

Sunworld

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It began with a personal revelation for Yarrek, shortly after he graduated from college at the time of his twentieth cycle, and ended in an even greater revelation which was to affect every citizen of Sunworld.

On the 33rd brightening of St Sarrian's quarter, Yarrek passed from the portals of Collium College for the very last time. He paused on the steps, ignoring the crowd of students surging around him, and peered up into the sky. Kite-fish were taking advantage of the approaching dimming, spreading their sails and floating high above the spires of the town as the heat of the sun diminished. He watched the multi-colored, kilometer-wide wings glide before the face of the sun directly overhead as it changed from dazzling gold to the molten, burnt-umber of full-dimming, and he knew then what it must be like to be as free as a kite-fish.

No more college, ever. Adult life awaited him, with all its promised mystery and romance.

He elbowed his way past a gaggle of fellow graduates and boarded an open cart hauled by four lethargic lox. As the cart set off through the narrow streets of Helienville, heading for the open farmlands beyond, Yarrek watched the town pass by with the heightened clarity of someone witnessing the familiar for the very last time.

Who knew what the future might hold? One thing was for sure - in a brightening, maybe two, he would be away from the family farm, heading by sail-rail all the way to Hub City.

The knowledge was like a warming coal, like the sun which burned at the center of the world. He watched the city folk go about their quotidian jobs, pitying them their lives of servitude, their changeless cycles of work and play, ignorant of what might lie beyond.

He sat back and let the somnolent lollop of the lox lull him into slumber, as the cart left the town and took the elevated lane through fields of golden yail.

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“Yarrek Merwell, your stop!”

The cry of the lox jockey yanked him from sleep. He hauled himself upright and jumped from the coach. As the team of lox set off again, farting and lowing in protest, Yarrek stood at the end of the path and stared out over the land that was his father's, and which in time would be passed on to Yarrek's elder brother, Jarrel, as was the tradition among the farmers of the central plains.

The Merwell estate stretched for as far as the eye could see, a vast golden patchwork of yail fields in various stages of ripeness. Ahead, like a galleon becalmed, stood his family's ramshackle farmhouse. The timber had been parched by the sun for countless cycles, warped cruelly by the merciless heat that prevailed this close to the Hub. For all its ugliness, a part of him loved the place. He would find leaving it, and his family, more difficult than he cared to admit.

There was a time, in his youth, when he resented the fact that his brother would inherit the farm, that he would have to make his way in the world in a profession other than that of a farmer. But as the cycles passed and he grew older and wiser, he came to thank the tradition that would force him to leave home and fend for himself.

He set off along the path, brushing against the yail plants and knocking from them the intense fragrance of pollen. He passed a threshing platform, with its troupe of labourers led by Jarrel.

His brother smiled down at him, called him a lazy lox as always, and added, "Hurry, can't you! The folks are wearing their Blacks."

He stopped and stared up at Jarrel. "Their Blacks? So soon?"

"You graduated, didn't you? Your future needs discussing."

Yarrek hurried home. Tradition among the farming caste had it that discussion of matters of destiny between parents and children necessitated the wearing of black gowns. It was a ritual of the Church that Yarrek took for granted, despite his friend Yancy's irreverent ridiculing of religious orthodoxy.

He had foreseen his parents' wearing of their Blacks, but had assumed they would leave it a brightening or two before they broached the subject of his future.

He took a jug of yail juice from the cooler, slaking his thirst. His mother and father would be on the Edgeward deck, as ritual decreed. He made his way up the two narrow flights of stairs to the third floor

and paused on the threshold of the deck, nervous now. The time had come to tell his parents of his plans to enter the offices of an architectural firm in the capital, Hub City.

They had their backs to him, staring out over the flat central plains towards the mountains of the Edge - though the Edge was so distant that it could not be seen by the naked eye. It was an act of obeisance they performed every dimming, this turning towards the Edge - one which Yarrek too, despite Yancy's joshing, often found himself performing, albeit cursorily.

They had heard his creaking progress through the house, and his father gestured for him to step between them and sit on the stool positioned before the rail.

Solemnly, he did so.

They were grave-faced, unsmiling. His father was fingering his Circle of Office; he was a part-time pastor of the Church, and he took his duties seriously.

"Son," he said in greeting.

His mother said without smiling, "We have heard. Congratulations. A second grade. No Merwell for five generations has attained better than a third."

His parents had always been distant. They were loving in a remote, stern kind of way, solicitous for the welfare of their sons, but wary of showing emotion, still less anything so exhibitionist as physical affection.

Unlike Yancy's parents, Yarrek thought, who showered the girl with such gestures of love that he found their displays embarrassing, not to say impious. But then Yancy's folks were from the Hub, where tradition was lax.

"The time has come," his father said, "to speak of what lies ahead. For so long now the future was college, and the attaining of success in your studies. Now that you have achieved more than we could ever have hoped, together we take the next step."

Yarrek swallowed nervously. "I have considered my future," he said. "I thought perhaps... well, I'd like to study to become an architect."

Silence greeted his words. His father's grim expression did not waver; his thin face might have been carved from wood.

His mother said, "Of course you have *dreamed*, Yarrek. Such boyish fancies are to be expected, and are excusable. But as the Church says, one's destiny is often beyond the scope of the individual. There comes a time when the experience of Elders must shape the course of disciples."

Yarrek bowed his head. "My plans are more than dreams, mother. I've heard that architectural offices in the Hub are crying out for skilled draftsmen."

"Yarrek," his father said, in a tone that stopped him dead. "Hub City is a den of vice, the playground of the heathen. No son of mine will venture there."

"But," Yarrek said, resenting the note of desperation in that single word, "you know yourself that I am pious. I attend regular church. Why, to deny me the right to go to Hub City suggests that you think me weak, your instructions insufficient."

His mother stared at him. "My son, we of flesh are forever weak. Do you not consort with the daughter of the Garrishes?"

"Yancy is a friend," he began, angry at the disdain his mother had loaded onto the word *consort*.

"She is the product of the Hub," said his mother, "and the thought of your being surrounded by crowds of such people..."

Yarrek stared from his father to his mother. "Then where else might I study to become an architect?"

His mother allowed herself a minimal smile.

His father said, "Tomorrow at mid-brightness you will take the sail-rail Edgeward to Icefast."

He echoed, "Icefast," in horror. The very name of the city, perched on the very margin of the Edge, filled

him with cold dread. The sun would be distant there; the outside temperature intolerable without layers of protective garments; his shadow eerily long...

“And there I can study - ?” Yarrek began.

His father said, “It has been arranged for you to sit an entrance examination for the office of the Inquisitor General.”

His mother allowed another smile to crack her features; she could not conceal her pride. His father’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

Icefast and the Inquisitor’s office? His parents’ plans for him were so contrary to his own that Yarrek was unable to grasp his sudden change of destiny. He thought of Yancy, and wanted nothing so much then as the consolation of her arms around him.

“I have no say in the matter?” he asked.

His father reached out and, with a hand as strong as a bailing iron, gripped Yarrek’s upper arm. “It is an honour to be so chosen, as you will come to appreciate.”

Yarrek bowed his head and whispered, “I’ve heard that the methods of Inquisitors are Draconian.

His father said, “Since Prelate Zeremy came to office, things have changed. He has curbed the power of the Inquisitors, put an end to their worst excesses. Now they truly are a force for good, instead of causing a conflicting schism within the Church itself.”

Yarrek nodded. “May I now go to my room?”

“Go,” his mother said, “and pack in preparation for your leave-taking.”

He stood and hurried from the deck, making his way through the cool, dark house, and reached the refuge of his room. There he lay on his bed, too gripped by shock even to cry.

He knew, even then, that he would do as his parents wished; he knew that Hub City was the dream of a juvenile, that his true destiny was in the icefields of the Edge, in the office of the Inquisitor General.

The door creaked open. It was his father. He had doffed his Blacks, and now stood above Yarrek in his homely farmer's garb.

"Yarrek," he said. "Yarrek, I must tell you something." He sat down on the bed next to his son. Yarrek stiffened at his father's unaccustomed proximity.

He stared into the old man's face, wondering at his father's nervousness.

And the farmer, pained by a duty he would rather have forgone, told him the truth.

"Twenty cycles ago," he began in a voice heavy with weariness, "a family in Icefast, a rich and influential family high up in the hierarchy of power, broke the edict of the Church and sired three children. " Yarrek did not yet comprehend the import of his father's words; the thought of a rich family contravening Church Edict was shocking enough.

"Had the Church discovered the birth," his father went on, "the child would have been put to death according to the Law of Conservation. But the family had power, as I said. They managed to spirit this child, a boy, out of Icefast in the depth of dimming and send it with paid agents Hubward."

His father could not bring himself to look Yarrek in the eye. "These agents arranged for a family to take in the boy, to raise him as their own."

Yarrek said, "No..."

"The truth, Yarrek, is sometimes almost impossible to bear. But remember this: that truth, duly weighed and considered, makes a man stronger."

"You..." Yarrek said. "... I am that child? You took me in? I am not...?" It was too vast a concept. His parents were not his parents? Jarrel was not his brother? He felt the certainty of the world tilt beneath him.

And then his father - or rather the man who was not his father, but had acted as such for twenty cycles - did something which he had never done before: he reached out and took Yarrek's shoulder in compassion. In a small voice he said, "Your mother had just miscarried. A son. She was grieving. We were poor then. The farm was yet to prosper. When the agents of aristocrats called and made their offer, we could not refuse. They paid us well, but money was not our motive. We looked upon you and knew that if we were to refuse, then you would die."

His father paused, and went on, "Your progress at college was monitored by the interested party in Icefast, and they arranged for your apprenticeship."

The irony! He, the illegal third child of aristocrats, was to be seconded into the very arm of the Church responsible for the policing of such edicts!

The hand tightened on his shoulder. "But be assured of this, Yarrek. Despite everything, we love you as our own."

It was the first time his father had ever spoken such words of affection. With that, his face averted, he stood and left the room.

Yarrek lay on his bed, staring through the open window at the baleful eye of the rapidly dimming sun. Unable to sleep, he thought ahead to his time in Icefast. Though much of what lay ahead would be a mystery, he resolved upon a course of action that would give his future some purpose: during his time in Icefast he would attempt to track down the people who were his rightful parents.

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Much later he was awakened by a sound.

He sat up quickly, the revelations of his past and his future brimming in him like sour wine. He blinked. It was still dark, though the sun had reached the extent of its dimming and was little by little beginning to brighten.

It came again, the sound...

"Yarrek!" A mere whisper, from the direction of the window. He turned on the bed and saw, beside the

nodding dark-blooms that wound in around the window-frame, Yancy's round face staring in at him.

“Yancy?”

“I heard that you're leaving for Icefast. Jarrel told me over at the platform. When you didn't turn up, I thought... Well” - she shrugged - “here I am.”

He hurried across the room and embraced her. She was standing on a thick twist of vine that clung to the facade of the manse. Her presence here, as it did every time she came for him, amazed Yarrek, for Yancy Garrish was blind. Her massive eyes were skinned over with a milky meniscus that only served to accentuate the beauty of her face.

She raised a small flagon. “I've brought some yail acid, from my father's locked cupboard,” she grinned. “Come to the platform and tell me everything.”

She was already shinning down the vine; he straddled the window sill and followed her.

He jumped the last meter and ran after Yancy as she disappeared through the yail stalks. Minutes later they emerged at the platform. It stood stark and empty in the umber light of the slowly brightening sun. Full brightening was hours away. He would have plenty of time with his friend before returning home.

They climbed onto the platform and fell back onto piled sacks of yail. Yancy unplugged the flagon, took a quick slug, and then passed it to Yarrek. The spirit burned his throat, filled his belly with strangely comforting fire.

He said, “What did Jarrel tell you?”

She chose to ignore him. “Are the kite-fish swarming?” she asked, her sightless eyes staring in the direction of the brooding sun and the flotilla of kite-fish that basked in its gentle pre-brightening warmth.

He took her hand. “Perhaps twenty, maybe thirty. Massive ones, mostly male, putting on a show.” He watched the intricacy of their aerial dance. “They're performing their mating rituals, flying circles around the sun.”

Yancy sighed and squeezed his hand. “And on the other side,” she said. “What can you see there?”

Yarrek narrowed his eyes, peering past the sun and focussing on the other side of the world. Directly above him he could see that side’s Hub City, and radiating from it the web of lines that were the sail-rail tracks, with a great checkerboard of farmland in between. Overland, as his people called it, was a mirror image of the plain on which Yarrek lived; he had never met anyone who had ventured there, though he knew that ships plied back and forth across the frozen seas of the Edge.

He described it to Yancy in great detail, omitting nothing.

She snuggled close to him, her warmth in turn warming him, banishing his fears.

He asked again, “Yancy, what did Jarrel tell you?”

She was a while before replying. “He said you were to go to the Edge, to Icefast, at mid-brightening. There you had a job awaiting you. A very important job.”

“Did he tell you what it was?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t know. Your parents had told him only so much, to prepare him for your leave-taking.”

His silence prompted her question. “Well, Yarrek, will you tell me?”

He braced himself for her ridicule, even her disgust. “I will sit an exam for the office of the Inquisitor General.”

He turned and stared at her broad, pretty face in the light of the brightening. It was as if her features were frozen. Her hand remained on his, though her grip had slackened appreciably.

“Yancy?”

“You’ll be a lackey of the Church?” she said. “And an Inquisitor at that!”

He shrugged. “I have no say in the matter. Do you think I want to leave here, leave you?” And he felt a twinge of treachery at these words, for he had planned to venture to Hub City without her. Though, he told himself, he would have seen her when he returned home, and she could have visited him often enough.

She was silent for a long time. He watched the kite-fish perform convoluted arabesques with vast, lethargic grace.

He wanted to tell Yancy that he was not a true Merwell - that his blood family were aristocrats in Icefast - but he could not bring himself to do so.

“You’ll change,” she whispered. “You’ll become like them. Hard. Unforgiving. You’ll forget what it is to love, to feel compassion. For how can those that rule by the Edict of the Church have room in their hearts for the forgiveness of human frailty?”

He took her hand. “I won’t change, Yancy.”

She turned to face him, and her soured eyes seemed to be staring at him. “But you already believe, in your heart, Yarrek. You have been indoctrinated by your parents. And from belief, it is only a short step to pressing your belief onto others, by force if necessary.”

“No!”

She laughed. “But you take in every word the Church spouts and believe it for the ultimate truth!”

Yancy and her family belonged to the caste of Weavers. From an early age Yancy had woven fabulous tapestries of such color and intricacy that they left Yarrek breathless. He had wondered how someone without sight could create such things of visual beauty. She had explained that she *felt* the colors, and kept the complex patterns in her head as she weaved.

The Weavers were renowned for their lack of convention, their irreverence, but because of the importance of their position in society, producing carpets both aesthetic and utilitarian, the Church chose to ignore their heterodoxy.

“Tell me again what the Church believes.” Yancy whispered now, mocking him. “Tell me that we are a bubble of air in a vast rock that goes on for ever and ever without end...”

He thought about that, even as she laughed at him, and as ever the concept of infinity dizzied him. “Tell me,” she went on, “that the Church believes that the bubble was formed from the breath of God, as He breathed life into dead rock, creating us and the animals and everything else in existence!”

“Yancy...” he pleaded, squeezing her hand.

She embraced him quickly, and he realized with surprise that she was weeping. “Oh, Yarrek, I will never see you again, will I? And if I do, you will be so changed I’ll never recognize the boy I love.”

He could think of no words to say in response, no gesture he could make to reassure her.

A little later they removed their clothes and came together and made love slowly, under the eye of the quickening sun, and Yarrek wondered if it would be for the very last time.

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Yarrek stowed his luggage in the warped timber carriage of the sail-rail train and found a window seat. He stared out at the busy platform, and among the crowd picked out the unmoving trio of his father, mother, and brother. They looked solemn in the glare of the mid-brightening sun. He lifted a hand to acknowledge that he had seen them, but only Jarrel responded with a wave.

He scanned the crowd for any sign of Yancy. Mere hours ago, as they lay limbs entwined on the yail sacks, she had promised that she would see him off at the station - but there were so many citizens swarming back and forth that he despaired of seeing her now.

The cry went up from the ship’s captain. A team of lox were whipped into motion and chocks sprang away from the rails. The carriage creaked as the great sails took the strain and eased the train slowly, at first, along the rails.

Desperately now Yarrek cast about the surging faces for Yancy - and then he heard the cry. “Yarrek,

goodbye!”

She had shinned up a lamp-pole and was waving furiously in the direction of the train. He called, “Yancy, farewell!” and waved even though she would be unable to see the gesture.

She smiled, and waved all the more, and Yarrek turned to the tableau of his family and was heartened by the disapproving expressions on the faces of his mother and father. Jarrel was grinning to himself like an idiot.

The train gained speed, the wind from the Hub sending it on its way. Yarrek felt tears stinging his eyes as he waved to his family and the small, clinging figure of the blind weaver girl.

He sat back in his seat and closed his eyes.

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He awoke a little later to the thrumming vibration of the train’s wheels on the track.

Yarrek had never before been further Edgeward than his farm. Now, mixed with apprehension at what should await him at Icefast, he was fired by the excitement and curiosity of adventure. The future was a blank canvas on which he would paint his destiny; he knew neither what to expect from Icefast - though in books he had seen engravings of dour, stone buildings - nor what exactly might await him in the office of the Inquisitor.

The train had gained full speed now, and fields of yail and other crops sped by in a golden blur. Yarrek slid open the window and poked his head out, staring up at the bellying sails bearing the great green circle of the Hub Line. Almost directly overhead, the sun had attained full brightness and the heat was merciless.

He wondered how he might cope in Icefast, where the sun was a speck on the inward horizon, and the temperature never rose above freezing.

He glanced around his compartment and tried to guess how many of his fellow passengers were bound all the way to Icefast; not many, judging by their scant luggage. Indeed, as the hours elapsed and the train stopped at the stations along the way, many travellers alighted to be replaced by others who remained

aboard only for short durations.

He began a letter to Yancy - addressed to the weaving house where she worked, and where a friend would read it out to her - describing the voyage so far, and promising that this letter would be the first of many.

Later he ate an evening meal packed by his mother, then went for a stroll along the corridor and up a flight of steps. The view from the upper deck, beneath the taut swell of the sails, was spectacular. He could see for what seemed like hundreds of miles in every direction: a sprawling panorama of yail fields, here and there the spires and steeples of towns and villages.

Towards dimming, as he was contemplating going below and setting up his bunk, there was a rush of activity over by the starboard rail where a dozen passengers gathered and pointed.

In the distance, perhaps a mile away, Yarek saw the humped remains of ancient buildings, tumbled stones upholstered by centuries of creeping grass and ferns. He recognized the ruins from picture books at school: this was the old city of Hassaver, the only existing remnant of the war that had almost brought the end of civilization on Sunworld. Dreadful weapons had been brought to bear by implacable armies, fighting for countries long forgotten.

The history books said that the war had been fought perhaps ten thousand cycles ago, and that, after the devastation, strange beings had come among the people of Sunworld - beings that ecclesiastical scholars later claimed were angels - and brought about the formation of the Church, which in turn had brought lasting peace to the world and the eventual rebuilding of civilization.

He hurried below, constructed a bunk from his extendable seat, and settled down to sleep as the sun dimmed quickly far above the hurtling train.

He was awoken in the early hours, and at first he couldn't make out what had brought him awake. It felt as though ice had invaded his veins; his body was rattling in a manner he had never experienced before. Instinctively he pulled the thin sheet over him, and then realized what had happened. He had read about this in books, but had never experienced the phenomenon of cold, the dead chill that enveloped him now.

Teeth chattering in a way he might otherwise have found amusing, he sat up and peered through the window.

The landscape surrounding the trundling train had changed alarmingly. Gone were the reassuring fields of

yail, to be replaced by smaller fields of some stubby green plant, and over everything lay a coating of what he would later learn was called frost, a scintillating silver dusting like ground diamond.

He noticed that other passengers were straining to peer ahead; he pressed his face to the icy glass and did likewise.

What he saw sent a throb of surprise and fear through his being. Ahead, stretching for the extent of the horizon, was a range of gray mountains capped by what he knew was snow. The rearing phalanx was forbidding, austere and steel-like in its breadth, and total dearth of living color. This, then, was the Edge, and the range before him the fabled mountains that circumnavigated this plane of Sunworld. The thought that he was actually here, witnessing this sight, took his breath away.

At the next station, vendors boarded the carriage selling mugs of hot broth. Yarrek gladly purchased one. Behind these vendors came others hawking thick clothing, serge pantaloons, padded jerkins, caps with ear flaps, and things called gloves which you fitted over your hands to protect the fingers - according to the spiel of the vendors - from something called frostbite.

Yarrek outfitted himself from head to toe, pulling his new apparel over his old. He felt at once constricted but snug, and wondered if he would ever become accustomed to being so lagged.

He settled down, more comfortable now, and stared in fascination through the window at the wonder of the passing world outside.

Two hours later Yarrek caught his first glimpse of Icefast.

If he had found the sight of the mountains a thing of wonder, then Icefast doubled his awe and sent his senses reeling. The engravings of his youth had done nothing to prepare him for either the scale of the city or the severity of its aspect.

Like the mountains, Icefast was gray, and like the mountains it reared stark and abrupt from the land. The uniformity of the tall buildings, the fact that constructions of such enormity had been planned and undertaken by his fellow man, made the sight of the serried facades all the more daunting.

Icefast filled the horizon between peaks as though the very mountains themselves had been found wanting and replaced. Yarrek made out ice-canals between the monolithic gray mansions, and on the canals the improbable sight of people skating back and forth, and others riding sleds drawn by teams of shaggy lox.

In due course the train slowed and entered a canyon of buildings. On the station platform Yarrek made out a thousand souls muffled to their ears, their breaths pluming in the cold. Strange cries and shouts came from the throng, vendors selling everything from cold cures to water-heated boots, mulled yail to grilled lox.

That morning, his father had given him instructions for his arrival in Icefast and directions to the House of the Inquisitors, where he would be given a bed in the apprentices' dormitory. He would take a lox cart to the Avenue of Creation, and present himself to the porter at the House.

As he gathered his belongings and stepped from the carriage, his breath robbed by the severity of the cold that wrapped around him and invaded his lungs, he realized that his heart was pounding with both excitement and dread.

He hurried to a lox-cart stand, climbed aboard, and gave his destination to a muffled dwarf of a jockey. Seconds later he was gliding smoothly - no jolts on this ride - across the silvered canals of Icefast, and everything he beheld seemed new and wondrous. He saw nothing familiar, no fields of yail or timber buildings or kite-fish sailing around the sun. Instead all was drear and austere, the gaunt buildings hewn from great stone blocks, the thoroughfares filled with ice. It was the start of dimming. Back home the air would still be bright with sunlight; this far away from the Hub the sun was but a distant disk. A strange twilight filled the air, and the city was illuminated by naked flames in great sconces set atop pillars positioned along the middle of the ice-canals.

The cart slowed at last and halted before the tall, pillared entrance of the House of Inquisitors. Yarrek paid the jockey and climbed down. Keeping his footing with difficulty as he negotiated paving stones slick with ice, he stepped towards the ancient timber doors and passed inside.

He was met by the grim-faced porter, who escorted him without a word to a tiny cell furnished with a hard, narrow bed and a trunk for his clothing. He passed a fitful night, tossing, turning, and dreaming - when sleep came in the early hours - of home and sunlight and Yancy. At dawn, a loud rapping on the door of his cell awoke him and the porter led Yarrek, along with a dozen other would-be Inquisitors, to the lecture halls overlooking the Avenue of Creation.

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For the next ten brightening - though this near the Edge the word was something of a misnomer, for a brightening never achieved much more than a pewter half-light - Yarrek rose early and hurried from his spartan cell to the lecture halls.

There, along with his fellow students, he pored over ancient manuscripts and studied more modern apologia. In the afternoons, after a short meal break during which he ate slabs of cold porridge and watered wine in a silent refectory, he returned to the lecture halls where he would listen, along with the other bored and nodding novices, to a different tutor every brightening who spoke at length on varying aspects of Church law and judiciary practice. At the end of the lessons he would sit a written exam on what he had learned so far, and he would have to dredge his memory for the arcane and abstruse tenets of ecclesiastical lore.

At dimming, after a substantial meal of meat broth, he would retire to his cell and compose letters to Yancy and his family. To the latter he would paint a picture of diligence and interest, but to Yancy he would tell the truth: that he found his studies tedious and life in Icefast at best alienating. He missed the warmth of all that was familiar, he wrote, but most of all he missed Yancy.

He made no friends among his fellow apprentices, for fraternisation was forbidden. Meals were taken in silence, and silence was the rule during study periods. At dimming, Church porters escorted the novices back to their cells. Though their doors were not locked, Yarrek suspected that guards were posted at the end of the corridor to discourage nocturnal wanderings.

On his eleventh brightening in Icefast, the rules were relaxed. Nothing was stated overtly, but Yarrek noticed that whispers at mealtimes were not admonished, and the porters no longer escorted the novices from the lecture halls. He made friends with a fat youth from a city around the Edge of Sunworld who pined for the flat ice-fields of home just as Yarrek pined for the sun-parched plains of the Hub.

Upon Yarrek's fifteenth brightening as a novice, the lecturer announced that for the first time they would be allowed outside after lessons. That dimming Yarrek, along with his new-found friend, hired skates and for an hour attempted to remain upright along the Avenue of Creation before the cold became too much to bear.

The following afternoon, in the great library, he consulted a gazetteer of the city, searching for the official building where he might find a listing of registered births. That evening after lessons he slipped out and skated shakily along the Avenue towards the House of Public Records

He came to the building, like all the others in the metropolis a sheer, towering construction with high slit windows and a massive entrance. He removed his skates and passed inside, only to discover that he had just thirty minutes before the records office closed. He hurried, sweating in the furnace heat of the building, to the room which housed the rows of mouldering ledgers containing the names of all who had been born, lived, and died in Icefast for the past five hundred cycles.

He knew, of course, that his name would not be among those listed, for he had been a third born, and thus an illegal issue. He hoped, however, to come across some clue that might help him in his search for his true parents. He reasoned that if he could find the names of all the families who had sired two children and their addresses (for he knew his parents to be high-born and assumed they would have lived in exclusive precincts), then he could furnish himself with a list of families who might possibly have birthed him against the law.

But thirty minutes was no time at all in which to accomplish this mammoth task. No sooner had he found the relevant ledger and scanned the first page, than a dour, cloaked official appeared at the door and announced that the House of Public Records was closing in five minutes.

Skating back to the House of the Inquisitors, the sun a tiny disk on the horizon, Yarrek told himself that on his next free brightening he would search the ledgers from first light to closing time.

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There was a surprise in store for the novices the following brightening. At the end of the afternoon's lessons the lecturer, a wizened old vulture known as Dr Kellaway, rapped on his lectern and called for silence. His rheumy, censorious gaze raked the thirteen pale faces of his pupils as he announced, "For sixteen brightenings you have studied hard and completed a series of testing examinations. That phase of your education has now ceased. Your papers have been assessed, your ability established, and it is my duty to announce that just three of you have attained the standards required to be admitted to the Office of the High Inquisitor. The ten of you who have failed will be found posts in the Inquisitor's halls of administration, which I might add is no disgrace."

He paused, his gaze moving from face to expectant face. Yarrek knew that his name would not be among the three who had passed. He could expect to pass his brightenings in dull administration; the thought of such work in the half-light and chill of Icefast filled him with despair.

Dr Kellaway consulted a list upon his lectern and read out three names. "The successful novices are Burce Madders, Kareen Holgen, and Yarrek Merwell. You will report at first brightening to the porter's lodge, and an official will escort you to your new study rooms."

Yarrek hurried to his cell as class was dismissed, wanting neither the congratulations of the failed candidates nor their recriminations. His only friend was not among the three. Yarrek knew that his commiserations would be met with stony resentment.

The truth was that Yarrek was amazed at his success, for in his own estimation he had failed miserably to

reproduce in the exams even half of what he had retained of the information supplied in the lessons. Could the failed ten have done even worse, he wondered with incredulity?

Thus began a new phase of study for Yarrek.

* * * *

The three successful novices attended seminars given by the eminent Dr Bellair in his private suite at the very summit of the House of Inquisitors. Their presence was required only in the mornings, while the afternoons were left free to fill as they desired.

In the mornings, Yarrek absorbed as much information as he thought possible on the abstruse subject of Church edicts. Every third brightening, the novices were expected to read out essays, to which Dr Bellair listened with an air of studious absorption, and then commented upon with clinical acuity. Yarrek came to understand the extent of the revolution that had shaken the Church. The old guard had been replaced, swept aside by Prelate Zeremy and his followers; traditional, Draconian ways had ceded to more liberal codes of practice. Beliefs that had held sway for cycles were now considered legitimate subjects for discussion and even for reasoned dissent. Yarrek found the sessions with Dr Bellair heady stuff indeed, after the dull lessons of ancient history, and for the first time thought he might find work in the Office of the Inquisitor to be ultimately rewarding.

In the afternoons, after a period of private study, Yarrek made his way to the House of Public Records and pored laboriously over one dusty ledger after another. Over a period of a dozen brightenings he succeeded in compiling a list of fifty names of families of high standing who had sired two children in the cycle of his birth. He stared at the names and wondered if one of them might bear his rightful title.

* * * *

The following brightening, as he sat in Dr Bellair's fire-lit study with his fellow novices, listening to the Doctor describe in detail the Prelate's position on Church infallibility, a sharp rapping upon the door startled them all.

Dr Bellair, ruffled at having his monologue interrupted, issued a testy summons and a poker-faced porter slid into the room and passed the Doctor a folded note.

Dr Bellair read it once, and then again, and then looked up and across the room to Yarrek, who started in surprise.

“Merwell,” the Doctor said, “you will accompany the Church Guard from this building forthwith.”

Dry of throat, Yarrek climbed unsteadily to his feet. Watched by the incredulous students and a puzzled Dr Bellair, he followed the porter from the room.

He was escorted down the switchback staircase from the twelfth floor to the spartan foyer where two tall guardsmen, outfitted in the resplendent golden uniforms of the Prelate’s office, awaited him.

“Yarrek Merwell?” asked the taller of the two. “Please, this way.”

Yarrek passed from the building between the two guards. In the ice-canal, a liveried coach-sled awaited them. He climbed into the lavishly upholstered cab and sank deep into a cushioned seat. The lox jockey yelled a command and the sled sped off, the guards standing on running-boards to either side of the careering vehicle.

Minutes later they turned from the Avenue of Creation onto the Avenue of the Prelate, and shortly after that the sled halted in the shadow of a rearing edifice which stood at the very end of the boulevard, almost enclosed by an impressive backdrop of snow-capped peaks.

Yarrek knew the identity of the building, but did not believe that he might ever be requested to step within its hallowed entrance.

And yet this was precisely what the guards now suggested. On watery legs he climbed from the sled and the guards escorted him up a flight of steps and into the private residence of Prelate Zeremy.

They climbed a winding staircase and paused before a double-door inlaid with lacquered frost-wood. Suddenly Yarrek knew then that his identity as an illegal third child had been discovered, though quite why that should entail an audience with the Prelate himself he could not guess.

The doors swung open, revealing a prosaic room filled with shelves of books, and an armchair illuminated by a gas reading lamp.

A small man, seated in the armchair, lowered his book and gazed the length of the room.

Yarrek felt a sharp prod in his lower back, and a second later he was in the room and cowering beneath the gaze of the most powerful person in Sunworld.

* * * *

“Tisane, or would you prefer something stronger? Yail wine, perhaps?”

The face was avuncular, kindly, and the enquiring tone of voice not one Yarrek would associate with the agency of punishment.

“Tisane, thank you,” he said in a small voice. He perched on the edge of a chair opposite the Prelate, and could only stare at the old man in wonder. He was familiar with Prelate Jeremy’s features from portraits, but oils failed to do justice to the man’s warmth. The prelate wore the scarlet robes of his office, and his hair was long and silver-gray. His eyes, as he stared across at the awe-struck boy, twinkled with what Yarrek chose to interpret as kindness.

A footman poured two small cups of perfumed tisane, then quietly withdrew.

The Prelate laid his book on a small table beside the guttering gas lamp. “My informants report that you are excelling at your studies, Yarrek Merwell.”

Yarrek stared into his tisane, at a loss for words. At last he said, “I... I try to do my best, sir.”

“We live in an age when the certainties of the past have been stripped away, Yarrek. Study, in such times, is more problematic than usual. Who to believe; indeed, what to believe? The solid shibboleths of past times, or the fashionable mores of the present?”

“We have been taught both,” Yarrek began, and cursed himself for stating something that the Prelate must obviously know. “Perhaps,” he ventured, “we could not appreciate the Church’s present enlightened position if we knew nothing of its more conservative stance in the past.”

Prelate Jeremy smiled. “Well put, my friend. My informants were not wrong in their assessment of you.”

Yarrek colored and turned his attention to his tisane.

Zeremy watched Yarrek closely. "You are by all accounts open-minded."

Uncomfortable, Yarrek made a non-committal gesture.

"You will consider improbable notions and not dismiss them out of hand."

He felt his heart begin a laboured thudding. What was the Prelate trying to say?

"Five cycles ago, Yarrek, we discovered certain facts pertaining to our place in the nature of existence, facts which threw into doubt the very sanctity and dominion of the Church's teachings." He smiled and shook his head. "I, personally, found the revelation shocking. Like you, like everyone in Sunworld, I knew with absolute certainty the provenance of our world... We lived within the shell of an embolism embedded in the substance of rock and earth which went on forever without let or termination."

Yarrek found himself whispering, "And five cycles ago?"

"Five cycles ago a discovery was made on the outer edges of the very Edge, beside the frozen circumferential sea. A discovery which changed everything."

Yarrek's pulse pounded in his ears. "Why," he said at last, "are you telling me this?"

"You are a brilliant student," Zeremy said. "You are the future of the Church, I might also say a future arbiter of the laws that govern Sunworld. As such, it is incumbent upon you to know the truth."

Yarrek could only nod, wondering if his fellow students would also be vouchsafed the *truth*.

"Five cycles ago," Zeremy said, "we received a report here in Icefast of a sighting of a *creature*, let's say, in the marginal lands beyond the mountains. A harl-herder observed a tall figure loitering in a crevice in the cliff-face, whence it vanished. The herder was too frightened to follow, but reported it to his foreman who in turn notified the Bishop. By and by the Bishop reported the sighting to the Inquisitor's office. It was not the first such sighting in the area."

“But what were they?”

“Five cycles ago,” Zeremy said, “I was a Deputy Investigator in the Inquisitor’s office. We convened meetings to discuss the matter. One theory was that we were being visited by beings - sentient, perhaps - from another world, from an embolism in the matter of creation adjacent to our own.”

Yarrek realized that he was staring at the Prelate open-mouthed, and shut it.

“It was decided that Investigators should be despatched to the margins to explore the possibility of other-worldly visitations. Duly I assigned my sons, Harber and Collan, to the task. They were eager and experienced Investigators, and shared my liberal inclinations. I might add that we were opposed by the more traditional elements within the Church council, who feared discoveries which might subvert the traditions - and I mean by that the power - of the Church. Be that as it may, my sons set out to explore the marginal lands.”

Yarrek was perched upon the edge of his seat. “And they discovered?”

Prelate Zeremy smiled, and Yarrek thought he detected sadness in the old man’s eyes. “They reported what they discovered to the council, but it was never disseminated for public consumption. The traditionalists had their way, and had the discovery effectively silenced.”

He stopped there, and then went on, “Three brightenings after Harber and Collan returned from the marginal lands, they were found dead in the wreckage of a lox-sled. My Investigators found evidence of sabotage: a rail had been sawn through, turning the sled into a death trap.”

Yarrek leaned forward. “And the culprits? Were they found and tried?”

Zeremy nodded. “Two known criminals did the deed, but they had been commissioned by elements within the traditional wing of the Church.” He smiled sadly. “It could be said that my sons’ deaths propagated the initial stages of what would become the revolution that brought me to power, the overturning of the old ways and the establishment of the new, liberal Church. Gradually, more tolerant views gained sway, and I had behind me a powerful lobby of like-minded Bishops and priests. Investigation into the sabotage proved to be the final straw - the traditionalists responsible were rounded up and exiled, though none of this was made public. To all intents, the revolution occurred quickly and without a single objection, violent or otherwise.” Zeremy’s fingers strayed to the circular symbol that hung on a chain about his neck. “I like to think that my sons’ deaths were not in vain.” He glanced across the

room at the portrait of a handsome, gray-haired woman. “Nor that of my dear wife, who passed on soon after the accident.”

Yarrek allowed a respectful silence to develop. It would be crass, he felt, to jump in with the question he needed to ask.

In due course he ventured, “And the discovery made by your sons, sir? What of that?”

Prelate Zeremy smiled. “After the revolution, I convened my new council to discuss the ramifications of the discovery, and how it might change things here in Sunworld. I had hoped that my sons might have guided me and my council in decreeing how the truth of their findings might be promulgated. In the aftermath of their deaths, that matter was set aside as too sensitive a subject to be rushed before the people. Cycles of planning might be required to pave the way for what would be a conceptual breakthrough.” The prelate laughed at Yarrek’s slack-jawed expression. “Yes, lad, I choose my words without hyperbole. What Harber and Collan discovered beneath the mountains of the marginal lands will in time change the world.”

Yarrek opened his mouth to speak, but fear robbed him of words.

Zeremy supplied them for him. “And what, you are thinking, was that discovery?”

Yarrek could only nod.

“Words,” pronounced Zeremy, “would fail to do full justice to the phenomenon.” The Prelate stopped abruptly and stared at Yarrek. “Tomorrow, at mid-brightening, I will send a sled for you. Then, Yarrek, we will meet again.”

As if at some invisible signal, the footman appeared silently at Yarrek’s side; the audience with the Prelate was over. Yarrek could only murmur his inadequate thanks and bow before he was led from the room and escorted back through the torch-lit ice-canals to the House of Inquisitors.

* * * *

He could not sleep that dimming, his mind roiling with all the Prelate had told him. He did eventually fall into a fitful slumber, but woke early and wondered if their meeting had been nothing but a vivid dream.

He found himself unable to concentrate the following morning in Dr Bellair's study, for lack of sleep and an excitement that filled his chest like fermenting yail. He was aware of his fellow students' scrutiny, and even the Doctor himself looked askance at Yarrek, as if wondering at the reason for his summons the morning before.

That afternoon he sat in his cell, jumpy with anticipation. Three times he began a letter to Yancy, but was unable to pen the trite words of affection, his mind full of his meeting with Prelate Zeremy and the enormity of what might lie ahead.

A loud rapping upon the cell door made him jump. It was the same pair of guards. They marched him quickly from the cell like a condemned man. Yarrek wondered if indeed that was what he might be, condemned to some terrible understanding denied all others of Sunworld.

The same sled awaited him on the ice-canal, though this time it was occupied. As Yarrek climbed inside, at first he did not recognize the swaddled figure ensconced upon the piled cushions in the back seat. The man wore a thick jerkin, and quilted leggings, and a cap pulled down over his head.

"Yarrek," came the command, "sit down before you fall down." And at that second the lox-team started up and hauled the sled along the ice, and Yarrek pitched into the plush seat beside the Prelate Zeremy.

Smiling, Zeremy handed him a thick overcoat, which Yarrek dutifully struggled into. "Where we are going," the Prelate explained, "this will be necessary."

Where they were going ... Yarrek could guess, but was too fearful to ask.

He stared out through the frosted window at the blur of Icefast passing by, a series of smeared torchlights and monolithic blocks of buildings; the only sound was the swish of sled's runners and the indignant *harrumph* of the reluctant lox-team.

He noticed that, this time, the two guards did not accompany the sled as it sped down the ice-canal. Beside him the Prelate sat back in the seat, his eyes hooded as if in contemplation, his fingertips joined in his lap.

Yarrek turned his attention to the landscape outside. They were passing through the outskirts of Icefast, past a series of low, mean buildings huddling in the shadow of the mountains. Soon they left behind these

suburbs and headed towards the rampart-like foothills, iron-gray ice-fields stretching away to right and left. Yarrek thought of the meadows surrounding the Hub, and the brilliant sunlight. Even though it was after mid-brightening now, the air was lit like twilight. Far behind them, the sun was as small as a pea held at arm's length.

Then they were plunged into sudden and startling darkness; Yarrek wondered if they had been swallowed by the very mountain range itself. He realized, then, that this was what had indeed happened: torchlight at intervals illuminated the curve of a tunnel bored through the heart of the rock.

The tunnel seemed interminable. Yarrek judged that they travelled its length for at least an hour. He marvelled at the feat of labour required to accomplish such an excavation. He realized with excitement that they would eventually emerge on the far side of the mountains, and that for the very first time in his life he would set eyes upon the circumferential sea.

In due course he became aware of light up ahead and peered out at the arch of gray sky beyond the hunched figure of the lox jockey. Seconds later they emerged from the tunnel. The sled slowed and Yarrek peered forward in amazement.

Beside him the Prelate stirred. "Is it not a sight to behold?"

Yarrek could only nod.

They were high up on a road that switchbacked down through the foothills. Far below was the breathtaking expanse of the rim sea. It stretched for as far as the eye could see, flat at first, but, as it followed the curved plane to meet the rim of Overland, it rose to form a vertical wall. More amazing than this, however, was the fact that the sea was absolutely still, the waves frozen in great shattered slabs of ice that would never break upon the shore.

He looked up. Here on the rim, where the two plains of Sunworld converged, Overland seemed like a low ceiling. Directly overhead he made out mountains and townships hanging upside-down, as if defying the laws of gravity.

With a shiver he lowered his gaze.

The lox were digging their hooves into the inclined track, slowing the sled in its descent. Little by little they negotiated the tight turns of the switchback road; perhaps an hour later they emerged on the great gray margin of the frozen shoreline.

Zeremy leaned forward and called to the jockey. "Slow, now. To the right you will observe a cutting in the mountainside. Halt there."

Seconds later the jockey yelled a command and the lox shambled to a stop. "This is as far as we go by sled," Zeremy said. "The rest of the way is by foot."

Yarrek nodded, his mouth dry, a hundred questions frozen on his lips.

They stepped from the sled, emerging into the teeth of a wind that bit like razor blades. The lox jockey had lit a torch, and this he passed to the Prelate.

Yarrek stared about him. The mountainside reared overhead, so sheer he was forced to crane his neck to make out the jagged peaks high above. He peered into the cutting Zeremy had mentioned and saw a jagged rent like the mouth of a cave.

Prelate Zeremy led the way, torch aloft, its flame flagging in the wind. They passed into the cave and deeper, the slit narrowing so that they were forced to squeeze between vertical planes of rock. Five minutes later the corridor widened and he saw that the slabs of natural rock had been replaced by obviously man-made squares of stone.

Zeremy halted before him, and indicated a flight of stone steps that disappeared down into the darkness.

Yarrek found his voice at last, and was ashamed by the note of fear that made it quaver. "Where... where does this lead?"

"This is the way my sons ventured, five cycles ago," the Prelate said. "I have been here only once before. We are following in their footsteps, and will behold soon what they discovered."

He began the steep descent, and Yarrek followed.

There was something odd about the steps, he soon realized. The treads were too high for comfortable descent; his stepping foot dropped too far, and his standing leg almost gave way before he made contact with the step below.

Perhaps thirty minutes later, the muscles of his calves paining him as if slit by knives, Yarrek was relieved when Jeremy came to a halt. They seemed to have hit a dead end. Before them was a great square of what at first looked like rock - though as Jeremy stepped forward, and the light of the torch played across its surface, Yarrek saw that it was not rock but some silver substance like metal.

Jeremy reached out, and miraculously the slab of metal slid aside to reveal a tiny, featureless room.

They stepped inside, and Yarrek was startled to hear the metal door swish shut behind him. His surprise was compounded when a lurching motion punched his stomach into the cavity of his chest, and he yelped aloud.

Jeremy could not help but smile. "We are descending through miles of rock at great speed," the Prelate pronounced. "The technology which bears us is far in advance of our own."

Yarrek nodded, though understanding had fled long ago. He could only hold his stomach and guess at what other wonders might lay ahead.

Minutes later the room stopped falling with a sudden, bobbing lurch, and before him the metal wall slid open.

This time Yarrek found himself frozen on the threshold, unable to take the step that would carry him into the chamber.

Behind him, Jeremy said gently, "Go on, you have nothing to fear," and placed a hand on Yarrek's shoulder, and eased him firmly forward.

They were in a vast chamber or auditorium, bigger than any Yarrek had ever experienced, or thought possible might have existed. It had been constructed, and was not a natural cavern in the rock, for the curving walls were of metal, ribbed like the inside of some great cathedral. He felt like a fly as he stepped forward, timorously, into the immensity of the yawning dome.

"Where are we?" he whispered. "What is this?"

A hand still on Yarrek's shoulder, Zeremy steered him toward what appeared to be a rectangular plate set into the side of the dome. As they approached, the plate slid aside to be replaced by a vast window, a plate of clear glass as wide as an Icefast building was tall.

Yarrek stared, but was unable to make sense of the scene revealed.

They moved closer, until they were standing at its very ledge. Beyond the glass was an enormity of darkness, at its center a whorl of glowing light.

"What is it?" Yarrek asked in a tiny voice.

Zeremy said, "You are about to be given the explanation that, five cycles ago, my sons were privy to, and myself not long after that. Behold."

Yarrek turned in the direction Zeremy indicated. Between where they stood and the door through which they had entered the chamber, a strange and silent figure had materialised.

"Do not fear," Zeremy said in a whisper. "For all its appearance, it is not hostile."

Yarrek nodded, evincing valour he did not feel.

The creature was hairless, with an emaciated, naked body supported in some kind of floating carriage; it was not the emaciated state of the being that so shocked Yarrek nor its nakedness, but the size of its cranium, supported by padded rests on either side of the carriage. Its head was almost the length of its body, a great bulbous pink dome threaded with veins, at its center a collection of tiny features that seemed pinched and mean: two tiny eyes, a thin nose, and lips like a bloodless hyphen.

"Welcome," it said in a croak.

"It speaks our language!" Yarrek said.

The creature's lips lengthened in what might have been a smile. "You have come so far, and we hope that you will take what you will learn back to your people."

Zeremy stepped forward. Yarrek hesitated, and the Prelate murmured, "Fear not, for the creature is but some kind of clever projection. A ghost, if you like - not flesh and blood as you and I."

Not comprehending, nevertheless Yarrek did not want to be parted from the Prelate, and hurried to his side.

They stood before the creature as it bobbed in its metal carriage, and Yarrek was amazed to see that, somehow, he could discern the outline of the entrance *through* the being's pink nakedness.

"You deserve an explanation for having ventured so far, and having witnessed so much that must be incomprehensible to you."

"What is this place?" Yarrek asked.

"You are at the very edge of the Ark," the feeble creature announced.

Yarrek shook his head and echoed, "The Ark?"

"Your world," the creature explained, "is but one of a thousand such worlds ranked side by side, like coins along the length of a tube. In each world a different race exists, examples of the thousand races which once inhabited the universe."

Yarrek glanced at Zeremy, as if for explanation, but the Prelate had closed his eyes, a serene smile upon his lips.

Sunworld is but one of many - like a coin in the barrel of a gun? His senses reeled.

The emaciated being went on, "Hundreds of millennia ago, we began the process of salvation, moving through space from planet to planet..." The creature gave its thin-lipped smile again. "But the concepts I describe are of course alien to you. The universe, space, planets, even millennia..." It lifted a weak arm and gestured. "Beyond the viewscreen is the universe, a vast emptiness scattered with galaxies, each comprising millions of stars, and around the stars, planets, worlds like your own world, though existing on the outside of spheroids of rock and earth."

Yarrek felt dizzy. He stepped forward, surprising himself. “The process of salvation?” he said. “Why did you collect us like animals in a zoo?”

The creature stretched its hyphen lips. “The analogy is valid,” it said. “We collected races that were on the cusp of extinction, races torn by futile enmity, which we feared might perish but for our intervention. The history of the universe is that of races coming to sentience and destroying themselves in needless warfare. We could not allow that to happen.”

“And then,” Zeremy said, “you engineered our society away from such warlike tendencies.”

“When we had installed you safely aboard the Ark,” the creature said, “we sent agents amongst you to effect such results.”

Yarrek wondered then if these agents were the angels of yore, who allegedly had founded the Church. What irony if that were so - the formation of a Church that might have brought about lasting peace but which, over millennia, had fossilized to the point of denying the existence of the Ark...

The creature continued, “The experiment, if you wish to call it that, has been deemed successful. Now we can commence the next step of the programme.”

“Which is?” Yarrek asked.

“The time has almost arrived to seed the planets again, to empty the Ark of its precious cargo and allow the races, now hopefully improved, to evolve as they will.”

“You are playing God,” Yarrek said.

The creature inclined its head. “If you wish to use that term, then so be it. We are playing God, in order to save and perpetuate these races.” It gestured, and all around the creature, stretching back towards the walls of the cavern, a great crowd of beings appeared, insubstantial as ghosts.

Yarrek stared, taking in beings of every conceivable size and shape. He saw creatures like crabs, and four-legged beasts like lox, and things that resembled kite-fish floating in the air, and great birds, and

bipedal hairless individuals with domed skulls...

And then he saw, in the silent crowd, tall, furred creatures like his own people, though more elongated of limb, and gray instead of brown...

The naked pink being went on, "We are the Controllers, my friends, though once we called ourselves humans. Our intention was not to wield the power of God, but to empower others to evolve peacefully, to inhabit planets in harmony with nature and with themselves."

"But when will that be?" Yarrek asked, wondering what it might be like to stand on the *surface* of what the creature called a planet.

The human gestured to the viewscreen. "The time has almost arrived to seed the cosmos. Perhaps, in a hundred of your cycles, the races of the Ark will be ready and the process can begin."

A hundred cycles...? He would be an old man then, Yarrek thought, if he lived to see the wondrous event. Oh, he could not wait to return to the Hub, and tell Yancy of his find, blind Yancy who had always been more far-sighted than himself.

"Now go," said the human, "and inform your people of what awaits them."

And so saying, the manifestation of the enfeebled creature, and the host of the saved, vanished in an instant.

Yarrek turned to Jeremy. To his surprise the Prelate was weeping.

"But you were aware of the truth, sir," Yarrek said, "and yet you did not tell the world."

"When my sons told me of what they had discovered," the Prelate said, "I thought that it would be they who would tell the world... but of course that was not to be. I had to wait, then, until..."

Yarrek stared at the old man, awareness slowly dawning. "Until?"

In reply, Prelate Jeremy laid a loving hand on Yarrek's shoulder and steered him towards the exit.
"Come, my son. Together now we have a duty to tell the world the truth."

And Yarrek, bearing a freight of understanding greater than the mere fact of a race saved from itself, made his slow way back through the rock and ice to Sunworld and the task awaiting him there.