

EVER, PART TWO: THE DAEMON IN THE MACHINE

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Part Two of the EVER trilogy.



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Our Story So Far...

In *The War in the Waste*, we encountered Crispin Kateralbin, truck driver, daemon handler, and sometime aerialist in the traveling circus billed as Smithrebel's Fabulous Aerial and Animal Show. Crispin is unaware that Saul Smithrebel, the owner of the circus, is his father. He is prone to visions which seem to depict the imminent end of the world, a cataclysm also prophesied by the religious cults proliferating across the continent. After Crispin caused an accident in which a fellow trapeze artist died, Saul fired him. He drifted into Valestock, a town on the western edge of Ferupe, and met a costume-maker's assistant named Rae. They

fled together into the Wraithwaste, the daemon-haunted forest that lies between Ferupe and the Significant Empire of Kirekune. The Wraithwaste is a source of valuable daemons and a bone of contention between the two powers, which have been warring for almost a century.

Reaching the far side of the Wraithwaste, Crispin was captured and recruited into the Queen's Air Force. The child he rescued in the forest, one of the daemon-blooded natives known as Wraiths, was killed in the struggle. Rae, since she is a Kirekuni, was taken into custody under suspicion of spying for the Significant.

In the QAF, Crispin's daemon-handling skills gave him an edge. He was rapidly promoted to lieutenant and then to captain. His commandant, Vichuisse, was an aristocrat whose connections compensated for his total inadequacy as a pilot. In the Salzeim Parallel Crispin became friendly with a fellow captain named David Burns. Burns persuaded him to join in a conspiracy to kill the universally hated Vichuisse. Crispin enlisted Mickey Ash, a Kirekuni deserter who joined the QAF to avoid execution, to help with the plot.

However, once Vichuisse was dead, Crispin realized Burns had double-crossed him: he meant Crispin to take the blame while he himself inherited Vichuisse's commandancy. Crispin, acknowledging his own crime, was prepared to face a court-martial. But Mickey convinced him to flee. They resurrected a clapped-out old bomber and took off in the direction of Kirekune, escaping military justice by minutes.

Book Five: *The Fall*

A Handful of Dust

2 Maia 1896 A.D.

Kirekune: the western foothills of the Raw Marches

The old Blacheim clattered westward across the sunlit ridges and shadowed gorges of the Raw Marches. Early that morning they had crossed into Kirekune.

It had taken Mickey most of the previous day to pilot the airborne banger across the resettled territories, the two-hundred-mile-wide band of pastureland that he now thought of, in Ferupian, as the Occupied Raw. He was afraid to push the sick old daemon too hard. At sunset he'd put her down in a goat pasture so Crispin could take over the whipcord. It had felt like setting foot for the first time in a strange country. Mickey's memories of his year at Anno Marono, hundreds of miles to the south, flying Wedgehead with Izigonara's 20th, seemed oddly distant, irrelevant to this emergency. So, too, did the Occupied Raw seem irrelevant to Mickey's sense of urgency. They hadn't yet escaped the war, but you'd never have known it. The grass was the same faded green it had been at Air Base XXI, Sarehole, the air just as soft. Something about the light of the setting sun flattened the landscape, giving the far-off mountains a look of stage scenery. The stream from which they refilled their canteens tasted of metal.

For a hundred years the Kirekuni Empire had been irrigating the former Wraithwaste as it captured it, saving the territory from desertification. Significant Disciples had built brand-new Anno villages and imported villagers from the Ochadou Plains west of the Raw Marches. Settlers and empire-expanding paraphernalia alike had to be either flown across or trucked south from the Teilsche and Lynche passes into Kirekune: the Marches were impassable by land. The Annos farthest from the war front were impoverished little hamlets where, despite the Disciples' efforts, the Chadou engaged in the same sleepy struggle to survive that their countrymen did on the other side of the mountains.

It couldn't have been less like the Raw that Mickey and Crispin had just left, that narrow strip of deforested, quickly parching land rife with military activity, buffered from the Wraithwaste only by the Shadowtowns. Mickey tried to tell Crispin they were more or less safe now. Kirekuni SAPPers and airmen stayed on their bases; they didn't roam freely across what was after all land belonging to ordinary Kirekuni citizens. Crispin wouldn't relinquish his conviction that the countryside was crawling with Disciples. And Mickey couldn't blame him for being jumpy. They might be deserters, fleeing from Ferupe for dear life, but all a Disciple patrol would see was their QAF uniforms.

If so much as a harmless Chadou child had come on them while they rested and ate, Mickey suspected Crispin would have shot it. He kept touching his holstered daemon pistol as if it were a lucky charm. Even while he comforted the daemon, his face pressed against the warm wood of the Blacheim's fuselage, his arms trying to hug its great curves, he'd kept on glancing around for danger. Didn't he trust Mickey to alert him? Did he think Mickey had secretly turned into a lizard the minute his foot touched Kirekuni soil? Mickey was still a QAF pilot on a sortie. He was as careful as ever not to use his tail to grasp something when a hand would do as well—it was so important to impress on Crispin that now neither of them belonged to any air force, Mickey was on *Crispin's* side. But Crispin hadn't even noticed.

Below, the Blacheim's shadow scudded across the jagged western slopes. Sitting idle in the rear cockpit, Mickey had to keep looking down at that shadow to remind himself where he was, what was happening. After twelve straight hours in the air he was starting to share the beast's consciousness as if *he* were in the pilot's seat, its pain and fear coloring his resurgent memories of the country to which he was returning.

He still wasn't sure he should have come. He'd been going to stay at Air Base XXI to put Lieutenant-Marshall Thraxsson off the trail. He'd had it all planned out. *He'd* have claimed responsibility for shooting down Commandant Vichuisse, the incompetent whom everyone in the squadron had hated. Crispin would have been far away by then, flying high and free in his maneuverable little Gorgonette, *Princess Anuei*. And in Crispin's absence, the traitorous Captain Burns of 96 Squadron would surely have settled for Mickey. He had to have *someone* to carry the can. It wouldn't suit his purposes to blame Vichuisse's death on the disastrous encounter with the enemy during which it had taken place. Merely having been the only survivor of a fiasco wouldn't warrant the promotion of a man like Burns, a half-Wraith who'd worked his way up from the ranks. And it was promotion Burns craved. If he were to make commandant, he needed to be a hero-patriot, the best of the best of the best. And who'd make a more appropriate counterweight to balance his rise to power than Mickey, the Kirekuni turncoat whose traitorousness was, after all, an open secret, whose execution had merely been put on hold by the Bureau of Intelligence at Chressamo?

Staying in Ferupe to face his fate would have been the first noble thing Mickey had done in his life. And who more worthy of such a sacrifice than Crispin, the only genuinely principled man Mickey had ever known, the only man who didn't have a cowardly bone in his body?

He should have expected that Crispin's principles wouldn't countenance Mickey's dying for him!

Crispin hadn't admitted it was a matter of principle, of course—he'd said he *needed* Mickey. *Kirekune might as well be the dark side of the moon for all I know about it. Just how far d'you think I'd get in Okimako without someone who speaks the language?* But he was just giving Mickey an honorable way out of going through with his plan to martyr himself. And Mickey had taken it. That was what he couldn't forgive himself for. When he fired on Captain Burns yesterday morning, risking his life to save Crispin's, he'd thought he was shaking his lily-livered monkey for good and for all—but the monkey had spoken, again, and dived down the first available bolt-hole. It was the coward in him who'd agreed to return to Kirekune. When he suffered such persecution and humiliation at the hands of 80 Squadron that he'd seriously considered suicide as a solution, the coward in him, Yozi, hadn't let him take his own life. Yozi remembered Okimako and love and wine and sweet things. Yozi refused to believe that even if he did make it home, he'd find himself an outcast, an embarrassment to his family. And probably find himself being tried as a deserter from the SAF, too—that had been more than three years ago, but Significance could hold a grudge for three hundred.

The wind in the open cockpit was dry and cold. Mickey knew it was like an oven on the ground. West of the Raw Marches, Maia was summer, and summer meant murderous heat everywhere in Kirekune except perhaps on the northern plains, or on the western coast, where Mickey had never been. In Okimako in summer, the sewerlike Orange River was so full of people day and night there was practically no room for the water. In Okimako, in Kirekune. Ever since they flitted across no-man's-land into enemy airspace late yesterday afternoon, Mickey had been aware the rules of the game were subtly altered.

And Crispin hadn't spoken into the tube in hours. Mickey wanted to say something just to see if he'd respond. While they flew up the eastern slopes, the daemon wheezing in the thinning air, Crispin had issued a stream of instructions and brittle banter. But then they'd crossed the ridges. Sunlit knife edges standing up between canyons unfathomably deep, black as if they were filled with water, but no water anywhere; and then those gave way to slopes scored by deep gullies running east-west now instead of north-south. Occasional birds sailed by on the head wind. The daemon was tiring. Mickey could no longer pretend he wasn't hearing it cough, snort, and roar in pain, its voice audible over the wind. It was too old. All Crispin's coaxing had made no difference.

“—any ideas?” Crispin's voice crackled through the tube.

“What? What did you say?”

“I said I don't think there's any way we can land here! Do you have any ideas?”

Mickey grabbed the speaking tube close to his ear. “Why do we have to land?” He wanted Crispin to say it. He glanced down through the slipstream at slopes and miniature cliffs, crags and dusty red gullies reduced by height to deceptively shallow wrinkles.

“Why d'you think? I can keep her in the air maybe another fifteen minutes.”

Mickey had thought his terror glands deactivated by exhaustion and nervous overload. He'd been wrong. “I don't want to die!” he muttered aloud, “dammit, not now—”

“What? What? Speak up!”

“You couldn't fit a motorbike down any of these valleys!”

“Well, the daemon's senile: I might be able to convince it this crate is a motorbike...” Crispin's voice wandered: he must be mentally wrestling to keep the daemon from giving up altogether.

“I've lost it!”

Curiously enough, the Blacheim felt steadier now that she was gliding. The altimeter

needle plunged—800 feet; 700 feet. Crispin cursed steadily into the speaking tube. Mickey saw it then, some way behind them. A triangular valley. It looked like an open vise, but no one would have thought of landing on that rampart-construction site behind the Ferupian lines either, would they? “Bring her round,” he said, rapping on the tube to get Crispin’s attention. “A hundred-eighty degrees. Think you can manage it?”

“Bring her *around? Where to?*” Crispin howled. “Best bet’s to try and hold the glide and take our chances on the slopes!” But even so he was bringing her around in a tight banking curve, raising the starboard aileron and lowering the port one just a little so that the Blacheim swooped gracefully back the way she had come without losing unnecessary height. Mickey didn’t take his eyes off the dials. “Don’t overshoot! Do you see it?”

“A fucking *hang glider* couldn’t land in there!”

“Any other ideas?”

Mickey heard a short dry crackle, which, after a moment, he identified as laughter. “All right, say your prayers!” He knew better than to speak again. Their lives depended on Crispin’s manipulation of the plane. From this low the valley looked reassuringly wide. The question was whether, as the tall rock cliffs drew closer together at the eastern end, it remained wide enough to provide a long enough taxi. The instruments showed the tail wind as a frightening thirty knots. Mickey had a horrible vision of both the Blacheim’s wingtips plowing into the sides of the canyon and the fuselage tearing like the body of a butterfly with its wings ripped off by a capricious child. He wanted to close his eyes, but he remembered Crispin saying yesterday evening as the sun set over the Occupied Raw, setting grass and trees and aircraft all on fire: *If nothing else, I want to see my death coming and spit in its eye—*

His hands checked his harness. He could hear the wind singing over the rocks, a thin loud bell-like sound that wavered up and down a scale of four or five notes, distinct from the roar of the Blacheim cutting through the air. The aircraft entered the mouth of the canyon at precisely the same moment as the landing gear touched rock. Mickey caught his breath in awe. There was at least fifty feet clear off either wing. Touch; bounce, bounce, touch and rip of rubber tearing away; scream of brakes and the clank of the wing flaps snapping down. “Sweet Queen,” Crispin gasped into Mickey’s ear. “I’m gonna fuck it up—it’s *gone...*”

Mickey said nothing. He knew they were safe. That very first touch had installed in him a sense of security. Scream, shriek, plunge, and halt. The starboard wingtip was six inches from the cliff.

2 Maia 1896 A.D. 11:30 P.M.

Kirekune: the western foothills of the Raw Marches

“Out of the frying pan into the bloody Queen’s Birthday bonfire.”

Crispin exhaled a white plume of smoke, staring out from the mouth of the valley over the seemingly endless expanses of the twilit foothills. Now they were west of the Marches, day lasted longer—the sun couldn’t just duck below the mountains, it had to trace a long, excruciating descent to the horizon. This high up, the air wasn’t hot as Mickey had expected, but *dry*. The sun and wind leached every drop of moisture from the body. He had seldom been gladder of nightfall.

He usually permitted himself to use his tail in the lighting of cigarettes, but after glancing at Crispin, he struck the steel on the rock with his right hand, awkwardly. The Queen’s Air Force had cured him of left-handedness. As a result, he’d probably be clumsy for the rest of his life; maybe it was just as well that looked to be a very short time. He said,

“You’re talking as though it’s hopeless.”

“If you can see a glimmer, you have sharper eyes than I do.”

Mickey glanced back into the gully. The Blacheim stood on its torn-up wheels at the end of the canyon like the ungainly flying bomb box it was. A mystery how it had ever taken off in the first place.

“That daemon’s a lost cause. Good night, Gramps. We can while away our last days composing its eulogy.”

They had both tried talking to it and got no response. Mickey had poked his head inside the engine cavity and removed the hatch of its cell, expecting a lash of power to blind him—but nothing happened. Through the silver mesh he saw it crouching cramped, a giant in solitary confinement, hands hanging over wrinkled yellow knees, head sunk to scaly chest. Judicious poking with a silver screwdriver had made it snarl, but when he pushed a wriggling splinteron through the feed hole in the mesh, it hadn’t reacted, allowing its intended prey to scramble freely about the cell and even swing on its long, matted black hair.

“You can’t give up now,” he insisted, feeling simultaneously desperate and put-upon. What right had Crispin to get fatalistic?

Crispin leaned against the corner of the cliff. “Did you know humans can eat daemon meat? Don’t look at me like that. I did, once. We could survive quite a long time on the splinterons, and if *it* dies, that should be enough to get us to the plains.”

Mickey couldn’t tell whether Crispin was joking. “We don’t have enough water.”

“No.” Crispin looked up at the sky, exhaling smoke. “Stars’re coming out, look.” His voice was thoughtful. “Mick, d’you ever find yourself forgetting things that weren’t all that long ago, accidentally on purpose, like?”

Mickey flashed on Izigonara’s 20th, hearing catcalls when he walked by the gunners’ barracks. *Miki...miki-noko*. They made it sound like night birds, trilling in falsetto. If you didn’t know what they were saying, you wouldn’t have understood. Birds. Or cats. *Miki...* He frowned at Crispin, wondering what he meant. Significant, a man could lose his mind over that face! Crispin looked even more exotic now than he did in daylight—almost like a full-blood Lamaroon. The lips did it. Wide, perfectly defined, and in the gloom you couldn’t see that they were cracked from the wind. A man could lose his mind—or his heart—

“Don’t stare at me like that!” Crispin threw away his cigarette and pushed himself upright. “Why don’t you do some thinking for yourself for a change? I’m not a hero! Never have been, not, and never will be! So don’t look at me like *I’m* going to come up with a way out of this!”

Maybe not, but you’re still my hero, Mickey thought. He shook his head, half-smiling, and retreated a couple of paces defensively.

“Say something, dammit, or I’ll have to say it for you. The way you *look* at me...” Crispin shook his head. “Did you hear that? I’m getting to be as bad as you! *Reading* shit into people!”

Mickey had never known anyone less predictable. Was that what goodness was? Unpredictability? Because for some reason he couldn’t disabuse himself of the belief that Crispin was *good*.

“But you were right about Burns. And I never saw it. Didn’t see it until it was on top of me. Queen, I was so *blind*!”

Mickey said aloud, “Have you considered that maybe what you call blindness is a function of goodness?”

“If so, I’ll pass!”

“So do you think you were wrong to trust Burns?”

“Hasn’t that been made abundantly clear by now?”

“Well, no. Materially, yes, I suppose so.” Mickey glanced around at the dark canyon, and out to the west. Night concealed the foothills utterly. “But morally you were right to trust him, and he was wrong to betray you.”

“The bloodsucking double-crossing half-breed,” Crispin said halfheartedly. “And you’ve dodged the issue of whether we were both wrong in the first place.” He was silent for a time; then, just as Mickey wondered whether he’d fallen asleep, or fallen off the side of the mountain, his voice wandered out of the darkness again, so deep and bitter Mickey’s skin tingled. “I’ve had it up to *here* with morality, Mick. I’ll tell you something. I was thinking in terms of morality, too, even at the time. I saw myself as being in the right. Vichuisse was in the wrong, simply because he was incapable of effective leadership. I was acting on behalf of all our men. I was selfless, *I* didn’t want the commandancy, I just wanted justice for the regulars and for all the friends I’d lost to his incompetence; I was a crusader, dammit!” He laughed unpleasantly. “In other words I was a fool. Don’t say anything!”

Mickey closed his mouth. He had indeed been about to protest, but it was merely an automatic reaction.

“It was personal from the word go. You were right about that. But you don’t know how long it had been going on. It was personal from the day Vichuisse first picked me out and made me a pilot. It was personal from the day I was arrested in Shadowtown. Those Intelligence bastards! They tell you you’re fighting for Ferupe and for the Queen and for honor and glory and so damn on and so forth, but that’s a load of daemon shit. It’s all schemes and strategies and power plays whether you’re a slop boy or a general. You against me, me against you, man against man, man against woman...My mistake, my transgression, was buying into Burns’s scheme. I should have seen where things were at right from the beginning. Every man for himself is where it’s at—and as for *honor*, it’s just as much a scam as the pension, because ninety-nine percent of those poor sods back on bases won’t ever get within spitting distance of it. And I’m not having none of it from now on.”

Mickey had an idea Crispin was not speaking to him at all, but he couldn’t let the captain’s tirade pass without comment. “*I* never had any ideals,” he said. “I didn’t join the Disciples because I was a patriot. It was because someone had broken my heart, and I never wanted to see him again.” The minute he said it he could have kicked himself.

But Crispin didn’t even seem to have heard. “No more of it! Whoever is without ideals, he’s got a head or two on his shoulders? And, Mick, that shit about virtue you were spouting a while back? Seems to me it all boils down to goodness being the same thing as having more illusions than the next man. Which is a fair definition of stupidity! Hah!”

Mickey gathered his thoughts, which had scattered like pigeons from a rooftop. “That’s beside the point. What interests me is the question of what you’re proposing to substitute for illusions. If, mind you, they *are* illusions, which I still don’t buy.”

“You’ll buy it soon enough when we start fighting over the last drink of water,” Crispin said.

Mickey chose not to have heard that. “Answer me that. If goodness is an illusion, then what’s behind it?”

Evil. He waited to hear it. But Crispin was apparently not angry enough to fall into that trap. Mickey heard him shifting against the cliff, ten feet away in the darkness. “I don’t know. Honestly, Mick, I don’t. Whatever’s left, I suppose.”

“And that is?”

Silence.

“Crispin!”

Scratch, and the blue spark of steel on stone. The tip of a cigarette glowed orange. As

Crispin drew on it, his face leapt out of the darkness, and the smoke showed up as a white visible cloud. “Something that isn’t any of your business, *Pilot*.”

Crispin had pulled rank. Mickey heard his voice come out clipped. “Might as well sleep while it’s dark, mightn’t we, sir? Time enough for talk tomorrow.”

“Time enough for fuck-all tomorrow,” Crispin said. “I’m getting that kite in the air if it’s the last thing I do.”

“With or without me, I presume,” Mickey said angrily. Not since he was a child had he walked out on a contretemps: he’d always been the one left with the sentence half-finished, the conciliatory gift still in pocket, watching the door swinging, in the ringing silence peculiar to the ten seconds after a parting blow. But now he spun and walked down the canyon, his ears buzzing with hatred. Halfway to the aircraft, he turned and shouted, “Maybe there is something to be said for being dragged up in a circus! It gives you quite a way with words!”

“Oh, I wasn’t putting my mind to it,” Crispin called after him, sounding completely unperturbed. “If I had been, you’d have known! And anyway, I don’t do my fighting with words, unlike some people!”

Crispin must have heard, and taken in, what Mickey had involuntarily said about having his heart broken. Mickey could think of no other reason for him to have turned so horrible. He must have thought Mickey was leading up to something. It’s one thing to guess about a person (and within the boundaries of taste, Mickey had never tried to hide anything) and quite another thing to hear it from the horse’s mouth. *Child!* he told himself, dropping to the ground against the wheel of the Blacheim. The canyon was cold, although mercifully sheltered from the wind. Dust bit his nostrils, making him sneeze. The wind hooted over the top of the canyon, that mournful five-note song of aloneness. Nearby, tiny feet scribbled on rock. *Child! Now how do you face him?*

But Crispin had been known, among other things, for his skill at jollying up disheartened regulars; and that was what Mickey still was, and Crispin was still a captain. After giving him an hour to cool down, Crispin crunched back to the Blacheim and kicked him in a friendly fashion. He chatted with apparent ease of mind as he passed blankets out of the airplane. “I’d never have thought of bringing these. I’d have counted on making it over the foothills before I got tired enough to need them. Good thing I brought you along, huh?”

Mickey said none of the things he thought of in response. He grunted and took the blanket, along with a single swig of water and a dry biscuit Crispin called a “midnight snack.” By this time the night was pitchy. Mickey lay still, listening to the small scrapings and fumbblings as Crispin took off his boots and rolled himself up in his blanket somewhere on the other side of the wheels. It made Mickey feel unpleasantly vulnerable to be lying right under the enormous, wrecked double tires, where the plane would roll over him if it shifted even a fraction. As he wriggled around to lie alongside the wheels, under the belly of the Blacheim, he heard Crispin’s voice, so near that he started up in a panic and thrust his fingers into Crispin’s face.

“Ouch! No, it didn’t hurt. No, I just wanted to know...” Crispin stopped.

“Sorry.” Mickey lay back down, carefully. His bruises hurt, but he had slept on less comfortable things than bare rock before, and at any rate he was so exhausted he would probably have slept like a baby on a bed of nails.

Crispin said, “Um, I’m aware that you and Vichuisse were...I mean, after that awful scene in my office—”

“I remember,” Mickey said shortly. Two days before his death, Vichuisse had paid a call on Crispin, and requested Mickey’s presence in Crispin’s office, whereupon he had blithely

and inaccurately reminisced about the pseudo-relationship they had had in the Lovoshire Parallel. Mickey had wanted to turn into smoke and drift through a crack in the wall. “What is it?”

“I know it’s intrusive of me to want to know, and you’re welcome to punch me in the nose if you’re offended. I just wondered...”

“If it was by my choice?”

“How did you know?”

“Of *course* you wondered that. Never mind that the fact that it wasn’t should have been obvious to anyone with a pair of eyes in his head who doesn’t think anyway that all Kirekunis are born sexually perverted.”

“I don’t think that,” Crispin said with unexpected definiteness.

“Good!”

“But—then, why did you go along with him? If you—you weren’t attracted to him?”

“Why did *you*? Different currency, same transaction.”

“I—” Crispin stopped, and gave his lion cough of a chuckle. “All right. Score one for you, Mick.”

“Morality aside, some men are better off dead.”

“Unfortunately, it’s usually the other kind who end up that way,” Crispin said in a voice that could have been hostile, or regretful, or nothing in particular. Mickey wished he could see his face. But the low-slung blackness of the Blacheim above them blocked out even the faint light of the stars. The remark had had a ring of finality; neither of them said anything else.

*(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

The Lower Air

3 Maia 1896. A.D.

Kirekune: the western foothills of the Raw Marches

Mickey paced up and down the canyon in the blazing sun. He knew moving around was making his chances of sunstroke much worse: he should sit down in a fragment of shade and wait. But if he stopped moving, he would look at Crispin. He could go sit at the mouth of the canyon with his back to the Blacheim. But then something would go wrong. Crispin would get hurt—Mickey couldn’t imagine why he hadn’t got hurt yet—and Mickey wouldn’t be on the spot, because he had a weak stomach.

His fingers trembled on the grip of Crispin’s daemon pistol. The screamers in its cartridge sent flashes of pain and anger up his wrist. “Here, just in case,” Crispin had said without explaining. His gaze had flickered up, down, and around; his voice wandered. “But don’t use it unless you’re in mortal danger. I mean that. You could do for me. If there’s anything worse than an angry daemon, it’s an angry daemon with a screamer in its hide.”

Mickey hadn't guessed even then. And he hadn't dared to ask. Crispin's manner was too strange. Since they woke, while they breakfasted on biscuit and water, he had been distracted and abrupt, as if during the night he'd remembered something important he had to do.

How could Mickey have guessed? No daemon handler who valued his life would risk a gambit like this.

Mickey stopped, facing the mouth of the canyon. The foothills seemed to stretch away forever, peak and valley, shimmering in the heat. Dust skirled across the slope at his feet. Nothing alive moved. In the QAF, some confusion persisted as to whether the Raw had got its name after the chopping down of the Wraithwaste began—or whether the Raw Marches had been called that to begin with, and lent their name to the battleground after it became appropriate. *The latter has to be true*, Mickey thought. *These mountains are nothing if not raw*. Surely even the snowlands, even the steppe of central Cype and the deserts of Izte Kchebuk'ara, even the unknown lands to the Far West could be no more desolate than this.

Crispin let out a weird, sobbing cry, and Mickey wheeled. The Blacheim cast a shadow as black as a tarred box. He couldn't see what was happening. He forced himself not to run. Crispin had warned him not to make any sudden movements or noises. The cry came again, softly, like a moan of grief—or *pleasure*—as he got closer. Crispin and the daemon were still on the ground where they had been before, but now they were locked in a tight embrace. No—Crispin was embracing the daemon. It knelt with its head in his lap, its arms around his waist, and he was hugging it, his face pressed to its sallow naked back. As Mickey watched in horror, it stirred and cried out once more.

He blinked. Daemons couldn't speak! Daemons...

It was jabbering now in a low voice. Some of the gibberish sounded like real words—Mickey could have sworn he caught "sir" several times. How could he have mistaken this voice for Crispin's? It was low and harsh, rusty with disuse. Occasionally it broke octaves higher. Crispin stroked the vile creature, kissed its back, kissed the bright red weals on its neck. His every motion bespoke tenderness. Mickey nearly gagged. At one point Crispin raised his face; Mickey made shift to rearrange his expression before he saw that Crispin's eyes were bright and blind.

A cold sweat broke out on his palms. Paranoia whispered that this must be some secret, extreme form of coercion that all Ferupian daemon handlers knew, that had been maliciously concealed from him all the time he was flying in the QAF. Maybe that was why he'd been so clumsy with Gorgonettes. But maybe even if he'd known of it, he couldn't have done what Crispin was doing! Maybe it was alien to his very race? After all, *Ferupe* was the empire of the occult, the land of the pallid-faced people who lived side by side with the daemons that shimmered in coves and hovered around lakes. Everyone in Okimako believed that—and although Mickey knew intellectually that it was nonsense, not even flying in the Queen's Air Force had entirely broken him of the myth. The sheer availability of daemons in the Ferupian Raw had in fact reinforced it. In Okimako, a daemon scarcely bigger than a screamer would fetch a hundred sigils—and the Ferupians' casual neglect of their daemons, the profanity with which they spoke to them, when indeed they *did* speak to them, fascinated him. What did they know, that they could afford to treat priceless gorgons like field mules?

In all of the new city where Mickey had grown up, the hustling, bustling middle-class heart of Okimako where conspicuous luxury was the stamp of prestige and every last sigil was counted twice over, there were exactly three demogorgons: one in the gasworks, one in the waterworks, and one to power the climate control in the monolithic Disciplinary Police Headquarters. Private daemon transportation was unheard of. Only the Disciples had the

finances to operate daemon trucks, tanks, and jeeps. Everyone else relied either on dray beasts, rickies, or (if they could afford it) the diesel-powered automobiles which had been invented in far-off Ixtara. The last Mickey had heard, a motion to outlaw these based on their smelliness and noisiness was on its way to the Significants. Kirekunis lived in a world they could see, taste, touch, and evaluate. What did they know of daemons?

At the same time Mickey's brain told him this was nonsense, that what Crispin was doing, no other man in the Ferupian army had ever dreamed of. They were *afraid* of their daemons! *That* was why they cursed them and mistreated them! A pilot would have to be crazy to take his daemon out of his airplane—

and take off its collar—

Mickey sweated, gripping the revolver so hard that his wrist went numb from the screamers' spikes of malice. He was afraid to draw it, afraid to move.

After a long time, he couldn't have said how long, Crispin disentangled himself from the daemon's embrace and ducked out into the sunlight. The daemon followed him. Unfolded to its full height it towered over Crispin, even though its back was stooped and its legs bowed. It was a skeleton draped with sagging yellow skin. Its black hair tangled to its knees. Mickey was faintly shocked—he could not have said why—to see that it was male. It shaded its eyes against the sun with an appallingly human gesture.

Crispin reached up to pat it on the shoulder. He gestured toward the Blacheim. The daemon gibbered. Its voice lilted up at the end as if in a question. Crispin nodded. Mickey watched openmouthed as the daemon stooped voluntarily back under the airplane and poked its head up inside the engine cavity. It paused there in the shadow. Then there was a shimmer, as if it were turning into water, and it liquefied upward.

Crispin sprang for the plane and clambered into the engine cavity. Mickey heard him banging the hatch of the cell closed. Then he dropped to the ground and struggled to lift the belly flaps into position. Mickey hurried to help. Between them they secured the flaps and scrambled back as if they expected the Blacheim to explode.

Nothing happened.

Mickey wiped sweat out of his eyes.

It was like closing an egg back up on a monstrous infant who has cracked its shell and ventured out to view the world, not yet realizing its own capacity for destruction. The wind sang mournfully over the canyon. The sun hammered down. A soft groan came from the Blacheim. It was as if the aircraft itself had given voice.

Crispin sat down hard on a rock. Mickey nearly jumped out of his skin. "Water! I need water! Whiskey would be better, but I don't suppose there's much chance of that."

Mickey went to the Blacheim for the canteen. Behind him he heard Crispin throw something away into the rocks with a grunt of effort. He turned in time to see it bouncing into a crack: a cracked circle of silver that could only have been the daemon's collar. He handed over the canteen mutely. Crispin drank for several minutes, his teeth chattering against the wooden lip. Mickey didn't dare to rebuke him. At last he put the canteen down and fumbled for a cigarette—one of their last. The moaning came again from the Blacheim, louder.

"Are we going to have to put up with that all the way to Okimako?" Mickey said. "Damn'd unnerving."

"Fair exchange for getting the whore airworthy at all, I think!" Crispin said breathlessly. "Mick, light this for me!"

As Mickey handed over the lit cigarette, Crispin's hand knocked against his. The half-breed captain was trembling, Mickey realized, like a man who has just returned from an

engagement with the enemy—one that ended in catastrophe. He steeled himself to ask, “How did you do it?”

Crispin shook his head and frowned dazedly. He was looking sicker every minute. “I didn’t think I would be able to.”

“You took its collar off. I thought only trickster women could do that. I mean, not that they take their collars *off*; they put them *on*—” Even a Kirekuni knew that. “But—”

“You must’ve thought I had a death wish. I should have warned you. But I was afraid I’d jinx it. Besides, I didn’t want to get your hopes up if it was no go.”

“It would have been a lot less of a go if you’d got yourself killed.”

Crispin didn’t take offense. “I know it was a risk. But...I *knew* it was going to work. Sort of.”

“Is this the first time you’ve ever—”

Crispin laughed. His laugh sounded rusty, like the daemon’s. He turned his head aside and coughed wetly. Mickey expected the phlegm to sizzle, the sun was that hot on the bare red rocks. “And if I ever do it again, you can box me up and address me to the loony bin. It was sickening. Nauseating. Like climbing into a sewer and *drinking*. Whatever the essence of a daemon is, it’s...it went right through me. Like poison. Enough to make me nearly puke the very minute I touched him.”

Not *it*. *Him*.

“And the worst of it was after I knew I was going to go on with it—*bad* to go on with it, or he would have killed me—I got used to it. You know how when there’s a horrible stench, after a while you stop noticing it or like mess grub, an acquired taste. Or like booze. You don’t like it, the first time you taste it when you’re a kid. Or maybe perverted sex—I don’t know personally, of course, but I imagine that when you do things that are unnatural, it feels good but you know it’s fucked-up, all at once...it was like that.” He shook his head. Lines that Mickey was sure had not been there before ran from his nose to his mouth.

“When you say perverted sex,” Mickey said, “what are you talking about? I’m trying to figure out what you mean.”

Crispin squinted at him. He opened his mouth and started to speak. Then he shook his head again, smiling faintly. “Making do, you mean? Like fags? Whatever gave you the idea I was talking about that? I mean *really* fucked-up stuff. Stuff neither you nor I have ever done.” He paused. “Well, I have, now. And I’d starve before I do it again. Or die of thirst. I don’t know how the fuck they do it.”

“How who does it?”

“The trickster women.”

He won’t tell me the truth about anything, Mickey thought. He sat cross-legged, gripping his knees. His head ached, and he wanted water, but they had to conserve it now that Crispin had drunk so much; because what if the daemon had a relapse, what if Crispin’s gambit had been a heroic failure?

Doesn’t he trust me in the least? Resentment throbbed in him like a furnace.

Crispin laughed mirthlessly. “I always told her they were coldhearted bitches! Anyone who could do that for a living. And they would have denied to the last gasp that they stole everything they knew from the Wraiths. I’d bet a double brandy they would. Lie between their teeth.”

“Let’s get you into the shade,” Mickey said, standing up. “You’re not in any condition for us to try taking off now.”

“Queen knows.” Crispin placed the palms of his hands against the rock, pushed, then sank back. Mickey helped him to his feet and led him down the canyon into the shade of an

overhanging rock. He fetched a blanket and arranged it behind him. Crispin leaned back with a sigh. “Thanks. Now I know why Millsy looked the way he looked. He told me it was because of trickery. I took him at his word, but I never really *understood*.”

“That’s the third or fourth person you’ve mentioned I don’t know,” Mickey said. “Either you want me to know about them, in which case you can tell me your life story, I’m all ears, or you’re rambling. And if you’re rambling, it’s—it’s—you’re acting as if you’ve gone round the twist. I don’t know what you just did to the daemon; I don’t know what the daemon did to you. It’s a complete mystery, and you’re not putting my mind at ease talking like this.”

After a minute Crispin said, “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

Mickey stared at his boots. A stone lizard scuttled out of a crack between his feet, and away into the sun.

“Do you remember what I told you about accidentally-on-purpose forgetting things? Well...when I remembered what I had to remember to—to trick Elektheris, a lot of other things came, too. I was bursting with it, that’s all. And I tend to forget you and I haven’t known each other for as long...well, for as long as weird shit’s been happening to me.” His tone had changed back to normal. “Tell you about it sometime.”

Mickey leaned back against the overhang. Gratitude suffused him, bringing tears to his eyes. At the same time he hated himself for being such a pushover.

“Well, I’m *sorry*,” Crispin said with a familiar touch of impatience.

The stripe of sky that Mickey could see beyond the overhang, over the other side of the canyon, glared as white and bright as a sheet of lightning fizzling low above the mountain. The air smelled of dust and crackled with static. The daemon—Elektheris—gave tongue again, loudly and despairingly.

Maia 1896 A.D. 9:20 P.M.

Kirekune: the western foothills of the Raw Marches

“It’s in the blood,” Crispin said later in the evening.

The sky glowed purple, and there was little wind. The air wrapped around Mickey like a hot, prickly blanket, scarcely breathable for its freight of electricity.

“In the blood.”

Mickey stared out into the twilight. They were standing at the mouth of the canyon, by unspoken consent keeping as far away from the Blacheim as possible. There would be no sleeping under the belly of the aircraft tonight.

“In whose blood?”

“Mine, evidently. I’ve half suspected for a good while now that it might have gotten in.”

“Gotten in?”

“Yes, well...” Crispin sighed. “D’you mind if I don’t go into detail?”

“If you’re worried that I’ll think worse of you,” Mickey said, “don’t. Whatever you did in the past, it doesn’t matter.” He stared out at the calm violet masses of the foothills, hearing his voice tremble with traitorous emotion. “I could never think badly of you.”

Earlier in the evening, he’d started up the Blacheim. Just as Crispin had promised, the daemon was now cooperating. The transformation engine had purred, as sweetly as an orchestra of pan pipes. Mickey backed her up and turned her carefully around in readiness for takeoff at first light. This proof that Crispin had accomplished what no one should have been able to filled him with awe and with an intense yet timid curiosity.

Crispin laughed. “I can see I’d better clear things up a bit or you’ll be thinking I have a

criminal record as long as the Raw! It's nothing so terrible, really. Just that I let someone die. Or rather, he died, and I couldn't do anything about it." He sat on a tall boulder, gripping his ankles. It was a comical pose for a man so big. "After we got clear of the Wraithwaste."

"What were you doing *there*?"

"Oh, Queen, never mind! It was me and—and this girl—and this kid, a Wraith. A Shadow, that is. About six years old. We were on the run, and we were bloody well starving to death. If I'd known then what I know now, I would have let us all die in there first. But I was just a kid myself. Somehow or other we made it to the western fringe and stumbled straight into Pilkinson's Shadowtown. I had no idea where we were. I didn't know jack shit about the war. I walked straight in there as if I owned the place." Crispin shook his head at his youthful folly.

"Pilkinson's Shadowtown. That's only about twenty miles from Pilkinson's Air Base II." Mickey rubbed between his eyes. His head was aching again. "All this time I had the idea you came from... I don't know... a long way away. Kingsburg... Naftha..."

"You thought I was recruit scum." Crispin smiled. "It's worse than that, my lad. We were arrested the minute we got into Shadowtown, of course. I was taken to Chressamo, and from there I was sort of decanted into the air force."

"Chressamo!"

"Starting to change your mind now?"

Something in the way Crispin said this made Mickey think he actually cared what the answer was. He looked sharply at him. As night gradually swallowed the canyon it had become difficult to make things out, but he thought Crispin was smiling. "I was only—" He swallowed. "That's where they took *me*, after I was captured. And told me, in a roundabout way, that I had the option of being put to death or changing sides."

"Not a hard choice, was it?"

"For a real Disciple it would have been easy," Mickey said, remembering Ju, who had not even waited to be given the option of deserting. Ju had been haunting Mickey for more than three years now. In life he had been laughably arrogant and gullible; but death had transformed him into an immortal model of Disciplehood whose example Mickey resented because he could not live up to it.

"Mick, did you—when you were in Chressamo did you meet a man named Sostairs? A colonel?"

"I don't think so. I may have. I wasn't told any names."

"Damn," Crispin said slowly. "They must have been much surer of you than they were of me. I guessed it even at the time, but...Queen, my life must have been in the *balance*. Hanging by a thread."

Mickey decided to ignore Crispin's surely unintentional slur on his integrity. "But what happened to the—the girl and the Wraith?"

"Brrr." Crispin shook himself. "It's getting cold. I hate this fucking altitude. Well, I lost my head and started fighting the soldiers. Orphan—that was his name because he was one—he ran out into the street. There were some Shadow kids there, you know what nasty violent little bastards they—they're just human rats. Orphan had these daemons. *Big* ones that followed him everywhere. One of them popped out of the air and started terrorizing the Shadow kids, and the brats ganged up on Orphan and banged his head on the ground. I thought he was dead when I got there, but he can't have been, quite. I was..." Crispin paused. "The soldiers were all over me, or I would have chased those little assholes and taken it out of their hides. I had my—my face on Orphan's face. There was blood."

Mickey held his breath. He had a sense that the crux of the business was coming.

“On my mouth. Do you see what I mean? And besides, I was all bruised and cut...”

“I don’t understand.”

“You numbskull, it’s in the blood! Orphan had the ability to trick daemons. Wraiths do—men *and* women.” Crispin paused. “It’s the only explanation I can think of. I *know* I’m not a trickster. Someone tried to teach me when I was younger, and it was a total disaster. So all I can think is...a few drops of his blood getting mixed up in mine must have...done it. It can’t have been six months after that when I first started thinking of names when I was coercing daemons, soothing them and so forth. I hoped it was my imagination. But for a while now I’ve had the feeling that if I wanted it to be part of—of what I do anyway, all I had to do was reach out and—and take it.”

Mickey shook his head. It sounded fantastic. “Wraiths are the same strain of people as the Chadou. And the Chadou don’t have a reputation for trickery?”

“But they don’t live in the Wraithwaste. There are no daemons in the plains—so you say, and I see no reason not to believe you—no, I’ve thought this all out, Mickey. It’s nothing to do with race. I mean, Ferupian and Kirekuni trickster women are the proof of that. I think it’s to do with the Wraithwaste itself—living there. It *does* something to people. I can remember... The gift is in the blood, but I think originally, however long ago—before there was ever a Ferupe, when the Wraiths had their own kingdom—trickery came from the Waste itself, kind of soaking into them?”

Mickey shook his head.

“Oh, I know it sounds absurd! Believe me, if I could think of a more rational explanation—but you did ask!”

“The fact remains, whatever you did, it worked,” Mickey said.

The wind had fallen, and the stilling of its song over the slopes made the whole mountain seem to be holding its breath. Mickey thought, *There’s going to be a storm*. He wanted to be away from this place. The valley had become contaminated with the inexplicability of Crispin’s trickery; the rocks and cliffs themselves lacked credibility. Nothing that happened here now could fall within the scope of the laws by which the normal world operated. He wanted to shout aloud and hear his voice bounce back off the walls of the canyon, proof that he existed, and simultaneously he wanted to immerse himself in this two-way current of secrets that violated the established rules of communication between himself and Crispin, he wanted to erase the gap of confidence between them which Crispin’s meager revelations had made even more palpable, as palpable as the tension and the silence.

“I can’t bloody well *breathe*,” Crispin said at last, fretfully. “Have you got a cigarette?”

Mickey felt in his pockets. “One.”

“Split it?”

Mickey moved over to the boulder where Crispin sat. They passed the cigarette back and forth in silence. Finally Crispin swung down off the boulder, wincing. “Fucking backache. Getting old.” As Mickey followed him back toward the Blacheim, he said over his shoulder, “Let’s get the blankets and clear off. Whenever I come near her I have this inexplicable urge to let the daemon out. They’re very good at making you feel they’re hard done by. If I start sleepwalking tonight, trip me up, all right?”

The storm broke in the small hours. Rain lashed the mountain and drove hard down the canyon, turning it into a river. Water surged around the Blacheim’s wheels and swept away nails, tools, and Mickey’s cigarette box. Where they were sleeping on the raised rocks at the mouth of the canyon, they escaped the worst of the flood, but got no sleep and were drenched to the skin. It was no use changing their clothes; the rear cockpit of the Blacheim had been left open, and everything inside was soaked. Squelching and shivering in the pink-

rinsed gloom that heralded the sun's advent over the mountains, they readied the airplane for takeoff. Mickey wasn't sure whether they should chance it—the rocks were wet and in some places puddled—but Crispin persuaded him the ruined wheels retained enough traction to handle the speed. Mickey was eager enough to leave the canyon behind that he let himself be persuaded.

It went unnervingly well. The daemon bellowed with a rejuvenated hunger for flight as they took off amid the first rays of day. Mickey's reflectors glowed like solid gold hundred-sigil pieces. Twisting in his harness to look at the sunrise, he saw the rim of the orb surging up over the ridges: the biggest gold coin of all. Lances of light shot out from behind the Raw Marches like searchglares from the keep of a many-towered city.

...let us now invoke all beings who inhabit the lower air, the shallow water, and the smaller hills, all Fauns and Dryads and slips of the memory, all verbal coincidences, Pans and puns, all that is medieval this side of the grave.

—E. M. Forster

It's All About Survival

5 Maia 1896 A.D. Kirekune: Somebai Province: 6,000 feet

But although Elektheris was willing, he was old, and he didn't know how weak he was. He had served in the QAF, in one shell or another, since the inception of the air force; before that he'd served briefly in a truck carrying troops along the Salzeim War Route. What passed for his memory preserved no distinctions between any of the machines he'd inhabited. He thought of all motion as flight. He knew only the crucifixion of the transformation engine, that cruel harness that followed him like the shackle dragging at the foot of a chain-ganger: the torment of captivity in silver and oak, an irritation so permanent that it had ceased to hurt and had become merely a goad to life when he would a million times have preferred death.

He hadn't seen daylight, except through the mesh when he was fed, for eighty-seven years. His will was worn down to a nubbin. He'd forgotten what it was to dematerialize. But during those peaceful years when the Blacheim stood in the scrap hangar at Air Base XXI, superannuated, he'd sunk into a torpor that nearly equaled the immaterial state. To a daemon so extenuated, sloth, perpetuated by regular administrations of food, had approximated the resolution of consciousness into pure genius.

The only thing missing was the presence of the masses. And such was his degradation that he was no longer aware they were missing. Since his collaring he'd forgotten the dissolution into the unconscious. He didn't remember that entity greater than the sum of its parts that alone gave uncollared daemons, through their linkage to it, any claim to the power of thought. Elektheris no longer remembered that other daemons existed. In light of this, it wouldn't be far wrong to say that he'd stopped being a daemon himself. Sequestration from his family, his *kind*, had effectively lobotomized him.

When, after that long respite, he was once more spurred to flight, it was an awakening to a nightmare. The air became thin. His lungs hurt, his body hurt; all he knew was that he must press on to escape this agony to which through long inactivity he had grown unaccustomed. But then he simply couldn't go on anymore. It wasn't a matter of choice. It

was a matter of being drained.

He'd come within a hairbreadth of total extinguishment when the one who understood took off his collar.

He stood upright in the sunlight. His tongue, though he was not entirely aware of it, was loosened. He was on the verge. Instinct whispered that he was free to relinquish consciousness—to *be* again—if he would.

But the one who understood, to whom Elektheris was infinitely, unconditionally obliged, had a need. He needed Elektheris. And Elektheris's joy at being needed, at being loved and wanted, brought him to the decision—though it was more of an *acceptance*—that giving up *had* been a matter of choice. He could just as well choose to go on.

He was turning to clamber back into his housing when the forgotten instincts reasserted themselves. For the space of an instant he was free. But in that instant, the awareness of duty took over and returned him to “himself”—to the crooked, aged, aching body which was as much his prison as the cell in which he sat, gibbering, weakly pulling his fingers through his tangled hair.

The hatch slammed shut. He wasn't aware he had been tricked. He was aware only of the desire to help the one who had been kind—and that was as forceful a motivation as his old desire to escape captivity. In the cause of kindness he now accepted captivity as his lot, the burden only he in all the world could bear.

Never, perhaps, in the history of trickery has a daemon come so close to being human. But humanity is vulnerable. Although Elektheris was willing, he was old, and he didn't know how weak he was. He flew for a day and a night. Then his heart burst, killing him in a second and half, in the air above Somebai Province in eastern Kirekune.

5 Maia 1896 A.D.

Kirekune: Somebai Province: the Eastern Plains of the Chadou

“Well, we're fucked now,” Mickey said.

The corpse of the daemon lay before them, ten feet of yellow skeleton laid out across the ruts left by the Blacheim's long, graceful landing. Once again they'd had to bring her down gliding without power. It was too much. Mickey felt sweat collecting in the creases of his body under his uniform. He had an impulse to kick the corpse. It was midday. It was exactly what he'd dreaded. He wished he'd voiced his fears earlier, so that now he could say, “I told you so.”

Crispin stared at the corpse, looking calm and thoughtful.

Mickey drove his hands into his pockets. “I don't suppose your miraculous powers extend to bringing the beast back from the dead.”

“Don't be so Queen-damned pessimistic. There's a town over that way.” Crispin jerked his thumb southwest. “Can't be more than five miles.”

Mickey had seen the place from the air—a dozen miserable huts scattered alongside a ford in a river. And he knew the Chadou. “What do you suggest we do—walk over there and say, excuse me, our daemon's died, do you by any chance have another? I told you, there's—”

“There's a daemon in that town,” Crispin said. “It's an—I mean, its name is Uemiel.”

“The only way that could be is if Disciples had commandeered hospitality there,” Mickey said sharply. “There's no reason for there to be any of *them* here. We're a hundred miles south of Chadou Imamako.” As he spoke the Kirekuni name he had consciously to prevent himself from dropping into the language. “And anyway, we would have seen them from the air.” He visualized troop carriers like the one he himself had ridden to war in, boxy

enclosed vehicles as black as tar. The smallest Disciple daemon vehicle was bigger than any Chadou house.

“Doesn’t matter. Uemiel is there, and we’re gonna get her. That is, *I* am. ‘Cause I’m not going to feel safe until—” Crispin took a breath, stopping himself. “You don’t have to come.”

“Of course I will,” Mickey said a half second too late. And then, because he couldn’t help it: “Safe?”

“In the middle of nowhere. Alone.”

“I know what you mean,” Mickey said. What he wanted to say was: *You’re not alone*. He stared at the calm face, the eyes wide-open despite the blazing sunlight, the incongruously hunched shoulders. He shivered. Crispin had never looked anything like this when he had been a QAF captain. Then, to Mickey looking up from his lowly station as a regular, he had seemed a god. Now he was merely a giant, hounded by something Mickey couldn’t understand. His uniform was creased and stained. He was slipping—a fact that Mickey had been trying to deny since the afternoon they killed Vichuisse, when Crispin had suffered what Mickey now thought of as his first lapse. Could that really only have been a few days ago?

Last night, after a twelve-hour flight over the foothills, they had slept on the open plain. Mickey had been roused in the middle of the night by Crispin’s furious, incomprehensible cries. Crispin was tossing and kicking in his blanket. His face was screwed up as if in pain. From time to time the horrid, high-pitched babble coming from his lips resolved into words. Mickey deduced that in the dream, he was trying to find someone and they were both in fearful danger. But it was no normal nightmare. Or if it was, Mickey had never heard of even battle-shocked combat pilots having nightmares so vivid. He couldn’t get back to sleep. He sat up, huddled in his blanket against the cold, debating vainly whether or not to wake Crispin. Morning came before he decided.

What he hated most about the Ochadou Plains—apart from the beastly provincials, which went without saying—were their extremes of temperature. Three years ago, on his greentail journey to the air base at Chadou Imamako, all the recruits had frozen at night (part of the toughening-up process, said their corporal, who rode in the heated cab), and during the day they had suffered near heatstroke. The troop carrier juddered so hard as the driver launched it blithely over the bumps in the road that they lost all sense of direction. Several of them had passed the entire journey in the corner which the already emergent hierarchy among them had allocated to those too weak to swallow their vomit. Mickey hadn’t been motion sick. That was the last time in his career as a Disciple, he thought, remembering, when he hadn’t been stuck firmly at the bottom of the unofficial hierarchy. The *official* hierarchy, of course, had been a different story; his proficiency in the air, no less surprising to him than anyone else, had earned him pilot’s wings and the rank of Wedgehead, which his flightmates had seized on as an excuse to hate him even more.

This morning he’d pleaded insomnia, and Crispin had taken the first shift at the whipcord. Thus it was that Mickey was in the pilot’s seat later when the daemon died in his hands. The sudden mental vacuum had nearly sucked *him* in.

“If you’re set on it, we’ll have to wait for dark. But I warn you, stealing *anything* from the Chadou, let alone a daemon, is ill-advised.”

“I wasn’t aware it was your place to criticize my strategy, Pilot,” Crispin said irritably.

“Sorry. Captain.”

“However, waiting for dark seems only sensible. In the meantime, I’m going to burn *this* stinking object”—he kicked the daemon’s corpse—”and I don’t care who sees the smoke. There aren’t any Disciples about, are there, and we can handle anything else that comes

along.” He smiled. “Huh?”

Called upon to prove his fortitude, Mickey threw himself into the task of clearing a space in the thigh-high grass with a will. The sweat dripped down their backs and their faces even after they stripped to the waist. The grass was extraordinarily hard to pull up, but it had to be done—Mickey knew how real the risk of a fire was. Every year between Maia and Sevambar, a steady stream of news on the latest tracts of plain burnt poured into Okimako. There usually weren’t many deaths—the population of all Eastern Kirekune, excluding army and air bases, was less than half that of Greater Okimako. And the Chadou of the deep plains had more than one reason for building beside rivers.

An hour later, as the daemon smoldered in the cleared circle, Mickey straightened up from pulling the tangled grasses out of the Blacheim’s landing gear to rub his aching back. He thought he saw the low roofs of the village far away across the grasses. Smoke rose in thin twists from it. Good sweet turf smoke—he could imagine the smell—so different from the foul fumes coming from the daemon corpse. (“We shouldn’t have cleared the ground so close to the plane,” Crispin had said, his face zebra-striped with soot. “I had no idea the motherfucker was going to take so long to burn.”)

The daemon’s burning created a haze in the immediate area; and through it Mickey was *sure*—

But no, he saw nothing. The town was too far-off to be visible. Everything was reminding him of cities and towns these days, that was all, from the sun itself to the mountains to the sunburn on his own cheeks, which, reflected in the glass face of a dial, brought back images of his mother’s rouged gay-girls. He wasn’t developing a sudden leaning toward anthropocentric poesy: nor, after so long, had he become homesick. It was the opposite, in fact. The very struggle to stay alive was bringing him closer to Okimako every minute, and he dreaded arriving there.

There was no guarantee they would ever get to the city, but one had to behave as though they would. And Mickey wasn’t good enough at applying himself to matters in hand to be able to push thoughts of the future out of his mind. Deep down he was worried sick about how long he would be able to stay out of the eye of the law before he had to flee the city again, this time forever. Would it even be long enough to locate his family? And how, in the name of Significance, were *they* going to greet their prodigal son returning without a scrap of honor or dignity, in the company of a gigantic barbarian they were sure to believe his lover, who would by then, like Mickey, if this daemon-stealing project went off at all successfully, be wanted by the law on both sides of the continent?

Mickey ground his teeth and yanked at the grass. Blood slicked his fingers.

5 Maia 1896 AD. 11:10 P.M.

Kirekune: Somebai Province: the Eastern Plains of the Chadou

And after all, Crispin had been right about there being a daemon in the village. Mickey thought, *I can never speak to him again. I just can't. It's unnatural. It's too much.*

His throat was cramped with fear. He wanted to laugh. They crouched in the grass beside the cart track that ran upriver from the village. In the middle of the “street”, about 150 yards off, was parked a small, rickety truck hung about with wares. Even in the dark it was impossible to mistake its lumpy silhouette. It almost certainly belonged to one of the trader-peddler-tinkers, richer than their nomadic lifestyle might lead one to believe, who were the only contact the isolated Chadou had with the outside world. No doubt the tinker was even now being entertained inside one of the huts, feted with the best in goat’s meat and

barley wine the village could provide.

At least, Mickey hoped that was where he was. Such men traveled with a veritable arsenal of projectile guns, both for sale and self-protection, which they didn't hesitate to use, and he and Crispin were armed only with Crispin's daemon pistol. Crispin had also, for some reason, insisted on bringing the welding torch from the Blacheim's toolkit—a snub-nosed instrument which operated on a spark and a cartridge of butane. Its flame only reached about a foot, and it would be less use than a dagger against an army of avenging Chadou.

"This is better than I was hoping!" Crispin whispered. "I thought it might be in a well or a generator or something. Or even demat—never mind, I know you said there aren't any. This is good. I know trucks."

"Are you suggesting we drive it away? They'd be swarming all over us as soon as we started the engine."

"Queen, no. Those tires couldn't handle the grass anyway. Why steal the treasure chest when you can just take the pearls and put them in your pocket?"

"You gonna put the daemon in your pocket?"

"Fathead," Crispin said. "Come on."

They slipped through the grass, stopping near the first hut. Glimmers of candlelight came from behind closed shutters. Mickey heard people speaking idiomatic Chadou dialect. A pikedog slept nose on paws in front of the door, a four-foot-high aperture in which hung a mat of woven reeds. Mickey and Crispin crossed carefully to the other side of the track, where the grass had been cleared away, leaving the slope down to the river bare and trampled. The pike stirred and whimpered, and simultaneously the voices within rose in a crescendo of laughter.

Crispin gripped Mickey's arm. "What are they saying? What are they saying?"

"Sssh. Don't worry."

"Don't you start! I mean it!"

"Laughing?" Mickey was nonplussed.

"Speaking Kirekuni! It's absolute gibberish as far as I'm concerned!"

"I wasn't—" Mickey stopped. The realization made him shudder. He hadn't spoken his own tongue in years, except softly to himself sometimes, in the air where no one else could hear. He'd prided himself on mastering Ferupian to the point where he thought mostly in that language. Yet it had taken him a mere thirty seconds to relapse. "I'll teach you," he offered.

"I don't want to—all right, yeah, but for *now* just don't start! And if anyone comes—Queen forbid—tell me what they're saying, will you?"

Mickey looked about. They were halfway through the village now, pressed against the wall of a henhouse behind the hut in front of which the tinker had parked his truck. From inside the sod-built coop came the soft sounds of birds twitching in their sleep. "Go for it, then. I'll stand guard."

"I'll need your help. I've never seen this model—it looks like a Glücken, but it's too long in the nose, and the axles are so high-set..." Crispin moved out from the cover of the henhouse and flickered into the street. He moved with incredible stealth, his acrobatic training showing. When he reached the truck he turned and beckoned fiercely.

Who does he think he is, ordering me about when this isn't even his country? Without me he'd be screwed!

That's the attitude that started a hundred-year war, he rebuked himself, obeying Crispin's summons. *Without him you'd be screwed, too.*

If not for him I wouldn't even be here!

Yeah, you'd be serving your time in the Salzeim Parallel under some other asshole with nothing to look forward to except getting shot down and the end of things.

"Hold this up," Crispin whispered, hoisting the hood. He extracted a hammer from his pocket, ducked into the engine cavity, whose lip was on a level with their chests, and went to work with the prying end of the hammer. The first nail came out with a screech that cut through the silence like a screamer. Mickey nearly dropped the hood. *Nerves!* It couldn't have been as loud as all that; and besides, the night wasn't really silent. The river added its own theme to the ceaseless, rustling music of the grass behind the houses as it clucked loudly over the ford fifty feet downstream. Far away a loper screamed in the teeth of a grass wolf. The plains might look deserted, but especially in the dark, they were by no means safe. From now on he and Crispin would be wiser to sleep in shifts. And wiser yet to rest during the day and fly under cover of night. Someone from the village might even have seen the Blacheim come down, this afternoon. A party might be on its way to investigate the crash right now!

Screech! The second nail came out.

"Can't you be a bit quieter?"

"No. Is anyone coming?"

"No—*ob*—"

"*What is it?*"

"Nothing." Mickey got his breath back. "Just that dog."

It was nosing around his legs, looking up at him with a pike's permanent tongue-lolling smile. He put his hand down to calm it, and a cold wet nose shoved against his fingers.

"Shut it up! Send it away! I'm doing this as fast as I can!"

Screech!

The dog would not go away. "Good boy," Mickey murmured in Kirekuni. Then, getting a better look at its thin belly, "Good girl, that is. Down now." His mother had never been one for pet animals, and the gay-girls had no time to care for anything except their looks, but on her seventh birthday Mickey's younger sister Zouka had pleaded for and received a Sinoese lion dog. When she grew bored with it, it had become Mickey's. It had died at the ripe age of two under a cart. "There's a girl."

"What? What's that?"

"Sorry."

Screech!

It had been a mistake to fondle the dog, Mickey realized. The Chadou didn't treat their animals as pets, and the pike was exhilarated by the unusual attention, frolicking around him, leaping and laughing and trying to put her paws on his chest so she could lick his face. "*Good girl,*" he murmured desperately, and to Crispin, "Are you nearly done?"

When Crispin's voice came it had that wandering, inattentive note Mickey dreaded. Fear shot through him. "No-ooo. Not—quite. Mickey..."

"What?"

"I... shit..."

"Crispin!"

"Uemiel..."

Forgetting the dog, Mickey shifted the weight of the hood onto his shoulders and twisted around to grab Crispin's shoulder. "Name of the Significant!" Fear brought frustration to the surface. "You're only *handling* it, not *tricking* it, you're acting like a cadet at a training session! You're stronger than this!" Crispin's body was rigid. Mickey shook him. "Someone's coming!" It was the only thing he could think of that might cut through the bubble of persuasion into which the daemon had drawn Crispin.

“Where? What?”

“Thank Significant! Nothing. You were—”

Behind Mickey the pike, deprived of attention, had been whining disconsolately. Now she began to bark.

Mickey had forgotten what loud, low, throaty voices pikes had. And how, once they got the wind up, they wouldn't stop barking until they succeeded in causing a commotion. It was why they made good watchdogs. Mickey tried to kick the dog. She skittered away and redoubled her howls. He scanned the houses. It would be a matter of minutes until someone came out. The river clamored blackly at the bottom of the slope.

“Give us the torch,” Crispin said in a strangely calm voice. He still hadn't emerged from the engine cavity.

“Gotta get out of here! Fuck the daemon!” Mickey wrenched at him.

“Give it to me!”

“You've got it!”

“I know! It's in my jacket, I can't reach it I'm *holding* her, I can't let go!”

Mickey fumbled in Crispin's jacket and handed him the little flamegun. The dog kept on barking. Crispin clicked open the nozzle. Mickey heard the fizzle of flame, and then the ear-piercing *crack* of metal under stress springing apart; he started and dropped the heavy hood on Crispin's shoulders. “Hell!” On the other side of the street a door opened, revealing a small, hunched silhouette against a gleam of candlelight. “Ina? Ina?” it shrilled querulously. The dog stayed where she was, staring at Mickey, giving tongue. Then voices drew his attention to the first house they'd passed, about a hundred yards back along the track. A crowd of ragged, long-tailed people, probably everyone else in the village, poured into the street, laughing and razzing each other. Mickey dragged Crispin out from under the hood of the truck, nearly tearing his head off in the process, catching the wooden slab and lowering it gently just in time to prevent it from slamming. “Cris, stand up.”

Crispin blinked. Even in the dark Mickey could see he wasn't focusing. He was surprisingly light even though he wasn't supporting any of his own weight. The blowtorch lay on the ground. Mickey tried to pick it up with his tail, but years of forcing himself not to do anything of the sort had made him too clumsy. “Stand up. We're busted.”

The Chadou were spreading down the street toward them. “It was an owl,” someone shouted from the rear fringe of the crowd. “Forget it!”

Crispin freed himself from Mickey's grasp and took a stumbling step. “Then what are we waiting for,” he slurred.

A sort of roaring disorientation washed over Mickey. The dog was still barking, and the noise seemed to jab right into his head, piercing his eardrums. He was nearly sick. “What about the daemon?” he managed.

“I've got her.”

Crispin's features seemed to waver oddly, his mouth opening and shutting without making any sound, as if he was underwater. The dinning in Mickey's ears clarified into words. “—she's right here. Come on.”

“Where? I don't see anything.”

“Look, for the love of the Queen, will you trust me?” Crispin shimmered out from behind the truck and made for the cover of the henhouse. Mickey followed—he could do nothing else, although he knew something was very wrong. The dog spun herself around to point after them, stiff-legged, barking wildly. As they stole down to the riverbank, Crispin's legs gave out and Mickey caught him. The rest of the escape was a fever dream. Mickey had to half carry Crispin while he issued irritable, senseless orders in far too loud a voice. The

buzzing came and went, and the nausea sat in his stomach like a bladder of poison likely to burst at any sudden movement. “Shift *down*, Queen damn it, you rotten-cunt whore!” Crispin barked at one point, and Mickey had no idea whether he was addressing him, or some regular years in the past, or the daemon. For the daemon was with them. How Crispin had done it Mickey did not want to guess, but the creature had dematerialized and it was keeping up with them, wrapped around their heads like a cloud of gas. The river crawled in his vision as if there were no water in its bed, but black-and-silver snakes, wriggling frantically downstream. The grasses writhed like an ocean of cobras standing on their tails. Behind them, the Chadou were setting up a hue and cry. One man’s voice rose above the rest, and because he spoke in Okimako dialect, Mickey understood even through his sickness and fear: “I’ll fucking string whoever done this! D’you hear, you poxy grass rabbits! I know you know who done it, and if he’n’t come forward, I’ll shoot the fucking lot of you! I’m gnawing well *stranded* long as you’nt give it up!”

Mickey had just enough of his wits left about him to smile.

A moment later, he heard the report of a rifle: the trader, as good as his word, was firing on the villagers.

Mickey had always been grateful for his sense of direction and even in his half-fainting state, it didn’t fail him. Not too long after he expected to, he broke clear of the grass into the ruts the Blacheim had left when she landed. With the last of his strength, he dragged Crispin up to the plane and dropped him. The reek of burnt daemon flesh still lingered about the place; as if in response to it, the presence of Uemiel suddenly thinned, withdrawing. Mickey staggered off and threw up into the ashes.

6 Maia 1896 A.D. 6:05 A.M.

Kirekune: Somebai Province: the Eastern Plains of the Chadou

At dawn Mickey watched Crispin balancing on the drop ladder, his upper body inside the engine cavity, banging the final nails into the cell into which they had forced the malicious Uemiel. Unlike Elektheris, she hadn’t gone willingly. For the best part of the night, while Mickey slept, Crispin had been working on her. In the last hour of darkness he resorted to force. The daemon’s shout woke Mickey. Jumping up, he saw Crispin wrestling with four feet of pinkish orange daemon and eight feet of whipping yellow hair, struggling to fasten the silver collar around her neck. When he understood what was happening he grabbed the blowtorch and went to help. While the silver was touching her skin, she couldn’t dematerialize; still, by the time they managed to pin her down long enough to weld her collar shut, most of her hair had been singed off in the torch flame, and she had given Mickey and Crispin both nasty power shocks. Then it was a renewed struggle to manhandle her into the cell inside the Blacheim. Arms and legs kept shooting out while they tried to close the cell, sometimes kicking perilously close to gears in the upper housing. It was like trying to fit a hydra-headed Jack back into its box. They both kept bursting into laughter: a nervous reaction to tension.

Mickey was trembling with the effects of nerves and sleeplessness. He longed for a cigarette. Neither of them had suggested taking time out to eat or rest until the daemon had been properly celled.

“And they wouldn’t give me a job at the daemonmongers’!” Crispin remarked hollowly, banging another nail in. “Fucking ignoramuses!”

Something whistled through the left sleeve of Mickey’s blouse and thudded into the Blacheim’s wing. He whirled. They erupted out of the grass all at once: five lanky, ragged

Chadou men with hairy untattooed tails like those of rats, and a big Okimakoan—the tinker, Uemiel’s owner. No more knives flew. They were going for the sure thing, and they’d surrounded Mickey before he could even draw Crispin’s revolver. In thirty seconds he fired all six rounds, and two men fell, clawing at the jewel-colored, famished spiders that were gnawing through their hands to get at their throats, but that left four of them. Although the tinker wasn’t using his projectile rifle for fear of hitting his allies, they all had knives, and Mickey found himself backed up against the fuselage, laying about him with the butt of the revolver. His opponents were inexpert fighters, even the tinker, using their knives as they would have used their fists, and Mickey just managed to hold them at bay—but he couldn’t last. He was already bleeding heavily from his right forearm, which he was using in lieu of a shield to parry the blows raining on him, and it wouldn’t be long before one of them scuttled under the Blacheim and cut his legs out from under him from behind. And he must have been hit in the body, too, because his stomach was cramping so fiercely his eyes watered, blurring everything in sight. Suddenly the onslaught lessened as one of the plainsmen and the tinker broke away right. Mickey drew his dagger, and, as the other two Chadou slewed their eyes around to see where their fellows had gone, he lunged for the throat of the one on the left. Scarlet splashed onto the trampled grass as the man fell, jerking. Now it was one-on-one, and although it had been a while since Mickey fought hand-to-hand, he was combat-trained, whereas the Chadou man had probably never been in a more serious set-to than piss-drunk brawls with the fellows from the village five miles upriver. The wail of a screamer stabbed through the noise of Mickey’s own breath in his ears. *Eeeeeee!*

The Chadou man made the mistake of looking around.

Eeeeeee!

What a blithering imbecile! Mickey stabbed him. Steel scraped bone but he had not misjudged his target: the blade slid sweetly in between the ribs, and the man’s entire body convulsed, spittle-flecked features distending. He dropped heavily to his knees. Just for good measure, Mickey stooped and cut his throat neatly, stepping to the side as he did so to avoid the spray of blood. He stood up, glancing around. The kill tally his brain had been keeping—a reflex so ingrained he didn’t question its accuracy—told him that according to the number of screamers he’d heard, unless more of them lurked in the grasses, that was the lot.

Pain hit him in a series of dizzying pulses as time slowed to its normal progression.

Crispin hurried with the blowtorch from body to body, making sure the Chadou were all dead. The screamers, in their communal-spirited fashion, had all migrated to the tinker’s body and settled down to feast at their leisure. Two of them were squabbling over the entrails in their screechy little voices. Crispin paused at a distance of three feet and aimed the blowtorch. At the first lick of flame, all twelve went up with a *whoomp* and a crackle. Crispin stepped back, fanning his face. “Can’t have ‘em coming after *us*.”

Mickey stared numbly.

From the pockets of his flight fatigues, Crispin produced a dozen beaten-tin cigarette boxes, grinning as he fanned them out like a conjuror. “Look what they had on ‘em. Must’ve just bought them off that fellow. Stroke of luck, eh? Wish I could’ve searched *him*, or the truck cab—should’ve done, no telling what might’ve turned up. His gun’s a loss, too.” He glanced regretfully at the flames licking over the body, which still gripped the long-snouted projectile rifle. “But only a fool would try to shift screamers once they’ve dug their teeth in.”

Mickey leaned against the nose of the Blacheim, wrapping his left arm and his tail around the propeller. His right arm was killing him. Blood was dripping into his hand. His side had gone numb. All over so quickly. Well, that was the way it went when people meant business. The sun was rising in the east, an orange fireball in a watercolor wash of pink

spreading rapidly up the gray sky. The grasslands rolled featureless as a desert to the horizon.

“Winged?” Crispin said from behind him.

“I’m all right.” The scent of roasting human flesh brought back his nausea. He swallowed bile. “Put that out, can you?”

“With what? Too much trouble to stamp it. Just let it burn down’s better,”

Mickey closed his eyes. He felt Crispin come up behind him, engulfing him in a psychic shadow of the deepest black, a shadow composed of his sweat-and-soot-and-daemons smell and of Mickey’s special awareness of him, an awareness that could judge the distance between flesh and flesh to the inch, which filled that distance with aching, as if Mickey’s own skin had been flayed away, leaving his whole body supersensitive to the least movement of the air.

“For fuck’s sake, you’re bleeding like a pig.”

Crispin moved around to the other side of the propeller and began to untangle him.

“Look at you!”

Mickey opened his eyes and stared between the broad, scarred blades at Crispin. “Actually, I can’t believe I’m alive. This is the first time I’ve ever fought hand-to-hand, apart from in training. I’m quite pleased with myself.” As recently as last week, he’d routinely shot down as many enemies as possible and then returned to base and eaten well and slept like a baby. He hadn’t felt like a killer then. He did now. In air warfare, the intellect was always engaged—in flying one’s kite if nothing else. One concentrated on obeying one’s briefing; the objective of murder was taken for granted, if not incidental. By the time Mickey joined 80 Squadron he had begun to be a competent pilot, but the handicap of his left-handedness had prevented him from subsequently *merging* with his Gorgonette the way the real aces did—the way he’d merged with his knife just now. As he fought the Chadou, instinct had extinguished the moral compunctions that Flight Commandant Vichuisse’s death had awakened in him. He needn’t have worried. He was a career soldier.

“We gave a pretty good account of ourselves, didn’t we?” Crispin peeled back Mickey’s sleeve. “Six to two, not bad odds, not bad at all...of course, they didn’t know what they were getting into...Queen, you’re a mass of cuts! Muscle and tendon, too... What were you doing, parrying with your bare arm?”

“Yes.”

“It’s beyond *me* why you ever thought you were a coward!”

“I a—h—h—h—h!” Mickey flinched as Crispin picked bits of cloth out of open gashes.

“Here, sit down. No, watch it, not there.” Crispin guided him around the nose of the Blacheim into the grass. He looked under the plane’s belly and saw the smoke from the slowly cooking corpse of the tinker rising straight up.

“What happened to you? I thought I was a goner.”

“They assumed you were alone.” Crispin smiled in a way that reminded Mickey of nothing so much as Captain Burns of 96 Squadron. It was a toothy, self-satisfied grin that would have been endearingly boyish if it had reached the eyes. “They were so bent on getting you they didn’t even see me. I just slipped down off the ladder and around the other side of her and Bob’s your uncle... Reconnaissance pays, boys,” he added loudly, cupping one hand to his mouth as if calling to the bodies. “Remember that for next time! Here, lie down. I want to see your ribs.”

Obediently Mickey lay back in the grass, tucking the curled tip of his tail under his head. Brown stems soared above him as tall as spires, topped by pale green budding seed heads that bobbed against the paling sky. Crispin unbuttoned Mickey’s tunic. Mickey wondered what he’d done to coax the daemon to follow them back to the aircraft; and what it had

done to him. *Never again*, he'd said after the first time. *I'd starve first, I'd die of thirst*. But he looked far better now than he had before the Chadou's attack...

"All the same," Mickey said, yawning.

"All the same what?"

"All the same I'm through with this shit. Fighting. Killing."

"That's an old story, son." Crispin laughed as he ripped strips out of Mickey's tunic.

"You don't understand. The only reason this happened is because we did something we shouldn't have."

Never again, he thought with the crystalline clarity of semiconsciousness. *I've had enough. We're out of the Great Problem now—we've no excuse for going on like this. It's time to clean up. No one can live this way forever, and the sooner we get off the truck, the less likely we'll get thrown off. All soldiers die in the end...*

The pain was receding, localizing, becoming manageable.

"You'll feel better when you get some sleep," Crispin said. "You can sleep in the air. I want to take off as soon as possible, in case more of 'em come to see what happened to the first lot. This here is just a flesh wound, you've lost a bit of blood, but if it doesn't heal straight, well, star and plaster me. We'll put down by a river and you can wash. One thing though, you're going to be flying copilot for quite a while."

"Uh?"

"Your right arm's fucked, isn't it? You won't be able to handle the whipcord." Crispin lifted Mickey carefully and wrapped strips of fabric around his abdomen below the ribs. He said casually, "I'm gonna take you up on your offer, I think."

"Wha'...what offer?"

"To teach me Kirekuni. They were yelling at you, and for all I knew they could have been saying something important."

"They were just calling me a tattoo-tailed lily-livered nancy boy."

"Before we get to Okimako I've got to be able to at least speak a few sentences. I'll tell you the things I have to be able to say, and you can tell me how. All right?"

"Oh...oh, yes. I can teach you more than just a few sentences," Mickey yawned. "I mean, gram—gramma—*grammatically* it's not half as complex as Ferupian. And there are fewer words in the...the spoken vocabulary." As always when he was tired, he had to search his brain for the Ferupian words. "The trick is...nuance. It's really easy to choose the wrong word and offend someone. But people will make allowances." He chuckled. "And if you fuck up bad and get into a fight, no...no doubt you can dispose of any number of my lily-livered countrymen."

Crispin sat back on his heels. "I felt the same way as you once," he said. "Not that long ago. Then I realized Lady Luck's a two-faced bitch; nothing's fair, so why should I bother trying to straighten something out that's so far out of whack I wouldn't be able to even things up if I lived a hundred years? All anyone can do is take responsibility for himself."

"And everyone else can go hang?"

"Yeah, well. Life is all about alliances."

Mickey chuckled. "In other words, making the best of a crap hand."

"Fuck you. How'd you say that?"

"I know who my friends are."

"'Fuck you'? Bit long, innit?" Crispin repeated the sentence with surprising accuracy. "'I know who my friends are.' How's that?"

"Fine." Mickey closed his eyes. On the bright red field of his lids he imagined he saw Crispin's silhouette. The tangible shadow of him coming closer, enveloping Mickey, his

heady effect on all the senses quickening Mickey's breath and sending a rush of heat straight to his groin; finally, after a pause during which anticipation enhanced arousal to an unbearable pitch, the brush of lips on...

Why is that what I want? Not the other—brutal, impersonal usage, buggery as a substitute for “the real thing”—which I might possibly get?

But he knew.

Whenever it's more than just physical, Yozi, you get as romantic as a schoolgirl. You've got to stop falling for normal men.

And the truth underlying that flippant self-admonition was too deep to think about: that he had never fallen for anyone, normal *or* crooked, like this.

The shadow...

When he opened his eyes—he might have slept, or dozed, he didn't know—he heard the Blacheim's engine turning over.

I'll never be an angel

I'll never be a saint, it's true...

I been up and down and all around

It's all about survival

—Cicccone / Austin

This Life So Free

10 Maia 1896 A.D. Kirekune: the Ochadou Plains

Again they took to the air, and flew southwest. Uemiel could only muster a third of Elektheris's speed, so it was a strange, stately journey, the antique bomber chugging through expanses of star-filled night without a glimmer of human habitation below. Mickey slept most of the time they were in the air. Occasionally he woke and peered down at the vast dark platter of the earth. Then he would look at the instruments, which always said exactly what they were supposed to; and then the stars would overcome him and send him wheeling back into oblivion.

It was supposed to be his task to keep watch on the ground, during the days, while Crispin slept. But the Blacheim's thermometer registered 97°F every afternoon, and what with the sweet smell of the ripening seed heads, and the hum of insects, and the starry flashing of their wings over the grass, he always ended up falling asleep, too. Crispin never said a word (except in his dreams, when he cursed and argued loudly; Mickey had got used to this, and usually managed to tune him out). When night fell, one of them roused the other, and they flew on. From the Raw Marches to Okimako, at this latitude, it was about two hundred leagues as the crow flew, or four and a half hundred miles by the Ferupian measure. At Uemiel's speed they were making barely eighty miles a day. Mickey only hoped they were going in the right direction. At Air Base XXI and indeed all over the Raw, no one ranked lower than marshal or general had been allowed to own maps—of Kirekune or anywhere else.

It hadn't escaped him that Crispin was clocking too many flight hours. Every day he looked older. The lines under his eyes and around his mouth were chiseled as deeply as if they'd always been there. Each evening, as their next stint in the Blacheim drew near, he

would retire into himself, ceasing to speak. But Mickey reasoned that if he needed to stop and rest, he would say so. No one was waiting for them in Okimako. There was no need to press ahead so fast. Therefore, Crispin must be perfectly comfortable with the number of hours he was spending at the whipcord.

He knew this wasn't true. Crispin was a stubborn son of a bitch, ferociously self-critical, who held himself to unrealistic standards. Besides, he was the ranking pilot of the two of them—and a captain never, ever let a regular see him falter. Mickey knew that Crispin still held himself responsible for both of them, and would probably rather kill them both by falling asleep in the air than ask to be spelled, when he knew that if Mickey were to try to use his right arm before the muscles and tendons healed, he would damage it beyond repair.

That was another reason Mickey said nothing. He couldn't even move the stiffened arm. It ached constantly, and he hadn't let Crispin see the jaundiced flesh with the red threads leading away from the sealed gashes. He was afraid infection had set in.

Yet in one way he was grateful for the low-grade fever that rendered sleep easy and comatose, as he was grateful for the constant, niggling ache in his arm. It prevented him from dreaming or even thinking too much about Okimako. The city had receded from an immediate threat into a hazy, almost unreal future.

Four nights after the incident in the Chadou village, Crispin put the Blacheim down in a water meadow carpeted with bright verdure, cupped in an oxbow of one of the rivers that meandered across the vastness. The meadow was a half mile wide and slightly sunken below the level of the plains. The ankle-short grass was very different from the tough, tall plainsgrass that sucked all the goodness out of the soil and spread like the wind, rendering farming impossible wherever the climate was suited to its growth. The reason it had not spread down here, Mickey guessed, was because when it rained, the bowl would flood. Certainly, stooping to rub the juicy grass in his fingers, he could see no molehills, no loper droppings, nothing except the tiny, near-invincible daisies whose roots spread like a labyrinth underground.

Trees grew up the banks of the meadow: willow and hazel in full foliage. A flood plain for certain. But the sky had been clear since the storm in the Raw Marches. It would probably be all right. He turned, shading his eyes against the sun, and shouted, "Nice place we've got here!"

Crispin jumped down from the cockpit. He landed neatly, started to call out a cheerful reply, then broke off as he staggered to his knees. For a minute, Mickey thought he had stumbled into some sort of quicksand, and he hesitated before rushing to him. Crispin's eyes were closed, his mouth open. His pulse beat wearily, raggedly, like an old engine turning over.

He had fainted. That was all. He had fainted.

The sun flooded down on Mickey as he dragged Crispin into the shadow of the Blacheim's wing. A fresh breeze blew off the river, into the shade. His heart was bursting with fear, but he could do nothing except wait for Crispin to recover consciousness. *At least the first thing he sees will be a friendly face.*

After about fifteen minutes, Crispin opened his eyes, frowned as if he didn't like what he saw, and closed them again. Mickey shook him. "Are you all right?"

"Shurrup F Queen's sake." Crispin's brow furrowed and he turned his face into Mickey's chest like a huge child trying to go back to sleep.

"What the hell happened?"

Crispin spoke into Mickey's tunic. His voice was perfectly normal yet somehow Mickey had a feeling that he was not really conscious but speaking out of a dream, *into* a dream in which Mickey was a character, not himself. "I'm hallucinating... marginally insane... losing my

touch... having a nervous breakdown... any number of things. Dunno what to call it. You wouldn't either."

"I might if you told me." Mickey shifted Crispin's head into the crook of his left arm—he really was amazingly light—and reached across with his other hand to adjust Crispin's rucked-up uniform jacket. Crispin wrinkled his nose as Mickey's sleeve brushed across his face.

"Pfeh!" His eyes flew open and he sat up. He was properly conscious now. The difference was outstanding. "You've opened it up again! You went fucking dragging me around the place, didn't you! How much of an idiot are you?"

"Yeah, yeah." Mickey concealed his arm behind his back.

"It's infected! Lemme see."

"How can you tell?"

"She... I... I have a sense of *smell*, all right? If it's infected, you're going to lose it unless you do something about it."

"Look, you're the one who just passed out. Don't worry about me!" It was so ridiculous Mickey had to laugh. The wounds probably had reopened while he dragged Crispin out of the sun. But he hadn't even noticed, or felt the pain get any worse, until Crispin drew his attention to it.

"Let me see." Crispin's eyes glittered as if he too had a fever.

Maia-June 1896 A.D.

Kirekune: the Ochadou Plains

They stayed for a month on the miniature floodplain, both of them slowly recuperating. There was water; there was sun; there were mosquitoes; and as the month wore on, there were red currants and other berries on the banks below the trees.

It was one of the happiest times Mickey could remember having passed in his life. Not even the constant pain in his arm—which seemed, against all reason, to be getting worse, not better, until he had to carry it by his side like a wooden limb—could lessen his heart's delight. He wondered if Crispin were enjoying himself, too. Sometimes he thought maybe; but then he would remember that Crispin had something else on his mind, something that couldn't be eased by the simple panaceas of sleep and sun and wormy raspberries. Crispin knew he was having nightmares, and he was afraid of them. Had it been anyone else, Mickey would have teased him about it, but the way Crispin cried in his sleep warned him not to bring up the subject.

After they had argued each other into agreeing that it wasn't practical to move on immediately, Crispin had slapped at a mosquito and remarked: "We'll be lucky if we don't catch malaria off these bloodsuckers, that's all I have to say," and over the course of four weeks, he remained uncommunicative and distrustful, of the water, the ground, the day, the night—distrustful, it seemed, even of the air itself. It took Mickey longer than it should have to realize that, of course, what Crispin really distrusted was Kirekune in its entirety.

Did Mickey himself fall into the category of highly suspect? No telling. They didn't do a lot of talking. Not to each other, nor to the Kirekuni daemon curled like a maggot inside the Blacheim, growing fat and idle off their store of splinterons.

Perhaps because he dreaded dreaming, Crispin was always reluctant to lie down to sleep. During the day he seemed indifferent to Mickey's company; but after dark he would ask him to come sit with him on a large, flat stone a stride out from the riverbank, that seemed to have been dropped there from the sky, to teach him Kirekuni grammar, vocabulary, and

idiom. Crispin was a better student, Mickey thought, than he himself was a teacher. He'd discovered that it was one thing to speak a language from the cradle and another to itemize it to someone else. But despite the frustrations involved, he didn't suggest stopping the lessons. Firstly because of the tremendous, terrible reason he could no longer deny to himself, which wouldn't let him pass up a chance at Crispin's company; and secondly because his still-unhealed arm hurt too much now to allow him to sleep easily, either. Crispin plagued him about the injury, asking endless questions: how was it today, how did it feel when you woke up this morning, I wish you'd wear a sling, let me see it, dammit I don't understand why you're so secretive... but Mickey kept the pain to himself out of a superstitious conviction that not talking about it would make it go away. Besides—the longer it took to heal, the longer they would have to stay here... Yes, altogether better to keep Crispin in the dark for now.

And anyhow, that was fair, wasn't it, considering Crispin had not divulged a single word about the disability *he* appeared to have developed: his reasons for not having gone near the Blacheim in two weeks. That was just plain irresponsible behavior for a daemon handler. Mickey, at least, had an excuse.

Tonight Crispin had made a point of not mentioning his arm. Instead he said out of nowhere, in correct Kirekuni: "Tell me about your family."

Mickey stared. They had been going over the vocatives used toward everyone from a Disciple down to a Dead City beggar; perhaps that was what had made Crispin think of it. But the sentence was perfectly grammatical. He must have rehearsed it beforehand. A half-full moon shone down on the river, turning the fishing pole resting on Crispin's knee into a trembling rod of quicksilver. The only fish they'd ever caught here were spiny trout with too little flesh in between their bones and carapacelike scales to make them worth cooking; they picked them clean anyway because they had no other source of meat in their diet, unless one of them ventured up to the plain to trap lopers.

"What about them?" Mickey said.

"If you're going to introduce me to them, it would help if I knew who was who."

Mickey felt a pang of disappointment. They'd been camping by the river since the moon was a fingernail-clipping crescent, and he'd started to entertain nebulous hopes that the charms of peace and quiet would derail Crispin's determination to reach Okimako. He should have known better. Crispin's feet had never really touched the ground. Even here he was hounded by past and future, dogged by his private whatever-it-was, always distracted, always planning ahead.

"They're not your sort," he said meanly. "I don't expect you'll want to stay long with them."

He glanced involuntarily across the meadow at the dark shadow poised on the grass, moonlight gleaming on its windshield, the single botched stroke that spoiled the *trompe l'oeil*.

"Not my sort? What's my sort?"

Mickey gestured with his good hand. "Military types."

"Uh-uh."

"Circus people."

"Maybe."

"Well, my family aren't *entertainers*." He could not keep a note of pride out of his voice. "My mother runs a brothel. A very professional establishment."

"That's a kind of circus, isn't it? Entertainment anyway. And entertainers are professionals. They have to be."

"I don't know, it's not entertainment where *we're* concerned. I suppose the clients see it

differently.”

“Where *we’re* concerned?” Crispin said in surprise. “*You* don’t...”

“Significant, no! The gay-girls take care of all that!” Mickey was stunned that Crispin could think such a thing even for a moment. What an alien place he must suppose Okimako, what a wide realm of possibilities it must encompass for him! “We’re the management. And the owners. We have our own wing—well, really, it’s the basement, but my mother’s been angling for years to buy half of the house next door. There’s a door at the top of the stairs. The Blue Door.” He shook his head, remembering. “When I was a kid, we weren’t allowed to go through after seven at night—one time, my big sister was looking through the keyhole, and this client bashed through, apparently his girl had made herself scarce when he got violent, he’d only paid the regular fee, we charge the earth for anything that could cause visible marks... the door hit Fumia and knocked her downstairs. She was lucky to only get one leg and a finger broken. After that we weren’t allowed even to go up the stairs on pain of death. And before you ask,” he added as Crispin started to interrupt, “not *really* death, just bed without supper.”

“Listen, I’ve—”

“We don’t slaughter our children for disobedience any more than we turn them into sex slaves.”

“I’ve *been* in Okimako, all right? I know you people aren’t monsters.”

“You’ve *what?*”

There was a short, horrid pause.

“—I mean I haven’t been there, of course not, I’ve heard about it; that’s—”

“Then why’d you say you had?” It had been so definite a statement. As if Mickey should have known all about Crispin’s habit of spending his leaves in the new city, and for that matter about his relatives on Aspadder Street.

“A slip of the tongue.”

“No need to get worked up over it, then.”

Crispin gathered in his fishing line and recast, ferociously. “*I’m* not getting worked up!”

It had come as a shock to Mickey that he and Crispin scarcely ever agreed on anything. Of course, they never *had*, not on the superficial level to which the circumstances of the QAF confined pilots of differing rank; but he’d thought that if they ever *really* talked, things would be different...

They were—worse. In the Raw, Crispin, aware of his audience even when there was none, had always been quick to find fault with Mickey. But now it was Mickey who couldn’t help starting arguments.

He tried to placate Crispin. “Well, you’re right about one thing: we certainly do have some characters in our family.”

Crispin was fishing angrily, if such a thing were possible, sitting with his back turned, his gigantic shoulders hunched.

“The Akilas have owned the same premises for two hundred years. My grandparents made the business what it is today. My mother—Saia—was the second of their four children. My uncle Kit died young, and my aunt Saonna joined a cult. She was another extraordinary one. She took off when I was just a baby, with her husband. The other one left is my uncle June. He collects hair.”

“He...Whose?”

Mickey smiled to himself. He had known that would get a response. “Anyone’s who’ll sell it to him. The gay-girls always want extensions, rats, knots... even my sisters do, sometimes, though none of them go in much for fashion. And since the gay-girls come and

go, June likes to keep every possible length and color on hand. He has about two hundred shades. Mine is what they call Rusty Nails, in the hair business; I had to cut it off when I joined the Disciples, and I gave him my ponytail.” Ruefully Mickey ran the fingers of his good hand through his buzz cut, which had grown out into spikes. “As for the gay-girls, not all of them are Kirekuni. There’s usually an Izte Kchebuk’aran and a northerner or two—yellowfaces, westerners, aren’t much in demand, but we keep a couple for the cheaper clients. And we had a Ferupian once, a blonde, and another time a Lamaroon girl. They both got better offers, though.” Mickey paused. “I hope I’m not giving you the impression I was involved in running the business. I wasn’t, although we were all steeped in it to a degree, of course. I was at school until I was sixteen, before I joined up.”

“Straight off?”

“There were two years in between.” Mickey grimaced. “I think I probably came home about twice.”

“Wild child, huh,” Crispin said. “What about your sisters? What are they like?”

They re beautiful, Mickey thought, but a hateful instinct stopped him from saying it. “What about them? I have three. One older, two younger. Fumia’s the eldest—Significant, she’s probably married by now, she had enough suitors even before I left. Then there’s Ashika and Zouka. They’d be…” He had to add up the years on his fingers. It staggered him that he had never thought to do this. In his mind his sisters remained as he had last seen them: flushed, giggling hysterically, clutching their lace shawls with their tails, struggling to keep their composure as the roller coaster at the Kirili Fairgrounds whipped them up and down and from side to side. That had been his day of grace, traditionally given to recruits just before they set off on the long, arduous, most likely one-way journey to the front, not just out of the goodness of the Disciplinarians’ hearts but also as a test of the recruits’ honor and resolve. Everyone had stared as he squired them through the smelly, rackety, wonderful carnival that operated all year on the bank of the Orange. One skinny boy in uniform and three stunning, demure girls in the bloom of youth, their tail-tattoos and their quality clothes revealing that they were from better parts. The looks of envy, the taste of candy floss, of a sugar pear he had finished when Zouka did not want any more…that day was immortalized in his memory as twenty-two and a half hours of heaven.

After the Kirili finally closed they had spent all night dancing at a ballroom down in the Fugue—the low city—where no one would recognize them. As the sky started to lighten, turning the streetlamps the same orange as the river two miles down through stone, they took a rickey back to Dragyonne Street. He helped Fumia, Ashika, and Zouka, all a little drunk on wine and staying up all night, down from the rickey and hugged them for the last time. They blew kisses as they retreated backwards, bumping into each other. (“Ow, Ashie, that was my tit!”—“Sssh! Yozi can hear!”—“Yoz! Yoz!”)

The door closed gently behind them. He executed a sharp about-face and walked off down the street. His hobnailed boots rang on the cobbles. Here on the priciest edge of the licensed quarter that extended uphill as far as Fleur Street, where private residences far outnumbered businesses, not even the draycarts got moving before dawn; but he could hear the voices of costerers from the Urba Downhill. And Okimako, the great beast, was never really silent. He would have to walk all the way to the depot to meet his troop. He had spent every last penny of the cadet’s pay he’d saved, and refused to let his sisters give him rickey money. A man had his self-respect. (And anyway, how would it look to the rest, back at the depot, if he came driving up in style like the son of the woman whose son he was?)

At the end of the street he couldn’t resist turning to look. He half hoped to see his mother’s face in one of the attic windows. The attic was supposed to be Uncle June’s

apartment, but the whole family spent enough time up there that June got no privacy. And if any of the gay-girls needed to watch the street, they co-opted his sitting room as a matter of course. Mickey-then-Yozi scanned the whole height of the housefront. But it was still too dark, and Dragyonne Street was too long. He would never know whether in fact Saia had been watching.

In his mind they were all frozen in time. Saia, too, standing in the hall, dazzling in jewels, her face as hard as her long-gone sister's in the Hasegale portrait that hung behind her. But of course—"Ashie must be twenty now. Marriageable. Zouy's still only seventeen..."

But of course by now they might all be dead or bankrupt or worse.

For the first time the possibility became real to him; and the weight of four years and ten months thudded down on speculation like a portcullis, crushing it, severing those long-cherished memories like a limb, setting them adrift in the limbo of endangered things. His arm throbbed. He worried the scabs with his fingernails.

"If we don't amputate now, someone else is going to have to later!" Crispin said in an unaccountably angry tone.

References to his injury made Mickey impatient and nervous. "It's not hurting half as much as it was."

"That's because it's fucked." Crispin leaned across—Mickey's pulse quickened, a physiological reaction like flinching when something came at your face—and patted his hand. Then he pulled back. "Nerves're dead. Completely dead."

Mickey looked down. Crispin had stabbed one of his improvised fishhooks deep into the back of his hand. "Ow!"

"Shut up. You didn't feel a thing."

The unpleasant truth, which he wasn't going to tell Crispin, was that he hadn't been able to feel anything below the elbow for days. His forearm had become a red-and-yellow-webbed log. The hook shone in the moonlight like a little silver worm standing with its tail in the air and its head buried in his hand.

"Just proving a point," Crispin said.

"What do you know about surgery? If you—if you ... amputate... what if you can't stop the bleeding?"

"If I don't give it a try, it'll kill you eventually. I know that much."

The throbbing seemed already to have progressed to Mickey's head. He stared out at the river, a chiaroscuro border for the robe of grass that covered the plain on the far bank. Night and day it remained the same. He and Crispin would leave, and they would remember it as a prim summer waterway, never cold and raging.

He gritted his teeth and ripped the hook out. Blood came with it, black in the moonlight. It smelled. He threw the little silver thing in the water. "Waste of a good hook."

"I can do it tomorrow if you want. Best to get it over with." Crispin's voice was soft, almost apologetic. "Pity we don't have anything to get you drunk on first."

"The SAPPers do it without getting drunk, so I should be able to. They think avoiding pain is for faggots. And women." He laughed again, thinking of his mother and sisters. "That's a good one."

"I'd hate to lose one of my hands." Crispin looked at his big palms.

"Oh, it's not that!" *I have to stop laughing. He'll think I'm mad.* He shook silently. "I won't be crippled, not by Ferupian standards anyway! But doesn't it strike you as ironic that I've flown combat for years without getting scratched, and now I'm going to lose my arm because of a fucking bandit in my own country?"

"Almost as ironic as it is to handle daemons for eleven years by means of ignorance,

and then to lose it all at once, to lose your *nerve*, because suddenly you know a little,” Crispin said bitterly.

Mickey smiled up at the moon. “What are you talking about?”

In the old days there had been a moon-viewing festival on a certain day in autumn when the reaper’s moon first rose, full and red, over the farms of the Western tribesfolk who had driven the Chadou out of the fertile lands along the northern rivers. The custom had been established long before they grew tall and pale and refined and built cities, and now only the nobles of Okimako still practiced it. They climbed to the tops of special towers in the old city where (it was said, spitefully, by *nouveaux riches* who had never seen the moon in any sky uncontaminated by city lights) they viewed it through Sinoese-crafted telescopes. It was white now, a single tooth in the sky’s black gape.

Crispin was silent; Mickey said anxiously, “Darling, you know sometimes you have to just *laugh!*”

Crispin gathered in his fishing line and stood up. Mickey started to protest; then he was arrested and distracted by the sight of Crispin as he stood, impossibly tall, stretching his arms against the sky, the moon hanging between neck and shoulder like an earring. The huge hands laced together and the palms pushed skyward. The moment flowed instant by instant and Mickey felt the pressure eddying, swirling in all the wrong directions. He had severed himself from the past and the future; was the present, too, going to flee in confusion?

“I didn’t mean it!” he said.

“I’ve had enough for tonight.” Crispin jumped to the bank.

“Don’t go!” Mickey had to force himself to sit still. He wanted to get up and jump to the bank, catch Crispin, drag him back, pull him into his arms.

“I’m sorry,” Crispin said, sounding strangled, and turned away. Mickey rested his chin on his good hand, staring sightlessly at the river. His arm throbbed dully, but he was no longer thinking about it.

I love him.

And he knows it.

And he doesn’t want to know.

Nothing more needed to be said. It had all been said. Without a fracture the pressure had drained away.

A few tears of passion oozed out of his eyes. The passion had no name. Or rather, it had so many they drowned each other out.

He found himself relishing the thought of tomorrow’s operation simply because it would necessitate a certain amount of physical contact between them.

He found himself drawing the character for *Cri* on the rock, using the blood that was still trickling from the gash on the back of his hand.

It was too much. It tipped real emotion over the edge into caricature. He was in too deep to shake it off so easily, but all the same he laughed at himself and rubbed out every trace of the letter. Then he curled up to sleep near the Blacheim, inevitably in the daemon’s poisonous mental exhaust, yet far enough from Crispin that, he hoped, he wouldn’t be woken later on. But the pain in his arm, among other things, kept him awake until the muttering and sobbing started; he took his blanket and went to sleep in the trees, on the slope. He couldn’t stand it.

19 June 1896 A.D. Kirekune: the Ochadou Plains

Having slept late, Mickey trailed back to the plane halfway through the morning,

carrying his blanket. His right arm hung by his side like a piece of badly carved statuary that had somehow got attached to his body. It ached, with shooting pains. How could it hurt when the nerves were dead? *Ours not to question why*. Crispin was sitting on his heels by the small fire. Mickey sat stiffly on the grass across from him, feeling rather depressed. Crispin was stropping his knife on a piece of leather. It made a sinister burring noise. Mickey understood that longing and hatred, elation and misery, frustration and pain, could build up only so far; after that they canceled out, leaving—not emptiness, which was another story altogether—but something like normalcy. Right then it seemed like a gift from Significance—the limits of the human capacity for excessive emotion.

“Breakfast is prepared, I take it?” He yawned.

“Life’s a bitch, Mick.”

“Right enough.”

“And then you curl up in a ball and play dead, but they get you anyway.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I shouldn’t think you’d want any, anyhow.”

Mickey stared into the fire. Crispin was boiling water on it in Mickey’s helmet. “Nearly forgot. Quite the entertainment we’ve got scheduled.”

“I’m glad you see it that way.” Crispin glanced up with a half smile, then back down at his knife.

“Well, all I have to do is sit back and relax and pray to the Significant you know what you’re doing,” Mickey said, ignoring the twinges his arm was sending him, as if in protest against the harm that was to be done to it. “You’re the one who should be sweating.”

Crispin grinned. “Remember, entertainers are professionals, too.” He’d emerged curiously cheerful from his night of horrors. Maybe he, too, had passed through some sort of crisis, or come to a decision.

“I only hope you got enough sleep.”

“I did. Guess why, though.” Crispin looked upward. Mickey followed his gaze. Now he noticed what was different about the morning. For the first time since they had come here, gauzy cirrus clouds covered the sky, serried from horizon to horizon. That was why he’d slept so late, of course. The sun hadn’t wakened him.

“Little lambs, little lambs,” Crispin said. “But you know what they bring home behind them.”

“Rain?” Mickey said hesitantly, dreading even to suggest it.

Steadying the makeshift tripod, Crispin added the knife to the water. Oil and dirt stained the bubbles. “By tomorrow, I think.” He balanced the wooden haft on the edge of the helmet. “If not tonight.”

Mickey squinted at him, trying to read his face. “Then maybe we should just get out of here as soon as possible. I think I could—”

“Oh, no, you don’t. It’s got to be done. Unless you don’t trust me.”

“I trust you!”

“But, you were going to say, how are we to leave with you out of it?” Crispin suggested.

Mickey opened his palms and shrugged.

“Didn’t I get us here? I can get us out of here, too.”

Mickey’s assumption, based on the fact that they were still here, had been that for whatever reason, Crispin was no longer able to handle the daemon. He’d thought Crispin had suffered some sort of breakdown, and that therefore they couldn’t leave until Mickey was fit enough to pilot the Blacheim. Of course, with only one arm Mickey wouldn’t be able to pilot the Ferupian aircraft at all, now or ever. “I wish you’d just explain,” he said in

sudden anger. "It would make things so much easier."

Crispin stood up. "I know." Mickey watched him walk toward the Blacheim, duck under its belly, and into the bomb hold, which was open, its flaps hanging down. Was it Mickey's imagination or as Crispin neared the aircraft did his motions become somehow *furtive*? Returning, he tossed something at Mickey. A biscuit.

"We're nearly out," Mickey reminded him.

"I know." Crispin dipped his own biscuit in the water in which the knife was sterilizing, lifted it dripping and bit in. "Look"—he paused, chewing—"for heaven's sakes don't worry about me."

"What if you faint again? And next time, we haven't landed yet?"

"Mmm." Crispin laid the biscuit carefully on his knee and steeped his fingers, avoiding Mickey's eyes. "Put it this way. Once even the smallest channel of communion is opened up, it's like inflicting the same—pain—on yourself that you inflict on the daemon. And Queen, what they go through! A lot of daemon handlers think they're good to their beasts, but they'd give it up and go grow tulips in the heartlands if they knew what they were really doing to their little friends. People think daemons have a high pain threshold, when in fact it's the opposite. I thought I could make it to Okimako without going under, but—"

"Well, why do you have to go into communion? That's what tricksters do, isn't it? She's collared and celled—can't you handle her?" It was unnerving, seeing the giant shrinking before his very eyes, into a human being so close to wits' end that he was breaking his own rule of secretiveness.

"But she's been uncollared once now," Crispin said in a low voice. "She remembers. And she's resisting. I can hardly make her go at all. She resists, she fights, she makes it harder all round, and I can feel everything, because they just pull you in!" He shuddered visibly.

"You should never have uncollared her in the first place, should you?"

"I know, I know. I lost my head. Do you remember, that stupid dog started barking? I thought they were going to be on top of us at any minute. I thought I had to go for the sure thing." He paused. "But I'm not even sure it has anything to do with the collar. It might be—me. Communion is a different story. It's on another plane. I think once you know how, once it's in the blood, you can't *not*."

"Oh, dear," Mickey said.

"But I haven't given up hope." Crispin paused again, for so long that Mickey wondered if he had lost his train of thought in contemplation of the ordeal ahead of him. "I used to know a trickster. A Ferupian man. He—"

"In the circus?"

"Where else? The point is he could drive trucks. He was a handler *and* a trickster. So if he could do it, I should be able to."

"You think it might just be a matter of practice?"

The fire crackled and spat. Overhead, the gray clouds raced, thickening. Mickey shivered in the breeze, imagining how much stronger it must be up there: the clouds were running north, so when they flew southwest, the wind would be in their faces.

"That's what I'm hoping. Uemiel's young and intelligent—she comes from the Iron Hills Forest, is that somewhere in northern Kirekune? But she's a *bitch*. Her last owner treated her badly. Say what you will, he got what he deserved. She kept on trying to crash us. I managed her all right, but a couple of times it was a close call. This time, I'm just gonna let her have her head. It might be a bumpy ride, but..." Crispin slowly crumbled his biscuit. "Like I said, I'm hoping it'll get easier as I go along."

You don't have to put yourself through that for me, Mickey thought. *When you come down to it there's no reason to go to Okimako at all.* "I feel awful about this."

"Don't."

"If I hadn't..."

"None of it's your fault."

"Dammit, I wish you'd let me take responsibility for something sometimes!" Mickey laughed.

Crispin looked surprised. Then he laughed, too. "All right, if I mess up and you die of blood loss, it's your fault, all right?" He brushed crumbs off his knees, then grabbed the dagger from the boiling water and brandished it with mock ferocity.

"Fuck you," Mickey said, and stood up. Dizziness nearly overcame him. Crispin pointed to the blanket he had spread out on the other side of the Blacheim. Mickey took off his tunic and lay down. Nearby was a pile of torn-up clothing, and a wooden slab that looked like the cover of a hatch from inside the aircraft. Mickey crooked his arm on the slab as Crispin told him, and accepted the leather stropping strip in his other hand.

"You might want to bite down on this. But try to lie still."

Crispin was hammering two more leather straps onto the slab, one over the wrist and the other over the biceps of the gangrened arm, fixing them with pegs. Mickey thought he recognized the thick, dark cowhide. Crispin must have cut up the satchel belonging to the late Captain Jimenez that they had brought from Air Base XXI.

"Just lie as still as you can."

"You've certainly made your preparations, haven't you?" Mickey was not touched, or even reassured; he was intimidated.

"I'm going to take it off right above the elbow."

"What's that for?" Mickey jerked his chin at the blowtorch, which he could just see out of the corner of his eye. It was lying in the grass beside a silver-weave pouch of splinterons.

"Got to cauterize it, after."

Fear slid through him, a curiously low-key invasion.

*And the man in the handcuffs suddenly sang,
With grimful glee:
"This life so free
Is the thing for me!"*

—Thomas Hardy