

THE WATCHED

Christopher Priest

Christopher Priest has been writing a series of stories about the world of the Dream Archipelago, a planet with one huge continent in its northern hemisphere and one to the south, plus many islands between. The peoples of the two continents are at war, while the inhabitants of the archipelago try to remain neutral. Psychologically oriented readers may consider this world terribly symbolic, and they may be right, but the situation leads to stories that are intriguing on the literal level. Here, for instance, is a tale of the guilt and the obsession of one man who's caught in the middle of a situation he can't understand.

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published.

I

Sometimes Jenessa was slow to leave in the mornings, reluctant to return to the frustrations of her job, and when she lingered in his house on these occasions Yvann Ordier had difficulty in concealing his impatience. This morning was one such, and he lurked outside the door of the shower cubicle while she bathed, fingering the smooth leather case of his binoculars.

Ordier was alert to Jenessa's every movement, each variation in sound giving him as clear a picture as there would be if the door were wide open and the plastic curtain held back: the spattering of droplets against the curtain as she raised an arm, the lowering in pitch of the hissing water as she bent to wash a leg, the fat drops plopping soapily on the tiled floor as she stood erect to shampoo her hair. He could visualize her glistening body in every detail, and thinking of their lovemaking during the night he felt a renewed lust for her.

He knew he was standing too obviously by the door, too transparently waiting for her, so he put down the binoculars case and went into the kitchen and heated some coffee. He waited until it had percolated, then left it on the hot plate. Jenessa had still not finished her shower; Ordier paused by the door of the cubicle and

knew by the sound of the water that she was rinsing her hair. He could imagine her with her face up-tilted toward the spray, her long dark hair plastered flatly back above her ears. She often stood like this for several minutes, letting the water run into her open mouth before dribbling away, coursing down her body; twin streams of droplets would fall from her nipples, a tiny rivulet would snake through her pubic hair, a thin film would gloss her buttocks and thighs.

Again torn between desire and impatience, Ordier went to his bureau, unlocked it, and took out his scintilla detector.

He checked the batteries first; they were sound, but he knew they would have to be replaced soon. He made frequent use of the detector because he had discovered by chance a few weeks before that his house had become infested with several of the microscopic scintillas, and since then he had been searching for them every day.

There was a signal the instant he turned on the detector, and he walked through the house listening for subtle changes in the pitch and volume of the electronic howl. He traced the scintilla to the bedroom, and by switching in the directional circuit and holding the instrument close to the floor, he found it a few moments later. It was in the carpet, near where Jenessa's clothes were folded over a chair.

Ordier parted the tufts of the carpet, and picked up the scintilla with a pair of tweezers. He took it through into his study. This was the third he had discovered this week, and although there was every chance it had been brought into the house on someone's shoes, it was nevertheless unsettling to find one. He put it on a slide, then peered at it through his microscope. There was no serial number.

Jenessa had left the shower, and was standing by the door of the study.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Another scintilla,” Ordier said. “In the bedroom.”

“You’re always finding them. I thought they were supposed to be undetectable.”

“I’ve got a gadget that locates them.”

“You never told me.”

Ordier straightened, and turned to face her. She was naked, with a turban of golden toweling around her hair.

“I’ve made some coffee,” he said. “Let’s have it on the patio.”

Jenessa walked away, her legs and back still moist from the shower. Ordier watched her, thinking of another girl, the Qataari girl in the valley, and wishing that his response to Jenessa could be less complicated. In the last few weeks she had become at once more immediate and more distant, because she aroused in him desires that could not be fulfilled by the Qataari girl.

He turned back to the microscope and pulled the slide gently away. He tipped the scintilla into a quiet-case—a soundproof, lightproof box where twenty or more of the tiny lenses were already kept—then went to the kitchen. He collected the percolator and cups, and went outside to the heat and the rasping of cicadas.

Jenessa sat in the sunlight of the patio, combing the tangles from her long, fine hair. As the sun played on her, the water dried, and she talked of her plans for the day.

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet,” she said. “He’s coming to dinner this evening.”

“Who is he?” Ordier said, disliking any interruption of his routine.

“A colleague. He’s just arrived from the north.” Jenessa was sitting with the sun bright behind her, outlining her bronzed body. She was at ease when naked; beautiful and sexual and aware of it.

“What’s he here for?”

“To try to observe the Qataari. He knows the difficulties, apparently, but he’s been given a research grant. I suppose he should be allowed to spend it.”

“But why should I have to meet him?”

Jenessa reached across, took his hand briefly. “You don’t have to... but I’d like him to meet you.”

Ordier was stirring the sugar in the bowl, watching it heap and swirl like a viscid liquid. Each of the grains was larger than a scintilla, and a hundred of the tiny lenses scattered in the sugar would probably go unnoticed. How many scintillas were left in the dregs of coffee cups, how many were accidentally swallowed?

Jenessa lay back across the lounge, and her breasts flattened across her chest. Her nipples were erect and she had raised a leg, knowing that he was admiring her.

“You like to stare,” she said, giving him a shrewd look from her dark-set eyes, and she turned toward him on her side, so that her large breasts appeared to fill again. “But you don’t like being watched, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The scintillas. You’re very quiet whenever you find one.”

“Am I?” Ordier said, not aware that Jenessa had been noticing. He always tried to make light of them. “There are so many around... all over the island. There’s no evidence anyone’s planting them.”

“You don’t like finding them, though.”

“Do you?”

“I don’t look for them.”

In common with most of the people who lived on the islands

of the Dream Archipelago, Ordier and Jenessa did not speak very often of their past lives. In the islands, past and future were effectively suspended by the Covenant of Neutrality. The future was sealed, as were the islands themselves, for until the conclusion of the war on the southern continent no one was permitted to leave the Archipelago; no one, that is, except the crews of ships and the troops of both combatant sides who constantly passed through. The future of the islands would be determined by the war, and the war was indeterminate; it had continued, without a break, for more than two centuries, and was as entrenched now as it had been fifty years before.

With a sense of future removed, the past became irrelevant, and those who came to the Archipelago, choosing the permanence of neutrality, made a conscious decision to abandon their former lives. Yvann Ordier was one amongst thousands of such émigrés; he had never told Jenessa how he had made his fortune, how he had paid for his passage to the Archipelago. All he had told her was that he had been prodigiously successful in business, enabling him to take an early retirement.

She, for her part, spoke little of her background, although Ordier realized this was a characteristic of native islanders, rather than a desire to forget a doubtful past. He knew she had been born on the island of Lanna, and that she was an anthropologist attempting, unsuccessfully, to study the refugee Qataari.

What Ordier did not want to reveal to Jenessa was how he came to possess a scintilla detector.

He did not want to speak of past nefariousness, nor of his role in the planned proliferation of the scintilla surveillance lenses. A few years before, when he had been more opportunistic to a degree that now alienated him from the memory of his younger self, Ordier had seen the chance to make a great deal of money, and he had taken the chance unscrupulously. At that time, the war on the southern continent had settled into an expensive and

attritional impasse, and the enterprises sections of the armed forces had been raising money by unconventional means. One of these was the selling of commercial franchises to some of their hitherto classified equipment; Ordier, with a ruthlessness that shocked him in retrospect, had obtained exploitation rights to the scintillas.

His formula for success was simple: he sold the scintillas to one side of the market, and the detectors to the other. Once the potential of the miniature transmitters had been recognized, his fortune had been assured. Soon Ordier was selling more scintillas than the army ordnance factories could produce, and demand continued to rise. Although Ordier's organization remained the prime distributor of the scintillas and their computerized image-retrieval equipment, unauthorized copies were soon available on the underground market. Within a year of Ordier opening his agency, the saturation distribution of the scintillas meant that no room or building was closed to the eyes and ears of one's rivals. No one ever found a way of jamming the tiny transmitters; no one ever knew for sure just who was watching and listening.

For the next three and a half years, Ordier's personal fortune had been amassed. During the same period, paralleling his rise in wealth, a deeper sense of moral responsibility grew in him. The way of life in the civilized northern continent had been permanently changed: scintillas were used in such profusion that nowhere was entirely free of them. They were in the streets, in the gardens, in the houses. Even in the erstwhile privacy of one's bed one never knew for sure that a stranger was not listening, watching, recording.

At last, with the guilt of his participation overwhelming any other motivation, Ordier took himself and his fortune to the permanent exile of the Dream Archipelago, knowing that his departure from the world of eavesdropping commerce would make not the slightest difference to its accelerating growth, but that he wanted no more part in it.

He chose the island of Tumo more or less at random, and he built his house in the remote eastern part, well away from the populous mountainous region in the west... but even on Tumo there were scintillas. Some were from the armies, in breach of the Covenant; a few were from commercial companies; and some, most numerous, were uncoded and thus untraceable.

Jenessa was right when she said that he did not like to find scintillas in his house, but those were an intrusion on his own privacy; he gave no thought to the ones scattered over the rest of the island. For the past two years he had tried, with a considerable measure of success, to put the scintillas from his mind.

His life now was centered on Jenessa, on his house, on his growing collections of books and antiques. Until the beginning of this island summer he had felt reasonably happy, relaxed and coming to terms with his conscience. But at the end of the Tufoit spring, with the first spell of hot weather, he had made a certain discovery, and as a result an obsession had grown within him.

It was focused on the bizarre, castellated folly that was built on the ridge on the eastern border of his grounds. There, in the sun-warmed granite walls, was his obsession. There was the Qataari girl, the Qataari ritual; there he listened and watched, as hidden from those he observed as the men who decoded the mosaic of images from the ubiquitous scintillas.



Jenessa lounged in the sun and drank her coffee, and then poured herself a second cup. She yawned and lay back in the sun, her hair dry now and shining in the light. Ordier wondered if she

was intending to stay all day, as she sometimes did. He enjoyed their lazy days together, alternating between swimming in the pool, lovemaking, and sunbathing... but the previous evening she had been talking of spending the day in Tumo Town, and he was uncertain of her intentions. At last, though, she went into the bedroom to dress, and afterwards they walked together down to her car. There were last words and kisses, and then she drove away.

Ordier stood idly by the grove of trees on the edge of his grounds, waiting to wave to her as she turned from the track to the main road leading toward Tumo Town. The brisk wind of the evening before had died, and the cloud of white dust thrown up by the wheels hovered behind the car... and long after Jenessa had passed from sight, Ordier stared after her. She sometimes returned unexpectedly.

When the dust had settled, and his view across to the distant white buildings of the town was interrupted by nothing more than the shimmering of early heat, Ordier turned back to his house and walked up the slope to the main door.

Once inside the house he made no attempt to conceal the impatience he had been suppressing while Jenessa was there. He hurried to his study and found his binoculars, then went through the house and left by the door which opened on the rough ground behind. A short walk took him to the high stone wall that ran laterally across the ridge, and he unlocked the padlock on the stout wooden gate and let himself through. Beyond was a sandy, sun-whitened courtyard, surrounded on all sides by walls, and already hot in the windless day. Ordier made sure that the gate was locked on the inside, then climbed steadily up the slope toward the angular height of the battlemented folly on the summit of the ridge.

It was this folly and its walled courtyard that Ordier had first chanced upon, and with the same recklessness of spirit of the madman who had built it three centuries before, he bought it and

the land around it after the most cursory of inspections. Only later, when the headiness of the purchase had faded, had he taken a second, calmer look at his new property and realized that the place was completely uninhabitable. So, not without regret, he had hired a local firm of builders, and his house had been put up a short distance away.

The ridge that marked the eastern boundary of his property ran due north and south for several miles, and for most of its length it was unscalable, except by someone equipped with climbing boots and ropes. It was not so much that it was high—on the side facing Ordier's house it rose on average about two hundred feet above the plain—but that it was broken and jagged, and the rocks were sharp and friable. In the geophysical past there must have been a tumultuous upheaval, compressing and raising the land along some deep-lying fault, the crust snagging upwards like two sheets of brittle steel rammed against each other's edge.

It was on the summit of this ridge that the folly had been built, although at what expense in human life and ingenuity Ordier could not imagine. It balanced on the broken rocks, a daring edifice, and a tribute to the singularity and eccentricity of its architect.

When Ordier had seen and bought the folly, the valley that lay beyond it had been a wide tract of desert land, muddy and overgrown with rank vegetation, or cracked, barren, and dusty, according to the season. But that had been before the coming of the Qataari, and all that that had entailed.

A flight of steps had been built across the inner wall of the folly, leading eventually to the battlements. Before Ordier had moved into his house, he paid the builders to reinforce most of the steps with steel and concrete, but the last few had been left unrepaired. The battlements could be reached, but only with great difficulty.

About halfway up, well before the last of the reinforced steps,

Ordier reached the fault that had been contrived carefully inside the main wall.

He glanced back, staring down from his vertiginous perch across the land beneath. There was his house, its evenly tiled roofs glittering in the sunlight; beyond, the untamed stretch of scrubland, and beyond that the buildings of Tumo Town, a sprawling modern settlement built on the ruins of the seaport that had been sacked at the outbreak of the war. In the far distance were the brown and purple heights of the Tumoit Mountains, rich in the mythology of the Dream Archipelago.

To north and south Ordier could see the splendid silver of the sea. Somewhere to the north, on the horizon, was the island of Muriseay, invisible today because of the haze.

Ordier turned away from the view, and stepped through into the fault in the wall, squeezing between two overlapping slabs of masonry which, even on close inspection, seemed to be so solidly in place that nothing could lie behind them. But there was a warm, dark space beyond, high enough and wide enough for a man to stand. Ordier wriggled through the gap, and stood inside on the narrow ledge, breathing quickly after his climb.

The brilliant sunshine outside had dulled his eyes, and the tiny space was a cell of blackness. The only light came from a horizontal crack in the outer wall, a slit of shining sky that seemed, in contrast with the rest, to darken, not lighten, the cell.

When his breathing had steadied, Ordier stepped forward onto the ledge where he generally stood, feeling with his foot for the slab of rock. Beneath him was the inner cavity of the wall, falling irregularly to the foundations far below. He braced himself with his elbow against the wall as he transferred his weight, and at once a sweet fragrance reached his nostrils. As he brought his second foot onto the slab he glanced down, and saw in the dim light a pale, mottled coloring on the ledge.

The smell was distinctive: Qataari roses. Ordier remembered the hot southerly wind of the day before—the Naalattan, as it was called on Tumo—and the whirling vortex of light and color that had risen above the valley floor, as the fragrant petals of the Qataari roses had scattered and circled. Many of the petals had been lifted by the wind as high as his vantage point here in the cell, and some had seemed to hover within grasping distance of his fingers. He had had to leave his hidden cell to meet Jenessa, and he had not seen the end of the warm blizzard of petals before he left.

The fragrance of the Qataari rose was known to be narcotic, and the cloying smell released as his feet crushed the petals was sweet in his nose and mouth. Ordier kicked and scuffed at the petals that had been blown onto the shelf, and swept them down into the cavity of the wall.

At last he leaned forward to the slit that looked outward into the valley; here too the wind had deposited a few petals, and Ordier brushed them away with his fingers, careful that they fell into the cavity beneath him, and not out into the open air.

He raised his binoculars to his eyes, and leaned forward until the metal hoods over the object-lenses rested on the stone edge of the horizontal slit. With rising excitement, he stared down at the Qataari in the valley below.



In the evening, Ordier drove over to Jenessa's apartment in Tumo Town. He went reluctantly, partly because of the necessity of making civil conversation with strangers—something he was habitually unwilling to do—and partly because he had more than a

suspicion that the talk would center around the Qataari refugees. Jenessa had said that her visitor was a colleague, which meant that he was an anthropologist, and anthropologists only came to Tumo to study the Qataari. Since his discovery in the folly, Ordier found all discussion of the Qataari unbearably unpleasant, as if some private domain was being invaded. For this and other reasons, Ordier had never told Jenessa what he knew.

The other guests had already arrived when Ordier walked in, and Jenessa introduced them as Jacj and Luovi Parren. His first impression of Parren was unfavorable: he was a short, overweight, and intense man who shook Ordier's hand with nervous, jerky movements, then turned away at once to continue the conversation with Jenessa that Ordier's arrival had interrupted. Normally, Ordier would have bridled at the snub, but Jenessa flashed him a soothing look, and anyway he was in no mood to try to like the man.

He poured himself a drink and went to sit beside Luovi, Parren's wife.

During the aperitifs and meal, the conversation stayed on general subjects, with the islands of the Archipelago the main topic. Parren and his wife had only just arrived from the north, and were anxious to hear what they could about various islands where they might make a home. The only islands they had so far seen were Muriseay—which was where most immigrants arrived—and Tumo.

Ordier noticed that when he and Jenessa were talking about the other islands they knew, it was Luovi who showed the most interest, and she kept asking how far they were from Tumo.

“Jacj must be near his work,” she said to Ordier.

“I think I told you, Yvann,” Jenessa said. “Jacj is here to study the Qataari.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I know what you’re thinking, Ordier,” Parren said. “Why should I succeed where others have failed? Let me just say this, that I wouldn’t have left the mainland to pursue something I thought was an insurmountable problem. There are ways that haven’t been tried yet.”

“We were talking about this before you arrived,” Jenessa said to Ordier. “Jacj believes he can do better than us.”

“How do you feel about that?” Ordier said.

Jenessa shrugged, and looked at Jacj and his wife. “I don’t have any personal ambition.”

“Ambition, Jenessa dear, is the foundation of achievement.” Luovi’s smile across the table, first at Jenessa, then at Ordier, was brittle.

“For a social anthropologist?” Ordier said.

“For all scientists. Jacj has taken leave from a brilliant career to study the Qataari. But of course you would know his work already.”

“Naturally.”

Ordier was wondering how long it would be before Parren, or his wife, discovered that one never took “leave” to visit the Archipelago. Spitefully, it amused Ordier to think that Luovi probably imagined, in anticipation of her husband’s success, that completed research into the Qataari society would buy them a ticket back to the north, where the brilliant career would be resumed. The islands were full of exiles who had once nurtured similar illusions.

Ordier was looking covertly at Jenessa, trying to divine how she was taking all this. She had spoken truly when she denied personal ambition, but that was not the whole story.

Because Jenessa was Archipelago-born she had a sense of nationalism, embracing all the islands, that Ordier himself lacked.

She had sometimes talked of the history of the Archipelago, of the distant years when the Covenant of Neutrality had first come into being. A few of the islands had put up resistance to the enforced neutralization; for some years there had been a unity of purpose, but the big northern nations had eventually overcome the resistance. The whole Archipelago was said to be pacified now, but contact between the islands, for most of the ordinary inhabitants, was restricted to the mail the ferries carried, and one never knew for sure just what was happening in the remoter areas of the Archipelago. Occasionally there were rumors of sabotage on one or another of the islands, or of the armies' rest-camps being attacked, but on the whole everyone was waiting for the war to end.

Jenessa did have a purpose to her work, although it was not of the same order as Jacj Parren's aggressive aspiration to fame. Ordier knew that she, and other island-born scientists, saw knowledge as a key to freedom, that when the war was over such knowledge would help liberate the Archipelago. She had no illusions about the immediate worth of her own calling—without access to the culturally dominant societies of the north, whatever research she concluded would be futile—but it was scientific knowledge nonetheless.

“Where do you fit into all this, Yvann?” Parren was saying. “You're not an anthropologist, I gather?”

“That's correct. I'm retired.”

“So young?”

“Not so young as it appears.”

“Jenessa was telling me you live up by the Qataari valley. I don't suppose it's possible to see their camp from there?”

“You can climb the rocks,” Ordier said. “I'll take you up there, if you like. But you wouldn't see anything. The Qataari have guards all along the ridge.”

“Ah... then I could see the guards!”

“Of course. But you wouldn’t find it very satisfactory. As soon as they see you, they’ll turn their backs.”

Parren was lighting a cigar from one of the candles on the table, and he leaned back with a smile and blew smoke into the air. “A response of sorts.”

“The only one,” Jenessa said. “It’s worthless as an observation, because it’s responsive to the presence of the observer.”

“But it fits a pattern.”

“Does it?” Jenessa said. “How are we to know? We should be concerned with what they would do if we weren’t there.”

“You say that’s impossible to discover,” Parren said.

“And if we weren’t here at all? If there was no one else on the island?”

“Now you delve into the realms of fantasy. Anthropology is a pragmatic science, my dear. We are as concerned with the impact of the modern world on isolated societies as we are with the societies themselves. If we must, we intrude on the Qataari and evaluate their response to that. It is a better study than no study.”

“Do you think we haven’t tried that?” Jenessa said. “There is simply no point. The Qataari wait for us to leave, and wait, and wait...”

“Just as I said. A response of sorts.”

“But a meaningless one!” Jenessa said. “It becomes a trial of patience.”

“Which the Qataari must necessarily win?”

“Look, Jacj.” Jenessa, visibly irritated now, was leaning forward across the table, and Ordier noticed that strands of her

hair were falling across the uneaten dessert on her plate. “When the Qataari were first landed here, about eighteen months ago, a team went into the camp. We were testing exactly the kind of response you’re talking about. We made no secret of our presence, nor of what we wanted. The Qataari simply waited. They sat or stood exactly wherever they were when they noticed us. They did *nothing* for seventeen days! They didn’t eat, drink, speak. They slept where they were, and if that happened to be in a muddy pool, or on stones, then it made no difference.”

“What about the children?”

“Children too... like the adults.”

“And bodily functions? And what about pregnant women? Did they just sit down and wait for you to leave?”

“Yes, Jacj. In fact, it was because of two pregnant women that we called off the experiment. We were frightened of what might happen to them. As it turned out, they both had to be taken to hospital. One of them lost her child.”

“Did they resist being taken away?”

“Of course not.”

Luovi said: “But then surely Jacj is right? It is a social response to the outside world.”

“It’s no response at all!” Jenessa said. “It’s the opposite of a response, it’s the stopping of *all* activity. I can show you the films we took... the people didn’t even fidget. They simply watched us, and waited for us to leave.”

“Then they were in some kind of trance?”

“No, they were *waiting!*”

Watching Jenessa’s animated expression, Ordier wondered if he recognized in her some of his own dilemma about the Qataari. She had always claimed that her interest in them was a scientific

one, but in every other aspect of her life she was rarely detached from an emotional reaction to people. And the Qataari were special people, not just to anthropologists.

Of all the races in the world, the Qataari were simultaneously the best and the least known. There was not a nation on the northern continent that did not have an historical or social link with the Qataari. For one country there would be the story of the Qataari warriors who had come to fight for their side in some long-forgotten war; for another, there would be the heritage of public buildings or palaces built by visiting Qataari architects and masons; for yet another, there would be the tales of the Qataari doctors who had come in times of plague.

Physically, the Qataari were a beautiful people: it was said in Ordier's own country, for instance, that the model for Edrona—symbol of male potency, wisdom, and mystery, captured in a marble sculpture and famous throughout the world—had been a Qataari. Similarly, a Qataari woman, painted by Vaskarreta nine centuries before, embodied sensual beauty and virginal lust; her face, pirated in the cause of commerce, glowed out from the labels of a dozen different types of cosmetic.

Yet for all the legends and visited history, the civilized world knew almost nothing of the Qataari homeland.

The Qataari were indigenous to the southern continent, the wild tract of land where the war had been fought for the last two centuries. On the northern coast, the Qataari peninsula pointed a long, cliff-bound finger of land into the Midway Sea, seeming to stretch out to touch the more southerly islands of the Dream Archipelago. The peninsula was joined to the mainland by a narrow, swampy isthmus, and beyond that, where the first mountains rose, there always stood a line of guards... but guards like no other. The Qataari never tried to prevent others entering, but guarded themselves so they always had warning of the presence of outsiders. Few people, in fact, had ever been to the peninsula.

The way across land was through dense jungle, and an approach from the sea was difficult because along the entire rocky coastline there was only one small jetty. The Qataari community seemed to be self-sufficient in every way, and their customs, culture, and social structure were all but unknown.

The Qataari were thought to be of unique cultural importance in the world: their society apparently represented an evolutionary link between the civilized nations of the north, the people of the Archipelago, and the barbarians and peasants of the south. Several ethnologists had visited the peninsula over the years, but all had been frustrated in their work by the same silent waiting that Jenessa had described.

Only one aspect of their life had been established, although its details were as much conjecture as knowledge: the Qataari dramatized. Aerial photographs, and the reports of visitors, revealed that there were open-air auditoria by every village, and there were always people gathered there. The speculation was that the Qataari depended on drama as a symbolic means of action: for decision-making, for the resolution of problems, for celebrations. What few pieces of Qataari literature had reached the world's libraries were baffling to a non-Qataari readership: the prose and verse were impenetrably elliptical, and any character named played a symbolic role, as well as having a seemingly endless list of contracted, familiar, or formal names, and appeared to represent a part in a scheme much larger than what could be inferred as the subject matter. The writing of theses on Qataari literature was a popular activity in northern universities.

The few Qataari who traveled, who visited the northern continent, spoke obliquely of such matters, seeing themselves as actors in a cultural play. One Qataari, in Ordier's country a few years before, had been secretly filmed while he was alone; evidently deep within a personal drama, the Qataari remonstrated with himself, declaimed to an imaginary audience, wept and shouted. A few minutes later the same man had been seen at a public

reception, and no one present had discerned anything unusual about his behavior.

The war had come, inevitably, to the Qataari peninsula. It had begun when one of the two combatant sides had started the construction of a deep-water refueling base on the northernmost tip of the peninsula. As this was an area hitherto unclaimed by either side, it constituted a breach of whatever neutrality the Qataari had enjoyed until then. The opposing side had invaded the peninsula, and before long a devastating struggle had begun. Soon the Qataari knew, as the rest of their continent knew, the shattering totality of the war, with its neural dissociation gases, its scintillas, its scatterflames, its acid rains. The villages were flattened, the rose plantations burned, the people killed in thousands; in a few weeks the Qataari society was destroyed.

A relief mission was sent from the north, and within a few more weeks the surviving Qataari were evacuated unresisting from their homeland. They had been brought to Tumo—one of the islands nearest to the peninsula—and a refugee camp had been built for them. They were housed and fed by the Tumoit authorities, but the Qataari, independent as ever, did what they could to close their camp to the outside world. In the first few days huge canvas screens had been put up around the perimeter fence, silent guards stood by all the entrances. Everyone who had entered the camp since—medical teams, agricultural advisers, builders—returned with the same report: the Qataari were waiting.

It was not polite waiting, it was not impatient waiting. As Jenessa had said, it was a cessation of activity, a long silence.

Ordier realized that Jacj Parren and Jenessa were still arguing, and that Parren was addressing him:

“...You say that if we climbed this ridge of yours, we should see guards?”

“Yes.” Jenessa answered for him.

“But why are they there? I thought they never left the camp.”

“They’re growing roses in the valley. The Qataari roses.”

Parren leaned back in his chair with a grunt of satisfaction. “Then at least they can be studied doing that!”

Jenessa looked helplessly at Ordier across the table. He stared back at her, trying not to reveal anything with his expression. He was sitting forward with his elbows on the edge of the table, his hands linked in front of his face. He had had a shower before driving to Jenessa’s apartment this evening, but a certain fragrance was still on his skin. He could smell it as he looked back at her, feeling a trace of the pleasant sexual arousal that was induced by the petals of the Qataari rose.

IV

Jacj Parren and his wife were staying in an hotel in Tumo Town, and the next morning Jenessa went round to see them. Ordier left with her, and they walked together as far as his car. Their embrace in the street was cool for the benefit of passers-by; it was no reflection of the night they had passed together, which had been more than usually passionate.

Ordier drove slowly back to his house, more reluctant than he could remember to succumb to the temptations of the cell in the folly wall, but at the same time more intrigued than ever about what he might see.

The conversation over dinner had done that for him. It had reminded him of the guilty associations with Jenessa, both as a sexual partner and as someone who had a genuine scientific

interest in the Qataari, that going to the folly awoke in him.

At the start he had made the excuse to himself that what he saw was so insignificant, so fragmentary, that it was irrelevant. But his knowledge of the Qataari had grown, and with it the secret... and a tacit bond had been tied: to speak of the Qataari would be to betray a trust he had created in his own mind.

As he parked the car and walked up to the house, Ordier added further justification to his silence by reminding himself of how much he had disliked Parren and his wife. He knew that prolonged exposure to the seductive laziness of Tumoit life, and to the laxity of the ways of the Archipelago in general, would change Parren in the end, but until then he would be an abrasive influence on Jenessa. She would seek the Qataari more eagerly, renewing her own interest in their affairs.

The house was stuffy from being closed for the night, and Ordier walked around the rooms, opening the windows, throwing back the shutters. There was a light breeze, and in the garden that he had neglected all summer the overgrown flowers and shrubs were waving gently. He stared at them, trying to make up his mind.

He knew that the dilemma was one of his own making, and could be resolved by the simple decision never to go up to the folly again; he could ignore the Qataari, could continue with his life as it had been until the beginning of this summer. But the conversation the evening before had heightened his awareness of the Qataari, reminded him of the special curiosities they aroused. It was not for nothing that the romantic and erotic impulses of the great composers, writers, and artists had been stimulated by the Qataari, that the legends and daydreams persisted, that the societies of the north had been so thoroughly permeated by the enigma that there was hardly a graffito that did not reflect it, nor a pornographic fiction that did not perpetuate it.

Voluntary abstention from his obsession was an agony to Ordier. He distracted himself for a time by taking a swim in his

pool, and then later by opening one of the chests he had had sent from the mainland and setting the books on shelves in his study, but by midday the curiosity was like a nagging hunger, and he found his binoculars and walked up the ridge to the folly.

V

More petals had appeared in the cell in his absence. Ordier brushed them away from the slit with his fingers, then turned his binoculars towards the Qataari camp, which lay on the far side of the shallow valley. On this day, as on all days, the high screens surrounding it were drawn tightly together. The breeze was stirring them, and great slow ripples moved laterally across the canvas blinds. His glasses did not have the necessary magnification, but Ordier nevertheless felt a sense of intrigue, hoping that the wind would momentarily lift the skirt of screens so that he might glimpse what lay behind.

In front of the camp, spreading across the floor of the valley, was the plantation of Qataari roses: a sea of scarlet and pink and green. So closely were the bushes planted that from this elevation Ordier could see the yellow, clayey soil only at the edge of the plantation.

He stared for a few minutes, relishing the privilege he was stealing.

It was the workers in the rose plantation he had first watched from this cell. Last night, listening to the dinner conversation, he had heard Parren speak of the possibility of seeing the Qataari at work in the roses; remembering his own excitement of discovery, Ordier had for the first and only time felt a trace of sympathy with

the man.

There was a small group of Qataari men standing amongst the roses and talking volubly. After a while, two of them walked away and picked up large panniers. They walked slowly between the rosebushes, plucking the largest, reddest flowers. They were quite unaware of his silent watching.

Ordier found this undetected intrusion into the Qataari privacy to be deeply exciting and satisfying.

The weeks he had been spying on the Qataari had taught him to be systematic, and Ordier looked with the binoculars at each of the rose-pickers in turn. Many of them were women, and it was at these he looked most carefully. There was one woman in particular he was seeking; she had been amongst the rose-pickers the first time he noticed her. He knew her, quite simply, as the one. He had never given her a name, not even a familiar one as shorthand for his recognition of her. She did remind him, in some ways, of Jenessa, but with the abundant opportunities he had had to watch her he now acknowledged that whatever similarities he had once discerned were the product of guilt.

She was younger than Jenessa, taller, undeniably more beautiful. Where Jenessa was dark in hair and complexion, with an attractive combination of sensuality and intelligence, the Qataari woman, the Qataari girl, had fragility and vulnerability trapped in the body of a sexually mature woman. Sometimes, when she was near the folly, Ordier had seen a captivating expression in her eyes: knowingness and hesitation, invitation and wariness. Her hair was golden, her skin was pale; she had the classic proportions of the Qataari ideal. She was, for Ordier, the embodiment of Vaskarreta's avenging victim.

And Jenessa was real, Jenessa was available. The Qataari girl was remote and forbidden, forever inaccessible to him.

When he had made sure the girl was not in the rose

plantation, Ordier lowered the binoculars and leaned forward until his forehead was pressing against the rough rock slab, placing his eyes as near as possible. He looked down toward the arena the Qataari had built at the foot of the folly wall, and saw her at once.

She was standing near one of the twelve hollow metal statues that surrounded the leveled area. She was not alone—she was never alone—and the others, although apparently paying little attention to her, were circling her. They were tidying up and preparing the arena: the statues were being cleaned and polished, the gravelly soil of the arena floor was being swept, and handfuls of the Qataari rose-petals were being scattered in all directions.

The girl was watching this. She was dressed as usual in red: a long, enfolding garment that lay loosely and bulkily on her body like a toga, but which was made up of many different panels of fabric, lying one on top of the other.

Silently, slowly, Ordier raised the binoculars to his eyes, and focused them on her face. The magnification at once lent him the illusion that he was nearer to her, and as a consequence, he felt much more exposed to her.

Seeing her as closely as this, Ordier noticed at once that the garment was tied loosely at the neck, and was slipping down on one side. He could see the curve of her shoulder, and just beneath it the first hint of the rise of her breast; if she moved quickly, or leaned forward, the garment would fall away to expose her. He stared at her, transfixed by her unconscious sexuality.

There was no noticeable signal for the beginning of the ritual; the preparations led imperceptibly to the first movements of the ceremony. The two women scattering the rose petals turned from casting them across the sandy floor to throwing them over the girl. Twelve of the men, until then apparently still cleaning the statuary, pulled open the hinged backs of each figure and took up their places inside, and the remaining men began to circle the arena as the girl stepped forward to take her place at the center.

This much was familiar to Ordier; soon the chanting would begin. Each time he saw this ritual unfold, Ordier was aware that it had been minimally advanced from the time before. Each time there was a renewed sense of the dual possibilities of the girl's sexual role.

The chanting began: soft and low, inharmonious. The girl turned slowly where she stood, her garment swinging about her limbs: it slipped lower on her shoulder, and as the panels lifted Ordier saw glimpses of ankle, elbow, stomach, hip, and he knew she was naked beneath it. As she turned she was looking intently at each man in the circle, as if trying to select one.

More petals were thrown, and as the girl turned in the arena her feet trampled and crushed them. Ordier fancied he could smell them from where he stood, although he knew that the fragrance probably came from the petals he had found in the cell.

The next stage was also one Ordier had witnessed before. One of the women who had been throwing the petals suddenly tossed aside her basket and stepped directly toward the girl. As she stood before her, she raised her hands to her bodice and pulled aside the cloth to bare her own breasts. She thrust out her chest. The girl responded by raising her hands to her chest and running them tentatively and exploratively across herself. She had at once the innocence of an adolescent and the sensuality of a woman. No sooner had her hands cupped her breasts through the fabric of the toga than one of the men left the others and ran into the arena. He knocked aside the woman with the bared breasts, and she fell across the ground. He turned, and went back to his place in the circle.

The woman got to her feet, closed her bodice, and found her basket and threw more petals. A few minutes later the whole incident was repeated when the second woman went forward to the girl.

Ordier watched this happen seven or eight times, wondering,

as he always wondered, where it was to lead. He was impatient for a further development, because apart from his having had the briefest glimpses of the girl's naked body accidentally revealed on occasions in the past, the ceremony had never proceeded beyond this. He lowered his binoculars and leaned forward again, watching the whole scene.

He was obsessed with the girl; in his fantasies he imagined that this ceremony took place here, beneath the wall of his folly, for his own exclusive benefit... that the girl was being readied in some mysterious way for him alone. But those were the fantasies of solitude; when he was here, watching the Qataari ritual, he was always aware of his role as secret intruder on their world, an observer as incapable of affecting the proceedings as the girl herself seemed to be.

Ordier's passivity, though, went only so far as a lack of direct action; in another way he became deeply involved, because as he watched he always became sexually aroused. He could feel the tightness in his groin, the swelling of physical excitement.

Suddenly the girl moved, and Ordier's attention returned. As one of the women went across to her, already pulling at the strings of her bodice, the girl moved to meet her, snatching at one of the long panels of her toga. The woman cried out, and her large, sagging breasts swung into view... and simultaneously the girl tore her own garment at the front, and let the cloth fall from her hands.

Ordier, looking again through his binoculars, saw an infuriatingly brief glimpse of the nakedness beneath, but then the girl turned away and her voluminous garment swung across her.

She took two steps, stumbled, and fell forward, lying across the place where the rose petals lay deepest. At this, one of the men went into the arena, brushed the woman aside, and stood over the girl. He prodded her with his foot, then pushed her, turning her over on to her back.

She appeared to be unconscious. The toga was in disarray, riding up her legs. Where she had torn part of it away a strip of diagonal nudity was revealed. It ran between her breasts, across her stomach, across one hip. Through his binoculars Ordier could see the aureole of one nipple, and a few strands of pubic hair.

The man stood over her, half crouching, rubbing his hands across his genitals.

And Ordier watched, surrendering to the exquisite excitement of sexual pleasure. As he came to physical climax, releasing wetly into his trousers, he saw through the shaking lenses of the binoculars that the girl had opened her eyes, and was staring upward with a dazed, delirious expression. She seemed to be looking directly at him... and Ordier moved back from the crack in the wall, ashamed and embarrassed.

VI

Two days later, Jacj and Luovi Parren came to Ordier's house in the early morning, and after they had shared a token breakfast, the two men set off toward the ridge, leaving Jenessa to entertain Luovi.

As Ordier had suggested to him the day before, Parren had equipped himself with stout boots and old clothing. They climbed roped together, but even so Parren slipped before they had gone very far. He slithered down the crumbling face of a huge boulder, brought up short as Ordier took his weight on the rope.

Ordier secured the rope, then scrambled down to him. The portly little man had regained his feet, and was looking ruefully at

grazes on his arm and leg, showing through the torn cloth.

“Do you want to go on?” Ordier said.

“Of course. It’s not serious.” But the challenge of the climb seemed to have receded, if only temporarily, for he was in no hurry to continue. He looked to the side, where the folly loomed high on the ridge. “That’s your castle, isn’t it?”

“It’s a folly.”

“Couldn’t we climb up to the battlements? It looks a lot easier that way.”

“Easier,” Ordier said, “but actually more dangerous. The steps are reinforced only part of the way. Anyway, you’ll see better from the ridge, I assure you.”

“So you have been up to the battlements?”

“Just once, the first time I came here. But I wouldn’t go up there again.” Ordier decided to take a chance: “But you could go alone, if you liked.”

“No,” Parren said, rubbing his arm. “Let’s do it this way.”

They struggled on, Ordier leading the way across the brittle slabs of rock. It was an ascent that would have posed no problem to practiced rock climbers, but to two amateurs it was perilous enough. Shortly before they reached the summit, Parren slipped again, and cried out as he fell backward against a boulder beneath him.

“You’re making too much noise,” Ordier said when he saw that the man was unhurt. “Do you want the Qataari to hear us before we reach the top?”

“You’ve done this before... It’s different for you.”

“I climbed alone the first time. I didn’t make as much row.”

“You’re younger than me.”

The recriminations ceased when Ordier climbed away from him, and resumed his position with the rope. He sat down on a slab and stared at Parren waiting for the climb to continue. The anthropologist continued to sulk for a few more minutes, then seemed to realize that Ordier was doing his best for him. At last he climbed up toward him, and Ordier took in the slack of the rope.

“We’ll head for that dip there,” Ordier said quietly, pointing up. “It was where I went last time, and if the Qataari haven’t changed their guard-line you’ll find that the guards are some distance away. With any luck, you’ll have several minutes before they spot you.”

He crawled forward, placing his feet on the best holds he could find, pointing them out mutely to the other man. At last he was lying face down across a broad slab, just beneath the summit. He waited until Parren was beside him.

“If you’ll take more advice from me,” Ordier whispered, “don’t use your binoculars at first. Take in the general view, then use your glasses on the nearest objects.”

“Why’s that?”

“Once they see us the cry will go up. It radiates outward from here.”

Ordier was wondering what had been going on at the arena since the day his watching had aroused him to the point of orgasm. Disturbed by the degree to which he was becoming involved in the ritual, he had kept away for two days, trying again to rid himself of his obsession. But he was failing, and this climb up the ridge was making the failure more certain.

Parren had his binoculars out, and Ordier took his own from their case.

“Are you ready?” he said.

Parren nodded, and they inched forward, peering over the

ridge.

Three Qataari guards stood in the valley immediately beneath their vantage point, staring patiently up at them.

Ordier instinctively ducked down again, but in the same instant he heard the Qataari shouting, and knew they had been noticed.

When he looked again he saw that the warning was rippling outward. The guards along the valley side of the ridge were turning their backs on Ordier and Parren... and in the rose plantation, along the banks of the narrow river, on the approaches to the camp, the Qataari were halting in whatever they were doing. They stood erect, waiting and waiting.

Parren was holding his binoculars awkwardly, trying to see but trying to keep his head down too.

“You might as well stand up, Parren,” Ordier said. “You’ll see better.”

Ordier himself sat up and settled himself on the edge of the slab. In a moment, Parren followed. The two men looked across the valley.

Ordier had no idea what Parren could now hope to see, but he had his own interest in the valley. He scanned the rose plantation systematically, looking with the powerful glasses from one Qataari to the next. Most of them stood with their backs turned, and from this distance it was difficult to see clearly. There was one female that Ordier lingered on; it might have been the girl, but he was not sure.

He made certain that Parren was busy with his own observations, then turned his glasses toward the foot of the folly wall. The arena itself could not be seen from here, but two of the hollow statues were just visible. He had had no hope of seeing if a ritual had been in progress, but he wanted to see if there were any

people about; apart from one of the guards standing near the folly, though, there was no apparent sign of activity.

Ordier did not know whether he was relieved or annoyed.

Their silent observation continued for several more minutes, but then even Parren admitted that there was nothing further to be gained.

“Would it be worth waiting beneath the ridge for an hour or two?” he said. “I have the time.”

“The Qataari have more. We might as well go back.”

“They seemed to be expecting us, Ordier.”

“I know.” He glanced apologetically at the man. “That’s probably because I came up to this part of the ridge last time. We should have tried somewhere else.”

“Then we could do that another time.”

“If you think it’s worth it.”

They began to make their way down, Ordier taking the lead. The sun was higher now and the morning wind had stilled, and by the time they were halfway down both men were feeling the heat.

It was Parren who called a halt first, and squatted down in the shade of a huge boulder. Ordier went back up to him, and sat beside him. Below them, deceptively near, Ordier’s house stood like a brightly colored plastic toy in a field.

After a while, Parren said: “Jenessa tells me you once worked with scintillas.”

Ordier looked at him sharply. “Why did she tell you that?”

“I asked her. Your name was familiar. We both come from the north, after all.”

“I’ve left all that behind me.”

“Yes... but not your specialized knowledge.”

“What do you want to know?” Ordier said resignedly.

“Everything you can tell me.”

“Parren, you’ve been misinformed. I’ve retired.”

“Then that wasn’t a scintilla detector I noticed in your house.”

“Look, I don’t see why you’re interested.”

Parren was sitting forward, away from the rock, and his manner had changed.

“Let’s not prevaricate, Ordier. I need some information from you. I want to know if there is any law in the Archipelago prohibiting the use of scintillas. I want to know if scintillas could be used to observe the Qataari. And lastly, if you think the Qataari would have any way of detecting or jamming scintillas.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“There’s no law against using them. I can tell you that much. Only the Covenant of Neutrality, but it’s never enforced.”

“And the rest?” Parren said.

Ordier sighed. “The scintillas could obviously be used against the Qataari, if you could think of some way of planting them without them knowing.”

“That’s easy. They can be sown from an aircraft at night.”

“I see you’ve worked it out. But your last question interests me. Why do you think the Qataari would be able to jam scintillas?”

“They’ve had plenty of experience of them.”

“How do you mean?” Ordier said.

“Both sides were using them during the invasion of the peninsula. The military work on saturation principles... scintillas must have been ankle-deep. A race who so obviously dislike being watched would have realized what they were for.”

“I was under the impression you thought the Qataari were primitive.”

Parren said: “Not primitive... decivilized. Their science is a match for anything we’ve got.”

“How do you know that?”

“An intelligent guess. But what’s your opinion, Ordier? Do *you* think they could jam scintillas?”

“No one else can, so far as I know. But technology is always advancing.”

“Qataari technology?”

“I don’t know, Parren.”

“Look at this.” Parren reached into a pocket, and pulled out a small box. Ordier recognized it at once: it was a scintilla quiet-case, identical to his own. Parren opened the lid, reached inside with a pair of tweezers he took from a mounting in the lid. “Have you seen one of these before?”

He dropped a scintilla into the palm of Ordier’s hand.

Ordier, guessing, said: “It hasn’t got a serial number.”

“Right. Do you know why?”

“Do you?”

“I’ve never encountered it before.”

“Neither have I,” Ordier said. “Except here on Tumo. My guess is that they’re military.”

“No, I’ve checked. They’re required by the Yenna Convention

to mark them. Both sides abide.”

“Then a bootleg?”

“They’re usually marked too. A few of the pirates might leave them blank, but these little devils are all over the place. I’ve seen hundreds since I’ve been on Tumo.”

“You’ve checked them all?” Ordier said.

“No, but every one I have checked has been blank.” Parren picked up the scintilla with the tweezers, and returned it to the quiet-case.

“Then whose are they?”

“I was hoping you’d tell me, Ordier.”

“You’ve already revealed that you’re better informed than I am.”

“Then I’ll tell you what I think. They’re connected with the Qataari.”

Ordier waited, expecting more to follow, but the other man was looking at him in a significant way as if waiting for a response. He said in the end: “So...?”

“Someone,” Parren said with ponderous emphasis, “is spying on the Qataari.”

“With what purpose?”

“The same as mine.”

And Ordier heard again the edge to Parren’s voice he had heard at Jenessa’s dinner party. Personal ambition was strong in the man. For a moment Ordier had felt a guilty suspicion growing in him, that Parren had somehow guessed that he had been spying on the Qataari from the folly, and that he was about to accuse him. But Ordier’s own guilt was as nothing beside Parren’s ambition, which was so bright it blinded him.

“Then you must clearly join forces with whoever it is, or compete.”

“I intend to compete.”

“You have your own scintillas?”

Ordier had intended his question sarcastically, but Parren said at once: “Yes, a new version. They’re a quarter the size of existing scintillas, and to all intents and purposes are invisible.”

“Then there’s your answer. You would clearly have the edge.”

Ordier’s urbane reply gave no clue to his thoughts. He had not known that scintilla technology had advanced so much.

“That’s not my answer, Ordier. Do you think the Qataari could either detect or jam my scintillas?”

Ordier smiled grimly. “I’ve told you I don’t know. You’ve seen how sensitive they are to being watched. It’s like a sixth sense. They might or might not have the electronic means of detection, but my guess is that they’d sense your scintillas somehow.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Ordier said. “Probably better. Look, I’m thirsty. Why don’t we talk about this back at the house? It’s too hot out here.”

Parren agreed, reluctantly it seemed to Ordier, and they continued their clumsy descent of the rocks. When they reached the house half an hour later, they found the place empty. Ordier fixed some cold drinks for them both.

He left Parren on the patio, and went in search of the women.

A few moments later he saw them in the rough ground behind the house, walking from the direction of the gate in the courtyard wall. He waited impatiently until they reached him.

“Where have you been?” he said to Jenessa.

“You were gone so long, I took Luovi to see your folly. The gate was unlocked, so we assumed it would be all right.”

“You know it’s not safe up there!” Ordier said.

“What an interesting building it is,” Luovi said to him. “Such eccentric architecture. All those concealed faults in the walls. And what a view there is higher up!”

She smiled at him patronizingly, then shifted the strap of her large leather bag on her shoulder, and walked past him toward the house. Ordier looked at Jenessa, hoping for some explanatory expression, but she would not meet his eyes.

VII

Parren and his wife stayed at the house for the rest of the day. Ordier was a passive listener to most of the conversation, feeling excluded from it. He wished he could involve himself in Jenessa’s work to the same degree that Luovi seemed to be involved with Parren, but whenever he ventured an opinion or an idea into the discussion of the Qataari, he was either ignored or tacitly dismissed. The result was that while Jacj Parren outlined his elaborate scheme—there was an aircraft to be hired, and a place found to erect the scintilla monitoring and decoding equipment—Ordier fell into an introspective mood, and grew increasingly preoccupied with his secret one-sided relationship with the Qataari girl.

From the summit of the ridge it had been impossible to see whether there was a ritual taking place, and in any event the fact

that he and Parren had been noticed would have put an immediate halt to it, but just the sight of the placid, colorful valley had been enough to remind him of the girl, and the ambiguity of the part she took in the ritual.

And there was the uncertainty of what Jenessa and Luovi had seen or done while they were in the folly.

Guilt and curiosity, the conflicting motives of the voyeur, were rising in Ordier again.

Shortly before sunset, Parren suddenly announced that he and Luovi had another appointment in the evening, and Jenessa offered to drive them back to Tumo Town. Ordier, uttering the platitudes of host to departing guests, saw this as a brief chance to satisfy his curiosity. He walked down with the others to Jenessa's car, and watched as they drove away. The sun was already behind the Tumoit Mountains, and the distant town was glittering with lights.

When the car was out of sight, Ordier hurried back to the house, collected his binoculars, and set off for the folly.

As Jenessa had said, the padlock on the gate was open; he must have forgotten to close it the last time he left the folly. As he went through he made sure of locking it, as usual, on the inside.

Twilight on Tumo was short, a combination of the latitude and the western mountain heights, and as Ordier went up the slope towards the folly wall it was difficult to see his way.

Once inside the hidden cell, Ordier wasted no time and put his eyes directly to the slit. Beyond, the valley was dark under the evening sky. He could see no one about; the alarm that their intrusion had caused seemed to have passed, for those Qataari in the valley during the day were nowhere about. The rose plantation was deserted, and the blooms moved to and fro in the breeze.

Unaccountably relieved, Ordier returned to the house. He was washing up the plates and cups when Jenessa returned. She was

looking excited and beautiful, and she kissed Ordier when she came in.

“I’m going to work with Jacj!” she said. “He wants me to advise him. Isn’t that marvelous?”

“Advise him? How?”

“On the Qataari. He’ll pay me, and he says that when he returns to the north I can go with him.”

Ordier nodded, and turned away.

“Aren’t you pleased for me?”

“How much is he going to pay you?”

Jenessa had followed him as he walked out onto the patio, and from the doorway she turned on the colored lights concealed amongst the grapevines hanging from the overhead trellis.

“Does it matter how much it is, Yvann?”

Looking back at her he saw the multicolored light on the olive skin of her face, like the reflection from sun on flower petals. “It’s not the amount that matters,” he said. “It’s what you would have to do to earn it.”

“Nothing more than I’m doing now. It will double my income, Yvann. You should be pleased! Now I can buy a house for myself.”

“And what’s this about going north with him? You know you can’t leave the Archipelago.”

“Jacj has a way.”

“He has a way with everything, hasn’t he? I suppose his university can interpret the Covenant to suit itself.”

“Something like that. He hasn’t told me.”

Ordier turned away irritably, staring out at the still blue water

of the pool. Jenessa went across to him.

“There isn’t anything going on between us,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, Yvann. It’s not sex, or anything.”

He laughed, suddenly and shortly. “Why on earth do you bring that into it?”

“You’re behaving as if I’m having an affair with him. It’s just a job, just the work I’ve always done.”

“I never said it wasn’t.”

“I know I’ve spent a lot of time with him and Luovi,” Jenessa said. “I can’t help it. It’s, well...”

“The bloody Qataari. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“You know it is.”

She took his arm then, and for several minutes they said nothing. Ordier was angry, and it always took some time for his moods to subside. It was irrational, of course, these things always were. Parren and his wife, since their arrival, had seemed set on changing the placid way of life he enjoyed, guilty conscience and all. The thought of Jenessa going over to them, collaborating with them, was just one more intrusion, and Ordier was incapable of dealing with it any other way than emotionally.

Later, when they had made some supper and were drinking wine together on the patio, enjoying the warm night, Jenessa said: “Jacj wants you to join his work too.”

“Me?” Ordier had mellowed as the evening progressed, and his laugh this time was not sardonic. “There’s not much I can do for him.”

“He says there’s a lot you can do. He wants to rent your folly.”

“Whatever for?” Ordier said, taken by surprise.

“It overlooks the Qataari valley. Jacj wants to build an observation cell in the wall.”

“Tell him it’s not available,” Ordier said abruptly. “It’s structurally unsound.”

Jenessa was regarding him with a thoughtful expression.

“It seemed safe enough to me,” she said. “We climbed right up to the battlements today.”

“I thought I told you—”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ordier said, sensing another row. He raised the wine bottle to see how much was left. “Would you like another glass?”

Jenessa yawned, but she did it in an affected, exaggerated way, as if she too had seen the way the conversation was going, and welcomed the chance to let the subject die.

“I’m tired,” she said. “Let’s finish the bottle, and go to bed.”

“You’ll stay the night then?”

“If I’m invited.”

“You’re invited,” Ordier said.

VIII

Four more days passed. Although Ordier stayed away from the cell in the folly wall, his curiosity about the Qataari girl

continued; at the same time he felt a growing sense of ambiguity, compounded by the unwelcome presence of Parren and his wife.

The morning after these two had visited the house. Ordier had been waiting for Jenessa to leave when a distracting thought came to him. It was what Parren had said to him on the ridge, about the unmarked, unidentified scintillas. He had linked them to the Qataari, and interpreted it to mean that someone else was observing them.

Ordier, listening to Jenessa in the shower cubicle, suddenly saw the possibility of an altogether different interpretation.

It was not that someone else was spying on the Qataari... but that *the Qataari themselves were watching*.

With their obsessive desire for privacy, it would clearly be in their interests to be able to watch the movement of the other people on the island. If they had access to scintilla equipment—or had been able to manufacture it themselves somehow—then it would be a logical way of defending themselves from the outside world.

It was not impossible. The Qataari men and women who had visited the northern nations had revealed a brilliant inductive understanding of science and technology, and after only a few moments of hesitation had been completely at home with such devices as elevators, telephones, automobiles... even computers. Parren had said that Qataari science was sophisticated, and if that were so, they might have learned how to duplicate the scintillas that had been poured so indiscriminately over their homeland.

If the Qataari were watching the people of Tumo, then they were certainly watching Ordier; he remembered the unmarked scintillas he was always finding in his house.

Later that day, when Jenessa had left, Ordier took his detector and scoured every room of the house. He found another half-dozen of the unmarked scintillas, and put them with the others in the

quiet-case. But the detector was fallible; he could never be entirely sure that every single scintilla had been found.

He spent most of this day in thought, realizing that this conjecture, if it was true, led to the conclusion that the Qataari knew he was spying on them from the folly.

If *this* was so, then it would account for something that he had always found naggingly strange: his unshakable conviction that the ritual was staged for his benefit.

He had always maintained the most scrupulous efforts at silence and secrecy, and in ordinary circumstances he had no reason to suppose that the Qataari knew he was there. But the girl had become a central figure in the ritual *after* he had noticed her in the plantation, and had watched her through his binoculars. The ritual itself invariably started *after* he went into the cell; he had never once found it in progress. And the ceremony, although staged in a circular arena, was always within his view, the girl was always *facing* him.

Until now Ordier had unconsciously attributed all this to simple good fortune, and had not sought a rational explanation. But if the Qataari were watching him, were waiting for him, were staging it for him...

But all this speculation was denied by one fact: the famous dislike the Qataari had of being watched. They would not allow someone to watch them, far less encourage it by mounting an intriguing ritual for his benefit!

It was this new understanding, and its attendant enigmas, that kept Ordier away from the folly for four days. In the past he had fantasized that the girl was being prepared for him, that she was a sexual lure, but this had been the stuff of erotic imaginings. To have to confront this as a matter of actual fact was something he was not ready for.

To do so would be to accept something else that had once

been an element in his fantasies: that the girl knew who he was, that the Qataari had *selected* him.

So the days passed. Jenessa was busy with Parren's preparations, and she seemed not to notice Ordier's abstracted state of mind. He prowled the house by day, sorting through his books and trying to concentrate on domestic matters. By night he slept with Jenessa, as usual, but during their lovemaking, especially in those moments just before reaching climax, Ordier's thoughts were of the Qataari girl. He imagined her sprawling across the bed of scarlet petals; her garment was torn away, her legs were spread, her mouth was reaching to meet his, her eyes stared submissively at him, her body was warm and soft to the touch.

She had been offered to him, and Ordier knew that she was his for the taking.

IX

On the morning of the fifth day Ordier awoke to a new realization: he had resolved the dilemma.

As he lay beside the sleeping Jenessa, he knew he accepted the fact that the Qataari had selected him, and he also knew why. He had met several Qataari in the north before he emigrated, and had made no secret to them of his work. They must have identified him here; he had been selected because of the scintillas.

But more than this: until this waking Ordier had feared the idea, for it implied that he was a prisoner of the Qataari will, but this new understanding actually freed him.

There was no further reason for his obsessive curiosity. He

need never again agonize about missing the ritualized ceremony, because the ritual would not take place *until he was there to observe it*.

He need never again return to the claustrophobic cell in the wall, because the Qataari would wait.

They would wait for his arrival, as they would wait for others' departure.

Lying in his bed, staring up at the mirrored ceiling, Ordier realized that the Qataari had liberated him. The girl was being offered to him, and he could accept or refuse according to his whim.

Then Jenessa, waking beside him, turned over and said: "What's the time?"

Ordier looked at the clock, told her the time.

"I've got to hurry this morning."

"What's the rush?"

"Jacj's catching the ferry to Muriseay. The aircraft will be ready today."

"Aircraft?"

"To scintillate the Qataari," Jenessa said. "We're intending to spray them tonight or tomorrow night."

Ordier nodded. He watched Jenessa as she rolled sleepily from the bed, and walked naked to the shower cubicle. He followed her and waited outside, imagining her voluptuous body as he always did, but for once he was incapable of lustful thoughts. Afterwards he walked with her to the car, watched her drive away. He returned to the house.

Reminding himself of his new existential state he made some coffee, then took it out on to the patio. The weather was hot again, and the scraping of the cicadas seemed especially loud. A new crate of books had arrived the previous day, and the swimming pool

looked clean and cold. He could make it a busy day.

He wondered if the Qataari were watching him now; if their scintillas lay between the paving stones, in the branches of the vines, in the soil of the overgrown flower beds.

“I’ll never spy on the Qataari again,” he said aloud, into the imagined aural pick-ups.

“I’ll go to the folly today, and tomorrow, and every day,” he said.

“I’ll move from this house,” he said. “I’ll rent it to Parren, and I’ll live with Jenessa in the town.”

“I’ll watch the Qataari,” he said. “I’ll watch them until I have seen everything, until I have taken everything.”

He left his cushioned recliner and roamed around the patio, gesturing and waving, adopting elaborate postures of deep thought, of sudden decision, of abrupt changes of mind. He played to the invisible audience, remonstrating with himself for his indecision, declaiming his freedom to act at will, declaring with mimed tears his independence and responsibility.

It was an act, but not an act, for free will liberates the purposeful and restrains the irresolute.

“Am I interrupting anything?”

The voice, breaking into his ridiculous charade, startled Ordier, and he turned around in anger and embarrassment. It was Luovi Parren, standing by the door to the lounge. Her large leather bag was slung as usual across her shoulder.

“The door was open,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“What do you want?” It was impossible for Ordier to keep the incivility out of his voice.

“Well, after my long walk I’d appreciate something to drink.”

“Have a coffee. I’ll get another cup.”

Furiously, Ordier went into the kitchen and found a cup. He stood by the sink, resting both hands on the edge and staring into the bowl in mindless rage. He hated being caught off guard.

Luovi was sitting in the shade, on the steps that led down from the verandah.

“I thought you’d be with Jacj,” Ordier said when he had poured her some coffee. He had recovered from the surprise of her unwelcome arrival sufficiently at least to make an effort toward politeness.

“I didn’t want to see Muriseay again,” Luovi said. “Is Jenessa here?”

“Isn’t she with Jacj?” Ordier was distracted; he wanted his illusion of free will again.

“I haven’t seen her. Jacj left two days ago.”

Ordier frowned, trying to remember what Jenessa had said. She had left the house only half an hour ago, to see the ferry leave, she said; if Luovi had walked from the town they should have passed each other on the road. And didn’t Jenessa say that Parren was catching the ferry this morning?

“Jacj has gone to charter an aircraft, I take it?”

“Of course not. The Qataari camp was scintillated three nights ago. Didn’t you hear the engine?”

“No, I didn’t! Did Jenessa know this?”

“I’m sure she must,” Luovi said, and smiled the same sparse smile he had seen the day she came back from the folly.

“Then what’s Jacj doing on Muriseay?”

“Collecting the monitoring equipment. Do you mean Jenessa didn’t tell you any of this?”

“Jenessa told me—”

Ordier hesitated, regarding Luovi suspiciously. Her manner was as sweetly polite as that of a suburban gossip breaking news of adultery. She sipped her coffee, apparently waiting for his reply. Ordier turned away, took a breath. It was a time for instant decision: to believe this woman, or to believe the words and behavior of Jenessa, who in the last few days had done or said nothing that roused the least suspicion.

As he turned back to face her, Luovi said: “You see, I was hoping I would find Jenessa here, so we could talk things over.”

Ordier said: “I think you should go, Luovi. I don’t know what you want, or what you’re trying to—”

“Then you do know more about the Qataari than you’ve said!”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“As far as I know, everything! Isn’t that what the folly was built for in the first place?”

“The folly? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t think we don’t know, Ordier. It’s time Jenessa was told.”

Five days ago, Luovi’s insinuations would have gone straight through Ordier’s defenses to his guilty conscience; that was five days ago, though, and since then everything had become more complex.

“Look, get out of my house! You’re not welcome here!”

“Very well.” Luovi stood up, and put down her cup with a precise motion. “You’ll take the consequences then?”

She turned and walked back into the house. Ordier followed, and saw her leave through the main door and walk down the broken terrain of the hillside toward the track. He was confused

and angry, trying to put some logic into what had just happened.

Did Luovi know as much as she seemed to be implying? Had she really come to the house to see Jenessa, or was it just to make a scene? Why? What could her motives conceivably have been? Why should she imply that Jenessa had been lying to him?

The sun was high, and white light glared down across the dusty countryside. In the distance, Tumo Town was shimmering in the haze.

Watching Luovi striding angrily away through the heat, her heavy bag banging against her side, Ordier felt a paradoxical sense of courtesy come over him, and he took pity on her. He saw that she had apparently lost her way and was not heading directly toward the track, but was moving across the hillside parallel to the ridge.

He ran after her.

“Luovi!” he called as he caught up with her. “You can’t walk all the way back in this heat. Let me drive you.”

She glanced at him angrily, and walked on. “I know *exactly* where I’m going, thank you.”

She looked toward the ridge, and as Ordier fell back behind her he was aware of the deliberate ambiguity.

X

Ordier marched into his house and slammed the door behind him. He went out to the patio, and sat down on the cushions scattered across the sun-warmed paving stones. A bird fluttered

away from where it had been perched on the grapevine, and Ordier glanced up. The verandah, the patio, the rooms of the house... they all had their undetected scintillas, making his home into a stage for an unseen audience. The uncertainties remained, and Luovi's brief, unwelcome visit had only added to them.

He was hot and breathless from running after the woman; so he stripped off his clothes and swam for a few minutes in the pool.

Afterwards, he paced to and fro on the patio, trying to marshal his thoughts and replace ambiguity with certainty. He was unsuccessful.

The unmarked scintillas: he had almost convinced himself that they were being planted by the Qataari, but the possibility remained that someone else was responsible.

Jenessa: according to Luovi she had deceived him, according to his instincts she had not. (Ordier still trusted her, but Luovi had succeeded in placing a doubt in his mind.)

The trip to Muriseay: Parren had gone to Muriseay (today? or two days ago?) to charter an aircraft, or to collect the monitoring equipment. But according to Luovi the aircraft had already done its work; would this have been carried out before Parren had his decoding equipment ready?

Luovi: where was she now? Was she returning to the town, or was she somewhere along the ridge?

Jenessa, again: where was she now? Had she gone to the ferry, was she at her office, or was she returning to his house?

The folly: how much did Luovi know about his visits to the hidden cell? And what did she mean about the folly being built for something "in the first place"? Did she know more about it and its past than he did? Why *was* there an observation cell in the wall, with its clear view across the valley?

All these were the new doubts, the additional ones for which he had Luovi to thank; the others, the major ones, remained.

The Qataari: did he watch them, or did they watch him?

The Qataari girl: was he a free observer of her, hidden and unsuspected, or was he a chosen participant playing a crucial role in the development of the ritual?

In his perplexity of free will and contradiction, Ordier knew that paradoxically it was the Qataari ritual and the girl that provided the only certainty.

He was convinced that if he went to the folly and placed his eyes to the crack in the wall, then for whatever reason or combination of reasons, the girl would be there waiting... and the ritual would recommence.

And he knew that the choice was his: he need never again climb up to the cell in the wall.

Without further thought, Ordier went into the house, found his binoculars, and started to climb up the slope of the ridge toward the folly.

He went a short distance, then turned back, pretending to himself that he was exercising his freedom of choice. In fact, he was collecting his scintilla detector, and as soon as he had the instrument under his arm he left the house again and climbed toward the courtyard gate.

He reached the bottom of the folly wall in a few minutes, then went quickly up the steps to his hidden cell. Before he went inside he put down the detector and used his binoculars to scan the countryside around his house. The track leading toward town was deserted, and there was not even any drifting dust to show that a car might have driven along it in the last few minutes. He searched along the parts of the ridge visible from here, looking for Luovi, but where he had last spoken to her was an area dotted with high,

free-standing boulders, and he could see no sign of her.

In the distance, the town lay in the hot, pellucid air, seeming still and abandoned.

Ordier stepped back, squeezed between the two projecting slabs, and went through into the cell. At once he was assailed by the sickly pungent fragrance of Qataari roses; it was a smell he associated with the girl, the valley, the ritual, and it seemed subtly illicit, sexually provocative.

He put his binoculars on the shelf and opened the scintilla detector. He paused before switching it on, frightened of what he might find. If there were scintillas here, inside the cell, then he would know beyond any doubt that the Qataari had been observing him.

He pulled the antenna to its full height and threw the switch... and at once the loudspeaker gave out a deafening electronic howl that faded almost at once to silence. Ordier, whose hand had leaped back reflexively from the device, touched the directional antenna and shook the instrument, but no further sound came from it. He turned off the switch, wondering what was wrong.

He took the detector into the sunlight and turned on the switch again. In addition to the audible signal there were several calibrated dials on the side which registered the presence and distance of detected scintillas, but these all stayed at zero. The speaker remained silent. Ordier shook the instrument, but the circuits stayed dead. He let out a noisy breath in exasperation, knowing that the detector had worked the last time he used it.

When he checked the batteries, Ordier found that they were dead.

He cursed himself for forgetting, and put the detector on the steps. It was useless, and another uncertainty had appeared. Was his cell seeded with scintillas, or wasn't it? That sudden burst of

electronic noise: was it the dying gasp of the batteries, or had the instrument actually been registering the presence of scintillas in the last microsecond of the batteries' power?

He returned to the claustrophobic cell, and picked up his binoculars. Qataari rose petals lay thickly on the slab where he normally stood, and as he stepped forward to the crack in the wall Ordier saw that more petals lay there, piled so thickly that the aperture was all but blocked. Not caring whether they fell back into his cell or out into the valley, Ordier brushed them away and shuffled his feet to kick them from the slab. The fragrance rose around him like pollen, and as he breathed it he felt a heady sensation: arousal, excitement, intoxication.

He tried to remember the first time he had found petals here in the cell. There had been a strong, gusting wind; they could have blown in through the slit by chance. But last night? Had there been a wind? He could not remember.

Ordier shook his head, trying to think clearly. There had been all the confusions of the morning, then Luovi. The dead batteries. The perfumed petals.

It seemed, in the suffocating darkness of the cell, that events were being contrived by greater powers to confuse and disorientate him.

If those powers existed, he knew whose they were.

As if it were a light seen wanly through a mist, Ordier focused on the knowledge and blundered mentally toward it.

The Qataari had been watching him all along. He had been selected, he had been placed in this cell, he had been meant to watch. Every movement in this cell, every indrawn breath and muttered word, every voyeuristic intent and response and thought... they had all been monitored by the Qataari. They were decoded and analyzed, and tested against their actions, and the Qataari behaved according to their interpretations.

He had become a scintilla to the Qataari.

Ordier gripped a piece of rock jutting out from the wall, and tried to steady himself. He could feel himself swaying, as if his thoughts were a palpable force that could dislodge him from the cell. It was madness.

That first day he had found the cell, the very beginning. He had been *concealed*, and the Qataari had been *unaware* of him. He had watched the Qataari, the realization of the nature of his stolen privilege growing in him slowly. He had watched the girl moving through the rosebushes, plucking the flowers and tossing them into the pannier on her back. She had been one among dozens of others. He had said nothing, except with his thoughts, and the Qataari had not noticed.

The rest was chance and coincidence... it had to be.

Reassured, Ordier leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the slab of rock above the slit. He looked downward, into the circular arena below.

XI

It was as if nothing had changed. The Qataari were waiting for him.

The girl lay back on the carpet of rose petals, the red toga loose and revealing across her body. There was the same crescent of pale aureole, the same few strands of pubic hair. The man who had kicked her was standing back, looking down at her with his shoulders hunched, and stroking himself at the top of his legs. The others stood around: the two women who had thrown the petals

and bared their bodies, and the men who had been chanting.

The restoration of the scene was so perfect, as if the image of his memory had been photographed and reconstructed so no detail should be omitted, that Ordier felt a shadow of the guilt that had followed his spontaneous ejaculation.

He raised his binoculars and looked at the girl's face. Her eyes, although half closed, were looking directly at him. Her expression too was identical: the abandonment of sexual anticipation, or satisfaction. It was as if he was seeing the next frame of a film being inched through a projector-gate. Fighting the feeling of associative guilt, Ordier stared down at the girl, meeting her gaze, marveling at her beauty and the sensuality in her face.

He felt a tightness in his crotch, a new tumescence.

The girl moved suddenly, shaking her head from side to side, and at once the ritual continued.

Four of the men stepped forward from the circle, picking up long ropes that had been coiled at the base of four of the statues. As they moved towards the girl, the men unraveled the ropes and Ordier saw that the other ends were tied around the bases of the statues. At the same time, the two women found their panniers of rose petals and came forward with them. The others began a chant.

In the rose plantation beyond, the Qataari were moving about their tasks, tending and plucking and watering. Ordier was suddenly aware of them, as if they too had been waiting, as if they too were a part of the ritual.

The girl was being tied by her wrists and ankles, the ropes knotted tightly and roughly around her limbs: her arms were stretched, her legs were forced wide open. She made no apparent struggle against this, but continued to writhe in the petals in the way she had done from the start, and as her arms and legs were tied, her movements changed to a circling of her pelvic girdle, a

slow rotation of her head.

The garment was working loose from her body; for an instant Ordier saw a small breast revealed, the nipple as pink as the petals being thrown across her, but one of the men with the ropes moved across her, and when he stepped back, she was covered again.

Through all this—the tying of the ropes, the throwing of the petals—the solitary man stood before her, working his hand across his genitals, waiting and watching.

When the last rope was tied the men withdrew, and as they did so, the chanting came to a sudden end. All the men, except the one central to the ritual, walked away from the arena, toward the plantation, toward the distant Qataari camp.

The women showered petals, the man stood erect, the spread-eagled girl writhed helplessly in the hold of the ropes. The flowers were drifting down across her like snow, and soon only her face was uncovered. As the girl pulled against the ropes, Ordier could see the petals heaving with her struggles, could see the ropes flexing and jerking.

At last her struggles ceased, and she stared upward again. Looking at her through the binoculars. Ordier saw that in spite of her violent writhing, the girl's face was at ease and her eyes were wide open. Saliva brightened her cheeks and jaw, and her face had a healthy, ruddy flush to it, as if reflecting the color of the flowers. Beneath the petals, her chest was rising and falling quickly, as if she was breathless.

Once more she was seeming to look directly back at Ordier, her expression knowing and seductive.

The stilling of her body signaled the next development, as if the victim of the ritual was also its director, because no sooner was she staring lasciviously upward than the man who stood before her bent down. He reached into the heap of petals and took a hold on one of the red panels of the girl's toga. He tore it away, throwing

into the air a cloud of swirling petals. Ordier, looking down, thought he saw a glimpse of the girl's body revealed beneath, but the petals drifted too densely above her, and the women were throwing more, covering the nakedness so briefly revealed. Another piece of the dress was torn away; more petals flew. Then another piece of fabric, and another. The last one came away with difficulty; this was the piece beneath the girl, and as the man snatched it away, the girl's body bucked against the constraint of the ropes, and bare knees and arms, a naked shoulder, heaved momentarily from the mound of petals.

Ordier watched as more and more of the petals were poured on top of her, completely covering her; the women no longer threw the petals with their hands, but up-ended their panniers, and let the scarlet flowers fall on her like liquid. As the petals fell, the man knelt beside the girl and shaped and smoothed them over with his hands. He patted them down over her body, heaped them over her arms and legs, pushed them into her mouth.

Soon it was finished. It seemed to Ordier, from his position above, that the girl lay beneath and at the center of a smooth lake of petals, laid so that no hint of the shape of her body was revealed. Only her eyes were uncovered.

The man and the two women stepped out of the arena and walked away, heading for the distant camp.

Ordier lowered his binoculars, and saw that throughout the plantation the work had stopped. The Qataari were leaving the valley, returning to their homes behind the dark canvas screens of the encampment, and leaving the girl alone in the arena.

Ordier looked down at her again, using the binoculars. She was staring back at him, and the invitation was explicit. All he could see of her were her eyes, placid and alert and yearning, watching him through the gap the man had left in the covering of roses.

There was a darkening around her eyes, like the shadows left by grief. As her steady gaze challenged and beckoned him, Ordier, partially drugged by the narcotic fragrance of the roses, saw a familiarity in the girl's eyes that froze all sense of mystery. That bruising of the skin, that confident stare...

Ordier gazed back at her for several minutes, and the longer he looked, the more convinced he became that he was staring into the eyes of Jenessa.

XII

Intoxicated by the roses, sexually aroused by their fragrance, Ordier fell back from the slit in the wall and lurched outside. The brilliance of the sunlight, the heat of its rays, took him by surprise and he staggered on the narrow steps. He regained his balance by resting one hand against the main wall of the folly, then went past his discarded detector and began to walk down the steps toward the ground.

Halfway down was another narrow ledge, running across the wall as far as the end of the folly, and Ordier walked precariously along this, obsessed with the urgency of his needs. At the end of the ledge he was able to climb down to the top of the wall which surrounded the folly's courtyard, and once on top of this he could see the rocks and broken boulders of the ridge a short distance below.

He jumped, landing heavily across the face of a boulder. He grazed a hand and took a knock on one knee, but apart from being slightly winded, he was unhurt. He crouched for a few seconds, recovering.

A stiff breeze was blowing through the valley and along the ridge, and as Ordier's breathing steadied, he felt his head clearing. At the same time, with an indefinable sense of regret, he felt his arousal dying too.

A moment of the free will he had accorded himself that morning had returned. No longer driven by the enigmatic stimulations of the Qataari ritual, Ordier realized that it was now in his power to abandon the quest.

He could scramble somehow down the broken slabs of the ridge, and return to his house. He could see Jenessa, who might be there and wondering where he was. He could seek out Luovi, and apologize to her, and try to find an explanation for Jacj's apparent or actual movements. He could resume the life he had led until this summer, before the day he had found the cell. He could forget the Qataari girl, and all that she meant to him, and never return to the folly.

So he crouched on the boulder, trying to be clear in his mind.

But there was something he could not resolve by walking away. It was the certain knowledge that the *next time* he looked through the crack in the folly wall—whether it was tomorrow, or in a year's time, or in half a century's time—he would see a bed of Qataari rose petals, and staring back at him would be the bruised eyes of a lovely girl, waiting for him and reminding him of Jenessa.

XIII

Ordier climbed clumsily down the last overhanging boulder, fell to the scree beneath, and skidded down in a cloud of dust and

grit to the sandy floor of the valley.

He stood up, and the gaunt height of the folly loomed beside and above him.

He knew there was no one about, because as he had been climbing down the rocks he had had a perfect view to all sides. There were no guards visible along the ridge, no other Qataari anywhere. The breeze blew through the deserted rose plantation, and far away, on the other side of the valley, the screens around the camp hung heavy and gray.

The encircling statues of the arena lay ahead of him, and Ordier walked slowly toward them, excited again and apprehensive. As he approached, he could see the mound of petals and could smell the heady perfume from them. Here in the shadow of the folly the breeze had little effect, and barely stirred the surface of the mound. Now he was at ground level he saw that the petals had not been smoothed to a flat surface above the girl, but that they lay irregularly and deeply.

Ordier hesitated when he came to the nearest of the statues. It was, by chance, one of those to which the ropes had been tied, and he saw the rough fibered rope stretching tautly across to the mound of petals, vanishing into it.

A reason for his hesitation was a sudden self-consciousness, a need for guidance. If he had interpreted the actions of the Qataari correctly, he had been tacitly invited to relinquish his hiding place, and to enter the ritual. But what was expected of him now?

Should he walk across to the girl in the petals and introduce himself? Should he stand before her as the man had done? Should he rape her? Should he untie her? He looked around again, helplessly, hoping for some clue as to what to do.

All these possibilities were open to him, and more, but he was aware again of the way his freedom was created by the actions of others. He was free to act as he wished, and yet whatever he did

would have been preordained by the mysterious, omniscient power of the Qataari.

He was free to go, but if he did, it would have been determined that this would be his choice; he was free to throw aside the petals and ravish the girl, for that too had been predetermined.

So he stood uncertainly by the statue, breathing the dangerous sweetness of the roses, feeling again the rise of sexual desire. At last he stepped forward, but some residual trace of convention made him clear his throat nervously, signaling his presence. There was no reaction from the girl.

He followed the rope, and stood by the edge of the mound of petals where it became buried. He craned forward, trying to see the place where the gap for the girl's eyes had been left, but the mound was irregular and he could not make it out. The fragrance of the petals lay heavy; his presence stirred it up like flocculent sediment shaken from the bottom of a bottle of liquid. He breathed it deeply, embracing the dullness of thought it induced, welcoming further surrender to the mysteries of the Qataari. It relaxed him and aroused him, made him sensitive to the sounds of the breeze, to the dry heat of the sun.

His clothes were feeling stiff and unnatural on him, so he took them off. He saw the pile of scarlet material where the girl's torn toga had been tossed aside, and he threw his own clothes on top. When he turned back to the pile of petals, he crouched down and took hold of the rope; he pulled on it, feeling the tautness, knowing that as he moved it the girl would feel it and know he was there.

He stepped forward, and the petals stirred around his ankles; the scent thickened, like the vaginal musk of desire.

But then he hesitated again, suddenly aware of an intrusive sensation, so distinct, so intense, that it was almost like pressure on

his skin.

Somewhere, somebody hidden was watching him.

XIV

The realization was so profound that it penetrated the pleasant delirium induced by the rose perfume, and Ordier stepped back again. He turned around, staring first at the wall of the folly behind him, then across at the plantation of roses.

It seemed to him that there was a movement somewhere in the bushes, and, distracted from the girl, Ordier walked slowly toward them. They seemed to be looming over him, so near were they. The bushes grew to an unnatural height; they were like small trees, and nearly all were taller than him. Convinced that someone was standing concealed behind the plants, Ordier ran toward where he thought he had seen the movement, and plunged into the nearest row of bushes. At once he was halted; the thorns of the branches snagged and tore at his skin, bringing spots and streaks of blood to his chest and arms.

Here, in the plantation itself, the thick smell of the roses was so concentrated that it felt as if the air itself had been replaced by the sweetness of scent. He could not think or focus his mind. Was there anyone beyond, hiding in the roses, or had he imagined it? Ordier peered forward and to each side, but was unable to see.

In the distance, just visible across the top of the plantation, were the screens around the Qataari camp.

Ordier turned away. He stumbled back through the prickly branches of the roses, and returned to the arena.

The statues faced inward, staring down at the girl buried beneath the petals.

A memory, surfacing sluggishly like waterlogged timber through the muddy pool of his mind: the statues, the statues. Earlier in the ritual... why were they there? He remembered, dimly, the men gathered around the girl, the cleaning and polishing of the statues. And later...?

As the girl walked into the center of the arena, some of the men... climbed into the hollow statues!

The ritual had not changed. When he returned to the hidden cell that morning, the Qataari had been positioned exactly as he had last seen them. But he had forgotten the men inside the statues! Were they still there?

Ordier stood before the one nearest to him, and stared up at it.

It depicted a man of great physical strength and beauty, holding in one hand a scroll, and in the other a long spear with a phallus for a head. Although the figure was nude from the waist up, its legs were invisible because of a voluminous, loose-fitting garment, shaped brilliantly out of the metal of the statue. The face looked downward, directly at him and beyond, to where the girl lay inside the petals.

The eyes...

There were no eyes. Just two holes, behind which it would be possible for human eyes to hide.

Ordier stared up, looking at the dark recesses behind the eye-holes, trying to see if anyone was there. The statue gazed back vacantly, implacably.

Ordier turned away toward the pile of rose petals, knowing the girl still lay there a few paces away from him. But beyond the petals were other statues, staring down with the same sinister

emptiness. Ordier fancied he saw a movement: behind the eyes of one, a head ducking down.

He stumbled across the arena, tripping on one of the ropes (the petals of the mound rustled and shifted; had he tugged at the girl's arm?), and lurched up to the suspect statue. He felt his way around to the other side, groping for some kind of handle which would open the hinged back. His fingers closed on a knob shaped like a raised disc, and he pulled at it. The hinges squeaked, the back came open, and Ordier, who had fallen to his knees, looked inside.

The statue was empty.

He opened the others, all of them, all around the circle... but each one was empty. He kicked his naked foot against them, he hammered with his fists and slammed the metal doors, and all the statues rang with a hollow reverberation.

The girl was still there, bound and silent beneath the petals, listening to his noisy and increasingly desperate searches, and Ordier was growing steadily more aware of her mute, uncritical presence. She was waiting for him in the manner of her people, and she was prepared.

He returned to the mound in the center of the arena, satisfied, as far as it was possible to be satisfied in this state of narcosis, that he had done all he could. There was no one about, no one watching. He was alone with the girl. But as he stood before her, breathing the sickly fragrance of the roses, he could still feel the pressure of eyes as distinctly as if it were the touch of a hand on the back of his neck.

A dim understanding was growing in him. He had always felt an unvoiced need to resist the fragrance of the flowers, dreading what it might do to him, but now Ordier saw that he had to succumb. He gulped in the air and the perfume it carried, holding it in his lungs and feeling his skin tingle, his senses dull. He was aware of the girl, of her presence and sexuality; the bruised eyes, the frail body, her innocence, his excitement. He kneeled down, reached forward with his hands, searched for her in the petals. The scent was suffocating.

He moved forward on his knees, wading through. The petals swirled about his sides and his elbows like a light, foamy liquid, scarlet-colored, desire-perfumed. He came to one of the ropes beneath the petals, and followed it with his hand toward the center. He was near the girl now, and he tugged on the rope repeatedly, feeling it yield, imagining it bringing a hand nearer to him, or spreading her legs marginally wider. He waded forward hurriedly, groping for her.

There was a deep indentation in the ground beneath him; Ordier, leaning forward to put his weight on one hand, fell instead, and pitched forward into the soft, warm depths of the mound. He shouted as he fell, and several of the petals entered his mouth. He reared up like a nonswimmer who falls in shallow water, showering flowers around him in a pink and scarlet spray, trying to spit the petals from his mouth.

He felt grit between his teeth, and he reached in with a finger and wiped it around. Several petals clung moistly to his hand. He raised it to look more closely at them, and Ordier saw a sudden glint of reflected light.

He sank down again on to his knees, and picked up one of the petals at random. He held it before his eyes, squinting at it. There was a tiny gleam of light here too: a glittering, shimmering fragment of metal and glass.

Ordier picked up a handful of the petals, felt and saw the same glistening presence on every one. He threw them up and let them fall, and as they flickered down, the sun reflected minutely from the scintillas embedded in the petals.

He closed his eyes. The scent of the petals was overpowering. He staggered forward on his knees, the petals rippling around his waist. Again he reached the depression in the ground beneath the petals, and he fell forward into the flowers, reaching out for the body of the girl. He was in an ecstasy of delirium and desire.

He floundered and beat his arms, threw up the petals, kicked and struggled against the suffocating weight of the flowers, seeking the girl.

But the four ropes met in the center of the arena, and where the girl had been bound there was now a large and tightly drawn knot.

Exhausted, Ordier fell on his back in the petals, and let the sun play down on him. He could feel the hard lump of the knotted ropes between his shoulder blades. The metal heads of the encircling statues loomed over him; the sky was brilliant and blue. He reached behind him to grasp the ropes above his head, and spread his legs along the others.

The wind was rising and petals were blowing, drifting across him, covering his limbs.

Behind the statues, dominating the arena, was the bulk of the folly. The sun's light played full upon it, and the granite slabs were white and smoothly faced. In only one place was the perfection of the wall broken: in the center and about halfway up was a narrow slit of darkness. Ordier stared up at it, seeing behind it two identical glimmers of reflected light. They were circular and cold, like the lenses of binoculars.

The petals blew across him, covering him, and soon only his eyes were still exposed.

