

# EVER, PART THREE: A TRICKSTER IN THE ASHES

**FELICITY SAVAGE**

*Part Three of the EVER trilogy.*



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## **Our Story So Far ...**

Since his birth in the back of a truck, Crispin Kateralbin has been a daemon handler, a trapeze artist, a fighter pilot, a street entertainer, a deckhand, a dock laborer, and a wanted man. A halfbreed who never managed to find acceptance in the United Domains of Ferupe, he has achieved wealth and anonymity as a middleman for Devi Yamaxi, governor of the island protectorate Lamaroon and drug-smuggling monopolist.

The war that divided Oceania for a hundred years is over. The Significant Empire of Kirekune has conquered Ferupe, and by extension the whole continent. Now Significance is busily reaching out to the rest of the world. The daemons that sustained Oceanian technology were made extinct in the last stage of the war, and Significance is courting the Far Western nations of Slux, Throssom, and Creddeze with an eye to modernization. This is badly needed. The infrastructure of the Empire has stretched and frayed in the two years since the conquest.

Mime entrepreneurs flourish, and in unimportant colonies like Lamaroon, law and order are no stronger than the morals of their enforcers.

This only means that in the center of the Significant Empire, Significance leans heavily on private citizens who can be of use to Them. Mickey Akila learned this the hard way. A friend of Crispin's in the Ferupian Air Force, he went home to Okimako, the capital of Kirekune, just in time for the devastating fire Significance itself set to rid itself of the cults that had got a grip on Okimakoan society. Since the end of the war, he has been struggling to rebuild his family business. His only confidante is his cousin, Rae Akila, whom he corresponds with although he has never met her.

Rae, like Crispin, grew up in Ferupe. She now lives in occupied Cype, where she has joined a cult that persists in worshipping the Royals of Ferupe. She was once Crispin's lover. Now she believes him dead.

He might as well be dead. He's neck-deep in an illegal industry, stuck in a loveless marriage, and plagued by visions of the future. Worse still, thanks to his knack for foreign languages, Devi Yamaxi has handed him the job of tour guide and nursemaid to wealthy Far Western investors.

## **Book Eight: *Fin de Siècle Fever***

### **Grey**

*12 Sevambar 1899 A.D.*

*Lamaroon: five miles outside Redeuina*

Crispin Kateralbin and the Slux man, Edward Macafryan, Jr.—Ted, as he insisted they call him—stood in the liquid-honey autumn sunlight watching Lamaroon laborers tear up thorn hedges. Sugarcane stubble wept up the scent of green death wherever they trod. This was the second week of construction on the Yamaxi Airport, and the fields Governor Yamaxi had bought up for the project looked like a battlefield, except where were the corpses? Crispin, taking his first spin in the Gorgonette he'd purchased for a song along with fourteen others from a demobbed QAF flight commandant turned black-market arms dealer on the lam from the Kirekuni bank rollers (the kites had been no more than hulks when Crispin acquired them, as obsolete as all the rest of the airplanes and trucks and tanks and jeeps and bikes and ships used in the war, but Yamaxi had shelled out to have them refurbished with powerful diesel engines)—having got the local Disciplinarians to clear the Dai Keuire straightaway so he could use the road for a runway—flying for the first time in more than three years—had been kidney-whacked by memories of patrolling the fringe of the Wraithwaste, seeing logging details hard at work below. They'd been clearing the forest so salvage trucks could reach a downed enemy aircraft, or to get wood for a replacement settlement for Wraiths whose Shadowtown had been swamped by the enemy, or to build a new barracks, or just because someone abhorred the concept of off-duty infantrymen and had ordered them “productively” out of his sight. But one couldn't (Crispin reminded himself now, squinting across dusty blond stubble at dusty brown laborers taking a flask break, keeping one eye on the irascible man beside him) fall into the trap of remembering the past as a time of rhyme and reason, because back then, too, despite the staring exigencies of winning the war and staying alive, one had had just as hard a time making decisions, and—just as now—the choices that seemed clear-cut had resulted as often in disaster as had those that seemed six of one, half a

dozen of the other.

“Say, these lads work like niggers,” Macafryan commented. His irony was obviously intentional: over by the half-uprooted hedge most of the men had sat down, and sun glinted off a flask passing hand to hand. Clouds of paperweed smoke rose straight up in the still air.

“Perhaps you are not yet used to the ways of the south, Mr. Ted,” Crispin said in his newly acquired, painstaking Slux. “To do business with us requires that you treat time as an infinite resource.”

“Time is money,” Macafryan objected.

“And you are very good to have patience with us while we absorb your so-practical Slux philosophy. My Kirekuni colleagues and I understand perfectly your impatience. I am afraid, however, it will take the work crew a little longer to become enlightened. In the meantime they are like mules: if they are not allowed to work at their own pace, they do not work at all. During the war, because of the ban on trade, jobs were very few, but now the harbor is crazed with shipping, and the shipyards, too, have changed from family businesses into industries”—Crispin gestured at the horizon, where construction cranes swayed amid the shacks of the outer slums—“and so, by working for us, the men feel they are doing us a favor, not the other way around.”

“But what I’m trying to find out here is how much longer is it going to *take*?” Macafryan slapped a succession of pockets with increasing irritation, finally jerked a fat gold watch from inside his coat, glanced at the dial, then stuffed it away: a gesture serving no purpose but to signal his impatience—Crispin didn’t think the watch even worked. “We’re scheduled to start construction on the first of October, we’ve been putting the stockholders off with sweet talk for a year *already*, share prices’re dropping like lead, my partner can’t lift a finger until I authorize the necessary expenditures, and Christ knows even if I decided to leave tomorrow I wouldn’t get home until the middle of November; ocean-liner departures are just about as irregular as everything else around here!”

“At any time you wish,” Crispin offered, “an airplane and pilot will be provided. With refueling stops in Naftha, Leondze, and Gazelle, you should be in Sahorlidun in less than a week. All expenses, of course, will be ours.”

The Slux looked momentarily taken aback. “That’s mighty generous of you, Mr. Kateralbin.” Then he threw his shoulders back and forth a couple of times, puffed out his chest, and expostulated determinedly: “*But* the whole reason I’m here! *If* you recall! Is to observe the procedures of airstrip construction so we can start work in Sahorlidun! And correct me if I’m wrong but so far I ain’t seen no procedures, no, sir, not one little bitty procedure a-tall! Less you count paperwork! I’ve visited a lotta foreign places, m’ boy! And lemme tell you! Not even the Ixtarans don’t love red tape’s much as yer Kirry-coonies!” He glared at Crispin, indignant and expecting something to be done about it.

Crispin kept his expression bland and conciliatory. He lowered his gaze to the cracked wing tips planted in the stubble. Macafryan breathed out loudly in anger, and then with a sharp movement (Crispin flinched, thinking the Slux was going for the pistol stuck in the back of his waistband) he yanked a bottle from the recesses of his coat and swigged. *Well Ted, I see you’ve learned the initial technique for coping with the Likreky*, Crispin thought. The Slux restored the bottle to its hideaway, fought with a cigar and lucifers, and finally got the banana-sized stogie lit. Squinting into the sun, he puffed forcefully, well satisfied with the invective he’d delivered and apparently confident that Crispin would now take steps to shorten his distastefully necessary stay in Lamaroon.

Macafryan was a heavysset man, as tall as Crispin, with the largest, reddest-veined nose anyone in Yamaxi’s household had ever seen. Despite his mania for “hygiene” and “sanitary arrangements” he had an air of perpetual scrofulousness: his face shone with sweat, and, no matter what the hour, he looked as though he’d just walked ten miles in his jacket, topcoat, and

top hat. He drove Crispin time and time again to the crumbling precipice of rage. When he spoke to Yamaxi, he couldn't have been more deferent if he'd learned his business craft at the palace of the Significant, and in the company of Yamaxi's wife Jionna he was a lumpish paramour, kissing her hand, passing her the salt before she asked, and almost every day producing with great ceremony an installment in a series of "house guest gifts"—some of them things Crispin wouldn't have given a whore. But with Crispin's wife Yleini he was worse than brusque, hardly a please or a thank-you. Crispin had to add them in when he translated the Slux's words for her, along with the "Mrs. Kateralbin, you certainly must have got your beauty sleep last night, ha ha ha!" genre of compliments he regularly accorded Mme. Yamaxi. And as far as Crispin himself was concerned, the Slux appeared to have decided off the bat that despite Crispin's having presented himself (mendaciously, but Macafryan didn't know that) as special aide to the governor, despite his identifying himself (as he'd started to do so long ago that by now everyone believed him) as a Mime from the Mim, he was no more than a flunky provided by Yamaxi for the express purpose of ferrying Macafryan about the city, allaying his fears (usually to do with hygiene), and acting as a whipping boy for the virulence the Slux concealed so well in the presence of his Kirekuni coinvestors.

It had been Yamaxi's idea to extend their plans for a commercial air service into Slux. The idea had been Crispin's to begin with. Now it belonged to the colonial government. Yamaxi was a vocal proponent of the new internationalism, though not because he considered himself a forward thinker: his particular bureaucratic genius wasn't for grandstanding but underhanding, it wasn't for altering the status quo but getting around it, and as a rule the only personal touch he added to the Okimako party line was the imbuing, perhaps intentional or perhaps not, of all Lamaroon's internationalist projects with an air of illegality, even seediness, which showed in the personalities of the foreign business partners he handpicked from the masses crawling out of the woodwork. All of them were Slux with the exception of a Throssomi and an Ixtaran, who together operated a cargo-shipping line in the lower islands, and that pair was sleazier, in person and in business practice, than all the Slux put together. The Throssomi, a pathetically down-at-heel aristocrat whose Throssomi sounded so different from the Slux dialect Crispin had learned that at first he couldn't understand a word of it, had gone pub-crawling in the Yard and been arrested by the Disciplinarians for insulting a prostitute and attempting to molest a perambulator. After that, Yamaxi invited only Slux businessmen into his domicile.

It had quickly become transparent to Crispin that the reason Slux and Kirekunis got on so well (and had been getting along well, in secret, for the better part of two decades if you could believe the rumors) wasn't just because Kirekunis saw, in the Slux obsession with morality, a reflection and validation of what they considered one of their own national characteristics. It wasn't even, as cynics said, because the Slux' cultie-like reciting of prayers to their God and their multifarious saints proved them in the Kirekunis' eyes primitives, thus justifying the lizards conviction of global superiority. The reason was, and most people in Redeuiina couldn't see the forest for the trees, because both Kirekunis and Far Westerners lived by the rules of a deeply entrenched social hierarchy unquestioned by anyone at any level of it; they in fact, whether they knew it or not, needed such a hierarchy in order to function with any efficacy at all. And Macafryan, force-fitting the Likreky into his personal hierarchy, had classified probably Crispin and certainly Yleini as "jumped-up niggers," "sidekicks to the white colonials."

This wasn't a guess on Crispin's part, these were phrases gleaned directly from a diary the Yamaxis' new maid Saami had found ill concealed under Macafryan's pillow, and brought downstairs for Yamaxi's and Crispin's delectation while the Slux was at dinner at Redeuiina Provincial Secretary Moriyama's house. They'd had quite an evening of it until the new doorman, acting as lookout, gave the alert. The diary revealed not just Macafryan's private, pungent opinions of Redeuiina, which he called a "teeming, bestial city in the anus of the world," but a

good many clues to Macafryan's plans to go Yamaxi one better in the finessing of contractual perks and quirks and man traps. Yamaxi had drooled with delight. As soon as he was free, he instructed Crispin to call on every respectable Kirekuni household in the city until he found somewhere for the Slux to dine the next night, so that Yamaxi would have more time to copy down everything relevant and post it to Okimako.

One despised the Slux; one was amused and repulsed by them; but one couldn't find it in oneself to hate them properly, not for long, because they all shared a touching naïveté, which was as beguiling as the limpidity of children.

The hoes began to swing again in staggered slow motion. Macafryan heaved a sigh of self-congratulation.

Like all foreigners, the Slux found the concept of daemonkind (and the lands where there had once been daemons, and the people to whom daemons had once belonged) both fascinating and terrifying. On discovering that there was nothing in Lamaroon which could be described as "supernatural," the foreigners couldn't decide if they were relieved or disappointed. Crispin told them that in his opinion, the epithet had been wrongly translated: in the days when daemons existed, they hadn't been "supernatural" in the sense of witches or ghosts; they'd just been work beasts, of a different provenance from mules and oxen. *Subternatural* was what the word should have been.

And Crispin, like everyone in Oceania, had taken them for granted until the world turned and changed under his feet. But in the arid lands on the Far Western side of the seas, there had never been any daemons. Amazing but true! Bound to their corporeal forms, daemons had either not been able to cross the ocean, or simply not cared to. And now the sales representatives of the arid lands had pushed their way in, cracked Oceania like a safe with the lock picks Significance had handed them, and fingered through its secrets only to find that there were no secrets anymore, they'd all died yesterday. *But we have some very nice skeletons we can sell you at a bargain twice if in return you will ship us a gross or two hundred gross of your marvelously efficient, magnificently soulless diesel engines so that these aircraft will fly again, carrying private legal safely-checked cargoes these days naturellement, and speaking of aircraft we will now finally disclose to you the specifications necessary to build them, if return you will not ask too many questions about how ours used to stay up in the air with only a handful of silver-wire cables in the engine cavity—*

"The myth of daemonology," Macafryan had written in his diary, "is nothing but a fabulous hoax perpetrated upon us for reasons known only to the Oceanians." In public, the Slux contemptuously spurned all attempts at discussion of their national differences, as if the distinction between *supernatural* and *subternatural* mattered no more than whether one put milk or lemon in one's tea. But Crispin thought Macafryan was still curious.

Not that he had much time to think, these days, about Macafryan or anyone else. Because one day in the early autumn of 1897, right after the Ferupian calendar had been outlawed and the Kirekuni calendar that had briefly taken its place been retired in favor of the Far West version, he'd woken up and realized he was rich beyond even his unrealistic ambitions.

And that was the cosmic arsonist's doing, too.

*A man whose underlings spoke of him as Master Hungt sat in state in a drawing room in a house which wasn't his, whose owner his followers had disembowelled earlier in the day. While the dead man's servants danced attendance on him, Hungt stared into space, and seethed, and schemed. And the men and women in his ragtag army-cum-sect-cum-mobile-refugee-camp loved him so much that tears welled up in their eyes. Hungt whom the dream shrouded in the red haze Crispin had come to understand meant a suicide, intended to overthrow the tottering dynasty whose grip on his country weakened every day. He believed so deeply in himself, and as a result radiated such charisma that Crispin was surprised he hadn't succeeded. But he couldn't have, because the vision*

*had that milky brown quality that came from looking back into the past, and if Hungt had managed to do more than ransack a few cities, the reverberations would certainly have been felt outside Sinoa.*

*But then (the dream gave Crispin dismissively to understand, lingering on Hungt's face with fascination) he had been a madman anyway.*

That had been Hungt Chü, leader of an attempt to overthrow the central government of Sinoa that had failed when it too fell prey to inertia. The ten or fifteen minutes the dream had shown Crispin had been dredged up from a time when the rebellion was still young, thirty or forty years ago. Crispin deduced this from costumes and mannerisms. The dreams were never explicit. He had to put two and two together with what he already knew of the lands they showed him, and with historical fact gleaned from the Far Westerners in Redeuina. Judiciously picking their brains enabled Crispin to situate the dreams in history, always provided they'd happened already. This amateur-detective approach didn't work for the high-speed montages of future events Mr. Nakunatta had been favoring recently. Technology-recognition was Crispin's only hope of dating *those*, but even when the machines and gadgets looked halfway familiar, he could only hazard a guess that it would happen within a couple of decades, and that it had a 50 percent chance (or so, based on the historical dreams) of changing the world. Also the near-future dreams tended to have the color leached from them, leaving only black and white and gray, like the daguerreotypes the Ixtaran had given the Yamaxis. The *far*-future dreams, although they came in vivid technicolor, looked even stranger, due to the refraction effect which made everything—humans, furniture, clouds, highways full of trucks and cars—into faceted solid crystals, shedding rainbows from knife edges. Airplanes, birds, and people falling from high windows trailed multiple, fading copies of themselves. And there was the disjunction effect that chopped scenes of life up into confoundingly truncated glimpses, sometimes seen from odd angles, sometimes as if through warped glass, sometimes slowed down to underwater grace, sometimes speeded up to amphetamine absurdity. Sometimes the transitions between scenes made sense. More often they didn't. People's voices were the only things that sounded normal—but usually there were no voices at all, just a clashing race between heavy percussion and repetitive clips of melody that might be Mr. Nakunatta's idea of music or his idea of a joke. And even when Crispin heard voices, he couldn't understand them, because in his visions of the future, his dream ability to comprehend whatever language was spoken (and remember the words and idiom patterns, not in translation, but as strings of alien intonations jingling in his mind; the first few dreams, set mostly in parts of Slux and the Throssomi Empire, had benefited him in a way the fatester surely hadn't intended, by aiding his studies of Throssomi; he was now working on Creddezi, Sinoese, and Yanglo)—but in the future this ability didn't apply. Instead, night after night he found himself suspended, like a fish in a waterfall, in a torrent of foreign slang, some of which sounded like Throssomi or Kirekuni, but not any dialects he knew. After a while it became unbearable. The incomprehensibility of fifty years from now (a hundred? two hundred? three?) beat at him like violence, bowed him, depressed him to the point where he longed to escape but couldn't.

As: the windows of a lozenge-shaped car imploded to the hacking coughs of guns

a man in a business suit slowly closed the door of an office and took a handgun out of a safe behind a map hanging on the wall and shot himself dead

children with the glamour of impending genius clinging about them sat gaping at flickering bright windows

a shift in the wind wafted clouds of poison back over the breast works and trenches of the army which had deployed it (Near *future*, Crispin thought, horrified, it had to be, because he *understood* warfare conducted by infantrymen sallying and shooting at each other across no-man's-land, he'd seen—and barraged with splinterons—similar breast works; and so, according to Mr. Nakunatta, within his lifetime there was going to be another vast war that chewed up the earth and tore down forests and devoured ten thousand men at a single bite)

and amid the feet of metal-and-glass towers that shot up into the clouds like man-made Jack's Beanstalks, a group of boys shot a man in the stomach, but instead of stealing his money they gathered around him and recited poetry that sounded, since Crispin couldn't understand it, like strings of numbers, and all the people scurrying by glanced at the fallen man, then away

and a prune-faced woman in a laboratory and a young man in a scruffy hotel room scribbled identical calculations on note pads at the same time on different sides of the world,

and a black-haired boy shut himself into a toilet cubicle and buried his face in his hands for three minutes and emerged an inch shorter and a stone thinner, with brown hair, and the bones of his face rearranged beyond recognition; no mystery there, he was a Mime, a member of that island race whose biggest secret Crispin had discovered through masquerading as one of them. But judging from the boy's expensively bland clothing and gold jewelry, the Mimes were on the way to the top, did they only know it

and a spot of light zoomed across a concrete plain and just as it started to slow down, the scene switched to show a tide composed partly of humans but mostly of dangerous-looking communications equipment, sweeping out of the base of a bulbous tower and down the steps of several gigantic transports that looked like airplanes but weren't, couldn't be, because what were those cylindrical excrescences under their wings, and where were their propellers

and Crispin couldn't wake up, and he feared he would go mad, and he knew that an inability to deal with the utterly bizarre was just what the arsonist wanted to induce in him. And so he tried *not* to understand. *Just let it wash over you, it's only a dream.* But whatever he did was irrelevant anyway because the rainbow-edged sights and sounds went on and on, with him drowning in the thick of them, until whatever Mr. Nakunatta wanted him to see had happened, or until—who knew?—the fearsome fatester simply got tired of the diversion and went off to find another mouse, or catspaw, or whatever the hell it was he wanted Crispin to—

awake—

Tumbling backward through shattering images, he landed in his own body.

His dizziness wore off, and he became conscious of the soft ghastly commodiousness of the bed in which he lay. He heard himself moaning, felt himself twitching and tossing, and stopped. His embarrassment was so acute, and acutely irrational, that to escape it he yearned to go back to sleep—*real* sleep this time, the layman's equivalent of forgetfulness. For perhaps thirty seconds he tried. But the bed remained too big, too spongy, too empty. Drowsiness receded. The absence of hot firm arms and legs twined with his, her defection from physical companionship, was intolerable. It was all he asked of her, and it wasn't much. He raised himself on his elbow.

The summer night lay heavy, thick as a preemptive deployment of poison gas. It took his eyes several seconds to adjust to the darkness. She sat, as he'd half hoped, half feared, in the window nook with the armchair and the lamp imported all the way from Slux's East Coast, gifts from Slux visitors that just hadn't fitted into the intrigues Jionna Yamaxi mounted daily against her home. Yleini had gladly received them as secondhand souvenirs. At twenty-three she had none of the Kirekuni woman's sense of intrigue, less of her aesthetic perfectionism, but she knew what she liked: anything "pretty" or "nice" or "adorable"—in other words, anything that looked expensive. She made an exception for romance novels, which, though cheap to buy, were all *about* pretty, nice, adorable things. Often when Crispin woke in the middle of the night she would be poring over one of these acquisitionist's pornographies. But tonight she'd dispensed with subtlety. Did this mean change was in the air? She perched on the back of the armchair, cheek on fist, her body silhouetted within her chiffon negligee by the moonlight outside the window. He wanted to throw himself at her feet and win her over with kisses and apologies. He wanted to storm out of the room, out of claustrophobic respectability masquerading as the high life, out of Yamaxi's labyrinth of payoffs and deceptions and looking the other way and looking for the moles and looking out for Yamaxi's best interests as loyally as any of the aides on the official payroll.

Organized crime had a protocol that enwebbed you just as tightly as the civil service that was its selfsame mirror image, and just like the civil service it was dreary and dangerous and stressful, but he could have coped, were it not for the *personal* deceptions he was forced to propagate. Mirrors within mirrors!

“Expanding to Slux was *your* idea. Jionna told me so,” Yleini said. “She thinks you’re *brilliant*. I wouldn’t be surprised if she wanted to screw you. Significant knows she’s been through practically every other married man we know. The old ones, even. It’s not because she wants them, though; it’s because Devi doesn’t love her anymore, and she wants to get her own back. She’s told me that in as many words. She knows he’s screwing around, too.” Her voice ripened with satisfaction. “But she doesn’t know with *who*.”

Okimako adored the private air service project, which They believed to be Yamaxi’s brainchild. A man who didn’t officially exist couldn’t claim credit in Okimako, so Crispin’s involvement had quickly dwindled to the usual: watchdogging the foreign investors, keeping the mirrors far enough apart so they wouldn’t see reflected things they didn’t want to know existed. Yleini, once she found out, had disapproved. To her, the project was just another proof that Crispin wanted to leave her. *Again*, she would always add—as though his leaving her had been a precondition of their marriage, as though he’d gone back on his word.

“Come back to bed,” he said hopelessly.

“It’ll be morning soon enough. I’m not tired anymore. I think I’ll wake Neila and have her brew tea. I don’t suppose you want any.” Scorn entered her voice. “Shall I have her bring a decanter?”

Actually a drink was just what he wanted, but he shook his head. *Do you know* (he wanted to say) *that I’m being hounded by a thing which has no name, which everyone knows about and which we have over the course of history labeled with a variety of inappropriate epithets, a thing I call ‘Mr. Nakunatta’—*

*Yes, well, in Creddezi it’s a pun, sort of—*

*I can’t show you a letter from him, nor hair nor hide. Now that I’ve thought of it he may well deluge me with letters. I wouldn’t put it past him. But so far I haven’t anything tangible to show for the interest he’s taken in me, unless you count various scars picked up along the way, like this one here from falling down a garbage chute. But he’s a real, live man. He’s not normal, not by any stretch of the imagination, because somehow, a long time ago, he discovered the secret of immortality; I’m not sure he has a body anymore, but his personality is like that of a shriveled old playboy who takes his frustration out on everyone in sight because the girls won’t stand for his nonsense anymore. If I knew where he was to be found, I’d make it my life’s mission to kill him. You say this sounds like the delusions of a paranoid: well, my dear, as you’ve so often told me, I am paranoid, but I’m also a rational bastard, and Mr. Nakunatta is the one and only eccentricity of logic I’ve kept in my rulebook, which ought to be enough to make you at least think about what I’m saying. And if you do, you’ll understand that logic and Mr. Nakunatta are mutually exclusive propositions. They’re both limited. But no one can get away from either of them. As human beings we all choose to pride ourselves on our faith in either one or the other. In both cases our faith is founded on trust. Especially if we’ve placed our bets on Mr. Nakunatta. We treat with him and curse him all on the assumption that he’s never going to show his hand never force himself down our throats—put himself about flagrantly maybe, because he likes doing that; but always as puppeteer, never out in the open. Well out in the open is where he’s come with me. This isn’t the first time he and I have had dealings. But I thought he’d decided to leave me alone. Wouldn’t you know it, I’ve even started seeing things during the day again, like I used to when I was in the airforce. (Oh, I never told you about that did I.) But no symbolic flames this time, it’s incomprehensibility made flesh, metal, sight and sound and smell, he’s force-feeding me the hard stuff now—like Reality Stir Fry, blood sauce not optional, no more dramatic foreplay, here’s the real thing and if you can’t handle it, no one’s stopping you from committing suicide or taking up bureaucracy—oh, sorry, I tried that already (and still hanging in there even though it hasn’t helped matters in the slightest but I suppose there’s always overseas to be considered, and maybe you’re right, darling, to worry about my having been the one to think of the air service, because although I told Yamaxi and myself it’s just because I hate the sea and I’d rather fly, and we might as well*

*make money off something as long as we're doing it and the idea appealed to the Little Governor's instinct for beating everyone else in the internationalization game, in the back of my head there's a voice saying, "You may not be able to run away from your devils but you can give it a bloody good try")—*

*Who am I kidding?*

A sense of futility came over him. All he had was images and concepts impossible to verbalize without flattening them into clichés.

*I considered writing a book of accurate prophecies, he imagined telling her, like that Ixtaran fellow, whatever his name was. I bet he sold like hotcakes in his day. I'd love to make money off of old Nakunatta. But in order for my prophecies to make sense they'd have to be after the fact. Like I saw the Fire of 1212 coming, but until it actually happened I thought I was seeing the end of the world, and even now I'm not sure what I did see. So for all I know—I mean I think there's going to be a war within the next twenty years that eats up continents, that's worse than the Kirekune-Ferupe Problem and the Sino-Creddezi War combined, but for all I know it could just be a mingy little border conflict between two pinhead Red Forest states you can't even pronounce the names of because if you put a fly under a magnifying glass, it looks like a monster...*

*Yleini...*

Crispin sank back onto the pillows. Yleini switched on the lamp. "Look, I can't stand it any longer," she said with a sort of abstracted harshness, as if she didn't really feel the desperation her words implied. "Is it Jionna or is it Michika? Or someone else altogether? I hope you've at least had the sense to stay away from the lower classes. Since the foreign sailors started coming, the whores have all got this revolting new clap. I've seen them. Their eyes go runny and their gums bleed and they get sores in their snatches."

Crispin gazed blearily across the room. Every line of her body revealed hope against hope: maybe *this* time—if she pretended she wasn't interested in his problems, if she got inside his guard by attacking him rather than pleading with him—maybe this time, he would tell her the secret sorrow burning in his breast! She knew there was something he wasn't telling her. She was perceptive enough to see that. But a steady diet of romances and after-tea conversation with colonial matrons had narrowed the horizons of her imagination. Once she'd run through the names of all the women they knew who were mildly attractive, she was stumped. And he hated listening to her run through them yet again, but he couldn't tell her that she was on the wrong track, because she would be furious to know that her suspicions weren't as private as she thought, and he couldn't have reassured her with a clear conscience anyway, because although he *wasn't* having an affair, he wished he were.

Moths walked across the ceiling. Staring up at them, he thought of an opening salvo that might punch a few new holes in the eternally reprised, terminally boring argument, holes through which they'd maybe be able to see daylight; and fired it; when her face lit up with vindictive satisfaction, he knew he'd missed. She wriggled, then held still, waiting for him to come up with something truly inventive.

*—Grey, Like... "Grey Death"? So, Rope...where'll I find this "death"?*

*—In the machine shop, most likely.*

*—Yozihisa Tagami*

## **Feel No Pain**

*21 Devambar 1899 A.D.*

*The Significant Empire of Kirekune: Okimako: the old city*

Mickey glanced at his watch in the moonlight. As he shook his sleeve back over it, the heavy silk caressed his skin: the dry slither of a snake on rocks: a tiny explosion of sensuality, a point of light contrasting the darkness of his misery, like the cold wind ripping his hair, the hot tear forming in the corner of his left eye, the blurring of the few lights below in the city.

He was waiting for the Throssomis to emerge from Significance. Missionaries usually got courteously chucked out by midnight. But these were investors. Significance had become *Greater Significance*, a veritable internationalization machine. Mickey had never been allowed farther in than this courtyard, but he didn't need to see Hiroxi Significant on the dais to know that his most pessimistic predictions of 1213—1897, he corrected himself—had come true. Greater Significance, in its full-speed-ahead rebuilding of Okimako as well as its expansions into the formerly private sphere, operated according to the military principle of expedience, not the noble principle of beneficence. The nobles themselves had either to play catch-up or tacitly accept obsolescence. Ordinary businessmen like Mickey had never had a chance.

Greater Significance had an eye like a gunner, and its hands lay as heavy on his shoulders as the treads of a tank, squashing him into the mud. His past had well and truly caught up with him. Mickey felt trapped between his creditors, his family, his crimes, and the Disciplinarians. The books looked the same however long he cooked them: Akila-uza was going under. He could cut corners and buy on credit and take loans on the strength of the establishment's good name, but ultimately nothing would make any difference. Just to stay alive, he had to be the soul of courtesy and hospitality to the foreigners whom Significance regularly billeted on him, whose expensive tastes were ruining him. These ruddy merchant-farmers, these sausage moguls, these sharp-nosed nobles. For all their pomp and snobbery, they tended to squeamishness. They only ever wanted fat little girls with their tails bobbed. They wanted everything just like it was at home in the Far West, and morning coffee in bed, too.

And Mickey couldn't afford to serve them coffee, black tea, tea with milk, green tea, Bloody Marys, *only the usual—sausages, potatoes, croissants, buttered rolls, filled bread, bacon, porridge*, actually you might as well ask for the moon, my dear monsieur—*just two raw eggs and an orange, what do you mean no oranges? What will the Board of Certification have to say about that?* There was no Board of Certification and there had been no hotel until Greater Significance seized on Yozitaro Akila as the man to provide good old-fashioned hospitality to foreigners whose letters of recommendation branded them middle-class. Merchants, aristocrats, missionaries, or of unspecified profession, they were less important to Significance than the diplomats They prudently confined to the palace, more respectable than the black marketeers and opium dealers and "tourists" who, although they, too, had their business in the old city, had to find their own accommodation somewhere out of Significance's sight and reach. Significance wanted the Far Western investors *in* reach. And Akila-uza wasn't just in reach, it was under Their thumb, so it was also the ideal lobster pot for the pestiferous missionaries They wanted an eye kept on. Mickey had to be that eye, too.

How had he dared to hope his record had vanished with the SAF? He'd bobbed and smiled and offered drinks to the Disciplinarian sting-inspectors, believing himself safe, out of reach, believing himself astute. Then Daixo had come to the front door, all alone in last summer's heat, gangly and deferential in his Far West-style suit and hat. *A quiet word if it's not too much trouble, Monsieur Akila...*

Upstairs Fumia and the girls rested in their bowers, waiting out the middle of the day.

And of course Mickey had said, yes he'd said, he was the man for the job, no trouble at all. He was sweating under his fine silk tunic and jacket and over-vest that told the world he was one of the richest men in the new city that had reclaimed itself, pride intact, from the rubble and the disgrace and terror of the Fire which hadn't catalyzed the transformation racking Okimako but been only a symptom of it, Coincidence's little contribution to the *fin de siècle*, helpfully making

everything obvious. Why hadn't he seen this coming? Daixo sat at the kitchen table in the half dark with his hands clasped before him and recited the charges that could be brought against Mickey for his desertion from the Significant Air Force in Fessiery of the 1209th Year of the Lizard, 1893 by the Far Western calendar, when he had attained the rank of Wedgehead and did willingly cooperate with his captors, subsequently conspiring to treachery against Significance. The words fell like drops of water on the flags, and Mickey kept on being polite.

Playing the hotelier was numbing and exhausting. The gay-girls, upcountry flowers to the last petal, wouldn't serve meals or do any task they suspected might be the province of maids (and you couldn't get a real maid to work in an establishment so widely known to be a holding-house for Significance: all the employable women in Okimako had better offers every day now that Society had come back to life, offers not sodden with rumors of foreign corruption) so Mickey was not just major-domo and host, but chef and waiter and doorman and *allais*, a multiplicity of roles he found utterly humiliating, and all of them had to be characterized with a servility that was slowly but surely eroding his dignity, his strength, and whatever ambition he had left at this late date.

Well, tonight he wasn't taking *anyone* to Akila-uza. He'd even told the gay-girls to turn away clients with appointments—and there were few enough of those nowadays. The new city knew Fumia was unwell; Mickey didn't want any of his bill-paying regulars to see or hear her on a night when it had taken three people to wrestle her upstairs. More to the point, on her bad days, her hearing became so sharp that she could detect doors opening and closing all the way at the bottom of Dragyonne Street. And if she were to hear men she knew unburdening themselves to the gay-girls, when she saw them next she would insult them so incisively they would never come back.

She'd learned to pick the lock of her room.

Mickey had tied her in a chair once, fastening the specially ordered restraints himself, and after five minutes he'd relented. He couldn't bear the sight of her ratted hair swinging as she strained at the bonds, her teeth showing, foam, her eyes rolling. The next day, when she "recovered her composure," she penned him a delicately remonstrative note of reproof and hand-delivered it to his room at five in the morning. She snuggled into bed beside him while he read it. Gaise, hiding in the wardrobe, nearly choked laughing. Gaise didn't take Fumia seriously.

On her good days, she reigned as queen bee, sex kitten extraordinaire, holding court in her bower, cat's-cradling the household into a cocked hat. Mickey would countermand her orders later. His attempts to disillusion her only had the effect of making her go shopping.

And tonight Fumia and her composure were wandering at opposite ends of the fields of madness. And so, once again, Mickey was going to have to impose on Ashie, who had escaped to Swirling only to be put on the spot all over again by the wonders of modern transportation. Taking these extreme risks with Daixo's charges always made him nervous. Daixo's contact with the foreigners after Mickey brought them back was minimal, and so far he hadn't caught on. But there was potential for disaster.

Mickey belonged to the Okimako Aviation Society, an organization of ex-SAF officers, both noble and common, who'd come home to enough money to keep on indulging their passion for flight in the aftermath of daemonology. They patronized Kirekuni engineers and diesel importers, contributing heavily enough to Okimako's still-recovering economy that Greater Significance didn't dare take their refurbished Horogazis and KEs away, or raze their hangars on a pretext. Nonetheless, at Society meetings they all strove to keep from talking politics. Instead they found common ground in memories of the war. Mickey had never thought he'd enjoy reminiscing about his time as a Wedgehead, but on days when he compared past and present and the present came off worst, the Society was his consolation: the only window in his cell. Daixo had warned him that he was not to exploit the Society for subversive purposes. If he ever found out Mickey

was disobeying orders, that would be the end of the OAS as far as Mickey was concerned, and possibly the end of Mickey himself, too.

The wind tore at Mickey's robe, lifting the hem to reveal his flight boots, threatening to snatch away the left-hand pilot's glove he stuffed in his pocket. At last the Throssomis emerged along the carpet of light that unrolled into the courtyard when the great doors opened. Both wore black tie with cactus-flower buttonholes no longer intact. They staggered like the walking wounded. Few foreigners—for that matter, few Okimakoans—could survive an evening of Greater Significance without injury to style and/or spirit. This pair, despite the decrepitude of their tuxedos, looked to be in the best of humor. Perhaps they thought they'd struck a deal to their own advantage. Poor dears, the Throssomi, they placed such trust in the binding power of *a man's word*, a misconception which a couple of weeks' stay in Kirekune inevitably redressed—but many obtained what they believed to be agreements sooner than that, and trotted off home jiggety-jog, none the wiser.

The two men grinned and blinked about disarmingly as the palace doors clanged shut. Mickey took a last drag from his cigarette, tossed it into the closest fountain, and went to meet them. "There you are," shouted the larger in tones of satisfaction. "Gorgeous night, eh? Eh?"

The thinner Throssomi glanced about for Mickey's right hand, saw the dangling sleeve, and seized on his left hand instead with drunken aplomb. "Cyril Wigglesworth, my dear man. I say, what a relief it is to get away from all those military types. We've got 'em at home, too, of course. And nowadays everybody kowtows to them, exactly as you say General X, oh, absolutely Admiral Y, I must say success suits you Major Z, don't you know, a sort of embarrassed admission of total dependence is the only way I can describe it. Do you know, I'm convinced now that the Queen is dead, poor old Throssom has decided to give up the ghost along with her, I mean after all, what is there left worth living for? That's why I came East don't you know? What, what, what?"

It was a cold night. Cyril Wigglesworth sniffled and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

"Came East to get away from his harridan of a mistress. Gave her five hundred a year but she wants eight," the large man informed Mickey importantly. "Call him Wiggly. I do."

It gratified Mickey that the Throssomis had the self-confidence to refrain from introducing themselves as walking manifestos of sexual peculiarity. He preferred to be nameless, and he didn't mind being faceless, but he disliked being taken immediately for a pimp. Even a hotelier was better than that. He decided to be pleasant. "Not at all cold for the time of year! I trust your audience went well? Kirekune is a delightful country in which to do business!" he said, quickly using up half his stock of Throssomi small talk.

"Demned ungrateful I call it, she's thirty-five this year, and even if she won't admit it, her mirror will," Wigglesworth protested.

"He hasn't a mistress. He's a flaming queen. Bernard Blythe-Frye."

"Whaley," Wigglesworth corrected with a laugh.

Blythe-Frye would have made three of his companion, and he had chins to go round. His truncated sentences were far easier to follow than Wigglesworth's torrent of idiom. Mickey judged foreigners by the same standard as he judged Greater Significance—the less trouble to follow, the better; and these Throssomis were simpler than the company clerks who represented the other face of Throssom's involvement in the East, the men whose cheeks tic'ed with the strain of maintaining their composure, who half killed themselves in order to monopolize every conversation and be witty at the same time, who smelled of too much hair oil and looked sharp out of the corners of their pale eyes, and whose idea of Heaven was immolation between the legs of a generously built woman.

"This rascal here," Wigglesworth said, returning his attention to the conversation, "known each other since *forever*, couldn't believe my eyes in Sinoa at the ambassador's wife's birthday ball,

Whaley! I said. If it isn't Wank-In-The-Woghouse Whaley minus his hair! He answers to Whaley, Blubber, Woghouse, or even Wanker if you catch him off guard. I assure you you won't be out of place."

And he cast a searching eye at Mickey as if to see who, exactly, was inside the lizard costume. They must have been prepped. It was always easier when Daixo sent Mickey the sort of men who would have sought out Kirekune's brothels on their own, eventually. Mickey mustered a smile and beckoned them to follow him into the raging darkness. Dust from the construction sites downhill whipped into their faces. The palace complex had been the only site in Okimako undamaged by the Fire of 1212. Wigglesworth wouldn't stop talking. Even the moon baring itself at them, low over the northern wall of the courtyard, wasn't enough to shut him up.

"What a beautiful night it is. A good night to get in an airplane," Mickey said.

Wigglesworth interrupted his own monologue. "What? What? Fly d'you mean? In the *sky*? That your hobby, then? Doesn't seem logical that it *works*, do you know, but then again, sometimes I think that in the Far East, logic and illogic change places, simply get up with a minimum of fuss and change places!" His laugh was a bray. "Now, of course, they're talking about building 'em at home."

"My airplane is very logical," Mickey said. "At a certain speed the pressure of the air flowing under the wings is enough to counteract the force of gravity acting on the plane's mass."

Wigglesworth hesitated, then doubled over with laughter. He spluttered, "Whaley, I'd rather deal with Significance than the bloody Sinoese any day! Tails or no tails, at least this lot has a sense of humor, what? what?"

Mickey laughed again, to prove to Wigglesworth that he'd assessed the Kirekuni race correctly.

Blythe-Frye rumbled, "Pity about these blackcoats running all over the shop. Weren't half so many last...this time last year. I'm afraid I find it rather disgusting. Then again, they must be endured, eh? City's in a bit of a flammable state. Recovering from regrettable incident. One has to keep the commoners in line in case they do themselves a mischief." He addressed himself to Mickey. His eyes glowed red in the moonlight. "Expect where we're going, in your logical airplane, there aren't so many blackcoats, are there? I expect things are a good deal more *fun*, eh?"

Mickey seized eagerly on the opening. "Very, very fun. Where we are going, the difference between lawful and unlawful resolves into the difference between pleasurable and not pleasurable." It was another of his stock lines, and it applied to Ashie's Swirling just as well as to his Okimako. Blythe-Frye's eyes glowed even brighter, and Wigglesworth jerked, mouth opening and hands flapping, but they had reached the courtyard gates, and Mickey excused himself to explain to the nearest Disciple. As the man examined his pass the wind wuthered under the stone arch. The light from the lanterns flickered only halfway up the walls. These had borne high reliefs of Significants past and present, but had recently been chiseled clean. A small change one could pass off as a vagary of architectural fashion, except that *Greater Significance* had made the decision to eradicate the carvings. In a lull in the wind, Mickey heard a confirmation of his worst fears for Okimako's future, and the world's. "That Lord Shusuxo, eh, Woghouse?" Wigglesworth was muttering. "What a bloody faggot. I know it's the pot calling out the kettle, but he *is*. What a foppish little imbecile. I kept trying to get to the point, gently you know, then a little bit more directly, but he kept fiddling with his cravat with his tail, one knot after another...wouldn't look me in the eye. I finally got him to come out in the open, of course. I *may* have been too reckless, I mean, ermmm, with the estimates, but I had to make it sound attractive, Woghouse, if the rumors are to be believed he's the one who matters around here as far as we're concerned, the only one we have a hope of being introduced to at any rate. I *think* I made a good impression."

The Disciplinarian was consulting a list of foreign names transliterated into Kirekuni characters. Mickey closed his eyes and saw Fumia's face. She wore her grimace, nose and mouth

scrunched up as if she were perpetually searching for the right words to communicate the secret of her inaccessibility. She fluttered like a moth in her mysterious discomfiture.

“Well, they wouldn’t have sat me next to him, would they, if they didn’t expect some sort of an understanding to be reached?”

“Can’t assume you’ve *got* one on that basis.”

“Oh, for all *you* know you might have been seated next to the Significant himself, Woghouse, you were so busy chatting up that piece with the snake-charmer chignon on your right! And blushing quite prettily she was! Wouldn’t have minded a bit of that myself: leg of lamb isn’t exactly my cup of tea, but show me a man who doesn’t perform better for a little harmless flirting to gussie up his ego, and I’ll show you a monk!” Wigglesworth produced a braying *haw haw haw*. “And after an hour or so of Shusuxo and his cravat, I would have *flirted* with a monk!”

“Thought you did that without provocation.”

“Only when they’ll allow me. For a moment there, though, I almost thought Shusuxo was...”

“They want ‘em back tomorrow night,” the Disciple told Mickey, putting away his list. Mickey ground his teeth in exasperation. He’d wanted to hear what else Wigglesworth had to say about Shusuxo, who was one of Greater Significance’s favorite pawns. “Sundown. Sharp.”

“Your wish is my command,” Mickey told him. Repocketing his pass, he nipped to the fading edge of the lanternlight, squinting across the outer plaza unofficially known (since the Fire of 1212) as the Square of the Human Barricades. The car was idling in the mouth of Summit Street. Mickey waved. For once, Gaise hadn’t fallen asleep: he eased the long black Rydro XV closer, engine chugging, tires clicking across the smooth paving stones. Mickey beckoned the Throssomis. “The night awaits, gentlemen!” He laughed.

“So it does!” Wigglesworth sang exuberantly, clapping his hands. “And what does it hold? Pray do tell!”

“Before we get into the car,” Blythe-Frye said, and laid a heavy hand on Mickey’s shoulder as he was turning.

“Oh, don’t worry, you can tell me in *detail* as we drive along.” Mickey would have given a good deal to remove that piece of red meat from its possessive place on his shoulder—and from its owner’s wrist. “My chauffeur is ‘in the know’ as I believe you say! He is as much family as my sister, who will be your hostess tonight.”

“Ah, aha.” Wigglesworth leaned in toward Mickey. “I’m not sure you understand exactly how we intend to spend a night on which we have, ah, cause to celebrate. Of course if it is—ah—possible we should like to. We—ah—we, like you, have a hobby, ha, ha! We were told that *anything* would be possible, but of course we understand the nuances of, ah, *hyperbole*—”

“Anything!” Mickey spread his arm and tail. “May I assure you that the hotel in which you will be lodged caters to *all* desires. We are, in fact, in the *business* of desire—if you take my meaning, gentlemen!” Seeing lubricity in their eyes, he hurried them into the car. There he spread his arm along the back of the seat, behind Wigglesworth’s shoulders. “To the airport,” he said to Gaise for effect, then took a deep breath and transformed himself from guide into sexual confessor. Far Western minds worked differently from Kirekunis’ minds, as a tangled string came undone differently from a tightly wound ball: although their fantasies were, as a rule, conventional, they sweated in agony while confessing to them, as a Kirekuni would sweat over confessing to murder, perjury, or treachery.

But these two Throssomis ran counter to type. Unhampered by Yanglo guilt or Creddezi shame, they competed to enlighten him about their “hobby,” fish-face on one side, wine fumes on the other. Perhaps they *had* managed to strike their deal with Greater Significance: they could have matched egos with any pair of nobles, and outdone them in condescension. Their conviction of cultural superiority extended even to their perversions. It was just as well Mickey was taking them to Swirling, for Ashie specialized. She gloried in catering to every obscure

obsession.

Akila-uza, by contrast, was still a traditional House of Ecstasy. Mickey hadn't found it necessary to reorganize on account of Daixo's foreigners—but he now did a sideline in boys. This had always been his plan once he claimed Akila-uza for his own: a touch of personalization. But like his desertion from the SAF, it had caught up with him, whipping around like the tail of a giant scorpion. Daixo had apparently come along incognito on one of those early sting-inspections and got a taste of what Mickey liked, and chewed that intelligence over, and processed it through Significance's Machiavellian system of stomachs. And soon after that, Gaise had appeared.

Mickey focused on the back of Gaise's head. What did he think of the Throssomis? He had a sideline in condemnations, borrowed no doubt from his puppeteers, and considering that in a year of working for them and for Mickey he'd more or less seen it all, he was surprisingly harsh. He sat stiff and erect, a cigarette clamped in his teeth, not giving a sign that what he was hearing annoyed him, except when a refurbished Disciple truck slid like a stripe of night across his bumper, and he swore and thumped his fist on the wheel. A cold wind, full of particles, buffeted in through the window. They were bumping and bounding downhill through the old city, between black, soggy rinds of houses and an occasional midnight glory spilling light from glass windows, heading for the City of the Dead, that wasteland whose name no longer had to be taken as a metaphor. Soot-streaked columns loomed on either side, with the remains of the old city's South Gate hanging off their hinges. Gaise swerved around a honeycomb of gray-brick houses that had been newly built down the middle of Rainbow Boulevard 17, and swerved again to avoid a gang of beggars with torches. Looters still worked the old city and the top of the new city, though with decreasing enthusiasm and proportionately less secrecy. In the backseat, Mickey turned to Wigglesworth, then to the implacable, inconceivably depraved Whaley. A moment ago he had known what clever Throssomi innuendo he was going to make, but suddenly all he could think of was his older sister, who this afternoon in the privacy of her bower had taken an ivory pipe from a hiding place he couldn't find and packed it with brown dust, tamping it with the end of a fountain pen or a barrette or a perfume bottle, and puffed her way elegantly, little finger extended, to a place where she could feel nothing and sense everything. He had been able to hear her breathing all the way down the stairs. As children they'd competed for the mantle of black sheep, but he'd won a clear victory, and what terrified him was the way she was now following his bad example, setting out to efface herself with an awful methodicalness that looked like determination.

And *she* had no Crispin to save her by sacrificing himself. Unless the hotelier had one more role to play.

And when it came to self-sacrifice, Mickey had terminal stage fright. He never stopped marveling at his own cowardice, which remained as lively and shameless as ever. *She's mad anyway—what could even Signcance's physicians possibly—nothing to be—throw your only chance away—no use, no point, no—chance: Rae, Rain, cousine—dammit; what did Fumia do with my fountain pen?*

*there nothing sacred  
breathing hatred  
we have to face it  
no one can take it  
and feel no pain  
—Sade Adu*

## Mere Babes in This Business

12 *Sevambar* 1899 A.D.

*The Likreky: Lamaroon*

When Macafryan had seen enough construction for one day, they got into Crispin's motorcar, an Exupresu with a typically sleek heavy Kirekuni design and a Rydro engine, still the most reliable you could get, and drove off on a "relaxing" tour of the coastal lowlands. The roads were no more than dirt-and-stone tracks between fields, but this didn't faze Macafryan, who professed to have seen worse in the course of his hardscrabble-bootstrap raising in Slux. Soon the Slux man insisted on taking the wheel. A collision, five seconds later, with a thorn hedge and two goats had him quickly maneuvering his bulk back into the passenger seat. Crispin inspected the scratches on the Nogame's shiny black bonnet, unsure whether to laugh or be angry. He suppressed both impulses and devoted himself to driving. Compared to a daemon, the Exupresu was laughably easy to handle: it demanded nothing of your mind, nothing of your heart. It fatigued you no more than sitting in one place for the same length of time would have. In fact, the greatest danger a motorist faced, as far as Crispin could see, was letting his mind drift. The car worked like a toy: wind it up, switch it on, and away it goes! And it had the same kind of eerie, temporary autonomy as a clockwork mouse. The transformation engine (ah, the bad old days) had stopped running as soon as you let go of the whipcord, you had to coax it constantly just to maintain speed. But you could lash down the accelerator of a motorcar and jump out while it was moving, and the machine would plunge straight ahead, seeming to develop a mind of its own as the unevennesses of the road adjusted the set of its wheels, until it plowed into a wall, or a ditch. Motorcars were peculiarly attracted to ditches. They were alive but imbecilic, like moths that bash themselves time and again into windowpanes. And once they hit something they lay roaring and helpless, like beetles fallen on their backs, wheels spinning.

One *had* to resist the temptation—as Crispin also had told himself in the days of daemons—to anthropomorphize them.

Yet in a way, handling had been a process of anthropomorphization. You had to think of a daemon as a wayward, cunning, physically strong simpleton, and extirpate your compassion, resist the simpleton's appeals for mercy. You had to have the mental stamina to keep on seeing through its sly bids for trust, in order not to let a master-slave relationship subside into a partnership such as genius players and trickster women had courted so unwisely. After a while there was a state of mind you entered without even thinking about it, and no one pretended that being able to do that didn't affect the way you behaved the rest of the time, when you weren't handling; but then no one pretended it didn't take a certain stubbornness, a domineering streak, to handle in the first place. The difficulties of learning to work the whipcord weeded out those who didn't have it.

No such process of natural elimination (Crispin thought, trailing black smoke as he cruised between fields in which the harvest workers were all taking breaks, Macafryan shifting impatiently in the seat beside him, stiffening as they overtook a bright yellow Supaido whose driver, a rich Lamaroon landowner from the looks of him, was driving far too fast in first gear, the engine screaming in protest), *nothing* selected motorists. Anyone could learn to drive without even understanding cars. Someone in Ixtara had had a counterintuitive brainstorm, that was what mattered, and when the Exupresu developed a worse problem than an empty fuel tank, Crispin took it to one of the Redeuiina mechanics who *had* bothered to learn to understand its intricacies and were making their living off it. Some of them had got absurdly rich off the colonial elite's tendency to crash their Exupresus and Akusas and Supaidos and genuine Ixtaran Rydros. Motorcars were status symbols in Redeuiina (as in Sjintang and Kherouge and Leondze and

Naftha), and the more often you took it to the mechanic's, the more people knew you had it. Crispin would have bet his honor, if he had any, that certain hotheads he knew crashed their cars on purpose.

"I said, what's up there?" Macafryan interrupted his thoughts. "Can this heap handle the grades?"

The Slux was squinting into the wind, pointing at the lower slopes of the mountains that rose ten miles away. The tree-blanketed west faces blushed reddish brown in the rays of the sinking sun—as if autumn had actually succeeded in imposing itself on those mountains that brooked no decay, no nakedness, But shadows lay black in the tree-choked gullies, and Crispin realized he had driven too far. Even if he turned around now, they would hardly make it back to Redeuiina before dark,

"Nothing of interest!" he shouted over the noise of the engine, and down shifted to first gear, looking for somewhere to turn around.

*Of course he'll be curious,* Yamaxi had said this morning. *They all are. Fob him off with stories of—*

*of—*  
*Daemons?* Crispin had suggested.

Yamaxi put his hand to his oily little moustache, covering his mouth, the corners of his eyes creasing. And Crispin *had* been joking—at the time,

"Demons!" he shouted now. The Throssomi word had a nice sonority to it. "That's what's up there! Those evil spirits we could once harness to our wills, which now roam free, stalking travelers, desirous of their flesh!" A rabbit lolloped along in front of the car, then dived into the hedge. At this speed, the reeking exhaust found its way into the open-topped car and into their lungs. Crispin coughed, sneezed, and yelled, "They especially like foreigners ! Even one like myself, they would consider a rare delicacy!"

"Gawds bails, I'm not as easy to hoodwink as *that!*" A heavy hand hit Crispin's shoulder. "Go on with yaself!"

Crispin blinked to see the Slux grinning, teeth gleaming, wet little eyes squeezed close in to the bulbous petrified chicken-head of a nose. He'd been nursing his bottle all the way from Redeuiina. By now he must have reached a certain, liberating stage of drunkenness and decided to shrug off his sulk in favor of high adventure.

"No need to waste your breath tellin' *that* story again! Demons schmuh-shme-schmemons! I'm not stupid." He tapped Crispin several times, heavily, to make sure he got the point. "No, sir. No, *sirree*. I ain't—I'm not stupid. And I know, like I know my own mother is named Josephine Catherine Macafryan , I *know* a whole *nation* ain't gonna tell an old wives' tale that's got no plausabli-plausibility whatsoever." He paused for effect. "Not without a dang good reason for *telling* it. And I intend to find out just what that—what that *is*. Ya hear me."

"Because daemons used to be real," Crispin said sadly, in Kirekuni. "And whether we admit it or not, we're having a hard time getting over the fact that they're not anymore."

Macafryan wasn't finished. "An'... an'...*genius players!* I posit to you, I posit to you that there *ain't* an' never *were* no such thing. Cause if they were such su-per-lative brains, they'd still be around, wouldn't they? *Wouldn't* they! Show me a live genius player, then!"

Crispin stared over the wheel, easing the car along just a mile per hour or two above stalling.

Macafryan rubbed his forehead with the heel of one hand and muttered, "What the *hell* I ever did ta deserve a nigger-boy nursemaid that won't even talk when ya try 'n make conversation; just a bit a friendly conversation; gotta treat 'em like they're as good's yourself; just trying ta get a bit a give-'n-take goin'..."

"The genius players are nearly all dead," Crispin said, in Lamaroon this time.

"What the hell I ever..."

Crispin switched into Ferupian. "I've met a couple who survived because they protected

themselves with silver; and a couple more—like me—who survived because we were resisting our own talent all along.”

“Ya forgotten how to speak Throssomi?” Macafryan inquired pugnaciously. “Huh? I said, what about those hills?”

Crispin looked at him and said in an alloy of Yanglo and Creddezi, “There’s nothing in them now except dope farmers. But if there *were*, if there were still daemons in the world, I would tear the gorgon out of the engine of this ‘heap’ and have it sit on your lap and spit in your face and then claw the fried-egg alcohol-poached eyes out of your loaflike head.”

“Well? We gonna go there or ain’t we? It’s gettin’ dark. Hurry this thing up! We’d be makin’ better speed on foot!” Macafryan upended his bottle over his mouth, drained it, then shook his head regretfully.

*Slux are easily horrified*, Yamaxi had said. *They obey their laws as they obey their priests. None know better than I what a large percentage of our yearly crop goes straight to Saborlidun and Logorlibo; yet they either do not know about, or are incapable of acknowledging their sanctimonious government’s hypocrisies. On no account must you take him anywhere near the mountains. We are likely to have a hard enough time as it is—Significant, do you remember when the elders of the Finequellii diin pulled their cart up to my front door and came to find me while I was engaged with our old friend of “Itz a Blitz”—that poor, bright-eyed fool who wanted us to turn the interior over to coffee plantations!* The governor lost control of himself again and a high-pitched cackle escaped; he twisted his moustache and upper lip hard between his fingers, punishing them, his eyes dancing.

Why had Yamaxi thought it necessary to remind him? All too well, Crispin remembered averting disaster by shoving the little coca-nuts out of the door, getting rid of them so fast that they threatened (emptily, as everyone knew) to apply for patronage to Tomichi Minami, Secretary of the Interior, who was Yamaxi’s main rival in the struggle to control Lamaroon’s secret exports. Poppies, dazeflower, cocaine, khat, nizhny, hashish; the small businesses run by diins such as Yleini’s family had not only, thanks to Far Western chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, survived the deaths of their trickster security chiefs, they’d multiplied and diversified. On his maiden flight in the Gorgonette, Crispin had ventured only a little way over the jungle before he ran low on petrol. But he had seen the telltale squares of lighter green on the hillsides. Poppies, dazeflower, coca, khat, nizhny, hashish: Yamaxi had become a millionaire six times over, though most of the money was prudently invested in pyrite mines in the north of Kirekune, and not even his wife knew the real depth of the pockets she spent her days digging into.

But Minami knew. A sharp young civil servant from Okinara with fluent Creddezi, he had talked his way into Yamaxi’s confidence and then decided he wanted a piece of the pie, too. No doubt if you ripped open his coat, you would have seen a neck on a stick held aloft by five or six Creddezi men kneeling on a clever little metal contraption, their eyes squinting with schemes. Yamaxi had seen his own mistake too late, and enjoined Crispin not ever again to let him be so gullible in this new era of loyalties taken more lightly than love. Crispin had had trouble convincing him that keeping Minami sweet would be easier than replacing him. (You had to remember the Creddezi.)

It had worked, for a while. The governor and the secretary’s rivalry had remained almost friendly until that incident with the Finequellii and the Slux owner of Itz A Blitz, Inc. (And a rash of less dramatic could-have-been-catastrophes involving shipping costs that shouldn’t have appeared on records made available to foreigners, interior-liaison men who should have been kept out of sight, luxury too prominently flaunted in the homes of various minor officials....) Now Minami was making unpleasant noises, forcing Yamaxi into gloves-off interviews Crispin had watched through peepholes, warning him that if he, Minami, wasn’t allowed total, free access to the “agricultural product” coming out of what was, after all, his sector, he would bring actions against Yamaxi in Okimako. These were empty threats. Before Minami had a chance to bring any

actions anywhere Yamaxi would have him demoted, fired, or framed for the very crimes he aspired to commit. But the vulture-robbery of three undercover shipments in the last month was no empty threat. Nor was the attack on a group of Yamaxi's *real* aides (those who assisted the governor in his other business of running the Colony of Lamaroon, as one of whom Crispin masqueraded when there were foreigners about—young lizards still wet behind the ears, worldly in a clumsy, terrified fashion, who wouldn't admit any knowledge of the governor's personal investments)—two of whom had been killed, and their companion stabbed three times, as they walked through the high town late at night. The single survivor said the knife men had been Lamaroons, but such a bloodlessly planned-through double murder had Kirekuni fingerprints all over it. And there was only one Kirekuni in Redeuiina who would have dared.

Was *that* what Yamaxi had been trying to impress on Crispin this morning? That he, too, had at last begun to take Minami seriously? And what did that have to do with Macafryan?

The Slux was rooting under the seat, grunting with effort. "Gawd *damn*—"

"Can I be of any assistance?" Crispin said.

The Slux straightened up. "You ain't got no liquor under there. Always keep a bottle in the auto, thass my advice, never know when you're gonna want it." He brooded for a moment; then sighed and shook himself, squinting at the hills, which bulked so close they filled half the twilight sky. "Looks like we're almost there anyways."

"We are not going to the hills, Mr. Ted."

Up ahead, a gap in the hedge! Crispin slowed the Exupresu to a crawl as they passed it, then slammed the gear shift into reverse and threw his weight behind the wheel, spinning the car backward, crashing it through the branches jammed haphazardly across the gap. The Exupresu lurched as the rear tires hit clods hidden under the wheat stubble. Clouds of fumes surrounded them. Macafryan sputtered, "Like hell we ain't—"

The engine stalled and died.

"*Now* what've you fuckin' done!" The Slux blew out an aggravated breath. Crispin, trying to coax the engine back to life, glanced over and saw Macafryan's little eyes glittering with drunken exasperation. Only a fool would succumb to the temptation to see the Slux as a figure of comedy. Macafryan was more dangerous than he looked, not least because of that concealed six-shooter.

"Hang on," Crispin said, and dived for the starting crank, jumped out of the car, and raced around to the front bumper.

"Get out of the way," Macafryan called.

"This will not take more than a couple of minutes!" Crispin went down on one knee and cranked for dear life, hardly able to see what he was doing, driven wild by his inability to *sense* the diesel engine—all he could do was try this and that, he had no mental operator's manual. "Keep your hair on!"—a phrase he'd learned from one of his previous Slux, to which Macafryan replied with a string of obscenities.

The Exupresu hiccuped, shuddered, and said, *Raa-aarb*. "Thar she blows!" Macafryan shouted joyously, and then with sudden fury, "Dint I tell ya gerroudova *way*!"

The engine hung fire, then turned over steadily. Crispin edged around to the driver's side, clutching the starting crank, eyeing Macafryan. The Slux hunched over the wheel. Gears crunched together hideously.

"Dunno 'bout you, but *I'll* go where I want to go," Macafryan shouted grandly. "Can't keep no secrets from Josie Macafryan's boy."

"In the name of the Significant, man!" Crispin wrestled with the door. Locked! He reached over the top and felt for the catch. Macafryan smacked his hand with the wooden butt of his gun. Pain slashed up his wrist and two fingers went numb.

"I'll not have niggers tellin' me what to do!" Macafryan bellowed self-righteously.

Crispin punched the Slux in the face. His knuckles contacted teeth, saliva flew, and the big,

heavy head snapped back. Grunting, Macafryan shook himself. He was too drunk, Crispin realized in horror, to be stopped by a mere blow. “Now willya get out of m’ fuckin’ way or am I gonna hafta—*fuck*—” And right then, some sixth sensitivity to danger—whether acquired in the QAF or in Okimako or on the Slow Expresses or at some point during the years of tedious wrongdoing afterward—made Crispin throw himself bodily backward into the thorn hedge just before the bullet from Macafryan’s gun whined through the air where he had been.

The fall, awkward as it was unplanned-for, left him momentarily stunned. Half-conscious, he felt the Exupresu grind magnificently into gear, lurch up onto the road, and bump away with a flourish of loose mudguards. Four or five seconds later, bleeding from a hundred jagged tears, thorns sewing his clothing to his skin, he staggered out to the weeded center of the road.

He stopped and listened. In the utter silence of the countryside, he could hear the chudder of the Rydro engine fading.

To reach the hamlet of Dumadiin the Slux wouldn’t have to know his way. This road would lead him there by default. He would, in fact, have to turn off along one of several unappetizing little side roads to go anywhere else. In Dumadiin they rented mules, guides, ox carts, and probably their own daughters to anyone willing to pay. They would find the spectacle of the drunken foreigner a tremendous joke, but they would encourage his desire to explore the hills as tenderly and firmly as they would encourage a child to take its first steps. Their livelihoods depended on their asking no one’s motives; the color of a man’s skin mattered not one tenth so much as the color of his money.

Oh, Yamaxi was going to love this!

Birds startled out of sleep settled rustling and twittering back down into the thorn hedges. Crispin rubbed his numb right hand and, for lack of a better plan, started to walk back toward Redeuiina.

In the end he was lucky. The old Lamaroon man in the yellow Supaido hadn’t been a rich landowner. He was the owner of a garage in Redeuiina, one of the fabled master mechanics, and this very day he’d driven one of his cobbled-together-from-parts fleet of motorcars out to see his daughter, who had married into a dairy-farming diin in the lee of the foothills. It was rumored to be their proximity to the jungle that gave the milk from their goats and cows a unique flavor craved far and wide. Crispin learned this, and much more, after the old mechanic picked him up about two miles down the road from the place where Macafryan had made off with the car. The mechanic was so nearsighted he never turned the car into the bends until it was almost too late; but myopic or hyperopic, he would have known if another car had passed him in the last half hour. Macafryan had vanished without trace. By the time they reached Redeuiina, Crispin had learned all he ever wanted to know about dairy farming, with details of the family relationships of the old mechanic’s son-in-law’s clan thrown in, and a few anecdotes (far more interesting to Crispin) of the garage trade; in return Crispin volunteered amusing stories of his job as dogsbody for a physician in the Yard.

You wouldn’t believe the complaints some people imagined they had! He didn’t have to make anything up: Yleini’s women friends made a hobby of being ill, and back when she and Crispin had actually talked instead of using each other for target practice, she used to relate their tales of woe to him with a straight face. She found their delicately half-described maladies fascinating. In fact, he thought she was rather in awe of her friends’ expert management and exploitation of their own vulnerability. That at least would be one explanation for why she overcompensated by making herself so *emotionally* vulnerable.

The old mechanic dropped him off in the middle of the Yard. As the sunshine-colored car bumped away into the night, Crispin ducked inside the building where he’d said he lived; slumped against the wall of the dark stairwell, breathing the smell of babies and wet washing and

refried beans and feces; then exited and started to walk “up the city” (as Yard folk said), going willingly toward the lion’s den, going to stick his head in the lizard’s mouth.

The autumn night was chilly and the wind smelled of dead things, but that was just the smell of the sea. Crispin had come to detest the sea, not in and of itself (he freely admitted it was useful, he’d even give you *necessary*) but because of all the things it had come to represent.

Yleini appearing behind Neila, shoving the maid out of the way; Yleini on the threshold, still dressed despite the late hour in a beige tea-gown, her hands over her mouth, gaslight flooding from behind her down the front steps.

“I thought you were dead,” she shrieked. “He thinks you’re dead.” Crispin heard the ears of all the maids and footmen below all the area railings all up and down the hill pricking up. He pushed her inside. She melted against him, gasping out a relief too profound for tears. He signaled Neila over her shoulder and mimed drinking. Neila knew what he wanted. She tiptoed backward, teeth showing, excited. She was fifteen, and her parents grew opium poppies deep in the interior; when she came to the Kateralbins she’d spoken a scarcely comprehensible patois, but had picked up Redeuiina dialect even faster than she picked up Yleini’s gowns when madame scattered them across her boudoir. With her lithe build and ready smile, she attracted the eyes of all the men who called on business, from liaison ruffians to elderly civil servants with moral codes for backbones, who would clearly have felt far more comfortable getting to know her than her employer. The cycle seemed set to continue.

Crispin held Yleini off by the shoulders. “*Who* thinks I’m dead? Mr. Macafryan? Is he here?”

“No, he’s not! Oh, Significant—oh, heavens—*Gawd dang it to hell,*” she swore in Throssomi, and he wondered in a momentary flash of jealousy whom she’d been talking to. “Devi, who else! When you didn’t come back—”

“But—” Why had Yamaxi jumped to the conclusion that something had happened? He couldn’t possibly have known Macafryan was going to get drunk and steal the car. If it hadn’t been for Crispin’s mismanagement of the situation, nothing would have happened at all; and Yamaxi could have had no way of foreseeing the engine’s stalling, Crispin’s losing his temper, the Slux’s shooting at him. Yamaxi had known something was going to happen, though. Had allowed Crispin to take the Slux “touring the countryside” *knowing* something was going to happen.

Crispin shuddered as he thought of the drunken, stupid, innocent-as-a-baby Slux careening along the tiny, dangerous road at the fringes of the jungle. It had been four hours since they parted—at least—and even then, the Exupresu’s diesel tank had only been a quarter full. Where was Macafryan now? Who’d been lying in wait for him, somewhere along the only road anyone “touring the countryside” would conceivably take?

“Devi set me up.” The fingers of his good hand burrowed into Yleini’s shoulder.

“No, Cris, he—”

“The scheming, oily, two-faced, giggling lizard. Fuck him, fuck him, fu—” Crispin saw Neila hovering in the door of the parlor. “Excuse my language.” He took Yleini by the hand, pulled her into the parlor, allowed Neila to set the brandy tray down on the sideboard, then dismissed the maid and closed the door himself, making sure it was locked. His nerves twangled. One oil lamp on a low table illuminated too many landscape oils, too many chairs, too much brocade, too many folds in the curtains of the windows, too many romance novels in the bookshelves, too many glittery knickknacks on too many surfaces (why, oh why did she think gilt-painted china figurines were the epitome of taste? he wondered not for the first time), too many shadows. Too many shadows.

Yleini hunched over her knees on the edge of the love seat, talking at him in fits and starts of retrogressive explanation.

“So Yamaxi came here about two hours ago,” he attempted to recapitulate. “Looking for me?”

*Specifically* looking for me?”

She seemed to stiffen. Then she recovered, and said sweetly, “Why on earth else would he come here? He brought some of his ugly, hideous Yard thugs.” She shuddered. “They wouldn’t take drinks.”

“Drinks,” Crispin repeated, and sitting down across from her, poured brandies for them both. “No, have it, I insist, I can tell you’ve had a scare. Now tell me what he said, as exactly as you can remember.”

“When he saw you weren’t here, he wouldn’t say much.” She brought her head up. Her gown, a pale shade of what she would call ecru, had a stiff low bodice and a valley widened between her breasts as she leaned forward. Why was she dressed so seductively? To receive *Yamaxi*? “Something about bad news, and he was worried about you, but he said I wasn’t to worry. As if I’d worry!” Her lip twisted, and she said defiantly, “As if I haven’t been hoping and praying, ever since he left, that this was it, that I’d finally be...” She stopped. Crispin winced. He supposed he should at least be grateful that she hadn’t the shamelessness to put what they both knew she meant into hard, solid words.

He downed his brandy in a gulp, picked hers up, and put it in her hand, closing her fingers around it. Her flesh felt so soft and hot that a low-level resurgence of misery washed through him. “Names? Didn’t he mention *any*?”

“Yours. The Slux’s. Tomichi, I think.”

“Tomichi who?”

“Significant, Cris! How many by that name do we know?”

“Yes,” Crispin said abstractedly, “it’s a small city.” He stood up and put down his glass. “I’ll have to go over to *Yamaxi*’s to sort this out.”

“Don’t do anything you’ll regret. Be a man. You’re hardly the first it’s happened to.”

“I mean the *bad* news,” Crispin said. Then he blurted: “Can’t you even say you’re sorry?”

“Sorry?” she trilled. “*Sorry*?” Her dark, round eyes, like hematites set in the patterned skin, held a depth of self-confidence, a depth of indifference, that knocked all the nervous energy out of him as hard and fast as the love tap from Macafryan’s gun had knocked all feeling out of his right hand. He was caught in a sparkling whirlwind of intense emotion. She saw that he’d guessed; and, seeing that it was pointless to continue with her exaggerated display of emotion, she sloughed the pretense of love-hate as easily and thoughtlessly as she’d sloughed off her dress and petticoats and stockings (*and...and...*Crispin thought, torturing himself) and the furbishments of her social persona, and the volcanic naiveté and girlish passion he’d married her for, for *Yamaxi*. Significant knew how long it had been going on! Probably since she came to Redeuina as a girl. On and off. Neither of them was the type to cherish a great and secret love. Likely it had started as coercion when she was still his employee, and then when she became disillusioned with her marriage, she’d drifted back of her own free will, out of frustration and the desire for revenge. He would believe that of her any day—had, in fact, accused her of it in the past (but with some unknown man, never with him, never with the one who was obvious).

Or maybe it was a great love, foiled.

Neither explanation provided an excuse.

As he stared at her, she rolled her eyes. She yawned, lifted the snifter of brandy to her nose, then put it down with a clink of glass on silver. “Give *Devi* my regards.”

Insults bubbled up in Crispin. Scalding pain. The furious embarrassment of the cuckold. *Are you sure that’s all you’d like me to give him? Your #,\$%@!—your—*

But as so many times before, anger quickly gave way to remorse. *What will it take to make you love me again? Yleini, my wife—*

He only just stopped himself from going down on his knees.

She yawned again, pointedly. “I doubt I’ll wait up. Don’t stay out too late, will you? It causes

such disruption among the servants when they have to clean your boots and fetch you the newssheet and press your clothes and make you breakfast when you come in at five only to go back out. And I'm having a luncheon tomorrow—mixed company—with cold meats, so there's a good deal of cooking to be done in advance. I do expect you to be there, by the way, your schedule permitting." She glanced at her bookshelves. She'd branched out recently. As well as romances written by Kirekuni ladies, she was reading foreign literature from Throssom and Creddeze. Beside the books he saw an ashtray and her cigarette case. "Pish-pish!" she called, turning. "Pishie! Come out, dearest! T-t-t-t!" With a soft yowl, the Mimese cat emerged from under the sideboard in the corner and jumped up beside her, where cat hair already matted the brocade love seat. Pish-pish was a bad-tempered feline they'd acquired as set dressing for Crispin's portrayal of a Mime immigrant. Not inappropriately, it found Yleini the most congenial person in the household. "Who's an angel-beast?" she said, stroking it.

With difficulty, Crispin recalled the matter of Macafryan and Minami. Macafryan, Minami, and *him*. He moved toward his wife. When she looked up, he took her face gently in his left hand, stooped, and kissed her. She smelled of flowers. "I'll be off then."

"Must—" she started automatically, then glanced down. "What have you done to your other hand?"

"Something to do with the nerves, I think; it's—"

"No, look at it."

"It might be broken, I suppose." He glanced at her face, saw live interest for the first time. "It'll heal." He shrugged and stole another kiss. She had so much power over him. "Don't stay up reading all night, darling. I'll be back as soon as possible. If not tonight, then certainly in time for your luncheon. I promise." At the door he glanced back. She looked fairly stunned. It had, he realized, been months since he'd spoken to her so tenderly.

Josie Macafryan's boy was dead. Dawn had broken by the time Yamaxi finally dismissed his five or six associates, some of them Kirekuni officials and some Lamaroon lowlifes, who'd been sitting around the Yamaxis' parlor with their boots up, smoking daze and doing free cocaine (perks of the business that few had the sense to stay away from) and gossiping interminably about how the Slux had met his end. Once the last of them took his leave, and the parlor was empty but for a fug of mind-curdling smoke, Crispin got down to brass tacks. "What have you and Minami been plotting behind my back? Devi, I have the right to know why you got whoever-it-was to bump off Macafryan—who was *my* charge, although you've cut off your nose to spite your face really, because as far as the world is concerned, he was *yours*—and why you tried, and didn't succeed simply because I thought he had a higher liquor tolerance than he did, to have *me* bumped off along with him!"

For a couple of seconds, Yamaxi seemed not to register Crispin's outburst. Then he yelped aloud and straightened up so fast he almost fell off the couch where he'd been reclining. His feet hit the floor and his pipe flew out of his fingers. "Bump? *Off?* Crispin, my dear boy!" He sputtered. It was the first time Crispin had ever seen him at a loss for words. "My dear boy!" he gasped.

Crispin was sitting across from him, so close their knees almost touched. "Can you explain to me, then, if it *wasn't* you that planned it, how the boys knew where to find him? They'd already come back with the body by the time I got here. And on top of that, I got a lift back to Redeuiina, and no one passed us on the road. Were they already out looking for him before they even knew I'd lost him? I don't think so. They were *waiting* for him. For us. Thank the Significant for booze, that's all I can say."

The first thing to confront him when he arrived at the Yamaxis' had been Ted Macafryan's body lying faceup on a tarpaulin in the middle of the rug. Everyone had been gathered around it,

babbling with excitement. Crispin's entrance had silenced them. Yamaxi explained—unconvincingly—that they were worried about waking his wife. Even after Crispin relayed what he'd just heard from the maid Saami, that Mme. Yamaxi hadn't yet returned from her evening calls, the Little Governor's anxiety didn't abate (nor did he seem to wonder what his wife was doing out so late). Twittering about "security," he had his thugs remove the corpse to an unspecified place of disposal. After they returned, the drinking and smoking started. Crispin had never in one evening been pressed so often to partake. He suspected they wanted to dope him into forgetting what he'd seen. They succeeded, and also failed, in that the dazeflower in the air had a slowing-down effect on him, diluting the initial horror of having his fears proved right into a weary, frustrated desire to get things straight. Now, in the face of Yamaxi's bewilderment, he pursued his reasoning with less conviction. "This nonsense about masked knifemen is just that—nonsense. The knifemen were *here* five minutes ago."

"You accuse our colleagues rashly," Yamaxi protested. "Of course, he was your charge, as you say, so naturally, but really—"

"Or else your boys met up with Minami's earlier, and they all ganged up on him. Poor old Ted. Drunk as a dog. Gets out of the car for a piss and probably the last thing he sees is the moon. Bit of a waste of manpower, Devi, if I may be so bold as to criticize. Judging from how they described where they found him, he'd only got a mile or two down the road, so if they'd waited a bit, in all likelihood he'd have crashed the motorcar and killed himself without any help at all. That would have made a watertight story. I'm surprised they brought the Exupresu back instead of bashing it about a bit and leaving him in it." He heard his voice continuing, flat, gray. "But I forgot, I was supposed to die, too, wasn't I? And no matter what my reputation, my wife"—his throat constricted briefly—"among others, would have sworn that I'm neither a reckless driver, nor prone to partake at inappropriate moments. I apologize. The whole scenario was gorgeously thought out. Pity it didn't fly."

He looked up at Yamaxi. The Little Governor was gripping his moustache with both thumbs and index fingers; his eyes were closed.

"I don't understand, Devi! A Far Westerner! *Why?* I mean, what are the Slux going to say? At the very least I expect they'll reconsider their plans for a consulate in Redeuiina. At the very least."

Yamaxi leaned forward. He appeared to have recovered command of himself. His gaze sought Crispin's and didn't waver, "It was never," he said clearly, "meant for you to die."

Crispin let out a long breath.

"You were meant to survive, as a witness." Yamaxi's hands rose, palms up. "You might have gotten a knock or two...but we would still be sitting here talking, as we are now. I anticipated this conversation. I do not underestimate you, dear boy. But had you not outwitted us"—the flicker of a smile—"you would have had different questions. You would not be asking *Why?* but *What are we to do about him?*"

"Minami."

"Of course."

"I wasn't supposed to know the pair of you are in cahoots."

"We are *not*, never *have* been, and never *will* be!" Yamaxi nearly shouted.

Crispin suspected that he was telling the truth—not just because he seemed really offended, but because Crispin had known him for almost four years, worked for him for half of that time, and if anything could be taken as an absolute index of Yamaxi's character, it was his ego. Despite Yamaxi's pretenses to modesty, he was the greediest, proudest lizard alive, and he would no more have cooperated with Minami than a rat would have gone into partnership with a snail.

Crispin's instincts told him to leave it there. But skepticism impelled him to press: "Then how did you find out that Minami had targeted Macafryan?"

"How does one find out anything in this city?"

“Then why didn’t you just stop him? It would have been the easiest thing in the world to tell me to take a different route.”

“Ah, that is the beauty of it!” Yamaxi’s eyes shone briefly. Then he said with a semblance of humility, “Very well, Crispin. Perhaps I should have warned you in as many words. Perhaps that would have been more honorable. I know you like these old-fashioned paradigms. But you would have been quite safe. You would have been signaled to stop by Minami’s men—as they in fact signaled Macafryan—and they would then have attacked you—as they in fact attacked Macafryan. We guessed, correctly, that no guns would be used because of the noise, which gave us time to ambush the ambush. The Slux did not fight back.” Yamaxi’s nose wrinkled with contempt.

“He was too drunk,” Crispin said, defending Macafryan he knew not why.

“But as you said, *you* do not partake unwisely. You would have fought back, and before you were overwhelmed, our friends”—he gestured to the pulled-together chairs where the thugs had sat smoking his bounty—“would have burst out of the hedges, as in fact they did, saving you; but unfortunately coming too late to save our foreign friend—as in fact they *were* too late. They would have told you they’d been tracking Minami’s men to see where they were going, so stealthy, so far out of the city, so late at night. You would have been indebted to them—”

“And to you—”

“—for life.”

Crispin steepled his fingers. “I find it difficult to believe you staged—or even *allowed*—Macafryan’s murder just to make sure of me.”

“You are so perceptive!” The fingers had crept up to twist the moustache again, and above them Crispin saw the telltale crinkles forming around Yamaxi’s eyes. “I hesitate as always to boast, dear boy. But I believe that Minami has laid himself open to the prettiest masterstroke in the history of the occupation.”

Crispin felt suddenly exhausted. Behind Yamaxi, dawn dripped greasy and gray onto the carpet, through the cracks between the curtains. Most of the daze smoke had dispersed, and in this first intimation of day which was more powerful than the plethora of burning gas lamps, Crispin saw the flattened place on the carpet where Macafryan’s body had lain. Crispin had tried to roll the Slux over with his foot and discovered that he was vastly heavy, weighing five or six times as much as any air-marrow-boned Lamaroon. Crispin didn’t believe that he hadn’t fought back. Maybe some farmer would discover the carcasses of a city type or two stuffed under his hedge, grinning in rictus.

“The essential thing, after all, is and has been for some time, our need to get this nuisance, this buzzing, stinging horsefly, this Minami, out of our way,” Yamaxi said with the self-confident grandiosity that only he could manage without the help of cocaine.

While he explained his masterstroke, Crispin thought mostly of Yleini. He tried to keep from imagining her adultery in detail—there was no point in torturing himself—but when he fixed his eyes on Yamaxi’s face, affecting to listen to the governor’s involved scheme for provoking the Slux and the Creddezi (heretofore the closest of friends) into mutual suspicion (whatever that had to do with Minami), all he could do was watch the Kirekuni’s mobile slice of a mouth move, and imagine it kissing her (all over her beloved body) soft soft...and that moustache, waxed as hard as twin nails, scraping her, hurting her...

Yamaxi naked. A repulsive image. His mind recoiled, and he heard what the Little Governor was saying.

“...they’re like demogorgons on choke chains: big, violent by nature, and easy to anger. The trick is angering them to one’s own advantage. When Minami is put on trial for the brutal murder of one of their citizens—*that* should do it, I think!” Yamaxi nodded several times, pleased with himself. “And when they dig him up by the roots and find the Creddezi—aha, we shall feel the ground shift under our feet! We’ll show them that here in Lamaroon we are not afraid of

punishing wrongdoing as it *ought* to be punished. We'll prove we share with them that moral probity they esteem so highly. Okimako ought to promote me to Significance for it—for promoting internationalism, and for having the balls to repair the damage done here by Their Disciplinarians' laxity. There has not been a court trial held here in Redeuiina for years; I have decided I cannot permit that any longer."

"I didn't know there'd *ever* been a trial held here," Crispin said.

Soft, dark, honey, her kisses like pure distilled love. Even before they married, it had been the bond of the flesh that held them together; that had been the thread by which their marriage hung; but now he was losing sight even of what it had been like. His memories were irrevocably contaminated. At the bottom of the abyss waited Mr. Nakunatta, occasionally glancing at the sky and checking his pocket watch.

Yamaxi nodded inattentively. "Back in the early days, after the Occupation, we used to hang several insurgents a day. But mostly Ferupians, and those were inexcusably sloppy trials. This one, by contrast, will be an indictment by means of incontrovertible proof with which not even the Slux, with their love of procedure, will be able to find fault."

*Become quite the international policy apologist, haven't we?* Crispin thought.

"The Creddezi will not dare to show any interest, for fear of showing their hand. The same goes for Okimako. Their hands are tied by their very own laws. They may grind their teeth, but they will never dare to replace me. I am too valuable. They will just send me an older, less ambitious secretary of the interior, and in private, both they and the Slux will butter up the Creddezi and hand them an official or two, gift-wrapped, to make up for their loss. The status quo will hold, my dear boy, never you fear. We are not provoking an *incident*, only making sure justice is done." Yamaxi giggled in pure delight. "Our dear friend Tomichi, though he does not yet know it, is stuck on a specimen card with a pin through his middle."

The gaps between the curtains glowed as bright as the cracked-open doors of furnaces burning gray. "And I suppose when the time for the trial rolls around, I'm to be the star witness," Crispin said.

"I hate to ask, dear boy. But really, I am not asking. I am insisting. Without you—you who have the distinction of never having been employed by me, you who are a completely unbiased witness, a chauffeur hired for the Slux's stay—" Yamaxi giggled again. "Without you we have no case."

"And after Minami is hanged?"

"Ah. You anticipate an upshot for which I scarcely, as yet, dare to hope." Yamaxi infused his expression with honest regret: eyes wide, lips quivering, forehead furrowed a little as if he could not comprehend why life had to be so hard on them all. Crispin knew that expression. He gripped the arms of his chair, whose red leather showed scars where people had knocked their pipes out. Pain tingled through his two numb fingers. The nerves were coming alive again. The brightness of the sunlight now finding its way into the parlor seemed an outrage, an offense against nature. He wanted a cigarette. In the QAF he'd smoked twenty-five a day without even thinking about it, because everyone knew that on the front lines tobacco was as essential as booze and comradeship to keeping your sanity and your nerve; he'd not given up the habit until he shipped on the Slow Express *Oil Flower* without a sigilimi in his pocket. The pangs of nicotine withdrawal had been almost as hellish as the pangs after he lost IndeIa Mishime Akele Favis Kendris Belamis the evil-spawned geniuses—so naturally, after he settled in Redeuiina, and Yamaxi filled his pockets with more cash than even Yleini could think of ways to spend, he'd tried to recapture the pleasure once delivered by a cigarette in solitude...only to find that something had immunized his body to even the mildest forms of palliation. The finest imported tobaccos, Sjintang paperweed, it made no difference. The craving fled by him like a whiff of scent and was gone.

Yamaxi seized his left hand in both of his own. He raised it to his chest and pressed it there. Crispin stared, and forced himself not to pull away.

“After the trial,” Yamaxi repeated, and swallowed, his pain visible. “Minami has friends. The Creddezi would never interfere on his behalf, far less avenge him; but there are others, right here in Redeuiina, men and women both, whose love he has won. *Bought* is probably more accurate, but in any case. They have not the power of the Slux government; they are not the sort of people, in fact, who have any real power at all; but they do have their hands, and their own friends, and quite a few of them have guns...and unfortunately, when it comes down to it, *that* is the sort of ‘power,’ if you want to call it such, which we are least able to negate. Against which I am least able to protect you.”

“Get to the point,” Crispin snapped.

Yamaxi clasped Crispin’s hand passionately, his eyes overflowing. For your own good, my dear, dear boy, I think it will be best for you to go away for a while.”

*Folk burnt out need a vacation,  
Kind court alleviates people’s vexation;  
Throw out the flattering fakes,  
scare blighters and crushers,  
Don’t ruin folk pretending it’s government,  
tho’ you’re mere babes in this business  
and the job bigger than you can guess.  
— Confucius, tr. Ezra Pound*

## To the Letter

*21 Devambar 1899 A.D.*

*The Significant Empire of Kirekune: Swirling*

“Nizhny,” Ashie said as if the word had thorns. “Nizhny. For all our sakes, Yozi, please scour every last trace of that stuff out of Akila-uzza. Give her laudanum instead. All the most fashionable ladies are taking it, it’s a cure-all; tell her that. If it’s the ritual of smoking she finds addictive, I have a man who can get her the best opium from Sinoa. The other advantage of morphia is that, unlike nizhny”—her nose wrinkled—“it will keep her quiet. Isn’t that what you want?”

Mickey lit a cigarette with his tail and shifted on the wooden bench, resting his left elbow on his knee, the stump of his right arm dangling. “Don’t you understand?” he said to the smelly coal fire in the hearth. “I don’t procure for her. She buys her nizhny herself, in secret, and I’ve had her followed, I’ve searched her room, I’ve taken away her pocket money, I’ve done everything I can think of, but it’s no good. She’s a grown woman.”

Ashie said, “Darling. I hate to remind you, but you’ve no one to blame except yourself.”

“*Don’t* remind me.” He rubbed his eyes with the tip of his tail. It was seven in the morning, the earliest (Ashie said) she’d been able to get away from her ongoing private party, where Swirling’s ugliest and richest rubbed shoulders in a medley of new money, old jewelry, and conspicuous sidearms. Any irritation Mickey had felt when she didn’t receive him immediately had long since vanished. He could scarcely keep his eyes open. Ashie, on the other hand, seemed as fizzy as a freshly mixed cocktail. She wouldn’t let him leave until, as she put it, they’d “decided what to do” about Fumia. She didn’t seem to understand there was nothing to decide or even to discuss.

She curled in an armchair with its springs sticking out the bottom, her dress arranged over

her feet, her pale skin burnished gold in the firelight. The parlor was as dingy as the rest of Akila-nichi: given a free hand and a minimal budget, Mickey would have ripped out the hard benches circling the fireplace, the motley assortment of armchairs, the stained carpet, the pornographic wall hangings—everything except the window—and started over. Yet amid this shabbiness Ashie, like those of her whores Mickey had seen, looked as desirable as a flower growing on a garbage heap. Her smooth skin, oak brown chignon, and carmine lips glistened. When they lived at home, long ago, she'd accepted the role of middle sister, making no effort to match Fumia's capability or Zouy's exuberance. Now she was dazzling. She'd filled Akila-nichi, itself an organism rather than an edifice, sprawling through five or six town houses on Swirling's grimy Yellowside, with prefabricated mange, slovenly servants, and the most beautiful gay-girls Mickey had ever seen. This made for stunning contrasts, but it wasn't just a gimmick; it was an expression of beliefs he wasn't sure she herself understood properly. She'd become convinced that prostitutes were such low-class professionals they could appropriately ply their trade only in settings as tawdry as the cheapest streetwalker's rented room. She was inordinately proud of the fact that her establishment had gone to seed five minutes after its grand opening. More than once, he'd heard her explaining that the only valid brothel aesthetic was archetypal decrepitude, the knife edge between "going slumming" and the slums.

She despised the luxuries with which Mickey had furnished his brand-new premises. He'd gambled that lavish spending on his part would encourage the same spirit in his clients, and so it had, until Greater Significance stepped in. But it had also been a self-compensation for all the years of danger and privation—a way of reclaiming his pride. Ashie had taken a different route.

Mickey wondered suddenly if the scrupulously contrived illusion of poverty with which she'd surrounded herself was in fact her revenge: the self-indulgence of a frustrated narcissist.

But that was doing her an injustice. She'd found a way to blend work and leisure that suited her perfectly, and Mickey could only envy her for it. This wasn't a genteel "all among friends" enterprise, where you pocketed your fees quietly at a later date, for the very fact of requiring them was something of an embarrassment. This was an entertainment emporium catering to a spectrum of Swirling men—and women, for in addition to one-on-one services, Ashie offered food, drink, and entertainment in the restaurant on Main Street that was the public face of her enterprise. Every night she held court at a corner table, collecting friends, strangers, and "characters" to add spice to her private parties. She never tired of socializing. Akila-nichi wasn't a House of Ecstasy at all but a way of life, one woman's statement of independence rendered a Swirling phenomenon by the Akila instinct for turning pleasure to profit.

Who would have guessed that *Ashie* would turn out to be the one out of all of them with that instinct most deeply embedded?

She leaned forward, brows knitted, lips parting. Mickey thought with a tinge of apprehension: *June died, Sala went mad and then died, Fumia went mad, Zouy died, and I'm on my way to one or the other, while she's still going strong. What does it take?*

"I'll take you at your word that you had to give her *something*. She's ill, she needs drugs. Fair enough. But what were you thinking of to start her on *nizhny*? It was only ever imported for a single, specialized market—don't you know it has connotations? If people find out—and given the rate at which she's deteriorating, according to you, people *will* find out—what on earth are they going to think? I'll tell you what they'll—"

Mickey forestalled her. "It's a painkiller. She was suffering, she was in pain. I thought at the time it was physical pain."

"And maybe you were right, who's to say? But practically every drug on the market works as a painkiller if taken in the right dosage." She sounded like a physician. "So what made you give her *nizhny*?"

"It's a luxury. She adores luxuries. She always did. You know that."

“It may be a luxury now but only because there’s no longer a market for it. Yozi, the first thing people will think of when they find out is the Decadents of the East—and who wants to be reminded of *them*? Ugh! The Glorious Dynasty was bad, but they were worse! Thank Significance no one in the family was ever infected with *that* brand of Ferupian corruption!” She brought out the official phrase without a hint of irony. The strain of holding back that particular footnote to his own life made Mickey’s throat feel dry and tight. He sucked on his cigarette to no avail.

Telling Ashie about his long-ago flirtation with the Decadents of the East would have given her the explanation she wanted, but it would have done no good. “Do you have anything to drink up here?”

“There ought to be a bottle of wine in one of those drawers. No glasses, I’m afraid, unless you want to send to the kitchen,” she said with satisfaction, temporarily diverted by her own impracticality. Mickey got up and headed for the sideboard. The drawers had all warped shut. They held debris, dust, and a bottle of Atsibo ’76. He wrestled one-handed with the cork. The sideboard stood half in front of the window: all was black outside, and the glass rattled in the wintry gusts. The wind had made the flight to Swirling relatively quick, but it would be hell to battle on the way back. He made a mental note to start long before sundown. “The point is,” Ashie continued behind him, “the Easterners are gone but not forgotten, and they’ll be back.”

“I doubt it,” Mickey said. “The Dynasty may yet reappear—most of its influential members are still around. And it was really a sociopolitical organization all along. But the Decadents really believed in the Ferupian Queen. They thought her death would change the world, and it has—for the worse... Perhaps it’s as well their own enthusiasm did them in before they lived to see their prophecies proved wrong.”

“But their followers are still around,” Ashie said. “They didn’t all die in the fire any more than the Children of the Dynasty did. And they haven’t fared nearly as well since. Decadents indeed: poor, raving madmen is more like it, trying to steal and scrape enough pennies to keep their local nizhny dealer in business.” She tossed her head up. “I may not have been in Okimako for a while, but I mingle with Okimakoans every day, and frankly I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes when people find out about our dear sister. It’ll drag the tone of the establishment right down into the mud. And, Yozi, let’s be honest, you haven’t got anything left to trade on except tone, have you? It was bad enough for business when Saia got mixed up with the Dynasty. And no matter what you say, that taint hasn’t worn off yet.” Her voice rose, and he heard a note of pleading. “Think of me, Yozi!”

“I am thinking of you,” he said meaninglessly, standing with the bottle of ’76 in his hand.

“So much of what was Okimakoan society before the Fire is Swirling society now. And when they find out about Fumia, they’ll remember, and they’ll hold me to account, because whether it was a wise decision or not, I’ve harnessed my reputation to the Akila name. You’re not operating in a void, Yozi, do you understand that? You’re operating at the very center of a web of gossip that links Okimako, Swirling, Niximako, Sjintang, and for all I know, Okinara and Kingsburg, too. And if you fuck up, you’re not the only one that’s going to suffer!”

Mickey lifted the bottle and took a long drink. The alcohol spread hot and tender through his gut. “I find it hard to believe a mere rumor could substantially damage your business. Everyone has troubles. Everyone has secrets they’d prefer to keep.”

“You’ve forgotten what it’s like,” she said. She lifted her hands and made them swim to and fro, then attack each other, the fingers of the left hand savaging the thumb of the right. “You don’t have any attention to spare for anything except your own dilemma. But I can tell you right now that you’re being watched. You’re the first who’s been sucked into the mangle, and everyone is holding their breath to see what happens.”

“Your blasphemy is impressive, but you’re not telling me anything I don’t know.”

“Even if what happens is the worst, no one will blame Significance. They’ll look for someone

else to blame. I'm already having to field questions—*What business, exactly, does your brother have in the old city?*” Viciously, she mimicked a noble's accent. “*What are the nature of his connections? Just between you and me, they're saying Greater Significance is feeding him peaches. Is it an open buffet, by any chance?* I'm trying to imply that you're being smiled upon—I'm not doing you any favors; it's self-preservation—but people suspect by now that Significance has something on you.” With a flash of guilt, Mickey realized she was refraining from asking him what that was. He ought to be grateful to her. “I can't afford to fight renewed suspicions of cultism, *too!* Certain people—I won't name names, but they're in the business—think the Akilas have lasted longer than we deserve to. They'll use every little bit of rumor they get hold of to bring us down. Her sister smokes nizhny; she's a cultie; her brother's a cultie, too; Akila-nichi is a hive of religiosos; and then business falls off, and then what are you going to do to make it up to me? You won't be able to do *anything*, Yozi!”

Mickey lit another cigarette, saddened by the knowledge that she didn't want his secrets. She didn't want the truth—that would have been too dangerous. She wanted plausible excuses. And he'd never been able to pull a rabbit out of a hat to save his life. Hoping to placate her by accepting culpability, he muttered, “I don't know what I could have been thinking—” but he did, of course: out of a misguided desire to protect Fumia, he had supplied her with the one drug whose effects and side effects he'd experienced firsthand. If he knew exactly what she was doing, then nothing too terrible could happen to her—that had been his cockeyed reasoning; but in reality he hadn't been reasoning at all. Ever since the Fire, she'd complained of headaches, and after he and she moved back to Draygonne Street, these had fructified into backaches, swoons, indispositions, epileptic fits, name an illness and she had it. For the first few months, she'd complained like a hypochondriac and he'd stopped taking her seriously. Then she ceased to complain. He breathed a sigh of relief and thought no more of it—until he started finding her in corners, sitting on the floor, quiet as a sleeper but with the grimace on her face, her eyes wide-open. And her hands rubbing her stomach, her breasts, her crotch, circling as if they had a life of their own. One day he realized that these withdrawals weren't aberrations, they were a new pattern—and fear flashed through him, charring every scrap of logic he possessed. He dropped to the floor, shaking her, shouting at her. When she blinked and slapped weakly at him, he could have cried (he did, later, in Gaise's arms); he would have done anything to stop that look reappearing on her face. He racked his brain, and finally made his way to the charred beach that had been the East Bank promenade, where he found a glum dealer sitting in front of a hotel that had become a refugee squat. He recognized the man. He'd been one of those geniuses who held the Decadents of the East in the palm of his hand. Evidently his connections hadn't been flexible enough to keep him from ruin when his market vanished overnight. Averting his face in case he himself should be recognized, Mickey brought a grin to the fellow's hardened visage by purchasing a month's supply, a small expensive packet wrapped in red tissue paper.

Before the month was up he'd realized his mistake. He went back intending to warn the dealer off, to threaten him if necessary. But the fellow had moved his pitch—probably by private agreement with Fumia, who on her good days could charm water from stones, cooperation from geniuses.

“I agree, if people find out about Fumia's addiction, it could be the straw that breaks the pakamel's back as far as *I'm* concerned,” he told Ashie. “But you and I aren't in identical situations. Whatever rumors come your way, you'll be able to ride them out, because—” It had been on the tip of his tongue to inform her that whereas she was operating with a wide profit margin, he was on the verge of bankruptcy. Fortunately, she interrupted him.

“Everyone is vulnerable to rumor.” She flung out her hand and clenched the air in her fist to indicate she wanted the bottle of wine. When he handed it over their fingers brushed. “Ugh, this is *horrible*. When I remember which cad gave it to me he'll get a piece of my mind. Breaking the

pakamel's back isn't a cumulative thing. There's no middle ground between being fashionable and being the dive where the sailors go on their nights off. Not in a small city like Swirling. It's everything or nothing at all. Yozi, do you want to hear some philosophy?" She leaned forward, her face intense as a fist. "All of us who lived through the Fire—all of us who had close encounters—something tells us that as long as we're alive, we'll survive. Well, that's not true!" She glanced around at the seedy little parlor, breathing hard, then reached down and brushed her fingers lovingly across the carpet. "It takes more. You and I, everyone who was caught in the Fire, we were cut adrift from our lives. I was alone, starving, despairing, hiding, for four days—and I'm not afraid of admitting that that changed me. It blunted my sensibilities. I stopped being a person and became a survivalist. That's why I stayed in Swirling. No one here understands. Here, life still goes on. Okimako came to the end of its tether and the tether broke and the whole city shot off around the twist—I don't know how you can bear to live there, it must be like living in a madhouse. But here the thread was never broken. I've been able to get back to normal by copying people around me. I need this."

Mickey stared at her. As always when he knew they'd become estranged, she reminded him of a small animal—a ferret or a stoat, a creature of instinct, poised for violence against everything she did not understand, intellectually negligible, terrifying in her physical perfection. Her eyes were slits as black as the window, and the shadows of the firelight thickened her brows into stripes of fur. It seemed an outrage that considering the life of nightly depravement she led, she should still possess flawless teeth and a lithe body and a mass of hair like a carved hematite. She practically sparkled with energy. He couldn't comprehend it. He felt afraid of her.

"Because I still dream about Zouy. I dream I'm looking for her. I dream I find her. Sometimes I dream I find her body burnt. And then I wake up, and it's just me again. At those moments, being alive is enough and too much." She paused. "Being alive is enough for you, isn't it?" Her eyes accused him of a shortcoming he was surprised she knew about. "You've been keeping going on sheer momentum. But when it comes down to it, you don't care about success anymore, and that's why I know that asking you to do something—about Fumia, about extricating yourself from Significance, even for *my* sake—is pointless. You aren't going to fight until your back is flat against the wall and they're holding a knife to your throat. And maybe not even then."

She nodded with dire satisfaction.

"I know. Because I have to struggle with the same fatalism every time I dream about Zouy. But I am struggling. I'm succeeding, Yozi, and I've learned all over again how fragile success is. I've relearned how to feel the subtle currents that govern societies that *aren't* tearing themselves apart from the inside. You can't feel those currents anymore. And Okimako is a whirlpool anyway."

Mickey sensed suddenly that this was a speech she'd delivered before. He no longer gave her credit for openness, though he still had to admire her acting. "Do you still play the lo-lute?" he asked.

She looked angry at being interrupted. "I—for fuck's sake, Yozi, I don't have *time!*"

Her fists pushed at her thighs. Her dress had bracelet-length sleeves, and he noticed how thin her forearms were. The musician's muscles in her wrists had atrophied.

"I'm fucking speaking *metaphorically!*" He flinched from the defiance in her face. At last she was improvising. "You've forgotten what a metaphor *is*, Yozi! You can't hear the melody anymore, you can only hear the drums! But there's a minor theme playing now and I'm telling you to listen, because if Akila-uza fails after two and a half hundred years, it'll be bad, but if I lose everything I've created here, it'll be worse! And what's more, it will be your fault, and I will hold it against you."

Mickey looked down. "You're partly right. I don't think I feel as strongly about anything as

you do about Akila-nichi. I used to, but not anymore.” *Not since Crispin left.* “Not even about Gaise.”

She flung herself about in her chair, expressing her distaste with her whole body. “Ugh, that despicable little catamite! I’ve never understood why you crooked types can’t settle for men of your own age!”

“It has a way of not working out.” Mickey looked down. His cigarette had smoldered nearly to his fingers. He tossed it in the hearth, then buried his face in his one hand. He brought his tail around and laced its tip through the splayed fingers. “I don’t want to drag you down with me. But what measures do you suggest we take?”

She whispered, “I’ve already told you. Get her off nizhny. Use any means necessary. But you won’t.”

He uncovered his eyes. There was perhaps six feet of smoke-charged air between them. “Akila-uza is going to fail before summer. All that’s at stake is Akila-nichi.” The words seemed to be coming from someone else. “*Your* ruin isn’t inevitable. You have two advantages: one, your clientele, while it may be based around a core of socialites, isn’t all of a piece the way mine is—”

“I told you,” she said. “It’s everything or nothing at all.”

He acknowledged that with a nod. “More importantly, there’s a hundred and fifty miles between you and Daixo, and although the Okimako Aviation Society is practically co-owned by the Disciples, and Significance is making noises about building a state-owned airstrip”—her eyes popped—“apparently there’s some such project happening in Lamaroon, and it hurts the generals’ pride to be out-modernized by a faraway province—it’s going to be a few years yet before they have the kind of access to you that they do to me right now. So plain old geography may insulate you.”

“Who is Daixo?” she asked, but then shook her head. “No. Don’t tell me.”

He drew his finger across his lips. The minute he’d made the gesture, he realized it was a holdover from childhood—*both* their childhoods. He saw by her face that she’d remembered, too. Sneaking up past the green door into the forbidden heights of the old Akila-uza building, carving peepholes in the paper-thin partitions: in the years before gender differences set in, he and Ashie had fallen naturally into partnership in crime. Spying on gay-girls and clients, learning more than they could possibly have understood, exulting innocently in their own cunning, swearing never to tell Fumia because she would just tell Mother...Fifteen years later, they stared at each other in shock. The fire settled loudly, and Mickey wrenched his gaze away. Watermarks of age on the walls; the details of the pornographic hangings. Outside the window, the blackness had thinned into discernible silhouettes of rooftops against the sky. He’d have to get some sleep before collecting the Throssomis and starting back to Okimako.

“Yozi,” she said. “There is a way we could firm up those points in my favor that you mentioned. If you could see your way to doing it.”

He knew what she was talking about. For the moment, they understood each other perfectly. “Of course. I was going to suggest it, actually, if you didn’t. *Someone* has to keep the Akila name alive, and since it looks as though it’s got to be you, I see it as my duty, really, to do all I can to help.”

For an instant the wild-animal eyelashes descended and she sank limply into her chair. Relief—or guilt? Once again she’d become a stranger. Then her eyes flew open and instead of any of the responses he had imagined, she said in a bright little voice, “Someone’s coming upstairs! Can you hear? Oh, Significant, why can’t they leave me alone for five minutes?”

He listened and heard footfalls on the stairs. Several people, jostling and laughing.

“I know people in Okimako,” Ashie said. “People in our line of business. I’ll give you names. I’m owed favors. I’ll call them in.”

“I expect I know the same people.”

“Yes, but you probably haven’t spoken to them in months. If *I* put in a word, they’ll do it.”

From somewhere in her dress she had extracted a compact, and she examined her face, frowning, touching the corner of her mouth where drinking from the bottle had smeared her lip rouge. “Oh, horrors. I look appalling.”

“You look like an absolute vision.” He got up and moved to the window.

“I’m immune to flattery, Yozi.”

“You’re beautiful, and that’s another point in your favor. Even Significance is much more susceptible to a charming woman than to a crooked flamingo. As a matter of fact, if you weren’t related to me, you’d have *everything* going for you.”

“Flamingo indeed,” she reproved him with sisterly affection.

He touched the window. It was freezing cold. He wanted to rest his face against it, but settled for pressing his palm to the smooth icy surface. Outside, above the irregular topography of roofs, river gulls glided down the slides and climbed the air ladders of a gigantic, invisible sky playground. Dawn showed light and streaky over the far bank of the Yellow. Flying to Okimako today would be a battle of skill against nature, as difficult a test as any he’d faced during the war. He hoped the Throssomis weren’t too hung over. Listening to one’s passengers vomiting in the back did nothing for one’s concentration—it was just as well, really, that diesel-powered planes demanded so little concentration in the first place.

“It’s eight o’clock in the *morning!*” Ashie shrieked. Mickey whirled around. She was jumping up and down in front of the door, trying to push it closed. After a minute she gave up and stumbled back, emitting hysterical caws. A young man in soiled white shoved into the parlor, followed by an entourage of revelers. Ashie, recovering her poise, flung a graceful arm out toward Mickey. “Hake, Michy, everyone, meet my brother! This is Yozi! He’s crooked, Ryu, are you interested? Too bad, he’s taken!”

“Yozitaro Akila?” the man in white shrilled. “I’ve heard of *you!* You’re famous!”

“Notorious!” someone said, and for some reason they all found this a wonderful joke. Painted mouths opened to reveal teeth stained with undisguisable records of self-abuse. Ashie screamed faintly and clutched at Mickey’s sleeve as he strode between them, out of the parlor; but her grip lacked dedication. Empty wineglasses and snoring bodies cluttered the dank, twisted stairwell. He stumbled several times on the way down.

*15 Jevanary 1900 A.D.*

*The Significant Empire of Kirekune: Okimako: the new city*

Mickey got back to Dragyonne Street just before midnight. He would have liked to walk from the old city, to work off the effects of Cyril Wigglesworth and Bernard Blythe-Frye, but after dark it was too dangerous. Compromising, he paid off his rickey at the bottom of Radiant Way 15 and leaned into the wind, climbing the hill. As usual after a visit to Swirling, where the centuries-old tenements jostled down to the river, boggling the sense of direction with their grimy, organic complexity, the ruin of the new city struck him as an execration. Greater Significance was funding a great deal of large-scale reconstruction in Okimako, a civic-spirited maneuver designed to ensure the city looked as modern as Their ambitions, but They were concentrating on the old city and the south side of the mountain. He’d brought the KE in just at dusk, and it had still been light enough to see the raw wood scaffoldings dotting the south side of the mountain like smallpox scars. Limelights as bright as fallen stars ringed projects judged top priority, and in those pools of brilliance, workmen scrambled over the skeletons of future masterpieces of the New Architecture. From the air they looked as tiny as ants. Mickey had put off Wigglesworth’s awestruck questions absently, assuring him that yes, work continued around the clock.

By contrast, the north new city was a wasteland. Last spring, inspired by Mickey's own example, various other opportunists had started rebuilding in the Dragyonne Street area; but Significance's revoking the quarter's license had deterred many, and few of the rest had won the race with winter, so settled for weatherproofing one or two rooms in which they lived as squatters. Occasional glimmers of light found their way out of these curtained dens to the cobbles. No one was about. Last week, the Disciplinarians had yet again flushed paupers and fly-by-night shopkeepers out of the ruins. A fully detailed map of stars arched overhead. Twisted iron poles stood as memorials to the famous Okimako gas lamps.

Akila-uza bulked skyward, visible from halfway down the street between shells of sooty brick.

Mickey stood, teeth chattering, in front of the monolith he'd designed. Its street front was four stories high and a hundred feet long. Its three-foot stone foundation anchored it on the ground, and its corner spires anchored it in the Milky Way. No lights showed here either. Only the glint of starlight on the windows revealed that this wasn't just another husk. He'd built it as a gamble, certain in his heart (like all gamblers) that he was onto a winner. He'd laid out his every penny like bait to lure his vision of the future into reality. And the future, usually such a coy beast, had bitten. He'd hooked his cloud castle and reeled it down to the ground. How many people could say that?

Why, then, did the monolith look to him—now as always—like a relic of the past, a piece of the old Okimako that had somehow come through untouched?

The cannibalized frame of the house where he'd been born teetered a half step behind like a tenacious ghost.

Fumia appeared on Akila-uza's threshold in a flood of brightness, looking out into the night, looking like nothing human. She always knew when he was coming home. "Halloo!" Her voice reached him faintly, blown like a rag on the wind.

"Get inside, it's freezing." He hustled her inside ahead of him. In fact it wasn't much warmer in the hall than outside. "What on earth are you wearing?"

She danced away. "Do you like it?"

Even in the candlelight (they had to rely on candles since the gas mains, wrecked in the fire, had never been repaired: Significance had been promising citywide electrification for months) her gown gleamed with the conscious ostentation of the new age. Its color could be described as lavender. Standaway points like the petals of a tulip cupped her goose-pimpled shoulders, and laces cinched her waist, whence skirts descended in folds to the floor. She struck a pose, arms extended, and Mickey was reminded for an instant of Ashie. But Fumia's eyes were squinched closed, and in the vertical gathers between her brows he saw the beginnings of a grimace.

He strode up to her and grabbed her, pushing her back against the black-and-cream-striped wallpaper. "Where's Rumika?"

She pouted, eyes still closed, and turned her head aside. She smelled as though she'd bathed in expensive perfume. Her fingers rose and fluttered around his face: she wore purple lace gloves to her elbows.

"Is everyone asleep?"

"Yozi, darling!" she murmured reprovingly. "What do you *think*?"

"You look like an absolute vision." And it was as true of her as it had been of Ashie. "You haven't been waiting up alone, have you?" *If so, Significance knows what she's got up to—*

He caught a movement in the corner of his eye and let go of Fumia, abruptly abashed. He turned to see Rumika standing in the doorway of the foyer, beyond the foot of the stairs. The tall northern gay-girl beckoned, swaying from the waist like a rooted seaweed. Mickey's boots rang on the checkerboard tiles as he went toward her. Behind him, Fumia hummed a tune amplified by the acoustics into opera. It emphasized the morgue-silence that filled the house: no clients, ergo no music, no laughter, no conversation. Whenever they could, the gay-girls went to bed

early.

“I had to lend her the money!” Rumika hissed excitedly. “She would’ve cried all day otherwise. You’d still be able to see it on her face, but she wanted to doll herself up before you got back, so I lent her a hand with her powder and rouge, and if I do say so myself, I think if we got a walk-in right now you’d have to warn him off!” She laughed. She was nearly as tall as Mickey, and as thin. She would have had an air of elegance were she not round-shouldered. However, in bed this reportedly didn’t matter, nor did her somewhat too-small face. Mickey had received praise of her skills he found difficult to credit. He knew she was a treasure; the only trouble was that so did she. She had come to Okimako on the heels of the Fire “to take advantage of the opportunities,” and she had warned him of this repeatedly—but not until Fumia began using *nizhny* on a regular basis had he properly appreciated Rumika’s enterprising soul.

“Did she go to the Urba on her own?” he asked, hoping against hope. He was wondering how much money, exactly, Rumika had lent Fumia. From past experience he guessed it would be as much as she had been able to borrow from the other gay-girls on short notice; he knew he’d be reminded of the sum at intervals until he’d paid it all back, with interest.

“Do you think I would have let her go out on her own, the state she’s in?” Rumika pursed her lips. “The boy took her.”

“Gaise?”

Rumika’s mouth resembled a puckered stitch. In her home province, deviant proclivities were disapproved of, and what she was required by Mickey to tolerate she didn’t necessarily countenance. She refused on principle to enunciate Gaise’s name. She nodded grudgingly. “It was all his fault to begin with. She would never have missed you if he hadn’t told her you’d gone to Swirling. So then she sets up keening and the next thing, he says ‘why don’t we go to the dressmakers’ showrooms in the Free Zone and we’ll take the car, we’ll play at being nobles, wouldn’t you like that?’ That was a display piece.” She gestured at Fumia. “She tried it for size, and nothing would do but she had to have it, straight off the form.”

“Oh, Significance,” Mickey said. He swung around to have another look at Fumia’s dress, trying to see what made it a luxury item of foreign manufacture rather than a sleazy nomad-merchant rip-off. Her purple skirts rustled as she tripped toward them; candlelight ran off her like water. Mickey realized with a sinking of the heart that the material was Sinoese silk.

“*She* doesn’t care how much a thing costs as long as she thinks it’s pretty, she’d have been perfectly happy going to the Urba, and so I told him. Gave him a piece of my mind I did. ‘Course she’d worn it out of the shop so there was no taking it back.”

“Where’s Gaise?” Mickey said, his eyes still on Fumia. He *could* have taken the dress back, theoretically, but he would have had to go through both Rumika and Fumia to do so, and it didn’t seem worth the trouble. Fumia was walking in circles, beaming at him every time she came around. In her ceremonious placement of heel in front of toe he saw the effects of the *nizhny*.

“Upstairs. Sulking.” Rumika snorted. “Took half the kitchen with him. The appetite on that child.”

Mickey, stung, was about to tell her for the umpteenth time that Gaise at seventeen was only two years younger than Rumika herself, that all of them were of the same generation, and if Gaise were a child, then this was a house full of children—but before he could speak Fumia looked up from her circles and sang, “Yozi! How is darling Ashie? I haven’t seen her in so *long!* Is she visiting friends? Swirling is such a *frightfully* dull city...even now, Okimako is really the only place in the world! But she’s been away such a time—her Swirling friends must be *very* interesting!”

“Oh, fascinating!” Mickey said grimly. “She’s having the time of her life. I doubt we’ll ever see her again, Fumie, actually. You might as well stop hoping.”

“Now look what you did!” Rumika hissed immediately. But in fact, Fumia only pouted.

“But I *miss* her. And Zouy, too, and Mother. Where are they? I know you’ve told me, but I’m

afraid I keep forgetting, my memory is just like cheesecloth...”

She looked down at her dress, and smoothed it with lace-sheathed fingers. His all-too-intimate knowledge of the burnt bridges in her mental map told him that her train of thought had jumped its tracks. She looked up brightly. Rumika had done an expert job with her makeup. The northern girl fussed over her like a mother with a bride-to-be. “Yozi, you don’t love me anymore!” Fumia announced.

Mickey gritted his teeth in exasperation. “Sig-ni-fi-cance,” he growled under his breath. “You deal with her, Rumika; it’s what I pay you for,” and disregarding the gay-girl’s affronted intake of breath, he turned and started up the stairs. The paneling reflected a flailing stick figure at him as he climbed toward the landing. The wood had been polished to mirrorlike perfection—on Fumia’s bad days, when there were no clients to prepare for, when the gay-girls had tired of primping, they passed their time cleaning and dusting. They took more pleasure in Akila-uza’s luxurious appointments than Mickey did.

He thought: *I tested the waters of self-sacrifice and I don’t feel any different. I suppose it’s too early to tell. I suppose I should take the plunge before I lose my nerve. But I—but I—*

From below he heard a plaintive wail: “Yozi, darling...”

On the top floor, a wave of dry heat hit him like a swoon as he let himself into his bedroom. “Oh, Yozi *darling*, wherever *were* you?” Gaise sat on the bed, grinning, perfectly composed, in the middle of the remains of a feast of priceless meats, breads, and cheeses. He did an imitation of Fumia, fluttering his eyelashes and clasping his hands in front of his throat. “I’ve been waiting and *waiting!* What on *earth* took you so *long?*”

“Headwind,” Mickey said. He stripped off his robe and after a moment pulled off his tunic, shirt, and undershirt, too. Gaise had stoked the fire into a roaring pyre that filled the hearth and tinted the whole room red. It looked like burning floorboards—Gaise must have made a foray down the city mountain to gather fuel. Like Rumika, he had an enterprising soul and wasn’t above taking risks in the course of his quest for the life of ease. No one who knew him could have described him as lazy although that was how he looked right now, supremely indolent, stretching out on his stomach oblivious of the dishes clinking together along the length of his body, propping his elbows on the edge of the bed, his black forelock falling down the center of his face as he regarded Mickey.

“Did you get the Throssomis back to the palace on time then?”

“An hour late.”

“What did Daixo say?”

*You know him as well as I do*, was on the tip of Mickey’s tongue, but since the fact of Gaise and Daixo’s professional relationship wasn’t supposed to be common knowledge, he said only, “Don’t get crumbs in the bed, will you?”

“Careful, you’re turning into an old woman.”

Mickey wrestled with the knots in his boot laces. Even after more than three years of life as an amputee, he still got angry at the disproportionate length of time it took him to do simple tasks using his left hand and his tail—without a fifth limb he no longer qualified in pure terms as a member of the superior Kirekuni race: he was as inefficient as a Ferupian, a Cypean, a Likrekian, a foreigner. “Don’t provoke me.”

“Ohhhh.” Gaise’s voice vibrated with sympathy, and despite himself Mickey looked up. The chauffeur was grinning. “Has it been a long hard day then? Come here and let me love it all better.”

Mickey wrenched off his boots and sat down, staring across the room at the hearth. This palatial *en suite* sanctum, on the top floor next to Fumia’s room, gave him no sense of ease. Thick carpeting, genuine Kalahashi chairs and sofa, glass tables, a selection of easy-on-the-eye portraits of strangers (all the paintings of Akila ancestors had burned) and the centerpiece, a king-size bed

covered with throw pillows and often, as now, with plates and crumbs—these were all very well, but the only personal touches could be traced to Gaise: the half-empty packets of cigarettes, the Significance-surplus chauffeur's uniform strewn across the floor, the dirty plates, the pages from various pamphlets and books containing passages Gaise had liked long enough to rip them out. The boy wasn't any more domestically inclined than Mickey was. His horrible childhood in the Fugue had given him the same conviction of impermanence that six years in the military had given Mickey. But Gaise was deliriously untidy and a hoarder to boot. Mickey couldn't open a drawer or move a piece of furniture without finding a cache of ill-assorted, valueless rubbish. Since the SAF and the QAF had infected Mickey with a passion for neatness, this made for a conflict that showcased the incongruity of their characters.

"Aren't you in the mood then?" Gaise prodded. "I've been *waiting*. Nearly gave up on you and jerked off. Consider yourself lucky."

"I haven't slept since this time the day before yesterday," Mickey said, hating himself for whining at the same time as he craved sympathy. "Put yourself in my place for a moment: I surprised one of my sisters trying to cut her fingers off with chopsticks, flew three hundred miles in a kite that ought to be scrapped for parts, had an argument with my other sister, and nursed two blubbering Far Westerners through hangovers, while you were gallivanting in the Free Zone. No, I'm not in the mood."

"I thought you always were," Gaise purred, undeterred, and slithered farther off the bed. "Anyhow"—an edge of resentment entered his voice—"it was me who mostly had to look after Fumia. You had it easy by comparison, take my word for it."

"Looking after her by encouraging her to spend our profits for the next fiscal year? What a hard job."

"Well, what would you have done? You can't cope with her when she smokes up. You go all to pieces. Me and Rumi end up dealing with her even when you're here."

"And split the profits!"

"What profits? Ain't no profits!" Gaise sounded genuinely stung. "You couldn't pay me enough to look after no nizhny addict not for *nothing*! I do it for *you*!" His body bucked, and he landed squatting on the floor, hands splayed in front of his ankles. Beautiful hands and feet, Mickey noticed not for the first time, as Gaise toad-hopped toward him across the carpet: disproportionately large, his toes almost as long as his fingers, brown with tan and ingrained dirt, and dexterous. One of the few details Gaise would divulge about his life before he had come to work at Akila-uza was that he'd done a stint as a pickpocket, and another stint in jail. Maybe that was when he'd joined forces with Daixo. Or maybe Greater Significance had just swooped him off the street when They were building their arsenal of things and people to use against Mickey. Their cast of potential puppets included almost everyone in Okimako, so They took pride in matching the tool with the task.

They'd done a good job of it this time.

Long, skinny, clever fingers sank into Mickey's neck from behind, digging out tension after tension.

"It's all your fault anyway," Mickey heard in his ear, just as he started to relax. "Catch *me* giving anybody nizhny, not even my worst enemy I wouldn't give it them. Fucking cultie drug."

*Don't remind me!* "You haven't told anyone, have you?" Mickey said sharply, twisting around. "Not—not—" *Daixo*—

"Why the fuck don't you trust me then?" Beads of sweat stood on Gaise's temples. But his voice rang with outraged honesty, so rare Mickey identified it immediately. "You must think I want to ruin you. You must think I want to ruin *Akila-uza*! Significant—I know what would happen if Significance found out about her! They're scarer of culties than they are of the whole fucking Far West put together? We'd go from A-list to the blacklist!" He was breathing hard.

Mickey bit his lip. Intimately, though not from analogous experience, he knew the anxiety flaring through Gaise's mind—the anxiety of the traitor to both sides, the secret agent who has become a double agent with a stake in keeping both masters hungry for more. Gaise had a cushy billet at Akila-uza. This was likely the closest he had ever come to achieving the life of luxury he craved. So as not to be snatched from this tailored, upholstered paradise and dropped back into the Fugue, he regularly betrayed both Significance, to whom he'd sold his soul, and Mickey, who'd sold it back to him,

But—and again, Mickey knew it deep in his heart—walking such a tightrope required isolation. And that kind of isolation, that glass helmet of secrets, conferred an acute perception of the gulf beneath, the gulf of Being Found Out. With a certain curiosity Mickey had watched Gaise's fear of falling grow to phobic proportions. Over the last months his mood swings had become ever more jarring. As he *became* the role he was playing, that of Mickey's lover and co-conspirator, the stresses of concealment had started to tell. It could end with his losing his finer judgment—committing himself once and for all to one side or the other, just for the sake of resolution. Mickey was waiting for that to happen.

At the same time he'd had to prevent himself from falling in love.

*I empathize too deeply with the role of the tortured puppet.*

He turned around, kneeling, and faced Gaise in the lurid light. *You know which side your bread is buttered on, don't you? I hope for both our sakes you do.* “Your features are truly exquisite.”

Gaise started to toss his head in impatience, and turned it into a coy hair flip. He grinned. Mickey saw the effort it took. “What are you going to do about it?” He pouted, doing an impression of an affected gay-girl.

“I just want to look at you.”

“I can think of better things to do.”

Mickey felt a sudden, impish pressure on his inner thighs and saw Gaise's fingers walking upward toward his groin. The sight and the caress had the effect of arousing him to instant, raging lust. He reached out and grabbed Gaise by the shoulders and kissed him. Their bodies met; Gaise's knee moved between his, and the boy's hard, muscular thigh ground against his crotch. Gaise's hot, thick tongue dived deep into Mickey's mouth, seeking his throat like a safe hiding place. The fingers of his right hand picked at the back of Mickey's trousers, trying to get inside, and with his left hand he seized Mickey's tail, rubbing its tip over his groin, using it to massage his stiffly outlined penis. Gaise's cock was hard to the touch, ramming against his tight trousers, trying to rise up off his balls. Desire surged through Mickey's brain, threatening his resolve. He reached for Gaise and cupped his penis, squeezing it through the fabric, remembering with a confusing sense of irony that the reason Significance had sent the chauffeur to him was, after all, the reason they sent their foreign guests to Akila-uza. The reason was pillow talk.

And he no longer had any clear idea how much of their *pillow talk* Gaise was reporting to Daixo, how truthfully. He didn't know on any given day or night which way Gaise's balanced loyalties were tipping. This uncertainty made it difficult for him to hold back from confidences.

He wrenched his mouth free, pushing the boy away a few inches. Gaise licked his lips. His face shone with sweat and exhilaration, and he was still moving, grinding himself against Mickey. “Oooh,” he said, his voice high and clear. “Yozi, darling! My, my! As I always say, if you want the best, apply to a professional!”

Mickey ducked his kiss and said with sudden bitterness, “But you're a professional, too, aren't you? That makes for a bit of overkill, wouldn't you say?”

Fear flashed through the eyes that were incongruously light in the tanned face. Mickey suspected Gaise had a bit of Eo Iorian or perhaps Mime blood in him, which would explain both his trickiness and his tan. Suspected was the key word: he didn't know. He didn't know anything

for sure about the undependable, self-centered, hellishly handsome boy who was the first lover he'd had in years. "Amateur," Gaise purred. "One hundred percent amateur—professional under the table man, if you want!" He laughed, his breath catching, and seized Mickey close, forcing his lips apart with the fat, snaky tongue that was a professional all on its own, and both his hands found their way inside the waist of Mickey's trousers, squeezing Mickey's buttocks, index fingers jabbing deep, and Mickey wanted to say, *Oh, you think you're clever!* but by the time they next broke apart again, desire had got hold of him properly, and all he could do was tug at Gaise's shirt. After they made love he sobbed with his face in Gaise's lap. Gaise sat against the head of the bed and stroked his hair absently, thinking Significant knew what; probably thinking nothing at all—he was satiated and, therefore, tolerant. And Mickey, satiated but unsatisfied, cried in a most unprofessional fashion, remembering:

that the handover hadn't gone as usual; that no matter what he pretended, nothing was as usual; that it had all gone wrong, and only an accident allowed him to be here instead of in an interrogation room. Worst of all, he wouldn't even be able to pretend for much longer. *You know Daixo as well as I do, Gaise!* In a flood of tears, he recalled the rest of what he'd been going to say. *Disobedience enrages him like nothing else. He chases offenders the way a dog chases scent, and he won't rest until he's run his quarry into the ground. Gaise, I'm cornered.*

Daixo had been waiting in the center of the palace courtyard, greatcoated and muffled to the teeth, the tip of his nose the color of a rotten strawberry. He greeted the Throssomis as jovially as if it had been a fine spring morning. He made, of course, no mention of the fact that it was long past sundown—one of his unspoken rules was to criticize only in Kirekuni. As far as Mickey could tell the pressures of his job had whittled his vocabulary in his native tongue down to hostilities. He was fluent in Throssomi, Yanglo, Creddezi, Slux, Ferupian, Eo Iorian, and Mimetic; he had a fair bit of Sinoese and some Ixtaran. Ironically, his facility for language wasn't accompanied by a facility for social situations—his preferred medium was ultimatums, not the ambiguities of small talk. But the mere fact of a Kirekuni who spoke their language well often served to boost foreigners' spirits. Blythe-Frye would not be coaxed out of his broody silence, but after a few minutes, Wigglesworth regained all his ebullience. He was tousled and terrifyingly voluble as he ranted about the efficiency with which Okimako was being rebuilt.

"Never seen anything like it!" he shouted, arms waving. "Everything in this country is on a bigger scale than anything at home! Lord, how I wish I'd been here to see it before! Dear old Blythe-Frye is unimaginably privileged to have done so! What did you say it was, Akila, that monument-in-progress on the south side near the top, a police station of some sort—"

When they approached Okimako in the KE, Mickey had been concentrating on maneuvering the kite down to the airstrip and hadn't really seen what a deep impression the view was making on Wigglesworth. Now he wondered frantically how to stop him letting the cat out of the bag. Daixo could not find out he had taken the Throssomis to Swirling.

"I'm a student of architecture, as a matter of fact! Purely on an amateur basis—but since I've been here, I've begun seriously to consider sitting down and writing my book. The contrasts between East and West, you know. Of course it's a broad subject; I haven't quite found my angle yet, but in the last few days I've been *besieged* with ideas!"

Mickey winced. Airplanes were just starting to gain aficionados in the Far West and, according to reports, most Far Western engineers weren't yet convinced they even worked—the Throssomi, especially, were so enamored of their railways they wouldn't concede that inventors halfway across the world had come up, a century earlier, with an even faster sort of machine. But at the rate Wigglesworth was going, the KE and the airstrip would logically figure in his paean.

"It's ambitious, it's impossible, it's bloody *monumental!*" the young company man cried, and appeared to run temporarily out of adjectives.

“This is not, of course, the first time in history that fire has ravaged Okimako,” Daixo said in Throssomi with a stiff half bow. “Yet after every disaster we have not just rebuilt, but reengineered, the city according to the most modern aesthetic standards. This time, since we have been exposed to the brilliant ideas of Far Western architects, we anticipate a true triumph of city planning. Within five years, the city is expected to have followed the example of your country and converted from gas to electricity. Then, of course, you have seen the new Disciplinary Headquarters. It is the brainchild of Fukubino, our most celebrated young architect. He has just returned from Throssom, and would I am sure be delighted to meet a Throssomi with whom to share his impressions.”

“I should worship at his feet!” Wigglesworth shouted.

Daixo smiled with closed lips. “I do not doubt a tour of the most interesting sites—old and new—can be arranged.” His gaze wandered between Wigglesworth’s and Blythe-Frye’s heads; Mick guessed he was watching for his relief to appear out of the palace. Usually these handovers only lasted long enough to ascertain that everyone had had a rare old time before a deletion of Significant Nobodies—as Mickey called the hangers-on who, dashing in all the hues of new grass, were doing their best to reclaim Significance from the military faction— appeared and swooped the foreigners off under their wings, to spend the remainder of their business trip being passed from one handler to the next, shown a succession of Okimako-style good times guaranteed to keep their heads spinning and send them home raving. The treatment’s lavishness disguised its similarity to a package tour. Daixo’s involvement ended here: that was why he’d never found out about Mickey’s occasional departures from procedure. Greater Significance might be the smoothest intelligence machine in all of Oceania, but it had so many cogs that some of them simply never connected.

And tonight it seemed to have sustained a minor breakdown. Nobody came. Parties of Significant Nobodies flowed to and fro between the main doors and the gateway arch, shrieking about the wind, ignoring the foursome standing off the beaten path. From time to time a heavy black car disgorged a dignitary or a military official at the gates. Daixo managed to glower in their direction and smile at Wigglesworth all at once.

“Of course before tonight, the palace was all I’d seen of Okimako,” Wigglesworth pursued expansively. “It’s simply stunning but let’s face it, all palaces have a certain sameness. And the rest of the city I’d seen only in the dark. Then, what’s its name, Akila? Swirling?”

—*that’s torn it*—

“A *hole!* But in contrast, the Okimako mountain is a unique asset which I think lends a majesty to the whole city. I can’t think of another capital in the world that is such a—a *pedestal* for itself.” He radiated goodwill and excitement: the flip side of his sexual depravement, which had just as much potential to adversely affect those in his vicinity. Daixo shot a glance at Mickey, his face resembling the carvings of the Significant that had reigned in front of all the best houses in the old city before the fire split and stained them and Greater Significance disappeared those that were left. Benevolence petrified in granite.

Mickey knew he would see those hard orbs and that frozen gray smile every night until the end of his life. At the moment, that seemed imminent. His head was roaring and whirling, and he fought to maintain his expression of scholarly interest in Wigglesworth’s paean to Okimako and airplanes. He glanced at Blythe-Frye. The older, fatter Throssomi stared down at the cobbles between his feet, panting gently. If he had been Kirekuni, he would have had his tail tip gripped in his teeth. Mickey narrowed his eyes, failing for a moment to understand; then two and two added up, and alarms rang in his head, and he interrupted, “Daixo! Something’s wrong with him!”

Daleuke whirled. Blythe-Frye did not move. “Woghouse, old man?” Wigglesworth said uncertainly—and as if conceding his point in an argument, Blythe-Frye dropped his case, his knees buckled, and he toppled heavily to the cobblestones. His head bounced with a sickening

*thwack*. He lay still. They all stared at him for a second. Then Daixo's head jerked up and he glared murderously at Mickey.

"Help! Somebody! He's dead! Oh, God, he's dead!" Wigglesworth screamed, and he, too, fell to his knees, shuddering away from Blythe-Frye, clutching his head between his hands. "Oh, God—what have I done—"

Mickey stooped. With his fingers between the cold, stubbly wattles he could just detect a pulse. He worked one-handed to undo Blythe-Frye's cravat. At the best of times it had been too tight, and now the gape-mouthed face resembled a blue tomato. "He's not dead." Mickey looked up at Daixo. "He's just unconscious—strained heart I expect. We have to get him inside—get him warm—"

In belated response to Wigglesworth's yell, a dozen Nobodies skidded up, chattering like squirrels with spring fever. Mickey found himself bowled backward by a phalanx of black coats who plowed through the Nobodies and shouldered around Blythe-Frye like a living wall. They picked him up and bore him bodily toward the palace, whose main doors were swinging open in readiness. Wigglesworth knelt rocking and screaming, his transformation from sophisticate to trauma victim pathetically complete; the Nobodies, seeing their job cut out for them, descended clucking and raised him up with half a dozen arms around his shoulders. The wind swooped down again behind them as they cast off in the black coats' wake. This wasn't the first time Mickey had seen Greater Significance reacting to an emergency, but the sheer smooth speed of it impressed him all over again. He hoped wildly that the rectification had been outright. It didn't seem impossible that in removing Blythe-Frye and Wigglesworth the Nobodies and Disciples had somehow managed to remove the things Wigglesworth had said, too.

Stiff with dread, he rolled over and sat up. Daixo looked rather less elegant—in the scuffle he'd been deprived of his muffler and his greatcoat had been torn open—but the expression on his face put paid to every hope of impunity Mickey had ever entertained.

"For fuck's sake," Mickey said tiredly, and got to his feet, narrowing his eyes.

"I take it you do not share our foreign friend's low opinion of Swirling?" Daixo spoke in Kirekuni. It established an intimacy between them, a space in which Mickey had no room to defend himself.

"My sister lives there." He shrugged. "She loves it, but I think mostly because it's not Okimako. This is my home and always will be, but I've found that an occasional jaunt to the provinces makes one better appreciate the cosmopolitan breadth of society in the capital. You should try it."

Irony was lost on Daixo. "I don't suppose it's occurred to you to wonder if the Okimako Aviation Society would approve of your making use of their airplanes to pay calls to your family?"

"It's all business," Mickey corrected him. "And I pay my dues to the Society like everyone else. The hangars are staffed twenty-four hours a day specifically to ensure that we can take out the kites whenever we happen to be free. Flying is a leisure pursuit these days, after all."

"Not, apparently, for you."

"Yes, well," Mickey conceded, and then, looking Daixo in the eye: "It's a pity. This would have been the last time."

Daixo gestured impatiently. "It doesn't become you to bargain. There can be no bargains between Significance and one such as you—I would have expected you to understand that."

"I thought we already had a bargain."

"And you have defaulted on it. Again. You were warned, yet—"

"Omoke—*please!* I *swear!* This will be the last time!"

"I'll oblige you not to be familiar, Akila!"

Was this to be his execution dock? Mickey wondered in the ensuing silence. The courtyard of the palace to which, for all his years-long entanglement with Significance, he had never once been

granted entrance? None of the lights from gateway or doorway or walls reached into the center, where the intransigent pool of darkness made it look as though the cobblestones dipped. An appropriate enough setting for the downfall of an outsider. And Daixo, too, for all his pretensions, was something of an outsider. As far as Mickey knew, the official had no tribal pedigree, not a modicum of originality, no war honors, no claims to Significance at all except a talent for foreign languages and a few Far West-style suits. He might hold Mickey's life and finances in the palm of his hand, but he was merely the last link in one chain of command among thousands: a tiny, almost toothless cog with no power to shift the gears deep within Great Significance—a mere mechanism for passing down Their dictates. His chilly style of operating, while appropriate to his current rank, was no sort of qualification for advancement. In the final analysis Mickey wouldn't have wanted to be in Daixo's brilliant white spats. A smile spread across his face. "Any words of wisdom for me to take to my death, then?"

"There is no need to be premature," Daixo said automatically. At that Mickey laughed.

"Singularly bad advice, if I may presume to say so. The biggest and best decisions I've made in my life have been premature ones."

"Perhaps that is why you are currently facing such an unenviable fate," Daixo spat.

"Got me there, Omoke. Got me there." Mickey tipped his head back, pretending to regard the stars. In actuality his eyes were closed and he was picturing Akila-uza in all its glory, its diamond-paned windows golden in the morning, the stone cherubs cooing to each other across the heaped roofs. The House of Ecstasy had never had such a grand incarnation. *Two hundred and fifty years, and it ends like this.* Why had he failed to realize that cloud castles were incompatible with architecture?

"Tell your chauffeur," Daixo said with cryptic portentousness, unaware that Mickey already knew Gaise was Significance's creature, "that there may be a job opening for him within Significance. We are always in need of mechanics, and I have heard good reports of him. Tell him to come by in the morning three days from now and ask for me."

*And that, Mickey thought, is all the warning I'm likely to get.*

In the middle of the night, when the fire had died down and Gaise snored like a pig, Mickey sat up and shook him awake—but not in order to tell him, as Daixo no doubt expected him to have done by now in some fit of self-sacrificing altruism, that Significance had another post lined up for him.

*I wouldn't be in your shoes either, Gaise.*

"Wake the fuck up!"

"Whuh...?"

"Find me my writing materials. You're the only one who knows where anything is at this stage, so you'll have to suffer the consequences." It gave Mickey vindictive pleasure to treat Gaise as a servant. "Now. I don't care if you have to turn the house upside down. Just don't wake anyone. And after that you can start packing my large pigskin case."

"You're fucking crazy, Yozi. Wake up. Then go back to sleep." Gaise flopped down again on his stomach.

"Now! Bloody hell, do I have to kick you?" And he did, so hard even he was surprised. Gaise screeched. Pretending he'd meant it, Mickey reached to the side of the bed and felt for lucifers to light candles.

"Significance! No peace!" Grumbling, Gaise sat up. The lucifer sparkled in Mickey's hand, and, as quick as a snake striking, Gaise darted his head forward, lips clamped around a cigarette that hadn't been there a second earlier. Smoking, he swung reluctantly out of bed and started turning drawers upside down onto the carpet.

"Quietly!" Mickey growled, and sat back against the headboard to think. *My darling cousin...*

After a second he followed Gaise's example and lit a cigarette. He forced himself to relax by

holding the smoke in his lungs for long minutes. Was it possible to explain at all? Of late his letters to her, while increasing in length and frequency (and provoking ever more cautious responses), had grown extremely selective in their reportage of current events. *My darling cousin...*

A crash startled him. Gaise had somehow managed to knock the mirror off the dressing table. Naked as the day he was born, skin copper-bright in the candlelight, he was struggling not to drop the heavy framed glass. “Don’t break it,” Mickey snarled.

*I’m coming—I’m deserting them all—all at once—*

He would, of course, have to put it more delicately than that.

*—take hold and bind him.*

*Double twist his arms behind him.*

*Remember all the sentence called for*

*And execute it to the letter.*

—Séamus Heaney

## Turning Not Into A Tree

*16 Jevanary 1900 A.D.*

*Cype: Kherouge*

It seemed to Rain that Kherouge had become a hive of secrets. Admittedly, she lived with the biggest, ugliest, greediest secrets of all. But she tried not to let that warp her perception of the changes she noticed every time she went abroad in her adopted city.

The Patriotic Sisters were no longer Kherouge’s only unpublicized freak show. Now there was an endless parade of Slux and other Far Westerners. They never ventured outside the hotels and society mansions, where they enjoyed the hospitality of the Kirekuni nouveaux aristos, except in cars. You knew they were coming a hundred yards off by the entourages of urchins, grandmothers, stallkeepers, laborers, everyone old or young who had no pride, who trotted alongside the vehicles, choking cheerfully on clouds of exhaust as they ogled the pale faces inside. The foreigners looked like better-fed Ferupians, but their somber-hued clothes, rigidly molded and stark of line, marked them out. These costumes fascinated Rain. They were unlike anything she’d ever seen. What sort of society commanded its men to sheathe their bodies in multilayered scabbards of fabric? Were they really that dangerous? And how did their women function as anything other than ornaments, imprisoned in those absurdly full mobile cages—you could see their skirts were steel-reinforced. However, she knew she would never get an opportunity to quiz the foreigners on the history of Far Western fashion, so she deferred her interest in them altogether. The Kirekunis had staged a surgical extermination of the Ferupian governing class and stepped calmly onto the bridge of the Kherouge slave ship, inviting the foreigners up almost as an afterthought, without causing more than a couple of ripples on the deep waters of Cypean idiosyncrasy.

It was the internal-combustion engines for the sake of which the foreigners had been invited to the protectorate that had *really* altered the rhythm of life. Automobiles were more numerous in booming Kherouge, whose broad flat concourses might have been designed for them, than in any other city on the continent. Some streets, especially in Center City, remained madhouses of beast- and human-drawn wagons, but others, including the dust highways that led out from the city to the stockyards and the drovers’ depots, had become rapids of metal and glass, lethal not just because of the speeds at which motorists accelerated around blind curves, but because of the

poisonous fumes their “horseless carriages” exhaled. Autos zipped blithely around disassembled models arrayed in front of disassembled walls, scattering the scavengers combing the wrecks for sellable parts. Who had expected that the extinction of daemons would make Kherouge *more* dangerous?

The extinction of daemons had had other effects, too, not all of which Rain could pin down. Perhaps the effects were inside her head, because they always manifested when she was in a pessimistic mood, when the remainder of her life seemed to lie before her like a car wreck strewn along the winding streets through which she slipped, hooded in black and shunned like a beggar, to have lunch with Crispin. What use combing the detritus? Not one flywheel, shaft, panel, or window remained whole; she would just have to pick her way onward as best she could. In the evenings, even in winter, loiterers clogged Center City. And at these times men and women, animals and hawkers, would shimmer before her eyes as if in an unseasonable heat wave, and their movements would take on a jerky mechanical quality. She blinked; she looked at her hand. The bones and muscles and veins seemed too perfectly interconnected under the stretched skin. Her own body was a mystery to her. It was an enemy. Once she’d glimpsed her face in a mirror behind jewelry displayed on a stall, and the black eyes and full lips and neat straight nose, the exile’s pale complexion, seemed unnatural, as if all the humanity she thought she possessed had been stealthily drained from her, leaving female features that were merely prototypical. She felt like part of the first shipment of a new model of humanity—of dubious quality, possibly issued by a fly-by-night firm—the rest of which had got lost in transit. Fear skewered her, and she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

And then there came a moment when she realized everything was silent, and she lifted her head, and the dizzily shimmering street gave way to a waking dream. The life-affirming babel was silent. The winter sun brimmed up to the top of a red stone canyon, tawny and cold and solid as congealed resin, and nobody was there. Rain was alone in a giant stage set of kings’ tombs, in a theater with all the lights on, wandering scriptless in front of an invisible audience of thousands. And then she turned and made them out through the footlights—and that was worse. Because all at once, she understood that Kherouge wasn’t a city built by man, but a sprawling rock formation inhabited by squatters forced out of the diamondtina by the drove conglomerations, who had done up their holes in the cliffs each as befitted his social status, and who all, rich and poor, lived in perpetual suspicion of the future, of each other, of what the sea might bring next. In this climate of suspicion, the Sisters were in worse danger even than Cloud, Sunlight, and Aurora realized.

Rain hadn’t told Crispin she was afraid she might be going mad. Or going into an absurdly early menopause.

But in her saner moments she wished she *were* menopausal. Her depressions often originated in her terror of getting pregnant again.

Crispin and pregnancy were connected only in the graveyard of her dreams—but since he arrived in Kherouge, black moods engulfed her ever more frequently. All the years she’d been in Cype, she hadn’t let herself think about him for fear her longing for what might have been would drive her crazy. And now her prince had thrown himself on her mercy, and proved himself no more than a married civil servant on the run from the law.

Who knew what might have been? All she knew was that life had cheated her, stolen a cherished fantasy and given her back a bitter pill. A burden of concealment.

She had only one unknown factor, one possible catalyst, left in her life, and his letters told of an increasingly dubious sanity. Still she hadn’t shown them to Crispin for a second opinion. She didn’t know why, unless—the very thought made her smile—she was instinctively acting out of feminine craftiness, like a woman juggling two lovers.

Lovers!

The only lover with whom she'd ever achieved a *real* rapport lay in a one-bed sick bay on the top floor of the Enclave, utterly absorbed in dying except for that one hour out of twelve when she awoke and pitter-pattered downstairs to the dungeons, where Kherouge's biggest secrets moped in chains.

And that had to be another effect of the extinction of daemons—the changes in the Royals. Never before had it been necessary to lock them up. But now, if not for bars and manacles, there'd be a Great Escape every day. The chains were iron, not a speck of silver in the alloy—the Sisters weren't that cruel—but Rae suspected it was the indignity that really hurt the Royals. Their eyes glowed red from weeping. Their skins had hardened into reptilian hides, and in one case a pelt. They'd all gained weight. Some of them appeared to have grown taller and heavier of frame, though in the too-small alcoves to which they now had to be confined you couldn't tell for sure. Their appetites had increased. Playing handmaiden to them had become an unappealing task, arduous as never before to all the Sisters—except Breeze and those younger ones who strove fanatically, stupidly, to copy her example.

*22 Fessier 1900 A. D. 6:25 A.M.*

*Cype: Kherouge: Center City: the Enclave of the  
Most Patriotic Consecrated Sisters*

"No one's come to visit me for days," Breeze said mournfully. "I know you're busy, Rain, I'm not blaming *you*—but sometimes it feels as though everyone's forgotten I'm here. Sometimes they don't even send me anything to eat."

"But you're looking much better," Rain lied. She stroked the veins on the back of Breeze's hand. "There's color in your cheeks. Shall I bring a mirror so you can see?"

"You naughty creature!" Breeze smiled. "You always try to tempt me into vanity!"

The entire Enclave had been heated by daemon braziers, and so far the Sisters hadn't been able to find any other system as cheap. The sick bay felt cold and damp. Outside, rain misted down into the muddy courtyard. It was a gray dawn. Rain had been up all night with Breeze's daughter. Annabedette had the flu.

"The Royals don't care if I have color in my cheeks—and as long as they don't, why should I?" Breeze gripped Rain's hand. "I don't care how weak I get—it doesn't *matter* how weak I get—as long as I can still serve them."

Rain wanted to shout herself hoarse. *Why can't you see that serving them in excess of the demands of our consecration is what's weakened you?* She said carefully, "I don't think you should take communion again until you're less frail. I'm not just saying that out of concern for you; the fact is you don't have anything to share with them. It would be pointless."

"Hasn't Cloud always said it's the ritual pledge of patriotism that counts?" Breeze objected.

"It depends who the ritual is for. Them"—Rain took a deep breath—"or you."

Breeze's eyes flashed, doing duty for sun and moon and stars. "You think I'm selfish. It's you that's the selfish one!"

"I would like to keep you with me, it's true," Rain confessed. "But for *your* sake, I don't want you to throw your life away. You won't be any use to the Royals when you're dead."

"You just told me I looked better!" Breeze started up off her pillows, clasping Rain's hand, eyes glinting with sudden fear. "What aren't you telling me? What did that physician *really* say? Tell me!"

"I have," Rain said. "And it hasn't stopped you, has it?" She was no longer so careful what she said to Breeze as she'd once been. She'd realized that no matter how brutally she tried to force comprehension on the other woman, it was no use. Last week Breeze had submitted to a medical examination. Ideologically speaking, that amounted to a breach of consecration, but

Breeze had suffered the doctor gladly. Perhaps Sister Cloud had revealed to her what Rain had found out on her own—that this wasn't the first time a doctor had been called to the Enclave. Had Cloud also revealed that every previous time, it had been for more or less the same reason? Times changed, but fanatics remained unoriginal—they always chose the method of self-destruction closest to hand. And the Enclave, like the cult Rain had grown up in, like the communities of trickster women that were fast fading from the world's memory, attracted disproportionate numbers of fanatics—those seemingly paradoxical types who combined sentimentality with stubbornness, neurotic cowardice with an antisocial, almost ghoulish drive to see just how far they could push themselves.

After seeing Breeze the physician had wetted his lips, nervous as a boy in a brothel, looked around at the Sisters, and ventured the opinion that the patient had nothing wrong with her apart from a touch of anemia. He had prescribed red meat, lentils, milk, oranges, and bed rest, clearly doubting his own diagnosis even as he spoke. Rain sympathized with him. Summoned inside so notoriously secretive a community as the Patriotic Sisters, he would have been within his rights to expect a cholera outbreak, at the very least. He couldn't know he'd only been called to sign Breeze's death certificate. Telling the Sisters that, in effect, communion was all that was wrong with her was the same as tying their hands, for to stop her taking communion would be to invalidate the principles on which the Enclave was established.

"The physician said you should rest," Rain said. "Don't worry about Annabee. She's being well looked after."

"Annabee, 'Dette..." Breeze's eyes clouded over. "I'm so tired, I couldn't sleep a wink. I just dozed. What are you doing up so early?"

"That was what I came to tell you. 'Dette's over the worst of it. I've been nursing her."

"Oh, that's right, she had something, didn't she. Well," Breeze said, "all illnesses are merely manifestations of our failings in our patriotic duty toward the Royals—"

"—and although in general the Founding Sisters demonstrated great wisdom in establishing the precepts by which we live, *that* one is nothing short of an invitation to suicide!" Rain snapped, unable to restrain herself. "And if you apply it to children, it's *murder!*" But Breeze continued as if she hadn't heard, parroting the words of the hymn that equated faith in Royalty with mental and physical health. *It amazes me how you manage to preserve your faith when you yourself are the evidence that it's groundless*, Rain thought, listening. *Maybe you just can't face the fact that when you leaned on that guarantee of immunity, it gave way!* This time she managed not to say it. After five years among the Sisters, she'd learned to balance the extremes men had always inspired in her—tongue-tied inability to speak her mind and ill-considered theatricism. She'd learned both to dive deep and to skim the surface. When Breeze finally paused for breath, she said: "Fanny took communion the day before yesterday."

"So what? Hasn't she been taking it for years?"

But when it came to your lover, or the one who had been your lover for a brief shout of angelic trumpets, there was no surface! You floundered in a sea of infinite interpretations. Rain bit her lip. She'd subconsciously expected someone else to have filled Breeze in by now. But apparently not. "Of course, just like the other kids," she said gloomily. "But not since..." Remembering Breeze's prudishness, which had converged with Cyprian conventions even as Breeze's own sex life grew less conventional, she let it trail off.

"Oooh." Breeze's eyes widened. "I'd forgotten! What happened?"

All Enclave gossip had to do with the offspring. The Sisters' dedication to solving the puzzle of their children, piece by piece, year by year, consisted of equal parts maternal concern, patriotism, and voyeurism. Some believed the puzzle would reveal itself as a picture in time; others didn't. The oldest offspring of all was Omar, aged fifteen, who had recently flexed his muscles of independence and started working as a day laborer at the docks—but Fantinora, Sister

Cloud's only living child, was the oldest girl and as such, had long been the object of covert curiosity. A week ago, Cloud had discreetly put out the news that Fanny had had her menarche. That ended speculation that perhaps she *never* would, but provoked more urgent questions: what would happen when Fanny next had an audience with her father and her uncles? The possibilities had stimulated every Sister's appetite for the unthinkable.

"I did hear someone crying across the courtyard. I think it was as the sun was going down," Breeze probed.

"That was Fanny. She went downstairs after Timotheo came up—just as usual." Once they reached the age of five, the children visited their fathers once a week. Fantinora had got her period the day after her last trip downstairs, and she had stopped bleeding (according to Mist, who was on linen duty) night before last. "But it didn't go as usual. She came upstairs late for supper, and when she opened the door of the dining room, she was so, so pale. I wasn't there, but Fairday said when she passed her going down the table, she saw her dress wasn't buttoned right, and two buttons in the middle of her back were off. I expect everyone was staring." Rain *knew* they had been. She'd been there. She'd stared, too. But for some reason it hadn't occurred to her until now to feel ashamed. "She sat down in her place and then she began crying. We—all tried to pretend nothing was happening, but her hair was hanging in her plate, and after a little she started screaming. Hysterics. Fairday said she'd never heard anyone shriek herself hoarse before. She thought the neighbors would come."

"I thought I must have been dozing. Sometimes I dream of my old family."

"No, it was Fanny. Fairday took her upstairs. She said she wouldn't say a word, she just kept screaming and—and—plucking at herself, at her clothes—until she wore herself out. And then the next morning she was back to normal." Rain took a deep breath. Why did she feel guilty now? Because instead of being the one woman who rescued Fanny from the torture of self-humiliation, she'd been one of the seventeen who stayed where they were? Nothing to be ashamed of there. Fanny's own mother hadn't moved a muscle. "Dear, compassionate Fairday! *She's* a real patriot, a patriot of the Enclave."

"But—" Breeze made a face, clearly feeling the story lacked a climax. "Didn't Fanny tell Fairday what really happened?"

"Not according to her."

"I don't suppose they...hurt her?"

*They hurt me the first few times, Rain thought. And I wasn't even a virgin. No lasting damage unless you count Jonny and 'Stell—but it hurt as much as anything Colonel Sostairs did. The only difference was that they made me want it, and afterward they made me want it again. Did they make Fanny want it? It didn't look like that. Is she immune to their persuasion? Or isn't it just me—has their persuasion turned hard?*

"Did Cloud—or Sunlight, or Aurora—say anything about it?" Breeze asked.

"Cloud went to see her late last night. Queen knows what they said to each other. Fairday—she said that Fanny insisted she would never take communion again, no, not ever, not even if she had to stand up to her mother. But I don't suppose she *did* stand up to her. We'll see next week."

"I can't stand up to Cloud," Breeze said, tugging her blanket up under her chin.

*And that's why I wish Cloud would stand up to you, Rain thought with an angry prickle of tears. That's why I wish I had her authority. I wouldn't let ideology get in my way!*

"—and anyhow I don't see why Fanny *should* be excused from communion. Half-Royal or not, she's one of us, isn't she? And Queen knows they need every drop of blood we can give them."

"Breeze, it's not just about blood! For crying out loud, you've got a *daughter*. *Annabedette*."

Breeze closed her eyes and wriggled vigorously on her pillows. "*Rain*," she protested in a tiny voice.

"All I'm saying is that if I were Cloud, I'd have taken that possibility into consideration!"

Rain heard her voice shaking with distress. Her head filled with images of monsters, offspring only a quarter human by blood and not at all human in appearance: multijointed fingers, huge useless wings, permanently oozing skin, lurid eyes. Would they be monkey geniuses, or congenital failures?

“But *Rain*,” Breeze whined. “She wouldn’t have to—you know—not with...”

“How is she supposed to know which one is her father? I bet not even Cloud knows! I don’t know which ones are Jonajon’s and ‘Stell’s fathers!” They weren’t supposed to be talking about any of this. But in her misery, Rain couldn’t hold back. “You don’t know which one’s Annabee’s father—and it makes no *difference*, because a Royal is a Royal is a Royal is a...”

Breeze shut her eyes tight and stuck her fingers in her ears. “‘We have to trust in the Sisters’ decision!” she sang. “‘We have to trust in the Sisters’ decision.” Rain smoothed handfuls of her black woolen skirt. “We have to trust. We have to trust...” Breeze’s voice died away. She lay still, the blanket hem over her mouth not moving. *She must be getting tired*, Rain thought guiltily. Enormous blood loss affected the body in odd ways: you wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest, but often you couldn’t fall asleep, or if you did, it was a lurid doze, and people you didn’t normally allow into your thoughts strolled and strutted and speechified in front of your lidless mind’s eye. Lessons branded with hot irons on the consciousness could be erased with one caress from the sandman.

She shouldn’t have burdened Breeze with such a knotty ideological dilemma. *But who else can I talk to? Crispin? He doesn’t understand the Enclave, and he has troubles enough of his own. Mist, Fairday—there’s no one.* “Rest, my darling.” Leaning across the bed, she brushed kisses on Breeze’s forehead and nose and lips. Breeze’s skin was cool and sweaty at once.

“Mmmph,” Breeze said crossly, and turned her head to the side.

“I’ll come and see you again soon. If I can get away, I’ll bring your lunch tray.”

“I’ll be down for lunch.”

“Oh, my love. Don’t strain yourself.”

“I ought to get up for prayers. I don’t know if I’m up to that, but I *definitely* have to get up for communion.”

Breeze believed the Royals needed a taste of her uniquely nutritious blood every day to survive. It wasn’t as if she knew no better: the incident last autumn Rain had come to think of as the Great Escape had slapped the whole Enclave with the truth. But Breeze had an extraordinary talent for self-occlusion, and she had simply *refused* to acknowledge that her lords’ sole motivation was carnality, and that they didn’t care if they communed with her or, as had happened on that terrible occasion, which would have been the end of the Enclave if anyone had made the connection, a shop boy and an ancient beggar and a laborer stumbling home late from a tavern and (had his bodyguards not been armed with projectile guns) a prominent member of Kherouge old-money society. The Royals’ omnivorousness was now conceded though never discussed by most of the Sisters. Rain supposed that was why no one had questioned Fantinora’s taking communion as an adult. The *Royals* wouldn’t care!

The Royals cared for nothing and no one.

Breeze spoke without opening her eyes, her lips hardly moving. “It used to be you who was weak, Rainie. Now it’s me. I don’t know what happened.”

Rain struggled for a moment and answered, managing her voice carefully. “I realized nothing was going to change. So I had to keep on; because there was no end in sight. I had to stop fooling myself.”

Breeze smelled like metal. Her delicate blanket-shrouded figure seemed a shell of flesh around molten, seething iron. “You mean, when we heard about the eradication of the Kingsburg Royals and you—you always thought, didn’t you, that when the Queen died, the world would end. You and your cultic notions.”

“You and *yours!*” Rain burst out, but Breeze didn’t answer for so long that Rain thought she had fallen asleep. She extricated her hand.

Breeze stirred and murmured: “The world didn’t end, Rain, because there still *are* Royals. Right here in this Enclave. And doesn’t that lead you to the conclusion that our consecration is more necessary now than...? Never mind. It does me.”

Rain looked out the window. The morning was dark in contrast to the glow behind her, the brightness of her love burning away, as if she were sitting next to a living pyre.

“Consecrated, my body. Consecrated, my blood. Consecrated, my sun-time,” Breeze chanted.

“I’ll send someone to wake you for morning communion,” Rain said. As she reached the door, Breeze stopped chanting and opened her eyes.

“Darling—Annabedette—say hello to her for me—give her a kiss—”

“If she’ll let me.” Rain went out. The corridor ran the length of the building. Locked doors led to other solitary-confinement sick bays and to storerooms. Gray light from the skylights showed dust in the corners where some rebellious child had skimped on his chores. A few moments ago Rain had been cold and tired, but now anger heated her blood, and she couldn’t believe she’d ever loved Breeze, except that the rational part of her knew that she was only angry because she *still* loved Breeze. She said to the closed door, “You’re killing yourself in the service of appetites that know no satiation and no gratitude, The Royals aren’t human. If I had to guess, I’d say the *real* Royals weren’t human either. But what I do know is that ours were nothing but beasts to begin with, poor imitations, and we’ve indulged their bestiality to the point of turning monarchs into monsters. I wish I had the strength to tell you what they really are! But you’re past believing me—and I’m not even sure I have the strength to believe it myself.” She rested her forehead against the door. From inside came the faint sound of Breeze chanting prayers. “I don’t *want* to believe it, that’s for sure. But you see, unlike you, I’m in constant contact with the children, and they’re the proof. I don’t understand how any of our Sisters can still convince themselves their babies are the offspring of the Ferupian Dynasty—unless they’ve known all along that the dynasty and the monsters were one and the same—and in that case, how can they keep insisting the children are privileged, brilliant, destined for greatness, and all the rest of it? Dynastic heritage is no longer a guarantee of success, for one thing. And for another, Fantinora! And Omar’s no better, he’s just better at blending in. As for my own Jonajon! ‘Stell!”

A throbbing, endless sigh of horror deafened her, as always when she really thought about her son and daughter. Faintly, she heard the chords of the organ from the chapel. Morning prayers. Breeze had been on time, but she was late.

*22 Jevanary 1900 A.D. 5:47 P.M.*

When, Rain wondered, had she become a playgroup leader? She’d never thought of herself as good with children. But judging from the way the older offspring had turned out, Rain was no worse than Founding Sister Cloud, or Sunlight, Aurora, or any of the other older Sisters. It was even possible that her own childhood, spent in an environment whose similarities to the Enclave she no longer bothered to deny, gave her a better understanding than they of the way the children’s minds worked.

Not that understanding them was the issue. The issue was controlling them.

Someone was pregnant all the time, and although a good third of the children born in the Enclave died—that was the same here as anywhere—still, increase was inevitable. Right now the Enclave had twenty-two offspring between the ages of fifteen and seven months.

Running the household entailed so many other tasks that it was simply impossible to watch all of the children all the time. When it came to damage control, most of the Sisters relied on scoldings and smackings. Others put their faith in reason, never mind that reason confused the

offspring worse than illogic did. Others, Rain thought, would secretly have liked to lock the children up alongside their fathers—at least that way the Sisters would have been spared the daily embarrassment of the Little Escapes, when one child or another went missing, only to be caught in vain attempts to infiltrate the nation of normal children. Their looks alone disqualified them for friendships with the neighborhood youngsters. They knew how to hide their precocity but not their oddly tinted skin, extra fingers and toes, and disproportionately long limbs. Worst off were those cursed with rudimentary wings, which, concealed under their clothes, looked like humpbacks. Rain's heart ached for them. But the pain turned to horror when she remembered the rare occasions when she'd witnessed Royal children and local urchins playing together. Inevitably, the offspring tried to organize the comfortable chaos of bucketball or lurk-and-peek into what looked like war games. And Rain had once spied on the absurd, pitiable spectacle of Jonajonny holding a tutorial in a shopkeeper's stockyard, drawing diagrams in the dirt for a circle of uncomprehending three- and four-year-olds, finally throwing down his stick and screaming at them like a short-tempered professor. He wasn't a normal child, and Estellesme was far from a normal toddler. And her two weren't even eccentric by offspring standards.

The only way, she'd decided, to minimize such doomed contacts and simultaneously try to normalize the children was to keep them busy. They had astounding memories, and they liked to use their imaginations; what could suit better than putting on plays? They'd extruded their first effort, *Dolorous and His Brothers*, before an audience of Sisters a year ago. Each successive production was ten times better than the previous. And she found the role of manager gratifying enough to continue for her own sake as well as theirs: combing Kherouge's libraries, salvation stores, and rag-and-boneries for scripts and costumes gave her an excuse to go out whenever she needed. This had come in especially handy since Crispin arrived. Besides, she loved theater itself, every aspect of it from casting to rehearsing to set-painting to the interpretive finishing touches that made each play *hers*. Watching the curtain rise gave her a thrill she hadn't realized was missing from her life. Ever since she ran away from the Seventeenth Mansion of the Glorious Dynasty, she'd been told over and over that she was good for nothing but theatrics. She'd once held a grudge against the world for forcing her on stage over and over; but now—ironically, now that she herself was no longer acting—she knew fate had understood her better than she understood herself. She would leave arithmetic and geometry, geography and literature, foreign language and history to the Enclave's fanatics.

She'd commandeered the biggest ground-floor room at the back of the courtyard for a rehearsal space. She stood with folded arms, watching the principal members of her cast milling in the rainlight from the windows, fighting over the interpretation of a climactic confrontation. It was the end of a long afternoon. Her limbs felt like rags, and her forehead throbbed: she always ran out of energy before they did.

"Cut by gee two. Disaster crypt to two."

"Green raspberries. Nocount, slash wy oh oar, catak-la."

They spat the monosyllables under their breaths like generals arguing behind enemy lines. She wasn't meant to hear. The four or five oldest offspring spoke only Ferupian, but these younger ones had their own language, a kind of military jargon, or perhaps it was more like the private terminology of art critics. She meant to keep Jonajonny from being initiated into it by any means necessary.

"Nemmine. By ex to nineteen, pattern no catak-la."

Three of the children closed in, watching intently as the other two embraced. The girl ducked the boy's kiss, pulled away, and delivered her line. Her voice throbbed with adult emotion negated by the voice itself, which was tiny, fragile, and high-pitched. "It's not intended / That I be your intended! / By the hand of my maid / Oh, heart, I'm afraid / Our betrothal is ended!"

"Duella?" Alessandro, nine, exclaimed on just the right note of shock. "That soft-eyed /

Creature who cried / For joy as I'd confide / My love for you, my desire to wed you—”

“Aless, snog ex one zero zero alt coilaway.”

Alessandro looked annoyed. “Ink, Petey. Eleo blay, truss no, zhee—” He dropped into Ferupian. “She’s as stiff as a nightgown hung out to dry!” Rain supposed there were nuances of disapproval you couldn’t express in their language, which seemed primarily designed for the purpose of codifying disagreements like algebra. Aless turned to his romantic interest, Eleondora. “You’re playing it for *laughs*, Eleo! You’re supposed to be telling me you love me, but you can never see me again! If you can’t fake it, then you should’ve let Julijo have the part!”

“She doesn’t want to kiss you because you’re *physically repulsive*,” Mogglebone, Petryan’s sidekick, suggested. He was too good an actor for Rain to jettison him, but he held a grudge against the whole production because she hadn’t made him hero, and had started a rumor that she’d discriminated against him because he was only eight. He was an expert at sowing schism. In her nightmares, Rain imagined him as governor of Kherouge—although it would be the first time the Assembly had elected a governor with permanent jaundice and a scowl as wide as his brow and webbed fingers that were the real reason she hadn’t given him the part (there was no way he could hold the hero’s prop, a big tin broadsword). But that was the kind of thing you couldn’t make offspring understand. “I wouldn’t kiss you if you paid me in *cash*.” The flaps of daffodil skin between Mogglebone’s fingers rustled as he mimed palming coins. “Flex point nine, siz aitcha therwise,” he added softly.

“I’d kiss a fish if my *art* demanded it of me. And even if you wouldn’t, no one’s asking you to, Maggie!” Eleondora peeped piercingly. Because a genetic accident had given her a sparrow’s voice, none of the other children took her seriously. Rain had cast her as the Squire’s Daughter in an attempt to build her self-confidence, which had backfired because all the children except Eleondora herself saw through it. She had simply caught prima donna fever and become unendurable.

“No one’s asking you to butt your silly yellow mug in, either!” she piped. “Aless obviously hasn’t got it with regard to my character. The whole idea is that I’m trying to convince myself that I shouldn’t see him again, and so I’m scared to let him touch me in case I change my mind. But if he has a complaint, he ought to direct it to Rain, and so you’re *both* wrong, what do you think, Auntie, I’m right, aren’t I?”

Eleondora swung in Rain’s direction, beseeching hands extended, her bedraggled pink chiffon contrasting with the black overalls and dresses the other children wore. She always wore her costume to rehearsal; it would have to be cleaned and mended before the actual performance. Rain started to scold her for treading on her hems, when memory pierced her—herself at just this age, playing music hall in her mother’s tatty, camphor-scented velvets and furs. All five of them were staring at her, their united focus like a battery of guns, and she knew she couldn’t avoid making a judgment. “At this stage, interpretations aren’t really important. Nor should we be concentrating on any one scene—it’s easy to fall into that trap, but you’ve got to remember that at this early stage the logistics of the whole production arc what matters. Everyone has to work on their entrances and exits, and I want you to be more creative onstage. You can’t just stand there looking at each other. Try improvising.”

They looked disappointed. They were justified, she knew. When she was nine her idea of “character” had been a scrap of fabric pressed onto a ball of clay, and she wouldn’t have known an “interpretation” from a sour plum...but *these* children had the elements of acting down better than many professionals, not just because they’d had instruction, but because no matter what the art, they absorbed it like nourishment and regurgitated it looking better than it had in the first place. They were almost too polished. Unlike the professionals of the road, who defined acting (if they thought to define it at all) as faking reality, the offspring faked fakery—or to put it another way, instead of playing roles, they played actors *acting* roles. And they pulled it off. Laypersons

saw no difference. The only thing the children couldn't fake was physical maturity, and their audiences, composed of Sisters and tolerant neighbors, allowed for that.

Maybe that was why they honestly thought of themselves as adults. Every time she forgot and treated them like children, they held it against her. They divided their "aunts" into two camps—neutrals and enemies—and since she introduced them to theater, she'd been in the former category, but she still had to watch her step. Sisters who logged too many offenses against their dignity were sorry, though nothing could ever be traced back to the children. They were too canny for that.

"Ex fussenfie alt ex! Two inco point nine oh down—" someone hissed.

Rain said, "And of course, it goes without saying that your lines have to be perfect."

"I have my lines down word for *word*," all five children said nearly at once, contemptuously. "That's the *easy* part."

They threw each other murderous glances, clearly detesting their own synchronization. "Slash aitch point three four. Screw shut now," whispered Alessandro. It was he who'd spoken before.

"No, Aless, 'cause you're *right!* We shouldn't go any farther until we've addressed the problem. Julijo *ought* to be the Squire's Daughter." Petryan, age ten, pointed at Julijoanna, daughter of Sister Moonrise. Julijo was a seven-year-old with the face and personality of a street pigeon. Her gray skin tautened to parchment transparency over her bony nose, and the useless wings under her blouse had bowed her into a permanent stoop. Petryan radiated calm authority. His unconscious mimicking of his mother, Sunlight, was a source of private amusement to the younger Sisters. "Eleo's playing against type. She'd be a lot more convincing as Aless's sister. We haven't cast the sister yet, Aunt Rain."

"That's 'cause the sister only appears in one scene and only has about two *lines!*" Eleondora howled as loudly as she could.

"I don't want to play the Daughter." Julijoanna bobbed her head back and forth. "I like being Duella. She's a lot more interesting." She bobbed toward Rain, her arms stiff at her sides, her toes turned out. "Isn't she, Auntie? I've been getting into her really well, haven't I?"

"No humility," Mogglebone remarked, gazing at the ceiling, as the others erupted into argument.

Rain clapped her hands. "None of you are ever going to make it as professionals—" *and that's that*, she thought, *no matter how convincing you are onstage*— "if you can't accept the parts you've been given. Playing against type is an opportunity to challenge yourselves, and I give you such roles on purpose. When I was touring, I would have *welcomed* the chance to be allowed to play characters other than those the troupe manager had decided were my 'type.' Secondly—"

"What was your type, Aunt Rain?"

They were inching toward her, sliding their feet across the flags one at a time. Worshipful fans—or a pack of hounds stealthily closing with their prey? She regarded them. "Harlots. Mistresses. An occasional helpless heroine. In *The Seven Falcons*, I was the sister who marries rich, whom Petryan wants Eleondora to play; but I've already decided, Petry, that part's going to Heloisandra." Heloisandra, nearly twelve, couldn't act for peanuts and displayed little interest in the theater, but since she was venerated by the younger set, Rain expected them to protest her being given a role that was little more than a walk-on. They might as well not have heard. They pressed around her.

"Aunt Rain, Aunt Rain, Aunt Rain," they cooed. "Auntraaaaaain."

None of them came up past her waist. All offspring grew fast at first, then slowed down after their fifth or sixth year. At this age they were smaller than normal children. Their legs were nearly as long as Rain's, but they had tiny puff-chested torsos like song birds.

"Tell us about your touring days."

"Tell us about before you came to the Enclave."

“Tell us.”

“Tell us about Ferupe.”

“Tell us about the desert.”

“Tell us! None of the other aunts will. Geography is just place-names and distances. It doesn’t mean anything!” Eleondora entreated.

“Split blue day point one nine three,” Alessandro said in a warning voice that came out so loud in the silence the other children glared at him. Rain seized her chance.

“And secondly, if we can’t have rehearsals without disagreements, we won’t have rehearsals at all.” She shook herself free and stepped back. “So think about that, and if you decide among yourselves that you can leave your differences outside this room, I’ll see you tomorrow at the same time.” She made a shooing gesture. She was trying to instill a sense of obedience in them. No one went. Eleondora pleaded:

“Auntie, can’t we do the scene for you one more time? I promise we’ll get it right!”

“No. Now go take off your costume and fold it in the tissue. The rest of you put on warm things, it’s cold and wet and you’re not allowed to catch anything until the babies are all over the flu. Get out, dammit, I’m sick of the lot of you!” she shouted, abruptly losing her patience, and the children recognized their own parlance: they stared at her for a second with delight, then fled, giggling wildly.

She let out a breath. The low ceiling seemed to echo back their laughter, and the rainy twilight was as much inside the room as outside, and patches of wetness seeped down the walls from the windows, across the flags.

On her way upstairs to see Breeze, she literally stumbled over Alessandro. He lay curled on the landing, his tiny body as stiff as a fetus aborted in snow country, his cheeks stretched with dry sobs. Get the children together and they were a billowing, amorphous entity that rolled away, laughing merrily when you tried to poke a hole in it, but get any one of them alone and he or she was a sickly, needy, emotional baby.

Rain knelt down and prised Alessandro’s arms away from his head. He gasped. “What’s wrong?” she asked gently.

He wailed, “It was all—my fault—”

“It wasn’t your—” It did no good to soft-soap them; they were too clever for that. “I mean, it wasn’t *all* your fault. You shouldn’t have picked holes in Eleo’s performance. But Moogle made things worse, and then Petry—it was *all* of your faults.”

“They all—hate me—”

“How silly you are. Why do you think that?”

“Because you—wouldn’t tell us—about touring—and it was my fault!” He wailed, scrambled away, and pressed himself shuddering against the wall.

Rain settled herself on her heels, tucking her skirt in, and stroked his cropped, shocking pink head. Offspring seemed inevitably to inherit their fathers’ coloring. She supposed it made sense that Royal genes would dominate merely human ones. But Alessandro with his lilac skin and hollyhock hair had had especially bad luck in the normalcy lottery. “I know I’m just a stupid grown-up. But I still don’t understand why they blamed you.”

Alessandro screamed with frustration. He wrenched around and flung himself into her lap. “Because you *heard* me!” He buried his face in her skirt. “You heard me talk kid. You don’t like it when we talk kid. Mother doesn’t like it either.”

“Oh, Aless,” Rain said sadly. “Tell Maggie and Eleo and Petry and Julijo—”

“It was Petry.”

*That explains it*, Rain thought. Petryan’s mother Sunlight had a bee in her bonnet about the children’s private language; she wanted any child caught mouthing an “ex,” a “raspberry,” a “slash,” or a “no count” to be punished with solitary confinement. Rain knew punishing the

children would just incite them to slyness. And she had her own reasons: she'd never tried to learn a foreign language before, but she did know that if she had no opportunities to hear it spoken, she wouldn't get far. "I'm not allowed to tell stories about Ferupe," she said. "You know that perfectly well. It had nothing to do with your talking—kid. When we're rehearsing, what I want is for everyone to communicate and feel comfortable with what we're doing, and if using—kid language—makes it easier for you all to agree, you can talk it as much as you like. Tell the others I said so. Of course"—she put a smile in her voice—"now and then you might have to translate for me."

Alessandro trembled. "Do you mean it, Aunt Rain?"

"Of course I do. But—"

"Then that's good! Goody-good!" He wriggled onto his back and embraced her forearms, a grin transforming his face. "Then we prob'ly won't *have* to talk it as much around you. We mostly talk it around aunts we don't like." Even on the dark landing she could see trust shining from his face. "We like you, and now I like you more. I know you'd tell us stories if Aunt Cloud let you."

"—but there's something I'd like you to do for me in return, if you can."

Alessandro's face closed. "What?"

"Oh, nothing much," she said in a forced casual tone. "Just that I'd like it if you and the others didn't talk kid to Jonny."

"*Little* Jonny? *Your* Jonny?"

"Yes, my Jonny." Rain tried to keep the edge out of her voice.

"But he's too...but...oh, *I* see, you don't want...but it won't..." Alessandro was thinking faster than he was talking. She saw the workings of his inconceivable mind flit across his face. When he sat up with a manufactured smile, she knew she'd gone too far.

"Don't worry, Aunt Rain, he won't learn kid from any of *us*..." His voice trailed off, and he glanced upward. Offspring ears were sharp; a moment passed before Rain heard halting footsteps. A sweep of black cotton descended around the twist in the stairs and then a pale blue, sorrowful face poked down. Fantinora put out her hand to the banister groove in the wall and struck a tragic pose. "Rain." Omitting either *Aunt* or *Sister*, she came off accusatory.

"Hello, Fanny. I was just—"

"I'm running away to become a playwright starving in a garret, and it's all your fault for putting the idea in my head."

"Don't be absurd." Rain glanced at Alessandro, but, with incredible stealth, the boy had got up and slipped away. She glimpsed a black shirttail vanishing downstairs. "All right, Fanny." She sighed. "What is it?"

"I'm not joking"

Rain felt a pang of fear. Fanny might actually be capable of doing what she threatened—or at least giving it her best shot—and if she did, Rain *would* be blamed. Fanny was too old to act alongside the younger set, so Rain had encouraged her to try her hand at writing plays instead. No one could fairly have linked Fanny's pubescence to her literary frustration, but all the same, Cloud held the girl's increasing unmanageability against Rain.

Fanny swayed from the waist. "Can you come see in my room? It's finished. I've scribed a clean copy." She smiled, and her corpse-blue cheeks appled, making her for a moment attractive.

Rain thought of Breeze, just two floors overhead. A wave of physical longing curled through her. Not sexual desire, just the desire to hold Breeze's poor drained body in her arms, to have one more chance to plead with her. "Are you really going to let me see it at long last?" She forced a teasing note into her voice. "Or is this a ploy to get me to help you pack your bags? I warn you, I'm an expert at running away. Everything *you* think you need, you don't really."

"Don't you *want* to see it?"

"Of course I do." Rain got up, brushing down her skirt. Her head hurt worse than ever.

22 *Fessierey 1900 A.D. 11:56 P.M.*

A soft slow relentless rain fell into the courtyard, onto the roofs, and into the cisterns of Kherouge. Rain slicked the backs and dripped from the horns of the stupefied cattle and hogs in the abbatoir stock pens. Rain glistened the docks and wasted itself in the sea. This month the city had grown used to such bounty, and it slept as if drowned.

She had been renamed for rain. She'd been grateful because the word sounded so much like her own name it hadn't been hard to get used to. Now, however, she wondered if the Founding Sisters had intended deeper symbolism. Maybe they'd sensed even then that, like rain in Kherouge, she tended to extremes. She'd thought the Enclave would be her salvation from herself. She'd thought patriotism of the Sisters' sort was a way of altruism, moderation, contentment. But Breeze's plight demonstrated that the end of the road wasn't contentment. It was oblivion. And even making allowances for the Royals' insatiability, oblivion seemed the poorest sort of reward for what had started out as altruism. It mocked every concept of justice.

She slid soft-footed into the sick bay. Breeze slept immobile, her black pajamas rucked up around her neck, framing a face as still and pale as if she, too, had been drowned by the damp air.

Earlier, while Rain helped prepare supper, Breeze had ghosted through the kitchen on her way downstairs. Five minutes later, Rain made some excuse—ignoring her Sisters' exchanged glances—and followed her. But Breeze managed to evade her in the tunnels. Rain, on the other hand, was no earthly good at evasion. Claws caught her sleeve, swung her around against iron bars, and a moment later her hand was on the lock and she was inside, and he was inside her, the Royals got straight to the point, you could say that for them, they dispensed with all the absurd human preambles; and when he'd finished she cleaned herself with her petticoat and stumbled back upstairs shamefaced, weaker than a survivor of a shipwreck. Everyone knew she had violated protocol, and they didn't look at her. Chopping winter squashes, her hands shaking so badly she nearly chopped off her own fingers, she felt herself flushed with specious emotions, foremost among them the desire to see her children. She needed to be reminded why she put herself through this. She needed reassurance that she wasn't unrecompensed.

Jonajonny! Estellesme!

After dinner she couldn't hold out any longer.

But of course the children were as good as their fathers at draining your lifeblood. They were just subtler. It was easy to get into the dorms after lights-out, nearly impossible to get out. Rain got caught up in their guessing games and relay-race stories, caught up like a conspirator in Jonny and his friends' plot to stay awake as long as possible. Crouching between giggling bedfuls of them in the dark, she'd eventually been discovered by Cloud, and scolded as if she'd been the ringleader.

"She practically dragged me out on my ear," she said to Breeze's sleeping form. "And then sent me to join the girls on late laundry duty. She pretended the rotas had already been altered, and she just hadn't had a chance to tell me; but I know it was punishment. I think she hates me."

Tears of self-pity welled up in her eyes.

*But then, I hate her, she reminded herself. So why shouldn't she hate me back? I can't get all tearful just because she has the authority to act on her hatred! I wish I did, too, that's all. Stupid self-satisfied bitch.*

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and moved around the bed. She sank onto the chair. With the toe of her shoe she nudged Breeze's supper tray across the floor. No one had bothered to remove it. Maybe they reasoned the leftovers would do for the invalid's breakfast. *Several* breakfasts: it didn't look as though Breeze had so much as picked up the spoon. Rain bent and listened for Breeze's breath. In her peripheral vision, the crack under the door glowed like a pulsating, fiery abyss. A strand of her hair drifted across Breeze's pale face. Breeze twitched her

nose. Her breath smelled like a forge.

“Fanny’s play,” Rain said, leaning back. “It would be a hit if it could ever be produced. If any manager bothered to read it before laughing her out of his office. She’s like the rest of them, she won’t stand being lied to, so I had to tell her the truth. It would be physically impossible for any company except maybe the Royal Opera to put it on. The sets—a mountaintop with a gale blowing, the deck of a galleon, a ballroom, the Princess’s bed chamber (the heroine is a princess, of course)—you’d have to ransack the Kherouge Treasury to build them. The plot’s cleverer than dueling daemons. Her characters are caricatures of stereotypes of archetypes, and there’s dozens of them. The songs...she sang them to me, or at least the choruses, and I realized in short order the reason they were so catchy was because she’d lifted all the tunes from productions I’ve done with the children. That’s what the best modern playwrights do—steal judiciously from the traditional dramas—and she didn’t even know it; her ambition is so genuine, so realistic, and so hopelessly incongruous with her station. I couldn’t say anything to her apart from *I’m sorry*.” Rain gestured helplessly. She knew she was talking to herself. “And I do feel sorry for her,” she whispered. “Her face got stonier and stonier. By the time I’d finished she looked like a gargoyle. It’s as if it were my fault. Of course it is, in a way—but it’s not my fault that a fourteen-year-old with a blue face couldn’t get *any* play produced by *any* company unless *she* paid *them* and probably not then! She’s never seen a professional production, she thinks it’s all the Royal Opera out there, and the doors are open to her. And she’ll never know the truth, because if it’s up to her mother, she’ll never set foot outside the Enclave as long as she lives. Cloud couldn’t stop Aurora letting Omar go out to work—but she’ll let Fanny do the same over her dead body.”

Breeze shifted. A waft of hot air licked Rain’s face. Banked down, the forge inside the other woman’s body had built up a tremendous heat.

“I know Cloud just wants to protect her. I mean, I want to protect Jonny and ‘Stell. Looking the way they do, they could never get anywhere, so it’s better if they don’t try, at least not yet. But keeping Fan *ignorant* isn’t going to help. Cloud didn’t even bother to warn her about menstruation. Fan hadn’t changed her bed, and I could see it was stained, absolutely polka-dotted. The room smells, too. Someone’s going to have to show her how to cope. But it won’t be me; she’d never forgive me. She *already* isn’t going to forgive me.”

Rain shifted from the chair onto the edge of the bed and laid her hand on Breeze’s hip. The blanketed bone felt like hot iron.

“I wish they’d let me use makeup on the children. Then I’d have rouge and lip paint and kohl and powder and I could make you look like yourself again. Crispin wants to see me in paint. He’s disappointed that I’ve aged. Maybe he’d give me the money to buy a few things. But I know you’d never let me touch you.” She thought for a minute. “Fanny might, though. She doesn’t know she’s ugly: she envisions herself playing her Princess, blue face and white hair and all! But there isn’t a woman born who doesn’t believe there’s room for improvement.”

Fanny was Rain’s inside line to Cloud. All the Sisters played each other off against one another: and Cloud had taught her daughter how to do *that*, even if she hadn’t taught her how to staunch her bleeding.

There had been too much blood. On the sheets, dried on the floor, on wadded clothes in the corner of the tiny bedroom.

“They *did* hurt her. They must have just about ripped her in half. No wonder she pretended not to hear Sister calling us for dinner. It probably still hurts her to walk. She’d rather starve than be seen limping.”

Fanny had sat on the floor, her gaze fixed on Rain’s hands, while Rain read the play. The girl’s mouth and shoulders drooped at angles. She didn’t say a word as Rain gingerly attempted to explain why *Roderick’s Quest* could never be produced. In an effort to compensate, she’d asked what type of man Fanny imagined playing the soldier-hero. Did he look like Omarhad? (Fanny,

thanks to her mother's over-protectiveness, had never seen any other adult male.)

"Queen, no!" Fanny had started up off the floor, daemon-fire in her eyes. "Roderick? The Princess *marries* him! I'm not marrying ugly, skinny, green-faced *Omar*! I'm going to marry a *normal* man!"

Apparently glimpses from windows had done enough damage.

*I knew a normal man once*, Rain had thought. *I thought if I had the luck ever to meet him again, I'd marry him that very day, in my street clothes. What happened?*

The Wraithwaste was what had happened. Rain tended to recall that time with the unemotional clarity of distance. But now she smelled the musky, tangy odor of wild daemons, heard pine needles crunch underfoot, saw her friend Hannah crumpling on the threshold of the menagerie, saw the corpses of the other trickster women and their boyfriends arranged like cords of wood waiting to be burned. The embers of the bonfire glowed dully in the dawn. Crispin dragged her away.

But she hadn't really escaped, had she? The Wraithwaste had been reduced to a wasteland, and the Kirekunis, one heard, were relocating the displaced and desperate there by the truckload; the trickster women had died out with their daemons—but daemons weren't extinct, and neither were the kind of women who enslaved themselves in rapt servitude to them, while refusing to admit that slavery was a two-way bond, and that slaves must eventually be sold out.

Everything that had happened to Rain since the age of eleven seemed rather than chance to have been the result of her own subconscious's hideously infallible sense of direction. Give or take seven years, she'd jumped straight from the frying pan of the Seventeenth Mansion of the Glorious Dynasty into the fire. And she and Crispin should have stopped to put it out because she was still burning. Her meandering route from Holstead House to the Enclave of the Most Patriotic Sisters might as well have been a beeline.

She bared her teeth and braced herself. But as she thrust herself upright, her head spun, and Breeze's voice penetrated her dizziness, a cold flame chattering in the dark. "Rain, will you lie down beside me? I'm f-f-freezing. Rain? Will you come give me a cuddle?"

"You're not cold," Rain snapped. "You're burning up."

"Please, Rain? I think I'm d-d-dying."

*She hated it, she knew how utterly cut off it was, how hideous and how sickeningly mindless. Sometimes she beat her wings like a new Daphne, turning not into a tree but a machine. And yet, she was overcome by the nostalgia. She struggled to get more and more into accord with the atmosphere of the place, she craved to get her satisfaction of it.*

—D. H. Lawrence