

## The Bee's Kiss

by Charles Sheffield

>>\_The moth's kiss, first.\_

\_Kiss me as if you made believe\_

\_You were not sure, this eve,\_

\_How my face, your flower, had pursed\_

\_Its petals up; so, here and there\_

\_You brush it, till I grow aware\_

\_Who wants me, and wide ope I burst.\_<<

\* \* \* \*

"Your guilt is not in question. Nor, given the outrage of your offense against the Mentor, is your punishment. Yet the past few days have provided anomalies for which a curious mind still asks an explanation. Will you tell?"

The room where Gilden sat was huge, low-ceilinged, dim-lit and smoky. The face of the Teller seemed to float on the dead air in front of him, pale and thoughtful, and the questioning voice, as always, was gentle and reasonable.

Gilden shook his head the fraction of an inch that the metal brace permitted. \_The past few days\_. He grasped that phrase and kept his mind focused on it. He could have been sitting in this chair for months or years, drifting in and out of consciousness as the drugs ebbed and surged within his body. But here was a data point.

Or was the Teller lying, for her own inquisitorial purposes? Perhaps it had been a year, five years, ten years since the arrest. Perhaps his location had been changed a score of times. Perhaps, even, he was no longer on Earth, but transported to one of the Linkworlds within the Mentor's domain.

"You are a clever man." The Teller, patient to infinity, had waited a full two minutes before speaking again. "You think, so long as you have information of value to the Mentor, or interesting to me, so long will your punishment be delayed. But that is a false conclusion. Permit me to demonstrate."

Gilden's forearms were clamped to the arms of the chair. The Teller leaned forward and pressed a blunt cylinder to the upward-facing palm of Gilden's right hand. The flat disk at its end glowed white-hot. Flesh sizzled and sputtered, black smoke swirled. The stench of charring flesh filled the room.

Gilden screamed and writhed. The pain was unendurable, beyond description or comprehension. Somehow he remained conscious as the disk burned through to the bare bones of his hand. Then, at last, the Teller lifted the cylinder.

"One taste of torment. But observe." She nodded, to where Gilden's palm was renewing itself. New flesh pooled eerily into the blackened cavity, new skin crept in to cover it. "We are of course in derived reality. Your body is unmarked. But before you take comfort from that, let me point out the implications. Your condign punishment can continue -- and will continue -- for many, many years, at the level of pain that you experienced for only a few moments. For although your specific offense is unprecedented, the nature

of your punishment is not. Do you recall the name of Ruth el Fiori Skandell, Bloody Ruth, who sabotaged one of the Mentor's aircars and thereby assassinated two of his lesser sons?"

Gilden grunted, deep in his throat. The Teller took it as a sign of assent, and went on.

"Skandell holds a melancholy record within the Linkworlds. After her sentencing she lived on for sixty-three years, enduring at every moment an agony at least as bad as yours. Virtual punishment is no boon, when pain exceeds reality. Someday, some unfortunate will break Skandell's record. It could be you, Arrin Gilden. Behold, one more time, the re-enactment of your crime."

The room darkened further. The Teller's pallid face vanished. Only her persistent voice remained, moving closer to whisper intimately into Gilden's ear.

"\_When\_, I know already. \_How\_, you have been wise enough to describe to me. Now I must know \_why\_. Why would the world's leading electronics designer and miniaturist throw away career, bright future, and life itself? What compulsion would lead him to work night and day for a full year, at a level of ingenuity marveled at by all who have studied the process, with a level of risk great enough to intimidate the boldest, to attain such a momentary and apparently trivial gratification? Look again. And tell me \_why\_."

The scene began as the ant-sized voyeur threaded its way toward the Mentor Presumptive's bed-chamber. It crept along pre-computed hair-thin curves, following a path where the monitors' sensing fields did not quite overlap. To learn the position of those curves, Gilden had thwarted a dozen elaborate and ingenious computer security systems. (And now he was not alone in paying for his skill. Twenty guards, if the Teller could be believed, had been sentenced to a lifetime of labor in the ice-world quarries of Decantil, for their failure to detect the voyeur as it insinuated itself into the Mentor Presumptive's sanctum.)

The Presumptive's new bride had been drugged during surgery and the elaborate preparations that followed, but before leading her into the bed-chamber the physicians had followed instructions. All drugs and sedatives were sluiced from her body. She lay now, dark-skinned, naked, and slightly trembling, on a great circular bed sheeted with blue satin. The Presumptive stood by the bedside. He was humming softly to himself as he removed a belted robe of dark crimson. Beneath it he was naked. The sensors of the voyeur zoomed to take in the Presumptive's facial expression as he moved rampant onto the bed and gripped the woman's quivering thighs. There was a long moment, a pause for savoring and anticipation. At the moment of entry the voyeur expanded its field of view to include the woman's face.

This time the surgeons had done a good job. The afferent nerves linking sex organs and hindbrain had been channeled and enhanced, but not too much. The bride's ecstasy during love-making took her close to the point of death, but after the Mentor Presumptive's climax she was still alive.

The display changed, turning to show continuing muscle spasms in the bride's inner thighs. The view moved slowly up her body, to pause at a slack-lipped mouth and at eyes where only a sliver of iris showed between whites and upper lids. At last the display moved again, halting at the Presumptive's flaring nostrils and full lips.

"You and I have watched this many, many times." The calm voice of the Teller cut into the recorded sound of the Mentor's heavy breathing. "Your resting pulse rate is fifty-seven beats a minute. Your current pulse rate is one hundred and sixteen. Would you like to tell me why?"

"I explained."

"You explained indeed. In response to my stimuli you explained too much. First it was your stated

intention to sell copies of this, the recording of a most secret and sacred element of the Mentor Presumptive's life. But while you have dozens of other illegal recordings in your quarters, there is no evidence that you have ever attempted to sell any one of them -- or indeed that you would know how to undertake this or any other illegal enterprise. I reject that explanation. Next you explain that you intended to use the recording to blackmail the Mentor Presumptive, or even the Mentor himself. A preposterous suggestion indeed, since the first hint that such a recording had been made would lead to your arrest and death -- as indeed it did and will. You then explained to me that you considered this a final test of technique for your new sensor. If it could penetrate this innermost and highly-protected sanctum, it could penetrate anywhere. True, perhaps, but a dangerous notion indeed for anyone who wishes to live. The Empyrium must be able to keep its secrets.

"So I am forced to my own conclusion. You have explained, Prisoner Gilden, and explained again and again. But you have not told. Tell me now. Why did you do this, and throw away a life most valuable to the Mentor?"

Arrin Gilden stared into darkness. He moved his weary head forward to rest it against the cool metal of the brace.

"Could we have some light?"

"I see no reason why not."

As the room brightened the Teller's face slowly appeared a few feet from Gilden's chair. If this was derived reality, the illusion was perfect. Gilden recognized a dreadful irony. The technology that would doom him to an endless lifetime of torture was the twin of the one that had caught him. No one in the Mentor's entourage had discovered his tiny voyeur device, or even dreamed of its existence. It was Gilden himself, unable to leave the looped reality offered by the voyeur, who had been discovered. And even that might not have been fatal. Many people suffered from illusion lock. But the equipment in Gilden's apartment had also been running its external display. Everyone on Earth knew the face of the Mentor Presumptive.

"You have asked me many questions." Gilden tried for the hundredth time to fathom the unreadable, the expression on the Teller's face.

"That is my function."

"I would like to ask you one."

"That is your privilege."

"Why are you a Teller? You seem a sincere woman, and a friendly one. Why do you pursue a profession that forces you to inflict torture and death?"

The silence in the room lasted less than a second for Gilden. He knew that for the Teller, with total control over her time rate and his, the interval might be minutes or hours -- long enough to consider the answer in detail, and match it to the Telling process.

She was shaking her head. "I have no answer to that question. I do what I do."

"And I did what I did. I cannot explain, but I can tell." Arrin Gilden's eyes fixed on the Teller as he tried to see within himself. "I do not know why. I know that I had no choice. I could not help myself. I was compelled to observe, to find a way to observe. I believe I was good at it."

"From everything that I have been able to discover, you are the best. Certainly the best in the records of

the Empyrium." The lights brightened and yellowed. The chair with its wrist and ankle cuffs became a soft couch. The brace at Gilden's head vanished.

"Real reality." The Teller's voice dropped half an octave. Gilden found himself facing a dark-haired, smooth-faced woman not much older than his own twenty-five years.

"When you stop explaining, and just tell, it makes things so much easier."

"How do you know when I am telling?"

"I cannot force truth. But I can detect lies. Perhaps that is why I am a Teller." She came across to sit next to Gilden on the couch. "And sometimes -- very rarely -- I can offer an alternative to eternal agony. This is such a time. You must leave Earth, and go to Lucidar."

She gazed at him with calm blue eyes. Gilden found himself unable to remember their color as it had been in that other reality.

She smiled. The Teller had even white teeth, a mouth slightly asymmetrical, the left side higher than the right. "I am sure that I am not the first person to suggest that you are a mental cripple, a person who might have been helped in his youth but who is now incorrigible. Your role as voyeur is the most important thing in your life. That is a statement, not a question."

"It is not a statement. It is an understatement." Gilden breathed deep and again looked inward.

"Voyeurism is the only important thing in my life."

"Even so, you should have treatment. But not until your return to Earth -- assuming, of course, that you do return."

"Treatment? Not torment?"

"Perhaps. You will go to Lucidar on official business of the Mentor. If you succeed at that, you will be pardoned upon your return. A man of your outstanding skills, suitably channeled and monitored, has much to offer the Empyrium. If you fail, you will serve your original sentence, strong agony until your final breath. The Mentor offers inducement to succeed."

"I don't understand what I am being asked to do."

"Of course. It has not been explained, and it is not my position to do that. I am merely empowered to make the offer. Let me say only this: it is a difficult task, but one for which I believe you are supremely well suited. From your point of view, events far from Earth have provided a happy accident of timing. Your unique services are required on the rebel world of Lucidar."

"I have no decision to make. It is either leave here for an unknown purpose, or suffer torture until I die."

"Bravo, Gilden! At last you comprehend, and state things exactly. We are agreed then, you are going?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then I have but one more official duty." The Teller reached out. Again she was holding a stubby cylinder with a flat end. When she pressed it against Gilden's upper arm the grooved disk flared white-hot. Gilden roared with pain and jerked away.

"No derived reality this time. Look at that brand often, Gilden, as a reminder for you to do your best. That pain was a pale shadow of what awaits you on your return if you fail. And the next time you will not

be able to pull yourself away."

Gilden rocked to and fro with tears in his eyes. The skin had been seared off his arm in a circle as big as the palm of his hand. His nostrils were full of the stink of burnt flesh and hair. But he had seen the rapturous look on the Teller's face as she pressed that fiery circle into his tender skin.

He knew, even if she did not, why she would never give up her position as Teller.

\* \* \* \*

The Mentor was absolute ruler of Earth. The idea that there were places on the Linkworlds where intelligent beings lived beyond the Mentor's control, that many of those creatures were not human in any way -- it was a revelation to Arrin Gilden. He wondered if this was just another derived reality.

For surely this was not the real world. Surely he would emerge to something more plausible. He was supposed to be in space, but there was no sign of the familiar stars of Earth. Instead a bubbling lava, dull-red and chaotic and flecked with orange sparks, stood outside every port of the sealed ship. A faint churning and trembling inside Gilden matched the seething exterior. Two more days of flight through this fiery maelstrom of non-space, and according to his shipboard companions they would emerge in the Lucidar system. He would meet the representatives of the alien Sigil. And his work would begin.

Or was it all a dream? The woman across the table from him, the only female on the ship, seemed absolutely real and solid. But was she? Or was he still in the interrogation chamber, awaiting the Teller's next question?

Derli Margrave was fair-haired, small-boned, and delicately built. Her eyes seemed too pale and piercing for an Earth native. She sought Gilden's company, as much as her partner (husband? mate? brother?) Valmar Krieg seemed to avoid it. The first few meetings with her had made Gilden profoundly uneasy. His adult intimate encounters with women had numbered in the hundreds but they had been one-sided. A voyeur was not required to endure scrutiny as well as observing, to make conversation as well as listening. A voyeur did not have to worry about his own appearance, about the impression that he was making on another.

By his fifth meeting with Derli, his feelings had changed. She was deliberately seeking his company. Her appearance at his side whenever he happened to enter the communal recreation area was too unfailing to be an accident. But when she was with him she made no demands. If he gave any hint that he did not choose to talk, she remained quiet. If he wanted to speak, she listened to his every word. She groomed her hair and face in his presence unselfconsciously, aware of but not displeased by his close attention. And she did not, like the women of his childhood and youth, dismiss, dominate, scorn, or command him. The one tender incident of infancy, when as he watched unnoticed a woman had given birth and held the tiny baby to her naked breast, was more dream than memory. But that woman had been like Derli, small, fair, and gentle.

She was talking now, answering his questions at the same time as she braided her long amber hair.

"You think you don't know much about the Sigil, but actually you know almost as much as anyone. Their exploration ship appeared in orbit around Lucidar only two months ago, and they landed a few days later. Just two of them. That's apparently the way they prefer to travel. The world of the Sigil, wherever it is, seems to be far off toward the center of the Galaxy. This couple are way outside the usual Sigil territory."

"Then why are we so interested in them?"

Derli paused, peering quizzically into the mirror at Gilden past a thick twisted lock of fair hair. "Define 'we.' I am a biologist, naturally I'd like to know the Sigil physiology -- something that so far has been completely denied to us. They keep to themselves, stay in their ship most of the time, avoid all direct physical contact."

"What about Valmar? Is he a biologist, too?"

"He is, but that's not why he's here. Lucidar is a rebel world, close to breaking point with Earth. Valmar is one of the Mentor's most trusted advisors. The Mentor wants to know if there is anything else going on with the Sigil -- are they what they claim to be, simple explorers? Or are they something else, part of a subversion that the Mentor needs to worry about? Valmar is convinced that they are hiding something."

"From what you say they seem to be hiding everything."

Derli was applying a smooth coat of cream to an area below her right cheekbone. Gilden noticed a slight discoloration.

"It's nothing." Somehow she still had one eye on him. "It will be gone in a day or two. You're right, though, the Sigil do seem to hide everything now. They were not like that when they first made contact. But that's where you come in. It should be a real challenge."

"They never leave their ship?"

"Briefly, for special occasions. But they have to wear suits. No one has been able to obtain a tissue sample -- not even a flake of skin. And naturally their ship remains totally sealed all the time, to hold its atmosphere." She inspected herself in the all-around mirror, then to Gilden's disappointment stood up. "I have to go. Valmar will be waiting for me."

Gilden stood up too, on the brink of a question: Is Valmar Krieg your husband, or your lover? He did not ask it, but waited until she was gone and the last trace of the perfume that she wore had been sucked away by the room's air purifiers.

Then he went to his own quarters. Most of his specialized voyeur equipment was stowed away, inaccessible until the arrival on Lucidar. But what he carried with him in his personal luggage should suffice for such a simple job.

Gilden told himself that it was necessary work. In another two days his skills would be taxed to their limit. He could not afford to be out of practice.

\* \* \* \*

Valmar Krieg was long-limbed and powerful, with a jutting red beard and golden-red hair over his whole body. He proved to be aggressively sexual, a brutal stallion of a lover who obviously hurt Derli and took no notice of her discomfort. She endured the violence of his passion without a murmur. When he was finished she stroked his body, fondling him and holding him in her arms, seemingly taking her own pleasure from his sated stillness. Only after he was asleep and quietly snoring did she ease away from him to examine the bruises on her neck, arms, and tender thighs.

Gilden watched everything in total absorption. And misery. For the first time in his life he had observed a sexual encounter in which he knew and liked the woman. It changed everything. He had experienced no vicarious thrill. Instead he had shared the pain felt by Derli. His only pleasure had come in observing her afterwards, when she explored and tended to herself. And then it had been an impossible transference, Gilden's virginal self becoming explorer and gentle nurse of Derli's abused body.

He felt that he could not bear to meet her again, nor to act as voyeur for her lovemaking. But the urge to do so grew on him steadily for the next day and a half. He was almost relieved when it was Valmar Krieg rather than Derli who sought him out.

"Been enjoying yourself?" Krieg's self-confidence matched his physical presence. He sat down at the table opposite Gilden. "Come on, man, don't act innocent. You've been watching Derli and me."

Denial was the immediate reaction. But it was over-ridden by another concern.

"How did you detect the presence of the voyeur? No one else has ever managed to do that."

"Relax. I didn't. One of my jobs is to keep an eye on you. I reviewed all your records back on Earth, and I've seen you ogling Derli. You have no work to do until we get to Lucidar. Put all those together, you had to be watching us. I don't mind."

"Derli -- "

"Doesn't know. And doesn't care right now. She's sick." Krieg laughed at Gilden's expression. "Oh, nothing to get excited about. Space doesn't agree with her, makes her want to throw up. But I didn't come here to talk about her. I came to talk about you."

"You saw my records. You know all about me."

"I do. But I don't think you do. I don't think you understand what you are."

"You think my records are wrong?"

"Not at all." Valmar Krieg leaned back and hooked his hands over one knee. "The records are fine. But everyone has missed their significance. Did you know that your pulse went from below sixty to way over a hundred when you invaded the Mentor Presumptive's bed-chamber?"

"The Teller informed me of that."

"Ah, but did she mention that the peak value, one hundred and thirty-eight, was attained before the voyeur was in position? By the time you were able to see the Presumptive and his bride, and the actual sex act began, your pulse rate was already dropping."

"I did not know that."

"I thought so. And the Teller could not interpret it. But I can." Valmar Krieg laughed again, with the dominant self-confidence that Arrin Gilden could never feel. "You see, man, you're no different from me. You're as big a stud as I am. It's just that you operate in a different area. Show you a protected, forbidden zone, like the Presumptive's bed-chamber, and it has all the challenge of a reluctant virgin. You can't rest until you've eased your way in past the barriers, broken down all her defenses, and she lies wide open and helpless before you. That's the exciting part. It's the penetration of defenses that gives you your kicks -- not when she says yes, and the screwing starts."

Krieg stood up. "And you know what? You've got the time of your life waiting for you on Lucidar. Because according to what I'm hearing, the Sigil ship is hermetically sealed and totally impenetrable. The ultimate virgin." He slapped Gilden on the shoulder. "Rest up, swordsman, and conserve your testosterone. You're going to need it in another couple of days."

\* \* \* \*

Derli had been wrong. Gilden's first meeting with the humans on Lucidar convinced him of that. They knew far more about the Sigil than anyone from Earth, and they had their own theories.

"Something changed." The man responsible for briefing the new arrivals had an unpronounceable Lucidar name, glottal stops and deep throat consonants spoken through a mouthful of gravel. "Something we told them, or maybe they told us. After the first two weeks we had a translation program that made sense most of the time. So we started to exchange information. We were doing fine, talking physics and linguistics and getting into biology and social structure and philosophy. Then one evening the two of them went off to their ship. Next morning they didn't come out. They've emerged only for short intervals ever since. And they will no longer swap information with us."

Gilden was nodding agreement, but he was having trouble absorbing information. Even without the alien Sigil, Lucidar provided an overload of strangeness. Gravity, sun, air, exotic flora and fauna. People. The gravel-voiced Bravtz'ig -- the nearest that Gilden could come to his name -- was tall and broad enough to have qualified as a giant on Earth, but here he didn't draw a second glance. It was tiny Derli and Gilden himself who would make the Lucidar freakshow.

Alien world, alien thoughts. He stared out of the window of the spaceport tower, to where the Sigil ship was visible as a far-off speck of iridescent green.

To penetrate its shields, of unknown nature and number, without leaving evidence of your presence. To plumb the impermeable hull's deepest secrets...

He forced his attention back to the conversation. Bravtz'ig was still talking. What had he just missed? Derli, sitting at his side, had a recorder. Was it running? He would need to review this meeting later.

She gave him a private smile and a raised eyebrow. She knew! Knew he had been observing her with the voyeurs. He was convinced of it. Valmar must have told her. And she didn't mind. He had a sudden voyeur flashback, a memory of Derli sitting naked and straight-legged on the bed. She was arching her back to reveal delicate pink-nippled breasts, then bending far over to massage overtaxed thigh muscles. Long amber tresses tumbled forward to hide her flat belly and pubic thatch. Had she done that deliberately, knowing he was watching?

Once again he had to fight his way back into the present. What was happening to him? It must be pure travel fatigue. For the past day and a half he had found himself unable to sleep, his head pulsing with thoughts of Valmar Krieg's prophecy about the challenge of the Sigil.

While he had been daydreaming, another of the Lucidar group had produced surround-videos of the Sigil couple, made not long after their original landing. Now their display was beginning.

Any single element of data about the aliens might be the crucial one. Gilden had seen videos of the two Sigil, but these were much more revealing. He studied them closely, knowing as he did so that he would review them again many, many times. The suits worn by the aliens concealed everything but broad general features. He could see that both Sigil were similar in morphology, bipedal and with bilateral symmetry. The legs were attached close to the middle of the forward-curving torso, and not far above them two long arms emerged at right angles to the body. The dark, hairless head formed a broad, forward-pointing cone on a thin neck and ended at the front in a prominent black muzzle.

There were certainly differences between them, but the main surprise was the disparity of sizes. One Sigil towered high over its smaller companion and was at least three times the bulk. Gilden assumed that the huge Sigil must be the female, because of the loving deference and exaggerated care with which it was treated by its diminutive partner. Then he thought of gentle Derli, and Valmar Krieg's indifferent brutality, and wondered if he had things exactly backwards.



"Sexual dimorphism." Derli spoke softly, more to her recorder than to Gilden or anyone else. "A substantial size difference between the sexes. Common among certain arthropods and mammals with harems. However, analogy with existing Terran forms is more likely to be misleading than helpful. The presence of just one of each of the Sigils argues against multiple mates."

Bravtz'ig was speaking again. "The Sigil told us -- when they were still telling us anything -- that a ship always carries one of each. By the way, although they can both apparently talk the big one never does. All we've been told about them comes from the little one."

"What do you mean, when they were telling you anything?" Valmar had seemed half asleep. Now he was alert. "I thought they were still talking? If you have concealed information from the Mentor..."

"Relax, Master Krieg." Bravtz'ig laughed, and his expression was more aggressive than respectful. "We've not concealed a thing. Don't get wrapped around the bureaucracy."

Gilden had another revelation, one that again turned his world upside down. The Mentor was nominal ruler here, but Bravtz'ig clearly had no fear of him. No one on Lucidar was worried about being carried off for arbitrary Teller inquisition and eternal torment. And yet the Teller had seemed absolutely confident that Gilden, whether he succeeded or failed in his task with the Sigil, would return to Earth. How could she be sure?

The answer was obvious: red-bearded Valmar Krieg, trusted advisor to the Mentor, was Gilden's unstated guardian. He would be responsible for Gilden's return.

Bravtz'ig was continuing, and Gilden had to postpone his own worries: "The Sigil still talk to us, but there's been an enormous change since the first days of communication. We found out how their civilization is organized, and how their ship works, and that this is their first contact with our section of the Spiral Arm. But the real information stopped coming on the day they went into seclusion in their ship. They still come out now and again, but we get what my boss calls party chat -- they tell us trivia."

"Maybe they received instructions from their home world." Valmar Krieg had taken the Terran lead, even though Gilden was the one who was supposed to solve the problem of the Sigil.

"If they did, they must be far beyond us in communications technology. We've been monitoring their ship with everything we've got. No sign of an outgoing signal."

"Any theories for what happened?"

"Bunches. But they all boil down to one of two ideas: either they learned something about us that they didn't like, or they're afraid we'll learn something about them that they don't want us to know."

"So why didn't they just up and leave?"

"We've been afraid they will. We've deliberately kept dribbling them useful information, bit by bit -- a lot more than they've given us recently. But we soon realized we needed expert help." Bravtz'ig nodded to Gilden. "If you can get an observation instrument into their ship, you'll be a Lucidar hero no matter what you did on Earth."

"I'll need help, too." It was close to noon, and Lucidar shimmered with heat haze. The speck of iridescent green danced tantalizingly on the horizon. A matching tingle of anticipation shivered within Gilden. "First, I'll need everything you have about their ship."

"You'll get that. But I don't think you'll be happy. They're closed tight. We measure zero material exchange with our atmosphere, no transparent materials, and no emergent radiation." Bravtz'ig glanced at

Derli. "What about you? What do you need?"

"I'll be as dependent on Gilden as you are. I can determine a little biology from external appearance, but with an alien species it's not very reliable. Their suits are a problem. I need X-rays, sonargrams, tissue samples." She turned from Bravtz'ig to Gilden. "Unless you can get me those, Arrin, I can't really begin."

\* \* \* \*

The easy things had to be done first. Even if there was only one chance in a million that they might succeed, Gilden could not afford to overlook the obvious. He also could not assume that Bravtz'ig's team was as painfully thorough as he had to be.

The Sigil ship sat on six splayed green legs in the middle of the open plain of the landing field. It was, as Bravtz'ig had warned him, sealed against matter gain or loss. Not a molecule from Lucidar went into the rounded hull, and none escaped. That eliminated the use of every material voyeur device in Gilden's arsenal.

Which left only radiation, in its various forms. It was not the first time that he had faced such a problem. Gilden, from the mobile experiment station provided by Bravtz'ig, set out to observe the Sigil ship using every wavelength from hard gamma to long radio.

Nothing.

He took a more active step and bathed the ship with monochromatic radiation generated from his own sources. The return signals at every frequency were quite featureless. No radiation penetrated more than a millimeter into the shining surface. Not in the ultra-violet, not in the visible, not in the reflective or emissive infra-red. He went doggedly on, creeping through the spectrum from shortest to longest wavelengths.

Again, nothing.

At last, when the sun was setting, Gilden abandoned his experiments in favor of pure thought. Sometimes, a negative result could be as significant as a positive one. One fact nagged at him: there was no anomalous thermal signature, no elevation of ship hull temperature above ambient. How could that be? If the Sigil ship was in exact temperature balance with the atmosphere, where did the heat go that was generated in the interior?

He was not able to answer that question, but it was an important one. Surely the Sigil, no matter how advanced their science, could not evade the laws of thermodynamics. Even if all power devices were turned off inside the hull, any living organism had to eat. Eating implied energy conversion from one form to another. Heat production was an inevitable by-product.

Gilden's neck ached, and his closed eyes saw nothing but the red after-images of dials and monitors. His head was suddenly buzzing with a swirl of speculation and unanswered questions. He filed his observations and went back to the living quarters that Bravtz'ig had assigned to the visitors.

On the way in he stopped at the bath-house to bathe his weary eyes. Derli was there, leaning against a wash-basin. He nodded to her, but only after he had laved his face and dried it on a hand towel did he notice her stooped posture.

"What's wrong."

"Nothing." Her smile was forced, her lips pale.

"There is." He stepped closer. "You look awful."

"I'm just a bit sick, still."

"I thought that was space nausea, and you were over it."

"I thought so, too." She leaned forward to rest her forehead against the cool grey metal of the wash-basin. "Guess a new planet can do it just as well. Unfamiliar air, food, gravity."

"I'm sorry. I'm working as fast as I can, but it's slow going. The ship's really impenetrable. Maybe you should return to Earth and come back here when I find some information you can use."

"\_No\_" Derli straightened her back. "Leaving is the last thing I want to do. I don't feel good, but I love this place. I'll stay on Lucidar until I'm forced to leave." She took a deep breath, and reached up to touch Gilden's cheek. "But thanks for the thoughtfulness. I'm not used to that. Maybe we can talk later, when I feel better."

She walked unsteadily out, leaving Arrin Gilden with something new to ponder. \_Until I'm forced to leave\_. He had assumed that as Valmar Krieg's partner, Derli Margrave was one of those who made the rules. But it seemed she was no more free to choose than Gilden himself. Derli's domination extended beyond sexual possession.

Gilden touched his cheek, and admitted for the first time his full resentment -- hatred? -- of Valmar Krieg.

\* \* \* \*

Gilden stayed in his quarters for the whole evening, his thoughts sliding uneasily from one subject to another. The Sigil, Valmar, the Teller, Derli. She did not come, although his voyeurs told him that she was alone. Valmar Krieg was far away, meeting with Bravtzig. The Sigil were locked tight within their ship.

Finally Gilden took the unprecedented step, walking the twenty steps from his rooms to Derli's.

She was looking better, leaning back on a broad divan covered with a beige cloth that complemented the color of her hair. Gilden realized that his voyeurs needed to be slightly re-calibrated. On their imagers the hair and divan had not quite matched.

"I wondered if you would come. I was going to give you another half-hour." She patted the seat beside her. "I thought you might be afraid of Valmar."

\_I was going to give you another half-hour\_. And then what?

"I am." Gilden remained standing. "I mean, I am afraid of him."

"You came anyway."

"He's miles away."

"I see." Derli gave a little shrug. "I guess you would know, Arrin, if anyone would. No point in taking a risk, is there?"

The tone was a criticism, far more than the words. Gilden sat down at her side. "I told you earlier that I was making slow progress. But that's not true anymore. I think I know a way into the Sigil ship -- not with an actual voyeur, nothing as direct as that. But a way to send in a probe signal."

"You told me earlier that the ship was impenetrable."

"The hull is. But I realized that there had to be some way to get rid of generated internal heat. It's going out through the ship's support legs, diffused deep into the surface of Lucidar itself."

"And you can get a probe in the same way?"

"Nothing material. But I can send in my own signals that way, use high-frequency modulated phonons -- ultrasonic packets -- if I have to."

"It sounds difficult."

"I've done it before. Give me a few days."

"I'm a patient woman." She turned to face him. "You came here to tell me that?"

"Yes." It was a lie. The Teller would have picked it up at once. "And to ask you something."

"Ah!" Derli leaned far back on the divan. "That's more like it. Ask me, Arrin. I'm waiting."

"You say that you love Lucidar, and hate the idea of leaving it. But you are not a condemned criminal, like me. What's to stop you staying here after the work on the Sigil is over?"

"You don't know?" She abandoned her languorous pose and sat straight up. "You really don't?"

"If I knew, I would not ask."

"Lean toward me, and give me your hand."

Gilden did so, and allowed her to guide his hand to a place on her head just behind where the thick amber hair was parted.

"Feel that?" She set his index finger on a spot where the skin of the skull was slightly rough. "That's scar tissue, over the implant. Valmar knows the code. If I refuse to return to Earth or do something disloyal to the Mentor, he will activate it."

Gilden was still touching her head, feeling the delicate bones of the skull. "What would it do?"

"I don't know. I'm not supposed to know. Uncertainty is part of the control. Maybe the top of my head would be blown off. Maybe I'd be in permanent agony. Maybe I'd just become a drooling idiot or a nymphomaniac for the rest of my life. I've seen all those and worse." She took Gilden's hand in hers, and again guided it. This time to a place on his own skull. "You, too, Arrin. Anyone gets it who leaves Earth and works directly for the Mentor."

"Even Valmar?" Gilden fingered with awful fascination the unnoticed small patch of scar tissue on his own head.

"Of course. Lucidar might subvert him, too. The difference is, Valmar controls you and me, but some other person controls him."

"He owns us!"

"Not all of us, Arrin. Some of our actions are our own." Derli was pulling him toward her, at the same time as she sank back on the divan. Gilden struggled free of her arms, stood up, and stared down at her. He was trembling.

"You don't want me?" A smile would have made it intolerable. But Derli looked hurt and sorrowful, like an abandoned child. Gilden groaned, turned, and blundered out of the room and the building, out into the evening gusts of Lucidar's spring. He walked blindly and randomly, hardly aware of time or direction until increasing cold drove him home.

Back in his own quarters, he activated a voyeur. Derli was still sitting on the divan. Somehow she knew. She stared right at the minute observation instrument and raised her hand in a wave.

This time she was smiling, but Gilden saw no reproach or scorn on her face; only an understanding that for him some things were still impossible.

He waved back, knowing that she could not see him. And then he settled down to work. He had an additional task now, as difficult in its way as the problem of the Sigil -- and far more dangerous. There was one place where no sane voyeur would ever dare to look. In this case, Gilden had no choice.

\* \* \* \*

He worked until close to dawn at a level of intensity that approached a trance. When he finally collapsed into bed the new problem ran on inside his head, distorted and paradoxical. And when Valmar Krieg marched into his bedroom early the next morning, Gilden saw his arrival as part of another cloudy dream sequence.

"Derli says you've cracked it." Valmar sat down uninvited on the end of the bed.

The words sent Gilden's heart into a mad race. Then he realized that the other man couldn't possibly know what he had worked on through the night. Because Derli herself didn't know. Krieg had to be talking about the Sigil and their ship.

"I haven't cracked it. But I do have ideas."

"Tell me." Krieg held up his hand. "Don't get the wrong impression. It's not that I feel I can't trust you, but I have to file my own status reports. I must know what you're doing, at least in outline. How will you get your voyeurs into the Sigil ship?"

"I won't. It's utterly impenetrable for solid objects without alerting the Sigil." Thinking about technical questions calmed Gilden at once.

"So how can you learn what's inside?"

"That's a different problem. We can be fairly sure that the Sigil ship has its own internal monitoring system, probably with imaging components just the way that our ships do. So I don't need to get my own voyeurs inside -- I just have to control the Sigils' own monitors. Then I have to get that information out."

"It sounds impossible."

"I've done it half a dozen times, back on Earth. The trick is to find an access point. That's what I think I have. The Sigil ship is getting rid of excess heat down into the planetary surface. So I have an avenue. I can send pulses in by the same route and read their returns. After that it means lots of data analysis, none of it automatic. But I'm comfortable with that. The part I'm less sure of is my interaction with the Sigil ship's computer systems. I have to plant my own code in there, hidden in a way that won't be noticed, before I can control the ship's monitors."

Krieg was thoughtfully stroking his red beard. "That doesn't sound so hard. Logic is logic, universal."

"Maybe suspicion is, too. If the Sigils have enough triggers built in against interference they'll spot me before I'm hardly started."

"So the sooner we know that, the better. Out of bed, and get to work. You weren't brought all this way for a vacation." But Valmar Krieg's nod was one of satisfaction as he strode out.

More sleep would be impossible anyway. Gilden, muzzy-headed, forced himself to take a hot and cold shower, and then to eat a full breakfast before he set to work.

He had over-simplified the problem for Valmar Krieg to the point of imbecility, and at the same time deliberately made its solution sound more difficult. Gilden didn't want anyone, most especially Krieg, aware of the sophistication of the tools he had developed over the past ten years. And no one must suspect that during the following days of intense dawn-to-midnight effort Gilden would be feeling his way through not one mental maze, but two.

\* \* \* \*

Derli found him on the afternoon of the tenth day, asleep in the dining area. His head rested on the hard table, he was snoring, and in front of him sat a cold and untouched plate of food.

She took a seat cushion and eased it under his gaunt cheek. She did it as gently as possible but the disturbance awoke him. He stared at her, bleary-eyed.

"Mmph. What time is it?"

"Four hours after noon. You look terrible. Why don't you go to bed and get some real sleep?"

"I was going to. As soon as I'd eaten. I was coming to see you. To show you." He was mumbling, still hardly awake, working his jaw from side to side and turning his head to ease the muscles of his stiffened neck. "I don't have all you need. Look for more as soon as I'm rested. But I have something."

"You're inside the Sigil ship?"

"Five days ago. Not too hard. Difficult part is time-sharing the monitors. So our observations won't be noticed. And then getting information out." Gilden stood up, leaning against Derli for balance. "Come on, if you want to see it. Krieg, too."

"He's not here. He flew to Montmorin for a meeting with a Lucidar group. I think there's a big fight brewing with Earth. He'll be back tomorrow."

"Mm." Gilden hardly seemed interested, leading the way into his own living quarters. "Doesn't matter. Unless you need him."

"For my work? I don't. Valmar started out as a biologist, but he hasn't done any real research or analysis for years. I don't need him."

Gilden grunted. He was already at work, setting up a linked series of displays. "Take a look at this first. It's just a summary, an overview of what we've got. When you see what's here and what's missing, you can tell me where I should concentrate my efforts tomorrow." He stood up and gestured to his seat.

"What about you?" But Derli sat down. The temptation was too great. A first image was already forming on the screen, of what could be an interior chamber of the Sigil ship.

"I'm going to take a shower while you do a run-through. You don't need me for that -- probably manage

better without me."

She said nothing. Gilden knew why. He had developed the displays slowly and painfully, over days of frustrating effort, but even that had been fascinating. For Derli the impact would be a thousand times as great.

He stood staring at her in silence for a couple of minutes. Then he retreated quietly to the bath-house. Derli did not even notice his departure.

\* \* \* \*

Progress was slow, but finally overwhelming. For the first couple of minutes of display Derli saw only blurry green outlines of two Sigil, moving jerkily from place to place. Frequent incomprehensible breaks or swirls of random color provided a maddening distraction, as did passing glimpses of what seemed to be chamber ceilings and floors.

But then, as Gilden's mastery of the interaction technique had slowly deepened, the recorded images improved in focus, depth, color, and detail. Derli could discern odd features of the Sigil ship interior. The chamber walls had a convoluted, organic look to them, unlike anything constructed by humans. Even the control banks lacked clean, hard, functional outlines. She waited, impatient but understanding. Her interest was in the biology of the Sigil but she was not the only customer for Gilden's magic. Others cared to know about the ship, not its occupants.

Finally, as though responding to Derli's impatience, the display settled down to show the Sigil themselves. Derli leaned forward. They were not wearing the suits that had cloaked every record in the Lucidar data banks. She confirmed overall structure. Both Sigil were certainly bipedal, with bilateral symmetry. Now that she could see their external colors, she learned that the legs and arms springing from the forward-curving torso were a bright orange-red. The trunk was banded, in crimson and white for the smaller Sigil and in darker red and white for the other. Only the head of each was dark. The prominent muzzles, almost black, were ciliated with delicate silver tendrils like the feelers on a catfish.

Derli watched the display through to its last incomplete image. Then she backed up to the beginning, longing for more: more detail of the mouth, especially its inside; more and higher-resolution images of the lower part of the trunk where the reproductive and excretory organs were logically housed; X-rays, to reveal internal structure; most of all, tissue samples.

She began to make a list, even though she knew that the last two elements would almost certainly be denied to her regardless of Gilden's skill. Ship monitoring systems used X-rays routinely for status reports on the drive and X-rays also served a purpose with living organisms. But that was in diagnosis of abnormal conditions, not during routine survey of the ship's interior.

As for tissue samples, Gilden had already assured her that he could return no material object, however small, from the inside of the ship. But he had performed other miracles. As the record progressed from beginning to end the Sigil became smoothly-moving three-dimensional objects rather than flat, jerky cartoons.

Derli stopped wishing for what she did not have, and concentrated her attention on the similarities and differences between the two Sigil. She moved to the appropriate part of the file.

She knew from the original records provided by Bravtz'ig that the smaller alien was about one and a half meters tall, the big one maybe three meters. Such a large size imposed structural limitations on any form evolved on a planet with gravity comparable with Earth or Lucidar. Gilden's new data confirmed it. The larger Sigil was bigger in every way, thicker, clumsier, more slow-moving. The small one danced

anxiously around it, bringing food and drink, adjusting cushions, apparently catering to its partner's every demand. Structurally, both of them possessed a generally similar body pattern except for variations of the lower trunk. That suggested the varying genital configurations appropriate to male and female. The color differences of the torso were also presumably sex-linked, brighter crimson bands fitting the display pattern of the smaller male.

It was all plausible and consistent. But something, somewhere, did not quite fit.

What?

She leaned back in her seat, placed interlocked hands on the back of her head, and pondered.

\* \* \* \*

Derli had frozen the display at a certain point, concentrating on a smooth boss at the base of the male Sigil's torso, when she heard a noise behind her. It was Gilden, his hair dark and wet and slicked down across his forehead. He was paler than ever, but far more alert.

"Is this everything?" Derli nodded to the display.

"Everything I thought you'd need to see. I have hours and hours of other records, about the ship itself and its computer system."

"I think I should see them all. Just in case." She pointed to her own notes. "And here's my wish list. Without cell samples I'm reduced to guessing on things as basic as sex. Maybe you can work out some way to provide me with a substitute for that information."

"I can try." Gilden stared at the display. "You're still in the middle sequence after all this time. Or did you go all the way through?"

"Twice." She frowned up at him, then glanced across to the general display board. "Phew. I've been sitting here over three hours. Unbelievable. I thought you were just going for a shower."

"I was. I took a nap first." He hesitated. "Want to eat? I don't remember when I last had a full meal." And, when she seemed slow to answer, "We can talk about the rest of the data you need. Don't know if I'll be able to get it. But I'll try. Just tell me what you want."

He was too nervous. His jittery movements reminded Derli of the anxious male Sigil (if it was the male) hovering over its hulking partner. She stood up. "All right. I'm hungry, too. And we don't have to discuss my problem. We can talk about anything you like." She took Gilden by the arm.

A mistake. He flinched away from her touch. He would not look at her as they walked together to the dining area, and he stared up at the ceiling while Derli made food selections for both of them.

It was a chance too good to miss. She glanced at Gilden's tormented, too-pale face, and quietly added a mixture of tranquilizers and stimulants to the drinks that she was ordering. He did not notice, even when they sat down and he took the first sip. He was staring at her when the food was served, but never into her eyes. He was studying her mouth, nose, and ears, as intently as a portrait artist.

The drugs were slow to take effect. They ate a full three-course meal, while Derli discussed Sigil physiology in as much detail as she was able, including her need for high-resolution body images, and Gilden remained silent. But at last, when the plates were cleared and a third drink had been served and drunk, he met her eyes and said: "You like it here. You don't have to go back to Earth if you don't want to."



"I told you, Valmar knows the code of my implant as well as yours. He can make us do what he likes. Kill us both, if he has the codes set that way."

"He might kill me, but surely he wouldn't kill you. He wouldn't set your implant that way. You are his lover."

"More than that. And less than that." Derli laughed and reached out to stroke Gilden's hand where it sat palm-down on the table, realizing as she did so that the drugs were affecting her as much as him. "He loves me, he loves me not. Arrin, I don't know what Valmar would do if I said I was staying on Lucidar. But I know I dare not take that risk. Other risks, I want to take."

All the initiatives had to come from her. She had known it would be that way. He said nothing as they stood up from the table and she led him slowly back to her bedroom. He knew exactly how to undress her and touch her, as though he had done it before a thousand times. Yet at the same time he was clumsy and breathless, a boy fumbling his way toward a first encounter.

Derli understood. When the time came she moved on top of him and took the final initiative. And when he was too nervous and sudden, finished before she was even close, she understood that, too. She was part of the problem, unable to respond in full despite the drugs' assistance. In any case, there was more than one form of satisfaction.

When it was over he drifted off into sleep without a word. She lay beside him, studying the tight mouth and hollow cheeks. She leaned over and kissed the fading red circle of scar tissue on his muscular right arm. Physical union had changed everything. She had realized that it would -- even counted on it. Now she had to tell him.

She patted his shoulder and his chest, not roughly but hard enough to bring him back to wakefulness. When his eyes opened she waited patiently until at last he turned to look at her.

"That was wonderful." But he did not look happy.

"Yes."

"But not for you."

"That was my fault." There was no point in her putting it off. "I couldn't get into the right mood, because of what I kept thinking."

"About the Sigil?"

"No. Damn the Sigil." The residual effect of the drugs made her want to giggle when there was nothing funny. "I kept thinking about you, and about Valmar. And my condition."

It was as bad as she had feared. He was staring at her in mystification. She would have to spell out everything for him.

"You knew I was throwing up on the ship coming here. And you knew I was sick when I got here. Wasn't it obvious to you that I was pregnant? Pregnant with Valmar's child."

He gazed at her with no expression that she could read. "He forced himself on you, made you do whatever he wanted?"

So easy, to agree to that lie. Derli sighed. "No. I was quite willing. I can say now that I wish I hadn't done it, but I did."

He sat up and laid his hand gently on her bare belly. "Are you telling me that you are pregnant now? That there's a baby in here?"

"Yes. I'm at nearly two and a half months. I hope the morning sickness is all finished."

"Good."

He turned toward her, and she saw the last thing that she had expected. He was physically aroused.

All the tension in her body melted away. She lay back and closed her eyes. "The second time will be much better, Arrin, I promise you -- for both of us."

\* \* \* \*

The first love-making with Derli had been agony for Gilden of an unusual and terrible kind. He liked her, more than he had ever liked any woman; but when she moved above him and took control of his body she became all the Harpies of childhood, playing with him, mocking him, tormenting him, using him for their own ends without any regard for his needs or wants.

His body had brought him rapidly to a climax, divorced from his anguish, and he had pretended to a satisfaction he did not feel. As he drifted toward sleep he was convinced that this was the only form of physical sexual experience he could ever know.

But then Derli had spoken of her pregnancy. That both soothed and excited him. His mind pictured her again with Valmar; and he had an answer.

He distanced himself mentally from their new union, even as he moved on top of her and entered her waiting body. Once again he became the voyeur, the involved but remote participant. The difference was that he functioned now as both observer and player, embarked on a dizzying self-referential exercise that sent him spinning down an endless regression of sexual congress. He was watcher and actor. He knew the right moves, he had seen them a thousand times over. And when his climax arrived, moments after hers, his dual selves coalesced with a force as painful as torture. His shudders were both physical and mental; this time they signaled a pleasure almost too much to bear.

It was Derli who drifted off to sleep, while Gilden lay wide awake and tried to understand what had just happened. In the dim overhead lights he studied her body. She lay flat, legs still spread wide. She was breathing slowly and her mouth was slightly open. She would probably not wake until morning.

It occurred to him that he might never have a better opportunity. He also realized that his workload had just increased again.

He had to create yet another voyeur, of unmatched sensitivity and operating lifetime.

She did not move as he leaned over to plant a delicate moth's kiss on her navel, dressed in silence, and left the bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Derli had said what information she needed. She had not suggested any way to obtain it. As soon as Valmar Krieg returned from Montmorin, Gilden moved his base of operations into the mobile experiment station next to the Sigil ship and went into round-the-clock surveillance.

He was trying to be cautious, but he suspected that he was pushing the limit. It would require minimal effort by one of the Sigil to learn that their privacy had been violated and the computer system subverted.

He began to confine his intrusion into the ship to microscopic time slices, just enough for a spot check of events. It was during one of these flashes, occurring close to the middle of the Lucidar night, that the crucial event began.

Gilden came fully awake. The ship's monitors were showing him the Sigil sleeping area. He had caught a glimpse of the big one crouched on the floor. Above it hovered the small one, clinging on to its partner's body with all its limbs.

If there was ever a time to take risks, this was it. Gilden set the ship's computer to provide and export to him continuous observations.

The massive body of the lower Sigil was wriggling uneasily as though she was not satisfied with her position. The smaller one clung on resolutely. A long, tapered member was emerging slowly from the rounded boss on the front lower part of its body. The new organ was pale yellow, glistening, and slightly corrugated along its upper side, as though another ribbed tube ran along it. After a preliminary probing the member's pointed tip stabbed into an invisible entry point in the rounded bulk of the other's lower back. The restless movement of the female ceased at once. The Sigil pair became motionless except for a steady pulsing within the thin pipe that coupled them. Waves of contraction passed along it, running in ripples from male to female.

The act went on for nearly forty minutes, until a shudder racked the whole body of the upper Sigil. As soon as the long spasm was over the creature began to withdraw and loosen its hold. The lower partner did not react to the de-coupling. Its splayed body remained immobile, apparently asleep on the floor of the chamber.

Gilden had been lost in the scene that came to him through the monitors. He was dismayed when he finally thought to glance at the time. He had obtained exactly what Derli had asked for -- but at a price. It was hard to believe that an intrusion of such duration and intensity would not raise alarms within the ship's security systems. Now that he checked he saw that for the past fifteen minutes there had been a flurry of activity on the ship's computer. Introspection routines that he had never before encountered were coming into operation.

An unfamiliar signal sounded through the ship's interior. The smaller Sigil, all its lethargy gone, came scuttling across to inspect the contoured control bank.

Gilden cut off interaction with the ship, made extra copies of the new records, and hurried with them toward Derli's apartment. Even though it was the middle of the night she would want to see what he had found.

He entered her bedroom reluctantly, afraid that he would find Valmar Krieg with her. But she was sleeping alone, covered to the neck by a thin sheet. When he woke her she sat up, sighed, and put her arms around him.

"No." Gilden resisted as she tried to draw him down beside her. "It's not that. Please."

She released him at once and pulled the sheet up to cover her body. "You've been avoiding me. Hiding from me."

"Not true. I've been working, all the time -- to get you this." Gilden held out a copy of the new data record.

"What is it?" She dropped the sheet and reached out for the little box, ignoring, as Gilden could not, the bare shoulders and breasts that were revealed.

"The Sigil. Mating. The images show everything, with more body detail than anything I've given you earlier."

"Ooh! At last." She cupped her hands around the data block and held it to her chest. "Arrin, I must see this. Right now."

She scrambled out of bed and into shirt and shorts. Gilden fancied that he could see a slight additional swell in her belly.

He looked away. "I hope this gives you what you need. I went much too far to get it. I think the Sigil realize that we have been observing inside their ship."

Derli was hardly listening. Although she reached out to give him a token squeeze as she passed by, her attention was on the data block. She went to the waiting computer and inserted the new record. Gilden watched over her shoulder until the first frames of data appeared, showing the smaller Sigil clinging to the back of its partner. Then he went in search of Valmar Krieg.

He found the red-bearded guardian where he was supposed to be, in his assigned living quarters and bedroom. Krieg was not alone. Asleep at his side lay a huge Lucidar woman, blond, big-bosomed, and thick-limbed. Gilden thought at once of the Sigil, with its far larger partner.

"This had better be important." Either Krieg had been awake or he slept so lightly that he awoke at Gilden's first touch. "It's the middle of the goddamn night."

"I have new information about the Sigil. I passed a copy on to Derli Margrave."

"So what?" Valmar Krieg was sitting up while the woman at his side snored on. "Derli doesn't need me to help her analyze it. I can find out what it tells tomorrow."

"I suspect I went beyond prudence in obtaining the new information. The Sigil are aware that I have tapped their ship's monitors."

"That's another matter -- and bad news for you if it's true." Krieg swung out of bed and moved toward the door, ignoring the sleeping woman. "You were supposed to operate invisibly, for God's sake. Not blunder around and announce your presence."

He went to the upper floor and stared out of the window. The Sigil ship was visible, sitting at the center of a permanent circle of lights.

Krieg grunted. "All quiet so far." But even as he spoke the ship began to lift, drifting upward from the smooth spaceport surface. As it rose higher its six support legs retracted into the iridescent green body. A few moments later the personal monitor at Krieg's belt called for attention.

"Emergency!" It was Bravtz'ig, by the sound of his gravel voice still three-quarters asleep. "You there, Krieg? We just received a Sigil departure flight alert. Their ship is moving out."

"This is Krieg. I'm watching it happen. What can we do about it?"

"Not a damn thing -- unless you want to tell me to try and stop it."

"How would you do that?"

"Good question. Destroy the ship, that's the only way I know. And I can tell you now, our space command would refuse to do that even if you ordered it."

"So I won't waste time trying. Can you follow their path?"

"Until they go to subspace. Then we've lost them. You know that as well as I do." Bravtz'ig's face appeared on the tiny screen, squinting and suspicious. "Did you cause this, Krieg, you and your cock-up Earth friends?"

"How could we? Follow their ship as far as you can. If we lose it we're all in trouble."

"You're in trouble anyway. Get off the line, Krieg, so I can talk to someone useful."

Bravtz'ig vanished. A moment later the unit went dead. Krieg turned to Gilden.

"I suggested we didn't cause this. But you did cause this, didn't you? You stupid asshole. It was the same on Earth. Your damned voyeur urges, you couldn't let go watching until it was too late. Now I have to go back and tell the Mentor that instead of learning more about the Sigil it was our party that drove them away from Lucidar. Come on." Krieg grabbed Gilden roughly by the arm and dragged him back down the stairs.

"Where are we going?"

"To collect Derli. With the Sigil gone our value on Lucidar is less than zero. We have to get out before this place blows up. Better be ready for pain, Gilden. The two of you will spend the next fifty years in purgatory."

"Derli had nothing to do with this."

"Don't kid yourself. You were screwing her, or more likely she was screwing you. Don't bother to deny it. She pushed you to get the data she wanted. Well, I hope she thinks it was worth it when she finds out what's coming to her."

"You can't hurt her." They were at the entrance to Derli's apartment. "She's pregnant -- with your baby."

"I've got a hundred kids." Krieg did not even slow down. "All my women have 'em, I make sure of that. Wise up, Gilden, that's what they're for. One kid more or less means nothing."

The door was unlocked. Derli was still at the display. She turned when they entered but she hardly seemed to see them. The screen showed an enlarged view of the glistening yellow organ that coupled the small Sigil to its great partner.

"Arrin! Did you realize what you were seeing when you made this recording? We had it wrong, everything wrong."

"That doesn't matter now." Krieg released his hold on Gilden and went over to Derli Margrave. He switched off the computer and left a static display. "You can stop screwing around with all that. You and Gilden fucked up bigtime. The Sigil left, and now we're leaving. We're going to Earth."

Still it seemed as though Derli was not listening. The screen held her attention. Gilden came to stand between her and Krieg.

"She doesn't want to go back to Earth, can't you see that? She loves it here on Lucidar."

"She's going. So are you, dead or alive. Get out of my way."

"What happened on the Sigil ship was my fault." Gilden moved to put his arms around Derli. "You don't have to take her. Just take me."

"I'll do whatever I like. I'm taking both of you." Krieg was reaching for his belt. "Hands off her."

Derli at last noticed what Krieg was doing. She cried out in horror and tried to pull free of Gilden's hold. "Do what he says, Arrin -- whatever he says."

"Take her advice, Gilden." Krieg's fingers were poised above his belt. "Do what I tell you. Last warning. Move!"

"I won't." Gilden tightened his embrace, holding Derli to him. "Try and make me. But I wouldn't if I were you."

"You bloody fool." Krieg's face was red with fury. "I've warned you, three times. You can't say you didn't ask for it."

He pressed a sequence of buttons along his belt.

There was a moment of total stillness, followed by an inhuman groan. It came from Valmar Krieg. He stood, unable to move. All the muscles of his body were contracting at once, tighter and tighter. Sinews and tendons snapped and popped, bones burst from their joints, arms and legs became shapeless bags of blood as veins and arteries ruptured. As he toppled forward the moan of expelled air from the tormented rictus of his mouth continued. But he was dead before his face smashed into the floor.

Gilden moved to stand by the body. "That's one question answered. I wondered what you had in store for me. Sorry, Krieg. I have to say you deserved it."

"You did that to him?" Derli Margrave had collapsed to her knees and was staring at Arrin Gilden's impassive face and Valmar Krieg's body with equal horror.

"I guess I did. He ought to have known better. Dammit, Derli, I'm a voyeur, and I'm the best there is. Krieg should have had more sense than to mess with me. Once you told me that coded sequences would activate implants in our skulls I had no choice. There's easy access through the nose and mouth. I sent voyeurs in to discover and erase the sequence from my implant. Yours, too."

"But what happened to Krieg?"

"I changed his coding to match the sequence that used to be in my implant." Gilden gestured to the shapeless hulk at his feet. "That would have been me, Derli. That's what he intended me to be. You, too, maybe."

He went across and lifted her to a standing position. "We're free now. Both of us. We can go where we like, do what we like."

Her eyes were empty. He was not getting through to her.

"Derli!" He shook her. "Snap out of it. If you want to stay on Lucidar without getting arrested we'll have to explain what happened to Krieg." And, when that warning produced no effect, "What's wrong with you? You were like this when we came in, before Krieg ever started in on you. What did you mean, we have everything wrong?"

The question broke her trance where shaking had failed. She began a shallow nod, almost fast enough to be a tremble.

"We did. We misunderstood everything. Now I know why the Sigil cut off contact with people here. I think I know why they left Lucidar -- and if we send the right message, I think maybe they'll come back."

I have to reach Bravtz'ig."

She started for the communication line, but Gilden stopped her.

"Bravtz'ig won't talk to us. Better if we go over there."

He led the way. Derli was talking non-stop behind him.

"I got off on the wrong foot during the very first meeting with Bravtz'ig. Sexual dimorphism, I said, to explain the size difference between the sexes. I also said that analogy with Earth forms could be misleading and dangerous, but I didn't listen to my own warning. When the records came in from their ship I found myself having trouble whenever I looked at the big Sigil and the small Sigil. To me, they both resembled females. But they weren't."

"Of course they weren't." Gilden had to pause to take his bearings. He had never been to Bravtz'ig's work area before in the dark. He turned slightly to the left and set off walking again. "We saw them mating."

"No, we didn't."

"You may not have -- but I did. Their coupling is on the data block I just gave you!"

"I know. But you didn't see them mating. For one excellent reason: the Sigil do not use sexual reproduction. They are asexual animals. I suspect that they had never encountered sex in any form before they landed on Lucidar. That's what terrified them when they began to learn our biology. Sexual reproduction is such a terrific way of performing genetic variations, anything without it seems at a terrific evolutionary disadvantage. They're scared of our biology."

Gilden had to stop, even though it was only another forty or fifty yards to Bravtz'ig's office. "You don't understand, Derli. I don't know what was wrong with the data block that I gave you, but I saw them mating. In real time."

"No, you didn't. You just thought you did. There is a valid Earth analogy, but it's not the one that we've both been using. Did you ever hear of a Sphex wasp?"

"What have wasps to do -- "

"Everything to do with this. A Sphex wasp is one species of the order of parasitic wasps. Its larvae eat grasshoppers. But the larvae don't catch them. The parent wasp does. She stings the grasshopper, enough to paralyze but not to kill. Then she lays her eggs inside it. They hatch and consume the host grasshopper from within. Some of the other parasitic wasps, ones that lay their eggs in caterpillars, are even trickier. The caterpillar is stung, but it doesn't stay paralyzed. It recovers and goes on feeding. The wasp larva inside feeds on it, eating the caterpillar's organs in ascending order of importance so that the host stays alive as long as possible.

"That's the analogy for the Sigil. We are observing two different, asexual species. They look pretty much the same to us, but a grasshopper and a wasp probably look the same to aliens. The little one has evolved to prey on the larger -- and carries it on long journeys, so that the smaller one's young will have food. The yellow organ you saw isn't for transfer of sperm. It's a combined sting and ovipositor, to paralyze the big one and then lay eggs inside it."

Gilden recalled the wriggling Sigil, suddenly becoming still as the tapered member pierced its body. "But the big one is intelligent. It must realize very well what's being done to it."

"It surely does. But we can't begin to guess how it feels. Maybe it even believes itself privileged, to carry the offspring of a superior being. Like the old stories of mortals who bore the children of the gods."

Any horror that Derli might feel was overwhelmed by professional satisfaction. She seemed to experience none of Gilden's revulsion as she moved ahead, leading the way to Bravtz'ig's offices. "But we can go into details on this later," she said over her shoulder. "What we have to do right now is send a message after the Sigil ship, pointing out how asexual animals survive on Earth and Lucidar and compete very well with sexual forms. Of course, that message won't be necessary if the Sigil has simply gone off for solitude during the larval growth period. That's what lots of Earth creatures do. Then the ship may be back anyway in a month or two."

Gilden trailed after her. He was not listening. To experience as the climax of life's experience, not love but the exquisite pain of a wasp's sting. To be protected and cherished not as a companion, but as a living larder. To be consumed slowly and agonizingly from within. And above all else, to know your fate and comprehend exactly what was being done to you.

Somehow, the old torments threatened by the Teller seemed feeble and half-hearted.

\* \* \* \*

The Sigil ship had not returned three weeks later when Gilden appeared one evening in Derli's living quarters. She was still hard at work. As Lucidar's expert on both the psychology of the Mentor and the biology of the Sigil, her services were constantly in demand.

She nodded to him. "Dinner? Sit down, Arrin. Ten minutes more and I'll stop."

"You don't need to stop." Gilden did not sit down, but began to pace back and forward behind her. "I didn't come to suggest dinner. I came to say I'm leaving."

"You have to go to Montmorin again?" She was focused on the screen in front of her.

"No. I'm leaving Lucidar."

"Didn't I tell you? We don't have to. Bravtz'ig says the Mentor daren't try a military move, and Lucidar would never agree to our extradition. We're quite safe here."

"It's not that. I came to say goodbye."

She froze, still staring at the screen. "You mean -- you're leaving me?"

"Yes."

"I thought you ... cared for me." She swung around. "No. I thought you loved me. That's what you've been telling me for the past few weeks."

"It was true. It is true."

"I see." Derli stared down, to her swelling belly. "I see. I've been a fool. I started a relationship with you when I had another man's child growing inside me. That was crazy. You can't put up with that, no man could."

He said nothing, and at last she went on, "It's the baby, isn't it? You can't stand the idea that I'm carrying Valmar Krieg's baby. But it's my baby, too. And you want me to get rid of it. You think, I could just go and have an abortion -- "



"Stop it. Right there." Gilden halted in front of her. "I could agree with you, tell you that it's the baby. That's an easy out. But it wouldn't be true."

"Then what is it?" Derli could not hide her misery and confusion. "I know I've not had enough time for you, I've been so busy the past couple of weeks."

"It's not that I'm feeling neglected, either. I've been busy, too. And it's certainly not the baby. It's me. You tell me I'm cured, that everything is fine now. That I'm sexually normal -- "

"More than normal. You are a wonderful lover."

"So you say. But Derli, inside my head I'm a mess. I dare not tell you what I think about when the two of us make love. I have to go away and try to sort myself out."

"But you'll come back?"

"I hope so."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Might you come back when the baby is born? I mean, you say it's not the baby..."

"One more time: it's not the baby."

"Because I haven't said anything to you, but I'm been really worried. I came through a subspace trip when I was pregnant, which you're not supposed to do. Then when we got here there were the changes of air and food and gravity, and no one seems to know what effect that might have. Maybe it's going to be abnormal, maybe it will be deformed..." She paused. "I don't see anything funny in this!"

Because Gilden was smiling. "Derli, you don't give me credit for anything, do you? Not for caring about you, not for worrying about you, not for watching over you. Not even for competence in the one field where I'm supposed to be better than anyone in the Empyrium."

He leaned forward and touched his fingertips to her abdomen. "Don't worry about the baby. Take my word for it: she's doing just fine."

\* \* \* \*

>>\_The bee's kiss, now!\_

\_Kiss me as if you entered gay\_

\_My heart at some noontday,\_

\_A bud that dares not disallow\_

\_The claim, so all is rendered up,\_

\_And passively its shattered cup\_

\_Over your head to sleep I bow.\_<<

-- Robert Browning, from "In A Gondola."