

Michael Swanwick

## THE BLIND MINOTAUR

One of the most popular and respected of all the new writers who entered the field in the eighties, Michael Swanwick made his debut in 1980 with two strong and compelling stories, "The Feast of St. Janis" and "Ginungagap," both of which were Nebula Award finalists that year, and which were both selected either for a Best of the Year anthology or for that year's annual Nebula Awards volume— as auspicious a debut as anyone has ever made.

He stayed in the public eye, and on major award ballots, throughout the rest of the eighties with intense and powerful stories such as "Mummer Kiss," "The Man Who Met Picasso," "Trojan Horse," "Dogfight" (written with William Gibson), "Covenant of Souls," "The Dragon Line," "Snow Angels," "A Midwinter's Tale," and many others— all of which earned him a reputation as one of the most powerful and consistently inventive short-story writers of his generation. Nor has his output of short fiction slackened noticeably in the nineties, in spite of a burgeoning career as a novelist, and recent years have seen the appearance of major Swanwick stories such as "The Edge of the World," "The Changeling's Tale," "Griffin's Egg," "Cold Iron," and "The Dead," which was on the final Hugo ballot in 1997 and is on the Nebula final ballot as I type these words in 1998; he remains one of SF's most prolific writers at short lengths, writing and selling seven or eight new stories in 1997 alone, for instance. By the end of the nineties, his short work had won him several Asimov's Reader's Awards, a Sturgeon Award, and the World Fantasy Award (for his bizarre and powerful after-death fantasy "Radio Waves").

At first, his reputation as a novelist lagged behind his reputation as a short-story writer, with his first novel, *In the Drift*— published in 1985 as part of Terry Carr's resurrected Ace Specials line, along with first novels by William Gibson, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Lucius Shepard— largely ignored by critics, and panned by some of them. His second novel, though, the critically acclaimed *Vacuum Flowers*, caused a stir, and his third and perhaps best-known novel, *Stations of the Tide*, established him firmly among the vanguard of the hot novelists of the nineties; *Stations of the Tide* won him a Nebula Award in 1991. His next novel, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, a finalist for both the World Fantasy Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award (a unique distinction!), explored new literary territory on the ambiguous borderland of science fiction and fantasy, and has been hailed by some critics as the first example of an as yet still nascent subgenre called "Hard Fantasy" (sort of a mix between the Dickensian sensibilities of "steampunk," high-tech science fiction, and traditional Tolkienesque fantasy). His most recent novel, *Jack Faust*, a sly reworking of the Faust legend that explores the unexpected impact of technology on society, blurs genre boundaries even more, and has garnered rave reviews from nearly every source from *The Washington Post* to *Interzone*.

Swanwick is a chameleonic writer, difficult to pin down as belonging firmly to one aesthetic camp or another. He writes everything from hard-science to Tolkienesque fantasy, but puts his own unique spin on everything he writes. During the eighties, during the Cyberpunk Wars, most critics included him in the cyberpunk camp, although the cyberpunks themselves never really seemed to accept him as One of Them, in spite of his famous collaboration with Gibson on "Dogfight," and in spite of the fact that *Vacuum Flowers* is usually listed as part of the cyberpunk canon by outside critics who are not themselves cyberpunks— and indeed, whatever it was that he was doing that made him appear to some to be writing cyberpunk, he was doing it on his own in stories such as "Ginungagap"— published in 1980— before the cyberpunks themselves were publishing much that looked like cyberpunk, certainly long before the publication of Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1985. So it was a matter of convergent evolution rather than influence, I think, as far as Swanwick's relationship to cyberpunk is concerned. Similarly, Swanwick is now widely accepted as having written one of the two main "Post-Cyberpunk" works with *Stations of the Tide* (the other is Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*)— but if you go back and look at

works such as "Ginnungagap," you can see that he was writing stuff that resembles "post-cyberpunk" then, before the Cyberpunk Revolution had even really gotten underway. So pinning him down to one of these categories is rather like trying to catch fog in a net.

This is not to say that there are no influences on his work. I think that recognizable traces of the influence of the work of writers such as Jack Vance, Cordwainer Smith, Brian W. Aldiss, Philip K. Dick, Howard Waldrop, Walter M. Miller, Jr., and Roger Zelazny can be seen in Swanwick's work, and perhaps even the influence of John Varley, although Varley started publishing only a few years before Swanwick himself did (influences turn over fast in the science fiction field!). Another big influence on Swanwick, as on Sterling, was clearly the early work of Samuel R. Delany; this is especially clear with the evocative story that follows, "The Blind Minotaur," which rings with strong echoes of Delany's work, particularly *The Einstein Intersection*— although, as always, Swanwick has changed the melody line and the orchestration and the fingering to make the material uniquely his own.

Although Swanwick's last few novels seem to be taking him away from science fiction (and perhaps even away from conventional genre fantasy toward that vaguely defined territory that might be described as "American Magic Realism," or perhaps "Postmodernism"), I don't think he will ever entirely abandon the field (at least some of his short fiction remains solidly centered here, and, in fact, falls under the heading of "hard science"), and it will be interesting to see what he produces the next time he returns to it at novel length. Like Sterling, Swanwick is also still a young writer by any reasonable definition, and I have a feeling he will be one of the factors shaping the evolution of SF well into the next century.

Swanwick's other books include the novella-length *Griffin's Egg*, one of the most brilliant and compelling of modern-day Moon-colony stories. His short fiction has been assembled in *Gravity's Angels* and in a collection of his collaborative short work with other writers, *Slow Dancing Through Time*. His most recent books are a collection of critical articles, *The Postmodern Archipelago*, and a new collection, *A Geography of Unknown Lands*. Swanwick lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter, and their son, Sean.

It was late afternoon when the blinded Minotaur was led through the waterfront. He cried openly, without shame, lost in his helplessness.

The sun cast shadows as crisp and black as an obsidian knife. Fisherfolk looked up from their nets or down from the masts of their boats, mild sympathy in their eyes. But not pity; memory of the Wars was too fresh for that. They were mortals and not subject to his tragedy.

Longshoremen stepped aside, fell silent at the passing of this shaggy bull-headed man. Offworld tourists stared down from their restaurant balconies at the serenely grave little girl who led him by the hand.

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His sight stolen away, a new universe of sound, scent, and touch crashed about the Minotaur. It threatened to swallow him up, to drown him in its complexity.

There was the sea, always the sea, its endless crash and whisper on the beach, and quicker irregular slap at the docks. The sting of salt on his tongue. His callused feet fell clumsily on slick cobblestones, and one staggered briefly into a shallow puddle, muddy at its bottom, heated piss-warm by the sun.

He smelled creosoted pilings, exhaust fumes from the great shuttles bellowing skyward from the Starport, a horse sweating as it clipclopped by, pulling a groaning cart that reeked of the day's catch. From a nearby garage, there was the snap and ozone crackle of an arc-welding rig. Fishmongers' cries and the creaking of pitch-stained tackle overlaid rattling silverware from the terrace cafés, and fan-vented air rich with stews and squid and grease. And, of course, the flowers the little girl— was she really his

daughter?— held crushed to her body with one arm. And the feel of her small hand in his, now going slightly slippery with sweat, but still cool, yes, and innocent.

This was not the replacement world spoken of and promised to the blind. It was chaotic and bewildering, rich and contradictory in detail. The universe had grown huge and infinitely complex with the dying of the light, and had made him small and helpless in the process.

The girl led him away from the sea, to the shabby buildings near the city's hot center. They passed through an alleyway between crumbling sheetbrick walls— he felt their roughness graze lightly against his flanks— and through a small yard ripe with fermenting garbage. The Minotaur stumbled down three wooden steps and into a room that smelled of sad, ancient paint. The floor was slightly gritty underfoot.

She walked him around the room. "This was built by expatriate Centaurimen," she explained. "So it's laid out around the kitchen in the center, my space to this side"— she let go of him briefly, rattled a vase, adding her flowers to those he could smell as already present, took his hand again—"and yours to this side."

He let himself be sat down on a pile of blankets, buried his head in his arms while she puttered about, raising a wall, laying out a mat for him under the window. "We'll get you some cleaner bedding in the morning, okay?" she said. He did not answer. She touched a cheek with her tiny hand, moved away.

"Wait," he said. She turned, he could hear her. "What— what is your name?"

"Yarrow," she said.

He nodded, curled about himself.

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By the time evening had taken the edge off the day, the Minotaur was cried out. He stirred himself enough to strip off his loincloth and pull a sheet over himself, and tried to sleep.

Through the open window the night city was coming to life. The Minotaur shifted as his sharp ears picked up drunken laughter, the calls of streetwalkers, the wail of jazz saxophone from a folk club, and music of a more contemporary nature, hot and sinful.

His cock moved softly against one thigh, and he tossed and turned, kicking off the crisp sheet (it was linen, and it had to be white), agonized, remembering similar nights when he was whole.

The city called to him to come out and prowl, to seek out women who were heavy and slatternly in the tavernas, cool and crisp in white, gazing out from the balconies of their husbands' casavillas. But the power was gone from him. He was no longer that creature that, strong and confident, had quested into the night. He twisted and turned in the warm summer air.

One hand moved down his body, closed about his cock. The other joined it. Squeezing tight his useless eyes, he conjured up women who had opened to him, coral-pink and warm, as beautiful as orchids. Tears rolled down his shaggy cheeks.

He came with great snorts and grunts.

Later he dreamed of being in a cool white casavilla by the sea, salt breeze wafting in through open windowspaces. He knelt at the edge of a bed and wonderingly lifted the sheet— it billowed slightly as he did— from his sleeping lover. Crouching before her naked body, his face was gentle as he marveled at her beauty.

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It was strange to wake to darkness. For a time he was not even certain he was awake. And this was a problem, this unsureness, that would haunt him for all his life. Today, though, it was comforting to think it all a dream, and he wrapped the uncertainty around himself like a cloak.

The Minotaur found a crank recessed into the floor, and lowered the wall. He groped his way to the kitchen, and sat by the cookfire.

"You jerked off three times last night," Yarrow said. "I could hear you." He imagined that her small eyes were staring at him accusingly. But apparently not, for she took something from the fire, set it before him, and innocently asked, "When are you going to get your eyes replaced?"

The Minotaur felt around for the platedough, and broke off a bit from the edge. "Immortals don't heal," he mumbled. He dipped the fragment into the paste she ladled onto the dough's center, stirred it about, let the bread drop. "New eyes would be rejected, didn't your mother tell you that?"

She chose not to answer. "While you were asleep, a newshawk came snooping around with that damned machine grafted to his shoulder. I told him he had the wrong place." Then, harshly, urgently, "Why won't they just leave you alone?"

"I'm an immortal," he said. "I'm not supposed to be left alone." Her mother really should have explained all this, if she was really what she claimed to be. Perhaps she wasn't; he would have sworn he had never bedded another of his kind, had in fact scrupulously avoided doing so. It was part of the plan of evasion that had served him well for so many years, and yet ended with his best friend dying in the sand at his feet.

Yarrow put some fragment of foodstuff in his hand, and he automatically placed it in his mouth. It was gummy and tasteless, and took forever to disappear. She was silent until he swallowed, and then asked, "Am I going to die?"

"What kind of question is that?" he asked angrily.

"Well, I just thought— my mother said that I was an immortal like her, and I thought ... Isn't an immortal supposed to be someone who never dies?"

He opened his mouth to tell her that her mother should be hung up by her hair— and in that instant the day became inarguably, inalterably real. He wanted to cling to the possibility that it was all a dream for just a while longer, but it was gone. Wearily, he said, "Yarrow, I want you to go get me a robe. And a stick"— he raised a hand above his head—"so high. Got that?"

"Yes, but—"

"Go!"

A glimmering of his old presence must have still clung to him, for the child obeyed. The Minotaur leaned back, and— involuntarily— was flooded with memories.

\* \* \*

He was young, less than a year released from the crèche by gracious permission of the ministries of the Lords. The Wars were less than a year away, but the Lords had no way of knowing that— the cabarets were full, and the starlanes swollen with the fruits of a thousand remarkable harvests. There had never been such a rich or peaceful time.

The Minotaur was drunk, and at the end of his nightly round of bars. He had wound up in a taverna where the patrons removed their shirts to dance and sweet-smelling sweat glistened on their chests. The music was fast and heavy and sensual. Women eyed him as he entered, but could not politely approach him, for he still wore his blouse.

He bellied up to the bar, and ordered a jarful of the local beer. The barkeep frowned when he did not volunteer money, but that was his right as an immortal.

Crouched on their ledge above the bar, the musicians were playing hot and furious. The Minotaur paid them no attention. Nor did he notice the Harlequin, limbs long and impossibly thin, among them, nor how the Harlequin's eyes followed his every move.

The Minotaur was entranced by the variety of women in the crowd, the differences in their movements. He had been told that one could judge how well a woman made love by how well she danced, but it seemed to him, watching, that there must be a thousand styles of making love, and he would be hard put to choose among them, were the choice his.

One woman with flashing brown feet stared at him, ignoring her partner. She wore a bright red skirt that flew up to her knees when she whirled around, and her nipples were hard and black. He smiled in friendly cognizance of her glance, and her answering grin was a razor-crisp flash of teeth that took his breath away, a predatory look that said: You're mine tonight.

Laughing, the Minotaur flung his shirt into the air. He plunged into the dancers and stooped at the woman's feet. In a rush he lifted her into the air, away from her partner, one hand closing about her ankles, the other supporting her by the small of her back. She gasped, and laughed, and balanced herself, so that he could remove one hand and lift her still higher, poised with one foot on the palm of his great hairy hand.

"I am strong!" he shouted. The crowd— even the woman's abandoned partner— cheered and stamped their feet. The Harlequin stepped up the band. The woman lifted her skirts and kicked her free leg high, so that one toe grazed the ceiling beams. She threw her head back and laughed.

The dancers swirled about them. For a single pure moment, life was bright and full and good. And then ...

A touch of cool air passed through the crowd. A chance movement, a subtle shifting of colors, brought the Minotaur's eyes around to the door. A flash of artificial streetlight dazzled and was gone as the door swung shut.

The Woman entered.

She was masked in silver filigree, and her breasts were covered. Red silk washed from shoulder to ankle, now caressing a thigh, now releasing it. Her eyes were a drenched, saturated green. She walked with a sure and sensual authority, knowing the dancers would part for her. No one could mistake her for a mortal.

The Minotaur was stunned. Chemical and hormonal balances shifted in preparation for the bonding to come. Nerveless, his arms fell to his sides. With an angry squawk, the woman he had hoisted into the air leapt, arms waving, to avoid falling. The Minotaur did not notice. He stepped forward, eyes wide and helpless, toward the immortal.

The silver mask headed straight for him. Green eyes mocked, challenged, promised.

Behind him, unnoticed, the Harlequin slipped to the floor. He wrapped long fingers lovingly around a

length of granite pipe, and brought it down, fast and surprisingly forcefully, into the back of the Minotaur's neck.

Bright shards of light flashed before the Minotaur's eyes. The dance floor washed out and faded to white. He fell.

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At the Minotaur's direction, Yarrow led him out to the bluffs on the outskirts of the city. There was a plaza there, overlooking the ocean. He sent the child away.

Though his every bone protested, he slowly crouched, and then carefully spread out a small white cloth before him. He was a beggar now.

Salt breezes gusted up from the ocean, and he could feel the cobalt sky above, and the cool cumulus clouds that raced across the sun. There were few passersby, mostly dirt farmers who were not likely to be generous. Perhaps once an hour a small ceramic coin fell on his cloth.

But that was how he preferred it. He had no interest in money, was a beggar only because his being demanded a role to play. He had come to remember, and to prepare himself for death by saying farewell to the things of life.

Times had changed. There was a stone altar set in the center of this very plaza where children had been sacrificed. He had seen it himself, the young ones taken from their homes or schooling-places by random selection of the cruel Lords. They had shrieked like stuck pigs when the gold-masked priests raised their bronze knives to the noonday sun. The crowds were always large at these events. The Minotaur was never able to determine whether the parents were present or not.

This was only one of the means the Lords had of reminding their subjects that to be human was often painful or tragic.

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"Let's not sleep the day away, eh? Time to start rehearsing."

The Minotaur awoke to find himself sprawled on the wooden floor of a small caravan. The Harlequin, sitting cross-legged beside him, thrust a jar of wine into his hand.

Groggily, the Minotaur focused his eyes on the Harlequin. He reached for the man's neck, only to find one hand taken up by the winejar. He squinted at it. The day was already hot, and his throat as dry as the Severna. His body trembled from the aftereffects of its raging hormonal storm. He lifted the wine to his lips.

Chemical imbalances shifted, found a new equilibrium.

"Bravo!" The Harlequin hauled the Minotaur to his feet, clapped him on the back. "We'll be famous friends, you and I. With luck, we may even keep each other alive, eh?"

It was a new idea to the Minotaur, and a disquieting, perhaps even blasphemous, one. But he grinned shyly, and dipped his head. He liked the little fellow. "Sure," he said.

\* \* \*

The sun was setting. The Minotaur felt the coolness coming off of the sea, heard the people scurrying to

their homes. He carefully tied the ceramics into his cloth, and knotted it onto his belt. He stood, leaning wearily on his staff. Yarrow had not yet come for him, and he was glad; he hoped she had gone off on her own, forgotten him, left him behind forever. But the city's rhythms demanded that he leave, though he had nowhere to go, and he obeyed.

He went down into the city, taking the turns by random whim. He could not be said to be lost, for one place was as good as another to him.

It was by mistake, though, that he found himself in a building whose doors were never shut, whose windows were not shuttered. He had entered, thinking the way yet another alley. No doors barred progress down halls or into rooms. Still, he felt closed in. The corridors smelled— there was the male stench and the female, and intermingled with them, almost overpowering, an insect smell, the odor of something large and larval.

He stopped. Things stirred about him. There was the pat of bare feet on stone, the slow breathing of many people, and— again— a sluggish movement of creatures larger than anything smelling thus should be. People were gathering; twelve, eighteen, more. They surrounded him. He could tell they were all naked, for there was not the whisper of cloth on cloth. Some walked as if they had almost forgotten how. In the distance, he thought he could hear someone crawling.

"Who are you?" Panic touched him lightly; sourceless, pure.

"Whrrarrwr," began one of the people. He stopped, swallowed, tried again. "Why are you in the Hive?" His voice sounded forced, as if he were unused to speech. "Why are you here? You are a creature of the old days, of the Lords. This is no place for you."

"I took a wrong turn," the Minotaur said simply. Then, when there was no reply, "Who are you people? Why do you cohabit with insects?"

Someone coughed and sputtered and made hacking noises. A second joined her, making the same sounds, and then others, and yet more. With a start, the Minotaur realized they were laughing at him. "Is it religious or political?" he demanded. "Are you seeking transcendence?"

"We are trying to become victims," the speaker said. "Does that help you understand?" He was growing angry. "How can we explain ourselves to you, Old Fossil? You never performed a free act in your life."

Some whim, then, of internal chemistry made him want these strangers, these creatures, to understand him. It was the same compulsion that had forced him to empty himself to the newshawks before Yarrow appeared to lead him out of the arena.

"I had a friend, another immortal," the Minotaur said. "Together, we cheated the patterning instinct by making our own pattern, a safe, strong one, we were like"— his short, powerful fingers joined, closing around the staff, intermeshing—"like this, you see. And it worked, it worked for years. It was only when our predators worked within the patterns we formed that we were destroyed." The words gushed out, and he trembled as the hormones that might give him the power to explain almost keyed in.

But the communards did not want to understand. They closed in on him, their laughter growing sharper, with more of a bark, more of a bite to it. Their feeble footsteps paltered closer, and behind them the chitinous whine grew louder, was joined by that of more insects, and more, until all the world seemed to buzz. The Minotaur flinched back.

And then they seemed to hesitate in confusion. They milled about uncertainly for a moment, then parted, and quick, small footsteps passed through them, ran to his side. A cool, smooth hand took his.

"Come home with me," Yarrow said. And he followed.

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He dreamed of the arena that night, of the hot white sands underfoot that drank up his friend's blood. The Harlequin's body lay limp at his feet, and the bronze knife was as heavy as guilt in his hands.

It was as if his eyes had opened, as if he were seeing clearly for the first time. He stared around the encircling bleachers, and every detail burned into his brain.

The people were graceful and well-dressed; they might almost have been the old Lords, deposed these many years ago in violent public revulsion. The Woman sat ringside. Her silver mask rested lightly on the lip of the white limestone wall, beside a small bowl of orange ices. She held a spoon in her hand, cocked lightly upward.

The Minotaur stared into her blazing green eyes, and read in them a fierce triumph, an obscene gloating, a very specific and direct lust. She had hunted him out of hiding, stripped him of his protection, and chivvied him into the open. She had forced him to rise to his destiny. To enter the arena.

Try though he might, the Minotaur could not awaken. If he had not known all this to be a dream, he would have gone mad.

\* \* \*

Waking, he found himself already dressed, the last bit of breakfast in his hand. He dropped it, unnerved by this transition. Yarrow was cleaning the kitchen walls, singing an almost tuneless made-up song under her breath.

"Why aren't you out being taught?" he demanded, trying to cover over his unease with words. She stopped singing. "Well? Answer me!"

"I'm learning from you," she said quietly.

"Learning what?" She did not answer. "Learning how to tend to a cripple? Or maybe how a beggar lives? Hey? What could you possibly learn from me?"

She flung a wet cloth to the floor. "You won't tell me anything," she cried. "I ask you and you won't tell me."

"Go home to your mother," he said.

"I can't." She was crying now. "She told me to take care of you. She said not to come back until my task was done."

The Minotaur bowed his head. Whatever else she might or might not be, the mother had the casual arrogance of an immortal. Even he could be surprised by it.

"Why won't you tell me anything?"

"Go and fetch me my stick."

\* \* \*

Bleak plains dominated the southern continent, and the Minotaur came to know them well. The carnival worked the long route, the four-year circuit of small towns running up the coast and then inland to the



fringes of the Severna Desert.

Creeping across the plains, the carnival was small, never more than eight hands of wagons and often fewer. But when the paper lanterns had been lit, the fairway laid out, the holographic-woven canvases blazing neon-bright, they created a fantasy city that stretched to the edge of forever.

The Minotaur grunted. Muscles glistening, he bent the metal bar across his chest. Portions of the audience were breathing heavily.

It was the last performance of the evening. Outside the hot, crowded tent, the fairgoers were thinning, growing quieter. The Minotaur was clad only in a stained white loincloth. He liked to have room to sweat.

Applause. He threw the bar to the stage and shouted: "My last stunt! I'll need five volunteers!" He chose the four heaviest, and the one who blushed most prettily. Her he helped up on the stage, and set in the middle of the lifting bench, a pair of hefty bouergers to either side.

The Minotaur slid his head under the bench. His face emerged between the young woman's legs, and she shrieked and drew them up on the bench. The audience howled. He rolled his eyes, flared his nostrils. And indeed, she did have a pleasant scent.

He dug into the stage with naked toes, placed his hands carefully. With a grunt, the Minotaur lifted the bench a handsbreadth off the floor. It wobbled slightly, and he shifted his weight in compensation. A surge— he was crouching.

Sweat poured down the Minotaur's face, and ran in rivulets from his armpits. The tent was saturated with the sweet smell, redolent with his pheromones. He felt a light touch on his muzzle. The woman on the bench had reached down to caress his nose with quick, shy fingertips. The Minotaur quirked a half-grin on one side of his mouth.

By the tent flap, the Harlequin lounged on a wooden crate, cleaning his toenails with a knife. They had a date with a sculptor in town after the show.

\* \* \*

The Minotaur awoke suddenly, reached out and touched the cloth laid out before him. There was nothing on it, though he distinctly remembered having heard ceramics fall earlier. He swept his hands in great arcs in the dust, finding nothing.

Snickers and derisive jeers sounded from the stone in the plaza's center. Small feet scurried away— children running to deliver the swag to their masters. "Little snots," the Minotaur grumbled. They were an ever-present nuisance, like sparrows. He fell back into his daydreaming.

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The sculptor had had stone jugs of wine sent up. By orgy's end they were empty, and the women lay languid on the sheets of their couches. They all stared upward, watching the bright explosions in space, like slow-blossoming flowers. "What do they hope to accomplish, these rebels?" the Minotaur asked wonderingly. "I can see no pattern to their destruction."

"Why should a man like you— a real man— look any higher than his waist?" the sculptor asked coarsely. He laid a hand on the Minotaur's knee. His lady of the moment laughed throatily, reached back over her head to caress his beard.

"I'd just like to know."

The Harlequin had been perched on the wall. He leapt down now, and tossed the Minotaur his clothes. "Time we went home," he said.

The streets were dark and still, but there were people in the shadows, silently watching the skies. The sidestreet cabarets were uncharacteristically crowded. They stopped in several on their way back to the carnival.

The Minotaur was never sure at exactly what point they picked up the woman with skin the color of orange brick. She was from offworld, she said, and needed a place to hide. Her hands were callused and beautiful from work. The Minotaur liked her strong, simple dignity.

Back at the carnival, the Harlequin offered their wagon, and the woman refused. The Minotaur said that he would sleep on the ground, it didn't bother him, and she changed her mind.

Still, he was not surprised when, sometime later, she joined him under the wagon.

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The sun hot on his forehead, the Minotaur again dreamed of the arena. He did not relive the murder—that memory had been driven from his mind, irretrievably burned away, even in dream. But he remembered the killing rage that drove the knife upward, the insane fury that propelled his hand. And afterward he stood staring into the Woman's eyes.

Her eyes were as green as oceans, and as complex, but easy to read for all that. The lusts and rages, and fears and evil, grasping desire that had brought them all to this point—they were all there, and they were ... insignificant. For the true poisoned knowledge was that she was lost in her own chemical-hormonal storm, her body trembling almost imperceptibly, all-but-invisible flecks of foam on her lips. She had run not only him, but herself as well, to the blind end of a tangled and malignant fate. She was as much a puppet as he or the Harlequin.

There, on the burning sands, he tore out his eyes.

\* \* \*

The newshawks vaulted the fence to get at him. His drama completed, he was fair game. They probed, scanned, recorded—prodded to find the least significant detail of a story that might be told over campfires a thousand years hence, in theatrical productions on worlds not yet discovered, in uninvented media, or possibly merely remembered in times of stress. Trying to get in on a story that might have meaning to the human race as it grew away from its homeworld, forgot its origins, expanded and evolved and changed in ways that could not be predicted or prepared for.

They questioned the Minotaur for hot grueling hours. The corpse of his friend began to rot, or perhaps that was only olfactory hallucination, a side effect of his mind telling his body that it had no further purpose. He felt dizzy and without hope, and he could not express his grief, could not cry, could not scream or rage or refuse their questions or even move away until they were done with him.

And then a cool hand slipped into his, and tugged him away. A small voice said, "Come home, Papa," and he went.

\* \* \*

Yarrow was screaming. The Minotaur awoke suddenly, on his feet and slashing his stick before him,

back and forth in pure undirected reaction. "Yarrow?" he cried.

"No!" the child shrieked in anger and panic. Someone slapped her face so hard she fell. The sound echoed from the building walls. "Fuckpigs!" she swore from the ground.

The Minotaur lurched toward her, and someone tripped him up, so that he crashed onto the road. He heard a rib crack. He felt a trickle of blood from one nostril. And he heard laughter, the laughter of madwomen. And under that he heard the creaking of leather harness, the whirring of tiny pumps, the metal snicks of complex machinery.

There was no name for them, these madwomen, though their vice was not rare. They pumped themselves full of the hormone drugs that had once been the exclusive tools of the Lords, but they used them randomly, to no purpose. Perhaps—the Minotaur could not imagine, did not care—they enjoyed the jolts of power and importance, of sheer godlike caprice.

He was on his feet. The insane ones—there were three, he could tell by their sick laughter—ignored him. "What are you doing?" he cried. "Why are you doing it?" They were dancing, arms linked, about the huddled child. She was breathing shallowly, like a hypnotized animal.

"Why?" asked the one. "Why do you ask why?" and convulsed in giggles.

"We are all frogs!" laughed the second.

Yarrow lay quietly now, intimidated not so much by the women's hyperadrenal strength as by the pattern of victim laid out for her. There were microtraces of hormones in the air, leaks from the chemical pumps.

"She has interesting glands," said the third. "We can put their secretions to good use."

The Minotaur roared and rushed forward. They yanked the stick from his hand and broke it over his head. He fell against the altar stone, hard, nearly stunning himself.

"We need to use that stone," said a madwoman. And when he did not move away, said, "Well, we'll wait."

But again the Minotaur forced himself to stand. He stepped atop the stone. Something profound was happening deep within him, something beyond his understanding. Chemical keys were locking into place, hormones shifting into balance. Out of nowhere his head was filled with eloquence.

"Citizens!" he cried. He could hear the people at their windows, in their doorways, watching and listening, though with no great interest. They had not interfered to save Yarrow. The Lords would have interfered, and human society was still in reaction to the rule of the Lords. "Awake! Your freedom is being stolen from you!"

A lizard, startled, ran over the Minotaur's foot, as quick and soft as a shiver. The words poured from him in a cold fever, and he could hear the householders straighten, lean forward, step hesitantly out onto the cobblestones. "No one is above you now," he shouted. "But I still see the dead hands of the Lords on your shoulders."

That got to them—he could smell their anger. His throat was dry, but he dared not spare the time to cough. His head was light, and a cool breeze stirred his curls. He spoke, but did not listen to the words.

Yarrow was lost, somewhere on the plaza. As he spoke, the Minotaur listened for her, sniffed the air, felt for vibrations through the stone—and could not find her. "Inaction is a greater tyrant than error ever was!" he cried, listening to heads nodding agreement with the old familiar homily. He could hear the

frantic hopping motions the madwomen made, forward and back again, baffled and half-fascinated by the hormones he was generating, by the cadences and odd rhythms of his words.

The speech was a compulsion, and the Minotaur paid it no more mind than he did to the sliding of muscles under skin that went into his gestures, some wide and sweeping, others short and blunt. A whiff of girlish scent finally located Yarrow, not two arm's lengths away, but he could not go to her. The words would not release him, not until he had spoken them all.

And when, finally, he lowered his arms, the plaza was filled with people, and the madwomen's harnesses had been ripped from them, the drug pumps smashed underfoot, their necks snapped quickly and without malice.

He turned to Yarrow, offered his hand. "Come," he said. "It's time to go home."

\* \* \*

The Minotaur lay belly-down on the earth under the wagon. He stared down his muzzle at a slice of early-morning sky framed by two wheel spokes. The clouds of energy were still slowly dissipating. "I'd love to go out there," he said. "To see other worlds."

The orange-skinned woman scratched him above the ears, at the base of his small ivory horns. Her hands were strong and sure. "They couldn't refuse you passage. What's stopping you?"

He nodded upward. "He gets sick—I'd have to go alone."

A triceratops beetle crept laboriously past his nose. He exhaled sharply, trying to turn it over, failed. "You two are inseparable, aren't you?" the woman asked.

The beetle was getting away. He snorted sharply again, twice. "I guess."

"Won't he be upset that I chose you over him?"

It took the Minotaur a moment to puzzle out her meaning. "Ah! You mean—I see. Good joke, very good joke!" He laughed without taking his eyes away from the beetle, watched it escape into the grass. "No, the Harlequin doesn't know that women are important."

\* \* \*

It did not take long to gather belongings: the Minotaur had none and Yarrow few. "You can find your mother?" he asked her. They left the door open behind them, an old Centaurimen custom at final partings.

"I can always find my mother," Yarrow said.

"Good." Still, he did not let her go. He led her by the hand back along the waterfront. There, among the sounds and smells, the subliminal tastes and touches that had grown familiar to him, he leaned forward to kiss her tenderly on the cheeks and forehead.

"Good-bye," he said. "I am proud that you are my daughter."

Yarrow did not move away. There was a slight tremble in her voice when she spoke. "You still haven't told me anything."

"Ah," the Minotaur said. For a moment he was silent, mentally cataloging what she would need to know. The history of the Lords, to begin with. Their rise to power, how they had shaped and orchestrated the human psyche, and why they thought the human race had to be held back. She needed to know of the

crèches, of their bioprogramming chemicals, and of those immortals released from them who had gone on to become legend. She needed to know everything about the immortals, in fact, for the race had been all but exterminated in the Wars. And how the Lords had endured as long as they had. How their enemies had turned their toys against them. All the history of the Wars. It would not be a short telling.

"Sit down," he commanded. There, in the center of the thoroughfare, he sat, and Yarrow followed.

The Minotaur opened his mouth to speak. At the sound of his words, resonant and deep, people would stop to listen for the briefest second ... for just a moment longer ... they would sit down in the road. The hormonal combinations that enforced strictest truth before the newshawks were to be in his voice, but combined with the strong eloquence of earlier in the day. He would speak plainly, with a fine parsimony of syllables. He would speak in strict accord with the ancient oratorical traditions. He would speak with tongues of fire.

The waterfront would fill and then overflow as people entered and did not leave, as they joined the widening circle of hushed listeners, as the fisherfolk came up from their boats and down from their masts, the boy prostitutes came out from the brothels, the offworld tourista joined with the kitchen help to lean over the edges of their terraces.

In future years this same telling, fined down and refined, elaborated and simplified, would become the epic that was to mark this age— his age— as great for its genesis. But what was to come in just a moment was only a first draft. A prototype. A seed. But it was to be beautiful and moving beyond all possible imagining of its listeners, for it was new, an absolutely new word, a clear new understanding. It was to sum up an age that most people did not realize was over.

"Listen," said the Minotaur.

He spoke.