

MEDRA

by Tanith Lee

I

At the heart of a deserted and partly ruined city, an old hotel rose up eighty-nine stories into the clear sunset air. The hotel was not necessarily the tallest structure left in the city. It had been a very modern metropolis; many of its buildings were of great height. But it had happened that several of the blocks surrounding the hotel plaza had fallen, for one reason or another. Now the tiered, white architecture, like a colossal wedding cake, was visible from almost any vantage of the city, and from miles away, across the dusty dry plains of the planet beyond, the hotel could be seen.

This planet's sunset took a number of hours, and was quite beautiful. The hotel seemed softened in the filmy, rosy light. Its garlands and sprays of ornamentation, long-blunted by the wind, had over the years become the nesting-places of large climbing lizards. During the hours of sunfall, they would emerge, crawling up and down the stem of the building, past the empty windows behind which lay empty rooms. Their armor blinked gold, their gargoyle faces stared away over the vistas of the city whose tall abandoned blocks flashed goldenly back at them. The big lizards were not foolish enough to mistake these sky-scrapers for anything alive. The only live thing, aside from themselves and occasional white skeletal birds which flew over, lived on the eighty-ninth floor. Sometimes, the lizards saw the live thing moving about inside two layers of glass, and sometimes the throb of machineries, or music, ran down the limb of the hotel, so the stones trembled, and the lizards, clinging, trembled, listening with their fan-like swivelled ears.

Medra lived on the eighty-ninth floor. Through the glass portals she was frequently visible—a young Earth woman, by appearance, with coal-black hair that fell to her waist. She had a classical look, a look of calmness and restraint. Much of the day, and often for long intervals of the night, she would sit or lie perfectly still. She would not seem to move, not the flicker of a finger or quiver of an eyelid. It was just possible, after intense study, to see her breathing.

At such times, which actually occupied her on an average for perhaps twenty-seven hours in every thirty-six-hour diurnal-nocturnal planetary period, Medra—lying motionless—experienced curious mental states. She would, mentally, travel a multiplicity of geographies, physical and non-physical, over mountains, under oceans, even across and among galaxies. Through the flaming peripheries of stars she had passed, and through the cold reaches of a space where the last worlds hung tiny as specks of moisture on the window-panes of her rooms. Endless varieties of creatures came and went on the paths of Medra's cerebral journeys. Creatures of landscape, waterscape, aircscape, and of the gaplands between the suns. Cities and other tumuli evolved and disappeared as simply as the forests and cultivation which ran towards her and away. She had a sense that all these visions concerned and incorporated her. That she wove something into them, from herself, if she did not actually form them, and so was a part of her own weaving, and of them. She threaded them all with love, lacking any fear, and when they drifted behind her she knew a moment's pang of gentle loss. But solely for that moment. It was only when she "woke" that Medra felt a true bereavement.

Her eyes would open. She would look around her. She would presently get up and walk about her apartment, which the hotel mechanisms kept for her scrupulously.

All the rooms were comfortable, and two or three were elegant. A hot-house with stained-glass walls projected from one side of the building. Enormous plants bloomed and fruited. There was a bathroom with a sunken bath of marble, in which it was feasible to swim. The literature and music, the art and theatre of many worlds were plenteously represented. At the touch of a button, food of exquisite quality—in its day, the hotel had been renowned through twenty solar systems—would be served to Medra from out of the depths below.

She herself never went downstairs. Years ago, now and then, she had done so. She had walked the dusty riverbeds of the streets, or, getting into one of the small hover-cars, gone gliding between the walls, past the blank windows, over the bridges—and back again. At night, she had sat eighty-nine floors down on the hotel's decorated porch, sipping coffee or sherbet. The planet's stars were lustrous and thickly scattered. Slaves to their generators, a few lights still quickened in the city when sunset faded. She did not trouble to pretend that any life went on in those distant lighted buildings. Sometimes one of the lizards would steal up to her. They were very cautious, despite their size. She caressed those that came close enough and would allow it. But the lizards did not need her and, "waking," she did not understand them.

In recent years, she stayed at the top of her tower. There was no purpose in leaving her apartment. She accepted this.

But every so often, "waking," opening her eyes, sensing loss, she wept. She was alone and lonely. She felt the pain of it always, although always differently—sharp as a razor, insistent as a needle, dull as a healing bruise. "I'm alone," she said. Looking out from the balconied heights, she saw the lizards moving endlessly up and down. She saw the city and the dust haze far off which marked the plains beyond. The weaving of her dreams was her solace. But not enough.

"Alone," said Medra in a soft, tragic voice. She turned her back to the window.

And so missed a new golden spark that dazzled wildly over the sunset air, and the white feather of vapor which followed it down.

Jaxon landed his shuttle about half a mile from the city's outskirts. He emerged into the long sunset fully armed and, from force of habit, set the vessel's monitors on defensive. There was, almost certainly, nothing to defend against, out here. The planet had been thoroughly scanned by the mother-ship on the way in.

Jaxon began to stroll down to the city. He was an adventurer who would work for hire if the pay was good. What had tempted him to this outcast place, well-removed from the pioneer worlds and trade routes that generally supplied his living, was the connivance of a freelance captain whose ship now hung overhead. They had met in some dive on the rim of Lyra, Jaxon a figure of gold as he always was, but gold somewhat spoiled by the bloody nose and black eye gained at an adjacent fight.

"So thanks for saving my skin. What do you want?" The captain showed him an old star-map and indicated a planet. "Why?" said Jaxon. The captain explained. It was, at that juncture, only a story, but stories sometimes led to facts. It would seem that a century before, a machine of colossal energy had been secreted on this small world. The planetary colony was promptly evacuated on the excuse of unstabilized earthquake activity. A whole city was abandoned. No one went there any more. Out of bounds and off the current maps, the planet had by now been overlooked, forgotten. Only the story of the machine remained, and finally surfaced.

Very well, Jaxon would assume the captain wished that someone (Jaxon) would investigate. What capacity did the hidden machine have? There must be safeguards on it, which were? "It's presumably a

war-machine. That's why it's been dumped. Whoever gets hold of it will be able to call the shots." ("Oh, nice," said Jaxon sarcastically, bleeding in his free drink.) "On the other hand, it may be nothing. But we'd like to follow the rumor up, without sticking our necks out too far."

"So you want to stick my neck out too far instead." The captain detailed the fee. Jaxon thought about it. It was not until he was aboard the ship that he asked again: "You still haven't given me specific answers to my two specific questions. What does this machine do? How's it protected?"

"All right. This is apocryphal, maybe. I heard it's an unraveller." Which was the slang name for something that had been a nightmare for decades, was condemned by all solar and galactic governments, could not, in any case, exist.

Jaxon said, "By which we're talking about a Matter-Displacement-Destructor?"

"Yes. And here's the punchline. Be ready to laugh. The only safeguard on the damn thing is one lone woman in a white hotel."

Legends abounded in space, birthed in bars and backlands, carried like seeds by the crazier shipping, planted in fertile minds, normally born to be nothing. But Jaxon, who had scented something frenetic behind the deal, was ultimately granted the whole truth. The freelance captain was a ruse. The entire run was government based, the mission—to find and destroy that machine, if it existed. Anything else was a cover. A quasi-pirate on a joyride, a notorious adventurer looking for computer treasure—that was all it was to be. If the powers who had hidden the machine learned its fate and made a fuss, the event must fail to become a galactic confrontation. You didn't go to war because you'd been ripped off by a cat-burglar.

"Alternatively, someone may pulverize the cat-burglar."

"Or it may all be nothing. Tall stories. Lies. A storm in a teacup."

"You ever seen a storm in a teacup?" asked Jaxon. "I did, once. A trick some character pulled in a bar one night. It made a hell of a mess of the bar."

As he entered the city, framed between the sky-touching pylons of the bridge Jaxon saw the hotel.

He stood and looked at it, and thought about the idea of one woman guarding there an MDD chaos device that could literally claw the fabric of everything—planets, suns, space itself—apart. If any of it were so, she would have to be a robot, or robo-android. He had a scanner of his own, concealed in the plain gold ring he always wore. This would tell him exactly what she was, if she existed, from a distance of three hundred feet.

One of the hover-cars swam by. Jaxon hailed it and got in. It carried him swiftly towards the eccentric old hotel. At two hundred feet, Jaxon consulted the ring. It told him promptly the woman did indeed exist and, as expected, exactly what she was. Her name had been planet-registered in the past; it was Medra. She was not a robot, an android, or even (present analysis) biologically tampered with. She was a young woman. She had black springing hair, pale amber skin, dark amber eyes. She weighed—"Just wait," said Jaxon. "More important, what about implants?" But there were no implants. The car was now only thirty feet from the building, and rising smoothly as an elevator up the floors, sixty, sixty-nine, seventy—"Check again," said Jaxon. The lizards glared at him with bulging eyes as he passed them, but he had already checked those—there were over two thousand of them dwelling in and on the building. They were saurian, unaggressive, obliquely intelligent, harmless, and non-mechanic. A bird flew over, a couple of hundred feet up. "And check *that*," snapped Jaxon, scowling at the lizards. But it was only a bird.

Seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-nine—And the car stopped.

Jaxon beheld the woman called Medra. She was standing at a window, gazing out at him through a double thickness of glass. Her eyes were glorious, and wide.

Jaxon leaned forward, smiling, and mouthed: *Can I come in?*

He was made of gold. Golden skin, yellow-golden eyes, golden fleece of hair. The semi-uniform he wore was also of a tawny gleaming material. He seemed to blind what looked at him.

Medra retreated from the window and pressed the switch which let up the pressurized bubble over the balcony. The man stepped gracefully from the car to the balustrade and over. The bubble closed down again. Medra thought, should she leave him there, trapped and safe, an interesting specimen? But his presence was too powerful, and besides the inner glass was rather fragile and might be broken. She permitted the pane to rise, and golden Jaxon walked through into her room.

The selection of opening gambits was diverse. He had already decided what would be the most effective.

"Good evening," said Jaxon. "I gather the name by which you know yourself is Medra, M-E-D-R-A. Mine is usually Jaxon, J-A-X-O-N. I have been called other things. Your suite is charming. Is the service still good here? I'll bet it is. And the climate must be pleasant. How do you get on with the lizards?" He moved forward as he spoke. The woman did not back away. She met his eyes and waited. He paused when he was a couple of feet from her. "And the machine," he said, "where is that?"

She said, "Which machine? There are several."

"Now, you know which machine. Not the machine that makes the bed or tosses the salad or puts the music on. Not the city computer that keeps the cars running, or the generators that work the lights in the stores."

"There's nothing else," she said.

"Yes there is. Or why are you here?"

"Why am I—?" She looked at him in astonishment.

All this time the ring was sending its tiny impulses through his skin, his finger joint, messages he had long ago learned to read quickly and imperceptibly. She is not lying. She is shocked by this arrival and so reacting unemotionally; presently emotion will break through. Her pulse ticks at this and this, rising now, faster. But she is not lying. (Brain-handled, then, not to know?) Possibly. Pulse rising, faster, and faster.

"—I'm here," she said, she gave a shaken little laugh, "because I stayed behind. That's all. The planet's core is unstable. We were told to leave. But I elected—to stay here. I was born here, you see. And all my family died here. My father was the architect who designed the hotel. I grew up in the hotel. When the ships lifted off I didn't go with them. There was nowhere else to go to. Nowhere else, no one else . . . How eccentric, to want to remain. But the earthquake activity—it's not so dangerous as they said. A few mild tremors. The hotel is stabilized, although the other buildings sometimes—Only six months ago, one of the blocks across the plaza collapsed—a column of dust going up for half an hour. I'm talking too much," she said. "I haven't seen another human being for—I can't remember—I suppose—ten years?" The last was a question, as if he knew better than she and would tell her. She put her hands over her eyes and began to fall very slowly forwards. Jaxon caught her, and held her as she lay in his arms weeping. (No lies. Valid. Emotional impulse verified: The ring stung and tickled its information through, to him.) It

was also a long time for him, since he had held any woman *this* way. He savored it abstractedly, his thoughts already tracking in other directions, after other deductions. As if in the distance he took pleasure in the warm scent of her, the softness of her dark witch's hair; pleasure in comforting her.

II

There was time, all the time a world could give. For once, no one and nothing urging him to hurry. The only necessity was to be sure. And from the beginning he was sure enough, it was only a matter of proving that sureness, being certain of a certainty. Aside from the miniaturized gadgets he always carried with him, there were his own well-tuned senses. Jaxon knew, inside ten minutes, that there was nothing here remotely resembling the powerful technology of a fabled MDD. In other words, no key to nemesis. The government ship continued to cruise and to scan far overhead, tracking the hollows of the hills, the deep places underground, the planet's natural penthouses and basements. And he, striding through the city, riding through it in the ever-ready little cars, picked up no resonance of anything.

Yet, there was something. Something strange, which did not fit.

Or was that only his excuse for remaining here a fraction longer?

The first evening, as the sunset began at last to dissolve in night, she had said to him, "You're here, I don't know why. I don't understand you at all. But we'll have champagne. We'll open the ballroom." And when he grimaced with amusement she said, "Oh, be kind to us. Be kind to the hotel. It's pining for a guest."

And it was true, the hotel came alive at the touch of switches. It groomed and readied itself and put on a jewelry of lights. In the ballroom, they ate off the fine service, every plate, cup, napkin and knife printed and embossed with the hotel's blazon. They drank from crystal goblets, and danced, on the crystal floor, the lazy sinuous contemporary dances of ten years ago, while music played down on them like a fountain. Sophisticated beyond his self-appointed station, Jaxon was not embarrassed or at a loss with any of this. Medra became a child again, or a very young girl. This had been her physical youth, which was happy, before—before the outsiders had come with their warnings, the death of the city, the going away of the ships and of everything.

But she was not a child. And though in her way she had the innocence of a very young girl, she was still a woman, moving against him when they danced, brushed by sequins from the lights. He was mostly accustomed to another kind of woman, hard, wise, sometimes even intellectual, the casual courtings, makings, and foregone departures amid the liquor-palaces he frequented on-planet, or in the great liners of deep space. This does not mean he had only ever known such women as these. There had been love affairs once or twice—that is, affairs of love. And Medra, her clever mind and her sweetness coming alive through the stimulus of this proximity—he was not immune to any of that. Nor to the obvious fact that, with a sort of primal cunning, she had trusted him, since she could do nothing else.

And for Medra? She fell in love with him the moment she saw him. It was inevitable, and she, recognizing the cliché and the truth which underlay the cliché, and not being a fool, did not deny it.

After the first night, a first date, waited on and worshipped by the reborn glory of the hotel, they parted, went each to an allotted suite of rooms. As Jaxon revelled like a golden shark in the great bathroom, drew forth old brandies and elixirs from cabinets, eventually set up the miniaturized communicator and made contact with the ship, reporting nothing—as all this occurred, Medra lay on her bed, still clothed in her dancing dress, dreaming awake. The waking dream seemed superior to any other dream of stars and oceans and altitudes. The man who had entered her world—her planet, the planet of

her awareness—he was now star, sun, ocean, and high sky-held peak. When she fell asleep, she merely slept, and in her sleep, dreamed of him.

Then the days began, extended warm days. Picnics in the ruins, where the dust made both carpet and parasol. Or lunches in the small number of restaurants which would respond, like the hotel, to a human request. Together, they walked the city, explored its emptied libraries, occasionally finding some taped or crated masterpiece, which in the turmoil of evacuation had been overlooked. In the stores, the mannequins, the solar Cadillacs, had combined to form curious sculptures of mutation.

Jaxon accompanied her everywhere, testing, on the lookout, alert for anything that would indicate the presence of the item he sought, or had come seeking. But the other level of him was totally aware of Medra. She was no longer in the distance. Every day she moved nearer. The search had become a backdrop, a prelude.

Medra wandered through the abandoned city, refinding it. She was full of pity and nostalgia. She had come to realize she would be going away. Although nothing had been said, she knew that when he left he would take her with him.

The nights were warm, but with a cooler, more fragrant warmth. The lizards came into the lighted plaza before the hotel, staring, their ears raised and opened like odd flowers. They fed from Medra's hands, not because they needed to, but because they recognized her, and she offered them food. It was almost a tradition between them. They enjoyed, but did not require the adventure. Jaxon they avoided.

Medra and Jaxon patrolled the nighttime city. (A beacon, the hotel glowed from many vantages.) In other high places, the soft wind blowing between them and the star-encrusted dark, he would put his arm around her and she would lean on him. He told her something of his life. He told her things that generally he entrusted to no one. Black things. Things he accepted in himself but took no pride in. He was testing her again, seeing now how she would respond to these facts; she did not dismiss them, she did not grow horrified and shut them out. She was coming to understand him after all, through love. He knew she loved him. It was not a matter of indifference to him. It crossed his mind he would not leave her here when he left the planet. In some other place, less rarified than this one, they would be far better able, each of them, to judge what was between them.

In the end, one night, travelling together in the elevator up towards the top floors of the hotel, Jaxon told her this: "The business I had here is settled. I'm leaving tomorrow."

Although she knew he would not go without her, even so she thought in this instant that of course he would go without her.

"I shall turn out all the lights," she said simply. "As your ship takes you away, you'll see a shadow spread across the city."

"You can watch that too," he said. "There's plenty of room in a shuttle for both of us. Unless you want to bring any of those damn lizards along."

The ritual completed, they moved together, not any more to comfort, or to dance. Not as a test. He kissed her, and she returned his kiss.

They reached the eighty-ninth floor, and went into her apartment. On the bed where she had slept, and wandered among galaxies, slept and dreamed of him, they made love. About the bright whirlwind of this act, the city stood still as a stopped clock. The hotel was just a pillar of fire, with fiery gargoyles hotly frozen on its sides, and one solitary nova burning on the eighty-ninth floor.

III

A couple of hours before sunrise, Jaxon left his lover, Medra, sleeping. He returned to his rooms on the seventy-fourth floor and operated the communicator. He gave details to the mother-ship of his time of return. He told the government officer who manned the intercom that there would be a passenger on the shuttle. The officer was open-faced and noncommittal of tone, not discouraging. "She's the last of the colony," said Jaxon, reasonably, insidiously threatening. There would be no trouble over it. The story of the MDD had been run to ground and could be exploded. Spirits would be high, and Jaxon in favor. Maybe rich, for a short while. She would like that, the harmony money would produce for her, not the raw essentials of cash. . . .

Having switched off and dismantled the communicator into its compact travelling form, Jaxon lay back on his bed. He thought about the woman fifteen stories above him, five minutes away. He thought about her as noncommittally and easily as the young man on the ship's bridge. But nevertheless, or perhaps sequentially, a wave of desire came in on him. Jaxon was about to leave the bed and go back to her, when he heard the door open and a whisper of silk. Medra had come to him.

She walked towards him slowly. Her face was very serious and composed. In the dimness of the one low lamp he had kept alight, her black hair gathered up the shadows and draped her with them. She was, no less than he, like a figure from a myth. No less than he. More so than he. And then he saw—with a start of adrenalin that brought him to his feet—that the one low lamp was shining *through* her.

"What," he said, putting his hand to the small gun by the bed—uselessly—"is going on? A real ghost, or just an inefficient hologram? Where are you really, Medra? If you *are* Medra."

"Yes," she said. The voice was exactly hers, the same voice which, a handful of hours ago, had answered his in passion and insistence. "I'm Medra. Truly Medra. Not a hologram. I must approximate. Will you countenance an astral projection—the subconscious, free of the body?"

"Oh, fine. And the body? Let's not forget that. I'm rather fond of your body, Medra. Where is it?"

"Upstairs. Asleep. Very deeply asleep. A form of ultra-sleep it's well used to."

"If you're playing some game, why not tell me the rules?"

"Yes, I know how dangerous you are. *I* know, better than I do, that is, my physical self. I'm sorry," the translucent image of Medra said to him, most politely. "It can only be done this way. Please listen. You'll find that you do grasp everything I say to you. On some level, you've known all the time. The inner mind is always stronger and more resilient than the thinking process we have, desperately, termed the brain."

He sat down on the bed again. He allowed her to go on. At some point, he let the gun slide from his hand.

Afterwards, for the brief while that he remembered, he seemed to have heard everything in her voice, a conversation or dialogue. It was not improbable that she had hypnotized him in some manner, an aid to his acceptance.

She understood (*she*, this essence of Medra), why he had come to the planet, and the nature of the machine he had been pursuing. The legend of an MDD was merely that. Such a device did not, anywhere, exist. However, the story had its roots in a fact far more ambivalent and interesting. The enormous structure of the universe, like any vast tapestry, rubbed and used and much plundered, had come with the centuries to contain particular areas of weakness. In such spots, the warp and woof began

to fray, to come apart—*fundamentally*. Rather than a mechanical destruction which could be caused to engender calamity, the macrocosm itself, wearing thin, created calamity spontaneously. Of course, this giving way of atoms was a threat both local and, in the long term, all-encompassing. A running tear in such a fabric—there could be only one solution. That every rent be mended, and thereafter monitored, watchfully held together; for eternity, if need be. Or at least until the last sentient life of the physical universe was done with it.

"You must picture then," she said, "guardians. Those who will remain at their posts for all time, as time is known to us. Guardians who, by a vast mathematical and esoteric weaving, constantly repair and strengthen the tissue of cosmic life. No, they are not computers. What upholds a living thing must itself be *alive*. We are of many galactic races. We guard many gates. This planet is one such gate, and I am one such guardian."

"You're a woman, an Earth woman," he recalled saying.

"Yes. I was born here, in the Terran colony, the daughter of an architect who designed one of the most glamorous hotels in twenty systems. When they came—those who search out the guardians are also sentient creatures, of course—they discovered that my brain, my intellectual processes, were suitable for this task. So they trained me. Here is one more reality: Extended to its full range, the mind of a human being is greater, more complex, capable of more astounding feats, than any mechanism mankind has or will ever design. *I* am the computer you searched for, Jaxon. Not a force of chaos, but a blueprint for renewal and safety. For this reason I remained, for this reason I always must remain. Those who were evacuated were given a memory, a whole table of excellent reasons for leaving. You, also, will be given a reason. I will give it to you. There'll be no regrets. Despite all the joy you've brought me."

"I didn't arrive here alone," he said. "The sky up there is full of suspicious characters who may not believe—"

"Yes. They'll believe whatever you tell them. I've seen to it they will."

"Good God. So what are you? A human machine, the slave of some—"

"No slave. In the beginning I was offered a choice. I chose—this. But also to forget, as you will forget."

"You're still a woman, not—"

"Both. And yes, in her forgetfulness, sometimes the woman despairs and is bitterly sad. 'Awake,' she doesn't know what she is. Only 'sleeping,' she knows. Always to know, to know when 'awake,' carries implications of power I don't trust myself with. Occasional sadness is better."

"Perhaps I don't accept any of this."

"Yes," she said. "All of it. As always happens. Dear love, you're not the first to alleviate my physical loneliness. When the time is right, I call and I'm answered. Who do you think drew you here?"

He swore. She laughed.

She said, "Don't be appalled. This episode is full of charm and amusement. Thank you again, so very much. Good-bye."

And she was gone. Into the air. The opening of the door, the whisper of material, they had been reassurances, and a ploy. He told himself he had been tricked. His nerves rioted with an impression of traps and subterfuge, but then these instincts quietened and the sullen protests ceased. It must be as she

had said, on some level he did know and had accepted. There had been a joke once, God's a woman—

He fell asleep, sitting on the bed.

Jaxon drove the shuttle up into the pure air of sunrise, then beyond the sunrise into the inky night of space. He left it all behind him, the planet, the city, the hotel, and the woman. He felt bad about leaving her, but he had foreseen the pit before his feet. Living as she had, she would be a little mad, and certainly more than a little dependent. There was no room in his life for that; he would not be able to deal with it. Her fey quality had delighted him, but it was no grounds for perpetuity. Eventually she would have clung and he would have sloughed her in anger. It might have been expressive anger at that, beyond a cruel word, a cruel blow, and the hospitals were makeshift in the areas he most frequented. She wasn't for him, and it was better to finish on a note of pathos than in that kind of mess. Ships came by, she had told him. Someone else would rescue her, or not.

"Which woman?" he said to the captain of the mother-ship. "Fine. She didn't want to leave after all. Come on, you got what you wanted, I did your work for you. Now elaborate on the fee."

He had left her sleeping. Her hair had spread across the pillows, black breakers and rivulets of hair. Eyes like dark red amber closed by two petals of lids. He thought of the facades of empty buildings, the glitter of meaningless lights, the lizards who did not talk to her. He thought of the hot-house of colored glass. He had a memory of strange wild dreams she had mentioned to him, which took the place of life. She was a difficult woman, not a woman to be lived with, and if loved, only for a little while. *I am half sick of shadows*, she said to him now, in his mind's ear. But that was a line from some antique poem of Earth, wasn't it? Somehow he didn't believe the phantom words. Those shadows were very real for Medra.

In the deserted, partly ruined city, on the eighty-ninth floor of the white hotel, Medra wept.

She wept with a terrible hurt, with despair, in her anguish of loss. And with shame. For she had trusted and moved forward openly, without camouflage, and the blow had crashed against her, breaking her, crippling her—as it seemed to her—forever. She had been misled. Everything had contrived to mislead her. His smile, his words, gestures of politeness and lust, meaning nothing. Even her planet had deceived her. The way in which the sunlight fell on particular objects, the way music sounded. The leaves that towered in the hot-house had misled her with their scent. And she, she was guilty too. Hope is a punishable offense. The verdict is always death; one more death of the heart.

Medra wept.

Later she wandered her rooms. And she considered, with a practical regard, the means to her absolute death. There were medicines which would ensure a civilized exit. Or cruder implements. She could even die in agony, if she wished, as if to curse with her pain's savageness the one who had betrayed her.

But all violent measures require energy, and she felt herself drained. Her body, a bell, rang with misery. After a prolonged stasis of insomnia, there was no other refuge but sleep.

Medra slept.

She slept, and so . . . she *slept*. Down, down, deeper and deeper, further and further. The chains of her physical needs, her pulses, sighs, hormones, were left behind as the golden shards of the city had been left behind, and as she herself had been left, by one she had decided to love. Then her brain, fully

cognizant, trained, motivated, keyed to vast concepts and extraordinary parallels, then her *brain* woke up.

Medra moved outwards now, like a sky-flying bird, her wings bearing her strongly. Into the vistas, into the sheens and shades, murmurs and orchestrations. She travelled through a multiplicity of geographies, over mountains, under oceans, galaxies—

Through the periphery of suns she passed, the cold reaches of space. She wove the tapestry and was the tapestry. The pictures filled her with happiness. The universe was her lover. Here, then, in the mystery, the weaver heard some far-off echo, diminishing. She thought, It must stay between the glass. She saw herself, part of a pattern, and elsewhere, random, her life. She said to it, kindly, You are my solace, but you are not enough. The stars flowed by her, and her brain fashioned their fires and was fashioned by them. She thought: But this—*this* is enough.