

## Mouse - a novelette by John Grant

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All of the doors in the complex suddenly plunged to the ground, like the blades of an array of guillotines. Makreed, the botanist, had been just about to step through one of them, and he watched in astonishment in the split second before the light failed as the front of his foot was pulverized. He staggered back, wondered briefly why it was that he felt no pain, then fainted.

A while later he swam back to consciousness -- experiencing as he always did after fainting the sensation that somebody was scrubbing his face both inside and out with lukewarm carbonated water. He lay on his back for a few seconds, seeing nothing but a swirling pattern of light that seemed to have no purpose to it, speculating about where in the universe he might

be.

The pain from his foot brought the memory back and he screamed. His entire right leg was an edifice of pain. Intellect told him that the source of the agony was the wreckage at the leg's end, but he was unable to distinguish it from the rest. Quite separate from the sensation of pain he could sense that somebody -- who? -- was manipulating in some way what was left of his foot. In the depths of his struggling mind he knew that he'd been maimed for life -- although at the same time there was a cooler voice inside him telling him that his foot could be restored, if only he could get himself to a surgeon in time.

A new sensation, one that he could tell apart from the rest: a throbbingly tight pressure at the back of his knee. In a way it hurt worse than the pain.

"Hi there, Makreed," said a soft voice.

He didn't recognize it, and so as a matter of principle he screamed again. If this was the afterlife that the succeeding Incarnate Ones so often and so solemnly promised their people, he, Makreed, had just decided that he wanted nothing to do with it. Too much pain. Perhaps he was doomed to spend all of the rest of eternity suffering from the anguish of the blow that had definitely killed him.

He noticed that the effort of screaming temporarily took his mind off the pain, so he did it again.

"Shut up, please," said the voice. "This place echoes, you know. You're deafening me. I'm having enough difficulty bandaging up your goddam foot without having to cope with punctured eardrums."

Makreed controlled himself. It wasn't as easy as he'd thought it would be. His shoulders twisted, the muscles around the base of his neck tightening, as he pulled the new scream back into himself.

Think of something else. Distract yourself. At least now you know you're not dead.

He tried to recall which member of the team had been immediately behind him just before the doors had closed. That person must have been fairly close to him, because the chambers down here were quite small. His recollections were muzzy; his visual memory had never been up to much, and at the moment all the pictures in his mind kept crumpling out of existence before they'd properly formed. But he knew that it must have been a woman

behind him -- he could tell as much from the sound of her voice as she worked on his foot. Bandaging it, as she'd said. She must have applied a tourniquet around his knee, or perhaps she was just pressing down on the blood-vessel with her thumb.

He permitted himself a moan.

"That's better," said the invisible woman. "Keep it at that level."

"Who are you?" he said.

"Qinefer."

For a few moments the name made no sense. Then he put it together with an image. He was conscious of the fact that his mind was working very slowly.

The trouble was that she didn't look much like Qinefers usually did.

Qinefer -- she was the woman whom somehow no one ever looked at all that often. She had a habit, when crossing a room, of following the line of the walls, as if afraid to expose herself to the open space in the middle. She had mid-length, curly black hair -- that was the first thing he remembered. Yes, and a broad face that managed, despite its breadth, to convey the impression of delicate construction. The only thing that distinguished her was that, anachronistically, she wore spectacles; these intensified the darkness and depth of her eyes while at the same time drawing attention to the prim nakedness of the folds at the outer corners. Small breasts, hardly discernible under her blue uniform shirt; you tended to notice things like breasts on a long flight. Some of the other men on the mission had called her Mouse, because of the way she was so quiet. So self-deprecating. That was probably why he'd hardly registered her presence except for the one time he'd thought about her breasts. Just the one time, which said a lot in itself.

"Mouse," he said, then wished he hadn't.

"Yes."

She was a biochemist; the information popped into his mind. More came. The earlier expedition to the star called Embrace-of-the-Forest had reported that, astonishingly, there was a deal of evidence indicating that, millennia before, the planet closest to the dim red dwarf had given birth to what had become an advanced civilization. That life could emerge at all on a world where the surface temperature was so low had been something of a surprise; that the miserly radiation from its star, so sluggishly devoid of high-energy particles, could have caused sufficient genetic mutation to create a sophisticated lifeform within the known lifetime of the universe was so startling that the exobiologists were still revising their theories. Meanwhile, the rest of the scientists were trying to puzzle out why the creatures of Starveling, as the world had been named, had disappeared, because now the planet was manifestly barren of all but the most primitive forms of animal life. What people tried not to speculate about too publicly for fear of a blasphemy charge was the possibility that this might have been the home of the Forgotten, the vanished race whose technological feats were evidenced throughout the Galaxy by constructions great and small, from hand-sized gadgets whose purposes were too often inscrutable up to the artificial worlds that floated between the suns.

But, if this were indeed the Forgotten's home world, perhaps a clue to that race's extinction might be found here. Hence the presence of a couple of hundred scientists and their inevitable hangers-on. Among the key members of the team there were a pair of biochemists: Mouse and a big blonde woman called Claire whom Makreed now recalled vaguely as having been curiously uninteresting in bed but attractively vivacious out of it.

If Qinefer had had any diurnal presence in his mind at all it had been as the other biochemist.

"What about the people who were ahead of us?" he said weakly, his lips feeling rubbery, like the fat leaves of a succulent plant. "And the others behind us?"

"Don't think about them. For the moment the only people we've got room to think about is us."

There was a spark of coldness in the small of his back and almost immediately the pain began to recede. In the lucidity which came into his mind like a wash of clean water he realized that Mouse had finally gotten around to giving him a shot of painkiller from the medikit at her belt. He wondered why she hadn't done that before.

He thanked her politely for her attentions and then drifted off into an untroubled sleep.

"You're a shit, you know?" Qinefer said quietly, clutching a towel to her chest as if to conceal the newly discovered slightness of her bosom. The taut vehemence with which she'd said the words made the tip of her tongue hurt; an isolated part of her was trying to tell her that the pain was merely psychosomatic, but she didn't want to listen to it. "You really are."

"What do you mean?" said Daan. He was standing looking out of the picture-window at the city two hundred metres below. The sun was bright and the sky a yellow-blue haze, as they always were on The World. He saw distant patterns of traffic moving like midges. She saw his tight buttocks and the tapestry of curly soft hair around the sharp bulges of his shoulderblades, and rubbed her fingertips together, as if trying to brush away all the times she'd touched him.

"What do you think I mean?" she said, her words like arrows at his back.

"She could have given you dead-eyes or limpets, you clown. And that would've meant that you gave them on to me. Not exactly the loving touch."

At last Daan turned to look at her. The sunshine drenching him made the hairs of his body seem to glow from their own light. He was smiling.

"I tested myself, you know," he said. Smiling.

"And the tests are only ninety-nine per cent reliable."

"That's a good level of risk."

"Not good enough. You want to spend the rest of forever wandering around with your eyes like marbles? Or limping -- hobbledly hobbledly hobbledly -- because your ankle-tendons have calced?"

"No. I'd euth rather than that." His grin broadened. "Yup, 've always wanted to find out what it's like to be dead. Better than living -- must be."

"And me?"

He shrugged. "We could've had fun in the afterlife together."

"I might have had an opinion on the matter. Did you ever think about that, huh? I mightn't have wanted to euth. But I wouldn't have wanted to keep on living with dead-eyes or limpets -- or you -- any longer, either."

"Hey, darling . . ."

"Just fuck off, you moron. You've blown it this time. Go and redesign your life."

His smile faded. "I think it's you who should be the one to go. If you

want to."

Qinefer dressed herself, gathered together as many of her possessions as would fit into a suitcase, and left. She never saw Daan again, and never allowed herself again to become that close to another human being. Instead she became a biochemist.

The chamber in which they were trapped was about five metres long and about three metres wide and about two metres high. One of a chain of fifty or more built here underground for reasons that had yet to be ascertained -- if ever -- it had been constructed with geometrical precision. The height dimension had led the social anthropologists on the expedition to speculate that the original inhabitants of Starveling must have been shorter in stature than human beings, but not by all that much. Around the walls of the chamber, featureless metal boxes were placed in a neat row. Everything was covered in a layer of dust.

Makreed was cold. The pain from his foot was now tolerable, thanks to the painkiller that Mouse had administered before he'd fallen asleep, but it constantly reminded him of his own potential for mortality, that it was possible for him not to live forever if he did too much irreversible damage to his body, something he normally never thought about. But at least the bleeding had stopped.

He sat with his knees drawn up, his arms around them and his back against one of the walls. He could see the chamber only in fleeting highlights as the beam of Mouse's torch swept around it. She was slowly working her way across one of the blank doors, hoping to find some pressure-sensitive patch that might open it. Makreed had little faith in her quest: she'd already searched the other of the two doors without success.

He wondered for the millionth time why he was here in the complex. He was a botanist, not a physicist. But someone among the expedition's loosely defined Powers That Be had decreed that, before they left Starveling, there should be one last prow through the subterranean maze by all the scientists who'd been brought along. Maybe a botanist might spot something that a physicist or a biochemist wouldn't? Makreed had protested at the implausibility of the reasoning; now he wished he'd protested louder.

He found his own torch, carefully stowed in the breast pocket of his uniform, exactly where it was supposed to be, and began to flash it around him. The little metal boxes that the ETs had constructed and left around the walls so many millennia ago seemed all to be much of a size; through the dust they showed a matte surface of dark green. Presumably they had had some purpose, but so far the expedition had been unable even to guess at what that purpose might have been. One popular theory was that the whole complex had been some sort of library, the metal boxes being the ET equivalent of books -- but it was just a theory. Someone else had suggested it was a mausoleum. If they'd been able to get the boxes open they might have found out.

"Any luck?" he said listlessly. The darkness quenched all sparks of optimism.

"I'd tell you if there were," said Mouse.

A stupid question.

"Can I help?"

"I don't think so. On second thoughts, yes. You can help by not helping. Don't speak, and try to relax. Thirty cubic metres of air isn't going to keep us going forever. And don't even think of lighting a smokette, if you

have the habit."

He swung his torch round to watch her. The air was dead down here, and it made her aliveness incongruous. Patiently, patiently, she was moving her right hand over the surface of the door, letting the fingers push against it gently every centimetre or so. The thinness of her wrists seemed somehow incompatible with the competence of her movements.

She turned and looked back at him, not moving her feet, the plastiglass of her spectacles flashing in the torchlight.

"I'd rather you didn't watch me," she said.

"Why not?"

"Let's not discuss it. The air -- remember?"

Daan had been great that summer. Ever since she'd known him he'd been broke -- or as broke as the Incarnate One ever permitted his children to be on The World -- but now one of Daan's mind-songs had been bought as the theme for some afternoon series on the psychoholo that no one ever admitted they watched. It wasn't exactly the kind of fame he'd been thinking of during the past two or three decades when he'd been slaving away at the psychosynth, but the first royalty cheque had been large enough to cover comfortably any sense of outraged artistic integrity. He'd banked half the money and told her that the best way of spending the other half was for them both to go south, to the Anonymous City -- which he'd always dreamed of seeing -- and bum around until there was nothing left but their fares home.

Qinefer had given up her job reluctantly. Well, only in some ways reluctantly. She'd liked the job but it hadn't seemed to be leading anywhere and, even if it had been going to, she hadn't been sure that that was anywhere she particularly wanted to go. The Anonymous City, where the air was sullen with the redolence of glamorously unknown sins, had been a much more appealing destination. A neighbour had been willing to look after the lizards in their absence, and so they'd gone . . .

And come back again. It was after they'd got home, having made love in an apartment that smelt of the passage of time, that Daan had confessed to her about the "little accident" that had befallen him in one of the sun-battered parks of the Anonymous City. In the normal way it mightn't have worried her too vastly, but like all Daans he was in some ways an honest man, some of the time, and felt that he had to explain himself.

"It wasn't exactly her in any way," he'd said, standing at the window, "and it's not that I don't love you very much. It was just that she'd got these really big boobs. Monsters. Like in the holos. I've always wanted to know what it was like getting laid by somebody like that, and she was sort of ultra-available. It was just, you know, the spirit of scientific enquiry."

Qinefer had never thought too much about her breasts before: like the rest of her body, they'd just been there. Now she wanted to laugh derisively at him -- or maybe herself -- but found that she couldn't muster the necessary derision. Instead she'd discovered to her astonishment that for the first time in her life she felt ashamed of the shape of her body.

She'd known that the embarrassment was ridiculous, based on a farcical perception of someone else's perception of herself, but she'd anyway grabbed a towel to cover up the suddenly offensively small curves. They'd always been average-sized curves before . . .

After she left Daan that day, Qinefer erected a transparent wall around

herself and watched the world through it. Visitors were allowed inside the wall only very occasionally, and never for very long. Before discovering that she'd qualified to go on the scientific expedition to Embrace-of-the-Forest and its enigmatic dead planet she'd slept with, all told, two men and one woman, one night apiece, no interesting conversation in the morning, not much interest in the event; the operation had in each case been a clinical one, designed purely to release a sexual tension which would not succumb to masturbation. The wall had been kept essentially intact.

And now she was on Starveling, sent here to examine the biochemistry of the planet's rudimentary lifeforms and, if the expedition was lucky and found some remains, to make guesses about what the workings of the bodies of the long-ago ETs might have been. She was also trapped in a dark, smallish chamber with a man she didn't much like. He was a nuisance: a complicating factor in what would otherwise have been an engrossing intellectual puzzle. That it had been by accident that he had breached her wall ameliorated his crime somewhat, but only somewhat. She'd bandaged his fearful wound automatically, more because she'd known that it would look bad to her rescuers if she hadn't than for any other reason, but, as she recognized, the fact that she'd forgotten about the painkiller for so long was symptomatic of her sense that he'd forced himself on her.

Wincing histrionically as he moved his right leg, making sure that Mouse heard the way he silenced the whistle of his indrawn breath, Makreed shifted himself over to one of the metal boxes. He brushed away the superficial dust and looked at the artefact in the rather too white light from his torch. The drab green metal looked back at him with little friendliness. For the first time since they'd landed on Starveling it became a part of his consciousness that they really were on an unknown planet -- not just in some mysteriously hitherto-unexplored tract on one of the Authority's worlds. The box seemed more alien to him than any luridly tentacled monster.

It looked utterly inert. He pushed it, knowing as he did so that the thing was fixed immovably to the smoothly tiled floor.

During the earlier forays into the complex, no one had discovered a single marking on any of the boxes: they were just featureless metal cuboids. And yet obviously they must be something more than that -- they had to have been put here for some purpose. The long-gone race that had come of age under the light of Embrace-of-the-Forest must have constructed them with some useful function in mind. Surely they couldn't be books: if they'd been books there'd have been some simple way of opening them. It crossed his mind whimsically that maybe the boxes hadn't been built by the ETs at all: maybe they actually were the ETs.

He smiled at the thought. Anything was possible in the universe, as scientists were constantly discovering. The whole structure of reality was a never-ending conundrum, with observed fact frequently at fundamental variance with the predictions of theory. The age of the universe was known from isotope-dating to be only about five million years -- far too short a time for all the rich diversity of sophisticated lifeforms it contained to have evolved at the rates that could currently be observed. One or the other calculation must be wrong, and so physicists on one side and biologists on the other produced ever more unconvincing hypotheses as to how the rate of radioactive decay and/or mutations might have wildly

fluctuated in past eras. And then there were the calculations that showed beyond all possible shadow of doubt that the speed of light should be some kind of limiting velocity in a universe that was curved as the universe was indeed curved, yet the transition from sublight normspace into supralight flashspace was an easy one, as any space-traveller could tell you, only the changed images on the telltales giving any sign that a barrier had been crossed. Mathematicians had teased for centuries at the paradox, but as yet they had found no flaws in the theory.

Rather like there were no flaws to be found in the impossibly stolid boxes

. . .

Wasn't it a bit presumptuous of the expedition to have assumed they had any function? Half the gadgets on which the Authority had founded a technological civilization shouldn't in theory have worked, yet they obviously did. The only conceivable explanation was that they were made to do so by the existence of each succeeding Incarnate One, who through the donation of his or her blessings could tailor the laws of the universe such that they conformed to human requirements. But presumably the boxes, having been constructed by ETs long before the election of the first Incarnate One, were without such blessing. Perhaps the ETs, too, had had a spiritual magic which could empower the otherwise useless, and that magic had died with them . . .

"I've finished doing this door," said Mouse.

Makreed swivelled where he half-lay. In the poor light of their torches he could see her taking the few steps needed to join him next to the box. He admired the precision and economy of her movements, was surprised to discover that he found them attractive.

She squatted down beside him. He noticed that for some reason she'd kicked her boots off.

"Any luck?" she said, nodding unnecessarily towards the box.

"What would you expect?" he replied sourly.

"You never know." Her voice was as soft as she could make it while still being audible to him.

"Any signs of life from the other side of either of the doors?"

"Nothing. But I'm not surprised. After all, the damn' things are about a metre thick. And solid."

Suddenly she smiled, like dawn. She put her right hand in the light of his torch and he could see a massive bruise across the back of it, staining the darkness of her skin even darker. She must have done some hammering on the doors as he slept.

His immediate reaction was to take her hand in one of his own, but she pulled her arm swiftly away.

"It doesn't hurt," she said. "I've told it not to. I'd teach you how to tell your foot to stop hurting, too, but it would take more time than it's worth."

Her mention of his foot reminded him of its presence. The effects of the painkiller were beginning to wear off. This was something he could deal with himself, without her help. He opened his medikit, dug out the hypo and sprayed himself on the back of the wrist -- as good a place as any. He saw her watching him do this and interpreted the expression on her face as patronizing. She looked away boredly. As the pain began to ebb again he nodded at her, not really liking her, far too aware of the fact that he was having to rely on chemicals for analgesia. It seemed that she could do without.

Her hands were moving rapidly over the contours of the box as if she were trying somehow to sense through her fingertips what might be hidden within. Her attention was completely devoted to the task; she didn't see his nod. The skin of her face was drawn tautly across her cheekbones as she concentrated, the peaks pale against the darkness, and he realized how birdlike her whole body could seem. Yet normally she didn't give the appearance of being slight.

She looked up at him abruptly and saw that he'd been observing her. Behind the windows of her thin-rimmed spectacles her dark eyes tightened in irritation, and then she turned back to her exploration of the box. Her lips formed a single straight line.

"D'you think we're likely to get out of here?" he asked, more because he wanted to hear the sound of a voice -- even his own -- than because he seriously expected an answer.

"Fount of silly bloody questions, aren't you, Makreed?" she said, but without any malice. "Either we will or we won't. I'm hoping that one of these boxes might turn out to be a key to the doors. Now, stop interrupting my thoughts and let me get on with it. Besides, remember the air. Again."

He was offended. The emotion annoyed him by its pettiness, but there was no escaping it. She was assuming that he was an incompetent simply because his foot had been damaged. He had an insight into what it must be like for all those sorry people who'd irreversibly maimed themselves or had one of the debilitating diseases yet had no wish to choose to euth out of it. The thought of spending eternity being treated as useless appalled him. It hurt him to realize that, as far as Mouse was concerned, he was just an additional factor to be taken into account while she tried to find some way of getting the doors open.

He shuffled on his knees across to the next box, dusted it off as last time, and began running his hands across it in imitation of her. All he felt was smooth, cool metal, like he imagined the black planes of Mouse's back must feel. But this thing -- it was an object, nothing more. It was a blank cuboid that some unknown ET had planted here for alien reasons that the human race would never discover. He was getting nothing from it, not even a sense that it had been crafted rather than being a product of nature. He shoved at it impatiently, hoping to get some idea of its mass, but his senses refused to tell him anything.

He sat back and watched Mouse at work. Again he felt that curious magnetism emanating from her body. How come, then, that he'd never really noticed her before? The position that she'd adopted, squatting down intently, was making her uniform trousers stretch over her buttocks, and he felt a foolish urge to reach out and touch the tightness. Only the thought of her contempt stayed his hand.

Makreed was an old acquaintance of lust, but he'd never expected that it would wind its webs around him in a situation like this -- trapped hundreds of metres underground with little hope of escape, his right foot wrapped in a bloodied bandage. He wondered if the heaviness at his loins was a natural response to the prospect of death.

Mouse froze.

"Hello."

"Hello there."

"I recognize you. Haven't we met somewhere before?"



"I don't think so, but if that's what you'd like to believe then please feel free to carry on believing it."

"I like the way you're touching me."

"Why, thank you. It gives me very great pleasure to touch you like this."

"Are you sure we haven't met somewhere before?"

"Very sure. But why should that stop us from becoming friends now? I feel that you and I could become very close to each other -- don't you?"

"Yes . . . yes. It's a good feeling, this learning to know you better. I'd like to be your friend. Syor was very kind to me when she made me, you know; she allowed for the fact that I could make friends whenever I wanted to. It's a very long time, though, since someone has asked to be my friend."

"You must have been lonely."

"'Lonely'?"

"Sad when you were without friends."

"No. No, not at all. That was one of her further kindnesses. I feel all the joys of being close to others, as we are becoming, but in the intervening times I do not feel any sorrow that I am not in this pleasurable state. That would not be constructive. Or perhaps it was simply something that Syor forgot to give me: she was a very simple person, in many ways, before she became our god. I am sorry that you feel this sense that you call 'loneliness'. It must be very painful for you."

"It gives me no pain. It is simply something that I feel. I feel many things, but few of them cause me either pain or pleasure. And none intolerably so."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course I am."

"But now that I am beginning to come so very, very close to you, Qinefer, now that you have permitted me to venture within your wall, I find that you are capable of feeling pain. You have a greater capacity for pain than any of the other Qinefers who have come to me."

"I do not want to discuss this subject any further. If you're really the friend of mine you say you are, you'll know that it would be better to talk about something else."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me. You can't hurt me."

"But I know that I did. You perplex me, friend . . . lover. (I may call you that, may I not? 'Lover'?) There is no reason for you to lie to me. I spoke with you about the pains and pleasures that you feel, and you told me that they did not exist. Now I sense -- as if it were through your own senses -- that my thoughts have hurt you very deeply, and I wish to make reparation. Please, if you are my friend, let me do so."

"You intrude into my privacy."

"Friends as close as we are have no privacy, one from the other. Everything of me is laid out naked before you, for you to look at as much as you will. I have no secrets from you."

"No!" yelled Mouse, throwing herself backwards from the box, scrabbling clumsily across the dusty carpet of the floor. "Leave me alone, fuck you! Leave me alone!"

Makreed was shocked out of his reflections. Instinctively he moved towards her, but she was crouching against the far wall, her eyes fixed on him

with feral intensity, her narrow chest moving in time with the harsh sounds of her breathing. He remembered once having come across a motto that read "Touch not the cat, but with a glove". He eased himself back out of range.

"Are you OK?" he said after a while, carefully modulating his voice so that it was as unobtrusive as possible.

"Sod off."

Another extended silence between them. She wasn't any longer panting in those great tormented gusts, but she was still breathing more loudly than he was. He remembered her admonitions to him about the need to conserve the air in this confined space, and found that his lips were beginning to curl into a smile.

Eventually he spoke again.

"Did the box give you some kind of a shock? Are the boxes dangerous?"

"No. Yes."

"Ah . . ."

"No, it didn't shock me. Yes, they're dangerous. Not dangerous to you, perhaps. I would guess you don't dream very often."

"What are you talking about?"

"The boxes are dangerous to me. At least, that one is. I don't want you here. Go away."

"If I could do that, then neither of us'd be here at all." He gestured with his torch at the walls surrounding them. Then, in an attempt to reassure her, he manoeuvred himself on hands and buttocks until he was an extra metre or so further away from her.

She moved her hands in a small gesture of gratitude, an empty recognition of courtesy. He could still feel the hatred radiating from her.

"What happened?" he asked softly. "It wouldn't hurt you to tell me what happened."

"I don't want to talk about it. Only . . . could you please turn your torch away so that the light doesn't reflect on your face?"

Puzzled, he obeyed, directing the beam into what he thought of as a neutral corner.

"Is that better?"

"Much. Thanks."

There was just enough stray light on her that he could see her shudder. He shifted uncomfortably on the hard floor.

"Can I help?" he said.

"No. No one can. For now. Maybe later -- I just don't know that. But not now. Certainly not now."

She didn't know what she could say to him. She had always been fairly good at reading body language, so that she usually had a reasonably clear idea of other people's unspoken thoughts. Sometimes she got it wrong, of course, and that could be embarrassing, but most often she was uncannily accurate. On several occasions she had had very good reason to be grateful to the ability.

She pulled her spectacles off her nose, and the poorly lit chamber became a reassuring dim blur. For a few moments she let all knowledge of Makreed's existence drop out of her awareness and appraised her situation. This was worse -- much worse -- than anything she could have imagined. The box, with its intrusive "closeness" to her, had made new linkages in her mind, or maybe they'd always been there but she'd consciously or

unconsciously left them neglected, like a dark alley down which, although it would shorten the journey, one chooses not to go. But now she had no option but to go down all the alleys, even though she wanted to stick to the brightly lit highways.

Makreed changed his position again and, even though the movement represented just a tiny change in the fuzz of her vision, it conveyed to her precisely his emotions and to a great extent also his conscious thoughts. There was bafflement, of course -- but she could have guessed that much; she must, as far as he was concerned, be acting in a completely irrational, inexplicable way. There was also a fair measure of irritated impatience, directed both towards her and towards the situation in which he found himself trapped. Fear; there was no obvious indication that they'd be able to escape from this place before the air ran out. And then there was . . . her mind recoiled. He was also wondering, in a curiously unwilling affectionate way, how to suggest to her that it might be good if the two of them made love.

Now?

Here?

With him?

Was he nuts?

And then she found herself smiling. She didn't want to make love with Makreed -- here or anywhere else -- but the mere fact that he was thinking along these lines was oddly cheering. And there was sufficient genuine affection in his thoughts that it might be possible for her to explain to him the changes that the box had wrought in her mind. It had been a very long time since she'd wanted to share any part of her burdens with another human being. It would be a relief to do so now. She could have been stuck here with companions a lot less sympathetic than Makreed.

"No," she said abruptly, "I don't want us to make love."

He made a small startled movement. There was a little guilt in it, and she regretted that. There was no reason for him to have to feel guilty.

She explained as much to him, and then went on to tell him all the rest of it.

"Telepathy," he said at last. He'd taken yet another shot of the painkiller, and his speech was beginning to slur a little.

"No, I don't mean that at all," she snapped, then wished that she'd been able to keep the worst of the acerbity out of her voice. As if to divert attention, she picked at the nails of her foot, fastidiously discarding the detritus on the floor beside her. "No," she said more calmly, "it's not at all like telepathy. Shine your torch into your face -- just for a moment -- and I'll tell you why this is so different."

Makreed found himself reluctant to obey. Had she asked him to strip naked he would have felt the same sort of reluctance. He was aware that he had already come to regard Mouse as a person who was very special; only an hour ago he had rather disliked her, and until a few hours before that he'd dismissed her as a nonentity. He was by no means confident that she'd experienced the same shift in affection towards him. She might look at his nakedness and not like what she saw -- not have the willingness to forgive the fleshly bulges. She might be unable not to laugh at him.

He was aghast at his insecurity; he thought it was something that he'd lost long ago, after the first time he'd slept with Direna, and he'd been for once impotent from nerves, and it hadn't mattered. The women he'd

slept with since the split with Direna had never produced this sort of reaction; he guessed, now, that he hadn't really cared about them enough as people to worry what they thought about him. But Mouse was a person. And she was asking him to bare himself to her in a much more intimate way than sheer physical nakedness. He didn't know if he could.

He decided the issue by pointing the torch so briefly onto his face that the light scarcely had time to touch his features. He let out a great sigh of relief as his eyes tried to accommodate to the gloom once more.

"If I were a telepath," Mouse was saying, "I'd be able to tell you the name of your ex-whilemate. No. Hang on. She's still your whilemate. The two of you haven't got round to divorcing each other yet. Anyway, even though there's no way that I can tell her name, I can read that you're still missing her -- not to mention the child, I'm pretty certain it's a son, that you had with her. You liked kicking a football around with your child and generally being a father; that's the main thing you miss about your child."

Makreed couldn't stop a thin little hiss of pain. He'd thought he'd finally persuaded himself to forget about Branden except as a sort of abstract fact. Now he saw a moving portmanteau image composed of freckles and bruised knees and shitty nappies -- that had been a long time ago, surely -- and, yes, just like Mouse had said, kicking a ball around. He wanted to see Branden's face, but the image vanished too swiftly. He wished that he could remember for himself what Branden's face looked like.

"I'm sad for you," Mouse continued, not looking up. By now she'd moved on to the toes of her other foot.

"In what sense?" he said at last. Keeping the words calm hurt him more than his injury had done.

"Oh, I don't know. In your attitude towards me. In your attitude towards other people -- especially women. I was able to read from your face that you still yearn after your lost wife, even though nowadays you never let yourself think so. That's a pity. You've been like an alcoholic or a junkie ever since then, except it's been with sex. Each new fix is vaguely pleasurable but it doesn't give you the kind of transcendental high you think it ought to, so you keep on going, taking another fix and another and another, each time expecting that this time it's going to be everything you ever hoped it might be."

He was aware of the fact that she wasn't looking at him.

"If you want my advice," she added, "I suggest you try to get things together with your wife again."

"Direna," he heard himself say. "That's her name."

For several long seconds he toyed with vivid fantasies of killing Mouse. She'd said that the boxes were dangerous to her, not to him. Then the anger ebbed, leaving behind it a glow of some emotion he couldn't readily identify.

"Why did the box affect you this much?" he said finally.

"Because it brought me to the edge of what I am," she said, very quietly.

"Because it made me face up to the fact that we're very unlikely to get out of here. You. Me. The cusp of the two of us."

"The box has given you something."

"Too true."

"Could it maybe give you that something again? More than that. Could it tell you how we might get out of this fucking place?"

He picked up a handful of dust from the floor and threw it away from him -- a pointless gesture that made him feel better. He was cleansing himself of the memories of Direna, and Branden. Direna hadn't just left him, she'd left him for somebody else, with whom she was manifestly much happier. In a moment of honesty, before the memory died, he admitted to himself what Mouse had been unable to read in his face: that he'd rather Direna had died.

"Yes, I think it might," said Mouse. It took him a second or two to realize that she was talking about the box. "But I don't want to try."

"Aw, for . . ."

"It touched me," said Mouse.

He snorted theatrically, consciously revitalizing the fading embers of his anger. "And that's more important than getting us out?"

"In some circumstances, yes."

Her voice was very small, but he chose to ignore that.

"You're so kind," he said. "If you want to die, that's your affair. I'd rather like to try to keep on living. Do you think the box would speak to me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because the box loves me, and it doesn't love you."

"Thanks."

"Sorry."

"Do you think," he said with heavy sarcasm, "I might be permitted to ask the box's opinion?"

Makreed hauled himself forwards, letting the beam of his torch wander where it wanted to. He threw himself onto the box beside Mouse, wrapping both of his arms around it, and waited for it to speak to him.

There was nothing.

The box was an inert lump of metal, just as he'd known it would be. It was like all the other boxes he'd touched down here in the complex.

"All right," he said resentfully, after a long while, "the only way we can hope to get these doors open is if you speak to the box a little while longer. I can't do it."

"Yes."

"So go on."

"No."

"Why not?" Makreed saw the torchlight beginning to whirl around his head.

He was so weakened by the cumulative effect of the throbbing from his foot and the liberal shots of painkiller that it had become difficult for him to concentrate any longer on the argument. Frustration with the box's muteness -- he realized that was sapping him as well. All he desired in the universe was to be a long way away from here and never to have to come back again.

"I think I'd rather even screw with you than go near that box again," said Mouse matter-of-factly.

"Wow. Thanks again. Really flattering. A nice thought to take with me into the afterlife."

"You don't believe in the afterlife," she said. He noticed that she was wearing her spectacles again. Her eyes seemed very alive. Her face was crumpled with what he recognized as pain. It must be hurting her to look at his undiluted emotions.

"No," he said. "I don't."

"Neither do I."

"Then aren't you as frightened of death as I am?"

"No. Believing that there isn't an afterlife makes me quite a lot less frightened of death."

He gave an odd, coughing laugh. "So death's less frightening than the prospect of having sex with me."

"Quite significantly less frightening," she said. "I'm not trying to insult you, or hurt you in any way: it's just a truth. For me. The lack's in me, not you. And both of them are as nothing compared with touching that box again -- letting it touch me."

Then he saw the lines of her face distort yet further as she continued to read his face.

"Oh, hell," she whispered. "I didn't realize anybody's life could be that important to them."

And:

It had been very atavistic of her; she had realized that even at the time, but it was just the fact that Daan had been screwing around that had made Qinefer flee from him, throwing him right out of her life. If she'd thought about it for a little while longer she might have recognized that he was one of those people who simply wasn't monogamous. This wasn't any particular failing in him; it was simply the way that he was -- and the way that she had herself been before she'd met him. Thereafter she'd assumed that their whitemateship involved a sexual fidelity that even at the time she'd known was logically indefensible; for his part, he'd assumed that spiritual fidelity was what they'd promised. And he'd kept his promise, but she'd ignored that in her strictly unnecessary preoccupation with the fact that he'd found a need to have sex with another woman -- even just as a scientific experiment.

Now, as she reached for the box, she began to accept that in a curious kind of a way it had been she who'd been the adulterer, she who'd broken the oath of fidelity.

But now, a fraction of a second later, as she actually touched the box she realized that that was all wrong. Daan had been one of life's shits. She'd been well rid of him.

Her new lover, she suddenly began to understand, was herself -- and always would be.

The box was only a lump of metal -- except for, at its core, a wafer made of a compound of silicon. Not long after the creation of the universe, Syor the god had carved runes on the wafer. She had had no understanding of the meaning of those runes; the knowledge of which configuration to create had come from somewhere so deep inside her that she'd never been there. Only millennia later, when the first Qinefer had come to this place, had the god discovered that her carvings had given the box life.

Her life.

The box enjoyed the intelligence she had given it, of course, especially in those rare moments when it was allowed to speak with, and inevitably to fall in love with, someone else.

"My friend! My lover! You're here again!"

"I wish that I could say that I loved you in return, but unfortunately I can't. I recognize that you've become a part of me, but that's all. I

don't think that I would be being honest with you if I called you 'friend'. I apologize for this."

"I want you."

"Yes, and I want you, too. I want to possess you -- and that's pretty embarrassing, because all of my cultural training tells me that people shouldn't own each other."

"I'm not a person. I'm a metal box."

"You're splitting hairs."

"What are hairs?"

"Things that I have. You don't. They're all over me -- head, crotch, armpits, legs . . ."

"I love you, sweet Qinefer. The hair that you tell me you have, the hair that I can sense you feeling slightly shameful about even though you know it is beautiful on you -- it only increases the love that I feel for you.

But enough of this/that/other -- delete as inexplicable. I would wish to help you, and I infer that you, too, wish that I would do so."

"I've told you, I can't say that I love you back, box. You come much too close to me, so that I need to break away from your embrace. I would be grateful if you could retreat from me a little."

"I cannot do that."

"What do you mean?"

"Once upon a time you and I were two, but now there's only the one of us."

"That sounds as if it's supposed to be pretty profound, but it doesn't actually mean a lot to me."

"You're not very good at being cruel, are you, Qinefer? Later you'll know what I'm talking about when I say that now we are only one."

"Why not now?"

"Why did you spend such a long time waiting before you asked me that question?"

"Because I knew what you were doing, and I knew that there was no way I could stop you from doing it. You've touched me in a fashion that no other person could have touched me, and I wish that you hadn't."

"I'm not a person. I'm a box."

"You're splitting . . ."

"I'm sorry. And sorry, too, for having displeased you."

"Bigger that! Of course you aren't! Damn you for a machine!"

"But we aren't two any longer. Just one."

"I didn't ask you to be a part of me."

"Yes, you did. You just didn't know that that was what you were doing. And now you're a part of me, as well. We're both parts of each other: we're both one. That's the way that love works. Like it or not."

"Not."

"I grieve."

"Look . . . box . . . look, I . . . I want to get away from this place. I want to get Makreed out of here, too. Is that too much for me to ask of you?"

"You ask it of yourself as well."

"Even so."

"Yes -- yes, it is too much for you to ask of me unless you allow us to maintain the closeness that we now have. I want the two of us to be parts of each other, so that we are a singleness forever. And yet, if you wish it, in this instance you have the freedom to reject me totally."

"I don't have that freedom. Makreed has taken it away from me."

"Then we are together for the everness."

The doors opened and Mouse allowed Makreed to put his pale arm around her shoulders as he limped alongside her towards the distant redness of the outer light.

Later she watched him being wheeled away along a bright corridor to where a surgeon would repair his foot, replacing the missing tissues and bones, regenerating the covering skin so that soon there wouldn't even be a scar. In a few decades' time Makreed would have forgotten the injury altogether, just as he'd have forgotten how for some hours he'd felt a whole gamut of emotions towards the rather unobtrusive woman whose eyes had at some late stage become the eyes for two.

All told, only seven of the people who'd been trapped in the underground complex had died; as disasters went, this had been nothing. In the dim illumination of Embrace-of-the-Forest the survivors had whooped happily, Makreed among them, their voices sounding strange in the thin air of Starveling. She had watched them silently, seeing their various confused emotions written into the language of their limbs, but deliberately she diverted the information away from her mind. She had found that she could appreciate the pain of their confusion without feeling it herself.

It was the box's idea to seek out Makreed a couple of weeks later as the ship sped through flashspace back towards The World -- the planet from where the Authority ruled the Galaxy, and the planet where, or so it was said, all the stories in the universe began. A long enough time had passed that she had become numbed to the sadness she constantly saw in other people; she had grown not to mind it -- because it was their affair, not hers. Makreed was superficially displeased to see her, turning his face away from her, not meeting her eyes, as if he were feeling guilty of some crime towards her. But, coaxed by the box's curiosity and confident that she was already quick with the life of the everness inside her, she lured him to her bed, where she discovered that his lovemaking was preferable to the conquest of fear and he discovered that in her arms it didn't hurt to remember Direna.

A month later.

The gaudiness and magnificent squalor of The World.

Qinefer and Makreed parted after their debriefing by the agents of the Authority and, though they never saw or heard from each other again, he remained her friend.

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