

TRAVELERS

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

"ARE WE ALL READY, THEN?" Nikomastir asks. He has fashioned a crown of golden protopetaloids for himself, and gleaming scarlet baubles dangle from his ears: the bright translucent shells of galgalids, strung on slender strands of pure gold. His long, pale arms wave in the air as though he is conducting a symphony orchestra. "Our next destination is-" and he makes us wait for the announcement. And wait. And wait.

"Sidri Akrak," says Mayfly, giggling.

"How did you know?" cries Nikomastir. "Sidri Akrak! Yes! Yes! Set your coordinates, everybody! Off we go! Sidri Akrak it is!"

A faint yelp of dismay comes from Velimyle, and she shoots me a look of something that might almost have been fear, though perhaps there is a certain component of perverse delight in it also. I am not at all happy about the decision myself. Sidri Akrak is a nightmare world where gaudy monsters run screaming through the muddy streets. The people of Sidri Akrak are cold and dour and inhospitable; their idea of pleasure is to wallow in discomfort and ugliness. No one goes to Sidri Akrak if he can help it, no one.

But we must live by our rules; and this day Nikomastir holds the right of next choice. It is devilish of Mayfly to have put the idea of going to Sidri Akrak into his head. But she is Eke that, is Mayfly. And Nikomastir is terribly easily influenced.

Will we all perish on hideous Sidri Akrak, victims of Mayfly's casual frivolity?

I don't think so, however nasty the visit turns out to be. We often get into trouble, sometimes serious trouble, but we always get out of it. We lead charmed lives, we four travelers. Someday Mayfly will take one risk too many, I suppose, and I would like not to be there when she does. Most likely I will be, though. Mayfly is my mask-sister. Wherever she goes, I go. I must look after her: thoughtful, stolid, foolish me. I must protect her from herself as we four go traveling on and on, spinning giddily across the farflung worlds.

Sidri Akrak, though--

The four of us have been to so many wondrous lovely places together: Elang-Lo and the floating isle of Vont, and Mikni and Chchikkikan, Heidoth and Thant, Milpar, Librot, Froidis, Smoor, Xamur and Iriarte and Nabomba Zom, and on and on and on. And now -- Sidri Akrak? Sidri Akarak?

WE STAND a circle in the middle of a field of grass with golden blades, making ourselves ready for our relay-sweep departure from Galgala.

I wouldn't have minded remaining here a few months longer. A lovely world indeed is Galgala the golden, where a myriad of auriferous microorganisms excrete atoms of gold as metabolic waste. It is everywhere on this planet, the lustrous pretty metal. It turns the rivers and streams to streaks of yellow flame and the seas to shimmering golden mirrors. Huge filters are deployed at the intake valve of Galgala's reservoirs to strain the silt of dissolved gold from the water supply. The plants of Galgala are turgid in every tissue, leaf and stem and root, with aureous particles. Gold dust, held in suspension in the air, transforms the clouds to golden fleece.

Therefore the once-precious stuff has grievously lost value throughout the galaxy since Galgala was discovered, and on Galgala itself a pound of gold is worth less than a pound of soap. But I understand very little about these economic matters and care even less. Only a miser could fail to rejoice in Galgala's luminous beauty. We have been here six weeks we have awakened each morning to the tinkle of golden chimes, we have bathed in the golden rivers and come forth shining, we have wrapped our bodies round with delicate golden chains. Now, though, it is time for us to move along, and Nikomastir has decreed that our new destination is to be one of the universe's most disagreeable worlds. Unlike my companions, I can see nothing amusing about going there. It strikes me as foolish and dangerous whimsy. But they are true sophisticates, untrammelled creatures made of air and light, and I am the leaden weight that dangles from their soaring souls. We will go to Sidri Akarak.

We all face Nikomastir. Smiling sweetly, he calls out the coordinate numbers for our journey, and we set our beacons accordingly and double-check the settings with care. We nod our readiness for departure to one another. Velimyle moves almost imperceptibly closer to me, Mayfly to Nikomastir.

I would have chosen a less flighty lover for her than Nikomastir if matters had been left to me. He is a slim, elegant youth, high-spirited and shallow, a prancing fantastico with a taste for telling elaborate, fanciful lies. And he is very young: only a single rebirth so far. Mayfly is on her fifth, as am I, and Velimyle claims three, which probably means four. Sembiran is Nikomastir's native world, a place of grand valleys and lofty snow-capped mountains and beautiful meadows and thriving cities, where his father is a minor aristocrat of some sort. Or so Nikomastir has said, although we have learned again and again that it is risky to take anything Nikomastir says at face value.

My incandescent mask-sister Mayfly, who is as small and fair as Nikomastir is tall and dark, encountered him while on a visit to Olej in the Lubrik system and was immediately captivated by his volatile, impulsive nature, and they

have traveled together ever since. Whither Mayfly goeth, thither go I: That is the pledge of the mask. So do I trudge along now from world to world with them, and therefore my winsome, sly, capricious Velimyle, whose psychosensitive paintings are sought by the connoisseurs of a hundred worlds but who belongs to me alone, has willy-nilly become the fourth member of our inseparable quartet.

Some people find relay-sweep transport unlikable and even frightening, but I have never minded it. What is most bothersome, I suppose, is that no starship is involved: You travel unprotected by any sort of tangible container, a mere plummeting parcel falling in frightful solitude through the interstices of the continuum. A journey-helmet is all that covers you, and some flimsy folds of coppery mesh. You set up your coordinates, you activate your beacon, and you stand and wait, you stand and wait, until the probing beam of some far-off sweep-station intersects your position and catches you and lifts you and carries you away. If you've done things right, your baggage will be picked up and transported at the same time. Most of the time that is so.

It is a stark and unluxurious mode of travel. The relay field wraps you in cocooning bands of force and shoots you off through one auxiliary space and another, kicking you through any convenient opening in the space-time lattice that presents itself, and while you wait to be delivered to your destination, you drift like a bauble afloat in an infinite sea, helpless, utterly alone, bereft of all power to override the sweep. Your metabolic processes are suspended, but the activity of your consciousness is not, so that your unsleeping mind ticks on and on in the most maddening way and there is nothing you can do to quiet its clamor. It is as though you must scratch your itching nose and your hands are tied behind your back. Eventually--you have no idea whether it has been an hour, a month, a century--you are plunked unceremoniously down into a relay station at the planet of your choice, and there you are. Relay-sweep transport is ever so much more efficient than any system requiring vast vessels to plow the seas of space from world to world; but all the same it is a disquieting and somewhat degrading way to get around.

So now we depart. May fly is the first to be captured by the sweep-beam. Perhaps half an hour later Nikomastir disappears, and then, almost immediately after, Velimyle. My own turn does not arrive for many long hours, which leaves me fidgeting gloomily in that golden meadow, wondering when, if ever, I will be taken, and whether some disjunction in our routes will separate me forever from my three companions. There is that risk--not so much that we would fail to arrive on Sidri Akrak at all, but that we might get there many years apart. I find that a melancholy thought indeed. More than that: It is terrifying.

But finally the dazzling radiance of the sweep aura engulfs me and hurls me out into the Great Dark, and off I go, moving freely across hundreds of light-years with nothing but an invisible sphere of force to protect me against the phantoms of the auxiliary spaces through which I fall.

I hang in total stasis in a realm of utter blackness for what feels like a thousand centuries, an infinity of empty space at my elbow, as I go my zigzag way through the wormholes of the adjacent continua.

Within that terrible passivity my hyperactive mind ponders, as it all too often does,

the deep questions of life--issues of honor, duty, justice, responsibility, the meaning of existence, subjects about which I have managed to learn nothing at all, basically, either in this life or the four that preceded it. I arrive at many profound conclusions during the course of my journey, but they fly away from me as fast as I construct them.

I begin to think the trip will never end, that I will be one of those few unfortunate travelers, the one out of a billion who is caught in some shunt malfunction and is left to dangle in the middle of nowhere for all eternity, or at least for the ten or twenty thousand real-time years it will take for his metabolically suspended body to die. Has this actually ever happened to anyone? There are only rumors, unfounded reports. But there comes a time in every sweep-jump when I am convinced that it has happened to me.

Then I see a glare of crimson and violet and azure and green, and my mask-sister Mayfly's voice purrs in my ear, saying, "Welcome to Sidri Akrak, darling, welcome, welcome, welcome!"

Nikomastir stands beside her. A moment later Velimyle materializes in a haze of color. The four of us have made a nearly simultaneous arrival, across who knows how many hundreds of light-years. We definitely do lead charmed lives, we four.

EVERYONE KNOWS about Sidri Akrak. The place was settled at least a thousand years ago, and yet it still has the feel of a frontier world. Only the main streets of the half-dozen big cities are paved; all the rest are mere blue dirt that turn into rivers of mud during the rainy season. The houses are ramshackle, slovenly, things, lopsided and drafty, arrayed in higgledypiggledy fashion as though they had been set down at random by their builders without any regard for logic or order. After all this time the planet is mostly jungle, a jungle that doesn't merely encroach on the settlements but comes right up into them. Wild animals of the most repellent sorts are permitted to rampage everywhere, wandering about as they please.

The Akrakikans simply don't care. They pretend the animals--monstrous, appalling-aren't there. The people of Sidri Akrak are a soulless, bloodless bunch in the main, altogether indifferent to such things as comfort and beauty and proper sanitation. Primitive squalor is what they prefer, and if you don't care for it, well, you're quite free to visit some other world.

"Why, exactly, did we come here?" I ask.

It is a rhetorical question. I know perfectly well why: Because Nikomastir, clueless about our next destination, had opened a void that Mayfly had mischievously filled with one of the most unappealing suggestions possible, just to see what Nikomastir would do with it, and Nikomastir had as usual given the matter about a thousandth of a second of careful consideration before blithely leaping headlong into the abyss, thereby taking the rest of us with him, as he has done so often before.

But Nikomastir has already rearranged the facts in what passes for his mind.

"I absolutely had to come here," he says. "It's a place I've always felt the need to see. My daddy was born on Sidri Akrak, you know. This is my ancestral world."

We know better than to challenge Nikomastir when he says things like that. What sense is there in arguing with him? He'll only defend himself by topping one whopper with another twice as wild,

budding such a towering edifice of spur- of-the-moment fantasy that he'll end up claiming to be the greatgrandson of the Fourteenth Emperor, or perhaps the reincarnation of Julius Caesar.

Velimyle whispers at my side, "We'll just stay here two or three days and then we'll move along."

I nod. We all indulge Nikomastir in his whims, but only up to a point.

The sky of Sidri Akarak is a sort of dirty brown, broken by greasy, sullen green clouds. The sunlight is greenish too, pallid, tinged with undertones of dull gray. There is a sweet, overripe, mildly sickening flavor to the warm, clinging air, and its humidity is so intense that it is difficult to distinguish it from light rain. We have landed within some city, apparently -- in a grassy open space that anywhere else might have been called a park, but which here seems merely to be a patch of land no one had bothered to use for anything, vaguely square and a couple of hundred meters across. To our left is an irregular row of bedraggled two-story wooden shacks; on our right is a dense clump of ungainly, asymmetrical trees; before and behind us are ragged aggregations of unpainted buildings and scruffy, unattractive shrubbery.

"Look," says Mayfly, pointing, and we have our first encounter with the famous wildlife of Sidri Akarak.

An ugly creature comes bounding toward us out of the trees: a bulky round-bodied thing, dark and furry, that rises to a disconcerting height atop two scrawny, hairless legs covered with bright yellow scales. Its face is something out of your worst dreams, bulging fiery eyes the size of saucers and dangling red wattles and jutting black fangs, and it is moving very quickly in our direction, howling ferociously.

We have weapons, of course. But it swiftly becomes apparent that the thing has no interest in us, that in fact it is fleeing an even more ghastly thing, a long bristle-covered, many-legged monster built close to the ground, from whose spherical head emerge three long hornlike projections that branch and branch again, terminating in scores of writhing tendrils that are surely equipped with venomous stingers. First one vile creature and then the other runs past us without seeming to notice us, and they lose themselves in the shrubbery beyond. We can hear wild shrieking and hissing in there, and the sound of cracking branches.

Nikomastir is smiling benignly. All this must be delightful him. Mayfly too looks entranced. Even Velimyle, who is closest to me in temperament, almost normal in her desires and amusements, claps her hands together in fascination. I alone seem to be troubled by the sight of such creatures running about unhindered on what is supposedly a civilized world.

But it is ever thus in our travels: I am fated always to stand a little to one side as I follow these three around the universe. Yet am I linked irrevocably to them all the same.

Mayfly was my lover once, two lives back. That was before we took the mask together. Now, of course, it would be unthinkable for anything carnal to happen between us, though I still cherish cheerful memories of her pixy breasts in my hands, her slim, sleek thighs about my hips. Even if we have forsworn the sexual part of our friendship, the rest is deeper than ever, and in truth we are still profoundly a couple, Mayfly and I, despite the rich and rewarding relationship I maintain with Velimyle and the frothy, sportive one Mayfly has built with Nikomastir. Above and beyond all that, there is also the bond that links us all. The lines of attraction go this

way and that. We are inseparables. They are my world; I am a citizen only of our little group. Wherever we go, we go together. Even unto Sidri Akrak.

IN A LITTLE WHILE, two immigration officers show up to check us out. Sidri Akrak is an Imperium world, and therefore the local immigration scanners have been automatically alerted to our arrival.

They come riding up in a sputtering little snub-nosed vehicle, a man and a woman in baggy brown uniforms, and begin asking us questions. Nikomastir does most of the answering. His charm is irresistible even to an Akrakikan.

The questioning, brusque and hard-edged, is done in Imperial, but from time to time the immigration officers exchange comments with each other in their own dialect, which sounds Eke static. The woman is swarthy and squat and flat-faced and the man is even less lovely, and they are not at all obliging; they seem to regard the arrival of tourists on their planet simply as an irritating intrusion. The discussion goes on and on--do we plan to remain here long, are we financially solvent, do we intend to engage in political activity in the course of our stay? Nikomastir meets every query with glib, easy reassurances. During our interrogation a slimy rain begins to fall, oily pink stuff that coats us like grease, and a massive, many-humped, blue-green beast that looks like an ambulatory hill with purple eyes appears and goes lolloping thunderously past us with utter unconcern for our presence, leaving an odor of decay and corruption in its wake. After a time I stop listening to the discussion. But finally they flash bright lights in our faces -- passports are validated retinally on Sidri Akrak--and Nikomastir announces that we have been granted six-month visas. Lodgings are available three streets away, they tell us.

The place they have sent us to turns out to be a dismal, rickety hovel, and our innkeeper is no more friendly than the immigration officials, but we are grudgingly allowed to rent the entire upper floor. The rooms I am to share with Velimyle face the rear garden, a patch of uncouth, tangled wilderness where some slow-moving shaggy monster is sluggishly browsing about, nibbling on the shrubbery. It lifts its head in my direction and gives me a cold glare, as though to warn me away from the plants on which it's feeding. I signal it that it has nothing to worry about and turn away from the window. As I unpack, I see a procession of glassy-shelled snail-like things with huge bulbous red eyes crawling diagonally across the bedroom wall. They, too, stare back at me. They seem almost to be smirking at me.

But Nikomastir and Mayfly claim to be delighted to be here, and Velimyle seems to have no complaints. I feel outnumbered by them. Velimyle announces that she would like to do a painting of Nikomastir in the hotel garden. She only paints when she's in a buoyant mood. Buoyant, here? They run off together downstairs, hand in hand like happy children. I watch from above as Velimyle sets up her easel outside and goes about the task of priming the psychosensitive surface of her canvas. She and Nikomastir are as untroubled as any Akrakikan by the shambling shaggy thing that grazes noisily nearby. How quickly they have acclimated.

"Are you very miserable here, darling?" Mayfly asks, running her fingertips lightly along my cheeks.

I give her a stoic smile. "I'll be all right. We'll find things to amuse us, I'm sure. It's all for the best that Nikomastir brought us to this place."

"You don't mean that, do you? Not really."

"Not really, no."

Yet in some sense I do. I often tell myself that it's important not to live as though life is just a perpetual holiday for us, even though in fact it is. It would be too easy to lose ourselves, if we aren't careful, in the nightmare that is perfection.

This is an era when all things are possible. We have godlike existences. We have every imaginable comfort close at hand. Beauty and long life are ours for the asking; we are spa-red the whole dreary business of sagging flesh and spreading waistlines and blurry eyesight and graying hair and hardening arteries that afflicted our remote ancestors. And all the incredible richness of the galaxy lies open to us: Key in your coordinates, snap your fingers, off you go, any world you choose to visit instantly available. Never in the history of the universe has any species lived such a life as ours.

I fear the terrible ease of this existence. I think sometimes that we'll eventually be asked to pay a great price for it. That thought engulfs me in secret terror.

Mayfly, who knows me almost as well as I know myself, says, "Think of it this way, love. There's something to be learned even from ugliness. Isn't it true that what we're trying to get out of all this travel is experience that has meaning? If that's what we want, we can't just limit ourselves to the beautiful places. And maybe a horrid place like Sidri Akarak has something important to teach us."

Yes. She's right. Is she aware that she's voicing my own most private thoughts, or is she just being playful? Perhaps it's all self-delusion, but I do indeed seek for meaning as we travel, or at least think that I do. These furtive broodings in which I indulge inside the hidden places of my soul are, so it seems to me, the thing that sets me apart from Nikomastir and Mayfly and Velimyle, who take life as it comes and ask no questions.

Velimyle and Nikomastir return from the garden a little while later. She puts the rolled canvas away without showing it to me. She has an uncharacteristically somber expression on her face, and even giddy Nikomastir seems troubled. Plainly something has gone awry.

I know better than to ask for details.

We eat at our hotel that night. The surly innkeeper slams the dishes down

before us almost angrily: a thin, greenish gruel some sort of stewed shredded meat, a mess of overcooked vegetables. The meat tastes like cooked twine and the vegetables have a dank, swampy flavor. I pretend we are back on Iriarte, where food is the highest art and every meal is a symphony. I pretend we have returned to Nabomba Zom, to that wondrous palatial hotel by the shore of the scarlet sea, the water, of which at dawn would reverberate as if struck by a hammer as the first blue rays of morning fell upon it.

But no, no, we are on Sidri Akrak. I lie sleepless through the night with Velimyle breathing gently beside me, listening to the fierce honkings and roarings and screechings of the wild beasts that roam the darkness beyond our windows. Now and again the sounds of the lovemaking of Mayfly and Nikomastir come through the thin walls that separate our bedroom from theirs, giggles and gasps and long, indrawn sighs of pleasure.

In the morning we go out exploring.

This city, we have learned, is called Periandros Andifang. It has a population of just under one hundred thousand, with not a single building of the slightest architectural distinction and a year-round climate of clamminess and drizzle. The plant life is, generally, speaking, strikingly unsightly—a preponderance of gray leaves, black flowers—and the air is full of clouds of little stinging midges with malevolent purple beaks, and of course one has to deal with the fauna, too, the fiend's gallery of grisly monstrosities, seemingly, no two alike, that greet you at every turn: huge beasts with beady eyes and slavering fangs and clacking claws, things with pockmarked, pustulant skins or writhing, furry tentacles or clutching, many-jointed arms. Almost always they appear without warning, galloping out of some clump of uttering banshee shrieks or ground-shaking roars. I begin to understand now the tales of unwary travelers who have total mental breakdowns within an hour of their arrival on Sidri Akarak.

It quickly becomes clear to us, though, that none of these horrendous creatures has any interest in attacking us. The only, real risk we run is that of getting trampled as they go charging past. Very likely it is the case that they find human flesh unpalatable, or indigestible, or downright poisonous. But encountering them is an unnerving business, and we encounter them again and again and again.

Nikomastir finds it all fascinating. Painstakingly he searches out the ill-favored, the misshapen, the feculent, the repulsive -- not that they are hard to find. He drifts ecstatically from one eyesore of a building to the next, taking an infinite number of pictures. He adores the plants' sooty, foul-smelling blossoms and sticky, blighted-looking leaves. The rampaging animals give him even greater pleasure; whenever some particularly immense or especially abhorrent-looking loathsomeness happens to cross our path, he cries out in boyish glee.

This starts to be very irritating. His callow idiocy is making me feel old.

"Remember, sweet, he's not even seventy yet," Mayfly reminds me, seeing my brows furrowing. "Surely you were like that yourself, once upon a time."

"Was I? I'd like to think that isn't so."

"And in any case," says Velimyle, "can't you manage to find that enthusiasm of his charming?"

No. I can't. Perhaps it's getting to be time for my next rebirth, I think. Growing old, for us, isn't a matter so much of bodily decay--that is fended off by efficient processes of automatic bioenergetic correction -- as of increasing inward rigidity, a creakiness of the soul, a corrugation of the psyche, a stiffening of the spiritual synapses. One starts to feel sour and petty and crabbed. Life loses its joy and its juice. By then you begin to become aware that it is time to clamber once more into the crystal tank where an intricate spiderweb of machinery will enfold you like a loving mother, and slip off into sweet oblivion for a while, and awaken to find yourself young again and ready to over. Which you can do over and over again, until eventually you arrive at the annoying point, after the eleventh or twelfth rebirth, where the buildup of solar poisons in your system has at last become ineradicable under any circumstances, and that is the end of you, alas. Even gods have to die eventually, it would seem.

Nikomastir is a young god, and I am, evidently, an aging one. I try to make allowances for that. But I find myself fervently hoping all the same, that he will tire of this awful place very soon and allow us to go onward to some happier world.

HE DOES NOT tire of it, though.

He loves it. He is in the grip of what some ancient poet once called the fascination of the abomination. He has gone up and down every street of the city, peering at this building and that one in unstinting admiration of their imperfections. For several days running, he makes it clear that he is searching for some building in particular, and then he finds it: a rambling old ruin of great size and formidable ugliness at the very edge of town, standing apart from everything else in a sort of private park.

"Here it is!" he cries. "The ancestral mansion! The house where my father was born!"

So Nikomastir still clings to the claim that he is of Akrakikan descent. There is no way this can be true; the natives of this world are a chilly, bloodless folk with mean, pinched, hard souls, if they have souls at all and not just some clicking, chattering robotic mechanisms inside their skulls. Indeed, I have known robots with personalities far more appealing than anyone we have met thus far on Sidri Akarak. Nikomastir, bless him, is nothing at all like that. He may be silly and frivolous and empty-headed, but he also is sweet-natured and lively and amiable and vivacious, terms that have never yet been applied to any citizen of Sidri Akarak, and never will be.

Velimyle has tried to paint him again. Again the attempt was a failure. This time she is so distressed that I dare to breach the wall of privacy behind which she keeps her art and ask her what the difficulty is.

"Look," she says.

She unrolls the second canvas. Against the familiar swirling colors of a typical Velimyle background I see the slender, angular form of Nikomastir, imprinted there by the force of Velimyle's mental rapport with the psychosensitive fabric. But the features are all wrong. Nikomastir's perpetual easy smile has given way to a dreadful, scowling grimace. His lip curls backward menacingly; his teeth are the teeth of some predatory beast. And his eyes--oh, Velimyle, those harsh, glaring eyes! Where is his cheerful sparkle? These eyes are hard, narrow, fierce, and above all else sad. The Nikomastir of Velimyle's painting stares out at the universe with tragic intensity. They are the eyes of a god, perhaps, but of a dying god, one who knows he must give up his life for the redemption of his race.

"The first one was almost as bad," Velimyle says. "Why is this happening? This isn't Nikomastir at all. I've never had something like this happen."

"Has he seen either of the paintings?"

"I wouldn't let him. All I told him was that they didn't come out right, that they would depress him if I showed them to him. And of course he didn't want to see them after that."

"Something about this planet must be shading your perceptions," I say. "Burn this, Velimyle. And the other one, too. And forget about painting him until we've left here."

Nikomastir wants to have a look inside the crumbling, lurching pile that he says is his family's ancestral home. But the place, ruinous though it is, happens to be occupied by Akrakikans, a whole swarm of them, and when he knocks at the front door and grandly introduces himself to the majordomo of the house as Count Nikomastir of Sembiran, who has come here on a sentimental Journey to his former paternal estate, the door is closed in his face without a word. "How impolite," Nikomastir says, not seeming very surprised. "But don't worry: I'll find a way of getting in."

That project gets tabled, too. Over the next few days he leads us farther and farther afield, well out into the uninhabited countryside beyond the boundaries of Periandros Andifang. The land out here is swampy and uningratiating, and of course there are the animals to contend with, and the insects, and the humidity. I can tell that Mayfly and Velimyle are growing a little weary of Nikomastir's exuberance, but they both are as tolerant of his whims as ever and follow him loyally through these soggy realms. As do I -- partly, I suppose, because we agreed long ago that we would journey everywhere as a single unit, and partly because I have been stung, evidently, by various hints of Mayfly's and Velimyle's that my recent crocheting could mean I might be getting ready for my next rebirth.

Then he turns his attention once more to the old house that he imagines once belonged to his family. "My father once told me that there's a pool of fire behind it, a phosphorescent lake. He used to swim it when he was a boy, and he'd come up

dripping with coot flame. I'm going to take a swim in it too, and then we can head off to the next planet. Whose turn is it to pick our next planet, anyway?"

"Mine," I say quickly. I have Marajo in mind-the sparkling sands, the City of Seven Pyramids. "If there's a lake behind that house, Nikomastir, I advise you very earnestly to stay away from it. The people who live there don't seem to look favorably on trespassers. Besides, can't you imagine the kind of nastinesses that would live in a lake on this world?"

"My father went swimming in that one," Nikomastir replies, and gives me a defiant glare. "It's perfectly safe, I assure you."

I doubt, of course, that any such lake exists. If it's there, though, I hope he isn't fool enough to go swimming in it. My affection for the boy is real; I don't want him to come to harm.

But I let the matter drop. I've already said too much. The surest way to prod him into trouble, I know, is to oppose him in one of his capricious fancies. My hope is that Nikomastir's attention will be diverted elsewhere in the next day or two and all thought of that dismal house, and of the fiery lake that may or may not be behind it, will fly out of his mind.

It's generally a good idea, when visiting a world you know very little about, to keep out of places of unknown chemical properties. When we toured Megalo Kastro, we stood at the edge of a cliff looking down into the famous living sea, that pink custardy mass that is in fact a single living organism of gigantic size, spreading across thousands of kilometers of that world. But it did not occur to us to take a swim in that sea, for we understood that in a matter of hours it would dissolve and digest us if we did.

And when we were on Xamur we went to see the Idradin crater, as everyone who goes to Xamur does. Xamur is the most perfect of worlds, flawless and serene, a paradise, air Eke perfume and water like wine, every tree in the ideal place, every brook, every hill. It has only one blemish-the Idradin, a huge round pit that reaches deep into the planet's primordial heart. It is a hideous place, that crater. Concentric rings of jagged cooled lava surround it, black and eroded and bleak. Stinking gases rise out of the depths, and yellow clouds of sulfuric miasma belch forth, and wild red shafts of roaring flame, and you peer down from the edge into a roiling den of hot, surging magma. Everyone who goes to Xamur must visit the Idradin, for if you did not see perfect Xamur's one terrible flaw, you could never be happy on any other world. And so we stared into it from above, and shivered with the horror we were expected to feel; but we were never at all tempted to clamber down the crater's sides and dip our toes into that realm of fire below.

It seems unlikely to me that Nikomastir will do anything so stupid here. But I have to be careful not to prod him in the wrong direction. I don't mention the lake to him again.

OUR EXPLORATION of Sidri Akarak proceeds. We visit new swamps, new groves of

fetid-smelling, malproportioned trees, new neighborhoods of misshapen and graceless buildings. One drizzly, disheartening day succeeds another, and finally I am unable to bear the sight of that brown sky and greenish sun any longer. Though it is a violation of our agreement, I stay behind at the hotel one morning and let the other three go off without me.

It is a quiet time. I spend the hours reflecting on our travels of years past, all the many worlds we have seen. Icy Mulano of the two suns, one yellow, one bloody red, and billions of ghostly electric life-forms glimmering about you in the frigid air. Estrilidis, where the cats have two tails and the insects have eyes like blue diamonds. Zimbalou, the sunless nomad world, where the cities are buried deep below the frozen surface. Kalimaka, Haj Qaldun, Vietoris, Nabomba Zom-

So many places, so many sights. A lifetime of wonderful experiences; and yet what, I ask myself, has it all meant? How has it shaped me? What have I learned?

I have no answers, only to say that we will continue to go onward, ever onward. It is our life. It is what we do. We are travelers by choice, but also by nature, by destiny.

I am still lost in reverie when I hear Velimyle's voice outside my window, calling to me, telling me that I must come quickly. "Nikomastir---" she cries. "Nikomastir!"

"What about him?"

But she can only gesture and wave. Her eyes are wild. We run together through the muddy streets, paying no heed to the bulky and grotesque Akrakikan monstrosities that occasionally intersect our path. I realize after a time that Velimyle is leading me toward the tumbledown house at the edge of town that Nikomastir has claimed as his family's former home. A narrow, grassy path leads around one side of it to the rear; and there, to my amazement, I see the phosphorescent lake of Nikomastir's fantasies, with Mayfly beside it, leaping up and down in agitation that verges on frenzy.

She points toward the water. "Out there-- there--" On this ugly world, even a phosphorescent lake can somehow manage to be an unlovely sight. I saw one once on Darma Barma that flashed like heavenly fire in rippling waves of cobalt and amethyst, magenta and gold, aquamarine and emerald and jade. But from this lake emanates the most unradiant of radiances, a dull, prosaic, sickly gleam, dark-toned and dispiriting, except in one place off toward the farther shore, where a disturbance of some sort is setting up whirlpools of glinting metallic effects, swirls of eye-jabbing bright sparkles, as though handfuls of iron filings are being thrown through a magnetic field.

The disturbance is Nikomastir. He-- his body, rather-- is tossing and heaving at the lake's surface, and all about him the denizens of the lake can be seen, narrow scaly jutting heads popping up by the dozens, hinged jaws snapping, sharp teeth closing on flesh. A widening pool of blood surrounds him. They, whatever they are, are ripping him to shreds.

"We have to get him out of there," Mayfly says, her voice congested with horror and fear.

"How?" I ask.

"I told him not to do it," says trembling Velimyle. "I told him, I told him, I told him. But he plunged right in, and when he was halfway across they began to break the surface, and then-- then he began screaming, and--"

Mayfly plucks urgently at my sleeve. "What can we do? How can we rescue him?"

"He's beyond rescuing," I tell her hollowly.

"But if we can get his body back," she says, "there'll be a way to revive him, won't there? I know there is. Scientists can do anything nowadays." Velimyle, more tentatively, agrees. Some kind of scientific miracle, Nikomastir gathered up and repaired somehow by the regeneration of tissue--

But tissue is all that's left of him now, frayed sorry scraps, and the creatures of the lake, frantic now with blood lust, are devouring even those in furious haste.

They want me to tell them that Nikomastir isn't really dead. But he is: really, really, really dead. Dead forever. What has been played out on this shore today was not a game. There is nothing that can be saved, no way to regenerate. I have never seen the death of a human being before. It is a dizzying thing to contemplate: the finality, the utterness. My mind is whirling-, I have to fight back convulsions of shock and horror.

"Couldn't you have stopped him?" I ask angrily, when I am able to speak again.

"But he wanted so badly to do it," Mayfly replies. "We couldn't have stopped him, you know. Not even if we--"

She halts in mid-sentence.

"Not even if you had wanted to?" I say. "Is that it?" Neither of them can meet my furious gaze. "But you didn't want to, did you? You thought it would be fun to see Nikomastir swim across the phosphorescent lake. Fun. Am I right? Yes. I know I am. What could you have been thinking, Mayfly? Velimyle?"

There is no sign of Nikomastir at the surface any longer. The lake is growing still again. Its phosphorescence has subsided to a somber, tarnished glow.

For a long time, none of us is capable of moving. Silent, pale, stunned, we stand with bowed heads by the shore of that frightful lake, scarcely even able to breathe.

We are in the presence of incontrovertible and permanent death, which to us is a novelty far greater even than the living sea of Megalo Kastro or the blue dawn of Nabomba Zom, and the immense fact of it holds us rooted to the spot.

Was this truly Nikomastir's ancestral world? Was his father actually born in that great old falling-down house, and did he really once swim in this deadly lake? And if none of that was so, how did Nikomastir know the lake was there? We will never be able to answer those questions. Whatever we do not know about Nikomastir, that we have not already learned, we will never come to discover now. That is the meaning of death: the finality of it, the severing of communication, the awful unanswerable power of the uncompromising curtain that descends like a wall of steel. We did not come to Sidri Akarak to learn about such things, but that is what we have learned on Sidri Akarak, and we will take it with us wherever we go henceforth, pondering it, examining it.

"Come," I say to Mayfly and Velimyle, after a time. "We need to get away from here."

SO, THEN. Nikomastir was foolish. He was bold. He has had his swim, and now he is dead. And why? Why? For what? What was he seeking on this awful world? What were we? We know what we found, yes, but not what we were looking for. I wonder if we will ever know.

He has lived his only life, has Nikomastir, and he has lost it in the pursuit of idle pleasure. There is a lesson in that, for me, for Velimyle, for Mayfly, for us all. And one day I will, I hope, understand what it is.

All I do know after having lived these hundreds of years is that the universe is very large and we are quite small. We live godlike lives these days, flitting as we do from world to world, but even so we are not gods. We die: some sooner, some later, but we do die. Only gods live forever. Nikomastir hardly lived at all.

So be it. We have learned what we have learned from Nikomastir's death, and now we must move on. We are travelers by nature and destiny, and we will go forward into our lives. Tomorrow we leave for Marajo. The shining sands, the City of Seven Pyramids. Marajo will teach us something, as Xamur once did, and Nabomba Zom, and Galgala. And also Sidri Akarak. Something. Something. Something.
