lips, and felt a pang of envy.

Because I had so little time to myself, I instructed Mabis to accompany Etaa in the future into the gardens—and to do anything else that might be required for her health and com-fort. Mabis confided that she had already been gathering healthful herbs for the babe at Etaa's request; for, bless her pagan soul, the girl had the skill of ten Newham physicians, and had even told her of a poultice to ease the ache in an old woman's back. Mabis was deeply religious in her own way, but she had never liked the queen, and Etaa's thoughtless kindness and lack of vanity had won her heart.

Etaa had little contact with the court in the beginning, partly at my wish and partly at her own. Yet she found another friend in the palace before long, a fellow outcast of sorts: young Willem, who was one of my pages. He was a strange, nervous boy, his hair as flaxen as her own was black, who seemed to be constantly starting at unseen sights and sometimes even to see around corners. He stuttered in both noble and common speech, as though not only his lips but even his own fingers wouldn't obey him. One afternoon I came to call on Etaa in her chambers and found him sitting at her feet before the fire, their faces half in the green light of waning eclipse, half ruddy with fireglow. They looked up at me almost as one, and Willem scrambled to his feet to bow, barely concealing his dismay at the arrival of his king. I gathered that Etaa had been telling him a story, and asked her to continue, feeling that I would be glad of a little diversion too.

She took up her story again almost self-consciously, a Kedonny tale of how a wandering people had come to settle and find a home at last. I grew fascinated myself by the realism of it, even though it was riddled with allusions to the supernatural powers of the Mother. It struck me that this must be the story of how they had come to our borders, in the time of the second Barthelwydde king, nearly two hundred years before.

I was fascinated too by the motions of her hands, so quick and bold compared to the refined gestures of the court poets, whose graceful imported

romances usually left me yawning. Occasionally she would stumble, breaking the trancelike rhythm of her tale, and I remembered that she had to translate as she told, a feat that would leave my poets ill with envy.

When her tale was finished I sent Willem away to his neglected duties, and, impulsively, asked Etaa if she would come with me to see our own collected lore. She nodded, politely curious. The child growing within her seemed to have given her a thing to love in place of the man she had lost; perhaps because of it—and because I no longer touched her— she tolerated me now, and sometimes almost seemed glad of my company.

I led the way into the part of the palace given over to the Gods; it was hung with gilt-framed paintings and ornate tapestries of religious scenes. I went there often, not for homage, but to visit the repository for the holy books. It had taken all the power and influence of the kingship to defy the clergy successfully, but I had been determined to study on my own those remnants of the Golden Age that the Gods deemed too complex—and possibly too heretical—for the layman. The priests who were entrusted with the books spent the greater part of their lives studying them, since they were presumably protected by their faith (or, I sometimes suspected, by their ignorance). I had had the best possible education, but even I found to my frustration that most of the learning from before the plague time was far above me. The Gods would give me no clues, of course, though they claimed omniscience, since they opposed my right to study the sacred lore. But then, they also refused to give guidance to the priests.

As we entered the corridors of the Gods a viridian-robed priest came to meet us, and I recognized him as Bishop Perrine, the archbishop's chief lackey. His bow was scarcely adequate, his lips moving in rigid formality. "Your majesty. You cannot possibly bring that—that woman here! It would be sacrilege to reveal the holy works to a—a pagan."

I smiled tolerantly, suspecting that after the morning's usual strife with the archbishop, this very scene had been secretly taking shape in my mind. "Bishop Perrine, this woman is acting as my watchman. I am quite sure she can't read—"

Etaa started, and I glanced past the bishop's shaven head to see one of the very Gods coming toward us down the hall. Bishop Perrine turned, following my gaze, and together we dropped down on one knee. Too late I noticed that Etaa still stood, defiantly facing the towering, inhumanly beautiful figure in robes lit with an unearthly inner glow. I signaled her to kneel but she ignored me, caught up in fearful amazement.

I waited while God regarded priestess in return, my knee grating on the unaccustomed hardness of the floor and my head thrown back until a crick began to form in my neck. At last an expression passed over his face that I almost took for appreciation; and remembering us, he gave us permission to rise, signing, —My

pardon, your majesty, for causing you discomfort; but I forgot myself, at the sight of the opposition.

Bishop Perrine began apologies, his fingers knotting in nervous obsequiousness, but the God stopped him. —No need, Bishop Perrine—I understand. And she is charming, your majesty. I see why they say the Black Witch has en-charmed you.

I inclined my head while I mastered a frown, and signed with proper deference, —She is no witch, Lord, but merely a handsome woman. Her beliefs are of no consequence; only primitive superstition.

—I am relieved to learn that. His hands expressed a faint mockery, each move slightly too perfect. —Etaa, can you deny the presence of the true Gods, now that you see one before you?

Slowly she nodded. —You are beautiful to see. But you are a man, and so you cannot be a god. There are no gods other than our Mother. Her face was serene, her eyes shone with belief. I had often envied unshakable faith, but never more than now.

Bishop Perrine shuddered visibly beside me and clutched his god-sign, but I saw the God laugh. —Well signed, priest-ess. Your belief may be misguided, but not even I can deny its purity. Bishop Perrine, I take it you sought to keep this woman from entering here. I commend you—but I think you should let her pass. Perhaps some further exposure to our beliefs would do her soul good.

Bishop Perrine dropped to the floor, and I sank grudgingly down beside him as the God passed. And as I led Etaa on to the repository, I wondered that a God should have treated us so affably. I knew that the various Gods who called on us had different manners, just as they had different faces when you were used to their splendor. But they were seldom so kindly disposed toward heretics, or anything that threatened the stability of their Church.

Etaa brushed the blue velvet of my sleeve. —Meron— She seldom called me by name, although it pleased me. —How is it that you do not believe in your own gods, when you've seen them all your life? Her hands moved discreetly, half hidden by her wide fur-trimmed sleeves.

I remembered my comment to her in the carriage, so long ago. —You don't believe in them because you say they look like men. Our scriptures tell us that they *are* like men; but I've seen them when they were not. I told her what I'd seen as a child. —So whatever they are, they're *not* the Gods of the scriptures who abandoned us long ago. But they control the lives of my people, and the peoples of all the adjoining lands, through the Church: these—false Gods.



She frowned. —It was only after the gods came that your people began to hate us. Are they cruel, then, to make your people cruel? Her eyes stole glances at the dark scenes dis-played along the walls.

I shook my head. —No...they're not cruel to us. But they don't condemn cruelty toward nonbelievers. They want no competition, I think. I looked away from a woven witch-burning. —They've done good, useful things for us—driven the wild kharks from the countryside, helped us grow better crops, shown us how to control the shaking fever . . . they've made us—comfortable. Too comfortable, I sometimes think. As though ... as though they wanted us to stay here forever, and be content never to regain the Golden Age again. And there *was* a Golden Age, I've seen proof of it, in the volumes we go to see now.

—Volumes? Books? Excitement lit her face. —We have a book in our village, that I've studied with the elders; it's said to be from the Blessed Time, when all people knew the touch of the Mother.

—You have that legend too? I stopped moving. —Then it must have been widespread—perhaps the whole world! Think of it, Etaa! But what knowledge we have left, the Gods keep hidden from anyone who could use it. My bitterness made my hands tighten. —The Church teaches us “humility”—not to strive, not to tempt fate, or the Gods, but follow the old worn path to sure salvation. It teaches the people to hate the “second sight” that could give them such freedom, and to hate your people most of all, because you make a religion of it. The Gods make us comfortable, but not because they love us. Damn th—

Etaa caught my hands suddenly, in a graceful grip that was like a vise; she forced them to her lips in a seemingly effortless kiss. I stared at her, astounded, and caught move-ment in the mirror at the side of my lenses. Down the hall, the archbishop stood watching us intently; she had kept me from cursing the Gods in his presence. I let her know by my tightened hands that I understood. She freed me, and I signed, —Come, love, first go with me to see the holy relics. We continued to the repository; the archbishop did not follow us. I wondered if he had seen enough.

I thanked Etaa, and for a moment she touched my hands again; but then she only looked away, signing stiffly, —Your life is my life, and my child's, as you have said. You need not thank me for that.

But I felt she had been repaid when her hands rose in wonder as we entered the repository and she saw the books— thirty-five volumes resting on yellow satin, above the elabo-rately embellished study table. Two priests were at their contemplation; not having attendants with me, I went myself and tapped them on the shoulder, asking them to leave. Their faces flashed surprise, acceptance—and a hint of scandal as they passed Etaa and left us alone. Etaa went to stand by the sloping desk, looking down reverently on the smooth, time-less pages of the open books. And then I learned one more thing about the barbaric Kedonny—that their priestess

read the printed words of the old language as well as any man of our own priesthood.

And so, though I had taken her with me originally out of a certain obstreperous pride, and because I valued her as a watchman, I began taking her with me for her opinions as well. Word of the pagan woman studying the holy books got rapidly back to the archbishop, and when he came to make his complaint I was forced to remind him sharply that he spoke to his king. I think despite his hunger for personal power he believed in the Church's tenets and its Gods, and was torn by the dilemma they created for him: He believed I committed sacrilege, but because a God had approved it there was nothing he could do to stop me. Or so I thought, even though I knew well enough he would do anything to get at the kingship, for the aspirations of his family and the furtherance of Church power.

As the dark noons of autumn passed into the bright, snowblind days of true winter, I continued to take Etaa with me to study the books, and to have her beside me as my watchman and companion whenever the occasion allowed. Her coming motherhood grew obvious to all, and was the target for much discreet levity, and also more serious speculation. Also for some unpleasant and ugly rumors revolving on witchcraft, whose sources I thought I knew. I didn't bother to deal with them, however, being more concerned with other matters; particularly with the rebellious Kedonny, who stubbornly harried our borderlands even though the snows lay heavy on the earth. There were rumors that a new leader had emerged, using the defiling of a priestess to rally them, and so I sent messengers to my most trusted border lords, telling them to be on guard. But the Kedonny would strike whenever a back was turned, and then fade away into the hills, and their Mother shielded them in Her snowy cloak, as Etaa would have signed—if she'd known. My best leaders seemed helpless against the determined fanaticism of the Kedonny chief, a man called only "the Smith," who was becoming a bogey-man in Tramaine fit to compete with the Godseye that looked down on my people's sinful lives.

At last came Midwinter's Day—a day I would not have marked except that I found Etaa kneeling awkwardly at her hearth, wearing dappled green velvet. She was tossing stalks of ripened wheat into the fierce blaze and reciting a ceremony of the Mother. Pale Willem crouched watching as if hypnotized, while his spotted pup chewed unnoticed at the tail of his jerkin. Mabis sat spinning in the far corner of the chamber, her round chill-reddened face set in righteous disapproval. I was mildly disturbed to see Willem so caught up in Kedonny ways; but his friendship with Etaa cheered them both, and lately I found it hard not to prefer Etaa to our own dour ways myself. But I chided Willem, and he disappeared, ghost-like as always, when I took Etaa away to visit the holy books.

That day she sat beside me as usual, though lately she found it hard to bend forward at the ornate table's edge. (Mabis had said my son—for I was sure it would be a son, just as I was sure he would hear like his mother—must be a strapping babe, perhaps even twins.) Her ungainly roundness charmed me even more than her

former grace.

I had taken my lenses off in order to read close up, for with Etaa there, I had no fear of being caught unawares. She glanced down as I set the lenses on the table, and then suddenly she caught at my arm. —Meron, look— She picked up the end of the thin, dark strip that lay pinned under them, curling it between her fingers. —What is this? It's like glass, but soft as paper. And look—look! Tiny words, under your lens—

I squinted, unable to make them out, and reached for a magnifying glass. —It's plastic, that the Gods use . . . and that we used, once, in the Golden Age. A strange excitement filled me as Etaa pulled the rest of the tape out from under the shelf into the lamplight. —How did it get here? Could the Gods have forgotten—

Etaa took up the glass and held it over the plastic strip.

—Can you read it?

She didn't see me, but sat frowning, breathless with concentration, her hand toying with the silver bell at her ear. At last she looked up, her fingers barely moving as she signed, —I can read it. It is part of a book in the old language. . . . But it's from *before* the plague time.

—Are you sure? All our holy books had been written after the plague; though they mentioned the wonders of the Golden Age, they were clouded with the despair of a failing people, and many references were unclear. My hands shook. —Read it to me.

I held the glass and Etaa translated, until her eyes were red and her hands trembled with fatigue. And though many things were still unclear, because they were so far above us, one undeniable truth stood out: —All men *could* hear, in the Golden Age. I was right! Men weren't meant to be less than the Gods—men *were* Gods. The Church has lost the truth in fear since the plague time, and these false “Gods” use our superstition to control us. I took Etaa's weary hands and kissed them. —But our son will be the beginning of a new Golden Age, he'll hear and see clearly, and show my people the truth. He will be our greatest king. Etaa smiled, caught up in my dreams, and if she smiled for her son and not for me, it didn't lessen the fullness of my joy.

And then the moment was torn by a lash of pain that raked my back, a blow that knocked me from my seat. My useless eyes met billows of indigo as I rolled, and a streak of light arcing down at my face; desperately I threw up my hands. But before the blade could find me again, a sweep of green velvet blocked my sight as Etaa flung herself on the attacking priest. Fair hands dimmed the shining blade, and somehow she drove him back from me while I got to my feet. I caught up my lenses and drew my dagger, only to see him fling her against the wall and bolt toward the

door. I brought the priest down as he tried to get past me; his skull cracked against the flags, and the knife flew from his grasp.

And beyond him I saw Etaa curled on her side on the floor, racked with a spasm of pain. She pressed her stomach, staining the velvet with blood from her slashed hands. I looked down again into the face of my attacker, full of terror now as my dagger rested on his throat. And saw that he was no priest: dirty hair slipped from under his cap, his face was young, but grimy and pinched with hardship. He was a paid assassin out of the Newham stews, and I was sure he was a hearer as well. And I couldn't touch him—or his master—for the Church claimed jurisdiction here. My hand tightened on the dagger hilt, and I would have slit his throat. But as blood traced my blade across his neck I felt Etaa's eyes on me, and I sickened. "Let the archbishop try you, then, for your failure, 'priest,'" I said. "And I pity you—" I struck him on the head with the dagger's butt, and felt him go limp.

Then I went to Etaa and fell on my knees beside her, raising her head. Her eyes sought me almost with hunger, and for a moment they filled with wild joy as her wounded hands brushed my face. But they tightened into fists with another spasm as she tried to form signs. —Meron ... my child. My child . . . comes—

My throat tightened with despair. It was scarcely half the year since her conception, and that was too soon, too soon ... I felt the back of my tunic soaking with blood, but the assassin's knife had caught in the folds of my cape and the wound was not deep. I picked Etaa up in my arms, gasping with pain, and started back through the endless halls.

Halls that were endlessly empty, until suddenly I came on the archbishop and Bishop Perrine. The archbishop saw us first, and laughter fell from his face, leaving blank horror. He hurried toward me, arms outstretched, until he met my eyes; then, and only then, did I ever see my cousin afraid. He stopped. "Your majesty—" His lips quivered; Bishop Perrine's eyes went to the trail of red on the stones behind us, and he dropped to his knees, babbling incoherently.

"My Lord . . . bishop." I staggered against the wall to save my precious burden. "If my son dies, my lord, not even the Gods will find sanctuary from me." I pushed grimly past him, and saw in my mirror that he was hurrying on toward the repository.

I found a guardsman and friendly halls at last, and summoned aid. My physicians swarmed around me like flies, binding my wound and begging me to rest; but I stood at the door of the chamber where they had taken Etaa, until finally my knees buckled and I could not stand. And then I remember little except my helpless fury, at events and my own weakness, until I woke in my canopied bed, hemmed in by kneeling attendants, to face a God. I struggled toward the only thing of real importance: —Etaa . . . my child—?

I thought the God smiled, though I couldn't focus. —I have been with them—

“No!” I lunged at him, and was pulled back by my horrified attendants.

They gibbered apologies, but he waved them aside. —The lady is well, and asks for you. And your son—yes, your majesty, your son—will live. He is well grown for one born so early, and we will watch over him.

I sank back into the pillows. —Forgive me, lord, I—I was not myself. I thank you. And now, doctor, with your aid I would go to see my Etaa . . . and my son.

\* \* \* \*

The Church proclaimed that my assailant was a mad priest, who had wrongly believed me guilty of sacrilege concerning the Church's holy books; he had been summarily excommunicated and put to death for his treason, upon order of the archbishop. There were mutterings in the Church faction at court that the priest was hardly mad, but in the celebration at the birth of a royal heir they were scarcely heard. I named my son Alfilere, after my father, and to me he was the most beautiful sight on Earth. And second only to him was his mother, her own face shining with pleasure as she gazed down upon him in his golden cradle or caressed him with bandaged hands.

I began to take her with me everywhere now, seeking her impressions of the things she saw at court; and though she protested, I seated her openly beside me at table. The queen still sat at my other hand, unwilling to give up any of her position, though her eyes drove daggers into my back. Her brother absented himself from the great hall these days, and I wondered if he was sharpening a new blade of his own. But he would never dare such a blatant attack on me again, and though my advisers knew of his treason and urged me to act against him, I refused. If I attacked my cousin I would risk civil war, and I would not bring that on my people for the sake of personal revenge. But I no longer went anywhere without attendants, and I saw that my guard kept watch at all times over Etaa and her child.

But though tension whispered in the halls like the chill drafts of winter, it could not discourage the spring that bright-ened my heart at the thought of my newborn son, or the nearness of Etaa. For the Armageddon Day festivities, I taught her, amid much laughter, to dance. I had always hated memorizing intricate patterns and steps, the watching of ceiling mirrors, the need to be constantly keeping count. But she was enchanted at this new challenge to her imagination, and her enthusiasm caught me up and made me feel the beauty of the dance.

The Armageddon celebrations, mirrored in Etaa's delighted eyes, had not seemed so bright since I was a boy, and as I carried my son in my arms I imagined how the same wonders would delight him too: the poets and jugglers and acrobats, the trained hounds and morts, the magicians flashing colored fire, even the Gods

who presided, resplendent in their shining auras. All the gaudily clad folk feasting and dancing, driving away the cold bleakness of dark noons that marked the equi-nox and the grating end of a cruel winter beyond the walls.

I think, looking back, that I had never been happier than on that evening, when Etaa danced beside me. Gowned in the fragile colors of spring, her shining hair bound with pearls, she was the very goddess of the Earth. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement and her dark eyes radiant; after the last dance I took her in my arms and kissed her, and she did not pull away. Anything seemed possible to me then, even that someday she might come to love me ... as I had come to love her, this captive goddess, in a way that I had never loved any woman.

But, as I have always known in my saner moments, not all things are possible, even for kings. And not long afterward Etaa turned cold eyes on me as I entered her chamber, looking up over Alfilere's dark curly head as he fed at her breast.

I hesitated. —Etaa, is something wrong?

Mabis got up heavily from her stool. She moved to sit facing away from us, still knitting, her ruddy face showing trouble and concern.

Etaa did not answer me for a moment, but rose and took Alfilere to his cradle near the fire, where she stood smiling and rocking him gently. She had refused a new nurse, preferring to feed and care for her own babe, another virtue which had pleased old Mabis. And indeed, my son's mother was better than any nurse, for she could "feel" his needs; she grew uneasy if he was ever beyond her hearing. At last she came back to me, the smile fading again, and I repeated my question.

Her pink-scarred hands snapped up with accusation. —Meron, I know the truth now, about my people. That they're making war on Tramaine, and being killed, because you've stolen me. I know that they demand my return—and beyond that, only to be left in peace by your witch-burners. But instead you send them soldiers, to kill and burn all the more. And you have kept it from me! And made me ... made me forget ... A strange emotion tormented her face, her hands twitched into stillness.

—Where did you learn this, Etaa?

She shook her head.

—Willem—

—You will not hurt him! Anger and fear knotted her fingers.

—I would not hurt a child for repeating gossip.

—But it's true?

—Yes.

Her fingers searched the rough edge of the tapestry that swayed in the draft along the wall.

—Then let me go home to my people.

I looked away, feeling disappointment stab me like an assassin's blade. —I... I cannot do that. You wouldn't leave your child. And I will not give up my son. Are you so unhappy here? Can't you tell your people you're content to stay? I'll make peace with them, pay whatever restitution . . . I—need you, Etaa. I need you here with me. I depend on you now, I—

She shut her eyes. —Meron. The man who leads my people, who demands me back, the man you call “the Smith”: He is my husband.

—Your husband is dead!

—No! Her foot stamped the floor.

—You saw him yourself, broken on the rocks! No man could survive that. He was a coward; he killed himself, he abandoned you to me, and I won't let you go. I drew a breath, struggling for control. —Your people raid and slaughter mine, and take their heads. You damn *our* souls—by our beliefs dismembered spirits cannot be freed by cremation. If there's war, then the Kedonny bring it on themselves!

Etaa drew herself up stiffly. —If you won't release me, he will come and take me!

I frowned. —If he can rise from the dead, then perhaps he will. But I doubt if even you can expect that of the Mother.

She crossed her arms, her eyes burning.

I left the chamber.

\* \* \* \*

She stayed in her rooms from then on, refusing to accompany me anywhere, the drawn look of grief she had first worn returning to her face. When I came to see my son she would sit by the fire and turn her back on me, wordless. Once I came and sat beside her on the cushioned bench, with Alfilere squirming bright-eyed on my knees, wrapped in a fur bunting. I clapped my hands and saw him laugh, and as I offered him ringed fingers to chew on, looked up to see Etaa smile. I took back my fingers and signed, —Who could ask for a handsomer son? But he doesn't favor his

father, I fear, little dark-eyes— I smiled hopefully, but she only looked away, brushing the silver bell at her ear, and tears showed suddenly on her cheeks.

Angry with Willem, at first I had forbidden him to visit her again; but I'd relented, knowing her solitude and sorrow. Not long after, I found him with her, his pale head in her lap, his thin shoulders shaken with sobs. She looked up as I came toward them, her eyes filled with shared pain; but Willem did not, and so she lifted his head from her lavender skirts. He rose unsteadily to make a bow, then sank exhausted onto the wine-red cushions beside her, wiping his face on his sleeve.

But I stood frozen in my place, because I had seen the thin tracks of drying blood that ran down his neck and jaw. Suddenly all his strange, frightened prescience fitted into place, and I realized the truth: my own page was a hearer, and somehow until now his family had managed to keep it a secret. Until now. My stomach twisted: His ears had been put out by the Church.

As though she had followed my thoughts, Etaa signed bitterly, —It was your Archbishop Shappistre. He hounded Willem for being with me, until he learned that Willem felt the Mother's touch—and see what he's done! He persecutes all who have Her blessings, he almost killed my child—he almost killed you! Your own kinsman! How can you let him go free, if you are king; why don't you challenge him?

I reached to the crooked scar along my back, caught in my own bitter outrage. The archbishop's open attempt to destroy me had failed, and now he waged a subtler war, spreading rumors, subverting those I trusted, tormenting those I loved. I had the power to strike him down, even in the face of the Gods; but I could not. —Etaa, it's not that simple. This isn't some villager's dispute, I can't take him out on the mead and thrash him! The royal line is split in two, and with it the loyalties of the nation; I rule a land at peace because I have tried to keep them reconciled. The archbishop is my counter-balance, but he'd upset the scales if he could, with his dreams of a Church-ruled state. He would throw this country into civil war to achieve it; he cares nothing for consequences. If I charged him with treason I'd do the same. He will stop at nothing; but I stop a long way before that.

Etaa stroked Willem's drooping head. —I don't understand the needs of nations, Meron . . . and you don't understand the needs of women and men. Suddenly she looked up at me, her face anguished. —He'll destroy you, Meron! Don't let him, don't . . . Her hands dropped hopelessly into her lap; she rose and turned away, going to the baby's cradle to comfort her gentle son.

Two days later, Willem was gone. The other pages said he had run away home. But one of Etaa's earrings, the tiny silver bells that she always wore, was missing too. I asked her where it was, and too carelessly she signed that she had lost it. And so I knew that Willem had gone east to find the Smith.



Slowly, with all the pain of birth, winter gave way at last to spring, while the Kedonny raided on our borders. Etaa mourned in her chambers, and the New Year's revels on the green were a bright, shallow mockery of the past.

And while I slept that night and dreamed of happier times, Etaa and my son disappeared.

Frantic with loss, I had the countryside searched and searched again, but there was no sign of them. There was no rumor, no clue; it was almost as if they had never been. I could get no rest, and my own lords said openly that I looked like a man possessed. The archbishop, smiling, said that perhaps the Earth had swallowed them up—and I almost came to believe him. But I learned my coachman had disappeared on the same night as Etaa, and some said they thought my carriage had gone in the night, and come back carrying no one. And so I wondered if the truth lay not in the Earth but in the sky...and the Gods had taken their revenge on me.

But the Kedonny ate deeper into my lands, and finally I was forced to abandon my search. I planned to raise a full army and put them to rout; but as I sent out calls to gather men, I discovered how well my archbishop had done his ungodly work. His rumors of my bewitchment had taken hold: My own people believed the Black Witch had snared me in a spell and addled my mind, then disappeared like the accursed thing she was, stealing even my son to be put to some terrible blasphemous use. They believed I would betray them to the Kedonny in battle, and that the Gods themselves had abandoned me.

Even lords who were always loyal to my father's line have deserted me for the archbishop, and those who still support me get little support themselves for the raising of an army. The word is abroad in the land that it is suicide to ride with me to war—that if I am denied, and destroyed, then the forces of Right will be served, and the Gods will save them from the pagan hordes. Damn the Church! The Gods have never intervened in a war of men; I doubt they'll do it now.

And so I leave today, with what forces I can gather, to go and save my kingdom myself, if I can. Perhaps then this new storm of ignorance will pass, and not inundate us all. Perhaps. Or perhaps it is already too late. . . .

If so, then maybe it is best that Etaa has gone, and taken my son. I only pray, to whatever true Gods may be, that they are safe, and that some day her son will return to claim his throne, and be the greatest of our kings. If she chose to leave me, I cannot blame her, for I never had the right to take her as I did. But I loved her, and I pray she will remember that too, and forgive me a little.

I often wonder if she ever loved me. If so, it was more than I deserved. But sometimes there was a look, or a sign— The hands of the summer wind are as warm and light as your touch, Etaa; it may be that your Mother has stolen you home after all. Watch over my son, and forgive his father. Give him your blessings, as you gave

them to me. Etaa ... I think I will not see you again.

But come, my lords; the Godseye keeps watch on us, and the sun is already high. They say a smith may look at a king: Then let it be the last thing he ever sees!

\* \* \* \*

### **Part 3: The God**

I understand that I'm speaking today because you wondered how a "naive kid" in the Colonial Service was inspired to solve the Human Problem. The answer is simple—I loved Etaa, and Etaa was the mother of Alfilere.

You probably all remember the situation at the time. The Colonial Service had come upon the Humans not long before: an intelligent life form based on carbon rather than silicon, but oxygen breathers and compatible with roughly the same temperature range that we are. That made them another competitor, but only marginally; and if they were anything else but Humans, we could have expected to coexist with them. But our studies of their ongoing culture, and the scanty records of their past, indicated they were the most unrelent-ingly and irrationally aggressive species we'd ever encountered. Combined with a high technology, it would have made them the most dangerous, too. We'd live in peace with them willingly enough, under the circumstances, but the question I'd always heard was whether *they* would live in peace with *us*. The majority Conservative opinion was that it wasn't likely, and so our sector council ordered us to intervene, and stall their cultural progress. The Liberal faction in the Service objected, doing their best to prod the Human status quo, and that was how the trouble started.

I'm a xenobiologist, and at the time I was just beginning my career; I was also too inexperienced to question policy then, and so I blindly supported the majority's stand on Humans. Especially since I'd had to live among Humans, to study (and watch) them, as the "coachman" for the God-hating king of Tramaine. When the Libs gave restricted records to the king, and then openly incited the neighboring Kotaane to war, we Conservatives retaliated by kidnapping Etaa, the king's Kotaane mistress, and her son, his heir. I was chosen to do the actual deed, because of my strategic position— and, frankly, my naiveté. All I had to do was keep the pair safely out of the way, they told me, and at the same time I could experience my first change-study of an unknown world. ... All I had to do was spend an eternity alone, I discovered, on a desolate abandoned world with no one for company but a superstitious alien woman and a squalling alien brat. I didn't know whether to feel honored by the responsibility, or ashamed of being used. But I did my duty, and stole her away to the outer moon.

I sent Etaa drugged wine, and shuttered all the ports; she never knew what had happened, even when I brought the shuttle down near the ruins of the dead colony and opened the lock. I watched her on the screens as she stepped outside, waiting while the first rush of stunned dismay took her. She stumbled back, clutching her

child protectively against her as the cold wind gusted, swirling the drab rust-brown grit into stinging clouds. Beyond us the naked, stony slope swept upward toward the ruins of the Human town, fangs of bitter-ness snapping at the clouds. I'd seen it once before, but never like this, knowing I couldn't leave it. My own eyes burned with the bleakness and the memory of the stinging wind. It would be hard to learn the unity of this world ... it was easy to see why the Humans had failed to.

I don't know what thoughts were in Etaa's mind then; only that they probably weren't the ones I expected. But confusion and despair were on her face as she started down the ramp, the wind tugging at her long cape and stiff, ungainly skirts. Her baby had begun to cry, wailing with the wind. For the first time she was real for me, touching my emotions and stirring—pity. This was the stolen woman, used by a ruthless king, whose misery I seemed to be tied to from the start, when I'd piloted the king's carriage in her capture. She was only another victim of the cruel and senseless schisms that divided these wretched Humans, and she'd suffer more now and never understand why, because of them, and because of us...I felt unease pull down pity: Did I have the right—? But she'd been a pawn, she would be a pawn; maybe that was her destiny, and this was mine.

I left the controls at last, bracing myself to deliver the final horror to her. I'd gotten rid of my Human makeup, and knew my form would be starting to slip after the stress of the flight. And no Human had ever seen a "God" unmasked, even a God who passed for a coachman. Avoiding the velvet cushion on the floor, I went to stand at the lock.

—Meron—? She turned with a gasp to stare up at me, her hands asking the question. I remembered she was a Kotaane priestess, and could hear; the speculation was that the king had taken her precisely because she *could*, out of his hatred for tradition. Her eyes had brightened with hope and something more as she turned. It froze into terror as she saw me, and she backed away, her fingers stiffening out in a sign to ward off evil. It was too much like an obscenity popular with the king's retainers; I almost laughed. That would have been the final cruelty. I caught it in time and only spread my hands in a peace gesture. I signed, —I will not harm you, Lady Etaa. Have no fear. She shook her head, keeping her distance. I wondered what I must look like to her—a mockery of a Human made of bread dough, or clay. I ducked back into the king's "carriage" to get my hooded jacket, thinking the more I covered the better. But as I disappeared I heard her startled cry and footsteps behind me on the ramp. She appeared at the lock in a swirl of dust, and dropped to her knees at my feet. —Oh, please, don't leave me here! The baby whimpered as her signing jostled him, inside her cape. I stared down at her, stunned; but seeing my face again she faltered, as if she saw her own doom instead. Looking away, she placed her wriggling child tenderly on a red velvet cushion, then forced her eyes back to mine, signing, —Then have mercy on my child. Take him with you, he's no harm to anyone! He is a prince, return him to—to his father, King Meron. You'll be rewarded! Give him to anyone . . . but let him live—

I bent down and picked up the child; he gazed at me in fascination, and suddenly he began to laugh. Inexplicably delighted, I held him close; then, slowly, I passed him back to his mother's arms. Hope shattered on her face, and she flinched when I touched her.

I stepped back. —Etaa, you aren't being abandoned in this godforsaken place. I am your guardian; I'll stay with you here, to look after you and your child. You've been . . . exiled, and it will be a hard life for us both. But it won't last forever, only until—certain matters are settled in Tramaine. But it has to be this way until then; you have no choice. This is your new home.

She watched rigidly, the need to ask a hundred questions struggling against the certainty that she didn't need to ask, but only accept, and endure, this new trial. She looked down at last, and I saw the trembling lines of her face grow quiet with resolve; she would adapt. I felt relieved, and somehow surprised.

—Who has ordered this? Not ... not the king? Her dark eyes flickered up again with a kind of urgency.

—No. I reassured her, thinking how she must hate the man, and not wanting the truth to seem any harsher than it was. —It—is the will of the Gods, Etaa.

Her flush of relief turned to a sudden frown, and she looked hard at me for a moment. But she pulled back into her silence, and signed nothing more, waiting for me.

I gave her a clingsuit and boots like my own to replace her awkward gown, then waited outside the craft in the wind, knowing the preoccupation with bodily shame that these het-erosexuals had. She appeared at last, with her hair bound up and her child slung at her back in the folds of her cape. The heavy jacket flapped around her like a tent, but I could see that the suit had adapted to her well enough to keep her warm. I sealed the clasps on her jacket while she watched me, intent and suspicious. Then I unloaded supplies, and sealed the hatch behind us. The lifeboat rose silently; the king's carriage would be home before he missed it. I wished we could have been, too.

We struggled up the hill toward the ruined town, battered by blowing grit and dead, unidentifiable vegetation. The rag-ged maze of the tree-eaten ruins broke the back of the wind as we reached the summit; we stood panting and rubbing our burning eyes while the wind moaned and clattered in frustra-tion overhead. I led Etaa through the rubble to a shelter that stood intact, a prefabricated box that still had its roof. As we stumbled along the street she watched with awe, but without the sickly dread Tramanians had for the cities of their dead past. I wondered if she had ever seen a pre-plague Human city even on her own world, not knowing she didn't understand that this wasn't her own world.

The Humans had colonized the inner, major moon of a gas giant they had named Cyclops, which circled the yellow star Mehel. This outer, barely smaller moon was just marginally habitable, and they had only tried to establish a colony here to escape from the disease that decimated them at home. They had failed, and all that remained was this town, under skies that were endlessly gray with clouds. Etaa never saw the change in the heavens, and never knew there had been one because she never asked a question: We communicated as little as possible, and often I caught her staring at me, her eyes somewhere between fear and speculation.

But once she insisted that she needed to gather healthful herbs for the baby, and when I tried to tell her that our supplies had everything she would need, she gathered him up protectively inside her jacket and slipped out the door. I went after her, armed, because I still wasn't sure exactly what else was making its home in this dead city. For over an hour I watched her search for a trace of the life she knew, but nothing had survived the departure of the Humans. At last, shivering and defeated, she brushed past me without meeting my eyes, and returned to the shelter. After that she communi-cated less than ever, only glaring at me as if this terrible strangeness were somehow my doing too. She never ventured outside again by choice, and never left her son alone with me.

\* \* \* \*

I spent most of my time outside, struggling with equipment in the bitter wind as I tried to gather background data for my ecological change-study. The deserted Human town crouched like a tethered beast on the rim of the plateau, waiting with un-Human patience for the return of its masters while time and the gnarled hands of the tree-shrubs worried it toward oblivion. Beyond the plateau's rim eons of sediment from some murky forgotten sea lapped away to grim distant peaks. But closer in, the stone had been shattered by countless faultings, eroded by the winter rains and the sand-sweeping wind until a network of twisting sheer-walled canyons had been eaten into its undulating plain. The eternal wind sang through the maze, whipping the iron-reddened dust of the washes, where flashing water roared and passed with every drowning downpour. The wind was a bully, tumbling the slow, heavy clouds, breaking them open for a sudden glimpse of burnished heaven and shutting them again before you found it. Land and sky merged at the dusky horizon, and everywhere the colors repeated, shadow-violet and rust, burnt orange and fragile lavender, all merging toward gray in the somber light.

What flora there was was carbon-based, mainly lichen and an omnipresent hummocky dark moss. The sparse scatter of higher forms climaxed in the tree-shrub that dotted the ruins, a grotesque thing that looked like it was growing upside down. I knew almost nothing about the animal life, the preliminary survey having been so cursory; from time to time dark things scuttled at the edge of my vision, and in the updrafts above the canyons I could sometimes glimpse a shadowy, undulating form. As I began to watch these "glid-ers" in flight, I first felt the change stir within me, a blind groping toward understanding, a restlessness, a formless need to seek the new

equilibrium ... for the first time I wasn't being forced into a preset mold, this time my body would find its own place freely in the unity of a new unknown. I was fulfilled in the knowledge that now I knew nothing of the life on this world . . . but soon, in a way, I would know everything.

And I wondered whether that was the true reason why we feared the Humans: For all the studies we'd done, we had never been to their origin place or really "gone native" among them. Because we were forced to non-natural imitation among this transplanted stock, we had never really *felt* what it was to be Human. We wore false faces, false bodies; We saw them act and react around us, but never knew what moved them to it.

Exploring the dead Human town, I found myself thinking of how it would feel to colonize an unknown world, to think you were secure and settled—and then to be struck by an alien epidemic: to see half the population die, the survivors left genetically mutilated, sterile and deaf and blind ... to lose contact with the rest of the Human kind, to see your proud civilization torn apart by fear and your technology crumble to barbarism ... to lose everything.

And then to come back, to begin again from nothing in a treacherous, silent universe, and come so far—only to be stopped again, by us. They had adapted; and there was nothing we admired more. Yet the Colonial Service held them back; we counted ourselves lucky that they had suffered so much. And I'd never had any doubt about the morality of our position.

But then I shared a deserted world with Etaa, and passed through the change, and was changed in ways I had never meant to be.

\* \* \* \*

The changes were resisted, in the beginning, as change always is. My physical deterioration of form had slowed, while my body chemistry fumbled toward an understanding of its new environment; but I stayed longer and longer out in the bitter days of the alien spring. My physical change was also slowed by the presence of Etaa; I went on instinctively mimicking the form of my closest companion—my only companion, for dreary weeks on end, until the return of Iyohangziplepi with supplies, and with them, the chance to hear a spoken word again and see a friendly face. And heard the gradually more agonizing reports that things in Tramaine continued unresolved. The Liberals had aroused the Kotaane, and now there seemed to be no stopping them. And as long as the uncertainty lasted, the king's son had to be securely out of it.

I began to worry sometimes that Etaa would break down in her endless solitude, since she rarely even had my escape into the greater world around the dead town. But she came from a people used to long, buried winters; and if she sometimes tended the fire below the window needlessly, or slept too long, and cried

in her sleep, I tried to leave her alone. We all cope however we can, and she wouldn't have listened anyway. But I watched her with her child, as I watched the gliders by day wheeling over the maze, and again I felt an indefinable shifting in my soul.

Her thoughts were wrapped in her eternal cloak of silence, and only the baby, Alfilere, could draw her out. She would sit rocking him for hours while rain dinned on the roof, the silver bell she wore on one ear singing softly. She made him toys from scraps, smiled when he pulled her hair, tickled him while he played naked on her cloak by the fire, until their laughter filled the bleak room with light. She made the best of their new captivity, and so her son thought the world was a delightful place.

But sometimes as he fed at her breast her gaze would drift out of the present; a wistfulness would fill her eyes like tears and pass into a deeper knowledge that was wholly alien, and wholly Human. Sometimes too she would look into her child's face as though she saw someone else there, and then cover his face with longing kisses. She called him by a Kotaane name, "Hywel," and never "Alfilere," and I suspected that she knew he was her husband's child, and not the king's—this child of hope and sorrow. This child who was the center of her world—to whom Etaa, who was named "the blessed one," could never give the most unique and wonderful "bless-ing" she possessed, the gift of speech. Because she would never know she possessed it.

Her Alfilere was a bright, gentle baby who smiled more than he cried, and only cried when he had a reason. His awareness of the world grew every day, and soon I shared Etaa's fascination at each change. But when he first found his voice, babbling and squeaking to himself for hours on end, she only watched him with perplexity. Her people believed that hearing was the manifestation of another's thoughts and soul, and I knew this was her first child. Though she clapped her hands to get his attention, she never made another sound for him except her laughter, only moving her hands over and over while he watched, repeating the signs for simple words. Usually he would only catch her fingers and try to stuff them into his mouth.

And watching this woman, who was strong and fertile and gifted with full hearing and sight, who represented everything a Human could be ... or should be ... I suddenly realized what it would be never to find fulfillment, because you had even lost the sound of the word . . . *the feel*— In desperation I began to recite, "I am the eye that meets my gaze, I am the limb ..."

Etaa started and stared at me; I'd never spoken before in front of her. Surprise and consternation pulled at her face; she looked back at her son, whose cheerful babbling must have made as much sense as mine, and then across the room at me again. On an impulse I repeated the lines, and she frowned. She picked up the baby and moved to the far corner, huddling inside her tentlike jacket on her ruined mattress . . . touching her throat. She coughed.

It wasn't long before I caught her mimicking the sounds her baby made. In a week or so more she had learned to hum for him. At first I was half guilty about what I had done; but gradually I convinced myself that it wouldn't come to any-thing. Though I wasn't even sure anymore that I'd done anything wrong.

\* \* \* \*

And then the day came when the clouds parted. As I prowled the rim of the canyons, grateful for the slowly warm-ing weather, brilliance suddenly opened up around me and all across the canyonlands a shower of golden sunlight was falling. For a moment I stood gaping at the incomprehensible glory until, glancing up, I saw the red "eye" and the banded green face of Cyclops peering back at me, filling a ragged piece of sky so bright it was almost black. I had taken off my braces to free my legs for change—running had gotten to be awkward and nearly ridiculous—but I ran back to the shelter and ducked in the open doorway. "Etaa, come and look!"

She stopped Alfilere in mid-whirl as she danced him around the room, and blinked at me, her smile fading. I realized I'd been shouting. I repeated it in sign language. —You can see the sky.

She followed me outside, and set Alfilere down to roll in the springy moss while she stood beside me, entranced by the sun-brindled, golden land and sky. I had almost forgotten the majesty of Cyclops wearing the sun for a crown, only a little diminished even from this outer moon. I remembered again that the sky the Humans took so much for granted was the most beautiful one I had ever seen. —Look, Etaa, can you see that dark spot against the face of Cyclops? That's your Earth.

She reddened as if I had insulted her. Only then did I realize that she had no idea we were on another world, and in my blind inexperience I had no idea of what that could really mean. —We traveled to Laa Merth, the moon you see from Earth, in the king's carriage; the Gods can make it travel between the worlds. You can see your Earth, up in the sky now instead; both these worlds are moons of—

She shut her eyes angrily, refusing me. —The Mother is the center of all things. *This* is the Earth! She folded her arms, then turned away toward the edge of the cliff, a small, stubborn figure plucked by the wind. She was still the Moth-er's priestess, and I suddenly realized that she was as true a believer as any Tramanian, and that her chthonic Goddess was just as tangible and real. As if by her will, the clouds closed over the last shining piece of the sky and rain splat-tered down, pocking the russet dust with spots the size of kiksuye buds.

Etaa turned back from the cliff's edge as the rain began, her eyes scanning for her child—and screamed. I jerked around, following her gaze, to see the shadow-form of a glider plummeting like dark death out of the clouds toward little Alfilere. She came running, her arms waving desper-ately. I pulled my stunner and



fired, not knowing where a glider was vulnerable, but hoping the shock would divert its strike. I ran too, and saw the incredible, leathery balloon of the glider billow with the shock, heard myself shouting, “Here, here—damn you!” And heard the piercing shrill of outrage, saw the sky darken as the glider swerved to strike at me. Warty mottled skin flayed me, I staggered with the impact of its shapeless bulk. I heard my own scream then and the glider’s moaning wail as a pincer beak closed over my arm, sank in, and snapped my body like a whip into the air. The glider shuddered at my weight, and hysterically I saw myself being crushed where it fell...But then suddenly my arm was free, the air brightened—and I slammed back down onto the earth. The glider soared out over the canyon’s rim, still keening.

I lay in the patch of blessed moss staring up into the rain, feeling as if a stake had been driven through me, pinning me to the ground. My torn arm throbbed with the beating of my heart, and I drew it up, strangely light, to see that the end was gone, bitten through. I studied the oozing stump where my hand had been, somehow unimpressed, and then let it drop back to my side.

But it didn’t drop, for Etaa caught it in her own hands, making small moans of horror while Alfilere wailed his fright against my leg.

“S all right, ‘s all right...” I said stupidly, wondering what had happened to my voice, and why she didn’t seem to understand me. I managed to sit up, shaking her off, and then stand. And then finally to realize that I didn’t know what I was doing, before I fell to my knees again, weeping those damn sticky silicon-dioxide tears and cursing. But strong arms pulled me up again, and with Alfilere on one arm and me on the other, Etaa led her two weeping children home out of the rain.

I collapsed on my bedding, just wanting to lie in peace and sleep it through, but Etaa badgered me with frantic solici-tude. —I’m a healer, let me help you, or you will die! The blood—

And I discovered that with a hand missing, there was no way I could explain. I frowned and pushed her away, and finally I held up my wounded arm and shook it at her; it had closed off immediately, and there was no more blood, noth-ing that needed to be done. She pulled back with a gasp of disbelief and looked at me again, her eyes asking the ques-tions I couldn’t answer. Then she brushed my cheek gently with her fingertips, and there was no revulsion in her touch. At last I let her bury me in warm covers and build up the fire, and then I slid down and down into darkness, through layers of troubled dreams.

I slept for two days, and when I woke my mind was clear and fully my own again, and I was starving. As if she knew, Etaa plied me with hot soup that I almost gulped down, though it probably would have poisoned me. I rejected it unhappily, unable to explain again. She looked down, hurt and guilty, as though I were rejecting her. I touched her face, in the gesture of comfort I’d seen Humans use, and signed, one-handed, —Can’t. . . can’t. Mine . . . cans— I waved at my own food supply,

stacked by the Human supplies on the dusty shelves by the door. Her head came up, as if she should have known, and she left me. I looked at my wound and saw signs that the tissue was regenerating already. But it only made me realize the bigger problem: I'd been slowly reabsorbing all my limbs. Now that there was a need, and a reason, how could I communicate anything?

Etaa returned with an armful of cans and dropped them beside me on the floor. Then, kneeling, she held out the pad and stylus I'd been using for my sketches outside. I took them; she signed, beaming with inspiration, —Write for me.

I'd heard the king had taught her to read the archaic “holy books,” but I hadn't believed it. I printed, clumsily, “Can you read this: ‘My name is Etaa.’” I handed back the pad.

She smiled and signed, —My name is ... She glanced up at me, puzzled. We used an arbitrary sign/symbol system based on the Human alphabet to record the Human hand-speech, and she had never seen her name written down at all. I pointed at her. She smiled again. —My name is ... The middle fingers curled and straightened on her left hand, she held her right hand turned palm down, toward the earth. —Etaa. I am a priestess, I can read it.

I smiled too, in relief, and showed her how to pull open cans.

After I had eaten she brought Alfilere to me, half asleep, and gently sat him in my lap. I cradled him in the crook of my wounded arm; he settled happily, trying to nurse my jacket. Etaa laughed, and a feeling both strange and infinitely familiar came to me like spring, and left me breathless . . . and content.

—Thank you for saving my child. Etaa's dark eyes met mine directly, without loathing. —I was afraid of you, before, because of your strangeness. I think there was no need to be afraid. You have been...have been very kind. Again her eyes dropped, heavy with guilt. I thought of the king.

I printed laboriously, shamed by my own hidden prejudices, “So have you; though you had every right to be afraid, and hate me. Etaa, my strangeness will keep growing with time. But believe me that it will never harm you.”

She nodded. —I believe that...Can't you eat the food I make? It's better than those— Her wrist flicked with faint disdain at the emptied cans; I wondered if they looked as disgusting to her as the coarse Human meals did to me.

I hesitated before I wrote an answer. “I can't eat meat.” I didn't add that I couldn't eat anything at all that wasn't on a silicon base like my own body.

—The Gods do many things strangely, besides changing their shape. Meron was wiser than he knew; you are false gods indeed to his people.

She watched me coolly, almost smug in her conviction. I remembered hearing of her confrontation with another God, back in the dreary halls of the royal palace.

She was probably gratified by my stupefaction. I wrote, “How did you know?”

—The king knows. He saw a God once in an inhuman form; he knows you are not the ones promised to his people.

I frowned. So that was why the king scorned the Gods: He had discovered the truth. Suddenly his repressed anger and his ill-concealed hatred of the Church fell into perspective, and I realized there could have been more to the man than royal arrogance and consuming ambition. But that hardly mattered now. “Who does the king think we are?”

—He doesn’t know . . . and neither do I. We only know your power over us, over our people. She studied me, and her dark-haired child blissfully asleep again in my lap. —Who *are* you . . . what are you? Why do you interfere in our lives?

“Because we’re afraid of you, Etaa.”

Her eyebrows rose as she read the answer, and her hands rose for more questions, but I shook my head.

She hesitated, and then her face settled into a resigned smile. She signed, —Why is it that you don’t wear golden robes like the other Gods?

I laughed and wrote, “I’m a young God. We don’t have all the privileges.” Besides which, it was impossible for a biologist to make valid observations of any xenogroup while wearing golden robes.

She smiled again, the conspiratorial smile of one who was herself a Goddess incarnate. —What shall I name you?

“Name me Tam.” I gave her my name-sign among Humans, since Wic’owoyake would have been unmanageable. I felt myself yawn, a trait I’d picked up from the Humans too, and reluctantly gave up Alfilere’s sleeping form to my own need for sleep. He clung to me with his strong, tiny hands as his mother lifted him away, and I felt a rush of pleasure that he had taken to me so. I slept again, and had more dreams; dreams of change.

\* \* \* \*

I don’t know exactly when I decided to teach Etaa to speak. The desire arrived on a wave of exasperation, as it got to be more and more trouble to write out every word

of every answer I made. My hand regenerated, but the change over-took it, and my other hand was getting too stiff and stubby to make signs or hold a stylus. Teaching Etaa speech meant going against the rules in a way I had never even considered before, interfering with Human society by adding a major cultural stimulus. But then, I thought, what was I doing here with her in the first place, and what were the Libs doing waging war back in Tramaine? I'd be guilty of Liberalism too, but I had to be able to communicate—and so I convinced myself that even if she could learn to speak, it would never come to anything among a people who were still mostly deaf.

And so while the final drenching storm of the rainy season battered the helpless land and rattled on the roof, I explained to Etaa how she knew there *was* rain on the roof, when other Humans didn't. I called her attention to the sounds her child made, and the ones I'd made—and the ones she had begun to make herself. I showed her the patterns they could weave, as her hands wove patterns in the air. I sang her a song from one of the pre-plague Human tapes, and twice again she asked me to sing it, her whole body tight with excitement—and, al-most, fear. The third time I sang it she began to hum along, tonelessly at first, while Alfilere sat in her lap chewing a strip of plastic and adding his own delighted baby song. But abruptly she broke off, glancing from side to side nervously. Wrapping her cloak of silence around her again, she signed, —This is not right! The Mother tells us that we feel—hear—the inner soul of all things. This “voice” is not from the soul, not real...perhaps we weren't meant to use it, or we would *know*. Her earring jingled with her desire and uncertainty.

“Etaa,” I scrawled patiently, “your people did know, once; all Humans did. But after the plague they forgot how to use their voices, because no one could hear them. You've seen the Tramanian nobles move their lips, and understand each other—they've forgotten their voices too, but they remember how a mouth was used to make signs. A voice was given to every Human, so they could let people know how they felt. Think how much more you know about other creatures be-cause you can hear their voices—feel their souls. Think how much more you'd know about people, too, if they knew how to use their voices fully!”

She stared at the message for a long time, and then she made a series of signs in Kotaane; I realized she was praying. She gathered up a handful of dust from the floor and let it drift between her fingers. At last she took a long breath, and her eyes told me before her hands did, —I will learn it.

Once she had decided, she was never silent, practicing her sounds to me or to Alfilere, or to the gliders on the warming winds of summer if no one else would listen. She immedi-ately learned to tell one sound from another as she heard it, to my relief, and I put away my pad and stylus once I had taught her the phonemes of the pre-plague speech. Making them herself was harder, and in the beginning she answered in an earnest singsong of slurred and startling imitations, making her own translations by hand as she went along. But slowly her instinct for forming sounds sharpened; she laughed and marveled at the endless surprises hidden in her own

throat. And so did I, as though together we had triumphed over ignorance and fear, and had begun to find our own private unity.

We began to spend more and more of our time together in conversation, too. She told me of her people and her life as their priestess, and about the man she loved, who had been her other half and made her whole. And that she had lost him . . . but no more than that. She kept Alfilere close in her arms as she spoke, the living symbol of her lost joy. It moved me in ways I couldn't explain, that would have made no sense to her; and somehow for the first time I began to feel the real nature of heterosexuality, and sense the kinds of love and desire that made it possible, the ties that could bind such a terrible wound of dichotomy.

I almost told her then that I had seen her husband, and that I knew he was still alive. She had asked me often for news of the king, and of the Smith, who led her people against Tramaine. When she asked about the Smith, sorrow and longing for the past made her tremble. But I thought she couldn't know that the Smith and her man were the same: that the Libs had found him broken at the bottom of the cliff and saved his life, and had used his own love and outrage to make him their tool for change. He fought for her now like a hero of Kotaane legend . . . and he might still die for her in the end. And so, though I told her what I'd heard about the Smith and the king, to spare her further anguish I never told her what I knew.

Etaa pressed her curiosity about my nature too, as we began to feel more free with one another. Who was I? What was I? Why were we here among Humans? I was forbidden in my training to give her the answers; but I gave them to her my way. Cut off from everything, with even my own form getting unfamiliar, this separate world I shared with Etaa and her son was suddenly more important than my own—and in a way, more real. If I had been less impulsive, or more experienced, maybe I wouldn't have become involved; but if I hadn't, this galaxy would be a different place today.

But Etaa had been open with me, and so I opened myself in return. I told her about my "home" far off among the stars, farther away than she could ever imagine—so far away that I had never even seen it; how I had been born in space, and followed my parents into the Colonial Service. I tried to tell her how many worlds there are, and of the limitless varieties of form to be found upon them, all lit by the unifying fire of life. How much of it she believed, I'll never know, but her eyes shone with the light of other suns, and she always pressed for more.

I never intended to be fully open about our purpose on her world, but I felt she had a right to know something about why she had been stolen into exile. So I told her we had come to make things comfortable for people on Earth—so that they would never want to leave it and intrude on our stars. We had helped the Tramanians to lead better lives, and if the Kotaane ever "needed" us we'd help them too. I explained to her about the starfolk faction that wanted to stir up trouble among her people (and stir up progress too, but that I didn't say): How they had encouraged

the Kotaane to fight a painful, vicious war they could only lose, and caused endless suffering and misery, when the rest of us wanted only to bring peace to her Earth. But Tramaine's king had begun the war by stealing her, and so we had rescued her from him, to help stop the ill-feeling (but primarily to keep the king from raising an heir to the throne who would be hostile to us, but I didn't say that, either). Let the angry king win the battle with the Kotaane but lose the war for progress, and the Libs would suffer a policy setback it would be hard to get over.

Etaa listened, but when I finished I noticed her dark eyes fixed on me, as bright and hard as black diamonds in the firelight. She said, "If you have taken me to save me from the king, then why won't you let me go to my people? You say it would stop the war—"

I hesitated. "Because the war wouldn't stop now, Etaa. Too much else is involved. When the war is over you can go home; it's not safe for you now, while the king could still search for you." And so could the Liberals, and they would have found her.

She set her silver bell ringing softly, with fingers that were still nervous to form a reply. "I *know* why the war will not stop. You say starfolk want peace for us, and comfort, and only a few wish us trouble. Then tell me why the 'Gods' urge the Neaane to burn my people and persecute them! My people are not fools to be misled, they fight because they have good cause, and the cause is you! The Neaane were our friends until you came to them, and now they spit on us. You offer us your help, 'God.' Spare us, we've had enough of it." She caught up Alfilere, who had been placidly stuffing a rag doll into my empty boot, and stood glaring at me before she turned away to her pallet in the corner.

"You've learned to speak very well, Etaa," I said weakly.

She glanced up at me from the shadows, disappointment softening her words. "Better than you do, Tam."

I settled down in my own darkened corner, listening to the sounds of Alfilere nursing himself to sleep, and his mother's sighs. And thought about the strains on a culture when new ideas come too fast, and the need for an escape valve to ease the pressure, a catharsis ... the Humans had needed a lot of them, in their past, and the Tramanians had needed one now, so we let them have it. We let them kill the Kotaane. It was a vicious escape, but they were vicious creatures. . . . But did that make it right? Not by our philosophy of unity; not by our standards. And we upheld those standards, or I thought we did. All life is our life, and so we do not wantonly destroy any species, no matter how repulsive or threatening it is to us. We meddle, yes, to protect ourselves. But how far should it go? What about the kharks, the wholesale destruction of so many, for the "comfort" of the Humans? The kharks were the most highly developed species indigenous to the planet. Was it right to put them so far below the Human intruders? Had the Human lust for destruction infected

us too—or did this politic blind-ness to the philosophical ideal go on everywhere?

I hadn't been everywhere—I'd hardly been anywhere, and I'd never questioned my teachings; I'd never had cause. The Liberal faction argued for more xeno self-determination, and I couldn't see the point, because with Humans it was suicide. The Libs tampered with Human society to overthrow our settled status quo, to force the sector council to accept a "better" one, and to do it caused Human bloodshed and chaos. The Libs revolted me—but had we been more honest, or only bigger hypocrites? Suddenly there were no answers; there were only Humans who suffered and died for their "Gods," and the words "More atrocities are committed in the name of religion than for any other reason." A Human quotation. I fell asleep at last, aching with fatigue and indecision, and dreamed that I met the Human empire, come to reclaim its lost colony: a colony of the deaf and blind, living in ignorant stagnation. And with the guns of their warships trained on me the Humans said, "What have you done to our children . . . our children . . . our children . . . ?"

\* \* \* \*

While Etaa went through the greatest change in her life, the evolutionary changes my body was undergoing speeded up, as though my instincts had finally become attuned to the rhythm of this new world, and my body had chosen its most suitable form. Etaa never referred to the change at first, too unsure even to ask me questions. But at last, one evening, she came to stand beside me while I played with Alfilere, now more awkward than he was, and making him bounce with sudden baby laughter. Cool, dry breezes fingered her dark hair, and she asked with lips and hands, "Must you change?"

I nodded as much as I could. "I'm committed, now."

"Why?"

"Why must I change? Because it was planned that I would, for the protection of us both on an unknown world. It helps me know what to expect." The specter of a glider struck behind my eyelids: I'd recorded that this world was too unknown, that the adaptation had left me vulnerably in-between for too long. "Or why do I change?" I opened my eyes. "Because . . . every living creature changes as its environment changes, that's called evolution; but my people have the ability to change very fast. What takes most creatures many lifetimes to do, we can do in months, instinctively—in a way, like your rainbow flies change the colors of their wings in an instant, to match a flower. We've learned to control the changes when we want to, and freeze them—but when we need to understand the system behind the form, nature has to take its own course."

"*Her* course," Etaa said mildly. "Will—will you still speak with me when you are changed?"

I smiled, and Alfilere giggled, blinking up at me with wide brown eyes. “I think so. I need my voice now.”

Her smile broke apart, her speech broke down into gestures. —I wish I could change, as you do! Mother, let me change my being and start again; let me lose my memories, and . . . and my sins— She rubbed her hand across her mouth like a child, pressing back the bitter misery.

“Etaa . . .” I raised myself up, holding Alfilere. “How-ever you changed, your mind and soul would still be the same—with all the bonds to hold you. But however you changed, you couldn’t choose better than to be who you are.” I remembered how I’d looked forward to my change, my hope and anticipation, and said, “If you knew the truth, I wish I didn’t have to change. I—I’d rather stay Human with you.” I laughed. “I never thought I’d hear that—but it’s true. It’s true.”

She took Alfilere from me and slipped open her clingsuit as he nuzzled her in hunger. She stroked his curly head and smiled again at me, her eyes so strong with feeling that I could barely meet them. “Thank you,” she said, very clearly; and I knew I had been given my reward.

\* \* \* \*

The change reabsorbed and reformed my Human limbs, and I settled squatly to the ground. My skin mottled rust and gray, expansible air sacs made my leathery hide sag into whispering folds: I was becoming a glider—a creature of the air, bound to the earth by my own unsureness. To be an earthbound glider was clumsy and exasperating; it was difficult even to use a recorder for my observations, and worst of all, I itched all over with the changes, and couldn’t scratch. Etaa reconciled herself with her usual determined grace; she spent her evenings singing off-key to her child while she sat beside me scratching my back with a stick, and my alien body sang with relief.

During the days I haunted the cliffs, watching the gliders swing and soar, hunting far out over the maze—or sometimes closer in. Seeing me, they would set up a moaning that started tonal vibrations in my own air sacs; they lured and cajoled . . . until at last my alien desires slipped free of my inhibitions and I threw myself from the cliff and joined them. My flaccid body ballooned as the sacs expanded and filled with air: I could fly. Battered and caressed by the wind, my elemental god, mindless with exhilaration and terror, I probed the limits of the constant sky. I was one with the wind and the cloud-shadow; without thought, with only the flow of light into darkness, time into eternal timelessness, motion to rest to motion.

At last I came back to myself and remembered my duty, and my reality. I returned to the shelter, to find the hot, rising winds had turned cold in the long shadows of evening. Etaa looked at me strangely, as if somehow she knew where I had been. For a moment I saw envy in her eyes, the envy of one who could feel the



unity of all things for one who could share in it.

But as I grew apart from Etaa in one way, suddenly and unexpectedly I found that I had become much closer to her in another, more profound way: I discovered that I had become pregnant. I was very young for that, barely twice her age, and separated from my own people, everyone I cared for; there was no stimulus—and yet I was pregnant. And then I realized my stimulus had been Etaa and her laughing Alfilere. But they were aliens. There was no one here of my own people to share a birth with, no one I loved, not even a pregnant stranger. How could I bring a child into the world without conjugation, to be a part of no one but me: a solitary-child, not a child of shared love, and without namesakes or a family? I struggled alone with my despair, hiding it from Etaa behind the growing strangeness of my face, until the supply shuttle came again. But Iyohangziglepi could only report “no change” in Tramaine, and sharing my misery only seemed to deepen it in the end, as I watched the shuttle climb toward the sullen clouds and turned back alone to the ruined town.

But like all natural things, I was prepared by nature to be glad, and when finally I was ready for the first partition, my fears disappeared and astonished pride filled the void they left behind. A secret pride, which I kept hidden from Etaa as I had hidden my pain, because I didn't know what her reaction would be. She had accepted everything until now—because Human culture had not progressed to the point where “miracles” were impossible—but my protective instincts kept me silent. I only made her promise to avoid a darkened back room of our shelter, and hoped she would obey.

Not trusting her with that one secret of the differences between us, thinking that one mother of a child could not learn to understand another, was the worst thing I could ever have done. And somehow I knew it, when I heard her shriek of horror; knew it, as I struggled frantically back to the shelter from the fields: She had entered the forbidden room and found my child.

“Etaa, no!” I floundered to the doorway, wild with frustration and grief.

“Tam, hurry, help me, a beast—!”

“Etaa!” My voice broke with fury—she froze with the stick in her hand, over the formless bleeding lump of gray still quivering on the floor. Its piteous cries shrilled in the range that only I could hear, fading now as its life faded.

“Etaa”—the words burned my mouth—“what have you done?”

Etaa dropped the stick and backed away from me, frightened and confused. She lifted Alfilere, crying now with his own confusion and fright, and stood staring from me to the bundle of living parts that cowered on their nest, all that remained of my half-finished child. Her lips trembled. “Hywel . . . Hywel crawled into this room. And when I came after, I found—I found—that creeping around him.”

“Etaa, that ... is my child.”

“No!” Revulsion flared in her eyes, against the truth, or against her deed, or both.

“Yes . . .” I moved to the quivering cluster, avoiding the part that lay still and silent now, and the rest gathered close, mewling for comfort and warmth.

An anguished cry tore itself from Etaa; I looked up to see her bury her face against her own child. She sank down on the dusty floor, sobbing her desolation.

I held my little ones close, and groped for the strength, the words, to help us both. “I should have told you ... I should have warned you. They’re helpless, Etaa, they wouldn’t harm your son. Among—among my people, we don’t have children the way you do, all in a finished piece. We form them a part at a time, by duplicating each part of ourselves; the way I was able to grow another hand, when I needed one. Some parts serve an extra purpose, protecting the rest, that are more specialized; they might have stung him . . . but it’s harmless.”

She looked up at me, shaking her head, her mouth drawn too tight for words.

“I should have told you, Etaa.”

“They ...” She took a long breath. “... they are—yours?”

“Yes.”

“But, I th-thought . . . ?”

“You thought I was a man? I am. But I’m also a woman. We don’t come together with another to form a child; we form our own and choose someone we love for sharing: a part of our child for a part of theirs, after the birth.”

She groaned again, softly, fighting for acceptance. “Oh, Mother, help me ... Oh, *Tam*, what have I done to you?” She clutched Alfilere against her so hard that he squalled in protest.

I looked away. She had done what all Humans did, acted from fear, reacted with violence, inflicted pain and death blindly out of ignorance. I had been a Human once, and had despised them; but only now, after I’d lost Human form, had I really learned anything about the Human mind and spirit— and now, in the face of this most terrible act, I found I could only blame it on myself. “It—wasn’t your fault. And this hurt can be mended . . . we’re more fortunate than you that way. It would never have happened, if you’d known all along.”

But she only sat rocking her child, the bell on her ear singing softly with her helpless grief.

Etaa spent long hours alone in the days that followed, gazing out across the sighing, broken world from the doorway of the shelter or walking the rim of the cliffs with her baby at her back. The clouds that filled the sky now were only wind clouds, dark and licked with lightning, never dripping enough moisture to settle the endless dust. The wind had grown hot and parched, shredding the clouds and sweeping the dust high into the upper air, to fade the brazen blue that sometimes broke through into this land of somber hues. She watched the sky with yearning as Midsummer's Day approached, and when it came she performed makeshift Kotaane rituals; but clouds hid the triumph of the Sun, and she left them unfinished, her eyes haunted and empty.

At dusk she came to me where I crouched in the doorway watching the luminous fantasy-face of billowing Cyclops wink behind the clouds. I heard Alfilere murmur as he slept, somewhere in the firelight behind us. She pushed a dark curl back from her eye, brushed at it irritably as it slipped down again. At last she said, "It's true, isn't it, Tam?"

"What?" I waited, knowing there was more troubling her than the secret of my child.

"What you told me: that we're not on the Earth anymore. That we're on Laa Merth? And"—she struggled to keep her voice steady—"and that little speck that you see, passing over the face of the Cyclops like a fly ... that's the Earth? I've watched the sky, and it is different; the Cyclops is shrunken, the bands on her robe are twisted . . . everything is different here. I think it must be true."

"Yes. It's all true."

"Our legends tell how Laa Merth once had children of her own, but the Cyclops destroyed them. This must be their town, and so that must be true too."

"Yes." I wondered if there was any truth in the Kotaane myths about the source of the Human plague.

"But our legends say that the Mother is the center of all things, She is greater than all things. How can She be a speck on the face of the Cyclops!"

My throat tightened with the pain that shook her voice, and I couldn't answer.

"Tam." Her fingers reached down, scraping my rough hide. "I know nothing; it is all lost on the wind. Tell me what is true, Tam." She sank down beside me, her voice wheedling and her eyes wild. "What shall I believe in now?"

“Etaa, I—can’t ...” Her fingers convulsed on my back, telling me that I *had* to, now: that my pitiless, self-centered world had torn her world away and thrown her into the darkness of the void. Her faith was her strength against adversity, and without faith she would shatter, we would all shatter. “Etaa, the Mother is—”

“There is no Mother! Tell me the truth!”

I closed my eyes, wondering what truth was. “‘Mother’ and ‘Earth’ ... are the same to you, in your language, in your mind. But the Earth is also the world where you live, and a mother is what you are, and I am, a bearer of life. And those things are both still real, and wonderful. Your Earth looks very small now, but only because it’s far away; like Laa Merth, in your sky at home. When you return you’ll see again how large it is, and beautiful—full of everything you need for life. It’s like a mother, and that will still be true. The Kotaane are very wise to call themselves the children of the Earth, and be grateful for its gifts.”

“But the Cyclops is greater, and stronger.”

“Greater in size. But only another world.” And only a brightness behind the clouds now. “Your myths are right; it doesn’t love your people—it would poison you to live on Cyclops; but the Earth is strong enough to stay out of its reach, and will always care for you. And the sun will always defy its shadow, making the Earth fertile, able to give you life. You see, you’ve known the truth all along, Etaa.”

“But ... the worlds are not alive . . . they do not see all, or *choose* to interfere in our lives as you do—”

“No. But really in the end they are more powerful than any of us. All our lives depend on them; even starfolk need air, and water, and food to survive. We’re very mortal, just as you are. Everything we know of is mortal, even worlds . . . even suns.”

“Isn’t there anything else, then? Is there no God, or God-dess, to give us form?”

“We don’t know.”

Etaa gazed out into the growing darkness, silent, and her hands formed signs I didn’t know. And then, slowly, she reached up to her ear and removed the silver bell. She dropped it into a pocket of her jacket as if it burned her fingers.

“Oh, Meron,” she whispered, “how did you bear it for so long, never knowing what was true, or whether anything is, at all?”

I glanced over at her, surprised; but she only got up and went to her pallet, seeking her answer in the closeness of Alfilere. I slipped into my darkened nursery to

see my own child, thinking of the sorrow we two had given to each other, and the joys. And as I lay beside my forming child, I wished there could have been a way for us to give each other the greatest gift of all.

\* \* \* \*

We stayed on Laa Merth for more than a third of a Cyclo-pean year, nearly half a natural Human year. Bright-eyed Alfilere took wobbling steps hanging onto his mother's fin-gers, and my own baby, full-born now, soft and silvery and new, opened enormous eyes of shifting color to the light of the world. I marveled to think that I could have been so beautiful once, for S'elec'eca was both my child and my perfect twin.

Etaa loved "her" on sight (Humans have only gender terms reflecting their basic dichotomy, and she refused to call my baby "it"); and if it was partly out of guilt and need at the start, I saw it grow into reality, while she watched both children and I studied the world outside. She called my child "Silver," her term for S'elec'eca, the name I had chosen. She said nothing more about religion or belief, and her love for the children filled her empty days; but when she absently invoked the Mother a painful silence would fall, and her eyes would flicker and avoid me. Sometimes I noticed her touch-ing her throat, as if in finding her voice she had eaten the bitter forbidden fruit of a Human myth far older than her own and found the cost of knowledge was far too high.

When the supply shuttle came again I slithered and slid down the hill to meet it, oblivious to everything but the chance of good news for us; Iyohangziplepi nearly stunned me, thinking I was an attacking alien beast, before I remem-bered to call out to the ship.

But after the initial shamefaced apologies, I finally heard the news I had been waiting for so long: the war between Tramaine and the Kotaane was over. But the Kotaane had won—and not just won concessions as the Libs had planned, but won Tramaine. The king had been killed in battle, fight-ing to save his people; because, thanks to our Archbishop Shappistre, the people wouldn't fight, cursing the king and expecting us to take their side when we couldn't. And so the Liberals had won too, and the Service would have to support the Kotaane; but the Kotaane didn't know what to do with their victory now that they had it. They wanted only their priestess, and their peace, and the shattered Tramanians filled them with disgust: so signed the warrior Smith. Once I would have said that he was lying or insane, or else he wasn't Human. But he was Etaa's husband, and I believed him.

But if it was true, then nothing was settled, and Etaa's world teetered on the brink of more chaos. Iyohangziplepi said bitterly that even the Libs were appalled at their success in changing the world: because of it, we were faced with leaving the Humans to worse grief than we had caused al-ready, or interfering in their culture to a degree that would destroy all that was left of our faltering integrity. Etaa could go

home at last, and so could I. But to what kind of a future?

Etaa was still waiting eagerly at the top of the hill, watching my return from the ship. She held a child in each arm, masked against the blowing sand, and I could almost see hope lighting her eyes as I scabbled back up the gravelly hill and the shuttle stayed on the ground behind me.

“Tam, are we going home? Are we?”

“Yes!” I reached her side, puffing.

She danced with delight, so that one baby laughed and one squeaked in surprise. “It’s true, it’s true, little ones—”

“Etaa—”

She stopped, looking at me curiously.

“The ship will wait for us. Let’s get our things, and—and I’ll tell you the news. But let’s get out of the wind.”

We threw together our few belongings in minutes, and then she settled with the children on the piled moss beside the ashy fire-ring. I crouched beside her, and our eyes met in the sudden realization that it was for the last time. Taking a long breath, I said, “The war is over, Etaa. Your people have beaten the Tramanians.”

She shook her head, wondering. “How can it be—?”

“Your people are brave warriors. King Meron is dead, because the Tramanians wouldn’t fight them anymore; they expected the Gods to—”

“The king is dead?”

I nodded, forgetting it wouldn’t show. “Long live the king.” I finished the Human salute as I smiled down at Alfilere, who had come over to me and was trying to climb up my face. Etaa cradled my own little rainbow-eyes in her lap, as I longed to do, and would do, soon, at last. “Your suffering has been avenged, and the suffering of your people.”

“How—how did he die?”

“Struck by an arrow, in battle against your people.”

A spasm crossed her face, as if she felt the arrow strike her own heart; her head drooped, her eyes closed over tears. “Oh, Meron ...”

“Etaa,” I said. “You weep for that man? When your people hate him for taking you, and defiling their Goddess? When his own people hate him for keeping you, and bringing the wrath of their Gods? Even the Gods have hated him . . . But you, who deserve to hate him more than any of us, for ruining your life—you weep for him?”

She only shook her head, hands pressing her eyes. “I am not what I was. And neither is the world.” Her hands dropped, her eyes found my face again. “One’s truth is another’s lie, Tam; how can we say which is right, when it’s always changing? We only know-what we feel . . . that’s all we ever really know.”

I felt the air move softly in the cavities of my alien body and the currents of alien sensation move softly in my mind. “Yes. Yes ... I suppose it is. Etaa, do you still want to return to your husband, and your people?”

Her breath caught. “Hywel ... he is alive? Oh, my love, my love ...” She picked up her curly-haired son, covering him with kisses. “Your father will be so proud! ... I knew it must be true, I knew it!” She laughed and cried together, her face shining. “Oh, thank you, Tam, thank you. Take us to him now, please! Oh, Tam, it’s been so long! Oh, Tam . . .” Her face crumpled suddenly. “Will he want me? How can he want me, how can he bear to look at me, when I betrayed him? When he jumped from the cliff to save his soul from the Neaane, and I pulled back? How can he forgive me, how can I go home again?”

“Why did you pull back?” I said softly.

“I don’t know! I thought—I thought it was because of my child.” She held him close, resting her head on his while he squirmed to get free. “For half a second, I drew back—and then it was too late, the soldiers...But how can I know? I was so afraid, how can I know it wasn’t for me? To let him die, thinking ...” She bit her lip. “He will never look at me!”

“But who was the coward, Etaa? Who threw himself from the cliff and left you to the Neaane? Was it you who betrayed, or Hywel?”

“No! Who says that—”

“Hywel says it. He is the Smith, Etaa, the victor in this war, and whatever the reasons that others fought, he fought for you. All he wanted was to find you, and to repay you for his wrong. He wants you brought to him, that’s all he wants— but only if it’s what you want, too. He cannot send you his feelings, but he sends you this, and asks you to—remember.” Carefully I produced, from a pouch in my hide, the box Iyohangziplepi had given me.

She took the box from me and opened it, lifting out a silver bell formed like a flower, the mate to the one she had worn on her ear. She searched in her pockets for

the one she had taken off, and laid them together in the palm of her hand. Her fist closed over them, choking off their sound; her hand trembled, and more tears squeezed out from under her lashes. But then, slowly, a smile as sweet as music grew on her face, and she pressed them to her heart.

Alfilere had drawn Silver off her lap, and they rolled together in the moss beside her, sending up a cloud of dust. Etaa's exile and sorrow were ended at last; she would return to her people, and I would return to mine. Probably we would never see each other again, and the children ... I looked away. What sort of a life would Alfilere have, in the world we had left him? The son of the Smith, the heir to Tramaine, the strong, gifted child of Etaa, the Blessed One . . . who would have been my child too if there had been a way; who was as dear to me as my own child. The child of unity in a broken world. The child of unity—

And suddenly it was so obvious: The answer to everything had been here in my keeping, all along. We could raise Alfilere to inherit his birthrights, and be a leader such as his people had never known—one who could give them back their rights and give us back our pride.

“Etaa?” She looked at me vaguely, still half lost in reverie. I tried to keep my voice even, not knowing if she felt the same way I did, or what her reaction would be. “You know the situation back on your Earth is very unstable right now. The Kotaane have won a war they didn't expect to win, and they don't know what to do about it. Your husband wants only to go home with you, not to rule a kingdom. Your people despise the Tramanians, and now the Tramanians despise themselves. They don't even know what to think about their Gods, they have no leadership; all the nations that surround Tramaine will be shaken, and there'll be more war and hardship that could involve your people, unless something is done—“

She frowned, and reached to catch up the escaping children.

I released air from my sacs in a sigh. “Yes, I know. *We've* done too much already. Even the Service can see that, finally. But if some new answer isn't found, some compromise, things will keep on getting worse. We could destroy you, Etaa, with our meddling, unless somehow you stop being a threat to us. And if we did that to you, we would have destroyed ourselves as well.”

She shifted the babies uneasily on her knees. “You have a plan to stop it?”

“I do ... I *think* I do. ... When I met you, I thought all Humans were violent and cruel without reason. That's why we were afraid of you, why we wanted you to stay where you were. But now I don't believe it. Your people are more aggressive than we are, and you have to learn there are responsibilities to progress that can't be ignored; you have to grow in understanding as you grow in strength.

“But your cultures are still young, and maybe if you begin to learn now how to



live with one another, when you come to us as equals between the stars you'll be able to live with us as well. The time is perfect now, in the balance of change, for a religion to show Humans the unity of all life, and how to respect it—as your people do, when they follow the teachings of the Mother. And there is the perfect sign of that unity, the perfect *Human* to begin it: your son.” I shifted nervously, trembling with hope and love. “Etaa, will you give me your son? Let me raise him, among my people, and give him the chance to change your world forever.”

Her eyes stabbed me with incredulity and betrayal. “My son? Why should you take my son?”

Blindly I said, “Because he’s the child of the Kotaane and the child of the Neaane. Let him inherit his father’s throne and close the wound between your peoples forever.”

“He is not the king’s son! He is mine, and my husband’s.”

“Only you know that, Etaa. The Tramanians believe he’s the heir to their throne.”

“My husband knows. He would never agree, he would never give up his son and clan-child.”

“Hywel would be proud to give his child such an honor! I know he would, I...” I faltered, in my terrible need to be right.

“No!” Her hand rose in a fist. “I will not! Do you think we’re less than animal’s, that you can take our children and we’ll never mind?” Her voice broke. “Tam, eight years we waited for this child—eight *years*. How can you think we could give him up?” She looked down at me, her eyes changing. “But I forget; you aren’t even Human.” It was the first time she had made that an insult.

And I suddenly remembered that I wasn’t, that we were still two totally alien beings who would never really know each other’s needs or share each other’s dreams; and there would never be an answer that was right for both our peoples. “I didn’t know what I was asking, Etaa. I’m sorry, I—”

“Would you give up your child, Tam?”

I saw Silver from the corner of my eye, and tiny mock hands contentedly exploring Etaa’s real one. I forced my eyes to meet Etaa’s. “For this, I would give up my child, Etaa. Even if it was the only child I would ever bear. If it meant the future of my people, I would. And it *can* mean the future of both our peoples.”

Coldly she said, “Would you give me Silver, Tam, if I gave you my son? To raise in his place?”

“Yes . . . yes!” I wondered wildly what emotions showed on my glider’s face. “Etaa, if you could only know how you honor me, how much it means, to share a child with you. If you knew how much I’ve wanted you to love my child the way I love yours—it’s all I could ask; to share with you, and bind our lives together.”

She searched my eyes desperately, holding the children, and the future, in her hands. At last she looked down, into the two small flower faces peering up from her lap, and asked, “Would you teach him to use his voice?”

“And write, and read; and hand-sign, too. And to respect all life, and make others want to do the same. He’s a good, beautiful baby, Etaa; let him be a great man. Let him be all he can be. He could save your world.”

She shook her head aimlessly and no silver song answered now to give her comfort. “Is this true? Is it the only way to help? Will it help everyone in the world?”

“It’s the only way, if you want the Humans to have any say in their own future, Etaa. If you want to save yourselves from our meddling.” The knowledge tore at me that I was the biggest meddler of all, not shifting the fates of anonymous aliens, but tearing apart the life of someone I knew about and cared about, who had suffered so much—for a dream that might never come true. And what if I was wrong? “Etaa—”

“All right,” she said softly, not even listening. “Then it must be, if we are to have our future. If you will love my son, if my son will be all he can be; if the *world* can too, then ... I will share my child with you.” The final words fell away to nothing. But she looked up, and for a moment her voice was strong and sure. “There is no one else I would do this for, Tam. Only for you. Don’t let me be wrong.”

\* \* \* \*

I kept my un-Human form hidden in the shuttle when we returned to Tramaine, to the town by Barys Castle where it all began. Etaa rose from her seat as the lock opened; beyond, in the darkened afternoon of early autumn, I could see the congregation of resplendent artificial gods—and goddesses, our “manifestation” of the Mother’s willingness to accept this new union of beliefs. Beyond them were the milling Human representatives, and somewhere among them, a dark-haired warrior who only wanted his wife. Etaa took Alfilere up in her arms for the last time wrapped in a royal robe, and I saw her shiver as he nuzzled her neck, cooing. Her face was the color of chalk, frozen into a mask too brittle to melt with tears. She left Silver squirming forlornly alone on the foam-cushioned seat.

“Etaa—?” I said. “Won’t you share my S’elec’eca?” In a voice like glass, she said, “I couldn’t take Silver, Tam. I love her, I *do*—but how could I teach her what she was meant to be? And my people wouldn’t understand her. It wouldn’t be fair. I

will try ... try to help them be ready for my son. And maybe someday for Silver, too. Will you bring her to see me then?"

"I will," I said, wanting to say something else. Tears crept down my face like glue.

"Will you always be with him, and Silver too?"

"Yes, always . . . and never let him forget you." I hesitated, looking down. "Etaa, you'll have more children. And it doesn't have to be eight years again. There are ways, we can help you, if you want us to."

Her mouth stiffened in angry refusal; but then, softening, she bent her head to kiss Alfilere and said very faintly, "I would like that . . . Tam, I should hate you too, for every-thing you've done. But I don't. I can't. Good-bye, Tam. Take care of our children." She knelt and stroked my mottled hide, while I caressed her with the sighing hands of the wind, the only hands I had.

Etaa left the cabin, and Iyohangziplepi came to pick up Silver, who began to cry at being held in a stranger's arms. Together we watched the viewscreen as Etaa presented Alfilere to the waiting deities, with the small speech I had trained her to recite for effect. She delivered it flawlessly, standing as straight and slender as a rod of steel, and if there was any sign on her face of the agony inside her, I couldn't see it. But Archbishop Shappistre stood nearby, still tolerated by the grace of the Gods, watching with an expression that surprised and disturbed me. And then after one of the Goddesses had accepted Alfilere, Etaa turned on him with pointing finger and charged him in sign language with treason, in the name of Alfilere III and his father Meron IV before him. The archbishop turned pale, and the Gods glanced back and forth among themselves. Then one of them made a sign, and guards appeared to lead King Meron's betrayer away.

Fleetingly, as if for someone beyond sight, I saw Etaa smile.

But already she was searching the Human crowd, and I saw it part for the tall dark man in Kotaane dress, the warrior known as the Smith—Etaa's husband. A fresh puckered scar marked his cheek above the line of his beard, and he still walked with the small limp that bespoke his terrible fall. He stopped beyond the crowd's edge, across the clear space from Etaa, and his grim, bespectacled young face twisted suddenly with uncertainty and longing.

Etaa stood gazing back at him across the field, a bizarre figure in a flapping dusty jacket, her face a mirror of his own. Two strangers, the Mother's priestess who had found her voice and lost her faith, the peaceful smith who had taken heads; strangers to each other, strangers to themselves. And between them they had lost the most precious possession this crippled people knew, a new life to replace the old. The frozen moment stretched between them until I ached.

And then suddenly Etaa was running, her dark hair flashing behind her. He found her and they clung together, so lost in each other that two merged into one, as though nothing could ever come between them again.

## **AFTERWORD— MOTHER AND CHILD**

*People often ask me, “Where do you get those weird ideas?” And they frequently go on to ask if I get them from dreams. Most of my dreams are not all that interesting, unfortunately. (I find far more inspiration for my work in the world around me when I’m awake.) I do get bits and pieces of image from dreams that I can sometimes work into my stories, but “Mother and Child” is the only thing I’ve written that comes entirely out of a dream.*

*In the dream I happened to be reading a story in an anthology; I had begun browsing somewhere in the middle of it and became more and more engrossed as I went along, until I was reading the second half of the story very carefully. (This is something I have a habit of doing when I’m awake, as well.) The story was illus-trated, and, in the way of dreams, it began to have more and more illustrations, until at the end it had actually become a kind of animated film instead of a story. When I woke up I wrote down what I remembered and then set out to plot for myself what had happened in the first half of the novella. (The dream began where Etaa and Tam are stranded on the second moon together.)*

*I couldn’t remember the name that I’d seen at the top of the pages while I was “reading” it in my dream, but I remembered that the name had begun with an O. After I wrote the novella, I ended up selling it to the anthology Orbit—which led me to wonder a little about precognition.*

*A lot of fantasy readers tell me that they really enjoyed this “fantasy”; like some of my other stories, the anthropological backgrounding I did in “Mother and Child” gives it something of a fantasy feel. (I’d been reading a lot of historical fiction just before I began the novella, and some of what I’d read influenced its tone, as well.) But unlike “The Storm King,” I consider this to be strictly science fiction. One of my favorite aspects of this story is the way that many of the characters regard hearing, which under normal circumstances is a perfectly normal sense, as a kind of extrasensory magic. I’m also particularly fond of Tam, the alien, who is probably my personal favorite among all the alien characters who have appeared in my work.*