

I REMEMBER PALLAHAXI

1. PROLOGUE

1

I came close to drowning on my seventeenth birthday.

This may not seem very important to a human like you; after all, you might say, what's one stilk more or less? But to me it was a big thing, almost as big as another thing that happened that summer day.

The other thing was that I met Noss Charm.

The near-drowning? It happened like this.

2

The water in the estuary lay flat and lazy and the little white cottages of Noss gleamed like a big human smile along the shoreline, and I was singing in the misty sunlight. A gentle breeze puffed out the sail of my skimmer as I glided upstream. There are all kinds of fascinating inlets on the Yam estuary and I was in the mood to explore.

The grume was on its way.

The ocean current that circles our world had been bringing denser water from the Great Shallows day by day, and by now all deep-hulled boats had been drawn up in ranks along the shore. The fishermen had fixed their nets and lines with heavier weights, and taken to the water in flat-bottomed boats like bigger versions of my own skimmer. Today they hauled in fish of a different kind, bottom-dwellers forced up by the thickening water. It's a special time, the grume.

Later would come the fierce grume-riders, skittering over the surface on powerful flippers, following the grume in its path around the world's ocean, attacking anything stranded on the surface, consummate predators. They'll even attack zumes, which must be twenty times their size.

Something about the grume-riders terrifies me. Probably something that happened to an ancestor of mine; that's where a lot of our fears come from. One day I'd dig back in my memories, stardreaming, and identify it and lay it to rest. We call it a backflash; that involuntary surfacing of a generations-old memory.

"Look out!"

I was deep in thought and only half-heard the shout.

"Look where you're going!"

A girl was waving and shouting from a deep-hulled rowboat near the rocky shore below the cottages. *These flounders seem to think they own the sea around*

Noss, I thought. *Probably got some kind of local rights over this little bay. Well, to Rax with her*, I thought. *I'm sailing where I like.*

But the fact that she was able to sit easily in a deep-hulled boat should have told me something. Deep hulls rise and become unstable during the grume.

My skimmer picked up speed unexpectedly.

It was a nasty moment. The wind hadn't changed, but the boat leaped forward like a startled lox. Water splashed noisily under the blunt bow. Now, grume water doesn't splash; it flops and oozes. Uncanny, this was.

Then the boat slowed suddenly, as though it had run into a fisherman's net. Off balance, I slid forward. The boat stopped, sitting lower in the water. Much lower.

Sinking, in fact.

The stuff of nightmares. I jumped to my feet and the little craft rocked violently. The sail jibed and enveloped me, blinding me. I felt cold water creeping up my legs. Cold, cold water. Infinitely cold water squeezed from the grip of the dead planet Rax.

You humans — born into a warm world — don't understand our fear of cold. But I tell you this fear is very real and based on ancient memories, not to mention superstitions.

Muffled in the sail, I heard myself screaming with dread. I couldn't think of anything but the icy hand of Rax, now exploring my groin with vile fingers. I couldn't move because I was wrapped so tightly in the sail. And anyway, I'm an inlander, so I can't swim.

Logic may tell you that my personal history ends right here and now.

3

"For Phu's sake stop that awful howling and come out from under that sail."

It was the voice of an angel, although I didn't discover this until later. At the time, any voice was welcome.

"I can't move!" I shouted back. I was trapped. I was doomed. And I was only seventeen. It was a tragic loss to the world.

The water crept stealthily up to my chest. The skimmer, well underwater, slid from under me. I fell sideways. Something caught me a fearsome blow in the ribs. A hand peeled the sail away from my face and a pair of grave eyes stared into mine.

"Look, this is embarrassing. People might be watching," she said. "I've saved you. Mumble broken words of gratitude, if you must. But stop that yelling right now."

I was lying half in, half out of her small deep-hulled rowboat. I was still entangled in the skimmer's sail, and the mast lay across my ribs. I began to see reason. After all, the icy powers of the dead planet Rax are only superstition, put about by religious cranks like my uncle Stance. The good sun Phu shone on my face and all was warm again. Particularly the brown eyes of my savior. Brown eyes are a much-admired rarity in our culture. They are supposed to be a blessing to remind us of the legendary Browneyes who, with her lover Drove, delivered us from evil long ago in a somewhat unlikely fashion. Anyway, I'd stopped yelling at some point and was able to

appreciate my surroundings more intensely than ever before, especially my savior's beautiful eyes.

"Thanks," I mumbled, maybe brokenly.

"Don't mention it. Listen, if you crawl forward you'll be free of all that stuff. I'll hold onto the mast so we don't lose your boat."

Later we sat on the rocks, drying off. We'd drawn the skimmer up on the beach; it lay tidily beside the rowboat. A gap in the canopy of tall seasuckers allowed the sun through. A few rock pools glittered nearby and we kept our feet well clear of them — more about that later. A long-legged loat stood beside one, eyeing it cautiously, as well it might. You humans don't really know our world; there's always a lot of explaining to do.

"You're an inlander, I bet," said my savior, whom I could hardly see through the mists of my shame. "A grubber. All the same, you should know better than to sail a skimmer upstream during the grume. All that fresh water coming down the river, huh? One minute you're safe on the dense stuff, the next, whoosh." She made a plunging motion with a small, plump hand. "Skimmers don't have enough freeboard to sail on ordinary water."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, looking across the estuary, at the pale sky, anywhere. I heard her chuckle.

"Mind you," she said kindly, "I've never seen anyone sink quite so fast. You really didn't have much of a chance."

"Yeah."

"What's your name?"

"Uh, Hardy. Yam Hardy."

"You come from Yam?" She was surprised; my village is half a day's journey away by motorcart, a day on loxback. "Are you . . . important, in any way? I mean," she grinned disarmingly, "I'd like to think I've benefited civilization, saving you from a watery grave."

"My dad's Yam Bruno." I tried to keep the pride out of my voice.

"Bruno? The brother of your manchief?" She sounded reasonably impressed. "He's here in Noss right now, isn't he? I saw the Yam motorcart."

"He's come to negotiate with the Noss chiefs."

"What about?"

"Oh, supplies, trading, that kind of thing. Planning. Top level stuff. You wouldn't be interested."

"You mean you don't really know, right?"

The subject needed changing. I seemed to be on the defensive again, as if the rescue operation hadn't been humiliating enough. Anyway, who was this girl? Beginning to recover my composure, I was now able to see she was about my age and startlingly pretty, with round and warm brown eyes, dimples in plump cheeks and a smile brighter than Phu himself.

But then, I was at an impressionable age. And men and women don't mix much on our world; I'm not used to being close to such beauty. You probably find that odd. "You haven't told me your name," I said.

She hesitated. Then, "Charm," she said. "Noss Charm." She hurried on, "I know it's a funny name, but it's because of this." She reached inside the neck of her dress — which seemed to be fashioned out of expensive human fabric — and pulled out a crystal on a thin cord. Some kind of sparkly thing; I know nothing about jewels.

But I do know I got the most powerful backflash at that moment.

I stared from the jewel to her face; those brown, brown eyes, and it seemed I was looking back in time for as many generations as there have ever been. Long, long years, countless people passing on this little memory; it must be a very precious and meaningful one.

The crystal, and the pretty girl. . . .

"Oh," she said quietly, staring at me.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

It was her turn to gaze thoughtfully across the estuary. Seasuckers rose up the far shoreline, tall, green and cool. The ocean lay flat beyond the headland to our left, and a million pale birds swooped and screamed, plucking stranded fish from the surface. The Noss skimmers plied the waters with their nets, gathering the harvest of the grume — which Dad was negotiating about right now, because our grain harvest at Yam was looking pretty scanty.

And I was sitting on the rocks with a girl flounder.

It was time I took stock of my position. Flounders — coastal people — have peculiar habits and webbed feet. They worship waves and sea monsters and such, so I've been told. They are so different from us inlanders that some folk think they're a different species, although this has been disproved on certain discreditable occasions. Their men catch fish and their women process them in various ways. Basic primitive lifestyle. No need for planning. Their lives are patterned by the annual grume, not by their own design. It's even been said their blood runs thick during this time of year. Mister McNeil, our resident human, calls them hunter-gatherers.

We inlanders, on the other hand, are a different breed.

Certainly our men hunt. But it takes intelligence to understand the complex land migratory patterns, and skill to bring down the prey. And our women grow crops, which requires all kinds of planning. Mister McNeil told me this impressed the humans enormously when they first arrived eight generations ago.

In short, we are more *civilized* than the flounders.

Or so I believed, right up to that seventeenth birthday. Forgive me; I was taught that way.

And I found it irritating that the flounders referred to us inland people as grubbers.

I regarded the female flounder loftily. "I have to be going. My father will be wondering where I've got to. I expect he'll have concluded his negotiations by now."

Belatedly, I realized I still had an unresolved problem. “Would you give me a hand with my skimmer?”

“What? Oh, yes.” She came out of her trance and we hauled the skimmer up the steep bank. I pulled and Charm pushed, her heart-shaped face pink with effort. Finally we emerged from under the trees onto the road that runs beside the estuary, and later beside the river all the way to Yam and beyond. Once on the road the going was easier and we lifted the boat to carry it, one either side.

“That’s funny,” said Charm.

“What?”

“There’s water coming out. Look.”

A small pool lay on the dusty road. Lazy drops of grume water plopped into it as I watched. We turned the boat over. . . .

Skimmers are of simple construction, unlike deep-hulled boats. They are little more than long, almost flat-bottomed boxes with transverse seats. Beneath the seats is the safety board, about a hand’s width away from the bottom of the hull, to keep the sailor’s feet away from direct contact with the boat’s cold bottom and the uneasiness — even fear — that such contact might cause.

“There’s a hole,” said Charm.

It was round, about two fingers wide. I felt the chill of fright. “I’d have sunk anyway, even without sailing into thin water.”

“You must have hit a rock.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then someone’s trying to kill you.” Charm regarded me wide-eyed. “Someone crept into your place at dead of night and punctured the boat. Probably wearing a mask. What fun! A secret enemy wants you dead. You must be even more important than you think. Perhaps you overheard a dirty political plot.” Her innocent expression slipped. “Or perhaps you hit a rock after all.”

“I didn’t hit a rock, for Phu’s sake!. I think I’d have noticed, huh? No, this is deliberate. Either it was done before I left home, or it was done here in Noss. The boat was sitting on the motorcart for quite a while after we arrived.”

Suddenly serious, she said, “No Noss person would damage a boat. We live off the sea and we know how awful it is to take on water.”

“But you can swim.”

“Not for long. Cold gets us just the way it gets you grubbers, uh, inlanders. It takes a while longer, that’s all. We’re even more scared of the sea than you are, because we lose people out there quite often. So we learn to swim. It’d never occur to anyone in Noss to put a hole in your boat.” Her tone was reproving.

Maybe she was right; I didn’t know. I regarded the boat glumly. It had lost its newness. It was violated. Maybe I’d have to leave it in Noss for repairs; we don’t have boatbuilders at Yam. I’d bragged about the boat before I left; everyone had seen it on the motorcart as Dad and I had driven away. Now I’d be crawling home with it holed and despoiled. People would laugh. My sometime friend Caunter — who’d been secretly jealous of the boat — would be delighted. And my stupid cousin Trigger

would ask stupid questions and offer mindless sympathy. And everyone would be quite sure I'd driven the skimmer up on a rock through sheer incompetence.

Except the secret enemy. . . .

Was there a secret enemy?

Surely not. In those innocent days, I liked to think I was universally admired and respected. Adored, even.

We walked on, carrying the boat between us. Soon we passed a cluster of women's cottages; tumble-down piles of rock set into the rising hillside, roofed with broad sealeaves. Drivets scuttled among mounds of garbage. Quite a contrast to Yam's neat women's village. A woman leaned against a doorway, a baby in her arms.

"Yah, grubber boy!" she shouted. "Go dig dirt!"

Charm's head whipped round. "Argh, go to Rax, Maddy!" she shouted back. She turned to me. "Sorry about that," she said in normal tones. "Maddy has a big mouth."

"Anyway, it's our women that grow the crops, not the men," I said, aggrieved. "Not that there's anything wrong in that."

I noticed a mischievous grin on Charm's lips. "Well, you have to admit it's a bit odd, spending your life scratching around in dirt. But it's not for me to say. I'm just glad I was born a coaster."

An astonishing statement. I examined her from the corner of my eye as we carried the skimmer. Average height, not slim; not plump either. Quite strong-looking for a girl, with good sturdy shoulders and legs. Nice little tits, too, for her age. As my examination seemed to be turning to admiration I noted that she was unnaturally clean to the point of almost glowing, unlike good inlander women whose skin is ingrained with the grime of honest agriculture. She probably — I told myself — stank of fish.

I couldn't tell, because the whole area stank of fish. A lumbering loxcart passed, dripping with a bad of glubb for the drying racks on the hillside behind the women's cottages. Charm waved to the man leading the lox; he nodded back. A lorin shambled along beside him, woolly hand resting on the lox's neck. Lox work much better with lorin as companions. I stole another glance at Charm. By Phu, she was gorgeous.

Then the companionable silence was shattered by an angry shout.

"Charm! What the freezing hell do you think you're doing?"

"Rax!" Charm swore. "It's Mom."

A tall woman strode toward us, long brown hair framing an expression of fury, dressed in the skin of some marine mammal so slick that she looked naked. Beside her trotted a fellow young enough to be her son. He was chunky and thick-set with a broad, pink face and yellow hair. An oddly assorted couple; but then, this was Noss.

Charm said mildly, "I'm just helping with this boat. This is Yam Hardy, Mom."

Charm's Mom drew up alongside like a stately freightsailer coming up into the wind. She began to murmur to her daughter in a tight and furious undertone. I caught a few words. ". . . will *not* have you parading in public. . . a freezing grubber. . . position to maintain. . . would people think. . ." and so on.

Charm merely looked sulky, interjecting "yeah, yeah" when appropriate. I stood by, outraged. This appalling Noss woman seemed to think her daughter was in some way better than I, an inlander!

"You want to get your face smashed in?" the young fellow asked me, fancying himself a man of action.

"Try it."

"If I catch you with Charm again I will!"

"No, I meant try it here and now."

"By Phu, I will!"

But he still hesitated, so I said sarcastically, "I'm not to clear on Noss customs. Does Charm *belong* to you in some way?"

"My name's Cuff," he said as though it should mean something to me. "Son of Walleye, and don't you forget it, grubber boy."

The Noss manchief's son. No wonder he was an arrogant snorter. Now I noticed that one eye had a slightly milky cast. Cuff had inherited the legendary disability of his manline.

By now Charm and her mother had concluded their one-sided conversation. The older woman turned to me. "So if you don't mind carrying your boat yourself, young man, I'll—"

"Ah, Hardy. So here you are." It was Dad, thanks be to Phu. Big and loose-limbed, his gait always reminded me of a lorin. His manner too, in many ways. Slow, easy-going and amiable. He addressed the appalling woman. "So you've met my son, Lonessa."

Lonessa! The dragon lady of Noss! And Charm was the daughter of this notorious womanchief? Poor girl. We laid the skimmer on the ground and I stepped over it to join the group. As Lonessa and Dad engaged in a moment of verbal grooming, Charm turned to me.

"Sorry," she whispered. "Mom's a freezing snob. But she's all right, really. And Cuff's just a bully. You have to make allowances."

Meanwhile Noss Lonessa had fixed me with a bright smile. Her eyes were the same color as Charm's. It seemed like sacrilege.

"So this is your son, Bruno?" Her manner had undergone a swift change for the better. "I should have known. He has your features. A fine young man."

Dad was grinning at me in that false way fathers do when there are strangers in the midst. "Noss Lonessa, Noss Walleye and I had a successful meeting, Hardy." As if I was really interested. Walleye, by the way, is not only half blind but walks with a stick due to some kind of fishing accident. It's an example of how peculiar coastal society is, Walleye being crippled but still manchief. If our own manchief, my Uncle

Stance — Dad's brother — was crippled, he wouldn't be able to lead the hunt. So his son Trigger would become manchief. Perish the thought, because Trigger's a fool.

And if Trigger got himself gored to death by a stamper, as he probably would, Dad would be manchief. And everything at Yam would be a whole lot better.

And I would be next in line for manchief.

My dream of glory was interrupted by the need to listen to Lonessa, who had deigned to talk to me. "Your father and I make a good team at the council table, Hardy. We both know how to get what we want. I think Yam can face next winter with confidence. Really, in these difficult times we have to pool our resources, don't you think?"

Well. . . . Times were difficult, no doubt about that. The Yam harvest looked to be even more thin than last year, and game animals were scarce. But reading between the lines, had Lonessa and Dad ganged up on poor old Walleye? And the way she stood close and smiled at him, you'd think. . . . No; my imagination balked at that. Dear old Dad wouldn't countenance a sexual liaison with a coaster. It would be like bedding a big thrashing fish.

On the other hand, Dad himself looked pretty good in the white ceremonial cloak he always wore when negotiating on behalf of Yam. My mother, Spring, had made it for him out of skins from the rare albino lox. It was the only one of its kind in Yam or Noss.

"It was a cold spring," I said dutifully.

"Last night I stardreamed," intoned Lonessa impressively, meaning that she rifled through her ancestral memories, "and I can tell you, young man, that it was the coldest spring Noss has known."

I shivered involuntarily as the specter of the dead planet Rax visited my mind again. Superstition is a rotten thing for a civilization to be based on.

As we were about to leave, the oafish Cuff seized my arm. "What I said about Charm stands, you freezer," he muttered. "And I'll tell you this. When I'm manchief there'll be no favors done to Yam, believe me. So far as I'm concerned, the whole lot of you can starve!"

5

It was a long drive home. The Noss council house is situated half-way between the men's and the women's village, a logical arrangement. This meant that I didn't get to see the men's village on the way home, which was a pity. There's something fascinating about a coastal men's village — although I wouldn't want Yam people to know I felt that way. The two types of boats, skimmers and deep-hulls; the nets all over the stone-built quay; the whirling clouds of grummetts trying to steal fish; the harsh accents of the fishermen and the strange words they have for commonplace objects; it's all quite exotic, really.

Unlike the women's village past which we now drove, very slowly, because children were everywhere, running around and yelling and trying the race the motorcart.

Women stood in their doorways, watching us pass. A few lorin sat around too; they make excellent child-minders when a mother is temporarily absent. The passing of a motorcart is an event; it only happens when something big is going on. One older boy was staring at me; he looked to be almost five and ready to move to the men's village. I tried to look suitably important, scrutinizing the water gauge and squinting up critically at the smoky exhaust. The motorcart puffed on, the skimmer on the cargo platform. Dad had made light of the damage, may Phu bless him.

"A couple more sticks, I think, Mister Stoker," he said jovially. He was in expansive mood. Either he was pleased with the way business had gone, or he was all puffed up with Noss Lonessa's attention. I swung open the firebox door. Yes, the fire could use some fuel. I tossed in an armful of the driftwood I'd gathered from the beach earlier.

An interesting monster, the motorcart. It can burn wood, which is easily obtained but bulky. Or, on long journeys when space might be at a premium, it can burn distil through jets in the firebox. Distil is tedious to manufacture but takes up less room on board than firewood because it can be carried in cans or even skins. Wood or distil, the purpose is to heat the boiler and produce steam to drive a cylinder the size of a bucket, which in turn drives the wheels.

Dad is easily Yam's best motorcart driver. Nothing goes wrong when Dad's at the tiller. Uncle Stance is a different proposition. I can remember several occasions when the motorcart has come trundling into the village late at night towed behind a team of lox, Uncle Stance sitting disgraced and shivering at the tiller, having run out of fuel somewhere in the wilds.

It takes more than knowledgeable ancestors and accurate stardreaming, knowing how to handle the motorcart. There's a knack to it that has little to do with genetics.

I'm losing you again. I keep forgetting humans have to *learn* things. We stilks don't. Knowledge is already there in our genetic memories — always provided one of our ancestors knew it, whatever it is. The trick is in locating it. *Stardreaming*. It must be very difficult for you humans having to restart knowledge every generation, rather like us having to light the motorcart's fire every morning. No wonder you need books and tapes and discs and stuff like that.

Much later, Dad said casually, "Pretty little kid, that Charm."

He wasn't fooling me with his light tone. The remark was fraught with deep significance. He couldn't have failed to note the incredible beauty of Charm, webbed feet or no. Anyway, she'd been wearing shoes.

We stilks get used to following trains of thought. In our case, though, the train might wander through the memories of many ancestors. And I knew what had prompted Dad's remark.

It was the sight of Mister McNeil's residence on the hillside, surrounded by outlandishly bright flowers.

A big round humanbuilt thing, like an umbrellafish, like no shape you ever see in a normal house. Shining silvery-red in the light of the setting Phu. And clinging to the side of it like a parasite was the tumble-down shack of the Nowhere Man.

It didn't happen in my lifetime, this local scandal. But Granddad — Yam Ernest, who was stabbed in the back some years ago — remembered it clearly from his younger days. And I'm privy to those memories, right up to the time Granddad and his woman lay together one summer day behind the lox stables, and conceived Dad. Since then, well, Granddad could have committed Phu knows what crimes, and I'd know nothing about it. This is why we tend to conceive children as late in life as is reasonable, to make sure the maximum memories are passed on. You wonder how I can speak your language so well? It's because I possess the human vocabulary learned over the generations by my ancestors. Important knowledge must not be allowed to die.

The problem is, shameful memories don't die either.

When Granddad was twenty he took a friend for a joyride on the Yam motorcart. He was next in line for chiefship, so he could get away with that kind of behavior. I've stardreamed this incident and I can picture it as vividly as if it were a first-hand memory. The track to Noss, bright and dusty. The narrow lane beyond Noss men's village that rises through seasuckers, past the sacred forest of anemones and cuptrees to the cliff top. The terrified screeching of a grummet snared by a tree. Windswept open ground at the cliff top. The grume-thick sea, white with distant birds like snowflakes. The rocky coastline ending in far-distant Pallahaxi, the ancient holy town showing as a knobby smudge on the horizon.

And young Granddad and his friend Hodge, chatting lazily in the sun.

And soon, mild boredom and temptation.

We've all tasted distil. Normal curiosity. It burns the mouth at first, but later you start to feel good. Later still you feel pretty rotten, but who thinks that far into the future? The past is what's important to us stilks. Granddad reached into the motorcart, chuckling, and took down a can of distil. I can feel it as though it were in my hand right now, red and metal and human-made, heavy with the contents slopping about inside. Granddad unscrewed the cap and took a sip, and passed it to Hodge. I can feel the shame in Granddad's memory for what happened after that. He blamed himself. I, more pragmatically, blame Hodge.

I'm surprised Granddad didn't place the memory under *geas*, the taboo we use on memories we don't want investigated. . . .

Two Noss girls arrived panting at the cliff top and stood regarding the motorcart with respect, no doubt thinking these two young men must be very important to drive such a vehicle. They were pretty girls, fun-loving and game for a sip of distil too.

Before long four drunken young people lay beside the motorcart, laughing and singing dirty fishing songs.

Granddad's memories become blurred after that, but he remembered Hodge and one of the girls drifting off somewhere. Then, sobering up rapidly, he remembered the arrival of a posse of Noss men and women including the womanchief. He remembered the shouting and the recriminations.

And, late that year during the drench, he remembered the deputation from Noss arriving at Yam, and diplomatic relations between the two villages being broken off.

The child was raised in Noss — in the women’s village, as is the custom with all children. He was a boy, so at the age of five he moved to the men’s village as boys do. Normally boys will then be taken under their father’s wing. But this boy had no father in Noss; no father in Yam either, since Hodge had left the village to start a new life in Alika. The child was an orphan and an oddity, the product of miscegenation, a freak and a monster who just happened to look like a normal person. I didn’t know whether he had webbed feet or not. Probably one of each. With nobody to take responsibility for him he became a problem in the village and, by the time he came of age, he was completely out of control.

In fairness to him we must remember all his ancestral knowledge came from his Yam male antecedents. Ancestral memories are sex-specific. He was mixed up, trying to fit into a fishing culture that meant nothing to him. After a number of incidents they threw him out.

He disappeared for a while; people said he went to Pallahaxi and prayed a lot. Then one day he was seen walking the coast road, and shortly afterward he was reported to be splitting wood near the human agent’s residence. Soon he’d built a lean-to shack for himself against the silver wall. An appropriate place, since it’s half-way between Yam and Noss. People waited for the agent to kick him out, but it never happened. Years passed, agents changed, Mister McNeil arrived, but the Nowhere Man is there still.

And all this had prompted dear old Dad to say, “Pretty little kid, that Charm.”

It was a double-edged remark. One: Charm, and by extension you, Hardy, are too young to savor the sweaty delights of sex. And two: You’d better keep your hands off her, you dirty young freezer, because she’s a flounder and therefore forbidden fruit.

So I said, “Uh.”

There followed a pregnant father-and-son silence. I could tell Dad was still brooding about miscegenation. Bearing in mind Charm’s beauty I wouldn’t have minded brooding about it myself, but the subject had to be changed before Dad became morbid.

“Is it that bad, the crops and stuff, Dad?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. I was talking to Wand yesterday, and she tells me we’re looking at a yield about a quarter down on last year.”

Yam Wand is our womanchief, a real pain in the ass. But even allowing for her love of scare tactics, the situation was clearly serious. You could tell just by looking at the village fields. Winter was long, spring came late, summer was cool and the grain crop was half its usual height.

“And last year was worse than the year before.” I said gloomily, showing a proper concern for our society. I’d noticed a lot of people wasting their time praying in the Yam temple lately, always a barometer of public morale.

Hunger overtook us about then, and we stopped for a mug of stuva tea, using hot water from the motorcart’s boiler. Dad brought out a bag of smoked fish, doubtless a gift from the besotted Lonessa, and we gnawed on that. Darkness and cold was coming on, which would have been frightening if we’d been on loxback, or walking.

But we finished our meal, climbed back onto the motorcart and felt the blessed warmth of it, and Dad opened the throttle. The funnel uttered its reassuring chaff-chaff-chaff and we rumbled on our way by the feeble glimmer of the running lights.

“She’s a nice old lady, that Lonessa,” I said casually, having had plenty of time to compose the exact wording of the remark.

I know Dad shot me a glance of deep suspicion because the firebox door was open at the time, but I don’t think he could see my face so clearly as I saw his.

Then he chuckled. “You’re a cheeky young freezer, Hardy,” he said. “One of these days it’s going to get you in big trouble.”

I laughed too, and soon we were running past little knots of people chatting around the public heaters on the outskirts of Yam. We drove on, waving, turned the motorcart into Uncle Stance’s yard, dropped the fire in a smoldering heap and chaff-chaffed into the covered shed on the last of the steam in the boiler.

So ended my seventeenth birthday.

6

“So what really happened to the boat, Hardy?” asked Caunter.

“Yeah, what really happened to the boat?” echoed the oafish Trigger.

I’d avoided them for two days, and on the third day I’d walked down the Toney road for a while, then turned off down a narrower track to a tiny tree-fringed pool; a favorite spot of mine when I wanted to be alone. The pool is almost circular and less than ten paces across. A Stardreaming Place; we all have them. I’d seated myself comfortably under a yellowball tree and pulled out my pipe and pouch of hatch. The sun was high but my spot was shaded, and buzzflies zoomed around, neatly avoiding the clutching frondflowers. A snowdiver splashed into the pool almost vertically and emerged safely with a little fish in its beak; there were no ice-devils in this inland water.

I filled and lit my pipe. It was time for stardreaming.

I slipped into Dad’s memories first. Dad is different from most, because he has this unhealthy relationship with my mother, Yam Spring.

Any normal fellow breaks off contact with a woman once the sex thing has been performed. But I’m seventeen now and Dad still sees Spring often, although covertly. Many times I’ve come across them by the riverside, sitting together looking at the water, talking quietly, holding hands. Bizarre! Men and women have nothing in common. A man’s memories pass on down the male line, a woman’s down the female. This makes for two different cultures.

What do Dad and Spring *talk* about, for Phu’s sake? Men aren’t interested in agriculture. Women aren’t interested in hunting. And their ancestral memories are totally unconnected and seen from separate viewpoints.

Dad refuses to explain. He seems embarrassed about it all, as well he might. I wanted to get to the bottom of this, maybe via Dad’s memories. So on that warm morning three days after my seventeenth birthday I lay back and began to stardream.

I remembered Dad meeting Spring. She was from Totney and he met her on a hunting trip with Granddad. I could see her in my mind's eye, gathering winternuts on the fringe of the empty moorland. She looked very beautiful to Dad. My mind was filled with the warmth of that meeting; there's a lot of emotion in stardreamed memories. She left Totney the same day and accompanied Granddad and Dad back to Yam on the back of Dad's lox. She and Dad went through the usual niceties, then they had sex.

And at that point my access to Dad's memories ends. The sex-linked chain of memory genes feeding the central lobe of the brain — a phrase of Mister McNeil's — had been passed on to the ovum. I had no memory of what happened to Dad and Spring afterward; no explanation of what kept them seeing each other. Maybe the answer lay in their courtship behavior, as Mister McNeil calls it. I began to remember this more carefully, in more detail.

That was when Caunter and Trigger arrived noisily, shattering the dream.

"I did *not* run that freezing boat onto a freezing rock!" I shouted, in response to Caunter's next question.

"They're saying you were rescued by a little flounder girlie," piped Trigger, with a whinny of derision.

"Whoever said that is a freezing liar."

"They're saying you were screaming like a stuck snorter. They're saying she had to slap your face to make you shut up. She was eight years old, they're saying."

"She was sixteen at least!" Rax! I could have bitten my tongue off!

"Aha! Aha!"

I switched to the offensive. "Who knocked a hole in the bottom, that's what I'd like to know!"

That shut them up. Caunter said tentatively, "You're serious, Hardy?"

"Of course I'm serious. Rax, can you imagine what it's like, a boat sinking under you like that? Whoever holed that boat could have killed me! If I thought it was either of you two freezers I'd—"

"Well, it wasn't," said Caunter hastily.

I'd been thinking about it over the past couple of days. "Dad brought the boat up from Noss by loxcart seven days ago for my birthday. It was sitting outside our door for a few days, right way up. We wouldn't have noticed a hole in the bottom. It could have happened any time."

"And it could have been bad Noss workmanship," suggested Caunter.

"Come on!" cried Trigger, who'd been tossing pieces of dried meat into the water in the hope of arousing something vile down there. "This place is no fun. Let's go down to the river!"

So we made our way to the river and found a likely looking pool in a water meadow, and threw in the remainder of Trigger's food.

There was a faint crackling sound as the water crystallized.

I don't know why we enjoyed scaring ourselves like that; as we were to find out, there were real enough dangers coming our way. But we could never resist triggering off an ice-devil in a pond. It always gave us a frisson of fear, because it could have

been us imprisoned in that crystal. I've seen animals as big as lox trapped by the jaw, having unwarily tried to drink from such a pool. And the ice-devil will hold them there until they suffocate or even starve, and then de-crystallize the pool, and eat its prey.

"I can never understand how they do it," said Trigger wonderingly, staring at the glittering surface.

"Mister McNeil calls it a saturated solution of some salt or other," said Caunter vaguely. "Much thicker than the grume, even, although you wouldn't know from looking at it. He says the ice-devil waits until something splashes, and then crystallizes the pool by releasing a bit more salt from its body. Then it decrystallizes the pool by pissing, or something very like that."

The explanation was prosaic but the situation fun. We cut squares of matweed from the river shallows and laid them on the crystal, and retired a short distance. Then we sprinted forward, leaped onto the matweed and slithered across the surface to the far side of the pool, yelling with excitement.

Occasionally we would catch a glimpse of the ice-devil lurking below the surface, a head-size many-tentacled thing, itself imprisoned — but only for a while. In days — or hours or minutes — the pool would just as suddenly turn to water again. And if its prey was still struggling, it would recrystallize.

That was the excitement, as we slid to and fro that summer afternoon. We were dicing with death, but the odds were on our side.

For the time being.

7

Speaking of dicing with death, we had a prime practitioner of that art in Yam.

Silly May was an oddity, a girl born with no memories. She will be alone for the rest of her life, with no ancestors to guide her. This defect only happens occasionally, fortunately for the species, and such people are discouraged from having children. Consequently May can only learn from her own experiences, and is given to social and practical errors. Since her defect was discovered she's been banned from the usual women's work in case she makes some costly mistake, such as setting fire to a grainfield.

"I refuse to turn that girl loose on my crops," our womanchief, Wand, said many years ago, and shortly afterward Silly May was appointed the Yam arborist. It's an important enough job from the religious angle, but it's simple and straightforward and there's not much can go wrong with the crops. However, plenty can go wrong with the arborist. They are looked on as expendable.

Our previous arborist had been strangled by an anemone tree while taking cuttings for her nursery. Fortunately she'd almost finished her spring cutting by then, and Silly May had a full summer to get used to tending the nursery plants before the thanksgiving planting at the end of the grume.

That was three years ago and May was now sixteen, a bright and pretty girl, although still liable to make outlandish statements.

“We should load all the scions onto a cart,” she told me the day before the thanksgiving pilgrimage to Newt Wood, “then they wouldn’t be so likely to get damaged on the journey. We could pull the cart behind the motorcart. Much easier and quicker.”

I regarded the nursery, collecting my thoughts. Two hundred or so miniature anemone plants and the same number of tiny cuptrees grew in neat rows in the most fertile area of our fields, cleared of popweed, palpater and spreadweed. Tomorrow the templekeeper would come here in his robes and bless the crop, for what that was worth, and each villager would take an anemone in one hand, a cuptree in the other, and walk the dusty road to Newt Wood, and stick them in the ground. And the templekeeper would bless them again.

It had been done that way as far back as my visited memories went.

“And we wouldn’t have that awful business of the anemones clawing at the people carrying them,” she said.

“It’s a good idea,” I said nicely because she was pretty, even though it was impossible to think of mating with a defective, “but I don’t think this is the time to suggest it.”

“Why not? It’s the very best time, with the pilgrimage coming up tomorrow.”

While I was trying to think of a way to tell her without insulting her, my Uncle Stance strode up. He regarded me with no more interest than he would regard a lorin. This was a relief, because it was not a good thing to be seen getting over-friendly with a defective girl. Just suppose — a remote possibility — we were to get together and May should have a girl child, that child would only have one generation of inherited memory. Bad for the species. May was destined to live her life a virgin.

“I have a suggestion, Yam Stance,” said May before I could stop her.

Uncle Stance inflated himself visibly. I guessed what he was thinking. Any suggestion from May was an insult. Did this slip of a girl — with no memories — think she could come up with something that he, the manchief with countless generations of experience behind him, had missed? Impossible! Outrageous!

“Yes?” he said menacingly.

She explained while he rocked to and fro on his feet, legs astride, growing progressively redder in the face.

“Sacrilege!” he yelled before she had a chance to finish. “We’ve always carried the plants to Newt Wood by hand and we always will! Have you no feeling for tradition, girl?”

“I have feeling for the plants,” she said unwisely. “Half of them die before we get there. You can’t leave roots exposed to the sun that long without damage. If it wasn’t for the lorin helping us water them in, we’d lose the whole lot. Anyway,” she continued quickly as he opened his mouth to shout something, “Agriculture is Wand’s responsibility, not yours.”

“The pilgrimage is my responsibility!”

“I’ll talk to Wand.”

I thought Uncle Stance would explode. I said diffidently, "Can't we discuss this like rational stilks?"

"There's nothing to discuss! And anyway, I only discuss such matters in Council, not in a field with a defective girl! And another thing, the motorcart is my responsibility. Whatever Wand might say, I will not authorize its use on a mission of sacrilege!"

Silly May was in no way overawed by Uncle Stance; partly because, being the manchief, he had no authority over her. And partly because he was looking ridiculous, huffing and puffing like the motorcart itself, his face red as the fire under the boiler.

"The goatparent won't be pleased," she said sadly.

Mention of this religious figure, symbol of fertility, did no good at all.

"To Rax with the goatparent!" shouted Uncle Stance; then, as he realized the extent of his blasphemy, the scarlet of his face faded to a deathly pallor and he glanced at the sky as though expecting to see threatening horns.

But no retribution was visited upon him, which confirmed my belief that religious figures exist only in our minds. I derived a perverse comfort from the thought. Uncle Stance whirled around and strode off. Silly May grinned at me.

"If it wasn't for people taking me for a fool, I'd be glad I had no memories stuffing my head with nonsense."

"I don't take you for a fool, May."

She looked at me seriously. "That's good, because I need a friend. And you're a good friend to have. One day you'll be manchief."

"No, my cousin Trigger will be manchief."

"Listen, perhaps I can't look into the past, but that makes it easier for me to look into the future. Trigger hasn't got what it takes. You'll be manchief."

I watched our present manchief striding back toward the village, full of anger and fear, and I wondered. The future is a worrying thing. We have such deep roots into the past, we hardly ever consider the future. Maybe we should. But maybe if we did, we'd frighten ourselves.

It was a prophetic thought.

2. DEVON STATION

8

The harvest came and the thanksgiving pilgrimage took place as it always had, and nothing more was heard of Silly May's suggestion. We carried her little cup-trees and anemones to Newt Forest and planted them carefully, more than replacing the numbers of old dead trees. The lorin fussed around us, urinating on the new plants. The big anemones were quiescent. It's a funny thing, but they always are during the thanksgiving. They withdraw their tentacles and sit there like vast stumps while we plant around them. Maybe they know, somehow, that we're working for the good of the forest. Or maybe the lorin have a calming effect on them, like they do on us. But the anemones don't like it when the arborist takes cuttings.

After the thanksgiving comes the harvest and then the drench, a time of dying vegetation, ceaseless rain, cold mists and ill-tempered adults. This is the time of year when the sheds beside the public heaters are stocked with a supply of hot bricks. There's nothing like a hot brick in your arms to ward off the fears when you're walking in cold rain. During that drench following my sixteenth birthday there were many meetings of the village elders, both men and women, and much shaking of heads and expressions of grim foreboding. As a young adult and nephew of the manchief I was allowed to attend such meetings, in fact Dad was quite insistent about it.

"You should be there," Dad said one day, as he pulled on layers of fur and took a brick from the stove preparatory to sprinting through the rain to the ale house where the latest meeting was to be held. "You never know what your position at Yam might be, in the future."

"My position will be cousin of the manchief when Uncle Stance dies." What a prospect.

He stared at me longer than he need have done. "Maybe. Anyway, there's talk of food rationing. We need the young person's viewpoint."

"Rax, Dad, the meetings are boring. And Trigger will be there. Get a young viewpoint out of him."

He paused at the door. "Think, Hardy. Do you really want Trigger to speak on your behalf?"

He had a point. "I'll drop by later on," I told him. By then, I hoped, everyone would be so bored with the discussion they'd have started drinking and singing.

And in fact they had, but not quite in the way I'd expected.

I reached the ale house well after sunset to find it jammed so full that people were having difficulty bringing their mugs to their lips. They were singing, but not the jolly words of a drinking song such as Granddad Ernest might have sung to a Noss girl, but a doleful dirge that, after a moment, I recognized as *Great Phu Deliver Us*. A

hymn. Religion, it seemed, had spilled out of the temple into the hallowed precincts of the ale house. Was nothing sacred?

And as the last melancholy notes died like poisoned drivets, Uncle Stance rose above the multitude, arms outstretched as he stood on the bar counter.

“My people!” he shouted.

Conversation, which was just starting up, hushed. Into the silence came the distinct voice of Wand, our womanchief and a stickler for accuracy.

“Only the men are your people, Stance!”

“I was speaking rhetorically. I’ll phrase it differently. People of Yam!” he roared. Stance is an impressive figure. He’s only medium height, but there’s something about the way he holds himself — upright, legs a little apart, chin high, gaze direct, as though he’s looking out to sea in a strong onshore breeze — that lends his words a momentous resonance. He seems to own his space; to *belong* wherever he is. He dominates. If Dad had tried leaping onto the bar counter to address his audience, he’d have cracked his skull on a low beam and dropped unconscious to the floor. Such an accident would never befall Uncle Stance, more’s the pity. “We must pray,” he said. His expression, which had been commanding, became instantly humble.

People bowed their heads. Stance launched into the miscellany of evasions, euphemisms and superstitions which he converted to the Only Truth. Did Stance believe all this himself? I don’t think so; he may have been a pain in the butt, but he was intelligent. He called upon Drove and Browneyes (mere legends) to mount the Great Lox (meaning the sun, Phu) and draw the world from the clutches of the Many-Tentacled Ice-Devil (meaning the dead planet Rax) and to bless us with everlasting sunlight — which, if Phu had obliged, would have made Yam a very hot place indeed. He called upon Ragina, queen of the ice-devils (the real ones in the pools) to forsake her legendary lover, Rax, and throw her lot in with Phu. He proposed an unlikely scenario in which Ragina lifted off into the sky like a human space shuttle, seized Rax in her arms and bore him off to a distant location where they became, I suppose, what Mister McNeil calls a binary system. He called upon the goatparent to give birth to high-yield crops. The audience loved it, raising their fingers in the sign of the Great Lox.

Afterwards he joined Dad and I, flushed with success.

“Good sermon, huh, Bruno?”

“Worthy of our templekeeper himself,” said Dad. “Although I understand the goatparent specializes in bearing people rather than root crops.”

I’ll explain about the goatparent, sometimes called the goat-with-two-mouths. It’s our templekeeper’s version of your Adam and Eve with the advantage that we don’t have to worry about who created it. It always was, and is. Its purpose, as it sits up there on a cloud, is to churn out people. It’s been out of work a long time because we’re perfectly capable of churning out people ourselves. Frankly, the goatparent strains my credulity, but Mister McNeil is quite careful not to deride it. One might almost think he *believed* in it, and him a human, too. I once asked him, “Why do you humans still have religions, when you know so much?” And he thought about it for a

long time, and just as I was expecting something really profound, he said, "For fun, I guess."

Stance said, "The goatparent is the symbol of fecundity. Of bounty."

"So now we've prayed, everything's going to be all right, is it?"

"I doubt it." Reality returned like a kick in the groin, and my uncle looked sick.

"I missed the start, Uncle," I said. "What happened about food rationing?"

"I'm considering a journey to Devon Station, Bruno," he said, ignoring me as usual. "Before the Freeze sets in, if possible."

"Tell Hardy about the rationing, Stance," said Dad, may Phu bless him.

"As of now," he said impatiently, staring over the top of my head, "Grain will be rationed to one half cup per person per day, or the equivalent in bread. Now, regarding this journey, Bruno, I have high hopes the humans at Devon Station will offer us assistance."

"Shouldn't we talk to Mister McNeil first?"

"You think so?"

"That's the protocol, Stance," Dad murmured.

He always seemed to be rescuing Stance from political gaffes. They rarely argued, and never in public. I sometimes wondered if Stance, as a boy, had been as idiotic as his son Trigger is now. If he had, he'd certainly grown out of it. Standing four-square and still dominating the room despite the gangling figure of Dad beside him, he announced in ringing tones, "We shall consult Mister McNeil!"

And the people, turning toward him, made noises of agreement. Stance was right. Stance knew the protocol.

Yam Wand sidled up. "A sound move, Stance. The humans have unlimited technology. There's little point in us starving when help is less than a day's journey away."

I caught Dad's eye. He grinned at me.

Uncle Stance began planning the trip to Mister McNeil's residence. He liked to plan, did Stance. Mister McNeil lived less than half a day's journey away, but the trip had to be planned and organized. Nothing must be left to chance.

The sea level always drops a little during the grume, but now it was high again and backed far up Noss inlet. The runoff from the moors flowed frighteningly dark, swift and deafening whenever the road took us close to the riverbank. Phu had contracted to a small orange eye in the pale sky, giving no heat at all. The cold mist laid a sheen of moisture on our clothes, and our breath blew as steamy as the motorcart's chimney as we headed for Mister McNeil's. We huddled together at the forward end of the cab, close to the firebox: Dad, Uncle Stance, Wand, Trigger and I. Uncle Stance was at the tiller and a poor job he was making of it, dropping the heavy iron wheels into every available pothole. We swayed about on the footplate, clutching at the metalwork and each other. Tempers were frayed. We were not a united negotiating team.

“For Phu’s sake, Stance, let Bruno have the tiller!” yelled Wand, as a wild lurch nearly threw her off the footplate.

My Uncle did not reply, maintaining a firm grasp on the tiller and staring fixedly ahead, a picture of resolute confidence.

I was becoming obsessed with the right-hand side of the road, which hereabouts fell off sharply to the raging torrent below. I took advantage of the next lurch to move to the left of the cab. If I judged we were heeling over too far, I could jump off.

“I think we’re here, Stance,” said Dad a short while later. I caught a glimpse of a faint track diverging at right angles from the Noss road.

“Stop!” shouted Wand. “Back up! Back up, you fool!”

Uncle Stance was not at his best in reverse. The motorcart came to a juddering halt as he hauled at the brake lever. We all toppled forward, grabbing at projections to avoid burning ourselves against the firebox. Still with that air of confidence, Uncle Stance spun the reversing screw.

It would have been better if he’d remembered to shut off the steam first. The motorcart began to accelerate backward before he got his hands back on the tiller.

Everybody froze. Nobody said anything. Tide and river meet hereabouts, and below us a deadly maelstrom boiled.

Then dear old Dad grabbed the tiller and swung it in the nick of time, and we roared backwards up the slope to Mister McNeil’s residence, a dramatic arrival in clouds of steam and fierce recriminations.

10

“You’ll all have a beer after your trip?” If Mister McNeil guessed the negotiating team had fallen apart, he didn’t show it. “Or maybe a mug of stuva?”

“A skin of distil would be more like it,” I heard Wand mutter, but not so that Mister McNeil could hear. He never serves us anything stronger than beer, and lets it be known that humans disapprove of us drinking anything distilled, although what business it is of theirs I don’t know.

He waved us to chairs and sat down himself, smiling and big. It’s always the first thing I notice about Mister McNeil, the bigness. Not just in height, although he is a head taller than even Dad. It’s the heaviness, the muscularity, even the loudness of voice that we notice. In numbers you humans can be really overpowering. And you show your teeth when you smile, which can be somewhat alarming until we get used to it. Otherwise there are not many physical differences between you and us — which I found surprising in those days, since we evolved on different worlds.

The second thing I notice about Mister McNeil is the kindness. He is a good man. He has our best interests at heart, and he always does what he can to help.

“Good to see you people.” For the first time I noticed the Nowhere Man sitting in the shadows. What was he doing here? At the sight of him Uncle Stance froze with mouth open in a comical expression of dismay.

Dad nodded to the Nowhere Man with a faint smile. Dad doesn't faze easily. Trigger stared, fascinated by this living example of evil. Wand sniffed and looked back at Mister McNeil as though for an explanation. I wondered how I was reacting, and tried to keep all expression from my face. I'd never heard of the Nowhere Man actually doing anything *wrong*. And personally, I think he looks much like anyone else. Even if he has — as they say — one webbed foot and one normal, he keeps them covered. It's the simple fact of his existence that bothers people.

Suddenly everyone began to talk at once, then everyone stopped and an embarrassed silence followed. Finally Wand said, "I will outline the purpose of our visit."

It was a crude, abrupt start to negotiations. Disconcerted, I scrutinized the contents of the room. Everything looked strange, because it all came from Earth. I'd been inside a few human residences at Devon Station and they were nothing like this. They had stuff from all over the Galaxy on the walls, and quite a lot of our own stilk artifacts. I visited one place that actually had a whole fishing skimmer with poles and nets hanging from the ceiling.

But there was nothing of our world in Mister McNeil's residence. It was as though he didn't want to acknowledge the place.

And yet he liked us. I could sense it. Not in the way one might like children, although he might think of us that way because your technology is so far ahead of ours. And not in the way one might like an animal; a favorite lox, for instance. No; he liked us as people. It set him apart from some other humans I've met.

He followed up Wand's remark adroitly, shifting to other matters. You humans consider it bad manners to come straight to the point. For a few moments he spoke of progress on the moor, and the mine the humans had sunk there some generations ago. "Grade A ore," he was saying. "It promises to be a very profitable venture."

"Who for?" asked Wand rudely.

"Everyone. Once the mine's broken even, profits will be shared equally between humans and stilks. That was the deal when we took our option on the land, and we stand by it."

"Will our share allow us to buy human technology?" Dad asked.

"If that's what you want." Mister McNeil looked dubious. "You may find you prefer your present level of development. It's not all good, the human way of life."

"But you don't starve," said Uncle Stance.

"It's that bad, is it? I'd heard the harvest was poor."

"Those profits you were talking about," said Wand. "We could buy machines to bring more land under cultivation."

"Guns and vehicles for hunting," added Uncle Stance.

By now Mister McNeil was looking positively alarmed. We've been reading human facial expressions for many generations, and I saw anxiety in his eyes, and something else. Sadness?

"You call it stardreaming, your ability to call on the memories of ancestors," he said. "You should stardream carefully before you start talking machinery. And you know we humans have a policy of non-interference. It might be permissible for us to

teach you sciences to enable you to learn to build your own machines, in due course. But we can't leapfrog the normal course of a society's development. Possibly your society is not the kind that develops. Often there are stabilizing factors in a society that inhibit progress beyond a certain point. Your preoccupation with the past, for instance." He sighed. He was speaking words, but his mind was elsewhere.

"So what good is our share of profits?" asked Wand harshly.

"If the worst came to the worst, you could pay to import food. But this is just one harvest. Sit the winter out. See how things go."

Dad said, "I've stardreamed. This is a long-term trend."

"You're right, Bruno," said Uncle Stance.

"I think we need food now, Mister McNeil," Dad said quietly. "And I hear there are villages in much worse shape than us."

The human replied, "The mine hasn't shown a profit yet."

"Then lend us the food against future profits."

"We don't have it. We only carry food for our own population, around six hundred people. You're asking us to feed the whole world from our storerooms?"

"Import emergency supplies."

I noticed Uncle Stance's head snapping to and fro as he followed the discussion. His problem is, he can't discuss. He's great at speeches, but when it comes to the cut and thrust of negotiation, he's lost.

Mister McNeil said, "Be fair, Bruno. You've been to Devon Station and you've seen things you count as marvels, so you think of humans as some kind of magicians. We're not. We're just a species of galactic travelers, no better than kikihuahuas."

"Kikihuahuas?"

"Forget it. They can't help either. They're very slow movers, the kikihuahuas. And even we humans can't import supplies, just like that. It takes time and money. To be frank, it takes too long, and it takes money you haven't got."

"I still think you could do something," said Uncle Stance stubbornly.

"Do what?"

"You're the expert. You tell me." It was a typical Uncle Stance evasion.

And it annoyed Mister McNeil. "All I can do is suggest you try Devon Station, Stance. I'll tell them you're coming, if you like. Maybe they'll be able to explain better than I can."

"I always said we should have gone there first," said Uncle Stance.

I had a strange and disturbing private conversation with Mister McNeil before we left. I've noticed before that he seems to seek me out for the occasional chat. Flattering in its way, but also rather mystifying.

“You’ll want to mull things over before you go home,” he said to the others, refilling their stuva mugs. “I’ll leave you alone for a minute or two. Hardy, you come with me. I have some new plants to show you.”

Nobody thought this odd; they knew my interest in Mister McNeil’s Earth plants. Trigger might have wanted to join us, but this was outweighed by the status factor of taking part in a top-level discussion. I was perfectly happy because I knew the discussion was doomed anyway.

Mister McNeil and I stood close beside the simmering motorcart, scanning the wreckage that the drench had wrought with the Earth flowers. Everything lay flat and rotting, the colors leached into the mud. The river roared below, lost in the mist. The drench had done its worst, and the freeze was around the corner.

“I’ve saved the seeds,” said Mister McNeil. “Your year’s shorter than Earth’s, but most of the plants have adapted. I’ve even been able to develop some new varieties.” He loved his garden. I wondered if it was the only thing that made his life here worthwhile, because it was plain he loved Earth too.

It was equally plain he couldn’t show me any new varieties right now, so what was he after? I said nothing.

“Uh, watch yourself, Hardy,” he said abruptly.

“What?”

“Be careful. These are difficult times. Maybe dangerous times.”

“You mean the food shortage?”

“Not necessarily.” He was very hesitant; he was not supposed to interfere in stilk matters. “You father is a good man.”

“I know.”

“Stilk hierarchy is a funny thing. I’ve never quite grasped it — but then, I can’t stardream.”

Was he trying to say Dad should be chief? I didn’t know, but it was a pleasant thought, if impossible. I said, “The two go together. The chief in any community is the one who can stardream the furthest back.”

“But he may not be the best one for the job.”

“He’s sure to be. He’s able to call on the greatest experience. They say our male line can dream right back to the beginning of things. That’s Dad and Uncle Stance and Trigger and I. People say we’re the only ones who can, anywhere in the world. Not that we’ve ever done it. It would take days and days of lying on your back, smoking hatch and concentrating. Sometime I’ll try, maybe. It’d be nice to find out how our civilization began. And how all those myths began. The Great Lox and Drove and Browneyes and all that stuff.”

But he was still mulling over the chiefship thing. “Stance and your father are brothers. They must have the same ancestral memories.”

“Uncle Stance is a year younger. That means he’s got an extra year of Granddad Ernest’s memories. So he’s chief. And Trigger will be the next chief when Uncle Stance dies.”

“But Trigger’s a jackass. Even I can see that.”

I presumed a jackass was something uncomplimentary. “Dad and I will be there to advise him.”

He was watching me closely, gauging my reactions — but he was human, and inexperienced at following stilk trains of thought. “You four are very valuable people,” he said, almost to himself. “No written language. . . . And we only arrived a few generations ago. We know so little. We think in terms of human problems. Rock structure. Escape velocities. The father and son relationship must be very important to you.”

“Of course. If a man doesn’t have a son his ancestral memories are lost forever. A daughter inherits only her mother’s memories. That’s how memories disappear. When a person doesn’t have a child of their own sex.”

“Or when they die young.”

Suddenly I shivered, feeling again the water creeping up my legs as the skimmer sank. What was Mister McNeil getting at? He was staring at me again.

“Be careful, Hardy.”

This was getting too weird. “I’m in danger? Are you saying someone might want to wipe out my memories? No, Mister McNeil. We venerate ancestral memories. And stilks don’t kill one another. Nobody could live with a memory like that.”

“I’m told your grandfather was killed a few years ago.”

“So it seems. At least he’d passed on his memories by then.”

“But he was killed. Murdered. I’m saying it can happen. Anyone can get desperate, even a stilk. And there are desperate times coming.”

It was nonsense, I tried to tell myself. And the skimmer sinking was just bad luck.

But it was a strange and disturbing conversation.

12

The mist turned to a fine snow and the world turned white. Hunting and farming were finished for the year. The domestic lox hibernated in the barns and the only creatures fool enough to venture outside daily were the lorin; heads down, shaggy coats white with snow, plodding through the countryside on Phu alone knows what errands. The rest of us gathered around our hearths to stardream, tell stories and wait out the freeze.

And I dreamed of Charm.

I tried to stardream instead. Winter is a great time for stardreaming; there’s little else to do and we can learn a lot of history that way, and broaden our experience. But every time I lit up my pipe of hatch and lay back on the cushions, that pretty face rose before me and those warm brown eyes watched me gravely. Mister McNeil tells me that human memories are faint things; just indistinct pictures that lack reality and sequence. So it may be difficult for you to understand the vivid nature of stilk memories, with all the colors and sounds, the smells and the emotions still there. When I thought of Charm, I relived that short time we were together, minute by minute, word by word.

I wonder if Dad guessed what was going on in my mind. I couldn't have explained it if he'd asked. It was different from our normal sex drive; it was somehow beyond that. It was going to be a long winter before I could see her again.

And anyway, she was a flounder.

Dad and I lived in the center of the men's village in a small cottage passed down our male line for generations. Uncle Stance and Trigger lived next door in the big chief's house. We saw all too much of them.

The temple was still busy, its keeper holding frequent services to reassure the superstitious that summer would come again, one day. The Great Lox still guarded us from the ice-devil Rax. It was a peculiar metaphor for the sun and its dead companion, but it was what the people wanted to hear. That, and word that the unlikely Drove and Browneyes still waited in the wings ready to prance forth and deliver us, should matters take a further turn for the worse. I never visited the temple, but I did take a short walk to the big barn on the outskirts of the women's village one day, well-armed with hot bricks. We were running short of flour.

I found my mother, Yam Spring, in charge of the stores.

Her face lit up when she saw me. "Hardy!"

Embarrassing. There is a public heater in the barn and a handful of men and women lounged around it, chatting and drinking ale, and they all turned and looked. Most mothers have the commonsense to ignore their sons, particularly in public, but not Spring; oh, no. She's a big woman with a round cheerful face and a loud voice, and her greeting had the kind of love in it that a fellow only wants to hear from his father. It rang around the barn and I'll swear even the lox jerked out of their doze and opened curious eyes.

"For Phu's sake, Spring," I muttered.

But she'd advanced on me, inevitable as the grume and just as cloying, and seized me in fat arms, hugging me to gigantic, unthinkable breasts. Having done, she held me at arms' length, clasping my elbows in a viselike grip. "You've grown. You're quite a handsome young man! You look just like your father."

Rax, the shame of it! Nothing wrong in looking like dear old Dad, but her words reminded me — and everyone else — of the peculiar relationship the two of them had. I saw grins on faces, and knowing looks. There were about ten people there, including that young freezer Caunter, who would never let me forget this. Ten accurate stilk memories. This dreadful scene would go down in history tenfold, and be chuckled at countless times by countless future generations. My reputation was doomed.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

She unclasped me. "So how is Bruno? I haven't seen him for days. I was thinking maybe I'd drop round your place later."

"Not a good idea. Uncle Stance will be there. They're arranging the trip to Devon Station."

"Oh. Devon Station? They're not thinking of going until the freeze is over, are they?"

“They’re talking about of going tomorrow. I’m going too.”

“Oh, not both you and Bruno?” She looked stricken. “It’s dangerous, Hardy. I can’t bear the thought of losing you both!”

“Look, Spring, would you mind keeping your voice down a bit? This journey’s confidential.”

“How can it be confidential when everybody will see the motorcart setting off?”

“Well, anyway, they’ll be arranging it all tonight.” Suddenly the sight of her plump — but kindly — face almost in tears moved some buried and shameful emotion in me, and impulsively I took her hand. “Don’t worry. We’ll be fine. Now, we need some flour. Dad miscalculated again.”

She took my earthenware pot and measured several cupfuls of flour from a wooden bin, and that was it. No need to write anything down. She would remember. And so would the spectators, watching closely for signs of favoritism.

“Bruno’s not the only one who miscalculated,” she said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“The flour ration’s going to have to be reduced. Wand will announce it tomorrow.”

“We’ll have to eat more vegetables.”

“They’re going on ration tomorrow too. It’s going to be a difficult freeze, Hardy. The meat situation is serious, too. If Noss hadn’t had a fish surplus we’d have been in bigger trouble by now.” She held onto my hand. “When things get bad, people tend to turn against their leaders. There was a winter, oh, eleven generations ago nothing like as bad as this, when people turned against their chiefs and stormed the barn, and the womanchief was killed.”

“Murdered, you mean?” My conversation with Mister McNeil was very fresh in my mind.

“No. They opened the trap on the grain hopper and it all spilled out over her. By the time they dug her out she’d suffocated. Her face was black as a snorter’s bottom.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle and after a moment Spring began to laugh too, her ample flesh vibrating busily. “A good thing it wasn’t the manchief,” I managed to say, “otherwise I wouldn’t be here now.”

The thought sobered her up. “Anyway, important discussion or not, I have to come over to see your dad later on. Particularly if you’re driving to the moors tomorrow.”

It would look strange, a fat middle-aged woman visiting the men’s village. People just don’t do that kind of thing. “I don’t understand why you have to see him,” I said stubbornly.

“Well, obviously. I love him,” she said, for all to hear.

That night I dreamed a strange dream of the past, culled from the dormant memories of many ancestors. There was blood and death in this dream, and cold and fear as well. There was a girl, who was Charm and yet not Charm; pretty, brown-eyed, whose face swam through the interlinked pools of memory and brought sanity with her. Her face was with me, smiling, as I awakened to find it was still dark and Dad was grunting like a dozing loat in his bed across the room.

I'd been thinking about Charm quite enough in my waking hours. Did she have to invade my dreams as well? She was only a flounder, for Phu's sake. And she was female, yet the dream had hinted at lasting relationships.

I thought about that the following day, as Spring waved to us from the door of her cottage. Dad waved back, showing no sign of shame. How could two people go on loving each other for seventeen years? It didn't make sense to me, then. Love is a short-term thing we feel for the purpose of mingling limbs and having children. It's not supposed to last. All right, so I know some of you humans see it differently. But I'm talking about your average stilk. The motorcart rumbled on, Uncle Stance at the helm. The safety parott swung in its cage, squawking at the rising sun.

The rest of us sat on the side benches, close to the firebox. Dad, Trigger, Wand and her daughter Faun.

Let me tell you something about Faun. She's a nice girl, no doubt about that, and not bad looking either. About my own age. But — and it's a big but — Wand wants Faun and I to get together one day. Have children, I mean. A boy would have my memories, supposedly right back to the Beginning, and a girl would have Faun's, which go back twenty-three generations. It's a heck of a lot of knowledge. If Trigger had no son — and I couldn't imagine him ever getting around to the necessary actions — a son of Faun and I would be manchief one day. And a daughter would be woman-chief. Wand thinks it's all for the good of Yam.

Well, to Rax with Yam. There's insufficient spark between Faun and I — certainly not on my side — and any attempt to *get together*, as Wand puts it, would likely end in failure and embarrassment.

It's politically odd that Wand doesn't want Faun to get together with Trigger. I can only assume she thinks it isn't worth the risk of Faun having children who are jackasses, to use Mister McNeil's expression. A jackass, he'd explained, is something like a lox with big ears, but even more stupid. Uncle Stance is all for a union between Faun and Trigger, naturally. Since Wand's memories only go back twenty-two generations she should, in principle, have been deferring to Uncle Stance. In practice, however, it doesn't always work that way. Wand has a powerful personality.

At that point in my meditations, Uncle Stance dropped the left-hand front wheel into a pothole, throwing Faun against me. She grabbed my hand to steady herself and, under the approving eye of Wand, kept hold of it. I didn't object. Her hand was warm and friendly, while outside the cab of the motorcart the world was sere and frigid, a dusting of white covering the scrub.

A terrible color, white. The color of death. We wouldn't have lasted more than a few moments out there before the insanity would get us and we'd go runabout, screaming across the crunching grass, soon to fall on our faces and freeze. Ahead of us, the empty moors rose in treeless hillocks against the pale sky, where Phu showed as a tiny ineffectual disc.

When Uncle Stance had wrestled the motorcart back on course, Dad said, "We should run through our approach to the humans again, Stance."

"Yeah," said his brother. "I notice you're wearing the negotiating cloak that woman made for you. Must I remind you who's in charge here?"

"It's the warmest cloak I have," said Dad, an unaccustomed edge to his voice. "You have your spear." Uncle Stance's hunting spear is unique, distinguished by a red tassel and serving as a badge of office as well as a weapon. "Now pull yourself together and let's talk business. We'll be at Devon Station before long."

"My feeling is, we should adopt a hard line," said Wand. "After all, those people are sitting on stilk land."

"Which we leased to them," Dad pointed out.

"We can cancel the lease unilaterally," said Uncle Stance. "It's written into the agreement."

"Quite right, Stance," said Wand. "We hold the whip hand."

The two fools continued in this vein for a while, mutually reinforcing their dream of power until I quite expected someone, probably Stance, to suggest throwing the humans off the planet by main force if they didn't come across with massive aid.

Eventually sensible old Dad put a stop to it. "For Phu's sake," he snapped, "they can stomp on us like drivets if they feel like it. We're going to them cap in hand, don't you understand? We're begging for crumbs."

"I'll be the judge of our approach," said the wise man at the tiller frostily.

"And I," our esteemed womanchief added quickly.

"Just don't put their backs up, that's all I ask," said Dad.

The negotiating team went into a sulk that lasted until we entered the Administration Dome at the entrance to Devon Station.

14

They call it the Administration Dome, but it's really a huge round barn. The big door hissed shut behind the motorcart and everywhere was suddenly warm. All our fears ebbed away; you'd be amazed what sudden warmth can do to a stilk. Even Trigger, who'd been whimpering quietly since we left Yam, perked up.

"It's *big*," he said, voicing the obvious. It was his first visit to Devon Station. "Will it belong to us when you cancel the lease?"

Uncle Stance's jaw tightened, but nobody answered this typically Triggerlike question. Not for the first time I wondered what winter evening conversations were like in the manchief's house. Probably the two of them sat playing circlets, an unusually mindless local game that excuses the obligation to talk.

“You’re the group from Yam, you people?”

A big human greeted us, and when I say big I mean even by human standards. A face like a lox and fine clothing molded onto his body.

“We are the Yam negotiating committee,” said Stance. “This is Yam Wand, our womanchief, and Yam Bruno, my older brother.” Stancelike, he made it clear that he was the younger and therefore chief, rather than unlucky old Dad. Also Stancelike, he failed to introduce the younger members of the party.

“Yes, well, I’m just a lackey around this place,” said the human disappointingly. “This way, please.” And he strode off so we had to run to keep up; all except Uncle Stance that is, who dropped behind as he maintained his usual measured tread, thumping the ground with his chief’s hunting spear at each step.

Trigger, Faun and I were excluded from the high-level meeting. Possibly to atone for the blow to our pride, the loxlike human was detailed to show us around.

“Call me John,” he said, “and stick close. Don’t go wandering off anywhere, you understand?”

“I wouldn’t know where to wander off to,” replied Trigger with his usual odd logic. “I’ve never been here before.”

Faun, too, had taken exception to John’s tone, which would have been more suited to addressing six-year-olds. “Just show us around like they told you,” she said sharply. There’s more than a touch of Wand in Faun.

John looked at me, but I had nothing to add. “Right,” he said, “We’re going to take a look at the mine.” He led us into a tiny room and pushed a selection of buttons. The floor dropped away beneath us. Trigger uttered a yell of alarm and Faun clutched my hand. Her hand-clutching was getting to be a habit and it could be a pleasant one, but I had other things on my mind at that moment. We soon caught up with the floor, which suddenly pressed against our feet. Trigger fell in a sprawling heap. The wall pushed me in the back. By now Faun and I had accepted that we were in some kind of human conveyance, but Trigger had gone to pieces and was vomiting noisily, completely disoriented.

“For Pete’s sake,” said John, pressing another button.

A flap opened and a small machine trundled out and confronted Trigger face to face as he lay on the floor. He yelled in fright and jumped to his feet. Making greedy sucking noises, the machine gobbled up his mess, spun around looking hungrily for more, and then hurried away through its flap, replete. There’s no accounting for tastes.

“Ugh,” said Faun. “Pull yourself together, Trigger.”

Then suddenly we all took a forced run across the room, bringing up against the far wall. The conveyance had stopped. The door opened. John led us out into a vast, glassy cavern. Trigger and Faun stared up at the roof arching far above, open-mouthed. I wished they’d stop being amazed; it gave John all kinds of advantages over us.

“Wow,” said Trigger. “Look at that long sun.” He meant the strip of overhead lighting, snaking off into the distance.

“This is Adit One,” John was saying. He pointed off down the cavern. “The machine we call Starnose is away down the tunnel, digging. See that conveyer belt along the far wall? Starnose is a nuclear-powered total miner. It follows the richest veins automatically, mines the ore, smelts it, melts and compresses the spoil back into the tunnel wall, and sends the ingots back down that belt. We don’t have to do a thing. Not a thing.”

This was apparent by the casual attitudes of various humans, males and females intermixed in that odd human way, wandering about, chatting, occasionally scanning instrument panels but without any real interest. It would have been a relaxing scene, were it not for that mighty roof poised to fall in on us.

“What’s going to happen to all the tunnels when you people have gone?” asked Faun.

John appeared baffled by the question. “Happen to them? Well, I guess they just stay here. You can have them.”

“We don’t want them. They’re no use to us.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll be long dead by the time we leave this planet, girl.”

“My descendants won’t be.” Faun turned to me. “I think that when they go, the humans should leave everything exactly as it was, Hardy. Maybe our descendants won’t want big holes underground.”

“They won’t see them,” said John. “We’ll bulldoze the domes flat and replant over the top. In a few generations you people will have forgotten the tunnels are here.”

“Forgotten? How can we forget? My descendants will remember every word of this conversation.”

John stared at her. “Of course they will. Sorry, girl, it was me forgetting. Well, if it means so much to you, I’ll talk to Missus Froggatt about it. That satisfy you?”

“Who’s Missus Froggatt?”

“She’s in charge of that kind of thing,” he said vaguely. “Now, hop on this belt and we’ll go take a look at Starnose.”

It took a moment to persuade Trigger, who was still demoralized by the previous method of transportation. In the end, mortified by the poor impression we were giving the humans, I grabbed him and threw him onto the belt. Faun sat on him and we were off, the glassy wall sliding by.

“The belt goes empty down this wall,” John explained, “and comes back full of ingots up the other. Impressive, huh?”

It was, but the tide of human efficiency was doomed to evaporate very soon. A man came hurrying along the belt behind us. He was short, about my height, but fat and very breathless. He wouldn’t have lasted half a day on the hunt. “Problems, John,” he panted. “I may need your help.”

“The usual?”

“Fraid so.”

Soon the belt began to jerk ominously and I noticed, far away on the other side of the tunnel, the returning belt was empty of ingots. Both belts stopped with a jolt. We

climbed off and began to follow the two hurrying humans. "Remember what I said!" John shouted over his shoulder. "Don't wander off!"

We caught up with them standing with a group beside a huge jumble of gleaming rectangular ingots, each one about the size of a human. The fat man was angry.

"Okay!" he was shouting. "What in hell happened this time?"

The others, six of them, seemed unconcerned. "Oh, well, you know how it is, Cal," said one woman lazily. "A couple ingots slip off, I guess, and nobody notices the monitor. Next thing, they're fouling the belt and piling up." She paused to scratch her ear thoughtfully. "If it goes on long enough, well, you can see what happens. Hell of a big pile-up."

If I'd been Cal, I'd probably have reacted violently. However, he seemed almost to calm down. "And a hell of a long time not to look at the monitor."

"You can say that again."

"All right. Where are they?"

"Where are what?"

"You know damn well what." Cal regarded them searchingly. They gazed back blandly. He shrugged and turned to John. "We'll get no sense out of these goons. They're besotted. You come with me." To the others he said. "There's a fork lift a half kilometer back. Start loading these ingots on the belt, huh?"

He and John skirted the pile and continued down the tunnel. Trigger, Faun and I trotted behind. The tour was turning out to be more interesting than we'd expected. Soon we came to a rough-hewn opening in the wall of vitrified rock, forming a tunnel high enough for me to have walked along.

"There you are," said Cal. "That's our problem." We hurried past the dark hole and soon reached a flat metallic wall almost completely blocking the tunnel. The lower part was covered with buttons, levers and bright square screens.

Lolling against this wall were three lorin.

They watched us approach without expression — but can anyone really read the expressions on their furry faces? Some say they can, but I doubt it. One carried a small fishing net containing ripe yellowballs. They'd all been eating the fruit; the juice had dribbled from their mouths and stained their receding chins.

"One day," said Cal, "I'll get to the bottom of this."

"Have our guys been eating that fruit?" suggested John. "Maybe that's what did it."

"The fruit's harmless," said Cal. "It's the goddamned lorin themselves that's the problem. Just being there. It seems to screw up our guys. And not just those guys back there. All of us. When the lorin are around, time just seems to slip by. We only notice things are going badly when we get a printout of production figures. The figures have been god-awful recently. Scary. We're not earning our keep, John."

John took hold of a lorin's arm, quite gently. "Come on, you guys," he said. "Out of here."

The lorin subsided gently to the floor, sighing in lorin fashion.

"I'll do it," I volunteered. "I'm used to them."

“Be my guest.”

I composed my thoughts, approached the creatures and said quietly, “They don’t want you here. Please go.”

I sensed resistance. Round gray eyes regarded me seriously.

“No,” I said. “You really must go.”

The one on the floor got up, the other two began to shuffle about, then the three of them shambled off toward the hole in the wall in single file, heads low.

“You telepathic or something?” asked John.

“No. I just understand them. It’s a knack.” I’d discovered my affinity with the lorin at the age of nine. “We don’t all have it, but I think all my male line does.”

“I have it,” lied Trigger proudly.

“How in hell do they burrow through rock like that?” asked Cal.

“I don’t know. We don’t know much about the lorin at all. They go about their business, whatever it is, and we go about ours. Our paths don’t seem to cross.”

“Don’t you have any curiosity?”

It was difficult to explain. The lorin are so much part of the natural scene that it seems pointless to question their existence. They just *are*, like Phu and Rax. “There could be an answer somewhere back in our memories, but it would take too long to dig it out. Why bother?”

He looked at me oddly. “You guys are easy meat,” he said.

15

It was an ill-tempered negotiating team that reassembled beside the motorcart later that day.

“Selfish freezers,” snarled Uncle Stance.

“Mister McNeil did warn us,” Dad pointed out.

“Does that make it any better? The point is, here are these freezers living in the lap of luxury, and meanwhile the rest of the world starves!”

“Well, actually we weren’t overly concerned about the rest of the world ourselves,” said Dad mildly. “We were only negotiating on behalf of Yam.”

““Policy of non-interference,”” shrieked Uncle Stance falsetto, apparently mimicking some human at the meeting. “Murder, I call it. Genocide, plain and simple. And when we’re all dead, they get the whole world free!”

“It didn’t help when you threw that in their faces at the meeting, Stance. They’re sensitive about genocide, hadn’t you noticed?”

“As well they might be. Well,” he swung himself onto the footplate. “Freeze them, that’s what I say. We don’t need their hand-outs. Inlanders will go it alone.”

“And coasters,” I said unwisely.

“Coasters!” He chose this occasion to acknowledge me, for once. “Coasters can go to Rax for all I care!” He hung out of the cab, glaring down at Dad. “And another thing, Bruno. I was seriously displeased when I heard you’d used the motorcart to visit Noss.”

“You authorized it, remember?”

“Begging the flounders for handouts as though we’re too stupid to feed ourselves. I won’t have it, I tell you!”

“Shut up, Stance,” said Dad sharply, in a rare show of anger. “You’re making a fool of yourself.”

Uncle Stance stared at him for a long moment, eyes narrowed. Then he pulled himself together and dropped the subject. “If you don’t want to be left behind you’d better climb aboard,” he snapped.

Wand spoke for the first time. “You’re not seriously considering leaving at this hour?”

“And why not?”

“It’ll be dark soon.”

“I’m not begging these freezers for hospitality after the way they’ve treated us. Absolutely not!”

We climbed aboard obediently. You probably find this difficult to understand, but the view was: Uncle Stance was manchief and he outmemoried everyone there. If he cared to stand on his authority there was not a thing any of us could do, not even Wand. Silently he took his position at the tiller, and silently Dad swung the regulator. We chaff-chaffed out of the dome into the brittle winter air, our breath like steam.

We’d scarcely left the moor before we had to stop and light the lamps. Darkness swept down on us as we started off again, huddled together on the footplate while the motorcart plunged on down the rutted track, rattling and clanking, the tiller bucking in Uncle Stance’s hands. We kept the firebox door partly open for warmth, which meant we used fuel fast, but I’d already calculated that we should have plenty for the journey. The rear of the cab was stacked with cordwood and there was a can of distil there too. The safety parott clucked contentedly in its wicker cage; those birds seem to be able to take any kind of conditions. The danger came more from Uncle Stance himself, and his incompetent driving. As we swept through the ancient stone pillars at the fringe of the moor there was a hellish screech of metal against granite and the motorcart lurched wildly. We barreled on through a forest of anemone trees, pale branches drawing back from the dim light from our lamps.

“Steady there, Stance,” shouted Dad.

Uncle Stance’s lips were moving. He was praying. “May the Great Lox guide our way, small frail creatures against the vastness of this cold world. . . .” I heard his faint muttering against the background clanking and hissing of the motorcart.

Wand said acidly, “We’re relying on *you* to guide our way, Stance. Save your prayers for the temple, please.”

“Would you rather I took over for a while?” Dad said diffidently. “You’ve been at the tiller a long time.”

There was no reply. Uncle Stance was in the midst of some complex exhortation and was doubtless scared to break off in case the Great Lox should be insulted. His face was white, probably from fear; but he maintained his foursquare attitude, legs

firmly astride, chin up, eyes gazing steadfastly ahead, every inch the manchief. It was a pose, but he'd have fooled anyone who didn't know him well.

Suddenly he burst out, the prayer apparently finished, "We wouldn't have had to make this freezing journey if you'd looked after your crops properly, Wand!"

It was uncalled-for. We regarded him in astonishment. I heard Dad say again, "Steady there, Stance, old fellow."

"And you can keep your freezing mouth shut too, Bruno!"

Dad got up, hanging onto a handrail as the motorcart rocked and swayed, picked up a heavy fur and threw it around Uncle Stance's shoulders, then jerked it into place around his body. The tiller is situated at the back of the cab, so Uncle Stance was further away from the firebox than the rest of us. Cold brings fear, fear brings irrationality.

We trundled on in the feeble glimmer the lamps and the faint cold light of Rax.

"I can't see the road with that firebox door open!" yelled Uncle Stance in a fit of self-justification. "Shut it, for Phu's sake!"

I kicked the door shut and latched it. The footplate was instantly frigid. We huddled closer. Faun's body was soft against mine. They say people get a strong sexual urge shortly before freezing to death; probably something to do with needing to perpetuate the species before it's too late. I felt an urge for Faun's body. I hoped I was not dying.

There came an almighty lurch, throwing me to the footplate. Simultaneously there was a sharp metallic crack! and a yell of alarm from Uncle Stance. Faun was on top of me, her fur wrap enveloping me, her neat little breasts pressed into my face. Too frightened to savor the moment, I threw her off and scrambled to my feet.

"Rax!" exclaimed Dad. "I didn't like the sound of that."

I heard Wand uttering shocked whimpers. Trigger was squealing. Uncle Stance was ominously silent.

The motorcart sagged at a crippled angle. The cold closed around us. Rax watched us with a greedy eye.

A fierce argument broke out among the elders. It seemed important to them that blame was assigned correctly. Our predicament was insignificant when compared to the quest for truth.

To me, the possibility of damage to the motorcart ranked higher. That snapping noise had sounded ominously structural, like an axle. I told Faun, "I'm going to take a look."

"No! You'll freeze out there!" She grabbed my arm, drawing me toward the firebox.

"It's got to be done quickly before the trees get interested." I detached myself, took a hot brick from the slanting footplate, wrapped my cloak tightly around me and climbed to the ground. Frozen vegetation crunched under my feet and the branches of

anemone trees waved near, glittering ghostly in the raxlight, attracted by the warmth. A rain of sparks drifted from the firebars, waking up the bindweed underneath the motorcart. I made my way to the front of the machine, each step an effort as the cold bit into my body and the fear began to build.

Only Phu knows how much I wanted to run back to the warmth of the cab. I forced myself to lift a lamp from its bracket and, stooping and hugging the brick to my chest, peered under the front beam. Surprise — the axle was in one piece and the heavy steering chain was intact, thanks be to Phu. So why was the motorcart listing at such an angle? I shone the light on the bearings, brushing off an anemone tendril that insinuated itself around my neck, trying to ignore the cold striking up through my feet. Then I spotted the cause of our problem.

The heavy spring above the right-hand bearing was fractured. Shards of metal littered the ground. The frame was resting directly on the axle.

The motorcart would go no further that night.

I hurried back to the cab. Faun hugged me, her tears wet against my face. In its way this was flattering but outweighed by other factors. I turned to the elders, who were still seeking truth.

“The right-hand spring’s broken,” I said.

They paused in their deliberations.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said Uncle Stance sharply. “My guess is, the wheel’s dropped into a snorter’s hole. We’ll jack it up and back out.”

Dad meanwhile was looking somewhat stricken. “You’ve been and looked, Hardy, have you? While we were standing here arguing! By Phu, Stance, he’s got more guts than we have. Well done, Hardy!”

“You’d accept the word of a kid in a matter like this, Bruno? Not me. Not in a thousand winters.”

“Then go and take a look yourself.”

By now all the nearby anemone trees were leaning toward us, their fronds reaching into the cab and caressing the boiler. Bindweed would be crawling up the wheels. We represented a small temperate zone in a frozen world. Uncle Stance regarded the network of fronds expressionlessly, his face still set in lines of leadership. I knew what he was thinking. It would take time to fight his way around to the front of the motorcart. It might take too long. . . . It might be better to accept the word of this young upstart.

“You’re sure of this?” he asked me, staring at a point where my face would be, if I were two hands taller.

“He’s sure,” said Dad.

“Well, in that case. . . .”

“We’re stuck here,” said Wand. Her voice quavered.

Trigger emerged from obscurity. “We’re gonna die!”

“We’ll wait it out until dawn, then go for help,” said Stance, ignoring his son’s more realistic appraisal of the situation.

“We don’t have enough fuel,” Dad pointed out.

“We do.”

“We don’t.”

“We do.”

“We had enough for the journey. We don’t have enough to keep the fire burning all night, Stance.”

“Are we gonna die, Dad?” whimpered Trigger. “Are we gonna die?”

“I’ll send off the parott,” said Dad.

“What’s the use of that?”

“None, probably. But you never know.” He opened the cage and took the silvery bird in his big fist, staring into its beady little eyes. “Help,” he said. “Help Bruno. Repeat?”

“Help Bruno,” croaked the bird.

“Off you go.” He threw the parott into the air. It fluttered around the cab, crimson in the glow from the firebox, then disappeared into the blackness, easily evading the clumsy sweep of an anemone frond. “You never know, Mister McNeil may be at Yam. He knows the route we took. He can contact Devon Station and they’ll send out one of their vehicles to look for us.”

“If he’s at Yam,” said Uncle Stance skeptically.

The muscles in the corner of Dad’s jaw knotted up, always a bad sign. He said nothing, but regarded his brother steadily.

Wand, taking her cue, said, “So what now, Stance?”

“What are we gonna do, Dad?” wailed Trigger.

Faun took my hand. Stance threw a log into the firebox.

The night deepened.

We’d pinned our hopes on the parott and the technology of the human race. It had been a long shot, but it had given us hope. We’d opened the firebox door and Dad had fed in wood grudgingly, calculated to keep a warm glow in there, but only just enough to stop us going mad.

Already, a subtle jockeying for position nearest the fire had started. Trigger, the smallest, would be the loser in this. Next would be Faun, then Wand. Social status meant nothing in matters of life or death. Rax would suck away our reason and turn us into animals fighting for survival. By rights I should go after Wand, but probably Dad would protect me.

Which meant that Dad and Uncle Stance would be fighting it out, probably at quite an early stage, maybe before Faun cracked, but after Trigger had gone. I couldn’t see Uncle Stance fighting for Trigger’s life, somehow.

I shuddered. I wished I were somewhere else. I riffled through my memories and tried to fix on something pleasant; some memory so powerful that it would wipe out the present. One of the good stardreams.

A pair of brown eyes looked into mine. "Charm," she said. "Noss Charm. I know it's a funny name, but it's because of this." She reached inside the neck of her dress and pulled out a crystal on a thin cord. . . .

Dad's voice broke the spell. "Move over, Stance! I can't get through to feed the fire." The brown eyes faded into the nightmare present.

The bottom of the firebox opening was about level with Uncle Stance's knees, the top at waist level. It was only a little wider than his hips. As Dad had left to get another piece of wood, he'd moved in closer until all the rest of us could see was a tiny slot of warmth between the edge of the opening and his solid body. But we didn't complain. In such circumstances a person has to be very careful; it's all too easy to say the wrong thing.

Dad said it. "Move over," he repeated, an edge to his voice.

"Are you accusing me of hogging the fire?"

"No. I want to throw some more wood on."

"Use distil." Uncle Stance indicated the filler that fed the burners, then extended his hands through the door into the very firebox. I heard Wand start muttering. Trigger whimpered somewhere behind me. Faun was pressed against the side of the boiler which, unfortunately, was well insulated.

"I don't want to use distil," said Dad in reasonable tones, "because there's only one can, and we may need that for. . . . other purposes."

"What other purposes, for Phu's sake?"

"Nine generations ago our ancestor of the time was trapped in this kind of situation. A wheel had fractured."

"I remember that!" shouted Uncle Stance angrily as though his own memory was being challenged — an impolite thing to do in our society, but we were all beginning to behave strangely.

"Then you'll remember what he did. Once he'd decided the situation was hopeless, he drank distil until he was insensible and fell asleep beside the boiler. He was found lying there the next day."

"Dead, I suppose."

"Of course not, for Phu's sake! You and I wouldn't be here now if he'd died, Stance! I stardreamed this; it happened before he sired his son!" Now Dad was angry; he never suffered fools gladly. "He was sick, but he was alive. And the important thing was: he was sane. Rax hadn't got him, because he'd been too drunk to feel the cold and the fear. Understand? We conserve the distil. So step aside and let me feed the fire!"

This is why leadership must depend on memory. It's as valuable as personal experience. Uncle Stance stepped back, muttering. Trigger squealed as his toes were stepped on. Time passed and the jostling at the firebox became less subtle. Suddenly Uncle Stance commanded Dad to build up the fire more. "If we're going to die, we'll die in comfort!" he shouted illogically.

Dad had no option but to obey. He'd already rigged furs over the cab's openings and it soon became stiflingly hot. The boiler pressure rose. Our fear subsided to

be replaced by a dull hopelessness. Uncle Stance uncapped the distil and from time to time drank deeply. Before long he was lurching around the footplate, yelling incoherent prayers.

“Easy there, Stance,” said Dad, seizing his arm as he stumbled toward the roaring flames.

Uncle Stance swung round, his face fiery in the glow. “Yes, you’d like to betray me, wouldn’t you, you freezer! You’ve always wanted to be chief. It must have been a big disappointment to you when I was born!”

“For Phu’s sake, Stance,” murmured Dad. “I was only two years old at the time.”

Uncle Stance stared at him wordlessly, then wheeled around, tripped and fell heavily, his head striking the footplate with a meaty thud. He lay still. Dad knelt beside him, lifting his head gently.

“He’s knocked himself out, poor freezer.” He took Uncle Stance under the armpits, dragged him to the boiler and propped him against it. Then he turned to Wand. “You’re in command,” he said briefly.

Our womanchief smiled grimly. “This is no time for social niceties. You out-memory me, Bruno. You take over.”

It made sense; Dad had the experience. “All right,” he said. “We’ll keep a minimal fire, like before. And when the cold really begins to bite, we’ll drink the distil. And may the Great Lox take care of us for the rest of the night.”

“And the next day,” said Wand. “Until someone comes.”

There was a long silence. Even if we got through the night, we wouldn’t survive a winter day.

Trigger was the first to speak. “Uh. . . Uh, Bruno. . .”

“Yes, Trigger?”

“Look.” He pointed. His cheeks were wet. He’d been crying for some time, in a quandary, not wanting to imply disloyalty to his father.

The can of distil lay on its side where Stance had dropped it. A pool of fluid surrounded it.

Dad shook it. “It’s nearly empty,” he said heavily.

But the evil planet Rax hadn’t finished with us yet. “Up there,” said Faun suddenly. “Isn’t that. . .” She couldn’t finish.

Perched on top of the boiler was the parott.

“It never went to Yam,” muttered Wand. “The freezing bird circled round and came back!”

“Too cold even for a parott,” said Dad.

Cocking its head, the bird stared down at us, a pale ghost against the blackness.

“Help Bruno!” it croaked.

I tried to escape into the reality of a stardream, but a person needs peace of mind and possibly a pipe of hatch to do that successfully. In the end I fell into a nightmare doze inhabited by icy monsters.

Then, beyond the stealthy scrapings of the anemones, I heard the squeak of wheels and the grunting of lox. That awakened me in a hurry.

“Someone’s coming,” I shouted.

“Go back to sleep, Hardy,” said Dad dully. He thought I’d dreamed it. Sometimes he disheartens quite easily.

“No, really. I can hear a cart. Listen!”

Now they were all alert — all except Uncle Stance, that is — heads cocked, listening.

“You’re right!” piped Trigger joyfully. “We’re saved!”

Dad hauled on the overhead cord and the shrill squeal of the motorcart’s whistle rent the night air. The anemones were crowding us so densely we’d be easy to miss. The whistle sounded again, then died away in a splutter as boiler ran out of steam.

We all shouted. “In here! In here!” We banged on the cab sides with the fire irons. We made so much noise we didn’t hear our savior’s approach until a lox snuffled right outside the cab.

“That’s the Yam motorcart, isn’t it?” came a shout from the darkness.

“We have a broken spring,” called Dad.

“You chose a bad time and place.”

“Can you get us out of here?”

The newcomer yelled to his lox and they crashed forward, trampling anemones underfoot. A covered cart drew alongside, ghostly luminous from the light of an interior lamp. Hanging furs were drawn aside and a round, cheery face peered into our cab. “I can do better than that,” the man said. “I can repair your spring if you can wait till morning.”

“It’s Smith,” said Wand with less delight than I’d have expected. “Why does it have to be Smith, of all people?” she muttered to Dad.

“Because nobody else is fool enough to travel on a winter’s night!” shouted Smith jovially, overhearing. “Except you, of course. You must be near frozen. Come on over! I’ll stoke the furnace up.”

Dad carried Uncle Stance like a child in his arms, and I helped Faun who was lost in a defensive stardream — how she managed it I don’t know. Wand arrived last, muttering disapprovingly.

We found ourselves in a large cart covered with skins stitched together and laid over hoops high enough to allow plenty of headroom. The air was warm and acrid, heated by a glowing brazier placed centrally. Beyond lay a big heap of coal — a rare sight in these parts. Also at the forward end was a great pile of strangely-shaped pieces of metal. And sitting on a heap of furs was the source of Wand’s displeasure.

A woman.

Everybody’s heard of Smith and his woman, Smitha. They’re legendary. Traveling together, eating together, sleeping together. Living together. It’s unnatural — or

so I thought at the time. Smith and Smitha are not normal. So people think they're at least part-way toward being evil. And here they were, saving our lives. An awkward situation for Wand.

But not for Dad. He wasn't a chief, so he didn't have to judge and set examples. And — let's face it — he had his own unhealthy relationship with Spring. He'd dumped the snoring Uncle Stance on the floor and was busy hugging Smith. When he'd finished, he hugged Smitha, and even his long arms could not reach right around her vast body.

“Glad to see you!” he roared.

Smitha had clambered to her feet for the hug, and now I could see around her, right up to the front of the cart. And I heard Wand's hissing intake of breath.

A lorin sat there.

It sat on a shelf jutting from the low side wall of the cart just like a real person might, arms folded and one leg thrown over the other. Lorin are great mimics. It watched us, round-eyed.

Incredibly, Dad approached it, touched it on the shoulder, and said, “How are you, old fellow?” The lorin made no reply, of course. Afterwards I realized Dad's action was no different from the way he might greet someone's pet animal, but in that unreal moment it was almost as though he was accepting the lorin as an equal. “So, where have you been since last year?” he asked Smith, sitting down on a pile of furs.

“Oh, the usual route. All over Erto, as far as the Yellow Mountains. Working by day, traveling by night. It gets easier; I've had these lox three, four years and they know the way. And I have Wilt, of course.” He waved a giant hand at the lorin. It was the first time I'd ever come across a lorin with a name. “He keeps the lox on the right track if they start to wander while we're asleep. I don't know what I'd do without Wilt.”

“And Smitha,” said Smitha, with a fond look at Smith. Her name was not really Smitha; it was Alike Chubb, but she'd changed it when she and Smith got together. They say there were a lot of objections because people simply don't change names; after all their name *is* them, isn't it? So some people had tried calling her Chubb, obstinately. They didn't do it more than once. One swipe from the back of Smitha's vast hand and they found themselves more than willing to accept her new name.

“And Smitha,” Smith agreed. He was smaller than his wife, but had unusually thick and powerful arms.

He and Dad began a long reminiscence — what we call a revisiting — part personal, part culled from stardreams, rambling back over the history of generations with moments of delight when they found themselves visualizing the identical event from differing ancestral viewpoints. The rest of us dozed, apart from Wand who listened for the purpose — so it seemed — of interjecting acid comments from time to time.

Near dawn, talk drifted on to the human presence. As the skins overhead began to lighten I began to awaken properly.

“Selfish freezers,” Smith was saying without rancor, when Dad mentioned the failure of our expedition. “But maybe we’d be the same in their place; who knows? Just because they look like us, we can’t expect them to treat us like their own people.”

“Funny, the similarity,” said Dad. “I mean, they could have looked like Iorin. Or even snorters. But no, they look like us, only bigger. I often wonder if we’re in any way descended from them. Or them from us.”

“Hardly,” said Wand. “I’ve stardreamed their arrival. Our world was new to them.”

“So we’re just an efficient, logical shape,” said Smith happily. “You too, Smitha.”

He was answered by a strangled snore.

“All the same,” said Uncle Stance, now awake and brooding over the previous day’s humiliations, “I do feel they might give us the benefit of their technology. It’s no loss to them. It’d help us a lot, particularly in farming.” This last was for the benefit of Wand.

Smitha was up and about, busy at the brazier. An appetizing smell of fried snorter wafted around. “We’re our own worst enemies,” she said over her shoulder.

“She wants a motorcart,” Smith explained.

“A motorcart!” Uncle Stance exclaimed, rubbing his head. “You’re talking sacrilege!”

“In what way?”

“One village, one motorcart, that’s the rule. You know that as well as I do.”

“Why is that the rule?”

“Motorcarts are for chiefs. Where would we be, if ordinary people were allowed motorcarts? They’d be off driving all over the place. We’d lose all control. We’d never get any work done.” A spasm of pain crossed Uncle Stance’s face and he slumped back against the woodwork, enthusiasm suddenly spent. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he muttered tiredly. “It would be the end of civilization as we know it.”

“One minute you’re complaining the humans won’t give us their technology, the next you’re saying people shouldn’t have motorcarts.”

“I told you, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It would be easy enough to build one. There’s all kinds of ancient machinery at Pallahaxi. Cranes, plows, boats, motorcarts, everything you can imagine and more besides. Metal things. Our ancestors made things in metal; new things, they didn’t just repair what they’d already got. Amazing people, they must have been. They certainly had the technology. We should learn from them, our own ancestors. We should take what we need and put it to use.”

There came a predictable outcry from Uncle Stance and Wand.

“Loot Pallahaxi? The Holy Fount?”

“Sacrilege!”

Dear old Dad was silent, having mixed feelings in the matter. Or possibly no particular feelings at all.

“Commonsense,” said Smith. “Particularly in these hard times. They’ve built caverns and all sorts at Pallahaxi, and furnished them. A thousand people could sit out the freeze in comfort. It’s stupid to treat the place like some kind of untouchable shrine.”

Smitha brought us plates of fried meat and flat fried bread. Uncle Stance was spluttering with too much outrage to enjoy his food. “If I hear you’ve been despoiling Pallahaxi, Smith, I’ll—”

“You’ll what? You have no authority over us, Stance. We’re travelers. We’re tied to no village.” Popping a strip of meat into his mouth he squatted before our chief, staring him in the face. “You want your motorcart repaired or not?” he asked, indistinctly.

Discretion subdued Uncle Stance’s tantrum. “That’s your trade, Smith.”

“Even if I have to replace your spring with a spare I took from a barn in Pallahaxi?”

“We’re not to know where the spare came from,” said Dad quickly, before Stance could condemn us all to death with a foolish word. “It’s no concern of ours.”

“It’s light enough now,” said Smith. “Time to start work.”

3. *THE THAW*

19

So Smith repaired our motorcart, that last freeze before everything happened, and saved our lives.

He couldn't find a spare spring from among the pile of assorted metal in his cart, so he removed the broken leaf and heated and riveted and hammered the bits together at the anvil beside his brazier. Dad and I helped. The frequent trips outside to try the leaf for size were scary; it was bitterly cold out there. Eventually all was ready, Smith gave us some coal for the motorcart's fire, and we puffed back to Yam. Spring ran to meet us, crying for joy, hugging Dad and then me. It was supremely embarrassing, but luckily everyone else was shut up tight indoors, huddled before their fires.

Little else of interest happened during the freeze. We were frequently hungry but the Noss fish saved us from starvation. A small faction found something in a stardream that suggested food rationing was against the will of the Great Lox, and stormed the storage barn. The alarm was given in time and they were beaten off. Nursing their bruises they crept back to their huts, muttering that the sun-god Phu must have a good reason for forsaking us. It was the deepest freeze in memory, so they said. And if Phu was capable — in the form of the Great Lox — of dragging the world from the clutches of the ice-devil Rax, then he was equally capable of dragging it the other way if we'd annoyed him. I was told they brought this up at the next temple meeting. It made a queer kind of sense — to those stupid enough to believe in religion in the first place.

Then one day the world was shining wet, and Phu shone more convincingly, and our spirits began to lift. The thaw had come at last. The first of the game animals was sighted within a few days.

Wand led the women into the fields earlier that year, to make sure the crops had the longest possible growing season. There were objections from the more religious, naturally; Uncle Stance among them. I was privileged to catch the start of one such conversation.

Uncle Stance was shouting, "We've never sown so early before. It goes against every Yam memory!"

"To Rax with the mistakes of the past!" retorted Wand. "We have to eat!"

Then they saw me, and took their ground-breaking argument elsewhere.

I must explain that our cultural practices and customs are almost inviolate. As a result of our vivid ancestral memories, change will always be resisted. Wand's early sowing might seem eminently practical to a human, but in our terms it was almost frightening in its novelty. She would prevail, of course. She was the womanchief, and therefore in charge of agriculture. But Uncle Stance never shirked fighting battles he couldn't

win. This is why he challenged Dad's commonsense views so often. Trigger was just the same.

The days grew warmer, the hunting team brought in fresh meat, and the abortive motorcart trip to Devon Station began to look like needless panic. I sometimes wonder what my sons and grandsons will make of it, as they relive that fearful night in their stardreams. I'm ashamed of the episode but I haven't put it under geas; there's a lesson to be learned. We're responsible to our descendants and should not risk our lives without good reason. They will judge us, in times to come.

As soon as the weather permitted I went to my stardreaming pool. It was wonderful to be out of the hut and away from the constant presence of Dad and the frequent presence of Uncle Stance and Trigger. Dad and I got along really well, but it had been a long winter and it was quite natural that we should be a little edgy with each other by the thaw.

Phu was warm and the palpators were pleasant, massaging my skin gently as I lay back with my hands behind my head. Wisps of fragrant smoke drifted from my pipe of hatch. I composed myself to stardream, alone and at peace.

A face appeared in my mind's eye. Brown eyes watched me.

Charm was there again.

No! This was ridiculous. I'd spent a whole freeze trying to stop thinking about that web-footed flounder girl. Now spring was here, surely she'd leave me in peace!

Determinedly, I tried recalling my first pipe of hatch.

"*Don't force it,*" Dad had said. Uncle Stance was there too, and Wand, and other village notables. A boy becomes a man with his first pipe. It's symbolic of his ability to pass on his genes. Often stardreaming doesn't happen on this occasion, because a fellow is too nervous. But I'd looked at Dad smiling down at me proudly, and I'd drawn on the pipe and relaxed, and suddenly someone had been speaking in my mind, clear as the summer sky.

"*Come to me, Bruno.*"

Spring's face had looked up at me, much younger, oddly intent, her lips slightly swollen. I/Bruno had leaned forward, holding her. . . .

I'd felt my cheeks go hot; I'd been about to stardream my own moment of conception in front of all those people. Worse, I'd been feeling the sexual attraction of my own mother; a confusing situation. I'd backtracked hastily and found I could easily slip into Dad's memories at an earlier point. So I'd relived a hunt through his eyes, minute by minute, and made the kill, and smelled the blood and felt the moment of arrogance and heard the congratulations. That's how real it was.

"*Well done, Bruno! Enough meat there for a few days.*"

My first stardream! I'd come out of it and grinned up at the expectant faces. "Good hunting, Dad!" I'd said, and he'd smiled his pride.

I'd stardreamed further back since that day, and was reasonably familiar with the memories of four generations. Now, on this first real spring day, I felt too lazy to break new ground so I ambled through Dad's early years. Actually, it's considered bad manners to investigate the memories of living ancestors, but Dad would never know.

I was mildly puzzled over his relationship with Uncle Stance. Having no brothers of my own, I'd often wondered how Dad really felt about the man who, by his very birth, had snatched the chiefship from Dad's grasping fingers.

I found a friendly contempt allied to a fierce loyalty. Dad clearly thought his brother was a bit of a jackass — by now the word had become a part of my vocabulary — but he was very protective of him, as you would expect of an elder brother. He supported Uncle Stance in his leadership of Yam men. He recognized his weaknesses and corrected his mistakes unobtrusively. I was able to jump from memory to memory on this basis; we call it riding a leader. It's similar to Mister McNeil using the search capability of his computer. I followed a series of examples of Dad helping Uncle Stance out of trouble, and one thing emerged from those memories loud and clear.

Dad would have made a better chief than Uncle Stance.

I pondered this. Their ancestral experience was almost identical; Uncle Stance outmemoried Dad by just two years. And his demeanor was more impressive than clumsy old Dad's. He looked the part and he acted the part. But it was acting, nothing more. He was weak and superstitious and I could tell that Dad — probably out of loyalty — had suppressed his memories of further shortcomings. Uncle Stance was a jackass, pure and simple. He lacked only the long ears.

I sat up and regarded the still water of my pool. I knelt and splashed the water over my face; a fellow can sweat a bit, stardreaming. The water was cool, the air warm. I took off my clothes and jumped in, and splashed about happily, shouting at the trees. Phu smiled down at me. Rax was a long way off, invisible in the day sky.

Then I heard a derisive yelling. Trigger and Caunter stood on the bank, laughing and pointing.

A fellow feels vulnerable without clothes; are humans the same? I felt as though I'd been caught doing something shameful, like praying. I scrambled out of the pool and dragged clothes over my wet skin.

"You're all soaking!" Trigger screeched with laughter, the fool.

He was Uncle Stance's son and he would be chief one day, barring accidents.

20

"I'm telling you, Stance, we're not getting the germination," said Wand.

"I knew it! I knew it!" He sounded almost pleased at this disaster. "Early sowing is an insult to the goatparent. It implies mistrust. Now you've got us in deep trouble."

"What do you think the cause is?" Dad asked Wand, ignoring Uncle Stance's foolery.

"Perhaps the last of the thaw rotted the seed. And there was a plague of drivets in the barn; perhaps they peed over the seed. Perhaps the seed is naturally weak because it comes from last year's poor crop. I don't know."

"One thing we do know," said Uncle Stance. "It's your fault, Wand."

"I accept that. It doesn't help the situation, though."

Wand, Uncle Stance, Dad and I stood in the middle of the field known as Low Prospect; usually our most productive bit of land apart from Silly May's nursery. It lay to the north of Yam on a south-facing slope, well drained and sunny, surrounded by a dense hedge of sticklebushes to keep the wild lox, loats and other ruminants out. Here the women tended our grain crop. A number of them were out now, pulling weeds from among anemic-looking shoots.

"The root crops don't look any better, either," added Wand.

"You should have known. Rax, we tried early sowing ten, eleven generations ago. It failed then just as it's failing now."

At these words Wand went a funny color. She glared at Uncle Stance. I wouldn't have liked to be the recipient of that look; her eyes were like twin Raxes.

"We did *not* suffer a crop failure, neither ten nor eleven years ago, Stance. They were warm years and the yield was excellent. I must remind you that my ancestor was womanchief at the time. What do you hope to gain by such stupid lying?"

Time stood still. Uncle Stance looked not one whit abashed. He'd committed the ultimate crime of bad manners: inventing a memory to prove a point. But he stared blandly over the head of the furious woman as though she was a small yapping animal beneath contempt.

"More relevant," he said, "is how are we going to repay the loan of fish from Noss?"

I felt as though we'd all been holding our breath, and we all exhaled at once.

"You'll have to explain the situation to them," said Wand, recovering. At least she had the good manners not to press home her point.

"Not I," said Uncle Stance, somehow conveying in two short words that her suggestion was inappropriate, even immature. "The failure lies within your field of responsibility, Wand."

"I did not negotiate the loan."

All eyes turned to poor old Dad.

"All right," he said amiably. "I'll go to Noss and do the groveling if it'll keep the peace here."

My heart jolted. Charm smiled at me in my mind's eye. "Can I come too, Dad?"

"Of course. This is going to be an excellent lesson in how to eat humble pie. I wouldn't want you to miss it."

Matters should have ended there, but Wand was still fuming. "By the way," she said nastily, "an interesting suggestion came up the other day. Oddly enough, it was Silly May who thought of it."

Stance stiffened. Whatever the suggestion was, he was against it. "Yes?"

"She thought we might try domesticating other animals beside lox. We could keep them in large fenced paddocks, and breed for tractability. Loats, snorters, that kind of thing."

"But those are game animals!"

"All animals except lox are game animals."

“Impossible. We’ve *never* domesticated game animals. Out of the question. I won’t hear of it.”

“Actually it’s not within your jurisdiction, Stance. Domestic animals are women’s work. Just bring back a few live young animals from the next hunt, will you? We’ll see to the rest of it.”

“Absolutely not!” I could see his problem. If we raised herds of domestic animals, the hunt would become unnecessary. Stance would lose the most spectacular aspect of his responsibilities.

Wand ignored him. “We’ll give it some thought,” she said.

That was the end of the episode as regards decision-making, but there was a curious aftermath. Dad and Uncle Stance walked back toward the village and I hurried ahead to check out my boat. I intended to take it with me on the trip to Noss and maybe leave it there in the care of someone. This would establish a permanent connection. Although it was basically a skimmer for the grume, the Noss boatbuilders make a false bottom that can be pegged underneath the hull, making the boat seaworthy in normal water conditions. I planned to persuade Dad to get me one.

The boat lay in our yard, covered with skins against the worst effects of the past freeze. I crawled underneath to check it out; the extreme drying effects of the freeze can cause timbers to split. Noss people keep the smaller boats in their cottages during cold weather and I’d suggested this to Dad, but I’d been outvoted.

I was relieved to find the boat had suffered no harm. There were a few fine cracks at the joints, but these would take up once the boat was in the water. I could hardly see the place where Dad and I had repaired last year’s damage. As I crouched there I heard footsteps approach, and Dad’s voice, thick with unusual anger.

“Try that again and you won’t get any support from me, Stance!”

It was too late to reveal my presence. I’d already heard too much. A top-level quarrel was in progress.

“An unguarded moment, nothing more,” replied Uncle Stance airily.

“No, I’m serious. I’ve backed you all the way up to now, but this is far enough.”

“I know, I know.” Now his tone was conciliatory. “Good of you to make the Noss trip, Bruno. I appreciate it.”

There was a pause before Dad spoke. I could tell he was weighing the satisfaction of ranting and raving against the need to get on with life. The practical approach won out. “It won’t be easy. Lonessa’s a tough nut. . . .”

Their voices faded. I crouched there, pondering. What was it all about? Dad didn’t lose his temper without good reason. What had Uncle Stance done? Was it his silly lie about the historic crops? Or was there more to it? Perhaps there’d been a further conversation after I’d left them. My curiosity was aroused. I’d wait for an opportune moment, and pry it out of talkative old Dad.

One thing had come through loud and clear, though: the extent to which Uncle Stance depended on him. Without Dad, the village would fall apart.

In years to come I'd be called upon to support the idiotic Trigger in just the same way. Would I be capable of showing the same forbearance and commonsense as Dad?

21

Uncle Stance had planned a hunting trip, so the motorcart was available for our trip to Noss.

Years ago Uncle Stance had tried using the motorcart for hunting, and I well remember his triumphant return, the back of the cart laden with carcasses, the rest of the hunting party trailing far behind on foot. The villagers had gathered around, cheering. Only later had it emerged that the motorcart had become disabled when he'd driven it off the beaten track in pursuit of game and, in the enthusiasm of the chase, tried to leap a small ravine with it. The hunting party had set up their tents and labored three days and nights with poles and rocks to lever the motorcart back onto level ground. The carcasses, which Uncle Stance had displayed so proudly, were those of a herd of snorters that had been so amazed by the sight of their lumbering pursuer that they'd fallen into the ravine themselves. "Which proves my point," said Uncle Stance, when the true story of the hunt became common knowledge.

Significantly, the motorcart had never since been used for hunting although the possibility was always left open. "No. . . . I don't think we'll take the motorcart this time," Uncle Stance would say thoughtfully, as though he'd given the matter mature consideration.

It was a fine morning and the long shadows were hard and sharp as people gathered to see us off. Like most villages, Yam is situated at a junction of well-worn routes: north to the moors and the ancient town of Alike, south to the coast and Noss, and east to the coast again at the holy town of Pallahaxi. West lies the river and a ford. The village consists of a straggle of cottages beside these roads, widening to an open square at the junction. This junction also marks the boundary between the men's cottages to the north, and the women's to the south.

Here in the square, Dad and I sat on the motorcart receiving the good wishes of the villagers. Dad cut an impressive figure in his negotiating cloak; I a lesser one in my ragged old tunic. Spring hovered close, plump hands pawing at Dad. Uncle Stance marched by at the head of his hunting team. He raised his spear with its chief's tassels in salute.

"Good luck, Bruno!" he called, strutting on, his men in single file behind him. Why they always marched in single file through the village I don't know, unless it was to give visible evidence that Uncle Stance was the leader. I do know that once they were out of sight they would degenerate into a shambling troupe, chatting and play-fighting and dropping behind to urinate. I've been with them out there. They spend more time chasing lost members of their own team than they spend chasing game.

"Good hunting, Stance!" Dad shouted back, and gave a blast on the whistle. Then we were off, trundling southward, with the village brats running behind, yelling. I

can't imagine why they do that, but they always do. It's what Mister McNeil describes as mass hysteria. I find myself urging Dad to open the throttle wide and outrun them.

Speaking of Mister McNeil, he was the first stop on our journey.

"Sorry to hear about your meeting at Devon Station," he said, as we stood outside his residence. "I did warn you. The policy of non-interference is quite strict."

"I should have thought the very presence of your mining operations invalidated that policy," said Dad cleverly.

"You could be right. Anyway, all that may be academic."

"Huh?"

Mister McNeil started to stroll along one of the network of pathways. Some of his flowers were already in bloom. Dad and I trailed after his tall figure like Uncle Stance's hunting team. He seemed to be searching for words.

"You probably know the mine's not been a particularly economic proposition recently," he said at last. He stooped and hauled out a weed that was trying to strangle a yellow trumpet-shaped flower.

"I hear they blame the lorin."

"Yes." From his crouched position, he looked up at Dad. "We don't seem to be able to get a handle on the lorin. What do you know about them?"

It was an odd question but a human one. "What do you mean? The lorin are the lorin. What else can I say?"

"Have you no curiosity about them?"

"No. They just *are*. Like Rax and Phu and so on."

"But you were curious about *us* when we arrived."

"Of course. You were new. You weren't in our memories."

Mister McNeil pointed. "There. See that?" A pair of lorin squatted among the flowers, removing weeds. "They were watching me from the trees. They always do. They saw me weeding, so now they're doing it themselves. Are they trying to help me? Or learn from me? Or simply mimic me mindlessly? Or what? They're a little unnerving, you know."

The lorin didn't look at all unnerving to me. "They often imitate us, too," I said. "It doesn't mean anything."

But Dad had been pondering on a previous remark. He often does that, then suddenly comes out with it when everyone else has moved on to a fresh topic. It's a sign of advancing years.

"You said the mine may be academic."

Mister McNeil hesitated. "If things don't improve we may have to close it down."

"And move out?"

"Yes, I suppose so. No decision's been taken. You see, we have to come to terms with this lorin problem. Don't get me wrong — we don't see them as hostile. They're a nuisance, though. Something about their presence seems to affect productivity. Almost as though they telepathically command us to slow down. Which is non-

sense, of course. But . . . Some people are saying: this world is not big enough for both us and the lorin. . . .”

I had an odd feeling of loss. The lorin would always be here, I knew that. Which meant that the humans might go. I liked the humans, particularly Mister McNeil. They were clever, they’d been around as far back as I’d stardreamed so far, and they were somehow comforting, like protectors. When the freeze came and Rax turned his baleful glare on us, it was nice to know the humans were equal to his evil presence.

At least, that’s the way I was thinking then.

“So in any case,” Mister McNeil was saying, “we can hardly give you people the benefits of our technology when we might not be around to teach you how to use it. You’d have a short-term improvement in your lifestyle and your population would rise accordingly. Then the machines would break down and you wouldn’t know how to repair them or build new ones. Then you wouldn’t be able to support your larger population. It would be a long-term disaster.”

“It wouldn’t have been, if you’d set out to help us right from when you arrived,” said Dad.

“They don’t want to take the responsibility.” It was the Nowhere Man, slow-spoken and stooping, joining us. “They’re not sure we have the intelligence to handle technology.”

“It’s not that at all,” said Mister McNeil, annoyed. “The reason’s quite simple. When we arrived we found a rural population and relatively happy people. Aside of policy considerations, we have no right to change things. It’s your world, your culture. Have the sense to value it.”

“People aren’t happy when they’re starving,” said Dad. “Even rural half-wits.”

“It’s a cycle. Your system isn’t particularly stable, not with a giant body like Rax affecting the pull of your sun. But believe me, good years will come back. Maybe even next year.”

Faced with his superior astronomical knowledge there was little we could say. We climbed aboard the motorcart and headed for Noss.

The Nowhere Man came with us, saying he was sick of Mister McNeil’s cant. What he intended to do in Noss I couldn’t even guess. He wouldn’t be particularly welcome there — or anywhere else, for that matter. I was uneasy in his presence, thinking guiltily of the alarmingly pretty — if web-footed — Charm.

The meeting was a disaster; but then, we’d known it would be. Lonessa behaved reasonably because of her lecherous inclinations toward attractive old Dad. Our problem lay with the youngest Noss representative.

We sat in a circle on wicker seats built like fish traps; Noss people are creatures of habit when it comes to design. It soon became clear that the abominable Cuff, with whom I’d tangled the previous year, wielded a lot of authority in Noss. Because of

Walleye's infirmity — crippled as well as being half blind — he was well on the way to usurping his father's position as manchief.

"Let me get this straight," he said after Dad had perpetrated his initial grovel. "You borrowed a large quantity of dried fish from us last year on the undertaking you would repay it with grain this year. Now you're saying your grain crop has failed."

"Not failed yet; that's putting it too strongly. It looks a little scanty," said Dad mildly. "There'll be barely enough for Yam."

"And furthermore," said the jumped-up young brat, ignoring him, "you're begging for more food this year. What's gone wrong at Yam? Can't you manage your own affairs? Must you come cap in hand to Noss?"

"It's unfortunate," said Walleye mildly, "but these things happen."

"Be quiet, Dad. Our objective must be to make sure it doesn't happen again. Yam needs to be taught a short sharp lesson."

"Really, Cuff, I don't see the need. . . ."

"I can handle this, Lonessa. I know these people," continued the arrogant young freezer, "and I know how they think. They spend half their lives lying in the sun in idleness, watching the crops grow. Over the generations, this has resulted in a peculiar mentality. They—"

Dad spoke suddenly. "Surely food stocks are Lonessa's responsibility, Cuff? You have first-hand knowledge of current inventories? It seems to me—"

"— seem to think other people owe them a living. This —"

"That's freezing unfair. The point is—"

"Don't interrupt me, Bruno. I'm trying to make you understand that—"

But exactly what Cuff was trying to make us understand, we never found out. His words degenerated to a gurgle as Dad, showing unaccustomed lack of control, lunged forward and seized him by the throat. He shook him around a few times while Cuff kicked helplessly like a roped snorter. Then he threw him away. I'm sure he'd intended to return Cuff to his seat, but violent old Dad didn't always know his own strength. Cuff soared across the room and smashed into the ancient stone wall. Then he slid to the floor, unconscious.

It was the only satisfying moment in the entire negotiating process.

Lonessa disapproved. "By Phu!" she shouted. "That was unnecessary, Bruno!"

Walleye had limped over to his son and knelt beside him, lifting his head. "You could have killed him."

"Rax," muttered Dad, contrite, "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking of. I wasn't really thinking at all." Foolishly he tried to elaborate. "Everything went blank. All I can say is I'm deeply sorry for any harm I may have caused the young freez— uh, fellow. Can I help you carry him somewhere, Walleye? No, I'll get some water." He looked around helplessly.

"You won't touch him," snapped Walleye. "And Yam can go to Rax with its problems, so far as I'm concerned."

“No, wait, Walleye,” said Lonessa quickly. “Let’s not be hasty. You’d be the first to admit Cuff can be irritating.”

“I would not!”

“Here’s my suggestion. We’ll never get anywhere the way we are now. We need time to cool off. Time to reflect. It’s Noss and Yam we’re talking about, not just the five of us here. Personal animosities must be put aside. We should take a break until sundown, and then meet again.”

“He’s coming round,” said Walleye.

Cuff raised his head, groaned, and fixed Dad with an unpleasant look. “That does it,” he muttered venomously. His gaze shifted to me. Despite his obvious pain, a poisonous smile touched his lips. He was visualizing smashing my face in; a long-held ambition.

“We’ll talk again at sundown,” said Lonessa firmly.

Dad and I crept out of the place, disgraced. To be accurate, Dad was disgraced; but some of it seemed to have rubbed off on me. “I’m going for a walk around the cliffs,” he said. “I’m sorry, Hardy. I made a fool of myself in there. I need to be alone for a while. I’ll take the circular route to the inlet upstream and meet you back here at sundown, huh?”

And he sloped off in the direction of the historic place where Granddad’s friend Hodge had sired the Nowhere Man. I hoped there was no fateful significance here, because my thoughts had turned to Charm. And suddenly I was very nervous. I wanted to see her so much that I couldn’t bring myself to take the necessary steps. I wasn’t even sure what those steps were. I couldn’t ask a Noss person: have you seen Charm around, by any chance? Because they’d instantly start thinking this young fellow seems smitten; is miscegenation in the wind?

I mulled it over for a while, sitting on the bank of the estuary, then the problem solved itself. I’ve often found problems do that, if you give them time.

“Hello, Hardy. I . . . I thought you might be somewhere around.”

It was Charm in a white dress, round-eyed and angelic, smiling uncertainly at me, dimples coming and going. I felt a huge thump in my chest.

“Uh,” I muttered, terrified.

“I saw your skimmer on the motorcart. So I came to find you.” She sat down beside me, smoothing her dress over her knees. It was a very rare item, that dress, obviously made from human fabric. Most Noss women wear skins. “Aren’t you pleased to see me?” she asked.

“Uh.”

“Rax!” she exclaimed, as a sound of puffing carried along the road above us. “It’s that freezer Cuff in our motorcart, I’ll bet!”

And she threw an arm around my shoulders and pulled me flat to the ground. We peered through the undergrowth, propped on our elbows. The Noss motorcart clattered by at speed, heading north, the unspeakable Cuff sawing at the regulator, apparently recovered from his injury and venting his temper on the machine.

I relished the moment, flat on my stomach with Charm's arm around me, her hips pressing into mine, her cheek actually touching mine, her hair mingling with mine. Palpater plants massaged us gently, looking for food. I could happily have died there. Charm showed no sign of moving. We watched the road while the waters of the estuary sighed and tinkled behind us. The Nowhere Man strolled past without seeing us, following in the dust raised by Cuff's passage.

As last Charm rolled away from me and sat up, staring at the water with her arms hugging her knees, expression grave.

"Listen, you haven't said if you're pleased to see me."

"Uh." I had to force the words out. "Yes. I am."

"Why?" She swiveled round to face me.

"I . . . like you."

"A girl wouldn't think so. But I believe you. I hope you do like me because I'm taking a big chance, seeing you. Mom is all worried because I mentioned you a few times this last freeze. Just mentioned you, that's all. I couldn't see the harm in it but she got suspicious. Apparently I'm not allowed to like you because you're a grubber with thick calluses on your knees from crawling around planting things. I told her: I don't care. I'll like who I like."

I weighed this up, my heart beginning to recover its normal pace. I seemed to be able to breathe again. "Your mother likes my Dad and he has calluses," I pointed out. What was I saying? "No, he doesn't. None of us do. What's all this about calluses?"

"That's how you can tell grubbers, so they say."

I hauled up my pants leg. "Show me calluses."

"Oh." She stared. "There aren't any."

"My Dad's worried too," I said. "I didn't have to say a thing, but he's worried."

"What didn't you have to say a thing about?"

"You."

She smiled a satisfied, dimpled smile. "I *knew* you liked me. A woman can tell." Then she looked puzzled. "But why would he worry?"

I wasn't going to say it, because calluses, if there are calluses, come from hard work, whereas webbed feet are genetic; a shameful deformity that get passed on to a person's descendants.

"Why would he worry?" she asked again. "Aren't I good enough to be your friend?"

In the end it had to come out. "It's the feet," I blurted.

"The feet?" She still didn't understand.

"The webs."

"The webs?"

"Between the toes."

She stared at me in amazement, coloring a pretty pink. Then, sighing as if in exasperation, she slipped off one black shoe. She held up a leg as she lay there. The

skirt slipped back above her knee. She had a very beautiful knee. She wiggled her toes.

There were no webs.

Her foot looked just like mine, only prettier.

"I've been misinformed," I said, trying to retain some dignity.

"But *webbed feet*, for Phu's sake? Grume riders have webbed feet. Not people. Is it just me, or are all Noss people supposed to have webbed feet?"

"Uh, all of you, as a matter of fact. And your blood is supposed to run thicker during the grume."

"Why would anyone say that?"

We thought about it for a moment. In the end I ventured, "Maybe it's to put us off. To stop Yam people getting too close to Noss people. After all, we are different in other ways. We wouldn't want a whole bunch of Nowhere Men around the place, would we?"

"Are you going to have children?" she demanded abruptly.

"Well. . . I suppose so. Not just yet. I'm too young."

And that's another difference from you humans. We tend to have children later in life, to give them the benefit of as much of our experience as possible.

"Rax!" she exclaimed. I don't believe in that stuff. Anyway," she said before I could argue, "Let's go sailing. We'll go and pick up a bottom for your boat." She jumped to her feet, grabbing my hand and pulling me up too.

I was supremely happy as we climbed the bank and set off down the road to the Noss men's village. It just shows how fate can lure a fellow into a false sense of security.

23

But the happiness lasted a little while longer. Phu smiled down and a light breeze sped us down the estuary, over the shallow bar, between the headlands and out to the open sea. Charm was a capable sailor like all Noss people, so my own inexperience was no problem. We set a southeast course on a broad reach, and sat side by side on the starboard gunwale. Charm held the tiller and I the sheet. We chatted of inconsequential things, getting to know each other — as much as Noss and Yam people can. She seemed content to hold the course indefinitely, and after a while I began to get nervous. Waves had begun to break over the bow and sweep aft, cold water swilling around our feet.

"Hadn't we better turn back now?" I suggested.

She glanced at me, grinned briefly and thrust at the tiller. Soon we were speeding back the way we'd come and my spirits rose again. Odd how the sight of land encourages a grubber. I loved sailing, but I didn't like to stray too far from shore.

Stealing a glance at Charm, I noticed something.

"What's happened to your crystal?"

Her hand flew to her neck; she looked dismayed. “Oh, Rax! I was wearing it earlier.” She concentrated hard. “I wore it when I was . . . looking for you. And then . . . when we went to the men’s village it wasn’t there.” She was visualizing the memory the way we people can, reliving the moments, feeling the crystal swinging between her young breasts — then not feeling it. “It happened when we lay down,” she said distantly. “On our tummies, when Cuff went past. The plants must have untied it from the cord, or maybe eaten it off.”

We’d been lying in a patch of palpaters; a spreading weed that digs for insects. It has a high level of curiosity for a plant, and will fiddle with anything that interests it. Charm’s crystal, dangling from her neck as she lay propped on her elbows, would have been irresistible.

“We’ll find it. The cord may have gone, but the palpater can’t eat the crystal.”

She was not reassured. “It could carry it off some distance to get rid of it. It could carry it up to the road.” The plants pass objects on, one to another, for consumption by the most hungry. An inedible object could travel quite a way. “Someone might pick it up!”

“They’d know who it belonged to. There’s nothing else like it in Noss, or Yam for that matter. They’d give it back to you.”

“They might give it to Mom! She’d kill me if she knew I’d lost it!”

“We’d better get back fast.” I regretted this as soon as I’d said it, because she hauled the sail in tight. The boat heeled, we sat well out on the side to balance it, and the trickling sound of water past the bow changed to a businesslike hiss. It was alarming.

We raced through a group of fish boats between the headlands. The men ignored us as we passed. I wore the clothes of an inlander, and Charm was a woman; they had no reason to acknowledge our presence. Then one tall fellow, in the act of pulling in a taut line, raised a hand and smiled.

“That’s Dad,” said Charm briefly, too occupied with the tiller to wave back. “Hold on tight, now. I’m taking us over the bar.”

Wise sailors skirt the bar with its confused waves that can dump a boat onto hard sand and break its back, but Charm was in too much of a hurry to consider such matters. Besides, I thought glumly, it’s not her boat.

But she knew what she was doing, caught a wave with plenty of body to it, and surfed over the bar into the deep water of the estuary beyond. I breathed a deep sigh of relief; I’d been holding my breath as we’d scooted along, seeing shellfish sitting on the bottom a handbreadth below the surface. “Won’t be long now,” said Charm.

But she was wrong. Our lives were about to change forever.

There came a solid bump, and the boat slewed to starboard. My first thought was that we’d hit bottom. The boat heeled over, then righted itself as I let the sheet fly.

“What was that?” I exclaimed.

“I don’t know.” Charm twisted around, scanning the water in our wake. “Look, there it is. There’s something floating.”

Now I could see it too, at the point where the bubbles of our wake showed a sudden curve. Just below the surface, something dark.

"It's a dead lorin," I said. I could see an arm, outflung.

Charm swung the boat around and we drifted slowly with the wind, back toward the object. I was getting a bad feeling about the thing. The closer we approached, the less like a lorin it looked.

Charm voiced my fears. "I . . . I think it's a person."

We drifted alongside. I reached out with the boathook and snagged it. It floated face down, a rounded back just breaking the surface. It wore a dark shirt and pants. It was big enough to be almost certainly male.

And in the center of the back was a wound from which a cloud of pink still drifted.

Someone or something had killed this man. My first thought was that a snorter had gored him; people don't kill people, on our world. Or at least, hardly ever. But he'd have to be lying down for a snorter to cause that wound. An unlikely scenario. People don't lie down and let snorters gore them.

I felt sick, and it wasn't just because we'd found a body. It was something else; something about the size and shape of the body.

"Who is it?" I whispered.

I was thinking: *this isn't Dad*. It's Dad's size and Dad's shape but it isn't Dad. Dad was wearing his negotiating cloak; this person only has a shirt and pants on. *It isn't Dad*.

"Roll him over," said Charm quietly.

I knelt and took hold of the cord around his waist and pulled. He rolled onto his side, then back again, nearly pulling me out of the boat. He was heavy. I tried again and the same thing happened. I worked up a rhythm, hauling at him, then letting go as he rolled back, hauling again, gaining a little each time.

Finally the resistance slackened at the top of a roll, and he kept going, and his head came round, and his eyes were staring at the sky.

And it was Dad. My father. The person who had sired me and taught me and been my friend and companion for most of my life.

I heard Charm say, "I'm so sorry, Hardy."

And I tried to stifle my feelings, not because I didn't want Charm to hear me wailing with sorrow and weakness and despair, but because we must have compassion for our descendants, and mine would be visiting this moment down generations without end.

I'd never felt so alone, despite Charm's presence. We roped Dad's body to the boat and towed it slowly to the nearest land: the sandy shore below the man's village. We beached the boat among Noss fish boats, untied Dad and dragged him clear of the water. A few fishermen arrived, staring at the body. One of them tried to help us.

“Get away from him!” I heard myself yell.

He backed off without comment. For all I knew, he might have been the murderer. But I doubted it. I thought I knew who was responsible.

Charm said quietly, “We’re going to need help loading him onto the motorcart, Hardy.”

“I don’t need help from any Noss people, thanks very much!”

“I . . . I’m a Noss person.”

I looked at her. She was crying.

“Somebody stabbed Dad in the back,” I said.

“It doesn’t have to be anyone from Noss.”

“It can’t be anyone else. And anyway, I know who it is. It’s that freezer Cuff!”

There was a murmur of outrage from the fishermen, who by now had grown into quite a crowd. “Careful what you say there, grubber boy,” someone said.

I looked up at their hostile faces, uncaring. “Cuff quarreled with Dad today. I saw Cuff heading up toward the women’s village in your motorcart. Dad went for a walk on the cliff and he’d have come down that way. Cuff waited for him and killed him.”

“You’re speaking of the manchief’s son,” said a fisherman grimly.

“Please don’t talk like this, Hardy,” said Charm.

Three lorin had arrived, and now they knelt beside Dad, placing their hands on him and sighing. I let them stay; you never know, with lorin.

“I think an apology is due,” said someone.

It was a bad time to lose my temper; but standing there over Dad — killed, I was sure, by a Noss man — among an unsympathetic crowd, and hearing someone asking for an apology from me. . . . From *me*! It was too much. I swung round on the speaker.

“You go to Rax!” I shouted in his face.

He must have read the violence in me because he backed off. Others didn’t. My arms were seized. I struggled, getting in a few good kicks before I was overpowered. I was hustled up the beach, grim faces all around me. I was still in the grip of anger, and felt no fear.

“In the net loft,” someone said.

A door was opened and they threw me inside. I landed on a pile of stinking nets, unhurt. One of the men remained inside the doorway, all ready to make a parting speech which I had no intention of hearing. I threw myself at him, hauled him away from the door and lit him solidly on the nose. It was his turn to fall among the nets. Other faces were grouped in the doorway now, peering in uncertainly. I made a run for them but was brought up short by the sheer weight of numbers. I hit a couple of them, but there were too many hands, and they tossed me back among the nets.

“He needs teaching a lesson,” said the man I’d hit first, feeling his nose gingerly as he joined his companions in the doorway.

It was an ugly situation, and my anger ebbed as I realized what I’d got myself into. There were some twenty fishermen out there, and some of them had picked up the

clubs they use for killing fish forced to the surface by the grume. Unlike humans we are not naturally violent people, but there was a queer madness in the air that day and at last I began to feel frightened. They surged into the hut, watching me as I lay there. I don't think they saw me as a person like themselves. They saw me as a dangerous animal, which made it much easier for them to attack me.

I jumped to my feet, kicked myself clear of entangling nets, and climbed the ladder to the loft. This ran around three sides of the building, a balcony about twice as wide as a stilk is tall. I threw the ladder away, realizing too late that I'd have been better off pulling it up, and stood looking down at them while their combined shouts blended into an animal roar. I remembered hearing about the blood-lust that comes over Noss fishermen during the grume, when they paddle their boats among stranded fish, clubbing and clubbing mindlessly, roaring all the while. They were not people any more; they were predators.

They leaned the ladder against the loft. A burly man began to climb. I let him get near the top, then heaved the ladder backwards. He fell among the others, and the roar intensified. More men arrived, bringing more ladders. They began to climb in several places.

I was about to dislodge the nearest ladder when I realized the face before me was Charm's.

She ran up the last few rungs and turned to face the crowd below.

"All right, that's enough!" she yelled.

The roar died away. "Come down from there, Charm!" came a single shout. "We don't want to hurt you!"

"Just calm down, will you?" she shouted back. "You're Noss fishermen! Where's your pride? You're behaving like a pack of grume riders!"

This brought some angry muttering; partly because it was true, and partly because Charm was the womanchief's daughter with no authority over the fishermen. But she had an undeniable status in the village, and those on the ladders hesitated.

"This is a matter for Walleye to deal with!" she shouted.

"Fetch Walleye!" someone yelled, and his shout was taken up by others, and the moment passed and the mood changed, and I was saved.

"Thanks," I said to Charm, as men began to stretch themselves out on the nets to await the arrival of their manchief.

She gave me an unfriendly look. "Make the most of it," she said, and climbed down the ladder, and was gone. She was loyal to her people and I'd upset her by accusing one of their number.

For a while I felt guilty about it and considered the possibility that I'd been wrong, but the guilt soon turned to sorrow as I tried to come to terms with the loss of Dad. What would I do without him? What would Yam do without him? As time passed I began to get angry again. My father had been killed, yet these people were holding me prisoner when they should have been out questioning Cuff at the very least. I climbed down the ladder. My guards tensed themselves, ready to deal with this wild young man.

“Let me pass,” I said.

“You must wait for Walleye.”

“Why?”

“Be patient.”

In the end it was Lonessa who arrived. “Come with me,” she said briefly.

One of the guards objected. “We must wait for Walleye.”

“He’s up at the council house,” she told him. “You can’t expect him to walk all the way down here.”

The guards muttered unhappily, but in the end they let us go. On our silent walk to the council house we passed the Yam motorcart and I saw that Dad’s body had been loaded onto the cargo platform at the rear. Water dripped to the road. I could have wept. The last cargo on that platform had been dried fish. My anger was all gone, my sorrow was threatening to cause me to break down. I entered the council house where, earlier that day, Dad had sat and talked and lived and thrown Cuff against the wall.

Walleye and Charm sat there. Cuff was not present. Lonessa and I sat down. The room was terribly dead and empty without Dad.

Walleye spoke first. “I understand you’ve accused my son Cuff of killing your father.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Charm would not look at me.

Walleye continued. “You’re young and rash.”

“I know that. It doesn’t alter the facts,” I managed to say.

“My son Cuff,” said Walleye in apparent sorrow.

Lonessa lost patience with the old fool. “We’re all very sorry about Bruno,” she broke in. “He was a great man, the greatest man in Yam. You’re going to find it very difficult without him. Stance will find it very difficult. But it’s no good you accusing Cuff or any other Noss villager. You’re an intelligent young fellow. Just think what kind of effect it will have on Yam if you go back with a story like that.”

So that was the line they were taking. It was a good one. Next winter would be a hard one, and Yam needed the goodwill of Noss — and to some extent vice versa. There would be no goodwill if a Noss man was accused of killing the brother of the Yam manchief.

“It’s my father we’re talking about,” I said weakly, having taken the point.

“And my son,” said Walleye.

“Have you spoken to him?” I asked.

“Yes. He denies it.”

“I want to speak to him myself.”

“It’ll do no good. He’ll still deny it.”

“Do you believe him?” I asked.

“He’s my son,” said Walleye.

“What about you, Lonessa?”

“I don’t know how men think,” she said frankly. “I don’t know what might have been going on in Cuff’s mind after your father attacked him in here. If he were a

woman, I'd say Cuff did not kill your father. But Cuff's a man and a fisherman, and fishermen are strange. Anyway, it's all beside the point. The real point is, you must not carry your suspicions back to Yam. I say this for Yam's own sake."

"Bruno was a great man," mumbled Walleye. "A great negotiator. It won't be the same with Stance."

I'd begun to realize that much of my anger stemmed from fear. With Dad gone I was at the mercy of Uncle Stance and his idiocy, as was all of Yam. I was feeling lonely and threatened. In the past Dad had always been there whatever happened, protecting us, correcting Uncle Stance's mistakes. It was small consolation that Uncle Stance would probably feel the same as I did, when he heard of our loss. And what about Spring? Of all the people in Yam, she was the one to whom I least wanted to break the news.

Through all this Charm had sat silent, watching me gravely. At last I began to regret my earlier outburst. I should have known better than to accuse the Noss man-chief's son in front of Noss people. Now even Charm was against me. I should have kept my suspicions to myself.

And, in due course, visited retribution. . . .

I smiled briefly at Charm in the hope she would smile back. She didn't. Lonessa saw, and said, "You make it very difficult for Charm. The time will come when she and Cuff will get together. They are admirably suited."

She couldn't have said anything better calculated to plunge me further into despair.

25

Surprisingly, Walleye offered me accommodation for the night. By the time we'd finished the discussion it was late, cold and getting colder. The breakdown of the motor-cart during the journey from Devon Station was fresh in my mind, and always would be. Night driving was too dangerous for my taste.

So I accepted Walleye's offer.

It took some time to walk to his cottage; he was a very slow mover. When we arrived I found the interior was much bigger than Uncle Stance's place, and the sleeping quarters were on the upper floor. This took the form of an open balcony rather like the net loft. Walleye climbed the ladder painfully and showed me to a pile of skins covered with a thick loxhair blanket.

"You sleep here." He hesitated. "It's been a long time since a Yam man stayed in this house. Your father used to, from time to time."

This seemed to be a friendly overture, so I thanked him. I drew on my ancestors' memories and we chatted of times past for a while; old people like to do that. I wondered how old Walleye actually was. Certainly he was much older than Dad, although the abominable Cuff and I were much the same age. Walleye had left the begetting of his son as long as was feasible.

The abominable one arrived as we were discussing an unusual grume that occurred over a century ago, when the sea was so dense that the skimmers could barely move on it, and the stranded fish decayed in the sun before they could be harvested, and monsters waved ponderous limbs just below the surface, struggling to return to their accustomed deeps.

“What in the name of Rax is this freezer doing here?”

Such was Cuff’s idea of hospitality.

“He’s staying the night,” said Walleye mildly.

“No, he’s not!”

“Calm yourself, Cuff. His father’s dead. I can’t send him back to Yam alone in the middle of the night.”

“I’m gonna smash his face in.” Cuff was a youth of limited ambition. “He accused me of stabbing the old fool in the back. I did no such thing. I’ve been tuning the motorcart’s valve gear most of the day. And you know what he’s been doing? He’s been hanging around Charm. So step aside, Father. Let me smash his face in.”

“For Phu’s sake, Cuff! You’re going to be manchief one day. Show a bit of maturity, will you?”

“After I’ve dealt with this freezer. And I’ll tell you right now, Father, things will be different when I’m manchief. There’d be no more handouts to Yam, for a start. Those freezers are bleeding us dry.”

“You’ve already made your views clear. But I have to remind you that I’m still manchief.”

Cuff subsided, muttering. My trip down memory lane with Walleye was over. I settled down on my bedding, pulling the loxhair blanket over me.

I lay awake for a long time, reliving my discovery of Dad’s body. The horror of it seemed to grow as the night wore on, and I found myself weeping. At some point in that long night, I realized I would have to put the incident under geas.

I’ve mentioned geas before: the taboo on revisiting certain ancestral memories. I had no right to subject my descendants to the personal sorrow I was suffering as a result of Dad’s death, so I spent the rest of the night imposing the geas by an effort of concentration. As they stardreamed in years to come my descendants would come across the geas. They could ignore it if they so wished, of course; the memory behind it was still there, and ineradicable. But they would assume I’d had good reason for imposing the geas, and out of respect for me, their ancestor, they would obey it. So a veil would be forever drawn over this day and its sorrow.

Except in my own memories, of course.

I awakened early and left Walleye and Cuff still sleeping. Phu had appeared over the hillside, tinting the white cottages pink, but I was in no mood for appreciating Noss’s beauty. The air was fresh and chilly. I stacked tinder and cordwood in the motorcart’s firebox, lit it with a blazing stick from a nearby public heater, and sat shivering in the cab waiting for the boiler pressure to build.

Behind me, a loxhair blanket white with hoar frost covered Dad’s body.

“Remember what I said.”

The voice made me jump. It was Lonessa, well-wrapped in furs against the morning chill.

“I’ll remember.” Last night I’d thought she was wrong. Now it was another day, and it seemed to me she was right. Dad was dead, it had happened, and there was nothing to be gained by promoting enmity between Yam and Noss.

Instead, it was a matter for personal vengeance.

“If it’s any consolation, I’m going to miss Bruno more than most.”

I felt a flash of anger. “Not more than me. And Spring.”

“Spring. . . ? Oh, yes, your mother. She was . . . fond of him?”

“Why not, for Phu’s sake? He was a good man.”

“Sometimes there’s nothing odd about a woman being fond of a man,” she said surprisingly. “At least, it doesn’t seem odd to the two people concerned. Which reminds me.” Her voice harshened and she was once again the dragon-lady of Noss. “If you value the relationship between our villages, stay away from my daughter.”

I didn’t answer that, and she didn’t wait for an answer either. It was a command, and Lonessa was accustomed to having her commands obeyed.

26

“You’ll have to be very careful, Hardy. In a way, you’ll have to grow up. People will put you in your father’s place as Stance’s adviser. They’ll want to look up to you. So you’ll have to think before you speak.” Mister McNeil chuckled. “You’ll find it strange at first. You’ve been an outspoken young freezer in the past.”

The Nowhere Man made one of his rare contributions. “Watch out for Trigger.”

I’d stopped off at Mister McNeil’s place on the way home for two reasons. Firstly, I was feeling low and needed to talk. Secondly, I needed advice. How would I face the villagers of Yam with Dad’s body on the cargo platform?

And the visit had been a good idea. Mister McNeil had given me stuva laced with an Earth-type distil manufactured at Devon Station, that he called Vodka. He’d listened gravely to my news. He’d made the right noises of sympathy. And now he was giving me the benefit of unbiased advice.

“Yes. . . .” I said thoughtfully.

“You intend to get back at Cuff?” he said. “Don’t. Or if you must, for God’s sake don’t get caught.”

I was reminded of something. I turned to the Nowhere Man who was sitting in the shadows, as usual. “We gave you a ride to Noss yesterday. Just after Cuff went past in the motorcart, I saw you walking in the same direction.”

“Did you?” He sounded surprised.

It’s difficult when several thoughts occur at once and you don’t know which order to follow them up in, and you know you’re going to forget some of them before you can use them. I decided to stick to the main issue.

“Maybe you caught up with him later along the road near the woman’s village. He said he was adjusting the timing.”

“I saw him. Yes. He was using a wrench on the valve gear.”

“Or pretending to use a wrench on the valve gear.”

“He looked hot and busy.”

Dad had been stabbed in the back. “Did he have any kind of knife with him?”

Mister McNeil broke in. “You must allow the possibility of an accident, Hardy. Your father could have slipped down the bank and fallen on something sharp.”

“Not Dad.” In my eyes, Dad had been almost immortal. He wouldn’t have died in such a silly way. I returned to the Nowhere Man. “Was Cuff carrying a knife?”

“He’s a fisherman. He always carries a knife. I didn’t actually see it. I wasn’t looking.”

“Did you see Dad? He’d have been coming from the opposite direction, down the back trail from the Point.”

“No.”

The Nowhere Man was born in Noss. His mother was a Noss woman, he was raised in Noss but his father had come from Yam. Where would his loyalties lie? Maybe it was time to switch to one of the side issues. “What were you doing in Noss, anyway?”

He hesitated. “Just visiting. I was born there, remember?”

Mister McNeil said, “It doesn’t matter, Hardy.”

Frustrated, I burst out, “Everything that happened yesterday matters! Right now, Dad’s death is in his killer’s memory and it’ll always be there, for ever! You can’t think the way we do. *Every* memory’s important to us. They go on and on, and they link together to form the web of our culture. Our people hardly ever kill people, and that’s why. We don’t know who we’ll be laying the crime and the disgrace on, in the future. And memories can spread if people have more than one son. In a thousand years every single man in Noss could have that murder in his memory!”

“Hardly likely, given your birthrate. And anyway, from what I know of your culture, Cuff’s motive is very thin. Your father was provoked into a fit of temper and attacked him. Cuff would have known it was uncharacteristic, and maybe even felt ashamed for being responsible. There were bigger issues than your father losing his temper and Cuff knew that too.”

“And he knows that if Dad isn’t around and Uncle Stance goes to Noss asking for handouts, they’ll tell him to go to Rax! Which is exactly what he wants!”

There was a long and thoughtful silence. We sipped our laced stuva. Eventually Mister McNeil said, “We humans see you as gentle folk, but perhaps we’ve forgotten how a society can break down when times get hard. It’s happened to us more than once, but such times are past and forgotten. We don’t have memory genes, and our brains are divided in two parts, not three. If we want to remember we have to dig into electronic archives, and who wants to do that just for the purpose of feeling rotten about ourselves? No, if there is a food problem in the future — I mean a serious problem — there has to be a possibility we humans will help out, and to hell with our policies. Your

Dad's death may go a long way in helping me persuade the authorities to change their views. Non-interference is one thing, but standing by and watching a peaceful culture descend into barbarism is quite another."

"Thanks." I couldn't think what else to say.

We stood and went out into the sunshine, leaving the Nowhere Man brooding in his corner. The garden was in full bloom, garish colors everywhere. I found it quite hard on the eyes; there was nowhere I could find visual relaxation. Mister McNeil, on the other hand, loved it. He led me around, talking of daffodils and tulips and Earth, and I got the impression of a world that shone in space like a multicolored beacon. I asked him what Earth was like, physically.

"Oh, very similar to your world, but a little bigger, and older." He bent to jerk out a handful of throttlers that had moved in on a flower bed. "When I say older, I mean more developed. I couldn't afford a garden this size, on Earth."

"Why not?"

"There isn't room. Lots of people, lots of factories. Most of everything is under domes, and the ocean's given over to oxygen mats."

"It sounds frightening."

"It's beautiful." He sighed, and paused at the garden's boundary, staring at the anemone trees on the riverbank with frank distaste. "You can't conceive it. . . . Listen, the Nowhere Man was right when he warned you about Trigger. You'll have moved up in the Yam pecking order, and he'll resent it. He may try to discredit you."

"He doesn't have the brains."

"All the same. . . ." He moved on, and in due course we arrived at the motor-cart. It was time to leave. I didn't want to go. Dad's body lay under its blanket, thawing out and dribbling moisture, mutely accusing. If I'd stayed with him all day, he wouldn't have been killed. But I'd become childishly bored at the meeting and I'd gone in search of a pretty face, and so he'd died.

I've scanned my memories of that day many times, and I know now it was a big turning point. From the moment I was able to accept part of the blame for Dad's death, I changed and began to see people differently. And, I think, become more tolerant of their foibles.

The fire had burned low and there was very little wood on the cargo platform; the Noss men had moved it off to make room for Dad. I debated asking Mister McNeil for the loan of some cordwood; I'd noticed a small plantation of cuptrees at the back of his house. Cuptrees are the only trees suitable for burning at this time of year; they catch moisture in their big leaves during the drench and absorb it downward; the opposite of our other trees that suck moisture up with their roots. So during the rest of the year they go dormant and the wood is dry, perfect for burning.

But I didn't feel like placing myself under any further obligations to the kindly Mister McNeil, so I picked up a distil can and began to pour the contents into the tank.

And immediately I knew something was wrong.

There was no smell.

Distil has an acrid, nose-catching stink that I find quite unpleasant. The stuff I was pouring had no smell at all. I dipped my finger in it and touched my tongue. It had no taste either.

“That’s funny.”

“What’s the matter?”

“It seems to be water. The cans have gotten mixed up. I’m going to have to drain the tank and refill it.”

I tested the next can first. It was water too. And the third and last.

“Just as well you didn’t start back yesterday evening,” Mister McNeil observed. “You’d have run out of fuel somewhere between here and Yam. And that would have been the end of you. The nights are still bitterly cold. I suppose a bunch of thirsty Noss fishermen must have had a party around your motorcart.”

“They wouldn’t have refilled the cans with water.”

“But they did, didn’t they?”

“Somebody did. I wonder why.” I left it to him to speculate. He’d seemed a bit skeptical at first when I’d insisted Dad had been murdered but this looked like proof positive. It had been a two-pronged attack. If the stabbing hadn’t come off for some reason, then switching the fuel would have ensured a fatal journey. And it would have taken care of me, too. Was I included in the murderer’s plans?

Suddenly I felt very insecure.

27

I drove into Yam as the afternoon shadows were stretching across the road. People looked my way as they heard the puffing of the motorcart and the crunching of metal treads on gravel, but they didn’t wave. They turned away, as though embarrassed. They stiffened up. Women called children closer.

It was an ominous homecoming.

I stopped outside Uncle Stance’s cottage and pulled on the brake. There was an uneasy fluttering in my stomach. People had drifted out from their doorways and were standing silently in the road, watching me. As I climbed down from the footplate I caught sight of Spring. Her face was wet with tears and she was looking at the blanket covering Dad, not at me.

She knew. They all knew. The news of Dad’s death had preceded me.

Uncle Stance came striding out of his cottage, followed by Trigger.

“You’re back,” he said harshly. “It’s taken you long enough.”

“I stopped off at Mister McNeil’s.”

This provoked a fit of superiority. “You what? You didn’t think the death of your father important enough to report back immediately? You irresponsible young freezer!”

People had gathered close, lots of them. This was to be the public humiliation of Hardy. There was an unfriendly muttering. Uncle Stance had his supporters.

"You seem to know all about it already," I pointed out reasonably enough.

"By chance," he snarled.

"How?"

"By Phu, do I have to explain to you? Go to your cottage and consider yourself confined indoors until we've discussed the matter in Council. Go on!"

And such is the force of habit that I almost went. Then I remembered: Dad was dead. My status, in fact my whole life, had changed. It was time to make a stand.

"No."

"What! Are you defying me?"

"Wrongdoers are confined indoors. I've done nothing wrong."

"Nothing wrong?" He had a knack of recovering his temper instantly, when it suited him. He began to talk in level tones of reasonableness. It occurred to me that this was quite an honor; in the whole of my life he'd rarely addressed me directly. "Let me tell you what you're done wrong, Hardy, since you clearly lack the intelligence to work it out for yourself. Firstly," He touched the forefinger of his left hand with the forefinger of his right, leaving the left forefinger extended upright for all of Yam to see, "you wandered away from an important meeting which was to have been a useful learning experience for you. Secondly," and the second forefinger went up, "as a result of abandoning your father in favor of fooling around with a flounder girl, you were not present to give assistance when he had his accident."

"Accident?"

"Silence! If you had been there, he would not have died. Thirdly —"

"Put your freezing fingers down!" I shouted through a red haze of rage.

"Thirdly, you took it on yourself to accuse our Noss friends of killing your father, an accusation made without justification, an accusation that seriously jeopardizes our relationship with the fishermen, an accusation that will have serious consequences in view of the poor showing of our harvest. . . ."

The fingers were thrust before my face in emphasis, and I began to lose track of the words accompanying them. Suddenly there were four fingers.

". . . dawdled on the way—"

The fingers were gone. I seemed to have flung myself on Uncle Stance. Incredibly, we were fighting. I found it difficult to land any blows, though; my arms would hardly move. It was like a frustrating dream. At last the blur of his face sharpened up and I could see him clearly. And I realized people were holding my arms.

". . . will do you no good at all, Hardy," he was saying.

"It was not an accident!" I shouted. "Why won't you listen to me? He was stabbed in the back!"

I flung off the restraining hands and fought my way to the motorcart.

"See for yourself!" I shouted, and pulled away the loxhair blanket.

Then shock hit me like a kick in the chest.

Slick-skinned, flippers folded against its flanks, needle-sharp teeth exposed in a last snarl, the body of a grume-rider lay on the cargo deck.

My mother came to see me the second day of my incarceration.

Uncle Stance had already visited me several times, but I'd refused to speak to him, partly because I felt too miserable to discuss anything with this unsympathetic character who just wanted to rub it in, and partly because he wouldn't believe what I told him. Or wouldn't want to believe me, all wrapped up in politics as he was.

Spring was different. Even she supported the accident theory, though.

"Who would inflict a terrible memory like that on his descendants, Hardy? Far more likely that your dad slipped and fell, and drowned. And far better to think that, for the good of all of us."

"But that's not what happened! Someone must pay!"

"It won't bring your dad back," she said quietly.

"It won't bring him back, no. But I'll feel a lot safer myself."

"What do you mean?"

"Just suppose the distil was switched after Dad was killed, instead of before. See what I mean?"

"Hardy, the whole distil business could have been a mistake. Your dad used cans for water here in Yam; they're easier to carry than skins. He could have put the wrong cans on the motorcart before we started."

"Dad would never make a mistake like that. Anyway, I saw him fill the cans from the distil tank in the yard just before we left."

"Well, I don't know. . . ." She looked at me doubtfully, plump face worried. "And with your dad's body gone. . . ."

"Grume riders don't come up the river until the grume, so they must have switched the bodies in Noss. Somebody got the animal from a cold-cellar. They wanted to make me look like a liar; maybe they didn't want people to see the wound. How did you find out about Dad's death, anyway?"

She sighed. "A Noss man happened across our hunting party late that afternoon. They came straight back here, of course."

"They'd have been better off heading for Noss. I could have done with some support. And a bit of trust," I added bitterly.

"People only have your word for the stab wound. The hunting team were told Bruno drowned. And we have every reason not to fall out with Noss," she said reasonably.

I wanted to tell her more about Charm. Of all the Yam villagers, Spring would probably have been the most understanding, and Charm was my best witness regarding the wound.

But would Charm support me? I doubted it. Her loyalties lay with Noss. . . .

"You see, Hardy, people are very upset about the loss of Bruno. He was a popular man, and everybody knows he was the strength behind Stance. That's why Stance is particularly unhappy. It's not just because Bruno was his brother. He's scared about a future without Bruno's help. And the hunting trip wasn't exactly a suc-

cess anyway; the game don't seem to be around. If we thought times were hard last year, they're going to be harder still this year. So people are looking for a scapegoat. And you're it. You mustn't blame them too much."

It wasn't as simple as that, but Spring was too kind to go any deeper. The truth was, people thought I'd lied. And as humans, you can appreciate the problem we have with lies and false information. Every Yam memory except mine now carried the certain knowledge that Dad had drowned accidentally. And every child born in Yam from now on — except any male descendants of mine — would carry that same false memory. They could never all be corrected, even if the truth became common knowledge. A lie goes down in history, and history is sacred. Lying is a crime.

It wasn't just being ostracized that hurt. It was the guilt, because Uncle Stance was right on one count: if I hadn't left Dad on his own, he wouldn't have been killed. So in a way I was glad to be on my own for a while; it gave me time to come to terms with myself. People confined indoors are supposed to spend the time gainfully in stardreaming, thus emerging wiser, but I had too much on my mind.

Spring brought me food every day, the last of the meltwater dried up, and at last I felt ready to leave the house.

4. EARLY SUMMER

29

I'd paid my debt. People behaved as though nothing had happened. It was kind of them, considering how pervasive memory is. I strolled around the men's village and heard the news of the latest hunt — which wasn't good — and I visited the woman's village and heard similarly gloomy news about the crops.

Uncle Stance invited me to join his hunting team on their next outing in two days' time. It was apparently a gesture of goodwill, so I accepted. Caunter would be going too, and Trigger, and some twenty Yam notables. Word had arrived of game moving near Totney, a day's loxride away. We couldn't afford to miss the opportunity.

The day of my release was sunny and pleasant but this warm weather — people never tired of pointing out — was late in coming. Soon I became sick of the gloom and despondency around me and set out for my little stardreaming pool to lose myself in happier days of the past. Moreover, it was time I justified my elevated position in Yam by absorbing a few generations of experience. Dad once told me he'd stardreamed as far back as twenty generations. Not so far back as the mythical Drove and Browneyes, but far enough to get a good idea of what life was all about.

I flopped down on the gentle slope that fell away to the water. All was quiet apart from the distant bellowing of a breeding lox. Alone in my private place, I lit my pipe, composed myself and opened up my memory.

Dad was with me, you understand? In my mind. I missed his presence, but not so wrenchingly as a human would. He will always be there and I can always visit him, any time I want. So, stardreaming, I hurried back through Dad's early life with which I was already familiar. Soon I was dawdling among Granddad's happier days, sidetracked as usual by fascinating byways. It takes a lot of discipline to stardream purposefully.

"Hey, there's a couple of girls coming this way, look!"

Rax! I'd stumbled across the begetting of the Nowhere Man again! Maybe it was a bad day for serious stardreaming after all. I worked my way forward into more recent times, living dear old Dad's life. I searched here and there with the vague idea of finding an alternative reason for his death, since my Cuff theory threatened political suicide. Had he made any other enemies during his life?

I came across a scene in a cottage, which after a moment I recognized as Granddad's place before Uncle Stance took over. Granddad himself sat in an old chair that had been used for firewood during a subsequent emergency. Dad was sitting on the floor; I was conscious of a queer immature excitement from him. Thirty or more men and several women stood around the walls, watching.

"Breathe easily now. Relax and let the smoke do the work. Open your mind."

Granddad was talking to a young Uncle Stance. It was his coming-of-age, his first pipe of hatch. The young fool, looking remarkably like Trigger did now, choked and gagged. It was good to see Uncle Stance in unflattering circumstances. Granddad sprang up and pounded him on the back. Dad chuckled. I could tell he felt the same way about Uncle Stance as I did about Trigger.

In due course the novitiate pulled himself together, blew his nose violently on a handful of moss and stuck the pipe in his mouth for another try.

“*Easy, now,*” said Granddad. “*Don’t force it.*”

Young Uncle Stance relaxed visibly with his next lungful. Hatch does that to a fellow. He lay back on his bed of furs and puffed away like an expert. Changing expressions flitted over his face. I guessed what he was doing; we all do it in our early days of stardreaming. He was hopping from memory to memory, person to person, not concentrating but picking the most exciting memories as you might pick the ripest fruit from a bowl.

Then suddenly his face froze.

“*What is it, son?*” asked Granddad.

Uncle Stance didn’t answer. He frowned as though concentrating. Time passed in a breathless silence. Tears crept from under his closed eyelids.

“*What’s the matter?*” asked Granddad, an edge to his voice.

And Dad’s vision suddenly clouded. The memory shimmered and grew hazy. A strong compulsion entered my mind: *Move away. Keep off. Go.*

Geas.

Dad had put the memory under geas, and I couldn’t probe any further without betraying his trust in me and my descendants. Did it matter? I wasn’t particularly interested in Uncle Stance’s coming-of-age, but I’d have liked to know what tidbit of family history he’d unearthed.

Was it something scandalous in Granddad’s past? Something worse than the begetting of the Nowhere Man? I slipped into Granddad’s memories and visited the same scene.

And the same thing happened.

Granddad had put the incident under geas too. It was frustrating, but geas is not invoked without good reason. I abandoned stardreaming and strolled to the water’s edge. At this time of year the pool is usually full of flutterfish, those creatures that spend the freeze in hibernation at the bottom of fresh waters, then emerge and fly off when the warm weather comes, their fins grown into rainbow translucent wings. I stared into the muddy depths. There was not a flutterfish in sight.

That should have told me something.

But Phu’s rays were warm on my back, and I’d just been released from a long imprisonment, and my spirits were high. I was thinking that the flutterfish were still burrowed in the mud due to the late thaw, when something bright caught my eye.

I knelt, peering into the pool. A cloud passed across the sun, the glaring reflections eased and the bottom of the pool became clearly visible. A sparkling jewel winked up at me. It was pink and crystalline, held in a silvery setting. It was a common

enough design, symbolizing the death of evil, but this particular crystal I recognized by its unusual size and beauty.

It was Charm's crystal; the one she'd lost that ill-fated day in Noss.

How had it got here?

I supposed at first a flutterfish had brought it; they're attracted by bright objects. But my main thought was to retrieve it and return it to Charm. I'd been searching for an excuse to visit Noss again; this could be it. Then perhaps she'd look on me more kindly.

It lay an arm's length below the surface. I lay on my stomach and reached into the water.

The snapping, crackling sound warned me, but too late. I tried to jerk my arm from the water. I couldn't move it. It was held in a cold and crushing grip. The surface displayed a bright crystalline pattern. I was trapped.

There was an ice-devil in the pool.

I shouted until I was hoarse but I was some distance from the Totney track and I doubted that anyone would hear me. I lay face-down, my hand frozen in the act of grasping the crystal, knowing that somewhere down there lurked a many-tentacled thing that would keep me imprisoned until I was dead.

And that wouldn't take long, because in due course Phu would drop below the horizon taking his warmth with him, and Rax would rise into the night sky. And I would know fear and cold, and go mad, screaming and thrashing, and then tire and freeze. The ice-devil would sense the stillness in me and, when morning came and the temperature rose, would release me and draw me into the depths, and consume me.

Unless somebody traveling the Totney road heard me yelling before nightfall. Then they could bring blankets and hot bricks and a tent, and start chipping at the crystals in the hope that the ice-devil would let go. Ice-devils sometimes do that when they feel threatened. But it was unlikely anyone would be traveling the Totney road until morning, when Uncle Stance's hunting party would pass by. . . .

On their way they'd have looked in my cottage and seen I wasn't there.

"Irresponsible young freezer," Uncle Stance would say, with a certain grim satisfaction. "He's probably gone chasing after that Noss girl. Well, to Rax with him. Come on, men, we have hunting to do!"

By the time they passed, I'd have been drawn under the surface.

This thought brought on another bout of screaming, but nobody heard. It was unlikely anyone would. They weren't meant to. This was not the work of a flutterfish.

No, it bore the mark of careful planning. Somebody, knowing I used this place for stardreaming, had planted the crystal here. It was no accident. Somebody was out to get me. Probably Cuff.

And he'd succeeded.

I tried some more screaming but without effect. A shameful loss of composure took me, and I jerked and thrashed and cried until, exhausted, I lay still and wished I'd used my life more gainfully, and been nicer to people.

That was when I felt the touch on my shoulder.

It was so unexpected I yelped with fright. I rolled onto my back, my trapped arm twisted painfully behind me, and prepared to fight off some sharp-toothed scavenger come to cheat the ice-devil of its kill.

But it was only the lorin. Three of them, wide-eyed. They crouched around me, laying hands on me and uttering soft cooing sounds. Their presence was strangely comforting and I relaxed, closing my eyes. Something was happening inside me; I could feel my heartbeat slowing. Under any other circumstances this would have been frightening, but my mind seemed to be slowing as well; my thoughts flowed sluggishly like the grume itself, softly as though pillowed on cloud. I was too comfortable to be frightened; too contented. The lorin pressed close, enfolding me. . . .

I awakened.

I was lying on the grass, well clear of the pool. A light breeze rippled the surface. My arm was red and sore, but undamaged. Charm's crystal lay in my hand. The sun was low. The lorin had gone.

I was alive. Life was good.

Marveling, I walked back to Yam.

A biological need for comfort took me to Spring's cottage. I found her lighting her lamps as evening darkened the sky outside. The euphoria generated by the presence of the lorin had worn off by now, and I was trembling with cold and shock.

"Sit down and tell me what happened," she said before I could speak; understanding woman.

"You cut it fine, coming back this late." This from Wand, lurking in a dark corner like the Nowhere Man. "It's going to be a cold night for the time of year."

I recounted my experience at the stardreaming pool and showed them the crystal while I sipped at a cup of hot stuva. Spring made clicking noises of concern from time to time; Wand listened in silence.

When I told them about the lorin, Spring said, "They've been known to do that before, occasionally. When the mood takes them."

I mentioned my suspicions. "There was no ice-devil in the pool last year. So how did it get there? Ice-devils can't fly, for Phu's sake."

"There was plenty of flooding during the drench," said Wand. "It could have swum from one of those pools around the river."

"My pool's on high ground. No amount of flooding could have joined it to the Yam. And last drench wasn't as heavy as usual, anyway."

"Are you saying someone put the ice-devil in there deliberately?"

"That's what it looks like to me."

“More likely some child from the village dropped an ice-goblin in.” Wand seemed determined to make light of the incident. Children keep tiny immature ice-devils in jars for fun; they call them ice-goblins. I’ve kept them myself and fed them with insects.

“No ice-goblin could have grown big enough during the winter to control a pool that size. I tell you, a full-sized ice-devil must have been moved from its home pool to my pool.”

“Impossible! There’s no way of getting an ice-devil out of its pool. It would solidify the water as soon as you tried.”

It would have been easy to lose my temper with the negative old fool, but that would have gotten me nowhere; and after all, she *was* the Yam womanchief. I tried to reason with her. “All right, now just suppose someone found a way of doing it. Plenty of folk know that’s my stardreaming pool. And plenty of folk know that Noss Charm lost her crystal. Cuff, for one.”

Wand opened her wrinkled old mouth to object. She looked like nothing more than a dried fish.

I said quickly, “So it would be quite a simple matter for him to booby-trap the pool and drop the crystal into it, knowing I’d see it there sooner or later.”

I glanced at Spring for support but she remained silent, a thoughtful expression on her plump, pink face.

Wand, confounded by my cogent reasoning, took refuge. “It’s a man thing, anyway,” she said dismissively. “Nothing to do with us women.”

“I’m talking about a Noss man trying to wipe out a Yam family, and you say it’s nothing to do with you? Who will be next? Uncle Stance and Trigger?”

“Take my advice and stop talking nonsense about Cuff. We’re going to need all the help we can get from Noss, next freeze.”

“I’m not saying the rest of Noss knows what’s going on. I’m not saying they’d approve of what Cuff’s doing. I’m saying that he, personally, has a grudge against Dad and me. And now Dad’s dead, and I’ve just had a very close call.”

“We all know your father attacked Cuff, and you’ve been seen with his prospective mate, young fool that you are. But what’s Cuff got against Stance and Trigger?”

I hesitated. Truth was, I’d tossed them in as makeweights. “It’s vendetta against Yam leadership because of our food shortage. Cuff disapproves of Noss helping us out.”

“And because of that,” Wand said in sarcastic tones, “he miraculously transported a live ice-devil from Noss to your pool. By Phu, he’s a clever young freezer!”

Spring said quietly, “That’s all very well, Wand, but you can’t deny there’s something funny going on.”

“And there was the distil business too,” I said. “Someone switched the cans.”

“So a few Noss fishermen got drunk on your distil. Foolish and thoughtless. But not murderous. No, you’d be well advised to forget all this stuff, Hardy. You’ve atoned for your misdeeds; now get on with your life. I’m not going to say anything to

Stance about it.” She stood, a small wizened woman with an undeniable stock of commonsense, and left us.

I turned to my mother. “You’re very quiet, Spring.”

“I’m frightened for you, Hardy.”

“Because I might blurt out all this, and get confined to the cottage again?”

“No. I’m frightened you may be right.”

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We sat in silence for a while. Eventually I said, “How can a person live with himself if he’s committed murder?”

“That’s a young person’s question. That’s why young people are so. . . *good*. But once you’ve had your children and done with it, your attitude changes slowly. You get used to the idea that whatever you do, it won’t go down in anyone’s memory. It’s as though nobody’s looking over your shoulder any more. You can do whatever you like.”

“I’ve never felt anyone’s looking over my shoulder.”

“You will, more and more as you take on more responsibilities. It can be quite overpowering. And then one day you’ve done your duty and had your children. Suddenly you’re free. It can go to a person’s head.”

“Are you saying an older person may have killed Dad? And tried to kill me?”

“You can’t rule it out, Hardy. Don’t be too quick to accuse Cuff.”

I thought about what she’d said the next day, as I heard the sounds of the hunt assembling in the village square. My anger, which had up to then been directed against Cuff, had overnight become more controlled and logical. First, I must make sure who the culprit was. Then, I must take my revenge, and put it under geas, and hope it stayed there forever. And — I told myself — the revenge was not just a matter of personal satisfaction. It was a safeguard against future murder attempts. I was protecting not only myself, but Uncle Stance and Trigger, and possibly other people in Yam.

My desire to protect Uncle Stance ebbed somewhat when the cottage door burst open and the arrogant fool himself stood on the threshold, a stocky figure against the daylight.

“Still in bed, Hardy?”

“I was planning my day.”

“Your day, as I understand it, consists of accompanying us on the hunt.”

“I have other plans.”

“They can hardly be more pressing than saving the village from starvation.” Uncle Stance had a knack of skillfully overstating the case.

“Actually, they are.”

Frustrated, he took a step into the cottage. “Get up, you idle young freezer! I don’t have time to stand here arguing with you!”

“Then go away.”

It had never occurred to me before to wonder when childhood becomes adulthood. People say it's was when a fellow becomes capable of siring children, or maybe when he smokes his first pipe of hatch. But in my case they'd be wrong. It was when I came to terms with the death of Dad, realized that I was on my own from now on, and with a decisive action set my course for the future. I couldn't do that with Dad alive because subconsciously I felt protected all the time.

My decisive action was to tell Uncle Stance to go away, knowing I wasn't going to back down. How did I know that? I was possessed by a most vivid backflash, when some far-distant ancestor had made a similar stand against a tall man in a strange uniform. One day I'd track that memory down.

Uncle Stance was unimpressed by my leap into adulthood. In fairness, he'd just come from sunlight into the dark room and couldn't see the light of maturity blazing in my eyes.

"Get out of bed right now!" he shouted.

There is a disadvantage in lying down with someone towering over you. I rolled out of bed and stood up. I was taller than he. I stepped close to him. It would have been better if I'd had clothes on, but these things can't always be planned in full detail.

"I recognize the importance of the hunt," I said steadily, "so you must understand that when I say I have other plans, they must be of greater importance. We don't have time to discuss them now. I'll talk to you when you get back. So off you go, Stance."

I dropped the 'Uncle' from that moment on.

The very air around him seemed to vibrate with frustrated power. I couldn't see his face against the light from the open doorway, but I could be sure it was set in an expression of granite leadership. Then suddenly he swung around and strode off, and I found I'd been holding my breath. I heard him calling to his men, and presently the hunting team filed by in their traditional formation. Stance marched with his usual bounce, but his ceremonial spear looked oddly forlorn, as though drivets had been nibbling at the tassels. His head huntsman Quorn came next, chin up and looking almost as indomitable as Stance. The rest followed in single file. A straggle of pack lox brought up the rear. Once out of sight of the village, the senior huntsmen would clamber on the backs of the animals and take it easy until game was in view.

I dressed and followed at a safe distance, and by mid-morning I was back at my stardreaming pool.

I worked my way carefully around the perimeter, looking for clues to the identity of the person who had laid the trap for me. I don't know what I expected to find, because the palpaters would have drawn anything unusual beneath the carpet of their thick fronds, hoping it was edible or at least decomposable. And sure enough, I found nothing of interest. I climbed a nearby tree to get a wider field of vision. Seated comfortably on a high bough I could see the Totney track and, in the distance, the hunting team shambling east. North, the moors rose against the sky, sweeping, treeless, green and brown. South I could catch a glimpse of the sea.

And then I caught a glimpse of something else.

They weren't visible from ground level; the palpaters covered them. But from this height I could make out two sets of tracks heading south; faint parallel depressions. They must have been made some time ago, immediately after the thaw when the ground was still soggy.

They were very distinctive tracks.

A motorcart had come from the direction of the sea, visited my stardreaming pool, and headed back again.

All my Cuff suspicions resurfaced. Why would the Noss motorcart have visited my pool? I thought I knew the answer to that. It had brought an ice-devil. How, I couldn't imagine; but it had been accomplished somehow. Cuff couldn't have brought it in a bucket; it was too big. Could he have pumped it from its home into the motorcart's big water tank? No, it would have solidified the pool as soon as he dropped the hose into the water. I climbed down from my perch and set off south, following the tracks in search of further evidence. Soon the palpaters gave way to spreadweed, but now that I knew where to look I could make the tracks out quite clearly.

I reached Butcher Bay in the early afternoon. The bay is named after an ancient occasion when a pod of zumes —big aquatic mammals — had been forced to the surface by an unusually dense grume and, fleeing from the savage grume-riders, had beached themselves. It had done them no good at all. The men from Noss had moved in and killed the lot, gutted them, carved them into manageable chunks and stretched these on racks to dry in the sun. There had been feasting all winter.

A shallow declivity runs down to the bay. During the drench it is filled with a roaring torrent, but at this time of year it is dry except for five separate pools stepping down to the sea. Hereabouts the motorcart tracks became lost in rocky ground with small areas of popweed growing in the cracks. I approached the first pool; it was smaller than the others; about three paces across. I picked up a small stone and threw it in.

Nothing happened. A light breeze ruffled the surface.

I threw a stone into the second pool.

Instantly the surface frosted over. An ice-devil lay brooding in residence. I tossed stones into the other three pools with the same result. So: four pools had ice-devils, one didn't. I returned to the first pool. The palpaters stopped short of the rocky edge of the pool. I noticed curious scratches in the rock surface, but decided they'd been made by boulders carried down by the drenchwater.

Time was passing and I had to get back. I was fairly sure the ice-devil had been brought from this first pool, but I couldn't think how.

It was late afternoon before I arrived back at my stardreaming pool. I made a quick final investigation around the perimeter, lifting the clumps of palpaters where they straggled over the edge.

And there I found it: a heavy woven rope trailing in the water and leading away from the pool under the palpaters. I tugged it clear of the plants; it was at least twenty paces long.

And then I realized how the ice-devil had been brought here.

It was so simple. Cuff — or whoever — had simply backed the motorcart up to the pool at Butcher Bay, tied one end of the rope to the tow post and thrown the other end into the water. The ice-devil had immediately solidified the pool. Then Cuff had started up the motorcart and dragged the whole pool away, the ice-devil with it. He'd driven up to my pool, pushed the solidified pool in, thus displacing most of the ordinary water already there. Then he'd driven away confident that the trap had been well laid. He couldn't take the rope, because that would have meant waiting until the ice-devil liquefied the pool again, and he'd have been anxious to get back.

Very neat.

I was about to set off back to Yam in some triumph when the low sun and slanting shadows revealed something that sent an eerie shiver up my spine.

There were more motorcart tracks. Two more sets.

And they headed to and from the direction of Yam. . . .

What did it mean?

Well, it meant that the Yam motorcart had visited my pool. Two motorcarts visiting the pool? Or it could mean — and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't dismiss this possibility — it *could* mean that only one motorcart was involved. It could have come from Yam, turned south to Butcher Bay, dragged the ice-devil back, dumped it into my pool and returned home. To Yam. That would account for all the tracks.

It made a horrible kind of sense.

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I arrived back at my cottage as darkness fell, lit the fire and sat before it, trying to find a solution to this mystery in the leaping flames.

When I'd got back to Yam following Dad's death, I'd found the news had preceded me. A Noss fisherman had apparently told the hunting team. Now, fishermen rarely travel far from the sea, so this meant the team must have been questing around the hills near Noss.

When game is in sight, the members of a hunting team split up and try to encircle the animals. The hunt ranges over a large area in this fashion, men running this way and that, out of sight of one another, linked only by yells and whistles. It can become an undisciplined rabble, and much time is wasted searching for lost huntsmen.

It would be easy for a member of the hunt to disappear for as much as half a day before people began to wonder where he was. As regards the hunt in question, any member could have slipped into Noss, killed Dad, switched the distil to neutralize me as well, and rejoined the hunt without his absence being noticed. He'd even have time, later, to switch the grume rider for Dad's body and deal a blow to my credibility.

The obvious candidate was Stance.

But could a man murder his own brother? He'd need a very good reason. And Dad had been very useful to Stance, and tactful about it too, always keeping in the background. It was unlikely that Stance had been overcome with a mad fit of jealousy

because Dad was the better man. Impossible, in fact. Could he have suspected Dad of mounting a coup against him? No. One of the strengths of Yam was dear old Dad's unswerving loyalty to his brother.

So I would question the men on their return from the current hunt.

Now, as to the motorcart.

The hauling of the ice-devil must have been done while I was confined and sulking in my cottage, probably soon after my return from Noss. But nobody could have used the motorcart without being noticed. The fire had to be lit and the pressure raised. It all took time, to say nothing of the noise the machine made as it rattled out of the yard and through the village. So someone must have come up with a pretext for using the vehicle; and people would remember the occasion. After all, the motorcart wasn't used very often. It would be easy enough to find out who was driving...

I went to sleep in hopeful mood. I had plenty of questions to ask on the morrow.

The following morning I examined the motorcart as it lay cold and idle in its shed.

The tow post projected up from the rear of the cargo platform. The metal was shiny from recent use but offered no other clues. The rest of the machine was clean apart from the wheels which bore traces of crushed palpaters — but then, they always did. There was nothing left on the footplate to identify any recent drivers.

I made my way to the village barn. Spring was there with two other women, listing the meager stores.

"I thought you'd gone hunting," she said, rosy face concerned.

"I had other things to do."

"I do hope you haven't quarreled with your uncle Stance. He was so set on you joining the hunt."

I had a sudden vision of the huntsmen scattered as usual over the rolling hills, myself among them, and Stance suddenly looming up with his spear at the ready and a murderous expression on his square face, and nobody else near. Was that why he'd been so set on me joining the hunt?

"Stance was a little miffed but he'll get over it. By the way, can you remember if anyone's used the motorcart since Dad's death?"

"Used the motorcart?" She looked surprised. "Of course they have. It's been in use almost every day; we've been cultivating new land."

I was obviously out of touch. "New land?"

"To compensate for the poor germination since the drench. We've been planting late crops."

"How does the motorcart come into this?"

"It was Silly May's idea. She's a bright girl, that one. We hitched plows to the motorcart instead of using lox. Much quicker. I wonder we've never done it before."

"Who drove the motorcart?"

"Oh, most of us had a try. It was easy enough. In fact your uncle Stance was the most difficult part of it. He seemed to think the motorcart was his personal posses-

sion, but Wand quoted ancestral memories that proved it had always been community property. Your uncle had no answer to that,” she said with obvious satisfaction, “so we fired it up and drove it off, and to Rax with him. We felt he’d have accepted the idea sooner if anyone other than Silly May had suggested it.”

“I wish I’d been there.” A thought occurred to me. I’d been confined to my cottage for a long time, but I hadn’t been totally deaf to what was happening outside. “I didn’t hear it coming and going each day.”

“Oh, we didn’t bring it back to the yard every night. That was another battle we had with your uncle. We kept it in the fields with the fire alight, so we could start work straight away each morning. He kept whining on about the need to clean the fire-bars and descale the tubes and shovel the soot from the smokebox and Phu knows what else, and in the end Wand told him to shut up and go hunting, if he couldn’t think of anything constructive to say. But he hung around for days, predicting disaster. I wish your Dad had been there. He’d have straightened him out.” There was a world of regret in her blue eyes. “Bruno knew how to handle your uncle Stance.”

“I know.” I was thinking. A determined man — or for that matter, I now realized, a determined woman — could have driven the motorcart from the fields to Butcher Bay and back, at night by raxlight, secure in the warmth of the cab, and nobody would have been any the wiser. “Did anyone ever use the motorcart at night?”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“I just wondered.”

She didn’t answer. She probably thought my question stupid. She was staring down into a sack of grain, eyes clouded.

“I do so miss your Dad,” she said eventually.

I was in the presence of something I didn’t want to understand. Embarrassed by her weirdness and hoping the other women hadn’t heard, I slunk away. I’d gotten nowhere.

33

But things improved greatly a couple of days later.

I heard the puffing of a motorcart late in the afternoon while I was frying myself a meager portion of loat. My first thought, as I hurried to the window, was that the hunt had been so successful that Stance had returned for the motorcart, to pick up his dead prey. But I was delightfully wrong. It was the Noss motorcart that trundled through the village, Lonessa at the tiller.

And my heart gave a huge thump, because standing beside her was Charm.

Charm looked prettier than ever, wearing a short dress of albino fur with a wide-brimmed hat of scarlet straw to shade her from Phu’s excesses. She saw me standing at the window as the motorcart rolled on toward the women’s village.

And she waved to me, smiling.

My heart gave another thump, preliminary to pounding painfully. I was having difficulty breathing, too. I was in deep physical trouble. It would be a pity if I died be-

fore I had a chance to talk to her, now that it seemed I was forgiven. Suddenly it was a beautiful afternoon and the banter of a nearby group of men sounded like song.

What was wrong with me? She was only a girl, and a flounder to boot.

Both Stance and Trigger were away hunting, so I reasoned that I was in charge of the men's village, though others may have disputed it. It was therefore quite natural for me to don one of Dad's more impressive robes and stroll up the road to find out what this was all about. It was a great pity that Dad's best robe — his negotiating robe — had been lost during the tragic incident at Noss. From time to time I'd pictured Cuff wearing it in the privacy of his cottage, gloating over it.

I found Charm in the barn with Lonessa, who was arguing with Wand.

"It's not your problem," Wand was saying, her dried-up face set in stubborn lines.

"It will be our problem if you come begging for food again this year," said Lonessa.

"We thank you for your help last freeze," said Wand woodenly, "and we've taken steps to make sure there are no shortages this year."

"We need to know your position, exactly. I'm going to have to inspect your fields."

"What!"

"If you have no objection."

"No objection? Of course I object! Our fields are entirely our own affair!"

"I could see how your crops are doing quite easily, just by riding by. I thought you'd rather to show me around. I'd hoped you wouldn't cause difficulty over this, Wand." She smiled faintly. "It's not the dragon lady talking now. I'm here as friendly neighbor."

"You have no rights in Yam, Lonessa!"

Now the Noss womanchief's voice rose. "I came here on a peaceful visit. I've been facing criticism back home over the help we gave you last freeze, and I have to make sure our loan can be repaid. I need to see for myself!"

I judged it time to enter the argument. "That seems reasonable enough to me, Wand."

"Reasonable!" she screeched. "Don't you see, Hardy? She's putting herself in a position of authority over Yam!"

"No; we put her in that position ourselves, last freeze when we borrowed the fish. There's no point in arguing about it. We're in their debt and that's the end of it. Go on now, show her round. There's no harm done."

Cords stood out in her ancient neck as she glared at me. Her mouth opened. I braced myself for the usual stuff: *What in the name of Rax do you know about anything, you young fool?* Then, amazingly, she relaxed and nodded.

"I suppose you're right. Hard times make a woman over-sensitive. I've been facing a lot of criticism too. Come on, Lonessa. We have a lot to see before dark."

Chattering fulsomely the way quarrelers do after making peace, they left. In fact they were so wrapped up in each other that Lonessa forgot Charm. We stood looking at each other. Charm was smiling.

“Well done Hardy.”

“I could have said exactly the same thing when Dad was alive, and they’d have told me to shut up.”

“And now all that’s behind you.”

“Would you like to see my cottage? I’ve got something for you there.”

“For me?” She regarded me, and I got the feeling she was suddenly nervous. “Why for me?”

“You’ll see.”

She was very quiet as we walked through the village under the curious eyes of the men. I stared around defiantly; after all, wasn’t it perfectly natural for the Yam man-chief’s nephew to accompany the Noss womanchief’s daughter? I opened my door and ushered Charm in, glared around the village for the last time and closed the door firmly behind the two of us.

I took Charm’s crystal from its hiding place behind a loose rock in the wall, and handed it to her.

“Oh, Hardy! Thank you so much!” And impulsively she threw her arms around me and hugged me tightly. She must have felt my heart pounding against her breasts. “Where did you find it?”

“In a pool just off the Totney road.”

She let me go and stepped back, and with the loss of physical contact an invisible wall of constraint rose between us. “In a pool? What was it doing there?”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you.”

Since Dad’s death I’d thrown our two piles of fur bedding into one heap, so we sat side by side on this. It was a comfortable arrangement. I related events since I’d last seen her, and she listened, eyes round, until it became too dark to see each other.

“What do you think?” I asked when I’d finished.

She hesitated. “I think you should be very careful. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Oh?” This was encouraging. “Why not?”

“Well. . . . I wouldn’t want anything to happen to *anybody*, would I?” I couldn’t see her expression but she was shifting about uneasily on the furs. “I’m not the kind of person that enjoys rotten things happening to people,” she said, too quickly, I hoped.

“You mean you like me?” It was much easier to be brave in the dark, without those warm brown eyes laying my soul bare.

“Well. . . yes.”

“In spite of my being a grubber?”

“Oh!” I felt, rather than saw, her make a gesture of impatience; then the unstable heap of furs came to my aid and she toppled against me. I put an arm around her.

It was not the best moment for the door to open, but I knew this situation couldn't last forever. A bright lantern had me blinking, and once I became used to the glare I saw the kindly face of my mother behind it. Matters could have been a lot worse.

"Hardy, for Phu's sake! Lonessa's looking for Charm. She's staying the night at Wand's cottage. Charm, you'd better get there quickly!"

We were both standing. Charm said helplessly, "I don't know where it is."

"I'll take you," said Spring. "Come on."

Then they were gone, but Charm's presence lingered in the cottage and in my mind. I lay down on my bed of furs and relived the events of the afternoon, accurately and in every detail. It took me half the night.

A human couldn't have done it. That's your loss.

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Charm stifled a chuckle. "I'm sorry. But it looks so funny, really."

Time: the following morning. The motorcart's journey back to Noss had been delayed by the ceremonial return of the hunt.

"It's the way we do it," I said defensively.

"But why is your uncle Stance waving his spear like that? And why are the others all prancing along after the lox, one behind another? Why not just walk into the village like normal people? When the fishermen arrive at Noss they don't make a big thing of it. They just sail in and unload the catch."

It was Stance's custom to repeat his single file formation on entering the village, except that the lox, instead of shambling along in the rear, would be positioned immediately behind him, staggering under the weight of the kill. The rest of the team would follow the lox. All this gave the impression that Stance was personally responsible for the success of the hunt.

"We're not talking about a mess of smelly fish. We're hunters, remember. We're different."

It was unfortunate for my show of civic pride that Stance's formation had backfired on him. As usual, he strutted in the lead followed by six lox, but five of them carried only bundled tents and furs. Just one lox, the lead one, bore the spoils of four days effort. This consisted of a skinny long-necked triped that appeared to have strayed from the Great Central Range where Phu stares fiercely and there are many such strange and unfavorable mutations. They are not normally considered edible, but these were hard times.

Charm, seeing the creature, broke into peals of musical laughter. "Give me fish any time!"

"Dropped dead during the chase, did it, Stance?" shouted someone, among scattered hoots and merriment.

But there was an undercurrent of dismay, and many people returned immediately to their cottages to brood over this latest evidence that the Great Lox had deserted

us, or was even visiting retribution for some unspecified shortcomings on our part. The temple would be full this evening.

Lonessa strode up to Stance. "So this is the total catch, is it?"

"Game is scarce." As the dispirited huntsmen drifted to their cottages and the women led the lox to the barn, his stature had diminished. He looked what he was: a small man coming to terms with failure. There was no point in pretense under the critical eye of Lonessa. "It's early days yet," he muttered.

She gave him a long and menacing look, then swung aboard the motorcart. "Come, Charm," she snapped. She swung the regulator, the engine puffed rapidly and accelerated away down the street. Charm waved as they rounded the corner and headed south.

Stance turned to me. "The team was short-handed, thanks to you."

I wasn't accepting that. "Did you see any game, other than that queer thing you killed? Or were you looking in the wrong place?"

He favored me with a look not unlike the one Lonessa had just given him; then wheeled around and hurried into his cottage, head down.

Tradition dictates that the hunters repair to the ale house on their return. I gave them time to settle in there, then joined them. I found a gloomy company. Instead of the usual happy crowd celebrating noisily, the men sat on benches singly or in couples, silently staring into their ale. I got myself a mug and sat next to Trigger and Caunter.

"Not much meat for four days hunting," I ventured.

"Huh. I'd like to see you do any better," snapped Caunter, taking it personally. "At least we tried."

"Yes," said Trigger. "At least we tried."

"Where were you, anyway?" asked Caunter. "I thought we were all going on this hunt together."

"I wasn't feeling too well."

"Dad was mad as a snorter when we left," said Trigger. "He said you weren't worth bothering with. He said you were nothing more than a freezing liability to Yam." He chuckled maliciously. "I wouldn't like to be in your shoes. He's coming to see you as soon as he's finished talking to Wand."

"He'll be even madder after he's talked to Wand," Caunter added.

I was getting tired of their company already. "Too bad, because I've already talked to him. So you think you'd have done better if I'd been hunting with you, huh? The game are attracted by my personality, is that it?"

"Maybe," said Trigger. "Who can tell? It couldn't have been worse."

"Maybe your Dad should try hunting where the animals are, instead of where they aren't."

"All right, where are they, if you're so clever?"

I was leading the conversation in the direction I wanted. "You did all right down Noss way a while ago, didn't you?"

"Noss? Oh, you mean that time when your Dad. . . ." His voice trailed off. Even Trigger had his sensitivity. "It was all right," he said.

“You got five loats in three days. Maybe it was the method you used. You circled round them, did you? Scattered yourselves all over the place in a big circle and drove them inward?”

“That’s what we did,” agreed Trigger happily, remembering better days.

“But you can’t encircle non-existent game,” Caunter pointed out.

“Obviously. And another problem with the circling method,” I said cunningly, “is that people often get lost. They can be lost all day.”

“Who told you I got lost at Noss?” Trigger demanded loudly. “I didn’t get lost!”

“I never said you did. Did anyone else?”

“Nobody got lost! We hunters don’t ever get lost!”

Caunter was watching me thoughtfully. “Why are you so interested in people getting lost?”

“Just a thought. Just considering hunting tactics.”

“You’ve got a nerve!” shouted Trigger, who seemed to be getting worked up about the thing. “My dad’s the only one entitled to consider hunting tactics. And now your dad’s gone he can do it without interference and stupid suggestions!” His brief moment of respect for the dead and my feelings had passed.

“To Rax with you,” I muttered. I left them sitting there. Trigger was too busy defending his Dad’s hunting prowess to be of any help to me.

I joined two hunters standing nearby, their spears propped against the wall, and set a similar conversation in motion.

“Loats?” said Quorn, Stance’s top man. “You often get loats near the coast, this time of year. Waiting for the grume, see.” Loats have long legs; a visit to the grume is a part of their regular migratory pattern. When the sea flows thick they wade out and scoop stranded fish from the surface with their wide lower jaws.

“So I suppose you’d heard there were loats down Noss way, the hunt before this one.”

“Your dad told us that,” said Quorn. “He’d heard word from Noss.”

“It was a tough hunt, that one,” said the other man, Patch. “Loats are fast beasts. Very fast beasts. You need your wits about you, to spear a loat. You must cast a wide circle.”

“A wide circle, huh?”

“Aye, a wide circle.” Patch’s speech was slow and deliberate. He moved from one point to another with infinite caution, like a man treading through a swamp. “You must cast your circle wide, that’s the secret of hunting loats.”

“It can get difficult, being out of sight of one another most of the day.”

“Aye. Aye. It can get difficult.” He digested this fresh concept while I tried not to scream.

“A man could get lost,” I ventured.

“We never get lost,” said Quorn firmly. This was a lie, of course, because I’d gotten lost on the hunt myself, more than once; but perhaps learners didn’t count. I’d insulted his hunter’s pride.

“We may not see another man all day, but we always meet up at the day’s end,” said Patch.

“It’s a kind of instinct,” said Quorn.

“A hunter’s instinct,” said Patch.

“So what about the Noss hunt?” I asked in some desperation. “Was there anyone you didn’t see for a long time?”

I was wasting my time and I knew it. “Hardly saw a soul all day,” said Patch. “But we all met up come nightfall. Hunter’s instinct, you see.”

35

A few days previously I’d thought I’d made great strides toward identifying Dad’s killer and my attempted killer. Now I was almost back where I started. All I knew was that the culprit was more likely from Yam than Noss.

Baffled, I returned to my cottage to consider the next step. Perhaps someone at Noss had seen a Yam man prowling about on the day of Dad’s death. But my mind balked at the notion of reopening the matter in Noss. They’d remember I’d already suggested a Noss man was to blame. I’d be lucky to get out of there intact.

Evening was darkening the sky outside when I lit the lamps and the fire, and put a chunk of dried fish on to boil. I was getting heartily sick of dried fish. I was trying to think how I could improve the flavor, to say nothing of the stink, when the door burst open and Stance stormed in. He took up position in the center of the room, puffing himself up, and stared at me from under lowered brows, trying to put the fear of Rax into me. After a glance in his direction, purely for the purpose of identification, I returned to my pot. A vile white scum was forming on the surface. It was, Mister McNeil once told me, very nutritious. I felt Stance’s eyes boring into my back.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” came his voice eventually.

It was an odd question, but a typical Stance one. I worked out an answer fairly quickly. It needed a casual voice.

“Not very much, really. What do you have to say for *yourself*, Stance?”

“What! What!” I heard quick steps across the room. A hand fell on my shoulder, trying to spin me round. “What did you say?”

I turned and stood. I was a head taller than he. This made his hand on my shoulder look like a friendly gesture. He realized this, and snatched it away. I said nothing.

He came to the point. “Get this straight, Hardy. I won’t have you bothering my men.”

“All right.”

“I don’t think you heard. I won’t have you bothering my men.”

“All right. Was there anything else?”

He stood there, baffled. “Isn’t that enough?”

“If you say so, Stance.”

At last he had something to get his teeth into. “It’s *Uncle* Stance, you impudent young freezer! *Uncle* Stance!”

“You are my uncle, yes.”

“And don’t you forget it!”

“I’m unlikely to, Stance.”

He got my point. His expression changed somewhat, but he was still giving me the kind of look a man might bestow on a stubborn lox. “My men tell me you were questioning their ability, and by association, mine. I won’t have this, Hardy. I won’t have it!”

“You must have found it annoying. I wonder why they told you that.”

“Do you deny it?”

I was getting tired of this silly little man. Shorn of Dad’s moderating influence, he was nothing more than a pompous prototype of his son; a jackass. How could I get rid of him? I tried changing the subject.

“Too bad about the hunt. Let’s hope the animals start moving in soon, otherwise it’s going to be a hungry freeze again. Can you remember if there ever was a freeze worse than the last one, Stance?”

He stared at me, his mouth open. At last, with an obvious effort, he said, “You’re speaking of things beyond your knowledge and outside your tiny sphere of authority, Hardy. I shouldn’t have to remind you that I am manchief here, and planning is my responsibility. The past is gone; dead. Whether or not the last freeze was unusual is irrelevant.” Was I imagining it, or was there a slightly crazed look in his eyes? He rambled on as though he was practicing a speech, trying on the words for size. “What matters is the future, and we must face it with fortitude and commonsense. We must cast a wide net in our struggle for survival. Too long we have dwelt in the past, and as a result we have continued to make the same mistakes, generation after generation.”

He was talking sacrilege! Had he gone mad? Or was he cleverer than he looked? Was he trying to trap me into agreeing with him so he could denounce me? The lamplight flickered on the twitching planes of his face from below, lending him a demonic look. His eyes stared vacantly at the far wall. I began to hope some passerby would stop and listen — and come and help, if Stance turned violent.

“There is no point in scouring the past for answers to our present woes. There is no precedent for the predicament in which we find ourselves. There is—”

“Stance!” I seized him by the shoulders, shaking him.

“What?” He snapped out of it, blinking.

“What are you talking about?”

He focused on me. “I . . . These are difficult times, Hardy. You don’t understand.” His attitude to me had changed completely. He seemed to have talked his rage out. The bombast had gone; he was just a rather small figure looking up at me in the lamplight. “Time will tell,” he muttered. To my surprise he swung round and left, closing the door quietly.

I was still puzzling about it when I climbed the ladder to the loft, where I sometimes sleep for a change. Had the problems of Yam unhinged him? Could it be that

without Dad's help he was unable to handle chiefship? A sudden scary thought took hold of me: if Stance went mad, Trigger would become chief, and where would Yam be then? Perhaps a temporary manchief would be appointed until Trigger reached the age of discretion, if ever. There were plenty of precedents for this.

And there was another thing. A temporary manchief would only hold his position until the permanent man was deemed responsible enough to take over. And if Trigger showed no sign of achieving some kind of maturity, the permanent man could be me.

It was while I considered this daunting possibility that I heard the cottage door creak open, muffled whisperings, and stealthy steps approaching the foot of the ladder.

36

We don't get people breaking into other people's dwellings in our world. We get very little crime at all, for obvious reasons. If it hadn't been for the recent murderous incidents I'd have been mildly puzzled by the present situation. As it was, I suspected the worst.

I rolled quietly out of the heap of furs and dragged my clothing on. The intruders were at the foot of the ladder, whispering together. What should I do? I had no weapon, and if they intended to do me harm they would be carrying knives. I could kick the first head that appeared at floor level, but it would only be a delaying tactic. They would be more careful on their subsequent approach. I could yell, but nobody pays any attention to yells in the middle of the night. They are invariably the result of blackflashes — terrifying sleeping backflashes that you humans might call nightmares.

Retreat was my only course of action. For all I knew, my enemy had been able to mobilize half the men's village against me; the memory of being pursued by Noss fishermen was particularly vivid. It's a scary thing, having a mob after you. A mob considers itself above the law of tradition and custom. And this time there was no Charm to rescue me.

Many years ago, my loft had been used for storage. Outside the gable end was a hatch with a bracket and pulley for bringing up goods; as a child I'd played on it until, one day, the rope had broken and I'd fallen heavily to the ground. It had never been replaced, which was a pity because it would have made my escape easier. As it was, I had no option but to open the hatch, sit on the sill, and push myself off into darkness.

I landed heavily, picked myself up and immediately fell down again. My right ankle hurt abominably. I seemed to have broken something.

"He's not here." I heard the voice from above.

"He must be here. He's hiding somewhere."

Rax gleamed balefully above me, the cold was biting into me, and it was only a matter of time before my pursuers would realize where I'd gone. As quickly as I could, I limped toward the women's village. I couldn't go far at night. I'd have to find shelter quickly. The village was asleep; no lights showed in cracks of shutters. Soon I was hammering on a door.

“Hardy! What in the name of the Great Lox are you doing out at this time of night?”

“I’ll tell you in a moment.”

I shoved my way quickly past Spring, turned and shut the door. She stood staring at me, a plump pink figure in a white robe of human cloth, holding a small lantern.

“It’s happened, hasn’t it?”

“I think so. Something’s happened, anyway.”

“How many were there?”

“More than one, anyway?”

“Do you know who they were?”

“I didn’t wait to find out.” She extinguished the lantern and we sat in the dark while I brought her up to date with events. “They won’t look far at night,” I said. “I’ll be safe here until morning, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course it’s all right.”

It was a strange feeling, depending on a woman. A man’s relationship with a woman is normally so brief that we don’t have time to get to know them. I had a memory of warm and comforting arms as an infant, but like all boys I’d joined my father in the men’s village at what a human would consider an early age. So here I was, putting my safety in my mother’s hands again. And feeling safe doing it. My mother is a very unusual woman; some considered her weird. I suspect it’s only her outgoing personality and good nature that keeps her from being shunned by men and women alike. Whenever I saw her, I thought of her and Dad, forever meeting and chatting; even touching, year after year. And now Dad had gone, but I still trusted Spring.

“Thanks,” I muttered, embarrassed by something in her voice. “I’ll get going at daylight.”

“Where will you go?”

“I’m not sure yet. Noss, maybe. I don’t want to go far. There’s something peculiar going on here, and I want to stay in touch.”

“I thought you weren’t very popular in Noss.”

“I can straighten that out. It was all a misunderstanding.”

“The girl will be a big help to you.”

“Girl?”

“Oh, for Phu’s sake, you can’t fool me, Hardy. Your dad and I were. . . different. You may have inherited it, whatever it is.” She sighed. “And that’s your bad luck. It can be wonderful, but it can’t last. People don’t die in pairs, you see. Someone gets left alone. So enjoy your Charm while you can; your dad said she might just possibly feel the same way as I do. Something in the way she looked at you, he said.”

“I’ve never known a man and a woman get along the way you and Dad did.”

“You haven’t? Let me tell you something. There are other women in Yam like me. Other men like Bruno, too. The problem is, they don’t have the guts to admit they’re different. Bruno had the guts, maybe because he had the status. He taught me how to feel, you know that?”

It was supremely embarrassing to have to listen to this, but it was better than being knifed in the cold of night.

She understood my silence, and continued in a tone of finality. "So now you know. I'm going to bed. You'll find some furs in that corner. I won't light the lantern; people might be watching for it."

"I'll leave at first light."

"There'll be hot bricks under the fire; take one. And a couple of spare furs. There are some lox in the stable behind the barn; you might take one of those; you have a long walk ahead of you."

"Thanks a lot."

"Good luck, Hardy."

I heard the rustle of her robe, then something outlandish happened.

I felt warm breath on my brow, then soft lips.

Then she was gone, leaving me wondering.

37

I awakened as a gray light was showing through the cracks in the shutters, stood and immediately collapsed on the floor. My ankle hurt agonizingly. I stood again, more carefully this time, limped to the nearest shutter, opened it and prodded my ankle carefully. It was enormously swollen, dull red with darker patches almost black. It looked like the ham of a skinned snorter. It didn't look like the kind of ankle a fellow could get far on. I wrapped some more furs around myself and sat down to consider my next move.

I couldn't stay here long. If Spring saw my ankle she'd start fussing over it and try to persuade me to stay; that's why I'd kept it from her last night. She might even take it into her head to send out for a healer. No; I had to get going, ankle or no ankle. I wasn't safe in Yam.

I lay back for a moment to ease the pain. . . .

I was jerked awake by shouting and the sound of battering at the door. Bright daylight illuminated the room. I'd let Spring down; my enemies had arrived.

"All right, all right!"

Spring was descending the ladder from her loft. She saw me and raised a finger to her lips, then pointed to the back door.

The hammering at the door started up again. In a minute they'd be coming around the side of the cottage; the shutter was open and the room would be in full view. I grabbed some furs and stumbled out of the back door, closing it quietly behind me.

"Let me get some clothes on, for Phu's sake!" I heard Spring calling. "What do you want this early, anyway?"

The reply was muffled, but it sounded urgent.

I heard a crash and an angry shout from Spring. They'd pushed their way in. A man's voice was questioning her, loud and hectoring. I looked around for a way of escape. The women's village consists of a string of cottages on either side of the road,

each separated from its neighbor by a narrow alley. Before me lay sunlit open grassland; few trees, little cover, long morning shadows. I couldn't run; I wasn't sure I could even walk. I didn't stand a chance. All I could do was to get around to the front of the cottage while my enemies were inside, and stand in the road and shout, attracting as much attention to myself as I could. That might deter them.

I limped around the side of the cottage and into the alley, which was about four paces wide. I stumbled and fell against the wall, a knot of dismay rising in my chest.

The alley was completely blocked by some kind of temporary structure. In hindsight I should have identified it immediately, but at the time I was blind with panic and saw it only as a barrier to freedom. And in panic I scabbled at the obstruction, felt something give, rolled over a waist-high obstacle and found myself in darkness. My hands encountered a heap of furs. I crawled under them and wedged myself into a corner, trying to quiet my breathing.

"I haven't seen him, I tell you!" I heard Spring shout. "This is the women's village, hadn't you noticed, you freezers?"

"He's around here somewhere," said a man's voice, closer.

And I froze, because I knew the voice very well. And another part of the mystery was revealed.

At that moment the floor started to move under me.

It was so unexpected and unreal that I almost yelled out before I got myself under control. I told myself Yam was experiencing an earthquake. It had little to do with my present predicament. I must lie still and quiet, and hope that Spring would satisfy my enemies and they would go away.

The rocking continued; ponderous and accompanied by a harsh scraping noise. It dawned on me that this was no earthquake. The explanation was much more simple.

I was in some kind of cart, and it was in motion.

With the realization came another thought: just possibly the cart might take me away from my enemies.

I lay on my side rocking with the motion like a dead animal. The last thing I wanted was to draw attention to my presence, and hear a grunt of discovery and have the furs hauled off me. Then the motion would stop, right in the middle of the road, and the cart's owner would start loudly demanding an explanation.

And my enemies would hear, and come charging out of Spring's house. They would not attack me, here and now in broad daylight. But I knew now that they would find a very good excuse to take me away, into their power.

Yes, even me, with my supposed status.

Because the last voice I'd heard belonged to Stance.

"All right then, let's be having you out of there!"

And the furs were dragged off me.

I blinked at the sudden light, gathered myself for flight, and found I was looking up into a familiar face.

“By Phu!” exclaimed Smith, “it’s young Hardy!”

I took in the interior of the cart at a glance ; vast Smitha sitting fat-kneed beside the dying brazier, the forward end piled high with metal objects and coal, baskets of tools and vegetables randomly scattered. The tailgate and hanging skins hid me from the road. Smitha overcame her surprise and grinned widely. This was reassuring.

“Please don’t give me away,” I said quickly. “I’ll explain once we’re clear of the village. And don’t stop the cart, for Phu’s sake.”

Without a word, Smith threw the furs back over me.

I waited. I heard shouting. The cart trundled on. I supposed the lorin, Wilt, was driving the lox.

The shouting came nearer.

Smith yelled back, “Don’t you think I know the contents of my own cart?”

Stance’s voice, close by and breathless, called. “Yes, but he may have slipped over the tailgate while you weren’t looking. Just stop for a minute, will you?”

“If you think I’m going to let that rabble poke around in my cart you can think again!”

“You could be harboring a murderer!”

“I’ll take that chance.”

“If you’re in there, Hardy,” yelled my uncle, “you won’t get far. We’ll be after you. You can’t escape justice for long!”

I had no need to escape justice, but I certainly needed to escape Stance. Alone I could take him, but clearly he was backed by select members of his hunting team. And he’d convinced them I’d murdered someone. Probably Dad, because nobody else had been murdered lately.

Well, I’d been in Noss at the time. And I’d inexplicably lost the only evidence — Dad’s body. And I’d uttered wild accusations against Cuff; it might have sounded like the bluster of a guilty person.

I wondered: If Stance got hold of me, what would happen next? At best, exile. More likely forced confinement to my cottage, followed by an accidental fire. . . . I huddled under the furs. I didn’t want to find out.

My uncle, hunting me down. What else was he responsible for? Last night’s foray into my cottage? Probably. The ice-devil in my stardreaming pool? He was familiar enough with the motorcart. The distil incident and Dad’s murder? Well, he’d been hunting near Noss at the time. And he hadn’t liked my questioning his hunters about their deployment on that day.

But was he capable of killing his own brother?

It seemed he might be.

But why would he want to? And why would he now be after me?

He had everything to gain by Dad, at least, remaining alive. Dad was useful to him, even indispensable. But suppose he didn’t realize that? It’s often said that our ancestors can give us memory, but they can’t give us the sense to use it wisely. Just sup-

pose he was so proud and so stupid that he'd begun to see Dad's help as interference, as a challenge to his leadership, even?

Was he that stupid?

And even if he was. . . . Why me? What threat did I pose?

The furs were pulled off me for the second time.

"All right, Hardy! We're clear of the village. Now suppose you tell us what this is all about."

I peeped through the skins hanging above the tailgate. Some distance back, a knot of men stood in the middle of the road, flanked by the cottages of the woman's village. Stance and his hunters. Five of them altogether. They were my enemies. Who were my friends?

"I wish I knew," I said.

"Come and sit by the brazier, boy," said Smitha. "There's still some heat left here."

It was annoying to be called 'boy,' but there was nothing but kindness in her voice. I crawled forward and hauled myself onto the narrow bench beside her huge body.

"You won't get far with that ankle," she said, staring.

"I can't stay in Yam."

"We'd noticed that," said Smith. "What's this about murder?"

"I didn't stay to find out. But my guess is, they're accusing me of killing Dad."

"Yam Bruno? That's hardly likely. You and he used to get along well, didn't you?"

I swallowed, angered by a sudden tearful weakness in myself. "Yes," I muttered.

"I thought so." He sighed and sat down on the other side of the brazier. "We have plenty of time before Totney. Maybe you'd better tell us what it's all about."

By the time I'd finished, the sun was high. The cart rumbled on, jerking and swaying as the wheels dropped into potholes. Smith sat silently; Smitha had hauled herself to her feet after a while and begun to prepare food, frying bannocks over the low fire in an ancient iron skillet. She balanced with an ease that belied her heavy frame.

"This girl," she said when I eventually ran out of explanations. "Your witness. You're not talking about the girl we met last freeze?"

"No, that was Yam Faun. If I'd been sailing with her the day we found Dad, there'd be no problems. But I don't want to drag Noss Charm into this mess. Lonessa wouldn't stand for it. She only puts up with me because she liked Dad."

"An apology would fix Lonessa. She may be fierce, but she sees reason when it's laid out in front of her," said Smitha confidently.

"And anyway, I don't think Stance and his men want to hear alibis."

"So you outflank them. Just tell the Noss people you were mistaken when you accused them of killing your Dad. Then Charm could come in on your side and tell everyone in Yam she was with you when your Dad was killed."

"But. . . . She's a girl. She's a flounder."

Smith chuckled. "Once people get an idea into their stupid heads it certainly gathers strength through the generations. It's that old miscegenation myth again. Listen, boy. I'm a flounder from Fal and I'm a man. Smitha's a grubber from Alika and you may have noticed she's a woman. And for good measure, Wilt out front's a lorin. And yet here we are all together, flounder, grubber and lorin; man, woman and whatever. And we get along together, and we stick together. You may think it's weird. We think it's the most normal thing in the world."

"We even have a son in Totney, said Smitha.

"He's no weirder than the rest of us," said Smith.

And I remembered Spring's words. *Let me tell you something. There are other women in Yam like me. Other men like Bruno, too. The problem is, they don't have the guts to admit they're different.*

Apparently Smith and Smitha had the guts.

"Make your way to Noss. Make your peace there. Charm will be on your side," said Smith. "Trust me." He stood, walked to the rear of the swaying floor and pulled the skins aside. "Rax!" he exclaimed. "Look back there."

In the distance a small group of men could be seen following us, carrying spears, leading lox. They didn't seem to be in any hurry, but they didn't need to be. They had plenty of time.

39

"We can't outrun them," said Smith.

Lox are not fast-moving beasts like snorters. They tend to amble at their own pace. They have great strength, though, so the two lox hauling the cart would have no difficulty keeping ahead of my enemies' pack animals. The problem would come when our lox decided it was time to eat. Then they would stop, lower their heads, and start munching at the roadside vegetation, and no amount of shouting and kicking would get them going until they were good and ready.

Smitha, who seemed to take all things in her stride, passed round platters of bannocks and fried meat. "We have plenty of time," she said comfortably. "The lox have been fed."

"We'll figure something out," said Smith.

I'd have preferred a more definite plan, but the food was welcome. I began to eat. The bannocks had an unfamiliar but pleasant flavor, probably derived from some herb Smitha had come across during their travels. The meat seemed to be grume rider; chewy like snorter but with a slightly fishy tang. I bolted it down. I hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon. Smitha refilled my plate. Meanwhile Wilt sucked some fluid from a floppy and none-too-clean skin.

I was very conscious of our pursuers. "But suppose they catch us up and search the cart? They'll find me here. And they won't want witnesses."

"Not if your theory is correct, no." Smith grinned thinly. "But I'm allowing you a breathing space because I trust you more than Stance. I haven't forgotten the way

you handled yourself last freeze on the moors road, when Stance fell apart. Now, as I said, we can't outrun them. So here's what we do. . . .

It was mid afternoon when we rumbled into Arrow Forest and the fronds of a grove of anemone trees closed overhead and reached hopefully toward us. Smith went forward and took the reins from Wilt. The lorin joined us and Smitha pinned furs around him, making sure his head was hooded. Then she did the same with me. The cart trundled on into the darkening forest. I parted the tailgate skins and peered out. Our pursuers were a hundred paces away, maintaining their distance. They didn't want to offend Smith by forcibly searching the cart unless there was no alternative; without his occasional visits Yam machinery would fall into disrepair. They would play a waiting game until nightfall, then move in under the guise of sociability, asking to share warmth of the brazier.

But now their waiting was over sooner than they expected.

"Go, Wilt!" snapped Smitha.

The lorin pushed past me, dropped to the road, and with a remarkably human-like gait scurried off into the trees to our left.

Stance and his men yelled with triumph. Leaving their lox, they sprinted into the forest at an angle to cut Wilt off. Soon they were out of sight.

At the last moment I had misgivings. "Won't they blame you for this?"

"No." Smitha handed me a bag of food. "Wilt will let them catch him in a while. When they bring him back we'll say he went to get a skin of milk from a warren, and got frightened when they came chasing after him."

I wondered how one got a skin of milk from a warren, and how the lorin had managed to grasp his role in all this, but there was no time for discussion now. The shouting had faded into the trees. "Thanks," I said, dropping over the tailgate to the road.

Smitha's big face peered down at me. "Make for Noss. See the girl. Apologize. Get them on your side."

"I will," I promised. "Thanks again."

I headed into the trees to the right of the road and began to hobble south, favoring my ankle, smacking away the inquisitive fronds of the anemone trees. You have to treat them rough, but not too rough. Ask any arborist gathering cuttings.

Escape can give a fellow a heady feeling of triumph, particularly when his pursuers are heading in the opposite direction. My elation lasted for quite a while as I limped steadily south, keeping the sun over my shoulder.

In due course I emerged from the anemone trees into the less inquisitive presence of cuptrees, low sticklebushes with a few yellowballs. It was while I was quenching my thirst with an unripe and sour yellowball that the mental rot began to set in.

The sun was lower than I'd thought. Rax would soon be rising.

I would need shelter for the night, but I was a day's journey from Noss and, so far as I knew, there was no human habitation between. True, Smitha had made sure I had plenty of furs with me, but this might not be enough. Even the members of a hunting team with their tents huddled around a central fire have to keep an eye on one another. There's a condition known as runabout that can afflict a person at night; a creeping panic brought on by the cold that can deprive him of commonsense and send him blundering off mindless into the deadly darkness.

By myself, with no tent and no fire, I stood a good chance of going runabout. I began to get frightened.

I pulled myself together and considered my surroundings. The forest was less dense here, and a few hundred paces to the south I could see a knoll topped by a stand of low trees. I made my way in that direction, and soon arrived breathless at the summit. My ankle throbbed agonizingly. The sun was low, the shadows long. I shut my eyes and uttered a short prayer to Phu — a measure of the state of my mind.

I opened my eyes and scanned the countryside.

Open ground rolled south: low moorland hills, woodland, a glint of winding streams, and in the distance the sea. No sign of people. No cottages, no smoke rising. Nothing.

I tried to think. I searched my mind for the memories of an ancestor caught in a similar situation, but there was nothing. I began to wish I'd been more assiduous in my stardreaming and gained more experience of this kind of peril. It was too late to try now. A stardreamer needs serenity, and I was anything but serene. And in any event, I doubted if any ancestor of mine would have been stupid enough to get himself into this kind of jam. And if he had, he'd probably have died before he became an ancestor.

There was just one possible way out. Smith would be long gone, but I could still make my way back to the road, try to find Stance and his posse, and throw myself on their mercy. They had all the equipment needed for survival. At least I would live through the night — unless Stance decided to put an end to me there and then, without the formality of a public trial.

That was a chance I would have to take. Stance was my only hope. Turning, I limped back northward.

As I reached the anemone trees I thought I heard something. I stopped and listened. There was no doubt about it; a steady crunching of popweed heralded an approach. At first I thought it was a loat; but then I remembered the tall creatures stay away from anemones, fearing a tentacle around the neck. And the sound was too regular to be a snorter. It could only be a member of Stance's team. I'd never been so glad of the freezer's presence.

"Uncle Stance!" In my relief I even allowed him his title. "I'm here!"

I heard a crashing of trampled bushes and a lorin came scampering toward me, eyes wide and finger to his lips.

"Wilt!"

He arrived at my side, took my hand in his furry paw and tugged. He wanted me to go south again.

“Hardy!” came a distant shout. “Where are you?”

Wilt tugged at my hand again, more urgently. It was the moment of decision; and for a moment I wondered what my descendants — if any — would think of it. I could choose Stance and possible safety. Or I could choose the lorin and the unknown.

And there was something reassuring about Wilt.

I let him lead me. He began to run, still holding my hand, and I stumbled awkwardly after him. The shouting sounded nearer as we began to skirt the knoll I’d climbed previously. I caught my foot in a root, felt a fierce stab of pain in my ankle, and fell. Wilt knelt beside me, tugging at me. He mouthed sounds, pointing, then left me and parted the low branches of a sticklebush.

And I saw hope there.

I crawled forward. Only a fool would normally approach a sticklebush, which uses its long spines to stab passing prey; they can even kill a snorter if they catch it right. But this bush was quiescent; calmed, like so many things, by the presence of the lorin. I pushed my way among the spines without injury and crawled into a sandy tunnel overhung by concealing fronds. And there I collapsed, finished. Wilt knelt beside me, his paw cool on my brow.

“He’s around here, somewhere.” The voice was so close I started up and hit my head against the tunnel roof.

“Young fool.” It was Stance’s voice. “How does he think he’ll survive the night? Anyway, now perhaps you’ll believe me. You all heard his voice. And there was broken popweed back there.”

“It’s just I’m surprised at Smith, that’s all. He must have sent that lorin off as a diversion.”

“I don’t see that. How in the name of Rax do you get a lorin to understand what you want?” asked another voice.

“That lorin’s been with Smith for years. They’re not stupid, you know.”

“Well, anyway, Hardy doesn’t stand a chance out here,” said Stance. “And I’d say he’s proved his own guilt. Only a guilty person would run away like this. I’m going to assume Smith knew nothing about him. He was hiding somewhere in the back of the cart; Rax, there’s all kinds of junk in there. And when the lorin went to take a leak he seized his chance.”

“And the lorin all dressed up to look like your nephew?”

“Best to ignore that. What’s done is done, the young freezer won’t survive the night, and I see no point in antagonizing Smith. Come on, men. Phu’s low. We’d better get back to the lox.”

“I still say we should look some more,” said someone doubtfully. “We might at least save him from his own stupidity.”

“No,” snapped Stance, “we’ve looked enough.”

“A person might think you don’t want to find him, Stance.”

Stance’s voice assumed pompous tones of leadership. I could almost see the expression on his face. “It grieves me greatly that all this should have happened within my own family. I see the death of my nephew as a necessary expiation to purge the

male line of its bad blood. Tragic though it is, it is better this way. The alternative is days of argument in Yam, excuses and counter-accusations, and worst of all, the chance of offending our good friends in Noss when we can least afford it. Yes, for the sake of Yam I would sacrifice even my own blood relative.”

“It does you credit, Stance.”

The voices faded, and I was alone with Wilt.

And night was not far off.

41

The tunnel was low and narrow, barely big enough for me to crawl along behind Wilt. Soon we were in total darkness. I sensed other tunnels opening off on either side, and kept myself on the right track by holding onto Wilt’s hairy foot. We crawled on endlessly. It was not cold but my knees were becoming sore. I wondered how far we were going and what I’d find when we got there.

Everybody knows the lorin live in holes in the ground and it’s rumored there’s a big warren near Yam; but that’s about all we know. Nobody has any desire to investigate further. We have very little curiosity about such a familiar part of the scenery. We don’t hunt them or eat them; possibly because they look too much like a smaller, hairier version of ourselves. So the lorin are left pretty much to themselves.

One thing we know: the lorin are friendly. They will help a person in trouble. They have no unpleasant characteristics whatever, and I’ve often felt that we’d be better off praying to the lorin instead of the Sun-god Phu and the Great Lox and all that nonsense. At least the lorin would be able to hear us. But I’d never told anyone about my heretical notion. I could just imagine the Phu-loving Stance’s response.

Years ago I discussed the lorin with Dad. He told me that in all his stardreaming he’d never come across any serious consideration of them, just frequent examples of their good nature and helpfulness. There are legends, though. One such legend holds that the lorin could once talk, but gradually lost the ability when they developed telepathic powers.

Legends are supposedly the experiences of ancient people whose bloodline has died out — so they can’t be recalled by a living stardreamer. They’ve been passed on by word of mouth and have probably gained in the telling to the extent that, in the end, they are little better than lies. Religion is based on one such lie: that the Sun-god Phu in the form of the Great Lox once dragged the world out of the clutches of the villainous ice-devil Rax. And another lie: the goatparent on its cloud, giving birth to one and all.

And then there’s the legend of Drove and Browneyes, the immortal couple who saved the world long ago, when Rax seemed to be getting the upper hand again. How, I’ve no idea. The legend tells that the lorin played a major role in this heroic saga, which may be another reason why we look so kindly on the creatures.

And now, for all these reasons and also because I had no alternative, I was putting my life in the hands of the lorin.

We crawled on, and suddenly my surroundings had changed. The ground was softer, drier and more sandy. The air was warm with an animal smell, but not unpleasant. The walls of the tunnel had opened out. I let go of Wilt's foot and extended my arms all around, but could feel nothing. I was in a cavern of unknown size. Wilt slipped his hand into mine and tugged upwards. Obediently, I stood. I could hear a multitude of shuffling feet and odd sounds not unlike someone sucking on a water skin.

I was in a lorin warren.

We'd always known about such places, but so far as I knew I was the first person to have entered one. At the time it didn't occur to me to wonder why I was so privileged. I felt warm and comforted, as we always do in the company of lorin, and it was a welcome change from the menace of the world outside. I knew I was safe for the night.

"Thanks, Wilt," I murmured, and let go of his hand.

I shuffled along and immediately ran into something hanging from the roof that swayed away and returned to slap me gently on the forehead. I grasped it. It was warm and yielding, and seemed to be part of a living creature.

I stretched up, following the thing as far as I could reach. Almost at the limit of my arms, my fingertips encountered a roof of similar soft flesh. I shuffled further. The roof continued. Another of the hanging things dangled against my face.

"Wilt?"

His hand touched my arm.

"What is this thing?"

He led me onward, and soon I was pushing my way among more of the things, hanging much lower. My head bumped softly against the roof. He pulled my arm downward, and I sat obediently. Then he guided one of the things toward my mouth.

Now I realized: it was a huge nipple.

I'm not normally squeamish, but I must admit I gagged as moisture wet my lips; and despite the presence of countless lorin I felt a moment of fear. I could only suppose that we were sitting beneath some beast of unimaginable size, squeezed into this lorin-built cavern. A cave-cow. Supposing the beast got hungry, where exactly was its mouth? The lorin were presumably feeding from the nipples; did it in turn eat them, as part of a never-ending cycle? The implications were beyond any stardreaming I — or anyone else — had even done, so far as I knew.

Wilt pushed the end of the nipple against my lips.

Well, maybe there was nothing to be lost by experimenting. I sucked.

The warm liquid tasted innocuous. As I realized how thirsty I was, I detected more than a hint of cocha juice — my favorite drink. I sucked greedily. Soon I began to feel sleepy, and I leaned back against a warm and yielding wall. Here, the roof and wall were one.

Just as I was beginning to grapple with the fact that I seemed to be actually inside this huge creature, I fell asleep.

I was awakened by Wilt tugging at my hand. I crawled away from the soft wall until there was enough headroom to stand. My ankle felt fine; the lorin have strange healing powers. Wilt led me past a glowing heap of some kind of fungus, then suddenly the ground was sandy again. We'd emerged from the cave-cow into a maze of tunnels. Eventually daylight showed ahead and I was squinting into the warm light of Phu. Unexpectedly warm, actually. At first I thought it must surely be noon, but the length of the shadows assured me it was still morning. It was a good day for the walk to Noss, and my spirits rose.

I headed south and soon joined the ancient Totney-Noss road; probably important during the days when Pallahaxi was a thriving center; now little more than a track winding through rolling coastal hills. From time to time I caught glimpses of the sea, but saw no game animals. It had been tempting to blame Stance for the hunt's recent failures, but the truth was, the animals simply were not around this year. Maybe they'd arrive later.

Trees were plentiful, however. I'd last traveled this road four years before, and it seemed to me that the forested areas had doubled in size since then. Most of the groves of cupps and anemones were sacred plantations; you can always tell them by the neat spacing. But scattered between these were stands of rising-sap trees of varying types, seeded by the wind. In less than fifty generations this land would be completely forested over.

I felt a surge of pleasure at this thought, and wondered why.

I saw very few people on my journey; just the occasional croft and its little sacred forest. I spoke to a woman hoeing a sickly crop of root vegetables with her daughter. Like most crofters they were none too clean, but then neither was I.

"It's going to be another short growing season," I ventured.

She shot me an unfriendly look from eyes sunken in a face wrinkled like a dried yellowball. "We'll get by. We always do."

She was a stubborn old fool. If those wilting rows of vegetables were to be their only food for the next freeze, they certainly wouldn't get by. The daughter glanced my way and I thought I saw fear in her eyes. She was a lot older than me; I judged her to be about my mother's age.

"Why don't you move to Noss?" I asked.

"Why should we?" the old woman snapped back. "We've always lived here."

I wanted to explain the advantages of living in a settled society but I couldn't think of words simple enough for her understanding. "Fish are still plentiful at Noss," I said eventually.

"My man's gone fishing," she said flatly.

Her man. I'd supposed the daughter to be the result of a passing traveler, but it seemed I was in the presence of another unusual relationship like Smith and Smitha's. It's often the way with crofters; the isolation thrusts men and women together in a manner that would cause comment in a village. Proximity can cause peculiar attachments.

Or so I've always been told. But Spring once suggested the reverse: *It's the intolerance of villagers that forces people into crofts, Hardy. The attachment happens in the village, then the couple are driven out.*

Suddenly the daughter spoke. "Dad's been gone fishing for twenty-three days, Ma."

I got an unpleasant hollow feeling in my chest. I was in the presence of a small tragedy. The daughter held my eyes, as though willing me to tell her mother to face facts. She'd tried herself and failed.

"Twenty-three days is a long time," was the best I could manage. Butcher Bay was less than a morning's walk away. "I'd say it was too long."

"My man will be back!" shrilled the old girl.

I'd provoked her hostility. I said, "I'm sure he will," trying to make it convincing, and walked on.

I'd gone perhaps a hundred paces when I heard running feet. The daughter caught up with me. "I walked to Butcher Bay one day," she said. "Surely you know I'd have done that."

I stopped, looking at her. She had a broad, pleasant face, prematurely lined from the labor of crofting. She was slightly stooped for the same reason. Her brown hair hung to her waist, roughly knotted at the neck to hold it away from her face as she worked, bent over. In today's warm weather she wore very little; just a light skin blouse and a woven loxhair skirt. She was hollow-chested and I could see the outline of nipples near her waist. She was not a woman to bear children. Her memory line was destined to die out; she was just living out her life, no more.

A human might not understand that. In our world of short relationships a woman must be beautiful, a man strong. One day when I was pointing this out to Mister McNeil, he said, *With all due respect, Hardy, nobody could call your mother beautiful.* But as I've said before, my Dad and Spring were out of the ordinary, and Dad must have seen something lovely behind Spring's plump face.

I asked the woman, "Did you find anything?"

"His boat, upside-down where he kept it."

"Was that all?"

She didn't want to tell me. It was not easily said. But I could picture the little V-shaped ravine, and the linked pools dropping to the beach. An elderly man could lose his footing on wet popweed and start to slide, digging his fingers into the soil, unable to slow himself until his foot dipped into one of those pools. . . . He'd be dead by the next morning, and then the ice-devil would liquefy the pool again and draw him down. Another few days, and the bones would appear at the water's edge.

But they could be anybody's bones, and this woman didn't want to assume they were her father's.

"He wasn't around," she said. "I'll come to Noss with you."

"What about your mother?"

"She won't come."

"But she'll starve."

“No. With me gone, there’ll be enough for next freeze. After that, it’s up to her.” She looked at me from under thick eyebrows. “My name’s Helen.”

“That’s a very human name.”

“Dad’s choice.”

And she said very little else until late afternoon, when we entered Noss.

43

“What are you doing here?” asked Noss Lonessa shortly. “We thought you were dead.”

It was a bad start, even somewhat sinister. I seemed to have barged into an acrimonious discussion between Lonessa and Walleye. As I’d approached the Noss council house I’d heard shouting and on entering I’d found them staring at each other with undisguised hostility. Now three angry eyes and one clouded one fixed on me.

“Another time,” I said hastily.

“No, come on in,” said Walleye, twisting his lips into a smile. “We’re always pleased to see a visitor from Yam. Obviously we received false information about the, uh, state of your health. Facts get twisted in the telling; in the end, memory is the only reliable thing. Sit down. What brings you here, Hardy?”

What false information had they received, and from whom? I decided to leave my questions until later. Mine was going to be a long story and I had a suspicion Lonessa’s patience would be exhausted long before the finish. Right now, I needed a dramatic start to rivet their attention.

“My life is in danger,” I said. “I’m seeking sanctuary here.”

Walleye was impressed. “Aha!” he exclaimed.

Lonessa sniffed skeptically. “Why not seek sanctuary in Yam, where you belong?”

“The danger lies in Yam itself.” This was beginning to sound stilted and pompous, as though Stance had lent me the words. I changed tack. “It started when my father was killed in Noss. I made a fool of myself then, I admit it. My only excuse is, I was not myself. I made some stupid accusations for which I’m truly sorry. I’m hoping you’ll accept that.”

“Huh,” said Lonessa.

“Just pass among our men and make it clear you were wrong,” said Walleye helpfully. “Time goes by, things don’t seem so important.”

“Anyway,” I resumed, deciding to edit out large sections of my story, “It all came to a head when you visited Yam a couple of days ago, Lonessa.”

“I didn’t visit Yam a couple of days ago.”

“I saw you myself.”

“You couldn’t have. I wasn’t there. I haven’t been in Yam for thirty days or more,” she insisted angrily.

“That’s true,” said Walleye.

I stared at them. What game were they playing? “But you came to talk to Yam Wand about her crops!”

“That was over thirty days ago, as I said. Are you doubting my memory?” She was rearing up in her seat, eyes like bright stones, fine leather tunic taut over menacing breasts.

“No. No, of course not. . . . Wait a moment,” I said. “Let me think about this.”

The lorin. Everybody knows the lorin are able to affect people’s minds. Examples: the slow production at the human mine. My escape from the ice-devil at the stardreaming pool. The lorin have a way of slowing consciousness; in some cases causing a loss of consciousness altogether.

I’d entered the lorin warren in mild weather with an injured ankle. I’d emerged in warm weather with my ankle cured.

How long had I been asleep?

With the lorin, anything is possible.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You’re right. I must have lost track of time. So much has happened lately.”

“We’d heard you’d gotten lost in Arrow Forest and died there, for one thing,” said Lonessa.

“I survived. Who told you I’d died?”

She shrugged. “Nobody in particular. It’s been common knowledge here for days.”

A good example of the importance of getting the facts right. Any child conceived during the past thirty days would pass the story of my death in Arrow Forest down the future generations. It would be corrected subsequently, but memories of me would be garbled for a while. That can make a fellow feel very insecure.

I shelved the matter of my death and the lorin’s powers for later consideration and marshaled my thoughts. We were sitting on the familiar fish-trap wicker chairs around the low table. The last time I’d been in this room, Dad had been alive. He’d thrown Cuff against the wall. His warm presence was very much with me, and I was in danger of slipping into an involuntary stardream. . . .

I pulled myself together, and gave them the gist of the story to date.

When I’d finished, Lonessa said, “First Cuff, now Stance. Can you really expect us to believe the Yam manchief wants to kill you? His own nephew? I don’t think so.”

“If we believe you, it puts us in a difficult situation with Yam,” Walleye pointed out.

“I can’t help that.” I’d been walking all day, I hadn’t eaten since Phu knew when, and I was tired. “Just tell me this. Was Stance in Noss the day my father was killed?”

“The Yam hunt was up on the east cliffs, not far off,” said Walleye. “I saw no hunters in the village.”

“Neither did I. If Yam Stance had been around, wouldn’t we have heard about it?” said Lonessa. “He’s not a man to go quietly.”

“Unless he had good reason,” I said. I was watching their faces as we spoke, trying to detect a shifty look. I could understand their problem. They didn’t want to get involved in anything that might have political repercussions or leave unpleasant memories. They certainly didn’t want to be party to an accusation of murder against the Yam manchief. On the other hand, maybe they genuinely knew nothing. Their faces gave nothing away. Not a shifty look in sight.

“The only stranger in town was the Nowhere Man,” said Lonessa in tones of righteous disgust, “so far as I know.”

“I saw him myself that day,” I said. “He had no reason to kill Dad.”

“The Nowhere Man is not always responsible for his actions,” said Lonessa.

Walleye added, “He was wild, as a boy. He’d have been welcome to spend his days in Noss, but he was out of control. Things happened, best kept under geas. He had to go.”

“A man bitter against authority might seize an unexpected opportunity. . . .” suggested Lonessa. “Your father with his back turned. . . .”

“It’s Noss authority he’d be bitter about, if any. He had nothing against Yam. He wouldn’t have killed Dad.”

“The circumstances of his conception. . . .” murmured Lonessa.

“I know all about that. I’ve stardreamed it.”

“Of course. Your grandfather was implicated.”

The woman was trying to annoy me. “Not *implicated*. He just happened to be there at the time.”

“Well, anyway,” said Walleye placatingly, “the Nowhere Man’s a more likely candidate than Yam Stance.”

“I told you whose voice I heard outside the lorin cave.”

“You have no reason for tying that in with your father’s death. Stance was probably concerned about you being out all night.”

It was hopeless; their minds were set. “All right,” I said. “We’ll agree to disagree. Can I stay in Noss for a while?”

“I won’t have you bothering Charm,” snapped Lonessa.

“I won’t bother Charm.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Really, Lonessa,” Walleye came to my rescue, “Whether or not Hardy stays in Noss is man’s business. Once he’s apologized to our men I see no objection. I’ll be glad to have him here. We’ll gain a useful understanding of Yam from him.”

“He could come between Charm and your son!”

Walleye sighed. “That’s Cuff’s problem. Sometimes I wonder what that boy is coming to.”

“That boy, as you call him, will be our manchief one day.”

“Yes, when I’m dead. Then he’ll be your problem, Lonessa.”

The hostility I'd observed when I arrived had surfaced again, and it seemed a good time to leave.

5: THE GRUME

44

Once there was a sailing ferry across the estuary at the end of the village. It was operated by the father of the Nowhere Man's mother, but nobody took the job on after he died. There wasn't enough traffic. A men's village that makes its living from fishing has boats to spare and little need for a specialized service. Noss's sacred plantation starts at the old stone ferry wharf and covers the hillside as far as the point. The path through the forest zigzags to the cliff top, then follows the coastline east to Butcher Bay. The Nowhere Man's prospective mother had climbed this path on the way to her historic meeting with my grandfather and his friend Hodge.

I found Charm alone on the disused wharf, sitting on the upturned remains of the ferry boat in the shade of a seasucker, gazing across the water to the other side of the inlet. My skimmer lay beside her. I hardly recognized her at first; she had her back to me and she was dressed in a loose fur smock that had seen better days. I identified her by the way my heart gave its usual alarming lurch.

"Hello, Charm."

She swiveled around on the old planking and her eyes opened very wide. As I approached I could see she was trembling violently. She continued to stare without speaking.

"It's me," I said cheerfully. "I'm not dead."

It was an insensitive opening to say the least; but you have to realize that up to this point neither of us had admitted any deep feeling for the other. I may have an extensive knowledge of the past, but I had no way of knowing the future and what it held for Charm and me.

Charm still shivered. She put her hands over her eyes and hunched over a little as she sat, her arms around her knees. Then her fingers parted and I saw two brown eyes regard me briefly, incredulously; then she covered her face again. She began to sob quietly.

I felt almost guilty at being alive. I sat down and put my arm around her, and began to mumble the kind of nonsense soothing noises that my mother used to mumble to me before I graduated to the men's village. It was the best treatment I could manage at short notice. I sat like that for a while, waiting for something to happen.

When it did happen, it was conclusive and almost violent. She twisted toward me, threw her arms around my neck, pulled me to her and laid a very wet cheek against mine.

"I thought you were dead," she whispered. "They told me you were dead. I wanted to die myself."

I felt completely inadequate. "I didn't know. . . . I never realized. . . ."

She released me, put her hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes with wet brown ones. Suddenly she was quite calm. “Of course you realized,” she said. “Nobody can feel like I do without being loved the same way back. Otherwise what’s the point of anything? So kiss me, why don’t you?”

I obeyed. I’d never done this before and I probably wasn’t very good at it, but when it finally ended Charm gave a sigh of happiness. “Oh, wow!” she exclaimed. “You really do love me!”

It’s a worrying thing, being accused of loving. It dumps all kinds of responsibilities on a fellow. If he accepts them he must act quite quickly and pass his memories down the line before the feeling dies. Fortunately — so they tell me — it’s all quite easy and extremely enjoyable, and when it’s over you can forget about the woman involved and get on with your life.

Unless you’re made like Dad and Spring. . . .

I had to say it.

“Charm, I’m not sure I love you that way.”

Her face paled. “You mean you don’t want to make love to me?”

“Of course I do, but it wouldn’t be fair.” It was difficult to find the right words. “You see, I don’t want to. . . . make a nuisance of myself. I couldn’t stand it afterwards, you see. You going off to the women’s village, me catching sight of you occasionally in the street. . . . I couldn’t stand it.”

Her expression told me nothing. “You don’t want it that way? What do you want, then?”

“I think I might be made like Dad. He and my mother used to meet secretly, ever since I was born. They wouldn’t let each other go. I wouldn’t be able to let you go, either. It’s not fair to lay that kind of thing on you.”

“Why. . . . What makes you think you’re like them?”

It took a big effort to make the admission. “I’ve never been able to get you out of my mind since I first saw you.” I waited for her to call me a fool, and get up and walk away, and maybe look for Cuff, the freezer.

“That makes two of us,” she said simply.

I couldn’t believe what I’d heard. “What?”

“I think maybe your dad and mom had the right idea. Except for the secrecy bit. To Rax with everybody else, I don’t care what they think!”

I couldn’t take it in. My life had changed in a short moment. What was I supposed to do next? I searched my memories, wishing I’d used my enforced confinement more usefully in stardreaming, but I couldn’t find any precedents. No doubt they were there in faithful old Dad’s memories, but these things take time to unearth. He may even have put them under geas, never realizing I’d be made so much like him.

I felt Charm’s hands on my face, turning me toward her. “You’re not riffing through your memory, are you?” she asked, grinning.

“Uh, not exactly.”

She chuckled. “You really are a very conventional fellow, aren’t you! You’ll get no help from the past. Nobody ever felt the way we do!”

"I suppose we're kind of special," I said uncertainly, not wanting to mention the shameful behavior of my parents.

"Of course we are. This is forever, Hardy." She hugged me close.

But I'd had too many conversations in the ale house with men who'd sired children. Once the siring part is over, the woman loses her attraction. That's what they all say.

So I was terrified that once we'd actually made love, the glow that turned Charm into a bright shining thing in my mind's eye, would suddenly snuff out. It would hurt her terribly if that happened. I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life and I didn't want anything to bring this to an end. Making love might do just that.

She was holding both my hands. She was waiting for me to continue the love talk, but I had to change the subject.

"You're wearing the crystal," I said.

"Thanks so much for getting it back." She let go my hands and fingered it. "I wish I was wearing nicer clothes with it. I didn't expect to see you ever again. What happened to you, anyway? Why did we hear you were dead?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow." Evening was darkening the sky, and I shivered. A lone zume raised a mighty splash across the estuary. Hunger and tiredness had suddenly caught up with me, and just for an odd moment I longed for the comfort of the cave-cow. This had been a day my descendants would visit many times. "It's a long story."

"Tell me tomorrow, then. Hardy. . . ."

"Yes?"

"I wish we could sleep together tonight."

"So do I, but we have to break this to Lonessa gently."

"All right. I can wait, just about."

We walked back toward the village hand in hand.

Walleye found me a cottage to myself. This was a relief, because I'd thought I'd have to move in with him and Cuff; the customary form of hospitality extended to a visitor. Having my own cottage made me feel as though I belonged. The previous occupant had been eaten by a grume-rider, but one thing we've learned through the generations is that history rarely repeats itself. I chased out the resident drivets, slept very well that night and dreamed of the legendary Drove and Browneyes.

The following morning I heated up some smoked fish provided by Walleye, ate it quickly and walked out into the morning sunlight, anxious to meet my girl. The cottages of the men's village are ranged along one side of the road; the hillside rises behind. A wide bank, worn bare of vegetation, slopes gently to the brown waters of the estuary. At this time of year the fishboats were all upside-down on the bank. Men were scrubbing them with pond sponge impregnated with sand.

“You’ll be Yam Hardy. I’m Noss Crane. I’ve seen you sailing with my daughter.”

A tall man with a wiry mop of red hair stood before me. I found myself expecting the worst, but there was no hostility in his gaze. More worrying was the sight of other fishermen strolling up.

“I’m hoping to stay in Noss for a while,” I said.

“Charm will like that.” It was an encouraging reply. He turned to the newcomers; six of them. Three of them were carrying the clubs they use for battering fish to death. It probably meant nothing. “You remember Yam Hardy,” he said to them.

They grunted. They remembered.

It was groveling time. “The last time I was here, my father was killed,” I said. “I was upset and I said some stupid things. I’d like you all to know I’m sorry.”

“That’s not good enough!” Cuff darted into view from behind a fishboat. “You accused me of murdering your father! It’s me you have to apologize to!”

He was right, of course. But my pride simply would not allow it. “You heard what I said to the men here. That covers you. So let’s forget it, shall we?”

“No, we won’t forget it! I demand an apology!”

“Get frozen, Cuff.”

He blundered toward me, fists clenched, face even pinker than usual. He’d finally gotten around to it. He was going to smash my face in. But he was no bigger than I, and the thought of his proprietary attitude toward Charm lent weight to my own fists.

I caught him with a pre-emptive strike on the nose while he was still shuffling in. It stopped him in his tracks. His eyes watered and he clutched his nose, pondering on the fact that my arms were longer than his. He appealed to the others. “He hit me! You all saw that! The dirty grubber hit me!”

“All right, that’s enough!” Noss Crane stepped between us. “You’re supposed to be adults, you two!”

Cuff was already retreating. “My dad’s going to hear about this!”

We watched him go; a chunky figure in leather shorts, bare back streaked with muck from the boat he’d been working on, mind full of bitterness and bile. It was a pity. I didn’t need enemies in Noss; I had enough already in Yam.

“Come with me, Hardy.” Crane led me away while the men wandered back to their boats. “You can give me a hand with my keel. Much better that you should be seen helping around the place, if you want to stay.”

“I hardly think Walleye will let me stay after I punched his son on the nose.”

“Walleye’s in your debt. You did what he hasn’t the strength to do himself. I’ll be frank with you, Hardy. Cuff’s gotten out of hand. Walleye’s our manchief because he has the longest memory and we respect him for it. But Walleye’s a cripple and Cuff’s a bully, and they live in the same cottage. It was almost inevitable, what’s happened. Cuff started off by passing on a few of Walleye’s instructions when Walleye maybe didn’t feel well enough to leave the cottage. Now we’ve found the instructions aren’t always Walleye’s. Cuff often invents his own. We’ve challenged them. No

jumped-up youngster tells us fishermen what to do. But Walleye backs him up, under pressure, we think. This means Cuff's our manchief now, in effect."

"Walleye seemed happy enough with Cuff when Dad and I were last here."

He smiled grimly. "They tell me your dad threw him against the wall. That would have aroused fatherly instincts, wouldn't it? Anyway, matters have gotten a lot worse recently."

"Yam may come begging for food again this year."

"They won't get it under our present regime. And particularly, not with your father out of the picture. He could wrap Lonessa round his little finger. Stance has the opposite effect on her."

He seemed sympathetic so I related the events that had driven me to seek refuge in Noss, while we unpegged the false keel from his boat in preparation for the grume. In answer to my final question he shook his head.

"No, lad. I didn't see your Uncle Stance that day. I was out fishing all day. I saw Charm sailing with you, but no other inlanders. Stance's hunters were up on the cliffs, I know that."

We worked on. From time to time I glanced up the road in the direction of the women's village, in the hope of seeing Charm heading my way.

Crane knew who I was hoping for. "I doubt she'll be coming today."

"Oh, yes?" I said casually, as though I didn't know what he was talking about, working at a recalcitrant peg with hammer and punch.

"Lonessa will try to find ways of keeping her in, if I know Lonessa. And I know her pretty well." He chuckled grimly.

I dropped the pretense. "What can I do about it?"

There was a pause while he thought, knocking out the last peg. The heavy false keel came free. One each end, we lifted it carefully and laid it beside the hull. The deep-water fishboat had now been converted into a skimmer, suitable for the dense waters of the grume. We strolled down to the water's edge, dusting our hands off. A huge white bird swooped low over the inlet, scanning the water for prey.

A grummet. The first sign that the grume was on its way.

Crane had been pondering for some time. Finally he said, "I've had three daughters, each by different women. I wanted to pass on my memories; we all want that. I sometimes wonder if it's a way of cheating death. Anyway, I failed. Lonessa was my last hope. It was easy enough; she was a beautiful woman. She still is. And," he grinned briefly, "she's an easy women to let go of, when the loving's over. But I should have known. They always say, the baby chooses the sex of the strongest lover. And I'd hoped for a son with Lonessa? Huh! So Charm was born. For a long time I hated her for not being a boy, for killing my memories off. But all our memories die, sooner or later. Charm began to grow up, and she wasn't like the other kids in the women's village. She started coming to see me, wanting to come fishing with me. She enjoyed the excitement. She said, if there was one thing more boring than watching crops grow, it was watching fish dry." He chuckled, remembering. "She said that if she

was going to be the next womanchief she was going to do what she freezing well liked, and to Rax with Lonessa!”

“So she and Lonessa don’t get along?”

“They get along fine in many ways, but Lonessa likes to be boss and Charm won’t knuckle under. So that’s your answer, Hardy. Charm will find a way to see you, if she wants to.”

It took Charm until the afternoon. I’d spent the rest of the morning helping Crane and the other fishermen to get ready for the grume. We were standing around chatting and gnawing on smoked meat, and I was thinking I was getting along with these people pretty well, when Lonessa came storming into our group, all flashing eyes and tossing hair.

“Have you seen Charm, you men?” Then she saw me. “You, Hardy! If you know where Charm is I’ll advise you to tell me, right now!” And her gaze raked the line of upturned boats, as though she expected to see her daughter’s foot sticking out from under one of them.

We all expressed ignorance.

“Just keep away from her, Hardy. That’s all I ask. Charm has responsibilities and a position to maintain. I won’t have her hanging around with a freezing grubber.” And she strode off angrily before I could think of a response. Dad’s death had erased any goodwill she might have felt toward me.

Cuff was not my only enemy in Noss.

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“Fine woman, that,” said one of the men, watching her strong legs carrying her in the direction of the woman’s village.

Lonessa had departed in the nick of time, because almost immediately a boat came sailing from behind a well-treed tongue of land and crunched onto the gravel beach. Charm called out.

“Hardy! Come aboard!”

I stepped into the dinghy. “Your mother was just here.”

“To Rax with her. Someone told her I was with you yesterday and she took it hard. Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it. I’m the next womanchief of Noss and I reckon that means I can do what I freezing well like. Within reason, of course. Anyway, this is a great day and I’m taking you for a hike along the cliffs.”

We beached the boat some distance beyond the old ferry wharf and climbed through the sacred forest toward the headland. Eventually we emerged, out of breath, onto a high, rocky promontory.

“There!” said Charm happily. “What do you think of that!”

Far below us I could see the bar across the mouth of the estuary; a pale sandy smudge beneath the rippled blue. Beyond that the sea stretched to the horizon, immense and mysterious. Asta lay below the rim of the world, another continent. A few

tiny fishboats sat on the vastness, sails filling to the light breeze. They were all making speed home to Noss.

With good reason. A pale line meandered across the sea from the shore to the horizon, as though a giant jug had dribbled milk across the surface. Above and beyond this line white birds soared, wheeled and dived. Grummets, feeding on fish and other creatures forced to the surface by the approach of dense water. The savage grume riders would be there too, gobbling up anything they could find including fishermen too slow to get back to port. Then they would move on, following the van of the grume, and the sea would be safe again.

“Isn’t that just something!” exclaimed Charm. “It gets to me every year. The grummets go round the world, following the grume. Round and round, year after year until they have heart attacks and die. Every year they lay an egg on the surface of the thick water and they keep throwing up around it, so when they look down from the sky they can see this big pool of white sick and they know where their egg is.”

“How do they know it’s not somebody else’s egg?”

“The smell, we think. Each bird’s vomit smells a bit different. Then when chick’s ready it knocks a hole in the egg just big enough to poke its head out, and feeds on the stuff. They must have strong stomachs. *I* wouldn’t want to, for sure. Then the chick uses the egg like a little boat until it feels confident enough to peck its way right out and float on the grume.”

It all sounded very strange and improbable to a grubber like me. “I’d have thought the waves would have scattered the vomit. And sunk the egg, once the chick punctured it.”

She smiled the superior smile of one who knows. “You don’t get waves on the grume, only a kind of slow swell. And eggshells don’t sink on it, either, silly.”

She was having things too much her own way. On her own territory, daughter of the Noss womanchief, she would have vast reservoirs of local knowledge that I couldn’t hope to match. She stood there in a pale blue dress of human fabric, grinning at me smugly. She needed to be taken down a peg or two.

There was only one way to deal with the situation. I seized her and kissed her, hard.

“Oh,” she said, when she could speak. “That was nice. Is this going to happen every time I show you how clever I am? So let me tell you about the grume riders, horrible things.”

I kissed her again, hugging her close so that her breasts pushed against my chest. I found I was running my hand over her bottom. I was also immediately, enormously aroused.

I let her go and stepped back quickly, but not quickly enough.

“Aha!” she exclaimed, staring at my mushrooming shorts.

“You’re not supposed to know about that kind of thing,” I muttered, embarrassed.

“A girl can’t live with a woman like my mother and not catch the occasional glimpse of her men friends.” Suddenly she reached out and grabbed me. “Did I do this to you, really?”

“It seems like it. I’m sorry. I didn’t intend. . . .”

“No, I’m very flattered.” The warm brown eyes gazed into mine dreamily and her hand still held me, moving gently.

“It’s best that you don’t do that.” I pulled myself free in the nick of time and tried to concentrate on the view: the silver fringe of the grume and the wheeling, screaming grummets.

“Spoilsport.” She found a patch of palpater and lay down on it, squirming as the plant’s stubby paddles kneaded her back. “Oh, that feels good. Come on, Hardy, take a chance. Lie down with me.” Maybe it was deliberate, or maybe it was the action of the plants, but the hem of her blue dress had risen to her thighs. I caught a glimpse of white pants beyond smooth, perfect legs. She raised her arms, tucking her hands behind her head in a way that pushed her breasts against the thin fabric. Hard little nipples drew my gaze hypnotically. I felt an overwhelming need to touch them. “Come on, Hardy,” she said again.

My knees gave way and I fell down beside her, hugging her to me, then running my hand over her breasts. My heart was pounding wildly and Charm’s breath was coming fast as she unfastened the row of buttons running down the front of her dress. I transferred my attentions to her thighs, and hesitated. “I’ve never done this before.”

“That makes two of us. Do you think we’re doing it right?”

“It feels pretty good to me.”

“I’m glad. I hoped it would. That’s why I got you up here today, to do this.” She raised her bottom and slid her pants off. “Now, get out of those shorts of yours.”

“But. . . .”

“No arguing. I outrank you here in Noss.” Deft fingers unfastened my belt. She tugged at my shorts, and the source of my embarrassment sprang into view, all ready for the fray with a mind of its own.

I kissed her, maybe trying to delay the inevitable, but she took hold of me, pulled me on top of her and guided me in.

At that point my mind stopped working.

Afterwards, I remember her looking up at the sky, her pretty face glowing, and saying, “That was the most wonderful thing in my life.” I watched her for a while, lying beside her, my hand on her breast.

I hope that memory never dies; her face and the sky, as though she was thanking the invisible stars.

Then she turned toward me, kissed me and said, “We should be thinking about getting back. My mother will be looking for me, the poor old girl. I bet she never had anything as good as this happen to her. She’s going to be jealous, and she’ll hide it by being angry about me being with you.”

“Jealous about what? You’re not going to tell her, are you?” The thought of Charm breezily informing Lonessa that we’d made love on the cliff top made my blood run cold.

“She’ll know. You can always tell.” She stood, buttoned her dress, retrieved her pants and pulled them on, reached down and hauled me to my feet. “You can’t lie there all day looking up my dress,” she explained. “It’s not a nice thing to do.”

I sighed, returning to the real world, and looked around. Nothing had changed, although I felt it should have. The grume was still there, advancing toward us imperceptibly; and the soaring grummets, and the rocks we’d climbed up to reach this spot, and the gap in the forest where the trail from village emerged into the open. . . .

I experienced a disturbing backflash.

We’d come by a different route, but the lay of the rocks was recognizable. That tall pillar of granite weathered to look like an old man. The three smaller rocks in a row. Trees and bushes may change, but rocks never do.

Near this spot the Nowhere Man had been conceived.

My mind didn’t always work sensibly when I was with Charm. And now fate had stepped into the gap and run matters for me. We could have made love anywhere, so why in the name of the Great Lox had we made love in this ill-fated spot?

Charm would not have known its significance. “You’re very quiet,” she said as we made our way down the trail toward the village, hand in hand. “Are you thinking how beautiful I am, and how much you love me? I hope so, otherwise I might think you were sulking about something.”

I couldn’t tell her a frightening foreboding had gripped me. Up to that moment I’d always felt I was in charge of my own destiny; but now my certainty had faltered, my confidence had ebbed. Events were huge and I was tiny. I could do nothing. I was being moved from situation to situation by a giant hand, like a helpless little wooden man in a game Mister McNeil once taught me. And in time the little man gets knocked off the board but the game rolls on as though he’d never been there.

“I’ll always love you,” I said automatically. But was I telling the truth? I had no control over the future. Neither had I control over my own body. I’d made love to Charm. Would I ever want to make love to her again, or would I seek out the company of the ale house and the backslapping fishermen, and forget about her now that she’d served her purpose?

It was dark under the trees, and the fronds of the anemones bent hungrily toward us as we passed. Somewhere a grummet squawked, snatched by an overhanging tendril as it swooped low by the waterside. A deathly flapping hammered through the forest.

“And I’ll always love you, too,” replied Charm, squeezing my hand, oblivious.

A dark figure strode toward us as we approached the ancient wharf. In the distance I could see a silvery machine glittering in the sunlit clearing at the wharf itself. The features of the striding man were blotted out by the dazzle from behind him. He was tall and long-legged, and a cloak hung to his knees, swinging as he walked.

Charm recognized him first.

“What’s the Nowhere Man doing here?” she said.

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Mister McNeil was working methodically across a row of flowers, spraying distil on them from a can with a spout. “I’m sorry I had to send the Nowhere Man for you, Hardy; but I didn’t want people to think there was anything big going on.”

“What’s going on that’s big?” I asked.

He ignored my question. “So Charm’s come too,” he said thoughtfully. “I hadn’t reckoned on that.”

“She insisted.”

“Where Hardy goes, I go,” said Charm. “That’s the way it’s going to be from now on.”

“You’re a lucky man, Hardy. Luckier than I am.” Mister McNeil took a metal tube from his pocket. “All right; stand back.”

He pointed the tube at the flowers and they burst into flame. Much of the garden had already been reduced to blackened ash. Smoke was still rising from nearby flower beds. There was an expression of anguish on his face that forbade me to ask the obvious question.

Charm hardly knew the man, though. “Why are you burning your flowers, Mister McNeil?” she asked.

“Orders from Devon Station,” he said shortly.

We followed him as he walked along a path to a circular bed several paces away and began to spray distil again.

“But don’t you have a kind of gun that burns things up?” asked Charm. “Humans usually do.”

“A laser. Yes.” His tone was bitter; I’d never seen him like this before. “But a laser only burns what it hits. I have to destroy every last trace, every seed. There must be no chance of any of these flowers growing again and competing with the indigenous plants. Indigenous plants!” He uttered a harsh bark of laughter, waving a hand at the landscape. “Just take a look at the goddamned things! Creeping and strangling and eating everything within reach. Do you really think any of my flowers would stand a chance out there?”

“Unlikely,” said the Nowhere Man.

“But. . .” Charm looked unhappy. “They were so pretty. They showed us what Earth is like. And they never went outside your garden, anyway. I don’t understand.”

He sighed. “I was breaking the rules, you see. Nobody knew, because nobody ever came to see what was going on. Yesterday Missus Froggatt came, and she didn’t like what she saw, either outside my house or inside. She said I clinging to the past and it was time I realized just what world I’m living on. As if I don’t know! Then she told me why she’d come, and I guess I lost my temper and there was a big argument, and I finished up yelling at her to get the hell back to Devon Station and never

come back here. As she was getting into her buggy she looked around and sneered, and said I was risking contaminating your world with all these Earth plants, and I had to get rid of them. According to the rule book she was right, but the rules could easily have been bent. If you ask me she said it out of simple spite. And then today it was backed up by an order from the Director. . . . All right; stand back.” And he pointed his tube.

The flower bed exploded in bright flames.

“So why did she come?” I asked. There was an uneasy feeling in my stomach. I didn’t want the flowers to be burned; it was like a dreadful omen. I wanted things to be just the way they’d always been. I glanced at Charm, but she was oblivious to the atmosphere. She was simply unhappy because she’d liked the flowers and now they were being killed. “You said there was something big going on.”

“Come inside,” said Mister McNeil.

The Nowhere Man seated himself in the shadows as usual. Charm and I sat side by side on a long window seat. Mister McNeil sat opposite with a glass of pale brown liquid. The Earth artifacts were still all around the room; some beautiful, some enigmatic. He hadn’t burned those.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this,” he said. He was gazing past us, at the smoke rising from his garden. He was weighing up his approach. I shivered suddenly, wondering what terrible thing had happened, or was going to happen. “Humans have been on your world a long time,” he said eventually. “We’ve tried to be good neighbors.”

I’d never stardreamed far enough back to remember the arrival of the humans, but it seemed to me relations had always been good. I nodded.

He sipped his drink thoughtfully. “There are two kinds of space travelers in this part of our galaxy,” he said. “There are humans, and there are people I’ve mentioned before, called kikihuahuas. We’re both good guys in our way, although we have different approaches. We both have codes of behavior that we try to stick to, and we both break them from time to time. It’s inevitable.” There was a plea to understand in his eyes. “It’s easier for kikihuahuas. They’re genetic engineers, but we humans are only technologists. The kikihuahuas don’t believe in killing. We humans, on the other hand, often have to kill others to save ourselves. Time doesn’t matter to kikihuahuas; they travel in huge living space bats, hibernating for thousands of years. They don’t work metal; they have no machinery. They have a creature that produces other creatures for whatever purpose is needed.”

“A creature like the goatparent?” I asked.

He looked at me, surprised at the religious reference. “I guess so.”

“What do the kikihuahuas look like?” asked Charm.

“They look like whatever they’ve been bred for. The space bat is a kikihuahua, and the little people traveling in it are kikihuahuas too; they look something like Earth gibbons. They’re very nice, friendly folk, clean and tidy.

“But we’re not so clever as them. We blast around the galaxy in metal ships and we make one hell of a mess everywhere we go. We have to, to survive. We take,

the kikihuahuas give.” He sighed. “I’m trying to contrast the two species. I’m trying to say it’s not our fault.”

“What’s not your fault?” I asked.

“We need metal and other elements to survive, you see. We came to your world because it had some of the elements we need, and we came to an agreement with you to mine it. We handled everything in a fair and businesslike manner. And now things have gone wrong. To put it simply, it’s begun to cost us more to operate the mine than the value of the product. And that doesn’t sit well with a group of very important humans we call Sector Central.”

“You should close the mine down, then.” It was the Nowhere Man speaking, and his tone was harsh and angry. He knew something Charm and I didn’t.

“I’ve already told you, that’s not possible. We’ve sunk too much into it.”

“You must cut your losses.”

“You think that. I think that. But Sector Central thinks otherwise. I’m sorry.” He turned to Charm and I. “You see, Sector Central is right, up to a point. The mine could be profitable, but for one factor.”

At that moment I had an inkling of what he was getting at. “And what’s that factor?” I asked, my mouth suddenly dry.

“The lorin.”

“What about them?”

“They slow things down. They hinder our work. They slip in and out of the tunnels and make a nuisance of themselves. Our people aren’t productive when they’re around.”

I remembered the lorin I’d met in the mine. I knew what he meant. “That’s just the way they are. They can’t help it. There’s nothing anyone can do about the lorin.”

“Sector Central thinks there is.”

“Yes?”

“We. . . .” He hesitated. “We have orders to wipe the lorin out.”

I found I’d jumped to my feet. “You can’t do that!”

“I’m very much afraid we can. We’ve already had orders from Sector Central. That’s what Missus Froggatt came to see me about. She knew I’d be angry and she thought she might be able to talk me round. But we got into an argument and she said I’d gone native and. . . well, you know the rest.”

“Why did she come to see you? Why not just go ahead and do it?”

“There’s a big lorin warren under Arrow Forest. That’s where most of the local lorin come from. The forest comes under my jurisdiction. There are certain protocols we humans observe, even at times like this.”

I was seeing him through a red haze of anger. “I was there in that warren myself a couple of days ago. The lorin saved my life and looked after me. The lorin are. . .” I searched for the right words; the words that might make a difference. “They’re part of

us. Without them we wouldn't have a civilization. They take care of us and they help us, and they ask nothing in return. You can't kill creatures like that!"

Charm was aghast too. "I thought you humans weren't allowed to interfere with other civilizations. What are you saying — the lorin aren't civilized? Just because they can't speak, you think they aren't intelligent?"

"Oh, they're intelligent enough, my dear."

"So how can you bring yourself to do this?"

"We humans have this knack of breaking the rules when it suits us. I sometimes think it's what makes us great — our flexibility. On this occasion, it makes us rotten. Our current bosses esteem profits more highly than a few hundred non-speaking aliens. I'm sorry. You're seeing us at our worst."

I was beginning to pull myself together. "You don't agree with this, do you?"

"Of course not. That's why I'm telling you, Hardy. You're the one person who may be able to help the lorin."

Charm exclaimed, "You'd betray your own people?"

"Just this time, yes. I'm flexible, too."

"How in the name of the Great Lox can I help the lorin?" I asked bitterly.

"I don't know. Warn them, or whatever. Get them away from the warren. I have no idea what weapons we're going to use; maybe poison gas. Or we might send heat-seeking mobile mines down there."

"It's not just the lorin. I think the warren itself is alive, like a big mother animal. A cave-cow."

After a moment Mister McNeil said hesitantly, "Yes. You see, the lorin are a species of kikihuahua."

"The space-travelers?" Charm was incredulous. "They certainly don't look like it."

"You expect them to wear clothes, maybe space suits? They don't need them in this climate. They were bred for your world. They hibernate if it gets too cold for them, and their body cells can survive freezing without damage. All they really need on this world is food, and they get this from the anemones and cupps."

"How?" I asked. I was visualizing myself leading a few hundred starving lorin across the countryside.

"You know anemones catch their food and digest it to feed the roots. And cupps catch rainwater and process it into a kind of honey for the same reason. So the sap flows downward, instead of up like it does with other trees. Well, the kikihuahuas have bred a creature genetically similar to their space bats, only much smaller. That's Hardy's cave-cow. It lives underground and taps into the roots of the trees, and produces a milk the lorin feed off. It's all they need to survive. Our people know this, and the cave-cow will be a prime target."

"How come you know all this, and we don't?" asked Charm. "After all, we've had generations to find it out."

"Maybe we have more curiosity," he said, evasively I thought.

I asked, "If the lorin are a species of kikiuahua, won't they simply radio for help? And if the kikiuahuas hear what you're doing, won't they retaliate?"

He smiled grimly. "They won't find out, not for a few hundred years or so. They don't have radio. Sure, they can communicate telepathically, but only over short distances." He sighed. "So now I've told you what our plans are. We'll be moving against the lorin within a day or two. Now, we have to decide what you can do about it. For a start, the Nowhere Man will drive you to Arrow Forest." He glanced out of the window. "You can be safe in the warren before nightfall. After that it's up to you."

"I'll think of something," I said. Somehow I had to make the lorin understand the situation. I didn't know how. After that, maybe they'd have some ideas of their own.

He said, "You feel very strongly about the lorin, don't you? You're very protective of them."

"Of course. They're good people. And they're very protective of us."

He looked at me seriously. "That figures. You see, we believe the kikiuahuas created you people, too."

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There was a moment of total shock.

But looking back, I don't know why there should have been. The clues had been there, all through my life, all through my memories. It was just that I felt we stilks should be — I don't know — unique. Springing from out of the ether, fully dressed. Instead, we were the product of some ancient genetic program. "The goatparent?" I whispered.

"Yes." He watched the expression on my face and said, "At least it's a clean and purposeful creation. Not like us, crawling from the ooze with no purpose other than to survive and breed. No wonder we make a mess around the place. Be proud of your beginnings, Hardy."

"Proud?" It was a strange word to use. I felt as though, somehow, we'd been living a lie.

Charm recovered first, and took hold of my hand firmly. "It makes no difference to anything, my love. Not a bit of difference."

"She's right," said Mister McNeil firmly. "And always remember, the more you know about yourselves, the better your chances. You never liked religion, did you?"

"I didn't want to find it was right in any way at all. I wanted it to be complete nonsense. And now you tell me the goatparent produced us. Well, to Rax with the goatparent!" I said bitterly.

A short while later Charm and I climbed into the glittering interior of the buggy. The Nowhere Man sat at the controls. It should have been fun, but I had more important things on my mind.

Mister McNeil watched us go, standing in the wreckage of his garden. As we swept through Yam and turned onto the Totney road, Charm and I couldn't help but sit

tall, inviting the admiration of the villagers. I caught sight of Caunter and Trigger standing outside the ale house. Their mouths dropped open as they saw us in our glittering carriage. My mood improved rapidly. I grinned and waved. Then it occurred to me that Trigger would report my resurrection to his father. Well, he'd have heard the news from Noss sooner or later.

Once clear of the village, I asked Charm a question that had been bothering me ever since we left Mister McNeil. "Had you ever heard of the kikihuahuas before? I mean, even the name of them?"

"No. But I haven't bothered to stardream very far yet. Maybe there's something way back there."

"I've never heard of them, myself. You'd think people would talk about them. Legends, even if there are no memories. But the only legend we have is the goatparent."

"When I asked Mister McNeil why it was all news to us, he avoided answering. Did you notice?"

"Yes. He knows a lot more than he's telling. I wonder why?"

The Nowhere Man spoke suddenly. "Because too much knowledge is not always a good thing."

"Mister McNeil doesn't think that," said Charm.

"Maybe he hasn't been telling us the whole truth," said the Nowhere Man.

The seed of suspicion had been planted. And that was a pity, because I'd begun to accept what I'd been told.

We took the same road I'd traveled with Smith and Smitha in their motorcart, but we reached Arrow Forest in a fraction of the time. The Nowhere Man dropped us at the spot where I'd fled Stance's posse. He spun the buggy round and headed home.

We watched him go, then Charm regarded me uncertainly. "Are you sure you know the way? Arrow Forest is a pretty big place."

"There must be plenty of entrances to the warren. I only visited a part of it, but even that part felt huge to me." I was grappling with the concept of the cave-cow. Was it so vast that it extended under the entire Arrow Forest? Surely not. A single cavern that big would need supports, which meant the cave-cow would need holes in its body for those supports to run through. I couldn't imagine it.

"It's going to get dark soon," Charm reminded me.

"Come on." I led the way into the forest.

Late in the afternoon, just as we were beginning to get a little worried, we found an entrance by chance. A decaying anemone tree was falling prey to a rising tide of clamberweed. I pulled the curtain of weed away without much hope, and saw a dank hole at the foot of the hollow trunk where the thick taproot had rotted. The clamberweed was the only thing holding the tree up.

"You want to go down there?" asked Charm doubtfully. The evening wind had begun to whisper through the forest, scaring her with its cold breath. I hugged her. She was shivering.

I lowered myself into the hole and kicked my feet around, but could feel nothing. There was a faint smell of lorin, however; and I knew there would be a tunnel floor not far below. I let go, fell, and hit bottom sooner than I anticipated. The floor was soft.

“It’s all right!” I called. “Just lower yourself through the hole and I’ll catch you. It’s much warmer down here.”

Charm’s descent was a lot of fun, because she was still wearing the thin dress and the descent rucked it up around her waist as she slid into my arms. I made the most of the moment, exploring each part of her as I lowered her to the tunnel floor. Even in the most worrying times, lust and love always lurked in my mind when Charm was around. I kissed her thoroughly while one of my worries evaporated. I still wanted to make love to her. Perhaps I always would.

“I never knew dropping through holes in the ground could be so exciting,” said Charm happily. “We must do it more often.”

“Whenever you like.” I recalled our purpose, released her and extended my arms. The tunnel, high at this point under the tree, dropped to crawling height on either side of us. The walls were soft, warm and yielding, unlike the sandy tunnel of my previous visit. We were already in an extremity of the cave-cow; a hollow tentacle. Perhaps this was how the creature extended over such a wide area. “Now, kneel down and sniff. Can you smell lorin?”

After a moment she said, “Down that way.”

I thought so too. A familiar warm, slightly sweet smell wafted toward us. “I’ll go first. Keep close behind me.”

We left the faint light and crawled into the darkness. Quite soon I heard soft scuffling sounds and the walls of the tunnel opened out. I stood. Immediately a warm, furry hand took hold of mine. I grabbed Charm as she was getting to her feet and pulled her against me. I didn’t want us to be separated.

“Hardy,” she said uncertainly, “there’s a lorin holding my hand. Why do you think it’s doing that?”

“It’s just being friendly. There’s one holding my hand too.”

“So what happens next?”

“Somehow we’ve got to make them understand the danger.”

“We can’t ask them to take us to their leader. I don’t think they have one.”

“I’m going to explain the danger in words. They won’t understand them, but if they’re telepathic like Mister McNeil says, that won’t matter. They’ll be able to get pictures from my mind while I talk.”

“If they can read our pictures. They may only be able to read kikihuahua pictures.”

“It’s the only chance we have.”

So I repeated to the lorin everything Mister McNeil had told us, standing there in the dark with a teat of the cave-cow brushing my hair. I addressed the lorin holding my hand, but assumed my words were going out to all lorin in the cave. By the time I’d finished I was quite thirsty.

“You expressed yourself very well,” said Charm admiringly. “I could almost read your mind myself. I wish my mom had heard; she’d say you were leadership material. If they didn’t understand all that, it’s their own silly fault.”

The lorin was drawing me forward. After a few paces it stopped, and a longer teat brushed my face. I took hold of it and drank.

“They did understand,” I said when I’d finished drinking. “They knew I was thirsty.”

“So why aren’t they panicking? I’d have expected more scurrying to and fro, and some squeaking or something.”

“Maybe there’s nothing they can do.”

“Or maybe they already know the human plan. There are lorin at Devon Central, remember? They could have read the humans’ minds and reported back. We could be wasting our time.”

It was a possibility. Whatever had happened, we’d done the best we could. I suddenly realized how tired I was. Immediately the lorin tugged at my hand. I followed, keeping a tight grip on Charm. Soon we reached the area where the roof hung low. We lay down, side by side. There was a little light here, given off by a small pile of fungi nearby.

“Make love to me,” whispered Charm.

“What, here?”

“Don’t argue.”

So we made long, slow love despite our tiredness, and it was just as wonderful as the first time.

Before I fell asleep I projected the thought into the darkness: *Wake me if anything happens.*

It’s easy to oversleep by a few days, in the cave-cow.

I awakened to the certainty that only a short time had passed. Charm was stirring beside me. I could hear voices. Deep human voices.

“I think we’ve found it.”

A brilliant light flashed around. It was the first time I’d seen the interior of the cave-cow in detail. The shapeless mass of the roof was striped black with the shadows of a thousand dangling teats. As I’d expected, horny columns rose from the flesh of the floor to support the roof. Piles of hay were scattered here and there, except around the edge where the roof curved around to become the floor on which Charm and I lay. In the distance was darkness; endless teats were dimly visible, and small heaps of glowing fungus.

A multitude of lorin stood around, motionless.

They were completely defenseless. Empty-handed, they stared into the light without blinking, their eyes reflecting a deep crimson. They didn’t move. It seemed to

me they were resigned to their fate. Lorin were known to be fatalistic creatures who accepted death without a struggle.

But not *this* time, surely. . . .

More lights, more humans, dancing shadows all around the cavern, shouts of discovery. Charm was gripping my hand tightly.

What happened next came as a complete surprise.

“Where the hell have they all gone?” said one of the humans in tones of amazement. “Jeez, I can smell them. They’ve only just got out of here.”

The lorin stood still, in full view.

“They must have heard us coming,” said someone else.

The first human stepped forward. He was tall, dressed in a businesslike golden suit hung about with unidentifiable objects. A teat hung directly in his path.

As he was about to walk straight into it, it swung gently out of his way.

Cave-cow teats had never done that with me. They just hang there. I’d walked into a few of them. It can be startling, in the dark. But that particular teat swung out of the way of that human, on that occasion. I couldn’t understand it.

What happened next was even more surprising. The human continued his slow walk, inevitably coming face to face with a lorin from time to time. They stepped aside quietly, allowing him to pass unimpeded. He didn’t glance after them. He didn’t even notice their shadows moving. It was eerie. It was as though he was selectively blind.

“The lorin have got into their minds,” whispered Charm.

“I didn’t know they could do that.” Then I remembered the way they’d saved me from the ice-devil.

The human strode on more quickly, followed by five similarly-dressed companions. “We’re wasting our time in here,” said the man in the rear. “They can’t have got far. Let’s take the hopper up, maybe search in the infrared.”

“Let’s shoot the place up a bit first,” said one of his followers, drawing a weapon from his belt.

Charm’s grip tightened on my hand.

“Put that thing away,” snapped the leader. “Do you want to bring the roof down on top of us?”

“There’s something funny about this,” said someone else. “It’s like in the mine. The bastards have a knack of melting away. Sometimes I wonder if they’re really there at all, or just some kind of mass hallucination.”

“They’re real enough,” said the leader grimly. “And they’re around here somewhere.”

The flashlights swung here and there. Red-eyed lorin watched, motionless. A wide circle of light swung toward Charm and me. We held our breath. The light was dazzling, brighter than Phu himself. I couldn’t help but blink.

The light moved on, probing the curve of the cave-cow. I don’t know what the humans saw, but they didn’t see us and they didn’t seem to be aware that they were inside an animal. Maybe it looked like a big sandstone cave to them.

“We’re going to search every goddamned centimeter of these walls, and the tunnels at the far end. We’re not leaving here until I’m satisfied the place is empty. Goddamn it, I know they’re in here somewhere!”

“If you say so. Personally, I’m convinced they’re not.”

“That’s just because you want to be convinced. You were never in favor of this in the first place.”

“Darned right I wasn’t. You can’t just go slaughtering an intelligent life-form in its own environment. The lorin have never shown any signs of hostility — quite the opposite.”

“It depends on what you mean by hostility. I reckon the lorin are doing their best to wreck the mine project. That’s what I call hostility.”

“Well, I think Sector Central are out of their tiny minds. Maybe they should try stepping down onto a real world sometime.”

Arguing in a most satisfactory manner, they moved on down the cavern, lights darting here and there.

I whispered, “It looks as though the lorin have everything under control. We should get out of here and report back to Mister McNeil.”

It was warm and comfortable on the resilient flesh of the cave-cow, and I knew that if I didn’t move now, I could doze away for days.

“You really want to go? How do you know your uncle Stance isn’t lurking out there with his friends, waiting for you to pop your head up? Trigger saw us pass through the village, heading this way. The news will have got through to Stance by now.”

Now that was a thought.

“We’d better make straight for Noss. It’s the only place I feel safe. We’ll send word to Mister McNeil from there. He’ll know the attack failed by then, anyhow. He’ll have had word from Devon Station. They’ll probably blame him for it.” I forced myself to stand and tugged at Charm’s hand. Like myself, she was reluctant to get up.

“Come on!”

“Hardy. . . . There’s a lorin holding me down.”

Then I felt hands on me too. Gentle hands, pushing me back. “What’s going on?”

“I think they want us to stay awhile.”

“How long, for Phu’s sake?”

“No, lie back just for a moment. They’re trying to tell us something.”

Her arms slid around me and I toppled down beside her. The lorin drew close; I could feel the breath of the nearest on my face. If it had been anything other than lorin I’d have been scared, and I’d have tried to fight them off. But it’s not possible to be scared of the lorin.

“Look!” murmured Charm.

A light appeared very close. Ghostly blue-white and with a definite outline, it was a single, big luminous fungus. I’ve hardly ever seen such things because, naturally

enough, you have to be outdoors at night for that to happen. Close beside the fungus was the face of a lorin, dimly visible. It was pointing to its head, then at me.

“What’s it trying to say?” I asked Charm.

“I don’t know. Look.” The lorin was making a circular gesture with its forefinger. Then it placed its palms together and laid them by the side of its face in an unmistakable gesture.

“Stardreaming!” exclaimed Charm. “It wants us to stardream!”

“Why?”

“Well, they seem to be able to read our thoughts. Maybe they want to pick up parts of our history while we’re stardreaming.”

“Do we want them to do that?” It was difficult to be suspicious of the lorin, and a few days ago the thought would never have occurred to me. But the news that they were created by a spacefaring race of world colonizers had eroded my confidence somewhat.

The lorin pointed to me, then held two fingers of its other hand above the single finger.

“That’s your dad and mom, he means,” said Charm intuitively. I’d never have guessed it, myself.

But the lorin shook its head.

“Dad and Uncle Stance?” I guessed.

The lorin nodded very deliberately, an imitation rather than a natural gesture. It took one finger away.

“Dad?”

A shake of the head. It stared at the single finger.

“Uncle Stance?”

The lorin nodded and bared its teeth in a parody of a grin. Then it made the circling gesture again.

“It wants you to stardream about your uncle Stance,” said Charm definitely.

“Why, for Phu’s sake?”

“It knew you were wondering why your uncle wants to kill you. It’s trying to help.” She hesitated. “If the lorin can read our minds, they probably know more about us than we know ourselves. So you go ahead and stardream. I’ll do the same, but for me it’ll be just practice. I’m due to try for another couple of generations back, anyway. My mom always tells me I spend too much time sailing and fishing, and not enough time thinking. She says I should have been born a boy.”

“I’m glad you weren’t.” The lorin was prodding my forehead urgently with its finger. “All right, I’ll stardream about my uncle Stance, if that’s what you want.”

I lay back and composed myself while the last shouts of the humans died away into the dark distance.

The cave-cow was conducive to stardreaming, more so even than my pool. In fact, since the episode of the ice-devil, I doubted that I'd ever be able to stardream there again. Here, in the warmth and sense of timelessness, and the presence of Charm and the lorin, I slipped into a stardream very quickly, without even the need of hatch.

I'd have liked to do a thorough job by using Dad's recollections of Trigger's birth as a starting point, but this was impossible because Trigger was conceived after me. So I began with the young Stance, filling in the gaps left by previous cursory stardreams. Somewhere in there, according to Charm and the lorin, lay the reason for Stance's murderous intent.

It seemed rather unfair that this reason, whatever it was, must relate to some event before I was born. But I couldn't think of any event since my birth that could have so triggered Stance off. Certainly we didn't like each other, but a person had to have a better reason for murder than that — particularly in our society.

I stardreamed.

Dad and Stance got along reasonably well as children, although even then it was clear Dad thought Stance was a pompous jackass. Stance was popular as a child because he always did the right thing, ever conscious that one day he would be manchief. Dad, on the other hand, was something of a rebel. A first child often rebels when his expectation of minor status is dashed by the birth of a second child of the same sex. It's a big step down and it can cause resentment. Yet I detected no resentment of Stance in Dad's memories.

Oddly enough, I detected pity.

I followed them back through their relatively uneventful childhood. We stilks don't have the childhood upheavals that Mister McNeil has told us about: the new schools, the parents divorcing, the traveling and so on. Our learning is done by endlessly observing and listening to our elders; our parents separate long before our birth, and we rarely travel far outside our own village. The only real upheaval in our lives is the switch from the women's village to the men's. And only the boys experience that.

Then I noticed something odd about the relationship between Dad and Stance.

They never stardreamed together.

Now that was unusual. Brothers will often engage in mutual stardreaming for the fun of later comparisons of the results, and for compiling a more complete set of memories for passing on. It's good practice, too.

But in all of Dad's memories there was no recollection of him lying down with Stance in some pleasant spot and stardreaming. In fact there was no recollection of Stance stardreaming at all.

Was this simply disinterest on Stance's part? Hardly; one of the principle duties of a prospective chief is to stardream thoroughly, as far back as he has time for. And Stance was nothing if not dutiful. Was he in some way frightened of his ancestors' memories? Or did he stardream in private, because he'd found certain ancient memories he didn't want to discuss with Dad?

Or was it some secret and profane belief?

I recalled the heretical words Stance had spoken to me quite recently.

“The past is gone; dead. . . . What matters is the future, and we must face it with fortitude and commonsense. We must cast a wide net in our struggle for survival. Too long we have dwelt in the past, and as a result we have continued to make the same mistakes, generation after generation.”

And the insane look in his eyes as he'd said it.

Convinced I was onto something, I worked my way rapidly back through Dad's memories until they became too babyish to make sense. I came across Stance's birth, which seemed to be attended by more excitement than usual. But then he was destined to be manchief, so you'd expect a certain amount of fuss.

Stance, manchief. Stance, memories.

And a recent memory: Stance's peculiar lie over the past results of early crop sowing. Other incidents; small in themselves but adding up to an almost unbelievable whole.

At that moment I got an inkling of the truth.

“What's the matter?” Charm spoke suddenly.

“Huh?”

“You're shaking. Was it a bad stardream? I have those sometimes, and it's nice to have someone bring you out of it.”

“I think I know why Stance wants to kill me.”

She uttered a squeak of excitement. “Hardy!”

“But my dad put it under geas. I have to break that, if I'm going to be sure of the truth.”

“Then break it.”

“But Dad. . . . I mean, he had his reasons. I don't like. . . .”

“Hardy, my love.” She cuddled up close. “Your dad couldn't have known your life might depend on knowing what was behind the geas, or he wouldn't have invoked it in the first place. Don't you see? He'd *want* you to break the geas.”

“I'm not so sure. Geas is geas.”

“All right then, do it for me!” she said impatiently. “We love each other and we want to be together for always. We can't do that if you're dead. So break the freezing geas for my sake!”

And I had no answer to that.

I stardreamed, starting again from Dad's later memories. . . . Stance's coming-of-age. His first pipe of hatch.

“Easy, now,” said Granddad Ernest. “Don't force it.”

The witnesses stood around the walls. Stance sat on the floor puffing away, his immature face intent, memory hopping. After a while he frowned.

“What is it, son?” said Granddad.

Stance was silent for a long time. Dad watched him, puzzled. Stance didn't look happy. In fact the poor fellow seemed to be actually crying. Those were tears, weren't they, on his face?

“What's the matter?” asked Granddad sharply.

And the geas came down.

"I'm so sorry, Dad," I muttered aloud. "I have to do it."

I felt Charm squeeze my hand, and I plunged into the geas. It was like a fog. Demons kept whispering, *Go back. Go back.* I ignored them, concentrating on Granddad's last words, fighting my way forward as a man might wade through a bog. Forcing myself into Dad's memories against his will.

Suddenly I seemed to break free.

"*What's the matter*" asked Granddad.

"*I . . . I wonder. . . .*" Stance opened his eyes, brilliant with tears. "*Can you help me, Dad?*"

"*Help you? You don't need help. You need concentration. Now get on with it, and stop your freezing whining. You're making a fool of yourself in front of all these people!*"

Nobody spoke for a while, and I could sense a huge wave of compassion flowing from my Dad toward his brother. Granddad's face was set like rock. Then suddenly my Dad spoke.

"*Maybe he should try some other time. It's not easy with all these people around.*"

"*Not easy? Not easy? By Phu, we've all been through this, every man and woman here!*"

The witnesses were shuffling uneasily. They couldn't help being aware of the conflict, although Granddad and Stance had been talking in undertones.

Suddenly: "All right, everybody go! Go on, get out! Get out! Granddad's face was red with temper.

They filed out, leaving my dad alone with Stance and Granddad.

"*We've never had to sent the witnesses away before,*" snarled Granddad.

"*By Phu, you'd better pull yourself together, young man!*"

"*I'm sorry,*" mumbled Stance. "*I can't seem to. . . .*"

"*You can't what? Of course you can!*"

There was a long silence. Stance's eyes were screwed up tight. He was shaking with effort. My dad became aware of an unpleasant stink. Suddenly Stance gave a great cry of despair. The pipe fell to the floor beside him, shattering. He hid his face in his hands, crumpling up into a heap, rolling over on his side. A pool of piss spread from under him, running in a rivulet down the sloping flagstones toward the chair where Granddad sat. He jerked his feet up with a grunt of disgust.

"*It's not his fault,*" said my dad.

"*You've disgraced me in front of the whole freezing village, you stupid young freezer!*"

Stance lay there, twitching and wailing in his own piss.

"*There's been people like this before,*" said my Dad hesitantly. "*People who can't stardream. It doesn't affect them in any other way. In fact they can be very clever, seeing things differently from us. Sometimes I think too many memo-*

ries get in the way of our thinking. Maybe it's no great disaster." He bent over his brother. "How far back can you go, old fellow?"

Stance responded to the kindness. "Just. . . Just my own memories. Before that there's nothing. Not a freezing thing. Just emptiness."

"You've brought disgrace on the male line," said Granddad heavily, his anger transformed to despair. He seemed to have shrunk, crouched in his chair.

I sensed a flash of anger from my Dad. "You can't blame him. You were the one that conceived him. It's your fault. You passed on faulty genes."

"Faulty genes? What kind of silly talk is that? You've been mixing with too many humans, Bruno!"

"All the same, lay off Stance."

During the silence that followed, I could feel my Dad's quick anger abating, to be replaced by a certain compassion for his own father.

"So what are we going to do?" said Granddad, beaten.

"Best to do nothing. Just tell people Stance was nervous but now everything's all right. They'll believe you. You're manchief."

"But if Stance is. . . faulty, you should be the next manchief, Bruno."

"I've already said, it's not Stance's fault. He was born to be chief. I'll not take that away from him."

"That does you a lot of credit. It won't be easy for you. You're going to have to back him up. . . ."

I pulled back out of the stardream. I knew enough.

I told Charm everything.

"But how has he managed to hide it all this time?"

"He's cunning, in his way. And he cultivated an air of. . . I don't know, a kind of arrogant omniscience. So nobody liked to question him. And there was always Dad, backing him up, giving him the benefit of his own memory lobe. Until he killed Dad." So many things made sense, now.

*Stance's clumsiness at the tiller of the motorcart; such skills are inherited like memories. His growing support of religion over remembered facts. His frequent shouts of 'I remember that!' as though his memory was being challenged. I recalled an incident in the motorcart: Stance swinging round, his face crimson in the glow from the firebox, shouting at Dad, *Yes, you'd like to betray me, wouldn't you, you freezer!* Many, many things.*

"But why did he kill your dad?"

"Last thaw there was a big argument between Wand and my uncle about crop failures. Stance invented a memory to prove his point and Dad caught him at it. Later on I was inspecting my boat, and I overheard Dad tell Stance he was thinking of withdrawing his support. I think Stance thought Dad was on the verge of exposing him and taking over the chiefship. Dad would never have done that, of course. I don't think Stance appreciated the extent of Dad's loyalty. Next day, Dad was killed."

"Surely. . . . After all those years, he wouldn't think your dad would suddenly tell on him, just like that?"

"I don't think he's quite right in the head. It's more than just his memory lobe's gone wrong. Life was easy for a long time, but this last year things haven't gone well for the village. He didn't have the memories to deal with the situation. He came in for criticism. He began to feel everybody was against him. And then the ultimatum from his own brother, who talked about kicking his last support away. It was too much."

"But to decide to kill his brother?"

"He had Trigger to think of, too. If Stance's memory is flawed, then so is Trigger's, obviously. If Dad had exposed Stance, Trigger would never be chief."

"I can see that. But why does he want to kill *you*?"

"The memory of his coming-of-age is like a—" I searched for the right word and finally had to use a human expression, "—time bomb. Just waiting to go off. He didn't know Dad had put it under geas. And even if he had known, sooner or later I might find a reason to break the geas. Which I did. And unlike Dad, I feel no loyalty to Stance."

"So what happens now?"

"There's only one thing to do. I have to confront the freezer in the presence of witnesses. I won't be safe until then."

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But confronting the freezer was not a thing to be rushed into. It had to be planned, and the right moment chosen. And there were other priorities.

When Charm and I arrived back at Noss, the grume was full and the place was buzzing with activity. It was not a good time to talk to people about my problems. The grume was here, and the grume couldn't wait.

"I have something to tell you, Mom, and I want you to be sensible about it," Charm said to Lonessa.

"I'm always sensible," said her mother cautiously.

"I'm going to live with Hardy."

"*You're what?*" the redoubtable womanchief shouted. "Not in my village you're not! And Walleye won't have you in the men's village, either!"

"So we'll live in the cottage down by the old ferry wharf. And it's no good puffing yourself up like that, Mom. I bet you'd have jumped at a chance to live with Hardy's dad. So simmer down."

"That cottage is not a fit home for a daughter of mine." Lonessa recognized Charm's determination and commenced a rearguard action. "The roof's fallen in. It's full of drivets. It hasn't been lived in since the ferry was in operation."

"So we'll fix it up. You might as well give in gracefully, Mom. It's much more dignified that way, in front of Hardy."

"And you expect that grubber to fit in here, in Noss?"

"Hardy would fit in anywhere if it meant living with me," said my girl, with a supreme confidence that left her mother speechless.

We left her gaping like a fish stranded by the grume, and strolled hand in hand past the men's village and a scene of frantic activity. Boats were sailing right up to the beach, unloading baskets of fish onto loxcarts, pushing off and tacking back to the fishing grounds just past the bar. Women urged the lox into action, driving the loaded carts to the women's village where the gutting teams and the drying racks waited. Lorin ambled here and there helping out, encouraging the lox, their relaxed demeanor contrasting with the bustle around them.

"There's Cuff," said Charm with a chuckle.

He'd just brought his skimmer in. He saw Charm and me as he was stepping onto the muddy beach. His face darkened. All movement ceased. He was trying to decide whether to unload his fish, or smash my face in. He hung there, one foot out and one foot in his boat. A huge grummet swooped, alighted on the gunwale and started to wolf down fish from one of his baskets. He swatted at it with a snarl of temper and, the spell broken, began to offload his catch onto the beach while a companion carried it to the loxcarts.

"It must be a terrible thing, losing a girl like you," I said.

"He never really wanted me, not the way you do. His pride's hurt, that's all. It made so much sense to people — the manchief's son and the womanchief's daughter. It seemed to tie up loose ends. But it took no account of love."

As we walked on past the men's village we could see the far headland, the sky a blizzard of whirling birds. We could hear them too, a continuous yelling din bouncing from the cliffs and echoing up the estuary. A group of long-legged loats scrambled ponderously down the opposite bank, making for a narrow beach where they could use their wide jaws to good purpose. The surface of the water was littered with weed, dying and dead things and the occasional wrecked boat, all brought up by the grume.

"I'm going to teach you to swim," said Charm.

"Not in all that muck, you're not."

"It won't look like that for long. That stuff drifts ashore. The water'll be clean in a few days. And the grume's the very best time to learn to swim because you can't sink. Listen, would you mind walking a bit faster? I need to be made love to."

We spent several days making the cottage habitable, visited frequently by Charm's dad who brought us small items of furniture and pottery. He offered to take me in his fishboat.

"Not until he can swim," said Charm. "And he has his own skimmer, remember? He has to learn to sail, too. He's not very good at it."

"He can't sink, not with the grume here."

"He might get eaten by a grume rider while he's thrashing about in panic. I want to be sure he can handle himself."

She was adamant, and her dad went away chuckling. On the other hand Lonessa ignored us, apart from one occasion when she walked by on her way to the cliff top while we were repairing the roof. Her eyes definitely swiveled in our direction, but her head didn't turn and she made no acknowledgment of our presence.

“She’ll come round,” Charm assured me. “Stubborn old fool. After her tantrum she feels obliged to make a stand.”

The swimming lesson took place three days after our arrival. The sun was warm, although not as hot as other years, when Charm took me down the ancient stone slipway. I wore my shorts; Charm wore a very attractive two-piece costume of human fabric. At first I thought the whole episode was going to be worthwhile because of the way she looked, but matters soon took a turn for the worse. The slipway was well named. My feet slid on slick weed and I tobogganed into thick cold water. I scrambled back onto dry land, spluttering and very scared.

“That’s good,” said Charm. “That’s a start. Now you know what it’s like. It’s given you confidence.”

“No, it hasn’t.” The sun seemed to have grown small and cold and Raxlike, and a bitter breeze swept in from the sea. A commotion started up about twenty paces offshore; big slow bubbles welling to the surface and bursting with an audible pop. I could visualize a huge carnivore lurking down there, exhaling, deciding to come up and see if there was any food around, such as a struggling grubber.

“We’ll wade in together.”

“Not until that thing’s gone.”

The bubbles reached a crescendo of popping, and suddenly a long shadowy thing reared from the depths and settled on the surface, rocking and shedding sluggish drops of water. I stepped back with a yell of dismay, lost my footing and sat down heavily.

Charm laughed. “It’s only the old ferry, silly. It sank at its moorings one drench, generations ago. It always comes back up at this time of year.”

“Yes, well I didn’t know that, did I? I thought. . . . Well, never mind what I thought.” The thing bobbed there, maybe twelve paces long, black and rotting and sinister, its weed-draped anchor line still in place.

“Ready then?” She took my hand and hauled me to my feet. I scanned the water warily. At least most of the initial muck had floated ashore by now. Further out, fishboats sailed out to sea, exchanging banter with returning boats low in the water. Cuff might be in one of those boats, laughing at my fear.

“I’m ready.” I took a deep breath and waded out, Charm at my side. The water was atrociously cold, as though I’d stepped onto the very surface of Rax itself. Terror rose within me but the warm hand of Charm kept it from getting the better of me.

“That’s far enough. Now we’ll sit down, and you’ll find you’re floating. Just don’t worry about the cold. You’ll get used to it. Remember, the sea never freezes, and grume water is warm.”

It didn’t feel warm to me. The sitting down brought on an even stronger anxiety attack. Then Charm began to fool around with my shorts and distracted me. I retaliated by investigating her costume, and soon we were laughing and splashing about like a couple of kids. Losing my fear, I tried to swim. It was easy enough; I lay on the water and sculled myself along. We circumnavigated the old ferry, returned to the dock and played around some more. Somehow the top of Charm’s costume came off. I swam

away with it, Charm chasing after me, yelling breathless threats. Finally, he pronounced me a proficient swimmer and we returned to the cottage.

It was one of the last really good times.

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That night I had a peculiar dream. I've mentioned that our dreams are very like backflashes; they're old memories that surface involuntarily. They could come from further back than a person has ever stardreamed. So, unlike your human dreams, they're completely realistic. In this dream I took on the persona of Dad. Three of us: Dad/me, Stance and Granddad made a pilgrimage to Pallahaxi, the holy fount.

We stood at the end of the main street. The houses, now roofless shells, climbed the hillsides on either side of the basin of the small harbor. There were no boats, no people, nothing. Nobody lived in Pallahaxi. It was a shrine, home of the legendary Browneyes, visited only by pilgrims. I was supposed to be impressed, but I wasn't. It was all such a decayed mess. I didn't know where to look, to find something to be impressed by.

The young Stance said, "Can we go back to the motorcart now?"

Granddad looked sad. "Doesn't this place do anything to you, son?"

"Yes, it bores me."

Legends tell that Pallahaxi is where our memories start. Granddad had hoped a visit to Pallahaxi would trigger off Stance's memory lobe, but it wasn't happening. We walked along the harbor wall and soon arrived at a building much the same as the others, except that parts of it had been renewed by templekeepers over generations of pilgrimages. It would be uncomfortable to live in, but at least it was in better repair than anywhere else in the town. Over the door was a device painted gold: a soaring grummet.

"The birthplace of Browneyes," intoned Granddad impressively. "She lived there with the great Drove, who came from Alika."

Stance stared up at the device, his mouth hanging limply open, an oafish expression on his face. "So we've seen it. Let's go home now," he said.

"We'll go to the cannery," snapped Granddad. "We haven't come all this way to give up now."

The cannery is another shrine and a really strange one. Close to Pallahaxi, it covers a lot of flat land near the marshes. We had to watch our step because ice-devils abound in the pools here. The cannery is a huge building of stone blocks that will endure for ever. It's gray and forbidding, surrounded by posts of metal so rusted that many of them have disappeared entirely.

"What an awful place," said Stance. "What's so holy about this?"

Legend has it that the cannery was built to protect our ancestors against the onslaught of savage animals, and that they sat out the Great Freeze here, to emerge triumphant and memory-rich. Led, of course, by Drove and Browneyes.

It's an inspiring legend, but nobody I know has ever had the inclination or the ability to stardream back far enough to prove its truth.

We strolled through the main entrance into the cannery building. Pilgrims had set up little shrines here and there: benches with artifacts, statues of the Great Lox often dragging the sun-god Phu in his wake. We came across one shrine that must have been someone's sick joke: the sun-god in the clutches of the ice-devil Rax. Rax had some twenty arms made of dried vines, and his clay face wore an expression of gloating lust.

In a smaller chamber we found a huge heap of wafer-thin ashes.

"Books," explained Granddad. "Full of writing, to teach people and to help them remember. They burned the books because the sun-god Phu had given them perfect memories during their stay in this holy place. They had no need of books any more." He glanced at Stance, who was looking mildly interested. "Come one, we'll go deeper into this place."

"Not me," said I/Dad. "It gives me the creeps."

I awakened to find daylight streaming into the cottage and Charm tickling my face with a grummet feather. I told her about the dream. There were valuable memories in there. The time might come when they would be useful.

54

Later that morning my mother and Faun arrived unexpectedly on loxback, having spent the night at Mister McNeil's place. It was good to see them. Charm welcomed them — warily, I thought — and we sat down with mugs of stuva.

"What brings you here, Spring?" my girl asked suspiciously. "You haven't been talking to Lonessa, have you?"

Spring hesitated, blue eyes regarding us worriedly. "Lonessa? No."

"Thank Phu for that. She has some funny notions, my mom."

"But I do have a favor to ask. Wand asked me to get Hardy's advice about the way things are going in Yam."

I was stunned into silence. When did my advice ever count for anything in Yam?

"Why Hardy?" asked Charm.

"Hardy has our longest male memory line. He's an obvious person to advise us. And . . . I wanted to see you, Hardy. I couldn't really believe you were still alive."

"It's really me, Spring." I reached out and took her hand. "But why do you say I have the longest memory line? What about Stance and Trigger?"

She regarded me steadily. "You can't fool me, Hardy. You know about Stance, don't you." It wasn't a question.

"Dad had it under geas. I broke the geas. It was necessary. So you knew about it, too?"

"Of course I did. Your dad and I were very close. Nobody else knows."

“Just as well for them. Faun, you must never mention this to anyone, all right? Never.” People who knew of Stance’s deficiency were at risk.

“If you say so, Hardy.”

We discussed generalities for a while, then I asked, “So what’s been going wrong in Yam?”

“Religion. Your uncle is a good speaker, I’ll say that for him. He’s deposed the templekeeper and taken over himself. He gets up in the pulpit and rants on about how the sun-god Phu is withholding his warmth because he’s angry with us and needs propitiating. And certainly it’s been getting colder every year, and Stance’s explanation seems as good as any other. In fact there isn’t any other. He’s carrying people with him, and there’s even talk of a mass pilgrimage to Pallahaxi! I suppose they’ll pray to Drove and Browneyes to saddle up the Great Lox and haul the sun back into the sky, or whatever it is they’re supposed to do. Can you believe it? When now, of all times, they should be tending crops and hunting game!”

“Stance always did have a religious streak in him. Maybe the stress of leadership has sent him over the edge, now he doesn’t have Dad to bail him out.”

“I think he killed your dad,” she said flatly. “Killing is easier for him; he doesn’t have the same urge to protect old memories that we have. For some reason or other he thought Bruno was going to betray him. If only he’d asked me! You dad would never have betrayed his own brother. He was absolutely loyal. I used to pull his leg about it.”

“Stance didn’t have the sense to realize that.” I told them about the argument I’d overheard between Stance and Dad. “That’s why he killed Dad. Just a few words, maybe badly chosen.”

It came as no surprise to my mother. “I thought so. I thought he’d killed you, too.” The round eyes were shining with tears. “I can’t tell you how relieved I was when I got word you were here in Noss.”

“I couldn’t bear to think you were dead,” said Faun, and was rewarded with another suspicious look from Charm.

“I think it was Stance who knocked a hole in my boat last year. How did he take the news I’d, uh, cheated death again?”

“He went berserk, raving around the village. He’s saying you killed your dad, and the hunters are on his side. It’s a funny thing about hunters; they love a violent leader. If you’d been anywhere other than Noss, they’d have come and dragged you away. But even Stance realizes he can’t afford to offend Noss.”

Charm broke a long silence. She’d been watching Spring with an unreadable expression. “Spring, what else did you come here for?”

Spring looked at her. “You’re no fool, are you? If you really want to know, Wand told me to persuade Hardy to come back to Yam. She thought Faun might help.”

“Mom would think that,” said Faun sadly, gazing around the interior of the cottage, finishing up with a frank appraisal of Charm. “But Hardy looks very comfortable here. We’re wasting our time.”

I sipped thoughtfully at my stuva. "Go back? That sounds pretty risky to me, with the men against me."

"The women are for you, and it's only the hunters that back Stance, among the men. But everybody's afraid of him. They need a leader, but they're suspicious of him. He's unpredictable. They respected Bruno, and you're his son. If Wand and I spread the word you were coming back, people would rally around you and forget all this religious claptrap."

"And kick Stance out? I can't see that happening. And I can't use his memory deficiency against him. Nobody would believe me. Stance would bluster his way out of it. No. If Stance ever goes, Trigger will be manchief, not me."

"Trigger? Never. He's as defective as his father. And he's a fool to boot. He'd be the finish of Yam." Her rosy face took on an unaccustomed hard look. "I'd kill him myself, first."

Her words echoed grimly around the stone walls. I thought about it all. This was the cottage that Charm and I had made into a home. In the corner lay the pile of furs where we'd made love, many times already, with simple delight in each other's bodies. Outside this door was the wharf where Charm had taught me to swim, only yesterday. A couple of hundred paces away was the men's village and the fishboats and all the friendly activity, and Charm's father who was going to teach me to fish.

This was my home now, wasn't it?

Spring read my thoughts.

"Wand took no account of love," she said. "She saw it as a simple matter of you striding into Yam all full of courage and challenging Stance for leadership. But it's not like that, is it? You're not going anywhere without your girl, and you're not going to expose her to any danger. I understand that because I had Bruno. Wand never had anyone, so she won't understand. I'll just explain to her as best I can."

"I'm sorry."

"You've changed, Hardy. That's another thing Wand doesn't know. You used to be so . . . cynical, somehow. Nothing seemed to matter much to you. Your dad used to worry about it; he said you didn't like people very much."

"With fools like Stance lording it over me, it's not surprising."

"Well, you got away from him. I suppose I can't blame you for not wanting to go back."

"I have responsibilities here, Spring. They're more important to me than the future of Yam."

"I can see that." She smiled at Charm, rather sadly. "You must do what you think is best, Hardy."

They left soon afterward, leaving me feeling sad and guilty.

But Charm and I were young and resilient. By next morning Yam seemed a long way away, although as we prepared our breakfast I caught Charm glancing at me with a concerned expression.

“You’re not going, are you?”

“Of course not.”

She smiled, punched me lightly on the shoulder, and we resumed our life in Noss.

A couple of days later Charm’s father, Crane, took me fishing. His skimmer was about eight paces long but very narrow, and it rocked alarmingly when I stepped aboard. I was glad of the new confidence Charm’s swimming lessons had given me. Not that I could have drowned, but a few days ago I might have disgraced myself with panicky screaming if I’d fallen in. Cuff watched from among the rows of false keels on the beach, hoping for disaster.

“We’ll head upstream first,” said Crane when I was safely seated. “Get you used to the feel of it before we go out to sea.”

It was a kindly decision. The boat felt very unstable and the slow waves of the open sea would have made it that much worse. I’d been used to my own little sailboat, where any movement on my part was instantly reflected in the attitude of the boat. But Crane’s big skimming fishboat was much heavier, carried more sail, and it *wallowed*. A slow heeling motion could not immediately be corrected by the crew shifting their weight. As we slid into the middle of the estuary and the wind took hold of the sail, the boat rolled ponderously as though it was never coming back. I suppressed a yell of alarm.

Things got better when Crane extended the skimming booms on either side: heavy poles, each maybe six paces long, from which the nets hung like wings. These had the effect of balancing the boat.

“Better now?” asked Crane with a chuckle. His face was lined from years of wind and sun, and it screwed up like a dried yellowball when he smiled.

I soon found we’d lost little by fishing the upper reaches of the inlet instead of the open sea. As the grume advances around the world the smaller fish flee before it, often to be overtaken and forced to the surface. The larger fish can fight the effect: but they too spend a lot of time resting on the surface, breathing air, summoning up the strength to dive if a predator approaches.

The situation is different when the grume advances up the estuary, driving the fish before it. Here in the little bays and inflows the dense water meets pockets of normal water like the one Charm rescued me from, when I first met her. The fish take refuge in these pockets in great numbers.

“There’s Walleye,” Crane said suddenly, startling me out of a reverie as we neared that historic bay.

The crippled Noss manchief stood at the edge of a low, bushy promontory with two other men. One of the men was bending over, examining something on the rocks. From this distance it was difficult to tell, but it looked like a dead lorin.

Their voices carried clearly across the water.

“. . . puts a new complexion on things. When they know about this—”

“They must *not* know about this.” This in the quavering, slightly shrill tones of Walleye. “That’s the last thing we want at this time. It’s important we pull together.”

“Besides, it could be a useful tool. . . .”

Then they caught sight of us, and we heard Walleye’s sudden shushing noise. They grouped around the object of their attentions as though to shield it from view. We heard a final mutter from Walleye.

“I’ll take care of this. You forget it.”

Crane grinned as we slid out of their sight into the little bay. “Amazing how sound carries over the water. I wonder what that was all about.”

Then we entered less dense water and the skimmer sank until the wavelets lapped worryingly high on the gunwale. I sat very still. I couldn’t swim in this kind of water. Crane pushed the tiller over and gathered in the sail a little, and we changed course to skirt the edge of the grume. The boat rose again, then slowed down. The starboard net, suddenly heavy, caused us to veer toward thin water again.

“Haul in!” Crane commanded.

I did as he’d taught me: first pulling on the lower rope to tighten and raise the lower edge of the long net, then on the upper rope to swing the starboard boom and net inboard. The net was fat and glittering with struggling fish. I let go the lower rope and they spilled into the bottom of the boat, jumping and gaping.

We repeated this three times until the boat’s motion became sluggish and, I thought, dangerous. “You can cover them now,” said Crane, satisfied. As he turned the boat into the wind I waded among the fish, extending a slick skin over them and tamping it down, getting rid of air pockets, packing the fish into an airless struggling mass. Unlike terrestrial fish, our fish can breathe air and have to be suffocated.

Crane dropped the leeboard — a temporary keel pivoted from the gunwale — and we tacked slowly to and fro against the light breeze. “Think you can face the open sea tomorrow?” he asked.

“I’d like that.”

“Can Charm spare you for another day?”

I thought about it. “If I’m going to live here, I have to earn my keep. She’ll understand that.”

“There’s more than one decision you’ll have to make.”

“I’m not going back to Yam, if that’s what you mean.”

He squinted up at the opposite hillside, so intently that I followed his gaze. “A few years ago there’d be snorters all over that open patch, grubbing up the palpaters and such. You hardly ever see them now. Something’s happened. Hunting isn’t what it was. But the grume still comes every year, and the fish with it.”

“This is the place to be,” I said.

“There’s talk of groups of starving inlanders on the move, attacking villages. I sometimes wonder what would happen if we were attacked. We’re fishermen. We’re not accustomed to using spears and bows. Yam men, on the other hand, hunters. . . .” He watched me for a reaction.

“Are you suggesting Yam might attack us if they get hungry enough?”

“No, Hardy. I’m saying it’s all very well for us to complain about the food we give Yam, but the time may come when we need something they can give. Like protection.”

“An alliance?”

“Exactly. And if that came about, you and Charm would be. . . . Well, let’s say you’d be in the center of things.”

I pondered on this all the way back to the men’s village.

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Crane’s words were to prove prophetic.

The grume passed by. With it went the grummets, the grume riders and all the other predators, scavengers and opportunists. Waves steepened, the sea became choppy once more. Dried fish were carried into storage barns and fishermen re-attached false keels to their boats. Then they turned their attention to the cottage roofs. When the first of the aftergrume storms arrived, Noss was ready for it.

At last the final storm subsided, but now the drench was with us, the rain falling vertically and ceaselessly. People retreated indoors. Only the lorin were still to be seen walking through the village with heads down, fur plastered against their skin, their slow strides seemingly too long for their small bodies. Lox were led into stables or, in many cases, accommodated in the cottages, separated from their owners by a ditch across the floor.

In this way, Noss prepared for the freeze. Freezes came, freezes went, another year would come and go, life would go on and memory would last forever.

And it was partly this confident attitude that made the next event so shocking.

A fish barn was raided one morning.

Charm and I were visiting Lonessa at the time; a duty visit if ever there was one. She’d received us politely but coldly, allowing Charm to peck her on the cheek but ignoring me. The obligatory mug of stuva, when it arrived, was so weak it might have been dipped straight from a well. Charm did her best to draw me into the halting conversation but had little success until Lonessa suddenly changed her tactics, and began to talk to me as though I were still resident in Yam.

“And how is Stance these days?” she asked sweetly. “I hear he’s very much involved in the temple. And that cousin of yours — what’s her name? — Fern. Such a pretty little thing. I expect you get along very well together.”

“Mom,” said Charm, “Are you out of your tiny mind? You know he hasn’t seen them for yonks.”

Her tone jerked Lonessa back to normality. “Right,” she snarled. “It’s bad enough that the whole village knows what’s going on, but to Rax with them. What turns my stomach is the weird, perverse nature of —”

There came a timely pounding at the door.

“Lonessa! Lonessa!”

“What is it?”

“The barn! There are men looting the barn!”

“Tell Walleye, not me! He’s in charge of the men!”

“They’re not his men!”

I couldn’t help but feel communication would be improved if the door were open, so I opened it. A drenched woman stumbled in. I shut the door behind her and she leaned against the wall, panting and clutching at her grandmotherly breasts. I’d seen her around; she was Noss Bell, a fish-gutter, fat, elderly and garrulous. Now she really had something to talk about, but she was too breathless to do it justice.

“Well, whose men are they, for Phu’s sake?” asked Lonessa.

“I . . . I . . . I’ve never seen them before!”

“Why didn’t you tell them to go away?”

“I did. So did Mave and Fountain and others, but. . . but they wouldn’t listen. They herded us aside as if we were lox. It was awful! Just look at the bruise on my arm!”

“I’ll alert Walleye,” I said.

“You come with me, Charm,” snapped Lonessa. “I want to get to the bottom of this.”

We left Bell weeping and dripping against the wall and went our separate ways. In a very short time I’d rounded up a posse and we headed back toward the women’s village, not as quickly as we’d have liked because we had to match our pace to Walleye’s limp. Meanwhile Cuff fired questions at me.

“Who are they, these men? Are they from Yam? It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“I have no idea where they’re from.”

“You’d surely have recognized them if they’re from Yam.”

“I haven’t seen them yet.”

“So how do you know they’re not from Yam?”

“Just shut up, will you, Cuff? I’ve told you I don’t know where they’re from. And anyway, they’ll be gone by the time we arrive if you don’t get your dad to hurry up.”

“Are you criticizing my father? Just who do you think you are, huh? Once we’ve sorted this out, I’m gonna—”

“I said, shut up.”

So it was not a united team that arrived at the fish barn. Six women stood outside the double doors of the tall wooden building.

“They’re still inside,” said Noss Fountain, a tall elderly woman, lips trembling with outrage and incipient crying. “Phu alone knows what they’re doing to Lonessa and Charm.”

We found Lonessa unharmed, haranguing a group of men dressed in tattered furs while Charm stood by ready to lend assistance. I was relieved to see the men were all strangers. They’d brought a handcart with them, and in the gloomy light of the barn I could see it was piled with dried fish.

“Put that fish back at once!” Lonessa was shouting. Then she saw us. “It took you long enough. Walleye, you tell these thieves to put everything back.”

Cuff answered for his father. “You heard. Put it all back on the racks.”

“We need it.” The speaker was tall and bearded, and looked as though he’d once been a powerful man. Now his furs hung from bony shoulders like limp sails. “We’re starving, can’t you see? We have women and children out there in the hills.”

“That’s too bad,” said Cuff. “You should have had more forethought. You could have fished the grume at Butcher Bay.”

“We’re not fishermen. We’re from Totney. The game didn’t show up this year. And our crops failed.” His voice was indistinct because his mouth was full of dried fish. All the strangers were munching and swallowing frantically, as though fearful that we might pry the food from their very mouths. “It’s been a cool summer. We’re not the only ones.” They were a pathetic bunch, huddled protectively around their loaded cart.

Walleye spoke for the first time. “You could have asked.”

“You might have refused us.”

“We are refusing you!” shouted Lonessa. “I’ve heard enough. Now put the fish back and get out!”

“Like he said, they’re not the only ones,” I said. “There’ll be others like them.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Lonessa swung round on me angrily.

“I mean, is this our policy? Are we going to fight off everyone who comes to Noss hungry?”

“We can’t afford to feed every grubber who can’t plan ahead.”

“We can afford to feed these few.” I addressed the tall man. “You’re hunters, right? You know how to use spears?”

He misunderstood me. “We left our spears in the hills. We didn’t come to fight.”

“But you could, if necessary.” I turned to Walleye. “I think we should take them in, let them live here. We can afford to feed them, easily. And it could be useful to have men who can use spears in Noss.”

“Protection,” said Walleye thoughtfully. “They could show us how to make spears, and train our men to use them.”

“It makes sense,” I said.

There was an outburst of shouting from Lonessa and Cuff. They were both trying to say the same thing, but they tended to nullify each other. The gist of their problem was that they were not interested in training; they wanted to kick the newcomers out.

Seizing a moment while the noisy pair were catching breath, Walleye asked the tall man, “Would you agree to throw you lot in with us?”

“That’s very kind of you.” He held out a hand. “Totney Yard.”

“Noss Walleye. You’re welcome. Go and bring your women and children.”

The men departed, still munching. There was a long silence. Both Cuff and Lonessa had been taken aback by Walleye’s unexpected show of leadership in accepting my suggestion. A reappraisal was going on, and it was taking time.

Charm said, "It's the best way, Mom."

Reluctantly, Lonessa nodded. "But only those eight men and their families. We want no more refugees from Totney, right?"

Cuff said, "Now we should be able to hold off those freezers from Yam."

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And so Noss began to arm itself, cutting spears from the forest and training men in their use. The drench continued and it seemed to us that the rain was more chilly than usual. Rumors abounded of bandits in the countryside, and one gang more foolhardy than most actually attacked Mister McNeil's residence. Helen, the woman whom I'd accompanied to Noss from her croft, brought the news. I hadn't seen her for some time; word had it that she'd moved in with the Nowhere Man.

"They came at night," she told us. "Can you believe it? They must have been desperate. Mister McNeil has some kind of buzzer that sounded suddenly. It woke us all up and the lights came on. And there they were in the garden, ten of them, all ragged and savage."

We were gathered in the net loft; some fifteen including Walleye, Cuff and Lonessa. The men had been repairing the nets until Lonessa arrived with Helen; now the fids and leather palms had been laid aside while we listened to the shocking news.

"They crowded around the door," Helen continued, "battering away at it. Somebody threw a rock through the window. Glass flew everywhere. I was scared, I can tell you. They were shouting. It wasn't just food they were after. It was Mister McNeil himself." She was trembling, remembering it all.

"What do you mean?" asked Walleye. "What did they want with Mister McNeil?"

"He's human, you see. They were blaming the humans for everything. They were saying the humans were letting people starve to death when they could have saved them."

"They were right," said Cuff.

"And they were saying the humans were pulling out, loading up their ships and abandoning everyone."

Lonessa snorted. "That's nonsense. The humans have been here for generations. They've put a lot of work into Devon Station and the mine and everything. They wouldn't leave now."

"Well, I'm telling you what these men were saying. They were from Okam on the edge of the moor, and they could see what was happening. And they saw humans loading equipment into their shuttle. And then it took off."

"That doesn't mean they're leaving," said Walleye. "The shuttle's always coming and going with equipment. Anyway, what did Mister McNeil do?"

“He got his laser rifle and told them to back off. He set their cart on fire with it, to show them what he could do. The cart was all wet with the rain, but he burned it up easily.”

Cuff said, “With technology like that, why do they let us starve?”

I said, “It’s their policy. It works all ways.”

Charm added, “Mister McNeil told me the humans are no happier than us, and in the end it’s how happy you are that counts.” She moved close to me, slipping her arm through mine.

“Starving counts, too,” said Lonessa grimly. “And for Phu’s sake stop clinging to him like that, Charm,” she muttered, nudging her daughter none too gently.

It was another of those moments I revisit often: The net loft, gloomy in the everlasting twilight of the drench; the rain falling like a curtain outside the open double doors; the men sitting around the floor, forgotten nets draped across their knees; the warmth of Charm against me; gaunt Helen dominating the room, Lonessa tall and sexual in fine leather that fitted her like a second skin; Walleye leaning against a post for support, very soon to die. . . .

And a distant rumbling, that I took at first to be thunder. That sound is the focus of the moment, although I didn’t know it at the time. I’ve revisited my emotions often and found no fear, only curiosity over Helen’s story, with the usual background of lust for Charm.

“So then he turned his laser on the bandits?” guessed Cuff hopefully.

“He didn’t need to. He told them he had no intention of leaving our world and he’d help any way he could — like any human would — within the restrictions of human policy. They jeered a bit at this, but I thought they’d calmed down a lot. Mister McNeil thought so too, because he invited them in for a bite to eat. Only Jon was suspicious. But he was right and Mister McNeil was wrong.”

“Who’s Jon?” asked Cuff.

“You call him the Nowhere Man, but I think he deserves a proper name, don’t you? Anyway, once the Okam men were inside the house they turned very nasty. They looked around at Mister McNeil’s Earth things and they began to pick them up and make remarks about them. One of them dropped something — I don’t know what it was — and it broke to pieces.”

Charm gripped my arm more tightly. “What’s that noise?” she whispered. “The floor’s shaking.”

“So Mister McNeil told them to behave themselves or they wouldn’t get anything to eat. He’d put his gun away to show he trusted them. One man said that if they took Mister McNeil prisoner and threatened to kill him, the humans might be forced to help. They kind of. . . closed in on him. That was when Jon went and got the gun again. Afterwards, Mister McNeil said he’d acted too hastily, but I know he was right.” She swallowed, eyes wide as she suffered an involuntary backflash of the moment. “Jon aimed the gun at one of the men, and suddenly smoke came from the man’s clothes, and. . . and he fell, and then things on the far side of the room began to crackle and fall apart, and the wall caught fire. Mister McNeil grabbed the gun from Jon and

the bandits ran out of the house, all except the one on the floor. And when we looked at him he . . . he was . . .” She broke off, got herself under control and said more calmly, “I’ve put it under geas. I don’t know if I’ll ever have a daughter, but if I do, I don’t want her to see what I saw, ever. I’ll never—” She broke off, head cocked, listening.

People were yelling outside. Walleye pushed himself away from his post. “What’s going on out there?”

We hurried into the rain, Charm keeping a grip on my arm. A group of men had gathered at the water’s edge, staring back over our heads, pointing.

Crane was among them. “What is it?” I asked him.

“The trees! Look at them! And can’t you feel it through your feet?”

I could feel it; the ground was trembling. The trees rose up the steep hillside behind the net loft; misty with rain, swaying and grasping hopefully the way anemones do. But there was something different there; something that made my heart jolt with an almost superstitious fear.

A small group of trees were shaking violently and seemed to be bouncing up and down, as though a giant hand was trying to uproot them. Spouts of partly-digested matter flew out of their maws. My feet were suddenly cold. The waters of the estuary had become choppy, sending waves ashore. There was a quick scrambling away from the water’s edge.

Walleye lay at the entrance to the net loft. The ground was heaving, the building was swaying, and the crippled manchief was unable to get to his feet. “What’s happening?” he shouted weakly. He couldn’t see the hillside from where he lay.

A nearby fisherman was praying. “May the Great Lox deliver us from the memory of this moment and may our sons be—”

His voice was lost in a roar from the hillside and yells of terror from the onlookers.

The group of trees suddenly spun around. When I recall the moment, that’s the way I still see it. They spun, all together as though mounted on a great wheel. Then they flew off in all directions. The roar became deafening and still we watched, too shocked to run.

Then the ground split apart and a monstrous creature crawled from the depths of the hillside.

It was bigger than ten cottages put together. It was almost as tall as the hillside itself. Its nose was blunt, ringed with terrible flashing blades from which whole trees flew. It crawled out of the sloping ground and, released, accelerated toward us. Someone bumped into me, yelling. People were running in all directions, trying to get out of the path of the monster. Trees crashed among us. I saw a man felled and pinned down by an anemone, screaming as he watched the monster advance toward him. Some waded into the cold water and began to swim with frantic splashing, their fear of the apparition

overcoming their fear of the icy water. A few stood where they were, praying for deliverance and making the two-fingered sign of the Great Lox.

I found Charm tugging at my arm. "Come on, Hardy!"

We ran hand-in-hand along the water's edge in the direction of the old wharf and our cottage, and when I judged we'd gone far enough we stopped and turned to look.

The monster was plowing a swathe down the hillside, spraying chopped pieces of trees. When I recall that day, I find a moment when my fear turned to curiosity. It was the moment when I realized the creature was mindless, pursuing its own path with no specific prey in mind. It wasn't after me; it wasn't after anyone. It just *was*; a huge moving thing destroying everything in its path. Not because it was evil, but because that was what it naturally did. It had nothing against people.

It reached the rear of the net loft. The building was no barrier to its progress which continued unchecked while splintered timbers flew. The noise was almost too much to bear; Charm held her hands over her ears. Now we could see the flank of the creature. It rose taller than the trees, almost featureless, cylindrical and brown with dirt with scratches revealing silvery metal below.

"Charm!" I shouted above the din. "It's Starnose! The mining machine from Devon Station!"

She stared at me, wide-eyed. "What's it doing here?"

"The tunnels go a long way. There must be one under us somewhere. And Starnose has gotten out of control!"

The net loft had disappeared in a storm of pulverized timber and Starnose was heading for the waters of the inlet. A small group of people in prayer eventually realized the Great Lox was of little help against this brute, and broke and ran. Starnose crossed the short stretch of beach and reached the water. Cuff, showing unexpected courage, pranced alongside the machine towering over him, yelling defiance.

Then the blades touched the water and he disappeared in a fog of fine spray. Starnose lumbered on. Now I could see the back end of the machine, just as I'd remembered it from our visit to Devon Station; the dials, the switches, the control levers. It looked naked, out of place here in daylight in old Noss, with no humans on the platforms to control it. Unmanned, Starnose plunged on into the waters of the estuary, shrouded in a dense cloud of spray.

And beside the wide trench dug by the machine's passage, Cuff knelt by the broken figure of his father.

I'd forgotten Walleye. We all had, except Cuff. In the immediate terror of the apparition bursting from the hillside, we'd done nothing to help the manchief as he lay at the entrance to the net loft, unable to rise. I found myself hurrying forward, then Charm pulled me back.

"Better to leave them alone," she said.

The roar of Starnose was fading now as the waters rose around its flanks. People were creeping back, gathering on the bank, watching the monster go. It sank from view, a boiling of cold thin water the only evidence of its passing. Soon it was gone

and all was quiet, and for a moment we stood without speaking, hardly able to believe the past few moments had happened. But a deep wound gouged the land from the hillside to the water's edge, and the net loft was no more, and out there the inlet waters swirled.

“What’s going to happen?” asked Charm at last.

“I suppose it’ll just die, drown or whatever things like that do. I’m sure it’s not meant to work underwater.”

“No, I mean what will the humans do without it?”

It was a good question, and it raised plenty of other questions. Helen had said the bandits were accusing the humans of pulling out. The mine was the humans’ reason for being here. Now mining would cease until Starnose was recovered. Would the humans bother to recover it? They’d failed in their attempt to wipe out the lorin. Had they decided our world was simply too much trouble for them?

I, for one, would be sorry to see them go. They’d been here for a very long time. In general, the two races had gotten along well.

People were turning from the water now, becoming aware of the tragedy the monster had left in its wake. Cuff had an arm under Walleye’s shoulder, cradling him. I thought I saw Walleye’s lips moving. Charm and I had drawn closer. Others were arriving from the men’s and women’s villages. A wide circle gathered around Cuff and Walleye, keeping its distance, respect balancing curiosity.

Walleye had been mumbling, the words inaudible to us, and Cuff was nodding.

Then Walleye’s head dropped back and his hand, which had been on Cuff’s shoulder, fell limply to the ground.

Cuff laid him down, then looked up, his gaze traveling slowly over the faces of the crowd. There was a dreadful sorrow in his eyes.

But then his eyes met mine.

His expression changed.

He looked at me with cold speculation, as though Walleye had conferred some unknown power over me with his dying words.

6. THE DRENCH

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“We must discover the true facts and we must present a united front to show we mean business. I propose an immediate deputation to Devon Station. We will demand to know what is going on.”

Stance stood on the Yam motorcart, addressing a Noss crowd still stunned by the events of the morning. Trigger stood beside him and Cuff and Lonessa had climbed onto the footplate too, unwilling to concede leadership of the crowd to my uncle.

“Noss chiefs will decide what Noss people do,” shouted Lonessa angrily.

Stance had arrived soon after Starnose had done its worst; the motorcart towing a trailer carrying his hunting team, eleven men in all. Charm and I had been discussing the events with her father when we heard the familiar chaff-chaff of the machine, then Stance and his team had rolled into view. He’d swerved and braked, narrowly avoiding running into the crowd, and come to an undignified halt at the water’s edge, listing dangerously. Undeterred, he’d started haranguing Lonessa on the hot topic of the rumored human exodus.

“Of course it’s your decision,” he told Lonessa. “I’m just presenting you with the facts.”

“You’ve chosen a bad moment. You’ve heard what happened here this morning. Come back tomorrow.”

The motorcart’s safety-valve suddenly blew with a hissing roar, blasting a column of steam far into the drizzling sky, startling us.

“Tomorrow may be too late!” yelled Stance above the din.

It occurred to me that Stance was right, for once. I pushed my way through the crowd and climbed onto the footplate, to be met with outraged looks from the occupants.

“The thing that killed Walleye and destroyed the net loft,” I told Stance, “was Starnose, the human mining machine. Now it’s lying at the bottom of the creek. I don’t see how they can retrieve it. Without it they can’t mine. And without mining, there’s no reason for them to stay.”

Stance eyed me suspiciously, suspecting a trap. “You’re sure?”

“Would I lie, Stance?”

I wished I hadn’t said that. His eyes narrowed. He took it as an oblique reference to his disability, confirming his suspicion that I knew all about it.

“I’m with you, Stance,” said Cuff unexpectedly. “Those bastards killed my dad and I’m going to face them with it. If they think they can get away with this they must think again!”

The safety valve reseated itself half-way through this, and the sudden silence lent his final words a ringing emphasis. The crowd responded with a roar of approval. Cuff, their new manchief, flushed with pleasure, inflating his chest. "By Phu!" he yelled, "We'll show those freezing humans we're a force to be reckoned with!"

It struck me that a lot of foolishness was about to be talked. I didn't want to be associated with it in later memory, so I left the leaders and rejoined Charm in the crowd.

"Let's get our motorcart fired up," she said. "We don't want to miss the fun."

"We're not going to get far today," I pointed out.

"Your uncle Stance will be leaving soon. I expect he'll stay the night at Mister McNeil's, and tackle him while he's there. Lonessa and Cuff won't want to miss that. I wouldn't put it past Stance to strike some kind of a deal with the humans and leave Noss out of it."

It was late afternoon when two heavily-laden motorcarts finally wheezed out of Noss. Stance led, having assured us that the hunting team would be replaced by Wand and others at Yam before proceeding to Devon Station. The sight of the spears had made people nervous, and during discussions the new spears of Noss had appeared too, carried by the reformed bandits and their trainees. There had been some jostling and I think Stance had gotten the point. If he'd been hoping to intimidate us with his escort he was disappointed.

Darkness was falling, Rax was rising somewhere above the leaden clouds and I, for one, was beginning to get nervous when the lights of Mister McNeil's residence showed ahead. Charm and I, together with Crane and six other Noss people, rode in a loxcart roped to the back of the motorcart. It was an uncomfortable ride, but we didn't want to be left out of things.

We saw the lead motorcart turn into Mister McNeil's driveway.

"That's a relief," said Crane. "I was beginning to think Stance intended to keep going all night. It's fine for people on the footplate, but it's freezing cold back here!"

Clutching furs and rugs around us, we climbed stiffly from the cart and hurried into the house. It was wonderfully warm in there and our spirits rose. People began to chatter brightly. Stance's warriors were already there, milling around and examining the Earth artifacts. The Nowhere Man, Jon, greeted us.

"Mister McNeil's not here," he said.

"That hardly surprises us," said Lonessa acidly, "considering he's probably blasting off in the shuttle at this very moment."

"I doubt it," said the Jon.

I hoped not, but the absence of Mister McNeil had cost me a lot of faith. Now, of all times, he should have been here to explain what was going on and put our minds at rest. He must have heard the rumors himself. There would have been all kinds of communication between him and Devon Station.

"Well, anyway," snapped Lonessa, "we're staying the night."

"I can't stop you. Just don't wreck the place, huh?"

"It's unlikely your human friend will be needing it again."

We heard a crash as one of the warriors accidentally knocked a large circular artifact off its mount. Helen appeared for the first time and replaced it. Charm heard my grunt of surprise and looked at me questioningly.

“She looks different,” I explained. I’d hardly recognized the gaunt and surly creature whom I’d brought to Noss. Now she’d fleshed out and was almost, to stretch a point, pretty. “Younger, somehow.”

“Love does that to a person.” She hugged me impulsively.

I looked at her, young and lovely and loving, and I thanked Phu for our perfect memories. To me she will always look like she did at that moment. It must be a terrible thing for you humans, to watch your loved ones grow old and to see them as ugly, and to have to use lifeless hobgrams to remind yourselves of what you once loved.

Stance addressed us. I won’t bother to repeat what he said because it was all nonsense, a typical Stance united-against-the-common foe speech. His audience took it well and his warriors cheered mindlessly. I only mention this because of the way Cuff watched him. There was a peculiar smile on the new manchief’s face. It wasn’t simple skepticism. It was more. It was a knowing look.

He couldn’t possibly know about Stance’s disability. The only thing I could think of, was that he’d made up his mind to throw me and Charm out of Noss, now he had the power. And he knew that if I returned to Yam, this would pit me directly against Stance, whom he also disliked. He could visualize Yam divided and impotent. The thought delighted his childish sense of irony.

It shows the mistakes we can make, trying to read another person’s mind.

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The next morning Stance dropped off his warriors at Yam, as promised, and filled the trailer with men and women high on the Yam pecking order by reason of memory rather than their ability to stick spears in things. Everybody breathed a sigh of relief. The untidy cavalcade set off for the moors, Stance’s motorcart still leading. The drench showed no signs of letting up; but then, it rarely did until the freeze came. The potholes and ruts were filled with water and the going was very tricky. The temporary awning over our cart afforded some protection, but not much.

“What’s the betting we have to pull your uncle out of trouble before long?” Charm chuckled, cheerful as ever as we sat with our arms around each other.

In fact we had to bail Stance out three times on the way to Devon Station. Cuff, who was driving the Noss motorcart, made the most of it. Barely able to conceal his triumph as he hauled the Yam motorcart out of a roadside ditch, he even went so far as to suggest that old Wand should drive the Yam vehicle. The rest of the Noss contingent were not so happy. Every time Stance got stuck, we had to evacuate our lox cart and unhitch it so the two motorcarts could be coupled together.

By mid-morning the exhaust note of the motorcarts deepened as they began to tackle the stiff climb to the moors. Then I heard something else above the chaff-chaff-chaff: a high whining noise accompanied by a rumbling. Stance must have heard it be-

cause the Yam motorcart slowed to a halt. We stopped too, pulling the awning back and staring up into the rain. The noise seemed to be coming from the sky, but it lasted too long to be thunder.

We couldn't see anything through the downpour, and after a while the noise ceased. The motorcarts moved on.

"A shuttle," said Crane knowledgeably.

When we arrived at the gates of Devon Station we found a scene of bustling activity inside a new fence that stretched as far as we could see. A few nomads were already gathered with their lox and carts, looking in through a heavy pair of gates, also new. Smith and Smitha were there, arguing with a human who stood inside the gates. We climbed from the cart and joined them.

"No, you'll have to talk to me," the human was saying. He looked flustered; a tall slender man in a golden uniform. "I'm authorized to answer all your questions."

Smith shrugged and glanced at Stance. My uncle said, "I am the manchief of Yam and I demand to speak to your commanding officer."

Cuff added, "And I'm the manchief of Noss and I demand the same," rather spoiling the effect.

Lonessa looked as though she, too, was going to add her weight to the demand, but commonsense prevailed and she shut her mouth.

Crane spoke next, forcibly. "Just tell us what's going on, you freezer! Why the fence? Why the gates?"

The human swallowed nervously and glanced at a tablet in his hand as though refreshing his memory. "As you are aware, Devon Station has been here for many years. During this period, your people and ours have worked together to benefit us all. The operative word is benefit." He was gazing over our heads, as though by addressing the falling rain he didn't have to think about real live people. "You have benefited though the injection of technology and bartering power arising from the royalties we grant for the use of the land."

"Get on with it!" shouted Crane angrily. "Tell us why you won't let us in! That's our land in there. We only rent it to you. The original agreement states that we have the right of access at all times!"

"Entry will gain you nothing and may put you in danger. There's heavy machinery moving about in there. Now, as I was saying. Benefit. It must be mutual. We can't afford to be philanthropists."

"Let us in," shouted Cuff, "or we'll smash through the fence with the motorcarts!"

It was a typical Cuff strategy and I'd have liked to have seen the human's reaction, but at that moment I was visited by the most vivid backflash I've ever had.

. . . and now I stood inside a fence, and the tall man beside me represented a temporary authority. "What's going on?" I was shouting. "Those are Pallahaxi people out there! For Phu's sake, who are we against?"

"We are against anyone who wants to kill us," he said.

People stood all around me with unfamiliar things in their hands, and I knew these things were for killing. Murder was in the air, both inside the fence and outside. I said to the tall man beside me, "If your men shoot them, I will kill you, father, the very first chance I get."

As the backflash faded, I realized I'd seen that place myself, not so long ago in a stardream. It was the cannery at Pallahaxi. What parallel events had taken place there, generations ago? What betrayals? And what kind of a father had my ancestor lived with, to threaten to kill him? When I had time, I would stardream. There might be useful lessons to be learned.

More people were arriving from both directions, mounted on lox or walking, singly or in little groups, bundled up against the chill rain. Inside the fence, the tall man had been speaking into a small device. Almost instantly a wheeled machine appeared, rolling rapidly toward us. I recognized the apparatus jutting from the blunt nose of the vehicle. It was a big laser gun.

By now Cuff had climbed aboard the Noss motorcart and was maneuvering it to face the fence. "Right, you freezers!" he was shouting.

I covered the intervening ground in a moment and swung myself onto the footplate. "They've got a laser gun there!" I shouted into his face. "They'll cut you to pieces!"

"Let them try! They don't scare me!" He reached for the regulator.

I pulled his hand away. "Have you seen what a laser can do?"

"Not interested. Let go of my arm, Yam Hardy, before I smash your face in. What kind of a coward are you, anyway? Scared of a few humans? Why do you think they're hiding behind that fence, anyway? It's them that's scared of us."

"You've hardly ever been outside Noss, Cuff. You don't know what they can do."

He caught me by surprise, relaxing as though taking in my words, then suddenly flinging me backwards. I landed on a heap of firewood, logs rolling under my feet as I tried to stand. The motorcart lurched forward and I fell again. Cuff leaned out of the cab, yelling defiance at the humans. Our own people dodged out of the way as the motorcart trundled toward them, gathering speed.

I experienced another horrifying backflash.

. . . I heard a sharp crack followed by a continuous rushing roar like the sound of a huge waterfall. The road filled with a great cloud of steam, boiling and billowing and rolling down the hill toward us. The crowd broke and ran, and the pretty girl and I ran with them, holding hands. After a while we stopped and looked back. Everything seemed to be over. Laughing nervously, we climbed the hill again.

The steam had almost completely dispersed; just a few wisps arose from the boiler. A dead man sat at the controls. He was steaming gently and his face was red and peeling. He must have died very quickly. . .

I struggled to my feet and seized Cuff around the waist, jerking him away from the regulator. A wheel dropped into a rut and the motorcart lurched, throwing him fur-

ther off balance. I swung him around and we toppled off the footplate together, crashing to the ground and rolling in the mud as the rear wheels churned by a handbreadth from my head.

Cuff twisted himself free. "Right," he snapped. "Now—"

An ear-splitting hiss cut him off. A thread of bright mist traced a path between the laser gun and the motorcart. Steam jetted from a small glowing hole in the boiler. The motorcart swerved, slowing.

Then something happened that Cuff's descendants will never forget. The laser beam must have penetrated one of the boiler tubes, allowing pressurized steam to blow back into the firebox. From where we lay, Cuff and I witnessed the result.

The firebox doors suddenly blew open and a great gout of flames and steam *whoofed* out, enveloping the footplate. The force of the explosion blew everything from the rear platform, and Cuff and I cowered low as logs, cans, fire-irons and other equipment plowed into the mud around us. When we opened our eyes the wooden cab was blazing and the motorcart was panting to a halt, nudging the fence. I lay there for a moment, dazed with shock. Then people came running. Charm was kneeling beside me, running her hands over my face as though to reassure herself I was still in one piece.

"I'm all right," I kept telling her, hating to see her crying. "I'm all right, really." I stood, rather shakily, and pulled her up too.

She clung to me, trembling. "You're bleeding!" She dabbed at my face.

"It can't be very much." I was watching Cuff. He was staring at me with an unreadable expression. Lonessa was fussing over him, shaken out of her aloofness. Cuff turned away, and as he did so he raised his right hand toward me in a curious gesture.

It might have been a token of truce.

"As I was saying, we can't afford to be philanthropists."

The tall human had resumed his speech as though nothing had happened. "We've paid our way since we've been in your world, and we've honored our agreements. We never agreed to stay here forever, and our time here has proved very costly for us. We understand that a few of our people made a misguided and unauthorized attempt to attack the lorin, and we apologize for this. We also believe that our mining machine was allowed to get out of control and caused a tragic death, not to mention considerable damage. Again, we're sorry. We all make mistakes."

I pushed my way forward, pressing against the fence. "I don't trust you," I said. "I want to speak to Mister McNeil."

A puzzled gaze rested on me. He was trying to gauge my status. "Mister McNeil is unavailable. I'm authorized to speak on behalf of all humans."

"That's not good enough. Bring him here."

He mumbled into his tablet and for a moment I thought he might be calling up Mister McNeil, but then I realized it was just for show. His whole performance was a sham. The humans were pulling out, and there was nothing we could do about it.

He looked up. "Mister McNeil left on the last shuttle."

It was a crushing disappointment. Was no human to be trusted? "Why don't you come right out and say you're all leaving and there's not a freezing thing we can do about it? Why don't you throw away your speech and tell us straight?"

He looked into my eyes. "If that's what you really want. We're all leaving," he said flatly. "There's not a thing you can do about it."

There was a wailing of despair and desolation from around me.

"Does that satisfy you?" he asked.

"Compensation?"

"We'll rebuild the net loft at Noss, and your motorcart here. We can't replace your manchief. And that's it. Everything else; use of the land, the minerals, you've been compensated for over the years."

I turned around to face our own people. "Let's go home," I said. "We're wasting our time here."

It was too much to ask that Lonessa and Stance should accept my suggestion. They began to bluster loudly, but it was noticeable that Wand and Cuff kept quiet. Indeed, Cuff had drifted off and was hitching the Noss lox cart to the rear of the Yam motorcart, in which Wand was already sitting.

The human listened to the babble. As it died away he said, "On behalf of my people I'd like to say how flattered we are that you want us to stay, and how much we regret leaving you."

The anger was still with me. "I don't care how it seems to you, I want you to go, right now. Many of us can remember our world before you came; and I can tell you it was pretty good. Certainly you've improved our roads and brought us your medicines and other benefits. But we were fine before you came, and we'll be fine after you've gone. So just go, will you, and to Rax with you!"

He regarded me silently, and there was an odd sadness in his eyes. Our own people had fallen silent, and I suspect that quite a few of them were revisiting days without the humans, and finding them pleasant.

"But we don't have enough food for the winter," said Lonessa, almost apologetically.

He hesitated. "I understood Noss didn't have a food problem."

Stance had been unusually silent for a few moments. Now he said, "We will starve in Yam. I demand that you. . . ."

His words were drowned out by a deep rumble that faded into a whine, hurtful to the ears. Just for a moment the drench had abated somewhat, and we caught a glimpse of an immense wall of shining metal rising into the clouds. There was an awesome finality about the spectacle. What could we, mere stilks, do against such technology? I glanced at Stance and caught an unguarded expression of hopelessness.

“There’s nothing you can do,” said the human. “There’s nothing I can do.” He was not quoting from his script. “If I could help, I would. Circumstances are against us.”

The truth of his words got through to us at last. We were wasting our time. I heard people weeping as the rain began to fall again.

“I’m sorry about your motorcart,” said the human. “I’ll send some mechanics out to fix it. It’ll be better than new.” It was as though he was talking to children.

Which, in a way, he was.

We left the nomads standing outside the gate and headed back for Yam, Stance at the helm of the Yam motorcart towing two overcrowded trailers. I left Charm with her mother and joined the small group on the footplate; in addition to my blighted uncle, Trigger, Cuff and Wand were there. I had the potential to outmemory anyone present, and I needed to be at the center of things in case something stupid was brewed up. . . .

Cuff nodded and Stance looked at me in mild surprise as I swung onto the motorcart. But there was nothing murderous in my uncle’s expression. “Uh, Hardy,” he said by way of greeting, and left it at that.

“Stance,” I said, equally briefly as I checked the water level in the boiler. It seemed we had another truce in the making. First Cuff, now Stance. Maybe our problems were too big for personal feuds. Or maybe Stance had decided that I was more use to him alive than dead. He was going to need all the help he could get in the light of the latest developments.

“I always thought they’d help us,” he said suddenly, correcting a wild veer caused by his inattention to the road. “By Phu, I never thought they’d run out on us!”

“They made their position quite clear a long time ago,” Wand reminded him.

This provoked a bout of blustering. I noticed Cuff glancing from Stance to me curiously as my uncle ranted on, as though he expected me to dispute some point. But I knew better than to try to argue with Stance in his present mood. And oddly, as time went by, my uncle seemed to reason himself into a more acceptable frame of mind.

“We’re better off without them,” he said finally. “You were right, Wand. We should have accepted the situation when they first made it clear they didn’t intend to help. My mistake has been in treating them like normal people. They’re not. They’re godless. It’s not in their nature to help other people unless they can see a financial advantage. And that’s where they made their mistake.”

“Mistake, Stance?” asked Cuff innocently. “What mistake was that?”

“In underestimating our powers of survival. In failing to take into account our greatest weapon.”

“Weapon?” repeated Cuff, puzzled. But I knew what was coming because I knew Stance. And I had a glimpse of conflict ahead.

Stance turned from the tiller and smiled at Wand, Cuff, Trigger and me in turn. It was not a normal smile. It was a bright and empty smile, one short step removed from foolishness. The motorcart bounced on and the rain fell heavily and vertically, steaming where it hit the firebox. The wheels hit a rougher patch of road and began to clatter. Stance hung onto the tiller as it bucked and rattled. He still smiled.

He raised his voice but he needn't have bothered because I knew what was coming.

"The one weapon the humans don't have," he shouted. "Prayer!"

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Only Stance with his charisma could have pulled it off. I stood in the temple with Charm and Lonessa, watching his performance. There were many such, although I left Yam soon after the first. I'm told they differed little — but this, according to Spring who stayed behind, was a positive advantage. People felt reassured, hearing the same thing over and over again. They flocked to listen.

"We must recapture the old ways of religion and the good times will return. It won't be easy. I'm not promising you endless summers and bountiful harvests, not yet. We have sinned and we are being punished. We have been embracing human materialism. We've neglected our prayers to the sun-god Phu and he has punished us, withdrawing his warmth just as the goatparent has withdrawn its bounty. Now we must atone."

There was a murmur of agreement from the fools around me. Stance was right. Stance knew what he was talking about. The proof was outside in the cold land for all to see.

Caunter was standing near. His immature face was rapt. "He's good, you know. He's right," he kept murmuring, nodding endlessly like a boat heading into a light chop.

"The humans were false friends. They led us astray. The old ways were good ways. . . ."

"That's funny, coming from him," said Charm. "It wasn't so long ago he was telling people the past was garbage."

"*Too long we have dwelt in the past, and as a result we have continued to make the same mistakes, generation after generation,*"

I quoted, whispering. "That was because he couldn't stardream. Now he's realized that nobody can challenge his knowledge of Phu and the Great Lox and that stuff, because it's all a myth anyway. He can invent whatever he likes."

"But why?"

"To hold onto his leadership."

"Hush!" somebody hissed. "Show some respect!"

"I've heard enough," I said. "Come on, Charm."

". . . so let us bow our heads and give thanks to the great god Phu for his mercies. . . ."

The Noss motorcart arrived in due course, good as new, in convoy with a glittering human vehicle. The humans made a brief speech of regret, heard in a stony silence. They were the enemy, so Stance had persuaded people. And their buggy was a symbol of their crass materialism. By the time they left, the buggy's glossy surface had

been defaced by deep scratches. That same day Cuff, Lonessa and the other Noss people left for home.

Two days later Smith and Smitha arrived to tell us the last shuttle had left and Devon station was officially abandoned. A new trailer of obviously human origin was attached to his cart, piled high with artifacts.

“You should see the stuff they’ve left behind,” he told us enthusiastically. “Enough junk for generations. I’m off to Alika to tell our son. There’s plenty of stuff he can use. And you should get up there yourself come next thaw, Stance. There’s stuff could make life much easier in Yam.”

“We want no part of human artifacts.”

“You don’t?” Smith glanced at him curiously. “Oh, well, that’s your problem.”

“And we don’t want to see anything human around Yam, Smith. Take it away. I’m sure there are plenty of godless villages where you can ply your trade without bothering us.”

Smith’s face darkened. “You were grateful enough for my help when you broke down on the moors.”

“Times change, and we’re flexible enough to change with them. Now we see things differently, here in Yam. We don’t need you and we don’t need humans.”

Smith looked at me. I shrugged. There were about a dozen people gathered in Stance’s cottage. Rain dripped steadily through the roof and I knew why. The knack of weaving the roofing leaves is built up through generations of memory. Stance and Trigger lacked the memory and the knack.

Smith said, “I take it you’re depending on the Great Lox to fix your roof and feed you all.”

“We’ve been seduced by human technology for too long.”

“Argh, I can’t talk to you, Stance. To Rax with the lot of you.”

He swung around and left, and shortly after we heard the chaff-chaff of his departing motorcart. He left behind a thoughtful silence.

“Another victory!” cried Stance, so suddenly that some of us started. “The ice-devil tempted us, and we resisted him as Drove and Browneyes themselves would have done. This is an occasion for giving thanks to the Great Lox, for lending us his mighty strength!”

“Let’s get out of here,” said Charm. Once we were back in our own cottage she said, “I wish he wouldn’t bring Drove and Browneyes into it. I’ve always rather liked them.” She sighed, looking around. “It’s nice here, Hardy, and I’ve really loved being with you this last few days.”

I had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. She was leading up to something rotten. “And your mother seems to have accepted the situation.”

“But I don’t belong here,” she concluded to my dismay.

“You belong with me,” I said weakly.

“And you don’t belong here either. You’re wasting your time, my love. Stance has Yam under his spell and there’s nothing you can do about it unless you expose him for a fake, and I know you’re not going to do that.”

"I can expose him any time!" But I knew she was right. I'd often pictured myself jumping to my feet in the temple during one of Stance's orations and calling out, *"You're a fraud, Stance. You can't even remember your own father's childhood. By rights I should be leading these people. You dispute it? All right, let's have a little test of our memories, right here in front of everyone!"*

No. I couldn't do anything so crude.

Was it a queer loyalty? Or was it irresponsibility; an unwillingness to take over leadership at a time when Yam faced starvation?

"You're too nice," said Charm. "You don't like him, but you don't hate him *that* much. You can't truly believe he killed your Dad, can you? Or that he tried to kill you."

"I'm sure he did." Or was I? Stance's attitude toward me had been different since the abortive trip to Devon Station. He'd treated me like an adult. He'd even asked my advice in small matters.

"We're going back to Noss," said Charm decisively. "We're not sitting around here while Stance fattens you up for the kill. You're gullible, Hardy. It's a good thing you've got a strong woman at your side. That's me, by the way. So let's gather up our stuff, get a couple of lox and get the Rax out of this place before your uncle sticks his spear through you. Accidentally, of course."

"Noss?"

"We have a nice cottage there, remember? And plenty of food."

"But. . . . I'm needed here, Charm. I can't run out on these people, just like that."

"Of course you can. Just let's make sure they don't see you doing it. I have a feeling your uncle prefers to have you where he can keep an eye on you."

So early the following morning we dressed in waxed skins over heavy furs, took two pack lox from the stables and set off southward before Yam awakened. I felt very sad about it. I didn't have the heart to say good-bye to Spring, even. She, for one, would feel I was running out on my responsibilities. And Stance would tell everybody that was exactly what I'd done. Maybe he was right.

It was mid-afternoon before Mister McNeil's residence showed dimly through the rain; lox travel slowly during the drench, sighing in dispirited fashion.

"I think we should stop here," said Charm, who seemed to have taken charge. My thoughts were still busy with Stance and Yam. "We're not going to reach Noss before nightfall at this rate."

I was reluctant. I didn't want to enter the house where Mister McNeil and I had so many pleasant times, but Charm was right; we had no alternative. I felt he'd deserted us — although I couldn't see what else he could have done — and the house was tainted as a result. So I hesitated a long time at his front door.

"Oh, come on, for Phu's sake, Hardy. The humans have gone. There's nobody for you to ask permission from."

"It's not that."

"What is it, then?"

But as I reached up for the doorknob the door swung open. Somebody was already here. In that brief instant I expected to see the Nowhere Man or his new woman Helen.

But a totally unexpected figure stood there. Much taller. Very familiar.

“Mister McNeil!” I gasped.

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We sat in his living room. Three of us in a little group; Helen and Jon somewhere else in the shadows.

I was still in shock. “We asked for you at Devon Station. The man told us you’d left on a shuttle days ago.”

“He wouldn’t have known. He was just a front man, trying to get rid of you painlessly.”

“You haven’t all gone, then? You’ve left your agents behind? We thought you humans had pulled out completely.”

“We have.” His face was gray. “I’m the only one left. By my own request.”

“When are they coming back for you?”

“They’re not.”

“Never?”

He shook his head.

This made no sense to me. “But you love Earth. Your place has always been full of Earth things. You always talk about Earth. Why did you pass up the chance of going home?”

He shook his head again, slumped in his chair and staring at the floor.

“You love Earth but you love this place more?” Charm guessed.

Now he met her eyes. “There’s nowhere like Earth.”

“So?”

He rose, crossed the room to a table, poured drinks from a bottle of amber liquid, and handed us one each, keeping one for himself. He drank.

I shivered suddenly. I’d had a backflash so terrible I’d tried to forget it instantly with a kind of personal gas. But the emotion and the place it was connected with was still with me. And the emotion was utter hopelessness, and the place was Pallahaxi.

“We’re clever people, we humans,” Mister McNeil was saying. “Some of our cleverness you can see, like our buggies and shuttles and Starnose. Some things you can’t, like the waves we send through the air. And the way we can predict the future.”

“Nobody can predict the future,” said Charm. “Not even humans. If you could, you’d have known the lorin would cause problems at your mine. You’d never have settled here in the first place.”

“That’s true. We didn’t predict the effect of the lorin. But some things we can predict. Some things follow a pattern, and once we know that pattern, we know what will happen next. The movement of stars and their planets, for example. They follow a

pattern.” He watched us. “Your own planet’s journey through space is a good example.”

“I thought we just went round and round the sun, Phu,” said Charm. “That’s what memories tell us.”

“Maybe you haven’t stardreamed far enough back.”

Now Charm turned pale. Maybe she’d had the same backflash as I. “What would we find, if we did?” she whispered.

“You already know Phu and Rax form a binary system,” he said carefully. “Phu is similar to our own sun Sol; Rax is a huge dead planet. They revolve around each other. And your world is revolving around Phu, as you said. But it hasn’t always been like that. Long ago your world revolved around Rax.”

I felt very cold, as though Rax himself were in the room with us. Perhaps it was the brush of death that made me clutch religion, as a freezing person might clutch a hot brick. “We know that. Then the Great Lox dragged the world away from Rax and into the warmth of Phu.”

“And so he did, if you want to look at it that way.” His face was somber. “But there is a pattern, and our instruments have analyzed it and made calculations. You’ve noticed the weather getting colder this past few years. Well—”

And he hesitated, and took a deep gulp from his glass, and finally spoke words that seem to crackle like ice in our very souls.

“— now Rax is about drag the world back.”

Much later, I said, “How long will the next freeze last?” And the biggest horror was not death by freezing, but my life with Charm ending.

“The coming freeze will last forty years. Rax’s pull is weak compared to Phu’s. In forty years time this world will be orbiting Phu again.”

“Nobody can survive a forty years freeze!”

“Not without human technology, and that’s all gone now. Now there’s just myself. That’s why I stayed on. To try to help. I had to tell you the worst, to give you a chance to prepare. Nobody else would.”

“Why not?” I asked angrily. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

“My leaders didn’t want the responsibility. They foresaw thousands of your people trying to fight their way into Devon Station before we’d all got out. Hundreds would have been killed. What good would that have done?”

“It would have given us longer to prepare.”

“We only discovered the truth a short while ago when we investigated the recent fall in annual mean temperatures.”

“That’s why your people pulled out in such a hurry, isn’t it?” said Charm bitterly. “It’s nothing to do with the lorin or economics. It’s because of the freeze. Another Great Freeze. The old religion is right after all.”

“Is there any chance you could be wrong?” I asked.

“None.”

“You said you were here to help. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Not yet. We need meetings with village chiefs, to get some ideas together.”

After the first moment of panic, we seemed to be handling it well. I was glad Stance and Trigger weren't there. They'd still be screaming and banging their heads against the wall. Charm even came up with something positive.

"All this must have happened before," she said, "and some of our ancestors survived. They must have, otherwise we wouldn't be here now. They must have lived through something like this, to have come up with the Great Lox and Drove and Browneyes and all that stuff. The legends have to have some basis." She looked at Mister McNeil hopefully.

"You were here when we came," he said, "but you may not have been here long. As I told you, we believe the kikihuahuas created you."

"They wouldn't have set us down on a world that would kill us."

"They might not have known. They don't have the kind of technology to find out."

Charm took my hand. "There's only one thing to do," she said. "We have to stardream back as far as we can. Perhaps we'll find out what really happened."

"I'll hold the village meetings," said Mister McNeil. "I can get around quickly; I still have my buggy. I'll tell people what's happening. Helen and Jon can come with me if they like. Meanwhile you two stay here. I understand you need peace and quiet for stardreaming."

He made his way upstairs, but we were not to get peace and quiet, not yet. The door burst open and a crowd of men poured in, carrying spears.

Stance was at their head.

"So here you are," he said grimly. "I guessed it. Well, now you can come with me."

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"Why?" I asked, remaining in my seat.

It was a simple enough question, but he was accustomed to instant obedience. He became disconcerted. And a disconcerted Stance was a blustering Stance. "Why? What do you mean, why? You run out on our people in their time of need, and you ask why?"

"Yes."

"By Phu, you need to be taught a lesson in loyalty!" He wheeled round. "Men!" he shouted, "take him!"

There were eight of them, but they hesitated. I was Bruno's son and I out-memoried them. Old customs die hard.

"Take me where?" I asked, to add to the confusion.

"Nowhere! Not yet, anyway. Just take him!" shouted Stance angrily.

"Seize him, men!" snapped Quorn, clarifying his leader's point.

"But there's no need to seize him," said Patch reasonably. "He's sitting down. You can't exactly seize someone sitting down. We'd have to sit down beside him. It's not as if he's running or anything."

“Why don’t you sit down yourselves,” I suggested. “We can talk things over.”

The hunting team, glad to be let off the hook, arranged themselves comfortably around the floor, laying down their spears. Stance alone remained standing. Charm moved over, patting the seat beside her as an invitation. This had the effect of enraging Stance further.

“By Phu!” he yelled, scarlet in the face, “I wouldn’t sit next to a flounder!” Taking refuge in physical action, he raised his spear and jabbed it toward my chest. “Get up! Get up!”

The spear smoked briefly and fell in half. Mister McNeil stood at the foot of the stairs, laser pistol in his hand. “That’s enough, Stance,” he said quietly.

My uncle’s mouth dropped open. The remains of the spear clattered to the floor. “I . . . We . . . We thought you’d gone away.”

“I haven’t, as you see. Now take a seat, there’s a good fellow. There’s a lot of explaining to be done around the villages, and you’re a good person to start with.”

Still staring at Mister McNeil, Stance slumped onto the long seat beside Charm. She smiled at him. “This is really important, Yam Stance.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he muttered, his gaze fixed on the laser pistol.

We sat in the fading light while the human explained. The electric lighting was switched on long before he approached the end of his story. His audience were not so familiar with human culture and technology as I; indeed some of them had never spoken to a human. The lighting itself was a novelty and distracted them even more than the strange artifacts around the room. Questions had to be answered, simple concepts had to be elaborated, but Mister McNeil persevered despite outbreaks of snorting from my Uncle. And by the end he was winning his audience over.

The evidence was clear, after all. Last year had been the coldest in memory; this year colder yet, and the drench was turning to sleet much earlier than usual. Charm and I already knew the weak point of his story: we were convinced that our race had survived a previous Great Freeze. But we didn’t know how.

“I know how!” said Stance.

“Tell us,” said the human.

“Through prayer, of course!”

And there was a murmur of agreement from his men. “The Great Lox delivered us,” agreed Patch. “So they say.”

“Let’s just suppose he did,” said Mister McNeil. “It still doesn’t explain how you survived forty years of freezing cold with no heat source.”

“The answer lies in the caverns of Pallahaxi,” said Stance. “The holy fount, birthplace of Browneyes. Our people sat out the Great Freeze in the caverns, warmed by prayer until they were led into the sunlight by Drove and Browneyes.”

Mister McNeil hadn’t attended any of Stance’s prayer meetings; in fact he hardly knew him. He saw my uncle as a funny little stilk. He didn’t appreciate how compelling Stance’s personality was, to another stilk. I foresaw a danger the human couldn’t see.

I had no alternative but to put the question to Stance.

“How do you know?” I asked.

I heard Charm’s quick intake of breath.

Stance stiffened. “How do I know? How does anyone know? Through our culture and our religion, of course. Are you challenging the Great Lox himself, boy?”

“Not necessarily. I mean how do you *know* our people sat it out in Pallahaxi? Have you stardreamed back that far?” There was a knot in my stomach. I felt as though I was standing on the brink of a cliff, with icy waters waiting below.

“Are you doubting my memory?” Stance was on his feet now, face set, chest puffed out. “*Are you doubting my memory?*”

There came a muttering of outrage from his warriors. “Apologize!” Quorn cried.

Charm said quickly, “Hardy didn’t question Yam Stance’s memory. He simply asked if his knowledge was based on religious grounds, or on a stardream.”

“We don’t need a flounder girl to teach us what’s an insult and what isn’t!” said Quorn, and again the muttering came. Spears rattled.

“Charm’s right. That’s what I asked, Stance,” I said. “Nothing wrong in that.”

“Charm’s right?” mimicked my uncle furiously. “Charm’s right? A flounder, right? And what exactly is your relationship with this flounder girl, Hardy? Must I add miscegenation to the list of crimes you’ve committed?”

It was too much. I found I was on my feet too, shouting in his face. “Yes, you must! Charm and I are at it all the time like drivets, if you must know! Now put that on your stupid list, and to Rax with you!”

Stance had arranged his face into an expression of disgust. “I can hardly believe a member of my own family is capable of such behavior. Rax! You might as well sleep with a lorin.”

“And why not?” I yelled, all control lost. “We’re the same species!”

Remembering that scene in later times, I realize I behaved stupidly. I allowed Stance to divert the argument into an area where he could not fail but win. Stance’s original quandary was forgotten in the outcry that followed from his men when this young upstart — me — claimed that stilk and lorin were cut from the same skin. It was outrageous, it was unthinkable, it was disgusting.

“I think we’ve all heard enough,” said Stance grimly, gathering his men around him. “You’re lost to us, Hardy. There’s no place for you in Yam.”

We arranged ourselves into factions. Stance and his men moved toward the door. Charm, myself, Mister McNeil, Helen and Jon stood at the foot of the stairs.

Stance turned back and nodded, as though such a grouping of misfits and miscegenators was no more than he’d have expected. He achieved an expression of contempt.

“The people of Yam will pray to the Great Lox, and by our very numbers ensure our deliverance from the evil of Rax. We will not pray for you. You are lost, all of you. Lost!”

It was a good exit speech but it quickly degenerated to bathos. Stance, fooled by the electric light, had lost track of time. He flung open the door onto a cold dark world of driving sleet.

“Rax!” he muttered, slamming the door shut. He swung around to face Mister McNeil. He swallowed. “You will accommodate us for the night,” he jerked out.

65

The days became colder and the sleet would soon become snow. Charm and I spent much of our time stardreaming. Helen and Jon stayed behind to attend to household duties, which were not onerous. The residence was powered by a small reactor which, Mister McNeil had once told me, was good for his lifetime and more without attention. So Helen and Jon had time to spare, which they too spent stardreaming in the hope that they might be able to help us in our own investigations into the past.

Charm and I took over Mister McNeil’s bedroom. I won’t go into the details of the room, because a human would find it quite unremarkable. To us, the furnishings were astonishing.

We stardreamed, occasionally coming out of it to eat or make love.

I quickly hopped back as far as I’d been before. I bypassed my favorite memories; a fellow can easily get bogged down in reliving pleasant times. More generations passed. The most time-consuming aspect was finding the best link to the next generation back. Usually I found the coming-of-age ceremony was best, where I could use the common memory to pass from son to father. This kind of hopping from ancestor to ancestor can be tedious in the extreme, and requires a high level of concentration. I’d never been good at mindless persistence; that kind of thing is for lox. So I’d usually had enough by noon; Charm lasted a little longer, but not much.

I’d always thought Yam was a boring place, and now I was getting proof aplenty. Nothing ever happened that hadn’t happened in a previous generation. And traveling through time backwards gave one no interesting threads to follow. People died, they lived and made love, and they were born. And their ancestors carried on the cycle, generation before generation. Even the coming of the humans seemed a minor excitement.

It was all so pointless that I became obsessed with the idea that somewhere there *had* to be a point; that among all those generations there was a clue what our lives were all about.

I knew what human life was about; Mister McNeil had described the human purpose. It was to go forth and multiply; and since the Universe was infinite the purpose would always exist. It must have been comforting for them; they might experience setbacks but they would never become obsolete.

“I mean,” I said to Charm one afternoon after making love, “Why did the kiki-huahuas create us? Just to colonize the world? Just to *be* here?”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing. It’s so meaningless, all these generations doing nothing but stay alive.”

“Even the villages stay the same size. I expected. . . .” It was difficult to put it into words. “I expected to find things got smaller, somehow, the further back we went. Less people, less houses. To show that we’ve been growing ever since, like the humans. But it’s not that way at all. No wonder people never stardream very far back. The most exciting generation I’ve come across is our own.”

“That’s because you’re in bed with me, my love. . . .”

I wondered how far back I could go, not for the first time. Would my stardreaming suddenly come to an end against the barrier of a defective gene, like most people’s? Or could I continue right back to some mysterious beginning, as the tradition of my male line claimed? Maybe the goatparent?

Meanwhile Mister McNeil journeyed from village to village, spreading his news. He kept in touch with us by radio.

“I’m telling them the mine at Devon Station is available for shelter,” he reported early on in his travels. “There’s no shortage of room, and the heating will hold out for forty years at least. The problem is going to be food. I’m telling them to bring everything they can lay their hands on, and livestock too.”

“I doubt if any village will have more than a year’s supply of food,” I told him.

The hopelessness in his voice came over clearly. “I know that. And I don’t think they’re listening to me, maybe for that reason. But what else can I do?”

Privately I thought there was another reason. It wasn’t just the food. It was getting dangerously late in the drench for traveling. People would already have battened down for the coming freeze.

And now they were being told it was going to last forty years, and that there was room available at Devon Station, but no food. What would they do?

My guess? They would choose to disbelieve or ignore Mister McNeil’s warning, and sit tight where they were. Mister McNeil must know that. So why was he risking his own life driving around in this foul weather? It could only be an overwhelming sense of guilt. . . .

Days went by, floodwaters foamed down the river at the end of the driveway, and Charm and I stardreamed on. We’d lost count of generations long ago. I continued on my exhausting way, plowing through life after life spent in subsistence farming. At least Charm’s memories featured the annual excitement of the grume. I envied her. I accompanied my ancestors on occasional hunting expeditions to break the tedium, but one loat looks very much like another. I found myself hoping a snorter would gore somebody, to provide dramatic interest. That’s when I stopped stardreaming hunts, ashamed of myself.

Then, one stardream, the weather was colder.

There was no doubt about it. Generations ago, the freezes had been longer, the summers shorter.

Was this the tail-end of the Great Freeze?

“Oh, I’m further back than that,” said Charm airily. “You’ve been dragging your feet. There’s less people about too, the period I’m in. And it’s colder still. Al-

most as cold as last year.” She rolled toward me in bed and kissed me. “We’re getting there, my love.”

And two days later I found myself in Pallahaxi.

66

Memory became blurred. It was not geas; it was as though the memories of those far-off ancestors were primitive and unpracticed. I got brief glimpses of groups huddled in ruined cottages; of rebuilding, of grumes coming and going, of fishing. Times were hard, the weather was cold.

That evening, Charm and I discussed our results with Jon.

“Pallahaxi?” he said.

“We’ve stardreamed a long way back, and that’s where we are now. Maybe there is something in the temple beliefs, after all.”

“I’d hate to think so.”

“By the way,” said Helen, “have you noticed a lot of people traveling this last few days? With loxcarts, heading north?”

“We’ve been too busy in bed to notice anything.” Charm smiled. “But they can only be from Noss. They must be heading for the mine. They’ve seen sense after all. Thank Phu for that.”

“All right in the short term,” said Jon. “But what are they going to do for food?”

We were discussing this when a high-pitched whining noise approached, persisted for a while right outside the window, then shut down.

“Mister McNeil’s back!” said Helen joyfully.

The huge human came clumping in, rainwater pouring from his slick coat. He greeted us briefly, made straight for the sideboard and poured himself a drink. Then he slumped into a chair and eyed us gloomily.

“A waste of time. Days wasted, talking to idiots.” He recalled himself and added hastily, “Mind you, humans would probably have behaved the same in similar circumstances. Anyway, most village chiefs simply didn’t believe me. And when they did, they didn’t want to do anything about it. They said it was too late for travel, the freeze was coming. I reminded them this was no ordinary freeze. And they’d say: yes, we heard you — as though it was of little consequence. If I didn’t know better, I’d say they’d been brainwashed into ignoring the evidence of the past few years.”

“Or programmed,” said Jon thoughtfully.

Looking back, I’ve often thought we should have involved Jon in our discussions more. Living and talking with a human for so long, he was able to make mental links between human society and ours, sometimes unconsciously.

“It’s not just the past days wasted,” said Mister McNeil, working himself into anger in an almost Stancelike way, “It’s the whole of my future. What am I doing here, if I can’t help you people? Why did I stay behind? I could be on my way to Earth by now. Jesus Christ, what a fool I’ve been!”

I just sat there dumb, feeling guilty because of the stupidity of my own people.

Charm, however, went and picked up Mister McNeil's huge hand with her own small one, and squeezed it. "We don't think you're a fool. We think you're very good and brave, and our descendants will remember you for ever."

He looked at her hand in surprise, then at her face. Something changed in his expression. The deep lines softened and the sick look faded, as though he'd been healed in some way. I felt better too; it was the confident way Charm talked about our descendants that did it for me.

"Thanks," he said briefly. "It's no use crying over spilt milk." He had a habit of coming out with these Earth expressions. I used to ask him to explain them, but soon gave up. "Anyway, what it all boils down to, is nobody's interested in sheltering in the mine. All right, so we admit there's a food problem there. There are the hydroponics, of course, but they're only geared to a few fresh vegetables. They won't feed many people on an annual basis." He ran his fingers through his hair; another habit of his. "I don't know what I'd hoped. Maybe that if everyone was neatly gathered in one place, Sector Central might see their way to lifting them out, or at least sending in supplies. They wouldn't, of course. They've already made that much clear. They're long gone. The hell with them." He fell silent, the lines deepening again.

"We saw the Noss people heading for the mine," said Charm.

He snorted. "Far from it. Haven't you heard? No, you probably wouldn't. Your uncle Stance is making a real nuisance of himself. He listened to what I said and he believed me; I'll give him credit for that. He said he'd notify Noss, to save me heading down into that backwater. So I drove inland leaving him to organize things here." He laughed bitterly. "Or so I thought.

"I called in Yam today on my way back here. And guess what I found. That fool Stance had twisted the whole thing round. He'd told Yam and Noss what I'd said, sure, but he'd said it was proof religion and legends were right. His goddamned Great Lox had pulled the world from the clutches of Rax before, and he would do it again. All that was needed was a bit of commonsense and a lot of prayer."

"I don't see where commonsense comes into that," I said.

"It seems there are some kind of caverns at Pallahaxi where Stance reckons you people sat out the Great Freeze before. His idea is, you all go there and pray like hell, and lo and behold the Great Lox will pat you on the back and get himself into harness — maybe long before the forty years are up."

"Did you tell him the forty years are inflexible and people must eat?"

"Apparently the Great Lox fed them before, and he'll do it again. Anyway, he's got everyone on his side, most of Noss billeted in Yam, and they're about to set off for Pallahaxi."

Charm was aghast. "The Noss people are going to Pallahaxi?"

"Stance is a smooth talker."

"But my mother went along with this stuff? And Cuff, and Dad?"

"I imagine there's a certain unbelief there. But Stance is good at persuading the ordinary folk. He pointed out the grume is dependent on warm weather, which we're not going to get, so Noss won't be any better off than anywhere else. I don't suppose

the chiefs wanted to be left all alone there, so they went along with him. At least it gives them a chance to keep an eye on him.”

“When do they leave?”

“Tomorrow. They’ve got a big herd of lox stabled, and covered carts with braziers, and piles of furs and skins, all ready to go. Stance calls it the Great Pilgrimage. He sees it as the biggest thing that ever happened, and he’s in charge of it. He’s drunk with power. I think he’s almost forgotten the danger.”

Charm looked at me. “We stardreamed Pallahaxi. And now the people are going there. You know what I think, my love?”

There was a sick feeling in my stomach. Good-bye to warmth and comfort and safety and good food.

“Yes. We have to go there too.”

7: *PALLAHAXI*

67

Mister McNeil was coming. At least we'd have the comfort of the buggy for the journey to Pallahaxi.

Jon and Helen were staying.

"I don't believe in prayer and I don't believe Pallahaxi has any significance," said the Nowhere Man. "If Helen and I have to choose between starving in cold damp caverns among people who won't accept us, and starving here in comfort with one another. . . . Well, the choice is obvious."

"There's food here for a couple of years or more," said Mister McNeil.

"That's more than they'll find in Pallahaxi. Why don't you stay, too?"

"I don't know why. I guess I'm clutching at straws. There's no hope here, but Charm and Hardy seem to feel there might be some kind of hope in Pallahaxi. . . . Hell, I've run out of human ideas. I'll take my chances with them."

"Good luck."

So we left Jon and Helen and drove to Yam in Mister McNeil's buggy. It was a desolate drive. The sleet fell fast and the trees were huddling down, squat and fat, withdrawing branches and tentacles to conserve heat. The river roared through its canyon beside the road, fed by the sleet from as far away as the moors, bearing struggling trees and the occasional dead animal in its brown waters.

On reaching Yam we stopped at Spring's cottage. The rooms were tidy as ever, but when I checked the shelves and storage areas I found everything portable had been taken.

"She's gone," I told the others.

"There's no movement in the village. They've all gone," said Charm.

Yam was deserted, dead. It gave me a queer feeling. Generations of people had lived here and still lived in my memories, and now they were all gone. Charm sensed my distress and took my hand.

"On to Pallahaxi, I think," said Mister McNeil.

Soon we were passing through Arrow Forest. The anemone trees were still, their tentacles withdrawn; they hardly acknowledged our passing. I pointed out the spot where Wilt had acted as a decoy.

Charm was concerned. "Watch out for Stance in Pallahaxi," she warned me. "If he's whipped everybody up into a religious fervor he could easily turn them against you."

"I have my pistol," said Mister McNeil grimly.

We bypassed Totney, reached Pallahaxi around noon and left the buggy on the outskirts, out of sight in the shell of a cottage. Then we walked down the main street to the harbor, well wrapped in heavy furs.

"It's changed a lot from the place we stardreamed," said Charm. "Older and deader and nastier. Not really the kind of place you'd expect Drove and Browneyes to come from, seeing it now." There was a hill behind the cottages to our right, and the remains of a large building could be seen. "I wonder if that was the temple where Drove and Browneyes' parents prayed for the Great Lox to come."

"What I'd really like to know," said Mister McNeil dryly, "is what your Drove and Browneyes did for food and warmth while they were waiting."

"They didn't have to wait long," said Charm. "The evil folk cast them out into the cold and so they gathered up the other people; the good ones, and led them to the caverns, and the very next day the Great Lox galloped through the sky pulling Phu behind him, and everything was warm again. They didn't pray in the legend, which is rather surprising."

"Maybe the Great Lox came out of the goodness of his heart."

"You've been to the caverns, haven't you, Hardy?"

"Dad and Granddad and Stance were there. It's supposed to have been a cannery before the Great Freeze, where they put dead fish in metal pots. I stardreamed it."

"At least you know the place exists," said Mister McNeil.

"Smith knows it better than me. I wonder where he is now. You know what he said once? *They've built caverns and all sorts at Pallahaxi, and furnished them. A thousand people could sit out the freeze in comfort.*"

We strolled down the harborside street where the cottages rose up the hillside in terraces to our left. Suddenly Charm stopped. We'd been holding hands; she jerked me to a halt too.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. . . . A backflash. A really strong one." She was staring at a building better preserved than most. A carving of a monstrous grummet hung from above the sagging door.

I told her, "That's the Golden Grummet. The birthplace of Browneyes."

"I . . . I knew that already."

"You probably visited it yesterday in your stardream."

"Probably." But she looked doubtful.

"Where *is* everybody?" asked Mister McNeil.

We found them by mid-afternoon, at the cannery.

The cannery was enormous, unnaturally sharp-edged and rectangular, built of stone blocks hewn from the Pallahaxi hillsides and laid on top of one another by an ancient people of unimaginable industry and persistence.

"And we're supposed to wait out the freeze here?" said Charm incredulously.

“So the legends say,” I said.

“I think maybe the legends lied.”

“I’ll second that,” said Mister McNeil.

A large door was set into the blank wall facing us. As we approached it a man stepped outside, wrapped so heavily in furs he was almost spherical. He squinted into the driving sleet.

“Stop right there,” he shouted. “What’s your business?” Then he recognized me, and I him. It was one of Stance’s huntsman. “Oh, it’s you, Yam Hardy,” he said. “And Noss Charm too. Come to give yourself up, have you? About time.” Then he caught sight of Mister McNeil, who’d been examining a piece of machinery in the yard. “You’ve brought the human. The troublemaker.”

“Shut up and take us to Stance,” I said brusquely.

Startled, and no doubt intimidated by the sight of Mister McNeil, the man nodded rapidly and led us inside. Here, the place had changed since Dad’s visit. The pilgrims’ shrines had all been taken apart. The benches were now mounded with furs and skins, and the little religious artifacts were piled against the far wall. Our guide caught my glance.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said defensively. “But all the shrines will go back exactly as they were, once we’ve got the clothing and bedding sorted out and distributed.”

“It’ll take more than a few shrines to make this place holy,” I said.

“Why are you doing all this sorting out?” asked Charm. “Why don’t people just keep what they brought?”

“There are no inequalities here.” He led us through a heavy door into a smaller chamber where a few people sat on benches around a flickering fire.

“Charm!” It was Lonessa, staring at us open-mouthed. She jumped up and ran to us, and threw her arms around her daughter.

“Mom. . . Mom,” muttered Charm, embarrassed. “Take it easy.”

“We thought you were dead!”

Meanwhile Spring arrived from another room. She said nothing; just smiled and touched my shoulder. “Good to see you, Hardy.” Her eyes were bright with tears.

“Didn’t Stance tell you we were with Mister McNeil?” I asked.

Lonessa swung round on Stance, who was watching me without expression. “You knew they were alive!”

“They are dead to the Great Lox. They are dead to us. I saw no reason to resurrect them in your minds.”

She stared at him. “Can’t you tell the difference between fact and religion, for Phu’s sake? Have you gotten totally carried away with your own rhetoric? They’re alive, you fool, just like the rest of us!”

“Don’t you call my dad a fool!”

Trigger’s weak protest was drowned by a bout of oration from Stance. “The facts speak for themselves, Lonessa. We are here in this place, and this place bears out the details of our great religion and proves the truth of the metaphor of the Great Lox.”

“Aha! So you agree it’s only a metaphor?”

I got the impression we’d interrupted a long-standing argument. It was good to know the leaders of this farce were at loggerheads.

“Of course it’s a metaphor. You don’t seriously think I expect to see a gigantic animal up there in the sky, harnessed to the sun? It always was a metaphor — but a telling one, Lonessa. And our people need metaphors to help them understand the truth.”

“And what exactly is the truth?”

Mister McNeil spoke for the first time. “The truth is, you’re not well enough prepared for a forty-year freeze.”

“The truth is,” shouted my uncle, suddenly enraged, “that you don’t know what you’re talking about! You should take a look at the wonders of this place. You should consider the machines in here and outside, built by our people for purposes we can’t begin to understand. *Our* people, I said — not yours. Our people had a great technology long before you humans arrived. And the truth is all around! Look at this place; look at the walls! Look at the doors! Take a walk through the chambers and see what you’ll find! There are wonders here!”

His eyes were crazed and he’d sprayed Mister McNeil’s coat with little flecks of foam. He bent down and snatched up a handful of wafery ashes. “Books!” he yelled. “My father brought me here when I was a child and he told me the legends. Our people had advanced beyond the need for such books. The sun-god Phu had bestowed the gift of perfect memory upon them while they were in this holy place, so they sacrificed the books as a thanksgiving. And now we’re here again. Who knows what miracles will fall upon us during our sojourn here! Praise be to Phu! Praise be to Phu!”

We’d backed away from him, a worried little circle with him ranting in the middle, his face demonic in the firelight.

“And we shall learn, oh yes, we shall learn. Once this freeze is over we shall learn from the machines our ancestors built. We shall—”

“Listen to me, Stance,” said Mister McNeil tiredly. “Do you believe me when I say this freeze will last forty years or don’t you? Yes or no?”

“The duration of the freeze is immaterial. We triumphed before and we shall triumph again! We stand on the threshold of. . . .”

And hearing his ranting, people began to drift silently in from other chambers. They didn’t want to miss any of his words. Their expressions were rapt. They were under his spell. My erstwhile friend Caunter’s face was alight with hero-worship.

“Let’s get out of here,” Charm said to me quietly.

Lonessa murmured, “Don’t go too far. I’m staying close to Stance and so are Cuff and Wand. He has the people here eating out of his hand, and we’re worried he may get them to do something really stupid.”

“We have some more stardreaming to do,” I told her. “We’re getting close to some answers.”

“We need them quickly,” she said. “If Mister McNeil is right.”

“He’s right,” I assured her.

“Look after Charm,” she said.
I got the impression she’d accepted me at last.

69

As we walked through the driving sleet Mister McNeil said, “I can’t understand why you didn’t simply tell people Stance’s memory is faulty and he’s not fit to be a leader. Good grief, it’s straightforward enough!”

“No. It isn’t. You can’t challenge a chief’s memory in public. Or anybody’s memory, for that matter. It would outrage people, and they wouldn’t listen to any proof you might have.”

“But surely you could just ask Stance, kind of innocently, to recall something ancient?”

“Stance is no fool. He’d say ‘Are you doubting my memory?’ and I’d be shouted down.”

“Sooner or later,” he said, “you’re going to have to do it.”

We’d decided to move into the Golden Grummet; apart from the cannery it was the only marginally habitable building in Pallahaxi. I pushed the door open and we found ourselves in a large room with a counter running the length of one wall. It was littered with artifacts left by pilgrims; mostly female figures with exaggerated sexual characteristics. I picked one up; it was heavy, about three hands high, crudely made in baked clay with a remarkably ugly face and gigantic globular breasts stuck onto the chest.

“If that’s meant to be Browneyes,” I said, “I’m surprised Drove ever went near her.”

“Any port in a storm,” said Mister McNeil.

Charm inspected the idol. She chuckled. “We have that saying in Noss, too. But according to the legends, there were other people around at the time. He and Browneyes led them to the cavern, remember? Drove could have had his pick. So my belief is, this is the work of a very poor sculptor with unfulfilled lusts.” She glanced at me mischievously. “Hardy would never feel the need to create anything like this.”

We explored the house. It had been well maintained by pilgrims and we finally settled on an upstairs room with a view of the old harbor. Mister McNeil brought his buggy and parked it outside, and we carried the bedding and supplies up to the room. By the time it was getting dark outside we’d lit a distil stove and warmed the place up, sorted out our belongings, and eaten a simple meal. Mister McNeil settled down with his tablet of moving pictures, and Charm and I composed ourselves for stardreaming. . .

I hopped quickly back to the days when Pallahaxi was a growing village. Through the eyes of an ancestor called Watch I skimmed the grume and survived a battle with a pod of grume-riders who capsized the skimmer and would have eaten Watch,

if they hadn't been even more interested in his catch of glubbs. He swam ashore with flailing arms, buoyed by dense water.

So one of my ancestors had been a flounder. It made nonsense of the age-old contempt of grubbers for flounders and vice-versa. Watch/I lay panting on the beach. I'd experienced his terror, and now I experienced his relief. I came out of it, exhausted, to find Charm propped up on one elbow, smiling at me.

"Oh, my love," she said.

"What is it?"

Her eyes were shining. "I'll let you find out. I won't spoil it for you."

"Something good?" I asked, surprised.

"You'll find out soon. Are you back in Pallahaxi?"

"Yes. It's heavy going."

"Take your time. Don't try to hop, now. Stay with people a bit. We're very close."

"Where's Mister McNeil?"

"He's gone exploring in the buggy."

So I eased my way back into the life of Watch and the people of his time and it became easier. Another grume came, nothing like as bountiful as grumes I'd known, but enough to keep the villagers alive. A colder world meant less evaporation in the Great Shallows, and a thinner grume. . . . I backtracked to Watch's coming-of-age, and shifted into the memories of his father.

Finally, a few generations earlier still, I found myself in the mind of a another fisherman, but one who seemed to be of some stature.

I/someone lay in a skimmer on the beach, exhausted, soaking up the weak sun. I'd unloaded the fish into baskets, and in a while I'd push the boat off and sail out again. But meanwhile, the sun was very pleasant. Out there on the grume, the skimmers plied their nets. Only a handful of boats but we'd be building some more next spring, and a few more of the village boys would be old enough to go out alone. I experienced a surge of optimism. Things were moving in Pallahaxi. By Phu, in a couple of years time we'd have twice the number of boats out there!

"Drove?" I heard a voice calling.

Drove! The legendary figure from the Great Freeze! I'd reached his generation. He was somewhere near! In my awe, the stardream wobbled between past and present.

"Are you asleep?"

And a shadow fell over me.

"Drove? Wake up, sleepyhead! I've brought lunch."

She was talking to *me!* I was living in the memories of the legendary Drove! Did this mean I was descended from the great man himself? But some names are borrowed, if they're good enough. I quickly riffled through my host's memories. There was no doubt about it; this was the great Drove in person.

"I was just resting a bit." I opened my eyes.

A girl was bending over me. I blinked; the sun was in my eyes. Dark hair hung down, framing her face. She bent closer to kiss me, and I saw her clearly.

Charm! The girl was Charm, surely? The same heart-shaped face, the same warm brown eyes. . . . And the same look of love. Something swung from her neck, glinting in the sun.

Charm's pendant, her crystal, her charm. Around this girl's neck.

I backed out of the stardream, disoriented. Charm was awake, watching me. She saw my expression and smiled. "Now you know it all," she said. "All right, just go back into that dream, and so will I. We're together, now."

Gently, I stardreamed again.

"No more fishing this morning," said the girl who looked like Charm. "You've done enough."

She took my hand, hauled me into a sitting position and handed me a plate of fried fish. Food tasted so good these days. Life was perfect. I finished my meal, climbed out of the boat onto the shore and took her in my arms. There was a patch of warm, soft sand nearby. I carried her to it, and laid her down tenderly.

"What, now?" she said, feigning surprise.

"Now," I said. "And for ever."

So, countless generations ago, Drove and Browneyes made love.

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Charm held me tightly. "I always knew there was something special about us."

I was still dazed by the whole thing. "All those generations, both of us, and never a break in memory. I can't get over it."

"It was always a tradition in my family."

"Mine, too. But I thought that was just to make us feel good about ourselves. . . . We can stardream now, together. We can live Drove and Browneyes' childhoods. We could be there when they met."

"We could make love with them." Charm's eyes were dreamy. "Four of us, all at the same time. In these bodies and in theirs. Maybe it's incest or something, but who cares?"

The theory interested me, but the practice would take an awful lot of coordinating. I was willing to give it a try, however. I moved closer to Charm — if that were possible — and was in the act of kissing her when there was an unwelcome interruption.

"Isn't that Mister McNeil's buggy? Listen!"

"Rax!" exclaimed Charm. "What rotten timing!"

She had a delightful sense of priorities. Reluctantly, we rolled out of bed and began to dress. I watched Charm; I could never take my eyes off her when she was dressing; or, for that matter, undressing. "Browneyes was wearing your crystal," I said.

"It's been passed down all those generations like a memory. Do you think she's prettier than me?" she asked with a touch of anxiety. People have been known to

drool over distant ancestor's lovers. Emotions are a strong factor in our memories, as I've told you.

"She's very like you. At first I had the weirdest feeling that she *was* you."

"And Drove's very like you. But not so handsome."

"Browneyes isn't so pretty as you," I lied. "Quite disappointing, really."

She chuckled and was kissing me when Mister McNeil came in. "Well," he said, grinning. "Have you found out anything interesting, or have you just been fooling around all this time?"

"Charm and I are direct descendants of Drove and Browneyes," I told him.

"Are you now?" he said thoughtfully. "So you must know how your people survived the last Great Freeze."

"Not yet. But it must be in our memories somewhere." I looked at Charm. "You've been further back than me. Did you find anything?"

"No. And that's funny, because you'd think it'd be such a big thing that it'd be uppermost in their minds. . . ." Suddenly her face paled. "And I'll tell you something else."

It hit me at the same moment. "They're too young. I was in Drove's memory after the Great Freeze when they were rebuilding. He and Browneyes were about twenty years old at the time. So they couldn't have been through a forty year freeze. It's impossible. They must be a different Drove and Browneyes."

"Oh, Rax. They're not. They're the real ones, Hardy. I hopped into Browneyes's childhood and she was living at the Golden Grummet, just like the legends say. I saw her mother and her father. I saw Drove's parents too. . . ." She hesitated. "They were rather silly people. And. . . . Browneyes' memories started there. At the Golden Grummet, when she was a little girl."

"She didn't inherit her mother's memories?"

"No. And Drove didn't inherit his father's either. I'm sure of that."

Mister McNeil asked, "Does this mean you can't go any further back?"

"No, we can't. Drove and Browneyes were the first generation to pass on their memories, it seems."

"So we're stuck," said Mister McNeil heavily. He sat down on a pile of furs. "The Great Freeze *must* have happened before they were born."

"Not according to the legends," I said. "And there's another thing. The legends say that people received the gift of memory during the Great Freeze. Now that would fit in with Drove and Browneyes not having their parents memories, wouldn't it? And it suggests they were around during the freeze."

"There's one possibility I can think of," said Mister McNeil, "but it's kind of far out. Just suppose they were all evacuated from the planet for the duration of the Great Freeze in a ship that accelerated to around the speed of light. Relativity would account for them still being young when they got back."

He'd discussed this kind of unlikely science with me before, and I was still unconvinced. It went against all commonsense, but I let it go. "Who could have evacuated us?"

“I told you there are only two space-going races in this part of the galaxy. We humans have the capability, but so far as I know we arrived here long after the Great Freeze. I’m just wondering if there was an earlier expedition, and the records have gotten lost. It’s unlikely, but not impossible. There’s so much stuff in our data bases, it’s easy to overlook something.

“And as for the kikihuahuas, there’s no way they could achieve the speed of light. They’re the slowest-moving travelers we’ve ever come across. Their space-bats are a thousand kilometers across and they’re propelled by the effect of solar winds.”

I’d heard all this, but it was new to Charm. “So they must live through an awful lot of generations before they get anywhere.”

“Actually, they don’t. The space-bat feeds them some kind of soporific fluid and they go into hibernation for the duration of the voyage. . . .” His voice trailed away.

“Hibernation,” repeated Charm thoughtfully. “Pity we don’t have a space-bat handy right now.”

I remembered Smith and Smitha, and Wilt acting as a decoy, and Stance and his hunters pursuing me through the Arrow Forest. . . .

“Maybe we do,” I said.

71

I told them about my experience in the cave-cow caves that day. “. . . and time passed while I was in there. It seemed like a day or so, but when I got back outside the season had moved on, and I’d missed it.”

“So that’s the answer,” said Mister McNeil. “I told you the kikihuahuas bred the cave-cow from space-bat genes. That’s where the lorin live during a normal freeze — but if there’s an exceptional freeze coming, maybe the cave-cow can be used by everyone.”

“Unless people are stupid enough to try to go it alone,” I said. “I had a back-flash some time ago. I was at the cannery, and now I’m sure I was in Drove’s mind. We get to recognize minds pretty quickly. They’re much more individual than faces. Anyway, some people were inside a fence around the buildings, and some were outside. It was snowing. The people outside were huddled around fires up against the fence, and they wanted to get in. The people inside wouldn’t let them. They said there wasn’t room.”

“What happened next?”

“I don’t know. There was a lot of fear in the air, though.”

“You’ll have to stardream it,” said Charm definitely. “We both will. It’ll lead us to the Great Freeze. We have to save those people in the cannery. Where we went wrong before, is thinking we were looking for a period of forty years in the lives of Drove and Browneyes. But if they were in the cave-cow, the Freeze went by in a flash so far as they’re concerned. They didn’t even age. We slipped right by it in their memories.”

So Mister McNeil lay back on his heap of furs, occasionally tending to the distil stove, while Charm and I stardreamed. . . .

And by the following afternoon everything was clear.

We took it in turns to tell Mister McNeil the story of the two groups of people; one group inside the cannery once outside. The people inside were the bureaucrats and their families, mostly from inland, known as Parls. Those outside were the Pallahaxi villagers and stragglers from other towns. Drove's people, from Alika, were inside; Browneyes' outside.

"Drove and Browneyes were separated," said Charm. "They held hands through the fence."

"The cannery was divided into levels," I added. "The Regent and his chiefs were five floors underground. The people on each level were less important than those on the level below. The guards lived on the ground floor. My people were one floor below that. What we didn't realize at first, was that the floors could be sealed off from one another. And the biggest stocks of food and fuel were the furthest underground."

Mister McNeil chuckled grimly. "Cultures may differ, but nature never changes."

"One day they locked all the doors."

Charm said, "By then, the lorin had come and led the all villagers away."

"And they went?" Mister McNeil was surprised. "Somehow I'd have expected them to stay outside the wire until the bitter end, looking in."

"The lorin can be very persuasive. They led the people to their cave-cow."

"Arrow Forest?"

"No. It had to be somewhere closer, because the freeze was pretty severe by then. People couldn't have walked far. It was snowing hard, and Browneyes just followed the lorin blindly."

I took up her tale. "Drove found an unlocked door leading directly outside, and he left the cannery that way. He'd decided he'd take his chances outside because Browneyes was there. Then the lorin came for him. The next day the guards deserted and the lorin took them, too."

"So that left four levels of people in the cannery," said Mister McNeil. "What happened to them?"

"Nobody knows. They'd sealed themselves off."

Charm said, "I wonder if they're still breeding down there."

"With no food?"

"For all we know, there's a cave-cow down there. They might even be hibernating. What fun it'd be to wake them all up!"

I said nothing. I had my own ideas as to what had happened to those people. Mister McNeil was silent, too. I knew what he was thinking.

"So we'd better get over to the cannery and tell everyone, hadn't we?" said Charm.

I wished it was so simple. "They won't believe us, my love. They're all settled in, nicely organized by my uncle. And we're asking them to go outside into the freezing

cold and find some lorin, and trust them? They'll laugh at us. And we're not exactly their favorite people, anyway."

"Grubbers and flounders are all together in there, Hardy. Maybe they're seeing things more sensibly now."

"Even if they are, Stance will twist them his way."

She hesitated. "You. . . . You're going to have to discredit him, my love. It's the only way. At least if we can get a few people out of there. . . . I think some of the Noss people might listen to us."

My stomach lurched at the thought of it.

"She's right," said Mister McNeil. "It's the only way. It's that, or have a few hundred deaths on our conscience for the rest of our lives."

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"So you've come crawling back," said Stance. "All I can say is, if you want to stay here you'll have to abide by our rules."

"That's fine, Stance," I said.

"Just don't you forget it." He eyed me suspiciously. We stood in the room where I'd met with him before; he'd taken it over as his headquarters. There was very little furniture; a few heaps of furs here and there, a cart upended to serve as a table, a couple of benches that had once held pilgrims' offerings. I'm sure he'd have preferred something more pretentious. And in one corner, a big lumpy heap covered by skins. That would be his private food supply. No doubt a bigger hoard than any other in the cannery, but hardly enough for forty years.

"Have you explored the lower levels yet?" I asked.

His eyes flickered. He glanced toward his team: Lonessa, Wand and Cuff. "Did you get around to exploring the lower levels, Cuff?" He picked on the youngest as a target for the question he couldn't answer himself.

Cuff handled it well. He'd matured a lot since the death of his father. "Which lower levels are you talking about, Stance?" he asked coolly.

Stance had no option but to refer the question back to me. "Which lower levels?"

It was not the time to challenge him; there weren't enough people present. If challenging was to be done, it would have to be at a bigger meeting. His downfall had to be complete, and witnessed as such. For the time being I would just play him along. "The levels below this one," I said innocently.

"This is ground level. How can there be others below it? They'd have to be pits."

I pushed him a bit further. "I take it you haven't gotten around to stardreaming this place yet."

His eyes flashed with a murderous glint. "Stardreaming? We have no time for stardreaming! What matters is the here and now, and our preparations for the future!"

“Of course. So you know nothing of the lower levels. That’s a pity. I think we should check them out, don’t you?”

Again I’d limited his options. He fell silent while his team discussed the notion of lower levels and what might be found there. It emerged that there was a door down a distant corridor that had resisted all attempts to pry it open.

“I’ve stardreamed this place,” I told them. “There were people down there during the Great Freeze, on another four levels below this one. My ancestor Drove was down there for a while.”

This was too much for Stance. “Sacrilege! You’re claiming the venerable Drove as your ancestor? What next, you presumptuous young freezer?”

“Charm is descended from Browneyes.”

“Oh, yes? I suppose she’s stardreamed this place as well!”

“No. She was outside the fence. . . .” I hesitated. I was being led into revealing my hand. The time was not ripe, not yet.

Lonessa broke in. “Is this true, Charm? Are you and I descended from Browneyes?”

“Yes. I’ve been all the way back, Mom. We’re descended from Drove, too. They had two children, a boy and a girl.”

Only Charm would have thought of that. Lonessa blinked, puzzled. She couldn’t think of herself as being descended from a man. Memories are so important to us that we tend to forget we each have two parents passing their genes down the line. Genes that — according to Mister McNeil — affect many aspects of our behavior, even our appearance. But Lonessa shrugged off the Drove connection as being of no consequence.

“Browneyes, our ancestor. . . .” she murmured.

“You needn’t be so impressed, Mom. She’s just an ordinary woman.”

Stance uttered an explosive noise. More sacrilege. “She’s the mother to us all!”

“Not really. The goatparent is the mother to us all. And the father. But that was long ago, long before the Great Freeze, even. Mister McNeil explained it to us. Maybe he’ll explain it to you some day.”

“What in the name of the Great Lox does Mister McNeil know about us!”

“More than we know ourselves, it seems,” I said. “Why don’t we go along to this door and see what’s behind it?”

He snorted derisively. “We’ve already told you the door can’t be opened. Have you forgotten already?”

“I’m sure Mister McNeil can open any door.”

The human smiled and produced his laser pistol.

Stance held a lamp aloft, Mister McNeil provided additional illumination from a human flashlight. We gathered quite a following as we made our way along the corridors, Noss and Yam people forgetting their differences, drawn together against the common peril. It would have been quite impressive, were it not for the fact that they were drawn together in the wrong place. Mind you, the corridors were splendid; the

walls square, sharp-cornered and smooth, with none of the lumpy roughness of our cottages. The old people had known how to build.

“What’s going on?” Charm’s dad had joined us, giving his daughter a quick hug.

I explained as we hurried on. There was a murmur of interest from our followers. Other levels? It was a fascinating idea. Drivets scuttled away from our feet, squeaking angrily. They’d had sole possession of this place for generations.

We arrived at a stout metal door; paint peeling, surface pocked with rust but in remarkable condition considering the number of generations it had stood. There were no latches or handles to pull it by; and when Mister McNeil threw his weight against it, it didn’t budge.

“Intended to keep people out,” he said briefly, and aimed his laser pistol. A glowing thread of molten metal began to creep steadily around the door. People backed away, muttering nervously. A few of them had seen this example of human prowess before, but it was new to most.

“Sacrilege,” murmured Stance apprehensively. He was very big on sacrilege these days. “This door has stood for generations. Obviously it was never meant to be opened. Now the human is destroying it.”

“Shut up, you fool,” whispered Wand.

A circular section of door fell away and hit the floor beyond with a great clang. The onlookers were silent, frightened. By now it had occurred to many of them that some cohort of Rax might have been lurking beyond that door ever since the Great Freeze, waiting to be let out and to wreak havoc on the world. Possibly Ragina, queen of the ice-devils and Rax’s legendary lover.

But no tentacle came reaching hungrily out of the hole in the door. Instead, we heard a curious droning sound. Mister McNeil shone his flashlight through the hole, playing it on the walls of a short corridor leading into blackness. The walls were pale and they seemed to be rippling.

I heard Cuff mutter, “What in the name of Phu—?”

His voice was drowned out by yells of alarm as the rippling walls resolved themselves into countless winged insects, lifting off and heading for us in a vast fizzing cloud. I ducked. People thrashed about, flapping their arms, hitting one another as often as the flies. The lantern was knocked out of Stance’s hand. The earthen base broke open and a pool of distil spread, flaring up with an eerie blue flame. The insects made for it, hovering above the flames in a dense mass as we backed away. They began to fall with singed wings. An odd, cloying stink arose.

“They’re only buzzflies,” said someone, relieved.

“When did you ever see a white buzzfly?”

“Well, they’re the right size and shape.”

Mister McNeil said, “They’ve been evolving for years in the dark. They don’t need color.”

“What do they feed on?”

The human hesitated. “Well, for a long time now I guess they’ve been feeding on one another.”

More flies emerged. Mister McNeil stepped through the hole in the door. We saw the circle of light playing on walls, now gray and devoid of life. Then the light disappeared; only a faint glow remaining. We heard him shout, “You’d better come through.”

I followed the glow and found him standing at the entrance of a large chamber, playing his light around the walls. Others joined us, jostling us from behind.

“Is Stance there?” he asked.

“Of course,” came the reply.

“I think you should take a look at this.”

The circle of light swung down.

I’ve put it under geas. I think everyone there has. There’s no point in inflicting that dreadful sight on the generations to come.

In the center of the floor lay a vast pile of ashes. At first glance in the poor light I thought the ashes were surrounded by a circle of clothing, thrown haphazardly down. But then I saw the pale gleam of bones, a skull, a skeletal foot sticking out from a pants leg, and I realized the clothing had once contained people. And I knew why Mister McNeil had hesitated before he’d taken his guess at what the buzzflies had been eating. He’d expected something like this. He’d been around the galaxy and he knew the meaning of time, and he knew how frail life is, and how people invent myths to reassure themselves.

And now we all knew something else.

“They burned their books to keep warm,” he said quietly to me. “Their books, their furniture, and anything else that would burn. And when everything was gone, they died.”

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Word traveled. People gathered. A great crowd of people packed into the largest chamber, chattering in frightened speculation as they awaited soothing words from their leaders next door.

Stance, meanwhile, refused to take advice from his team. “All right, some people died. But it doesn’t alter the facts. The fact is, some people lived, otherwise we wouldn’t be here now.”

“Then you’d better explain it to them,” said Lonessa, “before they all go running out into the cold. This place has the stink of death in it, in their minds.”

“The point is,” I said, “which people lived?”

“Exactly,” said Lonessa.

“You just shut up, Hardy!” shouted Stance with a classic show of temper. “We have enough problems without you compounding them!”

The roar of speculation next door resolved itself into a rhythmic shout. “Stance. . . ! Stance. . . ! Stance. . . !”

Lonessa glanced at me. Surprisingly, she smiled briefly.

“Time to face up to it all,” she said.

Lanterns flickered around the walls, lighting up the anxious faces of the crowd as Stance climbed onto a bench to address them. Two-fingered signs stabbed the air as though my uncle were the Great Lox himself. I stood on the floor behind the bench, together with Mister McNeil, Lonessa, Wand, Cuff and Charm.

Stance was on his own up there.

“My people!” he shouted. “Good people of Noss and Yam. Today we have learned a lesson. We have seen what happens to ungodly folk who turn their backs on their faith and resort to materialism and an inadequate technology. Did we see one single image of the Great Lox in that dreadful cave? No! Did we see symbols of the sun-god Phu, that might have encouraged him to return to the skies? No! Instead we saw a treacherous and ungodly people putting their trust in thick walls and locked doors. And they paid the price. They died, while the people here on this level survived.”

“How do you know they survived, Yam Stance?” came a shout.

“Do you see any bodies on this level?” His gaze raked the crowd. “Did you see buzzflies? No!”

“So where did the people go?”

If Stance was annoyed at the interruptions he didn’t show it. His voice had dropped and he leaned forward, legs astride, feet firmly planted on the bench, calves bulging before my eyes, willing his audience into gullibility. And he was good. There was no doubt about it; he was good. I could read trust in the faces all around — except, of course, those of Lonessa, Wand, Cuff and Charm. They knew Stance better.

“They didn’t go anywhere,” he said. “They stayed right here, and they prayed. Day and night they prayed, and the Great Lox listened. They prayed as we must pray.”

A lone skeptic called, “Pray for forty years?” It was Silly May, standing rear the end of the bench. She met my eyes and began to sidle toward us.

Stance smiled as though humoring a child. “Forty years? Of course not. Forty years is what the humans say, and what do they know about it? They stayed here for a handful of generations and then they left. Forty years? No, this is the usual freeze, perhaps longer than most, but its duration is entirely in the hands of the Great Lox, not some human soothsayer. The Great Lox will listen to our plea, and come the spring the flowers will bloom, and we’ll walk out of here into a world as it always has been.”

“He’s winning them over,” muttered Wand. “Clever freezer.”

“Do it, Hardy,” whispered Mister McNeil.

So it all depended on me, did it? I looked up at my uncle’s sturdy figure, foreshortened by the angle, all powerful legs and tense buttocks; and I knew that whatever I said, nobody would listen. Stance was mesmerizing them and any opposition would merely lower my own standing, which was already low enough. . . .

It was Silly May who had the inspiration. Silly May, unhampered by memory, whose thinking never followed the well-trodden paths. While I was desperately juggling words in my mind, she cut to the core of the problem of humbling Stance.

She took hold of the bench on which he stood, and began to shake it vigorously.

“Let us pray!” Stance was shouting at the time. Then he began to lose his balance. And posture was very important to Stance’s credibility. Staggering, he glanced over his shoulder angrily.

The genius behind Silly May’s action became clear to the rest of us. Mister McNeil and Charm grabbed the bench and added their efforts to hers. I was only mildly surprised to see Lonessa and Cuff do the same. And I was shaking with the best of them. Only Wand remained motionless, bewildered and affronted by our actions.

The spell was broken and isolated laughter came from the audience. So far as most of them could see, Stance was performing a curious dance.

“Up you go, Hardy,” said Mister McNeil, and lifted me bodily to the bench, which became suddenly steady as the shakers desisted. The only things shaking now were my knees, as Stance turned a murderous glance on me and the audience buzzed with interest.

I said loudly, “We’re wasting time. Our people died here before, just as we’ll die if we stay.”

“Oh?” Stance regarded me with exaggerated interest. “And where do you suggest we go, young Hardy?”

“To the *lorin* caves.”

“To the *lorin* caves. The *lorin* caves, you say. Yes, I think we know your love of *lorin*. And what will we do there, Hardy?”

“The *lorin* have a milk that sends you to sleep.”

“Of course they do, of course they do. Now just step down and let me talk to the people, there’s a good lad.”

“The *lorin* are our only chance!” I shouted desperately.

“I think not. I know you’ve always been obsessed by them — didn’t you once tell us we’re the same species as those furry little fellows? But we’ll stay here in Pallahaxi, Hardy. The holy fount. A fitting place to await the rebirth of the sun god Phu, don’t you think?” And he stepped close, put a friendly arm around my shoulders and suddenly and shockingly whispered in my ear, “Get down right now, you little freezer, or I’ll have one of my men put his spear through you!”

I looked into his smiling face and drew a perverse strength from his words. Obviously my presence alarmed him. I said loudly, “So we were wrong about the reason our ancestors burned their books. We thought it was because Phu gave them the gift of memory. But that wasn’t the reason, was it, Stance?”

“What?” He hadn’t really thought about this yet.

“The people down below burned the books to keep warm. And when the books were all gone, they froze to death.”

“But we’re not down below, are we, Hardy?”

“There are plenty of ashes on this level too.”

“And that proves my point. The people up here prayed, received the gift of memory, burned the books and lived. The people below were godless and they died.”

This was my chance, or so I thought. The truth was, I probably never had a chance. “So where did the people on this level go when they’d burned the books?”

“Out into a warm world, of course.”

My mouth was dry. “Did you actually stardream this?”

“I certainly did.”

“Well so did I, and that’s not the way it happened at all.”

The audience howled; that’s the only way I can describe it. It was an animal sound, overwhelming, hostile, directed at me. I’d overstepped the bounds of decency by a long, long way.

“Are you challenging my memory?” roared Stance.

“Yes! I’m saying you’ve invented the whole freezing thing. You built up all this religious nonsense because you’ve got no real memories to tell you the truth. You’ve no idea what happened even one generation ago. You’re risking the lives of all these people for the sake of hanging onto your power. You’re not fit to be a chief. You’re disabled and you’ve been disabled from birth — I’ve stardreamed your coming-of-age! You’ve concealed it all these years, and you’ve killed those who—”

But the noise from the audience drowned out anything more I could say. Hands grabbed for me. I saw Spring in the crowd, and made out her words, “He’s right! Listen to him!” but I was reading her lips, and nobody heard her. Then Stance raised a hand and they fell silent, damn them, loxlike in their obedience. He smiled at me pityingly.

I tried again, before he could speak. “Truth is the enemy of religion, don’t you see? If we can’t remember it, it didn’t happen. Trust your memories!”

“So you stardreamed that far back, did you?” Stance asked. “Well, well. And if our family tradition is to be believed, you and I are the only people here who can do that. Just you and I, Hardy. And you’d like to be chief, wouldn’t you? Just like your father would have liked to be chief.”

“There’s someone else who can remember the Great Freeze, Stance.”

“Oh, there is?” His eyebrows lifted in mock astonishment, but there was a touch of alarm in his eyes.

Charm climbed onto the bench. “Me.”

The audience was becoming noisy again.

“Let’s see, aren’t you Hardy’s trollop? The flounder who lives with a grubber?”

“I’ve heard enough of this!” Now Lonessa mounted the bench. We were getting perilously crowded up there, but the sight of the Noss womanchief quietened people down.

Stance eyed her uncertainly. “I realize Charm’s your daughter, of course, but—”

“I’m not here to argue about memories, Stance. That’s all beside the point.”

“And your point is. . . ?”

“That you murdered your brother, Stance, and I can prove it!”

When Mister McNeil used to tell me exciting stories about space travel, he would often use the expression ‘the blood drained from his face.’ Well, stilks have many similarities to humans for very good reasons, and as I watched Stance I actually saw the blood leaving his face, presumably to help his brain to race. Until, pallid as one of those disgusting buzzflies from the floor below, he croaked, “Nonsense!”

“Cuff!” snapped Lonessa.

The Noss manchief threw a sack made of stitched skins to the already overloaded bench and climbed up after it. The sack was distorted by something long and slender inside. Cuff let it lie and faced the audience, which had gone very quiet.

“Yam Bruno was a popular man,” he began. “We admired him in Noss, and we found him easy to negotiate with. . . except. . .” He bit his lip. He was obviously remembering dear old Dad throwing him against the wall. Now, he was deciding, was not the time to reopen old wounds. If Stance was to be the villain, then Dad had to be the good guy. As indeed he was. “It was a blow to both villages when he was killed.

“What made it worse, was that he was killed at Noss. He was found floating with a stab wound in his back by his son Hardy, who. . .” Again he hesitated, glancing at me. Another old grievance had surfaced. He was remembering I’d accused him of murder, but he’d matured a lot since ascending to chiefship. He swallowed the memory and continued. “It was early in the grume. Nobody knew who had done this thing.

“We know *how* it was done, though. Yam Stance, his brother, came up behind him while he was standing at the edge of Noss estuary and stabbed him in the back with his hunting spear. Bruno toppled and fell into deep water, nearly taking Stance with him.”

“Supposition!” shouted Stance. “Lies! Were you there yourself, to see this vision?”

Cuff ignored him. “Stance jerked at the spear and it came away from the body, but the barbs had caught inside Bruno’s cloak. The cloak was pulled from Bruno’s back and Stance, overbalancing, had to let go of his spear. The spearhead was iron. And Stance is a grubber. He can’t swim. He was forced to watch the spear sink out of sight, taking the cloak with it. But he thought he was safe; the evidence had gone to the bottom of the sea and that was the end of it.”

Now he turned and regarded Stance. The boy-man of my acquaintance had disappeared. He was an adult facing an adult. And Stance’s eyes dropped. “But you’re an inlander, Stance and you’d forgotten the grume.”

Stance repeated woodenly, “The grume? The grume?”

“The grume was not at its height yet. Days passed and the water became more dense. Do you see what that means? Things float to the top when they water gets denser, don’t they?” He picked up his bag. “Things like deep-sea fish, and sunken boats, and. . .”

He pulled his exhibits from the bag and held them high. “And cloaks with spears through them. Recognizable cloaks, recognizable spears. Bruno’s negotiating cloak, your ceremonial spear, Stance!”

It was the finish of my uncle. He stared at the exhibits uncomprehendingly, no doubt wondering where his prayers had gone wrong and why the Great Lox had deserted him. I see now that he had no moral sense; this is instilled in us by generations of memories. Or in the case of a child with a defective memory lobe like Silly May, by careful teaching. Stance had had no such teaching, because Granddad had never admitted he was lacking.

Was Granddad the chief culprit in all this? Maybe. But he was found dead soon after Stance’s coming-of-age; stabbed in the back. It makes you think, doesn’t it? Perhaps he’d told Stance that he couldn’t succeed him as chief unless he started remembering, pretty quick. And the young Stance, defective in memory but eager for power, killed him. Who knows?

Trigger knows, because he must have inherited the memory of the killing. Stance would have put it under geas, naturally. But it’s there in Trigger’s memory, and one day he’ll get a little too curious, and visit it. That’s his problem.

Stance half-jumped, half-fell from the platform, and the crowd parted to let him through. People averted their eyes as he stumbled toward the door. He looked like nothing much, a nobody, stooped and small, his personality left behind in our memories. As he reached the door leading outside there was a brief struggle. Trigger was there, trying to hold him back. With a final show of strength Stance flung his son from him and hauled open the door.

Snow flurried in. The Great Freeze had begun.

Stance walked outside.

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Somebody shut the door quickly. Lonessa looked at me. “It’s up to you now, Hardy. The freeze is here. I hope to Phu you’re right about the lorin.”

Meanwhile Cuff had turned an unpleasant look on me, reminiscent of earlier days. “If you knew Stance’s memory was defective you should have told us. You allowed us to be led by a charlatan. I find that hard to forgive.”

“I couldn’t tell anyone, Cuff. They’d have blabbed it out and Stance would have got to hear of it and been prepared. I had to wait for an opportune moment with a big audience.”

“But it didn’t work, did it?”

“It laid the foundation of doubt. Anyway,” it occurred to me that I had a grievance of my own, “why didn’t you tell me Stance killed my dad?” Little things came back to me. The sudden change in appearance of Stance’s ceremonial hunting spear. Overhearing Walleye’s words as he stood beside the creek. *‘They must not know about this. That’s the last thing we want at this time. It’s important we pull together.’* The dying Walleye whispering to his son. The odd looks Cuff had given me

from time to time. “You’ve known for a long time, you freezer! You should have told me!”

Surprisingly, his expression changed and he chuckled. “The time was not ripe. You might have blabbed it out at an inopportune moment.”

After a moment I found myself smiling back. “You could be right.”

“Mind you,” he said, “It was Yam May who set everything off for us. Stroke of genius, shaking the bench.” I noticed his admiring glance at May and put two and two together. His rank was high enough to discourage criticism if he and May got together. Perhaps another barrier was about to fall.

We climbed from the bench. We needed a conference before we could address our people again. Our people. I savored the thought.

“All the same,” said Cuff thoughtfully, “I find it odd that your dad didn’t tell Yam about Stance, and take over himself. I’m sure I would have done.”

“Just loyalty,” said Spring, who had joined us. “Bruno was always loyal, to everyone. Including me.” Her eyes were bright as she remembered.

“And Stance repaid the loyalty by killing Bruno,” said Cuff.

“Stance couldn’t understand Bruno was that kind of man. He just naturally didn’t trust him. He didn’t trust Hardy either because he thought Hardy would find out about him from Bruno’s memories, sooner or later. Neither did he trust his own father. What a way to live. I don’t know what he feared the most: the future without Bruno, or being betrayed by him. Bruno always told me he was watching his back. But he thought he was safe in Noss.”

“Stance was a treacherous freezer,” said Cuff. “I never did like him.”

At that moment Trigger rejoined us. His young cheeks were wet with tears. “Can’t you realize what it’s like to be different, and how you’d do *anything* to fit in, to try to show you’re not different?” he said. “Dad knew. And he had his loyalty, too. To his son. Me.”

Stardreamers are used to seeing things from many points of view. In that moment I pitied Stance, and I pitied Trigger.

Then Silly May said, “You can always accept the way you are and make the most of it.”

“People won’t let you,” said Trigger. “You should know that.”

Strange, how quickly euphoria wears off. A few moments earlier the most important thing in the world had been the deposing of my uncle. Now it was done and I’d experienced a brief moment of elation as I’d stood with my allies and gloated.

Then suddenly it was all gone, and I was standing in a dank, grim chamber among a great number of people, many of whom expected me to save their lives for them. They’d formed little chattering groups squatting around small fires on the floor, and from time to time they would glance my way. Trustingly. I’d stardreamed right

back to the previous Great Freeze. I was their rightful leader. They were waiting for a sign.

Mister McNeil coughed, waving a drift of smoke away from his face. "I'll bet the people down below died of oxygen starvation rather than cold and hunger," he said. "Can't we do something about these fires?"

"They'll panic if they don't have warmth," Lonessa pointed out.

"So what shall we do now?" asked Cuff.

"Withdraw to Stance's chamber and talk about it," I said. "I can't think while all these people are looking at me."

We reassembled in the next room, shutting the door. I found Silly May had come too, which didn't surprise me. I was surprised to see Trigger with us, though.

"All right," I said, "Let's have some ideas."

"You've promised we'll be safe with the lorin," said Trigger somewhat spitefully. "You've got to come through with it. How, is up to you."

"We're all in this together, Trigger," Charm reminded him. "If you can't be constructive, at least get out of here."

He muttered something I didn't catch and retreated to the outside of the group.

"You said the lorin caves are at Arrow Forest," said Lonessa. "The cave-cow, you called it. We can't all walk there now the freeze has started. Could Mister McNeil ferry people in his buggy?"

The human shook his head. "It's too far. A few days ago I might have stood a chance. But now the snow's started. I'd get bogged down after the first couple of trips, and I could only take three or four passengers at a time."

"So you could take the seven of us in two trips," said Trigger eagerly.

"Forget it," I told him. "There's other people."

"But somebody has to start everything going again once the freeze is over!"

"This is happening all over the world, remember? There'll be people who've moved faster than us. People who remembered, and put their faith in the lorin, and are asleep in cave-cows right now. They'll start things up after the freeze. It really doesn't matter too much if we don't make it."

"It matters to me!"

He was becoming a nuisance. "May, would you please take him into a corner and talk some sense into him. I don't want him out there with everyone else, spreading panic."

May led him away sniveling and we resumed a more rational discussion.

Charm said, "I don't think the lorin will come here for us. That's not how they work. They didn't come for the people last time. It was the ones left outside like Browneyes who were saved, and the ones who went outside of their own accord, like Drove. You know what the lorin think? If people are fool enough to hole up in here and die, then they're not the kind of people the next world needs. We have to prove we have some sense."

"Maybe there are other cave-cows closer than Arrow Forest," suggested Lonessa. "I don't know this area. You've stardreamed it, Charm."

“I didn’t stardream any cave-cows except the one Browneyes woke up in. By the time the lorin came for her, she was unconscious. They could have carried her all the way to Arrow Forest, for all I know.” She looked at me unhappily. “I’m sorry, Hardy. I’m not much help.”

“There must be cave-cows near Pallahaxi,” I said. “I saw plenty of lorin around there in my stardream. But Drove was unconscious when they came for him, too. . . . Wait a minute. Mister McNeil says the cave-cow lives off trees whose sap flows downward. Cuptrees and anemones. So there’s always going to be a forest where there’s a cave-cow.”

“There’s lots of forests around Pallahaxi,” said Cuff. “How do we know which have cave-cows under them? We can’t search them all, not now it’s snowing.” He was descending into pessimism.

Silly May joined us, leaving Trigger in his corner, staring fiercely at the walls as he tried to come to grips with himself. At least he was trying.

“There has to be something different about the trees,” she said.

“One cuptree looks much like the next,” said Cuff gloomily. “I should know. I’ve planted enough of them.”

May’s eyes widened. “So have I!” she said with suppressed excitement. “Why did you plant them, Cuff?”

“Because my dad made me. He was too lame to plant them himself toward the end, and he made me plant his share as well as my own.”

“Yes, but *why*?”

Lonessa couldn’t understand what she was getting at. “We have to keep replanting the sacred forests, you know that. Otherwise they would die out. You grow cuptrees and anemones from cuttings. They don’t drop seeds like ordinary trees. You’re the Yam arborist. You should know that.”

“But why does it matter if the forest dies out?” said Silly May. “There are plenty of other forests.”

“Yes, but we’re talking about the *sacred* forests, you fool.” Lonessa’s patience was dwindling.

“Why are they sacred?”

“Why are they sacred?” It was not the kind of question Lonessa appreciated. “They just *are*, of course. They always have been. You have no memories, you wouldn’t know. But Noss people have been replanting their forest for generations. It’s a thanksgiving. It’s putting something back in return for the blessings we’ve received. It honors the goatparent.”

“All right, all right.” Now it was Silly May who was losing patience. “Just bear with me a moment. Just imagine the forests are sacred because there’s a *reason*. Now let’s go a step further. Maybe the reason is, they’re needed to feed the cave-cows.”

There was a dead silence.

At last Spring said faintly, “But that means. . . . We’ve been *compelled* to plant, in some way?”

“Programmed,” said Mister McNeil. “Given an instinct. It’s possible.”

“I can’t see that,” said Lonessa. “I don’t feel compelled to attend the thanksgiving replanting.”

“Well, you wouldn’t, would you?” said Mister McNeil. “That’s the point. It’s like an inherited memory. It’s just *there*. Inside you. The need to plant, like the need to have children.”

“But *why*?”

“To feed the cave-cows. May’s right. It all fits together.”

“Fits together with what?”

“Never mind what!” Silly May was becoming exasperated. “We can talk all that out another time. The point is, Arrow Forest is Totney’s sacred forest and Hardy found a cave-cow under it. We’ll find another cave-cow under Pallahaxi’s sacred forest. Now, does anyone know where the forest is?”

“It would have died out long ago,” said Cuff gloomily. “There are no people living here. Pallahaxi’s dead.”

Charm said, “The town may be dead, but the pilgrims kept the forest alive. I know where it is. I’ve stardreamed them replanting it.”

8: DEPARTURE

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You humans, I'm sure you'll come back. I don't know how many generations from now; but you will. And when you come, look for a fellow with a gold ring around his thumb; Mister McNeil gave it me and it was too big for my finger. I'm passing it to my last son on his coming-of-age, and down the manline. So when you meet this fellow — he may have brown eyes unusual in a stilk — he'll tell you the story.

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Some came with us, some stayed behind and died.

Stance's huntsmen stayed behind. They crouched in a group around their little fire, jabbing at the flames with their spears. Soon enough, the spears themselves would be sacrificed as fuel. I saw Patch glance at me several times, as though trying to make up his mind. Many Yam residents had decided to stay, possibly out of loyalty to the memory of Stance, but more likely fear of the unknown. Caunter stayed, the fool. As we were getting ready for departure Faun joined us.

"I'd like to come," she said quietly. "Mom's staying."

Wand scuttled up at that moment, a wrinkled bundle of anxiety. "You can't go, Faun. I forbid it!"

"Sorry, Mom."

Her voice took on a pleading tone. "You're really going out there? You must be mad. You'll all go runabout."

We left her to her own delusions and the company of the lost.

I never went back to Pallahaxi cannery. I'd seen enough death in there already. We wrapped ourselves in furs and loaded ourselves with hot bricks. We opened the door and tramped outside, leaving the small silent groups squatting round their fires, making two-fingered signs, waiting for the Great Lox. The snow was already up to our ankles. It had drifted over all the wonderful machinery so that we had to pick our way carefully around little white hills with black spikes jutting out at all angles. Charm and I led the way south.

Our bricks were still warm when we met the first lorin. He waded out from under a dormant anemone as though he'd been waiting for us. Maybe he had. He took Charm's heavily-mittened hand in his furry paw, and led her to a tree with a vertical fissure in its trunk.

We climbed through, and climbed down.

Later, five of us lay on the warm floor of the cave-cow close together; Mister McNeil, Charm, Crane, Spring and I. The others were scattered all over the floor, dim

shapes in the light of the fungus. Some had already taken the nipples into their mouths and were beginning to fall asleep. Others had dozed off, so the lorin were placing the nipples for them.

It was a time for reflection; for sorting out memories and getting things straight.

I said to Mister McNeil, “This is what I think. You say the kikihuahuas created us. Perhaps they didn’t like the way we turned out. You say they don’t believe in killing things or working metal — well, we did both those. So maybe they saw the last Great Freeze as a chance to improve us. They gave us genetic memories while we were asleep, hoping it would help us to learn by our mistakes.

“Maybe it’s gone wrong again. We’ve killed animals and one another and we’ve worked metal and some of us have even wanted human technology. We haven’t revisited our memories enough. We’ve substituted religion for the facts. We’ve failed.”

Mister McNeil said, “You haven’t failed, believe me. You don’t know the whole story, that’s all.”

“Are you going to tell us?”

He hesitated, then came to a decision. “I may not come through this alive. It’s likely that the milk won’t suit my metabolism, so I’ll tell you what I know before we sleep. You may find it discouraging. That’s why I couldn’t tell you before. You needed all the encouragement you could get, just to survive. . . .

“Visualize the kikihuahuas arriving. This planet is what we call Earth-type. The kikihuahuas like a slightly different environment, so they need a creature to get it ready for them. Well, there’s one life form that’s evolved to suit Earth-type worlds, and that the human being. No need for trial and error. The kikihuahuas get the goatparent to produce a creature very similar to a human. I expect they even obtained some human genes to use in the mix they fed to the goatparent. So they set this creature down, programmed to get started making the world more suitable.”

My heart was suddenly pounding. “More suitable for what?”

“For a second, more preferable life form. In order to do this, the kikihuahuas accept that — in the short term — it might be necessary for their new creature to kill, and to work metal. But its successor will conform to the kikihuahua ideals. It will be a gentle creature living off the land, friendly and gregarious, parthenogenetic, with no likelihood of suffering from overpopulation.”

“A lorin,” whispered Charm. “They come next.”

“I’m afraid so. You’ve never felt any curiosity about them, have you?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Because you’re programmed that way.”

We thought about it. The lorin? They just *are*. How can one be curious about them?

“How do you know all this?” asked Charm. “You’ve only been here a few generations.”

“We know the kikihuahuas. This is the way they operate. You’re what we call First Colonists. Your job is to survive as best you can: hunting, fishing, farming, whatever, in a potentially hostile environment. So you have to be strong and ruthless, by

their standards. While you are surviving, you plant anemones and cuptrees to provide food and drink for infant cave-cows put in place by the first generation.”

Crane chuckled grimly. “So that’s all we are. Deep down, we’re all just arborists. The despised job we give to our least worthy people. Well, so be it. The grume will still come; the grume will still go.”

We thought about it. I’d often wondered what our real purpose was; now I knew. The Nowhere Man had been right; I felt no better for the knowledge. We were temporary and we were expendable. “You’re really saying our only purpose is to plant trees?”

“Yes. Until the cave-cows have grown sufficiently big to support an optimum lorin population.”

“And when will that be?” I couldn’t help but glance across the cave-cow. It looked huge. Lorin strolled to and fro on desultory errands, popping nipples into people’s mouths.

“I have no idea.”

“But this could be *it*. We could have served our purpose *now*. The cave-cows could be fully developed.”

“There’s no way of telling. Only the lorin will know that.”

“And what will they do then?”

“My guess is, they’ll just leave you to sleep forever. They can’t kill you. It’s against their law.”

We were silent. I felt a deep sadness. I’d always liked the lorin because I felt they were supremely good, and they helped us out from time to time because they liked us. Now, it seemed, it was because they needed a healthy workforce. It would take a long time for me to get used to that idea.

So I revisited old memories and I’m sure Charm was doing the same. I was glad we couldn’t remember back to the very beginning because then we’d have known too much and it would have discouraged us. So I decided to revisit a few good memories instead of brooding; the memory of Dad, for example. He must always have known I would be chief one day; he couldn’t let down his brother, but he knew the bonds between cousins were not so strong, and sooner or later Trigger, the fool, would be found out. But the best memories were very recent, and I hardly liked to think about them because they would be cruelly cut off so soon. . . .

Charm hugged me tight. “Let’s not go to sleep, Hardy. Let’s stay awake for the rest of our lives. Think how many times we could make love.”

Glancing over her shoulder, I saw Crane was already dozing against the curve of the cave-cow. As I watched, a lorin approached and gently placed a nipple between his lips.

“Wake up, Hardy!”

Charm, propped up on one elbow, was poking me gently in the ribs. I must have dozed off. I sat up quickly, blinking, puzzled.

I didn't feel tired any more. My last memory was making love with Charm, then struggling to keep awake while those around me slept. And now, suddenly, I was wide awake.

All around, people were stirring. Glowing fungi had been placed in heaps. Lorin bustled to and fro, more briskly than usual, removing nipples from mouths.

I said, hardly daring, "We've come through it, haven't we? Forty years?"

"I can hardly believe it." She was crying with quiet joy, tears dripping from her round chin, watching me.

I heard Crane whisper, "Another chance, by Phu! We'll see the grume yet."

I rolled over to awaken Mister McNeil and came into contact with something brittle that crumbled under my shoulder. I stared for a moment, considered geas, then decided not. I didn't want to forget anything about Mister McNeil; not even this. He must live in the memories of my descendants; everything he'd done, every word he'd said, until the lorin decided the First Colonists should call it quits.

But that was not yet.

The lorin were helping us to our feet, ushering us along the cave-cow with gentle shoves. Soon we were blinking in bright sunlight. Phu was back, Rax was gone.

It was all so beautiful and so new and bright, and I heard cries of wonder and thanksgiving from those around me.

"You can see why it's easy to believe in the Great Lox and all that nonsense," Charm murmured.

"I don't want that to happen. I wanted the new world to be based on truth." I looked around at the people of Noss and Yam. "I want to teach them everything Mister McNeil taught me."

"It's up to us, my love. But won't they find it a bit disheartening?"

"That probably depends on the person. We have one life each; plenty of people will want to make the most of it. But I want them to know they're part of a greater scheme. When they're planting the trees I want them to know *why*, instead of being led by their instincts the way you might lead a brainless lox. It's just too degrading, all this superstition. It plays us for fools. We're part of the whole process and we should be proud of it. I know *I* am, for Phu's sake!"

"Nothing wrong in having a purpose," agreed Charm.

"In a way I pity the humans, just vaguely going forth and multiplying."

She smiled, and I knew everything was going to be fine. "So what shall we do next, Hardy? Reality will set in soon enough. I'm hungry already. Of course," she gave me a sideways glance, "I'm fairly sure I have to eat for two these days."

"Fairly sure?" I stared at her. A great joy grew within me. Joy was in plentiful supply, today.

"Well, almost certain." She kissed me on the cheek. "Anyway, it's one of those things we must gloat over in private, not here. It's time for us to show leadership qualities. We can't stand around looking at the scenery all day. What do you think?"

“I think we should rebuild Pallahaxi and settle in there for a few generations. It worked before and it’ll work again. Particularly if we can get Smith and Smitha to join us. Wilt will have made sure they came through all right.” I looked at the angle of the sun. “The grume will be arriving soon, so there’ll be plenty to eat. We’ll fish the grume and we’ll sow in the spring, all of us together, none of this nonsense about grubbers and flounders.”

Silly May and Cuff had strolled up; she was looking at me speculatively. “You said *we’ll* fish and *we’ll* sow. As though you meant men and women together, as well as grubbers and flounders. Interesting concept, Hardy. I wondered if anyone would ever suggest it. What do you say, Cuff?” Cuff looked highly discomfited by this.

“I’ll take it further,” I said. “We’ll live together, too. Separate memory lines don’t have to mean separate cultures or separate men’s and women’s villages. I’m not going to be looked on as a freak because I love Charm and want to live with her. If she and I are in charge here, then by Phu why shouldn’t we wield a bit of power!”

“Good luck to you,” said Cuff. There was to be no leadership battle. Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed.

Spring was nearby with Lonessa, and they’d overheard. Trigger and Faun were chatting and Trigger, free of his father, looked almost normal. They laughed too. It could have been the fine weather and what Mister McNeil called *joie de vivre*, but I did notice people all around hugging one another with scant regard for gender. An encouraging start.

“To Pallahaxi!” I shouted, drunk with power. “We have a civilization to build!”

The words would embarrass my descendants mightily, but at that moment they were the right words to shout, and people cheered their approval.