

EARTH II

by Stephen Baxter

“Earth II” is a far-future adventure story set in the same universe as the author’s two-book sequence, *Flood* and *Ark*, about escape from a drowning Earth. While *Ark* will be out in the United Kingdom soon, *Flood* has just been published by Roc in the United States. In the meantime, Stephen is working on a new three-book series of alternate prehistory and the rise of civilization.

I

“Go home, Xaia Windru.”

Xaia sat up straighter in her chair, favoring her left arm with the crudely sewn gash in the forearm, and cradling her cup of looted Brythonic wine in her right hand. “Home, Teif?” She forced a smile. “We’re having too much fun. We’ve barely started. Ask the crews.”

She sat with Teif and Manda, her admiral and her general, under the silvered awning over the prow of the *Cora*. On the polished table before them, maps of the Scatter and the world were held in place by the weight of wine flagons. The *Cora* stood to sea with her sister ships a kilometer or so from the island of Manhatun, whose low, craggy profile wavered in the heat haze. From here Xaia could see smoke rising from the burning houses in the port city, and warriors with carts drawn by huge, high-stepping horses working their way through the narrow streets, and the landing craft plying to and fro, laden with goods and hostages. Balloons blazoned with the crest of the house of Windru drifted over the helpless city. On the higher land clumps of Purple glistened, useless, ugly.

The heat was intense. It was April, the peak of the hot spring; though the sun still set each night, it sailed high to the zenith each day, pouring light and warmth into the world like wine into a cup. Even sitting inert under this reflective awning was exhausting, and to work like Xaia’s crews was almost impossible. But she heard the crackle of gunfire, and the throaty boom of an artillery piece; even in the day’s heat the mopping up was continuing.

“That’s just it,” Teif said. “I have asked the crews. They’re exhausted, Lady. They long for home.” He was a heavy-set man, about fifty, ferociously strong, supremely competent. He wore a thick grey beard that Xaia always thought must have been impossibly stuffy in the hot seasons.

Manda snorted. She stood, her wine cup in her hand, and stretched. She was taller than Xaia, well-muscled, her chest a big-lunged barrel. In her late twenties, a few years younger than Xaia, she wore her hair shaved to the scalp. In her glinting body armor she looked beautiful, but rather terrifying, Xaia thought. And even here, on Xaia’s flagship, surrounded by Teif’s best sailors, Manda’s heavy iron sword was within reach of an outstretched hand. Manda said, “Don’t listen to this worn-out old salt dog, Lady. My warriors loved you even before the coldspring raid that broke the siege.”

The siege of the island nation of Brython, Zeeland’s greatest rival in the Scatter, had lasted years, through the unending days of the cool summers and the icebound dark of the cold winters, when countless crew had died of cold and disease on their frozen-in ships. It was Xaia’s bold scheme that had broken the deadlock. The previous year she had modified a handful of her ships to give them broad, shallow-draft hulls, that did not get frozen in when the pack ice came but were lifted up above it. Even before this year’s spring equinox she had had the crews out hacking the ships free of the ice. Then teams of horses with thick

gripping shoes nailed to their soles had dragged the ships across the frozen sea, and Zeelander warriors and gunfire fell on the ports of Brython, even before they emerged from their winter slumber.

Xaia knew that Manda was right about her hold on the crews. Xaia was co-Speaker of the Zeelander parliament with her spouse Thom Robell, the two of them scions of the greatest houses of Zeeland, with lineages reaching back to the Founders. Though they had their rivals in parliament, together she and Thom, united with their child Maxx, effectively ruled Zeeland, and everybody knew it. And after such a feat as the siege breaking, and not to mention the reward of Brythonic treasure on which the crews had gorged, the crews were hers for life.

“You are a warrior queen, and a winning one,” Manda said now. “Of course they will follow you. They followed you into Brython. They followed you here to Manhatun—”

“I didn’t plan the storm that blew us off course,” Xaia pointed out. “It was fortuitous that we ended up in Manhatun waters. And as an ally of Brython—”

“She revoked that allegiance when Zeeland declared war on Brython,” Teif said mildly.

“As a *former* ally, she’s fair game. And rich.”

“We didn’t need more loot,” Teif said. “The holds are creaking as it is.”

Manda said, “You have to seize your chances, Teif, you old stay-at-home! Who was it urged us to pursue the Brythonic army after Lundin surrendered?”

Teif spoke pointedly to Xaia. “The crew will follow you to the ends of Earth II, Lady. That’s true. But they have hearts, and hearths, and families. Why, most of Manda’s warriors are mothers. And mostly they would like to follow you home. That’s what they say, when they think I can’t hear them.” He eyed her. “And you, too, have duties there, now that the war is won.”

Xaia, restless, stood beside Manda and stared out at the burning port. “Duties!”

“An empire to build across the Scatter, now that Brython is broken at last.”

“I don’t see myself as much of a builder, Teif. Besides it’s Thom who wears the Fourteen Orbs.”

“But when the war is won wife and husband rule as a team. That’s the way it’s always been done.”

In Zeeland it had become the custom for men to take senior political positions at home while women went off to wage war. There was a theory behind it, dating back to the Founders, that women, less prone to blood lust than men, would wage war only when necessary, for national advantage and not for glory. Xaia knew herself well enough to know what a crock *that* was.

“And besides,” Teif said, “there’s Maxx. You haven’t seen your son in years.”

Manda laughed. “He’ll be fourteen years old by now. What do you think, that he’ll have

sprouted a grey beard like yours?”

“Go home, Lady,” Teif said patiently, ignoring Manda. “You have won Brython, the greatest nation in the world after Zeeland. What else is there worth conquering?”

On impulse Xaia sat down and pulled a sea chart toward her. She almost knocked over a wine flagon in doing so; Manda caught it with the reactions of a cat. “There’s a whole world! The Scatter is just a patch on the face of the planet. There are the continents, the Belt, the Frysby—”

Teif snorted. “The Frysby as you know is a plate of rusted sand, where even the Purple struggles to cling on at the coasts. And the Belt is a strip of land inhabited by relics and wild horses.”

Xaia studied the map. The Belt was a peculiar linear continent that stretched across the world’s latitudes, from north pole to south—much of it uninhabitable, of course, save for the equatorial regions, where it bounded the ocean which contained the Scatter. But Xaia’s sketchy map showed one prominent settlement, called Ararat. She stabbed her finger down. “Look at the distances. From here in Manhatun we are as close to Ararat as to Zeeland.”

Manda nodded. “We could sail there and back before the end of coolsummer.”

“And Ararat is the city established where the Founders landed. don’t they have the Shuttle itself ? Who knows what other Founder treasure we might find? And the rest of the Belt is pretty much unexplored....”

Teif looked as if he was regretting starting the conversation. “What are you talking about? You can’t seriously be thinking of mounting some kind of expedition to the Belt! It’s world-spanning—and worthless.”

Manda snapped back, “But even the Brythonics have legends of the City of the Living Dead, to be found to the far north of the Belt. Alien treasure.”

Alien treasure. Xaia felt the hairs on her arms prickle, despite the smothering heat.

“Or the far south, as others say,” Teif said scornfully. “Anywhere out of reach, that’s where treasure always lies. Ask the scholars of the Four Universities, who have preserved much of the Founders’ lore. There’s precious little there about a City of the Living Dead. Nothing in the surveys the Founders made from orbit before they landed—”

“But the Founders didn’t explore the whole world,” Xaia said. “There’s no doubt the Dead existed, of course. We have the ruins on Little Jamaica to prove that, evidence in the Scatter itself. If we were to compare traditions among our own people with whatever we can extract from our Brythonic prisoners, and anything we could find out from Ararat—”

“What traditions?” Teif said, almost pleading. “Lady, there were no humans at all on this world four hundred years ago! Time enough to spin out lies, but—”

Xaia looked out over the length of her flagship, the iron plates set in a timber frame, much battered by war, much repaired. With the Brython war over, so was her freedom to act. Now, suddenly, out of nowhere, she had a new goal—a last chance to achieve greatness for herself, before she was subsumed into her loving, combative relationship with her husband. “We can do this. We have the ships, the crew, hardened by experience. We have holds full

of Brythonic guns and gunpowder. There can't be a force on Earth II to match us."

"And we have time," Manda pointed out. "Long months of the cool summer before the hot fall comes—"

"And then the winter to freeze the marrow in our bones," Teif said. "You're talking yourself into this, Lady. I know you—impulsive! don't listen to Manda. She always drives you on; she for one has nothing to go home to."

Manda smiled dangerously.

"If you follow this whim you could waste many lives, and dissipate everything you have achieved so far. You're just putting off your own return," he said now, more boldly. "Putting off facing your proper responsibilities."

"Only you could speak to me like that," Xaia said calmly.

"It's my job to tell you the truth."

"I'll send a ship back to tell Thom what I'm doing," Xaia said. "It's a delay of a season, no more—"

"The crews will be unhappy," he warned. "I'm serious, Lady. Some of them are already uncomfortable at having spilled so much blood in Brython. We're all the Founders' children. All descended from the same Fifteen. They fled a drowning Earth. They didn't come here to bring war. If they could see us now—"

Xaia snorted. "The Founders were heroes. But they have been dead four hundred years. Listen to yourself, man. In another four hundred years we'll probably be worshipping them like gods. I'm going to take a look at the inventory. Prepare a study, both of you, on the feasibility of reaching the Belt. I want a report before the sun goes down." She slammed her wine cup down on the map of the world, and, without looking back, walked out into the dense light of the overhead sun.

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II

Come home, Xaia Windru.

The words floated unbidden into the head of Thom Robell as he walked with Proctor Chivian to the edge of the cliff by the sea. Thom's aides walked discreetly beside them, bearing broad, light parasols. They were trailed by more Proctors and parliamentary officials. A little way away, Maxx, Thom's fourteen-year-old son, walked with Jan Stanndish, the elderly yet spry scholar who seemed to have put the idea of the Library into the Proctors' heads. Thom kept his eye on Maxx, who had a habit of straying out of the shade of the parasols and into the searing sunlight.

Proctor Chivian took a breath of the air off the sea. About forty, a few years older than Thom, he was a big man, handsome, imposing in his white formal robes. His nostrils flared wide. "The air is refreshing. Almost cool."

"It blows in over the sea," Thom said. He stepped closer to the cliff edge. Here the

grass grew sparse, a green import from Earth, and the native Purple had a chance to flourish, clumps of it like fungi. When he kicked it with his toe the clumps broke up into smaller units that rolled or blew away. "About the breeze—can you see, it's forced up by the cliff face and arrives at us relatively cool. This is the most pleasant walk in the Speaker's estate and as cool a place as you'll find anywhere in a hot spring or hotfall. Certainly better than Orklund, a kilometer inland, even in the most robust stone buildings. But I still wouldn't be out without a parasol." But if Xaia were here, she would no doubt be setting a disastrous example to Maxx by wandering boldly into the light.

Proctor Chivian was nothing if not an astute reader of people, and he seemed to sense that Thom was thinking of his wife. "I am sure the Lady Xaia's expedition to the Belt will go as planned. And who knows what will be learned?"

Thom's feelings had been a swirl of contradiction since a handful of Xaia's ships had come home, bearing Brythonic hostages, booty, wounded, a few children born during the long campaign—and the news that Xaia was going on to the Belt. "Frankly, I wish she chose home, and me and her son, over more adventure."

"We must cherish the Lady for her boldness," Chivian said smoothly. "And if I may say so boldness is what is required now, of all of us."

Thom sighed. Once again, and none too subtly, the Proctor was wrenching the conversation around to the subject of his Library. "Your timing is poor, Proctor, I have to say, regarding our personal situation."

The Proctor raised cultivated eyebrows. "But not regarding the Library project as a whole." He glanced up to the overhead sun, visible through the heavy fabric of the parasols. "Soon the hot spring will pass, and we will enter the long months of the cool summer. Temperate warmth and twenty-four hours of daylight—ideal for making a start on the building work. Our schedules show that the vault may actually be ready before the hotfall to receive the Books, even if the aboveground building is barely started."

"Ah, the One Hundred and Eight Books of the Founders." Information dumped from a failing memory store brought from Earth, Books containing everything the Founders and their first children believed was essential for their descendants to know about their world, and the history of the remote planet from which they had had to flee. Now the Books were patiently transcribed by generations of scholars at the Four Universities of Zeeland, under the control of the Proctors.

"The Library will ensure the Founders' wisdom is preserved forever, regardless of human failings or other calamities. What greater tribute could we pay to the Founders' memory? What greater tragedy could there be than if those Books, our last link to the home world, were lost?"

"Oh, spare me the sales pitch, Proctor," Thom snapped. "You know as well as I do that there are more ways of preserving the Books than exhausting the treasury's coffers building a vault. You could simply make multiple copies, for a start."

"Ah, but who would verify the authenticity of those copies? Soon the true texts would be lost in a welter of error and fraud—"

"And your own power, as holders of the unique texts, would be lost. Yes, yes." He began to grow angry, and wondered if the Proctor would dare make this kind of approach if

Xaia were here, armor on her chest and pistol at her waist.

The Proctor backed off. “We are both realists. We both have personal motives to achieve. That is how the world works. But I am sincere. The Founders were heroes who crossed space from one world, dying, and came to another, this one, and their bravery gave us life—all of us, literally. They were greater than us—”

“Not literally.”

“Speaker?”

Like his wife, Thom was impatient with such blanket praise for the Founders, who had, after all, merely been human. “I mean, in physical size at least.” He nodded at the parasol bearers, tall men and women with chests like barrels. “I’m told that if we could be transported to Earth, we would tower over the people there. If there are any survivors.”

“The gravity on this world is less than Earth’s. We grow tall.” The Proctor shrugged. “As sunflowers grow tall in the right soil. Nothing more.”

“And we remember Earth in our bodies, our language. We share the names of their months—”

“Folk wisdom counts for little, sir,” the Proctor insisted with a scholarly sternness. “Not compared to what is recorded in the Books. Earth II lacks resources common on Earth, such as oil, coal, uranium, even metals to turn our poor iron swords into steel, like the Orbs around your neck. Where they crossed space, we sail in wooden ships and fire gunpowder weapons at each other. This is a more difficult world on which to build a high technological civilization. If we are ever to achieve what the Founders did, if we are ever to scale such heights again—if we are ever to overcome the impoverishment of this world—we must build on their wisdom. And we must never forget them. The Library is a way, our way, to do that.”

“But I come back to timing again, Proctor. Why now? Why the urgency? What terrible threat looms that makes you fear losing your precious texts *just now*? And there’s also the issue of the timing for the nation. We’re exhausted. We’ve just come out of a war that’s dragged on for years.”

“But that’s what makes this moment so opportune,” Proctor Chivian said. “The Founders’ books tell of Isobel and Ferdinand, monarchs of Spain. In the year 1492 they concluded a war against the Muslim kingdoms of Spain, a war that had lasted *centuries*, and suddenly they were free to fund an even more bold adventure—to send Columbus across the ocean—”

“I’m not Ferdinand,” Thom snapped. “This isn’t Earth.” He waved an arm at the sea, where a few of the Scatter’s closer islands could be seen as smudges on the horizon. “This is our home, our world—our time. This is what we’re interested in—the sea, our ships, trade, the empire we might build across the Scatter. Ask any Zeelander his or her dream for his country and I’ll wager he won’t mention Columbus, or the Founders.”

“You’re thinking of the Lady Xaia’s ambitions,” the Proctor said carefully.

“Indeed. Which may be another reason you’re encouraging me to start digging up the turf before she gets back and exercises a veto on the whole thing.”

“Sir, I assure you—”

“I need to understand what’s so urgent about this vault, the Library. Have your man Jan Stanndish brief me. I want the whole truth, Proctor, and I don’t want any arrogant scholarly nonsense. If I don’t see why you need the Library it won’t get built. Oh, and include my son in the sessions. He seems to be getting on well with Stanndish, and it would be good experience for the lad, against the day when he might become Speaker in turn.”

The Proctor bowed. “I’ll arrange it as soon as I can.”

“I’m sure you will.”

They walked on, avoiding the clumps of Purple that grew by the cliff edge, relishing the comparative cool of the air despite the tension between them.

* * * *

III

It was May by the time the *Cora* led Xaia’s fleet to the coast of the Belt.

Soon the temperate, light-drenched months of the coolsummer would be on the world, and the humans, animals and vegetation imported from Earth would flourish. Like other children of privileged families, and in preparation for a life at sea, Xaia had grown up with a clear understanding of the seasonal cycle on Earth II, as it sailed around its star—which the Founders, for their own mysterious reasons, had called 82 Eridani—with its axis of rotation neatly tipped over. Now, more than midway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice in June, the north pole was nodding as if respectfully toward the central star, and even now, from Xaia’s mid-latitude location, the sun descended beneath the horizon for only an hour or so each day. But though the day was lengthening, the temperatures were, on average, dropping. The sun did not climb so high in the sky as in the torrid months of April and May—and, so the Four Universities’ best scholars had taught Xaia, it was the sun’s height that determined its ability to heat the world.

Certainly Xaia, looking out from the deck of the *Cora* at the unprepossessing shoreline of the Belt, was glad of the coming cool. It was a coast of broad valleys incised into a rust-red plain, where little grew but the ubiquitous, and entirely useless, native Purple. It looked like a hot, dusty, arid land to trek over, and the cooler the air the better.

Aleksandria, the port that served Ararat further inland, was built on the delta of a broad river, sluggish and red with silt. There was quite a bustling harbor, with ships from communities along the Belt’s long coast, as well as craft from the island nations of the Scatter—including a small flotilla of ships from Brython, evidently refugees from the Zeeland conquest.

On landing, Xaia immediately sought out the local Zeelander envoy, a small, fussy, middle-aged man called Alain Jeffares, working alone out of a tiny, cluttered office. He was flustered when such a noble figure as Xaia walked in. But then Zeeland had only a nominal presence anywhere along the Belt coast; there wasn’t much trade, and only a few passengers, scholars and pilgrims who came to see Ararat, the almost sacred site of the Founders’ Landfall.

Still, she was faintly surprised that Jeffares had had no contact from the local

government, not so much as a polite query about the fleet anchored offshore. Jeffares said the Belt was governed by a quilt of independent city-states. But the cities were scattered widely across a nearly empty continent. Alliances among them came and went, and trade continued fitfully; disputes occasionally flared over tariffs or protectionist policies, but he wasn't aware there had ever been a major war here. There was nothing like the empire-building that had gone on in the Scatter, either by native city-states or by the island nations of the Scatter, some of whom had sent over tentative expeditions. You could knock over one city-state, but the rest of the Belt was barely affected by it. The government of Aleksandria, evidently seeking a quiet life, simply ignored Xaia's presence, and her warriors, hoping she'd pass on quickly.

"Nothing worth fighting over," Teif sneered. "Told you."

That was all going to change, Xaia assured Jeffares. She left behind a couple of officers to begin the process of sequestering the refugee Brythonic vessels. And she instructed the little envoy to assemble a caravan to take her and her companions inland to Ararat.

They stayed one night in a grand inn on the outskirts of the port. Named the Founders' Rest, it had wooden carvings of all fifteen of the legendary star travelers in a long panel over its frontage. In her honor, Xaia was lodged in the Thomas Windrup suite. She was quickly getting an impression of the importance of the Founder mythos to this place.

She slept badly, nursing her healing arm.

By morning Jeffares had assembled a caravan big enough to carry Xaia, Manda, Teif, and fifty tough warriors. While Xaia's carriage was drawn by grand, high-stepping warhorses, each of them taller at the shoulder than a man, the rest were pulled by squat, solid-looking bullocks.

The caravan left the port by a dusty road into the interior. For kilometers the city's rats plagued the caravan, burly creatures the size of small dogs that nipped at the legs of the bullocks. Jeffares beat them off with the flat of a rusty sword. "A plague from Earth," he said breathlessly. "I believe they've been kept off most of the Scatter islands."

"Certainly from Zeeland," Teif said. "I've never seen such beasts."

"Something to do with the lower gravity here," Jeffares said. "Animals can grow taller for a given bone mass, but the air is thinner, so smaller animals can't function so well. Earth rats grew bigger on Earth II. So the Founders said."

Even after one day on the Belt Xaia was growing tired of hearing about the Founders.

The road to Ararat was well laid if rutted; evidently this was a trail frequently followed. But the Belt countryside was unprepossessing. The road cut across a plain of crimson dust littered with broken rock, with only worn hills to alleviate the monotony of the horizon. Xaia had no interest in geology, but she gathered an impression that this was an old country, at least compared to some of the Scatter islands, like Zeeland with its steep volcanic mountains.

Between the sparse human communities little grew, a few scraps of green in grass banks and cactuses, although the Purple flourished everywhere, in banks and reefs. For

sport, Manda had her driver run her carriage through the Purple banks, and laughed as the bullocks' hooves smashed the heaped-up stuff down to its component spores.

The journey was blessedly short. The Belt was a north-south neck of land only a few hundred kilometers wide; no west-to-east journey was long. And Ararat, as it loomed over the horizon, was astonishing.

As large as any city on Zeeland, it was a town of stone as red as the plain on which it stood, though even from a distance Xaia could see a glimmer of green on rooftops and walls. It was watered by another wide, sluggish river, and drew power with huge, slowly turning wheels. What was extraordinary about the town was its plan. It was lenticular, narrow east to west and long north to south, and surrounded by stout walls in a teardrop shape.

"It's like a ship," Manda called from her own carriage. "A ship of stone, with its prow to the south and stern to the north...."

"What is this, envoy?" Xaia asked Jeffares. "Some kind of artistry to draw in the pilgrims?"

"Hardly," the envoy said. "The wall is entirely functional." He glanced at the sky, the elevation of the sun. "You'll probably see for yourself in a day or two."

"Then we'll wait."

As they approached the city they passed through a hinterland of farms, where the remains of winter crops, cabbages and cauliflowers, stuck rotting out of the ploughed fields. There were no buildings here, just the fields. When Manda asked where the farmers were, and why a summer crop had not yet been sown, envoy Jeffares just shrugged. "Wait and see."

The envoy negotiated their entry through a broad metal gate set flush in the shaped wall. The gate guards, armed with comically inadequate-looking pikes, spoke a variant of the English that was spoken across the Scatter, but laced with rich dialect words. Xaia was irritated to find they had to pay an entry fee.

As the envoy negotiated she got out of her carriage and walked to the wall. Close up it was still more impressive, stretching three meters above Xaia's head, and its smooth curve extended to right and left as far as she could see.

Teif ran a finger along the lines between blocks at his chest height. "These blocks haven't been shaped by human hands. Look at these scratches, the wear. The stone is worn smooth."

Looking more closely, they saw that the odd pattern of wear extended up for meters above their heads; above that height a rougher surface cast a speckle of shadows in the light of the sun. Manda murmured, "I wonder what storm did this shaping."

Teif said, "What storm stops above head height?"

And as they spoke Xaia heard a rumble, like thunder, or the firing of distant guns. When she looked to the north she saw a faint band of cloud on the horizon, an orange-brown stripe. A dust storm, perhaps.

Jeffares, his negotiations concluded, led the way through the gate. Once inside the walls Xaia found herself in a city of cramped, cobbled streets and mean-looking stone housing that was broken by broad stretches of open ground where crops grew, wheat and maize. The people here were crammed in; the rutted, muddy track along which the envoy led them was flanked by dirty children who came out to stare, resentful-looking adults, and fat, wheezing pigs that rooted in the muck. Xaia wondered why the people lived squashed up in here—why not go colonize the farmland outside? This evidently wasn't a continent plagued by war, and there seemed no reason to huddle within these walls.

At the heart of the city a much more impressive building loomed out of the huddle of housing. Long in plan, decorated with crenellations and statues, it was almost like the Christian cathedral in Zeeland, but oddly shaped. This was, of course, the Shrine of the Shuttle. Taller buildings, some topped with green, gathered around this focus. The envoy said this was the center of Ararat's government; these towers housed ministries and agencies, and the clerks and cleaners and cooks who serviced them.

Jeffares led them to the city's best hotel, one of the stone spires, once again named for the Founders. As the envoy negotiated with more guards and handed over more Zeeland dollars, Xaia found herself growing impatient.

Teif, always sensitive to her moods, touched her arm. "Are you all right, Lady?"

"I feel locked in. Walls and riddles. Teif, why have I added months to my journey to come to this museum? What is there for me here?"

He raised eyebrows like thickets. "Do you need me to say 'I told you so'?"

She pulled the envoy away from his negotiations. "Jeffares—oh, don't quake so, man. Take me to the Shuttle. I'm far more interested in that than where Teif will be entertaining his whores tonight."

"Of course. This way. Please..." But the envoy, even when flustered, was efficient; he hastily left one of Teif's officers behind to finish the negotiations at the hotel, and sent another scurrying ahead to make sure the Shuttle keepers were ready to receive Zeeland royalty.

The Shuttle's Shrine was only a short walk from the hotel. Within, beneath an impressive vaulted roof, the interior was brightly lit by electric bulbs of pinkish glass, perhaps blown from the rusty sand outside. They were met by a curator—"Keeper Chan Hil at your service"—a young, smooth-faced man who babbled about waiving the usual pilgrims' tithes for the co-Speaker of far Zeeland. Flapping, intelligent-looking but evidently nervous, and dressed in a cloak embroidered with stars and planets, he nevertheless had the presence of mind to pocket the cash bribe Jeffares slipped him. "This way to the viewing gallery—the best site to see the historic relic..."

Xaia had never had much interest in the endless memorializing of the Founders that monopolized so much of society's energy in Zeeland and elsewhere. Nevertheless she found her heart pounding as she followed the curator up a flight of steps cut into the inner stone wall; here she was in the presence of history.

At last they came to a gallery. Xaia noted that the wall before them was lined with collecting boxes.

And from an elevation of perhaps twenty meters they looked down on the Shuttle. It was like a bird, Xaia thought immediately, a fat and ungainly bird, white above, black below, sitting on open orange ground, with a rutted scraping in the dirt stretching off behind it. There were words painted on its side, in a blocky, graceless script: UNITED STATES. Xaia had no idea what that meant.

"Its windows are like eyes," Manda said, evidently uneasy. "I can't look away."

"It's an authentic Founder artifact," Teif murmured. "The first I ever saw save for the Speaker's Fourteen Orbs. Made by human hands on Earth. That's what's giving me the shakes."

"You must imagine it," Chan Hil said, evidently launching into a standard speech. "On the day of Landfall, nearly four centuries ago, this Shrine wasn't here, nor the city of Ararat. The Shuttle detached from the Ark and fell onto an empty land—empty save for the dust and the Purple. As it rolled to a halt its wheels scratched ruts in the virgin dirt—and that track, recreated from the Founders' photographs, extends off beyond this chamber, and is set under glass in the rooms beyond where you can view it. It is said that Cora Robles, your own husband's ancestor, Speaker, was the first to touch the ground of Earth II—"

"By now she's everybody's ancestor," Xaia murmured. "Why the collection boxes?"

Chan spread his hands apologetically. "It is not cheap to maintain this historic vehicle."

Manda asked, "I'll swear that tail plane faces the wrong way ... It's preserved just as it landed, is it?"

"Not exactly," Chan said. "The Shuttle was ingeniously designed to be taken apart, to provide the Founders, the first colonists, with raw materials for their first shelters. This was Ararat, the first city on the planet, built from the material of the Shuttle itself. In later generations these components, scattered among a hundred homes, were painstakingly traced, gathered together and reassembled."

"And you got it all back, did you?" Teif asked.

"Almost all of it."

Xaia asked, "And you're sure you recreated the ship exactly where it landed?"

Chan's mouth opened and closed. "Almost sure. Would you like to go aboard? You can see the Founders' couches, and try the lavatory..."

Manda shook her head. "Why, when they had all the world to choose from, would they come here? To the middle of this desiccated continent. It would have made much more sense to land on one of the Scatter's bigger islands."

Chan Hil said brightly, "The Founders were scientists. They believed that the Belt offered the widest range of land habitats reachable without a sea crossing—the coasts, the riverine environments, the poles. They wanted to learn as much as they could about their new world while their instruments and electronic archives lasted. It was a legacy for us, for future generations. And they achieved a great deal. They did explore the Scatter, and even visited the Frysbys, all within the first couple of generations..."

“But that’s all ossified now, hasn’t it?” Teif snapped.

Xaia frowned. “What do you mean?”

“When the Founders’ grandchildren turned away from studying a planet to building a world, when history began, the ancestors of these people in Ararat stayed put.” He spat on the dusty floor of the balcony. “With all the initiative and wanderlust gone, here they still are where the Shuttle came down, milking pilgrims and scholars for a chance to see these cobbled-together remains.”

“I’m not here for the Founders, or their works,” Xaia muttered. She turned to Chan. “I’m looking for the City of the Living Dead.”

Chan’s eyes widened. “Wow.” It was a dialect word Xaia had never heard before. “The Founders searched for that. Or rather, for traces of the intelligent culture that evidently once inhabited this world, traces besides the ruins on Little Jamaica, and the Reef.”

Xaia frowned. “The Reef ? What’s that?”

“More ruins, to the north of here, surveyed by the Founders ... But just ruins. If you want to find where the Dead *went*, Lady, you will have to go far beyond that.”

“Then that’s how it will be,” Xaia said grimly. “But this Reef sounds the place to start.”

Teif asked, “How far, exactly?”

Chan said, “About a thousand kilometers north of here.”

Teif groaned and slapped his forehead. Manda laughed. “You can’t be serious,” Teif said.

“We’ll send most of the ships home,” Xaia said, thinking aloud. “That will keep your precious crews happy, Teif, or most of them. Keep back just enough to support an expedition to the north, tracking the coast. Pick crew with backbone, who want some adventure. We can live off the land, and the sea. As long as it takes—”

There was a rumble, like thunder. The building, a massive stone structure, *shook*. Xaia saw a trickle of plaster dust fall down on the Shuttle’s pale surface, like snow.

Manda snapped, “What was that? An earthquake?”

Envoy Jeffares laughed. “We don’t have earthquakes on the Belt.”

Manda didn’t enjoy being laughed at. She grabbed him by the front of his jacket and bodily lifted him off the ground. “Then what, you pipsqueak?”

“I’ll show you! Please...”

At a nod from Xaia, Manda put him down. He stumbled, coughed, straightened his clothing, and had Chan Hil lead them all out of the Shrine.

In the open air that thunderous rumble was much louder, and it was continuous, not

spasmodic like a storm. Xaia saw Manda and Teif exchange uncertain glances; it sounded like they were in the middle of a war zone. Led by Chan, they made their way to the city's curving outer wall, and climbed another stone stair to a viewing gallery set just below the parapet. And here, along with a line of citizens, they looked down on the plain outside the city.

The plain was empty no longer. A river of animals washed down from the north, a tremendous stampede that spanned the world from horizon to horizon. Xaia saw horses that dwarfed even the great war beasts of Zeeland and Brython, and long-legged cattle and sheep, and even birds, huge turkeys that ran two-legged with the rest. This must be the source of the dust cloud she had seen on the horizon some hours ago. The whole mixed-up herd was moving at a tremendous speed, and raised a cloud of dust that billowed into the air around the city.

Every so often, in the headlong rush, a beast would fall. There would be a perturbation in the flow as others stumbled around it, and then predators would descend, cats and dogs and things like rats, to tear the hapless fallen into bloody segments. But these breaks were momentary; the unending surge would pass on and over the scavenged and scavengers alike.

Jeffares yelled above the noise in Xaia's ear. "I'm glad you got to see this, Speaker. These herds can take a day to pass."

Teif leaned over. "Now I see why they aren't out working those fields yet—and why the city's shaped like a boat." He pointed. The herd was forced to part at the "prow" of the city's walls, and flowed around it, as a river would flow around a streamlined island of mud, Xaia thought. No wonder the walls were worn smooth, with the friction of those thousands of carcasses.

She turned to Chan. "What are they fleeing?"

"In this season, the heat. Speaker, when the north polar lands face the sun they are baked to aridity; when the pole faces away from the sun it is plunged into a cold so deep every river freezes over. Facing such extremes, animals can only hibernate or migrate. Many herds cross the equator altogether. Animals brought here from Earth grew big quickly, and learned to run so fast because they have so far to go. It is only on the Belt, which stretches from pole to pole, that such migrations are possible. I have made a study of the migration patterns. When I was a boy my brother and I would try to count the individual animals passing in an hour ... It was impossible."

"Such curiosity seems unusual here."

He shrugged. "Life is easy in Ararat. People come for the Shuttle; wealth flows in, without us having to do anything much. But I am fascinated by the world we live in. I am a scholar, self-taught."

"That's probably the best sort." An impulse hit her, another in a lifetime of impulses. "Keeper Chan, where we're going we could use a guide. Want to come?"

He stared, eyes comically wide open. "To the Reef ? Are you serious?"

"Of course."

“You bet I’ll come.”

Another idiom she’d never heard before, but she could tell from his grin that his answer was positive.

Manda pointed down. “Look what they are doing now!”

Xaia leaned over the wall to see. Booms were being let down from the walls, bearing nets that dangled into the stampeding herds. Fleeing animals were soon tangled up, horses and cattle and sheep and even a few long-legged pigs, and the nets were drawn up with a groan of pulleys and winches.

“And so we are fed for a few more months,” Chan said. “In Ararat, even the food just comes flowing in, like the money.”

“Follow me and life won’t be so easy. If I can promise you anything it’s that.”

He grinned again. “Good.”

The nets were carried through slots in the walls and dropped. The released animals, many suffering from broken limbs, were hastily slaughtered and dragged away, and the booms let down into the stampede once more, like the traps of a giant angler.

* * * *

IV

Maxx loved listening to Jan Stanndish talk, and to watch the lively old man sketch his diagrams and equations on bits of slate, or just wave his arms in the air, miming his fantastic hypotheses into existence. And Stanndish was happy to spend time with Maxx while he waited for his chance to deliver his briefing on the urgency of the Library project to Maxx’s father—waited and waited, for Thom was always distracted by more urgent affairs, including the return of the bulk of Xaia’s fleet, laden with enough booty to distort Zeeland’s economy, but without Xaia.

It was June now, close to the summer solstice and the height of coolsummer, the season when the world’s north pole pointed straight at the sun, which from Zeeland’s mid-latitude wheeled around the sky. The days were endless, literally, and full of light and warmth, and life bloomed. Stanndish walked with Maxx and pointed out the intricate dance of predator and prey, of food and eater, working at every scale from the insects with their tiny dramas in rock crevices and dusty corners, to the hunting of wild rats and dogs out on the plains in the interior of Zeeland.

All living things from Earth, Stanndish said, including humans, still bore the imprint of the home world deep in their chemistry; all living things still longed for the release of terrestrial night, of long hours of darkness each twenty-four-hour day. Well, the “sidereal day” on Earth II, its rotation as compared to the distant stars, was more like thirty hours than twenty-four—but that was irrelevant, as on every point on the planet away from the equator there were long periods each year (eighty sidereal days at the latitude of Zeeland) where the sun never set, and in the winter an equally long period where it never rose.

“Human bodies long for sleep. Especially the young,” said Stanndish with a gentle envy. “When you get old it doesn’t matter so much. Anyhow we organize our societies to

allow periods of rest, even when the sun doesn't set, and wakefulness even when it doesn't rise. Such rules are broken in times of war—as are many rules, of course. In the world of nature there are no such treaties, but nevertheless predators and prey are unconsciously working out ways to survive, the prey to avoid being eaten while asleep, the predators to find ways not to allow their food to escape while *they* sleep. We're seeing much more elaborate interactions between species as a result. All this is behavioral, and we can expect it to continue for many generations until evolutionary pressures force these exiles from Earth to abandon their outmoded 'body clocks' and adapt to the peculiar cycles of high-obliquity Earth II...."

Of course the differing lengths of the days made no apparent difference to the Purple, which sat in unregarded places in its reefs and clumps, dark and glistening.

If the endless days of the coolsummer were times of opportunity and danger for plants and animals, so they were for human beings too. Maxx watched with a kind of hot envy the elaborate games of flirting, seduction, and bed-hopping going on among the courtiers here at Orklund, some of them only a year or two older than Maxx himself. The endless chill night of the coldwinter was the peak time for conception, but in the coolsummer hearts were stolen or broken, and unions made. But every girl Maxx met, the younger daughters of the ministers, parliamentarians, merchants, and philosophers who thronged the court, seemed determined to become a warrior like Manda or his own mother, and their martial mannerisms scared him to his bones. Maybe he would end up like Jan Stanndish, who drifted through the seasons all but oblivious to the flurry and fluster of the human realm.

Of all Stanndish showed him of the world, it was the Purple that came to intrigue Maxx the most.

One day Stanndish took him out of town, beyond the patchwork of farms around Orklund and out to an uncultivated scrap of grassland. Here he dug an iron trowel into the ground. Up came handfuls of thick black soil, speckled with green and livid Purple.

"This is the reality of our colonization of Earth II. There was no soil like this on this planet before the Shuttle landed, not a scrap. Soil is a construct of earthly organisms, many of them entirely invisible, a kind of factory for life manufactured by life itself. Look—a worm, whose grandfather came in a box across the stars! Our deepest colonizers are microbes from Earth that are steadily working their way into the alien dirt. But our earthly presence is but a trace—for most of this world remains held by the native life, a stubborn biosphere even older than ours."

"But it's *like* ours," Maxx said. "Isn't that true? I learned it at school. It uses the same sort of chemicals as we use. Carbon and stuff..."

Stanndish smiled, showing gappy teeth. "Indeed. 'Carbon and stuff.' Life here is based on carbon biochemistry, on a set of amino acids and proteins that *overlaps* ours, but is not identical. We believe life must wash between the stars, in the form of hardy spores. Life on Earth and on Earth II, which really aren't so far apart on the scale of the Galaxy, both derive from some common origin, perhaps much further away. Separated for billions of years, when both were at quite primitive stages, they have long diverged in fundamental ways. Earth II life doesn't use DNA coding, for instance, but stores its genetic data in RNA molecules."

"That's why you can't eat the Purple."

“Precisely. And why it can’t eat you.”

“The Founders knew all about this, didn’t they? All we do is learn about what they did. I wish I was a Founder. I wish I had been born on Earth a thousand years ago.”

Standish smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. We’re still thinking here, still finding out—some of us, anyhow. Which is why we’ve discovered we need to build the Library in the first place.... Would you like me to tell you something the Founders never knew?”

“Yes!”

He picked a clump of Purple from the soil on his palm. “Look at this stuff. What we call the Purple is actually the multicellular manifestation of the native biosphere. It’s purple because—”

“Of the chemicals it uses to get energy from sunlight.”

“Yes! Very good. Which is different from the chlorophyll green of Earth.” He rubbed the clump gently, until it broke up into dusty spores, and, gently, he picked out a single spore on a fingertip. “Each of these spores is a little clump of cells.

“What’s extraordinary about this, compared to the design of Earth life, is three things. First it’s almost autonomous—each Purple spore. Which means it can survive on its own, without other forms of life around it. Drop a single spore on a bare rock, in the sunlight, and it will busily extract the carbon and nitrogen and other materials it needs from the air and the rock. It’s as if each is an individual biosphere all to itself—everything you need for life packed into a single genome.

“And the second extraordinary thing is that this is *all* the multicellular life we’ve found. Spores just like this clump together in a variety of forms, of more or less sophistication—stable reefs like stromatolites, or more advanced composite creatures something like slime molds. But all of these, fundamentally, are assemblies of the spores, and can be broken back down into their individual parts. It’s extraordinary that you have a whole biosphere, at the multicellular level anyhow, which is actually a manifestation of a *single* organism.”

“And what’s the third thing?”

“We think we know from fossil evidence—traces of soft-body forms preserved in mud slides and so forth—*when* the multicellular forms first emerged on this planet: around five hundred and forty million years ago.”

Maxx frowned. That was just a number to him. “So what?”

“Well, multicellular life emerged on Earth, in a flourishing of diversity called the ‘Cambrian explosion’—about five hundred and forty million years ago.”

Maxx was enthralled. “Something caused it. Something in common, like the spores washing between the stars.”

“Yes, but we have more trouble believing complex life can have traveled across interstellar distances without design, without intervention. And we suspect that the evolutionary leap from single-celled systems to multicellular is a rare one, difficult.... Worlds

need help. Maxx, we believe, or some of us do, that *something* passed through this part of space all those hundreds of millions of years ago, and where it found a planet teeming with single-cell organisms, it uplifted them. Spun out complexity to make multicellular forms.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? Maybe for the adventure. Maybe for some deeper purpose. Both on Earth and Earth II the multicellular stuff is a fraction the biomass of the single-cell substrate. But it’s where all the fun is.”

“What happened to the uplifters?”

“We don’t know. It’s so long ago. We, or rather the Founders on the Ark and the generations on Earth before them, learned that we humans are a young species, born of a young biosphere and a young star, in an *old* Galaxy, where the peak of starmaking was in the deep past, and most civilizations probably rose and fell long before there was life on any kind on Earth, let alone intelligent life. We saw no signs of intelligence at work on a large scale in the universe—no grand projects like the universal uplift working in the present. It is all locked in the deep past.”

“These are wonderful ideas.”

“Yes, they are, Maxx, and I wish more people could appreciate that. But even after the uplift the trajectories of Earth and Earth II diverged. On Earth, even after the multicellular uplift it took a half-billion years for intelligent life to evolve—mammals like us. Here, technological intelligence emerged almost immediately. Well, within a few tens of millions of years. But it vanished almost as quickly.”

“You’re talking about the Dead.”

“Yes. That’s why traces like the ruins on the island of Little Jamaica, and the Reef on the Belt, are so old.”

“The Reef, where my mother is going.”

“Yes.” He clenched a bony fist. “I wish I could be with her! If only she had thought to stop and take some *scientists* on her scientific expedition...”

“If she thought about such things she wouldn’t be doing it at all,” Maxx said. “That’s what my dad says.”

“Quite. Well, I envy her.” He brushed the dirt from his palm back onto the ground, and checked the position of the sun. “We had better go. It’s time for Proctor Chivian’s daily audience with your father—and maybe a chance for me, at last, to deliver the briefing on the Library he asked for.”

“We have to be patient,” Maxx said solemnly. “My father’s very busy.”

“Busy he may be, but he needs to make a decision soon on the Library, or it will be too late to break the ground this season....” They began walking back to town and the parliament complex, the old man stiffly leaning on Maxx’s shoulder. “We do need the Library, you know. It isn’t just all about my calculations or the Proctor’s personal ambition. I do hope you understand that, Maxx.”

“We have to be patient,” Maxx repeated.

* * * *

V

The day was already ending by the time Xaia and her party came upon the Reef.

Amid kilometers of arid crimson dust they found an oasis, a hollow surrounded by plates of uplifted rock—evidence of some ancient geological torment, the water pooling from some accidental aquifer. Green plants grew, grass and moss and straggling trees, and clumps of Purple sat passively amid the rocks.

Xaia allowed the caravan to break up. The great horses were unharnessed and led to the water. She and her aides and her fifty crew members, most of them women warriors, wearily laid down packs and loosened dust masks. Manda clambered up a ridge with a spyglass, to survey the landscape.

Xaia sought out Chan Hil. Teif followed her. Chan had taken off his boots, replacing them with soft camp sandals, and was unfolding his tent. Xaia had a chart prepared by the *Cora*’s navigator, a sketch map of this northerly section of the Belt, gradually being filled in. “We should be here,” she said, pointing. “At the Reef. Here are the coordinates you gave us, latitude and longitude. Here is our calculation...”

“I told you we should have sent out scouts,” Teif rumbled.

“We are close,” Chan insisted. “Unless everything known at Ararat about the Reef is wrong.” Two months after walking out of Ararat, Chan looked quite different, his skin sunburned and leathery, layers of puffy city fat worn away. But as they had approached the site where he promised the Reef would be found, he had grown steadily more nervous. They had soon discovered that nobody alive from Ararat had visited the Reef, and nobody knew for sure if old travelers’ records were correct. “We should be there.”

“Wrong,” growled Teif. “We shouldn’t be here at all.”

Xaia suppressed a sigh as he began his usual round of complaints.

The journey from Ararat had certainly been long and hard. Xaia had had two ships track the coast, while rotating parties hiked along the shore, and sometimes further inland. The country was mostly arid right down to the sea, but incised with huge, ancient valleys through which diminished rivers trickled. Every valley was a challenge to cross. Further inland the plain was broken by peculiar outcroppings of rock, layered and twisted, thrust out of the ground by some antique geological violence and then eroded to fantastic forms.

The crews on land and sea shared the provisions they collected, fish and crustaceans from the sea, fresh water from the land. At first there were towns or villages where they could buy food—Xaia, not wishing to leave a trail of resentment along a track that she would have to retrace, had forbidden looting. But as they headed steadily north, the density of human settlements had grown sparser, and that option soon evaporated. Soon you barely even saw the glint of Earth green amid the ubiquitous purple. Xaia had grown up on a relatively small, relatively crowded island. Now she started to understand how few humans were on this planet, even after four centuries of expansion.

Meanwhile the crew, all islanders more used to the sea than the ways of the land, were poor at hunting. Increasingly hungry, already exhausted from years of warfare, the crews had tired quickly, and progress had been doggedly slow.

All the way Teif had kept up a slow barrage of complaints. “Over and over again I’ve said this. It’s already August, Xaia. Already the sun is setting again, the cool summer ending—”

“Oh, shut up, Teif. You pour the utterly obvious into my ear, day after day.”

“This jaunt could kill us all if we’re not careful, Lady. You don’t like what I say because it’s the voice of your own conscience.”

“The return trip will be easier,” she insisted. “Down the long river.” For many days they had tracked a mighty river that had flowed down the spine of the continent, before turning to wash through a huge delta system and out to sea. “We’ll raft!”

“Not through those rapids—not me.”

Exasperated, frustrated, Xaia turned again on Chan. “Well, if this addled boy hadn’t got his coordinates wrong we wouldn’t be having this argument in the first place.”

“He didn’t get it wrong.” Manda had come back from the ridge, breathing hard, her spyglass folded up in her hand. “It’s just over there. Come see.”

Following Manda, Xaia, Teif, and Chan hiked to the crest of the ridge. Here Manda pointed to a ledge of some blackish rock that protruded from worn, folded strata—and a cluster of lights that grew brighter as the daylight faded. Xaia snatched the spyglass from Manda’s hand to see better.

Manda said, “It’s just a bunch of shacks and tents. As dusty and rust-colored as the ground and the rocks. Hard to see in the daylight, until the lamps started glowing in the dusk.”

Chan, growing excited, pointed at the black stratum. “*That* is the Reef, I think ... Is that a fence around it?”

Xaia, through the glass, saw something suspended over the village, glimmering in the last light of the sun, a square panel on a kind of stalk. “I can see where they get their power from.”

Manda nodded. “A solar panel.”

“Founder technology.” Xaia lowered the glass, looking out over the darkling plain, the huddle of lights. “Well, it will keep until morning.” Which was only a few hours away, so short were the nights this soon after the solstice.

Teif nodded. “I’ll post a guard.”

After a few hours’ sleep Xaia prepared to cross the last couple of kilometers to the Reef. She was accompanied by Chan, Manda, Teif, and a dozen warriors. Teif, never trustful, had them watched by scouts positioned behind the ridge by the oasis.

As they neared the village, a man came out to meet them, riding high on a massive, slow-walking horse. Peering beyond him, Xaia saw a few people in the village itself, a woman standing with her arms defiantly folded, ragged-looking children peeking from behind doors. Fields had been cut into the dusty ground, and pigs and scrawny goats wandered, untethered. Judging from the number of shacks and lean-tos there could be no more than a hundred people living here.

Teif said, "I wonder how they overwinter. Cellars, I imagine." He growled at Chan, "Why didn't you tell us this lot was here?"

"I didn't know," Chan insisted. "I told you. Nobody from Ararat has been here as long as I've been alive, longer."

"Give thanks for the idleness of Ararat, Teif," Xaia said, grinning. "If the secrets of this place had been picked bare by generations of scholars, there would be nothing left for us to discover, would there?"

As he approached Xaia saw that the man wore a uniform of some black cloth laced with silver—but the uniform was shabby and patched, and didn't quite fit his lanky frame. And the horse, huge though it was, was no warhorse like Xaia's party's but a draught animal, heavy-set and plodding. Still he came alone, Xaia noted with some respect, facing a party escorted by several heavily armed warriors.

The man unrolled a kind of rope ladder and climbed down from his huge horse. He patted its muzzle, reaching up to do it, and left it grazing at a sparse stand of grass. He walked up to Xaia, clearly identifying her as the leader. "Welcome. My name is Ossay Lange. I am the leader of this place, this scientific colony devoted to the study of the Reef, which we call Reeftown."

Xaia thought she recognized his accent as a distorted form of the dialect spoken in Ararat. He was perhaps fifty, though his face was so weather-beaten it was hard to tell; he wore his greying hair long and tied back in a bun. He was missing an eye, she saw; a ball of what looked like steel, grey and moist, sat in one ruined socket. Xaia introduced herself as a leader of Zeeland.

Chan challenged Lange. "What scientific colony? I'm from Ararat. I work in the Shuttle Shrine. I know the curators, the scholars. There's no record of such a colony, or even a recent expedition to the Reef."

"Boy, my grandfather led that expedition. His name was Heyney Fredrik Lange. Look it up when you go back home. This was his uniform. Surely you recognize it."

Xaia glanced at Chan, who shrugged.

"Heyney Fredrik was, in fact, the first to discover the Reef, or rather to rediscover it after the Founders' initial survey with their automatic flying machines."

"But he never came back to report it."

"He suffered vicissitudes. Several of his companions died. When he arrived he found a small settlement, a forerunner of Reeftown here. The people were drawn by the aquifer. What they were doing so far north, nobody knows. He settled with them, intending to stay

and survey the Reef for a season or two.”

“But he never left.”

Lange shrugged. “He found happiness here. Formed a family. He wasn’t sure he could bring his children back across the wastes to Ararat.” He glanced across at the broken strata. “Besides, the Reef is *here*, not back at Ararat. He was a scholar. He devoted his life to a study of the Reef. And when he died his son continued the work—my father. And when *he* died—”

“And in all these years,” Manda said skeptically, “nobody came to visit. And none of you tried to get back to Ararat to report on whatever it is you have learned.”

“Some have come,” Lange said defiantly. “Explorers, merchants blown off course in their ships, wrecked and looking for water—and bandits.” His face set hard, and that eerie steel eye glinted. “Most paid their tolls, however.”

“Tolls?” Teif shook his great head. “You set tolls? Your grandfather must have had the genes of one of those Shuttle keepers back at Ararat. And, having come here, proved just as grasping and indolent.”

Xaia touched his arm. “He’s just a fool, Teif,” she murmured. “Him and his fathers. Look at this place. Perhaps he’s got a heap of obsolete money piled up in some hole in the ground, from all the tolls he’s collected. What can he spend it on? Don’t waste your anger.”

Lange didn’t seem to have noticed Teif’s insults. “My grandfather was the first scholar ever to have come here. Even the Founders never set foot here, only sent their flying drones over, and they never traveled further to the north.”

Xaia frowned. “Are you sure? Does nobody live north of here?”

“Of course not. The seasons are too harsh. And there is other evidence.” He glanced over his shoulder at the village. “Sometimes we have—disputes. Fallings-out between brothers. You know the sort of thing. Then one or the other will walk off into exile.” He waved a hand at the dusty panorama. “East, west, south—if they go that way, generally we hear from them again, even if it’s just a groveling apology and a plea to be let back. But of those who went north, no trace has ever been seen again. Nobody lives up there—nobody *can* live there.”

Xaia glared at him. “If the Founders never came this way, how can there be stories about a City of the Living Dead to the far north?”

Lange said dismissively, “Whatever you’ve heard, it’s all a legend—lies spun out for the credulous in inns and taverns. Travelers’ tales. *This* is the farthest north any human can travel. And this,” he said, waving a hand at the Reef, “is the only trace left by the Dead on all this world, save for those ramshackle ruins on Little Jamaica.”

Manda glared at him. “He’s the liar. Talking up this place, his own importance.”

Lange watched them, expectant, calculating. “You would be welcome in my home, Lady. My wife makes a fine cactus tea which—”

“No,” Xaia said briskly, growing angry. “We came to see yon Reef. The sooner we do

that the sooner we can move on.” She strode that way.

Abandoning his horse, Lange hurried after her. “Madam, the question of the toll—”

“Teif, make him rich beyond his grandfather’s dreams. We can afford it.”

Glowering his reluctance, Teif took fistfuls of Brythonic jewelery from his pouch and ladled it into Lange’s grasping hands.

Lange led them through the straggling wire that fenced off the Reef from non-payers of the toll.

The Reef itself was a shelf, protruding from a layered wall of rock that towered above their heads. The day was hot, and it was a relief to step underneath, and into its shade.

You could see at a glance that this particular stratum was different from the familiar crimson sandstone above and below it. Maybe a meter thick, it was a mottled black and grey, and seemed to be made of some harder material, for it protruded where the softer sandstone had worn away. Xaia could see where the sandstone had been cut away above one part of the black shelf, leaving a kind of shallow cave only maybe half a meter high; a crude wooden ladder led up to it. Some of the black ledge had broken off, and a thin scree of pebbles, flakes, and sheets lay at the foot of the cliff. Xaia inspected this rubble. She picked up one fragment, like a slate the size of her palm, with a strange, almost regular pentagonal pattern pressed into it.

Teif looked around, dissatisfied. “We busted our balls for this? *This* is a City of the Dead?”

Lange, daring or foolhardy, laughed at him. “My friend—what did you expect to find after half a billion years? Buildings and streets preserved as if frozen in ice? No—*this* is all that time leaves behind, thousands of years of history squashed down as if crushed between the pages of a book. And if not for a fortuitous flood, none of this might have been preserved at all.”

“A flood?” Teif glanced around skeptically at the arid sandstone plain. “Here?”

“Oh, yes. My friend, the spot on which you stand has lain deep beneath the surface of a sea—not once, but many times...”

Xaia struggled to follow.

On Earth II, as on Earth, if rock was above water it eroded away, turning to pebbles and sand that washed down the sluggish rivers. But below water rock formed. On the beds of seas and lakes, all that silt piled up, compressing under its own weight until the sand solidified to sandstone. Layers set down in different epochs showed as strata, subtly different bands in the depth of the rock.

“The sedimentary rocks are laid down as flat as the oceans that bear them,” Lange said. “But with time there are quakes and volcanic uplifts, and even the shifting of continents, though that’s not a significant factor on Earth II. The layers may be raised up above the air again, broken, buckled, and bent.” Lange walked around, miming these processes. Xaia imagined he had waited all this life for this moment, to show off the family knowledge to passing strangers.

“And somewhere in that process,” Xaia said, studying the sample in her hand, “between the setting down of one sandstone layer and the next—*this* occurred.”

“We think there was a river delta,” Lange said. “Right here. Oh, the river itself has long since shifted its course, but you can still see traces of its valley in the oldest rocks. And on that delta, in its fertile soils, *they* built a city. We can’t imagine how it looked. But it was a city of buildings of stone and metal, and must have been not entirely unlike human cities on Earth II, or Earth. All this in a flash—geologically speaking, in just millennia, after aeons of emptiness.

“But the city was flooded. Inundated, suddenly.”

“How?” Manda snapped. “By its river?”

“No,” Lange said. “By the sea. Just as on Earth—the sea level rose, suddenly and catastrophically, and covered the tallest buildings. Whoever lived here had to flee or die. But, thanks to the sudden flooding, the city was more or less preserved, sitting there on what had suddenly become a sea bed. The river silt still sifted down, covering the streets and buildings, piling up until it caved in roofs and collapsed cellars. But the city was entombed, you see. And when in the aeons that followed more sandstone formed above, billions and billions of tons of it pressing down, the city layer was compressed, from hundreds of meters thick, perhaps, to—well, to what you see today. Millions of years are recorded in these mighty layers—and a mere few millennia compresses to less than the height of a human child. As the planet convulsed in later ages, that vast coffin was lifted up into the light and broken open.”

Manda, to Xaia’s surprise, seemed to be imaginatively caught by this. “And yet you can still see what it was like, can you?”

He winked at her, with his one good eye. “Come and see for yourself.”

He led the way up the ladder, to the cave cut on the sandstone above the city stratum. They had to crawl to get inside. Xaia could see pick marks in the roof above her—and small pockmarks, deeper than the rest, where something appeared to be lodged. Lamps, perhaps? But if they were lamps they weren’t lit.

Lange let them explore with hands and eyes, their sight adjusting to the cave’s shadows. “We’ve found modified landscapes in other locations nearby. That was my grandfather’s term for it. We think there are traces of something like farms, marked by something like plowing, but in a kind of criss-cross pattern. But this was the heart of the city itself...”

The stone had been chipped away to leave big chunks of a brownish rock set in a rough square, and more massive pieces of rubble further away—all this trapped in the lower stratum, an ossified ruin. It was obviously the remains of a wall. And Teif swore softly. He had found what looked like the mouth of a pipe, neatly circular—or the remains of it; it was a rusted trace in the rock.

Lange was grinning at them. “Can you see? This was once a substantial building. My grandfather found it by tracing foundations dug deep into the rock layers below—that’s how to build on the soft ground of a delta, you know, by setting concrete rafts on deep foundations. When it came down it scattered big blocks of rubble all around. Dig up one of

these blocks and it would crumble in your hand. With enough time the concrete rots, the cement leached away by acid in the water, but leaving the sand and gravel in place. You see the pipework? We've also found what look like wires and cables. Road surfaces. Rusted lumps that could be the remains of crushed iron vehicles. And so on.

"Here are the real treasures." From a shelf in the wall behind him, he produced artifacts that he passed from hand to hand. Xaia became fascinated as she handled these things. A disc of what was clearly glass might have been the bottom of a bottle; it was opaque, milky. A light sheet felt like plastic, but it was discolored as if burned. Lange said that most plastics would have turned into blobs of oil, and seeped away. Most precious of all was an intricate artifact like a mechanical clock, but wrought in a glittering yellow metal.

"That's fool's gold," Lange said. "Which iron turns into, given time and the right conditions. What was this, a clock, an astronomical calculator? Whatever, it's now like a replica of itself..."

"All of this, this high culture, is more than half a billion years old. So my father dated it from his stratigraphy. Intelligence blossomed here almost as soon as animals were crawling around in the mud—not like Earth! And then, within a few thousand years—sploosh, the ocean covered it, gone forever." He glanced out of the cave at the bare plain. "We can't know what else was here. Maybe the plain was covered in cities ... Chance preserved only this one. And certainly my grandfather believed this was a planet-covering civilization. He said you could see changes in the biological structures below and above this stratum, changes in the atmospheric content. They changed everything about their planet, mixed it all up and moved it all around ... Just above the layers of the city, in fact, is a thin smear of ash, from a volcano. Perhaps that contributed to their downfall."

"Just a few thousand years," Chan said. "But that was enough time for them to change the world forever—to empty out the lodes of fossil fuels and metal ores and the rest, natural treasures never renewed on this small, static world."

"But there's no trace of the people," Xaia said. "The Dead. Whoever built this place."

"Nothing we can identify." Lange took back the pieces reverently and stowed them back on their shelf. "Worth the price of admission, Lady?"

Xaia glanced at the others. "Enough for now. Let's get out of here."

Once they were outside Lange's fence she gathered her aides around her. "We need to decide what to do about this stuff, and where to go from here."

Teif snorted. "As to the last—home!"

Chan said, "This scholarly resource, this Reef, can't be allowed to molder away like this. It sounds as if only the grandfather did any substantial work. We must reclaim this for Ararat—on your behalf, Lady," he said, stammering the addendum.

"Well, I agree. We must open up this odd little nest—"

"Open up? *Nest?*" Lange spoke shrilly. He was visibly angry, his face red, a vein pulsing in his forehead.

Manda and the warriors of the guard touched their weapons.

Lange backed away, fumbling for something under his grandfather's black shirt. He ranted, "I knew this day would come! Some rapacious predator like you, Lady Xaia, would come and take away my family's birthright—and without due academic credit, no doubt—"

Xaia sighed. "Generations in this wilderness have bequeathed an addled brain. He's not armed, is he, Manda?"

"Not as far as I could see."

"Then restrain him."

But as Manda stepped forward Lange produced a white box from beneath his coat. "Recognize this? More Founder technology, scavenged from the Shuttle like the solar cells and brought here by my grandfather...."

Manda paused, uncertain.

Xaia called, "What are you doing, Lange? What is that box?"

"I always knew this day would come!" Tears were streaming from the socket which contained his steel eye. "And I planned for it, even as a young man I planned, and prepared. I dug those holes in the cave roof—I planted the charges—go, all of you, just go now to your ships, or I will destroy it all!"

"Stop him," Xaia said quietly.

Manda lunged forward—but even she wasn't fast enough to stop Lange closing a switch on the box. She threw him to the ground.

And a dull crump echoed from the cliff face.

Xaia turned. Dust billowed out of the cave over the city stratum, and chunks of the black rock wheeled almost gracefully in the air. Above the collapsed cave a small landslip was starting, burying what had been there before. The charges Lange had evidently set in the cave roof had gone off.

Teif growled, "What a crime! To destroy a relic half a billion years old, all out of selfish pique."

Chan laughed.

Teif turned on him. "Have you gone mad?"

"No!" Chan quailed back. "It's just—this man has shown what a fool he is, how much less of a man than his grandfather. Yes, he's destroyed that one dig site. But I'll wager the city itself, the black stratum, goes on for kilometers, deeper into the rock. Sealed in the dark as it has been since the day it submerged, safe in the sandstone. All we have to do is bring the resources here to dig it out."

Teif looked as if he was struggling to understand. "I'll take your word for it." He turned to Xaia. "So you found your treasure. Black rock and bits of discolored glass. Is that enough for your vanity? Can we go home now?"

Manda was sitting on Lange, pinning his arms. He struggled, and turned his head to spit at Xaia. “Yes, go home, Lady, you glory-seeking buffoon with your pack of thug-bitches. Go home in failure!” He began to hawk, trying to spit again.

Manda grabbed his jaw, turned his head toward her, and dug her fingers into his damaged eye socket. Thick blood spurted, and the man howled. When she held up her fist it contained a bloody sphere, and his face was left a ruin.

Chan retched. Teif yelled, “What are you doing, woman?”

“Proving he’s a liar,” Manda said.

Xaia hurried over and, mindless of the blood and mucus, took the eye and examined it in the sunlight. “*It is an Orb*. Teif, look! A globe of the world in the Founders’ steel—here is the Belt, here the Scatter. Just like the others.”

Manda grinned. “I thought I recognized the profile of Zeeland, printed on his fake eyeball.”

Xaia said, “I always wondered why there were only fourteen Orbs, when every tradition has it there were fifteen Founders.” She glanced at her companions. “You realize what this means.”

Teif said, awed, “You hold an Orb. You hold the authority of the Founders—as much as your husband.”

“And it proves that *Lange was lying*,” Manda said, still sitting on the whimpering man. “Nobody would have brought an artifact as precious as an Orb out of Ararat. Everybody knows it took generations before the Zeeland families collected the other Orbs, and were united enough to join them into the necklace of the Fourteen.... The only way an Orb could have been lost here is if *a Founder came this way*.”

Xaia nodded. “And if she or he came this far, they would surely have gone further.”

Teif, alarmed, stood directly before her and stared into her eyes. “Lady, don’t even think about it. The season is already late. If we go on, we *will* be caught by the winter.”

Xaia looked at him, and laughed, and closed her fingers around the Orb. “Throw that fool back to his family. Break camp. We’re going back to the coast. And in the morning, we go on.”

Manda howled like a dog. “North?”

“North!”

* * * *

VI

“Earth II is unstable.”

Thom Robell paced the streets of Orklund, aides at his heels, Proctor Chivian at his

side. It was September, close to the autumn equinox, and the weather was pleasant, temperate, though clouds covered the sky, and a light rain made the pavements of Thom's home city gleam.

At this time of year, with both the world's poles looking away from the sun, the roll of the planet delivered day and night of equal lengths, about fifteen hours each. It was said that this was the closest the climate of Earth II came to emulating that of old Earth itself. But everybody knew this was the last of the good weather. In a month the snow would start to fall, and in just two months the sun would disappear altogether, for eighty long days, and the cold winter would set in. So, all over the city, people were preparing, bottling food, laying in fuel for fires, strengthening the stone walls and windows of their houses, preparing the cellars dug deep into the ground where the soil retained some of the warmth of summer, even in the winter's depths. It was an important time of the year, essential for survival. It was too late even to think about starting the Proctor's absurd Library project; everybody was too busy for that. Winter was coming.

And Xaia was not yet home.

Thom tried to focus. "'Earth II is unstable.' What can that possibly mean, Proctor?"

The Proctor sternly matched Thom pace for pace. Thom sensed that he wasn't going to give up today. Perhaps he had given himself a private target of the equinox to convince the Speaker to cooperate. "It comes from the work of Jan Stanndish, Speaker. Who has cultivated your son, at my suggestion, in the hope of finding a way to your ear. I'm sorry if that seems cynical—we are desperate, Speaker. I don't use that word lightly."

"Because the world is unstable?"

"Yes! That is Stanndish's conclusion, the outcome of page upon page of mathematics—I will not pretend to follow it all. Some say Stanndish is the most brilliant scholar we have produced since the Founders' generations. And what he has been analyzing is the motion of Earth II itself."

Thom frowned. "What is there to understand? Earth II spins like a top on its axis. And it follows a circular orbit around its sun. The planet's spin axis is tipped over so that it lies in the plane of the orbit. At the solstices one pole or another points directly at the sun, and half the world is light, and half dark—"

"Almost. The orbit is an ellipse—low eccentricity, not quite a circle. And the axis is a few degrees away from the plane of the ecliptic—"

"Into the sea with your nitpicking! *How* it is unstable, man?"

"If it were alone in this solar system, if there were no other planets, Earth II would be perfectly stable, yes. But it is not alone. You are aware that further from the sun orbit two giant worlds, balls of gas we call Seba and Halivah, off in the dark." He glanced at the cloudy sky. "They are remote, but massive, and their strong gravity plucks at Earth II. You have a child. Did he ever play with spinning tops? If you poke a top with your finger—"

"It wobbles."

"Yes. And that, we think, is what is going to happen to Earth II—and soon, given Stanndish's integration of a series of astronomical observations dating back to the

Founders themselves. Probably not this year, maybe not this decade—within a century, certainly. It is an excursion that seems to occur once every few tens of thousands of years. Stanndish says there is probably a periodicity to it, but—”

Thom marched on ever faster, growing angry, not wanting to hear any of this. “An excursion? I don’t know what you’re talking about, man. A wobble? How can a planet wobble?”

The Proctor held his hand level. “The rotation axis will tip up, away from the plane of the ecliptic.” He tilted up his hand. “No longer will the summer pole point directly at the sun. We don’t know how far this excursion might be. We do know that everything about the cycle of the seasons will change.”

Thom tried to imagine it. “No coldwinter. No coolsummer. Will it be more as Earth itself was?”

“Perhaps. That might be the end state. But It’s the transition that concerns us, Speaker. For example we know that ice collected at the poles of Earth—huge caps of it, kilometers thick. Sea levels were lowered drastically. That can’t happen here—”

“Because the ice that forms in coldwinter melts each hotsummer.”

“Yes. But as the global distributions of ice, water, and water vapor adjust we must expect extreme climatic events. Storms. Droughts and floods, failures of rainfall ... And, worse than that, the tipping planet will judder. There will be earthquakes and volcanoes. Tsunamis, perhaps, triggered by undersea quakes. The crust of our quiescent world is so thick that any volcano, punching through, will be violent, and will hurl billions of tons of rock and ash into the air. We can expect acid rain. A darkness, a global shadow perhaps lasting years.”

Thom tried to imagine a huge wave washing across the islands of the Scatter. He stopped pacing at last. “Dear God,” he said quietly. “I never heard of events like this in accounts of Earth.”

“Earth was different, in many ways. Crucially it had a moon, a massive moon. That helped stabilize its spin. We have no moon.”

“Why is it only now that I am learning of this?”

“We try to be responsible. We don’t wish to cause panic. With respect, I have been trying to tell you of this for some months—”

“The Founders themselves must have known this was a danger. They surely knew far more about the dynamics of planets than even your tame genius Jan Stanndish.”

“Yes. We have inferred, from hints in the chronicles, that there was a split among the inhabitants of the Ark when they reached Earth II. Some thought it would be uninhabitable because of the axial tilt. It’s said that our Founders were only a fraction of the crew who chose to stay, rather than go on in the Ark.”

“Go on where...? Never mind.”

“Perhaps they believed there would be plenty of time to deal with any tipping.

Perhaps they believed their descendants would be able to stabilize the world. Well, if they thought that, they were wrong; after just four centuries, this is the danger we face. And we have no Ark to escape on.”

“Then what will become of us? Is this the end of mankind on Earth II?”

“Oh, we don’t think so. We’re a pretty resilient species. But we think it may be the end of civilization. And if we do fall we may be slow to rise again. You know that this world has been emptied of its oil and metal ores by those who went before us.”

“The Dead.”

“Yes. How, then, can our descendants recover? And even if they do, even if there are once more cities and ships and scholars and Speakers, what will they know of where they came from? The science of the future will be able to establish that humanity doesn’t belong here, on Earth II. But there will be no way to establish where in the sky humans came from, or why or how ... If the tale of the Founders survives at all, it will seem a legend.”

And Thom understood. “Ah. And this is why you want to build the Library.”

“Yes. So that our memory of our true origin will *never* be lost. Now do you see why it’s so urgent we do this?”

“But it’s such an immense project, Proctor. We are a society that must work hard merely to stay alive—you can see that all around you today—we don’t have the spare resources for grandiose monuments.” Xaia, Xaia—if only she was here! She was not wonderfully wise, and nor was Thom, but together, they seemed to make the right judgments ... “Proctor, are you *sure* this axial excursion is going to happen? And that the effects will be as dire as you say?”

“Oh, yes. We can prove it. *It’s happened before*. Not once but many times. You can see it in the rocks. Your wife told us she was making for a formation called the Reef, didn’t she? According to the Founders’ own records the Reef is the remains of a city, a Dead city, buried in the rock. You could see where the city had been—a thousand years of history, of building—and then the inundation, the layer of volcanic ash, and then *nothing*, Speaker, nothing but layer upon layer of rock and the remains of burrowing purple things. That city never recovered. We owe it to our descendants that cities like Orklund do not suffer the same fate.” He grabbed Thom’s arm. “There’s still time to start, even this year. I know you fear for your wife. But she’s not coming home this year, if she ever comes home at all. Make your decision, Speaker. Let me build my Library. Let me save civilization.”

* * * *

VII

His name, he said, was Eykyn. Some kind of grease covered his face, to keep out the wind, and his hair was a nest of lanky ropes. Bundled up in what looked like layers of rabbit fur, it was impossible to tell how old he was.

Eykyn’s home was a mound, already covered thick with snow. The entrance was a dark hole without even a proper door, just a plug of wood and grass that could be forced in, a bung to keep out the cold. It was clear that the main part of the dwelling was deep underground, deep enough that the frost could not reach.

Xaia, Teif, Manda, and Chan faced Eykyn, cold to the bones, wary, exhausted. The ground was already frozen, encased under layers of snow. They couldn't survive out here. But that door was like a mouth, Xaia thought uneasily, a mouth in the earth that would swallow them all up. She felt deeply reluctant to enter.

Eykyn smiled, showing blackened, gappy teeth. "You are welcome," he said, gesturing. His accent was something like that of Ararat, much thicker, distorted. "People are scattered pretty thin up here, and hunker down in the coldfall. We have food."

Teif, his cloak pulled around him, scowled. "What kind of food?"

"Rabbit. Other stuff. You'll see."

"And you'll share it with us, will you?" Manda said. "A bunch of people who just walked up out of nowhere."

"People are scattered thin," he said again. "Have to help each other. Otherwise none survive."

"I don't like this," Manda said. Lacking Teif's mass, the cold had got to her more and she was shivering. "Living like animals in a hole in the ground. What kind of people are they?"

"Living people," Chan said, his own teeth chattering. "Surviving. It's a rational strategy. Even given the depths of coldwinter, the season is so brief that the frost can't penetrate too deeply into the ground."

"I say we leave this ball of grease to his pit," Manda said. "I don't like the look of him."

"I don't like the look of *you*," Teif said. "I don't see what choice we have."

"We build our own shelter. Blocks of snow. We don't need him."

"The sun's nearly gone," Chan said. "We left it too late."

Xaia looked up at a lid of cloud. A flurry of snow came in on the wind, the flakes needle-sharp where they hit her cheeks.

Chan was right. He usually was. They had left it too late. It was October now, they were deep into the coldfall, and the days seemed to get markedly shorter, one after the next. The ships were having to stand further off the coast because of the gathering pack ice, and Teif had lost several crew to frostbite and hypothermia already. To show leadership Xaia had undertaken the last few scouting trips into the land's frozen interior herself, she and her lieutenants, searching for evidence of the City of the Living Dead. But today, not for the first time, they had got their timing wrong, and as the night's cold clamped down they had got themselves stranded far from the coast.

And here was this man, this Eykyn, offering them shelter.

She murmured. "We're all armed. We're none of us fools. We take what we need from this man; we take no risks. All right?"

“I don’t like it,” Manda said again.

“We have no choice,” Chan said bluntly.

“Discussion over,” Xaia snapped. She led the way forward.

Eykyn’s grin widened, and he stuck out his hand. She forced herself to shake it. Then she followed him into the mouth-like door of his shelter.

Eykyn was shorter than she was, short and round, maybe an adaptation to the cold. She had to duck to follow him down the sharply sloping tunnel.

The walls were frozen and slick to the touch. The only light came from scattered lamps in alcoves dug into the wall, lamps that burned something smoky and stinking, perhaps animal fat. Down she clambered, deeper and deeper. It was like a nightmare, the enclosing walls and roof, the hunched form of the man going before her, the harsh breaths of her companions as they followed, all of it visible only in shards and shadowed glimpses.

She had no idea how deep they had descended before the tunnel opened out into a wider chamber. She stepped out onto a floor of hard-trampled earth—trampled but not frozen. Her companions followed her, Teif straightening stiffly.

More oil lamps revealed a dome-shaped chamber, a dozen paces across, maybe more. The ceiling was coated with a kind of thatch. A fire, banked up, glowed in the middle of the floor. Possessions were scattered around, heaps of skin, animal bones. More people huddled warily by the far wall, men, women, children like balls of fur with wide eyes; the light was too uncertain to be able to see clearly.

Eykyn stood proudly.

Teif flared his broad nostrils. “Stinks like a toilet.”

“You’re none too fragrant yourself,” Xaia murmured.

Manda was loosening her outer layer of clothing. “It’s not cold.”

“I told you,” Chan said. “Go deep enough and it never gets too cold—or too hot. Look—see the tree roots in that wall? Trees from Earth are adapting to survive, growing deep roots down beneath the frost, so their sap flows through the winter.” He glanced around. “There are elements of design. The thatch must soak up the fire’s smoke. And the fire itself is banked and air-starved so it burns slowly. See the way the lamps flicker? There must be passages for the circulation of the air...”

Xaia saw a heap of bones in one corner, stacked as if precious. Big bones, maybe from horse or cattle.

Eykyn gestured at heaps of straw. “Summer grass. Beds. Eat, sleep, drink.” He beckoned, and a couple of the older children came over with earthen plates piled with meat. One brighter-looking little girl was almost pretty, under the grease, and her hair was plaited. She smiled at Xaia.

Xaia took a plate from the girl and bit into a chunk of meat. “Rabbit. It tastes fresh. I mean, not salted or dried.”

“So it is,” Eykyn said.

Teif growled, “How can you find fresh rabbit at this time of year?”

“We know where they hibernate. Big burrows in the ground.” He pointed. “We have tunnels. We don’t even go up top. And we have the flesh of the horses and cattle from the herds that pass at the equinoxes. Dried, salted. We have dried fruit, wheat, the harvest from the spring and autumn.”

“How many are you?” Teif growled.

“Not many. You can see.”

“Why live here?” Manda said. “Why raise your children in a hole in the ground?”

“Our forefathers came here to get away from the cities. This is our land, our place. Our way.”

“It is a remarkable feat of adaptation,” Chan said.

Eykyn eyed Xaia. “You’re far from home.”

“I’m seeking the City of the Living Dead.”

Eykyn shrugged.

“If it exists, it’s north of here. Do you know how far north?”

“Couldn’t say. Never been there. Never met anybody who has.”

“Do you believe it exists?”

“Couldn’t say.”

Chan asked, “How many live like this, further north yet?”

“Couldn’t say. None, so far as I know.”

Teif asked, “Do you think it’s worth going on, hunting the City?”

He smiled that broken smile. “If you do, come back this way. We’ll make you welcome.” He held out the meat plates. “Look, do you want this or not?”

So they ate, and washed their faces in the meltwater that trickled from a pipe in the wall, and, self-conscious, used the corner of the dwelling marked out as a lavatory. The natives stayed away, though the children brought them more food.

At some unspoken signal, Eykyn and his people retreated to their own heaps of straw and fur.

It was a relief for Xaia to spread out her cloak on her pile of dry summer straw, and ease her boots off and tend to her feet, rubbing the sore patches and working at calluses

and blisters; mercifully she was still free of frostbite. She found she couldn't bear to have the rabbit-fur blankets Eykyn had given them anywhere near her body. She made a pile of her own clothes and burrowed into it.

The whole chamber was like a nest, full of breaths, sighs, farts, the rustling of straw as adults and children tried to get comfortable. Perhaps she slept.

"They are like animals."

The whisper, soft in her ear, startled her awake. There was a mass in the bed with her, warm, heavy. She reached for her blade, under the heaped jacket she was using as a pillow.

A hand touched her bare shoulder, a callused palm. "It's all right."

"Manda? What the hell?"

Manda kneaded her shoulder, her hand strong. She was behind Xaia, and snuggled closer; Xaia felt the pressure of her belly against her back, her knees in the crook of her own. "I was cold. Couldn't bear those piss-soaked furs."

"No." Xaia laughed softly. "Nor I. Stay, then."

Manda's hand slid down Xaia's arm, caressing.

Xaia came even wider awake. "What are you doing?"

"Do you ever feel as if you are the only human being in the world? You and I, Xaia. Listen to them." Soft snores, a scuffling as if somebody was humping somebody else. "They are animals. Like pigs. Even Teif. They turn into animals when they sleep. But not us. We don't need them." Her hand slid over Xaia's waist.

Xaia, thrilled, uneasy, didn't want her to stop. "Need them? I don't understand."

"You don't need Thom. Not any more. Not after this. *You have an Orb*, the Orb you took from Ossay Lange. A Founder's Orb, the fifteenth, as valid as the fourteen that dangle from Thom's fat neck. And you didn't just have it handed to you by your uncle, like Thom. You found your Orb yourself, you risked your own life—"

"And spent the lives of others."

"You can rule in your own right. We don't need these others, Thom grunting like a pig over you." Her hand slid over Xaia's breast, hard-palmed, almost like a man's, and Xaia's body shuddered with shock and desire. "We can rule Zeeland, you and I, Zeeland and the Scatter and the Belt and the rest of the world, forever—" The word ended in a throaty gurgle. She convulsed, her hand gripping Xaia's flesh so hard it hurt.

And Xaia felt a seeping of warm fluid, smelled an unmistakable iron tang. Blood. She grabbed her knife and rolled out of her bed, coming to her feet in a tangle of clothing.

The light was dim. Suddenly there was shouting, screaming. People moved everywhere, adults, children. She saw Chan huddled against a wall, a sword held in both hands before him. Before her, Manda, beautiful Manda, lay on her back with her throat laid

open by a livid bloody slash, her eyes on Xaia, fading. Over Manda's prone body stood the girl, the smiling kid with the plaits who had brought Xaia the plate of fresh rabbit meat. She held a bloody knife in her hand.

And Teif stood in the middle of the chamber, huge, wrathful. Blood seeped from his own belly. Eykyn's people stood off from him, wary. He swung his sword—and removed the head of Manda's killer with a single swipe. The pretty head fell onto Manda's belly, and the body shuddered, blood spurting from the arteries at the slim neck before falling.

The others closed, the adults and the older children, all armed with clubs and knives. Xaia and Teif pushed through to stand before Chan by the wall, and Xaia scrabbled for her firearm. The detonations of the gunshots were ear-numbingly loud in the enclosed space.

Their blades cut satisfyingly into human flesh. Xaia ignored the ache in her healing left arm, just as Teif showed no reaction to the gash in his belly.

The fight didn't last long.

When it was done, Teif and Xaia labored to pile the corpses at the center of the chamber, Teif at the shoulders and Xaia grabbing feet and legs. The floor was slippery with blood and spilled guts. Xaia was aware that Teif was grunting, his own wound giving him trouble. She felt stunned at the loss of Manda, unable to react, to think further.

They had spared a couple of the women, the smaller children. They huddled against a wall, clutching furs, eyes wide and fearful.

"Told you so," Teif said as they worked.

"So you did, old man. I won't question you again."

Chan, trembling, was in shock too. He seemed as afraid of Teif and Xaia as of dead Eykyn's people. "I never saw people die that way. You were outnumbered. The way you killed them all—it was a frenzy."

"*They* are butchers," Teif said. "We are warriors. Once they lost the element of surprise they were doomed."

Chan was nodding. "Butchers, yes. That's the right word. *There are human bones*, piled up in the corner with the others. I took a look. You can see the butchery marks. They sit here in their hole in the ground, eking out their summer supplies, their scavenging of hibernating animals. And, when chance wills it, they take the opportunity to feast on a supplement, on passing humans whose flesh they take like that of the animals that migrate at the equinoxes. No wonder Lange's exiled cousins never came home!" He glanced at the frightened children who huddled against their mothers. "Maybe they feed on their own, when times are particularly hard. Emergency larders. But with you three, they bit down on gristle."

"I wonder what the Founders would think," Teif said. "If they could see this, see what they made."

Xaia glanced at Manda's body, covered by her own cloak. A story cut short, of lust and maybe love thwarted. She had learned more of Manda, the true meaning of her ferocious loyalty, her true ambitions, in Manda's last few seconds of life than in all the years before. No wonder Manda had always driven Xaia on to feats of ever greater daring and

ambition. She would never know how it might have worked out, one way or another, if Manda had lived—and become a rival to Thom in Xaia’s heart. Maybe it was better that way.

She glanced at the cowering women and children. “Do you think they can survive? All the men are dead.”

Chan shrugged. “I know you’re planning to take their supplies, their bread and jerky—”

“Who cares?” Teif asked. They had finished their corpse-piling. He stood, breathing hard, holding his great right hand over his wound. “Let them eat their husbands and fathers. As for us, we stay until morning—and then we go, Xaia. Back to the ships, and to the south, and home. We’ve come to the end of the world, and all we’ve found here is decadence and savagery.”

“But the City,” Xaia murmured. “It may still exist.” She looked at Manda’s corpse. “And it’s already cost me so much. In the morning we go on.”

“North? How far, Xaia? How long? What would it take to convince you the quest is futile? When you are murdered, or frozen to death? I can’t let you put yourself at such risk again. Not while I’m still able to save you.”

His loyalty moved her. But she said, “We go on. In the morning ... But first we’ll take care of Manda.”

“We can’t bury her,” Chan said. “The ground is like iron.”

“We’ll take her back to the ship,” Teif said. “Bury her at sea. She’d have appreciated that, I think, even though she was a lousy sailor.” Then he slumped against a wall of the chamber. His sword propped against his legs, he kneaded his belly and grimaced in pain, his face grey. But he wouldn’t let Chan or Xaia see the wound.

* * * *

VIII

It was November by the time Proctor Chivian’s surveyors had chosen the optimal site for their Library of the Founders. It was inland, so away from the coast and any evidence of oceanic incursions on the past, and on the side of a hill, far from the flood plain of the nearest river, and far from the craggy slopes of Zeeland’s principal mountain, a volcano that had been long dormant but which, Chivian assured Thom, might waken when the world tilted and shook. “Nowhere is entirely safe,” Chivian said. “Not on this world. But this vault, dug deep into the bedrock, will be as safe a repository for the Founders’ wisdom as we can build.”

Thom grunted. A thin sleet was falling from a leaden grey sky. He and the Proctor stood on the hillside above the construction site. From here he looked down a sweeping valley to the huddled rooftops of Orklund, and saw the glimmer of the sea beyond, with the murky glow of the cloud-masked sun low on the horizon. At this time of year, the sun never climbed much higher, and soon it would not rise at all.

But even now, in late November, as the world headed into the depths of the

coldwinter, the Proctor had insisted the work proceed. So teams of workers were kicking aside resistant clumps of Purple, and hacking at the ground, stripping back the turf and the scree to expose the bedrock that lay beneath. The monument they would erect here, the Proctor had assured Thom, would be visible from throughout Orklund. But much labor remained to be completed before that monument's capstone was put in place.

"It's not the challenges facing future generations that trouble me, Proctor, but the difficulties I'm imposing on this one. That rock is basaltic. It will be a huge task to dig as deep into it as you claim you need."

"We have explosives," the Proctor murmured, unperturbed. "And plenty of spare muscle."

He was referring to the Proctors' proposals to ship over indentured labor from defeated Brython. It would be another hugely unpopular step for Thom to take, and a further darkening of the relationship between Zeeland and Brython. And all without any input, let alone approval, from Xaia. But by now Thom knew what the Proctor was thinking: that if Xaia had not come home by now, this deep into the winter, the chances were she never would, and was therefore no longer a factor in the Proctor's calculations about the future.

The Proctor said now, "Grasp the goal, Speaker. Visualize the end point. This won't be just a library; there will be a whole town here, of scholars and farmers and merchants and builders, all that is needed to support a great academic institution, and a network of roads to link it to Orklund and beyond. I'm told there is a proposal to name a wing of the Library after me. I am quite sure they will name the new city for you, as a memorial to your visionary leadership that will last for all time—even through the next precession event."

Or I will be condemned as the greatest fool since the Landfall, Thom thought gloomily. Thom hadn't felt in control of events since the Proctor's party had turned up at the parliament halls so many months ago. If only Xaia were here.

Come home, Xaia Windru! Come home!

* * * *

IX

The crew had to be forced to enter the City of the Living Dead. Only Xaia herself went willingly, and Chan—and Teif, because he hadn't left Xaia's side since the nest of Eykyn, even though he loudly despised the inhuman place.

"Inhuman, yes," he said as once again he walked with Xaia through the City. "The very light that bathes us is inhuman." A violet glow coming from all around them, it cast no shadows. "And human cities *stay still*; they don't swim around you. There's nothing here for us. There never was..."

"It has some similarities with our cities," Xaia protested, and she quoted Chan's analyses back at him. "It's finite, for one thing, with an edge. Different within than without. It has internal structure that Chan is trying to map—"

Teif swung a leg at a structure like a low, softly glowing wall. It broke up into clouds of violet spores. "It's just Purple! Just a heaping-up of weeds..." But the action had hurt him, and his hand went to his lower belly.

Xaia was concerned for him. But he wouldn't even admit the wound's existence. There was nothing she could do for him, because there was nothing she was allowed to do.

He was right, in some ways, about the City of the Living Dead, however.

At least they had found it, however enigmatic it was. She had achieved her goal. She supposed history would remember that about her, if it forgot everything else—always assuming she survived to tell the tale.

After the nest of Eykyn they had returned to the coast and pressed on with their dual journey, the ships at sea and the scouting parties on land, heading ever further north. At last there had come a day when the sun hadn't shone at all, and there had only been a vague, reluctant glow on the horizon at high noon. This was several days ahead of the sun's disappearance at the latitudes of Orklund and Ararat, Chan said, itself a measure of how far north they had traveled. The cold bit hard, turning the ground to rock and the sea to a plain of pack ice. Soon the ships could no longer follow, for fear of being caught in the ice and crushed. So Xaia had ordered the construction of sleds, with runners made from polished ship beams, and harnesses for the huge warhorses that had endured this journey for months in the ships' holds. And on they had pressed, with sleds laden with tents and food and fuel dragged by horses with iron grips nailed to their hooves, and when the horses had failed and died and been butchered, still a remnant of the party had pressed on over the frozen land, the sleds dragged by human muscle alone.

It had been an epic journey; nobody would deny that. But in the end, it was perhaps only Xaia herself who had continued to believe—until at last the forward scouts had spotted the violet glow on the northern horizon.

Presumably the vanished race called the Dead had been nothing like humans, to have built such a city as like this. Even the lighting was exotic. There were no lamps or fires. The City itself glowed, the streets and the structures that lined them all shining a faint violet. Often, when the skies were clear, this strange, subtly shifting glow was answered by the flapping of auroras far above, as if the star-strewn sky was a mirror.

And there was an endless mobility. It was a "city" of streets and blocks and structures, like buildings or like trees, some of which grew and changed as you watched them. Chan said there were patterns everywhere in the City, in the branches of the tree-like structures and in how they interconnected, and even in the layout of the "streets"—if that was the right word, if these broad open avenues had a function anything like the streets in Orklund. Every day the scholar busily mapped what he could, walking the length of the City accompanied by crew holding up lamps. And every day, he said, he found the City changed, on every scale from the smallest to its largest. It had complexity and structure that changed in space and in time, he said, scribbling his maps and charts. He longed for the "computers" spoken of by the Founders, marvelous machines that could have analyzed such complexity at the touch of a button.

And Teif seemed to be right. *All of it was made of Purple*, the ubiquitous native weed that cost human farmers and gardeners so much energy in eradication. Kick a wall, push your hand through the side of a "building," and the substance crumbled down to elusive spore-like structures, blowing away on the wind from the north, perhaps to settle on some other part of the City, a subtle and endless rebuilding.

"Yes, it really is just Purple," Chan said at the end of the day, when Xaia and Teif and

the scouts had retreated to the igloo village they had constructed on the City's edge. "I say 'just.' The shining is a new phenomenon, though there have been reports of bioluminescent clumps before, found in caves and so forth."

Xaia said, "Some of the crew don't believe the City actually glows by its own light, but is just reflecting the aurora's glare."

Chan snorted. "That's easily disproved. Just bring a handful of the stuff into an igloo and douse the lamps. That's typical of the untrained mind, that it's incapable even of observing something that defies its own prejudices. In fact I suspect it may be the other way around. That the city's evolving patterns generate a kind of electrical activity, which in turn interacts with the aurora...."

Xaia shook her head. "I never heard of Purple behaving this way before."

Chan shrugged. "It could be that's because humans always treated Purple as just a weed, to be cleared out of the way so we could graze our cattle and plant our beans. It's said that the Founders' Shuttle pilots deliberately aimed *for* the densest Purple reef they could see, on the modern site of Ararat, in order to cushion their landing. It's only here, far beyond the reach of humans, that it can flourish in these complex communal forms."

"Complex how?" Xaia growled.

Chan produced a notebook and tried to show Xaia his calculations. "I'm doing my best, Lady. In the end, I fear, we'll have to come back here with a fully equipped expedition. I can only map the changing structure at the gross physical level. I've only a handful of measurements of the changing electrical fields, for instance. It's like trying to understand what's going on in a human brain by counting its folds. But still, I've tried doing raw counts of element types, and then mapped their distribution in space and time, and then done correlations on the clusters that analysis uncovered, and then correlations on *them*...." He shook his head. "It's not like a city. It is more like a brain—I believe. Or a machine for storing thoughts. And the patterns I'm detecting, flowing and changing, are like the traces of an ongoing conversation."

Xaia tried to understand. "And did the Dead build this?"

"No," Chan said. "Yes. I mean—I don't believe this is an artifact of the Dead, Lady. *I believe this is the Dead.* Or all that's left of them. Look, the biosphere of Earth II is not like Earth's, in that there is only *one* kind of multicelled organism, above a substrate of microbe analogues. Some of us in Ararat, and I know there are scholars in the Four Universities of Orklund who hold similar views, believe that such an arrangement is unnatural. Artificial."

Xaia said, "You believe the Dead created this."

"Yes! They rebuilt their entire biosphere, from the microbial level up."

"Why?"

"To store the best of themselves—all that's left of them. After half a billion years, their memories and philosophies, everything that defines them, are stored in the endless conversations of their living cities—cities that might have covered the planet's land surface before humans came."

“And why in this form?”

“For robustness. No spore of Purple is immortal; but the Purple itself is, as long as the planet lasts, the sun shines. And the patterns stored in the City cannot be lost, as long as the City itself survives in some form. Break it down and it just grows back. Of course, they had to plan for calamity, for repeated and disastrous events, just as we must if we wish to survive on this world. They must have decided it was futile just to rebuild another city of the human type, like the one we found in the Reef—”

Xaia was struggling to follow this. “*What* ‘repeated and disastrous events’?”

Chan stared. “The axial tipping. You mean you don’t *know*?”

And Xaia learned for the first time of the coming axial excursion, and the damage it was likely to cause to the human world.

Xaia dug into her pocket and found the Orb Manda had taken from Ossay Lange’s bloody eye socket. She twisted it this way and that, pointing its polar axis toward the igloo’s central fire’s glow, and away from it. “If the scholars at Ararat know about this, so must ours,” she said to Teif. “Why was I never told? Why not our predecessors as Speaker?”

Teif snorted. “Those brain-cases always have their own agenda. A juicy bit of knowledge like this gives you power. You don’t want to waste it by revealing it to the rabble, or their leaders.”

Chan said, “There might be nobler motives. Maybe they thought there would be panic if this was made known.”

Xaia asked, “Is this common knowledge in Ararat?”

“Oh, yes. Ask anybody.”

“And is there panic?”

Chan shrugged. “You’ve been to Ararat. We tend not to get worked up.”

On impulse Xaia got to her feet, ducking to avoid the low ice ceiling, and pushed her way out through the skins that covered the entrance. The sky was clear, the stars like shreds of bone. Under the cold auroral glow the City of the Living Dead was bathed in its own violet light. She thought she could hear a soft sifting noise as its billions of living components, each almost too small for the eye to see, sorted through their endlessly repeating configurations.

Light streamed across the sky: a meteorite, whose billion-year career ended in a spark of light.

Teif came staggering out after her. He carried a heap of coats, but he stumbled and dropped them on the iron-hard ice. Chan followed, and grabbed a coat for himself and draped another over Xaia. “Fifty below,” Teif murmured, his breath frosting. “Wear a coat, Lady, the cold will kill you....” He slumped to his knees. Chan knelt over him and tried to haul his great bulk back against the wall of the igloo, and covered him with the remaining coats.

Xaia faced the City, and held the Orb in fingers turning numb with the cold. “I

feel—betrayed. My ancestors traveled light years to come here. I traveled around the world, a journey just as hard. I came for treasure. But there is no treasure here, is there?”

Chan said, “Only the frozen conversation of a culture half a billion years dead. Is that treasure?”

“No wonder the stories of this place are so fragmentary. Even the Founders must have failed to understand what they observed. Well, here’s what I understand. There is nothing here that cares anything for me or mine. The planet itself is going to try to shrug us off. And when it does, this Purple, this heaped-up decaying stuff, will crawl out of refuges like this and take back all we have built. And as for the Founders—look at us, with our wooden ships and our clumsy guns; look at us, still merely retracing their footsteps. What a disappointment we would be to them. I imagine they would wish they had never succeeded in reaching Earth II in the first place. Well, here’s what I say to the Founders.”

She flung the Founders’ Orb at the City, as hard as she could.

Teif gasped, “My Lady ... no...” His words broke up in a coughing fit.

Chan, cradling him, became frantic. “Lady Xaia—he is bleeding again.”

Xaia knelt down and thrust her hand under the coats. The whole of Teif’s right side was damp, with blood that was quickly freezing. “We have to get you inside,” she murmured.

“No bloody point,” Teif gasped. “You’ll only be lugging me out in the morning, stiff and stinking.” He gripped her arm, but with fading strength. “*Go home*, Lady. Promise me that.”

“I will. Tomorrow, we turn back. Good Teif, you did your duty—more than I deserved.”

“And when you get to Orklund, when you get back, there’s a woman in the Garment District, Bella her name is ... Find her for me, Lady. Tell her ... tell her the money I owe her...”

“Hush now,” she murmured, and put a bloody finger on his lips. His eyes were already closing, frosting over. “Come on,” she said to Chan. “Let’s get him inside before we all freeze in place.”

* * * *

X

“The last of the frost,” said Thom, as he walked with Proctor Chivian over the hillside above the nascent Library.

It was a bright day, the sun climbing high in the sky as the world spun toward its spring equinox, and even the workers in the Library’s foundation trenches looked cheerful. Thom himself, not given to elaborate show, felt rather splendid in his bright ceremonial robes, where the crimson thread caught the sunlight.

He glanced around to see the ceremonial party, scholars and Proctors and representatives of the various parliamentary parties, picking their way across the short, sheep-cropped grass. And there was Maxx, fifteen now and spectacularly taller after a year’s growth, walking alongside old Jan Stanndish, as ever the two of them talking and gesturing, blind to everything but the speculations they shared. All of them had clambered

out of the city of Orklund to this hillside to commemorate the deposition of the Hundred and Eight Books of the Founders in the Library's central vault—the kernel of the place, already planted securely underground, even though the rest of the structure had barely been begun. The Books themselves were set on a pallet on a hillside, an unspectacular pile ready for interment—exposed to the elements, and yet, as far as Thom was aware, the only copies of these precious, ancient texts in existence.

The footprints they left in the frost were vanishing fast.

“Indeed, the last frost of the winter,” said Proctor Chivian. “One can always tell.” He took a deep breath of air, opening up his wide nostrils.

Thom himself could smell the scents of sap, of growing grass, of spring. “The seasons change so quickly around the equinox, from coldspring to the torrid heat of hotspring, just a few weeks. It always seems to catch me by surprise.”

“So it should,” Proctor Chivian said. “We humans evolved as tropical animals on Earth—a planet, I remind you, of moderate seasonality. It's said that even on Earth those who lived at high latitudes felt surprised every year at the abrupt changes of length of the day—”

“This is Earth II. Not Earth. Why speak of a planet none of us will ever see?”

Thom whirled, shocked by the familiar yet half-forgotten voice. “*Xaia*...?”

And there she was, dressed in drab, scuffed armor. Warriors stood by her, all women, many of them apparently carrying injuries, all weather-beaten, sunburned or with the characteristic scars of frostbite on their faces—or both. Two of her crew carried torches, their burning an anomalous sight in the bright morning light. *Xaia* stood beside the Books, casually leaning with one gloved hand on the pile.

Thom felt a yearning to run to her, a physical compulsion like a steel cable yanking at his guts. Yet with Proctor Chivian standing stiff at his side, with the Library project splayed over the hillside, he could not move.

Maxx had no such inhibitions. He broke away from Jan Stanndish and ran to his mother. “Mom! Mom!” They embraced, though *Xaia* seemed shocked by how much he had grown in the years she'd been away. “You're back! But where are the others, Manda and Teif?”

“Dead, and dead,” she said softly. “Both gave their lives to save mine—or to help me achieve my goals. Too many died on the way back—including those who drowned as we tried to run the rapids on the Belt's greatest river, a perilous course Teif warned me against. Why, I only brought one ship back, the *Cora*; the others I didn't send home are wrecked or sunk or cannibalized.... Oh, it's been an expensive trip. And if you want its story,” she said to Thom and the Proctor, “ask Chan Hil, scholar of Ararat, who is writing it all down even now. *That* will be a story worth reading,” she said, glancing with contempt at the Books piled beside her. “A story of *our* world, of our achievements. Not the dead past.”

The rest of the parliamentarians and scholars had caught up now, and were forming a loose horseshoe around the Books and *Xaia*, Thom, and the Proctor. The parliamentarians muttered, agitated by *Xaia*'s challenging tone. Even the workers in their foundation trenches, aware that something was going on, were leaning on their shovels and

watching.

Suddenly this was a sensation, Thom saw, the incident exploding into a turning point in his relationship with Xaia, and their sharing of power. He touched the Orbs at his neck, caught himself doing it, and dropped his hand. "I looked out for you. I missed you every day."

"I'm sure you did." She sounded sincere.

"And, unable to consult you, I put off as many decisions as I could."

"But not this one." She gestured at the Library workings.

Thom felt anger simmer. "You show up like this after years away.... A decision had to be made. The Proctor and others made a good case."

"About the world's axis tipping? Yes, I learned all about that too."

"You should have come home, after Brython. You should not have stayed away."

"I did not 'stay away.' I went somewhere else."

"Yes," the Proctor sneered. "You searched for the City of the Living Dead. A fool in pursuit of a fantasy."

There was a stir among the parliamentarians, but Xaia, to Thom's relief, did not react.

"And what did you find, Lady, in the wastes of the north?"

"I found the City," she said, evoking a gasp from her audience. "I found the Dead—what is left of them. Frozen thoughts in mounds of Purple. That's all. They wait for us to pass from this world, like other blights of the past, so they can fill up our abandoned fields and cities with their Purple heapings. In the meantime they dream of the glory days of a half billion years ago.

"But we are the same." Abruptly she grabbed at Thom's necklace of Orbs; when the thread gave he felt a sharp burn at the back of his neck. "Here is our most precious artifact, our definition of power. Toys given to us by the Founders. Here, when we could be building our own cities for the future, we dig holes in the ground to preserve the Founders' words.

"I say, it's time to forget the Founders. Forget the Dead, and the billions who died on the Earth. Their memory crushes us, as if we are no more than moss on the feet of a statue. History doesn't matter. Life is all. You won't build a Library here, Proctor."

He grinned, cold, complacent. "Then what in its place?"

"Better a statue to me, a hero of Earth II, than to a world lost in the sky."

"Your arrogance is so overweening it is absurd."

She grinned. "Quite possibly." And she reached out, took a torch from one of the bearers and lowered it to the Books of the Founders.

“No!” Chivian lunged forward and would have flung himself on the Books, but Xaia’s warriors fielded him easily.

The Books of the Founders, old and dry, caught alight immediately.

Thom was appalled at the act, yet something dark in him surged with joy at the destruction, and at Chivian’s devastated reaction. “So it is true,” he said maliciously. “These really are the only copies. You foolish old men.”

Jan Stanndish came marching forward, waving a spindly fist. “What have you done, Lady? This is a crime that will ring down the generations.”

“On the contrary. I have set those generations free. We are orphans. We are rejected by this planet. To our ancestors we were a goal to be fulfilled, worthless in ourselves. Well, no more; let us build a world for ourselves. And we will start, here in Zeeland, by consolidating the empire I have sketched out in the Scatter and on the Belt, as far north as any human has ever traveled.”

The Proctor, trembling, managed to sneer. “Such petty ambitions. And when the axis tip comes?”

“We will survive, and build again.” She held up her arms. “Let it come! Let it cleanse us of the rot of the past!”

“There will be war over this!” Chivian roared, struggling.

Some of the parliamentarians ran over to remonstrate with him. Others took the Proctors’ side against Xaia. Feeble punches were thrown.

To Thom’s astonishment, Maxx forced himself into the middle of the crowd. “No! No fighting. *Think of the Founders*. The Books are gone, there’s nothing to be done about that. Whatever lies ahead now, we must work together. That’s what the Founders would have wanted. Let a healing peace be the Founders’ last gift to us....”

Xaia came to Thom. “He’s turning out to be a smart kid.”

“Wiser than either of us,” he said ruefully. They stood together, not quite touching, not quite apart. “I think we need some healing peace of our own.”

“Yes,” she said. “And in my case, a change of clothes and a damn good bath.”

“And then what? Will you start planning your statue?”

“Oh, I wasn’t serious about that. Well, not much. Enough mythology; we’ve too much to do.... You were close to old Teif, weren’t you? Did you ever hear of a woman called Bella, in the Garment District...?”

She linked his arm, and they walked away from the burning Books and the squabbling scholars and politicians, across the dewy grass toward the town. With a shout their son followed them.