

THE GLASS FLOWER

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Once, when I was just a girl in the first flush of my true youth, a young boy gave me a glass flower as a token of his love.

He was a rare and precious boy, though I confess that I have long forgotten his name. So too was the flower he gave me. On the steel and plastic worlds where I have spent my lives, the ancient glassblower's art is lost and forgotten, but the unknown artisan who had fashioned my flower remembered it well. My flower has a long and delicate stem, curved and graceful, all of fine thin glass, and from that frail support the bloom explodes, as large as my fist, impossibly exact. Every detail is there, caught, frozen in crystal for eternity; petals large and small crowding each other, bursting from the center of the blossom in a slow transparent riot, surrounded by a crown of six wide drooping leaves, each with its tracery of veins intact, each unique. It was as if an alchemist had been wandering through a garden one day, and in a moment of idle play had transmuted an especially large and beautiful flower into glass.

All that it lacks is life.

I kept that flower with me for near two hundred years, long after I had left the boy who gave it to me and the world where he had done the giving. Through all the varied chapters of my lives, the glass flower was always close at hand. It amused me to keep it in a vase of polished wood, and set it near a window. Sometimes the leaves and petals would catch the sun and flash brilliantly for an incandescent instant; at other times they would filter and fracture the light, scattering blurred rainbows on my floor. Often towards dusk, when the world was dimmer, the flower would seem to fade entirely from view, and I might sit staring at an empty vase. Yet, when the morning came, the flower would be back again. It never failed me.

The glass flower was terribly fragile, but no harm ever came to it. I cared for it well; better, perhaps, than I have ever cared for anything, or anyone. It outlasted a dozen lovers, more than a dozen professions, and more worlds and friends than I can name. It was with me in my youth on Ash and Erikan and Shamdizar, and later on Rogue's Hope and Vagabond, and still later when I had grown old on Dam Tullian and Lilith and Gulliver. And when I finally left human space entirely, put all my lives and all the worlds of men behind me, and grew young again, the glass flower was still at my side.

And, at very long last, in my castle built on stilts, in my house of pain and rebirth where the game of mind is played, amid the swamps and stinks of Croan'dhenni, far from all humanity save those few lost souls who seek us out—it was there too, my glass flower. On the day Kleronomas arrived.

* * * *

"Joachim Kleronomas," I said.

"Yes."

There are cyborgs and then there are cyborgs. So many worlds, so many different cultures, so many sets of values and levels of technologies. Some cyberjacks are half organic, some more, some less; some

sport only a single metal hand, the rest of their cyberhalves cleverly concealed beneath the flesh. Some cyborgs wear synthaflesh that is indistinguishable from human skin, though that is no great feat, given the variety of skin to be seen among the thousand worlds. Some hide the metal and flaunt the flesh; with others the reverse is true.

The man who called himself Kleronomas had no flesh to hide or flaunt. A cyborg he called himself, and a cyborg he was in the legends that had grown up around his name, but as he stood before me, he seemed more a robot, insufficiently organic to pass even as android.

He was naked, if a thing of metal and plastic can be naked. His chest was jet; some shining black alloy or smooth plastic, I could not tell. His arms and legs were transparent plasteel. Beneath that false skin, I could see the dark metal of his duralloy bones, the power-bars and flexors that were muscles and tendons, the micromotors and sensing computers, the intricate pattern of lights racing up and down his superconductive neurosystem. His fingers were steel. On his right hand, long silver claws sprang rakishly from his knuckles when he made a fist.

He was looking at me. His eyes were crystalline lenses set in metal sockets, moving back and forth in some green translucent gel. They had no visible pupils; behind each implacable crimson iris burned a dim light that gave his stare an ominous red glow. "Am I that fascinating?" he asked me. His voice was surprisingly natural; deep and resonant, with no metallic echoes to corrode the humanity of his inflections.

"Kleronomas," I said. "Your name is fascinating, certainly. A very long time ago, there was another man of that name, a cyborg, a legend. You know that, of course. He of the Kleronomas Survey. The founder of the Academy of Human Knowledge on Avalon. Your ancestor? Perhaps metal runs in your family."

"No," said the cyborg. "Myself. I am Joachim Kleronomas."

I smiled for him. "And I'm Jesus Christ. Would you care to meet my Apostles?"

"You doubt me, Wisdom?"

"Kleronomas died on Avalon a thousand years ago."

"No," he said. "He stands before you now."

"Cyborg," I said, "this is Croan'dhenni. You would not have come here unless you sought rebirth, unless you sought to win new life in the game of mind. So be warned. In the game of mind, your lies will be stripped away from you. Your flesh and your metal and your illusions, we will take them all, and in the end there will be only you, more naked and alone than you can ever imagine. So do not waste my time. It is the most precious thing I have, time. It is the most precious thing any of us have. Who are you, cyborg?"

"Kleronomas," he said. Was there a mocking note in his voice? I could not tell. His face was not built for smiling. "Do you have a name?" he asked me.

"Several," I said.

"Which do you use?"

"My players call me Wisdom."

"That is a title, not a name," he said.

I smiled. "You are traveled, then. Like the real Kleronomas. Good. My birth name was Cyrain. I suppose, of all my names, I am most used to that one. I wore it for the first fifty years of my life, until I came to Dam Tullian and studied to be a Wisdom and took a new name with the title."

"Cyrain," he repeated. "That alone?"

"Yes."

"On what world were you born, then?"

"Ash."

Cyrain of Ash, he said. "How old are you?"

"In standard years?"

"Of course."

I shrugged. "Close to two hundred. I've lost count."

"You look like a child, like a girl close to puberty, no more."

"I am older than my body," I said.

"As am I," he said. "The curse of the cyborg, Wisdom, is that parts can be replaced."

"Then you're immortal?" I challenged him.

"In one crude sense, yes."

"Interesting," I said. "Contradictory. You come here to me, to Croan'dhenni and its Artifact, to the game of mind. Why? This is a place where the dying come, cyborg, in hopes of winning life. We don't get many immortals."

"I seek a different prize," the cyborg said.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Death," he told me. "Life. Death. Life."

"Two different things," I said. "Opposites. Enemies."

"No," said the cyborg. "They are the same."

* * * *

Six hundred standard years ago, a creature known in legend as The White landed among the Croan'dhenni in the first starship they had ever seen. If the descriptions in Croan'dhic folklore can be trusted, then The White was of no race I have ever encountered, nor heard of, though I am widely traveled. This does not surprise me. The manrealm and its thousand worlds (perhaps there are twice that number, perhaps less, but who can keep count?), the scattered empires of Fyndii and Damoosh and g'vhern and N'or Talush, and all the other sentients who are known to us or rumored of, all this together, all those lands and stars and lives colored by passion and blood and history, sprawling proudly across the light-years, across the black gulfs that only the *volcryn* ever truly know, all of this, all of our little universe ... it is only an island of light surrounded by a vastly greater area of greyness and that fades ultimately into the black of ignorance. And *this* only in one small galaxy, whose uttermost reaches we shall never know,

should we endure a billion years. Ultimately, the sheer size of things will defeat us, however we may strive or scream; that truth I am sure of.

But I do not defeat easily. That is my pride, my last and only pride; it is not much to face the darkness with, but it is something. When the end comes, I will meet it raging.

The White was like me in that. It was a frog from a pond beyond ours, a place lost in the grey where our little lights have not yet shone on the dark waters. Whatever sort of creature it might have been, whatever burdens of history and evolution it carried in its genes, it was nonetheless my kin. Both of us were angry mayflies, moving restlessly from star to star because we, alone among our fellows, knew how short our day. Both of us found a destiny of sorts in these swamps of Croan'dhenni.

The White came utterly alone to this place, set down its little starship (I have seen the remains: a toy, that ship, a trinket, but with lines that are utterly alien to me, and deliciously chilling), and, exploring, found something.

Something older than itself, and stranger.

The Artifact.

Whatever strange instruments it had, whatever secret alien knowledge it possessed, whatever instinct bid it enter; all lost now, and none of it matters. The White knew, knew something the native sentients had never guessed, knew the purpose of the Artifact, knew how it might be activated. For the first time in a thousand years? A million? For the first time in a long while, the game of mind was played. And The White changed, emerged from the Artifact as something else, as the first. The first mindlord. The first master of life and death. The first painlord. The first lifelord. The titles are born, worn, discarded, forgotten, and none of them matter.

Whatever I am, The White was the first.

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Had the cyborg asked to meet my Apostles, I would not have disappointed him. I gathered them when he left me. "The new player," I told them, "calls himself Kleronomas. I want to know who he is, what he is, and what he hopes to gain. Find out for me."

I could feel their greed and fear. The Apostles are a useful tool, but loyalty is not for them. I have gathered to me twelve Judas Iscariots, each of them hungry for that kiss.

"I'll have a full scan worked up," suggested Doctor Lyman, pale weak eyes considering me, flatterer's smile trembling.

"Will he consent to an interface?" asked Deish Green-9, my own cyberjack. His right hand, sunburned red-black flesh, was balled into a fist; his left was a silver ball that cracked open to exude a nest of writhing metallic tendrils. Beneath his heavy beetling brow, where he should have had eyes, a seamless strip of mirrorglass was set into his skull. He had chromed his teeth. His smile was very bright.

"We'll find out," I said.

Sebastian Gayle floated in his tank, a twisted embryo with a massive monstrous head, flippers moving vaguely, huge blind eyes regarding me through turgid greenish fluids as bubbles rose all around his pale naked flesh. *He is a Liar* came the whisper in my head. *I will find the truth for you, Wisdom.*

"Good," I told him.

Tr'k'nn'r, my Fyndii mindmute, sang to me in a high shrill voice at the edge of human hearing. He loomed above them all like a stickman in a child's crude drawing, a stickman three meters tall, excessively jointed, bending in all the wrong places at all the wrong angles, assembled of old bones turned grey as ash by some ancient fire. But the crystalline eyes beneath his brow ridge were fervid as he sang, and fragrant black fluids ran from the bottom of his lipless vertical mouth. His song was of pain and screaming and nerves set afire, of secrets revealed, of truth dragged steaming and raw from all its hidden crevasses.

"No," I said to him. "He is a cyborg. If he feels pain it is only because he wills it. He would shut down his receptors and turn you off, loneling, and your song would turn to silence."

The neurowhore Shayalla Loethen smiled with resignation. "Then there's nothing for me to work on either, Wisdom?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "He has no obvious genitalia, but if there's anything organic left inside him, his pleasure centers might be intact. He claims to have been male. The instincts might still be viable. Find out."

She nodded. Her body was soft and white as snow, and sometimes as cold, when she wanted cold, and sometimes white hot, when that was her desire. Those lips that curled upwards now with anticipation were crimson and alive. The garments that swirled around her changed shape and color even as I watched, and sparks began to play along her fingertips, arcing across her long, painted nails.

"Drugs?" asked Braje, biomed, gengineer, poisoner. She sat thinking, chewing some tranq of her own devising, her swollen body as damp and soft as the swamps outside. "Truetell? Agonine? Esperon?"

"I doubt it," I said.

"Disease," she offered. "Manthrax or gangrene. The slow plague, and we've got the cure?" She giggled.

"No," I said curtly.

And the rest, and on and on. They all had their suggestions, their ways of finding out things I wanted to know, of making themselves useful to me, of earning my gratitude. Such are my Apostles. I listened to them, let myself be carried along by the babble of voices, weighed, considered, handed out orders, and finally I sent them all away, all but one.

Khar Dorian will be the one to kiss me when that day finally comes. I do not have to be a Wisdom to know that truth.

The rest of them want something of me. When they get it, they will be gone. Khar got his desire long ago, and still he comes back and back and back, to my world and my bed. It is not love of me that brings him back, nor the beauty of the young body I wear, nor anything as simple as the riches he earns. He has grander things in mind.

"He rode with you," I said. "All the way from Lilith. Who is he?"

"A player," Dorian said, grinning at me crookedly, taunting me. He is breathtakingly beautiful. Lean and hard and well fit, with the arrogance and rough-hewn masculine sexuality of a thirty-year-old, flush with health and power and hormones. His hair is blond and long and unkempt. His jaw is clean and strong, his nose straight and unbroken, his eyes a hale, vibrant blue. But there is something old living behind those eyes, something old and cynical and sinister.

"Dorian," I warned him, "don't try games with me. He is more than just a player. Who is he?"

Khar Dorian got up, stretched lazily, yawned, grinned. "Who he says he is, my slaver told me. Kleronomas."

* * * *

Morality is a closely knit garment that binds tightly when it binds at all, but the vastnesses that lie between the stars are prone to unraveling it, to plucking it apart into so many loose threads, each brightly colored, but forming no discernible pattern. The fashionable Vagabonder is a rustic spectacular on Cathaday, the Ymirian swelters on Vess, the Vessman freezes on Ymir, and the shifting lights the Fellanei wear instead of cloth provoke rape, riot, and murder on half a dozen worlds. So it is with morals. Good is no more constant than the cut of a lapel; the decision to take a sentient life weighs no more heavily than the decision to bare one's breasts, or hide them.

There are worlds on which I am a monster. I stopped caring a long time ago. I came to Croan'dhenni with my own fashion sense, and no concern for the aesthetic judgments of others.

Khar Dorian calls himself a slaver, and points out to me that we do, indeed, deal in human flesh. He can call himself what he likes. I am no slaver; the charge offends me. A slaver sells his clients into bondage and servitude, deprives them of freedom, mobility, and time, all precious commodities. I do no such thing. I am only a thief. Khar and his underlings bring them to me from the swollen cities of Lilith, from the harsh mountains and cold wastes of Dam Tullian, from the rotting tenements along the canals of Vess, from spaceport bars on Fellanora and Cymeranth and Shrike, from wherever he can find them, he takes them and brings them to me, and I steal from them and set them free.

A lot of them refuse to go.

They cluster outside my castle walls in the city they have built, toss gifts to me as I pass, call out my name, beg favors of me. I have left them freedom, mobility, and time, and they squander it all in futility, hoping to win back the one thing I have stolen.

I steal their bodies, but they lose their souls themselves.

And perhaps I am unduly harsh to call myself a thief. These victims Khar brings me are unwilling players in the game of mind, but no less players for all that. Others pay so very dearly and risk so very much for the same privilege. Some we call players and some we call prizes, but when the pain comes and the game of mind begins, we are all the same, all naked and alone without riches or health or status, armed with only the strength that lies within us. Win or lose, live or die, it is up to us and us alone.

I give them a chance. A few have even won. Very few, true, but how many thieves give their victims any chance at all?

The Steel Angels, whose worlds lie far from Croan'dhenni on the other side of human space, teach their children that strength is the only virtue and weakness the only sin, and preach that the truth of their faith is written large on the universe itself. It is a difficult point to argue. By their creed, I have every moral right to the bodies I take, because I am stronger and therefore better and more holy than those born to that flesh.

The little girl born in my present body was not a Steel Angel, unfortunately.

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"And baby makes three," I said, "even if baby is made of metal and plastic and names himself a legend."

"Eh?" Rannar looked at me blankly. He is not as widely traveled as me, and the reference, something

I have dredged up from my forgotten youth on some world he's never walked, escapes him entirely. His long, sour face wore a look of patient bafflement.

"We have three players now," I told him carefully. "We can play the game of mind."

That much Rannar understood. "Ah yes, of course. I'll see to it at once, Wisdom."

Craimur Delhune was the first. An ancient thing, almost as old as me, though he had done all of his living in the same small body. No wonder it was worn out. He was hairless and shriveled, a wheezing half-blind travesty, his flesh full of alloplas and metal implants that labored day and night just to keep him alive. It was not something they could do much longer, but Craimur Delhune had not had enough living yet, and so he had come to Croan'dhenni to pay for the flesh and begin all over again. He had been waiting nearly half a standard year.

Rieseën Jay was a stranger case. She was under fifty and in decent health, though her flesh bore its own scars. Rieseën was jaded. She had sampled every pleasure Lilith offered, and Lilith offers a good many pleasures. She had tasted every food, flowed with every drug, sexed with males, females, aliens, and animals, risked her life skiing the glaciers, baiting pit-dragons, fighting in the soar-wars for the delectation of holofans everywhere. She thought a new body would be just the thing to add spice to life. Maybe a male body, she thought, or an alien's offcolor flesh. We get a few like her.

And Joachim Kleronomas made three.

In the game of mind, there are seats for seven. Three players, three prizes, and me.

Rannar offered me a thick portfolio, full of photographs and reports on the prizes newly arrived on Khar Dorian's ships, on the *Bright Phoenix* and the *Second Chance* and the *New Deal* and the *Fleshpot* (Khar has always had a certain black sense of humor). The major-domo hovered at my elbow, solicitous and helpful, as I turned the pages and made my selections. "She's delicious," he said once, at a picture of a slim Vessgirl with frightened yellow eyes that hinted at a hybrid gene-mix. "Very strong and healthy, that one," he said later, as I considered a hugely muscled youth with green eyes and waist-long braided black hair. I ignored him. I always ignore him.

"Him," I said, taking out the file of a boy as slender as a stiletto, his ruddy skin covered with tattoos. Khar had purchased him from the authorities on Shrike, where he'd been convicted of killing another sixteen-year-old. On most worlds Khar Dorian, the infamous free trader, smuggler, raider, and slaver, had a name synonymous with evil; parents threatened their children with him. On Shrike he was a solid citizen who did the community great service by buying up the garbage in the prisons.

"Her," I said, setting aside a second photograph, of a pudgy young woman of about thirty standard whose wide green eyes betrayed a certain vacancy. From Cymeranth, her file said. Khar had dropped one of his raiders into a coldsleep facility for the mentally damaged and helped himself to some young, healthy, attractive bodies. This one was soft and fat, but that would change once an active mind wore the flesh again. The original owner had sucked up too much dreamdust.

"And it," I said. The third file was that of a g'vhern hatchling, a grim-looking individual with fierce magenta eye-crests and huge, leathery batwings that glistened with iridescent oils. It was for Rieseën Jay, who thought she might like to try a nonhuman body. If she could win it.

"Very good, Wisdom," said Rannar approvingly. He was always approving. When he had come to Croan'dhenni, his body was grotesque; he'd been caught in bed with the daughter of his employer, a V'lador knight of the blood, and the punishment was extensive ritual mutilation. He did not have the price of a game. But I'd had two players waiting for almost a year, one of whom was dying of manthrax, so

when Rannar offered me ten years of faithful service to make up the difference, I accepted.

Sometimes I had my regrets. I could feel his eyes on my body, could sense his mind stripping away the soft armor of my clothes to fasten, leechlike, on my small, budding breasts. The girl he'd been found with was not much younger than the flesh I now wore.

* * * *

My castle is built of obsidian.

North of here, far north, in the smoky polar wastelands where eternal fires burn against a purple sky, the black volcanic glass lies upon the ground like common stone. It took thousands of Croan'dhic miners nine standard years to find enough for my purposes and drag it all back to the swamps, over all those barren kilometers. It took hundreds of artisans another six to cut and polish it and fit it all together into the dark shimmering mosaic that is my home. I judged the effort worthwhile.

My castle stands on four great jagged pillars high up above the smells and damp of the Croan'dhic swampland, ablaze with colored lights whose ghosts glimmer within the black glass. My castle gleams; a thing of beauty, austere and forbidding, supreme and apart from the shantytown that has grown up around it, where the losers and discards and dispossessed huddle hopelessly in floating reed-huts, festering treehouses, and hovels on half-rotted wooden stilts. The obsidian appeals to my aesthetic sense, and I find its symbolism appropriate to this house of pain and rebirth. Life is born in the heat of sexual passion as obsidian is born in volcanic fire. The clean truth of light can sometimes flow through its blackness, beauty seen dimly through darkness, and like life, it is terribly fragile, with edges that can be dangerously sharp.

Inside my castle are rooms on rooms, some paneled over with fragrant native woods and covered with furs and thick carpets, some left bare and black ceremonial chambers where dark reflections move through glass walls and footsteps click brittle against glass floors. In the center, at the very apex, rises an onion-shaped obsidian tower, braced by steel. Within the dome, a single chamber.

I ordered the castle built, replacing an older and much shabbier structure, and to that single tower chamber, I caused the Artifact to be moved.

It is there that the game of mind is played.

My own suite is at the base of the tower. The reasons for that were symbolic as well. None achieve rebirth without first passing through me.

* * * *

I was breaking fast in bed, on butterfruit and raw fish and strong black coffee, with Khar Dorian stretched out languid and insolent beside me, when my scholar Apostle, Alta-k-Nahr, came to me with her report.

She stood at the foot of my bed, her back twisted like a great question mark by her disease, her long features permanently set in a grimace of distaste, her skin shot through with swollen veins like great blue worms, and she told me of her researches on the historical Kleronomas in a voice unnecessarily soft.

"His full name was Joachim Charle Kleronomas," she said, and he was native to New Alexandria, a first-generation colony less than seventy light-years from Old Earth. Records of his birthdate, childhood, and adolescence are fragmentary and contradictory. The most popular legends indicate his mother was a high-ranking officer on a warship of the 13th Human Fleet, under Stephen Cobalt Northstar, and that Kleronomas met her only twice. He was gestated in a hireling host-mother and reared by his father, a minor scholar at a library on New Alexandria. My opinion is that this tale of his origin explains, a bit too

neatly, how Kleronomas came to combine both the scholastic and martial traditions; therefore I question its reliability.

"More certain is the fact that he joined the military at a very early age, in those last days of the Thousand Years War. He served initially as systems tech on a screamer-class raider with the 17th Human Fleet, distinguished himself in deepspace actions off El Dorado and Arturius and in the raids on Hrag Druun, after which he was promoted to cadet and given command training. By the time the 17th was shifted from its original base on Fenris to a minor sector capital called Avalon, Kleronomas had earned further distinction, and was the third-in-command of the dropship *Hannibal*. But in the raids on Hruun-Fourteen, the *Hannibal* took heavy damage from Hrangan defenders, and was finally abandoned. The screamer in which Kleronomas escaped was disabled by enemy fire and crashed planetside, killing everyone aboard. He was the sole survivor. Another screamer picked up what was left of him, but he was so near dead and horribly maimed that they shoved him into cryostorage at once. He was taken back to Avalon, but resources were few and demands many, and they had no time to bother reviving him. They kept him under for years.

"Meanwhile, the Collapse was in progress. It had been in progress all of his lifetime, actually, but communications across the width of the old Federal Empire were so slow that no one knew it. But a single decade saw the revolt on Thor, the total disintegration of the 15th Human Fleet, and Old Earth's attempt to remove Stephen Cobalt Northstar from command of the 13th, which led inevitably to the secession of Newholme and most of the other first-generation colonies, to Northstar's obliteration of Wellington, to civil war, breakaway colonies, lost worlds, the fourth great expansion, the hellfleet legend, and ultimately the sealing of Old Earth and the effective cessation of commercial starflight for a generation. Longer than that, far far longer, on some more remote worlds, many of which devolved to near-savagery or developed odd variant cultures.

"Out on the front, Avalon had its own first-hand experience of the Collapse when Rajeen Tober, commanding the 17th Fleet, refused to submit to the civil authorities and took his ships deep into the Tempter's Veil to found his own personal empire safe from both Hrangan and human retaliation. The departure of the 17th left Avalon essentially defenseless. The only warships still in the sector were the ancient hulks of the 5th Human Fleet, which had last seen combat nearly seven centuries earlier, when Avalon was a very distant strikebase against the Hrangans. About a dozen capital-class ships and thirty-odd smaller craft of the 5th remained in orbit around Avalon, most needing extensive repairs, all functionally obsolete. But they were the only defenders left to a frightened world, so Avalon determined to refit and restore them. To crew these museum pieces, Avalon turned to its cryonic wards, and began to thaw every combat veteran on hand, including Joachim Kleronomas: The damage he had sustained was extensive, but Avalon needed every last body. Kleronomas returned more machine than man. A cyborg."

I leaned forward to interrupt Alta's recitation. "Are there any pictures of him as he was then?" I asked her.

"Yes. Both before and after. Kleronomas was a big man, with blue-black skin, a heavy outthrust jaw, grey eyes, long pure white hair. After the operation, the jaw and the bottom half of his face were gone entirely, replaced with seamless metal. No mouth, no nose. He took nourishment intravenously. One eye was lost, replaced by a crystal sensor with IR/UV range. His right arm and the entire right half of his chest was cybered, steel plate, duralloy mesh, plastic. A third of his inner organs were synthetic. And they gave him a jack, of course, and built in a small computer. From the beginning, Kleronomas disdained cosmetics; he looked exactly like what he was."

I smiled. "But what he was, that was still a good deal more fleshy than our new guest?"

"True," said my scholar: "The rest of the history is more well known. There weren't many officers among the revived. Kleronomas was given his own command, a small courier-class ship. He served for a decade, pursuing the scholarly studies in history and anthropology that were his private passion, and rising higher and higher in the ranks while Avalon waited for ships that never came and built more and more ships of its own. There were no trades, no raids; the interregnum had come.

"Finally, a bolder civil leadership decided to risk a few of its ships and find out how the rest of human civilization had fared. Six of the ancient 5th Fleet dreadnaughts were refitted as science survey craft and sent out. Kleronomas was given command of one of them. Of those survey ships, two were lost on their missions, and three others returned within two years carrying minimal information on a handful of the closest systems, prompting the Avalonians to reinitiate starflight on a very limited local basis. Kleronomas was thought lost.

"He was not lost. When the small, limited goals of the original survey were completed, he decided to continue rather than return to Avalon. He became obsessed with the next star, and the next after that, and the next after that. He took his ship on and on. There were mutinies, desertions, dangers to be faced and fought, and Kleronomas dealt with them all. As a cyborg, he was immensely long-lived. The legends say he became ever more metallic as the voyage went on, and on Eris discovered the matrix crystal and expanded his intellectual abilities by orders of magnitude through the addition of the first crystal-matrix computer. That particular story fits his character; he was obsessed not only with the acquisition of knowledge, but with its retention. Altered so, he would never forget.

"When he finally returned to Avalon, more than a hundred standard years had passed. Of the men and women who had left Avalon with him, Kleronomas alone survived; his ship was manned by the descendants of its original crew, plus those recruits he had gathered on the worlds he visited. But he had surveyed four hundred and forty-nine planets, and more asteroids, comets, and satellites than anyone would have dreamed possible. The information he brought back became the foundation upon which the Academy of Human Knowledge was built, and the crystal samples, incorporated into existing systems, became the medium in which that knowledge was stored, eventually evolving into the academy's vast Artificial Intelligences and the fabled crystal towers of Avalon. The resumption of large-scale starflight soon thereafter was the real end of the interregnum. Kleronomas himself served as the first academy administrator until his death, which supposedly came on Avalon in ai-42, that is, forty-two standard years after the day of his return."

I laughed. "Excellent," I told Alta-k-Nahr. "He's a fraud, then. Dead at least seven hundred years." I looked at Khar Dorian, whose long fine hair was spread across the pillow as he nibbled on a heel of mead bread. "You are slipping, Khar. He fooled you."

Khar swallowed, grinned. "Whatever you say, Wisdom," he said, in a tone that told me he was anything but contrite. "Shall I kill him for you?"

"No," I said. "He is a player. In the game of mind, there are no imposters. Let him play. Let him play."

* * * *

Days later, when the game had been scheduled, I called the cyborg to me. I saw him in my office, a large room with deep scarlet carpeting, where my glass flower sits by the great window that overlooks my battlements and the swamp town below.

His face was without expression. Of course, of course. "You summoned me, Cyrain of Ash."

"The game is set," I told him. "Four days from today."

"I am pleased," he said.

"Would you like to see the prizes?" I offered him the files; the boy, the girl, the hatchling.

He glanced at them briefly, without interest.

"I am told," I said to him, "that you have spent a lot of time wandering these past days. Inside my castle, and outside in the town and the swamps.

"True," he said. "I do not sleep. Knowledge is my diversion, my addiction. I was curious to learn what sort of place this was."

Smiling, I said, "And what sort of place is it, cyborg?"

He could not smile, nor frown. His tone was even, polite. "A vile place," he said. "A place of despair and degradation."

"A place of eternal, undying hope," I said.

"A place of sickness, of the body and the soul."

"A place where the sick grow well," I countered.

"And where the well grow sick," the cyborg said. "A place of death."

"A place of life," I said. "Isn't that why you came? For life?"

"And death," he said. "I have told you, they are the same."

I leaned forward. "And I have told you, they are very different. You make harsh judgments, cyborg. Rigidity is to be expected in a machine, but this fine, precious moral sensitivity is not."

"Only my body is machine," he said.

I picked up his file. "That is not my understanding," I said. "Where is your morality in regard to lying? Especially so transparent a lie?" I opened the file flat on my desk. "I've had a few interesting reports from my Apostles. You've been extraordinarily cooperative."

"If you wish to play the game of mind, you cannot offend the painlord," he said.

I smiled. "I'm not as easily offended as you might think." I searched through the reports. "Doctor Lyman did a full scan on you. He finds you an ingenious construct. And made entire of plastic and metal. There is nothing organic left inside you, cyborg. Or should I call you robot? Can computers play the game of mind, I wonder? We will certainly find out. You have three of them, I see. A small one in what should be your brain case that attends to motor functions, sensory input and internal monitoring, a much larger library unit occupying most of your lower torso, and a crystal matrix in your chest." I looked up. "Your heart, cyborg?"

"My mind," he said. "Ask your Doctor Lyman, and he will tell of other cases like mine. What is a human mind? Memories. Memories are data. Character, personality, individual volition. Those are programming. It is possible to imprint the whole of a human mind upon a crystal matrix computer."

"And trap the soul in the crystal?" I said. "Do you believe in souls?"

"Do you?" he asked.

"I must. I am mistress of the game of mind. It would seem to be required of me. I turned to the other reports my Apostles had assembled on this construct who called himself Kleronomas. Deish Green-9 interfaced with you. He says you have a system of incredible sophistication, that the speed of your circuitry greatly exceeds human thought, that your library contains far more accessible information than any single organic brain could retain even were it able to make full use of its capacity, and that the mind and memories locked within that crystal matrix are that of one Joachim Kleronomas. He swears to that."

The cyborg said nothing. Perhaps he might have smiled then, had he the capacity.

"On the other hand," I said, "my scholar Alta-k-Nahr assures me that Kleronomas is dead seven hundred years. Who am I to believe?"

"Whomever you choose," he said indifferently.

"I might hold you here and send to Avalon for confirmation," I said. I grinned. "A thirty-year voyage in, thirty more years back out. Say a year to research the question. Can you wait sixty-one years to play, cyborg?"

"As long as necessary," he said.

"Shayalla says you are thoroughly asexual."

"That capacity was lost from the day they remade me," he said. "My interest in the subject lingered for some centuries afterwards, but finally that too faded. If I choose, I have access to a full range of erotic memories of the days when I wore organic flesh. They remain as fresh as the day they were entered into my computer. Once locked in crystal, memories cannot fade, as with a human brain. They are there, waiting to be tapped. But for centuries now, I have had no inclination to recall them."

I was intrigued. "You cannot forget," I said.

"I can erase," he said. "I can choose not to remember."

"If you are among the winners in our little game of mind, you will regain your sexuality."

"I am aware of that. It will be an interesting experience. Perhaps then I will choose to tap those ancient memories."

"Yes," I said, delighted. "You'll begin to use them, and at precisely the same instant you will begin to forget them. There is a loss there, cyborg, as sharp as your gain."

"Gain or loss. Living and dying. I have told you, Cyrain, they cannot be separated."

"I don't accept that," I said. It was at issue with all I believe, all I am; his repetition of the lie annoyed me. "Braje says you cannot be affected by drugs or disease. Obvious. You could be dismantled, though. Several of my Apostles have offered to dispose of you, at my command. My aliens are especially bloodthirsty, it seems."

"I have no blood," he said. Sardonic? Or was it all the power of suggestion?

"Your lubricants might suffice," I said dryly. "Tr'k'nn'r would test your capacity for pain. AanTerg Moonscorer, my g'vhern aerialist, has offered to drop you from a great height."

"That would be an unconscionable crime by nest standards."

"Yes and no," I said. "A nestborn g'vhern would be aghast at the suggestion that flight be thus perverted. My Apostle, on the other hand, would be more aghast at the suggestion of birth control. Flapping those oily leather wings you'll find the mind of a half-sane cripple from New Rome. This is Croan'dhenni. We are not as we seem."

"So it appears."

"Jonas has offered to destroy you too, in a less dramatic but equally effective fashion. He's my largest Apostle. Deformed by runaway glands. The patron saint of advanced automatic weaponry, and my chief of security."

"Obviously you have declined these offers," the cyborg said.

I leaned back. "Obviously," I said, "though I always reserve the right to change my mind."

"I am a player," he said. "I have paid Khar Dorian, have bribed the Croan'dhic port-guards, have paid your major-domo and yourself. Inwards, on Lilith and Cymeranth and Shrike and other worlds where they speak of this black palace and its half-mythical mistress, they say that your players are treated with fairness."

"Wrong," I said. "I am never fair, cyborg. Sometimes I am just. When the whim takes me."

"Do you threaten all your players as you have threatened me?" he asked.

"No," I admitted. "I'm making a special exception in your case."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you're dangerous," I said, smiling. "We had come to the heart of it at last. I shuffled through all my Apostolic bulls, and extracted the last of them, the most important. At least one of my Apostles you have never met, but he knows you, cyborg, knows you better than you would dream."

The cyborg said nothing.

"My pet telepath," I said. "Sebastian Cayle. He's blind and twisted and I keep him in a big jar, but he has his uses. He can probe through walls. He has stroked the crystals of your mind, friend, and tripped the binary synapses of your id. His report is a bit cryptic, but admirably terse." I slid it across the desk for the cyborg to read.

A haunted labyrinth of thought. The steel ghost. The truth within the lie, life in death and death in life. He will take everything from you if he can. Kill him now.

"You are ignoring his advice," the cyborg said.

"I am," I told him.

"Why?"

"Because you're a mystery, one I plan to solve when we play the game of mind. Because you're a challenge, and it has been a long time since I was challenged. Because you dare to judge me and dream of destroying me, and it has been ages since anyone found the courage to do either of those things."

* * * *

Obsidian makes a dark, distorted mirror, but one that suits me. We take our reflections for granted all our lives, until the hour comes when our eyes search for the familiar features and find instead the image of

a stranger. You cannot know the meaning of horror or of fascination until you take that first long gaze from a stranger's eyes, and raise an unfamiliar hand to touch the other's cheek, and feel those fingers, light and cool and afraid, brush against your skin.

I was already a stranger when I came to Croan'dhenni more than a century ago. I knew my face, as well I should, having worn it nearly ninety years. It was the face of a woman who was both hard and strong, with deep lines around her grey eyes from squinting into alien suns, a wide mouth not without its generosity, a nose once broken that had not healed straight, short brown hair in perpetual disarray. A comfortable face, and one that I had a certain affection for. But I lost it somewhere, perhaps during my years on Gulliver, lost it when I was too busy to notice. By the time I reached Lilith, the first stranger had begun to haunt my mirrors. She was an old woman, old and wrinkled. Her eyes were grey and rheumy and starting to dim, her hair white and thin, with patches of pinkish scalp showing through; the edge of her mouth trembled, there were broken capillaries in her nose; and beneath her chin lay several folds of soft grey flesh like the wattles of a hen. Her skin was soft and loose, where mine had always been taut and flush with health, and there was another thing, a thing you could not see in the mirror—a smell of sickness that enveloped her like the cheap perfume of an aged courtesan, a pheromone for death.

I did not know her, this old sick thing, nor did I cherish her company. They say that age and sickness come slowly on worlds like Avalon and Newholme and Prometheus; legends claim death no longer comes at all on Old Earth behind its shining walls. But Avalon and Newholme and Prometheus were far away, and Old Earth is sealed and lost to us, and I was alone on Lilith with a stranger in my mirror. And so I took myself beyond the manrealm, past the furthest reach of human arms, to the wet dimness of Croan'dhenni, where whispers said a new life could be found. I wanted to look into a mirror once more, and find the old friend that I had lost.

Instead I found more strangers.

The first was the painlord itself; mindlord, lifelord, master of life and death. Before my coming, it had ruled here forty-odd standard years. It was Croan'dhich, a native, a great bulbous thing with swollen eyes and mottled blue-green skin, a grotesque parody of a toad with slender, double-jointed arms and three long vertical maws like wet black wounds in its fragrant flesh. When I looked upon it, I could taste its weakness; it was vastly fat, a sea of spreading blubber with an odor like rotten eggs, where the Croan'dhich guards and servants were well-muscled and hard. But to topple the mindlord, you must become the mindlord. When we played the game of mind, I took its life, and woke in that vile body.

It is no easy thing for a human mind to wear an alien skin; for a day and a night I was lost inside that hideous flesh, sorting through sights and sounds and smells that made no more sense than the images in nightmare, screaming, clawing for control and sanity. I survived. A triumph of spirit over flesh. When I was ready, another game of mind was called, and this time I emerged with the body of my choice.

She was a human. Thirty-nine years of age by her reckoning, healthy, plain of face but strong of body, a professional gambler who had come to Croan'dhenni for the ultimate game. She had long red-brown hair and eyes whose blue-green color reminded me of the seas of Gulliver. She had some strength, but not enough. In those distant days, before the coming of Khar Dorian and his slavers'™ fleet, few humans found their way to Croan'dhenni. My choice was limited. I took her.

That night I looked into the mirror again. It was still a stranger's face, hair too long, eyes of the wrong hue, a nose as straight as the blade of a knife, a careful guarded mouth that had done too little smiling.

Years afterward, when that body began to cough blood from some infernal pestilence out of the Croan'dhich swamps, I built a room of obsidian mirrors to meet each new stranger. Years pass more swiftly than I care to think while that room remains sealed and inviolate, but always, finally, the day

comes when I know I will be visiting it once more, and then my servants climb the stairs and polish the black mirrors to a fine dark sheen, and when the game of mind is done I ascend alone and strip off my clothing and stand and turn in solitude, slow dancing with the images of others.

High, sharp cheekbones and dark eyes sunk in deep hollows beneath her brow. A face shaped like a heart, surrounded by a nimbus of wild black hair, large pale breasts tipped with brown. Taut lean muscles moving beneath oiled red-brown skin, long fingernails sharp as claws, a narrow pointed chin, brown hair like wire bristles cut in a thin high stripe across her scalp and halfway down her back, the hot scent of rut heavy between her thighs. My thighs? On a thousand worlds, humanity changes in a thousand different ways.

Massive boney head looking down at the world from near three meters height, beard and hair blending into one leonine mane as bright as beaten gold, strength written large in every bone and sinew, the broad flat chest with its useless red nipples, the strangeness of the long, soft penis between my legs. Too much strangeness for me; the penis stayed soft all the months I wore that body, and that year my mirrored room was opened twice.

A face very like the one that I remember. But how well do I remember? A century was gone to dust, and I kept no likenesses of the faces I had worn. From my first youth long ago, only the glass flower remained. But she had short brown hair, a smile, grey-green eyes. Her neck was too long, her breasts too small, perhaps. But she was close, close, until she grew old, and the day came when I glimpsed another stranger walking beside me inside the castle walls.

And now the haunted child. In the mirrors she looks like a daughter of dreams, the daughter I might have birthed had I been far lovelier than I ever was. Khar brought her to me, a gift he said, a most beautiful gift, to repay me in kind after I had found him grey and impotent, hoarse of voice and scarred of face, and made him young and handsome.

She is perhaps eleven years old, perhaps twelve. Her body is gaunt and awkward, but the beauty is there, locked inside, just beginning to blossom. Her breasts are budding now, and her blood first came less than half a year ago. Her hair is silver-gold, long and straight, a glittering cascade that falls nearly to her heels. Her eyes are lame in her small face, and they are the deepest, purest violet. Her face is something sculpted. She was bred to be thus, no doubt of that; genetic tailoring has made the Shrikan trade-lords and the wealthy of Lilith and Fellanora a breathtakingly beautiful folk.

When Khar brought her to me, she was shy of seven, her mind already gone, a whimpering animal thing screaming in a dark locked room within her skull. Khar says she was that way when he bought her, the dispossessed daughter of a Fellanei robber baron toppled and executed for political crimes, his family and friends and retainers slain with him or turned into mindless sexual playthings for his victorious enemies. That is what Khar says. Most of the time I even believe him.

She is younger and prettier than I can ever remember being, even in my lost first youth on Ash, where a nameless boy gave me a glass flower. I hope to wear this sweet flesh for as many years as I wore the body I was born to. If I dwell here long enough, perhaps the day will come when I can look into a dark mirror and see my own face again.

* * * *

One by one they ascended unto me; through Wisdom to rebirth, or so they hoped.

High above the swamps, locked within my tower, I prepared for them in the changing chamber, hard by my unimpressive throne. The Artifact is not prepossessing; a rudely shaped bowl of some soft alien alloy, charcoal grey in color and faintly warm to the touch, with six niches spaced evenly around the rim. They

are seats; cramped, hard, uncomfortable seats, designed for obviously nonhuman physiognomies, but seats nonetheless. From the floor of the bowl rises a slender column that blossoms into another seat, the awkward cup that enthrones ... choose the title you like best. Painlord, mindlord, lifelord, giver and taker, operator, trigger, master. All of them are me. And others before me, the chain rattling back to The White and perhaps earlier, to the makers, the unknowns who fashioned this machine in the dimness of distant eons.

If the chamber has its drama, that is my doing. The walls and ceiling are curved, and fashioned laboriously of a thousand individual pieces of polished obsidian. Some shards are cut very thin, so the grey light of the Croan'dhic sun can force its way through. Some shards are so thick as to be almost opaque. The room is one color, but a thousand shades, and for those who have the wit to see it, it forms a great mosaic of life and death, dreams and nightmares, pain and ecstasy, excess and emptiness, everything and nothing, blending one into the other, around and around unending, a circle, a cycle, the worm that eats its own tail forever, each piece individual and fragile and razor-edged and each part of a greater picture that is vast and black and brittle.

I stripped and handed my clothing to Rannar, who folded each garment neatly. The cup is topless and egg-shaped I climbed inside and folded my legs beneath me in a lotus, the best possible compromise between the lines of the Artifact and the human physique. The interior walls of the machine began to bleed; glistening red-black fluid beading on the grey metal of the egg, each globule swelling fatter and heavier until it burst. Streams trickled down the smooth, curved walls, and the moisture began to collect at the bottom. My bare skin burned where the fluid touched me. The flow came faster and heavier, the fire creeping up my body, until I was half immersed.

"Send them in," I told Rannar. How many times have I said those words? I have lost count.

The prizes were led in first. Khar Dorian came with the tattooed boy. "There," Khar said offhandedly, gesturing to a seat while smiling lasciviously for me, and the hard youth, this killer, this wild bloody tough, shrank away from his escort and took the place assigned to him. Braje, my biomed, brought the woman. They too are of a kind, pallid, overweight, soft. Braje giggled as she fastened the manacles about her complaisant charge. The hatchling fought, its lean muscles writhing, its great wings beating together in a dramatic but ultimately ineffectual thunderclap as huge, glowering Jonas and his men forced it down into its niche. As they manacled it into place, Khar Dorian grinned and the g'vherm made a high, thin whistling sound that hurt the ears.

Craimur Delhune had to be carried in by his aides and hirelings. "There," I told them, pointing, and they propped him awkwardly into one of the niches. His shrunken, wizened face stared at me, half-blind eyes darting around the chamber like small, feral beasts, his mouth sucking greedily, as if his rebirth was done and he sought a mother's breast. He was blind to the mosaic; for him, it was only a dark room with black glass walls.

Rieseen Jay swaggered in, bored by my chamber before she even entered it. She saw the mosaic but gave it only a cursory glance, as something beneath her notice, too tiresome to study. Instead she made a slow circuit of the niches, inspecting each of the prizes like a butcher examining the meat. She lingered longest in front of the hatchling, seeming to delight in its struggles, its obvious fear, the way it hissed and whistled at her and glared from those fierce, bright eyes. She reached out to touch a wing, and leapt back, laughing, when the hatchling bit at her. Finally she took herself to a seat, where she sprawled languidly, waiting for the game to begin.

Finally Kleronomas.

He saw the mosaic at once, stopped, stared up at it, his crystalline eyes scanning slowly around the

room, halting here and there again to study some fine detail. He paused so long that Rieseën Jay grew impatient, and snapped at him to take a seat. The cyborg studied her, metal face unreadable.
"Quiet," I said.

He finished his study of the dome, taking his own time, and only then seated himself in the final empty niche. The way he took his place was as if all the seats had been vacant and this was his choice, selected by him alone.

"Clear the room," I commanded. Rannar bowed and gestured them out, Jonas and Braje and the others. Khar Dorian went last, and made a gesture at me as he took his leave. Meaning what? Good luck? Perhaps. I heard Rannar seal the door.

"Well?" demanded Rieseën Jay.

I gave her a look that silenced her. "You are all seated in the Siege Perilous," I said. I always began with those words. No one ever understood. This time ... Kleronomas, perhaps. I watched the mask that was his face. Within the crystal of his eyes, I saw a slight shifting motion, and tried to find a meaning in it. "There are no rules in the game of mind. But I have rules, for when it is over, when you are back in my domain.

"Those of you who are here unwillingly, if you are strong enough to hold the flesh, you wear, it is yours forever. I give it to you freely. No prize plays more than once. Hold fast to your birthflesh and when it is done, Khar Dorian will take you back to the world he found you on and set you loose with a thousand standards and your freedom.

"Those players who find rebirth this day, who rise in strange flesh when this game is ended, remember that what you have won or lost is your own doing, and spare me your regrets and recriminations. If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of this gaming, you may of course play again. If you have the price.

"One last warning. For all of you. This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt more than anything you ever imagined."

So saying, I began the game of mind. Once more.

* * * *

What can you say about pain?

Words can trace only the shadow of the thing itself. The reality of hard, sharp physical pain is like nothing else, and it is beyond language. The world is too much with us, day and night, but when we hurt, when we really hurt, the world melts and fades and becomes a ghost, a dim memory, a silly unimportant thing. Whatever ideals, dreams, loves, fears, and thoughts we might have had become ultimately unimportant. We are alone with our pain, it is the only force in the cosmos, the only thing of substance, the only thing that matters, and if the pain is bad enough and lasts long enough, if it is the sort of agony that goes on and on, then all the things that are our humanity melt before it and the proud sophisticated computer that is the human brain becomes capable of but a single thought:

Make it stop, make it STOP!

And if the pain does eventually stop, afterwards, with the passage of time, even the mind that has experienced it becomes unable to comprehend it, unable to remember how bad it truly was, unable to describe it so as to even approach the terrible truth of what it felt like when it was happening.

In the game of mind, the agony of the painfield is like no other pain, like nothing I have ever experienced.

The painfield does no harm to the body, leaves no marks, no scars, no injuries, no signs to its passing. It touches the mind directly with an agony beyond my power to express. How long does it last? A question for relativists. It lasts but the smallest part of a microsecond, and it lasts forever.

The Wisdoms of Dam Tullian are masters of a hundred different disciplines of mind and body, and they teach their acolytes a technique for isolating pain, dissociating from it, pushing it away and thus transcending it. I had been a Wisdom for half my life when I first played the game of mind. I used all I had been taught, all the tricks and truths I had mastered and learned to rely on. They were utterly useless. This was a pain that did not touch the body, a pain that did not race along the nerve paths, a pain that filled the mind so completely and so shatteringly that not even the smallest part of you was free to think or plan or meditate. The pain was you, and you were the pain. There was nothing to dissociate from, no cool sanctum of thought where you might retreat.

The painfield was infinite and eternal, and from that ceaseless and unthinkable agony there was only one sure surcease. It was the old one, the true one, the same balm that has been succor to billions of men and women, and even the smallest of the beasts of the field, since the beginning of time. Pain's dark lord. My enemy, my lover. Again, yet again, wanting only an end to suffering, I rushed to his black embrace.

Death took me, and the pain ended.

On a vast, echoey plain in a place beyond life, I waited for the others.

* * * *

Dim shadows taking form from the mists. Four, five, yes. Have we lost some of them? It would not surprise me. In three games out of four, a player finds his truth in death and seeks no further. This time? No. I see the sixth shape striding out of the writhing fog, we are all here, I look around myself once more, count three, four, five, six, seven, and me, me, eight.

Eight?

That's wrong, that's very wrong. I am dizzy, disoriented. Nearby someone is screaming. A little girl, sweet-faced, innocent, dressed in pastels and pretty gems. She does not know how she got here, she does not understand, her eyes are lost and childish and far too trusting, and the pain has woken her from a dreamdust languor to a strange land full of fear.

I raise a small, strong hand, gaze at the thick brown fingers, the patch of callous by my thumb, the blunt wide nails trimmed to the quick. I make a fist, a familiar gesture, and in my hand a mirror takes shape from the iron of my will and the quicksilver of my desire. Within its glittering depths I see a face. It is the face of a woman who is both hard and strong, with deep lines around her grey eyes from squinting into alien suns, a wide mouth not without its generosity, a nose once broken that has not healed straight, short brown hair in perpetual disarray. A comfortable face. It gives me comfort now.

The mirror dissolves into smoke. The land, the sky, everything is shifting and uncertain. The sweet little girl is still screaming for her daddy. Some of the others are staring at me, lost. There is a young man, plain of face, his black hair swept back straight and feathered with color in a style that has not been the fashion on Gulliver for a century. His body looks soft, but in his eyes I see a hard edge that reminds me of Khar Dorian. Rieseën Jay seems stunned, wary, frightened, but still she is recognizably Rieseën Jay; whatever else might be said of her, she has a strong sense of who she is. Perhaps that will even be enough. The g'vherm looms near her, far larger here than it seemed before, its body glistening with oil as it spreads demonic wings and begins to whip the fog into long grey ribbons. In the game of mind, it wears no manacles; Rieseën Jay looks long, and cowers away from it. So too does another player, a wispy grey shape covered by a blaze of tattoos, his face a pale blur with neither purpose nor definition. The little girl

screams on and on. I turn away from them, leave them to their own devices, and face the final player.

A big man, his skin the color of polished ebony with a dark blue undertone where his long muscles flex as he stretches. He is naked. His jaw is square and heavy, jutting sharply forward. Long hair surrounds his face and falls past his shoulders, hair as white and crisp as fresh bedsheets, as white as the untouched snow of a world that men have never walked. As I watch him, his thick, dark penis stirs against his leg, swells, grows erect. He smiles at me. "Wisdom," he says.

Suddenly I'm naked too.

I frown, and now I wear an ornate suit of armor, overlapping plates of gilded duralloy, filigreed with forbidding runes, and beneath my arm is a matching antique helmet, festooned with a plume of bright feathers. "Joachim Kleronomas," I say. His penis grows and thickens until it is an absurd fat staff that presses hard against the flatness of his stomach. I cover it, and him, in a uniform from a history text, all black and silver, with the blue-green globe of Old Earth sewn on his right sleeve and twin silver galaxies swirling on his collar.

"No," he says, amused, "I never reached that rank," and the galaxies are gone, replaced by a circle of six silver stars. "And for most of my time, Wisdom, my allegiance was to Avalon, not Earth." His uniform is less martial, more functional, a simple grey-green jumpsuit with a black fabric belt and a pocket heavy with pens. Only the silver circle of stars remains. "There," he says.

"Wrong," I tell him. "Wrong still." And when I am done talking, only the uniform remains. Inside the cloth the flesh is gone, replaced by silver-metal mockery, a shining empty thing with a toaster for a head. But only for an instant. Then the man is back, frowning, unhappy. "Cruel," he says to me. The hardness of his penis strains at the fabric of his crotch.

Behind him, the eighth man, the ghost who ought not be here, the misplaced phantom, makes a soft whispy sound, a sound like the rustling of dry dead leaves in a cold autumn wind.

He is a thin, shadowy thing, this intruder. I must look at him very hard to see him at all. He is much smaller than Kleronomas, and he gives the impression of being old and frail, though his flesh is so wispy, so insubstantial, that it is hard to be sure. He is a vision suggested by the random drift of the fog, perhaps, an echo dressed in faded white, but his eyes glow and shimmer and they are trapped and afraid. He reaches out to me. The flesh of his hand is translucent, pulled tightly over grey ancient bones.

I back away, uncertain. In the game of mind, the lightest touch can have a terrible reality.

Behind me I hear more screaming, the terrible wild sound of someone in an ecstasy of fear. I turn.

It has begun in earnest now. The players are seeking their prey. Craimur Delhune, young and vital and far more muscular than he was a moment ago, stands with a flaming sword in one hand, swinging it easily at the tattooed boy. The boy is on his knees, shrieking, trying to cover himself with upraised arms, but Delhune's bright blade passes through the grey shadowflesh unimpeded, and slices at the shining tattoos. He removes them from the boy surgically, swing by swing, and they drift upwards in the misty air, shining images of life cut free of the grey skin on which they were imprisoned. Delhune snatches them as they float by and swallows them whole. Smoke drifts from his nostrils and his open mouth. The boy screams and cringes. Soon there will be nothing left but shadow.

The hatchling has taken to the air. It circles above us, keening at us in its high, thin voice as its wings thunder.

Rieseen Jay has had second thoughts, it seems. She stands above the whimpering little girl, who grows

less little with each passing moment. Jay is changing her. She is older now, fatter, her eyes just as frightened but far more vacant. Wherever she turns her head, mirrors appear and sing taunts at her with fat wet lips. Her flesh swells and swells, tearing free of her poor, frayed clothing; thin lines of spittle run down her chin. She wipes at it, crying, but it only flows faster, and now it turns pink with blood. She is enormous, gross, revolting. "That's you," the mirrors say. "Don't look away. Look at yourself. You're not a little girl. Look, look, look. Aren't you pretty? Aren't you sweet? Look at you, look at you." Rieseën Jay folds her arms, smiles with satisfaction.

Kleronomas looks at me with cold judgment on his face. A band of black cloth wraps itself about my eyes. I blink, vanish it, glare at him. "I'm not blind," I say. "I see them. It is not my fight."

The fat woman is as large as a truck, as pale and soft as a maggot. She is naked and immense and with each blink of Jay's eye she grows more monstrous. Huge white breasts burst forth from her face, hands, thighs, and the brown meaty nipples open gaping mouths and began to sing. A thick green penis appears above her above her vagina, curls down, enters her. Cancers blossom on her skin like a field of dark flowers. And everywhere are the mirrors, blinking in and out, reflecting and distorting and enlarging, relentlessly showing her everything she is, documenting every grotesque fancy that Jay inflicts upon her. The fat woman is hardly human. From a mouth the size of my head, gumless and bleeding, she issues forth a sound like the wailing of the damned. Her flesh begins to smoke and tremble.

The cyborg points. All the mirrors explode.

The mist is full of daggers, shards of slivered glass flying everywhere. One comes at me and I make it gone. But the others, the others ... they curve like smart missiles, become an aerial flotilla, attack. Rieseën Jay is pierced in a thousand places, and the blood drips from her eyes, her breasts, her open mouth. The monster is a little girl again, crying.

"A moralist," I say to Kleronomas.

He ignores me, turns to look at Craimur Delhune and the shadow boy. Tattoos flame to new life upon the youth's skin, and in his hand a sword appears and takes fire. Delhune takes a step back, unnerved. The boy touches his flesh, mouths some silent oath, rises warily.

"An altruist," I say. "Giving succor to the weak."

Kleronomas turns. "I hold no brief with slaughter."

I laugh at him. "Maybe you're just saving them for yourself, cyborg. If not, you had better grow wings fast, before your prize flies away."

His face is cold. "My prize is in front of me," he says.

"Somehow I knew that," I reply, donning my plumed helmet. My armor is alive with golden highlights, my sword is a spear of light.

My armor is as black as the pit, and the designs worked upon it, black on black, are of spiders and snakes and human skulls and faces a-writhe with pain. My long straight silver sword turns to obsidian, and twists into a grotesquerie of barbs and hooks and cruel spikes. He has a sense of drama, this damned cyborg. "No," I say. "I will not be cast as evil." I am gold and silver once more, shining, and my plumes are red and blue. "Wear the suit yourself if you like it so much."

It stands before me, black and hideous, the helmet open on a grinning skull. Kleronomas sends it away. "I need no props," he says. His grey-and-white ghost flitters at his side, plucking at him. Who is

that? I wonder yet again.

"Fine," I say. "Then we'll dispense with the symbols." My armor is gone.

I hold out my bare, open hand. "Touch me," I say. "Touch me, cyborg."

As his hand reaches out to mine, metal creeps up his long dark fingers.

* * * *

In the game of mind, even more than in life, image and metaphor are everything.

The place beyond time, the endless fog-shrouded plain, the cold sky and the uncertain earth beneath us, even that is illusion. It is mine, all of it, a setting "however unearthly, however surreal" against which the players may act out their tawdry dramas of dominance and submission, conquest and despair, death and rebirth, rape and mind-rape. Without my shaping, my vision and the visions of all the other painlords through the eons, they would have no ground below, no sky above, no place to set their feet, no feet to set. The reality offers not even the scant comfort of the barren landscape I give them. The reality is chaos, unendurable, outside of space and time, bereft of matter or energy, without measurement and therefore frighteningly infinite and suffocatingly claustrophobic, terribly eternal and achingly brief. In that reality the players are trapped; seven minds locked into a telepathic gestalt, into a congress so intimate it cannot be borne by most. And therefore they shrink away, and the very first things we create, in a place where we are gods (or devils, or both), are the bodies we have left behind. Within these walls of flesh we take our refuge and try to order chaos.

The blood has the taste of salt; but there is no blood, only illusion. The cup holds a black and bitter drink; but there is no cup, only an image. The wounds are open and raw, dripping anguish; but there are no wounds, no body to be wounded, only metaphor, symbol, conjuring. Nothing is real, and everything can hurt, can kill, can evoke a lasting madness.

To survive, the players must be resilient, disciplined, stable, and ruthless; they must possess a ready imagination, an extensive vocabulary of symbols, a certain amount of psychological insight. They must find the weakness in their opponent, and hide their own phobias thoroughly. The rules are simple. Believe in everything; believe in nothing. Hold tight to yourself and your sanity.

Even when they kill you, it has no meaning, unless you believe that you have died.

Upon this plain of illusion where these all-too-mutable bodies whirl and feint in a trite pavane that I have seen a thousand times before, plucking swords and mirrors and monsters from the air to throw at one another like jugglers gone mad, the most frightening thing of all is a simple touch.

The symbolism is direct, the meaning clear. Flesh upon flesh. Stripped of metaphor, stripped of protection, stripped of masks. Mind upon mind. When we touch, the walls are down.

Even time is illusory in the game of mind; it runs as fast, or as slow, as we desire.

I am Cyrain, I tell myself, born of Ash, far-traveled, a Wisdom of Dam Tullian, master of the game of mind, mistress of the obsidian castle, ruler of Croan'dhenni, mindlord, painlord, lifelord, whole and immortal and invulnerable. Enter me.

His fingers are cool and hard.

* * * *

I have played the game of mind before, have clasped hands with others who thought themselves strong. In their minds, in their souls, in them, I have seen things. In dark grey tunnels I have traced the graffiti of

their ancient scars. The quicksand of their insecurities has clutched at my boots. I have smelled the rank odor of their fears, great swollen beasts who dwell in a palpable living darkness. I have burned my fingers on the hot flesh of lusts who will not speak a name. I have ripped the cloaks from their still, quiet secrets. And then I have taken it all, been them, lived their lives, drunk the cold draught of their knowledge, rummaged through their memories. I have been born a dozen times, have suckled at a dozen teats, have lost a dozen virginities, male and female.

Kleronomas was different.

I stood in a great cavern, alive with lights. The walls and floor and ceiling were translucent crystal, and all around me spires and cones and twisted ribbons rose bright and red and hard, cold to the touch yet alive, the soulsparks moving through them everywhere. A crystalline fairy city in a cave. I touched the nearest outcropping, and the memory flooded into me, the knowledge as clear and sharp and certain as the day it had been etched there. I turned and looked around with new eyes, now discerning rigid order where initially I had perceived only chaotic beauty. It was clean. It took my breath away. I looked everywhere for the vulnerability, the door of gangrenous flesh, the pool of blood, the place of weeping, the shuffling unclean thing that must live deep inside him, and I found nothing, nothing, nothing, only perfection, only the clean sharp crystal, so very red, glowing from within, growing, changing, yet eternal. I touched it once again, wrapping my hand about an outcropping that rose in front of me like a stalagmite. The knowledge was mine. I began to walk, touching, touching, drinking everywhere. Glass flowers bloomed on every side, fantastic scarlet blooms, fragile and beautiful. I took one and sniffed at it, but it had no scent. The perfection was daunting. Where was his weakness? Where was the hidden flaw in this diamond that would enable me to crack it with a single sharp blow?

Here within him there was no decay.

Here there was no place for death.

Here nothing lived.

It felt like home.

And then in front of me the ghost took form, grey and gaunt and unsteady. His bare feet sent up thin tendrils of smoke as they trod lightly on the gleaming crystals underneath, and I caught the scent of burning meat. And I smiled. The spectre haunted the crystal maze, but every touch meant pain and destruction. "Come here," I said. He looked at me. I could see the lights on the far side of the cavern through the haze of his uncertain flesh. He moved to me and I opened my arms to him, entered him, possessed him.

* * * *

I seated myself upon a balcony in the highest tower of my castle, and drank from a small cup of fragrant black coffee laded with brandy. The swamps were gone; instead I gazed upon mountains, hard and cold and clean. They rose blue-white all around me, and from the highest peak flew a plume of snow crystals caught in a steady endless wind. The wind cut through me, but I scarcely felt it. I was alone and at peace, and the coffee tasted good, and death was far away.

He walked out upon the balcony, and seated himself upon one of the parapets. His pose was casual, insolent, confident. "I know you," he said. It was the ultimate threat.

I was not afraid. "I know you," I said. "Shall I conjure up your ghost?"

"He will be here soon enough. He is never far from me."

"No," I said. I sipped my coffee, and let him wait. "I am stronger than you," I told him finally. "I can win the game, cyborg. You were wrong to challenge me."

He said nothing.

I set down my cup, drained and empty, passed my hand across it, smiled as my glass flower grew and spread its colorless transparent petals. A broken rainbow crawled across the table.

He frowned. Color crept into my flower. It softened and drooped, the rainbow was banished. "The other was not real," he said. "A glass flower is not alive."

I held up his rose, pointed at the broken stem. "This flower is dying," I said. In my hands, it became glass once again. "A glass flower lasts forever."

He transmuted the glass back to living tissue. He was stubborn, I will say that for him. "Even dying, it lives."

"Look at its imperfections," I said. I pointed them out, one by one. "Here an insect has gnawed upon it. Here a petal has grown malformed, here, these dark splotches, those are blight, here the wind has bent it. And look what I can do." I took the largest, prettiest petal between thumb and forefinger, ripped it off, fed it to the wind. "Beauty is no protection. Life is terribly vulnerable. And ultimately, all of it ends like this." In my hand, the flower turned brown and shriveled and began to rot. Worms festered upon it briefly, and foul black fluids ran from it, and then it was dust. I crumpled it, blew it away, and from behind his ear I plucked another flower. Glass.

"Glass is hard," he said, "and cold."

"Warmth is a byproduct of decay, the stepchild of entropy." I told him.

Perhaps he would have replied, but we were no longer alone. Over the crenellated edge of the parapets the ghost came crawling, pulling himself up with frail grey-white hands that left bloody stains upon the purity of my stone. He stared at us wordlessly, a half-transparent whispering in white. Kleronomas averted his eyes.

"Who is he?" I ask.

The cyborg could not answer.

"Do you even remember his name?" I asked him. He replied with silence, and I laughed at them both. "Cyborg, you judged me, found my morality suspect, my actions tainted, but whatever I might be, I am nothing to you. I steal their bodies. You've taken his mind. Haven't you? *Haven't you?*"

"I never meant to," he said.

"Joachim Kleronomas died on Avalon seven hundred years ago, just as they say he did. Steel and plastic he might wear, but inside he was still rotting flesh, even at the end, and with all flesh there comes a time when the cells die. A thin flat line on a machine, glowing in the darkness, and an empty metal shell. The end of a legend. What did they do then? Scoop out the brain and bury it beneath some oversized monument? No doubt." The coffee was strong and sweet; here it never grew lukewarm, because my will did not permit it. "But they did not bury the machine, did they? That expensive, sophisticated cybernetic organism, the library computer with its wealth of knowledge, the crystal matrix with all its frozen memories. All that was too valuable to discard. The good scientists of Avalon kept it in an interface with the Academy's main system, correct? How many centuries passed before one of them decided to don that cyborg body again, and keep his own death at bay?"

"Less than one," the cyborg said. "Less than fifty standard years."

"He should have erased you," I said. "But why? His brain would be riding the machine, after all. Why deny himself access to all that marvelous knowledge, why destroy those crystallized memories? Why, when he could savor them instead? How much better to have a whole second lifetime at his disposal, to be able to access wisdom he had never earned, recollect places he had never been and people he had never met." I shrugged, and looked at the ghost. "Poor stupid thing. If you'd ever played the game of mind, you might have understood."

What can the mind be made of, if not memories? Who are we, after all? Only who we think we are, no more, no less.

Etch your memories on diamond, or on a block of rancid meat, those are the choices. Bit by bit the flesh must die, and give way to steel and metal. Only the diamond memories survive to drive the body. In the end no flesh remains, and the echoes of lost memories are ghostly scratchings on the crystal.

"He forgot who he was," the cyborg said. "I forgot who I was, rather. I began to think ... he began to think he was me." He looked up at me, his eyes locked on mine. They were red crystal, those eyes, and behind them I could see a glow. His skin was taking on a hard, polished sheen, silvering as I watched. And this time he was doing it himself. "You have your own weaknesses," he said, pointing.

Where it curls about the handle of my coffee cup, my hand has grown black, and spotted with corruption. I could smell the decay. Flesh began to flake off, and beneath I saw the bloody bone, bleaching to grim whiteness. Death crept up my bare arm, inexorably. I suppose it was meant to fill me with horror. It only filled me with disgust.

"No," I said. My arm was whole and healthy. "No," I repeated, and now I was metal, silver-bright and undying, eyes like opals, glass flowers twined through platinum hair. I could see my reflection gleaming upon the polished jet of his chest; I was beautiful. Perhaps he could see himself as well, mirrored in my chrome, for just then he turned his head away.

He seemed so strong, but on Croan'dhenni, in my castle of obsidian, in this house of pain and rebirth where the game of mind is played, things are not always as they seem.

"Cyborg," I said to him, "you are lost."

"The other players," he began.

"No," I pointed. "He will stand between you and any victim you might choose. Your ghost. Your guilt. He will not allow it. You will not allow it."

The cyborg could not look at me. "Yes," in a voice tainted by metal and corroded by despair.

"You will live forever," I said.

"No. I will go on forever. It is different, Wisdom. I can tell you the precise temperature reading of any environment, but I cannot feel heat or cold, can see into the infrared and the ultraviolet, can magnify my sensors to count every pore on your skin, but I am blind to what I think must be your beauty. I desire life, real life, with the seed of death growing inexorably within it, and therefore giving it meaning."

"Good," I said, satisfied.

He finally looked at me. Trapped in that shining metal face were two pale, lost, human eyes. "Good?"

"I make my own meaning, cyborg, and life is the enemy of death, not its mother. Congratulations. You've won. And so have I." I rose and reached across the table, plunged my hand through the cold black chest, and ripped the crystal heart from his breast. I held it up and it shone, brighter and brighter, its scarlet rays dancing brilliantly upon the cold dark mountains of my mind.

* * * *

I opened my eyes.

No, incorrect; I activated my sensors once again, and the scene in the chamber of change came into focus with a clarity and sharpness I had never experienced. My obsidian mosaic, black against black, was now a hundred different shades, each distinct from the others, the pattern crisp and clear. I was seated in a niche along the rim; in the center cup, the child-woman stirred and blinked large violet eyes. The door opened and they came to her, Rannar solicitous, Khar Dorian aloof, trying to conceal his curiosity, Braje giggling as she gave her shots.

"No," I announced to them. My voice was too deep, too male. I adjusted it. "No, here," I said, sounding more like myself.

Their stares were like the cracking of whips.

* * * *

In the game of mind, there are winners and there are losers.

The cyborg's interference had its effects, perhaps. Or perhaps not, perhaps before the game was over, the pattern would have been the same. Craimur Delhune is dead; they gave his corpse to the swamps last evening. But the vacancy is gone from the eyes of the pudgy young dreamduster, and she is dieting and exercising even now, and when Khar Dorian leaves, he will take her back to Delhune's estates on Gulliver.

Rieseen Jay complains that she was cheated. I believe she will linger here, outside, in the city of the damned. No doubt that will cure her boredom. The g'hvern struggles to speak and has painted elaborate symbols on its wings. The tattooed boy leapt from the castle battlements a few hours after his return, and impaled himself upon the jagged obsidian spikes far below, flapping his arms until the last instant. Wings and fierce eyes do not equate with strength.

A new mindlord has begun to reign. She has commanded them to start on a new castle, a structure shaped from living woods, its foundations rooted deep in the swamps, its exterior covered with vines and flowers and other living things. "You will get insects," I have warned her, "parasites and stinging flies, miner-worms in the wood, blight in your foundation, rot in your walls. You will have to sleep with netting over your bed. You will have to kill, constantly, day and night. Your wooden castle will swim in a miasma of little deaths, and in a few years the ghosts of a million insects will swarm your halls by night."

"Nonetheless," she says, "my home will be warm and alive, where yours was cold and brittle."

We all have our symbols, I suppose.

And our fears.

"Erase him," she has warned me. "Blank the crystal, or in time he will consume you, and you will become another ghost in the machine."

"Erase him?" I might have laughed, if the mechanism permitted laughter. I can see right through her.

Her soul is scrawled upon that soft, fragile face. I can count her pores and note each flicker of doubt in the pupils of those violet eyes. "Erase *me*, you mean. The crystal is home to us both, child. Besides, I do not fear him. You miss the point. Kleronomas was crystal, the ghost organic meat, the outcome inevitable. My case is different. I am as crystalline as he is, and just as eternal."

"Wisdom" she began.

"Wrong," I said.

"Cyrain, if you prefer"

"Wrong again. Call me Kleronomas. I have been many things through my long and varied lives, but I have never been a legend. It has a certain cachet.

The little girl looked at me. "I am Kleronomas," she said in a high sweet voice, her eyes baffled.

"Yes," I said, "and no. Today we are both Kleronomas. We have lived the same lives, done the same things, stored the same memories. But from this day on, we walk different paths. I am steel and crystal, and you are childflesh. You wanted life, you said. Embrace it, it's yours, and all that goes with it. Your body is young and healthy, just beginning to blossom, your years will be long and full. Today you think you are still Kleronomas. And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow you will learn about lust again, and open your little thighs to Khar Dorian, and shudder and cry out as he rides you to orgasm. Tomorrow you will bear children in blood and pain, and watch them grow and age and bear children of their own, and die. Tomorrow you will ride through the swamps and the dispossessed will toss you gifts, and curse you, and praise you, and pray to you. Tomorrow new players will arrive, begging for bodies, for rebirth, for another chance, and tomorrow Khar's ships will land with a new load of prizes, and all your moral certainties will be tested, and tested again, and twisted to new shapes. Tomorrow Khar and Jonas or Sebastien Cayle will decide that they have waited long enough, and you'll taste the honeyed treason of their kiss, and perhaps you'll win, or perhaps you'll lose. There's no certainty to it. But there's one sure thing I can promise. On the day after tomorrow, long years from now though they will not seem long once passed, death will begin to grow inside you. The seed is already planted. Perhaps it will be some disease blooming in one of those small sweet breasts Rannar would so dearly love to suckle, perhaps a fine thin wire pulled tight across your throat as you sleep, perhaps a sudden solar flare that will burn this planet clean. It will come, though, and sooner than you think."

"I accept it," she said. She smiled as she spoke; I think she really meant it. "All of it, every part. Life and death. I have been without it for a long time, Wis" Kleronomas."

"Already you're forgetting things," I observed. "Every day you will lose more. Today we both remember. We remember the crystal caverns of Eris, the first ship we ever served on, the lines of our father's face. We remember what Tomas Chung said when we decided not to turn back to Avalon, and the other words he said as he lay dying. We remember the last woman we ever made love to, the shape and smell of her, the taste of her breasts, the noises she made when we pleased her. She's been dead and gone eight hundred years, but she lives in our memories. But she's dying in yours, isn't she? Today you are Kleronomas. Yet I am him as well, and I am Cyrain of Ash, and a small part of me is still our ghost, poor sad man. But when tomorrow comes, I'll hold tight to all I am, and you, you'll be the mindlord, or perhaps just a sex-slave in some perfumed brothel on Cymeranth, or a scholar on Avalon, but in any case a different person than you are now."

She understood; she accepted. "So you'll play the game of mind forever," she said, "and I will never die."

"You will die," I pointed out. "Most certainly. Kleronomas is immortal."

"And Cyrain of Ash."

"Her too. Yes."

"What will you do?" she asked me.

I went to the window. The glass flower was there, in its simple wooden vase, its petals refracting the light. I looked up at the source of that light, the brilliant sun of Croan'dhenni burning in the clear midday sky. I could look straight into it now, could focus on the sunspots and the flaming towers of its prominences. I made a small conscious adjustment to the crystal lenses of my eyes, and the empty sky was full of stars, more stars than I had ever seen before, more stars than I could possibly have imagined.

"Do?" I said, still gazing up at those secret starfields, visible to me alone. They brought to mind my obsidian mosaic. "There are worlds I've never been to," I told my sister-twin, father, daughter, enemy, mirror-image, whatever she was. "There are things I don't yet know, stars that even now I cannot see. What will I do? Everything. To begin with, everything."

As I spoke, a fat striped insect flew through the open window on six gossamer wings that trilled the air too fast for human sight, though I could count every languid beat if I so chose. It landed briefly on my glass flower, found neither scent nor pollen, and slipped back outside. I watched it go, growing smaller and smaller, dwindling in the distance, until at last I had telescoped my vision to the maximum, and the small dying bug was lost among the swamps and stars.