

EVER, PART ONE: THE WAR IN THE WASTE

FELICITY SAVAGE

Part One of the EVER trilogy.



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Book One: *The Immediary of Inevitable Sorrows*

A Filthy Thing

1876 A.D. Ferupe: Greenslope Domain

The circus convoy rumbled along at thirty miles an hour: the daemons were really kicking in

tonight. Inside Daisy 3, one of the big trucks whose body had been honeycombed with partitions to make living quarters, Anuei sat ungracefully on her sembhui mat. It was the only genuine relic of Lamaroon she had managed to preserve for this long. Her birdcages swung from the ceiling, linnets and nightingales silent under their cloths. She was knitting a sweater for Crispin and keeping an eye on him at the same time. He scrambled on a pile of the boxed props she didn't allow him ever to look at, trying to press his eye to the crack through which he'd be able to see the back of Roddy Colbey's head and the road between the dark, rolling fields ahead. During the day, Roddy was Fred the Fearless, a tiger trainer; at night, he was a reasonably expert truck driver. Crispin banged his head on the board ceiling as the truck jounced, let out one cry, and wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

He wore nothing except a shirt filthy with snot and what else Anuei didn't like to think. It didn't matter that his little penis bobbed in full view; he was only three, and the night air was warm. But before the end of the year, Smithrebel's Fabulous Aerial and Animal Show would enter the northern domains, where winter was one long swirl of whiteness and spring was a hillside or two covered with eyebright. By then Anuei wanted her son to have a wardrobe that wouldn't shame a squire's child. The circus's itinerary was so long, six full years between shows at the capital, that all Crispin had known in his short life were the plains of the east and these fertile, balmy hills of the heartlands. Saul Smithrebel said that this time, he'd timed the itinerary so that they'd make their swing through the northern domains during what passed for summer there. But it was already spring and they were not yet north of the capital. Anuei had twenty-five years of experience with Saul's timing. *Miserable man! she thought. He frets to get to our next stop, and then all he wants is to get the show over with and move out! I'd wager my last penny that every day when he sees the sun rise, the first thing he thinks is, "My hat and coattails, we're late, save the Queen!"*

Earlier in the day they had shown a farming town called Amisbottom. (*What a name for a town, no lilt, not like Eirbazji or Faiina or Redeniina. Oh, Redeniina, where it's always summer, and I was young and thin and wore hibiscus in my hair!* A pang of loss, the taste of sea-salt, memories of an ocean so blue that even the drops she splashed at her friends were turquoise... .)

As the circus rolled in along the main street of Amisbottom, sweeping carts and wagons aside, patchwork-coated clowns tumbling ahead of the parade, the band screaming its siren song, the lions in their open-sided truck and the elephants plodding behind, Anuei had known it was going to be a good show. Of course the respectable citizens were muttering behind their lace curtains. But out of sight was out of mind. And the lower classes, by contrast, were unashamedly visible. Scruffy street urchins trotting along behind the trucks. Farmers in town for the day showing their rotted teeth in laughter as the clowns plucked live birds out of the children's ears.

A good show.

In the east and west, circuses were seen so rarely that they carried no stigma. Here in the more populous domains of the heartlands, where the map was freckled with towns, everyone knew a circus was scarcely better than a music hall. The audiences were composed solely of the lower classes. But the lower classes of Amisbottom seemed far happier than they had any right to be. And happy people generally had coin in their pockets. Clink! Clink!

Anuei found the idea of saving her earnings—as her friend Gift “Mills the Magificent” did—ridiculous. She spent them on things that made Crispin laugh. Cypean lanterns, lollipops, paper dolls. She would have been happy to stay for two days, maybe more, in Amisbottom. Even Saul had known it would be a good show: he'd grinned as he sat in his paper-flower-covered throne on top of the first truck in the parade. Anuei believed that these were the best moments of his life, the rare triumphs of a ragtag general.

But the grin hadn't lasted long. Almost before Anuei finished with her last patron, the show was over and the roustabouts were dismantling her black top over her head.

Twenty-five years of this. Never slowing down.

She was forty-one, and she would spend the rest of her life with Smithrebel's. Sometimes she wondered how long that life would be; sometimes she didn't care.

If it weren't for Crispin... ! She didn't know why she'd waited so long to have a baby. What had she been afraid of? Should've gotten pregnant twenty years ago. Spawned a whole gang of little half-breeds. Blown up to the size of a baby elephant.

She cocked her ear at a knock on the planking partition. Not Millsy, *he'd* come right in; and only one other visitor ever came to her quarters—unless one of her Amisbottom patrons had somehow managed to conceal himself in the convoy, and was now emerging to confess his undying love! She expelled a long sigh as she got to her feet. “Must shed just a little, just a little of this weight,” she whispered as she unhooked the door curtain. Saul came in, sliding his feet and jerking his head about—like a crow, she always thought. A scavenger. He did not even look at her, but took up his stance in the middle of the tiny room, eyeing Crispin as if he thought the child might be good to eat. Beads tinkled as the curtain slid closed.

Anuei yanked up her skirts—she wore ordinary Ferupian clothing when she wasn't “on”—and slapped the mountainous, dimpled expanse of flesh as black as five-thousand-year-old oak. “Hey up, Saul, I'm going to lose some weight!” she said, silently cursing the soft-accented timidity of her voice.

“What, the Balloon Lady relinquish her rotundity? I forbid it!” Saul said pompously. “Skinny women are not female. They are Kirekunis.” He chuckled at his own joke and squinted at Crispin, who balanced precariously on the rail from which swung the vast “Lamaroon” gowns Anuei wore for her patrons, picking wood lice out of the juddering partition. “Always climbing!” Saul said. “I tell you he is going to be an aerialist!”

“And I tell *you*,” Anuei said, “the men of our race grow to be giants! He'll be six-foot-five by the time he's fifteen! More'n three heads taller than the tallest aerialist I ever saw. Millsy says he's not meant for the circus at all.” Millsy was a truck driver, and also a daemon trickster who filled in between the elephants and the aerial ballet. In the scheme of Smithrebel's, he was so far down the pecking order that he was practically ignored, but he was one of the few people in the circus who took a real, human interest in Anuei and her son.

“Gift Mills spouts more hot steam than a kettle!” Saul said. “Don't believe a word he tells you, my angel.”

Anuei looked at her son. His pudgy little hands were intent on their task. Anuei felt a pang of desperate sorrow: he didn't yet know he was a half-breed.

Annoyed at her inattentiveness, Saul tapped one foot in its meticulously shined shoe. “I expected to find you abed,” he remarked.

“You don't remember Lamaroon, do you,” she said sadly.

She had been fifteen when she met Saul. He had been eighteen. He was making a sight-seeing tour of the islands of the Pacific Ocean—his father, the then-owner of Smithrebel's Fabulous Aerial and Animal Show, heir to five centuries of circus life, had sent him to learn something of the rest of the world. For the young Saul, Ferupe, with its vast territories spreading from the frozen north to the equatorial savannah which bordered Izte Kchebuk'ara, had been enough world and more; he had refused to sail to the Americas, and he had stubbornly refused to have his mind changed by anything he saw in the islands. His itching, jumping eagerness to get back to the circus infected Anuei. She could not believe it when he offered to take her with him.

At fifteen everyone is prone to thinking they have fallen in love. But Anuei wondered, later, why she had never seen what her friends and family told her: that the short, maggot-pale tourist in his absurd black top hat could not hold a candle to the men of Redeuina who flirted with her every day. Island men wore nothing but char-dyed pantaloons, so it looked as if they were balancing naked on the decks of the fishing boats. Dusty black gods with grins like double rows of cowries. But back then, Anuei knew only that she had heard stories of husbands drinking too

much and bashing their wives' faces in. She had not yet learned the lesson of the circus: appearances are everything. So young, she placed no value on sheer physical beauty, on the positive impact of having that beauty come home to you every day. But of course, back then she had been beautiful herself.

She had been a valued addition to Smithrebel's Fabulous Show. But Crispin was even more valuable. A circus baby, he could be taught skills that no hiree could ever learn to the satisfaction of the born-and-bred performers. And a freak to boot! Saul prided himself on having one of everything. Among the roustabouts numbered a Green Eye from the Mim, a Red Nomad from Izte Kchebuk'ara, and a tiny, sallow, truck driver named Kiquat who supposedly came from deep within the snowlands. There was a man who called himself The Cultie, who did an epileptic trance dance to fill in between the lions and the high-wire acts, though Anuei very much doubted any apocalyptic cult would recognize him as a member. Saul even employed a couple of Kirekunis, though Queen only knew what they had done at home to have to live as exiles in a nation that was locked in war with theirs. They were tall men with glossy hair tied back from their faces, dead white skin, and long tails. They wore the brightest-colored clothes they could find and spoke Ferupian liquidly, adding vowels to the ends of words.

Then there was her. And Crispin.

She drew the line at including him in her act, as Saul wanted. But she couldn't stop people from staring as he toddled around the circus lot. When he learned to talk properly, she would teach him a comeback to spout when people asked him what he *was*: a precocious, improbable little speech ("I'm the child that the wind and the earth had when they danced with each other") that would make them laugh and forget. And she'd have to devise a last name for him. She hadn't given that thought yet. All she knew was, he wasn't going to go through life with a Lamaroon surname, let alone one as unpronounceable as Eixeizeli.

"My beauty. Even when you are silent, I revel in your proximity." With the half-apologetic grin that meant he was now going to flirt, Saul bent, clamped his hands on her thighs, and hefted her into the air. He bounced her slowly up and down, smiling with pleasure, letting her long hair waft across his face. His arms shook visibly, but that was only because he wasn't very strong. Like all Lamaroons, Anuei weighed no more than a Ferupian child. Her patrons never seemed to get over the fact that although she was too voluptuous for them to put their arms around, and her face bore evidence of her age, her stomach didn't droop, and her bosom was as pert as a young Ferupian girl's. Crispin was lighter than a Ferupian child his age—but nothing like her,

At least my baby will have half his heritage. Heir to five centuries of the circus—even if he is illegitimate. But if you, Saul, tell him before I'm ready for him to know—she stared impassively down at her lover—I will break your scrawny pigeon legs, little man. Smithrebel or no Smithrebel. Crunch.

*Although
There's not a man can report
Evil of this place,
The man and the woman. bring
Hither, to our disgrace,
A noisy, filthy thing.*

—W. B. Yeats, "The Dolls"

Keep Your Heart From Foolish Fears

1876 A.D. / 1192nd Year of the Lizard. Kirekune, Okimako

Saia Akila wiped sweaty hair off her forehead and squinted at her sister. Saonna's black eyes were flat, distant. She held her baby against her shoulder, stroking its little back hard, as if she were trying to rub off a stain. Yet Saia knew the child was less present in its mother's mind at that moment than the amulet of the Glorious Dynasty around Saonna's neck. She caressed it constantly.

Saonna might as well be in Ferupe already. It had been pointless for Saia to come all the way out here just to say good-bye. She had had to hold Yozitaro between her knees while the cart jounced interminably through the smothering dust of the Sayonoshima Road. She had been squashed between her sister and brother-in-law, breathing Saonna's soapy scent one minute and Vashisune's perspiration the next, trying unsuccessfully to avoid his elbows as he manipulated the traces. He slouched now on the front seat of the canvas-covered cart drawn up at the side of the road, floating his whip over the backs of the big, stupid draybeasts. He did not look at Saonna and Saia. She always felt a *vacuum* between the couple, a void of love—even though they had made so much of their passion for each other that everyone else had got tired of it. Maybe that vacuity was common to all culties—it certainly hadn't been in Saonna from the beginning—a symptom of their pretentious commitment to the Ferupian Queen.

Vashi was an initiate preacher in the Cult of the Glorious Dynasty, and proud as a tomcat. Saia despised him.

And the road was as busy as one would expect in late autumn. Everyone was rushing to get in or out of Okimako before the weather changed. Carts, chariots, and rickies drawn variously by draybeasts, mules, horses, pakamels, and bicycles vied with the new, noisy motor-chariots and an occasional black-painted Disciple tank for space on the paved "trunk strip" that ran down the center of the broad, packed-earth road. Out here, beyond the old city walls, beyond the new city walls, the misnamed "City of the Dead" spread nobody knew how many leagues into the plain. One supposed that at some point in history the City of the Dead had not been there; but Saia could not imagine when. It was so festered. Here, the road had no real borders, only a direction. Paupers' shacks, clustering together like soap bubbles, encroached on it only gingerly. Whenever the Disciples rumbled out of Okimako, the tanks came twenty abreast, spikes whickering around on their treads, and anything that was in their way suffered.

The *soi-disant* "leisured" Dead shunned the Sayonoshima Road. Their tall, ill-proportioned houses clustered along the river far away, red and white and yellow columns dimly visible through the haze. They had been upstarts for longer than anyone remembered; Saia could not imagine that they would ever not be upstarts. When they came into the new city with their baskets on their arms, noses twitching under the brims of their too-fashionable hats, she could tell what they were without even looking. Even the girls laughed at Dead men. They took their money, though: *never sneeze at gold* was the first lesson Saia had taught each of her girls. Keep it warm and cozy, and it'll multiply, like baby rats.

"Sao," boomed Vashi over the hullabaloo of drivers' voices and the clatter of wheels. "Sao, let's go."

For the first time, Saonna looked straight at Saia. Her gaze was like a blast of cold air. Saia gripped Yozi's hand so tightly that he squeaked. Docile little darling. He was sucking the tip of his tail.

"Tell June I promise we'll send word," Saonna said vaguely. "All right? Give him me and Vashi and Rae's love."

"I don't know how you expect to reach Ferupe in that thing," Saia said. "It's not a fit conveyance. It looks like something a Dead peddler would cart his wares to the new city gates in."

Since Saonna's conversion to the ascetic Dynasty, Saia had found it increasingly embarrassing to be seen in public with her. Strangers thought Saonna was her servant, and it was impossible for Saia to explain. A lady never explains anything: that was another of the lessons she taught her girls. And this explanation would have been professional suicide. The Dynasty and its imitator cults, like the flamboyant Easterners, were self-declared enemies of the Lizard Significant: the only reason they weren't hounded out of existence was because the Disciples didn't take them seriously.

The most rabid ones always took themselves off into Ferupe, anyway.

As Saonna was doing.

That made-over brown dress wasn't fit garb for her! She said that the pauperish dress code of the Dynasty enforced absolute equality among its members. She loudly condemned her own family for their "vulgar show of affluence." Saia would have none of it. In Okimako, showing who you were was a necessity not just for personal pleasure, but physical safety. She didn't know what roots the Dynasty's ascetism really sprang from, and she didn't want to. Only she couldn't help thinking it was strange that their dogma was near-identical to that of the Easterners, who dressed like harlequins and made nuisances of themselves in the streets until they had to scatter for fear of the Disciples.

On the other hand, she'd *seen* Saonna's leader, her Prince, or whatever they called him—and *he* wasn't wearing dull brown.

She could not refrain from speaking her mind. And in the corner of her eye quivered a drop of hope. Maybe—maybe—

"If that thing doesn't fall to pieces under you, you'll be luckier than I ever was," she said. "And, Sao, I wish you'd tell me how much money you have with you! What if you have to buy a new conveyance? What if one of you is sick, and you have to stay at an inn? What if—"

"It's not as if we're the first to have gone to Ferupe, Sayi!" Saonna's eyes crinkled as she turned to smile at Vashi. Saia felt cheated. Switching her tail, she stared at the cart.

Barely room under the canvas for two to stand up.

"Significant! What if you reach the pass in the middle of winter?"

"We'll be crossing the *plains* all winter," Saonna said patiently. "We'll reach the snows next spring, just at the end of the blizzard season. And the pass isn't *dangerous*, anyway. Thousands of people go by the northern route—even before there was a war, it was the only way to bypass the Raw Marches and the Daemon Waste. So of course it's well traveled."

Vashi says, *Vashi* says, Saia thought. The unspoken tag on each of Saonna's sentences.

If it wasn't for Vashi. He had drawn Saonna into the Cult of the Dynasty of the Glorious Decamillennium, he had planted in her this desire to journey to Ferupe, where their cult originated, where a goddess ruled the land. Neither of them seemed to care that Kirekune and Ferupe were at *war*! Saonna would not even *acknowledge* the dangers that she must be exposed to as a Kirekuni woman traveling in the hostile East! She seemed to think that all Ferupe belonged to the Dynasty, and that it would receive her with open arms. She had been full of plans for her "pilgrimage" so long Saia could hardly remember what the old Saonna had been like.

Ever since Saonna's conversion, Saia and their brother June had been running the Akila family business on their own. When Saia first confronted Saonna with not pulling her weight, Sao insisted she had never had a head for business, anyway. Saia could not deny that. But Sao had once had a real knack for dealing with the girls when they nourished grievances.

Love blinds the eye. (Better to believe Saonna really was in love.) And if blindness ran in the family, Saonna was probably about as perspicacious as a blind dung-pig! *Hari...* Saia thought, as she always did.

Yozi whined, as if he could feel his mother's sudden distress. Saia scooped him into her arms, and desperately played her trump card. "What about *Rae*? Don't you care what happens to

her? She's barely a year old! *Much* too young for a journey like this!"

Saonna had been shifting her feet, curling her tail around her ankles, as if she felt she had to wait for Saia's permission to make the final break. But when she focused on Saia, her eyes registered irritation. "Nothing is going to happen to her! Why should it? Vashi and I know the journey will be hard, but we're both committed to looking after her. It's not as if she's *replaceable*."

She curved her fingers around the sleek, scaly little tail that projected from under the baby's summer dress. Rae had got her strange, meaningless name because Sao and Vashi thought it sounded Ferupian.

"She's a child of the Dynasty."

"Yes, poor midget," Saia said.

"Oh, by the Lizard!" Saonna's brows knitted. "You're just jealous because I'm happy. But I tell you, it was the Dynasty that brought Vashi and me together. It's the only way. If you would just seek it out, you'd discover your true identity and stop pining after Haramel! I promise you!"

Saia blinked, stunned. Not just because Saonna could speak of Hari and the Dynasty in the same breath, but because she spoke of him without rancor, using his full name, as if he had been somebody she knew only vaguely, in passing.

Didn't she *remember*? During that terrible time, the thing that saved Saia's sanity—beside Yozi and his sisters, of course—had been sitting up at night with Saonna, crying in the candlelit kitchen, vilifying Hari and his fancy slut and his ancestors back to the nth generation. Flushed with indignation, Saonna had alternated between bursting into sympathetic tears and offering sisterly advice on tracking him down and ruining him.

Saia stared bleakly at her dry-eyed sister. "I don't suppose you've thought about what your joyous union will be like after you've lived in a three ells by three space with him for a year."

Yozi snuggled in her arms like a baby, sucking her earlobe. He was too big for that. She lashed him gently with the tip of her tail.

"But we're not just married," Saonna said. "We're joined in Waiting. That's the beauty of it. Everything else—even love—loses importance when you contemplate the end of the Dynasty! It harmonizes all disparities! You don't believe me, Saii, but if you'd just—"

"We've been over this," Saia said evenly.

"*Now*, Sao," Vashi called.

Saonna spun around on her toes, lips parted. Saia hugged Yozi tightly, sinking her chin into the top of his head, as her sister hurried to the cart, her chastely long skirt sweeping the dust, tail held high—pulling everything Saia cherished after her on a string. The end of the string was anchored in Saia's heart. What would happen to her when that doubtful cart bore the little family into the frozen north, and then, unimaginably, into Ferupe? Would she break in pieces?

She knew perfectly well what would happen. Slowly, stealthily, Saonna's absence would camouflage itself. It had happened with her mother and her father. It had happened with her older brother Kitsune who died at eighteen, a Disciple in the service of the Lizard Significant. It had even happened with Hari. You eat and you sleep and you pee and shit and you deal with business. And the sun shines, and the Disciples parade the streets on historic days.

"Is Aunt Sao leaving, Mama?" Yozi said softly. "When is she coming back?" His wet little lips felt like the kiss of a lover.

"Never, dear."

The cart diminished into the distance, one brown-clad hump among hundreds wrangling slowly north. A convoy of Disciple troop carriers rolled past. The weight of them on the road shook Saia's bones.

"Don't want to walk," Yozi said when she started to put him down.

"Oh, you lazy thing. I'll carry you then." He giggled with glee. Quickly, she added: "Only for a little."

Monkeylike, he wriggled around onto her back. “Giddy-up, Mama!”
“Mind your manners, Yozi!” Then, when he squeaked an apology: “My little black-haired dove.”

She began to trudge back the way they had come, walking beside the road.

Better suffer the dust than risk getting in among the paupers’ shacks. The cart drivers and rickymen looked at her strangely—a woman alone with a child—but that was because she was dressed so much better than the kind of woman who did walk alone beside the Sayonoshima Road. Her neatly coiffed hair, the tattoos on her tail, her red dress with the yellow satin flounces. Even in her frozen grief, she could take pleasure in the rich swish of the cloth, could derive comfort from the weight of her money pocket bumping her leg inside her skirt. These things as good as guaranteed her safety inside the walls, where the name of her business was her password into a web of friends the size of the new city. Flaunting her affluence (even during the year after Kit’s death, when they were barely scraping by) had extracted her, in the past, from a number of unpleasant situations. Even the most unscrupulous in the new city tended to take the practical view, the long view, when it came to the question of whether to rape, rob, abduct, or not. If you were hated badly enough, you would be killed. So you just had to try not to make enemies. Money could extract you from all other situations.

The old city was another kettle of fish. In the old city, it didn’t matter how rich you were. An old maxim: where you are determines who you are. Unwary night wanderers faced long odds against getting out alive. During the day, the steep streets thronged with sightseers from the provinces, and the hordes of Okimakotes who came to prey on them; but when night fell the place emptied out faster than an overturned chamber pot. Even provincials knew that getting in the way of the Disciples—or worse, their Significant masters—was a one-way ticket to nowhere.

And the City of the Dead danced to another tune yet, one that no one in the city proper really understood. Certainly not Saia. She wouldn’t toss a coin in the air for her chances here once night fell.

In a blurred way, walking was easing her pain. She never wanted to stop. But she could not get all the way home on foot. She had cut it too fine. Already the sun swam redly among the spikes and spires prickling the back of the huge slain beast ahead of her.

Okimako was not built on a hill. Okimako *was* the hill. At its highest point, the Significant Palace at the top of the old city, the Orange River ran in a tunnel buried under a thousand feet of solid architecture.

The limbs of the beast stretched out toward Saia, curling imperceptibly around her. Its rusty red scales sparkled with a thousand points of light.

She could smell something fetid cooking nearby. Yozi was drifting off to sleep, a patch of child-drool soaking wet into her shoulder. There was a pain in her chest, as sharp and tender as that time she’d shattered a rib.

Can’t have this, she told herself. Home. It’ll be all right once I get home. That young miss June hired couldn’t get supper on her own if you threatened her with beheading.

She stepped into the road and lifted her arm to hail a rickey. A man with the elegant logo of the Comashi Concern stenciled on his vehicle pedaled, careening, across traffic, nearly destroying himself under the wheels of a horse-drawn gas tanker, and screeched to a breathless halt five paces away. She walked toward him.

*Mother; keep your eyes from tears
Keep your heart from foolish fears
Keep your lips from dull complaining
Lest the baby thinks it’s raining.*

A Caricature of Infinity

1879 A.D. *Ferupe: Kingsburg*

Gift "Mills the Magnificent" bent to peer into the tiny mirror hooked on the wall of the men's quarters in the truck named Hollyhock 7. His fingers trembled as he wrapped a lace cravat around his neck. It had been years since he had done this. Ten years, to be precise. He was uncomfortably aware that ten years on the road with Smithrebel's had aged him immensely: at least in terms of appearance, he had reached the age at which style becomes a mere tautology. He looked as ridiculous as Sam Kithriss had; but at least Sam had had power to make up for it. Ten years ago, Millsy had cast aside his chance to inherit Sam's rings.

For ten years he had not written to any of them—until a week ago, to say he was coming. They must have thought him dead. He had been unforgivably rude.

And yet he couldn't *not* go back. Just to see. In the few hours since they had entered the suburbs of Kingsburg, the familiar restiveness had crept over him. Last time he'd been able to resist; but not now. Indeed, he was getting old.

"Goin' out?" a blurry voice said. Bru Wilcox lay in one of the lowest bunks of the men's quarters, caterpillar-wrapped in a blanket despite the heat of the Kingsburg summer. "Swear, Millsy, you're the most obscure fellow around. Show's in two hours."

"I have already told Mr. Saul I will not be taking part tonight," Millsy said, tugging at his lace. "Or tomorrow night, or next week."

Bru let out a low whistle. "What'd he say? This's *Kingsburg*, man."

"Precisely." Millsy had a horror of letting slip any crumb of information about his past, but punctiliousness compelled him to face Bru and explain, gesturing as extravagantly as if he were in ring center. "When I signed my contract, Smithrebel and I reached an understanding regarding Kingsburg. For six years of touring I would be his; when we reached the capital I could, if I wanted, take two weeks off. Of course it would be no good if everybody did it, but Mr. Smithrebel is an understanding and generous employer, and he realizes that I have certain needs." Bru's lip curled. Millsy hastily changed the subject. "Is your leg still bothering you?"

"Should be out with the rest of them. Whoopin' it up. Bloody pain in the ass." Bru slapped his blanket-shrouded limb, then winced. A war cripple, invalided home from the Teilsche Parallel, his only visible handicap was a rolling walk. According to him, he had blown his pension the first week after he got home, so that he now had to work to keep mind and body together.

Millsy, who had seen the Teilsche Parallel firsthand, wondered whether Bru had ever gotten his discharge—or whether he had taken his survival into his own hands. Many, if not most, so-called "invalids" were in fact deserters. *Real* invalids sat in their parents' houses, drooling. Men like Bru were regularly found guilty and incarcerated for unpatriotic behavior; but Millsy did not think that fair of the policemen, many of whom, after all, had joined the white-coats to avoid being recruited by the army. No one should be compelled to endure the ground front for a term of ten years. He had known men, and women, who had fallen in love with the war, and opted to stay on, and on, and on, until they were sent home in pieces. Perhaps they were even the majority. But whether you hated it or loved it, the conflict was still an atrocity.

In fact, it was a worse atrocity than most people knew, Millsy thought. After a hundred years, the population accepted war as a permanent evil, and resented the inconveniences of levies and

forced recruitment no more than they resented the vagaries of wind and storm. But Millsy knew that in the last ten or so years the situation had become critical. Somehow—either through a religio-mystical connection such as culties rambled about, or through the understandable stress of impending defeat—the war was killing the Queen.

And Lithrea the Second was the last, the very last daughter of a dynasty which had held Ferupe stable for almost nineteen hundred years.

Like all who had spent time in the court, Millsy knew that although Ferupe was the most powerful empire east of Sinoa, it rested upside down, on its peak, and the Queen was that peak. And she was crumbling. Some of those who saw the awful truth of her decline with their own eyes lost their faith in life. Some redoubled their patriotic zeal. And a few, starting quite early in the war, had transposed the threat of the end of the dynasty into a strange doctrine of apocalypse and nothingness. All his life Millsy had watched—bemused and increasingly worried—as these slandermongers gained followers and imitators all across Ferupe. Cults were even in Cype and Kirekune. He'd seen them for himself. And since he knew their rants were based on *some* truth—the impending end of the Dynasty—he could not despise them, as most did.

It would have been suicidal for the court to confirm the royal illness in public. Officially, the cults had to be beneath the Queen's notice. So the disgust of the righteous citizen for the culties' excesses was encouraged, subtly, wherever possible. If Millsy had still been at court, he would have been intriguing against them himself. But he was a coward.

You are unworthy even to speak her name, he thought disgustedly, looking into the mirror. *Lithrea Mathrelia Lithrelia, Queen of men!*

As a young man he had worshiped her more devoutly than any other courtier. Each day, awaking, he had spoken her name aloud.

But he had not been a courtier for a decade, and what good could he do her now? Wasn't he returning only to solace his own heart with—pray—a sight of her? He was just a truck driver now. A midway magician. His sleight of hand wouldn't cure her illness. A daemon handler, member of the most royal of professions, and yes, a trickster (and that was his vocation if you liked, as diplomacy had never been). He had no daemon big enough to make an honorable gift.

"You old fool," he muttered to the mirror.

"What's that?" Bru Wilcox said loudly.

Millsy flung out his hands, nearly knocking over a precarious pile of razors. "What do you think?" He was attired in knee boots, baggy silk trousers, and a long tunic which was the smartest he had, though it had gone out of style ten years ago. All of his fingers sparkled with rings that signified the status he had once had at court. He had had difficulties remembering which ring went on which finger. He hoped he had them right.

"Not bad," Bru said. "Wouldn't fancy loaning me them boots tomorrow, would you?"

"Mmm." Millsy stretched out his hands toward the windows in the side of the truck, watching them shake. He was only thirty-six, yet the face in the mirror, with its hollow cheeks and ragged gray hair, could pass for sixty. He had once been tall and lean; now he was stooped and skeletal. That was what tricking daemons did to you. The combination of wrinkled skin and expensive regalia made him look like one of the scholars of Kingsburg University, at whom he and his friends had used to snigger when they tottered past with their spectacles falling off. Youth, the most cherished possession of a courtier, had been the price he paid for his freedom from the court. And he knew he had been lucky to get free at all. If not for Boone—there was a man he must see, if he got a chance—

"A fresh face is the stamp of a life un-lived," he said aloud, and swirled his old cloak onto his shoulders.

"What?" Bru said again.

Irritation welled up in Millsy. Despite the heat he fastened his cloak all the way down.

“Anon, my friend!” Before the young man could ask where he was going, he pushed through the curtains that partitioned off the quarters, strode between head-height piles of canvas, and leapt over the lowered tailgate into sewage-colored mud. Head down to avoid meeting anyone’s eye, he crossed the vacant lot around which Smithrebel’s trucks were parked. The carousel stood on a flatbed trailer near the gap in the fence which passed for a gate. The gaily painted side panels of the trucks glowed as brightly as the Ferupian flag that would fly from the peak of the big top when it was erected. Saul Smithrebel always had the trucks repainted in the last town before Kingsburg: the circus had to work to hold its own in a city where more than five traveling shows would be playing at any given time.

Millsy strode between the low mud-brick houses of the suburb. Guarze, it was called. Smithrebel’s set up here every time it came to Kingsburg. Laundry filled the tiny front yards, flapping like flocks of birds descending onto scattered crumbs—but if there had been any crumbs, the scavenging cats, dogs, dragonets, and flightless crows would have gotten them already. Guarze. Spoken in the guttural drawl of Kingsburg, the word alone conjured long, dreary days at factory benches, bracketed by scant hours of sleep in rooms which no one had the time or inclination to beautify.

Much of the industrial north was like this, and none of the working people—whose fathers, or grandfathers had sweated their lives away, too, only in cornfields instead of factories—ever questioned their lot. Yet it was unthinkable that they should be content with such penury. One could almost despise them for it. And their country cousins, too, who knew no world beyond the perimeter of the squire’s estate, whose ears were deaf to the call of filthy lucre even though they didn’t know, as the slum-dwellers did, that the city’s promises were all false. But these same men, women, and children were the ones who filled any circus’s audience. One could not despise one’s patrons. And in the years since Millsy had come to work for Saul Smithrebel, he had gradually realized that every single hayseed and slumrat desired liberation somewhere in his or her tarnished little soul. He knew he was crazy, knew that the pounding of life had driven him honest to heavens crazy, when he found his eyes filling with tears at the thought that they would never be truly liberated, because that was not the way the world was made. The circus was the closest approximation of joy they would ever see.

True freedom couldn’t be bought. You had to reach out and grab it with both hands. That was what Millsy had done. He had been brought up on a tenant farm in the heartlands, barefoot and starving, but he had put that behind him. None of his cronies in the court had known he was born a peasant, just as none of his friends in Smithrebel’s knew he had been the Queen’s ambassador to Kirekune.

He’d only kept one of the vows he made as a child, and that was the vow never to have children himself. He never wanted to subject another human being to the misery in which he’d been born. The peace he had finally achieved as a ringside magician and truck driver in a small-time traveling circus was simply not worth it.

But now there was Crispin.

He sighed loudly, wrenching at his cravat as he walked.

Crispin, born in the back of a truck four years after Millsy arrived at the performers’ entrance of the big top with his daemons, materialized, following him like dogs, to stage an impromptu tricking demonstration for Saul Smithrebel that led to his being offered a position at a skinflint’s salary of six shillings a week. (It had since risen to ten.) Millsy hated children. Hated them! But Crispin had wormed his way under his skin. He was six years old now, and looked ten or eleven. Being half Lamaroon, he was as easy to pick up as a baby: a specimen the physicians of Kingsburg would surely have loved to get their hands on. *What mysteries Nature conceals, the experts knoweth not*, Millsy thought. All the aerial acts would have had Crispin for a novelty turn, except that his mother, Anuei, wouldn’t allow it. Elise and Heine Valenta, two-fourths of the Flying

Valentas, even wanted him for apprentice when he came of age. Anuei violently opposed the Valentas. But Saul Smithrebel supported their claim. He might even have put the idea in their heads for all Millsy knew. And Millsy knew Anuei would never stand up to Saul. The conflict was still years off—a child could not start proper training until he was at least nine or ten—but Millsy could see it coming, like a black splotch on Saul’s big map of Ferupe.

That meant it was up to Millsy.

The Valentas did not understand that once Crispin got a little older he would not take orders from anyone. But Millsy understood that perfectly. He would not make a single demand on Crispin. And because of that, Crispin would come to him willingly.

Millsy had already seen the small child watching the truck drivers coax their daemons into consciousness on cold winter nights. He’d seen him, entranced, sniffing the exhaust which filled the air as the engines warmed up. And after long nights on the road, he’d seen him sidle up to the handlers again, when they talked the daemons into quiescence, their heads and shoulders deep inside the engine cavities of the giant tractors. Crispin would listen, mouthing the words. *You ugly bastard... smelly snakely grass-eater...* Handlers used a limited repertory of persuasion on their daemons. The controlled violence of the relationship between men and daemons was what drew many to handling who would otherwise have been soldiers or policemen or criminals. Some said daemons understood every word out of your mouth; some said they were no more intelligent than fish. Millsy was a trickster, like the women who lived in the forests and captured wild daemons, and so he knew that the former was closer to the truth, but he would have had to be crazier than he was to give away trade secrets.

You’re not going nowhere! So calm the hell down fore I flay the skin off your ugly skelliton!

There was less than no chance that Crispin, too, would be a trickster. But Millsy would not have wished it on him in any case. All he wanted was to be able to share the joy of handling with the child.

That animated little face, the color of clove honey...

Admit it, old man, he thought with a flash of disgust, *you’re half in love with the child!*

He shook his head violently and tramped on, muttering.

In Guarze only the very small children stayed home from the factories. They looked up from their games, open-mouthed, dirty-eyed, as Millsy passed. The hem of his cloak swept the garbage-strewn dirt road. The weight of their neediness struck at him. How lucky the circus children were! Fate had not dealt Crispin and the others a particularly enviable hand—but all the same, they didn’t know what it was like not to have enough to eat. He sank his chin into his collar, not acknowledging the children’s whining pleas, and passed on beneath the ancient (and strikingly beautiful) stone arch marking the entrance to Guarze, into another mordant suburb named Hastych, and thence across the Eine into another world: one of the prosperous towns that snuggled against the walls of Kingsburg, Rotterys. Here all the houses had slate roofs like black paper hats, and their secret price tags were commensurate with the snotty manner of the maids hurrying through the streets. Everyone in Rotterys wished to be able to say that he lived in the Burg, and paid through the nose for the privilege of only having to stretch the truth a little.

The black worm of the Eine, oozing between the cobbled “river walk” on the Rotterys side and the sink-mud on the Hastych bank, fostered a sense of separation from the slums. But rich and poor alike breathed the same air. Thick with summer heat, evil-smelling, and vibrating with the far-off roar of the demogorgons in the factories. The noise was a contamination. It was everywhere. Even in the depths of the palace, if by a miracle everybody stopped speaking for a second, one heard it: *thud. Thud, Rrrrrrr-thud. Thud.*

By the time he’d found his way through the twisting streets to the gates of the city proper, his body was dripping with sweat under the layers of regalia. He bought a fruit drink from a farmer-stallkeeper. As he counted out the coppers, he longed to be young again. Oh, instead of a

mumbling, crazy old man in fancy dress, to be the boy with iron in his eyes and steel at his hip and gold in his pockets whom nobody in the court dared to cross. He had been a favorite. Once she had even spoken to him! He had crossed the northern pass into Kirekune and knelt as her ambassador before the Lizard Significant, full of high hopes, and failed to gain even the slightest concession from that august creature. And on his return she had said—

The failure of Millsy's mission had began the pattern of defeats which was to drain Ferupe and her Queen. Soon Gift Mills was no longer the darling of the court, but a tool that had turned in its mistress's hand. He had left the capital because he could not bear the thought of living out the rest of his life in the shadow of his one-time celebrity. He knew also that if he stayed, that life was likely to be short.

The cold fruit juice cleared his head. His face heated with shame as he realized that for several minutes he had been lost in nostalgia. Nostalgia!

Standing out of the way of the bustle, he gulped the juice down. Why should a ten-year-old failure matter in the least? Traveling with Smithrebel's, he was happy. *Happy!*

He lifted his eyes to the Salubrious Gates. Ajar, they looked as if they were about to fall and crush the market. Hundred-foot-tall marvels of black-painted wrought iron, they were the only entrance for miles into the stone wall that beetled like gray doom above Rotterys. He would not want to live even for a day with that hanging over him. Maybe that was why everyone here stared at the ground as they walked.

Moles! Blind, petty moles!

The haze of longing for the past which had clouded his mind since the circus came within a hundred miles of Kingsburg cleared. His thoughts were as lucid as crystal. Never like this anymore. Except with his daemons...

He threw his pottery juice bulb down to hear it shatter, and shouldered between shrill-voiced, foul-mouthed marketgoers toward the gates. Soon he would see his old friends. Then he would remember exactly why he had left the court.

The palace was unspectacular compared to the rest of the Heart of Kingsburg. It was the oldest building in the capital, built as a fortress before there ever was a capital by King Thraziaow, who had come out of the west to lead Ferupe under the flag of the Twenty-One United Domains. It was blocky and ill-proportioned. The buildings that crowded close around it, leaving mere cracks for streets, soared gracefully over the palace: the Hall of Justice; KPD HQ; Astrologers' Hall; the Crown Prince's Mansion (inhabited now only by servants); the Stock Exchange; the ancient church of God, now the Royal Opera House; and dozens of others. In the Heart of Kingsburg, there were no residential buildings, though in reality, the top floors of many of the public halls were in use as apartments.

The newer palaces dripped with balconies. They were airy with arches, and their spires strained toward the sky. If you stood in the maze of fountains on the plaza in front of the old palace, the spires hemmed in the sky like broken ice. It had been said that standing among the fountains was like drowning, looking up through the icy water to the surface.

The old fortress lay low like an old dog among children. Each block of pink granite was polished to brightness. The arrow-slit windows sparkled, and the heavy porticoes were freshly ornamented each day with flowers. Millsy entered in a river of people that got thinner at each police checkpoint. Every time, he flashed his rings and was shown through.

He had, in fact got the sequence of rings wrong. But none of the guards knew the difference until he penetrated the labyrinth to a depth where daemon-scented air whooshed out of grilles in corners, and the walls were no longer stone but carpet. Barkings, whoopings, and chee-cheeing sounds exploded close at hand. Millsy knew they could be traced to expensive pets (mostly animals that were never meant to be pets; he still had the scar where a bird of paradise had

pecked him ten years ago). Niches displayed artwork from far countries and from every domain in Ferupe, with no glass to protect any of it. Visitors who got this far were expected to be above pocketing the knickknacks.

“You a *prince*?” the policeman said with disbelief, dropping Millsy’s hands. “Whatcha wearing anyway?” He eyed Millsy’s scruffy cloak. Millsy felt shame climbing up his neck. “No, I—”

“You’re a foreign prince. With connections to Kirekune. That’s what this says.”

The policeman sat on a camp stool in the middle of a small lobby. He had an antique gray-marble side table for a desk. The checkpoint was more for show than security.

“A foreign prince. Show you, mate.” He began to flip through a ringbook printed specially for the illiterate, full of drawings of bejeweled hands. “Ain’t no foreigners authorized—”

“I apologize. It has been years since I wore my rings,” Millsy whispered.

The policeman looked up, eyes narrowing, sharp words springing to his lips. One hand went to his truncheon.

Millsy undid his cloak and swept it back from his shoulders.

An entering pair of courtiers who could have been twins, so ruggedly handsome were they, so springy their dark curls, laughed at the scene.

By the time Millsy found his way to the suite of Lady Gregisson, one of his oldest friends and a lady-in-waiting to Royal Cousin Dorthrea, he had lost all his desire for social interaction. Only loyalty drove him on. Through Christina Gregisson, and if not through her then through Sam Kithriss (if the old fellow was still alive!) or Boy Charthreron, he would wangle a glimpse of the Queen.

People were looking at him strangely. He realized he had been muttering to himself again.

Under the gaze of the lackeys at the door of Lady Gregisson’s suite, he gathered himself and presented his rearranged rings.

The lackeys conferred. Then one of them vanished inside. The others resumed staring at him. They were all tall, red, and muscular. The skimpy tunics worn by Izte Kchebuk’aran men showcased their powerful arms and chests to perfection. Millsy wondered whether they resented having to dress like barbarians, now that they were employed in the most civilized place in the world. Such a question would never have occurred to him in the old days, but now it seemed of paramount importance. What were the Kchebuk’arans *thinking*? He was on the verge of asking them when the fourth one came back.

“Lady Gregisson is not in her suite,” he said flatly. “However, her steward says that she is hosting Royal Cousin Dorthrea, Royal Second Cousin Sathranna, Royal Second Cousin Athrina, and Royal Aunt Melithra, as well as others, at tea on Sammesday. You are on the standing list of individuals who are welcome to join the Lady’s parties at any time. Thank you.”

“But she must be at home,” Millsy said. “I sent her a note from Severidge saying I would be coming.” He forced a laugh. “That was ten days ago.”

“Thank you,” another Kchebuk’aran said.

“Sammesday is the last day of my stay in Kingsburg. I am not sure whether I can—”

“Thank you.”

And over the course of the next few hours he came to appreciate Christina’s generosity, yes, the generosity she had displayed on leaving him on her standing list when everyone else had either crossed him off or presumed him dead. He wandered from door to door to door, jumping at servants, shaking his rings at them like a dancer jangling castanets for their entertainment, and with each rebuff he descended lower in the underground palace until he was in such rarefied territory that he had absolutely no hope at all of getting past any of the footmen who lined the walls like mannequins modeling different versions of the royal livery. None of his erstwhile friends had been Royals. Royals did not have friends. (Though he had spoken to her once, yes,

spoken to her, and she had said...)

He should have expected this. But somehow he had assumed—the former ambassador to Kirekune, they couldn't pretend he didn't exist—

Then again, maybe he did not, or only in ghostly form. The footmen watched him without turning their heads, dozens of pairs of eyes swiveling as one. He flapped his hands at them as if he were shooing pigeons. His voice cracked. “Minions! Minions, do you hear me? The world is above your heads, and it is a bright sky which you will *never see*, cocooned down here!”

The underground palace was shaped like an inverted pyramid buried in the ground, with each level designed on the same basic floor plan, but as you descended, the plan got simpler and simpler, the area enclosed by the halls which you could reach without an entrée smaller and smaller. The lowest floor of all was a simple square of hallway with only three doors beside the one to the stairwell. Two doors had one dejected-looking royal footman each. The other had none. There was a smell of must. The carpet on the floors and walls looked water-stained.

Millsy walked around the square twice. The second time, both footmen thought about challenging him, and decided to do so if he walked around again (he saw every step of the thought process in each pair of eyes).

From their posts they could not see each other. Somewhat wildly, he wondered if they ambled to the corner to chat when no one was around. Would that be considered scandalous, a breach of loyalty to the Queen and to themselves? He did not know. He had lost his feel for the court code.

Lost his feel—

It had been slightly less than a decade. A blink, in the scope of the Dynasty. But things moved fast at court, even while they did not move at all. Not Sam, he wouldn't have started it. Probably Boy Charthreron: he'd been a back-stabber even at twenty. Millsy could just see him spring-cleaning his list of friends, standing perhaps in the middle of a whirl of servants who were industriously feather-dustering his rooms (Boy's life was one long, painstaking practical joke) declaring with a flip of the fingers that old Gift was probably dead, and if he wasn't, he'd always been a bore, anyhow. “If he resurrects himself from the provinces again, Moose, you know the line. Who's next?”

Thus is the past erased. Despair welled up in Millsy's heart like black syrup.

He turned the knob of the third door. It opened and let him into a pitch-black passage.

Warm, sewage-scented wind gusted into his face. He could hear water rushing fast and far down.

After a stunned instant, he chuckled. The sound echoed, bouncing off walls into infinity.

How could he have forgotten?

Tapping gingerly outward with his right boot, he encountered the crumbling stone edge of the walkway. Gravel bounced down and down and down.

His left hand encountered a clutch of wet pipes running horizontal to the ledge. The pipes were at the right height for handholds, but they were thick with slime; not many more people used this little shortcut, then, than they had ten years ago.

He hadn't felt ready for Boone earlier this afternoon. But now he did. How could he have forgotten Boone? Boone would not have forgotten *him*—in fact, within the bounds of propriety, he *could* not, since it was *he* who had incited Millsy to leave the court!

Millsy chuckled again and began to edge along the walkway.

Millsy was in the Kingsburg Waterworks. The light of the daemon glares nailed to the rock behind his and Boone's chairs cast a streaky brightness on the water of the reservoir, which stretched out from the cliff much farther than the light carried. Boone never permitted anyone except his subordinates to accompany him on his “routine” boat trips into the blackness, but

Millsy had heard that it took several hours to reach the other side. It was difficult to imagine the years and manpower which had been necessary to hollow out such a vast space under the city.

Pipes at least three feet in diameter plunged down from the roof of the reservoir, into the water, like the proboscises of monstrous flies. Toward the edge of the light, the copper trunks grew as thick as a forest. Among them, stone support columns, inside which six of the pipes could have fitted comfortably, reached up to the invisible roof. The rumble of the pump daemons at work in nearby caves could be felt as a vibration. Boone's predilection for entertaining visitors on this sparsely furnished ledge mere inches above the reservoir, rather than in his sumptuous office, was, Millsy had deduced as much as fifteen years earlier, symptomatic of certain impulses, dangerously akin to sadism, which had grown from his boredom with his post.

Boone Skinner, Comptroller of the Kingsburg Waterworks, was king of his underground realm. He did as he liked. Valued by the Queen for his handling and administrative skills, and celebrated for his eccentricity, he was a treasure of the Burg, a rotund blond man who ought to have been jolly. In reality he had a gloomy manner far more pronounced now than the last time Millsy had seen him. His detractors said that he was not as pessimistic as he pretended: that, in fact, he thought better of himself than of any other man in Kingsburg. He lived in one of Kingsburg's rougher neighborhoods with his wife, Betsy, who was so common that she dropped the ends of her words. After absconding from the court, Millsy had stayed in their home while Boone taught him all he knew of the handler's art.

The comptroller's pale blue eyes stared meditatively at Millsy. His thumbs coaxed a thin ringing from the rim of his wineglass.

"It is that I regret my youth sometimes, nothing more," Millsy said, sipping the deliciously chilled ale Boone had served him. "And the indignity of the snub, perhaps. But that will pass. The last strings have been cut." He paused. "Now I know I could not live in court again."

"You are made of stronger stuff than the rest of them," Boone said. "I thought so from the beginning. Now I see I was right."

Millsy remembered the Teilsche Parallel. It was never far from his mind; but in light of what Boone had just said, the memory was especially painful. If Boone had seen him then, would he say that Millsy was made of strong stuff? Millsy had only been seventeen when he was in the army, but surely the stuff that a man is made of does not change. Once a coward, always a coward. All the machinations he'd put into getting his ambassadorship had been part of an elaborate, ongoing attempt to convince himself otherwise. Only when he discovered that he had the blood of a trickster had he finally accepted the truth.

"Perhaps the only difference between me and the rest of them is that I have weathered so many failures," he said. "Are you aware that when I was seventeen, I deserted? I was recruited into the Teilsche 198th Infantry. I only lasted three months."

"I was not aware of that," Boone said.

"I shan't bind you to secrecy. It's not as though it makes any difference now. The circus is effectively outside the law. At least half the roustabouts are deserters."

"Are you finding it satisfying?" Boone asked. "Commoners' entertainment. It's not much of a job for a handler. Especially one with trickster blood. You could be so much greater."

"But have no desire to be. Do I seem discontented?"

"I haven't heard from you in ten years, Gift. How should I know whether you are content? I did not even know whether you were alive."

The rebuke hung in the air. Millsy forced himself to look Boone in the eye. "I am not discontented any longer. I had to come here to know that, but now I am certain of it."

"Good," Boone said. "And good that you left when you did. They came to my house. I was in hot water for a while. It was lucky that Royal Sister Jacilithra spoke up for me." Pride rang in his voice as he mentioned the Royal.

Millsy sighed. “Boone, you are a better friend than I deserve. Tell me—they don’t still hold that grudge, do they?”

“Gift, they were going to kill you.”

“I had hoped it would be old news after so long. After all, I’m not coming back to reclaim my rings.”

“Although you are wearing them.”

“Only for a visit.”

Boone nodded thoughtfully. “I don’t expect there is any danger. But frankly, I was surprised to see you here. I thought that even if you were alive, you would not dare to come back. You have changed. In those days I thought you rather an amusing fellow, when you were allowed to be, but not very well attuned to reality.”

“I don’t believe it’s possible to be in or out of tune with reality. After all, we live in it,” Millsy said. But Boone did not respond, nor did his gaze leave Millsy’s face. It was discomfiting. Millsy shifted in his chair in a vain attempt to get out from under the stare. *An amusing fellow... not very well attuned to...*

Was that really what he had been back then? Had he been vastly unsuited for the Kirekuni mission? Had his failure been—oh, blasphemous thought—not due to his own mistakes, but the *Royals*?

There was no way of knowing. But it did not matter now.

He met Boone’s gaze and laughed aloud. “Do you know what, Comptroller? I think you simply say whatever comes into your head.” He took a drink of sweet ale.

Boone laughed: a prolonged rumble that carried out over the water. “I am still your friend, Gift. That is why I am telling you that you should not go to tea with Christina Gregisson.”

“Who have you been entertaining while I lost my way in your damned tunnels?”

“Christina,” Boone rumbled, glinting with joy.

“Is she planning to feed me poisoned pastries?” Millsy laughed.

Boone did not answer. He got up from his chair and stretched his massive shoulders. With the unhurried, rolling grace of the obese, he walked to the corner of the ledge, unhooked the front of his britches, and urinated into the reservoir. Millsy experienced a vague disgust as he watched the ripples spread into the drinking water of the masses of Kingsburg. “Even the Queen’s morning tea is made with water from my reservoir,” Boone observed as he returned to the assorted tables and chairs, on one of which Millsy sat. “A good joke, isn’t it?”

“The Queen!”

Sparkles of hilarity danced in the blue eyes. “Oh, come on, Gift! I thought you were past that.”

“No one calls me Gift any more,” Millsy said stiffly.

“Shall I tell you what’s happened to you?” Boone steepled his fingers. “I’ve figured it out. You’ve lost your cynicism. And if you’ll pardon my saying so, that was the most amusing thing about you.”

A torrent of words sprang into Millsy’s throat. *Do you know how hard I struggled to lose my cynicism? It took me ten years and Queen knows how many setbacks to regain a measure of the innocence which I lost, not when I failed in Kirekune, but when I understood that because of that failure I must resign everything else in my life. Because it was all connected.*

“Perhaps you’re right.” He bowed his head to hide his face. He had to chew his lower lip until the blood came, just to hold back his laughter. Or was it tears? He cried very easily these days. It came from being a trickster. The men of Smithrebel’s saw it as evidence of his craziness, but the women understood him a little better. “It’s true that I’ve lost my feel for Kingsburg. The code of the court might as well be Kirekuni to me. I knew that tongue once, too. Have pity on me.”

“Never fear,” Boone said, and hoisted himself to his feet. Millsy followed suit. “No, no, bring your glass. You are not drunk yet. I owe you that, at least, for old times’ sake! I think we’ve talked enough about the prize parrots in the palace. Come and see my daemons. I have two which I think you haven’t met. One was seventeen thousand, the other was twenty; you will enjoy trying your hand on them.” He shook his head. “Ahhh, where I’d be if I had trickster blood!”

Millsy paced himself to match Boone’s slow strides as they entered a glare-lit archway in the cliff. “But I have no chance to practice with demogorgons. The beasts I use in my act are only small heartland ninnies. I have one southern daemon true-named Gallanis that is twelve feet tall—I got him cheaply in Naftha. But all I can do with them is make them jump through hoops and tie themselves in knots.”

Boone shrugged. “You work in a circus, not a house of trickery.” Millsy knew the slur was unintentional. Everyone he had ever met—even those with democratic pretensions, like Boone—held the circus in low esteem. That was partly why Millsy himself had first been attracted to it.

“True, true.” He laughed. “Do you know what? My act is like that stunt with macaws Sim used to do. Except that he had them on strings, poor creatures. Remember?”

“Just wait until you see, Gift,” said Boone. “I have had a cave fitted especially for them.”

They entered a big, brightly lit cavern where pale-faced young men were seated at desks. There was a smell of old books. All of the clerks scrambled to their feet and mumbled “Comptroller” as Boone and Millsy passed through. Millsy’s palms were wet with anticipation. He glanced sideways: a half smile slackened Boone’s normally expressive mouth. After all, they still shared one passion. It was a glimpse of this zest which had first interested Millsy in the comptroller. During his period of social decline, Millsy had tried his hand at every conceivable occupation. It had been through Boone, finally, that he discovered the quirk in his blood and his aptitude for trickery, a trade normally exclusive to women. And with Boone’s help, he began to see a way out of his dilemmas at court. Very quickly they had come to share that all-devouring, enthusiasm for the “business”; for a brief while, in Boone’s house in Xeremaches, they had been as close as lovers, and Millsy had mistakenly believed they shared other things as well.

Now they had even less in common than they had ten years ago. But there were still daemons.

There always had been daemons.

The vibration became a real noise. Thump. Thump. And simultaneously: Clatter-rattle-ratter-clattle...

There would always be daemons.

They rounded a bend, hurrying now, and came out onto the floor of a wide shaft whose roof was visible high up in the light of brilliant glares that did not leave a pocket of shadow anywhere.

“Sumenitas,” the comptroller of the waterworks said in an odd voice. “Dorennin.”

Against opposed walls of the shaft, thirty-foot silver treadmills housed in wooden scaffolding were turning so fast that they blurred. A huge axle hung horizontally fifteen feet off the floor, connecting the treadmills at the hubs. An assortment of wooden gears—a transformation engine many times magnified—rose from the axle’s center into the roof, clanking and gnashing. And underneath that noise Millsy heard the booming of the pumps the engine drove, which sucked the water up from the reservoir into the pipes that ran beneath the streets of Kingsburg.

“Hallo!” Boone shouted at the top of his lungs, advancing into the cavern.

The handlers who stood guard, two to a treadmill, whipped around. For a minute Millsy thought they were going to crumple—as if the shattering of the tableau had shattered them, also.

Then they dived for their levers, and the scent of burning rubber filled the air as massive brake pads contacted the sides of the treadmills. As the rpms decreased, the second handler of each pair ran up to his treadmill, carrying what looked like a seven-foot lance tipped with a silver spike. These they jammed into the mesh, into the flesh of the daemons inside. Millsy winced.

The daemons were silent. Collared daemons could roar and groan, but not speak. Another attraction of Millsy's little act ("The Only Exhibition of Wild Daemons to Tour the Domains in a Hundred Years!") was the eerie jabbering of the daemons as they obeyed his commands. Sumenitas and Dorennin obeyed the cue of the lance and crouched on the bottoms of their treadmills without making a sound. Tears poured down their faces. Millsy noted the way they constantly picked up their hands and feet to avoid contact with the silver slats.

One—Sumenitas, he guessed from the look of her—would have been about fifty feet tall standing upright. Her bones were coated with sweat-sheened mauve. Her breasts hung down like flaps. Even in the slave crop, her hair was bushy and black. Dorennin was shorter and stockier. His skin was pale, though his hands, feet, and joints, like Sumenitas's, were wealed and infected. Silver slave collars two inches thick encircled necks covered with sores. They would never see a bath: their natural smell was so overpowering that most handlers *preferred* it masked by the smell of dirt and feces. They turned their heads languidly to see who had come in, eyes the size of brimming teacups.

Oh, they were tricky beasts! Demogorgons this big could only come from the Waste.

"How do you know their true names?" he asked Boone softly.

"I went myself into the northern Wraithwaste to buy them." Boone, too, spoke in a near whisper. Now that the last of the gears had stopped moving, his voice echoed up into the heights of the shaft. "The trickster woman told me their names, for a fee."

Most trickster women would sooner die than reveal a single bit of their lore to one of alien biology. That was why Millsy himself had never ventured into the forests of the Wraithwaste, never tried to seek out a house of trickery and get the training that would enable him to exploit the abilities his blood conferred on him. He had known it would be a wasted effort. Boone's bribe must have been handsome indeed.

"Sumenitas."

"And Dorennin."

There were many twenty- and thirty-foot daemons currently in use in the waterworks. But these were prize specimens. If Millsy had been trained as a trickster, he would have been able to step in perfect safety up to the sides of the treadmills and caress them through the bars. (The handlers hung back a good ten paces, aware just how far the daemons' auras of power extended, aware of the danger they were in. Boone would be rotating his men, putting different handlers on these daemons every day so that no man was numbed by the constant exertion of willpower that was necessary to keep the daemons calm enough that they didn't lash out. About seventy years ago a daemon had broken loose from its cage. That had not been in the waterworks, but in the gasworks, which lay about ten miles outside the city. The deaths had numbered in the hundreds.)

"Daemons are much like people," Boone said. He was fingering a small silver-threaded whip that he had taken from a pocket of his half-cape. "One learns a good deal from handling them. What one learns is that they are stupid."

"They're not." Millsy shook his head absently. He did not have to argue; he knew. "They are as intelligent as we are. That should be obvious even to you. I don't understand why handlers persist in believing them mindless."

"They are nothing like us."

"They do not *think* as we do. But they understand everything."

For the first time since they entered the cavern Boone looked at him. "Does it matter?" He laughed his deep, unhurried laugh. "They are ours. In *my* book, my friend, that which a man can

best is not his equal.” He strode to Dorennin’s treadmill and flicked the whip through the metal. Millsy heard the faint hiss of silver contacting daemon flesh. A split second later he *felt* the power with which Dorennin lashed back at Boone. The comptroller leapt backwards, surprisingly fast for a man of his bulk, laughing as he deflected the invisible blow. Dorennin’s handlers rushed up to the treadmill as the furious giant threw himself at the mesh. The whole scaffolding shook. The axle turned a half-rotation. On the other side of the cave, Sumenitas pitched forward in her wheel. Gears clanked like falling rocks in the roof.

The handlers pressed themselves against the mesh. Not for a second did they stop crooning to the daemon. *Ugly motherfucking beast... dickless ogre that you, that you are...* One of them, either bold or stupid, ripped one silver-woven glove off and stretched his hand into the cage. After an endless moment, the quivering giant let his head drop so that the handler could touch his neck, stroking around the cruel collar.

Boone walked back toward Millsy, grinning broadly, wiping sweat from his face. “All right! Start ‘em up again!”

Dorennin’s handlers withdrew. The daemons responded to the prodding lances. As the noise built, Boone shouted, “See what I mean? Eh?”

Millsy nodded. “Just so long,” he shouted, grinning, “as you don’t let them get free!”

“It’s not even possible!” Boone tipped his head back to survey the workings of the machinery. “The mills are welded shut. We feed them through traps in the mesh.”

Millsy felt exhilarated, as if he had shared in Boone’s triumph. And as a handler, he *had* shared in it. It was the triumph of mankind over beast: pure, intellectual, and visceral at the same time. Inevitably his thoughts went to Crispin. This was the joy to which he wanted so badly to introduce the boy when he got old enough. He felt that Crispin had an aptitude for it. Just as, long ago, Boone must have felt that Millsy had an aptitude.

Boone was explaining some difficulty they had had in the construction of the shaft. Millsy could not make himself pay attention. Exhibitions like this were not routine to him, as they were to the comptroller. The episode with the whip had left his heart beating fast. A voice whispered in him: *This is all that there is in life. The rest is words on the wind; what does it matter if they are sweet or bitter? This is the essence.*

(Crispin, my child...)

And love, after all, the fast-fading cynic within him whispered superciliously, is just another form of control.

It was insupportably cold in Christina Gregisson’s parlor. The Royals themselves seemed to emanate the chill—as if they were frozen stiff in their layers of draperies. They did not react to the conversation around them, except to flicker an eyelid when the company laughed. They were not dressed in the fashions of the court; instead, they had swathed themselves in what looked to Millsy’s unaccustomed eye like landscape paintings torn out of their frames. The courtiers who fluttered around them, proffering cakes, finger-goblets of wine, conversational sallies, seemed small and thin as sprites—men and women both, for the fashions for women this year were body-hugging sheaths that would have caused a scandal in the streets of any city in Ferupe.

Only the boldest courtiers actually dared to address themselves to Melithra, Athrina, Sathranna, or Dorthrea. The rest stood in the corners gossiping, slewing their eyes every five seconds toward the center of the room where the painted hillocks brooded.

Millsy’s dulled aesthetic sense could not help equating the exquisite fragility of the parlor with beauty. He had been speechless ever since he came in. Common sense told him that none of them even knew who he was. Yet fear pounded maddeningly inside his skull, and every time someone offered him a cake he hesitated. He hated himself for it, but he hesitated.

He had been a fool to come!

But he had been so hungry for a glimpse of the Royals. And here they were. The women cousins. He had forgotten how unsatisfying they were, these women cousins. He remembered the Queen as far grander than any of them. *Her* skin was almost as dark as Crispin's. Strange, Millsy had often thought, how although the non-Royal ladies powdered their skin to make it whiter, among Royals darker skin meant purer blood. The court ladies' rejection of their rulers' standards of beauty had something not quite dignified about it. He could not help thinking of the women of Smithrebel's. Not Anuei Kateralbin, but the animal trainers like Mrs. Lee Philpotts, who feared and loved her smelly tigers so much.

There was a reek of daemons in the room. They roiled unseen about the Royals, worming their way in and out of the stiff folds of their drapes. Millsy knew that nobody besides himself and the Royal women could sense them. The tiny porcelain cup between his fingers glowed with warmth, but cold hung like a miasma over the room, whitening the air. Of course they were hundreds of feet underground; but that alone did not account for the chill.

Daemon braziers burned at the feet of each Royal. Green tea steamed as it issued from the spout of the samovar over which Christina presided, her wit brittle, her voice strained. Yet when Millsy glanced at the little gatherings of courtiers, the women were surreptitiously rubbing their bare arms, the men cracking their knuckles. It was almost impossible to remember that outside, overhead, up in the world of dirt and vulgarity and death, summer was in full force. Could the chill, Millsy wondered, be psychosomatic? It certainly wasn't produced by the daemons. He knew of no medical condition which would cause such symptoms. Therefore, it must be all in his head: a function of the extreme, unreasonable case of nerves which had overcome him the minute he entered the palace this second time.

And yet it wasn't just him.

He must try to join in the conversation. It would take his mind off the cold, and his fear. Yet he knew that if he tried to make repartee, he would betray his own redundancy. Anyhow, he was terrified of the courtiers. The kisses Christina had given him on his arrival, and the questions she had asked, had been so sincere that despite himself he got quite flustered. In the world of Smithrebel's, because of the close quarters in which everyone lived, reticence was valued almost as highly as patriotism, and Millsy did not have to throw up any false fronts. No self-explanations were required, and so he gave none—whereas in the half hour he had been at the tea party, he had already had to offer prettified accounts of himself to the Royals and to half a dozen other people whose eyes flickered away from him while he spoke.

"More tea, Martha? More tea, Frederic? No? Gift, surely you—"

"No, no." Millsy's voice came out husky. He cleared his throat. "Christina, did I forget to compliment you on that rosette? It is quite exquisite."

Her hand flew to her throat. She giggled. "You have an eye for fine craftsmanship?" Like most court ladies, she never tired of compliments, bland or clever, sincere or otherwise. The thing at her throat looked like a full-blown, perfect yellow rose, one petal edged with brown, but from the way it weighed down her neck ribbon, Millsy knew it was metal.

"I was given it by Melithra on my twenty-fifth birthday—last year!" The courtiers on either side of her chuckled indulgently. It was hard to remember that Christina was in fact forty unless you looked at the tiny lines in the masklike white around her mouth and eyes. "Of course I always wear it. Melithra!" She raised her voice. "Gift admires the rosette you gave me..." She whipped back to Millsy, a forced smile on her mouth. "If you won't have any more tea, then surely a pastry!" She picked several from the platters on the low table before her, arranged them on a saucer, and thrust them at Millsy.

"Really, no," he began, but she had already turned away from him. "Frederic!" she commanded. "Come over here and tell us again about your expedition to the south! Do they all look like my Kchebuk'arans, or are some of them moderately civilized? I am speaking of the

people of the countryside, of course... Naftha is a perfect paradise, but then it is in Ferupe. Has anyone else been to Giorgio's in Naftha... ?”

Millsy's gorge rose as he stared at the assortment of microscopic pastries on his napkin. In order to keep their figures and simultaneously stick to a schedule which included four to seven meals a day, lady courtiers ate nothing that was not miniaturized. Baby chickens and quail eggs, fillets of minnow; wild strawberries, infant vegetables; doll-size scoops of sherbet, chocolates like bits of gravel. It was not a fad but a serious etiquette. If the food at a “mixed” party did not come in two sizes, the host was severely censured. What could be concealed in these dabs of flour and sugar? Should he choose cowardice or possible death?

He shook his head angrily and looked up.

The subject of the south had been a failure. Christina was frantically trying to entertain the Royals.

“And has your little Poche recovered from his canker, Dorthrea? We were all so concerned for the poor creature!”

Dorthrea turned her head, slowly. Millsy was surprised that the raised collars of her drapes did not crackle.

Silence fell over the guests: the Royal was actually going to speak! “The dog is quite well.”

Her voice was the grind of rocks falling. Her skin was sallow and lusterless, like that of her sister and her cousins. Her hair was a garden of china flowers. Beneath that hallucinatory mass, her eyes looked like rain puddles.

The Royals were not beautiful.

Once the Queen had spoken to him. And she had said—

“My bowels are about to move,” Royal Aunt Melithra said suddenly. “Perhaps I will go home.”

Far off, through the ground, Millsy heard the subsonic roar of the factories. The birds in the cages hanging from the ceiling were silent, their feathers puffed up in the presence of the daemons. Christina's voice rose high and gay over the silence.

“Well, of course, Melithra, if you are not feeling well, the last thing I should—”

The only light in the room came from the gas fixtures around the walls. It was yellowish, unhealthy. The tea in Millsy's cup had gone cold. He had not drunk a drop. He, too, would have to leave soon, or he would be sick; however, he probably wouldn't have to excuse himself. The Royal's announcement of her discontent meant the party would be over as soon as decency permitted. Knotting his fingers in his beard, Millsy stared at the curlicues of pastry on his knee, his heart pounding.

That night the trucks of Smithrebel's rolled out of the Guarze vacant lot. Millsy sat in a costume closet in the back of Daisy 3. He had left his pet daemons in the props truck so as not to frighten Crispin. If he had been a trickster woman, or a Royal, he could have forced them to stay invisible. But he was imperfectly trained.

He sat hunched in the dark as the trucks chugged through the streets of Guarze and Jaxeze. Little by little, they pulled free of the capital. Millsy could picture the half-mile-long convoy passing the gasworks, the Kingsburg Granaries, and nameless twenty-four-hour factories from which poured the noise of daemons in torment. At last the flattening of all outside sound told him they were on the northbound road. During the hours of daylight, ox-carts, dog-carts, private daemon limousines, police cars, foot travelers, men on horseback, and army trucks all vied for space, sometimes spilling across the hedges into the fields that bordered the road, reducing crops to mud. Now the road belonged to big game. Dump trucks, short-haul lorries, eighteen-wheelers bound cross-country for Naftha, Grizelle, Gilye, or Kotansburg, semiarticulated tankers full of natural gas; Smithrebel's trucks were merely the jesters of this powerful crew. The noise of the

daemon-powered engines blended in Millsy's ears into a spine-tingling hum, as if a choir five hundred strong were voicing one endless note.

The winter clothes hanging in the closet swayed against his face. He inhaled a moth, and coughed. The vibration of the transformation engine went through his bones.

Long before he had ever thought of becoming a truck driver, as a twenty-year-old courtier, he had stood at the edge of the northern road and watched the stream of behemoths pour by. His fine silk hose had been sopped with dew. His suede boots had been ruined. (In those days he had tried so hard to be fashionable, despite his long stork's body that could not wear tight clothes without looking skeletal.) He had lost his hat. He had—if he remembered correctly—been wild with grief over some boy.

And yet—and yet—

The daemon of Daisy 3 was lulling him into a trance, all the way from the other end of the truck. He was in danger of falling asleep if he didn't rouse himself. Feeling like an old man, he extracted himself from the costume closet and passed along a dark gangway until he reached the nook behind the tractor where Anuei and Crispin made their home. Seven square feet to contain the debris of two lives. A chilling thought.

"Hallo!" he called, falsetto, and in a blurry voice, as if she had been sleeping, Anuei said:

"Come in."

But she was not sleeping, but mending clothes, while Crispin, as was his wont, clambered quietly around the room. Anuei's kind heart and clever fingers meant she got saddled with a lot of other people's sewing. In his present state of mind, Millsy did not dare to speak to Crispin. He pretended that he had come to visit Anuei. If she was not fooled, so much the worse for her, but this afternoon had left him with a desperate zeal to maintain the proprieties.

Despite his good intentions, it did not take him long to work around to the subject which, he now realized ruefully, was his only subject. Daemons.

"Should you like to be able to command daemons some day?" he called to Crispin.

The little boy was hanging upside down from the clothes rail, half-naked, his thumb in his mouth, like some overgrown wingless fruit bat. His toes were on a level with the cages of Anuei's exotic birds, now covered with cloth, which swayed from hooks in the underside of the horizontal partition in the truck.

"Make them come to you, I mean? Should you like that? You could play with them, have them fetch things for you..."

"You are terrible with children," Anuei said. "Never offer them anything they don't need."

"I'd *like* that," Crispin said. His eyes shone like wet black stones. "D'you have some daemons with you right now, Millsy?"

"Don't build cloud castles for him!" Anuei said.

Millsy knew what she meant. *I'm warning you, Millsy!* But because she did not say it explicitly, he could ignore it—just as everybody else ignored what she meant. That difference between Ferupians and Lamaroons was the cause of Anuei's failure to influence Smithrebel's as the ringmaster's mistress should have.

Millsy took a deep breath and concentrated on ignoring the tragedy in her eyes. "Crispin, come down from there, and we'll have a game of cards—you, your mother and I. I'll show you a new shuffle."

"Don't wanna." Crispin flipped around on the pole so that he was hanging with his face to the wall. His cutoff shirt slipped down around his shoulders.

Millsy hitched himself closer to Anuei and murmured, "He has an aptitude. Look at the way he listens to the engine."

"He's always done that." Anuei bit off thread.

"Exactly! Don't you see—don't you see? If I started training him now, he would become so

outstanding a handler that not even his father would think of making him into an aerialist!”

“Not so loud!” Anuei almost shrieked.

Millsy held up both hands to calm her. “He doesn’t understand.”

“The neighbors!”

“They can’t hear, Anuei.” Only a few people in Smithrebel’s—Green Sam the chief cook, the elephant-training Philpotts brothers, and Millsy himself—knew the truth of Crispin’s parentage. A secret shared, even among half a dozen, is barely a secret at all—but with Millsy, at least, it was safe.

“No child’s got an aptitude for slave-driving,” Anuei said in a flat voice, so that for a moment Millsy did not quite understand what she was saying. “Not no Lamaroon child.”

Millsy rocked on his heels. “What most people mistakenly call aptitude is usually only a matter of early encouragement! And I feel it would be best to encourage Crispin to pursue the grandest of all professions, rather than making him into a mere entertainer!”

“I’m a ‘mere entertainer’! And I know what you want from my baby,” Anuei said, and for a paralyzed moment Millsy thought she was going to say something which should not be said by anyone. Then he remembered she was not like that. She sat hugely on the pillow of her thighs, on her cushions. “And I can’t protect him all the time—not from you, because you are supposed to be our friend. Or are you? This damn incestuous cesspit!” she spat suddenly. “Traveling monkey show! All I can ask you is not to put him in danger. And because you are my *friend*”—she stressed the word sarcastically—“I hope that you will respect my wishes.”

The room smelled of cheap tallow, and those Lamaroon fumes Anuei carried about with her, whose virtues Millsy had heard graphically extolled in the men’s quarters.

“I cannot,” he said softly. Her eyes were on her mending, through which she jerked the needle viciously. “Anuei” —he knew she could not hear him—“this afternoon I tasted the poison. Henceforth I must push the cup away whenever it is offered to me—even when it is offered by a friend. I cannot.”

It had taken him the greater part of his life to get the proportions right, but now he had it. From now on he was one hundred percent daemon handler. No more courtier. No more ambassador. No more failure.

No more misplaced scruples.

He had tasted poison, and he would have no more of it. The exhilaration of unrequited love, that obsession which frees the soul from gravity, buoyed him up. He felt as Anuei, the Balloon Lady, must feel when one of the roughnecks tossed her laughing into the air. His soul swelled with his desire for, and his complete belief in his own, altruism.

Twin tears sat on the shelves of fat below Anuei’s eyes.

“Millsy! I’m begging you!”

He smiled in his beard and held a skinny, shaking finger to his lips.

The truck rumbled on through the night. Cows slept in the fields and tenant farmers slept in their one-room huts, dreaming of circuses.

The mask fell off the city, and she saw it for what it really is—a caricature of infinity. The familiar barriers, the streets along which she moved, the houses between which she had made her little journeys for so many years, became negligible suddenly.

—E. M. Forster, *Howards End*

A Fragile Heaven

1884 A.D. Ferupe: Plum Valley Domain

Rae was nine. She had long, long, long black hair. Tangles didn't bother her, in fact she nourished her favorite ones with careful additions of burrs and thornbush prickles, and she always wore her hair hanging around her face, even like now, when she was playing down the stream and it kept getting in her way.

Black water gurgled along the bottom of the weedy gully. Elders and willows threw the summer sun down in shifting patterns. She crouched halfway up the bank, whispering to herself, pushing sticks into oblongs of wet clay. These would be her actors. Nearby lay a pile of scraps of material she'd cut out of curtains and tablecloths and things for their clothes. Dressing them up was her favorite part of the game—she enjoyed it even more than the plays themselves, since Daphne didn't want to help with the voices anymore. After their initial craze for theaters, Daph had lost interest.

Rae hadn't. She was like that.

She'd made the Prince. Now his consorts. "Sister Moira," she whispered. She giggled at her own daring, doubling over her knees, shaking silently. Sister Moira was the mother of Rae's enemy Colm, a towheaded twelve-year-old who lorded it over all the other children because their parents were lower in the pecking order than his. His father was the Prince's first courtier, and what with his mother being the first consort, you really would think he was the bee's knees! Rae's mother, Sister Saonna, was no less than the third consort. If it hadn't been for that, she suspected Colm would have given her a much harder time than he did. Even so, he pulled her tail every day in prayer. Morning, noon, and night. Her place was right in front of his. There was no escape.

Carefully, she scratched a scowling mouth onto Sister Moira's head. In the skit she was planning, Sister would get smooshed. Lovely.

Without thinking, she curled her tail around to hold Sister steady. Bad! Growling, she snapped it back over her shoulder. The tip hit a nettle; tears came to her eyes. She scrubbed them away with a handful of hair (so much glossier and stronger than any of the other girls').

She had a tail because she was Kirekuni. So did her mother—but her mother's tail was dark-patterned with tattoos, beautiful curly designs. None of the other children were Kirekuni, except for the Shard boys, who were much older, and a couple of the babies. But she'd never thought much about it until Daphne, her best friend, had told her they couldn't hang out anymore because Kirekunis and Ferupians were at war, they were enemies.

In the end it had proved to be just another of Daphne's things, like not wanting to play dress-up, or painting suns and moons on the knees of her breeches. But the idea had kept on bothering Rae, at meals and at prayer, and whenever someone slighted her, she couldn't help wondering if that was why.

Rae hardly ever spoke to her mother—though she watched her constantly. But at last, yesterday, she had sought her out in the kitchen. Over the clattering of cooking and washing up, she tried to ask her about being Kirekuni. Later she realized this was a bad mistake. Saonna hated kitchen duty. She didn't want to be distracted from the giant pan of scrambled eggs she was stirring. Sweating and biting her lip, she told Rae to go away.

So Rae went. She cried.

She didn't want to remember. Pinching her lips together, she pressed a piece of white curtain damask onto Sister Moira's torso for a dress. But she wasn't careful enough. The clay ball split, and half of it rolled into the grass. Rae gasped, threw Sister Moira down, and scrambled down the bank to dig more earth out of the muddy overhang.

Last night, feeling slightly desperate, she had gone to the third consort's bedroom to wait for Saonna. The bedroom was on the third floor of the mansion, right below the dorm where Rae herself slept. Underneath the central dome of the ceiling stood a canopied bed, its covers spilling onto the floor. Mirrors hung at strange places on the rose-patterned walls—some near the floor,

some at the ceiling, and just one small one over the dressing table where Saonna's perfumes and creams stood uncapped. Big pink chairs were draped with lovely clothes: dresses of fur and velvet—Rae would have liked that material for theater costumes—lace underwear, sateen corsets, and long lambswool underwear for winter. Saonna never, ever put anything away. Nobody in the cult did, except Rae and the other children, who had to clean up the dorm rooms and the dining room every day.

This is the way it should be, Rae had thought, seizing a long yellow ribbon and twining it around her hair. *This way, you can see everything there is. All at once. Like it will be after we transcend.*

Waiting was the only way to live. She knew that. But the meditative slowness of all the adults around her, so frustrating when they imposed their deliberation on the madcap, aimless games with which the children filled their time, sometimes gave her a funny feeling of being not suspended, but caught up in an onrush of fleeting days. She cried every time she had a birthday. She didn't want to grow up. Because soon—Sister Flora said probably when Rae was in her early twenties—the Queen, the Last Queen of the Dynasty, was going to die far away in Kingsburg and all of humanity was going to come to an end.

The adults often discussed how it might happen: plague, black rain, the end of childbirth, floods. They spoke of these terrifying things quite calmly. They had even calculated how long it would take death to reach Plum Valley Domain, presupposing that it would spread outward from Kingsburg. They didn't know *how* it would come. All they knew was that it was coming. That much had been revealed to the Prince in a vision. It was why, long ago, he had joined the Dynasty.

Such was the stuff of myth among the children of his acolytes.

But the end of humanity wasn't a myth. It was a fact.

No more dress-up. No more sweet to suck clover. No more Daphne. No more Saonna. No more Rae.

Transcendence.

In her mother's bedroom, she shook herself, and throwing a robe of mangy leopard fur around her shoulders, pranced over to gaze in one of the mirrors. For three hours, while the cult convened for prayer and supper downstairs, she amused herself trying on Saonna's dresses and creaming her face, playing music hall. All the actors at real music halls were men, with short hair, wearing wigs and heels—so she couldn't quite manage to believe in herself. When Daphne was around, that didn't matter. But without her it wasn't as much fun.

And Saonna did not come. And it got to be Rae's bedtime. Through the ceiling, she could hear the other children talking and scuffling. Her eyes were sore with tiredness. She was usually a good girl; Sister Flora would turn a blind eye to her absence, since she didn't make a habit of it; yet she was appalled at her own temerity. She climbed onto Saonna's bed, crawled under the fluffy but rather matted covers, and curled up, breathing in the heady smell of Saonna mixed with the scent of must.

And she must have fallen asleep, because suddenly she was awake, and a big, heavy-breathing animal was crawling onto the bed, jerking the covers away from Rae, flopping down hard on the mattress. The room was horribly dark. Rae lay stiff and still.

"Mother?" she whispered. She never called Saonna that. "Mother?"

"Rae? Rae, is that *you*?"

"Motherrrr," Rae said. "Motherrrr! Will you light a candle?"

Saonna tossed. She groaned and sighed. It sounded as if the bed itself, that massive, rotting piece of furniture, were releasing air from the depths of its frame.

"Please!" Rae nearly screamed.

"You shouldn't be here," Saonna mumbled. Letting out soft cries as if in agony, she slithered head down off the edge of the mattress and crouched with a thump on the floor. Rae held her

breath.

Steel scratched on flint. Yellow light flowered into the room, shaking up and down the walls as Saonna heaved herself back up onto the bed to sit facing Rae.

Her hair was tousled. She wore nothing but a grimy negligee. Under her daughter's open-mouthed stare, she twisted her head uncomfortably and gathered the filmy stuff close to her throat.

"Where *were* you?" Rae asked. She felt herself close to tears for the second time in one day. "I was waiting and waiting!"

"It's none of your business what I was doing." Saonna seemed to take charge of herself. "And I don't know what you and your little friends were playing at in here, but you can just leave now. I have to be up early. I have to feed the bloody hogs at dawn." She snapped her fingers. "Go on."

Rae wrung the cover desperately with her hands and tail, twisting it up around her like a nest. "Mother," she wailed, "I *love* you," and, bursting into tears, she threw herself across Saonna's lap.

"Oh, Queen," Saonna whispered. Distractedly, her hands rubbed Rae's back. It did not feel like a caress. Not like Daphne's arms and legs wrapping around her when they curled up in bed at night; not like Sister Flora's gruff one-armed embrace, that she gave you when she was pleased with you. A hard, embarrassed rubbing that rucked Rae's shirt up on her back. "By the Dynasty, how I wish your father was alive!"

Rae gulped. She knew her father had not made it out of Kirekune; she had never dared to try to find out why. "How—Mother, why is Father dead?"

"Don't call me that." But Saonna's voice sounded fat away, as if she were thinking of something else. "There was a lot of snow. Far more than we expected. A blizzard hit us after we had entered the mountains, before we reached Khyzlme—the trading post. Our horses died. Our food was running out. Vashi forced me to eat the larger share of what we had left, so that I could nurse you." She laughed. "My family hated Vashi. My sister Saia was incivil to him. I was never able to convince her that he was a good man—that his affiliation with the Dynasty didn't mean he didn't love me. But Saia didn't understand him any more than she did me. I never belonged in Okimako!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, Kirekunis like outpourings of emotion. They like fancy words and flamboyant clothes." Saonna's words dripped with distaste. Rae wondered what Saonna thought, then, of the gorgeous music-hall dresses Rae had tried on that evening. "They are so vulgar! One doesn't realize the full extent of it until one has lived in Ferupe. But it was—it was ironic that Vashi, by his self-sacrifice, should have proved Saia so wrong, and never have got the satisfaction of seeing her eat her words. Not that he would have rubbed it in, anyway. That would have made him just like her."

Saonna had stopped rubbing Rae's back. Rae was afraid to remind her that she was there. Lying perfectly still, she whispered: "How did you—and—and me—get out of the snow?"

"What? Oh. A trader came by, eventually. He took us into Khyzlme. A horrid smudge of a place, stinking of meat and leather, with dogs running around in the snow. The wild men there couldn't believe we had entered the mountains without trading our horse and wagon for a dogsled. How were we supposed to know? We never met anyone who had come west across the pass. Only traders and peddlers travel *into* Kirekune, because there's nothing over there that would be of interest to anybody except a merchant. But to tear oneself *out* of Kirekune, now—that is noble! So many of our mansion had gone before us..." Saonna snorted. "And many more were planning to follow. I expect their bones lie under the snow. The Shards made it. So did you and I. So did the Greys and the Dirkes. And there are other Kirekuni families at other mansions. But we are just a fraction of those who tried."

Rae shivered. It took an effort of will for her to dispel the image of those frozen skeletons.

“Why?” she whispered. “Why did they all want to leave Okimako?”

It did not sound like such an unpleasant place to her. Surely people wouldn’t make fun of you for being Kirekuni in a place where everybody was? She envisioned lots of mansions clustered together, their halls and ballrooms filled with people in bright-colored clothes, their black hair flowing, their long tails (tattooed like Saonna’s) carried high behind them.

“Oh... the religious are persecuted there. Not that we aren’t persecuted everywhere, in this degenerate century! But the presence of the Dynasty is so small there that it’s frustrating. The Decadents of the East cult was growing more popular when I left—I suspect their conversion rate has overtaken ours by now. Posing imbeciles! They believe dancing in the streets will save them when the Queen dies!” Saonna tapped Rae eagerly. “Girl, one must be of a certain class to comprehend the doctrines of the Dynasty. That is how the survivors of the apocalypse will be self-selected. And an atmosphere of refinement can be quite pleasant when one has grown up the way I did, let me tell you! I shan’t go into details, but... To speak truth, that was the greatest attraction the Dynasty held for me, before I became enlightened.”

Rae did not understand her mother’s allusions. She was fascinated with the idea of Kirekune—of Okimako—a gaudy trader’s city. Even the horrors it held would probably be delightful. But she didn’t dare ask Saonna to explain. It was rare enough to hear anybody speak with passion, let alone her mother; let alone with her as audience. Apparently she had finally managed to catch Saonna at the right time. Conscious, as always, of the brief blinding torrent of days that lay ahead of them, she thought suddenly, *And it may well be the last time!*

She buried her nose in Saonna’s musky negligee.

“Taraszune Hone was the Prince under whom I first studied the doctrines of the Dynasty. He was great. But the most propitious Mansions of the Dynasty in the world are right here, in central Ferupe. Rae, we live in the Seventeenth Mansion of the Glorious Dynasty! The First Mansion is not three hundred miles from here! We are assured transcendence! Even in Okimako, we knew that our best chance lay in coming to Ferupe. The sad thing is that we knew so little of the thousands of miles we would have to cross.” She was silent for a long moment. “And there. Circumstances govern us all, even the Children of the Dynasty.”

Another pause. Saonna straightened her back as if to push Rae off her lap. Rae tried desperately to think of some way to keep her talking.

“But Mo—Sister Saonna! I know the Dynasty is great, but why don’t other people want to become part of it? I mean—in Greenberith—they call us culties—crazies—”

Saonna sighed. “Oh, Rae! I don’t believe you’ve understood a word I’ve been saying. It takes a certain *purity of soul* to live in Waiting. I don’t think they should allow you children to go into the town... it does nothing for your morals. As I said, the Dynasty is different from other cults. It is the first and truest. The Easterners of Okimako, for example, will allow anybody off the street to come in and dance with them and meditate with them and partake of their food, as a result of which they’ve made themselves a public nuisance. It’s a very Kirekuni approach to transcendence. We, on the Other hand, are essentially *Ferupian*—in the *old* sense—in that we don’t make a show of ourselves. And so the degenerate don’t understand us. It can be hard—but that’s why we live here in the mansion. As you grow older, you’ll find that it’s in you to bear misunderstanding, and even take pride in it. You’re a child of the Dynasty. You are of a certain class.” She laughed wonderingly. “When I first came to the mansion in Okimako, I couldn’t even read and write! I could not speak any Ferupian. And even my Kirekuni was poor—I had such a new-city accent. Well, it took me a year, but I learned Ferupian. That was the only reason I survived the rest of the journey here, after Vashi died. One trader after another... and all of them wanted just one thing from me. You’re lucky. You’ve been raised up right. *That’s* what your father died for.”

For no reason Rae found herself thinking about the music hall she had once gone to. That had been the best escapade of her life. She and some of the other cult children had stolen a lift

into Salmesthwarth on a hay cart. They had worn their nicest clothes—though the hay hadn't done those much good. They had not let anyone know they were from the mansion. Maybe that was why they had been allowed to stay inside the theater, after they were discovered sneaking in through a storeroom door.

What little she understood of the bawdy songs and skits had both shocked and delighted her. At each fervent rendition of "Ferupe Loves Our Queen," she jumped up, put her hand to her chest and bawled out the words as lustily as any of the happy, drunken people around her. Only later—so much later that the music hall was ineradicably embedded in her memory as a paradise of glitz and glory—did Brother James happen to mention that those who frequented such places were low. Commoners.

She rolled onto her back and stared up at her mother's face. The commoners *had* looked at her tail; she remembered that now. She'd had it commented on more times in the space of that evening than ever before. Of course, that was before Daphne's pronouncement, before Rae got the thing of being Kirekuni stuck in her mind, like a burr in her hair.

At the music hall, she'd grinned and let anybody feel her tail who wanted to. But she'd only been seven. Stupid seven.

"Mother," she muttered, not trying to get Saonna's attention, just testing the word. "Mother."

Viewed from below, Saonna's face did not seem to belong to the person Rae covertly observed during the day: it looked haunted, tired. She was gazing out of the huge window. Even with the candle still guttering, Rae could see that dawn was coming, graying the tops of the trees around the mansion, bringing the fields that jostled higgledy-piggledy beyond into hazy silver focus.

Everybody else was going to die anyhow.

She packed her clay hard in her hands, rolling it, walloping it, thwacking it against the trunk of a sapling willow. *Splat. Thock.*

Everybody else was going to die anyhow.

The children of Greenberith who whispered behind her back, even when the tall beautiful Shard boys took her to walk between them. (She was in awe of the Shard boys. She was glad they were going to transcend.) The music-hall actors in Salmesthwarth. The farmers who wouldn't let the cult children play in their fields, and never gave them ripe plums, although the local bullies got theirs regularly at the start of the fruit-harvesting season. Squire Carathraw, who turned up every so often on the front doorstep of the mansion, half-drunk and ragged, pointing to the weeds that clogged the front drive and blubbering that the cult had ruined the land of his fathers. Well, it was his own fault, wasn't it, if he had been greedy enough to sell?

The Dynasty "did not deem modification of the physical world necessary." Brother James said that when the cult first bought the mansion from Squire Carathraw in 1855, all the lands which were now tangled forest had been a sculptured garden. Twenty or more locals had lived here just to take care of them, and of the daemon machines that mowed the lawns and clipped the topiary and burnished the windows. Those were now, mostly, fallen in glittering heaps beside the walls of the mansion. Some of those ex-servants, graying now, still turned up to accuse and beg, although unlike the squire, most of them had been reabsorbed into their own world. (The *condemned* world.)

The squire's world had not wanted him, Rae supposed.

Brother James said of course it hadn't. The vice of greed had brought Carathraw low. He was an example.

And it was his own fault. Only the worst kind of squire, those who valued cold sterling over the land their fathers had held for hundreds of years, would sell their houses—no matter how tempting the price. And the Dynasty offered very tempting prices! But eventually, inevitably, the

money was spent and the firework flared to earth. The squire, by this time generally without his family, came crying home to his ancestral mansion. But the Prince who now ruled the mansion had to close the door in his face. The squire had sold, had he not? He was not the sort who would be able to profit from joining the Dynasty. He was an example for the rest of the people, some of whom would eventually grow in spirit enough to seek out the Dynasty.

Squire Carathraw's lips were loose and perpetually wet from sucking on the stone bottle he carried. He wore clothes that he seemed to have inherited from a much smaller, poorer man. All the children said he lived in a ditch, but he managed somehow to be as fat as a pig. Rae had nightmares in which she saw him standing over her, his mucky boots planted on the mattress, pointing with shaking fingers to the gilt cherubs around the ceiling of the dorm that were all flaked and falling down.

Every time his voice was heard in the drive, she and Daphne ran to hide, laughing hysterically with fear.

But he was going to die.

She worked her clay angrily.

The little stream gurgled like a baby. Rae, be happy! Rae, be hap-ap-appy!

This stream was better than any other in the whole hundred-mile-long Plum Valley because it had fish in it. (Culties did not kill anything to get their food, not even fish. They lived for the most part on rice from the eastern plains that came once a month in trucks.) When you went paddling in the big pool in the woods, you could feel trout and minnows and freshwater guppies slithering against your legs, and of course you had to scream louder than anyone else. If you tried to walk upstream from the pool, though, you found you had to get out of the water. The stream wound in a deep defile through the tangly woods that surrounded the mansion, now and again vanishing beneath the wall-like thickets that subdivided all the lands where the children were allowed to play. Rae and Daphne sometimes stood at the very edge of the trees, looking wistfully down over a sunny patchwork of fields and hedges. They never ventured out. Not two girls alone. Blond bully Colm had a scar on his shoulder that he showed off constantly. It was the place where a splinter from Farmer Jelleby's daemon gun had had to be ripped off. Colm said he hadn't even cried. *Well, isn't that nice for you*, Rae would think, folding her arms and silently fuming. She knew that if she even *saw* Farmer Jelleby pointing his gun at her, she would cry.

Colm, nasty Colm, was going to transcend just because he belonged to the Dynasty. Was that *fair*? Rae wondered. She looked up. "Is that *fair*?" she said aloud to the trees.

"What?" came Daphne's laughing voice. "Is what fair, Ray-baby-oh?"

Rae whirled around, clutching her clay to her chest. She didn't see Daphne until the other girl waved. She was sitting in a tree a little way down the stream, her bare legs twined around the branch, her chin on her hands, her long reddish hair dangling,

All the members of the Dynasty, boys and girls, men and women, had long hair, but Rae's was the loveliest—second only to the Shard boys'. Because she was a Kirekuni. "How long have you been sitting there?" she shouted.

"Not long. I thought you were going to hear me climbing up, but you didn't." Daphne's voice vibrated with injury. "You weren't in bed last night. How am I supposed to know if you're all right, or what?"

Annnn, Rae thought. She glanced at her heap of actors and material and decided to leave them for later. She stood up. "Okay, Daphne the Squirrel." She climbed to the top of the bank and pushed through the weeds and undergrowth to the bottom of Daphne's willow. It was so branchy Daphne had not been able to get very high. Rae stood on tiptoe and stretched up both her arms. She could almost grab Daphne's hair. "Come on down!"

Daphne held on, looking solemnly down out of her pinched brown face. She was darker-skinned than Rae, and shorter—but then, Rae was as tall as any of the twelve-year-olds. Sister

Flora said that if she didn't stop growing, she would never become a consort.

"Where *were* you?"

Something clogged Rae's throat. She swallowed, hard. But she couldn't keep it from coming out. "Daphne, if I ran away, would you come with me?"

"Tee hee," Daphne said loudly. "Tee hee!"

"I mean it!"

"You bloody well do not!" Decisively, Daphne swung off her branch and landed with a grunt on the earth. She picked herself up and brushed off her knees. She wore summer shorts cut from last winter's breeches, which before she inherited them had been the property of some hireling in the days of Squire Carathraw. They were belted around her flat chest with a piece of red ribbon. "Come on, dummy, don't you want anything to eat? I've got some honey in my cupboard in the ballroom. Brother James gave it me."

"Yummy yummy honey," Rae sang, right on cue, sadly.

"Oh, you're being *silly!*" Daphne shouted. "*Silly!*" She threw her arm around Rae's shoulders. They ducked to avoid a branch as they started through the woods. "Yummy honey. Ouch, my foot. Yummy yummy yummy, Rae-baby-baby..."

Rae joined in reluctantly. The song irked her, and after a moment she realized why: she was not a baby any more, not Sister Flora's, not Brother James's, not anybody else's. She thought she would be Daphne's a little longer, just to keep her happy. But it was not real.

*if there are any heavens my mother will (all by herself) have
one. It will not be a pansy heaven nor
a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but
it will be a heaven of black-red roses...*
—e. e. cummings

Book Two: *The Catch*

The Open Air of the World

Jevanary 1893A.D. Ferupe: Lovoshire Domain

Midwinter, just after the turn of the year. Smithrebel's Fabulous Aerial and Animal Show was in Lovoshire Domain, at the westernmost point of the grand itinerary that Saul Smithrebel had sketched anew on his map last year, rumbling slowly southward through the Apple Hills. Lovoshire was a domain renowned for nothing except its massive, millennia-long flirtation with the Wraithwaste, the daemon-infested forest that stretched for thousands of miles along Ferupe's western border, over which the war with Kirekune was being fought right now. The Wraithwaste had never really been part of Ferupe. It was alien, unknown, colonized only by trickster women. In the rest of the country, the name of Lovoshire evoked a dark glamour. Beyond Lovoshire lay only the trackless Waste, and the exotic glory of the war front, into whose brilliance all young soldiers vanished. And beyond that... Kirekune!

Here in the Apple Hills one often saw airplanes gliding high and silent overhead, on their way to the front from the air bases in Salzeim. But there were no bases in Lovoshire itself, nor (for some reason known only to the Queen) in any of the other heavily forested western domains.

Here, the war might as well have been a thousand miles away. People's everyday business was quite different, and of a great deal of interest to Crispin: it was daemons. It had been years since the circus passed through daemon country. He had only been fifteen the last time around. So this time, Lovoshire held a special attraction for him, too.

It was an attraction, however, which vanished quickly when he remembered that in the Apple Hills, in Jevanary, it rained every day without fail. He and the other drivers muttered disloyally that it had been a mistake on Mr. Saul's part to come here in winter. What a fool the Old Gentleman was! The takings were unbelievably meager.

Last time, it had been Aout. High summer. The hills had been far greener than they were now. And the dark-haired people hadn't hidden in their wooden villages, putting their heads out when the musicians struck up, drawing them quickly back in when they glimpsed Missy, Charmer, and Two-Tails, the elephants. They had been so generous with themselves, so joyous, that the circus had not been able to do anything more than plug into their summer-long celebration, crystallizing the giddiness, synchronizing the overflowing energy into one glorious three-hour performance after another.

Even the Old Gentleman's chronic sense of lateness had abated. He had consented to do one show after another in the same location for as long as the appleseeds kept coming. Each clink of coin, to him, rang another note in the tune of a Ferris wheel. That had been his fixation ever since the daemon in the carousel died and they had had to sell it for scrap. A Ferris wheel! Prohibitively expensive, considering a twenty-foot daemon would be needed to power it—but maybe not! A tippy-giggly-making chiming Ferris wheel from whose top you could see miles over the forest!

Crispin's mother had been dead three years when he was fifteen, but he'd only just succeeded in forgetting all the things she had used to tell him. He passed the summer in a daze of elderflower wine. The hills were the sort of place where young men ought to have been thin on the ground, most of them having been snapped up by the army; but in the west, for some reason, the recruiters were not so gung-ho, and the population of the appleseed towns was gloriously skewed in favor of the young. In every village, Crispin met up with the local boys and drank cider under haystacks. He sobered up only when he was due to perform. (Always on the verge of getting himself chucked out of the troupe, never quite crossing that line. Elise Valenta had threatened to eject him more than once—but he *knew* they couldn't do without him. How he'd capitalized on that knowledge!) And he'd had a fling with a different girl every night. As a rule western girls were more prudish than heartland, prairie, southern, or northerners, but they were also more beautiful. (So it had seemed to him.) When they got drunk, the usual taboos fell away like layers of confining garments, and the dubious looks that Crispin provoked in all strangers, female or male (to which he had, at fifteen, achieved a hard-won immunity) gave way to the smoldering immobility of attraction. Attraction they could not repress, and did not want to. At fifteen, he hadn't been immune to *that*.

"Best damn summer I remember," he said sourly, as he, Millsy, and Kiquat the snowman climbed down from their truck cabs. They surveyed the site.

"Bloody shithole." Kiquat flexed stiff fingers. "Here?"

The roughnecks were making so much noise unloading the trucks that the dense silence lingered only in negative. The Old Gentleman had given the signal to stop in a field at the top of a hill, where the road paused for a breather before plunging down again into another dizzying series of hairpin bends. It was apparently used as a travelers' rest, though what travelers passed through here with any regularity, Crispin couldn't imagine. Probably gypsies—though he hadn't seen any of that lot on the roads for ages, not since they got out of the southlands. On the trunks of the trees that leaned over the field, various symbols had been hacked. He'd peered at them as he parked Poppy 2. Most of the carvings looked as old as the hills themselves, and as

meaningless. They were unlikely to be real writing: in Lovoshire, a schoolteacher would look as out of place as the elephants did. But Crispin wouldn't have known if they were. Like most circus people, he was illiterate, and he had no problem with that. Millsy said that knowing how to read and write caged you in. Millsy claimed to have had a Kingsburg education, and subsequently forgotten every letter, every equation, and the name of every constellation and flower he had ever learned. "Quite a feat," Crispin would say sarcastically whenever he mentioned it. They had been friends so long that Crispin wasn't fooled. Forgetting was not that easy. But everyone had to have his little secrets, and Crispin was not one to pry into things.

Kiquat wandered off to sleep somewhere. Droplets of dew gathered on the straggling ends of Millsy's beard as he listened to Crispin's recollections of that good summer. His bloodless lips were pursed, his head tipped on one side. Joining his thin hands together inside the sleeves of his overcoat, he nodded appreciatively whenever Crispin came to a salacious bit.

"Yes. Yes, I do remember. But I'm afraid you have it wrong, my young friend. That wasn't the Apple Hills, it was the Yellow Sweeps, as they call the lower hills of the Happy Mountains in Galashire. A westerly range—but more pleasantly situated than this Queen-forsaken place... This is the first time since you were born that we've taken the southward leg this close to the Wraithwaste." He shrugged sadly, his thin body swaying from top to toe. "And I hope it will be the last. Mr. Saul is not pleased with the takings. Not at all. He thinks it is due to the activity of cults around here. Those of the locals whom they have not drawn in, they have got under their sway..."

"Load of tripe," Crispin said. "If you ask me, the problem is there's so many daemons in the woods. They mess people up." He tapped his temple. "No one's going to go to the circus if they're sleepwalking half the time."

"I could be coaxed into agreement with you. But tell that to Smithrebel."

Crispin breathed slowly, watching his exhalations puff white in the air. *Last time the Old Gentleman was pleased with the takings, he thought, King Ethrew was on the throne in Kingsburg! He doesn't understand that altering the itinerary does nobody any good. What he needs to do is build us a better reputation. Visit the same places over and over. Over and over. Smithrebel 's ought to be a name like Furey's, like Gazelle's, Murk & Nail's...*

Too tired...

The two months they had expected to spend in these muddy, slimy hills were nearly over. All anybody wanted to see now was the last, long downhill run which would carry them out of the fog and rain into the flat farmlands of Thrazen Domain. Sweeter than a girl's kiss to Crispin would have been the sight of the sun. And last night, while he was at the wheel of Sunflower I, staring entranced at the headlights bouncing along the road, the Old Gentleman had crawled forward through the hatch from his quarters, and sitting forward with his hands on his kneecaps, regaled Crispin with long-winded anecdotes of his own boyhood in the circus.

Why? Crispin wondered. The Old Gentleman took an interest in him that was more than unusual, it was creepy. Crispin believed the Old Gentleman had a grudge against him—probably for some fucked-up reason to do with his mother—and was trying to kill him, but was too much of a coward, and too greasy a professional, to stain the circus annals with any "accidents." So he had to employ dirtier, subtler schemes.

It had been worse when Anuei was alive. Crispin had felt he had to protect her from the Old Gentleman. Saul was just not *good* enough for her! One time when he was ten he'd walked in on them. Grunting and bouncing in the dark of Daisy 3, The Old Gentleman wriggling like a white worm on top of Anuei's black bulk. Crispin had gasped and stiffened, and the red-eyed, growling beast inside him rose up and took a flying leap at the Old Gentleman and tried to rip him bodily off his mother.

That was the night he first knew, honest to the Queen knew, that he was strong. The Old

Gentleman tried to hush the incident up, but of course people found out. You can't very well pretend a battered face, a swollen groin, and a broken arm are all the result of falling off a chair.

And not long after that had come the night when Mike Valenta's trapeze ripped loose from the rigging, dashing him to the mats thirty feet below. His back was broken in seven places. The Flying Valentas found themselves without a catcher, and Smithrebel's bereft of its star turn. It was then that the Old Gentleman interfered with Crispin more intrusively than any owner had a right to interfere with his performers' children. Despite Anuei's violent, silent disapproval, Crispin was made an aerialist.

Queen, how he had hated the Old Gentleman for forcing that wedge between him and his mother. Working with the Valentas was the first thing he had not been able to talk to Anuei about.

But since then...

Perhaps the Old Gentleman had not even *thought* about Crispin's probable unhappiness; perhaps that had merely been the egocentrism of a child, who traces everyone's motives back to himself. Perhaps it had just been the circus instincts bubbling to the top in Saul Smithrebel's dried-up, one-track brain. For Crispin turned out to be a good catcher. He would never have made a flier. He was just too tall and bulky. But his weight—he weighed less than Prettie herself—his big ugly hands, and his ability to swing head down for hours without getting dizzy, made him, Herve freely admitted, a better catcher than Mike had been. Rock-steady. It used to worry Crispin that Herve didn't know that was all just an act of will. Rock-steady! In truth, in those early days, Crispin had been racked by a paralyzing fear of heights.

But gradually he came to enjoy flying, even to believe he loved it. Days, days, and more days. Rehearsals and performances. Tape-wrapped wrists and ankles slapping into chalk-dusted palms. The tricks you learn to ensure that someone's life is safe in your hands, even when it looks to the audience as if a thousandth of a second's miscalculation means the flyer's death. It's all a matter of being on.

The Old Gentleman's interference, however, had more repercussions. While Crispin tried to juggle his responsibilities to his mother and to the Valentas, he ended up neglecting Millsy. Millsy was the only adult who had taken a real interest in him as a child. They were friends and playmates; and Millsy taught Crispin geography, history, and everything it was possible for a child to learn about daemons—all the knowledge he might have needed, in fact, except reading and writing, against which Millsy was violently prejudiced. To Millsy, and only to Millsy, Crispin had confessed that he still hated his mother's lover—that giving Smithrebel a broken arm hadn't made any difference—that every time the Old Gentleman tried to talk to him, he wanted to attack him again. If the Old Gentleman wouldn't leave Anuei, couldn't he at least leave *Crispin* alone?

There had once been an understanding that Crispin would become Millsy's apprentice, that their friendship would, so to speak, be legitimized. But neither of them ever mentioned it after Crispin started training with the Valentas. Their night meetings came to an end. And Crispin hated the Old Gentleman for that, too.

But even when he was rushing to practice tumbling with Herve at five in the morning, there had been the hot, seductive stink of daemon breath wafting out from under the hoods of the trucks; exhaust staining the night as the engines turned over; and prickly hints of *not-scent* around the cotton-candy machine, the carousel, the appliances in the cook tent. His defection to Millsy had been gradual but inevitable.

"Like it or stick it up your ass," he had said finally to Herve.

Herve and Elise had chosen to like it. But hot-tempered sour-tongued southerners that they were, they'd never managed to forgive him for choosing to be better with daemons than he was on the flying trapezes. He could insist until he turned blue in the face that when he'd joined the

troupe, he'd been young enough to have become reasonably good at anything; that Smithrebel's couldn't afford for any adult to have less than two skills. But those were excuses, not explanations. Solely on the strength of his half-Lamaroon resistance to gravity, an advantage which far outweighed the drawback of his height, he could have become one of the best catchers in Ferupe. He could have been a mainstay of the Valenta troupe, instead of just a permanent adjunct. Perhaps, with his skill and Prettie's, the act could even have lifted out of Smithrebel's into the orbit of one of the really big circuses. A whole life spent sweating in the limelights.

But by the time he was sixteen, he was driving trucks, and it was too late. Every time he was late for a rehearsal, or showed signs of sleepiness—the curse of the daemon handler—Herve lashed out more bitterly than before. Gradually, the empathy necessary for a risk-free performance trickled away.

Thank the Queen—he thought now—Elise and Herve had found another boy to train. Fergus Philpotts, son of George, the elephant handler, and his wife. Fergus might not be a Lamaroon, but he was a circus baby. Pretty soon, Crispin knew, he himself would be relegated to back-up catcher and then phased out.

It sounded wonderful on the face of it; but it could easily turn out to be the worst thing that ever happened to him. While it had seemed that Crispin would fit neatly in with the Valentas, the Old Gentleman had left him pretty much alone. But now... He must know what was in the air; what did he have in mind for Crispin this time around? There wasn't a chance in hell he would let him just drive trucks. Smithrebel's invasion of the truck cab last night had been like the recurrence of a childhood disease of which you can't remember the symptoms, only the pain. Crispin had wanted to slouch in his seat and smoke and tip the ashes on the floor of the cab, spit out the window, sing dirty songs, shout that he wasn't having any of it, not this time. But he had only nodded and clenched his fists tighter around the wheel. Yes sir. No sir.

And he was worried about what Prettie might do when she was faced with the cessation of their working partnership. *That* had been over years ago. But the way she looked at him had never changed.

She and the Old Gentleman seemed to be boxing Crispin in, one on either side, pressing close, closer. He could refuse Prettie all right—that was horribly easy—but for obvious reasons, he could not refuse to take a new job, even though the Old Gentleman was likely to assign him heavy labor and long hours.

On the other hand, if he was honest with himself, he really did not know how much longer he could keep on like this. For four years he had been driving all night, every night, rehearsing every morning, and performing once, sometimes twice an evening. He was twenty years old. He needed some free time. He needed time to *think*. That was all there was to it.

Tired ... The deep blue vistas of dreams were shedding their nighttime disguises of transparency, creeping up around him.

He hoped he wasn't swaying on his feet. When you are six feet eight and look as if you can move a mountain, you'd better not let anyone see otherwise.

Millsy grabbed his arm. "Ware, my friend."

The shambling figure of Donald Lloyd was coming across the field, dodging the roustabouts hauling rolls of canvas with a nimbleness that belied his long-limbed awkwardness.

Donald was the only clown in Smithrebel's whose bumbling ring-center persona did not change when he came back out through the red curtains. He had been badly affected by his years in the army. He never talked about them, or about his desertion, though unlike many, he freely admitted he had deserted. Had he been clownish all his life, and stumbled into his second profession by a happy accident? Or had he been a different person, a tolerable person, and changed after he took up clowning? One had to be careful of that.

"I thought I was *dead*," he shrilled as he drew up to Millsy and Crispin, staring at them in

terror from under his hair. Crispin gazed stonily down at him. “She was groaning and wobbling every time I fucking downshifted! You gotta have a look at her, Cris.”

“I got stuff to do.” Crispin glanced across the lot. Lee and George Philpotts, the elephant-training brothers, were coaxing their animals out of Speedwell 11 to help raise the poles of the big top. Crispin had no responsibility for the elephants, but he was supposed to assist with the labor.

“I’m not getting behind the wheel tonight if you don’t. Come on. *One* of you.”

Millsy shrugged. He was like an empty overcoat hanging on a hanger, shivering as the truck swung around the bends. Movement without motivation. A human mannequin. Mills the Magnificent, who claimed to be the only male in six domains who could handle uncaged daemons. He was too young to have gray hair, and he talked like a quack doctor. He was unmarried. Once or twice Crispin had wondered, with a prickle of discomfort, if Millsy liked it *that* way—but he always dismissed the possibility. There were no men like that in Smithrebel’s, except for Shuffling Will the high-wire performer, and everybody knew about *him*.

“S’pose I’d better check it out,” he said. “Go on, then, Donald.”

The big top, half up now, quaking as the elephants pulled at the ropes, covered most of the field, a vaguely octagonal expanse of grubby white canvas. The smaller black tops of the sideshows were scattered on the far side of the field in a haphazard midway. Anuei had performed her act, which Crispin had never, ever seen—he’d obeyed her request not to sneak in, because she’d never begged him for anything else—in one of those little stuffy tents.

The trucks resembled a circular stockade of children’s blocks. The big top would abut onto the gap between Tulip 5 and Hollyhock 7, so that the performers could pass from the enclosure to the red curtains without being seen. All the tailgates were down. The panels of the menagerie trucks, Speedwell 11 and Pink 12, had been removed to let the cats, apes, and elephants smell fresh air. They were setting up a racket: couldn’t wait for their cages to be set up on the grass. The sight of the flaking swirls of blue and yellow that covered the trucks, and their red silhouettes of dancing people, most of them cut comically in half where the shutters of the living quarters’ windows were raised, always put the metallic taste of homesickness into Crispin’s mouth.

Which was stupid, because he *was* home.

He set his toolbelt down on the squelching dead leaves and propped the gigantic, warped wooden hood of Lily 6 on its rods. Donald, for once, was right. The whole vehicle shuddered gently.

“Hold up,” he shouted to the roustabouts who were unloading ring lino from the back of the truck. “Stand clear.”

He gulped damp air into his lungs and ducked into the hot, reeking interior. As a handler, he could feel the stink of the daemon, a powerful, localized source of tension. It stung his nostrils and eyes. He wiped water away. “You stupid hog, Donald! Cotton candy for a brain. Poor old lady.” He straightened up, took another breath of fresh air, and bent to gather hammer and pliers out of his toolbox. A daemon handler had two skills: the purely mechanical, which was just knowing the ins and outs of the transformation engines that power trucks, generators, and all the other machines that human ingenuity had devised to exploit daemons; and the daemonological. The interesting bit. Not dangerous, per se, for a celled daemon was a defanged daemon. And yet...

Taking a firm grip on the vibrating edge of the hood, Crispin slid back the hatch in the top of the cell anchored in the middle of the engine. The entire body of the truck jounced upward, and then sank on its wheels. Crispin held on. His bones shook.

Two thousand pounds’ worth of fury glared up at him. The face pressed against the silver mesh under the hatch was just like a human child’s, except that it was bright green. A silver collar gleamed, pinched cruelly tight around the daemon’s neck, trapping most of her mane of black

hair. She sat in the three-by-three-foot oak housing with her knees drawn up to her nose, her arms by her sides. The cage was too small to allow her to change position. Her lips moved as if she wanted to speak.

“Now, now,” Crispin muttered. “Ugly little bitch, aren’t you? Come on, calm down, soulless whore you are.”

She seemed properly angry. Nothing wrong there. Starved to the point of madness, not misery. A fine balance. Supposedly, you could eke a powerful daemon out for fifty years with the right care and feeding, but Crispin had never heard of one that had lasted that long. Millsy asserted that *captivity* killed daemons. Crispin agreed. If you were cooped up in a cell too small to stand up or lie down in, and the touch of the walls irritated you beyond pain, driving you mad with the urge to escape, so that you pushed and pushed and pushed—just as you had been trained to do... .

Lily 6 shook as though she were going to fall apart any minute.

Whispering obscenities, Crispin tapped the sides of the cell with the hammer. Probably a loose join. Daemons could not stand oak, so that was what must be used for the cells, and every crack must be sealed with an alloy containing at least 70 percent silver. The catch, of course, was that silver is infuriatingly weak. He had just located the loose place, and was fishing in a pocket for silver nails, when someone wrapped a hand around his arm.

Concentration shattered. Black bubbles danced in front of his eyes. Swearing, he dived into the engine cavity to retrieve his hammer, and the daemon shot a tentacle of power out through the loose join and sent fierce shivers up and down his spine as his fingers closed around the handle. The lip of the engine cavity caught him in the stomach. He heard a faint shout and knew that Lily 6 was standing on her port wheels, her center of gravity tipping dangerously high.

Every last kink in his hair straightened on end as he banged the vital nail in.

A squelching thud shook the earth as the big truck dropped back onto all eighteen wheels. The daemon shuddered with misery.

Crispin slammed the hatch closed, hooked it shut, and spun around to see if the person who had wrecked a nice straightforward fixit was still in the vicinity. That lash had hurt. He would lambast—

Prettie Valenta stood in the muck, her head bowed, wringing her hands. Her little body was sheathed in one of the long pink dresses he’d once liked so much on her. “I’m sorry!” she said before he could speak. “I’m sorry! I didn’t see you were...”

Why else would I have my head in the guts of a tractor, girl? What do you want?

But it was his own fault, and he knew it. *Can’t you get it through your thick skull, Crispin, that just because it’s there for the taking doesn’t mean it comes free?* He had only made that mistake a few times, but the last had been very recent. He shook his head in anger.

She was smiling hopefully.

“You know never to interrupt me when I’m working with a daemon.”

“But. I—I have to tell you.” She wasn’t smiling anymore. “Last night—Father finally decided to tell us what he’s been thinking. He says—oh, Crispin, he says Fergus is ready to perform. He’s gotten good enough to catch me. Father wants to put him in the ring on alternate nights, and then permanently.”

“Good,” Crispin said. “Maybe I’ll finally have time to give all of these old ladies a once-over.” He flung his arm out to embrace the semicircle of trucks. “Queen knows they’ve been waiting for, it long enough!”

Prettie’s eyes glimmered like raindrops. She was so predictable! Crispin felt as if he would fly apart. He looked away from her, up into the sky. The dawn had given way to another misty, motionless winter morning, weeping clouds. He rubbed his back. It ached.

Hadn't he all the appearance of a man living in the open air of the world, indifferent to small considerations, caring only for truth and knowledge and... to... find at least some happiness in the search?
—Henry James