

THE VALLEY OF THE GARDENS

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ike many writers of his generation, Tony Daniel first made an impression in the field with his short fiction. He made his first sale, to *Asimov's*, in 1990, and followed it up with a long string of well-received stories both there and in markets such as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Amazing*, *SF Age*, *Universe*, and *Full Spectrum* throughout the nineties, stories such as “The Robot’s Twilight Companion,” “Grist,” “A Dry, Quiet War,” “The Careful Man Goes West,” “Sun So Hot I Froze to Death,” “Prism Tree,” “Candle,” “Death of Reason,” “No Love in All of Dwingeloo,” and many others, some of which were collected in *The Robot’s Twilight Companion*. “Grist” and “A Dry, Quiet War” in particular can be seen as some of the finest stories done in shorter lengths in the New Space Opera. His story “Life on the Moon” was a finalist for the Hugo Award in 1996, and won the *Asimov’s Science Fiction Readers’ Award* poll. His first novel, *Warpath*, was released simultaneously in America and England in 1993. In 1997, he published a new novel, *Earthling*. In the first few years of the oughts, he has produced little short fiction, but instead has been at work on a major science fiction trilogy, containing some of the most extreme and inventive work to be seen in the New Space Opera to date. The first volume of the trilogy, *Metaplanetary*, was published in 2001; the second volume, *Superluminal*, appeared early in 2004.

In the violent and exotic tale that follows, he reaffirms the old wisdom that we belong to the land as much as the land belongs to us—*especially* if the land in question has been programmed with an intelligence and a purpose all its own.

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For weeks, Mac “walked the fence.” It formed the border where his land topped the mountainous ridge and sided the western slope where the Valley of the Gardens gave way to the Extremadura, Cangarriga’s vast northern desert. To the unaided human eye, the fence was made of stone, with pillars of rocks serving as posts every few hundred feet. Within the pillars were steel posts set in concrete that communicated with the jack-rock below. The fence ran deep into the substrate of the land—coded, modified, recoded, and shored up with millennia of layered routine and subroutine—so beyond Mac’s comprehension that he might as well call it ensorceled. But, magic or not, the fence had to be fixed, and to fix a fence properly you had to walk it, find the gaps, and fill them in.

And the gaps this season were wider than any he ever remembered. The desert on the other side was encroaching, making inroads many feet long down his side of

the ridge, and spreading its wildness, its potential pestilence, with it. His own land even on this high ground was tended ground. It might appear free, but that was merely because the land needed to be let alone sometimes. This ridge had been a vineyard before, and would be again someday. Now it was covered with broom grass interspersed with clumps of sage and rosemary. Restoration planting—as carefully planned as the straightest flower row.

The desert had broken through in multiple places in spear points of sand and creosote seedlings. He had more to do than he'd first anticipated. It surprised him. It *alarmed* him. In fact, his anxiety over the fence had worked its way into his dreams—and even into a couple of his nightmares.

He was reminded of fence gaps whether he was working the line or not. He'd be down below in the valley at some other task and suddenly hear the knowing screech of a desert grackle or be startled by the bounce and buzz of one of the enormous variegated grasshoppers blown into the valley by the winter westerlies in Cangarriga's northern hemisphere and feel shock, betrayal, by the fence. It was supposed to keep such things *out*—and away from his crops. At odd moments, he found himself suddenly fantasizing that a gap in the fence had let in bad code and his upper fields were being subverted and ruined. He'd even start quickly in their direction until he came to his senses and realized he'd only been daydreaming. Dayworrying. He'd had a real dream one night featuring the valley as well. Every surface in it had glowed with a sickly yellow infection—the rosemary, sage, and pine covered in a tacky, malfunctioning secretion. And he'd had several dim but troublesome nightmares featuring himself *leaving*, running through a break in the fence like a madman and disappearing (in the dreams, he was both observer and insane escapee) into the shimmer of the Extremadura vastness.

He couldn't be sure if it was himself or the valley itself that was bringing on the anxiety. Like the fence, Mac was deeply intertwined with the land in ways seen and unseen. But when he checked with other farmers, and with the villagers downvalley in Sant Llorenz, no one had noticed much different.

Maybe it was all just him.

In what was ancient custom while fence mending, he'd been joined on most days by a Faller nomad, a representative of his neighbors—his sometime enemies and trading partners on the desert side. The Faller walked with him and watched Mac as he worked, allegedly there to be sure that Mac kept to the line and did not cheat the fence outward, but mostly attempting to talk Mac into trading off-planet tech for their desert gleanings. Whatever its purpose, this tradition served to keep the line stationary. For a fence nearly fifty thousand years old, one inch of movement for every season of fence-mending would lop off a great deal of new land, or lose a large field to wildness if pushed in the opposite direction.

For his part, Mac wanted not a speck of the Extremadura. It wasn't just

desert, it was wild desert—never terraformed, but created as a battlefield, its source code hopelessly jangled, belligerent and untamed. Its jack-rock was still tainted with nox, the nanotech leavings of that war, never completely defanged. In addition, the Extremadura teemed with every manner of beast, all of them possessing a crazy sentience of sorts emanating from the jack-rock below. Yet people lived there. Nomads like Theresa.

Theresa had come on his second week working the fence, after her brother, the official watcher, had suffered some sort of injury and had to convalesce. She was a daughter of the Faller's clan that roamed this portion of the Extremadura, herding and harvesting whatever usable excretions the desert produced. The Fallers had been on Cangarriga since time immemorial, since the war itself, and were as much a part of the desert as Mac was a part of the valley.

If the valley was beauty and order, the desert was its opposite: wild almost beyond comprehension. It had taken root in the nomads as well. None was alike in appearance or even inner makeup. Some had grown carapaces, had beetled over with chitinous coats sporting insectlike wings that served as solar collectors and message transceivers. Others had grown odd appendages that served arcane purposes, or no purpose at all: roots, antlers. The girl appeared normal but for her forehead, which was nubbed with the buds of two tiny horns.

The weird was commonplace in the desert. What the nomads made their living from, such that it was, was finding the utterly unusual and unique. Over tens of thousands of years, even random computing was bound to churn out a few odd results that might be sold or traded for food and the various gewgaws the nomads lusted after.

Mac reflected that he ought to know; he'd done his share of trading over the years. He usually let his nonsentients analyze the goods, and himself only had a general awareness of what he bought from the nomads. Customarily, these were things such as solutions to mathematical conundrums, oddball, incredibly compact methods for file archiving, or remixes of movies, novels, or music that might strike someone's fancy on some other world, but had never struck his. In exchange, he sold the nomads the motorcycles they adored, tents, drills, old analyzer parts, obsolete robots, and cracked-code nonsentient algorithms. Across the desert was strewn the detritus of human-ity, the leavings of the religious pilgrimages that had occurred for several centuries after the war ended. Some of the junk was transformed in an odd or beautiful manner, brought back to a twilight life or function by interaction with the jack-rock and other castaway items. Most desert artifacts were worthless, however—as useless and stupid as the washing machine full of regenerating stones the nomads had once tried to sell him.

Much better to live in the Valley of the Gardens, where the land was loved, tended, and bountiful.

He'd tried to tell Theresa that in one of their conversations.

“Until you set foot over the line and enter the valley, you'll never know what a shithole you live in,” he'd said. “Give it a try, one try, and you're never going back.”

Of course, he had no real idea what he was talking about. He'd never been more than a footstep into the Extremadura.

Mac had been teasing Theresa the day he challenged her to cross over, but the next time they met—she tried it. Without a word of warning, she hopped through a tumbled section of fence and stood on his property.

And hopped right back—as if touched by flame.

He'd checked the log that evening and saw that his encroachment proto-cols hadn't even been triggered by her presence. It was as if a leaf had fallen, or butterfly had flitted, over the edge, rather than a girl.

She was so light. A thing of the air. She spoke of the mountains to the south, mountains he'd only seen from trips into orbit, but where she'd been born and raised. She was a creature of high passes. Winter, or the slight chill-ing of a world that was always warm since the terraforming, was the time the nomads traveled to the flats—an area she hated.

“That's why I keep coming up here to walk with you,” she told him. “This little ridge is the closest thing to a mountain I'll see until summer.”

He didn't speak much, but asked questions and listened. Mostly what he did was work on the fence: he lifted and placed stones and scanned for true. Every hundred feet, he dug a posthole and set a metal tie into the jack-rock below with jack-ready concrete he mixed in a small green wheelbarrow. Theresa watched, occasionally pitched a stone that had fallen on her side back over to him, told him of her life in the desert mountains.

She was a goatherd. Often she lived in the high passes for weeks on end without seeing another human. The goats were for milk and occasional slaughter, and her main task was to keep desert predators away—which she did with a wicked weapon of a crook she described for Mac—and to rescue animals that got in tricky situations even for goats. Her horn nubbins were her connection to the herd. They were an artifact that had been passed down through generations of women in her clan.

Theresa cherished her desert mountains in the same way he cherished his valley, only she didn't own the land in the same way he did. She was also the furthest thing possible from a farmer. She wasn't anything like any of the other girls in the village either, with whom he'd had his brief affairs. She picked at her horns,

leaped about as she spoke like a child at play. He found her irresistible.

By the end of a month of fence-mending, he realized he'd fallen in love with Theresa. And that they could never be together. She came to understand the first along with him—that had been about the time she'd made her jump through the wall—but it took her longer to grasp the second. They might live on the same planet, but eons of existence on opposite sides of the impenetrable divide had made them into practically separate species. Practically, but not quite.

Mac did love Theresa. Of that there was no doubt. And when the fence was done, he still found reasons to return to the boundary line, as did she. And one pleasant day in early spring they discovered that, while neither could abide the other's country, there was one place they could meet and touch.

On the fence.

There were places where it was wide enough and flat enough on top that two might lie side by side if they turned toward one another. Or one climbed upon another and made love to her. Again and again.

But no one could build a life upon a fence. Spring came in full, and it was time for Theresa to go back to her mountains. Her clan lingered until the first duststorm passed through, and then packed away their tents, their prospecting gear, and hitched traveling trailers to their motorcycles then headed out over the rock-strewn sand. He watched it all, saw them disappear in the distance using a delicate crystalline viewing scope Theresa had given him as a parting gift.

The telescope was a crusty brown thing on the outside, but sparkling clear within, like a split geode. Unlike a geode, it was a tube, and its crystals must have had quantum information transferring functions far beyond the chemistry of unjacked geology, because with the telescope he could see a hundred miles. And not just see. Hear. Smell. Even sense the touch of what-ever he was focusing on. Theresa had claimed the scope was an Extremadura extrusion, that there was a hidden depression in mid-desert known only to the Faller where telescopes and monoculars of every variety grew. He'd wanted to pay, but she'd scoffed at the offer.

“It's not for you to ever trade away either,” she told him.

Through this, he watched her go.

* * * *

I clung to Jasmine, centered our weight, and rode the zip line down at terminal velocity. The line was reeling out both ways as we fell from geosynch—one end toward the planet surface, one out into space as a counterbalance.

Buboes erupted all around us in the planet's upper atmosphere, not there a moment before, then, like eyes startled open, *there*, and spewing gamma rays, mutagens, disassemblers. Martin and Wu couldn't pull up in time and they rappelled right through a cloud of the nox. It etched and dimpled them until their valence defenses overcame it. But by that time their zip line was severed and the heat shield they rode upon had lost its contour. They burned when we entered the stratosphere. Others were luckier in their dying as the enemy emerged, fired, and blew them from the sky straight-away.

Of course one might consider this a bit of luck. If you died upon entry, there wasn't any chance of getting sucked into a bubo during a direct en-counter down on the turf. Because they spewed out the gob and the nox until they had you.

And then they reversed the process, and fed.

"Pock, pock, pock," Jasmine said. "The octopus is hungry." Her theory was that the buboes were like suckers on a giant kraken that surrounded the local continuum like an octopus might swarm a snowglobe. We two-dimensional creatures living on the curve of the surface would see only the suckers until the globe cracked and shattered. And even then among the shards we would never have seen the cause of our ruin.

For all I knew at the time, she was right. The scientists had lots of theories about what the hirudineans actually were, of course. Different physics from us. From everything, as a matter of fact. Skewed values for the ratio of the mass of proton and electron, the strength of the electroweak force.

The hirudineans were from a time so close to the Big Bang that questions of origin hardly mattered. They were far more ancient than us heavy-element species, and even older than the H- and He- nebulars, those sentients from the gas giants that had populated the galaxies before there was any such thing as carbon or iron.

Anyway, said the scientists, when the rest of reality aligned itself to its current state of affairs, the hirudineans did not. By that time, hardly a blink of the cosmic eye, they had reached the sentience threshold, achieving con-sciousness in a fermion condensate base. They built molecules from a soup of quarks without going through the step of creating the ensuring atoms and, with these, made the first bridge drives—at a time before there were stars to which to travel. They had migrated—not into the universe, but *out*, taking their weird physics with them. *They*. Or *it*. No one was sure. Now they—or it—had returned.

Or so the scientists thought. We skyfallers had our own notions, based upon the soldier's mixture of experience and superstition. To tell the truth, I never much cared about root causes and definitive classification back then. I was bloody-minded, full of rage and sorrow. The hirudineans had wiped out my three sons on Mars, before they'd eaten the sun of humankind—the *real*, original sun—a

feat even the nebulars had never been able to accomplish during our war with them, and had driven us into the darkness. They nearly killed me at Gang Kao, and my wife had died in the evacuation when a stealth disassembler disguised as a shuttle bulkhead dissolved, spraying us passengers into space. She was not space-adapted. I was.

A rescue drone picked me up as I spiraled toward the outer system holding my wife's exploded body in my arms.

I'd joined the army soon after. What else was there to do? Based on my background as an artist, they'd wanted to make me a graphic designer, but after a couple of years churning out dubiously effective recruitment prop, I wrangled my way into the skyfaller regiment. I was an old man even then—and nothing if not patient in my thirst for revenge.

That was many falls ago. Jasmine was my fifth variant. I'd lost the other four as humanity had lost, in battle after battle across the Milky Way—fights that echoed conflicts taking place across billions of light-years in the entire local galactic cluster. Our little slice of reality had the bad luck to be the entry point for the hirudinean incursion.

My other four variants had been close to me, of course, as comrades-in-arms always are. Jasmine was the first whom I would have called a friend. She was thirtieth generation, cloned from one of the best fighters during the nebular wars. Her angel was an AU away, dipping down into this system's solar corona and sending energy her way through the quantum tunnel formed by her entanglement with Jasmine, her twin sister. A variant needed every particle in her being to take the transfer of power. In order to then channel that energy into a more lethal form, she must also be physically transformed by her valence assemblers. She must take on the simple geometry of a cylinder, and store her mind and reassembly instructions elsewhere. That was where I came in. I was the shooter. I held the cylinder in my arms, pointed it at the enemy, and directed her fire.

And I was the protector. I melded with her mind, stored her thoughts inside me in a twisted singularity apart from the quantum entanglements of this world, so that she could be reconstituted as a person after the firefight. Like every skyfaller, I had a black hole for a heart.

Jasmine was my rifle, and I was the guardian of her soul.

We hit the ground and I took a moment to shake off the shock, then armed her up and crawled out of the impact crater we'd created.

Cangarriga. Humanity's last stand.

All became impression for me. Orange-tinged sky. The wind full of ashes. The

sickly sweet carbolic tang of the air when the hirudinean buboes popped into being. The odor of burned flesh and ozone leavings after the passage of power from their maws.

Fire shooting from Jasmine in my outstretched arms—thick streams of radiation, undulating on all wavelengths, some electromagnetic, some heavy particle, some superconducting quantum interference clumps, as large as pebbles but with the kinetic energy of a solar corona.

Buboes swelling with the overload, imploding with little gaseous *whumps* when they died.

But they killed us too. With a wink. A bubo “eye” would close, wither down to nearly nothing in a instant, and then pop back open. Vomit would pour forth. What the nox was, I’ll leave up to the engineers to explain. Some sort of extrauniversal nanotech horror. I only know that it was liquid, or at least moved like liquid, and felt like acid when it splattered you. No valence defense could withstand a direct hit. It ate through my arm twice, my shoul-der once, and my body had all it could do to regenerate the severed tendons, nerves, and muscles. If I’d taken a hit to an organ, I’d have been nothing but a backed-up file in one of the archive ships headed out of the local cluster at below light-speed. I might live again in a few billion years, or I might be rejuvenated just in time to watch the hirudinean bask in final triumph. A skyfaller’s version of the afterlife wasn’t very comforting.

We fought for a Cangarriga day-and-night cycle—which, for this world, was close to standard Earth-time. It took me a while to notice how Earth-like the planet was in other respects as well, since I was too busy digging foxholes, hiding behind anything solid and—finally—retaking the small settlement we’d come to defend. We moved into the village of Sant Llorenz at sunset on the second day. It was a ghost town. The hirudineans had exterminated most of the population before we arrived, sucking away the order-and life—from those they didn’t kill outright. Oh, they left a few behind; they always did—an assortment of disassembled and remade settlers halfway inside walls where they flailed about and expired when we extracted them, or with heads separated from bodies, yet maintained alive by a few necessary blood vessels so that the victims could observe their own decapitated state as they slowly died.

This was one of the few ways we knew the hirudineans were intelligent. Their sick sense of humor.

After the screams of the dying echoed their last, I looked around and found myself in a beautiful basin set between a half-crescent of craggy hills. Jasmine reconstituted into a woman beside me and was just as stunned as I was.

The place was beautiful. It had been terraformed for nearly a millennium prejack, and the vegetation was engineered based on the biome from the hills of

northern Spain. The ground was yellow-white and sandy, with a darker basalt substrate below. We were surrounded on all sides by green: evergreen, hardwood oca, and soft pine. Rosemary and sage formed the underbrush. The mountainsides were dry, but not arid. A first generation of trees in the surrounding hills had been burned for charcoal by the original colonists, who had arrived, as settlers will, clueless, urban, and without an adequate power plant. Some of them had found a way to weather the winters using the most primitive tech imaginable, and occasionally, a depression of blackened soil in the recovered woodland marked an ancient carbonero pit.

We learned the planet's name, Cangarriga, and that this area was called the Valley of the Gardens.

I had been wounded in the fighting, a hole neatly drilled through but-tocks, with nox traces still inside. My valence defenses were winning against it, but I walked with a limp for several days. I was also in much pain, especially at first. I convalesced with Jasmine by my side.

Meanwhile, the regiment invested the planet, most of which was desert where the terraforming hadn't taken hold (old-time techniques had always been hit-or-miss). My company was lucky enough to remain in the verdant valley. Overhead, the angels and motherships clustered in close orbits around the sun, the planet itself relatively unprotected. We were running low on ships. The Allied Species had lost badly in a nearby sector—to go along with everywhere else—and the hirudineans were following up with a withering counterattack. They'd soon be coming back, and we skyfallers would be expected to hold Cangarriga as a shield for retreating AS forces. If we went down too quickly—for not many doubted that we *would* go down eventually—the loss would likely turn into a rout and the sacrifice of a billion and a half lives made null in a matter of days. Humanity would be on the run from its own galaxy.

So we lived in the twilight between battles, Jasmine and I. This was the longest time I'd ever spent with a variant. The others had been killed or had lost their angels to hirudinean attack—and the loss of an angel nearly invariably signaled the end of her variant clone. It was hard on heart and soul to lose one's second self and shared mind.

Jasmine and her angel had been teachers before joining the regiment. They'd served on one of the old crèche ships created to fight the old wars. It had been blasted from the sky while they were on leave, and twenty thousand children—one fifth of them Jasmine-models—had been obliterated. Jasmine was herself, of course, not the original for her genome—not by many generations—but she was of the special breed of the quantum entangled, the sister-minds that had turned the tide humanity's way in the war with the nebulars.

Jasmine and I spent our off hours together on Cangarriga, roaming the hills

that enclosed the valley we garrisoned. I soon discovered that the cliffs at the valley head were riddled with caves and sinkholes—the entrances of which yawned in man-swallowing cracks leading down to black abysses. My sort of thing, back then. Spelunking with my boys had been a hobby we'd all shared. I crawled into a few of these caves and I found a cavern complex that ran throughout the hills. It was not water-created, but formed by lava tubes and magma bubbles—a relic of the planet from the days before the drone from Earth had arrived with its rainfall of tiny builders and shapers. I even coaxed Jasmine to accompany me on some of these trips, which she gamely did, although her IR visual enhancements were standard, while mine were fine-tuned for caving. Meanwhile, near the compound where we were barracked, she started an herb garden. It was an ephemeral gesture, and both of us knew it. But, somehow, it did not seem futile.

Our friendship, which had grown of necessity by proximity and intimate knowledge of one another, became something more than. Perhaps it was the pressure of knowledge of the end, the doom hanging over our heads. But I like to think it was more than that, that we shared a tough, creative nature—she with her little garden and her former profession of teaching, I with my former life as an artist. She and her angel sang lovely songs to one another when they thought no one was listening.

One thing we unequivocally shared was an understanding of what losing those you love meant. Because of this, we had been reluctant to let our feelings develop further. But as the days became weeks and the nearby stars which shone so brightly in the moonless night sky became mere photonic remnants, images of things we knew, via the subnet, to be *gone*, we at last concluded that our remaining life was bound to be very short and that we'd likely leave it together.

“And anyway,” Jasmine told me one evening, “she wants me to do it.” We were standing guard at the time—more to keep the wild pigs that roamed the wooded ridges away from the food supplies than from fear of invasion. We'd likely learn of a hirudinean approach over the subnet. They created a sort of subatomic pressure wave when they were building for attack.

“Your angel wants you to?” I asked.

Jasmine nodded. “She's lonely on patrol, and if it happens to me, it'll happen to her.” She smiled slyly. “Ever been in a threesome?”

There is a curious discipline among skyfallers. We're an elite, and, as such, we generally police ourselves. Fraternization between faller and variant is frowned upon, and hooking up officially forbidden. But it is done, and done often. After all, there's a long tradition of marines sleeping with their rifles.

I made the request of a day's leave from my captain. He understood what I was asking, and, perhaps because I was still recovering from my wound and he felt

he owed me something, offered me the residence, untouched by the fighting, which he'd taken over near the village outskirts. He could move into the village of Sant Llorenz for a day, he told me, no problem.

The house was called Rosinol, and, before he vacated the premises, my captain told me the story of the dead settler to whom it had belonged. One hot summer many years ago, its owner had been accused of accidentally setting the whole valley aflame during a drunken barbecue in his yard. This had been nonsense, and the charges had eventually been dropped, but the man had been mortified by the accusation and had moved into the village and never returned to Rosinol from that day forth. In the decades since, his rosebushes, for which he'd won prizes, had grown wild, covering the fence, then the yard, then the house itself—even the roof and chimney. At this late date in the summer, the mass of house-shaped roses was a riot of colors: red, pink, yellow, white. The accused man's barbecue grill still sat in the back meadow, a stark scarecrow robot, not yet crumbled to rust, as Jasmine and I took up residence the next morning. It was hard to believe that none of the past mattered anymore—the humiliation, the hidden truth, the pathos. The settlers were gone, all of them, and only the rosebushes remained.

We made love in the master bedroom with rose tendrils tingeing what sunshine passed through its bay window with a green and living light. I tried to be tender with her, for she was technically a virgin—remade so many times that her body was practically that of a child. She was a child with a woman's experience, however, and she showed no similar ginger feeling toward me, but pulled me down to ready her, then up by the hair to position me over her, and said “now,” and I plunged inside. She kept me on top only because of my wound.

She gushed when I broke her and we bloodied the sheets something terrible, until I finally stripped them off and set them to cleansing, then found a towel, put it under us, and fucked her until we were both too sore to move.

I lay in bed and thought: *This is the last time. If I lose Jasmine, there will never be another.*

Turned out we had timed it right. Within hours after we came off leave, the hirudineans attacked.

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Summer came to the Valley of the Flowers. The stone roses were blooming in the fields. They were blue-white in the sun, spangled through with shiny specks of red and black obsidian from the days before the planet was re-made by man. The “roses” themselves looked more like gigantic cauliflowers. They took their name from the long, brittle vines running along trellises from which the blooms depended. The stone roses were not exactly plants, of course, but crystallized mineral. Yet they were alive in a real sense with the jack-rock's swirl of near-sentience, and they

cross-fertilized one another ceaselessly. Mac took two crops a year, one in early summer and the other in autumn, hiring villagers each time to help him during the two or three weeks that a harvest usually lasted. In the autumn, his harvest and that of the other farmers in the valley was followed by a festival in Sant Llorenz.

After harvest, he crushed the stone flowers in the make vat by his barn, added water piped from the fountain spring at the upper end of the valley, and finally worked the mix into a slurry. He skimmed this off with a rake, and then his hands, and finally ran the drip into a settling pond nearby, where it sat for a month as the portal stone slowly coalesced. The land surround-ing the pond shone bone-white with a salty crust of summer extrusion from the final melding. Only the portal stone would be going to the stars. Everything else would stay right here on Cangarriga, to be plowed under and reused for another season, and the season after that, and after that—for as long as wind and sun turned the worlds and some people, somewhere, wanted gateways to wander between the spaces between them.

The physics of being were different in the Valley of the Flowers, and exploiting this odd difference—really no more than a thousandth of a per-centage in *this* force, a hundredth in *that* constant—was what allowed the known species of the local cluster instantaneous travel between the stars. The portal stone would go through many more stages of completion on a dozen other worlds—but Cangarriga was where all portals were born. That was why the system was protected and hidden from much of the outside world. The starlight in the sky at night was deliberately scrambled into random, changing patterns so that visitors who arrived by portal could not work out their location through triangulation. Some claimed the entire star system had been moved from its original location, but Mac doubted this. Mostly the place had just been forgotten about as gates became more common and portal stone a commodity—albeit an expensive one.

It was near sunset, and Mac listened in on the port-net's information buzz, as last orders for the day arrived, invoices were dispatched, calls made and received from elsewhere and elsewhen. People with family out there. Mac didn't have any himself—only his da, Old Jari. His ma had migrated off planet these twelve hundred years, and given up on him and his father. Not that Mac blamed her. Or remembered her. He'd only been a baby when she left. These days Jari was little more than a knobby root who sat in the rosefield day and night humming protocols for growth, hoeing out the viruses, sports, and weeds, and not saying anything much for sometimes years on end.

It was hard to live with a man like that, even when he was your father. Mac wasn't even sure if Jari knew anymore *who* he was. He'd never known his da to take off a Sunday for recollection and archiving, and when you didn't do that, he'd been taught by the priest, you were on the road to evaporation. Of course, his father was old—one of the oldest of the villag-ers—and once someone was fully invested into their singularity, the past was as accessible as the present. Or so the priest had also told him. To Mac, age seemed to merely make his da more vague and irascible.

He found his father up the valley, slowly hoeing down a row of stone-rose furrows. The blooms rose up and drank in the afternoon sun, converting it to energy and then to something else, working its curious physics upon the photons themselves. Mac had had the math drummed into him once, and it was still there if he wished to reach through the layers and find where that particular understanding was stored. It was paradoxical that the young sometimes had trouble remembering things that happened a mere century ago, when the old who had reached their full mental growth and inscribed themselves into their singularity could access millennia of memory without batting an eyelash. But singularities required more than two thousand years after implantation to twist and compress into enough complexity to serve as anything more than an archive for the most basic of sensory impressions. Most of Mac's dynamic memories were stored in the land—particularly the land around his house, and the jack-rock of the caves that he knew lay beneath it.

This was the reason he couldn't leave the valley. Until he was fully in-scribed into his singularity—and that would be five hundred years from now, at least—leaving the Valley of the Gardens would be, literally, the same as leaving himself. His brief jaunts in the planetary shuttle up to the solar collection station had been unnerving enough.

He was still a kid, and, except in extreme cases, the portals were for adult use only.

The thing was, he felt five hundred years ahead of schedule. He had since he'd met Theresa and made love to her on the fence. In one sense, his connection to the jack-rock of the land was far from mystical. He was a veritable nexus of command and control operations for every facet of the farm. Not a crystal grew or tree budded without his being aware of it, dimly or otherwise, as the situation demanded. They called it the Valley of the Gardens for a reason. He was a gardener.

But there was something else now. The feeling of something almost frantic in the land. Flowers blooming as if they would never get a chance to bloom again. Weeds running riot in the rosefields. This was why Jari had spent so much time hoeing these days. These years.

“Da, I want to talk to you,” Mac said. He strode across the furrows, gingerly stepping over the delicate living stone that grew between them.

His father did not answer, and continued his hoeing. There were real, actual weeds. And there were stray routines that inhabited them, that damaged the inner working of the crop flowers.

Mac reached Jari, touched his shoulder.

“Da!”

Jari stopped hoeing, but neither looked up nor answered. Mac felt lucky. This was more reaction than he'd gotten from his father in a month of Sundays. Jari's tangled hair fell down to his feet. His beard, a mass of curls, hung like a great bib from his chin, reaching nearly to his belly. And Jari's nails—they were uncut. Gnarled and brown spirals.

"I've met a girl," said Mac. "A woman."

Mac looked down at his da's toes, sticking out of rope-soled sandals. Bat-tered, broken-nailed.

"Faller," his father said.

"Yes." Mac didn't even bother asking how his father knew this.

"And you want to know why she can't cross over the fence?"

"I want to know how I can be with her. Together with her."

To Mac's surprise, Jari straightened up, brushed the hair from his eyes. Mac hadn't seen those eyes for a long time. He'd become so accustomed to thinking of his father as a stooped nebbish, he'd forgotten there was an actual human face under there.

"Other people visit the village, come in the valley. Why can't she?"

"Why don't you go over into the Extremadura?"

"You know why," Mac replied. "My memories are here. The fence cuts off my access."

His father nodded slowly, and his hair fell back over his face. The curtain closed over the man. Still his voice emerged once more from the shrubbery.

"She's got nox traces in her," Jari said. "Valley's likely rejecting *it*, not *her!*"

"But all that was neutralized years ago."

"The war's not over," he said. "Not yet."

Jari hunched over once more and resumed his slow hoeing down the rose furrows. Mac knew further questions would be met with stone silence. It had been infuriating him for centuries. Mac considered himself a patient person. He understood holding one's tongue until there was something worthwhile to say. He'd even admired his da for it at one point. But enough was enough.

Cryptic pronouncements. Answers that provoked more questions. Always the long view. Never a solution for the moment.

Seemed like every time he got around his father, he got irritated. Maybe the problem was with him, but Mac couldn't do anything about it. The villagers thought his father was wise, but there came a time when something *had* to make a common sort of sense in the here and now. But he supposed his da would never see that. Or had seen it and dismissed it millennia ago.

So it shocked him when his father called out to him as he was stalking away across the field, wondering why he'd come at all.

"When *he* comes," said Jari, "you may can go and get her."

Mac turned, put his hands on his hips. He almost didn't want to give his father the pleasure, but in the end his curiosity got the better of him. "Who's coming, da?"

But his father had resumed his hoeing, and there was no reply. It was as if a rock had spoken, and then gone mute again. You almost wondered if you had heard anything in the first place.

* * * *

There were more of them this time, if that were possible. They popped into existence all around the village. Guarding the planet's star, our angels and motherships faced a thousand times as many hirudineans in space. The buboes appeared from seemingly nowhere, disgorged their toxins, their blasts of unstable "energylike" gob lethally spewed from otherwhen. They were parasites, feeding on order. They were after the local sun as an after-thought—it was the rich complexity of planetary physics they truly wanted. But the hirudineans knew that to kill the star cut off power to the humans on the encircling planets and left them defenseless. Then the feast could begin.

The angels held on as best they could, and through quantum tunnels they fed us the sun's fire. They fed Jasmine. And she took it, transformed it, and flamed forth. I used her as the weapon she was, directed her fire, attempted to lance the pustules forming in the air about us.

Planetside, it was like trying to hold back a nightmare rain. We'd invested Cangarriga with a thick layer of jack-rock by this time, and we thus had an advantage against their disassemblers and other nano-based spew. This saved us from being wiped out in the first wave by the nox. The descending liquid gob, their energy attack, was bad enough. It burned through the woods, leaving razed forests of cinder stumps in its wake as it struck and rolled down the sides of the valley. The buboes worked together, concentrating their energy. They hung like diseased moons

in the air, oozing, sputtering, flaming forth from their gaping, lipless mouths after they recharged. They formed a half globe around us, a northern hemisphere of destruction.

We'd set up fields of fire, stationed ourselves as best we could using the cover we had in the village. The skyfallers in the surrounding region were not so lucky. Most of the planet was lifeless desert—what some history-conscious faller had named “Extremadura” after an area on old Earth. There were many more of them, and they were mercilessly annihilated, with maybe one in a hundred surviving the first assault. But they kept fighting back. We all did.

Because we knew that for those who survived the fighting, there would be the absorption, the eating. The hirudineans took no prisoners.

We used internal calculators to determine the moment when a bubo withered down to near nothing, but was still present. We sought to hit them in midblink with our variant rifles. It did some good.

Occasionally we'd knock one out and it would disappear with a hiss and wheeze into a puff of excrescence. But there were too many this time. And when we couldn't blow them away, they grew, extruding from their entry points in sickening stalks with no anchor except a point in space above us.

And, one by one, they picked us off. The gob rained down. The stalks extruding it grew longer, closer. When the stalks reached the ground—or any human, machine, or order-rich object in between—they would reverse their flow, begin their long-term task of parasitization.

Whole sections of the galaxy had been sucked dry in just such a manner.

The subnet crackled with death all around us, death above in space. Our forces outside the valley had been defeated and lay dead in what had become a glassine desert. Our captain was dead. We had to get out of there.

“Get to the caves!” I shouted. “The fucking caves!” The others—there were maybe twenty of us remaining—heard me over the subnet. I quickly passed along topo with the cavern entrances marked. Almost without thought, the company peeled away, followed me—not as if I were a leader, but as a flock might follow a random bird in flight. We made for the near-est entrance, a sinkhole, and threw ourselves in. At the bottom, we wormed our way into the underground system through a hole in the bottom of the hole.

I knew this wouldn't stop the hirudineans. But it did slow them down. The jack-rock was now between us and them, and its clacking counter-codes and security algorithms kept them from fixing on us precisely. I like to imagine some of the buboes lost their bearings entirely and spun away helplessly into space, or simply

crackled out of existence, but I have no way of knowing. I was running and couldn't look back.

Around one bend, through a crack in the wall, into a wider cavern. I led us deeper—as deep as I had ever been. After that, I stood exhausted, uncertain.

“Where to?” a soldier near me asked. His name was Markinken. He was a noncom master sergeant and my supposed superior.

“Deeper,” I said. “Somehow.”

We were navigating by IR at that point. Jasmine must have seen the flush in my face as my fear rose in a blood-hot plume to my skin.

“Follow me,” she said. We did for a few steps, all of us. And then Jasmine stopped. Stopped moving. Stopped breathing for a few seconds, even. Finally, she spoke in a numb voice.

“She's dead.”

Her angel.

The angels of the other variants winked out one by one at that point as well, their entanglements at an end, their connections severed. Our weapons, the only weapons that had ever worked against the hirudineans, were gone.

We sat in darkness a long time then. I didn't know where to go. To tell the truth, I'd lost my bearings so completely by that point that I was afraid that if we went forward I might be leading us up as easily as down. Jasmine sat and hugged her legs to her chest. After a moment, she tipped over onto her side in a full fetal position. I sat next to her, lifted her head up, placed it on my lap. I stroked her hair.

Then she sat up, rigid and alert, her aura coursing red in the darkness.

“Something,” she said.

“The buboes?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“Her.”

She meant her angel. “Still alive?” I stupidly asked.

She shook her head. “Not alive. Not exactly.”

Jasmine stood up, suddenly alert. I stood beside her. “How can that be?” she whispered to herself.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I said. “What are you feeling?”

A shudder ran through her. “It ate her. Whole. I can sense it. I can sense everything. The other side.”

“The place where the hirudineans exist?”

“No,” she said after a moment. “The place that *is* the hirudineans.”

* * * *

Winter came to the valley. Mac went every day to watch for her approach through his telescope. One day, there she was. A speck in the brightness at first. Closer. The cloud of motorcycle dust. The tents and cattle. He could see it all through the device, but he could only watch and wait to touch her.

She came as soon as her clan was settled. They met at the fence.

“I watched you as long as I could.”

“I knew you’d be watching,” Theresa said. “I felt you as soon as we hit the flats.”

“My da says you can’t cross because you’ve got the nox inside you,” Mac said, “but that can’t be right. We trade. Artifacts can cross the fence. The telescope did.”

“Something stops me,” she said. “When I stepped over, it’s like the world was yanked from under me. Like I’d fallen into a hole, and that I’d keep fall-ing forever if I didn’t jump back.”

“That’s how it feels when I’m cut off from my memories.”

“So here we are again.”

“Here we are.”

“Maybe it’s just not our time yet,” she said. “Maybe something will change.”

Mac laughed. “In the Valley of the Flowers? Nothing ever changes here.”

But at the fence they could touch one another. That was something, at least.

The winter passed. She left for her distant mountains with spring.

Something, but not nearly enough.

* * * *

Jasmine explained what she could. I hardly understood a word she said at the time, but I've pieced it together in the years since. The long, long years.

The quantum entanglement between Jasmine and her angel twin had reasserted itself, and communication was reestablished. The hirudinean uni-verse wasn't that different from our own in terms of physical constants. Just different enough to set up an energy differential. Over the eons, the hirudineans had parasitized our universe from their pocket creation, feeding off these tiny differences. They'd been merely a nuisance at first, an almost imperceptible suck on the laws of conservation. But as our universe had grown, so had the hirudinean appetite.

I say *its* appetite because "they" were an interlaced group mind. Jasmine's instinct had been right. The buboes were more like octopus suckers than individual organisms. They were like the tips of fingers touching a window-pane at different places on a frosty day. Each fingertip seemed separate, but all actually belonged to one hand.

Jasmine's angel had remained conscious during her passage into the maw of the hirudinean. Why, when so many millions of other angels had been utterly destroyed in the process?

Maybe it was because the war was so near its end. The hirudinean had won. It sensed its victory.

Overreach. Hubris. The desire to toy with its victim.

The fact that soon there would be no more sentients to talk to. To torture. To get its sick jokes.

It wanted to keep one human alive to play with for a while.

"I was right," Jasmine said. "It's an octopus." She smiled. It was a slight smile, cold—as cold as a glance from another universe. Alien. Frightening. "All I have to do is reach through one of the buboes. Touch her. And we can choke it, shut it down, she and I."

* * * *

When the first hirudinean bubo arrived, it was no longer trying to destroy us. With the defeat of our angels, we skyfallers were no longer a viable enemy. We were food.

The remains of the company attacked. But without massive energy from the sun, it was useless. Our conventional weapons glanced off without effect.

The eye grew nearer.

Hungrier.

One by one, the company members rushed it, flung themselves at it—sacrificed themselves so that Jasmine and I could inch closer. We needed it to try to swallow her whole, just as it had her angel.

And then we were as close as we were going to get. I took Jasmine in my arms, held her not like a weapon, but, I like to think, as a dancer holds a ballerina, suspended just before the next movement. She did not transform, but remained a woman to the last.

She signaled me that we were close enough.

“What if you’re wrong?” I said.

“Throw me.”

“If you don’t die, you’ll be alone.”

“I’ll always have Rosinol,” she said. Then she turned her head away from me, faced the maw of the bubo. “Now throw me in, you stupid bastard, before it’s too late!”

And so I did. I swung her back, then heaved her into the wound in reality that floated before us. She went inside. Head, torso, one bent leg.

And then stopped. One leg was still extended. Still in the world. Had it got her, then? Was it about to chomp down, finish swallowing her?

Less than a second later the bubo began to brown. It expanded and contracted rapidly, now attempting to expel what it had so eagerly consumed. Nothing doing.

I knew that she had touched her angel when the bubo went totally dark around her leg. The hirudinean was still there, and she was still there. The bubo became a black disk, the size of a picture mirror, perhaps. It gave off no light, no electromagnetic radiation in any of the bands I was equipped to observe. The only

reason I could see it was because of Jasmine's leg, absurdly sticking out.

I had the irresistible urge to touch her.

Warm. But not moving. Suspended there in mid-throw. I touched the surface of the blackened hirudinean. It had resistance and a bit of give as well—as if I were touching the surface of a hardened gel. But it didn't dimple or move in any way, and when I pulled my fingers back, they were cool and dry.

Outside, in the rest of the universe, the buboes were gone. I listened on the subnet. Queried. Confirmed. The hirudinean attack had simply evaporated. Across worlds. Across galaxies.

Only this one remained.

Jasmine was the wrench in the machinery, the virus in the system.

She had choked the octopus.

* * * *

The man who stepped from the portal that day looked neither particularly old nor particularly young. In a distant past, almost beyond memory, he might have been called middle-aged. He walked slowly down the pebble-strewn, dusty central road of the Valley of the Gardens. The sun was near noon and the man cast a stub for a shadow. The man's hair was grizzled gray, with black undertones, as was his neatly trimmed beard. He wore rope-soled sandals that were beaten to an oakum frizz and seemed barely to hang together on his feet.

When he reached Mac's house, he stopped, stood by the courtyard gate, then opened it and walked to the door. He rapped on the wood quickly, loudly, with his knuckles.

"Nobody home," said Mac, as he rounded the house, carrying a load of wood in his green wheelbarrow.

The man gazed at Mac for a long moment without saying anything. Mac started to feel uncomfortable under his gaze. He lowered his load, stood straight, and stared back.

"Can I help you with anything? We don't get many visitors this time of year."

"Maybe," said the man. "I noticed that most of the houses in the valley have little plaques with their names on it. But I don't see one here. So I was wondering—does this house have a name?"

“Sure it does,” said Mac. “Doesn’t need a plaque. Everybody knows it’s Rosinol.”

The man sighed, audibly. To Mac, it sounded like relief, a burden dropped. “Do you put people up here?” the man said. “For a price, I mean? Bed-and-breakfast?”

“Not usually,” said Mac. “But what did you have in mind?”

The man smiled. His teeth, white and perfect, flashed. He stroked his beard. His gaze became distant and he laughed softly. “I stayed here once before. Many years ago. I have fond memories of the place. I have some business in the valley that will keep me overnight. Would you mind giving me a place to stay? I haven’t got much money on me, but I can pay you...”—the man returned his gaze to Mac—“with a story.”

Mac nodded. “How’d you know that’s about the only thing I’d agree to?” he said.

The man gestured at the house, the beautifully kept rose garden in its courtyard, now dormant and trimmed back for winter, but still lovely in its tangle. “When a man’s already got everything, that’s about all a traveler has to offer.”

“I haven’t got everything,” Mac said. “Not close. But come on inside and let’s have something to drink. My father’s about. He may drop by. Been acting a bit queer lately, though.”

“I’d be interested to see him,” the man replied, “after all these years.”

“Now I really want that story,” Mac said. He led the way into the warmth of the house.

* * * *

“... the Valley of the Gardens was quite a famous place after she stopped the war. People made pilgrimages here. Religions formed. For a while, this world became a shrine. Sojourners camped in the desert on the other side of the mountain. Some of the surviving skyfallers, too, hung around after they were discharged. Thousands filled the plains at a time, millions at some points.”

The man sat across from Mac in the Rosinol living room. They sipped red wine from Mac’s own vineyards, now laid up these past twenty-five years and at a pitch-perfect age, even if he did say so himself.

“For a long time, I was the caretaker. I guarded the caves, let only certain scientists in. Two universes meet here. Jasmine holds on to her angel there, but part

of her sticks out here in the valley. It's as simple as that. Physical law is indeterminate. We determined it was a small area—a dozen square miles. Constants migrate back and forth over this small space. We fenced in this area. Cultivated it. The hirudineans wanted to parasitize our universe to enlarge their own. Now both exist side by side, and Jasmine is the bridge.”

“People hardly know this place exists anymore,” said Mac.

“You can't blame them,” said the man. “So much else has happened.”

“Or maybe it was hidden on purpose,” Mac said.

“And maybe you're just a bunch of damned provincials. Nobody's held prisoner on Cangarriga. It's just the locations have been a bit obscured to keep the valley pristine.” The man sipped his wine. “Something else happened too. Something we've yet to explain, although we've been studying it all these years. It wasn't just the hirudinean universe that's been seeping into the valley. It's Jasmine. She began to influence things. She'd been a gardener before the war. The valley had been beautiful when we arrived, but it took on a new luster. You knew somebody was *in charge*. Then the first stone roses grew, with their gateway properties. We knew then. We called in the scientists, and they were able to analyze the port stone, enhance its ability to exist in two realities at once. Make use of it. And that's how we cut star travel time down by decades, intergalactic travel down by lifetimes. How the portal system developed.”

“You say ‘we,’ but *you* left.”

“Yes,” said the man. “But I also stayed. I made myself a quantum-entangled clone, an angel of my own, to guard this valley. To stand watch over her grave. I've seen it all, no matter where I've been. He and I are always together.”

“My da,” said Mac.

“Yes,” the man replied. He took up his wine glass, took a long sip, wiped a drop from his beard. Outside, the sun had gone down and the stars twinkled in the Cangarriga night with no moon, ever, to dilute their light.

“So you're my...my real father.”

“No,” said the man. “Your father is your father.”

“And my mother?”

The man took another sip, considered, then drained his glass. “What do you remember?”

“She left before I was old enough to remember,” Mac said. “Da told me.”

“She’s here, son. She’s been here all along.”

“I’m a clone?” Mac said. “I’m *your* clone?”

“Your father’s. But it comes to the same thing,” the man replied. “Made from valley materials.”

“Why?”

“You’ll understand when you’re a little older. For one thing, you’ll be able to travel without a portal. At least, we think so. There’s never really been anything like you before.”

“So I can leave the valley?”

“That remains to be seen,” said the man. “Jasmine’s grip is loosening. She’s sent messages to your father. Dreams. It takes years for them to take shape, decades to understand. That’s what he’s been doing all this time. Lis-tening. Haven’t you felt them too?”

“I don’t know.” But he did. The restlessness. The wilderness creeping in where the fence had fallen down. Was his love for Theresa merely the valley loosening its grip?

“So what happens when Jasmine lets go of her angel? Will the hirudinean come back, destroy us all?”

The man didn’t answer directly. He stood up, turned to the living room’s window. Outside, a single lamp glowed in the courtyard.

“What do you imagine it’s been like for her, holding on, spread out over two worlds?”

“I guess the strain might get to you. You’d go a little crazy. You might start to hallucinate.”

“Or dream.” The man sat back down. “You’re wrong about your father,” he said. “He’s a lot more human than I am.”

“You’re joking,” said Mac. “He’s gone beyond the vegetable stage. He’s practically become a rock.”

“Fifty thousand years. That many lifetimes lacquered on. It’s a wonder he ever speaks at all. But you and I both know there’s a man under there.”

“But here you are, talking to me as free as can be, not bent over by time.”

“Wise boy,” the man said. “But still a kid. What is there beyond a stone? Beyond a storm?”

Mac shook his head. “A principle?” he said. “A law of nature?”

“What I am is a painter,” the man said. He reached for the wine bottle. Fingering the picture on the label. A stone rose. “I was only a soldier for a little while.”

Mac was confused. “You’ve come here to paint?”

The man set the wine bottle back down. “I came to meet my nephew, free my girl—and maybe in the process, I’ll finish a painting I’ve been working on for quite some time.” The man sat back in his chair, considered his wine glass. “I do need a brush, though.”

“You need a—what?”

“Something to paint with.”

“Well, good luck with finding one.” Mac drained his glass, poured himself another from the half-empty bottle. He’d added some coded mash to the ferment that spread the taste out longer, held it in the mouth after swallowing for a few seconds. That had worked out nicely—again, if he did say so himself. Along with the portal stone, wine was another of the valley’s principal exports.

The man held out his glass for a refill, with which Mac provided him. He drank, considered, and finally spoke. “The Extremadura has one purpose only.”

“I’d always thought it was a fairly pointless place.”

“That *is* the point. Aimlessness. A place to think. Slowly. Convolutionally. All those pilgrimages set the jack-rock in motion. Your father and I just tweaked it a bit, then left it alone. We asked it to come up with something to release Jasmine and keep the hirudinean in check. That’s the problem it’s been working on for all these centuries. Those trades you’ve made over the years with the Fallers? Discarded ideas. False starts. Sometimes useful, but never an answer. Now we think we’ve got something.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The artifact your nomad girl gave you.”

“My telescope? But that’s nothing. That was a love gift. It doesn’t have anything to do with all this.”

“Exactly,” said the man. “Do you think the gods speak in any other way?”

“You can’t have it.”

“I don’t want it.” The man took a sip, but kept Mac in his gaze. “All I want is for you to come with me tomorrow. Will you?”

To do what? Destroy the truce that had preserved the universe? Reveal the man for a charlatan? Likely, they’d clamber about in the caves until they both grew exhausted and decided to come home for supper.

“I suppose so,” Mac said. “Yes, I’ll come.”

The man nodded. “Let’s get some sleep,” he said. “We have a long way to go in the morning.”

Mac finished his wine. He stood with his glass and the bottle to take them away to the kitchen.

“You can leave the bottle if you don’t mind,” said the man. “It’s about the best I’ve tasted in a really long time.”

Mac nodded, pleased, and returned the bottle to the living room coffee table.

“Would you like to take the master bedroom? The one where... you know.”

“It’s yours now, isn’t it?” the man said.

“Yes,” Mac replied. “Da hasn’t slept inside for years.”

The man considered. “I think I’d rather take the couch,” he finally said.

“Then I’ll get your linens,” Mac said.

When he returned with them, the man was sitting quietly on the couch reading one of Mac’s farming magazines. He’d poured himself another glass of wine. He set the glass down on the coffee table, accepted the sheets, blan-ket, and pillow. Mac turned to go, and was halfway out of the room when the man spoke again.

“You know, I’m kind of worried about what she’ll think when she sees me,” he said. “I’ve gotten so old.”

* * * *

They left at dawn for the caverns. Mac brought along his telescope in a pack slung over his back. The man had asked for, and carried along with him, a ten-pound sledgehammer. After a while, the thing seemed so heavy in the older man's hands that Mac volunteered to carry it as well. The road ran down the center of the valley, then switchbacked twice, rising toward the spring that fed the Sant Llorenz, the small creek that watered the bottom-land and shared the same name as the village.

In a field not far up the road from the house stood Mac's da. Jari leaned on his hoe and gazed at them, moving not a muscle. Mac knew he'd probably been in that position for two or three days. Waiting, thinking. Listening.

When the man saw Jari, he paused, looked him over.

Did they speak in their hidden, quantum-tunnel language? Or was there nothing left to say?

After a moment, the man began walking again, and, with a glance back at his da, who still hadn't moved, Mac followed.

After the second switchback, the road ran a bit farther, then dead-ended into a circular parking area for those who drove up from the village. A small trailpost pointed the way onward to the Sant Llorenz's origin in a rock-enclosed spring. Past the spring, the road became a trail and climbed steeply up Moncau, the peak that overlooked the valley. Rosemary and sage grew thicker here, and the spindly hardwood oca began giving way to pure pine forest as they climbed higher. The ground was rockier underfoot and the underlying stone—basaltic conglomerate—began poking through the topsoil. This was the jack-rock itself, inhabited by five hundred centuries of algorithms. Sometimes Mac swore he could hear the rock whispering, more talkative than his father.

The family land ran in a long, thin swath down one side of the creek, and here, past where the creek gave out, it was bounded by a row of stone markers and cairns set in a curving line up to the very tip of the peak. It was at the top of Moncau that this line met the fence that bordered the land on the ridge.

The hammer he carried grew heavier in Mac's hand, but he'd trucked much greater weights for longer distances before, and he wasn't bothered by the burden. What irritated him was the unwieldy nature of the tool. He hung it over his shoulder, tried walking with it as a cane, and eventually settled on grasping it just under the head and carrying it horizontal to the ground, its handle slung out behind him.

At first, the man led the way with an easy certainty, but as the trail rose and twisted, the man slowed, looked around. When they passed the little side path that led to the cave entrances, Mac realized that the man was lost.

Mac turned them around, found the pile of gravel—the remains of an aborted mining claim—that marked the side trail’s split from the main, and brought the man to the entrance of the largest cave. Here the man seemed to regain his bearings, and he entered without hesitation, Mac following close behind. The man’s hands began to glow faintly. He held them aloft in front of them, and in the utter blackness of the cave, this was all either of them needed to see.

They made their way down, and then farther down. Mac had often been in these caves and prided himself that he could never get lost in them, but it was now his turn to lose his sense of direction. Something in the jack-rock was deliberately confusing him. The man had no such problem. He’d obviously burned the path he must follow into his memory, and it was as if the rock remembered him.

The cave was wet, dank. The rock in the walls was a combination of the hollowed-out black basalt underpinning the valley and later layers of water-deposited silicates which formed a pearly sheen over the darkness beneath. The floor was flat, its surface crazed, the bottom of an ancient fissure.

Down, through a lightninglike crack in the wall. Turn a corner. Down again.

And then they followed a tunnel with walls coated with the thick quartzite deposits brought from the valley above within the memory of man. Within this man’s memory. The air was fresher here, a cool breeze wafting from some hidden vent. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, and stalagmites rose from the floor to meet them in enormous columns. The ceiling was high, but the way was narrow. At length they came to a blank wall, a true dead end.

“Here we are,” said the man.

“Where?” said Mac. “I thought you said it was in a larger room.”

“This used to be a larger room. This was where we met the last bubo.”

Mac looked around. Nothing but stone.

“So where is it?”

The man lifted his glowing hand. “Let me just check—”

He waved it about as if it were a wand, first in one direction, then another. Finally, he ceased looking at where he was pointing and seemed to let the hand choose its own direction. It settled on a particularly large column, thick at the ends and just narrow enough in the middle to suggest the meeting of upper and lower excrescence that had formed it.

“We’ll need the hammer now,” the man said.

Mac examined the column, tapped it. It seemed thickly solid. “You want me to just take a swing at it?” he asked.

“Try for the middle,” the man replied. “That’s where I think you’ll find the weak spot.”

Mac did as he was told. He sent a mighty swing into the rock. The cavern resounded with the blow.

Nothing.

He struck again. And again. He may as well have been hammering on diamond.

“Hmm,” said the man. He waved his hand in the direction of the column again and its glow grew brighter. “Yes, that’s it.” Then a brighter flash passed down the length of the man’s arm, up his sleeve, and out the other hand. “Ah,” said the man. “Right. The code. My old valence shield code.” He scratched his head with his other hand. “What was that? Oh, yes.” He swept his hand along the column, his fingers gingerly touching it.

“Hit it again.”

Mac gathered himself. This time he flung everything he had into the blow—and the column shattered. Chunks of broken limestone showered down and lay in a rough semicircle around where the column had stood, looking like the hatch leavings of a giant egg.

And there it was, just as the man had described it. The black disk, about the size of a bedroom mirror. It floated motionless, disappeared when looked at from the side or the rear. A single leg protruded, extended like a bar horizontally, at about waist height for an average-sized man. The toes were curled and pointed, the stance of a gymnast, frozen in mid-flight. It was small, muscled, tight. The leg had been encased in the drip stone for all these years, a part of the land. And, just as the man had described it, the disk was uniformly black, its surface unreflective, like roughened ebony. A leg protruding from a nothingness. Macabre.

And this was the way humankind walked between the stars?

For a moment, Mac thought that the leg, too, had been turned to stone, but then the man went to stand beside it, touched it reverently. A dusting of stone came away on his fingertip.

Underneath was flesh. Alive? Mac could not tell. But not decayed.

The man pointed to a spot opposite him. "You stand here," he said. "Get ready to catch her."

Mac complied, put out his arms.

The man raised his hand, pointed it toward the disk. Hesitated.

"What are you waiting for?" Mac said. "Are you afraid you're going to wake it up?"

The man lowered his hand slightly, but still held it poised. "This is where I need a brush."

Mac was confused for a moment, then he realized what the man was talking about. "My telescope."

"It's up to you, but I think the general idea is to poke it into the bubo, just to the side of her leg."

"How do you know that?" said Mac. "How do you know anything?"

"Seems plausible," he said. "Got any better ideas?"

"And you want me to give it to you," Mac said, "like that?"

The man shook his head, considered one of his still shining hands. His face glowed a pale white in their light. It was bright enough to cast the man's shadow on the wall behind him.

"You're younger than I am," the man finally said. "I think you ought to catch her."

"You want me to give it to you?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because," said the man. "You should trust your family."

Mac shook his head. *This is not for you to trade*, she'd told him.

She would be coming in the winter.

Something had to change. He loved her. The valley had to let him go.

He couldn't trade the telescope, but he could give it away.

"Hell." He reached behind him, and into the pack. His hand closed on the rough silicate outer surface of the telescope. He withdrew it. For a thing of rock, it weighed little. It felt more like a delicate bird in his hand.

He put it to his eye and took what might be a last look through it. The vision was as if he were moving in an elevator through carved layers of rock. Up. To the Valley of the Gardens. Higher. Above Moncau. And spreading out. The Extremadura.

Then back down again in a plunging dive. Down through the caves. Into the hirudinean darkness.

A long, long passage without light, without sense.

Finally, past that darkness. Two hands, joined, grasping. Two identical faces, glowing blue-white against the general blackness—the same blue-white as the stone rose.

Eyes opening, seeing him. Hope.

He lowered the telescope, handed it to the man.

"I think it might work," he said.

The man smiled, nodded. "We'll see," he said. He took a deep breath, reached out with the telescope; it was only a forearm's length long, but seemed to grow as he pointed it—to *telescope* itself. He touched the edge of the black bubo disk just to the right of Jasmine's leg.

At first, nothing remarkable happened.

There was no flash of light, no explosion. Then the disk seemed merely to move away, to reduce itself gradually to a point, to dry up and drain away.

"Something—" said the man.

As the disk contracted, Jasmine's body was revealed. First her other leg, bent at the knee, the instep of its foot touching the opposite thigh. Then her hips. Her torso.

She started to sag, and Mac raised his arms under her, touched her legs—warm, alive—held her steady. Her shoulders. Her neck. Her face. Her open eyes.

They focused. Blinked. Green.

Theresa's were blue. In fact, she looked nothing like Theresa. For some reason, he'd imagined she would.

He caught her. He caught her, held her, and helped her straighten. Set her down on her feet and supported her. Surprisingly heavy. The man must have been brutish strong back then to be able to throw this woman into the hirudinean bubo. Or completely desperate.

Jasmine looked up at him. A woman. Pretty, but not beautiful. As un-knowable as any other person, but not a creature from the beyond.

“Oh, no.” A moment of terror. “Is it —”

Behind Jasmine, the bubo suddenly reappeared. And not as the black looking glass it had been, but as something pale white. Like a festering wound in the side of the world. Infected. Enflamed. Ready to disgorge something horrible, like the maw of a dragon.

The man thrust the telescope deeper into it. It struck with a wet splat, almost as if it were striking flesh. Putrid flesh. He pushed it harder, farther. It sank in smoothly, slowly.

A horrible shriek filled the cavern, like the sound of a surprised and en-raged animal. A very large animal.

“Band down your frequencies,” the man called out. “It's trying to blast us before we can do anything to it!”

Mac ordered his valence to close his ears; he held his hands over the woman's.

The shriek went on. Impossibly long—for this was a creature that need draw no breath. Rock cracked, fell about them. A layer of the lustrous mother-of-pearl patina of the cave shook loose and rained down upon them.

The man drove the scope deeper, deeper. Until his hand disappeared within. When he withdrew his hand, it was without the scope.

And the bubo went dark. The shriek abruptly fell away to silence, and the walls stopped tumbling down. The hirudinean seemed to tense up, to ripple like a shaken bowl of water. Then its surface was still. Black. Impenetrable.

“So I guess my telescope is gone.” It took him a moment to realize that the words were his.

The woman gazed up at Mac. She still seemed bewildered, in shock.

“It’s going to be all right,” he said.

Another moment of numbness—and then a wan smile from her. Ex-hausted.

She backed away slightly, rubbed her upper arms, kneaded them with her hands. Her skin seemed several shades darker than his own. Where was this new light coming from? He saw that the entire cavern was glowing.

“You’re the boy,” Jasmine said. Her voice was low, an alto purr. Again, nothing like Theresa’s musical soprano.

Mac started at her words. How did she know anything about him?

“In my dream.” Then a moment of hesitation. A look of joy seeped into her expression. A smile of jubilation. “She’s *still there!*”

“Who is?”

“My angel,” said the woman, “my sister!” Her face grew softer. Her eyes lost their focus on him, seemed to be gazing at a distant sight. Or perhaps not so distant. “I can see her. I can hear her. I’m still with her! We’ve kept it choked.” She focused again on Mac. “But how?”

“I don’t really know.” Mac gestured toward the man who was standing behind her. “He might.”

Jasmine turned.

The man stood silently, waiting.

After a moment, Jasmine took a step toward him. She reached out her hand.

* * * *

Mac watched the two embrace. He thought of the valley above. The fence. The desert beyond.

He wondered if he would find Theresa before winter if he set out to-morrow. Would the desert help him or hinder him on the journey? Would it notice him at all?

He wondered what it would be like to travel with no destiny but love.

He’d know as soon as he crossed the fence.

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