

How much explorers learn about a world—and what they can do about what they find—depends on how they come to it.

To a world unnamed by humans, humans came. The gate swung open on a pleasant mountain glade, where the weather could be cool without being cold, and which lay cupped in a high valley below the tree line and far from the gray smudges of the cities on the plains below. This isolation was by happy chance and not by wise choice. Gates swung where God willed, and man could but submit. Once, one had opened in the midst of a grim fortress full of armed and hostile things and what befell the team that crossed no man knows, for the gatekeeper sealed it forever.

Here, the humans erected a fine pavilion of gay cloth among mighty growths that might be called trees and colorful splays that might be called flowers, although they were neither trees nor flowers exactly. The motley of the fabric clashed with the surrounding vegetation. The colors were off. They aped the complexion of a different world and seemed here a little out of place. But that was acceptable. The humans were themselves a little out of place and a bit of the familiar ought to surround them in the midst of all the strangeness.

They decked the pavilion with bright cushions and divans and roped the sides up so the gentle and persistent eastern breeze could pass through. They stoked their larder with melons and dates and other toothsome delights and laid their carpets out for prayer. Though no one knew which direction served—the stars, when the night sky came, provided no clue—the gate itself would do for mihrab.

The humans spent a night and a day acclimating themselves to the strange sun and testing the air and the water and the eccentric plants and such of the motiles as they could snare. They named these creatures after those they knew—rabbit, goat, swallow, cedar—and some of the names were fair. They stretched their twenty-four hours like taffy to fill up a slightly longer day. By the second nightfall they had shed their environmental suits and felt the wind and the sun on their skin and in their hair. It was good to breathe the world's largesse, and many an outlandish aroma teased them.

Exploring their valley, they found a great falls and spent another night and day at its foot, spellbound. A stream poured into the valley from high above, where the snows always fell and the snows always melted. It tumbled from the sky with a roar like the voice of God, throwing up a mist from which they named the mountain and within which a kaleidoscope of rainbows played. Its ageless assault had worn a pool unknowably deep in the rock below. Where and how the waters drained from the pool God withheld. There was not another like it in all the Known Worlds.

Afterwards, they clustered in their pavilion and reviewed their plans and inspected their equipment, and assembled those items that required assembly. Then they told off one of their number to ward the gate they had passed through and settled themselves to study the strange folk on the wide plains below.

Hassan Maklouf was their leader, a man who had walked on seventeen worlds and bore in consequence seventeen wounds. To ten of those worlds, he had followed

another; to seven, others had followed him. From four, he had escaped with his life. With two, he had fallen in love. He came to the lip of the little bowl valley and from a gendarme of rock studied the plains through a pair of enhanced binoculars. Which are you, he asked the planet spread below him, assassin or lover? The answer, like the waters of the pool, remained hidden.

"This is a fine place," Bashir al-Jamal declared beside him, as broadly approving as if he himself had fashioned the glade. Bashir was Hassan's cousin and this was his first outing. A young man, freshly graduated from the House of Gates, he bubbled with innocence and enthusiasm. Hassan had promised their grandfather that Bashir would come back. With a scar, the old man had said severely. The trek is not worth the going if one bears no scars back. But then, grandfather was Bedu and such folk had hard ways.

"The water is pure; the air clean," Bashir continued. "Never have I camped in a more beautiful place."

Hassan continued to scan the lowlands. "I have seen men killed by beautiful things."

"But the biochemistry here must be so different, none of the beasts would find us tasty."

Hassan lowered his binoculars and looked at his cousin. "Before or after they have taken a bite?"

"Ah," Bashir bowed to the older man's advice. "You are the fountain of wisdom."

"I live still," Hassan told him raising the binoculars again. "Call that wisdom, if you wish."

"At least, we may study this world unseen," Bashir said. Deprived of one good fortune, he would seize another. "There is no evidence that the locals have ever been up here."

"Perhaps it is one of their holy places," Hassan suggested, "and we have violated it. God has granted to each folk one place that is holy above all others."

Bashir was not impressed. "If He has, this well may be it; but I think it is too remote."

Hassan grunted and lowered the binoculars. "I want a guard posted here and a sensor array, so that nothing may approach from this direction."

"Up a sheer cliff-face?"

"Perhaps the worldlings have climbing pads on their hands and feet. Perhaps they have wings. Perhaps they have nothing more than cleverness and perseverance." He capped his binoculars and returned them to their case. "I would fear that last more than all the others."

This is how they came to be there, in that enchanted glade upon the Misty Mountain.

Behind this world lies a shadow world. It is called the Other 'Brane, and it lies not so very far away, save that it is in the wrong direction. It is behind us, beneath us, within us. It is as close as two hands clapping, and as

far. Once before, they clapped, this 'brane and the other, and from the echoes and the ripples of that Big Clap, came matter and energy and galaxies and stars and planets and flowers and laughing children. Should they clap again, that will end it all, and many wise men fret their lives on the question of whether the two be approaching or no. But to know this they must learn to measure the wrong direction and that is a hard thing to do.

Hassan thinks of the two 'branes as the Hands of God, for this would make literal one of the hidden Recitations of the Prophet, peace be upon him. But he sees no reason to worry over whether they are to clap or not, since all will be as God wills. What, after all, could be done? To where would one run? "The mountains are as fleeting as the clouds." So reads the fifth of the 'Ashari 'aqida, and the other schools have assented with greater or lesser joy.

What can be done is to travel through the Other 'Brane. That skill, men have learned. The Other 'Brane is spanned like ours by three space-like dimensions and one time-like dimension; but it contains no planets, no vast spaces—only an endless, undulating plain, cut through by featureless chasms and buttes. Or maybe it is nothing of the sort, and the landscape is only an illusion that the mind has imposed on a vista incomprehensible to human senses.

Crossing the Other 'Brane is a hard road, for the journey from gate beacon to gate beacon must be swift and without hesitation. There is an asymmetry, a breaking of parity, hidden somewhere in the depths of that time which was before Time itself. To linger is to perish. Some materials, some energy fields, last longer, but in the end they are alien things in an alien land, and the land will have them. What man would endure such peril, were not the prize the whole great universe itself? For the metric of space lies smaller on the Other 'Brane, and a few strides there leap light-years here at home.

How many light years, no man knew. Hassan explained that to Bashir on the second night when, studying the alien sky, his cousin asked which star was the Earth's, for no answer was likely. Was this planet even in a galaxy known from Earth? How many light years had their lumbering other-buses oversprung, and in which direction? And even if Earth's sun lay in this planet's sky, it would not be the sun they knew. Light speed does not bind the universe; but it binds man's knowing of it, for in a peculiar way place is time, and all man's wisdom and knowing is but a circle of candle light in an everspreading dark. No one may see farther or faster than the light by which one sees. Hence, one perceives only a time-bound sphere within a quasar halo. Now they had stepped into the sphere of another campfire, somewhere else in the endless desert of night.

"The stars we see from Earth," Hassan explained, "are the stars as they were when their light departed, and the deeper into the sky we peer, the deeper into the past we see. Here, we see the stars from a different place, and therefore at a different time."

"I don't understand," Bashir said. He had been taught the facts, and he had learned them well enough for the examinations, but he did not yet know them.

"Imagine a star that is one million light-years from the Earth," Hassan said, "and imagine that this world we are on lies half-way between the two. On Earth, they see the star as it was a million years ago. Here, we see it as it was a mere five hundred thousand years ago, as we might see a grown man after having once glimpsed the child. In the mean time, the star will have moved. Perhaps it will have changed color or luminosity. So we do not see the same star, nor do we see it in the same place. Ah, cousin, each time we emerge from

our gate heads, we find not only a different world, but a different universe."

Bashir shivered, although that may have been only the evening breeze. "It's as if we are cut off and alone. I don't like it."

Hassan smiled to himself. "No one asked that you do." He turned toward the pavilion, where the others buzzed with discussion, but Bashir lingered a moment longer with face upturned to the sky. "I feel so alone," he said softly, but not so softly that Hassan failed to hear.

They studied the world in every way they could: the physics, the chemistry and biology, the society and technology. The presence of sentients—and sentients of considerable attainment—complicated the matter, for they must understand the folk first as they were and not as they would become; and that meant to see without being seen, for the act of knowing changes forever both knower and known. But to study even a small world was no small thing. A single flower is unfathomable.

They sought the metes and bounds of the planet. What was its size? Its density? Where upon its face had the gate swung open? How far did it lie from its star? Soong marked the risings and the settings of sun and moons and stars and groped toward answers.

They sampled the flora and the fauna in their mountain valley, scanned their viscera, and looked into the very architecture of their cells. Mizir discovered molecules that were like DNA, but not quite. They imagined phyla and classes upon the creatures, but did not dare guess at anything more precise.

Ladawan and Yance launched small, stealthy birds, ultralight and sun powered, to watch and listen where men themselves could not. On their bellies these drones displayed a vision of the sky above, captured by microcameras on their backs, in that way achieving an operational sort of invisibility, and allowing the tele-pilots to hover and record unseen.

"No radio," Soong complained and Hassan laughed a little at that, for always Soong preferred the easy way. "We will have to plant bugs," Hassan told the team when they met after the first flight for debriefing, "to study their tongue, for we cannot hear them otherwise."

"They don't have tongues," Mizir said, though with him it was less complaint than fascination. "They make sounds, and they communicate with these sounds, but I don't know how they make them."

"See if you can locate a body," Hassan told the tele-pilots. "Perhaps there are morgues in the city," pointing to the dark, smoky buildings that nestled distant against the bay of a cold, blue ocean. "Mizir needs to know how those people are put together."

"Tissue samples would be nice," Mizir added, but he knew that was lagniappe.

"An elementary school might have simple displays of their written language," Bashir suggested. It was a standard checklist item for the assay of inhabited worlds, studied and carefully memorized in his training, but Hassan was pleased that the boy had remembered it.

"Coal smoke," Klaus Altenbach announced the next day after a drone had lasered the emissions of a building they believed to be a factory. "Or something

carbonaceous. Peat? Not petroleum—those bunkers are with something solid filled. Technology is mid-nineteenth century equivalent," he said, adding after a moment, "by the Common Era. I expect soon the steamships to come to those docks." When Ladawan asked him from where these ships would come, he shrugged and told her, "There cannot be a horizon to no good purpose."

"It is a strange-looking city," Mizir said, "although I cannot say why."

Yance Darby scratched his head. "Don't look all that strange to me. 'Cept for the folk in it."

"They really are graceful," Iman said of the indigenes, "once you grow accustomed to their strangeness. They are curlicues, filigrees of being. They must have art of some sort. Their buildings are intaglio—plain boxes, towers, but they have incised their every surface. Look for painting, look for sculpture." And she set about to build a mannequin of the folk.

"There's so much to learn!" cried Bashir, overwhelmed by it all. Being young, he was easily overwhelmed; but a world is not something to be nibbled at. If one is to taste it at all, it must be swallowed whole; and yet that is impossible.

"As well sip the Nile," Mizir grumbled. "We could spend the rest of our lives here and not learn the first thing."

"Oh, we'd learn the first thing," said Hassan. What worried him, and kept him awake into the night, was not the first thing they might learn, but the last.

And so it went. The drones flew. Digital photographs downloaded into a mosaic map of landforms and soil types and vegetation. (Soong longed for a satellite in low orbit.) They sprinkled small ears about the city one night and harvested from them a Babel of sounds for the Intelligence to sort into phonemes and other patterns. (The Intelligence concluded that two languages were in use, and set itself to ponder the matter.) Mizir had for the time to content himself with creatures he could collect nearby. ("Alpine species," he grumbled. "How representative are they of the coastal plains, the estuaries?") Klaus discovered a railroad coming into the city on the far side. ("They had somehow to bring that coal in," he joked, "and muleback I thought unlikely.") The engines were steam-powered, with spherical boilers.

Bashir wanted to name the world.

Long-timers like Hassan and Soong and Mizir seldom bothered with such things. In time, the planet would speak and its name would be revealed. Until then, Hassan would simply call it the world. Still, when the team debriefed on the seventh day and Bashir broached the issue, Hassan did not stop the others from discussing it.

They lounged on the cushions and ate dates and cheeses. Yance Darby, like Bashir recently graduated from the House of Gates, tossed pieces of food at the curious animals, causing them to scamper away, until Iman scolded him for it. That the crumbs were indigestible would not stop animals from swallowing, and who knew what would come of that? Soong sat a little apart, on high furniture at a table spread with printout maps, while he and Klaus and Ladawan traced geography and the road network on maps made of light. A phantom sphere floated in the air above the projector: all black, all unknown, save the little spot where they encamped—and they were not yet certain they had placed it properly.

Hassan stood apart, outside the pavilion, under stars strange and distant. He held a cup of nectar in his hands and studied the MRI holograms of the local fauna that had been arranged on a display board, and he traced with a fingertip the clade lines that Mizir had guessed at. How strange, he thought, and yet how familiar, too. God was a potter and Nature was His knife. Everywhere life took form, He shaped it toward the same ends. And so there were things like mice, and things like hawks, although they were quite different in their details. The mouse had six legs, for one thing—its gait absorbing thereby many hours of Mizir's close attention—and the hawk had claws on wingtip and feet and concealed, too, beneath its covert.

Iman had constructed a mannequin of the sapient and had placed it by the entrance to the pavilion. Man or woman, no one knew, or even if such categories had meaning here. It stood shorter than a human and, at rest, assumed a curious sinusoid posture, like a cobra risen. In form, bilaterally symmetric, but possessed of four arms and two legs. Large lifting arms grew from mid-torso; smaller manipulators farther up. Claws tipped the one set, tentacles the other. The feet ended in claws, too, though these were stubbier. Mizir thought that the ancestral form had been six-legged, too, like so many of the scuttling things in the meadow, and the clawed lifting arms had evolved from the midlegs. "They are rodents," he had said, arranging their image under that clade, "or what things like rodents might become."

"Yet the 'rodents' here are territorial," Iman then told him, "which is very unrodentlike."

"Everything is the same the universe over," Mizir had answered philosophically, "except that everything is different, too."

Atop the torso sat a structure shaped like an American "football" positioned for a kick-off. The skin was smooth, without hair or feathers, but with small plates, as if the creature had been tiled by a master mason. The creature's coloring was a high cerulean, like the clear sky over the desert, though with darker patches on its back. But Mizir had spotted others in the throngs of the city—taller, slimmer, tending toward cobalt—which he thought might hail from the world's tropics.

It was a rich world. Diverse. There were many races, many tongues. There were alpine meadows and high prairies and coastal estuaries. How many eons deep was it? What lay over the curve of the horizon? How could they hope to grasp more than a meager slice? They would never know its history. They could hardly know its culture. Was that city below them—blackened with soot, lively with activity—the pinnacle of this world's civilization? Or was it a cultural and technological backwater? Later, they would send the drones out on longer recon flights, but even that would only scratch at the surface. Men will come here for years, Hassan thought, perhaps for generations. And maybe then we will know a little.

The creature in the model had no face.

There were filaments that Mizir thought scent receptors; there were gelatin pools that were likely eyes. There was a cavity into which they had watched indigenes spoon food. But none of these features were arranged into a face. Indeed, its mouth was in its torso. The filaments waved above the football like ferns. The gelatin-filled pits were distributed asymmetrically around the headball, as were other pits, apparently empty, and a large parabolic cavity perversely set where a human mouth would be, although it was not a mouth at all.

"They really are beautiful," Iman said. She had come to stand by Hassan while

the others chattered on about possible names for the planet. Hassan nodded, though in acknowledgement rather than agreement. He thought the indigenes looked scarred, pockmarked, twisted out of true. But that was because his mind sought a greater symmetry of features than was offered.

"Beautiful, perhaps; though they differ somewhat from the life forms Mizir has found up here," he said. "I think they are interlopers. I think they have come from somewhere else, these people of yours. Perhaps from across that ocean."

"Perhaps," she allowed the possibility. "Soong says that the entire coastal plain came from somewhere else, and its collision with this continent raised the Misty Mountains."

"I keep seeing a face," he said to her. "I know there isn't one, but my brain insists on nostrils and ears. It seems to be smiling at me."

"Recognition template," Iman said. "People have seen 'Isa, praise be upon him, in a potato; or Shaitan in a billow of smoke."

"It bothers me. We need to see these people the way they are, not the way we think they are."

"It was easier on Concannon's World," she told him. "The indigenes there looked like flowers."

"Did they?"

"A little. They flew."

"Ah."

"Vapors jetted out their stems. They could only travel in short hops. But one doesn't look for faces in a flower."

"And here I have always mistaken you for a lily."

Iman turned from him and made a show of watching the debate of the others. "Will you call this place Maklouf's World? As team leader, it is your privilege."

Hassan shook his head. "I met Concannon once. He had an ego big enough for a world, but I'm not so vain as he. What do you think we should call this place?"

Iman pursed her lips and adjusted the hijab under her chin. Her face was only a pale circle wrapped in a checkered cloth of red and white squares after the fashion of the Jordan Valley. "We should learn what the indigenes call it in their own tongue."

Hassan laughed. "They will call it 'the world,' and likely in hundreds of tongues, most of which we will never hear."

"Shangri-la!" said Bashir, loud enough that Hassan heard and turned toward him. Yance clapped his hands. "Perfect!" he agreed. "This place is sure enough a paradise." Klaus nodded slowly, as did Ladawan and Khalid, the gate warden. Soong said nothing and glanced at Hassan.

"No." Hassan stepped inside the pavilion. "That is a dangerous name for a world, and dangerous because it sounds so safe. Every time we spoke it we would think this place safer yet."

"Well, isn't it?" asked Iman.

Hassan looked back over his shoulder and saw her run a hand along the muscled lifting arm of her statue. "I don't know," he said. "I haven't seen the surprise yet."

"Surprise?" asked Bashir. "What surprise is that?"

Soong chuckled, but Hassan didn't bother to answer. He continued to watch Iman stroke the statue.

"Well, what would you call it?" Yance asked, making it sound a challenge.

"It is your privilege, Hassan," said Mizir.

"If you must have a name for this world," and Hassan looked again outside the tent, at the strange constellations above, at the expressionless, immobile "face" on the statue. "If you must have a name for this world, call it al-Batin."

Mizir stiffened, Bashir and Khalid exchanged glances. Iman smiled faintly. "It means, 'The Hidden,'" she whispered to the others.

"Not exactly," Hassan added.

"It is one of the Names of God," Mizir protested. "That isn't proper for a planet."

"It is fit," Hassan said, "for as long as God hides its nature from us. After that . . . After that, we will see."

They called the city "East Haven" because of its position on a broad and deep estuary. A channel led from the Eastern Sea well into the mouth of a swift river-to embrace piers, docks, warehouses. This much they learned from high altitude sonar pictures from their drones. Why no ships nestled at those docks, the drones could not say.

South and west of the city lay flatlands thick with greening crops, by which they guessed at a season much like late spring. The crops were broad and flat, like clover, but whether intended for the Batinites or for their livestock was unclear. Harrows and cultivators were drawn by teams of six-legged creatures the claws of whose mid- and hindlegs had nearly vanished into a hoof-like structure. Its forelegs stubbornly divided the hoof. Inevitably the team named them "horses," although something in their demeanor suggested "oxen," as well.

One field was more manicured, covered by a fine ground-hugging carpet of waxy, fat-leaved, yellow-green plants, broken here and there with colorful flowers and shrubs arranged in decorative patterns. A sample of the "grass," when crushed, gave forth a pleasant odor-somewhat like frankincense. The park-for such they assumed it was-spread across the top of a swell of ground and from it one gained a fine vista of the city, its port, and the Eastern Sea beyond. As the weather grew warmer, groups of Batinites ventured forth from the city to spend afternoons or sunsets there, spooning baskets of food into their gaping stomachs and watching their younglings leap and somersault through the chartreuse oil-grass.

A road they called the Grand Trunk Road ran southwest from the city. The

portions nearest the city had been paved with broad, flat stones, across which rattled a motley array of vehicles: carriages resembling landaus and hansoms, open wagons that Yance called "buck boards," and freight wagons heavy with goods and strapped with canvas covers, whose drivers goaded their teams of oxen six-horses with enormously long whips.

The Batinites themselves dressed in garb that ranged from pale dun to rainbow plumage, as task or mood dictated. They had a taste for beauty, Iman told the others, though for a different sort of beauty than Earth then knew, and she spent some of her free time adapting local fashion to the limbs and stature of humans—for there was a fad for matters alien in the cities of the Earth.

One fork of the Grand Trunk Road branched northwestward toward a pass in the coastal range of which the Misty Mountain was a part. The road simplified itself as it receded, like a countryman shedding his urban clothes piecemeal as he fled the city: it became first hard-driven gravel then earth damped with a waxy oil, finally, as it began the long switchback up to the pass, rutted dirt. The drone they sent through the pass returned with images of a second, more distant city, smaller than East Haven and nestled in a rich farming valley. Beyond, at the limits of resolution, lay drier and more barren country and the hint of something approaching desert.

"There is something energetic about those people," Hassan observed. "They have a commotion to them, a busyness that is very like Americans. They are forever doing something."

"That is why the city seems so odd!" Iman exclaimed, a cry so triumphant that, following as it did so many weeks of study, seemed tardy in its proclamation, as if the sociologist had been paying scant attention 'til now.

"Don't you see?" she told them. "They are Americans! Look at the streets, how linear they are. How planned. Only by the docks do they twist and wander. That city did not grow here; it was planted. Yes, Mizir, you were right. They came from across the Eastern Sea."

A lively people, indeed. One of a pair of younglings capering in the park caromed off a six-cedar tree and lay stunned while its parents rushed to comfort it. Three parents, Iman noted, and wondered at their roles. "Or is the third only an uncle or aunt or older sibling?" Yet the posture of consolation is much the same on one world as another and tentacles could stroke most wondrous delicate.

"They care for one another," Iman told Hassan that evening in the pavilion.

"Who does not?" he answered, rising from the divan and walking out into the night toward the vantage point from which they watched the city. East Haven was a dull orange glow. Oil from the chartreuse grass burned slowly in a hundred thousand lamps. Iman joined him and opened her mouth to speak, but Hassan silenced her with a touch to the arm and pointed to the shadow form of Bashir, who sat cross-legged on a great pillow and watched with night-vision binoculars. Silently, they withdrew into Hassan's pavilion, where Hassan sat on an ottoman while Iman, standing behind him, kneaded his shoulder muscles.

"You've been carrying something heavy on these," she said, "they are so hard and knotted up."

"Oh, nothing much. A world."

"Listen to Atlas." She squeezed hard and Hassan winced. "Nothing you can do will affect this world. All you do is watch."

"People will come here for the wonderfall, for the oil-grass perfume, for the fashion and cut of their clothing. In the end, that cannot go unnoticed."

"What of it? To our benefit and theirs. One day we will greet them, trade with them, listen to their music and they to ours. It is only the when and the how that matter. I think you carry a weight much less than a world."

"All right. The eight of you. That is heavy enough."

"What, are Soong and Mizir children that you must change their diapers? Or I?"

That conjured disturbing thoughts. He reached back over his shoulder and stilled her ministrations. "Perhaps you had better stop now."

"Am I so heavy, then?"

"It's not that. You scare me. I don't know who you are."

"I am as plain as typeset. Children read me for a primer."

"That's not what I meant."

"Do you wonder what is beneath the hijab? I could take it off."

The fire ran through him like a molten sword. He turned on his pillow and Iman took an abrupt step back, clasping her hands before her. "We've never been teamed before, you and I," he told her. "What do you know about me?"

"I know that Bashir is not so heavy as you think."

Hassan was silent for a while. "He grows no lighter for all your assurances."

"What can happen to him here?"

"Very little, I think," he admitted reluctantly. "And that is dangerous, for his next world may not be so safe."

"I think he likes the Batinites."

"They are easy folk to like."

"There are more such folk than you might think."

"I think you are bald. Beneath the hijab, I mean. Bald, and maybe with ears like conch shells."

"Oh, you are a past master of flattery! You and I may never team again. You will go through a gate and I will go through another, and maybe one of us will not come back."

"I am no Shi'a. I do not practice muta'a."

Iman's face set into unreadable lines. "Is that what you think? A marriage with an expiration date? Then perhaps you do not know me, after all." She went to the flap of his pavilion and paused a moment slightly bent over before passing without. "It's black," she said, turning a bit to cast the words back. "Black

and very long, and my mother compared it to silk. As for the ears, that price is higher than you've paid so far."

With that, she was gone. Hassan thought they had quarreled. I have seniority, he told himself. She will join Soong and Mizir and me when we next go out. He could arrange that. There were people in the House of Gates who owed him favors.

The next day, Hassan sent Bashir back to Earth for supplies and because he was so young, sent Mizir to accompany him and Khalid to drive the other-bus. They took discs full of information and cases of specimens for the scholars to study. "Check calibration on clock," Soong reminded them as they buttoned down. "Time run differently in Other 'Brane."

"Thank you, O grandfather," said Khalid, who had driven many such runs before, "I did not know that."

"Insolence," Soong complained to Hassan afterward. "Reminder never hurt."

"Makes me nervous having only the one buggy left," Yance said. "Y'know what I mean? We can't get all of us and all our gear into one, if'n we have to bug out in a hurry."

"Bug out?" Soong thought the word related to "buggy."

"Y'never know," Yance said, feigning wisdom by saying nothing, so that Soong was no more enlightened.

That evening, Klaus came to Hassan with a puzzle. "These are for today the surveillance flights over 'Six-foot City'."

"Don't call the natives 'six-foots.' What's on the videos?"

"I hope that you will tell me."

Klaus was usually more forthcoming. He had the German's attitude toward facts. He ate them raw, without seasoning, and served them up the same way. There was something brutal about this, for facts could be hard and possess sharp edges, making them hard to swallow. Better to soften them a little first by chewing them over.

Klaus' video had been shot at night and had the peculiar, greenish luminescence of night vision. The time stamp in the lower right named the local equivalent of three in the morning. The drone had been conducting a biosurvey over the tidal flats north of the city-Mizir had spotted some peculiar burrowing creatures there on an earlier flyover-and during the return flight, motion in the city below had activated the drone's sensors.

"It is most peculiar," Klaus said. "Most peculiar."

How peculiar, Hassan did not know. Perhaps it was customary for large groups of the Batinites to wake from their sleep and come outdoors in the small hours of the morning, although they had never done so before. Yet, here they were in their multitudes: on balconies, on rooftops, at their windowsills, in small knots gathered before the doorways of their buildings. All turned skyward with a patient stillness that Hassan could only call expectation. The drone had lingered in circles, its small Intelligence sensing an anomaly of some sort in the sudden mass behavior. And then, first one worldling, then another pointed

skyward and they began to behave in an agitated manner, turning and touching and waving their tentacled upper arms.

"Have they seen the drone?" Hassan asked. It was hard to imagine, stealthed as it was and at night in the bargain. "Perhaps they sense the engine's heat signature?" Mizir had floated the hypothesis that some of the gelatin pits on the headball were sensitive to infrared.

"No," said Klaus, "observe the direction in which they stare. It is to the east, and not directly above."

"How do you know which way they stare, when they have no faces?" In truth, it was difficult to judge in the unearthly light of night-vision. Everything was just a little soft at the edges, and features did not stand out.

"Look how they hold their bodies. I assume that their vision is in the direction in which they walk. It makes reason, not so?"

"Reason," said Hassan. "I wonder what reason brought them all out in the middle of the night?"

"Something in the sky. Ask Soong. Such a mystery will please him."

Hassan made a note to talk to Soong, but as he turned away, something in the panning video caught his eye, and that something was this:

When all men fall prostrate in prayer, the one who kneels upright stands out like bas-relief. When all men run, the one remaining still is noted. And when all men look off to the east, the one with face upturned seemed to be staring directly at Hassan himself.

Which was to say, directly at the drone. "This one," said Hassan, striking the freeze-frame. "What do you make of him?"

"So . . . I had not noticed him before." Klaus peered more closely at the screen. "A heretic, perhaps." But his chuckle stuck in his throat. "I meant no offense."

Hassan, much puzzled, took none. Only later would Mizir remind him that to a European, Mecca lies proverbially east.

"Planet," Soong announced with grave satisfaction after evening had fallen. "Most systems, many planets. This rising significant to sixlegs."

"Don't call them sixlegs. Why would it have special significance?"

Soong made a gesture signifying patient ignorance. "Perhaps beginning of festival. Ramadan. Fasching. Carnival."

"Ramadan is not a festival."

"So hard, keep Western notions straight," Soong answered. Hassan was never certain when Soong was being droll. "Is brightest object now in sky," the geophysicist continued, "save inner moon. Maybe next planet starward. Blue tint, so maybe water there. Maybe second living world in system!"

The next day, the worldlings went about their city bearing arms.

There had been little sign of a military hitherto, but now Havenites drilled

and marched on the parkland south of the city. They ran. They jumped. They practiced ramming shot down the long barrels of their weapons. They marched in rank and file and executed intricate ballets to the rhythmic clapping of their lower arms. Formations evolved from marching column to line of battle and back again. The floral arrangements that had checkerboarded the park were soon trampled and their colors stamped into a universal sepia. It bothered Hassan when behaviors suddenly changed. It meant that the team had missed something basic. "Why?" he asked, watching through the binoculars, expecting no answer.

But he received one of sorts that evening: When the Blue Planet rose, some of the worldlings fired their weapons in its direction and raised a staccato tattoo that rose and fell and rippled across the city like the chop on a bothered sea.

"Fools," muttered Soong, but Hassan recognized defiance when he saw it.

"Of planet?" the Chinese scoffed. "Of omen?"

Iman was saddened by the guns. "I had hoped them beyond such matters."

"What people," Hassan said, "have ever been beyond such matters?"

Klaus grunted. "It will be like Bismarck's wars, I think. No radio, but they must have telegraphy. No airplanes, but a balloon would not surprise me."

Iman turned on him. "How can you talk of war with such detachment?"

But Klaus only shrugged. "What other way is there?" he asked. "All we can do is watch." Ladawan and Yance and the others said nothing.

The day after that, the second other-bus returned with fresh supplies and equipment. Mizir off-loaded a wealth of reagents, a sounding laser, and a scanning electron microscope. "It's only a field model," he said of the microscope, "but at last I can see!" Soong regarded the aerosondes and high-altitude balloons and judged them passable. "View from height, maybe informative," he conceded, then he turned to Mizir and grinned, "So I, too, look at very small things." A team of mechanics had come back with Bashir and Khalid and they set about assembling the ultralight under Yance's impatient eyes.

"They wanted to know if you'll let the other teams through yet," Bashir told Hassan.

"No."

"But . . . I told them--"

"It was not for you to tell them anything!" Hassan shouted, which caused heads to turn and Bashir to flinch. Hassan immediately regretted the outburst, but remained stern. "Something has developed in the city," he said brusquely, and explained about the rising of the Blue Planet, al-Azraq, and the sudden martial activity.

"The new star marks their season for jihad," Bashir guessed.

"Who ever had such seasons?" Hassan scolded him. "It is the struggle with our own heart that is the true jihad."

"Maybe so," said Yance, who had overheard, "but when folks are in a mood for a

ruckus, any reason'll do." He studied the ultralight thoughtfully. "I just hope they don't have anti-aircraft guns."

Iman learned to recognize Batinites.

"They only look alike," she said, "because they are so strange, and the common strangeness overwhelms the individual differences."

"Yes," said Soong. "Like Arab curlicues. All letters look same."

"The Batinites do not have faces, exactly," Iman reminded them, "but the features on their headball are not random. There are always the same number of pits and ferns and they always appear in the same approximate locations . . ."

"No surprise there," said Mizir. "How many humans are born with three eyes, or with noses where their ears should be?"

". . . but the sizes of these features and the distances between them vary just as they do among humans. How else do we recognize one another, but by the length of the nose, the distance between the eyes, the width of the mouth . . ."

"Some mouths," Yance whispered to Bashir, "being wider than others."

". . . I have identified seventy-three eigenface dimensions for the Batinite headball. The diameters of the pits; reflectivity of the gelatin in them; the lengths of the fronds and the number and size of their 'leaves'; the hue of the skin-plates . . ."

"You don't have to name them all," Hassan said.

". . . and so on. All too strange to register in our own perception, but the Intelligence can measure an image and identify specific individuals."

"Are there systematic differences between the two races?" Mizir asked. "I think you will find the cobaltics have more and broader 'leaves' than the ceruleans."

"Why so they have! On the dorsal fronds."

Mizir nodded in slow satisfaction. "I believe those function as heat radiators, though I cannot be certain until I explore their anatomies. If the cobaltics are a tropical folk, they may need to spill their heat more rapidly. None of the mountain species here in our valley have those particular fronds-or any related feature. At this altitude, spilling excess heat is not a great problem."

"More evidence," Bashir suggested, "that the Havenites have come from somewhere else."

The Intelligence had been teasing threads of meaning from the great ball of yarn that was the Batinites' spoken tongues. The task was complicated by the presence of two such tongues, which the Intelligence declared to be unrelated at the fifth degree, and by the inferred presence of scores of specialized jargons and argots. "The folk at the docks," Klaus pointed out, "must have their own language. And the thieves that we sometimes hear whisper in the night."

"They don't whisper," Iman told him. "They hum and pop and click."

"Those pits on the headball," Mizir mused, "are drums. Wonderfully adapted. They no more evolved for speaking than did human lips and tongue. They were recruited; and yet they serve."

"If they cannot speak from both sides of the mouth," Klaus observed, "they may sometimes say two things at once."

"The advantage of having more than one orifice adapted to making sounds."

Klaus made a further comment and laughed; but because he made it in German no one else got the joke, although it concerned making sounds from more than one orifice.

They input the murmuring of the crowd from the night when al-Azraq first appeared and the Intelligence responded with . . . murmuring, and the occasional cry of [the Blue Planet! It rises/appears!] and [expression of possible dismay and/or fear]. It was not a translation, but it was progress toward a translation.

There may have been another language, a third one, which made no use of sounds, for at times they observed two Batinites together, silent but in evident communication.

"It's the fern-like structures," said Mizir. "They are scent receptors. At close range, they communicate by odors."

"Inefficient," scoffed Klaus.

"Inefficiency is a sign of natural selection," Mizir assured him. "And some messages may be very simple. Run! Come!"

"It's not the scents," said Iman. "Or not the scents alone. Observe how they touch, how they stroke one another's fronds. They communicate by touching one another." She challenged the others with an upthrust chin and no one dared gainsay her, for she herself often communicated by touch. "What else is a handshake, a clap on the shoulder," she insisted, "or a kiss?"

They decided that the frond-stroking amounted to kissing. Some was done perfunctorily. "Like a peck on the cheek," Yance said. Some was done with great show. Some, indeed with lingering stillness. Whatever it meant, the Havenites did it a lot. "They are an affectionate people," Bashir said. Iman said nothing, but tousled the young man's hair.

Bashir had tele-piloting duty the night when a drone followed a soldier out into the park. This soldier wore an ill-fitting uniform of pale yellow on his high cerulean form, one unmarked by any of the signifiers of rank or status that the Intelligence had deduced. It rode a sixleg horse past neglected fields and up the gravel road that led to the once-manicured hilltop. It rode unarmed.

When it reached the level ground where the Haven folk had sported at games before taking up more deadly rehearsals, the soldier dismounted and spoke soft drumbeats, as of a distant and muffled darbuka.

Other drumbeats answered and a second Batinite, a tall slim cobaltic, emerged from the grove of six-cedar and poplar. The two approached and stood together

for a while, intertwining their tentacled upper arms. Then the second spoke in two voices. One voice said [Show/ demonstrate/make apparent-(to) me/this-one-you/present-one agency-immediate time] and the other said [Fear /dread/flight-or-fight-I/this-one agency -now-and-from-now]. At least so the Intelligence thought it said. Yet what manner of ears must they have, Bashir marveled, to parse a duet!

The soldier answered in like harmony, [Appears/shows-it/that-one agency-not-yet] and [this-one (pl?)-defiance/ resolution/resignation (?)-now-and-from-now.]

The cobaltic had brought a basket and opened it to reveal covered dishes of the puree of grains and legumes that the Batinites favored on their picnic outings and which the Earthlings called batin-hummus. [Eat/take in-this item/thing-you/present-one agency-immediate time] and [Cook/prepare-I/this-one agency-past-time.]

The soldier had brought food as well: a thick, yellow-green liquid in pear-shaped bottles from which he pried the caps with a small instrument. The two removed their upper garments—a complex procedure in that four arms must withdraw from four sleeves—and exposed thereby the mouths in their torsos.

"I wonder if humans can eat those foods of theirs," Iman said. She had come up behind Bashir and had been watching over his shoulder. "A new, exotic flavor to excite the jades . . ." Ever since al NahTHa, the appetite for such things had grown and grown. The Rebirth, the Rediscovery. Art. Literature. Song. Science. Everything old was new again, and the new was gulped down whole.

"I've distilled a fluid from the oil-grass," Mizir told them. He sat at the high table drinking coffee with Ladawan and Klaus. "But whether I have obtained a drink or a fuel I cannot say. Yance will not let me put it in the ultralight's gas tank; but he will not drink it for me, either." The others laughed and Klaus indicated Mizir's small, exquisite mug, whose contents had been brewed in the Turkish fashion. "My friend, how would you know the difference?"

"Coffee," said Mizir with mock dignity, "is more than hot water in which a few beans have passed an idle moment." He took his cup and left the table to stand with Iman and Bashir. "Hassan?" he asked her through lips poised to sip. Iman shook her head and Mizir said, "He is always cautious when encountering a new world." He turned his attention to the screen just as the soldier ran its tentacles across the fronds of the taller one's headball and then . . . inserted those tentacles into its own mouth. "What is this?" Mizir said, setting his cup on its saucer and bending closer.

"A new behavior," Iman said delighted and pulled her datapad from her belt pouch. "Bashir, what is the file number on the bird's download? I want to view this later." She entered the identifier the boy gave her and with her stylus scratched quick curlicues across the touch-screen. "Into the oral cavity . . ." she mused.

"What does it mean?" Bashir asked, and no one could tell him.

Usually the Batinites fed themselves by gripping spoons or tines with an upper hand, most often with the left. Sometimes, though rarely, they held food directly using one of their middle hands, typically the right. ("Complementary handedness," Mizir had called it.) Yet the two Batinites on this double-mooned evening abandoned their spoons to their awkward middle hands, while their delicate and tentacled uppers entwined each other's like restless snakes.

Then the cobaltic reached directly into the cerulean's mouth orifice. The soldier grew very taut and still and laid its bowl of batin-hummus slowly aside. With its own tentacles it stroked the other's scent receptors or touched briefly certain of the pits on the cobaltic's headball. Mizir, entranced by the ritual, made careful note of which pits were touched on a sketch of the headball. Iman made notes as well, though with different purpose.

Using its large middle hands, the soldier took the cobaltic by the torso and pushed gently until the other had disengaged and the two pulled away from each other. "Look! What is that?" Bashir asked. "Inside the soldier's mouth!"

"A 'tongue' perhaps," Mizir said. "See how it glistens! Perhaps a mucous coating. A catalyst for digestion?"

Iman looked at him a moment. "Do you think so?" Then she turned her attention to the screen and watched with an awful intensity. She placed a hand on Bashir's shoulder and leaned a little on him. When the two Batinites brought their mouths together, her grip grew hard. Bashir said, "Why, they're kissing!"

Mizir said doubtfully, "We've seen no such kisses before among them. Only the brief frond stroke."

"This is more serious than the frond stroke, I think," Iman said.

"It's a rather long kiss," said Bashir.

"The mouth and tongue are the most sensitive organs of touch that humans possess," she told him, "aside from one other."

Hassan, drawn by the interest of the three clustered before the telescreen, had come up behind them. Now he said, "Turn that screen off!" with a particular firmness.

It was at that moment that Bashir realized. "They weren't kissing! They were . . . I mean . . ." He blacked the screen, then turned to Iman. "You knew!" But Iman had turned round to face Hassan.

"You're right," she said. "They deserve their privacy."

Klaus and Ladawan had joined them. "What is befallen?" the technologist asked.

Iman answered him without turning away from Hassan. "There is a struggle coming, a jihad of some sort, and two who may never see each other again have stolen a precious night for their own."

Klaus said, "I don't understand."

Ladawan told him. "A lover is bidding her soldier-boy good-bye."

Mizir was doubtful. "We don't know which one is 'he' or 'she.' They may be either, or neither, or it may be a seasonal thing. Among the fungi-"

"Oh, to Gehenna with your fungi!" said Iman, who then turned from the still-silent Hassan and stalked to her own tent. Mizir watched, puzzled, then turned to Hassan and continued, "I really must study the process. That 'tongue' must have been a . . ."

"Have the Intelligence study it, or do it in private," Hassan ordered. "Grant these people their dignity."

Klaus tugged Mizir on the sleeve as the biologist was leaving. "The soldier is probably the male. At this level of technology, no society can afford to sacrifice its females in combat."

Oddly, it was Ladawan, who was usually very quiet, who had the last word. "Sometimes," she said, "I do not understand you people." She told Soong about it later and Soong spoke certain words in Mandarin, of which tongue Ladawan also knew a little. What he said was, "Treasure that which you do not understand."

Two things happened the next day, or maybe more than two. The first was quite dramatic, but not very important. The second was not so dramatic.

Yance Darby brought forewarning. He had taken the ultralight out in the morning and had flown a wide circuit around the backside of the Misty Mountain to avoid being seen from East Haven. The ultralight was stealthed in the same manner as the drones and its propeller was hushed by mums; but it was larger and hence more likely to be detected, so he needed a flight path that would gain him sufficient altitude before passing over habitations. Yance had followed a river across the Great Western Valley to where it plunged through a purple gorge in the mountain range and so onto the coastal plain.

There was a small town at the gorge and another a little farther downstream on the coastal side of the mountains, but the mouth of this river was a morass of swamps and bayous and there was no city there as there was at East Haven. Yance reported, "Cajuns in the delta," but no one at the base camp understood what he meant at first: namely, trappers and fishers living in small, isolated cabins.

"Two of 'em looked up when I flew past," he mentioned.

That troubled Mizir. "I think the indigenes sense into the infrared. The waste heat of our engines is minimal, but . . ." The team had occasionally noted locals glancing toward passing drones, much as a human might glance toward a half-seen flicker of light. Hassan made a note to schedule fewer night flights, when the contrast of the engine exhaust against the deep sky was greater.

A large covered wagon accompanied by five horsemen set out from East Haven on the Grand Trunk Road, but the humans paid it no mind, as there was often heavy traffic in that direction.

Yance followed the line of the mountains out to sea. Soong thought that there might be islands in that direction, a seamount continuation of the mountain range, and Mizir lusted to study insular species to see how they might differ from those they had found on the coastal plain, the river valley on the western slope, and their own alpine meadow. To this end, Yance carried several drones slaved to the ultralight to act as outriders.

What they found was a ship.

"You should see the sunuvabitch!" he told them over the radio link. "It's like an old pirate ship, sails all a-billow, gun-ports down the sides, cutting through the water like a plough. Different shape hull, though I couldn't tell you just how. Wider maybe, or shorter. And the sails—the rigging—aren't the same, either. There's a sunburst on the main sail."

"They don't use a sunburst emblem in the city," Klaus said. "The six-eagle seems to be the local totem." He meant the ferocious bird with claws on its wings and feet and covert.

"It's not a totem," Hassan said. "It's an emblem. Didn't your people use an eagle once?"

"The Doppeladler," Klaus nodded. "But it was a totem," he added, "and we sacrificed a great many to it."

"Maybe it's an invasion force," Bashir said. "Maybe this is why the Haven folk have been preparing for war."

"A single ship?" said Hassan.

"A first ship," Bashir said, and Hassan acknowledged the possibility.

"I would hate to see these people attacked," Bashir continued. "I like them. They're kind and they're clever and they're industrious."

Hassan, who had bent over the visual feed from Yance's drone, straightened to look at him. "Do you know of Philippe Habib?"

"Only what I was taught in school."

"He was clever and industrious, and they say that he was kind—at least to his friends, though he had not many of those."

"He was a great man."

"He was. But history has a surfeit of great men. We could do with fewer. The Légion Étrangère was never supposed to enter France. But what I tried to tell you is that we do not know the reasons for this coming struggle. The 'clever and industrious' folk we have been observing may be the innocent victims of a coming attack—or an oppressive power about to be overthrown. When the Safavid fought the Ak Kolunyu, which side had justice?"

"Cousin, I do not even know who they are!"

"Nor do you know these folk on the plains. Yance, conduct a search pattern. See if there is a flotilla or only this one vessel."

But it was only the one vessel and it furled its sails and entered East Haven under steam to a tumultuous but wary welcome. There was much parading and many displays and the sailors and marines aboard the ship—who wore uniforms of crimson and gold decked with different braid and signifiers—had their backs slapped and their fronds stroked by strangers in the city and not a few had their orifices entertained in the evening that followed.

("Sailors," observed Klaus, "are much the same everywhere.")

A ceremony was held in the park. Flags were exchanged—a ritual apparently of some moment, for the ruffles and paradiddles of drum-like chatter rose to a crescendo. Ugly and entirely functional sabers were exchanged by the ship's captain and a high-ranking Haven soldier.

"I believe they are making peace," Iman said. "These are two old foes who have come together."

"That is a seductive belief," Hassan said. "We love it because it is our belief. How often in Earth's past have ancient enemies clasped hands and stood shoulder to shoulder?"

"I like the Havenites better than the Sunburst folk," Bashir stated.

Hassan turned to him. "Have you chosen sides, then—at a peace ceremony?"

"Remember," said Iman, "that Haven uses a bird of prey as its sigil. A golden sun is entirely less threatening an emblem."

"It's not that. It's their uniforms."

"You prefer yellow to crimson?"

"No. The Havenite uniforms fit more poorly, and their insignia are less splendid. This is a folk who make no parade of fighting."

Hassan, who had begun to turn away, turned back and looked at his young cousin with new respect. "You are right. They are no peacocks about war, like these fancy folk from over the sea. And that is well, for it is no peacock matter. But ask yourself this: Why do old enemies come together?"

Mizir chortled over the images he and Iman were collecting of the newcomers. "Definite morphological differences. The fronds on their headballs show a different distribution of colors. There are more of the greenish sort than we have seen in the city. And the Sunbursters are shorter on the average."

Ladawan told them that the Intelligence had found close matches between the phonemes used by the sailors and those used by the city folk. "They are distinct tongues—or perhaps I should say distinct 'drums'—but of the same family. That which the cobaltics here sometimes speak is quite different."

After the ceremony in the park, there was raucous celebration. Music was created-by plucking and beating and bowing. "They know the cymbal and the xylophone and the fiddle," said Iman, "but not the trumpet or the reed."

"One needs a mouth connected to a pair of lungs for that sort of thing," Mizir told her.

"But, oh, what four hands can do with a tunbur!" And indeed, their stringed instruments were marvels of complexity beside which tunbur, guitar, sitar, violin were awkward and simple. Clawtips did for plectrums and tentacles fretted and even bowed most wondrously.

There was dancing, too, though not as humans understood the dance. They gyrated in triplets, Sunbursters and Havenites together, clapping with their lifting arms while they did. Mizir could not tell if the triplets were single or mixed gender. "You have to reach into the thorax opening and call forth the organ," he said. "Otherwise, who can tell?"

"Not I," Iman answered. "I wonder if they can. A people whose gender is known only through discovery will have . . . interesting depths." She glanced first at Hassan, then at Mizir, who winked. The sound of the clapping in the parkland evolved from raindrop randomness to marching cadence and back again, providing a peculiar ground to the intricate, contrapuntal melodies.

The team gave up trying to make sense of the great babble and settled for recording everything that transpired. But dance is contagious, and soon Khalid

and Bashir had coaxed the other men into a line that strutted back and forth while Iman clapped a rhythm and Soong and Ladawan looked on with amused detachment. Caught up, Hassan broke from the line into a mesri, and Iman with him. They bent and swiveled and they twisted their arms like serpents in challenge and response, while Khalid and Bashir clapped 11/4-time and Mizir mimed throwing coins at them until, finally exhausted, they came to a panting halt, face to face.

It was only a moment they stood that way, but it was a very long moment and whole worlds might have whirled about like Sufis while they caught their breath. Then Iman straightened her hijab, which the dance had tugged askew. Hassan thought he saw a dark curl of escaped hair on her shiny forehead. She gave him a high look, cocking her head just so, and departed for her tent. Hassan was left standing there, wondering if he was supposed to follow or not, while Soong and Mizir looked to each other.

He did pass by her tent on his way to sleep and, standing by the closed flap—he did not dare to lift it—said, "When we return to Earth, we will speak, you and I." He waited a moment in case there was a reply, but there was none, unless the tinkling of wind chimes was her laughter.

The morning dawned with mist. A fog had rolled in from the Eastern Sea and lay, a soft blanket, over everything. Hilltops emerged like islands from a sea of smoke. A few of the tallest buildings in Haven thrust above the fog, suggesting the masts of a sunken shipwreck. Frustrated, the drones crisscrossed the shrouded landscape, seeking what could be found on frequencies non-visual. Yance took the ultralight out again, and from a great height spied a speckling of islands on the horizon. Delighted, Soong placed them on the map and, with droll humor added, "Here there be dragons" to the blank expanse beyond. The Intelligence dutifully created a virtual globe and dappled it in greens and browns and blues. Yet it remained for the most part a disheartening black, like a lump of coal daubed with a few specks of paint.

"The Havenites came here from somewhere near where the Sunbursters live," Iman declared, tracing with an uncertain finger curlicues within the darkened part of the globe. "If only we knew where. The cobaltic folk may be indigenes, but I think they come from still a third place, and are strangers on these shores as well."

But fog is a morning sort of thing and the sun slowly winnowed it. The park, lying as it did on a swell of land, emerged early, as if from a receding flood and, as in any such ebb, was dotted with bits of debris left behind.

"There are five," Hassan told the others when he pulled his binoculars off. "Two of the bodies lie together, but the other three lie solitary. One is a marine off the foreign ship."

"Suicide?" wondered Iman. "But why?"

Soong said, "Not so strange. Hopelessness often follow unreasonable hope."

"Why was their hope unreasonable?" Bashir challenged him; but Soong only spread his hands in a helpless gesture, and Bashir cursed him as an unbeliever.

Hassan cased the binoculars. "People will do things behind a curtain that they otherwise entertain only in their hearts. There is something disheartening and solitary about fog. I suspect there are other bodies in the bushes."

"But, so many?" Mizir asked with mixed horror and fascination; for the Prophet, praise be upon him, had forbidden suicide to the Faithful.

Hassan turned to the tele-pilots. "Khalid, Bashir, Ladawan. Quickly. Send your drones to the park and retrieve tissue samples from the corpses. Seed the bodies with micromachines, so Mizir can explore their inner structures." Glancing at Mizir, he added, "That should please you. You've longed for a glimpse of their anatomy ever since we arrived."

Mizir shook his head. "But not this way. Not this way."

Bashir cried in distress. "Must you, cousin?"

Yet they did as they were told, and the drones swooped like buzzards onto the bodies of the dead. Clever devices no larger than dust motes entered through wounds and orifices, where they scurried up glands and channels and sinuses and took the metes and bounds of the bodies. "Quickly," Hassan told them. "Before the folk from the city arrive to carry them off."

"The folk in the city may have other concerns," Iman said. When Hassan gave her a question in a glance, she added, "Other bodies."

"I don't understand," said Bashir. "They seemed so happy yesterday, at the peace ceremony."

"How can you know what they felt?" Hassan asked him. "We may have no name for what they felt."

Yance said, "Maybe it was a sham, and the Sunbursters pulled a massacre during the night." But as a practical matter, Hassan doubted that. The ship had not borne enough marines to carry out such a task so quickly and with so little alarm.

Before the fog had entirely dissipated Hassan ordered the drones home, and thither they flew engorged with the data they had sucked from the bodies, ready to feed it to the waiting Intelligence. On the scrublands south of the park, a covered wagon had left the road and stood now near the base of the Misty Mountain exposed in the morning sun and bracketed by three tents and a picket line of six-horses. Sensors warding the cliffside approach revealed five Batinites in various attitudes: tending the campfires, feeding the horses, and when the drones passed above, two of them turned their headballs to follow the heat track and one sprang to a tripod and adjusted its position.

"A surveyor's tripod," Klaus said when Hassan showed him the image. "They survey a new road, perhaps to those fishing villages in the southern Delta."

"I think these folk have seen our drones," Hassan decided.

"But our drones are stealthed," Bashir objected.

"Yes. And hushed and cooled, but they still leave a heat footprint, and against the ocean chill of this morning's mist they must stand out like a silhouette on the skyline."

"Still . . ."

"Among humans," said Iman, "there are those who may hear the softest whisper. Or see the shimmering air above the sands of Ar Rub al-Khali. Is it so strange if some of our Batinites have glimpsed strange streaks of sourceless heat in

the sky?"

Hassan continued to study the last, backward-glancing image captured by the drones as they passed over the surveying party. A short-statured Batinite crouched behind the tripod, his tentacles adjusting verniers on an instrument of some sort. "If so, they may have taken a bearing on what they perceived."

"If they have," said Bashir, "what can they do? The cliff is sheer."

Hassan ordered that all drones be grounded for the time being and that no one stand in sight of the cliff's edge. "We can watch the city with the peepers we have already emplaced." Yance was especially saddened by the order and said that he could still fly over the western slope of the mountains, but Hassan pointed out that to gain the altitude he needed he must first circle over the very scrublands across which the surveying party trekked. "It will be for only a little while," he told his team. "Once they have laid out the road and have returned to the City, we will resume the flights." The one thing he had not considered was that the party might not be blazing a road. This did not occur to him until after Iman brought him the strange report from the Intelligence.

"There is no doubt?" he asked her, for even when she had placed the two images side by side, Hassan could not be sure. Not so the Intelligence, which, considering only data, was not distracted by strangeness.

"None at all. The images are identical down to the last eigenface. The surveyor in your road party is the same individual who followed the flight of the drone on the night the Blue Planet rose."

Soong, listening, said, "Remarkable! First Batinite twice seen."

Hassan picked up the first image and saw again the headball turned against the grain of that agitated crowd. "I do not trust coincidence," he said. "I think he has been taking vectors on each sighting of a heat trail, and has set out to find their source."

Iman sensed his troubled mind. "Should we prepare to evacuate?"

"No!" said Bashir.

"When you are more seasoned, young cousin," Hassan told him, "you may give the orders." To Iman: "Not yet. But all may depend on what is under the tarp on his wagon."

Which was, as they learned a few days later, a hot-air balloon. Klaus was delighted. "Ja! Very like Bismarck's age. Railroads, telegraphs, sailing ships with steam, and now balloons. The technological congruence! Think what it implies!"

Hassan did not wait to hear what it implied but walked off by himself, away from the tele-pilot booths and the tent flaps snapping in the dry mountain breeze. Iman followed at a distance. He paused at the shimmering gate and passed a few words with Khalid that Iman did not hear. Then he continued through the meadow, his legs kicking up the sparkling colored pollen from the knee-high flowers, until he reached the place where the wonderfall plummeted from very the top of the world. There he stood in silence gazing into the hidden depths of the pool. Mist filled the air, saturated it, until it seemed only a more tenuous extension of the pool itself. After watching him for a while, Iman approached and stood by his side.

Still he said nothing. When a few moments had gone past, Iman took his hand in hers; not in any forward way, but as one person may comfort another.

"I wonder where it goes?" he said at last, his voice distant beneath the steady roar. "All the way into the heart of the world, I think. But no one will ever know. Who could enter that pool without being crushed under by the force of the water? Who could ever return against that press to tell us?"

"Will you order evacuation?" She had to bend close to his ear to make herself heard.

"Do you think we should?"

"I think we should meet these people."

Hassan turned to regard her, which brought them very close together. The better to hear over the roar, he told himself.

"We are not forbidden contact," Iman insisted. "Circumstances vary from world to world. When to make contact is a judgment each captain must make."

"Though few are called upon to make it. I never have. Concannon never did. Life is rare. Sentient life rarer still. Sentient life robust enough to endure contact, a jewel. Your flying flowers were not sentient."

"No. They were only beautiful."

He laughed. "You are as hidden as this world."

"Shall I remove the hijab?" Fingers twitched toward her head-scarf.

He reached out and held her wrists, keeping her hands still. "It is not the hijab that hides you. You could remove all of your clothing and reveal nothing. Are the Batinites beautiful, too? You told us that once."

"Yes. Yes they are, in their own way. But they prepare for war and cry defiance; and dance when enemies make friends; and sometimes, in the dark, they kill themselves. How can we go and never know who they are?"

Hassan released her and, stooping, picked up a fallen branch of six-elder wood. Like all such vegetation in that place, it was punkish in its texture, breaking easily into corded strings and fibers. "It doesn't matter." Then, seeing as she had not heard him over the roar of the falls, he came very close to her face. "Our curious friend will have his balloon aloft before we could gather up this scatter of equipment and pack it away. And we cannot hide ourselves in this meadow, if he can see our heat. So the decision to initiate contact is his, not mine, whether he knows it or not." He threw the branch into the churning waters of the pool, and the maelstrom took it and it was gone. Hassan stared after it for a while, then turned to go. Iman placed her hand in the crook of his arm and walked with him.

She said when they were away from the wonderfall and voices could be voices once again and neither shouts nor whispers, "One other thing, you could do."

"What?"

"We have the laser pistols in the bus lockers. You could burn a hole in his balloon before he even rises from the ground."

"Yes. A hole mysteriously burned through the fabric. A fine way to conceal our

presence."

"As you said, we can not conceal ourselves in any case. To burn his balloon would buy us the time to leave unobserved."

"Yes . . . But that's not what you want."

"No, I want to meet them; but you need to consider all your options."

"Can the Intelligence translate adequately for a meeting?"

"Who can know that until we try?"

Hassan laughed. "You are becoming like me."

"Is that so bad?"

"It is terrible. One Hassan is more than enough. One Iman will barely suffice."

The others had gathered at the pavilion, some at the ropes, as if awaiting the command to strike camp. The ultralight technicians were gathered in a group at one end of the camp. Whichever the decision, they would be leaving on the next supply run. Bashir caught Hassan's eye and there was a pleading in his face. Only Soong remained engrossed in his instruments. The world could end. God could clap his hands and mountains dissipate like the clouds, and Soong would only monitor the opacity and the density of their vapors.

To the technicians, Hassan gave a comp-pad containing his interim report and told them to carry it straight to the director's office on their return. "I've called for a contact follow-up team." Bashir and some of the others let out a cheer, which Hassan silenced with a glare. "I think our Batinite balloonist has shown sufficient enterprise that he deserves the fruit of it. But this decision has come on us too quickly and I dislike being rushed."

Passing Mizir on the way to his own pavilion, Hassan clapped his old colleague on the shoulder. "Once we have established contact, you will no longer need wonder about this world's ecology. Their own scholars will give you all the information you want."

Mizir shook his head sadly. "It won't be the same."

Later, Hassan noticed that Soong had not moved from his monitors. Through long acquaintance, Hassan knew that this was not entirely unworldliness on the man's part. So he joined the other at the astronomy board, though for several moments he did not interrupt Soong's concentration, allowing his presence to do for a question.

After a while, Soong said as if to the air, "At first, I think: moonlet. Strange skies, these, and we not know all out there. But orbit very low. Ninety-minute orbit." He pointed to a tiny speck of light that crossed the screen. "Every ninety minute he come back. Yesterday five. Today, ten, maybe twelve."

"What are they?" Hassan asked. "You said moonlets?"

"Only see when catch sunlight. Maybe many more, not see."

"Perhaps al-Batin has a ring of small moons . . ." But Soong was shaking his

head.

"Two big moons sweep low-orbit free."

"Then what. . . ?"

"Men go to moon, long time past. Go to Mars. I think now we see . . ."

"Rocket ships?" Hassan stood up, away from the screen where last night's telescope data replayed and looked into the pale, cloud-shrouded sky. "Rocket ships," he whispered.

"I think," said Soong, "from Blue Planet."

Soong's discovery added another layer of urgency to the team's activities. "A second sapient, and in the same system!" said Iman. "Unprecedented," said Mizir. "We should leave, now," said Klaus; and Yance agreed: "We can stay hid from the folks here, but maybe not from these newcomers."

"We have to stay!" Bashir cried. Soong himself said nothing more than that this would complicate matters, and it seemed as if the complications bothered him quite more than other possibilities. Hassan retreated to his tent to escape the din and there he pondered matters.

But not too long. There was the balloonist to consider. Balloons and space ships, and here the Earthlings sat with a Nagy hypergate and vehicles that could travel in the wrong direction—and it was the Earthlings who were considering flight. There was something very funny about that. When Hassan emerged from his tent, everyone else stopped what he or she was doing and turned toward him in expectation. "Prepare for D&D," was all he said and turned back into his tent. He heard someone enter behind him and knew before turning that it was Iman.

Iman said, "Destruction and demolition. But . . ."

"But what?" Hassan said. "We cannot get everything into the buses quickly enough. We must destroy what we cannot take."

"But you had said we would stay!"

"The equation has been altered. The risks now outweigh the opportunities."

"What risks?"

"You heard Klaus. Folk with spaceships have other capabilities. We have grown careless observing the Batinites. These . . . these Azraqi will know radar, radio, laser, powered flight. Perhaps they know stealth and micromachines. I would rather they did not know of other-buses."

"But the chance to observe First Contact from a third-party perspective. . . !"

"We will stay and observe as long as possible, but with one hand on the latch-handles of our other-buses. Soong counted at least twelve ships in orbit, and the Batinites began re-arming some while ago. I do not think we will observe a First Contact."

The team powered down nonessentials, transferred vital samples and data to the other-buses, and policed the meadow of their artifacts. Mizir drafted the ultralight technicians, who had been acting detached about the whole affair. They reported to a different Section Chief than did the Survey Team, but the old man leered at them. "There are no idlers on-planet," he told them. Hassan spent the evening redrafting his report.

The next morning, Soong told him that the ships had begun to land. "One ship fire retro-burn while in telescope view. Intelligence extrapolate landing in antipodes. Other ships not appear on schedule, so maybe also de-orbit."

Hassan passed the word for everyone to stay alert and imposed radio silence on the team. "We are no longer so remote here on our mountain as we once were. We must be cautious with our drones, with radar pings. With anything that these newcomers might be able to detect."

He did not suppose that there was anything especially remarkable about their alpine meadow that the orbiting ships would have studied it from aloft, but he had the tents struck—they clashed with the colors—and moved the primary monitors beneath a stand of six-cedar. He ordered Khalid and Ladawan to bring the other-buses to idle, so that they would be a little out of phase with the Right 'Brane and, in theory, impossible to detect by any but other instruments. When they had all gathered under the trees, Hassan did a head count and discovered that Bashir was missing.

With many curses, he set out to look for him and found him by the edge of the cliff that overlooked the plains. Bashir lay prone with a pair of enhanced binoculars pressed to his eyes. Hassan, too, dropped prone upon the grass beside him—strange grass, too-yellow grass, velvety and oily and odd to the touch. Hassan remembered that he was on a distant and alien world and was surprised to realize that for a time he had forgotten.

Bashir said, "Do you think he knows? About the ships in orbit, I mean."

Hassan knew his cousin was speaking of the balloonist. "He knew they were coming. They all knew. When al-Asraq came into opposition, the ships would come. Someone must have worked out the orbital mechanics."

"He's coming to us to ask for help."

"Against the Asraqi."

"Yes. They are brave folk. Regimented companies in squares, firing one-shot rifles. Field cannon like Mehmet Ali had. And against what? People in space ships! What chance do they have, Hassan, unless we help them? 'Surrender to God and do good deeds.' Is that not what God said through his Messenger, praise be upon him?"

"Bashir, there are nine of us, plus the technicians for the ultralight. We have no arms but the four lasers in the weapons lockers. Only Klaus has any knowledge of military theory—and it is only theory. What can we possibly do?"

The attack was swift and brutal and came without warning. The shuttlecraft flew in low from the west, screaming over the crests of the mountains, shedding velocity over the ocean as they banked and turned. There were three of them, shaped like lozenges, their heat shields still glowing dully on their undersides. "Scramjets," said Klaus into his headset and the Intelligence heard and compiled the observation with the visuals. "Bring the cameras to bear," said Hassan. "Bring the cameras to bear. One is landing on the park."

The second on the far side of the city. It may land in the swamp and be mired. Ladawan, we'll take the chance. Send a drone over that way. On a narrow beam. Yance, if the invaders put anything between us and the drone, destroy the drone immediately. Where did the third shuttle go? Where is it? Klaus, your assessment!"

"Mid-twenty-first-century equivalent," the German said. "Scramjet SSTOs. Look for smart bombs, laser targeting, hopper-hunters. High-density flechette rifles with submunitions. Oh, those poor bastards. Oh, those poor bastards!" Black flowers blossomed in the sky. "The Havenites have their field guns to maximum elevation. Low-energy shells bursting in the air . . . But too low to matter. Ach, for an AA battery!"

"You are choosing sides, Klaus."

The technologist lowered his binoculars. "Yes, naturally," he snapped, and the binoculars rose again.

"It is not our quarrel," Hassan said, but the Roumi was not listening to him.

"The second shuttle is in the swamp," Ladawan reported. "I do not think the Havenites expected that. They have few defenses on that side."

"I do not think the Asraqi expected so, either," Klaus said. "These shuttles have only the limited maneuverability. More than the first American shuttles, but not much more. They may have little choice in where they land."

"Where did the third one go?" Hassan asked.

Bashir raised an ululation. "It was hit! It was hit! It flew into a shell burst. It's down in the surf."

"A lucky shot," said Klaus, but he too raised a fist and shook it at the sky.

"Listen to them cheer in the City," said Iman, who was monitoring the ears that they had planted during their long observation and study.

The other two shuttles released missiles, which flew into the City, and two of the tallest buildings coughed and shrugged and slid into ruin. Smoke and flame rose above the skyline. Hassan turned to Iman. "Did the cheering stop?" he asked, and Iman turned away from him.

"No, show me," Klaus said to Soong, bending over the screen where the drone's feed was displayed. The Chinese pointed. Here. Here. Here. Klaus turned to Hassan.

"I was wrong. The third shuttle made by intent the ocean landing. They have triangulated the City. Park. Swamp. Ocean. Look at it out there. See? It floats. They must be for both the water or ground landing designed."

Soong said, "Ah! I find radio traffic. Feeding data stream to Intelligence." He put the stream on audio and everyone in the team paused to listen for a moment. There was something liquid, something squishy, about the sounds. Frogs croaking, iguanas barking. Not computer signals, but voices. The sounds had an analog feel to them.

Bashir said, "The balloon is up."

Hassan turned to stare at him. "Are you certain? The man must be mad. To go up in this? Iman, Bashir, Khalid. Go to the cliff. I will come shortly." Hassan

could not take his eyes from the dying city. Upping the magnification on his binoculars, he saw troops emerge from the first shuttle, the one that had landed in the park. "Close images!" he cried. "I want close images of those people."

"There are not very many of them," Mizir ventured.

"There do not need to be very many of them," Klaus told him. "These will be light airborne infantry. They are to hold a landing zone for the mother ship."

"You're guessing," Hassan said.

"Ganz natürlich."

The landing force scattered into teams of three and fanned across the park. The Asraqi were bipedal, shorter than the Batinites, stockier. They wore flat black uniforms of a leathery material. Helmets with masks covered their faces-if anything like faces lurked under those masks. Skin, where it showed, was scaled and shiny. "Reptiloids," said Mizir, half-delighted to have a new race to study but not, under the circumstances, fully so. "The works of God are wonderfully diverse, but he uses precious few templates."

"Speculate," Hassan said. "What am I seeing?"

"The helmets are heads-up displays," Klaus said. "The mother ship has in Low Orbit satellites placed and the Lizards receive on the battle space, the information."

"If they are reptiloid," said Mizir, "they would likely come from a dry place."

Klaus pursed his lips. "But Earth has many aquatic reptiles, not so? And al-Asraq is watery."

"So it does!" cried Mizir, "but there are yet deserts. Besides, those may be fish scales. Amphibians. What do you expect from me from the glimpse of a single bare arm!"

"Mizir!" Hassan cautioned him, and the exobiologist took a deep calming breath and turned away.

"Hassan." It was Bashir's voice on the radio. "The balloonist is halfway up, but the winds are contrary, keeping him away from the cliff."

Hassan cursed and broke his own rule long enough to bark, "Radio silence!" He turned. "What is it, for the love of God? Khalid, I told you to go to the cliff and wait for the balloonist."

Khalid glanced at the progress of the battle on the large plasma screen. "Not a fair fight, is it. Here, sir. You may need this."

Hassan looked down at his hand and saw that the gate warden had given him a laser pistol.

"There are only four laser pistols," Khalid explained, "two in each bus. Ladawan and I keep one each. We are trained marksmen. I give one to you, because you are team captain. Who gets the fourth?"

"Warden, if the Asraqi attack us here, four laser pistols will do no good.

Against a cruise missile?"

"Sir, they will do more good than if we were utterly disarmed."

Hassan tucked the pistol into his waistband. "Klaus?"

The German lowered his binoculars, saw what the gate warden had, and shook his head. "Military strategy is to me small squares on a map-screen. I have never fired a handgun. Give it to Yance. Americans make the Fickerei to pistols."

Soong reached up from his console seat. "I take."

Khalid hesitated. "Do you know how to use one?"

"I show you by burning rabbit." He pointed to a six-legged rodent on the far side of the meadow.

Khalid did not ask for the proof, but handed over the pistol. Soong laid it on his console.

"Do you shoot so well?" Hassan asked him after Khalid had gone to the cliffside.

"No, but now he does not give pistol to Yance. Too young, like your cousin. Too excitable. Better pistol with me. I not know use. But I know I not know use."

"The Batinites must have expected a landing in the park," Klaus announced. "They have a regiment in the woods concealed. Now they charge while the Asraqi they are scattered!"

Hassan paused in the act of leaving and watched while ranks and files decked in yellow marched from the woods to the drum-claps of their tympanums and their lower arms. He saw the corporals bawl orders. He saw the ranks dress themselves and two banners—the six-eagle and some device that was probably the regiment's own—rose aloft. The first rank knelt and both it and the second rank fired in volley, then they side-stepped to allow the next two ranks to pass through and repeat the process while they reloaded.

They managed the evolution twice before the invaders tore them apart. High velocity rounds from scattered, mobile kill squads firing from shelter shredded the pretty uniforms and the fine banners and splattered the six-cedars and ironwood and the chartreuse oil-grass with glistening pools of yellow-green ichor. A few cannon shots from the shuttle completed the slaughter. Nothing was left of the regiment but twitching corpses and body parts. Hassan wondered whether the young soldier they had once watched make love to his sweetheart lay among them.

"O, les braves gens," Klaus whispered, echoing a long-dead King of Prussia at a long-forgotten battle.

Hassan could bear to see no more. "Record everything," he barked. "The rest of you, get those buses packed. Power down any equipment whose source might be traced by those . . . lizards. Klaus . . . Klaus! Estimate the invaders' capabilities. What can we operate safely? At the moment, the Asraqi are . . . preoccupied; but sooner or later they'll bring down aircraft—or a satellite will chance to look down on this meadow. Leave nothing behind that those folk may find useful—and they might find anything useful!" He turned to walk to the cliffside, where the balloonist was attempting his ascent. Klaus said, "But, I thought we might . . ." Hassan silenced him with a glare.

When he reached the edge of the six-cedar grove that grew close to the cliffside, Hassan saw Iman monitoring the balloon through her goggles. She seemed an alien creature herself, with her head wrapped in a scarf and her face concealed by the glasses.

"He's using a grappling line," Bashir announced as Hassan joined them. "He whirls it around, then throws it toward the cliff."

"Has he seen you?"

"No." It was Iman, who answered without taking her eyes off the balloonist. "A dangerous maneuver," she added. "He could foul his mooring rope, or rake the balloon above him."

"We've been watching the battle," Bashir said, "on our hand comms."

Iman lowered her glasses and turned around. Hassan glanced at Khalid, who squatted on his heels a little behind the others in the brush; but the warden's face held no expression. Hassan rubbed his fist and did not look at any of them. "It's not a battle. It's a massacre. I think the Batinites have killed two Asraqi. Maybe. The invaders evacuated their wounded into their shuttle, so who can say?"

"We have to do something!" Bashir cried.

Hassan whirled on him. "Do we? What would you have us do, cousin? We have no weapons, but the four handguns. Soong is clever, and perhaps he could create a super-weapon from the components of our equipment, but I do not think Soong is quite that clever. Yance could fly out in the ultralight and perhaps drop the gas chromatograph on someone's head-but he could never do that twice."

Iman turned 'round again. "Stop that! Stop mocking him! He wants to help. We all do."

"I want him to face reality. We can do nothing-but watch and record."

"We could send one of the buses back to Earth," Bashir entreated him, "and show them what's happening here. They'll send help. They'll send the Legion, or the American Marines, and we'll see how those lizards like being on the other side of the boot!"

"What makes you think that the Union, or the Americans, or anyone would send so much as a policeman? What interests do they have here?"

Bashir opened his mouth and closed it and opened it a second time. "They'd, they'd have to. These people need help!"

"And if they did send the Legion," Hassan continued remorselessly, "every last trooper would have to come through the gate. The Asraqi may be brutal, but they can not be stupid. One cruise missile to take out the gate and the whole expeditionary force would be trapped, cut off from home forever. Or the Asraqi would simply pick off whoever came through, seize the buses, and . . . What general would be mad enough to propose such a plan? What politician fool enough to approve it? What legionnaire suicidal enough to obey?"

Khalid spoke up. "And you haven't yet asked how we would move a force large enough to matter down a sheer cliff onto the plains."

"Thank you, warden," Hassan said, "but I think my cousin begins to understand."

But there is one thing we can do," he added quietly.

Bashir seized on hope. "What? What can we do?"

"Little enough. We can give information-if the Intelligence has mastered enough of their speech. We can tell our balloonist friend about asymmetric warfare. About the Spanish guerrilla that tormented Napoleon. About Tito's partisans."

"Will that help?"

Hassan wanted to tell him no, that few irregular forces had ever triumphed without a secure refuge or a regimented army to back them. The guerrilla had had Wellington; Tito's partisans, the Red Army. "Yes," he told Bashir. Khalid, who may have known better, said nothing.

"He's latched hold," said Iman.

"What?"

"The balloonist," she told him. "His grapple. He's pulling the balloon toward the edge of the cliff to moor it."

"Ah. Well. Time to welcome the poor bastard."

"Why," asked Khalid of no one in particular, "with all that is happening to his city, does he insist on reaching this peak?"

"I think," said Hassan, "because he has nothing else left to reach for."

The Batinite headball cannot show expression, at least no expression that humans can read. Yet it was not hard to discern the emotions of the balloonist when, after he had clambered from the balloon's basket onto solid ground and secured it by a rope to the stump of a tree, the waiting humans rose from concealment. The Batinite reared nearly vertical, waving his tentacled upper arms in the air, and staggered backward. One step. Then another.

"No!" said Iman. "The cliff!" And she moved toward him.

Groping behind into the basket, the balloonist pulled out a musket and, before Hassan could even react to the sight, fired a load of shot that ripped Iman across the throat and chest. Hassan heard a pellet pass him by like an angry bee and heard, too, Bashir cry out in pain.

Grapeshot is not a high-velocity round; it did not throw Iman back. She stood in place, swaying, while her hijab turned slowly from checkerboard to black crimson. She began to turn toward Hassan with a puzzled look on her face, and Hassan thought she meant to ask him what had happened, but the act unbalanced her, and, sighing, she twisted to the ground.

Hassan caught her and lowered her gently the rest of the way. Speaking her name, he yanked the sodden hijab away and held her head to his breast. Her hair was black, he noted. Black, and wound tightly in a coiled braid.

The Batinite was meanwhile methodically reloading his musket, ramming a load down the muzzle, preparing for a second murder. With a cry, Hassan rose to his feet, tugged the pistol from his waistband, and aimed it at the thing that had come in the balloon. The red targeting spot wavered across the alien's headball. The laser would slice the leathery carapace open, spilling-not

brains, but something like a ganglion that served to process sense impressions before sending them to the belly. Hassan shifted his aim to the belly, to the orifice from which might emerge slimy, unclean organs, behind the diaphragm of which Mizir had named the creature's life and thought.

He almost fired. He had placed his thumb on the activation trigger, but Khalid shoved his hand down and fired his own laser four times with cruel precision, burning the hands of the beast, so that it dropped the musket and emitted sounds like a mad percussionist. With a fifth and more sustained burn, Khalid ran a gash along the body of the balloon hovering in the sky beyond. The colorful fabric sighed-much like Iman had sighed-and crumpled in much the same way, too, hanging for a while on the rocky escarpment while the wind teased its folds.

Hassan dropped his pistol to the dirt unfired. He turned and walked into the alien cedars.

Khalid indicated the thrumming prisoner. "Wait! What are we to do with him?"

Hassan did not look back. "Throw it over the cliff."

Soong found Hassan at last in the place where he ought to have looked first, by the endless falls and bottomless pool at the far end of the mountain valley. There the team leader knelt on a prayer rug that he had rolled out on the damp earth and rock and prostrated himself again and again. Soong watched for a time. He himself honored his ancestors and followed, when the mood struck, an Eight-Fold Path. Perhaps there was a god behind it all, perhaps not. His ancestors were not forthcoming on the subject. Soot from the burning city had begun to settle on the plateau. Explosions boomed like distant thunder. If that were the work of a god, it was one beyond Soong's comprehending.

Hassan sat back on his haunches. "Why did she have to die?" he cried, loudly enough that even the roar of the falls was overcome.

Soong wondered momentarily whether Hassan had addressed him or his god before he answered. "Because pellets sever carotid artery."

Hassan hesitated, then turned around. "What sort of reason is that?"

"No reason," Soong said. "Westerners think reason, always reason. But, no reason. 'Shit happens.' Life is wheel. Someday you escape."

"Do not presume to question God."

"Gods not answer, however often asked. Maybe they not know, either."

"I can't even blame that poor bastard in the balloon." Hassan covered his face with his hands. "His planet has been invaded, his people massacred, the proudest achievements of his civilization exposed as less than nothing. What were we to him but more invaders? Tell me Khalid did not throw him over the cliff."

"He know not lawful order. But survival up here, more cruel. Without balloon, how he descend? With hands burned so, how he fend?"

"It was my fault, Soong. What sort of captain am I? I let al-Batin lull me. I should never have allowed Iman to approach him like that, without taking time to calm his fears."

"Not matter," said Soong. "He no fear. He hate."

"What do you mean? How can you know that?"

Soong spread his hands. "Maybe Intelligence not translate well. But say headball drum hate and loathing. We question him. Mizir, Khalid, me. This not first visit from Blue Planet. Asraqi come once before. Come in peace. Trade, discovery, I think. And Batinites kill all-for defiling holy soil of Batin."

"Without provocation?"

"Arrival provocation enough, balloonist say. Asraqi ship damaged, but some escape, come to Haven. Warn of terrible revenge, next approach, but Batinites not care. No logic, just fury. Kill survivors, too. Balloonist one of them. Proud to defend al-Batin. Remember, Hassan, he bring balloon here before Asraqi land, and bring gun already loaded. Not know who up here or why, only someone up here. Come to kill, not to greet."

"Xenophobes . . ." Hassan could not reconcile that with the gentle, carefree folk he had been observing for so long. And yet, the one never did preclude the other.

Soong shook his head. "Balloonist not hate Asraqi; only hate that they come."

"Does the difference matter? And is the Asraqi punishment not worse than the original crime?" Hassan did not expect an answer. He did not think that there ever would be an answer. He rolled his prayer rug and slung it over his shoulder. "Are the buses ready to go?"

Soong nodded. "Waiting for captain."

"Is . . . Is Iman on board?"

"In specimen locker."

Hassan winced. "I'm ordering Khalid to seal the gate. No one comes back here. Ever."

"Too dangerous," Soong agreed.

"Not in the way you think."

From a world named The Hidden by humans, humans departed. The gate closed on a pleasant mountain glade, far above the flaming cities on the plains below. Gates swung where God willed, and man could only submit. Perhaps they opened where they did for a reason, but it was not man's place to question God's reasons.

Hassan Maklouf was their leader, a man who had walked on eighteen worlds and bore in consequence eighteen wounds. To ten of those worlds, he had followed another; to eight, others had followed him. From four, he had escaped with his life. With two, he had fallen in love. On one, he had lost his soul.