

Arrival and departure are alike: only the force of will gives direction to time.

*—The Book of Causes

ALTON TECHNIKSSON went to the Morning Gate of Cirque every dawn. He arrived while the stars were still awash in the sky; he sat comfortably in the cold dust at the base of the Gate and watched as the sun rose over the ancient angular towers of the spaceport to the east, lighting the day and sending the stars away.

So when the foreigner from Aldebaran arrived, Alton saw the slow descent of the shuttle-ship, its teardrop shape haloed in the light of morning. He thought nothing about it: the robot shuttle came every morning, but it was usually empty. Earth had become a backwater planet in these late centuries; few people bothered to make the long journey from the teeming planet-systems of the galaxy's core.

Alton breathed cool dawn air and watched as the sun, a red oval on the horizon, grew bright and round as it moved up into the cloudless sky. From time to time he blinked his eyes to adjust his fight-filters; he had worn them for fifty years, but lately they had begun to irritate his eyes.

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After a time he saw a low moving shape approaching from the spaceport, seeming to flow along the grassed-over path in its own shadow. It's not a human, he thought without surprise. The visitors who came to Cirque from offplanet were seldom Earth's own people.

As the foreigner came near, Alton saw that it was a millipede, three meters long, with fur glowing golden on its back. Alton had seen millipedes before; he had met many races of the galaxy in his century and a half of life. He watched calmly as the foreigner flowed toward him.

It stopped a few meters in front of him and curled its body upward to stand on its hind legs. Its eyes were large, dark and liquid; to keep its balance it moved its forward limbs in the air. A square green leather pouch was strapped to the forward part of its body like a chest-pack.

"I must find the River Fundament," the foreigner said.

Alton saw from the light tan color of its fur that it was comparatively young. "You want the Whiter Gate," he said. He gestured with his left arm. "It enters the city from the north—that way."

The foreigner glanced in the direction indicated and saw a path paved with worn flagstones running parallel to the edges of the cultivated fields of Cirque's outer edge.

"The River Fundament flows into your abyss?" it asked.

"Sure," said Alton. "We don't have any other river. You can get a boat at the Whiter Gate that will take you all the way to the Final Cataract."

The foreigner regarded him silently for a moment. Its black shadow stretched toward Alton across packed earth, and he became momentarily fascinated by the exaggerated undulations of the millipede's shadow-feet waving in the air.

"The Final Cataract is an area of many vines and low trees?" the millipede asked. "It is near the Cathedral of the Five Elements?"

"That's it," Alton said.

"I shall go to the Whiter Gate, as you say." The

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foreigner lowered its long body to the ground and resumed its smooth, flowing movement, heading northward along the flagstone path.

Belatedly, Alton's curiosity stirred. "What news from the inner worlds?" he asked. Cirque was out of touch with the progress of history, human and otherwise.

The millipede paused, lifting and curling its body to gaze back at Alton. "Nothing of note is happening elsewhere," it said. "Human trade thrives and expands as always. There is a limited war in the Cirilian system; it will end soon and be forgotten. Neo-Incan auras are popular on the human worlds. A man who has taken the name Hualpa Yupanqui grows rich and will contend for the position of Coordinator. Stellar inertia is the concern of inner-worlds science; discussion of its future has led to much controversy, but to no general agreement."

"So you've come to Earth for lack of anything better," Alton concluded.

"No. I come to observe the wonderful emergence from your Abyss," said the millipede. It gazed quietly at Alton for a moment, great dark eyes reflecting the morning sun. "I am pleased that I have arrived for this day."

Alton shrugged. "It's like all days in Cirque. You'll find we have a peaceful city; all our visitors say it's

beautiful. But Cirque is a city of centuries, not days."

"Yes," said the foreigner. "And this day is the heart of its century; Cirque comes to new life today."

Alton suppressed a sigh. "Each day is the heart of all time," he said, repeating a saying familiar in Cirque.

He wished now that he had not stopped the millipede from leaving; he would prefer to contemplate the sun rather than trade banalities with this foreigner.

The millipede seemed to sense his dismissal. "I thank you for your words," it said. It lowered its forebody to the ground, then lifted it again. "You would do well to watch the broadcasts today," it said.

"I sleep during the day," said Alton.

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The millipede blinked its dark eyes, furred lids meeting for just a moment. "How strange that a human of Cirque should sleep through this day."

"No stranger than sleeping yesterday or tomorrow," said Alton. "Enjoy your visit."

The foreigner smiled, its tiny mouth curling up at the edges. "I shall enjoy." It lowered its forebody and re-sumed its flowing gait northward along the path.

Alton watched its departure for a few moments, then returned his gaze to the red morning sun.

"Foreigners," he muttered.

The people of Cirque gained their news of each day from the civic mind-broadcasts, telepathically sharing whatever experiences the all-seeing monitor of the city chose to share with them. Thus, when the millipede arrived, those people who were tuned to the broadcasts experienced a view from the base of the Morning Gate and saw the millipede come flowing out of the low sun across the gold-washed plain. They saw the foreigner as it approached the Gate, paused, and said, "I must find the River Fundament." And they heard themselves say, "You want the Winter Gate." And all the rest of that conversation.

Nikki experienced this encounter during breakfast, when she was still NikM-One. This was her basic person-ality, not yet splintered by the capsule she had taken with her mango juice. Nikki was blonde and fat, and even in the cool of morning she itched with sweat. When the capsule took effect she would become Nikki-Two, with the heart of a gamin; then later Nikki-Three, the self-de-stroyer; and Nikki-Four, the singer of free space. By night-fall, if she gave herself sufficiently to her different personalities, she would be AH-Nikki, serene and in-tegrated as only the playing out of her conflicting drives could make her.

Drug-induced parasanity was the rage in Cirque this season.

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"Foreigners," she muttered to herself as she spooned watermelon marmalade onto her bread.

"What?" said Gregorian, who had just come from morning ablution. He was dark-haired and paranoid, a lean man with piercing eyes; he liked to dress, as now, in black body-suits tight at the wrists and ankles. He and Nikki had lived together through the winter just past.

"The broadcast," said Nikki, disengaging her mind. "Someone from Aldebaran, I think, has just arrived on the shuttle."

"Oh," said Gregorian, not greatly impressed. "Have you seen my sketchbook? I had it last night, by the fire."

"Over there." NikM waved a hand toward his work-bench. It was a wide table cluttered with scraps of wood of many shapes, sticks and blocks and cylindrical bores piled haphazardly. "I thought you'd want to get to work right away."

"Good." Gregorian lowered himself to sit beside her at the breakfast place. He ground salt onto his marmalade and took a bite. "This is going to be a tough day," he said glumly.

Nikki munched her bread and said, "Mm?"

Gregorian glanced warningly at her. "Don't ask."

"But I didn't," Nikki protested.

Gregorian continued to look at her, his eyes narrow. "All right, I'll tell you. Do you know the Cathedral of the Five Elements?"

Nikki brushed crumbs from her chin. "The temple at the Final Cataract? It has a gigantic spire."

"That's not a spire," Gregorian said. "It's a chimney."

"Oh," said Nikki. She wondered if she might change personalities before the heat of the day became great enough to make her start scratching. Then: "Oh!" she exclaimed, understanding.

"Yes," said Gregorian. "They've commissioned a fire for their services tonight."

Gregorian was a fire sculptor. He fashioned fires of

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wood, plastics and chemicals, laying his materials in pat-terns that determined the shapes and colors of the blaze they would produce. He was an artist who sculpted in flames, and already, after only one season in Cirque, he was considered one of the most promising new visionaries of the city.

"You took the job?" Nikki asked hesitantly.

"I had to. We can't go on living the way we do without commissions, Nikki. Wood is expensive this season. I can't work in synthetics all my life; they don't have the grain, the texture. I have to take a job like this just to keep growing."

Nikki regarded him with trepidation. Gregorian had always said he would never work for the temples as so many other fire sculptors did; he didn't believe in turning his art to religious purpose. Yet here at the very beginning of a new season he had taken a temple commission. Was it because of her? She decided not to have another slice of bread; carefully she wrapped the remainder of their loaf and replaced it in its wall niche.

"Do you ... have you decided what kind of fire you're going to make?" she asked.

Gregorian scowled and turned away from her, looking at the materials on his workbench. At length he said, "It will have to be something dull, something tame. They don't really want art; they only want pretty colors to focus on. The temples are even more conservative than you are."

Nikki smiled nervously, hoping she wouldn't have to argue about art with Gregorian so early in the day. "I've taken a capsule, Gregor. Maybe I'll dance for you this morning. Would you like that? You said last time that I inspired you."

He regarded her with distaste. "You're fatter than ever. If you dance, you'll look like a pregnant elephant." She flushed, and with the rush of blood she felt the first change coming over her. Her muscles were jumping and

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Her head was light. Tin on a diet," she said faintly.

"You shouldn't diet, you should fast," Gregorian said, and rose from the table. He went to his workbench, prowled nervously around it and abruptly turned back to her. "I wish you'd go out today," he said.

The room was whirling, a series of red and black strobes flashing through her consciousness. She felt sick. "Gregor—"

"Just go out," he said wearily. He sat heavily on the floor beside his bench and stared morosely at the blank page of his sketchbook. Then he looked up at her, and his expression softened. "Really, I've got to work today."

Nikki-One relaxed into her maelstrom, surrendering to the new personality that was emerging. She let it come and gradually felt the whirling lessen, saw the light in the room clear and stabilize. Her sick fears faded, a buoyant elation took hold of her, and she opened her eyes to a room suddenly sharp with detail and happiness. She was NikM-Two.

"Oh, Gregor, don't be a block," she said softly, rising from the table and gliding toward him. His back was to her, his sketchbook propped on his knees. She came up behind him and touched him gently under the ears.

"Can't we go outside just for a while?" she asked. "We could go look for the foreigner."

He said, "Stop it, Nikki. I told you—"

"I'm NikM-Two," she said, running fingertips down his chest.

He pushed her hands away. "I said stop! I don't care who you are."

"Yes you do," she said, smiling softly, remembering. She lay down on the floor next to him. "If we must stay inside—"

He looked at her with exasperation. "I told you I have to work. It doesn't matter what little piece of yourself you've opened up to use on me. I've only got until tonight to finish this job. Now please don't get in my way!"

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She lay back and stretched her body, thrusting her full breasts into the clearness of the air. The room had become so silent, each tiny sound distinct, the fragrance of her own body warm and comforting. "Gregor," she said again. "I'm NikM-Two."

He sighed impatiently. "No you're not. Nikki-Two doesn't exist. Look at yourself; you're three stones fat—do you really think a little capsule can make you someone else?"

"But it has," she said matter-of-factly. "Come on, Gregor, it's morning, it's a new day, let's go outside and—"

He turned away from her, picked up his stylus very deliberately and began to sketch free-form patterns in his book. She saw the muscles of his upper back become taut with gathering anger.

"Gregor..."

He didn't answer. He stared at the lines on the pad.

Nikki-Two rolled over and got to her feet with a light motion. She felt the fullness of her body as an ocean swell. She smiled softly.

"So I don't exist?" she said. "Now who's the conservative, Gregor?"

He dropped his sketchbook into his lap, sighing. "All right, Nikki-Two, you exist. Science is wonderful. But I've got to work; if you want to go out, go ahead. Go see the foreigner; see what tales he has from Aldebaran. Tell me all about it this evening."

Nikki threw a light shawl over her shoulders. "I'll be gone by this afternoon, you know. You'll have to hear about it from Nikki-Three, maybe. Or Four, if you're lucky."

He smiled faintly, picking up his sketchbook again. "Some gamble—either a catatonic or a manic loudmouth. Do you really have all those women in you?"

"Nikki-One has. And don't feel so sorry for yourself; you know you're crazy about Four." She went to the

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door, opened it and paused. She turned back to him. "Do you love her more than me, Gregor?"

He threw up his hands in exasperation. "Go! Go out! I can't deal with someone who's jealous of herself!"

Nikki-Two laughed; she waved and went out the door.

The River Fundament entered Cirque from the foothills to the north; it flowed quietly through neighborhoods of low family dwellings where weather vanes poked inquisitively into the morning sun, then it reached the First Cataract and plunged fifty meters into a bouldered gorge. Below the Cataract it rushed frothing down its narrowed channel, while on both sides the city grew higher, walls rising ten or twelve stories from the river's banks. Religious signs of a hundred sects adorned these building walls; concentric circles for the Centrists, merging patterns of color for the Universalists, crosses for the Christians. On the balconies, people gathered over breakfast and called to one another.

The center-city began at the First Cataract; below this point were shops and places of business and the signs of tradesmen. Traffic was increasing in the streets: people hurrying by on foot or unicycle, electric carts rolling silently with passengers already filling their backbeds. Plastic tires bumped over stones, and voices filled the air, shouts of greeting and advertisement. The streets smelled fresh with the dampness of morning.

A few kilometers farther downstream, the city's build-ings rose to heights of twenty stories. These were dwelling units, fantastic buildings of disc-shaped modules in many colors, looking like carelessly stacked poker chips. They were called the Apprentice Quarters from a time generations ago when youths had been required by ordinance to live there till they could afford to buy individual homes outside center-city ... or farther inside center-city, in the case of those rare young people who became rich early. Many youths continued to live in the Apprentice Quarters

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all their lives, so now nearly a quarter of the population of these crowded modular buildings was over a hundred years old.

The rich lived inside the circle of the Apprentice Quarters. Buildings here were lower, sprawling outward on the ground level in neo-medieval styles; there were courtyards and gardens and the green of oak, manzanita, laurel and plum trees. The river flowed slowly through open fields, winding now as if hesitant to reach its end. Walled villas appeared; private windmills rose behind the walls, lazily turning bright-colored vanes in the morning breezes.

The River Fundament wound its way inevitably to its destination: six kilometers inside the ring of Apprentice Quarters, the slowly running waters reached the Edge and plunged into space.

This was the center, the focal point of the city: the Abyss, a vast chasm around which the city had been built. Nearly ten kilometers across, the Abyss was edged with sheer cliffs that dropped into darkness; in the center of the Abyss was only air. It was a gigantic shaft plunging into the earth, bottomless in the memory of humankind, a limitless primal mystery of nature. The River Fundament ended here, emptying into the all-receiving darkness of the Abyss's depth.

No one knew what had caused the Abyss. Since the earliest records of history, stretching back into ancient wars, the Abyss had been here. Scientists theorized about a massive settling in the Earth's crust, a time when nearly a hundred kilometers of land had plunged into the honey-combed spaces of the planet's interior. Perhaps in an earth tremor, perhaps in a bombardment, or perhaps from the sheer weight of millennia. But few believed the scientists; Cirque was a religious city, and the dogmas of each temple had its believers.

There were hundreds of temples in Cirque, each with its own conception of the Abyss. But all saw it as a super-

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natural manifestation, and all believed it was a key to human salvation. Those Christian sects that practiced Confession said that confessed sins were cast into the all-absorbing darkness of the Abyss, and this dogma was common to most of the temples of Cirque in one way or another. The Abyss was a gigantic receiver of all that was dark and evil in human nature, a deep force that drew to itself the hatreds, fears and pettinesses of all people.

The Abyss was also used as a dumping place for the city's garbage.

It had been used in this way since time immemorial. Anthropologists claimed that this was what lay behind

the religious practices of expiation, that it had been a short step from dumping physical wastes into the chasm to seeing it as the receiver of sins. Some of the garbage contractors presented themselves as quasi-religious functionaries, claiming that their services were spiritual as well as sanitary.

The main dumping place of Cirque was on the North Edge near the Final Cataract of the River Fundament, just two kilometers across the river from the Cathedral of the Five Elements.

"Something interesting is happening in the city," said Jamie Halle as he gazed dreamily from his breakfast verandah across the great open space of the Abyss. Far across the chasm, the irregular towers of the Eastern Apprentice Quarters stood stark and black against the morning sun. The shadowed precipices of the East Edge, nine kilometers away, reached downward into darkness.

Gloriana Crest hoisted her willowy body onto the wall of the verandah and looked at him expectantly. "Oh? What could be interesting anywhere but on the Edge?"

Jamie smiled. "Very little, ordinarily; if city life were more interesting, I might live there rather than pay for the upkeep of this estate. But it seems that today the city has a visitor from afar."

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"From afar?" she said. "How far? From the sleepy headwaters of Fundament? From beyond the mountains? Or from the Moon?"

Jamie didn't mind her mocking him; he indulged in no illusions of self-importance. He was a hereditary mining engineer, inheritor of a vast fund of knowledge that had been expensively encoded in his family's genetic pattern many generations past. But the knowledge was useless now, Earth's mineral riches having been played out long since. He was fortunate that his family's expertise had produced the wealth to allow him to live in a ten-acre villa on the West Edge.

Jamie said, "I tuned to the broadcast for a while. There's a foreigner in the city—from Aldebaran, probably. It's not human."

Gloriana raised her eyebrows; the expression was dramatic, since she kept her skin fashionably pale to set off her short-cropped black hair. "Well, by all means you must invite this creature to go soaring with us. You do have room for two passengers in your glider, you know." "Yes, but not if one of them is a millipede. Must be over three meters long."

"A millipede!" There was real excitement in her voice. "I've never seen one! Where is she? Did you see her? Yes, of course you did. Was that what happened to the man at the Morning Gate? I left that broadcast while he was staring at the sun."

Jamie leaned his elbows on the balcony next to her, looking out into the vast chasm. He was twenty-two years old, a slender young man with sun-bleached blond hair and startlingly blue eyes. "I don't know if it's female or male. Not all people are divided into sexes, you know. The ones who aren't are probably saner." She pouted mockingly at him. "Oh, Jamie, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings last night. I have things on my mind, you know—you people with genetic money think bed-play is the only important thing in life. But I have to guard

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the whole city against transgressions of laws I don't even believe in. Do you think that's easy?"

He frowned, pulling his devolved-sabertooth coat closer around his neck to protect him against the chill of morning. "I just wish you'd let me help with whatever it is that's bothering you. Gioriana, we've been together for two years—I wish you'd talk to me more."

"It's my job, I told you." She stretched exaggeratedly, her widely spaced breasts rising to swell the green wool dress she wore. Shaking her hair around her ears, she affected a bright smile and said wonderingly, "A millipede from Aldebaran! Oh, I wish I'd kept tuned in! I have such a short attention span. Do you think I'm frivolous, Jamie? Sometimes I think I should apply myself more."

Jamie knew she was anything but frivolous. Just twenty-five, Gioriana Crest was the head of the city Guard officers. She had the intelligence and focus of a worldly saint, and she liked to lull people by behaving flightily. He had been fooled at first.

"If you applied yourself any more, you'd own the Abyss," he said. "I don't even know why you agreed to come flying with me today—don't you have some new set of laws to write or something?"

She shrugged. "Too many laws only confuse people. What I'd like to do is get rid of some laws that have been on record since before the South Edge was inhabited. Did you know it's still illegal to kill bison inside the city boundaries?"

"You worry too much about your job," he said.

"Of course I do!" she exclaimed, jumping down from the balcony. "That's why I'm here with you. Shall we go soaring, sweet?"

He nodded and went to the communicator on the breakfast table. Servants had cleared away all but the

stim cups. He depressed a color on the communicator and said, "Esteban, is the glider ready?"

"The catapult will be at full power in five minutes, sir."

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Jamie turned back to Gloriana. "Let's go."

But she was already past him, bouncing down the side steps of the verandah onto the broad green lawn that stretched to the stone wall at the Edge. Two hundred meters southward lay the glider field, a strip of smooth grey paving that ran directly to the Edge and disappeared through a break in the wall at the precipice.

Jamie hurried after her, and they walked together in the morning air. The grass was cold with dew; hoppers skittered around their ankles, and the smell of fresh earth rose like incense. The sky was a clear light blue; there was no wind. The sound of the field was an open silence.

Jamie always felt most alive in the morning. He liked the clarity of the *air* and the softness of the shadows high up on the distant walls of the great Abyss. It was a time of sharp vision.

It would be a good morning for gliding, he decided. The day promised to be warm; there would be thermals soon, even away from the Abyss. He was pleased; they could stay up for hours. Gloriana wouldn't be able to run off so soon today.

Abruptly he became aware that she had paused and was standing motionless in the middle of the field behind him, looking pensively out into the Abyss. Wondering, he turned and went back to her.

"Jamie, have you ever considered marrying?"

"Only with you," he said. "Never seriously."

She turned her deep brown eyes on him, and he was struck once more by their intensity. "Have you really thought of marrying me?" she asked.

He felt uncomfortable. Of course he'd thought of it; every man inside the Apprentice Quarters had, and some from outside too. But he'd always tried to avoid hoping. He was a pragmatist.

"I think of marrying you every night," he said. "And every morning. Will you marry me?"

"Jamie, don't play with me," she said. She resumed

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walking toward the glider strip, face bent to the grass. "I've *really* been thinking about it. I don't know what to do."

He walked in silence, wondering. He and Gloriana had talked about marriage, but only as bed-play. And after last night— He shook his head slightly. Gloriana was in a strange mood today.

"I've never thought of marrying anyone but you," he said truthfully. "And I've never thought you'd consider it."

"What if I ask you to marry me?" she said, still looking at the grass.

"If you really want to, I guess I'll have to think about it. Are you asking me, Gloriana?"

He managed to feel nothing when he said that.

And after several seconds he realized she hadn't answered. He discovered that he too was looking at his feet as they went through the grass, and he became aware that his fur moccasins were wet and cold. And that Gloriana was not going to say anything further.

They came to the paved strip. He looked ahead and saw the short figure of Esteban positioning his glider in the catapult. The glider was painted blue, sky color, a pale ghost on the runway; its wings spread out like a benediction.

Taking his hand, Gloriana said, "You think I have a calculator for a brain, don't you?"

He forced a grin, feeling as though his covering skin had shriveled away from his face. "I thought you wouldn't admit you had a brain at all," he said.

"Of course I have," she said shortly, "and you know it. And you know what it tells me, Jamie? If *s not* a calculator, you know; it surprises me. Right now, and all morning, it's been telling me there's a change coming to me today, that I'd better get ready for it." She shrugged. "Well, let's just go gliding for now."

He nodded, troubled by her moodiness, and they walked

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out onto the runway. She jumped lithely onto the wing of the glider and lowered herself into the front seat.

He moved in behind her, lowered the bubble over them and ran a quick check on the controls. All was in order; he signaled to Esteban by waving the rudder.

Behind them he heard the solar engines of the catapult whirring upward to a high whine. Suddenly the glider was flung forward, Jamie was pressed back into his seat, and the low, wide fields rushed past them. The glider hurtled off the runway, over the Edge, and a sharp blast of rising air threw them upward. Jamie handled the controls with practiced ease, sending the glider into a long, slow spiral up into the clear air over

the Abyss, where updrafts always rose from the deep inner fires of the planet Jamie usually felt a sense of freedom and joy on these takeoffs: the city spread out below, ringing the darkness of the great Abyss, streets and buildings stretching into the distance. But today he missed that sense of elation; there was an aching emptiness inside him. It was the un-certainty of his relationship with Gloriana. He cursed him-self silently for allowing himself to become so dependent on her.

Gloriana asked, "Where do you suppose that foreigner is?"

"The millipede?" He thought back, remembering the broadcast. "It went off toward the Winter Gate, looking for the river."

"Let's go that way," she said. "I like the river from up here; it's so silent while it flows through the city. I've never liked all that roaring and rushing when I've seen it from the banks."

"All right." He banked in a long circle to the left. For a moment the low sun flashed dazzlingly in their eyes; then they were flying to the north, climbing.

Below them the jumbled towers of the Apprentice Quarters cast long irregular shadows that covered the inner estates. The western wall of the Abyss glowed

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golden, and Jamie saw the winking flashes of windows in the estates on the West Edge.

He found the river's Final Cataract, where tons of water plunged off the Edge into blackness—a straight white line of water disappearing downward.

Suddenly Gloriana said, "Jamie, what's that?"

"What?" He had been looking upriver; he had noticed nothing unusual.

"Below us—behind us. I thought I saw something."

"Where?"

"Oh, never mind. No! I saw it again! In the Abyss, far down—there's something there!" Her voice was excited, and she craned to look over the side of the glider, pressing her face against the bubble.

He said, "In the Abyss? But there's nothing—"

"Yes there is! I saw it! Something white, it looked like, and moving. But that's not possible; it must have been—" She fell silent, still staring downward.

Jamie banked the glider to the left, circling back to-ward the dark chasm. He wondered why he bothered; there could be nothing in the Abyss; there was never any-thing there. It was simply a gigantic shaft into the earth, bottomless.

Gloriana gasped, a quick in-and-out breath. "There! There!" She was pointing downward.

Jamie looked, saw nothing. The Final Cataract plunged straight down into emptiness; green mosses showed against the wall of the Abyss, but mat was all. How *could* there be anything?

But there was! Movement caught his eye, deep in the blackness of the shaft. Something large and ponderous swelled down there, like an ocean wave rising, gathering and growing. He saw it for only a moment; then it was lost in the dark. He banked again, to the right this time, in a tight turn that made his stomach rise to his throat; he wanted a clearer view.

But it was gone. He circled twice and saw only quiet

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blackness below, the eternal dark of the Abyss. He be-came conscious of his own rapid breathing, felt his heart pounding.

Gloriana twisted around to look at htau "You saw it, didn't you?"

He nodded, licking dry lips. "I saw something, I don't know what. What did you see?"

"Let's go down closer," she said. "How low can you take us?"

"Not very far, with these thermals. If only we had an engine plane!"

"Never mind; let's go- as close as we can." She peered again over the side as he put the glider into a dive.

He felt a moment of forced vertigo as the glider curved down-ward and he was thrown forward against his gravity harness. The city rose before them and filled their view; the stark blackness of the Abyss leaped up over the nose of the glider as they plunged.

When the rising winds became too powerful, he leveled out and put the glider into a slow turn to the left that would take them directly over the area where he'd seen that movement. Gloriana stared intently downward

as they passed over the Final Cataract. Jamie peered down-ward too. Blackness, blackness; it seemed to swirl sud-denly, and he caught his breath, but then he realized that his vision was swimming. He tried to blink his eyes into focus; the swirling continued.

"There!" cried Gloriana.

Something moved—a faster movement this time, a pale 'darting shape that nicked across his vision and dis-appeared into the deep shadows. It was gone almost im-mediately.

He continued to look; he saw nothing more. Again the darkness began to swim in his eyes, and he looked away.

The sky was suddenly intensely bright, the interior of the glider bathed in sunlight. Gloriana's short black hair flashed as it caught the sun.

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"We can't get any lower," he said. He kept the glider in a tight circle, fighting the controls to hold it steady amid rising gusts of warm air. He kept seeing that last quick flicking movement in his mind. What could be moving so far down in the Abyss? The back of his neck tingled, and he realized suddenly that he was afraid.

"It must have been an illusion," he said. Tve seen a lot of strange things in the shadows, especially in the morning. And things always seem different from up here—"

Gloriana said, "No." Then she shook her head. Two separate actions, almost unrelated.

"All right," he said, forcing his voice to be calm. "Tell me exactly what you saw."

She was sitting completely still now, looking straight ahead. She said, "You saw it too; don't deny it. It was huge. At first it moved slowly, but that last time" She tried to turn around in her seat, but the gravity harness held her. "It was fast the last time," she said.

He saw it again in his mind: quick, darting white. It seemed clearer this time. He said, "Yes, I saw that. Like some fantastic jungle vine whipping through the air."

"Or a tentacle," said Gloriana. "Didn't it seem that way to you? Like something out of the ocean, something that breathed and rolled over and lifted a tentacle into the air."

He hadn't thought of it as anything that alive, and he didn't want to think of it that way. "It could have been a tree growing on the wall of the Abyss. Maybe a branch came loose and fell."

"It wouldn't have moved that fast, Jamie."

"It wasn't moving fast at first. Remember? It just seemed to waver, to drift. Then there was that quick movement at the end. Like a tree branch cracking, then breaking and falling."

She shook her head. "That was no tree branch and you know it." She turned down her gravity harness and twisted in her seat to face him. "Be sensible, Jamie. What would

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a tree be doing down in the Abyss? There isn't enough soil on the sides of the shaft for a tree that size to grow in. And it wasn't falling, it was reaching *up*."

He tried to see the movement again in his memory, but it was becoming infused with Gloriana's suggestions. He saw a pale tentacle waving out of darkness, and then suck-ers and the glint of sunlight on moist skin.

"I don't know what I saw," he said. Suddenly he real-ized that all the excitement had gone from him. He felt only weariness; he wished he'd never seen anything at all.

"I don't know either," Gloriana said. "But I'd better find out. Take me to Guard Base, Jamie; I've got to get out a detail in a gravity flier. Well go right down into the Abyss and see what it was, and well take holos."

Cirque was a city filled with hundreds of temples—for Centrists, Moslem Orthodox, the Death-in-Life Church, Christians, All-Masters, several Hassidic Zen sects, Uni-versalists, Higher Universalists, the Sufi Muse, the Centrif-ugal Centrists. There were great cathedrals, mosques with many minarets, an extensive Catacomb of the Meek. In the Southern Apprentice Quarters" was a seven-story struc-ture housing the Third Decade Revival Church, where the congregation wore open-heeled shoes and tattooed right arms in the style of twenty years past.

There were even temples for sects from far places of the globe, like the Hoosier Friends of the Earth; and from other worlds: the Faithful of Procyon, and the Binary Dualists.

But the oldest of them was the Cathedral of the Five Elements, where Salamander III was priestess. The shrine was just upstream from the Final Cataract of the River Fundament; flowering vines climbed from the banks of the river to the base of the ancient building's west wall. At the front of the Cathedral rose a massive bonded-brick fireplace which was kept alight at all times.

Salamander herself tended Fire; it was a holy duty. On

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this morning she had risen with the sun and breakfasted on upstream trout, and now she busied herself feeding the morning Fire.

"See, young Erich," she said to her apprentice, "by caring for the holy body of Fire we increase her life." Salamander laid the pieces of firewood close together and set the chimney damper at a low point. "Now tell me what would happen to Fire if we did not feed her sufficiently to maintain her life through this day." Beside Salamander, staring with large hazel eyes, the apprentice Erich stirred uncomfortably. He was just eleven years old, not yet dreaming of manhood, still partaking of Elemental purity. "Fire is eternal," said the youth care-fully. "Fire might disappear from our sight, but only as a symbol of punishment for us. We would not see her glory made manifest in our cathedral."

Salamander nodded, continuing to tend Fire. She was a slight, wiry woman in her fourth decade; flame-red hair cascaded over her shoulders. She wore a red-brown tunic and skirt; a white cape trailed out behind her like a boat's wake. "It is time to free your Spirit for the day," she said. "We can do it in the presence of Fire. What are your regrets?"

Erich hesitated only a moment; he brushed back a shock of sandy hair from his forehead and said, "I think I hurt my father's pride last night. He's been carving a big sideboard with lots of religious stuff on it—he's got Ram-tseu and St. Francis and lots of others, and on top is the Bo Tree with its branches coming down in a circle around all the saints and gurus. He's been making it for weeks, and it's got so much detail! There's even a little figure of Nefertiti reaching up to the—"

"What did you do?" asked Salamander.

"Well, he was telling my mom about it—he's been talk-ing about it all month, all about how the grain of the wood fit in with everything he wanted to do. . . ." Salamander frowned impatiently at the boy; he hurried on:

"What

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happened was that I got tired of hearing about it so much. So I told him if he wanted to do something useful, he'd carve designs like circuitry that he could ship to the inner worlds and get a lot of money. You know, he could do those circuits that make up religious symbols . . . maybe just something Centrist; that would be easy, and there are lots of Centrists in the inner worlds."

"You would feel more proud of your father if he were to sell his work offplanet?" Salamander asked.

Erich shook his head. "It was just that he acted like he'd done something so *important*. . . ." The boy fell silent under Salamander's soft gaze. "Anyway, I got tired of it, so I told him wood is for burning, we use it all the time here. Fire consumes it, and *that's* what makes it holy—it gets pure again."

He looked to Salamander for approval, but she only gazed quietly at him, waiting. After a moment Erich looked away from her eyes. He muttered, "I told him if he really wanted to carve something real, he'd be a fire sculptor."

Salamander smiled faintly: it was not such a great sin for a boy to wish his father were more devout. "Fire is only one of the Elements," she said. "Men like your father work with Spirit."

"I know," Erich said quickly. "I shouldn't have said what I did."

"Then if you regret it," Salamander said, "we can dis-card the action. Think of darkness."

Erich obediently closed his eyes; Salamander saw his features clear as he cast his thoughts into the Abyss. "Think of the great chasm; visualize its immense empti-ness," she said.

But the boy's face tensed suddenly, and he stirred un-comfortably beside her. He made an obvious effort to relax, but she saw that his hands were spread taut in his lap.

"The Abyss will receive all," Salamander said, casting

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her voice in the rhythmic cadences of the ritual. "All fears, all guilts and regrets ..."

The boy twitched and his eyes came open, staring. He shut them tight, straining.

"Feel the warmth of the Abyss," Salamander said. "It surrounds you with peace."

Erich's eyes came open again. "I can't," he said weakly.

Salamander sighed. Would the boy never learn even this simple ritual? Softly she asked, "Where is your Spirit right now?"

He looked anxiously at her. "My Spirit is in the Abyss," he said dutifully.

"It is not," said Salamander. "You own a portion of Spirit, but you are not allowing it freedom within you; you are trying to control it. Is this not true?" She fixed the boy with her eyes. "Where is your Spirit?" she asked very deliberately.

Erich avoided her gaze; he looked at Fire and at the hard Earth on which they sat. "I was distracted by a broadcast," he said at last.

Salamander was not surprised; children always seemed mesmerized by Cirque's broadcasts, unable or unwilling to tune them out of their minds when more important mat-ters were at hand. It was difficult, she knew, to free one's Spirit when a broadcast was in progress, because it reached directly into the mind. If one's concentration wandered—from inattention, from fear, from anything that robbed the innermost

will—then a broadcast could dominate the mind.

She sighed. "What is it that you find more worthy of attention than freeing your Spirit?"

The boy's face subsided into a distant expression. He said, "It must have been an illusion. I've seen a lot of strange things in the shadows—" The intonations were not his own.

"Don't read it out to me!" Salamander ordered. "Tell me what you found so important!"

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"But they're still up there," Erich said vaguely. Salamander saw that his eyes were unfocused: the boy was completely lost in the broadcast.

Curiosity caught her; whatever was being broadcast must truly be very interesting. She tuned in with her own mind.

She felt the sensation of flying in a glider, smelled the closeness of the air in its compartment, saw the great expanse of the *Abyss* tilting below her. She was saying, "It was huge. At first it moved slowly, but that last time . . ." She wanted to turn around to look at Jamie, but her gravity harness prevented it. "It was fast the last time," she said.

And in her memory she saw something monstrous loom up out of the *Abyss*, something that pulsed and quivered, and then something rosy that flashed out of the blackness for a moment. She saw all of that in an instant, and saw it again, and again. Gloriana's shock pervaded her own body.

"Yes, I saw that," she heard Jamie saying. "Like some fantastic jungle vine whipping through the air."

She heard herself speak again, but she paid no attention. She was watching in Gloriana's memory as the darkness of the *Abyss* pulsed and threw out that great tentacle. She heard Gloriana and she heard Jamie, but only that vision mattered.

After a while she realized that the *Abyss* was gone; the broadcast had ended. She was sitting on the dirt floor of her Cathedral, Erich beside her, Fire leaping and warming them. For a moment she thought she saw a tentacle in the flames, but she cleared her mind.

The boy said softly, "Salamander?"

She remembered that she was a priestess. "Yes," she said.

"Do *you* know what it was?" he asked.

She remembered a time when she had been much younger, had been apprentice under Salamander II. She
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had spent a long night in the Cathedral, alone, contemplating the ever-burning Fire. She remembered how the flames had seemed to expand, how the darkness had fallen back; and she remembered that on that night she had first felt the true power of her faith. A timeless moment of realization had come to her and she had heard the silence within the sounds of night. But she hadn't been ready; she had grown afraid, and she had passed from that state of

grace. The darkness had come back, had surrounded her, touched her heels and licked at her back, trying to grasp her in strong tentacles...

"Yes," she said to Erich, "I know what the creature was."

"What, then?"

"Tell me what being is the eater-of-Earth," said Salamander. "The drinker-of-Water, quencher-of-Fire—"

"You mean that was the Beast?" Erich asked, his voice muted with awe.

"Yes," she said. "He is rising again."

She could feel the cold tips of the creature's limbs trailing down her back even now, clutching and flailing. She leaned closer to Fire.

And she wondered what she could do to send the Beast away again, now that it had taken form in the deep darkness at the heart of the city. Others had seen it this time—how many thousands must have seen the broadcast? And the people of Cirque had so little faith today with which to fight the creature....

Nikki-Two waited at the side of the street for cart traffic to stop. Beside the intersection stood an unstable-element marker that changed color at short, random intervals; when it changed again, northbound traffic would have to wait. While the electric carts waited, passengers could climb on and off their backbeds.

Nikki watched the marker impatiently. What if the foreigner should reach the Winter Gate before her, pass through and lose itself in the city? Anxiously she tried to

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calculate the time it would take her to reach the Gate by cart-hopping against the time the millipede would require to walk there from the Morning Gate. But how fast could a millipede walk? And how many carts would she have to ride to reach the Gate?

It seemed important to her that she find the foreigner. She didn't think to wonder why; Nikki-Two felt an

urgency about so many things in life. Perhaps because she had been born as an independent personality only a few weeks ago, and even now she managed to come out so seldom. When she was out, there was so much to do!

The marker changed; traffic slowed to a stop. Nikki chose a cart whose backbed had only two people riding and climbed aboard. The other riders were a young woman and man who were apparently together. Nikki judged their age as under twenty and wondered at the way they dressed: loosely fitting brown and red two-piece suits. It was no fashion she was familiar with.

"Love to you," she greeted them. "Do you happen to know how far he's going?"

The young woman shrugged bony shoulders. "He doesn't have a voice horn," she said. Nikki thought the woman's straight brown hair was stringy and unattractive, but she liked her wide mouth.

The man said, "We're just going as far north as the Final Cataract; well have to change carts soon anyway."

"We're questers," the woman explained.

Nikki's interest quickened. "Religious?" she asked.

"We're going to the Cathedral of the Five Elements," the woman said. "We've been granted an audience!" She was obviously proud of it, but Nikki wasn't impressed. Outlanders on quest were always going to the Cathedral of the Five Elements, but to the people of Cirque it was just an outdated holdover from the past. The electric cart bumped along over the worn stones that paved Cirque's streets; Nikki had to hold onto the sides of the backbed to keep from being thrown about.

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"Where are you from?" she asked the couple. Knowing that they were questers explained their unfamiliar clothing at least

"We're both from Springs Crossing," the young man told her.

Nikki looked blank; she had never heard of their town either.

"The priestess of the Cathedral of the Five Elements visited there for a whole fortnight last year," said the young woman. "It's over eighty kilometers from Cirque, but she came all that way."

Nikki wondered how many kilometers away Aldebaran was. "Did you tune in to the broadcast?" she asked.

"You know, the foreigner from Aldebaran?" She twisted in the backbed to see where they were. Jumbled towers rose into the morning air, brightly lit from the east. Still the Ap-prentice Quarters, then.

"Foreigner?" said the young woman. "The only broad-cast we tuned in to this morning was the one over the Abyss."

"Which?" Nikki asked. The driver of their cart seemed to be getting ready to turn off the curving north-south route; she watched as he slowed the cart.

"Some people were gliding over the Abyss," said the young man. "They saw something pretty scary down in-side it."

"There's nothing in the Abyss," Nikki said distractedly, still watching what the driver was doing.

"Oh, yes there is!" said the woman. "It's something really big, too—you mean you've never seen it? But you're from Cirque, aren't you? How could you not know about something that big that lives right in the center of your city?"

Nikki turned to her with some annoyance. "What are you talking about?"

"The big thing down in the Abyss," said the woman.

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"Big and sort of white, with tentacles a kilometer long. Haven't you seen it?"

Nikki shook her head, wondering if these people knew what they were talking about. They had tuned in to a broadcast she'd missed—but they must have misunderstood what they'd seen.

"There's nothing down in the Abyss," she said patiently. "It's just a big hole that goes all the way down to .. well, wherever. Depends on your temple. But there's nothing in it. That's the whole *point*"

The young woman was smiling now, her wide lips pointing up at the corners in a peculiar quirky expression.

"You're wrong," she said. "There's something monstrous and awful down there. The people who saw it thought so too; they were pretty scared. You mean no one ever saw it before, huh?"

Nikki didn't have time to argue: the driver had turned his cart onto a side street, one of the radiators that led outward from the Abyss. Nikki craned over the side to look for crossing markers ahead, but saw none.

"Listen, I have to leave," she said, and just then the cart slowed for a rut and Nikki took her chance. She jumped heavily off the back of the cart, caught her balance with one hand against the stones of the street, then stood and waved as the cart carried the two young questers away.

"They should've jumped too, if they want to get to that Cathedral," she said to herself. "He's going outward,

away from it." She shrugged and looked around to see where she was.

The cart had carried her outside the Apprentice Quarters. Two- and three-storied homes with wooden pillars carved in the Neo-Greek style lined the streets, several with bas-reliefs over the doors painted in gaudy colors. Large oaks and bay trees shaded the street.

She turned north at an intersection and hiked for the next traffic marker. The morning sun was warm now, and

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though she kept to the shade of the trees she began to sweat. She didn't mind sweating, but she knew Nikki-One did—strange how the two of them could have such differ-ing feelings about precisely the same thing. It wasn't as though they had different bodies; they literally lived in the same muscles, bones and flesh. Yet when NikM-One was out and she sweated, it itched and stank to her, whereas to Nikki-Two it was just a free body reaction, like breathing. She thought of Gregorian and wondered about her feel-ings for him. She knew that Nikki-One loved him in a hopelessly dependent way, and the other Nikkis all loved him too in their own ways. And her, Nikki-Two? Well, she . . . was fond of him; she could see the worries and hopes beneath his abrasive manner. She guessed that meant she loved him.

But actually, she realized suddenly, she didn't really react to him directly; whenever she was with Gregorian she tried to treat him nicely, as NikM-One would . . . be-cause Nikki-One was painfully afraid of losing him, and Nikki-Two didn't want to hurt her. Nikki-One, after all, was the "owner" of their body, the one who lived in it most of the time; that ought to give her some rights.

Not that I wouldn't be glad to come out more often myself, thought Nikki-Two. She wondered if she might be able to influence Nikki-One to use the parasanity-inducing pills more often. How could she do that? They had no contact within their mind: when Nikki-One was out, Nikki-Two was asleep, and vice versa.

Could she leave a message? The only way she could think of was through memory; all the Nikkis shared the same memory, of course. Then the idea came to her: the best way to influence Nikki-One to bring her out more often was to enjoy herself to the utmost and leave behind good memories, warm memories, happiness.

Well, she thought, isn't that what I do anyhow? Really, I just try to enjoy myself as much as I can.

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She came to a traffic marker and stopped next to it. She sat on the curbstone beneath a dusty cherry tree whose leaves seemed afire with the sun shining through them. She scanned the street to the south. It curved away to the right, filled with many carts: she'd be able to get a ride quickly. Meanwhile, waiting for the marker to change, she leaned against the base of the cherry tree and relaxed. It was delicious to sit for a moment; Nikki's body wasn't used to so much walking.

She found herself wondering about what the people in the last cart had said: something monstrous down in the Abyss, something huge and frightening. What could they have been talking about?

Something to do with the foreigner from Aldebaran? She remembered the foreigner; she'd seen it herself on the broadcast. It wasn't frightening at all; and anyway, for-eigners came to Cirque all the time. Half a dozen times a year, anyhow.

She noticed th'at a cart had stopped in front of her. Looking up, she saw that the traffic marker had changed. She jumped up and ran to the cart's backbed.

It was filled with a mob of laughing children. One of them, a young boy, saw her and grabbed at her long blonde hair; she fended him off and looked back down the street for another cart. But there were none just now. And the marker was changing again. Before the driver of the cart could pull away, she climbed aboard.

She had to push children aside in order to make room for her feet. There were outraged cries, and one of them shoved back at her; she fell into the lap of a girl of ten or so. The girl said, "Watch it."

"Sorry," Nikki said. She sat up, brushed her hair back, felt the cart bumping over the street stones. She said, "It's so crowded; where are you all going?"

The girl looked critically at her for a moment, then said "Class pilgrimage. That's our teacher up there." She nodded toward a man who sat in the middle of the back-

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bed, legs folded, eyes alert. He was looking in her direc-tion; he waved.

She managed to free a hand and wave back to him. Then she asked the girl, "What class are you in? I mean, where are you going?" She hoped it wouldn't be far; she didn't relish the idea of sharing a long ride with a mob like this.

"Going to the Winter Gate," said the girl. "We're in an awareness class." She frowned as she inspected Nikki's clothes. "You should dress neater when you go out," she said.

Nikki looked down at herself and adjusted the shawl around her shoulders. Her body-suit was tight in the wrong places, but she couldn't help that. She was big in the wrong places.

"Why should you care how I look?" she asked the girl.

The girl wrinkled her face in an expression of distaste. "I just get so mad at the way girls dress sometimes. You don't see boys dressing sloppy, but girls think they can wear any old thing." Nikki saw that this young girl was wearing a precisely fitted body-suit, sleeves and cuffs but-toned tight. She looked like the steam doll that NikM-One kept in her closet. Every now and then she'd dress it in one of its fashion suits, fill it with water and watch it walk around the floor, singing in its squeaky voice and giving off little puffs of steam.

"I like to dress up, when I can," NikM said. "But it's too hot today. Listen, why are you going to the Winter Gate? What's your pilgrimage?"

"Ask *him*" said the girl, pointing behind Nikki. Nikki turned and saw the teacher crawling toward her through the pressing bodies of the children. He was slim and had long legs, so it was difficult for him to move on hands and knees through the crowd.

Seeing her turn around, the young man smiled—a fresh, open smile, she thought—and said to her,

"Everybody in class wanted to see that millipede this morning. So we

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started cart-hopping north, and then they caught the broadcast from the Abyss, and now half of them want to turn around and go there. Kids. Love to you; my name's Jordan." He had reached her side as he spoke; tickling a boy in the ribs, he moved him aside and sat next to Nikki.

"You're going to the same place I am!" Nikki said. And all these kids too, she thought.

"To look for the foreigner?" the teacher said. "Sure ... there'll probably be a dozen classes at the Gate by the time we get there. Awareness classes, body students, event watchers—maybe even some adult mind-disinterment groups. That poor millipede is going to be busy."

"It'll really have its hands full," said the girl who had criticized Nikki's clothes. "*All* of them!" She laughed de-lightedly at her joke, worming her way around so that she could sit beside the two of them. She sat in a precise lotus, bracing her back against a boy who was making a cat's cradle out of mind-shadows. He wasn't able to hold the image very well, Nikki noticed.

"I've met millipedes before, a couple of times," Jordan said to Nikki. "They always seem to be able to handle whatever comes up. Have you ever met one?"

Nikki shook her head. "No; that's why I'm looking for this one. It ought to be fun."

"More fun than some big old creepy snake-thing," said the young girl. She shivered exaggeratedly.

"Now, Robin, you didn't really see that thing," Jordan chided her. "Be fair."

"I did!" protested the girl. "I saw it in that woman's mind—Gloriana, her name was. Remember?"

"But we've seen how a person's memory can distort things, haven't we?" said her teacher. "Even after just a minute or two."

Nikki felt more and more curious about the broadcast she'd missed; it sounded as though it had been exciting. "Did you see it?" she asked Jordan.

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He smiled faintly. "Just for a moment. There really wasn't much to see."

"Everyone seems to be talking about it," Nikki said. Two girls behind her were wrestling and they bumped against her, but Nikki was heavy enough not to lose her balance.

Jordan put out a hand to steady the children down and said to her, "Nobody could see much. But the people in the glider were very out and open—you know how it is in a glider?—and their, reactions were intense. I think that's why it upset so many people."

"It didn't scare *met*" Robin said defiantly. She rocked back and forth in her lotus, angry. "That woman, Glori-ana, she was scared, and she's a grownup, but 7 wasn't scared! I don't even want to go see it. I'm just not inter-ested!"

"It would take too long anyway to double back and hop carts all the way to the Final Cataract," said Jordan.

"Be-sides, I'm looking forward to meeting the millipede, aren't you?"

"No!" said Robin, and she closed her eyes and began: to trance.

Jordan met Nikki's eyes and grinned. She grinned back at him and felt the warmth of the sun. Around them the kids yelled and giggled, and the cart shook them as it bumped along. Nikki wondered suddenly if she was still sweating, and if Jordan would hate her for being fat.

"I've never seen a millipede, ever," she told him. "I've never even met anybody from England City or Mars."

"Where have you been all your life?" he asked her.

She wondered if she ought to tell him that her "life" probably totaled less than twenty-four hours so far. But that wouldn't really be true anyway: she shared Nikki-One's memories; she *felt* twenty-three years old.

And maybe she was—after all, the capsules didn't create alter-nate personalities within Nikki, they just

freed the ones who were there.

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"I don't get out very often," she said. "I mean I'm not exactly a dragonfly socially—for obvious reasons." Jordan looked her over in an openly appraising way, eyebrows slightly raised. The light fuzz on Nikki's upper lip suddenly felt acutely damp to her.

"You ought to smile more often," he told her. "I liked it when you smiled a minute ago. Anyway, I'm no good at feeling sorry for people.*

Nikki had to laugh at that—not because he had complimented her, but because he had seen into her.

There's something wonderfully naked about finding someone who understands you inside, she thought.

"I'm terrible at it too," she said. "I'm even terrible at feeling sorry for myself, except when I do." Actually, she reminded herself, this body isn't really mine; why should I feel embarrassed about it? "How did you meet so many foreigners?" she asked.

"Stop pushing!" yelled the boy who had been making the shadow cat's cradle. He shoved backward against Robin, who elbowed him in the ribs without coming out of her trance. The boy howled and protested to Jordan. "She pushed me, and she ruined my concentration!"

"You're ruining mine," said Jordan. "Start again; you didn't have *the* image quite right anyway." To Nikki he said, "A millipede came to my class last season because it wanted to find out what we meant by 'learning.' It didn't understand anything that went on. We were doing arithmetic sets that morning, and it said, 'What are these objects you speak of? What are these numbers?' Can you imagine?"

"It didn't know what numbers are?" asked Nikki.

"It said it knew about zero and about one. But it thought two and three and so on were just different *ones*. Whatever *that* meant!" Jordan laughed, a short burst of real amusement. "I wonder how the millipedes ever developed the technology for space travel anyway."

"Didn't we teach it to them?" Nikki asked. She wasn't

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sure; but Gregorian sometimes lectured her about how much the other races of the galaxy owed to Earth. The cart stopped at a traffic marker, and a burly grey-haired workman pushed his way into the backbed, cursing sleepily. With the cart no longer in motion, Nikki felt the heat of the sun more strongly; she fanned her face with the shawl and wished they'd start up again quickly. Robin untranced, opened her eyes and stared for a moment at the workman. "He's boring," she said, and went back into trance.

Jordan saw Nikki looking bemusedly at the girl. "Robin's learning about negatives today. One of the smartest people in the class. Most kids can't really understand negatives till they're past puberty."

Nikki continued to look at her for a while. When she tranced, the tight set of her mouth relaxed completely; she looked like another person. The traffic marker changed and the cart started forward again.

"I'll bet you're a good teacher," she said. "I remember when I was studying, I had a teacher who gave us tests every day. Body tests, emotion tests, brain tests—I never got to enjoy learning anything; I always had to *know* it. That's when I started getting fat."

"You had a male teacher?" Jordan asked.

"Yes."

"And as soon as you got your first period you started getting fat," he said.

She thought back, and he was right. "How did you know?"

"That's a common thing—if you're a girl just entering puberty and a male dominates you like that, it's very threatening. It seems unnatural, and girls in that situation do all sorts of extreme things."

She regarded him with growing respect. She had come into life late—she wasn't really the Nikki who had gone through their childhood—so she should have had the objectivity to understand that herself. But she hadn't

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I don't really think much about Nikki-One, she said to herself. I just take her as a given. Which is about what she is.

"What else do you know about me?" she asked Jordan.

The cart stopped again, and half a dozen people crowded around the back trying to get on. But there really wasn't room; the class children screamed and protested whenever one of the newcomers tried to climb aboard, and there was some scuffling. Then the muscled workman who had gotten on at the last marker said loudly, "No more on this cart, or TU bust your heads!" His bunched fists were the size of street stones. The crowd hesitated; some went to other carts farther back. The marker changed and the cart bumped forward once more.

The workman grinned at Jordan and Nikki, flexing his hands in a satisfied manner. "I love getting out with

people every morning," he said. "I don't have to ride the carts; I'm old enough that I can have my own, but I like to relate to people. Wakes me up."

"People are boring," said Robin, her eyes open since the scuffle.

"Not around me they're not," the workman said. "See, if you really like people, they sense that and they're looser around you. When you're older you'll know that. Right?"

He asked this last of Nikki and Jordan. The teacher said, "Absolutely." Nikki said, "I guess so."

"You *guess* so?" said the workman. "It's a fact. You take that millipede that showed up this morning, for in-stance. The guy meditating on the sun just didn't want to be interrupted, remember? So the millipede went away. Yet that was somebody from way out in the stars, come all the way here, and the first guy it met wasn't interested in talking. If *I'd* been there when it came, I'd have jumped up and *taken* it to the Winter Gate, shown it a good time. See what I mean?"

The cart was nearing the Gate; the homes were more

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widely spaced on the street, and there were fields of corn and artichokes. Nikki craned to look forward and saw the sunwashed silhouette of the Gate rising ahead.

The Winter Gate was the oldest in the city; it was a high granite structure, built centuries ago when Cirque was still a small town growing along the river from the Final Cataract northward to the trade road into the moun-tains. One of the early temples had raised funds to build the Gate; Nikki didn't remember which temple it had been. One of the big ones—probably the Centrists or the Universalists.

"We're almost there," Nikki said to Jordan.

"Well, say hello to that millipede for me," said the workman. "Tell it to forget that guy at the Morning Gate—most of the people in Cirque are really friendly."

The cart slowed as it approached the Gate. The arch was narrow, built long before electric carts had become common hi Cirque. Traffic moved only one way at a time through the Gate, regulated by another unstable-element marker. Children began to jump off the cart's back, trail-ing along behind on foot. The sun continued to climb in the sky, and Nikki found the bed of the cart getting un-comfortably hot.

She picked a smooth stretch in the road and slid off the back; Jordan followed. They walked after the cart as it trailed more class children, and Nikki saw that Jordan was even taller than she'd thought when they were sitting in the cart's backbed. Tall and slim: what a contrast to her lumpish figure. Even his loose green and gold body-suit seemed to hang gracefully on him.

She found herself wondering why she had come here, why she had allowed herself to be seen outside the shad-ows of her home. She hated her body and the coarse seaminess of her face; how could she let other people see her so clearly? The sun beat down malevolently on her and she felt faint.

She stopped walking and stood swaying at the side of

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the road. I've got to go back, she thought hopelessly, and realized how very far from home she had come, how long it would take to get back to shadowed safety. The world around her wavered and blurred, and abruptly she sat down on the grassy verge of the road. Her ears roared.

I'm going, she realized faintly. Nikki-Three is coming out. This is all the life I'll get today; instead I'm becoming Three, and she doesn't even want to live.

Children shouted piercingly around her; Jordan bent over her, talking at her, talking.

It isn't fair, she thought. Just when I was getting to know someone I could love—

The thought frightened her; her stomach knotted and a consuming roar pressed in around her. She shuddered un-controllably. Nikki-One, she thought dimly—Nikki-One loved Gregorian. She had no right—She began to moan, and Jordan knelt beside her, hold-ing her by the shoulders. She saw his lips move, but she heard nothing but the roaring in her ears. A red haze covered everything, and she closed her eyes tightly.

She tried to speak. "Jordan . . . Jordan, I'm mul-tiple—" Her tongue, her lips were too heavy.

Then gradually the sick whirling lessened, the pressure at her temples began to go away. She heard Jordan ask, "Nikki, what's happening?"

She opened her eyes fearfully and saw her surroundings in all their stark harshness—the glare of the sun, the filth of the ground where she sat. Children clustered around her, pressing in, pointing.

"Never mind," she managed to say.

She tried to squirm free of Jordan's grip on her shoul-ders, but he held her tightly. His face before her v/as that of some stranger: irregular features, hawk nose. What did she know about this man anyway?

"Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"Let go of me," she said coldly. Jordan loosened his grip and sat back; he looked so surprised she almost had

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to laugh at him. He was a coward, like everyone else.

"Don't touch me again," she said. "I'm not who you thought I was. You're going to be sorry you ever met me."

The broadcasts in Cirque were controlled by a holopath who monitored millions of sensory data every hour and chose for broadcast those experiences that would be most interesting to the people of the city.

She had an aptitude for this. It wouldn't have been enough if she'd been only a telepath; she had to be able to scan many thousands of minds every moment, to understand everything holistically. Her judgments were instantaneous; when she picked up anything worthy of broadcast, she sent it out immediately, without thinking.

She had been born with this talent and had taken this job when she was just six years old. She was fifteen now, two years older than her predecessor had been when she had died. Holistic people don't live long, but they live a lot.

She had every bodily comfort she could want: she lived in a large house on the South Edge with servants who attended to needs she never even knew she had. They fed her and bathed her and moved her body into different positions several times a day. They brushed her hair and filled her room with fresh scents; they stimulated her with selected frequencies of sound. Someone always held her while she slept.

She had assistants—children in training to succeed her when she died, girls and boys with high telepathic and holistic aptitudes. They linked their minds with hers, their energies fed hers, and their personalities probably influenced what she did.

The assistants were all orphans, as she was herself. No parents would want their children condemned for life to listening to others' minds, never thinking for themselves, even dreaming other people's dreams at night. And dying

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young, so young. Most people in Cirque lived to be two hundred.

The first monitors had been monks and priestesses: Seanne, Ram-tseu, Alyxandra. *Saint* Seanne, of course, and The Venerable Ram-tseu; they had *all* been people touched with grace. They had seen a central oneness of existence and had thought to teach it to others by showing them what they saw with their minds. And they had been so successful that no one even thought of it as a miracle any longer.

The broadcasts were no longer thought of as religious in nature; they were simply experiences that were available to all, and people didn't always tune in to them. When their minds were open enough to receive an incoming broadcast, or when they cast their thoughts to the monitor, they tuned in, and that was that.

The monitors were no longer venerated; no one in Cirque even knew the name of the current monitor. Few cared to wonder where she lived. Most thought, if they thought about her at all, that she must be mentally retarded, a kind of idiot savant.

The monitor, who lived in the consensus of their minds, agreed.

In her sleeping quarters at the Cathedral of the Five Elements, Salamander had a personal shrine to which she sometimes retreated. A candle danced in the draft from a chink in the wall; it sat on an island of earth in a small basin of river water. The room was dark even in mid-morning; there were no windows.

Salamander knelt before her shrine, watched the flame dance and called Spirit to her.

She felt Spirit descend on her as distinctly as the falling rain; once again she heard the silence of darkness. The sound of her breathing became a part of that silence.

Spirit appeared to her in different Elements at different times; today she saw it manifest in the candle flame. Fire

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swelled and leaped as it stretched upward into the dark, a bright undulating line of light. And it sang a high, clear note that filled her mind and filled the room.

She merged with the sound and the flame; she felt herself as rising heat, touched lightly by the draft from the wall and singing the Fire song. The warmth of the song suffused her; she left her mind and became Fire.

Without the handicap of her mind, she was able to think.

Salamander's true thinking was more feeling than anything else: she sensed the darkness as a cool, peaceful color, tasted the sparkling life force of Air, experienced the spiritual hunger she had felt as ... fear. Fear? That surprised her, but immediately she understood it. The Beast, of course, the Beast was loose in Cirque, was rising from the depths of the Abyss and would engulf the city, the planet, everything....

Fire seemed very small suddenly, a thin tapering line of light; and she, who was part of Fire, felt even smaller.

For a moment she could not even feel her heat; but then the sense of it returned to her, and she thought again of the Beast. She needed to understand it if her fear was to pass, if she was to know how to fight it. She must see it clearly, not through the red veil of her memory. (A night in the Cathedral alone; the cold touch of the Beast at her neck...) She must see it through Spirit.

Everything was part of Spirit: the grasses of the fields and riverbanks, birds in flight, the stones of streets and buildings, every person in Cirque, every person in the universe and each thought that he or she had . . . every one was part of Spirit. She understood this; she felt it.

When the people of Cirque remained close to Spirit, they kept the Elements pure; but there were so many in these late years who had no awareness of Spirit, and they brought corruption to the world. Cirque was losing its belief in the higher truths, growing complacent with the passage of eventless years. How long had it been since her

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Cathedral had been filled with worshippers?

It could be no accident that the Beast had appeared in the Abyss. It was the place where people had dumped their refuse for centuries beyond counting. Not only their physical wastes, but the wastes of Spirit too—all had gone into the darkness of the Abyss. People had said that the shaft was bottomless, that it would receive their discards forever.

Salamander had always known that the Abyss had a bottom. And now she knew that what filled the Abyss was not melon rinds and sewage, but the discarded sins of the people. The spiritual refuse of humanity had collected there and piled up, till now it was reaching for the very rim of the shaft. And it was *alive*, a writhing, crawling thing whose body was refuse, whose mind was sin. Its awful hunger drove it upward.

It must be enormous, she thought, to have filled the entire Abyss. The enormity of human sin through the centuries appalled her. She thought: If it gets free of the shaft, will there be anything to stop it?

Then once again she took comfort in Fire, warmed and calmed herself, sang its supernal note and returned to full understanding. Nothing was inevitable; tomorrow would be made from the Elements of now. The rise of the Beast could be halted ... if only the people of Cirque would stop feeding it.

This was clear to her; but with the understanding came weariness, uncertainty and the renewal of fear. Fire's light dimmed, its heat drew away from her; once more she felt herself within her body, seated on the packed-earth floor in her dim room, and now she felt the tautness of her muscles. She shifted uncomfortably and tried to refocus on Fire . . . but it was only a candle flame now.

After a while she rose from her place before the shrine. Controlling a shudder, she brushed dust from her robe and went out into the greater dimness of the Cathedral. She went to the great chimney and stood before it, staring into

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the soft flames of the Cathedral Fire.

She heard a footstep behind her and turned quickly. Erich stood staring, his eyes wide, face pale. He was shaking.

"I saw your vision," Erich said. "I saw it all—it was broadcast." He looked anxiously into Salamander's eyes. "You *will* be able to send the Beast away, won't you?" he asked, and Salamander heard the boy's doubt echo through the dark reaches of the Cathedral.

Jamie had never been in one of Cirque's new gravity fliers, and he found it exciting. The craft lifted from the ground so smoothly that for a moment Jamie didn't realize that they were aloft; then he felt the unmistakable sensation of movement in air and saw that already they had risen above the level of the Guard field house. The one-story building fell away below, its grey flag stirring in the wake of displaced air from the flier.

"Go straight for the Final Cataract," Gloriana told the pilot. "Then circle till we find it." She twisted in her seat to look back at a grey-uniformed woman who cradled a holo camera. "How much time are you holding?" Gloriana asked.

"A full hour," said the woman. She shifted the heavy camera in her lap and the planes of its octagonal lens glinted like an insect eye.

Gloriana said to Jamie, "Remember, if she should need to move forward to get her holos, we both move out of her way. We've seen this thing; she needs to record it."

"Of course," he said. He had never been with Gloriana when she was working, only when she had erected her light social facade; now he watched in fascination as she concentrated on business.

The Guard airfield was below the South Edge, where the estates were larger and less built-up: Cirque had originally been settled from the north, along the river. The estates here belonged to families Jamie knew only by

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name; this was an area of Cirque's society into which he had no entry. They held their vast estates undivided even in the face of offers from the newly moneyed families of the North and West Edges. The flier left the land behind and flew out over the lip of the chasm. Jamie stared downward into the huge

dark-ness, and on impulse he asked, "Does this flier have a lightbeam?"

Gloriana was making notes in a battered pocket journal; she said abstractedly, "Up front—the pilot controls it." Then she looked up at him. "You have something in mind?"

He felt foolish: he was an outsider, a civilian. "What if we trained the light on the walls of the Abyss? I know we're not likely to find anything by shining a light down into the center, but what if something's trying to get out of the shaft? Wouldn't it try to come up the walls?"

"We're clear across the Abyss from where we saw that thing earlier," she said. But she leaned forward to touch the pilot's shoulder. "Giovan, bear east to the Edge, then follow it north. And tram your lightbeam on the wall as far down as you can."

The pilot nodded and banked the flier to the right. The craft flew almost as silently as Jamie's glider, the soft hum of its gravity repellers lost in its passage through the air. In a few minutes they again approached the plunging walls of the chasm, where the Edge fell sharply into black shadow. The pilot turned north, flying less than a hundred meters inside the Edge; he switched on the lightbeam, and it swept along the rocky face of the shaft like a bright bird.

"Take us lower," Gloriana said. "Let's get right down into the shaft."

The flier descended, the walls of the Abyss rose past them, and they were flying in darkness, the clear blue sky above only a distant mirage. Jamie felt as though he were under water—the demarcation between light and darkness

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was so sharp in the Abyss. He followed the flight of the lightbeam as it leaped across the sheeted rocks of the Abyss walls.

The walls were bare and stark; it was as though the planet were solid rock, and in this one place a gigantic slippage had occurred in which a hundred kilometers of rocky crust had fallen into some unimaginable cavern. The naked innards of old Earth lay exposed in cross section.

"I can't see where we're going," the pilot said nervously. In the dim light from the control panel, his face looked harsh and strained

"Just stay away from the walls," Gloriana told him. "You don't think we're going to run into anything in the middle of the Abyss, do you?"

"No," said the pilot, and Jamie suddenly realized how young the man was. That one word, the uncertainty in the way he said it, betrayed the youth his uniform had hidden. Jamie watched his hands on the controls—they were practiced and sure, at least.

"You've never flown down here before, is that it?" Jamie asked the pilot. The lightbeam danced along the cliff to their right, picking out rough rock formations and occasional growths of pale lichens.

"I was on a search crew down here once," the pilot said. "Last year. Some 'kids tried climbing down the rocks, for a prank or something. They *said* they were questing, but their temple said no. When they didn't come back, we had to go find them."

"Their temple threw them out," said Gloriana. "You know how the temples are about the Abyss."

"They were lucky to get back alive," said the pilot. His voice was steadier now; he seemed to take assurance from conversation. "Dumb kids tried climbing down here with nothing but ropes and piton guns. The heat got them, and they couldn't climb out again. One of them almost

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died—they had to clone his heart, and it was a month before he could walk again."

The flier descended into the darkness, pacing the light-beam along the wall. Jamie had left his heavy sabertooth coat behind, but as the heat from the planet's core increased he had to unfasten the upper buttons of his body-suit.

"What would make anybody try to climb down in here?" the pilot wondered. "No matter how loose their temple teaching might be, plain common sense ought to—"

"Wait!" said Gloriana. *She* leaned forward, peering into the air. "Sweep the beam back... below us."

The pilot obeyed hurriedly; the lightbeam flicked back and forth in the darkness, slicing brightness across rock. Jamie saw nothing, only the stark vertical walls of the shaft. Behind him he heard the woman with the hold camera shifting position, moving forward.

"Circle," Gloriana said. "Til handle the fight." She leaned over the pilot's shoulder and grasped the knob that controlled the lightbeam. As the pilot banked left and curled the flier back to where they'd passed a moment before, Gloriana braced herself and played the light low down on the wall of the Abyss. The woman with the holo camera climbed into the seat next to Jamie.

The flier completed its circle, but the light hadn't shown anything. Gloriana said, "Lower. Circle back again, but this time take us *down*,"

The pilot's face was taut, but he obeyed. The flier dived in a sweeping arc, dropped a hundred meters, two hundred. The heat rose in the flier's small compartment. Gloriana kept the light on the empty cliffs, slicing back and forth, finding only rock—

"There!"

It was the holographer who cried out, but they all saw it. A pale shape that scuttled out of the light as it swept by, leaving only a flickering impression of something

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faintly luminescent that trailed light like rising bubbles in water.

Gloriana swung the lightbeam downward as they passed, and they caught another glimpse of the thing. Jamie saw pale-furred tentacles, ghostly in the darkness, moving so quickly that he couldn't be sure he hadn't seen more than one creature.

Whatever was there disappeared into the deeper reaches of the Abyss, running straight down the cliff wall.

The woman beside Jamie shut off her camera. "I didn't get it," she said. "I know I didn't."

"Go down after it," Gloriana told the pilot.

The young man shot a frightened glance at her, fumbled with the flier's controls.

"Hurry!" Gloriana said.

The flier slipped sideways and plunged straight down-ward into the darkness and the heat. The holographer wasn't used to free-fall; she clutched at her seat, nearly lost control of her camera. Jamie had set his gravity harness before they'd taken off, but he too felt anxious: it was one thing to dive in his glider in the sky above Cirque where he could see clear air below him, but to dive into pitch blackness like this . . . He felt perspiration on his forehead, under his eyes, and knew it was from more than the heat of the Abyss.

The lightbeam streaked down the rocks so fast that they could see no details. Gloriana said, "That's enough; level off and circle." The calm of her voice seemed unreal to Jamie.

The pilot pulled out of the dive sharply; Jamie was crushed into his seat. He saw the lightbeam darting crazily back and forth in the darkness, searching, finding nothing, disappearing into the enfolding black. The flier leveled, and Gloriana swept the light in a flat circle till she once again found the cliff wall. They had moved away from it as they came out of their dive, and it seemed incredibly distant to Jamie.

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"Take us closer," Gloriana said. "Slowly."

She searched the wall with the light as they approached; the beam slashed up, down, across. Naked stone, sheer rock faces that had probably never been seen by a soul. The barrenness of the chasm was awesome.

A movement—

As the light leaped after it, it flashed across something pale and scuttling. The light jumped back, but the creature was gone.

"It went down!" said the holographer. She had her camera in position now and was making adjustments even as she peered out into the dark.

Gloriana sent the lightbeam down as the pilot began to dive again. They saw the creature then, moving so fast it seemed to be falling, but Gloriana was able to track it with the light. It was huge—a mass of crawling limbs and a mottled grey body that pulsed with life.

Jamie heard the hum of the holo camera beside him, but his eyes were riveted on the creature running down the wall. Once, twice Gloriana lost it with the light, but each time she focused again on it before the flung could dodge away into the dark. The holographer was muttering, "Yes, yes, yes."

Suddenly the creature stopped; it clung to the rock wall as they approached. Its body seemed to be a gigantic breathing sac, four meters in diameter; its blotchy markings undulated as it breathed, appearing to change the shape of the creature, like some shifting ghost in the dark.

Then it shuddered, its limbs convulsed, and it fell.

Gloriana followed it downward with the lightbeam, but she lost it in the depths. For several seconds Jamie kept thinking he could see the creature, but it was only a faint afterimage in his vision. The holographer switched off her camera, and Jamie heard silence in the flier. He heard his own breath coming fast and shallowly. Gloriana continued to sweep the light back and forth on the rocks as far down

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as they could see anything. They saw only the bare walls and the empty shaft.

"It was afraid of the light," Jamie said. "It ran from the light every time you caught it."

"Go down," Gloriana said to the pilot.

The young man shook his head, his face flushed from the rising heat. "Please, no more."

"Go down," she said. The pilot's eyes pleaded with her and lost; shakily he put the flier into another

descent, slower this time.

"What do you think we'll find by going farther down?*" Jamie asked. "We've lost that thing; we have the pictures you wanted—"

"It didn't come from nowhere," she said. "There'll be a cave, a nest, something. We've got to know."

"Look," said the holographer. She pointed downward with the faceted lenses of her camera, then flicked a switch to turn it on. The camera's hum began again, and Jamie looked at what she was recording.

The light picked out movement below—slow, oozing movement of something nearly shapeless. Something pale in the dark, something that shook as the light touched it and tried to flow away from it. Shadows crawled. There were other moving shapes outside the focus of the light-----

Then Jamie realized that these things weren't on the walls of the chasm, they were *below*. He thought: A ledge? Some overhanging growth? But he knew better: this was the bottom of the Abyss.

It crawled with hie as Gloriana swept the lightbeam back and forth; shapes bulged upward, writhed hi the light, fell back. Was it one giant creature or a colony of them? Everything below seemed to be moving; Jamie couldn't tell. The hot floor of the Abyss pulsed, flowed and quivered, and the light moved across that pale mass like a knife: the dead-white creatures parted as it touched them.

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Some of me shapes did not move; they were as dead white as the tentacled creatures, but as Jamie got a better look at the scene below, he realized that there were masses of fungoids down there—huge, shapeless blobs that loomed up out of the floor of the Abyss. Some of them seemed torn, eaten away in huge chunks: the food on which the tentacled monsters fed?

Suddenly the flier was jolted, and it pitched sideways; Jamie slammed into the wall of the compartment as the holographer fell against him. She had doubled over in-stinctively, cradling her camera. The flier rolled, and Jamie, held by his gravity harness, tried to steady the holographer as she tumbled across him. But her hands were slippery with sweat; the camera flew loose and struck him a numbing blow on the right shoulder.

"Take the stick!" Gloriana shouted at the pilot. Black-ness whirled around Jamie; he couldn't orient his vision. Outside, the light swept across a pale mass that shuddered and bulged. The flier was jolted again, and Jamie saw something ropy and white flash through the lightbeam.

The holographer managed to climb off him, but *the* flier was still spinning in air. "Jamie!" Gloriana said. "Giovan's out!"

Jamie saw that tfie young man had slumped in his seat; his head and shoulders were being thrown about as the flier tumbled. "Straighten the stick!" he told Gloriana.

"Tm trying to!" she snapped. "Jamie, I've never flown!"

He switched off the gravity harness that held him, caught the back of the pilot's seat and managed to pull himself forward to lean over the pilot's shoulder. The flier tumbled forward; Jamie fell across the seat-back, but he got hold of the stick and pulled back. The flier seemed to jerk upward. Gloriana grasped him by the shoulders with both hands and pulled him into the seat with her. He lost the stick, the flier yawed crazily, and he caught it again.

He eased the stick into the upright position and held it steady; the flier righted in the air. Outside, below, the pale

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creatures surged upward, furred tentacles writhing in the air. The flier was only a few meters above the seething bodies.

Then one of the tentacles caught the flier, striking it with such force that Jamie was thrown forward against the instrument panel. He pushed off from it and grabbed for the stick again. He pulled it back sharply—and nothing happened.

The stick moved loosely in its socket. The front port was half covered by the writhing tentacle, its suckers spreading and gripping against the 'glass. The flier began to tumble downward again toward that huge mass of pale bodies. There were floor pedals—frantically Jamie shifted posi-tion and pressed them. In a gravity flier there must be simple UP and DOWN controls.

The first pedal he pressed was the right one; the flier rose several meters, but then a weight dragged on it, slowing its rise. Jamie saw another tentacle cross the port, and the flier stopped rising. White suckers opened and closed on the glass like hungry mouths.

He pressed the antigravity pedal to the floor, but the flier could rise no more; the weight of the bodies on it was holding it back. Once again he pulled on the flight stick, but he could feel that something had broken in the mechanism.

The flier began to descend as more and more of the creatures below reached up to grasp at it and pull it down. Jamie realized suddenly that *the* creatures made no sound whatever; all he heard was the laboring hum of the flier's engines. Tentacles writhed across the port in front of him and dun shapes moved below, but they were silent; it was

chilling.

"The lightbeam," he said then. "Focus it on those things that are holding us."

Gloriana understood and moved quickly. The light, which had been directed downward, onto a pulsing ovoid

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of mottled grey and white flesfi, now darted upward and touched one of the tentacles on the 'glass. It quivered and retracted out of sight. The beam touched another; it crawled away, trailing a film of ooze on the port, and Gloriana followed it with the light till it let go and fell.

"You're right," she said, and at the same time he felt tie flier begin to rise again. He kept the antigravity pedal pressed to the floor. The light moved back and forth, cut-ting across pale-furred bodies that tried to crawl onto the flier; at the light's touch they shuddered and withdrew.

Behind Jamie the holographer was saying, "Oh yes," and he heard the hum of her camera again. The slimy trails of tentacles obscured his vision through the port, but the flier continued to rise. The temperature in the flier made Jamie's vision swim sickeningly.

The writhing, oozing mass of bodies was falling away farther and farther below. . . . They were almost free, and Jamie began to feel the vertigo of release.

Suddenly, with a searing jolt, he realized what that life mass was, and the understanding froze him with horror. *The Beast*. A blind thing whose body was refuse, whose mind was black sin. The creature of all evil, come to life in the secret depths of the Abyss and feeding on the putrescence of soul and body that was cast daily into the darkness ... Jamie shook his head. This wasn't his thought; he knew nothing of the Beast, of the sense of sin that flooded into him. His mind was being invaded by someone else's vision, a consuming dread that saw these creatures as the em-bodiment of primordial evil.

On the 'glass port in front of his eyes, suckers opened and closed, shuddered in the lightbeam and writhed away into the darkness.

It's all one enormous creature, he thought. It fills the floor of the Abyss and crawls toward the surface, driven by some awful hunger...

But I don't believe that!

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Yet He did, and the fear that went with the understand-ing mingled with his bewilderment at losing control of his own mind. He saw the Beast-mass pulsing and rising, gathering itself into a mountain of pale flesh as the crea-tures crawled and scabbled over each other in their effort to reach the flier. Tentacles flashed sinuously through the darkness; there were thumps below as they struck the underside of the flier. ... A dead-white sucker opened and closed on the port right in front of him, its mucous interior clearly visible against the 'glass. It was an obscene sight, and he felt his stomach twist within him.

Suddenly he struck at the tentacle and began to pound on the 'glass with both hands. He heard a shrill screaming and realized it was his own voice.

He stopped pounding. Gloriana had grabbed him by the shoulders and was trying to wrestle him back into the seat; his shoulder, the one the camera had struck, sent sharp stabs of pain through him.

"Stop it, Jamie, *stop it!* We're almost out!" It was her voice, Gloriana's. He must have stopped screaming.

For a moment he saw the flier compartment clearly, lit by tiny interior lights, while outside the ports the intense white of the lightbeam sliced across heaving shapes.

Then the fear came again, filling his body and mind with electric agony. He felt bombs exploding in his stomach, one after another, and they wouldn't stop. The tentacle crawled on the port; another whipped across it and fastened to the 'glass, suckers gripping.

"Get us *upF* Gloriana said.

"Yes," he said, "I know." He tried to remember how to lift the flier, but the Beast clotted his thoughts. That writhing mass ... He fumbled with the useless stick, then remembered: the foot controls.

He found the antigrav pedal, pressed it, and the flier began to rise again. The pounding against the underside stopped, and his mind seemed to clear.

The last tentacle slid down the port and the dim shape

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of the creature fell away. They were free, and they rose in i the darkness. Jamie looked up quickly, and saw, far above, a brilliant patch of light: the sky above the Abyss.

"Are you all right?" Gloriana was asking him. j

"Yes . . ." He sat up in the seat, disengaging himself from her. Had she been holding him down? "I'm okay , now. But I saw—" i

What had he seen? The Beast, monstrous putrescent flesh that pulsed and rose from the floor of the Abyss, bringing endless death with its touch... i

"I know," said Gloriana. "You saw the Beast. Dont think about it now; let's get back to the field. Giovan , needs medical help; so do you." ,

His shoulder ached; he felt it gingerly with his left hand and wondered if bones were broken. His whole body was i drenched with perspiration. The flier rose, and the light- j beam showed nothing in the darkness now.

"I think I was crazy," he said.

She shook her head. "No; I saw it too for a while. It j was a broadcast—one of the priestesses, I think. It was • her vision, and you fell into it."

Jamie saw the pilot stirring beside him, trying to sit up. There was a red gash across his forehead. Jamie helped the young man to steady himself.

"I saw it too," said the holographer behind them. "But | I tuned it out. I was shooting those things down there."

Jamie thought: So it *wasn't* my own vision. I thought ; I'd gone completely out of my head, but...

The sense of writhing, oozing evil returned for a mo- i ment in his memory, and he shut it out with an effort of i will. But he knew that chill vision would remain with him f forever*

In her textured, dim room in an isolated house on the South Edge, a fifteen-year-old girl who had been sitting t in a simple lotus suddenly tensed with pain, broke her f

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lotus and writhed on the floor, tittering soft, bewildered grunts.

The man who was her attendant rushed to her side and held her, stroking her temples, and murmuring soothingly. But it was many long minutes before her heart slowed and her knotted muscles relaxed.

Sounds and sights and smells returned slowly, the comforting sensations of the entire city. The monitor saw everything again; she was everyone; she thought their thoughts and felt then* breaths, thousands each second, entering and leaving her lungs. She was full again, and the brief nightmare receded to forgotten memory,

For a few cold seconds she had thought she was only one person.

Is it possible to see too far? Though we see only truth, our vision may be false: In open space we see galaxies, but few suns.

At least, on planets, there are horizons where some can see time move.

—The Book of Causes

THERE was already a crowd at the Winter Gate. Mostly class children, dozens of *them*, but quite a few adults too. Nikki-Three wrinkled her nose in disgust—people would do anything to break the monotony of their lives. The foreigner was just a millipede after all, just someone who happened to have a lot of legs and patchy fur like a dog with mange. In fact, it was about as smart as a dog— hadn't Jordan said millipedes couldn't even count?

She smiled joylessly to herself. A crowd of people gathered from all over the city, come to talk with a mangy dog.

"Are you feeling better?" Jordan asked her, seeing her smile. He had stayed with her even when his class children had dispersed to push their way into the crowd. The two of them, tall gangly Jordan and short fat Nikki, sat in sun-warmed dust outside the Winter Gate and waited.

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"Better that what?" Nikki said wearily. He was so dull; what had Nikki-Two seen in him? But then she was such a drab herself, so unthinking, so unaware, so stupidly eager about everything. It was amazing Nikki-Two could breathe without falling in love with air.

"You seemed sick earlier," Jordan said. "And upset. I guess the sun bothers you more than me."

She glared at him, "Why? Because I'm fat? Listen, I didn't make this body and it doesn't bother me. Who are you to criticize anyway? You're so tall it probably takes you three minutes to wiggle your toes. You're a freak."

"I lead a long life," he said with the air of someone who'd said the same thing many times before. "Tell me about Nikki-One—what's she like?"

"What do you care?" Nikki-Three said. "She isn't out —*I'm* out."

"If you call that *out*" Jordan said. "Come on, Nikki, I'm curious—what sort of person produces both you and the one I met earlier?"

"A fat one," Nikki-Three said. A sloppy, disgusting one who never had anything because she never deserved any-thing, she thought. A stupid girl who'd wear a hot shawl out into the sun and expect *her*, Nikki-Three, to carry it around all day. Or was it Nikki-Two who'd put on the shawl? No wonder she had a

fat body; how else could she have fit all of them inside?

Nikki began to struggle out of the shawl; she pulled it over her head, holding down her blouse to cover her cavernous belly button. She dropped the shawl on the ground beside her. Let some other Nikki come back and pick it up, she thought. *I'm* not going to.

"Nikki-One," she said for the benefit of Jordan, who sat waiting patiently for her to say more, "even disgusts herself. That's why she takes the pills—so she can become someone else. Except she doesn't; she just gets taken over by the rest of us. She just dies for a while. I guess that's what she wants, and no wonder."

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Jordan said, "I took one of these pills once. It was in-teresting; would you like to hear about it?"

"Sure," she said. "Who did you become? Probably a professional hiker and a male belly dancer and a philoso-pher. One personality for every meter of your body." She guffawed.

"Nikki," he said, "you're a pain hi the ass." He got up and went to join the crowd wailing for the millipede.

Nikki saw him work his way around the fringes of the crowd, looking over people's heads to get a better view. Some people, she thought sourly, can stand at the back of a crowd and still see everything.

She felt very alone suddenly. Not that it bothered her, but it was a little boring. She climbed to her feet, glanced at the shawl and went after Jordan. He disappeared into the crowd as she approached; Nikki tried to follow, but the press of bodies was too tight for her. She began to shove her way through.

"Watch it," said a young girl, pushing back at her. "You think just because Jordan talks to you, you can do anything you want?"

Nikki looked down and saw the crisp figure of Robin, looking calm and self-composed even in the middle of this hot crowd.

"The foreigner's almost here," Robin said. "You're too late to get a good place."

Nikki was annoyed by her air of superiority. "I see *you* aren't at the front," she said.

Robin wandered away from the crowd and began to draw neat squares and triangles in the dust with her heel. "I gave my place to some kid who was interested," she said,

Nikki glanced again at the press of bodies and saw that she'd never get through them to find Jordan. Well, good riddance. "You don't fool me," she said to Robin. "You'd give just about anything to get a good look at that mM-pede."

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"No I wouldn't," said Robin. "Just a dumb worm." She drew lines from the corners of the squares to the points of the triangles. She added a circle, then immediately scuffed it out. "You know what I'd really like?"

"You'd like to go to bed with your teacher," Nikki said, feeling deliciously nasty.

Robin grimaced impatiently. "Do you want to hear or not?"

A murmur rose in the crowd; Nikki heard someone say he saw the millipede coming. She turned her back to the noise. "All right, tell me. What would you really, really like in your inmost soul?"

Robin stared at her for a second, then looked down at the figures she'd drawn in the dust. Almost to herself she said, "I really wish somebody would just tell me what everything's all about. Instead of lessons, I mean, and pil-grimages and stuff. Just tell me what the point of every-thing is."

Nikki laughed in surprise. "There *is* no point, don't you know that?"

"I bet there is," Robin said. "You just mean you don't know what it is. And *you're* all grown up."

•Nikki decided that she despised this smug little girl. She was as hateful as the rest of them.

Then she saw the way Robin was looking at her. Eagerly, hopefully. Waiting for her—Nikki—to tell her something.

"Look," she said, "don't fall into all those sewers they give you. There isn't any meaning to anything that hap-pens. And don't take any of their mystical garbage either; that's the worst of it all. Just take a look at the priestesses and gurus and so on, and compare them with the rest of us. Who's got the money? Who gets to do whatever they want?"

Robin went back to drawing in the dust with her heel. She drew a circle again and filled it in, carefully piling up dust around the edges.

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"It's people like them who know better than to believe any of the stuff they say," Nikki told her. It seemed im-portant to make this little girl understand—maybe be-cause she seemed a little like Nikki herself suddenly. "But they want everybody *else* to think there are purposes and meanings and . . . *values* and garbage like that."

Robin sighed. "I know. But what's the point of all *that*?" She looked up then, right into Nikki's eyes, and Nikki had to look away. The sun was shining right in the girl's eyes, making them bright golden mirrors.

It was so hot out here.

"Oh well," said Robin, scuffing out the circle she'd drawn in the dust. "Maybe the millipede will be interest-ing after all." She turned away and went toward the crowd, leaving Nikki as though she were a doll run dry of water.

Nikki hesitated a moment, then followed Robin into the crowd. People moved aside for Robin, who didn't hesitate to use her elbows, and Nikki pushed her way through the small spaces left in the girl's wake. Some of the children tried to hold her back, but when Nikki used her bulk they couldn't stop her.

Before she'd reached the front of the crowd she heard Jordan talking: "We always meet visitors," she heard him say. "I know you people come here to learn, because Cirque is a spiritual center, but, you see, we need to learn about everything else."

A dry, reedy voice said, "You wish to learn? From me?"

"That's right," said Jordan. "We're really pretty isolated here. A lot of people come to Cirque, but we seldom go anywhere ourselves. I guess because—well, we love our city."

"Cirque is famous for its beauty," said the reedy voice, "both of sight and mind."

Nikki couldn't get any farther forward; bodies were pressed too closely together at the front of the crowd.

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Robin had disappeared, *burrowing* under elbows and hips. Nikki couldn't see anything but the backs of heads. She stopped pushing; she thought: Everybody always gets there before me.

She heard a child's voice: "Tell us about where you come from!"

"What are you asking?" The reed-like voice again.

"She means what world are you from?" said an adult. "What's it like there?"

•

"My world is Vertariat, or so we usually call it. A planet of Aldebaran. Much beauty, but not at the present time. Most of us are voyaging."

"Is that like questing?" asked another child.

"I am not sure," said the foreigner. "What is 'questing'? Was that the word? What does it mean?"

The press of bodies around Nikki became even tighter as more and more people, children and adults alike, tried to move forward. Nikki fought a sickness in her stomach from the sun's heat and the closeness of so many bodies. The blouse of her body-suit clung to her breasts and belly as though she were trapped in it. She heard Robin's voice: "Questing means you're look-ing for something, not just wandering around."

"I do not understand," the foreigner said.

"You know," said Robin. "It's when you really have a good idea what you expect to find, but you want to see it."

"Of course," said the foreigner. "How is this different from wandering around?"

Nikki suddenly knew that she was going to fall. Every-thing was whirling around her—the children, the hot sky, voices and pungent odors. Somewhere—somewhere she wasn't looking—a terrible thing was about to happen. She leaned for support against a boy in front of her, but he moved away, crying "Hey!" and she tumbled forward. Her mouth struck against someone's back, and she was shoved sideways; she tried to grab at someone's arm, but she slid downward and hit the ground.

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Crimson light pulsed in her eyes, and a chill spread from her temples to her neck, enveloping her body.

Something was clutching at her from behind, a dark and terrifying ghost. She shivered and tried to get to her knees.

No! It's too soon! I'm not finished!

A hand touched her shoulder. A voice, Jordan's voice, said, "Lie still a minute. Lie still, Nikki; take it easy." She rolled onto her back. The crowd had moved away, form-ing a circle around her; she saw them as dim shapes wavering against the intense blue sky.

Her shivering passed and her head began to clear. She found herself giggling, relieved that she was regaining control of her body. The one who was trying to come out, Nikki-Four, had lost again. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

There was a soft touch on her forehead, cool and sooth-ing. "You have no need to try so hard," someone said. "You have much time to be here."

She smiled and opened her eyes. Jordan was— It wasn't Jordan.

It was the millipede, its dark, liquid eyes gazing at her with the impersonality of a holograph image. Its fur glowed golden in the sun, creating a halo around its head. It was touching her with one of its forefeet.

She sat up suddenly, ignoring her dizziness, and pushed the millipede away. "Stop it," she said. "Don't." It was creepy, this thing; she hadn't realized it would be so ...

But she wasn't afraid of it; she wouldn't be afraid. Why should she be afraid of somebody who just happened to be shaped differently? Weirdly. "I'm okay; let me alone," she mumbled.

The millipede moved away from her—it seemed to flow like water in a slow stream. It said, "Why do you try so hard?" That reedy voice again, so flat and calm. Yet puzzled.

"I said let me alone," she told it. "The *last* thing I need is to have you running clammy feet all over me."

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They weren't really clammy; they were dry and soft. Even soothing, in a way. But the *nerve* of this ... It didn't even belong on Earth!

Jordan was still beside her; he said, "No one is trying to hurt you, Nikki. You're all right. Have you changed again?"

"Of course I'm all right." To prove it, she got to her feet, pushing away his hands when he reached out to help her. She swayed for a second when she stood, but the dizziness quickly passed. She dusted herself off. "You're still Nikki-Three," Jordan said. It was almost an accusation.

She flashed a triumphant grin at him. "That's right. I'm stronger than the others."

"Well, you sure faint a lot," said Robin. The young girl was inspecting her critically, as though Nikki were a body-suit she was thinking of buying.

"This person uses a chemical to fragment her mind," said the foreigner. It had not moved far away.

"Naturally she is weakened."

Nikki didn't like the way everybody was staring at her; the children looked as though they were about to laugh at any second, and this creepy foreigner kept acting as if it were *so smart!* She didn't have to put up with sewage like that.

"Listen," she told it, "just shut your mouth—if you call that thing a mouth." She giggled, and took courage from her wit. "No, I'll tell you what," she said. "If you know so much, just answer one small question for us. Okay? Just one question. This little girl here asked me a question a minute ago, and I'd like to hear you answer it. If you're *so smart!*"

Jordan said, "Oh, come on, Nikki—"

"No," she told him, pushing him aside and approach-ing the milh'pede. "This thing we call a *person*, which shows how polite we are, comes here and tries to tell us how to live our lives. Well, you brought your class here

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to learn, didn't you? So let's ask it some questions. And I've got a question that one of your own students asked me."

"I am flattered to be asked any question," said the mil-lipede, its voice dry as the dust. "I am not smart, but I shall respond to anything asked."

"Robin, come here!" Nikki held out her hand to the girl, and after a moment Robin came to stand beside her, looking dubiously from Nikki to Jordan and back again. "Okay," said Nikki, putting her arm around Robin's shoulders. "Just tell us this much. It's not a big question— it's just a little girl's question—but let's hear you answer it. What's the meaning of life?"

The foreigner's eyes blinked—Nikki hadn't realized it had eyelids; they were covered with downy fur.

Creepy. The foreigner said, "Life is an embodiment of conscious-ness. Is that the right answer?"

Nikki looked suspiciously at the millipede. Was it trying to make fun of her? "I didn't ask you for a *definition*. What I want to know is what the purpose of life is. What's the point of it?"

She squeezed Robin's shoulders and grinned down at her. "You pay close attention now, because it's going to tell us the purpose of life," she told the girl. Robin looked uncomfortable and tried to squirm out of Nikki's grasp.

The millipede's head bobbed up and down, back and forth, as though it were sniffing a nonexistent wind. Its forefeet—the eight of them that were off the ground— waved aimlessly.

"Well?" said Nikki.

"How can life have any purpose?" the foreigner asked. "I think I do not understand your question." The creature's eyes searched faces and settled on Robin's. "You are the one who asked this question?" it asked her.

Robin straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin defiantly. She shrugged off Nikki's arm. "It isn't such a dumb question," she said. "It's really simple, only nobody

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will take it seriously. See, everybody's always trying to teach me stuff, like about the early missionaries or the names of trees or just things like that. But I keep thinking I'd like to know why we're here, only nobody will tell me."

The millipede had lowered its forepart to Robin's height as it listened to her. Now it smiled with its thin, sliced mouth

and asked gently. "What is your religion?"

"Oh, come on!" Robin snapped. "None of that!"

"Then what is your view of reality?" the millipede asked.

Nikki noticed that everyone in the crowd was standing silently, listening to the foreigner as though it were an oracle from the stars. How stupid could they be? Did they really think this thing was going to tell them some great truth they'd never heard from the thousand temples in Cirque, just because it came from somewhere else?

Sure, that was exactly what they thought. That was why they all came out to meet it—to hear it talk about things it had seen out near Aldebaran, or what it thought of Cirque, or how it felt to walk around on twenty or thirty legs. As thought any of that meant anything.

"I'm just a Centrist," Robin said to the millipede. "You know—the world radiates out from the Abyss because God lives down there, where it's dark and nobody can see. But I'm not sure I really believe that even."

"Hey!" said one of the other children. "Did you know there's some real scary thing coming out of the Abyss? There was a broadcast this morning."

"I do know that," said the millipede. "I want to see it. That is why I have come."

Jordan spoke up: "You mean you can tune in to the broadcasts too? I thought only humans could see them."

The millipede turned its head to him, lifting it further from the ground, blinking slowly. "I do not see your broadcasts. I know of what is happening now in your

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Abyss because this eruption is famous on my world. How could it not become famous?"

"Already?" said Jordan.

"Not already in time," the millipede said. "It will take days for this news to reach Aldebaran.

It's talking in riddles, Nikki thought. The better to im-press the heathens, of course.

"You never answered my question," Robin said. "I bet you don't even know the answer."

The millipede regarded her silently, then lowered its head till it was looking up at her from *the* ground. It said, "That is true. I do not know of any purpose to life. There are so many people living—now, yesterday, tomorrow. There is no end to life, so if there is purpose it is never achieved. One person dies; a thousand die; stars fade into blackness. All the purposes that people imagine die with them. And other people live somewhere else with other purposes. Nothing is ever an end. How can there be a purpose such as you ask?"

Robin was making crosses in the dust with her heel, one after another, rapidly. She said, "I didn't ask you about stars or anything. Forget it." She looked up at Nikki. "People who don't know anything aren't *interesting*," she said.

There was an embarrassed silence. Nikki thought: Well, we've been rude to our visitor, and it hasn't even gotten past the Gate.

But the millipede showed no sign of resentment. Raising its head into the air, forefeet waving, it asked, "Is the River Fundament near?"

Several people tried to answer at once, Jordan among them. Nikki stepped forward and put her hand on the millipede's sparsely furred back, forcing herself not to shudder. "I'll show you," she said magnanimously, and guided the foreigner westward through the crowd. It wasn't as awful to touch as she'd expected; its fur was soft, its skin surprisingly cool in the sun.

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The crowd followed them, and Nikki saw Robin star-ing at her with a look of betrayal. She suppressed a grin. Kid, she thought, you've got a lot to learn about people.

"Here we are." Nikki guided the millipede toward a grey, sun-bleached dock where four gravity boats were tied up. A single attendant lounged in the shade of his boathouse, placidly watching the approaching crowd of people. He was used to crowds: the gravity boats on the River Fundament were popular with the tourists hi Cirque and with the people of Cirque themselves.

The river flowed slowly past, bounded by high banks covered with dense foliage: wild strawberry vines, flower-ing bushes, tree ferns, alders growing outward from the banks and curving up toward the sun. The river was a soft blue here, its surface smooth, the lush banks of the western side reflected in it like a memory of jungles.

The millipede paused at the top of the steps that went down to the dock. It peered upriver, its head bobbing in the air. Then it slowly turned to scan the river as it flowed past and slipped quietly under the walls of Cirque to the left. The millipede's fur stirred under Nikki's hand; she dropped her hand to her side.

"I feel honor," the millipede said.

"You'll feel more than that when you shoot the First Cataract," Nikki told it. "I'll bet there isn't anything like it out in space."

Nikki had never ridden the gravity boats, either as her-self or as any of the other Nikkis, but everyone hi Cirque knew of them. Sometimes the broadcasts included a trip downriver by some visitor; their reactions

were exciting.

"There is only one River Fundament," the millipede said. "There are rivers on every planet—if not today, then yesterday or tomorrow. None is the Fundament."

"Come on," said Nikki, urging the creature down the steps. The attendant had come out of his beathouse when he saw the millipede; now he came forward to wait at the bottom of the steps, smiling his tourist smile.

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Jordan had caught up to Nikki and now walked beside her down the steps. He asked the millipede, "Is the River Fundament famous on your world, then?"

"Very famous," said the millipede. "From the present time to centuries to come. It has given nourishment to the eruption of your Abyss, you see. It is a fortunate river."

"You seem to know a lot about Cirque that we don't know ourselves," Jordan said. "Are you sure you haven't been listening to wild rumors?"

Robin laughed at that as though it were hilariously funny; but when no one else laughed she abruptly quieted and looked annoyed.

"The city of Cirque is famous on my world," explained the millipede. "Its Abyss, its River Fundament, all are famous. We of course have senses that you lack—just as you can see broadcasts in your minds that we do not see. Surely you know much about Cirque that I shall never know."

They had reached the boat landing, Nikki and Jordan and the millipede, with the crowd close behind them.

The attendant, short and muscled in a red undershirt, stepped forward. He shook one of the millipede's forefeet with his right hand, and another with his left. "Well come to the Winter Gate of Cirque," he said.

He had an accent, Nikki noticed—not one of the Cirque accents, but one from the hills to the north. How typical that an outlander should greet visitors to the city.

"I feel honor," the millipede said. "I shall ride a gravity boat all the way to the Abyss. I should like to pay for the boat now."

The attendant shook his head as the millipede began to rummage in its green leather pouch. "Oh no, no need to pay—we provide the boat rides free for visitors."

"When a boat is damaged, it is the responsibility of the person who has chartered it, is that correct?" asked the millipede, drawing from its pouch several money-spheres.

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Nikki saw that they contained gold dust in a mercury solution, the most valuable of all interplanetary coinage. "What is the value of one gravity boat?" asked the millipede.

The attendant raised his hands, shaking his head. "No, no, I don't collect any money. It really isn't dangerous, you see, cataracts and all—you'll be safe and so will your boat. You wait and see."

The millipede hesitated. "I should prefer to pay for the boat now," it said; but it returned the money-spheres to its pouch. The attendant led them across sun-bleached planks to the nearest gravity boat.

"Are you riding alone?" the attendant asked.

The millipede bobbed its head back and forth. "It might be best," it said.

But Nikki stepped forward again. This was her chance to ride the boats—and to do it herself, not through Nikki-One or any of the others. "I'll go with you," she said. "I can tell you about all the parts of the city we go through—I'll be your guide."

The attendant looked at her dubiously. Nikki smiled brightly at him. The millipede said, "I respond to your kindness," and Nikki's smile flashed triumphant.

The millipede boarded the gravity boat, lifting its forepart across the half meter between the boat and the dock, then lowering its forefeet to the boat's boarding step and flowing into the passenger area. There were six seats, each with its gravity harness. There were no controls; the boats were self-guiding.

"Anybody else going with you?" the attendant asked. Nikki held out her hand for the man to steady her as she clambered aboard. First class, she thought. It just takes a little nerve, and you get what you want.

She saw Robin standing on the dock, staring at her with a stricken look. For a second Nikki felt a pang of conscience; she and the girl had been allies against the foreigner, but Nikki had defected.

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Maybe I can teach her some more lessons, she thought. She held out her hand to the girl. "Hey, Robin, come with us." „

Robin's eyes grew wide, but she made no immediate response. Instead Jordan said, "The class has to stay together. Sorry, but she can't go."

Nikki saw with surprise that Jordan was angry with her. Jordan? Angry? How delicious.

"Oh, please," Nikki said. "It will be so much fun, and Robin will learn a lot—she'll be with this person who's

come all the way from Aldebaran. She can tell the class about it tomorrow." Nikki turned again to the girl. "Robin? Tell him you want to come with us. It'll be ex-citing."

Robin made up her mind; she said, "I do want to go, Jordan. And I can get home by myself later; I don't live too far from the Final Cataract."

Jordan scowled. He said to the millipede, "Perhaps you object?"

Its furred eyelids blinked. "Not at all. I prefer to share excitements."

Robin ran forward and jumped into the boat; it rocked in the water as she seated herself next to Nikki. She set her gravity harness and sat still, staring straight forward. Nikki patted her hand and smiled softly. She loyed win-ning.

"Well," said Jordan, and then he stopped. His gaze moved from Robin to the millipede, who was inspecting its harness, adjusting it to its own dimensions. Jordan asked it, "Why did you want to pay for damage to this boat? If you expect anything dangerous—"

"Oh no," said the millipede, fur rippling on its neck and chest. "Robin will not be hurt. You need not fear for her safety."

"The boats are safer than traffic carts," said the boat attendant. "It's been years since we had any trouble."

"I know," said Jordan. "But I've met millipedes before,"

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and I remember they were always having hunches about what was going to happen. I used to play Go with one of them, and it always beat me.'

Jordan stood by the boat, staring down at the millipede. Jordan was very tall, and the boat bobbed in the water at his feet. Nikki decided that she didn't like looking up at him; she said to the attendant, "Will you cast us off, please?"

The attendant nodded and walked across the rough planks of the dock to the winch that anchored their boat. He pressed a metal plate, and the boat's cable retracted into a slot in the bow. The gravity engines started up with a low hum.

As the boat moved away from the dock, Nikki said, "Jordan, I tHink you're just mad at me. Don't take it out on poor Robin."

Jordan looked anxious. "No, Fm worried. The milli-pede said it knew things we don't—"

The boat drifted out into the river current and began to move lazily downstream. Nikki called, "You're just mad at me. Admit it, Jordan, admit it!"

The teacher stood helplessly as the boat moved farther out into the river. It was cool out here on the water; Nikki breathed a long sigh of pleasure. She saw Jordan waving goodbye, and she waved back.

Appeal to their better nature, she thought. Make them feel guilty.

Beside her, Robin leaned forward and said to the milli-pede, "Jordan really was wrong, wasn't he? He thinks you can see the future or something, I bet."

The millipede turned for a moment to look at Robin with its great dark eyes. It smiled briefly. Cool; the air at water level was cool.

"I do see the future," said the millipede. "Do not be afraid."

The boat began to rush headlong down the river, pick-

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ing up speed as it entered the midstream current and raced toward the cataracts and the Abyss.

It was early afternoon when Gregorian arrived at the Cathedral of the Five Elements. He parked his cart under cool pine trees and walked to the Cathedral entrance, studying the massive chimney that dominated the build-ing. Nearly ten meters high, he guessed; but he recognized the regulator at the chimney top as a type that drew air smoothly. Good, he thought; the fire will have enough height.

He went inside and found himself in a foyer built of ancient woods. There was a young couple waiting there, neither of them yet twenty years old, both dressed in out-lander styles. They sat on a bench in the corner, obviously awed by their surroundings. Gregorian noticed them cast-ing covert glances his way.

He decided to be polite to them. "Love to you," he said. "I have to see the priestess, Salamander—do you know if she's around?"

The young woman said eagerly, "Oh yes—we saw her. Right, Salvator? Just a few minutes ago."

"Yes," said the young man. "She went past the door-way there, and she nodded to us." He was shorter than Gregorian, with a stocky body and a round face. Blond hair.

"We have an audience with her today," said the woman. "But she's busy getting ready for the service tonight. Did you know that they broadcasted her meditation this morn-ing? She saw that thing that's coming up out of the Abyss, and she *recognized* it. It's the *Beast!* Really scary, but she'll know how to deal with it."

Gregorian decided that the woman's mouth was too wide. "Is she in there?" he asked, nodding toward the chapel.

"Yes, but she can't be interrupted. There's an ap-prentice around somewhere."

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"I'll wait for her," Gregorian said. He began to wander around the foyer, looking at icons of water and fire gods that dated back centuries. He recognized one of the fire gods as Sathana, the Devouring Mother; he'd been in-terested in her when he was in art school because she was a patron saint of fire sculptors. The

terra-cotta statuette of her that sat on a shelf here was crude; its face was hardly distinguishable in the flames. But it was old, Gregorian thought—molecular glazing had been abandoned over two hundred years ago.

I'll give them points for purity, he thought, but none for art.

A young boy was standing in the doorway to the chapel, gazing at him with large eyes. The apprentice, Gregorian decided. He'd seen the boy when he was here before.

He went to him, looking into hazel eyes. "My name is Gregorian," he said. "The priestess will want to see me right away."

The boy continued to stare at him. Such naked awe in his eyes, Gregorian thought; the green in his eyes shone even in the dim light of the foyer.

"You're the man who creates Fire tonight," said the boy at last. "Yes, come with me." He turned and led the way through the doorway into the chapel, and Gregorian followed.

The young outlander woman called after the boy, "You won't forget that *we* have an audience, will you?"

She's so anxious, Gregorian thought. A gaunt, nervous woman. Of course she's devoutly religious.

The apprentice didn't answer her; casting occasional glances over his shoulder at Gregorian, the boy led him through the packed-dirt chapel and around to the side, where a thick wooden door stood ajar. The boy stopped beside the door, rapped twice and motioned him inside.

Gregorian went in. The room was tiny, barely three meters on a side; there were no windows, but a candle danced in one corner. Part of a personal shrine, Gregorian

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noticed. Devotion and utility combined in a candle; he liked that.

The priestess came forward, flame-red hair and a dramatic white cape. Very sexy, except that she was so thin, so small. Nikki would make two of her.

The priestess held out her hand, and after a moment's hesitation Gregorian knelt to kiss her bracelet. Even on his knees, Gregorian came up to her breasts.

"I hope your Fire will be a large one," said the priestess. "We will have an important ceremony tonight."

Gregorian frowned as he stood up again. "You didn't tell me that yesterday. How large is large?"

The priestess shrugged and waved a dismissive hand. "No matter. Fire will make its own space in the darkness, whatever its size or shape." She smiled gravely. "There will be a message tonight, you see—a rather frightening one. We will need the warmth of Fire."

"Oh, it'll be warm enough," Gregorian said. "I figured you'd want that, so I used chemicals that will—"

"I appreciate that," said Salamander, turning away. She stood facing her shrine for a moment, her long hair catching the candlelight and spreading it into a halo of fire. "Were you tuned in this morning when my vision was broadcast?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I was working."

"And you don't pick up broadcasts when you work? Many artists do, I've heard."

Gregorian felt impatient; he wanted to get the fire laid and go home, look for Nikki—"Not me," he said.

"Some-times I get echoes, because fire sculpting is a preconscious process like any other art, but I concentrate too deeply on what I'm doing to pick up anything more." He looked around and saw that the door still stood ajar; outside he saw the open space of the great Cathedral and the high chimney that dominated one wall. "Shall I start?"

Salamander turned back to him, nodding. "By all means." She followed him as he went through the door

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into the Cathedral; he heard the soft rustle of her cape behind him. He went to the fireplace and stood looking up at the chimney, hands on his hips. Yes, it was as he'd remembered it: a wide hearth set above the level of the Cathedral floor, tapering into a conventional-sized chimney. All built of atom-pressed brick—good, it would take the heat he needed for his fire.

"I'll bring in my materials," he said, starting for the foyer. But the apprentice stepped through the door, one of Gregorian's heavy chemical boxes in each hand. The boy paused as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and Gregorian took the metal boxes from him.

The apprentice immediately turned and went outside again—going for the woods and plastics, obviously. He can't be more than ten, Gregorian thought. Best to start them young, I guess.

"Erich is anxious today," said the priestess, frowning after the boy. "He saw my vision this morning, you see."

Gregorian nodded without interest and set about placing the chemical injectors high inside the Cathedral hearth. He used a timed bonding cement that would release the injectors when he came back for them tomorrow—an expensive cement, but Gregorian had designed these injectors himself and didn't want to leave them behind. They would shoot precisely measured streams of chemical at the exact angles and times for which he preset them, feeding colors and fuel to shape his flames.

The priestess stood watching as he worked, her eyes grave. After a while she asked, "Did you also not tune to the

broadcast from those people who were flying in the Abyss?"

He pressed one of the injectors against the hearth wall and waited for its cement to set. "I worked all morning," he said. "Didn't tune in to a thing."

"Then you have no idea what's happening to us," said Salamander.

Gregorian released an injector, tested it and saw that it

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would hold. He turned to look at the priestess. She was staring at him as though he were dying before her eyes—a look of tragedy, melodrama. He drew his tape measure from a blouse pocket and began checking to make sure the injector angles were right. "I don't have any idea about anything," he said.

The apprentice returned, his arms loaded with wooden logs and blocks. Gregorian took them from the boy quickly, afraid he might drop and break one of the smaller pieces. The apprentice went back outside for more, while Gregorian separated the wood by type; redwood, eucalyptus, cedar, oak and more. Each would burn at its own rate and its own height; some had been treated with grain expansion or contraction techniques to emphasize their individual properties.

"Our city faces a terrible threat," said Salamander. "Not only to our souls, but to our physical beings as well. All of Cirque could be destroyed in an hour. This is what you missed seeing in the broadcasts, because you were working."

Gregorian began putting up the graph-paper charts he had drawn, spreading them against the face of the chimney and bonding them with temporary cement that would evaporate in half an hour. "Is that what your temple believes?" he asked politely. "A day of judgment is coming? My temple says that too—I'm with the Pragmatic Temple of the Apocalypse."

He wasn't; Gregorian had no temple. The Pragmatic Temple was Nikki's faith, but sometimes he went with her to services.

The priestess stepped closer, her face growing stern. "This is no dogma that I tell you—I had a vision this morning as I meditated. I was in truth when I saw it." She paused, then sat down on the step in front of the hearth. She studied Gregorian's face as he spread charts against the great chimney. "You have never had a religious experience in your life, have you?" she said.

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"Of course I have," Gregorian said. He read numbers from the charts and pressed tiny buttons on the side of one of the chemical injectors. As he set each number he imagined a stream of chemical jetting outward into the fire, saw black flames spurt upward, tinged with silver, saw a deep red glow in the heart of the fire, spreading until it enveloped all the flames. Another number, and a single tongue of fire rose up, coiling sinuously. "Artists aren't a breed apart, you know," he told the priestess. "We're human; we have our hopes and fears. We believe in things."

Salamander smiled faintly. "Yes, but I know of the Pragmatic Temple of the Apocalypse. You are no member of that faith."

Gregorian paused, looking over his shoulder at her. "Why not?"

"Because you are no cynic," she said. He laughed. "Oh, lady, you ought to see me at service. I bring my lunch."

The first chemical injector was completely set; Gregorian went to the one on the left of the hearth. Again he read numbers from his charts and pressed buttons. Salamander watched him silently, no longer smiling.

The apprentice returned with the rest of his materials: the plastics, the curved and flowing materials made of controlled atoms. They weren't really controlled; that was only the name of the process, a boast by a manufacturer who'd gone out of business decades ago. The colors and shapes of their flames weren't as reliable as those of wood, but they did enable Gregorian to create effects that wood could never provide. He helped Erich as the boy set down his load gently, and then Gregorian began to sort the pieces.

Erich backed away, but then hesitated. "The people from Springs Crossing are still waiting to see you," he said to Salamander.

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"They must be patient," the priestess said. Erich bowed his head and left.

Gregorian wondered why the priestess chose to stay and watch him lay his fire. He found her presence a bit disturbing. For one thing, he was never at ease in a temple, whatever the faith, and priestesses, gurus, rabbis only added to his unease. He always felt they were judging him.

Besides, he was uncomfortably aware of Salamander as a woman. Her red hair was like the embers of a fire, ready to burst into renewed life whenever light touched it. Her mouth was full-lipped and sensual, the more so because of her quiet, contained manner.

Gregorian shook his head, still sorting the plastics. This woman was a priestess; she believed in forces beyond reason, deities who secretly controlled the world's destiny. He didn't like irrational people; he certainly never found them sexually attractive. In any case, Salamander was too slight, an abridged version of a woman.

"Those people outside are anxious to see you," he said.

"They will calm as they wait," she said with a slight shrug. "I have never seen Fire fashioned by a professional. Fire is the manifestation of one of our deities."

Gregorian finished sorting his materials. He stepped to the chimney face and studied one of the charts there. The

detonators first, yes. He selected a dozen egg-shaped plastics and laid them under the giant grate in a spiral trail. "You must feel the Spirit within Fire," Salamander said. "I imagine artists must always do their work through some sort of contact with Spirit."

Gregorian liked her voice; it was soft and husky. He wondered what she would sound like leading a chant.

"The only spirit I deal with is an artistic one," he said. "My own." He glanced around at her; she still sat on the step before the hearth, legs drawn up under her rust-colored skirt. Her white cape made her seem ghostly in

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the dimness. "One reason I like the Pragmatic Temple," he told her, "is that they recognize that everyone has the spark in them. At least they know that much."

He *realized* that he was beginning to attack her faith, so he turned back abruptly to the hearth. He reached for the smaller wood and began to lay sticks and blocks in a careful geometric pattern.

Salamander said, "But if everyone contains Spirit, then each of us has the responsibility of using it properly. You see? And so many people do not. We betray the Spirit within us; we feed on hatred and selfishness, and then we go to a temple and say, 'I regret this part of my life; I cast it into the Abyss.' And we assume it is gone forever, but it is not."

"Sure, it's hypocrisy," Gregorian said. He was surprised that she'd admit so much; her temple cast the sins of its followers into the Abyss just as all of them did. Or was she beginning to question her beliefs? "What had happened this morning, anyway?"

The first level of the fire was finished. Gregorian looked again at his charts and placed several larger pieces of wood and plastic on top of his base arrangement. Then he began to lay in joists and buttresses: the next level would be a few decimeters higher, leaving air for the fire to breathe.

Behind him Salamander said, "I have never seen hy-pocrisy in anyone. But I do see ignorance—people who are not aware of truth or of themselves. So they act irrationally."*

Gregorian laughed suddenly, amused at her definition of rationality. He sat back on his haunches and looked at her; she smiled at his laughter. There was gold in her eyes.

He took a breath and asked, "What happened this morning? What did I miss?"

Her eyes met his and held them; there was enormous force in her gaze. The force of quiet and calm, like the eye of a storm. He felt warmth begin somewhere within him

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and expand, and gradually he became aware of the vast size of the silence in the Cathedral. There were only the two of them in that great chapel before the high vault of the chimney.

"You should not ask me," Salamander said. "You would only believe that what I told you was hallucination." She smiled slowly, still holding his eyes. "I have already told you that Cirque may be destroyed—physically, not in any spiritual sense. You did not believe me. And you do not believe me now."

She dropped her eyes, and the warmth left him. He wanted to tell her that he believed her, that of course he believed her; he wanted the contact of their eyes to be possible again. But he knew better, so he turned back to his fire sculpture and began to cement the buttresses into place.

One on the right side of the construction, another on the left, and smaller joists in the center. They would burn too, of course; it was all part of the fire. So too were the wire-thin beams he screwed into place to help balance the materials to be piled above; they would burn in their time, at their rate.

He began the second level of the fire, carefully placing wood and plastic pieces atop joists and beams, balancing them against each other and cementing several together after they were in place. The construction began to resemble an apartment building for birds, each cubicle open to the air. But textures and colors were mismatched, and there was no coherent shape; as architecture it was pre-posterous-

You have to be able to see what it'll produce, not what it looks like now, Gregorian thought. That's the mystic part of fire sculpture, the part that transcends ordinary perception; you have to be able to see the possibilities inside things. Then he thought: Maybe that's what Salamander means

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by a religious experience. If so, then I have them all the time.

The priestess watched him studying his skeletal construction. She said, "Tell me about your Fire. Will it be grand, will it be awesome? I have seen several of your Fires, you know; they have grace."

Gregorian resumed his work on the sculpture without looking at her. "I'm not sure I can describe it. A fire is like music—you can't put it into words. If you could, there'd be no point in building the fire." He paused, but Salamander said nothing, waiting. He said, "All right. The theme is in the contrasts of darkness and light. You'll see black flames in the center of the fire when it's at its greatest height, and blinding streams of light will jump up from areas where there doesn't seem to be any fire at all. I use darkness in this fire more than I usually do, but it's always to emphasize the brilliance of the flames."

He hesitated. This wasn't describing his fire at all; he felt as if he were some paid critic dictating a brochure.

But Salamander said, "Please go on. I see it as you speak." He turned to her and saw that she had closed her eyes. Her face was expressionless, in complete repose.

How could a woman be so attractive with no expression on her face?

"The light and dark will alternate," he said. "Colors will coil around and through each other like vines. The movements in the fire are sinuous—graceful, as you say, but a bit threatening too. The dark colors are always threatening in my fires somehow."

Salamander said, "Yes. And will the darkness win, or the light?"

He shrugged. "Neither. The fire doesn't tell a story; it just shows a conflict that's always going on. I thought it might be appropriate to have a temple."

Salamander's eyes opened, and she seemed to look into his center—the place he thought only he knew. He felt the warmth begin again.

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"You thought you did not tune in to the broadcasts," she said softly, "but you did. Your Fire shows it." Her green eyes held his, and he was surprised that they could change color even in the dimness of the Cathedral.

"What happened this morning?" he asked her. "Tell me," he said.

The monitor had had a name when Livy had come to this house on the South Edge four years ago. Livy had been only six then, a frightened young holopath who was awed at being chosen to be a future monitor herself. She had actually been introduced to the monitor, who had said "Love to you" much as anyone else might. But her face had been totally blank, like a doll's.

Livy had trouble remembering her name now. What need was there to know the name of the monitor, she whose mind was always open? She was simply the monitor.

Something strange was happening today. Livy sat on a pillow in the common room; two of the other assistants sat beside her as they watched the city. People hurried through the streets of the business districts, intent on errands; workmen strained as they loaded haulers near the trade route out of the summer Gate; gentry of the South Edge slept late and dreamed of what they might have done at last night's revel. Livy watched tens of thousands of minds at once, tasting the weather of the entire city. She felt Cirque as a ring of life around the deep empty space of the Abyss.

But today that space was filled; people had been there, down into the darkness, and the empty center of Cirque echoed with memories of their minds. Livy still felt Gloriana's tension as she directed a lightbeam downward; she still saw the pale shuddering creature that was impaled in the light.

Livy was bewildered by the experience. No one ever went into the Abyss—there was nothing there; it was the

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quiet center of her mind. Yet something frightening lived down there, and it was trying to climb out.

There was a point of intense cold in the middle of her back, an iciness that spread through her. She felt hair prickling on the neck of the boy beside her, and he shifted uncomfortably on his pillows.

Livy glanced at him: Edouard, only six years old, a thin boy with closely cropped blond hair covering his head like a coat of fur. He had come to the monitor's house only months before, a timid, confused child who had lived in an orphanage all his life, surrounded by strangers and invaded by visions from the entire city. He had never understood those things he continually saw, sights and sounds and thoughts that had no connection with the bare rust corridors of the orphanage. He was only now beginning to understand what it was to be a holopath, here in this quiet house where his guardians had finally sent him. How would he be able to deal with this new insanity from the Abyss?

But Livy saw that in his mind it was only one more frightening vision, something else he could not understand. Like everything in his world.

She reached out and touched his hand. "I don't understand it either," she said, as though that would somehow reassure him. As though he didn't know that already; as though he couldn't see her mind as easily as she saw his. "I want to sleep," he mumbled. The girl next to him, Mithra, frowned without opening her eyes. She was annoyed when anyone spoke in the same room with her; it disturbed her concentration. Mithra had the idea that she would be able to understand the patterns of her visions if only the servants and the other assistants would be quiet.

Livy thought that was ridiculous. She had watched Mithra's mind when she was "understanding"—Mithra understood nothing; she only stopped thinking.

"Well, does it make any sense to you?" Livy asked the

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girl. Mithra was eight, tall for her age, her body dominated by elbows and knees.

She shifted on her pillow, opened her eyes and stared reproachfully at Livy. "Must you speak?" she said.

"Look in my mind if you want to know something."

"I asked you a question so you'd think about what I wanted to know," said Livy.

"How can I see into anything with so much noise around me?" Mithra grumbled. "Wait and watch; it will all become clear. You should have learned that by now." Mithra was jealous of Livy because she was older, because she had more experience.

Edouard stared from one to the other of them, eyes wide and unblinking. His mind held only snatches of thoughts, momentary visions; he was fragmented. Poor Edouard, Livy thought; we don't help you much, do we?

Edouard began to cry silently, tears welling in his open eyes. No, we never help you, Livy thought. But you're getting better by yourself; time teaches you.

"That's because Edouard isn't sophisticated," Mithra said. "He still looks at everything as itself, not as part of anything else. I don't think people should keep on broad-casting after they're ten years old; you don't see things as clearly as we do."

Livy smiled. Be careful, she thought. The monitor her-self is hearing you. You'll upset her.

"No I won't," said Mithra, speaking aloud with a feel-ing of vindictiveness. She drew her pillow from beneath her, threw it against the wall and sh'd back so that she could lean against it. "The monitor, in case you haven't noticed, isn't even awake."

Not awake? Livy reached out for the monitor's mind, but she found nothing. Panic touched her. She remem-bered what had happened earlier after the visions from the Abyss: the monitor's sight had gone from her, she had seen only with her eyes, and it had taken her attendants many long minutes to soothe her back into her trance.

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But she was all right, Livy thought. I was with her then in her mind; I saw her open again and come alive.

"You know monitors don't live long," said Mithra. "Their minds break up; their bodies decay. She's fifteen years old—she can't stand any shock." And yet you're surprised, Mithra was thinking. You don't really believe the monitor can be failing, because if you did, you'd know the same thing will happen to you.

Not this soon, Livy thought. I'm still a person. "You're just in a hurry to get rid of her, and then of me," she said.

Where *is* the monitor? Edouard was thinking. If she's sleeping, where are her dreams? I can't find her!

Livy went searching for the monitor's mind. It was always easy to find her; Livy knew the feeling of the monitor's mind almost as well as she knew the feeling of her own: the vague, shifting textures and pastel colors. Only half a person, really—she had so little self-volition now.

But Livy couldn't find her. She could feel the heat of Cirque's streets baking in early afternoon, the slow tempo of homes near the Evening Gate, hopes and plans of so many people working through the day. She was surprised at how many of them were thinking of the Abyss; the morning's broadcasts had reached deeply into the minds of the city.

But the monitor wasn't there. Livy searched fruitlessly: that soft, attenuated mind was nowhere to be found. She heard a low moaning and realized it was Edouard. Unthinking, still searching with her mind, she took the boy into her arms and held him, rocking gently. The monitor's absence grew loud in the room; Livy didn't know whether it was her own fear she felt or Edouard's.

"She's been gone almost an hour," Mithra said. "After the servants left her, she just drifted away." And you didn't notice, Livy. You never notice anything.

Livy stood up suddenly and swayed for a moment with dizziness. The walls of the room were so white.

Gradually

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shadows reappeared, giving reality to her surroundings. She hurried out of the common room, calling "Sherrard!"

The monitor's chief attendant met her in the shadowed hall. Nearly thirty years old, black-haired and grave, Sherrard looked anxious. Livy went through the open door of the monitor's room without speaking to him. The monitor lay on her bed, eyes shut, her thick organic-wool blanket wrapped around her. She was curled into a ball, knees drawn up to her chin. Her mind was silent—was not there. No thoughts, no dreams, no images.

But she was breathing normally. Livy knelt on the floor mattress and laid her hand on the monitor's face: cool, damp.

"What's wrong?" Sherrard asked. "Isn't she sleeping?" He hurried to Livy's side and bent over, staring at the monitor. "She went to sleep an hour ago, after she got so scared—"

Livy said, "She's in a coma. Sherrard, this is your re-sponsibility."

He went quickly to an ornately carved sideboard to get his medical kit. Beneath his anxiety Livy saw a kind of relief: Sherrard had been expecting this. The monitor was fifteen, after all.

But that's not old! Livy thought. She asked, "Did she say anything when she was awake? Did she feel ill?" Sherrard took his leather-covered kit from a drawer. "All she said was she wanted to be alone. Said she was all right." He knelt on the other side of the floor mattress and opened his kit. Inside the small box were medicines, tubes of pills, a variety of sensory devices. Sherrard selected a neuroscope, fitted plugs to his ears and laid the pickup node against the back of the monitor's neck. He listened, staring at the monitor, then took a meter from his kit and began to connect it to the neuroscope.

"She didn't say anything else," Sherrard said. "She was just like she always is."

Sherrard studied the neuroscope meter: no beta activity,

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of course. No delta signs on the readout either: no dreams. But there was a trace of alpha activity and more of theta. A very level reading, almost no variation at all. The red dot of the meter's indicator held steady as the tape fed past it. Livy found herself staring at the monitor, seeing her as though for the first time. Her mind was not there—it had burrowed deep into the sublevels of consciousness—and Livy was able to see the girl as the servants saw her: a small, shapeless person whose face was as pale as the walls. Short dark hair, neatly cropped every week by Sherrard. Her face is like a baby's, Livy thought; she's never learned any expressions. She's lived all her life inside the fortress of her skull. Touching everything, watching every-body, but only inside—nothing more, ever, for fifteen years. She felt a dull horror. Do I look like that? she wondered. Will I look like that when I die? An amorphous body and no face?

Mithra's thought intruded: Yes, you will. You know you will.

"Her breathing is all right," said Sherrard. "Shall I use stimulants?"

"Yes," Livy said. "If it isn't dangerous. Do you think she might die?"

Now or soon, Sherrard thought. "The stimulants aren't dangerous," he said. But if she's gone into a coma, isn't that a sign that her body is already breaking down?

It's her mind that's failed, thought Mithra. Burned out.

Livy felt annoyance that Mithra had stayed on her pillow in the common room, watching with her mind only. You couldn't even come to look with your eyes! What if we need your help?

Edouard is frightened, Mithra thought. I'm holding him—feel how he shudders.

Deeper in her mind, Mithra was thinking: Livy's the

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eldest now; she's the one who's responsible for what happens to the monitor.

Sherrard had taken a vial from his kit; he held it to the monitor's nostrils and broke the seal. Yellow vapor rose from the vial, a pale buttery stain in the air. The monitor's nostrils flared; she shuddered.

"Don't worry, it's mild," Sherrard said. "It only stimulates the conscious mind."

A low sound came from the monitor's throat—not quite a moan, only the sound of breath over tightened vocal cords. Livy saw her mind coming awake, dull red images forming, dim shapes moving sluggishly in darkness.

The red dot of the neuroscope meter shook suddenly, jabbing back and forth. Livy heard: Not ready, not ready, wait, I can't—

"She's coming around," Sherrard said. He waved the vial under the monitor's nose; pale yellow vapor curled out and disappeared almost immediately. The monitor's head suddenly jerked upward.

"No!" she cried. The sound was high and piercing. She rolled to one side and pushed away Sherrard's hand. Her eyes came wide open, staring straight ahead as her head whipped back and forth.

Her mind was a bright crimson light, flaring out of control. She clutched the blanket around her, then rolled onto her side and shook. Livy saw her legs moving spasmodically under the blanket.

Horror filled her. It was not a reflection of the monitor's mind—it was Livy's own, felt from deep inside.

She fell onto the mattress beside the older girl and clutched her, arms around the monitor's waist, face buried in the cropped hair at her neck. The monitor fought her, trying to push her away, but Livy held on desperately; she climbed on top of her and pinned her under the blanket.

Easy, easy, Annalie, please. I love you; you're all right; please hold still. No fear . . . softness, warmth, calm now.

The girl beneath her quieted, the red flares in her mind

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subsided, and the two of them lay still, panting for breath. After a moment Livy rolled off the other girl and sat up on the mattress, looking at her.

Annalie was your name, she thought. That's right. Annalie. How could I forget?

Silence in the room. Livy heard the distant traces of the many minds of Cirque, a dim murmur. Sunlight and open air—*Annalie. I'm Annalie.*

It was the monitor's mind, childlike and wondering. Livy saw that she was crying, tears flowing from wide-open eyes.

The monitor stared at the ceiling and thought: I'm Annalie. No-fr-any of the others, just Annalie.

Yes, thought Livy. Yes, you're Annalie.

The monitor reached out for Livy, found her with her hands, ran fingers over her face like a blind person. She stared at Livy with pale grey eyes, and Livy was unable to look away.

After a long time, the monitor said, "You have to get out of this house." Her voice was hoarse and broken. "You have to get away before you're me."

Jamie waited quietly in Gloriana's office at Guard Base while she dictated her report into the daily log. Gloriana sat in a worn horsehide chair with her knees drawn up under her, speaking in a flat voice into her desk mike, which was mounted in a redwood icon of Tiresias the Seer.

Her report was calm and objective. At a depth of four hundred meters, a life form was seen; at seven hundred meters, it was holographed. Below eight hundred meters, all passengers of the gravity craft saw the following phenomena...

Her description of the pale, heaving mass of animal and fungoid life sent chills along his spine. "Limbs with no visible articulation . . . hide of pale grey marked irregularly by darker coloration..."

She did not look at Jamie as she dictated; she seemed

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to speak directly to the Tiresias statuette. Jamie sat across from her in an antique wood chair and fingered the smooth-worn arm rests, wondering how Gloriana could see such horrors and then describe them as though she'd measured them with a micrometer. And he wondered if she saw him as clinically.

At night, moving with him in love, he knew her mind did not work like that; she was a different person then.

But which was the real Gloriana? Did she discard her analyzing, measuring mind when she was with him, or was that her true self, covered during their nights together by a sensuousness that didn't touch her inside?

"Massive quantities of life-control chemicals are under requisition from the northern agricultural areas," she said. "The first consignment will be dropped at 1600 hours, this date. Further reports to follow."

She reached forward and pressed a plate in front of the Tiresias figure, switching off its recorder. Only then did her face relinquish its flat, professional look. "Well," she said softly, "so much for duty. If only it meant something."

"Those poisons will mean something when you drop them into the Abyss," Jamie said. "The Hill Councils have rezoned whole forests with them, haven't they?"

"Yes," she said. She sat in silence for a moment, staring at the Tiresias statuette. Then she said, "Jamie, I'm sorry about this morning. I've had a lot on my mind." She shook her head suddenly. "No, actually I haven't had any-thing at all on my mind—that's just the trouble. I'm so useless. This job has a lot of prestige, and I know you're impressed with me for having it, but it's all routine work. Anyone could do it; it's just a matter of fighting up through the ranks to get it."

"But you're the one who's got it," Jamie said. "You beat everyone else who wanted it; you're the Guardian." She waved a hand dismissively. "Guardian of what? A city full of quiet, decent, lawful people who worry more about what they have to tell their priests and priestesses

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than about the city laws. I don't guard "Cirque—the temples do. My position is a civic ornament."

Jamie leaned forward, wanting to reach out and touch her, knowing that was out of place in her office. He said, "Well, you're certainly beautiful enough for the job, then."

"Don't be patronizing," she said. "Any woman can be beautiful—so can any man. But what do I *do*? The most dramatic thing that's happened since I became Guardian is this growth of life in the Abyss, and we'll kill that off with a few tons of chemicals."

She rose from her seat, came around her desk and hugged Jamie—a quick squeeze, preoccupied. She began to pace nervously, Jamie noticed that there was a worn path in the moonweb rug.

"Do you really think your poisons are going to kill all those things down in the Abyss?" he asked her.

"Of course they will. You said so yourself."

He shook his head. "I only said they'd make a difference. Oh, they'll kill a lot of the life down there, certainly. But what about the things they don't kill?"

"They'll kill everything," she said. But she paused in her pacing to look at him, and her expression was unsure,

"How many square kilometers of life do you suppose there are at the floor of the Abyss?" he asked. "Plus whatever's been growing up the sides of the walls. Do you think you won't miss anything at all?"

She nodded. "All right, we won't get it all. But we'll kill most of it, and what's left won't be important." Her eyes held his. "Or do you think it will?"

He remembered the darkness, the white shapes, the sense of evil that had rilled him. And he knew that she hadn't accepted that feeling, that vision. "I think those things will try to climb out of the Abyss as long as there's a single one of them alive," he said.

She sighed and sat down again in the large hide-covered chair behind her desk; she ran her fingers back

and forth along the matted hair on its arms. "Let them try to get

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out, then. We'll keep on killing them."

"Is it that simple?"

"Yes. The Council is behind me, and the temples are behind it. Do you know what happened when we circu-lated copies of this morning's holos to the temples? Every one of them, without exception, voted to destroy those creatures. I've never seen the temples agree so totally. You'd think the Pro-Lifers or even the Universalists would argue that those things were sacred—they're life forms, no matter how monstrous they are."

Jamie remembered the priestess's broadcast vision. "They think it's the Beast. They all have some concept of ultimate evil, even if they don't agree on what's good."

She laughed shortly. "Jamie, you try so hard to be a cynic. But even you got caught in that broadcast."

"I know." He felt uncomfortable; something deep within him was shaken to discover how vulnerable he was. Jamie thought of himself as a reasonable person.

"Well, if even you had that reaction, you can imagine the pressure we're getting from the temples," Gloriana said. "Even if I wanted to stop the poisoning, they wouldn't let me." She began to beat a fist on the arm of her chair, softly, regularly. "You see? The temples tell the Council what they want, the Council tells me, and it's up to me to see that it's done. That's all. I'm just supposed to do what they tell me."

Her expression had become dark and angry again; Jamie didn't want to get into that same discussion. "Who was the priestess who had the vision?" he asked.

Gloriana leafed through papers on her desk. "Here it is: the Cathedral of the Five Elements. It's near the Final Cataract—one of the old, established temples." Gloriana studied the paper she'd picked up. "She's taken the name Salamander. Real name: Mary Bert Doyle. Married twice, once singly, once in a multiple—not married now." She glanced up at Jamie. "Evidently marriage didn't give *her* much sense of purpose."

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"Don't compare yourself to some religious fanatic," he said, annoyed. His shoulder was throbbing. At least the Guard doctor had said that it wasn't broken.

"Who knows what makes religious fanatics?" Gloriana said. "But whatever she was after in life, she didn't find it in marriage, so she went into temple life."

"Evidently she chose her temple more carefully than her marriage partners," Jamie said, keeping his voice level. "You said she was priestess of one of the important ones."

Gloriana smiled faintly as she placed the paper neatly on top of a sheaf of documents on her desk. "Her temple is likely to become even more important soon. By coin-cidence, she's holding open services tonight, and she's even brought in a sculptor to do the fire. There've been notices tacked up all over the city for days. And after her broad-cast this morning ..."

"What time is the service?" Jamie asked. He was sur-prised that he had asked that; it had been only a thought passing through his mind. But he wanted to stop Gloriana's talking; when she was in such a dark mood her energy was enough to drag him down with her. And now particu-larly, after their experience in the Abyss, he felt too shaken to deal with her mood.

"The notices say that things will start at sundown," Gloriana said. She looked at him quizzically. "Surely you aren't thinking of going."

"Why not?" Jamie's head had begun to ache; the pain seemed to travel from his bruised shoulder right up the back of his neck. He wanted to get out of this office, away from Gloriana. "I think I *will* go. I'd like to see what kind of woman would have a vision as bad as the one I picked up."

Gloriana's gaze was noncommittal. "You just said she was a religious fanatic. You were right; that's what she is. Since when are you interested in fanatics, Jamie?"

She was implying something, he knew. She thought that because he had been badly frightened by this priestess's

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vision he was now ripe for conversion. Damn her. He stood up.

"I've been thinking about my future—you're not the only one who thinks, you know. And maybe it would be a good idea for me to start meeting new people."

She shook her head, eyes still on his. "Don't be a fool, Jamie. You don't know anything about religion, and you think you do. You have no idea how many people like you become religious fanatics overnight."

"That's ridiculous," he said.

She shrugged. "You'll be among a crowd in a dark cathedral, chanting in front of a fire. Everyone around you will be a believer, and the crowd feeling will get to you. Especially if this priestess has charisma, presence. That's how they make converts, you know—no one will argue with you; nobody will try to convince you of anything. You'll do it yourself."

Jamie smiled tightly. "Thanks for the warning. And for the faith you have in me." He went to the door, opened it and turned to look at her. He wanted to say something devastating, something that would show that he was as contemptuous of her as she obviously was of him.

"I don't know why I bother," she said as she picked up a sheaf of papers and began to glance through them. Jamie left without another word. At the last moment he managed to keep himself from slamming the door.

There is coherence in time.

River Fundament flows: its unity is change.

Does this seem paradoxical?

There are no paradoxes in reality, only in minds that fail to see how moments connect.

—The Book of Causes

WIND blew in Nikki's face as the gravity boat gathered speed on the river; her long hair lifted from her shoulders and pulled at her temples. The boat rode smoothly in the water, stabilized by its gravity motors.

"Perfect!" she shouted into the cool air. "This is really going to be something; you wait and see!"

The millipede watched the passing banks with its great dark eyes, blinking furred eyelids in the wind. Cold water splashed out from the boat as it cut through the current, riding high. Robin sat with her hands gripping the seat, staring straight ahead. Nikki saw her taut expression and laughed loudly.

"Nothing to be afraid of!" she told the girl. "It's a smooth ride from here to the Abyss!"

"I can't swim," Robin said. "Can you?" She looked at Nikki as though the question were a challenge.

"Me? How could I sink? Don't you know fat floats?"

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Nikki laughed uproariously, bouncing in her seat.

The millipede said, "There will be no need for swim-ming."

"Hey!" said Nikki, turning to the foreigner. "Do milli-pedes swim? Do you have lakes of ammonia or mercury or something on your world? Do you do the hundred-legged crawl stroke?"

"We are never in liquid," the millipede said. "What is that building ahead?" It pointed with one of its forefeet. The creature's body seemed awkward as it rested on its back in the seat, held in by the gravity harness.

Muscles in its body moved continually, rippling its fur.

Nikki peered ahead and saw where the millipede was pointing. "That's a windmill," she told it. "When the wind blows, it moves those big vanes there, and they're attached to generators inside. They provide power for stuff like—well, come on, Robin, you're a student; you tell us!"

Robin, still staring straight ahead, said, "Factories, lights, heaters, elevators—"

"You'll see the taller buildings later," Nikki said. "In the Apprentice Quarters. That's where I live—on the fourteenth floor of a building that goes up to twenty stories."

The millipede said, "Earth's technology is a great tradition. The human worlds of the inner galaxy use other forms of energy, however."

"Stellar inertia," Robin said, still facing straight ahead but looking at the millipede from the corners of her eyes. "They use that there, don't they?"

"Only humans use it," said the millipede.

"You have to empty out a planet to put in all that machinery, don't you?" the girl said, turning in her seat to face the foreigner. "They won't let us do it here. They say we have to keep Earth the way it used to be, like a historic landmark. I think it's dumb."

The millipede regarded her silently for a moment. The fur of its head and back ruffled in the wind of the boat's

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passage. "Use of the stars' inertia is controversial," it said. "Ultimately it will threaten the balance of gravitational forces in the galaxy. It is difficult for humans to accept this."

"I bet," said Robin. She looked doubtfully at the millipede, as though she suspected it was trying to play some joke on her. Then she turned to Nikki. "You didn't think I knew about stellar inertia, did you?"

Nikki had never heard of stellar inertia, but she certainly wasn't going to admit that to a child. Nor to a foreigner. "If using stellar inertia was going to mess up the galaxy," she said to the millipede, "I'm sure people would realize it. Humans aren't stupid, you know."

The millipede waved several of its forefeet, apparently at random. "Humanity is a brilliant race; every being in the galaxy is grateful to humanity for many technical advances. It is no fault of humans that you have no temporal vision."

Temporal vision? Nikki had never heard of that either. She glanced at Robin, wondering if she knew what the foreigner was talking about. But Robin was staring in open perplexity at the creature.

"What's temporal vision?" she asked.

"The ability to see in time as well as in space," said the millipede immediately, as though it had expected the question. "Members of my species and of some others can see the future and the past as readily as they see the present." The creature paused. Seeing that Robin continued to stare uncomprehendingly, it said, "it is difficult to describe."

"You told us earlier that you could see the future—I don't believe you," said Robin flatly.

"Tell us about it," Nikki said. "See if you can convince us you're not making it up."

The millipede bobbed its head. "Yes. It is simply the ability to see what will happen to us at any time in our lives, not only in the moment through which our con-

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sciousness is passing. We see the past not only in our memory, but as an actuality, as events that pass before our eyes. We see the future in the same way."

"Oh boy," said Robin. "You must really think we're dumb, telling us stuff like that."

"Not at all. It is only foreign to your minds; it is not impossible for you to understand. Even though you feel it is the dumbest thing you ever heard—"

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard!" Robin said vehemently. Then she stopped, staring at the millipede.

"That's just a trick!" said Robin and the millipede simultaneously.

Nikki thought for a moment she had imagined it, the sound of their voices blending—some trick of the wind. But the look on Robin's face was one of shock, while the millipede merely smiled its thin little smile.

So it was true; the millipede had known what she was going to say before she had said it. Well, so what?

"You're a telepath, aren't you?" Nikki said. It was obvious; there were quite a few telepaths in Cirque. You didn't have to be some land of foreign freak to do what the millipede had done.

"I cannot read the minds of humans," said the foreigner. "I cannot even hear the broadcasts of your monitor. I see and hear only what happens in my presence."

Nikki and Robin both stared at the creature now. Nikki hoped she didn't look as ridiculous as Robin did.

"Listen," she said angrily, "if that's true, then—" She flailed about mentally, searching for an objection.

Something was fishy about what the millipede had said.

"What was all that stuff about how bad it is to use stellar inertia?" Robin said. "You said after a while it would mess up the balance of galactic gravity or something, is that right?"

The millipede, still smiling, said, "But how could I know that, since it will probably be thousands of years

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before anybody notices anything funny in all that gravity stuff—"

"—all that gravity stuff," said Robin, talking loudly to drown out the millipede. "And how would *you* know that . if you can only see what happens to *you*?"

Robin stopped talking and waited triumphantly for the millipede to answer. She was obviously sure she had such a good point that the foreigner would have to admit it was lying. But Nikki saw the girl's face become uncertain as moments passed and the creature only smiled at her.

Nikki shivered and wished she hadn't left her shawl at the Winter Gate; it was chilly out here on the river. She huddled into her arms, rubbing her shoulders.

"You will believe me soon," the millipede said. "I am sorry you feel as you do. To answer your question, I have met people who will live much longer than I— beings from the edge of our galaxy. They will be alive for many thousands of years, and they too have temporal vision; they know what will happen that far in the future. They have told me, as they have told scientists of my people. And of your people too—human scientists. It is difficult for humans to believe us, however."

Robin glared at the millipede. "Well, why don't you—"

"Your scientists will stop using stellar inertia before too much time has passed," said the creature.

"—why don't you stop those people from using stellar inertia, if you know it's dangerous?"

"Soon we shall be able to explain what makes it dangerous," the millipede said.

The three of them looked at one another silently then, the millipede calmly blinking furred eyelids, Nikki and Robin belatedly putting together the order of the conversation that had just happened.

Nikki suddenly laughed, seeing Robin's frustration. "We told Jordan you'd learn a lot by coming along, didn't we? I guess you're getting more than you bargained for."

Robin shot a glance of pure hatred at Nikki. "You're

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sure not helping," she said. "Do *you* believe this stuff?"

"Oh, I don't care," Nikki said, waving a hand. The noise of the river had become much louder, so that they nearly had to shout to make themselves heard. There was a roaring ahead—the First Cataract. The river seemed to flow more and more quickly as they approached it. On the banks, the houses were taller now, several stories; each house had balconies facing the river. Nikki saw clothing hung out to dry on several of the balconies.

Robin had subsided into a disgusted silence, arms folded across her chest. The millipede sat forward, writhing its body upward in the grip of its gravity harness and peering intently ahead. A few hundred meters down-stream, the river abruptly disappeared where it fell into the gorge of the First Cataract; mist rose from below, obscuring their view.

The roar of the falls grew louder; it seemed to thunder in Nikki's head. The mist drifted upriver at water level, quickly drenching the boat and its passengers as thoroughly as if they were in a rainstorm. Nikki huddled down in her seat and brushed her hair back with cold fingers to keep water out of her eyes. She hated this; if they'd told her before she'd gotten into the boat that she'd have to take a shower with her clothes on, she wouldn't have come. You'd think they could—

The roaring kept getting louder, and now it went up in pitch. It became a loud whine, a siren wail; Nikki's head felt as though it would explode. She moaned, gasping for breath in the mist-drenched air. She felt her stomach rise as the boat slapped through the current.

She glanced at Robin and the millipede and was surprised to see that they didn't seem bothered by any of this. Robin was grinning foolishly; the millipede was still sitting forward in its seat, looking as calm as if nothing at all were happening. But the crashing! The scream of the falls! Why was she the only one who felt it?

Then she knew. *Four*. It's you, isn't it? Trying to get

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out, trying to catch me by surprise!

Waves of excitement swept over her; she seemed to be falling. The noise in her head, incredibly, got louder. *No! You can't!* But there was nothing for her to hold, and darkness closed in.

I'll miss going over the Cataract, she thought with dim resentment; but then the blackness became complete. It filled her mind and held it, and when gradually it began to fade, to lighten both in weight and color, she thought: How wonderful.

She raised her head as her vertigo dissipated. They were just now coming to the falls; yes, the boat rushed forward raster, lifted from the water and slapped down again, but gently, gently. She felt as light in her seat as the boat was in the water; she felt buoyant, ready to fly.

"Oh, it's *great!*" she shouted to Robin, but the girl was too enthralled to do more than nod without looking at her. The millipede did turn to her for a moment, and it smiled softly. Its fur was matted with water.

They went over the edge, streaking straight out into the air over the gorge. The river plunged downward, crashing against boulders below, but the gravity boat's motors carried them in a smooth arc that curved gently down through the rising mists of the gorge. The crashing of the falls seemed soft and distant now, behind and below them; the mists were warm.

Nikki cried with happiness, sobbing and laughing at the same time. She raised her arms into the air, gathering the wind of their passage.

She began to sing: quietly at first, a low crooning, rune-less but soul-filling. As the boat curved downward, falling more and more rapidly, her song rose in pitch. She could barely hear herself, but she felt the song in her throat; each note filled her with warmth. She had such a wonderful voice. Oh, bless you, Nikki, you've given me so much!

The sides of the gorge rose past them, covered with ferns, vines and flowers in soft textures and bright colors.

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Nikki had never seen anything so beautiful. The boat sank easily through the air.

She heard Robin giggling, and she broke her song long enough to giggle with her. She reached out and rumbled the girl's wet hair; Robin ducked away, squealing her laughter. Nikki turned to the millipede, hesitated only a moment, then rumbled its fur too.

The millipede covered her head with several of its fore-feet, tickled her and rubbed her long wet hair on her cheeks. Nikki whooped in astonishment, bouncing in her seat; the gravity harness held her.

The boat came down to the river again and skimmed smoothly over the white froth of the current as it

rushed through rocks and boulders. The boat followed the river's deepest channel, lifted easily over the rocks, set them down again where the water was smooth. The rocks became less frequent, and the boat rode smoothly in the water. The roar of the falls was faint now, far behind.

"I want to do that again," Robin said. "Nikki? Will you take me again sometime?"

Nikki smoothed back the hair from the girl's face, smiling beatifically. "Sure," she said. "Whenever I get the chance."

"When?" said Robin. "Can we do it tomorrow?"

Nikki-Four had no idea when she'd be out again, in control of her body. It didn't seem important just now.

"Ask our friend," she said, looking to the millipede. "You see the future—when can I take Robin on another ride like this?"

The millipede smiled with its tiny mouth. "I see only what I personally experience. I will leave Cirque tomorrow; how could I know *your* future?"

"I guess you couldn't," Nikki said. She felt her body-suit clinging to her, the texture of wet fabric pressed against her breasts and belly. It was cool and wonderful. "It's hard to get used to the idea that you can see the future but not all of it."

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"Do you see all of the present?" asked the millipede. "It is the same."

"I don't think so," Robin said. She looked to Nikki for support. "I still think it's lying, don't you?"

"No," said Nikki. "Robin, this is such a beautiful world, and there are so many things we don't even know yet! You're so young—why are you trying to learn negatives so soon? You have a whole lifetime to learn about separation, illusions, all that stuff."

Robin stared at her. The boat floated smoothly in the water, moving more slowly now. The river had widened, and it was quiet out here in the central channel.

"You keep changing," Robin said.

Nikki beamed at her. "Of course! Everything keeps changing, don't you see? *Especially* me. Listen, Robin, do you know about how people change their personalities? How they take pills and become different people, only they're all parts of themselves?"

"Of course," Robin said. "I know all that stuff." But her voice was unsure. She heard the millipede mention it earlier, Nikki thought, but she doesn't know how it works.

"Well, I took one of those pills this morning," Nikki said. "I've been changing all day. I was Nikki-Two when you met me—"

"And now you are Nikki-Four," said the millipede. , Nikki glanced at him, and the millipede's large dark eyes rested softly on her. She felt herself melting into their liquid depths.

"You knew that all along," she said after a moment. "You knew I'd change. That's why you let me come with you."

"Yes," said the millipede. "I have been waiting for you."

Robin looked from one to the other of them, confused. "What is this? What are you talking about?"

Nikki laughed and reached out to hug the girl. Her wet body-suit clung for a moment to Robin's when they separated.

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rated. "It's simple. When we met on the cart, I was Nikki-Two, one of my personalities. She's a lot like me, only she's kind of practical. Then, at the Gate, I turned into Nikki-Three—you remember? When I'm Nikki-Three I hate everything. I was pretty mean to you, I think."

"You were rotten," said the girl. "And you kept fainting. Was that because you'd taken something?"

Nikki nodded. She breathed deeply of the cool breezes on the river, savoring a feeling of openness. "We fight over who gets to be out. The others take it seriously, but it's really just a game. I knew I'd get my turn, and I did: here I am."

Robin shook her head as though that were the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

"Why don't you just be yourself?" Robin said, but not as a question. She seemed to lose interest in the subject; suddenly she pointed to the buildings of the city. They had risen dramatically in the past minutes.

Modular towers of fifteen and twenty stories reared into the bright afternoon air. "Hey, we're in the Apprentice Quarters already!" Robin said.

The millipede followed her gesture with its eyes, studying the tall buildings with great interest. They were built of disc-shaped plastic, their blue and orange and rose modules weathered to subtle tints against the bright blue of the sky. Windows high in the buildings on the left bank shone golden as they reflected the sun.

"You live in this section of the city, yes?" the millipede asked Nikki.

"Not around here," she said. "Down that way." She waved to the southwest. "But they're all the same."

They're wonderful places to live—you're so high up that you can see the sun first thing in the morning and late in the eve-ning. And when it rains—oh, you'd love that; the rain just streams past your window, or the wind blows and washes it against the 'glass. It's really so open."

The gravity boat's blowers had come on, filling the boat

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with warm air that dried their clothes and bodies. Nikki felt her muscles relaxing in the heat.

Robin shifted impatiently hi her seat, annoyed to be left out of the conversation. "7 live further in," she said.

"In-side the Apprentice Quarters, I mean, in one of the big houses there."

"Really?" Nikki asked her. She began to see the girl in a different light: her parents were rich, and she was so bright. What a future she had!

"Well," said Robin, "it's just that my father is in charge of one of the estates. He does all the work on their fliers and carts, a whole *flock* of them. And my mother is in charge of the grounds. She wants to plant redwood trees, but they won't let her because they're too big. They don't want anything more than a couple of stories high in the estates."

"That's because they used to have slides around the edge of the Abyss," Nikki explained to the millipede.

"They used to build huge mansions, just terribly elaborate, but some of them fell right into the Abyss."

"You should see the way they build now," Robin said. "All the new houses are made out of aerated stuff, blown plastic and so on. They look like granite or real wood, but you can tell the difference when you touch them." She shook her head. "Rich people are crazy. Anyway, instead of putting up big mansions with towers and stuff, they spread the houses out as much as they can. The idea is that the more ground you cover with your house, the more important you" are."

"Also," said the millipede, "the more unused space they have on their property, the richer they must be. Yes?"

"Sure," said Robin. "Just look at the way every foot of ground is used in the rest of Cirque—the tall buildings and everything. They kind of like to waste space in the estates."

The blowers cut off. Nikki was dry now, but the occa-

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sional splashes over the boat's side where all the more refreshing.

"Aren't people wonderful?" Nikki said to the foreigner. "We take a problem like too much weight on the Edge and we make it into something really positive, something lots of people feel great about."

"Oh, it's just rich people acting rich," Robin said.

The Apprentice Quarters flowed past them, rearing up from the river's green banks. There were parks and prom-enades beside the river, and Nikki could see people strol-ling in the afternoon sun. The giant Apprentice buildings loomed into the sky like jumbled towers of Babel. Float-ing low over the water came the sounds of the urban circle —the continuous clattering of wheels on the streets, the low drone of thousands of voices. Birds flitted through the acacias and plum trees of the riverside parks, some-times venturing out over the water.

"Hey," Robin said to the millipede, "you keep doing that stuff where you know what we're going to tell you before we do. Like about how rich people like to show off their open space. You're really not telepathic?"

"No," said the millipede. It was watching the people on the banks.

"Then why do you need us at all? You brought us along to tell you all this stuff about the city, but you al;-ready know it."

The millipede gave her its tiny smile. "I would not know any of it if you did not tell it to me sometime."

"But you bring up things for us to tell you about," the girl said. "I wouldn't have told you about what unused space means here, except you started talking about it."

The millipede's great dark eyes glanced at Nikki and then back to the girl. "You are asking about causality?" it asked.

"Sure, that's what I'm asking. I mean, maybe you can see the future, but how can you cause things to happen backwards like that?"

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The millipede shifted in its gravity harness, adjusting it to give its body more freedom. "Causality is difficult for me to understand," the foreigner said. "What humans think of as causes seem very questionable to those of us who can see time in both directions; the same thing may seem to have different causes when looked at from differ-ent times. Only in the moment of actual experience do these things seem clear."

After a moment Robin said, "That's either terrifically profound or it doesn't have anything to do with anything. Which do you think it is, Nikki? —Oh, you wouldn't know; you probably think *everything's* profound right now."

"Yes, everything is profound," said the millipede.

Nikki beamed. The river flowed under their boat, around it; the city passed by. "It's wonderful," she said.

"Well, if it's so wonderful, explain it to me," Robin said.

The millipede blinked its furred eyelids slowly. "Explanation is difficult in your language—your verbs all assume the principle of universal causality. My people have always believed that things are much simpler than that."

"Simpler?" said Robin. "What could be simpler than one thing causing the next thing to happen?"

The foreigner said, "You have two important words in your language, *how* and *why*. They are the greatest example of your race's creativity, for you have made two ideas from only one."

Nikki was listening with fascination. She loved the soft, reedy sound of the millipede's voice. She wanted to remember every word so that Nikki-One would be able to experience this too.

"Hey, what do you mean, 'creativity'? Are you trying to be sarcastic?" Robin protested.

"Not at all," said the millipede. "I admire the originality of human thought. You see a how and you create a

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why to take its place. Actually there is no why; it is the how that acts."

Robin sat back in her seat and folded her arms. Her short-cropped hair ruffled in the breeze of their passage. "Don't think you can mix me up by talking like that. I'm smarter than you think; ten-year-olds have brains too, you know. I learned all about calculus a year ago, and I can tell you the first ten monitors of Cirque and everything about them."

The millipede bobbed its head apologetically. "I do not mean to be confusing. I do find it difficult to speak of a concept that is still foreign to me."

"Oh, I understood you. What you're trying to say is that things don't happen for any particular *reason*; they just happen. One thing happens, then another thing happens, and something else, but nothing *causes* anything else and there isn't any *purpose* to it. Isn't that right?"

"That is what we have always believed," said the millipede.

"Well, so what?" said Robin. "How come there *isn't* some reason for it all? What's the point of having no reason for anything?"

Suddenly the foreigner laughed. It was a high, chittering sound, like a field full of crickets. It leaned forward in its harness, curling its body in front of Nikki, and reached to touch Robin's face with its two foremost feet. "Humans are wonderful," it said, still chirruping its laughter. "Humans are whys. That is what a why is; it is a human."

The millipede settled back into its seat, still quivering with amusement. Robin glared at it, her face reddening. She looked to Nikki. "Listen, are you going to let this—oh, sure you are, you're just a goon. I wish you'd change again; you're no help grinning like that."

Am I grinning? Nikki thought. She realized that she was. She liked the way the millipede laughed.

"Hey, is it true you don't know anything about numbers?" she asked the millipede. "Can't you count?"

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"I have never understood your numbers," the millipede said. "I know their names. Two, three, six, seven.

Ten, twenty. I do not understand what they mean. What is a six?"

Robin stared at the creature. Nikki said, "A six is like two threes."

"What is a two?" asked the millipede. "How can something be a two and also a three? Perhaps at one time a thing is a two, and later it is a three?" The creature looked hopefully from Nikki to Robin.

"No," said Nikki. "It's two *times* three."

The millipede blinked slowly, fur rippling above its eyes. "Do you mean that if a three lasts long enough in time, it will become a six?"

Robin laughed suddenly; she reached around Nikki and ruffled the fur of the millipede's face. "And you think you're so *smart!* You try to tell us about how and why and causality and all that stuff. But you can't even count!"

She looked at Nikki and suddenly reached up and ran her fingers over Nikki's face too, as she had over the millipede's. "And *you* thought it could tell us so much! It doesn't even know as much as 7 do!"

Nikki was delighted by the girl's gesture of ruffling her nonexistent face fur. She tried to do the same to Robin, but the girl ducked. Nikki turned instead to the millipede and ruffled its face.

The millipede chattered laughter, its mouth opening to show bony ridges instead of teeth. It looked so comical that Nikki began to laugh uncontrollably; tears filled her eyes, and she held her bouncing stomach. The millipede ran its forefeet across her face, and she laughed even harder. The millipede's cricket sounds rose in pitch till they were nearly inaudible.

She heard Robin saying, "Hey. *Hey?*" Nikki stopped laughing and looked at the girl; Robin's face was set and stern. It made Nikki break up laughing all over again.

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When she subsided, Robin had settled back in her seat with her arms folded, looking straight ahead as though she didn't know these ridiculous creatures beside her. The millipede was wiping its tear-matted face

with its forefeet, smoothing down its soft fur like a cat washing.

"Are you through?" Robin asked coldly.

Nikki held hi a giggle. "I guess so. Are we through?" she asked the millipede.

"Yes," it said, still smoothing its face fur. "That was even better than I remembered. I have been waiting for that ever since I came to Earth."

"Oh boy," said Robin sarcastically. "I'm sure learning a lot from this foreigner. What a wonderful educational opportunity it is to ride with someone from the stars so that we can mush each other's faces around and giggle like idiots."

"Come on, Robin; it was fun," said Nikki. "I haven't had so much fun since—" She broke off. Since that time when Gregorian and I fell out of bed, she thought. But she couldn't say that in front of someone from Aldebaran.

"It's just dumb," said Robin.

"No!" said the millipede, and Nikki was startled by its vehemence. "Laughter is not at all dumb. It rises from a deep understanding of—"

"Oh, quit it," said the girl. "It's just dumb. You can't even add two and two."

"Have you ever laughed when you added two and two?" Nikki blurted out. "*Four!*" she cried, and laughed deliberately. "See, it isn't funny."

"Why should it be?" said Robin.

"Please," said the millipede, wiping its great dark eyes. "Do not say 'why' again. I laugh when you say 'why,' and you do not like it."

"This is *my* planet, and I'll say what I feel like," Robin told the creature. "Don't think you can tell me what to do just because you're older than I am or something. *Are* you older? Do you even know how old you are? You'd have

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to be able to count to know how old you are, and you can't do that."

"Numbers are a human perception," the millipede said. "No other race in the galaxy believes in numbers, you see. There is no number other than one—that is my belief."

Nikki wondered if millipedes could divide their personalities as humans did. If this person thinks there's only one number, can it understand that Nikki-Two and Nikki-Three and I, all put together, equal Nikki-One? It must make even less sense to a millipede than it does to me! The idea struck her as comical: she must be a creature of wonder to this foreigner.

They had left the Apprentice Quarters behind; now the river wandered in great slow curves through grassy fields dotted by wide-spreading oaks and elms, sky-reaching cedars. Here and there, nestled in the shade of the trees, Nikki saw the small villas of the outer estates area. Horses grazed in the fields on their left, and Nikki thought she saw gazelles leaping in the distance on the right bank.

The sounds of the city were gone; there was only the smooth flowing of the river and the almost inaudible hum of the gravity boat's motors. And something else, an intermittent note—an owl? The sun beat down on them and was reflected from the river in winking bursts of light.

The millipede regarded their wide surroundings silently, and Nikki saw its tiny smile slowly spread. Even Robin lost her sullen look as she became aware of the great soft silence.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Nikki said quietly. She breathed deeply; the air seemed richer out here, scented with the fresh smells of grasses.

"Yes," said the millipede. "This is what I mean when I say there is no number but one."

The boat rode quietly through the water, the open fields passed, and they moved steadily toward the Final Cataract.

Annalie had never felt her body so much before; it

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seemed she couldn't get out of it. She shifted restlessly on her bed of pillows, searching for a position of comfort, but she continued to feel the textures of satin and organic wool, the weight of her slight body, the pressure of warm air on her face.

Hands touched her soothingly, but she shrugged them away, making small pushing motions with her palms. She heard herself grunting softly deep in her throat. She kept her eyes tightly closed, trying to search out the places in her mind where she could see and hear the life of the city. But there was nothing.

She heard voices in the room with her—Livy, Sherrard. She didn't want to hear them; she needed the familiar sounds of thousands of other voices—the conversations of workmen, shopkeepers and street cleaners, the calls of workers unloading produce from boats north of the Win-ter Gate. She had heard them all this morning, had smelled the crisp morning air and had felt the rising heat of the day through countless people. But where were they now?

There was nothing in her mind but darkness—darkness and herself. She wasn't used to being alone inside.

Is this me? she wondered. Only darkness?

No, there was more. Shapes moved faintly behind her eyes, dim patterns of color that drifted and coiled slug-gishly. She strained to see them clearly, but they receded down into her depths. She tried to follow them with her mind, but she had no control in here. The colors returned in dim bursts, quickly fading; irregular lines of light formed, pale yellows and greens that curled slowly and receded.

Her heart pounded in her chest; it seemed to shake her whole being. She wanted to cry out with a thousand other people's voices.

The colors turned red—bright, so bright. Her temples felt crushed. Then, as quickly as it had come, the color dimmed, leaving only a mottled pale color that grew slowly, filling more and more of her mind.

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She realized suddenly that it was the color of death, of corpses and the white things that fed off them. And it would not stop growing.

She began to see movement—dun shiftings, slow and sluggish. She wanted to stop them, she wanted to look away, but there was nowhere else. The dead whiteness formed into shapes that grew and reached for her—

Annalie. I'm Annalie.

Something was smothering her; she kicked out and felt her legs caught and held. She gasped in air and tasted thick, putrescent liquid—

I'm Annalie.

She opened her eyes.

Livy knelt beside her bed, watching her anxiously. Sherrard stood by the door. Their forms seemed more distinct than she'd ever seen them; objects in the room looked so sharp and clear: the carved oak dresser by the wall, the low table near the door with its tray of lunch, uneaten. Yet everything was so pale, colors faded and lifeless. Even the shadows gave no depth.

"Annalie?" Livy reached out to her; the girl's hand seemed to trail a wake in the air. When it touched Anna-lie, it felt hot, and Annalie jerked away.

"What is it, Annalie? What's happening?"

Annalie shook her head, too confused to speak. Where was Livy's mind? Where was Sherrard's?

The silence of the room filled her mouth, her nostrils; suddenly she felt a jolt of fear that she couldn't breathe. She closed her eyes—

The dead colors were still in there, pulsing and quiver-ing. She moaned softly and forced her eyes open. Sherrard came to her side, his steps shaking the room. He bent over her, his features flowing like water.

"Anna-lie, we all love you. Do you know that?"

Sherrard's voice, and not Sherrard's voice; it seemed to come from somewhere else, another room. His words echoed in the halls.

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"I'm so tired," she managed to say.

"You've been sick," said Sherrard's echoing voice. "Don't worry. We're taking care of you."

Annalie looked away from the anxiety in his eyes. The walls of the room were hung with soft, embroidered drapes, but the figures writhed and coiled restlessly. Their colors changed; red became green, blue was blazing gold. Nothing was substantial.

"I can't hear," she said.

She saw Livy lean forward, trailing afterimages. Their eyes met, and Annalie saw the delicate lines of blue in her irises. So strange; she'd never known Livy's eyes were anything but a pure color.

"What can't you hear?" Livy asked. "Can you hear my mind?"

Annalie continued to stare into her eyes as though that contact would give her entry. The eyes grew pale, became a dull white, disappeared and left only black pupils. Annalie shuddered and looked away.

"I can't hear anything, Livy."

"I can't hear you either," said the girl. "None of us can, not Mithra or Edouard—"

"I can't hear the city," said Annalie, and she felt tears coursing down her cheeks like tiny flows of burning lava. She was powerless to stop them.

She blinked and saw white. She forced her eyes to stay open.

"It's all right," Livy told her. "We're monitoring—the three of us. We can do it till you get better."

Annalie looked around the room in wonder. She'd spent so many years here, yet she'd never really seen it. The dark wood floor, worn with two centuries of traffic. The . drapes, receding now into impenetrable shadow. The heavy wooden door, standing open, and the dark hallway be-yond. The darkness out there seemed to move like water in a pool.

She looked down at herself; her nightclothes were damp

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with perspiration. She must have torn at her nightshirt in her efforts to breathe; it lay open, exposing her small chest, her prominent bones. A blanket was wrapped around her legs, tangled so that she could barely move. She kicked out weakly, but couldn't free herself.

Sherrard unwound the blanket, then lay it over her and drew it up to her neck. Annalie pushed it aside. The room pulsed, pale colors and sharp outlines winking in and out.

"But I've always seen the city," she said. "I monitored everything even before I came here. Back when I was in the Home—"

"You'll get it back," Livy said. "You've been sick."

The air was so thick. Were the windows open? Annalie couldn't see that far through the shadow-choked air.

"Am I getting better?" (Please.)

Livy smiled. "Yes, you're much better. You've had a fever, but it's gone down."

"You do know we'll take care of you, don't you?" asked Sherrard.

Annalie remembered a monitor before her. A boy named . . . Sebastian? Yes, Sebastian. Thin, dark-haired, with such large eyes. When she had been here only a month, he had gone into fever, had cried out at night for a week—more faintly every day. Finally he had died, and none of the assistants had talked of him again. But she remembered how thin he had been when the servants took him out.

"Sebastian was only ten," she said. "Marian was next. She died when she was eleven."

"You're not going to die!" said Sherrard. But she heard the quaver in his voice. "We love you—we all do; we won't let anything happen to you!"

"I can't feel your love," Annalie said hopelessly. "I can't feel anything."

But she could. She felt her own terror, dull now but very real; she felt the throbbing in her temples, the close-ness of the air. Her immediate surroundings were sharp

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and oppressive, and there was nothing else. She was im-prisoned.

Livy said, "You're just tired. Don't worry."

"But what's happening in the city? This morning I was watching—I wanted to see what would happen when—" She ran out of breath for speech. What had she been watching anyway? Something in the heart of Cirque, some danger that she knew she must keep in view.

"The city is just as it always is," Livy said. "Shall I tell you? That boy, Raymond, the one who fell off a cart—he broke his foot but he's all right. Right now he's learn-ing about pain points from his teacher. The man who uncovered an old statue on his estate has called an an-thropologist to ask him what it is; he's excited because he thinks the statue looks like him. Maybe it's an ancestor."

"No," said Annalie. "I didn't mean that."

"The Council has voted to allow sporting games in three of the riverside parks. They'll use Cassiodor Fields, the Weasel Meadow and the Stadium—"

""Livy, you're trying to hide it from me!"

Livy stared at her uncertainly. Her face glowed with inner fires, bright in the shadowed room. Then the hidden fires faded, and she was only Livy, beloved Livy. Her face was so plain, so very plain; how would anyone recognize her in a crowd without knowing her heart?

"I'm not hiding anything," Livy said. "But there's so much happening, and I can't keep up with it, talking out loud—"

"Oh, Livy!"

"I know, you miss it. You must; I would too. But I'll tell you anything you ask. Until you get better."

I'll never get better, Annalie thought. Already the memory of the city was becoming dim, a dream; how could she have seen more than she could now?

"Will you eat?" asked Sherrard. She looked for him, following the sound of his voice through the moving air till she found his tall figure standing at the foot of her

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bed. He had brought a new tray to her; he held it out, and she saw thin wedges of cheese, a bowl of broth.

"Put it near me," she said. "Here, at my side."

Sherrard knelt and set down the tray. He couldn't meet her eyes.

"Please eat some of it," Livy said. "You need it to get better, you know."

"All right." She waved Sherrard away and waited till he left the room. "Listen to me, Livy. I'm not just sick; no one is

ever just sick, you know that. There's a reason for it—something frightened me this morning, and now I can't even remember. Won't you tell me?"

Livy's eyes shrank away as she stared at her; they became black pinpoints in the whites of her eyes. "I'd tell you anything if I could," she said. "But what do you think happened? Annalie, you're sick, that's all."

She saw it then: the expression in Livy's eyes, her eyes that tried to hide from her gaze, retreating into darkness. Livy was afraid for her. But what did she fear?

"You know," said Livy, stumbling over her words, "sometimes people do get sick just from what happens in their bodies. It happens to people who—"

"It happens when people are mental defectives so that they can't control their bodies," said Annalie. "And it happens when people get old and their beings decay. But I'm only fifteen, Livy; I've barely used a tenth of my life."

Livy looked miserable and tried to mask it. Her eyes found the lunch tray, and she fashioned a hesitant smile. "This will sound selfish," she said, "but could I—I mean, I'm hungry. I've been so worried I forgot to eat anything."

"Of course. We'll share it."

Livy sat beside her on the bed and balanced the tray on her lap. She ate a wedge of cheese and pretended to be hungry. She offered cheese to Annalie, and Annalie took it. She nibbled at it, unable to focus attention on food.

After a while she asked, "Is Edouard any better? I

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think he caught some of my fear this morning. He's so young and vulnerable."

She saw Livy listening in her mind before she answered. "He's a lot better now." Livy smiled faintly. "He got better after you went out of contact, I guess."

There was silence between them for a moment. Livy sipped at the broth through a reed straw.

Then Annalie asked, "Am I too old? Is that what's happening to me?"

Livy froze for a moment, almost imperceptibly; but Annalie, with her sharpened perception of things near her body, saw and recognized it.

"That's it, isn't it?" she said. "I've burned up my time; I'm dying. After all, I'm older than most of the monitors before me—none of us lives as long as normal people. First we lose our talent, then everything else goes and we die."

"No," said Livy.

How can I feel cheated to die so young? Annalie thought. I've lived so many other people's lives for years!

"Admit it," she said to Livy. "It isn't your doing; you shouldn't feel responsible. Am I dying of age?"

At last Livy looked at her. Her compassion burned like fire.

"Mithra thinks that's it," Livy said softly.

Annalie sipped at her broth. It tasted dark and rich, as though Sherrard had stocked it with medicines. He probably had, she thought. How terrible to be Sherrard, responsible for the life of a monitor and unable to do more than slip medicines into her broth.

She looked at Livy and was surprised to find that she felt pity for the girl—because she had to watch a monitor die and know that she was next in line. Livy was seeing a preview of her own death.

"You can still leave, you know," Annalie said.

Livy started. "Why should I leave?"

"To escape this—what's happening to me. You could

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leave—go and live a normal life in the city. No one will force you to serve as monitor if you don't want to."

Livy's eyes, resting on hers, gleamed with sudden tears; she blinked them back. "I can't leave here, Annalie; you know that. If I went to the city and tried to live like everyone else, it would be worse. No one can suppress the talent—I'd see and feel everything anyway, and I'd burn out just as quickly."

"Maybe you wouldn't," said Annalie.

"Yes, I would. And I'd be of no service to anyone; I wouldn't be able to focus on any other work, and I wouldn't be doing the work to which I'm called."

Annalie sighed; she knew that was true. When she'd been at the Home, before she'd understood about her talent, she'd tried to live as the others did and had failed. Like it or not, desire it or fear it, she had the monitor's holopathic talent; it was what made her herself.

Annalie raised the bowl to her lips and drank deeply, deliberately. The broth had cooled, and its taste seemed bitter, but she forced herself to swallow. And to smile.

"You know, I think Mithra was wrong," she said. "I'm feeling a lot better. Livy, I'm sorry to make such a fuss."

"Don't apologize, please. We just want you to get well."

She saw the love in Livy's eyes—yes, and the fear. The girl's emotions were so naked; what need was there to see her mind?

"I will," Annalie said. "I think I can hear some of them already."

But she couldn't. In her mind was only silence as deep as the Abyss.

Gloriana had had to issue a special order to have an agricultural flier brought to Guard quarters from the fields north of Cirque. By the time it arrived, loaded with its cargo of poisons, she was behind her schedule for the drop into the Abyss.

Not that it matters to the things down there, she thought.

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It's only my own orderly mind that cares. I want to kill those things, and I want to do it on time too.

The Abyss plunged into darkness below the flier as it headed due north, toward the Final Cataract on the far rim. The motors of this craft were louder than those Gloriana was used to; people didn't worry as much about noise in the outlands as they did in Cirque, where the sounds of the many thousands of motors had to be damped if people were to hear their own thinking. The roar of the flier made her edgy; she wanted to get this job over with.

"Can't this thing fly any faster?" she asked the pilot. He was a stolid man from the outlands, some sort of minor hill Guard officer. He turned startling grey-blue eyes to her for a moment, then reached forward to move a lever half a notch. The roar of the motors grew still louder.

"She's not built for hurrying," the man said. "Just a spray flier."

"All right, but let's use what speed we can," said Gloriana.

The man nodded without looking away from the forward ports. Gloriana studied him disinterestedly: about sixty, born and lived his whole life in the foothills most likely. Family man with eight or ten grandchildren, all of them still living in the hills too. Probably still married to his first wife. Temple twice a week. Probably happy with his life too.

Maybe I *should* marry Jamie, she thought. Because I know Jamie's secret: inside, where even he may not know it, he's as predictable and reliable as this outland pilot. He'd spend the rest of his life thinking of ways to keep me happy.

But keeping me happy is going to take more imagination than he has, she thought. What I need is somebody dynamic, lively, strong, and sexy . . . and also calm, stable, willing to let me make decisions without arguing.

She smiled faintly: I wonder if- there's some alien race

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out in the stars that combines all those qualities in one person.

"North Edge coming up," said the pilot.

She looked ahead and saw the green fields of the Edge spreading in a great arc, the jumbled towers of the Apprentice Quarters rising behind them. Late-afternoon shadows stretched from the west; the sheer cliff faces of the East Edge shone with gold and crimson colors.

"We'll start right at the Cataract," she said. "Let's take a pass in the Abyss there just to get a look first."

The pilot nodded impassively. He's probably bored with this job, Gloriana thought. Wishes he could get back to his house in the hills, his wife and kids and friends. The worst problem he usually faces is a killer bear.

They approached the Final Cataract, swung to the right and curved back again, flying through the mists that sprayed off the gorge wall. The ports clouded as water covered them; the pilot flicked a switch, and blowers cleared away the moisture.

"What's your name?" Gloriana asked him.

He said, "Lamont. I've got a second name too, but you won't need it."

"All right. Get us out from the Cataract a bit, Lamont, so we can see something. Turn on your outside lights."

The flier curved left, away from the spray. Lamont touched a switch, lights below the flier came on, and the near wall of the Abyss became clearer.

Below them was the blackness of the shaft—and a movement. Gloriana looked again, but the motion was gone. Yet she was able to see motionless pale forms far down in the Abyss, distant and indistinct.

"Take us down," she said.

The flier circled in a tight curve and dropped. The lights from its underside preceded it into the depths; Gloriana saw white creepers reaching up the walls of the Abyss, straining out of the depths toward the light.

They descended past these extensors from the deep,

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and the vegetation multiplied and spread. It became thick along the canyon wall; it covered the rocks and formed layers on itself. Only a few hundred meters below the rim, the harsh rocky wall of the Abyss was teeming with life that reached up from below.

There wasn't a touch of color in any of it; the vines and leaves were dead white, lifeless to the eye. But they reached upward in the patterns of life. And Gloriana re-remembered the dull white masses she had seen this morn-ing at the bottom of the Abyss: mottled grey and white bodies, phantasmagoric fungoid shapes, no hint of the variety of life colors she was used to on the surface.

The things that lived down here were specialized. They had one function, one goal: to reach upward into the sun. To reach the surface.

The thought sent a faint chill up Gloriana's back. She said, "Start dropping the chemicals right here. Now." Lament slid an indicator on the control panel to the right, and she heard the high sound of sprayers in the rear of the flier. Looking behind, she saw a cloud of white fall into the depths, glistening in the flier's lights. The chemi-cals disappeared as they fell beyond the light.

"Closer to the wall," she said. "We've got to spray around the Cataract first: that's where they're climbing the highest. They're growing on the damp wall there."

It's the river, she thought; it actually feeds those crea-tures. It carries rich soil down from the hills and dumps it into the Abyss; it's done that for thousands, maybe millions, of years. Put that together with the garbage that's dumped off the North Edge every day, and it must provide a fantastic environment for life to grow.

The flier banked to the right and curved around to head for the Cataract, its wake of poisons luminescent in the lights. As they approached the cliff wall, those lights picked out the rich colors of stone: brown, grey, ochre and black, in rock strata that canted and folded upon themselves. The familiar sight of the Abyss walls, cross

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sections of the earth under Cirque. But now she saw pale trceries of vines climbing in the niches of the rock, seem-ing to spread as she looked at them.

"That what you're after?" asked Lamont. "That stuff on the rocks? Biggest weeds I ever saw."

"There's more than what you see now," she said.

"I saw the way they grow near the falls. Thick and tough—I guess they have to be in this hole. But the spray will clear those walls better than you expect. Kills any-thing, those poisons."

Yellow and green mosses covered the rocks now, and the vines multiplied, climbing over each other in a thick-ening carpet that became greener the higher it climbed. The flier approached the Cataract, and the roar of falling water filled the air.

"I can bank alongside the wall," Lamont offered. "Shoot the poisons right onto those vines. Doesn't take much; you'll be surprised."

"Do it," said Gloriana. The flier was buffeted by sheets of spray from the Cataract—it looked like mist, but it fell with heavy force. They flew past the Cataract, shoot-ing dense clouds of poison at the teeming vines. Some of the chemicals were washed downward by the falls.

That's fine, Gloriana thought. They'll kill anything growing on the bottom here. In fact, maybe we should poison the river itself—simply let the river take the poisons into the Abyss to kill off those things. The river's been feeding them; it can kill them too.

But she knew the temples would never allow that. The River Fundament was sacred to *half*, the temples of Cirque; she couldn't tamper with it.

The flier had passed the Cataract; now Lamont banked around and headed for another pass. Gloriana craned forward, looking to see what effect the poisons had had.

It was hard to make out the scene—sheets of water plunged downward, spray floated in the air like ghosts. But there seemed to be more motion than there had been

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a minute ago. Yes, the vines were moving! As she 'watched, the darker green mass of vines near the top of the Abyss writhed, shook and fell, trailing downward into the darkness, pulling at other vines that still clung to the wall.

The flier passed by, spraying its deadly poisons, and in its wake the vines peeled away from the cliff wall and fell into the Abyss like a slug's feelers retracting from pain. They convulsed as they fell, clutching at each other, at the rocks as they slipped past, at the empty air. And they continued to fall, uncovering pale inner layers of vine, thick and ropey, anchored in the cliffs. The pale inner vines seemed to crawl along the rocks as the poisons touched them, but they did not fall.

The flier came out of the mists into open air again. Away from the falls, the carpet of vegetation had dropped away, leaving empty rock faces streaked with traces of the vines that had fallen.

"See how I told you?" Lamont said. "Once more past, . and that ought to do it."

He was enjoying this, Gloriana realized. He was proud of his clumsy craft that lumbered through the air and shot clouds of death behind it. Proud, and glad that the job would be a short one so that he could soon go home.

They approached the Cataract once more. The rocky walls seemed to shudder as vines absorbed the poisons, retracted and fell away writhing in the air; the Cataract gorge was a gigantic mass of indistinct movement.

Then suddenly there was something on the cliff wall that was not a vine, not leafy, not vegetation—something that moved *upward*, climbing over the stronger vines that still remained, reaching pale limbs ahead and feeling for purchase in the rocks.

Something dead white. Something that moved jerkily, half-hidden within the mists of the Cataract. Something huge.

Oh sweet lord, it's one of those things from the bottom,

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Gloriana thought. Trying to get out, to escape from the poisons.

The thing climbed with incredible swiftness, scuttling with long tentacles that whipped through the air. It was less than a hundred meters from the rim.

"Lamont! There!—don't you see it?"

But he had already turned the flier toward the creature. They approached the sheer canyon wall, banked through the buffeting spray of the Cataract. The rocks glistened in the flier's lights, and the heavy mists became opaque sheets of white. Through them she saw the scuttling movements of the creature, the shaking of vines as it climbed.

They passed within a few meters of it, shooting their poisons directly on its mottled body. The wash of chemicals hit it with so much force that it was shaken loose and fell. But it caught at the vines and stopped its plunge; the vines pulled away from the rock wall, but the many-legged thing grabbed more of the vines and held on.

"Again! Hit it again, Lamont!"

The pilot threw their flier into a tight circle, its heavy motors laboring, and Gloriana fell against the port on her right. She heard the man cursing softly under his breath. The Cataract's spray shook the flier.

"What *is* that?" Lamont asked.

"I don't know. Be careful; it's dangerous."

They approached and passed it again in the mists; as the chemical struck it this time, the creature shuddered and its tentacles jerked in the air. It fell away from the vines; it clung with one tentacle, swaying for a moment. A mouth gaped open on the underside of its body, and then it plunged out of sight.

The pale vines, torn away from the rocks, shook in the Cataract's heavy spray; they began to slide down the wall of the Abyss.

As her eyes followed the falling vines, Gloriana saw more movements below. The flier circled away from the Cataract before she could make out anything clearly,

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but she had recognized the scuttling motions of the ten-tacled creatures. More of them were climbing.

"We got it," said Lamont. "Told you the poisons would kill anything."

"We're not finished," said Gloriana. She pointed downward.

He watched as two dull white creatures scrambled up into the illumination of the flier's lights. He put the flier into another tight circle. "I don't believe this," he said.

"Just be sure you get them. If even one of those things gets out of the Abyss—"

"It won't." The flier came to the Cataract again, its chemical sprays washing against the cliff. The vines here at the top were almost gone now; the few that remained were as thick as the trunks of trees.

The creatures Gloriana had seen climbed upward right into the direct spray of poison. One was shaken loose by the force of the spray; it fell and disappeared below. The other stopped in its climb, but clung to a thick vine; it seemed to freeze against the rocky wall.

She saw more of them coming from below. Three, four—another had climbed almost to their height before she saw it. They moved astonishingly swiftly.

"Wait a minute," Lamont said, moving the flier's controls with angry thrusts of his big hands. The roar of the flier's motors became higher in pitch; Gloriana felt the entire compartment vibrating.

"Gravity engine," said the pilot. "We can move right in and hover to concentrate our spray."

"Stay out of their reach," Gloriana said.

"Oh, I will." The man was grim-faced. He brought the flier in close to the wall, moving more slowly now. He hovered over a tentacled creature and played the spray directly on it for several seconds. It writhed

frantically and fell away. Lamont moved on to another of them and washed it off the cliff just as quickly. Gloriana scanned the Abyss wall below as he worked;

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the creatures were still coming. There were so many! Their pale-furred tentacles glistened in the flier's lights. As they climbed out of the depths Lament blasted them with poisons, and one by one they fell away, still writhing as they plunged downward.

The last of the vines were disappearing now; even the thickest of them seemed to crumble as the spraying poisons washed over them, and they too fell into the blackness. After many long minutes, Gloriana surveyed the cliffs before them and saw no more vines and none of the climbing creatures. She allowed herself a deep, slow breath.

"I don't see any more," said Lament. He flew the craft slowly past the Cataract, peering into the mists for signs of movement.

"I think they're done," Gloriana said. "But we'd better —*Damn!*"

She had looked upward to the Very top of the cliffs, where the water of the Cataract plunged over the rim at the beginning of its great fall—and there, clearly outlined against the sky, she saw moving tentacles. One of them had gotten past—had managed to climb all the way to the surface!

Lament followed her pointing hand, squinting through the mists. The flier's engines blared loudly as he accelerated to climb; Gloriana was pressed back into her seat. The flier labored over the rim of the Abyss, then rose above the Cataract.

They had lost sight of the creature as they climbed; now they peered below, searching for a sign of those moving tentacles. The land here at the Final Cataract was a savannah; low bushes and trees grew along the banks of the river and extended out into the channel, rising on their roots like waiting spiders. Leafy vines covered everything, and bright flowers dotted the banks.

There was no sign of the creature. They flew across the river at the lip of the Cataract; water rushed through the

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vegetation below, frothing white as it ran over great boulders near the Edge. Gloriana looked upstream, where the river flowed in a long zigzag, lazy hi the late after-noon.

"What's that?" She had seen something on the river, something that rode the water smoothly in the center of the channel.

Lamont leaned over her to look upstream. "It's a boat, isn't it? Gravity boat. I rode one of them last tune I came to Cirque. They start up at the Winter Gate, come down all the way through the city to the Cataract." Gloriana stared, horrified. He was right; it was a tourist craft. The smooth sides of the boat barely skimmed the surface of the water; it gathered speed as the river approached the falls.

And as she looked, she saw the tentacled creature erupt from the water directly in the boat's path.

Mind, not me, has seen this moment: coils of flesh enwrap the air and churn the River into white. Here fear is born, and so am I.

(Another moment follows, and another birth. Each conception takes forever.)

—The Book of Causes

"I'll bet you don't have cities like this where you live," Nikki said to the millipede. "Cirque is the most beautiful city in the galaxy—isn't that true?"

Reeds and brilliant red flowers grew in the shallows of the wide river here near the Final Cataract. Few homes were visible this close to the Edge, but those that they saw were great sprawling affairs with guest cottages dotting the fields around them.

"Cirque is the most beautiful of the human cities," said the millipede. "In the Aldebaran system, human cities are crowded and somewhat dirty. And they become more so as time passes."

"That just means they're growing," Robin said. "Jor-dan says the cities on other planets are all covered by domes to keep the air in, and the heat and all. They can't spread out like Cirque."

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"Oh, it's not just the space we have," NikM said. "We're an old city; we've learned how important beauty is." She was leaning back in her seat, her arms spread across the backs of the seats beside her. Now and then her hand brushed against the fur of the millipede's back.

"I think," said the millipede, "that perhaps humans confuse beauty with time. You see only the present, and you enjoy the sense of great time in your old buildings."

"I guess you have some different ideas about what's pretty," Robin said. Nikki was pleased by the note of respect in the girl's voice; evidently she had come to realize that the foreigner was not stupid just because it said strange things.

"Actually we have many of the feelings you humans have," said the creature. "We too enjoy the sense of duration in our surroundings. The difference is that we see much of what is to come also. We are moved

not only by the past of Cirque, but also by its future. Do not imagine that your city's glory is past; it is on the edge of new wonders."

"Really?" said Robin. "Like what?"

"The eruption from your Abyss is happening even now," said the millipede. "Cirque becomes greater from today onward."

Nikki felt a surge of excitement. It was hard to imagine any great changes coming to Cirque so late in its history, but the foreigner seemed sure of what it said. Nikki sat forward, turning to the millipede. "That must be why you came here today! Can you tell us about it, about what's so exciting?"

The millipede was silent a moment, its dark eyes gazing across the low green fields beyond the river edge. Robin said, "Maybe you shouldn't. I mean, isn't that what's so exciting about things—being surprised when they hap-pen?"

"That may be true for humans," said the millipede.

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"You are such an energetic race, much more excitable than the rest of us."

"That's because we live in the present," Robin said. "We can't see into the future, so everything's new." She said it proudly, as though it were a truth she had just figured out.

"Everything is new to us too in a way," said the milli-pede. "Perhaps we see each moment more sharply than humans do, in fact. You spend much time guessing about the future, worrying or hoping. Races who know what is to come concentrate totally on what is happening at the moment."

"Well, / like *surprises*," said the girl. "Anyway, I'm not sure I want to know about those things in the Abyss; they're creepy."

"You're not afraid, are you?" Nikki asked her. "You said this morning you thought they were boring."

Robin made a face. "I just don't want to hear about them. I didn't like the broadcast."

"You know of the eruption only through what you saw in your broadcast—is that true?" asked the millipede.

"Sure," said Robin. "How else? I wasn't there, you know."

The millipede watched the river unwinding before them as the boat rode the smooth current. "Seeing through someone else's eyes is not truly seeing, I believe."

Nikki laughed, remembering how sharply she had smelled the odors of dawn at the Morning Gate while she had been at breakfast in a tower in the Apprentice Quar-ters. "I guess you don't understand what our broadcasts are like," she said. "We not only see and hear and taste everything, we even feel what the other person is feeling."

"I have heard that," said the foreigner. "It seems to be a very complete experience, except that you do not feel through your self. Surely your own reactions are the most important part of any experience. Well, you will

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soon see one of the creatures directly, and then you will know them fully."

Nikki felt her heart leap. "You mean we'll see one in person? Hey, this boat ends up at the Abyss, and that's where the creatures were!" She turned excitedly to Robin. "Remember when we were getting into the boat, and it wanted to pay for damages or something in advance? Wow, that must mean—"

"*No!*" Robin said sharply. "I don't want to run into any of those things! Let me out of this boat!" She began to fumble with the controls of her gravity harness, anx-i-ously searching the quiet waters of the river for signs of movement.

"There is no need to be afraid," said the millipede. Its body curled around Nikki and it tried to catch the young girl's hands to stop her from unfastening her harness. "It will be best to sit still and watch."

"Oh no," said Robin. "Maybe *you* want to see those things, but I don't!"

Nikki trembled with excitement; she was afraid she might burst into giggles, and she controlled herself with an effort. They were riding toward an adventure; she would finally get to see one of the strange creatures that everyone in Cirque had been talking about all day!

She didn't *think* it would be really dangerous. The millipede didn't seem to think so anyway, and it could see the future.

A thought came from deep inside her: since the for-eigner was used to seeing the future, maybe it thought nothing could be changed. If they were going to be killed by monsters, would the millipede even try to save them?

She found that she had begun to undo her own gravity harness; she stopped. *I'm Nikki-Four*, she told herself. I'm not afraid of things; that's Three who's thinking like this. *I'm* the one who's out now, and I'm not afraid!

Then suddenly the beast rose from the water directly in front of them, erupting as swiftly as a waterspout;

tentacles whipped through the air and Nikki felt a jarring crash. The boat was thrown to the right, and she clutched at her seat. The prow lifted into the air, engines roaring as they tried to lift the boat over the obstacle. Robin screamed.

"Just sit still," said the millipede.

But Robin had succeeded in loosing her gravity harness. As she tried to stand, two fur-covered tentacles curled over the boat, gripping. The boat plunged downward, striking the water and bouncing as its engines continued to lift it. Nikki grabbed at the girl, and clutched her around the waist to keep her from falling overboard. Robin screamed again and beat at her with small fists. Pale tentacles crawled on the prow, seeking purchase. Nikki saw the creature dangling in midair, its ropey limbs writhing. It was huge, twice the size of the boat.

The gravity engines hadn't been designed to control so much weight; the boat nosed downward and plunged into the river with a loud crash. Nikki held on to Robin fiercely, at the same time trying to protect herself from the girl's flailing elbows. She felt a giddy elation, blood pounding at her temples, and she realized she was laugh-ing.

The boat seemed to jump through the air, veering to the right; the creature fell away. The wide expanse of fields tilted crazily, and Nikki's stomach rose to her throat. The boat fell again, skidded in the water and struck a tree growing near the river edge. The tree trunk snapped with a great crack and they plunged past it, water splashing over them. Nikki was drenched, and she lost her grip on Robin. The girl fell to the floor of the boat, moaning.

The river churned to white froth around the boat as its engines continued to try to lift it; but then the engines died, and the boat settled among thick rushes. Nikki's cheek throbbed painfully, and she tasted salty blood. She looked at the millipede; it had twisted its supple body

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around in its seat to look behind them. It was smiling softly.

Nikki turned and followed its gaze. The boat had cut a wake of clear water through the floating vines of the shallows; as she looked, the creature surfaced in that wake. Water streamed off its huge grey and white body; tentacles seemed to flow around it. Sunlight glistened on the creature as it began to swim toward them.

For a moment she saw it clearly—more clearly, it seemed, than she had ever seen anything before. It was no monster, only a sleek, graceful beast moving smoothly through the water. Strange, so strange. And beautiful; in that moment she felt overwhelmed by the wild grace of the thing.

Then she heard an engine droning overhead and saw a Guard flier swoop down toward the creature. A thick cloud of spray shot down from the flier, and the great beast dived, disappearing beneath the tangled vegetation of the shallows. The spray fell on roiling water and was washed downstream.

"They're going to kill it!" she cried.

"No," said the millipede. "They cannot poison it when it hides in the river."

The Guard flier lumbered through the air toward them; the noise of its motors shook the leaves of trees and vines. She could see no sign of the great creature in the shadowed river edge.

"But it's beautiful! I've never seen anything so wonder-ful!"

The millipede only smiled its tiny smile, still regarding the wake of the boat. Robin climbed back onto her seat, her mouth opening and closing as she gasped for breath. Nikki drew the girl to her and felt her trembling.

"Don't be afraid," Nikki said. "It won't hurt us; it's beautiful, did you see it?"

"Are you crazy?" Robin broke away from Nikki's arm and tried to climb over the side of the boat. Nikki

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grabbed 'at her, caught her and held her tightly. The girl thrashed in her arms. "Let me go, we've got to get out—"

The creature resurfaced, this time much closer to them—only fifteen meters away. Its supple tentacles curled in the water, and its great sleek body turned slowly; it seemed to be lost, disoriented, and Nikki felt a stab of pity for it. Poor beast, why are they trying to kill you?

The flier approached again from above, but the creature disappeared into the roots of water-growing trees. Nikki saw it pulling itself through tree roots and vines with amazing speed, the flier following overhead. Another cloud of poisons shot downward, but she couldn't see the creature any longer. The flier began to circle -the spot where it had dropped its last spray.

"Did they get it?" Robin asked. Her body was tense and hard as she strained to see what was happening under the foliage.

"They must have," Nikki said softly. She felt like crying—such a wonderful creature, like nothing she'd ever heard of, beautiful and powerful, but they had hunted it down like vermin.

"The creature has escaped," said the millipede. It had stopped looking back; now it calmly loosened its gravity harness. "We can stand up now; our boat has settled and is steady."

Nikki undid her harness and rose, leaning on the seat-back to steady herself. The world seemed so peaceful all of a sudden; the current at the river edge moved slowly, and the soft light of the sun slanted through leaves to dapple the water with touches of gold. Even the motor of the Guard flier was only a drone in the distance.

"Are you sure that thing won't come back after us?" Robin asked the millipede.

"It has gone away," said the foreigner. "Your Guard flier will pick us up and return us to the city."

Gone away, Nikki thought. And I'll never see it again."

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Oh, but what a wonderful thing to have seen it at all, even for a moment!

The flier was coming toward them now. Nikki waved her arms over her head to make sure the pilot would see them.

Robin was still trembling. "I've changed my mind about surprises," she said. "I sure didn't like that one."

"But it's just the beginning, don't you see?" Nikki said. She turned to the millipede. "That's right, isn't it? You traveled here to see wonderful things come out of the Abyss—creatures like that one. Because they're so beautiful."

"Yes. It is like your ancient buildings; it is beautiful not only for the present moment. It is a future glory being born."

Then maybe I *will* get to see it again, Nikki thought. Her heart leaped joyously.—Maybe *soon*, while I'm still out.

She searched the river once more, looking for some sign of the creature. But all she saw were blackened leaves and branches in the shallows where the flier had sprayed its poisons; downstream from each spot the path of dying greenery was spreading as the chemicals diffused in the current. The Guard flier settled beside them, its motor shattering the quiet afternoon.

"I want to show you something," Salamander said. Without waiting for Gregorian to reply, she turned and led him across the empty Cathedral to her quarters.

She closed the heavy wooden door behind them, and they stood in silence for a moment. The small room was lit by the single candle of her personal shrine; its fire danced in the wall draft, moving shadows across Gregorian's face. His expression seemed to waver with the light, and she thought: How odd to see his face come to life in this way. He's so serious, so unemotive; only an illusion can bring expression to his features.

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Yet she had felt much warmth from him despite his reserve. It had been there in the way his eyes met hers, in his infrequent smiles.

She sat on the floor before the small shrine: the candle resting on an island of dirt surrounded by water drawn that morning from the river. After a moment he came and stood behind her.

She touched the packed-earth floor next to her with her fingertips. "Sit here." He did, trying to emulate the way she knelt, but the position did not come naturally to him. "No, sit comfortably," she said. "Now look at the flame for a minute. Silently."

She turned her attention to the dancing drop of light, allowing her self to be drawn into its brightness. The room enlarged around them, and after a while she heard his breathing slow, become regular. They sat in silence for a timeless interval.

At last he shifted his weight and said, "This is a form of self-hypnosis, isn't it?"

She smiled to herself. "If you like. I think of it as opening my self."

"To what? To your gods? To infinity?" The edge of cynicism in his voice amused her; she had heard it from so many people, especially in these last few years when Cirque had become infused with rationality. We're an old city, she thought; we think we can discard the things that have brought us to where we are now.

"I open to anything," she said. "Otherwise I am not open at all, you see."

Gregorian said, "I'm afraid I'm not a good subject for conversion. When I'm working, I don't open my mind—I focus it on what I'm doing, nothing else. And I'm not much of a believer anyway."

"Yes, so you told me earlier." Salamander continued to stare at the flame; she felt its tiny warmth reach out and enfold her.

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"I haven't even heard any of the broadcasts today," Gregorian said. "That's how much I get involved in my work."

"There have been no broadcasts since this morning," Salamander said. "Not since the monitor broadcast my vision."

"None at all?" Gregorian uncurled his legs and leaned back on his elbows. "That's strange. Especially when there's something happening in the city like those things they found in the Abyss. Whatever they are."

"They are one thing," she told him. "They are the Beast."

"Whatever they are," he repeated. "I'm surprised the monitor hasn't shared anything more with us."

"The Beast may have ways of silencing even our monitor. Its powers are only the negative ones, but those powers are great. Observe Fire before you."

"I see it," he said. "What are you trying to tell me?"

She said nothing for a moment. They sat before the small shrine, and she listened till his breathing became slow and regular again. She heard the sound of Erich's footsteps approaching her door; there was a hesitant knock, and after a few moments the steps moved away.

"I want you to see that you are not what you think you are," she said to Gregorian. "You believe you are a logical being, untouched by anything irrational—is that not true?"

"You said yourself that I'm not a cynic," he said.

"No, but you like to think that you are. Observe Fire before you."

He sighed. "I see it, priestess. But I look at fires all my life; I work with them, I mold and shape them. They don't hold the mystery for me that they have for your followers."

"Then why do you work with Fire?"

He shrugged. "Because it's beautiful."

"Beauty is an aspect of godhood—of mystery. It trans-

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cends the things of ordinary life; it is beyond understanding in that way."

"No," he said. "I understand beauty. That's the difference between us, you see—you're a priestess, I'm an artist. You worship things you think are beautiful; I study and understand them."

Salamander smiled softly. "Do you really think you understand beauty?"

"I create it," he said. "I control it."

"Do you? This tiny candle flame is not sculpted; no one controls it. Yet it is beautiful—you see?"

Tiny shadows leaped on the brick walls; golden light winked in the basin of water surrounding the candle.

"Wait till you see my fire tonight," he said. "This is pretty, but I've created a work of art in flame. It will be spectacular."

"Yes, it will be aesthetic. How long will it last?"

"Hours," he said proudly. "You saw how carefully I built it."

A smile tugged gently at the corners of her mouth. "This tiny flame has lived since before I was born. It is not spectacular, but it continues. We do not shape it or feed it or make it conform to our ideas. It is itself; observe it."

The flame danced in her eyes; the room around her became a dream, and Gregorian part of it.

"I don't know what it is you want me to see," he said impatiently.

"Only this: you have not created Fire; it exists without you and has existed since before thought came into the world. Do you know how ancient our planet is? Our most ancient and prized records have crumbled to dust so long ago that we cannot even guess. Yet before humans could write records, Fire existed. Before humans came to be, Fire existed."

She looked away from the flames, and met his eyes. Shadows of light flickered in her vision, obscuring his

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features. "And you think that because you have learned how to coax Fire into patterns, you have made the beauty in it?"

"Every artist has to work with some material," he said evenly.

"Exactly. No artist can fashion beauty from nothing. Now observe Fire. Regard your material."

She saw a slow smile go across his face. "You do argue cleverly, priestess."

"This is no argument," she said. She turned back to the candle flame, and he joined her in silent contemplation of it. After a moment she was able to hear the soft sound of the flame as it leaped in the air. After some further moments this sound too left her.

They shared the room with Fire. They sat on packed earth and smelled the fresh air blowing across the basin of river water. These things were eternal, quiet, deeply peaceful. The room enlarged around them and became a world. The world ceased to exist, and they were in a void. Even time faded; they simply existed. The distance between them ceased to have reality. They were no longer two separate people; they were a mote of consciousness in peace, surrounded by nothing and filling it with their presence.

Abruptly she leaned forward and blew out the candle flame.

The darkness of the room closed in around them; silence took on the quality of sound. But the afterimage of the flame glowed in her eyes and in his, and silently they watched that dim, subtle flickering. Fire was gone, but it remained.

Her sense of oneness was still incomplete; she reached out to touch Gregorian's face, fingertips brushing his skin. There was warmth there, the warmth she had felt only in momentary flickers before. She remembered not to think as she slid her arms around him, feeling the taut muscles of his back; then, as she ran her fingers down the seams

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of his body-suit and touched his cool skin, she had no need to remember at all. Her cape fell away;

everything fell away, and they met in darkness, using touch for eyes. His warm breath was on her face, and his hands on her belly, her hips; she was not surprised at their roughness.

There was no direction, no sense of weight; the brick walls did not exist, nor the deep-piled furs of her bed. They moved in quickening pulses of emotion. He made soft sounds in his throat; the sounds grew more urgent, and eventually he cried out, or she did.

There came a tune when breath returned. She brushed her hair from his eyes and lay back in damp furs. The room became real again, pungent with the aroma of the candle she had extinguished minutes or hours ago.

He was looking wonderingly at her in the dimness. At length he said, "I don't think I understand you." She smiled. "Oh yes, you do."

"No, not completely. What was all that talk about godliness for? Sitting in front of your shrine, arguing about aesthetics?"

She stretched lazily on the furs. "Not a preparation for lovemaking, if you think that. I only wanted you to open. When you did ... I had not planned the rest." She laughed. "Even a priestess does not plan everything, you know."

"Then what *did* you expect?"

"I thought you might see some of the things I see when I am alone with Fire. Instead, it was I who discovered new things." She blew softly on his sweat-dampened chest, drying it. His nipples were hard amid soft hair.

He stroked her back slowly. "I'm glad the subject got changed; I'm not comfortable with religion. You're very beautiful."

She said, "I wish . . ." The room was growing cold; she shivered and moved closer to him. "I wish you would let yourself see the truth inside beauty. It seems such a

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shame to be an artist and not know what you work with."

"Beauty and truth are the same thing," he said.

She frowned. "No, do not play with words. To say that without understanding it only builds defense against it."

He shrugged, continuing to touch the smooth skin of her back, tracing the line of a shoulderblade. She looked across the dark room at her shrine, the pale candle; she was surprised at how much colder the room was without the flame. She pulled one of her furs over them.

He said, "I see the beauty in you. Isn't that enough for now?"

"For now, yes." The room seemed to grow lighter, and for a moment she thought Erich must have opened the door. But when she looked up the light was gone again.

A shudder ran through her, and reflexively she pressed against him. But he was shivering too. The light came again, a sharp burst of it, an explosion. The dark ceiling became a brilliant blue that hurt her eyes; the bed seemed to tilt under her.

She saw rushing water, the prow of a boat, and she tore at the imprisoning grip of her gravity harness. Pale-furred tentacles writhed in the air, and she screamed.

Someone grabbed and held her; she fought, and from far away she heard Gregorian say, "It's a broadcast." The boat climbed into the air, but two of those huge tentacles had caught hold of the prow—she saw a monstrous creature hanging from the boat, saw its entire mottled body with chilling clarity. Then the boat nosed down into the river again, and the light flickered and disappeared; she was in her room again, staring into darkness.

She was freezing; even her furs held no warmth. Gregorian's body against hers was cold as river rock.

He said wonderingly, "That was the thing you told me about."

"Yes. The Beast." Her lips were numb.

Light returned, bright sky and white water flashing for

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several moments. The boat was settling in thick rushes near the bank. She heard the drone of an engine and looked up to see a Guard flier overhead.

The dark room closed in again. This time she quickly got to her feet and went to her shrine. She lit the candle, her hands shaking.

The light of her small Fire flared into bright blue, and she was on the river again. She swayed and caught at the wall beside her shrine; then she was clutching her seat in the boat, and Nikki was saying, "It won't hurt us; it's beautiful, did you see it?"

Darkness strobed. She tried to focus her gaze on Fire, but it disappeared. She was struggling to free herself

from Nikki, and the creature came out of the water again. This time she deliberately forced the scene from her mind.

Fire returned, and she fastened her gaze on it, opened her self to its familiar warmth. The room became real again, and now it stayed with her. She leaned one hand on the wall and gradually steadied herself. . . . Gregorian came and wrapped a fur around her shoulders. "It's only a broadcast," he said. "Something wrong with it, though—it keeps fading in and out."

Yes, she thought. The monitor's presence had felt different too: straining, unsure.

She picked up her robe and drew it over her head, thoughts whirling in her mind. That thing, the Beast . . . it was loose on the surface, probably less than a kilometer from the Cathedral. She thought: What if it gets away? If it attacks here tonight, there will be hundreds of people trapped inside.

She heard Gregorian's shaky laugh. "Well, you did open me," he said. "But I don't think what I saw was beautiful."

The room's chill would not leave her; she wrapped her arms around her shoulders and stood looking at the shrine. "Did they get it?" she asked; but her voice was

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Robin's and the bright sky was exploding into the room again.

"The creature has escaped," said the millipede.

The sky faded away, but those words seemed to echo in the room. A draft of air blew in past the shrine, cold from the river just outside.

Annalie forced herself to sit up, piling pillows against the great carved headboard so that she could lean against them till her dizziness passed. After a moment, the vertigo was gone. The darkness retreated into the corners of her room.

"I want to go outside," she said to Livy. "Will you go with me?"

Livy looked hesitantly at her. "You should rest," she said.

"No, I feel much better. Really, Livy, I feel fine." She realized as she said it that it was true: the sick weakness, even the fright, was gone from her.

"You need to get your strength back," Livy said. "I'm glad you feel so much better, but you can't—"

"Livy, this wasn't a sickness like other people have. We're not like other people; you know that. I think . . . it was a mindstorm, that's all. And it's gone now."

Except that I still can't see anything outside this room; I can't hear except with my ears. But maybe that's temporary too.

She tried to remember what she'd heard of mindstorms. They were rare, usually striking less developed mind talents than hers; she couldn't remember ever hearing of a monitor having one.

Maybe we only get them when we're too old, she thought. When we're ready to die.

She thrust the idea from her. "Please, Livy. Do you realize how long I've lived in this one room, never going out to breathe fresh air? I want to smell the grass."

"We don't need to go outside," Livy said. "Why

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should we, when we can see everything through other people's—"

She stopped, embarrassed.

"That's what I mean," said Annalie. "I can't see anything else now. I never realized how small this room is. It oppresses me, Livy; I need openness."

Livy stood up, turning to go to the door. "I'll ask Sherrard."

"No." Annalie threw back the blanket and slid to the side of her bed. Carefully, grasping the headboard, she raised herself to her feet.

"Sherrard!" Livy called to him anxiously, then hurried to Annalie's side; she took her firmly by the elbow.

"Here, lean on me."

"It's not necessary, Livy." And it was true; Annalie felt strength returning to her moment by moment. As soon as she'd thought of going outside, she'd begun to feel better.

It's the feedback, she thought. Stuck inside, living in shadows, I can only be sick. But outside is freedom, brightness. Maybe when I get outside these walls I'll even be able to see the city again.

Sherrard hurried into the room. His eyes widened when he saw Annalie out of bed; he rushed forward, saying, "No, you mustn't!"

"Bring me clothes," Annalie told him.

"Please, you're not well!"

Annalie felt a sudden surge of annoyance. She stood straight and stared hard into Sherrard's eyes. "Do what I tell you. / make decisions about me. If I die, who will lose? No one, only me. I can't function for the

city as I am now."

Sherrard fumbled for words; finally he said, "But you don't *have* any clothes."

Annalie laughed as she realized he was right. She hadn't been out of this house since she'd first come here; she had left her bed only to see to the needs of her body.

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What clothes she had had when she came wouldn't fit her now.

"Then bring me some of Livy's clothes," she said. Annalie was slight for her age; Livy, five years younger, was almost her size. "Not a body-suit; nothing tight like that. But maybe you have a robe?" she asked the girl.

Livy sighed. "My blue one," she said to Sherrard. "It's warm, and it should be big enough."

Sherrard hesitated a moment longer, then turned and left the room. Annalie drew her sweat-dampened night-shirt over her head, dropped it onto the bed and went to stand before the oval mirror by her dresser. She studied her naked body as *if* for the first time: white, slender, ribs stretching the skin of her torso. The swelling around her nipples had grown into small but recognizable breasts; she was surprised. Farther down there was soft dark hair.

I'm becoming a woman, she thought. I hadn't realized.

The thought brought with it a sharp instant of sadness. I haven't thought of my self for so long. ... If I hadn't gotten sick and lost my talent, I might not have noticed the changes at all.

Livy snatched up the blanket from Annalie's bed and threw it around her. "Sherrard's coming back; he'll see you," she said.

Annalie laughed, her exhilaration returning. "Oh, Livy, you're treating me like an ordinary person!"

"Sherrard *is* an ordinary person," Livy said. "A grown man."

"He's tended me for years," Annalie said; "he's seen me naked more often than—"

She stopped. —More often than I've seen myself, she thought. But now I'm no different from him. I'm really naked for the first time.

She stood silently as Sherrard hurried into the room, brining Livy's heavy blue robe made of micro-woven wool. He handed the robe to Livy, glanced at Annalie,

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and abruptly turned and went out again.

Livy helped her put the robe on; it was a bit tight under her arms and across her chest, but it fit well enough. Annalie looked at herself in the mirror as Livy tied the belt at her waist. Am I pretty? she wondered. She noticed that the robe was the exact color of Livy's eyes—but her own eyes were grey. Grey? Did I ever know that before?

She took Livy's hand and drew her through the door into the long hall that led to the large entrance of the house. As they passed the common room she glanced in and saw Edouard huddled into himself, eyes closed; but Mithra, holding him protectively, met her eyes with a challenging gaze. Annalie smiled faintly and went on past.

I know what you're thinking without hearing it, you ambitious child. You want what I've lost. But I wonder if it will make you happy.

She and Livy went outside, Annalie closing the great glass-paneled door firmly behind her. The light of after-noon dazzled her; she blinked her eyes clear and walked out onto the sward that stretched for hundreds of meters out to the line of pine and cypress trees that surrounded the monitor's house. She chose her steps carefully on the lawn, setting down each foot tentatively. The clean, sharp aroma of mown grass rose around her, and the huge vault of blue sky opened out overhead. Annalie let go of Livy's hand and twirled in the open space, heady with the feeling of freedom,

"Oh, Livy, it's so wonderful!"

Livy stood still in the open air, her eyes narrow and worried as though she were peering at shadows.—Or hearing distant thunder, Annalie thought. Of course! She's still seeing the whole city, living in everyone else's minds; she's only partly here. Is there something frightening in the city? *Is* that why she's so worried?

"Annalie, you mustn't stay out long," the girl said.

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"Yes, I must!" Annalie said, raising her arms to the air. "I've never been here before!"

Livy frowned. "But you've seen all this before. You've seen *everything!*"

How strange Livy's expression was! Such a young face, round and soft yet so serious!

"No, I haven't," Annalie said. "I've never seen it myself, alone, with my own eyes and my own mind. Livy, don't you understand? I'm *free* for the first time in my life! Everyone else is gone!"

Livy reached out a hand to her. "Don't worry; it will all come back soon."

Annalie laughed. "Maybe it won't. Maybe my talent is gone and I'll never see the whole city again. Maybe I'll just be me. Just me."

"No! It will come back to you; I know it will. It *has* to—we need you, every one of us. Especially today—" She stopped suddenly and bit her upper lip.

She's so anxious, Annalie thought. "Why today?"

Livy stared at her, her blue eyes shining with tears. "You know," she said softly.

"No," said Annalie. "I don't know anything. Especially today, I don't know a thing." She said it happily, without regret. Annalie tried to meet her gaze, but Livy's eyes flooded with tears and she looked down suddenly, blinking them away. "Because of those things from the Abyss," she whispered. "They've gotten out. They're loose in the city!" "What things?" Something pale and sinuous stirred deep in Annalie's mind; a shudder ran through her. Is it cold out here? she wondered.

"You saw them this morning," Livy said. "Remember Jamie and Gloriana flying over the Abyss, and the creature they saw on the wall?"

"No," said Annalie, frowning. The sky seemed to

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narrow above her. "I don't remember anything like that," she said firmly.

Livy looked uncertainly at her. "But you were still seeing everything then; I remember that for sure. It was a little later that you—" Her eyes widened. "That must have been what happened," she said softly.

"What must have?" Annalie still felt that strange crawling movement in the depths of her mind; it was trying to climb up into her awareness. She rubbed her arms through the warmth of the wool robe, arms crossed in front of her body.

Livy grasped her hand and tried to draw her back toward the house. "You shouldn't be out here; you've got to go back and get into bed."

But Annalie resisted. Her world was open and free for the first time; she wouldn't be wrapped in a dim bedroom again.

"Tell me, Livy. You've got to; whatever it was, it's freed me, so it can't be so awful. What happened to me this morning?"

Livy tried to smile, but she shuddered with it. Her eyes had gone unfocused; she was seeing somewhere else with her mind.

"Tell me!" Annalie said again.

Livy shook her head as though she were trying to free it of something. "Mithra says I should, but if you've managed to forget it—Oh, all right; yes. Shut up, Mithra!"

Annalie stood in the open grass, waiting. Ignoring the deep darkness within.

"Two people flew over the Abyss this morning in a glider," Livy said. She started to speak slowly, but then her words came in a rush. "They saw something down below near the Final Cataract, something huge with tentacles that ran down into the darkness. You saw that with them, and you broadcast it. Then Salamander, the priestess at the Cathedral of the Five Elements, saw the broadcast, and she had a vision that the creature was something

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completely evil, a monster that had grown from all the sins and hatred people have dumped into the Abyss. She was scared, and you picked that up too and broadcast it. ... Then, after that, your mind stopped. I mean, you stopped seeing, and that was when you—"

"When I got sick," Annalie said. She felt curiously empty, as though she had lost all capacity for emotion; only her reasoning mind was alive.

"Yes. But there was more than just one of those things, because when Gloriana and Jamie and some others went back down into the Abyss with a light, they saw that the whole floor of the Abyss was covered with them; it was just crawling with those dead-colored tentacles. The creatures kept *reaching up* at them, grabbing at the flier; but the lightbeam seemed to hurt them, and the flier got away."

"I was unconscious then," said Annalie.

Livy nodded, a quick jerky motion. "Gloriana got a life-control flier and dropped poisons at the Final Cataract. The walls there were just *covered* with vines climbing up to the edge, but when the poisons hit them they died and fell down into the Abyss. But those creatures just went wild running from the poisons, and one of them got out onto the surface; it disappeared in the undergrowth around the edge of the river."

Livy stopped, wide eyes staring at Annalie, searching for her reaction. But Annalie felt none; what Livy had told her seemed like something read in a book, a legend that could be shut between safe bindings. Reality for Annalie had always been experienced directly, right at the moment and with all her senses—through everyone's mind.

Yet she was conscious that there was something missing from even her own perceptions at this moment. It was as though her peripheral vision had dimmed, and she could only see straight ahead—seeing with incredible

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clarity but knowing that there was more that she wasn't seeing.

Well, how else should I feel? she thought. I've lost my talent. This is the way everyone else sees the world, and *they* don't feel anything missing. And I've found a sense of my self that I've never had.

"So that's what happened to me," she said. "I panicked and tried to hide from what I saw." She smiled faintly. "It's strange, isn't it, that when we use all of our minds we have so little control over them? You'd think it would give us more strength . . . but it's all a matter of opening ourselves, making ourselves

vulnerable. And sometimes we can't take it."

"Edouard did the same thing," said Livy.

"But he's so young, and he's still new here. Fm older; I should have been stronger."

Livy touched her arm consolingly. "You're much better already. In another day or so your talent will come back."

Annalie met the warmth of her eyes for a moment, then looked away at the open spaces of the field, the endless blue of the sky above. Freedom. But did she want it if it cost her the ability to see as she had all her life?

Something crystallized within her. "I want to see Sala-mander," she said, "the priestess who had the vision. I have to understand what she saw that frightened me."

"But why should you trust what *she* saw?" Livy asked. "She's just one person; what she saw was only something that a priestess would imagine."

"No, Livy. I've seen religious visions before—you have too. What a priestess does is a lot like what we do; we open our selves and let in whatever comes. You and I see into the minds of people, but she saw something else. A different level of sight, probably. If Salamander saw into the minds of those creatures, then I want to know what she found."

"But you *saw*—"

Livy's large blue eyes were so anxious. And Annalie

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suddenly realized that the girl's fright was not for her alone—it was for herself, for her own future when *she* would be the monitor. Which would be soon, if Annalie didn't recover quickly.

All the more reason I have to face this as directly as I can, Annalie thought. I'm fighting for her too.

"Come with me," she said. "Let Mithra monitor the city today; her talent is strong enough."

"Go with you to Salamander?" Livy said softly. "Leave the house?"

Annalie nodded. "Leave it to Mithra; that's what she wants anyway. We'll let her have a taste of what it's like to be monitor."

"But you're sick!"

"No I'm not." Annalie threw back her head and twirled, her feet bare in the warm grass of the field. "Oh, Livy, don't you see? I've lost my vision, but I've become complete in myself. There's nothing wrong with me physically! I feel better than I ever have before." She stopped and looked fully at Livy, trying to project her sense of wholeness through her eyes alone. "This house has been a prison to me for so long, but today I can go anywhere! Come with me, if you love me."

"You know I love you," Livy mumbled unhappily. Her face had gone vague again; she was seeing and listen-ing somewhere else. "But leave Mithra to be monitor?"

Annalie smiled. "She's telling you right now to go with me, isn't she? Livy, you're not *jealous* of her, are you?"

"Of course not. She isn't ready, that's all. Not to do it all by herself—and Edouard is sick too." Livy shook her head, her light brown hair bouncing. "I *can't* leave now. And you mustn't go alone."

There was determination in Livy's face; Annalie knew she wouldn't be able to change the girl's mind. Livy is so strong, she thought; she'll never let her talent disintegrate as I did... out of fear.

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But she can't see into my mind today. No one can; I'm cut off.

Annalie sighed, and shrugged. "I suppose you're right —I should rest. I do feel tired again. Let's go back inside, and I'll sleep."

The relief on Livy's face leaped like a Same. "Come on; I'll have Sherrard make you some hot herb tea." Livy took her hand and led her back inside the house. As they passed through the door Annalie felt the dimness of the interior fall on her like a shroud.

She allowed herself to be led to her room, where Livy bundled her into blankets, fussing over her. Annalie lay back and closed her eyes. "I don't think I want my tea," she said faintly. "I just want to sleep. You'll tell Sherrard not to disturb me, won't you?"

"Of course." Livy stood for a moment looking down at her, till Annalie forced her breathing to become slow and steady. Then Livy went quietly out of the room and closed the door behind her.

After several minutes Annalie opened her eyes and sat up. She tiptoed to her dresser and took from it a woven white shawl, which she wrapped around herself. Opening her door silently, she looked down the hallway: Livy had closed the door to the common room, and Sherrard was nowhere in sight.

They won't miss me till I've gotten away, she thought, slipping soundlessly into the hall, past the common

room and out the front door into the sun.

Jamie parked his cart under a towering stand of pine trees a few hundred meters inland from the Cathedral of the Five Elements and stood for a while in the shade. It was more than an hour till sundown, so no cart-hoppers had arrived yet for tonight's service; he was alone in the quiet afternoon.

A breeze came up, stirring his hair. It brought smells of wide grassy fields and the sound of an occasional bird

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call. Other than that, all was peaceful: a silent late after-noon in the inner city of Cirque.

Quite a contrast to what's happening out on the river, he thought, remembering the broadcast of the attack on the tourist boat. He began walking toward the Cathedral, looking past its high bonded-brick chimney at the lush growths of low trees and flowering bushes that spread down to the river edge. But he saw no sign of either the tentacled creature or the wrecked tourist craft. The river made one last great curve here before plunging into the Abyss; the boat would be downriver around that curve.

Well, you tried, Gloriana, he thought with a trace of satisfaction. What will you do now that one of them has gotten out?

He shook his head; he didn't want to think about Gloriana now. He turned his attention to the high facade of the Cathedral as he approached. Quite an old building, its doors carved with scenes from the past of Cirque. Jamie was no student of history, but he recognized the figure of The Venerable Ram-Tseu in one of the friezes.

Inside was a high-ceilinged foyer paneled in wood. A young couple wearing outlander clothes sat in the corner; they looked up eagerly as he came hi. Jamie smiled faintly and nodded to them.

"How does one see the priestess?" he asked.

The young woman said, "Oh, she's awfully busy today. We've been waiting for *hours*, and we have an audience!"

"I'm not surprised that she's been busy," Jamie said in an ironic tone. All she needs today is a couple of outland questers to waste her time, he thought. Jamie had talked with outlanders once or twice; they were stupefy-ingly boring, interested only hi weather and crop patterns.

"It *has* been an exciting day, hasn't it?" the young woman said. "Those poor people on that boat!"

"Yes," Jamie said. The foyer was empty except for these two; he sat on the bench beside them. "Your first visit to Cirque?" he asked conversationally.

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"Our very first!" she said. There are so *many* people here, just like in the broadcasts. But it's almost like home here around the Cathedral."

"We're from Springs Crossing," the young man said; his voice was quiet, almost apologetic.

Jamie took him in with a single glance: young, blond, callow, a stocky build and a face without personality.

"You see the broadcasts way down there?" Jamie asked. He noticed that there was a door at one end of the foyer, evidently leading into the Cathedral.

"Most people don't," said the woman. "Your faith has to be strong enough to focus; then you can sometimes see and hear things from the city. Salvator and I watch the broadcasts every day when we can."

"Cissy works at the processing plant," the young man said, "changing hydrogen into nitrogen. We met because my dad's land was going bad, so we called her in, and—"

"She reconstituted your fields," Jamie said. "My family did most of the research in transubstantiation two cen-turies ago. We were in mining."

"Oh," said the woman, Cissy; there was disappoint-ment in her voice. "You're not really from Cirque then; you just moved here."

"We own an estate on the West Edge," Jamie said shortly. "I grew up in Cirque, and so did my mother, and her mother too."

The woman was immediately apologetic; she dropped her gaze as she said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . ." She had such a plain face that her embarrassment was painful to Jamie.

To change the subject, he asked, "Is there someone here I could see to ask for an audience?"

The young man, Salvator, said, "Well, there's a disciple who comes out sometimes. I guess you should ask him."

Jamie nodded and glanced at the door to the Cathedral. He settled back on the bench, and an uncomfortable si-lence fell on them. Jamie thought of what Gloriana had

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said earlier—that he'd be an easy convert once he at-tended the service here. He smiled to himself. If these youths were an example of the followers of the Five Elements, he didn't see any chance of his joining them. Of course *they'd*

be taken in by such a temple; they were outlanders who probably knew nothing of the world beyond their small town. No doubt a lot of the less sophisticated citizens of Cirque were followers too. But Jamie had studied comparative religion at the Inner School; he had even toured much of Earth a few years ago, going as far as the cities of the Mississippi.

He became aware that Cissy was studying him with sidelong glances. When he met her eyes she started, looked away, then turned back to him and said, "I didn't mean to stare. But aren't you the man who was in the glider this morning when the Beast first came out?"

The Beast? Oh yes; that was how they thought of those creatures. He smiled at her. "There was more than one of them, you know. We went back in a gravity flier and searched the bottom. . . . There must have been thou-sands of them down there, crawling over each other."

"Yes, we know," Salvator said. "There was another broadcast when they tried to spray—"

"One of them got out," said Cissy. "At the Final Cataract, right near here. It disappeared."

"Cissy thinks it might be—"

"It's probably coming right for the Cathedral!" she said excitedly. "It would, you know; it hates everything good.

That's what it is—it's hatred come to life, all our sins grown into those awful monsters..."

She noticed Jamie's look of skepticism and stopped talking. Jamie glanced at Salvator, waiting for him to add something. But the young man was watching Cissy, taking his cue from her, and when she fell silent he did too.

Something jolted inside Jamie: a sense of familiarity. Something about the way Salvator deferred to Cissy, let her do the talking, the thinking ...

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Yes, of course: it was the same with him and Gloriana. Jamie always followed her lead; he made suggestions but never decisions. He never really told her when he felt strongly about something, in case she wouldn't agree. The idea of marrying, for instance; he hadn't urged her, tried to convince her...

He shook his head. Why should he think of marrying Gloriana now? She obviously didn't want him, not as a husband; and she was probably right as usual.

There were no answers to that problem, and worrying over it was painful. He said, "If I could see the priestess, we could discuss what I saw today. It might help her somehow—don't you think so?" He addressed the ques-tion to Salvator.

"Well, I don't know what the priestess—"

"Oh, yes!" Cissy said eagerly. "Didn't you say you'd gone down into the Abyss again? That wasn't broadcast, was it?"

"Maybe we could all three see her at the same time," Jamie said, speaking again to Salvator, holding his eyes, trying to draw a response. Salvator's gaze wavered.

The door to the Cathedral opened, and a slender boy emerged. He saw that there were now three people wait-ing, hesitated, then said to Cissy, "The priestess is ready to see you."

Cissy stood quickly, taking Salvator's hand. To the disciple she said, "This man is with us; he should come too."

The boy glanced at Jamie and nodded. He led them through the door into the dimness of the Cathedral, where the roof arched away overhead and their footsteps on the hard earth floor were echoless. They came to a large door; the disciple knocked, then opened it and stood aside to let them through.

They entered a small, spartan chamber lit by a single candle on an altar. Jamie's eyes were adjusting to the dimness, but the figure of the priestess was backlit by the

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candle flame so he couldn't see her features. Her hair seemed afire in the dim room.

She bowed her head slightly and said, "Great peace to you." Cissy and Salvator knelt before her, and Jamie stood uncertainly. Should he kneel even though he wasn't of their faith?

But the priestess didn't seem to notice. She touched Cissy's head lightly, and Salvator's, and they rose. Cissy said, "We've brought someone with us; I hope you won't mind. He was in the glider when—"

"I recognized you," said the priestess, holding out her hand to Jamie. He hesitated, then shook it. "You are welcome here, Jamie Halle," she said.

"You even know my name?"

The priestess smiled lightly and shrugged. "I know a lot about you. For a while today I was in love with you, you know." She saw his look of puzzlement and added, "During the broadcast this morning I was in the mind of Gloriana." Jamie retreated into silent confusion. Gloriana was in love with him? He was surprised, and then surprised that he was surprised—hadn't she whispered words of love during their nights together? But she had never re-peated them-during the days.

The priestess said, "Perhaps we should talk of that when we have time alone. But there are more important things for us to speak of now; there is the Beast." She turned to Cissy and Salvator. "You come at a time of great danger. I apologize for keeping you waiting."

Cissy said, "We understand. It's wonderful just to be in the Cathedral." Her eyes went back and forth from the priestess to Jamie.

Jamie became aware of someone else in the dimly lit room, a lean man who stood silently to the side, his eyes burning as he watched them. The priestess, noticing Jamie's gaze, started and said, "My apologies. This is Gregorian, who has fashioned our Fke for the service."

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Gregorian nodded silently, eyes boring into Jamie. Jamie had the impression of being in the presence of a predatory animal just waking from sleep.

"You're a *fire sculptor*" said Cissy. "It must be wonderful to work with the sacred elements."

"I'm not a believer," Gregorian said. "I'm more impressed by . . ." His eyes shifted back to Jamie. "I didn't see the broadcast this morning, but I did see the one this afternoon when one of those creatures escaped. If you saw them up close, what can you tell us about them?"

Jamie shrugged, and suppressed a grimace at the stab of pain in his wrenched shoulder. "They're like nothing I've ever seen. Like wild animals, enormous and strong; but I had the feeling . . . they almost seemed intelligent."

"They *are* intelligent," said the priestess. "They have the intelligence of eternity, fashioned from hate. And they are not separate creatures, but only one: the Beast. It wants to destroy all life above it on the surface."

"But it can't have any power against the Elements," said Cissy. "Can it?"

"That will be up to us," said the priestess. "We created the Beast ourselves; we will have to focus the powers of the Elements to dissolve it."

Cissy said anxiously, "Do you think the Beast will come here? How can we fight it?"

"Our services tonight will open us to love, not to hate. If the Beast comes, it will find nothing to fight."

Cissy nodded, bowing her head, and Salvator followed her gesture. But Jamie met Gregorian's eyes and saw disbelief there. A sense of horror filled him. "You mean you aren't planning any defense at all against that creature?" he asked.

"There can be no defense," said the priestess. "Only love and the greater awareness of Spirit."

"It will see that we're no different from itself," Cissy explained eagerly. "That all creatures are made of the Five Elements, that we're all one holy being."

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The damp chill of the tiny room seemed to press in on Jamie. Could these people be so naive as to think that the monsters he had seen this morning would respond to their mystical notions?

"My father was killed by a puma," Jamie said. "A creature made of your Five Elements, just as he was. But it mauled him so badly that he bled to death. It was a wild animal, and these monsters are no different."

"They *are* different," said the priestess. "The creatures you saw are not animals—they are sin created into life. And sin is weakness."

Cissy and Salvator stared silently at her, belief washing all thought from their faces. But Gregorian looked at the floor, his mouth twisted in something like pain. He said, "Believe what you want, priestess, but I have laser knives in my toolbox, and if that thing comes here I'm going to use them."

"No, you mustn't!" Salamander reached a hand toward Gregorian, then quickly withdrew it. "There is no way to defeat the Beast by fighting. It is part Spirit, no matter how dark; that is what we must reach."

Silence filled the small, cold room; for a moment Jamie imagined he could hear the river splashing by outside the walls. He thought of the great Cathedral filled with believers like Cissy and Salvator, meekly sitting on the packed-earth floor while a tentacled monster broke in and attacked the assemblage, tearing at bodies as it had struck at the gravity flier that morning. He remembered seeing his father's body when it was brought back from the mountains, slashed so badly it was hardly recognizable.

He met Gregorian's dark eyes, and understanding flashed between them.'

Are we fee only ones who understand? Jamie wondered. Just the two of us?

Then the candle flared for an instant, and he saw the look on the face of the priestess, lit surprisingly clearly

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for just a moment. **Her** green eyes were wide and un-certain.

Then it isn't just us unbelievers, he thought. The priestess is afraid too.

The realization gave him no comfort at all.

The temporally blind seem incomplete: beings who see in portions. Yet they feel more. They know uncertainty, and sometimes accept it. It takes only a moment.

—The Book of Causes

THE FLIGHT to the northern Guard field was a short one. Nikki watched the green fields and the widely spaced villas of the North Edge flow past beneath the Guard flier; once she saw a herd of zebras that trotted away as they droned overhead. Robin, whose spirits had re-lived quickly once they were off the river, pointed out the herd to the millipede, who smiled impassively as it gazed downward. Nikki listened to the quiet conversation of the grey-haired pilot and the young Guardian, Gloriana.

"It's almost dark now," the pilot was saying. "By the time we could refill the spray tanks it'd be night. There wouldn't be much chance of finding that thing in the dark."

"So that's it," Gloriana said. "We let it escape." "We can go back in the morning," the man said. "What's it going to do at night anyway, out on the surface"

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where it's never been? Probably hole up somewhere. You've got to remember, it's lost—probably scared and confused."

"But if it's used to "the heat down in the Abyss," Gloriana said, "what will it do when it gets cold tonight?"

The pilot shrugged. "Crawl under something, wrap those tentacles around itself and sleep. Or maybe it'll head back down into the Abyss."

"Maybe," Gloriana said without conviction. "But if it panics, looking for warmth, it might break into one of the villas around here."

Nikki sat forward in her seat, reached a hand out to touch Gloriana's shoulder. "You were trying to kill it, weren't you? And you still want to."

"We have to kill it," Gloriana said. Her brown eyes met Nikki's, glowing in the light of sunset. "It almost got your boat, you know. You're lucky to be alive."

Nikki shook her head. "I don't think it was trying to hurt us. It was just . . . like he said, it's confused; it was grabbing out at anything. It's frightened."

The flier banked to the right and descended; below them Nikki saw the grey strip of the northern Guard field. A flag flew calmly over the Guard building, its blue and green bands stirring in an evening breeze. Nikki suddenly began to feel cold; she shivered and rubbed her arms. She wished Three hadn't left her shawl at the Winter Gate.

"A frightened animal is the most dangerous of all," Gloriana said. "There's no telling what it might do."

"But don't you see?" said Nikki. "We should be trying to help it, not kill it. If it's in trouble, *of course* it might hurt something. That doesn't mean it's evil."

Gloriana turned in her seat _ to look disbelievingly at Nikki. "After what happened on the river, you can say that?"

Nikki forced herself to meet Gloriana's eyes. She was so strong, this woman; would Nikki herself ever have

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such strength? "But it's so beautiful—didn't you see it? Like a great tiger, all muscle and grace. We don't kill tigers, do we?"

"We don't let them loose in the city either," Gloriana said, turning away from Nikki as the flier descended to-ward the landing strip in front of the Guard building. The engines roared briefly as they braked in the air; then Nikki felt the wheels touch ground, and the flier settled. Gloriana released her gravity harness and opened her door as the motors whined down to stillness; she sprang to the runway with a lithe movement. Nikki clambered heavily out of the flier, gasping as she jumped to the ground. The evening air had taken on a crisp coolness that seemed to emphasize the wide spaces of the Guard field. Her long blonde hair stirring in the breeze, she reached up to catch Robin as she dropped from the flier.

Robin was still talking excitedly with the millipede. "You mean there are more of those things? Come on, you don't have to hide stuff from me—tell me what's going to happen. I'm not scared anymore."

The millipede waved away Nikki's proffered hand with two of its forefeet and flowed out over the edge of the flier's door, lowering itself headfirst to the ground while its hind feet clung to the sides of the door. It alighted smoothly, then raised its body to walk upright beside Nikki and Robin. Gloriana and the pilot had gone ahead toward the Guard Building.

"You must understand," the millipede said, "that I prefer not to talk about things that have not yet hap-pened. As you said earlier, your race experiences events more sharply than do those of us who foresee them. Let us enjoy what is to come as fully as we can."

"Listen, if there are going to be more of those things, I wouldn't mind if they didn't surprise me," Robin said. Nikki's attention was suddenly caught by the sight of a tall figure dressed in a loose green body-suit waiting by

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the door of the Guard building. It was Jordan, and as she looked he met Gloriana and the pilot and began to talk anxiously with them. The pilot brushed by him and went inside; Gloriana gestured toward Nikki and her com-panions as she answered Jordan.

Nikki was surprised at the way her pulse raced at sight of Jordan; she'd forgotten him in the excitement of the afternoon, but seeing him again brought back the memory of the warmth she had felt from him when they'd met in the cart. He was comforting and accepting in a way that Gregorian had never been.

Even when I was Three, he never really got mad at me, she thought. He just ignored my insults and kept treating me like a human being. Maybe it's because he's used to handling children—I'm sure juvenile when Three is out!

Jordan broke away from Gloriana and hurried out to meet them. At the last minute Robin saw him coming

and ran forward to throw herself into his arms. "Jordan! What are you doing here?"

"I saw a broadcast," he said, hugging her tightly. "You were on that boat, and one of the creatures from the Abyss attacked—"

"Oh, it's okay, Jordan," Robin said, giggling as he put her down. "I just used a whole lot of negatives, and it went away. I'm all right; see?" She twirled around in front of him, arms outstretched.

He smiled, obviously relieved. "I had to be sure. After Nikki lured you away . . ." He met Nikki's eyes, and she was startled by his concern. "Well, I see you're okay too. Here; I brought along your shawl—you left it at the Winter Gate."

She smiled gratefully as she took the shawl, feeling awkward and unsure of herself. But just a little while ago, when the creature was attacking their boat, she'd been calm, even elated. Where was her sureness now?

The wind stirred in the open landing field, whipping

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her hair in front of *her* face; she brushed it away, feeling giddy. Sounds and sights, even the cold that had cut through her a moment ago, suddenly seemed distant and faint.

"We've had an eventful day," she said in an attempt at nonchalance. "Didn't I tell you Robin would learn a lot today?"

"I did, too!" Robin said. "Jordan, did you know hu-mans are practically the only people in the galaxy who can't see the future? That's why the millipede came here in the first place—it *knew* what was going to happen to-day!"

Jordan glanced at the millipede, which stood silently, its large eyes closed, the fur of its face stirring lightly as it tasted the evening winds. "I guess that kind of puts us at a disadvantage out in the stars, if everyone else knows in advance what's going to happen," Jordan said.

"It is more complex than that," said the millipede, smiling slightly, eyes still closed. "Your race has very sophisticated thought patterns that assume the results of actions before you see them."

"Humans invented *causality*" Robin said proudly.

The millipede's smile broadened. "That is a good way of saying it."

The four of them were walking together toward the Guard building, a low structure of weathered pine and redwood with a large bas-relief carved across its face. Nikki recognized the figures of famous civic leaders of the past in the carvings: Sean Hassad, who had codified Cirque's laws centuries ago; Maria the Great, who had held the positions of monitor and Guardian at the same time; Pavel Borkin, the architect of early Cirque. This Guard building was the oldest civic structure of Cirque, built in the days when there had been nothing but a small trading town on the North Edge of the Abyss.

"It must be useful to be able to see the future, though," said Jordan. "Especially for anyone in your company,

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Nikki—Fd be able to know in advance Just when you were going to change into another personality."

"The millipede knew that too!" Robin said. "It was just waiting for Nikki to change to . . ." The girl hesi-tated. "What number are you now, Nikki?"

"Four," Nikki said softly. She was distracted by a curi-ous sense of unreality; her feet hardly seemed to reach to the ground, she seemed to float through the entrance of the Guard building. Amorphous visions drifted in the dimness of the interior. "But I think I'm going to . . ."

Her sight cleared gradually; she was able to make out the figures of Jordan and Robin and the millipede near her and Guard officers conferring with Gloriana at a great table in one corner of the large room. Their voices came to her softly and clearly; yet at the same time she heard a vast silence, as if a multitude of people standing behind her had stopped talking all at once.

"Going to what?" asked Jordan, watching her sharply.

Nikki straightened up and drew a deep breath; the air in here tasted warm, the low ceiling holding the heat of the day. "It's happened," she said. "I've changed again."

Robin's eyes opened wide, staring at her. "Wow! Who are you now?"

"Nobody," said Nikki "I mean, nobody new. Fm me, Nikki. It's over."

"What is?" asked the girl. She looked anxiously at Nikki.

"The changing is over. Pm whole again—All-Nikkt, Gregorian calls me when I've gone through all my per-sonalities." She smiled faintly. "I'm back to where I started before I took the capsule this morning, only now Fm in touch with all of my parts."

Robin continued to stare at her for a moment. "Well, at least you didn't faint this time," she said.

The millipede moved around in front of Nikki and looked deeply into her eyes; the great softness of its gaze

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was like a peaceful ocean. "I feel joy to meet you at last," the foreigner said.

Nikki looked into the millipede's great dark eyes, then reached out and ruffled the fur of its face. "And I'm glad to be out, all of me, so I can meet you."

Robin was frowning. "Does this mean you're not going to be happy like you were this afternoon?" she asked. "I really did like you that way, you know."

"Oh yes, I'm happy," Nikki said, taking the girl by the shoulders and hugging her quickly. "All those people I was earlier were parts of me, you know." She turned to Jordan, who was watching her quietly. "You asked me earlier what sort of person could hold all those others. Well, here I am; this is me."

Did he smile? If he didn't, he gave the impression of it. Jordan held out his hand and said, "I'm glad to meet you too, Nikki. At last."

"Yes," she said. "At last." They stood looking at each other silently, hands clasped together. Nikki thought: He seems just the way he did before, when I was Two. And when I was Three. He never changed, no matter how much I did. It's as though he was just waiting for me to come out. The millipede *knew* what I'd be like later, but Jordan just waited for me, even when I was so awful to him.

"Jordan, you said this morning that you took one of those capsules once. Tell me about it," she said.

He laughed. "Oh, it was very interesting, even though not much happened. For a while I thought it hadn't worked. I waited over an hour for the changes to come on, but finally I gave up and just decided to go to a museum. You know the one up near the First Cataract, where they have all the old plastic sculpture in vacuum cases? I cart-hopped up there and spent a while in the museum. Then all of a sudden I lost interest, and I went to a playground by the river. I went on the slides and the degrav rides; it was like being a kid again. Then I

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remembered that there was a karate jai alai court nearby, so I went there and played three games. I hadn't done it in years, and I was out of practice; I almost got a rib broken."

"By that time you must have noticed that the changes were working," Nikki said.

"That was the funny thing: I didn't feel any different at all, I just got interested in things I didn't do very often. After the games, I went down by the river and sat for an hour watching the Cataract."

"You never got all depressed and mean like Nikki did today?" Robin asked.

"No. But I didn't feel elated either, which usually happens to people who take those capsules. It was very subtle."

"Wow, are you *stable!*" Robin said, staring in wonder at Jordan.

He laughed again. "That's a nice way of looking at it. But you're supposed to be practicing negatives today, re-member?"

Robin narrowed her eyes. "Wow, are you *boring!*" she said.

The conference among the Guard officers finished, and Gloriana came over to them. She addressed the milli-pede: "I'm sorry your ride through the city ended up the way it did. I hope you won't think we set monsters on all our visitors."

"Certainly not," the millipede said. "I am aware that this day is unique in your history."

Gloriana's mouth was set in a firm line. "We intend to see that it remains unique. By tomorrow we'll have re-ceived enough life-control chemicals from our outstations to make sure we wipe out the last of those things." She turned to Jordan and Nikki. "Is either of you a follower of the Five Elements?"

Nikki shook her head. She felt confused about Glo-riana's determination to kill the creatures in the Abyss.

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How could anyone hate them so much?

"Tin not a member of any particular temple," Jordan said. "But I've been to services at the Cathedral of the Five Elements a couple of times. It's a beautiful old building."

"What sort of services do they hold?" Gloriana asked. "The priestess, Salamander—what's she like?"

Jordan said, "She's very dramatic. She wears a white cape, and her hair is the color of fire. When she stands in front of the flames, she almost seems to merge with them."

"But what does she do?" Gloriana said. "She's holding an open service tonight, you see, and if there should be any trouble—" She shook her head, a quick movement that made her short dark hair bounce. "You know from the broadcast today that she thinks that creature is some kind of bogeyman. JJE she panics the crowd tonight, and it gets broadcast...**"

"Well, tell the monitor not to broadcast anything like that," Robin said.

"Nobody tells the monitor what to do," Gloriana said. "Nobody tells priestesses what to do either. My job is to keep Cirque safe, but I have no control over the two most important offices hi Cirque. Most of the time that doesn't matter—most of the time I have nothing to do. But when I *do* have to do something, I don't have enough power."

Power, thought Nikki. Control. No wonder she wants to kill wild things.

"Look, couldn't you just capture the creature?" Nikki asked. "Put it in a preserve, the same as you'd do with

a tiger."

Gloriana sighed wearily, and for a fleeting moment Nikki saw the human being under the facade: Gloriana was small and willowly, not at all strong physically. "We've discussed that, and we'll do it if we can. I'm going to have Guard officers patrolling the entire Final Cataract

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area tonight with nerve guns. But if the Beast—that crea-ture—attacks any of the villas, they'll have to kill it. And if it should break into the Cathedral where a priestess is stirring up a crowd of religious fanatics, a lot of people could be hurt."

"The followers of the Five Elements aren't fanatics," said Jordan. "Their whole creed is built around spiritual peace."

Gloriana gave a short, wry laugh. "Peace. That's won-derful, but what good is it when some monster starts strangling you? Besides, I saw what the priestess thinks of those creatures—she wants to destroy them more than I do. Peace is for people without enemies."

They stood silently for a while then. Nikfci looked to the millipede, but it was calmly gazing around the Guard offices, studying the age-darkened wood of the ceiling beams.

"Enemies are for people without peace," said Robin.

Gloriana shot a surprised look at the girl. Robin flushed and looked down at her feet; she was drawing invisible squares on the worn floorboards. "I'm sorry," she mur-mured. "I was just practicing my negatives, turning things around backward."

Gloriana shrugged. "You can turn almost anything around and it'll seem to make sense."

"That's why I always have my students learn that," said Jordan. "It's a good thing to remember when you're grown up too."

"Don't lecture me, teacher," Gloriana said. She tamed away and called to one of her officers, "Are you ready?"

The man nodded, hitching a heavy gun onto his shoul-der. Four other officers stood near him, gathering their equipment.

"All right," said Gloriana. She turned back to Nikki and her friends. "I'm taking a squad with me to the

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Cathedral. There's room in the flier for you if you want us to drop you anywhere."

NikM was suddenly filled with a sense of urgency. She couldn't just go home now and leave the Guard people to do... whatever they might do.

Besides—and the realization came to her with a twinge of guilt—she had forgotten that Gregorian's fire was to be the focus of the service at the Cathedral tonight. She ought to be there. (Gregorian, she thought. I forgot all about you. How strange.)

"I'll go to the Cathedral with you," she said to Glo-riana. "I have to meet someone there."

The millipede stirred from its quiet observance of the activities of the Guard officers. "I will go to the Cathedral too," it said.

Gloriana eyed the foreigner for a moment, then shrugged. "No tour of Cirque is complete without seeing one of our temples, I suppose."

"Yes," said the millipede.

"Come on, then," said Gloriana, and she led them out the door onto the landing field, where evening winds played in the open air. NikM stayed beside Jordan, talcing comfort from his size and his quiet, calm manner. As they approached a large Guard flier, Nikki noticed that Robin was still with them. "How will you get home?" she asked the girl.

"I'm not going home yet," Robin said. "I want to see what happens at the service tonight."

"But won't your parents be expecting you home . . . * for dinner or something?"

"My *parents*," said Robin defiantly, "treat me like an adult. They'll expect me when they see me."

Jordan stopped and turned to look with concern at her. "Robin, I can't let you go to this service," he said.

Robin waved dismissively at him. "Oh, Jordan, quit worrying about me. Class hours were over a long time ago; you're not responsible for me now."

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"But this is a dangerous situation; you heard what Gloriana said. We can't take someone as young as you to the service."

Robin didn't even hesitate; she walked past Jordan and joined the others as they climbed into the flier. "I've been a full citizen for over a year now. You can't stop me, Jordan, so don't try."

He cast an appealing look at Gloriana. She shook her head. "I agree; she shouldn't go with us. But I have no power to stop her."

Smiling, Robin sat comfortably between Nikki and the millipede, staring out the windows as the flier took off.

Nikki watched the landing field tilt away beneath them as the craft banked eastward toward the Final Cataract. Black shadows of buildings and trees stretched ahead of them across open fields, and rocky precipices glowed in the evening light, a red-golden rim above the gaping chasm that was the center of Cirque. Nikki tried to see down into that mysterious darkness, but it was as impenetrable as ever.

Her thoughts turned to Gregorian: in just a few minutes she'd see him again. Only this morning she'd left him at his workbench, but she felt as though it had been weeks. So much had happened today, both in the world and in herself.

I'm a different person from what I was this morning, she realized. Yet I'm not—I've gone through my parts and come back to being whole. Had I lost so much of myself?

She seemed to see Gregorian's lean face, his intense eyes staring at her from the Abyss, but she felt none of the excitement that he usually quickened in her. He seemed almost a stranger now. Where was her desperate feeling of dependence and love for him?

Her head whirled as though the antigravity motors of the fliers were inside her. Unconsciously she grasped Jordan's hand and held it tightly.

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It was harder than Mithra had expected, acting as monitor for Cirque all by herself. Edouard had recovered from his childish fright enough so that she no longer had to hold and comfort him, but he wasn't much use to her in projecting broadcasts; his mind was still turned inward. And Livy, though she had returned to sit in the common room with them, spent most of her time trying to pick 'out some faint flickering of Annalie's mind.

Mithra shifted uncomfortably on her pillows. I wish you'd forget about her, she said in her mind to Livy. She's no use to us now, and she's not going to be ever again.

Livy lay flat on her back in the bed, eyes closed. She's *certain* not to get better if we don't even try to help her, Livy thought. If we just lie here and think that Annalie's gone, she's lost her talent, she's going to die, then . . . that will happen; she'll die. But I guess you'd like that, wouldn't you?

Mithra frowned; it was even more difficult trying to sort Livy's directed thoughts from the thousands of images and emotions coming to her from the city.

I'm just trying to face facts, Mithra thought. She felt a wave of contempt wash over her; the sights and sounds of Cirque were drowned out for a moment by Livy's emotion. You really don't want her to get better, Livy thought. If we only have a few years to enjoy our talent, better to start using it as soon as we can— isn't that right?

Mithra held her emotions in check. Better to do the job we've been given than to leave the city with no monitor at all, she thought. Did you know there were no broadcasts at all for more than two hours today? Because *you* were fussing over Annalie, and I had to take care of Edouard! We nearly missed broadcasting that dreadful attack on the tourist boat—I had to do it all by myself!

The people in Cirque won't miss an hour or two of broadcasts, Livy thought. The city goes on whether or not we broadcast; Cirque is eternal. But Annalie needs us!

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You're being irresponsible, Mithra thought. Our job is to serve the city, not Annalie. *She's* no use to anyone; now that she's lost her talent, she might as well not exist.

A jab of dread jolted Mithra so sharply that she jerked up from the bed for a moment. What if she's already died? Livy thought.

Mithra was aware of the bedclothes shifting as Livy stood up.

Livy! Come back! You shouldn't leave me alone just for—

It's what you really want, isn't it? Livy thought. To be the monitor all by yourself, without Annalie, without me or Edouard. To be the center of everything—just you.

Mithra kept her eyes closed, but she heard the sound of Livy's bare feet padding to the door and out. It's *not* what I want! But *somebody* has to watch and see and feel, or—

Or what? Livy thought. Through the other girl's eyes Mithra saw her walking down the dim hall toward Annalie's room.

—Or Cirque will become just another city, like all the others on Earth or anywhere else, Mithra thought.

Monitoring is a holy job; it always has been. It's the monitors who have made Cirque a unified city, a place where everybody's minds are linked and become something greater!

Nothing is greater than the life of one person, Livy thought; but her mind was only dimly on Mithra as she paused at the door of Annalie's room, tapped softly and listened for an answer from inside.

That's not true! Mithra was surprised at the vehemence of her own thought. That's what Annalie used to say when she followed one person for a whole day and broadcast nothing but that person's thoughts. She's been doing that for years, and look what's happened to Cirque— our sense of group is disappearing; people have stopped

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going to the temples; they think only of themselves. The city is falling apart!

Livy opened the door quietly and peered inside. Through her eyes Mithra saw the empty bed where Annalie should have been; she felt Livy's rush of fear, eyes darting around the room in search of Annalie. The room was empty. Gone? Livy thought. But she told me ... She's never lied to me before, never!

Mithra thought that was funny: How could she, Livy? Until today we could always see into her mind. But where has she gone?

Even as Livy thought that, the answer came into her mind: She's gone to the Cathedral! She wanted me to go with her, but I wouldn't and I didn't think she'd go alone—

Mithra felt a surge of impatience: Livy, you keep thinking of her as though she were still the monitor. But she's not; she can't hear anyone's mind, and we can't hear hers. She's like any of the others now, and she even likes it. She wanted to go by herself—have one last fling!

Livy's eyes were still searching the shadows in the corners of Annalie's room; now she backed out and called for Sherrard. In a moment he appeared, rubbing his eyes; he had been napping in the warm afternoon.

"Annalie has gone!" Livy told him. "Did you hear her go past your door?"

Sherrard's eyes opened wide, but he could only shake his head numbly. "Gone where? How?"

"To the Cathedral of the Five Elements," Livy said. "She must be cart-hopping. Few people ride north this late in the day; she must have gotten a cart with no other riders, and that's why none of us was able to see her!"

Silently, Mithra agreed; she'd been monitoring every-one in Cirque all afternoon, and she hadn't seen Annalie on any of the carts. But if she just hopped on the back and didn't speak to the driver, and if there were no other

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riders, she could have remained invisible even to the monitors.

"I should go after her," Livy said.

No, Mithra thought. Your place is here; now that she's gone, you're the monitor, Livy. Your term starts *now*. You're ahead of me, and you've got to take the responsibility. *Now*, Livy!

Sherrard hurried into Annalie's room to look for him-self. Livy thought: But if she goes to the Cathedral, she may run into that creature. You know what that did to her this morning, seeing it through someone else's eyes. What if she meets it face to face?

She's not our responsibility anymore, Mithra thought again.

She felt Edouard stir slightly next to her on the bed, and a faint, tentative thought came from him: I think she's being brave. I was scared too, and / wouldn't take a chance on meeting one of those things!

Oh, shut up, Edouard! thought Mithra. Then, instantly regretting her anger, she thought to him: I'm glad you're feeling better; you were almost as far away as she was for a while.

I know. But I was still able to see and hear the city, and—Mithra, Livy, did you see how that creature looked when it attacked the tourist boat?

Mithra fought down impatience with him. Big and wild, she thought; its tentacles slapped across the boat like roofs falling.

But did you see how it looked to that woman Nikki? *She* thought it was beautiful! It was so different from the way everyone else saw it!

She wasn't seeing things the way a normal person would, Mithra thought. She took one of those capsules this morning, remember?

Mithra felt a surge of excitement from Livy, and heard her thought: But the capsules don't bring on hallucinations; they only change people's personalities.

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Mithra abandoned her efforts to monitor the city for a moment: it was impossible to keep track of it all with everybody around her thinking so loudly. She opened her eyes; as the dim shapes of the common room swam into focus, she saw Edouard sitting up, straightening his bed-clothes. The look of dull terror that had haunted his face all day was gone.

What do you think it means? Mithra asked Livy.

But Livy's thoughts were chaotic, and she could only shake her head.

Edouard's thought came: Can there be some kind of creature that looks different to different people?

How blind we were, minds choked with facts,

no knowledge of what lies between. (What? Can anything squeeze between two moments? Say Instead that moments punctuate the truth.) Watch love and fear, destruction and new birth

blossom from colorless ropes of life. —The Book of Causes

IT WAS nearly dark, and Annalie shivered as the cart bumped over the dusty road that led to the Cathedral of the Five Elements. Tall pines stretched into the sky, their upper branches holding the last light of the sun in a golden glow. It had been a long trip all the way around the Abyss, and she'd had to switch carts several times, always making sure she didn't board a cart where people were already riding—people through whose eyes Livy or Mithra could see her.

Once out of the monitor's house, traveling alone, she had felt a surging elation that she didn't want to give up: she was herself, Annalie, and she didn't want to be followed. So many years she had spent living only through

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others, serving the city, never able to explore what was unique to her own mind. But now she was alone.

It was a little frightening. But mostly she just felt cold and wished she'd been able to find warmer clothing than Livy's robe and shawl.

The cart bumped to a stop in the great open area beside the Cathedral. As Annalie slid to the back of the cart and dropped off, the cart's driver got out and, seeing her, said, "You've come for the service tonight?"

For a moment Annalie hesitated, still afraid of being seen; but then she realized that the man's first glance would have identified her to Livy and Mithra. She smiled shyly at the man. "Yes. It's because of those creatures, you see."

"Ever been here before?" He was a small, round man, his hair sprinkled with grey, his face dark and lined with years.

How old? Annalie wondered. He could be eighty or a hundred and eighty.

"I've never . . . well, never *really* been here. But I've seen broadcasts from here, of course."

He nodded. "Well, come on; the entrance is up the road this way. My name is Alton." He set off without looking back, walking slowly along the darkening path beneath the trees. Somewhere in the dark, crickets trilled. (They're always out of sight, Annalie thought: even for a monitor, who sees everything in the city, crickets are just sounds hi the distance.) She felt an urge to say something more to the man, something that Livy would hear and know that she was all right.

She hurried to catch up with him and said, "I haven't been out for a while; I've been sick. But I feel fine now.

Wonderful, in fact."

"Good," Alton said, not looking at her, continuing to walk deliberately along the path. Annalie saw now that he was indeed very old; his movements had the careful sureness of one who had to will every step.

Other people were converging on the path from the

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cart areas: couples, people alone, groups of four or five who chattered excitedly among themselves. Everyone was moving toward the tall-chimneyed Cathedral ahead.

"Will it be crowded?" Annalie asked the old man.

He glanced sideways at her without interest; his eyes were such a pale blue that they seemed to blend into the whites around them. "Usually the Cathedral's half empty, but I guess not tonight," he said.

He didn't seem to want to talk, and Annalie shrank back into herself. She followed him silently up the steps into the Cathedral. People -jostled her, and they came to a complete halt in the building's wood-paneled foyer. Shoulders and elbows surrounded her.

Alton turned to her suddenly and said, "It isn't usually like this; these are just people who came here tonight because they're scared. Usually they never come to a service unless it's a Midsummer Chant. They're not be-lievers; there are hardly any believers left in this city."

There was bitterness in his voice; Annalie wondered if it was because he disapproved of the less religious people or because he was annoyed by the crowd.

"Everybody in Cirque believes," she said. "Whether or not they come to services here or somewhere else, they all believe. They all tune in to the broadcasts; they're all part of Cirque. We're really all one people, aren't we? Because of the monitors."

Alton sniffed disgustedly. "Monitors. Broadcasts. It was different when I was young. The temples were always full then, and people came because they believed in more than what they could see. Cirque isn't a religious city anymore—ifs just a place for tourists." He cast a sharp glance at her. "I guess you don't even know what I'm talking about."

"I'm not sure," Annalie said. She was intimidated by this old man: his bitterness and disapproval were things she'd seen many times in people's minds, but they'd always been just a few among thousands. She realized

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that being a monitor had made it easy to disregard the feelings of people who were in a minority; now she was alone with the people around her, unable to listen to the minds of those who stayed home and thought of other things.

"These people here tonight haven't come because they understand the Elements, because they want to touch the higher things," Alton said. "Half of them came because some new fire sculptor has done Fire tonight, and the other half are here because they want to be reassured that the thing from the Abyss isn't going to rip up their homes. Look at them, dressed up as though it were open-ing night at a star symphony." He was right; Annalie was almost smothered by the furs of the people surrounding her. Gold pendants inlaid with stones from Earth and the worlds of the stars gleamed in the elaborately styled hairdos of the women; many of the men affected shoulder jewelry. Their faces betrayed faint lines left by long years of boredom. These were the elite of the Inner City, she realized—many of them probably from the villas near the Final Cataract.

But there was an alertness in their eyes that seemed oddly out of place, as though their senses were fully open for the first time hi years. Excitement filled the room with electric intensity.

The danger has opened them, Annalie realized. They're frightened, but it's brought them awake. A slender boy opened the doors at the end of the foyer, and the crowd began to push through into the Cathedral; Annalie and Alton were carried along with them. The interior of the building was a high-vaulted room devoid of furniture, lit by small fires in wall braziers. The wooden floor of the foyer gave way to hard-packed earth, neatly swept; Annalie saw several of the expensively dressed people near her looking in consternation for chairs or benches on which to sit

Alton took her hand and pulled her toward the altar

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that stood in front of the giant fireplace. Low, dark flames bubbled in the wide fire pit. The room smelled of dry earth and the breaths of centuries.

"You want to get near the front," Alton told her. "That way you can hear better when—" He stopped, and she saw him staring toward the front of the room. But then he resumed his deliberate progress through the crowd. "Well, well," he said, "even the millipede is here."

Annalie had difficulty seeing over the shoulders of the crowd, but in a few moments she caught a glimpse of the raised dais before the fireplace where several figures stood—among them the foreigner from Aldebaran, its fur glowing redly in the light of the low fire. As they got nearer the front of the Cathedral, picking their way through people sitting in groups on the floor, she recognized others who stood near the dais: the slim figure of the priestess, Salamander, her long red hair splashing over her white cape; a young man with blond hair and aristocratic features, Jamie Halle. The events of the day crowded back into her mind; she remembered the millipede's arrival this morning, the conversation at the Morning Gate that she'd broadcast. (Why, it had been Alton who had spoken with the millipede! She hadn't recognized him, seeing him tonight only from the outside, not touching his mind as she had this morning.) She remembered a flight over the Abyss when Jamie Halle and the Guardian had seen those frightening creatures scuttling up and down the rocks of the Edge. And Salamander's vision of the Beast . . .

It all seemed very long ago, like something from another life. Annalie had been in other people's minds then, her vision dictated by their emotions; now she was herself, whole and self-willed. She felt strangely light, as though at any moment she might drift up from the floor into the high shadows of the Cathedral.

Alton led her right up to the front, where he chose a spot and sat on the dirt floor, carefully arranging his legs

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in a half-lotus position, back straight, head up. Annalie sat beside him in a full lotus and looked around with great interest.

On her left was a young girl in a precisely fitted orange body-suit; the girl smiled brightly at her as she sat down, then turned her attention back to the people up on the dais. Annalie saw that she was watching two people who stood a little to one side of the great fireplace: a lean dark-haired man and a woman with long blonde hair whose full body seemed to spill out of her body-suit. They were standing close together, talking intensely.

"That's Nikki, my friend," the girl said. "She's talking with her lover, Gregorian. I sure hope they aren't going to get into a fight or something."

"Why should they fight?" Annalie asked.

The girl rocked back and forth as she sat. "Well, see, Nikki took one of those pills that change your personality, and she's been getting real close with my teacher today. If Gregorian's going to be jealous—"

"Gregorian is the fire sculptor, isn't he?" said Alton, leaning forward to look at the girl.

"Yes," she said. "He's supposed to be famous or something. Nikki thinks so anyway. But she thinks she's in love with him, too. *I don't think she is; / think she's crazy about Jordan.*"

"Robin, you talk too much," said a tall man sitting next to the girl, and she abruptly fell silent.

Annalie found herself staring at the two people beside the vast fireplace, Nikki and Gregorian. Their figures seemed to waver in the air, outlines blurring. The entire Cathedral hall shimmered darkly as perspectives shifted; for a moment she saw the crowd as though she were looking down from the altar, and Gregorian stood close to her, his face set with that intensity that she knew so well. Confusion filled her: Gregorian seemed so familiar, yet at the same time so different from this morning. What was he thinking?

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Then she heard his mind: *Nikki seems so happy to-night! Is it just because of the capsule she took, going through all her changes and putting herself back together? But I've never seen her like this; there must be something more.*

Nikki was thinking: He's high from something—not just his fire sculpture either; he's usually tight and jumpy before a showing. Should I tell him now about Jordan?

(It's happening, Annalie thought. My talent is coming back.)

They felt tentative in each other's company; they had happinesses they were afraid to tell about. Annalie felt the weight of guilt in both of them, and the connection drew their thoughts together within her.

They met and merged in Annalie's mind; Gregorian saw what had happened between Nikki and Jordan, and Nikki caught an instant memory of his encounter with the priestess. Relief washed over them; guilts that a moment before had cut sharply into them vanished. They hugged like old friends.

"You needed someone else," Gregorian said aloud. "I think I must demand things you can't give."

Nikki smiled as she stepped back from him. "You may have gotten more than you bargained for," she said.

"Salamander won't be as easily dominated as I was, you know."

That made him laugh. "You've never been easy for me," he said.

They looked into each other's eyes, and warmth suffused Annalie.

She's there again! someone said in the distance of her mind. *Annalie! Can you hear me?*

Instantly she was shocked back into her self. She became aware of the hard-packed earth beneath her, and she drew in a long breath as her vision stabilized: the great Cathedral hall, the high fireplace decorated with intricate reliefs carved into its bonded-brick facade. She

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saw Gregorian leading Nikki over to the red-haired priestess to introduce them.

The last voice in her mind had been Livy's. Livy, back at the monitor's house, had been able to touch her mind from even that great distance.

I really am getting well, Annalie thought. But the surge of relief that came to her was mixed with disappointment. Do I really want my talent to come back? she wondered. These last hours have been so wonderful!

"Service is about to start," said Alton. "Fire's coming up."

Indeed the flames were rising: red coils of light flickered upward, growing more numerous as Annalie watched. In moments the entire fireplace grate was alight, silhouetting the people on the altar. She saw Nikki and Gregorian move away from the priestess, coming down the steps to take places on the floor near her. Nikki touched Jordan's arm and smiled as she sat down next to him; Gregorian nodded to him as Nikki introduced them. It seemed to Annalie that Gregorian's gaze was measuring the teacher, but Jordan only smiled and nodded back.

The priestess took her place in front of Fire; her long red hair glowed in the light of the flames, her white cape came alive with roseate colorings. Annalie smelled the tangy odor of burning chemicals.

But before the priestess could begin the service, a small woman went up to her and began speaking intensely; the woman's face was stern, as though she were warning the priestess about something.

"What's Gloriana saying to her?" Robin wondered aloud. She turned to Annalie: "Gloriana's the Guardian, you know. She's all upset about that thing that got out of the Abyss."

The priestess held out her hands in a calming gesture as she spoke to Gloriana, but the dark-haired woman's expression grew sharper as she replied. Jamie Halle got up from the crowd and went forward to join the conver-

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sation; he seemed to be arguing with Gloriana. Annalie leaned forward, staring at them.

Again her vision seemed to blur; she felt the heat of the rising Fire behind her now, and Jamie Halle's face swam into focus close to her. She was saying, "This isn't your business, Jamie. Sit down!" Every muscle in her body was tight.

"It isn't your business either," Jamie said. "This is a temple service, and you're interrupting."

"I am sorry, but he is right," said the priestess. "We must begin while Fire is on the rise." She touched Annalie's hand gently (no, *Gloriaruf's* hand!). "There will be no trouble here tonight, only a simple service to bring these people into the greater awareness."

She fought to control the anger that was rising in her. "I've *seen* your greater awareness! So have all the others here—your vision was broadcast today, remember? Why do you think they're so frightened? I want your assurance that you won't send them into a full-scale panic."

"My vision came many hours ago," said the priestess. "I now have more understanding of the Beast; there will be no need for anyone to fear it."

"Gloriana, you're not helping here," cried Jamie. "Don't you see? You're letting your job obsess you!"

She didn't like the way he was talking to her—calmly, patiently. And the way he seemed to put so much faith in this priestess—Of course: Jamie had become a convert already!

She pointed a warning finger at the priestess. "I'll sit with the rest of the congregation. But I have officers stationed in the crowd—*if* you let things get out of hand, we'll have to stop the service."

She turned away angrily, and as she went down the altar steps Jamie walked by her side. She felt rather than saw his anxious glances in her direction. So Jamie thought that she was obsessed by her job! Well, obviously he didn't understand that the kind of responsibility she had

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couldn't be shrugged aside. When had Jamie ever had to take responsibility for anything?

Annalie! Annalie, can you hear me?

Livy's voice. But who was Livy? Gloriana knew nothing about the monitor or her assistants.

—Yes I do! thought Annalie. *Livy, I hear you! Are you still there?*

But her vision was fading; she was once more in her own body, sitting between Alton and Robin, and the muscles of her legs were beginning to cramp with tension. She shifted position quickly, stretching her legs out before her and leaning back to brace herself on the heels of her hands. She felt bewildered by the conflicting emotions she'd felt in the people here, and she closed her eyes as she tried to calm herself.

This isn't the way it's always been before, she thought. This confusion; this fragmentation. I don't have all of my talent back, only flashes of it, and it's not enough. I'm getting caught in one mind after another, never getting the whole vision.

Livy! Where are you?

But there was nothing in her mind now except her own whirling thoughts. Am I fighting it? she wondered. Am I keeping myself from opening enough to hear everyone's mind? If only there weren't so much fear here!

She felt cold and drew the shawl around her. She opened her eyes and saw that Salamander was beginning the service. The priestess stood before the swelling brightness of Fire, and as she slowly raised her arms her cape spread around her like great red-tinged wings. For moments she stood motionless, her head thrown back, nostrils flaring as she drew in a deep breath. The crowd in the Cathedral had fallen silent.

"Behold Fire," said the priestess, her soft voice carrying clearly in the quiet of the Cathedral. The flames leaped behind her, Fire still growing, filling most of the

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vast grate now. Annalie's eyes were drawn to the flames as they coiled slowly upward: tongues of red and gleaming black that flicked around and through each other. Rising, continually rising. They moved with unnatural languor, like drifting smoke.

Gregorian's artistry, thought Annalie; but the realization did nothing to diminish the hypnotic quality of the sight. She felt herself leaning forward, sensed the rhythms of her breath and blood slowing to match the calm coiling of the flames.

"Taste Air," said the priestess, and now she drew in a long, deliberate breath, her dark tunic swelling. Annalie shifted quietly back into a lotus and began to breathe with her. The air smelled clean and clear, faintly pungent.

"Continue," said the priestess softly. "Let the purity fill your body."

Annalie breathed deeply, matching her intakes of air with the sounds of those around her. She continued to focus her gaze on the quietly rising coils of flame. In a few moments she realized that everyone was breathing more quickly, following Salamander's lead. She began to feel light, and the flames seemed to merge in her eyes; individual tentacles of flame blended and became one great fire.

"Now pause," said Salamander, "and feel Earth beneath you. Experience its vastness; you are touching the entire planet."

Annalie could feel the truth of that: this one small spot of hard-packed ground on which she sat was the surface of a world, its *size* beyond comprehension. Ancient plates of stone half a continent wide drifted beneath her with the patience of eons, and beneath that dreaming crust lay the pressure-boiling magma of the planet's core: the Fire at the center of Earth. Annalie felt her awareness magnified beyond herself, beyond the Cathedral and all of Cirque; she was a part of the entire planet, the very

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atoms that made her transmuted from the living dust of her world.

"There is one more Element of your physical being," said Salamander. "Erich, open the doors."

Annalie heard doors roll back behind her, and immediately the sounds within the great Cathedral altered subtly: the faint, unnoticed echoing of people's movements and breathing disappeared, and instead there was only the flat sound of open space. Even the low whispers of Fire's flames faded.

Beside her, Robin craned her neck to look behind; she whispered, "The whole back of the Cathedral opens up!"

Jordan touched her hand. "Focus," he said, and Robin turned back to look again into Fire.

The flames leaped upward now, dancing a celebration of freedom, reaching long fingers of red and black into the open vent of the huge chimney. Annalie felt the heat of the flames growing; their warmth overwhelmed her from the front even as the cold air from outside began to move in through the open doors behind. But the flames were eerily silent, as though the Fire into which she gazed were a ghost of all Fires that had ever been.

"If you listen well," said the priestess, "you may hear the sounds of River Fundament; it flows past our open doors."

Annalie did listen; and she heard from afar, as though from the other side of the world, the gentle lapping of water in the shadows of the river edge. It was a soothing sound; listening, it seemed to her that she had heard these sounds forever, that everyone in Cirque had always heard the soft flow of the Fundament as it coursed smoothly through the heart of the city on its way to the Abyss.

"Water, and Earth, and Air," said Salamander, once more raising her arms, spreading her pink-tinted cape like some all-enfolding mother eagle. "And Fire. They are the worldly Elements that give birth to life. To you and

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to me. And as we invoke the sense of these Elements tonight, we create life within ourselves—and the final Element, Spirit."

She fell silent. She lowered her arms slowly, leaned her head back and stood motionless as Fire moved behind her, throwing out its heat and light over the heads of the seated congregation.

How strange, thought Annalie, that I should feel so much life in this room when everyone is still.

She seemed to float in the air, alone and yet whole in a way she had never known even as monitor of the city. Fire's warmth was suddenly inside her, a part of her, and she understood that its heat was not just the product of chemicals reacting in a hearth, but something that happened everywhere at every moment in each creature that lived.

"Let Spirit come," said Salamander. The great Cathedral was completely silent, awaiting the miracle.

And suddenly there was a piercing scream behind Annalie, a child's shrill cry. A man yelled loudly, and Annalie heard thumpings and curses and a rush of rising voices.

For a moment she continued to float in her dreamlike reverie, then with a jolt she came out of it. She turned to look behind her, craning to see over the heads of the crowd. She saw only confusion, people scrambling to their feet and pressing toward the front of the Cathedral. A kaleidoscope of fragmented thoughts buffeted her mind as the congregation awoke into terror; the Cathedral seemed to shake with the force of it.

Annalie tried to stand up, but she staggered and fell against Robin, clutching at her to regain her balance. She heard Robin cry, "It's that thing again! It's that thing!"

Annalie stood swaying in the confused mass of people. As she looked to the back of the Cathedral she saw a pale tentacle whip through the air, and there were more screams. People pushed against her, driven forward by

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the press of bodies, and she grabbed desperately at someone's arm to keep from going down. Crimson waves of fear pounded at her mind.

Through a dark mist she saw the crowd parting and falling back as the tentacled creature surged toward her. It was clearly visible now, the matted grey and white hair of its body pulsing rapidly as its tentacles lashed out to clear a path before it. One of those tentacles struck an old man in the chest and threw him bodily through the air to crash against the backs of the fleeing crowd; the old man slid to the floor in an awkward heap. The monster came on with incredible speed, scuttling forward over the cleared dirt floor.

Pain crushed Annalie, and the room whirled over her; but then it was gone, and her senses were filled with the sharp smell of river-wet tentacles, the salty taste of blood under her tongue. But it wasn't *her* tongue, it was someone else's, for new impressions assailed her immediately. She felt herself gasping for breath as bodies fell and crushed her; she felt her fingers scrabbling vainly against the bonded-brick walls, trying to find escape; she tasted dirt as she was driven headfirst into the ground by falling bodies.

Somewhere she knew that none of this was happening to *her*, that she still stood at the front of the Cathedral, staggering back as the crowd fled from the monster; but she couldn't stop the assault of other people's minds, and suddenly she realized that she was falling, helpless to control her own body.

She felt her arm wrenched as someone grabbed her and held her up, and Jordan's face flashed in her vision for a moment. Arms wrapped around her waist and lifted her; she screamed, feeling tentacles and smelling wet fur, but it was still Jordan, running now as he carried her up to the altar in front of the great fireplace.

She came back to her own mind then and saw the panicked crowd fanning out below the altar, pushing and

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shoving to the sides as the tentacled beast drove forward. For one sharp instant she saw it so clearly that she realized it was not fur that covered the heaving body-sac of the creature, but patches of rough bristles quivering with horrible life. She looked for its eyes and found none: it was sightless, a raging beast that scuttled forward, flailing obstacles aside with its tentacles.

Something sharp lanced into Annalie, and she felt the sting of tears; her throat constricted with horror and . . . pity? Pity, for this blind monster that struck out at everything in its path?

But the feeling passed as quickly as it had come, and she realized that Jordan had put her down, that she was huddled against the wall of the chimney between Jordan and someone else . . . the fat girl she had met earlier: Nikki.

Suddenly she heard a new sound, a sharp crackling that cut through the air like parchment being torn. Cries reverberated in the Cathedral again, and she saw several Guard officers in their grey uniforms pushing through the crowd from the sides of the room where they had been stationed. They had their weapons out—heavy proton guns whose beams left faint yellow trails in the air as they fired at the monster.

Most of their shots were wild; the officers were being jostled by the panicked crowd, and they were firing too quickly. Yellow lines crisscrossed in the air, and the Cathedral walls exploded in small puffs where the beams struck. A young woman in outlander clothing was hit and thrown back, screaming shrilly, and Annalie doubled over as she felt the pain stab into her stomach.

Jordan pushed her to the floor and crouched over her. "Where are you hit?" he asked urgently.

"I'm not hit. Please, let me up, we've got to—"

"No, stay down," he said.

The whirling panic inside her was growing, flashes of

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terror beat on her from a hundred minds at once. A yellow beam sizzled over them and struck the face of the great fireplace, sending shards of brick down on them.

Someone was shouting, "Stop it! *Stop it!*" A woman's voice—Gloriana's? No, someone else.

Some of the beams had struck the monster; she saw it convulse, rising on its tentacles, and again those great bristled limbs lashed out, flailing through empty air now that the crowd had pulled away. A beam hit one of the tentacles, severing it halfway along its length; the creature recoiled, thrashing wildly. The severed tentacle twitched by itself on the dirt floor, jumping into the air and falling back to soil into a tight ball that shuddered and shuddered as it died.

"Please don't kill it! *Please!*" someone cried. The creature flattened itself to the floor and lay there for long moments, its body-sac heaving convulsively. Then it began to crawl toward the front of the Cathedral, toward Annalie.

She saw the millipede go toward the creature slowly, and she heard a thin, reed-like voice saying, "Be calm, be calm, you will not be killed. You have come to a holy place..."

But as the millipede approached the monster its tentacles thrashed out again; one of them struck the millipede and flung it backward through the air. The millipede thudded sickeningly against the face of the fireplace and lay still.

The crimson ball in Annalie's mind threatened to explode her head. She had begun to cry in breathy, hopeless sobs;

her whole body shook, and she tried to withdraw into herself, her own mind, retreating desperately into that empty darkness where she had gone earlier today. But there were too many minds nearby, all of them filling her with insistent terror; she couldn't escape.

She heard the guns of the Guard officers firing again, and she heard a different sound: a sharp crackling. She

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saw Gregorian holding in both hands a clumsy laser knife whose beam dug furrows into the ground near the creature and crisscrossed the thing's body with dark stripes. It shuddered each time it was hit, but it came on purpose-fully; ragged craters in its body oozed dark blood onto the ground.

Jamie hurried to Gregorian's side and rummaged in the toolbox. "Take that one," Gregorian said, turning briefly to point at one of the smaller knives. Jamie hefted it in one hand and began to move cautiously toward the beast.

It was more horrible than ever as it crawled laboriously forward, every movement of those powerful tentacles showing pain. Annalie's eyes seemed to be held wide open by invisible threads as she stared at the creature. How magnificent it seemed, so enormous and eerie and yet so overmatched by the onslaught of proton and laser beams. Still it straggled to move, to stay alive . . .

It was doomed. It must be nearly dead already.

"Please," said a voice. "Please stop shooting it. It only wants the heat of the Fire."

And Annalie realized that she was the one who had been pleading for the creature.

The beams continued, but they became less frequent as the monster's tentacles scabbled more weakly across the dirt floor. The creature was dragging itself now, trailing a broad wake of blood-soaked earth.

The vast, high-vaulted room had gone silent, only the tearing sounds of the proton beams and the crackling of the lasers disturbing the quiet dimness.

"Don't you see?" Annalie said, more loudly this time. "It wasn't trying to hurt anyone; it only needed warmth! It would have died outside!"

The creature continued to crawl slowly forward. Another yellow beam struck it, and it shuddered weakly.

And it's so beautiful, Annalie thought. Why didn't I see that before?

"Gloriana! Tell them to stop firing!" said a man's

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voice. Annalie looked wonderingly and saw that it was Jordan.

Her mind was whirling. She couldn't understand why the huge creature suddenly seemed so different. Its body-sac was flayed and gouged open in countless places where the beams had struck it, yet even the torn flesh continued to pulse with life; its tentacles curled forward along the floor, suckers opening to grasp dust. The sight was chilling, yet she was filled with an overwhelming sense of pity for the monster. Even now, torn and oozing, it was magnificent.

She realized then that she was seeing the creature through someone else's mind—that she must have been seeing that way for some time. Strong arms were holding her, and she looked up to see the face of Nikki. Of course! Nikki had been nearby all evening, and Annalie had felt her calm strength several times during the service. It was *she* who saw the creature as beautiful, who had felt that stabbing pity for it even while it was still able to lash out with deadly force. And when Annalie had become so terrified, her mind must have reached out for the nearest person whose feelings could reassure her.

But Nikki was . . . what had Robin told her? She'd taken something that sent her through personality changes. And now she'd come out of them as a whole human being; she was riding the crest of reintegration.

Gloriana's voice came: "Why should we stop shooting? This monster has killed a dozen people!"

And Jordan said, "Don't you see yet?—It needs warmth; that's all. It's used to the heat in the Abyss, and it's trying to get close to Fire."

Gloriana's expression wavered. She looked at the great beast through narrowed eyes. "This creature broke in—"

"But it didn't!" cried Nikki. "The doors were open. Please, no more shooting!" She looked pleadingly at Gregorian. "Put your knives away—you're cutting it up like a block of wood!"

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Gregorian met her eyes for a moment, then glanced at the creature. He lowered his laser knife and motioned for Jamie to do the same.

The guards kept their guns trained on the monster; they looked to Gloriana for orders. From the corner of her eyes Annalie saw the millipede stir, its many legs waving awkwardly as it struggled to a sitting position against the high wall of the fireplace. The tentacled monster heaved itself forward on the floor, reaching toward Fire.

The sense of beauty and overwhelming pity that had filled Annalie earlier came back, and this time she was fully aware that she was seeing through Nikki's mind. The sense of well-being that filled Nikki calmed Annalie's mind too; she

realized that her talent was completely restored if she wanted it. Dimly in the background, like distant echoes, she heard the minds of thousands of citizens in the homes of Cirque. Their attention was here in the Cathedral too: Livy and Mithra were broadcasting.

Yet at the same time Livy's mind was searching for Annalie's. *Can you hear me now? You can, can't you?*

Annalie breathed deeply, summoning strength. *Yes, I can hear everyone again.*

Annalie, what's happening? That creature looks different to different people! The ones up near the front, where you are, see something ... I don't know—wonderful, beautiful! But everyone else sees it the way it was earlier.

Annalie looked calmly at the tentacled beast; its motions, even as it dragged itself painfully across the floor, were grace personified. Its torn, bristled body seemed to glow with life.

Now that her mind was filled again with the familiar sights and senses of so many people, Annalie felt a peaceful clarity descend on her. Her talent had come back, but now it was her tool instead of her master; she could choose what she wanted to see. And she knew which vision of the beast she wanted.

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Its cHl right, Livy; I understand now. The creature is ... it was bom, all of them were, out of what we threw into the Abyss. Not only its body, but its mind. Ifs a pro-jection of all of us.

Annalie held Nikki's encircling arms tightly in her own and opened fully to her mind. *Livy, stop broadcasting—> you too, Mithra. I know what to do.*

She felt Livy's confusion and Mithra's resistance, but in a few moments the minds of Cirque were empty of visions from them. The people crowded against the walls of the Cathedral were open.

Annalie began to broadcast.

She sent what was in Nikki's mind: her fright and dismay at the events of this night, her sense of being trapped against the wall of the great fireplace as the beast crept forward, her love for Jordan . . . and her desperate sadness as she saw that magnificent creature from the depths of the Abyss torn and bleeding, only half alive yet still trying to move toward the warmth of Fire.

She sent all of it, even the half-submerged visions that whirled through Nikki's mind: her memory of the beast running from the death sprays of the Guard flyer in the river, or how it had looked when it was whole and unharmed . . . vast and beautiful, awesome in its grace.

The crowd quieted as these visions filled them; they stared in surprise at the beast.

It seemed to gain strength as it moved forward across the packed-dirt floor; its movements became less spasmodic, more flowing. The bristles on its body and tentacles lay smooth and sleek.

Gloriana said, "Stop firing."

The creature crawled forward, reached the steps of the altar and began to haul itself up them. Dim patterns from the black and crimson fire played across the beast's body, and it hesitated, tentacles twitching uncertainly.

The crowd was utterly silent.

"The Fire is too bright," said Jamie. "In the Abyss,

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these creatures ran from our light."

"I can adjust the chemical jets," said Gregorian. The fire sculptor looked to Salamander. "Shall I?"

The priestess's eyes were wide with wonder. "Yes, do it," she said softly.

Gregorian went toward the fireplace, carefully skirting the beast's massive tentacles. He reached into the grate and punched tiny buttons; the twisting red lines in the Fire died down and disappeared. Gregorian looked around at the beast as it began to move forward again; then he looked directly at Nikki.

"It's you who are seeing it like this, isn't it?" he said.

Nikki nodded, and Annalie with her. Gregorian looked again at the beast coming toward him; he shook his head and left the fireplace, going to stand again beside Salamander.

Fire coiled darkly in the grate, sending up long tendrils of deep violet. The rear of the Cathedral had gone dark; only the figures nearest the dim Fire could be seen now. A pale-furred tentacle groped forward, then another, and another. The creature pulled itself painfully up the steps.

Annalie concentrated on the view through Nikki's mind: she saw beauty. The bristled tentacles were soft now, and the great mottled body of the beast glowed warmly in the violet light of Fire. Fear fell away from her like a dropped cloak; joy began to swell within her.

The creature moved forward into the glow of Fire, and as it did so it... changed.

The slowly moving light of Fire played over the creature, casting soft light across its body, and it seemed to shimmer for a moment, its outlines shifting and rearranging. As it gained the dais and settled quietly before Fire, the coarse fur on its tentacles became delicate filaments that reached toward the flames like petals stretching into sunlight. The mottled body lay quietly and changed color:

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its grey and white markings faded into a pale rose color, quiet and peaceful.

Murmurs started among the crowd, whispered exclamations of wonder. The creature's colors became more intense: its roseate body seemed to glow from within, and the filaments reaching toward Fire sprouted tiny white flowers that opened slowly.

Its body began to break up, the pink flesh separating into clumps of petals soft as clover. Delicate roots sank into the ground of the dais. The clumps of pink petals seemed to swell and subside as though it were breathing, but the movement was slow and languorous.

The white flowers were fully open now; they swayed almost imperceptibly in the warmth of the flames, violet light playing softly over them. More tiny white flowers had opened among the main body of pink petals.

The changes ceased. On the altar before the great chimney there was now only a great clump of rose-colored clover dotted with points of white.

Annalie had been holding her breath! she let it out and inhaled deeply, letting relief wash over her as she stopped broadcasting. She smelled the rich scents of Fire's burning chemicals and, mixed with them, a delicate perfume like jasmine, like mint, yet like nothing she had experienced before. The white flowers, she thought.

Annalie? Livy's mind-voice. / *don't understand.*

Yes you do, Annalie said.

She felt Nikki's arms loosen their hold around her; she stepped away from Nikki, turning for a moment to meet her eyes. They were shining with tears that made them seem violet in the light of Fire. Annalie smiled at her, and after a moment Nikki's answering smile came.

Jordan touched Nikki's face softly with his fingertips. "You're beautiful," he said quietly.

Nikki shook her head, laughing a bit shakily. "No, it was . . ." She looked again at Annalie. "It was you who did that. You're the monitor, aren't you?"

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"Yes," Annalie said. "But it was your vision I broad-cast."

Nikki said, "It never occurred to me that you were a real person."

"I didn't know either," said Annalie. "Thank you."

The crowd was moving away from the walls, still hesitant but drawn forward to look in amazement at the luxuriant mass of flowers the creature had become. Annalie saw the millipede, recovered from its crash against the wall, as it reached the rose and white clump first. It lifted its head from the ground and regarded the flowers for a long moment with its dark eyes; then it thrust its head into the soft petals, and she saw the fur along its body ripple slowly.

More people came forward and surrounded the clump of flowers, but Salamander stepped in front of them, holding up her hand. "Wait. We mustn't cut off the warmth of Fire. Please stand back."

They did, forming a semicircle on the steps of the dais. Many people were talking at once, telling each other what they'd seen, agreeing furiously, exclaiming and shaking their heads. The priestess silenced them.

"We have seen a miracle tonight. We called Spirit to us, and Spirit has come." Salamander drew a breath, glanced at the flowers and frowned slightly. "It came first as confusion and pain, but that is the way of birth. Ultimately it is beauty, and now that beauty lives before us. We shall nurture it forever, here on our altar."

Annalie, we're broadcasting this. Is it all right?

Yes, Livy. Thank you, and please continue. You're the monitor now.

She felt sudden fear. *But your talent came back—you haven't lost it!*

No, I haven't lost it. But I've learned to control it. You must take my place till you learn that too. She withdrew from Livy's mind.

The old man, Alton Tekniksson, was standing near

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her on the altar; he said, "You'll have to change the services, priestess, if we're to keep the flowers alive. Fire will have to be kept low and soft, not like the bright Fires we've had."

Salamander smiled. "We can do that. Gregorian, will you stay on long enough to make the changes in our Fire?"

Gregorian glanced at Nikki, at Jordan; they stood close together, arms around each other. He grinned. "I'll stay as long as you like."

The priestess nodded. "Perhaps it is time for changes here anyway." She looked again at the mass of flowers, and her expression softened as she watched the play of Fire's light over the rose and white petals. Then she turned away and descended the dais steps to join Gloriana and several of her Guard officers as they tended the wounds of people who had been hurt earlier. Even they were staring in awe at the flowers on the dais.

Annalie saw the outlander woman who had been hit by a proton beam talking excitedly to a similarly

dressed young man. Then she felt an elbow nudging her insistently; she looked down and saw Robin. The girl whispered to her, "Hey, that wasn't *really* a miracle, was it? I mean, I bet those things are some kind of chameleon, only they're telepathic and they change their shape depending on what people are thinking. Right?"

"I don't know," said Annalie. "Does it matter?"

"Sure it does," Robin said. "Maybe not to *you*; you're an adult. But I'm still a kid, and I'm trying to learn things. Hey, Jordan, that wasn't really a miracle, I bet."

The teacher looked at her with amusement in his lean face. "I think you've practiced enough negatives for one lifetime," he said. He knelt beside the girl; very deliberately he said, "Now comes the hard lesson, if you think you're ready for it. Starting right now, I'd like you to practice positives. No more negatives, Robin, not a single

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one. See if you can find a positive for everything that happens."

"Everything?" She looked around uncertainly at the crowd in the dim Cathedral, the millipede smiling silently before the mass of flowers growing on the altar, Gloriana and the Guard officers clearing a path to carry out the wounded.

"But what about—"

He put a finger to her lips. "No buts. No exceptions, no reservations. You've graduated from that; now go on to the next lesson."

Robin stared at him; slowly a smile crept onto her face, and she hugged him.

Annalie watched silently, her mind awash with wonder. Robin had called her an adult—yet she was only fifteen. Of course she would seem old to a child, especially since she knew her face reflected the accumulated experiences of the entire city of Cirque for so many years. But she didn't *feel* grown up.

But, she thought. She laughed softly at herself.

Can time end? Moments multiply causes, extending eternity.

—The Book of Causes

ALTON TEOHNIKSSON had come to the Morning Gate long before dawn; he sat wearily at the base of the ancient portal, trying to slow his racing thoughts. Stars swarmed in the sky, campfires of distant tribes; Alton wondered if the people of their worlds had seen anything this night as strange as the events in Cirque. He thought of the crystal armies orbiting Procyon, fighting their enigmatic wars of alignment; the Six Sleepers of Tenebrum, their dreams still shaping storms on their planet; the subtle power dances of lost fetuses in the Great Cloud, each striving for birth.

No, he thought; all of these things are normal to their worlds. What happened in the Cathedral was new, something none of us could have expected. And despite the priestess's little speech, it was nothing we can explain either.

A miracle? He was surprised that he found it so hard to believe—hadn't he always followed the teachings of the Five Elements? Hadn't he known that life was always a miracle, a focus for infinite possibilities?

He sighed, shifting uncomfortably on the cold ground;

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he wished he'd brought a blanket to sit on. We thought we understood everything, he told himself wryly, but we got caught in our understanding. Our planet is so old, we thought it had no more surprises.

The distant stars seemed to swim in the sky as though they'd been cut loose from their paths.

Presently he heard voices behind him, and he shifted position to look over his shoulder. Half a dozen people came toward him along the worn road out of the city; he recognized the white cape of the priestess, Salamander, and the dark figure beside her was . . . that fire sculptor, Gregorian. Just behind them came the low, long figure of the millipede, its flowing movement unmistakable even in the night. There were others behind them.

He heard the voice of the priestess: "I only regret that your sculpture of Fire could not follow your plan. You must believe that I would never have asked you to change it if it hadn't been necessary."

"Of course," Gregorian said. "I *offered* to change it."

"Think as you will about the temples, but we have always respected art. How could we not?—it is an expression of the Elements."

Gregorian looked gravely into her eyes. "Let's agree on something now before we go any further: we won't talk about religion, and we won't talk about art. You're clever with words, but I don't trust words. I think you know some things I don't, but you'll have to *show* me."

Salamander laughed. "Weren't you shown enough to-night?"

"Enough to make me wonder," he said. He paused as they came to the great arch of the Gate, and he saw Alton sitting there. "Well—another survivor!"

Alton nodded to them and to the millipede as it came forward. To the foreigner he said, "You're leaving so soon? I hope you weren't disappointed by our city."

"I am never disappointed," said the millipede.

"I guess not," Alton said. "Who else has come to see

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you off?" He peered past them at two figures who trailed behind in the dark; in a moment he recognized Jamie and Gloriana. "This looks like an official send-off—a priestess and the Guardian too. Why didn't the monitor come?"

"Annalie is no longer monitor," said the millipede. "She has begun the second part of her life."

"She's asleep at the Cathedral," said Gregorian.

Jamie and Gloriana came through the Gate and stood a little apart from the group, not talking. Alton was surprised at the moody, dispirited look of the Guardian. Jamie still seemed fresh.

"I guess rich people are used to staying up all night, carousing or whatever you do," Alton said to Jamie.

And to Gloriana: "But *you* had a busy night. In case nobody's mentioned it, you and your officers handled a difficult situation tonight, and we owe you thanks."

Gloriana glanced at him, then looked away. "No," she said softly.

"What? What does 'no' mean when somebody thanks you?" Alton was feeling more alive now that there were people to talk with. He climbed to his feet, levering himself up with his hands against the stones of the Gate.

"We handled it badly," Gloriana said. "Seven people died, and two dozen more were injured. Most of the injuries were caused by the shooting done by my officers." She shook her head. "Our job was to protect people, but they would have been safer if we hadn't been there."

Alton felt a surge of sympathy for her. "You couldn't have known that the creature was harmless."

"That's not the point. I lost control of the crowd, of my officers ... of everything. I'm disgusted, and I think it's time I quit the Guard."

Jamie looked at her in surprise. "You can't be serious. You're not a quitter, Gloriana."

"It wouldn't be that. I need to change the direction of my life; that's been building up in me for quite a while,

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you know. Jamie, would you still want to marry me after the things you saw me do tonight?"

He glanced at the others in embarrassment, then took her hand. "You know I would, even this way. But it wouldn't work—we should take a two-month contract."

She smiled faintly. "I do love you, you know."

There was an awkward silence. Then Alton said, "Maybe the millipede has some advice. You see the future, isn't that right?" he asked the foreigner.

The millipede blinked once, slowly. Stars gleamed in its large eyes. "I see only my own future," it said. "I am leaving this planet."

"What will *you* be doing?" Alton asked. He could see that Jamie and Gloriana didn't want to discuss their life in front of the others. "You haven't even told us what you do out there in the stars. It must be something important to make you take such a short vacation."

The millipede's thin-lipped smile showed briefly. "Your languages have no word for my position. 'Poet' says only part of it. 'Prophet' would be misleading."

"Prophet?" said Salamander. "I didn't know the millipedes had a religion."

"We have never had one till now," said the millipede. "I am the first of my race who could tell from experience such a story as the emergence from the Abyss." Two of its forefeet opened the green leather pouch strapped across its chest; it drew forth a small book written on thin sheets of silicate vellum and held it out to the priestess. "You will need this."

Salamander took it and stared for long moments at the title page. "*The Book of Causes*," she read aloud.

"Yes." The millipede nodded, smiling again. "It tells of what has happened here in Cirque. I translated it myself so that you could understand why so many of my race will be visiting your Cathedral in the years to come. It is the book of our faith; thousands of copies are already in circulation in the worlds of Aldebaran."

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Salamander read one page, then another, a puzzled frown growing on her face. "There are poems about what happened yesterday. When did you write them?"

The millipede shrugged furry shoulders as it closed the pouch. "I have been writing them for years. An advantage of temporal vision is that one need not wait for events to occur to write about them."

Salamander continued to page through the book. "It's all here ... the monsters coming out of the Abyss, the attack on your boat, the service tonight. . . ." She stared at the millipede. "You did know everything that was going to happen."

"Yes. I came to see it, for experience is the foundation of our faith. Now that I have seen these things in life, I can talk of them fully, and that is what I shall be doing for the rest of my life. On my own world, I shall be much like you: I shall preach faith in Cause."

Alton moved close to Salamander and read the page to which the book was open. "There is coherence in time. River Fundament flows: its unity is change." He frowned. "These are mystical teachings to you?" he asked the millipede. "Certainly. It has taken us much time, lost as we are in temporal vision, but at last I am able to explain the great principle of causality to my people. I have seen Cause in my own moment, tonight when everyone willed the creature to change. All became clear to me; and at last we understand."

The millipede turned again to Salamander. "You must be ready for those of my people who will visit your Cathedral; they are pilgrims come to view the present form of the beast on your altar. There will be many of them, hundreds of thousands. We have never had a re-ligion before."

Suddenly Alton understood, and laughter bubbled out of him. He said to the millipede, "That was what you meant when I met you yesterday morning! You said that

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Cirque was on the verge of new life, that we wouldn't be ignored and forgotten by people in the stars any longer! You meant that this city was going to become some kind of Mecca for millipedes! Not for humans, but for your own people!"

The millipede made its clattering alien laughter. "Yes. But once we begin to visit Earth, humans and others will follow—our numbers will bring wealth and commerce. Cirque is truly a city of the future."

Alton shook his head, still grinning. "Then we're going to need you more than ever, Gloriana. This city will need an experienced Guardian to make order out of things. You can't quit now."

Gloriana seemed confused, but she said, "I'll think about it again. At least the job would have some mean-ing." She looked at Jamie. "You'll understand if I change my mind?"

"Not z/," he said. "You'll stay as Guardian." His eyes smiled at her. "There are different kinds of marriage. What if I joined *you*? I could become a member of the Guard, work in your world. I think I'd like that—and I'm not a total incompetent, you know."

After a moment she said, "Yes, I do know that."

The sky was growing lighter; the angular towers of the spaceport showed black against the glow of dawn. Already the stars near the horizon had faded. Alton looked over-head for a glimpse of the shuttle-ship, but it wasn't visible yet.

The millipede, seeing the direction of his gaze, abruptly lowered its body to the grassy path that led out to the spaceport. "I must leave. I appreciate the welcome you gave me, and I shall remember all of you even more than before I came."

"We should thank *you*" said Alton. "You're giving Cirque a new life. You won't be here so I guess you'll never know how much you've done for us."

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The millipede curled its head over one shoulder and said, "The changes are not yours alone; they will affect the galaxy. We shall even be able to explain to humans about the problems of controlling stellar inertia."

"Stellar inertia?" said Alton.

"I must not be late for the shuttle," said the millipede. "Ask Robin." It began to move along the path more quickly than Alton would have believed it could, and soon the foreigner was only an indistinct form in the distance. The shuttle appeared far above and settled into the dawn.