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Islands
by Marta Randall
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Fantasy

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Journey
for
Three Richards
one Nell
and
a Margaret
with love

Introduction

If you've ever dealt with material scanned into a computer, you know that it can come across with all sorts of interesting glitches. In preparation for the electronic publication of this, my first novel, eReads.com sent me the file of the book to proof-read. I had not read Islands since its 1980 reissue. As I did so this time I felt as though I was holding a dialog with myself across the decades. The book is full of energy and inventiveness and tackles all sorts of Big Issues; now, though, I see the vigor and passion with a more experienced eye and can see where the story could be better expressed, tightened, trimmed to its task. As a writer and, more particularly, as a writing teacher it was impossible to resist the urge to meddle, and I gave in to the temptation. It felt as though Marta the teacher was reaching back to Marta the young writer, lending the experience of thirty years to help shape the story the way that both of us envisioned it, then and now. It has been a peculiar form of time-travel.

The book is shorter than it was, and simpler, and, I think, one hell of a lot better. But it's still (as an early reviewer said) all about sex and drugs and death and transcendence -- the natural subject matter of the young. The changes are not drastic ones: I think the book is well served by this revision and its readers will, I hope, agree.

Petaluma, California

2001

1

Far below me invisible surf smashed against invisible rocks, ebbing with a vast, sucking rush over the stones. The night wind was cold under frigid stars; the moon, breaking through clouds, cast a diffused glow across the sea. Deep in the base of my spine, something twinged and nagged and sent

out a familiar, exploratory shaft of pain. I gripped the textured redwood of the rail with both hands and willed the cold to move in a straight line through me, up to my back and heart and mind, but the numbness reached only to my knees before it ebbed again. The pain blossomed.

Paul and Jenny, two stories below me, curled around each other in the large transparent bed and made love quietly so that I, presumably in the room just below them, would not hear. Considerate of them. I had heard them as I passed their room on my way to the roof balcony, the small gasps of pleasure, the sound of Paul in orgasm. Still the same, that sound, after all the years. Remembering, I clung to the rail until the pain lessened and I could breathe again. It was a mistake to invite them here, I told myself. Stupid to think that it wouldn't bother me, stupid to think that I was over it, over wanting at all. Idiocy, and I am well punished for it.

Eventually I stopped shaking and the pain became a small reminder, never gone but not, now, bigger than the world. I released the railing and slipped down the spiral stairs, past the murky glow of the sea-facing windows, past the landing by the guest room door. I closed and locked my door behind me and spoke to the lights. As they came up my reflection leaped at me from the large window and there I stood, Tia in the flesh, the drug-resisting meat. Tia the anomaly, the freak. Flat stomach crossed again and again by lines, breasts hanging low but never large enough to make much difference; ass wrinkled, thighs sinewy and shrunken, calves the same; skinny arms ending in big, square, capable hands. Face weathered around brown eyes, skin parched and lined as driftwood, hair streaked with grey and dry from constant exposure to the sun. Dry lady, driftwood hag. I must age but I would not disguise it, no creams, plastic surgeries, cosmetics. Let them be uncomfortable at the sight of Tia Hamley, growing ungracefully old in a world of the forever young.

But I would hide this unexpected torture at the memory of Paul's sounds of pleasure, at the thought of my former lover and his current lover coupling in my guest room. A secret, yes, held close between me and my window and the beast at the base of my spine. Hush.

2

Fifty years ago he was my lover, when I was seventeen and he twenty-seven. He was easy in his youth, looking as he does now: grey-green eyes muted to hazel brown in the evenings; long gold and brown hair swept around a strong-boned face; a slight build, narrow about the shoulders and hips; quick in his movements, in his words. A good, pleasing body, and he had not opted to have it changed.

And I? Portrait of the freak as a young girl? Rounded and firm, masses of auburn hair constantly falling into brown eyes, almost as tall as Paul. I remember her as laughing, sparkling, singing in her chains like the sea. Poised on the brink of eternity, waiting for my body to stabilize enough to take the Immortality Treatments.

When the time came we walked singing to the clinic and Paul left me for a week while they bombarded my body and brain with chemicals, rays, and spirits, trying to blast away the mortality in ways which were then great mysteries and which I have since studied at desperate length, to no avail. Paul was waiting for me when I left the clinic and we capered about the Himalayas, watched the sun set over the Rockies and the moon rise from the Pyrenees, spent ecstatic ages in the underwater city of Venice. A year later I returned to the clinic for the rest of the treatments. They kept me there and tested, and tested, and finally told me that it hadn't worked.

At all.

I would live a long time, yes, they would see to it Not forever, no, we're terribly sorry. You're unique, you know. Maybe one hundred, maybe one hundred and fifty years. We're sorry.

Maybe two hundred. It's not so bad, to live two hundred years. You'll live quite well, you know. We'll see to it. We'll pay you for it; we need you. As much as you need us.

You'll live very well.
But not youthfully.
So sorry.

After a while I went away sterile and lived on the moon, spent years alone in the station orbiting the sun, lived on Mars, and came back middle-aged to a world of the young. I bought my house on the California Archipelago, found a job, tried to lose myself in the convoluted involvement of dredging the ocean bottom for the past. Accepted Paul and his lady into my home, recognized the shock in his eyes as they disembarked from the cruiser and I stepped forward to meet them: "This is the woman I slept with, so many years ago?"

No, I told him in my mind. No, she's gone, she of the sleek round body and auburn hair. I'm just borrowing her name.

3

I go, sometimes, for days without remembering that they will probably never let me die. They need me, those who specialize in the archaic art of gerontology. They believe there will be no others like me; they have guaranteed that I can't reproduce. Of course they won't let me go. I will grow older and older, drying with age until I become a grasshopper caged in some kind institution's basement, amid the wires and machines; a legend used to threaten our few children into obedience. Nightmare stuff. I should practice for my part, drool at odd hours of the day, pace around the Ilium's decks shouting apocalyptic nonsense. But most of my colleagues are terrified enough of me already, even those fifty or one hundred and fifty years older than I.

Many years before, moping through the library at Luna, I had entertained a pleasant fantasy. I would re-enter the Treatment Center in southern Africa, a smiling attendant would touch a hidden button and an image would form in the middle of the room. An image of a bronzed and laughing woman, firm and youthful. And, my payment of suffering completed, I would be allowed to become that woman again. Gazing at my reflection in the darkened window, that first night of Paul's visit, I remembered the silly, seductive illusion of my youth, frowned at the actual image, and prepared for sleep.

4

Paul awakened early and came out to where I puttered around my sand garden, playing at cultivating the tough beach grasses. He brought me a cup of coffee and I stopped work to talk with him.

No, he hadn't changed. He sprawled over the stone bench, naked and at ease in the morning breezes. I, of course, was clothed; it was as much a source of wonderment to my colleagues as my greying hair and lined face. I lowered my gaze to my archaic stoneware cup and we talked about our found Atlantis.

"You've confused your legends," I told him. "It's Hawaii, some parts of the islands that sank during the Great Shaping. Interesting, yes, but not Atlantis."

Paul shrugged. What did he know of Atlantis? "And you are looking for..."

Youth, I was tempted to tell him. The Fountain of Immortality, the Philosopher's Stone.

"Anything," I said. "Houses, artifacts, artwork. Sometimes we find old safes, watertight, full of papers and other perishables. Machines, materials, jewelry, bits and pieces of other people's lives."

He looked appreciative. He had to, of course. He and Jenny were spending quite a bit to work with us for three months, under the blankets of the sea.

"What have you found?"

"This and that. You'll see most of it later this morning, when you go down to the ship. There's a museum on board. I'm still working to systematize it but it'll give you an idea of what we look for when we go under."

He nodded, still smiling. His gaze disturbed me. I looked over the edge of the cliff toward the waters. The mainland was a fuzz on the horizon; the clouds of the night before had disappeared with the dawn, leaving the air infinitely blue and infinitely clean. Far out, seabirds hovered and swept.

"And you, Tia?"

"Um?"

"How have you been? It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has," I said. "I've been well, thank you. Is Jenny up? It's time for breakfast and I should get you to the dock early. Tobias will be waiting."

"I'll see," he replied, stood, stretched, and loped toward the house.

I resisted watching him and bent instead to my plants. How had I been, indeed. How had he expected me to have been? Was this young Immortal mocking me? Playing games with my emotions?

Or only being polite?

Or all of the above, or none of the above, or Tia you are becoming paranoid. I left my garden and went into the house to prepare breakfast.

5

I do not like my kitchen. I tried to hide the equipment when I reconstructed the room, but it still intrudes, the storage units and recall units and heaters standing out in alien bleakness against the solemnity of my home. The house speaks to me; it too grows old beyond its time, it too contains modern intrusions, just as I contain bits of pipe and plastic, replacements and repairs.

I discovered the house when I first joined the project and began looking for somewhere other than aboard the Ilium to live. The house is ancient, pre-Shaping, made from the wood of the now extinct redwood. Constructed in a series of cubes and rectangles, it perches on the edge of a cliff and spills over to hang above the surf. That it had not disappeared ages ago was the work of some Immortal who had shored the building haphazardly with a collection of forcefields and ugly plasteel stilts, then abandoned it when it no longer served his purpose. Its ability to withstand the depredations of both time and incompetent repairs, more than anything else, endeared it to me. I traced the owner to a brothel in Gagarin, and after some trouble reminding him that he owned the house, succeeded in buying it.

I also bought the land for two square kilometers around the house, and spent the majority of my time between voyages rebuilding. I had the foundations rebuilt, removed the hideous struts. Contracted with a firm in Africa specializing in rare and extinct woods who developed something close to the original redwood. That part wasn't hard: reshaping the past in plastics is a favored Immortal pasttime. I jigsawed, tucked, gathered and nipped until the house was in as near its original shape as possible. I bought old pots and filled them with plants, I re-glazed the windows with antique polarized glass; had weavers make me rugs from ancient patterns, bought solid sculpture and old paintings. The real stuff, where I could find it. Cracked and stained and solid and good.

No one likes it but me, naturally. The walls are fixed in place, won't flow and move at one's least command. The furniture is furniture, not invisible forcefields that mold themselves to your every contour. You have to make some concessions to my furniture, you have to compromise, reach an agreement with it. My bed will not turn into a table for you, nor will my fireplace (yes, a real fireplace, and I burn real wood in it with real fire) become a chair. Solid, as I am. Firmly rooted in the reality of its own existence.

It's all a front, of course. Turn my house into a version of my own monstrosity and convince myself that freakery is a great and good thing. Still, it helps, and who am I to refuse the comforts of self-deception?

6

They had wanted me to stay at the clinic after the second useless try at the Immortality Treatments, wanted me to be where they could poke and pry and test, but I wouldn't stay and they couldn't make me. They threatened to call me before the claims and adjudication council in Berne, but the Law says: "No person shall damage or defraud, or cause to be damaged or defrauded, any other person," and that's it. They could not force me to be the sole occupant of their new zoo. I left quickly, before Paul could be notified, and wandered about the face of the earth. Four days in Istanbul, eight weeks in Australia, two days in Beijing, one week in the quiet seashore city of Diablo, gazing east from the island across the California Sea to the Sierras, gazing west beyond Tam Island at the Pacific Ocean. Paul found me there and I fled so far north that north ran out and I sat at the top of the globe, shivering in the heat of the large hotel. I wandered the fringes of the arctic, watched the aurora streak and curtain across the darkening sky. Spent time below the surface of the snows, down in the echoing Caverns of Ice.

"See this," said the guide. We stood within the invisible walls of a floating platform, gaping at the curving walls around us. "The Ancients laid their cables in a great grid under the arctic ice, using submarines to guide the initial operations and primitive remotes to do the actual placement. You can see traces of them here, and here, and here. They believed that in order to keep the melt equal at all levels, they needed more heat here, below, than on the surface. Does anyone know why they wanted to melt the ice at all?"

A group of Immortals giggled together; somebody raised a hand and recited the facts everybody knew, about global warming, the changed climate, the heavy rains that dropped their burdens on the oceans instead of on the lands, about the droughts and famines, about thirst.

"Exactly," the guide said. "The need for fresh water was desperate. Of course we know that they should have laid their grid at the edges of the ice shelf and melted off those sections first, and floated them down to cities and croplands. Who knows why they didn't?"

The Immortals giggled. The Good Student raised his hand again.

"Politics?"

"Politics," the guide agreed. "No country wanted to be last, no country wanted any other country to be first. That's one of the reasons we don't have countries any more."

Even then I knew that this was fatuous, but I didn't care. I stared at the ice walls and imagined the story happening now, the miscalculations, how the ice melted, heated, boiled, melted more ice, until the core of the ice mass liquified. Ocean levels rose as the melt escaped; eventually only a skin of ice covered a sea of water and when it broke, tremendous walls of water moved south, pulsing down the curve of the globe. The guide, saying this, shrugged as though one could hardly have expected better of parties who were not, after all, immortal.

The floating platform stopped before a wall of layered ice, clean and fresh toward the bottom, increasingly dirty as we rose, and broken by bands almost black with pollution near the top. The Immortals jostled close to the edge, peering at the grime. I moved away from them and stared down at the bottom of the cavern, imagined it bursting with boiling water, shivered, and turned to the guide again.

"The lack of pressure at the pole caused the earth's tectonic plates to shift, leading to earthquakes and volcanic upheavals. Because of the decline of fossil fuels, the Ancients built nuclear plants in haste and without necessary precautions. Some of these were located along fault lines or near oceans, in the path of the walls of Arctic waters. Here, on our left, is a hologrammatic representation of the line of volcanic and radioactive activity during the decades following..."

My attention wandered again. I had come to the Caverns hoping to solace the small tragedy of my own life with the greater tragedy of the past, but found no comfort. The Ancients had engineered the destruction of their world. I had not engineered the destruction of mine. I spent the remainder of the

tour staring down at the frigid wonders below.

We emerged into the lobby of the hotel where I saw the familiar and unwelcome figure of Paul. We argued violently and at length, *_sotto voce_* in the crowded restaurant, in hisses and whispers in the bars, in screams and shouts at the door to my room where I would not let him in. When worried guards appeared to calm the uproar, I fled again, out of the hotel, into a hastily rented hopper and far from him and his pleas that I spend the remainder of my brief time growing ugly in the shelter of his arms. I knew even as I fled that I did not evade Paul so much as the knowing that he knew, as though if I hid myself, my mortality, somehow it would not happen to me at all.

I look back at myself before the Treatments as though at a stranger. I look back at myself after the Treatments as though at a different stranger. I see, in fact, a line of strangers, like the receding images from two tilted mirrors. Some of them I do not understand at all.

7

I liked the Jenny-creature. An unforeseen development, which I pondered over breakfast. She moved with grace, unselfconsciously, slipping an occasional comment into the conversation that was sharp, to the point, and often quite funny. But for the most part she kept her peace, watching Paul and me with her quiet green eyes. She wasn't pretty, hadn't opted for cosmetic surgery, so that her nose was a bit too big, a bit too sharp; her high, fine and out-of-fashion cheekbones rode above unfashionably concave cheeks. A mass of black hair fell over her shoulders.

She was bothered by me, though, by my obvious age, my abruptness, my murmured sarcasms as I drove them in my ancient electric hover-car down the steep dirt roads to the dock. Did she know of my history with Paul? For that matter, did Paul really know anymore, did he remember Venice, or was it a vague piece of knowledge tucked into the back of his mind and forgotten? After all, it couldn't have been too pleasant, looking at my aging self and recollecting our brief passion, eons back. Did it even matter?

Yes. To me.

8

They hated my car, the road, my driving. I knew they would. Paul clutched the arm-rest on the passenger side and Jenny, sandwiched between us, clutched Paul, as I swung the little car around the steep curves of the road. Perfectly safe, that road and my driving of it; I knew every small bend and switchback, every place where water accumulated during rainfalls and where dried leaves fell in autumn. The road and the land through which it passes are beautiful but my passengers hid in their fear and did not see the beauty, and I was again exasperated by the typical, infuriating terror of the Immortals. I speeded up. The little car squealed and skidded. I forgot my sarcasms and concentrated on control, feeling the flight between my hands, the sharp rocking as the aircushions below encountered unevenness, the wind through my hair. I must have looked the maniac, grinning into the wind, for Paul and Jenny were pale and stiff as we rounded the last swing but one in the road, and I reversed thrust and pulled over.

"There she is," I said, gesturing out toward the sea. They came out of their terror, followed the line of my arm, saw the *_Ilium_*, and gasped.

Imagine an iceberg, pointed at bow and stern, rising straight and clean from waterline to decks. Below the waterline the hull flares to cover the antigrav housing, the generators, beamers, all the apparatus of movement and of flight. Above the waterline, form and function reach a new agreement. The *_Ilium_* is a broad-beamed cathedral of a ship, spired and buttressed, castellated, crystalline; a floating opera, a palace, a folly. Three hundred years of Immortal tinkering have turned her from a plain, white grav-schooner to an illustration from an ancient, fantastical story book; only the boundaries of her hull limit the fantasy of her decks. The morning sunlight

shattered against windows and metal arches, poured down smooth sides and bounced from intricate ones, picked out an arched and colored window here, a minaret there, a series of wrought-iron balconies. Staircases spiraled endlessly; colonnades appeared unexpectedly and just as unexpectedly disappeared; flags of many hues rippled from the top of each tower, turret, minaret, and spire. The Ilium flew her gaudy colors proudly as she sat scrubbed and gleaming a kilometer from the shore. My passengers stared, open-mouthed, and in thanks for their awe I drove sedately the remaining kilometer to the dock.

I stopped the rotor. They clambered from the car and stood holding each other and gazing at the ship while Tobias, slouched against the metal arch of the dock's entrance, pulled himself upright and came toward us. He stopped a yard away and, leaving Paul and Jenny to their awe, he scowled at me. I returned the courtesy.

Beautiful Tobias. Mass of curly, golden hair, Grecian-perfect face, eyes an intense blue. Tanned, graceful, sensuous. When clothed, and he was clothed surprisingly often for an Immortal, he wore ragged pants or grease-stained suits, knowing that the contrast heightened his own beauty. Tobias hated me. Perhaps I was too great a contrast, perhaps he thought my ugliness threatened his fairness. For whatever reason, Tobias hated me and I found the hate refreshingly unlike the polite, uneasy masks of the other Immortals. We silently reaffirmed our mutual aversion, standing there in the hot July sunlight beside the wonder-struck novices. He dropped his glance first.

"Are you coming out to the ship," he demanded, staring over my left shoulder.

"No, I'm busy today. I'll be down on time tomorrow morning. Am I needed?"

"Not at all," he replied, and smiled like a sullen child in on some secret. He knew damned well that today was my regular reaming-out day. I turned from him in disgust and called to Paul and Jenny.

"This is Tobias Gamin, he'll take you out to the Ilium and show you around, introduce you to people. Tobias, can you see that they get back to my place this evening?"

"Sure," he replied. The three gave each other a casual, sexual once-over, evaluating, picking, choosing. Such an easy, unconfined sexuality these people have: if it moves, fuck it. If that wasn't entirely fair, I didn't care. Still, I moved, and nobody fucked me.

"Paul Ambuhl, Jenny Crane," I said, completing the introductions, and turned toward my car. Paul followed and laid a hand on my arm. I stared at it, shocked at the contact.

"Tia, thanks for putting us up."

"No problem." I tried to move my arm but he kept his light grip and, wetting his lips, continued.

"Look, have we done something wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"It's just that you're so, well, abrupt. I was wondering if maybe we'd, well, you know..."

"No, you haven't done anything wrong. Why don't you get back to Tobias now, okay? I've got an appointment in an hour."

I slipped away from him and into the driver's seat, started the car before he had a chance to reply, and left him on the dock behind me in the dust kicked up by the aircushions. I drove to the far end of the village, parked, and picked up a hopper for the short flight to the mainland. I wasted a few moments fuming over Paul's presumptive worries, then shrugged my anger away. One more evening and I would be free of them both. The Ilium sailed in the morning and I could easily avoid them once aboard. Flight, I thought, heals all. I banished the bother from my mind.

By the time my arctic miseries cleared and I knew that Paul had not followed me from the hotel, I had evolved a plan which seemed, to my aching and melodramatic mind, in all ways perfect. I had traveled only on Terra, following the tradition that children not yet old enough for the Immortality Treatments stayed on the home planet. So the moon was a place Paul and I had not visited together, would hold no associations for me; he would not think of following me there. With all the drama of the young, pursued by my private furies, I determined to turn my back on the earth. Two months after I left the clinic I boarded the shuttle to the city of Luna.

After the cushioned push of acceleration, the semi-gravity of the shuttle delighted me. I bounded through the cabin, clumsy and soaring. The other passengers kept to their seats or moved cautiously, clutching hand-holds. I scorned their crablike uncertainties and bounced around them.

In the viewing cabin I pressed against the port. The universe revolved, stars floating by in a stately dance. I tried to see the yellow glow of the space station but it lay directly in front of us and couldn't be seen from the viewing port. Hand-holds framed the port. I clung to them, captured by the beauty of the stars seen through the clarity of vacuum until, part of the cosmic dance, the moon crept upward, astoundingly clear, pockmarked, beloved, beautiful.

"Impressive, eh?"

I turned my face from the splendor of the moon and looked at the other occupant of the viewing cabin. He was a tall, broad man, with epicanthic eyes set above sculpted cheekbones, a large, hooked nose, and a thick beard covering his cheeks, chin, and upper lip. His hair, fairly closely cut, was still long enough to float in the light pseudo-gravity as he nodded toward the rising moon. Blunt fingers gripped a hand-hold and one leg rested, bent, against the ribbed wall. The dim lights of the room washed all color from him, so that he seemed a mountain of blacks and greys and whites. I returned my attention to the port and nodded.

"This is your first time to Luna and you're very young, right?"

"Yes," I replied, interested despite myself. "How did you know?"

"It's not hard to tell. Older folk are less likely to go flying around the cabin, and since you're young enough to do that, and a little clumsy, this is probably your first trip. About, what, twenty, twenty-one?"

"Does it matter how old I am?"

"No, not really. Just guessing. Nosy, eh? Are you going all the way to Luna?"

"Um."

"You might like it. Few people do, you know. They go up for the mining or the Library, the observatories, just to stare, but people don't usually like the place. You might, though. If you do, get out of Luna itself, get to some of the observatories, get up to the surface. It's not that dangerous."

"Have you gone out on the surface yourself?"

"Sure, it's part of my job. I work maintenance on the transport tubes. Our crews walk the surface, check things over, fix the places where small particles have broken through the tubes and been temporarily patched."

"I thought machines did that, robots and waldoes, not people."

"Machines make mistakes sometimes. And you can't trust a machine to make fast decisions the way a human can -- they have no judgment, so they make mistakes. Can't have that up here, the smallest mistake could cause a disaster." He gave me a monochromatic grin across the plate of the port. "Tell you what, if you spend some time on Luna, give me a call. Name's Greg Hartfeld. The comsystem'll connect you with me. You want to get out on the surface, I'll take you along some time."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm Tia Hamley. Maybe I'll call."

"Good!" He smiled, kicked himself away from the wall with practiced grace, and soared out the door. I remained in the dimness, debating whether or not I wished to interrupt my self-imposed dramatic exile with the pleasantries of walks on the surface of the moon, or with the company of Greg Hartfeld. The

moon, spectral and beautiful against the backdrop of the stars, moved out of sight beyond the lip of the port.

10

I landed the hopper in the unobtrusive lot in front of the hospital and climbed out. The building stood in a grove of pines, looking like a recreation of a nineteenth-century hunting lodge -- rough, wooden exterior, wooden balcony sweeping along the front of the building and around the right-hand corner, double-sashed windows, peaked roof, large stone fireplace -- all of it fake, made of treated polymers, cushioned by force-fields. They'd done a good job of hiding the function of the building, but it still subtly announced itself as a hospital. They all do, for some reason, no matter how cunningly fashioned they are, no matter how much fear leads to the disguise.

I entered the rusticized antisepsis of the waiting room. The receptionist led me to an instrument bank which confirmed my identity and took my vitals. Then, as usual, I spent time lying in the white-tinged forced waiting for them to begin. I gazed alternately out the window at the garden of blooming fuchsias and at the carefully colored walls of the ovoid room, so precisely designed to soothe angerephobic Immortals. How terrifying to be immortal, to have an eternity of youth to look forward to, and then to be ill, to be maimed, broken. How frightening to descend to the level of animals, for only animals sicken, only animals grow old, only animals die. Basic lesson of childhood, as important as the difference between little girls and little boys. How sad for the animals, for the cats and dogs and porcupines, who can't be Immortals, can't be eternally young, who must grow up and bear or engender young and grow old and die; that's it, the sum total of their existence, to have young ones and then pow! That's it. Thus the philosophizing of Tia at age seven, thus the ingrained and fought-against belief of Tia now, Tia who is one of those sad, sad animals.

So I lay in bed amid the oppressively pleasing colors and pretended that I was resigned to it all, above it all, serene, an adult. I basked in self-congratulations at my understanding of and compassion for those who needed the pastel tones.

All of which was wasted, of course. They floated me into the operating theater and I felt the same ancient terror rising in my throat. My fingers ached to claw at the invisible straps, my legs tensed to run, and the shine of sweat covered my skin. I had an image to maintain, though, and smiled at the nurse as he applied the electrodes to my skull.

"Well, good morning, here we are again," he said. He touched a lead and minute shafts of electronic anesthesia snapped through my brain. "How are we feeling this morning?"

He didn't expect an answer and I couldn't give him the sarcastic one waiting behind my closed lips. My muscles slackened, the fog-fingers of drowsiness pushed my head. They floated me under the large machines and hooked the plastic veins in my neck and right arm to the transfuser. A surgeon busied herself with the sterile wrappings over my torso while someone sitting at a read-out board called out a series of numbers and letters. I looked up at the curving bleachers, crowded with students, doctors, and other curious souls.

"All for me," I thought. "A whole fucking branch of medicine, all for me."

I must have said it aloud for the nurse bent over my face, said, "Why, we're awake" and goosed his dials. As he did so, I saw the doctor raise her hand in signal. The large machines hummed to life and I passed out.

I woke five hours later in my room. The windows were opaqued, the lights out. Monitors hummed. I lay still, feeling new blood rushing through my arteries. My chest ached from the marrow-tap, my belly from the pumping, but I soon felt my way beyond these small pains and into the complicated plumbing I hold inside. How clean everything felt, all the little machines, as they hummed and sloshed and thumped and gurgled. They'd cleaned out my lungs this time; I felt air moving through them, oxygen absorbing into the soft pink

lining and moving into my new blood, whispering its way up and down the channels and conduits; the tingling of cells in the layers of my skin; opening and closing of small petcocks, valves releasing minute flows into stomach and organs and bloodstream; smooth, rhythmic shuntings and pulsings; the tautness of muscle and ligament, the firmness of bone. I slipped through capillaries, floated through cavities of lungs and stomach, nestled briefly in the warmth of my womb, revelling in the feeling of freshness and life, convinced anew that I would live forever, with youth, health, eager energy.

Then I opened my eyes and stared into the mirror I insisted they program into the ceiling. I confronted the same grey hair, lined face, sagging body, dry skin. That's me, all right. I looked, fought bitterness, waited, and soon my insisted-on hour of post-operative privacy was ended and the doctors and nurses and surgeons and technicians and orderlies and students and bed-pan cleaners trooped into the room, eager to begin. How they love me, these inquisitive troops! How they gloat over me, examine my least quiver and twitch, agonize over my urine and exult over my feces. They are all geriatric specialists, and I am their only patient; they follow me about the world, about the galaxy, waving their syringes and collecting bottles in the fond hope that I will allow them pieces of myself. And I do, of course: they keep me alive and pay me for the privilege, as they promised decades ago, under a hot South African sun. I was generally pleased by the irony, that they provided me with enough money to do the dangerous things they so deplored.

After a while they unhooked me from the monitors and trickled from the room, each one clutching a treasured piece of information -- a bit of skin, a jar of urine, a small vial of sweat. Dr. Hoskins chased the lingerers out, closed the door, and perched at the foot of my bed.

"Well, how are you feeling?"

I shrugged and sat back against the cool resiliency of the bed. I almost liked Hoskins. Generally my doctors lasted between seven and twelve years before giving up gerontology, or, as was more likely (through, I hasten to add, no fault of my own), giving up medicine altogether. But Hoskins had trailed in my wake for almost eighteen years, and I had grown, if not fond of her, at least tolerant.

"As usual," I said, "thoroughly reamed out, all the pistons and gears functioning at peak again. How did it go?"

"Well. The kidneys won't need to be replaced for another year, but I want to keep an eye on the liver although you shouldn't have any trouble there for, oh, another two, three years or so. We cleaned out the lungs."

"Yes, I noticed."

She moved her smooth round face into a frown. "I wish you'd tell us how you do that, moving into yourself that way."

How they loved that question! I had heard it, with subtle and not subtle variations, over the past forty-five years and had long since ceased to let it anger me. But the answer, like the mysterious pain in my back, was something I kept privately; let them poke and pry and postulate -- these things, at least, were my own.

"I've told you," I lied. "Meditation. Practice. It's in the old books. It's simply a question of training."

"But you can't control it, can you?"

"I can control the awareness-state, sure. But I can't control what goes on inside me, any more than you can. I can only observe." And that much, at least, was true.

She tugged at her amber-colored hair, the corners of her mouth tightened in concentration. "Dr. Evert spent ten years trying to do what you do." I nodded. "He couldn't get into it. He attained all the preliminary stages, but he just couldn't manage the last one."

"Perhaps," I suggested maliciously, "the Treatments make it impossible. Maybe you need to be dying to move inside yourself."

"Nonsense," she said. She stood, shook a wrinkle from her sleek tunic, told me I could leave in another hour, and departed the room, having asked her

usual question and obtained the same answer. How it must have galled her to be faced with a problem she couldn't solve; a depth, corner, piece of me that she couldn't probe and analyze with her machines, her tapes, her knowledge. I rose from the bed, cleared the windows, and sat gazing at the flowering plants outside.

"Simply a question of training," I'd told her. As though I knew. For I'd been taken there by a short-cut, decades ago, while orbiting a furious sun. And knew little more of the process than she did.

11

Fifty years ago I had left another clinic in a state of shock, tried to find solid ground beneath my feet, and failed.

It takes a while for big things to sink in. I stumbled from the clinic into the hot South African sunlight and did not fully comprehend what had happened, what I had been told. On the cruiser headed north the tides of it finally broke over me; I sat shivering and alone, huddled in a corner of the ponderous airboat as it glided and bumped over veldt and savannah, over mountains and seas. When I stumbled out at Istanbul, I left behind not only the cruiser, but whatever childhood the world was to give me.

Istanbul is a quiet city. The restoration is complete, but very tiny; some mosques, some medieval palaces, a few cobbled streets, the bridge across the Bosphorus. Hagia Sophia in miniature. A pocket Topkapi. Fragrant plants grow along the tops of walls and the ledges of buildings, great clusters of blossoms spilling down the stones. Occasional soft music from distant, closed, cool rooms. Small cafes with one or two people waiting silently within them. A hot, bright sun.

City of dreams. City of silence. City of pounding sunlight. City with a thousand beds, and each one carrying an Immortal in stupor, head filled with gaudy images, scents and sounds, tastes and touches, body neatly tucked into its life-support station. A constant euphoria is purveyed in the city of dreams, an unchanging ecstasy, seductive, solemn, and silent.

I could have stayed at the port, at the great crossroads between the East and West, and never ventured into Istanbul. But I shouldered my bag and took the hopper into the city. What Immortal needed dreams more than I? To whom would constant fantasy be more useful? Oh, I was young, and stupid, and in shock, and grasped at the first escape that presented itself.

The couches were full and I had to wait two days. I left the cool peace of the hotel every morning, had coffee and cakes in a cafe, then wandered the city at length, peering at the newly-old buildings and streets, at the waters of the seas and the distant shoreline. I avoided the Immortals, half convinced that they could see my secret, that the vicious, invincible signs of aging already streaked across my face. I wore clingsuits through the heat and kept my head well down. I was eighteen.

When the time came, people in gauzy harem clothes offered me a brocaded couch and a sleeping potion from a crystal cup. Once I slept they would float me into the dreaming room, affix the tubes and wires of the life-support to me and, when all was set, introduce the dreaming drug to my veins. I was more than ready.

Drug dreams come in strength and go quickly, and I cannot remember what, exactly, they were, nor where, exactly, they took me. I do remember a world of wonder and light, an exotic garden of fantastical fruits and imaginary beings, an Eden I had created, and with which I could have my way. So easy, so easy, to spend the remainder of my life in this self-made paradise, letting my body slide into death while I wasn't around to notice. So very sweet.

But I couldn't do it. No matter what the ecstasy or how seductive the image, a small, rebellious thing in my brain told me that it was only a dream, not real, no substance. A fantasy. A fraud.

At the end of my forty-eight hours they unhooked the life-machines, brought me from the dream-state, and asked if I wanted to go in again. I said

no and thanked them, slung my bag over my shoulder and left Istanbul, turned my back on dreams.

But not because I wanted to.

12

I backed my battered car down the landing groove into the garage and noticed a hopper parked by the door. Odd; who would be visiting here? Then I noticed the chrome, the dents on the back wings, the bright cerise seats. Tobias' hopper, but the driver's seat was pulled too far forward to accommodate that big bastard, and Tobias would never put his hopper under a roof. I was still puzzling it out as I walked from the garage to the house.

Paul and Jenny sat on a lower balcony, one that twisted halfway around the side of a redwood cube. They waved up at me as I approached the front door. They must have borrowed the hopper from Tobias and come up by themselves. Which meant, first, that my driving had terrified them more than I thought and, second, that one of them must either have screwed Tobias already or be planning to do so in the near future. Tobias never loaned anything without an assurance of getting some return for it. I waved back at them and entered the house, clattered down the twisting wooden staircase, past the bright stained-glass windows and the small ledges covered with potted plants, and paused at the kitchen floor. My guests had already cooked themselves dinner -- empty food containers littered the counter by the sink, the restored cooker was still lit. I turned off the cooker and tossed the garbage down the chute. At the foot of the stairs I found two liftpacks, piled casually on the bottom step. Liftpacks! With their youth and health they should be able to cope with the stairs for one more day. I was tempted to remove the power units, but didn't. They would garner quite a few bruises trying to use them; the staircase coiled over itself a number of times, creating its own ceiling. To use the packs they would have to proceed very slowly and with a fair amount of skill.

I had thought Paul and Jenny were naked, but when I walked onto the unprotected balcony I saw the shimmer of force-bubbles around them. Liftpacks, bubbles -- it would have been too much to expect them to sit open to the air. Jenny smiled at me and waved her hand toward the sea. "It's beautiful, isn't it? The sun behind us, and the colors reflecting backwards.... I've never seen a sunset on the sea from this angle."

I sat. "If you get up early tomorrow morning, you'll see the sunrise. The light appears over the far hills, there, then strikes the water. It's spectacular."

Jenny nodded, her eyes following the lingering tracks of the backward sunset. I felt Paul's gaze on me and turned to him. He nodded and continued staring. Someone on the Ilium, no doubt, had told them that I was off having my valves reamed today, had described in hushed tones their various misconceptions about my cleaning-out. I hoped that it had been Greville rather than Tobias; Greville would have explained his version in the solemn, prissy manner he had affected since becoming a "scientist," "while Tobias would have spread his tales with all the fascinated terror of a child speaking of bogeymen. Well, it didn't matter. I didn't expect Paul or Jenny to find me and my plumbing any less of a terrifying mystery than the others did. But Paul's look bothered me, the frank appraisal, things in his glance which I didn't want to see or cope with. I pulled my chair around so that he could see only part of my face.

"What do you think of the Ilium?" I asked.

Their comments were typical: beautiful, stunning, awesome, magnificent.

"And the possibilities," Jenny continued. "The forcefields, Benito explained them to me. He said that eventually they'll take the Ilium into space."

I nodded. I wouldn't be around to see. "Did Greville give you Lecture 1-A on the Meaning of It All?"

Jenny smiled. "Yes, we were thoroughly indoctrinated."

"You sink the entire ship, and just scoop up what's on the bottom," Paul said.

"It's more complicated than that. The Islands sank during the Great Shaping so there's damage from that. And water isn't the kindest preserving medium. Silt and plants tend to hide a lot, too. Things aren't just lying about waiting to be picked up. They have to be probed for, looked for, uncovered. You have to know where to take time and what you might just as well leave be. And there are certain dangers under the sea."

"But Greville showed us the bubblesuits," Paul said. "They're as safe as being on the deck, he said."

"They are," I said. "It's like taking a shell along with you. It protects you from the sea, but it also protects the sea from you -- you can't touch anything and there are a lot of places you can't fit into. You'll need remotes for that."

"What's wrong with that?"

"First of all, seeing something yourself is much better than seeing something on a screen from a remote. And since remotes can get into places where bubblesuits can't, you're forced to rely on the screens."

"But you can focus them, of course," Paul said, his hands making small knob-turning motions in the air.

"It still comes to you second-hand. And good as the remotes are, they aren't fine-tuned the way we are, the way our brains and hands co-ordinate. Often, by the time you realize the fragility of an object the remote has already crushed it - the automatics work only so far. You can see the problem."

"Tobias said you use a wet-suit," Jenny said. "Is that why?"

"And what's a wet-suit, anyway?" Paul asked.

"It's a skin-tight suit made of rubber," I said. "A pair of flippers for the feet, air tanks with hoses and regulators, a face-mask, weights to counteract the buoyancy of the rubber, small jets. I also have a radio keyed to the face-plate."

"And you go underwater just with that?" Paul asked. He shifted on the unfamiliar, solid chair and turned to face me more directly.

"Sure."

"But that's dangerous. You haven't any protection at all."

"Except a stunner. And my wits. When you want certain results, you have to evaluate the risks and take them. Or accept something second-rate, second-choice. Sure, scuba diving, wet-suiting, is more dangerous than floating in a completely protected forcefield, but if you want something you can't get using fields and remotes, you climb into a wet-suit and go down there yourself, and do it right the first time."

I didn't realized my own vehemence until I glanced at them. They wore the expression of pained attention people put on when they're forced to listen to nonsense from people they can't escape. I sighed, told myself that I should know better, and stood to go inside. The sun was gone and the last strands of the sunset darkened quickly into night.

"I've got to be up early. Remember that we have to be on board tomorrow by nine, okay?"

They assured me that they would be ready, bid me good-night, and I went in, still bothered.

13

In my mid-twenties I found myself completely alone for the first time in my life, tucked inside the research station that orbited the sun. Busy fleeing from the one place in the universe that I really wanted to be, from the one person I wanted to be with. In my grander moments I called it kismet, fate, the burden of mortality. In more common moments, I called it cowardice. This didn't change the station or my functions; I spun around Sol, measuring, metering, structuring time into neat blocks filled with neatly arranged activities. Each day my reports to Luna pulsed through, relayed from one

booster to another along a wide curve from my station to the receiver at Johns-Rastegar, and half an hour later I received a reply from the base. No use hoping for a voice transmission this near the sun; the boosters had difficulty enough transmitting the varied bleeps and bonks of my signal without picking up an unacceptable amount of static. Had I anyone with whom I wanted to talk, I could record my message and add it to the slim cargo I sent back each month in the supply shuttle, and wait another twenty-eight days until the shuttle, with message, came back to me. But there was no one I wanted to talk to, and the only voice I wanted to hear was, by now, approaching the orbit of Pluto.

I, or rather, the station's equipment, had tracked the course of that one place I wanted to be as she circled the sun and, her velocity boosted, headed out through the solar system for the stars. Driven by curiosity and, perhaps, some subtle masochism, I had watched until the ship was beyond the range of my equipment, then slid into a depression that clouded my brain and left me pacing through my duties with no more thought or emotion than an android. When I finally pulled myself out of it, eight months later, the third anniversary of my arrival at the station was upon me. I battled the remaining depression by structuring my secluded life along uncompromising lines. I set myself a goal and pursued it.

I studied Immortality. I had long blocks of time to devote to it and I certainly had the impetus for study. I requested an alternate-band transmission from Luna's Library, filled the station's extra memory with everything the Library sent, and set to work.

The Treatments work to create a state of nondegeneration, a state of physical stasis in the subject. They work on every primate above a certain evolutionary level. Certain chemicals affect the balance of certain glands, certain spirits affect the functions of certain processes, certain varieties of radiation control certain genetic commands. Or so they hypothesize. Bombard W areas with X amount of chemicals and radiation for Y periods of time at Z intervals and something shifts in the genetic structure, the degenerative processes cease. How does it happen? Why? No one exactly knows. Lippencott's papers abound with hypotheses and since-disproved theories, and the writings of his successors only serve to expand the areas of ignorance. The Immortals do not appreciate conundrums, and after the second century post-Shaping, research dwindled and eventually ceased. It was enough that the Treatments worked, and seemed to work successfully. If the Immortals discovered an onset of deterioration at year thousand, I suspected that research would re-open with haste. But year thousand, even for the oldest of the Immortals, was still far in the future, far longer than I would have.

I knew the basic structures of pre-Treatment human physiology and the subtleties were available on tape. I knew the basic structures of post-Treatment physiology and, again, the subtleties were available. I had my own tiniest specifications from before, during, and after the Treatments. I should have been able to pinpoint the reason for my lack of immortality. Death, the scientists and doctors on Terra should have been able to do so, they had certainly pried and poked enough.

But there was no obvious anomaly in me; people further from the mythic norm than I had been treated successfully. My post-Treatment records showed some slight changes that might or might not mean a tiny prolongation of my life beyond the pre-Shaping norm, but no explanation for why they had appeared instead of the expected shifts to the immortality pattern.

The total of one year's constant study summed to this: the answer is that there is no answer, the reason is that there is no reason. I found this unacceptable. I needed more data, more knowledge, more tests. I needed more of myself, a further exploration. The small medical analyzers provided on the station were unequal to the task and I could not afford to import the delicate instruments my studies demanded.

For one month I battered at a dead end, and then I remembered Kai-Yu's drug.

More than scientific curiosity was involved in my decision to trip again. Almost four years at sun station had left me desperately bored, despite the entertainments, the hobby rooms, the music and videos and cubes. And I was lonely. The only voices I heard were the canned companionship of the entertainments and the stultified monotone of the computer, and its maddening sameness so infuriated me that I had programmed it to visual read-out only six months after boarding the station. The only sound of breathing was my own, mine the only footsteps, mine the only movements within the smooth egg of the station. I began talking to myself, expounding, singing, reciting, laughing. My daily transmissions became positively long-winded, and I awaited the responses to them eagerly. I taped wake-up signals for myself, and started each ship's day greeted by my own face and voice hovering over my bunk. When I considered taking the drug, I decided that I was half out of my mind already and going the rest of the way would not be too terrible.

And I had first taken the drug with Greg Hartfeld, during that brief, ecstatic, moon-bound time after Paul and before the station. I would never touch Greg again, for he and his friends had launched themselves and their ship out beyond the system and I had watched them leave. In a convoluted way, the drug was one last link with him. That was important.

If one can hallucinate an outer world, one can hallucinate an inner world. Or so I told myself. I fasted for a day to make sure the drug reached my system without picking up anything from the synthetic food on which I lived. The next morning I swallowed three drops of the drug with a cup of water, quickly, before I could change my mind or think again about the nightmares of my previous dream-voyage. I centered my mind on myself, lay back, and waited for the drug to take effect.

I concentrated on my lungs, on the movement of air through my throat, the expansion and decline of my chest. I pared my attention to that only, filled my mind with the sensations of breathing, concentrated so deeply that I never noticed slipping into the drug-state, never noticed making the transition from feeling my lungs to being in them.

I watched my lungs at work, then thought my way through them into my blood vessels. Using them as the highways of my progress I explored heart, digestive tract, various organs, sneaked into my capillaries and thence to the cells. Tapped into the spinal column and worked my way to the brain, tasting, poking, watching, feeling. When I felt the drug-state slip from me, I rose and took another three drops, and three hours later took some more, and more after that, until twenty hours had passed. The computer was gibbering frantically, the read-out screens pulsed helter-skelter up and down the spectrum, and the vial was dry.

Johns-Rastegar was incoherent with worry. I had missed one full transmission, something unprecedented; coils of material waited to be bleeped and bonked and buzzed down the transmission channels to the receiver. I assured the base of my continued health, programmed and pulsed the information down the line, and set things to rights before taking time to assess the information I had gained from my inner explorations.

I still had no idea why the decaying lump of matter that traveled with me insisted on aging. My personal agglomeration of fat and tissue and suet and bone was as much a mystery now as it had been before the trip.

Then my stomach complained of emptiness and I found myself inside it, feeling each insistent contraction, monitoring the drippings and secretions, the whole damned thing.

Great, I thought as I punched random buttons on the food unit. Not only does the damned thing have to fall apart, I get a ringside seat to watch it. Fantastic.

It wasn't until much later, when the damned thing really did start falling apart, that I appreciated what the gift of monitoring meant; I could forestall various complications by discovering them in their early stages and head them off by requesting appropriate treatment. But I was ungrateful enough to find it only a minor consolation in the face of death.

14

The pain caught up with me that night as I emerged from the vibra. It grabbed my back with such force that I gasped and grabbed the door frame. I'd been warned -- the episode on the roof balcony last night, the small twinges I'd ignored throughout the evening. I should have paid attention, but there was no help for it now. I held the door frame and waited for the first great wave to pass. It seemed an age. When it finished with me I staggered across the room, bathed in sweat, and fell over the bed. I lay face down across the firm water-mattress and held it tightly while the next, greater wave built at the base of my spine and pushed through me, twisting my back, grabbing the muscles and ligaments of my abdomen and wrenching them out of shape. Part of me lay unable to think while another part followed with almost clinical detachment the tightening of muscles, the sudden contractions of the uterus, the gathering tautness of ligaments, the knots and pulls creating and following pain. The part of me twisting, the pain-part, demanded that something be done, but I was helpless to control my body, could only observe. The second wave subsided and left me shaking; my fingers ached from their grip on the wooden rails of the bed. The beginning, I thought before the next spasm. The metamorphosis into the grasshopper. Then I drowned once more.

When it passed I found Paul sitting on the bed, his hands on my shoulders.

"Tia? Tia? Are you all right?"

"No."

"Shall I call a doctor?"

"No!"

"Are you sure?"

The next wave came toward me. "Please, just believe me, don't call anyone, please..."

"What can I do?"

"Put your palm on the small of my back and push!" I stopped talking. Paul put his hands on my back, pushing hard, and the pain lessened but not by much. That wave left me in tears. Paul stroked my back, whispering.

"Tia, please, don't cry, please, let me call a doctor, please don't cry, Tia, please."

Speaking was an effort. I had to draw long ragged bursts of air into my lungs before I could continue. "It'll be over, I'll, soon, just push now, now, NOW!"

He pushed. He pushed for two hours, until the pain had finished playing with me and receded, leaving, as always, a promise to return. I lay quietly, putting myself back together while Paul brushed hair from my face.

"Is it over now?" he asked as I opened my eyes.

"For this time. Yes." I rolled over, not bothering to worry about his reaction to my body. Paul, too, was shaking and covered with sweat.

"Were you in great pain?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you let a doctor..."

"There's nothing wrong that they can find. It's just me turning into a grasshopper," I said. "It can't be helped."

"A grasshopper?"

"Forget it, nothing." I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and sat. "Why are you in here, anyway?"

"I heard you. I was getting ready for bed and heard you, and when I called at your door you didn't answer, so I came in."

"Oh." I paused. "Where's Jenny?"

"With Tobias, at the dock."

I nodded, remembering the borrowed hopper. I walked to the bathroom and closed the door behind me. When I returned to the bedroom, showered and damp, I expected Paul to be gone. He sat on the bed, watching me, so I stood and let him get his fill, waiting for him to make some brittle excuse and flee. He

didn't move, just watched me. Then he rose, walked to me, and kissed my mouth, so stunning me that I didn't react. He moved his head back and dropped his hands to my shoulders, then let his palms follow my body until they cupped my breasts.

"Remember Venice?" he whispered.

I nodded. Indeed, I remembered Venice, although I hadn't been back since that one trip with him, before the deluge. His mouth came down again to cover mine, he slid his hands to my back and pressed me closer. Then, carefully, he carried me to the bed, pulled the covers around my shoulders, slipped in beside me, and cradled me in his arms. Half convinced that I was dreaming, I fell asleep.

He was still there in the morning when the sunlight coming through the stained glass of the eastern windows woke me. I turned over and felt his arm, his back, opened my eyes and stared, remembering the evening before. He woke, rolled over, smiled at me and placed a hand on my breast.

"Do you know what you're doing?" I asked. He continued caressing me, until I felt stirrings that I'd believed to be long dead. Amazed, I touched his body, felt his erection, the smooth sweep of his back, the tense eagerness of his buttocks as he lifted himself and entered me. The remaining weakness and the eons since I'd last screwed made me ungainly, unable to match his pace, but he moved for both of us and my body surprised me by coming, the ecstasy moving through the places that had so lately been filled with pain and making them whole again. Paul, careful lover, took his time and when he came I held him and rocked us on the bed. The intensity of his orgasm and his cries tipped me over the verge into ecstasy again. Suspicious even in joy, I wondered at the why of it, whether he'd needed someone to screw and in his need accepted even me, whether he'd made a bet with someone, Jenny perhaps. But he held himself above me and gave me a smile of such radiant pleasure that my suspicions fled and I smiled back. After a while we made love again, this time with the blankets kicked to the floor, naked bodies twined on the bed. And, coming again, I felt forever youthful, for the fast time in fifty years.

15

Fifty years ago I owned Venice, or thought I did. The Great Shaping had eaten the soggy remains of the city but Venice had been rebuilt under the now pure waters of the Adriatic Sea. Reconstructed palaces gleamed from their protective force-bubbles; fish scurried through the plazas, skimmed by crystal windows, and darted through the columns and walls of the new, improved ruins. Bubblesuited visitors trailed light. Venice. Stepping from the transport tubes, Paul and I slipped under the skin of the water, deep into the gold and blue and scarlet, into mazes of stone and softness, into brocades, marble, velvet, granite, silk. The child that was me breathed deep, convinced that the air was of a different time, the lingering perfumes and incenses of ages past. I held Paul's hand and skipped through the corridors round-eyed with awe, sent clear laughter sparkling through the clear, pure city. The guidetapes said Venice had been a dirty but I didn't believe it. Our bubblesuits dissolved as we moved from clean water into the larger bubbles of the palaces, reformed as we danced from air into water again. We played with fish in the sunlight, ate and drank in rooms that still echoed the music of other voices and other times. I bought a plum-colored cloak and a white ruff and Paul bought a plumed hat; together we stalked through reconstructed halls, playing at doges and ladies until we spun into each other's arms, gasping, and sought quiet corners for our lovemaking. We found a room of mirrors; I still see a child with billows of auburn hair and a rounded, bronzed body, dressed only in spreading cloak and ruff, dancing over her own reflection with the slim beauty that was, that is, Paul. I think we were both in love, in Venice, with Venice, with ourselves, with each other.

From Venice I went back to South Africa and all the mirrors changed.

Now, ages later, lying with Paul in an archaic bed overlooking the Pacific Ocean, I fought again the battle with bitterness. This is Paul, I told

myself, the same Paul who danced with me in rooms of crystal, who ran races with me against silver regiments of fish. Who remembered the forgotten child, and loved her? Yes, certainly, but could he love what that child had become? I remembered the intensity of his excitement as he entered me and wondered if he was screwing Tia then or Tia now, and if Tia now, why? One question led to another, and another. I turned my back on them all, barred the gates against them. Do not poison, do not deny, accept. And I accepted.

16

"Hullo, lover. Slumming, are we?"

I turned against the hot Australian desert wind, peering through the sunlight at the figure behind me. The voice was not at all friendly.

"No. Not exactly."

The voice made a skeptical noise. Whoever it was stood against the falling sun and seemed to stare at me. Involuntarily, I brought my hands up to grab my shoulders.

"One of us, then," the voice said and laughed. "Marvelous, lover. Come along, then, no use your standing there getting baked." The figure grabbed my bag and paced toward the terminal. After a moment's hesitation I followed, rubbing grit from my eyes.

Australia, land of bogey-men and rumor, home of nightmares and rejects. Immortals whispered about it, children used the name to frighten each other. I squinted but could not see my companion in detail against the fiercely setting sun.

My bag was raised to eye level, turned about for a thorough inspection, lowered again.

"From Istanbul? Well, you've done the route, then. Know what we call this place? Damnation Springs, Australia. There's a frog's lot of us here, lover, but you'll meet us all. You got a queasy stomach?"

"I don't think so."

"Good." We stepped into the cool shadows of the terminal and my companion turned. A missing arm, a violent birthmark across the face and down the neck, one solid eyebrow running from temple to temple, a dark light within the eyes. The smile was real.

Her name was Sal. She left her face that way because if she didn't have periodic surgery on it, it reverted, so why bother? She'd lost her arm in a hopper accident. She'd been a tourist guide in London before then, and knew it and its history with such comprehension that I sometimes accused her of making it up. She'd taken on the job of greeting new arrivals and of chasing away those Immortals who came looking for a circus. She took me under her wing, into her house, into her bed. Showed me around, introduced me. Didn't ask what my particular freakery was.

No one asked at Damnation Springs. It was enough that you were there; your arrival included you in the roster of the world's rejects and they respected your privacy. Some, like Sal, were obvious freaks: missing arms or legs, physical damages so bad that nothing could disguise them. Medicine under the Immortals was advanced, yes; but there remained things they were unable, or unwilling, or afraid, to cure. Others were more internal freaks and I was taken to be one of the crazy ones. It suited well enough.

Patterns within patterns in the arid desert. A cell of people intent upon the overthrow of the Immortal way of life; the others called them the Freakery Forever sect. They harangued and marched and painted slogans on sheets of paper which they plastered all over the dingy village. The paper shredded and dried almost immediately, leaving the buildings bearded with illegible slogans. I asked Sal how long they'd been active, and she shrugged. Just outside of town was a commune led by a fanatic who spent his time railing at and against his apathetic followers. He read to them from self-made religious books, a mash of broken thought and empty theory to which they listened absently, sitting in the dust picking at scabs or each other. Sal and some others brought them food from town, dragged them to the hospital when

they needed it, buried those who died. The fanatic never seemed to notice.

The hospital was the hardest place to take, and after the first visit with Sal, I refused to go back. It seemed not so much a place of healing as a place of waiting, crammed with wounds and dullness. The doctors were all on assignment from Berne: Damnation Springs, for a doctor, was a punishment detail and they made no effort to hide their disgust. One of them, taking me aside, offered me a bottle of beer to go to bed with him. Sal broke his arm and the next day he left, still screaming. I think he thought she was contagious.

The children's ward was the worst. Sal and I had picked up four new ones that day: a man lost inside a confusion of waldoes, a woman with the withdrawn look of madness about the corners of her lips, and two children. We took the waldoed man to a hostel and the madwoman to the commune, where she sank into the thick apathy. I sat in the battered hopper with the children in my arms. The boy fell asleep against my shoulder; the girl, less trusting, finally put her face to my neck and slept. I tried not to shudder: they had thick pink scars running down their faces, puckered and ugly. The girl's right eye had disappeared into the scar-tissue; the boy's hands were permanently clenched. They could, neither of them, have been above seven years old.

"Fire," Sal said as she guided the hopper toward the hospital. "Too extensive for an adequate clean-up."

"But if just a little work was done, enough for the hands, or another eye -- "

Sal shrugged. "They're alive. That's all the parents are required to do, take steps to keep them alive. They probably didn't want to look at the results, even after clean-up." She glanced at the sleeping children. "Can't blame them."

"They sent them here," I said, feeling cold despite the hard light. Sal didn't bother to answer. As we pulled up before the dark hospital, I held the children tightly.

"Let's take them home," I said. "I'll care for them, I'll pay for them. Someone ought to want them, even if it's only us."

But Sal shook her head and pried the children from my arms.

"They die," she said. "Here, at least, they die in company."

When I saw the children's ward, I understood what she meant. There was room for sleep and room for play, classrooms and gardens and yards, toys and books, plentiful food. Enough to keep them alive, enough to keep them interested and educated. The children used none of it. Why should they? They were the children of Immortals, they had been taught the same lessons I'd learned as a child. And they'd been sent to bogey-land, had been consigned to hell.

They killed each other.

I couldn't have children -- they'd done that for me in South Africa. To maintain the purity, they said. Did I want to put a child into the same position I was in?

For the first and only time I was glad of that. I never went back to the children's ward again.

I followed Sal everywhere, peering, prying, trying to discover another one like me or, barring that, a situation among the freaks where I could spend my life. No libraries. No laboratories. No schools, aside from the unused rooms in the children's ward. A graveyard, yes -- but there were no deaths here from "natural" causes. They killed themselves or, more rarely, each other. They died of their diseases or disfigurements, not of age. They were freaks, but Immortal freaks, and their sense of oneness was also a prejudice against change, against chance, against reaching out. Their rejection by the mainstream of the culture made no difference in their view of the world. Freaks, yes, but they were not animals.

I, of course, was.

Gentle, violent Sal held me in her arm and pressed my face against her breast as I wept. She assumed that I was getting used to the life, to the

people, to my own eternity of difference. I would adjust, she assured me, her fingers wrapped in my thick hair. It would be all right. I clung to her until the shaking stopped and I could speak to tell her that I had to leave.

She didn't believe me, and when I finally convinced her she stood and left my bed, paused at the door, and glared at me.

"You'll be back," she said.

Coward, I thought, and caught the shuttle to Melbourne, to Beijing, to Diablo, to the Pole, to the moon.

17

We were closing the house when Jenny arrived. Paul stood on the balcony, handing the bars up to me as I balanced on the edges of the large windows and placed the bars across the protective shutters. He had looked at the thirty-foot drop from the window to the rocks below and refrained from offering further assistance. Toting the bars after me, he asked if it wouldn't be simpler to install repellors around the house. Of course it would be simpler, but it would not be fitting, not right. He wanted to know why not. I tried to explain to him, tried to explain about the redwood and stained glass, about the solid furniture and the alien kitchen, about the rightness of things being what they were meant to be. He didn't understand. He handed me the bars and I fastened them in place, contemplating the distance between us even as his hand rested on my thigh for a moment before moving to grasp another bar.

Jenny arrived in the hopper, parked it, and lifted easily over the edge of the cliff. The day was warm, the breeze cool, and she was, for once, dressed. The soft, slitted tunic changed color in the wind and floated about her body, baring her hips as she descended. I twitched the collar of my usual opaque jumpsuit, caught myself, grimaced, and kept working.

"Hello," she called, alighting on the balcony. "Do you want to use my liftpack?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I'm almost finished anyway."

From the corner of my eye I saw her glance at Paul, who shrugged in reply, amused, and handed me the last bar. I finished and climbed down to join them.

"Did you see the sunrise this morning?" I asked Jenny.

She remembered our conversation of the night before and gestured. "I was busy," she said, and grinned. Paul grinned back. "So were we," he said.

"Oh? Closing the house that early?"

"Not quite." Paul gathered the bindings of the shutter-bars together. "Tia, where do I put these?"

"Under the stairs, to the right as you enter. The door's open," I said. He shouldered his way into the house, arms full.

"Are you all packed?" I asked Jenny.

She avoided my eyes. "Yes, I've just got to take the stuff down. I brought the hopper, I thought it might be easier that way."

"We have to board in an hour, so maybe you'd better start." She nodded and went inside. I heard her speaking with Paul, then the smooth whisper of the liftpack as she elevated up the stairs and a second smoothness as Paul followed.

After I turned off the kitchen equipment and set the plants' caretaker on automatic, I climbed the stairs to my bedroom. It would only take me a minute to pack. The voices of my guests floated down to me as I paused on the landing by my door.

"Paul, you're not packed yet?"

"No, but it won't take long."

"I thought you were going to pack last night," she said. I heard the sound of clothes being floated from the closet toward the bed.

"I didn't have time to."

"Oh? Stargazing all night?"

"Not exactly."

"Good lord, what else is there to do around here? It's a wonder Tia

doesn't die of boredom, with nothing to do but watch the tide come in. Well?"

"Well, what?" A stubborn tone, an echo of fifty years back.

"What did you find so exciting to do last night?"

"I fucked with Tia."

A long pause. It wasn't the word I'd have used, I thought, and could not move.

"You ... with Tia?" Jenny said finally.

"Sure. You were busy with Tobias...."

"You bedded that -- that freak -- "

"Perish, Jenny, be reasonable -- "

"Reasonable! She's not even human! You're -- you're unsynched, Paul. You need help." Her voice shook.

"Jenny -- "

"Don't touch me!"_ Jenny screamed. I ran upstairs to my room, slapped the lock, and stood clenching my fists and my teeth. No human? Me? Tia? Perish, I was more human than any of them. I was in direct descent from the apes, from Donne and Heisenberg, from Petrukis and Penderevcki, from Li Po and Lippencott, the Father of Immortality, who discovered the treatments too late to save himself. And they? Lippencott's Children? Supermen, perhaps, but not human. No, of course not, definitely not human. Not like me. Not like me.

Silence from above. I opened the window, breathed the salt air, calmed myself, and began packing. I heard Paul lifting luggage from the upper bedroom balcony to the hopper. Soon Jenny joined him. They worked in silence. When I thought they were finished I slung my bag over my shoulder and clattered upstairs.

Jenny had already left, the hopper gliding down the road, secure in its webs of force. I stowed my bag in the back of my car.

"I guess I'll be going down with you," Paul said, smiling. His face was easy, body tense.

"Okay. Does Jenny have your stuff?"

"Yes." He climbed into the passenger seat, pulled the safety webbing about him, and gripped the seat, prepared to defy death. I slid into my seat, webbed in and started the rotors. I put the car in gear, and shot out of the garage. Paul maintained his white-lipped quiet and his desperate grip on the seat all the way to the dock.

18

One week after I arrived at Luna I decided that I wanted to stay and found an apartment near the Library. The apartment was small; I wasn't used to the cramped quality of life on the moon, just as I wasn't used to the gravity, and spent my first week in the apartment banging into things at every turn. The landlady, downstairs, laughed, called my bruises "earthbadges" and provided salves. I soon learned to move without constant disaster, learned to slide downstairs by the central shaft and bend my knees just so as I touched bottom, to lope rather than walk and soar rather than run. I liked the freedom of it, liked the freshness programmed into the air of Luna, liked the sense of living protected amid the wastes. The day a tourist asked directions of me, I was elated.

I explored the city, layer by layer, starting with the lower levels near my apartment. How odd to see a blue sky overhead, and know that I was fifty meters underground, and know that the same blue sky shone on the level below my own. I turned a corner on my way to the galleries and found an open meadow on my left, looking so real that I had to walk into the projection to convince myself that it was only a holo. "Home-like," my Luna-born landlady told me, yet Terra had never been her home. Wandering under the programmed stars one night, I found an anomaly in the dense city, an acre or so of dwellings completely uninhabited, illuminated by the dim glow of the fake sky. The walls were hacked from lunar rock -- undisguised, naked, raw. No veneers here, just the stark simplicity of stone, although the empty apartments each boasted force-furniture and -walls, complete kitchen units, self-programming

holo-sculptures, everything. I asked my encyclopedic landlady about it the next day and she was surprised by my surprise. "Not home-like," she said, "uncomfortable." She told me, though, of a complex at Gagarin that looked exactly like Luna's empty apartments, although Gagarin's stone houses were carefully constructed of plasteel and 'crete, and were immensely popular. I remembered Greg Hartfeld's comment in the shuttle about the dislike of tourists for the moon itself; the inhabitants, I thought, were barely fonder of their home.

I spent much time in the viewing chambers, staring at the stark frigidity of the moon's surface. More often than not I was alone there: the Immortals didn't care for the close-horized emptiness outside the dome. There was, I realized, no essential difference between the Terra I had fled and the Luna I had chosen; the difference, perhaps, between a garden and an exact copy of that garden in miniature. The inhabitants were identical -- comfortable stasis, fear of the new or different, and a view of the future as one broad, clean repetition of today and yesterday. My landlady had been a sand-jockey on Mars twenty years earlier and told endless stories of thick-domed hydroponics gardens pallid under an equally pallid sun, of ferrying supplies by surface barge over the dry red dunes, and the boisterous life in the cantinas and whorehouses of Yurigrad -- cantinas and whorehouses carefully designed to look, of course, like those on Terra. When I asked her to tell me about Mars itself, about the wastes, about the dunes, the tracks, the way the stars looked, she shrugged and said she'd never noticed and changed the subject. She insinuated that Luna, too, began to bore her, and talked about an endless series of possible future professions: medicine, perhaps, or the law, or some form of the arts. She knew nothing about these subjects, but there was no hurry, she had eternity in which to learn, practice, discard, choose again. All the time in an unchanging world. By the time my landlady had decided on and entered another field, I would probably be dead. I began avoiding her company, spending my time in the labyrinthine wonders of the Library of the Moon.

Luna is a dense city with not an inch of wasted space. Yet the Library sits on a square acre of grass; a huge, breathtaking sculpture. Only the first two decks are visible from the surface; constructed in articulated deltoids, cantilevered one over the other and bathed in textured light, they seem both immense and airy, both rooted and poised on the brink of flight. These first levels contain rooms, vaults, chambers, echoing halls crammed with materials, all this comprising only the indexes. The bulk of the building, bursting with copies and occasional originals of everything Terra and her colonies have produced, corkscrews deep into the lunar rock. Each level lies like a cross-section of a citrus around the main well. The Library sinks deeper into the moon than the city itself, but those sections of the Library level with the city have their own doorways and are dedicated to different subjects, so that a scholar can take up residence on, say, section three of Luna, study and research physics on level three of the Library, and never need to move vertically through either city or Library. For those who do wish to move among levels and subjects, the Library provides liftpacks; the central core serves as a great highway through the building. From the top deltoid of the Library, I looked down the central well and saw the lights of the levels extending below me until they were small, bright dots in the distance, and I knew that I still had not seen the bottom.

I spent the bulk of two months in the Library, moving through rooms rarely occupied by anyone other than myself, flitting on my liftpack from level to level as I read through eons of thought about mortality, about aging, about death. Read scientists and mystics and religious doctrine and poetry; viewed tapes of people dying; contemplated sculpture and paintings, found Petrukis' Andromeda Mourning and stood paralyzed before it for ninety minutes; listened to dirges and requiems until my head reeled.

"The best way not to die too soon is to cultivate the duties of life and the scorn of death," one tome advised, but the Immortals about me lived in

fear of death and maiming, and would live forever. "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls," an English mystic called to me. But the bell would toll for me only; there were no other inevitable candidates. And would my death diminish anyone at all? "When we exist there is no death, and when there is death we do not exist," Epicurus pontificated; how was I to draw comfort from that spare philosophy? "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Ah, how I envied the Ancients, for when they cried of death and aging their cry was universal. Yet "neither his class nor his kind nor his trade may come near him, / There where he lies on his left arm and will die." Very well, very well. The Ancients also died alone. It didn't help. I listened to a threnody composed for the victims of man's first atomic stupidity and found passion and anger and fear, but no comfort, nothing to guide me. What did any of it matter? People died, until comparatively recent times people had always died, there were no exceptions, no one escaped. People invented philosophies to explain or comfort, but they still died and were blown to nothingness, and there wasn't anything they could do about it. I read through novels and stories containing the guesses of my ancestors about immortality, and laughed at the worlds of wonder they so eagerly created.

These explanations held no place for me. When I died I would die alone and become a case history in some convoluted medical text, filed in an as-yet-undiscovered room of this same building. No wings of angels or demons of hell, no Valhalla, Elysian Fields or River Styx. I observed the videos, read the books, and stared at sculpture and paintings until I imagined death stalking me behind every soft whisper of filtered air, behind every distant footfall in the vaults of the Library.

I fled the Library, returned all the materials I had borrowed, destroyed my notes, and kept the one piece that spoke to me of all I had studied. An elegy written by a young man in the Tower of London, in Britain, the evening before he was executed for some crime that history has not bothered to record:

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my good is but vain hope of gain;
The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

Chidiok Tichborne, what were you thinking as you died? Was the sun shining or was the city smothered in fog? Was it spring? Autumn? Summer? Winter? Were many people there, or only you and the executioner, and the notables necessary to make sure you were dead? Did you cry out in protest or remain silent? Did you accept the comforts of your religion; did you have one? Did you joke?

My tale was heard and yet it was not told,
My fruit is fallen and yet my leaves are green,
My youth is spent and yet I am not old,
I saw the world, and yet I was not seen;
My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

Did you love someone, were you loved? Did you know your parents, and did they grieve? Did anyone rejoice in your death? Did your death make any difference, or none at all? What did you do with your hands? And your feet? Did you look at the sky or at the trees? Did you foul your clothes in fear, did you feel any fear at all? What were your last words? Did you cry?

I sought my death and found it in my womb,
I looked for life and saw it was a shade,
I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb,
And now I die, and now I was but made;
My glass is full, and now my glass is run,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

Chidiok Tichborne, if I die in fifty years or a hundred, I will be as

young to my world as you were to yours. You cannot comfort me, but you make me feel less alone.

19

Jenny had taken Tobias' hopper directly to the Ilium, leaving the deck hopper for Paul and me. I keyed open one of the garages and parked my car inside, and we took the hopper to the ship, landing on the mosaic flight-deck beside the largest of the minarets. Tobias' hopper was parked off to one side, still loaded with luggage. Jenny was gone. Paul shrugged, took his own luggage from Tobias' cerise machine, and started toward the dropshaft.

"Where's your cabin?" he said as I followed him.

"Third deck. Why?"

"Well, it looks like Jenny's not going to want me in hers...."

"Why not?" I stepped into the tube and clenched my teeth against the quick, stomach-lurching descent.

"We had an argument about Tobias," he said as we dropped.

Dishonest bastard, I thought. "Well, if you and Jenny are assigned together, that's where you'll be. Unless you want to make other arrangements with Greville. I'm sure he'll find you something suitable." I stepped off at the third deck. "I'll see you in half an hour on the bridge. Usual pre-sailing pep talk from Greville. We're not supposed to miss it."

Paul, looking unhappy, dropped out of sight. I walked to my cabin, still angry at the lie.

My cabin sat sterile and empty, waiting for me to bring it to life, to key in the forcefields and create beds, tables, chairs. Instead I slung my hammock from the two hooks I'd previously affixed to the walls. I uncovered my bookshelves, brought my desk from the storage area and assembled it, and set up the folding chair. One bright orange blanket tossed on the hammock, one rug on the floor, and I considered my cabin fit to live in again. I showered, climbed into a light cling-suit, knotted my hair behind my head, and, half an hour up, made my way to the bridge.

Greville and Harkness conferred by the large holomap of the Northern Pacific. Jenny, huddled beside Tobias, peered out of one of the large windows; they turned to look at me as I entered, then Jenny faced the window again. Paul slouched against the wall opposite them. He started toward me but I turned my back on him and greeted Benito, the hunch-backed Chief Engineer.

"Hello, ugly," I said.

"Hello, ugly," he replied, scowling. I sat beside him and we shared a companionable, contemptuous silence. Paul lean back against his wall, a strange expression on his face. He'd met Benito, of course, the previous day, but the engineer was always something of a shock, even to those Immortals who worked around him. That he was not in Australia was, to me, a source of wonder and awe; I could never, I thought, begin to match his courage. But I was not about to tell him that.

Li came in late as usual, slid into a field-chair to my right, and wriggled to adjust the field to his ample bulk. Jenny and Tobias moved from the window and sat near Hart and Lonnie. Paul, finally, accepted a seat at Lonnie's side. We were assembled. Greville made a quick round of the room, greeting us. When he reached me he clasped my hand with his usual reluctant warmth.

"Tia, how are you?" His brown cheeks wrinkled into a grimace of welcome.

"Well. And yourself?"

He dropped my hand as quickly as he could without being impolite.

"Busy, busy as always. Benito, hello." He didn't offer to take Benito's hand.

Benito growled something and Greville sailed back to the business end of the bridge, all scientific seriousness. Greville had decided to become a scientist-explorer at about the time I came back from Mars and had adopted the scientific mien until he grew to become the mask and the mask had become him. He affected glasses, rimless circles riding on his nose, and dyed his bush of

black hair white along the temples, so that his head had the appearance of a tumbleweed stricken with disease. Frightfully earnest, prissy, neat to the point of obsession, he spent each voyage giving "pep" talks and plotting our course, directing each dive from his safe nest on the bridge of the Ilium, and acting as he believed the head of a great scientific expedition should act. I could see him a century hence, unless he decided to trade his "science" for something else, just as earnestly plotting and explaining a dive into the depths of the Jovian atmosphere. Greville knew what we were after but didn't feel what we were after; the magic of the enterprise held no place in his calculations.

"Ahem," Greville began. "Good morning. I'm very pleased to see you all aboard and ready for our third voyage to the sunken islands of Hawaii. I believe you all know each other, including our two guests on this trip, Paul Ambuhl and Jenny Crane. Yes. We trust that this voyage will prove both educational and entertaining. Well. Um. Here is a map of the northern Pacific Ocean, and we are here, yes, over the Greater Coastal Bank, over what our guests may not realize was once the westernmost edge of the North American continent. California? Um? Yes. We are headed here, down toward the sunken chain of the Hawaiian Islands. During this trip we plan to explore the ruins of what was once the largest island of the chain, Hawaii itself." He ducked his head to read from a screen. "The Hawaiian Islands, once the playground of the North American people, were constantly bathed in warm winds and the warm ocean and so rich that no systematized food production was ever necessary. The islands were populated by a gentle, brown-skinned race who spent their time playing music and riding the waves on planks of wood. They were the inventors, as it so happens, of the modern sport of water-skiing."

Greville paused to let this sink in. Having been rewarded with surprised smiles and nods, he continued. "The Hawaiians declined Americanization and remained until the end primitive, untutored, and happy. They had a complicated religion based on the consumption of alcoholic beverages and worshiped their deities through dancing. Their sexual prowess was legendary." He looked up again, blinking. "Um. Yes. Many artifacts survived the sinking of part of the chain during the Great Shaping, and it is these ruins which we are exploring and cataloging for the, uh, greater enlightenment of humanity."

He kept it up for fifteen minutes, much of it fanciful, much of it simply wrong, all of it memorized and delivered in a sleep-inducing monotone. Benito slouched and glowered. I shared his disgust, though for different reasons. To Greville, to Harkness, to all the rest, the Ilium was a toy, a hobby. Each had happened upon the ship, been delighted, created a position and moved in, and when they tired of it they would move on again, perhaps leaving behind a new minaret or balcony, a new dial on the bridge, some scratchings in the archaic logs that someone else had left behind. But to Benito the ship was home and heaven both, and it pained him to see the Ilium in the hands of those who did not understand her. To me the Ilium was a means of slipping into the amniotic center of the seas, for moving backward in time, five centuries or more, to where I belonged.

Greville finally yielded the floor to the captain. Harkness briskly charted our voyage, his pseudo-military brevity a relief after Greville's oration. He announced our estimated time of arrival as one week hence, pinpointed the area where the Ilium would make her descent, and closed the meeting. Paul stood and headed toward me but was intercepted by Greville, who led the two novices away to the museum. Benito stood and slouched from the bridge. I hesitated for a moment, then caught Tobias' more than normally hateful, knowing glare, and followed Benito's hunched back down to the engine room.

20

Hunchbacked ugly Benito.

Has a scar where they removed the harelip.

Was conceived on a bet and borne on a bet and born on a bet.

Was abandoned by his mother when they pulled him squalling from between her legs, ass first: male, pink, loud, healthy, hunchbacked, harelipped -- the result of conception on a gamble, of nine months without prenatal care or someone who would have peered scopes and said, "Lady, get rid of it."

Was raised by a nurse from the hospital, a man who wanted children but could not bring himself to enter into a relationship with another human adult. Who refused to let them fix Benito's back while there was still time, finding the deformities of his own soul in the twisted spine of his adoptive son.

At eighteen, Benito Principe entered the realm of maturity and exited his parent's affections. He was given a ticket to the Treatment Center and told never to return and then, having been raised to distrust the world, went into the world and learned why. But Benito did not hide himself in Australia. Benito hid himself in machines.

He spent hours in the engine room, checking the lines, monitoring, fixing, polishing, loving the monsters in the bowels of the Ilium. Coming up from the hold only when he had to, and disappearing back into it as soon as he could.

Benito found me repulsive and I found him repulsive, and so we tolerated each other, two freaks nestled in the belly of Eden. He was worse off, I told him, because he would have an eternity of bearing his hunchback, no respite. I was worse off, he told me, because I would have to die, and dying was worse than living in any condition. We each suspected the other to be right and remained suspended between superiority on the right, inferiority on the left, the dislike of others above us, and the changeable sea below.

21

One evening soon after my flight from the Library I called Greg Hartfeld. I'd spent the day in the viewing chamber, gazing out at the bleak and forbidding surface of the moon, and decided that if I had to die, I would spend such time as I was given enjoying, exploring, experiencing. My small apartment began to cramp me, I could hear the emptiness of my days echoing around my skull, and it suddenly seemed a great waste to spend the hours of my life parsing my own elegy.

The comsystem shunted my call halfway around the surface of the moon to Clarke Observatory, and soon the round face and hawk nose of Greg Hartfeld filled the screen before me.

"Hi," I said. "Remember me? Tia Hamley?"

He laughed. "Sure, of course. You want to walk around on the moon, eh? I'll come to get you, unless you want to come yourself. Today? This evening? Takes an hour and a half, if you leave now you'll be here in time for dinner. Okay?"

"Sure. I'll come by myself."

"Great! You want Clarke Station One. I'll be waiting, catch the sixteen-ten, bring a change of clothes and a toothbrush. Good! I'll see you soon."

I closed the connection, both amused and excited, threw some clothes into a bag, and soared across Luna to the station. I barely caught the sixteen-ten and tumbled out ninety minutes later into Hartfeld's enormous arms.

He swept me along as though I were a child, scattering robo-porters around him like so much dust, talking continuously. We danced and leaped over slidebelts, shot up the dropshaft of a building at the edge of the permasteel bubble, and Greg Hartfeld threw open a door.

"There it is!" he announced, flinging my bag toward a wall. It was caught in the light green aura of a fieldchair. "It is nice, eh? Also cheap, nobody wants to live on the edge of the bubble except nuts like me. They think maybe the moon will sneak in the window some night and gobble them up. And they're right! Look!" He twisted a knob and a painting across the room melted into a clear screen. There sat the dry white surface of the moon, etched with

black where rocks caught sunlight and threw impenetrable shadows.

"Something, eh? Tomorrow we will be out on it, playing on top of the old lady. She will not mind, no, as long as we play by the rules."

I stared at the harshness. Hartfeld, seeing my concentration, was silent. A sterile eternity, just within the reach of my fingertips, unblemished by the great green orb of Earth. Not a landscape of death, no more than it was a landscape of life; it transcended both, transcended mortality and immortality. In that monochromatic stillness, my problems were totally irrelevant. I forgot to breathe and put my fingertips against the screen. The viewing chambers of Luna, with their labeled vistas and crowded comforts, had not prepared me for anything like this.

"She is a real bitch," Hartfeld said finally.

"But beautiful," I replied.

"You think so?" he said with great interest, and the spell of the moon burst. "Well, we shall see tomorrow, eh? You are hungry, take a bath, change your clothes, you always wear clothes? No matter, we'll go out and eat and you'll meet some more nuts, just like me. We collect 'em up here, maybe you'll fit in, maybe not. There's the bathroom, you like water showers? Okay, you get four gallons hot, ten cold -- you know that already, I am a fool. Not too long, yes? Good!"

The evening took on the flavor of Greg himself, massive, exuberant, unceasing, bewildering. We dined in a small, richly scented restaurant where four people waited for us at a corner table. "Other nuts," Greg called them, but none so large or overpowering as him. The conversation glittered, not with the usual Immortal collection of dusty in-jokes and borrowed opinions but with theses, arguments, counter-arguments; observations, analysis. Life to these people seemed a labyrinth of infinite fascination and I, fascinated in turn, spun and bobbed in their wake, enchanted. Dinner finished, we talked our way to someone's apartment, also tucked into the edge of the bubble. With the harsh moonscape as background, dark Najla talked of astrophysics and the history of the Minoan empire; Greg argued with tiny Susan about life-support systems, bare seconds after an discussion with Kai-Yu over communications techniques; Jaime sang softly and softly commented on Najla's theories. Once, in the course of a discussion on art, I diffidently offered a quotation I had picked up during my time at the library, and Greg enveloped me in a bear hug and crowed. Embarrassed and pleased, I retreated to silence again. My god, but these people were alive! Closing my eyes against the room, against the moon, listening to the rush and tumult of their conversation, I could believe that I had slipped into the past, into a time where ideas were new, concepts were fresh, where things mattered, where time mattered. Someone passed around more dope, someone talked about hydroponics. These people, I thought suddenly, were as different from mainstream Immortal culture as were the desperate freaks of Australia, but when I tried to follow the thought it skipped away from me.

When we finally left, as the night-glow of the dome was diffused into a programmed dawn, I was too stoned and sleepy to cope with the light gravity. Greg wrapped an arm around me to keep me from swaying off the slidebelt.

"We drown you a little, eh?" he said as we entered his apartment.

"Yes," I admitted. "Maybe I was too high to make sense of it -- Greg? Have you ever been to Australia?"

He held my shoulders and smiled down at me. "Strange little bird, what made you think that?"

"I don't know." I smiled back at him. "I'm too tired to think. Where do I sleep?"

"With me? I would like to make love with you, little bird. If you wish."

I considered my slight fear of him, of his size and his mind, and briefly considered Paul, and thought of the Library of the Moon, and smiled and nodded and moved toward him.

It was spectacularly good.

22

The Ilium moved through gentle seas, through sunsets and sunrises and the moon at night, through darkness and phosphorescence. The haze of land dropped away beneath us, the cries of birds circling our minarets became fewer, and the ocean took us on faith, as she had taken so many on faith; we rode her breathing skin toward the west and toward the south.

Greville updated his logs, gave his pep-talks, made sure to come around to each one of us at least once a day to chat, elucidate, encourage. Harkness, as usual, spent most of his time on the bridge, pounding his body into the military trim he felt fitting to his role, or playing quadrachess with sweet, dainty Hart who, despite his delicacy and quiet voice, was a viciously good gamesman. Li created and ate concoctions in the kitchen when he wasn't sleeping, screwing with Lonnie, or taking his shift in the control bridge. Lonnie arched over her tri-boards, shaping new minarets with movements of her brown fingertips, with hunchings of her sharp eyebrows. Tobias divided his time between the engine room and the diving hold, Jenny always close behind him. Benito kept to the humming cloister of his generators. Paul had asked for a reassignment from Jenny's room and moved out ten minutes before Tobias moved in. I took Paul with me to the engine room once or twice, but Benito's scowl and ugliness put him off and he would soon leave us to wander about the intricate mazes of the ship.

The land fell away and under the grey-green water. Jenny and Tobias kept to themselves, left rooms as I entered them; Paul reported that they did the same to him. Benito was more than usually sullen, Greville poured forth more than his usual good cheer. The others, ill at ease, avoided Paul or me or both of us together. I knew that the shock that tumbled from Jenny, days and leagues ago by the side of the sea, also troubled the other voyagers. I shunted it off to an unused corner of my consciousness, wrapped it tight for storage, buried it in unexpected happiness.

I didn't care that I shut off half of my mind to be with Paul, that he was a child, shallow, a fool. All of that, but still the man who swung with me in my hammock or who cradled me in the warmth of his bed, who kissed my breasts to life again. I didn't know why he did these things and didn't want to know. It was enough that he held me and spoke to me and awakened me in the mornings with soft words and sudden, ecstatic penetrations.

As for the others, I ignored them. Life had given me few enough pleasures; I would not let it take this one away. Reality floated beyond the boundaries of my new universe; I had no wish to let it in.

23

I moved into Greg Hartfeld's apartment three days after arriving at Clarke and took a job as a linewalker with the transport company. Once a week Greg and I went out, followed by remotes and carriers, and walked the line, patching patches, fusing the tough plasteel until no seams showed at all. Once a week we walked the inside of our section of the tube, once a week we did long-range surveys in the hopper, and once a week we caught up with the paperwork. Every two weeks the company transferred our substantial wages from its account to ours -- the company paid well, and we received hazardous duty allowances when we walked the line. My stipend from the Treatment Center accumulated in my separate account at Berne; I had not, and would not, tell Greg about it, or about the reason for it. That secret was the only disjunctive note in our life together.

I loved him. I thought I had loved before, but this was an Ancient passion, like the drive to confer the surrogate immortality of verse or sculpture, prose or painting. Beside Greg, the sparkling chambers of Venice became, in memory, a children's amusement park. Greg was an unending reservoir of strength, of excitement; even at his most annoying (and he could, at times, be astonishingly annoying), I could not conceive of being elsewhere.

We spent much of our free time in the company of Greg's friends. My initial impressions of them did not change. They seemed alive in ways I had

never experienced, as though they used immortality not as an endpoint, a goal, but as a springboard for change. They shared much of my own discomfort with the Immortal way of life, and they provided charts and graphs by the ream, showing the decline of invention over the past five centuries, the decline in art and music, in exploration and curiosity, in science and mathematics. The Immortals, said Najla with disgust, had taken the most important advance in history and used it to stop advancement forever. The Immortals accepted their static world, but these people did not.

My initial, instinctive connection between Greg, his friends, and Australia eventually clarified: they were the opposite ends of a scale, alike in their dissatisfaction with the Immortal mainstream of the mid-scale, antithetical in their expressions of that dislike. The freaks of Australia lacked cohesiveness, but in the society at Clarke I found a purpose I had never felt before.

After three months at Clarke they showed that purpose to me. Greg and his friends scooped me up as I entered the dome at the end of an exhausting day walking the line, brought me to a shadowed ravine kilometers away from the observatory, and showed me the center of their dreams. They had a ship, a slim, burnished line of metal whose tip caught the light and gleamed unbearably bright. They talked at me for hours, leading me from one end of the vessel to the other, showing me charts and diagrams, life-support systems, bunks, mess-halls, drives, recreation areas, hydroponic gardens, baths, control rooms, medical centers, workshops, until my initial wonderment faded to confusion and I begged for an hour's peace to assimilate it all.

Kind, understanding, confident, they loaned me a Barre suit. I scabbled up the sides of the ravine until I found an escarpment of rock to sit on, legs dangling and heels kicking at the lunar stone. The warmth of the deceptively flimsy-looking suit encased me, just as the repeller fields encased the slim ship in the valley below me.

They called the ship the Outbound and planned to launch it within five years and couple it with a circular disc that orbited, almost finished, around the pole, so that the ship would resemble a gold spike driven through a silver plate. Then they would aim it toward the sun, whip around the skirts of Sol, and use the borrowed momentum to fling the ship, and themselves, into interstellar space. They would journey through the void, rotating about the longitudinal axis of the ship, until they found a habitable planet and could set up housekeeping far from Mother Terra. But, they explained to me, once launched there would be no hurry; if the first planets didn't work out they would look for others. They were Immortals, after all. They could take their time.

And they wanted me to go with them.

I kicked at the rock a bit harder. A piece cracked away and wafted down the face of the cliff to the floor of the valley. The Immortals congregated in their ship, confident that I would come bounding down the hill with a ready acceptance on my lips, eager as they were to prepare, to finish, to catapult myself into the unknown with them.

But I wasn't sure I wanted to go.

Their philosophy didn't stop me. They weren't fleeing an imagined persecution directed against some preposterous belief, they weren't departing to bring Truth or Right or Good to the benighted aliens circling some distant sun. They were, simply, planning to create a society that preserved the benefits of Immortality while nurturing the spirit and drive extant before the Great Shaping. I agreed with their belief that the society they envisioned would find no haven on Terra. The Immortals accepted fads violently, sucked them dry, and rejected them: even the most cohesive of groups could not long survive the insistent curiosity of the culture around them. Nor did I object to the members of the group. I had no doubt that I would continue to enjoy the company of Kai-Yu and Susan, Najla and Jaime, or the other, still unknown members who were scattered over Terra and her two outposts, working toward the launching of their dream. I would never tire of Greg -- I loved him, and it

was love that stopped me from readily accepting their voyage to the stars.

I was twenty-one years old. My face and body bore a bloom consistent with Immortality; had the Treatments worked I would look like that forever. But I had studied in the dim quiet of the Library and carefully created a chronology for myself. I would live, with luck, to see my two-hundredth birthday. The mortals of before the Shaping lived, with luck, for ninety years. At two hundred I would be shriveled and tucked, seamed and weak and lined and dithering. At one hundred I would be caught between that state and the next one down, between middle-age and senility. At seventy-five I would be just beyond prime -- hair greying, lines on face and body, mind quick and ready, eyes bright. At fifty I would be well into maturity, with small crinkles growing along the corners of my eyes. The Ancient mortals had thought a woman of forty capable of great beauty; Lippencott's Children had never seen anyone looking that age and would find me hideous. I would find myself hideous.

As I died somewhere between the stars, Greg would look exactly as he had that morning, rising naked from our tumbled bed. They would all of them be unchanged as I withered and drooled and, eventually, died.

I kicked a boulder and it, too, floated toward the valley, lifting a trail of pale dust behind it. It rocked itself to a stop forty meters from the ship, well before it reached the protective field. I stretched out on my stomach and gazed through the haze of dust at the distant horizon. Earth lay out of sight over the ridge of mountains.

I searched my soul and felt no quiver of love for the planet of my birth. If I stayed on Terra I would be surrounded by the dislike of others, apart and alone -- as alone as if I ventured between the stars. A difference in quantity if not in quality and, perhaps, even a difference there. By the time my body betrayed me into age, the company of the Outbound would know me; would, perhaps, love me; would understand and accept me as those indifferent populations below could never do.

And if they wouldn't? But they would have to, they would have no choice. No turning back, no marooning me on some deserted interstellar island. They would do a health check on me, for form's sake. Well, let them. My anomaly wouldn't turn up on their ordinary tests and no one demanded a Certificate of Immortality in a world where everyone was immortal. Nor could they obtain records of my Treatment without my permission, a permission I was not likely to grant. They wanted children: well, so did I, and perhaps, beyond the stars, their need for children would allow them to reverse what had been done to me and my loneliness would be, again, mitigated. So I would leave with them, the worm of time tucked within me like a stowaway, and when that stowaway was discovered it would be too late for anything but acceptance.

And love? The torture of seeing a loved one wither to dust? I did not wish it on Greg but, I decided as I stood, neither did I wish it on myself. Surely a little selfishness was understandable. And he would have our child, our children, long after I had gone; it seemed an appropriately Ancient form of immortality for this group of inappropriately ancient Immortals. Here and now, I told myself, and let the future look to itself.

I shook the dust from the invisible folds of the Barre suit and bounded down the side of the hill toward the waiting ship.

24

I sat in the vast quiet of the engine room while Benito played with a confusion of tiny parts spread out on his workbench. He fit small gears onto small shafts, small belts over small drives, holding things together with microscopic pins and screws. Benito was making a sculpture. I don't know if he knew it or not. He had been building this small machine when I first met him, three years ago, and was still working on it with infinite patience. The only times he was content, it seemed to me, were during those long, slow, silent sessions at his workbench while he built his toy.

Around us the generators hummed just on the edge of perception. Each

humped form was encased in shining metal plates, separated by clean walkways. They extended from where we sat near the middle of the hold for the entire length and breadth of the Ilium. The workdesk and its adjacent control console created a semi-circle resting on a circular platform; the platform moved constantly, slowly, making a complete turn every half-hour, and the regiments of gleaming bronze and silver generators seemed to march before us.

I sat sprawled in a field chair, a calibrator almost forgotten in my lap and the pulser on which I was working on the floor before me. Illuminated on the screen of my eyelids, I saw the Outbound resting in her cradle dark-side, and a second later saw her moving through space, connected to her halo, vanes extended, turning against a backdrop of stars. The image pounced on my mind during moments such as these and left me with a sense of shame, of longing coupled with burning curiosity. Someone, something was picking up the reports the Outbound broadcast every ship's week, but I had not tried to find out who or what was doing the monitoring. To know of the Outbound was sufficient, to know about the Outbound would be both useless and painful. I played games beneath the cover of my eyelids instead, speculating in the breathing silence of the huge chamber.

"This Paul is an ass," Benito said.

Startled, I opened my eyes. He remained hunched over his workbench and for a moment I thought I had imagined the words.

"An ass," he repeated and put down the small pliers. He turned to face me, his usual scowl shifted slightly into the combative.

"Why?"

"Why? You're an ass too, if you don't see it."

"I see it," I said after a slight pause. "I know what he is." Benito looked skeptical. "All right, he's a child, he's selfish, he's shallow, he's a coward like all of them...."

"And he fucks you."

"Okay, he fucks me, we do it to each other, so what?"

"To each other?"

"Perish, Benito, what's your problem?"

"I have no problems, I am completely normal!" He rose and stormed around the semi-circle, his hump moving as he waved his arms. "You think that because I have this on my back, I have it over my eyes, too? I'm not blind, Tia."

"What in the death are you talking about?"

"Look, why do you think someone goes to bed with a hunchback, with me? Why?"

I had no answer, so said nothing.

"Because it's perverse, because they aren't fucking with me, no, just with this thing on my back. Understand?"

"So?"

"So?" he mimicked viciously. "You think maybe I've got a monopoly on hideousness?"

"Balls, Benito."

"Okay, so this Paul, this wonderchild -- listen, old hag, who do you think he's shoving into when he shoves between your legs? You think he's pronging Tia Hamley? If you believe that, you're stupid, stupid!

"Shut up, Benito!"

"Stupid!"

"Why are you so worried, anyway? What's it to you?"

"Because we're the twisted ones, you and I," he hissed. "Bear the full weight of it, Tia. All the pain, all of it, no delusions, no masks."

"Perish, Benito, you're just jealous, is all."

"Jealous?" he hooted.

"You couldn't even get it up, remember?"

The sting of saying it equalled the sting of receiving it, and we both gasped.

"Jesus, Benito, I'm sorry...."

"You bitch," he spat.

"Benito...."

"You've got your brains between your legs, just like the rest of them!"

I threw the calibrator down on the chair and hopped over the edge of the revolving platform. "Just let it ride, will you?"

"You in love with him, Tia?" Benito shouted.

"Shut up!" I yelled back as I paced through the gleaming generators.

"He make you feel young again?"

"Shut up!"

"What's the flavor of old cunt, Tia?"

"SHUT UP!"

"Does he leave the lights on?"

"Shut the death up!"_ I screamed and slammed the heavy door behind me. Through the thick paneling I heard reverberating shouts, but whether they were new insults from Benito or only the echoes of our screams I couldn't tell.

I forced myself not to run through the Ilium's corridors, up the dropshafts, through the wonderland of colonnades and archways and plazas, up twisting archaic staircases until I reached one of the vacant minarets. Its onion-shaped crystal top would eventually be used for astrogation but now it was clean, quiet, and solitary. I stared out window, watching the foam created by our passing flow from the stern, to my right. We were moving toward the southwest, barely resting on the skin of the ocean. We could have lifted the entire ship and been over the Islands an hour after leaving shore but there was no hurry, never any hurry aboard a ship with eternity to waste. So the ocean stretched before and behind us, foam glistened in our wake, and the sun sent evening shafts of light through the stained glass in the windows behind me, dappled the marble floor in wine-rich hues. The wind was warm and sweet.

"You in love with him, Tia?" Love? With Paul? No, of course not. He wasn't Greg. I had loved Greg, needed Greg, and the need had not threatened me. I did not love Paul, for how could one love an alien? And the need, therefore, did not exist.

Of course it wasn't that simple. There were needs and desires in this relationship that I decided not to pursue. It couldn't be simple physical attraction, not surrounded as he was by the physical beauty of Jenny or Lonnie or Tobias. I side-stepped the issue, knowing that my easy answer was no answer. Paul was, simply, fond of me, remembered Venice, perhaps even felt sorry for me. But, after all, it wasn't Paul's feelings that mattered so much as my own. I had been celibate for fourteen years before Paul and expected, once he left, to be celibate for the rest of my short life. He would leave, I didn't doubt it, and I would have sleepless nights and days spent in crowded loneliness. There would be many opportunities to pay for the sins of my strangeness. Tune for a hundred visions and revisions, but not yet. Not yet.

The rays of the sun slanted almost horizontally across the round chamber. I twisted my hair more tightly behind my head and went to mess.

Benito sat at one end of the oval table, Paul slightly down from him and across, and a vacant place beside each of them. Without hesitation, I crossed the patterned tile floor and sat beside Paul, and Benito refused to look at me.

25

Five days from land. The deep belly-thrumming of the generators told me that we were changing course. I sat on one of the ledges of my minaret, watching the bow of the Ilium carve long triangles into the sea. Paul had found a book on yoga in my personal library and was locked in his cabin, trying to tie his legs into knots. Tobias had decided to spend the day in the museum, while Harkness and Greville argued over the holocharts in the bridge. I went to the one place where I thought I would not be interrupted and there I sat, high above the flight deck and on the other side of the minaret from it, legs dangling between the wrought-iron rail supports, over the white-flecked waters.

"Uh, excuse me."

I turned and squinted up at Jenny. She stood near the wall, arms loose at her sides and fingers twitching against her browned thighs. "May I join you?"

I gestured toward a place by the ledge. She sat cautiously, legs wrapped around one of the rail supports. She grasped the rail and leaned forward, looking down at the moving blue below us, then gasped and pointed.

"Look! What are those?"

I glanced at the bow where sleek dark shapes capered.

"Dolphins. They often ride with us. Pure sport, I guess."

"I read in an old book that they're intelligent, that they talk to each other."

I shrugged. "Yes, and probably the same's true of whales. But research stopped during the Shaping, and no one's taken it up again."

"Pity," she said and leaned back to catch the sunlight full on her face. Her thick, black hair swept the deck behind her, brushed across the knuckles of her pulled-back hands. I waited for her to speak but she kept a long silence. A seagull mewed plaintively. The generators thrummed as we held steady on the new course.

"Tia?"

"Um?"

"What's it, well, I mean..."

I turned to look at her. "What is it, Jenny?"

She laughed nervously, played with her hair. "I'm a little scared of mentioning it. I mean, I don't want to offend you."

"If I'm offended I won't answer, okay?"

"Well, what does it feel like? Being old, I mean?" I stared at her.

"There, I told you you'd be offended."

"Jenny, how old are you?"

She looked startled, frowned a moment, then said, "A hundred ten. I think. It's sort of hard to keep track."

"And I'm sixty-seven years, eight months, fourteen days, and um, about eleven hours. You're older than I am."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. I know." I leaned my forearms against the low railing, rested chin on wrists. "It's not something I like talking about."

Pause. "Are you very lonely?"

I didn't answer that. After a moment Jenny continued.

"I mean, do you know of any others like you?"

"No. I used to look for someone. I'd have heard, or my doctors would have heard. No, there's no one like me, Jenny. Do you find that a relief?"

This time, she didn't answer.

"I wanted children, once," I said, mostly to the dolphins. "Maybe selfishly, so there could be others like me. But I didn't. One gets used to it, after a while."

"Really?"

"No."

I heard her move.

"Does it hurt?" she said.

"Sometimes. Some things."

"Like?"

I turned to her, my cheek against my arms. "Aren't you being a bit morbid?"

She flushed, moved her hands defensively. "I'm not trying to pry. It's -- it's not for me."

"Then the others can ask their own questions, can't they?" I went back to watching the dolphins. She didn't go away. When I glanced at her she, too, was leaning on crossed wrists watching the cavorting shapes ahead of us.

"Tobias is very moody, isn't he?" she said unexpectedly.

"I suppose."

"Do you know why?"

"Why should I? He does his job, I do mine."

"But you spend so much time together, during the dives and like that."

"He does his job, I do mine. He's not particularly fond of me."

"Well, you're not too friendly, either," she said with a touch of heat.

"Am I supposed to be? He goes out of his way to be unpleasant. There's no law that says I have to love someone who hates me."

"It's not hate," she began.

"Then it's something pretty damned close. I have enough to worry about, without that."

"It's not hate," she said again. "It's...." and she bit her lip.

Another silence ensued.

"How long were you with Paul?" I asked. To my satisfaction she looked uncomfortable.

"About three years."

"Yes? Did you enjoy him?"

She shook her head, in confusion rather than negation. "Paul's ... odd," she said. "No, I didn't enjoy him, not always. But I think I understand him better now."

"Are you still angry with him?"

"For what?"

"Me."

Again the confused shake of the head, and a disturbed creasing around the eyes. "I don't know, I'm not sure. I'm, things are so, so changing. I just don't know anymore." Her shoulders shivered. "Paul has bad dreams."

"Bad dreams? What kind?"

But she was already standing. "Look, I promised Tobias I'd be back before mess-time. I've really got to go. Thanks for talking with me." Then she leaned forward quickly, brushed my cheek with her fingertips, and ran wildly down the stairs, leaving me staring after her in amazement.

26

"Yes, but is it safe?" Paul asked for the fourth time that afternoon.

I cursed myself for an idiot and began putting away the bits of my wet-suit that lay scattered on the mosaic floor of the diving hold. "If you use any common sense, it's as safe as a bubblesuit," I said again.

He nodded, unconvinced, and fingered the faceplate before handing it to me. "Why don't you show me the bubblesuits now?" he asked.

Subject closed. I had stupidly hoped that I could talk him into scuba diving with me, but he responded with an impenetrable lack of interest and the unchangeable belief that scuba diving would kill him. Well, we would dive in two more days; he, Jenny and Tobias in bubblesuits and I in my wet-suit, and that would be that. So be it. I finished layering my equipment in the storage chamber, irised the mouth closed and led the way along the circular rim of the first deck to the bubblesuits.

"You've used one of these before," I began, and waited for his nod.

"All right, then, here's the shunts, you'll notice that they're a bit different from those you're used to; greater generation to offset the greater depths you'll be in. Air recycler, radio, stabilizers so that you don't go turning end for end. The propulsion equipment operates out of the main generator. Radiates from this and this, here on the waistband. So the centerpoint of the field is really the centerpoint of you. The border of the bubble will always be the same distance from you. Remember that you won't be able to touch the walls once the field is operating so you'll need to use remotes. The controls for them are here, on the wristbands, sight and sound on the right, motion on the left, it'll take you about five minutes to get used to them, they're fairly straightforward. Screen hangs from the waist-belt, so. The equipment sac rides in the bubble with you, here, and there's a tricky bit of electronics to keep it from penetrating the bubble wall, or bashing into you during turbulence." I held the equipment sac in my palm and turned it over

a couple of times. "Benito's work," I said. "All the modifications. Okay, that's about it."

"What if I get knocked against a building, or some fish tries to get in?"

"The field is set at no-displacement, like a table or floor, rather than some-displacement, like a chair or bed. Anything that tries to get in will just get bounced away, and if you get too close to something solid you get bounced away, bubble and all."

"Okay. How long's the recycler good for?"

"It'll work as long as the generator batteries last. They're fully charged before a dive, so even with full use you won't get a complete drain for about twenty-six or twenty-eight hours. You won't be under that long."

"And if I get stuck somewhere?" He looked very worried. I sighed.

"See this? It's a homing call. Your position is on the bridge screen at all times, so there's no danger that you might get stuck and not be rescued in time. If the rescue takes longer than you're charged for, we simply build a second bubble around the first one, pump in air, and you deactivate your field and use the larger one."

"So it's just about perfectly safe?" Paul asked.

"Perfectly safe," I agreed. He ignored the bite in my tone and inspected the equipment happily.

An alarm blared and Harkness' voice filled the hold.

"Attention. All crew to bridge immediately. Attention."

I turned, sprinted across the diving hold, and was on my way up the dropshaft with Paul close behind me before Harkness issued his command again.

"Does that mean me, too?" Paul asked as we ascended.

"Sure, honorary."

"What's going on?"

"Don't know." I jumped a floater and scooted down the hall toward another dropshaft. The last time Greville called an alert, he had discovered a dolphin in the diving well and raised a commotion until I guided the creature back to the open sea. But this alert was called by Harkness, who stood near the control banks watching the crew enter the room while Greville shouted at Benito. The chief engineer scowled, hands balled against his thighs, seemingly oblivious to Greville's tirade.

"I'll bet it's the generators," Lonnie said to Paul as he entered behind me. "I heard Benito growling at them this morning during my shift."

I was the one who usually knew, first after Benito, of the workings of the engine room. But I hadn't been down since our argument and Benito had not sought me out to invite me.

Li, late as usual, entered in a quivering rush and Greville advanced to his "leader of the expedition" post.

"Ahem," he began. "Benito tells me that we have a problem with the generators. There is no need to panic, no. Ahem. Yes. Benito says that one of the generators is, uh, malfunctioning. The Ilium will not be able to dive. Ahem." He looked about him, lost without a prepared speech.

Benito, still slouched against the control bank, lifted his face.

"Look, the number fourteen starboard generator is acting funny. If we go down, the load is too much and we leak at that sector, no good. But we're fine as long as we stay on the surface. I can fix the generator in five or six days -- maybe I'll need new parts and that might take longer, I don't know yet. I told Greville, Greville wants to go home."

"No," I said.

"No, that is what I think," Benito agreed. "We are safe here. They can dive from the surface, that is no problem, nothing new."

"I say we vote," Greville announced. "Can I see a show of hands? Return to the mainland?"

"Hold it, Greville, we haven't discussed this yet," Harkness interrupted. He strode to the map screen, lofted a pointer, and ran its light over the images behind him as he spoke. "I think Benito's right. We are,

approximately, here, six days out and over the main island by tomorrow, in place by tomorrow night. The sea is even, and we're going to be well out from the Mauna Loa breakers. No storms brewing anywhere within the Pacific circle...."

"Storms are okay," Benito interrupted. "Just no diving."

"Thank you. Diving from the surface presents no hazards, it's been done often enough before." Harkness released the pointer and angled his glance around the room. "I would hate to be in command of a ship that turned tail and scooted home at the first sign of trouble. I say we continue."

"I agree," Jenny said. "I'm spending a lot for this trip, and I don't want to go back without diving. If Benito says it's safe, and if Tobias and ... and Tia say it's safe, then I want to do it."

I nodded at her. "Yes, it's safe enough," I replied. "Your bubblesuits are pressurized so that decompression times won't be too long. At the depths we'll be going to, we'll be limited to one dive a day, but that should pose no problems. It won't be as convenient, of course, as when the Ilium dives and we don't have to worry about individual decompression, and we'll have to bring artifacts further to get them in the ship, but these are pretty minor considerations. It should be as safe as diving from below. I say we do it."

"But if one generator blows, the others might, too," Greville protested. "Maybe even the generators in the bubblesuits. I don't think we ought to take the chance."

"No generator has blown," Benito insisted. "My generators do not blow. This is preventive, just to clean this one up, its readings are a bit off. Nothing has blown and nothing is going to blow. You think that maybe it's communicable? No, my generators are fine. Dive."

"Well, I don't know," Hart said. "I mean, we're all the way out in the middle of the ocean, it's not like being in port. I mean, if something goes, well, it just does, doesn't it? It's a big chance we're taking, I think."

"If you didn't like the risks, you shouldn't have come," Tobias said. "If we're going to dive, then let's dive; if we're going, let's go. This is a waste of time." He crossed his arms, crossed his ankles and slouched down in the chair. His blue eyes glowered about the room and his lower lip thrust out. Tobias had taken a resolute stand, right in the middle.

Greville shrugged and called the vote. Hart, Li, and Greville wanted to return to the mainland; Benito, Harkness, Tobias, Jenny, and I wanted to dive. Paul cast his vote at the last minute, for diving, and Lonnie declared that it was all the same to her.

"I can do my work no matter where we are," she explained to Paul, leaning against his shoulder while she looked up at him. "Up, down, here or there. I'm adaptable."

Benito strode from the room, Harkness returned to his controls, and Greville, accompanied by much waving of arms, conversed with Hart and Li.

"Coming?" I asked Paul, and turned without waiting for his answer. He followed me to the diving hold.

"Look, Tia, are you sure this will be safe?" he asked as we dropped.

"I said so, didn't I?"

"Yes, but are you really sure?"

I didn't reply. As I straightened the equipment in my locker, Jenny and Tobias entered the hold. They nodded at us and moved toward the bubblesuit equipment where Tobias, with a great show of professionalism, began displaying the stuff to Jenny. As I watched them, I realized that he was playing to me rather than to her, and with great bravado. Ah, beautiful Tobias was not going to be outshone by a withered hag. But Jenny was truly interested and asked endless questions, relevant ones, while Paul played with my airhoses and funkyed.

27

Li grabbed a handful of bread, mopped at the gravy floating on his plate, and waved the sopping bread to emphasize his point before shoving it

into his mouth.

"It's a good place to dive," he said again. "All this good stuff, you see. Some places, 'mff, 'cuse me, some places all you get is stuff that breaks apart, but there's a lot of good stuff there. And the fishing's great. Hey, Tobias, you gonna bring me some yellowtail first dive?"

"Sure," Tobias grumbled. "What else do you want? Crab? Lobster? Oysters? Clams? Squid? How about a whale?"

"Hey, you can't get all that stuff 'round here," Li protested genially and washed down his bread with a great gulp of wine.

"Besides, we already have a whale aboard," Lonnie observed, smiling both at Li and at Paul beside him. "If there's one thing Li knows about diving, it's what kind of fish are where," she told Paul. "He may not know anything else, but he does know fish."

"And don't you appreciate it," Li said.

I sipped the wine, watching Paul return Lonnie's smile, then Li leaned between us and plopped another pastie onto my plate.

"Here, eat, eat," he commanded. "Benito, have some more, there's loads left in the kitchen."

"Galley," Tobias reminded him.

"Galley, kitchen, whatever, have some more."

"Tobias can use them for bait," Lonnie suggested, glancing sideways down the table to where Tobias sat. He ignored her, but Paul smiled.

"What about this good stuff?" Jenny said. "Why are these islands better than, say, California? Or one of the places that sank slowly? Wasn't Hawaii hit by a bunch of tidal waves before it sank?"

"Yes, tsunamis," I said. "But most of them happened during the sinking, not before. The water level rose pretty quickly during the first melt, then the pressure change at the pole activated a lot of the fault lines and volcanic areas along the Pacific. Mauna Loa really cut loose and covered most of the west side of the island with lava, then the tsunamis generated by other volcanic activity hit. Take a look at the volcano tomorrow; the black cliffs show where the successive tidal waves hit the lava flows -- it looks like steps cut into the mountain. What with one thing and another, by the time the last waterwall came down from the pole, most of Hilo, for example, was already under water."

"There are," Greville announced, "some plans to try underwater excavation of the west side of the island, what the natives called the, uh, um, Coffee Side. Of course, it will take considerable equipment and expertise to cut through the layer of, ahem, volcanic rock, and under water, too, to the city below. But we believe that we'll do a creditable job of it."

"If we get the job at all," Harkness said. Greville looked wounded.

"When that last waterwall hit," I said, "the waves rolled over Hilo at about ten meters from original sea level, higher in some places due to current formation. In downtown Hilo, many of the buildings are sheared off at a certain point, as though they were cut through with some huge laser."

"Of course," Tobias said, "many of the smaller buildings were demolished completely. No use at all."

"But not all," I said. "Some buildings were protected by other structures closer to the waterfront, that took the brunt of the waves. And there were some smaller buildings that, quite simply, were well-constructed enough to make it through almost undamaged. This, of course, helps us a lot."

"The Hawaiians were pretty swift in their use of materials even before the Shaping," Tobias said. "A humid atmosphere. Lots of salt in the air. They had to use things that didn't rot too quickly -- plastics, non-corrosive metals, that sort of thing. Kept the stuff in good condition, even under water. Inland places, like under the California Sea, they didn't bother with protecting their things, so you don't find very many valuable artifacts there."

"Iron, for example," Greville said, "simply disintegrates."

"Yes," Tobias began.

"Iron, poof," Hart commented sagely, making tiny explosions with his fingers. "You just touch the stuff and there it goes, like dust."

"Exactly," Greville said.

"Like dust," Lonnie explained. Everyone nodded at everyone else.

"But not always," Benito said, his love of machinery outweighing, for the nonce, his dislike for conversation. "You touch the stuff, sure, it crumbles, but you enclose the thing in a bubble, see, and when you bring it up you've gotta keep the pressure constant, consistent with the pressure where you picked the thing up. And be sure to cushion it. One bubble for the thing, another for cushioning, and you got it."

"Of course, you can't get it out again," Greville said.

"Poof," Hart reminded him. "Poof, poof."

"Yes, indeed. Poof." Greville must have caught the amused smile that passed between Hart and Harkness, for the Scientific Leader frowned and returned to his soup.

"And the buildings?" Jenny asked.

"Funny thing," Harkness said, smoothing the front of his crisp tunic. "You find some really cheap construction here, built during the Second Prosperity, where they used junk materials to reinforce the concrete. Oh, it worked well enough, for a while, but when the waters rose some of the metal was exposed to salt water and started to corrode. All the way through, sometimes, so you'll find a building with walls that look perfectly good, then you have the saser run on them and it turns out they're just loose concrete riddled with tunnels. About as safe and steady as a sand castle."

"Maybe less," Lonnie said, grinning. "Tobias always talks about all the good stuff he could have brought up from places like that."

"Good for fish, though," Li said. "How about it, Tobias? A couple of yellowtail ought to do us just fine, I could put one in stasis and, um, how about the other one in lime? Or white wine? With mushrooms, some garlic, red onions, tomatoes? What do you say?"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Tobias pushed himself away from the table. "I didn't come aboard to do your shopping for you. You want fish you go down and get them yourself." He strode from the room and, after a slight hesitation, Jenny rose and followed him.

"Hey, you don't have to go, you know," Lonnie called to her. "He always throws a tantrum after dinner, it's good for his digestion. Let him sulk."

Jenny shook her head and followed her lover from the room. Lonnie grinned, shrugged, and returned to her meal, but the conversation died.

28

Two years before Paul and Jenny came to the Ilium I was in Rome picking up a new valve set for my scuba equipment. Rome had, of course, been redone, refurbished, newly antiquated. Each hill was the possession of a particular epoch; each valley reflected a way of life dead for centuries, the interfaces between the replicated centuries sometimes sharp and clear, sometimes fading one into another in a confusion of times and styles. Tai-li's shop lay deep in the medieval sector; small cobble streets and alleys, houses and hovels packed densely together with little regard for what had actually occupied the area during the time being represented, picturesque and simulated squalor amid incongruous fountains and statues.

Rome is too cosmopolitan a city, however, to harbor those Immortals who dedicate themselves fiercely, for a decade or two, to living the day by day life of a past age. You have to travel to the Pyrenees to find villages where force-fields are strictly forbidden; you must delve deep into the African veldt to discover villages following cultures so old that even archaic zippers are not used. The Immortals playact with great enthusiasm at their living-games, and when they tire of them they move on, hopping from one century to another, exchanging cultures as easily as they exchange styles of clothing, and with as little knowledge of their composition. In Rome, however, the antiquity is merely a cover-up, the force-furniture cleverly simulates

wooden tables, stone benches, animal-skin rugs, and draperies. I was still building my house then, and sat in Tai-li's shop, sipping bitter coffee, contemplating the playacting of the Immortals with scorn.

Tai-li took the new valve set from a box and brushed it with her fingers.

"It's almost a completely true replication," she said. "I say almost because I didn't want to use the original materials, you understand. The rubber gives the air a vile taste. This is stabilized plasteen, a crystal, really. The set fits to the hose thus, then to the mask on this end, it should give you no problems. If it does, let me know."

"If it does I may not be in any position to let you know," I told her, and set down the pulsing cup.

"The other equipment's behaving itself?" she asked as she packed the set.

"Yes, the wet-suit works very well, stands up to use. You did a good job, Tai-li."

"I always do," she replied, and presented the payment plate. I pressed my thumb over the black surface. The signal pulsed and my purchase was complete. Tai-li ushered me to the door as we exchanged parting words and she saw me out with relief. Tai-li valued my business; it gave her a legitimate reason to indulge her hobby of recreating the rubberized wonders of bygone days, but she didn't feel any more comfortable around me than did anyone else.

I stood for a moment in the hot summer sunlight, considering whether to stop for a cool drink before taking the tube back home. If I stopped, I would be stared at. Well, let them stare. I wanted a drink and didn't mind clearing a cafe to get one. I remembered seeing one during the hop to Tai-li's shop, on an edge of the large square that was the center of the twentieth-century restoration, and I began walking in that direction.

Heat danced and quivered over the street as I crossed from cobblestones to asphalt. Here the interface between centuries was abrupt; half-timbered, thatched buildings smack up against towering glass skyscrapers, each as fake as the other. I turned a corner and before me stretched the square, dotted with statues and fountains, surrounded on all sides by reconstructed twentieth-century buildings, all at least ten stories high, all hideously ugly, all seeming to move as I stared at them through the heat waves. Hoppers scooted around the square, few people walked. I saw the cafe on the far side of the plaza, a pool of dark and welcoming shadow under awnings and umbrellas, and I started toward it.

A quarter of the way across the square, I was bathed in sweat and dizzy. I sat by a fountain, cursing the mid-20th century architects who equated barrenness with style. I wet the sleeve of my suit and wiped my face. I should have called a hopper but I didn't want to turn back. I began walking again, putting one foot before the other across the blistering flagstones. I stared at the sheets of rock under my feet, grey stone, white stone, brown stone, grey stone, brown stone, black lump.

Black lump?

The lump moved. A cat, old and mangy, mangled from ancient battles, lay spread on the ground, panting slightly. It ignored my hand and kept its eyes closed. Its fur almost burned my fingers. Old cat that had come into the square to die? Old cat that hadn't come out to die, but was dying anyway? The cat wouldn't last thirty minutes left in the sunlight. I picked it up, tented my shirt over it to make shade, and walked toward the cafe again.

Grey stone, brown stone, mottled stone, black stone, brown stone, white stone, grey stone; how many stones in the universe? How many stones in that baked and sterile plaza? My feet were stones, my neck, my head; the hair of my head was spun granite, my arms marble, the cat lead. White stone grey stone brown stone white stone and suddenly shade and voices; I looked up to find that I was within the cafe.

The voices died. I sat on a wooden chair, pulled the cat from my suit, and laid it on the table.

"Bring me some water," I whispered to the waiter. A glass appeared. I wetted a finger and tried to pry open the cat's mouth. The jaw gave way and hung slack, and I touched the wetness to the roof of its mouth. The cat didn't move. I tried again.

"Please, the cat is dead," the waiter said, pained.

I dribbled water down my finger into the cat's mouth. The water ran over my fingernail, pooled in the red cavity and spilled out onto the table. The cat didn't move.

"The cat is dead," the waiter repeated, and took the glass from me. I looked up at him and back at the table.

The cat didn't move.

"Was it your cat, perhaps?"

"Not my cat. No. Dead?"

"It was just an animal." He handed me another glass of water. I sipped it, staring at the dead cat. "May I remove the animal?"

"Yes, take it away." The waiter slipped a floater under the table and guided it along the side of the cafe and out of sight.

"Would you care to order something?" he asked when he returned. He centered a new table before me and, folding the floater, slipped it into the pocket of his pants.

"Just, no. Nothing. What are you going to do with the cat?"

"It's been fed down the disposal system, of course."

"Of course."

"It was just an animal. Had to die sooner or later."

"We're all animals, we just forget it whenever we can, is all." I might as well have spoken gibberish, for all the understanding in his green eyes.

"Get me a hopper, please. Right now."

"Yes, certainly," he said with relief, and very soon one waited before the cafe, door open. I stood, walked through the silent people, entered the hopper, and the gate closed.

I punched the buttons for the tube station and sat back, weary, as the hopper hummed, picked up speed, and rushed away from the barren square.

29

Pretty Paul lies in my hammock, foot idly swinging back and forth, as he puffs upon a joint.

"Off," I say to him. "I want to wash the blanket, remove yourself."

He has a tantrum. He does not want the blanket gone, he does not want to rise, he does not want to go to his room, he does not want to lie on the hammock's cords, he wants nothing but to recline in blissful idleness. I insist, he resists, and within five minutes an argument is in full flower. Eventually, in the heat of battle, he quits the hammock to harangue me at closer range, and I lift the blanket from the bed, toss it in the vibra, and punch the button. Paul hits me. I hit him back.

Ten minutes later he is contrite, apologetic, cringing, flattering. I am disgusted, angry, impolite, and abusive, but forgive him anyway. Don't ask me why.

"No," says Harkness with sarcastic patience. "If we go down here, where you want, we'll be a league south of Hilo, and will have to maneuver underwater. Hilo is here." He stabs a finger at the map.

"I'm not so sure about that," Greville says. "If we go down where I want to, we'll have a better view of what we're after...."

"Nonsense. Visibility underwater is lousy." Harkness reaches around the Scientific Leader to punch his own directions into the computer. Greville, controlling himself, announces that in his considered opinion a grave error has been made, for which he cannot, in fairness, accept any blame whatsoever. Harkness maintains a contemptuous silence; Greville stalks to the door, but before he reaches it his control breaks and he stomps out, goes down to his cabin where he will spend the next hour breaking tiny sticks of wood into many pieces and writing drafts of resignation. Up in the bridge, Harkness and Hart

giggle together. Greville doesn't miss dinner.

Beautiful Tobias burns. He smoulders about the ship, broadcasting darkness as he goes. Anger fit for cataclysmic occurrences, fit for catastrophic dooms.

I come down a corridor, my arms loaded with pieces of my back-up suit, to meet Tobias coming up from the hold with a gauge in his hand. I begin to sidestep, but he leans toward me, blocks me, and his eyes are hot.

"Ti-a," he said, turning my name into two distinct syllables. "Do you have any children, Ti-a?"

"Go away," I mutter, try to move around him.

"Any children? Any little children?"

"What do you think?" I say angrily and push him aside. His whisper follows me down the corridor, "children, children, children," until I plunge down a drop-tube, stuff my equipment in my locker, and flee to my minaret. I will give him credit for this, though: I do not think he knows how much his question hurts.

Another time I raise my head from an exhibit in the ship's museum to find Tobias behind me. As I turn, he whispers, "I'm twenty-three, Ti-a. I'm twenty-three," before he kicks his floater and rushes down the arcade and away. I shrug and turn toward the exhibit again. This is Tobias, playing at the very edge, gilding the emotional dandelion. Why? Does Jenny know of this? It makes no difference, really. Tobias burns.

Jenny searches for rationality, pursues cause and finds misunderstanding, falls into anger in her often useless quest for comprehension and sense. She destroys her searching by a refusal to accept the obvious. Or so I think. Lonnie thinks her nosy, Benito thinks her silly, Paul thinks her stupid.

Despite the sunlight, she seems more pale than she did a week ago at the edge of the sea. She seems more nervous, she seems lost. The glances that she gives Paul are no longer those of hate, but those of confusion, almost of understanding and pity. But she is still uncomfortable with me, despite our sunlit, minaret talk. I'm not sure I understand Jenny, I'm almost sure that I like her. But beauty does not reside with beast.

In a midnight wandering I pass Li's cabin and hear the sounds of music. Unwilling to eavesdrop, I nonetheless hear our fat and fatuous cook singing to the accompaniment of some stringed instrument. What he sings is soft and simple and infinitely sad. I am drawn to it, knock upon the cabin door. Li puts down the instrument. Lonnie and Hart look up with surprise, and all make nervous, giggling comments. I leave them, and soon the soft plunking of the instrument sounds again.

And Benito, locked away from me, I do not see at all.

30

"Paul?"

He wasn't in the diving hold, where he should have been, or in the museum, where he often was. I glanced down the brightly-lit hall again, hands on hips, and turned my back on the displays. We were coming into position over the island and I had asked Paul to be in the diving hold for a last dry run of his equipment and the ship's diving regulations before the first dive next morning. I hadn't expected him to be on time, that would have been asking too much, but I had expected him to show up sooner or later. An hour had passed before I exhausted my patience and went looking for him. And now I couldn't find him.

I dropped to the galley and peered into the room on the chance that Paul might have decided to raid Li's pantry. Li stood by one of the workfields, fine white flour streaked down the front of his dark-blue worksuit, while fruit tarts shaped themselves under his swift fingers.

"Seen Paul?" I asked.

"What? No, not since mess."

"Okay, thanks."

"Hey, Tia, you think Tobias will bring me a fish after all?"

"I don't know, Li. Would you like me to bring you one?"

"Uh, no thanks. I can manage." Li looked embarrassed. "I just like to tease him, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," I said, leaving the galley. Li always refused my offers. I thought his superstitions must include something about the communicability of mortality, but the thought only amused me. Li wasn't an important part of my life.

I bounced to the bridge and glanced in. Deserted, the banks blinking and bleeping to themselves. Harkness wouldn't feel the need to play captain until we actually maneuvered into position, in about four hours' time. Our fearless captain would, as usual, spend the interim in his cabin with Hart, dissipating tensions and clearing his mind for the complicated, tricky job before him, a job the computer could have done just as well, and with less circumstance. In the meantime, no Hart, no Harkness, and no Paul either. My exasperation gave way to anger.

My cabin? More likely than his. He seemed to enjoy spending time in my hammock, lying back with his eyes focussed on nothing or, more rarely, glancing through one of my archaic paper-bound books.

I dropped from the bridge to third deck, grabbed a floater, and kicked it down the patterned hallway.

In this part of the ship a deep well rose from the second deck toward the sky and was protected at the top by a Victorian glass-work cage which admitted light and fresh air, but was itself protected by an invisible force-field. Most third deck cabins opened onto the filigreed balcony circling the well, but I had chosen one that opened onto a small side corridor; three ports in my cabin looked off the starboard side of the Ilium, and the small corridor gave me greater privacy than the more public openings to the balcony cabins.

I kicked the floater across the emptiness of the well, maneuvered down my corridor, and palmed open the door, all in one easy movement.

They froze as I entered. Lonnie perched precariously above Paul in the hammock and both looked at me with expressions of complete amazement. The automatic masks of self-defense clamped over my emotions before I even thought of shock or pain. I dug my fists into my hips and glowered.

"Uh, hi," Lonnie offered. "Paul said you were busy."

"In the diving hold," he added.

"You were supposed to be there, too." Paul looked blank. "You need one last dry run before we dive tomorrow. I won't clear you with Greville until I'm sure you can handle the dive. I'll be in the hold for another hour. You want to dive, you'll be there."

I stepped out of the room and slapped the door shut. Gunning the floater, I whipped around the corner onto the balcony, across the well and down the droptubes to the hold, where I kicked the floater toward a corner and paced. I had barely managed to control my shaking when Paul dropped to the hold.

"Get your equipment out," I commanded. "Identify each piece, set them in order, and check them."

He did so silently, placing the various parts of the bubblesuit in a line on the floor, then stood and waited for me to check them over. I glanced at them.

"Get on with it."

He identified each one as he lifted it for an inspection, his tone subdued. I corrected his mistakes, took him through the inspection again, created some hypothetical emergencies that he coped with acceptably, and told him to stow the equipment. I turned to go before he had finished, but he sprinted after me, grabbed my shoulder, and pulled me around to him.

"Don't paw me!" I cried, jerking away from his hands. "Leave me alone!"

"Tia, please, I wouldn't have done it if I thought you were going to be so upset...."

"You were supposed to be here for the run, you can at least observe your own schedules."

"I'm sorry, really I am, Tia. After all, you know, it's you I love."

"I don't deathly care what you do with your spare time, but when it comes to the dive I expect you to be here, not off, off..." And there I stuck, dangling between self-pity, anger at Paul and Lonnie and more at myself, and a strong sense of betrayal that, as soon as I found it, blew my emotions aside. I didn't own him. I hadn't been so stupid as to believe that fidelity had anything to do with this, had I? The return of my sense of idiocy brought with it a return of rationality. Paul looked relieved.

"Look, Tia...."

"No, just be quiet. Put the stuff away, okay?"

"Sure. You'll be in to lunch?"

I shrugged and left the hold before he could venture any further comments.

I didn't even like Paul very much, I decided, but the thought of barring him from my cabin was still painful. I soothed myself with adages: Beggars can't be choosers, gift horses and mouths, and, finally, one of my own creations: Pride has nothing to do with it.

I battered the subject about until I grew thoroughly sick of it, then went down to lunch.

31

I pulled the legs of my wet-suit over my thighs, shifting and urging the balky rubber into place. I had finished helping Paul into his bubblesuit and Tobias was putting the finishing touches on Jenny's suit before readying himself. Lonnie, the list in her hand, checked Paul's equipment, her murmured words the only sound in the otherwise silent hold. Tobias finished with Jenny; she walked down the rough-surfaced ramp to the lower level and sat at the edge of the diving well. I wriggled into the top of my suit, checked seams and fastenings, closed the seals, settled the tanks and jets on my back. I pulled the black rubber headsheath over my hair and Tobias appeared behind me, set the seams on the sheath and checked for unwanted apertures. When he had finished I closed the connections on the back of his waistband, securing each shunt to its proper place. Safety took precedence over our mutual dislike; we checked each other's rigs before diving with a maximum of skill and a minimum of civility. He moved away. I scooped up my flippers and took my place by the diving well. Tobias sat a moment later, waiting for Lonnie to begin his check, while Greville from the bridge observed us all on the vidsystem. The tension in the air almost sang.

The three Immortals were encased in the network of dark blue and red wires and golden electrodes that comprised the bubble mechanisms; a vermilion bundle of equipment lay beside each one on the smooth, multi-colored floor. Their tanned bodies, firm and smooth, glowed through the crossings of wire, the bandings of fabric; beside them I looked even more the troglodite, encased in black rubber. The tanks on my back mocked Benito's hump, hoses trailed over my shoulders, waist loaded with metal weights and pieces of equipment. Jenny stared at me from the corner of her eye and I resisted the impulse to snap shut the clear shield of my faceplate.

Twenty minutes crawled by before Tobias and I were finally checked out. The intercom coughed.

"Friends, you are now ready to dive," Greville announced from the bridge. "You have been briefed on safety precautions, so I won't go into that again. Yes. Ahem. Tobias will dive first, then Paul, then Jenny, and Tia will take up the rear. The remotes are already waiting for you below the surface. Ahem. Do be careful. Okay."

Tobias dropped first, the field forming around him as he slid into the water below the lip of the well. He held position for a moment while the field closed over his head, then slipped down and to the side, motioning Paul to follow. I activated my radio so that I could hear them.

"Slowly," Tobias said. "Feet first and, wait a minute, okay, now touch the activating lever. Slowly. Fine. Keep coming. Stop now, let it finish. Right. Now come all the way under. Take your time. Good."

Paul glanced up at me, smiling, through layers of force and layers of water. I nodded at him. Jenny slid into the water as though she had done it innumerable times before. When the three Immortals were clear of the well, I snapped my face-plate shut, activated the tanks and tumbled backwards into the cool ocean.

The ocean made space for me, pressing against the blackness of my assumed skin, buoying me and counter-acting the heaviness of the lead fastened around my waist. I kicked and continued my initial dive, feeling pressure sliding back against my belly and legs, the quiet acceptance of the seas. Space and ocean have much in common: both are alien to us, not our element, both contain mysteries, dangers, sudden beauties of their own. But space is a container of nothingness, a vacuum, a void of immeasurable loneliness and occasional transcendence. Water is our birthplace, a repository of life, teeming with creatures large and small, beautiful or stunningly grotesque according to their custom, aquatic forests and microscopic landscapes, beings caught between the layers of life, rocks made of living creatures and living creatures made of stone, vegetable animals and animated plants and sudden deep, heart-breaking, lovely jewels that flick their trailing rainbows and dart away from you between the fronds of weeds.

Space does not care whether you are there or not. Implacable in its indifference, it kills you simply because it is. But the ocean is not indifferent. It reacts and shapes itself to your presence or absence, it peers at you from millions of eyes, presses itself against you, speaks in voices alien and intimate. Accept its strangeness and the ocean opens to you, gives you freedom and beauty, a hook into otherness.

Here, near the surface, the water shimmered with light and color. I caught Jenny's eye and gestured upward, and she raised her head to see the mantle of the shining sea. Paul stared morosely into the darkness.

We moved through the first atmosphere, the remotes following. I thumbed on my jets and closed the gap between Jenny's bubble and myself. She floated in the center of her sphere of air, her head moving as she tried to see 360E around her. Ahead of her, Paul started when a marlin swam by and only relaxed once the large fish was out of sight. Moving to one side, I saw Tobias already peering at the ruins below us. Two of the remotes streaked away in response to his signal.

"Do you have visual contact yet?" Greville demanded in his best scientific voice.

"Yes, looks like a hotel," Tobias reported as we approached the buildings. "There're some lower spots that look like they were swimming pools, and lots of windows. All broken. Lots of silt. Maybe ten, twelve floors originally, the first one's double size."

The remotes had reached the first building. I detached the small screen from my belt and held it before my face-plate. "It appears to be a lobby," Tobias continued. "Have you got the picture?"

"Yes, resolution's fine," Greville replied. "Can you implement holo-projection?"

"Not yet," I said. "Wait until we get there ourselves."

Sudden light spilled from the building below: the second remote had entered and set up the floods. I keyed its transmission to my screen and Tobias had it begin a slow pan of the lobby.

"Tune second," I told Greville. "There's the desk, elevator banks, couple of doors, some steps leading out toward the back of the building. A shambles."

"Stress factors?" Greville snapped.

"Wait until I get a reading," I replied, amused. I set one of the remotes to probing the walls. The saser beam bounce-back created a three-dimensional color image on my screen. Red lines for steel beams, blue

haze for concrete, bright yellow patterns of molecules under pressure. The remote tracked along the wall while I studied the image on my screen, ignoring Greville's huffs of impatience.

"It's safe enough," I said when I was satisfied. "Simple concrete and steel beam construction, some stress but not enough to worry about. Party wall construction inside, and the bearing wall integrity is good. The main lobby windows are big enough for the bubbles."

"Confirmed," Harkness' voice replied.

"Good," said Greville. "Post remotes and enter at will."

We reached the building and stationed one of the remotes by a window to relay our communications to the ship, while a second removed shards of broken glass from the window and entered, turning on its lights. The remaining three followed. I touched my screen. The grid faded to black, flickered, and clarified as the remotes lit up the room; the holocameras came to life and the scene became multi-dimensional.

Tobias held us up for a moment while he searched the window frames for broken glass, then slipped into the lobby. Paul followed, bouncing once from the side of the window when he underestimated his clearance. Jenny went through with little trouble and I swam in behind her.

"Has entrance been effected?" Greville inquired.

"Yes, everything's clear."

"Good. Find the main office," Greville directed. "These places usually had a safe."

And the looting was on.

Antiquities. Glass jewelry, wristwatches, vases, sculpture, paintings, anything, everything. Greville's home was already stuffed with things taken from the houses of the dead; Tobias' collection traveled with him aboard the Ilium. Each of the other crew except, perhaps, Benito, had a cache of treasures. Stuffed sportfish. Spoons and forks and tongs from the kitchens. Ersatz flowers. China. Stenware. Plastic coats. Devices for curling hair. Porcelain faucets from the bathrooms -- these were especially popular, more so when they came from resort hotels and were shaped like women or fish. Old plastic currency. Electric tooth-cleaners. Mirrors. Archaic vid-phones. Liquid crystal clocks, long defunct. Rubber boots. Telecommunications equipment. Plasticized greeting cards. Spectacles. Some of the stuff found its way into museums, some into the Ilium's collection, but most was either sold to collectors or vanished into the crew's private accumulations. Never mind what it was once for, or why it was created, or when it was used. Never mind what the lives of its original owners were like. It's a curiosity, a gimcrack, a decoration, a pretty, that's all. Jenny and Paul would leave the Ilium with their separate piles of treasure, each lovingly hand-stolen from the bottom of the sea.

I left the Immortals to their scavenging while I corrected the angles of the holocameras. When Tobias announced that they had cracked the safe I swam over to see.

It was a large safe, set into the side of the main office. The walls of the room cracked and peeled around it but its strong metal sides were intact, uncompromisingly rectangular amid the dissolving planes and angles of the room. The Great Shaping had delivered enough of a jolt to the room to twist the heavy door on its hinges, and water had entered the safe. Paul and Jenny hovered to one side, the utility remote retracted its implements while a second remote wrenched the door from its hinges and laid it on the floor. I raised my belt screen as the first remote entered the safe and began broadcasting.

"It's hard to tell," Tobias said. "Boxes, some stuff on the shelves, a few things on the floor. There couldn't have been much in here when the place went down."

"Well, check it over," Greville demanded, dropping all pretense of scientific detachment. "There's got to be something of value."

The remotes began hauling stuff from the safe and loading it onto a

field web. There was nothing of any interest to me, and I left the room.

"Greville, I'm going to take a look at some of the other buildings," I said into my radio.

"Take a remote," he said automatically, unnecessarily. I didn't reply, but when I left the hotel I signaled one of the outside remotes to tag along, and kicked myself upward until I could see over the lower wing of the building.

At ten meters down, all colors but blues and greys are washed from the spectrum. I floated in a subdued and eerie world, a universe the color of liquid ashes and suspended dust. The Immortals, of course, turned on their lights as soon as they dropped through the first atmosphere, restoring reds, oranges, and yellows, to the spectrum: the further down they dove, the less they saw outside their cones of illumination. Peering from the window of the hotel before I swam from it, it had seemed that I was leaving a world of light for a world of darkness, but the illusion melted as soon as I was far enough from the lights so that the natural illumination of the ocean was restored. I squinted through the somber sea and made out a bulk which, on closer inspection, turned out to be a second hotel in a great state of disrepair. I angled away from it. Two strong kicks sent me gliding, jetless, toward the slope of the island's saddle-back. I rose slowly, keeping the bed of the ocean a meter below me, pacing the rise of the land. A slight flat valley between the ruined hulks and humps of buildings was undoubtedly an old roadbed. Seaplants waved, small fish darted through the waters. I had turned my com down until the voices of the Immortals were distant buzzes, easily ignored. I glided through the sea, a small speck trailing through the calm waters, trailed itself by the smaller speck that was the remote.

As I rose, the blues and greys became tinged with green, then with yellow as I came into the first atmosphere. I inspected each building as I passed but most had collapsed beyond either safety or interest. Then, toward the mountain, I saw what looked to be an almost perfectly preserved building, nestled in a small depression in the hill. I flicked my jets open, glanced behind to see that the remote followed, and streaked toward it.

"Hey, look at this one," Paul's voice said. I glanced at my screen. The three Immortals clustered around one of the remotes, which held in its pick-up arm the broken piece of a chandelier.

"It's a sculpture," Tobias said. "The Ancients worked with glass a lot during the second or third century before the Shaping. This one's probably valuable."

"Careful with it," Greville directed. "Be careful."

The strong, clear light canceled the reflections of their bubblesuits; they looked as though they were floating unprotected in the deeps, the blue and red of their veins somehow misplaced and lying in intricate patterns over the gold of their skins. Behind them, moss and seaplants waved over the walls of the room, while below them lay gleaming piles of booty. Some small glittering fish swam into the room, moved through the plants, then bolted as the remote placed the chandelier atop the rest of the loot. Tobias, Paul and Jenny, oblivious to the fish, were already staring into the mouth of the safe.

I replaced the screen, turned down the volume on the radio, and continued toward the small building.

32

The building had no windows. I circled it twice, flooded the walls with light, and peered at the crumbling plaster and the thick blocks of stone beneath. One entrance, centered in one of the short walls of the rectangle, was covered by waving seaplants. The hinges of the door had rotted away and the thick plank hung askew over the opening. I lay my hand against the stones, puzzled; anything that solid, of that construction, would have lacked the resiliency to move with and survive the Great Shaping, should have tumbled under the shocks and cracked under the sinking. I had the remote probe the walls, and watched while the image formed on my screen; the red streaks of

steel beams and cable showed not the usual up and down, side to side construction pattern, but an interlocked web of polygons, more than allowing for the resiliency the building had to possess. The stones, according to the saser probe, were only deep lines carved into the sides of the building to simulate rock. I "peeled" the outer layer of image from the screen and found that the webbed wall construction ran through the entire structure. There were no party walls at all. A solid construction, almost a monument, built to last. Why?

No windows, no ventilation shafts, one door. No carvings over the doorway, no indication of function. A tomb? No, not in twenty-first century Hilo. A monument, then? For what purpose? And what self-respecting monument lacked an inscription? The probe showed two floors of rooms within -- hallways, doors, ceilings, floors. Functional, obviously, but functional for what?

Mystery, mystery. I hovered before the opening, excited. Seaplants danced with the motion of small fish, the darkness seemed to flow outward, beckoning. I restrained myself from plunging headlong into the mouth of the building and signaled the remote to activate its lights and enter.

"Tia, what have you found?" Greville's voice demanded, a small, insistent whine at my ear. Doubtless the rape of the main safe was completed and he had found a moment to remember me while the others searched for more plunder. I sighed and turned up the radio.

"It's hard to tell," I replied. "It's a building, but I can't figure out its function. Certainly not residential. Solid, no obvious damage, no windows, the door's open. About fifteen meters high, same width and length. I want to go in."

"Now, Tia, it might be dangerous," Greville advised. "Wait until we get some more remotes to you, all right?"

"Why? I've got one remote already, and the saser probe shows very little stress."

"At least wait until Tobias and the others finish with the hotel and get to you, they'll be able to go in with you."

"No, they won't fit through the entrance. Perish, Greville, just let me get on with it, will you?"

"At least leave a remote out to relay!"

"All right, all right," I muttered and glanced at my beltscreen before signalling the remote. The screen showed no picture at all.

I propelled myself to the door and grabbed the frame. As soon as I entered, I saw the remote before me and my screen leaped to life, still set to saser. I switched to visual pick-up and the red webs disappeared, became a simple, concrete view of the flooded lobby. I moved outside again and the image on my screen faded, disappeared.

"Greville, the walls seem to block everything except line-of-sight transmission," I said. "I'll have to leave LOS transmitters as I go, so talk-back will be a bit fuzzy."

I dove back into the building before he could object and took my time signalling the remote to take its station before the door. Then, activating my lights and loosening my stunner in its sheath, I moved deeper into the building.

The remains of chairs and sofas rotted along the walls, the fabric and cushions replaced by shivering plants. A metal desk at the far end of the room, moss-covered and rusting, bore complex, archaic communications equipment, the skeletons of writing implements, and a sludge of paper in the one drawer I was able to open. Small tables, corroded lamps. No inscriptions, nothing indicating the purpose of the building.

Directly to the right of the desk a door hung on one hinge. I pushed it and it floated to the floor, its descent terrifying a school of small, skittering fish. I entered the next room, a hall with many doors opening from it and metal chairs collapsed along the walls. A stairwell led up from the room, beside the closed doors of an elevator. Seaplants, amid the detritus on

the floors and chairs, bent and swayed in the wake of my passing; small creatures scuttled about the legs of the furniture as I moved through the rooms surrounding the main waiting area. Each door had a number engraved upon it, some illegible and none completely intact; it took a moment to realize that none of the numbers were in sequence. The doors quaked and fell as I touched them, raising clouds of silt that billowed through the water and sank again. Desks, chairs, filing cabinets, communications terminals, one room lined with hardbound books whose rotting covers shook and ran down my hands as I lifted them. No clues. I opened the last door at the far end of the room. A large, glutinous creature darted from the darkness and sped away. Another hall, here, with rooms branching out -- each contained high tables and rotting machinery, small instruments, occasional locked cases with glass doors that were clear sheets of silver in the light. The furthest door opened into what was obviously a ward; beds lined up in a double row, each parallel to the other, each now the silted bed of sealife. A clinic, then? A hospital? But for some reason it did not feel like a medical place -- I had been in enough of them to trust my instincts. I swam back slowly to the waiting room and contemplated the stairs. I was about to swim up them when I remembered the LOS transmitters. I returned to the lobby and began planting the small objects along the walls, through the waiting room, up the stairs. I waited until I had the last of them in place at the top of the stairwell before boosting the volume on my receiver.

"...where the death are you?" Greville shrieked. "Tia, will you answer me?"

"I'm still at the building," I said.

"Oh! We can't pick up your homer, and you weren't transmitting," he complained.

"Sorry, I forgot about the transmitters. They're up now."

"You forgot! You forgot! How could you forget something like that?"

"Sorry."

"Anything of interest?"

"No," I lied. "I'll let you know."

I turned down the volume and continued up to the hallway, slapping transmitters against the walls as I went.

This corridor ran the breadth of the building, from one wall to another. Again the multitude of doors, but here were no neatly placed chairs, no small tables bearing the remains of lamps. I swam to my right, down to the very end of the hall, and made my way back toward the stairwell, entering each room in turn. The first one, nearest the outer wall, held high tables and laboratory equipment. One wall was lined with metal cages in which grew small microcosms, tiny gardens of plants and animals, beautiful and strange. Lying amid the seagardens were small, pale bones. Monolithic cases of machinery lined a second wall, each hulking unit faced with dials and knobs, screens and nodes. Again no clues. More rooms, more offices, another liquid library, a closet containing the remains of ancient cleaning equipment, a room with four beds and a large mirror, a room beside that one holding a desk, chair, and the backside of the mirror, a window looking into the small ward. The stairwell, more offices, a few rooms whose functions I could not determine. A file room. The last room on the right, equally as large as its counterpart at the far end of the hall, held a large cylindrical tank and some rotting apparatus suspended above it. Banks of equipment lined its outer sides and bulged with gauges, dials, screens, knobs, sockets. Directly beside this room was one with a single bed and what seemed to be primitive monitoring equipment along a wall, one chair, and a cabinet of bottles and instruments covered with moss. Another large room on the left side of the corridor, with the remains of furniture and pillows, an old sound-reproduction machine, many frames hanging on the walls, but the pictures within the frames were gone, eaten by the sea. A screen.

I returned to the hall and floated motionless, trying to make sense of the building and its contents. A research facility? Possibly, but what goal

was being pursued? A clinic? Doubtful, but only because that definite hospital sense was nowhere in evidence. I could have been mistaken, and yet, and yet...

I turned up my audio and listened to my fellow divers. They had made their way up to the hotel rooms and were busy removing bulbs from sockets, wrenching faucets from bathroom equipment, yanking hangers from closets, taking various small trays and other objects. Greville wouldn't miss my remote for some time, so I signalled it to slap a general transmitter on the outer wall of the building and come to me. I very much wanted to make sense of the building, and another saser probe seemed to be the only thing I could manage. Maybe the image would be different from the second floor, maybe a probe would discover something on which I could hang a theory, maybe I was just wasting my time pursuing mysteries where none existed, maybe the building was simply a madman's folly and nothing more. Still, the solid construction, the blocking of transmissions, the incomprehensible rooms....

The probe revealed the same pattern as before, both on walls and on floors. Then, on impulse, I directed the beams toward the ceiling and discovered a third floor.

But there were no stairwells leading beyond the second floor, I was sure of it. I searched again, then had the remote pry open the elevator doors so that I could swim up the shaft. Cables, winches, smooth sides, but no openings. I tapped on the top of the shaft wall with the butt of my stunner, and instead of receiving the sound of solidity or the sound of water-filled space, the echo that bounced back to me meant only one thing -- air trapped under the layers of the ocean.

My heart raced. I held to the elevator cable and breathed steadily before I returned to the corridor and examined the ceiling, tuning the remote to medium magnification and studying the images on my screen. At the very end of the corridor I found a faint, square indentation amid the moss and discolorations above my head.

The remote built a seal around the entrance, a transparent wall of force extending from the ceiling to the floor and encompassing it and myself. When it was finished I had air pumped into the seal from the remote's store. Gravity grabbed me as the water emptied from the bubble; the square was now a good meter above my head. Well, there was no help for it; I removed my flippers and weights, clambered atop the remote and pushed at the square. It didn't budge. I activated my vibra-knife and sliced around its edges, then shoved against the hatch again. It resisted for a moment before moving heavily. I pushed it up and away from the opening. A rush of air blew upward past my face. Below me the remote released more oxygen from its tanks. I checked my balance, and jumped, grasped the edge of the opening and pulled myself upward, twisted and sat at the edge of the square hole. The remote scooped up my discarded equipment and, extending one arm to hook over the edge of the hole, pulled itself up into the darkness with me. I felt a slight shifting along my skin as the seal enlarged to encompass the entire room, then the remote's lights flashed on and the room leaped into dimension around me.

A low archway divided the small area in which I sat from the main room. Lying along the curve of the arch were the words MITSUYAGA FECIT, PRO BONO HOMINIS.

What the death?

33

MITSUYAGA, GEORGE ANDREAS. Born 2005 A.D., Molokai, Hawaii. Married: Mitsuko Hayakawa, 2025, div. 2027. Married: Jean Anderssen, 2030, div. 2055. No children. President: Hilo National Bank; Pacific Shipping & Steamship Co., Ltd.; East-West Imports, Inc.; International Electronics; Psychic Research Center of Hilo; Apollo Industries. Chairman of Board: American Amalgamated, Inc.; Far East Transport Co.; Industrias Mexicanas, S.A.; International Telecommunications Systems, Inc.; Hanover Studies Institute. Author: the inner light; studies in parapsychology; a history of psychic phenomena; mind over matter; the ultimate step. Leading proponent of theory of immortality through

psychic control, founder of Teleability Screening & Research Centers. Philanthropist. Committed 2087 Hilo Institute for the Gifted Insane. Died 2094, Hilo, Hawaii.

From Brief who's who of the minds of america, Alfred Greengarten & Co., New York, New York, U.S.A., 2102 Pre-Shaping. By courtesy of the Library at Luna.

It doesn't tell the half of it.

34

I stood and entered the room cautiously. The ceiling, walls, and floor were flocked with some soft, black material that rounded the edges and gave the room a feeling of depth, a womb-feeling. I peeled one glove from my hand and touched the wall; it was cold and gave slightly below my palm. Various humps and irregularities took form as I moved past them, becoming machines, monitors, somethings lying solemn and dead in my path. I made a complete circuit of the room, then returned to the hatch and looked back into the darkness, wondering.

The remote's clear-air signal winked on. I flicked the valves of my equipment shut, removed my tanks and mask and piled them beside me. Their rubbery black contrasted oddly with the deeper richness of the flocked floor. I touched them, felt their reassuring solidity, then ran my uncovered hands over the archway. It was flocked also, but with a silvery material, and the letters above had been lifted into relief by thicknesses of grey. Mitsuyaga? And the rest, Latin? Fecit, facilitate, factory, factotum -- to make? Made, then. Mitsuyaga made, what? This? Pro, propound, promote, protect? Produce? Mitsuyaga made (?) bono, bonus, benefactor -- bene, good? Hominis, easy, humanity. Mitsuyaga made, good of humanity. Mitsuyaga made this for the good of humanity. Okay. Who in the death was Mitsuyaga?

I found a silvery spot embedded in black along the thickness of the archway. I touched it and it gave beneath my fingers, a definite "click" but nothing happened. Ah, current, electricity, something to run the sulking machines. A generator, then, somewhere in the building? Or depending on outside sources, tied in with the city's lines? I probed the spot and eventually a cover yielded to my prodding, slipped out to lay in my palm. Wiring beneath, archaic. I had seen representations of pre-Shaping wiring in diagrams, in books, among Benito's collection of mechanical oddities, but I had never needed to work with it myself. I paused, stared, thought. Ground? This one, probably, and this one hot. Would I get away with introducing current into the system from this point?

I shrugged and beckoned the remote, had it send pulses through each of the wires, watching the diagrams appear as clean white lines over the blackness of my screen. Seemed simple enough, and intact. I programmed the machine to feed electricity into the wiring and, after a few false starts, the room vibrated with an almost subliminal humming; the wall on which I leaned grew warm beneath me.

A gentle light washed through the room, was absorbed into the soft black surfaces. I approached the first protruding hulk by the door and soon found another silvery spot. Hesitation, then determination; I pushed the spot and stepped back, concentrating on the machine, poised for flight. A humming of a different pitch, the side of the machine exchanged blackness for translucency and a series of still, hologrammatic images rolled before me.

The first one said:

English	Tagalog	Swahili
French	Mandarin	Hebrew
German	Japanese	Turkish
Italian	Burmese	Greek
Spanish	Hindi	Celtic
Danish	Urdu	Arabic
Farsi	Other	Urdu

I stared at it. A list of languages, but whatever for? Then I

remembered that the pre-Shaping world spoke many tongues, some of which I had learned on Luna. I picked one and said "English" aloud. Nothing. I touched the screen beside the word and jerked my hand back as the picture dissolved into blackness. Brief pause, and words reeled across the screen:

_Welcome. If these words are passing too quickly you may touch the screen and the image will freeze until the screen is touched again. _

_This room is the creation of George Andreas Mitsuyaga and is the result of his research into the control of human consciousness. The full use of the human mind and, consequently, the full use of the human body, the secret of eternal life, depends upon a constant inward-turning, an exploration of the world within yourself. This room and its contents are the result of a lifetime devoted to the pursuit of this goal. _

_As you progress through this course you will have greater control over yourself and over the world around you. You must be warned again, as you were warned when first inducted into the program, that the way is difficult, that complete concentration is necessary and that should you find yourself threatened by your experiences in this room, you must immediately stop and request aid and stabilization from your counselor. _

No one will disturb you in this room. It is your responsibility to see that your mind and body are properly maintained. Timing is essential. The stages of progress are numbered consecutively, and the layout of this room reflects this order. Begin at the next locus when you feel ready. Thank you.

The screen faded to black. I grinned at it with contempt. So, the mystery of the building was resolved to this: another of the Ancients' innumerable attempts to do in awkward and complicated ways what Lippencott had done so easily. Lippencott succeeded through rays and chemicals and spirits, others failed through, among other things, mysticism and magic. Idiocy, but I was curious to discover what particular shape this idiocy took. I stood before the next hump of blackness, felt the numeral "1" raised in flocking along its surface, and pressed its silver spot. The same list of languages presented itself; I touched "English" and the list faded, replaced by:

please recline.

I looked behind me, discerned a flattened ridge rising from the floor, and lay upon it, keeping my eyes on the screen. The sides of the ridge rose, reached around my sides, and met over my body, leaving only my head free. I clawed and kicked at the bindings, and they immediately retracted. I relaxed, catching my breath, and the ridges rose again. This time I lay still. They cradled me in warmth. Somewhat reassured, I glanced back at the screen.

It was pulsing at me, deep, even blue washes that grew and faded rhythmically, regularly. I watched with some curiosity, waiting for a change, but none came. Beat, fade, rise, fade. Puzzlement. But the movement was somehow familiar, and, struck by a thought, I held my breath. The pulsing ceased, resuming as I the air whistle out between my lips. So, a feedback monitor. I played with it for a while longer, holding my breath, letting it out, panting, breathing deeply and slowly. The screen paced me.

A subtle change overcame the blue, a hint of redness that also pulsed, but more rapidly. My heart. My breathing stabilized as I watched the two colors move in counterpoint to each other. I reached within and felt my heart pulsing, pushing the blood through me, felt my lungs moving and oxygen slip through the lungs' lining into the bloodstream, a familiar, comforting sensation.

A shiver of orange danced rapidly across the screen, and this one I recognized immediately. Alpha waves; these, too, I could regulate. A joining of beta waves, a movement within my mind. The world narrowed to encompass only the screen and my body, more and more colors pulsing and dancing through the one, more and more sensations weaving and interleaving through the other. This, I decided, was nice, this was pleasant. This, at the least, was making the decaying hulk of my body create pretty pictures for my amusement. I moved more deeply within myself.

What a glorious waste! The beautifully engineered arrangements and

changes all summed to extinction, the end result of this subtle physical mathematic was death. That small prettiness, there, is but the slow migration of calcium from bone to blood; this tiny, bright popping adds to the yearly loss of one gram's worth of brain. An alien wonder, a busy and beautiful other that had, in some malign fashion, attached itself to me, that insisted on making me wither, on making me die. Pain-maker. Infiltrated by plastic parts, subverted by a stubborn mortality. Yet so lovely, so terribly lovely. I reached toward the pulsing enchantment of my heart, and touched it.

Touched it. Changed it. Affected its movements. Altered its pace.

With my -- mind? Consciousness? Spirit? Soul?

I approached again, felt its steady flutter, reached for it. Slowed it and speeded it again. I gasped and molecules within my lungs danced and sang, I leached oxygen into my bloodstream, cut the flow to a trickle and expanded it once more. Played with the slidings of my intestines, fooled with the tiny valves and tubes of my glands, felt emotions wash over me and traced their causes, captured the scurrying pinpoints of hormones and cancelled them from me. Made my fingernails grow long, shed some skin on my arms, filled my womb with unseasonable blood and reabsorbed it. Touched my brain and microscopic fireworks sparkled, scenes and scents and tastes long forgotten raced through my senses. I heard the sighing of the sea and the slapping of waves leagues away, the soft whisper of electricity moving through the wires of the machine, the tiny interfaces within the remote. Felt the turning of the earth beneath me and the pulling of the tides through the liquids of my body and was, suddenly, no longer the alien, no longer the butt of mortality's joke. I pulsed as the ocean pulsed, joined to it, to the earth, to the pull of the seasons and the changes of the moon. I, me, Tia, body and soul, the creator and that which is created, the wine and its flask, the temple and its door.

When we came back, the joy and I, the arms of the ridge on which I rested were retracted, and the screen no longer pulsed and moved, but instead displayed the words:

You have now successfully completed your first month's session in the course. You must be completely rested and integrated before you progress to the second station.

Twenty-eight days? I asked my body. No, it assured me, no, nothing even close. I rose and inspected the time-meter on the remote: no more than two hours had passed since I activated the machine. Had the room's mechanisms aged to the point of unreliability? Somehow I doubted it. Then I considered the abilities I had brought with me, the inward-turning and the monitoring, and I understood. Three-quarters of what the machine sought to teach me was already old to me, and only the last step was new.

But that last step.

I had touched. Controlled. Determined. Created and changed my tiniest drippings and drainings. Moved my heart. I reached within and changed my heartbeat again, felt it obedient to my will, then sat, overwhelmed by what I had done.

35

The summer I was fourteen years old my mother and I left our mutual home, she to go her way to the sandy deserts of Mars, and I to go mine, to Seville and the university. I had my student's allotment and a credit allowance given me as a gift by my father, the second time I met him. I had lost my virginity a month before on a field-float gliding through the hot swamps of the Everglades, had lost it gloriously, thrashing under the slight shimmer of the field that protected our bodies from insects and the sweltering sun. I was convinced that I was mature. Of course I was. I was fourteen.

I journeyed to Seville, picked up my registration cubes, selected my First Field of Study, and found a small apartment above one of the older squares, where I could look out over the restored tile roofs to the spires of a rebuilt cathedral. I soon moved within a circle of other students about my own age, sharing songs and beds. My studies progressed well. My mother and I

communicated once or twice during the summer, then she contracted for another child and we lost touch with each other. Summer faded into autumn, my classes changed, I knew the campus city by heart, and I flourished.

One of my classes was a laboratory in comparative botany and, since many of the subjects needed an approximation of their native Martian climate to thrive, this class was held old-style, many students meeting twice a week in a large laboratory near the center of the city. This building, too, was a restoration, its huge stone steps leading to a colonnaded portico, arching windows strung along heavy, grey walls. The portico was a favorite liftplace; it faced a busy plaza and we thrilled ourselves by leaping from between the ornate columns to buzz over the heads of shoppers and passers-by. Complaints were issued and reprimands came down, of course, but we couldn't resist the temptation to soar over the crowd, cartwheeling through the soft Iberian air.

I remained in the laboratory late one day, intent on completing a private grafting project of my own. I wanted to merge a Terran cactus, a *Mammillaria Collinsii*, and a Martian *Bryantia Obesa*. I was not in the least bothered by the failure of botanists more gifted than I to accomplish this feat. So I bent over my worktable and only looked up when the quality of the light changed. The walls had assumed their evening radiance and it was long past my normal meal time. My stomach complained as I replaced my instruments, made a few final notes, and slipped the graft into a support system. I left the building, shrugged my liftpack over my shoulders and stood a moment on the edge of the portico watching the evening throngs.

They filled the square and the air above it, promenading, eating and drinking at the cafes, in the usual motley assortment of clothing and a sprinkling of nudity. The rays of the setting sun, the radiance of the walls around the plaza, gave each individual a separate aura of light and shadow, brilliance and shade. As I stood perched on the brink of flight, I saw the entire multifaceted crowd as something apart from myself, realized how very separate I was, how individual, how wholly contained within the universe of my own skin. Me, Tia, apart, absolutely other, myself and no one else, inviolate. This came over me with the intensity of an Ancient's meeting with God, a transcendental merging of individual and absolute truth: a feeling not so much of mind as of the entire being, body, soul, everything. I stood shaking with the intensity of the vision while the shaking became a sense of growing and glowing elation, of pristine and absolute joy. I, me, Tia Hamley, myself. I am sufficient; I am, simply and beautifully; a purely gratuitous gift. I exist.

I took off from the portico and flung myself into the most harebrained and madcap aerial arabesques the city of Seville had seen, ricocheting, laughing, bubbling, and diving through the evening air as though possessed. I shot through the waters of the plaza's fountains and spun glittering drops around me as I lifted again. I sat on the spire atop the cathedral and sang bawdy songs. I stole three oranges from a vendor and juggled them, laughing hysterically. In short, I was a disgrace.

Someone complained, of course. I was reprimanded and my liftpack was removed for a month. But it was worth it, every single step.

36

"What the death did you think you were doing?"

"Where were you?"

"Where's the remote? Where's the remote?"

"We had all the remotes hunting for you!"

"I'll have you restricted to the ship!"

Layers of ocean passed as I rose from my fifty-minute decompression stop toward the dark bulk of the Ilium and the bright, illuminated circle of the diving well. The remote behind me trailed my sop to Cerberus: a rusted lamp from the lobby of Mitsuyaga's building, something to placate the greediness above. The lamp, I hoped, would represent all that was salvageable from the disintegrating, silted, empty, and mythic building I planned to describe to them. Greville and Harkness brayed like small, infuriated goats. I turned down

the volume.

"...against every safety precaution!"

"That's valuable equipment!"

I pulled myself up the rungs of the diving well into the hold while the remote dropped the lamp into the general store and stored itself. Greville, Harkness and Paul stood at the lip of the well, Greville windmilling in excitement, Harkness shouting angrily, Paul staring at me. I snapped my face-plate open and peeled off the headsheath, dropped them to the floor beside me and sat, legs over the edge of the well, watching Greville and Harkness until their voices faltered and stilled.

"I brought a lamp," I said. "There wasn't much else in there. The remote's back in its locker."

"...valuable..." Greville sputtered.

"I have the usual bond posted," I told him. "You don't have to worry about losing your money."

"But you could have been, been..."

"That's my worry, isn't it? I'm tired. If you want to talk about this later, fine, but right now I'm going to sleep."

"That," said Greville, "that's fine for you, but I want you to know, I just want you to know, that if you ever do that again, I'll have you taken off the ship, I really will."

"Try it," I said. "Remember what the Law says. If you think you can prove that I've damaged or defrauded you, then take it to Berne and I'll contest it. I have an independent contract, remember?"

Greville opened his mouth, then thought better of it and stormed from the room, the hem of his lab coat flapping around his bare thighs, his two-toned bush of hair standing raggedly upright.

Harkness looked uncomfortable. "What can I say? We were worried."

"About what?" I snapped. "The remote? Bad karma?"

He shrugged, oddly helpless, and left the hold.

I rose, stripped away my wet-suit, and tossed it over by my locker while I went to clean up.

When I returned, the wet-suit had been dried and layered in my locker. Paul stacked the rest of my equipment in its proper place.

"You didn't have to do that," I said, surprised.

"I thought you'd be too tired to do it yourself," he said with a smile. He irised the locker's mouth closed. "Can I come up with you?"

"If you want," I said, and led the way to my cabin.

"Was it very dangerous?" Paul asked as we stepped through the door.

"Not particularly. Why?"

"You were out of contact for so long. We waited for you underwater, then Greville sent the remotes and Tobias said we should come up immediately. Jenny wanted to stay."

"Really?" I stretched out on my hammock. I felt the muscles relax through my body, felt the small tensions drain away; played with my heartbeat for a moment, then explored the doings of my intestines. I felt passage of blood and air through my lungs, the minute secretions of my ovaries, small vibrations through the complexities of my inner ears as Paul continued speaking.

"I thought you might have ripped your suit, that you might have drowned." His voice dropped an octave, reached me husky and dense. "I thought you might be trapped in rocks with your hoses cut, or spiked by one of those big fish. I saw you floating through the buildings with your mask ripped off."

Without opening my eyes I concentrated on his words. His voice moved closer.

"I saw you naked on a bed of silt, with sea-plants in your hair and your eyes opened, and tiny fish swimming over your cunt, and your body swayed in the water. An octopus held you down, it wrapped one tentacle around your breast, like this." His shaking hand cupped my breast, his thumb moved over the seal of my suit, opening it. "And it touched your body, here, and here, it

made bright red circles and they turned green on your skin, on your belly, on your thighs, and when it moved to cover you its beak split your skin, but your eyes didn't move because you were dead, Tia, drowned."

Mesmerized, I turned my head to look at him, saw at eye level the stiff red urgency of his cock. One small, translucent drop gathered at the tip and fell shining to the floor as he unsealed the rest of my suit and removed it, as he moved into the hammock, poised himself above me.

"The tentacles opened you, opened your legs, tiny green plants grew here, and here and it entered you, like this, like, this, all, the, way, in, and it fucked you, Tia, and it, harder, and harder, and, and, but you didn't move, because, because you were _dead!_" He screamed as he came; I felt the hot spurting within me, the contractions of his cock, the final epileptic thrust that broke my horrified fascination and sent me clawing my way from under him, from the hammock, across the room to stare in shock at his quivering back. He lay gasping, his fingers grabbing the edges of the polycrystal mesh. The entire hammock shook.

"Get out," I whispered, then, more loudly, "Get out!"

He turned to face me, jaw slack, eyes glazed over. "Tia...."

"_Get the death out!_" I screamed, grabbed his discarded tunic, threw it at him. "Out! OUT!" He stumbled from the hammock, his tunic held limply before him. "Tia...."

"_OUT!_"

He backed from my cabin, staggering. I slammed my palm against the lock. Somewhere within my spine, the small early twinges of pain began.

37

Greg shed his jumpsuit, peeling the material from his chest and thighs and tossing it into the cleaner. He used the vibra as I keyed through the mail, and by the time I stripped he was stretched out on the pale blueness of the forcebed. I took my time in the shower, clearing off the sticky residue of a day spent walking the line, of an evening checking and rechecking the hydroponic systems aboard the Outbound. By the time I came out Greg had flowed the walls around the bed, cutting the rest of the small apartment from view, and was playing with a tiny, vibrating bottle held in his large hand.

"What's that?" I asked, joining him.

"Something Kai-Yu gave me. It's from Mars, they call it some untranslatable, unpronounceable word, something they made up. It's supposed to be a Martian religious drug they found in one of the ruins. You don't believe that, eh? Well, I don't much either, but Kai-Yu said he tried it and it's good and it's not dangerous. Okay?"

I took the small bottle from him and held it to the light. It felt cool against my palm. The liquid within glowed with a multitude of small, distinct points of color.

"Why not? Do we drink it or what?"

"We drink it. Let's see, one drop for one hour is what he said. Two hours, eh? Two for you, two for me, then we sleep."

I brought two goblets of wine from the small kitchen space while Greg found a clean pipette. He mixed the proper dosage, sealed the small bottle, and added it to our stash. We toasted each other and drank the wine.

Tripping with Greg: we were in the habit of doing it once or twice a month during the year we'd been together. Our closeness seemed to potentiate the drugs we took, boosting not only our own inner awareness but also our awareness of each other. We rotated our trips, one time doing a visual drug, the next a sensory, then one that sprang open our throats and we would talk for hours, huddled together on our transparent bed. This last type was my least favorite. I found myself setting sensors to my mind and mouth, still careful to hide the secret of my mortality. I felt guilty and shamed but could not think of any way around it, any way to tell him without, I thought, destroying the love we shared. So I kept silent and took the talking drugs as rarely as I could.

We finished the wine and lay back on the bed. Inevitably our hands moved to each other's bodies, mouths joined and parted, I tasted the textures of his neck, shoulder, chest, hips. When we joined I rode atop him, upright, to watch the changes in his eyes, or to look down to where our bodies merged, wondering again at the perfect fit we always seemed to manage. We didn't notice the onset of the trip until we came, I for the second time. Greg said in a conversational voice, "Little one, this is a very funny come," while his hips arched below me in orgasm. I couldn't reply. Ecstasy moved through me, reaching from my center to encompass every cell, every nerve ending, until I could not distinguish between my body and my body's sensations. It seemed to last forever, to catapult me up and over the confines of my body. I floated, became a merging of sensations without any physical ground, both in the midst of, and myself creating, a warm and pulsing void.

Time became tactile, twisted back on itself, a visual presence shot through with long greens along its path, cool and solemn through my fingers and through my skin. I and the serpent of time, one and inseparable, moved sweeping through the universe, swallowing lemon-flavored suns and excreting dissonances of novae; ten thousand discrete rivulets of coolness traveled along our moving skins. The quick, sharp scents of light and shadow flowed amid the serpent smoothness, a smell of red, a tinge of slow, a rushing of bittersweet galaxies, unattainable, mysterious, beautiful, amid the bongings and twangings and hummings and keenings as I and the serpent brushed the strings of creation; canticles of eternity, harmonies of light, the sharp piccolo colors of meteors and comets, the quickness of planets and suns. O, wondrous, this; dappled and drenched, delight and desire.

I am an infinitely tiny point of light amid the hugeness of the stars and emptiness I have myself created. Where? How? Who? Why? The universe laughs, gusts of merriment and I am nothing to it, void, emptiness, drop to ocean but apart, mote to mountain but different; in the whisper of a moment I am crushed, engulfed, drowned in indifference.

It's only a drug only a trip only a dream I am I am I am I am....

Lying in my room. Our walls about me. Secure. Snug. Safe. Certain. Peace, and the serpent foiled. I raise my hand, laughing, in victory.

My hand is bone. The skin over it is a thin, semi-opaque membrane, fingers strands of fine wire, thick knobs on skinny wrists, mottled, dank, dry. Skin in slack folds over arms, shoulders, abdomen; my breasts are two scaly, empty bags suspended from sharp and twisted shoulders. Legs buckle and twist, welted with thick, protruding blue veins. I raise my hands to my face, feel the icy wetness of spittle running from pinched lips, harshness of hair on pointed chin and the hooked barb of my nose, collapsing with the weight of age toward my mouth. No! _No! This is not me! This is not me!_

Screams awaken hands that rest on me, strong, strong with the warmth of youth, they have come to dispose of me, rid themselves, take me. Take me where? How? Into the disposal system; into the secret, terrifying coldness of morgues, into a zoo, into a zoo. I scream, I scream, until the universe is suddenly, painfully sucked into blackness and there is nothing left.

As my eyes opened Greg cried my name and turned me in his arms to face him.

He was wrapped around me, starfish, his face strained and anxious as I fought away from him and staggered across the room, keyed the reflecting screen. My image leaped out at me -- light, lithe, rounded, firm, with only the staring emptiness of the eyes to remind me of what I had been. Would be. Greg caught me in his arms as I slumped against the screen, cradled me, and carried me back to the bed.

"Tia, little one, Tia, you are all right now? You are back here? Yes? Tia?"

Love and strength, warmth and protection. I leaped from his comfort, sank my back against the far wall and faced him as he sat, bewildered, amid the blueness of the bed.

"I'm going to die," I whispered, and, louder, "I'm going to die, Greg."

"But little one, we are all going to die, eventually, one way or another. Come back to bed."

"No, you don't understand. I'm going to die, I'm going to get old and wrinkled and ugly, and then I'm going to die!"

"Tia, what is this? Is it your trip still?" He glanced at the timepiece on the wall.

"No, Greg, beloved, listen. They didn't work, the Treatments didn't work on me, at all, nothing -- "

"This I do not believe. You are still tripping, I gave you too much, it is my fault. Come, sleep, it will soon be over." He opened his arms to me.

I forced my hands to stop shaking long enough to punch for and authorize my records from the Treatment Center, gathered the print-out together and offered it to my lover.

"Here. Read it."

He took the sheets from my hands, dropped them on the floor without glancing at them, carried me once more to the bed, and lay wrapped around me. His refusal to consider my mortality seemed the cruelest joke of all.

When he thought I slept he rose, gathered the papers, and read them by the dim glow of one light globe. The sheets rustled as, one by one, he finished with them and let them fall. Eventually he came to bed again, gathered me in his arms and rocked us both. I felt a small, surprising wetness where his face pressed against my neck.

When he slept soundly, I slipped from the bed, tossed my clothes in a bag and crossed to the door. Then, on impulse, I retrieved Kai-Yu's stoppered bottle from storage and added it to my bag. Ran across the early morning dome to the station, caught a train for Luna, and spent the next ninety minutes with my mind as blank as the landscape outside the tube.

Deep within my body, for the first time, a small pain began.

38

I couldn't sleep that night, haunted by the glaze of Paul's eyes. I huddled in the vacant minaret, my orange blanket pulled around me, watching the distant stars, unwilling to return to the new discomforts of my cabin.

My back betrayed me in the night. I pushed the pain away, too miserable to take joy in my easy victory over my body. Just before dawn I crept down to the galley for coffee and rolls. A small light shone through the galley door. Jenny sat at the worktable, alone, bent over a cup of coffee. She raised her head from her hands at my entrance, half startled, but the look she gave me was almost one of relief.

"Morning," I said. "Can I have some coffee?"

She nodded and rested her forehead in her palms again. Her black hair was tumbled and mussed, eyes ringed. I filled a cup, rummaged through the pantry for a roll and, finding one, crossed the galley to slip it through the oven. As I passed her, she held out her cup.

"More, please?"

I refilled the cup, placed it before her, and went back to the oven. I hadn't intended to stay but instead of taking the coffee and roll back to the minaret, I set them on the table, pulled up a stool, and sat across from her.

"Hard night?" I asked.

She nodded, massaging the back of her neck with long fingers. "Tobias locked himself in his cabin last night. He won't let me near him."

I sipped the coffee, watching her.

"After you came back, yesterday, he just went to pieces," she said.

I shook my head. "I don't want to hear about it, Jenny. I have enough problems already."

"Sure," she said bitterly. "You have problems, he has problems, everyone has problems and no one's willing to do anything about them."

"I'm not Tobias' keeper."

"Tia, please, he's not what you think, he's got reasons, I mean...." Her hands chased words through the air.

"Do you love him?"

"Love him?" She looked startled. "I don't know, I haven't thought about it...."

"Then why the worry? If he wants to be an unreasonable bastard, that's his business, not yours. And not mine."

"But you can't turn your back on him...."

"He doesn't need anything I'd be willing to give him."

"Don't you care about anybody?" she cried.

"Not if I can avoid it."

"Not even Paul?"

I almost dropped the cup. "Paul? Care about Paul? Let me tell you about Paul, child." And I did. She stared at me, pale and sick, and I told her, in detail, until she screamed. I rounded the table, took her by the shoulders, and shook her.

"What now? Shocked? Sick? What now, Jenny? Afraid he might have done it to you?" I forced the words through clenched teeth, shaking her until her hair flew. "Do you empathize with that?"

I shoved her away and turned to leave, but --

"Tia!" she cried.

She looked up from the table and whispered, "I'm no different than he is."

"Don't be stupid," I said. "You're not in his league."

39

At ten that morning the Immortals gathered on the mosaic deck below my tower to divide the previous day's plunder. Several floaters hovered in the center of the deck, while the Immortals stood in a ragged semi-circle before them and Greville began the division.

Most of the items were mis-identified but nobody seemed to care. They bid and bickered over each piece. Hart, as usual, bid for himself and for Harkness, who remained on the bridge. Benito, as usual, was absent, down in the engine room with his beloved monsters, and no one bid for him. Jenny did not appear, but Paul automatically bid on everything and gleaned for himself a great hulking pile of junk.

Things are not necessarily junk now that were junk then, but there was nothing new in this haul, nothing special, nothing of note. The Immortals bid on plastic building blocks, models of hover-cars and moonshuttles, wrappings to fit over infants' diapers. Plastic jars with thin, arching protrusions, rubber spheres, plastic head-protectors, ovals of metal with handles affixed to one end. Perfume bottles of cut glass, lotion jars, plastic hats, combs, brushes, a vibrating cup for cleaning prosthetic teeth. The chandelier. Belt buckles. Shoe-horns. Skeletons of lamp shades. Push-carts. Metal drain-stoppers, crusted and oozing. Rusted keys. An onyx egg. Plastic dolls. And more, and more, until I grew sick of the accumulations and quietly came down from my tower, avoided the deck and made my way to Benito's cave.

"What do you want?" he demanded as I approached him. He had moved a large generator from its place in line and was struggling to unlock one of the housing plates.

"Thought I'd give you a hand."

"Don't need one." He groped for a tool on a floater beside him. I picked up the implement and handed it to him.

"Look, I'm sorry about...."

"Doesn't matter."

"Come off it, Benito. Can't I even apologize?"

"No. Go back to your great romance, I don't need your help."

The words stuck in my throat. I sat on a heavy conduit and rested my forehead in my palms, waiting for the sudden nausea to pass.

A quick clatter. Benito had slammed his tools down on the floater, snapped the plate back into suspension and was stalking down the lines of the generators toward his own cabin. He turned as he reached the door to glare at

me.

"Go to Australia!" he shouted, and snicked the port closed behind him.

40

When the Immortals were finished dividing the loot, I floated what remained to the Museum and started cataloging each piece.

The ship's collection was housed in a long, echoing gallery with mirrors along one side and high, arched windows along the other. I palmed the window setting as I came in, turning off the stained glass and filling the room with clear sunlight.

Low cases lined the gallery's sides. Their contents floated in clear, protective bubbles, each one including a transparent band along its lower end that, when activated, read out a brief description of the piece. During my three years with the Ilium I had corrected many of the descriptions and identified most of the displayed items, but there was much left to do and each new dive added to the job. The Museum reminded the Immortals of how much they had accrued; it reminded me of how much I had yet to learn.

Most of the day's pickings duplicated things the we already had. I tagged them for storage and eventual sale to other collections. A few items were unique; the best was a set of pens preserved in a clear plastic block, with a plaque affixed to one side. The plaque was corroded beyond legibility. Such displayed pens had often been used to sign historic documents -- perhaps some day I would discover which document these had touched. I created a niche for them in the gallery and labelled them properly.

The afternoon passed undisturbed. I deliberately made it so, concentrating only on my sorting and labelling. These tasks done, I called for music and guided one of the vacant floaters to a window. I curled up on it and watched water lapping at the sides of the ship, beyond and below the thin, arching lines of the outer railings. The Museum was on the first deck and the water was very close.

I closed my eyes and reached inside for the first time since last night. My body responded to my gentle pokings and, escaping Paul, Benito, Immortals, Ilium and all, I settled down to a testing and exploration of myself.

I learned to touch myself at the chemical level, prod and direct their movements, working on smaller and smaller scales. My control increased slowly. I took time for a small wash of satisfaction. Me, Tia Hamley, I can do it. The sun moved across the sky.

A high, horrified keening filled the gallery, piercing through my concentration. It catapulted me up and out of the floater, and came again, and a third time, from the speakers high in the ceiling of the room.

"Who is it?" Harkness' voice shouted over the scream. "Where are you?"

"What?" Greville's voice yelled. "What? Stop it! Stop it!"

"I command you to..."

The screams stopped. "The hold, the gen...."

I shrank the floater, threw myself atop it and goosed the jets, streaking from the Museum toward the nearest dropshaft. The engine room was two decks under and all the way across the Ilium; by the time I reached the hold the rest stood frozen near the central platform. I leaped from the floater and hurried toward them.

The screams had stopped. Lonnie stood shaking near the edge of the group, her face hidden behind stiff, upraised fingers. She turned and hid her face against Paul's shoulder. He held her, staring over her shoulder. Jenny stared also. Tobias retched against the bulk of a machine. The rest were as statues, frozen in the act of seeing the Gorgon. I had to elbow and push my way between them until I, too, could see.

Benito lay sprawled over the generator, hands flung outward as though he had leaped atop the large, naked machine. The discarded plate rested against a side of the machine, amid a scatter of tools. I saw the generator's complexity of wiring between his outspread legs. His feet dangled above the

floor, unmoving.

"Benito?" I said.

"He turned off the machine," Hart said, forcing the words from his throat. "Lonnie and I helped him bring it here and took off the the the plate, and when we when we got back from the sorting he he turned it off and and turned it off and went to fix fix fix but the ch charge no time, and he took and he took off the off the wires and it built up and he and he..."

And he threw himself over the power beam. I looked above the generator, at the main cooling line that the beam would have severed, bathing the hold in liquid oxygen, freezing the delicate mechanisms of the control platform and crippling the ship. The cooling line was singed but intact because Benito had blocked the force of the beam with his body.

After the sorting. After, then, our argument. Angry, impatient - it wasn't like Benito to forget to check for a charge build-up. Impatient. Careless. Because we had argued, he made a mistake, and because he made a mistake, he was ... dead.

No one moved. The _corpse_ needed lifting, the _dead man_ must be settled. _It_, and it filled me with horror. This was no cat, no animal. This was a human, one of me. Was Benito.

Was Benito. His name loosened my hands. I walked to the generator, reached up, and held him by the waist. After a moment I pulled him gently to the floor and turned him over. His face was untouched, the scarred lips pressed together, but the front of his shirt bore a clean, sharp puncture. As I rested his body on the floor, a bright red bulge poked through the aperture and his hump made a soft, squishing sound as it collapsed.

Behind me Greville, Harkness, Li and Hart fled the hold, and Paul started to vomit.

41

Remember Duval? Duval pursues butterflies in Mongolia, Maya's making sonic sculpture on Mars, George just left for Moscow to become a doctor. Fuad has learned to fly space shuttles, Valentine continues drinking in Paris, Tai-li will be raising Victor's baby, Benito is dead.

Remember Helene? Helene finished her dissertation on relativity, Pyotr dances ballet, Angelique drives sand-cats on the moon, Mabooi designed a new orbiting hotel, Blair's fallen in love, Helmut will be singing opera in Lima, Paul dives from the _Ilium_, Benito is dead.

Remember Lars? Lars weaves cloth in London, Arieih just reached his village in the Pyrenees, Joanna has applied for a job in the observatories. Satyajit plays theremin for Symphonia Antiqua Khandahari, Paulita starts teaching in Seville, Katrina continues in transition, Aureliano builds furniture, Ian sails the Atlantic, Kyoshi makes cheese, Carina argues her case in Berne, Axel has had a baby, Sze-Ya searches for gold on Diemos.

Benito is dead.

42

It is not easy to lose oneself in Luna. Despite its complexity it is a small city, an intimate city, and people remember your face. I disembarked at the Library station and stood by the moving belts, wondering where to go, what to do. My change of location had been automatically relayed to the comsystem when I'd purchased the ticket to Luna; the records left by my use of water allotments, transportation, food, would pinpoint me exactly, and I was terrified that Greg or one of his companions would come to find me, would try to take me back to where I so desperately wanted to be. If Greg found me, if he said, "Come back, it doesn't matter, come with us," I would go without hesitation, forgetting the hell that going would entail, forgetting what I would be in twenty years or fifty, forgetting that if I loved him as much as I did, then I loved him enough to spare him what I would become.

I shouldered my bag and set out on foot from the station with no particular destination. The dome of the city pinked with dawn and people began

to fill the streets, crowding the slidebelts and swirling about me as I wandered through the business section. I passed small cafes and restaurants, rarely pausing for more than a glimpse inside their clean interiors. The crowds lessened, then in mid-morning thickened again as shoppers ventured out. Tourists from Terra and Mars appeared with their guide-tapes and holocameras, dressed in the transparent body-sheaths and stiff spherical capes of current fashion. The moon's natives were easy to spot amid the visitors, for they wore, if anything, fashions ten years out of date, glimmer-cloth and meters of hair. I still wore the plain blue clingsuit I had pulled on in Greg's apartment the night before, and tried to look like an observatory worker on leave. I walked through the second level and through the third, avoiding the location of my old apartment, barely noticing my surroundings.

By mid-afternoon I found myself back on the first level of Luna, uncomfortably hungry, uncomfortably sleepy. I found a small cafe, ordered a simple meal, and waited while the machines in the kitchen buzzed and hummed, preparing my food.

A woman at the next table glanced at me, then glanced again. I stared out the window at the crowds, hoping that she would disappear, but she came to my table and cleared her throat. Reluctantly, I looked up at her.

"Oh, excuse me, but aren't you from Clarke? I'm sure you are, I was there last week and someone pointed you out, said you were one of the linewalkers. I'm sure I remember you. I've never met a linewalker before."

"No, I'm sorry, you must be mistaken," I said nervously. "I'm from Gagarin, I've just been visiting, I've never been outside."

She smiled, not believing me. "I'm positive I saw you on Clarke and I don't usually confuse faces. It's my business. Do you mind if I join you?"

I shook my head, miserable, and she sat beside me. "I'm from TeraDisPlays, maybe you've seen me?"

"No, I don't watch much. Excuse me, here's my meal."

She continued to smile while the plates were placed before me. My hunger routed any manners I had, and I pounced on the food.

"You must be very hungry."

"What?" I said around a mouthful of salad. "Excuse me. No, I just skipped breakfast is all."

"Take your time, then," she said. I glanced up and the meaning of her smile dawned on me.

Well, why not? She'd have a room somewhere, registered in her own name. I probably looked like one of the vagabonds that flitted from planet to planet to moon, perpetually broke and perpetually on the move. Broke I certainly wasn't but being a vagabond served my purposes. I returned her smile and ate more slowly, listening to her talk.

She free-lanced for TeraDisPlays, doing interviews, travel shows, whatever interested her. She'd been on the moon two months and was returning to Beijing in a week, having, or so she said, exhausted the possibilities of the moon. She made one or two more comments about linewalkers, but when I didn't react she let the topic alone. I listened, smiled, and volunteered only my name, which she would have discovered anyway.

"Well," she said over coffee, "if you've just come in from Gagarin, you'll probably want to clean up. I have a room not far from here."

Indeed she did, one of the most expensive in Luna's most expensive hotel. It contained all the latest refinements, including emotion-keyed wall fields that, as I stepped from the sumptuous bathroom, were deep red. The woman lay naked on the bed, idly waiting for me, so I went to her and paid for my bed and board. When she finally let me, I fell asleep.

I awoke near nightfall. She had dressed and was impatient to go out. My reluctance soon disappeared, for Greg would never consider searching for me in the gaudy and expensive restaurant and nightclubs where we passed the evening. I drank when drinks were placed before me, danced when dancing was requested, laughed when it seemed appropriate, let myself be moved from one activity to another until, after two early morning hours spent thrashing about on her bed,

she was finally sated and slept. I lay beside her, tired beyond the point of sleep, while the small traitor hidden in my brain told me that this was no better a solution to my problems than any other. Badgered and nagged, I dragged myself from the bed.

She slept on while I bathed, gathered my bag, and left the hotel room; passed through the almost-deserted lobby and into the darkened streets. The tourist district around the hotel was bright and alive, even at four in the morning, and I left it for the smaller, quieter streets. I considered the faces of the buildings as I walked, considered the people within. They slept well, these incompatible compatriots of mine, each secure in the knowledge of a calm forever, as unchanging as they themselves were unchanging. These were the people who would stare and giggle at me as I grew more and more obviously the freak. Would I sell my ugliness to them, as I had sold my attractiveness the day before? For all its melodrama the question was real and bothered me. No, I decided, I would have none of it. Let them find their freaks elsewhere, as I would find some life for myself elsewhere. Tia Hamley was resigning the position of pet monstrosity. Tia Hamley, without Australia, would cope.

And I did. Johns-Rastegar Research Center needed someone to mind the solar observatory -- five years alone orbiting the sun, holos and telefaxes, complete computer tie-ins, simulators, stimulators, good pay, no previous experience necessary. They'd been looking for someone for two years and took me without a fuss. A week after I'd left Clarke I and my bedraggled pack were shunted up to the station and immured in solitude.

During my third year at the solar station I watched the Outbound move from the moon toward the sun, circle our little star, gain momentum, and fling herself out into the blackness of space.

I almost opened the hatch and walked out after her.

43

I sat in the diving hold, legs dangling over the lip of the well. Below my feet the water pulsed and gurgled against the sides of the well and on the transparent doors of the remotes' storage niches. The scent of salt mingled with the scent of rubber and powder from my mask and wet-suit, lying behind me on the floor where I had discarded them soon after beginning an unnecessary cleaning. Over and under these scents lay the smell of the hold, metal and polish. The floor vibrated.

Paul was locked in his cabin, coping with Benito's death in his own way. Lonnie and Li slept, deeply sedated; Harkness and Hart sat side by side in the bridge. Tobias, accompanied as always by Jenny, had taken over Benito's functions in the engine room until a full engineer could be flown to us from the mainland. I had left them in the hold soon after the others fled, made the call to the mainland, and came to the diving hold.

I picked up my faceplate and lay down on the floor, pressing the coolness against my skin, feeling the rasp of my suit's material across my belly and thighs. The chill puckered my nipples. The faceplate covered one hand. I looked at it blankly, feeling guilty.

It was my fault, wasn't it? If I hadn't argued with Benito he wouldn't have been angry, would have thought about a charge building up in the machine, would have checked, would still be alive. Yet I had gone to him seeking reconciliation, and he had refused it. Was it my fault? I hadn't pushed him over that generator, hadn't courted his anger. But if we hadn't argued... And why had we argued? Why had Benito been so upset at my liaison with Paul, why had I let myself react to his anger? Ultimately, did it even matter? Benito was dead and no amount of blame or questioning would change that. The guilt became a quiet, thorough mourning -- the only mourning, I suspected, that Benito would get.

"Tia?"

I turned my head to see Greville standing at the foot of the dropshaft.

"Tia, I uh, I need your help." He came a few feet into the room, twisting a button of his lab coat between his fingers. The button came off. He

stared at it with dismay, then put it in his pocket.

"Go away, Greville."

"Tia, please, you're the only one who can help."

"Go away."

"It's Benito."

I waited.

"Well, everyone's locked themselves up, everyone but you and me, and, well..." He stalled, started on another button.

"Where's Tobias?"

"He put everything on automatic and he's locked up too. He says he won't go near the engine room until, as long as, as Benito's, as long as, is down there."

"No one's moved Benito's body yet?"

"Well, who would move it?" he demanded, tugging at the button.

"Greville, what do you want me to do?"

"Get rid of it! We simply can't have it aboard, don't you see? Get rid of it!"

I thought of Benito, lying alone in the humming room, and stood.

"Okay, Greville."

"Thank you," he called over his shoulder as he ran to the dropshaft.

"Die off," I said to his ascending heels.

Tobias had covered the broken generator on all sides save the one nearest Benito, but no one had covered Benito at all. He lay as I had left him, arms along his sides, legs slightly open, head at an angle. His hump was completely gone now, pushed up through his chest and puddled, sticky, along the floor. He looked very small in death, much smaller than he should have. And cold. I left the engine room, took my orange blanket from the minaret, and brought it back.

I filled a pail with soap and water and cleaned Benito's chest, wiped the blood and tissue off him, and scrubbed the sticky puddle from the floor. I'd never handled a corpse before but through my numbness I remembered Sal, digging a grave with brusque tenderness under the hot Australian sun. It made it easier to wrap Benito in the orange blanket. I tucked in the ends and brought a floater from storage. He was cold and heavy in my arms as I rolled him onto the floater, positioned him, and checked the tightness of the blanket. I activated the floater and took Benito to the diving hold.

I loaded all my extra, archaic weights onto a spare belt and buckled it around Benito's waist. The hold echoed with the clacking of lead on lead; the air smelled, still, of salt and water and powder.

"Come say goodbye," I said into the intercom by the dropshaft. I sat beside Benito and, after a while, rested my hand on the blanket, over Benito's shoulder. Water slapped against the side of the well.

Someone dropped down the shaft. Tobias. I was too numb to be surprised. He hesitated before walking around the perimeter of the hold and toward me, stopping well away. He held his hand out. Sitting in his palm was Benito's tiny sculpture. It swayed and ticked with the trembling of Tobias' hand. I looked from it to the boy's face. The skin around his mouth was white and taut, his eyes rimmed with red.

"I thought," he said, and hesitated. The sculpture shivered. "I thought he might want this."

He tensed as I approached but let me take the toy from his hand. We both stared down at it.

"Is it always this way?" Tobias whispered.

I couldn't answer.

"Tia -- will this happen to you?"

"I hope not," I whispered.

"Or me?"

I looked up, startled.

"No, not to me," he continued, backing away. "I won't let it, and you can't make me."

I shook my head. He looked like an Australian madman. "Tobias, please. Can't we call a truce? Can't we at least not be enemies?"

"No," he said. "No. You're a freak, Tia. I'm not." He raced toward the dropshaft and jumped up it.

I took the small toy and tucked it into the orange blanket beside Benito. I didn't understand why Tobias had brought it, but did understand that Tobias was insane. It didn't matter. All that really mattered, now, was Benito's still shape and the absence of anything to say to it.

How do you make up a funeral service for a dead Immortal? Sal had said nothing. What do you say to a hunchback? I tried to remember some of the things I had read years ago in the Library; only tiny snatches came to me, none of them right. So, finally, I said nothing, touched the blanket once, and tilted Benito over the side of the diving well. A few bubbles marked the path of his descent, and that was that.

I heard a moist moan behind me, but when I turned all I could see was the lower part of Paul's body, moving swiftly up the column of the shaft.

44

"You're out of your mind!" Greville announced. I ignored him, shimmying into my wet-suit as he shifted from foot to foot, wringing his hands. Tobias and Jenny entered as I sealed my wrist-bands.

"Tia, do you have to...." Jenny asked. I ignored her, too. Tobias watched in silence, then strode to his locker and began assembling his bubble equipment.

"My God, not you too!" Greville said. "Do you know what you're doing?"

Tobias' full lips puckered. Greville, almost frantic, fairly danced.

"One field's already blown, yours might too," he said, his voice rising to a squeak. "It's a great risk, a very great risk!"

"I'll take it," Tobias muttered. "If she can go down, so can I."

"Tobias...." Jenny began.

"I said I'm going down!" he shouted.

Jenny shook her head and stormed toward the dropshaft. I shrugged and continued checking my recycler.

"Tia, please Tobias, this is insane...."

Neither of us spoke. Greville tossed his hands to his hair in exasperation and left the hold. I wondered why Tobias was coming under, but didn't much care. I could lose him, under water. I could travel far faster than he.

Paul appeared as I pulled the rubber smooth around my legs. He stood gnawing at his lower lip.

"Tia, you're not really diving, are you?"

I hoisted my belt and sealed it in place, adjusting the weights until they rested evenly about my hips.

"Greville says it's dangerous," he offered.

Waist beam here. Stunner. Knife. Specimen bags. Chronometer. Depth gauge. Compass. Wrist beams. Remote box. Emergency bubble. Dye. Buoys. Inflatable life jacket. Gloves.

"Something might happen."

I turned to him finally. Paul flushed, his gaze leaping from one object to another in the hold, his fingers searching for something on his smooth, naked hips to grasp and, failing that, twisting around each other behind his back. Of course, I thought. Not Benito's body, but the orange bundle that represented Benito's body; not Tia's death, but the symbols of that death. Necrophilia at one remove, the symbol rather than the substance, the shroud and not the corpse. I spread the headsheath and slipped it over my greying hair.

"Go away, Paul," I said. He turned and sprinted across the emptiness of the hold and up the shaft.

Tobias sealed my headsheath, then turned around while I completed the hook-up of his waist-band. When Lonnie failed to appear we took the checklists

and ran through them carefully.

As we finished and approached the lip of the well, Harkness' voice floated from the intercom.

"I won't let you go down without some monitoring," he said curtly. "You've made the safety checks?"

"Yes," I said.

"Very well, then. I've keyed the remotes for you...."

"I only need one."

"I want them all," Tobias announced. I shrugged.

"All of them are going, anyway," Harkness said. "Tobias, you might as well start."

He hesitated at the lip of the well, as though remembering the last thing that had slipped into the sea, then set his jaw and climbed down to the water. I waited until his bubble finished forming and he moved to one side, then snapped my face-plate closed and followed him into the ocean.

The current would, by now, have swept Benito's body far from the ship, but I maintained a watchful quiet as we descended. Tobias seemed to share it. A bulky object wavered in the distance. Tobias had the remotes flood it with light -- a bed of kelp. A shark floated alongside and swam away through the translucent water. We sank through the realm of fading colors, down toward Hilo.

"How are you doing?" Harkness asked.

"All right," I replied. "We're over the business district. A fair amount of destruction on the beach side. A couple of structures intact on the inland side of the main street, hard to tell what they are from this distance. Tobias, you want to take a look?"

"Yes," he said. The remotes dove in response to his signal. We followed until we hovered before what looked to have been a department store.

"Building's intact," Tobias said. "I'll meter stress in a moment. It looks all right."

"Rich pickings," I commented. Tobias looked at me through the slight shiver of his bubble, then turned back to the building, staring at the stress patterns on his screen. After Harkness' go-ahead, a remote cleared a window.

"Go on in," he said to me.

"No, thanks. I think I'll take a look around there." I waved my arm in the direction of Mitsuyaga's building. "I only need one remote."

"Tia," Harkness said, "as Captain, I think...."

"No. I'm exercising my independent discovery option so let me get on with it, will you?" I signalled a remote, opened my jets, and streaked away.

"There she goes!" Tobias yelled. My jets easily outdistanced his bubble. I reached the building and was about to enter before I remembered the remote. It followed slowly and close behind it came Tobias and his own regiment of remotes.

"Tia, wait," Tobias called. "I'm on private band. I have to talk with you."

I remembered Benito's toy in Tobias' shaking hand and reached for the wavering mosses of the doorway, steadying myself against the faint pull of the current. At my signal my remote entered the lobby and wait for me. Tobias came closer and I toggled my own transmitter to privacy.

"Well?"

He brushed golden hair from his forehead. I couldn't make out his expression through faceplate, water, and the bubble-wall, but the movement of his hands seemed hesitant. His body, laced with the dark colors of the wires and electrodes, moved like that of a troubled demigod.

"Tobias," I said. "What do you want?"

"I don't know," he said. "I -- I'm afraid of you."

I laughed, startled, and he tensed. "Of me?" I said, and laughed again.

"It's not funny! You don't belong with us, you don't blend. You make people uncomfortable. And you're a -- I mean, bad things happen when you're around. Like Benito."

"You mean I'm a jinx," I said, and turned to go in.

"No! Please, wait. I need to talk to you, I need to understand."

"Understand what?" I said, with rising anger. "I thought you already understood everything. I'm a freak, remember? I'm a jinx. What do you want me to do, Tobias? Disappear?"

"Yes! Yes, disappear, go away, take the bad things with you. Just go, you're not wanted here."

"You expect me to say yes, don't you?" I pushed away from the door to hover just before his bubble and stared at him through the shifting splotches of light. "I don't make bad things. I'm not responsible for evil. I'll be gone soon anyway, but that's not quick enough for you, is it? You don't want to see me die, right? That's what's bothering you. I'm going to die, dead, death, corpse, rot. I won't go away until I have to, little boy. Perhaps I won't go away at all."

It was stupid of me and had I thought I wouldn't have said any of it. I put my hand out, but Tobias screamed, "_I'm not your little boy!_" and clutched at his wrist-band. The nearest remote rushed me, cutting arms opened. I spun, twisted, ducked under one metal arm and pushed myself into the doorway. My mouth was filled with saltwater.

We both stared, horrified, at the cut hose dangling from my mask, before I turned and fled into the building.

45

My air hose was cut near the tanks: a river of air bubbled toward the dark ceiling as I sped through the lobby. I slapped the valve shut. I had to reach Mitsuyaga's room.

My lungs burned and my ears thundered. I couldn't find the staircase. Light flooded the lobby behind me as remotes came in and Tobias shouted something about children at the bottom of the sea, but I must have been wrong. He couldn't touch me through the borders of his bubblesuit. He didn't need to. I kicked, frantic to avoid the metal killers behind me, frantic to find the stairwell. I found it, jetted toward it, crashed against the wall, lost my air, rocketed up the stairwell, down the corridor, through the door, following the beam of my light which grew sharper in the middle and darker at the sides, narrowing to a point of silver that was light on water, light on air, a square receding the more I rushed toward it until I breached it, clawed at the sides, pulled myself into the damp softness of Mitsuyaga's hidden room. I clung to the floor, coughing, gagging, water pouring from nose and mouth. My throat and lungs ached, abraded, while the floor spun below me. After a while the shaking stopped.

When I reached to turn off my light, it wasn't there. Instead of touching my toolbelt or the rubber of my suit below it, I touched the cool skin of my hip. When I touched my facemask, I touched my forehead, my eyelids. When I touched my tanks, they were gone. I opened my eyes on blackness.

46

Panic rose and I lay still, concentrating on the feeling of the floor beneath me. I breathed evenly until I discovered how to go inside myself and purge the toxins of fear. The air smelled stale. Goosebumps rose on my skin until I adjusted my internal thermostat and felt warmer. The darkness was absolute. I knew how I had come here, I thought. I had followed a beam of light, from a device that, it appeared, I didn't have. Drowning, I had found time to shed my equipment and wetsuit. Why?

I calmed myself further, and thought. We argued, I turned to leave, a remote cut my airhose. I came into the lobby, I closed the tank valve, I came up the stairs, I found the room, I entered. I remembered each step on the journey except for the one where I lost my equipment. I touched my hip again. It was still bare.

I thought about the beam of light guiding me toward Mitsuyaga's room, where there was no power or light. That I could not change, but could I change

myself enough to see?

What are my eyes?

Cornea, iris, pupil, lens. Sclera, choroid, vitreous body, ciliary body. Retina. Optic nerve. So.

Sharpen this, here. Strengthen that, yes. And sensitize the other. A bare phosphorescence of the sea, a gleaming, and I change, touch, move. Dim shapes in the darkness of the room, differing shades of blackness. The shapes gathered form and definition. I lifted my hand and counted the scars on my fingers, I moved my legs and watched my toes. I could see. Good. Perhaps, in my panic, I had sharpened my vision enough to let me see my way to this room. That made sense. I could handle that. Good.

It was good not to have drowned. I was pleased, until I remembered that I lay in a rapidly depleting bubble of air at the bottom of the sea, and that I had no way out.

47

Old patterns of thought are hard to break. It took me a period of time, unmeasurable in the quiet of the room, to realize that all this was melodramatic foolishness and that I had a way out at my figurative fingertips. If I could alter my vision to see in the darkness, I could alter my oxygen intake to let a lungful last me to the surface, and regulate the formation of nitrogen bubbles in my blood to avoid decompression sickness. I wasn't condemned to this room. I was, in fact, condemned to very little.

So I fiddled with this and poked at that, and rose through the clear blue waters below the bulk of the Ilium. Created transparent eyelids below my opaque ones and refined them to handle distortions in the water. Above me the dark oval of the ship came into shape; eventually I found the roundness of the diving well. I pulled myself halfway to the lip and listened. Where were they? I raised my head to peer around the empty hold, then raised myself up and over the lip of the well.

The hold was empty and bright, too bright. I snicked back my new eyelids, narrowed my pupils until the light no longer pained me, sharpened my vision until I could count the individual rivets in the vaulted ceiling high above me, the small pores and lines of my hand, and was satisfied.

Padding to my locker, I irised it open and found it empty. Forgotten so soon, then? Or gratefully discarded? No matter. I closed the door and thought about the most surreptitious route between here and the supply hold -- I had no wish to meet them on my way.

Ding, dong, the witch is dead! How gleefully they must have cleaned me out.

A few minutes later I came around a bend in the corridor near the supply hold, convinced that I was alone, and slammed into somebody hard enough to toss us both back. I jumped up at his cry of surprise and saw Hart, flat on his back, staring at me in shock. The cry became a yell of terror as he scrambled to his feet and shot around the bend, leaving the charts and maps he had carried scattered behind him. I slumped against the wall, so frightened that it took me minutes to calm the pounding of my heart. Then I sharpened my hearing and, more cautiously, went on my way.

One remote, well stocked, would meet most of my needs, but I wanted a few other pieces of equipment, and food to supplement the remote's survival rations. Then back to my underwater room. With some care, I should be able to avoid a repeat of the corridor mishap.

I found a floater in the supply hold and loaded it with the equipment I wanted. It would make life more comfortable: two powerpacks, an extra recycler, a miniature generator that ran on salt water and was barely enough, but enough, to recharge the powerpacks. The generator was another of Benito's toys; its run-off was potable water, and I remembered his glee as he demonstrated it to me that first time. Anything else? Yes, a homing signal to guide the remote from the Ilium to Mitsuyaga's building. Then to the galley, also deserted, where I tucked food into bubble packs. No need to be greedy: as

long as the Illium floated here I had ready access to what I needed. I wondered if they had found a substitute engineer yet. I took the floater the diving hold, loaded a remote, followed it underwater and, holding the homing signal, swam down.

Was there anything more for me aboard the Illium? Just curiosity, and I could afford, I decided, to indulge it. Where were the Immortals? I couldn't leave them, I decided, without a final glance. And if the glance were of gloating and triumph, what of it? I deserved to crow.

48

I snuck into the Museum, peered through one of the many arches along the sunlit chamber, found no one. The quality of the light was wrong. When I came fully into the room I saw that every mirror was shattered, slivers and bands of glass lying broken amid the cracked display cases; the floor glistened with refracted light. I picked my careful, barefoot way through the chaos. Who? Why? Because of me, in some way; my displays were the most damaged, my discoveries all destroyed. The newest display, the pens found in the ruins of Hilo, were gone. The room was no longer mine, the work and skill and memories exorcised with fury; I glanced along it again and left.

In the engine room the generators thrummed around me. Still scattered at the base of the broken generator were Benito's tools, forgotten amid the hulking bronze monsters. Or, perhaps, the Immortals had fastened superstitions on them and they would lie forever on the polished floor, the only tombstone Benito would have. As, perhaps, the Museum would be mine? It seemed appropriate. I walked around the tools, climbed to the revolving platform, and stood above the ranks of dials and gauges.

Small, highly colored scenes flashed by me as I stood, my fingers brushing the cool plasteel of the control board. Benito hunched over the dials and buttons, manipulating the controls as the Illium descended into the sea. Benito creating his toy, his sculpture, with microscopic precision. Benito flung over the naked side of the generator, dying to protect his ship as much as to protect those who sailed on her. Benito in orange wool.

Something broke against the floor. I turned to see Tobias motionless against the bulk of the dead generator, his eyes immense. A large glassite voltmeter lay shattered at his feet.

Scared witless.

"Tobias," I said, grinned, stretched my hand toward him in sardonic greeting. He leaped backward, striking his shoulder against the generator. The motion broke the seals of his voice.

"I killed you," he said. "You're dead. I killed you. I brought your suit back, you're dead!"

"Want to touch my arm, Tobias? I'm not even close to dead. Here, touch."

"Stay away from me!"

"Think I'm a ghost? You didn't hurt me, not at all."

"That's what I told them. I said you killed yourself, that you stripped off your suit. They can't prove you didn't. We had an argument because you wouldn't obey orders, even Harkness' orders, and you got angry and killed yourself. You're dead. The remotes have voice tapes, Greville has your suit. You're dead!"

"I killed myself because I was angry?" I grinned. "Despite the cut airhoses? Or the shut valve on the tank? Do they believe you, Tobias?" I laughed. "They send murderers to Australia. Shall we meet there, me dying and you condemned?" I moved toward him. "I could save you, Tobias, simply by not being dead. Shall I?"

He stepped backward, into the shattered glassite. His foot bled but his expression didn't change.

"The Museum, Tobias, did you do that, too?"

"Ti-a," he said. "What kind of children do you have?"

"You filthy little bastard." I reached for his face.

He dove to the floor, lifted the laser torch from Benito's pile of tools, and leveled it at me.

"No, Tobias," I whispered. "Be sensible. They might believe you, now. Let me go. They'll send you to Australia if you do this. Tobias?"

His eyes didn't change. "I'll be in Australia anyway," he said.

"Not here, Tobias. You'll blow up the ship, everyone will die. Not here."

His gaze flashed from me to the regiments of generators. I leaped over the edge of the platform and crouched. Above me, Tobias bellowed.

I scurried toward the generators and ducked behind the closest one, the one on which Benito had died. Tobias screamed my name, his feet pounded on the metal deck. I ran through the bronze and golden monsters, hearing the tell-tale slap of my bare feet against the echoing deck. The shuttered door gleamed dully on the far wall, in sight and out again as I ducked and skidded and slid, and wished that I could fly.

I slapped the palm-lock on the door as I bounced against it, jumped out of sight beyond the generators and, as the door irised open I leaped through it and sprinted down the corridor. I slid into a branching corridor, into another, into a third, and slumped against the wall, panting, shaking. I couldn't hear beyond the pounding in my ears. Every new-found skill fled from me.

My heel scraped against the wall; the sound sent me bounding into the corridor. Tobias screamed and the wall near me bubbled viscously at the laser's touch.

I dove up the dropshaft, knowing he couldn't fire the laser torch for another thirty seconds. The bar for the third deck rushed downwards. I grabbed it, swung out of the tube, and sprinted down the corridor toward the wide balcony surrounding the well. I needed a floater, a flyer, wings, anything, but found nothing. Tobias flew from the dropshaft and sent a beam of light chasing across the emptiness of the well toward me. I slipped on the tiles, skidded on my hip, smashed against the balustrade, and spun off. Ahead of me, a section of corridor hissed into slag.

I crouched and scuttled along the balcony and he paced me, waiting for the laser to charge again. I stared back at him, each glimpse punctuated by the balcony's supports.

"_Ti-a!_" he shouted. His voice echoed. It couldn't be Tobias, not that white and staring face, the bulging eyes, the twisted mouth. "_I'm_" the nightmare, I thought as he shouted my name again.

At the corner the railing became solid, cutting my view. I paused, tense, knowing that his laser was charged again. My skin felt slick with cold sweat.

"What's going on here?" the intercom barked. It jerked Tobias' attention up. I dashed to the dropshaft, flew up the gleaming shaft, grabbed the bar at the top and catapulted onto the mosaic flight deck. Again I lost my footing and slid behind a hopper. I grabbed a strut and held tight, trying to catch my breath. The side of the hopper sizzled and I tore across the deck toward the minaret. There was nowhere else to go.

Voices shouted -- I couldn't tell whether they came from the intercom or not. It didn't matter, they barely made sense.

"What is it? What -- "

"...laser! Stop! I command -- "

"I told you it was here! I told you -- "

"Stop them! Stop them!"

"Who? What?"

"_Tiiiiiiii -- aaaaa!_"

The staircase twisted, slippery. I ran up it with Tobias one curve behind me. I ran faster, terrified of tripping, terrified of stopping, terrified of falling, terrified of slowing, and finally burst onto the topmost walk, the narrow ledge that girdled the minaret fifteen meters above the waterline. No exit, no crevices, no niches, no place to hide. I couldn't stop

running and ran all the way around the ledge until it brought me within sight of the staircase again as Tobias jumped onto the ledge and saw me. I stopped and put my hand to the minaret's cold wall. He held the laser steady, the dim green ready-light glowing along its barrel. There was nowhere left to go.

"Tobias. Stop it. Please."

Tobias' mouth moved, forming a word I couldn't hear. He paced toward me.

"It's not a game, Tobias. Stop now. Tobias?"

I didn't understand why he didn't just kill me. Footsteps sounded on the stairway, voices shouted on the deck below, Tobias chewed his word inaudibly. His hand never shook.

"Tobias!"_ Jenny raced onto the ledge and froze, but his gaze on me didn't waver. The laser lifted as he sighted, carefully, his finger on the trigger.

"STOP!"_ I screamed with my mouth, with my mind, with my guts, with my soul. _STOP!_

And Tobias stopped.

His expression did not change as he toppled forward and lay still. One hand dangled over the drop to the flight deck. His finger relaxed from the trigger.

I ran to him but Jenny got there first. We rolled him over. His lips twitched and I bent lower, straining to hear.

"Mother," Tobias said, and left me staring into clear and lifeless eyes. His chest, below my hand, emptied and was still. Jenny stood and, shocked and bewildered, I looked up at her.

"I tried to tell you," she said flatly. "He's as mortal as you are."

"But -- " I said. "I'm not his -- "

"It doesn't matter. You killed him." Jenny shuddered, sat on the deck, and stared with eyes as lifeless as Tobias' out across the sea.

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Beyond Jenny the other Immortals clustered at the top of the stairs. Harkness clutched the rail, knuckles white, white around the corners of his clenched jaws; Greville behind him, staring, his face almost as bleached as the dyed tufts of his hair. Hart, body shaking. Li. Lonnie. Paul, face scrubbed of any emotion at all, beautiful in his shock. And Jenny, as blank as a statue. Slowly their attention shifted from the death to the doer. I was impaled by their gaze.

"Please. I didn't mean ... did you hear him ... I didn't want..." But I did want. "He was going to kill...." But I had killed. Had left him alone on the sunbaked ledge, the only other one like me, dead of my fraudulent superiority, of my panicked pride. I had murdered Tobias. And had no weapon I could fling away for I had done it. All by myself.

"Please." I took a step toward them and they backed away from me, groping with their feet and still staring. We moved in silence, across the ledge, down the sun-drenched, winding staircase. I could no more move away from them than they could come toward me. Down and down, leaving Jenny and her dead lover alone at the crest of the Ilium. How many people had I killed up there?

They clumped on the mosaic deck, moving as one entity from me as I walked toward the edge of the ship. I turned when I reached the rail, saw them huddled together by the hopper and, high above, the spire of Jenny's body etched against the blueness of the sky.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, and slid over the edge.

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Hours passed, maybe days. The room hummed around me, emitting light and warmth, air circulated, food sat untouched about the walls of the anteroom. I sat at the entrance to Mitsuyaga's kingdom, unable to move after I had plugged the remote into the circuitry and provided power.

"Mother," he had said. He was no child of mine; I had no children, could not have children. "He's as mortal as you are." As I? Dying? "Mother," he said, after I killed him.

I sat in the hold mending a weight belt, that moment years ago when Greville wafted down the shaft followed by gold perfection. One is drawn to the beautiful and strange, a drawing neither of love nor hate, but simply of presence. Magnet and filings; one has to stare. Tobias saw me and turned pale, eyes round, fingers stiff and open. The Immortal reaction taken to an extreme, I thought, and retreated to sarcasm. I had been wrong, all the way down the line. No child of mine, that golden boy; did he watch his future in my self? Was that why he hated?

I had cried in the veldt and moved in terror through the streets of a dozen cities, fleeing from planet to planet and staring into mirrors for the claws of age ... Had Tobias? But I was never as beautiful as he. Not I. And he was no child of mine.

I had never asked his age, never known it until he whispered it to me on the run, and I hadn't stopped to reason why.

"No, there's no one like me. Do you find that a relief?"

"I tried to tell you. He's as mortal as you are."

Jenny stared with eyes as empty as her lover's. How many people did I kill up there?

No, he was no child of mine. But he could have been; he might as well have been. There was no virtue in me. I hated them for being close-minded, but I was no different. I hated them for fearing change and novelty, but I was no different. I hated them for not being like me. I wished I had the courage to laugh. There was nothing I was that they could not be. There was nothing they were that was beyond me, except perhaps immortality. Which they didn't deserve. And neither did I.

Around me stood a madman's attempt to foil mortality. It hadn't worked for him and it probably wouldn't work for me, but I had, literally, nothing to lose. I couldn't return to the Illium and once it sailed, I couldn't follow it. My resources, even enhanced as they were, would not take me so far. I looked at the bulk of the machines and thought about Tobias' golden face.

He might as well have been my child. Let my payment for his life be the peril of my own. He should have been my son.

I passed down the long room until I stood before the last machine. When I touched the grey spot the lump cracked in half to reveal, set on a small black ledge within, a stoppered flask. Nothing else. I took the flask in my hand, watching the grey liquid move within, as thin and light as water. All it lacked was a label reading "Drink Me."

Behind me, a couch rose from the floor. I lay on it, unstoppered the flask, lifted it, silently toasted Tobias, and drank the fluid. Something profound shifted, as though the universe changed gears. I closed my eyes and let the empty bottle fall away.

The darkness behind my eyelids gave way to streamers of delight, tendrils of euphoria, sly vines of pleasure. And beyond, nothing. To surrender to the flood was to slip forever into ecstasy, into the dance of nonbeing. But I searched for meaning, not death, not ecstasy. Would not use Tobias' fate, or Benito's, or my own, simply to retreat more elegantly from the question. I waited, torn and patient, for meaning to arrive.

Slowly, then, my perceptions sharpened and I saw divisions within the swirling, the constants amid the change. The pattern grew clearer, the manic dancing became ordered, stable, almost set in its change. Reassured, I ventured into it.

This was immediately familiar, once into it. This the expansion of my lungs, this the beating of my heart, all the solid internalities. Thick and strong, these cords and convolutions, binding the parts to one whole. I reached for the brighter, lighter pulses of my senses: sight, and the colors shifted and churned, blazed and mellowed; sound, and great, complex chords surrounded me, carillons pealed amid the high, young voices of flutes. Smell,

and I was besieged by subtle fragrances that seeped through my entire being, that blended and danced with the bells and colors. And taste, and touch; I opened myself to the flood, embraced, praised, danced with the dances of my body. And moved on.

I came up against the shell of my skin and pressed against it as though against the transparent walls of a cage. The universe waited on the other side, every sensuous touch and every spark of knowledge that could ever be. I wanted all of it. I pressed, turned, cooled my yearning, reached, shaped, and found an opening that, in panic, I had found before; I lay upon the couch and then I stood over it. The small flask rolled to the floor.

Was this how I had done it before, escaping Tobias' remote? It must have been, a door found in terror that I found again in calm. I pictured the flooded lobby, stepped through the insubstantial opening, and shivered in the press of cold black water. When I returned to the room I dripped water on the velvet. I warmed myself - it took barely a thought - and lay down once more. This time, when I pressed against the shell of my skin, I slid through it as I used to slide through the sea.

Memories inundated me - the desert house of my childhood, the coolness of lizards on my palm, my mother's voice, dead volcanoes rearing against an intense sky, the burnt hole of Nevada buzzing on the air-shuttle's counter, the caves of ice below the pole. And, mixed with the rest, moments of fear and pain and shattered innocence. Treatments. Hospitals. Distrust. Hatred. Terror. The web of my life linked by a web of tears; it came to me that fifty years of self-pity is a criminal waste. I let it go, the little girl wailing in South Africa, the heartbroken child on the moon, the Illium's bitter woman, the angry self-hatred that had become the way I breathed. Amazing how deeply these threads were worked into me but I followed each one, pulling it from me, watching it dissolve even as it emerged.

When the threads were gone I reached toward the component pieces of my self, turned them, nudged them, urged and pushed and settled and shaped until the dancers each moved to the same pulse and the harmony was a creation of the dance, the dance the result of harmony. I felt the possibilities within me, touched the nexus of change. Presence and power called to me from beyond myself, and a new urgency suffused me. A single, simple step waited, but I hesitated. Something was still missing. I was complete within myself, but alone within myself. To make that step now would take me only around and not forward.

I touched the movement of the dance, felt its steadiness and, reassured, rose through the layers of the sea.

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I rise as an essence, as a wave moves, every particle of water different amid the force of the whole. Enchanted with my flowing, immersed in movement and curious, infinitely curious.

The ship glows in the moonlight. I absorb its beauty as I move through it. Harkness has cried himself to sleep, lies snoring exhausted in his lover's arms while Hart stares at the unseen ceiling overhead and does not understand. Peace, Hart. Li moves amid piles of cheese in the galley, confusion assuaged by mounting trays of pastries. It's a lonely universe, Li. Take such comfort as you may. Lonnie lies sleeping in Paul's arms, drugged safely beyond the reach of dreams; her mind is a sponge that survives by absorbing. And Paul lies beside her, disturbed and confused, thinking vague, lustful thoughts about Australia. But the urgings of his sub-conscious are closed to him, and he knows not why he craves. Sleep, Paul. They are all me, part of me, as I am all them.

Greville sits motionless beside Jenny's still form. Feeling responsible, feeling concerned, feeling horror, feeling pain. I am surprised at Greville's midnight thoughts, here where he has no image to maintain. And Jenny, mind closed tight, desperately blank, desperately awake. I move into her mind, into the strangeness of her thoughts that are so much like my own,

and find small gaps, possibilities of comfort, chances of aid. Delicate, delicate -- I reach to her and feel the tiniest flicker of response, and my world shivers with energy.

Above the mantle of cloud lie the infinite reaches of space, the pulsing center of the universe, joy and light and peace. I reach to it briefly, a promise, then turn and bend myself toward Jenny's mind. I have work to do.

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