

The Way of All Ghosts (v1.1)

A Myth from Thistledown

Greg Bear, 1999

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"Probabilities fluctuated wildly, but always passed through zero, and gate openers, their equipment, and all associated personnel within a few hundred meters of the gate, were swallowed by a null that can only be described in terms of mathematics. It became difficult to remember that they had ever existed; records of their histories were corrupted or altered, even though they lay millions of kilometers from the incident. We had tapped into the geometric blood of the gods. But we knew we had to continue. We were compelled."

-- Testimony of Master Gate Opener Ry Ornis, Secret Hearings Conducted by the Infinite Hexamon Nexus, "On the Advisability of Opening Gates into Chaos and Order"

The ghost of his last lover found Olmy Ap Sennen in the oldest columbarium of Alexandria, within the second chamber of Thistledown.

Olmy stood in the middle of the hall, surrounded by stacked tiers of hundreds of small golden spheres. The spheres were urns, most of them containing only a sample of ashes. They rose to the glassed-in ceiling, held within columns of gentle yellow suspension fields. He reached out to touch a blank silver plate at the base of one column. The names of the dead appeared as if suddenly engraved, one after another.

He removed his hand when the names reached *Ilmo, Paul Yan*. This is where the soldiers from his childhood neighborhood were honored; in this column, five names, all familiar to him from days in school, all killed in a single skirmish with the Jarts near 3 ex 9, three billion kilometers down the Way. All had been obliterated without trace. These urns were empty.

He did not know the details. He did not need to. These dead had served Thistledown as faithfully as Olmy, but they would never return.

Olmy had spent seventy-three years stranded on the planet Lamarckia, in the service of the Hexamon, cut off from Thistledown and the Way that stretched beyond the asteroid's seventh chamber. On Lamarckia, he had raised children, loved and buried wives ... lived a long and memorable life in primitive conditions on an extraordinary world. His rescue and return to the Way, converted within days from an old and dying man to a fresh-bodied youth, had been a shock worse than the return of any real and ancient ghost.

Axis City, slung on the singularity that occupied the geodesic center of the Way, had been completed during those tumultuous years before Olmy's rescue and resurrection. It had

moved four hundred thousand kilometers "north," down the Way, far from the seventh chamber cap. Within the Geshel precincts of Axis City, the mental patterns of many who died were now transferred to City Memory, a technological afterlife not very different from the ancient dream of heaven. Using similar technology, temporary partial personalities could be created to help an individual multi-task. These were sometimes called ghosts. Olmy had heard of partials, sent to do the bidding of their originals, with most of their mental faculties duplicated, but limited power to make decisions. He had never actually met one, however.

The ghost appeared just to his right and announced its nature by flickering slightly, growing translucent, then briefly turning into a negative. This display lasted only a few seconds. After, the simulacrum seemed perfectly solid and real. Olmy jumped, disoriented, then surveyed the ghost's features. He shook his head and smiled wryly.

"It will give my original joy to find you well," the partial said. "You seem lost, Ser Olmy."

Olmy did not quite know what form of speech to use with the partial. Should he address it with respect due to the original, a corporep and a woman of influence ... The last woman he had tried to be in love with ... Or as he might address a servant?

"I come here often. Old acquaintances."

The image looked concerned. "Poor Olmy. Still don't belong anywhere?"

Olmy ignored this. He looked for the ghost's source. It was projected from a fist-sized flier hovering several meters away.

"I'm here on behalf of my original, corporeal representative Neya Taur Rinn. You realize ... I am not her?"

"I'm not ignorant," Olmy said sharply, finding himself once more at a disadvantage with this woman.

The ghost fixed her gaze on him. The image, of course, was not actually doing the seeing. "The Presiding Minister of the Way, Yanosh Ap Kesler, instructed me to find you. My original was reluctant. I hope you understand."

Olmy folded his hands behind his back as the partial pictured a series of ID symbols: Office of the Presiding Minister, Hexamon Nexus Office of Way Defense, Office of Way Maintenance. Quite a stack of bureaucracies, Olmy thought, Way Maintenance currently being perhaps the most powerful and arrogant of them all.

"What does Yanosh want with me?" he asked bluntly.

The ghost lifted her hands and pointed her index finger into her palm, tapping with each point. "You supported him in his bid to become Presiding Minister of the Seventh Chamber and the Way. You've become a symbol for the advance of Geshel interests."

"Against my will," Olmy said. Yanosh, a fervent progressive and Geshel, had sent Olmy to Lamarckia -- and had also brought him back and arranged for his new body. Olmy for his own part had never known quite which camp he belonged to: conservative Naderites, grimly opposed to the extraordinary advances of the last century, or the enthusiastically progressive Geshels.

Neya Taur Rinn's people were Geshels of an ancient radical faction, among the first to move into Axis City. "Ser Kesler has won reelection as presiding minister of the Way and now also serves as mayor of three precincts in Axis City."

"I'm aware of that."

"Of course. The Presiding Minister extends his greetings and hopes you are agreeable."

"I am very agreeable," Olmy said mildly. "I stay out of politics and disagree with nobody."

I can't pay back Yanosh for all he has done -- but then, I have rendered him due service as well." He did not like being baited -- and could not understand why Yanosh would send Neya to fetch him. The Presiding Minister knew enough about Olmy's private life -- probably too much. "Yanosh knows I've put myself on permanent leave." Olmy could not restrain himself. "Pardon me for boldness, but I'm curious. How do you feel? Do you actually *think* you are Neya Taur Rinn?"

The partial smiled. "I am a high-level partial given subordinate authority by my original," it said. *She* said ... Olmy decided he would not cut such fine distinctions.

"Yes, but what does it *feel* like?" he asked.

"At least you're still alive enough to be curious," the partial said.

"Your original regarded my curiosity as a kind of perversity," Olmy said.

"A morbid curiosity," the partial returned, clearly uncomfortable. "I couldn't stand maintaining a relationship with a man who wanted to be *dead*."

"You rode my fame until I bored you," Olmy rejoined, then regretted the words. He used old training to damp his sharper emotions.

"To answer your question, I *feel* everything my original would feel. And my original would hate to see you here. What do *you* feel like, Ser Olmy?" The ghost's arm swung out to take in the urns, the columbarium. "Coming here, walking among the dead, that's pretty melodramatic."

That a ghost could remember their time together, could carry tales of this meeting to her original, to a woman he had admired with all that he had left of his heart, both irritated and intrigued him. "You were attracted to me because of my history."

"I was attracted to you because of your strength," she said. "It hurt me that you were so intent on living in your memories."

"I clung to you."

"And to nobody else ... "

"I don't come here often," Olmy said. He shook his hands out by his side and stepped back. "All my finest memories are on a world I can never go back to. Real loves ... real life. Not like Thistledown now." He squinted at the image. The image's focus was precise; still, there was something false about it, a glossiness, a prim neatness unlike Neya. "You didn't help."

The partial's expression softened. "I don't take the blame entirely, but your distress doesn't please me. My original."

"I didn't say I was in distress. I feel a curious peace in fact. Why did Yanosh send you? Why did you agree to come?"

The ghost reached out to him. Her hand passed through his arm. She apologized for this breach of etiquette. "For your sake, to get you involved, and for the sake of my original, please, at least speak to our staff. The Presiding Minister needs you to join an expedition." She seemed to consider for a moment, then screw up her courage. "There's trouble at the Redoubt."

Olmy felt a sting of shock at the mention of that name. The conversation had suddenly become more than a little risky. He shook his head vigorously. "I do not acknowledge even knowing of such a place," he said.

"You know more than I do," the partial said. "I've been assured that it's real. Way Defense tells the Office of Way Maintenance that it now threatens us all."

"I'm not comfortable holding this conversation in a public place," Olmy protested.

This seemed to embolden the partial, and she projected her image closer. "This area is quiet and clean. No one listens."

Olmy stared up at the high glass ceiling.

"We are not being observed," the partial insisted. "The Nexus and Way Defense are concerned that the Jarts are closing in on that sector of the Way. I am told that if they occupy it, gain control of the Redoubt, Thistledown might as well be ground to dust and the Way set on fire like a piece of string. That scares my original. It scares *me* as I am now. Does it bother you in the least, Olmy?"

Olmy looked along the rows of urns ... Centuries of Thistledown history, lost memory, now turned to pinches of ash, or less.

"Yanosh says he's positive you can help," the partial said with a strong lilt of emotion. "It's a way to rejoin the living and make a new place for yourself."

"Why should that matter to you? To your original?" Olmy asked.

"Because my original still regards you as a hero. I still hope to emulate your service to the Hexamon."

Olmy smiled wryly. "Better to find a living model," he said. "I don't belong out there. I'm rusted over."

"That is not true," the partial said. "You have been given a new body. You are youthful and strong, and very experienced ... " She seemed about to say more, but hesitated, rippled again, and faded abruptly. Her voice faded as well, and he heard only "Yanosh says he's never lost faith in you -- "

The floor of the columbarium trembled. The solidity of Thistledown seemed to be threatened; a quake through the asteroid material, an impact from outside ... or something occurring within the Way. Olmy reached out to brace himself against a pillar. The golden spheres vibrated in their suspensions, jangling like hundreds of small bells.

From far away, sirens began to wail.

The partial reappeared. "I have lost contact with my original," it said, its features blandly stiff. "Something has broken my link with City Memory."

Olmy watched Neya's image with fascination as yet untouched by any visceral response.

"I do not know when or if there will be a recovery," she said. "There's a failure in Axis City." Suddenly the image appeared puzzled, then stricken. She held out her phantom arms. "My original ... " As if she were made of solid flesh, her face crinkled with fear. "She's died. I've *died*. Oh my God, Olmy!"

Olmy tried to understand what this might mean, under the radical new rules of life and death for Geshels such as Neya. "What's happened? What can we do?"

The image flickered wildly. "My body is *gone*. There's been a complete system failure. I don't have any legal existence."

"What about the whole-life records? Connect with them." Olmy walked around the unsteady image, as if he might capture it, stop it from fading.

"I kept putting it off ... So stupid! I haven't put myself in City Memory yet."

He tried to touch her and of course could not. He could not believe what she was saying, yet the sirens still wailed, and another small shudder rang through the asteroid.

"I have no place to go. Olmy, please! Don't let me just *stop!*" The ghost of Neya Taur Rinn drew herself up, tried to compose herself. "I have only a few seconds before ... "

Olmy felt a sudden and intense attraction to the shimmering image. He wanted to know what actual death, final death, could possibly feel like. He reached out again, as if to embrace her.

She shook her head. The flickering increased. "It feels so strange -- losing -- "

Before she could finish, the image vanished completely. Olmy's arms hung around silent and empty air.

The sirens continued to wail, audible throughout Alexandria. He slowly dropped his arms, all too aware of being alone. The projector flew in a small circle, emitting small *wheeping* sounds. Without instructions from its source, it could not decide what to do.

For a moment, he shivered and his neck hair pricked -- a sense of almost religious awe he had not experienced since his time on Lamarckia.

Olmy had started walking toward the end of the hall before he consciously knew what to do. He turned right to exit through the large steel doors and looked up through the thin clouds enwrapping the second chamber, through the glow of the flux tube to the axis borehole on the southern cap. His eyes were warm and wet. He wiped them with the back of his hand and his breath hitched.

Emergency beacons had switched on around the flux tube, forming a bright ring two-thirds of the way up the cap.

His shivering continued, and it angered him. He had died once already, yet this new body was afraid of dying, and its wash of emotions had taken charge of his senses.

Deeper still and even more disturbing was a scrap of the old loyalty ... To his people, to the vessel that bore them between the stars, that served as the open chalice of the infinite Way. A loyalty to the woman who had found him too painful to be with. "Neya!" he moaned. Perhaps she had been wrong. A partial might not have access to all information; perhaps things weren't as bad as they seemed.

But he knew that they were. He had never felt Thistledown shake so.

Olmy hurried to the rail terminal three city squares away, accompanied by throngs of curious and alarmed citizens. Barricades had been set across the entrances to the northern cap elevators; all interchamber travel was temporarily restricted. No news was available.

Olmy showed the ID marks on his wrist to a cap guard, who scanned them quickly and transmitted them to her commanders. She let him pass, and he entered the elevator and rode swiftly to the borehole.

Within the workrooms surrounding the borehole waited an arrowhead-shaped official transport, as the Presiding Minister's office had requested. None of the soldiers or guards he questioned knew what had happened. There were still no official pronouncements on any of the citizen nets. Olmy rode the transport, accompanied by five other officials, through the vacuum above the atmospheres of the next four chambers, threading the boreholes of each of the massive concave walls that separated them. None of the chambers showed any sign of damage.

In the southern cap borehole of the sixth chamber, Olmy transferred from the transport to a tuberider, designed to run along the singularity that formed the core of the Way. On this most unusual railway, he sped at many thousands of miles per hour toward the Axis City at 4 ex 5 -- four hundred thousand kilometers north of Thistledown.

A few minutes from Axis City, the tuberider slowed and the forward viewing port

darkened. There was heavy radiation in the vicinity, the pilot reported. Something had come down the Way at relativistic velocity and struck the northern precincts of Axis City. Olmy had little trouble guessing the source.

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A day passed before Olmy could see the Presiding Minister. Emergency repairs on Axis City had rendered only one precinct, Central City, habitable; the rest, including Axis Prime, were being evacuated. Axis Prime had taken the brunt of the impact. Tens of thousands had lost their lives, both Geshels and Naderites. Naderites by and large did not participate in the practice of storing their body patterns and recent memories as insurance against such a calamity.

Some Geshels would receive their second incarnation -- many thousands more would not. City Memory itself had been damaged. Even had Neya taken the time to make her whole-life record, store her patterns, she might still have died.

The last functioning precinct, Central City, now contained the combined offices of Presiding Minister of the Way and the Axis City government, and it was here that Yanosh met with Olmy.

"Her name was Deirdre Enoch," the Presiding Minister said, floating over the transparent external wall of the new office. His body was wrapped below the chest in a shining blue medical support suit; the impact had broken both of his legs and caused severe internal injuries. For the time being, the Presiding Minister was a functioning cyborg, until new organs could be grown and placed. "She opened a gate illegally at three ex nine, fifty years ago. Just beyond the point where we last repulsed the Jarts. She was helped by a master gate opener who deliberately disobeyed Nexus and guild orders. We learned about the breach six months after she had smuggled eighty of her colleagues -- or maybe a hundred and twenty, we aren't sure how many -- into a small research center -- and just days after the gate was opened. There was nothing we could do to stop it."

Olmy gripped a rail that ran around the perimeter of the office, watching Kesler without expression. The irony was too obvious. "I've only heard rumors. Way Maintenance -- "

Kesler was hit by a wave of pain, quickly damped by the suit. He continued, his face drawn. "Damn Way Maintenance. Damn the infighting and politics." He forced a smile. "Last time it was a Naderite renegade on Lamarckia."

Olmy nodded.

"This time -- Geshel. Even worse -- a member of the Openers Guild. I never imagined running this damned starship would ever be so complicated. Makes me almost understand why you long for Lamarckia."

"It wasn't any easier there," Olmy said.

"Yes -- but there were fewer people." Yanosh rotated his support suit and crossed the chamber. "We don't know precisely what happened. Something disturbed the immediate geometry around the gate. The conflicts between Way physics and the universe Enoch accessed were too great. The gate became a lesion, impossible to close. By that time, most of Enoch's scientists had retreated to the main station, a protective pyramid -- what she

called the Redoubt."

"She tapped into chaos?" Olmy asked. Some universes accessed through the Way were empty voids, dead, useless but relatively harmless; others were virulent, filled with a bubbling stew of unstable "constants" that reduced the reality of an observer or instrumentality. Only two such gates had ever been opened in the Way; the single fortunate aspect of these disasters had been that the gates themselves had quickly closed and could not be reopened.

"Not chaos," Kesler said, swallowing and bowing his head at more discomfort. "This damn suit ... could be doing a better job."

"You should be resting," Olmy said.

"No time. The Openers Guild tells me Enoch was looking for a domain of enhanced structure, hyperorder. What she found was more dangerous than any chaos. Her gate may have opened into a universe of endless fecundity. Not just order: creativity. Every universe is in a sense a plexus, its parts connected by information links; but Enoch's universe contained no limits to the propagation of information. No finite speed of light, no separation between anything analogous to the Bell continuum ... and other physicality."

Olmy frowned, trying to make sense of this. "My knowledge of Way physics is shaky ... "

"Ask your beloved Konrad Korzenowski," Kesler snapped.

Olmy did not react to this provocation.

Kesler apologized under his breath. He floated slowly back across the chamber, his face a mask of pain, a pathetic parody of restlessness. "We lost three expeditions trying to save her people and close the gate. The last was six months ago. Something like life-forms had grown up around the main station, fueled by the lesion. They've become *huge*, unimaginably bizarre. No one can make sense of them. What was left of our last expedition managed to build a barrier about a thousand kilometers south of the lesion. We thought that would give us the luxury of a few years to decide what to do next. But that barrier has been destroyed. We've not been able to get close enough since to discover what's happened. We have defenses in that sector, key defenses that keep the flaw from being used against us." He looked down through the transparent floor at the segment of the Way twenty-four kilometers below.

"The Jarts were able to send a relativistic projectile along the flaw, hardly more than a gram of rest mass. We couldn't stop it. It struck Axis City at twelve hundred hours yesterday."

Olmy had been told the details of the attack: a pellet less than a millimeter in diameter, traveling very close to the speed of light. Only the safety and control mechanisms of the sixth chamber machinery had kept the entire Axis City from disintegrating. The original of Neya Taur Rinn had been conducting business on behalf of her boss, Yanosh, in Axis Prime while her partial had visited Olmy.

"We're moving the city south as fast as we can and still keep up the evacuation," Kesler said. "The Jarts are drawing close to the lesion now. We're not sure what they can do with it. Maybe nothing -- but we can't afford to take the chance."

Olmy shook his head in puzzlement. "You've just told me nothing can be done. Why call me here when we're helpless?"

"I didn't say *nothing* could be done," Kesler responded, eyes glittering. "Some of our gate openers think they can build a cirque, a ring gate, and seal off the lesion."

"That would cut us off from the rest of the Way," Olmy said.

"Worse. In a few days or weeks it would destroy the Way completely, seal us off in Thistledown forever. Until now, we've never been that desperate." He smiled, lips twisted by pain. "Frankly, you were not my choice. I'm no longer sure that you can be relied upon, and this matter is far too complicated to allow anyone to act alone."

Neya had not told him the truth, then. "Who chose me?" Olmy asked.

"A gate opener. You made an impression on him when he escorted you down the Way some decades ago. He was the one who opened the gate to Lamarckia."

"Frederik Ry Ornis?"

Kesler nodded. "From what I'm told, he's become the most powerful opener in the guild. A senior master."

Olmy took a deep breath. "I'm not what I appear to be, Yanosh. I'm an old man who's seen women and his friends die. I miss my sons. You should have left me on Lamarckia."

Kesler closed his eyes. The blue jacket around his lower body adjusted slightly, and his face tightened. "The Olmy I knew would never have turned down a chance like this."

"I've seen too many things already," Olmy said.

Yanosh moved forward. "We both have. This ... is beyond me," he said quietly. "The lesion ... The gate openers tell me it's the strangest place in creation. All the boundaries of physics have collapsed. Time and causality have new meanings. Heaven and hell have married. Only those in the Redoubt have seen all that's happened there -- if they still exist in any way we can understand. They haven't communicated with us since the lesion formed."

Olmy listened intently, something slowly stirring to life, a small speck of ember glowing brighter.

"It may be over, Olmy," Yanosh said. "The whole grand experiment may be at an end. We're ready to close off the Way, pinch it, seal the lesion within its own small bubble ... dispose of it."

"Tell me more," Olmy said, folding his arms.

"Three citizens escaped from the Redoubt, from Enoch's small colony, before the lesion became too large. One died, his mind scrambled beyond retrieval. The second has been confined for study, as best we're able. What afflicts him -- or *it* -- is something we can never cure. The third survived relatively unharmed. She's become ... unconventional, more than a little obsessed by the mystical, but I'm told she's still rational. If you accept, she will accompany you." Yanosh's tone indicated he was not going to allow Olmy to decline. "We have two other volunteers, both apprentice gate openers, both failed by the guild. All have been chosen by Frederik Ry Ornis. He will explain why."

Olmy shook his head. "A mystic, failed openers ... What would I do with such a team?"

Yanosh smiled grimly. "Kill them if it goes wrong. And kill yourself. If you can't close off the Way, and if the lesion remains, you will not be allowed to come back. The third expedition I sent never even reached the Redoubt. But they were absorbed by the lesion." Another grimace of pain. "Do you believe in ghosts, Olmy?"

"What kind?"

"Real ghosts?"

"No," Olmy said.

"I think I do. Some members of our rescue expeditions came back. Several versions of

them. We *think* we destroyed them."

"Versions?"

"Copies of some sort. They were sent back -- echoed -- along their own world-lines in a way no one understands. They returned to their loved ones, their relatives, their friends. If more return, everything we call real could be in jeopardy. It's been very difficult keeping this secret."

Olmy raised an eyebrow skeptically. He wondered if Yanosh was himself still rational. "I've served my time. More than my time. Why should I go active?"

"Damn it, Olmy, if not for love of Thistledown -- if you're beyond that, then because you *want to die*." Kesler grunted, his face betraying quiet disgust behind the pain. "You've wanted to die since I brought you back from Lamarckia. This time, if you make it to the Redoubt, you're likely to have your wish granted."

"Think of it as a gift from me to you, or to what you once were."

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"If you were enhanced, this would go a lot faster," Jarr Flynych said, pointing to Olmy's head. Frederik Ry Ornis smiled. The three of them walked side by side down a long, empty hall, approaching a secure room deep in the old Thistledown Defense Tactical College building in Alexandria.

Ry Ornis had aged not at all physically. In appearance he was still the same long-limbed, mantislike figure, but his gawkiness had been replaced by an eerie grace, and his youthful, eccentric volubility by a wry spareness of language.

Olmy dismissed Flynych's comment with a wave of his hand. "I've gone through the important files," he said. "I think I know them well enough. I have questions about the choice of people to go with me. The apprentice gate openers ... They've been rejected by the guild. Why?"

Flynch smiled. "They're flamboyant."

Olmy glanced at the master opener. "Ry Ornis was as flamboyant as they come."

"The guild has changed," Ry Ornis said. "It demands more now."

Flynch agreed. "In the time since I've been a teacher in the guild, that's certainly true. They tolerate very little ... creativity. The defection of Enoch's pupils scared them. The lesion terrified all of us. Rasp and Karn are young, innovative. Nobody denies they're brilliant, but they've refused to settle in and play their roles. So ... the guild denied them final certification."

"Why choose them for this job?" Olmy asked.

"Ry Ornis did the choosing," Flynch said.

"We've discussed this," Ry Ornis said.

"Not to my satisfaction. When do I meet them?"

"No meeting has been authorized with Rasp and Karn until you're on the flawship. They're still in emergency conditioning." Flynnch glanced at Ry Ornis. "The training has been a little rough on them."

Olmy felt less and less sure that he wanted anything to do with the guild, or with Ry Ornis's chosen openers. "The files only tell half a story," he said. "Deirdre Enoch never became an opener -- she never even tried to qualify. She was just a teacher. How could she become so important to the guild?"

Flynych shook his head. "Like me, she was never qualified to be an opener, but also like me, as a teacher, she was considered one of the best. She became a leader to some apprentice openers. Philosopher."

"Prophet," Ry Ornis said softly.

"Training for the guild is grueling," Flynnch continued. "Some say it's become torture. The mathematical conditioning alone is enough to produce a dropout rate of over ninety percent. Deirdre Enoch worked as a counselor in mental balance, compensation, and she was good ... In the last twenty years, she worked with many who went on to become very powerful in Way Maintenance. She kept up her contacts. She convinced a lot of her students -- "

"That human nature is corrupt," Olmy ventured sourly.

Flynych shook his head. "That the laws of our universe are inadequate. Incomplete. That there is a way to become better human beings, and of course, better openers. Disorder, competition, and death corrupt us, she thought."

"She knew high-level theory, speculations circulated privately among master openers," Ry Ornis said. "She heard about domains where the rules were very different."

"She heard about a gate into complete order?"

"It had been discussed, on a theoretical basis. None had ever been attempted. No limits have been found to the variety of domains -- of universes. She speculated that a well-tuned gate could access almost any domain a good opener could conceive of."

Olmy scowled. "She expected order to balance out competition and death? Order versus disorder, a fight to the finish?"

Ry Ornis made a small noise, and Flynnch nodded. "There's a reason none of this is in the files," Flynnch said. "No opener will talk about it, or admit they knew anybody involved in making the decision. It's been very embarrassing to the guild. I'm impressed that you know what questions to ask. But it's better that you ask Ry Ornis -- "

Olmy focused on Flynnch. "You say you and Enoch occupied similar positions. I'd rather ask you."

Flynych gestured for them to turn to the left. The lights came on before them, and at the end of a much shorter hall, a door stood open. "Deirdre Enoch read extensively in the old religious texts. As did her followers. I believe they lost themselves in a dream," he said. "They thought that anyone who bathed in a stream of pure order, as it were -- in a domain of unbridled creation without destruction -- would be enhanced. Armored. Annealed. That's my opinion ... what they might have been thinking. She might have told them such things."

"A fountain of youth?" Olmy ventured, still scowling.

"Openers don't much care about temporal immortality," Ry Ornis said. "When we open a gate -- we glimpse eternity. A hundred gates, a hundred different eternities. Coming back is just an interlude between forevers. Those who listened to Enoch thought they would end up more skilled, more brilliant. Less corrupted by competitive evolution." He smiled, a remarkably unpleasant expression on his skeletal face. "Free of original sin."

Olmy's scowl faded. He glanced at Flynnch, who had turned away from Ry Ornis. Something between them, a coolness. "All right. I can see that."

"Really?" Flynnch shook his head dubiously.

Perhaps the master opener could tell even more. But it did not seem wise at this point to push the matter.

A bell chimed and they entered the conference room.

Already seated within was the only surviving and whole escapee from the Redoubt: Lissa Plass. As a radical Geshel, she had designed her own body and appearance decades ago, opting for a solid frame, close to her natural physique. Her face she had tuned to show strength as well as classic beauty, but she had allowed it to age, and the experience of her time with the expedition, the trauma at the lesion, had not been erased. Olmy noted that she carried a small book with her, an antique printed on paper -- a Bible.

Flynnch made introductions. Plass looked proud and more than a little confused. They sat around the table.

"Let's start with what we know," Flynnch said. He ordered up visual records made by the retreating flawship that had carried Plass.

Olmy looked at the images hovering over the table: the great pipeline of the Way, sheets of field fluorescing brilliantly as they were breached, debris caught in whirling clouds along the circumference, the flaw itself, running along the center of the Way like a wire heated to blinding blue-white.

Plass did not look. Olmy watched her reaction closely. For a moment, something seemed to swirl around her, a wisp of shadow, smoothly transparent, like a small slice of twilight. The others did not see or ignored what they saw, but Plass's eyes locked on Olmy's, and her lips tightened.

"I'm pleased you've both agreed to come," Ry Ornis said, as the images came to an end.

Plass looked at the opener, and then back at Olmy. She studied Olmy's face closely. "I can't stay here. That's why I'm going back. I don't belong in Thistledown."

"Ser Plass is haunted," Flynnch said. "Ser Olmy has been told about some of these visitors."

"My husband," she said, swallowing. "Just my husband, so far. Nobody else."

"Is he still there?" Olmy asked. "In the Redoubt?"

Bitterly, she said, "They haven't told you much that's useful, have they? As if they want us to fail."

"He's dead?"

"He's not in the Redoubt and I don't know if you could call it death," Plass said. "May I tell you what this really means? What we've actually done?" She stared around the table, eyes wide.

Ry Ornis lifted his hand tolerantly.

"I have diaries from before the launch of Thistledown, from my family," she said. "As far back as my ancestors can remember, my family was special ... They had access to the world of the spiritual. They all saw ghosts. The old-fashioned kind, not the ones we use now for servants. Some described the ghosts in their journals." She reached up and pinched her lower lip, released it, pinched it again. "I think some of the ghosts were my husband. I recognize that now. Everyone on my world-line, back to before I was born, haunted by the

same figure. My husband. Now I see him, too."

"I have a hard time visualizing this sort of ghost," Olmy said.

Plass looked up at the ceiling and clutched her Bible. "Whatever it is that we tapped into - a domain of pure order, something else clever -- it's *suffused* into the Way, into Thistledown. It's like a caterpillar crawling up our lives, grabbing hold of events and ... crawling, spreading backward, maybe even forward in time. They try to keep us quiet. I cooperate ... but my husband tells me things when he returns. Do the others hear ... reports? Messages from the Redoubt?"

Ry Ornis shook his head, but Olmy doubted this meant simple denial.

"What happened when the gate became a lesion?" Olmy asked.

Plass grew pale. "My husband was at the gate with Enoch's master opener, Tom Issa Danna."

"One of our finest," Ry Ornis said.

"Enoch's gate into order was the second they had opened. The first was a well to an established supply world where we could bring up raw materials."

"Standard practice for all far-flung stations," Flynych said.

"I wasn't there when they opened the second gate," Plass continued, her eyes darting between Flynych and Olmy. She seemed to have little sympathy for either. "I was at a support facility about a kilometer from the gate, and two kilometers from the Redoubt. There was already an atmospheric envelope and a cushion of sand and soil around the site. My husband and I had started a quick-growth garden. An orchard. We heard they had opened the second gate. My husband was with Issa Danna. Ser Enoch came by on a tractor and said it was a complete success. We were celebrating, a small group of researchers, opening bottles of champagne. We got reports of something going wrong two hours later. We came out of our bungalows -- a scout from the main flawship was just landing. Enoch had returned to the new gate to join Issa Danna. My husband must have been right there with them."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing at first. We watched them on the monitors inside the bungalows. Issa Danna and his assistants were working, talking, laughing. Issa Danna was so confident. He radiated his genius. The second gate looked normal -- a well, a cupola. But in a little while, a few hours, we saw that the people around the new gate sounded drunk. All of them. Something had come out of the gate, something intoxicating. They spoke about a shadow."

She looked up at Olmy, and Olmy realized that before this experience, she must have been a very lovely woman. Some of that beauty still shone through.

"We saw that some kind of veil covered the gate. Then the assistant openers in the bungalows, students of Issa Danna, said that the gate was out of control. They were feeling it in their clavicles, slaved to the master's clavicle."

Clavicles were devices used by gate openers to create the portals that gave access to other times, other universes, "outside" the Way. Typically, they were shaped like handlebars attached to a small sphere.

"How many openers were there?" Olmy asked.

"Two masters and seven apprentices," Plass said.

Olmy turned to Ry Ornis. He held up his hand, urging patience.

"A small truck came out of the gate site. Its tires wobbled, and all the people clinging to it were shouting and laughing. Then everyone around the truck -- the bungalows were almost empty now -- began to shout, and an assistant grabbed me -- I was the closest to her -- and said we had to get onto the scout and return to the flawship. She -- her name was Jara -- said she had never felt anything like this. She said they must have made a mistake and opened a gate into chaos. I had never heard about such a thing -- but she seemed to think if we didn't leave now, we'd all die. Four people. Two men and me and Jara. We were the only ones who made it into the scout ship. Shadows covered everything around us. Everybody was drunk, laughing, screaming."

Plass stopped and took several breaths to calm herself. "We flew up to the flawship. The rest is on the record. The Redoubt was the last thing I saw, surrounded by something like ink in water, swirling. A storm."

Flynch started to speak, but Plass cut him off. "Two of the others on the flawship, the men, were afflicted. They came out of the veil around the truck and Jara helped them get into the scout. As for Jara ... Nobody remembers her but me."

Flynch waited a moment, then said, "There were only two people aboard the scout when it reached the flawship. You, and the figure we haven't identified. There was no other man, and there has never been an assistant opener named Jara."

"They were real."

"It doesn't matter," Ry Ornis said impatiently. "Issa Danna knew better than to open a gate into chaos. He knew the signs and never would have completed the opening. But -- in the linkage, the slaving, qualities can be reversed if the opener loses control."

"A gate into order -- but the slaved clavicles behaving as if they were associated with chaos?" Olmy asked, trying to grasp the complexities.

Ry Ornis seemed reluctant to go into more detail. "They no longer exist in our world-line," he said. "Ser Plass remembers that one hundred and twenty people accompanied Enoch and Issa Danna. She remembers two master openers and seven assistants. Here on Thistledown, we have records, life-histories, of only eighty, with one master and two assistants."

"I survived. You remember me," Plass said, her expression desperate.

"You're in our records. You survived," Ry Ornis confirmed. "We don't know why or how."

"What about the other survivor?" Olmy said.

"We don't know who he or she was," Ry Ornis said.

"Show him the other," Plass said. "Show him Number 2, show him what happens when you survive, but you *don't* return."

"That's next," Ry Ornis said. "If you're ready, Ser Olmy."

"I may never be *ready*, Ser Ry Ornis," Olmy said.

4

The flawship cradled in the borehole dock was sleek and new and very fast. Olmy tracted

along the flank of the ship, resisting the urge to run his fingers along the featureless reflecting surface.

He was still pondering the meeting with the figure called Number 2.

Around the ship's dock, the borehole between the sixth and seventh chamber glowed with a violet haze, a cup-shaped field erected to receive the southernmost extensors of Axis City, gripping the remaining precincts during their evacuation and repair. Olmy swiveled to face the axis and the flaw's blunt conclusion and watch the workers and robots guiding power grids and huge steel beams to act as buffers.

The dock manager, a small man with boyish features and no hair, his scalp decorated with an intricate green and brown Celtic braid, pulled himself toward Olmy and extended a paper certificate.

"We're going to vacuum in an hour," he said. "I hope everybody's here before then. I'd like to seal the ship and check its integrity."

Olmy applied his sigil to the document, transferring its command from borehole management and the construction guild to Way Defense.

"Two others were here earlier," the dock manager said. "Twins, young women. They carried the smallest clavicles I've ever seen."

Olmy looked back along the dock and saw three figures tracting toward them. "Looks like we're all here," he said.

"No send-off?" the manager asked.

Olmy smiled. "Everyone's much too busy," he said.

"Don't I know it," the manager said.

As a rule, gate openers had a certain look and feel that defined them, sometimes subtle, usually not. Rasp and Karn were little more than children, born (perhaps *made* was a better word) fifteen years ago in Thistledown City. They were of radical Geshel ancestry, and their four parent-sponsors were also gate openers.

They tracted to the flawship and introduced themselves to Olmy. Androgynous, ivory white, slender, with long fingers and small heads covered with a fine silvery fur, they spoke with identical resonant tenor voices. Karn had black eyes, Rasp green. Otherwise, they were identical. To Olmy, neither had the air of authority he had seen in experienced gate openers.

The dock manager picked a coded symbol and dilated the flawship entrance, a glowing green circle in the hull. The twins solemnly entered the ship.

Plass arrived several minutes later. She wore a formal blue suit and seemed to have been crying. As she greeted Olmy, her voice sounded harsh. She addressed him as if they had not met before. "You're the soldier?"

"I've worked in Way Defense," he said.

Gray eyes small and wary, surrounded by puffy pale flesh, face broad and sympathetic, hair dark and cut short, Plass today reminded Olmy of any of a dozen matrons he had known as a child: polite but hardly hesitant.

"Ser Flynnch tells me you're the one who died on Lamarckia. I heard about that. By birth, a Naderite."

"By birth," Olmy said.

"Such adventures we have," she said with a sniff. "Because of Ser Korzenowski's cleverness." She glanced away, then fastened her eyes on him and leaned her head to one

side. "I'm not looking forward to this. Have they told you I'm a little broken, that my thoughts take odd paths?"

"They said your studies and experiences have influenced you," Olmy said, a little uncomfortable at having to reestablish an acquaintance already made.

Rasp and Karn watched from the flawship hatch.

"She's broken, we're young and inexperienced," Rasp said. Karn laughed, a surprising watery tinkle, very sweet. "And you've died once already, Ser Olmy. What a crew!"

"I presume everyone knows what they're doing," Plass said.

"Presume nothing," Olmy said.

Olmy guided Plass into the ship. The dock manager watched this with dubious interest. Olmy swung around fields to face him.

"I take charge of this vessel now. Thanks for your attention and care."

"Our duty," the dock manager said. "She was delivered just yesterday. No one has taken her out yet -- she's a virgin, Ser Olmy. She doesn't even have a name."

"Call her the *Lark!*" Rasp trilled from inside.

Olmy shook hands firmly with the manager and climbed into the ship. The entrance sealed with a small beep behind him.

The flawship's interior was cool and quiet. With inertial control, there were no special couches or nets or fields; they would experience only simulated motion, for psychological effect, on their journey: at most a mild sense of acceleration and deceleration.

Plass introduced herself to Karn and Rasp. Since she wore no pictor, only words were exchanged. This suited Olmy.

"Ser Olmy," Plass said, "I assume we are in privacy now. No one outside can hear?"

"No one," Olmy said.

"Good. Then we can speak our minds. This trip is useless." She turned on the twins, who floated like casual accent marks on some unseen word. "They've chosen you because you're inexperienced."

"Unmarked," Rasp said brightly. "Open to the new."

Karn smiled and nodded. "And not afraid of spooks."

This seemed to leave Plass at a loss, but only for a second. She was obviously determined to establish herself as a Cassandra. "You won't be disappointed."

"We visited with Number 2," Rasp said, and Karn nodded. "Ser Ry Ornis insisted we study it."

Olmy remembered his own encounter with the vividly glowing figure in the comfortably appointed darkened room. It was not terribly misshapen, as he had anticipated before the meeting, but certainly far from normal. Its skin had burned with the tiny firefly deaths of stray metal atoms in the darkened room's air. It had stood out against the shadows like a nebula in the vastness beyond Thistledown's walls. Its hands alone had remained dark, ascribing arcs against its starry body as it tried to speak.

It lived in a twisted kind of time, neither backward nor forward, and its words had required special translation. It had spoken of things that would happen in the room after Olmy left. It had told him the Way would soon end, "in the blink of a bird's eye." The translator relayed this clearly enough, but could not translate other words; it seemed the

unknown figure was inventing or accessing new languages, some clearly not of human origin.

Plass said, "It'll be a mercy if all that happens is we end up *like, him.*"

"How interesting," Rasp said.

"We are fiends for novelty," Karn added with a smile.

"Monsters are *made*," Plass said with a grimace, clasping her Bible, "not born."

"Thank you," Karn said, and produced a forced, fixed smile, accompanied by a glassy stare. Rasp was obviously thinking furiously to come up with a more witty riposte.

Olmy decided enough was more than enough. "If we're going to die, or worse, we should at least be civil." The three stared at him, each surprised in a different way. This gave Olmy a bare minimum of satisfaction. "Let's go through our orders and manifest, and learn how to work together."

"A man who wants only to die again -- " Karn began, still irritated, her stare still glazed, but her twin interrupted.

"Shut up," Rasp said. "As he says. Time to work." Karn shrugged and her anger dissolved instantly.

At speed, the flawship's forward view of the Way became a twisted lens. Stray atoms and ions of gas within the Way piled up before them into a distorting, white-hot atmosphere. Rays of many colors writhed from a skewed vertex of milky brightness; the flaw, itself a slender geometric distortion, now resembled a white-hot piston.

Stray atoms of gas in the Way were becoming a problem, the result of so many gates being opened to bring in raw materials from the first exploited worlds.

The flawship's status appeared before Olmy in steady reassuring symbols of blue and green. Their speed: three percent of c , the speed of light in the Way, slightly less than c in the outside universe. They were now accelerating at more than six g 's, down from the maximum they had hit at 4 ex 5. None of this could be felt inside the hull.

The display showed their position as 1 ex 7, ten million kilometers beyond the cap of the seventh chamber, still almost three billion kilometers from the Redoubt.

Olmy had a dreamlike sense of dissociation, as always when traveling in a flawship. The interior had been divided by its occupants into three private compartments, a common area, and the pilot's position. Olmy was spending most of his time at the pilot's position. The others kept to their compartments and said little to each other.

The first direct intimation of the strangeness of their mission came on the second day, halfway through their journey. Olmy was studying what little was known about the Redoubt, from a complete and highly secret file. He was deep into the biography of Deirdre Enoch when a voice called him from behind.

He turned and saw a young woman floating three meters aft, her head nearer to him than her feet, precessing slightly about her own axis. "I've felt you calling us," she said. "I've felt you studying us. What do you want to know?"

Olmy checked to make sure this was not some product of the files, of the data projectors. It was not; no simulations were being projected. Behind the image he saw the sisters and Plass emerging from their quarters. The sisters appeared interested, Plass bore an expression of shocked sadness.

"I don't recognize her," Plass said.

Olmy judged this was not a prank. "I'm glad you've decided to visit us," he said to the woman, with a touch of wry perversity. "How is the situation at the Redoubt?"

"The same, ever the same," the young woman answered. Her face was difficult to discern. As she spoke, her features blurred and reformed, subtly different.

"Are you well?" Olmy asked. Rasp and Karn sidled forward around the image, which ignored them.

"I am nothing," the image said. "Ask another question. It's amusing to see if I can manage any sensible answers."

Rasp and Karn joined Olmy. "She's real?" Rasp asked. The twins were both pale, their faces locked in dread fascination.

"I don't know," Olmy said. "I don't think so."

"Then she's used her position on the Redoubt's timeline to climb back to us," Rasp said. "Some of us at least do indeed get to where we're going!"

Karn smiled with her usual fixed contentment and glazed eyes. Olmy was beginning not to like this hyperintelligent twin.

Plass moved forward, hands clenched as if she would hit the figure. "I don't recognize you," she said. "Who are you?"

"I see only one of you clearly." The young woman pointed at Olmy. "The others are like clouds of insects."

"Have the Jarts taken over the Redoubt?" Rasp asked. The image did not answer, so Olmy echoed the question.

"They are alone in the Redoubt. That is sufficient. I can describe the situation as it will be when you arrive. There is a large groove or valley in the Way, with the Redoubt forming a series of bands of intensely ranked probabilities within the groove. The Redoubt has grown to immense proportions, in time, all possibilities realized. My prior self has lived more than any cardinal number of lives. Still lives them. It sheds us as you shed skin."

"Tell us about the gate," Karn requested, sidling closer to the visitor. "What's happened? What state is it in?" Again, Olmy relayed the question. The woman watched him with discomforting intensity.

"It has become those who opened it. There is an immense head of Issa Danna on the western boundary of the gate, watching over the land. We do not know what it does, what it means."

Plass made a small choking sound and covered her mouth with her hand, eyes wide.

"Some tried to escape. It made them into living mountains, carpeted with fingers, or forests filled with fog and clinging blue shadow. Some waft through the air as vapors that change whoever encounters them. We've learned. We don't go outside, none for thousands of years ... "

Rasp and Karn flanked the visitor, studying her with catlike focus.

"Then how can you leave, return to us?" Olmy asked.

The young woman frowned and held up her hands. "It doesn't speak. It doesn't know. I am so lonely."

Plass, Rasp and Karn, and Olmy stood facing each other through clear air.

Olmy started, suddenly drawn back to the last time he had seen a ghost vanish -- the

partial of Neyla Taur Rinn.

Plass let out her breath with a shudder. "It is always the same," she said. "My husband says he's lonely. He's going to find a place where he won't be lonely. But there are no such places!"

Karn turned to Rasp. "A false vision, a deception?" she asked her twin.

"There are no deceptions where we are going," Plass said, and relaxed her hands, rubbed them.

Karn made a face out of her sight.

"No one knows what happened to the gate opened at the Redoubt," Rasp said, turning away from her own session with the records. Since the appearance of the female specter, they had spent most of their time in the pilot cabin. Olmy's presence seemed to afford them some comfort. "None of the masters can even guess."

Karn sighed, whether in sympathy or shame, Olmy could not tell.

"Can either of you make a guess?" Olmy asked.

Plass floated at the front of the common space, just around the pale violet bulkhead, arms folded, looking not very hopeful.

"A gate is opened on the floor of the Way," Rasp said flatly, as if reciting an elementary lesson. "That is a constraint in the local continuum of the Way. Four point gates are possible in each ring position. When four are opened, they are supposed to always cling to the wall of the Way. In practice, however, small gates have been known to rise above the floor. They are always closed immediately."

"What's that got to do with my question?" Olmy asked.

"Oh, nothing, really!" Rasp said, waving her hand in exasperation.

"Perhaps it does," Karn said, playing the role of thoughtful one for the moment. "Perhaps it's deeply connected."

"Oh, all right, then," Rasp said, and squinched up her face. "What I might have been implying is this: if Issa Danna's gate somehow lifted free of the floor, the wall of the Way, then its constraints would have changed. A free gate can adversely affect local world-lines. Something can enter and leave from any angle. In conditioning we are made to understand that the world-lines of all transported objects passing through such a free gate actually shiver for several years backward. Waves of probability retrograde."

"How many actually went through the gate?" Olmy asked.

"My husband never did," Plass said, pulling herself into the hatchway. "Issa Danna and his entourage. Maybe others, after the lesion formed ... against their will."

"But you didn't recognize this woman," Olmy said.

"No," Plass said.

"Was she extinguished when the gate became a lesion?" Olmy continued. "Was her world-line wiped clean in our domain?"

"My head hurts," Rasp said.

"I think you might be right," Karn said thoughtfully. "It makes sense, in a frightening sort of way. She is suspended ... We have no record of her existence."

"But the line still exists," Rasp said. "It echoes back in time even in places where her record has ended."

"No," Plass said, shaking her head.

"Why?" Rasp asked.

"She mentioned an *allthing*."

"I didn't hear that," Rasp said.

"Neither did I," Olmy said.

Plass gripped her elbow and squeezed her arms tight around her, pulling her shoulder forward. "We heard different words." She pointed at Olmy. "He's the only one she really saw."

"It looked at you, too," Rasp said. "Just once."

"An allthing was an ancient Nordic governmental meeting," Olmy said, reading from the flawship command entry display, where he had called for a definition.

"That's not what she meant," Plass said. "My husband used another phrase in the same way. He referred to the Final Mind of the domain. Maybe they mean the same thing."

"It was just an echo," Rasp said. "We all heard it differently. We all interacted with it differently depending on ... Whatever. That means more than likely it carried random information from a future we'll never reach. It's a ghost that babbles ... like your husband, perhaps."

Plass stared at the twins, then grabbed for the hatch frame. She stubbornly shook her head. "We're going to hear more about this allthing," she said. "Deirdre Enoch is still working. Something is still happening there. The Redoubt still exists."

"Your husband told you this?" Rasp asked with a taunting smile. Olmy frowned at her, but she ignored him.

"We'll know when we see our own ghosts," Plass said, with a kick that sent her flying back to her cabin.

Plass calmly read her Bible in the common area as the ship prepared a meal for her. The twins ate on their own schedule, but Olmy matched his meals to Plass's, for the simple reason that he liked to talk to the woman and did not feel comfortable around the twins.

There was about Plass the air of a spent force, something falling near the end of its arc from a truly high and noble trajectory. Plass seemed to enjoy his company, but did not comment on it. She asked about his experiences on Lamarckia.

"It was a beautiful world," he said. "The most beautiful I've ever seen."

"It no longer exists, does it?" Plass said.

"Not as I knew it. It adapted the way of chlorophyll. Now it's something quite different, and at any rate, the gate there has collapsed ... No one in the Way will ever go there again."

"A shame," Plass said. "It seems a great tragedy of being mortal that we can't go back. My husband, on the other hand ... has visited me seven times since I left the Redoubt." She smiled. "Is it wrong for me to take pleasure in his visits? He isn't happy -- but I'm happier when I can see him, listen to him." She looked away, hunched her shoulders as if expecting a blow. "He doesn't, can't, listen to me."

Olmy nodded. What did not make sense could at least be politely acknowledged.

"In the Redoubt, he says, nothing is lost. I wonder how he knows? Is he there? Does he watch over them? The tragedy of uncontrolled order is that the past is revised -- and revisited -- as easily as the future. The last time he returned, he was in great pain. He said a

new God had cursed him for being a counterrevolutionary. The Final Mind. He told me that the Eye of the Watcher tracked him throughout all eternity, on all world-lines, and whenever he tried to stand still, he was tortured, made into something different." Plass's face took on a shiny, almost sensual expectancy and she watched Olmy's reaction closely.

"You denied what the twins were saying," Olmy reminded her. "About echoes along world-lines."

"They aren't just *echoes*. We *are* our world-lines, Ser Olmy. These ghosts ... are really just altered versions of the originals. They have blurred origins. They come from many different futures. But they have a reality, an independence. I feel this ... when he speaks to me."

Olmy frowned. "I can't visualize all this. Order is supposed to be simplicity and peace ... Not torture and distortion and coercion. Surely a universe of complete order would be more like heaven, in the Christian sense. " He pointed to the antique book resting lightly in her lap. Plass shifted and the Bible rose into the air a few centimeters. She reached out to grasp it, hold it close again.

"Heaven has no change, no death," she said. "Mortals find that attractive, but they are mistaken. No good thing lasts forever. It becomes unbearable. Now imagine a force that demands that something last forever, yet become even more the essence of what it was, a force that will accept nothing less than compliance, but *can't communicate*."

Olmy shook his head. "I can't."

"I can't, either, but that is what my husband describes."

Several seconds. Plass tapped the book lightly with her finger.

"How long since he last visited you?" Olmy asked.

"Three weeks. Maybe longer. Things seemed quiet just before they told me I could return to the Redoubt." She closed her eyes and held her hands to her cheeks. "I believed what Enoch believed, that order ascends. That it ascends forever. I believed that we are made with flaws, in a universe that was itself born flawed. I thought we would be so much more beautiful when -- "

Karn and Rasp tracked forward and hovered beside Plass, who fell quiet and greeted them with a small shiver.

"We have ventured a possible answer to this dilemma," Karn said.

"Our birth geometry, outside the Way, is determined by a vacuum of infinite potential," Rasp said, nodding with something like glee. "We are forbidden from tapping that energy, so in our domain, space has a shape, and time has direction and a velocity. In the universe Enoch tapped, the energy of the vacuum is available at all times. Time and space and this energy, this potential, are bunched in a tight little knot of incredible density. That is what your husband must call the Final Mind. That our visitor renamed the allthing."

Plass shook her head indifferently.

"How amazing that must be!" Karn said. "A universe where order took hold in the first few nanoseconds after creation, controlling all the fires of the initial expansion, all the shape and constants of existence ... "

"I wonder what Enoch would have done with such a domain, if she could have controlled it," Rasp said, hovering over Plass, peering down on her. Plass made as if to swat a fly, and Rasp tracked out of reach with a broad smile. "Ours is a pale candle indeed by comparison."

"Everything must tend toward a Final Mind. This force blossoms at the end of the Time

like a flower pushed up from all events, all lives, all thought. It is the ancestor not just of living creatures, but of all the interactions of matter, space, and time, for all things tend toward this blossom."

Olmy had often thought about this quote from the notes of Korzenowski. The designer of the Way had put together quite an original cosmology, which he had never tried to spread among his fellows. The original was in Korzenowski's library, kept as a Public Treasure, but few visited there now.

Olmy visited Rasp and Karn in their cabin while Plass read her Bible in the common area. The twins had arranged projections of geometric art and mathematical figures around the space, brightly colored and disorienting. He asked them whether they believed such an allthing, a perfectly ordered mind, could exist.

"Goodness, no!" Karn said, giggling.

"You mean, *Godness*, no!" Rasp added. "Not even if we believed in it, which we don't. Energy and impulse, yes; final, perhaps. Mind, no!"

"Whatever you call it -- in the lesion, it may already exist, and it's different?"

"Of course it would exist! Not as a mind, that's all. Mind is impossible without neural qualities -- communication between separate nodes that either contradict or confirm. If we think correctly, a domain of order would reach completion within the first few seconds of existence, freezing everything. It would grasp and control all the energy of its beginning moment, work through all possible variations in an instant -- become a monobloc, still and perfected, timeless. Not eternal -- eviternal, frozen forever. Timeless."

"Our universe, our domain, could spin on for many billions or even trillions more years," Karn continued. "In our universe, there could very well be a Final Mind, the summing up of all neural processes throughout all time. But Deirdre Enoch found an abomination. If it were a mind, think of it! Instantly creating all things, never being contradicted, never *knowing*. Nothing has ever frustrated it, stopped it, trained or tamed it. It would be as immature as a newborn baby, and as sophisticated -- "

"And ingenious," Rasp chimed in.

" -- As the very devil," Karn finished.

"Please," Rasp finished, her voice suddenly quiet. "Even if such a thing is possible, let it not be a mind."

For the past million kilometers, they had passed over a scourged, scrubbed segment of the Way. In driving back the Jarts from their strongholds, tens of thousands of Way defenders had died. The Way had been altered by the released energies of the battle and still glowed slightly, shot through with pulsing curls and rays, while the flaw in this region transported them with a barely noticeable roughness. The flawship could compensate some, but even with this compensation, they had reduced their speed to a few thousand kilometers an hour.

The Redoubt lay less than ten thousand kilometers ahead.

Rasp and Karn removed their clavicles from their boxes and tried as best they could to interpret the state of the Way as they came closer to the Redoubt.

Five thousand kilometers from the Redoubt, evidence of immense constructions lined the wall of the Way: highways, bands connecting what might have been linked gates; yet there were no gates. The constructions had been leveled to narrow lanes of rubble, like lines of powder.

Olmy shook his head, dismayed. "Nothing is the way it was reported to be just a few

weeks ago."

"I detect something unusual, too," Rasp said. Karn agreed. "Something related to the Jart offensive ... "

"Something we weren't told about?" Plass wondered. "A colony that failed?"

"Ours, or Jart?" Olmy asked.

"Neither," Karn said, looking up from her clavicle. She lifted the device, a fist-sized sphere mounted on two handles, and rotated the display for Olmy and Plass to see. Olmy had watched gate openers perform before, and knew the workings of the display well enough -- though he could never operate a clavicle. "There have never been gates opened here. This is all sham."

"A decoy," Plass said.

"Worse," Rasp said. "The gate at the Redoubt is twisting probabilities, sweeping world-lines within the Way to such an extreme ... The residue of realities that never were are being deposited."

"Murmurs in the Way's sleep, nightmares in our unhistory," Karn said. For once, the twins seemed completely subdued, even disturbed. "I don't see how we can function if we're incorporated into such a sweep."

"So what is this?" Olmy asked, pointing to the smears of destroyed highways, cities, bands between the ghosts of gates.

"A future," Karn said. "Maybe what will happen if we fail ... "

"But these patterns aren't like human construction," Plass observed. "No human city planner would lay out those roadways. Nor does it match anything we know about the Jarts."

Olmy looked more closely, frowned in concentration. "If someone else had created the Way," he said, "maybe this would be their ruins, the rubble of their failure."

Karn gave a nervous laugh. "Wonderful!" she said. "All we could have hoped for! If we open a gate here, what could possibly happen?"

Plass grabbed Olmy's arm. "Put it in our transmitted record. Tell the Hexamon this part of the Way must be forbidden. *No gates should be opened here, ever!*"

"Why not?" Karn said. "Think what could be learned. The new domains."

"I agree with Ser Plass," Rasp said. "It's possible there are worse alternatives than finding a universe of pure order." She let go of her clavicle and grabbed her head. "Even touching our instruments here causes pain. We are useless ... any gate we open would consume us more quickly than the gate at the Redoubt! You *must* agree, sister!"

Karn was stubborn. "I don't see it," she said. "I simply don't. I think this could be very interesting. Fascinating, even."

Plass sighed. "This is the box that Konrad Korzenowski has opened for us," she said for Olmy's benefit. "Spoiled genius children drawn to evil like insects to a corpse."

"I thought evil was related to disorder," Olmy said.

"Already, you know better," Plass rejoined.

Rasp turned her eyes on Olmy and Plass, eyes narrow and full of uncomfortable speculation.

Olmy reached out and grasped Rasp's clavicle to keep it from bumping into the flawship

bulkheads. Karn took charge of the instrument indignantly and thrust it back at her sister. "You forget your responsibility," she chided. "We can fear this mission, or we can engage it with joy and spirit," she said. "Cowering does none of us any good."

"You're right, sister, about that at least," Rasp said. She returned her clavicle to its box and straightened her clothing, then used a cloth to wipe her face. "We are, after all, going to a place where we have always gone, always will go."

"It's what happens when we get there that is always changing," Karn said.

Plass's face went white. "My husband never returns the same way, in the same condition," she said. "How many hells does he experience?"

"One for each of him," Rasp said. "Only one. It is different husbands who return."

Though there had never been such this far along the way, Olmy saw the scattered wreckage of Jart fortifications, demolished, dead and empty. Beyond them lay a region where the Way was covered with winding black and red bands of sand, an immense serpentine desert, also unknown. Olmy felt a spark of something reviving, if not a wish for life, then an appreciation of what extraordinary sights his life had brought him.

On Lamarckia, he had seen the most extraordinary variations on biology. Here, near the Redoubt, it was reality itself subject to its own flux, its own denial.

Plass was transfixed. "The next visitors, if any, will see something completely different," she said. "We've been caught up in a sweeping world-line of the Way, not necessarily our own."

"I would never have believed it possible," Rasp said, and Karn reluctantly agreed. "This is not the physics we were taught."

"It can make any physics it wishes," Plass said. "Any reality. It has all the energy it needs. It has human minds to teach it our variations."

"It knows only unity," Karn said, taking hold of Plass's shoulder.

The older woman did not seem to mind. "It knows no will stronger than its own," she said. "Yet it may divide its will into illusory units. It is a tyrant ... " Plass pointed to the winding sands, stretching for thousands of kilometers beneath them. "This is a moment of calm, of steady concentration. If my memories are correct, if what my husband's returning self ... selves ... tell me, is correct, it is usually much more frantic. Much more inventive."

Karn made a face and placed her hands on the bars of her clavicle. She rubbed the grips and her face became tight with concentration. "I feel it. There is still a lesion ... "

Rasp took hold of her own instrument and went into her own state. "It's still there," she agreed. "It's bad. It floats above the Way, very near the flaw. From below, it must look like some sort of bale star ... "

They passed through a fine bluish mist that rose from the northern end of the desert. The flawship made a faint belling sound. The mist passed behind.

"There," Plass said. "No mistaking it!"

The gate pushed through the Way by Issa Danna had expanded and risen above the floor, just as Rasp and Karn had felt in their instruments. Now, at a distance of a hundred kilometers, they could see the spherical lesion clearly. It did indeed resemble a dark sun, or a chancre. A glow of pigeon's blood flicked around it, the red of rubies and enchantment. The black center, less than the width of a fingertip at this distance, perversely seemed to fill Olmy's field of vision.

His young body decided it was time to be very reluctant to proceed. He swallowed and

brought this fear under control, biting his cheek until blood flowed.

The flawship lurched. Its voice told Olmy, "We have received an instructional beacon. There is a place held by humans less than ten kilometers away. They say they will guide us to safety."

"It's still there!" Plass said.

They all looked down through the flawship's transparent nose, away from the lurid pink of the flaw, through layers of blue and green haze wrapped around the Way, down twenty-five kilometers to a single dark, gleaming steel point in the center of a rough, rolling land.

The Redoubt lay in the shadow of the lesion, surrounded by a penumbral twilight suffused with the flickering red of the lesion's halo.

"I can feel the whipping hairs of other world-lines," Karn and Rasp said together. Olmy glanced back and saw their clavicles touching sphere to sphere. The spheres crackled and clacked. Karn twisted her instrument toward Olmy so that he could see the display. A long list of domain "constants" -- pi, Planck's constant, others -- varied with a regular humming in the flawship hull. "Nothing is stable out there!"

Olmy glanced at the message sent from the Redoubt. It provided navigation instructions for their flawship's landing craft: how to disengage from the flawship, descend, undergo examination, and be taken into the pyramid. The message concluded, "We will determine whether you are illusions or aberrations. If you are from our origin, we will welcome you. It is too late to return now. Abandon your flawship before it approaches any closer to the allthing. Whoever sent you has committed you to our own endless imprisonment."

"Cheerful enough," Olmy said. The ghastly light cast a fitful, abbatoir glow on their faces.

"We have always gone there," Rasp said quietly.

"We have to agree," Plass said. "We have no other place to go."

They tracted aft to the lander's hatch and climbed into the small, arrowhead-shaped craft. Its interior welcomed them by fitting to their forms, providing couches, instruments, tailored to their bodies. Plass sat beside Olmy in the cockpit, Rasp and Karn directly behind them.

Olmy disengaged from the flawship and locked the lander onto the pyramid's beacon. They dropped from the flawship. The landscape steadily grew in the broad cockpit window.

Plass's face crumpled, like a child about to break into tears. "Star, Fate, and Pneuma, be kind. I see the opener's head. There!" She pointed in helpless dread, equally horrified and fascinated by something so inconceivable.

On a low, broad rise in the shadowed land surrounding the Redoubt, a huge dark head rose like an upright mountain, its skin like gray stone, one eye turned toward the south, the other watching over the territory before the nearest face of the pyramid. This watchful eye was easily a hundred meters wide, and glowed a dismal sea green, throwing a long beam through the thick twisted ropes of mist. Plass's voice became shrill. "Oh Star and Fate ... "

The landscape around the Redoubt rippled beneath the swirling rays of rotating world-lines, spreading like hair from the black center of the lesion, changing the land a little with each pass, moving the bizarre landmarks a few dozen meters this way or that, increasing them in size, reducing them.

Olmy could never have imagined such a place. The Redoubt sat within a child's nightmare of disembodied human limbs, painted over the hills like trees, their fingers grasping and releasing spasmodically. At the top of one hill stood a kind of castle made of blocks of green glass, with a single huge door and window. Within the door stood a figure -- a statue, perhaps -- several hundred meters high, vaguely human, nodding steadily, idiotically, as the

lander passed over. Hundreds of much smaller figures, gigantic nevertheless, milled in a kind of yard before the castle, their red and black shadows flowing like capes in the lee of the constant wind of changing probabilities. Olmy thought they might be huge dogs, or tailless lizards, but Plass pointed, and said, "My husband told me about an assistant to Issa Danna named Ram Chako ... Duplicated, forced to run on all fours."

The giant in the castle door slowly raised its huge hand, and the massive lizards scrambled over each other to run from an open portal in the yard. They leaped up as the lander passed overhead, as if they would snap it out of the air with hideous jaws.

Olmy's head throbbed. He could not bring himself out of a conviction that none of this could be real; indeed, there was no necessity for it to *be* real in any sense his body understood. For their part, Rasp and Karn had lost all their earlier bravado and clung to each other, their clavicles floating on tethers wrapped around their wrists.

The lurid glare of the halo flowed like blood into the cabin as the lander rotated to present points of contact for traction fields from the Redoubt. Olmy instructed the ship to present a wide-angle view of the Redoubt and the land, and this view revolved slowly around them, filling the lander's cramped interior.

The perverse variety seemed never to end. Something had dissected not only a human body, or many bodies, and wreaked hideous distortions on its parts, but had done the same with human thoughts and desires, planting the results over the region with no obvious design.

Within the low valley -- as described by the female visitant -- a large blue-skinned woman, the equal of the figure in the doorway of the castle, crouched near a cradle within which churned hundreds of naked humans. She slowly dropped her hand into the cauldron of flesh and stirred, and her hair sprayed out from her head with a sullen cometary glow, casting everything in a syrupy, heavy green luminosity.

"Mother of geometries," Karn muttered, and hid her eyes.

Olmy could not turn away, but everything in him wanted to go to sleep, to die, rather than to acknowledge what they were seeing.

Plass saw his distress. Somehow she took strength from the incomprehensible view. "It does not need to make sense," she said with the tone of a chiding schoolteacher. "It's supported by infinite energy and a monolithic, mindless will. There is nothing new here, nothing -- "

"I'm not asking that it make sense," Olmy said. "I need to know what's behind it."

"A sufficient force, channeled properly, can create anything a mind can imagine -- " Karn began.

"More than any mind will imagine. Not a mind like our minds," Rasp restated. "A unity, not a *mind* at all."

For a moment, Olmy's anger lashed and he wanted to shout his frustration, but he took a deep breath, folded his arms where he floated in tracting restraints, and said to Plass, "A mind that has no goals? If there's pure order here -- "

Karn broke in, her voice high and sweet, singing. "Think of the dimensions of order. There is mere arrangement, the lowest form of order, without motive or direction. Next comes self-making, when order can convert resources into more of itself, propagating order. Then comes creation, self-making reshaping matter into something new. But when creation stalls, when there is no mind, just force, it becomes mere elaboration, an endless spiral of rearrangement of what has been created. What do we see down there? Empty elaboration. Nothing new. No understanding."

"She shows some wisdom," Plass acknowledged grudgingly. "But the allthing still must exist."

"And all this ... elaboration?" Olmy asked.

"Spoiled by deathlessness," Plass said, "by never-ending supplies of resources. Never freshened by the new, at its core. Order without death, art without critic or renewal, the final mind of a universe where only riches exist, only joy is possible, never knowing disappointment."

The lander shuddered again and again as they dropped toward the pyramid. Its inertial control systems could not cope with the sweeping rays of different world-lines.

"Sounds like a spoiled child," Olmy said.

"Far worse," Karn said. "*We're* like spoiled children, Rasp and I. Willful and maybe a little silly. Humans are silly, childish, always learning, full of failure. Out there -- beyond the lesion, reaching through it ... "

"Perpetual success," Rasp mocked. "Ultimate and mature. It cannot learn. Only rearrange."

"Deirdre Enoch was never content with limitations," Plass said, looking to Olmy for sympathy. "She went searching for what heaven would really be." Her eyes glittered with her emotion -- exaltation brought on by too much fear and dismay.

"Maybe she found it," Karn said.

"I can't welcome you," Deirdre Enoch said, walking heavily toward them. Behind Olmy, within a chamber high in the Redoubt, near the tip of the steel pyramid, the lander sighed and settled into its cradle.

Olmy tried to compare this old woman with the portraits of Enoch in the records. Her voice was much the same, though deeper, and almost without emotion.

Rasp, Karn, and Plass stood beside Olmy as Enoch approached. Behind Enoch, in the lambency of soft amber lights spaced around the base of the chamber, wavered a line of ten other men and women, all of them old, all dressed in black, with silver ribbons hanging from the tops of their white-haired heads. "You've come to a place of waiting where nothing is resolved. Why come at all?"

Before Olmy could answer, Enoch smiled, her deeply wrinkled face seeming to crack with the unfamiliar expression. "We assume you are here because you think the Jarts could become involved."

"I don't know what to think," Olmy said, his voice hoarse. "I recognize you, but none of the others ... "

"We survived the first night after the lesion. We formed an expedition to make an escape attempt. There were sixty of us that first time. We managed to return to the Redoubt before the Night Land could change us too much, play with us too drastically. We aged. Some of us were taken and ... You see them out there. There was no second expedition."

"My husband," Plass said. "Where is he?"

"Yes ... I know you. You are so much the same it hurts. You escaped at the very beginning."

"I was the only one," Plass said.

"You called it the Night Land," Rasp said, holding up her hands, the case with her clavicle. "How appropriate."

"No sun, no hope, only *order*," Enoch said, as if the word were a curse. "Did you send yourselves, or were you sent by other fools?"

"Fools, I'm afraid," Plass said.

"And you ... You came back, knowing what you'd find?"

"It wasn't like this when I left. My husband sent ghosts to visit me. They told me a little of what's happened here ... or might have happened."

"Ghosts try to come into the Redoubt and talk," Enoch said, her many legs shifting restlessly. "We refuse them. Your husband was caught outside that first night. He hasn't been changed much. He stands near the Watcher, frozen in the eyebeam."

Plass sobbed and hid her face.

Enoch continued, heedless. The only thing left in his control -- to shed ghosts like dead skin. And never the same ... are they? He's allowed to take temporary twists of space-time and shape them in his own image. The allthing finds this sufficiently amusing. Needless to say, we don't let the ghosts bother us. We have too much else to do, just to keep our place secure, and in repair."

"Repair," Karn said with a beatific smile, and Olmy turned to her, startled by a reaction similar to his own. Karn did a small dance. "Disorder has its place here, then. You have to *work to fix things?*"

"Precisely," Enoch said. "I worship rust and age. But we're only allowed so much of it and no more. Now that you're here, perhaps you'll join us for some tea?" She smiled. "Blessedly, our tea cools quickly in the Redoubt. Our bones grow frail, our skin wrinkles. Tea cools. Hurry!"

"Don't be deceived by our bodies," Deirdre Enoch said as she poured steaming tea into cups for all her guests. "They are distorted, but they are sufficient. The allthing can only perfect and elaborate; it knows nothing of real destruction."

Olmy watched something ripple through the old woman, a shudder of slight change. She seemed not as old and wrinkled now, as if some force had turned back a clock.

"I'm not clear about perfection," Olmy said, lifting the cup without enthusiasm. "I'm not even clear on how you come to look old."

"We're not unhappy," Enoch said. "That isn't within our power. We know we can never return to Thistledown. We know we can never escape."

"You haven't answered Ser Olmy's question," Plass said gently. "Are you independent here?"

"That wasn't his question, Ser Lissa Plass," Enoch said, an edge in her voice. "What you ask is not a *polite* question. I said, we were caught trying to escape. Some of us are out there in the Night Land now. Those of us who returned to the pyramid ... did not escape the enthusiasm of the allthing. But its influence here is limited. To answer one question at least: we have some independence." Enoch nodded as if falling asleep, her head dropping briefly to an angle with her shoulders ... an uncomfortable angle, Olmy would have thought. She raised it again with a jerk. "The universe I discovered ... there is nothing else. It is all."

"The Final Mind of the domain," Plass said.

"I gather it regards the Way and the humans it finds here as objects of curiosity," Olmy said. Rasp and Karn fidgeted but did not object to this line of discussion.

"Objects to be recombined and distorted," Enoch said. "We are materials for the ultimate in decadent art. The allthing is beyond our knowing." She leaned forward on her cushion, where she had gracefully folded her legs into an agile lotus, and rubbed her nose reflectively with the back of one hand. "We are allowed to resist, I suspect, because we are antithesis."

"The allthing has only known thesis," Rasp said with a small giggle.

"Exa-a-a-ctly," Enoch said, drawing out the word with pleasure. Struck by another sensation of unreality, Olmy looked around the group sitting with Enoch and himself: Plass, the twins, and, behind Enoch, a small woman with a questing, feline expression who had said nothing. She carried the teapot around again and refilled their cups.

The tea was cold.

Olmy turned on his sitting pillow to observe the other elderly followers, arrayed around the circular room, still, subservient. Their faces had changed since his arrival, yet no one had left, no one had entered.

It had been observed for a dozen generations that Thistledown's environment and culture bred followers with proportionately fewer leaders, often assigned much greater power. Efforts were being made to remedy that -- to reduce the extreme schisms of rogues such as Deirdre Enoch. Too late for these, he thought. Does this allthing want followers?

He could not get his bearings long enough to plan his course of action. He felt drugged, but knew he wasn't.

"Can it tolerate otherness?" Karn asked, her voice high and sweet once more, like a child's.

"No," Enoch said. "Its nature is to absorb and disguise all otherness in mutation, change without goal."

"Like the Jarts?" Rasp asked, chewing on her thumb with a coyness and insecurity that was at once studied and completely convincing.

"Not like the Jarts. The Jarts met the allthing and it gave them their own Night Land. I fear it won't be long until ours is merged with theirs, and we are both mingled and subjected to useless change."

"How long?" Olmy asked.

"Another few years, perhaps."

"Not so soon, then," he said.

"Soon enough," Enoch said with a sniff. She rubbed her nose again. "We've been here already for well over a thousand centuries."

Olmy tried to understand this. "Truly?" he asked, expecting her to break into laughter.

"Truly. I've had millions of different followers here. Look around you." She leaned over the table to whisper to Olmy, "Waves in a sea. I've lived a thousand centuries in a thousand infinitesimally different universes. It plays with all world-lines, not just the tracks of individuals. Only I am relatively the same with each tide. I appear to be the real nexus in this part of the Way."

"Tea cools ... skin wrinkles ... But you experience such a length of time?"

"Ten thousand lengths cut up and bundled and rotated." She took a scarf from around her thin neck and stretched it between her fists. "Twisted. Knotted. You were sent here to correct the reckless madness of a renegade ... weren't you?"

"A Geshel visionary," Olmy said.

Enoch was not mollified. She drew herself up and returned her scarf to her neck, tying it with a conscious flourish. "I was appointed by the Office of Way Maintenance. By Ry Ornis himself. They gave me two of the best gate openers in the guild, and they instructed me, specifically, to find a gate into total order. I wasn't told why. I can guess now, however."

"I remember two openers," Plass said. "They don't."

"They hoped you would find me transformed or dead," Enoch said. "Well, I'm different, but I've survived, and after a few thousands of centuries, one's personality becomes rather rigid. I've become more like that Watcher and its huge gaping eye outside. I don't know how to lie anymore. I've seen too much. I've fought against what I found, and I've endured atrocities beyond what any human has ever had to face. Believe me, I would rather have died before my mission began than see what I've seen."

"Where is the other opener?" Olmy asked.

"In the Night Land," Enoch said. "Issa Danna was the first to encounter the allthing. He and his partner, master Tolby Kin, took the brunt of its first efforts at elaboration."

Rasp walked over to Olmy and whispered in his ear. "There never was a master opener named Tolby Kin."

"Can anybody else confirm your story?" Olmy asked.

"Would you believe anyone here? No," Enoch said.

"Not that it matters," Plass said fatalistically. "The end result is the same."

"Not at all," Enoch said. "We couldn't close down the lesion now even if we had it in our power. Ry Ornis was correct. The rift had to be opened. The infection is not finished. If we don't wait for completion, our universe will never quicken. It'll be born dead." Enoch shook her head and laughed softly. "And no human in our history will ever see a ghost. A haunted world is a living world, Ser Olmy."

Olmy touched his teacup with his finger. The tea was hot again.

The living quarters made available were spare and cold. Most of the Redoubt's energy went to keeping the occupants of the Night Land at bay; that energy was derived from the wall of the Way, an ingenious arrangement set up by Issa Danna before he was caught up in the lesion; sufficient, but not a surfeit by any means.

For the first time in days, Olmy had a few moments alone. He cleared a window looking south, toward the lesion and across about fifty kilometers of the Night Land. Enoch had provided him with a pair of ray-tracing binoculars.

Beyond a tracting grid stretched to its limits, and a glowing demarcation of complete nuclear destruction, through which nothing made of matter could hope to cross, less than a thousand meters from the pyramid, lay the peculiar vivid darkness and the fitful nightmare glows of the allthing's victims.

Olmy swung the lightweight binoculars in a slow, steady arc. What looked like hills or low mountains were constructions attended by hundreds of pale figures, human-sized but only vaguely human in shape. They seemed to spend much of their time fighting, waving their limbs about like insect antennae. Others carried loads of glowing dust in baskets, dumping them at the top of a hill, then stumbling and sliding down to begin again.

The giant head modeled after the opener stood a little to the west of the Green Glass Castle. Olmy could not tell whether the head was actually organic material -- human flesh -- or not. It looked more like stone, though the eye was very expressive.

From this angle, he could not see the huge figure standing in the door of the castle; that side was turned away from the Redoubt. Nothing that he saw contradicted what Plass and Enoch had told him. He could not share the cheerful nihilism of the twins. Nevertheless, nothing that he saw could be fit into any philosophy or web of physical laws he had ever encountered. If there was a mind here, it was incomprehensibly different -- perhaps no mind at all.

Still, he tried to find some pattern, some plan to the Night Land. A rationale. He could not.

Just before the tallest hills stood growths like the tangled roots of upended trees, leafless, barren, dozens of meters high and stretching in ugly, twisted forests several kilometers across. A kind of pathway reached from the northern wall of the Redoubt, through the demarcation, into a tortured terrain of what looked like huge strands of melted and drawn glass, and to the east of the castle. It dropped over a closer hill and he could not see where it terminated.

The atmosphere around the Redoubt was remarkably clear, though columns of twisted mist rose around the Night Land. Before a wall of blue haze at some fifty kilometers distance, everything stood out with complete clarity.

Olmy turned away at a knock on his door. Plass entered, wearing a look of contentment that seemed ready to burst into enthusiasm. "Now do you doubt me?"

"I doubt everything," Olmy said. "I'd just as soon believe we've been captured and are being fed delusions."

"Do you think that's what's happened?" Plass asked, eyes narrowing as if she had been insulted.

"No," Olmy said. "I've experienced some pretty good delusions in training. This is real, whatever that means."

"I must admit the little twins are busy," Plass said, sitting on a small chair near the table. These and a small mattress on the floor were the only items of furniture in the room. "They're talking to anybody who knows anything about Enoch's gate openers. I don't think you can talk to the same person twice here in an hour -- unless it's Enoch."

Olmy nodded. He was still digesting Enoch's claim that the Office of Way Maintenance had sent an expedition with secret orders ... In collusion with the Openers Guild.

Perhaps the twins knew more than he did, or Plass. "Did you know anything about an official mission?" he asked.

Plass did not answer for a moment. "Not in so many words. Not 'official.' But perhaps not without ... support from Way Maintenance. We did not think we were outlaws."

"You've both talked about completion. Was that mentioned when you joined the group?"

"Only in passing. A theory."

Olmy turned back to the window. "There's a camera obscura near the top of the pyramid. I'd like to look over everything around us, try to make sense of our position."

"Useless," Plass said. "I'd wait for a visitation first."

"More ghosts?"

Plass shrugged her shoulders and stretched out her legs, rubbing her knees.

"I haven't been visited," Olmy said.

"It will happen," Plass said flatly. She appeared to be hiding something, something that

worried her. "I wouldn't look forward to it. But then, there's nothing you can do to prepare."

Olmy laughed, but the laugh sounded hollow. He felt as if he were slowly coming unraveled, like Enoch's bundle of relived world-lines. "How would I know if I've seen a ghost?" he asked. "Maybe I have -- on Thistledown. Maybe they're around us all the time, but don't reveal themselves."

Plass looked to one side, then said, with an effort, her voice half-choking, "I've met my own ghost."

"You didn't mention that before."

"It came to visit me the night after we left Thistledown. It told me we would reach the pyramid."

Olmy held back another laugh, afraid it might get loose and never stop. "I've never seen a ghost of myself."

"We do things differently, then. I seemed to be working backward from some experience with the allthing. A ghost lets you remember the future, or some alternate of the future. Maybe in time I'll be told what the allthing will do to me. Its elaborations."

Olmy considered this in silence. Plass's somber gray eyes focused on him, clear, childlike in their perfect gravity. Now he saw the resemblance, the reason why he felt a tug of liking for her. She reminded him of Sheila Ap Nam, his first wife on Lamarckia.

"Your loved ones, friends, colleagues ... They will see you, versions of you, if you meet the allthing," Plass said. "A kind of immortality. Remembrance." She looked down and clutched her arms. "No other intelligent species we've encountered has a history of myths about spirits. No experience with ghosts. You know that? We're unique. Alone. Except perhaps the Jarts ... and we don't know much about them, do we?"

He nodded, wanting to get rid of the topic. "What are the twins planning?"

"They seem to regard this as a challenging game. Who knows? They're working. It's even possible they'll think of something."

Olmy aimed the binoculars toward the Watcher, its single glowing eye forever turned toward the Redoubt. He felt a bone-deep revulsion and hatred, mixed with a desiccating chill. His tongue seemed frosted. Perversely, the flesh behind his eyes felt hot and moist. His neck hair pricked.

"There's -- " he began, but then flinched and blinked. A curtain of shadow passed through the few centimeters between him and the window. He backed off with a groan and tried to push something away, but the curtain would not be touched. It whirled around him, passed before Plass, who tracked it calmly, and then seemed to press against and slip through the opposite wall.

The warmth behind his eyes felt hot as steam.

"I *knew* it!" he said hoarsely. "I could feel it coming! Something about to happen." His hands trembled. He had never reacted so drastically to physical danger.

"That was nothing," Plass said. "I've seen them many times, more since I first came here."

Olmy's reaction angered him. "What is it?"

"Not a ghost, not any other version of ourselves, that's for sure," she said. "A parasite, maybe, like some sort of flea darting around our world-lines. Harmless, as far as I know. But much more visible here than back on Thistledown."

Trying to control himself was backfiring. All his instincts rejected what he was experiencing. "I don't accept any of this!" he shouted. His hands spasmed into fists. "None of it makes sense!"

"I agree," Plass said, her voice low. "Pity we're stuck with it. Pity you're stuck with me. But more pity that I'm stuck with you. It seems you try to be a rational man, Ser Olmy. My husband was exceptionally rational. The allthing adores rational men."

6

Rasp and Karn walked with Olmy on the parapet near the peak of the Redoubt. Their work seemed to have sobered them. They still walked like youngsters, Karn or Rasp lagging to peer at something in the Night Land and then scurrying to catch up; but their voices were steady, serious, even a little sad.

"We've never experienced anything like the lesion," Karn said. The huge dark disk, rimmed in bands and flares of red, blotted out the opposite side of the Way. "It's much more than just a failed gate. It doesn't stop here, you know."

"How do you mean?" Olmy asked.

"Something like this influences the entire Way. When the gate got out of control -- "

Rasp took Karn's hand and tugged it in warning.

"What does it matter?" Karn asked, and shook her twin loose. "There can't be secrets here. If we don't agree to do something, the allthing will get us soon anyway, and then we'll be planted out there ... bits and pieces of us, like lost toys."

Rasp dropped back a few steps, folded her arms in pique. Karn continued. "When the lesion formed, gate openers felt it in every new gate. Threads trying to get through, like spidersilk. We can see the world-lines being twirled here ... But they bunch up and wind around the Way even where we can't see them. Master Ry Ornis thought -- "

"Enough!" Rasp said, rushing to catch up.

Karn stopped with tears in her eyes and glared over the parapet wall.

"I can guess a few things," Olmy said. "What Deirdre Enoch says leaves little enough to imagine. You aren't failed apprentices, are you?"

Rasp stared at him defiantly.

"No," Karn said.

Her twin turned and lifted a hand as if to strike her, then dropped it by her side. She drew a short breath, said, "We act like children because of the mathematical conditioning. Too fast. Ry Ornis told us we were needed. He accelerated training. We were the best, but we *are* too young. It holds us down."

A sound like hundreds of voices in a bizarre chorus floated over the Night Land, through the field that protected the Redoubt's atmosphere. The chorus alternately rose and sank through scales, hooting forlornly like apes in a zoo.

"Ry Ornis thought the lesion was bending world-lines even beyond Thistledown," Karn

said. Rasp nodded and held her sister's hand. "Climbing back along the Thistledown's world-line ... where all our lives bunch together with the lives of our ancestors. Using us as a ladder."

"Not just us," Rasp added. The hooting chorus now came from all around the Redoubt. From this side of the pyramid, they could see a slender obelisk the colors of bright moon on an oil slick rising within an immense scaffold made of parts of bodies, arms and legs strapped together with cords. These limbs were monstrous, however, fully dozens of meters long, and the obelisk had climbed within its scaffolding to at least a kilometer in height, twice as tall as the Redoubt.

The region around the construction crawled with pale tubular bodies, like insect larvae, and Olmy decided it was these bodies that were doing most of the singing and hooting.

"Right," Karn agreed. "Not just us. Using the branching lines of all the matter, all the particles in Thistledown and the Way."

"Who knows how far it's reached?" Rasp asked.

"What can it do?" Olmy asked.

"We don't know," Karn said.

"What can *we* do?"

"Oh, we can close down the lesion, if we act quickly," Rasp said with a broken smile. "That shouldn't be too difficult."

"It's actually growing smaller," Karn said. "We can create a ring gate from here ... A cirque. Cinch off the Way. The Way will shrink back toward the source, the maintenance machinery in the sixth chamber, very quickly -- a million kilometers a day. We might even be able to escape along the flaw, but -- "

"The flaw will act weird if we make a cinch," Rasp finished.

"Very weird," Karn agreed. "So we probably don't get home. We knew that. Ry Ornis prepared us. He told us that much."

"Besides, if we did go back to Thistledown, who would want us now, the way we are?" Rasp asked. "We're pretty broken inside."

The twins paused on the parapet. Olmy watched as they clasped hands and began to hum softly to each other. Their clavicles hung from their shoulders, and the cases tapped as they swayed. Rasp glanced at Olmy, primming her lips.

"Enoch spoke of a plan by the Office of Way Maintenance," Olmy said. "She claims she was sent here secretly."

"We know nothing about that," Karn said guilelessly. "But that might not mean much. I don't think they would have trusted us."

"She also said that the allthing has some larger purpose in our own universe," Olmy continued. "Something that has to be completed, or our existence will be impossible."

Karn considered this quietly, finger to her nostril, then shook her head. "We heard her, but I don't see it," she said. "Maybe she's trying to justify herself."

"*We* do that all the time," Rasp said. "We understand that sort of thing."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to the peak and the camera obscura. Karn climbed two steps at a time, her robe swinging around her ankles, and Rasp followed with more dignity. Olmy stayed near the bottom. Rasp turned and looked down on him.

"Come on," she said, waving.

Olmy shook his head. "I've seen enough. I can't make sense out of anything out there. I think it's random -- just nonsense."

"Not at all!" Rasp said, and descended a few steps, beseeching him to join her. "We have to see what happened to the openers' clavicles. What sort of elaboration there might be. It could be very important."

Olmy hunched his shoulders, shook his head like a bull trying to build courage. He followed her up the steps.

The camera obscura was a spherical all-focal lens, its principle not unlike that of the ray-tracing binoculars. Mounted on a tripod on the flat platform at the peak of the pyramid, it projected and magnified the Night Land for anyone standing on the platform. Approaching the tripod increased magnification in logarithmic steps, with precise quickness; distances of a few tens of a centimeter could make objects zoom to alarming proportions. Monitors on the peripheral circle, small spheres on steel poles, rolled in and out with slow grace, tracking the developments in the Night Land and sending their results down to Enoch and the others inside.

Olmy deftly avoided the monitors and walked slowly, with great concentration, around the circle. Karn and Rasp made their own surveys.

Olmy stopped and drew back to take in the Watcher's immense eye. The angle of the hairless brow, the droop of the upper lid, gave it a corpselike and sad lassitude, but the eye still moved in small arcs, and from this perspective, there was no doubt it was observing the Redoubt. Olmy felt that it saw him, knew him; had he ever met the opener, before his mission to Lamarckia, perhaps by accident? Was there some residual memory of Olmy in that immense head? Olmy thought such a connection might be very dangerous.

"The Night Land changes every hour, sometimes small changes, sometimes massive," Enoch said, walking slowly and deliberately up the steps behind them. She stopped outside the camera's circle. "It tracks our every particle. It's patient."

"Does it fear us?" Olmy asked.

"No fear. We haven't even begun to be played with."

"That out there is not elaboration -- it's pointless madness."

"I thought so myself," Enoch said. "Now I see a pattern. The longer I'm here, the more I sympathize with the allthing. Do you understand what I told you earlier? It *recognizes* us, Ser Olmy. It sees its own work in us, a cycle waiting to be completed."

Rasp held a spot within the circle and motioned for Karn to join her. Together, they peered at something in complete absorption, ignoring Enoch.

Olmy could not ignore her, however. He needed to resolve this question. "The Office of Way Maintenance sent you here to confirm that?"

"Not in so many words, but ... Yes. We know that our own domain, our home universe outside the Way, should have been born barren, empty. Something quickened it, fed it with the necessary geometric nutrients. Some of us thought that would only be possible if the early universe made a connection with a domain of very different properties. I told Ry Ornis that such a quickening need not have happened at the beginning. We could do it now. We had the Way ... We could perform the completion. There was such a feeling of power and justification within the guild. I encouraged it. The connection has been made ... And all that, the Night Land, is just a side effect. Pure order flowing back through the Way, through Thistledown, back through time to the beginning. Was it worth it? Did we do what we had

planned? I'll never know conclusively, because we can't reverse it now ... and cease to be."

"You weren't sure. You knew this could be dangerous, harm the Way, fatal if the Jarts gained an advantage?"

Enoch stared at him for a few seconds, eyes moving from his eyes to his lips, his chest, as if she would measure him. "Yes," she said. "I knew. Ry Ornis knew. The others did not."

"They suffered for what you've learned," Olmy said. Enoch's gaze steadied, and her jaw clenched.

"I've suffered, too. I've learned very little, Ser Olmy. What I learn repeats itself over and over again, and it has more to do with arrogance than metaphysics."

"We've found one!" Karn shouted. "There's a clavicle mounted on top of the green castle. We can pinpoint it!"

Olmy stood where Rasp indicated. At the top of the squat, massive green castle stood a cube, half-hidden behind a mass of rootlike growth. On top of the cube, a black pillar about the height of a man supported the unmistakable sphere-and-handles of a clavicle. The sphere was dark, dormant; nothing moved around the pillar or anywhere on the castle roof.

"There's only one, and it appears to be inactive," Rasp said. "The lesion is independent."

Karn spread her arms, wiggling her fingers. A wide smile lit up her face. "We can make a cirque!"

"We can't do it from here," Rasp said. "We have to go out there."

Enoch's face tensed into a rigid mask. "We haven't finished," she said. "The work isn't done!"

Olmy shook his head. He'd made his decision. "Whoever started this, and for whatever reason, it has to end now. The Nexus orders it."

"They don't know!" Enoch cried out.

"We know enough," Olmy said.

Rasp and Karn held each other's hands and descended the stairs. Rasp stuck her tongue out at the old woman.

Enoch laughed and lightly slapped her hands on her thighs. "They're only children! They won't succeed. What have I to fear from failed apprentices?"

The Night Land's atmosphere was a thin haze of primordial hydrogen, mixed with carbon dioxide and some small trace of oxygen from the original envelope surrounding the gate. At seven hundred millibars of pressure, and with a temperature just above freezing, they could venture out of the Redoubt in the most basic pressurized worksuits.

Enoch and her remaining, ever-changing people would not help them. Olmy preferred it that way. He walked through the empty corridors of the pyramid's ground floor and found a small wheeled vehicle that at one time had been used to reach the garden outside the Redoubt -- a garden that now lay beyond the demarcation.

Plass showed him how the open vehicle worked. "It has its own pilot, makes a field around the passenger compartment."

"It looks familiar enough," Olmy said.

Plass sat next to Olmy and placed her hand on a control bar. "My husband and I used to tend our plot out there ... flowers, herbs, vegetables. We'd drive one of these for a few hundred meters, outside the work zone, to where the materials team had spread soil

brought through the first gate."

Olmy sat in the vehicle. It announced it was drawing a charge in case it would be needed. It added, in a thin voice, "Will this journey last more than a few hours? I can arrange with the stationmaster for -- "

"No," Olmy said. "No need." He turned to Plass. "Time to put on a suit."

Plass stepped out of the car and nervously smoothed her hands down her hips. "I'm staying here. I can't bring myself to go out there again."

"I understand."

"I don't see how you'll survive."

"It looks very chancy," Olmy admitted.

"Why can't they open a ring gate from here?"

"Rasp and Karn say they have to be within five hundred meters of the lesion. About where the other clavicle is now."

"Do you know what my husband was, professionally? Before we came here?"

"No."

"A neurologist. He came along to study the effects of our experiment on the researchers. There was some thought our minds would be enhanced by contact with the ordered domain. They were all very optimistic." She put her hand on Olmy's shoulder. "We had faith. Enoch still believes what they told her, doesn't she?"

Olmy nodded. "May I make one last request?"

"Of course," Plass said.

"Enoch promised us she would open a way through the demarcation and let us through. She claimed we couldn't do anything out there but be taken in by the allthing, anyway ... "

Plass smiled. "I'll watch her, make sure the fields are open long enough for you to go through. The guild was very clever, sending you and the twins, you know."

"Why?"

"You're all very deceptive. You all seem to be failures." Plass clenched his shoulder.

She turned and left as Rasp and Karn entered the storage chamber. The twins watched her go in silence. They carried their clavicles and had already put on their pressure suits, which had adjusted to their small frames and made a precise fit.

"We've always made her uncomfortable," Rasp said. "Maybe I don't blame her."

Karn regarded Olmy with deep black eyes. "You haven't met a ghost of yourself, have you?"

"I haven't," Olmy said.

"Neither have we. And that's significant. We're never going to reach the allthing. It's never going to get us."

Olmy remembered what Plass had said. She had seen her own ghost ...

They cursed the opening of the Way and the change of the Thistledown's mission. They assassinated the Way's creator, Konrad Korzenowski. For centuries they maintained a fierce opposition, largely underground, but with connections to the Naderites in power. In any given year there might be only four or five active members of this most radical sect, the rest presuming to lead normal lives; but the chain was maintained. All this because their original leader had a vision of the Way as an easy route to infinite hells.

-- Lives of the Opposition, Anonymous, Journey Year 475

The three rode the tiny wheeled vehicle over a stretch of bare Way floor, a deeply tarnished copper-bronze-colored surface of no substance whatsoever, and no friction at this point. They kept their course with little jets of air expelled from the sides of the car, until they reached a broad low island of glassy materials, just before the boundary markers that warned they were coming to the demarcation.

As agreed, the traction lines switched to low power, and an opening appeared directly ahead of them, a clarified darkness in the pale green field. This relieved Olmy somewhat; he had had some doubts that Enoch would cooperate, or that Plass could compel her. The vehicle rolled through. They crossed the defenses. Behind them, the fields went up again.

Now the floor of the Way was covered with sandy soil. The autopilot switched off the air jets and let the vehicle roll for another twenty meters.

The pressure suits were already becoming uncomfortable; they were old, and while they did their best to fit, their workings were in less than ideal condition. Still, they would last several weeks, recycling gases and liquids and complex molecules, rehydrating the body through arterial inserts and in the same fashion providing a minimal diet.

Olmy doubted the suits would be needed for more than a few more hours.

The twins ignored their discomfort and focused their attention on the lesion. Outside the pyramid, the lesion seemed to fill the sky, and in a few kilometers, it would be almost directly overhead. From this angle, the hairlike swirls of spinning world-lines already took on a shimmering reflective quality, like bands sliced from a wind-ruffled lake; their passage sang in Olmy's skull, more through his teeth than through his ears.

The full character of the Night Land came on gradually, beginning with a black, gritty, loose scabble beneath the tires of the vehicle. Olmy's suit readout, shining directly into his left eye, showed a decrease in air pressure of a few millibars beyond the demarcation. The temperature remained steady, just above zero degrees Celsius.

They turned west, to their left as they faced north down the Way, and came upon the path Olmy had seen from the peak of the pyramid. Plass had identified it as the road used by vehicles carrying material from the first gate Enoch had opened. It had also been the path to Plass's garden, the one she had shared with her husband. Within a few minutes, about three kilometers from the Redoubt, passing over the rise that had blocked his view, they came across the garden's remains.

The relief here was very low, but the rise of some fifty meters had been sufficient to hide

what must have been among the earliest attempts at elaboration. Olmy was not yet sure he believed in the allthing, but what had happened in the garden, and in the rest of the Night Land, made any disagreement moot. The trees in the southwest corner of a small rapid-growth orchard had spread out low to the ground, and glowed now like the body of Number 2. Those few trees left standing flickered like frames in a child's flipbook. The rest of the orchard had simply turned to sparkling ash. In the center, however, rose a mound of gnarled brown shot through with vivid reds and greens, and in the middle of this mound, facing almost due south, not looking at anything in particular, was a face some three meters in height, its skin the color of green wood, cracks running from crown to chin. The face did not move or exhibit any sign of life.

Puffs of dust rose from the ash, tiny little explosions from within this mixture of realities. The ash re-formed to obliterate the newly formed craters. It seemed to have some purpose of its own, as did everything else in the garden but the face.

Ruin and elaboration; one form of life extinguished, another imbued.

"Early," Karn said, looking to their right at a sprawl of shining dark green leaves, stretched, expanded, and braided into eye-twisting knots. "Didn't know what it was dealing with."

"Doesn't look like it ever did," Olmy said, realizing she was speaking as if some central director actually did exist.

Rasp set her sister straight. "We've seen textbook studies of gates gone wrong. Geometry is the living tissue of reality. Mix constants and you get a -- "

"We've sworn not to discuss the failures," Karn said, but without any strength.

"We are being driven through the worst failure of all," Rasp said. "Mixed constants and skewed metrics explain all of this."

Karn shrugged. Olmy thought that perhaps it did not matter; perhaps Rasp and Karn and Plass did not really disagree, merely described the same thing in different ways. What they were seeing up close was not random rearrangement; it had a demented, even a vicious quality, that suggested purpose.

Above the rows of flipbook trees and the living layers of ash stretched a dead and twisted sky. From the hideous chancre of dead blackness, with its sullen ring of congealed red, depended curtains of rushing darkness that swept the Night Land like rain beneath a moving front.

"Mother's hair," Karn said, and clutched her clavicle tightly in white-knuckled hands.

"She's playing with us," Rasp said. "Bending over us, waving her hair over our crib. We reach up to grab, and she pulls away."

"She laughs," Karn said.

"Then she gives us to the -- "

Rasp did not have time to finish. The vehicle swerved abruptly with a small squeak before a sudden chasm that had not been there an instant before. Out of the chasm leaped white shapes, humanlike but fungal, doughy and featureless. They seemed to be expelled and to climb out equally, and they lay on the sandy black-streaked ground for a moment, as if recovering from their birth. Then they rose to loose and wobbling feet and ran with speed and even grace over the irregular landscape to the trees, which they began to uproot.

These were the laborers Olmy had seen from the pyramid. They paid no attention to the intruders. The chasm closed, and Olmy instructed the car to continue.

"Is that what we'll become?" Karn asked.

"Each of us will become *many* of them," Rasp said.

"Such a relief to know!" Karn said sardonically.

The rotating shadows ahead gave the ground a blurred and frantic aspect, like unfocused time-lapse photography. Only the major landmarks stood unchanged in the sweeps of metaphysical revision: the Watcher, pale beam still glowing from its unblinking eye; the Castle with its unseen giant occupant; and the obelisk with its scaffold and hordes of white figures working directly beneath the lesion.

Olmy ordered the vehicle to stop, but Rasp grabbed his hand. "Farther," she said. "We can't do anything here."

Olmy grinned and threw back his head, then grimaced like a monkey in the oldest forest of all, baring his teeth at this measureless madness.

"Farther!" Karn insisted. The car rolled on, jolting with the regular ridges some powerful force had pushed up in the sand.

Above the constant sizzle of rearranged world-lines, like a symphony of scrubbing and tapping brooms, came more sounds. If a burning forest could sing its pain, Olmy thought, it would be like the rising wail that came from the tower and the Castle. Thousands of the white figures made thousands of different sounds, as if trying to talk to each other, but not succeeding. Mock speech, singsong pidgin nonsense, attempts to communicate emotions and thoughts they could not truly have; protests at being jabbed and pulled and jiggled along the scaffolding of the tower, over the uneven ground, like puppets directed by something trying to mock a process of construction.

Olmy's body had up to that moment sent him a steady bloodwash of fear. He had controlled this emotion as well as he could, but never ignored it; that would have been senseless and wrong, for fear was what told him he came from a world that made sense, that held together and was consistent, that *worked*.

Yet fear was not enough, could not be an adequate response to what they were seeing. This was a threat beyond anything the body had been designed to experience. Had he allowed himself to scream, he could not have screamed loudly enough.

The Death we all know, Olmy told himself, is an end to something real; death here would be worse than nightmare, worse than the hell one imagines for one's enemies and unbelievers.

"I know," Karn said, and her hands shook on the clavicle.

"What do you know?" Rasp asked.

"Every meter, every second, every dimension, has its own mind here," Karn said. "Space and time are arguing, fighting."

Rasp disagreed violently. "No mind, no minds at all!" she insisted shrilly.

Light itself began to waver and change as they came closer to the tower. Olmy could see the face of oncoming events before they occurred, like waves on a beach, rushing over the land, impatient to reach their destinations, their observers, before all surprise had been lost.

They now entered the fringes of shadow. The revisions of their surroundings felt like deep drumming pulses. Caught directly in a shadow, Olmy felt a sudden rub of excitement. He saw flashes of colors, felt a spectrum of unfamiliar emotions that threatened to cancel out his fear. He looked to his left, into the counterclockwise sweep, anticipating each front of darkness, leaning toward it. Ecstasy, followed by a buzz of exhilaration, suddenly a spasm of

brilliance, all the while the back of his head crisping and glowing and sparking. He could see into the back of his brain, down to the working foundations of every thought -- where symbols with no present meaning are painted and arrayed on long tables, then jerked and jostled until they become emotions and memories and words.

"Like opening a gate!" Karn shouted, seeing Olmy's expression. "Much worse. Dangerous! Very dangerous!"

"Don't ignore it, don't suppress," Rasp told him. "Just pay attention to what's in front! That's what they teach us when we open a gate!"

"These aren't gates!" Olmy shouted above the hideous symphony of brooms. The twins' heads jerked and vibrated as he spoke.

"They are!" Rasp said. "Little gates into directly adjacent worlds. They're trying to escape their neighboring realities, to split away, but the lesion gathers them, holds them. They flow back behind us, along our world-lines."

"Back to the beginning!" Karn said.

"Back to our birth!" Rasp said.

"Here!" Karn said, and Olmy brought the car to a stop. The two assistants, little more than girls, with pale faces and wide eyes and serious expressions climbed down from the open cab and marched resolutely across the rippled sand, leaning into the pressure of other streams of reality. Their clothes changed color, their hair changed its arrangement, even their skin changed color, but they marched until the clavicles seemed to lift of their own will.

Rasp and Karn faced each other.

Olmy told himself, with whatever was left of his mind, that they were now going to attempt a cirque, a ring gate, that would bring all this to a meeting with the flaw. Within the flaw lay the peace of incommensurable contradictions, pure and purifying. Within the flaw this madness would burn to less than nothing, to paradoxes that would cancel and expunge.

He did not think they would have time to escape, even if the shrinking of the Way was less than instantaneous.

He stood on the seat of the car for a moment, watching the twins, admiring them. *Enoch underestimates them. As have I. This is what Ry Omis wanted, why he chose them.*

He hunched his shoulders: something coming. Before he could duck or jump aside, Olmy was caught between two folds of shadow, like a bug snatched between fingers, and lifted bodily from the car. He twisted his neck and looked back to see a fuzzy image of the car, the twins lifting their clavicles, the rippled and streaked sand. The car seemed to vibrate, the tire tracks rippling behind it like snakes; and for a long moment, the twins and the car were not visible at all, as if they had never been.

Olmy's thoughts raced and his body shrieked with joy. Every nerve shivered, and all his memories stood out together in sharp relief, with different selves viewing them all at once. He could not distinguish between present and future; all were just parts of different memories. His reference point had blurred to where his life was a flat field, and within that field swam a myriad of possibilities. What would happen, what had happened, became indistinguishable from the unchosen and un-lived moments that *could* happen.

This blurring of his world-line rushed backward. He felt he could sidle across fates into what was fixed and unfix it, free his past to be all possible, all potential, once more. But the diffusion, the smearing and blending of the chalked line of his life, came up against the moment of his resurrection, the abrupt shift from Lamarckia --

And could not go any farther. Dammed, the tide of his life spilled out in all directions. He

cried out in surprise and a kind of pain he had never known before.

Olmy hung suspended beneath the dark eye, spinning slowly, all things above and below magnified or made minute depending on his angle. The pain passed. Perhaps it had never been. He felt as if his head had become a tiny but all-seeing camera obscura.

There was a past in which Ry Ornis accompanied the twins; he saw them working together near a very different vehicle, tractor rather than small car, to make the cirque. Already they had forced the Way to extrude a well through the sand. A cupola floated over the well, brazen and smooth, reflecting in golden hues the flaw, the lesion.

Olmy turned his head a fraction of a centimeter and once more saw only the twins, but this time dead, lying mangled beside the car, their clavicles flaring and burning. Another degree or two, and they were resurrected, still working. Ry Ornis was with them again.

A memory: Ry Ornis had traveled with them in the flawship. How could he have lost this fact?

Olmy rotated again, this time in a new and unfamiliar dimension, and felt the Way simply cease to exist and his own life with it. From this dark and soundless eventuality, he turned with a bitter, acrid wrench and found a very narrow course through the gripping shadows, a course illuminated by half-forgotten emotions that had been plucked like flowers, arranged like silent speech.

He had been carried to the other side of the lesion, looking north down the endless throat of the Way.

The gripping baleen of shadow from the whale's mouth of the lesion, the driving cilia whisking him between world-lines, drove him under and over a complex surface through which he could see a deep mountainous valley, its floor smooth and vitreous like obsidian.

Black glass, reflecting the lesion, the flaw behind the lesion, scudding layers of mist. The cilia that controlled Olmy's orientation let him drop to a few meters above the vitreous black floor.

Motion stopped. His thoughts slowed. He felt only one body, one existence. All his lines clumped back into one flow.

He tried to close his eyes, to not see, but that was impossible. He faced down and saw his reflection in the mirror-shiny valley floor, a small still man floating beneath the red-rimmed eye like an intruding mote.

On either side of the valley rose jagged glassy peaks, mountain ranges like shreds of pulled taffy. A few hundred meters ahead of him -- or perhaps a few kilometers -- mounted in the middle of the valley, lay something he recognized: a Jart defensive emplacement, white as ivory, jagged spikes thrusting like a sea urchin's spines from a squat discus. Shaded cilia played around the spikes, but the spikes did not track, did not move.

The emplacement was dead.

Olmy held his hands in front of his face. He could see them, see through them, with equal clarity. Nothing was obscured, nothing neglected by his new vision.

He tried to speak, or perhaps to pray, to whatever it was that held him, directed his motion. He asked first if anything was there, listening. No answer.

He remembered Plass's comments about the allthing: that in its domain it was unique, had never learned the arts of communication, was *one* without other and controlled all by *being all*. No separation between mind and matter, observed and observer. Such a being could neither listen nor answer. Nor could it change.

He thought of the emotions arrayed along the path that had guided him here. Pain, disappointment, fear. Weariness. Had the allthing learned this method of communication after its time in the Way? Had it dissected and rearranged enough human elements to change its nature this much?

Why pain? Olmy asked, spoken but unheard in the stillness.

He moved north down the center of the valley, over the dead Jart emplacement. His reflection shimmered in the uneven black mirror of the floor. He looked east and west, up the long curves of the Way beyond the jagged mountain, and saw more Jart emplacements, the spiral and beaded walls of what looked like Jart settlements, all abandoned, all spotted with large, distorted shapes he could not begin to comprehend.

Olmy thought, *It's made a Night Land for the Jarts. It does not know any difference between us.*

As if growing used to the extraordinary pressure of the shadow cilia gripping him, his body once more sent signals of fear, then simple, childlike wonder, and finally its own exhaustion. Olmy's head rolled on his shoulders and he felt his body sleep, but his mind remained alert. All his muscles tingled as they went off-line and would not respond to his tentative urgings.

How much time passed, if it were possible for time to pass, he could not judge. The tingling stopped and control returned. He lifted his head and saw a different valley, this one lined with huge figures. If the scale he had assumed at the beginning of his journey was still valid, these monolithic sculptures or shapes or beings -- whatever they might be -- were fully two or three kilometers distant, and therefore hundreds of meters in height. They were so strange he found himself looking at them in his peripheral vision, to avoid the confusion of placing them at the points of his visual focus. While vaguely organic in design -- compound curves, folds of what might have been a semblance of tissue weighted by gravity, a kind of multilateral symmetry -- the figures simply refused to be analyzed.

Olmy had many times experienced a lapse of visual judgment, when he would look at something in his living quarters and not remember it right away, and because of dim lighting or an unfamiliar angle, be unable to judge what it was. Under those conditions, he could feel his mind making hypotheses, trying desperately to compare them with what he was looking directly at, to reach some valid conclusion, and so actually see the object. This had occurred to him many times on Lamarckia, especially with regard to objects unique to that planet.

Here, he had no prior experience, no memory, no physical training or familiarity whatsoever with what he looked at, so he saw *nothing* sensible, nameable, to which he could begin to relate. Slowly, it dawned on Olmy that these might be more trophies of the allthing's encounters with Jarts.

He was drifting down a rogue's gallery of failed models, failed attempts to duplicate and understand, much like the gallery of objects and conditions around the Redoubt that made up the Night Land.

Humans had approached from the south, Jarts from the north. The allthing had applied similar awkward tools to both, either to unify them into its being, or to find some new way to experience their otherness. Both had been incomprehensibly alien to the allthing.

Pain. One of the emotions borrowed from Olmy's mind and arrayed along the pathway. A sense of disunification, unwanted change. The allthing had been disturbed by this entry; there was no evil, no enthusiastic destruction, in the Night Land. Olmy suddenly saw what Enoch had been trying to communicate to him, and went beyond her own understanding.

A monobloc of pure order had been invaded by a domain whose main character was that of disunity and contradiction. That must have been very painful indeed. And this quality of

order was being sucked backward, like gas into a vacuum, into their domain.

Enoch and the guild of gate openers had manufactured the tip of a tooth. They had thrust into this other domain the bloody predatorial tooth of a hungry universe seeking quickening, a completion at its own beginning.

But this hypothesis did not instantly open any floodgate of comprehension or communication. Olmy did not find himself suddenly analyzing the raw emotional outbursts of another mind, godlike or otherwise; the allthing was not a mind in any sense he could understand. It was simply a pure and necessary set of qualities. It gripped him, controlled him, but literally had no use for him. Like everything else here, it could neither analyze nor absorb him. It could not even spread back along his world-line, for Olmy's existence had begun over with this new body, with his resurrection.

That was why he had not met any ghosts of himself. Physically, he had almost no past. The allthing, if such existed, had flung him along this valley of waste and failure, another piece of detritus, even more frustrating than most.

He squirmed, his body struggling to break free like an animal in a cage. Panic overwhelmed him despite his best efforts. Olmy could not locate any point of reference within; not even a self was clearly defined.

Everything blurred, became confused, as if he had been smudged by an enormous finger and no outline remained. *I am no where, no here, no name, moving, no future.*

He twisted, convulsed, trying to find his center. The figures mounted on the ranges of mountains to either side seemed interested in this effort. He could feel their attention and did not welcome it. He fancied they moved, however slowly, advancing toward him across astronomical time.

If this lump of conflicting order and chaos could define himself anew, perhaps these incomprehensible monoliths, these unworshiped gods and unrealized mockeries, could establish a presence as well.

The panic stopped. Signals stopped.

He had come to an end. That minimum condition he had wished for was now upon him. He cared nothing for past or future, had lost nothing, gained nothing.

I am or was a part of a society really no part of any

This name is Olmy Ap Sennen

Lover of many loved and loving by few

Contact nothing without

Without contact nothing

Uprooted tree

The lesion's inflamed rim began to brighten. The suspended and aimless figure in its gripping cilia of probabilities maintained enough structure and drive to be interested in this, and noted that, compared to past memory, the lesion was much smaller, much darker, and the flaring rim much broader. It resembled an immense solar eclipse with a bloody corona.

Loyalties and loves uprooted

Language itself faded until the aimless figure saw only images, the lushness of another

world out of reach, closed off, the faces of old humans, once loved, once reassuringly close, now dead and without ghosts.

Can't even be haunted by a past uprooted

The figure's motion down the valley slowed. No time passed. Eternity, endless now. Naked, skinless, fleshless, boneless. Consumed, integrated.

Experiences stillness.

Mark this in an endless column: *experiences*

Experiences stillness stillness stillness

No divisions. A tiny place no bigger than a fist, a womb. Tiny place of infinite peace at the heart of a frozen geometry. All elaboration, variation, permutation, long since exhausted; infinite access to unbounded energy contained in oneness.

You/I/We no difference. See?

See. Vidya. All seeing. Eye of Buddha. Nerveless kalpas of some body. Nerve vanity.

This oneness consumed. Many nows, peace past.

At peace in the past. Loved women, raised children, lived a long life on a world to which there is no returning.

Nothing one at peace in no past all completed no returning.

Point.

One makes possible all.

I see. Buddha, do not leave your student bound.

The eye is shrinking, closing, its gorgeous bloody flare dimming. It is pierced by a white needle visible behind the small dark center.

Small large no matter no time Do not go. Take us with Am your father/mother/food loved raised living longing no return my own ghost

8

Ry Ornis, the tall insect-thin master, smiled down on him. Olmy saw many of the master opener, like an avatar of an ancient god. All the different masters merged.

They were surrounded by a glassy tent and a slow breeze cooled his face. Ry Ornis had wrapped him in a rescue field where he fell, carrying safe cool air to replenish what his worksuit could no longer provide.

Olmy rediscovered scattered rivers of memory and bathed his ancient feet there. He swallowed once. The eye, the lesion, had shut forever. "It's gone," he said.

Ry Ornis nodded. "It's done."

"I can never tell anybody," Olmy realized out loud.

"You can never tell anybody."

"We robbed and ate to live. To be born."

Ry Ornis held his fingers to his lips, his face spectral in a new light from the south. A huge grin was spreading around half the Way, a gorgeous brilliant electric light. "The ring gate. A cirque," the gate opener said, glancing over his shoulder. "Rasp and Karn, my students, have done well. We've done what we came here to do, and we saved the Way, as well. Not bad, eh, Ser Olmy?"

Olmy reached up to grab the gate opener, perhaps to strangle him. Ry Ornis had moved, however.

Olmy turned away, swallowed a second time against a competing dryness. There had been no need to complete the ring gate. The unfinished cirque had done its job and drained the final wasted remnants of the lesion, forcing a closure.

As they watched, the cirque shrank. The grin became a smile, became an all-knowing serene curve, then collapsed to a point, and the point dimmed on distant rippled sands.

"I think the twins are a little disappointed they can't finish the cirque. But it's wonderful," Ry Ornis enthused, and performed a small dance on the black obsidian of the valley floor. "They are truly master now! When I am tried and convicted, they will take my place!"

The Way remained. Rolling his head to one side, Olmy could not see the Redoubt.

"Where's the pyramid?" he asked hoarsely.

"Enoch has her wish," Ry Ornis said, and shaded his eyes with one hand.

Plass, Enoch, the allthing.

Plass had seen her own ghost.

To east and west, the ruined mountains and their statues remained, rejected, discarded. No dream, no hallucination.

He had been used again. No matter. For an endless instant, like any gate opener, only more so, he had merged with the eye of the Buddha.

9

"The Infinite Hexamon Nexus does not approve of risky experiments that cannot be documented or explained. How many were deceived, Master Ry Omis?"

"All, myself included."

"Yet you maintain this was done out of necessity?"

"All of it. The utmost necessity."

"Will this ever be necessary again? Answer honestly; the trust between us has worn very thin!"

"Never again."

"How do you explain that one universe, one domain, must feed on another in order to be born?"

"I don't. We were compelled. That is all I know."

"Could it have gone badly?"

"Of course. As it is, in our clumsiness and ignorance, we have condemned all our ancestors to live with unexplainable presences, ghosts of past and future. A kind of afterbirth."

"You are smiling, Master Gate Opener. This is intolerable!"

"It is all I can do, Sers."

"For your disobedience and arrogance, what punishment do you choose, Master Ry Omis?"

"Sers of the Nexus. This I swear. I will put down my clavicle from this time forward, and never know the grace again."

-- Sentencing Phase of Secret Hearings Conducted by the Infinite Hexamon Nexus, "On the Advisability of Opening Gates into Chaos and Order"

Tracting through the weightless forest of the Wald in the rebuilt Axis Nader, reaching out to the trees to push or grab roots and branches, half-flying and half-climbing, in his mind's river-wide eye, Olmy Ap Sennen returned to Lamarckia, where he had once nearly died of old age, and retrieved a package he had left there, tied in neat pieces of mat-paper. His wives and children had kept it safe for him, and now they returned it. There was much smiling and laughter, then saying of farewells, last of all a farewell to his sons, whom he had left behind Occupants of a different land, another life.

As they faded, in his mind's eye, he opened the package they had given to him and greedily swallowed the wonderful contents.

His soul.

THE WAY

Greg Bear

Eon (1985)

Eternity (1988)

Legacy (1995)

Once upon a very long extension, not precisely time nor any space we know, there existed an endless hollow thread of adventure and commerce called the Way, introduced in

Eon. The Way, an artificial universe fifty kilometers in diameter and infinitely long, was created by the human inhabitants of an asteroid starship called Thistledown. They had become bored with their seemingly endless journey between the stars; the Way, with its potential of openings to other times and other universes, made reaching their destination unnecessary.

That the Way was destroyed (in *Eternity*) is known; that it never ends in any human space or time is less obvious.

Even before its creators completed their project, the Way was discovered and invaded by the very non-human Jarts, who sought to announce themselves to Deity, what they called Descendant Mind, by absorbing and understanding everything, everywhere. The Jarts nearly destroyed the Way's creators, but were held at bay for a time, and for a price.

Yet there were stranger encounters. The plexus of universes is beyond the mind of any individual, human or Jart.

One traveler experienced more of this adventure than any other. His name was Olmy Ap Sennen. In his centuries of life, he lived to see himself become a living myth, be forgotten, rediscovered, and made myth again. So many stories have been told of Olmy that history and myth intertwine.

This story is set early in his life. Olmy has experienced only one reincarnation (Legacy). In fee for his memories, he has been rewarded with a longing to return to death everlasting.

-- **Greg Bear**