

THE BARBARIAN PRINCESS

Vernor Vinge

I believe there are writers who have never been comfortable with short fiction, even when they were beginners. I had the opposite problem. For the first five or ten years of my career, it was almost impossible for me to write novel-length stories. I think I benefited from this disability. Short fiction is a wonderful medium for speculative fiction. Even though science fiction short stories normally make less money per word than novels, the SF magazines are an ideal place for the new writer: many magazines are wide open to unsolicited submissions. At the same time, most new writers collect a number of rejections before they can sell consistently. So each short story is a kind of "small experiment." A writer can get lots of feedback quickly.

Eventually, a short fiction writer can grow into writing book-length stories. In my case, this happened in especially easy steps. In 1968, Damon Knight published my novella, "Grimm's Story," in his *Orbit* series. Around that time, Damon was also editing science fiction novels for Berkley books. He told me that if I felt like writing an extension of "Grimm's Story," he could get me a book contract for the combination piece! (The preceding exclamation mark reflects my feelings about this offer. Here I had never sold a novel and now I was being solicited to write one. I thought that I had finally arrived.) I wrote the extension, and in 1969 Berkley books published the expanded story as *Grimm's World*.

Years passed. I learned that my first book sale had been unusually good luck; selling my second novel was *hard*. But by the mid 1980s, I'd had success with several novels. Jim Baen offered to reprint *Grimm's World* but with some new material. The result was *Tatja Grimm's World* (Baen Books, 1987), consisting of a new piece, "The Barbarian Princess," and a revised version of *Grimm's World*.

Returning to one of my earliest story settings was a lot of fun. I was surprised that I had new things to say—and now I had the ability to say those things well. I think "The Barbarian Princess" stands well by itself. It

appeared separately in *Analog* in 1986, and made it onto the Hugo ballot.

Fair Haven at South Cape was a squalid little town. Ramshackle warehouses lined the harbor, their wooden sides unpainted and rotting. Inland, the principal cultural attractions were a couple of brothels and the barracks of the Crown garrison. Yet in one sense Fair Haven lived up to its name. No matter how scruffy things were here, you knew they would be worse further east. This was the nether end of civilization on the south coast of The Continent. Beyond South Cape lay four thousand miles of wild coast, the haunt of littoral pirates and barbarian tribes.

Rey Guille would soon sail east, but the prospect did not bother him. In fact, he rather looked forward to it. For obvious reasons, there weren't many customers along the south coast run. The Tarulle Barge would put in at two of the larger barbarian settlements, villages with a taste for some of Tarulle's kinkier publications. There was also an author living in the coastal wilderness. His production was weird and erratic— but worth an extra stop. Except for these three landfalls, the Barge would sail straight around the south coast, free of external problems. It would be thirty days before they reached the Osterlais.

Thirty days, sixty wake periods. Enough time for the translators to prepare the Osterlai and Tsanart editions, enough time for Brailly Tounse to recondition the Tarulle printers. Rey surveyed his tiny office. Thirty days. That might even be enough for him to dispose of his current backlog: manuscripts were stacked from floor to ceiling behind him. The piles on his desk blocked his view of Fair Haven harbor—and more important, the breeze that seeped in from over the water. These were all the submissions taken aboard during their passage through the Chainpearls and Crownesse. There would be some first class stories here, but most would end up as extra slush in Brailly's paper-making vats. (Thus, as Rey had once pointed out in an editorial, every submission to *Fantasie* eventually became part of the magazine.)

Rey jammed the tiny windows open, and arranged his chair so he could sit in the breeze. He was about halfway through the desk stack: the easy ones he could decide in a matter of seconds. Even for these, he made a brief note in the submission log. Two years from now the Tarulle Publishing Company would be back in the Chainpearls. He couldn't return the manuscripts, but at least he could say something appropriate to the submitters. Other stories were harder to judge: competent but flawed, or inappropriate outside the author's home islands. Over the last few days, a

small pile of high priority items had accumulated beneath his desk. He would end up buying most of those. *Some* were treasures. Ivam Alecque's planet yarns were based on the latest research in spectrometry; Rey planned a companion editorial about the marvelous new science.

Alas, he must also buy stories that did not thrill him. *Fantasie* magazine lived up to its name: most of his purchases were stories of magic and mysticism. Even these were fun when the authors could be persuaded to play by internally consistent rules.

Rey grabbed the next manuscript, and scowled. Then there were the truly revolting things he must buy, things like this: another Hrala adventure. The series had started twenty years earlier, five years before he signed on with Tarulle. The first few stories weren't bad, if you liked nonstop illogical action with lots of blood and sex; old Chem Trinos wasn't a bad writer. As was Tarulle custom, Trinos had exclusive control of his series for eight years. Then Tarulle accepted Hrala stories from anyone. The fad kept growing. Otherwise decent writers began wasting their time writing new Hrala stories. Nowadays the series was popular all around the world, and practically a cult in the Llerenitos.

Hrala the Barbarian Princess: over six feet tall, fantastically built, unbelievably strong and crafty and vengeful and libidinous. Her adventures took place in the vast inland of The Continent, where empires and wars had no need to conform to the humdrum world that readers knew. She was the idol of thousands of foolish male readers and a model for thousands of female ones.

Rey paged slowly through this latest contribution to the legend. Hmph . . . for its kind, the story was well written. He'd have his assistant editor look it over, make it consistent with the background files she kept on the series. He would probably have to buy it. He tossed the manuscript under his desk and made a note in the submission log.

An hour later, Rey was still at it, the in-pile fractionally smaller. From the decks below his windows there was the continuing noise of supplies being loaded, crewmen shouting at stevedores. Occasionally he heard people working on the rigging above him. He had long since learned to tune out such. But now there was a different clatter: someone was coming along the catwalk to his office. A moment later, Coronadas Ascuasenya stuck her head in the doorway. "Boss, such a deal I got for you!"

Oh, oh. When Cor's accent thickened and her words came fast, it was a

sure sign she had been swept away by some new enthusiasm. He waved her into the office. "What's that?"

"Tarulle magazines, they don't sell themselves. Other things we need to grab buyer interest."

Rey nodded. Jespen Tarulle had a small circus housed on the after decks. They put on shows at the larger ports, hyped all the Tarulle publications. Cor was fascinated by the operation; she was constantly trying to add acts representing stories and authors from *Fantasie*. She was good at it, too, a natural born publicist. Rey figured it was only a matter of time before higher-ups noticed, and he lost his assistant editor. "What have you got?"

"Who," she corrected him. She stepped back and waved at someone beyond the doorway. "I present you *Hrala*, Princess of the Interior!" She pronounced the name correctly, with a throat-tearing rasp that was painful even to hear.

The portentous intro brought no immediate action. After a moment, Cor stepped to the door and spoke coaxingly. There were at least two people out there, one of them a printsmen from Brailly's crew. A second passed, and someone tall and lanky bent through the doorway.

Rey rocked back in his chair, his eyes widening. The visitor was remarkable—though not in the way Cor meant. It was a female: there was a slimness in the shoulders, and a slight broadening in the hips. And she was *tall*. The ceiling of Guille's office was six feet high; the girl's tangled red hair brushed against it. But scale her down to normal size and she might be taken for a street waif. Her face and hair were grimy. A bruise darkened her face around one eye. With her arrival the room was filled with the smell of rancid grease. He looked at her clothes and understood the source of part of the smell. She was dressed in rags. There were patches on patches on patches, yet holes still showed through. But these were not the rags of a street waif: these were of leather, thick and poorly cured. She carried a walking staff almost as tall as she was.

The circus people might have use for such a character, though scarcely as *Hrala*. He smiled at the girl, "What's your name?"

Her only reply was a shy smile that revealed even, healthy teeth. There was a nice face hiding under all the dirt.

Cor said, "She doesn't understand one word of Sprak, Boss." She looked out the door. "What did she call herself, Jimi?"

The printsmen stuck his head into the office; there wasn't room for

three visitors. "Good afternoon, Master Guille," he said to Rey. "Uh, it's hard to pronounce. The closest thing in a civilized name would be 'Tatja Grimm.'" The girl's head came up and her smile broadened.

"Hmm. Where did you find her?"

"Strangest thing, sir. We were on a wood detail for Master Tounse, a few miles south of here. Just about noon we came across her on the table land. She had that there walking stick stuck in the ground. It looked like she was praying to it or something—she had her face down near the end of the stick's shadow. We couldn't see quite what all she was doing; we were busy cutting trees. But some boys from the town came by, started hassling her. We chased them off before they could do anything."

"And she was eager to stay with you?"

"She was when she saw we were from the Barge. One of our crew speaks a little Hurdic, sir. Near as he can tell, she walked here from the center of The Continent."

Three thousand miles, through lands which—until very recently— had swallowed up every expedition. Rey cast a look of quiet incredulity at his assistant. Cor gave a little shrug, as if to say, *Hey, it will make great copy.*

The printsman missed this byplay. "We couldn't figure out quite *why* she made the trip, though. Something about finding people to talk to."

Rey chuckled. "Well, if Hurdic is her only language, she certainly came to the wrong place." He looked at the girl. During the conversation, her eyes had wandered all about the office. The smile had not left her face. Everything fascinated her: the carved wall panels, the waist-high stacks of manuscripts, Guille's telescope in the corner. Only when she looked at Rey or Cor or Jimi did her smile falter and the shyness return. *Damn.* Didn't Cor realize what she had here? Aloud he said. "This is something I should think about. Jimi, why don't you take this, ah, Tatja over to the public deck. Get her something to eat."

"Yes, sir. Tatja?" He motioned her to follow him. The girl's shoulders slumped for an instant, but she departed without protest.

Cor was silent till their footsteps had faded into the general deck clamor. Then she looked at Guille. "You're not going to hire her." It was more an accusation than a question.

"You'd find her more trouble than she's worth, Cor. I'd wager she's a local girl; who ever heard of an inlander with red hair? Watching her, I could see she understood some of what we were saying. Whatever Hurdic she speaks is probably in Jimi's imagination. The poor girl is simply

retarded—probably caused by the same glandular problem that's sprouted her six feet tall before she's even reached puberty. My guess is she's barely trainable."

Cor sat on one stack of manuscripts, propped her feet on another. "Sure, she's no inlander, Boss. But she's not from Fair Haven. The Haveners don't wear leather like that. She's probably been expelled from some local tribe. And yes, she's dim brain, but who cares? No need for The Great Hrala to give big speeches in Sprak. I can teach her to strut, wave a sword, make fake Hurdic war talk. Boss, they'll love her in the Llerenitos."

"Cor! She doesn't even *look* like Hrala. The red hair—"

"Wigs. We got lotsa nice black wigs."

"—and her figure. She just doesn't have, uh . . ." Guille made vague motions with his hands.

"No tits? Yes, that's a problem." The "true" Hrala danced through her adventures wearing next to nothing. "But we can fix. The vice magazine people have props. Take one of their rubber busts and wrap it in brassiere armor like Hrala wears—it'll fool an audience." She paused. "Boss. I can make this work. Tatja may be dim, but she wants to please. She doesn't have any place else to go."

Guille knew this last was not part of the sales pitch; Ascuasenya had a soft streak undermining her pragmatism. He turned to look out at Fair Haven. A steady stream of supply lighters moved back and forth between the town's main pier and the deeper water surrounding the Barge. Tarulle was due to lift anchor tomorrow noon. It would be two years before they returned to this part of the world. Finally he said, "Your scheme could cause real problems the next time we visit this dump. Come the night wake period, go into town and look up the Crown's magistrate. Make sure we're not stealing some citizen's kid."

"Sure." Cor grinned broadly. Victory was at hand. Guille grumbled for a few more minutes: hiring an actress would mean going up the chain of command to Overeditor Ramsey, and perhaps beyond him to Jespen Tarulle. That could take days, and much debate. Guille allowed himself to be persuaded to hire the girl as an apprentice proofreader. The move had a certain piquancy: How many writers had accused him of employing illiterate nitwits as proofreaders?

Finally, he reminded his assistant editor that she still had a full-time job preparing the issues that would sell in the Osterlais. Cor nodded, her face very serious; the Hrala project would be on her own time. He almost thought he'd intimidated her—until she turned to leave and he heard a

poorly suppressed laugh.

It took Cor less than two days to understand what a jam she had talked herself into. The Barge was back at sea and there were no distractions from shorefolk, but now she found herself working thirty hours a day, setting up the Hrala rehearsals with publicity, looking after the Grimm girl, and—most of all—getting *Fantasie* into shape.

There were so many manuscripts to review. There were good stories in the slush pile, but more science-oriented ones than ever before. These were Rey Guille's special favorites, and sometimes he went overboard with them. *Fantasie* had been published for seven hundred years. A certain percentage of its stories had always claimed to be possible. But only in the last fifty years, with the rise of science, could the reader feel that there was a future where the stories might really happen. Rey Guille had been editor of *Fantasie* for fifteen years. During that time, they had published more stories of Contrivance Fiction than in all the previous years. He had Svekr Ramsey's permission to include two in every issue. More and more, he found readers whose only interest was in such stories. More and more, he found readers who were creating the science that future stories could be based on.

Cor knew that, in his heart, Rey saw these stories as agents of change in themselves. Take the spectrometry series: during the last five years, he had written a dozen editorials advertising the new science ("Spectrometry, Key to Nature's Secrets"), and soliciting stories based on the contrivance. Now he got one or two new ones at every major stop. Some of them were saleable. Some of them were mind-boggling. . . . And some were wretched.

Ascuasenya had been working on the Barge for five quarters, and as Rey Guille's assistant for nearly a year. She had read her first *Fantasie* story when she was five. It was hard not to be in awe of the magazine's editor, even if he was a crotchety old codger. (Guille was forty-one.) Cor did her best to disguise her feelings; their editorial conferences were running battles. This morning was no different. They were up in his office, putting together the first issue for the Osterlais. The slush pile had been reduced to desk height and they had plenty of room to lay out the pieces Rey had selected for the new issue. Outside Guille's office, the bright light of morning had slowly reddened. They were well into the eclipse season; once every twenty hours, Seraph blocked the sun or was itself eclipsed. Every wake period was punctuated by darkness as deep as night on the nether hemisphere. Guille had set algae glowpots on every available hook, yet he

still found it hard to read fine print.

He squinted at the Ivam Alecque manuscript Cor was complaining about. "I don't understand you, Cor. This yarn is *world-shaking*. If we didn't put anything else in the next issue, 'Pride of Iron' could carry it all."

"But the writing, it is so wooden. The characters have no life. The plot makes me sleepy."

"By the Blue Light of Seraph, Cor! It's *ideas* that make this great. 'Pride of Iron' is based on spectro results that aren't even in print yet."

"Phooey. There have been stories with this theme before: Ti Liso's Hidden Empire series. He had houses made of iron, streets paved with copper."

"Anyone who owns jewelry could imagine a world like that. This is different. Alecque is a chemist; he uses metals in realistic ways—like in gun barrels and heavy machinery. But even that isn't the beauty of this story. Three hundred years ago, Ti Liso was writing fantasy; Ivam Alecque is talking about something that could really *be*." Rey covered the glowpots and threw open a window. Chillness oozed into the office, ocean breeze further cooled by the eclipse. The stars spread in their thousands across the sky, blocked only by the Barge's rigging, dimmed only by mists rising from the pulper rooms below decks. Even if they had been standing outside, and could look straight up, Seraph would have been nothing more than a dim reddish ring. For the next hour, the stars ruled. "Look at that, Cor. Thousands of stars, millions beyond those we can see. They're suns like ours, and—"

"—and we buy plenty of stories with that premise."

"Not like this one. Ivam Alecque knows astronomers at Krirsarque who are hanging spectro gear on telescopes. They've drawn line spectra for lots of stars. The ones with color and absolute magnitude similar to our sun show incredibly intense lines for iron and copper and the other metals. This is the first time in history anyone has had direct insight about how things must be on planets of other stars. Houses built of iron are actually possible there."

Ascuasenya was silent for a moment. The idea was neat; in fact, it was kind of scary. Finally she said, "We're all alone in being so 'metal poor'?"

"Yes! At least among the sun-like stars these guys have looked at."

"Hmm . . . It's almost like the gods, they play a big joke on us." Cor's great love was polytheistic fantasy, stories where the fate of mortals was the whim of supernatural beings. That sort of thing had been popular in

Fantasie's early centuries. She knew Rey considered it out of step with what the magazine should be doing now. Sometimes she brought it up just to bug him. "Okay. I see why you want the story. Too bad it's such an ugly little thing."

She saw that her point had struck home. A bit grumpily, Rey unmasked the lamps, then sat down and picked up "Pride of Iron." It really was plotless. And—on this leg of the voyage, anyway—he was the only one capable of pumping it up. . . . She could almost see the wheels going around in his head: But it would be worth rewriting! He could have the story published before these ideas were even in the scientific literature. He looked up, grinned belligerently at her. "Well, I'm going to buy it, Cor. Assume 'anonymous collaboration' makes it twice as long: what can we do for illustrations?"

It took about fifteen minutes to decide which crew-artists would work the job; the Osterlai issue would use slightly modified stock illos. Hopefully, they could commission some truly striking pictures as they passed through that island chain.

The rest of the Osterlai issue was easy to lay out; several of the stories were already in the Osterlai language. The issue would be mostly fantasy, the new art work from artists of Crownesse and the Chainpearls. The cover story was a rather nice Hrala adventure.

"Speaking of Hrala," said Rey, "how is your project coming? Will your girl be able to give a show when we start peddling this issue?"

"Sure she will. We get about an hour of rehearsal every wake period. Once she understands about stage performance, things will go just fine. So far, we work on sword and shield stuff. She can memorize things as fast as we can show her. She's awful impressive, screaming around the stage with *Death* in her hand." In the stories, the Hrala Sword was magical, edged with metal, and so heavy that an ordinary warrior could not lift it. The Tarulle version of *Death* was made of wood painted silver.

"What about her costume?" Or lack of one.

"Great. We still gotta do changes—ribbon armor is hard to fit—but she looks tremendous. Svektr Ramsey thinks so too."

"He *saw* her?" Guille looked stricken.

"Don't worry, Boss. The Overeditor was amused. He told me to congratulate you for hiring her."

"Oh . . . Well, let's hope we're all still amused when you put her on stage with other actors."

Cor gathered up the manuscripts they had chosen. She would take them, together with the production notes, over to the art deck. "No problem. You were right, she understands some Spra'k. She can even speak it a little. I think she was just shy that first day. On stage she'll mainly scream gibberish—we won't need a new script for each archipelagate." Cor carried the papers to the door. "Besides, we get the chance to put it all together before we reach the Osterlais. We arrive at the Village of the Termite People in three days; I'll have things ready by then."

Guille chuckled. The Termite People were scarcely your typical fans. "Okay. I look forward to it."

Cor stepped into the darkness, shut the hatch behind her. In fact, she was at least half as confident as she sounded. Things ought to work out, if she could just find time to coach Tatja Grimm. The giant little girl was stranger than Cor had admitted. She wasn't really dumb, just totally deprived. She'd been born in some very primitive tribe. She'd been five years old before she ever saw a tree. *Everything* she saw now was novelty. Cor remembered how the girl's eyes had widened when Cor showed her a copy of *Fantasie*, and explained how spoken words could be saved with paper and ink. She had held the magazine upside down, paged back and forth through it, fascinated by both pictures and text.

Worst of all, Tatja Grimm had no concept of polemic; she must have been an outsider even in her own tribe. She simply did not accept that dramatic skits could persuade. If Grimm could be convinced of that single point, Cor was sure the Hrala campaign would be a spectacular success. If not, they might all end up with bat dreck on their faces.

The day they were to land at the Village of the Termite People, Rey took the morning off. He walked around the top editorial deck, looking for a place sheltered from the wind and passersby. This would be his first chance to play with his telescope since Fair Haven.

The marvelous weather still held. The sky was washed clean; widely spaced cumulus spread away forever. A Tarulle hydrofoil loitered about a mile ahead of the Barge, its planes raised and sails mostly reefed. Guille knew there were others out there; most of the Barge's foil bays were empty. The fastboats had many uses. In civilized seas, they ranged before and behind the Barge—making landfall arrangements, carrying job orders, picking up finished illustrations and manuscripts. In the wilderness east of Fair Haven, they had a different role: security. No pirates were going to sneak up on the Barge. The catapults and petroleum bombs would be

ready long before any hostile vessel broke the horizon.

So far, all the traffic was friendly. Several times a day they met ships and barges coming from the east. Most were merchantmen. Only a few publishing companies had Tarulle's worldwide scope. The hydrofoils reported that the *Science* was docked at the Village of the Termite People. That ship was much smaller than the Tarulle Barge, but it published its own journal. It was sponsored by universities in the Tsanarts as a sort of mobile research station. Rey looked forward to spending a few hours on the other vessel. It would mean some sales, and would give him a chance to make contacts; these were people who appreciated the new things he was doing with *Fantasie*. Notwithstanding Cor's Hrala project, seeing the *Science* would be high point of this landfall.

Guille rolled the telescope cart into an open area at the rear of the editorial deck. Here the breeze was blocked by Old Jespen's penthouse, yet there was still a reasonable view. He clamped the cart's wheels and leveled its platform. Back in the Chainpearls—just after he bought the scope—this operation would have attracted a small crowd and begun an impromptu star- or Seraph-party. Now, passersby said hello, but few stopped for long. Rey had his toy all to himself.

He flipped the tube down and took a scan across the northern horizon. They were about fifteen miles off the coast. To the naked eye, The Continent was a dark line at the bottom of the sky. The telescope brought detail: Guille could see individual rocks on the dun cliffs. Trees growing in the lee of the hills were clearly visible. Here and there were rounded lumps he recognized as wild termite towers. The Village was hidden beyond a small cape.

Not a very impressive coast for the greatest landmass in the world. Beyond those cliffs, the land stretched more than ten thousand miles—over the north pole and part way down the other side of the planet. There was a hundred times more land there than in all the island chains put together. It was an ocean of land, and beyond its coastal fringe, mostly unknown. No wonder it had been the source of so many stories. Rey sighed. He didn't begrudge those stories. In past centuries, speculation about the Interior was a decent story base. The island civilizations weren't more than a couple of thousand years old—the human race must have originated on The Continent. It was reasonable that older, wiser civilizations lay in the Interior. Whole races of monsters and godlings might flourish in those reaches.

But during the last thirty years, there had been serious exploration. Betrog Hedrigs had reached Continent's center. In the last ten years, three

separate expeditions had trekked across the Interior. The unknown remained, but it was cut into small chunks. The myths were dead and the new reality was a dismal thing: an "ocean" of land is necessarily a very dry place. Beyond the coastal fringe the explorers found desert. In that, there was variety. There were deserts of sand and heat, deserts of rock, and—in the north—deserts of ice and cold. There was no hidden paradise. The nearest things to the "Great Lakes" of legend were saline ponds near Continent's Center. The explorers found that the Interior *was* inhabited, but not by an Elder Race. There were isolated tribes in the mid-latitude deserts. These folk lived naked, almost like animals. Their only tools were spears and hand axes. They seemed peaceful, too poor even for warfare. The lowest barbarians of the Fringe were high civilization compared to them. And all these years, the story writers had assumed that the Hurdic tribes were degenerate relatives of Interior races!

Yet Interior fantasies were still written. Guille saw hundreds of them a year—and worse, had to buy dozens. Ah well. It was a living, and it gave him a chance to show people more important things. Rey stepped back from the telescope, and turned its tube almost straight up. It was Seraph he really wanted to look at.

"Hel-lo?"

Rey looked up, startled. He had an audience. It was the Fair Haven waif. She stood almost behind him and about ten feet away. He had the feeling she'd been watching for several minutes. "Hello indeed. And how are you today, Mistress Grimm?"

"Well." She smiled shyly and took a step forward. She certainly looked better than when he first saw her. Her face was scrubbed clean. In place of rancid leather, she wore tripulation fatigues. If she had been five feet tall instead of six, she would have seemed a pretty pre-teener.

"Shouldn't you be rehearsing with Cor?"

"I, uh, that is la-ter."

"I see. You're off duty."

She bobbed her head, seeming to understand the term. Somehow, Rey had imagined that Cor or the publicity people would be looking after Tatja all the time. In fact, no matter how incompetent she was, there simply were not enough people to baby-sit her. The girl must have many hours to herself; no doubt she wandered all over the Barge. By the Light, the trouble she could get into!

They stared at each other for a moment. The girl seemed so attentive,

almost in awe of him. He realized she wouldn't leave unless he explicitly told her to get lost. He tried to think of an appropriate dismissal, but nothing came. Damn. Finally he said, "Well, how do you like my new telescope?"

"Good. Good." The girl stepped almost close enough to touch the scope, and Rey went through the usual explanations: He showed her how the wheels could be fastened to the deck. The oil bath in the cart's base damped the sea motion and kept the optics steady. The cart itself was an old drafting rig from the art deck. Rey had removed the drawing table and substituted clamps that attached to the base of his twelve-inch scope.

Tatja Grimm didn't say much, but her enthusiasm was obvious. She leaned close to the equipment to see the details Rey pointed out. When he explained something, she would pause for an instant and then bob her head and say, "Yes. So nice."

Guille wondered if he could have been wrong about her. In some ways, she seemed a more thoughtful and enthusiastic audience than crew people he had shown the gear to. But then he noticed the uniformity of her responses. Everything seemed to impress her equally. Every explanation took the same brief moment for her to absorb. Guille had a retarded cousin, mental age around five years, physical age thirty after so much living, a retarded person learns to mimic the head movements and nonsense sounds that normal people make in conversation. Rey could imagine the blank look he would get if he asked Tatja something related to his explanations.

He didn't try such an experiment. What point was there in hurting the girl's feelings? Besides, she seemed to enjoy the conversation as much as a normal person. He aimed the scope at Seraph as he continued his spiel. The planet was in quarter phase, and the mountains of its southern continent stood in stark relief near the terminator. Wind and ship vibration jostled the image a bit. On the other hand, the line of sight was straight up, without lots of dirty air to smudge things. This was the clearest day-view he'd ever had. ". . . so my telescope makes objects seem much closer. Would you like to look?" Even a retard should be thrilled by the sight.

"Yes." She stepped forward, and he showed her how to use the eyepiece. She bent to it... and gave a squeal, a wonderful mixture of pleasure and surprise. Her head jerked back from the eyepiece. She stared upwards at the twin planet, as if to assure herself that it hadn't moved.

Just as quickly she took another look through the lense, and then

backed off again. "So big. So *big!*" Her smile all but split her face. "How can te-le-scope—" she reached up, as if to jerk the tube's end down to eye level.

Guille caught her hands. "Oops. Be gentle. Turn it around this pivot." She wasn't listening, but she let him rotate the tube so she could look in. Her eyes went wide as she saw the expanded image of her face in the main mirror. Rey found himself explaining about "curved mirrors" and how the diagonal directed the image from the twelve-inch through the eyepiece. The girl hesitated the same fraction of a second she had after his other explanations. Then, just as before, her head bobbed with an enthusiastic imitation of total understanding. "Yes. Yes. So nice."

Abruptly, she grabbed Rey's hand. "And you think this thing? You make it?"

Tatja's grip was almost painful; her hands were slender but as outsized as the rest of her. "You mean, did I invent the telescope?" He chuckled. "No, Miss Grimm. The basic idea is two hundred years old. People don't invent telescopes just to pass the time on a dull morning. Things like this are the work of scattered geniuses. Part of an invention may exist for decades, useless, before another genius makes the idea successful."

The girl's expression collapsed. It might have been laughable if it weren't so pathetic. She had no concept of what was difficult and what was trivial, and so her attempt at bright conversation had foundered. Rey turned her gently back to the telescope and showed her how to adjust the focus. Her former enthusiasm did not completely return, but she seemed sincerely taken by the close-up view of Seraph. Rey gave her his usual spiel, pointing out the brown smudges across part of the southern continent. "Brush fires, we think. That land must be a lot like the grassy plains north of Bayfast. The religions have all sorts of visions of Seraph, but we now know it's a world much like ours." And the stories of hidden civilizations *there* might still be true. Rey had written more than one editorial about plans for detecting and communicating with Seraph's hypothetical inhabitants. One of the first steps would be to build an observatory in this part of the world, where Seraph could be observed with a minimum of atmospheric distortion.

A couple of people from Printing had stopped nearby, were watching intently. They were not the sort Rey would think attracted by skygazing; one was Brailly Tounse's bombwright. Rey glanced at her questioningly.

"Sir, we've got a line of sight into the harbor now," the bombwright waved to the north. "We were wondering if you'd take a quick look at

Termite Town through your scope."

Rey hid a sigh, and gave up any hope of having the device to himself this morning. The bombwright must have noticed his irritation. She hurried on to say, "Something strange is happening with the Termite People, sir. So far the officer types ain't talking, but—take a look, will you?"

Guille eased Tatja Grimm away from the scope and tilted it toward the horizon. He made a quick adjustment with the spotter scope and then looked through the main eyepiece. "Looks about like I remember it." There were dozens of towers, from water's edge back up the hills around the harbor. The smallest ones were bigger than a house. The largest were over a hundred feet tall. The spaces between were like streets at the bottom of shadowed canyons. Even knowing the truth, one's first reaction was awe: this must be a city, the greatest one in the world. Krirsarque and Bayfast were insignificant, low-storey affairs compared to this. In fact, there were only a few thousand humans in this whole "city." They dug their burrows and staircases through the termite mounds; they poked air holes through the walls, holes that also served as windows. "Hmm. There's something different. One of the towers by the moorage ... it looks like it was burned, or stained with soot. The dark goes as high as the windows overhanging the water."

"Yes, sir. That's what got our attention, but we couldn't see what made the stain. And there's something strange in the water, too."

Key tilted the scope a fraction. A twisted pile of spikes and filaments stuck through the water, directly in front of the scorch-marked tower. Key sucked in a breath, "It looks like ship's rigging, the fiberglass part."

The bombwright stepped close, and he let her take a look. She was silent for a moment, then, "Unh huh. That's where they like visitors to dock. Looks like the gooks dumped pet' bombs out those windows, right onto the moorage. The guys they ambushed didn't have a chance."

A minute before, Rey had been feeling sorry for one retarded girl. Now ... He looked across the water. Without a telescope, the Village was a barely distinguishable skyline, the scorch unnoticeable.

The guys they ambushed . . . According to the advance reports, there had been exactly one ship tied up at the Village: the *Science*.

Crew and publishing folk spent the next few hours speculating: why was the *Science* ambushed? What would Tarulle do about it? The Barge stayed

several miles offshore, but rumor held that fastboats were doing close recon under cover of the midday eclipse. The only word from the executive deck was that there would be no immediate landing.

Top management was not asleep—just terribly indecisive. Rey Guille bluffed his way onto the bridge shortly before eclipsend. All the Biggies were there, both from Ownership and Operations. The atmosphere was that of an incipient brawl: consensus time had not arrived.

"—and I say, sail into catapult range and burn their filthy village to the ground! Barbarians must learn that ambushing merchants is a dangerous sport." The speaker was one of Tarulle's nephews, an arrogant pip-squeak who'd be scrubbing decks if it weren't for his relatives. The little man looked angrily around the room, daring anyone to disagree. Fortunately for the Company, there were some strong personalities present:

Barge Captain Maccioso stood near the helm, facing the rest. His form was a vague, intimidating shadow in the eclipse light. Maccioso was a huge man; the bridge itself had been rebuilt to accommodate his six feet eight inch height. He was in his early fifties and only just beginning to go to fat. The first twenty years of his career had been spent in the Chainpearls Navy. The man had retired an admiral, and the greatest hero of the Loretto Bight affair. Now he crossed his ham-like arms and seemed to lean toward Tarulle's nephew. "War-like talk coming from . . ." *a wee wimp who couldn't cock a bow*, the pause seemed to say, "from those who need customers to live. It's true, I could torch the Village. It would be expensive; we wouldn't be left with much reserve. And what would we get for it? The Termite Folk are isolated, Master Craeto. There would be few to learn from the lesson. The Tarulle Company would lose one—admittedly minor—customer. The Barge has visited here four times since I've been captain. We've had less trouble than in some civilized ports. These people are not pirates. The *Science* crew did something, broke some taboo. . ."

Maccioso turned to looked into the harbor; sunbreak was almost upon them. The land was bright with washed-out pastels. When he continued, his voice held more frustration than certainty. "Sure. We have the power to raze the place. But we could never bring off an assault landing. There's no way we can rescue the survivors and find out how to avoid such a debacle in the future."

Survivors? Someone had lived through the pet' bombing. Rey felt a surge of joy. No one else seemed moved by the news; they already knew. This must be a major point of the debate. "We can't just leave them there!" The words popped out of Guille's mouth without conscious thought.

Dead silence greeted his words. The people closest to him moved slightly away, but didn't look at him; it was as though he had made a bad smell. Maccioso turned and his gaze swept the bridge. "Master Tounse!"

"Sir!"

The Barge Captain pointed at Rey Guille. "Take this man out and ..." Rey's guts went cold; there were stories about Ked Maccioso's command of the Chainpearl Armada. "... *brief him.*"

"Yessir!"

Brailly Tounse emerged from the crowd and hustled Rey onto the open walkway beyond the bridge. The Printmaster shut the hatch and turned to face him. "'Brief you'? The commercial life is turning Ked soft." It took a moment for Rey to realize that the other man was suppressing laughter. "Don't you understand that a rescue is what Ked is dying to do? For almost an hour, he's been trying to trick these flightless bats into backing one."

"Oh." Rey was both embarrassed and encouraged. "Maybe my, uh, little outburst will start something."

"I hope so." Brailly stopped smiling. "But even by Ked's standards, it would be risky operation pulling those *Science* people out."

He led Rey to the forward end of the walkway. All around them, twilight brightened suddenly into day as the sun came past the edge of Seraph. Swarms of daybats rose from the harbor. They swept around the towers, their cries coming clear and reedy across the water.

Brailly gestured at the bridge binoculars. "Take a look to the left of the harbor towers. That's where they're holding the survivors." It was some kind of pit, probably the root of a fallen tower. Rey saw Termite Folk camped around the edge. Tounse continued, "They're in that hole, out of sight from this angle. See how the locals have set petroleum vats along the edge? They could light and dump those in a matter of minutes ..."

. . . incinerating the prisoners. The Tarulle people would have to sneak in a large party and overpower the guards at those vats all at once. One slip and a lot of Company people would share the fate of those in the pit. "We could offer a ransom, Brailly. It might be expensive, but the *Science* home universities would probably pay us back. . . . And there'd be lots of good publicity." The spinoffs from such an adventure could fill several issues of the Tarulle magazines.

"You don't understand: the *Science* people aren't hostages. The only reason they're still alive is that an appropriate method of execution hasn't

been decided on. The local bosses tell us that no ransom will save the prisoners. They won't even tell us what 'blasphemy' the poor suckers committed. The whole matter is closed. And you know, I think the gooks actually expect to continue business as usual with the rest of us!"

"Hmm." Rey had dealt with the Village's rulers. Their interest in certain types of pulp fiction had always made them seem relatively civilized. They had not seemed religious—and now he saw that was just a sign of how damned secretive their religion must be. He stared through the binocs a moment more. Beyond the edge of that pit were some good people. "We've got to do something, Brailly."

"I know. Ked knows." The Printmaster shrugged. After a moment, the two men walked back to the command bridge. Inside, Rey saw that the tension had drained from the meeting; consensus had finally been reached. Brailly smiled sourly and whispered, "But we also know how it's going to turn out, don't we?"

Rey looked around, and with a sinking feeling he understood. The Tarulle Publishing Company had existed for seven hundred years. Few island-bound companies were that old—and yet Tarulle had been sailing the oceans of Tu all that time, contending with tempests and pirates and religionists and governments. There had been disasters; three hundred years earlier, the old Barge was burned to the waterline. Yet the Company had survived, and prospered. One doesn't last seven hundred years by rushing into everyone else's fight. The Barge and its hydrofoils were well-armed, but given a choice they simply avoided trouble. If a village or even an island chain turned to religious nuttury, they lost Tarulle's business. The years would pass, and the regime would fall—or decide that it needed trade more than its crazy convictions.

Kederichi Maccioso had done his subtle best to bring another outcome, but it was not to be: the talk now was of delivering a few threats and, if that did not help the *Science* people, weighing anchor and sailing off.

There must be some way to stop this! Then he had it: Brailly said the Termite Folk wanted business as usual. For the second time in fifteen minutes, Rey interrupted the meeting. "We can't simply take off; we have magazines to sell here, and customers who want to buy."

This outburst was greeted with the same silence as before. Only this time, it was not Ked Maccioso who responded. There was a croaking sound from somewhere behind the Tarulle in-laws. The owners looked nervously at each other, then stood aside. Out of the shadows came a very old man in a wheel chair: Jespen Tarulle himself. He rolled far enough

past his relatives to get a look at Rey Guille. It was only the third time Rey had seen the man. He was wrapped in blankets, his hands clasped and shivering in his lap. Only one eye tracked and it was starred with a cataract. His voice was quavery, the delivery almost addled. "Yes. These folk haven't done us harm, and our business is to *do business*." He looked in Rey's direction. "I'm glad someone still understands this."

Maccioso didn't sound quite so enthusiastic. "It's risky, sir, not your average sales landing . . . but I could go along with it, if we can get the volunteers." Volunteers who might wangle the prisoners' freedom, or at least discover their exact situation; Rey imagined the wheels turning in the Barge Captain's head.

"Sirs. I volunteer for the landing." It was Brailly Tounse, barely hiding a smile.

"I-I volunteer." The words were coming from Rey's own mouth. He mumbled the rest, almost as a rationalization to himself: "I've handled sales landings here before."

Old Man Tarulle tilted his head at the other owners. "Are we agreed?" It was not quite a rhetorical question; the explicit recommendation of Jespen Tarulle counted for a lot, but he was not a majority stockholder. After a moment, there came mumbled acquiescence. Tarulle looked across the deck. "Operations? Are there any objections from them?"

"I have a question." It was Svektr Ramsey. He looked at Guille. "Have you finished your work on the first Osterlai issue of *Fantasie*?"

"My assistant can handle what remains, Master Ramsey." He had just finished the rewrite of "Pride of Iron."

"Ah." A smile split the gaunt Overeditor's face. "In that case, I have no objections." And if things didn't work out, there would plenty of time to put a black border around the editorial page.

They didn't go ashore until ten hours later, in the night wake period. It had been a busy time. The landing was to look like the previous ones here. There would only be one boat, less than a dozen people. Except for Rey—who was probably known to the locals—those twelve were not the usual sorts for a commercial landing. Maccioso picked people with military and naval backgrounds. The Barge Captain had imagined many contingencies. Some involved simple gathering of information, perhaps an attempt at diplomacy; others would mean quick violence and a frantic effort to get back to sea ahead of the Termite People. From the beginning,

it was agreed that no obvious weapons would be taken. Brailly Tounse produced explosive powder that could be carried in their jackets; that should pass any inspection the Termiters might make.

Though it was probably a futile contribution, Rey Guille took his telescope. It had impressed Tatja Grimm; it might have some effect on the locals. (On the other hand, such high technology might be what got the *Science* in trouble. Rey broke the scope into its components and stored them in different parts of the landing boat.)

Coronadas Ascuasenya had been furious. She wanted to take her Barbarian Princess act ashore and pretend that Tatja Grimm was *truly* Hrala. Maccioso rejected the plan—and Rey agreed with him. Ascuasenya claimed the girl had absorbed the role these last couple of days, that she was the most convincing Hrala ever produced. It really didn't matter. Rey doubted that the local rulers believed the Hrala stories. In any case, using the act to intimidate could cause the prompt massacre of both prisoners and would-be rescuers.

So Cor stayed behind, and Guille found himself on the landing boat surrounded by some very competent fighters. Except for Brailly, he knew none of them.

They were only a hundred yards from the shore. Seraph was at first quarter, and its blue light lay serene across everything. The loudest sounds were the splash of oars into water, and the occasional grunt of a rower. Beach bats and flying fish swooped low around the lighter. The smell of char and oil was stronger than the salt tang of the water. They were passing a ragged jungle of black glass—what was left of the *Science*. The bats swarmed through the twisted rigging: one creature's catastrophe is another's new home.

The termite mounds were awesome at this distance. Hundreds of airholes lined their sides. A few of the towers actually broadened with height so that they hung over the water. It was like some artist's vision of a city of the future. Even knowing what the towers really were, it was hard not to feel intimidated.

Early seafarers thought the Termite Folk were nonhuman. Alas and fortunately, this was not the work of gods. The locals were normal humans, using mounds that occurred all through this region. They brought in extra materials for the termites, then guided and pruned the structures. Basically the Termite People were Hurdic folk taking advantage of local circumstance. And strangely, they had no special pride in the towers. They seemed much prouder of the heritage they imagined

having lost when they left the Interior.

Brailly Tounse kicked at the crate that was their cargo. "Still don't see why the gooks are interested in *Fantasie*."

Rey shrugged. "We don't sell them the whole thing, just stories of the Interior. My guess is, they see themselves as a great people fallen on hard times. Stories about Inner Kingdoms stoke that vision. We don't sell more than a few dozen copies per visit, but they pay several coppers for each."

Tounse whistled softly. "Gods, if only our other customers were that eager." He turned to look at the towers. On the other hand, the Barge's usual customers bought in much larger quantities . . . and didn't incinerate visitors.

The landing boat slid up to a crude pier. Some thirty guards stood along its length, their spears held in salute. The local bosses were in a group just above the landing point. As the Tarulle people climbed from the boat, low-ranking priests came down to help carry Rey's crate. So far everything seemed normal.

The tallest of the locals advanced on Rey, and gabbled something in a singsong cadence. This was the priest they usually dealt with; the guy had an excellent reading knowledge of Spra'k but little chance to speak it. His vocabulary was straight out of an old-time adventure novel. After a second Rey got the avalanche of mispronounced words sorted out: "Master Guille, happy we are to see you again." The priest bowed in the direction of the magazines. "And happy we are to learn more Ancestor Truth. You and your crew are welcome in the Hall. We will examine the new truth and decide on fair payment."

Rey mumbled something appropriately pompous, and they walked toward the Village, Guille and the Termitter priests in the lead. Behind him, the landing party hung together, their tenseness obvious. This was the third time Rey had been here. He marveled that he had not been afraid before. In fact, the place had been a comic relief. *Then* when the locals spoke of "Ancestor Truth" it seemed a light turn of phrase. *Now* he had the wild impulse to run: What if there was some blasphemy in the stories? It put him in a cold sweat to think how casually he published new twists on traditional themes, or allowed small inconsistencies into story cycles. And just few days ago, he'd looked forward to testing the Hrala skit with these people!

The tall priest's tone remained friendly: "You have come at an appropriate moment, Master Guille. We have confronted blasphemers—who may be harbingers of the Final Battle. Now is a time

when we must consult all sources of Truth." Another priest, an older fellow with a limp, interrupted with something abrupt. The tall guy paused, and looked faintly embarrassed; suddenly Guille knew that he was more than an interpreter, but not one of the high priests. "It will be necessary to inspect both your boat and your persons. More blasphemers may come in fair forms. . . . Don't be angered; it is but a formality. I, we recognize you from before. And if the writings you bring speak to our questions, you can expect payment even more generous than usual."

Away from the pier, the smell of burned petroleum products faded, replaced by a barnyard smell and the acrid stench of the tiny insects that built the mounds. Up close, the tower walls were not smooth sweeps. Glabrous patches were surrounded by warty growths. The "windows" were holes hacked in the irregular surface. Even Seraph's blue light could not make such things beautiful. Behind the front tier of mounds, stone corrals held a few dozen skoats—the source of the farm smell. The place really was a village, similar to backward villages the world over. Without modern science, they had no way of making strong or hard materials. Their spearheads were fire-hardened wood and obsidian. Where the termites did not build for them, their structures were simple piles of stone. It was no wonder travelers had seen no danger from these people; a squad of crossbow armed troops could take them over. No one guessed they had access to petroleum or the knowledge to produce flammables.

They walked some distance through the shadows between the towers. The Great Hall was cut into the side of one of the largest mounds. The resulting talus was pressed into steps as broad as in front of any government building in Crownesse. At the top of the steps, carved wooden barricades blocked the entrance. Rey's guide called something Hurdic and ceremonial-sounding. Spear-toting priests slid the barricades aside.

Their porters carried the crate of *Fantasies* toward the altar at the back of the Hall. The place was exactly as Rey remembered it: at least one hundred feet from entrance to altar, but with a ceiling that was nowhere more than seven feet high. It seemed more like a mine than a building. Twelve-foot-wide pillars stood in a rectangular grid across the floor. The pillars were native moundstuff, painted white. The only light came from ranks of candles that circled each of them. As the Tarulle people walked toward the altar, they saw hundreds of Termite Folk standing quietly between the farther pillars. The room couldn't be more than one hundred feet across, but the pillars seemed to go on forever. On his last visit, Rey had walked to the side of the Hall (an act of unknowing bravado, he realized now), and discovered that the pillars there were smaller, more

closely spaced, and the walls were painted with the image of more pillars stretching off to a faked infinity; cleverly placed flecks of glass simulated hundreds of faraway candles. Like a lot of primitive folk, the Termiters had their own subtleties.

Rey expected the threatened body searches would come next. Instead, the Tarulle people were gestured to sit before the altar. There was a moment of near silence after Guille was asked to open the crate. Now he could hear a faint buzzing that came from all around, the sound of the real termites. They were, after all, inside an enormous hive. He pulled up the lid of the crate, and the insect sound was lost behind the Villagers' soft chanting.

The high priests lifted the top sheets from the crates. These were color illustrations that would be inside/outside covers on normally bound editions. The color didn't show well in the candlelight, but the Termiters didn't seem to mind; the best pictures from previous issues were mounted in the walls behind the altar. The priests poured over the illos, just like ordinary fans thrilled with the latest issue of their favorite magazine. Before, Rey would have smiled at their enthusiasm. Now he held his breath. At least one of those pictures showed Hrala carrying a spring-gun; could that be blasphemy?

Then the tall priest looked up, and Rey saw that he was smiling. "Wonderful, friend Guille. There is new Insight here. We will pay double." The others were lifting manuscript galleys out of the crate and solemnly laying them on velvet reading stands. There couldn't be more than a handful of locals who knew Sprak, did they *preach* from the stories? Rey let out a carefully controlled breath. It didn't matter now. The Tarulle people had passed the test and—

—outside the Hall, someone was shouting. The words were indistinct, but Hurdic. The priests straightened, listening. The shouts came louder; people were rushing up the steps to the Hall's entrance. The barricades slid aside and Seraph's light shone on the arrivals: they were spear carriers from the pier. They rushed down the aisle, still shouting. Their leader was waving something over his head. Everyone was shouting now. Rey saw that Brailly's men had slipped into a circle formation. Some of them were reaching into their jackets.

Then the newcomer reached the altar, and one of the priests—the old one with the gimp leg—gave an incredible warbling scream. In an instant, all other cries ceased. He took two objects from the guard and held them close to the candles. Strange reflections shifted across his face and the ceiling. ... He was holding the main mirror and the diagonal bracket from

Rey's telescope.

How can he know what these are, much less think them blasphemous? The thought hung for an instant in Rey's mind, and then everything went crazy. The old man threw the mirror to the floor, then turned on the Tarulle visitors and shouted in Hurdic. No translation was needed; his face was contorted with hatred. Spearmen ran forward, weapons leveled. Brailly tossed something onto the altar; there was an explosion and swirling gouts of chokesmoke. Rey dived to the floor, tried to belly crawl out from under the choke. He heard Brailly's men fighting their way toward the entrance. By the sound of it, they had some sort of weapons—strip knives probably. There were screams and ugly ripping sounds, all against a background of coughing and nausea. It sounded like all the Villagers had thrown themselves into the fight. They could never get past such a mob!

He had underestimated the Printmaster. From out of the smoke and shouting came Brailly's voice. "Down! We're gonna blast!" Rey tucked his head in his arms. A second later there was a flash of light and invisible hands crashed upon both sides of his head. He looked up. There was blue light ahead! Tounse had knocked the barricade over.

Rey came to his knees. If he could move while the locals lay stunned. . . .

His poor ears couldn't hear the rumbling; it came through his knees and palms. All around them, the hive was shaking. He saw now that the pillars near the entrance had been smashed. Avalanches of mound-stuff—first small, then engulfing, spilled down from above.

With that, the tower collapsed on the Great Hall, and Rey saw no more.

Consciousness returned in patches. there were unpleasant dreams. Something was banging his head; it wasn't the knock of his alarm clock. They were dragging him feet first, and his head was bouncing off uneven ground. The dream faded to pleasant grayness, then came back in a new form: he was rolling down a hillside, the rocks cutting into his body.

Rey came to rest in foul-tasting water, and wondered if he would drown before he woke up. Strong hands pulled him from the water. Through the ringing in his ears he heard someone say, "There. A moment of sitting to catch the breath."

He coughed weakly, and looked around. No more dreams: the nightmare was reality. He was sitting by a shallow pond, near the bottom of a pit. The edge of the pit was ten yards above his head, except on one

side, where it broke low and gave a view of the harbor. He was not alone. There were dozens of people here—all that remained of the *Science* crew. They clustered around the newly fallen. Looking up at their faces, Rey saw hope in some, fear and despair in others.

"You're looking bad. Can you talk?" It was the woman who had pulled him from the pond. She was in her late fifties, an Osterlai by her accent. Her clothes were neat but stained. There was a matter-of-fact friendliness in her voice. In a moment he would remember who she was.

"Y-yes," he croaked. "What happened?"

The woman gave a short laugh. "You tell us. Five minutes ago it just started raining people. Looks like the Termite Folk have found new blasphemers."

Rey swallowed. "You're right." And it was his fault.

Most of his companions were in worse shape than he. The *Science* prisoners were trying to help, but two of the Tarulle people looked freshly dead. Nowhere did he see Brailly Tounse. He glanced at the Osterlai woman and made a wan smile. "We came to rescue you." He gave his captive audience a brief account of the sales landing. "Everything was going fine. I was beginning to think they might listen to us, that we'd at least learn more about your situation. Then they found the mirror from my telescope. How could they know what it was, much less—" He noticed the look on the woman's face.

"And how do you think we got in trouble, my sir? We thought to do some observing from the peaks Inland. We had a twenty-inch mirror; the Seraph-seeing should be better here than—" She broke off in surprise. "Why, you're Rey Guille!"

Rey nodded, and she continued, "So I don't have to tell you the details; you've written enough about the idea. . . . I'm Janna Kats, Seraphist at Bergenton; we met once a couple years back." She waved a hand as recognition slowly dawned on Rey. "Anyway. We dragged that mirror ashore, gave the Termiters a look. They thought it was great stuff—till they learned what we wanted to look at." She laughed, but it was not a happy sound. "Lots of religions worship Seraph. You know: home o' the gods and such garbage. Turns out the Termiters think Seraph is something like the gods' bedroom—and mortals mustn't peep!" So that was how they learned what the parts of a telescope look like.

"It still doesn't make sense," Key said. "In everything else, they seem to be ancestor worshippers; I've sold them dozens of Interior fantasies. How did Seraphidolatry get mixed in?"

The question brought a fit of coughing from the little man sitting beside Kats. "I can answer that." The words were broken by more rasping coughs. The fellow's face seemed shrunken, collapsed; Rey wondered that he could talk at all. "The Termite Folk are intellectual pack rats. For three hundred years they've been here, picking up a little of this, a little of that—from whoever was passing through." More coughing. "I should have seen through 'em right off. . . . I've spent my whole life studying coastal barbarians, learning Hurdic. But these folks are so secretive, I didn't understand what was driving them . . . till it was too late." A smile twisted his thin face. "I could get a nice research paper out of what we've learned here. Too bad we gotta die first."

Rey Guille had years of experience finding loopholes in impossible situations—on paper. "Maybe we don't have to die. I never thought the Termiters were killers. If their religion is such a hodgepodge, they can't take the taboos too seriously. You've been here for several days. Maybe they just want a graceful way out." It really made sense. Then he remembered Brailly's bomb, and continued more quietly, "If there's anything they'd kill for, I think it would be what my people did to the Village Hall."

"You don't understand, fellow," a third *Science* person spoke, a sharp edge in his voice. "Knocking over a termite mound is a peccadillo in their eyes—compared to invading the gods' privacy. They've kept us alive this long because they're having trouble devising a torture-death appropriate to our crime!"

"How can you know that for sure—"

"We know, Master Guille." Janna Kats's tough exterior broke for an instant, and she looked just as frightened as the others. "In the last two days they've taken three of us from the pit. W—we could hear the screams; one we could see. Each took longer to die than the last."

There was a moment of silence, and then the cougher said, "I think the Termiters are scared, too—of their Seraph gods. If they can't come up with the proper death for us, they think the gods will apply that death to *them*. The three they killed were . . . little experiments."

"But there will be no more." The toughness was back in Janna's voice.

"The next time they come, one big surprise we'll show them. We won't be skoats waiting for the slaughter."

Rey looked up, at the rim of the pit. There were Termite Folk all around. Most carried spears, but that wasn't the most deadly thing; spears kill one at a time, make a slow thing of a massacre. Much more ominous were the

priests carrying torches. They stood near the three petroleum vats Brailly had spotted earlier. Each tank was mounted on a crude swivel. Should they choose, the torch bearers could drown their prisoners in flame. A few hours before, that prospect had filled him with sympathetic dread. For Janna and the others, it had come to be the only imaginable out.

The hours passed. at the top of the sky, Seraph widened toward full, its western ocean turning dark and reddish with the start of the midnight eclipse. The Villagers marched steady patrols around the edge of the pit. Mostly they were silent. The *Science's* anthropologist said they had long ago stopped responding to his shouted questions.

There were no more "experiments," but Rey gradually realized the pit was in itself a killing place. The only water was in the shallow pool at the bottom of the pit—and that became steadily more foul. The only food was what the Villagers threw into the pit: slabs of skoat cheese and balls of what turned out to be pressed termite larva. Rey had eaten some exotic things in his years with Tarulle, but the larva patties were half rotted. Hungry as they were, only a few of the prisoners could keep them down. Three of the Tarulle prisoners were dead, their bodies broken by the explosion. Two of the survivors had compound fractures; their moans came less frequently with each passing hour.

The prisoners were not alone in the pit. The true builders of the Village were here, too. In the silence that dragged between conversations and occasional screaming, Rey heard a *switching* sound coming from all directions. At the corner of his vision, a pebble would move, something would scuttle from one hole to another. The termites were no bigger than a man's thumb, but there must be millions of them in the sides of the pit. They avoided the humans, but their activity was ceaseless. The sides of the pit were not ordinary earth. All the way down to the pool, this was moundstuff. It must be old, the detritus of thousands of years of towers, but it was still used by the tiny creatures. The stones in this "soil" must have washed down from the hills to the north. The coming of humans was a recent event in the hives' history.

The towers of the Village crowded around three sides of the pit, but beyond the broken southern lip, they could see the harbor. The Tarulle Barge was less than a quarter mile out. Deck piled on deck, loading cranes sticking out in all directions, masts rising slim into the reddish-blue sky—the Barge had never seemed so beautiful to Rey as now. Safety was just twelve hundred feet away; it might as well be the other side of Seraph.

An hour earlier, a hydrofoil had arrived from the ocean and docked in a starboard slip. There was no other boat activity, though Rey fancied he saw motion on the bridge: another meeting? And this time, a final decision to leave?

Most of the prisoners huddled on the north slope of the depression; the corpses were carried to the other side of the pit. The prisoners were bright people. They'd had plenty of time to try to figure a way out, and no success in doing so. The arrival of Rey's group brought new hope, even though the rescue had been a failure. For an hour or two, there was renewed scheming. When it became clear that nothing had really changed, the talk gradually petered out. Many of the prisoners drifted back to inward looking silence.

There were exceptions. One thing Rey loved about scientists was *their* love for speculation. Take Tredi Bekjer, the little guy who spent the hours coughing his lungs out. Tredi was a sickly fellow who should never have been on the *Science* expedition in the first place. He was an anthropologist, and the only captive who spoke fluent Hurdic. He might be dying, but between spasms of coughing he argued about the origin and future of their captors. He predicted that, no matter what the prisoners' fate, the ambush had doomed the Termitter culture. Now, outsiders knew there was petroleum nearby. When that news got to the archipelagates, the Termitter Folk would have lots of visitors. Even if the locals were not booted off their land, they would be forced to make big changes, in thirty years, there would be a *real* city here.

There were others like Tredi, folks who could walk through the gates of death, still arguing about ideas. When the planning and the scheming was done, these few still had something to talk about. Rey found himself drawn in.

Janna Kats was the most interesting. Before specializing in Seraphy, she'd had lots of experience with other branches of astronomy. And U Bergenton had the best astronomers in the world—if you excepted the Doo'd'en fanatics on the other side of the world. Kats was just the sort of person he'd been hoping to talk to—back when he thought they'd find the *Science* in one piece. For minutes at a time Rey could forget where he was and what his fate must be. Kats had had great plans for the Seraph observatory. There should be good seeing from the mountains behind the harbor. Ground resolutions better than one hundred yards would have been possible with the twenty-inch mirror. The issue of intelligent life on Seraph might finally be resolved. . . . Instead, the project had brought them all to this pit.

Rey grunted. "Other things are happening in astronomy. Things that aren't so dangerous. There have been some fantastic discoveries at Krirsarque." He described "Pride of Iron" and the spectroscopic observations it was based on. "Can you imagine! With spectroscopy, we can know what things are like on planets around other stars." He sat back, waiting for Janna's reaction to this news. It was one of the occasional pleasures of his job, to be the first person in an entire archipelago to report a breakthrough.

Janna grinned back at him, but there was no surprise in her expression. "Ha! That's one of the results the U Tsanart people sent west with *Science*. During the last year, they've got good spectra on twenty stars in our sun's class. Every damn one of 'em is metal rich. And we have other results too. We can measure radial motions with this spectra stuff—" She laughed at the expression on his face. "You've written a lot of high-flown editorials about 'Spectroscopy, Key to the Universe.' Well, you may have understated the case. Combine the spectral shift data with proper motion studies, and it's obvious our solar system is an interloper, just passing through the local star stream."

Outcast Star. The title flashed through Rey's mind. There were writers who could run away with that idea—and surely would, if he got out of this alive. "You know, it's almost as if someone were picking on the human race," he mused. "Out of all the solar systems, that we should be the one on the low metal one, the outsider." He didn't like the idea. It smacked of the theistic fantasy Cor Ascuasenya so loved: humanity as doormat to the gods.

"You've got it backward, my sir. Ever hear of the anthropic principle? Most likely, intelligent life exists on Tu *exactly because* we are different from the others. Think what an abundance of metals would mean. It's not just a matter of wealth, millions of ounces of iron available for large scale construction. My guess is such concentrations of metals would change the surface chemistry so much that life would never develop."

Janna's middle-aged features were filled with a happy smugness, but Rey did not feel put down. He was imagining deadly, treasure-house worlds. "Or life might develop, but different than here. Why, there might be—"

Janna abruptly grabbed his arm. She was looking past him, her expression intent; his speculations were suddenly of zero interest. There were scattered gasps from the prisoners. He turned and looked into the harbor. The Barge had lowered a boat to the water. It glowed with white light, a jewel in the reddening dimness. Then he realized that Tarulle had

lit a flare at the focus of the bridge's signal mirror. Its light fell dazzling on the boat—which was nothing more than a freight lander painted silver and white. Before the flare guttered out, two more were lit at other mirrors. They tracked the boat as it started toward shore.

The Termiter priests were suddenly shouting. One group of spear carriers ran to the south side of the pit, while others moved to the pet' vats and slid the covers aside. Priests dipped their torches into the vats— and the night exploded. The thunder went on and on, drowning the shouts of prisoners and Villagers alike. Flame and smoke rose from the petroleum, swirls of red and black across the mid-night eclipse. Hundreds of bats swarmed drunkenly in the superheated air, burning, falling. The stench of pet' was everywhere. The Termiters cowered back from the pyres they had created, but Rey saw a few priests near each, setting long poles against the sides of the vats. A few good pushes, and the prison pit would be wall-to-wall fire.

Some of the prisoners collapsed, their mouths open, eyes wide. They must be screaming. Beside him, Janna Kats had caught his arm in both her hands. Her eyes were clenched shut, her face averted from the fires. Something in Rey's mind retreated and suddenly he wasn't frightened. He wasn't brave; he simply couldn't grasp the reality of his imminent torch-hood. He looked back to the harbor. The firing of the vats hadn't stopped the boat. It floated serenely toward them, still lit by the Barge's flares. He strained to see what it was carrying. The oarsmen wore black robes, their faces hidden within deep cowls. Those weren't Tarulle uniforms, yet they were somehow familiar. There was only one other person on the boat. She stood at the bow, scorning all support. Her clothes were white and silver, gleaming in the faraway spotlights. Black hair cascaded around her face and shoulders.

Now Rey understood this latest rescue attempt. He damned and thanked Cor all at once for trying.

Tarulle doused the flares the instant the lighter touched shore. In the roaring red dimness, the figure on the boat was a vague thing. She did something to her robes and suddenly was near naked, and incredibly female. When she swung over the railing, red-silver glinted from her breasts and thighs. The oarsmen followed, clumsy black beetles by comparison. They started up the hillside, and were lost to Rey's view beyond the south side of the pit ...

... but not lost to the Termiters'. The spear carriers hadn't moved, but every face was turned toward the approaching party. The priests by the fire vats had dropped their poles, and stared in shock. Janna's grip

loosened. She tried to ask him something, but even shouting mouth to ear, she couldn't talk over the flame-roar. Rey could only point to the rim of the pit.

A minute passed. Villagers at the southeast corner of the pit backed away . . . and the newcomers appeared. *By the Light*, what a job Cor had done! It was strange to see—in the middle of terrible, deadly reality—the incarnation of a hundred fantasies. This *was* Hrala, complete with a contingent of the Sibhood Sinistre. The Sibhood followed Hrala through most of the stories. Their motives were beyond knowing, but seemed more evil than not. Sometimes they were Hrala's deadliest enemies, sometimes her allies. When they were her allies, the rest of the world better watch out. The black-cowled figures hung silently behind her, looking a dozen times more deadly than any Termitter priests.

The fraud would have been nothing without its central character. Tatja Grimm had come to Tarulle an outsized waif. The make-up people had transformed her. Black hair lapped smooth down to her waist, a perfect copy of all the illustrations. Her body was evenly tanned, though all she wore was ribbon armor, and that only around her hips and breasts. If he hadn't seen the girl before, Rey never would have guessed that bosom was faked. She carried the blade named *Death*. Crafted of "magic metal," edged with diamonds, it was a living creature and one of Hrala's earliest conquests. Without her control, it would take up its original mission—to corrupt the powerful and scourge The Continent. In fact, the prop was carved from puffwood painted silver and edged with quartz. Any sharp blow would shatter it.

Tatja Grimm walked forward, *Death's* flat resting on her shoulder as though it weighed pounds and not ounces. Cor had coached her well. Every motion was fluid, arrogant. She walked straight to a high point on the pit's rim. For a long moment, she surveyed the flaming vats and the priests. Not once did she look at the spear carriers. The Villagers stared back, eyes wide. Rey could see the fear mounting in them.

Abruptly, Hrala's hand flashed out. She pointed at the vats and clenched her fist. The Barbarian Princess wanted those fires *out*. The Termitter priests scrambled to push the lids back onto the vats. Flames burst sideways, searing the priests, but one by one the lids were forced into place. There were scattered explosions; one of the vats trembled in its cradle. Then a great silence replaced the violence. For a long moment, everyone listened to the ringing in their ears.

Rey couldn't believe his eyes or ears. Did the Termitter priests actually believe the stories? Of course, the instant the girl opened her mouth the

illusion would be broken—

The Grimm girl turned, gestured the chief Sib to stand close behind her. The cowed figure slid forward, servile and sneaky at the same time. That must be Coronadas Ascuasenya; she might just be close enough to prompt the girl. There was a hissing conversation between the two, broken off by an imperious gesture from the Princess. She looked back at the Termiters and finally spoke. The words rattled fast, diamond hard. They were not Sprak.

Tredi Bekjer gasped. He crawled the few feet that separated him from Rey. "That's Hurdic!"

Janna and Rey dropped to their knees beside him. "What's she saying?"

Bekjer listened a moment more. "Hard to follow. She's speaks a deep Interior dialect. . . . I've only heard it a couple times." He choked back a coughing spasm. "Says she's angry as ... the hot pits of the earth. Termiters have no business holding her . . . property? prey? She means us, in any case. She demands reparations, replacements for the dead, and—" Tredi laughed and coughed at the same time "—and the return of the survivors."

The sharp-voiced speech ended. The Barbarian Princess stood waiting a reply. *Death* twitched in her hand, impatient to forego these diplomatic niceties.

A voice came from the priests. After a second, Rey recognized it as belonging to the tall Termiter. The words were tentative and quavery, totally lacking the menace Tatja/Hrala put into hers. Tredi continued his translation: "Local guy is explaining our blasphemy. Case you can't tell, he's practically wetting his pants. ... If he doesn't punish us, the High Gods will torture-kill his people. And now Hrala is threatening to skewer his guts if he doesn't let us go. He's caught between two dooms."

Hrala had a reply. She swung *Death* from her shoulder and thrust it skyward. The fake metal gleamed red-silver, "diamonds" glittering. Her speech was as angry and decisive as before. Tredi's translation consisted of a single, soft-spoken, "*Wow.*" Janna punched his shoulder, and the little anthropologist remembered his listeners. "Whoever she is, she's wonderful. . . . She told the Termiter to remember his place, that he's too *low* in the scheme of things to *presume* upon the High Gods' vengeance. ... I can't translate it any better; she packed a freightload of hauteur into a couple sentences. She's telling him, if her property is offensive, then that's something between Hrala and the Gods."

Rey Guille looked from Tatja Grimm to the clustered priests. Hope was

a sudden, wonderful thing. Every state religion he'd ever seen had a core of hypocrisy. That was why he'd been against bringing "Hrala" ashore—he knew the priests would never accept their theology suddenly incarnate. But Cor and the Grimm girl had taken the risk, and now, incredibly, the plan was working.

For several minutes the priests had no reply. They stood in a tight group, speaking in low voices. Around them, the spear carriers held their weapons loosely, their eyes never leaving Tatja Grimm. From beyond the rim, an anonymous voice called, "Hrala." After a moment, one of the spear carriers repeated: "Hra-la." The word was passed back and forth among the low-ranking Termiters. They pronounced the guttural "H" with a force and precision that made Rey wince. "Hra-la. Hra-la. Hra La. Hra La ..." The chant spread around the pit, a soft drumbeat.

One of the priests shouted; the chant stumbled, guttered out. After a moment, the priest continued. His voice was placating, but without the quavering fear of before. "New guy," said Tredi. "He's talking humble, sweet as sugar. Says that for sure Hrala's claim takes precedence over theirs, but . . ." Tredi sucked in a breath. "*Bastard!* He says, in dealing with beings so deadly as the High Gods, his people need at least to go through the motions ... of verifying Hrala's identity."

Another priest spoke up, his voice high-pitched and not nearly as confident as the first. "'A mere formality,' the second jerk says."

"S-so what's the *formality*, Tredi!" Janna all but shook the little man.

Bekjer listened a second longer, then caught back a sob. "Nothing much. A little trial by combat."

Rey's eyes stayed on Tatja Grimm all through this speech. She didn't flinch. If anything she stood taller now, her chin raised at the impudence of the "request." No amount of coaching could have taught her to do that: the girl was as gutsy as anyone he'd ever known. When the priest finished, her reply was immediate, a sharp three syllables filled with anger and arrogance.

" 'Certainly,' she says," Bekjer translated unnecessarily.

And Rey's hope fled as quickly as it had come. The girl looked down at *Death*, and for an instant he saw the gawky youngster who had come aboard Tarulle just a few days before. She wasn't afraid, just uncertain, feeling her way in a strange situation. The puffwood sword was a magnificent bluff, but they were beyond bluffs now. It couldn't cut butter,

and it would shatter at the first blow.

The girl gestured imperiously at the chief Sib, the one who must be Coronadas Ascuasenya. The Sib slid forward, and spoke hissing into Hrala's ear. The rescue party was about out of options. No doubt they were heavily armed. If they acted quickly, while the tattered bluff had some credibility, they could probably fight their way back to the landing boat—and at least save themselves.

Hrala listened to the Sib for a moment, then interrupted. The two were arguing! It was consistent with all the stories, but why now? Cor's hissing broke into full voice for an instant, and suddenly he realized this was no sham. Hrala shook her head abruptly, and handed her sword to the Sib. Cor sank beneath the pretended weight of *Death*. She didn't have much choice now. She slunk back to the other Sibs, her fear obvious but suddenly in character: she held *Death* in her hands. As a Sib Sinistre, she could not be perverted by it (the Sibhood was already pretty perverse), but possessing *Death* and being possessed by it were very close things. It was a theme Rey had insinuated into the series himself.

Hrala turned back to the Termitter Priests. She was smiling, and the anger was gone from her words; mocking arrogance remained.

"Says she's happy to fight, but it's no ... fun . . . wasting *Death* on such easy prey as the Termitters. She'll fight with whatever weapons her opponent chooses."

That almost started the chant again. The priests shouted it down, and alter a moment one of them carried a sword-club toward Hrala/Tatja. This fellow was no fighter, just an errand boy. He laid the club on the ground ten feet from the girl, then scuttled back to safety. Hrala let him depart, then stepped from the high ground to inspect the weapon.

"If she's from deep Inland, she's never seen a sword-club," said Tredi. "Spears and pikes are all the Inlanders have. Even on the coast, it's a ceremonial weapon."

This one was clearly for special occasions; the wood was polished, unmarred. Without metals or composite materials, true swords were impossible. It looked deadly all the same. In overall shape it was something between a club and a pike. Elaborate hooks and blades, of bone or obsidian, were set along its length. There was a spike of glassy blackness at one end, and a hilt at the other. A second grip was set halfway down the pole; perhaps the thing could be used like a quarterstaff.

Hrala/Tatja picked it up, clearly as mystified as Rey. Somehow the puzzlement didn't take her out of character: she smiled her curiosity,

seeming to say *how interesting, how clever*. He couldn't tell if she were acting or if this were the same frank wonderment he'd seen in her before. She swung it through a couple of clean arcs, then paused, glanced hesitantly at Cor and the others. Rey understood; this was her last chance to cut and run. Cor started toward her, but the girl turned away and shouted at the priests.

"She says she's ready."

Rey scarcely realized he was holding his breath. The girl *could win*. The spear carriers were already sold on the fraud; none of them could fight effectively. The more cynical priests weren't fooled, but they were exactly the sort that let others do their fighting. Who did that leave? Mental subnormals, too stupid to be afraid?

The crowd of priests parted and someone very broad and heavy started up the incline toward Tatja Grimm. The man's gait was slow, almost shambling. Even from here Rey could see the dullness in his features. *Thank the Light!*

Then he saw the second one.

They were nearly identical—giant, stupid . . . and armed. They carried their sword-clubs before them, both as threat and shield. Each was dressed in heavy leather. It was primitive armor, but at least real; Tatja Grimm was virtually naked, what armor she wore a gaudy fake.

Together, they outweighed her three to one.

The two separated as they approached the girl. They stopped ten feet from her, and for a moment the combatants stared at each other. Rey thought he saw traces of anxiety in the dullards' manner; you'd have to be a vegetable to ignore the mood of the Villagers and the deadly confidence that came from the enemy.

Twenty years of fantasy collided with reality tonight—and for an instant the fantasy seemed the truer vision. The scene would have made a perfect cover painting: Hrala standing straight and fearless before a pair of subhuman attackers, a city of towers spreading on and on behind her. The last blue had disappeared from Seraph's eastern ocean. The disk shaded from brighter reds to darker. The cloud of tarry smoke from the pet' vats still hung in the air, roiling Seraph's continents out of all recognition. Everything—towers, prisoners, priests, fighters—was lit with shifting reds. It was the color of blood, *Hrala's color*, the background color of her most chilling battles.

A priest shouted at the swordsmen, and the moment passed. They came

in from opposite sides, their bladed clubs swinging. The girl grabbed her club at the hilt and foregrip and whirled between them. They were slow, and Tatja Grimm was terribly quick. That could only save her from quick death: she danced backwards, up the rise. She used the club like a staff, blocking. Blade fragments flew from every blow.

She bounded three great steps back, and moved both hands to the hilt of the club. She swung it in a quick sweep, her greater reach keeping the two back—till they separated again and came at her from the sides. Even so, she wasn't retreating now.

"She learns very fast," Tredi said to no one in particular.

But some lessons are learned the hard way. The bladed hooks were good for more than terror and disemboweling. One of her parries brought a crashing halt; her club had locked with the attacker's. The swordsman raised his club, swinging her slender body against him. Tatja kicked and kned him. Even in his armor, the fellow staggered beneath the blows. The second attacker ran forward, rammed the point of his club squarely at the girl's torso. Somehow she sensed the attack, and threw herself backwards. The impaling thrust was turned into a deep slash across her chest.

She hit the ground and bounced instantly to her feet. For a moment the action stopped and the antagonists stared at each other, shocked. In the smoky red dimness, details were vague . . . yet the fake bosom still seemed to be in place. Everyone could see that the armor around her chest had been slashed open. Everyone could see the ripping wound across her breasts. Everyone could see that Hrala *did not bleed*.

The second swordsman stepped backwards and whimpered. His tiny brain finally realized that he should be terrified. He dropped his club and ran from both priests and Hrala.

The first fellow didn't seem to notice. He flipped Hrala's club over his head and advanced on her. She didn't retreat, didn't try to rush around him to the discarded clubs; she stood with knees slightly bent, hands held open. Only when the bladed club swung toward her middle did she move—and then it was too fast for Rey to follow. Somehow she caught the foregrip of the club, used it as a brace to swing her body up and ram her foot into the other's throat. The blow jarred the club loose, and the two fell in an apparently random tangle. But only one combatant rose from that fall. The other lay twitching, the point of a sword-club struck through his skull.

The girl stared at the dying man. A look that might have been horror passed across her face; her arms and shoulders were shaking. Suddenly

she straightened and stepped back. When she looked at the priests, haughty pride was back in her features.

"Hrala. Hra-la. Hra La. Hra La . . ." The chant began again. This time, no priest dared shout it down.

Coronadas Ascuasenya had plenty of contact with the rescued during the next few days. Some recovered from the horror better than others. Janna Kats could laugh with good humor within ten hours of the rescue. The little anthropologist, Tredi Bekjer, was almost as cool, though it would be some time before his body recovered.

But four days out from the Village, some of the *Science* people were still starting at shadows, crying without provocation. And for every survivor, there would always be nightmares.

Cor had never considered herself especially brave, but she hadn't been trapped in that pit; she hadn't seen friends torture-murdered. Once they returned to the Barge, and the Village was irrevocably behind them, it was easy to put the terror from her mind. She could enjoy the Welcoming Back, the honor given her and Rey Guille and Brailly Tounse, the greater honor given Tatja Grimm.

It was as close to a storybook ending as could be imagined. Thirty-six from the *Science* had died, but nearly one hundred had survived the adventure and would return with the Barge (much to the surprise of their sponsoring universities, who hadn't expected to see them for two years). When Tarulle sailed into the Osterlais—and later the Tsanarts—everyone would be instant celebrities, it would be the story of the decade, and an immensely profitable affair for the Tarulle Publishing Company. Whatever their normal job slot, every literate participant in the rescue had been ordered to write an account of the operation. There was talk of starting a whole new magazine to report such true adventures.

And management seemed to think that Cor and Rey had masterminded this publishing coup. After all, he had suggested the landing; she had produced Tatja/Hrala. Cor knew how much this bothered Rey. He had tried to convince Svektr Ramsey that he had fallen into things without the least commercial savvy. Of course, Ramsey knew that, but he wasn't about to let Rey wriggle free. So Guille was stuck with producing the centerpiece account of the rescue.

"Don't worry about it, Boss. They don't want the truth." She and the *Fantastic* editor were standing at the railing of the top editorial deck.

Except for the masts and Jespen Tarulle's penthouse, this was as high as you could get on the Barge. It was one of Cor's favorite places: a third of the Barge's decks were visible from here, and the view of the horizon was not blocked by rigging and sails. It was early and the morning bustle had not begun. A cold salt wind came steadily from the east. That air was so clean—not a trace of tarry smoke. White tops showed across miles of ocean. Nowhere was there sign of land. It was hard to imagine any place farther from the Village of the Termite People.

Rey didn't answer immediately. He was watching something on the print deck. He drew his jacket close, and looked at her. "It doesn't matter. We can write the truth. They won't understand. Anyone who wasn't there, won't understand." Cor had been there. She *did* understand . . . but wished she didn't.

Rey turned back to watch the print deck, and Cor saw the object of his interest. The man wore ordinary fatigues. He wandered slowly along the outer balcony of the deck. He was either lonely, or bored—or fascinated by every detail of the railing and deck. Cor suspected the fellow wasn't bored: part of the Hrala fraud had been the demand that the Termiters replace her damaged "property" (the dead from Brailly's party and the *Science*). It seemed unwise to retract the demand completely, so five unfortunate Villagers were taken aboard.

This was one of them; he had been a Termiter priest—their spokesman/interpreter. Cor had talked to him several times since the rescue; he made very good copy. He turned out to be a real innocent, not one of the maniacs or hard core cynics. In fact, he had fallen from favor when the cynics pushed for trial by combat. He had never left the Village before; all his Spra'k came from reading magazines and talking to travelers. What had first seemed a terrible punishment was now turning out to be the experience of his lifetime. "The guy's a natural scholar, Boss. We drop the others off at the first hospitable landing, but I hope he wants to stay. If he could learn about civilization, return home in a year or so ... he could do his people a lot of good. They'll need to understand the outside world when the petroleum hunters come."

Rey wasn't paying attention. He pointed further down the deck.

It was Tatja Grimm. She was looking across the sea, her tall form slumped so her elbows rested on the railing and her hands cupped her chin. The ex-priest must have seen her at that instant. He came to an abrupt halt, and his whole body seemed to shiver.

"Does he *know*?"

Rey shook his head. "I think he does now."

In many ways the girl was different from that night at the Village. Her hair was short and red. Without the fake bust, she was a skinny pre-teenager—and by her bearing, a discouraged one. But she was nearly six feet tall, and her face was something you would never forget after that night. The priest walked slowly toward her, every step a struggle. His hands grasped the railing like a lifeline.

Then the girl glanced at him, and for an instant it seemed the Termitter would run off. Instead, he bowed . . . and they talked. From up on the editorial deck, Cor couldn't hear a word. Besides, they were probably speaking Hurdic. It didn't matter. She could imagine the conversation.

They were an odd combination: the priest sometimes shaking, sometimes bowing, his life's beliefs being shot from under him; the girl, still slouched against the railing, paying more attention to the sea than to the conversation. Even during the Welcoming Back she had been like this. The praise had left her untouched; her listless replies had come from far away, punctuated by an occasional calculating look that Cor found more unsettling than the apathy.

After several minutes, the priest gave a final bow, and walked away. Only now, he didn't need the railing. Cor wondered what it must be like to suddenly learn that supernatural fears were unnecessary. For herself, the turn of belief was in the opposite direction.

Rey said, "There's a rational explanation for Tatja Grimm. For years we've been buying Contrivance Fiction about alien invaders. We were just too blind to see that it's finally happened."

"A visitor from the stars, eh?" Cor smiled weakly.

"Well, do you have a better explanation?"

". . . No." But Cor knew Tatja well enough to believe her story. She really was from the Interior. Her tribe's only weapons were spears and hand axes. Their greatest "technical" skill was sniffing out seasonal springs. She'd run away when she was eight. She moved from tribe to tribe—always toward the more advanced ones. She never found what she was looking for. "She's a very quick learner."

"Yeah. A quick learner. Tredi Bekjer said that, too. It's the key to everything. I should have caught on the minute I heard how Jimi found her 'praying' to the noontime shadow of her quarterstaff. There she had reproduced one of the great experiments of all time—and I put it down to religion! You're right; there's no way she could be from an advanced

civilization. She didn't recognize my telescope. The whole idea of magnification was novel to her. ... Yet she understood the principle as soon as she saw the mirror."

Cor looked down at the print deck, at the girl who seemed so sad and ordinary. There had been a time when Cor felt the start of friendship with the girl. It could never be. Tatja Grimm was like a hydrofoil first seen far atern. For a while she had been insignificant, struggling past obstacles Cor scarcely remembered. Then she pulled even. Cor remembered the last day of rehearsals; sympathy had chilled and turned to awe – as Cor realized just how *fast* Tatja was moving. In the future, she would sweep into a far away Coronadas Ascuasenya could never imagine. "And now she understands us, and knows we are just as dumb as all the others."

Rey nodded uncertainly. "I think so. At first she was triumphant; our toys are so much nicer than any tribe's. Then she realized they were the product of centuries of slow invention. She can search the whole world now, but she won't find anything better."

So here she must stop, and make the best of things. "I-I really do have a theory, Boss. Those old stories of fate and gods, the ones you're so down on? If they were true, she would fit right in, a godling who is just awakened. When she understands this, and sees her place in the world . . . She talked to me after the Welcoming Back. Her Spra'k is good now; there was no mistaking her meaning. She thanked me for the Hrala-coaching. She thanked me for showing her the power of fraud, for showing her that people can be used as easy as any other tool."

For a long while, Rey had no response.

The End