

# THE SIDON IN THE MIRROR

by Connie Willis

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We are near the spiraldown. I cannot see the mooring lights, and there are no landmarks on Paylay, but I remember how the lights of Jewell's abbey looked from here: a thin, disjointed string of Christmas tree lights, red and green and gold. Closer in you can see the red line under the buildings, and you think you are seeing the heat of Paylay, but it is only the reflection of the lights off the ground and the metalpaper undersides of Jewell's and the gaming house.

"You kin't see the heat," Jewell said on our way in from the down, "but you feel it. Your shoes all right?"

My shoes were fine, but they were clumsy to walk in. I would have fallen over in them at home, but here the heavier gravity almost clamped them to the ground. They had six-inch plastic soles cut into a latticework as fragile-looking as the mooring tower, but they were sturdier than they looked, and they were not letting any heat get through. I wasn't feeling anything at all, and halfway to Jewell's I knelt and felt the sooty ground. It felt warm but not so hot as I had thought it would be, walking on a star.

"Leave your hand there a minute," Jewell said. I did, and then jerked my soot-covered hand up and put it in my mouth.

"Gits hot fast, din't it?" she said. "A tapper kidd fall down out here or kimm out with no shoes on and die inside of an hour of heatstroke. That's why I thought I bitter come out and wilcome you to Paylay. That's what they call this tapped-out star. You're sipped to be able to pick up minny laying on the ground. You kin't. You have to drill a tap and build a comprissor around it and hope to Gid you don't blow yoursilf up while you're doing it."

What she did not say, in the high squeaky voice we both had from the helium in the air, was that she had waited over two hours for me by the down's plastic mooring tower and that the bottoms of her feet were frying in the towering shoes. The plastic is not a very good insulator. Open metal ribs would work far better to dissipate the heat that wells up through the thin crust of Paylay, but they can't allow any more metal here than is absolutely necessary, not with the hydrogen and oxygen ready to explode at the slightest spark.

The downpilot should have taken any potential fire-starters and metal I had away from me before he let me off the spiraldown, but Jewell had interrupted him before he could ask me what I had. "Doubletap it, will you?" she said. "I want to git back before the nixt shift. You were an hour late."

"Sorry, Jewell," the pilot said. "We hit thirty percent almost a kilometer up and had to go into a Fermat." He looked down again at the piece of paper in his hand. "The following items are contraband. Unlawful possession can result in expulsion from Paylay. Do you have any: sonic fires, electromags, matches..."

Jewell took a step forward and put her foot down like she was afraid the ground would give way.

"Iv course he din't. He's a pianoboard player."

The pilot laughed and said, "Okay, Jewell, take him," and she grabbed up my tote and walked me back to St. Pierre. She asked about my uncle, and she told me about the abbey and the girls and how she'd given them all house names of jewels because of her name. She told me how Taber, who ran the gaming house next door to her abbey, had christened the little string of buildings we could see in the distance St. Pierre after the patron saint of tappers, and all the time the bottoms of her feet fried like cooking meat

and she never said a word.

I couldn't see her very well. She was wearing a chemiloom lantern strapped to her forehead, and she had brought one for me, but they didn't give off much light, and her face was in shadow. My uncle had told me she had a big scar that ran down the side of her face and under her chin. He said she got the scar from a fight with a sidon.

"It nearly cut the jugular," my uncle had said. "It would have if they hadn't gotten it off of her. It cut up quite a few of the tappers, too."

"What was she doing with a sidon anyway?" I asked. I had never seen one, but I had heard about them: beautiful blood-red animals with thick, soft fur and sot-razor claws, animals that could seem tame for as long as a year and then explode without warning into violence. "You can't tame them."

"Jewell thought she could," my uncle said. "One of the tappers brought it back with him from Solfatara in a cage. Somebody let it out, and it got away. Jewell went after it. Its feet were burned, and it was suffering from heatstroke. Jewell sat down on the ground and held it on her lap till someone came to help. She insisted on bringing it back to the abbey, making it into a pet. She wouldn't believe she couldn't tame it."

"But a sidon can't help what it is," I said. "It's like us. It doesn't even know it's doing it."

My uncle did not say anything, and after a minute I said, "She thinks she can tame us, too. That's why she's willing to take me, isn't it? I knew there had to be a reason she'd take me when we're not allowed on Solfatara. She thinks she can keep me from copying."

My uncle still did not answer, and I took that for assent. He had not answered any of my questions. He had suddenly said I was going, though nobody had gone off-planet since the ban, and when I asked him questions, he answered with statements that did not answer them at all.

"Why do I have to go?" I said. I was afraid of going, afraid of what might happen.

"I want you to copy Jewell. She is a kind person, a good person. You can learn a great deal from her."

"Why can't she come here? Kovich did."

"She runs an abbey on Paylay. There are not more than two dozen tappers and girls on the whole star. It is perfectly safe."

"What if there's somebody evil there? What if I copy him instead and kill somebody, like happened on Solfatara? What if something bad happens?"

"Jewell runs a clean abbey. No sots, no pervs, and the girls are weff-behaved. It's nothing *like* the happy houses. As for Paylay itself, you shouldn't worry about it being a star. It's in the last stages of burning out. It has a crust almost two thousand feet thick, which means there's hardly any radiation. People can walk on the surface without any protective clothing at all. There's some radiation from the hydrogen taps, of course, but you won't go anywhere near them."

He had reassured me about everything except what was important. Now, trudging along after Jewell through the sooty carbon of Paylay, I knew about all the dangers except the worst one—myself.

I could not see anything that looked like a tap. "Where are they?" I asked, and Jewell pointed back the way we had come. ,

“As far away as we kin git thim from St. Pierre and each ither so simm tripletapping fool kin’t kill ivvery-body when he blows himsilf up. The first sidon’s off thit way, ten kilometers or so.”

“Sidon?” I said, frightened. My uncle had told me that tappers had killed the sidon and made it into a rug after it nearly killed Jewell.

She laughed. “Thit’s what they call the taps. Because they blow up on you and you don’t even know what hit. They make thim as safe as they can, but the comprission equipmint’s metal and metal means sparks. Ivvery once in a while that whole sky over there lights up like Chrissmiss. We built St. Pierre as far away as we kidd, and there in’t a scrap of metal in the whole place, but the hydrogen leaks are ivverywhere. And helium. Din’t we sound like a pair iv fools squeaking at each other?” She laughed again, and I noticed that as we had stood there looking at the black horizon, my feet had begun to feel uncomfortably hot.

It was a long walk through the darkness to the string of lights, and the whole way I watched Jewell and wondered if I had already begun to copy her. I would not know it, of course. I had not known I was copying my uncle either. One day he had asked me to play a song, and I had sat down at the pianoboard and played it. When I was finished, he said, “How long have you been able to do that?” and I did not know. Only after I had done the copying would I know it, and then only if someone told me. I trudged after Jewell in darkness and tried, tried to copy her.

It took us nearly an hour to get to the town, and when we got there, I could see it wasn’t a town at all. What Jewell had called St. Pierre was only two tall metalpaper-covered buildings perched on plastic frameworks nearly two meters high and a huddle of stilt-tents. Neither building had a sign over the door, just strings of multicolored chemiloom lights strung along the eaves. They were fairly bright, and they reflected off the metalpaper into even more light, but Jewell took off *the- lantern she* had strapped to her head and held it close to the wooden openwork steps, as if I couldn’t see to climb up to the front door high above us without it.

“Why are you walking like thit?” she said when we got to the top of the steps, and for the first time I could see her scar. It looked almost black in the colored light of the lantern and the looms, and it was much wider than I had thought it would be, a fissure of dark puckered skin down one whole side of her face.

“Walking like what?” I said, and looked down at my feet.

“Like you kin’t bear to hivv your feet touch the ground.

I got my feet too hot out at the down. You didn’t. So din’t walk like thit.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I won’t do it anymore.”

She smiled at me, and the scar faded a little. “Now you just kimiri on in and meet the girls. Din’t mind if it they say simmthing about the way you look. They’ve nivver seen a Mirror before, but they’re good girls.” She opened the thick door. It was metalpaper backed with a thick pad of insulation. “We take our inside shoes off out here and wear shuffles inside the abbey.”

It was much cooler inside. There was a plastic heat-trigger fan set in the ceiling and surrounded by rose-colored chemilooms. We were in an anteroom with a rack for the high shoes and the lanterns. They dangled by their straps.

Jewell sat down on a chair and began unbuckling her bulky shoes. "Din't ivver go out without shoes and a lantern," she said. She gestured toward the rack. "The little ones with the twillpaper hiddbands are for town. They only list about an hour. If you're going out to the taps or the spiraldown, take one iv the big ones with you."

She looked different in the rosy light. Her scar hardly showed at all. Her voice was different too, deeper. She sounded older than she had at the down. I looked up and around at the air.

"We blow nitrogen and oxygen in from a tap behind the house," she said. "The tappers din't like having squeaky little helium voices when they're with the girls. You can't git rid of the helium, or the hydrogen either. They leak in ivverywhere. The bist you can do is dilute it. You shid be glad you weren't here at the beginning, before they tapped an atmosphere. You had to wear vacuum suits thin." She pried off her shoe. The bottom of her foot was a mass of blisters. She started to stand up and then sat down again.

"Yill for Carnie," she said. "Till her to bring some bandages."

I hung my outside shoes on the rack and opened the inner door. It fit tightly, though it opened with just a touch. It was made of the same insulation as the outer door. It opened onto a fancy room, all curtains and fur rugs and hanging looms that cast little pools of colored light, green and rose and gold. The pianoboard stood over against one wall on a carved plastic table. I could not see anyone in the room, and I could not hear voices for the sound of the blowers. I started across a blood-red fur rug to another door, hung with curtains.

"Jewell?" a woman's voice said. The blowers kicked off, and she said, "Jewell?" again, and I saw that I had nearly walked past her. She was sitting in a white velvet chair in a little bay that would have been a window if this were not Paylay. She was wearing a white satinpaper dress with a long skirt. Her hair was piled on top of her head, and there was a string of pearls around her long neck. She was sitting so quietly, with her hands in her lap and her head turned slightly away from me, that I had not even seen her. "Are you Carnie?" I said.

"No," she said, and she didn't look up at me. "What is it?"

"Jewell got her feet burned," I said. "She needs bandages. I'm the new pianoboard player."

"I know," the girl said. She lifted her head a little in the direction of the stairs and called, "Carnie. Get the remedy case."

A girl came running down the stairs in an orange-red robe and no shoes. "Is it Jewell?" she said to the girl in the white dress, and when she nodded, Carnie ran past us into the other room. I could hear the hollow sound of an insulated door opening. The girl had made no move to come and see Jewell. She sat perfectly still in the white chair, her hands lying quietly in her lap.

"Jewell's feet are pretty bad," I said. "Can't you at least come see them?"

"No," she said, and looked up at me. "My name is ' Pearl," she said. "I had a friend once who played the pianoboard."

Even then, I wouldn't have known she was blind except that my uncle had told me. "Most of the girls are newcomers Jewell hired for Paylay right off the ships, before the happy houses could ruin them," my uncle had said. "She only brought a couple of the girls with her from Solfatara, girls who worked with her in the happy house she came out of. Carnie, and I think Sapphire, and Pearl, the blind one."

"Blind?" I had said. Solfatara is a long way out, **but** any place has doctors.

“He cut... the optic nerve was severed. They did orb implants and reattached all the muscles, but it was only cosmetic repair. She can’t see anything.”

Even after all the horrible stories I had heard about Solfatara, it had shocked me to think that someone could do something like that. I remember thinking that the man must have been incredibly cruel to have done such a thing, that it would have been kinder to kill her outright than to have left her helpless and injured like that in a place like Solfatara. “Who did it to her?” I said.

“A tapper,” he said, and for a minute he looked very much like Kovich, so much that I asked, “Was it the same man who broke Kovich’s hands?” “Yes,” my uncle said.

“Did they kill him?” I said, but that was not the question I had intended to ask. I had meant did Kovich kill him, but I had said “they.”

And my uncle, not looking like Kovich at all, had said, “Yes, they killed him,” as if that were the right question after all.

The orb implants and the muscle reattachments had been very good. Her eyes were a beautiful pale gray, and someone had taught her to follow voices with them. There was nothing at all in the angle of her head or her eyes or her quiet hands to tell me she was blind or make me pity her, and standing there looking down at her, I was glad, glad that they had killed him. I hoped that they had cut his eyes out first.

Carnie darted past us with the remedy case, and I said, still looking down at Pearl, “I’ll go and see if I can help her.” I went back out into the anteroom and watched while Carnie put some kind of oil on Jewell’s feet and then a meshlike pad, and wrapped her feet in bandages.

“This is Carnelian,” Jewell said. “Carnie, this is our new pianoboard player.”

She smiled at me. She looked very young. She must have been only a child when she worked in the happy house on Solfatara with Jewell.

“I bit you can do real fancy stuff with those hands,” she said, and giggled.

“Don’t tease him,” Jewell said. “He’s here to play the pianoboard.”

“I *meant* on the pianoboard. You din’t look like a real mirror. You know, shiny and ivverything? Who are you going to copy?”

“He’s not going to copy innybody,” Jewell said sharply. “He’s going to play the pianoboard, and that’s all. Is supper riddy?”

“No. I was jist in the kitchen and Sapphire wasn’t even there yit.” She looked back up at me. “When you copy somebody, do you look like them?” “No,” I said. “You’re thinking of a chameleon.” “You’re not thinking it all,” Jewell said to her and stood up. She winced a little as she put her weight on her feet. “Go borrow a pair of Garnet’s shuffles. I’ll nivver be able to git mine on. And go till Sapphire to doubletap hersilf into the kitchen.”

She let me help her to the stairs but not up them. “When Carnie comes back, you hivv her show you your room. We work an eight and eight here, and it’s nearly time for the shift. You kin practice till supper if you want.”

She went up two steps and stopped. “If Carnie asks you inny more silly questions, tell her I told her to lit you alone. I don’t want to hear any more nonsinse about copying and Mirrors. You’re here to play the pianoboard.”

She went on up the stairs, and I went back into the music room. Pearl was still there, sitting in the white chair, and I didn't know whether she was included in the instructions to leave me alone, so I sat down on the hard wooden stool and looked at the pianoboard.

It had a wooden soundboard and bridges, but the strings were plastic instead of metal. I tried a few chords, and it seemed to have a good sound in spite of the strings. I played a few scales and more chords and looked at the names on the hardcopies that stood against the music rack. I can't read music, of course, but I could see by the titles that I knew most of the songs.

"It isn't nonsense, is it?" Pearl said, "About the copying." She spoke slowly and without the clipped accent Jewell and Carnie had.

I turned around on the stool and faced her. "No," I said. "Mirrors have to copy. They can't help themselves. They don't even know who they're copying. Jewell doesn't believe me. Do you?"

"The worst thing about being blind is not that things are done to you," she said, and looked up at me again with her blind eyes. "It's that you don't know who's doing them."

Carnie came in through the curtained door. "I'm supposed to show you around," she said. "Oh, Pearl, I wish you kidd see him. He has eight fingers on each hand, and he's really tall. Almost to the ceiling. And his skin is bright red."

"Like a sidon's," Pearl said, looking at me.

Carnie looked down at the blood-red rug she was standing on. "Jist like," she said, and dragged me upstairs to show me my room and the clothes I was to wear and to show me off to the other girls. They were already dressed for the shift in trailing satin-paper dresses that matched their names. Garnet wore rose-red chemi-looms in her upswept hair, Emerald an elaborately lit collar.

Carnie got dressed in front of me, stepping out of her robe and into an orange-red dress as if I weren't watching. She asked me to fasten her armropes of winking orange, lifting up her red curls so I could tie the strings of the chemilooms behind her shoulders. I could not decide then if she were trying to seduce me or get me to copy her or simply to convince me that she was the naive child she pretended to be.

I thought then that whatever she was trying, she had failed. She had succeeded only in convincing me of what my uncle had already told me. In spite of her youth, her silliness, I could well believe she had been on Solfatara had known all of it, the pervs, the sots, the worst the happy houses had to offer. I think now she didn't mean anything by it except that she wanted to be cruel, that she was simply poking at me as if I were an animal in a cage.

At supper, watching Sapphire set Pearl's plate for her between taped marks, I wondered whether Carnie was ever cruel to Pearl as she had been to me, shifting the plate slightly as she set it down or moving her chair so she could not find it.

Sapphire set the rest of the plates on the table, her eyes dark blue from some old bitterness, and I thought, Jewell shouldn't have brought any of them with her from Solfatara except Pearl. Pearl is the only one who hasn't been ruined by it. Her blindness has kept her safe, I thought. She has been protected from all the horrors because she couldn't see them. Perhaps her blindness protects her from Carnie, too, I thought. Perhaps that is the secret, that she is safe inside her blindness and no one can hurt her, and Jewell knows that. I did not think then about the man who had blinded her, and how she had not been safe from him at all.

Jewell called the meal to order. "I want you to make our pew pianoboard player wilcome," she said. She

reached across the table and patted Carnie's hand. "Thank you for doing the introductions, and for bandaging my foot," she said, and I thought, Pearl is safe after all. Jewell has tamed Carnie and all the rest of them. I did not think about the sidon she had tamed, and how it now lay on the floor in front of the card-room door.

That first shift Jewell decked me out in formals and a black-red dog collar and had me stand at the door with her as she greeted the tappers. They were in formals, too, under their soot-black work jackets. They hung the many-pocketed jackets, heavy with tools, on the rack in the anteroom along with their lanterns and sat down to take off their high shoes with hands almost as red as mine. They had washed their hands and faces, but their fingernails were black, with soot, and there was soot in every line of their palms. Their faces looked hot and raw, and they all had a broad pale band across their foreheads from the lantern strap. One of them, whom Jewell called Scorch, had singed off his eyebrows and a long strip of hair on top of his head.

"You'll meet almost all the tappers this shift. The gaming house will close hiffway through and the rist of them will come over. Taber and I stagger the shifts so simmthing's always open."

She didn't introduce me, though -some of the tappers looked at my eight-fingered hands curiously, and one of the men looked surprised and then angry. He looked as if he was going to say something to me, and then changed his mind, his face getting redder and darker until the lantern line stood out like a scar.

When they were all inside the music room, Jewell led me to the pianoboard and had me sit down and spread my hands out over the keyboard, ready to play. Then she said. "This is my new pianoboard player, boys. Say hillo to him."

"What's his name, Jewell?" one of the men said. "You ginna give him a fancy name like the girls?"

"I nivver thought about it," she said. "What do you think?"

The tapper, who had turned so red, said loudly, "I think you shid call him sidon and kick him out to burn on Paylay. He's a Mirror."

"I alriddy got a Carnelian and a Garnet. And I had a Sidon once. I giss I'll call him Ruby." She looked calmly over at the man who had spoken. "That okay with you, Jick?"

His face was as dark a red as mine. "I didn't say it to be mean, Jewell," he said. "You're doing what you did with the sidon, taking in simmthing thit'll turn on you. They won't even lit Mirrors on Solfatara."

"I think that's probably a good ricommendation considering what they do lit on Solfatara," Jewell said quietly. "Sot-gamblers, tap-stealers, pervers..."

"You saw that Mirror kill the tapper. Stid there right in front iv ivverybody, and nobody kidd stop him. Nobody. The tapper bigging for mercy, his hands tied in front of him, and thit Mirror coming at him with a sot-razor, smiling while he did it."

"Yes," Jewell said. "I saw it. I saw a lot of things on Solfatara. But this is Paylay. And this is my pianoboard player Ruby. I din't think a man should be outlawed till he does simmthing, di you Jick?" She put her hand on my shoulder. "Do you know 'Back Home?'" she said. Of course I knew it. I knew all the tapper songs. Kovich had played in every happy house on Solfatara before somebody broke his hands. He had called "Back Home" his rope cutter.

"Play it, thin," she said. "Show thim what you can do, Ruby."

I played it with lots of trills and octave stretches, all the fancy things Kovich could do with five fingers instead of eight. Then I stopped and waited. The nitrogen blowers kicked off, and even the fans made no noise. During the song, Jewell had gone and stood next to Jack, putting her hand on his shoulder, trying to tame him. I wondered if she had succeeded. Jack looked at me, and then at Jewell and back at me again. His hand went into his formals shirt, and my heart almost stopped before he brought it out again.

“Jewell’s right,” he said. “You shiddn’t judge a man till you see what he does. That was gid playing,” he said, handing me a plastic-wrapped cigar. “Wilcome to Paylay.”

Jewell nodded at me, and I extended my hand and took the cigar. I fumbled to get the slippery plastic off and then had to look at the cigar a minute to make sure I was getting the right end in my mouth. I stuck it in my mouth and reached inside my shirt for my sparker. I didn’t know what would happen when I lit the cigar. For all I understood what was going on, the cigar might be full of gunpowder. Jewell did not look worried, but then she had misjudged the sidon, too.

My hand closed on the sparker inside my shirt, the nitrogen blowers suddenly kicked on, and Jack said lazily, “Now whit you ginna light that with, Ruby? There in’t a match on Paylay!”

Jewell laughed, and the men guffawed. I pulled my empty hand sheepishly out of my jacket and took the cigar out of my mouth to look at it. “I forgot you can’t smoke on Paylay,” I said.

“You and ivvery tapper that kimms in on the down,” Jewell said. “I’ve seen Jick play that joke on how many newcomers?”

“Ivvery one,” Jack said, looking pleased with himself. “It even worked on you, Jewell, and you weren’t a newcomer.”

“It did not, you tripletapping liar,” she said. “Lit’s hear simmthing else, Ruby,” she said. “Whit do you want Ruby to play, boys?”

Scorch shouted out a song, and I played it, and then another, but I do not know what they were. It had been a joke, offer the newcomer a cigar and then watch him try to light it on a star where no open flames are allowed. A good joke, and Jack had done it in spite of what he had seen on Solfatara, to show Jewell he didn’t think I was a sidon, that he would wait to see what I would do before he judged me.

And that would have been too late. What would have happened when I lit the cigar? Would the house have gone up in a ball of flame, or all of St. Pierre? The hydrogen-oxygen ratio had been high enough in the upper atmosphere that we had had to shut off the engines above a kilometer and spiral in, and here the fans were pumping in even more oxygen. Half of Paylay might have gone up.

I knew how it had happened. Jewell had interrupted the downpilot before he could ask about sparkers, and now, because her feet had hurt, there was a live sparker in her house. And she had just convinced Jack I was not dangerous.

I had stopped playing, sitting there staring blindly at the keyboard, the unlit cigar clamped so hard between my teeth I had nearly bitten it through. The men were still shouting out the names of songs, but Jewell stepped between them and me and put a hardcopy on the music rack. “No more riquists,” she said. “Pearl is going to sing for you.”

Pearl stood up and walked unassisted from her white chair to the pianoboard. She stopped no more than an inch from me and put her hand down certainly on the end of the keyboard. I looked at the music. It showed a line of notes before her part began, but I did not know that version, only the song that Kovich had known, and that began on the first note of the verse. I could not nod at her, and she could not see



my hands on the keys.

“I don’t know the introduction,” I said. “Just the verse. What should I do?”

She bent down to me. “Put your hand on mine when you are ready to begin, and I will count three,” she said, and straightened again, leaving her hand where it was. I looked down at her hand. Carnie had told her about my hands, and if I touched her lightly, with only the middle fingers, she might not even be able to tell it from a human’s touch. I wanted more than anything not to frighten her. I did not think I could bear it if she flinched away from me.

Now I think it would have been better if she had, that I could have stood it better than this, sitting here with her head on my lap, waiting. If she had flinched, Jack would have seen her. He would have seen her draw away from me, and that would have been enough for *him to* grab me by *the* dog collar and throw me out the door, kick me down the wooden steps so hard that the sparker bounced out, leave me to cook in the furnace of Paylay.

“Now whit did you do thit for?” Jewell would have said. “He din’t do innynthing but tich her hand.”

“And he’ll nivver do innynthing ilse to her either,” he would have said, and handed Jewell the sparker. And I would never have been able to do anything else to her.

But she did not flinch. She took a light breath that took no longer than it did for my hand to return to the keys and hit the first note on the count of three, and we began together. I did not do any trills, any octave stretches. Her voice was sweet and thready and true. She didn’t need me.

The men applauded after Pearl’s song and started calling out the names of other songs. Some I didn’t know, and I wondered how I could explain that to them, but Jewell said, “Now, now, boys. Let’s not use up our pianoboard player in one shift. Lit him go to bid. He’ll be here next shift. Who wants a game of katmai?” She reached over and pulled the cover down over the keyboard. “Use the front stairs,” she said. “The tappers take the girls up the back way.”

Pearl bent toward me and said, “Good night, Ruby,” and then took Jack’s arm as if she knew right where he was and went through the curtained door to the card room. The others followed, two by two, until all the girls were taken, and then in a stragglng line. Jewell unfastened the heavy drapes so they fell across the door behind them.

I went upstairs and took off the paper shuffles and the uncomfortable collar and sat on the edge of the bed Jewell had fixed for me by putting a little table at the end for extra length. I thought about Pearl and Jack and how I was going to give Jewell the sparker at the beginning of the next shift, and wondered who I was copying. I looked at myself in the little plastic mirror over the bed, trying to see Jewell or Jack in my face.

I had left my cigar on the music rack. I didn’t want Jack to find it there and think I had rejected it. I put my shuffles back on and went downstairs. There was nobody in the music room, and the drapes were still drawn across the door of the card jroom. I went over to the pianoboard and got the cigar. I had bitten it almost through, and now I bit the ragged end off. Then I chomped down on the new end and sat down on the piano stool, spreading out my hands as far as they would go across the keyboard.

“I understand you’re a Mirror,” a man’s voice said from the recesses of Pearl’s chair. “I knew a Mirror once. Or he knew me. Isn’t that how it is?”

I almost said, “You’re not supposed to sit in that chair,” but I found I could not speak.

The man stood up and came toward me. He was dressed like the other men, with a broad black dog collar, but his hands and face were almost white, and there was no lighter band across his forehead. "My name is Taber," he said, in a slow, drawling voice unlike the fast, vowel-shortening accents of the others. I wondered if he had come from Solfatara. All the rest of them except Pearl shortened their vowels, bit them off like I had bit the cigar. Pearl alone seemed to have no accent, as if her blindness had protected her from the speech of Solfatara, too.

"Welcome to St. Pierre," he said, and I felt a shock of fear. He had lied to Jewell. I did not know who St. Pierre was, but I knew as he spoke that St. Pierre was not the patron saint of tappers, and that Taber's calling the town that was some unspeakably cruel joke that only he understood.

"I have to go upstairs," I said, and my hand shook as I held the cigar. "Jewell's in the card room."

"Oh," he said lazily, taking a cigar from his pocket and unwrapping it. "Is Pearl there, too?" "Pearl?" I said, so frightened I could not breathe. He patted his formal pockets and reached inside his shirt. "Yes. You know, the blind girl. The pretty one." He pulled a sparker from his inside pocket, cocked it back, and looked at me. "What a pity she's blind. I wish I knew what happened. She's never told a soul, you know," he said, and clicked the sparker.

It was not a real sparker. I could see, after a frozen moment, that there was no liquid in it at all. He clicked it twice more, held it to the end of his cigar in dreadful pantomime, and replaced it in his pocket.

"I do wish I could find out," he said. "I could put the knowledge to good use."

"I can't help you," I said, and moved toward the stairs.

He stepped in front of me. "Oh, I think you can. Isn't that what Mirrors are for?" he said, and drew on the unlit cigar and blew imaginary smoke into my face.

"I won't help you," I said, so loudly I fancied Jewell would come and tell Taber to let me alone, as she had told Carnie. "You can't make me help you."

"Of course not," he said. "That isn't how it works. But of course you know that," and let me pass.

I sat on my bed the rest of the shift, holding the real sparker between my hands, waiting until I could tell Jewell what Taber had said to me. But the next shift was sleeping-shift, and the shift after that I played tapper requests for eight hours straight. Most of that time Taber stood by the pianoboard, flicking the imaginary ashes onto my hands.

After the shift Jewell came to ask me whether Jack or anyone else had bothered me, and I did not tell her about Taber after all. During the next sleeping-shift I hid the sparker between the mattress and the springs of my bed.

On the waking shifts I kept as close as I could to Jewell, trying to make myself useful to her, trying not to copy the way she walked on her bandaged feet. When I was not playing, I moved among the tappers with glasses of iced and watered-down liquor on a tray and filled out the account cards for the men who wanted to take girls upstairs. On the off-shifts I learned to work the boards that sent out accounts to Solfatara, and to do the laundry, and after a couple of weeks Jewell had me help with the body checks on the girls. She scanned for perv marks and sot scars as well as the standard GHS every abbey has to screen for. Pearl did not have a mark on her, and I was relieved. I had had an idea that Taber might be torturing her somehow.

Jewell left us alone while I helped her get dressed after the scan, and I said, "Taber is a very bad man. He wants to hurt you."

"I know," she said. She was standing very still while I clipped the row of pearl buttons on the back of her dress together.

"Why?"

"I don't know," she said. "It's like the sidon."

"You mean he can't help himself, that he doesn't know what he's doing?" I said, outraged. "He knows exactly what he's doing."

"The tappers used to poke at the sidon with sticks when it was in the cage," she said. "They couldn't reach it to really hurt it, though, and Taber couldn't stand that. He made the tappers give him the key to the cage just so he could get to it. Just so he could hurt it. Now why would he want to hurt the sidon?"

"Because it was helpless," I said, and I wondered if the man who'd blinded Pearl had been like that. "Because it couldn't protect itself."

"Jewell and I were in the same happy house on Solfatara," she said. "We had a friend there, a pianoboard player like you. He was very tall like you, too, and he was the kindest person I ever knew. Sometimes you remind me of him." She walked certainly to the door, as if she were not counting the memorized steps. "A cage is a safe place as long as nobody has the key. Don't worry, Ruby. He can't get in." She turned and looked at me. "Will you come and play for me?"

"Yes," I said, and followed her down to the music room. Before the shifts started, while the girls were upstairs dressing, she liked to sit in the white chair and listen to me play. She understood, more than any of the others, that I could play only the songs I had copied from Kovich. Jewell, to the end, thought I could read music, and Taber even brought me hardcopies from Solfatara. Pearl simply said the names of songs, and I played them if I knew them. She never asked for one I didn't know, and I thought that was because she listened carefully to the tappers' requests and my refusals, and I was grateful.

I sat down at the pianoboard and looked at Pearl in the mirror. I had asked Jewell for the mirror so I could see over my shoulder. I had told her I wanted it so she could signal me songs and breaks and sometimes the ropecutter if the men got rough or noisy, but it was really so I could keep Taber from standing there without my knowing it.

"'Back Home,' " Pearl said. I could hardly hear her over the nitrogen blowers. I began playing it, and Taber came in. He walked swiftly over to her and then stood quite still, and between my playing and the noise of the blowers, she did not hear him. He stood about half a meter from her, close enough to touch her but just out of reach if she had put her hand out to try to find him.

He took the cigar out of his mouth and bent down as if he were going to speak to her, and instead he pursed his lips and blew gently at her. I could almost see the smoke. At first she didn't seem to notice, but then she shivered and drew her shinethread shawl closer about her.

He stopped and smiled at her a moment and then reached out and touched her with the tip of his cigar, lightly, on the shoulder, as if he intended to burn her, and then darted it back out of her reach. She swatted at the air, and he repeated the little pantomime again and again, until she stood and put her hands up helplessly against what she could not see. As she did so, he moved swiftly and silently to the door so that when she cried out, "Who is it? Who's there?" he said in his slow drawl, "It's me, Pearl. I've just come in. Did I frighten you?"

“No,” she said, and sat back down again. But when he took her hand, she flinched away from him as I’d thought she would from me. And all the while I had not missed a beat of the song. ‘

“I just came over to see you for a minute,” Taber said, “and to hear your pianoboard player. He gets better every day, doesn’t he?”

Pearl didn’t answer. I saw in the mirror that her hands lay crossed in her lap again and didn’t move.

“Yes,” he said, and walked toward me, flicking imaginary ashes from his unlit cigar onto my hands. “Better and better,” he said softly. “I can almost see my face in you, Mirror.”

“What did you say?” Pearl said, frightened. “I said I’d better go see Jewell a minute about some business *and then get back next door*. Jack found a new hydrogen tap today, a big one.”

He went back through the card room to the kitchen, and I sat at the pianoboard, watching in the mirror until I saw the kitchen door shut behind him.

“Taber was in the room the whole time,” I said. “He was... doing things to you.” “I know,” she said.

“You shouldn’t let him. You should stop him,” I said violently, and as soon as I said it I knew that she knew . that I had not stopped him either. “He’s a very bad man,” I said,

“He has never locked me in,” she said after a minute. “He has never tied me up.”

“He has never known how before,” I said, and I knew it was true. “He wants me to find out for him.”

She bent her head to her hands, which still lay crossed at the wrist, almost relaxed, showing nothing of what she was thinking. “And will you?” she said. “I don’t know.”

“He’s trying to get you to copy him, isn’t he?” she said.

“Yes.”

“And you think it’s working?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I can’t tell when I’m copying. Do I sound like Taber?”

“No,” she said, so definitely that I was relieved. I had listened to myself with an anxious ear, hoping for Jewell’s shortened vowels and tapper slang, waiting in dread for the slow, lazy speech of Taber. I did not think I had heard either of them, but I had been afraid I wouldn’t know if I did.

“Do you know who I’m copying?” I said.

“You walk like Jewell,” she said, and smiled a little. “It makes her furious.”

It was the end of the shift before I realized that, like my uncle, she had not really answered what I had asked.

Jack’s new tap turned out to be so big that he needed a crew to help put up the compressors, and for several shifts hardly anyone was in the house, including Taber. , Because business was so slack, Jewell even let some of the girls go over to the gaming house. Taber didn’t go near the tap, but he didn’t come over quite so often either, and when he did, he spent his time upstairs or with Carnie, talking to her in a low voice and clicking the sparker over and over again, as if he could not help himself. Then, once the

compressors were set up and the sidon working, the men poured back into St. Pierre, and Taber was too busy to come over at all.

The one time he came, he found Pearl alone with me, he said, "It's Taber, Pearl," almost before I had banged a loud chord on the keys and said, "Taber's here." He did not have his cigar with him, or his sparker, and he did not even speak to me. Watching Pearl talk to him, her head gracefully turned away from him, her hands in her lap, I could almost believe he would not succeed, that nothing could hurt her, safe in her blindness.

We were so busy that Jewell hardly spoke to me, but when she did, she told me sharply that if I had nothing better to do than copy her, I should tend bar, and set me to passing out the watered liquor she had brought out in honor of the new sidon. She did the boards for the week herself while I ran the body checks.

Pearl, naked under the scan, looked serene and unhurt. Carnie had sot-scars under her arms. I did not report her. If Jewell found out, she would send Carnie back to Solfatara, and I wanted Taber to be working on Carnie, giving her sots and trying to get her to help him, because then I could believe he had given up on me. I did not dare believe that he had given up on Pearl, but I did not think that he and Carnie alone could hurt her, no matter what they did to her. Not without my help. Not so long as I was copying Jewell.

I told Pearl about Carnie. "I think she's on sots," I said. We were alone in the music room. Jewell was upstairs, trying to catch up the boards. Carnie was in the kitchen, taking her turn at supper. "I saw what looked like scars."

"I know," Pearl said, and I wondered if there was anything she did not see, in spite of her blindness.

"I think you should be careful. It's Taber that's giving them to her. He's using her to hurt you. Don't tell her anything."

She said nothing, and after a minute I turned back to the pianoboard and waited for her to name a song.

"I was born in the happy house. My mother worked there. Did you know that?" she said quietly.

"No," I said, keeping my hands spread across the keyboard, as though they could support me. I did not look at her.

"I have told myself all these years that as long as no one knew what happened, I was safe." "Doesn't Jewell know?"

She shook her head. "Nobody knows. My mother told them he threatened her with the sot-razor, that there was nothing she could do."

The nitrogen blowers kicked on just then, and I jumped at the sound and looked into the mirror. I could see the sidon in the mirror, and standing on its red murdered skin, Taber. Carnie had let him in through the kitchen and turned the blowers up, and now he stood between the noisy blowers, smiling and flicking imaginary ash onto the carpet beside Pearl's chair. I took my hands off the keyboard and laid them in my lap. "Carnie's in the kitchen," I said. "I don't know if the door's shut."

"There was a tapper who came to the house," Pearl said. "He was a very bad man, but my mother loved him. She said she couldn't help herself. I think that was true." For a moment she looked directly into the mirror with her blind eyes, and I willed Taber to click the sparker that I knew he was fingering so that Pearl would hear it and withdraw into her cage, safe and silent. "It was Christmas time," she said, and the

blowers kicked off. Into the silence she said, "I was ten years old, and Jewell gave me a little gold necklace with a pearl on it. She was only fourteen, but she was already working in the house. They had a tree in the music room and there were little lights on it, all different colors, strung on a string. Have you ever seen lights like that, red and green and gold all strung together?"

I thought of the strings of multicolored chemilooms I had seen from the spiraldown, the very first thing I had seen on Paylay. Nobody has told her, I thought, in all this time nobody has told her, and at the thought of the vast cage of kindness built all around her, my hand jerked up and hit the edge of the keyboard. She heard the sound and looked up.

"Is Taber here?" she said, and my hand hovered above the keyboard.

"No, of course not," I said, and my hand settled back in my lap like the spiraldown coming to rest on its moorings. "I'll tell you when he comes."

"The tapper sent my mother a dress with lights on it, too, red and green and gold like the tree," Pearl said. "When he came, he said, 'You look like a Chrissmiss tree,' and kissed her on the cheek. 'What do you want for Chrissmiss?' My mother said. 'I will give you anything.' I can remember her standing there in the lighted dress under the tree." She stopped a minute, and when I looked in the mirror, she had turned her head so that she seemed to be looking straight at Taber. "He asked for me."

"What did he do to you?" I said. V\_)

"I don't remember," she said. Her hands struggled and lay still, and I knew what he had done. He had locked her in, and she had never escaped. He had tied her hands together, and she had never gotten free. I looked down at my own hands, crossed at the wrists like hers and not even struggling.

"Didn't anyone come to help you?" I said.

"The pianoboard player," she said. "He beat the door down. He broke both his hands so he could not play anymore. He made my mother call the doctor. He told her he would kill her if she didn't. When he tried to help me, I ran away from him. I didn't want him to help me. I wanted to die. I ran and ran and ran, but I couldn't see to get away."

"Did he kill the tapper who blinded you?" I said.

"While he was trying to find me, my mother let the tapper out the back door. I ran and ran and then I fell down. The pianoboard player came and held me in his arms until the doctor came. I made him promise to kill the tapper. I made him promise to finish killing me," she said, so softly I could hardly hear her. "But he didn't."

The blowers kicked on again, and I looked into the mirror, but Taber wasn't there. Carnie had let him out the back way.

He did not come back for several shifts. When he did, it was to tell Jewell he was going to Solfatara. He told Pearl he would bring her a present and whispered to me, "What do you want for Christmas, Ruby? You've earned a present."

While he was gone Jack hit another tap, almost on top of the first one, and Jewell locked up the liquor. The men didn't want music. They wanted to talk about putting in a double, even a triple tap. I was grateful for that. I was not sure I could play with my hands tied.

Jewell told me to go meet Taber at the mooring, and then changed her mind. "I'm worried about those sotted fools out at Jick's sidon. Doubletapping. They kidd blow the whole star. You'd bitter stay here and hilp me."

Taber came before the shift. "I'll bring you your present tonight. Pearl," he said. "I know you'll like it. Ruby helped me pick it out." I watched the sudden twitching of Pearl's hands, but my own didn't even move.

Taber waited almost until the end of the shift, spending nearly half of it in the card room with Carnie leaning heavily over his shoulder. She had already gotten her present. Her eyes were bright from the sot-slice, and she stumbled once against him and nearly fell.

"Bring me a cigar, Ruby," he shouted to me. "And look in the inside jacket pocket. I brought a present back for everybody." Pearl was standing all alone in the middle of the music room, her hands in front of her. I didn't look at her. I went straight upstairs to my room, got what I needed, and then went back down into the anteroom to where Taber's tapper jacket was hanging, and got the cigar out of Taber's pocket. His sparker was there, too.

The present was a flat package wrapped in red and green paper, and I took it and the cigar to Taber. He had come into the music room and was sitting in Pearl's chair. Carnie was sitting on his lap with her arm around his neck.

"You didn't bring the sparker, Ruby," Taber said. I wanted for him to tell me to go and get it. "Never mind," he said. "Do you know what day this is?"

"I do," Carnie said softly, and Taber slid his hand up to hold hers where it lay loosely on his shoulder.

"It's Chrissmiss Day," he said, pronouncing it with the Solfatara accent. He took his hand away from Carnie's so he could lean back and puff on his cigar, and Carnie took her red, bruised hand in her other one and held it up to her bosom, her sot-bright eyes full of pain. "I said to myself we should have some Chrissmiss songs. Do you know any Chrissmiss songs. Ruby?"

"No," I said.

"I didn't think you would," Taber said. "So I brought you a present." He waved the cigar at me. "Go ahead. Open it."

I pulled the red and green paper off and took out the hardcopies. There were a dozen Christmas songs. I knew them all.

"Pearl, you'll sing a Chrissmiss song for me, won't you?" Taber said.

"I don't know any," she said. She had not moved from where she stood.

"Of course you do," Taber said. "They played them every Chrissmiss time in the happy houses on Solfatara. Come on. Ruby' 11 play it for you."

I sat down at the pianoboard, and Pearl came and stood beside me with her hand on the end of the keyboard.

I stood the hard copies up against the music rack and put my hands on the keyboard.

"He knows," she said, so softly none of the men could have heard her. "You told him."

“No, it’s a coincidence,” I said. “Maybe it is really Christmas time on Solfatara. Nobody keeps track of the year on Paylay. Maybe it is Christmas.”

“If you told him, if he knows how it happened, I am not safe anymore. He’ll be able to get in. He’ll be able to hurt me.” She took a staggering step away from the piano as if she were going to run. I took hold of her wrist.

“I didn’t tell him,” I said. “I would never let him hurt you. But if you don’t sing the song, he’ll know there’s something wrong. I’ll play the first song through for you.” I let go of her wrist, and her hand went limp and relaxed on the end of the keyboard.

I played the song through and stopped. The version I knew didn’t have an introduction, so I spread the fingers of my right hand across the octave and a half of the opening chord and touched her hand with my left.

She flinched. She did not move her hand away or even make any movement the men, gathered around us now, could have seen. But a tremor went through her hand. I waited a moment, and then I touched her again, with all my fingers, hard, and started the song. She sang the song all the way through, and my hands, which had not been able to come down on a single chord of warning, were light and sure on the keyboard. When it was over, the men called for another, and I put it on the music rack and then sat, as she stood silent and still, unflinching, waiting for what was to come.

Taber looked up inquiringly, casually, and Jewell frowned and half-turned toward the door. Scorch banged through the thick inner door and stopped, trying to get his breath. He still had his lantern strapped to his forehead, and when he bent over trying to catch his breath in gasping hiccoughs, the strip where the hair had been burned off was as red as his face and starting to blister.

“One of the sidons blew, didn’t it?” Jewell said, and her scar slashed black as a fissure across her cheek. “Which one?”

Scorch still couldn’t speak. He nodded with his whole body, bent over double again, and tried to straighten. “It’s Jick,” he said. “He tried to tripletap, and the whole thing went up.”

“Oh, my God,” Sapphire said, and ran into the kitchen.

“How bad is it?” Jewell said.

“Jick’s dead, and there are two burned bad—Paulsen and the tapper that came in with Taber last shift. I don’t know his name. They were right on top of it when it went, putting the compressor on.”

The tappers had been in motion the whole time he spoke, putting on their jackets and going for their shoes. Taber heaved Carnie off his lap and stood up. Sapphire came back from the kitchen dressed in pants and carrying the remedy case. Garnet put her shawl around Scorch’s shoulders and helped him into Pearl’s chair.

Taber said calmly, “Are there any other sidons close?” He looked unconcerned, almost amused, with Carnie leaning limply against him, but his left hand was clenched, the thumb moving up and down as if he were clicking the sparker.

“Mine,” Scorch said. “It didn’t kitch, but the compressor caught fire and Jick’s clothes, and they’re still burning.” He looked up apologetically at Jewell. “I didn’t have nothing to put the fire out with. I dragged the other two up onto my compressor platform so they wouldn’t cook.”

Pearl and I had not moved from the piano. I looked at Taber in the mirror, waiting for him to say,



“I’ll stay here, Jewell. I’ll take care of things here,” but he didn’t. He disengaged himself from Carnie. “I’ll go get the stretchers at the gaming house and meet you back here,” he said.

“Let me get your jacket for you,” I said, but he was already gone.

The tappers banged out the doors, Sapphire with them.

Garnet ran upstairs. Jewell went into the anteroom to put her outside shoes on.

I stood up and went out into the anteroom. “Let me go with you,” I said.

“I want you to stay here and take care of Pearl,” she said. She could not squeeze her bandaged foot into the shoe. She bent down and began unwinding the bandage.

“Garnet can stay. You’ll need help carrying the men back.”

She dropped the bandage onto the floor and jammed her foot into the shoe wincing. “You didn’t know the way. You kidded, got lost and fell into a sidon. You’re safer here.” She tried the other shoe, stood up and jammed her bandaged foot into it, and sat back down to fix the straps.

“I’m not safe anywhere,” I said. “Please don’t leave me here. I’m afraid of what might happen.” “Even if the sidons all go up, the fire won’t get this far.”

“It isn’t those sidons I’m afraid of,” I said harshly. “You let a sidon loose in the house once before and look what happened.”

She straightened up and looked at me, the scar as black and hot as lava against her red face. “A sidon is an animal,” she said. “It can’t help itself.” She stood up gingerly, testing her unbandaged feet. “Taber’s going with me,” she said.

She was not as blind as I had feared, but she still didn’t see. “Don’t you understand?” I said gently. “Even if he goes with you, he’ll still be here.”

“Are you ready, Jewell?” Taber said. He had a lantern strapped to his forehead, and he was carrying a large red and green wrapped bundle.

“I’ve gotta get another lantern from upstairs,” Jewell said. “There’s nothing left but town lanterns,” she said, and went upstairs.

Taber held the package out to me. “You’ll have to give Pearl her Christmas present from me, Ruby,” he said.

“I won’t do it.”

“How do you know?” he said.

I didn’t answer him.

“You were so anxious to get me my jacket when I went next door. Why don’t you get it for me now? Or do you think you won’t do that either?”

I took the coat off the hook, waiting for Jewell to come back downstairs.

“Let’s go,” Jewell said, hardly limping at all as she came down the steps. I took the jacket over to him. He handed the package to me again, and I took it, watching him put the jacket on, waiting for him to pat

the sparker inside the pocket to make sure it was there. Jewell handed him an extra lantern and a bundle of bandages. "Lit's go," she said again. She opened the outside door and went down the wooden steps into the heat.

"Take care of Pearl, Ruby," Taber said, and shut the door.

I went back into the music room. Pearl had not moved. Garnet and Carnie were trying to help Scorch out of the chair and up the stairs, though Carnie could hardly stand. I took his weight from Garnet and picked him up.

"Sit down, Carnie," I said, and she collapsed into the chair, her knees apart and her mouth open, instantly asleep.

I carried Scorch up the stairs to Garnet's room and stood there holding him, bracing his weight against the door while Garnet strung a burn-hammock across her bed for me to lay him in. Me had passed out in the chair, but while I was lowering him into the hammock, he came to. His red face was starting to blister, so that he had trouble speaking. "I shidda put the fire out," he said. "It'll catch the ither sidons. I told Jick it was too close."

"They'll put the fire out," I said. Garnet tested the hammock and nodded to me. I laid him gently in it, and we began the terrible process of peeling his clothes off his skin.

"It was thit new tapper thit came down with Taber this morning. He was sotted. And he had a sparker with him. A sparker. The whole star kidda gone up."

"Don't worry," I said. "It'll be all right." I turned him onto his side and began pulling his shirt free. He smelled like frying meat. He passed out again before we got his shirt off,, and *that made getting the rest of his clothes* off easier. Garnet tied his wrist to the saline hookup and started the antibiotics. She told me *to* go back downstairs. Pearl was still standing by the pianoboard. "Scorch is going to be fine," I said loudly to cover the sound of picking up Taber's package, and I started past her with it to the kitchen. The blowers had kicked on full-blast from the doors opening so much, but I said anyway, "Garnet wants me to get some water for him."

I made it nearly to the door of the card room. Then Carnie heaved herself up in the white chair and said sleepily, "Thit's Pearl's present, isn't it, Ruby?" I stopped under the blowers, standing on the sidon. She sat up straighter, *licking her tongue across her lips*. "Open it, Ruby. I want to see what it is."

Pearl's hands tightened to fists in front of her. "Yes," she said, looking straight at me. "Open it, Ruby."

"No," I said. I walked over to the pianoboard and put the package down on the stool.

"I'll open it then," Carnie said, and lurched out of the chair after it. "You're so mean, Ruby. Poor Pearl kin't open her own Chrissmiss presents, ivver since she got blind." Her voice was starting to slur. I could barely understand what she was saying, and she had to grab at the package twice before she picked it up and staggered back to Pearl's chair with it clutched to her breast. The sots were starting to really take hold now. In a few moments she would be unconscious. "Please," I said without making a sound, praying as Pearl must have prayed in that locked room, ten years old, her hands tied and him coming at her with a razor. "Hurry, hurry." Carnie couldn't get the package open. She tugged feebly at the green ribbon, plucked at the paper without even tearing it, and subsided, closing her eyes. She began to breathe deeply, with her mouth open, slumped far down in the white chair with her arms flung **out** over the arms of the chair.

"I'll take you upstairs, Pearl," I said. "Garnet may need help with Scorch."

“Aft right,” she said, but she didn’t move. *She* stood with her head averted, as if she were listening for something.

“Oh, how pretty!” Carnie said, her voice clear and strong. She was sitting up straight in the chair, her hands on the unopened package. “It’s a dress, Pearl. Isn’t it beautiful, Ruby?”

“Yes,” I said, looking at Carnie, limp again in the chair and snoring softly. “It’s covered with lights, Pearl, green and red and gold, like a Christmas tree.”

The package slipped out of Carnie’s limp hands and onto the floor. The blowers kicked on, and Carnie turned in the chair, pulling her feet up under her and cradling *her head against the chair’s arm*. *She began snoring* again, more loudly.

I said, “Would you like to try it on, Pearl?” and looked over at her, but she was already gone.

It took me nearly an hour to find her, because the town lantern I had strapped to my forehead was so dim I could not see very well. She was lying face down near the mooring.

I unstrapped the lantern and laid it beside her on the ground so I could see her better. The train of her skirt was smoldering. I stamped on it until it crumbled underfoot and then knelt beside her and turned her over.

“Ruby?” she said. Her voice was squeaky from the helium in the air and very hoarse. I could hardly recognize it. She would not be able to recognize mine either. If I told her I was Jewell or Carnie, or Taber, come to murder her, she would not know the difference. “Ruby?” she said. “Is Taber here?”

“No,” I said. “Only the sidon.”

“You’re not a sidon,” she said. Her lips were dry and parched.

“Then what am I?” I moved the town lantern closer. Her face looked flushed, almost as red as Jewell’s.

“You are my good friend the pianoboard player who has come to help me.”

“I didn’t come to help you,” I said, and my eyes filled with tears. “I came to finish killing you. I can’t help it. I’m copying Taber.”

“No,” she said, but it was not a “no” of protest or horror or surprise, but a statement of fact. “You have never copied Taber.”

“He killed Jack,” I said. “He had some poor sotted tapper blow up the sidon so he could have an alibi for your murder. He left me to kill you for him.”

Her hands lay at her sides, palms down on the ground. When I lifted them and laid them across her skirt as she had always held them, crossed at the wrists, she did not flinch, and I thought perhaps she was unconscious.

“Jewell’s feet are much better,” she said, and licked her lips. “You hardly limp at all. And I knew Carnie was on sots before she ever came into the room, by the way you walked. I have listened to you copy all of them, even poor dead Jack. You never copied Taber. Not once.”

I crawled around beside her and she got her head up on my knees. Her hair came loose and fell around her face as I lifted her up, the ends of it curling up in dark frizzes of ash. The narrow fretted soles of my

shoes dug into the backs of my legs like hot irons. She swallowed and said, "He broke the door down and he sent for the doctor and then he went to kill the man, but he was too late. My mother had let him out the back way."

"I know," I said. My tears were falling on her neck and throat. I tried to brush them away, but they had already dried, and her skin felt hot and parched. Her lips were cracked, and she could hardly move them at all when she spoke.

"Then he came back and held me in his arms while we waited for the doctor. Like this. And I said, 'Why didn't you kill him?' and he said, 'I will,' and then I asked him to finish killing me, but he wouldn't. He didn't kill the tapper either, because his hands were broken and all cut up." "My uncle killed him," I said. "That's why we're quarantined. He and Kovich killed him," I said, though Kovich had already been dead by them. "They tied him up and cut out his eyes with a sot-razor," I said. That was why Jewell had let me come to Paylay. She had owed it to my uncle to let me come because he had killed the tapper. And my uncle had sent me to do what? To copy whom?

The lamp was growing much dimmer and the twill paper forehead strap on the lantern was smoldering now, but I didn't try to put it out. I knelt with Pearl's head in my lap on the hot ground, not moving.

"I knew you were copying me almost from the first," she said, "but I didn't tell you, because I thought you would kill Taber for me. Whenever you played for me, I sat and thought about Taber with a sidon tearing out his throat, hoping you would copy the hate I felt. I never saw Taber or a sidon either, but I thought about my mother's lover, and I called him Taber. I'm sorry I did that to you, Ruby."

I brushed her hair back from her forehead and her cheeks. My hand left a sooty mark, like a scar, down the side of her face. "I did kill Taber," I said.

"You reminded me so much or>Kovich when you played," she said. "You sounded-just like him. I thought I was thinking about killing Taber, but I wasn't. I didn't even know what a sidon looks like. I was only thinking about Kovich and waiting for him to come and finish killing me." She was breathing shallowly now and very fast, taking a breath between almost every word. "What do sidons look like, Ruby?"

I tried to remember what Kovich had looked like when he came to find my uncle, his broken hands infected, his face red from the fever that would consume him. "I want you to copy me," he had said to my uncle. "I want you to learn to play the pianoboard from me before I die." I want you to kill a man for me. I want you to cut out his eyes. I want you to do what I can't do.

I could not remember what he looked like except that he had been very tall, almost as tall as my uncle, as me. It seemed to me that he had looked like my uncle, but surely it was the other way around. "I want you to copy me," he had said to my uncle. I want you to do what I can't do. Pearl had asked him to kill the tapper, and he had promised to. Then Pearl had asked him to finish killing her, and he had promised to do that, too, though he could no more have murdered her than he could have played the pianoboard with his ruined hands, though he had not even known how well a Mirror copies, or how blindly. So my uncle had killed the tapper, and I have finished killing Pearl, but it was Kovich, Kovich who did the murders.

"Sidons are very tall," I said, "and they play the pianoboard."

She didn't answer. The twillpaper strap on the lantern burst into flame. I watched it burn.

"It's all right that you didn't kill Taber," she said. "But you mustn't let him put the blame for killing me on you."

“I did kill Taber,” I said. “I gave him the real sparker. I put it in his jacket before he left to go out to the sidons.”

She tried to sit up. “Tell them you were copying him, that you couldn’t help yourself,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard me.

“I will,” I said, looking into the darkness. Over the horizon somewhere is Taber. He is looking this way, wondering if I have killed her yet. Soon he will take out his cigar and put his thumb against the trigger of the sparker, and the sidons will go up one after the other, a string of lights. I wonder if he will have time to know he has been murdered, to wonder who killed him.

I wonder, too, kneeling here with Pearl’s head on my knees. Perhaps I did copy Pearl. Or Jewell, or Kovich, or even Taber. Or all of them. The worst thing is not that things are done to you. It is not knowing who is doing them. Maybe I did not copy anyone, and I am the one who murdered Taber. I hope so.

“You should go back before you get burned,” Pearl says, so softly I can hardly hear her.

“I will,” I say, but I cannot. They have tied me up, they have locked me in, and now I am only waiting for them to come and finish killing me.