

PeriAndry's Quest

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His first stories appeared in Interzone in the late '80s and he has subsequently published twenty novels (two in collaboration with Sir Arthur C. Clarke and five for younger readers), three collections of short fiction, and three non-fiction books. He has won the Philip K Dick, John W. Campbell Memorial, British Science Fiction Association, Kurd Lasswitz, Seiun, Locus, and Sidewise awards. His latest novel, Exultant, moves his new "Destiny's Children" series decisively into the far future of his sprawling "Xeelee" future history. Upcoming is final "Destiny's Children" novel, Transcendent and Sunstorm, a new novel with Sir Arthur C. Clarke. His story "Breeding Ground" was reprinted in Science Fiction: Best of 2003.

The story that follows tells a tale of love distorted by social expectation in a world where time itself is distorted.

The funerary procession drew up in the courtyard of the great House. The blueshifted light of Old Earth's sky washed coldly down over the shuffling people, and through a screen of bubbling clouds Peri glimpsed stars sailing indifferently by.

Peri took his place at the side of his older brother, MacoFeri. His mother CuluAndry, supported by her two daughters, stood behind him. ButaFeri's hearse would be drawn by two tamed spindlings. Peri's father had been a big man in every sense, a fleshy, loud, corpulent man, and now his coffin was a great box whose weight made the axles of his hearse creak.

Despite his bulk, or perhaps because of it, Buta had always been an efficient man, and he had trained his wife, sons, and daughters in similar habits of mind. So it was that the family was ready at the head of the cortege long before the procession's untidy body, assembled from other leading citizens of Foro, had gathered in place. Their coughs and grumbles in the chill semi-dark were a counterpoint to the steady wash of the river Foo, from which the town had taken its name, as it passed through its channelled banks across the Shelf.

"It's that buffoon of a mayor who's holding everybody up," MacoFeri complained.

Culu's face closed up in distress. BoFeri, Peri's eldest sister, snapped, "Hold your tongue, Maco. It's not the time."

Maco snorted. "I have better things to do than stand around waiting for a fat oaf like that — even today." But he subsided.

As the family continued to wait in the chill, servants from the Attic moved silently among them, bearing trays of hot drinks and pastries. The servants were dressed in drab garments that seemed to blend into the muddy light, and they kept their faces averted; the servants tried to be invisible, as if their trays floated through the air by themselves.

The delay gave PeriAndry, seventeen years old, an unwelcome opportunity to sort through his confused emotions. This broad circular plaza was the courtyard of ButaFeri's grand town House. The lesser lights

of the town were scattered before the cliff face beneath which Foro nestled, dissipating in the enigmatic ruins at the town's edge. In this setting the House glowed like a jewel — but ButaFeri had always counselled humility. Foro had been a much prouder place before the last Formidable Caress, he said. The 'town' as it was presently constituted seemed to have been carved out of the remains of a palace, a single mighty building within a greater city. And once, ButaFeri would say, even this wide courtyard had been enclosed by a vast, vanished dome, and over this ancient floor, now crossed by the hooves of spindlings, the richer citizens of a more fortunate time had strolled in heated comfort. Buta had been a wise man, but he had shared such perspectives all too infrequently with his younger son.

Just at that moment, as PeriAndry's sense of loss was deepest, he first saw the girl.

Suddenly she was standing before him, offering him pastries baked in the shape of birds. This Attic girl was taller than most of her kind; that was the first thing that struck him. Though she wore as shapeless a garment as the others, where the cloth draped conveniently he made out the curve of her hips. She was slim; she must be no more than sixteen. Her face, turned respectfully away, was an oval, with prominent cheekbones under flawless skin. Her mouth was small, her lips full. Her colouring was dark, rather like his own family's — but this was a girl from the Attic, a place where time ran rapidly, and he wondered if her heart beat faster than his.

As his inspection continued, she looked up, uncertain. Her eyes were a complex grey-blue. When she met his gaze, she gasped, startled, and the dense hot warmth of her breath drew him helplessly.

BoFeri, his elder sister, hissed at him. "Lethe, Peri, take a pastry or let her go. You're making an exhibition of us all."

He came back to himself. BoFeri was right, of course; a funeral was no place to be ogling serving girls. Clumsily he grabbed at a pastry. The girl hurried away, back to the Elevator that would return her to her Attic above the House.

MacoFeri had seen all this, of course. Buta's eldest son sneered, "You really are a spindling's arse, Peri. She's an Attic girl. She'll burn out ten times as fast as you. She'll be an old woman before you've started shaving..."

Maco's taunting was particularly hard for Peri to take today. After the ceremony, MacoFeri and BoFeri, as eldest son and daughter, the co-heirs of ButaFeri's estate and the only recipients of his lineage name, would sit down and work out the disposition of Buta's wealth. While Bo had shown no great interest in this responsibility, Maco had made the most of his position. "You love to lord it over me, don't you?" Peri said bitterly. "Well, it won't last forever, Maco, and then we'll see."

Maco blew air through his finely chiselled nostrils. "Your pastry's going cold." He turned away.

Peri broke open the little confection. A living bird, encased in the pastry, was released. As it fluttered up into faster time the beating of its wings became a blur, and it shot out of sight. Peri tried to eat a little of the pastry, but he wasn't hungry, and he was forced to cram the remnants of it into his pocket, to more glares from his siblings.

At last the cortege was ready. Even the Mayor of Foro, a wheezing man as large as ButaFeri, was in his place. Maco and Bo shouted out their father's name and began to pace out of the courtyard. The procession followed in rough order. The spindlings, goaded by their drivers, dipped their long necks and submitted to the labour of hauling the hearse; each animal's six iron-shod hooves clattered on the worn tiles.

The road they took traced the managed banks of the river Foo. Ruttled and worn, it ran for no more than

half a mile from the little township at the base of the cliff and across the Shelf, and even at a respectfully funereal pace the walk would take less than half an hour. As they proceeded the roar of falling water slowly gathered.

The Shelf was a plateau, narrow here but in places miles wide, that stretched into the mist to left and right as far as Peri could see. Behind the Shelf the land rose in cliffs and banks, up towards mistier heights lost in a blueshifted glare; and before it the ground fell away towards the Lowland. Foro was just one of a number of towns scattered along the Shelf, whose rich soil, irrigated by ancient canals, was dense with farms. Peri knew that representatives of towns several days' ride away had come to see off Buta today.

At last the hearse was drawn up to the very edge of the Shelf. The family took their places beside the carriage. Peri's mother had always had a fear of falling, and her daughters clustered around her to reassure her. There was another delay as the priest tried to light her ceremonial torch in the damp air.

The edge was a sheer drop where, with a shuddering roar, the river erupted into a waterfall. Reddening as it fell, the water spread out into a great fan that dissipated into crimson mist long before it reached the remote plain far below. The Lowland itself, stretching to a redshifted horizon, was a mass of deep red, deeper than blood, the light of slow time. But here and there Peri saw flashes of a greater brilliance, a pooling of daylight. There was no sun in the sky of Old Earth; it was the glow of these evanescent ponds of pink-white light, each miles wide, reflecting from high, fast-moving clouds, which gave people day and night, and inspired their crops to grow.

Standing here amid this tremendous spectacle of water and light, and with the stars wheeling through their three-minute days above his head, Peri was rather exhilarated. He felt as if he was cupped in the palm of mighty but benevolent forces — forces that made his life and concerns seem trivial, and yet which cherished him even so. This perspective eased the pain of his father's loss.

At last the priest had her torch alight. With a murmuring of respectful words, she touched her fire to the faggots piled in the carriage around the coffin. Soon flame nuzzled at the box which confined ButaFeri.

Among the faggots were samples of Buta's papers — diaries, correspondence, other records — the bulk of which was being torched simultaneously at Buta's home. This erasure was the custom, and a comfort. When the next Formidable Caress came and civilisation fell once more, everything would be lost anyhow — all painfully accumulated learning dissipated, all buildings reduced to ruin — and it was thought better to destroy these hard-won monuments now rather than leave them to the relentless workings of fate.

For long minutes, family, priest, and crowd watched the fire hopefully. They were waiting for an Effigy to appear, a glimpse of a miracle. The spindlings grazed, indifferent to human sentiment.

And in that difficult moment Peri saw the Attic girl again. Once more she moved through the crowd bearing a tray of steaming drinks, restoratives after the march from Foro. Now she was wearing a dress of some black material that clung languidly to her curves, and her dark hair was tied up so that the sweep of her neck was revealed. Peri couldn't take his eyes off her.

Maco nudged him. "She's changed, hasn't she? It's — what, an hour? — since you last saw her. But in that time she's been to the Attic and back; perhaps half a day has passed for her. And perhaps it's not just her clothes she's changed." He grinned and licked his lips. "At that age these colts can grow rapidly, their little bodies flowing like hot metal. I should know. There was a girl I had, oh, three years ago — an old crone by now, no doubt — but — "

"Leave me alone, Maco."

"I happen to know her name," Maco whispered. "Not that it's any concern of yours — not while our

father burns in his box."

Peri couldn't help but give him his petty victory. "Tell me."

"Lora. Much good it will do you." Maco laughed and turned away.

There was a gasp from the crowd. A cloud of pale mist burst soundlessly from the burning coffin. It hovered, tendrils and billows pulsing — and then, just for a heartbeat, it gathered itself into a form that was recognisably human, a misty shell with arms and legs, torso and head. It was ButaFeri, no doubt about that; his bulk, reproduced faithfully, was enough to confirm it.

Buta's widow was crying. "He's smiling. Can you see? Oh, how wonderful..." It was a marvellous moment. Only perhaps one in ten were granted the visitation of an Effigy at death, and nobody doubted that ButaFeri was worthy of such an envoi.

The sketch of Buta lengthened, his neck stretching like a spindling's, becoming impossibly long. Then the distorted Effigy shot up into the blueshifted sky and arced down over the edge of the cliff, hurling itself after the misty water into the flickering crimson of the plain below. It was seeking its final lodging deep in the slow-beating heart of Old Earth, where, so it was believed, something of Buta would survive even the Formidable Caresses.

The watching dignitaries broke into applause, and, the tension released, the party began to break up. Peri did his best within the bounds of propriety to search for the girl Lora, but he didn't glimpse her again that day.

MacoFeri and BoFeri, brother and sister armed with the name of their dead father, went into conclave for two days. They emerged smiling, clearly having decided the fates of their siblings, their mother and the cast of servants in the House and its Attic. But they stayed silent, to PeriAndry's fury; they would take their own sweet time about revealing their decisions to those grateful recipients. Though his uncertainty was thereby prolonged, there was nothing Peri could do about it.

Maco's first independent decision was to organise a wild spindling hunt. He proclaimed the hunt would be a final celebration of his father's life. Despite his own turmoil, Peri could hardly refuse to take part.

A party of a dozen formed up on laden spindlings and galloped off along the Shelf. It was a young group; Maco, at twenty-three, was the oldest of them. He carried a bundle of goodwill letters to hand to the mayors of the towns they passed. And he prevailed upon his youngest sister KelaAndry to keep a chart of their travels; the world wasn't yet so well known that there wasn't more to be mapped.

As they rode, the roar of the Foo diminished behind them, and Foro was soon lost in the mist. It would likely take them many days before they even glimpsed their first wild spindling. After the Formidable Caress, it was said, the spindlings had come to graze in the very ruins of the ancient, abandoned towns, and to kill or capture them had been easy; but as the settlements at the foot of the cliff had grown again, the wild spindling herds were harder to find. But the journey itself was pleasant. The party settled into a comfortable monotony of riding, making camp, cooking, sleeping.

Of the dozen who travelled, seven were women, and there was a good deal of badinage and flirting. As early as the second night three couples had formed.

Peri had always been a vigorous, athletic type, and he had hoped that the hunt would take his mind off his own troubles. But he kept himself to himself, by day and by night.

It was not that he was inexperienced. Since the age of fifteen, his father had programmed for him a series

of liaisons with local girls. The first had been pretty, compliant, and experienced, Buta's intention being to tutor his son and to build his confidence and prowess. After that had come brighter, tough-minded girls, and subtler pleasures followed as Peri learned to explore relationships with women who were his peers. Though he had formed some lasting friendships, nothing permanent had yet coalesced for him. That was only a matter of time, of course.

The trouble was that now it would not be his father selecting potential mates for him: no, from now on it would be his brother Maco, with perhaps a little advice from Bo. Perhaps the women on this very trip had been invited with that in mind — although Peri was sure Maco would sample the wares before allowing his inferior brother anywhere near them.

All this, and the lingering uncertainty over his destiny, was hard to bear. He seemed to lose confidence. He had no desire to mix with the others, had nothing to add to their bantering conversations. And as he lay in his skin sleeping bag, with the warm presence of his favourite spindling close by, Peri found his thoughts returning to Lora, the girl he had glimpsed on the day of his father's funeral.

He hadn't forgotten the surge of helpless longing he had felt as he studied her demure face, her carelessly glimpsed figure. She hadn't said a word to him, or he to her — and yet, though she was just a servant, he sensed there had been something between them, as elusive yet as real as an Effigy, there to be explored if only he had the chance. And how he longed for that chance!

In his obsessive imagining, Peri constructed a fantasy future in which he would seek out the girl. He would show her his life, perhaps fill in the inevitable gaps in her learning — though not too quickly; he rather liked the idea of impressing her with his worldliness. They would grow together, but not through any seduction or displays of wealth: their Effigies would call to each other, as the saying had it. At last they would cement their love, and much of his detailed imagining centred on *that*.

After that, well, he would present their liaison to his family as an accomplished fact. He would ride out their predictable objections, claim his inheritance, and begin his life with Lora... At that point things got a bit vague.

It was all impossible, of course. There were few hard and fast laws in Foro; the community was too young for that, but it went against all custom for a Shelf man to consort with an Attic servant, save for pure pleasure. But for Peri, a romance with Lora would bring none of the complication of his liaisons with women from the town, none of the unwelcome overlay of inheritance and familial alliance — and none of his brother's gleeful manipulation, for this would be Peri's own choice.

Elaborating this comforting fantasy made the days and nights of the hunt easier to bear. Or at least that was so before Maco, with almost preternatural acuity, figured out what he was thinking.

It was a bright morning, a couple of weeks after the hunters had set off. They were running down a small herd of wild spindlings, perhaps a score of the animals including foals. Here the Shelf was heavily water-carved, riddled with gullies and banks, and the southern cliffs were broken into round-shouldered hills. The party was galloping at top speed, their spare mounts galumphing after them, and they raised a curtain of dust that stretched across the Shelf.

The spindlings' six-legged running looked clumsy, but was surprisingly effective, a mixture of a loping run with leaps forward powered by the back pair of legs. The spindlings' six-limbed body plan was unlike those of most of Old Earth's land animals, including humans. But then, so it was said, the spindlings' ancestors had not come from Earth. Unladen, the wild spindlings were naturally faster than their hunters' mounts, but, panicking, they would soon run themselves out.

Maco rode alongside Peri. He yelled across, "So how's my little brother this morning?"

"What do you want, Maco?"

Maco was very like his father when young — dark, handsome, forceful — but already he showed traces of Buta's corpulence in his fleshy jowls. "We've been talking about you. You're keeping yourself to yourself, aren't you? Head full of dreams as usual — not that there's room in there for much else. The thing is, I think I know what you've been dreaming about. That serving girl at the funeral. *Lora*. Your tongue has been hanging out ever since..." He clenched his fist and made obscene pumping motions. "Is she keeping you warm in your sack?"

"You're disgusting," Peri said.

"Oh, don't be a hypocrite. You know, you're a good hunter, PeriAndry, but you've a lot to learn. I think you will learn, though. You're certainly going to have plenty of opportunity."

Peri hauled on his reins to bring his spindling to a clattering halt. Maco, startled, rode on a few yards before pulling up and trotting back. Their two panting beasts dipped their long dusty heads and nuzzled each other.

Peri, furious now, said, "If you're talking of my inheritance, then tell me straight. I'm tired of your games."

Maco laughed. "You're not a very good sport, little brother."

Peri clenched his fists. "I'll drag you off that nag and show you what a good sport I am."

Maco held up his hands. "All right, all right. Your inheritance, then: in fact, it's one reason I organised this hunt — to show you what I'm giving you."

"What do you mean?"

Maco swept his arm wide. "All the land you see here, across the width of the Shelf — all this belonged to Buta. Our father bought the land as a speculation from a landowner in Puul, the last town, half a day back. Right now it's got nothing much to offer but wild spindlings and scrub grass..."

"And this will be mine," Peri said slowly.

"It's a good opportunity," Maco said earnestly. "There's plenty of water in the area. Some of these gullies may actually be irrigation channels, silted up and abandoned. Good farming land — perhaps not for our generation, but certainly our children. You could establish a House, set up an Attic in those hills. You could make your mark here, Peri."

"This is a dismal place. My life will be hauling rocks and breaking dirt. And we're fourteen days' ride from home."

"*This* will be your home," Maco said. As he spoke of Peri's inheritance, Maco had seemed to grow into his role, sounding masterful, even wise. But now a brother's taunts returned, sly, digging under Peri's skin. "Perhaps you could bring your little serving girl. She can make you pastries all day and let you hump her all night..."

Peri blurted out, "It is only custom which keeps me from her."

Maco let his jaw drop. "Hey — you aren't serious about this foal, are you?"

"Why should I not be?"

Maco said harshly, "Kid, she lives in the Attic. Up there, for every day that passes for you, ten or twelve pass for her. Already months have gone by for her... I know from experience: those Attic girls are sweet, but they turn to dust in your hands, until you can't bear to look at them. Already your Lora must be ageing, that firm body sagging..."

If it had gone on a minute longer Peri might have lost control, even struck his brother, and the consequences would have been grave. But there were cries from across the plain. Peri saw that the party had backed the family of spindlings into a dry gully. Grateful for an excuse to get away, Peri spurred his mount into motion.

The spindlings, cornered, clustered together. There were more than a dozen adults, perhaps half as many colts. They seemed helpless as the hunters closed their circle.

But then four of the adults craned their necks high in the air, and their heads, three yards above their bodies, turned rapidly. With a whinny the four broke together, clattering up the gully's dusty wall. The movement was so sudden and coordinated they cut through the hunters' line and escaped.

The spindlings' long necks were an evolutionary response. On Old Earth, time passed more rapidly the higher you went, a few percent for each yard. The spindlings were not native to Earth, but they had been here more than a million years, long enough for natural selection to work. That selection had favoured tall animals: with their heads held high, the longer-necked were able to think just a little faster and, over time, that margin of a few percent offered a survival advantage. Now these accelerated adults had abandoned the young, the old and feeble, but they would live to breed again.

The young hunters didn't care about evolutionary strategies. The aged adults made easy meat, and the captured youngsters could be broken and tamed. The hunters closed in, stabbing spears and ropes at the ready. Already they sang of the feast they would enjoy tonight.

But PeriAndry did not sing. He had made up his mind. Before the night came, he would leave the party. Perhaps this desolate stretch of remote scrubland was his destiny, but he was determined to explore his dreams first — and to achieve that he had to return home.

It took Peri just ten days to ride back to Foro. Each day he drove on as long as he could, until exhaustion overtook him or his mounts.

When he got home, he spoke to his mother briefly, only to reassure her of the safety of the rest of the hunting party, then retired to his room for the night.

His sister BoFeri insisted on seeing him, though, and she briskly extracted the truth of what he intended.

"Listen to me," she said. "We're different stock, we folk of the Shelf, from the brutes of the Attic, and similar lofty slums. Time moves at a stately pace here — and that means it has had less opportunity to work on us." She prodded his chest. "We are the ones who are truest to our past — we are the closest to the original stock of Old Earth. The Attic folk have been warped, mutated by too much time. Think about it — those rattling hearts, the flickering of their purposeless generations! The Attic folk aren't human as we are. Not even the pretty ones like Lora. Good for tugging, yes, but nothing more..."

"I don't care what you say, Bo, or Maco."

Her face was a mixture of his mother's kindness with Maco's hard mockery. "It is adolescent to have crushes on Attic serving girls. You are evading your responsibilities, Peri; you are escaping into fantasy. You are so immature!"

"Then let me grow up in my own way."

"You don't know what you will find up there," she said, more enigmatically. "I'm afraid you will be hurt."

But he turned away, and would not respond further.

He longed to sleep, but could not. He didn't know what the next day would bring. None of his family, to his knowledge, had ever climbed the cliff before, but that was what he must do. He spent the night in a fever of anticipation, clutching at shards of the elaborate fantasy he had inflated, which Maco had so easily seen and punctured.

In the morning, with the first light, he set out in search of Lora — if not yet his lover, then the recipient of his dreams.

There were two ways up the cliff: the Elevator, and the carved stairways. The Elevator was a wooden box suspended from a mighty arrangement of ropes and pulleys, hauled up a near-vertical groove in the cliff face by a wheel system at the top. This mechanism was used to bring down the servants and the food, clean clothes and everything else the Attic folk prepared for the people of the House; and it carried up the dole of bread and meat that kept the Attic folk alive.

The servants who handled the Elevator were stocky, powerful men, their faces greasy with the animal fat they applied to their wooden pulleys and their rope. When they realised what Peri intended, they were startled and hostile. This dismayed Peri; though he had anticipated resistance from his family, somehow he hadn't considered the reaction of the Attic folk, though he had heard that among them there was a taboo about folk from the House visiting their aerial village — not that anybody had ever wanted to before.

But anyhow he had already decided to take the stairs. He imagined the simple exertion would calm him. Ignoring the handlers, without hesitation he placed his foot on the first step and began to climb, counting as he went. "One, two, three..."

These linked staircases, zigzagging off into the blue-tinged mist over his head, had been carved out of the face of the cliff itself; they were themselves a monumental piece of stonework. But the steps were very ancient and worn hollow by the passage of countless feet. The first change of direction came at fifty steps, as the staircase ducked beneath a protruding granite bluff. "Fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six..." The staircase was not excessively steep, but each step was tall. By the time he had reached a hundred and fifty steps, he was out of breath, and he paused.

He had climbed high above Foro. The little town, unfamiliar from this angle, was tinged by a pinkish redshift mist. He could see people coming and going, a team of spindlings hauling a cart across the courtyard before his House. He imagined he could already see the world below moving subtly slower, as if people and animals swam through some heavy, gelatinous fluid. Perhaps it wasn't the simple physical effort of these steps that tired him out, he mused, but the labour of hauling himself from slow time to fast, up into a new realm where his heart clattered like a bird's.

But he could see much more than the town. The Shelf on which he had spent his whole life seemed thin and shallow, a mere ledge on a greater terraced wall that stretched up from the Lowland to far above his head. And on the Lowland plain, those pools of daylight, miles wide, came and went. The light seemed to leap from one transient pool to another, so that clusters and strings of them would flare and glow together. It was like watching lightning spark between storm clouds. There were rhythms to the sparkings, though they were unfathomable to Peri's casual glance, compound waves of bright and dark that chased like dreams across the cortex of a planetary mind. These waves gave Old Earth a sequence

of day and night, and even a kind of seasonality.

He continued his climb. "One hundred and twenty-one, one hundred and twenty-two..."

He imagined what he would say to Lora. Gasping a little, he even rehearsed little snippets of speech. "Once — or so it is said — all of Old Earth enjoyed the same flow of time, no matter how high you climbed. Some disaster has disordered things. Or perhaps our stratified time was given to us long ago for a purpose. What do you think?" Of course his quest was foolish. He didn't even know this girl. Even if he found her, could he really love her? And would his family ever allow him to attain even a fragment of his dreams? But if he didn't try he could only imagine her, up here in the Attic, ageing so terribly fast, until after just a few years he could be sure she would be dead, and lost forever. "Ah, but the origin of things hardly matters. Isn't it wonderful to know that the slow rivers of the Lowlands will still flow sluggishly long after we are dead, and that in the wheeling sky above stars explode with every breath you take?" And so on.

At the Shelf's lip, where his father's pyre still smoldered, he saw the Foo waterfall tumble into space, spreading into a crimson fan as it fell. Buta had once tried to explain to him *why* the water should spread out instead of simply falling straight down. The water, trying to force its way into the plain's glutinous deep time, was pushed out of the way by the continual tumble from behind, and so the fan formed. It was the way of things, Buta had said. The stratification of time was the key to everything on Old Earth, from the simple fall of water to the breaking of human hearts.

At last the staircase gave onto a rocky ledge. He rested, bent forward, hands on his knees, panting hard. He had counted nine hundred steps; he had surely climbed more than two hundred yards up from the Shelf. He straightened up and inspected his surroundings.

There was a kind of village here, a jumble of crude buildings of piled stone or wood. So narrow was the available strip of land that some of these dwellings or storerooms or manufactories had been built in convenient crevices in the cliff itself, connected by ladders and short staircases. This was the Attic, then, the unregarded home and workplace of the generations of servants who served the House of Feri.

He walked along the Attic's single muddy street. It was a grim, silent place. There were a few people about — some adults trudging wearily between the rough shanties, a couple of kids who watched him wide-eyed, fingers picking at noses or navels. Everybody else was at work, it seemed. If the children were at least curious, the adults were no friendlier than the Elevator workers. But there was something lacking in their stares, he thought: they were sullen rather than defiant. At the head of the Elevator the pale necks of tethered spindlings rose like flowers above weeds. They were here to turn the wheel that hauled the Elevator cage up and down. One weary animal eyed him; none of its time-enhanced smartness was any use to it here.

Near some of the huts cooking smells assailed him. Though it was only morning yet, the servants must be working on courses for that evening's dinner. The hour that separated two courses on the ground corresponded to no less than ten hours here, time enough to produce dishes of almost magical perfection, regardless of the unpromising conditions of these kitchens.

A woman emerged from a doorway, wiping a cauldron with a filthy rag. She glared at Peri. She was short, squat, with arms and hands made powerful by a lifetime's labour, and her tunic was a colourless rag. He had no idea how old she was: at least fifty, judging from the leathery crumples of her face. But her eyes were a startling grey-blue — startling for they were beautiful despite their setting, and startling for their familiarity.

He stood before her, hands open. He said, "Please — "

"You don't belong in blueshift."

"I have to find somebody."

"Go back to the red, you fool."

"Lora," he said. He drew himself up and tried to inject some command into his voice. "A girl, about sixteen. Do you know her?" He fumbled in his pocket for money. "Look, I'll make it worth your while."

The woman considered his handful of coins. She pinched one nostril and blew a gout of snot into the mud at his feet. But, ignoring the coins, wiping her hands on her filthy smock, she turned and led him further into the little settlement.

They came to the doorway of one more unremarkable shack. He heard singing, a high, soft lilt. The song seemed familiar. His breath caught in his throat at its beauty, and, unbidden, fragments of his elaborate fantasy came back to him.

He stepped to the doorway and paused, letting his eyes adapt to the gloom. The hut's single room contained a couple of sleeping pallets, a hole in the ground for a privy, and a surface for preparing food. The place was hot; a fire burned in a stone-lined grate.

A woman stood in one shadowed corner. She was ironing a shirt, he saw, wrestling at tough creases with a flat-iron; more irons were suspended over the fire. The work was obviously hard, physical. The woman stopped singing when he came in, but she kept labouring at the iron. Her eyes, when they met his, were unmistakable, unforgettable: a subtle grey-blue.

For a moment, watching her, he couldn't speak, so complex and intense were his emotions.

That could be my shirt she's ironing: that was his first thought. All his life he had been used to having his soiled clothes taken and returned as soon as he wanted, washed and folded, ironed and scented. But here was the cost, he saw now, a woman labouring for ten hours for every hour lived out by the slow-moving aristocrats below, burning up her life for his comfort. And if he lived as long as his father, he might see out *ten generations* of such ephemeral servants before he died, he realised with a shock: perhaps even more, for he could not believe that people lived terribly long here.

But she was still beautiful, he saw with relief. A year had passed for her in the month since he had seen her last, and that year showed in her; the clean profile of a woman was emerging from the softness of youth. But her face retained that quality of sculpted calm he had so prized on first glimpsing it. Now, though, there was none of the delicious startle he had seen when he had first caught her eye; in her expression he saw nothing but suspicion.

He stepped into the hut. "Lora — I know your name, but you don't know mine... Do you remember me? I saw you at my father's funeral — you served me pastries — I thought then, though we didn't speak, that something deeper than words passed between us... Ah, I babble." So he did, all his carefully prepared speeches having flown from his head. He stammered, "Please — I've come to find you."

Something stirred on one of the beds: a rustling of blankets, a sleepy gurgle. It was a baby, he realised dimly, as if his brain was working at the sluggish pace of the ground. Lora carefully set down her iron, walked to the bed and picked up the child. No wonder her song had seemed familiar: it was a lullaby.

She had a baby. Already his dreams of her purity were shattered. The child was only a few months old. In the year of her life that he had already lost, she must have conceived, come to term, delivered her child. But the conception must have happened soon after the funeral...

Or at the funeral itself.

She held out the child to him. "Your brother's," she said. They were the first words she had said to him.

He recoiled. Without thinking about it, he stumbled out of the hut. For a moment he was disoriented, uncertain which way he had come. The dreadful facts slowly worked into his awareness. *Maco*: had he really wanted her — or had he taken her simply because he could, because he could steal her from his romantic fool of a younger brother?

The old woman was here, the woman with Lora's eyes — her mother, he realised suddenly. "You mustn't be here," she growled. "You'll bring harm."

In his befuddled state, this was difficult to decode. "Look, I'm a human being as you are. You've no reason to be frightened of me... This is just superstition." But perhaps that superstition was useful for the House folk to maintain, if it kept these labouring servants trapped in their Attic. And this mother's anger was surely motivated by more than a mere taboo. He didn't understand anything, he thought with dismay.

The woman grabbed his arm and began to drag him away. Still dazed, his emotions wracked, he allowed himself to be led through the mud. There seemed to be more people about now. They all glared at him. He had the odd idea that the only thing that kept them from harming him was that it hadn't occurred to them.

He reached the Elevator. The boxy cage was laden with cereals, fruit, platters of cold meat, pressed tablecloths. It was the stuff of a breakfast, he thought dully; no matter how much time had elapsed up here, on the ground the House had yet to wake up. He took his place in the cage and waited for the descent to begin, with as much dignity as he could muster.

"... And you can go too, you with your red-tinged bastard!"

He turned. The scowling woman had dragged Lora out of her hut and had hauled her by main force to the Elevator. For a second Lora resisted; holding her child, she met Peri's eyes. Perhaps if he had acted then, perhaps if he had found the right words, he could have saved her from this dreadful rejection. But there was nothing inside him, nothing left of the foolish dream he had constructed around this stranger. Shamed, he looked away. With a final shove the hard-faced woman deposited Lora inside the cage.

As they waited for the captive spindlings to start marching in their pen, Peri and Lora avoided each other's gaze, as if the other didn't even exist.

The Elevator descended. Peri imagined slow time flowing through him once more, dulling his wits. His mood became sour, claustrophobic, resentful. But even as he cowered within himself, he reflected how wrong BoFeri had been. These Attic folk couldn't be so different from the people of the Shelf after all, not if a son of the House could sire a baby by an Attic woman.

At last the Elevator cage thumped hard against the ground. The heaps of cold meat and tablecloths slumped and shifted.

Peri threw open the gate — but it was Lora who pushed out of the cage first. She ran from the Elevator, away from the House, and made for the cobbled road that led to Buta's pyre by the edge of the Shelf. Peri, moved by shame, wanted nothing more to do with her. But he followed.

At the edge of the Shelf he came on his eldest sister BoFeri. She was feeding more papers into the smoldering heap of the pyre. For all the time he had spent in the Attic, here on the Shelf it was still early morning.

The girl Lora was only a few yards away. Clutching her baby she stood right on the edge of the Shelf and peered down at the waterfall as it poured into the red mist below. The wind pushed back her hair, and her beautiful face glistened with spray.

Bo eyed Peri. "So you went up into the Attic." She had to shout over the roar of the Foo. "And I suppose that's the girl Maco tugged so brazenly at Buta's funeral."

Peri felt as if his world was spinning off its axis. "You knew about that? Was I the only one who didn't see?"

Bo laughed, not unkindly. "Perhaps you were the one who least wanted to see. I said you would be hurt if you went up there."

"Do you think she's going to jump?"

"Of course." Bo seemed quite unconcerned.

"It's my fault she's standing there. If I hadn't gone up, they might have let her be. I have to stop her."

"No." Bo held his arm. "She has no place in the Attic now. But what will she do here, with her half-breed runt? No, it's best for all of us that it ends here. And besides, she believes she has hope."

It was a lot to take in. "Best for all of us? How? And — hope? Hope of what?"

"*Look down*, Peri. The Lowland is deep beneath us here, for the waterfall has worn a great pit. Lora believes that if she hurls herself down, she and her baby will sink deeper and deeper into slow time. She won't even reach the bottom of the pit. Her heart will stop beating, and she and her baby will be preserved like flies in amber. There have been jumpers before, you know. No doubt they are there still, arms flung out, their last despairing thoughts frozen into their brains, trapped in space and time — as dead as if they had slit their throats. Let her join that absurd flock."

Lora still hesitated at the edge, and Peri wondered if she was listening to this conversation. "And how is her death supposed to benefit us?"

BoFeri signed. "You have to think in the long term, Peri. Maco and I enjoyed long conversations with Buta; our father was a deep thinker, you know... Have you never thought how vulnerable we are? The Attic folk live ten times as fast as we do. If they got it into their heads to defy us, they could surround us, manufacture weapons, bombard us with rocks — destroy us before we even knew what was happening. And yet that obvious revolution fails to occur. Why? Because, generation by generation, we siphon off the rebels, the defiant ones, the leaders. We allow them to destroy themselves on the points of our swords, on our guillotines or scaffolds — or simply by hurling themselves into oblivion."

Again Peri had the sense that Lora was listening to all this. "So each generation we cull the smart ones. We are selectively breeding our servants."

"It's simple husbandry," Bo said. "Remember, ten of their generations pass for each one of ours..." She studied him, her face, a broader feminine version of his own, filled with an exasperated kindness. "You're thinking this is inhuman. But it isn't — not if you look at it from the correct point of view. While the Attic folk waste their fluttering lives above, they buy us the leisure we need to think, to develop, to invent — and to make the world a better place for those who will follow us, who will build a greater civilisation than we can imagine, before the next Caress comes to erase it all again."

"My poor baby brother, you have too much romance in your soul for this world! You'll learn, as I've had to. One day things will change for the better. But not yet, not yet."

Lora was watching the two of them. Deliberately she stepped back from the edge of the Shelf and approached them. "You think blueshift folk are fools."

Bo seemed shocked to silence by Lora's boldness. Even now, Peri was entranced by the blaze of light in the girl's face, the liquid quality of her voice.

"Addled by taboo, that's what you think. But *you* can't see what's in front of your nose. Look at me. Look at my colouring, my hair, my height." Her pale eyes blazed. "Three of your seasons ago, my mother was as I am now. MacoFeri took what he wanted from her. He left her to grow old, while he stayed young — but he left her *me*."

For Peri the world seemed to swivel about her suddenly familiar face. "You're Maco's daughter? *You're my niece?*"

"And," she went on doggedly, "despite our shared blood, now MacoFeri has taken what he wanted of me in turn."

Peri clenched his fists. "His own daughter — I will kill him."

Bo murmured, "It's only the Attic. It doesn't matter what we do up there. Perhaps it's better Maco has such an outlet for his strange lusts..."

Lora clutched her baby. "You think we are too stupid to hate. But we do. Perhaps things will change sooner than you think."

She wiped the mist from her baby's face, and walked away from the cliff. Around her, the flickering light of day strengthened.
