

IAN R. MacLEOD - Verglas

The first week after Marion and the kids left I kept busy around the base, clearing tunnels, tidying up their chambers, storing things away, taking in great gulps of memory. But even then I felt restless. I spent a long afternoon digging their graves by hand; trying to lose myself in working up a sweat, whacking the hot blade of the shovel through gray-tufted tundra into the course peat below. Then I went to seal up their bodies for the last time. They looked so beautiful lying inside their half-open sleepsuits with the stillfield showing through their veins in tiny threads of gold. I kissed Marion's mouth and her cool white breasts. I touched the bruise that still showed on Robbie's forehead from the day he fell chasing the silver-backed pseudocrabs soon after we landed. I drew my fingers through Sarah's pale yellow hair. There was a faint but palpable sense that, even though it was so slow as to be undetectable, they were still breathing. And despite all I knew and everything that we'd agreed, I felt that something of my family remained with me here. It was hard to believe that the decay of their bodies in Korai's acidic soil wouldn't destroy a lingering fragment. Not that I wanted to change things or go back, not that I regretted the decision we'd jointly made, but I knew that I couldn't bury them.

Next day as I walked out across the tundra to prepare the last quester for its journey across the mountains to explore Korai's far southern peninsula, I nearly stumbled into one of the long holes I'd cut. I spent that afternoon refilling all three, shoveling and then patting down and re-compacting the ground until all that was left was a faint disturbance of the sod that the growth of the slow-gathering summer would obliterate.

That evening, as always, I laid out new slabs of meat along the fissured table of rock at the east end of the canyon, steaming hot from the processor so they'd show up well on infra red. I'd genuinely expected Marion, Robbie and Sarah to return here the first few nights after they'd left. But with a week gone I'd decided that their staying away was really a positive sign; it showed they were managing to hunt and feed. By now I was just laying out the meat from habit. This deep and narrow rift between the mountains made a poor feeding ground, and Marion had always said that it made sense for them to start as they meant to go on, to get as far away as they could from their human bodies.

I sat on a rock with my powerpack set high to keep warm as the wind from the vast eastern range poured down around me in the blue gathering dark, waiting without much hope for Marion and Sarah and Robbie and thinking of the way things had been, enjoying the luxury of an undefined and unjustified melancholy. After all, it wasn't as though I was really losing them any more than I was losing myself. But there was Marion tossing Sarah in the clear spray of a forest rockpool back on Earth, her belly shining taught with Robbie who was yet to be born. And there was the night that we decided to make him, and the feel of snow and cold marvelous starlight pouring down through the trees. Yes, even then, Marion had loved the mountains.

Korai's sun Deres, long set from my sight, had painted the tips of the furthest mountains red when I sensed the gray beat of wings. I stood up quickly, feeling reality tingle around me once more, the sharpness of the wind breaking through the mingled taste of love and snow on Marion's skin. Those days were gone now. I was here on this planet and my ears and eyes were telling me that three shapes were drifting down from the grainy white cliffs that dropped from a desolate plateau. They seemed to shift and dance at the very edge of sight, drifting half-shadows or mere flakes of soot swirling on the sparse thermals. Scale is nothing here. As I caught the beat of pinions and the near-ultrasonic keening--part sonar, part language--there came, hazy and unbidden, the image of Sarah on a white beach by the blue ocean, her hair falling in salt tangles as she stooped along the shore to collect fishbones and shells. I pushed it away, an unwanted comparison, and concentrated on those shapes in the blackening sky, clearer to me now against the red-edged mountains, and real. One large, and two smaller. Although I still knew little enough about species identifiers, it had to be Marion, Robbie, Sarah. They were the only ones.

I ran across the turf, trying to pull everything in, every sound and every sense, greedy to hold this moment -- knowing that it would be soon gone. They swept over me once. Marion's larger shape darkened the already dark sky, then she slowed, circled, chittering to her offspring to keep aloft until she was sure that all was safe. There had to be an instinct for self-preservation, I supposed, and Marion was still Marion despite everything that had changed. She was always the one who had that extra sense of danger for our kids. That was why we'd decided she should go first.

I watched her finally settle on the table of rock. I saw her head pivot my way. I caught the faceted glint of her eyes. Then, with a lilting, hopping motion, she moved toward the meat. I could understand more easily now the point of that ugly metallic-sheened fur, her looped and whorled skin, that grayish-black coloring; she was almost a part of the twilight. And her movements were so quick; the way her jointed arms shot out, and how

she kept her balance, her wings still outstretched, pushing against the wind, ready to lift and flee at any moment. A bright hot flash of fluid as her claws broke open the meat. Then, when she was finally sure that all was safe, she signaled to the children -- KAK KARR KIK KARR -- and they fluttered down with almost equal grace to join her. The wind beat and howled. They stooped and folded their wings. The glacier-strewn mountains shone in the distance.

It was over quickly, this moment that I'd almost given up hoping for. The fact was all -- they were here and surviving -- and the mere sight of them feeding was nothing that I hadn't witnessed a thousand times before in the simulations we'd run back on Earth. KI KIK KARR; a sound like stones knocking, then beating wings again, and the brief fetal scent of fur and flesh. Marion the first to rise, to test -- protective as ever--the return to their chosen element. Then Robbie and Sarah lifting as one, drawn by the wind. A mere process, it seemed to me, of letting go, a skyward falling. I tried to follow them with my eyes but the sky between the mountains had brimmed with night, showing only a last hint in the east. Three specks, laughing, chattering, singing. Swooping.

I walked back down toward the base, calling on the lights as I did so, watching the string of tunnels and canopies blossom and fan like so many paper lanterns. Too big for me, this place, now that I was on my own. And I was sure that whatever remote chance there had been that the integration of the creatures that my family had become might fail was already long-gone. Ducking the first of the air barriers, feeling the wind lessen, I sensed the smug emanations of the thought machines. They were already far into the next century, sniffing the wind, testing the air, communing with the questers, pushing things on and through, asking endless what-ifs, checking for implausible or non-existent ecological anomalies. But Marion and Robbie and Sarah would fit in. For us, Korai was perfect. There was a niche for a sky-borne predator that the indigenous species would never fill.

The nights on Korai are as long as the days. The planet sits upright in its axis to Deres and the seasonal shifts come from the passage and repassage of the dust belts that haze the space between. Somehow the local wildlife manage to keep track of the complex cycles of long and short winters, cold or savage summers, indeterminate haft-autumns, endless springs. It caused, I remembered, one of the longest and most frustrating delays in configuring the new species. And the constant length of the periods of darkness was also a surprising barrier, even though the days are near as doesn't matter to Earth-standard. Night and day specializations don't seem to work here; you need to be able to see and function in either. The pseudocrabs that scuttle across the tundra each morning possess smaller versions of the eyes that Marion flashed at me before she started to feed. Polyhedral, with each facet wired independently to the brain, alternately set with focusing and filtering layers of polarized cones. When a good design works, you carry on using it.

Marion came to me that night, as I'd half-expected she would. But it was hard to tell how much of it really was her, how much had been simply pushed through my sleepsuit by the thought machines, how much was my own pure imagination.

"I couldn't bury you," I said. "You're still here--your bodies, I mean. It seems gruesome, really, stupid. I know it was part of the deal we made."

"Did we?" she said, looking at me with her face smiling, forgetful. "Yes, I suppose we did. When you're in a body, it matters to you. But when you're not . . ."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind. You'll know what to do when the time comes."

"It can't be long now," I said. "The projections I've seen are as good as anything we hoped for."

"I could tell," she said. "Right away. That first day as soon as I took flight. When I saw the mountains and felt the roaring air. I wonder now whether I was ever properly human. Perhaps I was an eagle or something in some other life. Not that I believe in mumbo jumbo . . ."

"No." I stared at her. Her face hovering there in the darkness. Mumbo jumbo. Would it be better if I willed the dream to gain more substance? Would it be worse? What did I want anyway? Marion sitting beside me at that cafe by the Spanish Steps? Marion swimming deep through the coral, drawing me to her from the flickering shoals, our silver bubbles joining? Or Marion now. Marion perched on a mountaintop with all this world and the sky beneath her?

"What's it like?"

"I knew you'd ask that," she said. "I can't tell you really. But it's far more than the simulations. It's life. You'll just have to come and see."

"I mean --"

"-- Of course," she continued, wild dream-light in her eyes, "it feels scary. It was everything Robbie and Sarah ever wanted, and for me it was just the plain unknown. But it's harder still for you. Bound to be --that was why I hesitated to leave you. You've seen it now. Both sides. Don't you remember they said that it's always most difficult for the one who stays behind. . . . ?"

"How are they? I mean Robbie, Sarah."

"They're fine. We're all fine."

"I still love you."

She smiled. I watched the way her lips moved, the sharp clarity in her wide-set eyes. It all suddenly seemed like amusement at my quaint human ways. But she said it anyway, the way she always had --I love you -- and at that point the dream faded and the sleepsuit softened and refolded itself around me and the thought machines withdrew. I was drifting in deep fathomless dark, alone.

I awoke next morning feeling weary. Even after Marion had faded, I'd still been dreaming -- un-prompted and unaided -- although whatever it was had gone too quickly for me to remember. Odd really, that so much of life slips by even as you live it. That was something Marion used to say. The thing about being human she most hated. Lying in my sleepsuit and with the taut canopy of my chamber gauzily lit with the gray Korain morning, I called up breakfast, then regretted doing so as my server stalked in. Another job that I should have clone myself to help fill the long day I could feel stretching ahead of me. The prospect made me realize just how much, even though I'd ostensibly given up waiting, I'd actually been clinging to the hope that my wife and kids would show up one evening out of the sky. But although Marion hadn't said so specifically, the tone of her conversation had made it clear that she and Robbie and Sarah wouldn't come again. Not outside my dreams, anyway, and even inside them I knew that the warnings would soon be flashing, the thought machines trundling into my sleepy head in magnificent disguise to point out that I was in danger of starting to obsess. Not that I was starting to obsess. Not about Marion anyway. I believed every word she might have said. And believed, although she'd hardly mentioned them, that Robbie and Sarah were happy on this new planet too. They'd been elated at the prospect of changing from the start -- more than eager to go -- then puzzled and angry when Marion and I continued to worry over it. If we stay human, Sarah had said to me one evening when she was back from the shore barefoot with her rods and her nets, we're simply making the same decision in reverse. Can't you see that, Daddy? And look at us. It's not as though we humans are that exceptional. We can't fly, we can't swim very well, our limbs are weak and we've only got four kinds of taste receptor on our tongues. Of course, Sarah really did look exceptional to me with the sun in her eyes and salt in her hair, but it seemed unjust to expect her and Robbie to spend all their lives as mere humans when a hundred different worlds beckoned.

After breakfast that morning I thought, briefly, of folding away all the extra chambers and tunnels to save unnecessary power. But I realized that my motive was simply to make the base more right to my own scale, more long-lasting, more homely. And I knew, anyway, looking back at the base from the flat fissured rock that was quite astonishingly clean today (just a few shreds of skin and greasy stains marked with claw prints, a faint ripe ammoniac smell of something other than human), gazing down at the steel frames and the spun silver lines of fielding and the fluttering chambers and tunnels, that everything here would always be temporary.

Instead I spent the morning with the thought machines, hunched over a crystal emanator in a billowing chamber where the wind broke intermittently through the last of the fields, drawing in images from the questers. The signals from the furthest one were bouncing off two satellites now, far over the horizon. Korai is a wide planet, larger than Earth, but with a cold core and no tectonic movement. There's just this one great nameless continent; a world map in crystal. It's one of the main factors in the relative uniformity in life here. No marsupial freaks on Korai, no platypi or swimming birds or tree-climbing kangaroos or flying fish. No real intelligence either. Things might have been different if Korain life hadn't developed a replicating mode with enormous built-in redundancy, but the linked proteins even look chunky under a microscope, box-shapes of

squared-off links and arches, the kind of genes a Victorian engineer might have come up with. A good planetary catastrophe like Earth's of 65 million years ago might still have pushed things on a different course. But Korai doesn't have comets or an asteroid belt. Funny, really, that we humans, with our tumbling-dice DNA, our fluctuating and meteorite-bombed planet, only realized how lucky we were when we found out what life was like on other worlds. Change and danger are the real stuff of species development.

I discovered that the furthest quester had now reached the lowlands on the costal edge. It's mostly swampland in those mid-latitudes, but still dominated by the air currents tossed around by the mountains. Hot rain pours, trees swoop and sway, swathes of reddish-slimed bog shiver and glisten. Hurricanes all the year round, and the life that I pulled in from the quester's transmission was slick, stooped, hurrying. This creature here, as I gazed through the quester's main lens in rain-tossed real-time, even looked like a folded umbrella. I chased and caught it with the quester's claws, to see if it actually unfolded. But silvery-marbled blood burst from the rent I'd made, dribbling with the rain into the mud. The thing was dead, destroyed by my own long-distance curiosity. So I made the puzzled quester scoop out a deepish brine-filled hole. And no, I didn't want ANALYSIS or PRESERVATION or AUTOPSY. When something is truly dead, I have no problem burying it.

I fixed lunch from the few remaining raw supplies, luxuries we'd brought with us from Earth. Picking out eggs and bread from the cooler, I noticed one last bottle of champagne at the back. What was it, I wondered, that we'd planned on celebrating? I opened out the flaps of the cooking chamber, set the fields to low and let the wind and the mountains roar. The sense of the mountains, anyway. I had to crane my neck up and out to see them. As the eggs thickened and the pan smoked and spat and the burner's blue fingers danced, I realized just how atavistic all this had become. I'd be making campfires next. But sitting outside afterward with a fork and a plate, making the most of Deres's brief appearance overhead through this strangely clouded sky, I still turned my powerpack up to keep warm -- I mean, you can take these things too far.

I instructed the plate and the fork to destroy after finishing, and watched as they did that Dali-thing on a rock; drooping and fading. Another fragment of my supplies gone, slipping by like the hours and the days. Marion had been a little concerned about my being alone; how I'd cope with the isolation. I even guessed it was probably why she and the kids kept away once they'd changed -- to give me the space I needed -although by now it was hard to read anything into their motives. The fact was, I was at least partly enjoying being alone. Sure, the days were hard to get through. But it was also nice just being here, just being me.

I wandered down along the southern arm of the chambers, stepping through into the dome where the questers had been kept. I had a vague memory that there was also something else in there -- and I saw it squatting in the dim canopy light now that all the packing had been cleared. It looked almost like another quester, and was certainly derived from the same design. I was surprised I hadn't noticed it on the inventory, but then there'd been so many other things on my mind before we left Earth.

Obviously complicated -- no use in simply calling it to activate. So I summoned up its frequency instead, and spent the next few minutes studying the manual. Until then it had seemed almost menacing, but now I absorbed the phraseology and understood what those forward and rear-facing gun-like things were for, the vicious studs on its belly and long stinger sticking out from its abdomen, why it had even more legs than a quester. Questers, after all, always take the easiest route. But this was a climber. And it was designed, like we humans, to seek out adversity.

I stepped into it, calling the bracelets to curl around my torso and limbs. Clumsily ripping the fabric around the exit porthole, I lumbered out across the tundra. My position within the climber on level ground was tilted, almost sitting up. I could sense busy metal snapping around me, although the thing had been designed in such a way that view was unrestricted. I strode faster, clattering over stones, squelching across bog along the whole dim length of the canyon. I'd explored it all before, the narrow confines of this shadowed place of waiting where scree and ancient cliff rose high on all sides, holding me in. I skimmed the edge of the lifeless lake. I hopped with easy grace onto the fissured rock of the feeding table. Tip tap. Scrape scrape. The manual was good, quick, easily accessible. Help menus sprang up into my mind before I'd even decided I needed them. The trick was to use the climber's limbs without higher brain involvement. To think WALK as you would just think walk normally, or STOP or RUN or REACH or CRAWL. Even on that first afternoon I was running, jumping, leaping.

I felt happy and tired that night. I called up a meal from the processor in my chambers; chicken korma and nan bread followed by amaretti biscuits and coffee, the kind of good, rich and uncomplicated food that I felt I

deserved. Only a task-checking routine from the thought machines just as I was sinking into the curry-dipped nan finally reminded me that it was time to put out the meat. I compromised by contacting one of the outer sensors, and listened through the thought machines to the endless rustling howl of the wind. But that night my family didn't come.

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I dreamed I was flying through bright clouds, feeling the wind -- now a complex element, a rich hidden tapestry woven with the taste of snow and air and sunlight. Everything was so sharp, so clear. I was lifting, failing, climbing. I was here at last. Truly here. And Marion was nearby, swooping over a great greenish-rimed cornice, ice pluming from her wings as she caught the air that came in a deep-throated roar from the depths of a valley.

"This is it!" she shouted as we leapt and fell through the sky, her voice still human in my dream despite the beating pinions, the jaws, the claws. "This is everything. Look . . ."

We'd risen far higher than I'd imagined -- borne aloft without trying. The air tasted thin, clear and cool. I knew that the whole mountain range -- all of Korai -- was mine, spread out below me. I flexed my claws and tumbled, spinning and laughing. Dense rainbow-threaded clouds fanned and shifted far below. Colors my poor human eyes had never seen. Senses I'd never imagined. Marion was close to me now, her wings slowing. Then I felt her claws on my back, the loose heat of her breath, the pulling weight of her body dragging me down through the bright sky.

"I love you," she said, her voice screaming as we fell.

I awoke and lay staring up from my sleepsuit at the canopy, listening to a sharp keening that was no more than the Korain wind howling down from the crystal peaks of the mountains. This is everything. Look . . . In the simulations, I'd always found that I needed some final leap of faith to see what she meant. In life, too. But now Korai was becoming ever more marvelous, brighter. This planet, the great frozen peaks. Those mountains.

I set about using the climber in earnest next day. After loading more detailed maps of the local area, and with the help of the climber's own intelligence, I selected a route to the southeast. It involved a scramble from the gorge up the white crystalline scree beside the lake, then ten kils of lumbering along the dry bed of a meltwater stream to a five hundred meter peak. Five hundred meters doesn't seem like much in your head -not when you're three thousand up already--but looking at the sheer face of the mountain gleaming against the sky was another matter. The climber's lenses zoomed and scanned, searching for feasible routes across the fissured crystal then flashing them into my eyes. The difficulty-grading was higher than I'd imagined from the satellite map, but at my command the climber began to work crossways toward the deep cleft of a chimney then boosted itself up through the crevices where the wind shrieked and eddied. The climber was methodical, working multi-pitch, shooting out spindles of wire ahead that buried and fused into the rock, testing the weight of the anchors, squatting to plant rivets beneath us, roping hexes into the cracks, taking the slack, testing, belaying, moving on. It finally hooked over onto a wide sheltered ledge where the light of Deres shone faint but warm, as if in reluctant benediction, through the hurrying clouds.

Something buzzed against me as I softened the climber's bracelets and clambered out onto the ledge. I batted at it unthinkingly. Through sheer luck I actually caught the thing and held it in my palm, feeling incredible lightness, brittle fur, puffed and trembling flight bladders. I reopened my hand, and watched smiling as it rose and fluttered, quickly gone against the swelling haze.

I could feel the cold, feel the wind. I was an explorer, a discover. I turned up my powerpack and reached inside the climber's harness for a pair of heated gloves. Then, grabbing an overhang, feeling an odd tingling pull in my belly, I leaned out to look down at the drop. I quickly drew away, my boots pressed hard against the rock. Not that I was scared, not exactly. But the space. The blue hurrying air. It just wasn't something I'd prepared for. I swallowed oxygen tablets, hauled myself back into the climber, blanked out its help manual, and prepared to move on.

Glinting flecks of opalescent light. Deres blurring rainbows through the dust belts in a clear sky. LIFT. The climber straining, motors whining. BOLT. Sparks flinging from the rocks. PULL. Vertical, then an overhang, the wires spooling out and the ground distant as the sky: jagged, hazy. Moving the front right claw to JAM. Then up. And up, up. That solid perpetual moment of effort. I was in control now, my own muscles tensing as

the climber tensed, my eyes searching each millimeter, each crack, each tiny chip of two billion years of frost erosion. Then a burst overhead, explosive as the detonation that had embedded the bolt, and the mountain tipped away from me in cloudburst of shards. I was falling, then jerked and held; spinning. My vision swarmed over stone, peak, ground, horizon, sky. The line I'd strung across the mountain was still holding. I looked around, willing my mind to adjust, to find an up and a down, but even as I tried to move the climber's front mandibles and haul myself back, the machine's own defaults kicked into place filling the air with smoke and sulfur, shooting out multiple ribbons of fresh bolts. Within a moment, without even having to will it, I was safely cradled.

I finally got back to my canyon in darkness and called up the base's homely lights. That night I didn't follow my usual practice of invoking a movie or a book from the thought machines. I just lay there, remembering the day; drawing myself up that mountain with the wind and the rock and the sun. The feeling of being astride the final ridge that led to the peak, and the timid fluttering shoal of Korain flyers. Their tiny blunt snouts, moist faceted eyes, puffed orange bladders, fluttering fins. Like the flashing coral fish that Marion and I had once swum through . . .

"What you did was dangerous," Sarah told me in my dreams. "I can understand you wanting to use that climber, Daddy. But you're inexperienced, you mustn't suppress the defaults."

"I suppose it takes time to learn," I said. We were sitting in a high place. Some world or other, too beautiful and hazy to be truly seen, lay spread out in glory beneath us. I smiled at her. What was the point in arguing? Sarah was like all kids. She loved being superior, telling me the right and the wrong.

"Then come and join us, Daddy. Come and join us now."

I looked at her. I was sure the moment before that she'd been human. But now there were facets to her eyes. A gray membrane fluttered in her throat through which she somehow spoke.

I thought I saw you today," I said. "When I was up on the last ridge. Three specks to the east. Those highest peaks. Would that be right? Is that where you are?"

"Are you looking for us, Daddy'. Is that why you're climbing? You'll never get up there in that clumsy machine. You know how to find us. Just change. Look at me. It's easy . . . "

I watched as Sarah's pinions unfurled and her wet jaws parted, wondering whether she could possibly understand my vague human needs. But this was what we had wanted. This was it. The freedom of this clear new planet, the joy of the hunt and the skies. This was it. To be here. To be real. So what was the matter with me now? Why was I holding on?

I set out again with the climber the next morning. The sole dissatisfaction of the day before had been that the peak, so real and majestic as I climbed, had finally revealed itself as but a doorstep to the range beyond -- not even reaching the snow line.

With help from the climber and satellite projections, I was able to work out a three-day route that would take me deep into the range. I collapsed some spare chambers, ordered food and fluid and clothes from the processor, oxygen tablets and an extra sling for the climber to hold it all. I wanted to go further, higher. It was a warm day, scented with metallic wafts of Korain sap. The day-flowers were unfolding, their glittering spinners catching the wind.

Up the scree slope, then along the dry riverbed, around the first day's mountain in the clear light of a dust-rainbowed sun. And on. I wasn't searching for another false triumph of some minor peak. All I wanted was that range, barely glimpsed through rearing black facets of obsidian, but sensed already in the cold wind from the glaciers that ground the jeweled dust filling this riverbed.

I camped that night in shelter of a crag at the edge of the snowline. I swallowed oxygen tablets before I unfolded my sleepsuit, but still my throat was raw, my chest was tight, my limbs sore, my heart hammering. Was it the thinness of the air? Or was it fear? Cold? Excitement? But I was nearing, stone on stone, rock on rock, crest on crest, the living heart of this crystal planet, the great range that seen from space was a white diadem stretched around Korai's girth. Yes, on. Toward Marion, Robbie, Sarah. In my dreams, and already far from the thought machines, I willed them to come.

I saw Robbie slippery and new. I saw him at Marion's breast, and then creamy waves beating over coral. I saw a sunset through palm leaves.

"We've got to go," Marion said, sitting there in her sarong beside the shore. There were dancers on the beach beside the waves, and the throb of drums. All the kids were like little savages out there in the sudden tropic darkness, Robbie and Sarah amongst them.

"What's wrong with all this?" I asked.

Marion looked at me. The clear whites of her eyes. Her moonlit fingers moved impatient on the table, long and slim and lean. I felt trim and relaxed from this endless holiday, although my body was hardly my own; undeserved, really, after all I'd drunk and eaten, and the age to which I was getting, the little that I had done.

"What do you say we take a skimmer to Shell Island tomorrow?" I asked. "Sarah could bring her nets. You know how she loves fishing. That guy I met on the quay says the mock-lobsters out there are --"

Marion waved it away. "Sure. Tomorrow. But what about next week? Next year?"

"It'll come."

She said, "That's it exactly," and a warm breath of sea wind lifted the hair from her shoulders, and I thought of her already in some ship, some spacecraft, sailing away from me. "I have just one life. One Sarah, one Robbie. One you, goddammit. We die, you know. We die. That's the one fact that still remains. I don't want to waste what's left between just being simply . . ."

"Happy?"

"Happy." She nodded. "Yes. Happy. Is that all you want? Think it over. Listen to what I've said."

In my dreams, I listened. But it was too late. That night by the shore had gone, the decision had been made. Happy. Human. Not happy. Not human. Death. Change. Time . . . Next morning as I broke camp, as I ascended and searched, as the blue-black walls of the glaciers grew around me and wind bit and chilled, I willed Marion to show herself to me.

A ravine. Each time, another barrier, seemingly this whole planet crisscrossed by fractures, tumbling narrow and dark yet easily forded by the little wire bridges made by the climber. By the end of that second day I was finally up in Korai's main biosphere, amid those marbled clouds that moved not quite as the wind pushed them. The smaller grazers were a common sight now that I was up on the snows of the great range; they hung fearless in the air, fluttering and drifting as I shot out icescrews and drew karabiners in blinding flutries of spindrift. Red and blue, fat and thin, some with barbed fins. I climbed through their pastures, great gray-odored clouds that suddenly billowed around me, tasting of new soil and copper and mushrooms. Less often I saw bigger creatures etched against the rainbowed whiteness. Mostly flyers the size of my outstretched palms, although one I discovered was rockbound, a froned mouth like a blue-lipped clam that puffed a steamy breath at me as I pulled over an overhang.

This was Korain high summer and the light of Deres was warm; dribbling water ice formed extravagant cornices and pillars when it froze in solid sweeps of shadow. The higher I climbed, the less white the snow became. I thought at first that it was a trick of the marbled clouds, but scooping it in my hands I saw that almost every frozen crystal was alive, pricked with green, blue, amber.

On the long afternoon of that day's climb it became obvious that the climber was stretching its abilities. To get to a ridge that led upward in one jaggedly promising sweep, I had to traverse a long cliff that hung exposed in a thousand meters of space-- not that nine hundred less or more would have made any difference had I fallen. Warmed then cooled by the wind that poured up from the glacier below, the rock had a thin coating of ice called verglas; something new to me--and not, if the warning flags in my head were anything to go by, greatly favored by the climber. Huge plates of it came creaking off as I moved, shattering into blades that stung my face and hands. Tip-tap. Scrape-scrape. It was dangerous, frustrating work. Just millimeters beneath this ice crust, clearly visible, lay good solid rock. Nooks and jams and crevices that would have given technically easy climbing. For the first time, breathing hard, the outer reaches of my body beginning to slow and stiffen in this endless wind despite pulling on the powerpack's reserves, I was truly scared, shooting bolts into the half-cracked ice that the climber gave a fifty percent chance of holding. I glared at the cliff face, the

thin patina holding me away from hard solid rock, keeping me from everything real. I wanted to smash, destroy this treacherous barrier. But the verglas was my world -- it was everything. Tip tap, scrape scrape. I tested the surface again and was about to move on and up when I caught a movement at my back. I twisted my head and saw a Korain life form bigger than anything I'd seen before, a double orange sphere bobbing on the wind like a fishing buoy, sucking and blowing its way along. A joke, really, that something so amiable and stupid should be free to wander the sky . . .

Suddenly there was another movement. A shadow came over me, making me tense in expectation of an icefall. But it was too fast, too big, swooping like a black dart. The Korain creature didn't have time to react. Its twin spheres crumbled in a bright spray as the predator swept down, and then-- barely slowed by the weight of its catch -- was instantly rising, soaring up over the cliff and out of my sight.

I shook my head.

Marion, Robbie, Sarah.

This is everything. Look . . .

Slowly, still feeling the pull of the drop, I traversed the verglas cliff, and finally, gratefully, dug the climber's mandibles into the hard spine of the ridge on the far side. A few hundred meters up from there, tinted blood-red, I could see a snow-scooped col that promised sheltered ground, and the route that the climber flashed up as EASY. Easy.

The fabric of my chamber was oddly dark when I awoke next morning. Outside, my feet sank into soft crystal. The whole world seemed newly white -- or almost. An opalescent mist hung in the air, veiling the snow-softened crags that I was planning to ascend.

I ate breakfast, collapsed and packed the chambers and shook the snow from the climber's limbs. Ascending the drifts to look over the edge of the col and take my bearings, I breathed the air, salt-ranged from the scatters of life that this morning seemed to have diffused this whole mountainside. And overhead, enormous yet half-real, swarming in and out of the mists, there were glimpses of crags and flutings, ice-cliffs and gullies. Eagerly, following the thin red line across the rainbowed white that the climber laid before me, I began my crosswise ascent of the vast snow-slope that lay ahead of me.

After an hour of easy going. I came into sight of the mouth of a cave, a clear gap of shadow against the rainbowed incline. I traversed toward it, digging and hardening a bollard in a peak of snow to make a belay as a precaution. The mist had closed in when I glanced back toward it, but that hardly seemed to matter -- and a cave was a rare formation on Korai.

I had climbed a few more steps when I saw claw prints in the snow. The outer digits were webbed and the inner claw made a deeper indentation. The climber made its own marks as I followed the prints up toward the cave, seeing how they skipped and faded as Marion and Sarah and Robbie took flight. I looked up again at the looming mouth as the snow slid in hissing plumes beneath me. The cave remained dark, but I knew from the simulations that they were unlikely to need shelter in the warm heart --to them, at least -- of this Korain summer.

I called on the climber's lights as I entered the cave. Tip tap. Drip, the mandibles touching bare wet stone. It was warm in here, and a faint but definite fog seemed to emanate, something more than my own breath or condensation. Boulders and wet rock gleamed around me. It was a steep upward climb. I saw crystalline shapes, metallic colors. I paused, tensing the limbs of the climber against the slippery drop, remembering the steaming mouth of the clam-like creature, wondering if some unexpected super-variant dwelled inside this cave. But that was absurd, and still I was curious.

The climber's front mandibles snagged on something dangling from the ceiling. Expecting a stalactite, I turned up the lights, but the substance broke loose in mucus-like strands that I saw also fronded from floor and walls and ceiling ahead. And what was this ball of threaded tissue, softly pulsing? There was something about all of this -- the most bizarre thing of all, really-- that made it seem familiar. I stared. Ahhbh. Haaa. A warm breeze was drawing me closer, pulling me away, and there was a muted thumping that sounded like a heart.

I took a step further, careful now with the climber's mandibles. The tunnel grew too narrow for it to get beyond

here, but perhaps if I went unaided, got out . . . Then I heard a shrill screaming behind me; KRREE KAARR as if the wind had cracked open the mountain.

I lost footing as I spun the climber around. Scrabbling, trying to fire a steadying blot into the rock face, I tumbled over. Held tight within the climber's protective cage, my head spinning, I saw something large and black clamp itself over the two raised front mandibles. Multi-faceted eyes momentarily caught in the wash of the climber's lights, then were gone again.

The climber skidded and tumbled down the loose wet rocks of the cave. My left leg snagged in a flare of pain. Then a burst of dazzling light and rainbowed plumes and the dry mineral taste of Korain snow filling my mouth as I willed the climber to HOLD. But still there was nothing but tumbling whiteness. Then came the sudden tug of the belay.

I lay there. I could hear the climber's dented mandibles ticking and the soft plop of something -- probably hydraulic fluid -- dripping. Twisting my head, I saw that I was partly right. Some of it was yellow oil. The rest was blood, steaming and melting the snow. I looked up at the sky where a thousand black flecks seemed to be swarming. I blinked: -- but Marion had gone. Just drifting marbled clouds. And all I could hear was that soft drip, and the whistle of the wind, and the snow beneath me creaking.

I moved one of the inner claws LEFT then RIGHT, unsnagging the line. Slowly, discovering that the main mandibles on the right side hung useless, I hauled the climber back up the rope toward the belay, and saw when I reached it how the harness had almost worn through the pillar of ice.

The snow slope stretched wide and featureless above and below me until it dissolved in rainbowed mist. CUT, SCOOP, MOVE. I began to work my way back toward the col I had left that morning. I had to make a conscious effort not to move my left leg in sympathy when I issued a command; there was a surge of pain each time I forgot. I checked the clock again. Four hours. Well past midday. Already the snow was darkening in long scoops and serrations. And there at last, suddenly picked out in clear outline by Deres's sinking flare, were the steps I'd made in the snow that morning.

I followed them and finally slid down into the col, shivering with relief and drawing great billows of warmth from my powerpack. The dull ache in my leg flared into something wildly brighter as I hauled myself out of the climber, unhooked the sling of supplies from its underside, and called up its still-functioning lights. It seemed ridiculous to put up the canopies by hand but I started work anyway, sucking in agonized breaths as I willed my powerpack to send out more opiates. Once the pain had reduced, my left leg was capable of holding me up. It was quite clever, really, the way that the blood had frozen around the leggings to make a kind of splint.

When I had finally dragged my body inside the warmth of my narrower-than-usual chamber, I took a knife and zipped it down the seam of my stiffened legging. There was a jagged gash across the outside of my calf, with glimpses of white inside that might or might not have been bone. But nothing seemed broken. I moulded artificial flesh and pressed it down over the wound. There was a brief agonizing flare as it stuck and welded -- then nothing, bliss.

I forced myself to drink and eat, then gulped down oxygen tablets. I lay back. I could still feel commands running in my head, CUT SCOOP MOVE and the slow reluctant motions of the climber. I thought back to the cave. I understood now why it had seemed familiar -- I'd seen something similar in one of the simulations back on Earth. As a flighted predator, a complex, organized being, Marion could neither casually lay eggs like a bird nor carry the maturing weight of an embryo around inside her light-boned body. The compromise lay somewhere between the two; to create a mixture between womb and nest in some inaccessible spot. If I'd had the sense to recognize the cave for what it was and gone in alone, the human mechanisms that remained in her mind would probably have overridden her protective instincts more quickly. But clad in the climber -- a great mechanical spider lumbering into her nest -- what was I to expect?

I lay in my sleepsuit, shivering although I was no longer cold. Outside, rising slow and thunderous, drowning the wind, I heard the rumble of a distant avalanche. I remembered the dream I'd had of being in flight with Marion, her claws digging into me preparatory to some alien way of making love. The fact was, I'd avoided knowing too much about reproductive processes that were bound, from my human viewpoint, to appear strange -- most certainly unerotic. I knew that the provision of the nest came soon after fertilization. Fine. But Marion, Robbie, Sarah were supposed to be alone here-- a mature female and two immature offspring. Or so I'd thought. It was ridiculous, really, here in this absurd situation I'd made out of my own confusion and vanity,

to feel jealous. But that, as the avalanches sounded again, closer now, changing the wind, shaking the very crystal beneath me, was how I felt. And I felt cheated, too. I felt betrayed. I felt angry.

That night the snow crust covering the col grew thin filaments. It was like walking over hoar-frosted grass next morning as I clambered across the drifts unaided to look at the horizon. I felt dreamless and rested. My leg was stiff but better, already healing. And there was so much light here, so much glory. Iridescent peaks, iridescent clouds. And no sign of three specks -- or more -- flying. My anger of the night before now seemed absurd, brought on by nothing but pain and worry. I just hoped that Marion hadn't been injured. And as to the peculiarities of making a new alien life, understanding would come to me soon enough.

As soon as I got back to the base, I'd bury those three empty bodies. I'd start the process of changing. My new shape was already waiting, a lump of Korain matter that needed only the will of the thought machines to precipitate it into life. That incident in the cave had been just what I had needed, a fortuitous accident -- perhaps even something that Marion in her new alien wisdom had foreseen and planned. I ached to join her now. And Robbie. And Sarah.

I breathed the air. Salt and sap and snow and metal. From here, all I had to do was go down which, in climbing terms, surely had to be easier than up. It was like the process that had happened in my mind, giving way to the pull of this new world, a mere matter of accepting and adjusting. Hungry for breakfast, I skidded down the furred snow. The climber still sat where I had left it, coated like everything else in soft glitter. I called out to it with my mind. It just sat there. Puzzled, I stood beside it, brushing white from its limbs, noticing the congealed pool of oil that lay beneath its thorax and the deeper pelt of crystal that covered the rent from which the fluid had seeped. I flipped back a manual cover and gazed at the screens. But they too, were silvered with filaments. Stiff and cold and lifeless.

Food. Oxygen tablets. Ropes and karabiners, a harness. Sleepsuit. Water. The struts and fabrics of the chambers. Manual iceaxes and bolts I'd never thought I'd have to use. Then food -- enough to last for at least two days until I got within range of the thought machines. Heated boots and gloves. A first aid kit. It was bizarre, the weight we humans must carry just to stay alive. I packed it all into the extra pouch that the climber had carried, shortening the slings to fit across my shoulders.

I began to descend the ridge. My left leg was stiff but workable. Although the dead climber squatted uselessly in the col, I kept wondering what its help menu would have said about using a wind-driven ridge like this, so high that I could see nothing but garish cloud beneath, as a place to experiment in free climbing. Still, I kept going, resting and moving on, sticking to my rhythm and avoiding looking at anything but the step down. The task was do-able if you split it into small components; and the climber, after all, had scooted up this ascent without even thinking, grading it as EASY. Easy, I thought, jamming a hex into a wedge of rock and using the harness to back down. Nothing to it, not so very different to those rocky shores I used to clamber over with Sarah. She had a knack of catching limpets, creeping up and banging them off the rocks with a swiftly wielded pebble -- a trick I could never manage. And she was a huntress in the rock pools, too, was our Sarah. So poised with her bare hands waiting in the clear water like pink shell-less crabs. Then she'd catch something; hold it bright to the sun and then plop into her bucket and then get the terminal to identify it back at the cottage. There was always one question Sarah would ask; could she cook it, eat it -- no matter how tiny or gross -- could she have it for her tea? Otherwise she lost interest. A little huntress, was--is--my--our--daughter. And Robbie was just the same, and looked up to his big sister, with her rods and her nets and her guns.

My left leg was becoming more awkward now, although there was still no pain. Sometimes I had to stoop and push it into position, and meanwhile had little enough purchase to hang on with. I thought about using the bolts to pin myself to the rock but I kept climbing free, knowing that the going was still EASY, knowing that I should save my equipment for what was to come.

I reached the end of the ridge. From the height of Deres riding over the peaks, it looked to be just past midday. Resting on a tilted rock, hunched against the wind, my breath pluming as I kneaded sore muscles, pulling all the extra heat and energy I could from my powerpack, I called up the time. But with the climber dead and far away from the thought machines, all I got was a cold space in my head. One thing I'd forgotten to bring was a manual timepiece.

After eating, and drinking what seemed like an absurdly large amount of fluid, I picked my way over the last of the ridge to look at the way ahead. The great verglas cliff face was gleaming half in shadow. It had taken the

climber the larger part of an afternoon to get from the other side, and I had about five and a half, maybe six hours before darkness. I decided that it should be enough. The climber had been less than helpful during this part of our ascent anyway, and the alternative was just to wait here as the sweat began to chill and solidify in my outer garments, or to try some other route, possibly abseiling down into the jagged wasteland of crevasses below the verglas cliff. But the downward drop was too immense to be seriously contemplated, and even from here, picked out like some mad miniature fairyland, the crags and crevasses at the start of the glacier looked impassable.

Deres seemed to vanish in churning purple clouds as soon I made my way onto the cliff face. The wind chilled, became a solid physical presence, pulling at me with icicle arms and driving up a sleet of pinkish flakes from the drop beneath. I realized that the morning's descent had used up more of my energy than I'd imagined. Tip-tap. Scrape-scrape. Creaking ice. The bang of each fresh bolt, the hot tensing of my arms, the sway of the verglas crust in the moment before it crumbled. Then, starting with a slow itch and rising notch by notch, my left leg began to hurt. But at least when the ice was hacked off there was rock beneath. Easy technical climbing, I reminded myself. EASY.

Verglas. I was hanging in five degrees of overhang on a wall of thin ice. My eyes searched, and my mind gave only fifty percent solidity in every direction; was hedging its bets as the climber had done. Verglas. So clear, so slick and smooth to the touch. It was all I could see now. I looked around for Deres, no longer even tensing as fresh ice showered over me. The sky was dark. I tried to call up the time, but there was only the ice that held me and the pain in my trembling muscles and the thing that was working a hot dagger into my left leg. I looked down, truly expecting to see a grinning froned maw. But there was nothing, just the endless spinning of the drop.

Left, right, up, down. I was back now within the climber, cursing its stupidity although I knew I had no reason to expect more now that it was dead. I gazed at the ice-coated cliff through the weight of the darkness, willing it to dissolve, disappear. My whole life had been shielded by these walls, something smooth and thin and barely tangible that somehow managed to separate me from everything, from a chance to LIVE. That's what this is about, I could hear Marion whispering to me above the scream of the wind. Us humans with our weak lives, our soft and cozy planet, our weak senses. You need to break the verglas, Darling. You need to get THROUGH.

I leaned back, breathless, aching, sodden with freezing sweat. Somewhere in these mountains, the alien sun had finally set. The harness dug beneath my shoulders and crotch. The belay bolt creaked. This was pointless. I knew I'd still be hanging here when my powerpack and my heart gave out -- slowly frozen, or eaten as some new morsel by the grazing Korain life. I looked LEFT, the way I was supposed to be going. I could see only verglas slipping further and further from the vertical. There was no way that I could traverse such an overhang, no way that I could simply hang here all night. And UP was out of the question too. So was RIGHT. Which left only DOWN, seeing if I could fly. The idea was appealing. The darkness below looked friendly. Cushions of black. And I could stretch out my arms as I fell. I could swoop and glide. Marion and kids would join me, shrieking, laughing. KI KIK KARR Lifting me up. It had to be the easiest way.

Feeling the trembling snap of weakened muscle, I reached for the remaining bolts strung in my harness. There was only one left. I unpeeled and dropped one of my gloves as I threaded the remaining length of rope through the loop of a descendeur. I twisted the descendeur, and the world slid by me as the rope hissed through. I dropped, slowed, then dropped again. The dark verglas cliff swung away, bounced back. I pushed off with my feet, yelping at a white flare of pain from my left leg. Down again, spinning. I thought of the fairyland of crevasses I'd seen below, the route I'd rather not have taken. How far up had I been from it? A thousand meters? But I'd gone DOWN as well as LEFT, and the beginnings of the glacier rose toward this end. The rope marker slipped through my hand. I slowed before I was jerked against the end-knot. There was no change in the rock surface. It was still verglas; flat, iced, vertical. I fired in my last bolt, and looped it through. I snapped out the catch and the rope fell past me out of the darkness. I twisted the descendeur and abseiled down for what had to be the last time, wet blisters rising and bursting on my ungloved hand. How far had I gone? I felt the marker slide by, the jolt of the end-knot. I hung there, swinging in empty darkness. That was it. I had no more bolts, and this time I wasn't even close to the verglas cliff. I could go no further. Before I had time to think, I reached for the knife in my belt with my one good hand, and cut the rope.

Then I was flying.

Some kind of lunar morning. Gray-whiteness all around. Craters and mountain peaks. I leaned up on my

elbows, breaking a stiff covering of snow. A greenish wall of verglas loomed up into the mist.

I lay back again, surprised to be alive, wondering about all the pain and effort that implied. I drew on my powerpack. There was a brief flicker of warmth and energy. I called for my server. I searched for the thought machines. At least, I decided, lifting my good gloved hand up out of the snow, wondering at the odd absence of feeling in my other limbs, I still had the pouch. I somehow pulled it out of the snow. It was torn, empty. I lay back again, seeing the pretty amber flecks in the white, the way that, close to, they seemed to be moving. A few fell over me, glittering on my eyes. Feeling thirsty, I licked my lips. But the stuff was dry in my mouth. Salt, soil and metal.

Some time after, I discovered that I was up on my knees and crawling around, looking for something. Even if the pouch was empty, the stuff inside must have fallen nearby. My left leg felt as though some livid mechanism was slicing within it, and the snow here was oddly light. Moving forward, it crumpled and my arms pushed through. Looking into the hole I had made, I saw that I was hanging over the bluish depths of a crevasse. I tumbled back and curled up in the snow, nursing my pain and willing the cold to take it from me, gazing at the stiffened gray fingers of my bare hand.

Hours passed. No sunlight got to me but there was little pain until something suddenly stabbed at me. Not my legs or arms, but at the side of my back that still stuck a little out of the snow. I ignored it but it came again, more insistent, and I turned, a grumbling sleeper. I saw a black shape now amid the white, and scratched the crust of ice from my eyes. I was having nightmares. A creature with black wings, gray fur, long jaws, triple-jointed limbs, squatted over me. It tilted its head, but said nothing. After all, what could it possibly have to say? But then it opened its jaws and something dropped. I gazed at it, steaming close to my own eye-level on the snow. A crumpled sac of blood-silvered flesh almost like that hurrying umbrella I'd seen though the quester and so clumsily destroyed. It gave off an odd smell, more cinnamon than metal. I looked up at the creature that had brought it. Marion. Her faceted eyes. The pulsing membrane in her throat. Those thinly coated wings. What was she expecting me to do? Congratulate her on her kill?

KAK KARR KIK KARR

I shrank back at the sound, loud and sharp in this place of silence -the same noise Marion had made as she squatted on the stone table back at the base, a signal to Sarah and Robbie that it was safe for them to feed. Her head shot out, snakelike from her lengthening neck. She pushed the carcass closer to me. I touched the flesh with my good hand. Watched by Marion -- afraid, in all honesty, about what she might do if I didn't -- I pushed the threads of salt coppery meat into my mouth, and chewed and swallowed.

She flew off in a quick burst of wings. I lay there, drowsier than ever, feeling whatever it was that she'd given me churn in my belly. Then she returned, hardly seeming to fly at all, just becoming there. Again, the dropped food. I marveled at her simplicity, that she could think she could feed me alien meat. I wondered if I was simply dreaming, playing the same incident over and over. KAK KARR KIK KARR Light bones, that snake-like neck, and already the day getting darker. Or perhaps it was my sight. The creature before me was smaller now anyway. Robbie or Sarah -- I couldn't tell. The loose sac I was given burst moisture in my mouth. I drank it all, sucking greedily. Then I lay back. The problem was, the more I ate, the softer and wearier I became, the more comfortable grew the snow. I'd done everything right, really, to end up here. This place of understanding. Marion's voice now, as the pure wind began to rise, was a reassurance to me.

"It's not a question of imagining," she'd said that last day as we took the skimmer to Shell Island. Sweet sunlight and bright water. So clear. "That's the whole point -- can't you see? -- it's everything we can't imagine."

I nodded, holding a tiller worn smooth with my own and other hands.

"You're too wrapped up in what you've seen in the simulations," she said. "It won't be like that. That's still all coming through these same minds we always use. We humans simply aren't equipped to be something else. Even as simple an action as looking seeing is routed in our heads down neural channels that are time-shared, jumbled up. The information's corrupted before it reaches our minds. Nothing is pure . . ."

This crystal sea. The gulls and the frigate birds wheeling. In a way, she was right. Even as you saw things, tasted the breeze with the four meager receptors on your tongue, it was slipping by, becoming memory. I searched around, thinking of a way to argue. But Marion, being Marion, was already ahead of me.

"I know all the things we humans have created. What we call civilization. This skimmer. And I know about Paris, Venice, Acapulco. But think of the best times we've had. Think of Ayres Rock, think of Bhutan, and of Borrowdale. We've always sought out the pure and the natural. We don't want civilization, we want this. This moment, uncorrupted. I mean look at them, there . . . "

She meant Sarah and Robbie, stooping over at the prow, untangling nets. Both brown and naked and weathered as the deck of this skimmer, Sarah's hair bleached whiter by the day, and Robbie's freckles blending into a mahogany stripe over his shoulders. When they came close to me now my children smelled of the sea, and of sunlight and fishscale and sand, of woodsmoke and flowers and blood and palm trees. Already, they were halfway there.

We were nearing Shell Island. I could see the white blaze of sand.

"There!" said Marion, pointing to the water. "That's what it will be like!"

I left the tiller to its own devices and went to the rail where a school of dolphins, their wet backs shining were leaping beside us. So fast. Astonishingly high. Masters of everything who'd left the land long ago and returned to the freedom of the sea . . .

Darkness was falling. There were heavy flakes lying over me, or a sense of high beating wings. The odd thing was, as I turned my head, that the snow was alight, alive, glowing. Each twisting amber fleck was the flame of a tiny candle. I hauled myself up on my arms. Truly this was some alien fairyland. Slowly, thinking MOVE, LIFT, I got to my knees, and saw that my left leg had threaded a dark pool of moisture. I peeled away a little of my legging, expecting pain. My leg was clearly visible in the weak but all-pervading glow. The artificial skin had sloughed off. The lips of the wound were open again, and inside there was white fur, almost like the pelt that had formed over the rent in the dead climber's abdomen. I could feel nothing. There was no pain. I tried to pluck the stuff away. Then, suddenly, there was pain. Pain that rocketed out through all my senses. I lay back in the golden snow, feeling sick tremors running through me. Even when they had gone, the snow had lost its comfort. It was one thing to die from the slow loss of hypothermia, another to be consumed by some alien parasite. I felt stronger, anyway, than I had -- sicker, too. I decided to start moving.

Some indeterminate time later, I was standing. All I had now was the pouch in which I'd carried my provisions -- empty now, its contents dumped down the crevasse that had so nearly taken me. Still, I looped it around me and picked my vague and shambling way. At least, amid this candlelit snowfield, the deep mouths of the crevasses were easy to spot.

Morning and the darkening of the snows came simultaneously, one light fading as the other began. I could see the dawn-rainbowed peaks that confined the glacier, even a hint of lowland beyond. I stopped without thinking, falling down, exhausted, dragging myself into the shelter of an overhang. My powerpack was totally dead now and my boots and the remaining glove had ceased to give off any heat. I held up my exposed hand in the blush of morning light, using the other to wiggle each finger tentatively. They were senseless and gray, still wetly indented from the bumps of the rope, but by rights they should have been worse; frozen flesh that snapped off like icicles.

I dozed through the morning, missing my sleepsuit, hoping in moments of consciousness that Marion and Sarah and Robbie would find me again. I had a desire for the slick coppery taste of alien meat that I doubted was entirely healthy. But it was better than nothing, a sign of my determination for life. Dimly awake, I had to smile at the thought of being taken over by the crystal fur that had grown out along my leg now, trailing filaments. I could see me stumbling along the glacier like some mush-room-mantled log, yelling, See Marion! I've done it! -- I've changed without even trying!

But there was no life here. No wingbeats. No glowing snow. Just me, the wind, cold aching silence. Despite the fluid I'd been given the day before I was agonizingly thirsty. My tongue was swelling and sticking in my mouth. I knew I had to get going.

I was out of the worst of the crevasses now and my left leg, despite the worrying outward signs, was actually becoming easier to use. Crashing over splinters of ice and diamonded moraine, I stumbled royally down the glacier. I kept moving as darkness finally came and a dancing opalescence filled the night sky. Looking up, falling over, getting up again, I was reminded of the Aurora Borealis. But that hung as a curtain on Earth's horizon, and this was sky-encompassing. Pondering, I stumbled on, and was pleased with myself a few hours later when I realized that this glow probably came not from Korai but from the dust belts that swirled

between it and Deres, casting off the cosmic rain that otherwise would have prevented life from ever beginning here.

Morning again. Another day. I'd got beyond the glittering moraine at the edge of the glacier -- dry, when I'd been hoping for meltwater -- and was now approaching the ravined foothills. I kept looking up to the sky, wishing Marion down to bring some more of the odd-tasting flesh, the sour water. But her ways were not mine-- nor was her understanding. Her new brain was geared for the pure moment, the pure sensation, everything pouring in over an unimaginable bandwidth that would have burned my feeble human synapses in a moment.

I came to the ravines that the climber had crossed. The ropes that it had fired were still there, those rustless bands that had seemed on the way up to be an act of desecration were now my salvation. I karabinered my harness and slung myself over the first of them, slowly hauling with my good hand. It was wearying, agonizing work, and there was no sign of an end to the drop beneath me. It probably sank deep into the planet, where all the meltwater went. And I felt sure that there was movement down there, some kind of flickering shoal.

The next ravine was wider. I had to stop many times, swaying and cursing myself as night began to fall. It was as bad as the verglas cliff face. I was sure I wouldn't make it. The flickering lights in the chasm below me seemed threatening, hallucinatory. Finally, I lay gasping on a rock on the far side, gazing up at the churning starless sky. I knew there had to be a way around these chasms, but stuck with my own useless mind, my own useless memory, I had no idea how far I would have to go. I suspected, anyway, swallowing dry air over the bolder of my swollen tongue, gazing at the glow that came through my ripped and fungi-encrusted leggings, that I had only a day or so left. I reached over and unclipped the karabiner. A fissure of the ravine, deep but little wider than the reach of my arm, had split the rock beside me. There was no doubt, peering into it, that lights were moving down there, flickering goldfish shoals. I lay looking down as the wind swept over me. The movements were closer now, and the shapes more apparent, truly like little fish. I smiled, remembering Sarah, those rock pools, how she'd wait for hours with her bare hands . . .

Deeper into the night, I felt two thoughts connect. I reached down with my good hand and saw the fish flicker close, near enough to throw their light onto my palm but always darting away as I grabbed toward them. Catching the little fish. It was a kind of dream-game, part nightmare. Then I remembered my empty pouch, and made the effort to unslung it, opening the mouth and lowering it amid the dancing shapes so that it dangled like a net, then jerking it up. Running my hand down the fabric, I felt movement inside, and squeezed. My hand grew slippery wet. I lifted the creature out, and nibbled at its flesh. Still glowing, not fishy at all, but coppery like all Korain life, with the threadlike bones that were impossibly hard and sharp. Managing to chew a little, forcing the stuff back over my gums, I swallowed, then stooped over the life-filled crevice again.

I managed to catch six of the little fish that night, and to squeeze out and drink a fluid that probably came from their bladders. It tasted sweet enough; what for them was waste matter was for me the stuff of life. The prospect next morning of bridging more of the ravines, although grim, no longer seemed hopeless. Stuffing the two fish that I'd saved into my pouch, noting that they were translucent in daylight, their inner organs like the mechanism of an old analog clock, I set out across the crystal landscape.

It was an hour or so later that my left leg, which I had done my best to ignore since it had stopped hurting, suddenly emitted a red shriek of pain. I rolled over on the rocks, gasping, and gazed down at my leg in agonized disbelief. The white fungi was moving, rippling. Then the mossy stuff parted, and a silvery eel about six centimeters long wriggled out from my flesh and sniffed the air. Too amazed to move, I watched it slide quickly across the rock beside me and bury itself out of sight. Then the fungus on my leg withered and shrank like melting snow. Within a few minutes all that was left was a sticky gray residue, and a clean-looking scar. Still only half-believing, I touched it. It was so normal. So real. I moved my leg, testing. Then my shoulders began to shake. I tilted my head up toward the rainbowed skies, and began to laugh.

I was sure that evening -- crossing the last of the roped-over ravines, and even though any sense of the thought machines still evaded me-- that I was within a day's reach of the base. As I sagged dangling on a rope or slithered over yet another fall of fractured crystal, I buoyed myself up with the knowledge of how far I had already come. I was immensely weary, but it would have seemed sinful to give up now. That night I fished for food in another narrow chasm -- managing to catch five of the air fish, shyer and blue-banded here-- then took shelter in a roofed-over rockfall.

The wind was quieter now, a thin shriek. And I no longer hoped that every sound might be Marion or Sarah or Robbie. I didn't even quite think of them by those names any longer. They had changed. And so, in a sense, had I. I was still hungry, thirsty, weary, but at least I no longer had to contend with the end of my existence. This planet, so strange, so hazardous, was also kind in a way that the mountain territories of Earth never were. Korai was truly a hopeful place, somewhere of fresh beginnings. I no longer felt scared here, or lonely. And when I got back to the base, when I got back . . . I winced in the darkness and shifted off a blade of rock, too tired to think by now, or sleep, or dream.

The last of the journey back to base was infinitely tedious. I kept looking back at the mountains, willing them to make the precise shape that I recognized from my days alone in the canyon. In near darkness, I reached the jeweled riverbed, and stumbled my way along it, heedless of the risk of falling. Every part of me ached and the thought machines, whose transmissions should have been vivid by now, remained vague. Finally, finally, I stumbled around a boulder and found that I was standing on top of the scree slope above a dead lake. Dim but definite, the whole territory of my confinement stood before me once again. I slid down to the tundra. Staggering toward the chambers, weaker than ever, I called for the lights, called for the server. Nothing happened. The chambers stayed dark. The thought machines murmured aimlessly. I ripped open my chamber, collapsed, and gazed up for a moment at the whipping field-less fabric before dropping into enormous caverns of sleep.

It was light when I awoke, then dark, then light again. I staggered out once to relieve myself and vomit up bile and silver-blue scales. I couldn't remember where the server kept the drinks. Instead I dragged myself over to the lake. It tasted gritty, rank, familiar. I awoke again on what was probably the evening of my third day. I was sensible enough by now to understand that this odd failure of response had to do with my damaged powerpack. I hobbled along to the control chamber and manually turned up the lights, the heat. I also got the server working, and the processor. Fumbling with keys I was unused to handling, weak and suddenly ravenously hungry, I opted for the first item on the processor's menu. It was only after I'd eaten the gray slab-like lumps that I realized what it was that I'd ordered.

By the next day I was in better control. My left leg seemed fine, and although my frost-bitten hand was still swollen I found that I could move the fingers tolerably well as long as I kept taking pain killers. The Korain sun was bright and warm. There was hardly any wind, or any need to set up the fields. I sat for timeless hours watching the pseudocrabs scuttling in their purposeful way, or gazing up at the warm turquoise-streaked sky, remembering Robbie, and how he'd fallen and banged his head on that very first day. It was a chore to keep track of the thought machines without proper reception from my powerpack, but I grew used to keying in manual commands to the server -- and many of the other distractions I'd once relied on seemed irrelevant. And my dreams were entirely my own now, even when I slept within a sleepsuit -- and they were so vivid, and all about Earth.

I continued to live a kind of semi-detached existence from the normal goings-on at the base, watching the server scuttling on unexplained errands in much the same way that I watched the pseudocrabs. I had no warning when the first of the questers returned from its long journey. I even thought for a moment when the silver figure scuttled out of the twilight that the climber -- or its ghost -- had somehow returned.

Such were my days. A process of physical and mental healing. I no longer put out food for the creatures that Marion and Robbie and Sarah had become. I no longer scanned the skies in the hope that I might see them. And sometimes, although it seemed bizarre in view of all that had happened, I found myself clambering over the canyon with my feet and hands, traversing some gleaming stretch of cliff that seemed especially intriguing. I climbed unaided, just relishing the true solid feel of the rock, the absence of any barrier between me and anything, the taste and the smell of this planet, the loss of verglas, the true sense of being here.

One day, perhaps three weeks after I'd returned, I was resting after a quick ascent of a greenish fissured face above the white scree slope, looking down at the canyon and the base and catching my breath in sunlight, thinking that tonight I would finally get around to drinking that last bottle of champagne, when I noticed a slight change in coloration of the tundra close to the base. Three long rectangles in the turf that I puzzled over for some minutes before realizing.

I drank the champagne back inside the chambers that evening. It gave me the courage I needed to go and see the bodies of Marion, Robbie, Sarah. After all that had happened, it seemed wrong that they should still be here to remind me -- even in my thoughts I'd been avoiding them. But I stood looking at those three beautiful bodies that once held the people I had loved. Now gone, leaving just slumbering golden-threaded

flesh . . .

I tossed and turned that night, experiencing insomnia for the first time in my life. Everything seemed gray, black. What, after all, was I doing here? What had I gained.) I willed my Earth dreams to come, but there was nothing. My sleepsuit felt rough and unaccommodating. Somewhere in the higher reaches of this planet were alien beings I was too afraid to join, creatures that I could never understand or know. Here. This is everything . . . Marion's claws in me and the drop. KI KIK KARR KARR And that cave. New life. Not even three circling figures, but more. More . . .

I could still taste the champagne -- sweet and sharp, just the way it had been that last evening I'd spent here with my human family. I remembered how the kids had been so excited about the coming change that Marion had had to up-program their sleepsuits to get them quiet for the night. Then she and I had sat outside the chambers around a real fire of applewood logs we'd brought with us for the occasion. I remembered the way she smiled and held her glass, the way the smoke was snatched as it drifted out of the fields. We didn't say much. There was nothing much left to say. A time of stillness here on this far planet that felt so much stranger to me than as the wind howled and the dark white mountains loomed. The silence of change, of resolution. I remembered Marion taking my hand and leading me to the chambers, stepping from her clothes, tossing away the sleepsuits. We slept naked and together that night, flesh on flesh. At some point, an act less of passion than of sharing, a remembrance of other times, we rocked slowly together, making love.

I sat up in the trembling dark and fumbled for the manual switch I'd rigged to turn on the lights. I stumbled down the chambers to the thought machines, and sat there for the rest of the night wrestling with the manual screens beside emanators I could no longer use, attempting to find my way into one program amid the myriad. It took me until the light of Deres had begun to show through the wind-fluttering fabric. And when I found it, that hidden blob that only senses stronger and stranger than my own could reveal, I had to keep checking, scanning and re-scanning the cloudy images. Even then, I still couldn't quite believe.

The thought machines were grumpy and distant now. Perhaps it was just the difficulty they now had in dealing with me, this powerpackless human -but I suspected that they would never have diagnosed Marion without my prompting, or have told me if they knew. It still seems likely to me that they would have simply allowed me to bury Marion. To their way of thinking, I suppose, she had carried the new life with her when she changed, to be re-born in that cave.

Summer faded and returned. I lived and breathed and walked and climbed. The sac of life nurtured within Marion's body continued to grow. I sat for hours beside the stillfield as the sky flickered green and red and blue outside, sometimes touching the swelling in the fold of her sleepsuit, sometimes lost in sorrow, or happy, or drifting with my mind almost clear of thought. Sometimes, too, I felt anguish at this thing that I was doing. What right had I, alone on this planet, to bring life? But the anguish faded with the touch of warm flesh and the scent and the nearness of the three loved bodies that surrounded me. I knew I couldn't destroy Marion now, knowing of the life that she was nurturing.

She grew big with the heat of summer, as the air turned truly warm and fresh water gurgled, too slick and fast for all the ravines between me and the mountains to swallow, into my swelling lake. There were new forms of life in there too. Colored fronds and filaments. A slow gray mud-like wing that flapped and crawled along the bottom. The pseudocrabs brought out their young. Shell-less and pink like tiny crawling hands, they dutifully studied their parents as they scuttled from rock to rock across the soggy tundra, clumsily stuffing berries into their own nascent pouches before getting lost, or falling over. A monitor satellite in deep solar orbit made contact with a starship that passed near Deres, and checked me out with a quick exchange of beams. I told them that I was well, making excuses for the clumsiness of my transmission, and worried for days after that they might still change route and visit me. But they didn't. And I was fine anyway. I felt safe being alone.

One evening as I was sitting outside of my chambers, studying the rock and the warm ribboned glint of the skies, I heard, almost as I had expected to now that I'd given up hoping, the gray beat of wings. They came from a different angle this time, from another part of the sky. Who knew, after all, just how far across this planet Marion and Robbie and Sarah had been roaming? And now there were four shapes, not three; one large, another two only slightly smaller, then a smallest, a tiny fleck riding the slipstream of its mother. Marion settled first, cupping her new offspring inside the protective arch of her wings. She looked around as I ran over to her. I caught the faceted glint of her eyes.

"I'm fine!" I shouted. "Marion, It's great to see you!" But my voice sounded strange even to me after these

months of silence and she backed away at the sound of it, her wings catching the air, ready for flight. Ugly as a gargoyle, the little creature beside her hissed and whimpered. Robbie and Sarah still circled. I looked again at Marion, willing her to call them down. But our children were nearly adult now, and would probably take little notice of her.

Moving slowly, I backed away from the rock table, then broke into a run, splashing through the puddled tundra. I stabbed breathlessly at the keys in a flapping chamber, grabbing the hot slabs as they emerged from the processor and running back out with them into the deepening twilight. But the shapes had already vanished from the rock table. There were no wingbeats in the air. I scanned the sky as darkness deepened until my eyes were nothing but thickened pools of black. But there was no sign of them. It was as if they had never been.

The first snows of winter came. I had seen the snow in patches here when we first arrived, and then of course up in the mountains, but none of it had ever been this green. The seasons here, I was coming to realize, were like the flash of light through a dozen different patterns of weave. Marion's belly grew taut. I saw the baby stirring on the scans, and felt it kicking with my own hands. Afraid to think of him growing alone and in silence, I began to talk and pace around the stillfield. And at night, as the wind howled and glowing plumes of ice curled over the canyon like beckoning hands, I even began to sing.

I ordered pain killers for Marion on the night she gave birth. The thought machines couldn't understand why I didn't let them use the server's blades simply to cut the baby out-- nor why her emptied synapses could be disturbed by the lost concept of pain. Anyway, the contractions came easily, thoughtlessly induced by the still-functioning ganglions in Marion's spine. I could even say the birth itself was easy, but then how can I ever know? -- and for me, watching as Marion's eyes opened and her belly tensed and her jaw spasmed, as her whole body sweated and strained and came briefly to life, it was truly hard. I was in tears afterward as I washed the baby and cleaned and cut his cord, smiling and sobbing as I laid him in the crook of Marion's arms as she lay wrecked and drained amid the spreading pool of afterbirth and he sucked the clear whitish fluid from her breasts.

I sat for many hours beside the stillfield, rocking my sleeping baby. He looked different as all babies look different. The red forehead, the huge thin-lidded eyes, those impossible toes and fingernails. It was so strange, that he should come here to me now. All so hard to believe --but then that's what it's like to be human, the way things slip away. It's what keeps us together and apart.

I let him suckle Marion for a few days, holding him against her in the crook of her warm lifeless arms. But the golden veins of the stillfield threaded her breasts, and even with her body cleansed and refreshed, something had gone from her with the birth. The last vestige, I supposed, of the life that had held me back from burying her all those months before. And Robbie and Sarah, although I held the baby to them as well and whispered every secret I could imagine into their ears, seemed also to have lessened, changed. They were far brighter in my dreams and memories these days than they were in the flesh. I supposed they'd grown a little, become more of what they would never become. As with the true living spirits that soared the mountains with Marion, it was time for them to leave.

I worried as my baby cried that he wouldn't take to the milk the processor provided. I worried about his mind, the way he had grown within the stillfield, and how the air of this strange new planet would affect him. I would sometimes take him out from the chambers when the wind died down, well-wrapped and held close against me. Then, in the blazing chill of these mountains, I knew that everything was safe. The way his face lit up at the sight of the glittering multi-hued ice, those gorgeous flooding skies. And even at two months old he was reaching out with his hands toward it all. And the dream light that I remembered so well from Marion was there in his eyes.

Winter receded a little-- although I knew enough about Korai by now not to think it would be followed by anything as mundane as spring. As the snows pooled and melted, blue moth-like creatures emerged from it and took flight. I was grateful for the new warmth -- my food supplies had been stretched far longer than planned. Planning to replenish them, I set out one morning with my baby harnessed to my back, hiking up the scree slope and along the meltwater-threaded drifts to the first of the ravines. There were great shoals down there now, huge and plentiful. My baby watched and slept and smiled as I stooped into the roaring caverns. But when I hooked out the creatures twisting and flopping into my hands, when I had let my baby touch them with his plump-knuckled fingers, I simply let them slide back into the ravine. Now that my own life no longer depended on it, I couldn't bring myself to kill something that was living.

That was a year ago; I scrimped and survived. Another human family have now come to Korai. They contacted me via satellite when they arrived, and flew over the range a few days later in the big craft they'd brought with them. I watched it land, the howling engines flattening the tundra beside the table of rock. I held my baby close as he chuckled at this strange new silver creature and at the smaller ones that emerged from it. But he frowned as they grew closer. Two boys, a man and a woman. I think he thought we were the only humans on this or any other world.

They treated us with courtesy. Their server unloaded fresh generators and chambers and supplies. As mine helped, I noticed how it had corroded to green in the near-on two Earth years I'd been here, and how the old chambers it was replacing had grown mottled and dark with Korain fungi. Before, I hadn't even noticed.

"What's his name?" the woman asked as we sat out in the cool lavender twilight. I'd let her hold my baby, which was a strange sensation in itself. He and I had become like parts of each others it was like lending someone your arm. But my baby was uncomplaining after an initial squawk of surprise. He gazed up at her with fierce blue questioning eyes, he was that kind of kid.

She repeated her question. I blinked back at her. I hadn't thought of a name. With just the two of us here, there had never been any need.

Letting it pass, she smiled and looked around at where her boys and her husband were wandering, calling to each other with strange loud voices as they peered under rocks and climbed up slopes and made fresh discoveries. Even without asking, she'd know my whole story anyway. She had her powerpack, access to my thought machines.

"But this is such a beautiful planet," she said. "As soon as we landed, everything else faded, all my worries and regrets. Even . . ." She looked down. In her arms, my baby chuckled. "Him . . . This . . ."

"I understand," I said, "why people want to change. I've changed myself. That's the oddest thing of all. I've changed too. I just didn't have to lose my humanity to do so."

"We'll all go together. I mean the kids. Me and Mark. It'll be soon." "That's probably the best way."

She held out her arms. I took my baby back from her. He said ga-Koo and I breathed the salt-soapy scent of the crown of his hair. Then she stood up, looking around. Those bright red peaks behind which Deres had set long ago even though the whole sky was still glowing. "Those . . ." She pointed toward the mountains. "That highest one there. What do you call it? Seeing it all this time, you must have . . ."

I shook my head and followed her as she walked across the tundra. Her youngest son ran up to her with something in his hands. A pseudocrab that he'd tried to dismantle like a clockwork toy was dribbling marbled Korain blood through his fingers. Pseudocrab. A name of sorts. Dayflower. As for the rest, as for all the life and the crags and ravines of this planet, as for that highest red-stained peak that I'd so nearly died on and the creatures that Marion and Robbie and Sarah had become, I hadn't presumed to give any of it a name. Things here are what they were, and ultimately alien. No names could ever change that.

"Samuel," I said.

"What?"

"My baby. I call him Samuel."

"That's good. I once knew someone . . ."

We wandered a little further. The wind was picking up. The sky was showing threads of golden dark. The father was calling to his eldest son to get down from the ridge above the lake that he was trying to ascend. The servers had finished their work. Soon, the family would be going.

The ground was a little softer here. Even folded over in this gathering gloom, the dayflowers beneath our feet seemed larger, brighter. She glanced down at the three darker rectangles they picked out in the sod, then back at me.

"You know the starship that brought us here will be out in stellar orbit for another month?"

"Yes." I nodded.

"I was wondering . . ."

"If I might be going? I'm not sure. I love this planet so much. But seeing you, realizing about my -- Samuel. I know can't bring him up alone here. He has his own life."

"He has to learn how to deal with things," she said. "He'll need a powerpack -- assessment and teaching, skills to understand the thought machines. How to work a sleepsuit . . ."

"Not that I miss any of that."

"But you've got to let him make his own decisions. That's what we're all doing here." She folded her arms and looked about her. "But you'll be going? You'll take that starship back to Earth?"

"Yes," I nodded, feeling the soft Korain air flooding around me, the moments of my life slipping by. "I'll be going."

"Look." She smiled and touched my arm. She was pointing. "Up there." Her voice was shivering, expectant. Against the eliif, glimpsed and distant, four black specks were rising.

I held Samuel up to see. He chuckled -- Ka.Koo -- and pointed with his outstretched chubby hand.