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Blake's Progress by R.F. Nelson

INTRODUCTION

When I first heard that Ray Nelson was writing a science fiction novel about William Blake, I was a bit surprised. "What does Blake have to do with science fiction?" I asked.

"Ah," said Ray, "you forget that he had visions of the future. He was, in fact, a *time traveler*." Ray stared at me with his piercingly mild eyes.

I said, "Oh, I see. Sort of like DaVinci in Manly Wade Wellman's *Twice in Time*"

"Not at all," said Ray. "Mr. Blake wasn't a modern man who went back in time, he was an 18th Century man who traveled at will to the limits of the timestream, past and future. His works show it."

"They do?" I said. Ray knows more about art than I; he was studying art at the University of Chicago when I was still in junior high school, struggling with Mechanical Drawing. He also knows more about poetry than I; he published a slim volume called *Perdita: Poems of Love and Self Pity* while I was graduating from high school (and reading Manly Wade Wellman).

"Read my book and you'll understand it all," Ray told me.

So I did read his novel, and indeed I came to understand. Though in truth, what I understood wasn't so much about William Blake as about Radell Faraday Nelson. I realized once again that Ray has an imagination more fertile than that of anyone today who isn't locked up.

Ray has always been creative. Years ago, before he took typewriter in hand to write either poetry or science fiction, Ray was known primarily as a cartoonist; he drew wonderful cartoons featuring roughly humanoid creatures called "globlies." The globlies were *roughly* humanoid only in appearance; their personalities were more human than most of us.

One of his cartoons showed a globly riding a horse pell-mell toward a giant mirror, fiercely tilting his lance at his own reflection.

Another showed a globly on the back of a robot horse, riding through a dark land of featureless sheet metal; the globly, with touching faith, was saying, "Ole Dobbin knows the way home."

In another of Ray's cartoons, a fat globly politician marched forward saying smugly, "The people are 100% behind me." And indeed they were: a dimly seen mass of humanity milled on the distant horizon.

Ray once told me he was going to write a science fiction novel about the globlies, casting those lovably naive creatures as Martians. He even wrote an outline for the book and sent it to me when I was a junior editor at Ace Books. I passed it on to Don Wollheim, the senior editor, but he declined to buy it on the grounds that it was too whimsical. Somehow, I've always felt that the field of modern literature was just a little impoverished by the lack of that globly novel.

Ray's creations *are* often whimsical; and they're always off-trail and unpredictable, as readers of such Nelson stories as *Turn Off the Sky* and *Time Travel for Pedestrians* can attest. So I wasn't surprised when I read *Blake's Progress* and found that Ray had taken that great old science fiction plot, the alternate worlds story, and made of it something new and odd.

For one thing, though *Blake's Progress* is about a battle that literally shakes the timestream, its settings ranging from the remote past to the far future, there are no brawny heroes wielding rayguns. Instead, the hero is a rather dreamy artist with a sexual peculiarity that may lift Hugo Gernsback's eyebrows right out of his grave. The heroine is no timid beauty who cries "Eeek!" at the sight of giant reptilian antagonists; Kate Blake is a prim Christian wife who regards the villains of the story with stern disapproval.

There are wonders galore in this book, panoramas of glittering future

cities and savage alien beings, but the focus of it all is the home and hearth of Mr. and Mrs. William Blake, citizens of a simpler world than our own.

As for whimsy, it's been quite awhile since I've read about an alien being as charming as the reptilian giant named Morr Droon Fahra Rahoor Thee Ahh Oh Thahrr Noh Grooh Rahhr—called Grooh for short.

All in all, I don't believe I've ever read a science fiction novel like *Blake's Progress* before. And I suspect I'll never see another like it till Ray Nelson writes it.

Terry Carr

Hear the voice of the Bard! Who Present, Past and Future sees.

William Blake

Songs of Experience

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CHAPTER ONE

Nude but for wings, the Zoas swarmed beelike from century to century, savoring of each age its unique bouquet. In tunic, toga and sandals, with shortsword and dagger at the ready, they mingled with the Roman crowd, heard the hysterical ovation as Nero's chariot passed, then, as the rain came, watched the blood of Jewish gladiators turn the earth to brick-red mud.

In doublet and hose they rode in procession a while with a king.

In airtight silver suit and inverted fishbowl helmet they walked the twilight desert of Mars at noon, under a Sun that was no more than one more star.

In monkish robes they watched the armored knights crash together on horseback and then, when one knight fell, continue the fight on foot, panting, grunting, weeping.

In glowing fog of energy like a second skin, they stood at a wide oval porthole and watched the triple star Capella recede, turn red and fade into blackness.

In hairy dirty animal skins they ran barefoot through tall grass, howling at a shaggy bellowing mastodon that fled before them toward a trap, while the grim sun shimmered at zenith.

And then at last, weary and laughing and nude once more, they rested on a cliff overlooking a swamp that would someday be London, gazing down at a torpid, gigantic, mottled diplodocus that chewed its cud and waded while a gray overcast moved overhead.

The Zoas unstrapped their wings and laid them among the ferns, white feathers among the graygreen feathery fronds in the dim shadowless light.

The diplodocus swung its little head in their direction, neck graceful, swanlike, tiny eyes glistening like wet ebon pebbles, but made no move to harm them or to flee.

Many of the Zoas wandered, in twos and threes, away from the swamp, toward a distant grove of giant redwood trees, gathering samples of ferns, palmlike cycads, tasting the nuts and fruits of the ginkgos.

Four Zoas, the leaders, remained at the cliff's edge, reclining on the wild fern lawn that grew there.

Los said to the other three, "That was wonderful! And when we've rested we can do some spot-checking to make sure we haven't changed anything."

White-bearded but athletic Urizen rolled over and said softly, "What if we did change something? Does it matter?" Los answered, "Of course it matters! One mistake could alter the whole of history!"

"That's true, but is history so perfect it could not be improved? You saw all the hate, the violence, the injustice! What's so sacred about that? Why should we be so careful not to change one blood-stained minute?"

It looked like a good argument was developing between Los and Urizen. The other two sat up and paid attention. "Once we begin making changes, when do we stop?" Los said angrily.

Urizen leaned forward. "We stop when we have brought into being a perfect world, a joy without pain, and a stability without fluctuation. We stop when we have brought mankind under perfect laws of peace, of love,

of unity, of pity, compassion, forgiveness... one command, one desire, one weight, one measure, one king, one God, one law! Isn't this worth a little risk?"

Los laughed uneasily. "I'd be upset if I thought you were serious, but you're always full of dreams like this."

"Dreams?" Urizen stood up. "This time my dreams will become the world's reality! Power is not power unless you use it."

As Urizen picked up his wings and began strapping them on, Los got up and came over to him, touching him on the arm and saying softly, "Urizen, my friend..."

Urizen turned and gave Los a shove. Still Los, taking it for good-natured horseplay, repeated, "Urizen..."

But Urizen was gone.

Los hesitated only an instant. "My comrades!" he shouted to the Zoas and they, hearing the urgency in his voice, came running from all around.

"Listen, all of you," Los cried. "We must find Urizen and stop him!"

"What's he going to do now?" came the voice of one of the women. She was already struggling into her wings.

"I doubt if even he has any clear idea," Los answered grimly.

Moments later the cliff was again vacant. The diplodocus noted this fact with monumental indifference.

But in eighteenth century London a redheaded, blue-eyed boy awoke with a scream to glimpse a bearded winged figure passing across the face of the moon.

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1782

The Borough of Battersea lay shrouded in fog on the right bank of the Thames, opposite Chelsea. Even on those rare days when the sun shone, Battersea was a drab gray place; no tourist visiting London from the

Continent would waste his time on its ordinary little homes, close-crowded together, its ordinary little shops, its ordinary little market-gardens.

Kate Boucher was comfortable in this drabness. She had never been outside of London, never seen anything better. She found a gentle human beauty in her city, and her attitude transformed everything wherever she went, not only for herself, but for those around her.

Now, as she rode beside her father on a vegetable wagon down a narrow cobblestone street, soot-blackened chimneysweeps, bearded street-vendors and ragged barefoot prostitutes turned to watch her, amazed. It was not only the way she was dressed, all white from head to toe in bridal gown and lace, not only the glow of health and youth (she was only 21) that burned in her slender body, not only the classic Grecian elegance of her face—framed in curly light-brown hair—but above all it was her eyes they looked at, eyes that seemed to see right through this world into some more magical world beyond.

Her father, dressed in his Sunday best—black coat, waistcoat and kneebreeches with puff of white muslin at the throat—smiled at her from time to time but said nothing to break her enchantment. In the wagon behind them rode Kate's mother, sisters and brothers, likewise all scrubbed and brushed and dressed-up for the occasion, and they too were silent. They knew it was no use to talk to Kate when she was like this.

They turned a corner, entering a larger street, and there up ahead Kate could see the modest neighborhood church of St. Mary. To her it might have been a cathedral. On the front steps a small group of people stood waiting. "William," she whispered.

And there he was, the man she was going to marry. William's family stood around him, but her eyes could focus only on him, on his stocky young body (He was 25), his unkempt carrot-orange hair, his large wide eyes that seemed to echo her own, as if they might be sister and brother rather than bride and groom.

William's mother and sister stood a little apart from his father and elder brother. They were all so neat, so well-dressed, except William. Even at his own wedding William's kneebreeches were slightly frayed.

His mother and sister were both named Catherine, the same as Kate. Now there would be three Catherines in the Blake family.

Kate noticed that William's father was frowning. He had been against the marriage all along. Perhaps he still was, though there was no way he could prevent it. William was making enough money to support her, so the old man's threats to "cut Bill off without a sixpence" no longer carried any weight. What did Mr. Blake object to in the marriage? She thought he liked her well enough; in fact it was almost as if he was trying to warn her, as if there was something about young William that was not quite right, but which the father was too loyal to openly reveal.

The vegetable wagon reined up at the foot of the church stairs and William came running to help her down. How like him that was! Always so impulsive, doing instantly whatever he wished, without a thought about what was proper.

She laughed as he lifted her down. How strong he was!

Hand in hand they ascended the steps and entered the dimness of the church vestibule. Out of the corner of her eye she studied his profile, so calm and noble even under stress. It was strange that a man so free and impulsive never laughed.

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"Will you be good enough to sign the church register?" asked the lean, balding sexton.

"Why no. I'm sorry but..." Kate blushed and drew back from the extended hand holding the goosequill pen.

"Your husband has signed. The witnesses have signed," persisted the sexton. "The law requires it, young lady."

"I can't, you see. I can't spell."

Old Mr. Blake turned away from the guests and glanced at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Is it absolutely necessary?" demanded William, coming quickly to her aid.

"Absolutely," the sexton replied. "However, sir, the law is satisfied in such cases if the bride draws an X on the proper line."

She haltingly drew her X, pausing between the two strokes, then returned the pen to the sexton.

"Very good, very good," the sexton muttered. "And now could you tell me your maiden name?"

"Boucher," she replied.

The sexton bent over the register, saying to Kate's father, "Could you give me the correct spelling for that, please?"

Mr. Boucher began, "B... U..."

The sexton was growing impatient. "Yes, yes. Go on."

"T... C... H... E... R."

"Good heavens, man," the sexton exclaimed. "That's not Boucher, that's Butcher!"

Mr. Boucher answered angrily, "Is it my fault the Good Lord didn't give me nor my daughter the high position in life that opens the world of book learning to a man?"

"Of course not. I understand, sir. I understand perfectly." The sexton was carefully blotting the ink.

William put in, "Perhaps you can change it."

"No," the sexton said with finality. "It's in ink now, sir. Butcher it is and Butcher it stays."

Kate felt dizzy and ill. Everything else in the marriage ceremony had gone off perfectly, and now this had to happen. It was such a little thing, yet it brought into high relief other things not so little, things that she had brushed aside as unimportant but which now forced themselves into her mind and refused to be silenced.

Her husband's profession was the making of illustrations for books—he was a commercial engraver—and worse than that his hobby was the writing of poetry. She, because she could neither read nor write, was an alien, an intruder, in his world of books and words.

As they left the church and descended the stairs, Kate clung hard to William's arm as if, having seen her shortcomings exposed in such a humiliating way before his well-educated and proper family, he might leave her forever.

There was a fine carriage waiting.

"Oh, how elegant!" she cried.

"Better enjoy the ride," William said soberly. "We won't be taking many. It's my father rented the carriage. He can afford it. I can't. At least not yet."

He helped her in.

The coachman gave the horses a soft command and the carriage jerked into motion. She looked back and saw her family climbing into the old vegetable wagon. Her father waved to her and as she waved back she thought, *He's as good a Christian gentleman as anyone else, even if he's never been to school.*

"Where to, sir?" the coachman asked.

"23 Green Street, Leicester Fields," William told him.

"Very good, sir."

They turned a corner and Kate's family was lost to view.

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William closed the door behind him. "Well, here's your new lodgings, Mrs. Blake!"

"I like that!" Kate said.

"Like what?"

"I like to have you call me Mrs. Blake. It's so homelike... Mr. Blake." She laughed and he smiled slightly.

She wandered about, touching things, as he looked on. Two small rented rooms on the second floor; she was used to more room, and there

was an air of respectability in those two rooms she found vaguely intimidating. Were the curtains too white? Or were the comforters on the bed too well-stuffed? Or were the pitcher and washbasin on the dresser too finely made, too delicate, too breakable? And were those candleholders on the mantel made of gold? She touched one. No, it was only brass covered with gilt. That was somehow reassuring.

"It's quite nice, Mr. Blake. I believe I'll stay."

"I knew you'd like it, Mrs. Blake."

There was a long uncomfortable silence.

"Would you like a fire?" asked William at last.

She turned to look out the window. There was a brick wall a short distance away. She could not see the sky, but by the ruddy color of the light on the wall she could tell the sun was setting. "Indeed yes, Mr. Blake. It will be a cold night, I expect."

She could hear him moving around, arranging the wood in the fireplace. The red glow outside was fading rapidly. Why was she so uneasy? What could possibly be wrong? Then she realized what it was. Since they had entered the flat, William had not once touched her.

"Mr. Blake?"

"Yes?"

"You're not ashamed of me, are you?"

"Good heavens, no!"

"I'm not as well-learned as some."

She was thinking of Polly Wood.

William had been in love with Polly Wood, so much in love that he'd fallen ill from it. Polly had been bright, educated, well-bred, but had not been in love with William. Kate was William's second choice, not his first, and she knew it.

Kate and William had met while William was staying with the Boucher

family in Battersea, trying to forget Polly, and Kate remembered well their first conversation.

He'd told her all about his hopeless love for Polly, all about how Polly was unfaithful to him, how Polly made him suffer, and then he'd asked, "Kate, do you pity me?"

She'd answered, "Yes, I surely do."

And he'd said, "Then I *love* you."

But now William was behind her, kneeling in front of the fireplace, saying, "Education isn't important."

She whirled from the window to face him. "Promise me something, Mr. Blake."

"Whatever you wish, Kate."

"Promise you'll teach me to read and write!"

"I told you that wasn't important."

"But it is! It is! Promise me! Swear that you'll teach me!"

He looked at her over his shoulder, an odd expression on his broad features. "Very well, girl, if it'll make you happy."

"Promise to teach me everything you know, Mr. Blake."

He grew even more serious than usual. "I can teach you some things, but not everything. Certain matters must remain..."

"No, no! Everything! Do you think men are so much cleverer than women?" She knew he prided himself on being an advanced thinker, on believing in freedom and equality for all... even women.

"It isn't that, Mrs. Blake." The room had grown quite dark, but the fire in the fireplace illuminated William's face in a way that transformed it into a mask of moving' light and shadow, made it look almost demonic. "It's nothing to do with men and women. There are certain matters I know of that I could not teach anyone, male or female."

"Good God, Mr. Blake, what are you talking about?" He sighed and stood up. "I can't... I must not tell you."

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The fireplace in the next room was the only light, dim and flickering. Kate and William lay side by side in bed, under voluminous comforters, not touching each other.

For some time now the gentle crackle of the fire had been the only sound in the room, then Kate murmured, "Are you asleep, Mr. Blake?"

"No."

"I never took you for the shy sort, Mr. Blake. Is this how young gentlemen of your class generally spend their wedding nights?"

"I suppose not," he admitted reluctantly.

"I can tell you for sure, sir, it's not the way things are done in my part of town."

"I thought there was more between us than that."

"Than what?"

"The simple lusts of the flesh."

She sat up. "The simple lusts of the flesh! We're husband and wife, you silly man. What's between husband and wife ain't no sin! I don't understand you, Mr. Blake. You always had the gift of gab, so you could make everything clear to a poor girl, so now turn over and explain."

"There's nothing to explain."

"At least sit up and face me. I want to see your face."

Slowly he sat up and faced her, but his features were so shadowed she could not make out his expression. His voice, when he spoke, was calm, deep and grave as ever. "Please Mrs. Blake, don't plague me so."

"Then tell me what's gnawing on your soul, Mr. Blake. I'm sure there's something. You've often preached about how a true marriage must be

based on honesty, so now be honest with me. What is that business you were talking about? That business you can't teach anyone."

"You mustn't ask me."

"But I do ask you, and I'll get an answer or pack up and go home tomorrow." Her own words frightened her, but it was too late to take them back.

When his answer came he spoke so softly she wasn't sure she heard him correctly. "I have visions, Mrs. Blake."

"Visions, Mr. Blake?"

"Since I was four years old I've seen things nobody else could see."

"What... what kind of things?"

"Angels. Demons. The distant past and the distant future. The face of God."

"Of God? No man sees the face of God and lives. I've heard that right from the pulpit!"

"I have seen Him. When I was four God peered in at my window, then flew off across the face of the moon. I ran screaming to my mother with fear."

"With fear? But God's our gentle father, Mr. Blake. You don't have nothing to fear from Him, at least if you ain't done nothing wrong. That wasn't God you saw, but it might have been that other fellow... you know who I mean."

"It was God! Nobody else could look so wise, so all-knowing. If you'd seen Him you'd believe me."

"Well then, what did He look like?"

"Bearded, muscular, naked..."

"Naked? You mean he was walking around outside with no clothes on?"

"That's right." William's voice was still calm, reasonable.

"Now I *know* it was the other fellow!"

"No, God and the angels never wear clothes."

"How do you know?"

"About the angels? I've seen them with my own eyes, walking among the hay-makers in a field one summer morning. They were all naked, I swear it. And so were the angels I saw later on as I walked through the fields hard by Peckham Rye, all up in a tree with their bright wings shining among the boughs."

"They were all naked?"

"All! But then one day I was out in the fields again, and there I met the prophet Ezekiel. My mother whipped me when I told her."

"You told your parents?"

"Oh yes, they thought I was telling foolish lies, but when I kept it up they began to worry. That's the reason, you see, why they didn't send me to school, but taught me to read and write at home, as I'm going to teach you. They understood, finally, that my visions were a gift from God, and that the other children would only laugh at me. When I was old enough to be apprenticed I was sent to an engraver named Ryland, but I wouldn't go."

"Why not?" Now that William was talking, she had to hear it all.

"I had a vision. I knew Ryland was going to be hanged, and later on, sure enough, he *was* hanged, for forgery. Now do you understand why I didn't want to tell you these things?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, I think I do. And I understand something else, too."

"What's that, Kate?"

"I understand why your father didn't want you to marry."

Once started, William's monolog could not be stopped. He lay beside her all that night telling her, in urgent whispers, about Gwin King of Norway, and King Edward the Third, and King Edward the Fourth, and a

woman in the middle ages named Fair Elenor who was handed her husband's head in a bloody cloth and died of shock, and many more things from every time and place in history, and he swore he'd seen each event with his own eyes.

He finally fell asleep as the first light of dawn filtered into the little flat, but she lay awake a long time, a sorely troubled virgin.

At last she thought, *if he's insane, and I stay with him, we can't be happy together unless we share even his madness. I must make him teach me to see his vision!*

Then, smiling, she slept.

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CHAPTER TWO... 1787

Kate was still a virgin after five years of marriage. It no longer seemed strange to her—soothing rather, and peaceful, with the kind of peace that comes, with the vow of chastity, to a nun. There was, to make the semblance complete, the feeling that she had—she couldn't remember exactly when—taken a vow of poverty also, and this feeling that her poverty was voluntary, freely chosen, kept her from complaining that her William was not a good provider.

William's father had died; her own parents never visited her. The few artists and writers who dropped in spoke to William but not to her. Had she also taken a vow of silence? She did not think about it.

William opened a printshop. It was not successful. With the help of some of his wealthier friends, he had had a book of his adolescent poems published; few people read it when it was given to them as a gift, and nobody bought it.

He exhibited his watercolor paintings at the Royal Academy; nobody noticed them.

His friends tried to raise money by subscription to send him to Rome to finish his studies as an artist; nothing ever came of it.

They moved, first (after his father died) to 27 Broad Street, where he had been born and where his mother and sister still lived, then, in the

autumn of 2785, to 28 Poland Street. It made no difference where they lived, their lives were always the same.

They were always alone together in a little room. She would cook, sew and make things; he would work on his engravings when someone was willing to pay for them, and on his paintings when he was "at liberty." As he worked he sang, making up both melody and words as he went along, and if he happened to come up with a particularly striking bit of song, he would say, "How about that one, Mrs. Blake?"

And she, like as not, would say, "Very nice, Mr. Blake."

And he would pause in his engraving to scribble the verse in a notebook.

He called her "Kate" at times but usually "Mrs. Blake." She never called him anything but "Mr. Blake."

It was in the evenings that Kate went to school, with Mr. Blake as her one and only teacher, and it was then, more than at any other time, that she felt close to him. Slowly, patiently, never once losing his temper, never once laughing at her, he taught her how to read and write, how to draw, how to paint with watercolors, how to cut the copper engravings with which he made his modest living—the illustrations for books full of fencing, history, sentimental poetry and second-rate lovesongs...

Her style in drawing, painting and engraving became so close to his own that they themselves could not tell, where both had worked on the same picture, who had done what.

She would lay down her graver and turn to him, looking into his large round blue eyes glowing in the candlelight, and ask, "Is that done proper, Mr. Blake?"

And he would answer, "That's capital, Mrs. Blake."

He was a good teacher. She was a good student.

But there was one thing that, try as he might, he could not teach her.

He could not teach her to see his visions.

"First," he would tell her, "let us be sure you're ready."

"Oh, I'm ready, right enough."

"You have abstained from all strong drink? Even coffee and tea?"

"Not a drop, Mr. Blake."

"You have not indulged in the lusts of the flesh."

Leonardo DaVinci, you know, could never have seen what he saw if he'd indulged in the lusts of the flesh."

"Have no fear, Mr. Blake. I'm a good girl, I am."

"You have taken no drugs or medicine?"

"What would I do that for? I ain't sick."

"Then let us begin." He would turn toward the fireplace where, by this time the flames were usually burning low, smoldering a sullen glowering red. "Look into the fire. Relax. Let your soul be at peace."

"Like this, Mr. Blake?"

"That's right. Now watch and wait. Don't force it, but if you see something, tell me."

There would be a long silence.

"What am I supposed to see, Mr. Blake?"

"A face. A human form, or an animal. A landscape perhaps. Some unfamiliar scene from, for example, Biblical times or ancient Egypt or Rome."

"I don't see nothing."

"Patience. Relax. You will."

But she didn't.

That was how they spent their evenings, but stranger still than the days

and the evenings were the nights, at least some of the nights.

She would awake sometime between midnight and dawn and discover that William was not beside her. She would rise, put on her robe, and go into the other room.

William would be sitting in a chair, staring into the empty darkness, and sometimes—and this really frightened her—he would speak to people she could not see.

"Julius Caesar! It's good to see you again," or "Moses! Could I ask you something?" and he'd lapse into Latin or Hebrew. Or perhaps his unseen visitor was someone she'd never heard of. "Well, hello, Prime Minister Churchill" or "Good day, President Kennedy."

When the ghostly conversation was finished William would turn to this worktable and begin writing, almost as if he were unaware she was in the room. His notebooks were full of such writing.

One night, after he had been talking with someone, he came over to her and handed her something, a short metal tube, round at one end and with glass at the other, that she could have sworn had appeared in his fingers by magic.

"What's this, Mr. Blake?"

"Push the little button on the side there. That's it!"

"Oh! It lights up! Is there a fire in it?"

"No. Don't worry."

"But it's so bright! Where did you get it?"

"From the future, Kate. It's called a 'flashlight'."

"Good' Heavens," she whispered, setting it down gently on the worktable.

Days, evenings, nights. That was how they passed, until the night after William's brother died.

She awakened to find William shaking her by the shoulders. "Kate! Kate! I've just spoken to Robert!"

"Your brother?" She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. "But your brother's dead, Mr. Blake."

William's huge blue eyes glowed in the light from the candle he held in his hand. "Get up! I must tell you what he said!"

"Oh, very well." She was not upset or surprised, only a little annoyed at having her sleep disturbed. She swung her feet down to the floor.

"You know, Mrs. Blake, how unsuccessful my book of poems was?"

"Yes, we've still got almost every copy." She followed him into the other room.

"Robert has told me how we can succeed with my next book!"

"You don't say." She sat down in her favorite rocking chair near the fireplace, while William vigorously poked up the flames.

"It's so simple, really, I'm ashamed I didn't think of it myself." He sat down in the other rocker next to her. "We don't make much money with our engraving, even in the best of times. Isn't that right?"

"I don't complain, Mr. Blake."

"No, no, you're a perfect angel about money, but certainly someone is making money in the book business, though it's not the writer or illustrator. Now who is it?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know."

"The publisher! You see how those men dress whom I deliver my work to. You see the kind of homes they live in! Mrs. Blake, it's all so clear now that Robert has pointed it out."

"Robert's dead, Mr. Blake."

"Only his body, Kate! His spirit has gone into the future and brought back something that will save us both from the poverty that now imprisons us. Mrs. Blake, he showed me how you and I can become

publishers!"

"You and me?"

"You and I. He showed me a new printing process used by the people of the future, where both the text and illustration can be combined on one plate."

"We have no press."

"We don't need a press. With this method we can, if we like, simply hold the paper against the inked plate and rub it with a spoon." He rocked forward and tapped her on the knee with an extended forefinger. "If there's color wanted, we can dab in a bit with watercolor!"

"What a lot of work!" She could see, without any supernatural powers, that it would probably be she who would be doing most of the dabbing in.

"Ah, but that's where the money is, Kate! In limited editions illustrated by the author."

"You're not yourself tonight, Mr. Blake. I've never heard you talk this way before. You've given me to believe you never cared for money, that it was a sin to want it."

"I was being selfish then, thinking only of my own needs, which are few and simple, but you... you shouldn't have to go on living like this."

"Did Robert tell you that, too?"

"Yes. He took pity on you. That's why he gave me this process. To rescue you from poverty."

"Upon my word, that's strange. In life he never liked me. How is it that now he's dead he thinks of nothing but my welfare?"

"He has repented. Everything looks different from the other side, you know."

"I suppose so."

"We can't reject this gift. Robert would be heartbroken!"

"If you put it that way..."

She knew she would go along with this, as she went along with everything else, but she thought, *Robert me boy, you always did have a vile sense of humor.*

*

Kate Blake was worried.

Always before William had dabbled around with his own artistic projects only during slack periods when he had no paying work to do, but now he was beginning to put the paying work to one side and devote himself more and more to what he called his "Illuminated Printing."

The first result of this work was a print based on a drawing of Robert's. It was entitled, "The Approach of Doom."

Then William began making the plates for a collection of his own philosophical sayings under the working title of "There is No Natural Religion."

One afternoon she confronted him with, "Well, Mr. Blake, you were supposed to be finished today with that frontispiece for John Casper Lavater's 'Aphorisms on Man'. Where is it, I'd like to know?"

He waved her aside. "I'll do it tomorrow. The publishers are used to waiting a day or two past the deadline."

"But you've never been late before."

"I've got my own 'Aphorisms on Man' to illustrate. This Lavater is a mealy-mouthed humbug anyway. When my book comes out, the world will join me in forgetting all about him."

"But in the meantime we have to eat, Mr. Blake."

" 'Man does not live by bread alone', " he quoted.

It was that night that she first served him a supper consisting of empty plates, though it was not the last time she was forced to this extreme.

It was that night also that she first heard him mention the name

"Urizen."

They had completed one more unsuccessful attempt to get Kate to see something, anything, in the fire, and now sat side by side in their rocking chairs, watching the glowing embers.

"You've been seeing more than usual lately, have you not, Mr. Blake?"

He nodded soberly. "The gift, like a muscle, grows stronger with use. Now it is not only my mind, but my body as well that travels through time."

"And where have you been traveling?"

"To the future, when men will build cities on distant worlds, and to the past, when a land vaster than England sank into the Atlantic Ocean." She could tell by his voice he was troubled. "I've taught myself Latin, Greek and Hebrew, but I've been to places where those languages, and good old English, are forgotten, or not yet thought of."

"Is something wrong?"

He glanced at her from furrowed brows. "I am not the only traveler. I thought I was, but I'm not. I thought only I, among living men, could move through time the way the dead do, but then I saw a man. I saw him in the future, then I saw him again in the past."

"Are you sure it was the same man?"

"If it was a man. I spoke to him, you see. I introduced myself to him, shook hands with him. There can be no mistake. In the future we stood and talked while riding in a flying machine that flies forever around the earth without falling, then, in the past, we spoke together again in the few minutes before the earthquakes began that destroyed the Atlantic continent."

"Then you know his name?"

"Urizen." He spoke it with a touch of awe.

"What did he look like?"

"Tall, white-bearded, muscular, naked."

"But that's what you told me God looked like!"

William was startled. "That's right. You don't suppose... Yes, now I remember! That face I saw at my window as a child... It was Urizen!"

"Then you shook hands with God?" At last she could not keep a note of disbelief from her voice.

"I don't know. I must have been wrong. Urizen was only a man. He chatted like a man, passed the time of day as if he was my neighbor passing me on the street." William was bewildered. "Is that the way a God acts?"

"Tell me what he said. Let me be the judge."

"He welcomed me to some kind of exclusive club, open only to that one person in a billion who can escape the bounds of his own time. He invited me to voyage with him, share some great work with him. I refused."

She took his hand. "Because of me, Mr. Blake?"

"Because of fear, Kate."

"Fear? But if he was just some naked man running around..."

"I don't know what he is! You might have been right about him, don't you see? He might be... the 'Other Fellow'!"

*

CHAPTER THREE... 1789

Blake did just one job this year, three engravings for John Casper Lavater's "Essays on Physiognomy," including a tail-piece. The work was handed in late and the publisher had not been pleased with the way the work was done.

Kate had delivered the finished plates and passed on to William the publisher's objections.

"He didn't like your little vignette, Mr. Blake."

"And why not?"

"It was supposed to be a hand holding up a candle."

"And that is what it was!"

"But you added some moths flying into the flame."

"The design was so tame. I thought it needed something."

"And he was angry at having the job finished a week late."

"A week? Was it that long?"

"Yes indeed, Mr. Blake."

"I hope you told him what I said to tell him."

"That you had other more important work to do? Thank God I didn't have to tell him anything. He didn't press me, you see. It goes against me nature to lie, it does."

William angrily turned back to the plate he was preparing for his own book, "The Songs of Innocence." Eventually there would be thirty-one of these plates, each prepared by the same slow and painstaking process.

The writing and drawing was done in etcher's ground on a sheet of paper which had been soaked in a solution of gum arabic and allowed to dry. The paper was then spread, face down, on a heated copper plate and run through a press or rubbed down with the back of a spoon. The plate, with the paper stuck to it, was submerged in a pan of water until the gum softened and the paper floated free, leaving the design, in reverse, adhering to the copper. The plate was placed in a bath of nitric acid where it lay for about eight hours, the acid eating away the copper so the drawing stood out in low relief. It was this part of the process that worried Kate most. The acid was dangerous and gave their rooms a funny smell.

After the plate had been washed, prints could be made from it by inking it from another plate (blank) pressed against it, then rubbing the bookpaper against the design with the back of a spoon.

That night, after supper, he went immediately to work. She watched him a while, then picked up that odd souvenir of the future, the flashlight, and idly switched it on and off a few times.

"Mr. Blake, you can pick up something in one time and carry it with you into another, can you not?"

"Quite so, Mrs. Blake," he answered absently, concentrating on his work.

"Tell me then, could you go back to yesterday and get that set of engravings you did late for the Lavater book?"

"I suppose so."

"Could you then take those plates back a week and hand them in on time?"

"How can you plague me with such trivial matters? Can't you see I have more important things to do?"

"No, wait. Could you go back to when you were cutting the plate of the hand holding the candle and tell yourself to leave out the moths?"

"What? Go back in time and meet my own self?" He turned and looked at her, frowning. "Well, why not, I ask you?"

"Don't you see? It would be like creating a whole new world. The world with the plate with the moths on it would vanish and be replaced by a world where there was a plate with no moths on it."

"What's the harm in that?"

"I might change something else as well... who can say what? It's too dangerous."

"Such a little thing... and you and your friend Urizen are going back and forth in time so much anyway."

"But we never interfere. The spirits travel in time too, but since they can neither touch anything nor speak to anyone that doesn't cause any problems. The flesh and blood time voyager must try to be as much as possible like a ghost."

"Were you like a ghost when you took this thing here?" She held up the flashlight.

"Urizen gave it to me."

"I didn't see him do it."

"I left, visited the future and saw Urizen, then returned to the same instant I'd departed from. That's why it seemed to you, I suppose, that the flashlight appeared by magic."

"Lord help us!"

"But even that little thing made the others angry."

"What others?" This was something new. Others?

"Urizen and I are not the only time travelers. There are quite a few others, but they stay mostly in the far future. They call themselves the League of the Zoa. Zoa is an ancient Greek word meaning 'beasts'. Urizen is one of their leaders. There are three others, Tharmas, Luvah and Los. It is Los who warned me against changing the past. There's an argument... Urizen changes the past and Los goes back and changes it again, back to what it was."

"So Urizen does change the past! Then so can you!"

"No, you don't understand. He doesn't make any major changes, and Los always corrects whatever he does."

"But this flashlight..." She held it up. Suddenly it vanished. She gave a little scream.

"You see?" he said reasonably.

*

Another evening a month later, they sat in their rockers before the fire. Kate had tried once again and once again failed to see any "visions" in the flames.

Pouting, she picked up her knitting and began working with rigid angry movements.

"Mr. Blake, will I ever see them?"

"Who, Kate?"

"The Zoas. You visit them every day, but I never see nothing. It's a man's world, right enough."

"Perhaps you are the lucky one." His voice was more than usually sombre.

"How can you say that? Your life has ever so much adventure in it, while mine..." She shrugged.

"What good is experience without understanding? I tell you, Mrs. Blake, the more I see the less I understand. At first I thought—yes, I'm serious—I thought Urizen might be Satan, but now that I see he shares power with three other Zoas, I don't know what to think. Have you ever heard of four Satans?"

"There's never been but one, so far as I know."

"I talk to these Zoas. I shake hands with them, touch them. But what are they, Kate? I don't even know that. Are they angels? Sometimes they wear wings, but now I know there's a time in the future when everyone will wear wings and fly. Are they demons? They don't seem really evil, not even Urizen, though the others warn me against him. Urizen's only crime, so far as I can tell, is a passion for knowledge. He must always know the why of everything, and the how. It seems to me he'd be willing to take the universe apart to see how it works."

"And if he couldn't put it together again?"

"That wouldn't matter to him. Once we stood together at dawn in the fields outside Jerusalem in 30 BC and watched a shepherd tending sheep. Urizen saw a sheep straying toward us and I thought he'd give the signal for us to slip out of that time, but instead he knelt before the sheep and whispered to it, 'Who made you?' As if the sheep could talk."

"Well, the Good Lord made the sheep of course. I hope you told Urizen that. God made the sheep and everything else."

"I told him, but he only smiled at me with that faint mocking smile he has, and said, 'After all you've seen, does that word still mean anything to you?' "

"Heavens, Mr. Blake!"

"I wrote a song about it and tried to sing it to him, but he wouldn't listen."

"I'll listen, Mr. Blake."

William cleared his throat and began singing, rocking in his chair in time to the music. The melody was his own, but it had the quality of an old English folksong.

Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, and bade thee feed,
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little lamb, I'll tell thee;
Little lamb, I'll tell thee;
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb.
He is meek and He is mild.
He became a little child.
I a child and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.
Little lamb, God bless thee.
Little lamb, God bless thee.

There was a long silence in the room, then Kate's rocker creaked as she leaned toward him and said softly, "That's very pretty, Mr. Blake."

*

She had been dreaming of lambs and of herself as a shepherdess when she felt someone gently shaking her. She grumbled and turned over. The shaking came again.

"Let me sleep, Mr. Blake," she muttered.

Silently he shook her again, and this time she opened her eyes.

"Look, Kate," William whispered. She saw he was pointing toward the foot of the bed.

Slowly, numbly, she became aware of a tall motionless figure standing there, just beyond the bedstead.

"Oh my God," she murmured.

The figure was naked, muscular, bearded... the beard was long and white and seemed to glow faintly in the dark, or perhaps the feeble light that filtered in from some unseen moon was fooling her.

"Is that...?" she began.

"Yes, it's Urizen." William, too, sounded frightened. But why? Wasn't Urizen his good friend and traveling companion?

"Speak to him, Mr. Blake," she whispered.

"Urizen, old chap. Good to see you again, sir. And to what—ahem—to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Urizen did not answer, only smiled faintly and vanished.

It took her a moment to recover, but when she did she turned to William with a joyful cry. "I saw him! I saw him!"

She could see William's visions at last!

But William was sober, disturbed. "And he saw us. Now he knows where to find us."

"But where's the harm in that? He's your friend, isn't he?"

"I don't know what he is! I never told him exactly what time and place I came from, because I wanted to be sure first that... that he wouldn't harm you."

"Harm me? Why would he harm me?"

"I don't know, Kate, but I do know this. Now he can appear whenever

he likes and do whatever he likes to us, and there's no policeman in the world can catch him or protect us. If he likes he can even go back into the past and do some little thing and we, you and I, will cease to exist!"

*

Kate had never seen William really afraid before now, but she could tell that was what drove him into an orgy of work, as if work could provide him with at least the illusion of safety.

And she knew he had, for the moment, given up time-voyages.

"The Songs of Innocence" was soon engraved and printed; making no attempt to sell copies of it, he immediately started on a new project, to be called "The Book of Thel", and he often stayed up late at night laboring on it.

Kate read what he had written and commented, "Well, Mr. Blake, this is quite a change from the tone of your lamb poem, I must say."

"My lamb poem? That was sentimental garbage!"

"Garbage you say? I rather liked it myself, I did."

"The world is not like that, Mrs. Blake. Behind the mask of smiling religion there is a skull."

"A skull, Mr. Blake? Dear me." It was morning and bright sunlight filled the little apartment. It seemed absurd to talk of skulls at such a time.

"If there was any truth in religion, the Bible would tell us about Urizen, explain who and what Urizen is and how we should deal with him." William's eyes were no longer calm and grave.

"Perhaps the Good Lord never meant us to learn about such things."

This interchange pointed up a difference in their attitudes toward religion that had been there from the start, but now was becoming more pronounced. She had never read the Bible, but she went to church every Sunday; he had read the Bible from cover to cover not once, but many times, yet he never went to church, had not been inside a church of any kind since his wedding day.

She picked up the manuscript and reread the last few lines. "It's a grim business you have here, Mr. Blake. I can't say I understand what you're driving at. You have this young girl named Thel wandering about asking a flower, a cloud, a worm and a dirt clod, 'What's the meaning of life?' Well, that's clear enough, but this girl, if I follow you, visits the Land of the Dead, and there she finds her own grave."

"That's right."

"And a ghostly voice says, 'Why cannot the ear be closed to its own destruction?' "

"Yes."

"And then this girl runs screaming back to the Land of the Living."

"Correct."

"A grim business indeed, if you'll pardon me saying so. Not like you at all. Can you explain the symbolic meaning to me? There's always a symbolic meaning in a poem, an upliftin' moral of some sort."

"Not in this one. It means what it says and nothing more."

"This girl Thel isn't just a girl, is she? Isn't she a symbol of something or other? Curiosity? Youth? Innocence?" She lowered her voice. "Virginity?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Come along there! Who is she, really?"

"If you must know, she is me."

"You? But you ain't no young lady! At least not unless you've been fooling me all these years." She laughed but he didn't. He never laughed.

Instead he quoted, " 'A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.' "

"So now you're a prophet, are you?"

"I can see the future."

That silenced her, but she did understand the poem's symbolic meaning. William had visited the past, dwelling place of the dead, and returned, terrified, because someone in that land had spoken to him, invited him to stay.

And then had followed him home.

Writing the poem brought William no relief. As the weeks passed with no more sign of Urizen, Kate watched her ordinarily calm and self-possessed husband grow more and more nervous and distraught.

If he sang, it was "Why art Thou silent and invisible, Father of Jealousy?", as if Urizen was God. In the evenings, when he had been used to teaching her things, he muttered endlessly about how Urizen might be "the spectre of our sins."

And more and more often he would gaze at her with vacant blue eyes and demand, "Kate, am I insane?"

Her answer was always the same.

"No indeed, Mr. Blake. *I saw him too!*"

*

CHAPTER FOUR... 1790

The lessons had begun again, and Kate had spent night after night with William at her side, gazing into the glowing embers in the fireplace. She wanted to stop, but she had made a vow and she was a woman who did not vow lightly. She wanted to stop because the lessons had begun to produce results.

Now and then, quite clearly, she had seen faces form in the dim redness, mad Ogre faces that leered up at her mindlessly, other faces that were impossibly beautiful yet rilled with a demonic delight and a cruelty that terrified her, yet others that looked at her with concern, kind faces that seemed worried about her.

"Who are they, Mr. Blake?" she would whisper, for he could see them too.

"Ghosts, Kate. Curious ghosts, that's all. They're gathering here from every age, from the very ends of time."

"But why?"

"They're waiting for something, watching for something."

He tried speaking to the visions, questioning them, but they would not answer him.

There were scenes now too, landscapes with castles and distant towers at dusk, the wind-sculpted dunes of unknown deserts, forests where the trees glowed at night and moved their limbs like women, vast emptiness where silver vessels, like schools of fish, swam from star to star. There were no sounds in the visions, though sometimes they spread out from the fireplace to completely surround her, completely replacing her familiar home. She might have been lost in them if it hadn't been for William's voice coming to her out of the vision, saying, "Do you see it? Tell me what you see."

She'd reach out her hand and he'd take it in his, and she'd feel safe in keeping on with it.

Yesterday, though, had been bad.

She'd been walking down the street, on her way home from the market, when the ghosts had faded into view all around her, so she looked through their transparent bodies as she might look through a reflection in a window, where one scene is superimposed on another. There was a cloud of them, swirling around her, regarding her curiously, and in an instant they became so thick she could no longer see where she was going and had to stop and stand motionless while they swooped in on her, coming so close she could feel their cold fingers brush her cheeks, like spiderwebs.

A coachman had shouted a warning behind her and, as she jumped to avoid the horse's hooves, the ghosts had faded quickly away.

Later, at home, she'd told William about it, but his only comment was, "Good! Good! You're progressing splendidly!"

Yes, it was then she'd wanted to bring these lessons to an end, but William had said, "One more night." And she'd remembered her vow.

So here she was again, leaning forward in her rocking chair, a shawl thrown 'round her shoulders, gazing fixedly into the ruddy coals, while William spoke quietly, saying, "Relax, Mrs. Blake. It's all right. There's no harm in it. Relax and tell me what you see."

What had once been impossible was now only too easy. The room grew vague, drew back, while the red glow expanded to fill her entire field of vision. And yes, there were images in the redness, moving images...

"I see your brother Robert, Mr. Blake."

"Wonderful, Kate!"

"He looks worried. He's holding up his hand as if to warn me to go back."

"Speak to him."

"Too late. He vanished. There are other men there now, men I don't know. Can you see them?"

"Only shadows. Tonight it seems you are the teacher and I the student."

"They're warning me, too, telling me to go back. Perhaps we should..."

"We can't stop now, Kate."

William and the room were gone. William's voice came to her out of the air, from a long way away. The ghosts were thronging around her now like a whirling flock of birds, warning her, warning her.

"I can see the ghosts, Kate," came William's faint distant voice. "I'm still with you."

She was drifting, bodiless, across a red-lit plain. Ahead lay a city like no city she had ever seen. It was gigantic, inhuman, dark, made of immense blocks of stone leaning together.

She floated up and over the city walls.

"William!" she screamed.

"I see them, Kate. Don't be afraid."

The citizens were not human, but serpentine, like lizards that walked on their hind legs like men. She saw them for an instant, then they were gone.

The ghosts had returned, but now they were rushing past at blinding speed, as if Kate were falling, falling through them at an ever-increasing velocity.

"Mr. Blake! Where are we going?"

"I don't know. I don't like this. Concentrate, Kate. We're back home in front of our fireplace. Concentrate!"

She concentrated. Something was looming ahead of her, something huge and formless. She could almost see it... then, abruptly, she was in her chair at home.

"Thank God," she breathed.

"Are you all right, Kate?" William was concerned, anxious, as he stood up to bend over her and look her over with large worried eyes.

"Yes, quite all right, thank you." She laughed nervously. Then she noticed something.

"When we left, the fireplace was painted white," she said.

"Why yes, of course."

"Mr. Blake, it's got a plain wood varnish finish now. It's brown, Mr. Blake!"

A soft deep voice came out of the shadow to the right of the fireplace. "You'll have to get used to little things like that now, Mrs. Blake." It was not William's voice.

Urizen stepped into the firelight. "I hope I didn't startle you," said the powerfully built white-bearded naked man.

Urizen stood on one side of her, William on the other. She looked from one man to the other. What would they do now? Urizen extended his hands, one to William, one to Kate. "I've come to congratulate you both. Come now, don't look so surprised. Isn't this what you've been working for

all this time? Today is graduation day. You've succeeded!"

She hesitated, then took Urizen's hand. It was a hard, muscular hand, but certainly felt human enough. "Well, thank you, Mr. Urizen," she said haltingly. "I'm... pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

Urizen chuckled. "Come, my dear. You too, William."

He had them both by the hand, pulling them toward him. She rose half-fearfully from her chair.

"Urizen..." protested William.

"No arguments, either of you," said the smiling Urizen. "You must be my guests at my home. This is an occasion for celebration."

Kate tried to pull free, but Urizen held her easily.

"No thank you just the same, Mr. Urizen..." she mumbled.

But the room was already dissolving.

The ghosts reappeared, but now she could not only see them but hear them and feel them. They seemed to be howling an endless wail of dismay as they streamed past, a blur of distorted, anguished faces, and as they brushed against her they were like a cold damp wind that passed through the skin to freeze the bone. Images were flashing in an out of focus, each lasting only a fraction of a second.

Buildings. Mountains. People, but people moving at impossible speeds. Darkness and light, flickering faster than the mind could register.

And she had the feeling, the horrible feeling, of falling. William said, "Don't be frightened, Kate. It's always like this."

Now the fall slowed.

Now it stopped.

Kate, William and Urizen stood on a parched white desert. The sky was white and too bright to look into. Nearby was a jumble of bleached ruins.

"Where are we?" said Kate, when she could speak.

"This once was London, but that was many a million year ago," answered Urizen. "This is, you might say, the end of time, if time can be said to have an end."

"You can let go my hand now," she said, trying to pull away.

Urizen laughed. "Not so fast, young lady. As long as I touch you two, you share in the energy fields that protect me. The moment I let you go, you'd die. There's no air here, and that sun is hot enough to melt many metals. Soon there will be a supernova and the world and the whole solar system will be gone, and even I, with all my power, would be gone if I did not spring back from the instant of nova, back into some earlier, safer time." He tugged on their hands. "Come."

They walked across the sands toward the ruins.

There was an entrance in the ruins, Kate could see, and a passageway leading down into the earth.

Urizen paused as they reached this entrance and said mockingly, "Welcome to Rintrah, the Kingdom of Wrath."

*

Rintrah was an underground city, or better, a vast underground cathedral, for its high stone ceilings and endless echoing passageways were clearly intended to suggest the majesty of one of the great churches of the Middle Ages. It had tall, brilliantly-lit stained glass windows, too.

Urizen said, "That's the sun you see behind those colored windows, my friends, but the sun filtered and tamed by a long journey from the surface. The sun is the only light we have in Rintrah, and the only light we need."

William asked, "Even at night?"

"There is no night here, sir. The Earth keeps always the same face toward the sun," Urizen answered. "Look there." He pointed toward one of the windows. "I'm particularly pleased by the design of the windows in this chamber."

The window he indicated was in the artistic style of ancient Egypt. It depicted a smiling young woman bending over an agonized old man. The woman's headdress suggested the horns of a bull, or a half-moon on its

side.

"Isis," William said.

"Ah, you recognize the tale." Urizen smiled broadly. "Isis has just poisoned her father, the god Ra." He was explaining for Kate's benefit. "She won't give him the antidote until he tells her his secret name, and when she knows that he will be her slave."

The three moved on across the wide flagstones. There was air here and protection from the sun, but Kate continued to cling to William's hand, as if he, not Urizen, had the power to hold the elements at bay.

"It's one of the finest stories in Egyptian mythology," Urizen added.

"And that other window," William said. "That's Prometheus, isn't it?" The stained glass showed a proud young man chained to a rock and trying to beat off an attacking eagle.

"Right again, sir! A great hero, according to the Greeks. He stole the fire from Heaven for mankind and as a punishment was chained to a rock to be tormented for all eternity by that eagle there. A pity the decision couldn't have been appealed to a higher court."

They had come to another window, and this one Kate recognized easily. "Why, that's Adam and Eve by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."

Urizen added, "And, as you see, they are listening to the wisdom of their good friend and advisor, the serpent."

"Their friend?" Kate was puzzled.

Urizen said softly, "One might even say, their Savior. He gave them freedom, and he would have given them eternal life if he'd been allowed to. But come, there's more."

The next window showed a desert at dawn. The hazy pinks and yellows and blues in the background were disturbingly real, and in the foreground a powerful man with a black beard was wrestling violently with what appeared to be an angel.

"This is my favorite." Urizen gazed up at it with intense glittering eyes. "Jacob! The only man who ever wrestled hand to hand with God, and won."

There was one more window in the chamber, but this one was not yet finished. Kate looked up, squinting, at the face in the center of the composition, the only part that was clear enough to recognize. "Mr. Urizen! That's you!"

"Indeed so, my dear," said Urizen.

"Why isn't it finished?" William asked.

"Because *I* am not finished," Urizen said crisply.

"Unfortunately," came a voice from the next chamber. As the voice died away in echoes, Kate turned to see three tall bearded men striding toward her. As they approached they were alternately in darkness and in the patterned colored light from the stained glass windows, so she could at no time clearly see their features.

"Ah," cried Urizen delightedly, spreading his arms as if to embrace the men. "My good friends Los, Tharmas and Luvah! You know Mr. Blake of course, but this time he's brought his wife Kate. Allow me to introduce you."

"I am Los," said the first. He kissed her hand.

"You may have seen his picture," said William.

"His picture?" The man did look vaguely familiar.

"In my own century," Los explained, "I use the name Milton. I'm a poet." He bowed.

"And this is Tharmas," put in Urizen. "In his own century he is the King of Atlantis."

Tharmas gave her hand a squeeze but did not kiss it, murmuring, with a thick strange foreign accent, "Charmed, I'm sure."

"And we mustn't forget Luvah," Urizen finished.

Luvah gazed at her but said nothing. She shuddered.

"Luvah is called The Unapproachable," Urizen said. "He is called the Lord of Hate, the Warmaker, and by science he's made himself hermaphroditic. In his own century Luvah is ruler of a galactic empire." Kate took a step backward.

Luvah was a kind of beautiful monster, his thick beard a disturbing contrast to the rounded feminine curves of his body. He could have been a bearded lady in some circus sideshow.

Los said seriously, "Mr. and Mrs. Blake, we share with Urizen the rule of Rintrah, and of the League of the Zoas. Could we speak to you? Alone?"

"He means without me around," Urizen said dryly, then to Los he added, "These two are my guests, Los. There are certain rules..."

"Rules? How dare you, of all people, speak of rules!" snapped Los. Tharmas laid a restraining hand on his arm and mumbled something in an incomprehensible language.

"Urizen... is my friend," said William haltingly.

Kate shot him a disturbed glance.

"You see, Los? They are with me!" Urizen was delighted.

"I only hope that is not true," sighed Los. "The gift of time-voyaging is given to only a few, and of those few, all are content to enjoy the gift and not ask for more. All but Urizen. He says it is not enough to travel through time; one must also change it."

Tharmas frowned.

Luvah stood almost motionless, lips, cheeks and eyelids painted to hide any trace of tell-tale expression.

William went on, "I don't understand this dispute you have between you, but I know this... Urizen sought me out and spoke to me, Urizen made himself my guide and teacher when a guide and teacher was what I sorely needed."

"Only to recruit you," Los said urgently.

"Only for making you on his side," Tharmas added.

Luvah said nothing.

"It is not our way to impose ourselves and our ideas on people," said Los. "We wait. When questions are asked, we try to answer."

"Soon you would come to us. We know this," said Tharmas. "No hurry."

Urizen spoke with contempt. "When questions are asked, you have no answers. Answers come from experience. None of us have enough of that."

Los was about to reply, but William said, with calm determination, "I see I must choose between you. Very well, good sirs. But I will decide nothing until I have more information."

"And from whom will you get this information?" demanded Los.

"Urizen," said William.

"No, Mr. Blake..." Kate began, but then she saw the firm line of her husband's lip, and fell silent.

*

There were no clocks in Rintrah, nor any day or night.

"We tell time by the sun," Urizen explained. William and Kate were puzzled by this statement until they came to understand that the sun was undergoing rapid changes as it neared supernova; the only time that mattered in Rintrah was the time until the end, and that was not measured in clock ticks, but in subtle shifts in the sun's spectrum.

But because they could not read these shifts, the Blakes soon lost all sense of time while urbane Urizen patiently imparted to them the lore of Zoas—which included a view of history that was full of unsettling surprises—and the art of time-voyaging.

It may have been weeks later, or it may have been months, when Urizen finally said, "That is all we know. We have come to the edge of our knowledge."

Kate was disappointed. "Is that all?"

"By no means," said Urizen. "The best is not the known, but the unknown, and that is what we start on now. Are you ready?"

"I am, for one," said William.

"Perhaps we should check with the other Zoas..." said Kate uncertainly. They had not seen Los, Tharmas or Luvah since their arrival.

"Nonsense," Urizen snorted. "I know what they'd say without asking them. They'd say, 'Whatever you plan to do, don't do it!' " He chuckled and took them by the hands. "Come, my friends. Let's try our wings."

He meant this quite literally. All three were now wearing the broad white wings the Zoas used in their trips through time. These wings served to guide them rather than support their weight. The force that propelled them and held them aloft was the energy of time itself. Urizen had taught the Blakes how to use their unique time-voyaging talent to tap from the flow of temporal energy a power that protected them even in the void of outer space.

William had asked, "Where's the machine that converts all this energy?"

Urizen, for answer, had solemnly pointed to his own forehead.

"And another thing, Urizen... does it do any harm to tap out all this energy?"

"I must confess, sir, I don't know," Urizen had answered with smiling frankness.

But now all caution was behind them as they winged their way backward through the centuries, laughing, joking, pausing now and then to glimpse some particularly freakish folly of mankind or howl at some particularly outlandish turn of fashion. (Kate would never have believed men could actually admire some of the grotesque costumes women wore during the more obscure ages of history.)

"Look there!" cried Urizen. "They call that the miniskirt."

"Indecent!" exclaimed Kate, but she was not really shocked.

Whenever they were flying through the space outside of time, the ghosts clustered around them in thick spinning clouds, calling to them, stretching out imploring fingers, but they passed them so fast their anguished pale faces were hardly more than a blur.

"Well, here we are," Urizen said.

Kate looked around. They were, she recognized, in London, but it was not quite the London she was familiar with.

"I think we've overshot," William said. "This is London as it was when I was a child."

He was right. Kate recognized the costumes of the people who passed the mouth of the alley where they stood as those of her mother's day.

"Perhaps we should have worn something more in the fashion of the time," William said with a frown. This was directed at Urizen; Kate and William's garb was only a little odd, while Urizen's nakedness would have been freakish in almost any historical period.

"We won't be here for long," Urizen said as he unslung a leather bag from his shoulder. There was something in the bag, something long, slender and heavy.

Kate glanced around nervously. If someone should see them standing there with these white wings...

"Ah," Urizen said. "Here she comes now."

Kate followed his line of vision, then gasped.

Her mother was coming down the street, her mother as a young woman hardly older than Kate herself. There could be no mistaking the family resemblance. Urizen smiled.

"Can I speak to her," Kate whispered.

"If you like," Urizen answered.

Kate slipped off her wings and stepped from the alley. "Mother?"

The woman looked up sharply. Her mind had been on other things. "Do

I know you, me girl?"

"I'm your daughter."

"I have no daughter. Don't joke with me. I'm not a married woman."

"But you will be a married woman."

"I certainly hope so."

"And you'll have a daughter named Kate."

"Are you a gypsy witch? I'll not give you money, you know, be your fortune-telling ever so true. I'm not a rich one."

"A fortune-teller? No, I'm..." But how could she explain?

And now her mother was looking past her, eyes widening with fright. Had she seen Urizen? Kate half turned. Urizen had indeed stepped from the alley. He had a flintlock pistol in hand.

"Urizen, what..." Kate began.

Urizen took aim and pulled the trigger. There was a click, and faint momentary sizzle, and an earsplitting bang. Kate screamed. Kate's mother fell.

Kate knelt by her side. "Urizen. Why? I don't understand."

"You can't help her," Urizen said quietly. "She's quite dead."

There were people running toward them from the other side of the street. William had grabbed Urizen's arm.

"Let me go, you fool," Urizen growled. "We can set this right easily enough, if we get out of here."

"How?" demanded William.

"Come. I'll show you."

He snatched up the wings Kate had discarded and, with a rush, they were once again in the place outside of time.

There was a brief blur of ghostly faces, then the alley again. They had gone backward in time, but not far.

Urizen seated himself on a barrel and, humming softly to himself, began filling the flintlock pistol with gunpowder.

"My mother... is she really dead?" murmured Kate.

"Yes, indeed," Urizen said, tamping in the powder with a short ramrod drawn from the underside of the gun.

"But then... that means I never was born," she said.

"Does it?" Urizen said. "You seem real enough to me."

"You said you could get things right," William said angrily.

"And so I can, sir." Urizen neatly plopped a metal ball down the muzzle, then tamped in a bit of wadding. "A little patience, if you please."

He had finished loading the pistol, and now cocked it. "My theory, for what it's worth, is this. When we step outside the stream of time we break the chain of cause and effect. Things are changed in the ordinary world, but the changes don't affect us. In a moment you'll see... ah, there you are."

Kate heard an exclamation of surprise. She whirled. Not three feet away stood a second Urizen, a second William, and... a second Kate. Kate had seen herself in a mirror many times, but it was not like this. The other Kate was a living, breathing being, not a reflection, a separate being that looked back at her when she looked at it. As she fell back a step, Kate noticed, from the corner of her eye, that Urizen was again aiming the pistol.

The second Urizen tensed.

The first Urizen fired.

Her ears ringing from the violence of the shot, she saw, with that supernatural clarity that comes with a fever, a hole appear in the forehead of the second Urizen, saw that powerful well-muscled body sprawl, face-down, in the dirt. The second Kate and the second William bent over,

took hold of the body, and all three vanished. There remained no sign of them but a spot of damp blood in the dust.

"How could you kill him?" asked Kate in a strangled whisper.

"He let me do it," Urizen answered placidly. "He lowered his shields for me, as I'd planned."

"But what about my mother?" Kate demanded.

"Why don't you go to the mouth of the alley and have a look?" Urizen suggested.

With William close behind her, she did as Urizen said.

Yes, there was her mother coming down the street, preoccupied with her own affairs.

This time Kate let her pass, remaining in the shadows to watch this young woman until she turned a corner and was lost from view.

"But..." Kate was still unsteady on her feet. "But where did the second Urizen and Kate and William go?"

"I must confess," Urizen answered lightly, "I haven't the foggiest notion."

"You mean," William demanded, "you perform these experiments with people's lives, and you don't know what you're doing?"

Urizen was unperturbed. "It is by performing experiments, my dear sir, that we find out what we're doing." He was returning the pistol, still smoking slightly, to his leather bag.

Was it her imagination or did she see, among the ghosts who swarmed around them as they returned to Rintrah, the tortured faces of Urizen and Kate's mother?

*

The Blakes had met other Zoas; not only humans from various ages of history, but creatures from other levels of being... dragon-men, eagle-men, lion-people who seemed made from blazing fire.

And they had met, though Kate attached little importance to it, the beautiful Vala of the Long Black Hair, daughter of Luvah, the galactic ruler. There was a falseness to Vala, with her sophisticated posturing, that annoyed Kate, though William seemed fascinated by it, much to Kate's disgust.

Vala was full of riddles and mysteries.

For instance, Vala had once told them, as she lay on her couch of orange nylon tricot, "Yes, I am the daughter of Luvah, and some day I will be the mother of Urizen."

William had protested, "But Urizen is already born."

"Not in the stream of my private time," Vala had replied. "I am a lucky mother, to see my son full-grown before I see him as a babe. It will make motherhood easier, when it comes, to know how handsome a man my baby will become."

And before she could be questioned further, Vala had gathered her long translucent red robes around her and walked slowly away.

*

But now Urizen was growing impatient.

In the hall of the stained-glass windows, before the unfinished window of Urizen's face, Urizen stood, half in light and half in shadow. "You said, my friends, that when you had enough information, you would choose between me and the others, between my way and theirs. There is no more to teach you. I have taken you to the most distant outpost of what I know. Now you must choose."

"We're ready," said William firmly.

"No, we're not," contradicted Kate.

"Trouble in the family?" asked Urizen with a raised eyebrow. "I would not wish to come between man and wife."

"Mr. Urizen, sir," began Kate. "It wouldn't be fair if we made our choice here in Rintrah. You've quite bedazzled us with all your wonders, and we must have a clear head for such an important decision."

"What do you propose, woman?" Urizen spoke coldly.

"Let us go home to London, to our own century, to our own home, Mr. Urizen. There we'll be able to see things in a more normal light."

William turned on her, face red with anger. "This is our home now, Kate! Rintrah! And the whole range of time from beginning to end. For us to return to our old life now would be like a butterfly trying to squeeze back into his cocoon. We belong here, with Urizen."

Urizen smiled.

Kate shook her head vigorously, "No, no, Mr. Blake. You think like that because you're so easily influenced. I'm sorry, but it's true. You always get so carried away by every new fancy."

"Mrs. Blake!" William drew himself up indignantly.

"You won't admit it, Mr. Blake, but I could give you an example or two if I liked. Now you're my husband. That's right, isn't it?"

"Why, of course." There was suspicion in William's tone.

"And you love me, don't you? Or at least you did once."

"I'll always love you. You can't say I've ever given you cause to think otherwise."

"Then to make me happy—you do want to make me happy if you love me—come back with me."

"Kate." He was wavering.

"Please." She was pleading.

"Oh, very well." He would do it, she could see, but he'd find ways to make her regret asking him to do it. That was a man's way. Only a woman, she thought, can do an unselfish thing without wanting revenge.

Urizen was annoyed, but managed to maintain his facade of politeness. "You decide not to decide. Very well. I will wait yet a bit longer, but you must understand something."

The Blakes turned toward him expectantly. "Yes?" said Kate.

Urizen was no longer smiling. "I and other Zoas disagree on many things, but on one thing we all agree completely. We cannot allow anyone who is not a member of the League of Zoas to enjoy the power of time voyaging."

"I understand," Kate said softly.

"Good," Urizen said, his habitual smile returning. "Then take your wings and go, with my blessing. I'll be dropping in on you from time to time, to see if you've changed your minds."

"You've traveled into our future already, haven't you?" demanded William. "You know what we'll decide."

Urizen, for the first time, seemed really puzzled. "I've tried to see it, yes, but whenever I look your future is different."

"And another thing." Kate had taken a few steps, then paused. "Is that true what Vala says? Is she your mother?"

Urizen laughed outright. "Now that's a very interesting question! You'll have the answer to it if and when you are one of us."

*

The book was printed from twenty-seven plates laboriously prepared by William's own process. It had been months in preparation, during which time William not once turned his skill to the production of anything that would put bread on the table, though Kate, who was now quite skillful at the cutting of plates, had prepared several illustrations that had met with approval among the publishers. She told them the work was William's; they expressed delight that William's work had suddenly taken a turn for the better. His line, they said, was freer, and more important, the work was done on time.

The book, William's book, was printed in a limited edition by William himself, each page rubbed against the inked plate with the back of a spoon. A limited edition? Ten copies. No more.

And Kate did not dare to suggest that these ten copies be offered for sale. Once printed they all, save one, were locked in a trunk, to be

occasionally taken out so that one illustration or another could be hand-painted with water-color paints.

The one which was not locked away William delighted in reading aloud, over and over, to her.

And though Kate hated every word of this book, she let him read, listening at first, then later, when she'd all but memorized it, pretending to listen.

She endured it all, because of the look on his face, the look that seemed to say, "You've taken Eternity away from me. Can't I keep my silly little hobby?"

The title of the book was "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." William had not signed it, and it would have been an act of plagiarism if he had, for the thoughts expressed in it were not his own, but Urizen's.

Why did Kate hate "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"? Here are a few quotes from it:

"Rintrah roars and shakes his fires in the burdened air."

That is how it began. Later on appeared the following "Memorable Fancy."

"As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of genius, which to angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their proverbs, thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the proverbs of hell show the nature of infernal wisdom better than any description of buildings or garments."

"Let us look at some of these infernal proverbs.

"The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

"He who desires, but acts not, breeds pestilence.

"What is now proved was once only imagined.

"Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth.

"You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than

enough.

"As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys.

"Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires."

And this last, which William took special pleasure in reading to her:

"Let man wear the fell of the lion, woman the fleece of the sheep."

The work continued with attacks on the priesthood and on orthodox religion, blasphemous words put into the mouths of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, a visit to the printing-house of hell, and tales of the victories of devils over angels. In one of these tales the Devil argued:

"If Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love Him in the greatest degree. Now hear how He has given His sanction to the law of the Ten Commandments. Did He not mock at the Sabbath, and so mock the Sabbath's God? Murder those who were murdered because of Him? Turn away the law from the woman taken with adultery? Steal the labor of others to support Him? Bear false witness when He omitted making a defense before Pilate? Covet when He prayed for His disciples, and when He bid them shake off the dust of their feet against those who refused to lodge them? I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments."

And in the story the angel, swayed by these arguments, became a devil. William wrote:

"This angel, who is now become a devil, is my particular friend; we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well. I also have the Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no."

Kate was a patient woman, but finally she could keep silent no longer.

They were in the kitchen, seated opposite each other at the table, and William had just finished reading again the phrase, "This angel, who is now become a devil, is my particular friend." He looked up at her expectantly, the candlelight dancing on his face revealing an expression she did not recognize as his own; Urizen's expression.

She began uncertainly, "This angel who has become a devil... that's Urizen, isn't it?"

He slapped his palm on the table exultantly. "Ah ha! So you understand after all. I'd begun to think I was reading to a stuffed owl!"

She laid down her graver and the illustration she'd been cutting, regarding him seriously. "And Urizen, you say, is your particular friend?"

"What else can I call someone who offers me, as a gift, absolute freedom?" There was a madness in his large eyes she had not noticed before, and it worried her.

"I thought it was I, Mr. Blake, who was your particular friend."

"You're my wife."

"It's the same thing."

"Not at all! One loves a friend because one wishes to, but one loves one's wife because one must."

The hardness in his voice hurt her more than his words, though they were bad enough in themselves. For a moment a pain constricted her chest so she could not speak. Fighting back the impulse to break into tears, she said, "That's clever talk, Mr. Blake, but I doubt if you'd be saying such things if we were close, like other married folks."

"Close? What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, Mr. Blake. In bed."

William leap to his feet. "In bed? Are you telling me that after all these years you're finally offering up to me your virginity?"

"Mr. Blake! I was always willing! It was you what didn't want to!"

"I can't believe it! Kate Blake, the woman who always goes to church on Sunday, never missing a day! She's a common whore under it all, selling her body like any bawd on a streetcorner!"

"A whore? Mr. Blake, that's a lie!"

"Who are you then, Mrs. Blake? Are you Helen of Troy? Are you Cleopatra? Who are you that I should trade the world and all eternity for you? You're a whore I said, and I say it again, but much too expensive a whore for a poor man like myself."

He turned and strode from the room.

She did not cry, but sat motionless for some time, then picked up her illustration and graver and tried to go on with her work.

She had to give it up.

Her hands were shaking too much.

*

CHAPTER FIVE... 1791

Kate's engravings were more popular than William's had ever been, though she continued to maintain the fiction that it was William who was doing them. Commissions were plentiful and well-paid, and the Blake family celebrated its prosperity by moving to new and better lodgings at 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, in Surrey.

The Hercules Buildings was a row of clean, pretty terrace houses on the east side of the street; the Blakes' home had ten large rooms and a small garden overgrown with unpruned grape vines that concealed a cozy little arbor beneath the shade of a group of poplar trees in the backyard.

It was a paradoxical neighborhood.

In times past it had been a resort of the rich, and luxurious gardens and parks were scattered over the area; the Temple of Flora, the Apollo Gardens, the Flora Tea Gardens, and half a mile down York Place, Vauxhall.

Unfortunately the rich are fickle, and had found other places more fashionable, so that though the area was still open and green with trees, the lords and ladies had been replaced by prostitutes, thieves, and mobs of foreigners who shouted obscenities against King and Church in a dozen alien languages at all hours of the day and night. Not far away was a grim building called the Royal Asylum for Female Orphans, actually a

workhouse and little better than a prison.

Thus the neighborhood, as external surroundings so often do, reflected the internal world within the Blake family; a facade of flowers and green growing things that hid violence and suffering and unrest.

William had one patron, an admiring humble government clerk named Thomas Butts, who bought an average of one drawing or print a week, including such things as "Elohim creating Adam", "Newton", "God judging Adam", and "Nebuchadnezzar", and for a time William gave art lessons to the sons of the rich, but it was Kate the publishers admired and, though no one outside the Blake family knew it, Kate's engravings they published. Without her they might both have found themselves in a poorhouse. If some editor or publisher asked her why her work was unsigned, she would lightly lecture him on her dear William's modesty.

In company, as when they had tea with the Butts family, the Blakes presented a flawless image of domestic tranquillity; at home, with no one to see them, they fell into a habit of silence. Better to be silent than speak aloud thoughts that might make it impossible for them to go on living in the same house.

When he had nothing to do, which was increasingly often, William went for long walks, and on returning would say he'd been down to the intersection of Barley Street, New Road, York Place and Hercules Road and from there perhaps had crossed the Thames by way of Westminster Bridge to wander about in Chelsea.

She knew and did not know, both at the same time, that he was lying.

She knew and did not know that he had actually been to Rintrah.

To know something and not know it... that's a trick every wife must learn, sooner or later.

To do it she had to avoid reading what he was writing, because she knew what she would find.

To do it she had to look away from the drawings he was making, because she knew they depicted things he could not have seen in Lambeth, or even in Chelsea.

They hired a maid.

William suggested that Kate help him seduce her.

Kate wept and the maid was fired.

William forced her to join him in sitting naked in the grape arbor while he read to her mockingly from "Paradise Lost."

And when Thomas Butts had accidentally walked in on them there, William had called out, "Come in! It's only Adam and Eve, you know!"

William began a long poem glorifying the French Revolution, but even though Kate had found a publisher for it, he did not finish the manuscript, shouting at her that he'd outgrown the ideas in it.

One day, at last, he grew careless, or perhaps he wanted finally to free himself from his own lies. He returned from a one hour walk with a three day's growth of beard.

He stood a moment in the front doorway, a shaggy silhouette before the bright noonday sky. (For once the sun was shining.) Then as he saw her looking at him from the other end of the dim hallway, he entered slowly and closed the door behind him.

"You've been with Urizen." She put it as a statement of fact, not a question.

"Yes, Kate. I've been with Urizen." His voice was the calm, good voice he'd had so long ago, before he'd been her husband.

She leaned her broom against the wall. "We must talk, Mr. Blake. Come along now."

She led him into the living room. They seated themselves in the comfortable overstuffed furniture her work had bought them, she in the chair, he on the couch,

"Did you have to lie?" she asked him quietly.

"Yes, Kate. If I'd asked you about it, you'd have said no."

Kate nodded. That was true, "So you've made your choice."

"I have."

"Without me."

"You made your choice, too, without me."

Again she nodded. That too was true. "And among the Zoas, which side are you on?"

"I'm with Urizen."

"I needn't have asked. It's him what made you the best offer, isn't it?" Her voice, which had been flat and tired, now had an edge on it.

His voice, too, changed as he answered, grew hard and angry. "Yes he did. A better offer than the other Zoas. A better offer than you."

"It's a good home we have here, Mr. Blake, and it's rather an easy life you have of it here, doing whatever you like all the time. My father would envy you, he would."

"It's a pretty prison, but a prison all the same."

She wanted to stop there, to say no more, to leave it alone, but her mouth, as if it had a life of its own, went on talking.

"A prison, you say. What are you? A wild animal? Prowling, prowling. But I notice you always come home for meals."

His face flushed as red as his hair. "I won't be spoken to like that in my own house."

"Your house! When was the last time you chipped in for the rent?"

"I paid in advance."

"Paid in advance, did you? And how do you figure that, Mr. Blake?"

"I taught you to read and write, to draw and engrave. Did I charge you tuition?" His huge eyes were wide with mingled fury and pain.

She sprang to her feet and screamed down at him, "I don't owe you a thing!"

He looked up at her, his powerful hunky body hunched with wrath.
"You owe me your life!"

"My life?" That startled her.

"Your life. If I wanted to I could go into the past and change something so you'd cease to exist!"

"You wouldn't do that." '

"I could!" He was triumphant. "I could, but I didn't."

She wanted to speak now, but could not. William had gone into the future and someone else had come back, a changeling, a monster. Did she really want this being who looked like her husband to stay with her, to live in the same house?

At last she said softly, "I never thought I'd be frightened of you, Mr. Blake. Never thought that, but I am. You can do what you like. I won't stop you."

He stood up. "That's my good old girl, Kate." He was smiling now. He reached out to pat her arm, but she shrugged off his hand.

"So that's how it is, eh?" he said. "That's how it is."

He walked slowly out into the hall. She heard him speak to someone in a low voice, heard a rustle as of wings, but when she rushed after him she found the hallway deserted, though the front door remained closed.

She spoke to the emptiness. "My father was a fighter, he was. And I'm my father's girl. I ain't done with you yet, William Blake!"

When she arrived in Rintrah she found Los in the Hall of Windows.

"I'm looking for William Blake," she said. Los was puzzled. "Do I know you?"

"Of course! I'm William Blake's wife. When we were introduced you kissed my hand."

"I see. That Los who kissed your hand must have been me as an older man. I'm Los as a young man. I haven't yet met you, *or let us say*, I'm

pleased to meet you now." He kissed her hand. '

"Then you can't help me find my husband?" She realized now that this Los was indeed younger than the one she'd met.

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting your husband either, Mrs. Blake. You want to talk to my other self, Los as an older man."

"And where is he?"

"I think I saw him going into the Garden of Vala. That's about a half mile in that direction." He pointed down a passageway that branched off from the Hall of Windows.

"Thank you very kindly, sir," she called back over her shoulder as she set off briskly in the direction he indicated.

Vala's Garden was entered through the Gates of Dark Urthona. It was perhaps the strangest part of Rintrah, in that it did not seem to occupy any physical space, as seen from the outside, yet from the inside appeared as vast as a whole planet.

It was, as she understood it from Urizen's explanations, a realm of waking dreams, where impressions of despair and hope forever vegetated in flowers, fruits, fishes, birds and clouds, the land of doubts and shadows, sweet delusions and unformed hopes.

She hesitated before entering. It would not be easy to find someone here, and it might be difficult to avoid getting lost.

Looking through the entrance she caught a glimpse of William and ran forward.

Behind her the entrance vanished; ahead of her the figure of William moved and changed. As she ran toward it she saw it was only a curiously humanoid treetrunk.

She stopped, looked around. In Urizen's company she had several times glanced into the Garden, but this was the first time she had actually entered. Now she saw on all sides beautiful alien vegetation; vines, flowers, treetrunks and a kind of translucent grass, and it was all in constant motion, growing, blooming and dying as rapidly as normal Earth plants

might have done if their life processes were greatly accelerated.

Fighting back a feeling of panic, she seated herself on a stone, only to leap up again with a little scream. The stone too was alive and moving only a little slower than the plant life.

A pale low-hanging slow-moving fog, full of vague shimmering iridescent lights, obscured the sky, so it would have been futile to try to tell direction from the sun, and in the brief time since she'd entered, the landmarks in the garden had so greatly transformed themselves that she could no longer tell from which direction she'd come.

"Los!" she called, but there was, for answer, only the whispering of the plants, which seemed constantly murmuring to each other like a multitude of gossips.

There was a narcotic aroma in the air, a sweet heavy odor that coaxed her not so much to sleep as to dreaming awake, to aimless somnambulistic wanderings. She fought to keep her mind clear. "Los!" she screamed again.

The drugged air was softening the edges of her panic. She threw herself down on the grass. For a long time she could not remember what she was doing there, then her eye was caught by the colors in the wings of a beautiful beetle that walked toward her with a show of infinite dignity. The beetle was about the size of a large cat. She touched its hard smooth back. "You're a handsome gentleman, you are," she whispered in awe.

The beetle answered with a low growl. "Handsome, anyway," she added, drawing back her hand.

Then she remembered her mission. "Los!" she called out. The beetle fled. "I'm coming." The voice was far away. When Los at last arrived and stood looking down at her, she no longer remembered calling him. "Who are you, sir?" she demanded.

"I am Los. You called my name." He was tall, bearded, naked as ever.

She thought she might have met him somewhere, but couldn't remember where.

"Are you looking for your husband?" he asked gently. "My husband?"

"William Blake."

William Blake was a familiar name. She frowned, trying to connect it with a face. "Could you explain...?"

Los laughed softly. "When I think of what you have waiting for you, I'm almost persuaded to leave you here. It would be an act of kindness. But..." He leaned over and took her hand. "... you have work to do." He pulled her to her feet.

"This husband you say I have... where is he?" Her voice was like that of a baby asking where the world comes from.

"He has gone with his friends back in time."

"Back in time?" She frowned again.

"To the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, when the fleets of Augustus Caesar and Cleopatra fought to determine who would rule the Roman Empire."

"These friends of my husband's... who are they?"

"One is Urizen."

"What an odd name." Her voice was flat, emotionless.

"The other is Vala."

"Vala?" Suddenly her mind was clear. "Mr, Blake is with Vala?"

Los grinned. "That's right"

"I might have known!" she snapped. "Well, we'll put a stop to that, won't we?"

"We, Mrs. Blake? I will not be with you."

"The other Zoas will help me."

"No, I'm sorry. We have voted a new policy. No more struggling against Urizen. Let Urizen have his way. He's so sure he's in the right, and we have never been sure we were. Perhaps he knows things we do not."

"No, Los!"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, Mrs. Blake. You may do what you wish against him, but we will remain here in Vala's Garden until the Sun explodes. That will be soon. But we will not suffer here."

But this much Los did.

He led Kate to the exit from the garden and kissed her hand one last time before she left him.

*

Octavian, seasick and dazed with heat and sun, paced the deck of his command galley while the rowers rested on their oars, trading obscene jokes among themselves to ease the tension. He wiped the sweat from his sunburned narrow features with the back of his slender hand, then squinted up at the savage Mediterranean sun, now almost at the zenith. "It's noon," he shouted to the ship's captain. "Why doesn't the wind come?"

"Patience, my lord," answered the old seaman. "It will."

When the wind came the battle would begin.

At least that was the theory of Octavian's top strategist, the cunning Vipsanius Agrippa, and over the years Octavian had come to regard the faithful Agrippa as almost an oracle.

There was no shade on the ship, not even the fitful shade from a raised sail. Not only the sails, but the very mainmasts had been left behind on land to make way for archer's towers, catapults, balistas, sharp-beaked boarding gangplanks and grapples. On the over four hundred ships that stretched out in a rough line from Octavian's galley on the south to Agrippa's on the north, not so much as one small square steering sail could be seen.

The four hundred ships drifted, rising and falling on the gentle swells of the Ionian Sea, filled with the promise of violence from bright-painted tailfeathers to sharpened metal prow, while above them wheeled clouds of prophetic seagulls hungry for human meat, screaming in their impatience.

To the east, plainly in sight, the ships of the enemy, a roughly equal

force, also drifted and waited, the green shore at their back, and the narrow channel from which they'd come.

Octavian shielded his eyes with his hand and studied the enemy ships, as if he might, even at this distance, catch a glimpse of the traitor and adulterer Mark Antony and the Greek-Egyptian witch Cleopatra Ptolemy. Witch she must be, to have cast a spell that would make a Roman forget Rome! Could it be true what her followers said of her, that she was not human, but the goddess Isis incarnate. "I can fight a man, or a woman if need be, but a goddess?" He felt faint and leaned against the gunwale to keep from falling.

"The wind's rising, sir," announced the old sea captain. Octavian could feel it on his burning cheeks, see it roughen the surface of the slow sea swells... and feel it turn his light ship, exposing his side to the distant enemy. His ships were drifting together, bunching up. The wind was Cleopatra's friend!

The captain spoke again, a touch of anxiety in his voice. "Here they come, sir."

Faintly Octavian could hear the oarsmen on Cleopatra's ships begin singing in time with their oarstrokes, hear the boom of the oarmasters' drums. Louder and softer by turns, as the wind rose and fell, he could hear the terrible sound of forty thousand men singing in unison, voices harsh with exhilaration, singing in a barbarous alien mode and barbarous alien languages of which he could understand only a few words at the end of each stanza.

"Isis! Isis! Isis!"

"Give the command, sir!" rasped the sea captain. "We're ready."

But the words would not come to Octavian's lips.

With a curse the captain gave the command for him.

Octavian heard a great shout roll down the line of his ships, heard his own oarsmen strike up a familiar battle song, felt his stomach turn as his ship lunged forward.

"I'm not a well man," Octavian whispered, but his words were lost in

the hiss of the surf and clank of the oars.

The captain came forward, slapped him on the shoulder. "You could have my head for that, sir," he said, but he was grinning.

"Never mind," whispered Octavian, his eyes on the narrowing expanse of water between him and his enemies. "Never mind. Thank you."

The seasickness was fading, the breeze was cooling his fever; the battle-lust of his men infected his own hesitant spirit. He snatched his shortsword from its scabbard, held it high, laughing.

But his laughter died when he raised his eyes skyward.

There, where an instant before there had been nothing but wheeling gulls, three winged human figures had appeared, gliding toward him as if leading the fleet of his enemies. There was a woman in flowing red gowns, a red-headed man in a brown coat and knee-breeches, and a powerful muscular man with a white beard and long hair that thrashed in the wind.

A cry of dismay went up from the crews of Octavian's ships; their song ended in mid-phrase as the three figures landed on the foredeck of Octavian's galley.

"Who... who are you?" stammered Octavian.

It was the white-beard who spoke, in a deep commanding voice. "We are the ruling deities of Egypt, oldest and most terrible of all the gods. We are Isis, Osiris and Horus, rulers of the Land of the Dead."

"But what do you want... from me?"

"Your sword," said the white-beard.

When Octavian hesitated, the winged naked man stepped forward and snatched it from his hand, saying, "We need it!"

With a rush of wings the three were airborne.

"What for?" Octavian shouted up to them.

"A gift to Cleopatra Ptolemy, Empress of The World," called down the naked man. Octavian's sword, in the stranger's hand, flashed in the

sunlight.

So high above that she might be mistaken for one of the gulls, Kate Blake glided in slow spirals, watching but not knowing how to intervene.

Kate was an experienced time-voyager; she knew how to measure her journeys down to the minute or, if need be, to the second. Thus there could be no mistake. The unfamiliar vista that spread out before her startled gaze was London in 1791, and this should have been her own pretty house at 13 Hercules Buildings.

Instead she saw what appeared to be a small café or tea room, quite attractive really, in a half-timber style that suggested Tudor. The sign which hung above the door, swinging slightly in the wind, was lettered in Greek characters.

William had taught her a little Greek but not enough, it would seem, to read the sign.

It was midafternoon and the café appeared to be open. She gathered her courage and pushed open the front door, noting as she passed a carving in the face of the door that seemed to portray the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus. Yes, people were eating and drinking at the tables here in the somewhat dim interior. The murmur of conversation, the clink of dishes and silverware, the occasional laughter; all were exactly what one would expect in a small suburban tearoom, but then she began to notice the things that were not as they should be.

First, the costumes of the customers were unlike anything she had ever seen in any of the time periods she had visited. Both women and men wore long flowing garments of some heavy but silklike material. They could have been Arabs, except that they were bareheaded and the cloth in their robes was much more finely woven than any Arab material. Some of the customers glanced at Kate with curiosity; undoubtedly her costume appeared as strange to them as theirs did to her.

Second, there was a soft music playing in the room whose source she could not at first locate. The timbres of the music were harsh and the rhythms complex and percussive, not at all proper British tea room music, even played, as it was, softly enough not to disturb conversation. But where did this music come from? She could see no musicians. Then a shock. The music was coming from a television set mounted high on the

wall. No one was watching the TV screen where, in color and three dimensions, nude men and women were dancing. Everyone, it would appear, took this for granted, yet Kate knew there should not be any TV here. That was an invention of the 20th Century!

Third and most subtly disturbing, there was the language she heard all around her. It was Greek, yet not Greek, so that she could understand no more than a tantalizing word or phrase in all the buzz and hum, yet one word was repeated over and over, as if in echo of what she'd heard at the Battle of Actium.

Isis. Isis. Isis.

The serpentine sibilance of that name hissed at her from every corner of the shadowed dining room, and it took her a moment *to* realize why. The name of Isis was being used "in vain". The name of Isis had taken the place of the various names of Jesus and Jehovah in the unthinking blasphemies of polite conversation. It was then Kate realized that it had not been Mary and Jesus she'd seen carved in the door, but Mother Isis and the infant Horus.

Dazed, Kate opened a door at the rear of the dining room and immersed into...

Her garden!

There were her familiar poplar trees, there the tangled unpruned grape vines, all in their proper places, except that now they formed a backdrop for a cluster of outdoor tables where strange robed figures spoke some dialect of Greek never heard before and said "Isis" all the time. She was outraged. What were these strangers doing in her garden?

Outrage quickly gave way to horror as she realized it was she who was the stranger. William had made good his threat; he and Urizen had made a world in which Kate Blake had never been born.

She fell into a chair at one of the tables and sat staring at her grape vines until a waiter came walking quickly to her and spoke to her with concern in his voice.

She forced a smile and, seeing that he was carrying a menu, reached out for it. . He hesitated, then handed it to her.

She smiled at him again, and he left her to make her selection. Opening the menu she found, without surprise, that it was written in Greek characters and she could not understand a word.

A large jet airliner passed overhead, but Kate was the only one in the garden who looked up at it. Jet airliners were another thing that should not have appeared until the 20th Century, but of course these Londoners did not know that.

Over the top of the menu, Kate studied the people around her.

Some of the women wore crosses... but no, not crosses. Crosses with loops on top. The Ankh, Egyptian hieroglyph for Eternal Life.

The waiter returned; Kate ordered by pointing her finger at one of the items on the menu. She had no idea what she was going to get.

As she waited for her lunch, she puzzled over all she had seen since arriving in 1791, and a pattern began to emerge. This was what England had become as a result of Cleopatra's victory.

The Roman Empire had been ruled from Egyptian Alexandria, seat of learning and science, instead of from Rome, seat of mere military power. That explained the advanced technology! Perhaps there had been no decline and fall of the Roman Empire, no Dark Ages.

And that explained the carving of Isis and Horus, the Ankh pendants around the women's necks, the casual whispers of the name of Isis. As Alexandria had triumphed over Rome, so had The Great Mother Isis triumphed over The Great Father Jehovah.

And Greek, not Latin, had become the mother of modern languages. This Greeklike tongue she heard around her... those who spoke it must believe they were speaking English!

But of course England must now have another name. Kate wondered what it was.

And her garden—she glanced around at it, on the verge of tears—her garden had developed the same as if nothing had ever been changed. Her garden took no part in politics.

The waiter arrived with her food.

It was some sort of meat stew. When she tasted it, she found it overly spicy, but ate it anyway. She had become, without noticing it, very hungry indeed. The silverware, in an ornate floral pattern, consisted of a knife and a spoon, but no fork. A glance at the other tables informed her there was not a fork to be seen. She wondered, *Is the fork a Roman invention?*

When the waiter approached her, obviously expecting to present her with the bill, she vanished.

*

Language is the great divider; in every society those who speak the dominant tongue are on top, and those who don't on the bottom, with social rank in between determined largely by linguistic fluency.

Thus Kate sought out the foreigners, the outcasts, in this changed London. She made her search mostly on foot, using her power to slip out of the time-stream only when she felt in some danger. She didn't like the world outside of time. The herds of ghosts who roamed there seemed greatly multiplied, and their terrible howling had begun to form words. If only they could be silent a moment; perhaps elect a spokesman. Then she'd listen to them and be able to understand what they were so urgently trying to tell her.

At first it puzzled her that the streetplan of London was so little changed. Almost all the main avenues followed exactly the same course they had before the change, though in the sidestreets the changes had been great. Then she remembered that these main avenues followed roads laid out by the ancient Britons, long before the coming of the Romans. William had taught her the history of her nation, along with all the rest, and in her time-voyaging she'd seen enough to know more than any ordinary historian.

She knew, as ordinary historians did not, that before the invaders had called her city Londinium it had had another name: Golgonooza. She knew, as ordinary historians only suspected, that where the Roman milestone called the London Stone stood against the south wall of St. Swithin's on Cannon Street, there had once been a stone of a different sort, where druids stretched out their victims for human sacrifice.

Now, in this changed London, she discovered that St. Swithin's was gone but the London Stone remained, now set apart in a little park before a temple of Isis. Cannon Street also was still there, as was Cheapside, Gracechurch Street and Fleet Street, though all had new names she could not read. And London Bridge, though it was greatly changed in appearance, still crossed the Thames at exactly the same spot.

So different, yet so much the same.

At first she did not understand why, almost without exception, every one of the churches she remembered had been replaced by a temple of Isis on the exact same site. Then she remembered that these sites had all once been druid holy places: the religion of Isis, like Christianity, had taken care to occupy the locations already made sacred by defeated gods and goddesses, the hubs of the web of magical roads that once radiated from Stonehenge to the opposite side of the globe.

She wandered all day long and at night was given shelter in some sort of woman's refuge next to the Temple of Isis that stood on the site of Westminster Cathedral. Here she found the foreigners, the outcasts, the poor people she sought, lying in fourdecker cots arranged in long straight tiers. Here she ate, surrounded by people of all races and languages and costumes and ages, women with only one thing in common, their poverty.

The shaven-headed nuns of Isis who served the food asked Kate questions, but were not surprised when she could not reply, nor did they seem to find anything remarkable about Kate's clothing. That night Kate slept well, in spite of the stench of unwashed bodies and the moans of the sick.

*

Kate was a good student. Sister Boadicea was a good teacher. In a little more than a week the alchemy of translation had begun to take place; when Sister Boadicea spoke in her native tongue, Kate's mind transformed what she said into something very like the King's English.

"You have done well in your lessons," said Sister Boadicea, speaking slowly and carefully.

Kate struggled with the words. "Thank... thank you, Sister." There were sounds in the language she could not form.

"Better than the others, my dear."

"Thank you."

Kate was glad that she had been kept after class to be praised rather than criticized. The Sister's dignity and shaven head made Kate a little in awe, but both women were young, about the same age. Sister Boadicea, seated behind a massive desk, was smiling up at Kate now as Kate stood before her, trying hard to speak in a way to justify the Sister's praise.

"May I ask a question, Sister?"

"Of course."

"What is the name of this city?"

"Golgonooza."

"Golgonooza? That's a very old name."

The Sister was surprised. "How do you know that, my dear?"

"I learned it... at home."

Sister Boadicea did not ask where home was, only said quietly, "You are right. When the Alexandrian Empire expanded to include our nation, the soldiers brought with them scholars from the Alexandrian Library. Thanks to these devoted servants of Isis, nearly all the old place names were preserved as they were when this was a land of druids and superstition."

Kate asked, still struggling with the language, "And what is the name of this nation?"

"Albion, of course. How strange that you know the name of Golgonooza and not the name of Albion. They must have strange schools in your land."

"I never went to school. My husband taught me."

"As best he could, I suppose. By Isis, I should get over being surprised at the odd things in the heads of those who come to Albion." She toyed with the Ankh that hung from a leather thong from her neck. "Where is your husband now?"

"I don't know."

"Dead?"

"I don't think so." Kate thought, *It is I who am dead, here in this world where I never was born.*

"Did he abandon you?"

Kate could not answer. The image of William as he had once been, the good William, forbade it.

The Sister sighed and nodded. "I understand."

But, thought Kate, how could she understand? How could anyone but a Zoa understand? Still, Sister Boadicea was so gentle, so wise, perhaps...

Kate began, "Sister, I must tell you. I do not come from Albion. In this world I never was born."

"I know, my dear. None of us was born in this world. The body is born in this world. The Ka is born in this world. But the Ba is immortal. Never being born, the Ba cannot die." The Sister was smiling sweetly. "The Ba is your true self. It is through your Ba that you are united with Isis."

Kate was speechless. The Sister would take anything that was said to her and translate it into Bas and Kas and Mother Isis; Kate could see that now.

Sister Boadicea went on, "You cannot know how pleased I am to hear you speak in a spiritual way. You must realize, since you're obviously a bright woman, that we teach you how to speak, not as an end in itself, but so that you may learn and one day speak the truths of our faith, that we teach you to read and write Albion so you may read the holy scrolls of Isis and write them on your heart."

"No, Sister..."

"Many learn Albion, but few Isis. Perhaps you are one of that few. I am a nun in the order of the Daughters of Albion, as are all the Sisters here. We are a teaching order, and in our teaching we seek not to press something in from outside, but, like the saintly Socrates, to draw

something out from the inside. We seek to awaken the slumbering Ba, to turn it to its Maker. In you I believe I sense a Ba that slumbers lightly. If you will let us help you, I think you can become what I am, one of the loving hands of the Goddess." She rose to her feet, leaned forward so her loose linen robe brushed the desktop. "The poor and ignorant have need of us, Kate. We can help them. As Isis tenderly raised her husband Osiris from the dead, we can here resurrect those who are dead to hope, who without us would die in the streets of Golgonooza, hungry, sick, helpless."

Kate took a step backward. "I'm sorry. I cannot be one of you."

"Oh Kate, once I said those same words, but now look at me!" Her words were urgent, serious. "When the Goddess created us, she..."

"When *God* created us," Kate corrected. There was a moment of shocked silence, then Sister Boadicea sat down abruptly, saying, "I see."

"You see what?" Kate already regretted offending the Sister.

"I see, Kate, that you have come from the land of dark superstition, where the red men worship the Sun King."

"No, that's not so."

"No need to deny it, girl. You come from Oothoon." It was some time before Kate realized that Oothoon was what, in the world before the change, had been called The American Colonies.

And the following day, from one of the other "students", Kate learned that Oothoon and Albion were on the brink of war.

"Germs," the old woman muttered, peering up at Kate with bloodshot eyes.

"Germs?" Kate knew the Albion word, but was uncertain she'd heard it correctly. She'd been with the Daughters of Albion for two months now and had learned to understand the language well, but she still sometimes made mistakes.

The old women took a sip of coffee from a cracked cup, nodding slowly. "You Sisters shouldn't bother your heads about things like that."

"I'm not one of the Sisters. I help out around here to pay for my room and board, but I will never be one of the Sisters."

The old woman sighed, squinting in the glare of the unshaded electric light bulbs that lit the now almost deserted mess hall. "All the same, I shouldn't say nothing. It's supposed to be a secret."

Kate was turning to leave when the old woman added, "But it's a crime what they're doing, a crime and a sin. Isis don't like things like that."

Kate had chores to do. "What are you talking about, good mother?"

The old woman leaned forward and said in a low, confidential tone, "There's an army base just a bit south of here. I've had a job there until last week, cleaning up around the offices, but when I found out what they were doing, I quit."

"What they were doing?" Kate prompted.

"They're setting up huge big rockets, Sister. They're going to shoot those rockets all the way across the ocean to Oothoon. A surprise attack!"

"But why..."

"Germs!" The rockets will be full of plague germs. As soon as I found out, I quit."

"And started drinking?" Kate said.

The woman shrugged. "So what if I did? There are some things too awful for a sober mind."

Kate went directly to the common room, where she thought she might find Sister Boadicea. Kate had formed the habit of talking to Sister Boadicea whenever something upsetting came up.

Sister Boadicea was there, watching television with Sister Gwendolen, Sister Ragan, Sister Sabrina and Sister Gonorill. Kate sat down beside her and said, "Sister Boadicea, I've just heard something..."

Sister Boadicea, finger to lips, cut in, "Ssh. The King is speaking."

Kate glanced at the television screen. There was a face she'd come to

recognize as that of King Caesarean, direct descendant of the son of Cleopatra Ptolemy and Julius Caesar; the lean sad features and large protuberant nose were unmistakable. The King was saying, "... Oothoon is to Albion a wilful disobedient child, testing its parent to see how far it can go, but..."

Kate persisted, "Sister Boadicea, can I speak to you outside?"

Reluctantly Sister Boadicea got up, bowed to the other Sisters, and followed Kate into the hall.

"Try to be brief, Kate. The Popess will be speaking from Alexandria later tonight. I don't want to miss that, and you should watch it, too. The sight of the Holy Mother might soften your hard heart."

"Sister Boadicea, I've just heard that Albion plans a sneak attack on Oothoon, with transoceanic rockets filled with plague germs."

The Sister's lips formed a firm line, then she smiled faintly and said, "I'm not surprised."

"But what shall we do?"

"Nothing, my dear."

"We've got to stop it!"

"Stop it? How could we? And more important, why should we?"

"You've told me Isis is a tender loving mother. You've told me Isis is the Goddess of Life, of Love, of Mercy."

"As indeed she is, Kate. But your sympathies are with Oothoon. You can't see this matter objectively. You know that the monks and nuns of Isis, in all faith and love, have taught the red men of Oothoon for centuries, in hopes that one day Oothoon could become a full member of the union of nations. You know that, thanks to us, they have been raised from the level of naked savages to a level of technology and prosperity almost equal to our own. So certainly you must understand that Albion and the other nations who recognize the authority of the Holy Church of Isis cannot now stand by and do nothing when the red men of Oothoon threaten *to* drive the white man from their continent, deport our monks

and nuns, burn our holy temples, and revive the barbaric worship of the Sun God, a *male* deity!" She pronounced "male" as if it was a dirty word.

Exasperated, Kate cried, "How do you know the deity is female?"

The Sister replied smugly, "It is the female who brings forth life, my dear. Can a man have a baby?"

There was a tense silence, then Kate said softly, "You've been very helpful, Sister. Thank you."

"And as to this coming war, history will vindicate us, Kate." She touched Kate on the arm.

Kate flared up, "You don't know what history will say!"

"Only Isis can know the future," the nun agreed, then added sharply, "You certainly can't!"

Oh yes I can, thought Kate.

When Sister Boadicea returned to the common room, Kate stood for some time alone in the hallway, steeling herself for the howling of the hordes of the dead that she knew would greet her the instant she entered the place outside of time.

*

The statue of naked Urizen stood on the bank of the river, looking down on the vast city of Golgonooza, capital of Albion and capital of the World. No building stood taller than Urizen's head, not even the towers of the Temple of Isis. Under Urizen's right foot was a winged serpent, symbol of the Sun God, symbol of the red men of Oothoon. The serpent was portrayed as writhing in its death agonies.

William Blake, looking down on the statue from his helicopter, pondered its symbolism. The figure was a faithful reproduction of William's original design drawing, yet in this scale it seemed different, more pompous. William was not sure he still liked it; certainly the High Priestess of Isis in Alexandria did not like it. She even used the word "blasphemous" to describe its "pretentions."

But her word no longer carried much weight.

"To the palace, Little Eagle," he commanded.

"Yes, sir," the red slave replied, tilting the control column.

The helicopter crossed the river and headed west.

*

The slave, Chief Running Water, snapped to attention. He was an impressive sight in his feathered headdress and warpaint. "Announcing my lord William Blake, Prime Minister of Albion," he intoned.

Urizen looked up from *the* chessboard, smiling. "We can finish our game later, Vala," he said *to* the beautiful dark woman sitting opposite him, clad in yards and yards of white silk.

Vala sprang to her feet and ran across the multicolored geometrical mosaic floor of the immense throne room, her bare feet slapping against the hard little tiles, her silks swirling behind her like the tail of some fantastic tropical fish.

"William!" she shouted with delight. William, grinning, stood in the tall doorway, where the massive bronze doors stood ajar, his arms outspread to receive her. He was clad in the latest style, neo-archaic, with tunic, cloak and sandals all in gold-trimmed white, his red hair neatly cut so it hung no lower than his earlobes.

William and Vala embraced and kissed with hungry violence as Chief Running Water watched them emotionlessly.

"Come, darling. Talk to me," she said, as she led William toward the slightly raised platform where Urizen, reclining on white cushions, awaited them.

They paused a moment to bow and say in unison, "Our King," then Urizen gestured for them to be seated. Urizen, as usual, wore no clothes, but his bearing was kingly, commanding more respect than the most costly crown on the head of a lesser man.

"What news from the empire?" Vala demanded. Between themselves the three spoke English so no one else would understand.

"The empire..." William chose his words carefully. "... is imperfect."

Urizen laughed. "For the moment, perhaps. But since my plan is perfect, the result of my plan will also be perfect."

"But when?" asked William.

"All has gone well so far, has it not?" Urizen said playfully. "We set the world to uniting itself under a single capital, then, when that single world capital in due time came into being, we took that capital for ourselves. That was my plan—a simple one really—and here we are, exactly where I expected we'd be. Politics is like farming, my friend; you plant a seed, then wait."

"I've flown over Oothoon," William said bleakly.

"And you found?"

"A land of death eternal. Nothing human lives over there, not on the northern continent nor on the southern. There are trees, animals, but..."

Urizen leaned forward, saying seriously, "What do you want? A world split in half? A world like the one before the Great Change where the United States and Russia stood facing each other with drawn knives for a hundred years? If one world is what we want, there must be one power, not two or ten or a hundred, one power with the means and the courage to exterminate all rivals."

William glanced at Chief Running Water. "Not everyone would agree."

Urizen said, "Are you speaking of the Chief there? Believe me, he is only too glad we captured him in the early stages of the war, before the plague infected him. Here, it's true, we make a clown of him, forcing him to parade around for our amusement in the costume of his savage ancestors, though we know well enough that before the war he dressed the same as any good citizen of Albion." Urizen turned to the Chief and called, "Hey there, boy! What were you before the war?"

The answer came without hesitation. "A college professor, my lord."

"And tell me, Chief, where would you rather be? Back there before the war, teaching college, or here, as you are?"

"Here, my lord."

"You see?" Urizen said.

"What other answer could he give, and live?" demanded William.

"You're so sour," Vala said, pouting. "You should stay here with me, not go bouncing around the world so. It isn't good for you."

"I am the Prime Minister," William reminded her. "Someone must go about and see that things are as they ought to be."

"You sound as if you have still more complaints to make," Urizen said languidly.

"There is unrest in high places and low," William said gloomily. "The officials in the temple of Isis complain that you have no priestess at court."

"Hey Vala," Urizen called. "Would you like to be a priestess?"

"You swine," she cooed affectionately.

William went on, "The nobility complains that you fail to give proper respect to the king and queen."

"Proper respect? It is against my better judgement that I let those royal schemers live, and as for the nobility, they must be aware by now that I preserve them only as one preserves the last examples of some nearly extinct species, for the amusement of the zoo-going public."

"And there are riots," William continued doggedly. "Not only in distant parts of the world, but in the very streets of Golgonooza itself. The young roam the streets like packs of wolves and every wall is covered with obscene scrawls. Golgonooza was to be a city of art..."

"It will be a city of art, William," Urizen said soothingly. "Patience. We have visited the future. We know that these dark times will one day end. There is a perfect world uptime from here, and we visit it when we make our spot-checks. It's there, William, the prize that makes it all worthwhile."

"But..." William began to object.

Vala touched his lips with her fingertips. "Hush now, darling. Don't be so serious."

William sighed and smiled. "I suppose you're right."

"The important thing is that you're home," Urizen said heartily. "It's almost suppertime. Let's go on down to the dining room and see if we can guess, by sniffing the air, what the cook has in store for us." He got to his feet, stretching and scratching himself. "Let's make this a celebration, not a wake. A celebration of your safe return, William."

The way to the dining room led across a long stone bridge that spanned the gulf between the southern and northern wings of the palace. The bridge was roofed but open at the sides so you could look down (if you weren't afraid of heights) into the courtyard twenty floors below, or off across the landscape toward Golgonooza. William, tagging along behind Urizen and Vala, looked toward Golgonooza where, dominating the skyline, the giant statue of Urizen trampling the serpent-god was silhouetted against the afterglow of early evening. He thought, *The High Priestess of Isis is right*. The statue really was too big. No statue of a mere man should be that large. And yet it was a perfect symbol of all that Urizen stood for, all that was too vast for ordinary humans to understand, but for which ordinary humans by the millions were expected to give their lives.

William's thoughts were interrupted when he almost bumped into Urizen and Vala, who had stopped abruptly.

"What's wrong?" William asked, annoyed, then followed the line of their vision.

Someone was standing in the shadows at the end of the bridge, waiting for them... a woman in a loose white robe.

A familiar voice called, "Mr. Blake?"

It was Kate. William tried to speak, but could not.

*

Chief Running Water came crisply to attention, thumping the butt of his spear against the mosaic tile floor, as Urizen and Vala passed him, dragging Kate behind them by the wrists into the throne room. William followed, his features pale and masklike.

"Shut the doors!" Urizen commanded.

"Yes, my lord." The Chief shut them with a boom.

As the echo of the boom died away, Kate shouted, "Let go of my wrists!"

"Save your breath, Mrs. Blake," Urizen told her grimly.

"You can't hold me like this! A bit of concentration, and I can pop a hundred years into the future or a hundred years into the past, where you'd never find me."

"Try it, Mrs. Blake," Urizen said quietly.

She tried. Nothing happened.

"I don't understand," she said, suddenly afraid.

"Remember when I first took you and William to Rintrah?" Urizen said. "I held you by the hands, and my power communicated itself to you. I have power, Mrs. Blake, over anything I touch."

"I have power too," objected Kate. "I've been practising. It wouldn't surprise me if I was every bit as good at controlling time as you are."

Urizen smiled. "You may be as good as I am alone, but not as good as Vala and I together. Believe me, my dear, Vala and I together can cancel out anything you might be planning to do."

Vala said, "You scared me, standing in the shadows like that, particularly since I honestly never expected to see you again. Kate dear, that was naughty of you!"

"You thought you'd murdered me, good and proper!" Kate was furious.

"Murdered you?" Urizen said with mock astonishment.

"There is no murder without a *corpus delicti*. We simply arranged things so you wouldn't be born."

"You murdered me," Kate insisted. "And you murdered all the others, too...the people who would have been born if you hadn't changed things."

Urizen was amused. "Is it murder every time a man passes up an opportunity to get a woman pregnant?"

"Let me go!" shouted Kate, struggling with all her strength. Urizen and Vala held her fast.

Urizen went on, unperturbed, "We took life from some, yes, but only to give it to others. That's what it means to be a ruler. You must take the responsibility for saying 'This one will live, that one will die.' "

"And you never ask yourself, do you, Mr. Urizen, if it's your right to decide that. You never think there might be a higher court." When Urizen did not answer this, she went on with more conviction, "Ah, I see I've struck a nerve! You do have doubts!"

"Only at around three in the morning," admitted Urizen, but his tone was ironic. "But now it's my turn for a question... a simple one at that. What do you want here, Mrs. Blake?"

"I want me husband," she said firmly.

"I can't believe it," said Vala.

"Do you know what you're doing, Mrs. Blake?" Urizen asked, in all seriousness.

Kate held her head high. "I'm doing nothing more than any good Englishwoman would do, nothing more than my mother's done many a time. When my father fell in with bad company, with drinking men and evil loose women, she went right down to whatever tavern or bawdyhouse he was in and dragged him home by the ear, she did."

Vala laughed out loud. Urizen only said mildly, "And why did she do that?"

Kate looked at him as if he was feeble-minded. "She loved him, you silly man!"

"Let her go," put in William softly.

"I'd like to," Urizen told him. "But I can't. She's a Zoa. She's powerful. The moment we let go of her wrists there's no telling what she might do,

and Vala and I have better things to do than stand here holding her."

"If she promised..." began William.

"Could we believe her?" demanded Urizen reasonably. "No, my friend. I sympathize with you, but at the same time ask you, remember the greatness of our cause. The plan comes first, before all else."

"What are you saying?" William was bewildered.

"That we must kill her," answered Urizen with real regret. "We have no choice. But you can leave the room if you like."

William remained where he stood, but did not protest.

"Mr. Blake..." said Kate with dismay.

"Chief, do you have your spear?" called out Urizen.

"Right in my hand, my lord," answered the red man, stepping forward.

Urizen's voice was cold, emotionless. "Then run her through... but try to make it quick and easy."

"Yes, my lord!"

Kate closed her eyes and waited for the pain.

*

"Am I dead?" Kate had to shout to hear her own voice above the howling of the clouds of swirling spectres.

"No, Mrs. Blake." William's voice was deep and gentle in her ear.

They were falling, falling through the void, spinning head over heels through a maze of vague images that formed and disintegrated before they could really be seen... buildings, animals, human faces, machines.

"I don't understand," she said.

He chuckled. She was amazed. She'd never heard him laugh before. "I saved you," he said. "I threw myself on you and tore you free of Urizen and

Vala, then took you with me here, outside the timestream."

They rested on a summer hillside in Albion, in the days before Urizen's castle was built. The skyline of Golgonooza in the distance showed no trace of Urizen's statue, and the sun was shining brightly.

"It's better that way," William murmured.

"Better without Urizen on the throne?"

William nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Blake."

William was sitting with his back against a tree. Kate lay down and rested her head in his lap.

"Do you forgive me, Kate?"

"What's to forgive, Mr. Blake?"

He bent forward his head and kissed her awkwardly on the ear. She knew he was crying by the way his body jerked, but he made no sound and she made no comment. At last she said, "Are you with me against Urizen?"

"I'm with you," he whispered.

"And against Vala?"

He hesitated, then said, "Against Vala, too."

"Then it's even, two against two, and we've got a chance," Kate concluded excitedly. "He'll be sorry he taught us all his tricks."

"Not all of them, Kate," William warned.

"Enough of them, Mr. Blake!"

*

As they stepped from the brightly-lit printseller's shop into the fog and darkness of the street, Kate said, "Thank you kindly, Mr. Blake, for buying me this map of Albion."

"You need never thank me for anything again," he answered contritely.

"I owe you a debt I'll spend the rest of my life paying, a debt for all the trouble I've given you."

"Be a Christian gentleman. Forgive! Forgive even yourself."

"If only I could."

"You're just a man, you know. My mother told me a hundred times, 'A man may be strong in body, but it's up to the woman to be the moral backbone of the family.'"

The fog was so thick they had to walk slowly, but at least they were in no danger of being run over. Here in Golgonooza, unlike London, only foot traffic was allowed in the central business district. Kate could see William as little more than a blurred black shape except when they passed under a streetlight where she could catch a glimpse of his drawn features.

"I hope you know where we're going," he said.

"I won't get lost in this neighborhood. I used to come down this very street every day when I was living with the Daughters of Albion. We'll be there in a minute."

"Be where?"

"At the Women's Mission, next door to the Temple of Isis. There's someone there I must talk to. See, that's the temple now."

The temple loomed ahead of them, black and huge. They passed in front of it, then left the street and silently mounted a flight of stairs. A glowing window seemed to materialize out of the fog. They stopped to peer through it.

"Why, that's you in there!" William whispered.

"Hush now."

Inside Kate could see herself talking to the old woman, see the old woman telling her about the rockets. She could hear the murmur of their voices, but could not make out the words. Now the Kate inside the room was nodding, now turning and walking briskly away.

The Kate outside said, "Wait. That's it. All right, let's go in."

She pulled open the door to the Mission dining room and entered, William beside her.

The old woman looked up, startled. "What's this? You go out one door and come in another! Did you forget something, Sister?"

Kate answered, "I'm not a Sister. I'm just wearing this robe because... but never mind about that. Yes, I did forget something. I need to know exactly where that base is where they've got the rockets." She spread out the map of Albion on the table. "Could you point out the place for me?"

"No trouble at all," the old woman replied, squinting at the map. "It's right there." She pointed a bony ringer. "And there's another one in the north of Albion and another in the south—here and there. I remember from a map they had in the office."

William said, "Three bases. Are you sure that's all there are?"

"Just three," the old woman said, nodding firmly. "I'm certain sure."

"Thank you," Kate said fervently. "Thank you so much."

"Then you'll do something about it?" The old woman was grinning toothlessly with rekindled hope.

"We'll try," Kate promised.

"Isis be praised, Sister!" exclaimed the woman.

Kate and William were already heading for the door.

*

The sentry did not look up, and thus did not see the Blakes pass swiftly and silently overhead, high enough to clear the electrified barbed wire fence, but too low to be picked up on radar.

They landed atop the administration building and crouched there on the roof, shivering in the damp fog, whispering together through chattering teeth.

"Are you sure this is the right place, Kate?"

They had so far gotten lost four times that night.

"It must be. It's so... so military."

"I don't see any rockets."

"Well, we must look for them of course. Come along!"

She took off and he followed.

The rockets, when they found them, were lying on their sides in a long line, hidden from passing aircraft under vast tentlike camouflage nets. It was too dark to see any but the closest ones, but the Blakes, by making a tour of the area, determined that there must be around a hundred.

"Multi-stage," William whispered, indicating the three segments into which each missile was divided. "But no warheads."

William had become, Kate reflected, quite an expert in weapons under the tutelage of Urizen.

"They're overconfident," muttered William. "It's not wise to put all the rockets so close together. If one explodes, they all explode."

"Then let's explode them!" Kate cried delightedly.

William's gloomy voice came out of the darkness. "It's not as easy as that. I told you, they have no warheads." A spot check revealed that they had no fuel on board either.

"They're not as stupid as I thought," William complained.

For a moment they stood baffled, gazing in frustration at the nearest rocket. It was so long that both nose and tail were lost to sight in the fog.

At last Kate said, "There's no fuel on board now, but there will be."

"When?" He did not sound very hopeful.

"When it takes off, you silly man!"

*

A little over a month later, on a sunny afternoon, the countdown was completed and the first of the trans-oceanic rockets breathed flame and slowly rose from its launching pad. In a nearby concrete bunker, tense scientists, watching it rise, began, tentatively, to smile.

Then one of them shouted and pointed skyward, but his voice was drowned out by the thunder of the rocket. All the same, the others looked where he pointed.

A man and a woman had appeared, drifting through the air. The woman was wearing the robe of a nun of Isis; the man, a redhead, was clad in tunic and sandals, with his cloak swirling in the wind. They moved in from either side of the rocket, which was still rising quite slowly, and put their hands on it.

The rocket, together with the man and the woman, vanished.

In the sudden silence that followed, one of the scientists could be heard, weeping.

*

The rocket re-appeared a little over a month earlier, moving at a different angle, skipping on its side over the ground through darkness and fog. An instant later it rammed into the central segment of another rocket (Or was it the same rocket at an earlier time?) with an earsplitting crash, then kept on going, passing through one rocket after another until, almost at the last one, it exploded in a great rolling ball of flame and a deep thump of an explosion that broke windows fifty miles away.

High above, their faces illuminated by the flames, the Blakes embraced and laughed hysterically.

"How's that for a firecracker?" he shouted.

"Capital, Mr. Blake!" she answered.

Before dawn the two other bases in the north and south of Albion were also masses of roaring flame, and the attack on Oothoon definitively postponed, perhaps permanently.

Kate and William, soaring hand in hand upward into the brightening sky, gazed down at the white overcast and at the glowing spot in the

clouds that marked one of the burning bases.

"A nasty surprise for Mr. Urizen, I dare say," Kate remarked maliciously.

But William's mood was more sombre. "Surprise Urizen? I'm not sure that's possible. Actually it's I who am surprised... that Urizen has done nothing to stop us."

"What are you saying?" Now she was alarmed.

"I'm saying that before we celebrate our victory, we should go uptime a way and examine the results of this night's work."

*

It was a gray afternoon in Golgonooza.

Rain fell without cease on Kate's garden, which now grew even more wild than it had when this city had been called London and this nation England. The grape vines had crept forward to reclaim the area where the tearoom tables had stood, where Kate had tried and failed to read the menu. The table where she'd sat, like everything else, was overgrown with the serpentine vines and translucent green fruit, and there was no sound but the steady hiss of the rain. The chairs, some still upright, some overturned, were iron under their chipped paint and had begun to rust.

A yellowed skeleton lay face down in the garden, almost bidden by the leaves, the rain drumming on the skull with a curiously hollow sound.

Kate and William stood in the back door of the tearoom for a long time, watching.

Finally Kate spoke. "That skeleton... do you suppose that's the fellow who waited on me?"

William answered softly, "Perhaps."

Absent-mindedly she scratched herself with her slender fingers. There were fleas everywhere inside the tearoom. They thrived in the dust that lay thickly on all the furniture, here in the comparatively dry interior.

They had walked the streets for hours before finally ending up here.

Nowhere had they seen a living human being, though corpses were numerous enough.

She spoke again. "It's like this all over Golgonooza, isn't it?"

William's large blue eyes turned toward her. "All over Albion, I expect. Probably all over the continent as well ... and it's our fault."

"Our fault?"

"We exploded the germ warfare rockets here in Albion. We had literally all the time in world, but we had to hurry, had to rush in and make our silly blunder. We should have known that we'd be spreading here the plague intended for Oothoon! We saved the redmen, but sacrificed Albion to do it."

She thought of Sister Boadicea. She and William had been to the Mission of the Daughters of Albion, but had found no trace of anyone. She thought of the old woman who had been so eager to have the rocket attack stopped. All, all dead.

"Let's leave here," she said, and her voice was soft as if she'd been in church. "Let's go back downtime to before all this happened, to before Urizen came to Albion."

William shook his head heavily. "No, Kate."

She turned on him angrily. "What's that? Do you like it here?"

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "We must try to learn to like it. It'll be our home from now on."

She swept his hand away with an impatient gesture. "Our home? Are you daft? We can go anywhere we like... the present, the past, the future!"

He sighed. "No more. Here we are and here we stay."

"No! I won't have it!"

"We've got the plague, Kate."

"Don't frighten me with your ugly jokes. How could we..."

"We've been very foolish. You can't walk the streets of a plague city without getting the plague, but I didn't think of that until we'd been here for more than half an hour. Now, you see, we can't leave here because we'd take the plague with us, we'd infect any age we visited. Those fleas that have been biting us... every one of them must be a plague carrier."

In a moment of blind panic she slapped and rubbed herself with impotent frenzy, trying to get rid of the fleas that, she now was horribly aware, were crawling all over her.

"Hush now," William said soothingly. "That will do no good. We'll have some time together before the fever comes on. A few days. Maybe a week. Let's make as good use of it as we can. You know, we've never gotten to know each other as well as we might."

She stopped slapping and scratching and said with ill-suppressed fury, "You've known for hours and you didn't tell me!"

His large eyes were full of pain. "I couldn't think of any kind way to say it."

*

"Look Kate. The rain has stopped."

She awoke and rolled over on the pile of tablecloths and towels on the floor that served her as a bed. The backdoor was open, and through it she could see her garden, fresh and bright in the morning sunshine, the grape leaves wet and dripping, the trunks of the poplar trees glistening with moisture.

With the rain her suffering seemed to have passed as well. The fever was gone, not to be replaced by the chills, as before, but by a curious feeling of great peace. Her makeshift bed was clammy with old sweat, and she raised herself slowly into a sitting position, fighting against waves of dizziness and nausea that threatened to destroy her strange joy.

William, she saw, was sitting nearby on the floor, his back to the wall. His reddish beard was quite long, dirty and tangled and his skin pale. His eyes were bloodshot and his body terribly thin.

"Can I get you something to eat?" he asked gently. "There's still some

cans of food in the kitchen."

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Blake, but I'm not a bit hungry. I'll eat later perhaps. I'm feeling much better."

"You look better, and that's a fact. I've never seen you more beautiful." His voice, she noted, was not strong, and had a quaver in it. They'd taken turns nursing each other, and that had seemed to be working quite well until last night when, four hours at time, neither of them had been altogether sane.

"I was thinking," he began. "It being such a fine morning, maybe you and I can go for a walk."

"A walk?" It sounded like such an insane suggestion she wondered if he was in a fever again, but no... fever gave a certain high quickness to a man's voice, and he sounded perfectly normal. A walk? Why not? People go for walks all the time.

"Down to the river," he said. "That's not far."

Was he joking? No, he was slowly, painfully, dragging himself to his feet. For a moment he stood there swaying and blinking, then, with shuffling sandaled feet, he came over and extended his hand to help her up.

Could she stand up? Yes, much to her own surprise, she could.

Very slowly, pausing every few steps to gather strength, they made their way to the front door and out into the street.

Several times Kate felt as if her legs would give way under her, but each time William was there, holding her, keeping her from falling.

"You're a good man," she whispered. "I always knew it."

He did not answer. Perhaps the effort of walking took all his energy.

As they reached the intersection a pack of gaunt dogs appeared around a corner and, seeing them, came forward slowly, curiously. One, who seemed to be the leader, showed his teeth and let out a low growl.

"Go on!" shouted William, bending over and picking up a rock from the

cobblestone street. When he raised the rock as if to throw it, the pack of dogs fled, but not very far, and when William and Kate continued on their way, the dogs followed at a safe distance.

"They want to eat us," Kate said softly.

"Nonsense. They're just overfriendly."

Kate did not believe him. She had heard that growl. But she was not afraid. It seemed right and good that the dogs should eat her. Nature was like that.

As she looked around she saw birds everywhere. There had never been so many birds in the neighborhood. And there were other animals too. Squirrels. Chipmonks.

And an occasional huge rat that did not flee as rats used to do, but stood its ground in the middle of the street and watched them with fearless little eyes, so they had to detour around.

In every yard the weeds formed a small jungle, and in each jungle there were eyes.

She would die today. She knew it. And all the dogs and birds and squirrels and chipmunks and rats would eat her, because her man would die too and there would be no one to stop them. And that was fine. That was exactly as it should be.

A small breeze made itself felt, a welcome breeze, because either the day had become suddenly very hot or the effort of walking was too much for her... "The fever's coming on again," she whispered. "We'll be at the river soon. We can rest there." His voice was strained, desperate. Was he getting a fever too? They paused to rest.

The dogs settled themselves on their haunches, tails wagging, tongues hanging, intelligent eyes fixed on the Blakes with a calculating gaze. They were closer than they had been.

But the sun was so warm. Everything was so quiet. The birds sang. The insects hummed. The cobblestones glistened, already beginning to dry. She'd never seen a more perfect day.

Then, without warning, William fell. She bent over him, concerned yet somehow detached. "Are you all right, Mr. Blake?"

He rolled over. "Yes, yes. A little dizzy there, that's all. I'll be on my feet in a minute."

But he found he could not stand, and she did not have the strength to lift him.

"Damned nuisance," he muttered, and began to crawl on all fours. The dogs came a little closer. She tottered along beside him. Her thoughts grew vague.

When she was thinking again she found herself on the bridge, alone, leaning against the cement rail. Puzzled, she looked around. Where was William? Ah, there he was!

He was about a block behind her, inching along on his belly toward her. The dogs were following him very closely, only a few yards from him.

"Go away! Go away, you!" she screamed at the dogs. They paid no attention to her. The lead dog's teeth were showing, so he seemed to be smiling.

"Go away! Leave Mr. Blake alone!" she shouted.

The lead dog rushed forward, sniffed at William's ankle.

"No!" cried Kate. It was no longer a beautiful day. It was horrible. Hot as an oven. Moist.

Every cobblestone in the street stood out with a supernatural clarity. Every separate hair on the dog's pelt stood out so she could have counted them.

"William!" She tried to run toward him, but instead fell, painfully, on her knees.

A great roaring rushing sound filled the universe.

She raised her head, looked up.

The last thing she saw before losing consciousness was a large brown

helicopter hovering overhead.

*

His skin was brownish red, his shoulder-length hair black, and his shirt and pants white. He was a young man, handsome, and his teeth, as he smiled, were white too.

"I see you're awake," he said pleasantly.

"Yes. I think so." Kate found it difficult to speak. "Where's... William?"

"William? Ah yes, he's in the men's ward."

"Ward? Is this a hospital?"

"Yes it is, fortunately for you both. You and... what did you say the man's name was?"

"Mr. William Blake."

"You and Mr. Blake will be all right in a few weeks. The military police helicopter was able to bring you in for inoculation before the disease had reached the terminal phase."

Kate tried to sit up in bed, failed. Her eyes swung from the young doctor's face to a curious object hanging on the wall. At first she took it for a caduceus, symbol of the medical profession, but then she noticed *it* had one serpent, not two, and no staff. "What's that thing on the wall?" she demanded.

The doctor reacted with surprising anger. "That's God!" he snapped.

"God?" said Kate stupidly.

"The Winged Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, God of Oothoon!"

After the doctor had left, Kate fell asleep looking at Quetzalcoatl, thinking, *The redmen won the war...thanks to us.*

*

The young doctor, whose name was Laughing Bear, became quite

friendly with the Blakes during the following week. The three of them often talked together on the sun-deck during the afternoons, when the doctor was taking his break.

The hospital, they learned from him, was located in the south of Gallica (or France as the Blakes might have called it) near the Mediterranean Sea, so sunny days were many. They suspected it was their strangeness that drew Laughing Bear to them; the Blakes were the only Whites in the entire institution.

She thought, *The redmen must be world rulers now.*

William and Kate were feeling much stronger now. They might have asked to leave the hospital, but they hadn't the slightest idea where they would go. The whole of the past and the whole of the future were open to them, but it seemed somehow easier to lie in the afternoon sun and pass the time in lazy conversation.

The only disturbing factor was the coldness of the other patients. Perhaps it was skin color, perhaps religion, perhaps politics, but the red-skinned dark-eyed convalescents studied the Blakes from a distance but never spoke to them.

One afternoon, as William and Kate lay in deckchairs clad in bathrobes and sunglasses and Dr. Laughing Bear sat on a stool facing them, William brought the matter up.

"Laughing Bear, can the other patients here speak the language of Albion?"

The doctor smiled, teeth very white against dark skin. "Of course. It's the only language all the thousand tribes of Oothoon have in common. Most of us speak two languages: the historic tongue of our province, and Albion."

"Then why don't they speak to us?"

The doctor sighed. "How can I explain? Partly it is guilt, if we are speaking honestly. No winner is ever free of guilt. Partly it is resentment. The older ones remember how it was before the war, when you ruled us with an all-too-heavy hand." Laughing Bear often addressed the Blakes as if they represented the entire White race.

Kate commented, "Sometimes they seem afraid of us."

"Afraid?" Laughing Bear nodded soberly. "Yes, some of them are afraid. You are, to them," he paused, searching for a word, "holy."

"Holy?" William was surprised.

The redman nodded, leaning forward, elbows on knees. "Our religion teaches us that white is the skin-color of the gods. That is why the redman was so long content to bow under the whiteman's domination. Our scripture foretold your coming to Oothoon, foretold that we would be your servants for a time, learning from you until we were your equals, then, when you destroyed yourself, the scripture foretold that we would inherit the world. It has all happened as our god Quetzalcoatl promised." His voice lowered a bit in reverence as he spoke his deity's name.

"But Laughing Bear," William persisted, "I know there are not other Whites here, but aren't there any Whites anywhere else? People of our own kind?"

Laughing Bear shook his head. "Your race is almost extinct. A few survive in the priestly orders. Indeed, their skin color helps them attain high rank there, but of all your millions that once swarmed Albion, Gallica and this whole continent there remain around ten or fifteen individuals at most.

"Perhaps, when you are well, you would like to go and live with them. They have a little village in the mountains where they keep alive the ancient customs of their nations for the benefit of tourists."

Kate shuddered, "I don't know as I fancy that."

"Then you must study for the Holy Priesthood of the Winged Serpent." He seemed pleased and eager to inform them about his religion.

"And there's no third choice?" Kate asked.

"None." Kate noticed that the doctor's voice was deep and calm, like William's.

"Then we shall study," William concluded.

Lapsing into English, Kate sat up abruptly and snapped, "We shall not! You're a Christian gentleman, Mr. Blake, and don't you forget it!"

Laughing Bear was startled by the sound of an unfamiliar language and, though he couldn't understand her words, could easily see that Kate was protesting.

William translated her outburst, but the doctor was still puzzled. "Christian? Christian? What's that?"

Of course, Kate thought, *in this world there's no such thing as a Christian*. She thought of the church she'd been married in, of the church she'd faithfully attended as a child, and for the first time she realized how utterly alone she was now.

She tried to explain. "Dr. Laughing Bear, there is another world where things turned out differently, where..."

The doctor interrupted. "Impossible! Things could not turn out any other way. All history is a reflection of the will of Quetzalcoatl, all events planned by him from before the beginning of time to beyond the end. He created the world, and he created the redman to rule it, and he wrote our holy scripture to show us our future, to ready us for our role as his chosen people!" At this point Laughing Bear realized he had raised his voice so that some of the patients nearby were looking at him curiously. Speaking more calmly, he added, "But you will learn all this when you study for the priesthood."

"No thank you just the same," Kate said firmly. "I think the tourist business sounds more promising."

The doctor looked at her sadly. "Still clinging to your childish superstitious faith in Isis?"

"We never did believe in Isis," she told him primly. "Isis isn't the real God."

"Of course not," the redman agreed. "A real god is someone you can see and hear and touch, like Quetzalcoatl; someone who can stand at the head of all nations and give personal guidance to his loyal worshippers." He was becoming excited again. "*Someone you can see on TV!*"

William and Kate looked at Dr. Laughing Bear in astonishment as Kate echoed his words. "Someone you can see on TV?"

"Of course." The doctor was quite smug now. "Come, I'll show you. We have video tapes of Quetzalcoatl's weekly television broadcast here. I'll play one for you on the set in the game room."

He led the Blakes off the sundeck and down a long deserted hallway.

A terrible suspicion was forming in Kate's mind. "Tell me, Doctor. Is Quetzalcoatl a white man?"

"Just as was foretold!" said Laughing Bear.

"And," she continued, "does he have long white hair and a long white beard?"

"Yes, he does, just as our scriptures describe."

They entered the game room. There was nobody there; on fine days like this everyone ambulatory was always out on the sun deck. Dr. Laughing Bear selected a tape from the library cabinet and inserted it in the read unit.

The television screen high on the wall hummed, crackled; a colored image began to form, the face of a man.

"You see?" Dr. Laughing Bear said triumphantly.

"Blessings on you all, my children," said Urizen's recorded image.

*

"Wake up, O immortal god of wine," Cleopatra called from the entrance to Antony's tent.

Antony groaned but did not reply.

She sniffed. The air in the tent was heavy with the smell of stale spilled wine and vomit. "Wake up, Antony dear. It's battle time."

He rolled over but his eyes remained closed, his nude hairy body more that of an aging wrestler than of a potential emperor of the known world.

"Leave me alone, bitch," he mumbled thickly.

"The enemy is waiting, Antony dear."

"Let 'um wait."

"Someone has to lead your fleet into battle, Antony dear."

"You lead it."

"Antony!" she shouted, but he had slipped once more into unconsciousness.

Angrily she turned on her heel and, muttering obscenities, walked quickly away from the tent. Antony's second-in-command snapped to attention, thumped his breast with his fist, and gave her a straight-arm salute. *Handsome young man*, she thought, looking him over from sandaled feet to helmeted head. *Perhaps ...*

The soldier's crisp voice interrupted her speculations. "Is the general awake, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, more or less."

"Does he have any orders for us, Your Majesty?"

"Yes... as a matter of fact." A faint ironic smile appeared on her lips. "He ordered that he be carried on board his flagship."

"Carried, Your Majesty?"

"You heard me, soldier. Then, he told me to tell you, you are to sail out and engage the enemy." That would be a sobering experience, she thought maliciously, to wake up in the middle of a sea battle... with a hangover.

"Is that all, Your Majesty?" The soldier had turned rather pale.

"One thing more. When I asked him who was to lead the fleet into battle, he confidently placed the responsibility in my hands."

"But..."

"But I'm a mere woman? My own Egyptian soldiers would not question

that, but you Romans with your blustering male pride... very well. I will give the commands, but as far as the troops are concerned, it will be Antony who has spoken the words you pass on. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Dismissed!"

He again thumped his breastplate, gave her a straight-arm salute, and then hurried off to obey her orders.

She continued through the camp, so deep in thought she hardly saw the soldiers who leaped to attention and saluted her. She squinted at the sky. It was a beautiful clear morning, a fine day for a battle. Octavian's fleet, she knew, was waiting out beyond the mouth of the channel. His ships were lighter, faster and more maneuverable than hers, his men better trained, the cream of the Roman legions. She had Antony's Romans, but her forces were fleshed out with slaves and freedmen, Egyptian palace guards, the troops of various allied minor kings, and a scraggly mob of local peasants pressed into service. There was, it seemed to her, only one way she could win. She must at all costs avoid hand-to-hand combat, where Octavian's legionaries would butcher her irregulars, and instead ram his fleet head-on when, as it always did, the wind picked up around noon, blowing his ships so they'd bunch up and show their sides to her. Her stronger heavier ships would smash his light ones to splinters!

The camp was laid out in a perfect square, Antony's tent exactly at the center where the two roads crossed at right angles. Her own camp, somewhat smaller, was a little apart, with walls and embankments and ditches of its own. To reach it, she had to pass briefly through a grove of trees that hid her from the view of the sentries on either wall.

It was here she had her vision.

Suddenly, so suddenly she jumped back with a gasp, there appeared a man and a woman floating through the air. The man was stocky, red-haired and wore a short tunic. The woman was slender with curly light-brown hair and a long white robe.

Kate spoke first, raising her hand so her long sleeve hung down like a wing. "Cleopatra Ptolemy!" Her Greek had an accent Cleopatra had never heard before.

"We bring you a message," boomed William. His Greek was better.

"From whom?" Cleopatra demanded, unafraid.

"From the gods!" William answered.

The queen drew herself up proudly. "There are no gods, unless they are the gods within us. All others are theater."

He said uncertainly, "But you believe yourself to be the goddess Isis..."

Cleopatra replied coldly, "I do not believe, I know it! Religion's too important to rest on belief!"

"But look!" The man sounded desperate. "We're flying!"

"Mirrors! Wires! In Alexandria we have magicians who can make an elephant seem to fly." Her glance was flicking nervously around, though her voice still showed no trace of fear. Was this a trap? Had Octavian sent assassins? "Speak and be gone! I have men to kill today."

"I can't..." He was flustered, frustrated.

The woman spoke to him in some unknown language. "Yes, Kate," he answered gently.

"Well?" prompted the queen.

He said haltingly, "We are your friends. We've come to warn you."

"Warn me?" Her tone was almost pitying.

"The spirits of the dead are gathering, my queen." His voice was deep and sombre, the voice of a singer, a poet. "They want you to rule the Western Land, to rule Amenti, the Kingdom of the Dead."

Still she answered mockingly, "And you, I suppose, have come to offer me a crown?"

"Not a crown, my queen. A sword. And not now but later today, when the battle begins. I will come flying to you over the waves, and with me will be a woman in red robes and a man with a white beard. The man will offer you a sword, saying it is the sword of Octavian. But it is not! It is the

sword of the Land of the Dead, and if you take it you will lead no more living men into battle, but only spectres. Do not take that sword, if you love life, but flee."

"Flee from a battle I expect to win? Impossible!"

"Then stay and die."

Cleopatra laughed outright. "It was not the gods or the spirits of the dead who sent you, but that sick weakling Octavian! If you come from the dead, give me proof of it!"

Kate took Cleopatra's right wrist and William the left, quickly, giving the queen no chance to straggle. "This is the proof," said William.

In the place outside of time Cleopatra saw the swirling, clouds of moaning spirits, the images of past and future that appeared and faded, and the swiftly changing gray-green light that is seen more with the mind than with the eyes. She screamed as she fell through the nothingness, clutched at the wrists that held her wrists, and, at last, believed.

Antony's second-in-command was supervising the loading of the ships when he turned and saw Queen Cleopatra running toward him. He was surprised. Cleopatra never ran, she strode, with queenly dignity, yet here she was, pale, panting, with her hair blowing in wild disarray.

He saluted, pretending not to notice. "Antony is safely on board, Your Majesty."

Gasping for air, she commanded, "Load... the sails and the rigging."

"But we have no need" for sails in battle, only oars!"

"Fool!" she screeched. "We make ready not to fight, but to flee."

When the demon came to offer her the sword, she knew she would refuse it. What she did not know was that this refusal would change the course of history, swing it back to what it would have been if the sword had never been offered to her.

*

"We threw a scare into her, didn't we?" laughed Kate, as she and

William drifted through the place outside of time. She could see the wave of change rushing on into the future, making everything once again "the way it ought to be."

As the wave moved onward, the clouds of ghosts faded, except for one who came toward them. It was William's brother Robert.

"Robert," William called out, "What's happening to all the spirits? There used to be clouds of them around. I saw them when Kate and I came back from that future where the redmen ruled the world. What's become of them now?"

"They are being born," answered the transparent Robert.

"But why couldn't they be born before?" he demanded.

"The world has changed," the spirit said sadly. "The bodies meant for them were not brought into being."

She protested, "Not the same bodies, perhaps, but there were bodies in the changed world. Who was... wearing them?"

Robert seemed uneasy. There are other spirits, spirits not intended to be human. When Urizen diverts the time stream, these unhuman things seize the opportunity to invade the human universe, to take human form. Thank God you two were able to return the time stream to its proper channel."

"So all's well then?" William said cheerfully.

"There's still a danger," Robert warned. "Urizen is a determined man. He'll try again to make some world in which he is master, in which he can realize his dreams of false perfection. Next time he may go further back in time to make his change, draw more of the unhuman beings into the human universe. The other Zoas no longer restrain him or correct his changes. It's up to you two now."

"But you'll help us?" Kate asked hopefully.

"I can do so little," the spirit said. "I have no physical body. But I can warn you when Urizen makes a change. We know it here before the chain of effects reaches those in the time-stream. We can see his changes

coming, like a line of falling dominoes."

"Warn us then, Robert," said William seriously.

"I will," said Robert, fading away.

"We'll do what we can," Kate promised.

*

Albion was gone, and Oothoon, and Golgonooza. It was 1791 in Lambeth, across the Thames from metropolitan London, the evening of the day Kate had left in search of William. The sky was still clear, so the moon (almost full) and the stars were plainly visible.

Kate stood at her back door and gazed out into her garden. There were the wild untrimmed grapevines, there the poplar trees.

"Even when everything else changed, my garden stayed the same," she murmured.

William lightly slipped his arm around her shoulders. "There could be other changes, changes that even your garden, though it is uncommonly hardy, could not resist," he said.

"Don't say that, Mr. Blake!"

"Why not? It's the truth."

She sighed. Of course he was right. The garden seemed so alive, so eternal, so indestructible, but there was an infinite number of ways it could be utterly obliterated. The birds she heard could cease to sing. The fragrance she smelled of plants and flowers could be replaced by poisonous fumes. The cool night breeze could be replaced by the airlessness of outer space. Impulsively she reached out to touch, almost to caress, the moist surface of a grape leaf.

Finally she said, "Then we'd best enjoy it while we may."

She took William by the hand and led him out under the sky.

*

Robert, in the place outside of time, could see the years 1791, 1792, 1793 and 1794 all at once, in a single glance, peaceful years, almost uneventful. He turned his spectral head, looked downtime.

So distant he could hardly see it, a wave of change was coming, a wave of change more profound than Robert had believed possible.

"I must warn William!" cried the spirit, wheeling and darting toward 1794.

*

CHAPTER SIX... 1794

The preceding year William Blake had printed and distributed among his friends and neighbors the following curious document:

"PROSPECTUS, TO THE PUBLIC.

"The labors of the artist, the poet, the musician, have been proverbially attended by poverty and obscurity. This was never the fault of the public, but was owing to a neglect of means to propagate such works as wholly absorbed the Man of Genius. Even Milton and Shakespeare could not publish their own works."

It went on to tell how William had invented a process for overcoming this problem, and ended by stating, "I have been able to bring before the public works (I am not afraid to say) of equal magnitude and consequence with the productions of any age or country."

There followed a list of eight illuminated books and two historical engravings.

Nobody, except for the faithful Thomas Butts, had paid the slightest attention.

All the same, William had spent most of his time since then working on the announced books, which, when completed, bore such titles as "The First Book of Urizen."

"Visions of the Daughters of Albion," and "America, A Prophecy." There was another book, "The Book of Vala", which he wrote but did not print. Kate, on seeing the title, had asked him, "When will you write a 'Book of

Kate?' "

He had hastily changed the title to "The Four Zoas," but then had lost interest in it.

The books were full of images taken from William's adventures as a time-voyager through the alternate worlds, used to comment on the current political and social scene. The public ignored them. Thomas Butts was almost the only buyer, so William began to cheerfully refer to him as "my employer."

Kate continued to cut the engravings which put food on the table. Though some of the publishers had begun to suspect who the real artist was, as her style, against her will, began to take on a character quite distinct from the stiff formal style of her husband, they did no more than exchange winks when she delivered, always before the deadline, her unsigned little masterpieces. Her specialty was sentimental glimpses of children at play; though she had no children of her own, her engravings were so lifelike, in their way, that they moved many a matron to tears.

She worked in the same room with William, sharing his tools, but her method was completely different now. He worked very slowly, sometimes copying or tracing things line for line from other artists' work. (DaVinci supplied the model for many of his designs.) She, on the other hand, worked with frightening speed, sometimes without preliminary sketches, finishing a plate in a single evening, including a great deal of fine detail work that another hand might have taken a week to do.

Sometimes, as she worked, she broke her intense concentration long enough to look up and see William staring at her moodily, but she would throw him a smile and return to her task. She loved her home and her garden, and there was no way in the world she could have kept them on what they got from poor old Butts.

William had once again taken up the habit of reading aloud to her after supper, but he no longer sang. His writing had become too long-winded and heavy, for the most part, to be set to music. Though she knew who Urizen and Los and Vala and the Daughters of Albion were, she often could not understand what he was talking about, and so couldn't help but wonder how the general public could be expected to figure it all out.

There was one poem she liked.

It was, as William explained it, a poetic image of Urizen as a flaming tiger, and was meant to be a kind of refutation of his "Lamb Poem."

Here it is:

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And, when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand forged thy dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the Lamb make thee?

When she first heard it, she remarked, "Very pretty, Mr. Blake. I'm glad to see you getting back to animal poems. Much more wholesome!"

He glared at her across the kitchen table, his large eyes glowing in the candlelight. "This is no simple animal poem!"

"Well, I'm sorry if I offended you, Mr. Genius! Seems to me there's an animal or two in there somewhere." She went back to sharpening her graver on a small oilstone.

"The tiger is Urizen! I'm showing how Urizen must have come from some other universe, how he must have been created by some other god."

"There's just one God. You know that, I hope."

"For this universe perhaps but..."

"For any universe. Now I take the poem in a different way, I do. I don't see Urizen in it at all. I see this beautiful tiger, walking proudly along in the jungle, and someone says, 'Upon my word, that's a pretty kitty, a credit to his Maker!'" .

"No, no, no!"

She shook her graver at him. "You'll see. That's the way the public will read it too, if they ever look at it at all."

"Future ages will view it as I do," he growled, almost as if he were a tiger himself.

"Will future ages pay you for it?"

She instantly regretted her words as she saw the pain in his face. *He's home*, she thought in a wave of guilt. *Am I going to drive him away again?*

They had done no more time-voyaging since returning from Actium. Robert spoke to them now and then, as they sat before the fire, but otherwise their lives had become quite normal.

William would say, "Is there any danger from Urizen?"

And Robert, a half-visible shadow in the glowing coals, would answer, "Not yet."

When the warning finally came, it was in broad daylight, as Kate was throwing on her shawl, getting ready to go shopping. Robert appeared, smokelike, in the dust motes that danced in a beam of sun from the window.

His hissing windy voice seemed to come from far away, but the urgency in his tone was unmistakable. "Get out of the time-stream! Now!"

She grabbed William's wrist and they leaped into the place outside of time.

And saw the wave of change—or did they feel it?—rushing toward them out of the distant past.

*

Kate and William waited until the wave had passed, then re-entered the timestream at the same point they'd left it. Kate's garden had vanished, along with her home.

Instead she saw, looming over her, an immense silent building of dull green stone, its lines not straight and rectangular as in a normal structure, but curiously curvilinear; in fact there did not appear to be one straight line in it. Even in the hot bright sunlight, it seemed dark and forbidding, as if the smooth stone somehow sucked in the light, creating a halo of blackness around it.

"Careful," William said, but she had already begun to walk slowly toward it. Alien as it was, it reminded her of something, some half-forgotten vision seen in the glowing coals of her fireplace.

Into its walls were cut in undulating lines the characters of an unknown language, different from anything she'd seen before, yet irrationally, she felt she might be able to read it, if only she concentrated hard enough.

She came to a broad staircase which led upward to a round cavelike entrance near the top of the building. She touched the stone. How cold it was! She drew back her hand, frowning. The steps were worn as if by centuries of use, and they were high, disturbingly high, as if designed for creatures taller than humans. It was only with difficulty that she managed to climb onto the first step.

"Where is everyone?" she whispered.

"I don't know," William answered in a low voice.

He followed her as, step by arduous step, she ascended the stairs. Halfway up, she paused to rest and turned to look out over the city.

The skyline still vaguely reminded her of London, and there, unchanged, was the bend of the Thames river, but the endless block on block of various-sized dull green structures stretching to the horizon were constructed according to some insane non-Euclidian geometry never

meant for human understanding.

"The streets, the buildings, everything is in curves," she said, puzzled.

"I noticed that," William replied.

"And there are no windows, no windows at all."

"And no people. I shouldn't wonder if everyone's asleep."

"Asleep?"

"Well, they wouldn't need windows if they slept all day and only came out at night."

They continued on up and soon came, panting, to the head of the stairs. At this point the building was considerably narrower than it was at the base, and there was an irregular platform around it. Kate decided that before venturing inside, they should explore this platform. A moment later they turned a corner and came in sight of where they might have expected to look out over downtown London. Kate gasped. "Look!"

On the opposite bank of the Thames, towering above all other structures, was William's giant statue of Urizen, unchanged except that it was no longer stepping on the serpent god of Oothoon.

"He's done it again," William groaned, then added, more cheerfully, "But he must have liked my statue to have gone to all the trouble of including it in this new reality."

They continued around the platform until they arrived once again at the cavernous entrance. In all this time they saw not seen a single sign of life or heard a single sound except their own footsteps and whispering voices, but now, as they stood before this opening that gaped from the building's head like the empty eyesocket of an amoeboid cyclops, then heard, from deep within, distant echoing footsteps.

Without a word the Blakes sprang silently back around the corner of the building and waited. The footsteps were coming closer, but they were not human footsteps. Humans don't have claws that strike the stone floor with an unmistakable click and scrape. Humans don't have tails that slither along with a faint frightful rustle. And the voices of humans are are

not full of birdlike chirps and sibilant hissing, as was the conversation that now came to her ear. And there was nothing in the least bit human about the smell, the musky, bittersweet utterly alien smell that now came to her out of the darkness inside the building.

She saw them!

Two of them, twice as tall as men, emerged into the sunlight, heavy lids closing to slits to protect huge black glistening reptilian eyes, gaunt clawed bejeweled ringers drawing heavy dark-green capes around brownish-green lizardlike bodies, broad fanged mouths grimacing in evident distaste for the light.

They paused, raising cowls to shield their scaly heads, then continued on down the stairs, tails flicking from side to side.

Kate watched the two in frozen fascination as, reaching the foot of the stairs, they bumped snouts and parted to stride off in opposite directions toward different clusters of buildings.

"Ugly things," muttered William, his normally ruddy features quite pale.

"I never did care for reptiles," she answered, "but come..."

She led him through the entrance into the shadowed interior.

*

Because her eyes took a second to adjust to the gloom, she almost tripped over a sleeping lizard. William caught her by the arm not a moment too soon.

"What's he doing here?" she whispered, more indignant than frightened.

"Look at his cape," William answered. The cape was worn and dirty. "He's poor."

Kate glanced around, then said with surprise, "There's more of them!" Indeed the stone floor was strewn with sleeping lizards, all with worn and dirty capes wrapped around them.

An odd idea struck her. "This is some kind of sanctuary for the homeless, isn't it? And this building is so much larger than all the others in the neighborhood. Do you suppose it's a temple?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," William said grimly. "If so we may be trespassing on holy ground."

They soon passed the last of the lizards and entered a high-ceilinged corridor that sloped gently downward. The walls curved inward slightly and were lined with columns that, because they tapered subtly, suggested bones: Kate could not avoid the impression that the pillars were ribs, and that this was the stomach of some gigantic beast. She could see it all only too clearly, thanks to a dim shadowless green glow from the walls and floor.

It was cool and getting cooler, and a faint breeze blew steadily in their faces, bringing to Kate's nostrils an occasional scent of the lizards, fetid and sickening. She almost wished she could see the creatures. That would be better than knowing they were around, but not knowing where.

"Maybe we should turn back," William said uneasily.

Kate reassured him, "We're in no danger. We can always pop out of the time stream, you know."

The passageway opened out into a cavern where both roof and floor were so distant that they were lost in the gloom, but a narrow stone bridge, without railings, spanned the gulf. It was here that the stench grew all but unbearable.

Kate knelt on the bridge and peered down, holding her shawl over her nose, for all the good that did. Below, all along the walls of the chasm, she could make out dim white objects. Skulls. Bones.

"Mr. Blake," she whispered in horror.

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "I know, Kate. I can see them."

She stood up and turned to him, clutching his powerful forearms, and said, "There's so many."

"These are just the few that got stuck on the way down. There's many

more down at the bottom, I'll wager."

"What are they? Some kind of sacrificial victims?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

Kate and William, as they crossed the bridge, were careful not to walk too near the edge.

Beyond the bridge they entered a narrow passage, made a sharp turn to the right and entered a vast arched room that reminded Kate irresistibly of the interior of some medieval cathedral. The light was brighter here, thanks to what appeared to be an airshaft or skylight on the opposite end of the room, behind what could only be an altar.

Between her and the altar there was a wide expanse of open floor, sloping downward, then a long, vaguely oblong or perhaps oval pool of water with steps leading down into it.

On the other end of the pool the steps led up out of the water to a raised platform, almost a stage. Behind the stage, silhouetted against the sunlight that filtered down the air-shaft, was a huge statue of one of the lizards on his knees, arms outstretched, reptilian head thrown back. Was the creature praying?

In front of the statue stood two chairs... or were they thrones? If they were thrones, then those must be jewels glittering in the chair arms.

The thrones were in the shadow of the statue, but Kate, shuffling forward in the semi-darkness, could see the suggestion of a figure sitting in one of the thrones, the one on the left. The figure was visible also in the reflection in the pool, a muscular body, long white hair, a white beard.

"It's a statue of Urizen," she breathed.

Yes, it was Urizen all right, seated, motionless, elbow on knee and bearded chin on palm, in an attitude of deep thought.

"I believe you're right," said William.

Then the statue moved. "No, William, she's wrong. I'm not a statue," said Urizen, his deep voice echoing in the huge empty room.

*

Urizen made no attempt to harm them, but only remained in his place on the throne on the other side of the pool, talking in a light, ironic, sometimes almost loving voice to them, trying, it would seem, to put them at their ease.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you a chair, my friends. My worshippers are generally content to stand in my presence. And there's always the factor of efficiency to consider. You may never have thought about this, but it's a fact that you can crowd more than twice as many worshippers into a given area standing as you can sitting." Urizen leaned back, enjoying the comfort of his throne. "I have a place for you, William, right here at my side." He gestured toward the other throne.

"I've no use for thrones," William answered stiffly.

"But once you did. Admit it." Urizen's voice was full of scornful amusement.

"I made a mistake, sir," said William.

"The mistake you made was turning against me," said Urizen. "Is that Christian? Doing evil to someone who does only good to you? I created a world for you and I to rule together, and now, thanks to you, it's all gone. Golgonooza. Albion. Oothoon. Gallica. All gone." Then Urizen chuckled and went on, "But I must say that was clever, the way you handled Cleopatra. As your teacher I take pride in your victories, even if they're won at my expense."

"I hope you enjoy it when I put an end to this world too," said William, gesturing at the room around him. Kate was proud of him now, more proud than ever before.

"Not this one," said Urizen confidently. "I have, as it were, put a lock on this one."

"I can still change it," William insisted.

"You're welcome to try." Urizen's voice was bland; its very blandness was the thing that worried her.

Kate broke in. "Mr. Urizen, I don't understand you."

"But I'm actually a simple fellow, under it all, Mrs. Blake."

"Are you now? Then give me a simple explanation of why you had to put this big heap of stone right on top of my garden."

Urizen leaned forward, stroking his beard. "I wanted to be where you could find me easily."

An idea was forming in Kate's mind, but it still wasn't quite clear. It was a painful idea. She didn't want to believe it, and that perhaps was why it hadn't occurred to her before.

"I still don't understand. You seem to take such an interest in us, more interest than you do in all the billions of people, whose lives you snuff out in an instant. Why is that? Will you tell me?"

"Actually, my good lady, I'm not interested in you at all. It's your husband who engages my attention, but unfortunately you seem to come along with him. Once I bought a fine racehorse, but a lot of fleas came along with him. It's the same thing."

"Is it?" Kate was angry now. "And why, of all the men ever born on earth, should William be so special."

"You don't want to know the answer to that, madam," Urizen said gently.

"We'd both like to know it!" William spoke up. "If you'll not leave me alone, at least tell me why!"

There was a long pause, during which Urizen sighed deeply. Finally he said, "Yes, the time has come for truth. I see that only truth can end this foolish war between us." He looked at William gravely. "Have you never noticed? You and I are much alike, William, in voice, in build."

"Our hair..." began William.

Urizen cut him off. "Once my hair was as red as yours."

Kate understood now, and the pain of understanding hurt her more than anything she had ever experienced before. Yet she could not speak, could not bring this fatal conversation to an end before William

understood too.

"What are you trying to say?" William demanded scornfully. "That you're my brother?"

Urizen shook his head. "Think, William. Vala is my mother. You were Vala's lover. It's simple logic, like mathematics. *You, William Blake, are my father!*"

*

Kate and William had sat for a long time on the broad ovoid roof of Urizen's temple, gazing in silence out over the plains of fog below them that gleamed white under the full moon like banks of slowly undulating snow, staring at the only other structure that was tall enough to rise above the overcast, the statue of Urizen; now she turned toward William, studying his grim profile, his stocky body clad in rumpled kneepants, suitcoat, unbuttoned shirt, and buckled shoes. Who was this man? Who was this man she had thought she knew so well? His shadowed face revealed nothing.

With a shudder she drew her shawl tight around her throat, though the temperature was mild. Her first words were hesitant. "You could have told me."

"I didn't know." His voice, deep and resonant, was so much like Urizen's, yet she'd never noticed.

"That Urizen was your son? That's not what I mean. You knew what you'd been up to with Vala. The Bible puts a name to it... adultery!"

William lowered his eyes, unable to meet her steady gaze. "Do you love me, Kate?"

Love you? Once I did indeed! Once I thought you weren't like other men, that you were some kind of bloody saint who'd risen above the 'Things of the Flesh', as you put it."

"If you really loved me, you'd rejoice that I'd finally overcome my problem, that I'd at last been able to be a man. If you loved me you'd pick out two women for me, a blonde and a brunette, and sit on a riverbank watching to see which one I'd take."

For a moment she was speechless, then, "Problem? Problem? What problem?"

"I don't know why." His voice had become low and thick, so she had to lean toward him to understand. "I don't know why, Kate, but I can't seem to be a man with a woman unless..." He seemed unable to go on.

Kate almost shrieked.

"Tell me, for God's sake!"

"... unless *she's cruel to me*," he finished miserably.

As she heard it, she knew it was the truth. It was another of those things one knows but does not know. She'd known and not known it from the very first, the day they'd met, when he'd talked of how Polly Wood was torturing him, his wide madman's eyes gleaming, when he'd pleaded for pity. She'd known and not known it when he'd tormented and provoked her, *trying to force her to torment him in return*. She thought, *How can I condemn him? I knew what he was, but I married him anyway.*

"If you'd been a little harsher with me..." he murmured.

"I am what I am. To be cruel to a man, to my own husband... that's not the way of a Christian lady." There was no anger left in her, only an overwhelming sense of relief, and a touch of guilt. *It's Polly he should have had*, she thought. *Polly would have made him a hell where he'd feel right at home.*

"Well," he said uncertainly, "now it's all in the open, maybe I can change."

This time she refused to not know the truth. "No, you are what you are too."

There was a long silence. An aircraft passed slowly overhead, leaving a white trail against the stars, so high it seemed to make no sound.

William said softly, "All the same, I'm your friend."

Kate sighed and took his big hand in her little one. "I'm your friend, too, Mr. Blake. A good friendship's a rare thing. It's worth a dozen of the

kind of marriages most folks have. Isn't it strange, though, that we can change everything in the universe but the one thing that matters... ourselves?"

Later Kate and William went down into the temple and watched the ceremony where the lizard people worked themselves into a frenzy and threw themselves off the bridge into the chasm. It was exciting, what with all the dancing and drumbeating and ecstatic reptilian screaming, but Kate watched William's face the whole time, watched how his large eyes gleamed and his moist lips hung open as he followed with his gaze one after the other of the holy suicides. He looked somehow reptilian himself, and she clutched his thick arm firmly, on the chance that he might, on impulse, leap off the bridge with the others.

*

Urizen, too, looked vaguely reptilian the following day as he walked with Kate and William along the banks of what once, in a different world, had been the Thames. The windowless buildings were silent under the swiftly moving gray overcast; the lizards were, except for a few "day-watchmen," asleep.

It puzzled Kate, that touch of green in the skin, that faint suggestion of scales, but perhaps it was a trick of the light. She stopped a moment to seriously observe her reflection in the water. Long dark skirt, white blouse, shawl... and a disturbing greenish cast to the skin. She looked at her hands. Was it her imagination, or had they changed since yesterday, grown longer in the fingers, more clawlike?

William had been complaining about being Urizen's prisoner, but Kate had paid little attention until Urizen said, "On the contrary, it is I who am your prisoner."

"What do you mean?" called Kate, picking up her skirts and running a few steps to catch up with the men.

"Simple," Urizen answered with a smile. "There are two of you and one of me. Your combined energy fields would easily cancel mine out, if you both took hold of me at once. You could snatch me out of the time stream, even kill me. If that's what you want to do, now is the time, while Vala is away and can't help me."

"Would that change everything back to the way it was?" Kate asked.

Urizen laughed. "Who can say? It would be an interesting experiment, of course, but I doubt if killing me would change a thing. This world, the world you see around you, is the real world now, quite able to go on without me. To change it, you must go back in time, as you did when you frightened poor Cleopatra so much she refused to accept the sword I wanted to give her. You must go back and somehow make things, as you might say, the way they're supposed to be. This time, however, that will not be so easy."

"I'd like to know why," William said, annoyed.

Urizen bent over, picked up a smooth flat stone, and threw it expertly out over the river; it skipped three times before sinking. "To make things the way they're supposed to be, you have to know how they're supposed to be. Let us say I made the change before the dawn of history, before any era you've visited, so far in the past that science can only guess what conditions were like. I've had a chance to study the chain of cause and effect that produced the world as it was. You will not have that chance, since that chain no longer exists. You cannot bring back your old world, and you must not kill me, because I am the only person who can."

"Then do it," Kate said impulsively, reaching out to touch Urizen's arm. "This isn't the perfect world you dreamed of, is it?"

Urizen frowned. "Not yet."

"Never!" exclaimed Kate. "The world you dreamed of was a human world, not a world of talking lizards."

"Define your terms!" Urizen challenged. "I say these so-called lizards are as human as you or I. So what if their skins are a different color..."

"They're not human inside, either," Kate said urgently. "Their spirits come from somewhere else, they're unhuman spirits... and while we live in this changed universe, those unhuman spirits can enter our bodies, change us, absorb us!"

"Nonsense," Urizen said, but there was a trace of doubt in his voice at last. He forced a smile.

And Kate could have sworn his teeth were smaller than yesterday, and sharper.

*

"We must leave," Kate told William urgently. "Urizen and Vala are expecting us."

He was sitting on his cot in the room Urizen had given them in the temple, looking up at her like a pouting child. The glow from a torch stuck in the wall illuminated his ruddy features in a flickering light, glittered in his large eyes.

"Still," she insisted, "we must leave."

William seemed stupider now, not like his old self. The lizards were stupid, she knew. They could talk, but Urizen had given them all their science and technology. She coughed in the acrid smoke from the torch. Why didn't he teach them how to make lights... gaslights if not electric? But they didn't like light, these nocturnal monsters.

For a moment her own thoughts became hazy. She knew she must leave, but she'd forgotten why. It didn't matter why. She leaned over, grasped his hand. (How rough and dry it was!)

"Come," she pleaded. "Please."

"Oh, all right." His voice was flat, dull, as if he didn't care.

Together they sprang into the place outside of time.

There was a battle going on.

Human ghosts and lizard ghosts whirled screaming around the Blakes. Kate reached out her hand to try to help a human, then remembered she could not touch these beings. The graygreen light had changed to a dull glowering red, like the fire in her fireplace, and there was a hole in space... she did not know how else to describe it. There was sky, and in the middle of the sky, a sort of jagged rip, and through this rip she could see another sky, different, redder. The rip was growing steadily larger, and out of the other sky came an endless stream of lizard ghosts.

The humans were putting up a valiant fight, but they were losing.

Can a ghost be killed? she wondered.

Perhaps not, but a ghost could be overpowered if out-numbered. A ghost could be dragged away through the rip in space.

For an instant she caught a glimpse of a giant Kate and giant William, sitting in rocking chairs and looking at her gently. *Am I in my fireplace?* she thought distractedly.

Robert swooped past, shouting, "Go downtime!"

With her clouded mind it took her an instant to understand, then she grasped William's arm with both hands and drew him, unresisting, back toward the past.

The red light faded, the battle vanished.

There were no ghosts in sight, either human or lizard. They were all uptime, joining in the battle, she decided.

Her mind was clearing. She could focus on the blurred images from the time stream as they flashed by, see a tree growing backward and vanishing into the ground, the sun coming and going with the effect of a strobe light. (She had seen strobe lights once, in the 20th Century of the world as it used to be.)

The light was gray again, and there was a rushing sound.

She looked at William. His face was normal, with no trace of scales. He was smiling.

"Feel better?" she asked him.

He nodded vigorously. "Much better! It's like a fog lifted off my mind."

She wondered about Urizen. Was something happening to Urizen's mind too?

"Let's stop here," she said.

*

The low, flower-bespread hills stretched to the bent river. (In Kate's

mind it was still the Thames.) On the horizon, bright in the noonday sun, stood tall billowing white clouds. There were clumps of poplar trees to her right and her left and, turning her head, she found a genuine forest beginning not far behind her, and a thick tangle of wild grapevines. There were no houses to be seen, nor any trace of human or lizard habitation.

A warm, daisy-scented breeze stirred her curly light-brown hair, rustled her long skirts and set her dangling shawl swaying. "Mr. Blake, do you know where we are?"

"Can't say as I do."

"This is my garden."

She took his hand and led him toward the forest. The poplar trees were short, younger than she remembered them, but their peculiar spacing was the same, and the way the grapevines clustered around them.

"I do believe you're right." There was surprise, even awe, in William's voice as he picked his way through tall grass and weeds that reached to his kneebreeches.

"The grapes are ripe." She picked one and ate it, spitting out the seeds. "Open your mouth." The second grape was for William.

"We should give this place a name," William said, talking with his mouth full.

"A name? Yes, I suppose it's not really London."

"Or Golgonooza. Let's call it Eden."

She laughed, then said seriously, "Nothing so grand as that, please. New Lambeth will do well enough."

"New Lambeth." There was a thoughtful expression on his face. She could see he would rather have called it Eden, and now he was nodding. "Yes, New Lambeth."

"Home," Kate said softly.

That afternoon they flew in slow circles over New Lambeth, surveying the countryside. Passing birds looked at him with amazement and fled.

"We could live here," she called to him.

"Perhaps so."

"There's wild fruit and plenty of fish and small game."

His normally serious face broke into a smile. "And no neighbors to call the law if we feel like taking the sun with nothing on but the bodies the good Lord made for us!"

Kate frowned but let that pass. Perhaps he was right. Could she be certain the same moral code that applied in metropolitan London also applied here? This was a new world. Perhaps it called for new ways.

But even here, she decided, one must draw the line somewhere.

"Look there!" William exclaimed suddenly, gesturing earthward.

"I see." She did indeed see the moving figures on the riverbank, some miles distant. Were there humans down there? "Let's go in for a closer look."

A moment later William called, disappointed, "Only lizards."

The lizard-people had a village of crude huts with mud and stone walls and straw roofs nearby. In spite of the sunlight, some of them, it appeared, were fishing in the shallows with spears, and as the Blakes passed overhead, the lizards broke into a panic, screeching and throwing spears that came nowhere near Kate and William.

"How crude they are," Kate said, puzzled, as they gained altitude. "I didn't think we'd gone that far downtime."

"We haven't. Don't forget, Urizen told us he taught the lizard-people all their science and technology. It wouldn't take long to transform this level of civilization to a higher one with Urizen as teacher, but as of today the lessons have not yet begun."

"Perhaps this isn't quite the Eden you thought it was," Kate said teasingly.

"What would Eden be without its proper reptiles? And we have nothing to fear from them. We have the power of flight, and our temporal energy

fields to protect us, and the power of time-voyaging, with all that implies. We could, if we liked, take Urizen's place as the gods and culture-bringers of the lizard-people."

Kate shuddered. "No, thank you just the same."

At sunset they landed at New Lambeth.

"It will be night soon," William said. "We'd better be going downtime."

"Why?" She looked at him challengingly.

"We must find where Urizen started the change that made this world." He gestured at the fields and trees around them. "That's the only way to change things back."

"Are you sure you want to change things back?"

"What are you saying?" William seemed genuinely shocked.

"It's very nice here, Mr. Blake."

"Yes, I suppose it is," he admitted reluctantly.

"And I'm very tired. Aren't you tired, too?"

"Well... if we stay the night here, we'll have to take turns standing watch. You know how those lizards love darkness."

"I don't mind."

For a long time they looked at each other in silence as the red sky gradually turned purple, then William said gruffly, "Help me build a lean-to... in case it rains."

*

Dawn came during Kate's watch.

She sat huddled against one of her beloved poplars, watching the eastern sky turn pale pearly gray. She had not slept well, even during William's watch; it had turned bitter cold and the ground had been hard. Her bones ached, and her flesh was covered with goosebumps and her

muscles were weary with shivering.

Yet she felt contented and at peace.

New Lambeth was hers, and there was no landlord to come and ask her for the rent, or evict her if she didn't have the money. The vast flocks of birds that now sang a discordant fanfare to the sun, the rabbits who peeked at her from the tall grass, the squirrels who wiggled their noses at her from the trees, the fish she could hear, even at this distance, leaping for insects and plopping back into the river; all were hers... And William's too, of course.

She glanced over at William, who lay under the lean-to on a bed of weeds, snoring softly. How young he looked! He might have been a huge overgrown baby. She smiled.

Through the stillness came the plop of another leaping fish. She thought, *Breakfast*.

First she looked around carefully to be sure there was no danger, then she rose swiftly skyward and circled a few times to be doubly sure, then she glided down toward the river.

From directly above she could see the fish moving under water, see when one was rising to make a jump. She missed the first one, but the second she managed to strike with the flat of her palm and slap onto the shore.

With flint from William's pocket she started a small fire on a hollow in the top of a rock, and when William awoke it was to the mouth-watering smell of frying fish and the brilliant light of a sun already some distance above the horizon.

"You're a wonder, Mrs. Blake." He was stretching, yawning and scratching himself.

Carefully she turned over the fish impaled on the end of her stick. "Thank you, Mr. Blake."

Breakfast eaten, the Blakes reclined at leisure and swatted at insects, she with her back against a tree, he with his head in her lap.

"We'll have to do some stealing," he said thoughtfully. "We have no ax. Without an ax we won't be able to cut down trees to build a log cabin, and this lean-to won't give us enough protection..."

She nodded. "I suppose you're right, but..."

"The lizards have axes. Probably made of stone, but that's all right. Stone will do the job. They won't miss one or two."

"Perhaps we can trade. Stealing's not right."

"They're not human beings, Kate!"

"All the same... I could trade them my shawl." She took it off, looked at it sadly. She hated to part with it but she felt she should trade something.

He sat up, frowning. "We have our own needs to think of. It's hard enough to keep warm as it is."

"It would be worth something to be able to live in peace with our neighbors," she pointed out.

William, Kate saw, was getting angry. "I can't talk to you, Kate. You're too soft. There are times when one must be hard!"

"If you wanted someone like that, you should have stayed with Vala." Once again Kate's mouth was acting as if it had a mind of its own.

William sprang to his feet. "Now you're talking sense! Vala faced life as it is! Vala was a realist."

"Then why didn't you marry her?"

"I did, in a way. Who is more my real wife, the woman who's bound to me by a slip of paper or the woman who's the mother of my child?"

With a cry of fury, Kate scrambled to her feet. "Swine! Swine! Swine!" Like a cat striking at a bird, she lashed out and slashed his left cheek with her fingernails.

"Kate." His voice was soft now, almost pleading.

"Swine!" She kicked him in the shins. Lines of blood were appearing on

his cheek where she'd clawed him. At the sight of the blood a ghastly glee welled up inside her. *I owed you that*, she thought triumphantly. *And a lot more!*

She was raising her hand to claw him again when he caught hold of her wrist. He was strong, stronger than she would have believed, but she went on struggling, even when through vision blurred with tears, *she* saw his face grow rigid, strange, saw beads of sweat appear on his forehead and his large eyes become opaque and staring.

He tried to kiss her on the lips, but she bit him, and as he pulled back, she kicked him twice with all her strength. He was so strong! Now he held both her wrists in one powerful hand, panting, grinning fixedly. Where was his other hand?

She felt him clutch her skirt, heard the sound of cloth ripping.

Later, as they lay side by side among the crushed weeds, not touching each other, she whispered, "Now perhaps I'll be mother of a child of yours, too."

He answered tonelessly, not looking at her. "Perhaps."

*

The Blakes lived at New Lambeth for a week and half, fighting, making love, and building.

William had swooped down on one of the lizards and taken a stone ax, which proved to be surprisingly effective at chopping down and trimming trees that were not too thick. Little by little a small, one-room cabin was taking shape.

The roof was not quite finished the night the rain came, but it gave them enough shelter so they could remain dry if not warm by huddling together in one corner; their fire, contained in a crude fireplace made of piled stones, could not heat the place so long as a portion of the roof was missing.

They stared in silence into the dying embers, teeth chattering, bodies shivering.

It was William who spoke first. "We need never go time-voyaging again.

We could live out the rest of our lives here in New Lambeth."

"If Urizen lets us," Kate added, rubbing herself vigorously.

"Urizen may not be able to find us. He had all time to search through, and other things to do besides hunt for us. I know it's not comfortable now, but when we have our cabin built, perhaps a dog or two trained... there are wild dogs around here."

She nodded. "Yes, yes, it is possible."

"Look!" William pointed abruptly toward the fire.

A dim, vague shape was forming in the smoke and smoldering sticks. A face!

"Robert!" William said with surprise.

The voice of Robert's ghost was weary and faint. "So here you are! I thought I'd never see you again."

"Never see me again?" William was puzzled.

"The lizard-spirits are driving the human spirits out. They almost got me too. I tell you, William, the battle is going against us uptime." The transparent face was clearer now. She could see the moving lips, the pain-filled eyes.

"Stay here with us," Kate invited.

Robert frowned. "That I cannot do. The lizard-spirits will follow me and drag me away. They may do you harm, too. And you must not stay here either. This is a lizard's universe now. Humans cannot stay human here. You'll change, become cruel, without the feeling, the consideration, the intelligence of humanity. The lizards have different feelings, a love of destruction. They love to kill so much they find their greatest pleasure in killing themselves. Suicide, for them, is the only action in which one can be absolute aggressor and absolute victim at the same time."

"We won't change," William said firmly.

Kate turned in his arms to look at him. The firelight nickered on his face, but it was not entirely his face. "We will," she said. "It's already

begun." She was thinking of the way William made love. Each time, it seemed, he was a little more brutal, took a little more pleasure in hurting her. She thought, not for the first time, *Someday William will kill me.*

"Nonsense!" William snapped, a bit too quickly. Had he noticed the changes too, but kept them to himself? *And, Kate wondered, am I changing, and would I know it if I was?*

Robert continued urgently, "It's worst uptime, near the battle. Urizen is changing, and Vala. I've looked into their future, and the future of their civilization. There's nothing waiting for them but an orgy of destruction. Everything Urizen's built up will be joyously torn down by those who call themselves his worshippers, and Urizen himself will be so changed he'll call it progress. There will be progress, of a sort. The science of destruction will move ahead at blinding speed. There will be bombs more powerful than exploding volcanoes. There will be rockets to carry those bombs to any part of the globe, and as an afterthought they'll send a lizard to the moon. The air and water will be full of poison and the food without nourishment. There will be no more symphonies, no more operas, no more ballet; just noise so loud it makes you deaf, but lizards like it that way. There will be no more painting, just smears of meaningless color, no beauty in architecture, just big and little boxes all the same, all drab and featureless. Even chemistry will become chiefly an instrument for the destruction of the mind. And Urizen will not know he's becoming a lizard! That's the worst of it."

"But that's far in the future," objected William. "It doesn't effect New Lambeth. Kate and I can be happy here, at least for a while."

"There would be times when you'd become aware of what was happening." Robert's image was becoming dimmer, his voice fainter. "Would you be happy then?"

"Wait, Robert!" William called, but Robert was gone.

Neither of the Blakes spoke for several minutes. The fire glowed feebly. The rain fell with a steady hiss. There was no wind.

Kate sighed and said softly, "Robert's right, you know."

"I suppose so."

"One more night here, Mr. Blake?"

"If you like."

"Then we'll be heading on downtime to the source of this universe, but you know if we change things we'll have to change them to a world where there is no New Lambeth."

"There'll be something else, girl."

"There's always something else," she said, raising her lips to be kissed.

This time William was not cruel.

*

The place outside of time was deserted and silent. A dim red glow filtered down from uptime, and the images from the timestream, as they flowed by, were oddly sluggish.

"It's as if the universe itself were dying," Kate commented uneasily.

William, drifting at her side, nodded.

They were far downtime from New Lambeth, and the glimpses they caught of the lizard-people revealed steadily more debased levels of culture. The huts and stone axes were gone; there was little to distinguish the lizards from wild animals.

And now the river was abruptly overflowing its banks. The water, in the strobelike flickering light, was flowing uphill higher, even higher.

Suddenly it was raining.

No dry land at all remained, only wildly swirling sea fitfully illuminated by lightning flashes. In the place outside of time Kate and William could see, though unclearly, all that happened, but could hear nothing, feel nothing.

Kate thought, *The Deluge! It isn't a myth after all.*

They flew eastward, searching for some place that was not submerged, not daring to emerge into the time stream for fear the storm would be so

violent it would overcome their protective shields of temporal energy.

"Look!" said William.

Ahead she could see islands, and, an instant later, a dark jagged coastline.

"The Himalayan Mountains," he said. "The world's highest. Perhaps there are some survivors here."

The coastline passed below them. They were no longer moving backward in time, and the lighting was more normal, free of the strobe-effect and the curious double-images and fadeouts that made vision so difficult in the place outside of time. Faintly, as if from a great distance, they could hear the raging storm.

William grasped Kate's elbow.

"Human!" he whispered.

On the hillsides, inland from the coastal range, human corpses lay strewn in small groups, a few here, a few there.

"They've been freshly killed," William said grimly. "There's no decay."

"They must come from a fairly high civilization. It wasn't no savages that made those fine robes they're wearing, or forged those swords in their hands. I wonder what killed them. The storm?"

"I don't think so." William's face was pale in the gray light. "It seems to me they've been torn apart by some kind of animal."

Kate shuddered, but as they dipped down for a closer look, she had to admit William was right. "Let's nip into the time-stream, Mr. Blake. Our energy shields will keep the rain off us."

"All right. There's a mystery here, right enough."

The howling wind and driving rain exploded around them, but their shields held firm. They landed near what appeared to be a family—father, mother, three children and a horse—all frightfully mutilated. A few yards away was a steep cliff overlooking a gorge through which thundered cascades of white water studded with branches-and bits of broken pine

trees.

Kate knelt beside the mother. Was it the rain that made it seem the blood in the woman's gown was still wet?

Shouting to make himself heard above the gale, William called, "It was no animal did this!" She looked up, saw he was beckoning to her.

Moving quickly to his side, she looked where he was pointing. The tracks were not animal tracks. Once, with Urizen, she and William had visited Europe during the First World War, and there they had seen tracks like these, the tracks left by a heavy armored tank. Even half-submerged in muddy puddles, the broad segmented ruts were unmistakable.

"A tank?" she shouted into the wind, unable to believe her eyes.

William nodded, the rain against his energy field forming a halo of mist around his troubled face. "The tracks are fresh. The tank must be close by."

At that moment, without warning, there was a violent explosion. It was so close that without their protective energy shields they would certainly have been killed. As it was, it threw them both to the ground, Kate face-down in the mud, William flat on his back.

Rolling over, Kate looked up and saw, through the sheets of rain, a vast black shape lumbering into, position on a ridge above her. It was a tank all right, but a tank unlike any she'd seen in World War One. Instead of cannon, it carried banks of rockets, and from its sides jutted long metal arms with tiny clawlike hands. A flare of flame briefly illuminated the tank, and Kate watched as if hypnotized as a bright-tailed rocket rushed toward her.

This second explosion was closer than the first, but Kate was ready for it and strengthened her shield against it. *You can't hurt me*, she thought triumphantly.

Then she realized the blast had broken loose the cliff on which she lay. With a great grinding rumbling roar, the cliff was sliding down into the foaming flood.

*

Airborne an instant before the cliff hit the water, Kate and William soared upward toward the tank, she on its right, he on its left. As they swooped in on it, it raised its metal arms, its tiny hands opening and closing convulsively, trying to fend them off, but they were too quick for it. Kate's fingers closed on the cold wet metal of the rocket launchers on one side. She waited. William shouted, "Now!"

And they, with the tank between them, were in the place outside of time, adrift in a universe where there was no gravity. The tank was still struggling, still helplessly thrashing its metal arms and spinning its caterpillar treads, but the Blakes avoided its defenses and approached it from the bottom. There was a door there. William clutched the handle and wrenched it open.

"There's nobody inside!" he said,-astonished.

Kate crowded in alongside him. Sure enough, there was a mass of electronic equipment full of little blinking colored lights there in the dark interior, but no sign of a driver.

"Is it—what do they call it?—radio-controlled?" asked Kate.

"No. If it was it wouldn't work here. It must be run by some sort of on-board computer." He scambled inside and began ripping wires loose at random. There was an electronic flash, a puff of ozone-scented smoke, and the tank's thrashing came to an abrupt halt.

"Programmed to kill," he commented grimly as he clambered out.

"By whom?"

Wordlessly he showed her a metal label he had found inside the tank. Cut in low relief into the face of the label was a simplified drawing of William's statue of Urizen.

*

They had dragged twenty tanks into the place outside of time before they realized the futility of it. There were too many of the tanks... hundreds, perhaps thousands of them, patrolling the Himalayan continent and killing every human they could hunt down, with their complex electronic senses, they were very good hunters indeed.

And once, as Kate and William flew out to sea, they glimpsed, below the waves, dark long moving shapes.

"Robot submarines," William commented, shouting above the howling wind.

"What for?"

"To sink Noah's ark."

When they were once again outside the time stream, William explained. "This natural disaster is Urizen's opportunity. The flood kills off most of the human race, except for a few who have built arks or managed to flee to the highest mountaintops. Then Urizen's robots hunt down and exterminate these few, and humanity is extinct. Urizen has a clean slate to write on; his precious lizards can develop without fear of human competition."

"So it's here, then, where he's made the big change."

William shook his head. "Not here. Earlier. This is only part of the plan, and a late part at that. He must have entered the timestream at least far enough downtime from here to have been able to build up that huge army of computerized killers."

"But it may be, Mr. Blake, that it's here we can switch things back."

William sighed and took her hand. "I wish it was that easy, but Urizen was right when he said we can't make the correct changes unless we know what we're doing. We could create an even worse future than the one Urizen has made!"

There was a dull apathy in William's voice that frightened Kate. She gripped his arm and said, "But we must do something!"

"Must we?" He sounded so tired, so lifeless. "Maybe Urizen is in the right. After all, lizards are living creatures too. Who's to say lizards aren't as good as men? Or better?"

"Now you sound like those Zoas, ready to give up, ready to slip away into a garden of dreams, because you're not as fanatic as Urizen, because you're not as insane as he is! We must be up and about! There's things to

do!"

He looked at her with something very like pity. "What, for instance?"

"We can explore, investigate. If Urizen has a weak spot, we shan't find it without looking for it!"

"You look for it, Kate. If you find it, you can let me know."

This was too much for her. She screamed, "Mr. Blake! You damn fool! Come along!"

He followed her back into the time stream and the storm, but unwillingly.

*

The tracks, though partially obliterated by the rain, could be followed from the air, and the Blakes quickly determined that all the tracks radiated from a common source. Kate guessed the source before she actually saw it.

"Mount Everest," she said as they flew swiftly along the face of a mountain range. Of course. What better location for Urizen's stronghold than the peak of the world's highest mountain?

And she knew she must be getting close. It was no longer mere tank tracks she was following, but wide highways cut into the mountainsides, tunneling here and there, crossing gorges on fantastic suspension bridges that even the world holocaust seemed not to have been able to damage.

Urizen's kingdom must have flourished up here for centuries, perhaps completely unknown to the humans to the east and west, the humans in the valley nations now lost beneath the sea. And the citizens of Urizen's kingdom had nothing to say to the outside world... they were mindless machines, every one.

Below two roads met to become one in a Y intersection, near the crest of a mountain. Kate could see it clearly; the rain had slackened and the sun, low in the western sky, came in under the overcast, over the turbulent sea that now completely covered India, and briefly illuminated the sheer west face of towering Mount Everest with a hot red glow.

The glow faded as quickly as it had come. Kate realized that they must reach Mount Everest within the next few moments, or lose it in the fast-falling darkness. There was no cause for alarm. A simple leap backward in time would bring them once again the light of the setting sun.

No backward leap was needed.

Ahead, where she knew the peak of the mountain must be, a light appeared. A huge door was opening and a bright bluewhite light blazing forth. It opened vertically, like a mouth. Kate and William soared toward it.

They glimpsed a broad highway leading out of the mouth-like door, covered with the mingled tracks of many vehicles, then they were inside, and the door closed behind them.

Kate was worried. Perhaps they should not have rushed in so eagerly. Perhaps this was a trap. But William had led the way, apparently unafraid, and she had followed out of habit. Could he be overestimating the immunity resulting from their Zoa training?

"Did those doors open just for us?" she asked.

"It would seem so. Urizen is probably waiting for us. Otherwise I don't understand why he's made no move to stop us."

"He's so sure of himself!"

They had traversed a vast empty hall, and now the passage narrowed. They landed and proceeded on foot. Glancing around, Kate noticed that, though the bright shining bluewhite walls were made of some glasslike material that was as clear and smooth as if made a few hours ago, the floor was covered with thick dust that rose in choking clouds as their feet disturbed it. She wondered, *How old is this place? How many centuries?*

They passed rooms, dark rooms full of the hulking forms of immense motionless silent machines. It was these machines, Kate decided, that had built the robot army.

But now the passage widened again, opening into a round room with a high domed ceiling, a room with a disquieting echo. This echo of their

footsteps and whispering voices was the only sound; the storm outside could not be heard at all.

In the exact center of the room was a low raised platform, oval in shape, and on the platform was what appeared to be an open coffin of the same glasslike material as the walls. It was carved with some sort of inscription, and decorated with ornate serpentine borders. Above it, set at an angle, was a large mirror.

The Blakes stepped closer to read the inscription.

The language was English; the letters Roman capitals.

"I'll always be ahead of you."

William frowned in puzzlement. "What does that mean?"

Kate glanced up at the mirror. "Look! Urizen!"

In the mirror they could see a dust-covered Urizen in the coffin, eyes closed, a faint smile on his face.

"Is he dead?" she asked, and the echo repeated her question.

William sprang up on the oval platform and peered into the coffin. "He's not here!"

Kate joined William beside the coffin, thrust her hand inside it and felt around. In the mirror it appeared as if she was putting her hand inside Urizen's body, but she could *feel* nothing but the soft smoothness of the white silk lining. "Is it some kind of magic trick? A magician's illusion?"

William sat down dejectedly on the edge of the platform. "Not exactly. Urizen told me about this once, but he never showed me how to do it. He's in that coffin, right enough, but a fraction of a second in the future. We can see the light that bounced off him as he passed... that's his reflection in the mirror. But we can't see him."

"Can't we nip ahead and catch up with him?"

"Not a chance. It's like Zeno's paradox. As he says in the inscription, he'll always be ahead of us. By the time we reach the fraction of a second he's in, he'll have bounced ahead to another one. And he's not dead, either.

He's in a special kind of suspended animation."

Kate leaned her elbows on the rim of the coffin and gazed up at the reflection of Urizen. Paradox! Everything about time voyaging was paradox. For example, was Urizen really in the future? Or was he in the past? He was certainly in the past in one sense... he had been here, and gone.

She said, "He's teasing us, putting himself barely out of reach, so we can see him but are helpless to do anything."

"That's right. He can't be very far ahead. Just far enough so the light has time to strike his body, pop up to the mirror, and bounce down to our eyes."

She examined Urizen's bearded features, his muscular naked body. Urizen held something rectangular in his arms. "What's that he's got there?"

William answered, "That's the bronze book Urizen has inscribed with the laws for his perfect world. I'm beginning to understand what he meant when he said he's put a lock on this universe. Here he is, safe, and out there his robots are setting everything up for him. He talked about this many times, when he and I were rulers of Albion."

"But what can we do?"

"Nothing."

"I won't accept that, Mr. Blake. There's always something a person can do."

Before the flood there was a world of men, and there was land where there now is water and water where there now is land, and there were giants, and visitors called the Sons of God who loved and taught the Daughters of Men, but all that was done then is either forgotten or but a whisper of legend, bits and threads of truth torn from a vast fabric.

Men fought giant lizards, and finally won.

There was a science, which we now call magic, and a magic we call science.

There were empires. There was a man who owned the whole world and everyone and everything in it. There were cities. There was vision. There was blindness. There were jewels full of power and grains of sand full of wisdom. If we were to pick up these grains on our seashores and learn to read them, we could learn secrets that would topple our most certain knowledge.

Continents sank and continents rose from the sea, and billions of books were written and billions of songs sung, and billions of battles lost and won. There was evil and cruelty and glory and pride.

Once or twice, there were moments of real love.

Through it all, Urizen slept in the mountain.

Before that there was only sea, except for one island.

And on that island, the only dry land on the planet, Urizen slept. Under endless clouds moved sluggish seas where life flickered and glowed and it was always night, with no moon, no stars, nor any living thing that walks on land or flies in the air.

A vast and horrible peace.

Water heated to boiling by a sun that can't be seen, and boneless monsters living in the boiling water, eating invisible energy.

Above the boiling water and fleshy giants, above the slow-moving clouds of steam, hovered Kate and William Blake, she in torn and tattered long skirt, clutching the remains of a shawl, he in battered and filthy knee-breeches.

"Can you see Urizen's mountain?" she asked.

"It's over there, that blackness where none of the creatures are glowing."

They glided slowly toward the blackness.

Kate screamed

Something had reached up from the water and grabbed her ankle. She pulled free, with William's help.

Feeling her ankle, she thought, *Is that sea slim, or my own blood?*

There was no way to be sure.

Her fingers moved along the hot stone, found the crack, straight as a rulerline. "Here's the door to Urizen's strong-hold."

She followed the crack *to* a right angle turn. She was sure now. There are no right angles in nature.

"He's still in there," William said wearily.

"We must go back some more, go downtime a little further, Mr. Blake. We can't make things as they should be unless we *go* back to where Urizen made the first change."

"What if there is no beginning, Kate? What if Urizen was always there?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" She groped in the hot darkness, found his sweating hand. "Come along now." Even the place outside of time was dark.

*

"We've passed it!" Kate could no longer find the crack in the rock.

"Are you sure?" William was beside her, joining in the search.

"It was here. Now it's gone. Let's go uptime a bit."

As soon as they were outside the time stream, they saw the light. It was like a tiny star at first, then grew larger and brighter. "Here he comes," whispered Kate in awe.

It was coming from uptime, from the far future, and from the odd angle at which it traveled, she got the impression it was coming from a *different future*. But of course. It would be coming from Rintrah, in the future of the world before the change.

From here, at the point where the two futures branched, she could see down them both. An idea began to form in her mind, a flicker of hope... but it was driven away by the rushing arrival of The Ship, monstrous and

metallic, blazing with lights, Urizen's insignia, the picture of William's Urizen statue, embossed on the hull, painted in glistening metallic paint.

She and William had to move quickly to get out of the behemoth's path as it rushed past them and entered the time stream. Kate and William followed it.

From a distance, hovering in the steamy air, they watched the timeship open its doors and disgorge a horde of quick, insect-like machines. The machines instantly set to work digging into the side of the island's only hill. Kate recognized the style of the devices. They were from the distant future, from the time when Luvah had been a galactic emperor, a time when technology had reached a height it never afterward surpassed.

"If we attack now..." whispered Kate.

But it was too late. Urizen and Vala had just emerged from the forward hatchway... a surprisingly young Urizen and a young Vala.

Urizen raised a microphone to his lips and spoke, and his voice, greatly amplified, came to Kate from across the steaming water. "Mr. and Mrs. Blake! How nice of you to come to the grand opening of my new future! I can't see you, but my machines can, so why be shy? Come on down here and join me in a spot of tea."

The Blakes hesitated, but Kate said, "We may learn, something useful," and they descended.

Two beetle-like machines about the size of cats brought out a card table and set it up. Another beetle-machine brought four chairs, and a third appeared carrying a tray with a teapot, cups, dishes and silverware. It was more comfortable here near the ship. The ship generated some kind of energy-field that drove off the steam and a refreshingly normal atmosphere was being puffed out by hardworking air-conditioners.

Vala eyed the Blakes with distaste. "You look awful, my dears. In this new future, don't you ever take baths or put on fresh clothes?"

As she sank into one of the chairs, Kate realized how tired she really was. If she looked half as bad as she felt...

Urizen was shaking his head sympathetically. "Won't you let Vala and I

loan you two some fresh clothes?"

"If you wouldn't be inconvenienced..." William began.

Kate broke in. "I never knew you to give anyone something for nothing. What do you want in return?"

"A little information, that's all." Urizen sat down, smiling. "You've come from uptime. Tell me, how is it? What's it like in the world I'm about to create?"

They were all seated now. Urizen nodded to Vala, who poured the tea. Vala was beautiful in her flowing red robes.

"It's a hell you're creating, not a world," Kate said.

Urizen raised an eyebrow. "So? Why do you say that?"

Kate thought, *it doesn't have to happen. If I can talk him out of it...* She blurted, "There's no people uptime, just lizards."

"Excellent," Urizen said with satisfaction. "Just as I'd planned. I'm tired of humans. Humans are so unmanageable, not to mention ungrateful. We can't have Utopia with humans, can we, Vala?"

"No indeed," Vala answered. "Each human has a different idea as to what constitutes perfection. Lizards may be a bit stupid, but otherwise they're much better. Easier to please, you know."

"If you like lizards so well," Kate challenged, "are you prepared to *become* one?"

Vala was shocked. "What a disgusting idea!"

William joined the conversation. "That's what will happen. The new future you're creating doesn't like humans. If you linger too long in it, it will change you, change you into something that... fits in."

"Interesting," Urizen said, then sipped his tea. "To turn into a lizard. That would be a novel experience." He gazed thoughtfully off into space.

Vala shuddered. "Really, Urizen dear!"

Urizen spoke blandly, though his words were harsh. "Shut up, mother." He turned to William and added, "Women have no stomach for things that are really grand, eh William? But you and I, we know. Power isn't power unless you use it! That's what we used to say, back in Albion. Right?"

William squirmed. "Well, er..."

Urizen slapped William on the knee, saying cheerfully, "But you're half starved, old man! Vala and I will be having supper soon. You and the little lady are welcome to join us."

"You're very kind," William said, a bit too humbly for Kate's taste.

But when one of the beetle-robots led her into the time-ship, she, like William, went along docilely and allowed the machines to wash her and dress her in a flowing white linen tunic that made her look like an ancient Greek.

It was either during the fish course or the meat course or perhaps during desert that Urizen explained to the Blakes that he was going though with his experiment, come what may. He ended by saying, almost sadly, "And there's nothing you can do about it."

*

Before going into suspended animation, Urizen carefully explained, "Because I am here, slightly out of phase in the time stream, there will be a powerful locking effect in this area. You won't be able to move anything on this island, or on the mountaintop this island will become. Nor will you be able to enter unless it opens for you, and it will open only when it sends out a flying robot to capture lizard specimens and later, during the second flood, it will open to release the army that will exterminate the last of mankind. Both those times Vala and I will be in the time zone, patrolling to see that you, William and Kate, don't do anything naughty. So go in peace! I will not harm you, because there is nothing you can do to harm me."

He shook William's hand and kissed Kate on the cheek. Kate was surprised. The usually cold Urizen was displaying genuine warmth... but then he could afford to. He was winning.

Urizen lay down in his white coffin and vanished.

Kate could still see him in the mirror above the coffin.

In the next room, in another coffin, lay Vala, equally invisible, equally invulnerable.

Kate and William tried to move some of the beetle-robots, tried to drag them into the place outside of time, but, as Urizen had said, it was no use.

Taking a powerful light globe with them, the Blakes left the timeship by the forward hatch. The furious digging had gone on constantly all the time they'd been on board, and now the timeship was three-quarters buried. Within a few hours, Kate realized, the ship would be completely underground, with nothing to show its location but the cracks in the stone that marked its main doorway.

She looked sadly at William. He, too, was dressed in the Greek fashion. (Urizen had said, "It's the only rational clothing style in history.") Tunic, cloak and sandals. As a gesture of, perhaps, contempt, Urizen had allowed William to carry a shortsword and dagger.

"We'd best be on our way," she said.

"Where to?"

"Uptime, I think, to New Lambeth."

*

The winter rains had not ceased for three days, but Kate and William, snug in the one-room log cabin they had built with their own hands, bided their time in comfort and fed logs to their great stone fireplace. The first months in New Lambeth had been hard. There was still much to be done, but now and then, in *the* evenings, they could afford the luxury of sitting, warm and dry and watching visions in the fire.

The Greek clothing Urizen had given her was torn, but still she wore it night and day under the deerskin dress William had made for her. Deerskin was good against the cold but not comfortable on the skin.

She turned from the fire and, stretched full-length on her belly, chin resting in palm, elbow on floor, contemplated William's bearded features in the firelight. William was older. His beard showed traces of gray. His clothing—jacket, pants, boots, cap—was, like hers, made from animal

skins. He was seated on the wood floor, his back against one of the pillars that supported the roof, his scraggly chin resting on his knees. His sword and knife lay near him. He always kept them within easy reach.

"What you thinking?" she asked him softly.

"About despair." His deep voice was calm, serious, the voice of the man she'd married in another universe.

"Despair?"

"It's a wonderful feeling. When there's no hope at all, not a speck, a man feels a special peace that, when all's said and done, is probably more satisfying than victory. There's contentment in despair. And there's freedom, the freedom to think of other things." He sighed and smiled. "You know what I mean?" He raised his head expectantly.

Kate sat up and said primly, "No, I don't, because I have not despaired."

William's head swung slowly, heavily, from side to side. "What a fool you are." His voice was not bitter, just tired. "You're putting yourself through the tortures of hell—yes, there must be hope in hell, since that's the worst torment of all—and it's for nothing. Urizen has won, and there's an end to it."

"You know there's nothing sure in this world. Not even disaster."

"We could be happy here. We could make a life for ourselves."

"Sometime I think the same. Yes I do. But then I think of Urizen and I know we've got unfinished business."

"Forget Urizen."

"Never!"

Should she tell him now? Should she tell him what gave her hope? No, not yet. She must be sure.

*

Neutrality had proved impossible.

The lizards were capable of hostility or worship, but peaceful co-existence was beyond them. Thus Kate and William had been faced with a choice: apotheosis or war. War would have taken too much time and energy, so they reluctantly agreed to accept the duties of godhood.

How quickly it happened, thought Kate, as she stood by the door to her cabin and watched the procession of lizards march toward her in the spring afternoon sunshine. The rain had stopped. The lizard emissaries had appeared at her door, expressing themselves with eloquent pantomime. William had accepted their offer. (It had been William's choice, but she had not protested.)

So now here they came, green scaly tails swishing, vast toothy mouths grinning, carrying the makeshift sedan chairs with which they would transport the Blakes to the evening ceremonies at their village where Kate and William would be, as it were, sworn in as goddess and god.

She had been fraternizing with the creatures for only about two weeks, but already she understood some of their language, could actually speak a few words of it. She listened to the hissing, chirping and birdlike twittering that passed for song among them. They were singing about her, about her omnipotent power, about how she would help their crops to grow. She frowned. She could help them, teach them many things, but it was the real God who made crops grow. Somehow she would have to make that clear to them.

Mr. Blake," she called. "Here they come."

William emerged from the cabin, clad in the Greek tunic, cloak and sandals Unizen had given him grinning like an excited boy. In beard and long hair he looked disturbingly like Urizen. Kate thought, *Like son, like father*.

"Rather enjoy the idea of becoming a god, don't you?" she demanded sharply.

His grin vanished. "Why no, not at all, but it must be done, you know."

"It's only temporary, and don't you forget it. As soon as we can we'll explain things to them. Promise?"

"I promise. Upon my word, what do you take me for?"

The lizards marched to within a hundred feet or so of the cabin, then halted and flung themselves face down on the ground. William led Kate by the hand to the sedan chairs, helped her into one of them, then settled himself in the other.

It was a bouncy, jouncy ride to the village. She could have flown there much more comfortably and quickly, but she didn't want to hurt the lizards' feelings.

The sun was setting as they arrived, but a bright bonfire on the riverbank supplied plenty of light, together with not a little greasy black smoke. In the flickering light and shadow beyond the fire several lizard drummers were restlessly thumping drums of various sizes and shapes with a listless, unrhythmical sound. Other lizards peered from the doorways of their rude huts, while still others fell in behind the procession that now conveyed the Blakes to the heart of the village.

The sedan chairs were gently set down on the ground. A particularly tall lizard raised a conch shell and blew a mighty and discordant honk. All around her Kate could hear the rustle of tails, the shuffle of clawed feet, the excited yet subdued sibilance of the serpentine language. She stood up and stepped from the sedan chair. William joined her, touched her reassuringly on the elbow.

The lizards fell silent and backed away, clearing an aisle through which the Blakes could pass through the crowd. Kate noted uneasily that many of the creatures were armed with stone axes and long spears. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that William had his hand on the pommel of his shortsword, and she, just to be on the safe side, concentrated and brought into being her shield of temporal energy.

A fat lizard with one eye missing approached them and bowed low. This one was wearing brightly colored feathers in a long cape over his shoulders, and on his head carried the skull of a wild boar.

"He wants us to follow him," William said in a low voice.

"Then follow him we shall," said Kate, stepping forward.

The fat lizard led them to a low platform on which stood two crude stone chairs.

"Thrones," murmured William.

Kate nodded and followed him as he took his place in one of them. When the Blakes were seated, the fat lizard with the wild boar skull headress signalled the drummers.

The music began; a low, slow, steady, hypnotic throbbing punctuated by occasional birdlike warbles and cries from the tribe. The lizards were dancing, and dancing with a boneless grace no human could hope to equal. No human could balance for half an hour on one foot, moving his arms at a rate of a few inches a minute, so that the motion could hardly be detected. No human could send ripples through his body, first fast, then slow, but always perfectly controlled. No human had jaws that opened wide enough to completely conceal his face, or a tail that could at one instant stick out straight as a rod behind him, at another whistle through the air and crack like a whip. There was no planned step or choreography that Kate could discern, yet at any given moment all the dancing lizards seemed to form a perfectly-balanced, intricate, interwoven design; a scaly green living arabesque that languorously undulated in the shifting firelight.

Her vision blurred, the edges softened, the colors blended. The slowness of the lizards' dance infected her mind, and her thoughts slowed too, creeping through her mind like drunken slugs. How good it would be to watch the dance forever, to watch the dance and sleep!

William's powerful fingers dug into her arm, hurting her. He was shaking her, calling to her, but his voice came from far, far away. "Kate! Don't let them get to you!"

Her vision sharpened. Her mind speeded up.

She noticed for the first time that every one of the dancers was looking at her as it danced, watching her expectantly.

"They're tricky rascals," William muttered angrily. "Don't watch them for more than a few seconds at a time."

"Yes... I see... all right."

The lizards seemed disappointed, but the dance continued, the tempo gradually speeding up, the volume gradually growing louder. "I wonder,"

Kate said, speaking loudly to be heard above the din. "Does one have to die to become a goddess?"

Later, as dawn began to brighten the eastern horizon, Kate and William rode in their sedan chairs away from the village, toward their cabin in New Lambeth.

The lizard guard of honor seemed subdued, depressed. At the height of the ceremony, the Blakes had been offered a cup of the "sacred drink," but Kate had guessed, apparently correctly, that it was poison and commanded the fat lizard with the wild boar skull to taste it for her. When the fat one refused, his comrades had forced the drink down his throat and as he writhed in agony, screaming and hissing and clutching at his throat, the tribe had thrown him into the bonfire to be burned alive.

"Am I a goddess?" Kate asked William.

He shrugged. "How should I know?"

Kate rode a while in silence, putting together a sentence in the unfamiliar language of the lizard-people. Then she leaned out of the sedan chair and called to one of the lizard guards that trotted alongside. "Am I a goddess?"

At first the creature did not understand, but when the question was repeated, it answered with a caw and a hiss, "Yes, Sky Queen." Then, after a pause, it added, "You passed the tests."

*

He was handsome, as lizards go.

Twice as tall as a man, with powerful hind legs, a long elegant tail, and a full set of pearly white teeth, he strode up to Kate's cabin door one morning and in the blunt way lizards have, told her, "I am yours."

His full name was Morr Droon Fahra Rahoor Thee Ahh Oh Thahrr Noh Grooh Rahhr. She called him Grooh for short.

She did not fear him. In the month since the Blakes had "passed the tests," a relationship had sprung up between humans and reptiles, something a little like friendship and a lot like symbiosis. The lizards could not speak the human language, but the humans were quickly learning to

speak the language of the lizards, though with an unavoidable "human" accent.

So she did not fear Grooh, and in a few days felt perfectly at ease when Grooh accompanied her on an afternoon expedition to the forest to gather wild grapes and berries. His claws were too large to pick fruit, but he seemed to enjoy the role of Protector of the Goddess, and conversed freely with her as she plucked grapes from the vines.

"Were you sent to me by your tribe?" she asked him.

"I came of my own will," said the giant creature.

"To worship me?" She wondered if the time had come to set him straight.

"No. I know you are not a goddess."

That surprised her. "You do?"

"You are some alien race, that is all. You will live with us a while, grow old, and die. Then, if I have good memories of you and your mate, I may call you gods seriously. Until then, I pretend. Until then, I learn from you."

She paused, placing some of the grapes in her mouth instead of in the crude deerskin sack on the ground beside her. "And you're not... afraid of us?" she asked.

"One male of your species would not frighten me. One female would not frighten me. A male and a female together would not frighten me, unless they brought children."

She frowned. "What difference would children make?"

"Without children you will live a while with us, then die and be honored. With children you would breed and start another race that would struggle with us for land, for water, for food. Children would mean war between your kind and mine."

She felt dizzy and swayed a moment. His great claw darted out to steady her. "You are so small and weak," he said. "Let me carry your sack."

"Thank you," she said, as he shouldered the load. Still feeling a little

giddy, she seated herself on a stump. (It was from this part of the forest that William had cut the logs for their cabin.)

She looked up into the strange toothy grinning face, into the glittering black reptile eyes. "You're almost human," she said softly.

"I think more than most of my brothers and sisters, more than most of my tribe. Many of them are very stupid. Some believe you are a real goddess and fear you. Once our race was great, before the flood, but now we become stupid. Each generation is more stupid than the last. Someday we will forget how to speak."

"No! That can't be!" Kate's sympathies were easily aroused.

"When brother mates with sister, it can be, and when tribes are small..." The monster broke off his sentence with something very like a sigh.

"Sit with me, Grooh," she said, gesturing toward the open patch of long grass and weeds next to her stump.

Obediently Grooh settled himself on his haunches. "I will sit, little female creature. It is good to talk."

"One day your tribes will become large. Then you will no longer have to mate brother with sister."

"The taint is there," said Grooh gloomily. "When the few become many, the taint will remain."

"But why?" She was almost angry with him now.

"We are all descendants of one couple. One couple and one couple only was saved from the flood, and that couple..." He sighed again. "... had the taint."

Kate wondered, *Did Urizen, without knowing it, save a pair of feeble-minded lizards?* That could explain their lack of progress, the streak of unreasoning violence and destructiveness in their nature.

Then she thought of her secret. She had not told William. She had not told anyone else. Perhaps she could tell Grooh. She turned toward him,

opened her lips to speak. But no! She could not tell Grooh. Least of all Grooh!

"Have you troubles?" asked the lizard. He was remarkably perceptive. It sometimes seemed he understood her better than William did.

"No, it's nothing." She spoke very softly, but Grooh, she knew, could hear her anyway. His hearing was far better than a human's.

His eyesight was better, too, even in daylight. He pointed skyward. "Your mate is coming."

She strained her eyes, shielding them with her hand and squinting against the brightness, but it was a moment before she found the dot that was William. William was indeed gliding swiftly toward her. Now she could see his deerskin tunic and cape, now his beard and long hair, red streaked with gray. And now she could hear him laughing with delight, and Mr. Blake was not a man who laughed often.

He landed lightly between Kate and Grooh. "Oh, Mrs. Blake," he cried excitedly. "What a hunt! You've no idea! With me in the air to spot deer herds for them, our lizard friends are bringing home more venison than they ever dreamed possible!"

Grooh perked up at this. The mention of food seemed to revive his spirits like magic. "You're a useful little thing!"

William extended his hand to help Kate to her feet, but no sooner did she rise than she fell back again, dizzy, nauseous. William was annoyed. "Come now. Our lizard friends are waiting for us! Tonight we feast!"

"You go," she told him weakly. "I'm not hungry."

Now William was all concern. "My word, have you gotten a touch of sunstroke?"

"No," she whispered.

"Something you ate?" coaxed her husband, leaning over her.

"Not that either."

"Then what's wrong?"

The answer, when it came, was shouted angrily, defiantly. "I'm pregnant, you fool!"

Grooh was the first to react. He rose stiffly and said, with reptilian coldness, "How nice for you."

*

The lizard witch doctor would not treat Kate, nor would the lizard midwife. Grooh and his people came no more to New Lambeth. To them the Blakes were no longer gods, but demons.

William, however, revealed a gentleness in his nature that was almost feminine. He was doctor and nurse all in one.

In the last month of Kate's pregnancy, the Blakes chose a name for the child. They called it Ore, a name that in the lizard language meant "revolutionary." Ore, together with other later children, would lead the human revolution against the domination of Urizen and the lizards. At least that was the plan in Kate's mind. Perhaps it would be impossible to make things as they had been before the change, but at least the human race would not perish!

On the last afternoon of her pregnancy, Kate lay on her crude but comfortable bed near the fireplace in the cabin, half-awake and half-asleep, listening to the singing of the birds outside and dreaming of the new race she would mother, and it seemed to her in her drowsy reverie that her swelling stomach contained, not one child, but multitudes, vast armies of unborn men and women who would rise from her body and reclaim the planet, snatch it back by superior wit and courage from the serpentine usurpers.

When Urizen awakes, she thought, it will be in a human, not a lizard, world. Too bad for Urizen! Kate chuckled softly to herself.

Suddenly, without warning, she was shocked into full awareness by a sharp pain. *Is it beginning?*

She waited for the pain to return for a long time, and had almost decided nothing was happening when the pain came again, harder. When it passed she sat up, drawing the animalskin covers up to her chin, and shouted, "Mr. Blake!"

There was no answer.

"Mr. Blake!" she shouted again, at the top of her voice.

Silence.

Wrapping the furs around her naked body, she stumbled to the cabin door and looked out.

There were the poplar trees and the wild grape vines that marked her garden, there, in the distance, wound the familiar river. The long grass was there, and the weeds, and the humming bees, and the occasional fluttering birds. No painter could imagine a more peaceful sunny landscape.

But where was William?

She felt the pains coming on again, turned and threw herself on the bed.

"Mr. Blake!" The pain was bad this time, but the fear was worse. Could she bring little Ore into the world alone, by herself, without aid? What if, at some crucial moment, she fainted? "Mr. Blake!"

The pains were fading.

It was cool in the room, but Kate was drenched with sweat. With the back of her wrist she wiped her damp forehead, brushed the unruly hair back out of her eyes.

"Mr. Blake!" she screamed.

Then she heard footsteps approaching, a rustling in the high weeds outside the cabin. With a great sigh of relief she closed her eyes and fell back, relaxed, on her fur-covered pillow. "

"Thank God you've come, Mr. Blake!"

The footsteps halted in front of the cabin door.

Kate waited for William to say something, make some excuse for not being there when she needed him.

"Mr. Blake?" she called uncertainly.

Why. did he stand there saying nothing? What was wrong?

She opened her eyes and looked toward the door. A pair of reptilian eyes was watching her... a huge green scaly head was grinning at her, framed in the open doorway.

"Grooh!"

The lizard did not reply.

"You are Grooh, aren't you?" she asked, sliding back in her bed until her shoulders were against the wall.

"Yes. I am Grooh."

"What... what are you doing here?"

"I heard you scream. Is the child coming?" His tone was flat, emotionless.

Why did he want to know that? Was he here... to kill the child?

"No," she said.

"You are lying."

There was a long tense silence.

Then Grooh said, "Do not fear me. I am yours."

"What?"

"I said I was yours, and I am yours." The lizard hunched over and thrust his snout inside the cabin. "You are not an evil demon to me, as you are to my people. You are a helpless little creature who wants to live and give life, like all other animals. Like me. I have stayed away because the chief commanded it, but I passed close by every day, keeping out of your sight, watching that no harm should come to you."

She did not know why, but she believed him instantly. "Grooh, Grooh, you're right. I was lying. The child is coming. My pains have begun and

Mr. Blake is nowhere to be found. Can you help me?"

Grooh tried to enter the cabin, but quickly gave up. "I can't get through the door. It's too low and narrow."

Kate felt her contractions beginning again and rolled over with a groan. The huge reptile hissed in frustration and tried once more, without success, to thrust himself through the doorway.

"Grooh!" she cried. The room was spinning. The pain was unbearable. She reached out blindly toward him. "Grooh!" she screamed.

Grooh gripped the sides of the doorway in his powerful front claws, braced his hind legs against the cabin's stone foundation, and, with a grunt, pulled. There was a long drawn-out creak as the wood bent, then a loud, sharp crack as it broke. A large portion of the front of the house splintered and crumpled as it came loose in his hands.

A moment later he was at her side, leaning over her.

Was it his presence, or simply the natural progress of the cycle? Whichever it was, the pain was now draining away as she clutched Grooh's heavy muscular claw in her small sweating hands. "Oh thank you, Grooh. Thank you," she whispered.

She looked up, past Grooh's shoulder, out through the gaping hole in the side of the cabin. There was a dot in the sky, growing larger. "It's all right now, Grooh. Mr. Blake is coming."

It was indeed Mr. Blake. She could see him clearly, clad in his Greek tunic and sandals, his beard and long hair streaming in the wind. Then she frowned, puzzled. William was drawing his shortsword. Why was he doing that?

Then, in a horrified flash, she understood. "No, Mr. Blake!" she shrieked. "Don't!"

With the full force of his flying momentum, William rammed his sword to the hilt into Grooh's unprotected throat.

*

"He was trying to kill you," William insisted.

"No, no, he was trying to help me. You have the power of time travel. You can go back and undo what you've done!" Kate cried.

William's jaw was set. "No. It was a trick. He tricked you!" She looked at William with anguished frustration. *He won't admit he made a mistake*, she realized. *He'll never admit it*. But she needed this man now. Whatever he'd done, she needed him.

"Mr. Blake..." The pain was starting again.

William, still carrying his blood-wet sword, stepped over the limp tail of Grooh's corpse and knelt at her bedside.

"William," she moaned, eyes closed, and felt his strong arms encircle her. She'd never called him William before.

The sword, as it turned out, came in handy for cutting the umbilical cord.

*

He was a human baby the first day.

On the second day he began, to change.

She was startled to feel teeth against her nipple as the baby sucked and, holding him away from her, forced open his tiny mouth.

Ore had teeth all right, but they were not human teeth. There were too many of them, and they were too small and sharp. Ore began to cry. She put him back on the breast. His teeth didn't really hurt her, at least not yet.

She did not mention the teeth to William.

On the third day Ore hissed at her.

Still she said nothing to William.

On the fourth day she caught Ore staring at her intently as he lay bundled up-in his furs in his makeshift crib. She stared back. And she began to understand.

"Are you Grooh?" she asked the chubby, strangely silent child. A four-day-old baby was not supposed to be able to focus his eyes like that.

Ore said nothing.

"Are you Grooh?" she repeated. "Give me some sign."

He smiled, ever-so-slightly, and she saw his teeth had grown. They were more reptilian than ever.

On the fifth day Ore's skin had taken on a faint tinge of grayish green.

William said, "Is he sick?"

Kate said, "It's just a phase."

She laughed in a forced way that made William glance at her with suspicion. *Have to be careful*, she thought.

William wouldn't understand.

William wasn't a mother.

On the sixth day, when the nub of a tail became visible at the base of Ore's spine, it was no longer possible to know and not to know at the same time.

William had examined the child while she slept, and she awoke to find him standing at her bedside, a naked Ore in his arms, in the dim misted light of morning. William was gentle; Ore, eyes closed, hissed faintly with contentment. She sat up quickly, trying to meet William's accusing gaze.

"It's not my fault," she said, her eyes on the nub of a tail.

"You didn't tell me. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"At first. Then he got worse." She reached up. "Give him to me!"

Half-angrily she took the child and put him to her breast. William watched grimly, hand on swordhandle. Kate thought, *Poor little thing. Mother will protect you.* But the tiny teeth hurt her nipple.

"We can't keep him," William said softly.

"I won't let you kill him!" She turned to the wall, shielding Ore with her body, looking at William over her shoulder.

"He's not human," said William.

"He is! What does that mean, 'human'? When he gets older he'll be all right."

"Now he's half human. When he gets older he'll be all lizard." Suddenly she hated the calmness, the sweet reasonableness of his voice. It was William who was not human!

"Leave us alone!" she shouted.

William sat down on the edge of the bed and laid a warm hand on Kate's bare back, saying, "I won't kill him, but... you can't ask me to accept that thing as my son."

"We won't kill him, but we won't keep him! What will we do with him then, I'd like to know?"

William considered her question, brows knit, great eyes full of pain. At last he said, "I want to give him to Urizen."

"Give him to Urizen? You're insane, you are!"

"He belongs to Urizen."

"He belongs to me!"

"This is Urizen's universe. Everything in it belongs to Urizen. You belong to Urizen. I belong to Urizen. So Ore belongs to Urizen too." He reached for the child.

"No!" She retreated across the fur-strewn bed. "Urizen don't know how to care for no baby."

"Vala does."

"Vala! She's got one of your brats already! You've got your bloody nerve... !" She was cornered now, wedged in to the place where the side and rear walls of the room joined.

"Don't you see, Kate? If Ore was human we might have had a chance. He's not. He's a... a monster."

"No!"

"And you and I, we'll be monsters too. Urizen will be a monster. Vala will be one. We've lost, don't you see? The fight's over and we've lost." He leaned over and roughly wrenched Ore from her arms. Oh, why did he have to be so much stronger?

As he stood up she sprang forward and snatched the shortsword from his scabbard. They faced each other in the center of the room, he with the baby, she with the sword. Ore looked first at one, then at the other, eyes glowing with unnatural concentration.

"Are you going to kill me?" William asked gently. "Are you really going to kill me?"

Kate hefted the weapon, getting the feel of its weight and balance, silently asking herself, *Well, am I?*

They stood motionless for a long time, then Kate said, in an almost inaudible voice, "Not you."

"Who then?"

"Urizen!"

As she leaped into the place outside of time, William was close behind her, still carrying Ore in his arms.

*

There were spirits in the maze of fading, brightening, shifting images, but none of the spirits were human. Lizards! Lizards! Lizards! As she soared uptime they whirled around her in clouds, green and transparent like emeralds, hissing and whispering like waves on an ocean beach. They paid no attention to her, occasionally even passing through her body with a sensation like a cold wind. Was the battle over here too? Had the lizards won, once and for all?

Ahead she saw the rip in the universe, the gap that led into... somewhere else. It had almost completely closed. Here and there the last

few humans were still struggling as they were forced through the opening by an overwhelmingly superior reptilian force. Was that Robert, in the claws of a half-dozen opponents? They were too far away to tell for certain.

The red light was fading as the rip closed, but the new light was greener than the one she remembered, much greener. A reptilian green!

She changed course, cutting through space as well as time. Spain passed below her, then the Mediterranean. There was Egypt, and there the great gash that marked the Dead Sea. The Himalayan mountains appeared on the eastern horizon.

Soon she would be able to see Mount Everest.

She thought, *There will be a moment, when Urizen wakes, when he will fade back into common time. He will be there in his white coffin, dazed, vulnerable, with his shields not yet up. At that moment I will strike!* Would that bring back the world she knew and longed for? It no longer mattered.

There was Urizen's mountain. She circled it, planning.

The stronghold will be sealed when Urizen awakes, but a little later it will have to open to let him out. I'll slip in then, go downtime, and be inside when he opens his eyes.

She headed uptime, rushing through the weeks, the months, the years.

The stronghold opened. The mouthlike entrance gaped wide. Urizen and Vala emerged. Vala was carrying something, but Kate could not, at this distance, see what it was.

Before the entrance closed again, Kate had passed through, unseen. She entered the great hall where Urizen's white coffin lay, now really empty, then, still outside the time stream, she hurtled backwards in time.

There was a blur of reversed motion. She recognized herself, William, Vala... and Urizen. Urizen alive! Did that mean Kate's mission would fail? No, she decided, just that her intervention had not yet generated a new future.

Now she saw Urizen in the mirror but not in the coffin.

She entered the timestream.

There was an awesome silence in the stronghold. Clouds of dust arose from her feet as she walked quickly across the hall to stand, looking down at the empty coffin, then up at the image of Urizen in the mirror. She thought, *Am I too early?*

The image in the mirror moved, ever-so-slightly, under its layers of dust. In the coffin the dust was disturbed. A cloud of dustmotes arose, and they outlined a figure, still invisible, lying there.

Kate raised the sword. Her hand shook only a little.

Urizen was transparent, then translucent.

Kate thought, *One second more.*

Urizen was there, breathing gently, and the dust that covered him made him seem hardly human. His eyes were still closed. Hardly human! Hardly alive! It would be easy to drive home the blade!

But the same dust that made Urizen seem less than human also obscured his identity. For one instant Kate hesitated. Was that Urizen lying there? Or William?

Urizen's eyes opened.

Kate stabbed downward.

The blade shattered.

"Too late, Mrs. Blake," Urizen said, smiling.

*

Kate had no idea how long she had been sitting on the platform near the foot of the coffin, weeping hysterically. She could hear Urizen's voice and William's, speaking to her with concern, but the voices were so similar she could not tell them apart. She could hear Vala's voice too, and the rustle of Vala's long robes.

Vala's voice was full of pity. "There, there, my dear. There, there. Don't cry. Everything will be all right." Kate had never heard Polly Wood's voice,

but she had imagined it many times, sounding just like that.

"Leave me alone!" Kate screamed.

"But Kate dear..." Vala's hand rested on her shoulder. Kate shrugged it off.

Urizen had been speaking to William while Vala tried to calm her. For a moment Urizen's words came through clearly. "... amazing woman, William. There was a chink in my armor after all, and she found it. She could have killed me if..." Kate's consciousness blurred.

When she looked up, a little later, she saw William handing Ore to Vala, saying, "Take care of him for us."

Vala looked down at the half-human infant with a false smile. "Of course. You can come and see him when Kate's feeling better."

"Good of you..." William said.

"Not at all," Vala said.

"Think nothing of it," Urizen said.

Urizen and William shook hands.

Kate sprang up. "No! No! You can't have him!" She tried to reach Vala, who backed away a few steps, as William and Urizen blocked the way. Kate slapped William's face, kicked Urizen in the shins. They hardly seemed to notice. They were so strong, so hard. When she tried to scratch them with her fingernails, they caught her by the wrists.

Fragments of words and sentences came to her through the sound of her own shrieking. "... she's in no condition to..."

"... of course..."

"... obviously in no condition..."

"... rest..."

"... a long rest..."

The room was tilting, spinning She thought with determination, *I'm not going to faint.*

She fainted.

*

The long fever had passed.

Kate opened her eyes and looked around. She was in the cabin at New Lambeth. Through the doorway she could see a low, slow-moving gray overcast. It was raining, but not very hard. She thought, *William had fixed the wall.*

"Mr. Blake?" she called weakly.

"Yes?" William emerged from the shadows to stand, looking down at her. His face was lined with weariness, and his beard and hair were more gray than red. His fur cloak was wet and filthy.

"Where is Ore?" she asked him, without emotion.

"Uptime, with Urizen."

"With Vala, you mean."

"With Vala."

"We must go..." She sat up in bed, but fell back instantly. Her body, it seemed, would not obey her.

"We will go," William said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "We're not ready yet"

"When I'm well, will we go then?"

"It isn't that." There was something in his tone that alarmed her.

"What is it then?"

He smiled faintly, and she saw his teeth, small and sharp, not human. "We must wait until we've become... like him," William said. "Like Ore."

"You're changing!" She inched away from him.

He nodded. "Yes." The S drew out unnaturally long. He reached out to take her hand.

"Don't touch me!"

"Look at your own hand, Kate."

She looked at her... claw. "Oh my God," she whispered.

William said gently, "In a little while we'll all be together, a family."

When she did not answer for a long time, William asked, "What are you thinking?"

"I'm praying."

He stood up with a sigh and went over to put another log on the fire.

*

Kate slept badly that night, by fits and starts. A little Before dawn, after hovering for some time between waking and sleeping, Kate suddenly understood.

She rolled over, grasped the sleeping William by the shoulder, and shook him. "Wake up! Wake up!"

With an uncomprehending grunt, he raised up on one elbow and stared at her.

"Listen, Mr. Blake. I've found the way out!"

"Out of what?" he said stupidly.

"This universe!" She sat up, her enthusiasm overcoming her weakness. "There's a way out, and it's been in front of us all the time without our seeing it."

William rubbed his eyes with a thick knuckle. "What are you talking about?"

"Time!" she cried. "There's time in the place outside of time!"

"What?" His face, in the dim light, was a blob of incomprehension.

"Don't you see? If you want to get out of the stream of normal time, you go into what we call the place outside of time. But it's not really outside of time! There's another kind of time there. Things happen. People grow older. Things like the battle between the lizard and human spirits begin, go on for a while, then end."

"So?"

"Aren't you awake yet? Don't you realize what this means? Just as we can, by concentration, get out of the normal timestream into the place outside of time, so must we be able, when in the place outside of time, to concentrate and get out of the place outside of time into some other place, some place that's *really* out of time."

"No, impossible. We would have seen it..."

"We have seen it! Remember when we were on Urizen's island and Urizen came rushing toward us out of the future? It wasn't this future that we're living in, it was the other future, before the change. From there we could see both futures. Both futures still existed! So there must have been some kind of time that was common to them both. It's clear as day, Mr. Blake! And when Urizen shot his own earlier self, where did the old self go? And when the lizards drove out the human spirits, where did they drive them out to? And where did all those lizards come from in the first place. Answer me that if you can!"

"Urizen would have figured out..."

"No, Urizen didn't figure it out! But it's true all the same. There is another place outside of time, a place where all the different futures exist together. There's got to be!"

"If there was, we couldn't find it."

"Yes, we can!" She grasped his hand. "Come!"

New Lambeth was gone. The place outside of time was sparsely populated by lizard spirits who rushed past heedlessly on urgent but

unguessable errands. Uptime the battle was over and the rip in the sky had vanished without a trace. The light was an even green, flickering only when you moved uptime or downtime. The images were less vivid, less alive than ever, and here and there Kate could see peculiar crumpling effects, as if the very fabric of space was on the verge of collapsing under some infinite weight.

She looked at William. He had a tail.

It was a small tail, but a tail nonetheless.

Kate thought, *Perhaps I have one too.*

She said firmly, "Concentrate, Mr. Blake, while you still have a mind that can."

*

It was easy when you knew it could be done. She thought of the saying, *A prison is a home if the door's unlocked.*

She had not known what to look for, and had almost ignored the effect when it had first appeared. An impression of distance. That was all there was at first.

Her impulse was to say, "That's not it."

But then she realized that she was seeing, more with her mind than her eyes, both the world inside the time-stream and the place outside of time, superimposed, neither more sharp than the other.

"I think it's coming," she said to William, and clutched his hand.

Quite suddenly, with a rush, she was falling back away from her vision. Everything was shrinking rapidly. Other things were coming into view, but they were too far away to see clearly. The light was growing brighter, taking on a brilliant bluewhite color.

She glanced to her right. William, still holding her hand, looked so startled she had to smile.

"You see?" she cried. "You see?"

She laughed out loud from sheer exhilaration.

The place they had come from was shrinking to a point.

A point is that which has position but no magnitude. A point has neither length nor breadth nor depth, yet it exists.

The place they had come from was part of a thin, glowing line.

A line is the course of a moving point, having length but no other dimension. In each line there are an infinite number of points.

Infinite! That was a word Kate had heard William use many times. She'd thought she'd understood it, but she hadn't... not until now!

The line they had come from was one of many. It branched and branched and branched again, and from each branch-sprang other branches. It was like a tree or, better yet, a fan. Far away it all stretched out endlessly, an infinite fan-shaped plane.

A plane is a surface such that a straight line joining any two of its points lies wholly within the surface.

Her mind struggled to understand.

The point she'd come from was a point in time. That point was part of a single timeline, the timeline of the lizards. But the timeline of the lizards branched, again and again. There were an infinite number of lizard timelines, and all the lizard timelines, taken together, were a branch of yet another timeline. *And where am I?* she thought. *Am I really outside of time?*

That could not be. Events still happened to her one after the other, in an ordered sequence. Even here, above the fan of time, above the infinite different branches of time, there was time.

She saw more. The fan could rotate. It could describe a vast cone... A cone! But what was outside the cone? As if in answer to her question she began to see another cone, completely within the first cone, *yet branching off from it at a right angle.*

William screamed. She saw he was covering his eyes with his right

hand, clutching her with his other hand so tightly it hurt her.

She remembered, oddly, a line he'd written in his "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as *it is*, infinite."

"There, there, Mr. Blake," she said soothingly. "Don't take on so. There's nothing to fear."

He looked at her, his large eyes filled with more madness than she'd ever seen before. "There's a limit!" he shouted.

"A limit to what?"

"You know!"

"The universe?"

"No! My mind!"

She turned away from him to look again at the cone. And the cone within the cone. And the cone within the cone within the cone. There could be no mistake. The light was very bright. It hurt her eyes.

There was light all around. It moved and undulated like smoke, yet was somehow solid. Was it made of colored glass? She tried to touch it, but could not.

And it seemed to her she could hear the light as well as see it, and the sound was of a vast chord on a cathedral organ, a single chord that changed constantly yet always remained the same. She could feel the sound on her skin, like sunshine.

And in the light and sound she could sense... *consciousness!*

A third time she looked at the cone. Of all the timelines in it, one was stronger and brighter than the others. Of all the points on that brighter line, one stood out like a spot of pure white flame.

Without words, *something* was directing her toward that flame, guiding her gently.

"Come along, Mr. Blake," she said.

The cone hurtled toward her.

*

When the rain hit her skin, she was aware for the first time that she and William were naked. In the dim early morning light she looked at her hand. It was a human hand, not a claw.

She looked at William. He had no tail.

She looked around her. She was standing in the middle of the street, facing a house, and she recognized the house at once. 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, Surrey, London, England, one of a row of terrace houses of eight or ten rooms each, surrounded by gardens, trees and bushes.

Home!

Something told her the year was 1794. Something told her there was no giant talking lizards in this world, no temples of Isis, no Albion, no Oothoon, no Golgonooza.

William turned toward her, dumbfounded.

"We'd best go inside," she told him. "Think of the scandal if the neighbors should see us as bare as the Good Lord made us!"

The front door was as they'd left it, unlocked.

Inside, William remarked, puzzled, "There's no dust... and we've been gone so long."

Kate said, "No we haven't. It was yesterday afternoon when we left here. We'd been about to go shopping... Remember? I suppose we'll have to go shopping today instead, but you must shave first. You look a sight!"

She put on her robe, after drying herself with a towel, and stood at the back window watching the rain fall on her wild grape vines and her poplar trees.

Soon William joined her, saying, "How do I look?"

"Much better, without the beard."

"Kate! You've been crying!"

She nodded, lowering her eyes. "Yes, I suppose I have."

"But we're home now! Everything's back the way it was."

"That's true. Perhaps I'm being silly..."

"Is it Ore?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "Yes, it's Ore. I miss him you know. He was a dear thing, in spite of his... bad complexion."

"Perhaps we can go back, get him away from Urizen. Perhaps we can bring him here, and he'll change, become... like other little boys."

Something told her the process of change, when it had gone beyond a certain point, was irreversible.

She shook her head. "No... but thank you for being willing..." Here she broke down and cried for a long time.

That afternoon, however, though she felt weak, she and William went shopping, and William got a haircut.

*

CHAPTER SEVEN... 1827

The Blakes were old. Kate was still vigorous, but William had, for several years, been suffering from recurring attacks of what he called "shivering fits," each worse than the last, and lately from jaundice as well, both symptoms of gallstones, the disease that would eventually cause his death.

They no longer lived in Lambeth, though Kate occasionally walked past their old home and paused a moment in the street to look at it. They had two small rooms on the ground floor at No. 3 Fountain Court. In one of them he lay, his bed laden with well-thumbed books in French, Latin, Italian, Greek and Hebrew, reading, writing and drawing by turns, when his weakness would permit. The most-read of all his books was his Bible,

which had been all but destroyed by constant use.

The house stood in a narrow slit between the Strand and the Thames River. His long engraver's table was placed under the room's one window so that he could, while working, look out across the squalid yard and see this river, as he said, "like a bar of gold." The fireplace was in the corner opposite the window. It would have warmed him as he sat there. A pile of portfolios and drawings that he could have consulted were on the right hand end of the table, near the room's only cupboard, and on what would have been his left was a pile of books placed one upon another. He had no bookcase. There were just two pictures on the walls: a copy of an illustration by Giulio Romano of Ovid's "Metamorphoses" and, close by the engraving table, Albert Dürer's "Melancholy the Mother of Invention".

The bed, like everything else in the room, faced the window, as if the window was a theatre stage on which the seasons performed an endless, enigmatic and slightly boring, but nonetheless fascinating, play.

The other room, though it served as a showroom for his work, was much darker and somewhat smaller. It was nothing like the Lambeth place, but William was not unhappy here, and the landlord never pressed them if the rent was late; he was a certain Mr. Baines, Kate's brother-in-law.

So here William lay, not like a sick man, but like a languorous Roman emperor reclining on a royal dais, his great bald forehead rising majestically above an oddly shrunken face, clean-shaven, calm, and dignified. His eyes had not changed: they were large and strange as ever, but everything else about him was in some way paler, smaller, more shrunken... the ruddy color of his skin had been replaced by an alarming yellowish white. Yet he was an emperor for all that, though his toga, tunic and sandals had been replaced by a linen nightshirt, worn but white with the whiteness that comes from many washings.

He sighed, looking out the window at a beautiful August morning, at the white clouds piled on the horizon, on the familiar skyline of Lambeth across the Thames. Then he heard the front door open and close gently, heard whispers, the rustle of clothing.

"Kate, is that you?" His voice was not strong.

"Yes, Mr. Blake. Me and a neighbor lady that's giving me a hand with

things."

He turned his head as Kate came quickly to his bedside. Her blouse was white muslin with slightly puffed sleeves; her skirt was long and full, also of white muslin. It did not fit her very well, as it was a hand-me-down from "the other Kate", William's sister. The neighbor lady hung back in the doorway, fidgeting.

"Can we talk?" William said.

Kate shot a meaningful glance at the neighbor lady, who said in a half-whisper, "If you need anything more..."

"Not now, but thank you so much. You've been such a comfort," Kate told her.

The woman left, grateful, it seemed, to escape from the presence of sickness. Kate removed her broad-brimmed straw hat and threw it on the table, not looking at William. "So much to do..."

"We really should talk a bit," William said.

Kate sat down on the edge of the bed. "I've heard some gossip next door. Would you believe..."

William broke in. "Today's the day."

Her face showed she understood. Today was the day of his death.

"When?" she asked.

"It must be sometime after six this evening. I jumped uptime—it isn't as easy as it once was—and I saw my corpse, here in the bed, and you bending over me. That was about seven-thirty. I fell back into present-time before I could see anything more."

"Can't you hang on a bit longer? There's unfinished work. We've got that engraving to do. Mr. Cumberland's bookplate..."

"You'll have to finish it without me."

"No, I can't!"

"You can. We've worked together for years. All our best work we've done together. I have grand ideas, yes, but I haven't your skillful fingers. On this job the grand ideas are all done..."

"But the other work..."

"Do the best you can."

"It'll be perfectly rotten! Alone I do such trivial things, though it's true I do them quick and well enough to please the customers. If it was you, could you go on and work alone?"

"I suppose not." He closed his eyes. "I've never been a real artist, never been able to give life to the things in my mind. It's when we worked together... my rough clumsy sketches and your fantastic finished work. It's when we've worked together that we've made pictures that could have come from the hand of Raphael or daVinci. All the prophetic books, all the books based on the things we did in distant times and places. We did them together, Kate!"

"The books aren't finished either. What about the 'Book of Kate'? That was to be your gift to me. The master key that unlocks all the rest. It's almost done..."

"That, too, you must finish yourself. You can do it. You know all I know. You can do all I can do."

"I can't!"

"You must." He opened his eyes and looked at her anguished face. "We must preserve the key. Otherwise those who come after us will not understand. Remember what we saw uptime? My work will be taught in schools, to children, but nobody, not even scholars who spend a lifetime at it, will understand my meaning. 'The Book of Kate' can change that."

"I don't know." Kate frowned. "Perhaps it's better they don't understand. Perhaps what we know can... do harm. Would it be good if hundreds... if hundreds, thousands, millions of school children learned to invade the place outside of time, learned to change history? There are too many timestreams already. It makes my head ache to think of them all. But Robert told me..."

"You've seen Robert?"

"He came to me last night, to comfort me, I suppose. He says all the spirits have come back to our own time line. He says the timeline of the lizards is dying."

William was surprised. "How can a time line die?"

"Our time line has a strength the others lack. Our time line is sustained by eternal law. The others are sustained only by human will, and the human will fades."

He took her hand. "I see, I see. Then something must be happening to Urizen. Perhaps he's dying too."

Kate shuddered. "Don't use that word 'dying'."

"You remember what I said when our old friend Flaxman died last year?"

"You said you thought you should have gone first."

"And I said I could not think of death as more than the going out of one room into another. That's what it is, too. Who knows that better than we?"

"Yes. Yes, you're right, of course."

"And now I'm tired. I want to take a little nap. Don't worry, though. We will talk again before... before I leave."

Kate watched him as he fell into a light slumber. She did not tell him what else Robert had said. She did not tell him that Urizen, when his proud intelligence had begun to fade in his changed lizard body, had gone insane and, with his newly grown teeth and claws, torn Vala, and Ore to bits. Why tell such upsetting things to a dying man?

*

"We will talk again before I leave."

Reassured by these words, Kate left her sleeping husband and went for a walk.

She moved as if in a dream, and hardly knew where her feet were taking her until she found herself turning off the Strand and heading down Wellington Street toward the Waterloo Bridge.

I'm going to Lambeth, she realized.

She knew she could have stepped out of the timestream and flown there, could have hovered unseen over her beloved garden, that now belonged to someone else, but she did not. She still had the ability to do such things, but did not use it.

But it's a long walk, she thought as she reached the midpoint of the bridge. Did she really want to see the garden again? Did she even really want to go downtime and see it as it was in earlier, happier times?

She stopped, went to the rail, and gazed down at the brown river.

There were no earlier, happier times. Even poverty-stricken as she was, even with her husband dying, she had never been happier than she was at this moment. And this puzzled her.

Wagons and carriages passed behind her, with a constant rattle, whinny and clop, but she neither saw nor heard them.

William had taught her so much: to read and write, to draw and paint, to speak a little in a half dozen foreign languages. Lately he'd taken her, step by step, through the Bible, helped her to understand deeply all that she had before believed blindly, with faith but without comprehension.

And he'd taught her one more thing... or had she taught it to him?

Acceptance. He'd taught her to accept things.

She smiled down on the slow water.

A few days earlier, she remembered, William had been working in bed, finishing the coloring of an etching of "The Ancient of Days" for a customer, his friend Frederick Tatham. Finally finished, William had all but thrown the etching at Tatham, crying, "There, that will do! I cannot mend it!"

Then he'd looked at her and added, with a new joy in his voice, "Stay,

Kate! Keep just as you are! I will draw your portrait, for you have ever been an angel to me." It had been a good likeness, though he'd drawn it almost without looking at her. What need was there to look at a face he knew better than his own?

She murmured, "He mustn't wake and find me gone," turned away from the rail, and quickly made her way back the way she had come.

*

Still smiling, she'd opened the front door, crossed the dark "Exhibition Room", and entered the bedroom.

That was several minutes ago.

Now she stood motionless and pale, paralyzed by what she saw. Over and over she thought, *I know he must die, but not like that.*

The smashed engraver's table. The shredded books. The scattered tools. The collapsed bed, soaked in blood. The torn and mutilated corpse. The deep claw-scratches in the floor.

"Urizen!"

Urizen had been here, seeking revenge against his father, *revenge for having been born!*

She spoke softly. "No, not like that."

At last she moved, but only to spring into the place outside of time and plunge downtime.

Was the corpse still there? The smashed furniture?

Yes.

A little further back then.

Ah, there was Mr. Blake, as yet unharmed, sleeping.

She waited.

Suddenly Urizen appeared in the center of the room, though Kate

would never have recognized him if she hadn't known what happened to humans in the lizard timeline. He was all lizard now, his white beard and hair replaced by green scales, his muscular body distorted, caricatured into a reptilian parody of the man he once had been... but there were traces. There were still traces of the old Urizen... a gesture, a way of holding his head cocked slightly to one side. Without seeing her, he advanced toward the bed.

"Urizen!" she shouted.

Urizen spun to face her, crouching, wary. Did he recognize her?

"Urizen, this is Kate." Her voice was firm.

The creature hesitated, puzzled, then recognition began to dawn. She thought, *The mind is almost gone*. But the will, the terrible proud unyielding will was still there, giving a fixed, hard expression to the nonhuman features. He said nothing, not even in the language of the lizards. Had he lost the power of speech?

She went on, speaking as if to a small child. "You don't want to hurt Mr. Blake, Urizen. It's me you want. It's me always said no to you, always took Mr. Blake away from you, always made a ruddy mess of your beautiful plans."

Urizen stared at her in silence.

"You understand?" she demanded. "It's me, Kate Blake, you want to kill!"

The lizard seemed to be making a titanic mental effort. He shifted from one clawed foot to the other, shook his massive head with perplexity, sucked in great gasps of breath. Finally his lips parted and, in an agony of concentration, spoke a single English word with a tongue that never was made for human speech.

"Yessssss."

He drew out the final sibilant in a long whisper that began as a hiss and ended as a sigh, fading away into nothing.

"And so you see..." Kate began.

Urizen lunged.

His talon brushed her arm as she sprang backward, ripping the white cloth of her blouse. In an instant she was clear of him, hurtling downtime through the graygreen world of shifting images in the place outside of time.

She glanced over her shoulder. He was following her, matching her speed. Through the rush of the unreal wind she could hear his hoarse panting.

Ahead a form materialized.

Another Urizen!

She veered off, then glanced back. There were two Urizens now, and as she watched they were joined by a third, all exactly alike, all swiftly pursuing her like a school of sharks.

"How many?" she whispered.

She was Zoa enough to know there was no practical limit to the multiplication of selves, and that she could multiply her self too, by zig-zagging backward and forward in time.

She had visited the twentieth century and read some of the stories about time travel in that curious genre of literature known as science-fiction. So far as she could recall, she'd never seen a story that grasped one simple fact, more fantastic than any of the so-called time paradoxes the science-fiction writers delighted in.

If you can go backward in time, you can meet yourself.

If you can meet yourself once, you can meet yourself twice, three times, a hundred times, a thousand!

She veered, saw herself pass with the gang of Urizens in hot pursuit.

She veered again.

There was three of her.

One of her said, "All of space and time is open to me, past, present and

future... including all the other alternate time tracks. I'll lead Urizen a merry chase... or should I say, we'll lead Urizen a merry chase!"

*

Kate and William sat in their rocking chairs, gazing into' the fire in their fireplace. They were young, just beginning. Kate wondered, *Will I ever learn to see William's visions?*

Then, in the ruddy glowing coals, something moved.

"Mr. Blake! I see something."

"Yes, Kate? What is it?"

"It's... myself... as an old woman. I'm flying."

"Go on, go on."

"Something's following me. A dragon!"

"Yes? Yes?"

"I'm coming closer!"

"Yes, Kate. I see it too."

"Mr. Blake! Watch out!"

The young Kate and the young William sprang out of the way an instant before the old Kate, panting and pale, burst from the fireplace, rushed by and turned, crying, "Help!"

The young William snatched up a poker, the only weapon available, and struck at the beast. He hurt it. He could see a fleck of blood on its arm.

Then the dragon Urizen swept him to one side with a single sweep of its great claw, sending him crashing against the wall.

As William lay there, half-stunned, he saw—or thought he saw—another Kate spring from the fire, pursued by another dragon, then another Kate, then another dragon.

But here he screamed and closed his eyes.

*

Dr. Laughing Bear frowned as he made his way down the hallway toward the mental ward. Was that the sound of running feet he heard?

Suddenly, up ahead, the swinging doors of the mental ward burst open and a majestic wave of Kates hurtled toward him, and behind that wave came another wave... of demonic green lizards. His eyes saw but his mind would not believe.

He jumped back into a doorway and watched as the running figures passed and passed and kept on passing.

*

Vala, standing on the bridge and looking out over the palace grounds toward Golgonooza, where the statue of Urizen towered on the skyline against the brightening dawn sky, saw a white-clad army surging toward her, and behind that another army of darker figures, strangely inhuman.

"Urizen!" she screamed as she ran toward the throne-room.
"Revolution!"

*

Drunken Antony awoke on board ship.

He felt sick.

He could hear the rowers singing, feel the galley surge. Were they going into battle? He lurched to his feet. Where was he? What was happening? Oh yes. He knew now. This was the battle tent on the afterdeck of his flagship. He must be going out to fight Octavian!

"Cleo!" he shouted.

If anyone answered, they were drowned out by the singing and the clatter of oars as they rose and fell, rose and fell.

"Cleopatra!" He opened the flap of his tent and looked out.

There was a woman amidships, but it was not Cleopatra. She wore a

strange white dress with a torn sleeve and a long skirt of the same material, and on her head was a broad-brimmed hat of straw.

"Where's Cleopatra?" he demanded.

Kate ignored him.

He looked past her, beyond the prow of his ship.

"By the gods!" he gasped.

A solid wail of ships was bearing down on him, flying the colors of Octavian, his arch enemy, but as the ships closed in he saw the troops on board them were not human.

They were lizards or crocodiles in armor, hundreds of them, waving swords and spears and shields, swishing their tails, opening their fang-lined jaws and shrieking wordlessly.

Antony stared at them stupidly for a moment, then he became aware that the troops were pouring up from belowdecks on his own ship.

But they were all women!

And they were all exactly alike, all wearing the same outlandish white dresses with ripped sleeves and broad-brimmed straw hats, though the weapons they carried were unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

They were sticks that spouted fire and smoke and made a frightful racket!

"That's it girls!" shouted one of the Kates.

The lizard Urizens were dying under the hail of gunfire, falling from the decks of the enemy ships into the foaming sea.

Antony shook his aching head and went back to bed.

*

The starships of the Urizens fought with courage; it was not courage but cold calculating intelligence that won wars out between the galaxies, so the starfleet of the Kates pressed on to one victory after another.

*

In the place outside of time, the tension that had been so long in building at last found relief. A rip appeared in empty space. Another. A cloud of white-clad female figures whirled through the rip, mixed with struggling green reptiles. There was something like an infinite sigh, and the vast cone of spacetime began to collapse.

One of the Kates, hiding in her hut in New Lambeth to catch her breath, saw the lines of space around her that had been straight grow curved, saw the walls grow transparent, saw her poplar trees and wild grape vines writhe as if alive as the earth sucked them down.

An Urizen appeared nearby.

She thought, *Rintrah!*

She launched herself toward the future.

*

A Kate was running; Urizen was close behind, she human and weary, he strong, inhuman and gaining on her.

They ran through the Hall of Windows near the center of Rintrah, the city at the End of Time. She saw, as she passed, that Urizen's window was complete. It depicted, in a slightly stylized form, an Urizen pursuing a Kate through the Hall of Windows. (It might almost have been a mirror image of what was actually happening.)

She went on running.

Here, too, space was beginning to bend.

She came to the entrance to Vala's Garden.

"Los!" she screamed through the portal. "Luvah! Tharmas! Help me!"
There was no answer.

She heard claws on the stone floor behind her.

She stepped forward as if to enter, then suddenly leaped to one side. Urizen was too heavy for such rapid changes of direction. He tried to stop

himself, his claws wildly flailing, but could not. He, slid past her with an almost-human howl of frustration.

She looked through the doorway, saw Urizen inside, saw Urizen's face relax, his great jaws open in an idiot smile, like a panting friendly dog. The other Zoas stepped out from among the dancing trees, coming forward to welcome him.

Los said, loudly enough for Kate to hear, "We're only dreams and shadows here, brother. Stay with us. Be one of us. It's better... better than being real."

The earth shook. The air became suddenly hot around Kate, but beyond the gateway, in the Garden of Vala, nothing was disturbed. Kate thought, wonderingly, *The Garden of Vala is the true place outside of time*. In the Garden of Vala there was no memory, and thus no past. There was a dream, an endlessly changing but meaningless dream, a beautiful and fascinating dream. What is the perfect trap? A trap that removes the desire of the victim to escape, that makes him forget that escape is possible. Urizen stayed in the garden, smiling, and in another garden another Urizen smiled, and in yet another garden, yet another Urizen smiled, and in an infinite number of Gardens of Vala, an infinite number of Urizens smiled forever as the cone of possible futures slowly, steadily collapsed until one Urizen remained, dreaming in the one remaining timestream.

Los took Urizen's claw in his hand and they walked slowly among the changing trees and dancing flowers. Los said, "Can you understand what has happened to you?"

Urizen's reptilian eyes were opaque with incomprehension.

Los said, "You love change, don't you?"

Urizen's eyes glowed with a faint light, and the huge gargoyle head nodded.

Los said, "Here there is nothing but change." He gestured toward the moving forms and colors around them.

Looking around, Urizen felt all his discontent fading. There was so much to see here. It would take an eternity to see it all. For a moment he

remembered someone... a woman.

Kate Blake.

And a man. William... he couldn't remember the last name.

When one awakes, dreams fade quickly. To remember dreams one must write them down as soon as one opens one's eyes. Few people take the trouble. Is there anything in dreams worth remembering?

Urizen did not think so.

The other Zoas followed Los and Urizen to where a hill was growing. They stood in a little cluster on the hill and let the ground raise them slowly above the level of the surrounding trees.

Again the image of the woman passed before Urizen's inner eye. An evil woman. His enemy. Yet he could not remember her face, only her white dress. The faceless Kate in his mind turned in emptiness, and other Kates came to her and they all became one, and the one Kate was swept from Urizen's mind by the majesty of the panorama that stretched out before him as the hill became a mountain.

*

Outside the entrance to the Garden of Vala Kate felt the temperature rapidly rising. The earth shook again.

The supernova, thought Kate, and leaped downtime as the Earth became a ball of flame in the inferno of the exploding sun. There was nobody in the hall to see the gateway to Vala's Garden glow red, then white, then soften and melt. There was nobody to glance through the portal and see the undisturbed universe within where, in the distance, the Four Zoas stood on a mountain. A moment later, when metal became liquid, then gas, the portal vanished. No one would ever pass through it again.

In the collapsing cone of time Kate turned in the void, absorbing selves as the many timestreams became one. Golgonooza and London melted together, and New Lambeth joined them. The fabric of time itself was collapsing, slumping, decaying, rotting, putrefying.

Spirits swished past her like thin flames. She glimpsed transparent

faces, all smiling with a strange ecstasy... and there were no lizard faces among them.

There came Robert! She stopped him with a shout.

"Robert! What's happening?"

"Uptime!" Robert was almost incoherent. "A new cone!"

She thought, *A new Heaven and a new Earth.*

"But the lizard spirits," said Kate. "Where are they?"

"There was only one, and he's gone. Urizen was... all of them!"

Robert darted around her and vanished into the future.

*

William, when he awoke from his nap, asked Kate about her ripped blouse, but she pretended she'd caught it on a nail.

At six in the evening William began to sing hymns.

Kate joined in, as did the neighbor lady and a friend of William's named George Richmond. The woman and Mr. Richmond wept as they sang, but Kate and William were dry-eyed.

The singing continued for several seconds after William fell silent.

*

William Blake was buried in Bunhill Fields on August 17, 1827, near where other members of his family were buried. The service was an orthodox one, performed by a clergyman of the Church of England. The widow, together with three of William's friends, were the only mourners present.

The clergyman was somewhat scandalized to note that Kate did not give way to tears, but instead consoled the others and generally managed things so that all went off without a hitch.

She looked quite handsome in black, in spite of her age, though the

clergyman felt she should at least look a little upset, for the sake of appearances.

He was further scandalized over the matter of the tombstone.

Kate refused to buy one.

"A waste of money," she said firmly.

If it had been anyone else who took this position, William's friends would have raised the accusation of hard-heartedness, but since they knew how devoted Kate had been to William, they could only shake their heads in puzzlement.

Obituary notices appeared in a number of journals, some making much of William's spirituality and unworldliness.

*

As the timeline continued to decay, the year 1828 winked out of existence, unnoticed by anyone in 1829 because of the false memories that remained intact.

*

It was October in 1831, and in London cold rain fell without cease.

Shaking water from overcoats and umbrellas, Frederick Tatham and his wife came stomping and sniffing into the hallway of Kate's rooms at Cirencester Place. William's sister greeted them in a hushed voice and showed them in to the sickroom.

Kate lay quietly in a huge four-poster bed, reading William's dog-eared and underlined old Bible. She looked up, smiled, and laid the book aside.

There was an embarrassed silence, broken only by the drumming of the rain on the windowpane.

"You're looking well," said Frederick hesitantly. "There's no need for lies," Kate answered, amused. "I know I'm dying."

"Don't say that, madam!" He was shocked. "You can't tell what the future holds."

Kate sighed. "Are you sure of that, Mr. Tatham?"

"Oh yes indeed. Sometimes there are almost miraculous recoveries from the most serious of illnesses."

Kate patted the bedcovers at her side. "Come. Sit with me. There are matters we must discuss this morning."

"Surely they can wait until..." He approached her bedside.

"No, no," she waved aside his objections with a frail bony hand. "This afternoon I will not be here."

Mrs. Tatham and William's sister hung back, trying not to cry, as Frederick seated himself on the bed.

Frederick said, "Of course, I place myself completely at your service." His voice shook only slightly. Frederick Tatham prided himself on his composure in difficult situations.

Speaking slowly and gravely, Kate said, "It is you William chose to receive his inheritance, such as it is. You're a good man. I know you'll do the right things with it, and you've been very kind to me since William passed on. There's not much. Some books, some manuscripts, some plates ready for printing."

"You two were never rich. I couldn't expect..."

"But there are no debts. Mr. Blake didn't hold with going into debt." For a moment Kate's voice was touched with pride.

"I know, but..."

"You remember how William was buried?"

"Well... yes."

"That's the way I want to be buried, in Bunhill Fields, the same as him, with a regular Church of England service. I've always tried to be a good Christian."

"And you have been, Mrs. Blake! Everyone says so!"

The two women, over by the door, hastened to agree.

Kate continued, calm and unperturbed. "I'll not have a lot of strangers looking at me. You three—that's all right—but you put me in my box and nail down the lid. No pawing me over and making me pretty, you understand."

"Of course, if that's what you want."

"Indeed it is. And I'd be much obliged if, before nailing me in, you'd dump a bushel of slaked lime in the box with me."

Frederick had turned quite pale. "Whatever you say, madam."

Kate frowned. "There's too much fuss made over the body in this country, Mr. Tatham. This isn't ancient Egypt, you know. It's the soul that matters here, or it ought to be."

"You're right, of course." Frederick's voice had grown so faint it was scarcely more than a mumble.

"Hmm. Now let's see. Have I taken care of everything? Yes. Yes, I believe so. Now if you don't mind..." She gestured for her visitors to leave.

With what dignity he could muster, Frederick stood up and walked unsteadily toward the door. Mrs. Tatham and William's sister waited, as if uncertain whether they should leave or stay.

"Miss Blake?" Kate called out.

"Yes?" answered William's sister, suppressing a sob.

"I know you and your family never liked me, never thought I was good enough for your William."

William's sister protested, "That's not so!"

Kate nodded slowly. "Yes, it is so. And it's all the more reason why I want to thank you for taking care of me now."

The two women finally could contain themselves no longer, and fled, weeping openly, into the hall. Frederick followed them out. Kate lay back with a sigh and picked up her Bible.

*

Mr. and Mrs. Tatham and Miss Blake stood vigil in the hall, listening to Kate's weak voice reciting fragments of scripture, singing snatches of hymns, and repeatedly calling out, "Don't fuss, William. I'm coming. It won't be long now!"

A little over two hours later there was an abrupt silence.

Mrs. Tatham cried out, "No!" and ran into the bedroom.

Frederick entered at a more dignified pace. Mrs. Tatham was holding Kate in her arms and rocking slowly back and forth, sobbing. Kate was obviously dead.

Then Frederick frowned, noticing something.

There was a smile on Kate's face.

"She spoke..." Mrs. Tatham blurted out between sobs.

"Good heavens, woman," Frederick said impatiently. "Get a grip on yourself. What did she say?"

"It was only a whisper..."

"Come along there. Let's have it."

"It—it sounded like, 'William', as though she were greeting him."

*

"Well, and there you are, Mr. Blake!" William turned and saw that Kate was as transparent as he. "What's this, Kate?"

"Aren't you glad to see me? I just died uptime and came down to join you. It was the oddest thing... I closed my eyes and the universe vanished!"

The last of the timestream was fading, crumbling.

"So it's all over then." A note of wistfulness had come into his voice.

Her large strange eyes glowed with suppressed excitement. She took his hand. "Not over, Mr. Blake. Just beginning."

She led him swiftly forward out of the deepening darkness toward a distant light.

*

CHAPTER EIGHT

In eighteenth century London a redheaded, blue-eyed boy screamed and ran to his window.

He didn't know exactly why, but he had expected to glimpse a naked, bearded, winged figure passing across the face of the moon.

There was no figure, only silent empty darkness.

Little William was disappointed.

He had a feeling that somehow, somewhere, this had happened before, but the other time it had been different. More exciting! He shuffled back to his bed, frowning, and climbed under the blankets.

He thought, *Anyway, I can still pretend.*

He closed his eyes and imagined a beautiful green dragon living forever in a magic garden.

*

Urizen the Dragon grins in the Garden of Vala as this vast vortex of stars we call the Milky Way Galaxy revolves once, twice, three times...