

Virgin Wings
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Ms. Van Scyoc is "a new writer who graduated high school and southern Indiana five years ago to become an Air Force wife. Despite several solo cross-country flights, Sydney Van Scyoc says she is not now flying and does not intend to fly again until she overcomes her fear of 'forms, clearances and radio procedures—or until these things have been eliminated.'" If only airplane flying had improved radically in the forty-one years since Avram Davidson introduced her work to F&SF readers with those notes! Ms. Van Scyoc's life has certainly changed during those intervening years—in June 1992, after years of writing fiction, she became obsessed with jewelry making and spent a decade selling earrings and bracelets in the San Francisco Bay area. Last year she retired from that trade and now spends most of her time gardening and conferring with her cats...and, yes, writing again.

The sun extended warm fingers through the open window, and even here, four levels above the avenue, the air was scented with festival pollens. Lavender shadows shifted across the wallscreen, an abstract suggestion of flowering wisteria. When breakfast was done, Topa leaned across the table, sunlight brightening her fair hair, and grasped Didra's wrist. "You promised we could go to the park today."

Didra felt Topa's anticipation as a warm tingle upon her own flesh. She drew back. "If you think we will see anything from the edge of the plaza—" Graciously though the Children treated the uninitiated, those who had not accepted the Light would be restricted to the perimeter of the plaza today.

Topa's hazel eyes met Didra's dark ones earnestly. "Didi, I don't care if I can't see Her face. I want to celebrate our year together. I want to see the trees dressed for spring. I want to see the girls when they ride in on their white mares. I want to see—"

The great barrels of Virgin lilies, forced into bloom for the festival; the satin-lined lovers' nests half-concealed behind screens of wisteria and jasmine; the laughing boys tossing confetti and pollen as they raced down the pathways. Didra's shoulders tightened. The festival of the Spring Virgin was a celebration of the reawakened earth, a day and night of sanctioned license and intoxication.

Didra had been expelled from the Congregation of the Dark Veil half a lifetime ago. Indeed, the austere Congregation itself had splintered not long afterward and neither of the resulting cults had survived. Still, seventeen years later, the abandon of the Children of Light stirred misgiving in Didra.

Topa's eagerness touched that same nerve. Topa was no longer the anxious girl Didra had first seen on the midnight cruiser the year before. She was no longer the girl who wore her history in her downcast eyes and in the guarded stoop of her shoulders.

No one could document the date of Topa's conception or the identity of her parents. She had begun life as a few fertilized cells preserved and set aside rather than implanted. Later she had become part of an inventory passed from clinic to laboratory.

The laboratory had been converted to defense purposes during the Long War. Two decades after the war, the Children of Light announced the generation of their four gods from the One. When the long-forgotten embryos were discovered in a sealed freezer unit, one of the more militant sects acquired Topa and her pre-born companions, intending to rear them as Soldiers of the One. But the sect splintered a few years after incubating the embryos, abandoning them to the care of the Civil Authority.

Didra had seen Topa alone night after night on the midnight cruiser, a pale waif passing the hours as Didra herself often did, watching city lights below. Didra had long accepted her own isolation—she was a Sister, condemned by the sects, regarded as an anomaly by the more tolerant Children—but after a while, she could not accept Topa's. Night succeeded night; Didra watched Topa step off the cruiser into the harshly lit avenue alone. Didra's anxiety gradually became a far more intense misgiving.

But did its source lie in Topa's youth, in her vulnerability? Or in Didra's growing fear of breaching the protective shell of her own isolation?

She took the risk one night in March. Topa did not recoil. Very soon she shared Didra's apartment and her bed.

Didra pressed her fingertips to the tight furrow between her brows. Was Topa even aware of the extent to which she had changed in their year together? Didra weighed Topa's blossoming boldness, her restlessness, the vibrant shades of lavender and rose that replaced the drab colors she had worn the year before.

Topa touched Didra's wrist again. "Didi, you promised that we could go today."

She had, in a moment's weakness. "I'll change clothes." Didra's chair rasped against the tiles. "And don't even think of going dressed as you are."

Topa fingered stray whispers of lavender fabric. Her smile was coy. "You don't like me like this?"

The gown was a filmy tease of fabric, nothing more. "If you step out the door dressed like that, whose attention are you soliciting?"

Confusion darkened Topa's hazel eyes. "Yours?"

"If it's my attention you want, we can stay here." With her dark brows, her glinting eyes, her rigidly squared shoulders, Didra could be forbidding when she chose.

Topa ducked her head, pale hair veiling her slight features. When she brushed her hair back, her lips trembled. "I'll change."

She should never have agreed to this. Tense, frowning, Didra went to her closet and chose dark trousers and her most severely tailored tunic. She combed her fingers through her dark, close-clipped hair. When she glanced in the mirror, even she was momentarily intimidated by the flash of jet eyes.

Topa emerged wearing a dress and over-vest that hung to her ankles in faded folds—clothing she had brought with her the year before. Her fingers pleated the coarse fabric. She did not meet Didra's eyes.

On the avenue, pots of flowering vines hung from every street pole, their scent spicing the air. Green foliage and pink blossoms burgeoned from wide-mouthed barrels. Men swaggered in satin tunics and sashes, the emphatic clatter of their boot heels demanding

attention. Women denied them with downcast eyes, but soft laughter and the coquettish ripple of sheer fabrics told another tale. Pollen drifted in the air.

None of the surviving sects of the One had stationed watchers along the avenue. There were no Servants of the Burning Heart in flame-fringed robes, no Watching Eyes glowering from coarse-bearded faces. Even the Devotees of the Scored Flesh had sent no one to stand in silent condemnation of the festivities. There was only a pair of Civil Authority Guards on patrol, gray-clad, disinterested.

There had been no torch-lit marches the night before, no public harangues against the festival pollens that polluted the air and corrupted the innocent. Newscasters had commented upon the unexpected quiet.

Topa gazed down the avenue. "It's beautiful, Didi."

Didra nodded, frowning. Didra was sect-born, the child of parents who had proclaimed the One on street corners. Was it bred into her very bones to meet the Children's public extravagances with wariness? She forced herself to draw deeply of the scented air. At least the pollen could do no more than make them sneeze if they avoided the wine.

A cruiser cast its billowing shadow upon the pavement and settled into place. The vessel's iridescent dorsal banner carried just one message today: **THE SPRING VIRGIN COMES!**

"And we come to take Her!" half a dozen male voices bugled in ragged chorus.

Drunk already on pollen, wine, and anticipation.

The men stormed the boarding ramp, pushing past the single Civil Guard, stumbling over each other like puppies. Topa laughed and the youngest turned, eyes glinting. His bold smile faltered when he met Didra's narrowing gaze. He turned and pushed his mates aside.

Topa laughed again, her hazel eyes shining. "You frightened him, Didi."

Didra's fingers dug into her arm. "Do you want to miss the ship?"

They slipped into softly inflated seats. The Guard secured the door and the cruiser floated into the air and drifted along the avenue. The remaining seats filled at the next stop. The vessel bobbed aloft and began its leisurely journey across the city.

Topa, seated next to the ship's exterior membrane, drew spread fingers across its surface. It cleared to transparency. She peered down, lips parted. "They've put barrels of Virgin lilies down the center of Avenue K. People are dancing the Living Vine. Hundreds of people. Have you ever done that?"

"Danced the Vine?" Wrapped herself in gauzy veils and abandoned herself to delirium on the street? "What do you think?"

Topa peered at her obliquely. "We could do that next year, Didi."

Didra shook her head—no more thoughtless promises—and glanced around the passenger compartment.

A young woman in lilac and jonquil gazed at her, eyes luminous with good intentions. Didra expelled a sharp breath, steeling herself for the inevitable overture.

"You are a Sister of the Isle, are you not?"

"How could you tell?"

The young woman did not hear Didra's irony. "I would not have guessed, but my cousin was a Sister. She was dear to us all, never mind how cruelly the sects malign the Sisters. And when she accepted the correction—"

The cousin *had* accepted correction, of course, as did most Sisters; had become even more beloved once she conformed to the social norm. The tale was familiar.

"If you wish to join us in the Light, you are welcome as you are. But the correction is so easily achieved. A day in the adaptation clinic, a few after-visits..."

"I am considering it," Didra lied. "Of course, had I accepted correction when I was younger, I would not have been expelled from my parents' sect. I might still serve the One."

The young woman shrank. "Surely you would not!"

She was hardly older than Topa. And Didra felt Topa's anxious fingers on her arm. "No, I would not," she agreed, relenting. "Thank you for your interest." She leaned back, closing her eyes.

Soon the excited chatter in the passenger bay quieted. The vessel listed as it settled. Didra opened her eyes. Dozens of hands had wiped the opacity from the ship's membrane. Didra caught glimpses of flowering trees draped with rose and ivory satin: the park.

The onboard Civil Guard released the door lock and stood aside. A second Guard scanned their faces as they stepped to ground.

A few moments later they stood under the trees, spring sunlight dappling the grass. Plum, dogwood, satinleaf—the boughs were heavy with blossoms. Even here, at the very edge of the park, Virgin lilies spread fleshy pink petals. They stood in pots and barrels, spilling their intoxicating pollen.

Topa reached to touch one soft-downed petal, then drew back. "Are we allowed to touch the lilies?"

"You'll get pollen on your fingers."

Topa nodded and stepped back. "And if we drink the wine while the lilies are open—"

"We won't drink the wine." Pollens and wines were cleverly engineered to interact to intoxicate the senses fully. Didra glanced around. The park was circular in configuration. White-paved paths led like spokes toward the central plaza. The other passengers hurried down the nearest path, the women's sheer gowns streaming.

Fountains bubbled beside the path. The wine was as rosy as the pollen was golden. "Just a taste, Didi."

"No."

"Didi—"

Didra did not suppress the quick blaze of anger. "If you must drink the wine, then drink it! Pull a length of silk off a tree and wrap yourself in it. I'm sure you can find someone to join you behind the vines. Is that what you want?"

Topa took a single step back. "I—*no*." She averted her eyes.

Didra turned, her shoulders taut. The exchange left a sour taste in her mouth. But what had she expected when she agreed to come?

Shouts, laughter—A dozen girls cantered past on white mares, long headdresses fluttering around their bare thighs. Men shouted after them.

When they had passed, a vendor pushed a cartload of caged white doves toward them. "Loose a dove for the Spring Virgin!"

"Will that make me a virgin too?" A tall woman, not young.

The vendor paused, selecting a single cage and exhibiting it with a flourish. "You know it will, my dearest lady. When the Virgin gives Her blessing, every woman in the park will be a virgin again, no matter her age or experience."

"Then why pay you for a dove?"

"Because the doves want to mate too! How can you leave them mourning in their cages?"

"And who locked them into those cages?" But in the end the tall woman paid the price, as did three others, and there was a flurry of wings.

Topa held her breath, watching the doves vanish into the sunlight.

They continued among the others. Occasionally they passed an encampment of rainbow canopies. Vendors had spread festival wares upon tables and across the grass: embroidered sashes, jewelry, jars of scent and pomade, vials of special pollens.

The path widened and the din of voices told Didra they neared the plaza. Gray-clad Civil Guards stood in a tight group under a silk-draped acacia. A second cluster stood nearby, watchful, silent.

"Didi!" Topa caught her arm. "There's a glitterfly! If we catch it, we'll win a prize!"

"No! We—"

But Topa had already darted from the path. She ran between vendors' tents, laughing. The glittering lure danced just beyond reach of her fingertips, the sensors on its wings winking.

Annoyed, Didra pursued her. Behind them, mares' hooves drummed again. Men shouted. A boy so tiny his sash flapped around his ankles broke free of his mother and stumbled after Topa, fingers clutching for the glitterfly.

They passed a sheltered dell. Flowering hedges half-concealed silken nests. Lovers already curled in the nests. Wine bubbled nearby.

The boy paused, distracted by the fountain. He dipped his fingers, licked them... His mother snatched him and carried him back toward the path, scolding.

The lure led them across a second paved path. Again Didra glimpsed clusters of gray uniforms.

The glitterfly led them finally to a grove of flowering dogwood and plum. A tall tent of

white net panels stood at its center. Behind the net, Didra saw pots of lilies and peonies, trellises covered with flowering vines, glossy-leaved trees in containers. The glitterfly fluttered to rest on the net. Lunging, Topa caught it. She held it in the palm of her hand, her face glowing.

"And the prize is yours!" The man who appeared from the tent was imposing in turquoise robes and a turban decorated with a massive faux emerald. He wore more rings than he had fingers. The largest winked in unison with the sensors on the glitterfly's wings. "Don't you wish to know the nature of the prize?" He extended one palm.

Reluctantly Topa surrendered the glitterfly. She licked her lips. "What is the prize?"

"Have you heard of the Blue Virgin moth?"

"I have never even heard of the Blue Virgin," Topa admitted.

"That could be because she doesn't exist. As it happens, my moths fly on blue velvet wings on the Spring Virgin's day. Thus their name. On the Sun King's day, I bring with me moths with golden wings. For the Harvest Mother's festival, my moths have wings the color of falling leaves. And can you guess, for the Winter Queen—"

"White wings."

"Indeed. Wings of frost and snow with eyes like minute specks of scarlet blood." He gestured toward the tent flap. "Please accompany me."

"Topa—"

"I won a prize, Didi."

"If you want to miss the Virgin—" Every instinct warned Didra against letting Topa enter the white net tent.

"We have a few minutes before the ceremonies begin. Please address me as Yonatan, Topa."

"That's your name?"

He laughed. "You've taken my measure sharply enough! Yonatan is my name today. Perhaps tomorrow as well."

"And the day after?"

"How will I know that until the moment arrives? I deal in wonder, not in small-minded consistency." Turning, he swept back a white net panel. Before leading them into the tent, he released the glitterfly.

Sunlight penetrated the net panels and fell upon ankle-deep grass. Wisteria and jasmine spilled over the tops of tall trellises. Scents mingled in the air: spices, pollens, the perfume of peony blossoms.

Long brocade cushions had been arranged along one side of the tent. Three of the cushions were occupied. A young woman in a gauzy yellow gown, an older woman, a youth: all lay as if in deep sleep, thin tubes secured in their nostrils. Didra's eyes followed the tubes to a metal cylinder that hung from a wooden stand.

Her eyes darted to Yonatan. He studied her, his eyes deep-set, as dark as her own.

Instinctively she clutched Topa's arm. "What is this?"

"This is the villa of the Blue Virgin moth." He raised one hand. A pair of velvet-winged moths floated from the nearest vine and perched on his outstretched fingers. Their feathery antennae were black. Tiny yellow eyes winked. "As you can see, they are not organisms but devices. They are cunningly made to flutter around my villa and carry with them the senses of their human passengers. There you see a young woman sleeping on the cushions. But look up."

Topa gazed up into the sunlight. Didra peered tight-lipped at Yonatan, unable to judge from his hawk-nosed visage whether he was prophet, wizard, or charlatan. Reluctantly she looked up.

Far above, a solitary blue moth floated in the sunlight.

"And there, on the vines."

A second moth explored green foliage. Its wings were faintly iridescent.

"And the orange blossom—see the moth there, tasting the nectar? You can tell it carries a human passenger by the opalescent tinge of its wings. Have you ever tasted nectar, Topa?"

Mutely Topa shook her head.

"When you explore my villa on moth wings, you will see the pollen grains that drift in the sunlight as golden bits of sweetness. You will drink the nectar of orange blossoms. And you will feel sunlight as you have never felt it before, so heavy and encompassing that you will never suffer cold again."

Didra felt Topa quiver. "Just how is this achieved?" Didra demanded sharply.

Yonatan flicked the moths who sat on his fingers back into the air. "There is much in life we do not understand."

"Yes, and those things we avoid."

He shrugged. "Then let me ask this. How often do you see a man with no hair on his head?"

"Very rarely. The relevance?"

"Explain to me exactly how that happens when male baldness once was common. Tell me how cruisers cross the city with no engines to propel them. Tell me how a statesman can speak any language he wishes by selecting the correct tube of inhalant. Tell me how a young man who lusts after men visits a correction clinic and emerges lusting after women. Can you explain these things."

Didra expelled an angry breath. "You know I can't." Who could, except in the broadest terms?

"Then don't ask me to explain how I can send your young friend's senses flying on the wings of a moth. The explanation would mean nothing to you."

"And if the moth escapes the tent as someone enters?"

"It will not."

"If it lands in the grass and someone steps on it?"

"Then your young friend will return to consciousness unharmed."

Didra peered up at the moth that floated in the sunlight. Tension knotted the muscles of her shoulders. Her nails bit at her palms. "No," she said. If she would not let Topa drink wine while festival pollens were in the air, how could she permit this? "No."

She waited for Topa's protest. Topa stared up at her, wordless, pupils wide and black.

"No."

Yonatan shrugged. He reached into his robe and extricated a blue token. He extended it to Topa. "Keep this. The Virgin's Embodiment is about to ascend the altar. You must not miss the blessing. You can return later."

Topa accepted the token without speaking. Nor did she speak as she followed Didra from the tent. Her lips were a tight, pale line.

Didra avoided the paved path. Instead they walked among dogwoods, plums and redbuds. Small finches chattered in the branches. They passed a pond. A cluster of Guards eyed them narrowly from shade of a drooping willow. Pollen was thick in the air. Didra noted with distant interest that the Guards wore filters in their nostrils.

"I know that I seem like a child to you sometimes," Topa said finally. "But I've passed my twentieth birthday. If you want a child, you should visit the implantation clinic."

Pausing, Didra turned and met the level defiance of Topa's gaze. "I don't want a child."

Topa frowned down at her shoes. "I know why you won't accept correction, Didi."

"Do you?" Didra crossed her arms across her chest, waiting.

"You want to be yourself, not someone else. You want to be the person you were born to be, whether or not people find that acceptable."

"And you need to be yourself. Is that what you're telling me? You need to be yourself, no matter the risk."

Topa nodded, peering up again, her eyes meeting Didra's squarely. "I'm not a child, although I know sometimes I act like one. And I'll never be a Sister. Not really. But I won't leave you. I think—I think I was stored so long my soul froze. I felt nothing before I met you. Maybe you thought I was a sad little girl, a frightened child—Well, I was. I was too cold to feel anything else. Then you found me and you made me warm. I'm awake now. I want—" She hesitated, groping for words to encompass all she wanted.

Didra shook her head impatiently. "You're telling me all this because you want to go back to Yonatan's tent?"

"He said I would never be cold again."

Didra shook her head. "Have you ever heard of Yonatan before, Topi? Or anyone like him? Have you heard of those devices? What do you expect me to do if the gas in that cylinder harms you? If your mind never returns to your body? What would you say if I proposed to let a charlatan put me into a trance? With an inhalant he refuses to identify?"

Topa stared down at her feet. "I would be frightened," she admitted.

"Then don't accuse me of holding you back. Accuse me of caring about you." She glanced up. The sun stood nearly overhead. "Do you want to miss the Virgin?"

"I want—No." Face flushed with everything she could not express, Topa followed Didra back to the path. It soon widened and they heard laughing, clapping, chanting. Small groups of uniformed Guards gathered beside the path, their nostrils plugged against festival pollens, their jaws oddly pale in the midday sun. Their shoulders were hunched and wary.

Didra felt a prick of anxiety. Was the Civil Authority expecting trouble?

Then the plaza was before them, a shallow circular bowl of white paving stones. Eight broad aisles led to a raised circular platform, the altar. The Children of Light sat upon the bare stones, swaying, chanting, clapping. Their garments were brilliant in the sun. Young women in white robes were stationed around the altar, sprays of pink blossoms in their arms.

An elderly man wearing a comm-set and a scarlet sash approached. "Have you entered into the Light, dear ones?"

"We have just come to watch."

He inclined his head. "Then for you we have benches." He directed them to the perimeter of the plaza. "If you are moved to step into the Light, please approach the altar when I direct you. I am the Virgin's appointed shepherd for this small section of the venue."

Didra sat stiffly on the hard bench, Topa rigid and silent beside her.

People had brought flasks of wine and tubes of pollens. The delirium in the plaza grew as intoxicants flowed. Women jumped to their feet, bobbing and careening until they fell. An occasional ecstatic cry shivered through the crowd. Men and women in white trousers and scarlet sashes patrolled the aisles, medics' packs slung over their shoulders.

The sky was clear, brilliant. The sun glided silently toward the zenith.

When it reached that point, a long brass note quivered from the trees at the verge of the plaza. A young woman in a diaphanous gown urged her mare into the plaza, a long white banner snapping behind her. She circled the altar four times, each time crying out the name of one of the Four, and pounded away again toward the trees.

The Children were on their feet, leaping, swaying, screaming, every eye focused upon the altar, upon the white-gowned form that slowly, so slowly rose from its center.

The Embodiment of the Spring Virgin appeared to them, her face veiled, her raised arms making wings of her gown. Topa's fingers closed tight on Didra's arm. Didra started. When had they taken their feet? They had not touched the wine but Didra felt light-headed, disoriented. She swayed and turned, alarmed.

Half-concealed by frenzied Children, uniformed Guards trotted briskly down the aisle. Their eyes were narrowed, their jaws knotted and pale. One turned, his eyes meeting Didra's.

She knew him. Not by name. She had not seen him before. But she knew the concentrated intensity of his gaze. Recognized the significance of the pallor of his cheeks.

Shock made her tongue thick. "He shaved."

Topa stared up at her. "What?"

"They shaved their beards."

"The Guards? They aren't allowed to grow beards, Didi."

No, but the men of the Watching Eye were bearded. Didra managed a single deep breath. She gave her muscles conflicting commands, with the result that she neither clutched Topa's hand and pulled her beneath the bench nor turned and ran for shelter of the trees. Instead she stood frozen as the cadre of cultists advanced.

A patrolling medic shouted. From across the plaza, a woman shrieked. Heads turned. Ecstatic cries yielded to stunned silence. For one sunlit moment, every person in the plaza stood frozen.

The cultists bellowed "*One! There is but One!*" From the far side of the plaza, a dark cloud blossomed. A second.

Topa caught Didra's arm. "*The Virgin!*"

One of the gray-clad men hurled an object down the aisle. It burst, producing a third dense black cloud. "*There is but One!*"

They had come to abduct the Embodiment. To harm her. Perhaps to leave her dead upon her altar. But the cultists were few, the Children many. The Children boiled into the aisles, ecstatic frenzy transformed in an eyeblink to drunken fury. Gray uniforms swiftly vanished in a swirl of color.

The plaza was filled with thrashing bodies.

In the end, when the screaming quieted and the confusion resolved, the Watching Eyes lay bound in satin sashes, twisting like larvae in rainbow cocoons. Children swarmed around them, kicking, spitting, cursing. The altar stood vacant.

Adrenaline hissed in Didra's ears, stinging her palms. She turned to Topa and saw the same blood-fury she saw on every face. Two medics struggled through the crowd and threw a tightly bound cultist down on the bench. A tall, silver-haired shepherd pushed his way after them, his comm-set askew. The cultist spewed fiery verses, eyes bulging. Blood ran from his unplugged nostrils.

Three women in scanty gowns elbowed their way toward the bench. The smallest caught the cultist by the hair and struck his head sharply against the bench.

"*Here!*" The medics tore her fingers free and pushed her away.

The woman uttered a half-strangled curse and clawed at the nearer medic, drawing blood. The shepherd caught the woman by the shoulders. "*Leave him.* Leave him for the Civil Authority. He can do no damage now."

"They were carrying darts—darts to bring down our Virgin!"

"So we know. They were carrying smoke bombs, darts, and daggers—But they were not quick enough. She escaped. She is safe. Leave him."

Instead the crowd muttered and moved forward. The shepherd intervened again, placing himself between crowd and cultist. "Pull his fangs," he instructed the medics.

The medics bent over the Watching Eye, groping through his pockets. He spat at them. "The One will judge you! He will judge you and send you to the fires."

"You'd better quiet down or this crowd will send you to the fires."

"I am prepared! The One knows my heart!"

"Sure He does. But for now, let's see what you've stuck down this boot."

"There!" The small woman thrust an angry finger at the weapon the medic drew from the cultist's ankle holster. "Look at the tip! He's poisoned it! Jab him with his own blade!"

Didra's mouth was dry, her entire body rigid. "No! Don't do that."

The small woman glared up at her. "What do you care about this worm?"

"Even if none of us care about these worms, we must guard the Light." The shepherd grasped the woman's arm and pulled her back again. "Listen to me. These mortals came to darken the Virgin's day, and they failed. We are more in numbers and stronger in the Light. We are far stronger. If we harm them, we sully the Light ourselves."

"They insult us every time they open their mouths. It's time we ground them under our heels!"

"And track their blood to the altar on our feet? These men are to be pitied, not harmed. They refuse the very truth that would make them whole: that their One is progenitor of the Four. They think their One harsh and forbidding, but that was never the One's nature. It is their own. They rail at every joy and every mercy, and while they rant, we grow more and stronger."

The small woman combed her hand through her tangled hair, shaking her head angrily.

"The sects are dying because they have pledged themselves to an angry One who does not exist. Let the Civil Authority lock these men away. The Virgin is safe. This is Her day, and Hers is a day of joy."

Didra licked dry lips, peering around as the crowd fell under his spell. She wondered remotely why she cared what happened to the bound man. The sects had no use for her, and she had no love of them. Perhaps she simply had as little taste for violent frenzy as for sensual abandon.

A shadow fell across the bench. Didra looked up. A Civil cruiser drifted across the plaza, its bay open, uniformed officers spilling out. They settled toward the crowd on orange jumpchutes. Didra raked her fingers through her hair, the tension in her shoulders easing.

The sun stood only a few degrees lower when the Civil Guard withdrew with their prisoners. The Children settled back to their places, recounting their individual tales, slowly digesting the experience. Shepherds moved among them, counseling them.

The elderly man who had directed them to their seats earlier appeared and sat, folding Topa's hands into his own. "Child, I hope this experience has not frightened you too badly."

Topa released a long, shivering sigh. "No. I think I understand better now. About the Light."

He smiled. "It ended peacefully, did it not? The Embodiment is safe and she will

reappear within the hour. The rituals will proceed just as they were intended to proceed. Afterward we will have the day and the night for joy. Joy is what the One intended when He blessed this world with the Light and the Four."

"And the sects—"

"How much longer can they live on anger and bitterness? They are already dying, consumed by their own dark vision. The Light is mighty and all-encompassing. It will warm us and our children to a hundred generations."

Didra's glance flickered from old face to young. She had had no words to turn the events of the hour from gall to honey. But now the same muted radiance shone from Topa's eyes as from the shepherd's.

Who did not want to believe in a world saturated with goodness and joy?

She resisted the temptation to share her own vision. Topa and the shepherd did not want to hear.

The sects would die, yes. And when they were gone, some evil-natured god would be born among the Four, some god who incorporated the acrid, forbidding nature of the sects.

Men and women were not born of gods. Gods were born of men and women, and in Didra's view, every human tapestry carried a dark fringe.

That was her truth, and her truth would never warm Topa and make her radiant. Her truth would never drive the last cold from Topa's soul.

The shepherd withdrew. Didra slumped, wishing she could bow her head and shut the Children, the plaza, all the sweet-scented park from her consciousness.

She could not. Nor could she ever be anything other than what she was: a tight-laced unbeliever.

Topa studied her. Didra repressed a sigh. "The ritual will begin again in a few minutes. Afterward we'll go back to Yonatan's tent." And Topa would fly on blue moth wings. Topa would fly into sunlight that would warm her forever.

She said she would never leave. But of course she would. Perhaps this year. Perhaps next. The leavetaking, in fact, had already begun.

"If you don't want me to, Didi—"

She did not want a child or a moth with broken wings. "Of course I want you to, Topa."

The moment was filled with Topa's laughing anticipation. She threw her arms around Didra.

And the future? Didra peered into the cloudless sky, contemplating her own journey. There would be light there too. When she rode the midnight cruiser, the lights of the city were distant and cold, but the shifting patterns they described sometimes offered a remote promise.

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