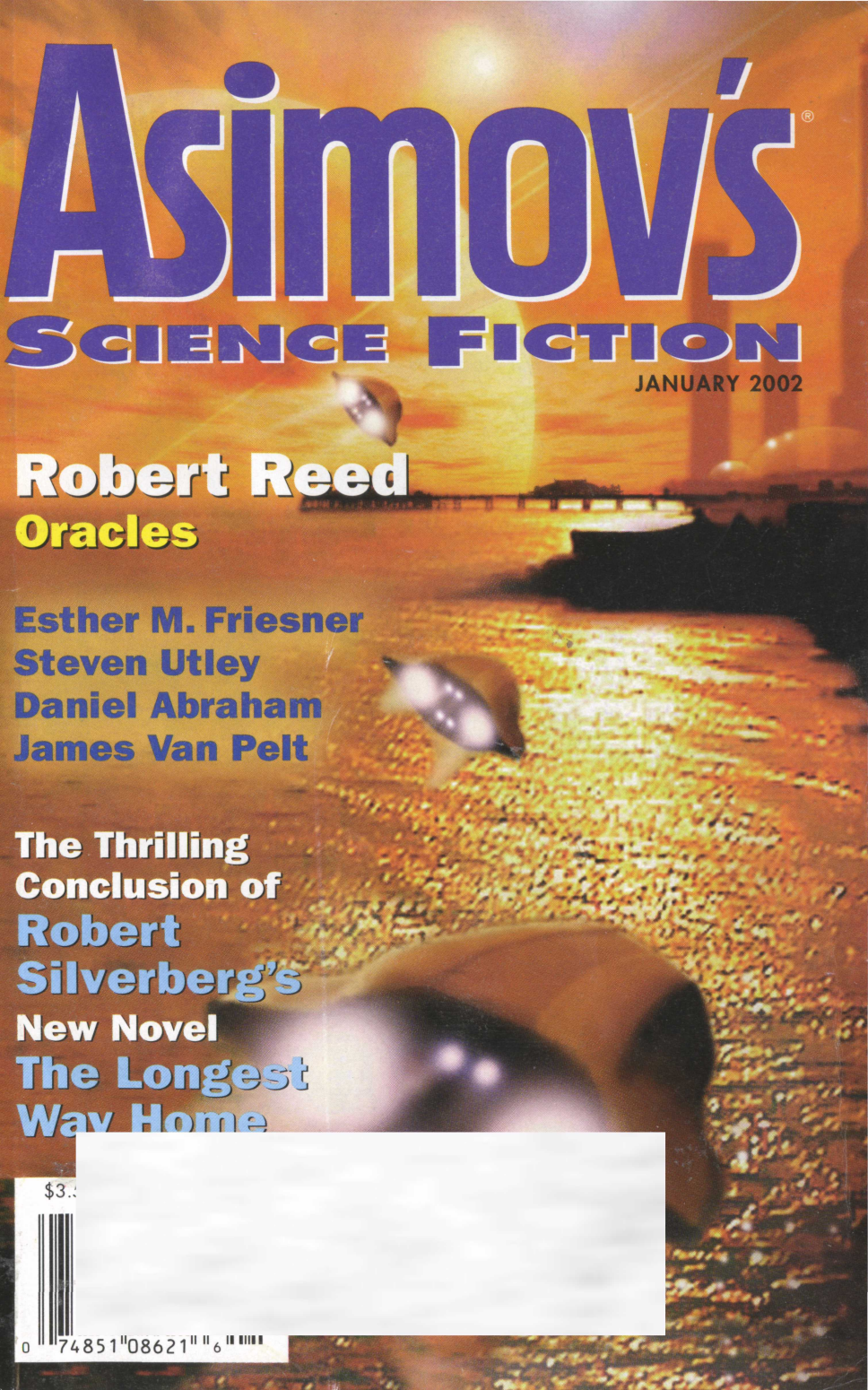
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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE SKALD OF SCIENCE FICTION

Poul Anderson, the great science fiction writer who died last summer at the age of seventy-four, was a Viking, no doubt about that, Danish by ancestry and name and profoundly rooted in the ancient Nordic traditions. On first acquaintance you might not have understood that. We soft modern civilized folk tend to think of Vikings as pretty rough-hewn fellows, ferocious unkempt swaggerers with blazing eyes and hot tempers—a race of warriors. Poul was, in fact, a gentle and kind-hearted person, who maintained an unfailing sweetness of spirit under all circumstances. He was as unswaggering as they come, our science-fictional Viking, and neither by temperament nor physique could he be regarded as a warrior in the usual meaning of that term.

Though he was a tall and rangy man, his eyesight was poor and his physical coordination was terrible. I remember with some amusement his sorry performance during the Society for Creative Anachronism tournament at the 1968 World Science Fiction Convention in Berkeley. In those years the S.C.A. people staged mock jousts at the conventions, amidst much grand and formal medieval foofaraw. And Poul, though he had not been designed by nature for combat, enjoyed the scholarly aspects of the S.C.A.'s recreations of times gone by, and was a familiar figure at their gatherings.

This time Poul and the equally unathletic Randall Garrett, good sports both, let themselves be talked into sallying into the lists of battle, with the stated intention of "defending the honor of John W. Campbell," the famed editor for whom they had each written so many fine stories. Poul, who could easily get into the spirit of such an organization, fought under the name of Sir Bela of Eastmarch of the Kingdom of the West; what name Garrett chose, I could not tell you at this late date. A more unlikely duo of science-fictional swordsmen I would be hard pressed to name.

They were paired against two of the Anachronists' grimmest, starkest knights, true adepts of swordplay. (One of them, I recall, was Marion Zimmer Bradley's younger brother Paul, a formidable hand with mace and broadsword.) It took about 3.5 seconds for Poul and Randall to be slaughtered in the joust. It was a fearful massacre. John Campbell's two awkward champions barely had a chance to raise their wooden swords before they found themselves clobbered to the ground by their implacable opponents. Poul—even when he was masquerading as Sir Bela of Eastmarch—was indeed an ill-made knight. (But I have it on good authority that this was one of Poul's least distinguished episodes of combat—he was under the handicap that day of having partied a little too enthusiastically the night before.)

A true Viking he was, all the same, legitimate heir to his remote Nordic ancestors. Not all Vikings had to be warriors, back in the savage days of old. There were poets among them, too—*skalds,* they were called—and their role in Norse culture was every bit as important as

that of the brawnier fellows who swung the big swords and wielded the battleaxes. More so, perhaps: for any muscle-bound lummox could wave a sword around, but the skalds were the necessary chroniclers who gave life and meaning to the age in which the Vikings carried out their bloody deeds. They were the men who wrote the sagas, that great body of glorious Scandinavian poetry and prose: the Eddas and the related Volsunga saga, say, from both of which Wagner's *Ring* operas grew, and the stirring epics of the heroes Grettir the Strong and Njal and Hrolf Kraki, and Snorri Sturlason's *Heimskringla,* or Book of Kings, which tells us what we know of the great Viking chieftains, and many another powerful poem that has come down to us out of that misty Nordic world of a thousand years ago, a literature of dirges and battle-songs and historical chronicles and soaring tales of bloody conflict and adventure. It is through the work of the skalds, more than from any other source, that we derive our understanding of the Viking way.

Those Viking skalds were superb poets, many of them, and their finest works are imperishable classics of literature. Poul Anderson, who grew up reading the Norse sagas the way we grew up reading Mark Twain and Lewis Carroll, was *our* skald, carrying that ancient bardic tradition of high adventure and singing poetic style into the very different world of starships and time machines. I like to think that people will be reading his greatest science fiction novels as long as anyone reads science fiction.

Certainly I'll never forget my initial encounter with his work, that grim little story of a dark post-atomic future, "Tomorrow's Children," which appeared the year I was twelve. It was Poul's second published story, written when he was

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just nineteen himself. (His first, a two-page squib, appeared in *Astounding* in 1944, before his eighteenth birthday.)

And then, in the 1950s and 1960s, came the torrent of irresistibly readable stories and novels that brought him a houseful of Hugos and Nebulas and put him on the road to SFWA's Grand Master award—*Brain Wave, Three Hearts and Three Lions,* the classic novella "Call Me Joe," *The High Crusade,* and the Time Patrol stories, and the lighthearted Hoka tales that he wrote with his dear friend Gordon R. Dickson, on and on for decades thereafter, "The Queen of Air and Darkness," "Goat Song," "Hunter's Moon," the Dominic Flandry stories, the Nicholas van Rijn stories—shelf after glorious shelf of wonderful tales. Just the day before he died I received a new issue of *Analog* with his latest, though apparently not his last, story. I understand that there may be several novels still in the publishing pipeline. Poul was always a ferociously productive writer, and he went on working practically to the end.

One of those forthcoming books, I'm told, hearkens back to his skaldic ancestors: a book based in part on the Icelandic epic *Egil's Saga,* which deals with the relentless feud between the hero Egil and his enemy Eirik Bloodaxe (an Andersonian name if there ever was one!). Nor was that the first time that Poul made such explicit literary use of his Scandinavian heritage. As far back as 1954 he published the undeservedly neglected fantasy novel *The Broken Sword,* set in the world of the Aesir of Asgard, and embellished by a great deal of Poul's own skaldic poetry, following the ancient meter ("Swiftly goes the sword-play; / Spears on hosts are raining; / men run forth in madness, / mowing ranks of foemen; / battle tumult bellows; / blood is red on axeheads; / greedily the gray wolf / gorges with the raven.") And twenty years after that came *Hrolf Kraki's Saga,* in which he recreated one of the great Nordic poems that had come down to modern times only in fragments and botched summaries. Since a complete version of the saga no longer existed, Poul wrote it for us.

For all his great accomplishments over a long and marvelously prolific career, he was a modest man, who never claimed to be anything more than a popular entertainer. (His legion of readers knew better.) His prime concern as a storyteller was, as it should be, storytelling: he knew how to snare a reader and how to hold him in that snare, and with skaldic cunning he called upon details of sight, sound, smell, and taste to make every paragraph a vivid one. But there have been plenty of tellers of tales whose work ultimately rings hollow, however lively it seems on first acquaintance. What Poul was really doing as a writer was dealing with the great moral themes of existence within the framework of society: values, purpose, the meaning of life itself. Who am I? his characters asked, not in so many words but through their deeds. How shall I live my life? What are my obligations to myself and my fellow beings? Where does personal freedom end and the bond that creates a society begin? Big questions, all of them, with which great writers have been wrestling since the time of Homer and the author of the Gilgamesh epic before that; and Poul did not shy away from them, even as he pretended to be telling swift-paced tales of the spacelanes.

In person he often tended to be quiet and even shy, the antithesis of today's science-fictional self-promoters, although he knew how to look after himself pretty well in his dealings with the publishing world. But in the right setting Poul was any-

thing but quiet, anything but shy. At any convention party, for example, you could usually find him in the center of a fascinated group of listeners, holding forth with great animation and much flailing of arms (he was an energetic gesturer) on the conversational topic of the moment, be it slavery in ancient Rome, the cultural significance of the Lascaux cave paintings, the physics of time travel, the techniques of brewing beer in Belgium, or the customs regulations of the Byzantine Empire. The sound of his voice was unmistakable—a high-pitched, herky-jerky baritone—and so was the flow of unpretentious erudition that would come from him whenever talk veered toward any of his innumerable areas of profound expertise.

I knew him for more than forty years. He and I had an amiable collegial relationship for much of that time, and in my days as an editor of anthologies we worked together on many projects easily and well, and for the past three decades we lived in neighboring communities, but somehow we never became close friends as I understand that term, despite the high regard that each of us had for the other. When we met at parties, which was fairly often, we usually gravitated toward each other and exchanged tales of recent foreign travel, or discussed the various malfeasances of various publishers and agents, or got into pleasant dispute over some fine point of history. Of real personal intimacy, though, there was very little between us. Others I know reported the same phenomenon; and yet when Poul did take someone into that kind of close friendship—Gordy Dickson, say, or Jack Vance, or Ted Cogswell—it was a deep and close friendship indeed. A matter of chemistry, I guess.

His voice, as a writer, was as distinctive as was his way of speaking. One would have had to be style-deaf indeed to fail to recognize a Poul Anderson story after hearing only a paragraph or two of it. The powerful use of imagery and sensory detail, above all the dark rhythms that had come down to him out of the Viking literature of long ago, were all unmistakable. He was indeed our Nordic bard, the skald of science fiction. And if there's a Valhalla for science fiction writers, Poul is up there right now, putting down Odin's finest mead with the best of them. ○

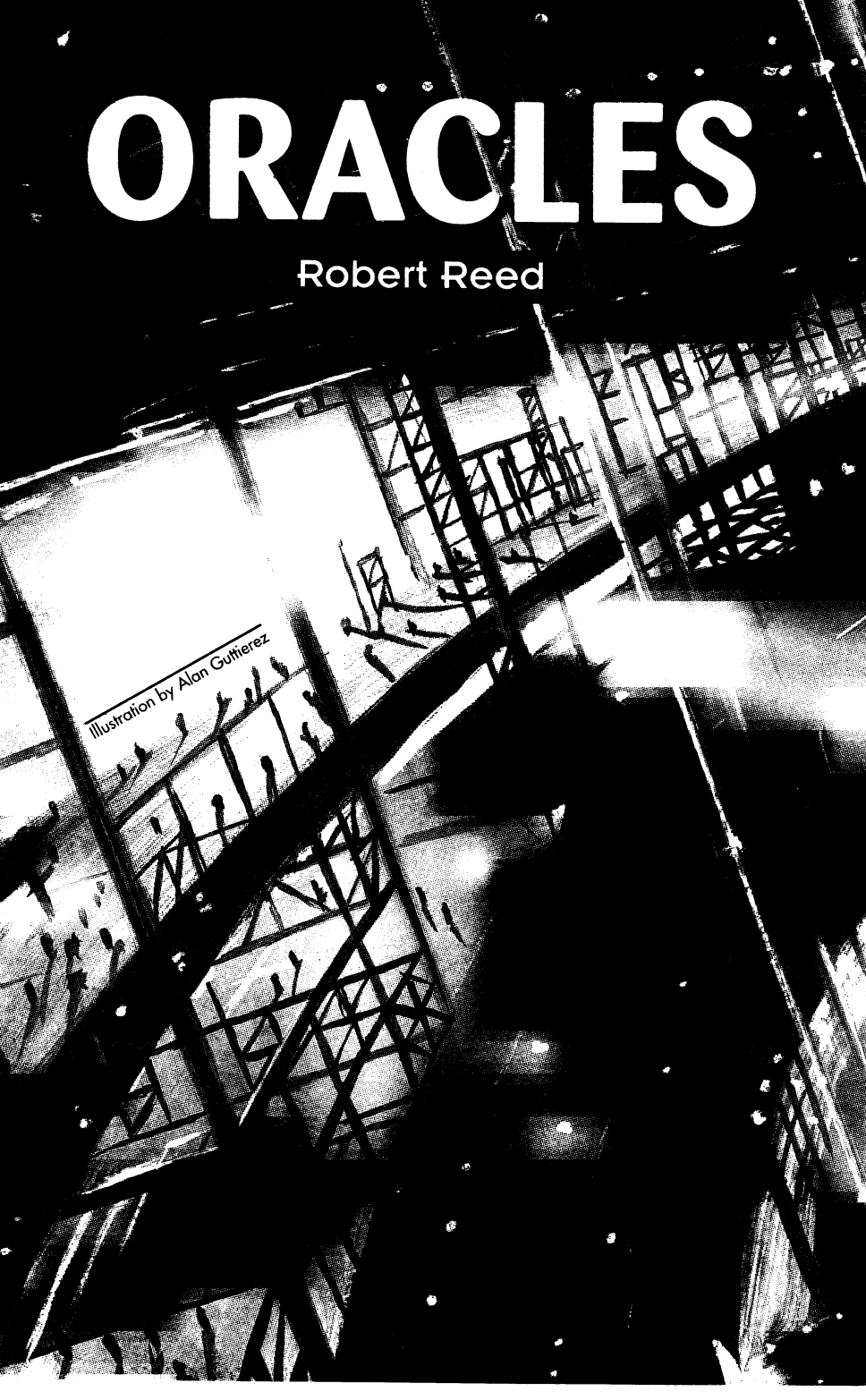
PAPERWEIGHTS OF THE GODS

humans embedded
like bugs in blocks of Lucite:
souvenirs from Earth

—Keith Allen Daniels

ORACLES

Robert Reed




MARRIOTT

For his latest tale, the author tried to write a science fiction story about a future that he could believe in—one where humans figure out how to hear alien chatter, but don't make contact in any conversational way. "We're suddenly in the middle of a loud party, picking up useful bits of other guests' conversation." Of course, the business about the role of a mid-list author in this near-future world may prove that the tale is actually a fantasy.

They ambushed Rheingold at the elevator. Maybe a dozen high-and-mighties were representing the convention, with at least twice as many underlings and tag-alongs standing nearby. Everyone wore luminous nametags, and they smiled in the gushing, overdone way that people use when they're in the presence of real fame. It was a strange, sweet moment. A heavyset man swallowed conspicuously, then shambled forward to offer a sweaty hand. "Mr. Rheingold," he said with a nervous wet gasp. Then he muttered his own name before declaring, "I'm thrilled to finally meet you." And after a ragged breath, he added, "On behalf of our convention, I'd like to thank you for joining us. I know you're enormously busy with the Committee. I know . . . we all know . . . that three days out of *your* life is a great sacrifice. . . !"

Jack just stared at the man, conspicuously saying nothing

"Yes, well . . ." Silence was the last response that their official greeter had expected. But having practiced his kowtowing, he wasn't to be stopped now. "If you or your family needs anything, just e-me. Please. Any problems with programming or activities for you or your children . . . anything at all . . . someone with the con will do everything humanly possible—"

"We'd like our rooms," Jack blurted. He showed the rest of the delegation a warm smile, and then returning his gaze to the man standing before him, he let his smile dissolve into a barbed frown. "My family's very tired. It's been a long trip."

"Of course."

"Point the way to the front desk. Now."

"Yes. Sir." But the man was flustered. Losing his bearings, he turned in a sloppy circle while pointing in random directions. A tiny assistant saw his plight, and gesturing with confidence, she said, "Over there, sir. Mr. Rheingold. Just past the fountain, sir."

Jack nodded and walked away.

Tasha said, "Thank you," for him. "So nice of you to meet us like this!" Then after telling the boys to keep close, she came up beside her husband, quietly remarking, "My, that was a daggered little moment."

"We'll talk later," promised Jack.

"I can hardly wait."

The hotel lobby was enormous and busy, but it didn't feel crowded and it wasn't nearly as loud as it could have been. Hundreds of conventioneers stood in knots and tangles, most of them studying Jack as he strode past. Quiet voices and loud whispers blended into a respectful murmur. Some of the spectators grinned like old friends, while others laughed anxiously. Perhaps a quarter of the faces were alien. Elaborate, rigorously accurate costumes had been fashioned from pseudoflesh and hololight as well as simple cotton and dye. Voice boxes and embedded translators allowed the people inside to converse in the newest languages. Jack could imagine what they were saying. Looking at the human faces with their star-struck gazes and smarmy grins, it was easy to feel like some great king. Then some hard face or a distant curse would remind Jack that some people didn't approve of him or his work, and his writer's paranoia would kick in: Who had a gun? Who had the rope? What tree would they string him from?

It was a silly paranoia, and for every good reason.

Jack glanced at his wife and took a quick deep breath.

"Some things refuse to change," Tasha said with a cheery tone. "Look at all these aliens!"

"But not one Klingon," Jack pointed out. "It looks like those poor bastards are extinct."

Unfortunately, their seven-year-old overheard the conversation. Tugging on his father's arm, the boy asked, "What are Klingons?"

"Pretend aliens," his mother explained. "From old movies and television."

Petey had a wide but exceptionally shallow knowledge about popular culture. Inflating his cheeks, he asked, "What'd they look like? Like the Frufurkhan?"

"No," Jack began.

"The Balla? Or Smilers?" The boy was making random guesses. "Maybe like the Bishop Boys, maybe?"

His older brother interrupted, growling, "Hey, goof! Klingons were just people." Nobody but a twelve-year-old could become so exasperated with simple ignorance. "They were a bunch of actors, Petey. Stupid actors with stuck-on foreheads."

"Thank you," their mother said, using her reprimanding tone.

"Well, that's what they were," Clay argued. "And Klingons didn't go extinct, because they weren't ever real."

His parents exchanged weary looks.

Again, Tasha told him, "Thank you." Then she gave Clay a warning stare, causing the boy to drop his shoulders and pout with his lower lip.

The lobby seemed to stretch forever. Restaurants of every cuisine were scattered between water features and potted trees and shiny new cobbled walkways. A lone conventioneer sat at a nearby table. The man seemed to be glaring at Jack, wearing an odd, almost lost expression. But just as his paranoia flickered, he realized that the fellow was wearing implants. "Fancy eyes," they had been dubbed. He was functionally blind for the moment, tied into some game or book or fictional playground. Fancy eyes had just officially entered the market. Supply shortages and taxes were keeping them expensive. Very few people had gone to the trouble of replacing their God-given eyes with prosthetic implants. And besides, the commercial models were clunky and slow compared to what was possible—like the truly fancy eyes that Jack had relied upon for the past five years, without incident.

Again, with the reliable ease of a beating heart, he felt like a king of the universe, a lord of Creation.

The main desk stood against the far wall. It was a block of cultured sapphire, and standing behind that glittering blueness was a single android wearing a black-and-white uniform and a torch-like smile. The face was just human enough to reassure, and so was the voice. "Mr. Rheingold," the machine called out. "Welcome to the Marriott!"

"Thank you. Our room?"

"On the forty-seventh floor, sir. Room nine."

"May we go up?"

"Whenever you wish, sir."

Jack hesitated. Looking at the artificial face, he asked, "How do you know I'm Jack Rheingold? What are your security measures?"

"Facial recognition," the robot began.

"Sure."

"And your retinal prints. And your fingerprints." Its smile widened. "Plus, sir, we employ three other methods that I'm not free to divulge."

Jack guessed, "Aroma and a brain-glimpse, and what else? Metabolic markers, or a body scan?"

The robot said nothing.

"The forty-seventh floor?" Jack asked.

"Yes, sir. We have lift pads at convenient locations. But if you prefer, there are elevators along each of the main walls."

Jack turned and found Tasha herding the boys toward him. "We've got another climb," he reported. "Pad or elevator?"

"Pad!" the boys shouted.

Tasha loathed the pads. They made her uneasy for all the obvious reasons, and no statistic could slow her pulse while she was riding one. "Thank you," she said, "but I'll take the old-fashioned route."

"Stairs?" he joked.

With a thoroughly sarcastic grin, Clay asked, "What are stairs, Dad?"

That earned a patient little laugh from his old man. "Come on, boys. Let's race your mom!"

The closest pad resembled a disk of polished sandstone. There was room for twenty, upholstered benches set in an outward-facing ring and looking as if nobody had ever used them. Climbing inside an invisible scaffold, the disk lifted from the lobby floor with a smooth inevitability, not a whisper of sound audible over the murmur of people and water. Petey was fearless, standing with his toes curled over the edge as they soared high into the air. Clay appeared fearless, but he kept a good six inches between him and the brink. Jack preferred to sit, unashamed by his own little case of vertigo. This technology was proven, and he couldn't count the safety features, but still, that didn't mean he relished peering down through hundreds of feet of open air.

From above, the lobby looked and sounded busier than ever. There had to be several thousand conventioneers, easily. Jack found himself watching the alien costumes, instinctively checking their accuracy. The Balla were popular. And the Wkkens. Plus several species with tortuous names that humans had simplified into cuddly handles like Smilers and Robins and Bishop Boys. What did this say about human beings? These preferences gave clues into his species' nature; how many times had he thought that? The Balla were easy: Their transmissions were the first detected at the Water Hole.

And it was the Smilers' beacon that gave humanity its first lessons in advanced technologies. But after that, aesthetics mattered. Despite the oddness of the bodies, despite the weird whistles and barks rising up to them, Jack was seeing the most ordinary, human-like species. The public was aware of more than a thousand alien civilizations, but barely thirty were represented here, proving again what Jack had known for years: Human eyes and ears could absorb only so much strangeness before they went blind and deaf.

Walkways made of Bishop Boy plastics hung out over the atrium. Without prompting, their pad docked in front of their suite. An elegant railing of black iron collapsed to let them pass, and then it rose up again and froze with a soundless grace. Boys and man had to take a moment to stand at the railing, gazing down from this high place. The hotel was a cylinder set inside a wider and much taller cylinder. In truth, it was a tiny piece of architecture—a little feature buried inside something far grander—yet without anything to compare it against, the hotel seemed huge and majestic, and memorable.

"Now," Clay signaled, and the brothers spat impressive gobs of spittle over the black railing.

"Enough," Jack rumbled, laughing under his breath.

The door to their suite stood open. Tasha stood in the middle of the main room, grinning as she reported, "These elevators are quick."

Their luggage had already arrived and unpacked itself.

"Nice," was Tasha's assessment of their rooms.

Jack nodded agreeably. There were no windows in the old sense, but a Smiler window had been hung on the outer wall. Their view was being piped in through several meters of diamond composites and dark-matter scaffolding. The hotel was twenty miles above a string of little snowy bumps: The Andes. Jack was staring west, his eagle-sharp eyes following the perfect smooth curve of the horizon, the blueness of the Pacific merging with a bank of blue-white clouds that were undoubtedly magnificent in their own right. Yet the ocean and storms and mountains were tiny compared to the sky. They were standing where the universe began, a multitude of stars and things that were not stars hanging about them, everything moving with the easy, mindless majesty that has moved the universe since time began.

Tasha threw an arm around Jack's waist. "So what happened down there?"

"That gentleman who greeted us—"

"Mr. Boot-Licker?"

"Years ago, he was in charge of programming at a con. We were married, so I was an established writer. I joined the con late and asked to get to sit with a panel or two. But Mr. Boot-Licker told me that he'd never heard of me, and I wasn't welcome, and then he turned and rolled away from me." Hearing himself, Jack had to laugh. "Sounds awfully petty of me, doesn't it?"

But his wife had a different sensibility. "What you should have done . . . you should have had some fun with him. In front of his friends, you should have—"

"What?"

She didn't want to say it. Lifting her black eyebrows, she showed him a predatory look. Then she glanced at their boys, asking, "How's the view?"

"It's okay," Clay allowed. "I guess."

Petey shrugged his shoulders, saying nothing.

"Guys!" Jack blurted. "We're staying in a new hotel perched on the edge of space. Our hotel is inside one of three half-finished skyhooks. When the skyhooks are finished in another seventeen months, the entire solar system will be at our feet." Then he laughed, confiding, "I never believed, not in my wildest dreams, that I'd see a spectacle like this. Not in my lifetime. Ever!"

Petey glanced up at his father, puzzled now. "But why not?"

"What's the date?" Jack asked.

"August thirtieth," the seven-year-old blurted.

"No," said Jack. "What year is it?"

Clay had played this game before. He made a scrunched-up face, and as if talking to an idiot, he scornfully reported, "It's the year two thousand seventeen. You know that!"

Jack grinned and threw his arm around their mother's waist, squeezing Tasha and almost giggling. "But *you* don't know, boys . . . you'll never begin to understand . . . just how incredible and impossible, and how wondrous, all that sounds to me. . . !"

For the universe, nothing worth doing is done just once, and a thousand times is little better than once. Everything that is possible is performed again and again. A billion successes are nothing but a good beginning. Even events that look miraculous to humans can be done with a deceptive, almost nonchalant ease, whether it is building great worlds from microscopic specks of dust or conjuring life from the simplest palette of mundane atoms.

The first extrasolar planets were discovered in the waning days of the old millennium. Once astronomers had the tools and a little experience, discovering worlds proved to be a routine business. Several hundred gas giants were spotted dancing around nearby suns. A few of those massive bodies had earth-like orbits around mannerly suns—Gs and Ks—and they were tempting targets for radio dishes. And that's how the Balla were discovered.

The aliens lived on the earth-like moon of a superjovian world. Their signal was relatively simple but easily deciphered. Like humans, the Balla were a compulsively visual species. What they loved best was to broadcast images of their home world and their Mother God world and the half dozen colonized moons and planets scattered around their own solar system. They were humanoids, which made them agreeable to human audiences. The Balla had two sexes. They lived in cities and maintained elaborate, beautiful farms. They had nation-states and religions with temples, and their aesthetic tastes weren't too unlike a certain tool-using ape that began to spend its days and nights doing nothing but staring at those delicious images of far-flung worlds.

Jack Rheingold was a mid-list author who once wrote about creatures not too unlike the Balla. His novel had earned lukewarm reviews, and it was long out of print, and, in the details, his aliens didn't much resemble the real item. But that didn't matter to reporters desperate for authority figures. They wanted presentable bodies that would sit under the hot lights, smile politely, and endure the same few unanswerable questions.

"What effect will this discovery have on humanity?"

It was far too soon to tell.

"Will the Balla revolutionize our technologies?"

They were more advanced than human beings, yes. But they were sending pictures, not schematics for better rockets.

"What will this discovery do to human perspectives?"

Make them larger, he supposed.

"Could human religions withstand this blow?"

It was too soon to care, Jack told his audience.

"Are you pleased to have predicted the Balla?"

But he had predicted very little. During the first interview, Jack confessed that his aliens didn't much resemble the Balla. Not in social customs, or history, or anything else that mattered. But Tasha, blessed with a keener sense of public relations, convinced him to be a little more gracious, and a little less honest. "Your book's been out of print for years," she reminded him. "Let's get people interested, and maybe we can sell a few copies. What do you think?"

So Jack took every gram of credit, even when it wasn't his to take. He learned to nod and smile, describing how he dreamed up his aliens in the first place. Then he would point to one of the most recent images, pulling all kinds of wild speculations out of what were basically a few thousand fancy postcards that had arrived over the last three weeks.

That's what he was doing when the MSNBC reporter broke in, muttering, "Excuse me, Mr. Rheingold. Nobody's listening."

"What do you mean?" he bristled.

The reporter said, "Sir," with a distracted voice. "We broke away several seconds ago. But we'll probably come back to you in a few minutes, if you're willing to make a quick comment on the news—"

"What news?"

The man tapped his earpiece, and with a knowing grin admitted, "It just broke. Some telescope down in Australia found a second alien species. And these guys aren't *anything* like your little Balla. . . !"

They were the Smilers, dubbed that for their enormous mouths and toothy grins. Where the Balla had a whispering signal coming from a nearby sun, the Smilers' signal came from a thousand light-years away, and it was a screaming roar by comparison. No sun lay at its source. The aliens had abandoned their home world aeons ago, migrating away from every sun. They lived by terraforming comets and plutos and the occasional interstellar planet, building artificial suns and vast arrays of radio dishes. Every second, their broadcasts spewed out more energy than humanity had produced in its entire existence, and, following some murky Smiler logic, they wanted to do nothing but boast, showing the universe just how clever they were.

Buried inside their signal were half a thousand treasures, including exact plans for a quick and clean fusion reactor, a high-acceleration plasma rocket, and the manufacturing schematics for a stew of ultrastrong materials. Also included was an ocean of intricate mathematics that seemed to be the much-anticipated M-Theory. And perhaps most astonishing, the aliens threw in a comprehensive map of the Milky Way, identifying every intelligent species from which they'd heard so much as a murmur, and the frequencies and methods of transmission, and where exactly to look for these other next-door neighbors.

The universe does nothing three times.

Humans and the Balla and the Smilers were just the first examples of a common, if never quite ordinary or predictable, phenomena.

In the first year, forty unique species had been heard from, if only through a distorted squawk lasting less than a minute. After the second year, only

the spectacular and horrific species made it into the news. And after ten years of relentlessly improving skills, even an informed expert could only shrug his shoulders. "I don't know how many species we'll eventually name," Jack had to admit. "All I know is that they're everywhere, and there's a lot of sky left to be seen."

"I really like your *Decoy* books," said a slightly rumpled, decidedly middle-aged man. Smiling at the author with a mixture of cool pleasure and narrow intelligence, he asked, "Are you writing another? Because that last book . . . well, it ends rather in the middle of things. . . ."

In that instant, Jack became a writer again. He remembered how uncomfortable he was at these meet-the-pros events. They were fantastically noisy and unreasonably crowded, and for a person who was fundamentally shy, they could be a genuine nightmare. Not that the fan standing before him was unlikable or rude. If anything, the poor fellow was working too hard, gushing about novels better than ten years old, looking far too earnest when he asked, "So what happens next in the series?"

Jack had to tell him, "Nothing happens. There's no next book."

The man's clothes were casual and out of fashion, and he didn't even sport one of the intricate medallions or rings depicting the popular aliens. The last ten years hadn't happened. Not in this fellow's mind, they hadn't. With a winded gasp, he said, "There isn't?" and shook his head. Then with a misplaced compassion, he said, "I'm sorry. Are you blocked somehow?"

"No, I just don't write anymore." How simple could it be? "I've got a different job now."

"But this is a convention," the man complained. "Aren't you here as a professional?"

"I was invited to attend," Jack explained with an officious care. "I used to be in this business, yes. And I was intrigued by the location, naturally. And the simple truth is that I was hoping for the chance to get out in the public eye, talking to people I don't normally hear from."

Puzzled, the man scratched at his uneven white beard. Then the obvious question occurred to him. "So what exactly do you do now?"

"I sit on the Oracle Committee."

At that point, abruptly, some stubborn switch was flipped On. The man's eyes brightened, and his mouth clamped shut with a mixture of astonishment and reflexive caution. It was all he could do to mutter, "I'm sorry, I didn't know. What do you do? Are you an assistant to someone?"

"No, I'm a voting member," Jack replied with a mild but delighted voice. "A member in full standing for most of the last decade."

His fan could only shrug, admitting, "I'm a reader. I know what I like, and I don't spend time following politics and such."

"There're a hundred voting members on the Committee," Jack allowed. "Hell, I barely know everyone's name."

That was a lie, but a believable lie. Which is what a writer did for his living—making untruths seem plausible and sweet.

The man regained his fragile composure. "Well, then . . . as an Oracle, I was wondering—"

"Yes?"

"Do you see a time when writers write my kind of books again?"

"Maybe," Jack offered.

"You do?"

Not at all. But he smiled, and with a storyteller's ease, he said, "The pace of change is slowing, I think. In a few more years, with a new generation of highly educated readers . . . sure, I think that a rebirth of our industry is very possible. . . ." Then with his next breath, he added, "Could you excuse me? I just saw an old friend, and I really need to talk to him—"

"Oh, no. And thank you, sir."

"Thank you." Jack turned and slipped away. A pair of costumers stood nearby. They were pretending to be a single Smiler—a quadruped with a pair of burly arms at both ends of the body. The single face was watching nobody but him, and as he passed by, someone growled, and with a decidedly human voice said, "Censor this," while flipping up the two middle fingers of a six-fingered hand.

With a practiced ease, Jack pretended not to notice. He let his fancy eyes scan the crowd, and sure enough, it was easy to find a familiar face in that crush of bodies. The round, clean-shaved face smiled, and a strong little hand was offered.

"Sam Timmons," Jack exclaimed. "How have you been?"

"Prospering," his one-time colleague exclaimed. "And you, Jack?"

"Hanging on," he replied.

"Not you," Timmons responded. "Now don't turn modest on me!"

They laughed for a moment, appraising each other. It had been eight or nine years since they'd last met in person, and middle age had been kindest to Timmons. He had always been a little heavy, but his weight served to make his face smoother and younger than Jack's. As always, his clothes were well-tailored—Bishop Boy fabrics and Italian shoes—and everything about him had a seamlessly groomed appearance. His brown hair was thick, almost boyish—an easy trick with the new biomedical procedures. But he had a mature man's gaze, hard and certain even when the smile was in full shine.

"Quite the party," said Jack, aiming for the smallest of small talk.

"Like the meat-markets of old," Timmons remarked with a happy laugh. Then, showing a sly wink, he mentioned, "I saw that Smiler giving you the bird."

Jack shrugged it off. "Some still don't accept the Committee's mandate, I suppose."

"Some people never understand," Timmons said.

"Which is dumb," Jack rumbled, instantly regretting his pissy tone.

But Timmons seemed to appreciate the observation. "What choice did we have?" he asked with a seamless confidence. "There had to be controls set in place. Priorities defined. Disasters put on hold." He nodded and smiled, and after a moment of reflection, he changed the subject. "God, remember when you and I first met? We'd just been published. Each of us, what? A couple bad stories? And we were signing at the same table—"

Jack offered a name.

"The old shit was stoned," Timmons remarked. "Or drunk. Or both, probably. But those kids didn't care. His fans just kept bringing in his books. In sacks, in wheelbarrows. In goddamn dump trucks, it seemed like!"

They enjoyed a good long laugh. Here was the purpose of youth—a source of entertainment for a person in his comfortable years.

"Well," Timmons said, "nobody reads that old shit now, do they?"

"They don't," Jack agreed.

Then they laughed again, but in a new, decidedly different way. Like

small-minded victors gloating over the body of an old foe, they enjoyed themselves quietly, looking everywhere but at the other man's eyes.

"You said you saw someone," Tasha prodded.

"What's that?"

"You said you ran into someone at the party." Then she realized what Jack was doing. "Hey, this is a vacation. Quit working." She said, "Darling," with a tight, impatient voice, setting her hand over his closed eyes. "Forget the world. Forget humanity. Pay attention to me, all right?"

He felt her hand, its heat and the elegant long bones of her fingers, but he couldn't see anything except what was being displayed inside his fancy eyes. Even when he opened his eyes, he saw a string of images harvested from Committee-only files. Shutting down the eyes' high-functions took time. By law, what he was watching couldn't be stored in any form, regardless of encryption.

"Are you back?" Tasha inquired.

Eventually Jack could say, "I am now."

"So what happened at the party?"

"I signed autographs, talked to old fans." He mentioned the man who hadn't read anything new in years. "They were the same faces as always, just older. Tired and fewer. I still feel like a new kid on the block."

"You're not," she replied.

"Thank you," he said.

"What I mean," Tasha told him, "is that you've accomplished a lot since you gave up writing." She showed him a good stare, reminding him, "They're the little people here. Not you."

He decided to shift the subject, admitting, "The people wearing the costumes are younger, I'm pretty sure."

"Yeah, well. That's reasonable."

"A Smiler had me worried." He shrugged, admitting, "It stared at me with those huge black eyes, and someone inside doesn't quite approve of our current policies. Judging by the schoolyard gesture."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No, just complained." Then he made himself look at his wife's face, reminding her, "We're safe here. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't have come. And I certainly wouldn't have brought you and the boys."

"Why wouldn't it be safe?" she asked, angry that he even raised the issue. "Your own security people looked at the hotel and the convention's organization. How many times were we scanned between Quito and here?"

"Right," he said.

"The newest security features," she mentioned.

Watching everyone, yes. Even an old-fashioned ass-kicking was pretty much impossible.

"You're being paranoid," she warned him.

"Which is why I've got this job." He offered a weak smile and halfway laughed. "I earn the big money because I'm better than most people at being worried about trivial things."

His wife watched him with admiration and with doubt. Then, knowing what was best, she redirected the conversation. "When you got here, first thing, you said that you bumped into someone at the party. So who was it?"

"Oh, yeah. Sam Timmons."

"Yeah? How's he doing?"

"Looks prosperous, as always. Happy. Fit." Jack laughed quietly, adding, "In that order, I would guess."

"Where's he getting his money?"

"Consulting. Investments. Some hybrid of the two."

"Good for him." Tasha sat on the bed beside Jack. It was late, their boys in their rooms and hard asleep. She was dressed for bed. She looked tired and impatient and probably a little horny. Hotel rooms had that effect on her. "What were you watching just now? Something about Sam?"

He said, "No." Then he told her, "I was just getting an update on current events."

"Anything you can share?"

"Riots in Bombay and Kiev."

"Conservative groups involved?"

"Always." There were dozens of anti-sky movements, all fighting to turn back the clock twenty years. But they mostly fought each other, and usually over inane points and small philosophies.

"What else?" said Tasha. "And give me some good news."

"Industrial efficiencies are doubling every seven months, with economic growth tagging along right behind."

"How about something more personal?"

"Kathryn had her baby," Jack reported. She was another member of the Committee, and more important, she was one of Tasha's best friends.

"Well, that's good. Great! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought I just did."

She playfully stuck out her tongue, then asked, "What were you watching when I stopped you?"

He had to say it. "In the last twelve hours, the Committee carried out three successful raids. One in Shanghai, and two more in Siberia—"

"Magic shops?" she asked, in a whisper.

"I can't say," he replied.

"God! Why do people even think about that crap?"

"I didn't say—"

"You didn't. No." Tasha climbed off the bed. She was thinking about the boys. Jack could see the fears racing behind her damp eyes, worry and reason fighting for dominion. But they had to be safe here. Tasha trusted the world's protective measures far more than her paranoid husband ever could. Besides, hadn't the system worked? The magic shops had been identified by surveillance measures and raided without incident. Innocents hadn't been injured, and only the guilty would be.

Jack changed the subject, remarking, "You look nice."

His wife's nightgown was sheer, its fabric leaking a newly discovered pheromone. The extraterrestrials knew nothing about human biology, but they had offered tools that could analyze and then synthesize any molecule in nature. It was just another major revolution in an age when a hundred revolutions were chasing one another in a wild sprint.

Yet still, a woman's breasts could fascinate any man.

"What are you thinking?" Tasha asked, knowing the answer.

He looked at the Smiler window, thinking of the UN stations that were constantly watching over them. "Maybe we could dial up a different view," he suggested. "A little entertainment, maybe."

"Something filthy?"

"Absolutely," he declared.

She said, "All right," and started for the bathroom. "You do the choosing. I'll trust you."

Jack pulled off his shirt, using one fancy eye to access the room's entertainment menu.

Over the sound of running water, Tasha called out, "Timmons, was it?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Didn't he win that big award? Everyone said you were sure to win, but then he bought a bunch of memberships for his friends. . . ?"

"It was just an award," Jack countered.

"Well, obviously."

Jack made his selection and fell back on the clean covers, looking up at the white emptiness of the ceiling. "Sam had fancy eyes," he mentioned. "It took a long time for me to notice."

The water stopped running. "What was that?"

"Timmons's eyes. They're as good as mine." Jack shook his head. "He told me that he got them through some back channels, through a friend."

"That's how I got mine," Tasha countered.

"I remember."

"You're my friend."

"Always," he purred. Then he closed his wondrous eyes, seeing nothing. "Anyway," he said with a sigh. "Sam asked me out to dinner tomorrow night. For old times' sake."

"Make the big-award winner pay," Tasha told him.

"Oh, he will. He will." Jack turned his head and opened his eyes again. Digital lovers had appeared inside the Smiler window, vigorously engaged in things meant to be private, and the Oracle ignored them, staring hard at things that could never be mentioned aloud.

"Will people ever again write speculative fiction?"

The moderator posed that question, his words magnified by nanophones, his voice conveying a longing and genuine hopefulness. He was a one-time book editor—a small, handsome, and rather elderly man once famous for his voracious reading habits and a relentless string of publishing successes. He had never bought so much as a shopping list from Jack Rheingold. Yet turning to his left, he said, "Jack," with an easy fondness. "Introduce yourself, please. For those who live on Pluto. And then, if you're willing, give us your considerable opinion: Will anyone do serious, important work again?"

"I don't know how considerable it'll be," he joked, gazing across the enormous auditorium. Perhaps a thousand people were waiting to hear the panelists. Costumes were scarce. The audience was mostly white and usually male, and everyone seemed to be fascinated by the subject. Jack gathered his thoughts as he gave a clipped description of his life: As a young man, he made a modest living as a writer. Then his books fell out of print, and he was having trouble finding markets for his new work. A quick wink at the moderator earned a good-natured laugh. "And then everything changed," Jack mentioned. "Aliens and futuristic technologies were suddenly fascinating to the general public, and for the next couple years, my old books were being churned out by the print-on-demand shops. And for the first time in my professional life, I was actually making a good solid living."

A dark murmur passed through the audience.

"I was about to build my dream house," he confessed. "And that's when Houston happened." He could have said St. Petersburg. Or Madras. But the

audience was mostly American, and everybody knew somebody who had vanished in the south Texas disaster. "Overnight, our society jumped from curiosity and speculation into a near-panic, and when cool heads finally prevailed, we made a series of hard, pragmatic choices."

Hundreds shifted in their chairs.

The moderator said, "Jack," again. Then, as if they were fine friends, he said, "You've never told me the story. Exactly how did you get your position on the Oracle Committee?"

"I really don't know," Jack said, shrugging his shoulders.

Most assumed that he was joking. Even the moderator laughed aloud, saying, "No, really. I've always believed—-correct me if I'm wrong here—that it was your public warnings about too many changes happening too quickly."

"Plenty of voices were giving the same warnings," he countered.

"But you predicted troubles with the Smilers' technologies. That business with 'magic,' and so on."

The Smilers lived today in interstellar space, in widely separated communities. In part, it was because they had destroyed their home world. That was one of those oh-by-the-way details that lay buried beneath their marvels and arrogant boastings. On a much smaller scale, that's what had happened to Houston. A private research lab, using specifications taken from public records, had built a machine that should have gently produced vast quantities of perfect nanotubules. Instead, two million died, a city was ruined, and, to this day, a slice of Texas was boiling and spitting up black, virulent clouds.

"What happened, I think," Jack began. Then he paused, pretending to hunt for the right words. He wanted to appear thoughtful and cautious, even when he knew exactly what he wanted to say. "The panic was everywhere," he allowed. "At all levels, in our private lives and in the highest ranks of government, people were absolutely terrified. We needed measures to control the flow of information from the sky, and we desperately needed people who could help direct and control our society's growth." He paused, and sighed. "I was a known name and a recognized face. I had appeared on a few news programs, and I'd met government officials in the process. Right or wrong, somebody high-up selected me to fill the seat on the Committee that had been reserved for an American author."

"And you've served for most of a decade," the moderator remarked. "With distinction."

The only gracious response was to say, "Thank you," and move on. Jack smiled at his audience, showing confidence, and then he finally answered the mostly forgotten question. "Yes," he said, "I think there will be new works in our field. Eventually. When the pace of change slackens. And when our world decides where it is going and how it's going to get there."

It was a good answer, judging by the little nods and satisfied sounds. But then again, Jack had years of practice in the high art of politics.

Four other retired authors sat behind the long table. Two men, two women. The first three gave polished introductions. To various degrees, each made a living acting as a consultant to one of the brand new industries, helping their corporate officers identify trends that would survive another six or seven months. And sensing the general mood, each speaker did his or her best to repeat Jack's optimism, changing his phrasing, but basically stealing everything else.

Sam Timmons was last to speak.

"Our business is finished," he began, skipping the pretense of an introduction. "Nobody wants to read about fictional aliens when *real* ones are being uncovered every day. I know *I* don't want to read that stuff. What I do, for fun and for work, is study the latest broadcasts. The lives and histories of these aliens are infinitely more engaging than anything that I could ever muscle up from my backwater human imagination."

People stirred in the audience, and on the stage, too.

"But by the same token," he continued. "In another sense, I think all of us sitting up here are still writing our brand of fiction." He held himself with an easy arrogance—a quality that always served the author who could master it. With a wide grin, he looked down the length of the table, remarking, "Each of us writes about the future, but we don't use words anymore. We've thrown away the narrative method, and with our own actions, we're building the story of our own world. Each of us, some less and some more, is helping to tell the same amazing story, and our reborn species is our medium. Our page."

There was a pause.

The other panelists remained very still, waiting for a reaction. And a cheer rose up from the ends of the auditorium, thin at first but growing louder. The panelists shifted in their seats, allowing themselves to relax. Then came a thin rain of applause before the auditorium fell silent again, leaving a residue of smug good feelings that showed best in Timmons' hard, self-congratulatory smile.

"How's the family enjoying their vacation?"

"Pretty well. The boys like the hotel's playland, and my wife hits the shops down in the concourse." Jack regarded his grilled bonito for a moment before adding, "Actually, there's not much up here that they can't do at home. Which is why Tasha took them down to Quito for the day."

"They'll have fun," Timmons promised. "Really, it's a beautiful city. They've done a wonderful job absorbing all their prosperity." He was working on a thick cultured steak, slicing the boneless meat into juicy red ribbons. "I've visited Ecuador on business. Two or three times."

"When you were consulting for Miracle, Inc."

"Sure." The man was untroubled that Jack knew his work history. "In part, they wanted my expertise. How much traffic would the skyhook bring, and how soon? But mostly, they just wanted someone who'd say the right words. Who'd tell their officers and investors to sleep easy, at least for the next few years."

Jack said, "Sure."

Timmons took a hearty bite of steak.

"Miracle's building its own ships," Jack pointed out. "Using Smiler engines and Goggle-eye materials, and it wants to launch from everywhere on the globe."

"That's what I hear," Timmons allowed. "I'm not with those fools anymore." He set his fork and knife on the edge of his plate, wiping his mouth with a perfumed napkin. Timmons looked prosperous and relaxed, wearing a bright silk shirt and a tightly knotted tie, an old-fashioned Rolex on his right wrist and a simple gold band on the ring finger. A clear quick twinkle came to his artificial eyes, a little smirk building. Then he folded his napkin and set it on the table, remarking to his dinner guest, "But you already

knew that, don't you? Miracle, Inc. and I parted ways . . . how long has it been. . . ?"

"Three years," answered Jack.

"A division of opinion, it was. They thought they were going to have the first major presence in space. Launching tanker-sized cargoes, and then small cities. But I warned them. I told them they'd have troubles with local governments and the UN. They had to expect long delays. There would be concerns about the plasma engines. Regulations and air passage rights, and headaches like that."

"All of which have come true," Jack said.

Timmons gave a quick shrug and a half-wink. Then he grinned, asking, "But you're not entirely sure who pays my bills now. Are you?"

"Do you mind my asking?"

"You can always ask." Timmons pretended to consider the question, but his mind was already made up. Not yet. He said as much when he picked up his fork again. He said it when he set a clean napkin into his lap. Then, speaking to the waiter standing beside their table, he said, "More wine. Please."

The machine smiled at both men, asking, "And for you, sir?"

"Nothing," Jack replied. "I'm fine for now."

They were the only diners on a tiny island bracketed by a swift artificial stream. The waiter walked across an arching bridge, leaving them. The island was thickly planted, lending to the sense of isolation. Orchids were in bloom, displaying elaborate flowers that may or may not have been natural. Jack didn't know his botany well enough to tell if these were wild species or marvels cooked up in someone's new laboratory. For a moment, he watched the stream sliding past, and then Timmons broke in on his thoughts, asking, "What's on your itinerary tomorrow?"

"Actually, I've got a speech in the morning. 'An Hour With an Oracle,' is the title." He laughed, adding, "A usefully vague title."

"I've got an early panel," said Timmons. "'Memories of Our First Contact.' Which means, I suppose, that I'll be talking about the Balla again. Myself and—" He named two retired writers. "Which means you're the lucky one here."

Both men laughed.

Then Jack mentioned, "Afterward, I'm taking the kids and Tasha up to the construction zone. We're being given a full tour."

"It must be a lot of fun, being who you are."

"Sometimes," Jack allowed.

"I'd love to have a close look at the work. Just to be up there—"

"Maybe I can talk to someone," Jack offered.

"Would you?"

"I'll try," said Jack. "I can't promise anything. But I will try."

Both men knew that if Jack made the request, permission would be granted instantly, without hesitation.

"I hope I get that chance," Timmons confided. Then he glanced over his shoulder, watching what appeared to be a giant daddy-longlegs stepping across the bridge. There wasn't room for a human inside its dangling body. Someone was operating the machine from his hotel room, or, more likely, from his faraway home. A set of intricate arms held out an autograph pad, and a shy voice asked, "Would you mind, Mr. Rheingold? I wasn't planning this, but I saw you through the trees—"

"Sure." He signed the white pad, and then, with a definite sharpness, he added, "Now if you'll excuse us."

"Thank you, sir. Sure."

After the fan had retreated, Timmons laughed. He shook his head and giggled, remarking, "That bug's eyes didn't even glance at me."

A feeling came over Jack. He looked at his dinner companion, took a shallow breath, the tips of his fingers tingling and a sudden nervousness stealing away the last of his appetite.

"Jack," Timmons purred, "you're the main attraction here."

He stared at his one-time colleague. "Who do you work for now?"

"You've tried to find out, have you?"

Jack said nothing.

"Your best lead," Timmons continued, "is a mailing address that leads to a vacant warehouse in Hilo, Hawaii." Then he shrugged, adding, "Plus some lucrative investments, of course. With all the best and luckiest corporations."

Jack fought the urge to look at the jungle surrounding them. Instead, he stared at that pleasant, perpetually smiling face, and he asked Timmons, "What do you want with me?"

"Invite me along with you tomorrow. Really, that's all I'm asking." He smiled with his eyes and mouth, holding his little hands open and palm up. "Just, please . . . take this old sci-fi writer up into space. . . ."

"From the beginning, a few dissenters have argued that we are wrong. We meaning the Committee. We meaning the major and minor governments of the world. We who have a clear mandate, a thousand elections, and three billion concerned voters telling us exactly what they want done. But the dissenters still claim that we are wrong to control the flow of the alien messages. By demanding reason and order in these amazing times, we have done the world a great disservice. In censoring, and in a few cases, stopping the flow of key information into the public domain . . . well, according to a few angry voices, we are nothing but tyrants and the worst kind of fools. . . .

"Frankly, as a point of fact, I agree with that hard assessment. Yes, we have to act like tyrants sometimes, and yes, we are perpetually foolish. And I can tell you honestly, I for one have never been comfortable with my role as a censor. . . !"

The door of their suite swung open, and two boys burst into the main room, engaged in some little race. Together, in a breathless voice, they cried out, "Dad!"

Jack froze the text of his speech, the word *censor* hanging phantom-like in the space between them. "Have fun?" he asked.

"Yeah," Petey claimed. "It was great!"

Clay couldn't simply agree. "It was pretty much okay," he allowed, those gray words passing through a beaming smile. "Mom had to shop. But we got to go to a dinosaur park. Robots and holos." He had loved it, but in the next moment, he had to add, "It wasn't as good as Disney."

"Too bad." Jack's attention began to waver. "Where is your Mom?"

"Here," she called out. Looking tired but pleased, Tasha stepped into the central room, a sack of treasures floating after her. "I got something for your mother. But your dad . . . well, you're going to have to find something yourself. I just don't know about . . ."

Her voice trailed away.

Watching Jack, she quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He said it and smiled, and then he looked at the boys. "Hey, guys. Did you get anything for yourselves?"

"A couple of fancy books," Petey sang out.

"A virtual Cretaceous," Clay reported. "It's supposedly pretty accurate, although you never know about these things."

"Go play with them," Jack suggested. Then to make sure they understood, he added, "In your rooms. All right? Let Mom and me have a little time alone."

Neither boy made a complaining sound. They grabbed their toys, and the old race was resumed, Clay taking his rightful place at the lead while his little brother struggled just to hold the pace.

Tasha never quit watching him.

"What's wrong?" she asked again.

He told her about the dinner. He mentioned Timmons' interest in joining them tomorrow. Tasha seemed to bristle at that news, but she had the good sense to say nothing. Then he mentioned the daddy-longlegs hunting for his autograph, and he said nothing else about it. "After that, it was just polite conversation. Talk about old times, and whatnot."

She settled on the sofa beside him. In the early years, she read everything that he wrote, including what would never sell. She knew him. She knew how he told stories and how he thought, and that's why she went back to the fan wanting his autograph. "What about the bug? What?"

"I'm not telling you this," he began.

"Okay."

"I'm talking in my sleep. If anyone ever asks."

She said nothing, waiting now.

"Seven months ago, the new lunar array got a long look at a signal from Andromeda—"

"Wait! That's not inside our galaxy, is it?"

"Our first real faraway signal, yeah," he said. "It was a laser beacon. Very powerful. Phenomenally powerful, in fact. In about three hours' time, we doubled the information that we've gotten from the stars."

"Was that daddy-longlegs—?"

"The alien responsible? No." He shook his head. "That would have been obvious, and clumsy." Jack took a moment, deciding what to explain next. "After we arrived at the hotel, I set up a little program. My right eye runs it. Every alien costume that it sees is identified by species and put on a list. I'm making a count. A census. I got curious about which aliens are popular, and which ones aren't."

"Okay," she said.

He explained, "My eye didn't find any listing for that creature in the normal files. So immediately, it shot a warning at me. Timmons and I were talking. I didn't react. So the program started searching through fictional aliens, in case. And again, no candidates. Which is when this feeling came over me, and I downloaded and twitched open a second list of known aliens."

In the distance, a happy voice cried out, "I've got you, haddysaur. In my mouth, I've got you!"

The adults shivered for a moment.

Tasha asked, "What second list?"

"Remember how the Smilers sent us a list of aliens and their locations? Well, the Andromedans went several steps farther. They sent us, and who-

ever else is in the path of that beam, the essential texts of every message they've ever received from slightly more than ten thousand species of intelligent life. Mostly from inside their own galaxy, but not always." He let those words drop, and then added, "In three hours, we increased our list of extraterrestrial lifeforms nearly tenfold."

Tasha shivered, then said, "And they're all classified, right?"

"The daddy-longlegs belongs in that list. That secret pool." He shook his head, adding, "Coincidence? It could be argued that some kid built a critter that just happened to resemble an obscure species. But I checked. That machine was identical to the real thing in every tiny facet, and every major one, too."

Tasha said nothing for a moment, pretending to listen to their sons wrestling in the next room. Then she prodded Jack, saying, "Nobody but you can get into that file, can they?"

"We have wonderful safeguards," he promised. "The Committee has first look at new technologies, and we've got the best encryption tools and quantum computers that can be built today."

"But why come up to you with a machine that practically *tells* you—?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Or I can think of too many reasons, maybe. My paranoia meter is off the scale here."

Now Tasha looked at the floor, her expression stern but composed. She was thinking hard about everything that had sent her husband into his paranoid spiral.

"I'm going to invite Timmons to come along with us." Jack spoke quietly, waiting for his wife to argue for caution, or anger, or some other useful tactic. That's what he wanted here. Tasha's clear-headed advice. But when she didn't respond, he said, "I could leave you and the boys behind. I could make an excuse and talk to Timmons alone—"

"No," she blurted. "I want to be there."

He wasn't entirely sorry to hear it.

"And I don't want to leave the boys down here, alone."

"We're as safe up there as anywhere," he allowed.

"Could you. . . ?"

"What? Could I what?"

"Nothing," she said. "If Timmons wants to talk to you, we'll make him talk to both of us. Won't we?"

"Hopefully." Then he said again, "What did you want to ask me?"

"I was just wondering," Tasha continued. "Since you're talking in your sleep, and since I'm lying awake in the dark . . . why don't you whisper something more about what else these faraway Andromedans have given us. . . ?"

"I thought your speech went quite well."

"Thank you."

"You came across as honest and very reasonable," Timmons continued, pleased to be giving Jack a sterling review. "The speech itself was politically shrewd, yet substantial at its heart. You sang justified praises for your work, but then you dwelled on the Committee's mistakes, too. Which I'm sure helped dispel the cliché of bloodless bureaucrats ruling from ivory towers."

"Speaking of towers," Jack mentioned, trying to change subjects. "Engage the C-setting in your eyes, and you'll get a rather different perspective."

"Oh, goodness. Yes."

The new setting linked them with telemetry from outside. Using that data, their eyes wove an image, and the walls of the giant freight elevator seemed to vanish. For an instant, they could see the skyhook's diamond shell streaking past. And then the shell evaporated too, leaving the two men inside sitting in the open. They could still see each other, and Jack kept glancing at Tasha and the boys. But it felt as if there was nothing but stars and vacuum around them, and they could see themselves accelerating out into space at an astonishing pace.

Quietly, almost reverently, Timmons said, "This is wonderful."

Jack agreed.

"How many times have you actually been here?" his guest inquired. "Up in space, I mean."

"Before today, six times," Jack allowed. "Touring the security posts, mostly. Plus a little shakedown cruise on one of the first torchships." He let himself laugh, adding, "We could have reached Mars in less than a week. And I was tempted. Believe me. But instead, we just did a flyby of the moon and came home again."

"I am jealous," Timmons confessed.

Jack shrugged, saying nothing.

The cargo pad was huge and virtually empty, its blister of air contained by an invisible gossamer dome. The boys sat on a nearby bench, happily watching their ascent through a Smiler window, while Tasha sat between them, helping to keep the peace when she wasn't nervously glancing over her shoulder at Jack. A pair of construction robots stood nearby, waiting for the first question; but none had been asked. The official delegation was still thousands of miles overhead, waiting at the top of the skyhook. Jack had warned them that he didn't want any fuss made, which meant that no more than a hundred architects and engineers would be vying for his attentions. Normally, he despised these forced events, but today, for every good reason, he kept wishing that they were already there, safe inside one of life's silly rituals.

"Thank you again for including me," said Timmons. "I know that I was pushy about coming along, but I had good reasons. Great reasons, frankly."

"Such as?"

His guest glanced at him and smiled happily, while his eyes appeared amused and perhaps a little distracted. "I think you already know some of the story, Jack. In fact, I'm counting on your intuition. If you can't piece it together for yourself, then what I've been doing here is a waste of my precious time."

Again, Tasha glanced at them, her mouth hanging open.

Jack managed a breath, and then he said, "You already know about the Andromedans, don't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Of course I don't know how you learned about them," Jack continued, "but the simplest explanation is probably best."

"What is the simple explanation?"

He answered, "You have a friend on the Committee."

"I'd like to think that you're my friend, Jack." Timmons laughed, betraying a genuine nervousness. Then his eyebrows lifted, and he admitted, "Actually, I have several good friends who happen, yes, to be colleagues of yours."

"Colleagues who gave you access to sealed files."

Timmons nodded, admitting, "I've had a good look at portions of the files. What matters most." The man sat back and took a deep breath, and then he quietly announced, "It's just astonishing what the Andromedans have given us. If I had the power, I'd send them a message. A thank-you note. Their gift was the very best. By far, the most important. And I'd like them to know that."

"You think it is?"

Timmons gave a little snort. "Of course. Why not? A person in your position . . . well, it has to be an enormous blessing. You and the rest of the Committee have been struggling from the start. You have an impossible mandate. You're overseeing the birth of an entirely new society. Nothing like this has ever been attempted by human beings. Not on this scale, and not with so much at stake. Yet not only do you have to do it right, there's no room to make mistakes."

"There's a little room," Jack countered. "A little wriggle space."

"Not when it comes to important mistakes." Timmons closed his eyes, and then he opened them again. "But luckily, we happened to find the Andromedans: A very advanced, exceptionally ancient species that has studied thousands of species, in depth. They've measured everyone's mistakes and the tragic consequences, and they've identified the roaring successes. Each species' nature comes into play. Mathematical models have been constructed, making predictions that almost always come true." Again he closed his eyes, referring to some secret file. "Social engineering as a hard science. Finally. And not only does the science work, but our benefactors have taught us how to make this science work for ourselves."

"Yes," Jack allowed, "it's impressive stuff."

"Intelligence evolves in how many directions?"

"Infinite directions."

"No," Timmons said, "I mean stable directions. And I mean highly social, highly visual creatures like us and like the Balla. How many options do we have, if we want to build a lasting, happy high-tech civilization?"

"Eleven," Jack allowed.

"Eleven islands of stability inside a chaos of rebellion and war and genocide." Timmons shook his round face, and he grinned, and after a little moment, he added, "The Committee has already picked its target. Hasn't it?"

"We have a general plan, yes."

"The skyhooks allow cheap but controlled access to space. That's the course we were following in the first place, so why not continue along the same rational line? Important but still conservative changes to the species itself: Longer lifespans, but no immortality. Enhanced intelligence, but only to a carefully defined point." Again he shook his head. "Amusing, isn't it? We can plug humanity into these alien equations, and out come eleven stable solutions. And how many of these solutions actually look human when we're finished?"

"Two," Jack said.

"Once we reach the target, our society will be locked-in. Isn't that the fair assessment? We will become an entirely new animal that could well persist, with minimal changes, for the next five billion years."

"Some people hope so," said Jack.

"You don't?"

"These equations may not work perfectly with humans," he cautioned. "The Andromedans themselves have some rather stern warnings—"

"But still," Timmons interrupted, his voice finding muscle and volume. "You have a goal. You and the rest of the Committee argued about it for several months, and you took votes, and you held conferences, and you took more votes until you finally reached something that resembled a consensus. A hundred intelligent and presumably rational men and women were sitting in their conference hall at UN headquarters, in New York City, and seventy-six hands were lifted in unison, effectively deciding the next five billion years of human history."

Jack stared at the man. "I remember, Sam. I was there."

"You were," Timmons agreed. Then he closed his eyes once again—

—and suddenly Jack was staring at the world through someone else's eyes. He found himself on the street outside the Oracles' headquarters—an elegant, false-granite structure built in three weeks by one of the first brigades of construction robots. The Committee was in recess, but most of Jack's colleagues would have come to their offices, attending briefings and meeting with their own staffs. Even on a weekend afternoon, he should be watching an endless flow of foot traffic passing through the Committee's tall, diamond-paned doors. But the stranger's eyes saw nothing except long reaches of empty pink stairs and a few busy pigeons. The dull anxieties that had been gnawing at Jack vanished abruptly, replaced by a raging panic. Something horrible was about to happen. He could feel a treacherous and vast menace lurking just out of view. But nothing changed. For what felt like an eternity, the pigeons bobbed their heads and flicked their wings; and finally, as Jack took a shallow quick breath, the diamond doors swung wide and a lone figure calmly strolled into the open air.

The pigeons exploded into flight.

For an embarrassing long moment, Jack didn't recognize the man.

He was that man.

What he was watching was himself, standing on the top stair, one arm lifted high and the hand waving; and now the eyes through which Jack could see began to pan to their left, revealing thousands of people standing shoulder to shoulder in a great plaza that he didn't recognize, in the heart of what looked like a clean and prosperous and radically transformed city.

Tasha cried out, "No—!"

Then, in the next horrible instant, the cargo pad began to jerk and shake, safety harnesses instantly weaving themselves around its passengers, holding them against their benches, while the pad struggled against its momentum, bringing itself to an emergency stop.

"Mommy?" Petey whimpered. Their youngest hadn't used that name in a year, but just a heartbeat later, he said it a second time. "What's happening to us, Mommy? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Tasha lied. "It's nothing."

"Something's got to be wrong here," was Clay's hard assessment. "It's dark, and we're not moving anywhere."

"But we're safe," his mother insisted. Then she called out, "What is it? A power outage, maybe?"

The robots assumed that the question was theirs to answer. One quietly responded, "There's a large-scale disruption, yes. But our emergency systems are operating within norms—"

"Shut up!" she hollered.

But it wasn't a simple power outage. Except for allowing him to see his

immediate surroundings, Jack's eyes had stopped working. The pad's distant edge leaked an amber warning light. He could just see Tasha peeling away her harness, and then leaping up while telling the boys, "Stay where you are! I mean it! And leave those harnesses on!"

With a low, fierce voice, Jack said to Timmons, "What the fuck are you doing?"

His companion seemed to be grinning at him in the near-darkness, holding his head at a calm angle while he deftly removed his own harness.

Tasha ran up, asking, "What was I watching just now?"

"You showed her the same . . . scene. . . ?" Jack sputtered.

"A scene, yes. She saw exactly what you saw." Timmons rose to his feet. "And to answer your first question: What the fuck I am doing is making you a considerable and very generous offer."

Jack struggled to engage his fancy eyes, but the fault wasn't with his hardware. The entire net had collapsed, along with energy production. How wide was the disruption? How could it happen? But he kicked those questions aside, growling at Timmons, "Explain all of this. Now."

Timmons glanced at Tasha. "How are your boys? Are they fine?"

"For the moment," she muttered.

"Good. Very good." The man took a deep breath, adding, "Let's work at trying to keep them well. Shall we?"

Jack stifled a curse.

"What do you want?" Tasha snapped.

With the mildest of voices, Timmons announced, "Some rather considerable changes are coming. Arriving today, in fact. Rumbling into view as we speak." Then he took a deep, satisfied breath before adding, "You've earned our attentions, Jack. You have a good mind, a good presence, and a fair talent for politics. In a very difficult business, you've made remarkably few enemies."

"So what?"

"But here's what's most important, Jack: You voted with my friends. My associates. You and twenty-three others stood against the Committee's secret agenda for humanity, and when we were looking at potential candidates—"

"For what job?" Tasha interrupted.

"President." Timmons said the word with a prurient delight. Then he added, "By that, I mean president of a newly reorganized Committee. An Oracle Committee with a firmer grasp of the needs of its people, and their enormous promise, too."

"What is happening?" Jack asked. "I mean now, with my colleagues . . . what are you doing with them. . . ?"

As if wounded, Timmons exclaimed, "We aren't vicious people. This isn't some bloody coup, and nobody is being placed against a random wall and shot." With both hands, he pretended to physically shove those images aside. "All I can tell you is what I know, and it's that everything is being done smoothly and quickly, overseen by good people, many of whom you've trusted for years now."

"What. . . ?" Tasha began.

Timmons turned toward her. "Yes? A question?"

But her courage dribbled away.

Jack asked his own question with a sharp suspicion. "What kind of world do you want to make?"

Timmons gave an amused snort. "I'm human. I want everything that's *possible*."

Then he briefly explained himself, acting as if nothing could be more obvious. "We'll build cheap, reliable starships, and we'll explode across this arm of the Milky Way. With all that room, humans will be able to achieve all eleven harmonious states. And thousands more that nobody's envisioned yet."

Jack swallowed, and nodded. "But what if?" he asked. "Just suppose. If I don't accept this post—if for some reason I refuse your generous offer—what happens to me? To us?"

Timmons was ready. He knew how to maintain his broad smile even as he shook his head, remarking with a casual menace, "If it was up to me, my friend, your fate would be a quiet and comfortable and very obscure life. That is, if it was up to me."

Jack shivered and said nothing.

"How long?" Tasha blurted. "Before he needs to decide—?"

"Three or four minutes," Timmons replied, staring only at Jack. "Really, I don't think it's that difficult a decision. Do you?"

Jack looked at his wife.

"Come over here," she muttered. "Let's talk about this."

They started walking away from the center of the pad. Tasha's arms were crossed, and she shivered from simple nerves. After a little while, she looked at him, then glanced back at Timmons. She almost spoke, but one of the robots ran up to them suddenly, reminding them, "We're operating on emergency power now. The safety fields are no longer in effect—"

"I know that," she snapped. "Thank you."

"Leave us alone," Jack told the machine. Then he followed Tasha for a few more steps, finally stopping her with a touch. "This is a figurehead post, you know. What they're offering me."

She nodded, and grimaced.

"I don't look very big or ambitious to them, and nobody sees me as a threat."

Quietly, she asked, "Who's responsible? Do you have any idea?"

"I can make five good guesses," he admitted.

She didn't ask for names.

Jack looked over his shoulder. The boys were still seated, but one of them was crying. Petey was. He heard the sobs, and then Clay barked, "It's going to be all right. So please, shut up!"

Timmons was standing by himself, speaking quietly but effusively to someone that only he could see.

Jack turned back to Tasha, but she was gone. He saw her running across the pad, her body lightened by the altitude, her gait long and her back held stiff and straight. He called out to her. He shouted, "What are you doing?" And then he started to run, to sprint, chasing her to the pad's lip and that ribbon of warm amber light.

Tasha was squatting, perched perilously close to the gossamer dome that held the air inside and kept the hard vacuum out. Her face was buried between her knees, and with a mixture of terror and loathing, she wept.

"Bloodless or not," he admitted, "we are talking about a coup. A rebellion. And if the people behind this mess had all that much power, they wouldn't bother begging for my face and my good name."

Tasha said nothing, pretending not to notice him.

Jack looked back over his shoulder again. Timmons was coming after them, trotting along with a growing urgency.

"We've got people above us and below us," Jack offered. "Both groups have some of the smartest men and women anywhere. I'll bet anything that right now, everyone's working on fixes to get us out of this place."

Tasha sniffed, and then she asked him, "What would you bet? If it came down to a wager, what would you risk?"

Jack opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak.

Tasha looked away from him, remarking, "You know, that's what was wrong with your writing."

"My *writing?* What are you talking about?"

She sniffed and said, "You were always so *careful*. With style, with subject. You never took real chances, Jack. You don't know how many times I wanted to tell you, 'Try to be bold. Just once. Go out on that limb farther than any of these pumped up egos have gone before. . . .'"

"Shit, I didn't know," he muttered.

"Because I never told you," she admitted.

Timmons was near enough that they could hear his deep, wet breathing, followed by a worried voice. "Have you made up your mind?" he called out. "Jack? Jack?"

Jack glanced at his wife. "What are you suggesting? We tell these shits 'Yes,' but later, when I'm actually president, we turn against them?"

"And bite them in the ass, yes. That's a smart, time-honored strategy." Then she calmly rose to her feet, watching as Timmons closed the gap, and with those last few moments of privacy, she said, "Or call their bluff, if that's what you think this is. Tell them, 'No, and go to hell!'"

"Tell them how—?" he began to ask.

Then he saw it for himself.

A slow step backward put him near enough to the dome that his skin began to tingle. The gossamer field could hold back a quiet atmosphere, but not a full-grown man.

Timmons slowed in front of them, and stopped.

"Okay, Jack," he said. "What's your decision?"

Jack looked at his wife, and she returned his gaze, a cold sternness coming into her face.

"It's your call, darling," Tasha said with a firm, calm voice. "Whatever you decide. I'll help any way I can."

Then the two of them turned to face Timmons together.

"Yes, Jack. . . ?"

"His legs," Jack whispered. "You get them. And I'll grab the little fucker's arms." ○

Daniel Abraham delves into why sophisticated technology may never really replace an organic conscience in his chilling tale of the . . .

GANDHI BOX

Daniel Abraham

Mason had almost convinced himself that Foster wasn't going to show when the door by the bar opened—the angry sound of rain cutting through the music for three long seconds—and the man himself walked in. Mason felt the blood pushing him, he could already feel Foster's little pug nose breaking under his palm.

"Okay," the box said, straight into Mason's skull, "we've got a problem."

The hum of conversation went down half a notch, and the bartender glanced from Foster, who was stripping off a dripping black greatcoat, to Mason's booth in the back, apprehensive. A few other people—regulars who knew the score—shifted back toward the corners of the room, expecting violence.

At the bar, Big Joey took a long drag on a joint and laughed his soft-headed laugh. Foster looked slowly around the room, watery blue eyes taking in the place until he saw Mason sitting by himself, nursing a beer that was over half way to flat. Mason wished to God he had his knife, that he could carry a knife anymore. Six years on parole ahead of him, and not so much as a good pocketknife allowed.

"Stay calm," the box said. "Let's just get out of here. Walk it off."

"Shut it," Mason murmured so that only the box could hear.

Mason leaned back, stretching casually. Foster narrowed his eyes, hesitated, smiled. He walked across the room, shouldering his way past an early-evening bunch of college kids down slumming and looking to score a few cheap kicks of D. There had been a time when Mason would have been happy to sell it to them. Maybe Foster was doing that now too.

"Hey," the smarmy voice said. "Mason, mi amigo. Good to see you back."

Foster leaned against the table. He smelled like a wet dog. Mason curled his lips and looked away.

"Walk away," the box said. "It isn't worth it. *He* isn't worth it."

"Foster," Mason said, less a greeting than a grudging acknowldgement of existence. Foster slid into the booth across from him and lifted two fingers to the barkeep.

"Let me buy you a beer, muchacho. It's been a long time."

"Two years," Mason said.

"Too damn bad, man," Foster said. "Bad rap. Everyone knows it wasn't you beat that kid up."

"Yeah, it was," Mason said.

"Well, hey, man, everyone knows *that* too, right?"

Foster grinned at his own joke, but the gleam in his eyes was weighing. Mason looked away. Maybe they didn't know, maybe no one would figure out that he had a box. Maybe Foster didn't know that Jenny had split, that Mason had found out about them.

A waitress slid by, putting two fresh beers on the table and pressing Foster's credit chit into her reader. Mason didn't touch the new bottle, his fingers clenched tight around the warm one in his hand.

"Let's go," the box said. "Come on, Mason. Let's get out of here."

"So, I hear they fitted you up with one of those things," Foster said, making a tapping motion at his temple. "You're like Big Joey now, eh?"

"A little different," Mason said. "Joey never called his own shots. Even when he was breaking legs, he just took orders. You ever know me to let someone else call my shots?"

"No, man," Foster said, half-laughing. "Not you."

"Good," Mason said.

"So. Grapevine says little miss Jennifer bailed on you. Sorry to hear it. Must be rough, with you just back out in the world, eh?"

"Grapevine says you were seeing her while I was inside."

"Damn smart for a plant, that grapevine, eh? Hey. You don't mind, do you? I figured it was like borrowing a shirt or something. You know. Between friends."

Foster grinned like a kid lighting a cat on fire. Mason pictured raising the bottle. He knew how the thick glass would feel when he whipped his wrist. No need to break it, just plant its bottom edge right above that smile where it would snap the teeth. Mason could already see Foster's gums bleeding.

He shifted his weight, subtly changed his grip on the bottle. The box took about a quarter-second to deduce what he intended. When it spoke, its voice was lower, no longer pleading.

"Three years left on your sentence, Mason. You could be back in the cells by morning."

He paused, shifted back. Big Joey laughed at a joke no one else could hear. Foster shrugged, faking casual, and lit a cigar. The smoke was too sweet, laced.

"If there's anything I can do. You know, make your life easier, you just let me know, eh? I figure I owe you one. Or six. Ten, maybe."

"Walk away from it," the box urged.

Mason forced a smile to mirror Foster's.

"You know, hombre," Mason said. "Thing about these boxes? They can't do shit except call the cops. Violation of my rights otherwise, eh? I figure it would take the cops about ten minutes to get here."

Foster frowned and tapped a gray feather of ash onto the floor.

"Cops get here, well, you know how they are. Assholes would probably shoot me as soon as look at me," Mason said. "Best case, I'd be looking at three years. I'd have to put in a lot of effort to make ten minutes worth that. But you know, I probably *can*."

He stood up, carefully, slowly pushed the beer Foster had bought him onto its side, a sizzling sluice onto Foster's lap.

"Hey, fuck!" Foster yelped.

"Sorry," Mason said, and walked for the back, for the door, out. Just out.

The apartment was depressing. The windows were all laced with security wire. The door was reinforced. The place had ratty off-white carpet and a push feed with six hundred channels and still nothing good to watch. But other than that, it was a lot like a cell.

That was bullshit. That was his heart talking. Back inside, he'd have guards watching him eat, watching him shit, watching him jerk off. Every night, the lights-out would come, and he'd wonder if any of the revolving cast of cellmates was a ringer sent to kill him because he'd pissed someone off or even just to make a point. This was better than a cell. Outside was better than in.

It was just that Jenny wasn't there. All those months when she'd come by to see him in person or telnet in on the ratty little text-only interface the prison let inmates use—logged and monitored—for fifteen minutes a day, he'd just wanted to get out, to touch her.

"You're drinking too much," the box said.

"Piss off. I can get drunk," Mason said. "That's not a violation."

"It's your right," the box agreed. "But it won't help."

"Eat me."

"You did good back there," the box said. "I know it feels weird, but you did the right thing. You did the strong thing. It takes a real man to walk away from that kind of bullshit."

"Leave me the fuck alone!" Mason yelled. The box went quiet.

He stood up from the couch, his legs unsteady, and went back to the bedroom. It looked stripped. Just his four changes of clothes in the closet. All of her makeup gone. All of her ugly little glass figures—unicorns and angels and shit—gone from the shelf she'd had for them. He lay down on the bed and used the bedside keypad to replay her message.

She flickered onto the screen. She looked bad—red eyes, hair a vague blue-green that needed to be freshened-up. She looked beautiful, the fucking traitor.

"Mace," she said. "Look, I know I should have said this to you in person. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. But . . . look, I need to go, you know? Spend some time alone and stuff."

She'd kissed Foster with that soft little mouth. Maybe she'd gone down on him with it. There was a cold place growing just under his collarbone, reaching down toward his heart.

"I know you're going to hear it from someone. No one in this fucking town knows how to keep their mouths shut. Look, Mace. I was seeing Foster for a while when you were in the joint. I'm sorry about that too."

She shook her head again, muttered something sharp that he couldn't make out, and looked back into the camera. He could see it in her face now. The set of her jaw, and the way he could see white all the way around her iris. She was scared.

"Don't follow me?" she begged. "Please, Mace. Just let it go for a while, okay?"

Give you a head start, you mean, he thought. Not likely.

He didn't say it, though. He didn't want the box to know what he was thinking. The spool cut out. She'd said all she had to say. He imagined that he could feel the box disapproving, some little electronic frown. Not possi-

ble, of course. The box was just a bunch of monitors with a little brainwashing expert system and a hotline to the cops. It was a machine. It could no more disapprove than his toaster could.

He called up the apartment's system and ran a check on the message. She'd sent it from a kiosk at the airport. Well, it made for good cover. He had to give her that much. She could be anywhere by now, or on her way there. But she wasn't a pro at running. She'd screw up. He had the apartment system try to make a direct contact. No reply, but hey, that was no surprise.

It wouldn't be hard. He could probably guess most of her passwords. And it wasn't that hard to buy information from the hollow-faced little freaks the airlines had processing reservations.

Four hours, tops. If he didn't have the box.

He had the system contact Dafyd Kupp instead. Dafyd wasn't picking up, but there was a record option. Mason chose it.

"Hey, Daf," he said, lifting his chin to the camera as if it were the man. "Need to know if you can do me a favor. Jenny took off. I think she's feeling a little confused or something. I want to talk to her about stuff, but she's got me filtered."

Mason tapped his temple, hating the way his movement echoed Foster's. But Dafyd had to know or it wouldn't make sense to him.

"Just let me know if you hear anything about her, eh? I'll owe you. Later."

He played the message back, saved it, and killed the connection. The box stayed quiet. Maybe it hadn't figured out that it had been watching a business transaction. If the cops looked over the recording, Mason figured they'd know. A real human would spot the message for what it was. By the time they had reason to check, though, anything he needed to do would be pretty much done.

He made dinner for himself—beans out of a can, some white bread with artificial butter. The data entry day job the parole board had him on was barely enough to live on. The beers at the bar were probably more than he could afford. If Jenny were around, it would be easier. If he was going to stay outside, he'd have to get a roommate. Twenty-six years old, and still with a fucking roommate. It was no way for a man to live. This or prison was the choice between eating a whole turd or half of one. But he wouldn't be doing either for long. Not him.

"What would you do if you found her?" the box asked.

Mason turned on the push feed and spooled through channels. The beans were too salty. The couch had a coffee ring on the arm that hadn't been there when he went into prison. The guy in the apartment above him started lifting weights—an irregular dull thud when the metal hit the carpet.

"What would you do?" the box asked again.

"Why ask now? Why not before?"

"I wanted to know now."

"Bullshit," Mason said, grinning. "You wanted to wait until my pulse and stuff all got back down to normal. You're like living with a fucking lie detector. I don't have to answer anything."

"True," the box agreed. "But you should know the answer even if you don't tell me. You should think about it."

I'll teach her a fucking lesson before they kill me, Mason thought, nodding to himself. That's what I'll do, you self-righteous prick.

Big Joey was sitting on the curb outside Mason's apartment building

when he got home. Other people on the sidewalk stepped around him, eyeing the shining bald head, wife-beater undershirt, and camouflage pants. Even squatting, the man loomed.

Mason slowed his pace, leaving a little time to watch before he got to the man. Big Joey had been breaking legs for years. Dumb as a post, mostly, but a sonofabitch if he needed to be. He'd gone in eight months before Mason and come out a year earlier. He still dressed like a badass, but the way he stroked his wire-brush moustache and chuckled at nothing—at the things his box was whispering in his ear—reminded Mason of the glassy-eyed look of a religious freak.

"Joey," he said when he came to him.

"Mace," Joey agreed. His voice was also huge. "I was looking for you."

"I don't owe any money," Mason said.

Joey laughed and stood up. His muscles rippled like a machine. Mason looked into the cool blue eyes and didn't even twitch. He felt no fear of the big man at all. It was sad.

"You got a minute?" Joey asked. "I thought we maybe better talk a little, you know? I know this bar down on Madrid. Cheap, and the waitresses are cute."

"Sure," Mason said. He didn't even give the box a half-second pause to read his reactions. Stay unpredictable, that was his plan. Joey just smiled, turned, and walked south. Mason noticed that the big man still had the fighter's habit of not putting hands in pockets. He wasn't all gone maybe. Or maybe it was like finding one of Jenny's socks—just a leftover from something that wasn't real anymore. Neither one spoke while they walked, and Joey didn't laugh.

The bar was a nice enough place. More upscale than the usual. Business types writing mail on the screens built into the tables. A few working-class guys to make the place feel like something more than a slicked-up suburb. It smelled like good beer and fresh bread. And, yeah, the waitresses were pretty damn cute. The one who seated them smiled at Joey like she knew him.

"So, how's it going now you're out?" Joey asked after they'd placed their orders.

"Been worse, been better," Mason said.

"Saw you facing down Foster the other night."

"Yeah."

"You did good getting out of there. Foster thinks that because we got these things in our heads, he can be a prick and get no static for it."

"Not too far off, is he?" Mason said.

"Didn't see *you* with a lap full of beer," Joey said and smiled. It was his soft-headed smile. Made him look half retarded, but this was the first time that Mason caught a glint of something behind it. Like it was Joey who thought the rest of the world was a little soft. Mason shrugged.

"Did they send you?" he asked, pointing toward Joey's temple. "The box tell you I needed talking to?"

"No, they're not networked," Joey said. "I'm here because I thought maybe you wanted to talk to someone who's been through it."

"Through what?"

"The readjustment. You caught it talking to you in your sleep yet?"

The waitress came back, plopping a beer in a thick glass mug in front of each of them and a wicker basket of soft-shell peanuts in between. Joey grinned at her and told her to run a tab. It gave Mason a chance to think.

"Didn't know they did that," he said when she'd gone. "The sleep thing."

"They don't miss a trick, mi amigo. Not a single fucking trick. And you know the bitch of it is, they're right."

"Whatever," Mason said.

Joey's expression clouded over, a flush of anger that washed away as fast as it had come. Then the laugh again.

"Violence is a stupid way to fix things, Mace. That's all I'm saying. Shit. That's all the *boxes* are saying too. Doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure that one out. Thinking with our fists didn't do either of us much good, did it? Stuck us here with these things in our heads."

"Getting *caught* is what got me here," Mason said.

"Look. I don't want to get preachy here, but I know what you're going through. It's tough. They put one of these things in you, and it's like all of a sudden you've got this conscience grafted onto your mind. Every time you start getting up a good head of steam, it pops in and breaks the mood. Or it makes you think a step past doing whatever it is you're about to do. But there's a reason that works, man. There's a reason talking you down like that works."

"And what is that, Joey?"

"Violence never did us any damn good, Mace. It's a disease, and we caught it, and it sent us both into the joint and lost us both everything we cared about on the outside."

Mason sipped his beer. It was good. He took a longer drink and set the glass down half-empty. A peanut shell splintered between his fingers.

"What'd it cost *you?*" he asked.

"My dad died while I was inside," Joey said. "I didn't get to talk to him. I didn't get to see him. They let me watch the funeral on a closed feed."

Mason closed his eyes and quirked a smile.

"Something funny?" Joey asked.

"I just never really talked to you much. Before I went in, I mean. But I heard you talk a few times. I even saw you break a guy's wrist once, at the bar. One quick move. Hardly looked like anything at all, except that the guy started yelling."

"That was a different life, man."

"It's just that, all this stuff you're telling me. It doesn't sound like the way *you* used to talk. It sounds like a *box*. You said yourself. They don't miss a trick."

"I also said that they're right."

Mason rolled his head, stretching the muscles in his neck, feeling where the fine wires had been inserted into his flesh.

"So, you think violence is a disease?" Mason asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay, so I pull out a knife. Right here, right now. It's self-defense, 'cause I started it. The box can't bitch about it. Parole board has the record, so they know it's kosher."

Joey pursed his lips, considering.

"You know violence is a wrong thing," Mason said, "but *I* pull the knife, so there's no consequences. You can't get caught." He paused. "What happens?"

Joey smiled, sad and nostalgic as an alcoholic remembering a perfect bottle of wine.

"I crack your ass the other way," Joey admitted.

"Figured," Mason said. "Thanks for the beer, man. I should be getting home."

As he rose to leave, Joey put a massive hand on his shoulder. Mason paused. There was a sadness in the man's face that hadn't been there before. A sense of loss.

"Just don't do anything you don't *mean* to," Joey said. "Think about it first. Whatever it is."

"You too, man," Mason said.

When he got back to his place, there was a message waiting on his system. Dafyd Kupp, with a map to Jennifer's new apartment, where she was working, her schedule, and a picture of her with yesterday's timestamp. She was wearing her hair tighter, in a French braid the red color that it would have grown out as. It was the same way she'd worn it when he'd first met her. Shitty disguise, baby, he thought, his fingertips touching the screen. Like I'd ever forget you looking like that.

The box was quiet when he bought a ticket to the little corporate work-for-food that Jenny had chosen as her bolt hole. She hadn't even crossed state lines. Poor little Jenny never could think something like this through.

Nothing in his probation about traveling inside the state. Jenny hadn't put in a restraining order against him. All this was perfectly legal. He could walk right up to her door without violating parole. He might even talk her into letting him in.

Mason sat in the last car of the train, watching the gray concrete and old brick slowly give way to the plastic stucco and glass of new city. The walk from the station to her complex was a short one, through a cookie-cutter neighborhood that had probably looked really pretty for the first half-hour or so after the place had been opened. It wasn't wearing well, though. The stucco was peeling at the corners of the buildings. The bushes on the traffic median were looking feral. Two bums came up, hoping for cash, and Mason waved them away. Whatever corporation had put this little bedroom community together was past caring anything about it.

If the security in the place ran true to form, he might get as long as fifteen minutes from the time the box ratted him out to when the cops arrived. He couldn't count on it, but it was possible.

"What are you hoping for?" the box asked. "I mean think about it, Mason. What's the best-case scenario?"

"I just want to help her work this all through," Mason said. "She made a mistake. But I still love her, and I've got no intention of going back to prison."

Let the fucking electronics chew on *that* for a while.

Her building was an eight-story that took up half a block. He knew from Dafyd that her place was on the sixth floor at the back, and, this being her day off, that she was probably in it. He didn't have his system check, though. She might have an alert on her filter. Not likely, but there was no call to tip his hand. He walked in the foyer and back for the elevators. Fake marble floors were wearing through to their linoleum base. Wall sconces lit the corridors at whatever wattage had been around when the last bulb burned out. The place looked like a so-so hotel gone to seed.

"I don't believe you," the box said, breaking a long silence.

Mason almost laughed as he pushed the up button.

"Here," he said. "You got a good baseline for me?"

"Yes."

"I still love her," Mason said. It was easy to live with a lie detector if you knew what parts of the truth to feed it. The doors slid open with a sick grinding sound and Mason stepped in, thumbing the 6 button. He closed his eyes as the elevator lurched upward.

Jenny. Little freaky Jenny with her crying jags. Her perfect little tits and the crazed bitch grin. He still loved her. If he didn't, the image of her legs wrapped around that little shit Foster would have been just a good joke. So he still loved her, that was the truth. The other truth was that love didn't mean the same thing to everyone, and the box didn't need to hear that from him. Not yet.

The door to 647 was almost in the middle of the back corridor, facing in, so her window would be on the air shaft. It looked like all the other doors. He ran his fingertips over it. Good construction, but not great. Deadbolt with an encryption lock. No way to pick it. But the frame was just wood and plastic. He pressed a palm to the spot where a few good kicks might pop the door open. He imagined himself stepping back, then his body shifting forward and a fast kick out from the hip. In his mind, he rehearsed it.

He knocked, then without waiting for her to answer, he called out.

"Jenny. It's me. Open the door."

The silence was longer than he'd expected. He'd almost convinced himself that Dafyd had been wrong, or that something unpredictable had changed her schedule. But then the bolt shot, and the door opened an inch. There was a brass security bar about two inches above the deadbolt. Mason glanced at the new spot on the door. Yeah, he could still make that kick.

"Mace," Jenny said. "What're you doing here?"

"We need to talk. Open up."

Her mouth was pinched nearly bloodless.

"She's scared," the box said. "Take it slow with her. There's a right way to do this, Mason. We can get through this. Just stay cool."

Mason bit down the grin. Stupid fucking box was trying to help him through this difficult emotional moment! Jesus Christ. That was so sad it was almost endearing.

"If I wanted you dead, I'd have shot you already. Come on, sweetie. Open the door."

"Don't talk like that. I hate it when you talk like that."

There were tears in her eyes. Fear. Just fear. Not sorrow.

"You said you loved me. And then you fucked my friends and ran. I think you owe me something. And it starts where you open the door. Now, Jenny."

"Go home, Mace. Okay? Please go home."

The box chimed in.

"Come on, Mason. Let's go. Walk it off. She isn't ready to do this right now. Maybe you aren't either. Take it slow, man. You can do it right if you take it slow."

Mason took the step back. Jenny's eyes went wide as she figured it out and she tried to get the door closed. The wood giving under his heel felt perfect, and the grin on his face felt like righteous anger. Jenny squealed and ran back into the apartment.

"Mason! Stop it!" the box howled. "Stop right now! Three more years if you break probation. Three years, plus anything you get for this. Stop it now, and there's still a chance."

Bullshit there was a chance! But the box knew that the lie would be the

right thing to say. Mason walked through the door with his blood singing. Jenny was down a short hall, heading for her bedroom. He closed the door behind him. It had only broken where the security bar inserted into the frame. That was good. He shot the deadbolt.

"The thing *you* don't get," he said to the box. "Those years? They don't really happen. This happens *now*."

"It's not too late," the box said. "Tack on another two for home invasion. If the judge is having a good day, you might get probation when you're done with three. If you touch her, you won't get less than fifteen, Mason. You won't see the world again until you're in your forties. Stop now."

"Too late," Mason said.

The bullet went past his ear at the same moment he heard the report, the flat bang and the hiss two parts of the same sound. Jenny stood in the doorway of the bedroom, one hand wrapped around the butt of the gun, the other steadying it like something she'd seen in a cop show.

Mason laughed, a little cough of disbelief.

"You're gonna shoot me?" he asked. "You fuck around on me, dump my ass, and *you're* gonna shoot *me?*"

"Okay," the box said. "We have a problem."

"Don't come any closer," Jenny said. "I swear to God I'll do it. I swear to God. One more step."

Mason took a step forward.

"Stop it!" she screamed.

"Tell her it's okay. Tell her she doesn't have to do it."

"Jenny. Put the gun down before you hurt someone with it."

"Tell her you're not going to hurt her. Reassure her. And don't get any closer to her. Back off. Give her some space."

"You don't need the gun, sweetie," Mason said, but he didn't step back. "I'm not going to hurt you. You don't need the gun. We just need to talk."

The gun wavered. Mason stepped forward and it zoned back in on his chest. She'd been training—probably one of those cheesy self-defense for women things. The Jenny he knew wouldn't have been able to resist the head shot.

"Don't move toward her!" the box yelled. "Don't move!"

"What are you going to do? Shoot me? It's me, Jenny. It's your old Mason. You remember that time at Old Tony's place? The warehouse? You remember how we played hockey with a roll of electrical tape and some brooms? It's the same guy. It's just me."

"Back off, Mace," Jenny snarled, but it wasn't very convincing. He stepped forward. He was close enough now, he could probably make a grab for it. Flip a coin, he figured.

"Mason, we can get through this," the box said. "Just stay cool. Don't startle her. Don't do anything. Just stand right there until the police get here. It'll be okay. Just don't do anything."

"Jenny. I love you. Locking me out like that, just turning me out, it hurt my feelings. I lost my temper a little bit, and I'm sorry. That was the last thing I wanted to do, scaring you like that."

Jenny wavered. The gun was still trained on his chest, but her eyes were on his, not looking at her target. Mason smiled, but a little wistfully.

"I love you, Jenny. I love you. I came here to try to make things right."

"Don't take the gun, Mason. It's an extra five to ten automatically if you take the gun. You won't be out before you're fifty."

Mason held out his hand, moving slow so she knew it wasn't a grab. There were still maybe six minutes, twelve if he was lucky, before the cops showed up.

"It's going to be okay. It's all okay. I love you too much for the thing with Foster to get in our way. All those months I was inside, all I was thinking of was you and what we'd do when I was back out. You think the thing with Foster would stop me? You think I'd let Foster win? We're stronger than that, sweetie. You and me. You hurt me. You hurt me bad, but I still love you. We can talk this out."

"Do *not* take the gun, Mason!"

"Jenny. I swear to God I won't hurt you. Just give me the gun."

She looked down. The tears were coming down her face now, her eyes red to the point of pink. When she took her left hand away from steadying the gun to wipe her nose on her cuff, Mason slowly, gently put his hand around her right wrist. She let him uncurl her fingers, and the weight of the gun slipped into his hand.

"I'm sorry, Mace," she said. "It wasn't like it sounded, you know. I mean the thing with Foster. He . . ."

Mason, still smiling, turned her gun around, wrapped his finger around the trigger and shoved the barrel into her neck hard enough that she yelped.

"You stupid bitch," he said softly. "You *stupid* piece of shit."

"Mason," the box said.

"If you say another word, I'm going to put two caps into her skull and then I'm going to blow you out of mine, and my brainstem will just have to take its chances. You understand? If you say anything else, you will be endangering her life. You got that?"

The box went silent. Mason took it for a yes and turned back to Jenny. She was backed against the bedroom door, staring at him like he was a snake or an oncoming car. He casually leveled the gun at her face.

"Mace," she whispered. "Please . . ."

Maybe four minutes left.

"Your ex who you fucked around on gets out of prison. Out of *prison,* where he was for beating some asshole into a coma, right? He tracks you down, kicks in your fucking *door,* then says a few pretty words and you give him your fucking gun? Jesus, Jenny, how stupid *are* you?"

"Please don't kill me," she said, her voice flat and fast. Panic voice. "We had a lot of good times, didn't we, Mace? You always said you loved me, right? So don't kill me now. You can hurt me. That's okay. I deserve it. Just let me live."

Three minutes. Anything after that was just luck. Jesus, three more minutes. A lifetime.

"Why with Foster?" he said. "Talk fast."

"I was lonely, Mace. And I was scared. There was this guy following me around. He was always there when I came out of the apartment or went to the store. He was looking at me. And I told Foster and he broke his arm, made him go away. Foster, he said he just wanted to be friends, you know? Take care of me until you got back."

"And you didn't think he was out for you?"

"He said he wasn't," Jenny said.

"How did you think that you were going to make it out here on your own without me?" he asked. "Jenny, you're too stupid to make it in the world. The

world's dangerous, and you can't even deal with some creepy asshole following you around . . . damn."

"I missed you, Mace," she said. She was crying again. She was too pretty, even like this, even with her hair down in strings, snot and tears shining her face. "I missed you so bad. And then I knew you'd kill me. Please don't kill me, Mace. I love you."

Mason lowered the gun, put out his left hand. Jenny hesitated, took it, pressed her body against his, crying into him. He held her head against his chest, felt her thin arms around him. He lifted her face to kiss her. She was always a great kisser. And a great lay.

"I'm not going to be around to protect you," he said. "They're coming for me right now. They wired me. The cops knew about it as soon as I broke the door. I won't be here to take care of you. You have to do it yourself."

Her eyes went wide, her mouth a little "o." He pressed the gun into her hand. It was like a puzzle—her forehead went into wrinkles and she stared at the flat black metal.

"Mason," the box said. Its voice was low and tentative. "What are you doing?"

"Call your own shots. Don't ever fucking take shit from anyone again."

"I won't, Mace," she said. "I promise."

He stepped back a pace and punched her twice, hard, in the face. The second time, he felt something in her nose click against his knuckle. She went down like he'd cut her strings.

"Not good enough."

"Mason! Stop it!" the box yelled.

He kicked her hard in the ribs. She tensed into the blow. Stupid. He turned around and walked into the kitchen. He could hear her mewling and coughing. His time was up. He was into his grace period now, and he felt like he'd taken six hits of D. The world was perfect and beautiful as a pop song. The rage was in him like a fire, only cold because he was in control of it.

The knife on the cutting board would do. It had a good weight. He tested it against his thumb. Not real sharp, but it didn't have to be. There were footsteps out in the hallway.

"You don't have to do this, Mason," the box said. Stock phrases from an expert system grasping at straws. "Walk away from it, man. She's not worth it."

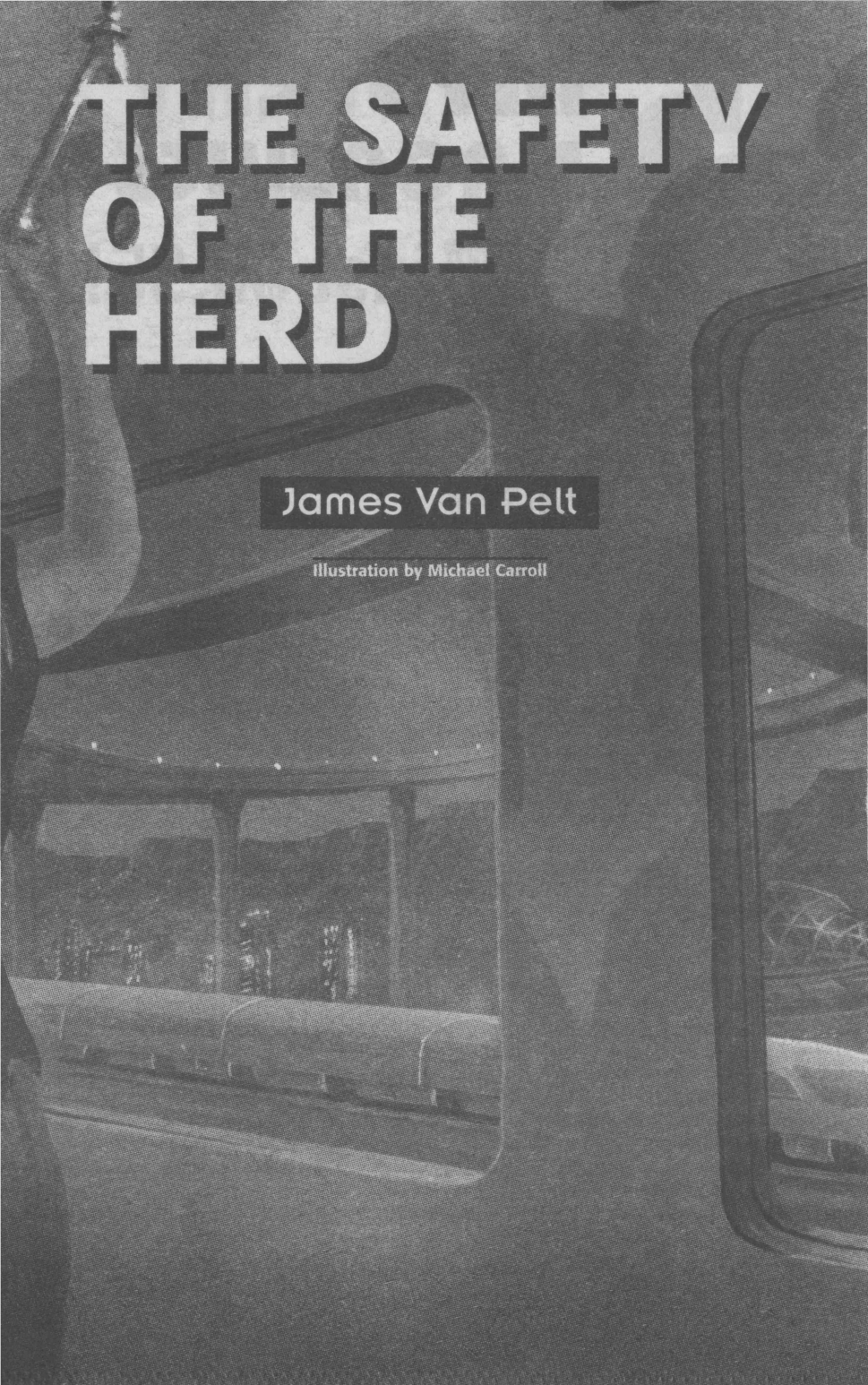
"You're out of your depth, babe," he murmured, just loud enough for the box to hear.

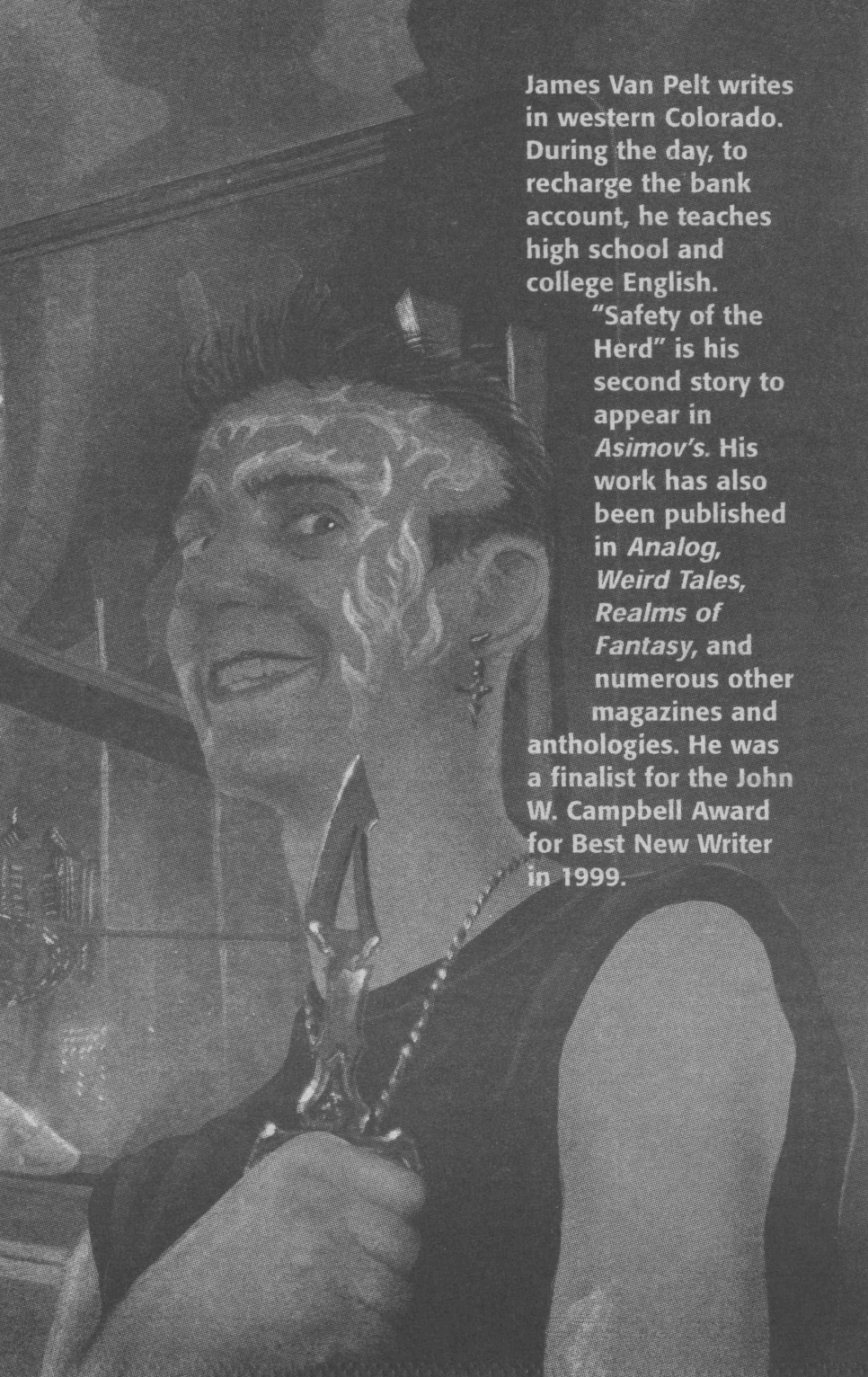
When he stepped back into the room, Jenny was sitting up, holding her broken nose in her hand. Blood soaked the front of her blouse. He saw the knife register in her eyes, saw the panic fill her. He held the knife aloft and ran at her. The shots were panicked, wild. He thought he counted five of them, but he wasn't sure. The impact was amazing. Like a car wreck.

Mason felt himself go down, but it was like watching it in a dream. The pain was so complete that he could barely speak, and it made everything seem distant. Vaguely, he felt her straddle him, her hands cradling his head, beating it against the floor. Her legs pinned his arms to the ground. There was a sound from the kitchen. The cops kicking down the door, he figured. It didn't matter.

"That's the way," he whispered as she hit him again. There was blood in his mouth. It tasted wonderful. "That's my girl! *Now* you get it."

Jenny was screaming. It sounded like joy. ❍


THE SAFETY OF THE HERD
James Van Pelt
Illustration by Michael Carroll



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"Safety of the Herd" is his second story to appear in *Asimov's.* His work has also been published in *Analog, Weird Tales, Realms of Fantasy,* and numerous other magazines and anthologies. He was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1999.

Cringing from the press of bodies, Shotgun City detective Toyas Midtmann missed the beginning of the confrontation. He pushed his elbows against the commuters penning him in to give himself a little room, shutting his eyes against the mass of heads swaying to the tram's movement. A cop who loathes people shouldn't be a public servant, he thought. If he were a lion strolling alone across an African steppe where hills rose in the distance, shimmering in the heat, he would be happy. . . . An uneasy murmur brought him back.

He eyed the tram securitycams, three black-lensed bubbles hanging from the roof. A red light blinked in two of them, but the one directly overhead looked dead, which either meant the vid *was* dead or the light didn't work. Regardless, the two toughs facing each other a few feet away weren't paying attention. Toyas squeezed between a couple of business types, trying to get close before things got worse. Everyone leaned away, though, and there wasn't room to move. Toyas shifted to get his stun prod out of its holster, but a heavyset guy in a gray overcoat trapped his arm against him.

A young tough said to an older man, "Are you pulling blade on me?" A skin-art forest fire blazed on the young man's face and shaved head. Flame images circled his cool, blue eyes. He tapped his dueling knife's hilt that hung on his chest just below his shoulder, handle down for a quick draw.

The older one, dark-bearded, wearing pale leather, held his knife delicately between thumb and finger, sliding it slowly in and out of its chest sheath. "I'm pulling it."

"But are you pulling on *me?*"

Faces surrounded them, mostly Shotgun City domestics heading downcanyon for day jobs. They pushed back, creating a four-foot arena. Behind them, the curious stood on their toes, peering over heads for a better look. The tram rocked, and, through the windows, building after building whipped by.

The tableau froze, pale-leather holding his blade so that an inch gleamed, fire-face resting a finger on the hilt. Toyas yelled, "Break it up! Police!"

Fire-face turned toward him, and the tram lurched. Pale-leather lunged forward, blade beside his ear.

Someone screamed. People pushed together so hard that Toyas lost his breath. The tram slid onto the platform and stopped. Doors on one side opened, releasing the commuters. Behind him, other doors opened and new commuters pushed in. Toyas rode the crush out, panning the crowd for the two toughs. Nothing. People riding slideways and escalators. Others milling around soy and drink kiosks.

He almost tripped over the body ten feet later. Lying on his back, fire-face stared into the sky. Toyas felt for a pulse, but knew the boy was dead. A stab wound just left of center bled little. The blade had gone straight to the heart, a rare thrust for a dueling knife, which by law could be no longer than three inches.

The neck was warm and placid. Sweat slick. Toyas guessed that the boy had died before he left the tram, but the crowd had carried him upright to this point before he dropped. Fire images still crawled up his cheeks, licked his ears, flickered across his forehead, the skin-art dyes following their programmed display, living on the dead skin. False fire. No heat. A woman brushed against him, her eyes locked forward; he was sure she didn't see him. "Step wide!" he called. "Crime scene. Step wide!" Still, they came.

Crouched over the body, he saw knees and feet. A flattened cup leaked coffee until someone kicked it, and only the stain remained.

Toyas tongued a transmit switch on the back of a tooth and called for clean-up. He ordered a tracer on the tram and a download of the security-cam files, but he held little hope they'd show much: backs of heads, fuzzy faces, motion—not enough for court-worthy ID's. Another corpse–fifteen to twenty a day on this tram line alone.

Tiny voices filled his ear: a rolling riot had spread to Idaho Springs, fifteen miles down canyon; there was a hostage situation in Dillon and another in Shotgun City. A dozen All Points Bulletins. Another cop called for a clean-up while he waited. The violent recital: situations droned on. He half listened, tuning in to his calls and not the others, but he had nothing to do, leaning over the dead boy.

People stepped over the body. Toyas fended them off the best he could until clean-up arrived. The human tide inexorably flowed, a herd on the move.

By the time he got to Bellamy Labs, where he was to arrest Reanna Loveday for unauthorized genetic manipulation, it had turned into a suicide standoff.

Not much to the building itself. Undistinguished signs marked the slideway platform as private, and the afternoon's light reflected off the door's muted silver sheen. People in a steady procession on the slideway moved up and down canyon behind him. Toyas leaned back; the sky, a luminous blue ribbon cut by walks and bridges, stretched between the buildings' tops. Trams scooted overhead on magnetic rails. The population's weight pressed around him, above him, below him. It smelled of fish and deodorizers, of dusty, clammy skin, of people that never saw the sun and slept too close together. This is no place for a Masai warrior, he thought. I should be trotting across a grassy plain, spear in hand, my fate's master. Not that there are any Masai left—or grassy plains, for that matter.

He imagined how easy it would be to pull his own dueling blade in a crowded tram and stab and stab and stab. He rubbed his hands together. He still felt the dead boy's sweat on his fingertips.

The door scanner okayed his warrant, opening to a wide hallway crowded with frightened lab staff. A young man in a medical smock turned to him when he came in the door. Something in his eyes struck Toyas. They darted wildly, and the man trembled. A skin-art rose rotated slowly on his cheek, and Toyas thought about the dead tough, fire crawling on his head. "It'll be fine," said Toyas. "We do this all the time."

Sub-detective Clancey waved from the far end, looking small in his new uniform, his police academy chevrons still shiny. "She's blocked herself into a back office on the other side of her lab with a vial of something poisonous. Nobody knows what it is." He'd unholstered his stun-prod and slapped it nervously into his hand. "I figured I'd wait until you got here."

"Her lab's through there?" A skinny window beside the door revealed another hallway punctuated with doors.

Clancey nodded, then wiped his sleeve across his forehead. "She's got DNA stuff back there, they say. Maybe some wacky diseases. I don't know. Something exotic and incurable. Make your skin fall off."

Toyas shook his head. "Not a contract gene shop like this. Worst she could do is change your rhododendrons."

A shaky voice behind him said, "Her specialties are genetically based animal behavior modification and natural vectoring. She finds traits we like

from one kind of animal to replace traits we don't like in another animal."

Toyas turned.

Another man in a medical smock. Close-set eyes. Fiftyish. Name tag read "Hirohito Blevins." He extended a hand. "Loveday is working on the pigeon problem for the city. Wonderful mind. Wonderful, but touchy. She has a lab to herself. Over a hundred square feet of space, and she bullied the others out. Hates crowds, she says. Terribly inefficient. Three employees generally work a lab that size. We leave her alone, though. Genius can be eccentric."

Toyas tried to back away from the man, but the room was too crowded. "Can't you let these people go home? They'll just be in the way."

Blevins shook his head. "They're hourlies. Automatically docked if they leave the building."

Toyas rubbed his eyes and fought back an urge to yell. Clancey downloaded the situation file and Loveday's psychiatric and work profiles into Toyas' palmtop. Intelligence rating off the scale, but mediocre school records. She'd worked continuously for the last four years, moving from one contract to the next—a rarity for most employees—flawless performance numbers. She must be good, Toyas thought. She'd tried killing herself when she was a teenager. Clancey peeked over his shoulder at the display. "See, she's serious about this."

Loveday's portrait came up. An unsmiling, thin-faced blonde in her mid-twenties.

"Any clue what set her off?"

Blevins said, "I was talking, very calmly, and she started raving. Threw a clipboard at me. Totally unprovoked. She's unbalanced. Always has been, but we need her."

Toyas guessed the conversation wasn't that innocent, but didn't say so. The case profile noted that Blevins had turned in the original complaint for unauthorized computer use. Loveday's user history showed hours of research on human gene patterns, mostly centering on socialization behavior. "This is all outside her specialty, isn't it?"

Blevins said, "Oh, yes. Completely misplaced effort. Her real gift is natural vectoring for animals. Most genetic manipulation happens under controlled conditions: a livestock breeding facility, for example, or a doctor's office. But sometimes we want to spread a genetic change where the subjects are difficult to reach, so we have to find a way to introduce and disseminate the mutagen naturally. A parasite or a disease. Something infectious, easily transferred, but not fatal. She was piggybacking a mutagen to a weakened form of avian influenza for the pigeon problem. This investigation into human genetic patterns is *not* a part of her contract. There are federal laws, and, besides, she stole computer time and lab space. It reflects on my evaluation."

Toyas gave his stun prod to Clancey, then opened the door into the empty hallway. His palmtop went back into its fanny pack. "Why'd she try to kill herself the first time?"

Clancey scanned his display. "Doesn't say, but her parents died two months before in a rolling riot." He read further. "Looks like they got caught at a restaurant. Six others died there, too. The report doesn't implicate them. Might be a connection."

"Give me an hour."

The door closed. Toyas walked past open offices toward Loveday's lab. He turned off his earplug, and the crime litany stopped. His steps clicked loud-

ly in the silence, and he realized that for the first time in days, he couldn't hear a human voice. The police station rang with sounds; human commerce filled the shops and streets; his tiny Shotgun City apartment never completely shut out the slideway's rumble and the rise and fall of human murmur twenty-four hours a day. Everywhere he went, thousands of people were within a mile of him. The entire Denver to Salt Lake City intermountain urban corridor was crowded to bursting with people. They'd even filled the twin Eisenhower tunnels that used to be a part of the highway system with apartments and shops to create Shotgun City.

He slowed to enjoy the moment. Took a deep breath. Here the air smelled antiseptic, scrubbed clean, slightly chemical, not close and clammy. Not like the tram. He walked down the middle of the hall and thought about extending his arms like wings; they wouldn't touch either side. In his apartment, he kept a recording of a Greater Flamingo taking off from the shore of Lake Samburu—a tremendous bird fighting its way into the air. He could spin around here, his arms out, and not touch anything.

Toyas glanced back; in the window behind him, Clancey and several others peered through. He kept his arms down, but, for the first time today, he felt relaxed. If the tram hadn't been so crowded, if it had been like this hallway instead, the fight might never have happened. The flame-faced boy would still be alive, the fires washing over his lips and sweeping around his eyes. Before the fight started, the people close by had pushed away, but the people farther back had pushed *in,* not wanting to miss the action. Their heads bobbed between shoulders, craning for a view. A hunger for violence. They wanted to *see,* and the close ones didn't want to be hurt, but none of them had reached forward to stop the fight. Toyas thought that everyone on the tram should have been arrested. Co-conspirators. Accessories to a homicide.

Most people wore blades. Old folks, children, clergy—it didn't matter. A knife was a fashion statement. Illegal to use outside the dueling halls, but people had them just the same. Toyas thought that it was lucky that the tram had pulled into the platform when it did. Everyone jammed that close, the smell of blood in the air, a chain reaction could have started. Everyone stabbing everyone else out of . . . what? Fear? Hatred? Hysteria? It didn't matter. Mass stabbings had happened before. Like a rolling riot. No explanation. Violence breaking out in one spot, spreading to another, leaving destruction and injury behind before moving on. Sometimes lasting for weeks and traveling for miles, like a forest fire.

Loveday's lab door wasn't closed tight. Toyas pushed it open with his foot, letting the room unfold before him as the door swept wide. She wasn't there. A long table in the middle was clean, a clipboard on the floor the only sign of disarray. On the wall, between open cabinets filled with equipment, several posters hung. All historical scenes. In one, a herd of cows grazed at sunset, their backs golden in the slanted light. Another showed a hundred buffalo, their heads up and alert, as if a wolf had appeared just off the poster's edge. He touched it, and it crackled under his fingers. Real paper. Very expensive.

"Reanna Loveday?" Toyas called. He thought that the partly closed door at the back of the lab must be her office. The light was off. "My name's Toyas. Shotgun City police. Reanna, I need to talk to you. We don't want you to hurt yourself. Your friends are concerned about you."

"Blevins isn't a friend," said a voice from the dark. A bitter laugh. "He's an accounting geek. Right now, he's adding up lost productivity." A shuffling

noise. A click of metal on metal. "Toyas? Good African name. Are you a rat or a snake, Officer Toyas?"

Toyas sat on the table's edge. He liked the empty room. He liked the posters. There was no reason to rush. Unless someone buzzed his palmtop, he was unreachable for the moment.

"I don't know. What's the difference?" he said. She didn't reply. "Must be nice to have a big place like this to work in." Blevins was right about the room: it was about ten by ten feet, which made it two feet longer and four feet wider than Toyas' Shotgun City apartment. "They said you were going to kill yourself."

Loveday didn't speak for a while. There was only one way out of the lab, and it was past him, so she wasn't going anywhere. Toyas stretched his legs.

"I might," she said. Her voice didn't sound stressed. Tired, but not stressed. Not like she was poised on the precipice. "Rats kill themselves. Snakes don't."

"Any particular reason?"

"Genetics. It's all in the genes."

"I didn't know animals could commit suicide," said Toyas. She actually sounded pleasant. A little stuffed-up perhaps. She sniffed in the darkened office and blew her nose. "Do you want to come out here to tell me about it?"

"I don't like people. Did they tell you that?"

"Who does?" Toyas got up. Walked around the room. It was amazing. Step after step without running into someone! His knuckles brushed against the wall as he went by.

"Snakes do."

"Like people?"

"No, each other. You could fill a box with snakes and they wouldn't know the difference. Some of them spend the winter crammed into a little hole, hundreds of them. There was a story once of a Texas rancher who broke into a snake den while digging a cellar. Ten-foot-thick ball of rattlers snoozing away."

Toyas wrinkled his brow. The conversation had taken an odd turn. Still, standard procedure in a suicide situation was to keep the victim talking. "Snakes aren't people, though."

"My point exactly! At least, most of them," she said, as if she'd won an argument. "But we can't avoid them! I had a reservation to go camping next month. I've held it for four years. Three days and two nights in a real forest. It's with a group, of course, but you can hike by yourself. There's a stream and a lake, they say. I've seen the brochure. There's a picture of one person, just one, sitting on a rock at a meadow's edge."

Toyas nodded sympathetically. For the last three years, he had submitted requests to visit Mt. Kenya Park. He wanted to see *Kere Nyaga,* the Kikuyu name for Mount Kenya, the Mountain of Brightness.

She sneezed. "Sorry, allergies." She wiped at her nose. "They canceled my reservation."

"Why?" Toyas paused in front of a complicated computer display: twisted strands braiding among each other, numbered and lettered notation labeling the strand's bumps. He scrolled to the display's top. Human Gene Segment, L14d.

"People won't come out. Not enough snakes. Too many rats. They closed the park. They've closed all of them. There's no place to go to get away anymore. There are too many people who are rats. We've got to get rid of the rats!"

Toyas glanced sharply at the office door. Her voice sounded odd on the last statement, ominous or desperate. He remembered Clancey's fear that she'd made a disease. It was unlikely—anticipation of just such an event had prompted hundreds of checks in the system—but maybe she'd figured a way around the security. He reached behind him for his palmtop, and pressed the emergency call to bring a squad to isolate the building. This might not be just one detective talking a person out of suicide anymore. Soon, experts by the score would dissect her notes and computer, revealing everything she'd worked on in all the time she'd been here.

"That's why you wanted to kill yourself? Because you lost a camping reservation?" Keeping his tone calm, he clicked backward through screen after screen of genetic code, but his fingers quivered on the keys. All beyond him, the cryptic notations giving no clue of her intent. Was this a suicide situation or a threat to public safety? "And what does this have to do with rats?"

"No. Not the camping." The ominous tone dropped away, and now she sounded exhausted, like she was giving up. "An experiment went wrong. I thought I'd solved a problem, but it didn't work. I couldn't change a rat. Physician Rat, heal thyself."

"Blevins said you worked with pigeons."

She laughed. "Those stupid pigeons. Do you know what the city wanted me to do? Stop pigeon droppings! Millions of dollars over the years spent cleaning buildings. They contracted me to change pigeon pooping behavior. I think I solved it. Pigeons poop everywhere. Cats are clean about it. A cut here, a splice there, and I'll have all the pigeons in the world scratching their droppings into the dirt. No, the experiment was with *me*. My self-experiment failed. I'm genetically resistant."

Toyas transferred everything in her computer onto his palmtop. It only took a few seconds. The experts could look at it later if there was a need. He didn't see her own palmtop. Probably had it on her. Incriminating evidence might be there.

"Genetically resistant?" he said, mostly to keep her talking while he waited for reinforcements.

She sneezed again. "Yes. Not everyone's genes are malleable. Some resist mutagens better than others."

A chair scraped. Her pale hand appeared on the door jamb, and the door swung open. "Are you by yourself?" She stood in the shadows.

He nodded.

After several minutes without moving—he could feel her eyes on him, sizing him up—she said, "I'm agoraphobic. Really bad. You know, panic attacks." She slid around the door's edge, keeping her back to the wall. The palmtop picture didn't flatter her. Even in the lab's harsh light, her features were softer, younger, color high in her cheeks. "It's hard to breathe with you here." There was nothing in her hands—no poison or way to kill herself—nothing frightening about her. She might have a syringe in the lab coat, though, thought Toyas, something that would take just a pressure on the pocket to inject.

The file transfer finished. Toyas moved to the other end of the room. "Have you always been that way?"

She touched a button near the computer, and the doubled-helix on the screen cleared. "Since I was a kid. The doctors call it trauma-induced social anxiety disorder. It got worse after my parents died. Rats in the box."

"Rats?" He checked his palmtop. The files were all there. Crisis intervention reported that they were in the lobby.

She looked directly at him for the first time since she'd come out, her eyes bright, fevered. "Rats *attack* each other in a box. They're social, but you can't overcrowd them. They'll even bite themselves. Snakes don't. Herd animals don't. Pressed together in pens, they're content. Nothing bothers them. It's genetic. Mom and Dad died in a restaurant, killed with butter knives and forks. The box was too crowded. The rats got them. So, are you a rat or a snake?"

A bustle in the hallway behind him, and the door shattered inward. Loveday shrieked, leaping for her office door, but a tangle-burst got her. She went down in a tightening confusion of fine mesh that pulled her arms into her sides and bound her legs. Masked intervention operatives poured into the room, fifteen or twenty of them. There was little room to move. Toyas backed against the wall.

"Did she say anything?" someone shouted to him. "Did she make a threat?" Someone else pushed a re-breather into his hands, but he didn't put it on. Operatives opened drawers, poking gene-scanner proboscises into the depths, the hand-held units sucking air to their tiny, automated analysis chambers. "Nothing here," said one operative, the re-breathing unit muffling his voice. "Pigeon DNA," said another. "More pigeon. And cat. I have cat."

Blevins, voice came from the door; Toyas couldn't see him past the officers. "Those are authorized! We have papers for them!" Blevins followed the officers, showing them clearances for everything they found: dog, cow, octopus, mosquito, several others, but no snake. Toyas shook his head. Why no snake? That's what she said she'd been doing. There wasn't any rat either.

Loveday kept shrieking wordlessly.

"What are you looking for?" said Toyas, flinching against her voice. "Can I help?" He sidled along the wall toward Loveday. Two officers held her down while a third ran a see-all over her tangle-webbed lab coat.

"Nothing in the pockets. She's clean." The officer searching her looked up at Toyas. "If she's made a pathogen, she needs a way to distribute it. Powder, pills, liquid spray—it could be anywhere. We've got a squad doing her apartment too."

Another officer ground his knee into Loveday's back, making her scream. Toyas grabbed his collar and pulled him off. "She's not going anywhere," said Toyas. "No need to hurt her." Only the man's eyes were visible above his re-breather, dark and enigmatic. Toyas suspected that the man liked what he had been doing. Loveday stopped screaming.

They ripped posters off the walls, scanned behind them; emptied cabinets, broke jars, poured out chemicals, cut open notebook covers, all efficiently. In fifteen minutes, they'd taken the lab apart and found no deadly viruses, or evidence that she'd worked on one.

An officer came out of her office, a melted palmtop in his hand. "She torched it," he said. "We may never know what was on this." He dropped it into a plastic bag for later analysis.

Toyas stayed close to Loveday, keeping his hand on her arm. "She just wanted to go to a park," he said under his breath. Knees and feet passed around him. He fended them off so no one stepped on her. It reminded him of the dead boy from the tram. No reason for all these people to be here, thought Toyas. They're scaring her, and it made his own skin creep. Too much crowding, too much jostling.

Finally, the officers gathered around Loveday, discussing whether they should take her to the patrol house for questioning or to a hospital for observation. She breathed through her mouth. "Officer Toyas," she whispered. "I need to blow my nose." Stuffed-up, her arms tight to her side, she sounded pathetic. Toyas found a tissue in his fannypack and held it for her. She blew noisily against his hand. When they picked her up, still horizontal, facing the floor, she rose until her red-rimmed eyes were level with his. "Thanks," she said, and sneezed in his face.

When the squad left, Toyas looked around the room. The litter had been swept up, but broken glass in a fine dust sparkled at the lab table's end. They'd taken the computer and her notes. A poster dangled from one corner on the wall. He pressed it back up. Sheep on a hillside, covering it so tightly he could see no grass, just backs and heads. In the middle, a single tree rose above them, its green a sharp contrast to the sheeps' white and black.

Toyas couldn't sleep that night. The slideway's constant rumble bothered him. He could feel crowds pressing past his doorway. He tried staring at his prints on the wall: a brightly lit view of Mt. Kilimanjaro, a sunrise on the Indian Ocean at the Kenyan coast, a lone giraffe. But it didn't help. After he turned down the light, he imagined his neighbors' breathing to his left and right. The weight from neighbors above him seemed to bow the roof. Sometimes he heard them in bed, their apartment no larger than his own, moving rhythmically.

When he finally dozed, he dreamt of crawling in a tunnel, deep underground, moist dirt falling on his neck, slipping under his hands. After a dozen turns, the tunnel grew tighter until he squirmed on his belly. Then, the ceiling rose away. His fingers hooked over an earthen edge. A dim light glowed in the huge room below him. It was filled with people. Thousands of naked people, intertwined, moving slowly in their sleep—a giant people ball. The closest parted, as if they knew he was there, to give him a space in the mass. He slithered from the hole, put his hands on legs and arms, pulled himself in. No one woke, but they moved aside, let him burrow deeply in their phosphorescence. He pushed his knee against a shoulder, levered himself between two backs, their ribs and backbones sliding over him, swimming in people, and then he reached the middle. He rested. Everything tight and cozy, warm and friendly, until he heard a vibration, a quiet rattle rising in the mass. The leg above his head grew cool. Pressing against his side, a thigh thinned, became slick and scaled. Air buzzed, and pressure rose. He struggled to breathe. A fanged face pressed against his head, black marble eye unblinking. It slid by. All snakes, everywhere. No people. He gasped. Lungs ached. Arms trapped. No breath.

He flailed in the darkness, throwing his blanket aside. One hand slapped against the wall, and his neighbor rapped back a muffled curse. Toyas lay gasping, his throat coated and his nose stuffed up. By bed light, he found tissues, but blowing didn't clear his nasal passages. A couple of pillows propped beneath his head stopped the worst of the draining, and when the antihistamine and decongestant began to work, he fell asleep again, this time without dreams.

The next morning, after he stepped outside his apartment door, he keyed for an update on Loveday. The palmtop showed they'd checked her in for observation. A couple screens later, he found the hospital had put her in a private room. She'll like that, he thought. Other than disrupting the peace, no indictments had been issued. A blinking icon at the screen's bottom indicat-

ed "Under Investigation." Another one said, "Possible Biohazard." He clicked the unit closed, waited for an opening, then stepped on the slideway. Before he reached the Shotgun City limit sign and the end of the city's long tunnel, he'd sneezed half a dozen times. "Sorry," he said each time to annoyed commuters. "Allergies." The decongestants kept his breathing clear, but his nose itched and he had a sore throat. Not bad, but it hurt to swallow.

He checked in so that headquarters would transmit his cases, a short list this morning, only three homicides. On the tram ride, he mulled over the dream, and, as an afterthought, checked on the stabbing from yesterday. As he'd feared, the securitycams didn't show enough to advance an investigation. No blood on flame-face's knife. No witnesses who could help. No specific similarities to other stabbings to indicate a pattern. Probably random, Toyas thought, one act of violence by a man who had never done such a thing before and probably never would again—not that finding the killer would help the dead boy anyway.

The tram missed the first Dillon platform. The rolling riot was too close. Police shut off the platforms, rerouted slideway traffic, and shut down bridges and elevators through the district in an attempt to choke the fighting off. As the tram slid past the platform, Toyas saw yelling people standing on the edge, trying to get out. Rats and snakes, Loveday had called them. With no room to move, rats turned on each other. The box was too small. She'd asked him which one he was. That must mean I could be either, he thought. Not everyone hates the crowding. He sneezed again. Couldn't even get his hand up over his mouth in the tram's tight quarters. A lady in front of him flinched and wiped at the back of her neck.

The second Dillon platform passed, and the third. An angry mumble rose in the tram. People missing their stops would either have to walk up-canyon to get to work, or they wouldn't be able to get there at all. Most employees were hourlies. They were paid only for time on the job, regardless of the excuse. Somebody pushed someone else, and, for a few seconds, shouting filled the tram. Toyas held his palmtop tight. With the right combination of commands, he could have the car flooded with sleepy-gas. He wondered how long ago it had been since he'd been gas-proofed, and if it would still keep him conscious. The yelling subsided, though, and he relaxed, swallowing in relief. It hurt.

His all-call squeaked in his ear, and headquarters queried him on his position. "Emergency override," the earphone said. "Debark at Silverthorne #4." He shrugged and worked his hand up to his face so he could wipe his nose. The tram followed a long curve in its track, making everyone lean. A man next to Toyas stumbled a little and caught Toyas' sleeve to keep his balance. "Pardon," he said.

"It's okay." Except for his sneezing, Toyas didn't feel bad this morning. Not like yesterday, when he might have thrown an elbow to keep the stranger off him. It's not their fault, thought Toyas. They're missing work.

He couldn't see a window. Somehow he'd ended up in the middle, but he knew the upper canyon complexes were passing by. In a minute, they'd be at Silverthorne, and he could find out what the emergency was. In the meantime, he let the tram's gentle motion lull him. People pressed against him, moving with the sway. Very soothing.

Then, Toyas saw him, the pale-leather tough from yesterday. His hand rested on his dueling blade, a line of gleaming metal showing it was partially out of its sheath, and Pale-leather scowled around him, his dark beard

disarrayed, his expression filled with hate. Toyas tongued a transmission and subvocalized a report. It took a few seconds to clear his stun-prod from its holster. He didn't want to be caught unprepared this time.

The tram slid toward Silverthorne station. Pale-leather glared at the crowd, his hand tight on the dueling blade, obviously within an instant of pulling it out. Toyas brought the stun-prod up, next to his chest. If the man drew the blade, Toyas figured he could just reach him over the intervening heads. They held the pose until the tram slowed down for the platform. Pale-leather closed his eyes for a moment, as if in relief, and Toyas felt suddenly inside the man's head. It was the closing of the eyes that did it. It wasn't people the man hated, but the constant *pressure* against him, the constant touching. He didn't want to hurt anyone, but he would. A rat in the box, ready to bite, his emotions nearly beyond his control, and Toyas knew that was *him* too, yesterday, an inch from stabbing out. . . .

Doors opened, and a line of policeman waited on the platform, standing steady against the stream flowing from the car. Toyas maneuvered himself behind Pale-leather, letting the traffic carry him out. He reached to snag the man's shoulder when something grabbed him on both sides.

They spun him around, a policeman on each arm. Toyas barely saw the helmet coming before it was over his head.

"He's escaping!" yelled Toyas, and struggled to get an arm free. They held too tightly though, and through the helmet's glass, Toyas glimpsed Pale-leather stepping onto a slideway. The other officers formed a barricade around them that diverted foot traffic. Blevins' face floated into view as he sealed the helmet at Toyas' neck. A circulation fan kicked on, sending a sweet-tasting wash of bottled air across his forehead. The policemen didn't say anything as they half-carried Toyas to a cruiser and pushed him into the holding tank. Blevins and an officer followed.

Blevins said, "Did Loveday cough on you? Did you touch her hands or face? How close did you get?" The officer ran a gene-scanner over Toyas' clothes. On the officer's shoulders were biotech chevrons and captain's bars. Toyas had never met a captain before. He searched for something to say.

"Oh, man," the captain said. "He's loaded."

Blevins paled. "It's not our fault. We admit no liability. Her actions were not sanctioned by the lab. Pure pirate stuff."

"What's going on?" said Toyas. His head wobbled, and he wondered blearily if the air in the helmet was doped.

Blevins ignored him. "If your people could have salvaged her palmtop sooner, none of this would have happened. Remember, we reported her. We deserve a medal."

The captain leaned back. A lurch indicated the cruiser had taken off. Where? Toyas wondered, sure now he was drugged.

"Shut up, Blevins," said the captain tiredly. "The courts will decide what to do with your company. In the meantime, how can we stop this?"

Blevins licked his lips. Toyas watched the man's lips part in slow motion, his tongue moving at quarter speed. Funny, Toyas thought, that their speech sounds fine, but they've slowed down so much.

"She tied the mutagen to a cold virus. That's her specialty, natural vectoring. Maybe we can quarantine the area, contain it all."

The captain kept his eyes closed, defeated. "We've ordered it already."

Toyas formed his words carefully. "Was it snake genes? She said some-

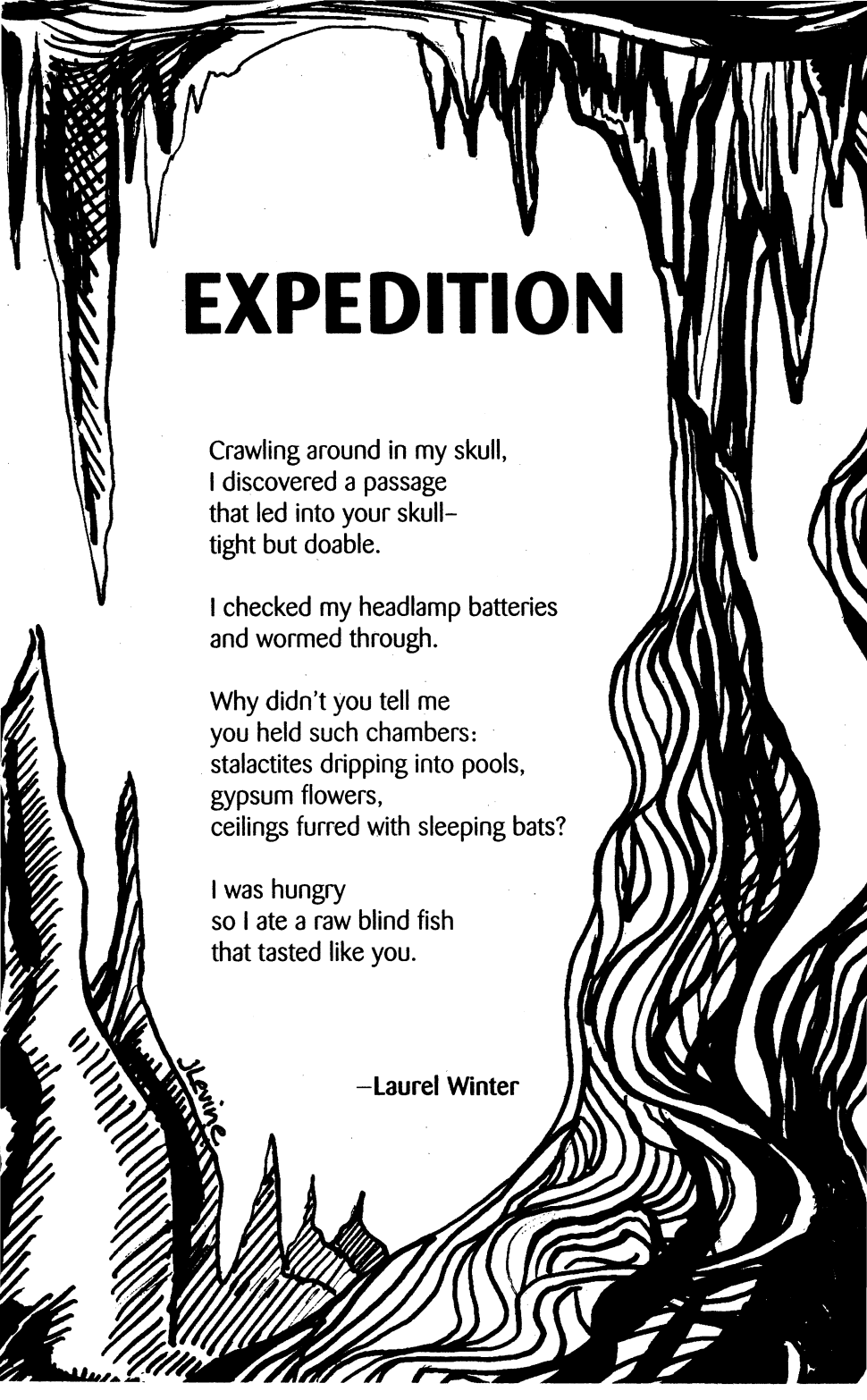
thing about snakes. Am I going to die?" The question felt academic, and he almost giggled.

Blevins looked at him. "No, not snakes. Why would you say that? It was a part of cow genetics. We don't know what part yet. We don't know what she wanted to do, but it's a human mutagen. She was immune."

Toyas' head dipped and circled. He was sure they could see it, although they didn't seem to notice. The world felt buttery and soft. He didn't even mind being transported to an unknown destination. In the background, the cruiser's hum sounded like bees, African bees, and he thought about Kenya, the great, wind-swept plains, and the long extinct animals. But not a lion. He pictured zebras instead, a congregation of them, heads down at the water hole. Toyas wished he were there, shoulder to shoulder in the population, at peace, taking water. He could almost feel them around him, pressing tight around him. The dust they kicked up a comforting layer on his back. The safety of the herd.

A tendril of fear eddied in him for a second. His lips parted heavily; he could barely shape the words. "They won't lock me up, will they?" He saw himself thrown into an empty hospital room. A viral contagion ward. No one to *lean* against. No one to reach out and *touch*.

Toyas held onto consciousness long enough to say, "Don't let them put me in . . . isolation." O



EXPEDITION

Crawling around in my skull,
I discovered a passage
that led into your skull–
tight but doable.

I checked my headlamp batteries
and wormed through.

Why didn't you tell me
you held such chambers:
stalactites dripping into pools,
gypsum flowers,
ceilings furred with sleeping bats?

I was hungry
so I ate a raw blind fish
that tasted like you.

—**Laurel Winter**

WALKING IN CIRCLES

Steven Utley

Steven Utley's collection of short stories, *Custer's Last Jump & Other Collaborations,* will be coming out from Golden Gryphon Press later this year. The author is still at work on *Silurian Tales. Tales* will contain six or seven stories that were first published in *Asimov's.*

"God *damn,*" gasps a voice in my earphone, "that *hurt.*"

Yes, it did, it hurt like hell, I agree completely, but I can't say so, it's all I can do to keep from retching from pain. I clutch the railing of the platform as if my life depended upon the strength of my grip; perhaps it does—I'm holding on to the only thing that can get me back, get me home, to the only world I've ever known till now. Very well, I admit it: I was scared. It's scary going through a spacetime anomaly, and it hurts like a son of bitch.

Gradually, though, the nausea subsides, and the headache, and the muscle spasms. My eyes refocus. The air around the platform ripples gently, like heat shimmer in slow motion—this is the only visible manifestation of the anomaly, and it is a short-lived one. The world beyond looks starkly empty, half-finished, unused, a vast monochromic stony plain stretching away in every direction.

There's real heat shimmer out there: without soil, never mind plant cover, the land bakes. The rocks have a faint greenish tinge where lichens homestead, but the only vivid color is the blue of the sky.

Nervous laughter crackles in my earphones. One of my teammates, I'm not sure who, upholds the tradition of making memorable utterances on historic occasions; he says, "Whoa." Well, it's not as if we're the first group of people to come here, or the second, so the occasion's not really all that historic. "Whoa" will have to suffice.

For all I can tell, the platform has materialized where and when it was supposed to do so. The preceding team of visitors consisted exclusively of technicians who assembled the apparatus that maintains our synchronous link with Holocene time, "our proper matrix" or "the present" which is now "the future." The present present is really "the past."

Makes me glad that all I have to think about is collecting botanical specimens. Not, of course, that this is really all I have to think about.

Our own little party includes just one technician, brought along as insurance—in our hermetic clothing, with our headheld recorders, we all look like giant bugs, but he's distinguishable by his slouch and the tool belt strapped around his hips. As with some other forms of insurance, you hope you won't need this one because you aren't absolutely convinced that it'll be adequate if you do need it. At least, I'm not absolutely convinced. But there is a strong element of personal dislike, distrust, at work here. He knows Merry Grenon, who now stands beside me on the platform. "Well, well," I distinctly heard him say when the team assembled for the first time, "it's the girl paleontologist, fancy meeting you here." She responded with a look that passed in a moment from surprise to contemptuous acknowledgment to a kind of amused tolerance. It was the last that smote me in the heart; I'd have preferred that she stop at contempt.

So, poised on the verge of the greatest adventure of my life, I found myself wracked by pure old human sexual jealousy.

Perhaps I read too much into her expression. Perhaps.

No, clearly, they know each other, they have some kind of history.

This technician bears watching.

Well, anyway: "Whoa," and then the team leader wants to know if everyone is all right and though he could simply look around the platform and do a head count, he calls each of us by name, and we have to answer "Here" or "Yo." Articulate, that's us.

"Jesus effing Christ," someone says, "it's like goddamn Death Valley here, I'm burning up. Won't the A.C. in these suits crank up any higher?"

Nobody answers, everyone is surely thinking what I'm thinking, that maybe we should've listened to the physicists, but nobody wants to be the one to say it, everyone's too abashed.

I hear the team leader clear his throat, and then he says, "Check your respirators."

We have done so already, many times, but we do it again.

"Now," says Merry Grenon, "if we're through with all the mickeymouse—"

Unoffended, the team leader nods, signals to the technician to swing back the hinged portion of the railing, and at long last, we step off the platform, we half a dozen human beings, step through the shimmering air and set foot on Earth.

An Earth. Depending on what one chooses to believe, it is either our very own Earth during mid-Paleozoic time or else an alternate, virtually identical Earth—existing in an alternate, virtually identical universe—where

conditions are virtually identical to those that prevailed on our very own Earth during mid-Paleozoic time. Adherents of the former idea generally are non-physicists, which is to say, my colleagues; I keep to myself the suspicion that probably only the chief adherents of the latter idea, the quantum physicists, know what they're talking about. The attitude among my colleagues is essentially, "But who the hell cares?" We're here, wherever it is, with no physicists among us. The technician doesn't count. The physicist who made it possible for us to "manipulate the spacetime anomaly" or "jump through the hole" is a notorious agoraphobe. The view here would send him into shock.

We fan out from the platform. A rivulet cuts across the barren and otherwise featureless landscape; its margins are marked by slimy mud and tangled patches of dull green plant tendrils. I would love to run to them; the best I can do is a sort of lurching waddle. Our bulky and uncomfortable clothing represents what we are now fast recognizing to have been a Pyrrhic victory over those smug physicist assholes. We had insisted throughout the planning phases that we didn't want to contaminate the pristine Paleozoic environment and possibly introduce a paradox.

I remember the physicist Cutsinger in particular because he had a habit of turning his eyes up in their sockets and shaking his head whenever we said such things.

"You people," he once told us, speaking as if to a classroom of slow children, "have watched too many bad sci-fi TV shows. You're going to leave tracks and collect stuff on this jaunt. Just like all the probes and all the people who went before you did. The allegedly pristine so-called Paleozoic environment is *already* contaminated. Now here comes the hard part, so listen carefully. A paradox is by definition an impossibility. You cannot travel directly backward into our own Earth's own prehistoric past. You can only moved diagonally, into some parallel Earth's Paleozoic. Therefore, nothing you do in this parallel Earth's Paleozoic can make any difference here in our proper matrix, our twenty-first century of the Christian era, *the present.* You cannot overlook this absolute condition. Time travel in the sense you people use the term violates the laws of physics. Time travel is a gross contradiction of logic."

"Oh, yeah?' someone piped up in the back of the room. As I said: articulate, that's us.

Cutsinger got off then into his pet theory of infinite multiple universes. When he paused for breath, Merry Grenon popped up out of her seat and asked, "If it's true we're going to some universe not our own, how about the *return* trip? With all those universes floating around, how do we get home to the right one?"

Well, he talked about the apparatus and the synchronous link, and still as if to a bunch of dunces.

Then Merry Grenon said, "This whole spacetime-anomaly thing, you know, hasn't done a whole helluva lot for your credibility."

Now he was nonplused. (Always wanted to see somebody nonplused.) "Whatever do you mean?"

"Isn't it true this spacetime anomaly just sort of fell into your lap, in a manner of speaking? You weren't looking for it when you found it, right? And right up to the moment you found it, you would've said it was impossible, right?"

"I'm certain—Doctor Grenon, is it? I'm certain that even in your own field, science is acknowledged to be a self-correcting system." (A sound like escaping steam arose from the people sitting around her, but Cutsinger pretended not to hear.) "Very well, grant me for the moment that the prehistoric world you're going to visit is one of a random selection of alternate worlds. We'll assume that we can't maintain a synchronous link. This, then, is the possible consequence of our not being able maintain continuity between, ah, one end of the anomaly and the other—the world to which you'll return will *also* be one of a random selection of alternate worlds, rather than this one—" he stamped his foot "—right here. How much difference will it make to you? None. Absolutely none. There is a virtually infinite selection of these alternate worlds. If you accept the most profound implications of quantum mechanics, and you earth-science types are goddamn well going to have to take my word for it, every either-or situation that arises in the universe demands a resolution. Whether it's a subatomic particle going this way or that, or whether you have coffee or tea for breakfast, each resolution causes the universe to split into replicas of itself. Given the frequency of resolutions at the submicro level alone, this splitting must occur billions of times per second. We don't feel the split because we ourselves split along with everything else. Each replicated universe continues to split, on and on and on."

"So," somebody demanded, after a moment, "which one's the real universe?"

Cutsinger rolled his eyes again. "The question's utterly meaningless."

I had to speak up then. "Which one's the real *me,* then? I *don't* think this question is meaningless at all."

Cutsinger grinned at me, entirely without mirth, and made an expansive gesture. "Why, all of you! Every single one of your billions and trillions of selves believes himself to be the unique, true, original self. But there is no such thing, not in any perceptible way. During the course of your life, some of your alternate selves may have diverged wildly from what you yourself regard as your norm. Some of them may even inhabit very strange alternate universes indeed. But every single one of you exists as completely as every other one of you."

He paused to gauge our reactions. I was making a sincere effort to get my mind wrapped around a difficult concept, but the general disbelief of my colleagues must have been palpable; Cutsinger heaved a sigh and said, "All right, if you don't want to hear about infinite multiple universes, how about a practical consideration? You're going to have to ditch the suits if you ever expect to spend meaningful periods of time in the field. By meaningful periods, I don't mean a collecting season, I mean from the time you eat or drink till the time you have to use the potty."

But we voted him down. And now here we are, suited from pate to peds, miserable, sweating buckets, plodding around as clumsily as though we were the first creatures in the world to try to invent bipedalism. And if we'd listened, we could have come in our old shirts, jeans, hiking boots.

Yet—I'm sure I can speak for every member of the team—we are happy.

We already knew a good deal about conditions here, of course. Before us, before anybody, robot probes came into this world and went out of it again loaded with specimens, samples, and recorded data about everything from insolation to, well, everything else. And all of the information matched what had already been inferred, bit by bit, from the geological record. Which is

why we expect merely to confirm, for instance, that mean global temperature here is 20 degrees centigrade, about five degrees warmer than in Holocene time, that the atmosphere contains more carbon dioxide and less oxygen, though there is enough of the latter to produce ozone in sufficient quantities to screen out lethal ultraviolet radiation, with enough left over to encourage assorted invertebrates' expeditions onto land. Had we arrived, say, on the shores of the proto-Atlantic rather than somewhere (we believe) in the interior of the primordial North American continent, we would have expected merely to confirm that the salinity of that ocean is about the same as average oceanic salinity in the Holocene, but that oceanic oxygen content is low, barely a third of the Holocene.

These and many other things are already known to us, and yet here we are, impelled by our hard-wired monkey instinct to see for ourselves. Nothing in my experience has ever given me the thrill I get from stroking, even with my fingers gloved, a fragile leafless *Cooksonia* stem.

Merry Grenon motions to me. I go over and squat next to her, and she gestures at the soft ground. "Someone's been here before us."

Before I think about what I'm saying, I say, "Who?"

"You mean, *what?* Diplichinites."

I've been too rapt in the tangible reality of *Cooksonia* to see past the plant cover. The patches of soft mud among the tendrils are covered with looping, crazily intersecting animal trackways, each consisting of a subcircular double row of small crescent-shaped indentations that come out of the water, describe a loop, and return to the water.

"Now why should they do that?" I wonder aloud.

"It's an arthropod's way of looking back over its shoulder. I think it's preadaptive behavior. Your more flexible marine invertebrates do the same kind of thing. It makes for efficient harvesting. Eat everything in your path and then everything *inside* your path. But it also helps you establish a sense of direction. Helps you find your way back to back where you started. A useful skill if you're investigating a hostile new environment."

I watch her as she begins to measure. "Maybe they're just overwhelmed by their own daring. They come crawling out of the water and get a compound-eyeful of this landscape, and then it's, 'Omigod!' and back into the water."

"Can't really blame them for being a little hesitant, can you?"

A small scorpion emerges from cover near the water's edge and advances with seeming purpose directly toward my foot.

"Some," I say, taking a backward step to cover a shudder, "evidently are less hesitant than others," and she scoops the scorpion up in a specimen container.

"Out here," she says as she peers at it, "they have to cope with atmospheric pressure and gravity. And there's always the danger of desiccation. They could just stay home, where the living's easy."

"So could we," says the technician, behind us. "This is one inhospitable-looking place if you ask me." Not that anyone has.

She glances past me, nods to him, then clips the specimen container to her belt.

"Eventually," he says, "they do come out and keep on going. Always upward and outward. Up out of the sea, out onto the land. Out of the trees, out onto the veldt. Off the planet, out into space."

Christ. A poet. I was hoping he'd reveal himself to be an insensitive troglodyte.

She flicks on her recorder and draws a measuring tape from its hiding place on a glove finger. "Average trail's five centimeters wide and describes a loop—" she brushes at the sparse plant cover with consummate tenderness "—approximately a meter long. Six to ten footprints per centimeter comes out to—"

"About two thousand per meter," says the technician.

She nods again but doesn't look his way this time. "About."

It's time I get to work as well. I sort of nudge aside the technician, who gives me a look that's supposed to be superior, and set about collecting my plant samples in such a way that Merry Grenon and I stay abreast of each other as we advance, ducklike, at a squat, along the soft green margin of the rivulet.

It's exhausting activity, with the suits and all. We stop and listen to each other pant. Her face gleams behind her visor. "I hate," she says, "to have to admit those smarmy physicists were right," but she smiles at me, and my heart leaps.

Doctor Grenon, I want to say, Merry, when this is all over, I hope we'll continue to see something of each other. And I imagine her response: she looks at me seriously, searchingly, as she has never looked at me before. You mean, she says, with a catch in her voice, in a romantic kind of way? Surely she must have noticed how interested, how attentive, I've been ever since our introduction. Surely she knows that my interest is not merely professional. But perhaps she simply wasn't sure till this very instant. I wait for her expression to soften in token of the dawning of understanding. Then I smile and say, Of *course* I mean in a romantic way, and take her by the hand.

And surely the universe has split, replicated itself, and these things are occurring, these words are passing between two human beings identical in every particular to Merry Grenon and myself except that that other me is slightly braver and quicker. In my own universe I hesitate, the moment passes, a voice in my earphones says, "Time to head home, people, everybody back to the platform."

"So soon?" I say and look at my watch.

Merry Grenon shrugs and picks up her collecting case. "Time flies when you're having fun. Anyway, I'm about to drown in my own sweat inside this suit."

Everyone converges on the platform.

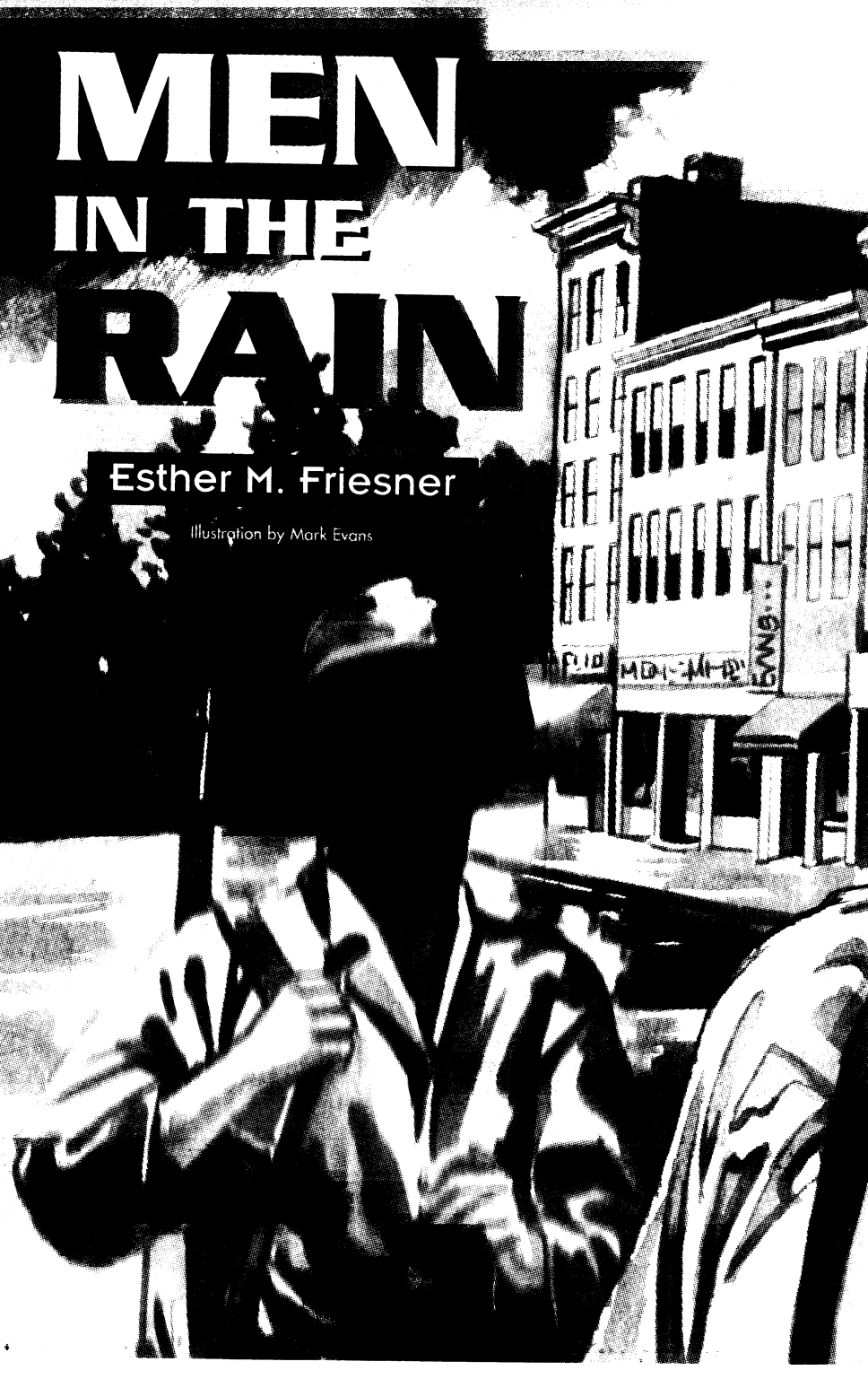
At the verge of the shimmering area, Merry Grenon pauses and points back the way we have come, and I look and see that the ground is now covered with intersecting human footprints that loop away from the platform and return. She laughs and says, "How perfect!" My hopes start to revive.

But when we have stowed our gear and arranged ourselves on the platform, though I've tried to find my way to her side again, she's somehow eluded me, she's standing beside my hated rival with the slouch and the tool belt as he kneels to make some minute adjustment on the apparatus. I hear her say to him, lightly, "Do try to get us home in one piece," and see him look up at her, see his infuriating grin through his visor. In some other universe, it is not so, it does not happen, but in *this* one I have to stand there and listen as he tells her insouciantly, "Baby, I'll take you where you wanna *go,*" and it hurts, it hurts, it hurts like hell. ❍

MEN IN THE RAIN

Esther M. Friesner

Illustration by Mark Evans



Esther M. Friesner's latest novel, *The Chick Is in the Mail* (Baen), is the fourth in her *Chicks in Chainmail* anthology series. She's currently working on several books at once, and has stories appearing in the Datlow/Windling *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* anthology, *Alternate Generals 2* (ed. Harry Turtledove), and *The Ultimate Halloween* (ed. Marvin Kaye). Of "Men in the Rain" she says, "I have no personal military experience, but my father-in-law is a WWII veteran and my late father was a Holocaust survivor. I hope I have done well by them."

We're almost home by the time the sky goes ashen, the clouds scudding in across the sun. My bones send up fresh aches, sharp ones, just to make sure I can tell the difference between the pain that's always with me and pain that means something new. There's thunder coming, and maybe rain. We've been needing a good, steady downpour for most of the summer, but all we get are cloudbursts, gusting in and drifting off, curtains of rain that burn away, leaving nothing changed.

I look out through the windshield and watch the slowly mounting pile of granite clouds grow top-heavy against the sky, like the crest of a tidal wave. Gina sees me staring straight ahead as we pull into the parking space, but she doesn't just assume I'm gazing off at nothing. She knows my mind's still sharp, even though my body's turned to mush and memories. She thinks I'm worried about being caught out in rough weather; she's wrong.

"I think I can get you home before it breaks, Mr. Soder," she says. "It's just that we *do* need milk. I'm going to run into the supermarket to get some. Do you mind waiting here in the car?"

I don't know whether to laugh more at the way she talks about what "we" need or the part where she asks if I mind waiting. She knows there's no way I can walk through a supermarket these days, not even leaning on one of the shopping carts. Stop & Shop's becomes the Gobi Desert for me and what's left of my legs. But she still asks that same damn question every time she leaves me parked out in the Lincoln, one more sack for her to lug through the door when we get home.

The poor, dumb, sweet little thing actually stands there until I give her an answer. Like it matters. Like I've got a choice. Like she gives a good goddamn. Like anybody does.

Wonder what she'd do if I ever spoke up and said yeah, I mind waiting. I am goddamn sick and tired of waiting, feeling my tailbone dig its way deeper into the seat in this car, or at the doctor's office, or in front of my TV. I have spent the past four years of my life doing nothing *but* waiting for some fucking boneman to remember where he was supposed to make the pickup, and when the bastard does show his fleshless face I'm gonna kick him right in the hourglass because skeletons don't have assholes.

But I won't do it, won't curse or talk crazy, won't turn ornery or make a

fuss. When you get to be my age, you learn that the ones who fuss the most are the ones the young folks avoid. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, but only when it's new; later on, it just gets replaced. There's enough old cranks in the world. It doesn't matter if you've got a right to complain, you're still an old crank for doing it. It's something automatic, like walking used to be, like taking a deep breath without your lungs fighting you every step of the way.

So I'll spare Gina the rough talk and even the wisecracks. I'll sit here in the car like a good boy—if a boy can still be a boy and seventy-eight in the bargain. "You go ahead, dear," I say to her, and I smile. Something inside me chooses now to send a stabbing pain right through my gut, but I think I cover it all right. There's a flicker of doubt on Gina's face, but the day's too hot and she's just taken me to the doctor and it's almost time for her shift to be over. I know she wants to get the milk and get me home and get the hell out too.

"I won't be long, I promise. You want the air conditioner on?" she asks.

"No, that just drains the battery. All the windows are open; I'll be fine."

She gives me a shy little smile. "Sure? Okay." This time she doesn't bother waiting for an answer, but turns and dashes across the parking lot into the supermarket where it's cool.

I sigh and settle back in the seat, listening to my own breath scrape and shudder along, looking out the window. God knows why; there's nothing new to see. I've been left out in this parking lot so many times that I know every store in this strip mall by heart. I could rattle off their names like my old catechism, *plus* the stores that used to be here before they went out of business, *plus* the name of the family that owned this tract of land when it was all still strawberry fields back in the forties.

People walk past the car in a hurry, people who still have important things to do. Mothers wheel shopping carts back and forth, struggle with bags full of food to feed legions. Their kids are crammed into those little seats that look like cages or else they're scampering along beside the mothers, tugging at shorts and skirts and blouses, whining for a drink or a snack or a nap or just because they've got lungs they've hardly used yet. Lucky little bastards. One of them sees me sitting here and stops dead still, doesn't know whether to smile or not, so I do it for him. He smiles back, and for a minute it looks like he's going to say hello to me, but right then his mother grabs him by the arm and yanks him along, telling him not to bother the nice old man.

I wonder what she'd say if the nice old man told her what he did at Anzio, what he saw at Auschwitz?

Thunder grumbles out of a sky that looks like ink spilled into water. Still no sign of Gina; must be a long line at the checkout counter. There's a big yellow dog in the car next to me. He hasn't stopped barking since we pulled into this parking spot. I know how he feels, but I don't have the balls to join him. The thunder drives him crazy, makes him bark harder, louder, shrill like one of those stringy-furred lapdogs Mary used to love.

"Shut up, you big pussy," I mutter. Mary would hate to hear me use that kind of language, but Mary's dead.

The sky rolls itself out into an iron sheet, battleship gray. The first drops of rain come down, splattering hard and fat against the windshield. A cooling wind takes the edge off the throbbing summer heat. It feels good against my skin. Lately I'm cold all the time, but this weather's left me sweltering. I

don't mind it when the rain blows into the car through the open window. I hardly need to close my eyes—the cataracts have pretty much done that for me—to dream I feel Mary's hands cup my face, soft and smelling of roses, both of us young.

"Still the same, huh, Red? Still too dumb to come in outa the rain."

He's leaning against my side of the Lincoln, one hand on his hip, the other resting on the roof, his face tilted over to one side so he can look me in the eye. Rain streams down his poncho—it's coming down in buckets now—and puddles around his boots. The dumb son-of-a-bitch's grinning like he just got laid.

"You should talk, Nick," I tell him. "At least I'm under cover."

"Yeah, well, so am I." He grins wider. I can see the big gap between his front teeth. He used to use that space to do a little parlor trick for the ladies. Last time I saw him do it was in a whorehouse in Naples, and it didn't matter that not one of us could speak a word of Italian except *beer* and *how much?* and *where's the toilet?,* Nick made the girls and Mamma laugh and we all got along just fine.

Before I can say a word back at Nick, someone taps me on the left shoulder. I jump, if you could call it that. More like I twitch like a gigged frog. "What the—?" I sputter, jerk my head around to see the hand that's reached all the way in through the driver's side window, a skinny white hand blotched red, nails bitten off to the quick, freckles, nearly as smooth as a girl's. When I gasp, the air sounds like beads dragged across a washboard. "Frank? Jesus, what the hell are *you* doing here?"

Frank laughs the way he always did, all the way back to the time that he and Nick and Jimmy and me all first buddied up in basic training. It sounds like he's almost embarrassed to be caught enjoying himself. Raindrops bead in a row across the brim of his helmet, trickle down his cheeks. "I got called up, Red," he says. "My turn on patrol."

"What are you talking about?" I demand.

Frank wipes the rain off his face with that ugly green bandanna his girl Josephine sent him. He punched me in the nose when I wouldn't stop calling her G.I. Jo. Then she sent him a Dear John letter and he didn't care what anyone called her. He kept the bandanna, though, used it to wipe up the messes that happened when he and the girl he did marry had little Katie. "Like I said, I got called up, that's all I know."

"So now I've got to put up with the *two* of you? Bad enough the first time *he* showed up." I nod at Nick and my head keeps on bobbing like one of those big-head baseball player dolls with a spring in its neck. "It was raining then, too. It's always raining when you come by."

Nick shrugs. "Rain opens up the world a little, I guess, blurs the lines. . . . Shit, I dunno. What am I, a fucking philosopher?"

"You're a jackass," I tell him, joking like we always did. "That first time, though, you might as well have been the devil himself. God damn it, I thought I was losing my mind."

Nick shares a wink with Frank that he thinks I don't see and says: "Too late."

"So what if it is? Can't honestly say I care any more. At least you're company, you sorry son-of-a-bitch."

"Well, Red, now I'm back, you got a little *more* company," Frank tells me.

"Damn it, I wish you bastards would stop calling me that!" I snap. "You know how stupid it sounds now?" I try to take off my hat, to let them see that what's left of my wild red hair is just a few limp wisps of gray combed

across a brown-mottled scalp, but my hand shakes and misses, and I don't have the strength to make a second try. All I've done is knock my hat to one side at a crazy angle, making me look like a drunk or a fool.

"You worry too much about *now*." Nick puts his hand in through the window and sets my hat to rights. Water from his poncho runs down my shirt collar and makes me shiver with cold. "What's *now* ever done for you but make you old?"

The rain falls more softly while he speaks, as if his words have worked some kind of spell, chasing it away. Clouds trail off to other skies, rain becomes mist, mist steams up from the asphalt as the sun comes out again. People talk about cloudbursts as they hurry to and from their cars, about how we could really use a good, hard, soaking rain. I listen and I watch them; I'm alone.

Gina's beside herself when she finally gets back to the car. She nearly bursts into tears apologizing, she can't get me inside the house and into dry clothes fast enough. By the time she's finished fixing me up so I won't die just yet, it's five o'clock, time for the night woman to come on duty. She's late, as usual.

"You go ahead home, dear," I tell Gina. She's looking nervous; I know why. *He* comes home at six-thirty. I've never met him, but I've seen his mark on her and I can tell you all about him. He comes home, he's worked hard for a lousy boss who makes his life hell, and all he wants is to find a decent meal waiting for him when he walks through the door. Not too much to ask, is it? A good woman would see to it he gets what's his by right, right? She ought to be thankful she's got a man like him, shouldn't she? She doesn't talk about him a lot, but whenever she does, she never really want any replies to her questions. He's already taught her all the answers she's allowed to give. If she ever had any of her own, they're all long gone. For some reason, she's never told me his name.

"Oh, it's all right," she says. I hear how her voice shakes just a little. "I can stay; it won't be any trouble." Bullshit, angel. "I wouldn't feel right, leaving you alone."

There's nothing I can say. What am I going to do, throw her out? I can't even take my hat off for myself any more without some goober like Nick having to bat cleanup. So we wait, the two of us, and that scrawny old biddy who spends nights here doesn't show.

When the old case clock on top of the bookshelf chimes six I finally say, "Maybe you should call the agency." Gina giggles, embarrassed not to have thought of that herself. She heads for the kitchen, first turning my recliner chair so that I'm facing the television, making sure the remote's tucked snugly into my hand. Why does she bother? She knows I only watch that damned box when someone else is with me who cares. Like the way Mary and I used to sit in front of the fireplace, watching the sparks leap up and the logs crack open under the flames. We had perfectly good steam heat in the house and even more warmth than that from each other, but she loved to watch the fire play, so I watched it too.

I'd rather look out the window, see dusk come stealing up our street. Fat chance. It's summer, daylight overstays its welcome and I don't have the strength to keep my eyes from closing long enough to watch the night come on.

Gina's back, looking harried. There was no one in the office at the agency, she doesn't know what to do, who to call next, where to turn. Her eyes flash

to the clock on the bookcase: Ten past six, too late to get home on time, much too late to have things done the way he wants to find them.

"Look," I say, trying to bring some power back into my voice, or just air enough so that it won't wheeze. "You can't stay here. Tell you what, you call up Reverend Emerson, ask if maybe he knows someone from the church social outreach committee who wouldn't mind a baby-sitting job." I give her my most charming smile.

Almost as soon as I do, Mary's there. Old cartoons flicker in the fog across my eyes, bumbling cats or pudgy mice tempted to do evil, pulled back from the brink by a tiny *döppelganger,* the winged and haloed Conscience on their shoulder. My angel-self looks nothing like me; it's Mary through and through. *Oh no you don't, Andrew James Soder!* she commands. *Don't you try pulling that crooked little grin of yours on her. It's bad enough that you used it to unfair advantage on me all those years—which never would've happened if I hadn't had the bad sense to fall in love with you—but I will not stand for you inflicting it on Gina. You know she's got troubles enough of her own without a silly old man trying to wrap her 'round his little finger.*

No need to tell her that my grin's crooked all the time, now, like it or not, and its effect on the ladies is—well, at least I can still leave them laughing. Mary's gone, her duty done, and so is Gina. I can hear her out in the kitchen, explaining things to the Reverend Emerson, or maybe his wife. She comes back glowing.

"Mrs. Gottschalk can come by," she tells me. "She'll be here at nine. Now let me get you fed."

She's so damn eager to please. Not a lick of ginger in her, not a splinter of backbone, only heart and sweetness. So damn dumb. Sweet and dumb, yeah, and young, that's her; no wonder her boyfriend slaps her around. Bet she thinks I haven't figured that out either. Well, I did, long ago, back when Mary was still alive. I told Mary and she said maybe we should do something about it. That was good for a laugh too.

Gina's a nice girl, a good kid, the best little home health aide/driver/housekeeper/goddamn old folks' nursemaid we ever had. When we fired the last one—there was a brass-balled bitch if ever there was one—and we got Gina, it was like someone cracked the gate of heaven just enough for an angel to slip through, only the stupid thing tripped over its own gold-sandaled feet and when it fell to earth it landed on its head. She means well and she wants to do good, but every time she finishes her shift here and leaves our house I get the feeling it'll be a miracle if she ever comes back. The world's waiting to chew her up and spit her out, just from plain meanness, to beat her over the head until she learns that this isn't heaven. And then there's that bastard boyfriend of hers, stretching out the job, gnawing like a rat along the edges of her soul.

What would've happened if we *had* said something? And who in hell would we say something *to?* Her supervisor? The police? Her? Once, I decided to try a little experiment: I got Gina aside, where Mary couldn't overhear, and I told her how I'd noticed the bruises, and that one black eye, and the splint on her little finger. She stretched her lips out—maybe she thought it would look like a smile—and told me it was all nothing, she was such a klutz, accidents happen.

I asked her *how* the accident happened, the one that broke her pinkie finger. And when she told me she'd slammed a drawer on it, I waited until the

next day and asked again and when she said she got it caught in a closet door I gave her this big Ah-*ha!*

Who in hell ever told me I was Perry Mason? Gina got all upset, started crying, said she didn't want any trouble, maybe she should go find another job with people who didn't think she was a liar. She never came out and said in so many words that the weasel was the one who broke her finger for her, but it was there, it was there. So was the fact that she'd never *do* anything about it, not even run away, and if anyone else tried doing something about it, she'd lie through her teeth to protect him.

Tell *me* Mary and I could've done one damn thing to help her! Without her word to back up our suspicions? Two old folks, you know how they get at that age, probably can't tell the difference between stuff they see on television and what's real, they think the characters on their favorite soap operas are real people, they're just like kids, yeah, what are you gonna do?

I persuaded Mary to let the matter drop. She looked mad, didn't talk to me for a day or so, gave me the cold shoulder for the rest of the week. Then one night after we were in bed together she said, "Andy, I've been thinking; you're right. She's got to want to help herself first or there's not a thing we can do." And she leaned over, kissed me, went to sleep, and didn't wake up again in this world. Heart failure in her sleep. God love that woman, what a way to get in the last word.

Gina and I eat dinner together—nothing fancy, just some spaghetti. A phone call comes while we're eating. Gina answers it and comes back to the table looking sad.

"What's the matter, dear?" I ask, wondering if it's maybe the weasel calling up to let her know what's waiting for her when she goes back to their place. That'd figure. Why settle for just making her hurt when he can also make her suffer?

"Oh, Mr. Soder, I'm so sorry," she says, her big eyes shining with tears. "That was a Mrs. Ramsay calling, Kate Ramsay. She said you'd know her."

"Frank Kinney's little girl," I say. Now I know what's coming. I'll try to look surprised when she breaks the news.

Gina tells me that Frank's gone and I sigh and shake my head and don't say more than, "That's too bad. We were buddies." I'm pretty sure Gina doesn't think I'm being cold about Frank's death. She knows I was a soldier. I'll bet my life she's another one who believes that we don't cry.

We go back to our meal. The sauce turns my stomach sour; I push my plate away like a sulky kid. Gina urges me to eat, but I don't have the appetite for it. It's not on account of Frank. It's the way I see so many things these days: Why bother? Why drag it out when you know where it's going? Eat another meal, draw another breath, get out of bed another time, watch another autumn turn into another winter that's doomed to become a fresh spring . . . why? I've come down to the place where the only thing I can do besides take up room and use up air is talk, and what in hell do I have to say? Where's anyone who cares enough to listen?

Gina spreads butter on my bread and coaxes me to take a bite. I wait until her attention's elsewhere and cram it in the pocket of my cardigan. It's a pretty big slab of Italian bread, crisp-crusted, from a real bakery, not a plastic bag on the supermarket shelf. It's the kind I used to gobble down three, four slices at a sitting until Mary'd tell me to lay off or I was going to get fat. More of me to love, I'd say, and she'd smile.

Now that there's so little of me left, is there anything left to love?

I'm sitting there like a maudlin old fool, so wrapped up in my own pity that I don't even notice when Gina clears the dishes. Water runs in the kitchen sink, water starts tapping on the windows: It's begun to rain again. I'd like to go to the window, look out into the night and see the silver of streetlights trickling down the road, but until Gina's done with the dishes—

God damn it, I *will* see it! I'll see it *now,* and not when someone else shows up to haul me where I want to go. Bad enough I spend my days dropped like a parcel on someone's doorstep. Bad enough I'm locked away with shadows when I used to blaze with dreams. I've won a life and a woman and a war and I will see myself in hell if I can't manage to haul these bones a lousy five feet across a floor I bought and paid for because I want to look out at the rain.

The walker's by my chair. I almost pull the cloth right off the tabletop, trying to push myself up to the point where I can lay hands on it. Thank God it's the kind with wheels. My left leg drags some, but it moves, it moves. I make it to the window and lean my forehead against the glass, wishing for the cool, soft touch of Mary's hands across my brow.

Wishing someone'd read my mind and turn off the lights in back of me, kill the back-glare so I could see out this window better, too. My breath puts another layer of fog between my sight and what's outside, but I can make out the street and the cars and the lampposts and the trees. The first time I looked out this window, Mary hollered at me because she had her hands full, trying to boss the moving men and keep track of our two boys at the same time. She said the view would always be there, and if I was so crazy for it I could pull up a chair and just sit there watching it all day, but *now* I was going to give her a hand.

That was when I noticed that Paul'd got out of the house somehow and was running down that street with his two-year-old backside naked as the day he was born. I raced out after him and caught the little scamp in front of the Leslau place. Old Mr. Leslau was sitting on the porch, nodding and smiling. I scooped up Paul and made some kind of excuse for the boy. Mr. Leslau kept on nodding, kept on smiling, and I thought what a nice old man he was. It wasn't until we'd been moved in a week that Mary told me he didn't have anything left upstairs but dust and fog and the unshakable certainty that he was back on his father's cattle farm in Poland, waiting to drive the cows in from the pasture.

I remember thinking how awful that had to be, lost to everything, even to yourself. Well, my mind still works all right, works well enough to tell me every waking minute that it's the only damn part of my body that *is* working up to code. Makes me wonder, between me and Mr. Leslau, who's the lucky one after all.

I see the swash of headlights come tearing down our street, see the car screech into my driveway, dinging the back of the Lincoln hard enough to shatter the taillight. My hands clench the walker and I swallow air, trying to fill my lungs enough to shout for Gina to come see what some crazy bastard's done.

But he's too fast for what's left of me. He's out of the car and up the steps, banging on the door, jabbing the bell until it sticks and just keeps on buzzing like a bomb that's got forever to fall.

"Gina! Gina, open up! God damn it, you open this fucking door *now,* you bitch, or I'm gonna—!"

She's standing in the kitchen doorway, holding the jamb like it's a lifeline, her body clinging to the painted wood. Her eyes are wide, but there's no

room in them for anything but fear. The pounding goes on, and the yelling, and then we hear a different sound: He's kicking at the lock plate, he's kicking in the door.

I start to say, "Call the police," but I'm swallowing drool, gasping and bubbling for air. Gina ought to know enough to do that without my telling her, but she's too scared, frozen where she stands. She's crying. That's all the girl can do is cry her heart out. That's no defense against somebody who's thirsting for her tears.

Pain cuts me from groin to gut to gorge and redness floods my eyes. The walls of my house are shooting up all around me, the floor slaps the side of my head just as the door breaks open. He's skinny as a snake, green slits for eyes. I feel Gina's arms slip under mine as the floor gets farther away and he closes in on us. She's holding me across her lap like I was her son.

"Please, Eddie, please." So that's the fucker's name; first time I've ever heard her say it. Now I can guess why: Speak of the devil and he shall appear. "Please, I'm sorry, I couldn't help it, no one else could come. Please, Eddie, you gotta call 911, please, he's just an old man, he needs help. Oh my God, Eddie, I think he's dying!"

"Shut up!" He grabs her wrist, yanks her up. I fall from her lap to the floor and taste dust and blood. I've got just enough left in me to roll myself onto my side in time to see him punch her in the face so hard she hits the wall behind her. Her nose makes a crunching sound when it breaks.

"You don't tell me what to do, you got that?" he yells. "What the fuck do I care, the old bastard lives or dies? You better worry about just one thing, bitch, and I don't mean him. I mean—"

Rain fills my ears, washing away the sound of his voice, his fists pounding her flesh. I roll myself all the way over onto my back and feel wetness trickling down my cheeks. Tears? It can't be tears. A soldier's got a job to do; a soldier's got no time to cry.

I know that part of it's a lie. I tasted plenty of tears in my day, standing by a strip of new-turned earth, a shattered tree-branch jammed into the ground at one end, watching while someone hung an empty helmet on top of it like the star at the top of the Christmas tree. And you know, it never failed: Someone would always catch me at it and ask me was I crying and I'd always answer, "No, it's just the rain."

So now it's still the rain. I let it come streaming down my face where I lie, knowing I could lie here forever, staring up into a sky so flat and gray. For once the German planes aren't soaring through the clouds, bombs dropping, earth gouting up brown and black and red. My ears still ring with the numbing clap of sound that hit me like a sledgehammer in the back, threw me halfway to the woods we were all racing to reach. I remember how I lay there, sucking mud, until Jimmy caught up with me, how he and Frank got me moving again.

Someone stoops over me on my left side now, someone on my right, just the way it was back then in Italy. Strong arms hook themselves through my elbows and tilt me back onto my feet. My boots sink deep into the mud. I stand there staring down at my uniform, filthy as a pig's ass and how the hell am I gonna get it clean? Oh man, Captain Sharrock's gonna give me hell for this; he's one of the biggest clean-crazy officers in the whole E.T.O. *Keep it clean or dig the latrine,* that's that fucker's motto. I run one hand through my thick, red hair in consternation just as Nick gives me my helmet, Frank gives me my gun.

I know that something's wrong, something big, but you know how it is: Your house catches fire and you stand there yelling at the fireman who just saved your life because he didn't save your wedding photo. Your father dies and you spend half the funeral fighting with your son. I ought to be flat on the floor of my own diningroom but instead I'm standing in the rain outside the same tall window where I was standing on the inside not five minutes ago, and all I want to do is argue with Nick, tell him *What the hell are you doing here, helping me stand up like a whole man again? It was* Jimmy *did it back then in Italy, Jimmy and Frank, not you. You were shattered into a thousand pieces in a bomb crater somewhere behind us. What the hell are you doing inside what's got to be my memory?*

Nick smiles. "I know," he says. "It's a bitch, ain't it?"

Frank claps me on the back. "Good to have you, Red. Let's go."

"What? I'm not going anywhere with you clowns!"

"You are," Frank says. Whenever he said something that way, back on the battlefields, you knew it was going to be no use arguing: Frank had an eye for spotting the things you couldn't change, no matter how much you wanted to, no matter how hard you dreamed. It saved his life more than once, and ours. "If you want, you can still go in and say goodbye, but—"

"Goodbye?" I ask, but they've already pulled me through the window, out of the rain. It's trickling down my poncho, puddling up the floor where that bastard made Gina drop me. He's got her in a corner now, right against the old marble fireplace Mary loved so much. She got her arms thrown over her head, trying to shield herself from his fists. How soon before he catches wise and starts kicking her belly instead?

If I get only one goodbye before I go, then I want this one. I chamber a round and raise my rifle to my shoulder. I've got him in my sights. I've never stood this close to a man I was about to kill, not once in all the war. My lips are dry and hot, but all I can taste is rain. I pull the trigger.

Nothing. Not even a click; only a small silence. I lower my rifle and see Nick shaking his head sadly.

"What's the matter with this fucking gun?" I shout, waving it in his face.

"Nothing," he says. "No more than being what it is."

"They won't shoot for us any more," Frank puts in. "Nick told me; he tried. He had me try too, just in case it'd maybe be different for me. It wasn't."

"You know that?" I challenged him. "You know that for sure?"

"I've only just signed up, Red, but it doesn't take you long to learn the drill."

"Well, why don't you dogfaces *do* something about it?" I holler at them both.

"You think I haven't tried?" Nick says. "You think all we *want* to do is walk patrol? Wearing out our boots, seeing the things we see and no way to do a damn thing about any of it? Once, just once I wish that we could break the wall. Shit, what'd they tell you you became a soldier for?"

"Making it right again," Frank says, his mouth a cold, straight line. "Standing up to the sons of bitches who act like they're the only ones who count as human beings. Everyone else is nothing to them but things, numbers, toys for them to break, tools for them to use. Standing up for the ones too beaten down and weak to fight for themselves, that's why I signed up."

"So that's it?" I demand. "We can't help, we can't mix in, we can't do anything but walk and watch and wait?" Nick and Frank shrug. "Then why the hell have they got us dressed like *this?*" I grab the front of my own uniform. It stinks of gunpowder and mud. "Because someone wants us to *play* sol-

diers?" They don't give me any kind of response. They're only waiting for me to have my temper fit until I'm tired and I finally accept the way things are.

I wasn't any good at that, you know; I never was and Mary said so. I stare at the useless weapon in my hand and remember how they taught us what to do with a rifle when you couldn't use it to shoot with any more. I know this uniform by heart; it used to be my world. There's a bayonet at my belt that my hand finds without my eyes having to guide it. I fix it to the barrel fast, before the boys can stop me, so fast I can almost hear my old sergeant yelling in my ear to move, move, *move!* I aim it at the small of Eddie's back as he's bending over Gina. I may come out of this looking like a fool, but at least I'm going to try. I let loose a holler Sarge could hear clear through his coffin lid, and charge.

I'm on him, I hit him, I run right through him like the memory I've become but I just can't stop. And suddenly I see two big, brown eyes, a shattered nose, a blood-streaked, tear-streaked face. She's looking up at him, begging him for mercy, but she's also begging me for help—not seeing me, but begging me all the same and then—

—then I break through into the dark inside her head. I'm still charging, going so fast, hell-for-leather, that I don't stop until I hit the back of Gina's skull. The impact knocks me half silly, makes little starbursts dance in front of my eyes as I get my bearings. What am I doing in here, where the walls flow with tears like rain? Who are all these sorry, wailing ghosts?

Who's that man over there, telling Gina she's nothing but a worthless girl, lazy, ugly, that no man will ever want her for his wife. Who's that woman sneering at her, locking her out of her heart with disdain because she's not her perfect brother? When he drowned, why couldn't it have been her? Who's that one in the shadows, the one with the oily smile? He's warning her that if she ever tells her parents what he's done to her, he'll say she's lying and they'll believe him. A woman with chalk dust on her fingers and a voice like molasses, too sweet to be good for you, is saying how wouldn't it be a silly waste of time for Gina to try getting into nursing school with those grades, how tutoring would just delay the inevitable. She even takes the time to explain what "inevitable" means, speaking just as if Gina were a sort-of-bright dog.

There are many others. They drift in and out of focus, but they're always there. They crowd around something small and helpless in their midst, something thin and broken-down that's overwhelmed by their numbers. For an instant the crowd of chittering phantoms parts and I see it: Its eyes are like the ones I saw everywhere when they opened the gates of Auschwitz and we marched into hell.

My bayonet slices through them like a sickle through a wheat field, stabs them back into the darkness one by one. I split that oily smile from ear to ear, I use my rifle butt to smash my way through to stand over the broken, trembling thing and let it know I'm there to shield it, that with my protection it can stand up on its own.

And it does. It does! It cowers there a moment, but at last a tiny hand reaches up, pats my arm, squeezes it, uses it to help itself stand. It only wanted breathing room to grow. It only needed one voice in its ear to shut out all the others. My rifle drops to my side as I see it begin to glow, then to burn, than to fill every corner of its prison with pure light. But it's no longer in a prison, and that piteous, bent little creature has taken back everything those bastards took away from her. The walls are dry, the tears are seared

away. She's standing up so gloriously tall that when her wings unfurl I'm flung back out into the world hard enough to ram into Nick. We both fall down, but not before I see that she's got something in her hand.

We get back on our feet in time to hear the sound of iron breaking bone, in time to see Frank's white face go even whiter and to hear him say, "Son-of-a—!"

But Eddie's shriek of pain blots out Frank's voice. He's staggering away from the fireplace, holding his busted arm and staring like he's seen the face of Jesus. (Mary would say that I've got my nerve, comparing a vision of our Lord and Savior to a girl like Gina, even if she is holding our fireplace poker and looking like the wrath of God.)

"Get out, Eddie," she says, moving toward him. "Get the hell out of here or the next thing I'm gonna break is your head."

"You crazy bitch!" he shouts. "I'll get you for this!"

"Try," she says. Her broken nose makes her speech a little thick, but her voice is as firm as a good general's. I peek inside her head because I still can and see plans to take back her life, plans for learning how to do more to save it than just pleading and hoping for kindness from Eddie and his bastard kin. No one will break her, no one will make her bleed, no more. *Next time,* her eyes tell me, *next time it won't be just a poker.* Eddie seems to see that message too, because he's gone.

Gina drops the poker and runs to where I lie. I see how tenderly she holds the old shell, how she checks for pulse and breath, how she sets me gently down again and marches into the kitchen to call 911 like a good soldier.

I stand over my own body and wonder how I ever got to look like that. The boys give me time and space to say the last of all goodbyes. I hear Gina's voice in my ear, clear as a bell, even though she's still in the kitchen. She's made the first call, and now she's talking to a friend of hers who lives in the same apartment building and keeps the extra key, asking her to go lock herself in there with the chain and the deadbolt that you can't undo from the outside and when Eddie comes back and tries to get in she's got to keep him out no matter what, call the cops if she must, anything.

And just as clear, I heard her friend's voice answer, "Thank God."

I look up and see Nick and Frank waiting for me by my busted-down front door. Nick's got a lit cigarette stuck through the gap in his front teeth, the clown. I give him a punch in the arm and say, "Don't you know those things are gonna kill you one day?"

He laughs and we go out the door, down the steps, up the street, counting stripes of lamplight that shimmer across the pavement like a captain's bars. We've got a way to go before it's time to bring the last man back onto patrol with us. Jimmy's in pretty good health for an old codger, last I heard from him, but we're in no hurry, and I'm willing to bet my left nut that neither is he.

We can do more than just walk patrol while we wait for him, now. Gina was only the first one; we won't let her be the last. Once a soldier, always a soldier, knowing all the heartbreaking, brute ugliness of war and still fighting it to save something human that can't save itself. If we won't, who will? We've got a new battle, and I've brought us the weapons to fight it. Mary won't mind waiting for me to come home just a while longer; she's done it before. You never stop being a soldier's wife any more than you stop being a soldier. The sky is iron and angel wings as we march off together through the rain. ❍

EUROPA

Jupiter floats
above the horizon like a huge
psychedelic balloon

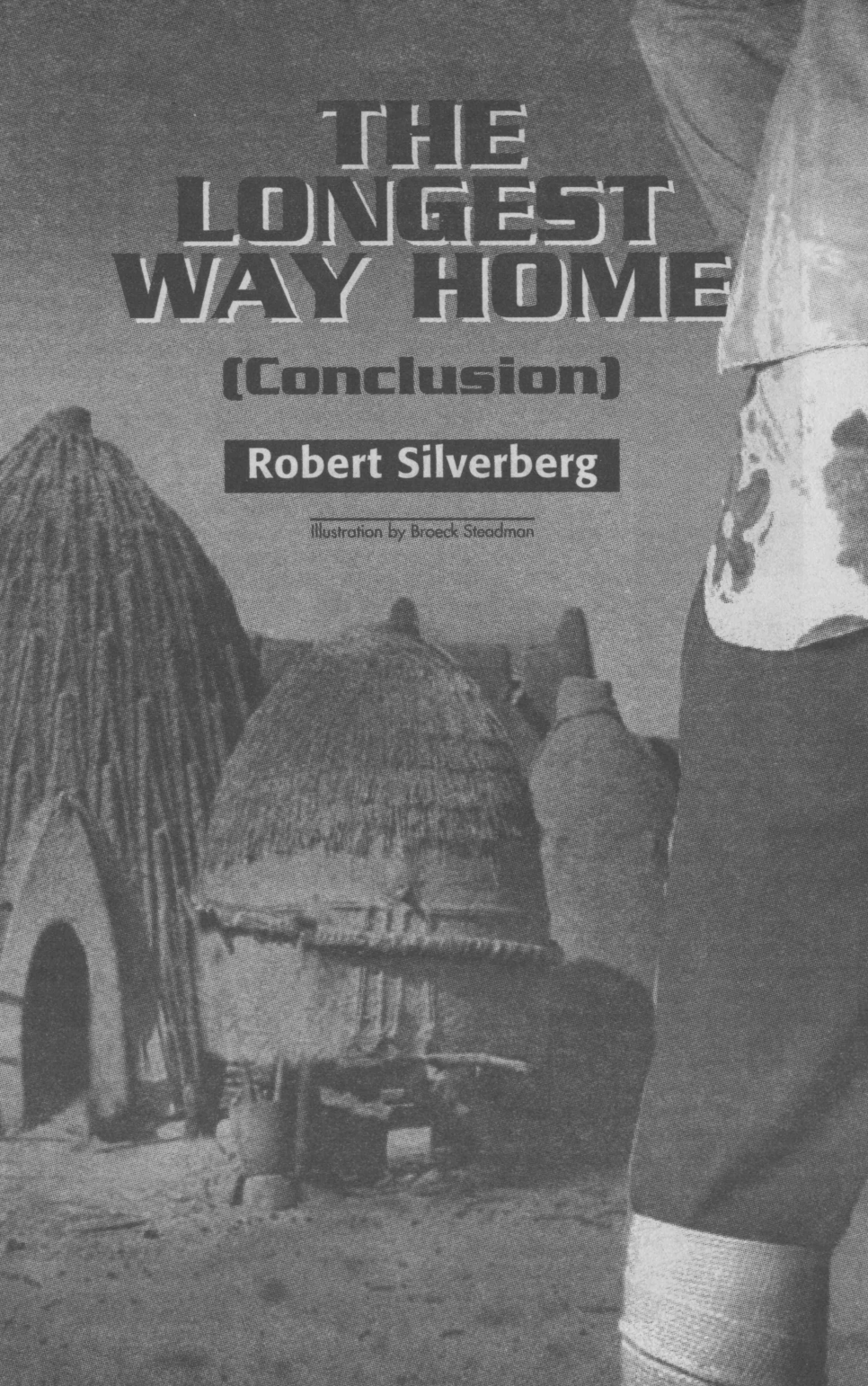
as we hover-skate
over the frozen terrain of Europa,
millions upon millions of

stars glowing all about
us, some reflecting here and there
from the icy surface

of this world of deep
oceans sleeping, oceans waiting for
just the right celestial cure,

or man-made touch,
to transform this hibernating giant
into a living possibility.

—G.O. Clark

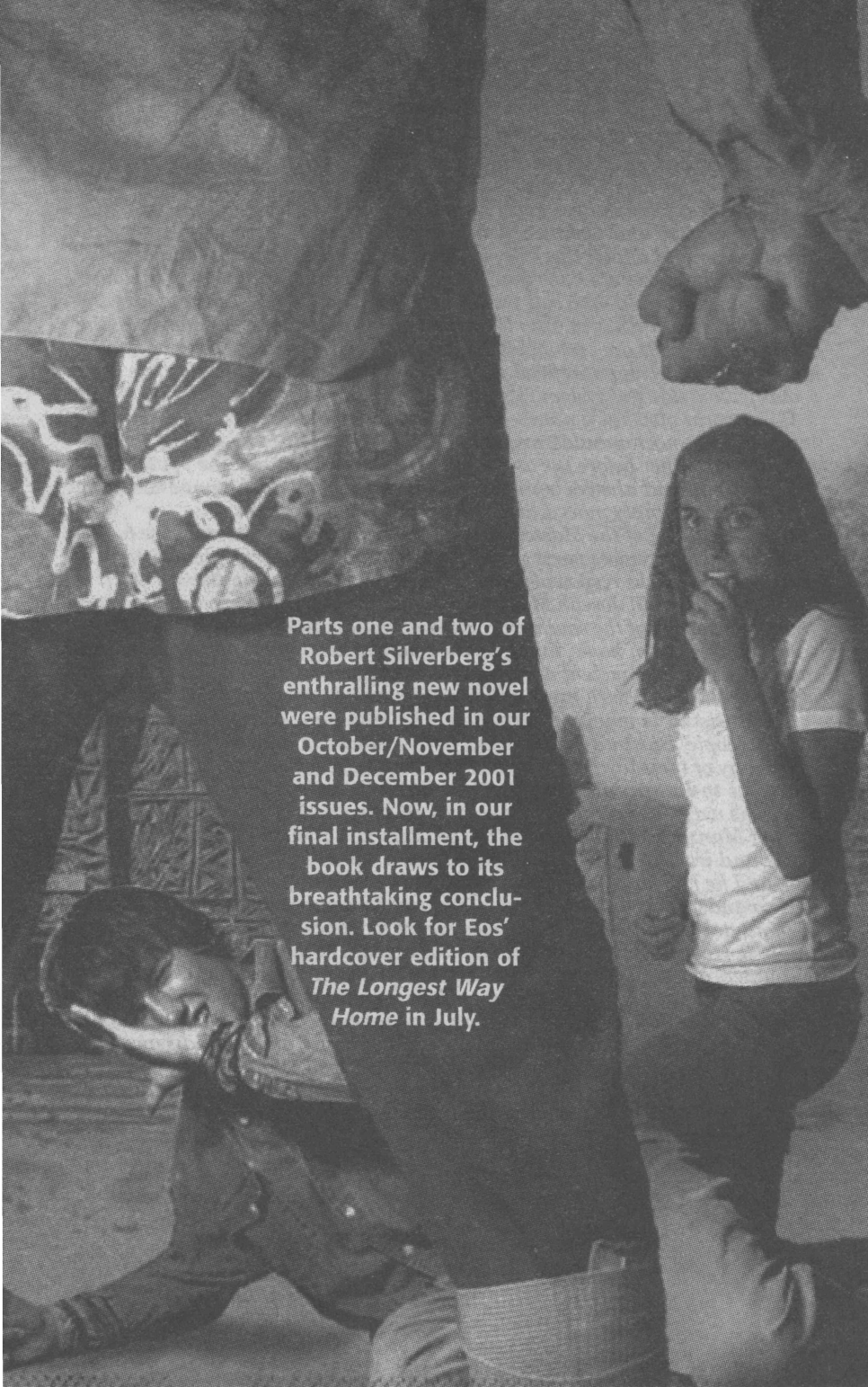


THE LONGEST WAY HOME

(Conclusion)

Robert Silverberg

Illustration by Broeck Steadman



Parts one and two of Robert Silverberg's enthralling new novel were published in our October/November and December 2001 issues. Now, in our final installment, the book draws to its breathtaking conclusion. Look for Eos' hardcover edition of *The Longest Way Home* in July.

SYNOPSIS OF PARTS ONE AND TWO

The planet called Homeworld has been colonized twice by humans, in two waves spaced several centuries apart. The first to arrive was a group of farmers and herders who established a simple agricultural economy. When these first settlers experienced economic difficulties they invited a more aggressive and technically advanced group of Earth people to settle among them and advise them. By now, more than a thousand years later, the second group of settlers have made themselves the dominant caste of Homeworld, an elite group who call themselves Masters. The two continents of the planet have been divided into large private estates under Master rule, the Great Houses, that are virtual city-states. The earlier group of settlers, known now as the Folk, live as serfs on the estates of the Masters, though some have remained outside the system in independent villages of their own.

Homeworld also has a number of more-or-less intelligent native races—the Indigenes, the noctambulos, and others—which had lived in general harmony with each other before the arrival of the human colonists. The populations of each group had always been quite small, and when the humans came the native species simply moved aside and made room for them.

It is the custom of the Masters to send the heirs to each Great House to live with kinsmen in remote parts of the planet for a period during adolescence, to prepare them for the responsibilities of government that await them. Thus it is that fifteen-year-old Joseph Master Keilloran, the oldest son of one of the most powerful Masters of the southern continent, Helikis, finds himself many thousands of miles from home, living on the estate of his distant northern cousins the Getfens, when a violent uprising of the Folk breaks out and leaves him cut off from all contact with his family and having no way to return to them.

The uprising is wholly unexpected. The Folk have always been passive, placid people. But in a single night Getfen House is destroyed, the Getfens and many of their loyal followers are massacred, and Joseph himself barely manages to escape into the forests south of the estate. His only hope is to make his way—alone and on foot—toward some part of this northern continent of Manza where the rule of the Masters still prevails. Though he is capable and intelligent, he has always lived a life of high privilege and comfort, and he has had little preparation for the hardships that face him now.

He wanders through the forest, searching for a supposed village of the humanoid natives known as Indigenes where he hopes to find aid in reaching Ludbrek House, the next Great House to the south. In the course of his flight he encounters one of the giant, simple-minded creatures called noctambulos, who helps him forage for food and conveys him eventually to the Indigene village. Along the way Joseph stumbles over a hidden obstacle and badly injures his left leg. But he does manage to reach the village, finally, and the Indigenes, who have the most advanced culture of any of Homeworld's native races, offer him shelter and care for him while he recovers from his injury. When they discover that he has some rudimentary medical knowledge, derived from watching his father treating the peasants of House Keilloran, they ask him to examine several sick members of the tribe and cure their ills. Joseph, though he is uneasy about pretending to have skills that he does not in fact possess, does what he can for these people, and—somewhat to his surprise—achieves some cures.

Once Joseph's leg has begun to heal, the grateful Indigenes provide transportation for him to Ludbrek House—but he discovers that that House too has been put to the torch and all its inhabitants slaughtered. An old Folkish

man named Waerna, roaming about in the rubble, tells him that the Folk everywhere have risen up against the Great Houses and are killing any Masters they find. Joseph sees now that he will be entirely on his own as he tries to make his way homeward.

His leg is not yet strong enough for him to attempt such a journey. He has no choice but to return to the Indigene village, where he continues to function as a doctor, and engages in enlightening conversations with the Ardardin, as the village chief is called. Joseph knows a little of Indigene philosophical thought from what his father has told him, but now the Indigene explains in much greater detail why it is that his people have so readily accepted the seizure of their world by the human intruders. It is that the Indigenes have little regard for the reality of this world and all that is in it. All that truly matters is the world above, the world of the gods. This world is little more than illusion, and the humans who have conquered it are mere transient phenomena.

Once Joseph recovers and begins thinking of setting out to the south, he is offered a quid-pro-quo: the Indigenes will convey him by wagon to the next village in the chain of Indigene villages that stretches the length of Manza, and that village will take him on to the next, provided he will minister to the medical needs of each village as he goes. Joseph agrees, and after a stay of many weeks he leaves the village of the Ardardin, not without some regret, for he had come to regard the Indigene chief as a friend.

The parting is a strangely brief and chilly one, though. The Ardardin offers him no word of thanks for his medical services, no wish for a safe journey onward, no acknowledgment of the friendship that Joseph believed had sprung up between them. The village chief simply looks on as Joseph boards the wagon, and turns in silence. Joseph is surprised and a little hurt.

But they are not like us, he thinks, as the wagon moves on down the road. To them we are mere transient phenomena.

He is taken from one Indigene village to another, and the farther he gets from the first one, the more anomalous his position becomes. He is looked upon now as a mere commodity, something to be sold from village to village. No one speaks to him except when his services are needed. And after a time he realizes that the Indigenes are not moving him southward, toward the part of Manza that may still be under the control of the Masters, but are simply sending him on a circular route through their own mountainous territory in accordance with their own needs.

His only hope of reaching his family again is to escape from the Indigenes and continue his homeward journey unaided. This he achieves, coming down out of the winter-gripped mountains under conditions of extreme hardship, only to find himself in an uninhabited district where there is scarcely anything for him to eat. His attempts to hunt the local animals meet with little success, nor can he find edible plants, and as starvation takes hold of him he slips gradually into an hallucinatory state. He knows that he is dying and almost does not care.

As Joseph reaches the end of his strength he is discovered by two men from the nearby Folkish village of Eysar Haven, whose inhabitants are cuylings— *Folk who have opted to remain outside the Great House system. Joseph, fearing that he will be cast out or even slain if they discover he is a Master, pretends to be Folkish himself, claiming for himself the name of the old man he had encountered at the ruins of Ludbrek House. They seem to believe him, and he is taken in by a family of the village, who nurse him back to health. The village governor suspects from Joseph's looks—he is taller and darker*

than Folk tend to be—that he has some Master blood in him, but does not seriously dispute his claims.

Joseph becomes friendly with the adolescent daughter of the family that has given him refuge. While still maintaining his pretense of being Folkish himself, he learns a great deal from her about the life and the customs of the Folk, and begins to entertain romantic fantasies about her. But then, abruptly, she asks him when he plans to return to his own people.

He tells her that he has no people any more. Ludbrek House has been destroyed and the Folk who were attached to it have been scattered.

"I don't mean the Folk of Ludbrek House," the girl says. "I mean your real people. I know what you are."

"What I am?"

"What you are, yes." She caught him by the sleeve and pulled him around to face her. She was smiling. Her eyes were shining strangely. "You're a Master, aren't you, Waerna?"

The word struck him with explosive force. He felt his heart starting to race and his breath came short. But Joseph struggled to permit nothing more than a look of mild bemusement to appear on his face. "This is crazy, Thayle. How could you possibly think that I'm—"

She was still smiling. She had no doubt at all of the truth of what she was telling him. "You have a Master look about you. I've seen some Masters now and then. I know what they look like. You're tall and thin: do you see anybody tall and thin in Eysar Haven? And darker than we are. You have the darkest hair I've ever seen. And the shape of your nose—your lips—"

Her tone of voice was a gentle one, almost teasing. As though this were some sort of game. Perhaps for her it was. But not for him.

"So I have some Master blood in me." Joseph kept his voice level, which was not an easy thing to manage. "Stappin said something about it to me, weeks ago. He noticed it right away. Well, it's probably true. Such things have been known to happen."

"*Some* Master blood, Waerna? *Some?*"

"Some, yes."

"You know how to read. I know that you do. There are books in that pack you were carrying when you came here, and one night when I was outside the house very late I looked in your window and you were awake and reading one. It's a Master book. What else could it be? And you were reading it. You look like a Master, and you read like a Master, and you have a little case that's full of Master tools. I've looked at them while I was cleaning your room. I've never seen anything like them. And your books. I held the book-thing right in my hand and pressed the button, and Master words came out on the screen."

"I dwelled among Masters at Ludbrek House. They taught me to read so I could serve them better."

She laughed. "Taught a stable-boy to read, so he'd be a better stable-boy?"

"Yes. And the utility case that you saw—I stole that when I fled from Ludbrek House. The books, too. I swear to you, Thayle, by whatever god you want me to swear by—"

"No." She put her hand over his mouth. "Don't lie, and don't blaspheme. That'll make everything worse. I know what you are. It has to be true. You hadn't ever heard of Eysar, and you don't know the names of our holidays, and there are a thousand other things about you that just aren't right. I don't know if anyone else here has seen it, but I certainly have."

He was stymied. He could bluff all he liked, but nothing he could ever say would convince her. She thought that she knew what he was, and she was sure that she was right, and she *was* right, and Joseph would have to be the best actor in the world to make her believe now that he was of the Folk. Even that might not be good enough. She knew what he was. His life was in her hands.

He wondered what to do. Run back to the house, collect his things, get himself away from this place while he still could? He did not feel ready for that, not now, not so suddenly. Night was coming on. He had no idea which way to go. He would have to live off the land again, at a time when he was still not entirely recovered from his last attempt at that.

Thayle said, as though reading his mind, "You don't need to be afraid of me, Waerna. I'm not going to tell anyone about you."

"How can I be sure of that?"

"It would be bad for you, if I did. Stappin would never forgive you for lying to him. And he couldn't let a runaway Master live among us, anyway. You'd have to leave here. I don't want that. I like you, Waerna."

"You do? Even though I'm a Master?"

"Yes. Yes. What does your being a Master have to do with it?" That strange glow was in her eyes again. "I won't say a word to anyone. Look, I'll swear it." She made a sign in the air. She uttered a few words that Joseph could not understand. "Well?" she said. "Now do you trust me?"

"I wish I could, Thayle."

"You can say a thing like that, after what you just heard me swear? I'd be furious with you, if you were Folk. But what you just said would tell me you're a Master if nothing else I knew about you did. You don't even know the Oath of the Crossing! It's a wonder no one else here has caught on to you before this." Joseph realized that somewhere in the last moments Thayle had taken both his hands in hers. She stood up on tiptoe, so that her face was very close to his. Softly she said, "Don't be afraid of me, Waerna. I won't ever bring you harm. Maybe the Oath of the Crossing doesn't mean anything to you, but I'll prove it to you another way, tonight. You wait and see."

Joseph stared at her, not knowing what to say.

Then she tugged at him. "Let's go back, all right? It's getting near time for dinner."

His mind was swirling. He wanted very much to believe that she would not betray him, but he could not be sure of that. And it was deeply troubling to realize that his secret was in her hands.

The evening meal was a tense business for him. Joseph ate without saying a word, looking down into his plate most of the time, avoiding the glances of these people with whom he had lived for weeks, people who had taken him in, cared for him, bathed him when he was too weak, fed him, clothed him, treated him as one of their own. He was convinced now that they all knew the truth about him, had known it a long while, not just Thayle but her brother also, and Simthot, and Saban. He must have given himself away a hundred times a day—whenever he failed to recognize some reference that any of the Folk from anywhere on Homeworld would have understood, whenever he said something in what he hoped was idiomatic Folkish that was actually phrased in a way that nobody who was truly of the Folk would ever phrase it.

So they knew. They had to know. And probably they were in constant anguish over it, debating whether to tell Stappin that they were sheltering a member of the enemy race here. Even if they wanted to protect him, they

might fear that they were endangering their own safety by holding back on going to the governor and reporting what they knew. Suppose Stappin had already worked out his real identity also, and was simply waiting for them to come to him and report that the boy they were harboring was actually a fugitive Master? The longer they waited, the worse it would be for them, then. But possibly they were just biding their time until some appropriate moment, some special day of the Folkish year that he knew nothing about, when you stepped forward and denounced the liars and impostors in your midst—

In the evenings Saban and Simthot, and sometimes Velk as well, would settle in the front parlor to play a game called weriyel, which involved making patterns with little interlocking pieces of carved bone on a painted board. Joseph had explained, early on, that this game had not been known to him in his days at Ludbrek House, and they had seemed to take that at face value; Velk had taught him the rules, and some evenings he played with them, although he had not yet developed much skill at it. Tonight he declined to join them. He did not want to remind them of how badly he played. He was sure that his lack of knowledge of the rules of weriyel was one more bit of evidence that he was no true man of the Folk.

Thayle never took part in the weriyel games. Most evenings she went out—to be with her lover Grovin, Joseph assumed. He did not really know, and he scarcely felt free to ask her. Lately he had taken to imagining the two of them going off to some secluded grove together and falling down to the ground in a frenzied embrace. It was not a thought that he welcomed, but the harder he tried to rid his mind of it, the more insistently it forced itself upon him.

Though darkness was slow to come on these summer nights and it was much too early to think about going to sleep, Joseph, uncomfortable now in the company of his hosts, retired early to his room and sprawled glumly atop his bed, staring upward, hands locked behind his head. Another night he might have spent the time reading, but now he was fearful of that, not wanting Saban or Velk to come in without warning, as they sometimes did, and find him with the little reader in his hands. It was bad enough that Thayle, spying on him late at night through the window—and why had she done that?—had seen him reading. But it would be the end of everything for him here if one of others actually walked in and caught him at it.

Joseph saw no solution for his predicament other than to leave Eysar Haven as soon as possible. Tomorrow, even, or perhaps the day after: pack his belongings, say his farewells, thank Saban and her family for their hospitality, head off down the road. There was no need for him to sneak away, as he had done when leaving the Indigenes. These people did not own him. He was merely a guest in their midst. And, though Joseph had agreed to repay them for his lodgings by helping them with the harvest, they would very likely be happy enough to see him get on his way without waiting around for harvest-time, suspecting what they surely did about his real identity. It was the only sensible thing to do: go, go quickly, before the anomaly of a Master dwelling in a Folkish town became too much for anyone to tolerate.

Finally it was dark enough to try to sleep. He got under the covers. But he was still all awhirl within, and he lay stiffly, hopelessly awake, shifting from one position to another and finding none to his liking. There was not going to be any sleep for him at all this night, Joseph decided.

But he must have fallen asleep somewhere along the way, because he heard the door of his room opening and sat up, groggy and confused as one is when one is abruptly awakened, with the fragments of an exploded

dream still floating through his mind. Someone had come in. Joseph could see very little—what might have been a figure at his threshold, a mere outline, darkness against darkness. "Who's there?" he asked.

"Shh! Quiet!"

"Thayle?"

"Shh!"

Footsteps. A rustling sound, as of garments being thrown aside. This was beyond all belief. I am still asleep, Joseph thought. I am dreaming this. He was aware of movements close by him. His coverlet being drawn back. She was joining him in bed. A warm body up against his flesh, too warm, too real, to be a phantasm of the night.

"Thayle—what—?"

"I told you I'd show you tonight that you could trust me. Now be quiet, will you? Please!" Her hands were moving boldly over his body. Joseph lay still, astonished, wonderstruck. So it was going to happen at last, he realized, the thing that he had read about in so many books and plays and stories and poems, the thing that he knew he would experience eventually, but which he had not thought would be coming to him so soon, here, now, tonight. Perhaps it had been inevitable that his first time would be with a girl of the Folk. He did not care about that. He did not care about anything, just now, except what was unfolding in this bed. Her touch drew shivers from him. He wished he could see her, but there were no moons tonight, not even much starlight, and he dared not break the flow of events to light a lamp, nor did he think she would want him to.

"You can touch me," she said. "It's allowed."

Joseph was hesitant about that for a moment, but only for a moment. His hand hovered over her, descended, found her. A thigh, this was. A hip. That sturdy body, that strong wide-hipped Folkish body, here against him, naked, willing. The fragrance of her flesh, delighting him, dizzying him. He slid his hand upward, meeting no discouragement, until he found her breasts. Carefully he closed his fingers over one of them. It was a firm, heavy, resilient globe; it filled his entire hand. He could feel the little hard node of her nipple pressing against his palm. So that is what breasts feel like, Joseph thought. He had expected them to be softer, somehow, but perhaps the softness happened later, when a woman was twenty or twenty-five, and had had some babies. He wriggled around to a better position and glided across the valley of her chest to the other breast, and caressed them both for a while. She seemed to like it that he was touching her breasts. Her lips sought his, and found them, and he was astounded to find her tongue slipping between his lips. Is that what people did when they kissed? Tongues? He felt impossibly innocent. Surely she must realize, by this time, how totally innocent he was. But that was all right, Joseph thought, so long as she does not laugh, so long as she leads me along step by step, so long as she teaches me what to do. As she was doing.

On his own initiative he moved his hand lower, sliding it down her body, reaching her belly, now, the deep indentation of her navel, halting there, running the hand from side to side, from one hard upjutting hipbone to the other. Then, emboldened, he went onward, found the soft, dense patch of hair at the meetingplace of her thighs, touched it, stroked it. She seized two of his fingers and thrust them inward. He felt moisture. Warmth.

And then everything was happening very quickly. He was on her, searching, thrusting, suddenly inside her, enveloped in that moist softness, the

tender velvety secret place between her legs, moving. It was an astounding sensation. No wonder, no wonder, that themes of desire and passion were so central to all those books, those plays, those poems. Joseph had always supposed it would be something extraordinary, the act itself, but he had never really imagined—how could he?—the actual intensity of the feeling, that sense of being inside another human being, of being so intimately linked, of having these exquisite ecstatic feelings spreading outward from his loins to the entirety of his body. They built and built with irresistible force, sweeping him away within moments: he wanted to hold back, to savor all this a little longer, but there was no way he could do that, and as the spasms rocked him like a series of detonations Joseph gasped and shuddered and pressed his face down beside Thayle's cheek and clung to her strong sturdy body until it was over, and then he was lying stunned against her, limp, sweaty, drained, trembling, ashamed.

Ashamed?

Yes. In that first moment of return from his climax it astonished him how quickly he had traveled from unthinkable ecstasy to dark, exhausted, bewildered guilt. The whole descent had taken mere instants. Now that Joseph was able to think coherently again, his thoughts all were bleak ones. He had not expected that. There had been no chance to expect anything. But now, now, in the surprisingly harsh and chilly aftermath, looking back at that frenzy of eager grappling, he could not help but focus on the question of what sort of pleasure there could have been in it for her. Could there have been any, any at all? She had merely served as the instrument of his own delight. He had simply entered her, moved quickly, used her for his own gratification. Master and peasant girl, the old, old story, disgusting, shameful. He had never hated himself so much as in that moment.

He felt impelled to say something, and could not, and then did. "It all went so fast," Joseph said, speaking into his pillow, his voice rough and frayed, sounding unfamiliar in his own ears. "I'm sorry, Thayle. I'm sorry. I didn't want—"

"Shh. It was fine. Believe me, Waerna."

"But I would rather have—I would have liked to—

"Shh! Be still, and don't worry. It was fine. Fine. Just lie here beside me and relax." Soothingly she stroked Joseph's back, his shoulder, his arm. "In a little while you'll be ready to go again."

And he was. This time it all went much less frenziedly for him. There was none of the crazy heedless swiftness of before. He felt almost like an expert. He had always been a quick learner. He knew now what to expect, had a better understanding of how to pace himself, how to hold himself back. Thayle moved skillfully beneath him, a steady pumping rhythm, delightful, amazing. Then the rhythms grew more irregular and she dug her fingertips hard into his shoulders, clung to him, rocked her hips, arched her back, threw back her head, and he knew that something was happening within her, something awesome, something convulsive, although he was not entirely sure what it was; and a weird throaty sound emerged from her, deep, throbbing, not even really a human sound, and Joseph knew that her big moment must have arrived. Somewhere within it he had his own, not as overwhelming as before, not nearly, but nonetheless an immensely powerful sensation.

There was no guilt or shame this time, none of the terrible bleakness of that earlier aftermath. He felt only a calm sense of accomplishment, of achievement, an awareness of pleasure given and received. It seemed to

Joseph that he had crossed some border in this past hour, stepping over into a strange and wonderful new land from which there would be no returning.

They lay tangled together, spent and sticky, breathing hoarsely, saying nothing for a long while.

"It was my first time," he said finally.

"I know."

"Ah. Was it that easy to tell, then?"

"Everybody has a first time sometime. It's not anything you need to explain. Or to apologize for."

"I just want to thank you," Joseph said. "It was very beautiful."

"And for me also. I won't ever forget it." She giggled. "Grovin would kill me if he found out. He thinks he owns me, you know. But no one owns me. No one. I do as I please." She drew a little playful line along Joseph's jaw with the tip of one finger. "Now we each have a secret against each other, do you see? I could tell Stappin that you're a Master, but I won't. And you could tell Grovin that I've been to bed with you."

"But I won't."

"No. Neither of us will say anything to anybody. We've put each other in each other's hands. —But now tell me your real name. You can't be a Waerna. Waerna isn't a Master name."

"Joseph," he said.

"That's a strange name. *Joseph. Joseph.* I've never heard a name like that before."

"It's an ancient name. It goes back to Old Earth. My father has an Earth name too: Martin."

"Joseph. Martin."

"I'm not from Ludbrek House, either. Not from Manza at all. I'm Joseph Master Keilloran of House Keilloran in Helikis."

It was strange and somehow wonderful to speak the full name out loud, here in this little Folkish town, in this Folkish house, lying here naked in the arms of this naked Folkish girl. It was the final nakedness, this last stripping away of all concealment. Thayle had never heard of House Keilloran, of course, had barely heard of Helikis itself—a far-off land, that was all she knew, somewhere down in the southern part of the world—but she said the name three or four times, Joseph Master Keilloran of House Keilloran in Helikis, Joseph Master Keilloran of House Keilloran in Helikis, as though the words had some magical potency for her. She had some difficulty pronouncing Joseph's surname correctly, but he saw no point in correcting her. Joseph felt very drowsy, very happy. Idly he stroked her body in a tender but nonsexual way, his hand traveling lightly along her flanks, her belly, her cheeks, a purely esthetic enjoyment, simply enjoying the smoothness of her, the firmness of her skin and the taut flesh and muscle beneath it, the way he might stroke a finely carved statuette, or a thoroughbred racing-bandar, or a perfectly thrown porcelain bowl. He did not think there was any likelihood that he could feel desire again just yet, not so soon after those two cataclysmic couplings. But then his hands were going to her breasts, and then to her thighs, and to his surprise and delight he felt himself awakening to the pull of her body one more time, and she made a little chuckling sound of approval and drew him down into her once more.

Afterward she kissed him gently and wished him pleasant dreams, and gathered up her scattered clothing and went out. When she was gone Joseph lay awake for a while, reliving all that had taken place, playing it back in his

mind with the utmost vividness, watching it all in wonder, amazement, even disbelief. He tumbled then into sleep as into a crevasse on some lofty snowy mountain slope and was lost in it, dreamless, insensate, until morning.

There was no possibility after the experiences of that night of his leaving Eysar Haven of his own volition, regardless of the risks involved in his staying. Thayle had tied him to it with unbreakable silken bands. His only thought now was of when she would enter his bed again.

But that did not happen immediately. Often in the days that followed Joseph would glance toward her and see that she was covertly looking at him, or that she was smiling warmly in his direction, or even winking and blowing him a kiss; but though he lay awake for a long while each night hoping for the sound of the opening door, the footsteps approaching his bed, the rustle of clothing being shed, four nights went by before she finally did come back. It was an eternity. "I thought you were never going to be with me again," he said, as his hands moved toward her breasts. She said something about needing to take care that her parents did not discover what was going on under their own roof. No doubt that was so. But also it had occurred to Joseph that Thayle probably was in the habit of spending several evenings a week with Grovin, and would not want to come to him while her body was still sweaty and slippery from another man's passions. He tried not to think about that; but it was a time of agony to him, those nights that he waited in vain for her, imagining that at this very moment she might be with Grovin, doing with him the same things that he so desperately wanted her to be doing once more with him.

Twice during those days his path and Grovin's crossed in town, and both times Grovin gave him hard, sour looks. Joseph asked Thayle about that, wondering whether Grovin suspected something, perhaps the truth about Joseph's identity or else the possibility that he and Thayle were taking advantage of his presence in her family's house to do the very thing that they were in fact doing. But she assured him that neither could be true. "If he so much as dreamed you were a Master, he'd have taken it up with Stappin already. And as for suspecting you and me—no, no, he's so confident of himself that it would never occur to him. If he thought anything was going on between us he'd have let me know about it by now."

"Then why does he look at me that way?"

"He looks at everybody that way. It's just the way he is."

Maybe so. Still, Joseph did not much like it.

The summer days floated along in a golden haze of mounting heat. The harvest season approached. Joseph lived for the nights of Thayle's visits. Helikis might have been a continent on another planet for all that it entered his mind.

They were friends as well as lovers, by this time. In the intervals between their bouts of lovemaking they talked, lying side by side looking toward the ceiling instead of at each other, sometimes for hours. She revealed a lively, questing intelligence: that came as a surprise to Joseph. It fascinated Thayle that he should be a Master. In this district of cuyling Folk, where the nearest Great Houses were far off beyond the mountains, Masters were unfamiliar, exotic things. She understood that most of the rest of the world was divided up into huge feudal estates on which her people had for many hundreds of years lived, essentially, as property, until the recent outbreak of violent revolution. She had heard about that, anyway. But she seemed to have no inward grasp of what it was like. "You *own* the Folk who live on your land?" she asked. "How is that, that one person can own others?"

"We don't exactly own them. We provide for them; we make sure everyone is housed, that nobody goes hungry, that there's work for everybody, that good medical care is available. And in return for that they work the lands, and look after the livestock, and do what needs to be done in the factories."

"But everyone is housed here in Eysar Haven, and everyone has work to do, and nobody goes hungry, and all of that. Why would we need Masters here?"

"You don't, I suppose. But the Folk of other places aren't as self-sufficient as the people of the cuyling towns are."

"You mean, they came to your ancestors and said, 'Please rule us, please be our Masters?' They *wanted* your people to take charge of their lives for them?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking—"

"No. Actually they were conquered, weren't they? There was a thing called the Conquest, when the Masters came out of the sky and seized the land and *forced* everyone to submit to them. Except for a few like us, off in places of the world that nobody seemed to want to bother conquering. Isn't that so, Joseph?"

He could not deny that. He would not even try. It would not be known as the Conquest, he thought, if it had not been a conquest. And yet—yet—it had always been his understanding that the Masters had imposed the system of Great Houses upon the Folk for the good of the Folk themselves, not just for their own, and that the Folk had learned to see the wisdom of that system. It had been his understanding, too, that the Folk were an inherently weak breed, nothing more than creatures of a docile domesticated sort that had been waiting for leadership to be provided for them.

But it was impossible for Joseph to say any of that to her. How could he let this girl—this woman, really—for whom he now felt such desire, such need, such love, even, and from whom he had received such delights and hoped to receive more, think that he looked upon her not as a human being but as a kind of domesticated beast? Not only would telling her that be a hideous impossible insult, but he knew it was not even true. Everything about her demonstrated that. Everything he had seen about Eysar Haven demonstrated that. These people were quite capable of functioning on their own. And perhaps that had been true of all the other Folk, too, once upon a time, back before the Conquest.

It was clear to him now that the Conquest had been a conquest indeed, in fact as well as name. The Folk had been doing well enough before the first Masters came to Homeworld. They lacked the force and drive of Masters, perhaps, but was that a sin? Had they deserved to lose control of their own lives, their own world, for such failings? The Masters had *subjugated* the Folk. There was no other applicable word. Even if the bloody rebellion that had driven Joseph himself into these wanderings across the face of the continent of Manza had not taught him by now how resentful of Master rule the Folk were, or some of them, anyway, this stay in Eysar Haven and these late-night conversations with Thayle would have shown him that. It all seemed obvious enough to him now; but it was devastating to him to be forced to see how much he had simply taken for granted, he with his fine Master mind, his keen, searching intellect.

She challenged him in other areas, too.

"Your father, the Master of House Keilloran—how did he get to be the Master of the House?" She still could not pronounce the name correctly, but Joseph let that go. "Did everybody who lives there choose him for that?"

"His father was Master of the House before him," Joseph told her. "And his

father before that, going back to the beginning. The eldest son inherits the title."

"That's all?" Thayle said. "He is allowed to govern thousands and thousands of people, Masters and Folk alike, simply because he's his father's son? How strange. It seems very foolish to me. Suppose there's someone else better suited to govern, somebody who's smarter and wiser and more capable in every way. Everyone can see that, but he won't be allowed, will he? Because he's not the eldest son of the eldest son. That's a stupid system, I think." Joseph said nothing, and Thayle was silent a moment, too. Then she said, "What happens if there's more than one son? That wouldn't be very unusual, would it?"

"The eldest son always inherits."

"Even if the second or even third son is plainly better qualified. Or the second or third *daughter,* for that matter. But I suppose daughters don't figure into this."

"Only the eldest son," Joseph said. "He's specially trained for the job from childhood on. Since it's known that he's going to inherit, they see to it that he's been properly taught to do what must be done."

"But no matter how well they teach him, he isn't necessarily the smartest member of his family, is he? Even if it is agreed that you have to limit the title to a single family just because that family happens to have grabbed power first, you could have generation after generation where the new Master isn't even the best qualified person among his own people. Do you think that's so good, Joseph?"

This is a girl of the Folk who is asking me these questions, he said to himself. This is a docile, ignorant creature, a peasant, a person incapable of serious thought.

There was another long silence.

Thayle said then, "Are you the eldest son, Joseph?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"You will inherit the title, then, and be Master of House Keilloran. By right of birth alone, nothing else."

"If I live to get home, yes. Otherwise my brother Rickard will be. He won't like that, if things happen that way. He never expected to rule and he's not well prepared for doing it."

"But he'll become the Master, because he'll be the eldest available son."

"Yes. Yes."

"By right of birth alone. Not necessarily because he'll be a good Master."

He wished she would stop pounding at him. "Rickard will be a good Master if the title comes to him," Joseph said stubbornly. "I'm sure that he will. I know that he will." But he could not hide the lack of conviction in his voice. He was amazed at how, within the space of fifteen minutes, Thayle had undermined every assumption he had ever held about the relationship of Master to Folk, about the method by which the Great Houses chose their leaders, about the merit of his own automatic succession to the powers of head of the House. He felt as though this bed on which the two of them were lying had turned somehow into a flimsy raft, on which he was being borne down some turbulent river toward a steep cataract that lay only a short distance ahead.

Joseph let the silence stretch and stretch until it was nearing the breaking point, but still he could not bring himself to speak. Whatever he might say would be wrong.

"Are you angry with me?" Thayle asked him finally.

"No. Of course I'm not."

"I've offended you. You thought I was criticizing you."

"You have a different way of looking at things, that's all. I was just thinking about everything you said."

"Don't think too much. Not now." She reached across to him. Gratefully he surrendered to her embrace. They began to move in the way that was already beginning to become familiar to them. Joseph was glad to be able to lose himself in the unthinking pleasures that her supple body offered.

The next morning after breakfast, the hour when nearly everyone had gone off to the day's work in the fields and Joseph was alone in the house, he was startled to hear her voice, calling to him from outside, a low, sharp whisper: "*Joseph! Joseph!*"

That surprised him, that she should be calling him by his real name. But at this time of the day there was no one around but old people and small children to hear her do it.

And the fact of Thayle's presence here at this time of day made his heart leap. She must have sneaked back from the fields so that they could be together. It was exciting to think that she would want him that much. And there was another thing: they had never made love by daylight. That would be something new, different, wonderful, a revelation.

He rushed out onto the porch to greet her and lead her to his bedroom.

But then he saw her. How she looked. "Thayle?" he said, in a small, bewildered voice. "What happened, Thayle? Was there an accident?"

"Oh, Joseph—oh—oh, Joseph—"

She looked horrifying. Her clothing was torn and dirty. One sleeve dangled by threads. Thayle herself looked bruised and hurt. Her lower lip had a bloody cut on it and it was beginning to turn puffy. Another narrow trail of blood ran down from one of her nostrils. Her left eye was swelling shut. She held her hand pressed to her cheek: that seemed to be swelling up also. One of her sandals was missing. Her expression was a strange one: blank, frozen, dazed.

Joseph gathered her in without asking questions, held her close against himself, gently stroked her back and shoulders. She began to sob quietly. For a few moments she accepted the comfort he was offering her, and then she pulled back from him, looking up into his eyes, searching for words. "You have to leave," she said. "Right now. There's no time to waste."

"But what—what—?"

"Grovin. He knows. He was hiding outside your window last night. He heard us . . . everything."

"And he beat you?" Joseph asked, incredulous. "He did this?" It had never occurred to him that a man would strike a woman, any woman, let alone his own lover. But then he reminded himself that these people were Folk, and that not very long ago the Folk had risen up and slaughtered their Masters as they sat in their manor-houses, and plenty of their own kind as well.

"He did it, yes." She made it sound almost unimportant. "Come on, Joseph! Come *on*. Get your things. I've taken a truck. We need to get you away from here, fast. I told you he'd kill me if he found out I was going to bed with you, and he will, he will, if you stay here any longer. And he'll kill you too."

It was still hard for Joseph to get his mind around all that Thayle was telling him. He felt like a sleepwalker who has been unceremoniously awakened. "You say he overheard us?" he asked. "The lovemaking, you mean, or the things we were discussing, too? Do you think he knows I'm a Master?"

"He knows, yes. Not because he overheard our conversation. I told him. He suspected that you were. He's suspected all along. So he asked me what I knew

about you, and then he hit me until I told him the truth. And hit me again afterward. —Oh, Joseph, don't just stand there in that idiotic way! You have to get moving. Now. This very minute. Before he brings Stappin down on you."

"Yes. Yes." The stasis that had enfolded him these past few minutes began to lift. Joseph rushed into his room, grabbed up his few possessions, bundled them together. When he emerged he saw that Thayle had had the presence of mind to assemble a little packet of food for him. He was going to be alone again soon, he realized, trekking once more through unknown regions of this unfriendly continent, living off the land.

The thought of parting from her was unbearable.

What was running through his mind now were thoughts not of the dangers he would be facing out there, or of the trouble Grovin could cause for him before he managed to leave, but only of Thayle's lips, Thayle's breasts, Thayle's open thighs, Thayle's heaving hips. All of which had been his this brief while, and which now he must leave behind forever.

When they emerged from the house they found Grovin waiting outside, standing squarely in their path. His face was cold and mean, a tight, pinched-looking, furious face. He glared at them, looking from Thayle to Joseph, from Joseph to Thayle, and said, "Going somewhere?"

"Stop it, Grovin. Let us pass. I'm taking him to the highway."

He ignored her. To Joseph he said, icily, fiercely, "You thought you had a sweet little deal, didn't you? They fed you, they gave you a soft place to sleep, and they gave you something soft to sleep with, too. Wasn't that nice? But what are you doing here, anyway, you lazy parasite? Why aren't you dead like the rest of your kind?"

Joseph stared. This was his rival, the man who had hurt Thayle. What was he supposed to do, hurt this man in return? Something within him cried out that he should do it, that he should beat Grovin to his knees for having dared to take his hand to her. But nothing in his education had prepared him for doing anything like that. This was not like punishing an unruly field-hand, which any Master would do without thinking twice about it; this was something else, a private quarrel over a woman, between two people who also happened to be of two different races.

Nothing in his education had prepared him, either, for the spectacle of an angry Folker hurling abuse at him this way. That was not a thing that ought to be happening. It was a phenomenon on the order of water running uphill, of the sun rising in the west, of snow falling in the middle of summer. Joseph did not know what to say or do. It was Thayle, instead, who took it upon herself to step forward and push Grovin out of the way; but Grovin merely grinned and seized her by one wrist and flung her easily from him, sending her spiraling down into a heap on the ground.

That could not be allowed. Joseph dropped the things he was carrying and went toward him, not sure of what he was going to do but certain that he had to do something.

He had fought before, roughhousing with other Master boys his age, or even with Anceph or Rollin, but it had been clearly understood then that no one would be hurt. This was different. Joseph clenched his hand into a fist and swung at Grovin, who slapped the fist aside as though it were a gnat and punched him in the pit of the stomach. Joseph staggered back, amazed. Grovin came after him, growling, actually growling, and hit him again, once on the point of his left shoulder, once on the side of his chest, once on the fleshy part of his right arm.

Being hit like this was as surprising as first sex had been, but not at all in the same way. The flying fists, the sudden sharp bursts of pain, the absolute *wrongness* of it all—Joseph was barely able to comprehend what was taking place. He understood that it was necessary to fight back. He could do it. Grovin was slightly built, for a Folker, and shorter than Joseph besides. Joseph had the advantage of a longer reach. And he was angry, now, thinking of what Grovin had dared to do to Thayle.

He struck out, once, twice, swinging hard, missing the first time but landing a solid blow on Grovin's cheekbone with the second. Grovin grunted and stepped backward as though he had been hurt, and Joseph, heartened, came striding in to hit him again. It was an error. He managed to hit Grovin once more, a badly placed punch that went sliding off, and then the other, crouching before him like a coiled spring, came back at him suddenly with a baffling flurry of punches, striking here, here, there, spinning Joseph around, kicking him as he was turned about, then hitting him again as Joseph swung back to face him. Joseph staggered. He moved his arms wildly, hoping somehow to connect, but Grovin was everywhere about him, hitting, hitting, hitting. Joseph was helpless. I am being beaten by a Folker, Joseph thought in wonder. He is faster than I am, stronger than I am, in every way a better fighter. He will smash me into the ground. He will destroy me.

He continued to fight back as well as he could, but his best was not nearly good enough. Grovin danced around him, hissing derisively, laughing, punching at will, and Joseph made only the foggiest of responses. He was faltering now, lurching and teetering, struggling to keep from falling. Grovin took him by the shoulders and spun him around. And then, as Joseph turned groggily back to face him and began gamely winding up for one last desperate swing, Grovin was no longer there. Joseph did not see him at all. He stood blinking, bewildered.

Thayle was at Joseph's side. "Hurry, Joseph! Hurry, now!"

Her eyes were bright and wild, and her face was flushed. In her hand she was gripping a thick, stubby piece of wood, a club, really. She looked at it, grinning triumphantly, and tossed it away. Joseph caught sight of Grovin a short distance off to the left, kneeling in a huddled moaning heap, shoulders hunched, head down, rocking his head from side to side. He was holding both hands clapped to his forehead. Blood was streaming out freely between his fingers.

Joseph could not believe that Thayle had done that to him. He could not have imagined a woman clubbing a man like that, not under any circumstances, any at all.

But these people are Folk, Joseph reminded himself. They are very different from us.

Then he was scooping up his discarded possessions and running, battered and dizzy and aching as he was, alongside Thayle toward the truck that was parked at the edge of the clearing, a truck much like the one in which his two rescuers had brought him to Eysar Haven many weeks before. He jumped in beside her. She grasped the steering-stick and brought the truck to a roaring start.

Neither of them spoke until they were well outside the town. Joseph saw that it was not easy for Thayle to control the vehicle, that it took all her concentration to keep it from wandering off the road. Plainly she was not an experienced driver. But she was managing it, somehow.

It did not seem to him that the fight had caused him any serious injury.

Grovin had hurt him, yes. There would be bruises. There would be painful places for some days to come. But his disorientation and bewilderment in the final stages of the battle, that weird helplessness, he saw now, had been the result more of simply finding himself personally involved in violence, finding himself in actual hand-to-hand combat, than of any damage Grovin had been able to inflict. Of course, it might all have become much worse very soon. If Grovin had succeeded in knocking him down, if Grovin had begun to kick him and stomp on him, if Grovin had jumped on him and started to throttle him—

Thayle's intervention had saved his life, Joseph realized. Grovin might well have killed him. That might even have been what he was trying to do.

The truck rolled onward. Joseph was the first to break the long silence, with a question that had been nibbling at his soul since they had boarded the truck. "Tell me, Thayle, are we going to stay together?"

"What do you mean, Joseph?" She sounded very far away.

"Just what I said. You and me, together, on the whole drive south. To the Isthmus. To Helikis, you and me, the whole way." He stared urgently at her. "Stay with me, Thayle. Please."

"How can I do that?" That same distant tone, drawing all the life out of him. Her hand went idly to the cut and bruised places on her face, touching them lightly, investigating them. "I can take you as far as the crossroads." They had already left the town behind, Joseph saw. They were back in forested territory again, on a two-lane road, not well paved. "Then I have to go back to Eysar Haven."

"No, Thayle. Don't."

"I have to. Eysar Haven is where I live. Those are my people. That is my place."

"You'll go back to *him?*"

"He won't touch me again. I'll see to that."

"I want you to come with me," Joseph said, more insistently. "Please."

She laughed. "Yes, of course. To your great estate in the south. To your grand home. To your father the Master of the House, and your Master brothers and sisters, and all the Folk who belong to you. How can I do that, Joseph?" She was speaking very quietly. "Ask yourself: How can I possibly do that?"

It was an unanswerable question. Joseph had known from the start that what he was asking of her was madness. Come strolling into Keilloran House after this long absence, blithely bringing with him a Folkish girl, his companion, his bedmate, his—beloved? There was no way. She could see that even more clearly than he. But he had had to ask. It was a crazy thing, an impossible thing, but he had had to ask. He hated having to leave her.

A second road had appeared, as roughly made as the one they were on, running at right angles to it. Thayle brought the truck erratically to a halt. "That's the road that runs toward the south," she told him. "Somewhere down that way is the place where your people live. I hope you have a safe journey home." There was something terribly calm and controlled about her voice that plunged him into an abyss of sadness.

Joseph opened the door and stepped down from the truck. He hoped that she would get out too, that they could have one last embrace here by the side of the road, a hug, at least, so that he could know once more the feeling of her strong body in his arms, her breasts pressing up against him, the warmth of her on his skin. But she did not get out. Perhaps that was the very thing that she wanted to avoid: to be drawn back into the whole un-

workable thing, to have him reawaken in her something that must of necessity be allowed to sleep. She leaned across, instead, and took his hand and squeezed it, and bent toward him so that they could kiss, a brief, awkward kiss that was made all the more difficult for them by the cut on her lip, and that was all there was going to be.

"I won't ever forget you," Joseph said.

"Nor I," she told him. And then she was gone and he was alone again.

He stood looking at the truck as it swung around and disappeared in the distance, praying that she would change her mind, that she would halt and come back and invite him to clamber up alongside her and drive off toward Helikis with him. But of course that did not happen.

Soon the vehicle was lost to view. He was alone in the stillness here, the frightening quiet of this empty place.

Looking off toward the blankness on the horizon where the dark dot that was the truck had been before it passed from sight, Joseph felt as though he had just awakened from a wonderful dream, where only bits and pieces of recollection remain, and shortly even those are gone, leaving only a vague glow, an aura. Fate had taken him to Eysar Haven; fate had put him into the house where Thayle lived; fate had sent her into his bed, and now he was changed forever. But all that was behind him except the memories. He was on his own again in unfamiliar territory, with the same inconceivable journey of thousands of miles still ahead of him, even after having come all this distance since his escape from Getfen House.

He took stock of the situation in which he found himself now: dense woodlands, late summer, the air hot and torpid, no sign of a human presence anywhere around, no houses, no cultivated fields or even the remnants of them, nothing but the poorly maintained road along which he was walking. Were there other cuyling towns nearby? He should have asked her while he had the chance. How far was he from the Isthmus? From the nearest Great House? Would he find encampments of the rebels ahead? Was the rebellion still going on, for that matter, or had it been quelled by armies out of Helikis while he was spending the summer mending in Eysar Haven? He knew nothing, nothing at all.

Well, he would learn as he went, as he had been doing all along. The important thing now was simply not to let himself starve again. He knew only too well what that was like.

And the provisions Thayle had thrown together for him would last him no more than a day or two, he guessed. After that, unless he could learn to turn himself into an effective hunter or found a new set of hospitable hosts, it would be back to eating ants and beetles and bits of plants again.

He started off at a swift pace, but soon realized he could not maintain it. Although he had returned nearly to full strength during his time in Eysar Haven, he had also softened there from inactivity. His legs, which had turned to iron rods during the endless days of his solitary march down from the mountains, were mere muscle and bone again, and he felt them protesting. It would take time for them to harden once more. And he was beginning to feel stiff and sore, already, from the beating that Grovin had given him.

The land changed quickly as Joseph proceeded south. He was not even a day's walk beyond the place where Thayle had left him and he was no longer in good farming territory, nor did his new surroundings offer the possibilities for shelter that a forest might provide. The woods thinned out and he began to ascend a sort of shallow plateau, hot and dry, where little twisted shrubs with

sleek black trunks rose out of red, barren-looking soil. It was bordered to east and west by low, long black hills with ridges sharp as blades, and streaks of bright white along their tops, blindingly reflective in the midday sun, that looked like outcroppings of salt, and perhaps actually were. The sky was a bare, dazzling blue rind. There were very few streams, and most of those that he found were brackish. He filled his flask at one that was not, but he realized that it would be wise to use his water very sparingly in this region.

There was a vast, resounding quietude here. It was not hard to think of himself as being all alone in the world. No family, no friends, not even any enemies; no Masters, no Folk, no Indigenes, no noctambulos, nothing, no one: only Joseph, Joseph, Joseph, Joseph all alone, walking ever onward through this empty land. It was completely new to him, this solitary kind of life. He could not say that he disliked it. There was a strange music to it, a kind of poetry, that fascinated him. Such great isolation had a mysterious purity and simplicity of form.

Despite the increasing bleakness of the landscape, Joseph moved through his first hours in it in an easy, almost automatic way. He barely took notice of its growing harshness, or of the growing weariness of his legs; his mind was still occupied fully with thoughts of Thayle. He thought not only of the warmth of her embrace, the smoothness of her skin, the touch of her lips against his, and the wondrous sensations that swept through him as he slid deep within her, but also of their discussions afterward, the things she had said to him, the things she had forced him to think about for the first time in his life.

He had always assumed—unquestioningly—that there was nothing remarkable about his being a member of the ruling class by mere right of birth. That was simply how things were in the world: either you were a Master or you were not, and it had been his luck to be born not only a Master but a Master among Masters, the heir to one of the greatest of the Great Houses. "Why are you a Master?" Thayle had asked him. "What right except right of conquest allows you to rule over other people?" Those were not things that one asked oneself, ordinarily. One took them for granted. One regarded one's rank in life as a matter of having been endowed by a stroke of fate with certain great privileges in return for a willingness to shoulder certain great responsibilities, and the inquiry stopped there. "You are Joseph Master Keilloran," they had told him as soon as he was old enough to understand that he had such a thing as a name and a rank. "Those people are the Folk. You are a Master." And then he had devoted the succeeding years of his boyhood to the study of the things he would have to know when he came—by inheritance alone, by simple right of birth—into the duties of the rank for which destiny had chosen him.

Out here everything was different. The identity that had been automatically his from the hour of his coming into the world had been taken from him. For these past months he had been only what he could make of himself—first a fugitive boy searching frantically for safety and gladly accepting the aid that a passing noctambulo offered him; then a valued tribal healer and the friend, no less, of an Indigene chieftain; then a fugitive again, a pathetic one, living along the desperate borderlands of starvation; then the welcome guest of a Folkish family who nursed him back to health as though he were of their own blood, and the lover, even, of the girl of that family. And now he was a fugitive again. He was created anew every day out of the context of that day.

How upside-down everything has become, Joseph thought. At home I never had to worry about where my next meal would come from, but I was aware constantly that when I grew up and succeeded my father I would have to bear the enormous responsibilities of running a Great House—instructing the overseers on what needed to be done, and by whom, and checking the account books, and looking after the needs of the Folk of my House, and many such things like that. Out here there are no responsibilities to think about, but there is no assurance that I will have anything to eat the day after tomorrow, either.

It was a dizzying business. There once had been a time when his life had been all certainty; now it was a thing of perpetual flux. Yet he did not really regret the transformations that had been worked upon him. He doubted that many Masters had been through experiences such as he had had on this journey. He had had to cope with unexpected physical pain and with severe bodily privation. His stay among the Indigenes and his conversations with the Ardardin had taught him things about that race, and the relationship of the Masters to it, that would stand him in good stead once he returned to civilization. Likewise his time at Eysar Haven, both the things he had learned in Thayle's eager arms and the things she had forced him to confront as they lay side by side quietly talking afterward. All that had been tremendously valuable, in its way. But it will have been a mere waste, Joseph told himself, if I do not survive to return to House Keilloran.

Darkness came. He found a place to sleep, a hollow at the side of a little hill. It would do. He looked back nostalgically to his bed at Eysar Haven, but he was amazed how quickly he could become accustomed to sleeping in the open again. Lie down in the softest place you can find, though it is not necessarily soft, curl into your usual sleeping position, close your eyes, wait for oblivion—that was all there was to it. A hard day's walking had left him ready for a night's deep sleep.

In the morning, though, his legs ached all the way up to his skull, and he was aching from the effects of Grovin's blows, besides. Not for another two days would any of that aching cease and his muscles begin to turn to iron again. But then Joseph felt himself beginning to regain the hardness that had earlier been his and before long he felt ready to walk on and on, forever if need be, to Helikis and beyond, clear off the edge of the world and out to the moons.

The road he had been following veered sharply left, vanishing in the east, a dark dwindling line. He let it go. South is my direction, Joseph thought. He did not care what lay in the east. And he needed no road: one step at a time, through glade and valley, past hill and dale, would take him where he wanted to go.

As the food Thayle had given him dwindled toward its end, he began to think more seriously about the newest metamorphosis in his steady sequence of reinvention, the one that must transform him into a hunter who lived off the land, killing for his food.

Though he was traveling now through a harder, more challenging environment than any he had encountered before, it was by no means an empty one. Wherever he looked he saw an abundance of wild animals, strange beasts both large and small, living as they had lived for millions of years in this unaccommodating land for which neither Masters nor Folk nor Indigenes had found any use. In a glade of spiky gray trees he saw a troop of long-necked red-striped browsing beasts that must have been thirty feet tall, munching on the twisted thorny leaves. They looked down at him with

sad, gentle gray eyes that betrayed little sign of intelligence. A brackish lake contained a population of round shaggy wading animals that set up a rhythmic slapping of the surface of the water with their flat, blunt, hairless tails, perhaps because they were annoyed by his presence, as he passed them by. There was a squat, heavy, ganuille-like beast with an incongruous nest of blunt horns sprouting above its nostrils, and small, frisky, stiff-tailed tawny animals with dainty, fragile legs, and slow-moving big-headed browsers nibbling on the unpromising saw-edged reddish grass that grew here, and paunchy, jowly, furry creatures with ominous crests of spikes along their spines, creatures that walked upright and, judging by the way they paused in their wanderings to contemplate the stranger in their midst, might very well be at the same level of mental ability as the poriphars, or even beyond it.

Joseph knew that he would have to kill some of these creatures in order to survive. The noctambulo was not here now to do his hunting for him. Nor were there any streams conveniently provided with mud-crawlers, or with those tasty white tubers he remembered from his earliest days on the run, and it was not very likely that he would be able to find any of the small scrabbling creatures the noctambulo had so easily snatched up with quick swipes of its scoop-like paws.

So he would have to do it himself. He had no choice. The idea of killing anything bigger than a mud-crawler seemed disagreeable to him, and he wondered why. At home and at Getfen House he had hunted all manner of animals great and small, purely for pleasure, and had never given the rights and wrongs of it a thought; here he must hunt out of necessity, and yet something within him balked at it. Perhaps it was because this was no hunting preserve, but the homeland of wild creatures, into which he was coming uninvited, and with murder on his mind. Well, he had not asked to find himself here. And he, just like any of the animals that fed on the flesh of other beasts, needed to eat.

That night, camping among some many-branched crooked-trunked trees that had covered the ground with a dense litter of soft discarded needles, Joseph dreamed of Thayle. She was standing gloriously naked before him by moonlight, the white light of Keviel, that made her soft skin gleam like bright satin and cast its cool glow on the heavy globes of her breasts and the mysterious triangular tangle of golden hair at the base of her belly, and she smiled and held out her hands to him, and he reached for her and drew her down to him, kissing her and stroking her, and her breath began to come in deep, harsh gusts as Joseph touched the most intimate places of her body, until at last she cried out to him to come into her, and he did. And waited to go swimming off to ecstasy; but somehow, maddeningly, he awoke instead, just as the finest moment of all was drawing near, Thayle disappearing from his grasp like a popping bubble.

"No!" he cried, still on the threshold between dreaming and wakefulness. "Come back!" And opened his eyes and sat up, and saw white Keviel indeed crossing the sky overhead, and realized that he was in fact not alone. But his companion was not Thayle. He heard a low snuffling sound, and picked up a smell that was both sharp and musty at the same time. Elongated reddish-green eyes were staring at him out of the moonlit darkness. He could make out a longish thick-set body, a flattened bristly snout, tall pointed ears. The creature was no more than seven or eight feet away from him and slowly heading his way.

Joseph jumped quickly to his feet and made shooing gestures at the beast. It halted at once, uncertainly swinging its snout from side to side. His

eyes were adapting to the night, and he saw that his visitor was an animal of a sort he had noticed earlier that day, fairly big, slow-moving grazing beasts with thick furry coats reminiscent of a periphar's, black with broad white stripes. Unlike the periphars they had seemed harmless enough then, in all likelihood mainly herbivorous, equipped with nothing that looked dangerous except, perhaps, the strong claws that they used, most likely, for scratching up their food out of the ground.

Groping in his utility case, Joseph located his pocket torch and switched it on. The animal had settled down on its haunches and was looking at him in a matter-of-fact way, as though it were puzzled at finding Joseph here, but only mildly so. It did not seem like a particularly quick-witted creature. "You aren't by any chance an intelligent life-form, are you?" Joseph said to it, speaking in Indigene. It continued to stare blandly at him. "No. No. I didn't really think you were. But I thought it was a good idea to check." Probably this was one of its preferred feeding areas, a place where it liked to dig by night for nuts hidden beneath the fallen needles, or insects that dwelled just underground, or some other such easy prey.

"Am I in your way?" Joseph asked. "I'm sorry. I just needed a place to sleep. If this place belongs to you, I'll go somewhere else, all right?"

He expected no reply, and got none. But the animal did not leave, either, and as it began to resume its snuffling search for dinner Joseph saw that he was going to have to find another camping-ground for himself. He was hardly likely to be able to fall asleep again here, not with a thing this size, be it harmless or not, prowling around so close by him. Gathering up his belongings, he moved a dozen yards away and settled down again, but that was no better; soon the animal was coming in his direction once more. "Go away," Joseph told it. "I don't want to be your friend. Not right now, anyway." He made the shooing motions again. But it was hopeless. The animal would not leave, and Joseph was wide awake, probably irreparably so, besides. He sat up unhappily the rest of the night, watching the beast poking unhurriedly about among the needles.

Dawn seemed to take forever to arrive. From time to time he fell into a light doze, not really sleep. Somewhere in the night, he realized, the striped beast had wandered away. Joseph offered a morning prayer—he still did that, though he was not sure any longer why he did—and sorted through his bag of provisions, calculating how much he could allow himself for breakfast. Not very much, he saw. And the remainder would go at lunchtime. This was the day when he would have to start hunting for his food, or scratch around in the needles on the ground for whatever it was that the striped creature had been looking for, or else prepare himself for a new descent into famine.

Hunting it would be. Barren-looking though the land seemed, there were plenty of animals roaming hereabouts, a whole zoo's worth of them, in fact. But he had nothing with him in the way of a real weapon, of course. What did castaways without weapons do when they needed to catch something to eat?

A sharpened stake in a pit, he thought. Cover it with branches and let your quarry tumble down onto it.

It seemed an absurd idea even as Joseph thought of it, but as he set about contemplating it as a practical matter it looked sillier and sillier to him. A sharpened stake? Sharpened with what? And dig a pit? How, with his bare hands? And then hope that something worth eating would obligingly drop into it and neatly skewer itself? Even as he looked around for something he could use as a stake, he found himself laughing at his own foolishness.

But he had no better ideas at the moment, and a stake did turn up after a lengthy search: a slender branch about five feet long that had snapped free of a nearby tree. One end of it, the end where it had broken off, was jagged and sharp. If only he could embed the stake properly in the ground, it might actually do the trick. But now he had to dig a hole as deep as he was tall, broad enough to hold the animal he hoped to catch. Joseph scuffed experimentally at the ground with the side of his sandal. The best he could manage was a faint shallow track. The dry, hard soil would not be easy to excavate. Perhaps he could find some piece of stone suitable for digging with, but it would probably take him a month to dig the sort of pit he needed. He would starve to death long before that. And he had wasted the whole morning on this ridiculous project, without having moved so much as an inch closer to his destination.

The last of his food went for his midday meal, as he knew it would. A prolonged search afterward for edible nuts or even insects produced nothing.

What next? He reached once more into his recollection of old boys' adventure books. String a snare between two trees, he supposed, and hope for something to get entangled in it. He did have a reel of metallic cord in his utility case, and he spent a complicated hour rigging it between two saplings a short distance above the ground. The black-and-white burrowing animal of the night before came snuffling around while he worked. Joseph was fairly sure it was the same one. By daylight it looked larger than it had seemed in the night, a short-legged, fleshy, well-built creature that weighed at least as much as he did. Its thick white-striped pelt was quite handsome. The animal seemed entirely unafraid of him, coming surprisingly close, now and then pushing its flat bristly snout against the cord that Joseph was trying to tie to the saplings and making the task harder for him. "What is this?" Joseph asked it. "You want to help? I don't need your help." He had to shove it out of the way. It moved off a short distance and looked back sadly at him with a glassy-eyed stare. "You'd like to be my friend?" Joseph asked. "My pet? I wasn't really looking for a pet."

Finally the job of fashioning the snare appeared to be done. Joseph stepped back, admiring his handiwork. Any animal that ran into it with sufficient velocity would find itself caught, he hoped. Those lively little tawny-skinned animals that went frisking swiftly around the place in groups of five or six: they were just reckless enough, possibly, to be taken that way.

But they were not. Joseph hid himself behind a big three-sided boulder and waited, an hour, two hours. It was getting on toward twilight now. In this early dusk his snare would surely be invisible: he could barely see it himself, looking straight toward the place where he knew it to be. From his vantage-point behind the boulder he caught a glimpse of his furry striped friend browsing around nearby, scratching up large rounded seeds out of the ground and munching on them in a noisy crunching way. But he doubted that that would bother the little tawny animals. And at last they came frolicking along, a good-sized herd of them, a dozen or more this time, tails held stiffly erect, ears pricked up, nostrils flaring, small hooves clacking as they skipped over the rocky soil. They were moving on a path that seemed likely to take them straight toward Joseph's trap. And indeed it was so. One by one they danced right up to it, and one by one as they reached it they launched themselves into the air in elegant little leaps, soaring prettily over the outstretched cord with two or three feet to spare and continuing on beyond, switching their tails mockingly at him as they ran. They went over his

snare like athletes leaping hurdles. Scarcely believing it, Joseph watched the entire troop pass by and prance out of sight.

He waited half an hour more, hoping some less perceptive animal might come by and fall victim to the snare, one of the many wandering beasts of these unpromising fields. That did not happen. Darkness was coming on and he had nothing whatever to eat. In the morning, things would be no better. He was looking at starvation again, much too soon. None of the parched, gnarly plants that grew in this dry land looked edible to him, though the grazing animals plainly did not mind them. He could not bring himself to eat the three-sided saw-edged blades of tough red grass that grew in sparse clumps everywhere around. There were no likely roots or tubers, no snails, perhaps not even ants. Somewhere beyond those white-edged hills there might be a land of tender fruits and sweet, succulent, slow-moving land crabs, but he might not live long enough to reach it, if indeed any such place existed. Nor could he hope that Folkish rescuers would come conveniently to his rescue a second time when he collapsed once again by the wayside in the last stages of hallucinatory exhaustion.

I must find something that I can kill and eat, Joseph thought, and find it quickly.

There was a familiar snuffling sound off to his left.

No, Joseph thought, aghast. I can't! And then, immediately afterward: Yes! I must!

His new friend, his self-appointed companion. This slow-moving musky-smelling seed-eating thing, so trusting, so unthreatening. It was not just any animal; somehow this day it had turned into an animal that he felt he knew. That is sheer imbecility, he told himself. An animal is an animal, nothing more. And he was in dire need. But could he kill it. this harmless, friendly creature? He must. There was nothing else. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. It was a horrifying idea, but so too was starving. He had experienced starvation once already, and once was more than enough: the steady melting away of his flesh, the shriveling of his muscles, the weakening of his bones, the blurring of his vision, the swollen tongue, the taste of copper in his throat, the quivering legs, the headaches, the giddiness, the craziness.

He picked up a wedge-shaped rock, a large one, the biggest one that he could hold. The animal was looking at him in a vague incurious way. Clearly it did not have the slightest awareness of Joseph's intentions. Joseph prayed that there was little or no intelligence behind those dull eyes. Did you ever really know how intelligent any creature might be? No. You never did, did you? He thought of the poriphars who had shared their food with him beside that stream in the lovely springtime country just below the mountains. No one doubted that they were intelligent beings. Stand this creature on its hind legs and it would look a little like a poriphar, Joseph thought: a distant cousin, possibly. He hoped it was only a coincidental resemblance. "Forgive me," he said foolishly, taking a deep breath, and raised the rock in both hands and brought it down as hard as he could across the striped animal's wide flat forehead.

The impact barely seemed to register on it. It stared stupidly at Joseph and took a couple of wobbly uncertain steps backward, but did not undertake any real retreat. Joseph hit it again, and again. And again. He went on and on, to little apparent avail. The animal, staggering now, made a sorrowful rumbling noise. I must be unrelenting, Joseph told himself, I must be ruthless, it is too late to stop. I must carry this through to the end. He struck

it once more and this time the thing fell, toppling heavily, landing on its side and moving its feet through the air in a slow circular path. The rumbling continued. There was a breathy whimper now, too. The reddish-green eyes remained open, peering at him, so Joseph thought, with a reproachful stare.

He felt sick. It was one thing to hunt like a gentleman, with a weapon that spat death cleanly and quickly from a distance. It was another thing entirely to kill like a savage, pounding away brutishly with a rock.

He went to his utility case and found his little knife, and knelt, straddling the creature, feeling strong spasms of some sort going through its back and shoulders, and, weeping now, drove the blade into the animal's throat with all his strength. The rear legs began to thrash. But the knife was barely adequate to the task and it all took very much longer than Joseph expected. I must be unrelenting, Joseph told himself a second time, and clung to the animal, holding it down until the thrashing began to diminish.

He rose, then, bloodied, sobbing.

Gradually he grew calm. The worst part of it is over, he thought. But he was wrong even about that, because there was still the butchering to do, the peeling back of the thick pelt with the knife that was scarcely more than a toy, the slitting of the belly, the lifting out of the glistening abdominal organs, red and pink and blue. You had to get the internal organs out, Anceph had taught him long ago, because they decayed very quickly and would spoil the meat. But it was a frightful task. He was shaken by the sight of the animal's inwardness, all that moist shining internal machinery that had made it a living, metabolizing thing until he had picked up his rock and begun the ending of its life. Now those secret things were laid bare. They all came spilling forth, organs he could not begin to identify, the sacred privateness of the creature he had killed. Joseph gagged and retched and turned away, covered with sweat, and then turned back and continued with what he had to do. Twice more he had to pause to retch and heave as he went about the work, and the second time the nausea was so intense that it was necessary for him to halt for some five or ten minutes, shaking, sweating, dizzied. Then he forced himself to continue. He had arrogated unto himself the right to take this innocent creature's life; he must make certain now that the killing had not been without purpose.

When he was done he was slathered with gore, and there was no stream nearby in which he could bathe himself. Unwilling to squander his small supply of drinking-water, Joseph rubbed himself with gritty handfuls of the sandy soil until his hands and arms seemed sufficiently clean. Then he searched in his utility case for his firestarter, which he had not used in such a long time that he was not at all sure it still worked. The thought that it might be necessary for him to eat the meat raw brought Joseph to the edge of nausea again. But the firestarter worked; he built a little bonfire of twigs and dried leaves, and skewered a steak and roasted it until the juices dripped from it; and then, the culminating monstrous act, he took his first bite. The meat had something of the same sharp and musky taste that he had smelled in the animal's pelt, and swallowing it involved him in a mighty struggle. But he had to eat. He had to eat *this*. And he did. He ate slowly, sadly, chewing mechanically, until he had had his fill.

It was dark, now, and time for sleep. But he did not want to use the same campsite that he had used the night before. That would summon too many memories of the animal that had visited him there. Instead he settled down not far from the dying ashes of his fire, though the ground was bare and uneven there. While he lay waiting for sleep to take him Joseph remembered a

time he had gone with Anceph on a three-day hunting trip in Garyona Woods, he and Rickard and some of their friends, and on the second morning, awakening at daybreak, he had seen Anceph crouching over the faintly glowing coals of their campfire, staring at small plump animals, vivid red in color, that seemed to be leaping around and across them. "Ember-toads," Anceph explained. "You find droves of them in the morning whenever there's a fire burning down. They like the warmth, I suppose." He was holding a little net in one hand; and, as Joseph watched, he swept it swiftly back and forth until he had caught a dozen or more of the things. "Plenty of good sweet meat on their legs," said Anceph. "We'll grill 'em for breakfast. You'll like the way they taste." He was right about that. Rickard refused indignantly even to try one; but Joseph had had his fill, and recalled to this day how good they had been. He wondered if there would be ember-toads hopping about what was left of his fire in the morning, but he did not think there would—they were found only in Helikis, so far as he knew—and indeed there was nothing but white ash in his fire-pit when he woke. No ember-toads, not here, and the body of good-natured Anceph, who knew so much about hunting and all manner of other things, lay in some unmarked grave far to the north at Getfen House.

The task for this morning was to cut and pack however much of the striped creature's meat he could carry with him when he resumed his march. Joseph could not say how long the meat would last, but he wanted to waste as little of it as necessary, and perhaps in this dry climate it would be slow to spoil.

He got down to the job quickly and in a businesslike manner. It did not make him suffer as the killing and the first stage of the butchering had made him suffer: this part of it was just so much work: unpleasant, messy, slogging work, nothing more. He was greatly relieved not to feel any but the faintest vestige of last night's grief and shame over the killing of that harmless, friendly animal. Everything has to die sooner or later, Joseph told himself. If he had hurried the event along for the striped animal, it was only because his own life would have been imperiled if he could not quickly find food, and in this world those who are quicker and stronger and smarter end up eating those who are not: it was the rule, the inflexible rule of the inflexible universe. Even Thayle, who thought it was wrong that the Masters should have set themselves up as overlords over the Folk, did not see anything wrong with eating the flesh of the beasts. It was a normal, natural thing. He had eaten plenty of meat in his life, just like everyone else, without ever once weeping over it before; the only difference this time was that the act of slaughtering it himself had brought him that much closer to the bloody reality of what it meant to be a carnivore, and for a moment in his solitude here he had let himself give way to feelings of guilt. Some part of him, the Master part that had been so rarely in evidence these recent days, found that unacceptable. Guilt was not a luxury he could afford, out here in this lonely wilderness. He must put it aside.

Joseph spent the first half of the morning cutting the meat up into flat strips, letting all residual blood drain away, and carefully wrapping them in the thick, leathery leaves of a tree that grew nearby. He hoped that that might preserve it from decay for another few days. When he had loaded his pack with all that it could hold, he roasted what was left of the meat for his midday meal, and set out toward the south once more. After a few dozen steps something impelled him to look back for one last glance at his campsite, and he saw that two scrawny yellow-furred beasts with bushy tails were rooting around busily in the scattered entrails of the animal he had

killed. Nothing goes to waste, Joseph thought, at least not in the world of nature. Man is the only animal that countenances being wasteful.

The day was uneventful, and the one after that. Though there was no actual path for him to follow, the land was gently undulating, easy enough to traverse. Far off in the distance he saw mountains of considerable size, purple and pink in the morning haze, and he wondered whether he was going to have to cross them. But that was not something to which he needed to give much thought at the moment. The immediate terrain presented no problems. Joseph's thighs and calves had shed the stiffness of a few days before, and he saw no reason why he could not cover twenty miles a day, or even thirty, now that he was in the rhythm of it.

He was pleased to see that the territory through which he was passing grew less forbidding as he continued onward: before long the soil became blacker and richer, the vegetation much more lush. Soon the ominous sharp-ridged salt-encrusted black hills dropped away behind him. There was more moisture in the air, and better cloud-cover, so that he did not have to endure the constant pounding presence of the summer sun, although by mid-morning each day the heat was considerable. He found water, too, a thin white sheet of it that came sluicing down over a mica-speckled rock-face from some cliffstop spring high above, collecting in a shallow basin at the foot of the cliff; he stripped gladly and washed himself from head to toe, and drank deep, and refilled his flask, which had gone so low that he had been permitting himself only the most niggardly sips at the widest possible intervals. A bush not far away was bowed down under heavy clusters of fat, lustrous, shining golden berries that looked too attractive not to be edible. Joseph tried one and found it full of sweet juice, soft as honey. He risked a second, and then a third. That had become his wilderness rule, three berries and no more, see what happens next. By the time he had built a fire to roast his evening meat, no harmful effects had manifested themselves, so he allowed himself another dozen with his meal. When he resumed his journey after breakfast he took three big clusters with him, but later he saw that the bush was common all along his path, wherever a source of water was to be found, and he did not bother carrying such a large supply. Within a couple of days, though, the berry-bushes were nowhere to be seen, and when he tried a smaller, harder red berry from a different bush it burned his mouth, so that he spat it quickly out. Even that one taste was enough to keep him awake half the night with a troublesome griping of the abdomen, but he felt better in the morning.

An hour into his morning march Joseph came up over a gentle rise in the land and saw a road cutting through the valley below him, looping down from the northeast and aligning itself with the route that the position of the sun told him he must take. Quite possibly it was the same road that Thayle had left him on, the one that he had abandoned when it seemed to turn eastward. It did at least look similar to that one, rough and narrow and badly in need of maintenance. There was no traffic on it. He had never realized how sparsely populated so much of the northern continent was.

After only a few days back in the purity of the wild Joseph felt a strange reluctance to set foot again on anything so unnatural as an asphalt highway. But the road did seem to run due south from where he was, and therefore was probably his most direct course toward the Isthmus. There was no harm in following it by day, he thought. He would go off into the bush each evening when it came to be time to settle down for the night.

It was not pleasing to be walking on a paved surface again, though. The

highway felt harsh, even brutal, against his sandaled feet. He was tempted to take the sandals off and go barefoot on it. I am becoming a creature of nature, he thought, a wild thing, a beast of the fields. My identity as a civilized being is dropping away from me day by day. I have become a shaggy animal. If I ever do get home, will I be able to turn myself back into a Master again? Or will I slip away from House Keilloran when no one is looking, and go off by myself to forage for berries and roots in the wilderness beyond the estate?

There were traces in this district of former settlement: a scattering of small wooden houses of the sort he had lived in at Eysar Haven, but isolated ones, set one by one at goodly distances from each other at the side of the road. They were the homes of individual Folkish farmers, he supposed, who had not wanted to live in a village, not even a cuyling village. None of them was occupied, though there was no sign of any destruction: apparently their owners had just abandoned them, he could not tell how long ago. Perhaps the war had come this way, or perhaps those who had lived here had just gone away: it was impossible to tell.

Joseph prowled around in one that had a wire bird-coop alongside the main building, the sort in which thestrins or heysir would have been kept. There was at least the possibility that some remnants of the farmer's flock might still be in residence there. His supply of meat was nearly at its end and it would be splendid to dine on roast thestrin tonight, or even an omelet of heysir eggs. But Joseph found nothing in the coop except empty nests and a scattering of feathers. Inside the farmhouse itself a thick layer of dust coated everything. The building had been emptied of virtually all it had once contained except for some old, shapeless furniture. Joseph did discover a single incongruous unopened bottle of wine standing at the edge of a kitchen counter. He had nothing with which to open it, and finally simply snapped its neck against the side of the rust-stained sink. The wine was thin and sour and he left most of it unfinished.

That night a light rain began to fall. Joseph decided to sleep inside the house, but he disliked the confined feeling that sleeping indoors produced in him, and the drifting clouds of dust that he had stirred up were bothersome. He slept on the porch instead, lying on some bedraggled old pillows that he found, listening to the gentle pattering sound of the rain until sleep took him.

The morning was bright, clear, and warm. He allowed himself a quick, minimal breakfast and set out early, and soon was beyond the last of the abandoned farmhouses. He was moving into a terrain that was neither forest nor meadow, dominated by immense stately trees with steeply upturned branches, each standing in splendid isolation, far from its nearest neighbor, amidst a field of dense, rubbery-looking pink-leaved grass. A myriad of small round-bodied hopping creatures with fluffy grayish fur moved about busily below the trees, probably searching for seeds.

The sight of them in such a multitude made Joseph, who had begun to see that he would need to restock his food supply in another day or two, feel a burst of sudden hunger. He yearned for a rifle. The best he could hope for, though, was to try to bring one down with a well-aimed rock. But as he crept up on one group of them with what he hoped was something like stealth they melted away before him like winter fog in the bright morning sun, easily and unhurriedly drifting out of his range as Joseph approached them, and resumed their explorations at the far side of the field. A second group did the same. Joseph gave the enterprise up without casting a single stone.

His mood was cheerful, nevertheless. This was an inviting kind of coun-

tryside and he did not doubt that he would find something to eat somewhere, sooner or later, and his body felt so well tuned now, so smoothly coordinated in every function, that there was real joy to be had from striding along down the empty road at a brisk pace. The sun stood high in the sky before him, showing him the way to Helikis. Joseph felt that it did not matter if it took him another whole year to get home, three years, ten years: this was the great adventure of his life, the unexpected epic journey that would shape him forever, and however much time it required would be the span that his destiny had marked out for it to last.

Then he came around a curve in the road, still moving jauntily along, whistling, thinking pleasant thoughts of his nights with Thayle, and discovered that the road just ahead was full of military-looking vehicles, perhaps half a dozen of them, with a crowd of armed men standing alongside them.

A roadblock, Joseph realized. A checkpoint of some kind. And he had walked right into it, or nearly so.

Had they seen him? He could not tell. He halted quickly and turned about, meaning to slip back the way he had come, thinking to hide himself in the woods until they moved along, or, if they didn't move along, to take up a lateral trail that would get him around them. He succeeded in covering about a dozen paces.

Then a voice from somewhere above him, a crisp, flat, nasal voice, said in Folkish, "You will stay exactly where you are. You will lift your hands above your head."

Joseph looked up. A stocky helmeted man in a drab uniform stood on the hillside overlooking the highway. He had a rifle in his hands, aimed at the middle of Joseph's chest. Several other men in the same sort of uniform were jogging around the bend in the road toward him. They were armed also.

Any movement other than one of surrender would be suicidal, Joseph saw. He nodded to the man on the hillside and held up his hands.

They came up to him and formed a little cluster about him. Rebel soldiers, he supposed, five of them altogether. Not one came up much higher than his shoulders. All five had the same flat broad noses, narrow grayish eyes, yellowish hair that looked as though it had been cut by snipping around the edges of an inverted bowl. They might almost have been five brothers.

He heard them chattering quickly in Folkish, arguing over him, trying to decide who and what he was. The prevailing belief among them seemed to be that he was a spy, although for whom they thought he might be spying was not something Joseph was able to determine. But one of them thought he was a wandering wild man of the woods, a harmless crazy simpleton. "Only a crazy man would come along this road right now," he said. "And look how filthy he is. Did you ever see anyone who looked as filthy as this one?" Joseph took some offense at that. It was only a few weeks since he had last trimmed his beard and his hair, and not a great many days had gone by since he had last washed himself, either. He thought he appeared respectable enough, considering his recent circumstances. Yet these soldiers, or the one who had said it, at least, saw him quite differently. This latest sojourn in the wilderness must have left him far more uncouth-looking than he suspected.

He said nothing to them. That seemed the wisest policy. And they made no attempt whatever to interrogate him. Perhaps at their level of authority they had no responsibility for questioning prisoners. Instead they merely bundled him unceremoniously into one of the vehicles parked by the side of the road and headed off with him toward the south.

A sprawling encampment lay ten minutes down the road: wire-mesh walls encircling dozens of flimsy-looking, hastily-flung-up huts, with scores of Folkish soldiers wearing the rebel uniform moving around busily within it. At the gate Joseph's five warders surrendered him, with a muttered explanation that Joseph could not hear, to two others who seemed to be officers of a higher rank, and they gestured to Joseph to follow him within.

Silently, he obeyed. Any kind of resistance or even a show of reluctance to cooperate was likely to prove foolhardy. They conveyed him down an inner avenue between rows of the little huts and delivered him to one of the larger buildings, which, Joseph saw, was provided with an attached and fenced-in yard of considerable size: a compound for prisoners, he supposed. Wordlessly they directed him within.

It was a long windowless structure, a kind of dormitory, dark inside except for a few feeble lamps. The air inside was stale-smelling and stifling. Simple iron-framed cots were arranged along the walls. Most were empty, though half a dozen were occupied by Folk, all of them men, most of them sitting slumped on the edges of their cots staring off into nothingness. Joseph saw no one among them who might have been a Master. A door on the right led to the fenced-in outside area.

"This will be yours," said one of his guards, indicating an empty cot. Wordlessly he held out his hand for Joseph's pack, and Joseph surrendered it without offering objection, though he bitterly regretted being parted from his utility case and everything else that had accompanied him through all these many months of wandering. He owned so little that he could carry it all in that single pack, and they were taking it away from him. The officer sniffed at the pack and made a face: the last of the wrapped meat was within, probably beginning to go bad. "They will come to speak with you in a little while," the guard said. Both men turned and went out, taking the pack with them.

Not a single one of the slump-shouldered Folkish men sitting on the cots looked in his direction. They seemed as incurious about him as the cots themselves. Joseph wondered how long it was that they had been interned here, and what had been done to them during their stay.

After a little while he went out into the adjoining yard. It was a huge, barren, dreary place, nothing but bare dusty sun-baked ground, not even a blade of grass. At the far end Joseph saw what looked like a brick-walled washhouse and a latrine. There were some more Folkish men in the yard, each one keeping off by himself in a little zone of isolation, holding himself apart from any of the others, immobile, looking at nothing, almost as though he was unaware that anyone else was with him out there. All of them stood in a manner that gave them the same odd slumped, defeated look as the men on the cots inside. Joseph was surprised to see three Indigenes also, a little silent group huddled together in one corner. He wondered how this incomprehensible civil war could have managed to involve Indigenes. He understood nothing. But he had been on his own for more than a year, he calculated: from mid-summer in High Manza to late summer, or even early autumn, wherever he was now. A great deal must have happened in all that time, and no one here was going to explain it to him.

There seemed to be no harm in trying to find out, though. He went up to the nearest of the Folkers, who paid no more attention to the approaching Joseph than a blind man would, and said softly, "Pardon me, but—"

The man glared at Joseph for an instant, only an instant, a quick, hot, furious glare. Then he turned away.

"I'm sorry," Joseph said bewilderedly. It did not seem at all remarkable to him just then to be apologizing to a Folker. "I'm new here. I only wanted to ask you a few things about—"

The man shook his head. He seemed both angry and frightened. He moved away.

Joseph got the same reaction from the next two men that he tried. And when he went toward the trio of Indigenes, they drifted silently away from him the way those little hopping creatures in the field had. He gave the project up at that point. It is not the done thing here, Joseph realized, to have conversations with your fellow inmates. Perhaps conversation was prohibited; perhaps it was just risky. You never knew who might be a spy. But again he wondered: spying for whom? For whom?

Noon came and went. In early afternoon three Folkish orderlies arrived with food for the prisoners' meals, carrying it in big metal tubs slung between two sticks: cold gluey gruel, some sort of stewed unidentifiable meat that had the flavor of old cardboard, hard musty bread that was mostly crust. The inmates lined up and sparse portions were ladled out to them on tin plates. They were given wooden spoons to use. Hungry as he was, Joseph found it hard to eat very much. He forced himself.

The hours went by. The sun was strong, the air humid. He saw armed sentries marching about outside the wire-mesh fence. Within the compound no one spoke a word to anyone else. At sundown one of the guards blew a whistle and everyone who was in the yard went shuffling inside, each to his own cot. Joseph had forgotten which cot was his: he picked one at random in a row of empty ones, half hoping that someone else would challenge his taking of it so that he could at least hear the sound of a human voice again, but no one raised any objection to his choice. He sprawled out on it for a while; then, not finding it comfortable to lie on the thin, hard mattress, he sat up like the others, slumped on the edge of his cot. When it was dark the orderlies returned with another meal, which turned out to be the same things as in the earlier one only in smaller portions. Joseph could not bring himself to eat very much of it. He hardly slept at all.

The second day went by very much like the first. The food was, if anything, just a little worse, and there was even less of it. The silence in the yard grew so intense that it began to resound within Joseph's head like a trumpet-call. For hour after hour he paced along the fenced border of the compound, measuring off its dimensions in footsteps. He envisioned his spending the next thirty years, or the next fifty, doing nothing but that. But of course he would not last fifty years on the sort of food that they served the prisoners here.

The question is, Joseph thought, will I starve to death before I go insane, or afterward?

It seemed foolish even to think of attempting to escape. And trying to stand upon his rights as a Master was an even sillier idea. He had no rights as a Master, certainly not here, perhaps not anywhere any more. More likely than not they would kill him outright if they found out who he really was. Better to be thought to be a vagabond lunatic, he thought, than the scion of one of the Great Houses of Helikis. But why was he here? What was the point of rounding up vagabond lunatics? Did they mean simply to intern their prisoners purely for the sake of interning them, so that they would not intrude on whatever military action might be going on in this part of the world? Why not just shoot us, then? he wondered. Perhaps they would; perhaps they were merely waiting for the order to come from some other camp.

Joseph began to think he might almost prefer to be shot to having to spend an indefinite length of time here.

But on the third morning a guard entered the compound and indicated, in the curt wordless way that seemed to be the usual way of communicating with prisoners in this place, that Joseph was to follow him.

The guard marched him up the middle of the camp, turned left down an aisle of important-looking structures that were guarded by strutting sentries and appeared more solidly constructed than those Joseph had seen so far, and delivered him to an smallish building at the end of the row.

A Folkish officer with an air of great confidence and power about him that reminded Joseph of Governor Stappin of Eysar Haven was sitting behind a desk that had the contents of Joseph's pack spread out on it: his utility case, his books, his water-flask, and all the rest. His shoulders were immensely broad, even as Folkish shoulders went, and he had his shirt open to the waist in the muggy heat, revealing a dense, curling thatch of reddish-gold hair. The hair of the officer's head was of the same color and curling texture, but it was receding badly, laying bare the great shining dome of his forehead.

"Well," he said, glancing from Joseph to the assortment of objects on his desk, and then to Joseph again. "These things are very interesting. Where did you get them?"

"They were given to me," said Joseph.

"By whom?"

"Different people. It's hard to remember. I've been traveling so long."

"Traveling from where?"

"From the north," Joseph said. He hesitated a moment. "From High Manza," he added.

The officer's gaze rested coldly on Joseph. "From where in High Manza, exactly?"

"A place called Getfen House, it was." It was Joseph's intention to tell as few lies as possible, while revealing as little as he could that might be incriminating.

"You came from a Great House?"

"I was there just a little while. I was not a part of House Getfen at all."

"I see." The officer played with the things on the desk, inattentively fondling Joseph's torch, his cutting tool, his book-reader. Joseph hated that, that this man should be touching his beloved things. "And what is your name?" the officer asked, after a time.

"Joseph," Joseph said. He did not add his title or his surname. It would not do to try to masquerade as Waerna of Ludbrek House any longer, for that had not worked particularly well at Eysar Haven and was unlikely to do any better for him here, and he preferred to use his real name rather than to try to invent anything else. They would not necessarily recognize "Joseph" as a Master name, he thought, not if he held back "Master" and "Keilloran" from them.

But the name did seem odd to the Folkish officer, as well it should have. He repeated it a couple of times, frowning over it, and observed that he had never heard a name like that before. Joseph shrugged and offered no comment. Then the officer looked up at him again and said, "Have you taken part in any of the fighting, Joseph?"

"No."

"None? None at all?"

"I am not a part of the war."

The officer laughed. "How can you say that? Everyone is part of the war, everyone! You, me, the Indigenes, the poriphars, everyone. The animals in the fields are part of the war. There is no hiding from the war. Truly, you have not fought at all?"

"Not at all, no."

"Where have you been, then?"

"In the forests, mostly."

"Yes. Yes, I can see that. You have a wild look about you, Joseph. And a wild smell." Again the officer played with the things from the utility case. He ran his fingertips over them, almost lovingly, and smiled. "These are Master things, some of them. You know that, don't you, Joseph?" Joseph said nothing. Then the officer said, switching for the first time from Folkish to Master, and with a sudden ferocity entering his voice, "What you are is a spy, are you not, Joseph? Admit it. Admit it!"

"That is not so," said Joseph, replying in Folkish. There was no harm in revealing that he understood Master—there was no Folker who did not—but he would not speak it here. "It is just not so!"

"But what else can you be but a spy?"

"It is not so," Joseph said again, more mildly. "I am not in any way a spy. I told you, I am not a part of the war. I know nothing whatever about what has been going on. I have been in the forests."

"A mere wanderer."

"A wanderer, yes. They attacked Getfen House, where I was staying, and I went into the forests. I could not tell you what has happened in the world since."

"You did not fight, and you are not a spy," the officer said musingly. He drummed on his desktop with the fingers of one hand. Then he rose and came around the desk to where Joseph was standing. He was surprisingly tall for a Folker, just a few inches shorter than Joseph, and the immense width of his shoulders made him seem inordinately strong, formidably intimidating. He stared at Joseph for an interminable moment. Then, almost casually, he placed his right hand on Joseph's right shoulder and with steady, inexorable pressure forced Joseph to his knees. Joseph submitted without resisting, though he was boiling within. He doubted that he could have resisted that force anyway.

The Folkish officer held him lightly by his ear. "At last, now, tell me who you are spying for."

"Not for anybody," Joseph said.

The fingers gripping his ear tightened. Joseph felt himself being pushed forward until his nose was close to the floor.

"I have other things to do today," the officer said. "You are wasting my time. Tell me who you're working for, and then we can move along."

"I can't tell you, because I'm not working for anyone."

"Not working for the traitors who come in the night and attack the camps of patriots, and strive to undo all that we have worked so hard to achieve?"

"I know nothing about any of that."

"Right. Just an innocent wanderer in the forests."

"I wanted no part of the war. When they burned Getfen House I ran away. I have been running ever since."

"Ah. Ah." It was a sound of annoyance, of disgust, even. "You waste my time." Now he was twisting the ear. It was an agonizing sensation. Joseph bit his lip, but did not cry out.

"Go ahead, pull it off, if you like," he said. "I still couldn't tell you anything, because I have nothing to tell."

"Ah," said the officer one more time, and released Joseph's ear with a sharp pushing motion that sent him flat on his face. Joseph waited for—what, a kick? A punch? But nothing happened. The man stepped back and told Joseph to rise. Joseph did, somewhat uncertainly. He was trembling all over. The officer was staring at him, frowning. His lips were moving faintly, as though he were framing further questions, the fatal ones that Joseph was dreading, and Joseph waited, wondering when the man would ask him what he had been doing at Getfen House, or what clan of the Folk he belonged to, or which towns and villages he had passed through on his way from High Manza to here. Joseph did not dare answer the first question, could not answer the second, and was unwilling to answer the third, because anything he said linking him to Eysar Haven or the Indigene villages might lead to his unmasking as a Master. Of course, the man could simply ask him outright whether he was a Master, considering that he looked more like one than like any sort of Folker. But he did not ask him that, either: he did not ask any of those obvious things. A course that seemed obvious to Joseph was apparently not so to him. The officer said only, "Well, we are not torturers here. If you're unwilling to speak, we can wait until you are. We will keep you here until you beg us to question you again, and then you will tell us everything. You can go and rot until then." And to the guard waiting at the door he said, "Take him back to the enclosure."

Joseph did not bother counting the days. Perhaps a week went by, perhaps two. He was feverish some of the time, shaking, sometimes uncertain of where he was. Then the fever left him, but he still felt weak and sickly. The strength that he had regained at Eysar Village was going from him again, now that he had to depend on the miserable prison-camp food. He was losing what little weight he had managed to put on in the weeks just past. Familiar sensations reasserted themselves: giddiness, blurred vision, mental confusion. One afternoon he found himself once again quite seriously considering the proposition that as the starvation proceeded he would become completely weightless and would be able to float up and out of here and home. Then he remembered that some such thought had crossed his mind much earlier in the trek, and he reminded himself that no such thing must be possible, or else he would surely have attempted it long before. And then, when he felt a little better, Joseph was amazed that he had allowed himself even to speculate about such an idiotic thing.

Several times on his better days he approached men in the enclosure to ask them why they were here, who their captors were, what was the current state of the civil war. Each time they turned coldly away from him as though he had made an obscene proposal. No one ever spoke to anyone in this compound. He called out to the three Indigenes that he was a friend of the Ardardin and had worked as a doctor among the people of the mountains, but they too ignored him, and one day they were removed from the enclosure and he never saw them again.

I will die in this place, he thought.

It is an absurd end to my journey. It makes no sense. But what can I do? Confess that I'm a spy? I am not a spy. I could give them no useful information about my spying even if I wanted to.

I suppose that I can confess that I am a Master, Joseph thought, and then they can take me out and shoot me, and that will be the end. But not yet. I am not quite ready for that. Not yet. Not yet.

Then one morning a guard came for him, very likely the same one who had come for him that other time, and gave him the same wordless gesture of beckoning as before, and led him up the long aisle of important-looking structures to the office of the burly man with thinning reddish-gold hair who had interrogated him earlier. This time the man's desk was bare. Joseph wondered what had become of his possessions. But that probably did not matter, he thought, because this time they would ask him the fatal questions, and then they would kill him.

The officer said, "Is your name Joseph Master Kilran?"

Joseph stared. He could not speak.

"Is it? You may as well say yes. We know that you are Joseph Master Kilran."

Joseph shook his head dazedly, not so much to deny the truth, or almost-truth, of what the man was saying, but only because he did not know how to react.

"You are. Why hide it?"

"Are you going to shoot me now?"

"Why would I shoot you? I want you to answer my question, that's all. Are you Joseph Master Kilran? Yes or no."

It would be easy enough to answer "No" with a straight face, since he was in fact not Joseph Master Kilran. But there could be no doubt that they were on to the truth about him, and Joseph saw no advantage in playing such games with them.

He wondered how they had found him out. Were descriptions posted somewhere of all the missing Masters, those who had escaped being slain when the Great Houses of Manza were destroyed? That was hard to believe. But then he understood. "Kilran" was his clue: Thayle had never managed to pronounce his surname accurately. This man must have recognized all along that he was a Master. Probably in the past few days they had sent messengers to the people of all the towns in the vicinity, including the people of Eysar Haven, asking them whether any fugitive Masters had happened to come their way lately. And so they had learned his name, or something approximating his name, from Thayle. It was a disquieting thought. Thayle would never have betrayed him, he was sure of that: but he could easily picture Grovin betraying *her,* and Governor Stappin forcing a confession out of her, by violent means if necessary.

It was all over now, in any case.

"Keilloran," Joseph said.

"What?"

"Keilloran. My name. 'Kilran' is incorrect. I am Joseph Master Keilloran, of Keilloran House in Helikis."

The officer handed Joseph a writing-tablet. "Here. Put it down on this."

Joseph wrote the words down for him. The officer stared at what Joseph had written for a long moment, pronouncing the words with his lips alone, not uttering any of it aloud.

"Where is House Keilloran?" he asked, finally.

"In the southern part of central Helikis."

"And what was a Master from the southern part of central Helikis doing in High Manza?"

"I was a guest at Getfen House. The Getfens are distant kinsmen of mine. *Were.*"

"After Getfen House was destroyed, then, what did you do, where did you go?"

Joseph told him, a quick, concise summary, the flight into the forest, the aid that the noctambulo had given him, the sojourn as a healer among the Indigenes. He did not care whether the officer believed him or not. He told of his escape in the mountains, of his trek back to the lowlands and his time of starvation, of his rescue by the inhabitants of a friendly cuyling town. He did not name the town and the officer did not ask him for it. "Then I left them and was heading south again, still hoping to find my way back to Helikis, when I was captured by your men," Joseph concluded. "That's the whole story."

The officer, tugging obsessively at the receding curls of his forehead, listened with an apparent show of interest to all that Joseph had to say, frowning most of the time. He took extensive notes. When Joseph fell silent he looked up and said, "You tell me that you are a visitor from a far-off land who happened by accident to be in Manza at the time of the outbreak of the Liberation." It was impossible for Joseph not to hear the capital letter on that last word. "But why should I accept this as true?" the man asked. "What if you are actually a surviving member of one of the Great Houses of Manza, a spy for your people, lying to me about your place of origin? One would expect a spy to lie."

"If I'm from one of the Great Houses of Manza, tell me which one," said Joseph. He had started speaking in Master, without giving it a thought. "And if I'm a spy, what kind of spying have I been doing? What have I seen, except some Indigene villages, and one town of free Folk who were never involved in your Liberation at all? Where's the evidence of my spy activities?" Joseph pointed to the officer's desk, where his belongings once had lain. "You confiscated my pack, and I assume you've looked through it. Did you find the notes of a spy in it? My records of troop movements and secret strategic plans? You found my school textbooks, I think. And some things I wrote down about the philosophical beliefs of the Indigenes. Nothing incriminating, was there? Was there?"

The officer was gaping at him, big-eyed. Joseph realized that he was swaying and about to fall. In his weakened condition an outburst like this was a great effort for him. At the last moment he caught hold of the front of the officer's desk and clung to it, head downward, his entire body shaking.

"Are you ill?" the officer asked.

"Probably. I've been living on your prison-camp food for I don't know how many days. Before that I was foraging for whatever I could find in the wilderness. It's a miracle I'm still able to stand on my own feet." Joseph forced himself to look up. His eyes met the officer's. —"Prove to me that I'm a spy," he said. "Tell me which House I come from in Manza. And then you can take me out and shoot me, I suppose. But show me your proof, first."

The officer was slow to reply. He tugged at his hair, chewed his lower lip. Finally he said, "I will have to discuss this with my superiors." And, to the guard who had brought him here: "Return him to the compound."

Shortly past midday, before Joseph had even had a chance to confront whatever unsavory stuff they intended to give the prisoners for their afternoon meal, he was back at the big officer's headquarters again. Two other men in officers' uniform, senior ones, from the looks of them, were there also.

One, a hard-looking man who had a terrible scar, long healed but still vivid, running across his jutting cheekbone and down to the corner of his mouth, pushed a sheet of paper toward Joseph and said, speaking in Master, "Draw me a map of Helikis. Mark the place where you come from on it."

Joseph made a quick sketch of the continent, and drew a cross a little past midway down to indicate the location of Keilloran House.

"What is your father's name?"

"Martin Master Keilloran."

"And his father?"

"Eirik Master Keilloran."

"Your mother's name?"

"Wireille. She is dead."

The scar-faced officer looked toward the other two. Something passed between them, some sign, some wordless signal, that Joseph was unable to interpret. The officer who had twice interrogated him gave a single forceful nod. Then the second man, the oldest of the three, turned to Joseph and said, "The free people of Manza have no quarrel with the Masters of Helikis, and they are not interested in starting one now. As soon as it is practical you will be taken to the border, Joseph Master Keilloran, and turned over to your own kind."

Joseph stared. And blurted: "Do you seriously mean that?"

At once he saw the flash of anger in the scar-faced officer's eyes. The ugly scar stood out in a blaze of red. "We of the Liberation have no time for jokes." The words were spoken, this time, in Folkish.

"I ask you to forgive me, then," Joseph said, in Folkish also. "I've been through a great deal this past year, very little of it good. And I was expecting you to say that you were sentencing me to death."

"Perhaps that is what we should do," the second man said. "But it is not what we *will* do. As I said: you will be taken to the border."

Joseph still had difficulty in believing that. It was all some elaborate ruse, he thought, a ploy intended to soften him up so that they could come at him in some unexpected way and extract the truth from him about his espionage activities. But if that was so, they were going about it in a very strange way. He was transferred from the prisoners' compound to a barracks at the other side of the camp, where, although he was still under guard, he had a small room to himself. His pack and everything that had been in it were restored to him. Instead of the abysmal prisoner food he was given meals that, although hardly lavish, were at least nourishing and sound. It was the quality of the food that led Joseph at last to see that what was going on was something other than a trick. They did not want to send him back to Helikis as a creature of skin and bone. They would fatten him up a little, first, to indicate to the Masters of Helikis that the free people of Manza were humane and considerate persons. Perhaps they would even send the camp barber in to cut his hair and trim his beard, and outfit him with a suit of clothes of the sort a young Master would want to wear, too. Joseph was almost tempted to suggest that, not in any serious way, to one of his jailers, a young, easy-going Folker who appeared to have taken a liking to him. But it was not a good idea, he knew, to get too cocky with his captors. None of these people had any love for him. None would be amused by that sort of presumptuousness.

The fact that they were calling their uprising the Liberation told Joseph what their real attitude toward him was. They hated Masters; they looked upon the whole race of them as their enemies. They were not so much offering him assistance in getting back to his home as they were merely spitting him out. He was no concern of theirs, this strayed Master out of the wrong continent, and very likely if all this had been happening six or eight months before they would simply have executed him the moment they had realized

what he was. It was only by grace of whatever political situation currently existed between the liberated Folk of Manza and the Masters who must still be in power in Helikis that he had been allowed to live. And even now Joseph was still not fully convinced of the sincerity of the scar-faced man's words. He did not plan to test them by trying to enter into any sort of easy intimacy with those who guarded him.

Four days went by this way. He saw no one but his jailers in all this time.

Then on the fifth morning he was told to make himself ready for departure, and half an hour later two soldiers, uncongenial and brusque, came for him and escorted him to a waiting car, where a third man in Liberation uniform was at the controls. His two guards got in beside him. He was not riding in any clumsy jolting wagon this time, no open wooden cart, no farm truck. The vehicle was a smooth, sleek car of the sort that a Master might use, and probably once had.

The road went due westward, and then a little to the north. Joseph was in the habit by this time of determining his course by the position of the sun. Neither of his guards said a word, to each other or to him. After several hours they stopped for lunch at an ordinary public roadhouse: he was leaving the wilderness world behind, reentering the one he had once known, prosperous-looking farms on all sides, fields awaiting harvest, farm vehicles moving up and down the roads, everything seeming quite as it should but obviously under Folk control, no sign of a Master presence anywhere. The guards, silent as ever, watched him closely while they ate; when he asked to go to the restroom, one of them went with him. Joseph clearly saw that they had been ordered to prevent him from escaping, if that was what he had in mind, and probably they would shoot him if they thought that that was what he was trying to do. So, just as he still did not completely believe that he was being released, they did not completely believe that he was not a spy.

An hour more of driving, after lunch, brought them to an airfield, a smallish one that nevertheless must have been a reasonably important commercial field before the Liberation but now looked somewhat run down. A solitary plane, with dull-toned Liberation emblems painted over whatever insignia it had borne before, was waiting on the runway. The sight of it was another powerful reminder for Joseph of the modern civilized world that was somewhere out there, that he once had lived in and would be returning to now. He wondered how easy it was going to be to fit himself back in. His guards led him aboard, taking him to a seat in the front of the cabin, where he could not see any of his fellow passengers.

Joseph wondered if this was actually a flight to Helikis. Could that be possible? Had everyone on Homeworld already settled into such a complacent acceptance of the new order of things in liberated Manza that normal air traffic between the continents had resumed?

He had his answer soon enough. The plane took off, soared quickly to its cruising altitude, moved off on a southerly course. Joseph, sitting in the middle of a group of three seats, leaned forward across the guard at his right to stare out the window, looking hopefully for the narrowing of the land below that would tell him that they were nearing the sea and approaching the Isthmus, the little bridge of land that separated the two continents. But he saw no coastline down there, only an immense expanse of terrain, most of it divided into cultivated patches, reaching to each horizon. They were still in Manza. And now the plane was starting to descend. The flight had lasted perhaps two and a half hours, three at most. They had

gone only a relatively short distance, at least as aerial journeys went, though Joseph knew now that it would have taken him several lifetimes to cover that relatively short distance on foot, as he had with so much bravado intended to do. And he was still a long way from home.

"Where are we landing?" Joseph asked one of his guards.

"Eivoya," the guard said. The name meant nothing to Joseph. "It is where the border is."

It hardly seemed worthwhile to seek a more detailed explanation. The plane touched down nicely. Another car was waiting for Joseph at the edge of the runway. Once again the two guards took seats on either side of him. This time they drove about an hour more: it was getting to be late in the day, and Joseph was growing very tired, tired of this long day's traveling, tired of sitting between these two uncommunicative men, tired of having things happen to him. He realized that he was probably as close to home as he had been in over a year, and that this day he had covered a greater distance toward that goal than he had managed to cross by his own efforts in all the time since the burning of Getfen House. Yet he felt no sense of mounting jubilation. He still did not know what further obstacles lay between him and Keilloran. He might not even get there at all. And he was weary to the bone. This is what it feels like to be old, he thought. To cease to care, even about things that you have sought to achieve. I have aged seventy years in just these few months.

The car pulled up at the edge of what looked like an untilled field. There was nothing in view anywhere around, no farms, no buildings. He saw a few trees a long way off. There was a scattering of gray clouds overhead.

"This is where you get out," said the guard to his left. He opened the door, stepped out, waited.

"Here?" Joseph asked.

The guard nodded. He scowled and made an impatient backhanded gesture.

It made no sense. Here, in the middle of nowhere? This forlorn weedy field looked like exactly the sort of place where you would choose to take a prisoner to be executed, but if all they had wanted to do was kill him, why had they bothered to go through all this involved business of loading him on cars, flying him south, driving him around in the countryside? They could much more easily have shot him back at the camp. It would have caused no stir. Tens of thousands of Masters had been massacred in Manza already; the death of one more, even a stranded visitor from Helikis, would hardly make much difference in the general scheme of things.

"Out," the guard said again. "This is wasting time."

Very well, Joseph thought. Whatever they wanted. He was too tired to argue, and begging for his life was unlikely to get him anywhere.

The Folker pointed out into the field. "There's the border marker, out there ahead of you. Now run. Run as fast as you know how, in the direction that I'm pointing. I warn you, don't go in any other direction. Go! Now!"

Joseph began to run.

They will shoot me in the back before I have gone twenty paces, he told himself. The bolt will pass right through my pack, into my body, my lungs, my heart, and I will fall down on my face here in this field, a dead man, and they will leave me here, and that will be that.

"Run!" the guard called, behind him. "*Run!*"

Joseph did not look back to see if they were aiming at him, though he was sure that they were. He ran, ran hard, ran with all the determination he

could summon, but it was a tough sprint. The ground was rough beneath his feet, and not even these last few days of decent meals had brought him back to anything like a semblance of strength. He ran with his mouth open, gulping for air. He felt his heart working too quickly and protesting it. Several times he nearly tripped over the extended ropy stem of some treacherous low-growing shrub, lurched, staggered, barely managed to stay upright. He thought back to that time, what seemed like a hundred years ago, when he had lurched and staggered and stumbled and fallen in the forest near Getfen and had done that terrible injury to his leg. He did not want that to happen again, though it was strange to be fretting about anything so minor as an injured leg when two men with guns might be taking aim at him from behind.

But the shot that he had expected did not come. A few moments more and he ascended a little rise in the field, and when he came down the far side he saw a broad palisade standing before him, a row of stout logs tightly lashed together set in the ground, and he realized that he had arrived at the dividing point that set the two worlds apart, the boundary between the territory of the Liberation and that which must still remain under the sovereignty of his own people.

There was a gate in the palisade and a guard-post above it. The grim faces of four or five men were looking out at him. Joseph thought he saw the metal face of a gun facing him also.

Bringing himself to a stumbling halt a few dozen yards before the palisade, he raised his arms to show that he intended no harm. He hoped that they were expecting him.

"Masters!" he cried, in his own language, with what was nearly his last gasp of breath. "Help me! Help! Help!"

Then the ground came rushing up toward him and Joseph seized it and held it, because everything was whirling around. He heard voices above him, saw booted feet standing beside him. They were lifting him, carrying him through the gate.

"What place is this?" he asked, speaking through a thin mist of exhaustion.

"House Eivoya," someone said.

"You are Masters?"

"Masters, yes."

He was lying in a bed, suddenly. There were bright lights overhead. They were washing him. Someone was doing something to his arm, attaching something to it. Someone else was wrapping a kind of collar around his left ankle. Joseph had the impression that they were explaining to him the things that they were doing to him, step by step, but none of it made much sense, and after a time he gave up trying to follow it. It was easier to go to sleep, and he did. When he awoke, sleep still seemed the easier choice, and he glided back into it. The next time he awakened there were two people in the room, a man and a woman, older people, both of them, watching him.

The woman, he discovered, was his doctor. The man introduced himself as Federigo Master Eivoya, of House Eivoya. "And what is your name?" the man said.

"Joseph. Joseph Master Keilloran. Am I still in Manza?"

"Southern Manza, yes. Just north of the Isthmus. —Can you tell me your father's name, Joseph?"

"You don't believe I am who I say I am? Or are you just trying to see whether my mind still works?"

"Please."

"Martin is his name. Martin Master Keilloran. My mother was Mistress Wireille, but she's dead. My brothers' names—"

"You don't need to go on."

"So you believe me?"

"Of course we believe you. We needed to know, and now we do."

The woman said, "You'll want to rest for a while. You're half starved, you know. They treated you very badly in that prison camp, didn't they?"

Joseph shrugged. "I was in pretty bad shape when I got there. They didn't make things any better for me, though."

"No. Of course not."

She gave him something to make him sleep again. He dreamed of Thayle, tiptoeing into the room, climbing naked into the bed beside him, taking his thin ruined body into her arms, holding him against the warmth of her, her firm abundant flesh. He dreamed he was in the village of the Ardardin, discussing the difference between the visible world and the invisible one. At last it all was clear to him. He understood what the Ardardin meant by the axis of the worlds upon which all things spin, and the place where mundane time and mythical time meet. He had never really managed to grasp that before. Then he was back in the forest with the noctambulo, who was reciting noctambulo poetry to him in a low monotonous voice, and then he was in his own room at Keilloran House, with his mother and his father standing beside his bed.

When he woke his mind was clear again, and he saw that there was a tube going into his arm and another into his thigh, and he knew that this must be a hospital and that they were trying to repair the various kinds of damage that his long journey had inflicted on him. A younger man who said his name was Reynaldo was with him. "I am Federigo's son," he told Joseph. "If you have things to ask, you can ask me." He was about thirty, dark-haired, smooth-skinned, as handsome as an actor. Joseph had things to ask, yes, but he hardly knew where to begin. "Did the Folk conquer all of Manza?" he said, after a moment's hesitation. That seemed like as good a starting-point as any.

"Most of it, yes," Reynaldo said. "All but here." He explained that the Masters had been able to hold the line at Eivoya, that the rebel forces in the far south had not been strong enough to break through it and eventually they had abandoned the attempt and worked out an armistice acknowledging the continued sovereignty of the Masters over the southern tip of Manza. The rest of the northern continent, he said, was in Folkish hands, and he supposed that most or all of the Great Houses had been destroyed. The fighting had ended, now. Occasional straggling survivors from the north still made their way down here, said Reynaldo, but they were very few and far between these days. He said nothing about any plans to reconquer the territory that had been lost, and Joseph did not ask him about that.

"And Helikis?" Joseph said. "What happened there?"

"There was no rebellion in Helikis," said Reynaldo. "Everything in Helikis is as it always has been."

"Is that the truth, or are you just telling me that to make me feel better?"

"You should have no reason to distrust me," Reynaldo said, and Joseph let the point drop, though he realized that what Reynaldo had told him had not exactly been a reply to what he had asked.

He knew that he was very ill. In his struggle to survive, going again and again to the brink of starvation, he must have consumed most of his body's re-

sources. Perhaps he had been operating on sheer force of will alone, most of the time since he had left Eysar Haven. At his age he was still growing; his body needed a constant rich supply of fuel; instead it had been deprived, much of the time, of even a basic input of nourishment. But they were kind to him here. They knew how to heal him. He was back among his own, or almost so. Joseph had never heard of House Eivoya, but that did not matter: he had never heard of most of the Houses of Manza. He was grateful for its existence and for his presence at it. He might not have been able to survive much longer on his own. It was possible to take the position that his being captured by those rebel troops was the luckiest thing that had happened to him during his journey.

Once again Joseph began to recover. He realized that the innate resilience of his body must be very great. They took out the tubes; he began to eat solid food; soon he was up, walking about, leaving his room and going out on the balcony of the building. It appeared that the hospital was at the edge of a forest, a very ancient one at that, dark, primordial, indomitable giant trees with their roots in the prehistory of Homeworld standing side by side, green networks of coiling vines embracing their mammoth trunks to create an impenetrable barrier. For a moment Joseph thought that when he left here it would be necessary for him to enter that forest and cross it somehow, to solve all the terrible riddles that it would pose, the next great challenge on his journey, and the thought both frightened and excited him. But then he reminded himself that he had reached sanctuary at last, that he would not have to wander in dark forests any longer.

"Someone is here to see you," Reynaldo told him, a day or two later.

She came to his room, a tall dark-haired young woman, slender, elegantly dressed, quite beautiful. She looked astonishingly like his mother, so much so that for one startled moment Joseph thought that she was his mother and that he must be having hallucinations again. But of course his mother was dead, and this woman was too young, anyway. She could not have been more than twenty and might even be younger. And only then did it occur to Joseph that she must be his sister.

"Cailin?" he asked, in a small, tentative voice.

And she, just as uncertainly: "Joseph?"

"You don't recognize me, do you?"

She smiled. "You look so good with a beard! But so different. Everything about you is so different. Oh, Joseph, Joseph, Joseph, Joseph—"

He held out his arms to her and she came quickly to him, rushing into the embrace and then drawing back a little from it as though pausing to consider that he was still very fragile, that a hug that had any fervor to it might well break him into pieces. But he clung to her and drew her in. Then he released her, and she stepped back, studying him, staring. Though she did not say it, Joseph could see that she still must be searching, perhaps almost desperately, for some sign that this gaunt bearded stranger in front of her was in fact her brother.

He too was searching for signs to recognize her by. That she was Cailin he had no doubt. But the Cailin that he remembered had been a girl, tall and a little awkward, all legs and skinny arms, just barely come into her breasts, her face still unformed. This one—a year and a half later, two years?—was a woman. Her arms, the whole upper part of her body, had become fuller. So had her face. She had cut her long, wondrous cascade of black hair so that it reached only to her shoulders. Her chin was stronger, her nose more pronounced, and both changes only enhanced her beauty.

They were little more than a year apart in age. Joseph had always been fond of her, fonder than he was of any of the others, though he had often showed his liking for her in perversely heartless ways, callous pranks, little boorish cruelties, all manner of things that he had come to regret when it was too late to do anything about them. He was glad that she, rather than Rickard or one of the House servants, had come for him. Still, he wondered why she was the one who had been chosen. Rickard would be old enough to have made the journey. Girls—and that was what she really was, still, a girl—were not often sent on such extended trips.

"Is everything all right at Keilloran? I've heard nothing—nothing—"

She glanced away, just for the merest instant, but it was a revealing glance none the less. And she paused to moisten her lips before answering. "There have been—a few problems," she said. "But we can talk about that later. It's you I want to talk about. Oh, Joseph, we were so sure you were dead!"

"The combinant was broken. I tried to get in touch, the very first night when they attacked Getfen House, but nothing would happen. Not then or later, and then I lost it. It was taken away from me, I mean. By an Indigene. He wanted it, and I had to let him have it, because I belonged to them, I was a sort of slave in their village, their doctor—"

She was staring at him in amazement. He covered his mouth with his hand. He was telling her too much too soon.

"Communications were cut off for a while," Cailin said. "Then they were restored, but not with the part of Manza where you were. They attacked Getfen House—but you got away, and then what? Where did you go? What did you do?"

"It's a complicated story," he said. "It'll take me quite a while to tell it."

"And you're all right now?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Thinner. A few scars, maybe. Some changes here and there. It was a difficult time. —How is Rickard? Eitan? The girls?"

"Fine. Fine, all of them fine. Rickard had a difficult time too, thinking you were dead, knowing that he was going to have to be the Master of the House eventually in your place. You know what Rickard is like."

"Yes. I know what Rickard is like."

"But he's been coming around. Getting used to the idea. He's almost come to like it."

"I'm sorry to be disappointing him, then. —And Father?" Joseph said, the question he had been holding back. "How is he? How did he take it, the news that I was probably dead?"

"Poorly."

Joseph realized that he had asked two questions in one breath, and that Cailin had given him a single answer.

"But he rode with the shock, didn't he? The way he did when Mother died. The way he taught us all to do."

She nodded. But suddenly she seemed very far away.

Something is wrong, he thought. Those "problems" to which she had alluded. He was afraid to ask.

And she wanted to talk about him, anyway, where he had been, the things that had befallen him. Quickly he told her as much as he could, leaving out only the most important parts. That he had lived among a family of Folkers as a guest in their house, dependent on their mercy, not as a Master but as a weary hapless wayfarer whom they had taken in, and thus that he had

discovered things about the Folk that he had never understood before. That he had accepted aid also in his wanderings from even humbler races, noctambulos, Indigenes, periphars, and had come to see those beings in new ways too. That he had eaten insects and worms, and that he had been brought to the verge of madness more than once, even death. And that he had slept with a Folker girl. He was not ready to tell her any of that. But Joseph did describe his gaudier adventures in the forests, his perils and his escapes, and some of his hardships and injuries, and his strange new career as a tribal doctor, and his final captivity among the rebels. Cailin listened open-mouthed, awed by all he had been through, amazed by it. He saw her still studying him, too, as if not yet fully convinced that the stranger behind this dense black beard was the brother she remembered.

"I must be tiring you," she said, when at last he let his voice trail off, having run through all the easy things he could tell her and not willing yet to attempt the difficult ones. "I'll let you rest now. They say you'll be ready to leave here in another two or three days."

He wanted to go sooner, and told Reynaldo that. He insisted that he was strong enough to travel again. The doctors thought so too, Reynaldo told him. But the plane on which Cailin had arrived had already gone back to Helikis, and the next one would not be getting here until the day after tomorrow, or possibly the day after that, no one was quite certain. Joseph saw from that that the lives of the Masters of Homeworld must be far more circumscribed than they had been before the uprising, that even in supposedly untouched Helikis certain cutbacks had become necessary. Perhaps a good many of the planes that at one time had constantly gone back and forth between the continents had fallen into rebel hands and now served only the needs of the Liberation. But there was nothing to do except wait.

It turned out that the plane from Helikis did not arrive for five days. By then Joseph was able to move about as freely as he wished; he and Cailin left the building and walked across the hospital's broad gleaming lawn to the place where the lawn ended and the forest abruptly began, and stood silently, hand in hand, peering in at that dim, primordial world, wonderstruck by its self-contained forbiddingness, its almost alien strangeness. There was no way to enter it. The strangler vines that ran from tree to tree made entry impossible. A thin grayish light lit it from within. Bright-feathered birds fluttered about its perimeter. Sharp screeching noises came from the forest depths, and the occasional deep honking of some unknown creature wallowing in some muddy lake. Joseph found himself thinking that that gigantic, brooding, immemorial forest, forever untouched and untouchable by human hands, reduced all the little quarrels of the human world, Masters and Folk, Folk and Masters, to utter insignificance.

He did not take up with his sister the question of whatever it was that had happened at House Keilloran in his absence. He almost did not want to know. She volunteered nothing, and he asked nothing. Instead he told her, day by day, bit by bit, more about his journey, until at last he came to the part about Thayle, which he related quickly and without great detail, but leaving no doubt of what had actually taken place. Color came to Cailin's face, but her eyes were aglow with what seemed like unfeigned delight for him. She did not seem in any way shocked that he had yielded up his physical innocence, or that he had yielded it to a Folkish girl. She simply seemed pleased for him, and even amused. Maybe she knew that it was a common thing for Master boys to go to the girls of the Folk for the first time. He had

no idea of what she might know about any of this, or of what she might have experienced herself, for that matter. It was not a subject he had ever discussed with her. He did not see how he could.

The plane from Helikis arrived. It stayed overnight for refueling, and in the morning he and Cailin boarded it for the return journey.

Joseph was carrying his pack. "What is that?" Cailin asked, and he told her that a Folkish woman had given it to him the night of his flight from Getfen House, and that he had carried it everywhere ever since, his one constant companion throughout his entire odyssey. "It smells terrible," she said, wrinkling up her nose. He nodded.

The flight south took much longer than Joseph expected. They were over the Isthmus quickly—Eivoya, Joseph saw, was in the very last broad part of Manza before the narrowing of the land began, which told him just how little of the continent remained in Master control—and then, quite soon, he found himself looking down on the great brown shoulder of northern Helikis, that parched uppermost strip that marked the beginning of the otherwise green and fertile southern continent, and although he knew a Master was not supposed to weep except, perhaps, in the face of the most terrible tragedy, he discovered that a moistness was creeping into his eyes now at this first glimpse of his native soil, the continent that he had so often supposed he might never live to see again.

But then the stops began: at Tuilieme, at Gheznara, at Kem, at Dannias. Hardly did the plane take off and reach a decent altitude but it started to enter a pattern of descent again. Passengers came and went; freight was loaded aboard below; meals were served so often that Joseph lost track of what time of day it was. The sky grew dark and Joseph dozed, and was awakened by daybreak, and another landing, and the arrival of new passengers, and yet another takeoff. But then came the announcement, just when he had begun to think that he was fated to spend the rest of his life aboard this plane, that they were approaching Toroniel Airport, the one closest to the domain of House Keilloran, and Joseph knew that the last and perhaps most difficult phase of his journey was about to commence.

Rickard was waiting at the airport with a car and one of the family drivers, a sharp-nosed man whose name Joseph did not remember. He was startled to see how much his brother had grown. He remembered Rickard as a boy of twelve, plump, pouty, soft-faced, short-legged, still a child, though an extremely intelligent child. But he had come into the first spurt of his adolescent growth in Joseph's absence. He was half a foot taller, at least, just a few inches shorter than Joseph himself, and all that childish fat had been burned away in the process of growing: Rickard was gawky, now, even spindly, the way Cailin had been before him. His face was different, also: not only leaner but with a far more serious expression about the eyes and lips, as though Joseph's absence and presumed death had sobered him into a first awareness of what life now was going to be like for him as an adult, as the future Master of House Keilloran. Joseph felt a little shiver go traveling down his back at the sight of this new, changed Rickard.

They embraced in a careful, brotherly way.

"Joseph."

"Rickard."

"I never thought to see you again."

"I never doubted I'd come back," said Joseph. "Never. Oh, Rickard, you've grown!"

"Have I? Yes, I suppose I have. You look different too, you know. It's been practically two years. That beard—"

"Do you like it?"

"No," Rickard said. He gestured toward the car. "We should get in. It's a long drive."

Yes. Joseph had forgotten just how long it was. This was not Keilloran territory here, not yet. The airport was in the domain of House Van Rhyn. They drove off toward the west, through the broad savannas thick with purplish quivergrass that Joseph had loved to set trembling, and through the immense grove of blackleaf palms that marked the boundary between Keilloran and Van Rhyn, and past hills of pale lavender sand that marked the ancient sea-bed where Joseph and Cailin had sometimes gone hunting for little fossils. Then they came to the first of the cultivated fields, fallow at this time of year, a series of neat brown rectangles awaiting the winter sowing. Even now it was a good distance to the Inner Domain and the Great House itself. Rickard asked just a few questions of Joseph during the drive, the barest basic inquiries about the rebellion, his wanderings, the current state of his health. Joseph replied in an almost perfunctory way. He sensed that Rickard did not yet want the complete narrative, and he himself was not at the moment in the mood for telling it yet again. A great deal of chatter seemed inappropriate now anyway. Once they had settled into the car there was an air of reserve, even of melancholy, about Rickard that Joseph neither understood nor liked. And about Cailin too: she scarcely spoke at all.

Now they were in the Inner Domain, now they were going past the Blue Garden and the White Garden and the Garden of Fragrance, past the gaming-courts and the stables, past the lagoon, past the statuary park and the aviary; and then the airy swoops and arabesques of Keilloran House itself lay directly before them, rising proudly on the sloping ridge that formed a pedestal for the great building. Joseph saw that the Folk of the House had come out to welcome him: they were arrayed in two lengthy parallel rows, beginning at the front porch and extending far out onto the entrance lawn, hundreds and hundreds of them, the devoted servants of the clan. How long had they been waiting like this? Had some signal been given fifteen minutes before that the car bearing Master Joseph had entered the Inner Domain, or had they lined up in this formation hours ago, waiting here with Folkish patience for him to arrive?

The car halted on the graveled coachgrounds along the border of the lawn. Flanked by Rickard and Cailin, Joseph set out down the middle of the long lines of waiting Folk toward the house.

They were waving, grinning, cheering. Joseph, smiling, nodding, waved back at them with both hands. Some he recognized, and he let his eyes linger on their faces a moment; most of them he had forgotten or had never known, though he smiled at them also as he passed them by.

His smiles were manufactured ones, though. Within his soul he felt none of the jubilation that he had anticipated. In his fantasies in the forests of Manza, whenever he let his mind conjure up the longed-for moment of his return to Keilloran, he had imagined himself skipping down this path, singing, blowing kisses to shrubs and statues and household animals. He had never expected that he would feel so somber and withdrawn in the hour of his homecoming as in fact he was. Some of it, no doubt, was the anticlimactic effect of having achieved something for which he had yearned for so many months, and which had so often appeared to be unattainable. But

there was more to it than that: there was Rickard's mood, and Cailin's, their silences on the drive, the questions that they had not answered because he had not had the courage to ask them.

His youngest brother Eitan was waiting at the door, and his other two sisters, the little ones, Bevan and Rheena. Eitan was still only a small boy—ten, now, Joseph supposed, still round-faced and chubby—and he was staring at Joseph with the same worshipful look as ever. Then tears burst into his eyes. Joseph caught him up, hugged him, kissed him, set him down. He turned to the girls—virtual strangers to him in the time before his departure for High Manza, they had been, one of them five, the other seven, forever busy with their dolls and their pets—and greeted them too with hugs and kisses, though he suspected they scarcely knew who he was. Certainly they showed little excitement over his return.

Where is Father? he wondered. Why is Father not here?

Cailin and Rickard led him inside. But as the three of them entered the house Rickard caught him by the wrist and said in a low voice, almost as though he did not want even Cailin to hear what he was saying, "Joseph? Joseph, I'm so tremendously glad that you've come back."

"Yes. You won't have to be Master here after all, will you?"

It was a cruel thing to say, and he saw Rickard flinch. But the boy made a quick recovery: the hurt look went from his eyes almost as swiftly as it had come, and something more steely replaced it. "Yes," Rickard said. "That's true: I won't have to. And I'm happy that I won't, although I would have been ready to take charge, if it came to that. But that's not what I meant."

"No. I understand that. I'm sorry I said what I did."

"That's all right. We all know I never wanted it. But I missed you, Joseph. I was certain that you had been killed in the uprising, and—and—it was bad, Joseph, knowing that I'd never see you again, it was very bad, first Mother, then you—"

"Yes. Yes. I can imagine." Joseph squeezed Rickard's hand. And said then, offhandedly, "I don't see Father. Is he off on a trip somewhere right now?"

"He's inside. We're taking you to him."

Strange, the sound of that. He did not ask for an explanation. But he knew he had to have one soon.

There were more delays first, though: a plethora of key household officials waiting in the inner hall to greet him, chamberlains and stewards and bailiffs, and old Marajen, who helped his father keep the accounts, and formidable Sempira who had come here from the household of Joseph's mother's family to supervise all domestic details and still ran the place like a tyrant, and many more. They each wanted a chance to embrace Joseph, and he knew it would take hours to do the job properly; but he summoned up a bit of the training he had had from Balbus, and smilingly moved through them without stopping, calling out names, waving, winking, showing every evidence of extreme delight at being among them all once more, but keeping in constant motion until he was beyond the last of them.

"And Father—?" Joseph said, insistently now, to Rickard and Cailin.

"Upstairs. In the Great Hall," said Rickard.

That was odd. The Great Hall was a place of high formality, his father's hall of judgment, his seat of power, virtually his throne room, a dark place full of echoes. It was not where Joseph would expect a long-lost son to be welcomed. But his father was, after all, Martin Master Keilloran, the lord of this estate these many years past, and perhaps, Joseph thought, many

years of lordship will teach one certain ways of doing things that he was in no position yet to comprehend.

Joseph and his brother and his sister went up the grand central staircase together. Joseph's mind was spilling over with thoughts: things he would ask, once he had told his father the tale of his adventures, and things he must say.

He had it in mind to resign his rights as the heir to House Keilloran. It was an idea that had been lurking at the corners of his mind for days, only half acknowledged by him; but it had burst into full power as he came down that double row of smiling, waving, cheering Folk of the House. He would abdicate, yes. He would rather go to live among the Indigenes again, or as a peasant-farmer among the cuylings of Manza, than rule here as Master of the House, rule over the Folk of Keilloran like a king who has lost all yearning to be king. By what right do we rule here? Who says we are to be the masters, other than ourselves, and by what right do we say it? Let Rickard have the task of ruling. He will not like it, of course. But Rickard does not deny that we have the right, and he claims to be ready for it: he said that with his own lips, just a few minutes before. It is his, then, whenever the time comes for it. Let him be the next Master, the successor to their father, the next in the great line that went back so many centuries, when the time came.

"In here," Rickard said.

Joseph glanced at him, and at Cailin, whose eyes were cast down, whose lips were tightly clamped.

There was a twilight dimness in the Great Hall. The heavy damask draperies were closed, here on this bright afternoon, and only a few lamps had been lit. Joseph saw his father seated at the far end of the room in his huge ornate chair, the chair of state that was almost like a throne. He sat in a strange unmoving way, as though he had become a statue of himself. Joseph went toward him. As he came close he saw that the right side of his father's face sagged strangely downward, and that his father's right arm dangled like a mannequin's arm at his side, a limp dead thing. He looked twenty years older than the man Joseph remembered: an old man, suddenly. Joseph halted, horror-stricken, stunned, twenty feet away.

"Joseph?" came the voice from the throne. His father's voice was a thick, slurred sound, barely intelligible, not the voice that Joseph remembered at all. "Joseph, is that you, finally?"

So this was the little problem that Cailin had alluded to when he was in the hospital at Eivoya.

"How long has he been this way?" Joseph asked, under his breath.

"It happened a month or two after word reached here of the attack on Getfen House," Cailin whispered. "Go to him. Take him by the hand. The right hand."

Joseph approached the great seat. He took the dead hand in his. He lifted the arm. There was no strength in it. It was like something artificial that had been attached recently to his father's shoulder.

"Father—"

"Joseph—Joseph—"

That slurred sound again. It was dreadful to hear. And the look in his father's eyes: a frozen look, it was, alien, remote. But he was smiling, with the part of his mouth over which he still had control. He raised his left hand, the good one, and put it down over Joseph's, and pressed down tightly. That other arm was not weak at all.

"A beard?" his father said. He seemed to be trying to laugh. "You grew a

beard, eh?" Thickly, thickly: Joseph could barely understand the words. "So young to have a beard. Your grandfather wore a beard. But I never had one."

"I didn't mean to, not really. It just wasn't easy for me to shave, in some of the places where I was. And then I kept it. I liked the way it looked." He thinks I'm still a boy, Joseph realized. How much of his mind was left at all? Suddenly Joseph was wholly overcome with the sadness of what he saw here, and he drew his breath inward in a little gasping sound. "Oh, Father—Father, I'm so sorry—"

He felt Rickard kick him in the heel from behind. Rickard made a tiny hissing noise, and Joseph understood. Pity is not being requested here. My little brother is teaching me the proper way to handle this, he thought.

"I like it," his father said, very slowly. Again the twisted smile. He appeared not to have noticed Joseph's little outburst. "The beard. A new fashion among us. Or an old one revived." Joseph began to realize that his father's mind must still be intact, or nearly so, even if his body was no longer under its control. "You've been gone such a long time, boy. You look so different, now. You must be so different, eh?"

"I've been in some unusual places, Father. I've learned some strange things."

Martin nodded slowly. That seemed to be a supreme effort, that slow movement of his head. "I've been in some unusual places too, lately, without—ever—leaving—Keilloran—House." He seemed to be struggling to get the words out. "And I—look—different—too," he said. "Don't I?"

"You look fine, Father."

"No. Not true." The dark, hooded eyes drilled into him. "Not—fine—at—all. But you are here, finally. I can rest. You will be Master now, Joseph."

"Yes. If that's what you wish."

"It is. You must. You are ready, aren't you?"

"I will be," Joseph said.

"You are. You are."

He knew it was so. And knew also that he could not possibly think of abdication, not now, not after seeing what his father had become. All thought of it had fled. It had begun to fade from his mind the moment he had entered this room and looked upon his father's face; now it was gone entirely. Now that you are back, I can rest, is what his father was saying. That wish could not be ignored or denied him. The doubts and uncertainties that had been born in Joseph during the months of his wanderings were still there; but still with him, too, was that inborn sense of his obligation to his family and to the people of House Keilloran, and now, standing before the one to whom he owed his existence, he knew that it was not in him to fling that obligation back in the face of this stricken man. Rickard had not been trained for this. He had been. He was needed. He could not say no. When his time came to be Master, though, Joseph knew he would be Master in a way that was different from his father's.

The hand that was holding his pressed down harder, very hard indeed, and Joseph saw that there was still plenty of strength in what remained of Martin Master Keilloran. Not enough, though, to perform the tasks that the Master of the House must perform, and which, he saw now, would—in a month, six months, whenever—devolve upon him.

"But we need to talk, Father. When I've been home a little while, and when you feel up to it. There are things I need to ask you. And things I need to say."

"We'll talk, yes," his father said.

Cailin nudged him. She signaled with a roll of her eyes that it was time for Joseph to go, that this was the limit of their damaged father's endurance. Joseph gave her a barely perceptible nod. To Martin he said, "I have to leave, now, Father. I've had a long journey, and I want to rest for a while. I'll come to you again this evening." He squeezed the dead right hand, lifted it and kissed it and set it carefully down again, and he and Cailin and Rickard went from the room and down the hall, and into the family wing, and to the suite of rooms that had been his before his trip to Getfen, and where everything seemed to have remained completely as he had left it.

"We'll leave you to rest," Cailin said. "Ring for us when you're ready, and we can talk."

"Yes."

"That was hard, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Joseph said quietly. "Yes, it was."

He watched his brother and sister going down the hall, and closed the door, and was alone in his own bedroom once again. He sat down on the edge of the bed, his old bed that seemed so small, now, so boyish. As he sat there, letting the facts of his return wash over him, the bed became all the places that had been bed for him as he made his way across Manza, the rough hollows in the forest floor where he slept on bundles of dry leaves, and the stack of musty furs in the Ardardin's village, and the hard cot, sharp as bone, in the prisoner compound, and the place under the bush where he had drifted into the hallucinations of starvation that he untroubledly believed heralded the end of his life, and the little bed in Eysar Haven that had taken on the fragrance of Thayle's warm breasts and soft thighs, and all the rest of them as well, all flowing into one, this bed here, the little bed of his boyhood, the boyhood that now was done with and sealed.

In the morning, Joseph thought, he would go out and walk about the estate and reacquaint himself with its land and with its people. He would pull its air deep into his lungs. He would reach down and dig his fingers into its soil. He would visit the farms and the factories and the stables. He would look at everything, and he knew that there would be much that he would be seeing as though for the first time, not just because he had been away so long but because he would be seeing it all through the eyes of a different person, one who had been to far-off places and seen far-off things. But all that was for the next day, and for the days to come. For the moment he just wanted to lie here atop his own bed in his own room and think back through all that had befallen him.

I've had a long journey, and I want to rest for a while.

A long journey, yes, a journey that had begun in thunder that had brought no rain, but only endless thunder. And now it was over, and he was home, and some new sort of journey was just beginning. He was not who he had been before, and he was not certain of exactly what he had become, and he was not at all sure who he was going to be. He was full of questions, and some of those questions might never have answers, though he wanted to think he would go on asking them, over and over, nevertheless. Well, time would tell, or maybe not. He was home, at any rate. He had come by the longest possible route, a journey that had taken him deep into the interior of himself and brought him out in some strange new place. He knew that it would take time for him to discover the nature of that place. But there was no hurry about any of that. And at least he was home. Home. Home. ❍

ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

REVELATION SPACE
by Alastair Reynolds
Ace, $ 23.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-441-00835-6

Here at the start of the new millennium, much of the most interesting new work in SF originates in the British Isles. Stephen Baxter, Ken McLeod, and Paul McAuley are just a few of the British authors who've come out with big, ambitious, uncompromisingly *science fiction* novels in the last couple of years. Now comes *Interzone* (and *Asimov's*) author Alastair Reynolds, who on the basis of this first novel looks as good as any of them.

With the other recent British authors, Reynolds shares an unmistakable affection for good old-fashioned space opera, spiced with the stylistic flash and restless intelligence that Bester and Delany brought to the genre. This makes for a heady mixture, even for readers who don't recognize the taproots reaching back to "Doc" Smith and A.E. Van Vogt. Typically for this genre, the narrative focus is on a single larger-than-life figure; in this case, a near-immortal scientist named Sylveste.

We meet Sylveste at an archaeological dig on Resurgam, a planet once inhabited by an intelligent bird-like race, which we later learn became extinct in some unknown ancient disaster. Sylveste and his assistants are racing to uncover an artifact before the arrival of a "razor storm"—a sandstorm of devastating intensity, which threatens not only to rebury the excavated ruins but to kill the diggers. When he ignores the weather forecast and keeps digging, Sylveste sets off a course of events that ends with his political rivals seizing power and placing him under arrest.

Meanwhile, several people are searching for him. One is Ana Khouri, a mercenary snatched from a distant battlefield and trained as an assassin by someone she knows only as "the Mademoiselle." The other is Ilya Voyova, one of the officers of a heavily-armed FTL ship, *Nostalgia for Infinity,* the captain of which is infected with a cancer-like plague. Voyova needs to replace the ship's gunnery officer, whom she had to kill after he went mad, apparently haunted by a hostile entity called "Sun Stealer." These three strands coalesce when Khouri signs on as gunnery officer, and the ship departs for Resurgam.

Sylveste is accompanied by a "beta" simulation of his father Calvin, an eminent scientist and doctor whose experiments in transplanting minds into computer software led to his own demise.

It is Calvin's medical skills—which can be channeled through Sylveste—that Voyova and her crew seek, in hopes of curing (or at least delaying the plague's effects on) the captain. And the Mademoiselle quickly reveals that she has recruited Khouri as an agent to kill Sylveste—whom she accuses of being an agent of a plan to destroy all intelligent life in the universe. And these conflicts are only the beginning of the plot's considerable complications.

Reynolds sets these battling characters against a fascinatingly drawn background, in which *Nostalgia for*

Infinity is a central ornament. The ship's baroque architecture includes a variety of mini-environments, a fitting stage for the novel's complex action—especially after the arrival onboard of Sylveste and Calvin. The history of Resurgam, both before and after the arrival of humans, is a driving force of the plot. And Reynolds' other settings, which often have complex histories of their own, are likewise well done.

This Ace edition comes a year after the British (Gollancz) release of the book, and so I can report that Reynolds already has out a second novel, *Chasm City*, set in the same universe some years earlier than the events of *Resurrection Space*. I'll be looking forward to it when the U.S. edition arrives.

THE PICKUP ARTIST
by Terry Bisson
Tor, $ 22.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-87403-0

Bisson turns his satirical eye to a "problem" that most of us don't consider an issue: the proliferation of art in the modern world. We can see it in our own field: It was once fairly easy to keep up with the genre, even (as several old-time fans testify) to read every important piece of SF ever published. Nowadays, not even a speed reader would find it possible to read everything published. And forget about catching up with the old stuff—there's way too little time.

Bisson's answer is a government agency with the mission of removing old art from the world so that there's room for the new. The protagonist, Shapiro, is a pickup man—one who goes to private homes to collect outdated books, music, videos, and so forth. The rules for what gets pulled are complex, but one fact is central: possession of an outdated artist's work is punishable by law. On the day we first meet him, Shapiro is collecting works by Walter M. Miller, Jr., Clint Eastwood, and Hank Williams; from casual conversation we learn that the purge has also taken J.D. Salinger and Frank Sinatra. And we learn that Shapiro's dog, Homer, is ill.

Then an LP album jacket photo of Williams catches Shapiro's attention. (His own first name is *Hank,* although he never uses it.) His curiosity piqued by Williams' face and pose, he goes to an underground club where the banned arts are part of the fare, searching for a record player so he can hear the old time country singer's voice. Meanwhile, he has taken Homer to a veterinary hospital, where an appalling bureaucracy takes over—he spends much of the first few chapters trying to penetrate Byzantine phone systems in the vain hope of communicating with someone who can tell him what's happening.

And from there, things begin to fall apart. Shapiro's interest in Williams draws the attention of the security section of his bureau, and he is soon a wanted man. He is forced to kidnap Homer from the vet hospital, strike out across America in a van borrowed from Indian Bob, who inconveniently dies on the way. Bisson leads them through a brilliantly twisted variation on the great American road novel, interspersed with chapters on how the ban on outmoded art came to be. The plot comes to a climax in an abandoned Las Vegas skyscraper, where Shapiro finally gets to hear Williams and where the meaning of everything becomes clear. A fine, funny novel, with echoes of classic SF satirists like Robert Sheckley, but unmistakably Bisson's.

A SHORTAGE OF ENGINEERS
by Robert Grossbach
St. Martin's, $23.95
ISBN: 0-312-27554-4

This one's science fiction only if you consider that term to include

fiction about scientists—or, in this case, engineers. Grossbach follows Zack Zaremba, a young engineer whose first job after engineering school is with a Long Island plant doing defense work for the Air Force. As with many young men entering the world of real work, Zack quickly learns that everything he studied in school is next to useless.

To begin with, his employer has almost no idea of what to do with him. The various division managers he comes in contact with are more concerned with preserving their own turf than with making the project work. One senior engineer is running his own business out of the offices; another walks around wearing his necktie backward as a sign of defiance. The project was bid with specs nobody except the bosses—who of course aren't engineers—thinks the company has the faintest chance of meeting. The support services are completely dysfunctional. This probably sounds like quite a few places you've worked, and left behind with not a hint of regret. But Grossbach, by capturing the manic humor implicit in the situation, turns the description of a hellish job into a broad satiric romp. Zack finds various ways to make his daily life more or less tolerable—from illegally brewing his own hot drinks at his desk to starting bizarre competitions among his coworkers (e.g., weighing themselves before and after bowel movements). But his life turns interesting when one of those coworkers—an attractive woman from the Human Resources department—turns out to have a young son on the junior soccer team Zack is persuaded to coach. (With no experience and hopeless idealism, he is as overmatched as a soccer coach as he is on the job.) Grossbach's take on the stock theme of a young man learning about the real world is made fresh by his ability to deploy a convincing set of characters in a realistic setting, then gradually push them over the edge into the absurd. Add to this a good ear for the language and a sense of the telling detail, and you get a book that ought to belie the common complaint among genre readers that "mainstream" fiction is deadly dull. Well worth a look.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN: Author of the Century
by T.A. Shippey
Houghton Mifflin, $26.00
ISBN: 0-618-12764-X

The subtitle's claim is enough to make this book controversial in many circles—particularly among those academics who can't bear the notion of placing a writer so popular with the masses on the same plane as Joyce, Faulkner, and other icons of twentieth-century literature. But, easy as it is to jeer at the stuffiness of the ivory tower clique, honesty requires one to note that it is still less than a century after the publication *of Lord of the Rings* (LOTR)—perhaps a bit early to claim that it will appeal beyond its native era. I have met a fair number of intelligent readers who cannot be accused of snobbery, but who for one reason or another find Tolkien's epic unreadable. And even limiting the field to writers in English, it would be hard to name an "author of the century" for most previous centuries, with the possible exception of the fourteenth—and even there, Tolkien himself might argue against the "obvious" choice.

On the other hand, Tolkien's life and work fit directly in the center of the century's complex drama. In fact, he had much in common with the Moderns—like Hemingway, he served in the First World War; like Eliot and Pound, he found his anchors in early literature, and in the Church; and like Faulkner, his art

focuses on the history of an imaginary world with distinct similarities to our own. What makes Middle earth different from Yoknapatawpha County, of course, is the frank admission of the magical into the mythology. Tolkien is often credited with the invention of fantasy as a genre; in many ways, that's an overstatement. There were plenty of predecessors—as evidenced by the cover of the pirated 1965 Ace edition of *LOTR*, describing the contents as "sword and sorcery," a term readers of the time probably associated with such works as Leiber's "Fafhrd and Grey Mouser" stories, or Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*. On the other hand, one could convincingly argue that the modern fantasy genre didn't really emerge until Terry Brooks's Shannara books demonstrated that somebody other than Tolkien could provide whatever readers had found in *LOTR*. Curiously, not even Tolkien himself could recapture that particular whatever it was—nor did he seem to be at all interested in doing so. What he *was* interested in doing, according to Shippey, was playing around with languages. A world-class philologist, Tolkien knew more about language, and in particular about the languages that have contributed to the growth of modern English, than almost anyone of his era. Shippey points out numerous instances where an old word, or the hypothetical root of a modern word, was the inspiration for some detail of the Middle-earth saga—including the central inspiration (beginning with the title itself) of *The Hobbit*. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that most of the peoples of Middle-earth originated as languages, which then needed someone to speak them. The central portion of the book is a discussion of *Lord of the Rings*, from three different perspectives: plot, concepts of evil, and mythical dimensions. Interestingly, at several points here, Shippey takes issue with Tolkien's own statements about his work, notably his contention that *LOTR* is fundamentally Christian in its inspiration. In fact, beyond a sort of vague sense of ritual and spirituality, Shippey finds very little direct reflection of Christian doctrine in the work—in effect, like *Beowulf*, it takes place in a sort of limbo where the virtuous pagan need not fear exclusion from an afterlife that makes faith the one criterion of salvation.

Shippey's conclusions are too numerous and complex to allow easy summary here. Suffice it to say that the book is a well-thought-out analysis of Tolkien's major work, largely free of academic or critical jargon. Any reader familiar with Tolkien's major works—i.e., *The Hobbit* and *LOTR*—and interested in thinking about their larger significance will find much food for thought here. And, if my experience is typical, a lot of those readers will find themselves inspired to take another look at Tolkien's own writings.

THE GIANT LEAP: Mankind Heads for the Stars
by Adrian Berry
Tor, $24.95
ISBN: 0-312-87785-4

Travel to the stars, long a staple of science fiction, is the subject of this optimistic look at our race's future by a long-time science correspondent for London's *Daily Telegraph*.

Berry shares the SF reader's belief that exploration of worlds beyond our own solar system is inevitable. Never mind that even the shortest interstellar voyage could bankrupt even affluent nations, or that the technology described here exists in rudimentary form, if at all. Berry is interested in the big picture — and readers who can balance his

enthusiasm with healthy skepticism are likely to enjoy the ride, even when the details remain unclear.

Much of the focus is on the technical means of getting a ship to the nearest stars. Chemical rockets are too inefficient for interstellar flight, at least if one wants to complete the journey in some acceptable fraction of a human lifetime. So we get a detailed look at the virtues and flaws of antimatter drives, Bussard ramjets, and light sails, and at the vexing question of shielding passengers from the deadly energies some of these devices are likely to produce. Distance is the cheapest way of minimizing the radiation flux; Berry envisions ships that tow their passenger compartments kilometers behind the drive units. Provisioning a years-long voyage—assuming no unforeseen breakthrough to FTL travel emerges from the backwaters of theory—is another significant problem. The more the ship carries along, the greater the demands for fuel and power, already stretched to the breaking point. Worse, there are no handy ports for reprovisioning along the way. One likely solution is recycling on a hitherto-unknown scale; in theory, one can take any organic substance (in this case, human waste) and turn it into tasty, nutritious, food. An alternate (and currently popular) solution is keeping the majority of the passengers in some kind of suspended animation. However, barring an unexpected breakthrough in cryogenic techniques, the sleeping passengers will still need to be fed, possibly intravenously.

Those of the crew who do remain awake will need spacious accommodations. Exercise will be essential if they are to arrive at the end of their journey in condition to begin a colony on an alien world. They will also need ample entertainment to keep their minds sharp. Berry foresees elaborate computer games as the best answer to the latter question, not just passive adventures but participatory games on a level today's game designers are just beginning to create.

Arrival at the far end of the journey will be the beginning of a new phase of the enterprise, the wresting of a living from an untamed world with only those resources that justify shipping across the light-years—or those that can be created on the spot by the colonists. Terran animals will probably be shipped as frozen embryos, or even as genetic blueprints. But achieving a technological level that remotely approaches the society that sent them will be the work of generations—the first few of which are likely to think that stories of traveling through space are complete fabrications. Obviously some provision for education and indoctrination will be necessary; again, Berry sees this as the province of computer science.

Like its two illustrious predecessors—Arthur C. Clarke's *Profiles of the Future*, and Shklovskii and Sagan's *Intelligent Life in the Universe*—*The Giant Leap* combines deep familiarity with present technology with blue-sky speculation on the grandest possible scale. The test of this book, like those two pioneering works, will not be the long-range accuracy of its predictions (which none of us is likely to live long enough to judge) so much as its ability to provide inspiration for serious SF writers over the next couple of decades—and through them, for the engineers who will eventually try to make the first expeditions to the stars a reality. Recommended. ❍