

Waging Good

by Robert Reed

1

The spaceport resembled a giant jade snowflake set on burnished glass. Not a year old, it already absorbed much of the moon's traffic. That's what Sitta had heard. Unarmored and exposed, the port didn't have a single combat laser or any fighting ships at the ready. The fat new shuttles came and left without fear. A casual, careless prosperity was thriving beneath her. Who would have guessed? In the cold gray wash of earthshine ... who could have known...?

When Sitta was growing up, people claimed that Nearside would remain empty for a thousand years. There was too much residual radiation, they said. The terrain was too young and unstable. Besides, what right-thinking person would live with the earth overhead? Who could look at that world and not think of the long war and the billions killed?

Yet people were forgetting.

That's what the snowflake meant, she decided. For a moment, her hands trembled and she ground her teeth together. Then she caught herself, remembering that she was here because she too had forgotten the past, or at least forgiven it. She sighed and smiled in a tired, forgiving way, and blanking her monitor, she sat back in her seat, showing any prying eyes that she was a woman at peace.

The shuttle fired its engines.

Its touchdown was gentle, almost imperceptible.

Passengers stood, testing the gravity. Most of them were bureaucrats attached to the earth's provisional government -- pudgy Martians, with a few Mercurians and Farsiders thrown into the political stew. They seemed happy to be free of the earth. Almost giddy. The shuttle's crew were Belters, spidery-limbed and weak. Yet despite the moon's pull, they insisted on standing at the main hatch, smiling and shaking hands, wishing everyone a good day and good travels to come. The pilot -- three meters of brittle bone and waxy skin -- looked at Sitta, telling her, "It's been a pleasure serving you, my dear. It's been an absolute joy."

Eight years ago, banished from Farside, Sitta carried her most essential belongings in an assortment of hyperfiber chests, sealed and locked. All were stolen when she reached the earth, whereupon she learned how little is genuinely essential. Today, she carried a single leather bag, trim and simple. Unlockable, unobtrusive. Following the herd of bureaucrats, she entered a long curling walkway, robot sentries waiting, politely but firmly asking everyone to submit to a scan.

Sitta felt ready.

Waiting her turn, she made the occasional noise about having been gone too long.

"Too long," she said twice, her voice entirely convincing.

The earth had left its marks. Once pretty in a frail, pampered way, Sitta had built heavier bones and new muscle, fats and fluid added in just the last few months. Her face showed the abuse of weather, save around her thin mouth. Toxins and a certain odd fungus had left her skin blotchy, scarred. Prettiness had become a handsome strength. She needed that strength, watching the robots turn toward her, a dozen sensitive instruments reaching inside her possessions and her body, no place to hide.

But these were routine precautions, of course. She had endured more thorough examinations in Athens and the orbiting station, and she was perfectly safe. There was nothing dangerous, nothing anyone could yet find --

-- and the nearest robot hesitated, pointing a gray barrel at her swollen belly. What was wrong? Fear began to build, Sitta remembered the sage advice of a smuggler, and she hid her fear by pretending impatience, asking her accuser, "What's wrong? Are you broken?"

No response.

"I'm in perfect health;" she declared. "I cleared quarantine in three days -- "

"Thank you." The robot withdrew the device. "Please, continue."

Adrenaline and the weak gravity made her next stride into a leap. The walktube took a soft turn, then climbed toward the main terminal. Another barrier had been passed; that's what she kept telling herself. It was a simple ride to Farside, another cursory scan at the border, then freedom for the rest of her days. It was all Sitta could do not to run to the public railbugs, the spectacle of it sure to draw all sorts of unwelcomed attention. She had to force her legs to walk, telling herself: I just want it done. Now. Now!

Two signs caught her attention as she entered the terminal. "WELCOME," she read, "TO THE NEW NEARSIDE INTERPLANETARY TRANSIT FACILITY AND PEACE PARK." Beyond its tall, viscous letters was a second, less formal sign. Sitta saw her name written in flowing liquid-light script, then heard the shouts and applause, a tiny but enthusiastic crowd of well-wishers charging her, making her want to flee.

"Surprise!" they shouted.

"Are you surprised?" they asked.

Sitta looked at the nervous faces, and they examined her scars and general weathering, nobody wanting to out and out stare. Then she set down her bag, taking a breath and turning, showing her profile, making everyone gawk and giggle aloud.

Hands reached for her belly.

Pony, flippant as always, exclaimed, "Oh, and we thought you weren't having any fun down there!"

It was insensitive, a graceless thing to say, and the other faces tightened, ready for her anger. But Sitta politely smiled, whispering, "Who could have guessed?" Not once, even in her worst daydream, had she imagined that anyone would come to meet her. How could they even know she was here? With a voice that sounded just a little forced, Sitta said, "Hello. How are all of you?" She grasped the nearest hand and pressed it against herself. It was Varner's hand, large and masculine, and soft. When had she last felt a hand both free of callus and intact?

"No wonder you're home early," Varner observed, his tone effortlessly sarcastic. "What are you? Eight months along?"

"More than six," Sitta replied, by reflex.

Icenice, once her very best friend, came forward and demanded a hug. Still tall, still lovely, and still overdressed for the occasion, she put her thin long arms around Sitta and burst into tears. Wiping her face with the sleeve of her black-and-gold gown, she stepped back and sputtered, "We're sorry, darling. For everything. Please -- "

Varner said, "Icenice," in warning.

" -- accept our apologies. Please?"

"I came home, didn't I?" asked Sitta.

The question was interpreted as forgiveness. A second look told her this wasn't the same old gang. Where were Lean and Catchen? And Unnel? The Twins had made it, still indistinguishable from each other, and Vechel, silent as always. But there were several faces hanging in the background, wearing the suffering patience of strangers. Spouses, or spies?

Sitta found herself wondering if this was some elaborate scheme meant to keep tabs on her. Or perhaps it was a kind of slow, subtle torture, a prelude to things even worse.

Everybody was talking; nobody could listen.

Suddenly Varner -- always their reasonable, self-appointed boss -- pushed at people and declared, "We can chat on the rail." Turning to Sitta, he grinned and asked, "May I carry this lady's satchel?"

For an instant, in vivid detail, she remembered the last time she had seen him.

Varner took her hesitation as a refusal. "Well, you're twice my strength anyway." Probably true. "Out of our way, people! A mother needs room! Make way for us!"

They used slidewalks, giant potted jungles passing on both sides of them.

Staring at the luxurious foliage, unfruited and spendthrift, Sitta wondered how many people could be fed by crops grown in those pots, if only they could be transported to the earth.

Stop it, she warned herself.

Turning to Icenice, she examined the rich fabrics of her gown and the painted, always perfect breasts. With a voice intense and casual in equal measures, she asked, "How did you know I would be here?"

Icenice grinned and bent closer. "We had a tip."

Sitta was traveling under her own name, but she'd left the Plowsharers in mid-assignment. Besides, Plowsharers were suppose to enjoy a certain anonymity, what with the negative feelings toward them. "What kind of tip, darling?"

"I told one of your administrators about us. About the prank, about how sorry we felt." Her long hands meshed, making a single fist. "She knew your name. 'The famous Sitta,' she called you. 'One of our best.'"

Nodding, Sitta made no comment.

"Just yesterday, without warning, we were told that you'd been given a medical discharge, that you were coming here." Tears filled red-rimmed eyes. "I was scared for you, Sitta. We all were."

"I wasn't," said Varner. "A little cancer, a little virus. You're too smart to get yourself into real trouble."

Sitta made no comment.

"We took the risk, made a day of it," Icenice continued. She waited for Sitta's eyes to find hers, then asked, "Would you like to come to my house? We've planned a little celebration, if you're up to it."

She had no choice but to say, "All right."

The others closed in on her, touching the belly, begging for attention. Sitta found herself looking upward, hungry for privacy. Through the glass ceiling, she saw the gibbous gray face of the earth, featureless and chill; and after a long moment's anguish, she heard herself saying, "The last time I spoke to you -- "

"Forget it," Varner advised, as if it was his place to forgive.

Icenice assured her, "That was eons ago."

It felt like it was minutes ago. If that.

Then Pony poked her in the side, saying, "We know you. You've never held a grudge for long."

"Pony," Varner, growled, in warning.

Sitta made no sound, again glancing at the earth.

Again Varner touched her with his soft heavy hand, meaning to reassure her in some fashion. Suddenly his hand jumped back. "Quite a little kicker, isn't he?"

"She," Sitta corrected, eyes dropping.

"Six months along?"

"Almost seven." She held her leather bag in both hands. Why couldn't she just scream at them and run away? Because it would draw attention; and worse, because someone might ask why she would come here. Sitta had no family left on the moon, no property, nothing but some electronic money in a very portable bank account. "I guess I just don't understand ... why you people even bothered -- "

"Because," Icenice proclaimed, taking her best friend by the shoulders, "we knew you deserved a hero's welcome."

"Our hero," people muttered, something practiced in those words. "Our own little hero."

Now she was a hero, was she?

The irony made her want to laugh, for an instant. She had come to murder them, and she was heroic?

"Welcome home!" they shouted, in unison.

Sitta allowed herself another tired smile, letting them misunderstand the thought behind it. Then she glanced at the earth, longing in her gaze, that world's infinite miseries preferable to this world's tiny, thoughtless ones.

2

The war ended when Sitta was four years old, but for her and her friends it hadn't existed except as a theory, as a topic that interested adults, and as a pair of low-grade warnings when the earth fired its last shots. But they were never endangered. For all intents and purposes, the war was won decades before, the earth in no position to succeed, its enemies able to weather every blow, then take a certain warm pleasure in their final campaigns.

Victory was a good thing. The four-year-old Sitta could understand good and evil, winning and losing, and why winners deserved their laurels and losers earned their punishments. She also understood, in some wordless way, that Farside was a special place meant for the best people. Its border was protected by fortifications and energy barriers. Between its people and the enemy were several thousand kilometers of dead rock. Bombs and lasers could obliterate Nearside, melting it and throwing up new mountains; but on Farside, for more than a century, the people had suffered nothing worse than quakes and some accidental deaths, friendly bombs and crashing warships doing more damage than the earth could manage.

Other worlds were fighting for survival, every life endangered; but the back of the moon was safe, its citizens able to profit by their luck. Sitta's family made its fortune in genetic weapons -- adaptive plagues and communicable cancers, plus a range of parasites. Following a Farside custom, her parents waited until retirement to have their child. It was the same for Icenice, for Varner. For everyone, it seemed. Sitta was shocked to learn as a youngster that near-youngsters could make babies. She had assumed that humans were like the salmon swimming up from the Central Sea, a lifetime of preparation followed by a minute of desperate spawning, then death. That's how it had been for Sitta's parents; both of them expired even before she reached puberty.

An aunt inherited her -- an ancient, stern and incompetent creature -- and when their relationship collapsed, Sitta lived with her friends' families, all pleasant and all indifferent toward her.

Growing up, she learned about the great war. Tutors spoke of its beginnings -- and they lectured for hours about military tactics and the many famous battles. Yet the war always seemed unreal to Sitta. It was a giant and elaborate theory. She liked its battles for the visual records they left behind, colorful and modestly exciting, and she observed the dead with a clinical detachment. Sitta was undeniably bright -- her genes had been tweaked to ensure a quick, effortless intelligence -- yet in some fundamental way, she had gaps. Flaws. Watching the destruction of Nearside and Hellas and dozens of other tragedies, she couldn't envision the suffering involved. The dead were so many theories. And what is more, they were dead because they deserved their fates, unworthy of living here, unworthy of Farside.

The earth began the war with ten billion citizens. It had skyhooks and enormous solar farms, every sort of industry and the finest scientists. The earth should have won. Sitta wrote the same paper for several tutors, pointing out moments when any decisive, coordinated assault would have crushed the colonies. Yet when chances came, the earth lost its nerve. Too squeamish to obliterate its enemies -- too willing to show a partial mercy -- it let the colonies breathe and grow strong again, ensuring its own demise.

For that failure, Sitta had shown nothing but scorn. And her tutors, to the machine, agreed with her, awarding good grades with each paper, the last tutor adding, "You have a gift with political science. Perhaps you'll enter government service, then work your way into a high office."

It was a ridiculous suggestion. Sitta didn't need a career, what with her fortune and her natural talents. If she ever wanted, for whatever the reason, any profession, she was certain that she would begin near the top, in some position of deserved authority.

She was an important child of important Farsiders.

How could she deserve anything less?

The railbug was ornate and familiar -- an old-fashioned contraption with a passing resemblance to a fat,

glass-skinned caterpillar -- but it took Sitta a little while to remember where she had seen it. They were underway, free of the port and streaking across the smooth glass plain. Sitting on one of the stiff seats, she stroked the dark wood trim. There was a time when wood was a precious substance on Farside, organics scarce, even for the wealthy few. Remembering smaller hands on the trim, she looked at Varner and asked, "Did we play here?"

"A few times," he replied, grinning.

It had belonged to his family, too old to use and not fancy enough to refurbish. She remembered darkness and the scent of old flowers. "You brought me here -- "

" -- for sex, as I remember it." Varner laughed aloud, glancing at the others, seemingly asking them to laugh with him. "How old were we?"

Too young, she recalled. The experience had been clumsy, and except for the fear of being caught, she'd had little fun. Why did anyone bother with sex? she would ask herself for weeks. Even when she was old enough, screwing Varner and most of her other male friends, part of Sitta remained that doubtful child, the fun of it merely fun, just another little pleasure to be squeezed into long days and nights of busy idleness.

The railbug was for old-times sake, she assumed. But before she could ask, Icenice began serving refreshments, asking, "Who wants, who needs?" There was alcohol and more exotic fare. Sitta chose wine, sipping as she halfway listened to the jumbled conversations. People told childhood stories, pleasant memories dislodging more of the same. Nobody mentioned the earth or the war. If Sitta didn't know better, she would assume that nothing had changed in these last years, that these careless lives had been held in a kind of stasis. Maybe that was true, in a sense. But then, as Icenice strode past and the hem of her gown lifted, she noticed the gold bracelet worn on the woman's left ankle. Sitta remembered that bracelet; it had belonged to the girl's mother, and to her grandmother before. In a soft half-laugh, she asked:

"Are you married, girl?"

Their hostess paused for an instant, then straightened her back and smiled, her expression almost embarrassed. "I should have told you. Sorry, darling." A pause. "Almost three years married, yes."

The buzz of other conversations diminished. Sitta looked at the strangers, wondering which one of them was the husband.

"He's a Mercurian," said her one-time friend. "Named Bosson."

The old Icenice had adored men in the plural. The old Icenice gave herself sophisticated personality tests, then boasted of her inability to enjoy monogamy. Married? To a hundred men, perhaps. Sitta cleared her throat, then asked, "What sort of man is he?"

"Wait and see," Icenice advised. She adjusted the straps of her gown, pulling them one way, then back where they began. "Wait and see."

The strangers were staring at Sitta, at her face.

"Who are they?" she asked in a whisper.

And finally they were introduced, more apologies made for tardiness. Pony took the job for herself, prefacing it by saying, "We're all Farsiders here." Was that important? "They've heard about you, darling. They've wanted to meet you for a long, long while...!"

Shaking damp hands, Sitta consciously forgot every name. Were they friends to the old gang? Yet they didn't seem to fit that role. She found herself resurrecting that ridiculous theory about spies and a plot. There was some agenda here, something she could feel in the air. But why bring half a dozen government agents? Unless the plan was to be obvious, in which case they were succeeding.

A social pause. Turning her head, Sitta noticed a long ceramic rib or fin standing on the irradiated plain. For an instant, when the earthshine had the proper angle, she could make out the bulk of something buried in the glass, locked securely in place. A magma whale, she realized.

At the height of the war, when this basin was a red-hot sea stirred by thousand megaton warheads, Farsiders built a flotilla of robotic whales. Swimming in the molten rock, covering as much as a kilometer every day, they strained out metals and precious rare elements. The munition factories on Farside paid dearly for every gram of ore, and the earth, in ignorance or blind anger, kept up its useless bombardment, deepening the ocean, bringing up more treasures from below.

Sitta watched the rib vanish over the horizon; then with a quiet, respectful voice, Icenice asked, "Are you tired?"

She was sitting beside Sitta. Her gown's perfumes made the air close, uncomfortable.

"We haven't worn you out, have we?"

Sitta shook her head, honestly admitting, "I feel fine." It had been an easy pregnancy. With a certain care, she placed a hand on her belly, then lied. "I'm glad you came to meet me."

The tall woman hesitated, her expression impossible to read. With a certain gravity, she said, "It was Varner's idea."

"Was it?"

A sigh, a change of topics. "I like this place. I don't know why."

She meant the plain. Bleak and pure, the smoothest portions of the glass shone like black mirrors. Sitta allowed, "There is a beauty."

Icenice said, "It's sad."

Why? "What's sad?"

"They're going to tunnel and dome all of this."

"Next year," said an eavesdropping Twin.

"Tunnels here?" Sitta was dubious. "You can shield a spaceport and a rail line, but people can't live out here, can they?"

"Martians know how." Icenice glanced at the others, inviting them ... to do what? "They've got a special way to clean the glass."

"Leaching," said Varner. "Chemical tricks combined with microchines. They developed the process when they rebuilt their own cities."

"People will live here?" Sitta wrestled with the concept. "I hadn't heard. I didn't know."

"That's why they built the port in the first place," Varner continued. "All of this will be settled. Cities."

Farms. Parks. And industries."

"Huge cities," muttered Icenice.

"This ground was worthless," growled one of the strangers. "Five years ago, it was less than worthless."

Varner laughed without humor. "The Martians thought otherwise."

Everyone looked dour, self-involved. They shook their heads and whispered about the price of land and what they would do if they could try again. Sitta thought it unseemly and greedy. And pointless. "You know," said Pony, "it's the Martians who own and run the spaceport." Sitta did her best to ignore them, gazing back along the rail, the earth dropping for the horizon and no mountains to be seen. They were at the center of the young sea, the world appearing smooth and simple. Far out on the glass, in a school of a dozen or more, were magma whales. As their sea cooled, they must have congregated there, their own heat helping to keep the rock liquid for a little while longer.

Sitta felt a strange, vague pity. Then a fear.

Shutting her eyes, she tried to purge her mind of everything fearful and tentative, making herself strong enough, trying to become as pure as the most perfect glass.

4

Sitta couldn't recall when the prank had seemed fun or funny, though it must have been both at some time. She couldn't remember whose idea it was. Perhaps Varner's, except the criminality was more like the Twins or Pony. It was meant to be something new, a distraction that involved all of them, and it meant planning and practice and a measure of genuine courage. Sitta volunteered to tackle the largest target. Their goal was to quickly and irrevocably destroy an obscure species of beetle. How many people could boast that they'd pushed a species into oblivion? Rather few, they had assumed. The crime would lend them a kind of notoriety, distinctive yet benign. Or so they had assumed.

The ark system was built early in the war. It protected biostocks brought from the earth in finer days; some twenty million species were in cold storage and DNA libraries. Some of the stocks had been used as raw material for genetic weapons. Sitta's parents built their lab beside the main ark; she had visited both the lab and ark as a little girl. Little had changed since, including the security systems. She entered without fuss, destroying tissue samples, every whole beetle, and even the partial sequencing maps. Her friends did the same work at the other facilities. It was a tiny black bug from the vanished Amazon, and except for some ancient videos and a cursory description of its habits and canopy home, nothing remained of it, as planned.

Sitta would have escaped undetected but for the miserable luck of a human guard who got lost, making a series of wrong turns. He came upon her moments after she had sent the beetle into nothingness. Caught sooner, her crimes would have been simple burglary and vandalism. As it was, she was charged under an old law meant to protect wartime resources.

The mandatory penalty was death. Gray-haired prosecutors with calm gray voices told her, "Your generation needs to behave." They said, "You're going to serve as an example, Sitta." Shaking ancient heads, they said, "You're a spoiled and wealthy child, contemptible and vulgar, and we have no pity for you. We feel nothing but scorn."

Sitta demanded to see her friends. She wanted them crammed into her hyperfiber cell, to have them see

how she was living. Instead she got Icenice and Varner inside a spacious conference room, a phalanx of lawyers behind them. Her best friend wept. Her first lover said, "Listen. Just listen. Stop screaming now and hear us out."

He told her that behind the scenes, behind the legal facades, semiofficial negotiations were underway. Of course the Farside government knew she'd had accomplices, and a lot of officials were afraid that the scandal would spread. Friends with pull were being contacted, he assured her. Money was flowing from account to account. What Sitta needed to do, he claimed, was to plead guilty, to absorb all blame, then promise to pay any fine.

The judge would find for clemency, using some semi-legal technicality, then demand a staggering penalty. "Which we will pay," Varner promised, his voice earnest and strong. "We won't let you spend a single digit of your own money."

What were her choices? She had to nod, glaring at the lawyers while saying, "Agreed. Good-bye."

"Poor Sitta," Icenice moaned, hugging her friend but weeping less. She was relieved that she wouldn't be turned in to the authorities, that she was perfectly safe. Stepping back, the tall girl straightened her gown with a practiced flourish, adding, "And we'll see you soon. Very soon, darling."

But the promised judge wasn't compliant. After accepting bribes and hearing a few inelegant threats, he slammed together the Hammers of Justice and announced, "You're guilty. But since the beetle is missing, and since the prosecution cannot prove its true worth, I cannot, in good conscience, find for the death penalty."

Sitta stood with her eyes shut. She had heard the word "clemency" and opened her eyes, realizing that nobody but her had spoken.

The judge delivered a hard, withering stare. In a voice that Sitta would hear for years, syllable by syllable, he said, "I sentence you to three years of involuntary servitude." Again he struck the Hammers together. "Those three years will be served as a member of the Plowsharers. You'll be stationed on the earth, young lady, at a post of my approval, and I just hope you learn something worthwhile from this experience."

The Plowsharers? she thought. They were those stupid people who volunteered to work and die on the earth, and this had to be a mistake, and how could she have misunderstood so many words at one time...?

Her friends looked as if they were in shock. All wept and bowed their heads, and she glared at them, waiting for even one of them to step forward and share the blame. But they didn't. Wouldn't. When they looked at Sitta, it was as if they knew she would die. Everyone knew the attrition rate among the Plowsharers. Had Varner and the others tricked her into confessing, knowing her fate all along? Probably not, no. They were genuinely surprised; she thought it then and thought it for the next eight years. But if they had come forward, en masse ... if another eight families had embraced this ugly business ... there might have been a reevaluation ... an orphan's crime would have been diluted, if only they'd acted with a dose of courage ... the shits...!

The earth was hell.

A weak Farsider would die in an afternoon, slain by some nameless disease or embittered Terran.

Yet not one good friend raised a hand, asking to be heard. Not even when Sitta screamed at them. Not even when she slipped away from her guard, springing over the railing and grabbing Varner, trying to

shake him into honesty, cursing and kicking him, fighting to shame him into the only possible good deed.

More guards grabbed the criminal, doing their own cursing and kicking, finally binding her arms and legs behind her.

The judge grinned ear-to-ear. "Wage good," he called out, in the end. "Wage plenty of good, Sitta."

It was a Plowsharers' motto: *_Waging Good_*. And Sitta would remember that moment with a hyperclarity, her body being pulled away from Varner as Varner's face grew cold and certain, one of his hands reaching, pressing at her chest as if helping the guards restrain her, and his tired thick voice said, "You'll be back," without a shred of confidence. Then, "You'll do fine." Then with a whisper, in despair, "This is for the best, darling. For the best."

5

The mountains were high and sharp, every young peak named for some little hero of the war. Titanic blasts had built them, then waves of plasma had broken against them, fed by the earth's weapons and meant to pour through any gaps, the enemy hoping to flood Farside with the superheated material. But the waves had cooled and dissipated too quickly. The mountains were left brittle, and in the decades since, at irregular intervals, different slopes would collapse, aprons of debris fanning across the plain. The old railbug skirted one apron, crossed another, then rose into a valley created by an avalanche, a blur of rocks on both sides and Varner's calm voice explaining how the Martians -- who else? -- had buried hyperfiber threads, buttressing the mountains, making them safer than mounds of cold butter.

Then they left the valley, passing into the open again, an abandoned fort showing as a series of rectangular depressions. Its barrier generators and potent lasers had been pulled and sold as scrap. There was no more earthshine and no sun yet, but Sitta could make out the sloping wall of an ancient crater and a rolling, boulder-strewn floor. The border post was in the hard black shadows; the railbug was shunted to a secondary line. Little gold domes passed on their right. They slowed and stopped beside a large green dome, fingers of light stabbing at them. "Why do we have to stop?" asked one of the strangers. And Pony said, "Because," and gracelessly pointed toward Sitta. And Varner added, "It should only take a minute or two," while winking at her, the picture of calm.

A walktube was spliced into the bug's hatch, and with a rush of humid air, guards entered. Human, not robotic. And armed, too. But what made it most remarkable were the three gigantic hounds, Sitta recognizing the breed in the same instant she realized this was no ordinary inspection.

She remained calm, in a fashion. It was Varner who jumped to his feet, muttering, "By what right -- ?"

"Hello," shouted the hounds. "Be still. We bite!"

They were broad and hairless, pink as tongues and free of all scent. Their minds and throats had been surgically augmented, and their nostrils were the best in the solar system. The provisional government used them, and if smugglers were found with weapons or contraband, they were executed, the hounds given that work as a reward.

"We bite," the hounds repeated. "Out of our way!"

A Belter walked into the railbug, her long limbs wearing grav-assist braces. Her bearing and the indigo uniform implied a great rank. Next to her, the hounds appeared docile. She glowered, glared. Facing her, Varner lost his nerve, slumping at the shoulders, whimpering, "How can we help?"

"You can't help," she snapped. Then, speaking to the guards and hounds, she said, "Hunt!"

Sensors and noses were put to work, scouring the floor and corners and the old fixtures, then the passengers and their belongings. One hound descended on Sitta's bag, letting out a piercing wail.

"Whose is this?" asked the Belter.

Sitta remained composed. If this woman knew her plan, she reasoned, then they wouldn't bother with this little drama. She'd be placed under arrest. Everyone she knew or had been near would be detained, then interrogated ... _if they even suspected_...

"It's my bag," Sitta allowed.

"Open it for me. Now."

Unfastening the simple latches, she worked with cool deliberation. The bag sprang open, and she retreated, watching the heavy pink snouts descend, probing and snorting and pulling at her neatly folded clothes. Like the bulky trousers and shirt Sitta wore, they were simple items made with rough, undyed and inorganic fabrics; the hounds could be hunting for persistent viruses and booby-trapped motes of dust. Except a dozen mechanical searches had found her clean. Had someone recently tried to smuggle something dangerous into Farside? But why send a Belter? Nothing made sense, she realized; and the hounds said, "Clean, clean, clean," with loud, disappointed voices.

The official offered a grim nod.

Again Varner straightened, his skin damp, glistening. "I have never, ever seen such a ... such a ... what do you want...?"

No answer was offered. The Belter approached Sitta, her braces humming, lending her an unexpected vigor. With the mildest of voices, she asked, "How are the Plowsharers doing, miss? Are you waging all the good you can?"

"Always," Sitta replied.

"Well, good for you." The official waved a long arm. Two guards grabbed Sitta and carried her to the back of the bug, into the cramped toilet, then stood beside the doorway as the official looked over their shoulders, telling their captive, "Piss into the bowl, miss. And don't flush."

Sitta felt like old, weakened glass. A thousand fractures met, and she nearly collapsed, catching herself on the tiny sink and then, using her free hand, unfastening her trousers. Her expansive brown belly seemed to glow. She sat with all the dignity she could muster. Pissing took concentration, courage. Then she rose again, barely able to pull up her trousers when the Belter shouted, "Hunt," and the hounds pushed past her, heads filling the elegant wooden bowl.

If so much as a single molecule was out of place, they would find it. If just one cell had thrown off its camouflage --

-- and Sitta stopped thinking, retreating into a trance that she had mastered on the earth. Her hands finished securing her trousers. A big wagging tail bruised her leg. Then came three voices, in a chorus, saying, "Yes, yes, yes."

Yes? What did _yes_ mean?

The official genuinely smiled, giving Sitta an odd little sideways glance. Then there wasn't any smile, a

stern unapologetic voice saying, "I am sorry for the delay, miss."

What had the hounds smelled? she kept asking herself.

"Welcome home, Miss Sitta."

The intruders retreated, vanished. The walktube was detached, and the railbug accelerated, Sitta walking against the strong tug of it. Varner and the others watched her in silent astonishment, nothing in their experience to match this assault. She almost screamed, "This happens on the earth, every day!" But she didn't speak, taking an enormous breath, then kneeling, wiping her hands against her shirt, then calmly beginning to refold and repack her belongings.

The others were embarrassed. Dumbfounded. Intrigued.

It was Pony who noticed the sock under the seat, bringing it to her and touching the bag for a moment, commenting, "It's beautiful leather." She wanted to sound at ease and trivial, adding, "What kind of leather is it?"

Sitta was thinking: _What if someone knows?_

Months ago, when this plan presented itself, she had assumed that one of the security apparatuses would discover her, then execute her. She'd given herself a 10 percent chance of surviving to this point. But what if there were people -- powerful, like-minded people -- who thought she was right? No government could sanction what Sitta was doing, much less make it happen. But they might allow it to happen -- _that woman smiled at me!_ -- while checking on her from time to time...

"Are they culturing leather on the earth?" asked Pony, unhappy to be ignored. Stroking the simple bag with both hands, she commented, "It has a nice texture. Very smooth."

"It's not cultured," Sitta responded. "Terrans can't own biosynthetic equipment."

"It's from an animal then." The girl's hand lifted, a vague disgust showing on her face. "Is it?"

"Yes," said the retired Plowsharer.

"What kind of animal?"

"Human kinds."

Every eye was fixed on her.

"The other kinds are scarce," Sitta explained. "And precious. Even rat skins go into the pot."

No one breathed; no one dared to move.

"This bag is laminated human flesh," she told them, fastening the latches. _Click, click._ "You have to understand. On the earth, it's an honor to be used after death. You want to stay behind and help your family."

Icenice gave a low moan.

Sitta set the bag aside, watching the staring faces, then adding, "I knew some of these people. I did."

The Plowsharers were founded and fueled by idealists who never actually worked on the earth. A wealthy Farsider donated her estate as an administrative headquarters. Plowsharers were to be volunteers with purposeful skills that would help the earth and its suffering people. That was the intent, at least. The trouble came in finding volunteers worth accepting. A hundred thousand vigorous young teachers and doctors and ecological technicians could have done miracles. But the norm was to creak along with ten or fifteen thousand ill-trained, emotionally questionable semi-volunteers. Who in her right mind joined a service with 50 percent mortality? Along the bell-shaped curve, Sitta was one of the blue-chip recruits. She had youth and a quality education. Yes, she was spoiled. Yes, she was naive. But she was in perfect health and could be made even healthier. "We're always improving our techniques," the doctors explained, standing before her in the orbital station. "What we'll do is teach your flesh how to resist its biological enemies, because they're the worst hazards. Diseases and toxins kill more Plowsharers than do bombs, old or new."

A body that had never left the soft climate of Farside was transformed. Her immune system was bolstered, then a second, superior system was built on top of it. She was fed tailored bacteria that proceeded to attack her native flora, destroying them and bringing their withering firepower to her defense. As an experiment, Sitta was fed cyanides and dioxins, cholera and rabies. Headaches were her worst reaction. Then fullerenes stuffed full of procrustean bugs were injected straight into her heart. What should have killed her in minutes made her nauseous, nothing more. The invaders were obliterated, their toxic parts encased in plastic granules, then jettisoned in the morning's bowel movement.

Meanwhile, bones and muscles had to be strengthened. Calcium slurries were ingested, herculian steroids were administered along with hard exercise, and her liver succumbed as a consequence, her posting delayed. Her three year sentence didn't begin until she set foot on the planet, yet Sitta was happy for the free time. It gave her a chance to compose long, elaborate letters to her old friends, telling them in clear terms to fuck themselves and each other and fuck Farside and would they please die soon and horribly, please?

A new liver was grown and implanted. At last, Sitta was posted. With an education rich in biology -- a legacy of her parents -- she was awarded a physician's field diploma, then given to a remote city on the cratered rock of northern America. Her hyperfiber chests were stolen in Athens. With nothing but the clothes she had worn for three days straight, she boarded the winged shuttle that would take her across the poisoned Atlantic. Her mood couldn't have been lower, she believed; then she discovered a new depth of spirit, gazing out a tiny porthole, gray ocean giving way to a blasted lunar surface. It was like the moon of old, save for the thick acidic haze and the occasional dab of green, both serving to heighten the bleakness, the lack of all hope.

She decided to throw herself from the shuttle. Placing a hand on the emergency latch, she waited for the courage; and one of the crew saw her and came over to her, kneeling to say, "Don't." His smile was charming, his eyes angry. "If you need to jump," he said, "use the rear hatch. And seal the inner door behind you, will you?"

Sitta stared at him, unable to speak.

"Consideration," he cautioned. "At this altitude and at these speeds, you might hurt innocent people."

In the end, she killed no one. Embarrassed to be found out, to be so transparent, she kept on living; and years later, in passing, she would wonder who to write and thank for his indifferent, precious help.

Farside, like every place, was transformed by the war. But instead of world-shaking explosions and lasers, it was sculpted by slower, more graceful events. Prosperity covered its central region with domes, warm air and manmade rains beginning to modify the ancient regolith. Farther out were the factories and vast laboratories that supplied the military and the allied worlds. Profits came as electronic cash, water and organics. A world that had been dry for four billion years was suddenly rich with moisture. Ponds became lakes. Comet ice and pieces of distant moons were brought to pay for necessities like medicines and sophisticated machinery. And when there was too much water for the surface area -- Farside isn't a large place -- the excess was put underground, flooding the old mines and caverns and outdated bunkers. This became the Central Sea. Only in small places, usually on the best estates, would the Sea show on the surface. Icenice had lived beside one of those pond-sized faces, the water bottomless and blue, lovely beyond words.

It was too bad that Sitta wouldn't see it now.

Looking about the railbug, at the morose, downslung faces, she decided that she was doomed to be uninvited to the celebration. That incident with the bag had spoiled the mood. Would it be Varner or Icenice who would say, "Maybe some other time, darling. Where can we leave you?"

Except they surprised her. Instead of making excuses, they began to have the most banal conversation imaginable. Who remembered what from last year's spinball season? What team won the tournament? Who could recall the most obscure statistic? It was a safe, bloodless collection of noises, and Sitta ignored it, leaning back against her seat, her travels and the pregnancy finally catching up with her. She drifted into sleep, no time passing, then woke to find the glass walls opaque, the sun up and needing to be shielded. It was like riding inside a glass of milk or a cloudbank, and sometimes, holding her head at the proper angle, she could just make out the blocky shapes of factories streaking past.

Nobody was speaking; furtive glances were thrown her way.

"What do they do?" asked Sitta.

Silence.

"The factories," she added. "Aren't they being turned over to civilian industries?"

"Some have been," said Varner.

"Why bother?" growled one of the strangers.

"Bosson uses some of them." Icenice spoke with a flat, emotionless voice. "The equipment is old, he says. And he has trouble selling what he makes."

Bosson is your husband, thought Sitta. Right?

She asked, "What does he make?"

"Laser drills. They're retooled old weapons, I guess."

Sitta had assumed that everything and everyone would follow the grand plan. Farside's wealth and infrastructure would generate new wealth and opportunities ... if not with their factories, then with new spaceports and beautiful new cities...

Except those wonders belonged to the Martians, she recalled.

"If you want to sleep," Varner advised, "we'll make up the long seat in the back. If you'd like."

On a whim, she asked, "Where are Lean and Catchen?"

Silence.

"Are they still angry with me?"

"Nobody's angry with you," Icenice protested.

"Lean is living on Titan," Pony replied. "Catchen ... I don't know ... she's somewhere in the Belt."

"They're not together?" Sitta had never known two people more perfectly linked, save for the Twins.

"What happened?"

Shrugs. Embarrassed, even pained expressions. Then Varner summed it up by saying, "Crap finds you."

What did that mean?

Varner rose to his feet, looking the length of the bug.

Sitta asked, "What about Unnel?"

"We don't have any idea." Indeed, he seemed entirely helpless, eyes dropping, gazing at his own hands for a few baffled moments. "Do you want to sleep, or not?"

She voted for sleep. A pillow was found and placed where her head would lay, and she was down and hard asleep in minutes, waking once to hear soft conversation -- distant, unintelligible -- then again to hear nothing at all. The third time brought bright light and whispers, and she sat upright, discovering that their railbug had stopped, its walls once again transparent. Surrounding them was a tall, delicate jungle and a soft blue-tinted sky of glass, the lunar noon as brilliant as she remembered. Through an open hatch, she could smell water and the vigorous stink of orchids.

Icenice was coming for her. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I was just going to shake you."

The others stood behind her, lined up like the best little children; and Sitta thought:

You want something.

That's why they had come to greet her and bring her here. That's why they had endured searches and why they had risked any grudges that she still might feel toward them.

You want something important, and no one else can give it to you.

Sitta would refuse them. She had come here to destroy these people and devastate their world, and seeing the desire on their hopeful, desperate faces, she felt secretly pleased. Even blessed. Rising to her feet, she asked, "Would someone carry my bag? I'm still very tired."

A cold pause, then motion.

Varner and one of the strangers picked the bag up by different straps, eyeing one another, the stranger relinquishing the distasteful chore with a forced chuckle and bow, stepping back and glancing at Sitta, hoping she would notice his attempted kindness.

Artificial volcanoes girdled the earth's equator, fusion reactors sunk into their throats, helping them push millions of tons of acid and ash into the stratosphere. They maintained the gray-black clouds that helped block the sunlight. Those clouds were vital. Decades of bombardment had burned away forests, soil and even great volumes of carbonate rock. There was so much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that full sunshine would have brought a runaway greenhouse event. A temporary second Venus would be born, and the world would be baked until dead. "Not a bad plan," Sitta's parents would claim, perhaps as a black joke. "That world is all one grave anyway. Why do we pretend?"

The earthly climate was hot and humid despite the perpetual gloom. It would be an ideal home for orchids and food crops, if not for the lack of soil, its poisoned water, and the endless plant diseases. Terrans, by custom, lived inside bunkers. Even in surface homes built after the war, there was a strength of walls and ceilings, everything drab and massive, every opening able to be sealed tight. Sitta was given her own concrete monstrosity when she arrived at her post. It had no plumbing. She'd been promised normal facilities, but assuming that she was being slighted by the Terrans, she refused to complain. Indeed, she tried to avoid all conversation. On her first morning, in the dim purple light, she put on a breathing mask to protect her lungs from acids and explosive dust, then left her new house, shuffling up a rocky hill, finding a depression where she felt unwatched, doing the essential chore and covering her mess with loose stones, then slinking off to work a full day in the farm fields.

A hospital was promised; every government official in Athens had said so. But on the earth, she was learning, promises were no stronger than the wind that makes them. For the time being, she was a laborer, and a poor one. Sitta could barely lift her tools, much less swing them with authority. Yet nobody seemed to mind, their public focus on a thousand greater outrages.

That was the greatest surprise for the new Plowsharer. It wasn't the poverty, which was endless, or the clinging filth, or even the constant spectre of death. It was the ceaselessly supportive nature of the Terrans, particularly toward her. Wasn't she one of the brutal conquerors? Not to their way of thinking, no. The moon and Mars and the rest of the worlds were theories, unobserved and almost unimaginable. Yes, they honestly hated the provisional government, particularly the security agencies that enforced the harsh laws. But toward Sitta, their Plowsharer, they showed smiles, saying, "We're thrilled to have you here. If you need anything, ask. We won't have it, but ask anyway. We like to apologize all the same."

Humor was a shock, set against the misery. Despite every awful story told by Farsiders, and despite the grueling training digitals, the reality proved a hundred times more wicked, cruel, and thoughtless than anything she could envision. Yet meanwhile, amid the carnage, the people of her city told jokes, laughed, and loved with a kind of maniacal vigor, perhaps because of the stakes involved, pleasures needing to be taken as they were found.

Tens of thousands lived in the city, few of whom could be called *_old_* by Farside standards. Children outnumbered adults, except they weren't genuine children. They reminded Sitta of five- and six-year-old adults, working in the fields and tiny factories, worldly in all things, including their play. The most popular game was a pretend funeral. They used wild rats, skinning them just as human bodies were skinned, sometimes pulling out organs to be transplanted into other rats, just as humans harvested whatever they could use from their own dead, implanting body parts with the help of primitive autodocs, dull knives and weak laser beams.

By law, each district in the city had one funeral each day. One or fifty bodies -- skinned, and if clean enough, emptied of livers, kidneys and hearts -- were buried in a single ceremony, always at dusk, always as the blister-colored sun touched the remote horizon. There was never more than one hole to dig and refill. Terrans were wonders at digging graves. They always knew where to sink them and how deep,

then just what words to say over the departed, and the best ways to comfort a woman from Farside who insisted on taking death personally.

Despite her hyperactive immune system, Sitta became ill. For all she knew, she had caught some mutant strain of an ailment devised by her parents, the circumstances thick with irony. After three days of fever, she ran out of the useless medicines in her personal kit, then fell into a delirium, waking at one point to find women caring for her, smiling with sloppy toothless mouths, their ugly faces lending her encouragement, a credible strength.

Sitta recovered after a week of near-death. Weaker than any time since birth, she shuffled up the hillside to defecate, and in the middle of the act she saw a nine-year-old sitting nearby, watching without a hint of shame. She finished and went to him. And he skipped toward her, carrying a small bucket and spade. Was he there to clean up after her? She asked, then added, "I bet you want it for the fields, don't you?"

The boy gave an odd look, then proclaimed, "We wouldn't waste it on the crops!"

"Then why...?" She hesitated, realizing that she'd seen him on other mornings. "You've done this other times, haven't you?"

"It's my job," he confessed, smiling behind his transparent breathing mask.

She tried to find her other stone piles. "But why?"

"I'm not suppose to tell you."

Sitta offered a wan smile. "I won't tell that you did. Just explain what you want with it."

As if nothing could be more natural, he said, "We put it in our food."

She moaned, bending as if punched.

"You've got bugs in you," said the boy. "Bugs that keep you alive. If we eat them and if they take hold --"

Rarely, she guessed.

"-- then we'll feel better. Right?"

On occasion, perhaps. But the bacteria were designed for her body, her chemistry. It would take mutations and enormous luck ... then yes, some of those people might benefit in many ways. At least it was possible.

She asked, "Why is this a secret?"

"People like you can be funny," the boy warned her. "About all kinds of stuff. They thought you wouldn't like knowing."

Sitta was disgusted, yet oddly pleased, too.

"Why do you hide your shit?" he asked. "Is that what you do on the moon? Do you bury it under rocks?"

"No," she replied, "we pipe it into the Sea."

"Into your water?" His nose crinkled up. "That doesn't sound very smart, I think."

"Perhaps you're right," she agreed. Then she pointed at the bucket, saying, "Let me keep it. How about if I set it outside my door every morning?"

"It would save me a walk," the boy agreed.

"It would help both of us."

He nodded, smiling up at her. "My name is Thomas."

"Mine is Sitta."

A big, long laugh. "I know _that_."

For that instant, in the face and voice, Thomas seemed like a genuine nine-year-old boy, wise only in the details.

9

Icenice's home and grounds were exactly as Sitta remembered them, and it was as if she had never been there, as if the scenery had been shown to her in holos while she was a young and impressionable girl.

"Privilege," said the property. "Order." "Comfort." She looked down a long green slope, eyes resting on the blue pond-sized face of the Sea, flocks of swift birds flying around it and drinking from it and lighting on its shore. After a minute, she turned and focused on the tall house, thinking of all the rooms and elegant balconies and baths and holoplazas. On the earth, two hundred people would reside inside it and feel blessed. And what would they do with this yard? With everyone staring, Sitta dropped to her knees, hands digging into the freshly watered sod, nails cutting through sweet grass and exuberant roots, reaching soil blacker than tar. The skins of old comets went into this soil, brought in exchange for critical war goods. And for what good? Pulling up a great lump of the stuff, she placed it against her nose and sniffed once, then again.

The silence was broken by someone clearing his throat.

"Ah-hem!"

Icenice jumped half a meter into the air, turning in flight and blurting, "Honey? Hello."

The husband stood on the end of a stone porch, between stone lions. In no way, save for a general maleness, did he match Sitta's expectations. Plain and stocky, Bosson was twenty years older than the rest of them, and a little fat. Dressed like a low-grade functionary, there seemed nothing memorable about him.

"So," he shouted, "does my dirt smell good?"

Sitta emptied her hands and rose. "Lovely."

"Better than anything you've tasted for a while. Am I right?"

She knew him, The words; the voice. His general attitude. She had seen hundreds of men like him on earth, all members of the government. All middle-aged and embittered by whatever had placed them where they didn't want to be. Sitta offered a thin smile, telling Bosson, "I'm glad to meet you, finally."

The man grinned, turned. To his wife, he said, "Come here."

Icenice nearly ran to him, wrapping both arms around his chest and squealing, "We've had a gorgeous time, darling."

No one else in their group greeted him, even in passing.

Sitta climbed the long stairs two at a time, offering her hand and remarking, "I've heard a lot about you."

"Have you?" Bosson laughed, reaching past her hand and patting her swollen belly. "Is this why you quit being the Good Samaritan?"

"Honey?" said Icenice, her voice cracking.

"Who's the father? Another Plow?"

Sitta waited for a long moment, trying to read the man's stony face. Then, with a quiet, stolid voice, she replied, "He was Terran."

"Was?" asked Icenice, fearfully.

"He's dead," Bosson answered. Unimpressed; unchastened. "Am I right, Miss Sitta?"

She didn't respond, maintaining her glacial calm.

"Darling, let me show you the room." Icenice physically moved between them, sharp features tightening and a sheen of perspiration on her face and breasts. "We thought we'd give you your old room. That is, I mean, if you want to stay ... for a little while..."

"I hope you remember how to eat," Bosson called after them. "This house has been cooking all day, getting ready."

Sitta didn't ask about him.

Yet Icenice felt compelled to explain, saying, "He's just in a bad mood. Work isn't going well."

"Making laser drills, right?"

The girl hesitated on the stairs, sunshine falling from a high skylight, the heat of it making her perfumes flood into the golden air. "He's a Mercurian, darling. You know how bleak they can be."

How were they?

"He'll be fine," Icenice promised, no hope in her voice. "A drink or two, and he'll be sugar."

Following the familiar route, she was taken to an enormous suite, its bed able to sleep twenty and the corners decorated with potted jungles. Bright gold and red monkeys came close, begging for any food that a human might be carrying. Sitta had nothing in her hands. A house robot had brought her bag, setting it on the bed and asking if she wished it unpacked. She didn't answer. Already sick of luxuries, she felt a revulsion building, her face hardening --

-- and Icenice, misreading her expression, asked, "Are you disappointed with me?"

Sitta didn't care about the girl's life. But instead of honesty, she feigned interest. "Why did you marry him?"

Bleakness seemed to be a family trait. A shrug of the shoulders, then she said, "I had to do it."

"But why?"

"There wasn't any choice," she snapped, as if nothing could be more obvious. Then, "Can we go? I don't want to leave them alone for too long."

The robot was left to decide whether or not to unpack. Sitta and Icenice went downstairs, discovering everyone in the long dining room, Bosson sitting in a huge feather chair at one end, watching the guests congregating in the distance. His expression was both alert and bored. Sitta was reminded of an adult watching children, always counting the baubles.

As she arrived, whispers died.

It was Bosson who spoke to her, jumping up from his chair with a laugh. "So what was your job? What kind of good did you wage?"

Sitta offered a lean, unfriendly smile. "I ran a hospital."

Varner came closer. "What kind of hospital?"

"Prefabricated," she began.

Then Bosson added, "The Martians built them by the thousands, just in case we ever invaded the earth. Portable units. Automated. Never needed." He winked at Sitta, congratulating himself. "Am I right?"

She said nothing.

"Anyway, some Plow thought they could be used anyway." He shook his head, not quite laughing. "I'm not a fan of the Plows, in case you haven't noticed."

With a soft, plaintive voice, Icenice whispered, "Darling?"

To whom?

Sitta looked at him, finding no reason to be intimidated. "That's not exactly a unique opinion."

"I'm a harsh person," he said in explanation. "I believe in a harsh, cold universe. Psychology isn't my field, but maybe it has to do with surviving one of the last big Terran attacks. Not that my parents did. Or my brothers." A complex, shifting smile appeared, vanished. "In fact, I watched most of them expire. The cumulative effects of radiation..."

Using her most reasonable voice, Sitta remarked, "The people who killed them have also died. Years ago."

He said, "Good."

He grinned and said, "The real good of the Plows, I think, is that they help prolong the general misery. People like you give hope, and what good is hope?"

His opinions weren't new, but the others appeared horrified. "Things are getting better!" Icenice argued. "I just heard ... I don't remember where ... that their lifespans are almost 20 percent longer than a few years ago...!"

"The average earthly lifespan," Sitta replied, "is eleven years."

The house itself seemed to hold its breath.

Then Pony, of all people, said, "That's sad." She seemed to mean it, hugging herself and shaking her head, repeating the words. "That's sad. That's sad."

"But you got your hospital," Varner offered. "Didn't it help?"

In some ways. Sitta explained, "It didn't weather its storage very well. Some systems never worked. Autodocs failed without warning. Of course, all the biosynthesizing gear had been ripped out on Mars. And I didn't have any real medical training, which meant I did a lot of guessing when there was no other choice ... guessing wrong, more than not..."

She couldn't breathe, couldn't speak.

Nobody liked the topic, save Bosson. Yet no one knew how to talk about anything else.

The Mercurian approached, hands reaching for her belly, then having the good sense to hesitate. "Why carry the baby yourself? Your hospital must have had wombs -- "

"They were stolen." He must know that for himself. "Before the hospital arrived, they were removed."

Icenice asked, "Why?"

"Terrans," said Bosson, "breed as they live. Like rats."

An incandescent rage was building inside Sitta, and she enjoyed it, relishing the clarity it afforded her. Almost smiling, she told them, "Biosynthetic machinery could do wonders for them. But of course we won't let them have anything sophisticated, since they might try to hurt us. And that means that if you want descendants, you've got to make as many babies as possible, as fast as possible, hoping that some of them will have the right combinations of genes for whatever happens in their unpredictable lives."

"Let them die," was Bosson's verdict.

Sitta didn't care about him. He was just another child of the war, unremarkable, virtually insignificant. What drew her rage were the innocent faces of the others. What made her want to explode was Varner's remote, schoolboy logic, his most pragmatic voice saying, "The provisional government is temporary. When it leaves, the earth can elect its own representatives, then make its own laws -- "

"Never," Bosson promised. "Not in ten thousand years."

Sitta took a breath, held it, then slowly exhaled.

"What else did you do?" asked Icenice, desperate for good news. "Did you travel? You must have seen famous places."

As if she'd been on vacation. Sitta shook her head, then admitted, "I was picked as a jurist. Many times. Being a jurist is an honor."

"For trials?" asked Pony.

"Of a kind."

People fidgeted, recalling Sitta's trial.

"Jurists," she explained, "are trusted people who watch friends giving birth." She waited for a moment, then added, "I was doing that job before I had my hospital."

"But what did you do?" asked one of the Twins.

They didn't know. A glance told her as much, and Sitta enjoyed the suspense, allowing herself a malicious smile before saying, "We used all kinds of parasites in the war. Tailored ones. Some burrow into fetuses, using them as raw material for whatever purpose the allies could dream up."

No one blinked.

"The parasites are good at hiding. Genetically camouflaged, in essence. The jurist's job is to administer better tests after the birth, and if there's any problem, she has to kill the baby."

There was a soft, profound gasp.

"Jurists are armed," she continued, glancing at Bosson and realizing that even he was impressed. "Some parasites can remake the newborn, giving it claws and coordination."

The Mercurian showed a serene pleasure. "Ever see such a monster?"

"Several times," said the retired Plowsharer. "But most of the babies, the infected ones, just sit up and cough, then look at you. The worms are in their brains, in their motor and speech centers. 'Give up,' they say, 'You can't win,' they say. 'You can't fight us. Surrender.'"

She waited for an instant.

Then she added, "They usually can't say, 'Surrender.' It's too long, too complicated for their mouths. And besides, by then they're being swung against a table or a wall. By the legs. Like this. If you do it right, they're dead with one good blow." And now she was weeping, telling Icenice, "Give me one of your old dolls. I'll show you just how I did it."

10

Sitta expected to leave after her mandatory three years of service. To that end, she fashioned a calendar and counted the days, maintaining that ritual until early in her third year, sometime after the long-promised hospital arrived.

Expectations climbed with the new facility. At first, Sitta thought it was the city's expectations that made her work endless hours, patching wounds when the autodocs couldn't keep up, curing nameless diseases with old, legal medicines, and tinkering with software never before field tested. Then in her last month, in sight of freedom, it occurred to her that the Terrans were happy for any help, even ineffectual help, and if all she did was sit in the hospital's cramped office, making shit and keeping the power on, nobody would have complained, and nobody would have thought any less of her.

She applied for a second term on the stipulation that she could remain at her current post. This set off alarms in the provisional capital. Fearing insanity or some involvement in illegal operations, the government sent a representative from Athens. The Martian, a tiny and exhausted woman, made no secret of her suspicions. She inspected the hospital several times, hunting for biosynthetic equipment, then for any medicines too new to be legal. Most apparent was her hatred for Farsiders. "When I was a girl," she reported, "I heard about you people. I heard what you did to us, to all your 'allies' ... and just because of profit...!"

Sitta remained silent, passive. She knew better than to risk an argument.

"I don't know who I hate worse," said the woman. "Terran rats, or Farside leeches."

In the calmest of voices, Sitta asked, "Will you let this leech stay with her rats? Please?"

It was allowed, and the Plowsharers were so pleased that they sent promises of two more hospitals that never materialized. It was Sitta who purchased and imported whatever new medical equipment she could find, most of it legal. The next three years passed in a blink. She slept three hours on a good night, and she managed to lift lifespans in the city to an average of thirteen and half years. With her next reapplication, she asked Athens for permission to remain indefinitely. They sent a new Martian with the same reliable hatreds, but he found reasons to enjoy her circumstances. "Isn't it ironic?" he asked, laughing aloud. "Here you are, waging war against the monsters that your own parents developed. The monsters that made you rich in the first place. And according to import logs, you've been using that wealth to help the victims. Ironies wrapped in ironies, aren't they?"

She agreed, pretending that she'd never noticed any of it before.

"Stay as long as you want," the government man told her. "This looks like the perfect place for you."

Remaining on the earth, by her own choice, might be confused for forgiveness. It wasn't. It was just that the dimensions of her hatreds had become larger, more worldly. Instead of being betrayed by friends and wrongfully punished, Sitta had begun to think of herself as fortunate. Almost blessed. She felt wise and moral, at least in certain dangerous realms. Who else from Farside held pace with her accomplishments? No one she could imagine, a kind of pride making her smile, in private.

Free of Farside, Sitta heard every awful story about her homeland. Every Martian and Mercurian seemed to relish telling about the bombardment of Nearside, in those first horrible days, and how convoys of refugees had reached the border, only to be turned away. In those remote times, Farside was a collection of mining camps and telescopes, and there wasn't room for everyone. Only the wealthiest could immigrate. That was Sitta's family story. Every official she came across seemed to have lost some part of his or her family. On Nearside. Or Mars. Or Ganymede. Even on Triton. And why? Because Sitta's repulsive ancestors needed to build mansions and jungles for themselves. "We don't have room," Farsiders would complain. And who dared argue the point? During the war, which world could risk offending Farside, losing its portion of the weapons and other essentials?

None took the risk; yet none would forget.

The naive, superficial girl who had murdered a helpless beetle was gone. The hardened woman in her stead felt an outrage and a burning, potent taste for anything that smacked of justice. Yet never, even in passing, did she think of vengeance. It never occurred to her that she would escape the battered plain. Some accident, some mutated bug, would destroy her, given time and the proper circumstances.

Then came an opportunity, a miraculous one, in the form of a woman traveling alone. Eight months into a pregnancy that was too perfect, if anything, she was discovered by a local health office and brought to the hospital for a mandatory examination. Sitta had help from her own fancy equipment, plus the boy who had once happily collected her morning stool. He was her protege. He happened to find the telltale cell in the fetus. In a soft, astonished voice, he said, "God, we're lucky to have caught it. Just imagine that this one got free...!"

She heard nothing else that he said, nor the long silence afterward. Then Thomas touched her arm -- they were lovers by then -- and in a voice that couldn't have been more calm, Sitta told him, "It's time, I think. I think I need to go home."

Dinner was meat wrapped in luxurious vegetables and meat meant to stand alone, proud and spicy, and there were wines and chilled water from the Central Sea and milk too sweet to be more than sipped, plus great platters full of cakes and frosted biscuits and sour candies and crimson puddings. A hundred people could have eaten their fill at the long table, but as it turned out, no one except Bosson had an appetite. Partially dismantled carcasses were carried away by the kitchen's robots; goblets were drained just once in an hour's time. Perhaps it was related to the stories Sitta told at dinner. Perhaps her friends were a little perturbed by the recipes involving rats and spiders and other treasured vermin. For dessert, she described the incident with Thomas and her bodily wastes, adding that they'd become lovers when he was a well-worn fourteen. Only Bosson seemed appreciative of her tales, if only for their portrait of misery; and Sitta discovered a grudging half-fondness for the man, both of them outsiders, both educated in certain hard and uncompromising matters. Looking only at Bosson, Sitta explained how Thomas had carelessly inhaled a forty-year-old weapon, its robotic exterior cutting through an artery, allowing its explosive core to circumnavigate his body perhaps a hundred times before it detonated, liquifying his brain.

She began the story with a flat, matter-of-fact voice. It cracked once when Thomas collapsed, then again when she described -- in precise, professional detail -- how she had personally harvested the organs worth taking. The boy's skin was too old and weathered to make quality leather; it was left in place. Then the body was dropped into the day's grave, sixteen others beneath it, Sitta given the honor of the final words and the ceremonial first gout of splintered rock and sand.

She was weeping at the end of the story. She wasn't loud or undignified, and her grief had a manageable, endurable quality about it. Like any Terran, she knew that outliving your lover was the consequence of living too long. It was something to expect and endure. Yet even as she dried her face, she noticed the devastation and anger on the other faces. Save Bosson's. She had ruined the last pretense of a good time for them, and with that she thought: *_Good. Perfect!_*

But her dear friends remained at the table. No one slunk away. Not even the strangers invented excuses or appointments, begging to escape. Instead, Varner decided to take control to the best of his ability, coughing into a trembling fist, then whispering, "So." Another cough. "So," he began, "now that you're back, and safe ... any ideas...?"

What did he mean?

Reading the question on Sitta's face, he said, "I was thinking. We all were, actually ... thinking of asking if you'd like to come in with us ... in making an investment, or two..."

Sitta sat back, hearing the delicious creaking of old wood. With a careful, unmeasurable voice, she said, "What kind of investment?"

Pony blurted, "There are fortunes to be made."

"If you have capital," said a stranger, shooing away a begging monkey.

Another stranger muttered something about courage, though the word he used was "balls."

Varner quieted them with a look, a gesture. Then he stared at Sitta, attempting charm but falling miserably short. "It's just ... as it happens, just now ... we have a possibility, love -- "

"A dream opportunity," someone interrupted.

Sitta said, "It must be," and hesitated. Then she added, "Considering all the trouble that you've gone through, it must seem like a wondrous possibility."

Blank, uncertain faces.

Then Varner said, "I know this is fast. I know, and we aren't happy about that. We'd love to give you time to rest, to unwind ... but it's such a tremendous undertaking -- "

"Quick profits!" barked a Twin.

" -- and you know, just now, listening to your stories ... it occurred to me that you could put your profits back into that city where you were living, or back into the Plowsharers in general -- "

"Hey, that's a great idea!" said another stranger.

"A fucking waste," Bosson grumbled.

"You could do all sorts of good," Varner promised, visibly pleased with his inspiration. "You could buy medicines. You could buy machinery. You could put a thousand robots down there -- "

"Robots are illegal," said Bosson. "Too easy to misuse."

"Then hire people. Workers. Anyone you need!" Varner almost rose to his feet, eyes pleading with her. "What do you think, Sitta? You're back, but that doesn't mean you can't keep helping your friends."

"Yeah," said Pony, "what do you think?"

Sitta waited for an age, or an instant. Then, with a calm slow voice, she asked, "Exactly how much do you need?"

Varner swallowed, hesitated.

One of the Twins blurted an amount, then added, "Per share. This new corporation is going to sell shares. In just a few weeks."

"You came at the perfect time," said his brother, fingers tapping on the tabletop.

A stranger called out, "And there's more!"

Varner nodded, then admitted, "The deal is still sweeter. If you could loan us enough to purchase some of our own shares, then we will pay it back to you. How does twice the normal interest sound?"

Bosson whispered, "Idiotic."

Icenice was bending at the waist, gasping for breath.

"You can make enough to help millions." Varner offered a watery smile. "And we can make it possible for you."

Sitta crossed her legs, then asked, "What does a share buy?"

Silence.

"What does this corporation do?" she persisted.

Pony said, "They've got a wonderful scheme."

"They want to build big new lasers," said a Twin. "Similar to the old weapons, only safe."

Safe? Safe how?

"We'll build them at the earth's Lagrange points," Varner explained. "Enormous solar arrays will feed the lasers, millions of square kilometers absorbing sunlight -- "

"Artificial suns," someone blurted.

"-- and we'll be able to warm every cold world. For a substantial fee, of course." Varner grinned, his joy boyish. Fragile. "Those old war technologies, and our factories, can be put to good use."

"At last!" shouted the Twins, in one voice.

Bosson began to laugh, and Icenice, sitting opposite her husband, seemed to be willing herself to vanish.

"Whose scheme is this?" Sitta asked Varner. "Yours?"

"I wish it was," he responded.

"But Farsiders are in command," said Pony, fists lifted as if in victory. "All the big old families are pooling their resources, but since this project is so vast and complicated -- "

"Too vast and complicated," Bosson interrupted.

Sitta looked at Icenice. "How about you, darling? How many shares have you purchased?"

The pretty face dropped, eyes fixed on the table's edge.

"Let's just say," her husband replied, "that their most generous offer has been rejected by this household. Isn't that what happened, love?"

Icenice gave a tiny, almost invisible nod.

Pony glared at both of them, then asked Sitta, "Are you interested?"

"Give her time," Varner snapped. Then he turned to Sitta, making certain that she noticed his smile. "Think it through, darling. Please just do that much for us, will you?"

What sane world would allow another world to build it a sun? she wondered. And after the long war, who could trust anyone with such enormous powers? Maybe there were safeguards and political guarantees, the full proposal rich with logic and vision. But those questions stood behind one great question. Clearing her throat, Sitta looked at the hopeful faces, then asked, "Just why do you need my money?"

No one spoke; the room was silent.

And Sitta knew why, in an instant, everything left transparent. Simple. They wanted her money because they had none, and they were desperate enough to risk whatever shred of pride they had kept from the old days. How had they become poor? What happened to the old estates and the bottomless bank accounts? Sitta was curious, and she knew she could torture them with her questions; yet suddenly, without warning, she had no taste for that kind of vengeance. The joy was gone. Before even one weak excuse could be made, by Varner or anyone, she said with a calm and slow, almost gentle voice, "Because my money has been spent."

A chill gripped her audience.

"I used it to help my hospital. Some of the equipment was illegal, and that means bribes." A pause. "I couldn't buy ten shares for just me. I'm afraid that you've wasted your time, friends."

The faces were past misery. All the careful hopes and earnest plans had evaporated, no salvation waiting, the audience too exhausted to move, too unsure of itself to speak.

Finally, with a mixture of rage and agony, one of the strangers climbed to her feet, saying, "Thank you for the miserable dinner, Icenice."

She and the other strangers escaped from the room and house.

Then the Twins spun a lie about a party, leaving and taking Vechel with them. Had Vechel spoken a single word today? Sitta couldn't remember. She looked at Pony, and Pony asked, "Why did you come home?"

For an instant, Sitta didn't know why.

"You hate us." the girl observed. "It's obvious how much you hate this place. Don't deny it!"

How could she?

"Fucking bitch...!"

Then Pony was gone. There was no other guest but Varner, and he sat with his eyes fixed on his unfinished meal, his face pale and somehow indifferent. It was as if he still didn't understand what had happened. Finally, Icenice rose and went to Varner, taking him in her arms and whispering something, the words or her touch giving him reason to stand. From where she sat, Sitta could watch the two of them walk out on the stone porch. She kept hugging him, always whispering, then wished him good-bye, waiting for him to move out of her sight. Bosson watched his wife, his face remote. Unreadable. Then Icenice returned, sitting in the most distant chair, staring at some concoction of mints and cultured meat that had never been touched --

-- and Bosson, with a shrill voice, remarked, "I warned you. I told you and your friends that she'd never be interested." A pause, a grin. "What did I tell you? Repeat it for me."

Icenice stood and took the platter of meat in both hands, flinging it at her husband.

Bosson was nothing but calm, confidently measuring the arc and knowing it would fall short. But the sculpted meat shattered, a greasy white sauce in its center, still hot and splattering like shrapnel. It struck Bosson's clothes and arms and face. He gave a flinch. Nothing more. Then, not bothering to wipe himself clean, he turned to Sitta, and with a voice that made robots sound emotional, said:

"Be the good guest. Run off to your room. Now. Please."

12

Thomas' death was tragic, yet perfect.

Nobody else knew what Sitta was carrying. The original mother thought her baby had come early and died. The hospital's AI functions had been taken off-line, leaving them innocent. No one but Thomas could have betrayed her, and it was his horrible luck to inhale a killing mote of dust. By accident?

Sometimes she asked herself if it was that simple. Toward the end, the boy would wonder aloud if this was what Sitta truly wanted, and if it was right. Maybe he became careless by distraction, or maybe it was so that he couldn't act on his doubts. Or maybe it was just what it had seemed to be at first glance. An accident. A brutal little residue of the endless war, and why couldn't she just accept it?

Constructed in the final years of official fighting, the parasite within her was a particularly wicked ensemble. Designed to be invisible to Terran jurists and their instruments, it carried its true self within just one in a million cells. But in the time between her first labor pains and the delivery, each of those cells would explode, invading their neighbors, implanting genetics in a transformation that would leave no outward sign of change, much less danger.

The monster would be born pale and irresistible. Perhaps the finest baby ever seen, people would think, wrapping it in a blanket and holding it close to their breasts.

That appearance was a fiction. Beneath the baby fat was a biosynthetic factory that would absorb and transmute every kind of microbe. Mothers and jurists would sicken in a few hours, their own native flora turned against them. No immune system could cope with such a thorough, coordinated assault. A village or city could be annihilated in a day, and with ample stocks of rotting, liquified meat, the monster would nurse, growing at an impossible pace, becoming for all intents and purposes a three-year-old girl, mobile enough to wander, mute and big-eyed and lovely.

It was a weapon made in many labs, including her parents'. That was no huge coincidence; Sitta had seen many examples of their work. But it helped her resolve. If justice was a simple matter of balance, then both were being achieved.

It was a weapon rarely used and never discussed publicly. As far as Sitta could determine, no medical authority had seen it in the last fifteen years, although several isolated villages had died in mysterious, unnamed epidemics, one of them within a thousand kilometers of her city. What would Farside do with such a monster? she asked herself. Its people had little experience with real disease, and if anything, the moon was a richer target for this kind of horror. Where the earth had few species and tiny populations, Farside had diversity and multitudes. Each beetle and orchid and monkey had its own family of microbes. A thousand parallel plagues would cause an ecological collapse, the domed air left poisoned, the Central Sea struck dead. Here was an ultimate, apocalyptic revenge, and sometimes Sitta was astonished by her hatreds, by the depth of her feelings and the cold calculating passion she brought to this work.

Sometimes doubts made her awaken in the middle of the night, in a sweat. Then her habit was to walk under the seamless black sky, taking the wide road to the cemetery, reading the simple tombstones with her lamp, noting the dates and trying to recall who was below her feet. The earth itself was entombed in a grave, alone, and the heated air made Sitta think of ten billion bodies, and more, rotting in the useless ground. How could she feel weakness? she asked herself. By what right?

Given such a mandate, she had no choice but to continue, turning back with a resolve, feeling her way down to the city and along its narrow streets. That's what she did on her last night in the city, the shuttle for Athens scheduled for the morning. Her bag was packed. She was wearing her travel clothes. Approaching her bunker-like home, lost in thought, Sitta didn't notice the children at work. She was almost past them when some sound, some little voice, caught her attention, making her turn and lift her lamp's beam, dozens of faces caught in mid-smile. What were these girls and boys doing here? She muttered, "You should be sleeping." Then she hesitated, lifting the beam higher still, every bunker festooned with long dirty ribbons and colored ropes and stiff old flags. "What is this?" she whispered, speaking to herself. "Why...?"

Then she knew. An instant before her audience broke into song and a ragged cheer, she realized this was

for her, all of it, and they hadn't expected her so soon. These were people unaccustomed to celebrations, who had few holidays, if any; and suddenly Sitta felt her legs tremble, then give way beneath her, knees into the foot-packed earth and her eyes blind with tears. Hundreds of children poured into the street, parents at their heels. Everyone was singing, no one competent and everyone loud, and what surprised Sitta more than anything was the realization -- abrupt; amazing -- that these were genuinely happy people.

In the hospital, she saw them wounded or ill, or dead. Those were the people she understood best.

Yet here she saw people more healthy than hurt, and more grateful than she could believe, everyone touching her, every hand on her swollen belly, every joyous shout giving her another dose of luck, the burden of all this luck and gratitude making it impossible for her to stand, much less turn and run for home.

13

Obedying Bosson, not caring what happened, Sitta climbed halfway up the staircase before she paused, standing beside sunlight, turning when she heard a whimper or moan. Was it Icenice? No, it was one of the begging monkeys. She looked past it, waiting for a long moment, telling herself that regardless of what she heard, she would do nothing. This wasn't her home, nor her world -- she was here to destroy all of them -- and then she was walking, watching her shoes on the long steps, aware in a distant, dreamy way that she was walking downhill, reentering the dining room just as Bosson finished binding his wife's hands to one of the table's legs.

The Mercurian didn't notice his audience. With smooth, practiced deliberation, he lifted Icenice's gown over her hips and head, the girl, motionless as stone, her naked back and rump shining in the reflected light. Then Bosson stood over the table, selecting tools. He decided on a spoon and a blunt knife. Then he moved behind the thin rump, wiping his face clean with a sleeve, coughing once, and placing the blade against the pucker of her rectum.

He was twenty years her senior and accustomed to the moon's gentle gravity, and he was taken by surprise. Sitta struck him on the side of the head, turning him, then struck his belly and kicked him twice, aiming for his testicles, earth-trained muscles making Bosson grunt, then collapse onto an elegant floor of colored tiles and pink mortar...

"Get up," she advised.

He tried to find his balance, halfway standing, Sitta driving her foot hard into his chin.

Again she said, "Get up."

"Sitta?" whispered Icenice.

Bosson grunted, rose.

She drew blood this time. A cheekbone shattered beneath her heel. Then the man lay still, hands limp around his bloody head, and Sitta screamed, "What's the matter with you? Can't you even stand up, you fuck?"

With the weakest of voices, Icenice asked, "What is happening?"

Sitta pulled the gown back where it belonged, then untied the napkins used to bind her hands. Her

one-time friend looked at Bosson, then with genuine horror said, "You shouldn't have...!"

Knotting the napkins together, Sitta made a crude rope, then knelt and tied the groggy man's hands and feet behind him. When she stood again, she felt weak. Almost faint. When Icenice tried to clean Bosson's wounds, Sitta grabbed her and pulled her toward the stairs, panting as she asked, "Why? Why did you marry it?"

"I was in such debt. You don't know." Icenice swallowed, moaned. "He promised to help me -- "

"How could you lose all that money? Where did it go?"

"Oh," she whimpered, "it seemed to go everywhere, really."

Reasons didn't matter. What mattered was bringing Icenice upstairs, the two of them moving through the shafts of sunlight.

"Everyone had debts," the girl was explaining. "I mean, we didn't know enough about modern business, and the Martians ... they seemed very good at taking our money...!"

Sitta said, "Hurry up."

"Where are we going?"

"Hurry!"

Her bag was where the robot had set it, on the bed, still unopened. She unfastened the latches and threw its contents on the floor, then used a tiny cosmetic blade to cut into the thick bottom layers. What wouldn't appear in any scan were half a dozen lozenges of leather, their pores filled with hormones and odd chemicals that nobody would consider illegal. She had made them in her hospital. Hesitating for an instant, she looked at Icenice and tried to decide the best way to do this thing.

"Varner wanted your money," said the girl.

"Come on. Into the bath."

"Why?"

"Now! Hurry!" She was scared that someone was watching them. She thought of the Belter with the dogs, wondering if she had shadowed them all this way. Stripping as she walked, Sitta ended up naked, wading into the clear warm water, down to her chest before looking up at Icenice. "You have to climb in with me. Do it."

The girl asked, "Why?"

Sitta made the lozenges when she couldn't sleep one night. What if she found herself giving birth in the wrong place? The possibility had awakened her with a shudder. What if she found herself trapped on the earth, whatever the reason, and this monster of hers was threatening the people whom she loved most?

How could she protect the innocent ones?

"I don't understand," The girl was weeping, quietly devastated by the day's events. "Why are you taking a bath now?"

One by one, Sitta swallowed the lozenges, gulping bathwater to help get each of them down.

"Sitta?"

The whole process would take half an hour, maybe less. In minutes, the first of the drugs would cross into the fetus, crippling its genetic machinery -- she hoped -- giving her long enough to let the miscarriage run its course. The danger was that she would lose consciousness. The horror of horrors was that the monster would live long enough to outlast the anti-genetics, then somehow climb to the air and out of the bath, premature but coping regardless, its transformation happening despite her desperate best wishes. That would be the ironic, horrible end --

"Sitta?"

-- and Sitta looked up at Icenice, then said, "In. Climb in."

The girl obeyed, still wearing her gown, the black fabrics blacker when soaked, billowing up around her waist, then covering her breasts.

"You're my jurist," said Sitta, looking straight into Icenice's eyes. "When it comes, drown it. Don't let it take a breath."

"What do you mean -- ?"

"Promise me!"

"Oh, my." Icenice straightened, as if stabbed by a needle.

"Promise?"

"I can try," she squeaked.

"You have to do it, darling. Or the world dies."

The words were believed. Sitta could see their impact and their slow digestion, the girl becoming thoughtful, alert. A minute passed. Several minutes passed. Then Icenice attempted a weak little smile, telling her friend, "I've never wanted your money."

A single red pain began in Sitta's pelvis, racing up her spine.

"And I've always wanted to tell you," the girl went on. "When you were sentenced, and only you would be going to the earth, I knew that was best for everyone, really."

Wincing, Sitta asked, "Why?"

"Nobody else could have survived. Not for three years!"

"And I was safe?"

"You did survive," Icenice responded, then again tried her smile. "You always had a toughness, a strength, that I've wanted. Even back when we were little girls."

Pain came twice, _boom_ and _boom_.

"I'm not strong," Icenice said with conviction.

When was I strong? thought Sitta. What did the girl see in me?

Then more pain. _BOOM_

And when it passed, she grabbed the ruined gown, pulling her friend in close to her, wrapping arms around her, and whispering with her most certain voice, "When the time comes, I'll kill it myself."

"Because I don't think I could," Icenice whimpered.

"But can you stay?"

"Here? With you?"

Sitta winced, then pleaded, "Don't leave me!"

"I won't. I promise."

Then pains began in earnest, and every pain before them, reaching back through Sitta's entire life, were just careful preparation for the scorching white miseries inside her, trying to escape.