

# THE STONE CITY

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The crossworlds had a thousand names. Human starcharts listed it as Grayrest, when they listed it at all—which was seldom, for it lay a decade's journey inward from the realms of men. The Dan'lai named it Empty in their high, barking tongue. To the ul-mennaleith, who had known it longest, it was simply the world of the stone city. The Kresh had a word for it, as did the Linkellar, and the Cedrans, and other races had landed there and left again, so other names lingered on. But mostly it was the crossworlds to the beings who paused there briefly while they jumped from star to star.

It was a barren place, a world of gray oceans and endless plains where the windstorms raged. But for the spacefield and the stone city, it was empty and lifeless. The field was at least five thousand years old, as men count time. The ul-nayileith had built it in the glory days when they claimed the ullish stars, and for a hundred generations it had made the crossworlds theirs. But then the ul-nayileith had faded and the ul-mennaleith had come to fill up their worlds, and now the elder race was remembered only in legends and prayers.

Yet their spacefield endured, a great pockmark on the plains, circled by the towering windwalls that the vanished engineers had built against the storms. Inside the high walls lay the port city—hangars and barracks and shops where tired beings from a hundred worlds could rest and be refreshed. Outside, to the west, nothing; the winds came from the west, battering against the walls with a fury soon drained and used for power. But the eastern walls had a second city in their shadows, an open-air city of plastic bubbles and metal shacks. There huddled the beaten and the outcast and the sick; there clustered the shipless.

Beyond that, further east: the stone city.

It had been there when the ul-nayileith had come, five thousand years before. They had never learned how long it stood against the winds, or why. The ullish elders were arrogant and curious in those days, it was said, and they had searched. They walked the twisting alleys, climbed the narrow stairs, scaled the close-set towers and the square-topped pyramids. They found the endless dark passageways that wove mazelike beneath the earth. They discovered the vastness of the city, found all the dust and awesome silence. But nowhere did they find the Builders.

Finally, strangely, a weariness had come upon the ul-nayileith, and with it a fear. They had withdrawn from the stone city, never to walk its halls again. For thousands of years the stone was shunned, and the worship of the Builders was begun. And so too had begun the long decline of the elder race.

But the ul-mennaleith worship only the ul-nayileith. And the Dan'lai worship nothing. And who knows what humans worship? So now, again, there were sounds in the stone city; footfalls rode the alley winds.

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The skeletons were imbedded in the wall.

They were mounted above the windwall gates in no particular pattern, one short of a dozen, half sunk in the seamless ullish metal and half exposed to the crossworlds wind. Some were in deeper than others. High up, the new skeleton of some nameless winged being rattled in the breeze, a loose bag of hollow fairy bones welded to the wall only at wrists and ankles. Yet lower, up and to the right a little from the doorway, the yellow barrel-stave ribs of a Linkellar were all that could be seen of the creature.

MacDonald's skeleton was half in, half out. Most of the limbs were sunk deep in the metal, but the fingertips dangled out (one hand still holding a laser), and the feet, and the torso was open to the air. And the skull, of course—bleached white, half crushed, but still a rebuke. It looked down at Holt every dawn as he passed through the portal below. Sometimes, in the curious half-light of an early crossworlds morning, it seemed as though the missing eyes followed him on his long walk toward the gate.

But that had not bothered Holt for months. It had been different right after they had taken MacDonald, and his rotting body had suddenly appeared on the windwall, half joined to the metal. Holt could smell the stench then, and the corpse had been too recognizably Mac. Now it was just a skeleton, and that made it easier for Holt to forget.

On that anniversary morning, the day that marked the end of the first full standard year since the *Pegasus* had set down, Holt passed below the skeletons with hardly an upward glance.

Inside, as always, the corridor stood deserted. It curved away in both directions, white, dusty, very vacant; thin blue doors stood at regular intervals, but all of them were closed.

Holt turned to the right and tried the first door, pressing his palm to the entry plate. Nothing; the office was locked. He tried the next, with the same result. And then the next. Holt was methodical. He had to be. Each day only one office was open, and each day it was a different one.

The seventh door slid open at his touch.

Behind a curving metal desk a single Dan'la sat, looking out of place. The room, the furniture, the field—everything had been built to the proportions of the long-departed ul-nayileith, and the Dan'la was entirely too small for its setting. But Holt had gotten used to it. He had come every day for a year now, and every day a single Dan'la sat behind a desk. He had no idea whether it was the same one changing offices daily, or a different one each day. All of them had long snouts and darting eyes and bristling reddish fur. The humans called them foxmen. With rare exceptions, Holt could not tell one from the other. The Dan'lai would not help him. They refused to give names, and the creature behind the desk sometimes recognized him, often did not. Holt had long since given up the game, and resigned himself to treating every Dan'la as a stranger.

This morning, though, the foxman knew him at once. “Ah,” he said as Holt entered. “A berth for you?”

“Yes,” Holt said. He removed the battered ship's cap that matched his frayed gray uniform, and he waited—a thin, pale man with receding brown hair and a stubborn chin.

The foxman interlocked slim, six-fingered hands and smiled a swift thin smile. “No berth, Holt,” he said. “Sorry. No ship today.”

“I heard a ship last night,” Holt said. “I could hear it all the way over in the stone city. Get me a berth on it. I'm qualified. I know standard drive, and I can run a Dan'lai jump-gun. I have credentials.”

“Yes, yes.” Again the snapping smile. “But there is no ship. Next week, perhaps. Next week perhaps a man-ship will come. Then you'll have a berth, Holt, I swear it, I promise you. You a good jump man, right? You tell me. I get you a berth. But next week, next week. No ship now.”

Holt bit his lip and leaned forward, spreading his hands on the desktop, the cap crushed beneath one fist. “Next week you won't be here,” he said. “Or if you are, you won't recognize me, won't remember anything you promised. Get me a berth on the ship that came last night.”

“Ah,” said the Dan'la. “No berth. Not a man-ship, Holt. No berth for a man.”

“I don't care. I'll take any ship. I'll work with Dan'lai, ullies, Cedrans, anything. Jumps are all the same. Get me on the ship that came in last night.”

“But there *was* no ship, Holt,” the foxman said. His teeth flashed, then were gone again. “I tell you, Holt. No ship, no ship. Next week, come back. Come back, next week.” There was dismissal in his tone. Holt had learned to recognize it. Once, months ago, he'd stayed and tried to argue. But the desk-fox had summoned others to drag him away. For a week afterward, *all* the doors had been locked in the mornings. Now Holt knew when to leave.

Outside in the wan light, he leaned briefly against the windwall and tried to still his shaking hands. He must keep busy, he reminded himself. He needed money, food tokens, so that was one task he could set to. He could visit the Shed, maybe look up Sunderland. As for a berth, there was always tomorrow. He had to be patient.

With a brief glance up at MacDonald, who had not been patient, Holt went off down the vacant streets of the city of the shipless.

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Even as a child, Holt had loved the stars. He used to walk at night, during the years of high cold when the iceforests bloomed on Ymir. Straight out he would go, for kilometers, crunching the snow beneath until the lights of town were lost behind him and he stood alone in the glistening blue-white wonderland of frost-flowers and icewebs and bitterblooms. Then he would look up.

WinterYear nights on Ymir are clear and still and very black. There is no moon. The stars and the silence are everything.

Diligent, Holt had learned the names—not the starnames (no one named the stars any more—numbers were all that was needed), but rather the names of the worlds that swung around each. He was a bright child. He learned quickly and well, and even his gruff, practical father found a certain pride in that. Holt remembered endless parties at the Old House when his father, drunk on summerbrew, would march all his guests out onto the balcony so his son could name the worlds. “There,” the old man would say, holding a mug in one hand and pointing with the other, “there, that bright one!”

“Arachne,” the boy would reply, blank-faced. The guests would smile and mutter politely.

“And there?”

“Baldur.”

“There. There. Those three over there.”

“Finnegan. Johnhenry. Celia's World, New Rome, Cathaday.” The names skipped lightly off his youthful tongue. And his father's leathery face would crinkle in a smile, and he would go on and on until the others grew bored and restive and Holt had named all the worlds a boy could name standing on a balcony of the Old House on Ymir. He had always hated the ritual.

It was a good thing that his father had never come with him off into the iceforests, for away from the lights a thousand new stars could be seen, and that meant a thousand names to know. Holt never learned them all, the names that went with the dimmer, far-off stars that were not man's. But he learned enough. The pale stars of the Damoosh inwards toward the core, the reddish sun of the Silent Centaurs, the scattered lights where the Fyndii hordes raised their emblem-sticks; these he knew, and more.

He continued to come as he grew older, not always alone now. All his youthful sweethearts he dragged

out with him, and he made his first love in the starlight during a SummerYear when the trees dripped flowers instead of ice. Sometimes he talked about it with lovers, with friends. But the words came hard. Holt was never eloquent, and he could not make them understand. He scarcely understood himself.

After his father died, he took over the Old House and the estates and ran them for a long WinterYear, though he was only twenty standard. When the thaw came, he left it all and went to Ymir City. A ship was down, a trader bound for Finnegan and worlds further in.

Holt found a berth.

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The streets grew busier as the day aged. Already the Dan'lai were out, setting up food stalls between the huts. In an hour or so the streets would be lined with them. A few gaunt ul-mennaleith were also about, traveling in groups of four or five. They all wore powder-blue gowns that fell almost to the ground, and they seemed to flow rather than walk—eerie, dignified, wraithlike. Their soft gray skin was finely powdered, their eyes were liquid and distant. Always they seemed serene, even *these*, these sorry shipless ones.

Holt fell in behind a group of them, increasing his pace to keep up. The fox merchants ignored the solemn ul-mennaleith, but they all spied Holt and called out to him as he passed. And laughed their high, barking laughs when he ignored them.

Near the Cedran neighborhoods Holt took his leave of the ullies, darting into a tiny side street that seemed deserted. He had work to do, and this was the place to do it.

He walked deeper into the rash of yellowed bubble-huts and picked one almost at random. It was old, its plastic exterior heavily polished; the door was wood, carved with nest symbols. Locked, of course—Holt put his shoulder to it and pushed. When it held firm, he retreated a bit, then ran and crashed against it. On his fourth try it gave noisily. The noise didn't bother him. In a Cedran slum, no one would hear.

Pitch-dark inside. He felt near the door and found a coldtorch, touched it until it returned his body heat as light. Then, leisurely, he looked around.

There were five Cedrans present: three adults and two younglings, all curled up into featureless balls on the floor. Holt hardly gave them a glance. By night, the Cedrans were terrifying. He'd seen them many times on the darkened streets of the stone city, moaning in their soft speech and swaying sinister. Their segmented torsos unfolded into three meters of milk-white maggotsflesh, and they had six specialized limbs; two wide-splayed feet, a pair of delicate branching tentacles for manipulation, and the wicked fighting-claws. The eyes, saucer-sized pools of glowing violet, saw everything. By night, Cedrans were beings to be avoided.

By day, they were immobile balls of meat.

Holt walked around them and looted their hut. He took a hand-held coldtorch, set low to give the murky purple half-light the Cedrans liked best, plus a sack of food tokens and a clawhone. The polished, jeweled fighting-claws of some illustrious ancestor sat in an honored place on the wall, but Holt was careful not to touch them. If their family god was stolen, the entire nest would be obliged to find the thief or commit suicide.

Finally he found a set of wizard-cards, smoke-dark wooden plaques inlaid with iron and gold. He shoved them in a pocket and left. The street was still empty. Few beings visited the Cedran districts save Cedrans.

Quickly Holt found his way back to the main thoroughfare, the wide gravel path that ran from the windwalls of the spacefield to the silent gates of the stone city five kilometers away. The street was crowded and noisy now, and Holt had to push his way through the throng. Foxmen were everywhere, laughing and barking, snapping their quick grins on and off, rubbing reddish brown fur up against the blue gowns of the ul-mennaleith, the chitinous Kresh, and the loose baggy skin of the pop-eyed green Linkellars. Some of the food stalls had hot meals to offer, and the ways were heavy with smokes and smells. Holt had been months on the crossworlds before he had finally learned to distinguish the food scents from the body odors.

As he fought his way down the street, dodging in and out among the aliens with his loot clutched tightly in his hand, Holt watched carefully. It was habit now, drilled into him; he looked constantly for an unfamiliar human face, the face that might mean a man-ship was in, that salvation had come.

He did not find one. As always, there was only the milling press of the crossworlds all around him—Dan'lai barks and Kresh clickings and the ululating speech of the Linkellars, but never a human voice. By now, it had ceased to affect him.

He found the stall he was looking for. From beneath a flap of gray leather, a frazzled Dan'la looked up at him. “Yes, yes,” the foxman snapped impatiently. “Who are you? What do you want?”

Holt shoved aside the multicolored blinking-jewels that were strewn over the counter and put down the coldtorch and clawhone he had taken. “Trade,” he said. “These for tokens.”

The foxman looked down at the goods, up at Holt, and began to rub his snout vigorously. “Trade. Trade. A trade for you,” he chanted. He picked up the clawhone, tossed it from one hand to the other, set it down again, touched the coldtorch to wake it to barely perceptible life. Then he nodded and turned on his grin. “Good stuff. Cedran. The big worms will want it. Yes. Yes. Trade, then. Tokens?”

Holt nodded.

The Dan'la fumbled in the pocket of the smock he was wearing, and tossed a handful of food tokens on the counter. They were bright disks of plastic in a dozen different colors, the nearest things to currency the crossworlds had. The Dan'lai merchants honored them for food. And the Dan'lai brought in all the food there was on their fleets of jump-gun spacers.

Holt counted the tokens, then scooped them up and threw them in the sack that he'd taken from the Cedran bubble-hut. “I have more,” he said, reaching into his pocket for the wizard-cards.

His pocket was empty. The Dan'la grinned and snapped his teeth together. “Gone? Not the only thief on Empty, then. No. Not the only thief.”

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He remembered his first ship; he remembered the stars of his youth on Ymir, he remembered the worlds he'd touched since, he remembered all the ships he'd served on and the men (and not-men) he had served with. But better than any of them he remembered his first ship: the *Laughing Shadow* (an old name heavy with history, but no one told him the story until much later), out of Celia's World and bound for Finnegan. It was a converted ore freighter, a great blue-gray teardrop of pitted duralloy that was at least a century older than Holt was. Sparse and raw—big cargo holds and not much crew space, sleep-webs for the twelve who manned it, no gravity grid (he'd gotten used to free fall quickly), nukes for landing and lifting, and a standard ftl drive for the star-shifts. Holt was set to working in the drive room, an austere place of muted lights and bare metal and computer consoles. Cain narKarmian showed him what to do.

Holt remembered narKarmian too. An old, *old* man, too old for shipwork he would have thought; skin like soft yellow leather that has been folded and wrinkled so many times that there is nowhere a piece of it without a million tiny creases, eyes brown and almond-shaped, a mottled bald head and a wispy blond goatee. Sometimes Cain seemed senile, but most often he was sharp and alert; he knew the drives, and he knew the stars, and he would talk incessantly as he worked.

“Two hundred standard years!” he said once as they both sat before their consoles. He smiled a shy, crooked smile, and Holt saw that he still had teeth, even at his age—or perhaps he had teeth *again*. “That’s how long Cain’s been shipping, Holt. The very truth! You know, your regular man never leaves the very world he’s born on. Never! Ninety-five per cent of them, anyway. They never leave, just get born and grow up and die, all on the same world. And the ones that do ship—well, most of *them* ship only a little. A world or two or ten. Not me! You know where I was born, Holt? Guess!”

Holt shrugged. “Old Earth?”

Cain had just laughed. “Earth? Earth’s nothing, only three or four years out from here. Four, I think. I forget. No, no, but I’ve seen Earth, the very homeworld, the seeding place. Seen it fifty years ago on the—the *Corey Dark*, I’d guess it was. It was about time, I thought. I’d been shipping a hundred fifty standard even then, and I still hadn’t been to Earth. But I finally got there!”

“You weren’t born there?” Holt prompted.

Old Cain shook his head and laughed again. “Not very! I’m an Emereli. From ai-Emerel. You know it, Holt?”

Holt had to think. It was not a world-name he recognized, not one of the stars his father had pointed to, aflame in the night of Ymir. But it rang a bell, dimly. “The Fringe?” he guessed finally. The Fringe was the furthest *out*-edge of human space, the place where the small sliver of the galaxy they called the manrealm had brushed the top of the galactic lens, where the stars grew thin. Ymir and the stars he knew were on the other side of Old Earth, inward toward the denser starfields and the still-unreachable core.

Cain was happy at his guess. “Yes! I’m an outworlder. I’m near to two hundred and twenty standard, and I’ve seen near that many worlds now, human worlds and Hrangan and Fyndii and all sorts, even some worlds in the manrealm where the men aren’t *men* any more, if you understand what I’m saying. Shipping, always shipping. Whenever I found a place that looked interesting I’d skip ship and stay a time, then go on when I wanted to. I’ve seen all sorts of things, Holt. When I was young I saw the Festival of the Fringe, and hunted banshee on High Kavalaan, and got a wife on Kimdiss. She died, though, and I got on. Saw Prometheus and Rhiannon, which are in a bit from the Fringe, and Jamison’s World and Avalon, which are in further still. You know. I was a Jamie for a bit, and on Avalon I got three wives. And two husbands, or co-husbands, or however you say it. I was still shy of a hundred then, maybe less. That was a time when we owned our own ship, did local trading, hit some of the old Hrangan slaveworlds that have gone off their own ways since the war. Even Old Hranga itself, the very place. They say there are still some Minds on Hranga, deep underground, waiting to come back and attack the manrealm again. But all I ever saw was a lot of kill-castes and workers and the other lesser types.”

He smiled. “Good years, Holt, very good years. We called our ship *Jamison’s Ass*. My wives and my husbands were all Avalonians, you see, except for one who was Old Poseidon, and Avalonians don’t like Jamies much, which is how we arrived at that very name. But I can’t say that they were wrong. I was a Jamie too, before that, and Port Jamison is a stulty priggish town on a planet that’s the same.

“We were together nearly thirty standard on *Jamison’s Ass*. The marriage outlasted two wives and one husband. And me too, finally. They wanted to keep Avalon as their trade base, you see, but after thirty

I'd seen all the worlds I wanted to see around there, and I hadn't seen a lot else. So I shipped on. But I loved them, Holt, I did love them. A man should be married to his shipmates. It makes for a very good feeling." He sighed. "Sex comes easier too. Less uncertainty."

By then, Holt was caught. "Afterward," he asked, his young face showing only a hint of the envy he felt, "what did you do then?"

Cain had shrugged, looked down at his console, and started to punch the glowing studs to set in a drive correction. "Oh, shipped on, shipped on. Old worlds, new worlds, man, not-man, aliens. New Refuge and Pachacuti and burnt-out old Wellington, and then Newholme and Silversky and Old Earth. And now I'm going in, as far as I can go before I die. Like Tomo and Walberg, I guess. You know about Tomo and Walberg, in here at Ymir?"

And Holt had only nodded. Even Ymir knew about Tomo and Walberg. Tomo was an outworlder too, born on Darkdawn high atop the Fringe, and they say he was a darkling dreamer. Walberg was an Altered Man from Prometheus, a roistering adventurer according to the legend. Three centuries ago, in a ship called the *Dreaming Whore*, they had set off from Darkdawn for the opposite edge of the galaxy. How many worlds they had visited, what had happened on each, how far they had gotten before death—those were the knots in the tale, and schoolboys disputed them still. Holt liked to think that they were still out there, somewhere. After all, Walberg had said he was a superman, and there was no telling how long a superman might live. Maybe even long enough to reach the core, or beyond.

He had been staring at the console, daydreaming, and Cain had grinned over at him and said, "Hey! Starsick!" And when Holt had started and looked up, the old man nodded (still smiling), saying, "Yes, you, the very one! Set to, Holt, or you won't be shipping nowhere!"

But it was a gentle rebuke, and a gentle smile, and Holt never forgot it or Cain narKarmian's other words. Their sleep-webs were next to each other and Holt listened every night, for Cain was hard to silence and Holt was not about to try. And when the *Laughing Shadow* finally hit Cathaday, as far in as it would go, and got ready to turn back into the manrealm towards Celia's World and home, Holt and narKarmian signed off together and got berths on a mailship that was heading for Vess and the alien Damoosh suns.

They had shipped together for six years when narKarmian finally died. Holt remembered the old man's face much better than his father's.

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The Shed was a long, thin, metal building, a corrugated shack of blue duralloy that someone had found in the stores of a looted freighter, probably. It was built kilometers from the windwall, within sight of the gray walls of the stone city and the high iris of the Western Door. Around it were other, larger metal buildings, the warehouse-barracks of the shipless ul-mennaleith. But there were no ullies inside, ever.

It was near noon when Holt arrived, and the Shed was almost empty. A wide columnar coldtorch reached from floor to ceiling in the center of the room, giving off a tired ruddy light that left most of the deserted tables in darkness. A party of muttering Linkellars filled a corner off in the shadows; opposite them, a fat Cedran was curled up in a tight sleep-ball, his slick white skin glistening. And next to the coldtorch pillar, at the old *Pegasus* table, Alaina and Takker-Rey were sharing a white stone flask of amberlethe.

Takker spied him at once. "Look," he said, raising his glass. "We have company, Alaina. A lost soul returns! How are things in the stone city, Michael?"

Holt sat down. "The same as always, Takker. The same as always." He forced a smile for bloated,

pale-faced Takker, then quickly turned to Alaina. She had worked the jump-gun with him once, a year ago and more. And they had been lovers, briefly. But that was over. Alaina had put on weight and her long auburn hair was dirty and matted. Her green eyes used to spark; now amberlethe made them dull and cloudy.

Alaina favored him with a pudgy smile. “Lo, Michael,” she said. “Have you found your ship?”

Takker-Rey giggled, but Holt ignored him. “No,” he said. “But I keep going. Today the foxman said there'd be a ship in next week. A man-ship. He promised me a berth.”

Now both of them giggled. “Oh, Michael,” Alaina said. “Silly, silly. They used to tell *me* that. I haven't gone for so long. Don't you go, either. I'll take you back. Come up to my room. I miss you. Tak is such a bore.”

Takker frowned, hardly paying attention. He was intent on pouring himself a new glass of amberlethe. The liquor flowed with agonizing slowness, like honey. Holt remembered the taste of it, gold fire on his tongue, and the easy sense of peace it brought. They had all done a lot of drinking in the early weeks, while they waited for the Captain to return. Before things fell apart.

“Have some ‘lethe,” Takker said. “Join us.”

“No,” Holt said. “Maybe a little fire brandy, Takker, if you're buying. Or a foxbeer. Summerbrew, if there's some handy. I miss summerbrew. But no ‘lethe. That's why I went away, remember?”

Alaina gasped suddenly; her mouth drooped open and something flickered in her eyes. “You went away,” she said in a thin voice. “I remember, you were the first. You went away. You and Jeff. You were the first.”

“No, dear,” Takker interrupted very patiently. He set down the flask of amberlethe, took a sip from his glass, smiled, and proceeded to explain. “The Captain was the first one to go away. Don't you recall? The Captain and Villareal and Susie Benet, they all went away together, and we waited and waited.”

“Oh, yes,” Alaina said. “Then later Jeff and Michael left us. And poor Irai killed herself, and the foxes took Ian and put him up on the wall. And all the others went away. Oh, I don't know where, Michael, I just don't.” Suddenly she started to weep. “We all used to be together, all of us, but now there's just Tak and me. They all left us. We're the only ones who come here any more, the *only* ones.” She broke down and started sobbing.

Holt felt sick. It was worse than his last visit the month before—much worse. He wanted to grab the amberlethe and smash it to the floor. But it was pointless. He had done that once a long time ago—the second month after landing—when the endless hopeless waiting had sent him into a rare rage. Alaina had wept, MacDonald cursed and hit him and knocked loose a tooth (it still hurt sometimes, at night), and Takker-Rey bought another flask. Takker always had money. He wasn't much of a thief, but he'd grown up on Vess where men shared a planet with two alien races, and like a lot of Vessmen he'd grown up a xenophile. Takker was soft and willing, and foxmen (some foxmen) found him attractive. When Alaina had joined him, in his room and his business, Holt and Jeff Sunderland had given up on them and moved to the outskirts of the stone city.

“Don't cry, Alaina,” Holt said now. “Look, I'm here, see? I even brought food tokens.” He reached into his sack and tossed a handful onto the table—red, blue, silver, black. They clattered and rolled and lay still.

At once, Alaina's tears were gone. She began to scabble among the tokens, and even Takker leaned



forward to watch. “Red ones,” she said excitedly. “Look, Takker, red ones, meat tokens! And silvers, for ‘lethe. Look, look!” She began to scoop loose tokens into her pockets, but her hands were trembling, and more than one token was thrown onto the floor. “Help me, Tak,” she said.

Takker giggled. “Don't worry, love, that was only a green. We don't need worm food anyway, do we?” He looked at Holt. “Thank you, Michael, thank you. I always told Alaina you had a generous soul, even if you did leave us when we needed you. You and Jeff. Ian said you were a coward, you know, but I always defended you. Thank you, yes.” He picked up a silver token and flipped it with his thumb. “Generous Michael. You're always welcome here.”

Holt said nothing. The Shed-boss had suddenly materialized at his elbow, a vast bulk of musky blue-black flesh. His face looked down at Holt—if you could call it looking, since the being was eyeless, and if you could call it a face, since there was no mouth either. The thing that passed for a head was a flabby, half-filled bladder full of breathing holes and ringed by whitish tentacles. It was the size of a child's head, an infant's, and it looked absurdly small atop the gross oily body and the rolls of mottled fat. The Shed-boss did not speak; not Terran nor ullish nor the pidgin Dan'lai that passed for crossworlds trade talk. But he always knew what his customers wanted.

Holt just wanted to leave. While the Shed-boss stood, silent and waiting, he rose and lurched for the door. It slid shut behind him, and he could hear Alaina and Takker-Rey arguing over the tokens.

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The Damoosh are a wise and gentle race, and great philosophers—or so they used to say on Ymir. The outermost of their suns interlock with the innermost parts of the ever-growing manrealm, and it was on a time-worn Damoosh colony that narKarmian died and Holt first saw a Linkellar.

Rayma-k-Tel was with him at the time, a hard hatchet-faced woman who'd come out of Vess; they were drinking in an enclave bar just off the spacefield. The place had good manrealm liquor, and he and Ram swilled it down together from seats by a window of stained yellow glass. Cain was three weeks dead. When Holt saw the Linkellar shuffling past the window, its bulging eyes a-wobble, he tugged at Ram's arm and turned her around and said, “Look. A new one. You know the race?”

Rayma shrugged loose her arm and shook her head. “No,” she said, irritated. She was a raging xenophobe, which is the other thing that growing up on Vess will do to you. “Probably from further in somewhere. Don't even *try* to keep them straight, Mikey. There's a million different kinds, specially this far in. Damn Damos'll trade with any *thing*.”

Holt had looked again, still curious, but the heavy being with the loose green skin was out of sight. Briefly he thought of Cain, and something like a thrill went through him. The old man had shipped for more than two hundred years, he thought, and yet he'd probably never seen an alien of the race *they'd* just seen. He said something to that effect to Rayma-k-Tel.

She was most unimpressed. “So what?” she said. “So *we've* never seen the Fringe or a Hrangan, though I'd be damned to know why we'd *want* to.” She smiled thinly at her own wit. “Aliens are like jellybeans, Mikey. They come in a lot of different colors, but inside they're just about the same.

“So don't turn yourself into a collector like old narKarmian. Where did it ever get him, after all? He moved around a lot on a bunch of third-rate ships, but he never saw the Far Arm and he never saw the core, and nobody ever will. He didn't get too rich, neither. Just relax and make a living.”

Holt had hardly been listening. He put down his drink and lightly touched the cool glass of the window with his fingertips.

That night, after Rayma had returned to their ship, Holt left the offworld enclave and wandered out into the Damoosh home-places. He paid half-a-run's salary to be led to the underground chamber where the world's wisdompool lay: a vast computer of living light linked to the dead brains of telepathic Damoosh elders (or at least that was how the guide explained it to Holt).

The chamber was a bowl of green fog stirring with little waves and swells. Within its depths, curtains of colored light rippled and faded and were gone. Holt stood on the upper lip looking down and asked his questions, and the answers came back in an echoing whisper as of many tiny voices speaking together. First he described the being he'd seen that afternoon and asked what it had been, and it was then he heard the word Linkellar.

"Where do they come from?" Holt asked.

"Six years from the manrealm by the drive you use," the whispers told him while the green fog moved. "Toward the core but not straight in. Do you want coordinates?"

"No. Why don't we see them more often?"

"They are far away, too far perhaps," the answer came. "The whole width of the Damoosh suns is between the manrealm and the Twelve Worlds of the Linkellar, and so too the colonies of the Nor T'alush and a hundred worlds that have not found stardrives. The Linkellars trade with the Damoosh, but they seldom come to this place, which is closer to you than to them."

"Yes," said Holt. A chill went through him, as if a cold wind blew across the cavern and the flickering sea of fog. "I have heard of the Nor T'alush, but not of the Linkellars. What else is there? Further in?"

"There are many directions," the fog whispered. Colors undulated deep below. "We know the dead worlds of the vanished race the Nor T'alush call the First Ones, though they were not truly the first, and we know the Reaches of the Kresh, and the lost colony of the getsoids of Aath who sailed from far within the manrealm before it was the manrealm."

"What's beyond *them*?"

"The Kresh tell of a world called Cedris, and of a great sphere of suns larger than the manrealm and the Damoosh suns and the old Hrangam Empire all together. The stars within are the ullish stars."

"Yes," Holt said. There was a tremor in his voice. "And beyond *that*? Around it? Further in?"

A fire burned within the far depths of the fog; the green mists glowed with a smoldering reddish light. "The Damoosh do not know. Who sails so far, so long? There are only tales. Shall we tell you of the Very Old Ones? Of the Bright Gods, or the shipless sailors? Shall we sing the old sing of the race without a world? Ghost ships have been sighted further in, things that move faster than a man-ship or a Damoosh in drive, and they destroy where they will, yet sometimes they are not there at all. Who can say what they are, who they are, where they are, if they are? We have names, names, stories, we can give you names and stories. But the facts are dim. We hear of a world named Huul the Golden that trades with the lost getsoids who trade with the Kresh who trade with the Nor T'alush who trade with us, but no Damoosh ship has ever sailed to Huul the Golden and we cannot say much of it or even where it is. We hear of the veiled men of a world unnamed, who puff themselves up and float around and around in their atmosphere, but that may be only a legend, and we cannot even say *whose* legend. We hear of a race that lives in deep space, who talk to a race called the Dan'lai, who trade with the ullish stars, who trade with Cedris, and so the string runs back to us. But we Damoosh on this world so near the manrealm have never seen a Cedran, so how can we trust the string?" There was a sound like muttering; below his feet, the fog churned, and something that smelled like incense rose to touch Holt's nostrils.

“I’ll go in,” Holt said. “I’ll ship on, and see.”

“Then come back one day and tell us,” the fogs cried, and for the very first time Holt heard the mournful keen of a wisdompool that is not wise enough. “Come back, come back. There is much to learn.” The smell of incense was very strong.

\* \* \* \*

Holt looted three more Cedran bubble-huts that afternoon, and broke into two others. The first of those was simply cold and vacant and dusty; the second was occupied, but not by a Cedran. After jiggling loose the door, he’d stood shock-still while an ethereal winged thing with feral eyes flapped against the roof of the hut and hissed down at him. He got nothing from that bubble, nor from the empty one, but the rest of his break-ins paid off.

Toward sunset, he returned to the stone city, climbing a narrow ramp to the Western Iris with a bag of food slung over his shoulders.

In the pale and failing light, the city looked colorless, washed out, dead. The circling walls were four meters high and twice as thick, fashioned of a smooth and seamless gray stone as if they were a single piece; the Western Iris that opened on the city of the shipless was more a tunnel than a gateway. Holt went through it quickly, out into a narrow zigzag alley that threaded its way between two huge buildings—or perhaps they were not buildings. Twenty meters tall, irregularly shaped, windowless and doorless; there could be no possible entrance save through the stone city’s lower levels. Yet this type of structure, these odd-shaped dented blocks of gray stone, dominated the easternmost part of the stone city in an area of some twelve kilometers square. Sunderland had mapped it.

The alleys here were a hopeless maze, none of them running straight for more than ten meters; from above, Holt had often imagined them to look like a child’s drawing of a lightning bolt. But he had come this route often, and he had Sunderland’s maps committed to memory (for this small portion of the stone city, at any rate). He moved with speed and confidence, encountering no one.

From time to time, when he stood in the nexus points where several alleys joined, Holt caught glimpses of other structures in the distance. Sunderland had mapped most of them, too; they used the sights as landmarks. The stone city had a hundred separate parts, and in each the architecture and the very building stone itself was different. Along the northwest wall was a jungle of obsidian towers set close together with dry canals between; due south lay a region of blood-red stone pyramids; east was an utterly empty granite plain with a single mushroom-shaped tower ascending from its center. And there were other regions, all strange, all uninhabited. Sunderland mapped a few additional blocks each day. Yet even this was only the tip of the iceberg. The stone city had levels beneath levels, and neither Holt nor Sunderland nor any of the others had penetrated those black and airless warrens.

Dusk was all around him when Holt paused at a major nexus point, a wide octagon with a smaller octagonal pool in its center. The water was still and green; not even a ripple of wind moved across its surface until Holt stopped to wash. Their rooms, just past here, were as bone-dry as this whole area of the city. Sunderland said the pyramids had indoor water supplies, but near the Western Iris there was nothing but this single public pool.

Holt resumed walking when he had cleaned the day’s dust from his face and hands. The food bag bounced on his back, and his footsteps, echoing, broke the alley stillness. There was no other sound; the night was falling fast. It would be as bleak and moonless as any other crossworlds night. Holt knew that. The overcast was always heavy, and he could seldom spot more than a half-dozen dim stars.

Beyond the plaza of the pool, one of the great buildings had fallen. There was nothing left but a jumble of

broken rock and sand. Holt cut across it carefully, to a single structure that stood out of place among the rest—a huge gold stone dome like a blown-up Cedran bubble-hut. It had a dozen entrance holes, a dozen narrow little staircases winding up to them, and a honeycomb of chambers within.

For nearly ten standard months, this had been home.

Sunderland was squatting on the floor of their common room when Holt entered, his maps spread out all around him. He had arranged each section to fit with the others in a patchwork tapestry; old yellowed scraps he'd purchased from the Dan'lai and corrected were sandwiched between sheets of *Pegasus* gridfilm and lightweight squares of silvery ullish metal. The totality carpeted the room, each piece covered with lines and Sunderland's neat notation. He sat in the middle of it all with a map on his lap and a marker in his hand, looking owlish and rumpled and very overweight.

"I've got food," Holt said. He flipped the bag across the room and it landed among the maps, disarranging several of the loose sections.

Sunderland squawked, "Ahh, the *maps!* Be careful!" He blinked and pushed the food aside and rearranged everything neatly again.

Holt crossed the room to his sleep-web, strung between two sturdy coldtorch pillars. He walked on the maps as he went and Sunderland squawked again, but Holt ignored him and climbed into the web.

"Damn you," Sunderland said, smoothing the trodden sections. "Be more careful, will you?" He looked up and saw that Holt was frowning at him. "Mike?"

"Sorry," Holt said. "You find something today?" His tone made the question an empty formality.

Sunderland never noticed. "I got into a whole new section, off to the south," he said excitedly. "Very interesting, too. Obviously designed as a unit. There's this central pillar, you see, built out of some soft green stone, and surrounded by ten slightly smaller pillars, and there are these bridges—well, sort of ribbons of stone, they loop from the top of the big ones to the tops of the little ones. The pattern is repeated over and over. And below you've got sort of a labyrinth of waist-high stone walls. It will take me weeks to map them."

Holt was looking at the wall next to his head, where the count of the days was scored in the golden stone. "A year," he said. "A standard year, Jeff."

Sunderland looked at him curiously, then stood and began gathering up his maps. "How was your day?" he asked.

"We're not going to leave this place," Holt said, speaking more to himself than to Sunderland. "Never. It's over."

Now Sunderland stopped. "Stop it," the small fat man said. "I won't have it, Holt. Give up, and next thing you know you'll be drowning in amberlethe with Alaina and Takker. The stone city is the key. I've known that all along. Once we discover all its secrets, we can sell them to the foxmen and get out of this place. When I finish my mapping—"

Holt rolled over on his side to face Sunderland. "A year, Jeff, a year. You're not going to finish your mapping. You could map for ten years and still have covered only part of the stone city. And what about the tunnels? The levels beneath?"

Sunderland licked his lips nervously. "Beneath. Well. If I had the equipment on board the *Pegasus*, then—"

“You don't, and it doesn't work anyway. Nothing works on the stone city. That was why the Captain landed. The rules don't work down here.”

Sunderland shook his head and resumed his gathering up the maps. “The human mind can understand anything. Give me time, that's all, and I'll figure it all out. We could even figure out the Dan'lai and the ullies if Susie Benet was still here.” Susie Benet had been their contact specialist—a third-rate linguesp, but even a minor talent is better than none when dealing with alien minds.

“Susie Benet isn't here,” Holt said. His voice had a hard edge to it. He began to tick off names on his fingers. “Susie vanished with the Captain. Ditto Carlos. Irai suicided. Ian tried to shoot his way inside the windwalls and wound up on them. Det and Lana and Maje went down beneath, trying to find the Captain, and they vanished too. Davie Tillman sold himself as a Kresh egg host, so he's surely finished by now. Alaina and Takker-Rey are vegetables, useless, and we don't know what went on with the four aboard the *Pegasus*. That leaves us, Sunderland, you and me.” He smiled grimly. “You make maps, I steal from the worms, and nobody understands anything. We're finished. We'll die here in the stone city. We'll never see the stars again.”

He stopped as suddenly as he had started. It was a rare outburst for Holt; in general he was quiet, unexpressive, maybe a little repressed. Sunderland stood there, astonished, while Holt sagged back hopelessly into his sleep-web.

“Day after day after day,” Holt said. “And none of it means anything. You remember what Irai told us?”

“She was unstable,” Sunderland insisted. “She proved that beyond our wildest dreams.”

“She said we'd come too far,” Holt said, as if Sunderland had never spoken. “She said it was wrong to think that the whole universe operated by rules we could understand. You remember. She called it ‘sick, arrogant human folly.’ You remember, Jeff. That was how she talked. Like that. Sick, arrogant human folly.”

He laughed. “The crossworlds *almost* made sense, that was what fooled us. But if Irai was right, that would figure. After all, we're still only a little bit from the manrealm, right? Further in, maybe the rules change even more.”

“I don't like this kind of talk,” said Sunderland. “You're getting defeatist. Irai was sick. At the end, you know, she was going to ul-mennaleith prayer meetings, submitting herself to the ul-nayileith, that sort of thing. A mystic, that was what she became. A mystic.”

“She was wrong?” Holt asked.

“She was wrong,” Sunderland said firmly.

Holt looked at him again. “Then explain things, Jeff. Tell me how to get out of here. Tell me how it all makes sense.”

“The stone city,” Sunderland said. “Well, when I finish my maps—” He stopped suddenly. Holt was leaning back in his web again and not listening at all.

\* \* \* \*

It took him five years and six ships to move across the great star-flecked sphere the Damoosh claimed as their own and penetrate the border sector beyond. He consulted other, greater wisdompools as he went, and learned all he could, but always there were mysteries and surprises waiting on the world beyond this one. Not all the ships he served on were crewed by humans; man-ships seldom straggled in this far, so

Holt signed on with Damoosh and stray gethsoids and other, lesser mongrels. But still there were usually a few men on every port he touched, and he even began to hear rumors of a second human empire some five hundred years in toward the core, settled by a wandering generation ship and ruled from a glittering world called Prester. On Prester the cities floated on clouds, one withered Vessman told him. Holt believed that for a time until another crewmate said that Prester was really a single world-spanning city, kept alive by fleets of food freighters greater than anything the Federal Empire had built in the wars before the Collapse. The same man said it had not been a generation ship that had settled her at all—he proved that by showing how far a slow-light ship could get from Old Earth since the dawn of the interstellar age—but rather a squadron of Earth Imperials fleeing a Hrangan Mind. Holt stayed skeptical this time. When a woman from a grounded Cathadayn freighter insisted that Prester had been founded by Tomo and Walberg, and that Walberg ruled it still, he gave up on the whole idea.

But there were other legends, other stories, and they drew him on.

As they drew others.

On an airless world circling a blue-white star, in its single domed city, Holt met Alaina. She told him about the *Pegasus*.

“The Captain built her from scratch, you know, right here. He was trading, going in further than usual, like we all do”—she flashed an understanding smile, figuring that Holt too was a trading gambler out for the big find—“and he met a Dan’la. They’re further in.”

“I know,” Holt said.

“Well, maybe you don’t know what’s going *on* in there. The Captain said the Dan’lai have all but taken over the ullish stars—you’ve heard of the ullish stars? ... Good. Well, it’s because the ul-mennaleith haven’t resisted much, I gather, but also because of the Dan’lai jump-gun. It’s a new concept, I guess, and the Captain says it cuts travel time in half, or better. The standard drive warps the fabric of the space-time continuum, you know, to get ftl effects, and—”

“I’m a drive man,” Holt said curtly. But he was leaning forward as he said it, listening intently.

“Oh,” Alaina said, not rebuked in the least. “Well, the Dan’lai jump-gun does something else, shifts you into another continuum and then back again. Running it is entirely different. It’s partly psionic, and they put this ring around your head.”

“You *have* a jump-gun?” Holt interrupted.

She nodded. “The Captain melted down his old ship, just about, to build the *Pegasus*. With a jump-gun he bought from the Dan’lai. He’s collecting a crew now, and they’re training us.”

“Where are you going?” he said.

She laughed, lightly, and her bright green eyes seemed to flash. “Where else? In!”

\* \* \* \*

Holt woke at dawn, in silence, rose and dressed himself quickly, and traced his path backwards, past the quiet green pool and the endless alleys, out the Western Iris and through the city of the shipless. He walked under the wall of skeletons without an upward glance.

Inside the windwall, in the long corridor, he began to try the doors. The first four rattled and stayed shut. The fifth opened on an empty office. No Dan’la.

That was something new. Holt entered cautiously, peering around. No one, nothing, and no second door. He walked around the wide ullish desk and began to rifle it methodically, much as he looted the Cedran bubble-huts. Maybe he could find a field pass, a gun, something—anything to get him back to the *Pegasus*. If it was still sitting beyond the walls. Or maybe he could find a berth assignment.

The door slid open; a foxman stood there. He was indistinguishable from all the others. He barked, and Holt jumped away from the desk.

Swiftly the Dan'la circled around and seized the chair. "Thief!" he said. "Thief. I will shoot. You be shot. Yes." His teeth snapped.

"No," Holt said, edging toward the door. He could run if the Dan'la called others. "I came for a berth," he said inanely.

"Ah!" The foxman interlocked his hands. "Different. Well, Holt, who are you?"

Holt stood mute.

"A berth, a berth, Holt wants a berth," the Dan'la said in a squeaky singsong.

"Yesterday they said that a man-ship would be in next week," Holt said.

"No no no. I'm sorry. No man-ship will come. There will be no man-ship. Next week, yesterday, no time. You understand? And we have no berth. Ship is full. You never go on field with no berth."

Holt moved forward again, to the other side of the desk. "No ship next week?"

The foxman shook his head. "No ship. No ship. No man-ship."

"Something else, then. I'll crew for ullies, for Dan'lai, for Cedrans. I've told you. I know drive, I know your jump-guns. Remember? I have credentials."

The Dan'la tilted his head to one side. Did Holt remember the gesture? Was this a Dan'la he'd dealt with before? "Yes, but no berth."

Holt started for the door.

"Wait," the foxman commanded.

Holt turned.

"No man-ship next week," the Dan'la said. "No ship, no ship, no ship," he sang. Then he stopped singing. "Man-ship is *now*!"

Holt straightened. "*Now*?! You mean there's a man-ship on the field right now?"

The Dan'la nodded furiously.

"A berth!" Holt was frantic. "Get me a berth, damn you."

"Yes. Yes. A berth for you, for you a berth." The foxman touched something on the desk, a drawer slid open, and he took out a film of silver metal and a slim wand of blue plastic. "Your name?"

"Michael Holt," he answered.

"Oh." The foxman put down the wand, took the metal sheet and put it back in the drawer, and barked,

“No berth!”

“No berth?”

“No one can have two berths,” the Dan'la said.

“Two?”

The deskfox nodded. “Holt has a berth on *Pegasus*.”

Holt's hands were trembling. “Damn,” he said. “Damn.”

The Dan'la laughed. “Will you take berth?”

“On *Pegasus*?”

A nod.

“You'll let me through the walls, then? Out onto the field?”

The foxman nodded again. “Write Holt field pass.”

“Yes,” Holt said. “Yes.”

“Name?”

“Michael Holt.”

“Race?”

“Man.”

“Homeworld?”

“Ymir.”

There was a short silence. The Dan'la had been sitting there staring at Holt, his hands folded. Now he suddenly opened the drawer again, took out an ancient-looking piece of parchment that crumbled as he touched it, and picked up the wand again. “Name?” he asked.

They went through the whole thing again.

When the Dan'la had finished writing, he gave the paper to Holt. It flaked as he fingered it. He tried to be very careful. None of the scrawls made sense. “This will get me past the guards?” Holt said skeptically. “On the field? To the *Pegasus*?”

The Dan'la nodded. Holt turned and almost ran for the door.

“Wait,” the foxman cried.

Holt froze, and spun. “What?” he said between his teeth, and it was almost a snarl of rage.

“Technical thing.”

“Yes?”

“Field pass, to be good, must be signed.” The Dan'la flashed on its toothy smile. “Signed, yes yes, signed



by your captain.”

There was no noise. Holt's hand tightened spasmodically around the slip of yellow paper, and the pieces fluttered stiffly to the floor. Then, swift and wordless, he was on him.

The Dan'la had time for only one brief bark before Holt had him by the throat. The delicate six-fingered hands clawed air, helplessly. Holt twisted, and the neck snapped. He was holding a bundle of limp reddish fur.

He stood there for a long time, his hands locked, his teeth clenched. Then slowly he released his grip and the Dan'la corpse tumbled backward, toppling the chair.

In Holt's eyes, a picture of the windwall flashed briefly.

He ran.

\* \* \* \*

The *Pegasus* had standard drives too, in case the jump-gun failed; the walls of the room were the familiar blend of naked metal and computer consoles. But the center was filled by the Dan'lai jump-gun: a long cylinder of metallic glass, thick around as a man, mounted on an instrument panel. The cylinder was half full of a sluggish liquid that changed color abruptly each time a pulse of energy was run through the tank. Around it were seats for four jump-men, two on a side. Holt and Alaina sat on one flank, opposite tall blond Irai and Ian MacDonald; each of them wore a hollow glass crown full of the same liquid that sloshed in the gun cylinder.

Carlos Villareal was behind Holt, at the main console, draining data from the ship's computer. The jumps were already planned. They were going to see the ullish stars, the Captain had decided. And Cedris and Huul the Golden, and points further in. And maybe even Prester and the core.

The first stop was a transit point named Grayrest (clearly, by the name, some other men had gone there once—the star was on the charts). The Captain had heard a story of a stone city older than time.

Beyond the atmosphere the nukes cut off, and Villareal gave the order. “Coordinates are in, navigation is ready,” he said, his voice a little less sure than usual; the whole procedure was so new. “Jump.”

They switched on the Dan'lai jump-gun.

*darkness flickering with colors and a thousand whirling stars and Holt was in the middle all alone but no! there was Alaina and there someone else and all of them joined and the chaos whirled around them and great gray waves crashed over their heads and faces appeared ringed with fire laughing and dissolving and pain pain pain and they were lost and nothing was solid and eons passed and no Holt saw something burning calling pulling the core the core and there out from it Grayrest but then it was gone and somehow Holt brought it back and he yelled to Alaina and she grabbed for it too and MacDonald and Irai and they PULLED*

They were sitting before the jump-gun again, and Holt was suddenly conscious of a pain in his wrist, and he looked down and saw that someone had taped an i.v. needle into him. Alaina was plugged in too, and the others, Ian and Irai. There was no sign of Villareal.

The door slid open and Sunderland stood there smiling at them and blinking. “Thank God!” the chubby navigator said. “You've been out for three months. I thought we were finished.”

Holt took the glass crown from his head and saw that there was only a thin film of liquid left. Then he noticed that the jump cylinder was almost empty as well. “Three months?”

Sunderland shuddered. “It was horrible. There was nothing outside, *nothing*, and we couldn't rouse you. Villareal had to play nursemaid. If it hadn't been for the Captain, I don't know what would have happened. I know what the foxman said, but I wasn't sure you could ever pull us out of—of whatever we were.”

“Are we there?” MacDonald demanded.

Sunderland went around the jump-gun to Villareal's console and hooked it in to the ship's viewscreen. In a field of black, a small yellow sun was burning. And a cold gray orb filled the screen.

“Grayrest,” Sunderland said. “I've taken readings. We're there. The Captain has already opened a beam to them. The Dan'lai seem to run things, and they've cleared us to land. The time checks, too; three months subjective, three months objective, as near as we can figure.”

“And by standard drive?” Holt said. “The same trip by standard drive?”

“We did even better than the Dan'lai promised,” Sunderland said. “Grayrest is a good year and a half in from where we were.”

\* \* \* \*

It was too early; there was too great a chance that the Cedrans might not be comatose yet. But Holt had to take the risk. He smashed his way into the first bubble-hut he found and looted it completely, ripping things apart with frantic haste. The residents, luckily, were torpid sleep-balls.

Out on the main thoroughfare, he ignored the Dan'lai merchants, half afraid he would confront the same foxman he had just killed. Instead he found a stall tended by a heavy blind Linkellar, its huge eyes like rolling balls of pus. The creature still cheated him, somehow. But he traded all that he had taken for an eggshell-shaped helmet of transparent blue and a working laser. The laser startled him; it was a twin for the one MacDonald had carried, even down to the Finnegan crest. But it worked, and that was all that mattered.

The crowds were assembling for the daily shuffle up and down the ways of the city of the shipless. Holt pushed through them savagely, toward the Western Iris, and broke into a measured jog when he reached the empty alleys of the stone city.

Sunderland was gone; out mapping. Holt took one of his markers and wrote across a map; KILLED A FOX. MUST HIDE. I'M GOING DOWN INTO THE STONE CITY. SAFE THERE. Then he took all the food that was left, a good two weeks' supply, more if he starved himself. He filled a pack with it, strapped it on, and left. The laser was snug in his pocket, the helmet tucked under his arm.

The nearest underway was only a few blocks away; a great corkscrew that descended into the earth from the center of a nexus. Holt and Sunderland had often gone to the first level, as far as the light reached. Even there it was dim, gloomy, stuffy; a network of tunnels as intricate as the alleys above had branched off in every direction. Many of them slanted downward. And of course the corkscrew went further down, with more branchings, growing darker and more still with every turn. No one went beyond the first level; those that did—like the Captain—never came back. They had heard stories about how deep the stone city went, but there was no way to check them out; the instruments they had taken from *Pegasus* had never worked on the crossworlds.

At the bottom of the first full turn, the first level, Holt stopped and put on the pale blue helmet. It was a tight fit; the front of it pressed against the edge of his nose and the sides squeezed his head uncomfortably. Clearly it had been built for an ul-mennalei. But it would do; there was a hole around his mouth, so he could talk and breathe.

He waited a moment while his body heat was absorbed by the helmet. Shortly it began to give off a somber blue light. Holt continued down the corkscrew, into the darkness.

Around and around the underway curved, with other tunnels branching off at every turning; Holt kept on and soon lost track of the levels he had come. Outside his small circle of light there was only pitch-black and silence and still hot air that was increasingly difficult to breathe. But fear was driving him now, and he did not slow. The surface of the stone city was deserted, but not entirely so; the Dan'lai entered when they had to. Only down here would he be safe. He would stay on the corkscrew itself, he vowed; if he did not wander he could not get lost. That was what happened to the Captain and the others, he was sure; they'd left the underway, gone off into the side tunnels, and had starved to death before they could find their way back. But not Holt. In two weeks or so he could come up and get food from Sunderland, perhaps.

For what seemed hours he walked down the twisting ramp, past endless walls of featureless gray stone tinted blue by his helmet, past a thousand gaping holes that ran to the sides and up and down, each calling to him with a wide black mouth. The air grew steadily warmer; soon Holt was breathing heavily. Nothing around him but stone, yet the tunnels seemed rank and thick. He ignored it.

After a time Holt reached a place where the corkscrew ended; a triple fork confronted him, three arched doorways and three narrow stairs, each descending sharply in a different direction, each curving so that Holt could see only a few meters into the dark. By then his feet were sore. He sat and removed his boots and took out a tube of smoked meat to chew on.

Darkness all around him; without his footsteps echoing heavily, there was no sound. Unless. He listened carefully. Yes. He heard something, dim and far-off. A rumble, sort of. He chewed on his meat and listened even harder and after a long while decided the sounds were coming from the left-hand staircase.

When the food was gone, he licked his fingers and pulled on his boots and rose. Laser in hand, he slowly started down the stair as quietly as he could manage.

The stair too was a spiral; a tighter corkscrew than the ramp, without branchings and very narrow. He barely had room to turn around, but at least there was no chance of getting lost.

The sound got steadily louder as he descended, and before long Holt realized that it was not a rumble after all, but more a howl. Then, later, it changed again. He could barely make it out. Moans and barking.

The stairway made a sharp turn. Holt followed it and stopped suddenly.

He was standing in a window in an oddly shaped gray stone building, looking out over the stone city. It was night, and a tapestry of stars filled the sky. Below, near an octagonal pool, six Dan'lai surrounded a Cedran. They were laughing, quick barking laughs full of rage, and they were chattering to each other and clawing at the Cedran whenever it tried to move. It stood above them trapped in the circle, confused and moaning, swaying back and forth. The huge violet eyes glowed brightly, and the fighting-claws waved.

One of the Dan'lai had something. He unfolded it slowly; a long jag-toothed knife. A second appeared, a third; all the foxmen had them. They laughed to each other. One of them darted in at the Cedran from behind, and the silvered blade flashed, and Holt saw black ichor ooze slowly from a long cut in the milk-white Cedran flesh.

There was a blood-curdling low moan and the worm turned slowly as the Dan'la danced back, and its fighting-claws moved quicker than Holt would have believed. The Dan'la with the dripping black knife was lifted, kicking, into the air. He barked furiously, and then the claw snapped together, and the foxman

fell in two pieces to the ground. But the others closed in, laughing, and their knives wove patterns and the Cedran's moan became a screech. It lashed out with its claws and a second Dan'la was knocked headless into the waters, but by then two others were cutting off its thrashing tentacles and yet another had driven his blade hilt-deep into the swaying wormlike torso. All the foxmen were wildly excited; Holt could not hear the Cedran over their frantic barking.

He lifted his laser, took aim on the nearest Dan'la, and pushed the firing stud. Angry red light spurted.

A curtain dropped across the window, blocking the view. Holt reached out and yanked it aside. Behind it was a low-roofed chamber, with a dozen level tunnels leading off in all directions. No Dan'lai, no Cedran. He was far beneath the city. The only light was the blue glow of his helmet.

Slowly, silently, Holt walked to the center of the chamber. Half of the tunnels, he saw, were bricked in. Others were dead black holes. But from one, a blast of cool air was flowing. He followed it a long way in darkness until at last it opened on a long gallery full of glowing red mist, like droplets of fire. The hall stretched away to left and right as far as Holt could see, high-ceilinged and straight; the tunnel that had led him here was only one of many. Others—each a different size and shape, all as black as death—lined the walls.

Holt took one step into the soft red fog, then turned and burned a mark into the stone floor of the tunnel behind him. He began walking down the hall, past the endless rows of tunnel mouths. The mist was thick but easy to see through, and Holt saw that the whole vast gallery was empty—at least to the limits of his vision. But he could not see either end, and his footsteps made no sound.

He walked a long time, almost in a trance, somehow forgetting to be afraid. Then, briefly, a white light surged from a portal far ahead. Holt began to run, but the glow had faded before he covered half the distance to the tunnel. Still something called him on.

The tunnel mouth was a high arch full of night when Holt entered. A few meters of darkness, and a door; he stopped.

The arch opened on a high bank of snow and a forest of iron gray trees linked by fragile webs of ice, so delicate that they would melt and shatter at a breath. No leaves, but hardy blue flowers peeked from the wind-crannies beneath every limb. The stars blazed in the frigid blackness above. And, sitting high on the horizon, Holt saw the wooden stockade and stone-fairy parapets of the rambling twisted Old House.

He paused for a long time, watching, remembering. The cold wind stirred briefly, blowing a flurry of snow in through the door, and Holt shivered in the blast. Then he turned and went back to the hall of the red mist.

Sunderland was waiting for him where tunnel met gallery, half wrapped in the sound-sucking fog. "Mike!" he said, talking normally enough, but all that Holt heard was a whisper. "You've got to come back. We need you, Mike. I can't map without you to get food for me, and Alaina and Takker.... You must come back!"

Holt shook his head. The mists thickened and whirled, and Sunderland's portly figure was draped and blurred until all Holt could see was the heavy outline. Then the air cleared, and it was not Sunderland at all. It was the Shed-boss. The creature stood silently, the white tentacles trembling on the bladder atop its torso. It waited. Holt waited.

Across the gallery, sudden light woke dimly in a tunnel. Then the two that flanked it began to glow, and then the two beyond that. Holt glanced right, then left; on both sides of the gallery, the silent waves raced from him until all the portals shone—here a dim red, here a flood of blue-white, here a friendly homesun

yellow.

Ponderously the Shed-boss turned and began to walk down the hall. The rolls of blue-black fat bounced and jiggled as it went along, but the mists leached away the musky smell. Holt followed it, his laser still in his hand.

The ceiling rose higher and higher, and Holt saw that the doorways were growing larger. As he watched, a craggy mottled being much like the Shed-boss came out of one tunnel, crossed the hall, and entered another.

They stopped before a tunnel mouth, round and black and twice as tall as Holt. The Shed-boss waited. Holt, laser at ready, entered. He stood before another window, or perhaps a viewscreen; on the far side of the round crystal port, chaos swirled and screamed. He watched it briefly, and just as his head was starting to hurt, the swirling view solidified. If you could call it solid. Beyond the port, four Dan'lai sat with jump-gun tubes around their brows and a cylinder before them. Except—except—the picture was blurred. Ghosts, there were ghosts, second images that almost overlapped the first, but not quite, not completely. And then Holt saw a third image, and a fourth, and suddenly the picture *cracked* and it was as though he was looking into an infinite array of mirrors. Long rows of Dan'lai sat on top of each other, blurring into one another, growing smaller and smaller until they dwindled into nothingness. In unison—no, no, *almost* in unison (for here one image did not move with his reflections, and here another fumbled)—they removed the drained jump-gun tubes and looked at each other and began to laugh. Wild, high barking laughs; they laughed and laughed and laughed and Holt watched as the fires of madness burned in their eyes, and the foxmen all (no, *almost* all) hunched their slim shoulders and seemed more feral and animal than he had ever seen them.

He left. Back in the hall, the Shed-boss still stood patiently. Holt followed again.

There were others in the hall now; Holt saw them faintly, scurrying back and forth through the reddish mist. Creatures like the Shed-boss seemed to dominate, but they were not alone. Holt glimpsed a single Dan'la, lost and frightened; the foxman kept stumbling into walls. And there were things part-angel and part-dragonfly that slid silently past overhead, and something tall and thin surrounded by flickering veils of light, and other presences that he felt as much as saw. Frequently he saw the bright-skinned striders with their gorgeous hues and high collars of bone and flesh, and always slender, sensuous animals loped at their heels, moving with fluid grace on four legs. The animals had soft gray skins and liquid eyes and strangely sentient faces.

Then he thought he spied a man; dark and very dignified, in ship's uniform and cap. Holt strained after the vision and ran toward it, but the mists confused him, bright and glowing as they were, and he lost the sight. When he looked around again, the Shed-boss was gone too.

He tried the nearest tunnel. It was a doorway, like the first; beyond was a mountain ledge overlooking a hard arid land, a plain of baked brick broken by a great crevasse. A city stood in the center of the desolation, its walls chalk white, its buildings all right angles. It was quite dead, but Holt still knew it, somehow. Often Cain narKarmian had told him how the Hrangans build their cities, in the war-torn reaches between Old Earth and the Fringe.

Hesitant, Holt extended a hand past the door frame, and withdrew it quickly. Beyond the arch was an oven; it was not a viewscreen, no more than the sight of Ymir had been.

Back in the gallery he paused and tried to understand. The hall went on and on in both directions, and beings like none he had ever seen drifted past in the mists, death silent, barely noticing the others. The Captain was down here, he knew, and Villareal and Susie Benet and maybe the others—or—or perhaps

they *had* been down here, and now they were elsewhere. Perhaps they too had seen their homes calling to them through a stone doorway, and perhaps they had followed and not returned. Once beyond the arches, Holt wondered, how could you come back?

The Dan'la came into sight again, crawling now, and Holt saw that he was very old. The way he fumbled made it clear that he was quite blind, and yet, and yet his eyes *looked* good enough. Then Holt began to watch the others, and finally to follow them. Many went out through the doorways, and they did indeed walk off into the landscapes beyond. And the *landscapes* ... he watched the ullish worlds in all their weary splendor, as the ul-mennaleith glided to their worships ... he saw the starless night of Darkdawn, high atop the Fringe, and the darkling dreamers wandering beneath ... and Huul the Golden (real after all, though less than he expected) ... and the ghost ships flitting out from the core and the screechers of the black worlds in the Far Arm and the ancient races that had locked their stars in spheres and a thousand worlds undreamed of.

Soon he stopped following the quiet travelers and began to wander on his own, and then he found that the views beyond the doors could change. As he stood before a square gate that opened on the plains of ai-Emerel, he thought for a moment of Old Cain, who had indeed shipped a long ways, but not quite far enough. The Emereli towers were before him, and Holt wished to see them closer, and suddenly the doorway opened onto one. Then the Shed-boss was at his elbow, materializing as abruptly as ever in the Shed, and Holt glanced over into the faceless face. Then he put away the laser and removed his helmet (it had ceased to glow, oddly—why hadn't he noticed that?) and stepped forward.

He was on a balcony, cold wind stroking his face, black Emereli metal behind and an orange sunset before him. Across the horizon the other towers stood, and Holt knew that each was a city of a million; but from here, they were only tall dark needles.

A world. Cain's world. Yet it would have changed a lot since Cain had last seen it, some two hundred years ago. He wondered how. No matter; he would soon find out.

As he turned to go inside, he promised himself that soon he would go back, to find Sunderland and Alaina and Takker-Rey. For them, perhaps, it would be all darkness and fear below, but Holt could guide them home. Yes, he would do that. But not right now. He wanted to see ai-Emerel first, and Old Earth, and the Altered Men of Prometheus. Yes.

But later he would go back. Later. In a little bit.

\* \* \* \*

Time moves slowly in the stone city; more slowly down below where the webs of spacetime were knotted by the Builders. But still it moves, inexorably. The great gray buildings are all tumbled now, the mushroom tower fallen, the pyramids blown dust. Of the ullish windwalls not a trace remains, and no ship has landed for millennia. The ul-mennaleith grow few and strangely diffident and walk with armored hoppers at their heels, the Dan'lai have disintegrated into violent anarchy after a thousand years of jump-guns, the Kresh are gone, the Linkellars are enslaved, and the ghost ships still keep silent. Outwards, the Damoosh are a dying race, though the wisdompools live on and ponder, waiting for questions that no longer come. New races walk on tired worlds; old ones grow and change. No man has reached the core.

The crossworlds sun grows dim.

In empty tunnels beneath the ruins, Holt walks from star to star.

*Chicago*

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