

NIGHT CALLS

by Robert Reed

Although Robert Reed's latest tale is clearly a homage to one of science fiction's most famous stories, inspiration for this piece came from elsewhere, too. As Bob tells us, "despite what the outside world might believe, little Lincoln, Nebraska, has a substantial immigrant population. I once worked with Vietnamese refugees, and a substantial group of Sudanese have lately come to town. There's also a strong Iraqi community. By some odd coincidence, I have seen several young Muslim women having meetings with boyfriends in the city parks. And at one of those big patriotic events, my family and I found ourselves sitting with Iraqis, listening to patriotic music while watching patriotic pyrotechnics. One young lady had a blond, blue-eyed man-friend. He looked comfortable, but only to a point. And I got interested in him and his situation. And everybody was watching the sky."

* * * *

Ferrum was no Believer.

In that, he felt normal. This was an age when the powers of religion were plainly on the run. The old temples stood empty, except for the rare exceptions populated with worshippers embracing a thin, heartless scripture. Much of the world seemed eager to mock superstition and ritual, and every plaintive cry for God's vengeance was conspicuously ignored. Indeed, despite these heretical attitudes, modern life was abundant and generous and often fat. The sciences constantly generated new understandings and powers, each revolution delivered to all the races and distant creeds. Yet if some supernatural punishment ever became necessary, those same sciences promised more suffering than any Deity sitting in the most perfect Heaven could deliver. Really, Ferrum could not understand why any sober, honest citizen would entertain the preaching of mad souls and charlatans. After all, this was the Day of those twin Geniuses, Invention and Discovery, and hadn't history proved that nothing in the Creation was as half as powerful or a tenth as good as what was best about people?

Yet Rabiah insisted on finding weakness in the fashionable disbelief.

"What do you mean?" asked Ferrum sharply. "What weaknesses do you see?"

“Start with your name,” she suggested. “It’s old, and it means iron.”

“I know what ‘Ferrum’ means.”

“To the ancients, our world was the obvious center of the universe. And since what is heavy must sink, it was only reasonable to assume that the world’s heart was made of iron and the rarer metals.”

“The core is iron,” he agreed, laughing without much heart. “Those old fools happened to get one puzzle right.”

“‘Ferrum’ comes from the Fifth Day.” She looked past her newest lover, concentrating with her usual intensity. “That was when the Boy Emperor conquered half of the world’s land. Then the Sixth Day began, and an obscure tribe marched across a slightly different half of everything. And then the Seventh Day emerged from the darkness, and the Pale Prophet appeared, claiming to have walked with the True God who told Him to subjugate the world.”

“Which those zealots nearly did,” Ferrum interjected.

“And then that Day came to its end, and my ancestor stumbled out of the desert, inspiring a holy war that set the scene for our very long Day.”

The young woman had a temper. While it was popular to deny the value of stereotypes, Rabiah nonetheless fit the model of her people: She was passionate with a preference for strong opinions. Suggesting she was wrong, even in the most minimal fashion, brought the risk that she would explode with hard words or even a few defiant slaps delivered to her lover’s bare chest.

Ferrum managed to restrain his mouth.

“Of course neither of us Believes,” she continued. “Yet don’t we assume that people should be good to one another, even if it serves their own selfish interests? Don’t you hunger for a world where ethics have teeth and decent, generous citizens are called godly?”

He continued to say nothing.

“And now look at the rules and rituals embedded in our major faiths. What do you find waiting there? Codes and commandments—a set of principles that pave the path to excellence.”

Ferrum was breathing deeply, staring at the bland, water-stained ceiling above his bed.

“You and I are creatures of science,” she continued. “But what is science? And by that, I am asking what it is that our discipline assumes, first and before anything else?”

“Evidence,” he offered. “Science demands evidence.”

“It needs evidence to live, but that’s not what it assumes.” She paused for a moment, carefully considering her next words. “The universe has order and meaning. Before anything, science must believe in that. What is true here, on our tiny patch of ground, has to apply everywhere. Scientific principles must be uniform and fair. Because if they are not fair, where’s the value in lofty theories that only pretend to explain the questions worth asking?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, honestly confused.

“I’m talking about God,” she admitted. “Not the old gods, who were tiny and not all that mighty. I mean the kingly Gods from the last Days. They taught us that the universe has a single overriding authority. With wind and floods, they proved what they said, and that made us ready for the Four Natural Forces and the eighty-one known elements.”

Ferrum couldn’t agree. “What are you arguing here? If we never believed in God, we wouldn’t have science today?”

A happy wobble of the head ended with a fetching stare. “What I think ... well, yes, I do believe that if our ancestors hadn’t surrendered to the idea of one viable answer, compelling and perfect, then our minds wouldn’t have bothered to chase new ceramics or the principles of gravity, much less waste fortunes probing the depths of the sky.”

Ferrum lay still, taking a deep breath and holding it inside as long as possible. Meanwhile, Rabiah laughed and swung one leg over his hips, climbing on top. This was no lover’s pose. She was a wrestler holding her opponent’s arms flush against the spongy mattress, thick legs wrapped around his thighs and her long black hair falling loose, tickling his chest and belly.

“So everybody is a Believer, even if we don’t like thinking so. Is that it?”

She laid her hand on his chest. “The two of us are Believers. Our souls are lashed to the faith of universal order.”

“And what about other people?” he asked.

“Give me names.”

Ferrum offered candidates from their few shared friends—smart, well-educated souls—and then before she could answer, he mentioned her parents, and his. “Are they all secret Believers, like silly us? Or could they be only what they claim to be?”

“What do they claim to be?”

“Unrepentantly modern, godless and untouched by old foolish ways.”

“Some are like us.” Rabiah’s weight had settled on his middle, her eyes watching him carefully. “But really, most of the world doesn’t understand science. Not truly. What people like to do is throw out a few popular phrases, trying to fit in with what they perceive as convention.”

“And what about your cousin?” Ferrum asked.

“Which cousin?”

“You know who.”

But Rabiah didn’t wish to talk about the man. So she changed topics, telling Ferrum, “You know what would happen, if the world ever changed for the worst....”

Her voice trailed off.

“What would happen?”

She shifted her weight. “At the first sign of serious trouble—I guarantee it—every last temple would overflow with clumsy but devout worshippers.”

Ferrum watched her pretty face, skeptical about her arguments but unable to refute the words.

“And if our civilization collapsed,” she continued, “then even our best scientists would pull out knives and start sacrificing livestock to the Moon

and the lost Sisters. And when those desperate gestures didn't appease our old gods, our greatest minds would invent new ones and then happily, happily cut each other's throats...!"

* * * *

Ferrum met his difficult lover at the city's largest park—an abandoned silica mine too hilly to be farmed but perfectly suited for tough trees and sedges, with clay-lined ponds in the low spots and tended fields where children and adults could hike and play. He drove to the park after work but before the evening wind died down. On a whim, he had purchased a cheap paper-and-stick kite, and using skills that he hadn't employed for years, he assembled the toy, tied on fresh string and then managed to pull his creation far enough into the air that he could stop running, panting while he admired his achievement.

It was a warm spring evening. The sun was setting, a perfect wind blowing from the north. Ferrum happily looked over his shoulder, the boyish part of him hoping for spectators. Three of the Sisters were still above the horizon, each bright enough to keep the evening pure, but their combined light too dim to feed plants or coax the tired mind into staying awake. He watched the Sisters for a long moment, observing how close they had drawn to each other; and then he glanced back at the ruddy skies to the west. That's when he noticed a small car parked close to his, and inside the car, what looked like a young woman. She was sitting behind the steering wheel, hands across her face, and, even at a distance, she looked as if she was suffering some awful, consuming grief.

Ferrum wasn't an outgoing person. Pretending to see nothing was easy. He focused on his kite, and, as the wind died, its increasing demands. Then the wind vanished, and he had no choice but to reel in the string and carry his toy back to his car. The girl was still sitting close by. Nobody else was visible. She remained behind the wheel, but for the moment, her suffering was done. Sad swollen eyes glanced his way, and he noticed how pretty she was. Then with a mixture of embarrassment and expectation, she smiled: She didn't want to be noticed, but on the other hand, her pain was too large and important to hide away.

In a moment of unusual fortitude, Ferrum approached. "Do you need help, miss?"

For some reason, that was an extremely funny question. She broke into a smart little laugh, and just as suddenly, she was sobbing again.

“I’m sorry,” Ferrum muttered, beginning his retreat.

“But I liked watching,” she confessed.

“Excuse me?”

“The kite. I enjoyed its dance.”

In Ferrum’s mind, she was exotic. The colored scarf and the style of her dress made her different from every other woman he normally spoke with. Refugees were fleeing their native lands, desperate to escape a host of political troubles. She must have been among the recent émigrés. Her voice carried a rich accent. Her face and beautiful skin betrayed a history composed of the lost nation’s ancient tribes.

Ferrum asked, “Where are you from?”

Laughing, the stranger named his home city.

Of course, she was a naturalized citizen. What was he thinking?

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “That was a stupid question.”

The girl saw something worthy of a smiling stare. “You should ask something smart, then.”

Ferrum learned her name and pieces of her life story.

It was Rabiah who brought up the possibility of dinner, and Ferrum mentioned that he was free for the rest of the evening.

Unfortunately, she had a previous commitment.

Eventually they settled on the evening after next, and following several meals and two concerts, not to mention the calculations and negotiations common to any romantic venture, their relationship moved into the physical realm.

At that point, Ferrum finally asked about the sadness in the park.

“Oh, that was nothing,” Rabiah said with a heavy tone, implying otherwise.

“Nothing?”

“I used to meet my old boyfriend there. That’s all.”

But her confession wasn’t quite honest. It took more weeks of prodding, plus some carefully gathered clues, before the ex-boyfriend’s story was told. The man was considerably older than Rabiah, and he was married. He would meet his young girlfriend in the park, and they would make love in the passenger’s seat. Rabiah carelessly offered details, letting Ferrum imagine her climbing on top of that old fellow, him yanking down her underwear and shoving his business inside her, enjoying her body until he was spent, or until he had to leave for home and his ugly old wife...

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Ferrum, sickened yet aroused. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Now three people were lying in their little bed.

Smiling with a calculated menace, his girlfriend asked, “Do you know who he was? And is?”

“I don’t want to,” he claimed.

“My cousin,” she admitted.

“Oh, God,” the agnostic whispered.

“A second cousin, and you needed to know,” she claimed. “If we’re going to continue seeing each other, darling ... there will be a moment when you have to meet the man...”

Ferrum couldn’t help but think along stereotypic lines. “But why? Do you want me to fight with him?”

“Goodness, no.” Rabiah laughed softly for a moment or two.

“Is he a jealous fool? Will he attack me, maybe?”

“My cousin is more civilized than either of us. In fact, he’s a mathematician, and a great one at that!” Then, with a wink, she added, “But if you’d like ... if it would make you happy ... maybe you could slice off his penis....”

Then she broke into wild laughter, and for several moments, her new

boyfriend wasn't sure if his embarrassment and horror was the source of her pleasure, or maybe, just maybe, this exotic desert creature expected him to commit some horrible revenge...

* * * *

Five Sisters ruled the evening sky: Mistress Flame, Little Wind, Ocean's Angel, and the Sullen Twins. Out of fascination and fear, ancient peoples had studied those bright bodies, measuring their slow, stately motions; and after so much focus and the occasional insight, it was decided that the heavens—the sun and moon and every Sister—rode upon a collection of nested spheres, crystalline and perfect. And the world was a perfect sphere sitting at the center of all that existed. And because it was a good story, the ancients decided that each Sister was given to the world by the gods, each lending its distinct magic to the lives of good people everywhere.

Of course those old explanations were flawed, but they allowed those early astronomers to predict how the sky would look in another half year, and after a full lifetime. With bare eyes and persistent calculations, people realized that the Sisters could never huddle close together. Envy had to be the reason; none wished to dilute her beauty with her siblings' glow. But there were years when the solitary Sisters pushed close enough to fill one kite flyer's gaze, while the Sullen Twins stood in the opposite direction, carefully balancing the heavens.

Once in a thousand years, on average, their good world would throw its shadow across the moon; and at the same moment, the Twins would dive behind that lifeless gray rock, allowing themselves to be swallowed whole.

One Day would end, and shortly after that, the Next Day would begin.

But for a little while, darkness and chaos were unleashed on the world. Or so it was said. Threads of evidence did support those legends. Lost cities and early societies had collapsed at the same approximate moment. Chance might be to blame, and of course those first civilizations might have been frail and failing as it was. But whatever the cause, survivors blamed the darkness that lay between the Days. Then for the next thousand years, old women would happily tell their horrific stories to frightened, spellbound young children.

"The Night makes a soul insane," they would claim. "Good families will suddenly fight with their neighbors, and brothers always turn against

brothers. Homes are burned; the old laws are forgotten. And then the Twins rise again, and nothing can ever be the same.”

“But what do people see?” the children asked. “What did the Night show them?”

“Nobody knows,” the old women would promise. “Whatever was there, it was too awful and far too strange to be remembered.”

“Then we won’t look,” young voices proclaimed. “If the Night shows itself, we’ll hide indoors. We’ll live in our cellars, with sacks tied over our heads.”

“And what then? Do you think that you’re the first clever people? Make no mistake, little darlings. Wherever you hide, the Night will find you.”

Nothing can save a person, particularly when he or she insists on believing in a particular fate. If the entire world decided to remake itself every thousand years, then the Night was a fine excuse, chaos sweeping away what was weak and old so that tiny prophets had their chance to stand on the wreckage, proclaiming new faiths and followings.

* * * *

Ferrum’s grandmother liked to tell the wicked old stories. She would laugh out loud when she described riots and wars and other flavors of mayhem. This was all in the past, of course. The perceptive soul was free to mock the ignorant hordes from Days gone. But she made a critical error—the same mistake repeated by millions of sturdy, doubting adults across the world. She assumed her little grandson would hear about the Night and its madness, and Ferrum would realize that this was nothing but a fun old story.

Yet young boys have a fondness for worlds that teeter on the brink, ready to collapse into fire and blood.

Ferrum wanted to believe in the Night’s power.

“When will the darkness happen?” he asked, his voice soft as a whisper, but fearfully sharp. “Soon, does it?”

“Very soon,” she told him.

He imagined going to sleep after this evening’s meal, and then waking

in the morning to find the world transformed.

“Twenty-four years from now,” she continued.

“But that isn’t soon,” he pointed out.

“I suppose not.” She laughed. “Yet for me, it’s as good as forever.”

“Why?” Ferrum asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Because I won’t live long enough to see this next Night.” The grim words made the old woman cackle. Already his grandmother’s eyes were turning soft and dark, and by year’s end she would be living inside her own endless Night—a suffocating experience that would make her bitter, small, and hateful. “But my little Ferrum ... you’ll still be a young man when the Night happens. Probably with your own wife and family to share the experience with....”

The boy couldn’t shake the images of insane people fighting in the darkness, setting fires and spilling guts. When terrified, young boys will find something very compelling about mayhem.

The bigger, the sweeter.

“But what does the Night look like?” he asked again. “Does anybody know?”

“Oh, everyone knows what the sky holds,” she told him.

But Ferrum didn’t. The subject never came to mind before this. He was young and ignorant, curious, and very persistent. From that moment, he would bombard adults with questions about this once-in-a-thousand-years event. He interviewed his parents and teachers and neighborhood adults. And what struck him about their confident answers was that each vision was very similar, but no two were perfectly identical.

Which brought an epiphany that twenty-four years and a considerable amount of education hadn’t wrung out of him:

Each eye, no matter how ordinary, inevitably sees its own Night.

Ferrum’s grandmother proved to be a flawed prophet. Ferrum became a man, and the Sisters indeed were aligning themselves in

accordance with elegant scientific principles. But he stubbornly remained unmarried and childless. There was only Rabiah in his life, and nothing about their relationship seemed secure: Long periods of passionate, desperate love would dissolve with a suddenness that always mystified him, and even when their fight was finished, the tension between them remained so deep and dangerous that a single careless word would surely shatter their love forever.

Their worst battle stemmed directly from the Night. Several years earlier, Ferrum paid a considerable fee to reserve time at an observatory being built for the occasion. The large mirror and assorted optical equipment cost a modest fortune, but the resulting telescope would reach deep into the sky, harvesting details that larger instruments couldn't achieve on an ordinary evening. Ferrum liked to boast about his investment: It meant that so many heartbeats could be lived with one eye pressed against a viewfinder. And because he loved the girl so much, he gladly promised that he would share half of his time, or nearly so.

But Rabiah didn't appreciate his charity.

"How much did this cost?" she asked, her tone dismissive, even scornful. "This is a one-in-forever event, and what are you planning to do? Catch a glimpse through a tiny sliver of glass?"

"It's more than a glimpse," he responded. "And more than a sliver of glass, for that matter."

"Come with me instead."

"Where?"

She named a place that he didn't know, and then promised, "My entire family is gathering, and hundreds more too. This is our traditional way of meeting the Night. Don't you think a celebration sounds both fun and appropriate?"

He didn't think so, and Ferrum decided on honesty.

The resulting fight went on for a long, painful time.

He finally had enough. Apologizing for his stubbornness, Ferrum said, "Tell me again. Where's this gathering to be?"

The site was far from any city, on a plain shackled by high hills.

Nobody was building giant mirrors, but if Ferrum joined Rabiah, he could bring his father's old hunting telescope to watch the sky. He spent a few moments trying to convince himself that this was best, that it would even be worthwhile. But what would he do with his reserved place in line?

"Sell it," Rabiah advised. "You could make back your investment, and probably more too."

The girl might be right, yes.

"But what happens there? What does your traditional celebration mean?"

Rabiah named favorite foods, old dances and music, and then almost as an afterthought, she mentioned the Night's culminating event.

Ferrum cringed.

"What's wrong?"

"A once-in-forever event, and that's what you do?"

"I know it might sound silly," she agreed. But she didn't act joyful or much in the mood for teasing. "In our history, for as long as anyone remembers, my people have met the Night in a very similar way."

"How stupid," he blurted.

No lover would tolerate those words or the tone they were delivered with. But Rabiah's anger was so large and consuming that she couldn't speak, giving Ferrum time to begin making amends.

"I don't mean you're stupid," he offered. "I would never say that."

Then he confessed, "It seems like such a waste, that's all."

Finally, he snapped, "This doesn't make any sense."

She worked on him with silence and her eyes.

"The event of our lifetime," he complained, "and you're letting a tribe of ignorant nomads dictate what you are going to do...?"

Rabiah dropped her gaze.

At last, Ferrum realized how deeply he had hurt her. But he didn't offer apologies. With the last of his resolve, he told himself that she deserved the truth, and maybe in the next Day, she would thank him.

But then his lover suddenly looked up, and with a dry, almost dead voice, she mentioned, "My cousin will be there."

"The cousin you slept with?"

Rabiah didn't rise to the bait. Instead, she just smiled at him. Then for the first time, and last, she told Ferrum, "You are a bright young man, darling. Well-read and thoughtful. But my cousin is smarter than you, and, in ways you'll never be, he is wonderfully wise."

* * * *

Ferrum lost that fight, and as a result, sold his time on the giant telescope. Just as Rabiah predicted, he made a fat profit—enough to pay for their coming travels. Despite his car's age and several worrisome cracks in the ceramic shell, that is what they drove. Her vehicle's sordid history would be too much of a distraction. They pretended to be married, spending their first evening at an isolated lodge far from the highway. The nearly full moon was still below the horizon. Even without the benefit of an eclipse, the sky proved dark enough to use his father's little telescope. There was a bonewood field nearby, recently harvested and usefully bare. Ferrum set the telescope on a flat stump, four stubby legs holding the tube and lenses steady. Then he focused on the narrow crescent of the Lost Sister—a nearby world of rock and blazingly hot air that showed itself only at dusk and dawn.

When Rabiah bent to look, Ferrum described what was known and what was guessed.

In the earliest days of Creation, their sun was surrounded by dust and countless half-formed worlds. Collisions and near-collisions shaped the history of those worlds; titanic forces shattered crusts, melting each to its core. Debris was flung this way and that. By chance, one world gathered more than its share of the solar system's metals. Then came the final collision: A rogue body from one of the Sisters struck hard, ripping away fat portions of the stony exterior while leaving the precious iron mixed swirling inside the molten stew that remained.

That miserable world became their home, and its former crust pulled

itself into their stony moon.

“We won the iron,” he mentioned. “Without it and the other metals, we wouldn’t be here.”

She had heard his lecture before. But Rabiah could be a good listener, even if her lover repeated what both of them knew.

“And if we didn’t have our moon,” he continued, “then the stone crust under our feet would be too deep and stubborn for volcanoes to crack open. Without volcanoes, minerals wouldn’t be recycled. And our carbon cycle would probably collapse. In the end, this would have become a giant version of the Lost Sister. And I wouldn’t have you begging for my affections.”

“What did you say?” she asked.

Rabiah was only pretending to listen to him, he assumed.

But then she laughed. “You are the beggar, my dear.”

“How can you say that?”

“This business about worlds colliding ... it’s a symbolic tale about lust and intercourse and the like...”

Maybe she was right. Soon they were making love on the soft ground beside the stump.

Then later, as Rabiah slept and the moon rose, Ferrum focused his telescope on the Twins—ruddy little suns dancing close to one another, illuminating a few dead worlds well beyond the reach of all but the most powerful telescopes.

As he watched the sky, a tiny artificial moon silently spun its way overhead.

Later, he roused his lover and led her to their bed, and they made love again before sleeping longer than they intended. In the morning, they drove fast until their fuel ran low, and then Ferrum picked a random station and parked against an empty nipple. Stepping out of his car, he heard a stranger shouting, “Hello,” to somebody.

Innocently, Ferrum made an agreeable gesture, in case he had met

this fellow before.

But the stranger was talking to Rabiah. He smiled and said her name, and she smiled back at him, replying, "Hello, Ocher."

This was the infamous cousin, Ferrum realized: A heavy man worn down by one or several infirmities. And the woman riding with him looked very much like his wife would look. She was short and fat, and when she saw the young woman smiling at her husband, her expression said everything.

The fat wife turned away, snapping off a few hard words.

But the cousin—Rabiah's former lover—seemed untroubled. He invested a few moments staring at his replacement, and then he smiled. And suddenly Ferrum found himself grinning too. So this was the cheating husband? The fellow that he'd been jealous of for months? Goodness, he was just a chubby old fool with a homely, nagging wife.

Really, the situation couldn't have been funnier.

Ferrum suddenly wished they'd brought Rabiah's car. What did it matter? The image of that invalid and his girlfriend doing anything in the front seat ... well, it was sad, even pathetic, and how could he have wasted his worries about the two of them...?

* * * *

An acquaintance from work purchased Ferrum's time on the new telescope. But before he would agree to the asking price, the buyer wanted to see the equipment and its placement. One evening, the two men drove out of the city, to the high hill where teams of engineers fiddled with gears and lenses and the astonishingly large mirror—a highly orchestrated chaos in full swing. Ferrum's companion didn't seem especially worried that with just a month left, nothing was finished. Indeed, he spent remarkably little time examining the facility or the fancy equipment that would split the light, directing it into dozens of eyepieces. He didn't say two words to the experts who liked nothing better than to break from their labors, explaining their narrow discipline to any interested face. No, the fellow seemed most interested in the view behind them. Standing on the highest knoll, on a pile of weathered sandstone, he looked back at their city and the dark swatches of irrigated farmland, bonewood and lickbottom trees dark with the season. And with a matter of fact tone, he declared, "Soon all this will be swept away."

Ferrum asked, "What do you mean?"

The man's intentions were obvious, at least to him. So obvious that he said nothing, his mouth closed for a long moment, perhaps expecting his companion to suddenly say, "Oh, swept away. I didn't hear you with the wind. Yes, I know exactly what you mean."

But Ferrum didn't understand, and he asked his question again.

They were workmates, not friends. But Ferrum's companion was as smart as him, or smarter, and he was definitely better read in matters of history and politics. With a devotion to the past, the co-worker could discuss the ebb and flow of civilizations, the relative strengths of different governments, and the dangers inherent in ignorance and blind trust. He was particularly fond of the great men: Those godly names that everybody recognized, even when few understood the bloody particulars of their glorious lives.

Ferrum's companion studied him, as if examining his soul for flaws. Then he looked back down the hill, saying to the wind, "The Night will remake the world."

It was an old sentiment, and perhaps not unexpected.

But Ferrum felt surprised nonetheless. "It's just darkness," he muttered. "And we know what we'll see—"

"Do we?"

"Of course." History might not be Ferrum's favorite terrain, but he felt at ease with the sciences. "I can tell you exactly what you're going to find when you look through that telescope."

"So it's not worth my money?" the man asked.

Ferrum hesitated. Was this a bargaining ploy?

"If you 'know' what you'll see, there's no point in looking. At the sky, or anything else." The man offered a wicked little laugh, adding, "That girlfriend of yours. You've seen her naked once or twice, so why look at her body again?"

"Enough," Ferrum warned.

“But do you see my point? When you and I set our eyes on anything, anything at all, we refresh our memories. Make new what is familiar. And if we’re very lucky, we might even see a detail or two that we somehow missed with every past glance.”

For an instant, Rabiah’s wondrous body drifted before Ferrum’s eyes.

Then the man continued, pointing out, “In another month, countless people are going to look through these telescopes and see the sky in a new way. Everyone will witness the Night in its full glory. Unless of course you’re unfortunate enough to be stuck on the Wax Islands or the Gray Continent.”

Those bits of land were on the far, daylight side of the world.

“I agree with you, Ferrum. Intellectually, yes, we know exactly what the Night brings. But if you study history as I have ... well, there’s only one conclusion: Each Day brings its revolution.”

“Because we expect change.” In a charitable mood, Ferrum would concede this point. “Self-fulfilling prophecies.”

But his companion dismissed that easy answer.

“Do you think something mystical is at work here?” Ferrum asked. “Do you believe in an Almighty hand?”

“What I believe...”

Then the wind gusted, and the voice hesitated.

Ferrum looked over his shoulder, tired of their game.

“Explanations don’t matter much,” the fellow claimed. “I accept the possibility that one of our Gods, or even some unrecognized scientific principle, might be at work. But mostly, I believe everything changes because nothing can stay the same.” The smile was joyous, the eyes grim. “It is the nature of people. Of history and our world. The old must be swept aside, my friend. And what better place to begin than with the Dawn?”

* * * *

Ten millions years ago, an elderly shield volcano choked on its own

magma, and moments later, a single titanic blast flung rock and dust across the sky. The surrounding countryside was scorched and then buried. Every end of the world saw the sun grow dim, and no doubt there were places where a different Night held sway, too little light finding its way down to hungry leaves and a billion blind, terrified eyes. The resulting winter would have been sudden and years in duration. Countless species must have gone extinct, while others prospered in the ripe chaos. But then the rich dusts finally fell to the ground, and the climate found its new balance, and with the patient hands of wind and rain, the remains of that gutted volcano were gradually carried away.

What remained was a ring of dark mountains, and in the middle, a plain as round as a coin and as flat. The mountains helped keep the country too dry for crops or trees, and most importantly, those rounded peaks practically guaranteed that the skies would remain free of clouds. A few towns were scattered across the wide emptiness—just enough to supply food and water to the crowds coming from the cities. Every little highway was jammed with cars. The sun was high and bright, and driving out onto the plain, Ferrum understood why Rabiah's tribe had picked this location. He was thinking about the evening to come, anticipation pushing aside every lesser emotion. But then Rabiah said proudly, "Do you know who picked this site for us?"

"Your cousin," he guessed.

"I have quite a few cousins," Rabiah reminded him. "But it was Ocher, yes. Of course it was."

"The cheating husband," he muttered.

"Why don't you ever say his name?"

Ferrum replied with a thoughtful silence, and then asked, "How much farther?"

They arrived at the designated location in the early afternoon. Where a volcanic crater once stood, more than a thousand strangers were building a busy, temporary city. Men were pitching colorful tents, setting up long tables, and testing the fires in a hundred big camp stoves. Women were chatting happily, sweeping out the tents and assembling the beginnings of the evening feast. Children seemed to be everywhere, and Ferrum was glad to see them: The adults used their mother tongue, but the youngsters screamed and complained in the language he knew.

Ferrum had met Rabiah's parents, but it took him a few moments to recognize them now. Instead of the drab clothes of business people, they were dressed in the brilliant robes of their desert tradition, and instead of being reserved for the sake of propriety, they were outgoing, even giddy. They greeted both their daughter and her boyfriend with warm hands and quick kisses. "I was afraid you were going to miss all this," the mother confessed. Her voice was very much like her daughter's, but slowed by an accent that made her words difficult to understand. Turning to Ferrum, she asked, "Did you have trouble finding us?"

Ferrum didn't want to mention oversleeping, since that might bring up the matter of sharing one bed. So he offered a simple, pragmatic lie. "It's my fault. I took a wrong turn at Damp Sand."

"You did not," Rabiah snapped.

Ferrum hesitated.

"We were up late watching the sky," Rabiah confessed.

The mother's eyes twinkled. "More than just sky-watching, I hope."

With a dismissive gesture, Rabiah said, "He did just enough for me. Yes."

Then both women broke into a hard, shared laugh.

Ferrum was embarrassed. He dipped his head while looking at the father, trying to read emotions that hid behind a broad, painfully polite smile.

When he and Rabiah were alone again, he asked, "Why did you say that?"

"What did I say?" she replied. And then, as if suddenly understanding the simple question, she added, "My parents are thrilled to have a responsible man in their little girl's life. In fact, I think they adore you. At least a little bit."

"Adore me?"

"As long as you keep me happy, they will."

But Rabiah's happiness was never easy, and to make matters worse, Ferrum had the impression that his own feelings, good or lousy, were

inconsequential when it came to their relationship.

The remains of that afternoon brought introductions to cousins and aunts and family friends, plus people who Rabiah didn't know but who felt curious about this fellow of hers. Almost every name offered was forgotten before the introduction was finished. A hundred polite conversations ended in uncomfortable silence. Soon the faces surrounding Ferrum looked much the same, and he found himself thinking about inbreeding and other uncharitable possibilities.

The feast proved amazing, and miserable. By convention, young men shared the same long tables while the single women were safe at the far end of the field. Strangers filled the pillows beside Ferrum. Most were conversant in his language but few were willing to use it. Foods he had tasted on occasion were suddenly heaped high on his platter-sized plate, every bite laced with spiced salts that burned his mouth and throat, and later, his belly. When the feast was finished, he lugged his swollen carcass to a large black tent that Rabiah had pointed out earlier. "I'll meet you there," she had promised. But standing in the tent's long shadow, it occurred to Ferrum that his lover hadn't specified an exact time for this meeting. Where was she? Was that her standing over there? But no, Rabiah had been wearing trousers and a simple blouse, while most young women were showing off the gaudy dresses of their home country, legs and arms and the long elegant necks covered with jewelry, their feet balanced on impossibly delicate shoes.

She was testing him, Ferrum hoped.

Because every other possibility seemed more awful.

Suddenly a pair of young men approached. They wore smiles and tool belts, and the nearest fellow called to him by name before saying, "Come with us."

"Where to?" Ferrum asked.

"Over there," he said with a wave. "She told us you would help us."

"You mean Rabiah?"

Just mentioning the name made both strangers laugh. Then the second man, wrestling with the unfamiliar language, said, "Come. Help."

"With what?"

“The show!” the first man shouted. “We are slow. We need cool hands, please.”

Ferrum followed them through the noisy, happy crowd. He couldn't see how he might help, but at least he wasn't standing in one place, waiting for a woman who might never appear again.

“Have I met you already?” he asked the first man.

That deserved another laugh.

“I'm sorry,” Ferrum continued. “I don't remember names—”

“Rabiah,” the man interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

The stranger stopped and turned, and with his pleasure receding into some other emotion, he said, “You are lucky. Very lucky, you know.”

“In what way?”

The second stranger asked a question of his companion.

An answer was offered—an impatient bark of syllables. And then the first stranger turned back to Ferrum, regarding him with a careful gaze before saying, “Or maybe you are not fortunate. Too soon to say, maybe.”

Again, the three men walked on. Eventually they fell into the open, and later, far from the celebratory racket, they were standing on a flat-topped little knoll. Suddenly Ferrum understood what was happening, and after a lot of consideration, he still didn't approve. But what else could he do? Perhaps twenty other men were busy with this very important work. Rare skills were on display. What Ferrum was qualified to do was uncoil the new copper wires while walking quickly from place to place. It would be best if the job was finished before evening, and the men were thankful for his help. After a while, there was an odd moment when Ferrum completely forgot his old objections. He discovered that he was enjoying this uncoiling and stretching of the wires, and later, the careful planting of long tubes. Then a gentleman that he didn't know smiled at him and said, “Good,” and Ferrum's reaction was to smile back and bow a little, saying, “Thank you,” with relish.

The sun set before they were finished.

Once, then again, older men approached to complain, mentioning the time remaining and the sorry state of affairs. But the full moon made their work easy enough, and they were done even before the world's slow shadow began to obliterate the sky's brightest light.

Ferrum joyfully accepted the thanks of his new friends, and then he returned alone to the black tent, imagining Rabiah waiting for him. But the tent had been moved or dismantled, and his lover was still missing. Where could she be? He walked about the camp, searching for everything that was lost. He wanted to retreat to the car and grab his telescope, but there wasn't much time left. The moon was already half-consumed, the Sullen Sisters hovering close to its left limb. Ferrum spent a few moments listing the ways that the woman had made his life miserable, and then he stopped walking, closing his eyes while wishing he was anywhere else in the world.

Somebody called his name.

Ferrum turned and opened his eyes, finding a familiar face, and then that face said to him, "You look so very unhappy."

"Hello, Ocher."

"I know where we can find a good telescope," the old man mentioned. "But we don't have very much time. This way, please."

And without hesitation, Ferrum fell in beside his newest friend.

* * * *

Ocher's telescope was set on flat ground outside the campground. It was no hunter's tool meant to search for herds of poor-lillies and fat blackbottoms, but instead it was a precise astronomical instrument with three heavy legs and a broad mirror, tiny gears and motors moving the tube along the same course that the sky took. Ferrum's long first look showed him the brilliant snows of the moon's southern pole—a frigid terrain famous for killing the only explorers to ever set foot on it—and then the world's shadow fell over that wasteland, a rainbow flash marking the sunlight as it passed through the same air he was now breathing in gulps.

"Did you hear?" Ocher asked. "It is raining at home."

He looked up from the eyepiece. "Now?"

“A colleague called me with the sad news,” his companion allowed. “A squall line is sweeping out of the west. Probably gone before sunrise, but there’s going to be a lot of angry souls in its wake.”

Ferrum imagined hundreds of novice astronomers standing beside that expensive, useless telescope, faces glistening with the rain, every sorry voice screaming at the profoundly unfair sky.

His personal gloom began to lift, just a little.

The moon was soon immersed in the night.

Ocher pulled a small timepiece from his shirt pocket, adjusted his telescope’s aim and then stepped back again. “If you wish, watch the Sisters vanish.”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Oh, I’m not being generous,” said Ocher. “I just want my eyes kept in the dark, to help them adapt.”

Those distant suns looked like twin gemstones, brilliant but cold. Ferrum’s vision blurred, but he watched carefully as the lightless bulk of another world rose to meet them. Then thin dry atmosphere made one flicker, then the other, and then the first Sister touched the rim of a crater, and it vanished.

“I hope she’s watching,” Ferrum muttered.

“I am sure she is,” Ocher promised. Then he made a low sound, as if intending to say something else ... or ask his own question, perhaps ... but that’s when the final Sister plunged out of sight, and the lightless air was filled with gasps and exclamations, old prayers and inarticulate screams as old as their species.

The Night had come.

Ferrum jumped back from the telescope.

Like a startled animal, he looked up. His eyes chose a random line, and after wiping the eyes dry, he stared as hard as he could into the new sky. But what was he seeing? Somehow his mind had forgotten a thousand lessons of science, and for that delicious moment, he felt scared and

happy, and confused, and absolutely enthralled. There was nothing to see; there was nothing but black upon black. That was because there was nothing there. Except for the Sisters and their own sun, the universe was devoid of meaningful light. Eyes a thousand times stronger than Ferrum's would do no better. Only mirrors that were a billion times more powerful could work, and then only when thrown high above the world's atmosphere ... and even the luckiest of those telescopes would gather in nothing but a few weak photons—odd travelers from regions too distant and ancient to resolve with any confidence whatsoever.

This was the Creation, utterly empty and divinely cold.

Save for this one tiny realm, of course.

“Where is that girl?” he growled.

“Standing directly behind you,” said Rabiah, her deep voice laughing.

Then despite telling himself not to, Ferrum turned, ignoring the sky in order to reach out and grab a body and face that he knew better than he knew anything, including his own sloppy pounding heart.

* * * *

The three of them stood close together in the absolute Night.

The hollering and chants in the camp gradually fell away, becoming gentle conversation and reflective silence, and at some imprecise point Ocher began to talk, using surprisingly few words to explain the basics of his life's work.

“Has Rabiah told you?” he began. “I'm a failed scientist. I tried physics twice before falling into mathematics. But I'm very good with calculations, and my old school chums use me to test their ideas. ‘Do my equations balance, Ocher? Are they pretty? And are we telling the truth about the universe?’”

“What about the universe?” Ferrum managed.

“It is far larger than we can see,” the genius reported. “There is physical evidence to support that hypothesis. Microwave radiations. Exhausted particles from hot, bright places. Even the shape of the cold holds its clues.” He had a pleasant voice, smooth and almost musical at times. “The true universe is unimaginably grand, and it doesn't have to be

as smooth and empty as we find it here. Hydrogen and helium can pull together, with help. Through simple probability, it can be shown that there must be regions full of suns and worlds like ours, and presumably, worlds very different from the handful that we know well.

“But not our realm, no.

“And so long as we think in small ways, this is where we will be trapped, and for all of our Days.”

A sudden shout interrupted the lecture. From the knoll where Ferrum had helped uncoil wire, someone shouted a single command ... and then, on that signal, a soft wet woosh could be heard.

Ferrum saw red sparks rising in the darkness.

Rabiah’s warm hand slipped inside his grip, and now she leaned hard against him, waiting for a kiss.

Then the first explosive was detonated above the flat barren plain—a bright greenish light that flung stars in every direction, accompanied by a host of bright sharp blasts.

A cheer rose up with a wave of rockets.

Rabiah had explained the tradition this way: In ancient times, the desert people were never caught unaware of the Night. Their open country was the best place to watch the sky, and when the heavens warned of darkness coming, scarce wood was piled high. When it was impossible to see, great bonfires were set ablaze. The tribes feared that the gods would forget what light was if none could be seen, and that was how people ensured that the Sullen Sisters would find their way to the other side of the moon.

In recent times, bonfires gave way to more interesting pyrotechnics.

Each wave of rockets was bigger than the last, and despite his doubts, Ferrum found himself spellbound. The colors; the noise; the wild patterns burning into his eyes: The show was spectacular and lovely, and thrilling, and he didn’t mind that the darkness was being pushed away. He smelled the burnt powder and his own excitement, and he felt Rabiah’s wonderful body pressing hard against him. When the fourth wave exploded, he looked into her face. When the fifth broke, he clumsily pawed her. Then came the sixth wave, and he thought to look for Ocher. Her one-time lover

was standing beside his telescope, his hands on the tube but his gaze watching the nearer spectacle. Ferrum walked to him. Together, they watched the seventh salvo of rockets head skyward, and just before the carefully timed blasts, he put his mouth against the man's ear, asking, "What did you mean?"

"Mean?" the man replied.

Then neither could hear anything but the noisy rainbows flying overhead.

When the rockets paused, Ferrum said, "If we think in small ways, we will be trapped?"

"Yes," said Ocher.

"But what is a large way to think?"

The eighth flight of rockets was the largest—a thunderous fleet of suicidal machines arcing higher and higher into the smoke-rich sky—and as they watched the grand ascent, Ocher said simply, "Space can be cut, if you know how. If you focus enough energy in the proper ways. And then a brave soul can leap across a trillion light-years in the time it takes one Night to pass."

The heavens were suddenly filled with ornate figures.

Ferrum retreated to the girl again.

"What did you ask him?" said Rabiah.

"What?"

"Did you ask him about me?"

"No," he confessed. "Not at all." Then as the roaring in his ears fell away, Ferrum added, "Ocher was telling me about tomorrow, and about the next revolution to come..."