

THE HOB CARPET

by Ian R. MacLeod

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Ian R. MacLeod has published four novels and three short story collections, and has a new novel, *Song of Time*, due out from PS Publishing this year. His work has been widely translated and received many awards. He lives in the riverside town of Bewdley, in England. “The Hob Carpet” came from an idea for an alternate earth that he’d been entertaining for many years, and finally took shape when, in the way in which stories have, it sucked in another couple of ideas that he’d been saving for something else. Ian has a personal website at www.ianrmacleod.com.

A word of warning: there are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

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I’m a monster, an aberration. I’ve never really known what it means to be human. You could try to trace what I am back to the life that supposedly formed me. Try, and most probably fail. In that, at least, reader, and even though you may try to deny it, I’m much like you.

I was raised in a family of moderate influence and reasonable wealth. My father’s line were successful merchants—men who had once plied the Great North Water, but calculated long before I was born that there was more money to be earned trading along its banks. My mother’s side were paler-skinned than is common, and perhaps more savage and unpredictable in their moods as a result. That was her, certainly; a waxing, waning Moon to orbit my father’s calmer earth. Her lineage was of the temple guards, and her father was proud of the spear-wound which a skirmish in his youth had inflicted. I remember him baring his shoulder as we sat in the lazy aftermath of a processional feast, inviting me to place my finger in the cratered dimple in his shoulder. It was like touching a second navel; another part of my birth. In those peaceful times, the wound had most probably been inflicted during training. The man drank to excess, and grew bitter performing duties that were entirely ceremonial. I still believe that there was intent in the riding accident that brought about his early death.

I imagine it was this very unlikeness which first attracted my parents to each other, and which eventually drove them apart. That probably also explains why I was the only fruit of their union, although, as I of all people should understand, it is dangerous to peer too deeply into truths of love—if any such truths exist. But, for whatever reasons, I grew up largely alone, and somewhat pampered, and perhaps had more freedom to roam my own thoughts and obsessions than was good for me. That, at least, has often been said.

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Our homestead and its grounds covered many acres. It rose—still rises, for all I know—above the banks of the same river that had brought my family its wealth, beyond Eight Span Bridge and upstream from Dhiol. It was a pretty place, if anywhere so large can be called simply pretty, emerging from the cliffs like the prow of some unimaginable vessel on thick, golden-stone ramparts which had become bedecked with mosses and flowering ivies since they had lost their military function, and were a roost and feeding ground for many varieties of bat and bird. The battlements, viewing towers and high perimeter walkways along which I wandered were decorated with flags and ceramics, fruiting arbours and fishpools. The arrowslits which had once been constructed for purposes of defense were set with filigree metals and stained glass. There were spectacular views of the Great North Water and all its barges and sails passing far below. The towers of Dhiol hazed the middle distance and the vast forests of Severland reared beyond to meet the peaks of the Roof of the World, which still shone white with snow at the height of summer even in those more beneficent times. Turning to the inward side of the battlements revealed the gameboard neatness of a typical middle class homestead, with its ditches and canals filled with all the patterns of the sky and the trees which shaded them. At some point as the eye proceeded inwards along this dazzling patchwork of the produce fields toward the main house which rose at its center, those fields became gardens, although the moment of transition was hard to discern.

My family homestead now seems like a kind of heaven. Of course, I then took it entirely for granted, but if there was one thing which I ignored more than any other, it was the presence of the hobs. Walk along the avenues that spanned the manicured distances toward our house, and their stooped backs would be as common as the swallows which then wheeled in the summer twilights. They were the first thing I saw each morning as their hands parted the vast curtains of my bedroom. Pinching out the candles and lanterns as the shadows deepened until they became shadow themselves, they were the last thing I glimpsed at night. But imagine for a moment, reader, that all of this is new to you—then think of a part of your existence which is always there, something which you would notice if the effort seemed worth such foolishness but which you never do. Imagine the smell of your own flesh, or the taste of your own tongue, or the blink of your eyelids, or the feel of your own toes. Then think of the hobs.

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Like you, I was raised in their presence. I was never close enough to my mother to ask her whether one suckled me, but I imagine that that statement in itself provides an answer; most likely, I grew plump affixed to the nipple of some nameless surrogate hob. Certainly, the hands of numerous hobs would have dealt with all the messier tasks which the rearing of a baby requires. Then, as tradition demands on the brightening of my thirtieth Moon, and in a ceremony which I cannot even remember, I was presented with the first of what my parents no doubt fondly imagined would be the beginnings of a large retinue in the shape of two young hobs.

I imagine you expect me to record how I developed an especially strong and sentimental bond with these

creatures, but I honestly did not. I called them Goo and Gog. Babyish sounds which, to an imperious three- year-old, seemed to fit their mute and trusting natures. In retrospect, I can see how cleverly they learned to understand my moods—to sense whatever I wanted long before I had made the appropriate hobbish gesture; often, in fact, before I had even fully decided what I wanted myself. But they were typical of their sort. Blue-eyed. Pale. Slope-headed. Guiltily deferential. Stooped. Tonguelessly mute, of course, and entirely lacking in any sense of gender, although I was too young to understand the meaning of the shiny scarring I sometimes glimpsed within their slack mouths and beneath their crude kilts. I was, as the saying goes, like any other child with a new hob. On the few occasions when I didn't take Goo and Gog entirely for granted, I passed the time by signing them to perform pointless and undignified tasks. *Get. Put down. Bring back. Take away. Roll over. Wave feet. Eat shit. Pant like dog. Bring back.* When I think now of my two silent and mostly ignored companions, I cannot summon the misty-eyed nostalgia which I know many humans seem to feel for their first attendants, be they called Pip and Pop, or Boo and Baa. All I feel is a sense of emptiness, and a vague guilt, which strengthens to something resembling disgust when I remember the many times when either Goo or Gog—have I mentioned that I never troubled to tell them apart?—was bound and flogged as punishment for my own misdemeanors until their backs streamed with blood.

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Hobs are everywhere in our world, but those which do not belong to our retinues are generally shy as fauns. They slink back along corridors or hide in the vegetation as soon they sense our approach. So quickly and efficiently do they vanish that it barely ever occurs to us humans that they are there. If we were to consider this trick at all—which I then never did—it seems almost magical. But the fact is that hobs hear and scent us long before we are seen. To put it bluntly, we smell as strongly to them as they do to us, and they have trained themselves to notice our presence just as rigorously as we have trained ourselves not to notice theirs. Hob, or human. Ignored, or noticed. That, it sometimes seems to me now, is where the true distinction ultimately lies.

Even if I was unconcerned by such questions, I was a busy and inquisitive child, and my parents saw to it that I was provided with academics and priests to keep me occupied and out of their sight. A restless learner, I much preferred to stride around the grounds and hallways of our homestead than to be confined to the single high room in which I was supposed to study. My tutors, being in the main sensible, intelligent men and women—and, for academics, quick on their legs—were generally happy to walk with me.

Once I had mastered the basics of calligraphy and numerology, I became a child of endlessly changing enthusiasms and fascinations. Why do the petals of a flower only come in certain numbers? Why is the sky blue, and why are the stars only visible at night? And what, exactly, is the mechanism by which the seasons come and go? Later, I came to ask even more imponderable questions, such as how it is, if the Gods are endlessly wise, that people receive different answers when they pray to them. And why do hobs look so nearly like us, and yet remain so different...? Perhaps I asked that last question as well as I strode along the florid avenues and golden-paved battlements with some flustered tutor. And, as always, the garden hobs retreated as they sensed our approach, and the domestic ones who followed with their fans and awnings waited until they were summoned by a gesture, and our debate continued as we took

our ease on cushions laid across their bent backs and were silently served with refreshments by their unnoticed hands.

In winter, Dhiol became a less favored place. Although trade continued and the river never iced itself over in those days, it was customary for families of our class to travel downstream through the mountains and lowlands to escape the worst of the cold. Sometimes we crossed the Bounded Sea to sample the delights of the cities of Ulan Dor or Thris. Long before my age reached a century of Moons, I had stood on the Glass Pinnacle and counted—or tried to count—the sacred flamingos. I rode an elephant along the Parade of the Gods and blew the sacred horn to celebrate the flooding of the God River. I witnessed priests, crimsonly enrobed with the skins of their sacrifices, moving down the steps of the great temple of Thlug. But it was always the journey rather than the arrival that most appealed to me; the procession of landscapes as we headed down the Great North Water, then the glimpsed islands and broad horizons and all the changing moods of the sea. Being merchants, my family had their pick of the best vessels. No matter how rough the weather, they always felt like places of safety to me. Ships were places of exploration as well. After the endless avenues of our homestead, it was liberating to live aboard spaces so confined, yet within which—along gangways and inside storage spaces and beneath endless levels of deck—there was always some new surprise.

Afloat, the proximity of the hobs was unavoidable. Look up at the sails, and you would see dozens of them climbing like apes in a jungle. Look toward the waters, and there was the endless splash of the oars; a ship's heartbeat is the beating of its engine room drum. On the decks themselves, ropes were always being fed through pulleys, as woods and irons and brasses were polished. I stepped around these activities much as you might step around a lamp-pillar in the street, but I also studied their processes in the abstract sort of way that seems to typify my intellect. I came to enjoy analyzing the configuration of the sails, and quizzed the mariners about their differing functions. Occasionally, one of the figures that moved with such acrobatic abandon along the spars and ropes would misjudge a leap and tumble into the sea. They never made a sound as they fell. The vessel pushed on without pause. I was reminded, I remember, of apples dropping from a tree. I even considered producing a poem on the subject, although, if I had ever written it, it would have been more about orchards than about hobs.

The masters, navigators and gangsmen were enormously proud of their vessels, and were as keen to show me their engine rooms, for all their stink and noise, as they were to demonstrate their understanding of the stars. Down at the waterline, the sustained beat of the motive drum, and the movement that came with it—the slide and creak of wood, the tensing of hob muscle, the huge combined intakes and outtakes of hob breath—became a solid presence that thrummed within your chest. Striding down the gangways, the captain or master would explain in great detail the length of the oars and the mechanisms of the rowlocks and the number of *arms*—they never talked of whole hob bodies—that serviced them. The squeamish might find such scenes hellish, but as I was told about stroke speeds and sweeps of arc and shift times, I saw the hobs as these mariners saw them; as one combined mass of muscle. The stink and effluent, the shortage of good air, the bodies—*components*—that failed during shifts and had to be swiftly hoisted out, disposed of and replaced without loss of the rhythm, were all mere technicalities; the equivalents of how a drainage engineer might discuss rates of inundation and flow.

The first time I came consciously into closer contact with a hob beyond my thoughtless encounters with

our domestic retinue was on one of these ocean journeys. It was a pale morning, and our vessel was surrounded by nothing but sea. I had risen early to discover everything misted, shining and slippery, and greyly dark. I was still in the phase of inwardly composing poems that I never actually wrote, and I recollect as I stood at the rail and looked out into the fading nothingness that I was thinking how the ship itself, in its stealth and greyness, seemed to be made of little more than mist. Doubtless, the engine-room drum was still beating and the oars were thrashing as they drove us on—the entire ship would have thrummed and creaked as all such vessels do—but we had been at our journey for a few days, and all I felt was silence, all I breathed was stillness and fog.

The next thing I remember is a spinning whooshing, and being knocked sideways across the deck. When I recovered my senses, I discovered the weight of some other living thing lying on top of me, and a face briefly peering down into my own. What I saw, before it clambered off and loped into the mist, was nothing but the generalized features of a typical hob—beetle-browed, chinless, broad-nosed, pale-skinned and set with a wild spew of reddish hair. Several mariners were already running over to me as I got up. Even as I attempted to explain what had happened, it seemed impossible that I could have been touched—*assaulted*—by such a beast. Then one of the men grinned and pointed to the spew of rope and metal that had gouged itself across the deck. A pulley must have broken somewhere high up in the masts and come swinging toward me out of the mist. If it hadn't been for the intervention of that hob, I would have been killed.

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Another winter faded, and my family returned with the birds toward the mountains and forests of the cooler north, to find our gardens emerging from their winter swaddlings, and the house perfectly clean, and our beds warmed and aired, and fresh fruits and sweetmeats laid in bowls on the tables, and fires crackling in every hearth. The gardens, in particular, were delight in this coming season of growth. In response to my endless questions about the purposes of insects and the mechanisms of fruiting and growth, my parents placed me in the company of Karik, the most senior garden gangmaster.

Everything that's ever said about hob gangmasters is true. Karik was tall and unstooped. His face was broadly handsome. His skin was aristocratically dark. All in all, he was about as far from the near-hobbish caricature of his type as you could possibly get. But in every other way he fitted the bill. As he promenaded the fields and gardens, he would pause in his explanations of when the soil should be turned, or a tree pruned, and call over some creature that I, in my absorption, had not even noticed, and strike them hard and efficiently with the cane he always carried. No explanation was ever given. Glancing back as he and I strode on, I noticed how other nearby hobs ceased their tasks and scurried over to see to the needs of their—what *was* the term, comrade, fellow, friend, colleague? Perhaps it's a sign of the beginnings of my obsession that I was starting to wonder about such things. Karik was as skilled with his cane as he was with the other aspects of his craft, and I'm sure that some of the hobs had their limbs broken, although others remained capable of getting up and continuing working. I suspect a few were actually killed. Karik knew what he was doing, and I suppose the hobs understood as well.

As well as a cane, Karik carried several gardening implements slung around his hips on a belt. An

eccentricity of his was that he would sometimes stoop down toward the earth and actually snip a shoot, or even dig out a weed, with his own bare hands. In that busy season for new planting, he would sometimes take the pointed wooden object he called his dibber, and work it into the soil, and physically plant a tuber or seed. I watched this activity with amazement. It seemed as unlikely a thing as a human cook peeling a vegetable, a sweep personally climbing up a chimney, or a dressmaker physically sewing the fabric of a dress. But when Karik encouraged me to try, I discovered that I actually liked the grainy feel of the earth and the dark scent it left upon my hands. I like it still.

As a student of horticulture, I also became a student of the work of the hobs. I felt by now that I knew our entire homestead. But, wandering with Karik and then on my own, I discovered new landscapes hilled with piles of mulching vegetation, and low arches which I'd long passed without noticing within the house itself, which led down narrow stairways into smoky caverns. The hobs were endlessly busy. They were always carrying things away, or bearing them in, or wading ditches, or bearing laundry, or scooping out sludge. Pushing my way around unlikely corners, I would emerge into storerooms and potting sheds. There were cavernous kitchens and huge glasshouses and busy workshops and subterranean acreages of dusty furniture waiting for their fashion's return.

Once when I was exploring the gardens, I re-found a turn along which Karik had shown me several Moons earlier. The potting sheds, I reckoned with my newly acquired knowledge, would be already busy with the planting for the following spring, but, contrary to my expectations, they seemed to be deserted. I hunched along the dark passages, curious as ever, and enjoying the feel and the taste—it was too intense to be called merely a smell—of the rich, loamy earth. Here and there were set rooflights, emblazoning the blackness with gilded veins of Sun. The roots and shoots exposed by my exploring fingers could have been formed of the finest coral. When I sensed something ahead of me, I moved softly on. I had learned that, if I kept downwind of them and moved quietly enough, I could sometimes catch working hobs unawares.

Ribboned in a dazzling fall of light, Karik and a hob were engaged in some strange mutual contortion. The scene was oddly beautiful. They were both making sounds and their voices, hob grunt and human cry, intermingled in a way that could have been a sacred chant. Their gleaming bodies rose and fell. The hob, who was bending, shook her mane of hair in a spray of gold. Karik was bucking and baring his teeth. He was rivered with sweat. And his penis, which was at least as long and thick as his dibber, thrust and emerged from the hob's nether regions, and she thrust and bucked back. Then, with a rising bellow that began in the depths of Karik's lungs and which the higher scream of the hob's voice almost extinguished at its peak, the business that they were engaged in reached some kind of conclusion.

The two creatures, human and hob, fell back from each other toward the soft earth. Karik muttered something, and the hob replied in a growl as she climbed from her knees. Her gaze shifted along the tunnel to where I was standing as she swiped the dirt from her breasts, and she stepped back into the blackness, and was instantly gone. Karik turned to look in the same direction, his still erect penis trailing a glistening blob. When he saw me hunched there in the shadows, he tossed back his head and laughed like a God.

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Hobs are born male or female. They do not lay eggs or have beaks or scales. They do not dwell in eyries or the depths of the ocean. Neither do they produce flowers or send out roots. They may have oddly pale skins and those masses of russet hair, and be broader and shorter than we humans are, but they are the only species I know of that chooses to walk on two legs just as we do. Their faces may be somewhat flatter than ours, but their eyes and mouths and ears and noses are arranged much like our own. In fact, their bodies are like ours in almost every significant detail. And they possess penises and vaginas—unless, that is, they have been physically removed.

As outdoor hobs routinely work naked, even a child far younger and less curious than I should long have been acquainted with these facts. Even you, patient reader, will be aware of the similarities of fleshy geometry that humans and hobs share. We are alike in ways that horses and dogs and sheep and cattle and all the other creatures that serve us are not. That, I believe now, is why we keep ourselves so far apart.

What I saw happening between Karik and that hob left me puzzled, and it was a quieter and less exploratory child who inhabited our homestead for the rest of that summer. One who, much to the relief of his parents and tutors, was happy to sit up in his room in the high tower and seek knowledge within ancient scrolls.

After its uncertain start, the weather that year turned hotter than anyone could remember this far north. People walked beneath fans and awnings when they walked at all, and received their guests seated in cool, lily-adorned baths. Carpets were taken up. Beds were placed on balconies. Gangs of hobs were diverted from their usual tasks to fan air along complex systems of vents. The gardens beyond my windows shimmered and blazed. Then, just a few days before my family was planning to flee this furnace for the cooler Winds of the coast, the skies above Dhiol finally darkened. I looked up from my work to silently urge the Gods to break their thunder overhead. And, like the opening of a sluiceway, they did. For all my newfound seriousness, I couldn't help but rush down the stairways and out into the lightning-split torrent like the excited child I still almost was. I spread my arms and tilted back my head. Jumping from the lip of an overflowing fishpond, I felt my right leg slip out, and twist and buckle with a grating snap.

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It was a bad break. I was delirious for several days with medicines and pain. When I finally awoke, I found myself immobile in a vast, strange bed. Looking up at the ornate drapes, painted wooden arches and door-sized cushions of which the boat-like structure was composed, I felt an odd flash of recognition. An echo of my fever came back over me, and I cried out. I feared for a moment that I had actually died, and was lying in my own tomb. Or, worse still, that I had been interred while still living. Pale and quick as a ghost, a hob face came and went amid the turbulent decorations. Intense pain shot

through me. I cried out again, and struggled to fight my way out of this gilded tomb.

Footsteps came, followed by a flutter of hunting scenes and forests amid the fabrics. I cringed, expecting some ebony guardian of the Afterworld to emerge. But it was only my mother. I say *only*, but she was surrounded as always by a large retinue of personal hobs dressed in silks that complemented and blended with her own attire. They were bearing the golden poles of the great crimson canopy that evolved into a hat as it neared her head, and wafting the dyed and silvered ostrich feathers and incense burners that fanned her air, and laying down the rose petals upon which she habitually walked, and sweeping them up in her wake, and carrying her enormous silk train like some great living fishtail, and plucking the small instruments from which emerged the aura of sound that she always bore with her. Smiling down at me, actually taking my bare hand in her own gloved one for a few moments, she asked if I was feeling better. Despite the obvious stupidity of my accident, she was in a forgiving mood. She told me how she had briefly feared for the worst, and had had the family tombs re-surveyed and this ancestral bed restored in case the journey of my fever should take me further than this earth. I nodded and smiled as pain and surprise receded. Looking up at the tumbling, fruited carvings, I realized why I had dimly recognized this structure; I had come across it in on my wanderings through the vast storerooms which formed part of the hidden landscape of this house.

“The arrangements for our journey south,” she told me, “are too far advanced to be postponed. Contracts have been set. Visits have been promised. Sacrifices have been made. Feasts and entertainments have been agreed. Money, above all, has been paid. Your father and I will be traveling downriver as usual, but we have discussed the matter and decided that it would be impossible for you to come with us in your current state. You will remain here through the winter in our homestead, and your body will heal. Everything has been arranged.”

A glorious vision, a jewel set within the perfumed glitter of her chiming, wafting attendants, she turned from me and the curtains fell back.

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My parents saw to it that I was provided with tutors to teach me things I was no longer interested in learning, and priests to remind me of the doings of Gods in whom I was certain that I no longer believed. Visits were also arranged from acquaintances and relatives, and reports required of them and me. I was given a pet parrot to keep me entertained—which soon flew out of a window to reappear a few days later as a sprawl of rainbow feathers in the frost. But, more than ever, there was no human company I was prepared to tolerate beyond my own.

It did occasionally strike me that the scene that my progress made through the house and grounds was rather extraordinary, even if it is something that you, reader, will regularly see passing beneath your window if you live in a city. But, with little else to occupy my thoughts, I was intrigued by the complexity and variety of the process by which the hob retinues bore my newly disabled self along. As our house

was as rich in mirrors as our garden was in ponds, I was even able to study the strange manner of my progress as if I was watching someone else. There was the *simple half-crouch*, wherein two or three hobs would position themselves almost as if they were sitting as we humans do. I would recline on the silks and cushions that they had arranged upon their bodies, whilst four or six other hobs beneath that top layer would contort their backs in a variety of postures to provide the necessary motive power and support. For stairs and slopes, there was the position that I called the *rolling back*, during which a dozen or so hobs, more if necessary, would lay themselves face-upward across the ascent, and push the rolling knot of upper hobs which still actually supported me up or down. Then there was *hands over arms* for the steeper ascents as the hobs formed something like a stairway of limbs, and, most strange of all, what I thought of as *the hob carpet* in which, once I had signed that I was weary of being seated and wanted to stretch my still-functioning limbs, my tumbling, ever-changing retinue would briefly contrive to convey me upright as though I were walking, yet still supporting my splinted leg as if it were not broken at all.

Here I was, riding about every day on my writhing throne of hob flesh, and also submitting to the sort of attentions that are otherwise usually reserved for infants, the elderly, the lazy, or the infirm. There is, it has to be admitted, a smoothly addictive quality to reaching toward something that lies beyond the span of your arms, only to find a moment later that you are actually holding it. It does not take much further effort, I can well imagine, to enjoy having your food chewed and every other conceivable outward process of your body performed on your behalf.

My bathroom lay along a corridor adjoining my suite of rooms. Each morning, I was lifted from my bed by the gentle touch of dozens of hands. Still supine and still half-asleep, I had leisure to see aspects of my surroundings that I had never previously noticed. Gazing up, I saw now how the long, high ceiling was marvellously arched, and spangled with fragments of polished stone. The bathroom itself was a larger room, its great heights dripping with candelabra that, in the dark of those winter mornings, glowed with thousands of candles freshly lit by an invisible army of hobs. This light played on tiles and marbles and filigree embrasures; it shone across the dreams of some long-dead architect rendered material by the labors of hobs even longer gone. It's a scene, reader, which I imagine you can probably picture from your own abode. In fact, you may well scoff at the plainness of my description, for if there is one thing we humans are good at creating, it's structures that involve the near-endless labor of hands other than our own. My bath itself was a simple affair, consisting of nothing more than a deep, steaming lake of white marble. The same hands and arms that had borne me from my bed now subtly divested me of my nightclothes and laid me afloat amid islands of rose petals and scented candles. They somehow even managed to support and keep dry my splinted left leg.

All in all, it was an untroublesome way to start the day. Often enough as I drifted back toward easy sleep and the continuation of my dreams, it was barely a start at all. Inevitably, being male and of the age I was, these half-sleeps had a certain effect upon my anatomy. When I fully awoke, I would find that my member was rigid. That solitary winter, cradled by hands and steam, I discovered the means of dealing with this state.

I felt no particular shame as the signs of my morning's activities were washed away by the subtle hands that supported me. But I did feel an odd sense of curiosity. Sexual activity, even of this simplest sort, is peculiar in that way; I found myself wondering if this one thing could be done, why not others. Not, I

have to say, that I was particularly experimental, but I soon discovered that I enjoyed the way the hands which supported me touched other aspects of my body as I reached the height of my satisfaction. Soon, I was commanding the hands to do this or that. In truth, once a small moment of initial resistance had passed, they required little encouragement.

The snows came rolling down from the mountains on dense banks of cloud that seemed far too dark to be capable of containing anything so miraculously white. Slowly, my leg healed. My cast was removed at the physician's directions and replaced by a light splint. I was encouraged to bathe. And, in each of those many baths, the contortions that I demanded of my retinue of hob flesh became more elaborate. Soon, the use of my own hand to pleasure myself became redundant, and I made use of a twisting, ever-changing array of hob vaginas, hob breasts, hob mouths, and hob anuses. Then the water itself became an annoyance. By now, I was capable of walking, but I often chose instead to transport myself naked amid a writhing orgy. I tumbled through the echoing corridors and staterooms of my homestead amid a many-limbed, -backed and -buttocked fist of mingled hob and human flesh.

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The snows abated, the canals brimmed and the Great North Water roared with meltwater beneath the battlements. I was able to walk unaided and without a stick by the time my family retinue returned, but, looking down at the flotilla of craft as it moved and flashed upstream in the bright spring Sun, I saw the flutter of black flags and heard the trumpets of mourning.

My mother greeted me a day or two later in the chapel she had established within her quarters at the house. A dark grotto had been created within one of the great halls, set about with huge stones and ferns and moss to signify the entrance to the underworld. A waterfall hissed, and many diamonds were scattered across the flower-bedecked turf that had been laid across the usual tiles, in echo of tears she was supposed to have shed.

"Well," she said, looking me up and down as I entered this odd place to greet her. Dappled light played. She looked magnificent in black. "I am pleased to note that at least some of our prayers and sacrifices have been answered in this time of great loss." She gave a small sigh. Her retinue of hobs wailed and beat their bloodied torsos with flails. "Although I believe that the Gods were right to call your father when they did. In fact, I almost wish they'd done so sooner. He'd become weak and lazy long before the fever that struck him. It's up to you now, my darling, to be the man he once was."

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My father's body processed upriver in the great boat of his funerary bed through Dhiol and beyond the forests of Severland toward our family tombs in the Roof of the World once the embalmers had finished their work. We disembarked onto a carved obsidian platform that traversed the polished face of a great

glacier on a complex system of ropes. The great mountains were all around us now, and I longed for quiet to contemplate the frailty of life and the vastness of eternity—but I still couldn't help but notice odd and irrelevant things. How, for example, the teams of hobs who worked all these pulleys wore scarcely any more clothing in this frozen land than their compatriots did in the lowlands, while we humans shivered in furs.

Our passage into the final chamber that my father had spent many years constructing was lit by clever arrangements of ice and mirrors. Carved here were scenes from his life reproduced with a scale and a grandeur that already placed him amid the Gods. My mother and I stepped back from his gold sarcophagus. The priests were retreating, and the final doors were already closing off the light. We were not just leaving my father behind, but enough supplies to ensure that he did not go lacking in the afterlife. In fact, a worrying amount of our family possessions lay strewn around us. Great trees under whose shade I had once studied had been uprooted and placed within huge pots. There were whole libraries of scrolls, and paintings and statues and chairs and rugs, not to mention a veritable farmyard of animals, whose soundings and smellings the priests did their best to combat with their clamor and incense. Inevitably, amid all the wealth that my father would bring to the underworld, there were also dozens of hobs. They, though, sat in a quiet huddle. The panic, I supposed, would come later as they began to realize that the labors of others of their kind had not only sealed off all light from this tomb, but also air.

“Well,” my mother sighed as we stood outside again once all the doors had slammed shut and the splendid white of the mountains gleamed around us, “that’s half a fortune gone.”

* * * *

Although I worked hard as a merchant, I realize now that my heart was always elsewhere, although exactly *where* still remains in doubt. I certainly enjoyed the sights and the journeyings. I liked meeting people from other lands, and finding out about how they lived their lives. But the stuff of actually doing business with them, of starting at one price and working around to another after many hours or days of mock outrage and subterfuge, left me bored. These were also seasons of unexpected rains, bad harvests and broken bridges, when the rich became cautious, and the merely well off decided they weren't so well off after all.

It came as no surprise when my mother broached the subject of marriage. In every way, it was sensible for us to make alliance with another family of similar means to our own. By any standards, though, Kinbel was a great catch. A daughter of the priesthood, she was so exquisitely educated as to make my own knowledge seem half-made. Her eyes were amber. Her skin was like polished jet. She moved with the grace of a statue come to life. Above all, though, she brought fresh money and influence. In retrospect, I realize that, beneath all her layers of accomplishment, Kinbel was something of an innocent, but, in the few words and glances that she and I were allowed to exchange before the ceremonies of our wedding began, I found it hard to see beyond her outer perfection.

Being a union in which the priests were more than ever involved, the gutters that had been laid for that special purpose in the gardens of our homestead ran red with blood for days. It's a rarely noticed truth that, with the possible exception of whories, priests are alone amongst us humans in doing anything resembling real physical work. There's certainly no doubt that the removal of an entire hob skin in one untorn piece, leaving only the hands and feet remaining on the shuddering carcass like shoes and gloves, is a feat of manual skill so great that one might almost call it hobbish. Granted, though, that the labor of many other hobs was then required to smooth out and stitch this gathering mass, while still warm and dripping, into one vast sheet, which was then folded over and tented in such a way as to create a roof and floor—indeed a carpet—of hob flesh.

The drumming and the ululations reached new heights as Kinbel and I finally descended the offal-strew steps from our separate thrones so that we might complete our tryst inside the weird structure that had been created for us below. A flap, which seemed to be made entirely of eyelessly peering hob faces, was pulled back. Kinbel and I then found ourselves standing together—but, inevitably, not alone—inside a rank cave.

I remember thinking, as Kinbel was finally divested of all her raiments, that, with her upturned breasts and sculpted thighs, she really was too beautiful to be real. I even remember staring at her perfect feet in the bloodied, pinkish light, and admiring the pearly sheen of her toenails. I was naked by now myself, but I had, as so often happens, become over-absorbed in odd abstractions. When I finally tried to meet her gaze, I saw that she was looking down toward my flaccid penis. I imagine that she had been told that such small obstacles were to be expected on a day of such magnitude, and a murmur of anticipation and delight went up amid the watching priests as she stepped forward, twined her arms around me, and pressed her mouth against my own.

What was suddenly the most important part of my body still remained ignorantly unresponsive. Sex had ceased to interest me in the years since my early solitary experiments, and I found it still left me disinterested now. But Kinbel was persistent. She drew me back and down until more and more of my body was in contact with the carpet of flayed flesh, which was inlaid as if by jewels with bits of hob ear, hob nipple, and hob nose. Now, as Kinbel reached out to me and the priests cried out and clattered their bells, my member finally responded, and the necessary work was soon done.

* * * *

It was thus in a spirit of genuine optimism that I entered married life. Kinbel was, I kept telling myself, all and more than I could have hoped for. We took informal solitary walks with no more than a few dozen hobs as our retinue. We even ate in the same room. People commented on how she and I made a fine couple in the statues that were being carved as a prelude to the commencement of work on our tombs. It was hard not to enjoy her presence; how she moved, the dark, sweet sound of her voice. Although my mother was avoiding these colder climes and spending more and more of her time in the warmer south, Kinbel charmed even her.

If Kinbel and I had differences, they manifested themselves at first in the way that she would protest about statements I made against things being merely the work of the Gods. I could scarcely credit that someone so obviously intelligent could imagine that the Sun had to be persuaded to rise through a thousand daily sacrifices on the steps of the great temple at Ulan Dor, or that there was meaning to be drawn from a random spill of intestines, or the shapes of the clouds.

But in the background lay a different problem. One which struck me at first as vanishingly small. As small, in fact, as my penis which, since its efforts during our marriage ceremony, had shrunk back into flaccid reticence and stubbornly refused to perform. Our marriage bed was a vast thing, cushioned and canopied on a scale more than large enough to allow both of us to lose each other and a hundred others in untroubled sleep, but Kinbel returned to me night after night across its soft landscapes with small entreaties, then more and more extravagant seductions, all of which, although I was able to appreciate their invention and aesthetic merit, left a crucial part of me cold.

“Why is it...” she asked finally, kneeling before me in the lamplit smog of incense and chimes that she had created on that particular night, her ebony body emblazoned with curlicues of gold, “...why is it that you could do this thing so easily on the evening of our marriage, and yet never since? Would it help, for example, if I summoned your mother to watch again?”

“My mother would scarcely thank you for such an invitation, Kinbel,” I muttered, still feigning half-sleep underneath a landslide of pillows.

“Then perhaps the prayers of the priests of my father’s sphere do not reach us as easily here as they might. We could arrange for some acolytes to place themselves in the higher reaches of this bed.”

That was too much. I sat up. “Does it matter so very much? Is this a question of offspring, or pure inheritance—”

“Inheritance!” She barked a laugh so ferocious that I drew back. “Is *that* what you think this is about? Can’t a man and a woman do that for which the Gods made them in their own marriage bed out of nothing more than sheer affection and joy?”

Affection. Joy. Even spoken in her delicious voice, the human words sounded odd. “If it’s the mere act you want, Kinbel,” I suggested, “couldn’t you visit one of the houses that I believe have discreet doorways in the west of Dhiol?”

Now she was silent. Her eyes were shining. For the first time in my life, it struck me that human females are perhaps more different from the male than the small variations of our anatomy imply.

“Wouldn’t that deal with the problem, and perhaps even furnish the heir that you appear to desire?” I continued. “Believe me, Kinbel, no one would rejoice more than I if—”

“You don’t understand. All I want to know from you is, is ... what is it that I have to do to persuade you to make love?” A tear joined with the gilded swirls on Kinbel’s left breast. “I’ve tried dressing and undressing,” she muttered. “I’ve tried dancing and not dancing. Do you want me here? Or in this place instead? Even that, I really would not mind. Nor this. Whatever you want of me I would enjoy. Nothing would bother me as much as ... this nothing at all. Or would you like me to summon some other priestesses to join in our couplings as well? Or priests? Perhaps a pack of the sacred dogs? You even mentioned, I recall, a parrot that you were briefly fond of. I’m not sure how such congress might be arranged, and I’ve certainly put on and taken off enough feathers, but if you really think—”

“Enough! Enough!” By now I was covering my ears. I was shuddering like a flayed hob.

Instead of turning away from me and shifting across to her own encampment in this land of cushion and silks, Kinbel drew closer. And she did a strange thing. She placed her naked hand across my own. “There must be something of this world that you desire beyond mere ideas. There *must* be something, and I’d like to help find it, no matter what it is. We could pray. We could call for sacrifices. We could sport ourselves naked in the purest snow. For all I care—and happily I would do this—we could frolic with the rats in the sewers. After all, there was that one time at the ceremonies of our betrothal, when seemingly the task was most difficult. And yet you managed.” She gave a softer laugh. “I’m starting to talk like you, as if this were a terrible task, some difficult matter of enormous work...”

Her voice was trailing off now, and the pressure of her hand was loosening against my own. I knew that if I did not speak now, I never would. “There *is* something,” I croaked. “Or there was. Once...”

Speaking in a low voice, as the candles guttered and the chimes stilled and the last of the smoke of the incense settled like mist into the hollows of mattress and coverlet, I told Kinbel about my winter alone, and my shameful, as it seemed to me now, congress with that retinue of hobs. And all the time I spoke, the pressure of Kinbel’s hand against my own remained unchanged. Only when I had finished, and I feared that my own eyes were shining as much as hers, did she lean forward. I felt the strange press of her lips against my face.

“Have you not heard,” her voice murmured into my ear, “that no human congress is considered worthy of the name without the assistance of a few hobs in fashionable circles in Yoha and Halu? In Jasih Noish, apparently, many use them as beds. And everyone knows the stories of gangmasters, and no one ever thinks less of them for it, or even cares. It’s not, I confess, a variety of love for which...” I heard a click in her throat. “Something for which I previously felt any strong attraction. But now that you have told me I would be happy and proud to summon as many hobs as you desire. Indeed, they could be trained in such

arts. I would willingly submit—”

Something broke within me. Flapping angrily at pillows and fabrics, I pulled away from Kinbel’s hold. “I don’t want you to submit to *anything*! I don’t want you to drag some army of hobs into this dreary cage of silks. I don’t *love* hobs. I don’t even desire them—or at least not now. It was just some childhood fancy that lingered for too long in some lost part of my brain. A taste I briefly acquired and then discarded. All I care about now is knowledge. All I want to find are ways of understanding the world. Why can’t *you* understand that, Kinbel—and then, by all those ridiculous Gods that you seem to hold so dear, just leave me alone!”

* * * *

The next morning, and after a night undisturbed by further entreaties, I woke up to find that I had slept alone. Kinbel had left word at my breakfast table that she would reside for the time being in her father’s temple-house in Dhiol. I felt a twinge of guilty delight as I read the papyrus. Without Kinbel, and with my father dead, and my mother gone to the warmer south, and but for the presence of a few gangmasters, I finally had my homestead entirely to myself. Walking the battlements in the breezy Sunshine, I decided that seeing to the maintenance of this place would be the task to which I would apply myself from now on.

It’s not that I ceased being a merchant, but there was something about the needs of my homestead that inspired me in a way that the mere business of buying and selling had never done on its own. I found bargaining was far more to my liking if, instead of taking money and promises of goods, I asked for labor and skills, or even plain advice. Other businessmen were surprisingly happy to lend me their roofing or drainage hobs once they had overcome their incredulity that this was something I was genuinely prepared to accept. It didn’t take long for me to enhance my already growing reputation for eccentricity as I drew deals based on recovered slates and sacks of mortar. Let people stare, I thought. Let them say that I have lost all sense. Let them call me a fool and—yes, even then—a lover of hobs.

I believe that particular phrase came from several sources. It probably began with my endless questioning of gangmasters. Word may also have seeped out from my bedtime confession to Kinbel. Not, I remain certain, that Kinbel herself would have deliberately spread such a slur, but she was probably innocent enough to imagine that the confessional with a priest was sacrosanct, even if that priest happened to be her father. In any case, *hob lover* is a common enough term of abuse in some lands. I didn’t care—or at least not so very much.

My gangmasters were required to have daily meetings. There, we discussed not just the quickest and easiest ways of getting their individual duties performed, but how we all might benefit the smooth running of the homestead. When the owners of other homesteads were complaining about the poor summers and the vicious winters, I was doing better than ever. I had no time now for the fripperies of planting and ornamentation that my mother had encouraged. Even within the house itself, I was more than happy to

see some of the staterooms being used for storage or as hob workshops rather than being left waiting for the grand dances and ceremonies that I had no desire to hold. I think I convinced a few doubters, although those who came to visit generally returned to Dhiol with stories of the increasing roughness of my dwelling, and the Godless way in which I went about my work. That, and my apparent kindness to all creatures of my homestead, which of course included hobs. It seemed self-evident to me that persuasion and reward worked better than punishment, and that it was better to keep and cherish something rather than to let it die of neglect or sacrifice. But stories began to circulate as a result, although most of them were false. Threats were made. The priests of Dhiol grew restless. But I was content. Now that I had my homestead in a state of productivity and order that exceeded all of my neighbors', I was free to investigate all the many things which continued to puzzle me about this world.

I discovered that domestic pigs and the wild boars of the forest can be mated, and that they produce an offspring that has good, strongly flavored meat, and can be left to forage out of doors. I learned that milk, if turned over in a machine of my own design, separates into different, and entirely useful, parts. I also found out that most of my hob gangmasters, my old educator Karik included, had a poor knowledge of the more detailed aspects of hob signing, and used the stick or the whip too easily when they failed to get things properly done.

I set out to learn more about communicating directly with the hobs. There was a quietness and a sense of withdrawing as, crouched inside the low walls of their crude and stinking dwellings, and often without even the company of a gangmaster, I watched and prodded and questioned and cajoled. Hobs are generally uncomfortable in human presence, and they grew all the more so when they realized I had grown capable of telling individuals apart merely from their facial features, and then that I had worked out the grunts and gestures of some of their names. Disputes arose. I believe deaths occurred. The world of hobs is, in many ways, as savage as our own. They perform upon themselves the common mutilations that we require, choose nominations for sacrifice, and are fierce in securing what we humans would consider to be laughably small distinctions in status, although I was unable to find any proof of the common slur that hob mothers routinely eat their own young.

But I was pleased by what I learned. Knowing hobbish to an extent that now made my gangmasters redundant, I came to understand hobs' tribal rivalries and separations, and set about issuing my own instructions to the lead hob of each freshly organized gang. I was certain that the drains were being cut more efficiently, and fields better hoed, as a result. I developed ever greater plans. Even as the forests of Severland died and produce shrank in the markets of Dhiol, I was convinced that every homestead in this northerly land could remain fertile and productive if only it were better run.

I was stripped to the waist in a ditch with some hobs one morning and demonstrating how they should install some new ceramic pipework when I looked up and saw a figure outlined against the grey sky above. So unused was I to any other kind of company that I'd grunted and signed in hobbish before I realized that the figure was human, and female, and then that it was my wife.

* * * *

Kinbel smiled away my apologies as I climbed out. After all, she was plainly dressed, and had come alone without warning, or retinue.

“I’ve been hearing so many tales. I thought it was time that I found out.” She looked around her. The fields that we had once thought might belong to both of us shone with new growth. “And I can see that you’re doing well.”

“I think I am.” Signaling for a towel from the gang of hobs, I wiped myself down. “I believe that this place will one day be seen as a way forward.”

Kinbel chuckled. The sound had lost none of its beauty. Neither had she, plainly dressed, unadorned and alone though she was. “All I hear in Dhiol is that you live with the hobs, and that you treat the Gods as if they do not exist.”

I shrugged. We were standing on a muddy pathway. The whole aspect of the landscape that surrounded us had lost the posturing grandeur that it had once possessed, but it seemed to me to be yet more beautiful in its simplicity and efficiency. All the more so now that Kinbel was here.

“This place.” She turned around, and I saw the sky and the fields mirrored in her eyes. “It’s nothing like I imagined. Yet I think that you are wrong to tell yourself this is not the work of the Gods. The Gods work through people as well, you know. I imagine that they even work through simple hobs. But tell me, that structure over there...?”

I was delighted by her interest. No longer the innocent, she had grown and changed. She was particularly amused when I described how merchants squabbled over a single crumb of gold, then yielded at the suggestion that they give me a drainage screw that, with a few repairs, was worth far more.

“You must see us as wasteful,” she said as I showed her the beasts of the stable, and the stinking lake of effluent that would feed next year’s fields.

“Us?”

“I mean people. Humans.”

A silence fell between us as we walked on.

“Your mother sends her regards,” she told me as she stood at the homestead gates. It was starting to rain. “She wants you to be reassured that many sacrifices have been made in the most holy of sites on your behalf.”

“You don’t still think that your Gods are so stupid and angry as to be appeased by hob blood, do you, Kinbel?”

Kinbel looked at me in that dauntingly composed way she had. “What you believe does not alter the punishment the Gods are inflicting upon our world.”

There was no doubt, by now, that our summers were shortening and our winters were growing more harsh. The white blaze of the Roof of the World had spread, and the growth of its glaciers threatened to destroy many family tombs. Even in the sacred homelands in the south to which my mother had retreated, the nights were apparently showing teeth of frost, and the inundations of the God River threatened the temples of Ulan Dor. The processes of my agricultural research were long-winded and often frustrating, but I was certain that my discoveries would soon be crucial. I tried to tell her more, but she held up a hand to make me stop.

“What you’ve done here, and what you are doing is—well, it’s everything you say. But there are things you don’t understand. People in Dhiol are saying bad things about you—”

“They’ve been doing so for years.” I gave a dismissive wave even as I felt a flush come into my cheeks.

“That may be so, but it has gone far above mere personal abuse. You probably know better than anyone that times are hard. But when times are hard, people look around for something to blame. Or, better still, someone.”

“No one can be so stupid as to hold me responsible for the weather!”

I still expected her to laugh and shake her head, but she looked at me gravely, and nodded. “Exactly so. It is even spoken of amongst us priests.”

“Can’t you do anything about it?”

“Can’t *you*?”

“What?”

“If you acknowledged the Gods a little, and talked less to your hobs, that might be a start. But you must do so quickly. Otherwise, I fear that it will be too late.”

“And so?”

“Then, if you do not listen, all that you have done and stand for will go to waste.”

I blustered in reply, shouting that she was being ridiculous, that it was the fault of her kind—her and all the others—but already she was turning, walking off through the rain.

They came on a winter’s night. By then, I had long been expecting them. I had even considered reinstating my homestead into the fortress it had once been, but its walls were enfeebled despite the fine cliff-face it presented to the river, and the waste of such an enterprise appalled me even more than the prospect of what was to come.

It was an impressive sight that I looked down on from the battlements along which I had once debated the number of petals in a flower and the shining of the stars. This was certainly no random mob. It was a river of light, and of chanting, and of bells. Some of the priests rode on elephants. Others were transported by oxen on glinting wagons of sapphire and gold. The landowners came with their gangmasters, and the merchants with their suppliers and storeholders, and all around them dripped flaming sconces, and everywhere there was a humming and a clashing of gongs. The crowd was huge, and it was organized in a way that was reminiscent of the great southern ceremonies which are said to sustain the workings of the Sun, the God River and the Moon. And, like any other human crowd, it consisted mostly of hobs. They steered and goaded the elephants and oxen, and scooped up the ordure left behind. They carried huge braziers, which shone like giant coals, to keep the procession warm. They bore the tall poles and vast banners that would provide shade or shelter should there be rain or snow or Sun. They carried many of the lazier and fatter members of the general population in sedan chairs, or rolled and writhed to support their bodies in muscled engines of livery and tattoo. And it seemed to me, as the chants and the voices rose up to me, that even the accusations of my being a godless renegade, a devil-worshiper, a non-human, a lover of hobs, came mostly in the distinctive rhythm and grunt of the voices of hobs themselves.

I looked at my small gang of hobs that stood behind me in the flickering light that was thrown up through the chill darkness. They kept the same distance from me they always kept, as if still awaiting orders. They still behaved, the thought struck me, like any other retinue, even my mother's, although they were somewhat more roughly clothed. But I could tell them apart well enough to understand that they felt emotions almost as a human might, and that they were far more afraid than I was. I had already relinquished the rest of my establishment of hobs, either through selling them in markets distant from my tainted reputation in Dhiol, or by simply releasing them, and signing them to ford the river and head north, where I believed they stood a better chance of surviving than we humans did in this increasingly hostile world.

What do you want of us now? The lead hob, who, in a fit of nostalgia, I had chosen to call Gog Two, signed to me, and I looked back at him, and for the first time in my recollection, he met my gaze without turning away. He was a sturdy creature, beetle-browed and heavy-set, with particularly large and agile hands. How he disciplined his colleagues was in many ways harsher than any gangmaster, but it was always directed toward getting the job done. I thought of him as fair-minded, and I liked to imagine he thought of me in a similar way.

Nothing. I made the simple signal of reply that any human might make when they have no immediate need of their hobs. But instead of simply remaining where they were and waiting for their next command, he and the rest turned from me and began to walk away, moving with that characteristic gait that hobs have. Then, without any obvious exchange of grunt or signal, they broke into a run.

I watched them vanish along the battlements, and down the steps, scurrying out of sight across the darkness of the homestead's muddied fields that had once been a delicate checkerboard of gardens, heading toward the gates I had left open on the far side. Then I turned back toward the procession, which now lapped in a glittering tide beneath my homestead's walls. I clambered up onto the lip of the battlements. I raised my arms, and felt stillness shiver out beneath me as the chanting ceased, and with it the rhythm of bells, as light trembled on ten thousand upturned faces. I almost threw myself down at that moment into the fine, living carpet of both human and hob that lay spread beneath me; perhaps that was even what was expected. But I drew back, even though I often wish that I had leapt.

* * * *

After the initial beatings and cursings when I was blindfolded and chained and taken into Dhiol, I was treated well enough. I was imprisoned in rooms in a high tower of the Temples of the Moon, which looked down on the many courtyards, balconied gardens, ziggurats, and raised terraces where the priests regularly performed their exulted work. Beyond that, glowering through clouds or blazing white in the light of the Sun or the Moon, lay the ever-mightier peaks of the Roof of the World. In many ways, my lodgings reminded me of the tower where I had dwelt as a child. If anything, the furnishings and decorations were more sumptuous, although, by priestly standards, they probably seemed rough.

For many Moons, I was left to fend for myself. My only visitors were a daily attendance of hobs, who were not only mute and castrated, but rendered deaf and sightless as well. These strange, sad creatures moved by touch alone, although they seemed able to sense my presence by what I eventually decided was body heat, and skirted around me with the slow caution of a chameleon stalking its prey along a branch. When I tried touching their scarred and naked bodies, they scuttled back with alarming speed across the walls and floors. But they left me food and water, and a few buckets and crude implements that, once I had finished using them, they took away again. After my initial nightmares about the ingenuity of the tortures that the priests, of all people, were capable of devising, I decided that this was to be my punishment: to have to do the things which no self-respecting human would ever expect to have to do unaided and alone.

If that was the punishment that had been intended, it was a failure. I remained fascinated by life's processes, even those that ended up in a bucket. I soon realized, for example, that a huge source of extra fertility went to waste by our peevish refusal to feed the land with human manure. And I found comfort in the simple preparation of food. Peeling an apple or a raw carrot can be an eminently enjoyable task, and the dissection of a slab of meat always carried the promise that I might find out something new about the structure of animal musculature. And I enjoyed shaving as well, the careful craft of steering a soaped blade across my jaw, which was something I had never thought to do myself.

Outside the window, and despite the glories of the architecture, the scene was less elevating. These priests of the Moon seemed to have little else to do with their time other than perform sacrifices. As the silver sphere that they worshipped processed and re-processed across the sky in its changing quadrants, I heard the cries and screams of many of my own hobs. They soon even reduced the resourceful and resilient Gog Two to a whimpering mess of bared flesh and bone. I supposed it was inevitable that the hobs that I had released into the wild would soon be caught. After all, the only life they had ever known was one of servitude and captivity. But it struck me as perverse that the priests should also track down, and then presumably re-purchase, the many other hundreds of hobs that I had legitimately sold. No doubt, they thought it was a fine spectacle, to kill the beasts that I had supposedly loved on specially raised platforms within my earshot and sight, and by methods that were even more ingenious than I had feared, and which were often almost impossibly slow.

Maybe they hoped to drive me to madness, although the chants I heard from beyond the temple's outer walls credited me with being mad already, and more evil than the foulest enemies of the Gods. But if there was one thing that my life, like the life of any other well-placed human, had prepared me for, it was the spectacle of hob sacrifice. Even though I understood the pleading gestures and moans in ways of which few other humans are capable, and was disgusted by the agony and the waste, I remained somehow unmoved.

If there truly was a pain that I was put through during my captivity, it was the perverse one of not caring and hurting enough. In my darkest times, I even began to wonder if people were right, and that I really was different—some kind of monster who lacked some crucial spark or spirit, or even soul.

The seasons came and went with or without the aid of the priests, and grew increasingly cold. I took special delight in the return of a flock of swallows that I knew journeyed far downriver each winter to seek the better climes of the lands beyond Ulan Dor. They came to nest above my windows, and I watched the superb flight of the parents as they brought beakfuls of insects to feed their squeaking young.

It was on such a morning as I was staring from my window—for once, no sacrifices were going on, for which blessing I truly praised the Gods—and pleasantly lost in thought as I considered the play of the seasons and the way in which all life seemed to respond, that I heard an unusual noise: the turn of a key in my outer door. Not that my mute lizard hobs didn't still visit me, but their pattern was strict, and they only came at night. Even more extraordinary, then, was the unmistakable sound of human footsteps, and of a human voice.

“Are you in here? Are you alive?”

I found myself frozen despite the relatively warm light in which I sat. It wasn't just that it was Kinbel's voice; it was that it was anyone's at all.

She ducked beneath the low stone arch. She was wearing a plain, hooded cape. “I'd imagined somewhere far worse than this....”

It had been so long a time since I had spoken to anyone that I opened and closed my mouth like a frog.

“See, I've brought you gifts.” She put down a bag and pulled back her hood and gave a laugh, which sounded almost like the Kinbel of old. But not quite; she wasn't any less beautiful, but she had changed. Her face was sharper, and so was her gaze. She still moved with grace, but it was a grace that reminded me of the swallows, or even of my mute hobs. It had that edge of wariness, and of caution, which all creatures that are preyed upon possess. “I wondered if you could use a mirror, although I thought twice about bringing one. But you look well enough. I should have brought scissors, though.” She smiled. “Your hair isn't quite the current fashion.”

“Here, here...” My own voice sounded even odder than hers as, courteous as a hob, I brushed down my only chair and turned it around. “There must be a lot of stairs to climb to get up here.”

“Indeed there are.” She sat down. Her hair had streaks in it, silver amid the dark. Fine lines drew around her eyes as she squinted against the window's light. “What's that sound?”

“That? Those are my birds.” I felt my mouth shape a smile. “Not that I own them, of course. Or anything now. They come and go with the seasons, and return to exactly the same spot. They help keep me occupied.”

“Birds—the whole way you look at things. You haven’t changed so very much.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no.” She shook her head. “I meant that as a compliment.”

It was strange to talk to a human again. I felt my face flush.

Kinbel told me about the outer world. Things were as bad as I imagined, but life went on. My homestead had been possessed by the priests of her father’s own sphere, and then sold on at what, I pleased to note, was a considerable price, even if the priests had kept it all. The new owners imagined that they would be able to maintain the place as profitably as I had done, and I was even more pleased to learn that they had failed. My homestead was deserted now, apparently. So were many others. People were heading south, but, unlike my birds, they weren’t returning.

“Your mother does well, or so the occasional communications that cross the storms in the Bounded Ocean assure me. She has remarried, of course. You didn’t know? Stupid of me—how could you ... The way she put it, some kind of new alliance was essential because you have dragged the family name so low. She believes that she performs an important task in parading in pomp along the golden avenues of Thris. The way I hear it from my other contacts, she seems to be in so many places at once that people speculate that she employs two or three fake retainues, who process with all the usual scents and bells and awnings and rose petals by which she characterizes herself. But without her at the center, of course.”

“That hardly seems to matter.”

“No. For her, perhaps it does not.”

“You and I, Kinbel—are we still married? I mean, if we are, and if it causes you embarrassment—I mean, more than embarrassment...”

Kinbel looked at me. She still had that way of doing so. “Yes, we are married. Or at least as married as we ever were. Which isn’t saying so very much. I still even get inquiries from the stonemasons who are storing the statues of ourselves we once had made. They ask if there isn’t more work we should be doing if we are to gain the afterlife we deserve.”

“Perhaps we’ll get that anyway.”

“Yes. Perhaps.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

“What? Being married but having no husband? Or not possessing a tomb? Or lacking a name I can safely proclaim—or a homestead I can call my own?”

I’d forgotten about those flares of anger; I’d forgotten how strange and unpredictable people can be. But the glare in her eyes subsided almost as quickly as it had come. In that, at least, she hadn’t changed.

“No. We remain married. No one else would have me now even if I were not. In fact, I think it suits my priesthood to have me thus. Not that I’ve been asked to disown you. But I know that I will.”

I felt a chill pass over me. “What do you mean?”

“Oh. I see. You imagined that this was the end of things—that you would be kept up here until you expired? I’m sorry, but that’s never been the plan. There will be a ... I think the word they use is ‘trial.’ A special hall is being built for the purpose. I believe you can probably see it from that window. Unlike the rest of us humans, you will be called to judgement in this life rather than the next.”

“And punished?”

Her look melted. She rose from her chair. I believe she would have moved toward me, perhaps even embraced me, had I not shrunk back. “I should never have said...”

“No, no. It’s important that I understand. And I had wondered what that huge new building that all those thousands of hobs are clambering to construct was, although I’d never have been arrogant enough to

imagine it had anything to do with me.”

“Oh, you’re famous.” She sat back down again. All the old distance between us had returned. “The priests wish to make you so.”

Kinbel went soon after, having left the contents of her bag. There was a mirror, as she had promised—although it was removed that evening by the creeping hobs, and the knives that I was given thereafter to prepare my food and shave myself were so blunt as to be useless; it had never occurred to me before that I was being watched. Kinbel also gave me spices for cooking, which I was happy to experiment with. She had even obtained some scrolls that, although they were couched in the ridiculous language of the priests, recorded several useful aspects of natural science. But what pleased me most were the blank scraps of papyrus and small cake of ink; both that she should think of bringing such a gift, and that I was finally free to write.

* * * *

Now, at last, I could put my ideas down.

Above all, I kept thinking of those arrow-tailed birds. The priests, I discovered in one of the scrolls Kinbel had left me, took their coming to these northerly lands as an augury, and had recorded their precise numbers and the Moon of their arrival for thousands of years. There were far less now, and I wondered as I watched the swallows swoop among the spires at the many that must die during each long journey.

Here my heart started racing. Those creatures that flew and thrived the best, the thought rushed over me, would survive and produce offspring, while those that didn’t would not. I’d be lying if I said that the rest came easily. But, looking back, I can see that it was but a small leap to consider that not only a change in habit might produce better chances of survival, but also that the types of alterations which I had deliberately been engendering in my homestead’s crops and livestock would surely occur naturally as well.

After her first visit, Kinbel came to see me with every Moon. She brought news of the outside world, although she often seemed almost as distant from such goings-on as I felt myself. Far more importantly, she brought fresh writing materials. Soon, as well, she arrived with bundles of scrolls on the specific subjects I’d started to request. It would never have occurred to me to look for information about the natural world within sacred texts, but here was everything I could ever need recorded over aeons in pedantic priestly detail. I even tried to tell Kinbel about my vision, in which every type of beast and tree and plant and insect had changed and developed over aeons in response to the demands of its surroundings. And she appeared to listen, and sometimes even to understand.

“And if the pig and the boar are related,” she once said, “if a tree and a bush are sisters, if the fish that inhabit the oceans are remote cousins of those in our rivers, what does that make us?”

“Of course, of course. That is why I need to find out more! That taxation scroll on the categorization of different crops from the first dynasty you found for me was excellent, but perhaps there’s something similar about livestock, or even fruit...?”

Outside, through the freezing mists, the great hall of my trial gathered its many roofs and domes, but it seemed vague, insubstantial compared to my theories and thoughts. I found it hard to believe that Kinbel’s world, with all the gossip and ceremonies and money of which she talked, was real.

Her eyes were reddened. She sniffed. She looked weary and drawn. “I’m sorry. I have some small malaise that our priests cannot cure. Everyone seems to be possessed by it. Perhaps it’s this cold summer. I do sometimes wonder if we humans were ever meant to live under such grey skies, and this far north. Apparently, the hobs get it as well, and have long done so, yet they thrive well enough. And now they seem to have given it to us. Shortly, many will be sacrificed as a result.”

“Why? I thought everything was supposed to be my fault?”

She looked at me in that bitter way she sometimes had. “You mustn’t let the grandeur of that building outside fool you.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I can imagine how difficult life is for you.”

“No.” She was still staring at me. “You probably cannot. But I’ve almost grown used to that. It’s the way you are, and I don’t think that’s your fault. You see things, but you don’t feel them. With you, that’s almost an asset. But ... those early difficulties we had in our marriage—I’ve learned since that they’re not so unusual. And I have a theory of my own. A small one compared to yours, admittedly, but still ... If we humans were brought up by our parents in the way that most other living creatures are—if we were suckled by them and touched by them, and perhaps cooed over and tickled as well. If we were allowed to laugh and cry and squirm and perhaps even feel love in the arms of another human instead of the arms of some trained anonymous hob ... well...” Suddenly, she appeared awkward. Her gaze traveled the floor. “I wonder if we might not all be better at being closer. I did tell you it was a small theory....”

I was flustered. I guessed that she was right, but I didn’t know how to respond.

“Look at you now,” she said, although still without looking up. “Lost for words as soon as I mention human closeness. I suppose you’d call that evidence, wouldn’t you?”

With a sweep of her cloak, and a sneeze, she left.

* * * *

By some process I longed to understand but didn’t, Kinbel passed her malaise on to me. I coughed and sneezed for a while and thought it was nothing. Then I started to shiver. I crawled to my bed. The light of unnumbered days came and went at my window as I sweated and ached.

I had some new kind of fever, and that fever brought visions. I believed that I was no longer in my cell. I believed I was flying even higher and faster than my beloved fork-tailed birds. I saw everything. I saw the human cities as they really were—not just the great buildings and squares, but also the desolate sprawls of hob dwellings which surrounded them. I saw the endless ranges of white mountains that seemed to march in every direction from what I now realized was the tiny enclave of our human world. I saw the spreading glaciers, and the plains and savannahs, and the pull and flow of the great God River, and all the teeming life of the great tropic forests, and the storm-flecked grey and blue oceans that stretched even further than the wildest mariner’s tale. I saw that our earth is vast, and I saw that time is even vaster, and that change is irrepressible and endless under the blaze of the ever-turning Moon and Sun. I saw, and understood, everything as I tossed and turned in my fevered shroud.

I awoke ringingly clear-headed to the sound of movement. I imagined at first that another quick day was passing and that it was the noise of the shadows dragging themselves about. Then I thought that it was merely my lizard hobs creeping about their usual duties. But the sound didn’t fit that pattern, either. These were unmistakably human footsteps, and I felt a small flush of joy to know that Kinbel had returned. But the footsteps were many, and the air and light in my room seemed to be muffled by a presence that I realized could not be hers alone.

I opened my eyes.

Gorgeous in their raiment and retinues, wreathed in incense, fluttering with fans and bells, a horde of priests stood around me, and I knew that the time of my trial had come.

* * * *

The new halls loomed even grander than I’d imagined as I stumbled across the frosted paving and

experienced the odd sensation of being beneath open skies. The rustle and murmur of a huge auditorium quietened as I was drawn inside. Thousands of faces from all the lands of humanity stared in my direction as I was led up and up a winding stairway to the high podium where I was seated on a kind of caged throne.

The first Moon of the proceedings was taken up in the initial bidding prayers and sacrifices. So was most of the next. Fires had been set in many places to keep the halls warm, and the whinnies of the suffering hobs and the stench of their offal mingled with wafts of undrawn smoke. Meanwhile, I had more than enough opportunity to consider the vast labor and invention that had been poured into the construction of this edifice, and to study the nature and reactions of the many humans who had gathered here: all the priests and the guards and merchants and mariners and other representatives who hoped to be persuaded that I was single-handedly responsible for every woe of the world, and, more importantly, be entertained. Even I shared something like their sense of anticipation; the thrilling idea that justice might be meted out in this world instead of some subsequent one appealed, although I was already certain that the justice would be false.

Kinbel was there, of course. She had a special podium far opposite across the great bowl of the main auditorium. She was not alone there, but sat at the pinnacle of a whole swarm of other priestesses who, according to the current stage of the proceedings, sang or danced or silently mimed their shock or concern. Many eyes other than mine were drawn to her, and the light and the fires and even the smoke conspired to make her presence glow. She seemed less like the woman I remembered than some Goddess made flesh.

Inevitably, for she was never one to miss out on a big social occasion, my mother attended as well. I soon recognized the characteristic pomp of her retinue down amid some of the more expensive balconies, where for every one human there was a swarmingly decorative mass of perhaps a hundred liveried hobs. I sometimes thought I even caught glimpses of something small and withered and possibly human inside all that glory, although I was never sure.

I awaited the words of accusation with interest, yet was amazed at their length and invention when they finally came. I had supposedly done so many things that I felt almost flattered. All those foul desecrations, the terrible deeds, when I'd imagined that the worst that could be thrown at me was an unnecessary love of nature, and of hobs. It went on and on. Despite the glory of the occasion, I began to feel bored, and cold. I started to wish the hours away, and to miss my happy days alone in my cell, and the company of my fork-tailed birds, who had fled again to escape a winter so savage that I wondered if, this time, they would ever return. Even though I studied her endlessly day after day from across the distance of this smoggy, dripping, gilded hall, I missed Kinbel's visits, as well.

Moon by slow Moon, the proceedings continued. The crowds shuffled and whispered, then became noisy with sneezes and coughs as they were possessed by the same malaise that had afflicted Kinbel and myself. People came and went. Some didn't return. This winter city, set beside a frozen river within a great, ice-bound bowl, was cut off from the world, and struggled to cope with the inundation of representatives that my trial had caused. Looking down at all the faces, I studied humans as I had never

studied them before. I saw the distinctions in attire and matters of custom that people from different regions affected. And I noticed, as well, the surprising variations in the color of their skin. Although Kinbel's ebony beauty might be rightly prized, I was struck by how many had a far lighter tint—even paler than my own, and my mother's. I was also struck by how, although the paleness of hob skin is cherished because of the fine contrast it makes with the red of blood, many, even at this high gathering, were surprisingly dark.

My eyes travelled. My mind wandered. High up though I was in my throne of imprisonment, there was a mechanism that seemed capable of raising it higher still. It ascended beyond the dome of the main hall, and long left me puzzled until one evening when I had returned to my cell. Winter was waning, and the Sun lingered over the rim of the mountains long enough for me to be able to gaze across the snowbound city of Dhiol. I saw that on the outside of the main dome of the halls of my trial had been constructed some ultimate spire that rose high above every other spire and tower in the entire city, and that on top of that spire was a platform, and on that platform glinted an extraordinary machine. I'd seen such devices used to punish hobs, but this was far more extravagant. Poised and exquisite as some huge golden insect, the machine of my planned excruciation flashed its many pincers and blades in the last of the evening Sun.

* * * *

Spring attempted to arrive in Dhiol. Some of the snow and ice melted, and much did not. The priests who traversed with me to and from my cell now chatted freely amongst themselves, and I learned of the frozen bodies of deceased representatives that had been stored in the catacombs. I even heard it said that the great glaciers of the Roof of the World were expanding so mightily that the great tombs and their wrecked contents would soon be pushed into the streets of Dhiol.

Although I'd learned the language of the priests through the scrolls Kinbel had brought me, I'd long reached the point where all the prayer and debate of my trial passed me by. So it came as a surprise when it was suddenly announced that the vote on my verdict would commence the following day, and that I would be given a chance to speak beforehand. My heart gave a small kick. That night, I barely slept.

* * * *

The priests came with the dawn. I was led through the morning mud to my usual spot high above the vast hall. But today, I was released from my shackles to stand within the cage of my throne, and the crowd I looked down on seemed almost as big and expectant as it had been at the start of my trial. I thanked the Gods for this extraordinary chance.

I'm not sure how clearly I explained things, and there were times when many of my audience seemed lost or confused. After all, they'd come today expecting either a denial or a confession. What they received

instead was a different way of understanding the world.

Living creatures, I began, amid gasps that subsided into incredulous silence, are not the work of the Gods. They come about through natural laws. Everything that lives, lives to survive long enough to reproduce, and those that thrive will have more offspring than those that do not. And each living thing is different. Each plant is as different in its own small way as one human is from another; it's just that, as we are not plants, we are not so good at telling them apart. (At that moment, there was laughter, and I knew that my audience was not yet lost.) But these small differences can be crucial—a fleeter foot, a broader wing, a stronger scent from a blossom—and they can combine and multiply over many generations to form a creature which is no longer the same as its ancestors. As different, indeed, as one type of flower is from another, or all the varied species of fish or bat. (There were murmuring nods at this suggestion; I think I had already taken people further than they realized).

This process of change and development, I told them, is slow but extraordinarily powerful. It explains not only the different plumages of different birds, but why there are birds at all. (A few of the murmurs here sounded hostile, but they were shushed by others who remained interested to hear what else I had to say.) For the earth is almost as old as the Gods themselves (I hadn't intended to put that sop in, but it seemed to help) and it has been changed through frost and fire and inundation and flood. If living things were not able to adapt, nothing would have survived at all.

I paused for a moment there. I felt light-headed and breathless. I'd said much of what I'd wanted to say, yet people were still nodding, and looking up at me as if half-persuaded by what I'd said. Even many of the priests seemed content. Perhaps they'd feared I'd accuse them of all the vengery and corruption of which they were most probably guilty, but instead I'd produced this odd lecture. But I could see as I took my breath that some representatives had already lost track of the concept I'd set before them, while others, perhaps the quicker ones, were growing puzzled or restless. A few were even starting to look angry. The noise below me increased. But the designers of these halls had paid great attention to how well an individual voice might carry, and my position in my caged throne was unassailable. Even as people began to scream and block their ears, my words still carried.

It follows, I explained, that all living things must stem from one primitive organism, and life in all its specialization and variety has developed in simple response to the demands of competition and survival through the mechanism of selection and random change. Thus the pig and the boar are related (I glanced over at Kinbel; I even think that she nodded, for I was using her words) and the tree is cousin to the bush. The evidence is written everywhere in the way in which different animals share similar but differently used organs. You can see it in the bones of a leg, the arrangements of a flower....

I think I could have stopped there. In many ways, there was little more to be said. The few in my audience who were able to grasp my theory had already grasped it. As for the rest—they had come to these halls for spectacle and superstition, and still cared for nothing else. So perhaps it was a kind of malice that made me then go on, or it might even have been Kinbel herself. As I looked across at her once more through all the light and fume, I remembered how quickly and elegantly she had grasped my meaning, and seen that it applied not only to trees and fishes and birds.

We humans, I told the gathering, are as much a product of chance and survival as any other species on this earth. Indeed (and now I did have to shout, for the gasps were growing to a roar) the evidence of our origins abounds in the natural world. Look at the monkeys and the great apes of the jungle. Look, above all, at our closest of relatives—the hob. So closely are we related, in fact, that we can mate and interbreed, just as the horse can with the donkey, and the lion with the tiger, and (and here the uproar grew even wilder) different breeds of dog. Look at the color of your own skin, and the features of your face, and then at the flesh of your retinue....

For some time, I had been aware of activity below me. Now, the last of my proclamation was muffled by an ungainly scuffle as my guardian priests scurried up the final steps and then heavy bodies fell across my own.

* * * *

It was almost nightfall by the time I was returned to my cell. The Sun glittered on the arms and spindles of the terrible machine on Dhiol's topmost spire, then sank. I, too, slumped down in the gloom. All sense of elation was gone. Then I heard a sound just outside my window; a sound that was at once so strange and yet familiar that I felt an odd displacement of time. I was back in the days before my trial; free to explore my thoughts and the evidence of the scrolls Kinbel brought me—without, it now seemed, a care in the world. But the sound was unmistakable. A few swallows had made their habitual journey to this unwelcoming northern clime. I smiled, although I knew that their chances of raising another batch of chicks in this savage land were probably as doomed as my life was.

I was still sitting and wondering what I had accomplished when the lizard hobs began to come and go about their nightly tasks. This would be their last night. It was hard to imagine that the process of my excruciation would be delayed. As always, I ignored the hobs as they shifted and stirred. Then one of their number came closer than I was accustomed, and removed the hood that had covered its head, and straightened up. I was telling myself that I had never seen a hob so tall, or so fine-looking, or with skin so dark, before I realized who it was.

“They told me I couldn't see you,” Kinbel said.

I was so happily astonished that I almost laughed, but her face remained stern.

“You know what will happen tomorrow?” she asked.

“Some kind of judgment will be announced. And then I suppose I will be slowly killed on that machine...” All sense of happiness and surprise drained from me. “I just hope it isn’t as awful as I imagine.”

“There’s something else first. Why else do you think they’ve made me sit in those halls for all these interminable Moons? You’ve seen the way the delegates stare at me, and how my fellow priests chant and respond. I’m your wife, and they still want to hear about all the terrible things you did to me ... Things...” She made a gesture. “Even worse than they can imagine, although I can’t believe that that amounts to very much.”

“If you’re called to denounce me and make up stories, Kinbel, then you should do so.”

“Even if that means I have to lie?”

“Things are so bad for me now, there’s little you can do to make them worse.”

“But it wouldn’t be true. And I’m standing witness before our—or at least *my*—Gods.”

“You don’t still accept all that nonsense?”

“If you mean that the Sun will stop in his movement across the skies if the ziggurats of Thris do not run red each day with fresh hob blood—no, I do not. I think the Gods are far less eager for hob slaughter than most of the priestly spheres imagine. I’m tired of its stench. Even as a child, I used to hate the way my father would come home each evening with his vestments stained—like, I would say, a butcher’s apron, although no self-respecting human butcher ever gets that close to the work his hobs do for him. I’m sick of slaughter. But, yes, I do still believe that there is more to this world than what we experience with our senses. That life’s not just the product of struggle and vicious chance—”

“That’s never what I meant.”

“Perhaps it isn’t. But this is hardly the time to debate niceties. I’ve watched over you these long Moons. I’ve listened to you. I sometimes think I could almost say I’ve known you, and that I’ve seen you for what you are, which is a good man. I’m a priestess and I know what that machine out there will do to you, and I don’t believe you’ve done anything to deserve such agonies, nor that it’s what the Gods would want of us—if, that is, the Gods want anything at all. Perhaps this world is being ruined by a coming age of ice, and perhaps we all are being punished, but if there has to be a sacrifice, let it not be you. Let it be someone else. Now...”

Kinbel unbundled something from around her waist. It was a grey livery much like the hobs were wearing, and her own.

“...put this on.”

“How did you manage all of this? How did you persuade—”

She gave a laugh; the sound was half-happy, half-sad. “Even now, you have nothing but questions! You can’t accept anything without trying to have it explained.... I think, may the Gods help me, that’s what I most hate and admire about you, you wilful, stupid man. But, since you ask, do you seriously imagine that you’re the only human who has ever taken an interest in the welfare of hobs? And, in all your schemes and thoughts, did it never occur to you to find a way of communicating with these creatures who have cared for you for so long and so kindly in this cell?”

Kinbel was surrounded by them now. The mute grey creatures shifted about her in the dim light like shadows thrown from the edges of her robe. Their movement reminded me of the priestesses who had surrounded Kinbel during my trial, but the sense of true reverence and worship was much more strong.

“If you’d only taken the time,” she said, “to learn to communicate with your hobs about something other than ditches and crops, you might have learned far more. Every living creature has its own story, and my friends here have been through such times and sufferings as you would not believe, even were you to ascend into that terrible machine tomorrow. All you ever had to do was to reach out with an open heart...”

I watched as her fine dark fingers traced shapes in the pale flowers of the hobs’ open palms, and then how the fingers of the hobs dipped into hers. It was a dance of touch and shade, a mingling of different lives, and the strange thought came upon me that perhaps Kinbel was right—perhaps there was more to this world than could ever be proved by clever minds like my own. Then, at some signal from her that I did not see or understand, the hobs drew back.

“We all must go,” she muttered.

“What about the watchers? What about the human guards?”

“You forget how used they are to having everything done for them. The people who guard this tower are

as lazy as...” She paused. The phrase was *as lazy as a hob*. “As lazy as humans. Quick.” Her hand moved to her neck. A key dangled on a piece of string. “We have to leave.”

* * * *

Through corridors and beneath arches. The hobs led. Kinbel and I followed. I stooped and scurried. I was a hob myself, a shadow, but weaker, and clumsier, and lost. It was night, and pitch dark, yet I sensed that we passed through places with which I had once been familiar, back in the days of my youth—those far corners of my lost homestead, where every new turn and experience had been a lesson and a surprise. Great subterranean halls filled with the lost lumber of other ages and styles. Vast, vaulted kitchens echoing to footsteps amid the dangling metal of thousands of hooked pans. White ghosts of laundry rooms. Reeking lakes of wine and beer. Potting sheds, even, filled with the extra dark of waiting earth. We seemed to pass through all of these places, but now they were chill and empty and distant as they waited for a summer that would never come.

The journey seemed even more endless than the darkness. I was bruised and tired and exhausted, but part of me was elated. It was as if the prayers that I’d never offered had been answered in the shape of these quiet and subtle creatures, and of Kinbel. We were, I reasoned, moving through these halls and passages not only beyond the chapels of the priesthood that had imprisoned me, but the entire city of Dhiol. Sometimes, I thought I caught voices, or glimmers of light shed along the cold, wet passageways. I was certain that I smelled human effluent, and worse. But we pushed on without pause. After all, what human would ever think to notice the passage of a few anemic hobs?

Then we reached a final opening in which the darkness changed texture, and the breath of a cold night came rushing to touch my face. The archway was set in a hillside beyond the confines of the city, and my exploring hands as I levered myself out to stand on the cold earth told me that, like almost everything that is hob-made in our world, it was cleverly and finely wrought.

The hobs gathered around me, touching hands with Kinbel, yet avoiding my own. Some kind of message seemed to be passed between them as we stood beneath a thin Moon and a few cloud-chased stars. I sensed a change in their posture. They even seemed to glance toward me with their ravaged eye sockets for a moment before they turned back toward Kinbel.

“From here,” she said, “you and they have a chance of being free.”

My teeth were starting to chatter. Iron air was pressing down from the dark shoulders of the Roof of the World. It took me a moment to understand.

“What do you mean? ‘You and they’?”

“I have to go back to Dhiol. Look, the Sun will soon be rising. If I beat on those gates down there for long enough, I’m sure I’ll manage to wake someone, be it human or hob.”

“Kinbel, you can’t!” My head was rushing. I felt as the priests claim to feel when they feel the spirit of the Moon within them, or the turn of the stars.

“If I go back, I’ll be able to answer for myself in those halls. I’ll have my chance to speak what I see as the truth just as you did yesterday. I’m a priestess. I still owe that much to the Gods.”

“Don’t you realize what they’ll—”

She stopped me by taking my hand. “*You* realized, and yet you did what seemed right. You’ve got to give me that same chance.”

“I just said what I thought. I could even be wrong. Especially what I said about humans and hobs—our mixed offspring and characteristics, the idea that we interbreed. That’s just supposition. I have no proper evidence. What it needs is more study. What I have to do is—”

Kinbel stopped me by leaning forward and pressing her fingers to my lips. “There. Human touch. That’s the only way I’ve ever found of shutting you up. But look, the Sun is rising. I have to go.”

“You can’t...”

“You’ve said that already. I must.”

She stepped back, and briefly touched the ravaged faces of each of the hobs, which shone with edges of fire in the first flush of the rising Sun. Dhiol stretched below us, ashy shadow in a valley lit as yet only by the glittering ember of its highest tower. She turned and walked down the slope toward the city walls. And as I watched her go and did nothing to stop her, I knew that everything that had been said about me in the long days of my trial was true.

I’m a monster.

An aberration.

I'm less than human, and far less than hob.

* * * *

Of all the things that I've described to you, reader, it seems strangest of all to have written of the old seasons: of hot summers, migrating birds, budding flowers, and misty autumns. Not that the weather doesn't change up here in these mountains, but we treasure the cold hard darkness of winter, and see spring as the harshest of times, fraught with avalanches, rockslides, and dangerous torrents of meltwater, instead of as the most blessed. I say *Blessed*—as if blessings really existed! But, more and more, I find myself thinking in these ridiculous priestly terms. I smile up at the cold white Sun, ask questions of the wind or the Moon.

My mind must be weakening, or I'm getting old. Otherwise, why am I wasting my precious supply of papyrus and ink on writing this tale? I would once have filled these same scrolls with notes, descriptions, questions, calculations, theories. But the truth is that the part of my mind that once worked in that way—as hard as a well-whipped hob, as the saying used to go—feels worn out. And time is no longer precious to me. I have plenty of it. My colleagues or captors have little use for me. I sometimes feel that I have little use for myself. But it's pleasant to recall those old times—or many of them. And I enjoy the process of writing, even if, in doing so, I feel that very little has been explained, even to myself.

I still think of Kinbel's actions. And I still have no idea whether things happened as she intended. For, although she showed every evidence of knowledge, I cannot believe that she would have submitted to events had she really known what was to come. But even *I* knew, and I did nothing—I watched her walk down that hillside toward her city, and her fate. Around this point my suffering mind still revolves.

The climb away from Dhiol on that cold spring morning was hard: for me, who had been too long at leisure in my cell—and for my mute and blind companions, who found themselves suddenly evicted into a place of wild, high air and jagged drops. But I could see, and they could feel and climb, and between us we made our way higher and higher across a maze of icy rock. We were all soon exhausted, and bleeding, but, hand over hand, and arm over arm, flesh against flesh, we still hauled ourselves up.

It was a bright, clear day. By noon, with no bay of hounds, shout of humans or grunt of hobs to signal pursuit, we took time to breathe. I looked down. Dome upon dome, tower upon tower, Dhiol was a perfect jewel. The river's ice-flecked rush was like a curl of shining hair. I had never been a lover of cities, but the place seemed beautiful to me now that I knew I could never return to it.

Perhaps I had allowed myself to briefly forget about Kinbel—monster, aberration, that I am. But even as I gazed down at it, the city breathed out a great and glittering clamor, a rush of trumpet and voices, a seethe of processions and flags. Then the noonday Sun blazed in an incredible beam through parting strands of clouds as if the Gods really were at work, and that beam found focus on hilo's dreadful topmost spire that rose above the halls of my trial. The air that I gazed across seemed to shudder, and my blind companions gathered and trembled and touched hands. I felt as if I could see everything—as if I, too, were a God—and that which I could not see, I could feel, and that which I could not feel, I heard. It was, above all, the sounds of Kinbel's screams that filled that great space through all the long and terrible afternoon. I hear them still. After all the labor and expense that had gone into constructing it, I imagine that the priests decided that their machine must be used. And if not on me, what better choice than my consort—the one who had engineered my escape and who, even in the terror of her excruciation, still refused to denounce me? Sometimes in my musings, I can briefly make it seem as if Kinbel's return to Dhiol and her prolonged death were inevitable. But I still like to pride myself on the rigor of my intellect, and I know that I could have taken Kinbel's fate from her, and that agonized death was something that I was certainly worthy of, just as certainly as she was not.

But I still cannot leave those events alone. They gnash their blades as if some machine of excruciation has formed itself inside my head. I wonder, for example, at the ease of my escape. After such time and investment, and on that of all nights, were the priests really so neglectful? Perhaps they saw the truth as clearly as I did, and knew that I bore no more responsibility for the worsening seasons than did the swallows, and that my death would cause nothing to change. Yet rash promises had been made about the many miracles the Gods would grant upon my death. The ice would retreat, the warm days return, the crops grow, the God River herself would flow with beneficent calm again. And, as they began to consider the consequences of all those unfulfilled promises, perhaps it occurred to them that it might be better and easier to let me escape, and uselessly sacrifice a scapegoat instead?

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Ideas, theories—you see how I still cannot let them go. But life continues, and I, to my shame and disappointment, find small satisfactions—even hints of something resembling happiness—in observing the habits of the increasing numbers of hobs who have come to reside here in the Roof of the World. The ice tombs, ravaged though they are, provide a ready source of materials—even of food, for the frozen produce of lost offerings can, if properly heated and cooked, provide useful nourishment. Then there are all the stones, and the tools, and the furnishings. Hobs, despite all the sayings, are industrious, and they know how things work in a way no human has ever done. But rarely is anything put to the use for which it was originally intended. A funeral bed makes shelter for an entire tribe. A sarcophagus becomes a trough to feed the animals they so cleverly manage to raise here—once its previous occupant has been evicted, I might add. These changed ruins seem like some dream of the human world in which everything is twisted and transformed.

As well as being industrious, the hobs are intelligent. They understand that these funerary supplies will only last for a few years. And after that, I believe they will survive just as well. Already, parties go out to

hunt for boar, goat, and deer, and to collect the berries that still grow in what passes for summer. Sometimes, they even risk venturing into the lower lands around Dhiol, which are now mostly empty of civilized life, either human or hob. Hobs are used to hard times, and to difficult work. Above all, though, I believe that they will prosper because this cold land belongs far more to them than it ever did to us humans.

In the times when I permit myself to think in terms of my old theories, I feel an understanding of how humans and hobs came to live as we have done. Just as in the priestly myths, we humans, with our dark flesh, thinner limbs and intolerance of cold, came from the warm south. We spread slowly north in the time when the ice sheets were in retreat as the world grew warm; moving across and around the Bounded Ocean, toward the lands where my family eventually prospered on the trade of the Great North Water. There, we encountered our near relatives who, with their thicker-framed bodies and lighter skins, coped more easily with a colder Sun. We called these strange, half-familiar creatures—with their red hair, thick jaws and beetle brows, who signed and grunted instead of speaking, and wore half-rotted furs for clothing—hobs.

Perhaps there were times of co-operation and understanding. More likely, there was fear and distrust. Almost certainly, there would have been conflict as our numbers increased and resources grew more precious. But we humans won, and the hobs were subjugated, and we began to use and exploit them as they are used and exploited still. As to why it was that way around, and not some other, I cannot tell. Life, as I still see it, is ruled as much by chance as any other process. Perhaps there is some other version of our world where the hobs triumphed, and we humans worked for aeons to build hob cities. There may even be a world where, in a spate of even greater vindictiveness, we humans destroyed the hobs entirely, and their existence passed into records in the rocks in the way of many other lost creatures. But if that had happened, if the hobs vanished and we humans came to thrive alone, I struggle to imagine a better world than the one that I have known. Hard work would still have to be done, and I doubt if its burdens would have been shared equally. I shudder, indeed, to think of the means we would have used to divide humanity between the rulers and the ruled, the watchers and the workers, the fat and the poor, were it not for the convenient presence of hobs. It may have been something as ridiculous as skin color, or the simple accidents of geography and birth.

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The hobs in this high retreat treat me mostly with distance, and a kind of respect. Sometimes, admittedly, there are small abuses and bullyings—they are as aware as the humans in my trial of the accusation of my being a hob lover, and seem to regard the idea with almost equal disgust. But they find me food, and supplies such as this papyrus. They even let me forage on my own, secure in the knowledge that I would die if I wandered off too far in this jagged place of bitter cold. Mostly, though, I keep to my cave, which was once the anteroom of a large tomb. In many ways, it isn't so different from my cell in Dhiol.

It suits them, I think, to have me as their willing captive almost as well as it once suited the priests of the Moon. Word sometimes reaches us from the hobs who flee here of human doings in the lowlands, and it seems my name has become an even bigger curse. I'm responsible now not just for the changing climate,

but for the wars that have set human against human as the shortages increase. Of course, when I say human against human, I still mostly mean hob against hob, but the numbers of hobs who will unquestioningly do human bidding is decreasing, even if they are still in the millions. Our world is changing in more ways than simply by growing cold.

The other name of which I still hear, as if it didn't torment me enough already, is Kinbel's. The hobs revere her for reasons that I find too complex to fully understand. They say, for example, that through her suffering no further sacrifice will ever be necessary, although I'm certain that plenty of hob sacrifice still goes on. Odder still, it's even signed in whispers that there are some humans who revere her as well. Could it be that Kinbel's death really wasn't in vain? Is it possible that what she did might somehow signal through history that hob and human can live together, not as slave and master, but as equals?

Again, my mind rambles, but I'm almost sure that humanity would have prospered better if we'd had to do things for ourselves. Maybe our temples wouldn't have been quite so huge or our gardens so elaborate, but we might have been pushed instead toward inventions that allowed more to be done with less effort. I remember the times when I was alone in my homestead with that broken leg, and how the hobs bore me about with the contortion known as the hob carpet, when it seemed as if I was walking unaided even though I was supported almost entirely by their work. That, it seems to me now, is how all of humanity has lived for far too many centuries. We imagine that we do it all ourselves, when in fact we do nothing.

My hands are turning numb. Soon, I will find a place in the ice to consign these scrolls in the vain hope that they will be found and read. Are you there, reader? Are you human, or hob? Are you even from this particular world? Or perhaps you're from some other place, where humans worked so hard and alone that they heated the very air so warmly that they stopped the glaciers from their terrible return. Nothing but fantasies. This real world fades. My teeth chatter. My bones hurt. I sense the coming of another fever. Perhaps my final excruciation does not lie so very far off.

But the seasons still change, and life will go on. And sometimes things will be good, and sometimes they will be terrible, and most often they will be both at once with much that is neither intermingled. The hobs who come to our redoubt all bear their scars and stories of the horrors of the lowlands. Sometimes they arrive with other burdens as well. There is a young hob who reached here two dozen Moons ago. She was female and pretty (there, I've said it), if exhausted by her long flight. And she was noticeably pregnant.

I watched her with the same distant curiosity with which I watch most things as her belly grew and her term approached. One night, and not so very far from my cave, I heard the unmistakable commotion of a birth. The hobs were too preoccupied to notice my presence as I watched. A baby was held up, mewling and screaming, still dripping from its caul. Then came a second, which is as unusual with hobs as it is with humans. I thought at first that the even greater uproar that ensued was simply down to that. But the two babies were very different. The first one was pale-skinned, and already had a fetching crest of red hair. The second was thinner, and longer. Its skin was dark.

The debate that transpired was too quick for me to follow, but the result was plain. Even as the new mother nursed the child with the crest of red hair, the darker, more human-seeming baby was taken out along the smoky lamplit tunnels toward the snow-teeming night. Hobs, as I've long since discovered, may not practice ritual sacrifice or eat their young, but they are not afraid of bringing death. I ran after them. I signed. I yelled.

Maybe I've saved or helped other creatures during my human existence, but I cannot honestly recall when, or how. Abstract theories and good husbandry are fine enough things in their way, but I've long grown sick of intellectual pride along with all other kinds of pomp. Through what I'm still convinced was my intervention, the dark-skinned child was allowed to survive. She's in her thirteenth Moon now, and is learning to sign, and to walk. Perhaps because of my special interest, she's less afraid of me than most of the other young hobs are. Her mother sometimes even lets her squat in my cave, and I try talking to her using human words, and she gargles some of them back in return. She's a sweet thing, precious beyond jewels, and has a hob name which I cannot record with these written symbols, but I call her Kinbel, and I've noticed that a few of the hobs have started signing to her by their own version of that name, as well.