

To Bell the Cat by Joan D. Vinge

Another squeal of animal pain reached them from the bubble tent twenty meters away. Juah-u Corouda jerked involuntarily as he tossed the carved gaming pieces from the cup, spoiling his throw. "Hell, a triad.... Damn that noise; it's like fingernails on metal."

"Orr doesn't know the meaning of 'surrender.'" Albe Hyacin-Soong caught up the cup. "It must be driving him crazy that he can't figure out how those scaly little rats survive all that radioactivity. How they ever evolved in the first place - "

"He doesn't know the meaning of the word 'mercy.'" Xena Soong - Hyacin frowned at her husband, her hands clasping her elbows. "Why doesn't he anesthetize them?"

"Come on, Xena," Corouda said. "They're just animals. They don't feel pain like we do."

"And what are any of us, Juah-u, but animals trying to play God?"

"I just want to play squamish," Albe muttered.

Corouda smiled faintly, looking away from Xena toward the edge of the camp. A few complaints, hers among them, had forced Orr to move his lab tent away from the rest. Corouda was just as glad. The noises annoyed him, but he didn't take them personally. Research was necessary; Xena - any scientist - should be able to accept that. But the bleeding hearts are always with us. No matter how comfortable a society became, no matter how fair, no matter how nearly perfect, there was always someone who wanted flaws to pick at. Some people were never satisfied; he was glad he wasn't one of them. And glad he wasn't married to one of them. But then, Albe always liked a good argument.

"Next you'll be telling me that he doesn't feel anything either!" Xena pointed.

"Keep your voice down, Xena. He'll hear you. He's right over there. And don't pull down straw men; he's got nothing to do with this. He's Piper Alvarian Jary; he's supposed to suffer."

"He's been brainwiped. That's like punishing an amnesiac; he's not the same man - "

"I don't want to get into that again," Albe said, unconvincingly.

Corouda shook his head, pushed the blond curls back under his peaked cap and moved further into the shade. They sat cross - legged on the soft, gray - brown earth with the studied primitivism all wardens affected. He turned his head slightly to look at Piper Alvarian Jary, sitting on a rock in the sun; alone as usual, and as usual within summoning range of Hoban Orr, his master. Piper Alvarian Jary, who for six years - six years! Was it only six? - had been serving a sentence at Simeu Biomedical Research Institute, being punished in kind for the greatness of his sin.

Not that he looked like a monster now, as he sat toying endlessly with a pile of stones. He wore a plain, pale coverall sealed shut to the neck in spite of the heat; dark hair fell forward into his eyes above a nondescript sunburned face. He could have been anyone's menial assistant, ill at ease in this group of ecological experts on an unexplored world. He could have been anyone -

Corouda looked away, remembering the scars that the sealed suit probably covered. But he was Piper Alvarian Jary, who had supported the dictator Naron - who had bloodied his hands in one of the most brutal regimes in mankind's long history of inhumanity to man. It had surprised Corouda that Jary was still young. But a lifetime spent as a Catspaw for Simeu Institute would age a man fast. Maybe that's why he's sitting in the sun; maybe he wants to fry his brains out.

" - that's why I wanted to become a warden, Albe!" Xena's insistent voice pulled his attention back. "So that we wouldn't have to be a part of things like this ... so that I wouldn't have to sit here beating my head against a stone wall about the injustice and the indifference of this society - "

Albe reached out distractingly and tucked a strand of her bound - up hair behind her ear. "But you've got to admit this is a remarkable discovery we've made here. After all, a natural reactor - a concentration of uranium ore so rich that it's fissioning. The only comparable thing we know of happened on Terra a billion years before anybody was around to care." He waved his hand at the cave mouth 200 meters away. "And right in that soggy cave over there is a live one, and animals survive in it! To find out how they could have adapted to that much radiation - isn't it important for us to find that out?"

"Of course it is." Xena looked pained. "Don't patronize me, Albe. I know that as well as you do. And you know that's not what I'm talking about."

"Yes, I know it isn't...." He sighed in surrender. "This whole expedition will be clearing out soon; they've got most of the data they want already. And then the six of us can get down to work and forget we ever saw any of them; we'll have a whole new world all to ourselves."

"Until they start shipping in the damned tourists - "

"Hey, come on," Corouda said, too loudly. "Come on. What're we sitting here for? Roll them bones."

Albe laughed, and shook the cup. He scattered the carved shapes and let them group in the dirt. "Hah, Two-square."

Corouda grunted. "I know you cheat; if I could just figure out how. Xena - "

She turned back from gazing at Piper Alvarian Jary, her face tight.

"Xena, if it makes you feel any better, Jary doesn't feel anything. Only in his hands, maybe his face a little."

She looked at him blankly. "What?"

"Jary told me himself; Orr killed his sense of feeling when he first got him, so that he wouldn't have to suffer needlessly from the experiments."

Her mouth came open.

"Is that right?" Albe pushed the sweatband back on his tanned, balding forehead. "Remember last week, he backed into the campfire.... I didn't know you'd talked to him, Juah-u. What's he like?"

"I don't know. Who knows what somebody like that is really like? A while back he came and offered to check a collection of potentially edible flora for me...." And Jary had returned the next day with the samples, looking tired and a little shaky, to tell him exactly what was and wasn't edible, and to what

degree. It was only later, after he'd had time to run tests of his own, that he had understood how Jary had managed to get the answers so fast, and so accurately. "He ate them, to see if they poisoned him. Don't ask me why he did it; maybe he enjoys being punished."

Xena withered him with a look.

"I didn't know he was going to eat them." Corouda slapped at a bug, annoyed. "Besides, he'd have to drink strychnine by the liter to kill himself. They made Jary into a walking biological lab - his body manufactures an immunity to anything, almost on the spot; they use him to make vaccines. You can cut off anything but his head and it'll grow back - "

"Oh, for God's sake." Xena stood up, her brown face flushed. She dropped the cup between them like something unclean, and strode away into the trees.

Corouda watched her go; the wine-red crown of the forest gave her shelter from his insensitivity. In the distance through the trees he could see the stunted vegetation at the mouth of the reactor cave. Radiation had eaten out an entire hillside, and the cave's heart was still a festering radioactive sink hot enough to boil water. Yet some tiny alien creatures had chosen to live in it ... which meant that this expedition would have to go on stewing in the sun until Orr made a breakthrough, or made up his mind to quit. Corouda sighed and looked back at Hyacin-Soong. "Sorry, Albe. I even disgusted myself this time."

Albe's expression eased. "She'll cool down in a while.... Tell her that, when she comes back."

"I will." Corouda rolled his shirtsleeves up another turn, feeling uncomfortably hot. "Well, we need three if we're going to keep playing." He gestured at Piper Alvarian Jary, still sitting in the sun. "You wanted to know what he's like - why don't we ask him?"

"Him?" Incredulity faded to curiosity on Albe's face. "Why not? Go ahead and ask him."

"Hey, Jary!" Corouda watched the sunburned face lift, startled, to look at him. "Want to play some squamish?" He could barely see the expression on Jary's face, barely see it change. He thought it became fear, decided he must be wrong. But then Jary squinted at him, shielding his eyes against the sun, and the dark head bobbed. Jary came toward them, watching the ground, with the unsure, shuffling gait of a man who couldn't find his footing.

He sat down between them awkwardly, an expressionless smile frozen on his mouth, and pulled his feet into position.

Corouda found himself at a loss for words, wondering why in hell he'd done this. He held out the cup, shook it. "Uh - you know how to play squamish?"

Jary took the cup and shook his head. "I don't g - get much chance to play anything, W - warden." The smile turned rueful, but there was nothing in his voice. "I don't get asked."

Corouda remembered again that Piper Alvarian Jary stuttered, and felt an undesired twinge of sympathy. But hadn't he heard, from somebody, that Jary had always stuttered? Jary had finally loosened the neck of his coveralls; Corouda could see the beginning of a scar between his collarbones, running down his chest. Jary caught him staring; a hand rose instinctively to close the seal.

Corouda cleared his throat. "Nothing to it, it's mostly luck. You throw the pieces, and it depends on the - "

Another mindless squall came from the tent behind them. Jary glanced toward it.

" - the distribution, the way the pieces cluster.... Does that bother you?" The bald question was out before he realized it, and left him feeling like a rude child.

Jary looked back at him as though it hadn't surprised him at all. "No. They're just animals. B - better them than me."

Corouda felt his anger rise, remembering what Jary was ... until he remembered that he had said the same thing.

"Piper! Come here, I need you."

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Corouda recognized Hoban Orr's voice. Jary recognized it too, climbed to his feet, stumbling with haste. "I'm sorry, the Doctor wants me." He backed away; they watched him turn and shuffle off toward Orr's tent. His voice had not changed. Corouda suddenly tried not to wonder why he was needed.... Catspaw: person used by another to do something dangerous or unpleasant.

Corouda stood up, brushing at his pants. Jary spent his time outside while Orr was dissecting; Piper Alvarian Jary, who had served a man who made Attila the Hun, Hitler, and Kahless look like nice guys. Corouda wondered if it were possible that he really didn't like to watch.

Albe stood with him and stretched. "What did you think of that? That's the real Piper Alvarian Jary, all right. 'Better them than me ... just a bunch of animals.' He probably thinks we're all a bunch of animals."

Corouda watched Jary disappear into the tent. "Wouldn't surprise me at all."

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Piper Alvarian Jary picked his way cautiously over the rough, slagged surface of the narrow cave ledge, setting down one foot and then the other like a puppeteer. Below him, some five meters down the solid rock surface here, lay the shallow liquid surface of the radioactive mud. He rarely looked down at it, too concerned with lighting a path for his own feet. Their geological tests had shown that a seven-meter layer forty meters down in the boiling mud held a freakish concentration of fissile ores, hot enough once to have eaten out this strange, contorted subterranean world. He risked a glance out into the pitch blackness, his headlamp spotlighting grotesque formations cast from molten rock; silvery metallic stalactites and stalagmites, reborn from vaporized ores. Over millennia the water-saturated mass of mud and uranium had become exothermic and then cooled, sporadically, in one spot and then another. Like some immense witches' caldron, the whole underground had simmered and sputtered for nearly half a million years.

Fumes rising in Jary's line of sight shrouded his vision of the tormented underworld; he wondered vaguely whether the smell would be unpleasant, if he could remove the helmet of his radiation suit. Someone else might have thought of Hell, but that image did not occur to him.

He stumbled, coming up hard against a jagged outcropping. Orr's suited form turned back to look at him, glittered in the dancing light of his own headlamp. "Watch out for that case!"

He felt for the bulky container slung against his hip, reassuring his nerveless body that its contents were still secure. Huddled inside it, creeping over one another aimlessly, were the half dozen sluggish, rat-sized troglodytes they had captured this trip. He turned his light on them, but they did not respond, gazing stupidly at him and through him from the observation window. "It's all right, D - doctor."

Orr nodded, starting on. Jary ducked a gleaming stalactite, moved forward quickly before the safety line between them jerked taut. He was grateful for the line, even though he had heard the warden named Hyacin-Soong call it his leash. Hyacin-Soong followed behind him now with the other warden, Corouda, who had asked him to play squamish this morning. He didn't expect them to ask him again; he knew that he had antagonized Hyacin-Soong somehow - maybe just by existing. Corouda still treated him with benign indifference.

Jary glanced again at the trogs, wishing suddenly that Orr would give up on them and take him home. He wanted the safety of the Simeu Institute, the security of the known. He was afraid of his clumsiness in these alien surroundings, afraid of the strangers, afraid of displeasing Orr.... He let the air out of his constricted lungs in a long sigh. Of course he was afraid; he had good reason to be. He was Piper Alvarian Jary.

But Orr would never give up on the trogs, until he either broke the secret code of their alien genes or ran out of specimens to work with. Orr wanted above all to discover how they had adapted to the cave in the geologically short span of time the reactor had been stable - everyone in the expedition wanted to know that. But even the trogs' basic biology confounded him: what the functions were of the four variant kinds he had observed; how they reproduced when they appeared to be sexless, at least by human standards; what ecological niches they filled, with such hopelessly rudimentary brains. And particularly, how their existence was thermodynamically possible. Orr believed that they seined nutrients directly from the radioactive mud, but even he couldn't accept the possibility that their food chain ended in nuclear fission. The trogs themselves were faintly radioactive; they were carbon-based, could withstand high pressures, and perceived stimuli far into the short end of the EM spectrum. And that was all that Orr was certain of, so far.

Jary clung with his gloved hands to the rough wall above the ledge as it narrowed, and remembered touching the trogs. Once, when he was alone, he had taken off his protective gloves and held one of them in his bare hands. Its scaled, purplish-gray body had not been cold and slippery as he had imagined, but warm, sinuous, and comforting. He had held onto it for as long as he dared, craving the sensual, sensory pleasure of its motion and the alien texture of its skin. He had caressed its small unresponsive body, while it repeated over and over the same groping motions unperturbed, like an untended machine. And his hands had trembled with the same confusion of shame and desire that he always knew when he handled the experimental animals....

There had been a time when he had played innocently with the soft, supple, pink-eyed mice and rabbits, the quick, curious monkeys, and the iridescent fletters. But then Orr had begun training him as an assistant; and observation of the progress of induced diseases, the clearing away of entrails and blood, the disposal of small, ruined bodies in the incinerator chute had taught him their place, and his own. Animals had no rights and no feelings. But when he held the head of a squirming mouse between his fingers and looked

down into the red, amorphous eyes, when he caught its tail for the jerk that would snap its spine, his hands trembled....

The ground trembled with the strain of pent-up pressures; Jary fell to his knees, not feeling the bruising impact. Behind him he heard the curses of the wardens and saw Orr struggle to keep his own balance up ahead. When his hands told him the tremor had passed, he began to crawl toward Orr, using his hands to feel his way, his palms cold with sweat. He could not compensate for unexpected motion; it was easier to crawl.

"Piper!" Orr jerked on the safety line. "Get up, you're dragging the specimen box."

Jary felt the wardens come up behind him, and heard one of them laugh. The goad of sudden sharp memory got him to his feet; he started on, not looking back at them. He had crawled after the first operation, the one that had killed his sense of touch - using his still-sensitive hands to lead his deadened body. The lab workers had laughed; and he had laughed too, until the fog of his re-personalization treatment began to lift, until he began to realize that they were laughing at him. Then he had taught himself, finally, to walk upright like a human being; to at least look like a human being.

Up ahead he saw Orr stop again, and realized that they must have reached the Split already. "Give me some more light up here."

He moved forward to slacken the line between them and shined his lamp on the almost meter - wide crevice that opened across their path. The wardens joined him; Orr gathered himself in the pool of their light and made the jump easily. Jary moved to the lip of the cleft and threw the light of his headlamp down, down; saw its reflection on the oily, gleaming water surface ten meters below. He swayed.

"Don't stand so close to the edge!"

"Just back up, and make the jump."

"Don't think about it - "

"Come on, Jary; we don't have all day!"

Hyacin-Soong struck at his shoulder just as he started forward. With a choked cry of protest he lost his footing, and fell.

The safety line jerked taut, battering him against the tight walls of the cleft. Stunned and giddy, he dangled inside a kaleidoscope of spinning light and blackness. And then, incredulous, he felt the safety line begin to give.... Abruptly it let go, somewhere up above him, and he dropped six meters more to the bottom.

"Jary! Jary - ?"

"Can you hear us?"

Jary opened his eyes, dimly surprised that he could still see - that his headlamp still functioned, and the speakers in his suit, and his brain....

"Are you all right, Piper?"

Orr's voice registered, and then the meaning of the words. A brief, astonished smile stretched Jary's mouth. "Yes, Doctor, f - fine!" His voice

was shaking. The absurdity of his answer hit him, and he began to laugh.

"Well? What happened?"

Jary noticed that his lunge for the box had driven him deeper into the mud; the water was up to his chest now. "I've g - got it. But I'm st - st - stuck in the mud; I'm sinking." He glanced up at the external radiation meters inside his helmet. "Every dosimeter's in the red; my suit's going to overload f - fast." He leaned back, trying to see Orr's face past the convex curve of the cleft wall. He saw only a triple star, three headlamp beams far above him, shafting down between the vertical walls of the slit.

"Keep your head up so we can see you; we'll throw you down a line." He recognized Corouda's voice, saw the rope come spiraling down into his piece of light. "Tie it around your waist."

The end of the rope hung twisting half a meter above his head. He struggled upward, clinging to the wall, but his muddy gloves could not hold the slick fibers and he dropped back, sinking deeper. "It's too short. I c - can't do it."

"Then tie on the specimen case, at least."

"I can't reach it!" He struck at the rock wall with his fist. "I'm sinking deeper, I'll fry. G - get me out!"

"Don't thrash," Corouda said evenly, "you'll sink faster. You'll be all right for at least fifteen minutes in that suit. Find a handhold on the wall and keep it. We'll be back soon with more equipment. You'll be all right."

"B - but - "

"Don't let go of that case."

"Yes, Doctor...." The triple star disappeared from his view, and he lost track of the cleft's rim. He could touch both walls without stretching his arms; he found a low ledge protruding, got the specimen case and one elbow up onto it. Steam clouded his faceplate and he wiped it away, smearing the glass with water and mud instead. The trogs had grown quiet on the ledge, as if they were waiting with him. There was no sound but his own quick breathing; the trap of rock cut him off utterly from even the reassurance of another human voice. He was suddenly glad to have the trogs for company.

The minutes stretched. Huddled in his cup of light, he began to imagine what would happen if another earth tremor closed this tiny fracture of the rock ... what would happen if his suit failed.... Sweat trickled down his face like tears; he shook his head, not knowing whether he was sweating with the heat of the mud or the strain of waiting. His suit could have torn when he fell; the radioactive mud could be seeping in, and he would never know it. He had been exposed to radiation in some of Orr's experiments; it had made him sick to his stomach, and once all his hair had fallen out. But he had never had to see the flesh rot off of his bones, his body disintegrating in front of his eyes....

His numb hand slipped from the ledge, and he dropped back into the mud. He hauled himself out again, panting, sobered. He had too much imagination; that was what Orr had always told him. And Orr had taught him ways to control his panic during experimentation, as he had taught him to control his body's biological functions. He should know enough by now not to lose his head. But there were still times when even everything he knew was not enough. And it

was then that he came the closest to understanding what Piper Alvarian Jary had done, and why he deserved his punishment.

He relaxed his breathing, concentrating on what was tangible and real: the glaring moon-landscape of the mottled wall before his face, the bright flares of pain as he flexed the hand he had bruised against the stone. He savored the vivid sensory stimulation that was pain, that proved he was alive, with a guilty hunger heightened by fear. The gibbous, mirrorlike eyes of the trogs pooled at the view window of the box, reflecting light, still staring intently through him as if they saw into another world. He remembered that they could, and turned his head slightly, uneasily. He froze, as the small, beslimed face of another trog broke the water beside his chest; then two, and three ... suddenly half a dozen.

Moving with a sense of purpose that he had never seen them show, they began to leap and struggle up the face of the wall - and up his own suit, as though he was nothing more than an extension of the stone. He stayed motionless, not able to do anything but stare as stupidly as his own captives. His captives ... a trog dropped from his shoulder onto the ledge; they were all trying to reach the box. Had the captive ones called them here? But how? They were stupid, primitive; creatures with rudimentary brains. How could they work together?

But they were working together, clustered now around the box, some probing with long webbed fingers, the larger ones pushing and prying. They searched its surface with their bodies, oblivious to the light of his headlamp, as though the only way they could discover its nature was through their sense of touch. He remembered that they were blind to the segment of the EM spectrum that to him was visible light. He was only a part of the rock, in their darkness. And here in the darkness of the cave they were reasoning, intelligent creatures - when outside in the camp they had never shown any kind of intelligence or group activity; never anything at all. Why? Did they leave their brains behind them in the mud when they surfaced?

Jary wondered suddenly if he had lost his own mind. No, it was really happening. If his mind was ever going to snap, it would have happened long ago. And there was no doubt in his mind that these animals had come here for one reason - to free the captives from their cage. These animals ...

He watched their tireless, desperate struggle to open the cage, knowing that it was futile, that they could only fail in the end. The captive trogs were doomed, because only a human being could open the lock to set them free. Only a human being -

His hand rose crookedly, dripping mud, and reached out toward the case; the trogs seemed to recoil, as if somehow they sensed him coming. He unsealed the lock, and pulled up the lid. The trogs inside shrank down in confusion as the ones on the outside scrambled over the ledge. "C - come on!" He pulled the box to him angrily and shook it upside down, watched their ungainly bodies spill out into the steaming water.

He set the case back on the ledge and clung there, his mind strangely light and empty. And then he saw the second circle of brightness that lapped his own on the wall, illuminating the empty cage. He looked up, to see Corouda suspended silently from a line above his head, feet braced against the shadowed rock. He could see Corouda's dark eyes clearly, and the odd intentness of his face. "Need some help, Jary?"

He looked back at the empty box, his hand still holding onto the strap. "Yes."

Corouda nodded, and tossed him a rope.

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Isthp: But we must contact these creatures. We have seen at last that they are beings, alien, but like ourselves; not some unknown force. They have mobiles with forms which can be known. (Warm heavy currents billow upward)
(Mobiles rise together) (Sussuration of thermal neutron clouds)

Mng: They have souls which can be reached. The shining mobile that released our captives, when all we did could not - we must contact that one's sessile, and make our problem known. These aliens must have space flight too; they are not native here. They can help us. (My tendrils flatten) (Golden - green carbonaceous webs) (Bright gamma deepens to red as we rise)

Ahm: Our only problem is that these aliens wish to destroy us! That being did not truly shine with life - it was a cold creature of darkness, dripping warm mud. (Silty currents, growing colder as this one rises) (Soft darkness above, we rise toward darkness)

Mng: But its sessile realized our distress. It released your mobiles. It showed good will. We did not know of the aliens' true nature; perhaps they only begin to grasp our own. (Silent absence of neutron flux)

Ahm: But how do we know they would leave us in peace, even then? We have sent our mobiles into the upper darkness to begin the ritual three times already. And three times they have attacked us viciously. We have only six months left. Our mobiles must complete the ritual in the soft upper reaches, or there will be no new sessiles. We are growing old; it takes time to focus the diffision, the obliqueness of a new young mind. We cannot wait until the next Calling. (It grows softer, colder) (The bright world dims around us)
(Grayed, delayed radiation) (Only whispers from the neutron clouds)

Isthp: That is true. But surely we can make them understand... We must take the risk, in order to gain anything worthwhile. (Cool sandy crosscurrents)

Scwa: And what is there worth risking our wholeness and sanity for that we do not already have? We set out to colonize a new world - and we have done so. (Darkness; dimming, whispering darkness) (Soft atmospheric spaces, hard basalt)

Isthp: But we have not! We are trapped in this pocket of light, with barely room to exercise our mobiles, on a dark and hostile world. Every century our lifespace grows less. The ore concentration is only a fluke, undependable. This is not the world you wanted, one like our own that generates perpetual light. There is no future here. (Crackling gusts of prompt neutrons)
(Swept upward, swept upward) (Hold back, Swift One, wait for the rest)

Ahm: What do you propose, then? That we return to our world, where there is no room for us? That we should depend on these alien monsters to take us there? (Darkness, blind darkness on all sides) (Dim warm radiance of mud)

Mng: There are not monsters! They might help us find a better world!
(*****)

Kle: We are content here. We are colonists, not explorers; we ask only to be able to breed our mobiles together ... such pride, to feel the quickness of body, or the grace of supple fingers; to know that I have chosen the best to

breed with ... and to meditate in peace. (Mud-pools pulse with dim ruby radiance) (Smooth basalt ... and the rarefied atmosphere of the upper reaches) (I perceive that I shine in all my parts)

Mng: What is the point of breeding the finest mobiles, if they have no purpose? They build nothing for you, they contribute nothing - you are not a whole being; you are a debased breeder of pets. To breed mobiles that can gaze upon the starry universe, that is truly beautiful. If it were possible to breed mobiles like ours which ran the ship, which could perhaps see the true nature of the aliens from the upper darkness - that would be worthy. But we have no way to create anything worthy here. (Crackling gusts grow dim and gentle) (Push this mobile; currents slip) (Bright depths below us now ... they halo the mobiles of my radiant friend Isthp, Gamma - shine - through - Molten - Feldspar)

Ahm: Worthy - breeding artificial mobiles and building artificial machines? Machines that fail, like all ephemeral, material objects.

Bllr, Rhm, Tfod: Technician Mng!

Mng: After five hundred years, still you have not reconciled an accident. You are well named, Ahm, who is Darkness - Absence-of-Radiation. (Begin first alignment) (How they shine ... how I shine) (Shine against darkness) (Shine)

Ahm: It was spaceflight that brought true Darkness into our lives. It is the purpose of the body's sessile to remain fixed, to seek the perfection of mind and mobile, not to tumble like a grain of silt through the nothingness between worlds. (Cluster) (Form first pattern) (Gray - ruby gleaming mudpools)

Isthp: The "nothingness" of space is full of light, if one has mobiles to perceive it. Strange radiation, that trembles in my memory still. Technology frees the sessile as meditation frees the soul. So do sessiles become the mobiles of God. (All gather, to form the patterns) (Heaviness of solid rock density) (Beautiful to behold)

Ahm: Heresy. Heresy! Blasphemer. (All gather, my mobiles) (True breeding. Fine breeding)

Mng: Ahm, you make me lose control - ! (*****)

Isthp: Peace, my beloved Mng, Cloud-Music. I am not offended. As our Nimbles differ from our Swifts, so do our very souls differ, one being's from another's. We were never meant to steep quietly in the depths, you and I. (Gently, my Strong One, move with control) (Vibration ripples lap the shore; mudpools settle) (Pass under, pass through)

Mng: Ahm, you must think of the future generations - why do our mobiles answer the Calling now, but to create new sessiles, who will soon be breeding new mobiles of their own? Our space here will shrink as our numbers increase, and soon it will become like the homeworld ... and then, much worse. We do not have the resources, or the equipment, or the time, to restructure our lifespace here. You are selfish - (Stray whisper of the neutron breeze) (Pressure shifts the rock) (Tendrils brushing)

Zhek: You are selfish! You only wish to return to space, to inflict more danger and discomfort on us all, for the sake of your perverted mechanical - mobile machines. (Subtle flow of color on radiant forms) (First movement of receptiveness)

Scwa: I remember dim blackness and killing cold ... anguish in all my mobiles, as they bore my sessile container over the pathless world crust. We have suffered too much already, from the failure of the ship; we few barely reached here alive. I for one am not ready for more trials. Mind the mobiles! Enter a new phase of the pattern ... (All circle together)
(Weave nets of life - shine) (The patterns multiply)

Rhm, Tfod, Zhek, Kle: Agreed, agreed.

Isthp, Mng: We must contact the shining creature!

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Jary lay back on the examining table while Orr checked his body for broken bones and scanned him with a radiation counter. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the empty specimen box, still lying on the floor where Orr had dumped it when he entered the tent. Orr had kept him waiting while he talked with Corouda outside - but so far he hadn't said anything more about the loss of the trogs. Jary wondered how much Corouda had really seen - or whether he had seen anything. No one had ever looked at him the way Corouda had, at the bottom of the cleft ... and so he couldn't be sure what it really meant.

"There's nothing wrong with you that's worth treating." Orr gestured him up. "Hairline fractures on a couple of your ribs."

Jary sat up on the table's edge, mildly relieved, pressing his bruised hand down against the cold metal surface. Orr was angry; he knew the way every line settled on that unexpressive face. But Orr might only be angry because he'd lost the specimens.

"Something else bothering you?"

"Yes - " he answered the graying back of Orr's head, because Orr had already turned away to the storage chests. "You l - let me fall. Didn't you?" He had found the muddy safety line intact, and the unfastened latch at the end.

Orr turned around, surprised, and looked at him. "Yes, I did. I had to release the rope or you might have dragged me into the crevice with you."

Jary laughed sharply.

Orr nodded, as though he had found an answer, "Is that why you did it?"

"What?"

"Turned the specimens loose. Because I let you fall - is that it?"

"No." He shook his head, enduring Orr's pale scrutiny.

"Don't lie to me." Orr's expression changed slightly, as Jary's face stayed stubborn. "Warden Corouda told me he saw you do it."

No - The word died this time before it reached his mouth. His gaze broke. He looked down at his feet, traced a scar with his eyes.

"So." The satisfied nod, again. Orr reached out and caught his wrist. "You know how important those animals are. And you know how much trouble and risk is involved in bringing them back." Orr forced Jary's hand down onto the shining tabletop, with the strength that was always a surprise to him. Orr

picked up a scalpel.

Jary's fingers tightened convulsively. "They'll g - g - grow back!"

Orr didn't look at him. "I need some fresh tissue samples; you'll supply them. Open your fist."

"Please. Please don't hurt my h - hands."

Orr used the scalpel. And Jary screamed.

"What are you doing in here, Orr?"

A sharp and angry woman's voice filled the tent space. Jary blinked his vision clear, and saw Warden Soong-Hyacin standing inside the entrance, her eyes hard with indignation. She looked at the scalpel Orr still held, at the blood pooling in Jary's hand. She called to someone outside the tent; Corouda appeared beside her in the opening. "Witness this for me."

Corouda followed her gaze, and he grimaced. "What's going on?"

"Nothing that concerns you, Wardens." Orr frowned, more in annoyance than embarrassment.

"Anything that happens on our world concerns us," Soong-Hyacin said. "And that includes your torture - "

"Xena." Corouda nudged her. "What's he doing to you, Jary?"

Jary gulped, speechless, and shrugged; not looking at Corouda, not wanting to see his face.

"I was taking some tissue samples. As you can see." Orr picked up a specimen plate, set it down. "My job, and his function. Nothing to do with 'your world,' as you put it."

"Why from his hands?"

"He understands the reason, Warden.... Go outside and wait, Piper. I'll call you when I want you."

Jary moved around the table, pressing his mouth shut against nausea as he looked down at the instrument tray; he slipped past the wardens and escaped, gratefully, into the fresh air.

Corouda watched Jary shuffle away in the evening sunlight, pulled his attention back into the tent.

"If you don't stop interfering with my work, Warden Soong-Hyacin, I'm going to complain to Doctor Etchamendy."

Xena lifted her head. "Fine. That's your privilege. But don't be surprised when she supports us. You know the laws of domain. Thank you, Juah-u...." She turned to go, looked back at him questioningly.

Corouda nodded. "In a minute." He watched Orr treat the specimen plates and begin to clear away the equipment. "What did you mean when you said 'he understands the reason'?"

Orr pushed the empty carrying case with his foot. "I questioned him about the

troglydites, and he told me that he let them loose, out of spite."

"Spite?" Corouda remembered the expression behind Jary's mud-splattered faceplate, at the bottom of the crevice. And Jary had told Orr that the lock had broken, after they had pulled him up.... "Is that how you got him to admit it?" He pointed at the table.

"Of course not" - irritation. Orr wiped the table clean, and wiped off his hands. "I told him that you'd seen him do it."

"I told you I didn't see anything!"

Orr smiled sourly. "Whether you told me the truth or not is of no concern. I simply wanted the truth from him. And I got it."

"You let him think - "

"Does that matter to you?" Orr leaned on the table and studied him with clinical curiosity. "Frankly, I don't see why any of this should matter to you, Warden. After all, you, and Soong-Hyacin, and the other fifteen billion citizens of the Union were the ones who passed judgment on Piper Alvarian Jary. You're the ones who believe his crimes are so heinous that he deserves to be punished without mercy. You sanctioned his becoming my Catspaw - my property, to use as I see fit. Are you telling me now that you think you were wrong?"

Corouda turned and left the tent, and left the question unanswered.

Piper Alvarian Jary sat alone on his rock, as he always did. The evening light threw his shadow at Corouda like an accusing finger; but he did not look up, even when Corouda stood in front of him. Corouda saw that his eyes were shut.

"Jary?"

Jary opened his eyes, looked up, and then down at his hands. Corouda kept his own gaze on Jary's pinched face. "I told Orr that I didn't see what happened. That's all I said. He lied to you."

Jary jerked slightly, and then sighed.

"Do you believe me?"

"Why would you b - bother to lie about it?" Jary raised his head finally. "But why should you b - bother to tell me the truth...." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

Something that was almost envy crossed Jary's face. He leaned forward absently to pick up a stone from the pile between his feet. Corouda saw it was a piece of obsidian: night-black volcanic glass with the smoothness of silk or water, spotted with ashy, snowflake impurities. Jary cupped it for a moment in his lacerated palms, then dropped it like a hot coal, wincing. It fell back into the pile, into a chain reaction, cascading a rainbow of colors and textures. Two quick drops of red from Jary's hand fell into the colors; he shut his eyes again with his hands palm-up on his knees, meditating. This time Corouda watched, forcing himself, and saw the bleeding stop. He wondered with a kind of morbid fascination how many other strange abilities Jary had.

Jary opened his eyes again; seemed surprised to find Corouda still in front of him. He laughed suddenly, uncomfortably. "You're welcome to play with my rocks, Warden, since you let me play squamish. B - but I won't join you." He pushed a rock forward carefully with his foot.

Corouda leaned over to pick it up: a lavender cobble flecked with clear quartz, worn smooth by eons rolled in the rivers of some other world. He smiled at the even coolness and the solidness of it; the smile stopped when he realized how much more that must mean to Jary.

"Orr lets me have rocks," Jary was saying. "I started collecting when they sent me to the Institute. If I held still and did what I was told, sometimes somebody would let me go out and walk around the grounds.... I like rocks: They don't d - d - die," his voice cracked unexpectedly. "What did you really see, there in the cave, W - warden?"

"Enough." Corouda sat down on the ground and tossed the rock back into the pile. "Why did you do it, Jary?"

Jary's eyes moved aimlessly, searching the woods for the cave mouth. "I d - don't know."

"I mean - what you did to the people on Angsith. And on Ikeba. Why? How could anyone - "

Jary's eyes came back to his face, blurred with the desperate pain of a man being forced to stare at the sun. "I don't remember. I don't remember...." He might have laughed.

Corouda had a sudden, sickening double vision of the strutting, uniformed Jary who had helped to turn worlds into charnel houses ... and Jary the Catspaw, who collected stones.

Jary's hands tightened into fists. "But I did it. I am P - piper Alvarian Jary! I am guilty." He stretched his fingers again with a small gasp; his palms oozed bright blood like a revelation. "Fifteen b - billion people can't be wrong ... and I've been lucky."

"Lucky?" Corouda said, inadequately.

Jary nodded at his feet. "Lucky they gave me to Orr. Some of the others ... I've heard stories ... they didn't care who they gave them to." Then, as if he sensed Corouda's unspoken question, "Orr only punishes me when I do something wrong. He's not cruel to me ... he didn't have to make sure I wouldn't feel p - pain. He doesn't care what I did; I'm just something he uses. At least I'm useful." His voice rose slightly: "I'm really very grateful that I'm so well off. That I only spend half my time cut up like a f - flatworm, or flat on my back with fever and diarrhea, or vomiting or fed through a tube or cleaning up the guts of d - dead animals - " Jary's hands stopped short of his face. He wiped his face roughly with the sleeve of his coveralls and stood up, scattering rocks.

"Jary - wait a minute." Corouda rose to his knees. "Sit down."

Jary's face was under control again; Corouda couldn't tell whether he turned his back gladly or only obediently. He sat down hard, without hands to guide him. "You know, if you wanted to be useful ..." Corouda struggled with the half - formed idea. "The thing you did for me, testing those plants; the way you can synthesize antidotes and vaccines. You could be very useful, working on a new world like this one." Jary gaped at him. "What do you m - m" he bit

his lips" mean?" "Is there any way Orr would be willing to let you work for some other group?"

Jary sat silently while his disbelief faded through suspicion into nothing. His mouth formed the imitation of a smile that Corouda had seen before. "It cost too much to make me a b - biochemical miracle, Warden. You couldn't afford me ... unless Orr disowned me. Then I'd be nobody's - or anybody's."

"You mean, he could just let you go? And you'd be free?"

"Free." Jary's mouth twitched. "If I m - made him mad enough, I guess he would."

"My God, then why haven't you made him mad enough?"

Jary pulled his hands up impassively to his chest. "Some people like to l - look at my scars, Warden. If I didn't belong to a research institute, they could do more than just look. They could do anything they wanted to...."

Corouda searched for words, and picked a burr from the dark-brown sleeve of his shirt.

Jary shifted on the rock, shifted again. "Simeu Institute protects me. And Orr n - needs me. I'd have to make him angrier than he ever has been before he'd throw me out." He met Corouda's eyes again, strangely resentful.

"Piper!"

Jary stood up in sudden reflex at the sound of Orr's voice. Corouda saw that he looked relieved, and realized that relief was the main emotion in his own mind. Hell, even if Orr would sell Jary, or loan him, or disown him - how did he know the other wardens would accept it? Xena might, if she was willing to act on her rhetoric. But Albe wasn't even apologetic about causing Jary to fall....

Jary had gone past him without a word, starting back toward Orr's lab.

"Jary!" Corouda called after him suddenly. "I still think Piper Alvarian Jary deserved to be punished. But I think they're punishing the wrong man."

Jary stopped and turned back to look at him. And Corouda realized that the expression on his face was not gratitude, but something closer to hatred.

. . . .

"All right, you're safely across. I'll wait here for you."

Jary stood alone in the darkness on the far side of the Split, pinned in the beam of Orr's headlamp. He nodded, breathing hard, unsure of his voice.

"You know your way from here, and what to do. Go and do it." Orr's voice was cutting; Orr was angry again, because Etchamendy had supported Soong-Hyacin's complaint.

Jary reached down for the carrying case at his feet. He shut his eyes as he used his hand, twitched the strap hurriedly up onto his shoulder. He turned his back on Orr without answering and started on into the cave.

"Don't come back without them!"

Jary bit down on the taste of unaccustomed fury and kept walking. Orr was sending him into the cave totally alone to bring back more trogs, to complete his penance. As if his stiffened, bandaged hands weren't enough to convince him how much of a fool he'd been. He had lost half his supper on the ground because his hands could barely hold a spoon ... he would catch hell for his clumsy lab work tomorrow ... he couldn't even have the comfort of touching his stones. Orr didn't give a damn if he broke both his legs, and had to crawl all the way to the cave's heart and back ... Orr didn't care if he broke his neck, or drowned in radioactive mud -

Jary stopped suddenly in the blackness. What was wrong with him; why did he feel like this - ? He looked back, falling against the wall as the crazy dance of his headlamp made him dizzy. There was no echoing beam of light; Orr was already beyond sight. Deliberately he tightened his hands, startling himself back into reason with a curse. Orr wouldn't have made him do this if he thought it would get him killed; Orr hated waste.

Jary pushed himself away from the wall, looking down at the patches of dried mud that still caked his suit. Most of it had fallen off as he walked; his dosimeters barely registered what was left. He started on, moving more slowly, picking his way across the rubble where the ledge narrowed. After all, he wasn't in any hurry to bring back more trogs; to let Orr prove all over again how futile it had been to turn them loose ... how futile his own suffering had been; how futile everything was -

And all at once he understood. It was Corouda. "Corouda - !" He threw the word like a challenge into the blackness. That damned Corouda was doing this to him. Corouda, who had pretended interest to draw him out, and then used false pity like a scalpel on his sanity: telling him that just because he couldn't remember his crimes, he was guiltless; that he was being punished for no reason. Trying to make him believe that he had suffered years of hatred and abuse for nothing. No, he was guilty, guilty! And Corouda had done it to him because Corouda was like all the rest. The whole universe hated him; except for Orr. Orr was all he had. And Orr had told him to bring the trogs, or else. He slipped unexpectedly and fell down, going to his elbows to save his hands. Orr was all he had ...

- - - - -

Isthp: We must make the shining mobile understand us. How shall we do it, Mng? They do not sense our communication. (Thin darkness) Mng: But they see us. We must show them an artifact ... a pressure suit, perhaps; to reveal our level of technology, and our plight, together. (Mudpools vibrate with escaping gases) (Patterns of light)

Isthp: Exactly! I will rouse my second Nimble; it is my smallest, perhaps it can still wear a suit ... I summon ... (Find the suit, and bear it upward) (Weave the circle together)

Ahm: We will not allow you to do this. We are the majority; we forbid contact with the alien's mobile. We will stop you if you try it. (Cold fluid lapping basalt)

Isthp: But its sessile is a creature of good will; even you must admit that, Ahm - it set your mobiles free. (My patterns are subtle) (Pulse softly and glow)

Ahm: I saw great shining fingers reaching toward me ... fear, hope ... to set my mobiles free ... But the thing we must communicate is that we wish to be left alone! Let us use the shining mobile as a warning, if the aliens

return again. It can make the invisible aliens visible, and let us flee in time. (Draw in the circle) (Draw in) (Strange radiance)

Mng: No, we must ask more! Show it that we are an intelligent life form, however alien. We must seek its help to rescue us from this forsaken place! (Close the net) (Mobiles draw in) (A light in the darkness)

Ahm, Scwa, Tfod, Zhek: No. No. (Radiance, strange light)

Isthp: Yes, beloved friend Mng - we will have our freedom, and the stars: Look, look with all your mobiles; it shows itself! It shines - (Strange radiance) (Light flickering like gamma through galena) (Hurry! Bear the suit upward)

Ahm: The shining one returns! Take care, take care - (Patches of radiance flowing closer)

Bllr: Break the pattern, prepare to flee. Make its light our warning. (It shines) (Prepare for flight) (Prepare)

Mng: Make it our hope! (Patches of radiance) (It shines)

- - - - -

Echoes of his fall came back to Jary from a sudden distance; he guessed that he must be close to the main chamber already. He climbed to his feet, unable to crawl, and eased past the slick patch of metallic ore. It flashed silver in his light as he looked down, making him squint. The red pathmarkers fell away beyond it; he fumbled his way down the rough incline, half sliding, feeling the ceiling arch and the walls withdraw around him.

Here in the main chamber a firm, ore-veined surface of basalt flowed to meet the water surface of the radioactive depths; here they had found the trogs. He passed a slender pillar bristling with spines of rose quartz, touched one with the back of his hand as he passed. In the distance he saw the glimmer of the water's edge, rising tendrils of steam. His stomach tightened, but he was barely aware of it: in the nearer distance the filigree of ore-veins netted light and a cluster of trogs lay together on the shore. He swept the surface with his headlamp, saw another cluster, and another, and another, their blind, helpless forms moving sedately in a bizarre mimicry of ritual dance. He had never had the chance to stand and watch them; and so he did, now. And the frightening conviction began to fill his mind that he was seeing something that went beyond instinct; something beyond his comprehension. But they were just animals! Even if they cared about what happened to their fellow creatures; even though they had risked death to perform a rescue ... it was only instinct.

He began to move toward them, trying to flex his bandaged fingers, trying not to imagine the pain when he tried to keep his hold on a squirming trog body... He stopped again, frowning, as the trogs' rhythmic dance suddenly broke apart. The small clumps of bodies aligned, turning almost as one to face him, as if they could see him. But that was impossible, he knew they couldn't see a human -

A dozen trogs skittered back and disappeared into the pool; the rest milled, uncertain. He stopped, still five meters up the bank. They were staring at him, he was sure of it, except that they seemed to be staring at his knees, as if he were only half there. He risked one step, and then another - and all but two clumps of trogs fled into the pool. He stood still, in the beginnings of desperation, and waited.

His numb body had begun to twitch impatiently before another trog moved. But this time it moved forward. The rest began to creep toward him then, slowly, purposefully. They ringed his feet, staring up at his knees with the moon-eyed reverence of worshippers. He went down carefully onto one knee, and then the other; the trogs slithered back. They came forward again as he made no further motion, their rudderlike hindquarters dripping mud. They came on until they reached his knees, and began to pluck at his muddy suit legs. He held himself like a statue, trying to imagine their purpose with a mind that had gone uselessly blank. Long, webbed fingers grasped his suit, and two of the trogs began to climb up him, smearing the suit with fresh mud. He did not use his hands to pull them off, even though his body shuddered with his awareness of their clinging forms. The dials inside the helmet began to flicker and climb.

He shut his eyes - "L - leave me alone!" - opened them again, after a long moment.

Almost as if they had heard him, the trogs had let go and dropped away. They all squatted again in front of him, gazing now at his mud-slimed chest. He realized finally that it must be the radioactive mud they saw - that made his suit shine with a light they could see. Were they trying, in some clumsy way, to discover what he was? He laughed softly, raggedly. "I'm P - piper Alvarian Jary!"

And it didn't matter. The name meant nothing to them. The trogs went on watching him, unmoved. Jary looked away at last as another trog emerged from the pool. He stared as the mud slid from its skin; its skin was like nothing he had ever seen on a trog, luminous silver reflecting his light. The skin bagged and pulled taut in awkward, afunctional ways as it moved, and it moved with difficulty. All the trogs were staring at it now; and as he tried to get to his feet and move closer, they slithered ahead of him to surround the silver one themselves. Then abruptly more trogs swarmed at the edge of the pool; he watched in confusion as the mass of them attacked the silver trog, forcing it back into the mudpool, sweeping the few who resisted with it.

Jary stood waiting in the darkness while seconds became minutes, but the trogs did not return. Bubbles of escaping gas formed ripple - rings to shatter along the empty shore, but nothing else moved the water surface. He crouched down, staring at the tracks of wet mud where the trogs had been, staring down at his own muddy suit.

They weren't coming back; he was sure of that now. But why not? What was the silver trog, and why hadn't he seen one before? Why had the others attacked it? Or had they only been protecting it, from him?

Maybe they had suddenly realized what he was: not Piper Alvarian Jary, but one of the invisible monsters who attacked them without warning.

And he had let them get away. Why, when they had climbed his suit, begging to be plucked off and dropped into his box - ? But they had come to him in trust; they had put themselves into his hands, not knowing him for what he was.

Not knowing him....

And from that moment he knew that he would never tell Orr about the rescue, or the dance, or the silver trog - or the way the trogs had gathered, gazing up at him. Their secret life would be safe with him ... all their lives would be safe with him. He touched his muddy suit. Inadvertently they had shown him the way to make sure they could be warned whenever he came again with Orr.

Maybe, if he was lucky, Orr would never see another trog.... Jary closed his hands, hardening his resolution. Damn Orr! It would serve him right.

But what if Orr found out what he'd done? Orr might even disown him, for that: abandon him here.... But somehow the thought did not frighten him, now. Nothing they could do to him really mattered, now - because his decision had nothing to do with his life among men, where he lived only to pay and pay on a debt that he could never repay. No matter how much he suffered, in the universe of men he carried the mark of Cain, and he would never stop being Piper Alvarian Jary.

But here in this alien universe his crime did not exist. He could prove what he could never prove in his own world, that he was as free to make the right choice as the wrong one. Whatever happened to him from now on, it could never take away the knowledge that somewhere he had been a savior, and not a devil: a light in the darkness....

Jary got to his feet and started back up the slope, carrying an empty cage.

The End

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