

Strangers

By Gardner Dozois

For Tom and Sara Purdom, who won't read this one either

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Joseph Farber met Liraun Jé Genawen for the first time during the ceremony of the *Alantene*, the Mode of the Winter Solstice, the Opening-of-the-Gates-of-Dûn, which was observed annually in the ancient city of Aei, on the North Shore of Shasine, on the world of Lisle. "Lisle" was the Terran name, of course, after Senator Lisle Harris, the first human to visit the planet, and had come into common usage among the expatriate Terran population of Aei because the Earthmen professed great difficulty in pronouncing the native Weinunnach, "Fertile Home."

Farber had been on Weinunnach—or "Lisle"—for a little more than a week, and had only been outside the Enclave—the exclusive Terran district, or ghetto, however you wanted to look at it—on rare occasions.

Tonight boredom and despondency had combined to finally shake him loose; he'd gone along with a group of expatriates who were walking down to the *Alàntene*, partially because Brody had assured him that "the Cian always put on a good show," and partially because he was afraid of getting hopelessly lost without guides. Now, as he walked the broad ceramic streets of Aei New City, he was morose and melancholy in spite of the frenetic over-loud chatter of the other Terrans—or perhaps because of it—and already beginning to wish that he'd stayed at the Enclave.

It was a wet, chilly night, just this side of actual rain. Gray mists, up from the river, wound slowly through the high-walled streets, like sluggish snakes, or drifted in glistening, billowing curtains across the wide porcelain squares. The wet air carried the smell of spices, pollen, incense, musk. Sharp, sour, sweet, heavy, and rank—the odors slid across the moist night like oil over water, most unidentifiable, all evocative. Occasionally the wind would rise, scooping the mists and cloud-scuds aside like an invisible hand, revealing the million icy stars of Aei's night sky, dense and blazing against velvet black. None of the moons had yet risen, and the constellation of Winter Man was just thrusting its frosty, nebula-maned head up over the close northern horizon. Old City loomed there, to the north, on top of its three-hundred-foot-tall sheer obsidian cliff, silhouetted against the blaze of Winter Man's upper body, with His head rearing terribly above its tallest towers. Its lights shone silver and yellow and deep, secret orange, glinting coldly from that cold stone place in the air. To Farber, it was as if Old City was watching him; not necessarily with disapproval, or even with interest, but just watching, staring down inscrutably, as if to drive home again the fact that this was not Earth.

New City was friendlier, with its rounded ceramic homes, its tiles and mosaics, its glazed earthenware and pottery walls. Its lights were soft pastels, blinking and diffusing wetly through the languid mists. But still, the underlying ambience was unsettling, and strange. They had been walking through New City—a small, nervously giddy group of humans, too loud in the alien hush—for an hour that had seemed like a year, and they had seen no one, no natives, no living thing at all. Farber was just beginning to wonder if the streets were always so empty, echoing and still, and if so, how anyone could ever stand to go abroad in them, when they sighted a group of Cian ahead, walking in the same direction they were. And at the same moment, they heard the first faint and distant mutter of the *Alàntene*. They were near the eastern outskirts of New City now, and the streets began to slant rapidly down toward the River

Aome. The natives ahead slowed down—they had fetched up against

another group of Cian, and in front of that group was another, and another, and Farber saw why New City was deserted. The whole population of Aei was on the move, down to the banks of the River Aome for the *Alàntene*, and the Earthmen had just caught up with the tail of the immense crowd.

Ahead, as far as the eye could reach, the streets were packed solid with shuffling ranks of Cian. Most were walking, carrying children on their shoulders, holding baskets of fruit, or strangely shaped garlands of flowers, or various implements of polished wood and metal and obsidian whose function the Earthmen were unable to divine. There were numerous other objects, half-seen, that defied definition altogether. Some of the Cian were riding in six-wheeled carts pulled by huge, brindled animals that looked something like enormous boar hogs; their reins were hung with star-shaped black flowers, and with tiny crystal chimes, so that when the boars tossed their heads, the air was filled with tinkling melancholy music, and their spiral tusks flashed white in starlight. A few Cian—and Farber blinked, startled—were riding bareback on big, sinuous things like many-legged snakes, or reptilian centipedes. The crowds seemed to make the things skittish; occasionally they would moo, long and mournfully, and, looking around at the assemblage, blink their sad, intelligent eyes. The Cian themselves—short, slender humanoids, uncannily graceful of movement—were dressed mostly in dark colors, but in rich and fantastical costumes, of the finest fabric and workmanship. Jewelry of silver and amber and obsidian glinted here and there throughout the crowd, and the entire slow-moving procession had about it a curious mood of somber celebration.

It took about another half-hour for the bulk of the remaining crowd to filter down into the place of ceremony. In that time, the sound of the *Alàntene* grew from a murmur, a whisper, to a vast rhythmical sea-surge that filled the night, that filled the blood, and brain, and bowels, until Farber found that he was breathing in time to the huge slow booming of the drums and the deep-throated susurrus of the chant, and he suspected that his heart was also beating in rhythm. Janet LaCorte said it gave her a headache. Sometimes the wind would bring them a snatch of faster music—crystalline, ringing and staccato—that was being played as counterpoint to the giant beating of the World-Heart. There was no other sound, except the whisper and scuff of a million feet over tile, the creak of wagon wheels, and the occasional plaintive lowing of the snake-things. The Cian around them did not speak at all. Brody was off on something—like many of the Earthmen, he was of the opinion that the Modes, the native ceremonies, were more enjoyable if you went to them stoned—and he was

giggling constantly now, his eyes rolling from one object to another, never quite focusing on anything. Farber had been quarreling bitterly with Kathy Gibbs for the last fifteen minutes over some trivial matter, their voices growing ever louder and more heated, and as they reached the bottom of the slope, Farber, stung by some final gibe of Kathy's, broke away and whirled fiercely to face her.

"You fucking bitch," he said. He had gone pale, and he looked as if he was going to hit her.

Kathy laughed in his face. She was flushed and bright-eyed from the argument, but she seemed in no way perturbed by his rage. "You're no fun at all tonight, are you?" she said. Some of her hair had become plastered to her forehead with sweat, and Farber could see her breasts clearly through the semitransparent blouse; her nipples were hard against the fabric. A sudden rush of desire mixed with his anger, confusing him. His mouth worked on words, but she laughed at him again, and they died in his throat. She had read him well enough. "See you later, sweetheart," she said, brushing the hair out of her eyes, giving him a knowing, cutting smile. "Here, about midnight. All right?" He said nothing. She looked at him with hard, taunting eyes, smiled again, and walked quickly away, mingling with the crowd. She vanished from sight within seconds. Farber stared after her, his fists balled impotently, his jaw tight.

Brody giggled. He had listened openly to the whole exchange, without embarrassment, apparently getting a kick out of it. He slapped Farber on the shoulder. "Fuck her," he said, in a voice that was a dreamy parody of hearty man-to-man comradery. "Fuck 'em all, I always say. There're millions of cunts in the world. Always another one along in a minute."

"Why don't you mind your own goddam business?" Farber snapped.

"Fuck you too, Jack," Brody said pleasantly, without any hint of rancor. He was almost jovial about it. He giggled abruptly, seeming to startle himself, as if it had popped out before he was ready for it. He squinted at Farber. "*You'll* find out," he said, with listless, languid wisdom. Then he said, "Oh my!" plaintively, and tracked to follow something moving down on the beach. And he smiled and smiled.

The other Earthmen had been hanging back while the fight went on; now they came up, and Fred Lloyd gave Brody a shove to get him walking in the right direction again. Ed Lacey and two friends went by, sniffing narcotic atomizers, followed by Janet LaCorte, who gave Farber a disapproving look as she passed; she was Kathy's friend. Lloyd was wearing a complex expression of condescending boredom that—it

occurred to Farber—must have taken him years of diligent practice to perfect. "You coming?" Lloyd asked. Farber shook his head. Lloyd shrugged, and the Earthmen went on. Farber was glad to see them go. Soured by the futility of the Terran enterprise, they were all self-consciously cynical and bitter, and liked to think that they were projecting an air of *fin de siècle* decadence. Actually, they were boring.

Farber plunged into the thick of the crowd and started worming his way through the dense mass of bodies. He was filled with disgust and self-contempt. Kathy had only been his lover for a few days, and already she was so sure of him that she could laugh at him and walk away into a festival crowd, sure that he would be waiting for her when she chose to come back to him. And he would be. Once he'd swallowed that, his anger died to a dull resignation. Light-years from his home and his people, he had to hang on to something—and she was it. Sullenly, he kept walking. He had run out of road. He was on sand now, and it shifted and whispered under his feet. A row of sand dunes rose up in front of him, interlaced and overgrown with tough sea-grass and ironwood shrub.

He came up over a dune, and saw the *Alàntene* spread out below him. He paused, swaying, a little drunk, alone in the alien night. He was a big, slow-moving man, bullet-headed and bull-necked, with dark eyes and a shaggy mane of blond hair. He had a blunt, big-boned face, dominated by thick flat cheeks and a massive, stubborn jaw—square, jutting and truculent. It was an arrogant face, touched permanently now by a shadow of wistful puzzlement. His eyes were incongruously lost and vulnerable, set against those rough-hewn, brutal features—as if there was a frightened child inside, peering out, running the massive body by manipulating pedals and levers. The long, bone-deep sougning of the chant came up and hit him in the face, and the patient elemental thunder of the drums shook the dune under his feet, sending little rivulets of sand whispering down toward the beach. Listening now, as his anger died, he was submerged again by that endless sea-sound, drowned, dissolved, whirled away like a grain of sand in the tide, to be rolled across the secret places of the ocean bottom and then washed back to the shore after a decade or a thousand years. Calmly, he began to descend the dune, digging his heels in. He felt that if he should fall, or jump, the huge noise of the *Alàntene* would puff up to meet him, bearing him up, and he could ride the sound as a gull rides the currents of the air—

Here the River Aome, rolling out of the west, met the sea, Elder Sea, the Great Northern Ocean, the World-Ocean. The Aome was a roaring gray turbulence to the right, a streak of lighter darkness rolling through a dead

black night, more sensed and heard than seen. To the left, and at right angles to Farber's path, the dunes stretched away in an unbroken line to the north; they, and their fringe of beach, extended for more than three hundred miles, ruler-straight: the North Shore of Shasine. South, beyond the Aome and invisible now, were endless leagues of saltwater marsh. Ahead, straight east, the night opened up into a feeling of echoing, infinite space. Ocean was there, behind the mists—the smell of its salt was in the wet wind that slapped Farber's face, the hissing of its swells and surges could be heard under the derivative sound of the chant, and—beyond the ceremony—its waves gleamed in torchlight as they foamed against the beach.

Farber passed the L-shaped bulk of Ocean House/River House, and made his way down as close as he could to the water. The Cian were packed in shoulder to shoulder here, by the thousands. Smoky red torchlight glinted from teeth and eyes—large-pupiled, large-irised eyes and needle-pointed canines. They were all swaying side to side in a slow, ponderous rhythm, and doing a kind of shuffling dance step—one step forward, a step back, a step to the side, a step forward again, stamp, stamp, stamp, *stamp*. None of this seemed deliberate; the motion was an unconscious, instinctive response to the music, almost a tropism. The Cian were preoccupied with the ceremony, all their attention focused outward, and perhaps they were not even aware that their bodies were swaying and stamping in the wet smoky dark. After a while, Farber discovered that he was doing it too—without volition and in perfect time, as if he had been practicing all his life. At first Farber found that frightening, then oddly exultant, and then both emotions died, and there was nothing but the chant, the steady mesmerizing motion of the crowd, the enveloping heat of a hundred thousand close-packed bodies, the pungent stink of alien sweat.

Beyond the crowd was the ceremony, the *Alàntene* itself. The musicians, playing drums, flutes, and tinkling stringed instruments like dulcimers and mandolins, sat crosslegged in a huge semicircle just beyond the first row of spectators, facing the Ocean. Their hands pounded and strummed and plucked with unvarying, unwavering, inhuman precision, as if they were all motley close-robed robots, and they rocked back and forth rapidly in time to their own music. To Farber's extreme left, massed in between the musicians and the sea, were the chanters, the singers—more than a hundred brightly clothed Cian, all male, all *old*: snow-white hair, gleaming silver eyes, their faces intricately meshed with lines and wrinkles, expressionless as rock. They were doing a more complex, studied version of the crowd's step-and-sway, some of them also making ritualized

gestures and sweeps with their hands and arms, others periodically tossing handfuls of powder into the torches so that they flared up silver and amber-green and scarlet. Some of them were standing up to their waists in the water, as the tide rose; they continued to chant, unperturbed. On the far right, almost out of sight, another group of old men were involved in what seemed to be a kind of highly stylized dramatic performance, reminiscent of a Terran Nô play—their voices, speaking instead of chanting or singing, cut flatly across the rest of the ceremony from time to time.

But the center of the ceremony, the heart of the *Alàntene*, were the dancers. They took up most of the torchlit stretch of beach, dancing next to the edge of Elder Sea on wet, hard-packed sand. There were perhaps two or three hundred dancers, of all ages, men, women and children. Some of them were naked, and the flaring torches played strange light-and-shadow games with their gleaming skin and the flashing motion of their limbs. Others were dressed in fantastic costumes, towering, nodding plumes, brilliant jewels and feathers, grotesque swollen-headed masks. Gods and demons danced on the beach, and their reflections danced with them across the glossy sand. Platforms had been built out into the ocean, only an inch above the surface, and the glittering creatures danced there too, half-awash, sometimes leaping into the air to tumble and jack-knife down into the water. They sported and plunged there like solemnly drunken porpoises, as at home in the sea as on the land. The dancers were sure-footed, lithe, incredibly agile. They spun, pranced, stood vibrantly motionless for a long moment, twisted, somersaulted, leaped high into the air. They had been going on like this for hours, since sunset, and they would continue without pause until sunrise. Farber watched them for a long time. Only afterward, away from the beach, would he be able to estimate that at least three hours must have passed. Now, there was no time, no duration. Occasionally the crowd of onlookers around him would sigh or moan all at once, a vast articulate *Ahhh* going up to the coldly watching stars, sinking back under the chant, then welling irresistibly up again. *Ahhh*. As with their swaying motion, it was not a deliberate thing, a planned response as in a Terran religious ceremony. Rather it was a reaction, a muted, reluctant sound of awe, pulled from them—almost against their will—by the power of the *Alàntene*. Farber did it too, his lips opening as though yanked by fishhooks, the sound coming jagged and low from his throat, *Ahhh, Ahhh*. And as he watched them, it seemed as if everything was knitted together—the motion of the dancers, the singing, the snapping flame-banners of the torches, the ecstatically pained crying of the instruments, the reflections in wet sand, the heat and

sweat of the bodies around him—and the universe was crimped, a corner of the World folded over, and earth and sky and water became one, indistinguishable.

And Farber pulled away, frightened. He pushed his way up from the beach, shoving and scrambling, until the sound of the ceremony was less overwhelming and some of his panic died. He had taken it too far, come too close to something alien, too near to intuitively grasping a thing he was not equipped to understand. He was shaken, dizzy with incense and torchlight and strangeness, and his legs were like jelly under him. Slowly, he staggered up the beach toward Ocean House. The *Alàntene* had spoken to something wild and sad and desperate in his blood, conjured up longings that he could neither name nor satisfy. There was a ghost-horde of chaotic, unidentifiable emotion in his skull now, peripheral, mocking, insistent. Their voices had faded somewhat by the time he reached the portico of Ocean House, but he was still dazed and unsteady, and more helplessly bewildered than ever. A group of Earthmen were standing out in front of the building, holding native drinks and atomizers, watching the ceremony down on the beach with amused tolerance, as if it was a fireworks display. Farber avoided them, and went inside.

It was an enormous, L-shaped building, situated just to the north of the Aome's juncture with Elder Sea. The side that faced south, overlooking the Aome, was called River House; the side that faced east, to the sea, was Ocean House. Both faces were glassed in floor to ceiling, so that they were actually two huge windows, divided horizontally by the building's second story. It was purely a secular establishment, and had no real connection with the *Alàntene*, or with any of the Cian Modes, although it had been built—by the Cian—because of them. Here you could come in out of the weather—and there were Modes that were carried out in the middle of blizzards, or in the broiling, near-fatal heat of high summer—and watch the ceremonies through glass for a while; here you could relax on loungers and hammocks and refresh yourself with the variety of essences, liqueurs and foods that were on sale. The Modes had been around for a very long time, and the Cian were well aware of their entertainment value, and the possibilities for commercial profit that were created thereby. And had been so aware for hundreds of years, long before the first outworlder had arrived. It was not a matter of the Modes being exploited by crass aliens; the Cian exploited them themselves, cheerfully, and no one seemed to be upset by it. And yet there was a depth of solemn belief, a feeling of pure religiosity to the Modes that had died out of Terra generations ago. It was a point of contention among the Earthmen: whether the Modes were religion, or were considered by the urban Cian to be merely a body of

quaint and charming tradition.

Your opinion on this, Farber now believed, would be determined by where you stood during the Mode. Here in Ocean House, surrounded by Cian who were relaxing and watching the show through the huge window-walls, or chatting with their friends, or strolling on the portico, or devouring essences and batter-fried blackfish, as easy and sophisticated as any crowd of city people anywhere, one would certainly opt for tradition. Down on the beach, packed in with the indefatigable mass of swaying, stamping, groaning devotees, you would come to quite a different conclusion. But there were not two separate groups of Cian; they mingled indiscriminately—often the chefs and concessionaires of Ocean House/River House would come down to take part in the Mode after their work shift, and some of the sweating, earnest spectators would eventually drift up to the big building for rest and essences. It was a dichotomy that no Earth-man understood, and now Farber intuited dimly that it was only the tip of an iceberg.

He purchased a *fuge*—a gelatin concoction something like across between chocolate pudding and raw jellyfish—from a concessionaire, and strolled slowly through the corridors of Ocean House. Most of his terror had passed, leaving him sad and contemplative. He made his way up to the second story, which had a better overview of the beach. The lighting here was dim and diffuse, and Farber felt as if he was walking in a glass tunnel under the sea. He drifted over to the window-wall. The *Alàntene* glittered far below, the tiny figures swaying and whirling, a masque performed by animate, passionate dolls. Its flaring light struck odd reticulations from the vaulted ceiling of Ocean House, sent hunched shadows capering wildly across the stone floor. After a while, Farber became aware that someone was there with him, watching the fire and the night. The other had been there all along, hidden in the gloom at the bottom of a pillar, silent as a shadow, with only its presence to grow patient and gradual in Farber's mind, until at last he must turn his head to look, not knowing why he did. He squinted. It was a woman. She felt his gaze and turned away from the window. The *Alàntene* washed half her face with fire-shot light, left the other half in shadow. One eye glinted clear silver, the other was a pale ember in darkness. She looked at him.

"Hello," she said. "I, do not speik, this, well." Her voice was low. Her English—a tongue that this group of Earthmen had the audacity to represent to the Cian as the *Terran* language—was halting and heavily accented.

"*Në*, it is of no circumstance," Farber answered, in her own language,

which he had learned by subcerebral techniques. It seemed a curiously evasive tongue to him, its simple grammar and syntax masking a million quicksilver shifts in meaning that he could never quite grasp. He wondered if he had impressed the woman with his cosmopolitanism. She did not speak again, and at last he said, "Hello," belatedly, to break the inscrutable silence. He felt inane.

She nodded to him with somber formality. Then she smiled, quick and startling. "Do you"—she gestured with her head at the beach—"enjoy the Mode?"

"Yes, I do," he answered. Then honesty made him add: "Although I don't understand it."

"Ah—" she said, wisely, squinting a little. "There are many things about the Modes that are not easy to understand, even for us perhaps, nē? But still we must cope, as best we can." Her tone was both mocking and melancholy—she was laughing at him, surely, but at the same time he sensed that she was pleading almost desperately for his company, for his regard. She seemed lonely, and yet ineffably remote. She spoke with economy, almost brusque, and yet her manner was relaxed and easy. Her smile was intense and abrupt, *flash*, striking like a chisel, gone—and yet, somehow, wistful. Her eyes turned to him again and again. He could see the liquid flash of them as they moved, to him, away, back. She fascinated him—almost in the old sense of *fascinare*, to bewitch, striking him motionless as a charmed bird. She was wild and sad, and she looked at him sidelong through the complex, shifting light-and-shadow cast by a thing that was older than either of their civilizations.

Her name, he learned, was Liraun Jé Genawen. She was taller than the Cian average, which brought the top of her head up to Farber's breastbone. She was resting against the window ledge, one long leg tucked up on the stone and under her, sitting easy and supple on her own calf. She seemed even more slender than the majority of her slender race, sleek and lithe—even in the minuscule movements of her head and neck as she sat otherwise motionless on the ledge there was apparent the sureness and total muscular control that marked the dancers on the beach. Her face was sharp-edged, angular, her nose straight and heavy, her lips long and full, her eyebrows like startled black brushstrokes. Her eyes were enormous, fierce and staring as an owl's or a hawk's. Her skin held something of the rich, breathing tone of mahogany, though muted and with more brown in it. Her hair, black, was long, thick-textured and glossy, and fell heavily about her shoulders. She was dressed in silver and black, and she wore a tight necklace of amber and obsidian. Looking at

her, Farber realized for the first time—although he had known it intellectually all along—that *Cian* translated as "The People."

They talked for a while. She tried to explain some of the ceremony to him. "It is also called the Opening-of-the-Gates-of-Dûn," she said. "Dûn is the otherworld, the Other Place, and it lies out there, deep below Elder Sea. The bones of the Ancestors rest there, naked, on the floor of Ocean, the Place of the Affliction—but it is not just that, not just the bottom of the water, *nĕ*? It is a world in its own right, the place where some of the dead go, but more than that— there are demons, and People of Power, and *opein*, and they live there in Dûn." She shrugged, and smiled her somber smile. "*Alàntene* marks the end of the Summer World, the heat, the growing things, the reign of the Warm People who govern in that season. It is the end of the year—after *Alàntene* is the Winter, the snow, the ice, the withering of life, the reign of the Cold People at the start of a new year. The Gates of Dûn open then, under Elder Sea. Then the ghosts of those who died in the old year, and who are to go into Dûn, they rise up then on the wind and go into Dûn, for the Gates are open and the otherworld is touching this Earth. And also, those demon and *opein* who wish to come into the world of men, they come in then. And the Cold People come up through the Gates, and the Fertile Earth dies and turns to frozen ash, for the House of Dûn holds influence during this season. And so, the *Alàntene*."

"That's—not quite what I expected," Farber said, a little dismayed. "In fact, it's kind of frightening. Why in—" he had been about to say *hell*, realized that the only possible equivalent would be Dûn, "—the world do you have a festival, a holiday, for such a thing? A ceremony I could see, maybe, but a *celebration*?"

She shrugged again. "For all the cold and death to come, at least the old year is gone, drowned, taking all its old problems and sorrows with it. An old year gone, a new year born—however malign. That is something to celebrate perhaps, *nĕ*?" She looked intently at Farber. "And time does not exist, during *Alàntene*. It is the pause between the fading of one rhythm and the beginning of another, the motionless unmoved center, the still place wherein the syncopations of the World wind up and wind down. Uncreated and eternal. So we are told. *Nĕ*, would you like that? It means that we two have always been here together, talking on *Alàntene*, and always will be here. No matter where else we have been on *Alàntene* in other years—we are there too, always, yes, but we are *here* too, always. Yes! Do you find that pleasant?" And she laughed, her face somber and set, her eyes unfathomable.

It was impossible for Farber to determine how much of this she took seriously; every time he thought that he had pinned down her mood it would shift dramatically, or seem to, and the words she was speaking, and had spoken, would be open to a new interpretation. It was also impossible for her to tell him more than the barest surface of the Mode, and not all of that. Time and again she would lose him in trails of allegory and language and symbolism that he could not follow, and she would have to shrug and smile and say that he did not know enough to know. They fell silent for a while, until finally she said, speaking to her reflection in the window: "The *opein* come into the world at *Alàntene*. They are spirits who possess men and drive them to evil deeds. Or they take the shape of men themselves, and walk abroad in the World in flesh, or what seems to be flesh. You could be an *opein*," she said, after a heavy pause. Then she broke into sudden silver laughter. "And so could I!"

Silence again. She watched her reflection in the window, and did not look at him any more. He could see the tiny, rhythmical jerking of her belly as she breathed, the pulse in the hollow of her throat, the way her hair was sticking lightly to her skin at the temple, the cheek, the side of the neck. It was hot here, perhaps, but not that hot. She turned farther away from him then, as if to look at something way out on the beach. With her head averted and bowed, the buttons of her spine stood out taut against the material of her costume, and he could see her shoulderblades work slightly under her tight skin. She did not turn back, or speak. He had moved much closer, without volition—almost touching, but not quite. His blood had been speaking to him for some time, clearer than her words, and now it was the only sound that he could hear. He was intensely aware of her heat and her smell. He lifted his hand, slowly stretched it out—some distanced part of him thinking in horror: *You don't even know if she's got a husband or a lover, or what their miscegenation laws are, prison, murder, castration*—and closed it over her shoulder, feeling the flat muscle of her back under his palm, fingers brushing her neck, digging into the hollow of her collarbone. She stiffened—while he thought, *That's it!* in tranced dispassionate despair—and then she slowly relaxed, muscle by muscle, and settled her long warm weight back against his chest, her head coming to rest against his cheek with a muffled *bump*, and she said "Ahhh—" in a whisper, a tiny sighing echo of the devotees on the beach. They stood quietly for a while, listening to each other breathe, and then he said, hoarsely, "Will you come home with me?" And she said, "Yes."

2

All this took place about two decades after the Expansion, when a team of Silver Enye had opened the Earth up for trade by "inducing" her to join the Commercial Alliance, as cynically, and with as little concern for the inevitable impact on native culture, as Perry had opened Japan.

As a matter of fact, the impact of this on Earth—whose technology had not yet freed man of the solar system when the Enye arrived, whose cities were scarred and half-ruined by a series of vicious and nearly terminal "tactical" wars, whose biosphere was scummed and strangled by pollution, whose natural resources were nearly depleted—was immense.

Although he had been only a child when the Enye came, Farber was old enough to remember the tension, the fear, the knots of people in the streets of his little German village who spent half the night staring apprehensively at the sky; most of all, he remembered his parents' frightened voices, coming dimly to him through his bedroom door as he lay sleepless and watched dusty moonlight on the cracked wood of his windowpane, thinking about the worlds beyond the sky, the endless black depths into which one could fall out and up forever. . . . For a day and a night and a day, the seven great egg-shaped spacecraft—each over a mile long, defying both Terran weaponry and our understanding of natural law—hung in the air above Stockholm, Rio De Janeiro, Chicago, Addis Ababa, Tokyo, Melbourne and Ulan Bator, and then the Enye emerged with their offer of incorporation, with the gift of stars.

In the months that followed, brushfire wars flared, guttered and died all across Earth, governments toppled, nations vanished as viable political entities. When the shooting stopped, amalgamations were formed among the survivors, the Terran Co-operative was hastily created, and its members were charged with the task of going out and getting a nice juicy piece of the pie in the sky for impoverished Earth. Earthmen went forth to the stars, first as paying passengers on alien ships, then, later, in human-crewed ships purchased at staggering cost from other worlds. Terran trade missions were gradually established on some of those other worlds, while meantime the Enye—and later, the Jejun—mission on Earth was doing a land-office business, mostly in "quaint" Terran trinkets and primitive native art.

Amidst all this forced-draft confusion and hothouse change, Farber grew up, and, growing up, partook of the rapacious spirit of the times. For

many, the arrival of the Enye had been a miracle, divine intervention, an eleventh-hour reprieve for an exhausted civilization that had been just about to start an inevitable, irreversible spiral down into barbarism and degeneracy. The common response to this reprieve was buoyant relief and a sudden giddy sense of destiny. Suddenly, just when things had seemed darkest, the top was off the sky again—in fact, the polluted gray sky of Earth was nowhere *near* being the limit anymore, now that the alien cavalry had ridden to our racial rescue at the last possible minute. If there was any shame attached to the realization that we had needed the Enye to pull us out of the hole we had dug for ourselves—and the condescending, scornfully blunt Enye were hardly easy on Terran egos—then that very shame would make us work harder and scramble higher to blot it out. All at once, "manifest destiny" meant something again, was believed in again with a naive, almost religious optimism that had not been a serious political force since the muddled, saddening middle of the twentieth century. It was the age of the Robber Barons again, with those very Third World powers who had suffered most under the colonial yoke the most eager to go and carve some sort of colonial empire in the sky.

God was alive, after a long dry spell of atheism, and God helped those who helped themselves.

Like most of his compatriots—especially those who, as adolescents, had scored high on their aptitude tests and had been inducted into the Co-op—Farber grew up into a cocksure and confidently aggressive man. By the time he was ready to space, Earth's sweet imperialistic dreams had begun to sour and darken a little, but Farber remained untouched by any hint of pessimism. Perhaps he was even more headstrong and arrogant than the majority of his fellows—or perhaps he was just young. At any rate, he was cocksure, ambitious, *and naive*, which in any culture and in any age has always been an unstable combination.

Farber spent the night before he was to report to the Outbound Center drinking in a small rural gasthaus in Zirndorf, the air heavy with the smell of spilled beer and cooking sauerkraut, listening to the bawdy jokes and naughty songs of his classmates, watching the proprietor's half-blind old German shepherd beat its dusty tail against the floorboards and dream doggy dreams of youth. At midnight, ignoring the sounds of breaking crockery and Teutonic abandon, Farber got to his feet, carefully skirted two classmates who were wrestling on the floor next to the *fussball* machine while the proprietress slapped at them with a wet mop and the ancient shepherd growled reminiscently, and thrust himself out into darkness.

The stars were out in their chill white armies, and, moving under them, Farber felt almost too big for the night, for the narrow cobblestone path under his feet—big and raw and new, he felt, filled to bursting with life like a skin full of living green water, charged with blind energies that left him hot and glowing in the cold country silence. Walking unsteadily, he made his way through the sleeping streets and shuttered squares, out through the harvested stubble of the surrounding fields (dirt under his feet now, and rutted frozen furrows), and ultimately down onto the dry flood-bed of the river. It was black and still here, the lights of the town left far behind, only the dim blinking red eyes of the hydroelectric plant downstream to remind him of civilization. Then the ground sloped down slightly toward the river channel, and he lost even the lights of the hydroelectric plant, left them behind him in darkness. He could hear the river now, a soft toothless muttering of water, and he was surrounded chest-high by cane and thickets of wild wheat that rustled and creaked and re-formed around him. Thick black mud squelched under his feet, and he could smell manure and wet earth and dampness. He had reached the center of things, and it was dark and still and wet—and he was the only one there. He was the only one there was, or ever had been, on the Earth and under the sky—

A ghost exploded skyward from the grass at his feet, was a spread-armed gray shadow against the stars, was gone. Farber swayed in shock, scared sober. Another ghost-explosion, a half-seen form erupting upward from the ground as if it had been shot from a cannon; this time he heard the wet-canvas beating of wings against the damp river air. *Pheasants*, he thought, with a surge of astonishment and laughter he was still too scared to accept, *pheasants*, sleeping in the tall cover, frightened into flight by his blundering approach. He took a few more clumsy steps ahead, the undergrowth crackling and roaring around him. Another group of pheasants, four or five of them this time, exploded into the air a split-second apart, like shotgun blasts, like rockets going off, like spaceships hurtling outward to their destiny. He tilted his head up to follow the birds aloft, losing them almost instantly but being caught and transfixed instead by the million icy eyes of the stars. As he stood in rustling silence and stared up at the stars, he was shaken by such a surge of desire and awe and lingering terror that the stars seemed to spin and swirl into tight pinwheel squiggles, throwing down their light like spears, and he danced in rage and lust and exultation in the wet black mud.

Then back through the dampness and the manure-smelling dark, with the liquor dying in him and his clothes wet against his body, through the translucent gray fog that was coming up to the town that was still asleep

and the night that was somehow no longer his.

And then—too quickly, too brutally sudden, before his hangover had even had time to dissipate—he found himself alone with aliens, locked into a vibrating steel box with them, watching Earth shimmer and disappear into Ur-space, into the scummy darkness laced with shooting pastel blurs that looked like nothing so much as the inside of his own mind.

In spite of everything, most of the Terrans took quite a load of arrogance along with them into space. And as they traveled from world to world, further and further from Earth, that arrogance slowly died; some of it was drained away at every planetfall, like an intense electrical charge being grounded, and with it—oh, so gradually and grudgingly!—went the expansionist dreams of Empire, went even the more modest hope of financial dominance, fading from them as it had faded in turn from every star-faring race. Space was too *big*. Everything was too complex and too strange, the distances were too vast, the travel times too great, the communications halting at best. Even the Commercial Alliance was the loosest of organizations; some of its members had not had contact for hundreds of years. Establishing dominance—or even much continuity—across that gaping infinity of night was something that seemed possible only from the provincially narrow viewpoint imposed by looking up from the bottom of a gravity well. The vastness swallowed everything; it was too much for any corporeal creature.

By the time the Enye ship phased into existence again before Weinunnach, Farber was no longer the cocky, ambitious boy who had shipped from Earth a year before. The Enye looked something like big gray-green boulders with watery oyster eyes and fringes of squirming chartreuse cilia. They were dour creatures who liked to coat themselves with saliva on social occasions (different kinds of saliva, and therefore different odors, on different occasions), and who "talked" (to Earthmen) by modulating air through a sphincter in a series of controlled belches or flatulences. They treated Terrans with barely restrained contempt—and sometimes open contumely—and were reluctant to deal with them on any sort of interpersonal level at all, feeling put-upon in much the same way a Terran might if he were obliged to open diplomatic negotiations with his dog, especially if the dog had fleas, doggy breath, and had recently been rolling in something nasty. Most of the time they ignored Farber, and when they did deign to interact with him—cilia curling in distate—it was often worse: he couldn't understand their games and pastimes (whose

rules changed every few minutes according to a system he could never figure out but was expected to grasp without instruction), their casual conversation was bewildering, their "humor" was unfathomable, and the most everyday shipboard gadgets baffled him in humiliating ways that frustrated his desire to force the Enye to admit the equality of his intelligence. When they made planetfall along the Enye trading circuit, the other kinds of aliens he met—most of whom had never seen an Earthman before—tended to treat him as a pet of the Enye, or as part of their luggage, or to ignore him in a totally dispassionate way that indicated that he wasn't even significant enough to be rude to.

Farber had more than a year of this, in a ship that went subjectively from gigantic to much too small before the first two months were out.

Other writers have speculated about Farber's state of mind on *Alàntene* eve, reading into him the prejudices and passions of their day. Thus Nemerov's *The Barbarian* has him full of jingoistic energy and choler, while Innaurato's *Till Human Voices Wake Us*—written decades later, after breast-beating for our cultural insensitivity had lost its popularity among the intelligentsia, and reaction had set in—has him the innocent victim of sinister alien machinations. Most bizarre is Darcy's *Comic Mazes*, in which we find Farber characterized as an Absurdist Sage, manipulating people's lives in random directions for no reasons to no ends, when in actuality the sinister cult of Noism would not even begin to spread from the rancid Detroit slum wherein it had spawned until nearly fifteen years after Farber left Earth.

The fact is, Farber's state of mind reflected the racial experience of his time. Thousands of young Terrans were going through similar kinds of culture shock in a dozen other places, although seldom were the consequences so drastic, or, in their own left-handed way (one thinks of the controversial *Alternate Lives Society*, founded by Eileen Ross and Tamarane, that had—and is having—enough of an effect on Cian culture as to nearly force the closing of the Terran mission) so far-reaching.

Far from being the strutting egotist described in Nemerov and Gershenfeld, Farber was sad, bewildered, and apprehensive as he prepared to land on Weinunnach. A year of contact with the Eyne— and, even worse, with creatures so alien they could barely interact with humans at all on any level—had stripped him of most of his original assurance, and given him no real knowledge or wisdom to replace it. Most of his pride had been leached away, and he was unable to retreat behind a wall of defensive snobbery and cultivated disdain, as had many of his fellows. The path of his life, once so straight and obvious, had been lost in a morass of

confusion. His career—once the vital, central thing in his existence—now seemed insipid, unimportant, meaningless.

He didn't even bother to watch as the orbot descended onto Weinunnach.

When they reached the spaceport, in the low hills west of Aei New City, he took the high-speed line direct to the Terran Enclave, and, for all intents and purposes, did not come out again until *Alàntene* eve—either out of the Enclave, or up out of the stagnant depths of his own soul.

Now, tonight, *Alàntene* eve, he had been drawn up out of himself again, and for the first time since leaving Earth he felt young and expansive and alive.

Liraun had drawn him up, Liraun and the velvet intensity of the night itself—although the effect on him seemed more acute than even sex and strangeness could explain.

Sex was good with Liraun, certainly (they had walked through the empty, echoing streets to the Enclave, to Farber's apartment, without speaking at all, hand in hand, stealthily, like naughty children sneaking back to their rooms after some illicit escapade), but no better than it had been on occasion with other women. Their lovemaking that night was not a blaze of transcendental pleasure; like any other couple, they needed time to adjust to each other, and their first attempts were not without a certain element of clumsiness. It was the usual sweaty business, full of small mutual discoveries, disappointments, elations—not much different from his first time with Kathy a few days before, on a purely sexual level. Liraun was different, though, and the night was steeped through with her strangeness, as the air of Farber's bedroom was soaked with the musty erotic smell of her body. She spoke little. She would laugh or sob at unpredictable times, for—to Farber—unanalyzable reasons. She was playful, and at the same time intently, almost grimly, serious; Farber could never be sure which mood to respond to, and couldn't master her apparent trick of mixing the two. Physically, she was odd, although not enough so to be repugnant—rather the opposite, in fact. She had no breasts, or rather she had only vestigial ones, like Farber himself; the Cian men nursed the young, not the women. Her nipples were also vestigial—three pairs of them, spaced two by two, down along the rib cage, flat and almost unnoticeable except for large, smoky-dark aureoles. Most of her body was covered with a light, fine down that might once, millennia ago, have been fur. Her pubic hair was unusually thick and heavy,

stretching down her thighs and up along her belly. Her canines weren't really too much longer than a human's, and she was very careful not to bite too hard, to Farber's relief—and, almost, regret—since he had been half expecting her to slash him to ribbons. She was perhaps not as selfconsciously expert as Kathy—although she was by no means unsophisticated, sexually—but there was an exquisitely restrained desperation to her responses that puzzled Farber even while it delighted him. At orgasm—their second try, finally working their slow, patient way up to it—she hugged him with a strength almost greater than his own, nearly cracking his ribs, and cried out harshly, as though terrified and elated by something he could never understand.

In the morning, Liraun got up and dressed without a word. Watching her pad around his apartment in the cold, slate-gray dawnlight, shrugging herself into her skintight outfit, Farber felt a rush of idiot desire and would have been ready to tackle the night's business all over again, eager as a schoolboy, although he was probably too drained and exhausted physically to take it. Liraun looked much less frazzled than Farber; her movements were still crisp and supple, her face was fresh and unshadowed, and she moved like a dancer through the mundane interstices of his room.

Farber was so enthralled by the grace and fluidity of her motions that he let her glide all the way to the door before the spell broke and he sat up in sudden dismay to stammer, "Wait, I— Will I see you again? Will you come back? I'd like you to come back again"—he paused, intimidated by her silence, adding lamely—"if you want to."

She turned at the door to stare at him, her expression unreadable; then she shrugged, still wordless and noncommittal, and left.

A few moments later, sitting in bed and staring at the blank white door, it occurred to Farber that he didn't even know where she lived, or how to find her again.

3

Farber remained bemused throughout the morning rituals of washing and dressing and eating. His mind was divided. Half of it was moronically happy, and tried to keep him whistling and humming when the other half wasn't paying attention. That half was filled with increasing anxiety,

almost with fear, as the morning wore on. Suppose she didn't come back? It was quite possible that he'd never see her again.

Later than usual, he made it out into the flat white windy morning and headed for the Terran Co-operative Offices.

Here in the Enclave the streets had Terran names—Washington Street, Pine Street, Second Avenue, Sutton Place, Rainbow Terrace—and the architecture was Terran as well: lots of glassine and plastic and fiberbond, lots of jutting arrogant angles, everything as tall as possible, like nothing in Aei, like nothing on all of "Lisle." The high wall that encircled the Enclave was also reassuring, blotting out as it did all sign of the alien city beyond. Farber could almost pretend he was still on Earth as he walked up the black asphalt of Washington Street toward the futuristic alphabet blocks that were the main Co-op offices; New York, Frankfurt, Chicago, Tokyo— dozens of cities on Earth looked just like this.

The Co-op offices were busy, as they usually were on all except Mode-days, but Farber was beginning to entertain suspicions about just how much of the swarming activity he saw ever actually accomplished anything. Daily the Cian would bring in sample goods from all over the planet, but they did so in a spirit of play, as a game—the Cian found the Terran Mission uproariously funny, as they did most Terran customs, and Farber wondered if they didn't simply enjoy bringing useless and possibly insulting objects thousands of miles to place under the weary eyes of the Co-op evaluation teams. Every day the Co-op offices would be multifarious, multitudinous, malodorous, clangorous: stacked full of strange artifacts, bales of cloth, ore samples, pungent spices, art objects, plants of every kind (fruits, samples of food crops, flowering shrubs, bushes, whole trees, whole jungles it sometimes seemed, all adding their various fragrances, subtle or overpowering, to the manifold alien stink that even the nightly antiseptic spraydowns couldn't wholly obliterate), animals of all descriptions (from a spherical, dead-black thing the size of a small elephant to small shaggy predators no bigger than lobsters that had scurried about nipping the clerks, though not, somehow, the Cian; from fairly normal-looking insects and worms to "birds" that were actually "lizards"—few of which were worthwhile exporting even as exotic pets, and almost none of which were housebroken), crates of household goods, samples of drugs and medicines and Cian *haute cuisine*, and even strange genetically altered beings produced by the Cian "tailors." And, of course, the Cian themselves were there, obviously having a hell of a good time at Terran expense, all the while managing to keep their demeanors good-natured and solemn at the same time; "like dealing with a planetful

of cigar store Indians," one harried factor had said.

Jacawen *sur* Abut, the Cian Liaison to the Terran Mission, struck Farber as about the only Cian connected with the Enclave who actually was as solemn as the others sometimes pretended to be, and he seemed not only solemn but downright grim. Of course, as "parent of appointment" to the Terrans, to use the Cian term, he was personally responsible for any damage to Cian society that might result from use of Terran trade goods or from interfacing with Terran social systems, but somehow Farber sensed more darkness of soul there than could be justified even by such heavy administrative responsibility. Jacawen was a Shadow Man, the old station hands said, and even though Farber wasn't completely sure what a Shadow Man was, or what being one entailed, the name had a sinister enough sound to it—especially when considered in light of the alien's brooding grimness—that Farber had already decided to avoid Jacawen as completely as he could.

Most of Jacawen's work was concerned with that small fraction of the vast influx of potential trade goods that had already been established as being of value to the Terrans—primarily art objects, some exotic chemicals and minerals, artifacts, spices, and bizarre foodstuffs at this point, as it was in the early years of trade between most planets—and, of course, with the corresponding Terran goods that, for whatever reason of caprice or (incomprehensible) economics, had taken the Cian's fancy: goods as diverse as harmonicas, ball bearings, and English muffins. Jacawen dealt primarily with the sour-faced Co-op Director, Raymond Keane, and with the scurrying, rabbit-like little Ethnologist, Dr. Ferri, causing them trouble enough to keep the Director sour-faced and the Ethnologist scurrying, merely by refusing to allow the Terrans to use their big forklift trucks to haul trade goods back and forth from the Enclave to the Cian warehouses on the banks of the Aome; no, instead Jacawen insisted that the goods be hauled by sweating levies of Cian laborers—who seemed to enjoy the work immensely, laughing and singing as they worked, as the mythical "happy darkies" of Southern propaganda were wont to do—with occasionally a few centipede-drawn carts to help with the really heavy loads, which not only slowed down business but assured that cheerfully rowdy Cian laborers would be penetrating the sacrosanct boundaries of the Enclave at all hours. All of which meant that Jacawen, Keane, and Fern were tied to the Enclave most of the time, and *that* meant that Farber could successfully avoid all three of them, none of whom he liked very much.

Now that Farber's initial sensory studies of the Enclave and of Co-op

routine were completed (including, among other things, footage of the sweating Cian laborers, which he eventually did incorporate into a satirical still shot called *Down on the Old Plantation*, decking the grinning Cian out with torn slave clothes, floppy straw hats, mint juleps, and banjos), he could, if he wished, stay away from the Co-op offices the entire day, knowing that the hours he spent prowling Aei as a sightseer would be both officially sanctioned and legitimate work—that, in fact, it was what he was supposed to be doing.

Farber was a graphic artist, and thought of himself as such, although, like most artists of his generation, he had seldom even touched paints or oils or clay or bronze. He worked instead with a sophisticated device known as a sensory crown—exported by the Jejun, master craftsmen for this entire section of the spiral arm—that enabled him to transpose his internal fantasies and visualizations directly onto holographic film. The results of this process, rather inevitably known as "sensies" in popular parlance, could be exhibited either as a movie or as blown-up stills (there were conflicting views as to which was the proper method) and were gradually replacing the old arts of painting, sculpture, and photography—now regarded as passe and intolerably primitive by the Young Turks—among the more highly civilized nations of Earth. With the advent of the sensies, and the concurrent exodus of men to distant star systems, the old school of landscape painting crossbred itself with the travelog and regained something of the prestige and popularity it had enjoyed in the eighteenth century—with the additional advantage that these visualizations of alien lands were filtered through and colored by the perception of the individual sensie artist, giving rise almost overnight to critics and connoisseurs who would argue endlessly over the precision of Tunick's eye as contrasted with the passion of Frank's.

It became common practice for sensie artists to be sent along with the outbound trading missions and exploratory expeditions, to record them for the folks back home. This was Farber's position with the mission to "Lisle," and so far he had not been fulfilling it very well. That would change now, he hoped; the night with Liraun had eased much of his trepidation about venturing out into the alien city, and his head was full—perhaps too full—of images derived from his experiences at the *Alàntene*. Full of noble resolve, he went to get his sensie equipment.

Janet LaCorte gave him an indignant glare as he ducked into Admin Office B.

Wincing, feeling the beginnings of an acid roiling in his stomach, he picked up the backpack and the sensory crown and started back through

the complex toward the Enclave gates. He thought he felt disapproving eyes on him several times, and caught himself wondering, uneasily, how many people knew that he had slept with Liraun, and what the general reaction to the news had been. At the same time, one train of thought running consecutively with the other, he was angry with himself for his uneasy fear of censure, and disgusted that he should automatically start reevaluating a beautiful experience as sullyng as soon as he thought that the judgment of his peers would be against him. Those two things ground together in his head, working first one way and then the other, leaving him pinched and uncomfortable at their center, where the grinding edge was.

To his displeasure, he ran into Dale Brody on the way past the Records and Supply Building. Brody looked elaborately—almost pretentiously—dissipated, as though he had been dipped by the hair into a quick-drying lacquer to preserve him, but only after he had already died and been left to rot for several days. There was a crackly, shiny film to him, but underneath it his flesh was the putty gray of corrupted meat. He walked stiffly and slowly, barely moving his arms and legs away from his body, and his eyes were small and red and mean.

"Hello, boy," Brody said hoarsely. "A night among the niggers, eh?" His voice was heavy with phony camaraderie. Farber nodded sheepishly, reflexively, and then flushed red to the ears with a curious mixture of embarrassment and rage—the grinding edge again. Brody was still speaking, lazily, reminiscently: "You know, I always wondered what that was like, that nigger cunt, running all sideways and all, like they say—but shit, son, how'd you get past the smell? That's 'ut always hung me up, you know? I just don't see any dang way you could do it at all, now, 'less you just don't have a nose." He grinned a yellowed, snaggletoothed grin that was without warmth or humor.

Distanced from all this somehow, hiding in some cave in the back of his head, Farber watched his own reactions with fascination. Part of him was definitely reacting to the locker-room overtones in Brody's voice with that kind of shamefaced, hangdog embarrassment that, although it humiliates you, still leaves you a part of the social mechanism, if only in the role of scapegoat, simply because you *have* been humiliated. *Ah, hell, Dale*, he knew that he should say now, in that whining, half-angry tone, *I was just drunk. You know, Dale, you know—shit, ain't you ever tied a real blind pisser of a load on? Goddamnit, a man just ain't responsible for what he's doing when he's got a load like that on. Ah, come on now, Dale . . .* and Brody would humiliate him for a while more, the laughter "open" now

in that insiduously accepting locker-room way that assured that Farber would laugh weakly along with his tormentor while Brody got his licks in: *Goddamn, Ol' Joe, man—whew, you get a load on, Ol' Joe, ol' son, you gonna fuck just goddamn all anything, ain't you, goats, knotholes, don't make no nevermind to you*, Farber smiling his sickly, humiliated smile all the while, metaphorically turning his underbelly up, exposing his vulnerable parts to the stronger animal—and then Brody would give him a final metaphorical thump, bastinado, and walk away, leaving Farber to slink off, nurse his wounds, comfort himself as best he could with the knowledge that at least he was still a member of the pack.

Farber knew this game well—in his hometown of Truechlingen, the accent would have been different, and the language and the idioms, but the rules would have been the same.

Conversely, he could flare up in rage and indignation, shout obscenities at Brody, maybe even hit him—and Brody would probably back off. But from then on Farber would be a pariah, an outcast. Untouchable.

Farber acted on neither alternative. Instead—cravenly, perhaps—he opted for a neutral gear: "Ah, Christ, Dale," he said querulously. "Don't jack me around today, all right? I got a fucking bitch of a hangover. A fucking *bitch* of a hangover." And he let a little sliver of a leer flash out through the peevishness, as though to say *Oy! What a night! You wouldn't believe it. . . .*

Brody stared uncertainly at Farber, tugged off balance by another traditional locker-room gambit, not sure which way to respond. After a flat pause, he said, tentatively, "I saw that Kathy woman today, that one you ditched last night, and she ain't too fond of you anymore, boy—matter of fact, son, you're going to have to come up with some *hell* of a line to get that little lady to open her legs again."

"Fuck her," Farber said, only partially aware that he was echoing Brody's speech of the night before. "There's always another cunt along in a minute, right?"

"Right," Brody said, unwittingly forced into agreement and so into a faint unwanted sense of camaraderie—he was more uncertain now than ever, and less of a threat. Within a couple of minutes, Farber was able to untangle himself from the facedown and walk away, leaving Brody to rub a hand over his stubbled, lacquered face and frown a faintly puzzled frown at Farber's retreating back.

As Farber hurried away, reaction began to hit him. He was fiercely disappointed with himself, abashed that he had felt it necessary to

compromise with Brody even as much as he had, that he had felt obliged to collaborate with Brody in his game, *even*—one part of his ego busily throwing up defenses for itself, while another part tried to break them down with guilt—even though he *had* played it defensively.

Snaky black storm clouds began to pile up behind him as he walked—almost too tidily analogous to his mood—and he cursed himself root and branch all the way down into Aei New City, shame and anger building up inside him as thick and dark and smothering as the clouds gathering over his head.

The rain broke when he was halfway to the waterfront, a cold stinging rain that he trudged through dourly without making any attempt to seek shelter, glad for the sting and discomfort of it, flagellating himself with the rain as surely as if it had been a flail. By the time the rainsquall passed, sweeping out across the bay to be absorbed by Elder Sea, Farber's anger had ebbed to a sour scum of melancholy that made his stomach queasy and left a foul sulphur taste in the back of his mouth. He was soddenly wet now, and cold to the bone, but he slogged on, his mood getting lower and blacker by the heartbeat. He paid no attention to his surroundings, didn't know if he was alone or jostling through crowds of people, didn't know where he'd just been, didn't know where he was going.

Ocean House/River House was in sight before he realized that he was retracing his journey of the night before. He sneered at his own sentimental credulity. Did he expect to find Liraun there, too? The *Alàntene*, the night there to be lived again? Well, he wouldn't—he told himself that with the glum utter certainty of defeat that comes very close to being pleasurable. He would find nothing, nothing there.

And perhaps because that was what he was looking for, that's just what he did find there—nothing. The L-shaped bulk of Ocean House/River House was empty, a big abandoned glass box streaked with the shiny tracks of the rain. The day was still gray and wet, the air sodden as a sponge, and the beach was desolate and deserted. He walked up the empty beach, the wet sand crunching under his feet, the mist beading in his hair, on his upper lip; as far as he could see there was nothing alive or moving on the whole North Shore of Shasine. Elder Sea looked flat and tired, and, incongruously, like it was uncomfortable out in the rain, getting wet; its waves curled listlessly in to shore, making only a senile muttering in the throat of the sea.

Ocean House was still dimly visible from here, its window-wall glinting through the mist, and, looking at it from the beach, Farber remembered the *Alàntene*, the indefatigable dancers who had stamped and swayed on

this very spot, Liraun's assertion that the Mode was co-existent with every moment of time. Was it here, then, the *Alàntene*, here somewhere behind the mist and drizzle and emptiness? Co-existent—Liraun here somewhere, Farber himself, the passionate dancers of the surf, interpenetrating him right this moment perhaps, passing through his body like ghost ships on their way to insubstantial seas? Listening to wet disgruntled "birds" shrieking their discomfort above the raw gray mist, feeling his feet sink deeper in the cold gritty sand, he shook his head: no. It was not here for him. If it was here at all, it was not here for him—or if it was, then the one who could have brought him to it was gone, was not here, would not be here. Not for him.

Feeling wronged, bereaved, and pleasantly morose, he walked back up the beach.

The sky had cleared by the time Farber had plodded up the Way of the Third Dead Ancestor into the Winterchild district. A brisk wind had come up from the east, and, before it, puffy blue clouds chased themselves like kittens around a sky that still looked cold and wet. Fire Woman, the sun, peered wanly out through flying black lines of scud, pale and feeble and drawn. Even Farber's flamboyant despair had by now sifted down into a numb spiritual exhaustion, like sludge settling to the bottom of a fish tank. Every so often, as he trudged sullenly up the slope from Winterchild to Brundane, he dutifully unlimbered the sensory crown and looked around for a subject—at last remembering the original purpose behind this sodden, miserable hike—but after the passion and mystery of *Alàntene* night, after the physical and emotional storms just past, the day seemed unreal: flat, insubstantial, dull, the colors less vivid, the vistas of Aei less inspiring, the air itself stale.

Wrapped in wet black gloom like a magpie in wet black feathers, damp and dispirited, Farber came into the Enclave with the dying of the day. He went past the gates and offices, down to the strip of stone that was foundation to his apartment building, and she was there, a small woman standing patiently alone in the shadows, still as a post.

"Liraun," he said in a kind of stupid wonder, feeling gladness and something else—fear?—rise up in his throat like bronze.

She said nothing. Her eyes glinted like pearls in the darkness, and she watched him levelly.

"I didn't know if I'd see you again," he said at last, awkwardly.

"Nor did I," she said. She was calm, unsmiling, enigmatic. "The People Under The Sea decide these things, little things, births, deaths, joy—" She

smiled. "They spin out our lives like cloth, and who are we to know what things they weave?"

She came to him then, across the stone, across the dying light, and they touched, turning, bumping gently together, like falling leaves.

4

In the days that followed, they saw each other steadily. Even after a week, two weeks, as lovers, he still knew next to nothing about her. She was quite willing to talk about her people and her society, but only on the most general and theoretical of grounds. The philosophy sometimes and to a limited degree, but the specifics, never. About herself, never. He didn't know what she did during the day, after she left him, where she went or why. He still didn't know where she lived—she had never taken him there, or said anything about its location, and something in her manner had discouraged him from asking. Always she would leave by dawn, like the enchanted girl in an old fairy tale.

But always she came to him again. Sometimes she would come to his apartment at night, silently, hovering in the darkness outside his door like a wraith that the winds might blow away, like an insubstantial embodiment of the night itself, until he pulled her gently inside, where she would be fleshed by the light, given life and warmth and substance. Sometimes she would meet him in the late afternoon, and they would walk down through Aei together in the long, slow twilight, while Fire Woman sank painfully below the bare western hills, like an arthritic crone lowering herself into a tub of tepid brown water.

By an unspoken agreement, they stuck to the New City in their rambles, shunning the foreboding stone needle of Aei Old City, although its monolithic bulk and sometimes its long cold shadow were unavoidable; always the Old City dominated one of the horizons, wherever in Aei New City they went. Occasionally Farber would start toward the Old City, a tourist's interest smouldering to life, but always Liraun would somehow communicate her reluctance to approach it—without a word being spoken—and they would go someplace else instead.

Once Farber brought his sensie equipment, and they sauntered through the ceramic squares and broad avenues of the New City, past Ugly Man Street, down through the tangle of small alleys in the quarter known as

Fish Head Bay. The alleys were narrow and cheerfully crowded, their walls overgrown with lush black vines and blazing with red, orange, and silver flowers; the walls were peppered with balconies, ledges, windows, and Cian lounged or balanced precariously or thrust themselves out of all of them, calling to their neighbors across the way, or talking, or singing, so that to walk down the alleys, between the walls, was like walking beside an Arizona cliff dwelling, replete with colorfully dressed and cheerfully waving Indian ghosts, or like being under a moss-grown aviary filled with chattering rooks and magpies and starlings. Small groups of children dodged past them occasionally, the only living things in sight that seemed to be in a hurry. Occasionally the interlacing alleys would open up into small terra-cotta squares, overhung by lime-green ghostfinger trees or ruddy golden *wellá*, and here someone would have set up a brazier shaped like the open mouth of a fish and would be cooking redfins and sandcrawlers, someone else would have a stand selling snow nectar and blue wine and essences, and the long dusk would be filled with the smells of frying meat and wood smoke and strange spices, and with the tinkling crystalline sound of a *tikan* being played somewhere out of sight in a roof garden or a hidden patio.

They walked down beside the Aome for awhile to look at the boats, the bustling River-Docks, the swirling silver water that seemed—to Farber, anyway—to contain faces and voices and phosphorescent kingdoms of foam. They stopped at a stand to buy pungent strips of marinated snapper meat, and at another stand for skullcups—these turned out to be big mellon-shaped silver fruits that had been baked in ashes; the leathery rind was warm to the touch, but when the fruit was split open the meat inside was cool and firm; it was a marbled pearl-and-turquoise color, and tasted like a pleasantly odd combination of cantaloupe, yam, and passion fruit. After eating, they strolled back through Ethran and Vandermont and Lothlethren, past the dazzling, sinuous five-hundred-foot-long gold-and-scarlet mosaic mural in Serpent Street.

On Ice Woman Way, near the crest of Cold Tower Hill, Farber stopped to unlimber his sensie equipment again. There was a black stone bridge here, over a deep crevasse, and to the north the Old City rose like a frozen black wave over the steep-peaked, pastel-colored roofs of Brundane. A thin line of water dropped from the Old City on this side, twisting and waving with the wind, like a plume of moving white feathers. Liraun watched as Farber unslung his pack, took out the sensory crown, adjusted it on his head, connected it to the equipment in the backpack, adjusted dials and knobs and push-plates—watched him silently, as she had when he had done this before, at the River-Docks, in the terra-cotta squares, at the

giant mosaic. At last, reluctantly, speaking as though against her will, she asked him what he was doing, and he explained.

Surprisingly, she frowned. "Can't they see things for themselves?"

"Of course they can—but most of them will never come here, to Lisle, or see any of this, so I have to see it for them."

"And they agree to that? To see through your eyes?" She spoke with distaste. "They let themselves see the world through someone else's eyes? Why would they do that?"

Farber was puzzled by her vehemence. "Because, for instance, if they didn't, they'd never see any of this—the Old City, the bridge, the crevasse—"

"Let them come here, then, if they wish to see it! Better to see nothing at all than to see a lie. How can they know the world, or themselves, or the proper paths to take in life, if they are foolish enough to let other men do their seeing for them?"

Shrugging, a bit annoyed, Farber busied himself with his scanning of the scene, juxtaposing the image in his mind's eye and the actual vista before him—like focusing an old split-image lens camera—to produce the still shot he wanted, fiddling subjectively with the lighting and the texture, accentuating the curve of the bridge, adding a thunderhead bank of cloud behind the Old City, then fixing the image in his mind and activating the recorder. He had included Liraun, her pose subtly altered to make a more dramatic composition, as a foreground figure, and it was obvious that she realized it: she grimaced, one long canine tooth glistening wetly, shifted her weight restlessly, frowned again. For a moment, Farber thought, with a surprising flash of scorn and amused condescension, that she was afraid to have her "picture" taken, that—like some primitive tribesman on Earth—she feared that the machine would steal a slice of her soul. Then, almost reluctantly, he realized that wasn't so: her reaction was more complex than that, her reluctance stemming from aesthetic rather than superstitious grounds, arising from some opaque kind of philosophy or mysticism that he could not understand. Now he was the one to frown. He had been thinking of her almost as a human woman—in some vague way on "his" side against the strangeness of Aei—and to run into this unfathomable core of alien thought in her shattered the illusion, and left him cold and uneasy.

In silence, they went back down Cold Tower Hill into Lothleth-ren, the light dying behind them in long black and lavender bars across the pale plum sky.

As they came into the outskirts of Brundane, they encountered a ceremony of some kind in progress in Glassblower Square. Six or seven Cian men, elaborately and bizarrely costumed, were dancing in the middle of the square to the skirling music of a *tikan* and a nose flute, surrounded by a ring of about thirty spectators. Some of the dancers capered drunkenly about on stilts with great black bat wings flapping from their backs, some squirmed bonelessly across the cool blue tiles on their bellies, some whirled and hopped and genuflected, but the center of attention was a huge, grotesquely jiggling false head—also on stilts—with three carved and painted faces: one looking straight ahead, one looking right, one looking left. The faces were inscrutable and fierce, so contorted and stylized that it was difficult to tell if they were supposed to be men or demons or beasts, or amalgamations of all three. The forward-looking face, done in dull gray and brown, had both eyes closed; the left-hand face, done in black and silver with streaks of orange, had its eyes turned upward toward the sky; the right-hand face, done in pale green and blue and yellow, had its eyes turned to the ground—the center face was inlaid with bits of ivory or bone; the left with flint and obsidian; the right with feathers and jade. The great three-faced head jiggled ponderously around the square, tilting precariously first to one side and then the other, while a *twizan* stood at the edge of the crowd and declaimed in a sing-song dialect that Farber found hard to follow.

With a lightning change of mood, Liraun became voluble and enthusiastic and gay, and insisted on "explaining" the ceremony to him.

First of all, she told him, it wasn't a ceremony. This was a secular performance, not a Mode—an interpretation of Danau *sur* Nestre's classical poem-play *The Exaltation of Little Dead Crawlers*. The hero—heroine? the language was ambiguous—was a small worm who lived in the silt at the bottom of Elder Sea. For no reason that Farber could grasp, the worm one day changed into a crawling insect, and the crawling insect subsequently turned into a fish (a sort of flippered eel, actually). The fish (or eel) could have lived a long and peaceful life in the ocean, but as it turned out, the fish was "sea-hearted." Farber could not quite tell, either from the fwizetn's chant or from Liraun's cryptic commentary, exactly what "seahearted" meant—possibly "daring," possibly "restless," possibly "extraordinarily pious" or "blessed," possibly "incautious" or even "stupid." At any rate, it was seahearted, and because it was it resolved to swim from one end of the Great Northern Ocean to the other.

And so it did, but by the time it reached the farther shore it had built up such great speed that it continued to swim up onto the land, beating its flippers into legs against the rocky shoreline as it did.

This part of the poem-play was very long, and, to Farber, extremely tedious; it described the fish's emergence from the ocean with an incredible profusion of oddly mundane detail: the kind of mud the fish crawled over; its consistency; where the rocks were, and how big they were, and what they were made of, and how they looked that day; where the firm sand was; where the patches of sea grass were; the direction and strength of the currents; the temperature of the water; the taste and degree of salinity of the water; the other kinds of fish in the area at the time, numbered, named, and described; how the surface of the water looked from underneath just before the fish shattered it and emerged into the open air; how the sky looked, seen for the first time; what the temperature of the air was; how strong the wind was and from what direction it was blowing ... and so forth. If it had not been for some fairly spectacular gymnastics the stiltless dancers were going through in accompaniment to this recitation. Farber might well have fallen asleep on his feet.

Once the fish did make it up onto the land, though, things picked up. The first thing the fish—now a sandcrawler, by the way—did was either to have a litter of baby sandcrawlers or to split itself up into a number of parts, each of which would then eventually grow up to be a baby sandcrawler—the dialect made it difficult for Farber to tell. The babies (or parts) did an odd, intricate dance, and then *kwians*—winged marsupials, although here they seemed to be symbolic of or synonymous with supernatural creatures of some kind—swept down and snatched up the mother sandcrawler (or one of the parts) and deposited it on a barren plain of rock. Here the sand-crawler (or part) was visited by a Person of Power, jet black and puissant, who told it that it must change again, and for the final time, in order to protect its children (or fellow parts) from the barrenness of the world and the fierceness of the sun. The Person of Power offered it three choices: it could turn into a rock, high and remote, and shelter the others from predators with its adamant bulk; it could change into moss, cool and moist, and shelter the others with its dampness and softness from sun and sharp rocks and biting wind; or it could die, and turn into a pool of blood that would provide life-giving nourishment for the others.

The dance ended then, and the Cian snapped their fingers in applause, hissing like teakettles.

"But what did it do?" Farber asked. "Which one of the three things did it turn into?"

"It turned into all three, of course," Liraun said, smiling radiantly.

"But it couldn't! They're mutually exclusive—it would have had to've turned into one or the other. They can't all be true at the same time."

"But they are! Of course they are," Liraun said, still smiling, but looking at him now with an odd, intent expression. "It turned into all three things, at once. It did. That is the point of the story—if it had become only one thing, the story would be meaningless. Do you see? Do you understand? It's important that you understand."

Farber muttered polite acquiescence, understanding nothing. As they left the square—she still exuberant, he puzzled and unsettled—he looked back in time to see the two dancers who had operated the huge false head crawling out from inside it, like parasites emerging from the torn and paralyzed body of their unwilling host, and it struck him that the faces of the dancers were no less remote and strange than the flint-and-wood-and-obsidian masks of the great totem that they inhabited and haunted, that they strained to animate, succeeding only for a few brief seconds in bringing it to a passionate and totally transitory kind of life.

Hugging each other against the gathering evening chill, hip slapping hip, they wandered back to the Enclave while, like transcendent fireflies, glowing pastel lanterns came on one by one around them in the luminous darkness of the alien night.

5

Ecstasy is perhaps too large a word to use in connection with sex, or even lovemaking, but that night was the most perfect that Farber could remember, sweet and hot and fine; they were alternately tender and fierce, exuberant and pleasantly melancholy—and at last they sank down peacefully together into soft black sleep, like twins settling into an ocean of dust and downy feathers.

When Farber awoke, it was that cold and bitter hour just before dawn, and Liraun was gently disentangling herself from him preparatory to

leaving. Feeling her softness and warmth slipping away over his skin, feeling the chill empty air rush in to fill the void, so that he was suddenly naked where before he had been handsomely clothed in flesh, Farber opened his eyes. He watched her face, luminous as a moon in the darkness, rise up over him, pull away from him, seeming to fall away from him like a spaceship falling from an orbiting satellite toward the bronzy disk of its home planet, like a tiny phosphorescent fish swimming away and down into the living darkness of the sea. Something complex and painful rose up in him, tightening his throat and burning behind his eyes. Without volition, his voice began to speak—the words ringing oddly in the silent room—and he heard it asking Liraun to stay, to stay with him, to live with him, to never leave—

Liraun's face went blank, as though something had flown from it, shooting away as the pheasants had shot up into the damp German night. She did not, would not, answer him. While he beseeched her to tell him what was wrong, she put her clothes on, moving stiffly and mechanically, her usually agile fingers fumbling with the fastenings. Her face was cold and empty as wax. She would not look at him. When she had finished dressing, she paced aimlessly around the apartment, darting first one way and then the other, like a caged animal. Farber was on his feet now, trying to touch her, hold her, but she brushed by him as if he didn't exist. She stood quiveringly still for a moment, her eyes glassy and blind.

Then she ran from the room.

The door slammed with finality behind her.

Farber was left to stand alone in the darkness, listening to the cryptic tickings and buzzings of household appliances, and slowly, through the bewilderment and pain, came the frozenly rueful realization that he still did not know how to find her again.

That evening, Liraun did not come to visit him. He sat up waiting for her half the night, dozing in his chair, starting up expectantly at every sound, going over that final scene again and again in a futile attempt to figure out what had happened, reliving some of their past moments together with an almost hypnotically intense recall.

Liraun didn't show up the next night, either.

On the third evening, Farber stormed out of his apartment, furious and hurt, went to the Co-op Mess, and had an unreasonable number of drinks. He also had an intense, tearful reconciliation with Kathy, and within two

hours they were back in her apartment, and in her bed. Kathy spent the rest of the night inventing exotic ways of making love, in order to seal the bond. Farber worked at it grimly, and managed to come consecutively more times than he ever had in his life, but it was no good: he kept thinking about Liraun, he kept picturing her, he kept wanting it to be her instead. In spite of his boozy resolve, he found that he could only relate to Kathy absent-mindedly; he kept fantasizing that she was Liraun, and it was this that sparked most of his desire, not Kathy herself.

Early the next evening, Liraun appeared at Farber's apartment, seeming almost literally to materialize from the darkness beyond his door. She didn't say a word about her absence, or his the previous night, or the fight they'd had, if that's what it had been. She never mentioned any of it again. Neither did Farber. He relaxed gratefully into the familiar strangeness of her company, suffused with a feeling of having come home again. Kathy rang the bell about ten, and kept ringing incessantly until Farber was obliged to shout for her to go away. Liraun said nothing about that, either.

They didn't again discuss the prospect of living together, but a few nights later, unasked, she showed up with a backpack of possessions and moved in. It only took her about fifteen minutes to get settled. As Farber watched her moving around his apartment, putting away her things, he was overcome by a feeling of amazement that was almost awe. He really knew nothing about her at all, nothing about her life. And yet, here she was—moving in with him. This alien, living in his house, day in and day out. It was incredible and wonderful. Already—as she put supper on to boil, unasked, and sat tranquilly playing the *tikan*—he could feel her neat, quiet, calming presence spreading throughout the apartment, seeping into his body like radiant heat, thawing his hopes, loosening his fears.

After this, Farber stopped trying to avoid further emotional involvement with Liraun, although if you had mentioned the word *love* to him at any one point he would have denied it quickly and emphatically. In fact, though, he was coming to depend on her presence more and more, especially now that he was a virtual outcast in the Terran community, shunned by everyone. She was a prop; she held him up, she kept him going. She was a tranquilizing drug to assuage the loneliness and isolation of exile on an alien earth. She helped him forget that he could stare at the stars here forever, and never once see a configuration he could recognize from a thousand boyhood nights spent dreaming on a hill in the Frankische Alb near Treuchlingen. He was drawn powerfully by her enigmatic and bottomless nature. Her mind and spirit were still masked from him, as by a thousand thicknesses of distorting semitransparent

gauze, and physical intimacy was only a means to strip away the first of these layers. Also, Farber, who had been used to the aggressive, self-assertive women of Earth, was delighted by Liraun's apparent sub-missiveness, although like most men of his generation he seriously believed himself to be "liberated." Nevertheless, he quickly became comfortably accustomed to having her defer to his will, cook his supper, serve him in a hundred little ways.

The next month was probably the happiest Farber had yet experienced in his bland young life. Certainly it was the period during which he produced his best work. During the weeks he lived with Li-raun he created several stills which would later attract a moderate amount of attention on Earth, among them *Woman at Rest*, *Alantene Night*, *Riverman*, and the fairly well-known *Esplanade—Looking East to the Sea*. He was as content as he had ever been. He had the pleasure of work that he enjoyed, the satisfaction of that work done well, a reasonable prospect of future success—and Liraun. And, as people are always ready to disregard the most painfully learned lessons the moment they think the wind has changed, he even began to regain some of his old cockiness.

Naturally, it could not last.

Authors and scholars have argued for years about why Farber became determined to marry Liraun. In actuality, Farber himself was never sure. It was not so much a conscious decision, but rather something that—he realized, in retrospect—he had become committed to at some point along the line. Exactly when that point, that moment of commitment, had been reached, he himself did not know. But there were six specific things that took him toward it, six long steps into deep water.

Perhaps the first step occurred when he realized that Liraun was unhappy.

Or if not unhappy exactly—for they still took much delight in each other—then troubled, at least, and divided of soul. Even in her gayest moments, there had always been an edge of melancholy to her, but now it seemed to deepen and widen daily. He noticed it, responded to it with concern, but couldn't find out why it was happening. As usual, she was intensely reluctant to talk about her feelings, and would either change the subject when Farber questioned her or become withdrawn if he pressed her to answer.

It wasn't until they attended the monthly Co-op mixer—a flamboyant

gesture of defiance on Farber's part, from which he derived a good deal of bittersweet enjoyment—that he began to understand what was wrong. Prominent members of the Cian community were regularly invited to the mixer—still referred to as a "cocktail party," although amphetamines and hallucinogens were served as readily as alcohol—and some of them actually came; they called the parties "Little Modes," and seemed to regard them with tolerant, amused condescension, as one would an absurd play put on by kindergarten children.

Tonight the Cian were very cold toward Liraun, even colder than the Terrans were to Farber. They didn't quite snub her openly, but there was a thinly veiled hostility behind everything they said and did that indicated their disapproval of her. Jacawen *sur* Abut was there, that chilly man—as Liaison, he almost had to be there, but it was clear that he hated attending; unlike the other Cian, who participated in the spirit of celebration with a whooping gusto that was not without a certain overtone of sarcasm, he watched the crowds of noisy partygoers with distaste, eyed the dancing with scorn (never, never trying the Terran dances himself, as some of the other Cian sometimes did, the grace and suppleness of their movements far outshining the dancing Terrans even when they amusingly bungled the steps, good-naturedly leading the laughter their attempts to master the Scorpion or the Dustdevil Three-Step inevitably evoked), and imbibed nothing, neither food nor drink nor drug. And, also unlike the other Cian, he alone was openly hostile to Liraun, his flinty eyes snapping with displeasure whenever he saw her, stalking abruptly from rooms if she entered them, refusing to speak to her or acknowledge her presence in any positive way.

Liraun was strained and silent throughout the party, and kept to herself as much as possible. Farber was chagrined: it had never occurred to him that their miscegenation might have caused Liraun to be ostracized by her people as he had been by his; he had realized that the Terrans would be distant with her, but had not stopped to think that by bringing her to the party he would be exposing her to the hostility and scorn of the Cian as well.

That night, for the first time since he'd known her, she was preoccupied and unresponsive during their lovemaking. At first he thought she was angry with him for taking her to the party, but then he realized that her distress was made up more of pain and humiliation than of anger. They lay quietly together in the darkness, her sweaty thigh still thrown over his legs, her head on his shoulder and three of her nipples—still hard—pressing into his side, feeling the sweat drying on their bodies, the

body fluids and semen turning sticky in their pubic hair, watching the creamy shimmer of light the streetlamp outside the window cast across the ceiling and along the top of one wall. The silence was too heavy and too long there in the musk-smelling darkness, her body too inert a weight, and so to break the silence he said, "What was it like for you when you were a child?"—not so much because he thought she would answer him, or even necessarily because he really wanted to know, but because these were the only words, the only conversational gambit, he could find in his tired, intoxicated head.

Surprisingly, she did answer him, raising up a little on an elbow to speak musingly, ironically, bitterly: "What was it like, to be a child? I remember mostly emptiness and wind, and that no one would play with me. Being alone. Walking on the Esplanade in the snow and the icy wind, looking at the shuttered houses. Knowing that every day, every minute, that went by brought me that much closer to the day I would die."

Farber stared at her, appalled. "It was really that bad for you?" he asked, but she merely shook her head, indicating not a negative reply but that she no longer wanted to talk about it. Instead she propped herself higher on her elbow, her thigh sliding over him as she moved, and stared down at him in a languid but intent way that finally reminded him—with an odd thrill of embarrassment—that she could see much better in the dark than he could. She touched his face with her fingertips, gently tracing the ridge of his eyebrows, his cheekbones, the line of his massive jaw. "So strange," she said dreamily, "so strange. Like an animal, almost. Bestial. Like one of the scurrying little rockbabies who live in the western hills." Farber, who had seen a rockbaby, realized that she was comparing him to the closest analog of an ape that Weinunnach possessed, and—after the initial half-amused flash of pique—it startled him to hear that she thought of him as ape-like, because he had often thought how much like a cat she was; a cat, or an otter, perhaps: some sleek, graceful animal, self-possessed and beautiful. Bestial, yes. Like a beast. Like him. Feeling obscurely guilty, he reached up and touched her cheek, the silken, crackling cascade of her hair. She blazed up at his touch like tinder. They made love in a desperate hurry, Liraun forcing the pace, as though she feared the ceiling would fall in or the ground swallow them before they could finish.

Afterwards they rested in each other's arms, the cat and the ape (neither was either, though both were aliens)—but Liraun slept fitfully, tossing and moaning as she worked her way through the turbulent country of her dreams, and Farber, who held her and stroked her throughout the

night, slept not at all.

6

It took Farber a few more days to dig out the cause of Liraun's ostracism, but at last, after much persistence and persuasion, the story came out in disjointed sections. Pieced together, it looked like this: Cian morality saw nothing wrong with an unmarried girl taking a lover, even an alien lover, as long as she did not conceive; there was no special premium on virginity—rather the opposite, in fact. Until she was married, however, she was expected to live by herself, or in her father's house. There was a special symbolism to this—a girl was said to go "from under her father's roof to her husband's." It was a matter of ownership, plain and simple, of transference of title, and there was no room in the equation for her accepting the protection of any other male. So Liraun's sin was not that she was sleeping with Farber—a matter of utter indifference to most of the other Cian—but *that she was living with him*, "under the roof" of a man who was not her husband. Odd as this seemed to Farber, it was serious enough to get her ostracized.

All this gave Farber another sleepless night. If he had been born thirty years earlier, or ten years later, he probably wouldn't have worried about Liraun's welfare at all, but amorality had gone out of fashion, as it periodically did, and along with their Horatio Alger optimism and drive to succeed, his generation had rediscovered humanism—limited to their own class of people, of course, i.e.: "humans"—and a sort of studied naivete. So he stayed up to figure out the Decent Thing To Do. On the one hand, he sincerely loved Liraun, didn't want her hurt on his behalf—but he didn't want to lose her, either. On the other hand, he was as terrified of marriage as most young men of his day, especially the artists and the intelligentsia. But no matter how he nagged it, it always came down to that: he should either marry her, or leave her; nothing else would help her situation.

Toward dawn, he decided—rather cold-bloodedly, but a man can often identify cold-bloodedness as practicality if he squints at it hard enough—that the best thing to do would be to marry Liraun, but only under the Cian rites. That would make her a respectable woman again in the eyes of the Cian, and yet, as far as his fellow Terrans were concerned, it would be only a native marriage: it wouldn't be binding on Earth, and if his relationship with Liraun soured, he could leave at the end of his hitch

without worrying about legalities. In the morning he sent an application to the Cian Liaison (that cold little man probably wouldn't approve it anyway, judging by his reaction to Liraun at the party), and a note to the Co-op explaining what he was proposing to do. Then he went to sleep. He hadn't thought to tell Liraun about it yet.

Liraun's eyes, when he told her. The second step.

The next afternoon, Farber had an interview with the Co-op Director.

Most of the Earthmen played at being embittered because it was the style of their times, but with Raymond Keane, the Director, it was not an assumed thing. He was embittered. He was a bitter, troubled, cynical, beat-out, burnt-up man, with just enough energy left to him to form a reservoir of weary malice. He had been here since the very beginning of Terran involvement with "Lisle," in one capacity or another. In all that time, he had been unable to come up with a really viable trade commodity. The last great white hope had been a native drug—used for an entirely different purpose on Wei-nunnach—that the Co-op had imported to Earth as a serum to overcome organ rejection in transplant cases, and which had turned out to have the unfortunate side effect of dissolving all the cholinesterase in a user's body two years after the initial dose, something that had never happened at the Enclave in years of testing. Apparently the reaction had been triggered by something in the environment of Earth; something had switched on an episome that remained latent on "Lisle." That was the trouble with interstellar commerce: too many wild factors, and the rules of the game shifted constantly and unpredictably. Keane, a minor executive at the time, had been swept into the Director's office by the cholinesterase scandal, but had not been able to get out from under its shadow. Time after time, his exports to Terra went wrong, soured, failed of their expectation—never as spectacularly as the first fiasco, never drastically enough to shake him out of office, but consistently. This had been going on for almost five years. It had eaten him. He looked like a man who no longer had the strength to go on, but who must, and so goes on without strength, held together only by a set of complex and rigidly interlocking weaknesses.

He kept Farber on the carpet for more than an hour.

Farber had not been passionately attached to his matrimonial plans when he came to the office—it was the morning after, and he was

beginning to see some of the difficulties involved. He had half-expected to be talked out of it, and half-wished that he would be. But instead of persuading, Keane had chided, threatened, fumed, ranted, finally working himself into such a red-faced rage that he had almost begun to scream. At first, Farber had been amazed. He worked for the Co-op on the loosest of contractual bases, with effectively no supervision at all, and he wasn't used to this type of vicious dressing-down. Then he began to get mad. Keane blustered on—the marriage would stir up bad feelings among the Cian, it would be a step toward diluting the cultural identity of the Earth Enclave, it might encourage other Earthmen—or worse, women—to do the same, it would split Farber's loyalties, take up too much of his time ... a plethora of reasons, some good, some bad, all of them false. Farber watched Keane's face as he talked. The Director's face was flat and dull, his skin the seeming texture of horn, cross-hatched with shiny dead places, like scales of congealed lard, where a dream had died and turned to chitin. No matter what he said, the real reason he was against the marriage was that he hated the Cian. That was something that went beyond logic, or duty, or even self-interest. He hated the Cian, he hated the Co-op, "Lisle," his job, Farber. Most of all he hated himself. It was a weary, helpless hatred, all the blacker because it was impotent. It could not even destroy. All it could do was negate.

Farber could be a very obstinate man indeed when aroused to it, and now that mulish streak became dominant. He began to flush. Unconsciously, he braced himself, settling down more firmly in his chair, flattening his feet against the floor.

Keane ran down at last, and the room filled with a silence that went on and on. Farber sat perfectly still. He had not said a word since Keane began his tirade. He did not speak now. He just sat motionlessly in the center of the office—a gleaming antiseptic cave, steel, plastic, chrome, shiny tile, glass, filled with oddments, plaques, framed certificates, charts, stacked banks of files, a huge computer terminal, a hologram tank that filled half a wall—and stared levelly at Keane. Keane fiddled with the litter on his desk.

"The Cian Liaison has granted you an interview tomorrow," Keane said, after an uneasy pause, "to discuss this proposal of yours. My advice to you is not to keep it. If you do keep it, then you must assure the Liaison that this has all been some sort of mistake or misconception on your part. Do you understand that?"

"My personal life is none of your business," Farber said flatly.

"Under no circumstances will you pursue this matter any further, Mr,

Farber."

"Your authority does not extend to my private life," Farber said, with a touch of heat. "I'll do what I like with it."

"Farber—" Keane said, and Farber, simultaneously said, "It's none of your business!"

Another pause.

"I can make a great deal of trouble for you, you know," Keane said.

That was the third step.

Doggedly, Farber took the following afternoon off and went to see the Cian Liaison to the Terran Mission, Jacawen *sur* Abut. Jacawen had his office in Old City.

Farber had been up to Old City before, but he hadn't stayed long because he didn't like it there. It was a place of precipitous cobblestone streets, towers and spires and domes, steep stairways, terraced balconies and plazas, long narrow alleys that wound claustrophobically between high walls of black rock until they opened onto sudden startling vistas of the wide country or the restless sea below. It was a place of levels, of shafts that dropped down deep into the rock of the cliff itself, going down and down with lights and windows sparkling silver and orange in the depths like phosphorescence at the bottom of an old dry well; of honeycombed bluffs of more adamant rock that rose like cliffs atop a cliff from a terrace or a square, looming up like the stern of a great dark ship and lifting a twinkling freight of windows high above the rooftops of the level below, with more buildings built atop it, and still more built atop them, mazy roofs climbing up and up into the deep blue-black sky. It was a place that was banded by little vertical jungles, growing right up and over the city like creeper vines. All of Aei was crisscrossed with Feral Strips, kept wild to provide the citizens with relief from urban existence, but the Feral Strips in Old City were almost straight up-and-down, weeds and ropy bushes and little stunted trees that clung to fissures and slanting crevasses in the outer walls, full of shaggy agile creatures—something like goats, something like squirrels— that leapt in serene silence from hummock to hummock, pursued by little mewling predators with needle-tipped tails and perpetually apologetic grins. It was a place of little commerce or overt activity. There were no shops or stores in Old City, although there were many administrative offices and private homes. There were two open-air markets during the daytime, and hot-food vendors along the Esplanade,

but only a few small restaurants that operated after dark, and no commonhouses or entertainment places at all, unlike New City. It was a restricted place, in some ways. Any Cian could visit Old City, but only a member of one of the Thousand Families could live there. In New City, you would often see nulls or clones or genetically altered beings in the street—the Cian possessed an immensely sophisticated biological technology, and their genetic surgeons, the "tailors," produced strange creatures to order as one of Weinunnach's major exports—but they were not allowed to set foot in Old City. Offworlders like the Terrans were allowed to visit, but reluctantly. It was a place made primarily of rock and dressed obsidian, interwoven with wood, iron, glass, and slate. Its predominant colors were black and silver, with a few slate grays and reds, and an occasional startling patch of orange or earth brown. It smelled of clean naked rock, and ozone, and sea-wind, with a lingering undertang of musk. There were few loud sounds, but the silence was a vibrant humming one—as of a million constant voices a bit too subdued to be heard. The mood of Old City balanced on the razor edge between "brooding" and "serene."

Today, to Farber, it was brooding. He took the cablecar up, walked along the Esplanade at the edge of the great cliff, went up a stairway, along an alley, through a tunnel, up another stairway, along another alley, penetrating ever deeper and higher into Old City. At last he was so deep inside it that he saw Fire Woman only occasionally and at a distance as it peered over the jumble of high roofs and down into the narrow warrens and passageways. Everything was bathed in shifting half-light now, and he walked on through alternating strips of bright hazy radiance and shadows so deep that they looked like glistening black solids. He felt like a worm inching his way through black rock and wet earth, until he came out onto a staircase that led up and across the domed roof of a building on a lower level, dizzying and sundazzled, with a sheer unprotected drop on one side, and then he felt like an insect crawling across the naked shoulder of a mountain. Jacawen's office was nearby, in a building that jutted out from the city mass like a gable, its windows opening on nothing except air and distances.

Jacawen's heir-son, Mordana, showed Farber in. He was a tall, taciturn young man with a face like a scornful angel: remote, handsome, full of pride and disdain. He moved like a tiger, like a warrior gliding into battle; his eyes blazed with feral intelligence and an almost fanatical intensity. It was obvious that he disliked Farber on sight, that Farber's very existence was somehow an affront to his conception of the universe. With a stiff, self-absorbed face, like that of someone who smells a bad odor, he took

Farber to the inner office and departed quickly.

"Sit down, Mr. Farber," Jacawen said.

Farber sat down. The floor here was carpeted with what appeared to be a kind of pale fungus, and he sank into it as he would into a cushion. Jacawen sat on a low dais a few feet away. The office was roomy, neat, uncluttered, with stone walls and a half-timbered ceiling. There was a window in the east-facing wall, looking out over the tidelands of Elder Sea; it was open, and they could hear surf and the crying of "seabirds," brought near by the wind, then fading away again into distance as the wind died. That wind, whistling in through the window with its freight of ocean sounds, was thin and cold, and tasted of salt, which tasted in turn of blood. Some sunlight leaked in with the wind, also thin and cold, but pure as clear crystal—it played on the rich tapestry covering the opposite wall, meticulously picking out gods and men, cold-eyed demons and beautiful women, births and battles, deliverance and death.

Farber and Jacawen looked each other over, silently.

Jacawen himself was a small, somber, self-possessed man, with the jet-black hair and wide golden eyes of most of his race. He was sleek as an otter, giving the impression of sturdiness, of a compact and supple muscularity. His breasts were no larger than those of an ordinary Earthman, as he was not in lactation at the time, but his thin shirt showed the impression of three pairs of nipples, spaced two by two down along his ribcage, and six small bumps to go with them. His face was calm, almost dispassionate, but it looked somewhat satanic to Farber because of the tiny points of the canine teeth that protruded beyond the lips. Jacawen was even more intelligent and adamant than his son, but in him the fanatic intensity had been banked down into a more assured, controllable, useful force, a steady, smokeless flame. Both were Shadow Men, a quasi-religious sect that ran much of the government of Shasine, but Jacawen had the maturity and the wisdom of experience—Mordana was still full of worldly pride, but Jacawen had passed beyond that to the curious arrogant humility of a senior Shadow Man, and he aspired to be, like the angels, beyond shame and pride. With that, he had varying degrees of success.

"Did you know that Liraun is my half-niece?" Jacawen asked abruptly.

Oh Christ, Farber thought.

After a moment, he managed to say: "No, I didn't know that."

"I tell you this," Jacawen said, with equanimity, "not because it is important in itself, but because it is proof that I know her mind, that I

have had much time to observe her. On Weinunnach, it is the custom to have our children in surges, Mr. Farber, four years apart. Liraun was born in the fallow period between surges, one and a half years after the previous surge, two and a half years before the surge to come. It almost never happens that our women conceive when they are not supposed to conceive, but sometimes it happens regardless, and this was one such time. Do you understand, Mr. Farber? Liraun grew up alone, with no age group to fit into, with no companions. Not even wombmates—the Mother, who did not realize for months that she had conceived, did not have time to cherish the growth in the proper way: most of her wombmates were stillborn, one sister died in early childhood. Liraun survived, but she grew up sad and wild, and she still is so. She has been out of Harmony on other occasions." He stopped and stared at Farber. "Do you understand, Mr. Farber? I am talking openly to you of private matters, against the custom of our people, and it is distasteful to me—but I wish you to understand."

Farber scowled. "It seems like you're telling me that Liraun's—affair—with me is just one more wild prank in a life of unfortunate rebellion."

"That is oddly put, but basically accurate."

"And that's all you think it is?"

Jacawen sat impassively for a moment, then started again. "Mr. Farber, I don't think you've understood me after all," he said drily. "I am not talking about your proposal of marriage to Liraun. What I have been saying to you is in the way of an apology for the strain and disharmony this thing must have caused you, and an assurance that it was not your responsibility. This mating between Cian and Terran should never have happened at all, but if it was going to happen, then it does not surprise me at all that Liraun should be the one woman in all of Shasine that it happened to. Who *caused* it to happen, Mr. Farber. That is all I wished to convey to you."

"What about my proposal of marriage?" Farber said, in a tight voice.

"That, of course, cannot be. It is unallowable."

"Why?"

"Because your race and mine are not interfertile, Mr. Farber!" Jacawen said, a hint of passion in his voice for the first time. "Can't you see that? A marriage between you and Liraun would be a sterile one. A marriage that does not produce children is an abomination in the eyes of the People of Power, it is an offense to all Harmony. There has never been such a thing on the face of Weinunnach! There never will be!" All the intensity had

flared up, the steady flame roared and swelled behind his eyes. Then it slowly guttered, leaving him shaken. "No, I'm sorry, Mr. Farber," he said. "It cannot be. I speak to you frankly now, Mr. Farber, perhaps to my own dishonor: even if the marriage were not impossible, I would be against it, I would disapprove, but by our custom I could not stand in the way of your free choice. However, as it is, I have no need: all Weinunnach stands in your way and prevents you. It is unallowable. I cannot say that I am sorry."

That's it, then, Farber thought, and felt only a vast wave of relief. But even while it was washing over him, some distanced part of himself that he did not understand was making him say: "Are you sure there's no way around that? Are you *sure*? No way at *all*?" in a tone of petulant, chivvying desperation.

Jacawen stared at him, and something new came into his face, disgruntlement, annoyance, malice, reluctance, regret—all of these perhaps. He said: "There is a way, Mr. Farber. If you wish, you may have our Tailors adjust your karyotype, change it to match with ours. Then you could marry, Mr. Farber. Making that adjustment would not change you into a Cian in the gross physical sense, but it would effect your cytological material, and it would change the number and morphology of your chromosomes. It would have little real effect, except on your offspring. It would change your seed, Mr. Farber, it would change your seed. You see? You and Liraun would no longer be sterile. If you impregnated her, your children would be full-blooded Cian, with no trace of Terra in them at all." He smiled cuttingly at Farber, the malice now only thinly veiled. "Well, Mr. Farber, do you want me to put you down for an appointment with the Tailors? I assure you that is the only possible way you could marry Liraun, and I'm *sure* of that, Mr. Farber. Well?"

Farber was flushing with shame and puzzled anger. In an attempt to save some semblance of face, he let his voice say: "Yes."

"You do wish to see the Tailors, then?"

Flatly: "Yes."

"Excellent!" Jacawen said. His hand broke a light beam. A control panel, of compact Jejun make, slid up out of the floor. Jacawen studied a dial, turned a switch, hit three keys, and said something in a dialect too swift to follow. The panel slid back into the floor. Jacawen looked at Farber. "Now," he said, "you have an appointment at the Hall of Tailors, here in Old City, tomorrow, at 1125 by your time. I wish you good luck." And Jacawen smiled with calculated blandness, with aloof contempt, mocking Farber, pouring his scorn onto him—a scorn so much more

devastating than Mordana's, because it was so much less automatic, and so much more earned. Farber had tried a bluff, and it had been called; he had been forced right out of the game. Jacawen knew that Farber would never keep the appointment, that the price was too high, that Farber never had any intention of going at all. Farber had tried to brazen it through, and had lost face enormously. Jacawen knew that Farber would not have the courage to go through with it.

He was right. Farber knew it too.

The shame that Farber felt as he pushed out of the office, that was the fourth step.

It was late afternoon by the time he reached the Enclave, so Farber stopped off at the Co-op Mess to have a drink. He found Dale Brody at the bar, already well on his way into a stinking, falling-down drunk. The Co-op grapevine must have been working as well as ever, because, after a few minutes of silent, cold-shoulder drinking, Brody leaned over to Farber, and said, in a hoarse malodorous voice: "You can fuck niggers if you want, but don't you think about marrying them! We don't marry our niggers back home."

Farber raised his big fist—feeling like a character in an old-time movie, but doing it anyway—and knocked two of Brody's teeth out.

That was the fifth step.

When Farber checked back at his office at last, there was a note waiting for him, asking him to call on Dr. Anthony Ferri, the Co-op ethnologist.

Ferri was a phlegmatic, reclusive man, but his cool reticence was a mask for voracious ambitions of a sort that must have burned themselves to slag in Keane years before. He worked for the Co-op, but he was simultaneously doing field work for Cornell—*really* doing field work for Cornell is the way he himself would have put it, if you caught him in a confiding mood—and all his dreams were centered on the marvelous monographs he would publish, on the books he would write, on the honors he would earn, on grants and university chairs and lecture tours and tenure. He wanted to be famous, to be well respected, to be a giant in his field. That was his one passion; everything else had been sublimated into it. And it was possible that he would yet translate dream into reality. He had a brilliant mind, an enormous—though somewhat specialized—store of erudition, and enough practicality to realize that he would have to work like a demon every moment of his stay on "Lisle" if he were ever to realize

his ambitions. All that was on the credit side of the ledger. On the debit side was his own personality. Most men found him cold, distant, and unfriendly. Actually, he was a fairly sociable man, and, when he noticed them, sincerely liked people. But he seldom noticed them—he was too absorbed by work, too haunted by the sense of time ticking by and taking him no closer to his goal. He was taciturn to the point of insult. That was because, basically, he had nothing to say about most things. But when he judged that a bit of communication might advance his career, and especially when the subject under discussion fell within his own sphere of expertise, he could suddenly become affable, loquacious, enthusiastic, persuasive, even glib.

He was all of those things that evening.

He wanted Farber to work for him. More precisely, he wanted Farber to be a "research assistant," gathering the type of data that he was unable to get himself. Ferri was too much of a cold fish— although he didn't put it quite that way when he was explaining it to Farber—to become really friendly with the Cian, to be accepted into their homes; he had tried, in his most ingratiating manner and with all the professional wiles he could command, and he had been rebuffed—with characteristic Cian politeness, but decisively. That meant that some doors were forever closed to him in Shasine. But Farber was already intimately involved with a Cian, and if, as the gossip had it, he was going to marry her, then the chances were that he'd eventually be able to penetrate even deeper into Cian society. Ferri, seeing that Farber was getting angry, admitted hastily that it was none of his business whether Farber married Liraun or not, but if he did, if he *did*—The job wouldn't be very demanding, Ferri explained, mostly a matter of keeping his eyes open, surreptitiously recording conversations—here Ferri exhibited a bracelet containing a hidden microminiaturized recorder—and telemetering the stuff back to Ferri. Just the raw data; he wouldn't have to try to analyze it or draw conclusions. Ferri and his semantic and anthropological computers would do that. But only Farber could get the data in the first place.

"Joe, listen to me," Ferri said urgently. "You're new here, you don't realize yet what a godawful *secretive* culture this is. On the surface it looks like a pretty open and relaxed society, everybody friendly and polite, almost stress-free when compared to an Earth society like America or Russia, low incidence of neurosis, lower incidence of insanity, suicide relatively rare, stress-induced illness infrequent, psychosomatic illness almost completely unknown. But they're so completely obsessional in guarding their privacy! Their private lives are sacrosanct, they won't talk

about them, they won't let us investigate them. We've been here more than a decade, and we still don't know anything about them, except what they let us see. Nothing, not a damn thing! We've never even been able to put a Cian through a physical examination, let alone dissect one. Joe, you *have* to cooperate."

"I don't know," Farber said.

"I can pay you for your help, out of my Cornell budget. Middling well."

"It isn't that."

"What, then?"

"I just don't know if I'd want to do something like that. I don't think I would."

"There're one hell of a lot more questions about this world than there are answers, you know that, Joe?" Ferri said, as if he hadn't heard Farber, as though the possibility of a negative answer just didn't exist. "For one thing, I'd like to know how in the world the Tailors think they're going to change your karyotype. They're going to open up each and every cell in your body and tinker around with the chromosomes with their little hammers and screwdrivers, right? Sure they are. And yet, who knows—I'm told that their genetic science is one of the most sophisticated known, and that they get plenty of interstellar trade on that basis. . . . It's so damn frustrating trying to figure out the technological level of this society, it really and truly is. As far as I can tell, the Cian have the capacity for space flight, if they'd put all the various pieces of their technology together in the right way, and 've had that capacity for thousands of years. They just don't want to—it doesn't interest them. Goddam it, none of it squares. Look at the primitive way they live, animal-drawn carts, all the rest of it. They don't have to! The technology is there, has been available for over a thousand years, so they say—but they just don't use it much. They have efficient mass communications and high-speed transportation, but they use them so damn sparingly; most of the time they'd rather walk, and there isn't a public phone system in all of Aei, except for ours at the Enclave. What kind of cultural development produces a psychology like that?" He paused to wipe his face, glaring at Farber.

"I don't know," Farber said mildly; he had decided it was no use even trying to breast the floods of talk Ferri was capable of unleashing—just sit patiently and wait for them to crest and ebb, that's all you could do.

"You're damn right you don't know!" Ferri said angrily, mopping at his face again. "No one does. There never was anything like it in Earth history. In spite of occasional Luddites and back-to-nature freaks, there never has

been a human society that had all the gadgets and benefits of a high-production machine technology available to it, and yet just didn't bother to use it, whose members just didn't *feel* like using it—and I don't think there ever will be such a society, either. The simple life, noble savages, all that—that's just a bunch of crap. Primitive people always snatch eagerly at the comforts of a higher technology, even if those comforts do them harm in the long run, even if the civilized, convenient methods just don't *work* as well as the old primitive ones did: look at the Eskimos, for Christ's sake! How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm, right? After they've seen a shopping center, even, let alone Paree."

"The Cian aren't Eskimos," Farber said.

"Damn right! Damn right!" Ferri said, nastily. "You hit it on the head again, friend. The Cian aren't Eskimos, damn right. And yet we act as if they were. The Cian are dangerous because they look so much like humans compared to the other kinds of aliens we've met, that we tend to think of them as people in make-up and furry costumes, we tend to think of them as human and relate to them on that basis—and yet they are not human, and there is an insidious danger in relating to them as if they were. They are aliens, with alien thought processes that are very different from ours beneath a seductive surface similarity. Actually, we have few points of similarity, and we'd be better off thinking of them as animals or even monsters, rather than pretending that they're people."

"They're human enough to sleep with," Farber snapped, without thinking, and then flushed red to his ears.

"Sex!" Ferri sneered. "So you can *schtup* them—so what? Back on Earth, people fuck goats, sheep, dogs, horses, cows. . . . Does that make a cow human, because you can lean it up against a stump and *schtup* it? You're as bad as those idiots over at the Co-op. Every day I can see them settling a little deeper into their role-playing— they're the agents of the British East India Company, and the Cian are the ragged native hordes, right? Right? They're even calling them 'niggers' now, aren't they, even people who wouldn't think of calling a real Negro that—even the *Negroes* are calling them that, for Christ's sake! Colonialism, that's what it is. We're all settling into this fantasy that Earth is a colonial power and the Cian are backward savages to whom we're bringing the benefits of civilization. But the Cian aren't a backward people, in spite of the carts and hand labor and barbaric splendor, and all that—they were members of the Commercial Alliance a thousand years or more before we showed up, and the Enye, at least, think a lot more of them than they do of us. And yet we deal with them as though they were nineteenth-century tribesmen from

India or Africa, and call them 'niggers.' Because we think we know them, but we don't. I don't. You don't."

"Maybe I know them a little better than some others do," Farber said quietly, but with a trace of smugness.

"And maybe you don't, either. They don't even have the same conception of time that we do. They're not as prone to think of time as a linear flow. Verbs in their language don't even have tenses, just aspects and validity forms, like Hopi. You can say 'remembered eating' or 'eating expected,' but you can't say 'He ate' or 'He will eat.' For Christ's sake, they shouldn't have men like us to deal with these creatures; we're wrong for the job, completely wrong. They should have sent Asians, Amerinds, Polynesians, Eskimos, even Bushmen or Abos—somebody who'd at least have a *chance* of understanding the Cian!"

"You know the political situation back home," Farber said, shrugging.

"Yes, I do," Ferri said. He was silent for a moment, then: "The women have a very strange role in this society. You're living with one, maybe marrying one! Don't you want to learn about them? Don't you want a fair chance of understanding the motivations of your own woman? I don't understand them, now. You won't either. Unmarried women are the *property* of the father. Married women, at least at first, are the property of the husband. No status, few rights. A textbook patriarchal society. But it doesn't stay that way— somehow some of the wives change their status, and go right to the top; they run everything then, they're almost worshipped. Why does that happen? I don't know. I do know that a woman usually changes her surname three times in life. Your woman's surname is *Jé Genawen*, I think I remember. Right? That means, approximately, 'belonging to Genawen,' her father. If she marries you, her surname will change to *Jé Farber*, believe it or not: 'belonging to Farber.' If she makes the status leap, however it's done, her surname becomes 'belonging to—' whatever the name of the female First Ancestor of her line is. What is all this rigmarole for? I don't know, but you could help me find out." He put his hand on Farber's arm with studied sincerity. "Joe, this is the first time a Cian has ever become intimately involved with a Terran. In a decade or more. It might never happen again. That's why this is so important. Don't you see, you're in a better position to learn about them than any man in the history of this mission! You must help me."

"I'll think about it," Farber said, and brushing aside Ferri's protests, he got ready to leave.

He had already made the sixth step, although he didn't realize it yet.

And Farber spent another night of years.

7

The next morning, Farber rose very early, and, prompted by some obscure instinct, dressed in his best suit. Liraun lay in the big bed and watched him, her eyes following him as he wandered through the apartment. She didn't get up to make breakfast for him, as she usually did; nor did he ask her to. She did not speak at all. Her expression was unreadable. Farber was equally mute; he finished dressing as quickly as he could, although he was far from being in a hurry—he wanted to avoid her patient, thoughtful eyes. Those eyes did not pressure him at all; that was why he couldn't stand them. The pale red light of Fire Woman bled in through the blinds, polarizing dust motes in the air, throwing slats of radiance across the opposite wall. The Terran furniture that filled the apartment looked cheap and shabby in that pitiless light—plastic and machine-stamped, as indeed it was. Everything was bland, precise, artificial. Only Liraun was real here. Without moving or speaking, she remained the vital, vibrant center of the place. The apartment was filled with her presence, and with her warm musky smell. She was the extenuating factor, she lent the room what validity it had. Without her, it would be a wordless.

Outside, it was very cold. Farber walked hurriedly through the wide streets of the Enclave, hands in his pockets, his feet making a hollow *click-clack*, his breath steaming in plumes and tatters. There was no one else about. Fire Woman was dipping in and out of corrugated gray clouds, and hoarfrost glistened over everything. The tall Terran-style buildings rose on either side, prefabricated glass-and-plastic hives, jarringly out of place. They were surrounded by lush groves of black feathertrees, a half-hearted decorator's touch which only succeeded in increasing the contrast. A hidden something was singing in the cold morning hush—it sounded like a bird, but it was a lizard. Some of the streetlights—another Terran touch—were still on, looking wan and sadly pointless against the lightening gray sky. He reached the huge wall that surrounded the Enclave—*What do they think they're keeping out? he thought. With a wall?*—passed the sleeping gate guard in his glassine booth, and struck

out into Aei. The streets turned from asphalt to porcelain, and, as he cleared the horizon-swallowing Terran skyline, Old City loomed up on its obsidian cliff, way in the middle of the air.

Twice, he stopped and turned back. One of these times, he retraced his steps for about a half-mile back toward the Enclave, until shame and indecision stopped him, turned him around again, and set him stumbling off toward his original goal. He couldn't do it—he couldn't go back and tell her that he was afraid to do it, that the marriage was off. She wouldn't cry, she wouldn't reproach him—she would accept it with patient, unaccusing despair, and *that* was what he couldn't face, that was what he wouldn't be able to stand. If he backed down, he wouldn't be able to face any of them: Keane with his angry contempt, Jacawen with his cold scorn, Kathy with her smug complacent belief in his inevitable return to her. Not one of them believed he would go through with it, and if he proved them right, that would be the death blow to the surviving tatters of his pride. And without that pride, he would not live. It was the last thin membrane between him and a gaping black pit of futility; he could sense that pit very clearly, the depth of the fall that awaited him. So he continued to walk, jerky, gray-faced, like a clumsily made automaton.

He took the high-speed line up to Old City. There, surrounded by high stone walls and steep cobblestone streets, the enormity of what he was about to do hit him with redoubled impact. He found a small terrace at the foot of a winding alley and stood there for almost an hour, looking out over the alien lands below. The Aome glinted like a silver-scaled snake as it wound through New City—it hadn't frozen over yet, although it certainly wouldn't remain clear too much longer. He flicked a pebble down toward the river, and was appalled to see how fast the pebble disappeared. Lost, lost. *You have to be crazy*, he told himself. *You have to be crazy to think of doing a thing like this. Nothing's worth it, nothing.* He was shaking, and his throat was dry. His skin felt feverish to his own touch. He started walking again, without volition. After a while, he noticed, in horror, that he was walking toward the Hall of Tailors. *I won't go in*, he told himself. *I'll just take a look at it, and then go back.* But he did go in, walking as though in a dream. For all his procrastination, he noticed numbly, he was only five minutes late for his appointment.

Jacawen *sur* Abut was waiting there for him. With a face like stone, he led Farber through the busy, echoing corridors to a room filled with unobtrusive machines and polite Cian technicians. Jacawen said nothing. Farber's presence said all there was to say. Jacawen muttered to the chief technician, nodded to Farber, and left.

The technician smiled politely at Farber, revealing even wet teeth, and bowed.

Then they shut Farber off, put him into the machines, and did what they were supposed to do to him.

Four hours later, they switched Farber back on again. He blinked, and sat up groggily. He was on a roll-away bed. His vision was swimming, and his head felt fuzzy, as if it had been stuffed with cotton batting. There was a horrible taste in his mouth. The technician, standing at Farber's elbow, gave him exactly the same polite smile, tooth for tooth, and handed him a glass of the fiery native liquor. It sent him into a coughing spasm, but it cleared his head. The technician took Farber's pulse, looked into his eyes, pressed a tubular machine against his upper arm and read the result off a dial, and then told Farber that he was to go now.

Somehow, Farber found himself outside, stumbling through the streets of Aei Old City. He kept looking at his hands, turning them over and over, holding them up to his eyes. He pressed his palms against his cheeks, feeling the warmth and solidity of his flesh. He pinched himself, digging his fingernails in. Everything felt the same, looked the same, but it was not. Alienness was swimming inside of him, ticking inside of him, waiting in his seed. Numbly, he kept slamming into that terrible realization, over and over again.

He was no longer human.

8

Joseph Farber and Liraun Jé Genawen were married late that afternoon, on the Esplanade of the Terrace, with the towers of Old City above them, and the expanse of New City below them. The ceremony was short, simple, and incomprehensible to Farber, who couldn't follow the dialect. The wind swept the length of the Esplanade to lash them, and it was bitterly cold. The thin voice of the Cian Elder, the Singer or *twizan*, sank under that wind, and then rose stubbornly above it once again. He was braced against the wind like a weathered gray rock, almost toothless, white-haired, very old. His bright ancient eyes gave no indication that he found this marriage unusual, though it had never happened before in the

history of his race. There were no Earthmen present. Jacawen was there, standing silently to one side, looking cold and disapproving. Genawen *sur* Abut, Liraun's father, was there. He was a fat, good-natured old man with huge floppy breasts and a heavy bristly beard. He was trying to take his cue from his half-brother, Jacawen, and look stern, but he kept forgetting and letting a big happy grin spread over his face—he had been afraid that his daughter would never marry, and he was glad to see her wed, even to an alien. Several other Cian men were present, but no women. That struck Farber as odd, but he was still too numb to think about it. He was devoting all his energy to putting up a good show for Liraun. Liraun was radiant—there was no other word for it. Several times Farber thought he saw a burst of light out of the corner of his eye, and turned to find that it was only Liraun's face. The flash of her smile drew reflexive radiance from everyone, even dour Jacawen. As the ceremony ended, Fire Woman broke through the clouds on the horizon, and the world opened up. You could see all the way up the North Shore now, mile upon mile, the glinting bulk of Elder Sea, the dunes, the tidy checkerboarded fields and orchards of Shasine, Fire Woman sending shafts of smoky amber sunlight stabbing down into the rolling landscape below. Liraun turned to him, and put her hand into his. Her name was Liraun Jé Farber now.

9

They spent their wedding night at Farber's apartment, the last night they would spend there. He went to bed drunk and woke sweating and sober, with the full realization of what he'd done beginning to come home. Panicked, he sat up and started to swing himself out of bed. The touch of his hot, sweaty feet against the cold tile floor was nauseating; it froze him in mid-motion, as if his flesh had congealed, and he sat dispiritedly at the edge of the bed in a sagging, sweating, hunch-shouldered lump. His thoughts probed and gnawed at his situation, seeking a way out. There was none. There were no alternatives. It was too late. The finality of that was as cold and sick in his stomach as the evening's sour wine. He lay down again. He catnapped feverishly, and woke again and again during the night, lying still and blinking at the darkness, listening to the small sounds of his apartment. They were all cold sounds, artificial sounds, dry sterile tickings and clickings and buzzings. The clock, the lamp post outside the window, the temperature control, the air filter—all dead

things. They were loud enough to keep any sounds from outside, any living sounds, from reaching his ears. Each time he woke and listened, they seemed to grow more loud and distinct, until he felt as if he were closed up in the cold mechanical womb of some indifferent and unliving creature, he himself already dead before he could be born: a stone fetus. He rolled over, and tried to concentrate on the sound of Liraun's breathing, setting that warm purr and bumble against the too-precise whispering of the clockwork things. After a while, he slept.

Raymond Keane called in the morning, as expected. Farber felt better by then, clearer-headed and calm, as a man may when he has irreversibly committed himself. Resignation was almost a relief after the long interval of doubt and indecision. He watched without fear as Keane's flushed face swam into focus on the phone screen— he had used up all his apprehension the day before. Indeed, he was almost amused, Keane looked so hot and so earnestly angry. Farber had turned the volume control nearly all the way down, but the voice of the aging putty-faced zealot in the hologram still scritch'd unpleasantly loud in his ears. The Director was definitely not *gemutlich* today. Once again, Keane was demonstrating his basic incompetence, this time by peppering Farber with insults and threats in a ragged voice full of personal pique and vindictiveness that would never be used by a good administrator. Under any provocation. It was plainly evocative of a lack of control, and shattered the image of impartial omnipotence that men of Keane's position were expected to cultivate. *Another fool*, Farber thought. *I wonder if we all are?* For a moment he had a vision of the snobbish, overbearing Earthmen as they might appear to Cian eyes. It was not a flattering thought. He was aware of Liraun standing somewhere behind him, out of sight of the hologram cube. She made no sound.

The gist of Keane's tirade was—expulsion from the Terran community. Farber had dared to step across the line that Keane had drawn, and he would be struck down for it. None of this was surprising to Farber either, although "struck down" was a rather strong way to put it. Farber had broken no Terran laws—in fact, laws covering this situation did not as yet exist—but only the directives of the Co-operative. Keane had judicatory power over the Terrans in certain special circumstances, but they were sharply limited.

He could not prosecute Farber. Nor could he exile him from Earth; as a Terran citizen he was entitled to eventual passage to Earth if destitute,

although it might take him a couple of years to make the connections to get there. Nor could Keane keep from Farber a small regular stipend to be paid toward his support. The law—pushed through by Labor—insisted on this to keep the threat of firing by the Co-operative, and the possibly fatal abandonment of the discharged man in an alien society, from becoming the undefiable weapon it could have been. But Keane did have the power to dispose over the operation of the Co-operative on "Lisle," and he could bar Farber from the use of any Co-operative facilities. As this included the Enclave and most of the Terran establishments on the planet, it was trouble enough for Farber.

Effectively, it cut him off from all of his own people.

Now he was really an expatriate.

"—traitor to your race," Keane was saying, pious and prissy, when Farber finally told him to go fuck himself.

Without ceremony, they left the Enclave.

That afternoon, they moved up to Old City.

As a member of the Thousand Families, it was Liraun's privilege to live in Old City, and, as her kin-by-marriage, it was also Farber's. He would have preferred to waive privilege and live in New City, which he found a much more pleasant place, but Liraun was uncharacteristically adamant on this point. Too emotionally drained for a fight, Farber gave in to her.

They moved into the same house Liraun had vacated when she'd come down to live with Farber—it had stood unclaimed and uninhabited all the weeks she'd spent at the Enclave, there being little population pressure in Aei as a whole, and none at all in Old City. The house stood just a little behind and above Kite Hill, fronting on a broad cobblestone alley known as the Row. In one of the dominant architectural styles of Old City, it was a slate-roofed oblong building of black rock, narrow across the base, consisting of three large rooms stacked directly one on top of the other, connected by stairs and ladders, with the topmost room used mostly for storage. It was already furnished, so moving was only a matter of bringing their small personal possessions in, and their clothes, putting them away, and then cleaning the house. It was done to the last detail within two hours.

In the morning, Liraun returned to her old job, running a lathe in a precision machine shop in Toolmaker Way, near Cold Tower Hill in the New City. She picked up her work as though she had never been gone. Of

course, no one commented on her absence, and, except for one or two polite words of greeting, no one remarked her return.

Farber was left alone in the house.

He had the uneasy feeling that everything had happened too fast.

That afternoon he wandered aimlessly out into the Old City, exploring the adjacent neighborhoods in ever-widening spirals. On Kite Hill, appropriately enough, he found a group of Cian children flying an enormous, amorphous black-and-orange kite that looked, to his Earth-trained eye, like a dragon, although it could just as easily have been a squid or a snake or a jellyfish or any of a dozen other things. Other than the shrill voices of the playing children, an occasional flapping-canvas sound from the kite as warring air-currents took it, and the faint—almost subliminal—constant humming of the wind that was inescapable in Old City, there was no sound. No sound, and, once he had left the children behind, no people, no one at all. No motion, no life: only the black rock, the steep, winding streets, the shuttered houses, the keening of the wind—like a deserted stage set, like a city of ghosts, desolate and terrible.

It was less spooky down on the Terrace, less musty and claustrophobic; there were more people about here, and a welcome feeling of space, of air open to the horizon, as the New City stretched itself out below. He strolled along the Esplanade for a mile or so, and then, at its junction with the Winterwalk—a flight of stairs so steep they almost had to be climbed like a ladder, disappearing up into the rock-bound, hidden districts of the Old City's interior—he found what seemed to be a museum. At any rate, the door stood open—the only open door he had seen all afternoon—and small groups of Cian wandered in and out seemingly at random; inside, the building was dusty and dimly lit, and cluttered with artifacts of all kinds, some piled on tables or low benches, some propped up on the floor or along the walls, some on bookcase-like shelves or even on stairstep shelves that dangled down from the ceiling. There were no guards, no ticketsellers, no tour-guides, no display cases, no explanatory plaques or signs, no captions under the displays—for that matter, the artifacts didn't really seem to have been arranged for display under any organizing scheme or aesthetic, but simply piled up wherever it was most convenient to put them. Apparently you could stay as long as you liked, leave and enter without hindrance; no one seemed to be in charge, there were no museum-keepers or caretakers, and Farber wondered if the place stayed open all night—if, in fact, it ever closed at all. The Cian wandered through

the building, picking things up and studying them closely for a moment, putting them carefully back, ambling on, and Farber wondered if *shrine* were not closer to the truth than *museum*, although none of the Cian seemed particularly reverent in their handling of the artifacts.

Museum or shrine, there were some wonderful things there: ancient tools; bells; plows; keys; painted screens; coins; bronze cooking utensils turned green with age; elaborate bone combs; lengths of rusty chain; massive obsidian sculptures; little porcelain gods; nails; wooden carriage wheels; vases; bridles set with yellowstar gems; faded cloth costumes with elaborate gold brocade; broken pots; musical instruments of all varieties and degrees of repair; pitchforks; scrolls with ancient poem-plays written on them; old bricks and pieces of paving stone; masks; carved demons; bent spoons; monstrous false heads; and thousands of other objects he couldn't even begin to recognize. It was an archeologist's paradise, a midden without the mud and garbage (although some of the stuff looked suspiciously like junk to him), and he wondered if Ferri knew about it—having a brief amusing daydream of Ferri sticking artifacts under his coat and trying to smuggle them out, alarm gongs going off, invisible guards materializing out of nothingness and menacing the startled little ethnologist with energy guns and halberds. . . .

In a back room, where the only light was a dusty golden sliver of afternoon sunlight coming through a high slit-window, Farber found an entire suit of armor of an odd chain-link kind, standing upright against a wall. It held a two-pronged spear in one hand and a spike-studded club in the other; a broad, triangular-bladed sword was at its belt, along with something that looked like an oversized nutcracker; boots, gloves, and the one-piece leather body-tunic were black, the overlying chain-armor was a dusty dented silver; on the chest was a flat metal plate, black again, decorated in silver with rows of children's faces—serene and hauntingly melancholy—and with a lidless orange eye; the helmet was of silver metal, crowned by a rack of bone antlers that towered an additional three feet into the air. The visor of the helmet was thrown back, and inside was the glint of bone—Farber suddenly realized that there was a skeleton inside the armor, the skull leering out from under the visor with sightless empty sockets that had once been eyes. He felt the short hairs bristle along the back of his neck, and all at once his mouth was dry. It was uncanny to look at this fierce armored ghost and think of the ages of strife and turmoil that he represented, that stretched endlessly behind him like a long bloody shadow to the days—unimaginably long ago, known to him only by intuition—when the Cian had been warlike barbarians, when the chieftains of Shasine and the masters of Aei had carved out an empire

here with slaughter and sword and fire, perhaps subjugating whole races of unknown and vanished alien peoples. . . .

Bemused, Farber left the museum by a side door, also open. He found himself on the edge of the Esplanade, and stopped for a moment to lean on the railing and look out over the New City. There was the Enclave, its tall glass towers glaringly out of place with the rest of the city around it, and it struck him forcefully how alien it looked, how enigmatic and strange the enormous buildings were with their blank black glass and razor-sharp angles, how cold and arrogant they looked, how unfathomable and fierce must be the race of giants that built them.

This was his home now, Farber realized, this cold stone city around him, and that was the alien place, forbidden and proscribed.

As he walked back up Kite Hill, into the rock-bound interior of the Old City, he felt the brooding silence of his new home rise up over him like a wave, and once again he shivered.

Farber was left alone in the house every day, from sunrise to sunset.

Gradually, he began to go to seed.

His deterioration was a slow and subtle thing, so imperceptible that it could not have been seen from day to day. Certainly he himself was not aware of it, and would have denied it if it had been pointed out to him. Nevertheless, every day he became a little bit more lethargic, did a little bit less. Every day—very gradually—his mind became a little bit duller.

If he had been another man—if he had even been Ferri, for all of Ferri's faults—it might not have happened. Another man might have tried to master his new alien environment, or analyze it, or let himself be assimilated by it; another man might have gone out and found things to do, found ways to occupy his mind; he might have manufactured new passions for himself, new interests, new tasks, new ambitions, new goals. But Farber was not another man. He was himself, and it happened. He went to seed. He was not a stupid man, or an insensitive one, but his mind and talents had been trained in the rigid, narrowly specialized way of his times, discouraging spontaneity, and he couldn't deal with a situation to which none of the old learned answers would apply. Furthermore, he was in serious emotional trouble—having just gone through a series of long, slow-grinding shocks that had ground his identity to dust.

He was himself, and he deteriorated. There was nothing to do. There was no point in trying to get a job—Liraun's income plus his Co-op stipend

was more than sufficient to support them both. He had wandered the city in a brooding daze until he was sick of it, Old City and New, up and down, east and west. So he stayed home, stayed indoors more and more frequently. Stayed inside a week, and only realized that he had in retrospect, when he suspiciously counted up the days. He shrugged and smiled, and put it out of his mind.

He went down.

After a month of this, he roused himself and made an effort to break out of his dull flat purgatory. He would paint. He no longer had access to his sensie equipment, but artists had created by hand once, and he could do the same. So he bustled around for a while with a great forced show of artificial energy, going down to New City—the first time in how long?—and contacting Ferri, getting Ferri to buy easels and canvas and oils and brushes for him at the Co-op commissary, where they were stocked for the swarming hobbyists of the Enclave whom Farber had sneered at a few weeks before.

He got his bootleg equipment, and spent the next three days trying to paint. He failed. He'd had a small amount of sketching in school, but nothing else helpful, and after working with a machine that could translate his thoughts into images, his fantasies into film, he didn't have the patience to spend thousands of hours trying to coordinate hand and brush and eye. He failed miserably. He failed abominably. His colors were either sick and rancid, or totally insipid; his proportions were all wrong. His people looked like frogs, his trees were wilted featherdusters, his buildings were daubs of un-molded clay, his mountains were great slimy masses of broken-egg browns and yellows. Panting with rage, he broke the easels, tore the canvases, and burned everything in the fire-pit.

That night he woke crying from unremembered dreams.

He slid further downhill.

The horror and isolation of his situation began to hit home with exaggerated strength. They had been jabbing at him since his first moment on the planet, but now that he had been cut off from his fellow humans, and now that his career was gone, they were hitting him squarely and solidly, and Liraun's companionship and love were no longer enough to shield him. She had been his prop, and now even she had been kicked out from under him.

He woke screaming every night for a week, not knowing why.

Then—and this was much worse, this was horrifying—he began to remember his dreams.

He dreamed often of the *Alàntene*, long slow-motion nightmares full of blaring, ear-grating, slowed-down sound and dead, inching, almost imperceptible zombie motion, full of horrible sluggish avatars of himself and Liraun, intolerable because the *Alàntene* was the center of time and all this would go on forever, as it already had.

He would dream of Treuchlingen, the farms, the smell of mown hay, the mountains, the dusty white town asleep in the sun, the red-tiled roofs, the tall church steeples, the people in the marketplace, the chalk cliffs, the Danube coming through those cliffs at Kelheim—and then the dream would change. Earthquake! The ground smoking and sinking as if struck by a great cloven hoof, the earth opening, tossing, grinding, the neat, tile-roofed towns being kicked to flinders, going up in flames—War! Only minutes from the border, the gleaming silver needles flashing down, nothing left but ash and ghosts and fused puddles of quartz, fused ashen ghosts, quartzite bones—Nova! That burst of clear light stripping the air away, flash-boiling the seas, baking the land to slag—the meteor pulverizing the globe; the toppling axis whipping the world away; the moon falling like a pregnant porcelain cow; the seas marching over the land in war; the Ice Age making the planet safe for silence; the fungus whispering over the Earth in a rusty bronze shroud— Any or all of them, night after night. Even in sleep, his reason said that none of those things was likely to be happening, but his gut said, Who knows what's happening to an Earth lost among the stars?, and it was the gut that ruled the dreams. It had an unreasoning solipsistic bias that made him feel the Earth couldn't continue to exist without him; now that he was gone from her, his protection would be withdrawn, and all the disasters he had been keeping from Earth by personal force of will would *happen*, all at once. They did, in his dreams. And he would twist awake to the ugly sound of his own screaming.

He would dream that he was awake, and he would get up and walk to the foot of the staircase on his way upstairs, and the mirror on the wall there would give him his reflection—distorted, twisted, slimy, skin running with pustules, scabs, horns, claws, demon eyes: a monster.

He dreamed that Liraun gave birth to a worm that howled.

He began to drink.

Farber had never been averse to an occasional drink, but now he started to drink in earnest—moderately heavy at first, then heavily, and then very

heavily indeed. It helped; it definitely helped. Deaden the nerves enough, numb the brain sufficiently, and he didn't worry about bad dreams. He didn't worry about much of anything. He kept drinking. He began to buy pills from the Enclave black market, rationalizing it magnificently every step of the way, and from then on chased his liquors with downers, and vice versa. He experimented with native brews. With wines and whiskeys fermented from odd alien substances. He found a soapy native root that looked something like a yam, and which, when dissolved in wine, was even better than the pills. It was cheaper too. He was drunk most of the time now. He was beginning to get fat.

Thanks to an iron constitution, he was still amazingly healthy, considering what he was inflicting on his body every day. But his hands, he noticed, were just starting to develop a fine tremor.

How long until he pushed himself beyond the chance of recovery?

A little more wine.

At least he was a courtly drunk, he told himself. Although he might get maudlin when he was sloshed, he was never abusive or discourteous to Liraun. He never beat her up or bullied her around. He didn't let himself get mean with her, pulled himself up sharp if he saw it building in himself. Least he could do. Least he owed her. She deserved better than having some drunken fool slap her around when she came home from working to support them. Don't let that happen! he told himself, feeling like he was shouting into a deep dry well. Liraun still seemed fairly happy, although she must be disappointed in him—she still treated him the same way she always had, comforting him when he'd wake up screaming, cooking for him, ignoring his delicate condition. Putting up with him, poor woman, he told himself. Poor woman. A little more wine. Somewhere in his head, the first sly, insidious thought of suicide.

A few days later, Liraun suddenly became withdrawn, nervous, and rather grim. Farber wondered if she hadn't finally gotten fed up with him, and cut back visibly on the booze for almost three days, in a half-sly, half-sincere effort to placate her. But this was wasted effort on Farber's part—it wasn't his drinking that was on her mind.

Early in the evening on Farber's third night of semi-abstention, she told him what really was on her mind. It was the beginning of *weinunid* she explained, one of the times that came every four years when a wife was allowed by custom to conceive. If Farber wished to "start" children to be

born in the current surge, he would have to impregnate her within the next four days. Otherwise he would have to wait four years to the beginning of the next surge, when she would be required by custom to conceive anyway—four years being the maximum time a couple could remain childless. Most couples waited the maximum four years before starting children. But by custom, the decision was Farber's—he could make her conceive now instead, if he wished.

All this was explained in a halting, reluctant voice, as if the words were being yanked out of her on a string, against her will. The taboo against discussing personal matters—even with your husband, apparently, or was that because he was Terran?—was a powerful one. Most of the time it was satisfied by discussing such things only in the most circuitous and symbolic of speech; when bald words were necessary, as now, it was enough of a strain to make a normally loquacious woman into a tonguetied stutterer.

But there was something else wrong, this time. He studied her closely. She was still nervously grim. She was standing stiffly, feet braced. Her eyes were narrowed, a muscle in her jaw was tensed. A few beads of sweat stood out on her forehead. She was still trying, clumsily, to talk about the *weinunid*.

So that's it, he suddenly realized. She wants a child! and she knows if I don't opt for one now, she'll have to wait another four years. And of course it would be against custom to try to influence my decision. That's the reason for this grim waiting silence. She wants a child.

He stared at her, waiting for the idea to sink in.

When it did, his first reaction was, *Well, why not?* She had to have something for herself. God knows, she got little enough out of him these days. If she really wanted it, why not let her have it? He owed her that much, or more, putting up with a sad fool like himself all this time. Besides, maybe it would settle her down some. Settle things down all around. Even him? Well—if he got better they'd have a family, and if he got worse at least the baby would be some comfort to her.

"Would you like to have a child, Liraun?" he asked her in a careful voice.

Her face went blank.

"My husband," she said, after a considerable pause, "at the *Alàntene*, do you recall a group of Elders at the far end of the beach, *twizan* who spoke instead of dancing or singing?"

"Yes."

"Those twizan were enacting the story of the First Woman. And this, in different words, is that story." She struck a posture, and began in a subtly altered voice: "In the First Days, before the world was wholly made, and before Harmony had yet been established, there was no life on the land. All people who then lived dwelt in Elder Sea. Among them were the Ancestors, for at this time the Ancestors were still in the Womb of the Sea, for the world had not yet been born from out of it, and time had not begun. Now the Ancestors went up and down in the Womb of the Sea, and they went to and fro in it, and in their pride they called themselves the Lords of All Things, for they were yet ignorant, and thought that the Womb was already the World-to-Be. And they named the Womb the World-That-Is, and themselves masters of it. This was an offense against Harmony Unborn. So the First High One, perceiving this, sent an Affliction upon the Ancestors from beyond space. So it struck them down, and the manner of the smiting was this: that the Womb of the Sea, the Womb-That-Was-Ocean, became blighted and shriveled, and the Ancestors were every one of them killed, save two. The bones of the dead Ancestors were sunk to the Place of Affliction on the bottom of Elder Sea, but the two who were spared were cast up naked on the land, because the Womb would hold them no more. They were the First Man and First Woman. They stood in barren desert, and nothing moved in all the World though time had begun, because the land could bring forth no life.

Seeing this, the First Woman knew what she must do, and she said, 'I will give of myself, and infuse the World with the life of my blood.' And so then the First Man took the First Woman's blood, and with it he made the clear rivers that run over the land, and the pools that lie in the land. And he took the First Woman's dung, and with it he made the Fertile Earth that covers the land and is the house of life, and with the First Woman's hair he made all the plants and the trees that are in the World and grow in the Fertile Earth. Then the First Man broke the First Woman's body into parts, and she cried out in great pain, but he sculpted the parts of her body as clay, and from them he made all the beasts who roam abroad in the World, and all the People who dwell on the Fertile Earth. But the First Woman's cry of pain shattered and escaped, and the four shards of it became the four winds that wander forever about the World, looking for a surcease of pain that is not in it. And so it has always been the duty of the descendants of the First Woman to replenish the World with their bodies, and to bring forth life out of themselves with pain."

Liraun stopped talking.

That, apparently, was that.

Farber almost laughed.

He had triggered her "circuitous and symbolic" circuit again, and away she had gone on it. He had gotten little out of her speech, other than the fact that she considered it her duty to God to bear children. He assumed that meant that the answer to his first question was "yes."

Liraun was watching him intently.

"My wife," he said with great seriousness, meeting her gaze, "I have decided that this is the time for you to conceive, and to bear your children."

Her eyes went opaque.

"I hear you, my husband," she said, mechanically. There was a considerable pause, long enough to make him wonder if she had fainted or fallen asleep on her feet with her opaque eyes open. Her expression was unreadable. At last, in a voice that started in a whistling whisper very far away, and slowly rose into audibility, a squeaky voice that quivered with strain as though it was brittle enough to snap in two, a drugged voice like that of someone being tortured, slowly being torn open to emit each word, she said, "My husband—*oh my husband, I'm afraid!*"

Farber took her in his arms and held her until he felt some of the tension go out of her body, and it slumped a little in his grip. Then he said: "There's no need for you to be afraid." And, very gently: "You're a woman; this would have come to you eventually no matter how long you waited. You shouldn't be afraid of it."

"I hear you," Liraun repeated, ritualistically. She pushed herself away from him. "Let me be by myself now, for a small while," she said wearily. She walked slowly away into another part of the house.

He didn't see her again the rest of the evening.

By bedtime, Liraun seemed to have regained some of her composure.

She padded in from the upper room, gave him a half-challenging, half-plaintive look as he stood washing at the basin, wordlessly pulled her frock over her head and off in one smooth motion, and then lay down naked on the bed in front of him, inviting him with her eyes, her mouth, her opened knees. She was trembling even before he touched her, and when he lowered himself down on her, skin touching skin all along the length of their bodies, a little muscular twitch went through her, as if they were magnets clicking together.

Their lovemaking that night was more violent than it had ever been before, a desperate pitched combat with nothing of leisure or tenderness to it—rather it was a thing of harsh noises, slamming bodies, hard and hurtful hands. She seemed to be trying to rip him apart, and it took all of his considerable strength to prevent her. He was torn and bleeding in a dozen places in the morning, and his sides and buttocks were drummed raw by her knees and heels. She wore the marks of his fingers on her body for a week. Once she did something she'd never done before—she bit him seriously hard in her passion, drawing blood from his shoulder. The next moment she had rolled him completely over, and was riding above him like a succubus, like a mad thing, her head thrown back, the muscles corded all the way up the side of her body to her jaw.

When he came, he could feel his seed shoot up deep inside her, going home.

Afterward, she assured him that she had conceived.

10

At the end of the month, Liraun went off to the Hall of Tailors for her tests. There was a great deal more involved than a simple pregnancy test, however, and Farber understood little of it. The testing was interwoven with an elaborate mesh of ritual and symbology that Liraun was reluctant to explain. She had fasted and practiced total abstinence for the past three days, sleeping alone on a hard pallet near the hearth. Indeed, although she continued to cook and clean for him, she refused to touch him, or even come near him, and she spoke almost not at all. Farber kept at her until he had convinced himself that her sullen iron absorption could not be broken, and then he submitted to the situation with as good a grace as he could muster. He spent the evenings trying to catch up on his correspondence, writing letter after letter that he would almost certainly never send. *Things are different here*, he would write, and then pause, sometimes for hours, staring at the paper, mesmerized by the homogeneity of the banal and the inexpressible.

Across the room, his wife would be scooping warm ashes from the hearth, adding powdered bone, charcoal dust, a few drops of an unknown viscous liquid from a vial, kneading the mixture into a dark oily paste. She now painted herself with this substance every night—transforming her

face into a tragic ashen mask, rubbing it into her scalp until her hair become a dull dead gray, painting gaunt-black starvation shadows under her eyes. She looked then like a grimy, desolate ghost, and, before she went to sleep, she would sing a ghostly little song to herself in a shivering, keening voice that seemed to avoid any key familiar to Farber's ear. On awakening, she would wipe her face clean and start again with different substances. This time her face would become a frightening—almost insectile—mask, done in streaks of dull green and blue and black, with little spots of sullen red. Fierce resignation, righteous rage, religious ecstasy, sexual frenzy—Farber could never decide which of these, if any, the face was intended to represent. She would also paint concentric circles around her nipples, cabalistic swirls on her flat belly, stylized arrows thrusting down her loins into her pubic hair. Her canine teeth would gleam against the dully glistening face paint, suddenly seeming much longer, suddenly—shockingly—becoming fangs. She would remain naked all day, unself-consciously, paying no attention whatsoever to Farber's periodic attacks of prurience.

She hadn't washed in days, and she was beginning to develop a rotting-sweet smell that was not entirely unpleasant.

Neither was it entirely unpleasant to awaken to intense cold, as Farber did on the morning of the test: a cold more sensed through the sleeping-furs as yet than actually experienced, giving him a shuddery, almost pleasurable intimation of the discomfort to which he would be subjected when he finally did get up. He drowsed for a while, relishing the warmth he was wrapped in. Then he stuck his head up above the furs. The cold stabbed glassy talons into his cheeks, and shocked him a little more awake.

Liraun was moving noiselessly about the room. She had opened the wide, low window in the east wall; that explained why it was so cold. Through that window, he could see a maze of low roofs stairstepping away and down, and the fall of heavy new snow that was settling onto them. There was no sky, only the snow—line after steady line of it, coming down with ponderous, unstoppable grace, filling all the air. Silent, furry, soft, like a slow fall of caterpillars. It blotted up sound, and softened Fire Woman's harsh glare into an even, directionless, undersea light. Occasionally the snow would gust in through the window, swirling and dancing across the polished silverwood floor, spiraling into the air again, vanishing. Some of the flakes struck Liraun, clung and melted, leaving shiny wet spots on her skin. She ignored them. Naked, she moved to the stone washbasin, broke the scum of ice on the water, and began to wash

herself. Her movements were slow and deliberate, and she evinced no discomfort with the cold. Her face—the first time, Farber realized, that he'd seen it bare of paint in days—was serene and contemplative. The water was already beginning to freeze again, and there was a glaze of ice in her hair.

Farber dozed, wrapped in his cocoon of warmth, and opened his eyes in time to see Liraun leaving the house. She had put on her ferocious daytime face, although this time there were streaks of orange and patches of bright yellow in among the green and blue and black. He wondered sleepily what the brighter colors represented. Hope? A somber hope, then. A fierce, cruel hope, rooted in despair. Liraun's painted mask seemed too harsh and hard-edged a thing for such a furry, filtered morning. He called to her, drowsily, but she did not answer. She seemed a completely isolated creature now— mysterious, self-contained, unreachable, gliding through the external world without touching it or being touched by it. Like oil over water, Farber thought. Not mixing at all. He didn't call to her again. She was above him, in this moment—or beyond him, anyway. He wondered if there was anything he could do that would make her respond to him, if she was aware of his presence at all. He thought not. That made him very sad, although drowsiness blunted the pain into a poignant, drifting wistfulness. She wrapped herself in a gray cloak, and, without looking back at him, went out into the storm. The door closed solidly behind her. He was left alone in a room that was filled with muted white light as a mountain lake is filled with clear icy water, and he sank slowly down through the light, and through the whispering hiss and murmur of the snow, until he bumped against the bottom of the lake, and then he slept.

He woke to a silence that was composed of many small natural noises just too far away to be heard. Occasionally one of the noises—doors slamming away down the Hill, footsteps, a voice— would become momentarily distinct: a sound made up of the many small silences that enabled it to be heard. Sunlight glinted from wall and ceiling, dazzled his eyes. Farber got up and hopped across the cold floor to the window, clutching one of the sleeping-furs. The storm was over. The sky was its usual intense blue-black, the roofs and towers of Old City outlined starkly against it. There was a three-inch crest of powder snow on every flat surface, on tree branches and window ledges and roofs. Hoarfrost glistened over everything, and sparkled in the air like tiny crystalline fireflies. It was incredibly cold, Farber closed the window, and, cursing and sputtering, hurried to struggle into his clothes. Goddamn, it was cold!

By the time he got a fire going in the hearth, he was shivering, and his fingers were numb. How did Liraun stand this? Not for the first time, he entertained the uneasy suspicion that Liraun was much hardier than he. The nutlike, leafy smell of the smoke filled the room, followed, more tentatively, by an expanding wedge of warmth. Farber began to thaw. He stood by the fire awhile, flexing his fingers, and then returned to the window. The glass was coated with frost. He hand-warmed a hole in the frost, and peered out. Nothing was moving in Old City. The snow in the streets was still smooth and unmarred. Windows were shuttered, or blinded by frost. The black rock walls of the ancient houses were sheathed in ice. The world was a stark composition in black and white, ice, black rock, white snow-capped roofs, black sky: an overdeveloped monochrome photograph, all jagged, unrelieved masses of light and shadow. There was no color, no chiaroscuro, no shadings of gray. The Cold People had taken over completely now. This was their world and their season, ruled by the House of Dûn: harsh, frozen, silent.

Shuddering a little, Farber turned away from the window.

He spent the morning doing nothing. That was not unusual—he did nothing most days. He had become quite adroit at it. But the almost supernatural hush and suspension of the morning somehow made him ashamed of his own lethargy. For the first time in weeks, he began to find his sloth distasteful. *What good are you to anybody like this?* he asked himself bitterly. *What kind of a life is this?* But the habit of lassitude was hard to break. He sat near the window and brooded, feeling like a man who cannot wake all the way up from an uneasy dream, feeling stale and dull and useless, and listened to the silence. Occasionally, one of the silverwood trees outside would snap in the cold, a sharp *crack* like a rifle shot, or there would be a whoosh and thump as a branch gave way somewhere and dumped a load of snow into the street. Once a swarm of shiny-scaled flying lizards perched under the eaves and exchanged trilling arpeggios that clashed and shimmered through the frozen air like showers of a cold liquid metal. But mostly there was silence, and it seemed deep enough to drown.

Going down in that hush for the third time, Farber was snagged by a persistent fishhook of sound. He had been hearing it without hearing it for a couple of minutes, but now it registered. Slowly, the sound drew him up out of stagnant pools of thought. The hammering of stone on stone. *Klak klak kadak.Klak!* Unsteadily, Farber got to his feet.

It was right outside.

Feeling strangely apprehensive, Farber went to the door.

Two Cian men were struggling to erect a stone eikon in front of the house. As Farber stepped outside, one of the Cian was driving it home with a big stone hammer. *Klak! Klak!Klak!* the hammer went. The noise rang frighteningly loud in the silent street, and sparks flew at each blow. Then they were finished. The two Cian stepped aside, wiped their foreheads, rubbed their hands, and looked at the eikon with satisfaction. It was a St. Andrew's Cross, about four feet high, carved from a milky, fine-grained stone. Some small furry animal had been quartered, raggedly, and the quarters had been lashed to the arms of the cross. The animal's head had been tied upright atop the upper right arm. It stared reproachfully out at the world with blind agate eyes. Blood had seeped into the pale stone, and stained the snow around the base of the cross.

Farber stared at the eikon in bewilderment.

The Cian men were watching him intently. Their faces were contorted into terrifying, fang-glinting snarls. Their hands were covered with blood.

Farber started toward them, repressing an urge to run away instead. This grotesque kind of rictus was, with the Cian, indicative of extreme good will and pleasure—although they were an undemonstrative enough race that it was an expression seldom seen in public. The Terran equivalent would be to leap and shout in unrestrained joy. *I have no idea what this is all about*, Farber thought, numbly. In spite of the cold, his brain had not cleared at all. He felt confused and stupid, and couldn't imagine how he was expected to act in this situation. His feet crunched through the snow, sinking up to the ankle with every step. The brilliant sunlight dazzled his eyes, and made his head ache. He was sickened by the glassy stare of the dead animal, and by the blood, which was already beginning to freeze into tarry, glistening streaks. He came to a stop, blinking, baffled, shivering. *What do I say now?* he wondered. "Good wishes to you," one of the Cian said, saving Farber the strain of initiating conversation. "You are one with the People of Life, the Ones Who Rule the New Earth. May Their radiance fill you, and warm your dreams."

He fell silent. "Thank you," Farber said.

"You are a vessel for Their Light," the other Cian put in. "Through you, It refracts into the Thousand Warm Colors. You help to harmonize the radiance in the Place of Turning Silence, the Motionless Unmoved Center."

Farber searched for the correct response. "Your light illuminates my darkness," he said at last.

"*Në*, it is of no circumstance," the Cian replied. Then, less formally: "No

obligation here. It is pleasure to inform your happiness."

"So!" the other injected, enthusiastically, "This is a great moment for you! My soul chimes in sympathy."

They snarled joyously at him.

"I don't understand," Farber did not say. He wanted to, though.

By this time, the ceremony had attracted the attention of several of Farber's neighbors from up and down the Row. They gathered around, five or six more Cian males, and added their own polite praise and congratulations to those of the two emissaries. There was much low warbling and snapping of fingers, which was applause. Someone produced a glass flask of the potent native liqueur, and it passed from hand to hand. If their social construct had included the slapping of backs, there would have been back-slapping as well.

Farber saw the light, belatedly, at about this point.

Bemused, he stood in the alien street and drank with his well-wishers, the ancient ice-sheathed black walls rising sheer on either side, a narrow swath of sky visible at the top, like a cold blue-black river that flowed over the world.

A wind came up and ruffled the fur on the dead animal's head, made the head appear to be nodding in a deliberate, grisly fashion. There was an inscription on the eikon that Farber could not translate. He memorized it for Ferri's semantic computer.

And, after a while, they went respectfully away, and left him alone.

Liraun came home about an hour later. She wore no paint, and her skin looked fresh and scrubbed. She was dressed in a long, bright-green frock, embroidered with designs in yellow and orange, but bordered by a heavy somber black. She was obviously naked beneath it. Her long hair had been put up, and fastened with pins of silver and obsidian. The fanatical tension that had possessed her for the past few days was gone. She seemed calm and happy. She also seemed, as she paused in the doorway to stare at him, a totally aroused and totally erotic creature, almost feral, as though she were a female animal in estrus. He could feel the heat come up out of her, and smell the hot musky scent of her body. It struck him like a wave, drying his throat and tightening his thighs.

She stared at him for a long, intent moment, as if she had never seen him before, as if she was trying to memorize every line and detail of him.

Then, slowly, she smiled.

"My husband," she said quietly.

And she closed the door behind her.

Sexually, Liraun had always been somewhat passive, but that night she was aggressive, inexhaustible, and demanding. She wore Farber out, she used him up. She drove him to the limits of his endurance, and then somehow urged him beyond them. She was relaxed and cheerful about it, but there was no arguing with her insistence. She seemed happy enough. Her play and pillow-talk were full of excitement and gaiety. But, beneath this, there was a sadness so deep and intense that it could only be called despair. With her there in the darkness, experiencing her slow rhythmical cries, the desperate spasms of her body, her legs crushing the breath from him, the muscles in her neck cording like taut wire cables, her head beginning to lash violently from side to side—as if she was in pain so great she must seek surcease by dashing out her brains—Farber felt curiously alone and disassociated, a spectator at someone else's bittersweet apotheosis. It was that inexplicable storm of joy and despair that fueled her, that drove her, that was, in this moment, her lover more than he.

Just before dawn, a party of Twilight People, Those Who Have Influence with Dreams, arrived for a Naming ceremony. The party was composed of a male Elder, a *twizan*—Farber couldn't decide if this was the same Singer who had married them; if not, then he was certainly struck from the same archetype—five young Cian women in varying stages of pregnancy, one so huge that her time must certainly be almost at hand, and a *soubrae*, or Old Woman. The Old Woman was old indeed, even more ancient, by the look of her, than the *twizan*. She gave Farber the impression that she kept herself alive only by a conscious effort of will—that if she turned her mind away from the task for even a moment she would crumble into dust and ashes. She was also, Farber realized, the only really old Cian woman he could remember seeing. She had a snow-white robe, eyes like ice, a face as hard as winter-frozen earth, and she was definitely the person in charge of the Naming. Under her taciturn direction, Liraun was specially dressed and painted, the east-facing window was opened to allow the first rays of Fire Woman's rising to strike into the room, and a roaring, oddly pungent-smelling fire was built in the firepit. The Twilight People and Liraun gathered close around the hearth, and the ceremony began. It seemed to go on forever. There were many ritual exchanges between Liraun and the pregnant women, especially with the woman closest to

term, while the Old Woman chanted responses, and the Singer sang a haunting, minor-filled song so desolate-sounding that it might have made a banshee sad. Farber sat in the far corner during all this, wrapped in a fur. He was exhausted and bedraggled, and the noise and smoke of the Naming made him irritable. Everyone ignored him. So he sat glumly by himself, watching the chanting, gesticulating figures, feeling caught up in some mechanism that he could not understand, and which was sweeping him toward a conclusion he could neither predict, forestall, nor comprehend.

The Old Woman passed around a series of unidentifiable—to Farber—objects that were touched and handled reverently by the participants, the first rays of dawn flashed from a coronet of tiny silvered mirrors that had been placed on Liraun's head, and the ceremony was over. She was no longer Farber's chattel. From that moment on, legally and by ancient custom, she belonged to no one save herself and her Ancestors. For the first time in her life, she was her own person.

Now her name was Liraun Jé Morrigan.

11

Liraun was now a Mother of Shasine, and her elevation from chattel to the highest caste in the society drastically changed their lives. She had discussed the subject with Farber when "they" had first decided to have children, but, as usual, much of what she said was enigmatic and couched in obscure allegory, and none of it had prepared Farber for the totality of the change.

By law, Liraun now became the head of their household for the duration of her pregnancy, representing it in its relations with the body of Cian society, and holding title to all its goods and property. This did not mean that Farber had been reduced to a chattel; his status had not been diminished—Liraun's had been tremendously enhanced. In theory, Liraun now had some authority over Farber, but, in practice, it was the custom to let the husband and wife work that problem out domestically, and most of them came to an equitable compromise. But while Farber was married to Liraun, and while Liraun was a Mother of Shasine, none of his actions were binding on the household. They carried no legal weight. He was not allowed to negotiate contracts that affected the entire household, nor

could he dispose of or transfer any of their property, or rent a house without

Liraun's consent—just as, before her pregnancy, Liraun herself had been forbidden to do any of these things. In fact, Farber was still better off than Liraun had been. Before her elevation, she had enjoyed almost no legal rights at all, being considered a minor and under Farber's absolute rule. Farber, at least, maintained his rights as an adult citizen, but was expected to defer to Liraun's judgment in communal matters, as she was now a superior creature, "One Who Has Been Translated to Harmony." This was disconcerting.

Also, Liraun was no longer allowed to work to support herself. As a Mother of Shasine, she was part of the Council that, in conjunction with the Elder's Lodge, ruled Shasine. One of the first things she was required to do, after her Naming, was to quit her job. She was on call to the Council at any hour of the day or night, and could have no other duty that might interfere with that single overriding concern. Her husband, therefore, was required to support her, and was subject to severe penalties if he did not. And Farber's regular stipend from the Terran Co-operative was not enough to keep them both, even added to the small amount Ferri was able to pay him for "research assistance." That was alarming.

Surprising even himself, Farber rose to the challenge. He put away the bottle, and he put away the pills. He pulled himself together with an almost audible click. And he went out and got a job.

It was down at the River-Docks, a manual job unloading ice-skimmers.

The Cold People had settled in to stay—the Fertile Earth was locked in ice, and shrouded in snow and silence. At night, Winter Man blazed high in the sky, His full terrible length above the horizon now. The River Aome had finally frozen over. Every morning on his way to work—cold and still as death, a pink flush of dawn just beginning to dilute the jet-black night sky, the last of the tiny moons rolling down toward the far horizon like thumb-flicked marbles—Farber could see it gleam in a long, dull gunmetal line, a soldered seam that held the invisible world together. By the time the cablecar had brought him down from Old City, he could look through the growing blue light and see the first of the big black iceboats skimming up out of the west, up on four long legs, like water beetles from a Terran river grown mechanical and great. When the Aome froze it froze all the way to the bottom, and remained that way until the Thaw. River traffic thereafter went on the ice. That ice was as solid as stone, and mirror-smooth in most places, save where the wind had dusted the surface with snow. No better road to the West could be asked. The Aome skirted

the foot of Aei New City for twenty miles, and every mile of that twenty bristled with docks, and every dock in every mile buzzed with commerce, deep winter or high summer.

By midmorning, with the sun as high as it ever got in that season, the ice would look green-gray, instead of the blue it had been in the dawnlight, and intricate hieroglyphic patterns would have been scored into its surface by the runnerblades of the iceboats. Sometimes, if Fire Woman was particularly intense that day, the top half-inch of ice would melt, and the fast-skimming iceboats would throw a wake of water and half-frozen slush high into the air on either side.

Once, Farber saw a skimmer hit a freak irregularity in the ice, a jagged, tilted block that protruded three feet above the surface. The impact jarred two of the runners into the air—the iceboat skidded along precariously on the remaining two for an endless moment, but the task of keeping it upright was too much for the boat's gyro stabilizers, and it went over. The boat rolled twice, very fast, snapping its runners, making a noise like a million tin cans tail-dragged by a multitude of dogs, bounced into the air and came down hard, skidded, and rolled again. Then it exploded. The burning wreck melted a hole in the ice, and settled into the slush to a depth of six feet. When the fire guttered and the ice refroze, the boat's bow was left protruding from the surface at a forty-five-degree angle, and flags and torches marked the wreck for two days until Cian work crews could remove it.

That was an exceptional incident, but more commonplace accidents were avoided by inches—if they were avoided at all—every day. Most of them involved pedestrians. The people who worked on the river started their tasks well before dawn, but by noon there were many individual citizens of Aei out and about on the ice as well, many of them on their way to the great saltwater marshes on the far side of the Aome, for one reason or another. Hunters out after lizards and snappers and mud-devils. Potters hoping to collect certain rare clays and earths needed for special ceremonial glazes. Holy Men on the Shadow Path, seeking solitude to facilitate their efforts to find Syncopation with Harmony. Madmen, failed men, on the Lightless Path, seeking degradation and pain. Parties of young women, off to gather lizard eggs and fungus and winter mushrooms. Strollers and sightseers. All walking across the traffic lanes on the River, all oblivious to any danger from the hurtling iceboats, which occasionally came quite close to splattering them all over the ice.

Most endangered—and most oblivious—were the hordes of young children who appeared in the late afternoon to play on the frozen river.

They would scatter out across the ice, tobogganing on their stomachs, skating, playing at curling with long stick-and-twig brooms and flat-bottomed ceramic disks—none of these pastimes imported from Terra, as Farber had first suspected, but independently derived, as will almost inevitably happen on a world where there is a juxtaposition of playful, humanoid biped children and ice for them to play on. Inevitable or not, the playing children were nearly invisible during the long hours of twilight, and were a terrible headache to the iceboats pilots. It was an odd quirk of racial psychology that the Cian, living in what was in many ways an intensely regulated society, made no attempt to keep private citizens off the ice, or to interfere with their right to amble across the busiest traffic lanes. Of course, this meant that the ice-ambling pedestrians were left to take their own chances, but if they didn't mind risking a collision with a ten-ton ice-boat, then the pilots weren't going to worry too much about it either. They contented themselves with sounding their fogwhistles if children ventured too near the major lanes, and the children, unperturbed and unimpressed, shouted happily back. The low, mournful hooting of the iceboats and the faint, shrill cries of the children floated constantly at the edge of Farber's hearing as he worked.

It was hard, heavy, fast-paced work, loading and unloading the iceboats, hauling cargo to warehouses and staging areas. It was the kind of work that would have been performed by robot machinery on Terra, but nothing in Shasine was automated unless it was absolutely unavoidable. Farber had always been a powerful man, but his robustness was the product of spas and intramural athletics—he'd never had a job that required prolonged physical labor, day after day. To his shame he found the work amazingly hard. The first week was a blur of fatigue, a nightmare that he stumbled through like a leaden-limbed automaton. He was head-and-shoulders taller than the biggest of his Cian workmates, and could lift a heavier weight than they, but their endurance was incredible. Any of them could outlast him with ease, and keep working smoothly and efficiently while he slumped in exhaustion, blown, gulping at the needle-sharp arctic air. He was stronger than they were, but he didn't have their stamina, and that was what counted.

Instead of deriding him, Farber's workmates were friendly and encouraging, sympathetic without being condescending. They gave him advice on cold-weather working, and tips on how to load and unload heavy cargo.

Grimly, Farber kept at it.

Weeks went by, and Farber gradually settled into his job. He grew more

used to the pace, and the work went easier. He burned off his excess fat, and became more lean than he'd ever been before—in fact, he was almost gaunt. But what meat he did keep was tough, firm-packed, and hard as iron. He had never been healthier.

He was also happier than he'd been since leaving Earth, although it took him a long time to realize it. At first, Farber had regarded his job as a grim, degrading necessity, but he had slowly become reconciled to it, and now drew a good deal of satisfaction from it. It was hard, honest work that kept him out in the sun and the clean air— more important, although he never verbalized this, it gave him something concrete to do, something he could accomplish with his own hands, a way to carve order from chaos. It gave him the feeling that he could manipulate his destiny, and that assurance—illusion or not—killed some of the panic of existing in a milieu he did not understand. For the first time, he stopped fighting Weinunnach quite so much. In fact, he started thinking of it as Weinunnach, instead of mentally insisting on "Lisle." A lot of the tension went out of him when he did, as though he had set down a load he hadn't been aware of carrying. He stopped seeing his workmates as remote alien figures, and began to form friendships with them. They were a relaxed, equable crew—although Shasine had a sharply defined caste system, you didn't get that feeling of fastidious class-consciousness from the individual Cian that you got from an Englishman or a Hindu. Manual labor was not a despised, menial thing here, as it was on Earth; for the most part, it imparted no more and no less prestige than any other profession. Thus, the equanimity of the crew, who were given no reason to feel inferior to anyone in their society. Farber found them easier to get along with than the Thousand Families, or the brooding Shadow Men aristocrats like Jacawen. He found himself looking forward with pleasure to the day's work.

He was content, he realized.

Liraun seemed happier too, although there was still an edge of sadness to her. Much of the inexplicable dissatisfaction and wild-ness was gone, or banked down to embers, at least. She had accepted—resigned herself to?—the role that she was to play. With that had come a new serenity. Their marriage had settled down. They were more relaxed with each other, and more tolerant. Liraun's duties with the Council kept her busy, but not so busy that she couldn't spend plenty of time with her husband. In the early months of her pregnancy, they would often borrow mounts and a pack of coursers—long, lean carnivores something like giant shrews, but without a shrew's viciousness—from Liraun's father, Genawen, and go hunting in the great salt marshes south of Aei. They rarely caught

anything, but it was pleasure enough just to ride through the sprawling marshland, the air crisp and cold and the sky dazzling, listening to the plaintive mooing of their snaky mounts and the shrill *yip-yip-yip* of the running coursers, cantering with a hollow iron clatter across the rude stone bridges that connected the strips of higher ground, surrounded by polished green ice, snow, and endless miles of gaunt, winter-stripped reeds, meeting only the vast flocks of silver-scaled lizards that would thunder into the sky at their approach to soar and circle and sob petulantly until the intruders were safely past. Sometimes they would go without the coursers, penetrating deep into the marshes to avoid hunters and mushroom-gatherers, and Liraun would go swimming—it was always well below freezing, but Liraun would casually pull off her clothes, knock a hole in the milky ice, thinner here because it was over sluggishly moving salt water, and churn through the shallow pools like an icebreaker, disappearing into the reed-ceilinged tunnels that formed over the tidal channels, sloshing into view again on the far side, splashing and whooping and making a terrible uproar, dozens of tiny otterlike creatures scattering in panic before her, lizards and redfins screaming hysterically skyward, Farber holding the mounts and watching her, laughing, affectionate, bemused, his breath steaming in the cold air and condensing into frost on his lips. When she emerged from her swim, she would shake herself free of water like a dog, using a piece of rough cloth to scrape away the patches of ice that had formed on her skin.

Sometimes then they would make love, on a bed of crackly reeds strewn over the frozen ground. Liraun would always be amused when Farber refused to take off his clothes. Occasionally, when they were on their way back to Aei, they would see a marshman, distant cousins of the Cian: a gnarled, dwarfish man with bone-white skin, wearing ragged furs and artfully worked iron, his hair lacquered into two enormous upthrust beehives, his face painted a garish blue and orange, a string of freshly killed snappers and redfins hanging head down from a belt slung over his shoulder. His eyes very bright and sharp, like black volcanic glass. Calm and solemn, with great dignity, the marshman would watch them ride by. Then he would raise his fist in a salute of—not adulation, exactly, but rather an unbowed but respectful acknowledgment of their presence. The marshmen believed that the Cian were ghosts. What they believed Farber to be, there is no telling. The ghost of a ghost, perhaps.

The weeks passed, and Shasine shouldered deeper into Winter. Snow piled up in the streets of Aei, and there were stretches during bad blizzards when no one ventured outside for a half a week—the city then seemed desolate and deserted, only the yellow and orange gleam of the windows to hint at life. Farber got Ferri to buy an arctic skier's mask for him at the Co-op commissary. He wore it to work, and the Cian gaped at him in the streets. His co-workers at the Docks were delighted by it. They began, jovially, to refer to him as "No-Face." Farber didn't care. His nose would almost certainly have become frostbitten without the mask, and the snow goggles sewn into it helped him tolerate the glare Fire Woman kicked up against the icefields. His workmates used contact lenses grown from a transparent lichen-like substance for the same purpose, but the lenses were "alive" in that they had to be stored in nutritive fluid and needed to be trimmed back into shape every few weeks, and the thought of one of them in contact with his naked eyeball made Farber queasy. No, he would stick to his mask, and tolerate the good-natured jibes of the rest of the crew. He hadn't "gone native" to quite that degree yet.

It had finally become cold enough to make Liraun admit to discomfort. They obtained a featureless, four-foot sphere that was placed in the corner of the downstairs room. It radiated heat and a smoky golden light, without any fuel source that Farber could discern, and was apparently inexhaustible. Here was a viable trade commodity for Keane! Certainly, this device was almost supernaturally efficient. Too efficient for Liraun—sometimes the room became too hot for her and she would retreat to one of the upstairs rooms that still held the evening chill. She spent much of her time there anyway. Her pregnancy had finally caught up with her. She was just entering her fifth month, and Cian women usually came to term in six. Her stomach had hardly swelled at all, but suddenly she had become ponderous and weak. She moved painfully now, carrying herself with slow caution, as if her belly was a membranous sack of water that she feared would rupture and spill. And in a way, it was just that. She still answered the summons of the Council, but now when she returned home there would be no expeditions to the marshes, no strenuous bareskin swims, no rambles around Aei. Instead she would sit in the upstairs room, sometimes for hours, and stare out through the open window at the hilly winter streets of Old City. She was sinking into her old melancholia again. This time it was deeper and more fully in possession of her than ever. She spoke little. She laughed not at all. Her face was drawn, and her complexion pale, as if she was continually in pain.

It seemed to Farber that pregnancy was not so stark and debilitating a thing with most healthy women, and that worried him. But those were healthy Terran women, after all. Who understood the quirks of Cian physiology, who knew what to expect? Certainly not Farber. None of Liraun's relatives seemed worried, and Farber decided that he had no choice but to accept their assessment of the situation. Liraun herself was not worried, although she was deeply sad. Whenever he asked her, she assured him that everything was proceeding normally. These were about the only words he did get out of her—she became more uncommunicative by the day. But now it was Liraun who would wake up crying, and who would need to be held and comforted. She would not say why. She was ashamed of it, refused to talk of it, and would have liked to pretend that it did not happen at all. But it did. And when it did, she would cling desperately to Farber, as if by pressing hard enough she could weld their flesh together inseparably.

One afternoon on his way back from work, Farber dropped in on Anthony Ferri. The ethnologist seemed delighted to see him. In fact, Farber had never known him to be so animated, so crackling with energy and good humor. Ferri's eyes were alive and sparkling, and his long, horsy face was radiant. His arms were stained with blood to the elbows, and he was grinning like an unrepentant ax murderer the moment after his crime.

Farber stared at him. Ferri seemed unable to stand still. He shifted his weight continuously from one foot to another, unconsciously doing a shuffling little dance of joy. Dancing vigorously, Ferri explained that he had finally, after months of complex and delicate negotiations, managed to obtain the corpse of a male Cian for dissection.

"You have to see this!" Ferri exclaimed. "The things I've found! I've learned more today than I have all year." Enthusiastically, he grabbed Farber's arm and began hustling him toward the rear of the apartment. "You just have to see this!"

Reluctantly, Farber allowed himself to be dragged along.

The long corridor leading to the kitchen had been set up as a dissecting room, jammed with lights and machines, a jury-rigged tangle of extension wires snaking across the floor. It smelled strongly of blood and formaldehyde. There was a roll-away bed against the wall, doing duty as an operating table, and, on it, a carved, flayed thing that no longer bore much resemblance to human or humanoid. Ferri seized a scalpel and

jabbed at the body. "See? There's a real thick extra layer of subcutaneous fat. Cold adaptation, of course. But there's more to it than just that, I think. There's real hair only on the head and the crotch, and the underarms. This other stuff, this down, is really a kind of fine-textured fur, very close-meshed fibers —it's water-resilient, like duck feathers. Look at the musculature here. And the bone structure in the legs. The dorsal ridges aren't quite as pronounced as they are in a human. The ilia in the pelvis aren't quite as flared, and the hips are a tiny bit longer and narrower. The shoulders are narrower, the chest less rounded. See? The forearms are just a bit shorter. All minuscule things, but, taken together, they might be significant. And the feet, they're not as broad and clublike as ours, not as good a weight-carrying base. I'll bet there's a lot of foot trouble among the Cian! And look! Here, the most interesting thing of all—I found the remnants of an inner eyelid, a transparent, aqueous-filled lid. Atrophied, of course, but there."

Farber shrugged. "So what does this mean?" "I don't know,"

Ferri said. "I suppose we may never know for sure. But I've been dreaming up half-baked theories all day. The way I read it is that the Cian evolved from aquatic mammals—or amphibious ones, anyway—a remarkably short time ago. Short in a geological sense, of course. The layer of fat, the waterproof down, the transparent eyelid, they all point to that. If they didn't start out as a land animal, then they haven't had as much time to adjust to an erect posture as *Homo sapiens* has had. The musculature, the bone structure, the hips. Most especially, the feet. Naturally, all this is speculation. I've got another specimen on ice, and tomorrow I'll go over it with the medical computer at the Co-op Hospital, see if I can't get some evidence to confirm some of this stuff."

"Interesting," Farber said, in a neutral voice. Actually, he was not interested at all. It was hot and close in the corridor, and the stink of death was overpowering. He was hoping that Ferri would get off this jag so that they could go back into the living room.

Ferri glanced quizzically at Farber. "You're not very impressed by all this, are you?"

Farber shrugged. "It's interesting. But don't expect me to jump and shout, Tony. I don't have the bias of your specialty, to make it exciting for me, yes? And it doesn't seem to be anything of immediate relevance."

"No?" Ferri arched an eyebrow, and then waved his bloodstained scalpel at Farber. "You might be surprised!" Some of the aggressive bounce went out of him. For the first time, he seemed to realize that he and his clothes

were heavily splattered with blood.

"Hell," he muttered, "let me get some of this muck off of me." He disappeared into the bathroom. A moment later, Farber heard the shower come on.

Farber went back out into the living room. He found the chair that was the farthest away from the corridor, and sat down. Even there, a faint smell of corruption reached him. He waited.

A few minutes later, Ferri came out, dressed in slacks and a sweatshirt. He switched on the exhaust blower to carry away the odor, and then went to a portable bar and built them drinks. He gave one to Farber and sat down in an opposing chair.

"Christ!" Ferri sighed, settling in, letting the foam cup itself to his shape. "A long day." He sipped at his drink. Now, he looked tired. Evidently Farber's lack of enthusiasm had brought him down from his manic edge. "Sorry to've rattled all that gibble-gabble off at you, Joe, but God! This means a lot to me, and I guess I'm kind of wound up, you know? If you had any idea how hard it is to get any kind of cooperation out of the Cian, how damn suspicious they are, how much sweet-talking and doubledealing I had to do to spring these two lousy specimens—" He sighed again, and took a bigger drink. "You think this is all a bunch of doubledomed pedantry, don't you?"

Farber smiled noncommittally. He swirled the murky stuff in his glass. Strange to be drinking Scotch again. At last he said, politely, "It does seem a bit academic."

"Not at all," Ferri said, emphatically. "I'll bet on it. This might be the key to everything. Hell." He paused. "There's something very odd about the Cian culture. Goddamn it, there's something almost *artificial* about some of this. This business of the males nursing the young, for example. I hooked the specimen in there over with a diagnosticator, and the enzymic and hormonal changes in the basic male system needed to make it possible are incredibly complex. And the thing's complex in execution too—lactation in the males is triggered by the secretion of musk by the pregnant female, and by minute amounts of hormones that osmose through her skin and are transferred to the male by touch. Dammit, a system like that could *never* evolve naturally. I don't think so, anyway. Not in a sophisticated mammal. It's way overcomplicated. And it's unnecessary. Why can't the females nurse? They do in the low-order mammals I've been able to examine, so it isn't some universal quirk of this planet's eco-system." He shook his head. "No, everything points to the idea

that the Cian were faced with some sudden, drastic change—they adjusted themselves to meet it, and that adjustment warped the development of their whole culture."

"What change?" Farber asked.

"That's where today's findings come in," Ferri said. "Lisle's now in a major interglacial. According to my figures, the last big glaciation would have dropped the level of the oceans by quite a significant amount. Get it? This assumes that, before the glaciation, the Cian were amphibious hominids, living right on the shorelines, in the shallows. Probably they were almost as highly evolved as the modern Cian, intelligent, but not culture-transmitting in the same way that the Cian are now—I doubt if they'd have fire, of tool making, living in the water most of the time. Probably they had speech, and an oral tradition. I get the chilly feeling that some of the Cian myths are older than humans can imagine, that they've come down in an unbroken line from the days before the Cian left the sea. Spooky." He finished his drink. "Anyway, the ice age comes, and the sea level drops, drastically. The continental shelves fall away very rapidly here, and very steeply. Drop the sea level enough, and you wouldn't have any shallows, anywhere. So it was either adapt to life as a fully aquatic mammal again, or adapt fully to life on land. So they adapted to land life, some of them anyway, and they did it very quickly. The pressure on them must have been enormous, and the situation unbelievably harsh. I imagine that the majority of them died, but some of them made it. Think of it! I doubt if Terran life would have been capable of meeting the challenge in time, but the Cian did. They adjusted themselves."

"How'd they adjust?" Farber said harshly. "You make it sound like they tinkered around with their bodies and custom-modeled themselves to fit."

Ferri grinned. "That's just about what I do mean. Fire Woman spews out a lot more ultraviolet than Sol. This planet is drenched with hard radiation. That makes its biomass a lot more fluid than Earth's. *Lots* more mutations in every generation, and more of them viable." He paused, and looked at Farber significantly. "Hell, you should've gotten a hint of that from your own experience. A lot of their legends seem to point to the fact that their females practice voluntary natural contraception. Reabsorption of the embryonic material. Your own experience with your wife seems to confirm that, and I have other instances. And, if they can do that, I don't doubt that they've got a lot more control over their genetic material in other ways as well. There are hints of that, too. So, they were forced to live on land, to adapt to it in a very short time, by evolutionary standards. For some reason, the transition interfered with the ability of the females to

nurse. But their genetic fluidity saved them. Necessity jury-rigged this system with the males nursing the young. And that distortion was reflected throughout all the rest of their cultural development, until by the time their society reached the point where they were able to fix it—and they could, don't kid yourself; their genetic technology is sophisticated enough now so that they can do just about anything they want; your own case is proof of that—it'd become such an intrinsic, integral part of their culture that they couldn't rip that thread out without destroying the rest of the weave as well."

"I don't know." Farber toyed with his glass, set it down. "It all seems very complicated to me. *Ja?*"

"And so it is," Ferri said. "That's one theory. Here's another. The Cian *deliberately* engineered these alterations in their own biological systems, within historical times. This is a very stable culture, Joe. Almost static. From the evidence, I'd say that they've had a biological technology more advanced than ours for at least three thousand years. A long time, right? Sometime during those three millennia, after they had developed the capability to do so, they 'tinkered' with themselves, to use your phrase. That male-lactation lashup *is* suspiciously complicated and cumbersome; it would be easier to explain it away as a deliberate act of genetic engineering than to try to figure out how such a screwy system could have naturally evolved. So they did it to themselves, then. Why? Jesus Christ

I don't know! But the minds of the Shadow Men aristocrats are so dark and unfathomable to us—who in hell knows why they do anything? They're *aliens*. Right? What do we really know about the Way, what its goals are, what its motives are, what its dictates are? Nothing."

Ferri got up and made himself another large drink. His movements were a little unsteady—he was rapidly getting sloshed. "So that's my second theory," he told Farber. "I don't like it as well as the other one, but I have to admit that Occam's Razor favors it. Don't forget, though, that the Razor often doesn't cut it, when it comes down to real-world situations." He chuckled at his own wit, finished his drink, made another. Farber refused a refill. Clutching his drink carefully, Ferri returned to his seat.

The two men sat in silence for a moment. Ferri's face had acquired a puckered expression, as though he was tasting something that had spoiled. It was obvious that his manic enthusiasm was souring under the influence of weariness and whisky. He grinned lopsid-edly at Farber. "Two theories, and neither of them really accounts for all the weird sociological quirks of this society. So fuck it. I can spin a dozen more, if you want. What else have I got to do in this vacuum but sit here and make up fairy

stories for myself?" He took a ferocious swig of his drink. "If the Cian would only cooperate!" he said bitterly. "If I could just get a female specimen to work on, get her down on the table and open her up, I might be able to figure this out. But they won't let me dissect a female—it's such a sacrilege to them they hiss in horror if you even hint at it."

Farber watched him in silence. Scientific objectivity was all very well, but, goddamn it, the man knew Farber's situation, and there was such a thing as discretion. Farber's mind insisted on flashing him a vivid picture of Liraun laying flayed and gutted on the rolla-way bed, split from stem to sternum to satisfy Ferri's curiosity. Farber's jaw muscles clenched, and a pulse began to throb at his temple.

"This doing you any good?" he said in a thick, harsh voice, tapping the telemeter-bracelet at his wrist.

"It's doing me too goddamn much good," Ferri grumbled. He crossed to the bar and came up with a narcotic atomizer, pressed it into his nose, and inhaled deeply several times. When he spoke again, his voice was high-pitched and dreamily remote, as though he had gone away somewhere and left his body behind on automatic pilot to deal with Farber. "It's driving me to distraction, it's doing me so much good," he said in his new passionless voice, waving his hands mechanically, looking like a robot programmed to act out emotional turmoil. He drifted back to his chair, walking with the leisurely slow-motion strides of an astronaut in low gravity, and proffered the atomizer to Farber. Farber refused, with a sudden twinge of distaste—he was just beginning to realize how much his life among the Cian had estranged him from his fellow Terrans. Ferri shrugged, gave him a dreamy scornful smile, and gave himself another long snort of the narcotic. When he came up from it, his eyes were opaque, and his voice was even further away. "We've known all along that the Cian language depends heavily on shifts in tone and inflection to convey meaning, like Chinese. Now it appears that words and sentences spoken exactly the same way can take on alternate, and usually totally different, meanings, just by the social construct of the moment in which they are spoken. Or maybe by infinitesimal hand-and-body gestures too, although that's hard to prove. But Christ! I'm surprised we've ever understood *anything* these people have told us."

"How'd you know we have?" Farber said.

Ferri grimaced, and stuck the atomizer back into his nose.

13

After that, Farber didn't see Ferri again for a while. He and Liraun were increasingly forced to depend on their own company. With Liraun in her present mood, that made it a lonely time for Farber. He was leading a celibate life again, but this time he accepted it with real equanimity, as he tried to accept Liraun's sullenness, and the sudden apparent deterioration of her health. He was still content, he realized, in spite of everything. His old unrest, his Earthsickness, was gone. He didn't want to be anywhere else, he didn't want to do anything else—that knowledge seeped from the inside out, and left him in peace. When he looked to the future, he was full of confidence. He had his feet on the ground now, and he and Liraun had been working out fine. The pregnancy was upsetting everything at the moment, but after she'd had the kid things would settle down again, and they'd get back to normalcy. He was not a particularly patient man, but he could summon up enough patience to last until then. And then they'd be all right. Then they'd be fine. And the child—he found himself looking forward to that with a keener pleasure than he'd known he could feel.

Wait until the child is born, he told himself. Wait until the child is born.

14

The last month of pregnancy began, and Liraun underwent another sea change. Although still physically weak and shaky, she seemed to tap some inner source of serenity and strength. She was at peace with herself, once again the old Liraun. But now the Council began to take up more and more of her time, as if they were getting as much use out of her as possible while she was still a Mother of Sha-sine.

Sometimes he would accompany her to Council meetings, or pick her up after work on his way back to the Row, and he saw and heard enough, in snatches, during those times to realize that what Ferri had said was true: Liraun, along with the six other Mothers who composed the Council at the moment, was literally running Shasine. It was a huge and complicated task, and Farber understood only enough of it to be glad that it wasn't his. Finance, for instance, was a game to the Cian, in a way that

it never could be to a Terran. They treated it as an agreed-upon fantasy, understood as such; that, of course, was true on Earth as well, although it was seldom understood or admitted—but never on Earth would they agree to cancel or change all the rules in the middle of the game, as they periodically did in Shasine, sometimes even wiping out all debts and starting again, or "agreeing upon" a new value for money; "national debt" was an unknown concept among the Cian. Dealing with this sort of thing was the least complicated part of being a Mother of Shasine, and Farber was content enough to leave it to Liraun, although his new role as First Lady, so to speak, took him awhile to get used to. Liraun was the important one now—if he had any importance at all (and he didn't have much), it was only because he was connected to her, because she liked to have him around, as if he were her favorite cat.

One day during this period, he was witness to a very strange thing, something he wouldn't really understand until weeks later.

He and Liraun were on their way back home from a Council meeting. As a Mother of Shasine, Liraun now rated a carriage, pulled by one of the sad-faced centipedes, and a driver who was on call at any hour of the day or night—Farber was allowed to ride in the coach only through Liraun's special intervention, and received many primly disapproving looks every time he stepped in or out of it. This evening they were almost back to the Row when something broke the tomb-like silence that was the norm in Old City at this hour of the night: an eerie, wailing blast from some sort of musical instrument, a horn, perhaps, or a flute. Again it sounded, discordant and desolate, the sort of sound a lost soul might make while sinking down to Hell. Under it came a drum: harsh, clattering, with a crazy rhythm that staggered back and forth like a drunken man.

Liraun had sat bolt upright at the first note of the "horn," and Farber could feel her quivering with tension or fear beside him in the darkness. Now—at the sound of the drum—she swayed and put her hands to her throat in horror. "An opeinad!" she whispered. For a second she sat as still as stone, but then—just as Farber was opening his mouth to ask her what the matter was—she sprang to her feet and pounded on the back of the driver's seat to attract his attention. "The *opeinad!* Find it! Follow the sound!"

The driver turned around to stare at her, his face disapproving and apprehensive. "But Mother, you know I can't do that . . ."

"Do what I say!" Liraun snarled. "Find it. Now!"

Shrugging and muttering, the driver turned the coach and headed back

the way they had come. Farber reached up to pull Liraun back down in the seat, but she shrugged him off and remained standing, holding on to the back of the driver's seat. "Liraun—" he started to say, but at the same time she leaned forward and shouted "Faster!" at the driver.

Without turning around, the driver said, "But Mother—" in a choked sullen voice; Liraun hit him savagely in the back with the flat of her hand and screamed "Faster! Cold People shrivel you if you don't go *faster*?" That was enough for the driver—no one wanted to have ill luck wished on him by a Mother of Shasine. Hissing, he prodded the centipede with a long sharp pole. The centipede mooded plantively, shook itself, and began to flow forward at twice its previous speed, rippling over the ruts and bumps in the road.

Unfortunately, the carriage didn't have the centipede's multiple suspension system: it bounced and jolted wildly, while Farber yelled for Liraun to sit down and she ignored him; Farber could barely keep his seat, but Liraun kept her balance easily, shifting her weight with each jolt as though she were riding a surfboard—she was staring intently ahead of her into the darkness, something about the set of her head and neck evocative of her anxiety and tension. At last there was a light: torches ahead, somewhere down the slope, bobbing like a train of moving red jewels. "They're headed for the Square of the Benediction," Liraun shouted, above the clatter of the wheels. "That way! Head them off!" She pounded on the back of the driver's seat. "Faster!" Obediently, the driver swerved the carriage into the alley Liraun had indicated, almost tipping them over in the process; they plummeted down a steep incline, blue sparks shooting from the brakes as the driver tried to slow the carriage up enough to keep it from over-running the centipede. Bewildered and ignored in the midst of all this commotion, Farber hung onto his seat and clenched his teeth, trying not to think about how hard they would hit the stone street if the carriage went over.

Bobbing and swerving, they careened out into the Square of the Benediction.

Liraun had timed it well. The square was still empty, but they could hear the horn calling nearby, and the staccato clatter of the drums, and, under it, a sound like that a large and angry bee might make: a concerted and ominous hum.

The carriage screeched to a halt, the brakes throwing sparks three feet in the air, and had not yet stopped rolling before Liraun sprang out of it, heading for the center of the square. Farber vaulted out after her, calling her name, terrified that she would injure herself. But in spite of her

pregnancy she was running like a deer, and she was nearly twenty yards ahead of him when the other woman bolted into the square.

This woman was running too, but she staggered and reeled as she ran, and it was obvious that she was on her last legs. Even as he watched, she tripped and went down, tumbling over and over, coming to a stop face down. She didn't try to get up again, but lay sprawled out against the pavement, her shoulders heaving as she breathed in stertorous gasps. Behind her, the *opeinad* spilled out of an alley mouth into the square. To Farber, they looked like something out of an old Frankenstein movie: two or three dozen men waving torches and carrying improvised weapons, clubs, paving stones, pieces of pipe, one *twizan* ceremoniously brandishing something that looked absurdly like a giant set of pinking shears. It should have been funny, ludicrous, but it wasn't—the faces of the men were grim and fierce, their bared fangs glittered evilly, their eyes were hard as flint, and Farber thought that they were the most terrifying sight he had ever seen. They saw the woman, howled with rage and glee, and threw themselves forward. Liraun ran to meet them. She passed the other woman, ran a few feet farther on toward the oncoming mob, stopped, threw her arms wide, and waited, motionless, like a spread-armed statue, like King Canute trying to turn back an alien tide.

To Farber, running hard to catch up, cold fear like a fist in his belly, it looked for a long moment like the mob was not going to stop, like it would roll right over Liraun, trampling her, to get at the other woman. But almost imperceptibly the mob slowed, slowed, and then came to a restless, surging halt a few feet from Liraun, like a comber arrested on its way in to the beach.

They eyed each other in silence, Liraun and the hundred-handed, hundred-headed crowd.

Then Liraun, arms still outstretched, said: "This hunt is over. Go home."

The crowd surged restlessly, humming that ominous razor-edged hum, and then one of its voices said "The *opein!*" and another voice said "What about the *opein?*" and another said "Let us have her! She is an *opein!*" They started forward again.

Liraun took another step forward, raising her arms higher, holding the mob, seeming to press them back as though she were radiating a wall of invisible force. "*Opein* or not," Liraun shouted, "you shall not have her! She is mine now, and the *opeinad* is over. Go home!" Her voice was hard, icy, filled with chill authority. The crowd also heard that authority, and

reluctantly, against their own wills, they began to respond to it, one or two men at the back of the mob turning hesitantly to walk away.

Behind Liraun, the woman sat up.

That was a mistake. The mob howled at the sight of her face, and one young man at its leading edge darted forward, trying to get around Liraun. Hissing, Liraun snatched the man's torch away from him and beat him fiercely over the head with it. As he fell, rolling and slapping at the sparks in his hair, Liraun whirled the torch around and around her head, so that it blazed up as brightly as a comet, and screamed "Get out! People Under The Sea, hear what I say! Get out! Now!"

And she hurled the torch at the crowd.

That broke them. They poured back out of the square, some unabashedly running, some trudging dispiritedly with their heads bowed, but none stopping or turning back.

Liraun stood looking after them, standing straight as a ramrod, her face passionate and fierce. Farber watched her in awe, almost afraid of her, seeing in this furious Valkyrie no trace of the Liraun he thought he knew.

The other woman got painfully to her feet, Liraun making no attempt to help her. Her face was streaked with dirt and sweat and blood, her hair wildly tangled, a bruise—probably from a thrown rock—purpling half her face and already beginning to swell. In spite of her dishevelment, Farber realized, with a shock, that he recognized her. She was named Tamarane, and she was the wife of Lord Vrome (his actual title was *hyrithākumenäe*, "Hereditary Holder of Land-Titles, in Escrow, for a Sub-Sept of Which He Is Elder"), who had bloodline connections of some kind to Genawen's sept. He had met them at Genawen's house a few times, and had heard some talk about her—she had failed to conceive at two *weinunids* now, and was thought to be sterile.

Liraun and Tamarane eyed each other, much as Liraun and the mob had a few moments before, and there was a similar kind of hostility and tension in the air between them.

At last, Tamarane managed a crooked smile through her bruised and bleeding face. "Well, Mother," she said in a husky, ironic voice. "Thank you for my life."

"I should have let them have you," Liraun said bitterly. "I should have let them have you. Only I couldn't, somehow—" She swayed suddenly, no longer fierce, looking instead gray and tired and drawn. Farber put out a hand to steady her.

Tamarane's face changed, too. "Liraun—" she said, or started to say, concern in her voice now, and a certain rueful tenderness. But Liraun cut her off with a wave of her hand. "There is nothing I want to hear from you," Liraun said coldly. "There is nothing you can say to anyone anymore. You forfeited that privilege." The carriage came up then, and, with Farber's help, Liraun climbed into it. She would not look at Tamarane again.

Farber's last glimpse of the scene, as the carriage clattered away, was of Tamarane, standing alone in the center of the square, looking after them, grinning a complex, bitter, and ironic grin through her broken face as she fell away behind into the darkness and obscurity of the night.

Liraun refused to say anything about this incident at all, but the next day at work Farber's shiftmates were full of gossip about it. It had been discovered—how, Farber did not know—that Tamarane was not really sterile at all; that instead she had been taking a *drug that inhibited fertility* (the Cian shuddered in incredulous horror as they related this, and it struck Farber that the word "contraceptive" wasn't even a part of their vocabulary)—said *drug-that-inhibits-fertility* having been smuggled up at enormous expense from distant lands to the south. Thus the *opeinad*: obviously only an *opein*, or a woman who had been possessed by an *opein*, could do such a monstrous thing, and it was best to crush it and her out of existence before the *opein* could contaminate anyone else. All of Farber's workmates were puzzled by Liraun's interference with the *opeinad*, but they didn't censure her for it or—now that the heat of the moment was past—even question her actions: after all, she was "One Who Has Been Translated to Harmony," and as such her decisions were divinely motivated and by definition correct, no matter how incomprehensible they might seem to mere untransmogrified creatures like themselves—annoyingly, they included Farber in this classification and didn't even bother to question him about the motivations for Liraun's behavior, naturally assuming he was too lowly to understand them.

The affair of Tamarane was far from over, however. Already, two foreign river-traders, suspected of duplicity in bringing the *drug-that-inhibits-fertility* north to Shasine, had been taken into custody, and Tamarane herself had disappeared into Sloptown, the warren of foreign commonhouses and hostels on the Vermont edge of the Aome waterfront. No one would hurt her, since a Mother of Shasine had thrown a cloak of protection over her, but at the same time it was obvious that she

could not remain in Aei for long—no one would serve her, shelter her, or sell to her, except possibly a few foreign merchants of dubious sensibilities, and once Liraun's term as a Mother was over and her protection was therefore withdrawn, the *opeinad* would start its hunt for Tamarane all over again. There was much speculation about what Tamarane would do then. There was even more speculation about whether Lord Vrome himself had had complicity in his wife's crime. Whether he had known about it or not, he was nevertheless in deep disgrace.

Later that day, Farber took the cable car back up to Old City, and had just stepped out onto the Esplanade, making his way through the afternoon crowds' on the Terrace, when his attention was caught by the sudden and insistent ringing of a triangle or gong. He looked up. There was a man on the roof of one of the tall buildings that bordered on the edge of the Esplanade, six stories up, standing with his hands clasped behind his head. A few steps behind him was a servitor with a bronze gong and a hammer. The servitor beat the gong, over and over again, until the brassy waves of sound washed back and forth across the Terrace, and everyone was looking up. Satisfied that all eyes were upon him, the man unclasped his hands, touched them to his chest, and bowed. Then he stepped to the edge of the roof, raised his arms like a diver going off the high board, and threw himself out into space.

The man seemed to hang in the air above Farber for a long time, arms outstretched to either side, hair floating in the wind, face serene, and then, suddenly moving very quickly, he plunged down and past, having calculated his leap to take him past the outer edge of the Esplanade. He plummeted down through the gulfs of air toward the New City, down the sheer three-hundred-foot drop toward the roofs of Brundane, dwindling, becoming a manikin the size of a fingernail paring, a dot, a speck, disappearing from sight entirely, swallowed by distance and death. Farber had recognized him. It was Lord Vrome. Or perhaps one should say, it had been Lord Vrome.

A week or two later, at dusk, Farber was making his way through one of the narrow, high-walled, winding alleys in the interior of Old City when he came face to face with a man coming the other way. A fugitive ray of wine-colored sunlight, falling down a shaft past dust and old black stone, illuminated the man's face.

It was Lord Vrome.

Farber gasped and fell back against the wall, too stunned even to be

afraid. "Lord Vrome!" he whispered, feeling the blood drain out of his face and his lips go numb. The man turned to look at him, that impossible face unruffled and remote, and said, "You are mistaken. I am not Lord Vrome. My name is Tanar *sur* Rine." He brushed past Farber—who shrank away from his touch—and continued on down the alley, and was lost in musty darkness within five paces.

Farber stared after him long after there was anything to see. It *had* been Lord Vrome: the face was the same, line for line, the body and posture and gait the same, only the style of clothes different.

But, at the same time, it *couldn't* have been Lord Vrome.

Farber started walking again, his skin crawling, looking fearfully into dark corners as he passed them, the uncanny silence and mystery of the Old City pressing down on him like a hand.

That night. Farber dreamed that he was present at the Creation of Life.

This was before anything had come into being, even mountains and oceans, and the world was smooth and gray as a billiard ball.

Farber—or Farber's viewpoint, rather, since he had no body— was hovering just above a flat ashen plain that seemed to stretch to infinity in all directions. As he watched, the gods appeared on the horizon, looking down into the world. There were two of them, immensely tall, vaguely humanoid, with the blank, rough-hewn, oversized faces of Easter Island statues. Stiffly, the two gods—each miles high, storms and lightnings playing unheeded around them— began to walk ponderously forward, the ashy ground sinking and smoking under their weight. They walked steadily forward, side by side, looking straight ahead, past Farber's viewpoint and away toward the horizon, shrinking to the size of big-headed Tiki totems, disappearing around the curve of the planet. Behind them they left a long double-line of deep-sunken footprints, each footprint filled with water and suffused with an eerie blue glow. Slowly, the footprints began to widen, merging together, spreading out in ever-increasing circles, and the Elder Creatures who inhabited the ashen plain, creatures who lived without being alive and without recourse to flesh, dwellers in the primordial Chaos, drew back in dismay before the steadily spreading advance of these pockets of causality and life— when they joined together, meeting each other after spreading around the planet, Chaos would be exiled, time would have begun, and the Fertile Earth would be born.

Farber tilted his viewpoint to look down into the puddle of water at the bottom of one of the gods' footprints, at the squirming, wiggling life that bred there.

The puddle was full of worms.

The worms had Liraun's face.

15

Sometimes Jacawen *sur* Abut, Liraun's half-uncle, would come to visit them. Apparently this was motivated by polite custom more than by familial affection, as both Liraun and Jacawen were very formal with each other, most of their exchanges seeming to conform to a set ritual. But Jacawen didn't know what to do with Farber. There was no ritual there to tell him how to act—the situation was unique. The man was there, he must be treated with, an interrelation must be formed. But what? Jacawen knew how to relate to out-worlders: it was part of his job, and appropriate custom had evolved. But, like it or not, Farber could no longer be considered an outworlder—he was now tied by blood to Jacawen's own House and Tree, he was, by law, a relative. Jacawen, however, found it impossible to accept him fully in that role either. Try as he might, Jacawen could not wholeheartedly attune himself to familial ritual with this huge, obstreperous alien. And Farber's ignorance of the proper forms made things even more difficult. There was nothing left but to attempt to deal with Farber on an extemporaneous, one-to-one basis, unguided by custom or ritual, neither knowing what the other expected of him—a horrifying prospect for a Cian, especially one of Jacawen's aloof and aristocratic caste.

To give Jacawen his due, he made a conscientious attempt to do it. Jacawen was a Shadow Man. Like the Apache *Netdahe* or the *Yaqui-Yori* of Old Earth, his philosophy was one of unwavering hostility to all outlanders, to all intruders. Unlike the *Netdahe*, he was not obliged to kill them on sight. Social contact with outlanders was regarded, by the Shadow Men, as a distasteful but unavoidable condition of interstellar commerce, which in turn was acknowledged as a necessary evil. Cian *Angst* rarely worked itself out in violence, anyway—not socially directed group violence, at least, though there were many duels. Nevertheless, the hostility was there. Jacawen was trained to regard outlanders with polite

scorn and bristling suspicion. He did. He would have had difficulty reacting to them in any other way. He did not like Farber. He did not approve of Farber— everything about the Earthman reeked of an offensive and contaminating unorthodoxy. He had been outraged by Farber's marriage to Liraun, and was forever estranged from them by it. It was a wound that could never heal. But, by the custom of his people, he was obliged to seek synchronization of spirit with the despised out-lander. It was unthinkable that he do this by increasing his tolerance of Farber's unorthodoxy—ignorance of the Way was no excuse; its Harmony lay waiting to be discovered at the heart of all creatures, of all things, and if Farber had not found it, then it was a sin of omission on Farber's part. Therefore, if they were to synchronize, it was Farber who must change. To this end, Jacawen spent long hours patiently explaining to Farber what, in his opinion, was wrong with the Earthmen's way of life.

"You go too fast," he said once, unconsciously echoing Ferri's words. "You have no patience. You do not understand what you see, and you will not wait for understanding to come, you just rush ahead, so *fast*." He blinked, shaking his head, groping for expression. "You are all so hungry. You are *aggressive*—" he used the Cian term, which translated as "The Mouth (Which) Is Always Hungry." "You are *ambitious*"—he used the English word here, as this concept could not be translated into his language at all— "and you go so fast that you cannot watch the ground under your feet, and so you smash what is around you. Like wild things, you are dangerous even when you are not overtly hostile. You are too much enmeshed in the external world, the world of flesh and duration, and you do not perceive the inside of the world or of yourselves. It is a disease with you, a contamination, this thing that lets you see only' the one aspect." He paused, and his expression shifted from so'mber to grim. "We, the Shadow Men, have that disease too, although we suffer from it much less. That is why we can deal with you,, why we can understand you at all. We are aberrant, abnormal, but we have our purpose—the burden of earthly government is left to> us. We serve as buffers for the rest of our people. We are barriers against the contamination of corporeality that creatures such as yourself spread. This is our pride and our sorrow—honor to us that we guard our people so, shame to us that we are tainted enough to b»e able to do so."

And so on, throughout the night.

Farber did not understand. Jacawen did not understand Fzarber.

After a while, in spite of tradition, Jacawen stopped coming at all.

Farber began to spend time with Genawen *sur* Abut, Liriaun's father, and Jacawen's older half-brother. Although one of the Thousand Families, Genawen was not a Shadow Man—you had to become one, you could not be born into the cult—and didn't seem to share Jacawen's dislike of aliens. He was a shrewd, jovial old man, and he ran a large household with benevolent firmness. His house was a rambling stone structure fronting the Square of the Ascension, at the far end of the Esplanade.

Genawen's wife was a Mother at the time, and that gave him and Farber some common ground for conversation, although Genawen seemed to want to spend most of his time complaining about how his wife was simply ruining his household staff during her period of authority over them. But what was disrupting Genawen's household the most at the moment, it seemed, was what looked to Farber like a circus parade, sans elephants, in the inner courtyard.

"What in the world is that?" Farber asked, as Genawen led him around the flagstone rim of the courtyard.

"It's the rehearsal for my wife's Procession," Genawen answered.

"But what's a Procession, anyway?"

Genawen stopped dead. He stared at Farber in amazement. "What's a Procession?" he murmured blankly, and then he said: "What's a Procession! Oh, ho ho ho! By the First Dead Ancestor, Mr. Farber, do you know that I'm not really sure how to tell you what it is. I've never had to explain it to anyone before. Oh, ho ho ho!" Genawen always laughed by saying "Ho ho ho!" like Santa Claus, with perfect enunciation and never an extra "ho!"—or a missing one. He even looked something like Santa Claus, minus the beard: bushy eyebrows, ruddy cheeks, fat jelly-bowl stomach. Since his wife was pregnant, he was in lactation, and his six pendulous breasts flopped up and down when he laughed. "Well, let's see, how do I explain," Genawen began, becoming more serious. "You know that my wife, Owlina, is a Mother, and she's pretty close to term. She should be delivering any day now, as a matter of fact. Well, these people will escort her to the Birth House when she's ready—you do know about the Birth Houses, don't you?"

"Yes, Liraun mentioned them just the other day."

"Well," Genawen continued, "the Procession will escort her to the Birth House, sort of like a—" he groped through his small stock of Terran referents.

"—an honor guard?" Farber suggested.

"Yes," Genawen said, "that fits well, although you must realize that there are solemn religious aspects to it as well. That's why those men are in costume, and why some are carrying Talismans, or idols, as you people would have it—although that doesn't quite get the concept across. Many represent People of Power, or symbolize natural forces."

"What does that one represent?" Farber said, nodding toward a Cian who was dressed head to toe in an odd gray costume, which was covered in turn with soft downy hair—he had big staring circles of red and black paint around his eyes, and gilded false canine teeth that were almost a foot long.

"That's one of the Fetuses," Genawen replied, "and it is ill luck to talk of what they represent, especially for men in our position, with Mothers almost ready to go on Procession. The proper forms must be observed in these things. That's why there are always at least two of the Twilight People with a Procession, a *twizan* and a *soubrae*."

As if responding to a cue, a *soubrae* picked that instant to come out of one of the encircling buildings and enter the courtyard. This was the same emaciated, hatchet-faced Old Woman who had presided at Liraun's Naming, Farber realized. She glided like an iceberg through the sea of brilliant costumes, giving orders with a word, a nod, a curt gesture. They were instantly obeyed. The *soubrae* stopped momentarily, and stared at Farber. Farber returned her gaze. It was obvious that she recognized him. She flared her nostrils, gave him a look of cold disapproval, and moved on. She seemed to leave a chill behind her even in the dusty afternoon courtyard.

"I don't think she likes me." Farber said.

Genawen shrugged.

"What does *soubrae* mean anyway?" Farber asked.

"It is an archaic word," Genawen said. "It means 'Sterile One.'"

"She looks it, too," Farber said. "Sterile as a rock."

Genawen grinned. "Oh, ho ho ho! You had best be careful, Mr. Farber. Some of them have power. She might curdle the milk in your paps!"

"I'm not worried," with a lazy grin.

"Eh?" Genawen said. Then: "Oh, ho ho ho!" again as the joke hit him.

Farber was counting. "How many men in this Procession, ah, twenty?"

"Twenty-five in this one."

Farber whistled, then clicked his lips for Genawen's benefit, as the Cian did not whistle in surprise. "That must be expensive." He suddenly looked worried. "Am I supposed to pay for Liraun's Procession?"

"No, the government, by custom, will always finance at least a small Procession for any Mother of Shasine. Of course, if you want extra marchers, or expensive costumes, then you must pay for it, as I have here. Oh, ho ho ho! Though I won't be able to afford it for long, by the Second Dead Ancestor, if Owlinia keeps mismanaging the budget—"

But Farber wasn't listening. There was a thought in the back of his head that kept itching for attention, but he couldn't quite reach it to scratch.

He forgot it.

A week later, Farber met Genawen again in a little park at the foot of Kite Hill. Genawen and a young Cian woman were strolling six babies in a complicated, crowded wheelbarrow-wagon.

Farber greeted them, and Genawen insisted on picking up one of the babies and thrusting it enthusiastically under the Earthman's nose. The baby began to cry, just as enthusiastically.

"Oh, ho ho ho!" Genawen said. "A fine litter, don't you think! Just listen to him squall!"

"They look very healthy," Farber said.

"Too healthy," Genawen replied. He had switched the baby to one of his fat, glistening breasts, now left exposed in the fashion of nursing fathers. "They hurt when they suck too hard."

Farber suppressed a smile. They stood in silence for a moment, looking down over the sprawl of New City below, while Genawen fed another insistent baby. The young woman remained in the background, looking on.

Finally Genawen noticed her. He beckoned her forward, and put a meaty hand on her shoulder. They both smiled at Farber, Genawen enthusiastically, the girl shyly. "Mr. Farber," Genawen said enthusiastically, "I'd like you to meet my new wife."

The next time, Farber managed to catch the elusive thought in his head. He instantly wished that he hadn't.

Farber left work early the next day and went in search of a Birth House. They were not easy to find—the Cian sense of propriety dictated that they must be unadorned, nondescript buildings, and there was no Cian equivalent of a telephone directory. But one of Farber's workmates had taken his wife to the Birth House a few days before, and although he had stonily refused to answer any of the Earthman's excruciatingly impolite questions about the process, Farber had overheard him describing the route of the Procession to his friends. Farber had a vague idea, then, as to the location of one of the Birth Houses anyway.

He set off on foot through Aei New City, following River Way along the bustling Aome waterfront. There were no Birth Houses in Old City, he had picked up that much information in the past few days—apparently it was forbidden. He doubted that there would be any in this district either; as he understood it, Birth Houses were located in quiet, out-of-the-way pockets of the city, not because they were considered shameful, but because they were so sacred that they must not be unduly contaminated by the mundane flow of urban life. So he walked rapidly, almost at a dogtrot, until the city began to dwindle and fall away on either hand, and he turned onto the North Road. Here he must walk slowly and keep alert. The Birth House could be anywhere.

The North Road paralleled the shore of Elder Sea, about a quarter-mile inland from the unbroken wall of the Dunes. Faber followed it up the coast for miles, while the scattered clumps of buildings that served Aei for suburbs became less and less frequent. They had all been places with some obvious utility—truck farm, heavy machine shop, pottery works—and none of them could be the Birth House. Doggedly, he kept walking. The towering monolith that was Old City had been looming ahead and to the left; now it pulled abreast, and then slowly fell behind him, its mazy roofs and towers glinting against the muted afternoon sky. As it fell behind, the world opened up, as the city had opened to suburb when he turned onto the North Road. He had the feeling that the Eye of God had just done a long slow dolly-back, like some preternatural television camera, reducing him to a tiny black spot toiling across an immense field of white. The wind now tasted of distances, of all the places he had never been, the unimaginable expanses of an alien world, open to the horizon. It was both

daunting and madly exhilarating. He realized that he had never been out of sight of Old City on this world, that his experience of Weinunnach was bounded by a twenty-mile circle. Now, as the obsidian cliff and its burden of stark towers began to sink under the horizon behind him, like a skeleton-masted ghost ship going down. Farber felt a sudden overwhelming urge to just keep walking, heedless of his original goal. To keep going on and on across the snowy plain until Aei disappeared, until everything he knew was gone—to forget about Liraun, about their child, about Ferri, about Earth, to put away and forget all of his old life, to go on until he came to a new place, a new city, to start again. That went through him like a sexual thing, like an electric current, like a hot drugged wind. It shook him and staggered him. For a moment it straddled and rode him like a succubus, then he tore it free. The wind whipped it away, and it was gone. He blinked. He shook his head.

He kept walking.

Still no Birth House.

The countryside around him was buried under at least ten inches of snow, although the North Road itself had somehow been kept spotlessly clear. Nothing grew here now, except for the snowtrees that were scattered in groves over the low hills to the west. These were tall, lustrous, translucent plants, something like giant asparagus, something like wax beans, with spiky ebony-leafed heads. They were heliotropic, and they hunted the sun as it slid across the horizon from east to west. They flourished in this season, in the deepest winter, and the air was full of the drifting white clouds of their pollen. For a while then, walking the road, Farber underwent a strangely pleasant attack of *déjà vu* that persisted until he had puzzled out the reason for it. It was an unseasonably warm day, for Sashine in winter, and the bright sunlight, the hazy blue sky, the drifting pollen, all combined to reproduce for him—if you ignored the snow—the effect of a balmy spring day on Earth, shirtsleeve weather, birds singing invisibly behind the bright sky, sweet-smelling clouds of cherry blossoms on the wind, probably a crowd of raucous children playing soccer somewhere ahead. The illusion was so real for him that he nearly took off his coat, absentmindedly. But the "birds" were lizards or small winged marsupials, the pollen had a pungent, rusty smell, and whatever lay ahead of him would certainly not be a game of soccer. That hit him in an eyeblink, dissolving the illusion. Again and again he fell into the trap of preconceptions, of old ways of thinking and perceiving that could no longer apply, and repeatedly Weinunnach betrayed him, brought him up short, snatched the ground away, kicked his teeth in. How long would it

take him to realize, emotionally, that this was not Earth?

Suddenly, he was shivering. There was a bitter, bone-deep chill in the air that the direct sunlight could only momentarily disguise. A sudden turn in the road brought him to a roadside shrine, deserted, open to the road and sunk a bit into the ground, the crescent wall that cupped it made of patchwork sections of marble and porcelain and ceramic. The shrine was crowded with stone deities, squat, staring gods about four feet high, with grotesque faces and knobby hands, vaguely Aztecan in style and execution. He recognized some of them. The Warm People, carved jade inlaid with silver and bone, had been turned so that their faces were to the wall. For the remainder of the winter, they would look away from a world whose destiny they no longer controlled and whose suffering they could in no way abate. The Cold People, weathered rock and polished obsidian, had been moved to the front of the shrine, and glowered out over the road. Their faces were dour, unhappy, and fierce. Their blank, black obsidian eyes seemed to follow him as he passed.

A quarter-mile beyond the shrine, Farber gave it up. He stopped, defeated, on a small rise and tried to catch his breath. Behind, Old City poked up like a stump, up over the edge of the world; away to the west, he could see the winterstripped trees of an orchard, tiny as twigs with distance; ahead, to the north and east, were the snow-shrouded Dunes—like a mountain range in miniature—and Elder Sea. The water was cold and metallic and sluggish, and the beaches were locked in ice. The only sounds were the wind, and the groan of the pack ice breaking and reforming under the slow shrugging of the waves. The light was beginning to die, and it was growing colder. The desolation of the scene was unbelievable—it was more than could be borne. There was nothing left to do but pack it in, and go back to Aei. He had failed in the search anyway; he'd come almost three miles from the junction of the North Road, and the Birth House couldn't be this far out. Reluctantly, Farber turned around to go back. He raised his foot for the first step. Then he hesitated, not quite letting his weight down on it.

The wind brought him a ringing crystalline music.

For a moment, he thought it was in his mind, a waking return of his old dream of the *Alàntene*, but it grew steadily in volume and distinctness, shimmering staccato arpeggios that nailed themselves to the air with the vivid authority of silver spikes through jet-black wood. Under that was a slow walking thunder of drums.

Farber watched the road to the south, back toward Aei, and in a little while he saw the dusty sunlight flash from bronze masks and iron

hauberks, shimmer across rich fabric, pick out the tall nodding silhouettes of plumes, wink back brilliantly at him from onyx and amber and amethyst. At this distance, the figures of the marchers were small and close together—they looked like some fantastical centipede, cloth-bodied and varicolored, dozens of tiny legs scissoring rhythmically, scores of booted feet slapping stone in step. Flashing, rippling, stamping, swaying, casting a clangorous music up before it, the centipede wound out of the hills toward him.

He sat down on a rock to wait for it.

Ten minutes later, the Procession reached him. He sat and watched it pass, expressionless and unmoving as any of the statues in the shrine, although the cold stone had numbed his buttocks and the chill was spreading down his legs. This was the Procession of a rich household, probably one of the Thousand Families—it was made up of over twenty marchers. First came the Impersonators, carrying the Talismans on tall poles or wearing them over their shoulders as false heads, then the cluster of Twilight People around the Mother; following them were the musicians, with their drums and *tikans* and nose-flutes. Everyone seemed fresh and unfatigued. The marching was crisp and well coordinated, the musicians played steadily, the Talismans were held high and erect on their poles, apparently without effort, although some of them must have weighed thirty or forty pounds. In spite of his obvious age, the *twizan* was doing a complicated step-and-sway as he marched, darting from one side of the road to the other, whirling and leaping, scattering hand-fuls of fine brown powder into the air—it smelled something like nutmeg, something like onions, and it made Farber want to sneeze. The *twizan* was not even breathing hard, although he must have been eighty years old. Farber had not taken the incredible Cian stamina into consideration. A forced march of three or four miles through near-zero temperatures would certainly have killed or miscarried a Terran woman in the last month of pregnancy, but, somehow, the Cian Mother was still on her feet, walking between the *soubrae*—this Old Woman was fat, strapping, and nearly bald, but equally cold, equally ancient—and the silent, costumed Fetuses. The Mother's face was drawn and blank, and as gray as putty. Her skin was shiny-slick with sweat, in spite of the cold. Occasionally, she would stumble, and the *soubrae* would put out a hand to steady her. But she kept going.

They all ignored Farber completely, and he made no attempt to attract their attention. He sat stolidly on the rock, saying nothing, and in a little while the Procession had passed down the hill and out of sight, into a snowtree grove.

He gave them five minutes, and then got up and followed them.

The Birth House was another three-quarters of a mile down the Road. It was a low, long, flat-roofed structure, made of rough gray rock, fronting on the road and recessed into a low hill that rose up behind it to the west; probably the hill was excavated inside. There were no windows, and only one door that Farber could see. It was a most unremarkable building, and he might easily have taken it for a warehouse, except that the Procession had drawn up in a semi-circle before it. As he arrived, they were going through the Ritual of Imminence, celebrating the Translation-to-come. Farber watched from a position about thirty yards away, standing hunch-shouldered against the cold. Again he was in plain sight, and again he was ignored as if he did not exist—Farber had no business here, and if he chose to snoop, then that was a manifestation of *his* poor taste, his boorish-ness; no one else would take a chance on contamination by deigning to notice him. The ritual was short: after being anointed by the *twizan*, the *soubrae* escorted the Mother up to the Birth House, up to the tall iron door of the featureless stone wall. The door opened. There was a glimpse of someone inside, white-costumed, vague. The Mother entered the Birth House. The door closed behind her.

The *soubrae* turned away from the Birth House, and the Procession was over. The marchers ceased to be a precision unit, and became again an informal aggregation of individuals. They straggled back toward Aei in no particular order, talking, laughing at a joke, the musicians with their instruments slung over their backs, the Impersonators resting their long poles across their shoulders. Most of them glanced surreptitiously at Farber as they passed. Only the *soubrae* and the *twizan* did not look, and they radiated a chill disapproval. Within minutes, they had disappeared up the Road, and Farber was alone again.

He waited.

The wind moaned in from the sea, and the sun slid west across the horizon.

Nothing else moved—everything was cold silence and suspension.

He waited, freezing, hugging himself against the cold, finally doing calisthenics to keep warm, jumping jacks, squat thrusts, running in place, wondering what the Cian who were probably watching made of these unorthodox obeisances, feeling conspicuous and absurd but keeping grimly at it anyway, his feet slapping circulation back into themselves, his breath coming in violent little explosions of vapor, like an old steam engine building up working head, and still, doggedly, he waited. He

haunted the Birth House for another hour and a half, while the long afternoon guttered to night around him. During that time, two more Processions arrived from Aei. These were less elaborate affairs, from poorer households—neither of them were made up of more than twelve members, and their panoplies were not quite so sumptuous. All the marchers ignored him, as the inhabitants of the Birth House had ignored him during the long intervals between Processions. While Farber watched, the last Prodfession delivered their Mother to the Birth House, lit smoky, punk-smelling torches—for it was full dark now—and headed back to Aei, their torches growing smaller, becoming tiny bobbing match-flames, winking out one by one. Again Farber was alone, staring at blank secret rock.

Three women had entered the Birth House.

Nobody had come out.

Shivering, Faber slid forward abruptly, off the Road, crunching through knee-deep snow. He didn't know where he was going, or what he was going to do—like an arrow held at full draw that is suddenly released, he went because he was impelled to go. An intuition had brought him here; suspicion had kept him here, and it was suspicion, having been screwed intolerably tight, that now snapped like a bowstring and whipped him away toward the target. That suspicion was wordless, unfounded, irrational; he had not even really entertained it yet, in his conscious mind. But on some subcortical level it had been accepted and believed—now he was looking for proof. He began to circle the Birth House, thrashing through stiff winter-stripped brush. Twigs snapped under his feet like bones, and branches raked at his eyes. The snow was now thigh-deep. Now waist-deep. He floundered through it like a moose, breaking a path for himself. Off to the side rose the gray featureless walls of the Birth House. He grinned at them nervously as he fought the snow. The place didn't even have any windows.

Around the far side of the hill, he found another door. It was a plain thing of ironbound wood, almost a hatchway, set flush in the side of the snow-covered hillside. There was a tramped-down area in front of the door, and sitting in it were two or three oblong boxes, about four-by-four. *Garbage*, was Farber's first thought, so homely and commonplace was the scene. But the boxes were built of hardwood, unvarnished but planed smooth, and they looked sturdy and well made. Nobody went to that much trouble for garbage. He had started forward to investigate when there was a loud metallic click from the door, followed by a rusty ratcheting sound. Farber froze, half-crouched, watching warily.

The door swung open. Yellow light spilled out across the packed snow. Two silver-robed Cian technicians emerged from the tunnel, carrying one of the oblong boxes between them. They set it down near the other boxes, talked together in low voices for a moment, their breath steaming silver and blue in the bright light from the tunnel, their spindly backlit shadows stretching out into the barren winter country. Then they went back inside. The door closed. The light went out.

Farber tobogganed down the slope on his butt, kept sliding when it leveled out—on his back, feet helplessly in the air—as he had built up too much momentum to stop, and ended up inside a snowdrift. He got to his feet, slapped snow from his clothes, and came cautiously up to see what he could see. There was, he noticed, a faint trail leading back from the cleared area before the door, and winding away to the north and west, into the remote, winter-locked hills. It was hardly more than a path trampled in the snow, but Farber was willing to bet it was used to pack the boxes out, by centipede probably, or by some other big draft animal. He broke from the drifts onto the packed snow, and stopped to listen for an alarm. Nothing. Nervously, he padded up to the boxes, and knelt by one of them. He ran his hands over it, exploring, picking up splinters from the wood. He tugged experimentally at the lid. It was nailed down, apparently, but not too tight. Abruptly, he decided to risk it. He dug his fingers in under the lid and found purchase for them. He took a deep breath, held it, and seemed to swell like a puffing toad. His big hands tensed, his wrists arched, his shoulders bent—there was the crisp sound of splintering wood, and the lid flew open. He swayed above the box, panting for breath. The two brightest moons had risen, hurtling up the sky like meteors—they cast a dim lactescent light over the evening snowscape, but it was still hard to see, and the shifting double shadows they caused compounded the problem. Farber squinted, then, gingerly, he reached into the box and rummaged around. His hands encountered something smooth and hard—it rolled under his touch, he groped for it, got it again, and lifted it quickly out of the box and up into the light.

It was a skull.

Farber grunted, as if he had been hit in the stomach, and dropped it. The skull hit the packed snow with a chitinous *thunk*, spun, and rolled leisurely away into the shadows. The world pulsed and time stopped—Farber hanging in suspension, his fingers outstretched as they had been when he dropped the skull, while a decade went by, a century, a millennium—then *pulse*, and time started again, the world tilting and whirling around his head as he wrenched his whole body back and away so

that he sat down heavily on his heels, shaking his hand convulsively as if he had touched something very hot, screwing his eyes shut and instantly opening them again. The spasm passed, and the world stopped spinning. He put his hand to his throat, put it down again. "No," he said aloud, in a flat, almost matter-of-fact voice. He discovered that he was grinning, involuntarily, mirthlessly, grinning with horror. At the same time, a distant part of himself was saying, *You knew what it would be*, dispassionate, unafraid, and not at all surprised. He blinked. Then, grimly, he reached back into the box. Brittle dead things, rustling, rolling things that scuttled under his fingertips. A cold, unpleasant texture. *Like porcelain*, he thought inanely. Bones. Ribs, vertebrae, finger bones, femurs, a pelvis.

He scrambled over to the next box—scurrying along on hands and feet without bothering to straighten up, like a crab—and wrenched it open, heedless of noise, hitting it a savage, splintering blow with the palm of his hand when a nail stuck, the lid rising into the air with dreamlike slowness, as if it were a butterfly, and then, suddenly fast, clattering away end over end. There was now a long splinter wedged painfully under his fingernail, but he ignored it. Recklessly, he reached into the box and scooped out a double armful of its contents. Yes—bones. And more bones. He froze again, face turned up to the sky, squatting grotesquely with his arms full of brittle white bones, like a ghoulish creature gathered firewood. There was an odd, dangerous vacuum inside him, waiting to be filled by the panic and horror he knew were there, insulated from him as if by a thin layer of glass. Calmly and patiently, he crouched there in the dark, waiting for the glass to break.

Behind him, the door made a loud ratcheting sound.

The glass shattered. The vacuum filled. Before the light from the opening door could even spill out across the cleared area, Farber was off, dropping the bones and springing away in a single enormous bound, like a startled cat. Three strides took him to the edge of the packed snow, up the icy slope then—scrambling straight up it with hands, feet, knees, elbows, fingernails—and he was running and plunging away through the drifts, battering and bulling his way forward, floundering, falling, snowplowing, almost swimming through the snow as he breasted it. Up again. A hoarse shout behind him, and he ran faster, snapping his knees up as high as he could with each stride to get his feet clear of the snow. Then his feet bit air. He fell from the drifts to the surface of the road, hit jarringly, rolled, and came up running. Fortunately, when he came up he was pointed south, in the direction of Aei, because he was in no condition to navigate.

His mind had whited out under an overload of panic and superstitious terror. But his body had orders to run as fast as possible, and, to it, the hard, dry pavement underfoot and the sudden release from the encumbering snowdrifts were a benediction. He ran.

Somewhere in the smothering night behind him, there was another shout. Already it was faint with distance, diminishing, left behind.

Farber kept running anyway.

17

Afterward, Farber was unable to remember much about the trip back to Aei. Cold, jarring motion, darkness, the stars doing a stately jig around his head, the rasping sound of his breathing loud and ugly to his own ears. He ran or dogtrotted most of the way, occasionally slowing down to a walk when he was blown, but running again as soon as he got his wind back. He didn't look behind him. Sometimes he would miss his footing in the dark and fall—rolling with it if he was lucky, rattling his teeth and cutting himself on pebbles and grit if he was not—but always he would scramble up again immediately and keep on. He ran because it was the practical thing to do, a defense against the amazing cold, but he also ran to stay ahead of the horror that ghosted along at his heels like a vast black shadow, stopping when he stopped, watching him without eyes, following after again when he ran, patient and indefatigable.

Somewhere just outside of Aei, it caught him, swallowed him in a single velvet gulp, and he was *thinking* again, the thoughts scribbling themselves unstopably across the blank slate of his mind. My God, how could he tell Liraun! She wouldn't believe him. How *could* she believe him? How could he convince her, how could he make her see through the monstrous deception that had been perpetrated on the women of her race for—Christ, hundreds of years? Millennia? How many victims, across all that gulf of time? The horror and pity of it squeezed his heart. Think of them, the countless millions of women who had gone unsuspecting to be slaughtered, consenting happily to the rituals without realizing where it would lead them, believing the pious lies of the butchers. And then the Birth House, the door closing behind, the sudden terror and shock, the knives. Slaughter. The ignoble burial in the secret hills. And all because of some dark superstition, some god-haunted paranoia, some murderous

holy flummery! The pastel lights of New City were winking languidly ahead, and, feverish and shivering, he ran madly toward them.

At the junction of the North Road and River Way, he took his last and hardest fall, skidding down the steep slope on his stomach for about thirty yards, embedding gravel deeply in his hands and face. The impact stunned him for a moment, and he lay peacefully on his elbows in the dark, breathing raggedly. When he lifted his head, his eyes were drawn irresistibly across the low roofs of Aei New City to the towering obsidian cliff that rose up out of them—such an imperative upsweep that it eventually sucked all vision to itself, wherever else you tried to look—and then—head tilting back to take it in—up the column of glistening black rock to the cold stone place at its top. Old City of Aei. As he stared at it, he underwent a swell of such profound and complex emotion that his vision blurred, and Old City danced and shimmered on its cliff.

Then he was walking through its narrow, secret streets.

Black rock, high walls, shuttered doors. Along the Esplanade, up Kite Hill.

The Row. His own house, orange light leaking from the windows. As he made his way up to it, the door opened and Jacawen came out.

The two men stopped, and stared at each other. Then Jacawen closed the door behind him, and walked slowly forward. Until now, Farber had felt panic and terror and dismay, but he had not had time to get angry. That caught up with him now, in an enormous wave of detestation and rage, as he watched the small, somber figure ghost quietly toward him. It was all the fault of the ones like Jacawen, the Shadow Men, with their feculent darkness of spirit, and their hard, pitiless, flinty minds. They were the ones who wanted to take Liraun from him and destroy her. Jacawen stopped walking—they were almost nose to nose. Bristling, they locked eyes, each instinctively circling a step or two to the other's left. Jacawen's eyes were intense, sober, unflinching. Farber had to clench his fist hard to keep from striking him. But he could not hold that brilliant, agate-hard gaze for long; against his will, his own eyes flicked uneasily aside. As they did, Jacawen calmly said "*Hatatha*, greetings to you." Farber made a sullen reply. Jacawen nodded politely, and started walking again. Farber pushed himself against the wall to let him go by, the thought of touching him suddenly amazingly repugnant. Farber turned and slammed into the house.

Liraun looked up from a chair, saying, "Joseph—?" Then she stopped. Farber's clothes were grimy and torn, he was scratched in a dozen places

and there was dried blood on his face. He looked ghastly. Liraun stared at him in amazement.

"What was he doing here?" Farber demanded.

"My husband—"

"What was he doing here?"

"I don't understand," Liraun said. She got painfully to her feet. "You mean Jacawen?"

"Yes. I don't want him around here, and I want to know why he was sucking around when I was gone. You understand?"

"But—" She made a bewildered, tentative gesture, almost taking his arm but letting her hand drop before it could touch. "He was here," she said, more firmly, "to make the arrangements for my Procession. I will go to the Birth House tomorrow."

"Oh," Farber said.

"That is why I was alarmed when you didn't come home," she said, boring into his sudden silence. "You see? My time is very close now. A few days perhaps, *nē?* They will not let me wait any longer. But Jacawen will take care of it all, pay for it all as a birthday gift, we won't have to worry, and we have until the morning. Joseph—" stopping and looking at him in a frightened, plaintive way, not understanding him. "You are my husband. I wanted us to be together. Joseph—"

Farber groped behind him to find a chair, and collapsed into it. All the rage and bluster had gone out of him. He looked sick. "Liraun," he said, heavily. "What is it?" she cried, immediately becoming even more alarmed.

"My God, Liraun," he said. His voice was flat and dull. He sat there like a stone, growing more sodden and inert by the second, while Liraun hovered apprehensively nearby. He raised a heavy dead hand to ward her off, then tangled it clumsily in his hair, saying, "Christ, how can I tell you!" Liraun instantly said, "What's wrong?" and Farber, not hearing her, overpowering her, at the same time said, "But I have to. We've got to face it."

After the tangled words, there was a moment of silence. He looked at her as if he was really recognizing her for the first time that evening. "Sit down," he said. She stared uncertainly at him, shrugged, and moved back to her chair. She sat down. Another stretch of silence then, with the feeling under it that his spirit was swimming back from some deep, dank place. He firmed himself up, grimly, almost visibly. "Liraun," he said, "I want you

to try to understand this, and try to believe me. Okay? I know it's not going to be easy for you. But I'm not going to let it happen to you. I'm going to protect you." Liraun, impatiently: "Joseph, what—" but he cut her off, waving her to silence, saying, "*Listen*, goddammit." A nervous silence, then, plunging in to get it over with: "Liraun, try to understand. If you let them take you to the Birth House, you'll never come back. They'll kill you."

"I know," Liraun said.

Blankness, then he ran the program again: "No, baby. Listen to me—you'll die. You'll be *dead*."

"Yes, I know."

"Oh," Farber said stupidly. His face went dead again.

"Joseph," with a hint of agitation, "do we have to talk about it now? Why—"

"Wait a minute," slowly, bewilderedly, floundering, "you mean you know?" He stared at her helplessly. Then something else rose up in his face. "My God! Oh my God! *You knew all the time*."

She said, "Joseph, please." And he said, "You didn't tell me!" simultaneously.

They stared at each other wildly, like things at bay.

"Joseph—"

"Why didn't you tell me!"

Totally bewildered now, and beginning to cry: "But I did. I *have*— "

And that stopped him cold. Maybe she had. When she talked philosophy, he seldom understood much of it. It was so easy to get lost in a maze of allegory and indirection, so much was oblique and subtly implied. Maybe she had. But— He had risen to his feet in his passion; now the strength drained out of him again, and he fumbled blindly for the chair. He couldn't find it—he stood in a daze, making pathetic groping motions with his hands. His mouth was working weakly, without sound.

For the first time that he could remember, Liraun was crying openly.

"But," he said, looking puzzledly at her, as if he were a schoolboy and she was a problem he had to solve, "if you knew—to go along with such a thing, to let them— Why, you must be crazy," trembling, all his defenses being sluiced away by horror. "You must be crazy! Dear *God*. Jesus God!"

Desperately: "No—it's not a 'letting.' Don't—Joseph!"

But he was not listening. He was staring at her in total fascination. He

had looked at her every day and every night for months, but he had never seen her. Never. She was a stranger to him. He had never known her at all.

"Tonight we must recall and cherish what we've been together," the stranger said.

He backed away from her.

"Please, this is the last night we have," the stranger said.

He turned away from her.

"*Joseph!*" said the stranger.

Blind and deaf, he ran from her.

Stumbling, lurching, wet wind, cold rock, black earth below. He went down to New City.

18

It was the night of one of the minor Modes, the Imminence of Spring, and in New City the streets were filled with light. It glinted from demon masks, flashed from jeweled costumes, and made odd amalgamations of flesh and cloth and shadow. Someone had built a bonfire in Potter's Square, and the flames ate holes in the sky. The noise was overwhelming. Music stitched through sudden silences. The ceramic streets and squares and alleys were crowded with prancing, drunken demigods. They clutched at Farber, trying to get him to stay and celebrate, and he pulled roughly away. Using knees and elbows, he forced his way through the crowd like a trickle of ink working through a rich and vibrant tapestry. The air smelled of ginger, resin, musk. A demon with a horned, wooden face offered him a half-empty bottle of wine. He slapped it aside. The demon face was swallowed by the crowd.

Walpurgisnacht, he thought.

By the time he found a commonhouse, fireworks were making luminous pastel novas behind the steep slate roofs. Inside, it was dusty, dark, and almost empty. What patrons there were nursed their own thoughts and ignored him. He bought a flask of strong native liquor from the concessionaire, and took it to a remote corner of the common room.

He nursed the bottle for an hour, staring down at the scarred planking of the table, unaware of the passage of time.

When he looked up again, Tamarane was sitting at his table.

He blinked at her, startled. He hadn't heard her come in, he was sure of that—she had just appeared there, like smoke, like a broken-faced ghost.

"My friends told me that you were here, the Earthman," Tamarane said. "I came to see what sort of thing you were."

"And what sort of thing am I?" he asked bitterly.

"I don't know—a strange sort of thing. A thing not worth Li-raun's death, that much I know."

Farber flushed. "Look here, now—"

"She was the best of us, you know," Tamarane said, ignoring him. "I never told her that, we were never really close, but she was the best of us. And now it is too late to tell her. Now she is dead."

"Goddam you, you witch! She's not dead yet!"

"Yes, she is," Tamarane said calmly. She studied him intently but with seeming dispassion, as though he were a specimen on a laboratory slide. "You failed her miserably, do you know that? She always was the rebel, the lone one, the stranger—rescuing me from the *opeinad*, no one else in Aei would have done that. She had the potential to get free of here, this bleak deadly country, to ignore custom, to escape from Shasine. She couldn't quite get all the way out, though; for all her rebellion and defiance, all out in the open with no fear of consequence, she could not quite get free of custom, as some of us, less brave, did in silence and dissemblance while pretending to obey. She deserved someone who would help her to get all the way out. Instead, you Came along and pushed her right back in."

"I didn't make up your damn barbaric customs, missy," Farber snapped, breathing harshly. "I didn't notice *you* helping her, eh? I didn't notice you telling her she should 'get out.' After all, you knew about all this crap—I didn't. No, all I notice you doing is pretending to be a good loyal wife like everybody else and keeping your mouth shut, right?"

Tamarane studied her hands, clenching and unclenching her fingers, and there was silence between them for a long time.

"I failed her too," she said at last. "We all failed her. She failed herself—she could have gotten out, but she did not. Damn her!" she blazed suddenly, using the Terran word. "Goddam her! Why couldn't she have pressed a little harder?" Her snapping black eyes flicked to Farber. "And

damn you! Why couldn't you have seen, why couldn't you have helped her? And damn me . . ." Her eyes filmed over, became opaque, and there was another long pause. "There is too much silence, too much fear, too much of living only from day to day, too much of doing what is easy. Not enough questions, not enough talk, not enough work. We all failed ourselves, all of us."

She took a long swig from Farber's bottle, shuddered, and stood up. "I go downriver tonight," she said. "Smuggled south in an iceboat to Katrine, like contraband. There are other places on this world beside Shasine, after all, other cities than Aei to live in, even if the Shadow Men don't seem to think so. That's what you should have done with your wife, Earthman—long ago, before it was too late."

"It's not too late," Farber said doggedly. "There is still time to do that later, if I want to, and maybe I will someday; it's not a bad idea at that, although it's going to be hard to get away entirely from Shasine's influence anywhere on this miserable planet." He wagged his hand at Tamarane. "You are counting me out, eh? But you're wrong. I'll protect Liraun, don't you worry about that—I'll even protect her from herself if I have to. Nothing's going to happen to her while I'm around!"

Tamarane looked at him quizzically, that hard bitter irony coming back into her face now that pain and guilt had ebbed. "When this is over, Earthman, remember one thing—the Shadow Men could save Liraun if they wanted to. They could save all of us. They have the knowledge, the technology— But then, one cannot interfere with religion, can one? And of course, the Modes are so beautiful —" She grimaced, her battered face wincing in some complex variety of pain. "Goodbye, Earthman," she said. "I mean you no ill, but I wish you'd stayed there, I wish you'd died there—on Earth."

"Goodbye, Tamarane," Farber said harshly. "I wish I could say we'll miss you around here, but goddam it! I don't think anyone will."

"Oh, I'll be back!" Tamarane said, almost jovial now. "Life in Shasine is a hard and unyielding thing. Hard things are brittle." She smiled. "Brittle things break."

She went out.

Farber ordered another bottle. He noticed, dispassionately, that his hands were trembling.

For the first time in months, he drank himself into oblivion.

When he woke up in the morning, he felt like a dead man. No part of his

body seemed to be working properly. The Cian, who had let him wallow alone in his corner all night, stared at him with opprobrium. He stared back at them without shame or interest. The concessionaire, his face frozen with distaste, suggested politely that—since this establishment was far too poor to serve him appropriately—Farber might care to grace another commonhouse with the honor of his patronage.

Out into the bright morning, sweating and stinking.

19

"I can't help you," Ferri said. "Keane will kill me if I do."

"I'll kill you if you don't," Farber said.

Ferri glanced sidelong at Farber, and felt the blood begin to drain out of his face. There was something in Farber's voice that he had never heard before in anyone's, a hard, weary, backed-to-the-wall desperation. It was there in his face as well: cold and expressionless as a mannikin, eyes like two daubs of lead. He sat slumped in his chair as if he was too heavy to move. And yet it was that very heaviness that was ominous—instinct told him that anything with that much inertia would possess a terrifying amount of kinetic energy when it finally did start to move, the mountain coming down with the landslide. Ferri suddenly accepted that Farber might well be capable of killing him, not so much in passion as out of a sodden bitter stubbornness: because Ferri was blocking the only road Farber knew how to follow, and the man simply did not have the energy to trail-blaze a new one.

Nervously, Ferri licked his lips.

"Look, Joe," Ferri said, in as reasonable a voice as possible, "this thing you've stumbled on, the ritual murder of the Mothers— that's the missing factor in the social equation here, and it explains a lot. Your second 'Lord Vrome,' for instance. Even with multiple births, even with the majority of the babies female, their population would slowly and inevitably decline if they lose the mother every time, especially as a certain percentage of the women are sterile. A diminishing spiral. They must clone certain individuals, important individuals, to bring the population back up to its usual steady level. Genetically unsound in the long run, but feasible, and

possibly even another reason why this society has been static for so long.

"But don't you realize how all-pervasive a thing it is? Using hindsight, it's easy to see how that one thing is reiterated throughout their whole society, art, religion, the home, everything. That inscription on the eikon, remember? The one you couldn't read? It's: "From Sacrifice—Life," as near as I can get it. There are hundreds of things like that, in front of our faces all the time, that prove—in retrospect—that the average Cian not only accepts this killing of the Mothers, he believes in his bones that it's sacred. It's not just the Shadow Men; however much of an aversion you've taken to them, you can't say that—although they may have been responsible for this mass indoctrination in the first place, millennia ago. But by now it's a thread that's woven right through their entire culture." He glanced at Farber's face, looked away quickly. "Dammit, don't you see how difficult it would be to buck a tradition that firmly entrenched? Remember, *the women accept it too*. It's sacred to them, too; in fact, it's a transcendental thing to them, a way of becoming a god, if only for a few months. And Liraun has all the prejudices and values of her society, you know. Damn it, I warned you not to role-play with these people. You're treating Liraun as if she were Madame Butterfly, but she's not—she's one of the heads of Shasine government, a leader of their whole society, and, under these circumstances, high priestess more than victim. You've got to understand that. Face it—it's too late to do anything about this, change anything."

"It will work," Farber said. His accent was coming back, as it did only under extreme stress, so that he actually said, "it vill vork," like a comic-opera Prussian. "I had a lot of time to think about this last night." He closed his eyes tiredly. "She'll get over it. Once she has the child, and she realizes that she doesn't have to die, that a bolt of lightning will not come down and fry her because she didn't go to the Birth House. It'll be hard, sure, but she'll get over it. I'll re-educate her."

"It won't work," Ferri said flatly.

"Goddammit! It better!" Farber blazed. His eyes flew open— they were muddy and ill-tempered, like those of a snapping turtle. "I refuse to lose my wife to a bloodthirsty pagan superstition. D'you understand me, Mister? And you're going to help me, aren't you?"

Ferri wiped his face—it had gone white. Very carefully, he said: "This is going to raise a hell of a stink. You know that. I don't believe this kind of a situation has ever come up before—the Cian are temperamentally unsuited for it. God knows how they'll react to it, except I doubt if it'll be phlegmatically. If you kick that bee's nest over, Keane is going to find out about it, very soon."

"He already knows," Farber said. "You know what I did this morning?" he continued in an artificially light voice. "Before I came here? I called Keane up, and I asked him if I could put Liraun into the Co-op Hospital. I crawled on my belly to him. Do I have to tell you what he said? No, I thought not. Easy to guess, huh?" He shrugged with elaborate casualness. "So, Liraun will have to have her baby at home. And you're going to deliver it."

"I *can't*" Ferri said. He looked sick. "Joe, listen. I can't help you that openly. You know Keane has it in for you. If I delivered Liraun, he'd find out, and then he'd have it in for me too. He sends efficiency ratings on me back to Cornell, you know that. *Listen*, dammit. A really bad report from him could ruin my career, invalidate this expedition and all the work I've done. Lose me my tenure—"

"Are you going to help me? Or not?" Farber said. His voice had become very quiet, and his face had gone dead. He was not moving at all.

"Christ," Ferri said. He reached out for the drink that had been sitting, unsampled, on a sidetable, and then drew his hand back with a grimace, as if the touch of his fingers against the cold sweating glass had made him nauseous. He put his fingers to his lips, as though he wanted to suck on them. "Look, Joe," he said, coming alive, "this is what I'll do for you. Right? I've got a scanner here, on loan from the Co-op. I'll use it to give you a subcerebral course on childbirth, take about an hour. We've got a package on it in the First Aid program, 'Basic Midwifery,' or somesuch. Then you can go home and deliver Liraun yourself, and Keane won't be any the wiser. Right?" He winked at Farber, as though in relief at solving the problem, but there was a fine tremor to his hands.

Farber was silent for a long time. "What if there're complications?" he said at last.

"Unlikely," Ferri replied. "Ninety percent of the time you won't run into anything you can't handle after the subcerebral training. Christ, don't forget women did it all by themselves for thousands of years." At Farber's unsatisfied look, he said passionately, "Goddammit, how much do you want from me?" Admitting defeat: "Okay, listen. You can borrow the diagnosticator. It's Jejun work, beautiful thing, you can fold it up small enough to fit it in a backpack, though it's fairly heavy. And for God's sake, be careful with it—it's at least a century advanced over any medical equipment made on Terra, and it's as expensive as shit. I only got one because I'm doing critical field work. Now the thing telemeters, and it's got waldoes on it, surgical ones, micro stuff. I'll monitor everything, when the big moment comes, and if anything serious goes wrong, I'll take over.

But *I* won't be there in the flesh, oh no! And if we're careful and you keep your mouth shut, friend, then Keane won't find out about it. Okay? I swear to God," he added, belligerently, "that's the best I can do for you. Take it or leave it."

Another long silence, then Farber seemed to untense a little for the first time, slumping back against the cushions. He closed his eyes again.

"All right," he said. "I'll take it."

Ferri drained his glass in one fervent gulp.

Farber made one more stop on the way home, visiting a rat-faced steward who worked in the Co-op VIP Mess.

From him, Farber bought a gun.

It was an outdated, secondhand projectile weapon, one of thousands on the Co-op black market, and nowhere near as classy as the kilowatt lasers used by the honor guards at the Enclave.

But it worked.

20

Thinking gray, coagulated thoughts, Farber took the cablecar up to Old City. He watched the pastel sea of roofs spread out and fall away below as the car rose, and he told himself, *I will not let it happen*. He repeated it aloud, but the Cian riding with him were too polite to stare. Perhaps they edged infinitesimally away, perhaps not. Farber was oblivious of them in either case. "She isn't responsible," he announced to the air. "She doesn't know any better." Almost to the top now, and he felt his stomach and thighs tightening, as if he was unconsciously preparing himself for combat. The car ratcheted as it swung through the coupling and up to the station platform, bright reticulations shook across the windows, the walls vibrated. He rested his forehead against the cool, buzzing metal, and was instantly overwhelmed by the smell of her body, the taste of her secret flesh, the texture of her skin, her voice, her calm eyes, the soft pressure of her hands and mouth and tongue—more a cellular remembrance than an ordinary memory. She was imprinted on him; he was surprised it hadn't left visible marks on his skin. *I will not let it happen*, he thought. "I won't

let them take her," he remarked conversationally to the alien standing next to him. The Cian smiled noncommittally, and edged away. The car stopped.

He was making his way up Kite Hill when he first heard the music.

He began to run, ponderously, weighted down by the heavy backpack, stiff from lack of sleep and hungover as hell, but grimly covering the ground anyway. He skidded around a corner onto the Row, and there they were: a large Procession marking time in front of his house, drums and *tikans* skirling, Talismans held high. In front of the Procession proper stood the *twizan* and the *soubrae*. Off to one side was Genawen, beaming at everyone, looking almost fatuously happy. Up and down the Row, people had poked their heads out of windows to watch, and the whole scene had the relaxed, festive formality of an old-fashioned Fourth of July parade.

Farber felt himself go very cold.

Something in the back of his throat tasted like molten iron.

He came forward at a stiff-legged walk, not trusting himself to run, afraid of what might happen if his anger should shake itself completely free. He speeded up on his last few steps, and hit the dense-packed crowd like a shark slamming into a bloodied carcass. He bulled through the Procession, shoving, hitting, scooping the little men up and tossing them aside, much rougher than he had been with the crowd the previous night, not really caring if anyone got hurt. A Talisman went over, its weight pulling its bearer down with it. Another—a huge swollen-headed grotesquerie—swooped and wobbled like a comic drunk. A nose-flute was cut off with a squawk as Farber straight-armed a musician from behind. A *tikan* clattered under Farber's feet, and he stomped on it with malicious pleasure. There was a shout, another, and a general discord of music that swept from the rear of the Procession to the front as Farber's passage made itself felt. At last, Farber broke into the open. The musicians stopped playing entirely.

The *twizan* stepped into Farber's path. "Citizen—" he began to say, placatingly, but Farber shoved him roughly aside. Farber made it to the front door of his house, and whirled.

Panting, he stared at the crowd.

The crowd stared back in stunned silence. The *twizan* on his knees, getting up from where he had fallen. The *soubrae*—the one from Liraun's Naming—looking levelly at him with eyes of ice. Genawen, a big grin frozen idiotically on his face. The rest of the marchers in various stages of disarray. There was no sound.

Farber was trembling, falling apart, trying to keep some semblance of control. Fear and fury impelled him to speech, but it was a while before he could get his voice working right.

"Out!" he shouted hoarsely.

Genawen's fat face collapsed in dismay. "Joseph—" he said, in a quavering, incredulous voice.

The *twizan* was on his feet and edging backward.

"*Get out!*" Farber screamed. "*Goddamn you all to hell!*" He had more to say, but what control he'd kept was slipping, and his voice, as he continued to shout, passed into strangled incoherency. He came forward in a stumbling rush, swinging his arms.

The Old Woman made as if to stand her ground, but the appalled *twizan* seized her arm at the last moment and hauled her back. Reluctantly, she allowed the *twizan* to hustle her away, looking back at Farber all the time, her face like stone, her eyes brilliant with hate. Genawen hesitated, but Farber shoved him and shouted nearly in his face, and he gave ground too, staggering and almost falling, looking hurt and totally bewildered. Farber followed them for only a few steps, and then stopped, breathing heavily. He shouted again, in derision.

Dazed and horrified, they let Farber run them off.

With the retreat of its three principals, the Procession backed off *in toto*. Within seconds, it had turned into a slow-motion rout, everyone flowing away down the Row, confused and demoralized, turning their heads to look back, their faces showing every possible degree of dismay. Farber waited until he was sure they were leaving, then went into the house.

Liraun was sitting near the hearth, looking pale and tired. Standing next to her, with his back toward Farber, was Jacawen's son, Mordana. He was leaning over her, one hand on the arm of her chair, talking urgently to her in a low, persuasive voice. Her face was drawn. She kept shaking her head in an exhausted, baffled way, but Mordana kept on at her, insistently.

Two iron thumbs behind Farber's eyeballs, pushing out.

Farber crossed the room in three enormous strides. He clamped a big horny hand around Mordana's shoulder and began to drag him away.

Mordana hissed, and spun around with terrifying speed, breaking Farber's grip. A knife grew out of his fist, like magic.

Farber stumbled backward in dismay, suddenly feeling clumsy and slow and vulnerable, an ungainly clay-footed golem matched against a creature of tigerish grace and ferocity. He made an awkward warding gesture with his open hand. It was sluggish and ineffective, even to his own eyes, and he became suffused with a dull, incongruous embarrassment that made him even slower. He never thought of the pistol inside his pack. Instead, he took another step backward. It seemed as if he was swimming through syrup.

Dropping into a crouch, Mordana shuffled forward, his arms low and extended, the point of the knife making slow, minuscule circles in the air. His face was intent and very serious. His eyes were opaque with rage. He began to edge sideways like a crab, coming a step nearer with every few steps to the side, turning Farber in a circle to get the sun in his eyes. Numbly, Farber let himself be turned—he felt ponderous and stupid, and he kept his useless hand out, palm open, as if he would simply push the knife aside, gently, as he would something proffered but not desired. He blinked as the sunlight hit his face. Instantly, Mordana started to come in at him, fast and low, going for the belly.

"Mordana!" Liraun cried.

She had found her voice, and she was on her feet. The blood had drained from her face. She was swaying.

Mordana pulled back in the middle of his strike, as though he had been yanked by a rope. He glanced at Liraun, then stared intently at her. Then, reluctantly, grimacing fastidiously, he straightened up. He shook himself, like a cat, and was once again poised and remote. The knife disappeared—Farber could not tell where it had gone.

Mordana nodded politely to Liraun, turned, spat deliberately at Farber's feet, and then went quickly out of the house.

Farber and Liraun were left alone to stare at each other through an enormous silence.

"Sit down before you fall down," Farber said at last, with less authority than he would have liked. He was shaking, and bathed in cold sweat, and something of that had crept into his voice.

Liraun ignored him. She had braced herself against the back of her chair, and she was looking through him, not at him. Something complex was happening in her face, it was settling into new, hard lines, it was taking on determination and purpose even as he watched. At last, she focused her eyes on him. Her gaze was calm and adamant, and she came very close to frightening him, in her moment. She let go of the chair and

stood unassisted, staring levelly at him. "Listen to me, Joseph," she said quietly. "I'm going to go out to them."

"Like hell you are," Farber grated.

"You can't try to keep me here, Joseph. It's wrong."

"I don't want to talk about it," he said blindly. "Just sit down. Sit down and keep quiet, for God's sake." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I have to *think*. Oh Christ." Warily: "*Will* you sit down?"

"You don't understand—"

"Noxdamn straight, I don't understand! Too fucking right!" He was amazed at the harshness of his own voice. The flare of temper took him two quick steps forward, then it guttered abruptly. He stopped, slump-shouldered. Liraun was watching him intently, looking hard as nails in spite of the soft swell to her stomach. In her last few days, pregnancy seemed to have invested her with an odd, ponderous invulnerability, a finality, an irresistible momentum. He wondered, uneasily, if he *could* stop her. "Oh hell," he said. "Look, we're going to work this out. But you're not going anywhere, understand?"

"That is a very wrong thing," she said flatly. "That will destroy all Harmony."

"But to let them throw you away like garbage, that's okay," he said sullenly. "To pack you in a box, like garbage, and scratch out a hole in the hills and kick dirt in over you, by you that's fine. That's all right."

"What is left of me after I am dead is no better than garbage," she said, with equanimity. "The flesh is boiled away; it has its uses: genetic material for the Tailors, fertilizer, other things. The bones are buried, with respect, yes, but with no need for ceremony—all the sacred parts are already gone, can't you see?"

Farber turned away from her. His face had gone slack. His hands were shaking. "You're making me sick," he muttered. "Christ. I can't— You *are* crazy. Why? How can you—"

"Joseph!" she cried, pain openly in her voice for the first time. "I can't talk about it any more. It's the most private thing in my life, between me and the People of Power, and it's so wrong to talk of it, even to you. Can't you see that?" "Taboo," he said, scornfully.

Not understanding that: "Joseph, I must go now." Her voice had become strained and unsteady. "Please—let me go with your blessing and your love. That would mean very much to me." "Sit down," Farber said.

Grimly, Liraun set her lips. She began walking toward the door. "You're my wife!" Farber cried.

"And you are my husband," Liraun said in her new hard voice as she made her way slowly, painfully and patiently across the room. "But my children belong to my people. Nothing must jeopardize them. Not even you."

Farber stepped into her path, and she kept coming. He felt tired and dispirited and bitter, and for a moment—contemplating the emotional effort it would take to keep her here—he was very tempted to give up and step aside, to let her go, to let her do what she wanted to do. In a way, it would be a relief. In a way, he would be satisfied just to get this whole thing over with, at any cost. He would almost be glad. But in the wake of that realization, triggered by it, came a surge of sharp-edged, unbearable guilt. Unable to take that, he found an ember of rage inside him and fanned it to life. All this in a second: so that by the time Liraun reached him his muscles were taut and his face was flushed, and he reached out and seized her by the arms. Something wild blazed up in her eyes. Wordlessly, they wrestled back and forth, pitting one leverage against another, their feet hardly moving. She was amazingly strong, but not strong enough to break free of him. Apparently she realized this—her face became pinched, her eyes desperate. Her lips had ridden back from her canines, and Farber wondered—with a stab of real fear—if she would try to bite him. Instead she began throwing herself back and forth in his grip, panting, thrashing as wildly as a bird in a net, thrashing with such frantic violence that Farber became afraid that she would seriously injure herself. Dispassionately, almost mechanically, he struck her across the face.

At once, she went limp in his arms. He stood, supporting her weight, too burnt out to feel much remorse. He had even enjoyed it a little. Liraun was getting heavy. He tried pushing her erect, and found that she would stay where he put her, her muscles reshaping like putty under steady pressure. She was not conscious. Her eyes were open, but they were blank—fused over and opaque. There was a tarry, glistening streak of blood leaking from the corner of her mouth.

Like a doll, she let him walk her to a chair.

She would not speak. He talked to her gently for a long time, coaxing, explaining, pleading, admonishing, finally blowing up and shouting at her. Nothing worked—she would not answer. She gave no indication that she had heard him, or that she was even aware of her surroundings. She just sat there, where he had put her, not moving, her hands in her lap in front of her.

Finally, he gave it up. He bustled about the room for a while, then he came back and sat down next to Liraun. He tried to think if there was anything he'd forgotten to do. He'd set up the diagnosticator, and used it to put a call through to Ferri to make sure the remote linkage was working. He'd hired a wet nurse on the way up this morning, a crusty, middle-aged man who kept himself in permanent lactation by the use of artificial hormone injections. He had the pistol, thrust through his belt. He drew it, slid out the clip to check it. One thing in his advantage: the city didn't seem to have a police force, not the kind they had on Terra, anyway. The Cian seemed to rely mostly on tradition and taboo, and peer-group pressure: the terrible threat of ostracism. But the system was not designed to cope with a total maverick like himself. There was a core of doctor-monitors who dealt with the insane, and with the occasional berserker or rowdy drunk, but, unlike Terrans, the Cian were not hypocritical enough to judge him insane simply because he insisted on doing something they didn't like. Not yet, anyway. The Twilight People acted as arbitrators in ethical disputes, and sometimes as referees for the more formal duels, but they had no punitive capability. What did that leave? A lynch mob? Possible—but it should take them a fair while to work themselves up to that. Religion? Moral persuasion? Would he have to shoot any of them?

He pushed the clip into place, and put the gun back into his belt. He hoped that he wouldn't have to shoot any of them. Wearily, he put his face in his hands. All his rage had died, leaving him empty and sick. If he could have figured a way to back out of the situation then, he would have taken it. But there was no way.

He waited, silently, while the day began to die out of the room around him.

It seemed to him then, sitting in the gathering dusk with his catatonic wife, that Ferri had been right about them, about the Earth-men. They were the wrong people. They had come for the wrong reasons, and they were looking for the wrong things in the wrong places at the wrong time. They had brought their wrongness with them, transported it at enormous cost over hundreds of light-years—for certainly they had committed the same litany of errors at home, lived the same wrong ways: look at the shape Earth had been in when the Enye had come to give it the ambivalent gift of stars. It seemed to him that the governments at home had made a basic—and possibly fatal—racial error in sending men like the men of the Enclave out to represent Earth to the galaxy. The worst of them, these emissaries, were shallow, jaundiced, neurotically repressed,

but-toned-down reflex machines, out for the main chance, proud of their efficiency even though it achieved nothing. Certainly Earth had better men than these to offer. Even the best of them—Ferri, for instance—had demonstrated repeatedly that they were incapable of thinking of the Cian as *people*, and that false objectivity had warped the very observations it was intended to protect. At the end, Ferri had not helped Farber because of honest concern or sympathy, but merely because he was afraid Farber would do violence to him. Even he, Farber, himself—so smugly proud of being an "artist." How innocuous his work must have been, for the Co-op to be unafraid of sending him to the stars as chronicler of its activities. What was another name for a government-supported artist? A mediocrity? A whore?

He heard them then, coming back. The Cian.

Unsteadily, he got to his feet, and stood blinking around him. "Liraun?" he said, aware of how flat and dull his voice sounded through the dusty silence. She did not move or answer—she sat lifelessly, gleaming faintly in the darkening room, like a statue carved of old dark wood. Outside: crowd noises, murmurings, footsteps, all drawing closer. He leaned against a wall, trying to call up the rage he knew he needed to survive this. He couldn't find it. But, probing past exhaustion, he came upon a stew of fear and guilt and sullen injured pride. That would be a good enough substitute.

Farber went outside. It was nearing dusk. At the end of the Row, framed by black rock and seeming to sit on the cobblestone street, Fire Woman peered at him down a long tunnel of masonry—a lidless red eye staring dispassionately through a microscope at the tiny world inside. For the first time in months, it was warm enough to rain. A fine mist hung in the street, beading on windows, sweating from old stone walls. The wind that carried it smelled of spring, unlocking, wet rich earth. Spring was still a good distance off, but it was coming, fast enough to make the Cold People shift uneasily on their rock-and-ice thrones, jar them from their frozen reveries and get them to thinking about working up a last, killing frost. Farber looked down. It was Liraun's Procession, back for another try. The other instruments were mute, but the drums had been keeping up a low tattoo on the march; now, as the members of the Procession filled up the space in front of Farber's house, even they fell silent.

There was no one else in sight; all up and down the Row, the doors were closed, the windows were shuttered and blind. Farber stepped forward and stopped, bracing his legs.

Scores of eyes staring up at him, gleaming like wet yellow stones.

The *twizan* stepped out from the crowd. He looked nervous but determined. "Citizen," he said, "we have come for our daughter. Send her out to us."

Farber drew his pistol.

"Citizen," the *twizan* said, "you must not try to prevent us. There is no other shape for things to be. Since the time of the First Ancestor—"

"Listen to me now," Farber said in a flat, quiet voice, leveling the gun. "Liraun is not coming out to you. There isn't going to be a Procession, now or ever. Do you understand that? Now get away from my house. Go on—all of you, get out!"

The *twizan* faltered, looked at the *soubrae*, whose face was cold and adamant, and then looked at Farber. The *twizan* drew himself up, and took a step forward. Another. The Procession pressed up close behind him, Talismans held high—Fire Woman threw their weird twisted shadows across Farber, banding his face with darkness.

Farber raised the pistol. One of the Talismans, off to his left, was bigger than the others, a huge, ruddy, puff-cheeked head representing the Person of the Winds—it was actually a sewn leather balloon, filled with hot gas, used at only the most distinguished of Processions and needing two husky Impersonators to brace it down. Farber fired at it. The roar of the heavy-caliber pistol was horrendously loud in the narrow, high-walled street, and it froze everyone, Farber included, into stunned immobility. Only the head of the Person of the Winds moved: it billowed, a ripple going from cheek to cheek, seemed to swell monstrously for an instant, and then, hissing in dismay, began to fold up, the puffed cheeks caving in like a consumptive's, the fierce eyes collapsing onto the nose which collapsed in turn onto the mouth, the lower lip swelling as the head was compressed, the huge, sagging face assuming an expression of bemused petulance, pouting as it hissed itself flat. The entire thing sagged down over the two Impersonators like a collapsed tent, forcing them to their knees with stately relentlessness. The crowd—no longer a Procession, after this—stared in horror. But here and there, someone took another step toward Farber.

If Farber had known more about guns, he would never have done what he did then. He lowered the pistol, aimed, and fired two quick shots into the cobblestone at the feet of the crowd. Instantly, he felt something hot whiz by his own ear; a window shattered; a *tikan* held by a musician splintered across its neck; another musician clutched his arm and almost fell; a jeweled eye flew off a Talisman—all at the same time, as it seemed.

There was a sound such as a very rapidly ticking clock might make, if its gears were made of stone and iron, interlaced with little giggling echoes. In that narrow place, the bullets had ricocheted maybe thirty or forty times in a fraction of a second, from wall to wall to wall.

Everyone was dazed by this—again including Farber—but Farber recovered first. He took three quick steps forward, shouting, and firing the pistol again, into the air this time.

The crowd fell back.

Farber pressed forward rapidly; the crowd parted and fell away as the Red Sea had for Moses, and there was Jacawen, just seeming to appear in Farber's path—another conjuring trick—as the crowd fell back behind him, a small, somber, unyielding man, the only one in the street who was not in motion.

Jacawen did not fall back.

Farber stopped. He was aware that the rest of the Cian had kept retreating, leaving Jacawen to face him alone, but only subliminally aware—all his attention was fixed rigidly on Jacawen, so much so that he was losing color and detail around the periphery of his vision.

"Our ways are not your ways, Mr. Farber," Jacawen said.

Farber's fingers were turning white as they clutched the pistol grip. "Get out of here," Farber said in a voice so strained that it gave every syllable in every word the same flat, unstressed emphasis.

Jacawen said something in reply, too tight and fast for Farber to be able to follow the dialect—the only indication Jacawen gave of the intense emotional strain he himself was under. By the time his enunciation had flattened into partial intelligibility, he was saying, "know. I warn you, if you keep on with this—" mistake? sin?—too garbled—"you will be damning her to" hell?—"you will be condemning your own wife."

"I don't care about your goddamn religion," Farber snapped.

Another garbled reply, then: "(?) death. They do not surfer. At the Birth House we give them a drug that obliterates consciousness, without pain."

"I don't want to hear how you rationalize your fucking little murders, either," Farber said, a detached part of his mind wondering how his voice could possibly sound like that. "Now get *out* of here!"

"You're consigning your wife to agony!"

"Let me worry about her soul, huh?" Farber shouted.

"Mr. Farber—"

Farber pointed the pistol at Jacawen's abdomen.

A silence. Then Jacawen said, "Our ways are not your ways, Mr. Farber."

Farber jacked a round into the chamber.

A long moment, with Jacawen staring at Farber, a very odd expression on his face. Then Jacawen shook his head, and turned away. He walked off down the Row, moderately quick, a small stiff figure dwindling into the slit-eye sliver of red lidded with black that was all there was left of the sunset.

Farber was alone in the street.

When the eye on the edge of the world closed, and night was complete, he went back into the house. It was dark inside. For a moment, he thought that he couldn't hear Liraun's breathing, and then he caught it: very slow and thready. He fumbled his way to the heating globe and started it, flooding the room with golden light.

Liraun was sitting in the chair, unmoving, just the way he'd left her.

Farber stared at her. She stared back, blankly, though if he stepped out of her line of vision her eyes did not move to follow him. He made an impatient noise. "You don't have to be afraid any more," he said. "You're safe now—I saved you, I scared them off. They won't be back any more. You don't have to die. Do you understand that?"

She didn't answer.

Sighing, he sat down. He leaned his head back against the wall.

Time seemed to stop then, or at least blur its edges. He very nearly fell into a trance state himself, nodding in and out of sleep. After a long time, someone outside in the street—possibly the *soubrae*, from the sound—began to wail "*Opein! Opein!*" in a voice that thrilled with a kind of despairing horror. That roused Farber a little, and for a while he sat there thinking that the Twilight People had concluded that the whole mess had been caused by an *opein* who had possessed Liraun at the *Alàntene*, and how tidy an explanation that was, but the voice keening "*Opein! Opein!*" went on so long and monotonously, and it was such a droning thing even in its sorrow, that it lulled him back into his nod-and-daze, and it wasn't until after the voice had been silent for a very long time that he realized, belatedly, that it had stopped. He skimmed on, right on the borderline of sleep, aware only of the slight purr of the heating globe, the beating of his own heart, of Liraun's, of his slow breathing, Liraun's, and so on in a diminishing spiral, until he became aware, again belatedly, that

he had also been listening to an ascending series of sounds in counterpoint, a series of little panting sighs from Liraun, each one the smallest fraction hoarser than the one that had come before. Then—belatedly—silence.

Huuunnn, said Liraun through the silence.

He shook himself awake, shatteringly, and looked at her.

Her thighs were drenching wet. Her face was ashen with pain.

The diagnosticator, he thought, urgently. But somehow, in spite of his urgency, he found that he had not gotten up to get it. Instead, he was still sitting there, bemused, watching Liraun.

She had turned her head, and was staring back at him. As their eyes met, another pain hit her, and she huddled herself around it, hugging it, shoulders hunched, head bowed, her lips wrenching open to emit a sound that was not quite a scream. Then it passed, and she slumped in the chair, panting. After a second, her breathing steadied a little. She looked back up at him. Her neck muscles were corded, and her skin was shiny with sweat, but her eyes were alive and alert now in her pain-soddened face. They watched him with incongruous calm. She studied him silently for a while, and then she began to speak in an even, passionless voice, without prelude, as though resuming a conversation already in progress

"When you came into Ocean House at *Alàntene*, and I saw you," she said, "I knew that our souls had been told to twine about each other, by the People Under the Sea, who grow men as men grow flowers and fruits and vines. I knew, then, that they meant for our lives to be wound together, like vines that grow so interlaced around a trellis that no man can say where one ends and another begins. That came to me then, in a whisper from Under the Sea, as I watched you, long before you saw me, I watched you. And I thought—I thought many things. You were alone. I knew that you were one of the Distant Men, not of this world, but I also knew that even among them, the others of your race, you would be alone, always alone. In the heart of the *Alàntene* you walked alone and no one touched you, and only I saw that, only I. I saw. Because I too have been alone always among my own people, and I thought, *Like me, he has only half a soul*, and I thought, *Put them together*, the halves."

She stopped to fold herself around a pain, her eyes rolling into her head. *Time the contractions*, Farber's subcerebral training told him, but he made no move to do so: like Coleridge's Wedding Guest, he had been charmed. When she was able to use her breath for speech, she said: "And so you took me. So I let you take me. And because you wanted me I knew

that the People Under the Sea had spoken to you as well as to me, and that the night was ordained for our use. I expected no more than the night that had been given us, the *Alàntene* night. But you asked me to come back again, and I did, and another night and another, and I did. You asked me to share your hearth, and I did even that, although it was against custom and caused disharmony with my people. And during all that time I did not dare to hope for fear the hope would be taken away from me.

But then you said that we would marry, and I thought, *At last I have something that I can keep.*" Another pain—this time it took longer to pass, and when she spoke again, her voice had deepened and hoarsened, as though she was controlling her diaphragm only by an intense effort of will: "And I was happy as your wife. But when *weinunid* came, and you said that you wished me to conceive, I was hurt, hurt that you did not want to take the full four years of life together that were ours by custom before I was obliged to conceive. I thought, *He no longer wants me*; he is tired of me and wishes to be rid of me. But these were thoughts not worthy of a daughter of the First Woman, one who must bear the Sacred Obligation. So I wrestled with my sorrow, and at last I told myself that it was, after all, an honor for you to waive our years of grace—*He wishes our children to come into the world at once*, I thought, *for they will be special children, fair and full of grace.* I told myself that this must also be the will of the People Under the Sea, Theirs the will behind your deed, and that our children would be Vessels of Power, Those-Who-Con-duct-Radiance-to-Earth. And so, except for moments of unsyn-chronization and darkness, I was again at peace. But now—" She paused. "But now you do this to me. Now you damn me and destroy me, and I do not understand why." Her voice faltered, then grew harsh again. "Do we always love those who'll destroy us? Do we love them *because* they'll destroy us? Because only they care enough to assume the burden of our destruction, to take it from our shoulders? Do you think that's true? Because the thing that I cannot understand is, as you destroy me, I still love you—" And at that, she laughed, because it was very funny, laughing with the corroding irony of a ghost looking back over the anthill passions of its former, finished life.

She stopped laughing suddenly, and looked at him with a strange expression on her face, hard and intricate and compassionate all at once, very similar to the expression Jacawen had worn at the end of his encounter with Farber. She kept looking at him in that way until a pain hit her that shattered her face, and blew her humanity out like a candle flame.

Then she began to scream.

21

When Farber became aware of himself again, he was sitting against the wall, knees hugged to chest, head on knees, as far across the room as he could get from the bulk of the unfolded diagnostica-tor.

Liraun had stopped screaming hours ago.

He moved his head, sluggishly, and with motion came pain and nausea, and with pain came another flicker of awareness. Instinctively, he tried to straighten up, and was rewarded with a rusty stab of agony, like tearing a scab off a wound, except that the scab was the top of his head. The pain kept coming, in rhythmic undulations, urging him back into the world.

There was a dirty gray rag of light pressed against the window. That was the imminence of morning. He blinked at it.

Are you still alive? he asked himself in mild surprise, not much interested.

More pain, as he moved.

First, he had bitten completely through his lower lip; then, when that did not prevent him from hearing the screams—and he had heard them for a long time after they had actually stopped—he had pried his teeth free and bitten deeply into his hand, locking his jaws, and then, still hearing them, he had dashed his head against the wall twice, very hard. That hadn't really worked either, although it had driven everything another step away, and at last his mind had accomplished the thing for him by simply shutting itself off, shutting him off, closing down shop.

Now I know who the open was, he thought, and then stopped thinking, because it seemed a useless thing to do after he was dead, after the world had ended.

He tried to straighten up again, and, as if it had been jarred loose by the motion, an image of Liraun welled up under his eyelids: not, surprisingly, a picture of the way she had looked as she screamed, but instead her face as it had been the moment before the pain hit, suffused with that strange expression, the same kind of a look that Jacawen had given him at the end. He could name it now:

Pity.

Pity.

Pity.

He was sitting against the wall.

Liraun had stopped screaming hours ago.

Shuddering, he started again. His teeth were still half-embedded in his hand, and his hand was plastered to his face by crusted blood. Mechanically, he began to work the whole mess free, stopping occasionally to pant while the world faded in and out, for the small bones in his hand were certainly broken. When that task was done, he cast around for something else to do: stand up, instinct told him, and after a while, taking it slowly, he accomplished that too. On his feet, then, he again cast around for something to do. This time, he could think of nothing, no activity with which to absorb himself for the next five minutes. And in that case, he thought with a kind of dispassionate panic, what could he use to fill up the next hour, the day, the year? The *years*? Standing there then, a vacuum, he became gradually aware of a sound so persistent that it had not consciously registered on his hearing until this moment.

Babies crying.

Urged by something he did not understand, he began to drift across the room. The floor felt strange and rubbery under his feet. Automatically, he stopped to turn off the heating globe, and the golden radiance. He continued on through the wan half-light of morning, through the shadows like caves and stalactites. Ahead, the dull shine of polished metal and buffed leather: the diagnosticator, opened and expanded to form a narrow table surrounded on either side by banks of microminiaturized instruments. Farber stopped, took a few more steps toward it, stopped again.

Somehow, he had gotten her into the diagnosticator, while she screamed and flailed mindlessly, and managed to strap her down. Ferri had taken over then as planned, directing the surgical waldoes by remote, and had done as much as he could. It had not been enough.

Mercifully, Liraun's face was to the wall.

Ferri had exulted over the Cian's marvelous genetic fluidity, but it had, after all, its limits. It had adapted semi-aquatic hominids into land-dwelling hominids in an amazingly short time, but the same frantic time pressure that had triggered the transition had also led inevitably to biological errors and oversights. One consequence of this forced-draft

evolution was a drastic narrowing of the hips and pelvis as the skeleton was altered to allow for totally erect posture, so that as each subsequent generation was able to walk more and more completely upright its women also became increasingly inefficient childbearers—especially as multiple births were the norm. Finally, the pelvis became too narrow in most cases to permit normal births at all. In adapting for land, the species had gambled and lost: they were in an evolutionary dead end. A social adaptation had saved them for awhile, provided by the first primitive genius to pick up a flint knife and help his children into the world by inventing the Caesarean. But the universe had one final trick to play: a slow mutation-al shift in the metabolism of pregnant women that killed the Vitamin-K-producing bacteria in their intestines during the final weeks of pregnancy. Now women didn't stop bleeding after a Caesarean—they hemorrhaged and died. It was an incredible price to pay, but it was paid because there was no other choice. The Cian survived.

Or such, at any rate, is Ferri's Hypothesis, which was widely accepted at the time and garnered Ferri a measure of the acclaim he'd always sought (ironically, Farber would become much more "famous" once his story came out, and today Ferri's name is known only to a few scholars and specialists). Ferri's Hypothesis, however, remains merely a hypothesis. Even today, nobody knows for sure—and the Cian, as close-mouthed as ever in spite of recent social upheavals, still aren't talking.

Later, Ferri would meticulously explain his theorizing to Farber. But although the diagnosticator had flashed and shrilled at Farber while he was earnestly attempting to dash out his brains, Ferri himself had not come over to help—there had been only one humane thing to do, and he had not done it. Ferri was probably sleepless, apprehensive, and full of remorse, but not full enough to risk coming himself. He was still hiding behind his machine.

Farber rounded the end of the machine. It had thrust a padded shelf out of itself at floor level, and in the shelf were the babies that Liraun had died to birth. They were all crying. Using the waldoes, Ferri had gotten them breathing and cleaned them up, and they seemed healthy—born more advanced than Terran babies, they already had their eyes open and were making their first fumbling attempts to crawl. Probably they were crying from fear and lack of attention as much as from hunger: four girls and two boys, red naked things, mewling and bumping into each other like kittens. Farber studied them for a very long time, while daylight grew in the room. His face was like stone. Once he raised his foot as if to crush them—he put it down again. He was quiet for a longer time, and then, still stone-faced,

he reached down and picked up one of the boys. His son. Farber lifted him into the light. He seemed to weigh almost nothing at all, but he squirmed lustily in Farber's hands. He had three sets of nipples. He was screaming furiously. Farber held him stiffly for a few moments, and then, hesitantly, he began to rock him, thinking as he did, with some practical and newly-thawing corner of his mind that was already doggedly calculating on beyond grief, that he had better get the wet-nurse up here right away; the babies would need to be fed soon, he'd need to make up doses for them, they'd need clothes . . . His motions gradually assumed a gentle authority, and he started, unconsciously, to croon as he rocked.

After a while, the baby stopped crying and went peacefully to sleep.