

This story — about the adventures of Rodan Samsara » the pleasure planet of Thearis — is a blend of strong writing and marvelous invention. It is from a new writer who has been published in Amazing. Mr. Wightman writes that he is 35 years old, teaches creative writing at the Modesto (CA) Junior College, and "spends a lot of time listening to Haydn while I'm in the kitchen teaching myself how to cook. I also run about 20 miles a week so I can enjoy eating what I cook."

Condemned, A Kiss, and Sleep

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Full formatting, spell check and read-through still required.

My name's Rodan Samsara and I travel with the Delphic Oracle. It's a business arrangement, although she is very good to look at, and sometimes when she touches me, the touch is more than skin-deep. Nonetheless, it is business only with us. She is a soul-catcher and her first allegiance is to the 40,000 or so whispering souls waiting inside her to be reborn. She has no time for me. On the outside, she is a wiry, sexy tomboy with thick, black-rope hair, and when she walks, she moves more ways than one.

How we met is another story, but suffice it to say that she kept me from being turned into 170 pounds of high-grade extra-lean rat kibble for the long-nosed concubines of some slime king on a dumpworld where I had the misfortune of stopping over for a few days' rest. And now we travel together. We assist each other. But when she touches me, it sometimes feels like she is moving the tip of her tongue across my heart. I have not told her this.

Now, this time, I wanted a little rest, a little relaxation. Was I being excessive in my desires? Was I demanding too much of the universe? I just wanted a few days without pressure, so what did I do? I arranged to see Cor-andra Kinellen, the only woman living whom I had told that I loved. Coran-dra was an even two meters tall; she had solid cat-like muscles and a mind like a box of razor blades. Her idea of love-making would have appalled anyone but a clinician and would have amazed gymnasts — and her skin smelled of gardenias, always of gardenias.

I should have known better.

I had met her a dozen years earlier, and every time I had seen her, some putrid disaster had rolled out of the woodwork — *but*, I figured, what were the odds of that happening four times straight? God damn it, I should have known. How many times will I have to learn that in this universe you give thanks when nothing goes wrong — and if you're having a good time, that's when you should start looking behind you. Screw around, and you find your gonads up drying on some muscle-head's meatrack.

"High quality illusions that *you* direct! The only perceptible difference between *our* illusions and *your* reality is time: you can spend two weeks and your life's savings trying to have a good time somewhere else, but on Thearis we use an ultra-high-speed generator that allows you to squeeze two weeks' fun and games, two weeks' high living or two weeks' low-down gut-level *fun* into an *hour!* And the price is something to write home about. Thearis — a resort world for those with unusual and discriminating tastes."

That was the same advertisement I'd been picking up for two weeks. The seventh or eighth time I'd

heard it, I got in touch with Corandra Kinellen and arranged to meet her there. Del said she could use a rest too — carrying thousands of people within her was a burden she did not discuss, but it showed in her eyes. She drank a lot.

Del and I were coming in on Thearis, the resort world, and I was sitting with my chin resting on my folded hands wondering what kind of meeting Corandra and I would have. It had been five years since we'd seen each other. Del came up from the back part of the ship and stood at the counter and mixed herself some gin and lemon.

"I have a reading on our vacation," she said. "Want to hear it?"

I didn't want to hear it, but when the oracle offers, you take. I nodded.

"There will be a change of mind." She shrugged and turned back to the bar. "Doesn't sound too ominous," she said. Del only reported what came to her — she didn't know any more than I did about what her prophecies meant.

Guidance chirped and threw an image of the Thearis jump station on the screen. It grew larger as we approached. Behind it was Thearis itself. The only land mass was a thin circular rim that looked like it could have been the remains of an ancient impact crater. The center of it was filled with water, and dead in the middle of it, like a bull's-eye, was another dot of land. The rest was water — smooth, gray water.

"What do you plan to do down there?" I asked.

She came up behind me and looked at the screen. She rested her hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to try to feel like a human being again. I'd like to forget for a few minutes all the people I carry around. I'd like to forget the voice that tells me things I don't understand." The ice in her glass clinked as she poured the entire drink down her throat. "I'd give anything to be stupid." She went back to the bar and I saw her fingers touch the combination of buttons that would give her more gin and lemon.

The ship nuzzled against the jump station and then clanked into the lock.

"Someday" I said, "maybe you can be free of all that."

Her narrow shoulders shrugged. She looked back and gave me that cocked-head look of hers that's the closest thing to a smile I ever see on her face. "And maybe gin is good for me" she said. She slugged down the second drink and dropped the glass in the re-cycler. "Let's get on with it" she said, brushing her hands against her thighs. I took a deep breath.

How you do, folks! My name is Earl and I'm going to be your host here on Thearis." Earl at least looked human. "Thearis is the greatest pleasure center in this sector of the known universe! Step right this way. Right down this corridor. Just follow me." Earl looked like he would be more at home selling small appliances to defectives. He wore a stagger-stripe suit, the kind that changes with every movement and causes you to wonder if you're suffering from a drug overload. His face was red, and slick-skinned and from his nearly lipless mouth boiled a continuous stream of words: "...straight ahead is what we call 'the lagoon,' although it's actually a small inland sea. Get your money ready please — twenty creds each. The only land area on this planet is this right here, that's in the shape of a skinny donut, with the lagoon in the middle, which is where the Techs live, the people, if you want call 'em that, who lived here before we came and made this place what it is."

"Why is the central island orange-colored?" I asked.

"We serve all species," Earl said, sticking his hands in his baggy pockets and making his suit jitter even

more. "This part of the island is for humans, and up the trail a ways we take care of the Shrifar, the Vargoonians, you name it." He stopped suddenly and with a flourish indicated a small inset in the corridor. "Just deposit twenty creds each right here." He smiled pleasantly, his eyes nearly disappearing. Between his short teeth showed a narrow, deeply grooved tongue.

"Why is the central island orange, Earl?" I asked. I looked directly into his eyes, but there was nothing there.

"Orange?" The question seemed to freeze him, as though he had never been asked it before. Suddenly he sprang to life. "Beats the hell out of me. I just work here, meet folks at the jump station, take their money. I don't get paid to think!" he said happily.

Del looked at me curiously.

"Twenty creds each. Just feed it into that slot there," Earl said. His suit wavered wildly each time he rocked back and forth on his feet.

I took the money from my pocket.

"Why is it so cheap?" Del asked.

"I am not allowed to discuss the economic operations of Thearis, miss" Earl said good-naturedly. "But I guarantee if you don't like what you get, I'll see to it you get your bucks back."

I put the money into the intake. The machine thanked me.

"A friend is supposed to meet me here" I said. "She—"

Earl walked away from us, motioning us to follow. "Our illusions are of the highest quality, tailored to fit any species. We got no prejudices here, although personally I could do without some of the trashlife that comes down here and expects us to virtually hand over an actual herd of sex objects for them to mess around with and then kill or eat or whatever the hell they want to do. But I digress—"

"Earl could you hold it just a minute?"

He stopped in his tracks and turned around very fast, his face open, blank, his lips slightly parted. "You have some special request? Something a little on the unusual side? Say no more. Something a shade on the violent side? Say no more." His tongue flicked at his bottom lip and he grinned.

Del was standing very erect beside me, watching Earl carefully.

"A friend of mine is supposed to meet me here. Her name is Corandra Kinellen."

Earl stared blankly at me several seconds. He did not seem to be able to think and move at the same time. Suddenly he raised one hand over his head. "A tall one? About this high? Copper kind of skin? Gets mean and shows her muscles if you mess with her?"

"That sounds like her." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Del had her hands in her hip pockets and was doing her cocked-head mona-lisa smile.

"Right down this way and around the corner," Earl said, "and all your questions and desires will be satisfied." He was silent for a few steps. "Your friend, Coranna Kinanna or whatever, she kind of injured one of the Techs this afternoon. The management will be happy if you can get her occupied. The Techs, see, they're a bunch of cold-blooded sonsabitches, if you want the truth, and this one was asking her

some questions about her body and I guess he tried to touch her."

"How bad was it?" I asked. Del was still doing her smile.

"Well, she busted his arm and then she held his hand right up to his own ear and then she crushed his hand — I guess she wanted him to hear it. You gonna mess with her?"

"As much as I can," I said.

"Well, she's right up here. Now, what we got here, on this island, is a real nice situation. About twenty years ago, the first generation of my people landed here just to look around and see what kind of place it was, and they met the natives, the Techs, and they called 'em that because they were real good with machinery. Not real talkative, but good with their hands. Now my forebearers handed over a bunch of equipment, old junk stuff, and lo and behold, they thought miracles had happened. The whole goddamned island filled up with what you're going to see right down that hallway right *there*."

He had timed it perfectly. We went around the last corner and saw something that looked like a centimeter-wide strip of silver tape across the corridor floor; it was mirror-like but seemed to reflect nothing — but *best*, best of all, on the other side of it stood Corandra Kinellen, two meters of her, dressed in lavender fur, her hair a violent configuration of shifting arabesques. My bones vibrated, and when she turned her eyes on me, I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. I wanted her. I was smothering in desire. Testosterone poured into my blood.

Like the vaguest voice of some fading ghost, I heard Earl saying from somewhere behind me, "Just walk across that shiny thing. Just step right across it and you'll see what Thearis is all about."

Corandra had her arms out, reaching toward me. I glanced back at Del — she had her hands in her back pockets and was looking at the mirror-line. Del glanced up at me and with her eyes told me to go on, to go ahead. A part of me didn't want to leave her; she looked very small.

Just one pace in front of me, Corandra was reaching for me, coming toward me. Like a lavender cobra, she fixed me with her eyes, stepped across the mirror line at the same moment I crossed it and swung around her, my arms wrapping around her hard body and my hands feeling the smooth sheaths of muscle that enclosed her powerful body. Something flew up out of the mirrored strip — something blue and round — but it was only light — globes of blue light. Then something unusual happened.

In all my years drifting in lightless space and admiring the rising and dying flares of tortured stars, the stately entropy of galaxies that relax their hold on order, and the quiet intricacies of dark, uninhabitable worlds where small things creep and live with night — in all that time, I never guessed, never dreamed, how my irrational blood yearned for the green living things of Old Earth, for the black rich soil on which my ancient kin had built and lost their dreams a thousand times and more. But there I was. In a place I had only heard about, I was home. / *was home*. And I was sitting in the shade of a wide, spreading tree with leaves like the palms of hands, looking into the round blue eyes of Corandra Kinellen, who now, like a figure out of history, sat straight-backed, her legs folded lady-like beneath her, dressed in white lace. The smell of gardenias filled the air around her.

For a moment, the smallest instant, I was distracted by the rush and flutter of a flock of black birds that rose from the rolling meadow near us. They were birds of Old Earth — I had never seen anything like them before.

"What has taken us so long?" she asked. Her lips barely moved when she spoke, and her eyelids lowered slightly. Corandra's gaze barely concealed the sexual violence that was visibly rising in her. Her dress of white lace was beginning to fade, revealing her brown skin and browner nipples beneath. She stared at me.

"I was...." I looked behind me, expecting to see Earl or Del or some part of the building in which we had been standing. There was nothing but pastures and rows of bushy poplars. "Where are we? What is this place?"

"Part of us is back in the corridor — where I was waiting for you." She moved closer. The smell of gardenias was stronger and I could feel her warm breath on my lips. "I've been waiting for you longer than I can remember."

I had forgotten the details of her face, her mongol eyes, the way her black hair glowed like spun filaments of black pearl. I had forgotten the speck of pale skin on the back of her left thumb — *my* skin that she had had grafted there.

"As always" she breathed, "I carry you with me."

I moved my hand up her arm, over the smooth arches of muscle, to her neck. Her blood pulsed under my fingers. In every part of my body I could feel the speeding beat of my heart.

"Stand up," she said. "See what happens."

I got to my feet, nearly lost my balance, and then realized why: somehow, in this land of illusions, when we stood up, we grew taller, and we stood shoulders-above the tree we had just been sitting under; we were titans, we were giants in this place, and it was all ours.

She turned and ran a few strides away from me. The ground trembled with her steps. She grinned at me and then sprinted away. I followed her across fields and plains, and we ran knee-deep in wide, swift rivers; and miles away, over the tops of scattered forests, we could see range after range of fading mountains in one direction — and in the other lay the humped back of the ocean, lying smooth and blue, not more than a few miles away. We ran and ran, and when we ran, the earth thundered.

I caught her in the white dunes. The hot sand poured rivers of energy into us until we were no longer like human beings but were wind and sea and fire restrained only by the sheerest lac-ery of flesh. We were giants and we were power and we were greater than our world.

She lay beneath me, her hair spread in intricate curls, half-buried in the powdery sand. Her hands pulled at my shoulders at the back of my neck, and I said, "I didn't know how much I was meant to be here, how much I needed you."

She just said, "Yes."

The breeze off the water dried our sweat, and we lay on our backs and watched a single seagull pass one direction and then the other over the hissing surf. I asked her if she had been here before.

"Yes, while I was waiting for you."

"How much of this illusion is of our own making? How much does Thearis provide?"

"Morley told me that Thearis provides the whole thing. We have no input." Her hand touched my thigh. "We just enjoy."

"Who is Morley?"

"A fellow who speaks bad English and says he is my host."

"I should have guessed. The man who met us was named Earl."

Corandra breathed deeply and turned on her side. She took a handful of sand and held it over my chest and let it slowly drain between her fingers. "Morley told me that on the center island the Techs set up some devices that they use to project the illusions. But the one Tech I talked to didn't seem bright enough to do anything more complicated than feed himself."

I turned on my side and faced her, resting my cheek on her wrist.

"Why is this place so cheap?" she asked. "It makes me suspicious."

I placed my hand between her breasts and felt her heart beating in strong slow pulses. "I heard you broke the Tech's arm."

She grinned. "He stood and stared at me, which I ignored, and then he started asking me what percentage of me was fat, how fast I could dissipate lactic acid, if I had any implants, and then he started to touch me."

I grinned. Corandra Kinellen did not like to be touched by strangers.

"I told him not to, but he thought he could do it anyway. He tried to grab a handful of loose skin on the side of my waist. Not only was that implicitly insulting, but he touched me after I told him not to. So I broke his arm and then pinned him and held his hand up by his ear where he could hear what it sounded like to have his fingers broken." Corandra turned onto her stomach. The sun gleamed in two lines down her back on each side of her spine. "The Tech didn't care. He really didn't seem to mind. But he didn't touch me again. Morley was coming down the corridor, and he didn't care either. The Tech got up and strolled away, unconcerned."

Far away, a gull called and the surf rhythmically answered in a drawling hush. Gardenias filled the air.

"What do the Techs look like?" I asked.

"Humanoid. Grayish-pale skin. Primarily they are unclean. They walk around with dirt on them. Why are you grinning?"

"Your phobia about dirt. I've seen you deal with chaos like it was an old friend, but dirt makes you wild" I was almost laughing. "The Tech was lucky you didn't remove his offending parts."

She looked at me coolly, regally. "He was relatively clean. Dirt is for growing things and walking on, not for cosmetic purposes." She blinked slowly and her eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly. "And, now, I'm going to eat you alive, I'm going to make you remember me the rest of your life." She rose up on her arms and moved over me, pressing her mouth to mine. Her tongue was hot and against my lips her teeth were smooth and cool and dangerous and lovely and lovely and love-ly....

We swam and we floated in the sea as great speckled shapes moved in the depths below us. The bright clear sun was still high in the sky.

"Even in dreams," Corandra said, "I never imagined a place like this." She made a splashing turn and flipped her long, smooth legs over her head and dived beneath me.

When she came up I said to her, "I can't believe this is illusion — I just saw you do that, you did it. Are we both going to have the same memories when we go back?"

She swam over to me, her eyes large and dark like a cat's eyes when it sees prey. I took her by the waist as her legs wrapped around me. "The Solip-sistic Inevitability has you in its grips," she said, grinning. Even wet, she smell-ed of gardenias. Her hands moved over my shoulders, down my arms to my wrists;

and in the moment her lips touched mine, I realized she had immobilized me. "Admit it," she said, moving herself against me. "Admit that I'm just a collection of appealing sensations." Beneath the surface of the water, her skin was hot against mine. "Admit that I'm just another way you have of looking at yourself and that's why you love me." She touched me slowly.

"I can't think straight when you do that — I'll admit anything."

She released me, and like mammals of the sea, we dived, made love, surfaced to breathe, and then dived again, over and over, without thinking, without care, without thought, with joy.

I dropped to the corridor floor like a bag of dirt. By an immense force of will, I opened my eyes and saw Earl's low-top shoes a meter away. On the other side of him, Corandra was slowly getting to her feet. She looked as beaten and exhausted as I felt. Raising myself up, I saw Del lying near me on her back. Her eyes were open and dazed and blank.

"See what I tell you?" Earl was saying. "See what I *mean*? Thearis is one hell of a place! And you get all this for only twenty creds each. Be sure to tell your friends and cohorts." He reached down to help Corandra up but then jerked away his hand as though he were bitten by a painful thought. "Ma'am? I'll give you a hand up, if you want me to, if you promise not to break my arm."

Corandra waved him away and slowly lifted her hands off the floor and stood.

Earl briskly pulled me up by the wrist. "Look where you like, you won't find no other places like Thearis. We got ubiquitous scenery, we got un-endless delights, we got whatever you want. This place is ace-primo." He pulled Del up. She wavered on her feet and slowly gathered her senses. "Now I imagine," Earl continued, "that you people are tired as runnin' midgets. So if you'll follow me, I'll take you to your cabins where you can repose and get some rest before you do this again." He waved us to follow him. It was not easy.

We left the entry building and came out on a stretch of sandy dirt where tall scrawny palms cast small pools of shade. Fifty meters in front of us, two neat rows of white cabins stood in the sun, and beyond them lay the huge lagoon with the one dark, orange island in its center.

I moved next to Del as we trudged behind Earl, and in a shaky rasp I asked her what had happened when she stepped across the reflective tape.

"I could never tell you," she said in a voice as tired as any I'd ever heard from her. "All my people ... thousands of them, they were all there. They were separate from me. They had faces, and they talked and laughed. In the mountains, beside a lake, they all sat and told stories and had picnics — and for the first time, I was free. I was like anyone else. I was simple."

Great as the effort was, I turned my head to see her face — but she did not resemble the Del I had known before: she was all exhaustion and sadness — the beauty of what she had seen had filled her with grief. I wanted to put my arm around her, to touch her, but Earl was pulling her away.

"Right this way, miss." He opened the cabin door for her. "Just let me help you up that step, and there you are." Del disappeared in darkness, and Earl pulled the door closed. His face was starting to glaze with sweat. "And the both of you, you have this cabin here, two doors down." He unlatched it and I pulled Corandra up after me. There was only a cot and a water dispenser inside; the bare ugliness of the room did not offend us; we needed only rest.

Corandra fell onto the cot and rolled to the side nearer the wall. I lay beside her and felt all sensibility drain out of me. The noise of Earl slamming the door echoed far, far away.

"Tomorrow," Corandra murmured. "Tomorrow ... there will be more ... and more...."

I remember the smell of gardenias, the faint pink of her lips, and then there was nothing.

The faint pink of morning crept under the door, but when I reached across the darkness to touch Corandra, my hand touched only bedding.

"Corandra?" I nearly fell out of bed — it was narrower than I remembered. "Corandra? Are you here?" I pushed the door open and let in enough light to see that I was alone — and to see that the cot was too small for both of us to have slept in.

The door pulled open. "Good morning, sir! Good morning!" It sounded like someone who sounded like Earl and could have been his brother, but this person had such a smearing of scaly freckles across his nose and cheeks that he looked like the survivor of some disease that should have killed him. "Hope you slept good, sir," he said, grinning and grinning. "My name's Cleetis and I'm your host today."

"Where's the woman who was with me, Corandra Kinellen?"

He looked around and behind him, as though she could have been standing within touching distance. "Where's *what*?"

"The woman I was with. Last night we slept in this cabin. When I woke up, she was gone."

He gave me a sly look and a shrug. "Your affairs is your affairs," he said. "Maybe you said something in your sleep she didn't like. Maybe she just went for a walk." He stuck his hands in his pockets and jingled something metallic.

A door closed behind me, half a dozen cabins away. It was Del. She stood on the step, blinking into the morning sun.

"Look whata a nice day we got here," Cleetis was saying, turning his face to the sky. "Sun shining, nice quiet surf, hundreds of illusions you can walk through. This woman you're interested in, just step through one of the illusions, and she'll be there."

"Sometime during the night I was moved from one cabin to another. Why was that done?"

"Moved?" He looked surprised. "You mean like *bodily* moved? Well." He pulled one speckled bony hand from a pocket and massaged his chin. "We don't normally move people unless they ask us to."

He was stalling and we both knew it. I ran down to the cabin Corandra and I had been taken to the previous evening and looked in. Empty. The bed was made up.

Cleetis strolled casually over to me, his hands once again in his pockets.

"Where's Earl?" I demanded.

"I don't know any Earl. I just came on duty an hour ago."

"What's the matter?" Del asked fuzzily. The pink morning sun made her hair look blacker than usual.

"Corandra has disappeared." I faced Cleetis and stood very close to him. "This conversation has gone on too long," I said. "Tell me either where Corandra Kinellen is or where Earl is."

"I don't know either one of those people!" Cleetis said helplessly.

"He's lying," Del said, as though stating the tediously obvious. She sounded sullen, withdrawn.

"I didn't *do* anything!" Cleetis whined. Sweat began rolling out of his hair.

"Tell me something I want to hear, Cleetis, or I'm going to damage you a little bit."

Half a second later Cleetis was running toward the lagoon, toward a small cluster of palms that grew around a pile of boulders. He ran splay-footed and knocked-kneed, but desperation made him run fast. Sand kicked up in sprays behind him. I still ached from the day before, and my muscles seemed to be filled with some kind of slow viscid fluid that made me feel kilos heavier. Just before he got to the boulders, I was close enough to see the dirt on his white collar. He looked back once, his eyes bloodshot and wide with fear—

And I should have seen it. I was slow. I wasn't watching.

The man dodged, and as I swerved around him, I saw my foot touch down on a shining, mirror-like strip that stretched across the ground between the two palms. Effervescent blue boiled up from the ground and enveloped me.

I stood in a garden amidst curving rows of yellow and pink tea roses. Other than the buzzing of a few bees, it was utterly silent. The boundaries of the garden were lined with huge, shaggy eucalyptus trees whose drooping limbs blocked all view of the surrounding countryside. Behind me a white wicker gazebo sat in a small grassy clearing. Two wicker chairs waited silently beside a white table, and a steaming pot of tea was in the precise center of it. It was all vaguely familiar. Something about it jiggled an old memory of something ... somewhere.... And something was not right about the garden. It was lovely, peaceful, beautiful, and vaguely wrong.

I figured that if this illusion were like the previous one, I would be stuck in it an hour or more, subjective time, and when I came out of it, I could expect Cleetis to either be vanishing in the distance or standing over me with a club. I could also expect to be exhausted. All I wanted was a little rest. What had I got? A peculiar rose garden. I had lost Corandra Kinellen, and Del had looked depressed.

I sat down at the wicker table under the gazebo and tried to concentrate on what was wrong with the garden.

The teapot was white china, decorated with a green vine that grew up from its base and circled the lid. All the leaves on the vine were different. I had seen one like it before — when I first met Corandra, back on 9J-0321. We had sat in the Sub-governor's garden one afternoon and drank cherry-root tea.

I lifted the lid and breathed. Cherry-root tea.

Then I knew what the other thing was — it was the roses. I was sitting in the middle of a rose garden, every bush in full bloom; I was surrounded by eu-caplytus trees — and all I could smell was gardenias. *Gardenias*.

The significance was more complicated than putting two and two together, but not much more. Thearis provided the landscape for its guests, and this landscape was coming from Corandra Kinellen. How or why, I didn't know — but I did know that Corandra was on the wrong end of this thing, she was gone, and I had been lied to about her disappearance. I also knew that I wanted to get my hands on Cleetis and make a physical statement of my displeasure.

I sat under the gazebo and waited until the tea was cold. I waited. I seethed.

It was like falling backward out of a chair. The scraggly palms lazily waved their fronds in the morning

sky, and I could feel the damp sand under my hands and shoulders. And again, waves of exhaustion spread through me. Not ten seconds had passed because Del was still in front of the cabins, just starting to run toward me, and Cleetis was thirty or forty meters away shouting, "Tech! Tech!" and waving his arms wildly in the air. He ran like a wad of laundry.

When I tried to pick myself up, my hands trembled and my legs felt like they hadn't walked in months.

Del walked around the silvery tape and helped me to my feet. "This is not a good place," she said sullenly. "As you fell across that thing, the voice told me." Her voice was low and dull.

"Your voice is very perceptive," I said, trying to stay above my legs.

By now, Cleetis had disappeared around a sand dune.

"It looks like we're in it again," she said, looking past me at the lagoon.

My legs were wobbling, but they could carry me. "All I really wanted to do was get some rest," I said.

"And to see Corandra Kinellen." Her voice was flat and emotionless, and I was beginning to fear the reason for it.

I nodded in the direction of Cleetis' trail. "Let's go."

We didn't have to look very far. After trailing him along the inner beach for five minutes, we heard running behind us — a Tech. It was the first one I had seen and it fitted Coran-dra's description perfectly: his skin was gray and smudged with dirt, and raggy hair grew out of the back of his head. He wore only a dirty brown shirt that reached halfway between his hips and his knees. When he saw us waiting, he stopped running and began a sort of mindless shuffling slog through the sand. There was something distinctly ineffectual and nonthreatening about him. His feet seemed heavy and his head swung side-to-side and he panted open-mouthed. He was one of those creatures whose ignorance precedes them like an odor.

"I want to know where my friend is," I said to him before he got up to us.

"You are looking for the tall female who injured Tech yesterday" he said crisply in a snapping little high-pitched voice. Inside the sloppy, tired-looking body, his slick pink tongue worked like a machine.

"Where is she?"

"She's gone" the Tech chattered. He was close to us now. His eyes were small and dark and hard-looking. "She left last night. She is not here anymore."

"Lying" Del said flatly behind me.

I didn't see what the Tech did until he had done it, and the whole time his gray rat-face looked straight at me and smiled.

I was tired when I came to Thearis. I was more than tired after two trips through their illusions. I was exhausted, and I was slow. Without it registering on my slow brain, the Tech's hand came from behind him and he threw something at my feet that looked like a wadded ball of blue foil. When it touched me, I saw a streak of silver at my feet and then I was enveloped in blue. They had me again.

I stood in a world of ice. I was not cold, but the world was a cliff-sided valley, and it was all crystallized and frozen tight — waterfalls that poured from the crags were frozen rigid. Every living thing there were

held in icy suspension, waiting only for a warm breeze to thaw it out so it all could die.

I stood on a sheet of ice and wondered, Why *this*? Why an illusion of a frozen world? There was an awesome grandeur about it, but it was not my idea of beauty. Somehow, Corandra had designed the illusion of the rose garden and gazebo to let me know that somewhere, somehow, she was nearby. But *this*?

I tried to see something in the immense walls of ice other than crevices, shatter-marks and shades of darker and lighter ice. Only in one place — and then I couldn't be sure — a great hump of ice loomed in the middle of the valley floor; it was shaped, in a peculiar way, like some kind of insect, a great humpbacked, many-legged insect. Around its base, several rows of trees stood like pawns, and in front of those, frozen, frost-covered trees lay across the plain as though they had been dropped from a careless hand. I saw it all, but it meant nothing to me. All the time, behind my eyes, the words were repeating, "They have Corandra. They have Corandra. They have Corandra." The illusionist stood in was all ice and death, and I could do nothing but wait for and dread the return to Thearis and think, over and over, "They have Corandra." And at the last moment, the instant before the world of ice flicked away, I smelled it. I smelled gardenias.

My cheek hit the closure on the Tech's flimsy shoes. Above me I could hear him making a kind of *snick-snick* sound. The Tech was laughing. And all I wanted was to rest, to sleep. I didn't care if he laughed. I wouldn't have cared if he walked on me, shot me, or left me for the waves to pull into the lagoon — my arms ... legs ... all heavy, filled with sand ... I wanted to sleep.

The Tech moved his foot, and the small buckles scraped across my face and raked away strips of skin. Then the sole was shoving at my shoulder. When the sun shot across my dazed line of sight. I realized he was turning me over, face-up. And he was still laughing. At my feet I saw Del, her arms hanging limp at her sides, her face blank and observant.

I forced my eyes upward, and from under his loose shirt, the Tech was taking a small, flat handweapon. He looked down at me, his eyes like black plastic bearings. He pointed the silvered tip of the weapon at the bridge of my nose, and still making that sharp clicking noise in the back of his throat, he fired.

A chisel between my eyes being pounded into the back of my brain would have been less painful. Whatever he shot me with, it attacked the nerves, overloaded them, set up echo patterns, until everything blazed in a chaos of red and black, blackening to purple, fading to nothing.

He killed me and it was the best thing that could have happened.

Del caught me at the instant of death and I floated nowhere. Around me, like softly breathing sleepers, I could sense the others, the thousands of others she harbored.

I knew either she would push my consciousness into the Tech where I would have to power it out with him, or he would be too fast for her and do to her what he had just done to the body I had lived in for the last four months.

Del was quick.

I caught a glimpse of Del through the Tech's eyes — she stood there gazing calmly into our face, apparently willing to accept whatever the outcome was.

In a second, the Tech's mind turned on me — it was massive; it was huge and complex and swelled up around me like an ocean of knives. I fought for a last glimpse of Del, because I knew she could not save me from this; I knew the Tech would kill her as soon as he subdued me; and knowing that I had not the

dimmest chance, I fought screaming into the midst of the thing — and it evaporated. Like a fog bank, it simply dissipated, leaving me standing in the Tech's body holding the weapon and looking down at the steaming, blown-open body that I had lived in. Now it was no more than a congealed abomination.

Del stood unmoving, waiting to see either savagery or recognition in what was now my gray-skinned face.

"I'm back," I said.

Del nodded.

Something bleak and unspoken was growing up between us — but I consciously refused to deal with it then. "Something is wrong here," I said. "Between you and me."

She nodded again.

"But now I have to find Corandra."

"I know you do."

"Will you help me?"

"I'll help you, as we agreed." Her voice was even and mechanical, without inflection.

"You'll be my prisoner," I said, "Maybe we can get somewhere with that." I pointed the weapon in her general direction and started to move along the tracks left in the beach sand by the Tech. She stood there, still staring at my face.

"I am afraid I will die here," she said. "My people will die with me."

"I understand. I'll do this alone. You get back to the ship."

Still, she did not move. She stood there, wiry, intense, her black-rope hair glistening in the sun. "I wasn't excusing myself," she said finally. "I wanted to tell you what I am afraid of. I'll go with you to save the woman if we can, but Rodann ... if I have to choose between you and the 40,000 people I carry, I'll let you go. I'll save my people first."

"I know that. I understand." I also understood that it wasn't just that she was afraid of dying on Thearis — she was expecting to die. Perhaps her voice had spoken to her. She wasn't telling me, if it had, and I certainly did not want to know.

"So let's go," she said, turning and walking along the trail left by the Tech.

During the walk I started feeling the strangeness of the mind I inhabited — there was almost no shape to it, no boundaries or residues that would make it a distinct mind. I felt like I was standing in the middle of a desert without sand, without elevation or depression. There was not the slightest trace of who or what the Tech might have been.

The tracks led us down the beach to another smaller row of cabins. One of the human hosts saw us and turned our way. It was neither Cleetis nor Earl, but he looked remarkably like them. To our right, half a dozen meters away, I saw another strip of silver between some rocks and a palm. Del saw it at the same moment.

"Let's push him through that a few times," I whispered.

She veered in the direction of the tree.

The man strolled toward us, whistling something pointless through his teeth. His pants were skin-tight, several inches above his ankles, and looked like he had made them himself. On the pocket of his shirt he had sewn the word *Leon* in a dozen stitches. He never looked at me. He stared at Del.

"Well, well, well," he said admiringly. "You got yourself another good-looking one, didn't you."

"Please, sir!" Del whined, appropriately desperate. "Help me! I don't know what he wants of me. Make him leave me alone!"

"Now, now," he said, patting her shoulder. "You just let me have a word with the rat-head here, and we'll see what we can work out" He turned to me. "Now look. I realize you Techs skim off a few tourists now and then and what you do with 'em is your own business, am I right? And it seems to me, if I am remembering what I seem to be remembering, that you guys got one of the human women yesterday. That tall one you brought through here. Right? Correct me if I'm wrong." He turned and winked heavily at Del. "Now we don't want any word to get out that people turn up missing when they come to Thearis. So what I suggest to you is that you turn this one over to me. She's more my type than yours anyway. I'll examine her, find out if she's expected anywhere, and if she isn't..." He shrugged knowingly. He turned to wink at Del again, and I gave him a little kick at the back of his knees and then slugged him as hard as I could in the back of his neck. The thin bones in my hand snapped like twigs, but Leon stumbled right across the strip of tape that had been planted between the rocks and the palm.

I hadn't seen it happen to anyone before: as he fell, he turned, and I could see his eyes — as soon as his head passed over the band, his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell like a side of meat. When his head hit the sand on the other side of the strip, his eyelids blinked open. Del and I went around to the other side and pushed him through the field again. This time when he fell, he fell like a dead man.

We dragged him to the base of the palm and set him up. I slapped him twice with my broken hand before I realized that I was hurting myself more than I was hurting Leon. Del nudged me aside, positioning herself over his legs, and slugged him like a fighter. Leon rolled sideways and opened his eyes and groaned.

"Where is Corandra Kinellen, the tall woman you saw?" I asked him as Del pulled him upright by his shirt front. "Tell me where she is or we'll take all day to beat you to death."

He stared at me, as much as he was able, but he couldn't understand; he was, after all, staring into the blank face of a Tech.

"Tell me where the Techs took her," Del said. Coming from a human, Leon could understand the question. Still, he didn't answer. Del took the weapon from my hand and pressed it hard into his upper lip, right under his nose. "You don't have long to answer the question," she said.

"We didn't do anything to her!" Leon slurred, talking through his exhaustion. "We didn't touch her. I don't know anything about nothing — we just work here because they pay us in metals." Blood dribbled out of his mouth. Del pushed a little harder into his lip. "The Techs took her. Ask *him* what they do with 'em." He was looking at me now.

"Last time, Leon," Del said. "*Where?*" Blood ran around the silver point of the weapon and down the man's chin.

"The island" he blurted. "In the middle of the lagoon." He kept looking back at me. "I *knew* you sonsabitches would try to take over sooner or later" he said venomously.

Del slapped him once quickly to regain his attention and then jammed the weapon's point against his lip. "Now, Leon, *why* did they take her? Why do they take tourists out to the island?"

"I don't *know*," he blubbered. He started crying. "Shit, / don't know, I just work here like all the other hosts. I don't know nothing about what they do with the people and things they snatch off and take out there. They let us use the illusions and —" He wiped one cheek with a gritty hand, leaving his face splotched with sand. "— and they pay us good. / don't know what goes on out there. / don't hurt anybody."

Del did not look impressed. I stood back, trying to ignore the pain in my shattered hand, and let her deal with him. She was doing well.

"Leon," Del said calmly, "tell me how they get the tourists out there?"

"I seen 'em swim off in that direction," he whined. He had got sand in his eye and was trying to wipe it clear.

"Keep your hand down," Del said.

"My eye —" He raised his hand again and Del slugged him again. I heard something pop. Leon fell over, his mouth half-buried in the sand, and he whimpered. "You hurt me," I heard him gurgle.

"I will kill you, if you don't answer me" she said evenly. "A human being can't swim that far — how do the Techs do it?"

Leon didn't want to answer.

Del looked at me. "I'm going to kill him now."

"Wait! They put 'em on this flat thing that floats," he said weakly, "and then three Techs hook themselves up to it and they swim out there and when they come back the thing is empty. That's all I know."

"Where do they leave from?" Del asked.

He pointed further down the beach. "Over there. Down in those rocks they keep two or three of those flat things."

Del stepped quickly away from him, and I grabbed him by one arm and muscled him right over on his side and then pushed him so his head rested right in the middle of the silver illusion-strip. Leon tried to say something when he saw it coming at his face, but his eyes suddenly rolled back in his head, and the word caught in his throat like a piece of unchewed food.

Del handed the weapon back to me. "Heavy-duty interrogation," I said. "Where did you learn to do that?"

She turned and started walking toward the rocks where Leon had said the "flat things" were kept. After half a minute, she answered: "People are dying here. They are being used up and killed. The voice told me. It told me what to do to that man back there. It said that he'll have a hundred-year dream of ecstasy and will be dead ten minutes from now. It told me that what we're looking for is out there" She nodded her head toward the faintly orange island in the middle of the lagoon.

I had to ask: "Did it say if we would be coming back?"

She interlocked her fingers behind her head, prisoner style, and said nothing. Once again, we were

prisoner and Tech, and once again, this Del was not the Del I had known before. She was sullen, withdrawn, and she did not seem to like me much anymore.

Ahead, in the rocks, I saw a gray face peek out at us. Then, very methodically, it and another Tech hauled out their weapons and began firing at us. I pushed Del aside and we both hit the sand simultaneously. But there was little danger. Their shots were missing us by three or four meters.

I sighted along my arm and seared a hole in the midsection of one of them and then swept across to the second one, sending jets of steam out of his shirt. They fell silently, and for a moment I heard only the water of the lagoon lapping at the wet sand and the sound of my own breathing.

"Up the beach," Del said quickly as she pointed.

A ragged formation of Techs slogged through the sand toward us, all of them armed and firing randomly. Everywhere the sand hissed and melted in globular clumps. One of the Techs tripped on his own feet and went down, tripping another one who continued firing as he fell, cutting in half the Tech who was running in front of him. A spot of sand the size of a handprint melted beside my shoulder, and I smelled the fabric of my shirt smoldering. They were getting closer and more accurate.

I did not like doing it, but one by one, the front ones first, I dropped them. A breeze blew the hot stink across the sand toward us.

"More coming," Del said.

Another dozen of them gathered at the top of the beach. Without any conference, but with some apparent plan, one of them moved out from the group and jogged sloppily at us, firing as he ran. Del and I bolted for the shelter of the rocks, twenty or thirty meters up the beach, and I picked up a second weapon and handed it to Del.

When the approaching Tech got close enough that his shots were becoming dangerous, I aimed — but I didn't fire. His little black eyes showed neither fear nor hatred, and like the others, his mouth was open, gasping for breath, and he was utterly at my mercy.

I glanced at Del. She knew what I was thinking.

"Do it," she said. "Now."

I squeezed the handgrip. The Tech's face seemed to blur and for an instant his legs seemed to run out from under him and he went down on his back. Up above us, another Tech separated himself from the group and ran at us — and again, the same thing happened.

"What the hell is this?" I said when the third one came, slogging and firing wildly at us. "Stop this!" I yelled at them. He came ahead anyway, his mouth open and working, and those little pointed teeth seemed to chew the air as he lurched forward, past the first burned body.

"*Do it,*" Del said from behind me.

I quickly turned to her: "What are these things? Is there anything in them? Are you picking them up when they die?"

"There is nothing in them. When they die, I hear whispers I can't understand, and in a second, they fade to nothing. Kill them all — you're killing nothing."

The sea-damp rock next to me hissed and steamed as one of the random shots of the Tech came close. I

turned and looked at him a second — and it was true: he ran like some anesthetized corporeality, unaware of where he was, of the ground under his feet, of what he was attacking or why. And the others stood further up the beach and emptily watched me kill them one by one. They came, and I stopped them, but I did not like it.

When only three remained, something happened. Simultaneously they dropped their weapons and walked unevenly toward us, again harmless-looking. Halfway to us, one of them chitter-ed mechanically, "If you want to go to the island, we will take you there."

"What I want is the woman you took there, Corandra Kinellen," I said back, still ready to burn them. "If she is on the island, bring her to us."

"No," one of them said. They stood twenty meters away, all in a row, like mannequins.

"Bring her to me," I said in the most authoritarian voice I could manage with the Tech's tongue and teeth.

The Techs said nothing more. They came toward us again, veering to the far side of the cluster of rocks we had taken shelter in. One of them pulled out a white panel, about one-by-two meters, that had on one side a dozen oddly spaced straps and closures — oddly spaced until one imagined a human form lying on the thing: a person would be utterly immobilized when strapped to it.

Del watched them carefully, her eyes as cold and distrustful as I had seen them all day. "I'm not understanding these things," she said. "They must be telepathic — they knew you were not one of them right away, and they act in concert without any overt communication." She tilted her head forward a little, still watching the Techs as they swarmed over the panel, attaching lines to the front of the thing and slipping harnesses around their chests and shoulders. "They must be telepathic," she repeated, "But my voice tells me that they are empty, they know nothing about machines, nothing about people, about this world, or about anything else." She looked at me. "If there is nothing in them, about what could they be telepathic?"

"You may come this way" one of the Techs said. He pointed at the panel. "You will sit here. We will pull you to the island." They were slipping off their cloth shoes: thier feet separated into long, webbed toes not far below the ankle. They waded into the lagoon until only their heads showed above the water and the panel was floating. "Sit in the middle, please," one of them said. "Hold to the straps."

Del slowly took in a deep breath. She stared emptily at the bobbing white panel and asked, "Do we go?"

"You don't have to. I can do this alone. Corandra is no one to you."

"She's important to you and you're someone to me. Let's go."

We waded out knee-deep and then gingerly climbed on the thing. In front of us, only the sleek gray heads of the three Techs were above water. Smoothly and evenly, their arms and legs started moving, and the panel jerked a little as the slack went out of the cables. They swam like rats, holding their chins out of the water and paddling swiftly, machinelike.

Within minutes we had moved nearly a kilometer from the shore, and the beach now was only a thin line of dirty yellow with a few scraggly palms here and there to break regularity of the horizon. From that small a distance, it looked bleak and lonely and desolate — how I or anyone else could have dreams of such beauty in a place like that was something I would have to understand later; I did not understand it then. Sitting beside Del, watching the orange central island grow larger and deeper in color, I realized how little I understood of anything.

And the mystery nearest me was Del. Finally I said, "Talk to me. Since we came here, you've been remote and haven't talked to me much ... or much seemed that you liked me anymore. Is it because of Corandra?"

She had been gazing at the nearing island, but all at once she turned and stared into my face. Her eyes were calm, unblinking, and cold. "Of course it isn't Corandra. Between you and me it's a business arrangement. We assist each other. Isn't that so?"

I nodded, but I didn't believe it any more than she did.

At the waterline was a scrambled chaos of wet black rocks that reached four or five meters up the shore. Beyond that, the island was made of closely fitted red-orange boulders. The huge colored rocks were all flat-faced and relatively smooth, and they all — I suddenly realized — had four sides: three sides were fairly straight and the fourth, the longest side, was a gently curving arc. They were all approximately the same size — and they were *not* rocks.

The three Techs slowed as they approached the rocky shore and slipped out of their harnesses and then waded ashore. Del and I followed watching for anything unusual. The island was a silent place, no birds, no lapping waves, no breeze whispering over the land. A quick look above us at the interlocked orange slabs confirmed that they were not stone, not a random convergence of natural forces — they evenly covered what we could see of the island like the shell of a turtle.

I pointed my weapon at one of the Techs that stood looking dully at the floating white panel and demanded, "Where is Corandra Kinellen?"

The Tech looked at me silently. In his glossy black eyes I could see myself, Del, and the island in dark reflections. It took him a moment to think; then he waved us to follow him up the island to the orange slabs. That was when I noticed the smell.

When we approached the slabs, they creaked and ground together, and then, slowly, they parted, opening up a passageway just wide enough for us to walk through single-file. As they shifted laterally, I could see their cream-colored underbellies and their many multi-jointed legs folded neatly beneath them. The things were crustaceans — something like crabs. And from underneath the things drifted a wet, fetid smell — an odor like the death-smell of small hot animals and like the rancid churning of warm bacteria-ridden swamps.

Behind me, Del gasped for breath. "I'm all right," she said. "Keep going."

Ahead of us, there was always the constant growl of one shell heavily grinding against another, opening up a corridor for the five of us.

Beneath the shell was little room for anything else but the legs of the things, but several times we did see single Techs crouched among the pale-shelled legs. All of them were busily eating small wet pieces of something. They ignored us and often licked their hands and wrists. Twice we saw decomposed parts of Techs smashed beneath the crabs' legs or lodged between them. The air grew thicker with stink, and the most primitive part of me recognized it as a smell to flee from.

"We are here," the lead Tech suddenly announced. He stepped aside and I saw, all at once, the machinery of dreams, the source of its power, and Corandra Kinellen.

At the highest part of the island, at its center, there was an open area, surrounded by the segmented, nonhuman faces of the crabs. In the center of the clearing, surrounded by the unconscious, the dying and the near-dead, stood the neat arrangement of machinery the ancestors of Earl and Cleetis and Leon had

given the Techs.

Corandra Kinellen lay face-up in the rocky dirt along with hundreds of others, both human and nonhuman. Her skin was blistered red and purple. Her eyes were closed, but I could not tell if her face was peaceful because her eyelids were no more than watery blisters and the skin on her cheeks and forehead had puffed and cracked and slowly oozed a clear fluid. She would not live much longer lying there.

And extended from the hot shining equipment in the center was the receiving antenna: suspended on a light framework, the concentric circles of cable hovered only inches above their faces. As Corandra lay there dying, her dreams were somehow being picked up and beamed back to the tourists.... My hand sweated on the handgrip of my weapon.

I wanted to scream, "You have killed her!" I wanted to kill them all, to burn a steaming swath through them, all the way to the lagoon — but all I could do was stand there and look from Corandra to the empty, shelled faces of the crabs to the Techs. I wanted to curse them and have them die with curses in their ears.

But no one feared us. No one paid us any attention. A dozen Techs busily attended the bodies. They would make a small incision in the hand or foot to see if blood still flowed. If it did, they moved on. If it didn't, they dragged the corpse from beneath the low rings of the antenna and disappeared with it among the legs of the crabs. I saw one of the Techs stare at the distended abdomen of a dying dehydrating alien and stroke it gently.

One of the corpse-carriers abruptly dropped his hands, and the body he was helping to carry thumped heavily on the dirt and gravel. The Tech turned and plodded over to us. His gray, dead face showed no trace of intelligence and only the slightest hint of tiredness.

"Hello," he said rapidly. "You were interested in this one?" He pointed to Corandra. As I glanced at her, I saw a small, hard-shelled thing crawling on her arm.

Always watching the Tech, I took off my shirt and laid it on the antenna, shading Corandra's head and shoulders.

"You're killing her," I said, almost choking on the words. I *needed* to kill the thing in front of me. My hand started to draw the weapon upward.

"She isn't dead yet," it said.

"I want you to understand this," I said, consciously shaping each word in my dry mouth, wanting so badly to kill him and the rest of the Techs that at the moment only the words *death* and *murder* had any real meaning to me. "Understand that I do not expect to get out of here alive. I know that I am as close to death as she is." Corandra lay unmoving.

"Your expectation is justified," the Tech said in a quick burst of speech.

"You don't deserve to live."

"*Deserve* to live? Tell me how you came to believe that you understand what should and should not be allowed to live."

The Tech wanted to discuss why I believed he was evil — and all around me lay dying humans and aliens, their skin blistering off their bodies. Corandra stirred minutely, a clicking noise coming from the back of her throat. Without a thought in my head, I burned the Tech, shearing his shoulders from his

body.

He dropped in a heap. Instantly, two other Techs dragged him away. Another one approached and said, "Rational discussion offends you? It makes you want to kill me?"

"Kill *you*? You and the other one—"

The Tech did not grin, but his lips twisted peculiarly and his shiny black eyes became even more glossy. "There is only one native resident on this planet. Just one, and I am it."

My eyes focused beyond the Tech on the angularly segmented faces of the great crabs that surrounded the clearing. A heavy grinding rumble of their shells sliding against each other came from behind us — the passageway through which we had walked was closing up.

"One must not mistake an extension of the body, an extremity, for the body itself. What you call Techs' are my hands and fingers. The thinking part of me resides around you."

I looked around at the chitinous shells, the edges of their folded limbs, and high up at the edge of their bodies, the tight mandibles of their mouths. There was nothing that looked like eyes. "And there's only one of you," I murmured. The weapon in my hand felt as useless as a rock.

"Only one," the Tech answered, "spread through many parts. Are your aggressive inclinations learned or inborn?"

The thing was invulnerable if what it said was true — and it probably was. It explained a lot. If I tried, I could kill most of the Techs and three or four of the crabs — but then what? There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of the things crowding edge-to-edge over the island — and for all I knew there could be hundreds of thousands more scuttling across the silent floor of the ocean.

"I am a curious race," the Tech was saying. "I thought we were alone in the universe until humans came and gave us their worthless equipment. They told us there were other races, and I became interested. That is why Thearis is arranged as a place of pleasure and relaxation."

The weight of helplessness was settling on me. It didn't register at the time, but I saw Del pulling my shirt off the antenna, exposing Corandra's face. Then she stepped back a pace and looked at her.

"I have learned that most species are like humans in that they fear the universe. It is too complicated for them to understand. Out of helplessness, they eliminate those things they find offensive because, perhaps, they reason that those things 'do not deserve to live.' In truth, the universe terrifies you, and you repond by removing ambiguity where you find it — and what is conscious life if not an intricate configuration of meat, chaotic fears, obsessive desires, and demanding rationality? What could be more repulsive to your sensibilities?"

"The woman is dying" Del said from behind me.

The Tech folded his hands under his shirt. His eyes showed no more emotion than the plastic knobs on a piece of electronic equipment. "In the backs of your fearful minds" he said, "death is the mother of beauty, and here on Thearis we allow you to play in the beauty that grows in the dreams of the damned. When animals of your type know they are condemned" he said, gesturing at the human and alien bodies lying under the antenna, "they dream of beauty and hope, they dream that the universe is simple, small, harmless, and that they are where they *belong*. Final hopes are the finest."

The Tech's hands moved swiftly from beneath his shirt — the hypo-gun snorted and I felt the sting of the needle in my side and the cool seepage of the drug into my blood.

"You should have interesting dreams," the Tech said. "I will learn from your desires, and I will allow other humans to participate in those dreams — such is the price of their pleasure."

Already, the drug was causing his voice to sound like it was far away, echoing down a long hallway. I squeezed the handgrip of the weapon and swept its beam across the Tech and across the bellies of the huge crustaceans nearest me. The Tech's left arm and shoulders slid off his body, and where the heat hit the shelled things, I heard meat sizzling and steam puffed out of the burned gashes. I aimed the weapon at the central machinery — I wanted to end this, all of it — and fired. A red spot formed on one of the casings — it turned white and then the side caved in on itself amid a crackling of burning insulation.

Blackness started squeezing off my vision — I wanted to see Del — I wanted to tell her I was sorry before I dropped. But when I turned I saw her poised over Corandra, and, faster than I could think, she fired her own weapon point-blank into Corandra's face — her body jerked as though throwing off the last vestige of life.

"Del -"

She raised her weapon and pointed it at my face. "Stop," she said. "Just stop."

"But did you catch Corandra when she died?"

"Why should I?" she said coolly. "We're all dying here today." It was utterly silent after she said that. Then, still looking at the silver emission point of her weapon, I felt my arms drop. I could barely stand. "We're all dying alone here. We are all always alone — yesterday I realized I was even more alone than other people. And just this once, I want to indulge my desire to kill you, in payment for bringing me here. Goodbye."

Before the fire illuminated every pain I had ever known, there was something worse by far — the one person I had trusted with my life abandoned me. Before the fire came despair, and I did not care that I died. I was released to an emptiness beyond blackness.

The planet had no life on it. I liked that. The sea was smooth and blue, and when the slow sun eased itself behind the barren mountains, the clouds turned lavender and pink. Beyond the beach where we lay, a continent of rubble, mountain-sized boulders, and flows of ridged magma spread thousands of kilometers to the next empty ocean. We were alone. We liked that.

Del roused herself from her nap and looked at me through sleepy eyes. "Did you sleep?" she asked huskily.

"I've been sitting here, glad to be sitting here. I've never watched you sleep before. You're pretty when you sleep." I put my hand in her black hair. "I don't know how I could ever have not trusted you."

She put her head in my lap. The sun in this place had darkened the freckles across her nose. "What else could I have done?" Her arms wrapped around my waist and she closed her eyes again.

Del had caught me and Corandra when she killed us and had then told the Thearisian that she appreciated its intellectual curiosity, that she knew a race of shape-changers it might be interested in examining. Whether or not it believed her she did not know — but it released her, it said, because the machine was broken. Del said that the thing seemed to be amused with what she said. "Consciousness is a cancer," it said, "and it is metastasizing across the universe."

It took her months to find a body for me to reside in'— he was a patient in a hospital, an unrepentant suicide; Del had him released to her care, and, two hours later, I was taken from the murmuring darkness

within her and could see again and smell and touch and taste her — that was the first thing I did: I kissed her, and I took my time doing it.

Over the ocean and beyond the barren mountains, the lavender sky was deepening to a dense, rich purple. Del opened her eyes. "Do you still love me, after watching me sleep? After everything else?"

"Even more," I said.

"After we leave here, we'll find someone to put Corandra into."

"I'm staying with you." I moved my hand across her forehead and into her hair. "I love you now, I'll love you then. With you, I am who I was meant to be."

She reached around my neck and pulled herself to my mouth and kissed me and kissed me, and I did not care that it was the beginning of night or that in this world we were utterly alone, because I loved her, was loved, and was happy.