



The

Secret History

OF



Mars



VOL. III



DFHall



A novice once said to a scribe that it is generally known that all good things must come to an end.

The scribe asked and what of the things that merely are?

Upon hearing this, the novice was enlightened.

—69th koan of the scribe Juri

The Secret History of Mars

D. F. Hall

Hardboiled Babylon

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To S., who saved this book from its Author
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BOOK V

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INTERVIEW
(CONTINUED)

INTERVIEWER

Tell us about the process of translation.

MARSDEN

Well, of course, the texts themselves are too fragile to be handled directly. They're sealed away in sterile environments.

INTERVIEWER

You work with photographed copies?

MARSDEN

Not exactly. The automated systems photograph the pages. Please, check and verify that for consistency. It should sound a little more professional than that. Then these images are scanned by character recognition software which converts any text in the image to a collection of numbers—that might need to be rephrased better—and are stored in what I believe they call an encoding. Yes, it's an encoding. The images are scanned by character recognition systems and converted into an encoding.

INTERVIEWER

How do you work with these?

MARSDEN

Obviously, we don't directly. Only the computers understand the encodings. So we work with rendered versions of them.

INTERVIEWER

Versions?

MARSDEN

Yes. Sometimes the documents don't contain whitespace, that is, words are not separated. So the software has to try and determine where words begin and end. And, uhm, sometimes multiple valid word combinations can come from the same, compacted, as it were, passage. So the software generates all these possible variants, or versions, for us. Actually, let's leave this out.

INTERVIEWER

So what is the next step?

MARSDEN

Well, we can't work from the encoded files. So other software converts these encodings to a sort of what I believe they call a phonetic rendering that uses English-like characters and various other markings to form a file we can read. But actually, maybe we should leave this out, too. But maybe we should keep phonetic rendering. That sounds professional.

INTERVIEWER

Walk us through the actual process of translation.

MARSDEN

Yes. Anna will take those files and begins, what you might call, to literally translate, word by word, to produce what we call a script. Then I will take the script, as we call it, and try to see how the text can be made to more smoothly flow in modern English.

INTERVIEWER

How compartmentalized is this process?

MARSDEN

Very, I would say. Once I have the script, that's enough to work from.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any difficult points that cause you both to have to discuss how something should be translated?

MARSDEN

No. Once I have the script, everything's clear from there.

Bloody evening light trickled down towers.
Fire tenders stirred the small flames that dotted a massive square.
Helena sucked'er fingers as they walked.
"Do yuh've t'do that now?" Li said.
"Yuh'd've come and eat, too."
"I'd thins t'do."
"Come on," Genie said. "We wanna get a good place."
Already, someone'd ascended the small bamboo platform constructed acenter the square. A horn sounded.
"'Oo's supposed t'b'first tonight?" Li said.
"The shaved'ne," Genie said.
"*Which'n?*"
They sat cross-legged on paving stones. Kayla opened'er bag and held Quetzalcoatl'n'er hands and'e looked over'er fingertips and sniffed and'is whiskers twitched.
"*Which'n?*"
Someone nearby: "Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

This's just me. But there's several pages stuffed'n the back of the journal that look t'b'junk, maybe something from some old religious manuscript—they're too worn t'read—but there's some notes'n the margins that'ren't readable but I'd think they'd probably refer t'the many-colored-feather-clad storyteller. And they'd probably relate an event earlier on'n the proceedings where'e was denied entry into these events that our journaller's apparently chronicling because, t'quote what'd likely say: "He's not from the city. Storytellers from the city only." Because that'd b'the mostlikely outcome.

I thought I'd seen a variant of'is story before, or something near-nuf, so I thought I'd fill'n where necessary from that'f need be, but when I went and pulled those scrolls from their cubby, a rat'd nested'n there at some point and chewed't. And I'm too afraid t'dis-ravel what's left of't—and since I don't wanna stop this work t'duplicate that, at the moment, I'll've t'leave't out.

Juri always complains bout this stuff, anyway, because't's all been written down by city scribes and translated and converted into city numerology and such, so none of'em're 'authentic'. But some people just won't b'pleased no matter what.

“Good,” she said. “You’re awake. We were beginning to worry.”

He looked up at’er as she smiled and’er head must’ve seemed t’float disembodied amid blurred semidarkness. He tried t’swallow, but t’d’ve been as’f sand’d been packed down’is throat and shoved out.

“Just sips,” she said, and pressed a glass t’is lips. “Slowly.” Propped against the headboard, his head resting against a pillow, his skull’d’ve throbbed. So’e let’er tilt the glass into’is barely open mouth. Desperation t’gulp faster’d’ve co-mingled with ache and pain. She withdrew the glass. “There’ll be more in a little while,” she said. “Just relax now.”

Ache’d’ve traveled outward along fissures as’f’is skull’d been spider-fractured glass.

“I’ll get your wife now.”

She’d’ve disappeared into the hazeland beyond the doorway.

And Esmerelde and Beatrice’d’ve seemed t’emerge from void.

He turned’is eyes toward where blue lacework fringe angled over’er hands. “Who died?” he said, but retched as’is throat contracted.

“Don’t try to talk,” Esmerelde said, and went for the pitcher on the nightstand and brought over a half-filled glass. “Just rest.”

Beatrice just stood by the bed, somehow perhaps an anchoring point that allowed the room t’accrete round’er. Esmerelde dabbed’is chin. He glanced toward the curtained window. Neither dark nor light beyond, as’f they’d been hung over a wall t’pretend a window where there’d been none. Maybe’e’d the not-comfortable feeling that somehow that room’s shadowed corners were *somehow* the universe’s

boundaries. And beyond the door Beatrice'd closed when she entered?
...he yet'dn't've'd proof of anything beyond that portal.

"What time is it?"

"A little after one," Esmerelde said.

"Which?"

Puzzlement. Then a nod. "In the afternoon."

"The sun?" Both women seemed t'wince, as'f desert wind blew outa'is powder-dry throat.

"It's the storm," Esmerelde said. "The windows are shuttered."

He'dn't've been able t'distinguish any roaring'n'is ears from that which lay outside the house.

"How...long?"

"A while," she said.

"No..." He paused till pain subsided. "How long...have I..."

Esmerelde nodded. "The same," Beatrice said. "They started shuttering the windows the same day the doctor had you brought back here."

"Don't..." But'e just looked down at'mself, at the blue-striped blanket pulled up over'is pajamas.

"Just lie back," Esmerelde said.

"My arm..."

"It's broken. The doctor had to put it in a sling."

He'dn't nod. He seemed t've realized what't'd do t'm. "Catch him?"

"Who?" Beatrice said.

"The truck...cats..."

"Just sit back," Esmerelde said.

"Do you remember?" Beatrice said.

"Remember..."

"Who did this to you?"

"...get him?"

"Who?"

Esmerelde turned toward the nightstand as'f something required'er full attention. A spoon clinked against glass.

"Why was...killing cats?"

"What?"

"...burning...cats..."

“Just lay back,” Esmerelde said. And she offered more water. It’d’ve tasted different then, but’e’dn’t’ve noticed. And’e’d’ve settled back quietly. A few moments later’is eyes closed. She moved the blanket up’is chest. “We should probably call the doctor,” she said. “There might be something special he wants us to do now he’s awake.”

Beatrice looked at’er. Looked back at Ron. His mouth twitched, as’f’e tried t’say something’n a dream. “I’ll let the doctor know.” At the door, she glanced back at the nightstand. “Bring that down with you. And bring up some fresh when he wakes.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Both women paused, looked at t’other.

“Well,” Beatrice said. “Hurry up.”

Esmerelde turned toward the nightstand.

“Wash everything.”

“These haven’t been used yet,” Esmerelde said.

“Don’t argue.” Beatrice stepped into the hall. “They’re collecting dust just sitting out. You should put something over them.”

“Yes, ma’am” She paused’n the doorway with the tray.

“You go on.” And Beatrice stepped aside.

“Yes, ma’am.” Spoons clinked against glasses as she descended.

Beatrice looked back into 'is room, moved toward the foot of the bed. She tugged a wrinkle from the sheets, smoothed 'em with 'er hand. And she looked back at 'm one last time before she closed the door.

“Certain people,” she said, “haven’t any respect for history.” And whoever’d said’t chewed something dried as she sat on a stairstep. “They write plays based on events that’dn’t’ve possibly dis-folded the way they portray. The problem’s, when watching these things, we get carried along by the performance’s flow and loose”⁹³ all critical sensibility.”

Someone else said, “But take time t’examine these works on paper and’t’s utterly apparent they’re totally fact devoid.”

“Yuns’re freakin’ elitists.”

The one tore a dried chunk with’er teeth. She shrugged.

This's just me. But I can't find mention of the play itself, but I think I've found a couple that're nearnuf.

SCENE

Third-shift members breathe softly as they lie asleep on cots scattered across the stage. One cot is conspicuously empty. Small, dim lights are strung overhead. They blink. The DOCTOR sits on a stool at STAGE LEFT and looks down, seemingly absorbed in the space between her shoes. CATHERINE enters from STAGE RIGHT.

CATHERINE

(Looking at empty cot)

Where'd he go?

DOCTOR

(Looking up)

He went for a walk, I guess.

CATHERINE

You guess?

DOCTOR

If he's strong enough to get out of bed, what am I supposed to do?

CATHERINE

Then where is he?

DOCTOR

How the hell should I know? (*Looks absently off STAGE LEFT*) It's not like he can fucking go far.

CATHERINE

What's wrong with you?

DOCTOR

(*Turning to look at CATHERINE*)

Why don't you go find some of your worshippers.

MAE

(*Voice from beyond STAGE RIGHT*)

Everyone should take some time. (*CATHERINE turns. MAE enters from STAGE RIGHT*) I think I saw him a little ways down the left passage. You probably came the other way and missed him.

(*CATHERINE crosses to STAGE RIGHT, touches MAE's shoulder as she passes. CATHERINE exits STAGE RIGHT. MAE looks off STAGE RIGHT as CATHERINE exits.*)

MAE

(*Turning toward DOCTOR*)

Don't take it out on her.

DOCTOR

And what's that?

MAE

Word of warning. My bullshit threshold is low right now.

DOCTOR

(*Smirking*)

Must make it pretty tough in your profession then.

(*MAE turns and exits STAGE RIGHT.*)

Wind side-blasted'em and the suspension creaked. Marie groaned, rubbed'er neck where she'd slept bent back against the seat. "What time is it?" Instinctively, she reached and swiped the phone taped t'the dashboard.

"Hey—put it back to the map." Joan flicked the screen and arrows and lines tumbled over topological vectors.

Marie rubbed'er eyes, squinted through the windshield. "We shouldn't have been in front."

"Where would you prefer to be?"

"At least if we weren't in front we'd have somebody's taillights to follow."

Dust-swirled wind blasted through the headlights' limited sweep. Pea gravel peckled the windshield. "Yeah, we could follow those headlights right off a—" Music blared. But neither't nor the creaking and shifting suspension woke the woman sleeping with'er head against the passenger window. Joan reached and accepted the call.

"*Leader.*"

"Here."

"*Ready for stop?*"

"Hell, yeah."

"*Alright. All drivers stop. Fifteen minute break. Out.*"

Joan touched the screen.

"Why doesn't she just say goodbye, like normal people."

Joan clunked the truck into park. "How'm I supposed to know? You ask her." She jerked the handbrake. "She's all yours."

"I've gotta piss."

"Why tell me?"

Marie grunted. Joan dis-latched the cab window.

“Where’re you going?”

“In the back to get some sleep.”

“Sure.”

“Why don’t you step outside to take a piss?”

“Huh?”

“So you can get some sand up your ass.” And Joan pulled’erself up the seatback, pushed against the dash and squeezed into the truck bed. Joan clicked-on’er light. Wind push-pulled the covering tarp. Dust infiltrated between gaps and a thin film’d settled on everything packed within.

Allison, huddled between stacked water containers, which rattled when wind creaked the suspension, looked up with red-rimmed eyes and salt trails reflected speckled white from the illumination provided by the small flashlight she held’n both hands’n’er lap. Joan rooted out a canteen. “Want some?” She swirled water round’er mouth, then swallowed. “Go on.”

Allison gulped, wiped’er chin with the back of’er hand.

“You slept any?”

Allison shook’er head.

“Lay down,” Joan said. “You’re only going to hurt yourself this way.”

“You sound,” Allison said, voice low, “like my mother.”

Pea gravel and wind struck the tarp.

“I messed everything up.”

(CATHERINE emerges from STAGE LEFT. Grime-covered men and women move toward STAGE LEFT. CATHERINE presses between them. A light is clipped to her sari. Several people sit at STAGE CENTER, half with their backs to the audience. Light plays amidst them.)

CATHERINE

(Passing between them, she stops)

What're you doing? *(None look up)* If you don't need the light, get out of the way somewhere and turn them off. You're wasting batteries. *(CATHERINE pauses, but none reply)* Do you hear me?

(CATHERINE remains still. Those seated rise and move toward STAGE LEFT. Others emerge from STAGE RIGHT. They walk wearily. We can't see their faces. They are almost abstractions. CATHERINE stands silent. Everyone but her has exited STAGE LEFT. But she still stands there. Others emerge from STAGE RIGHT. They settle not far from her as if they don't see her. One of them carries SEX ROBOT over his shoulder. He lowers it to the stage.)

MAN #1

Somebody turn it on. *(Someone taps something they have in their hand. SEX ROBOT rises to its knees)* No. The other

way. (SEX ROBOT *falls onto its hands and knees*) That's what I'm talking about.

(MAN #1 *gets on his knees behind SEX ROBOT and grabs its hips and begins to thrust while the others cheer and hoot.*)

WOMAN #1

(*Kneeling in front of SEX ROBOT and slapping it*)

You like that bitch, don't you. (*She grabs SEX ROBOT's hair*) Fuck this cunt. (MAN #2 *slaps SEX ROBOT's buttocks*) Yeah. Somebody get up here and fuck her mouth. Show her she's just a dumb slut. (WOMAN #1 *looks at CATHERINE*) What're you looking at, bitch? (*The rest turn to look at her while MAN #2's hips slap against SEX ROBOT's buttocks*) Haven't you ever seen a sex toy before?
(*They all laugh.*)

MAN #1

(*Grunting*)

Almost there.

(*Everyone turns to look at MAN #1 and SEX ROBOT as CATHERINE exits STAGE LEFT.*)

"Alright," Li said. Someone offered'er a canteen, but she shook'er head. "ere's wut I'dn't get—"

"Jes the *one* thin?"

Everyone else on the steps laughed.

"a'a." Someone offered'er a pipe, but she shook'er head. "So'ere's wut I'dn't get, was either'n'r both sick by then, orn't?"

"Ceili," someone said.

"No, it was Argile."

"It'dn't've been both."

Several nodded. "Alright, we'n agree on that."

"Ases'fs'ts frackins matters," Lizbeth said. She drew, again, on the pipe, passed't. "Ise'dn'ts wannas imagines hows muches ofs thisses stuffs yours'ves beens doins tuse takes thisses poppycocks seriouslies."

"It'd at least b'consistent," Li said.

"What'appened..." Genie shook'er head. "What exactly'appened when they'dn't get their medication?"

"They stopped sweatin, didn't they?" somebody said.

"Then they'd start gaspin."

"Then which ever one of'em't was'd've collapsed not-conscious."

"Alright," Li said. "But why—and'ow—'d they've been all the way out there at that town? Mm? Wut, they jus'dn't thin of some-thin—they freakin need t'live? Or wut?"

"Maybe they'd some way t'deliver't."

"How?"

"Maybe they flew'ne of'em drones."

"That'd work."

Li grumbled. "Why'd they'd that?"

"Why'dn't they?"

"They'd've been sued or...or somethin," someone said.

Li rolled'er eyes. She shook'er head as someone offered'er the pipe.

Lizbeth must've looked at our journaller, because she said, "Don'ts yous'vers stops?"

He looked away from the wallpaper when the door opened. If they'd asked how many days't'd been since'e'd wakened, he probably'dn't've answered. The lights'n the fixture above and on the nightstand were the lights of the world.

"I didn't wake you?"

He motioned *no* and she entered with a tray. Already she'd become adept at interpreting'is hand, those subtle movements that allowed'm t'communicate'n silence, a sub-language grown complex'n however long't'd been, and perhaps the only indicator any time'd passed at all.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she said. Utensils clattered as the tray contacted the nightstand. "You look a little pea-kud."

"Things seem so flat."

"Flat?"

Don't know. "I can't tell if it's just in my head or not. Everything seems so... It's like looking into a diorama. Or maybe a dollhouse."

"You just need some rest," she said. "But first this." And she scooped the pills and poised'er bunched fingers so'e'd extend'is hand. He grimace. "Go on. The doctor said to continue twice a day." Hand occupied, he'd t'settle for another grimace. But'e brought'em t'is mouth and accepted a glass of water. "There. Not so bad." She returned the glass t'the tray. "And here's a reward." Flower-scented steam curled upward as she tipped the tea pot. "It'll help." She offered the cup on a saucer and turned the cup handle toward'm.

"What is it?"

"It's what you need," she said. "Take it."

Steam tickled'is nose as'e tentatively brought't t'is mouth. He sipped. "This's good."

"I know that," she said, and turned back t'the tray. "The doctor said you should start off slow. So—"

"What is it?"

"Chicken broth."

"No. What kind of tea is this?"

"My kind," she said.

"I didn't used to like tea. I wonder if one of those knocks on the head scrambled something."

"Maybe you just never had the right kind before."

"So what kind is this?"

She straightened and wiped'er hands on'er apron. "If you need anything, just ring the bell."

"Yes, you keep telling me."

"Sorry, sir."

He looked down at pink-brown liquid. "Please, I'm already sick enough. Just call me Ron. Or, better yet, nothing at all."

"Nothing at all?" She tilted'er head as she looked at'm.

"Yes," he said. "You're right there. I'm right here. We know who we're talking to. Why do we need names...or anything else?"

She must've looked at'm as'f'is statement bout something possibly being scrambled mightn't've been far off the mark. But she nodded. "Yes—"

"Just yes."

She paused. Nodded. "I'll be back for the dishes later."

"Thank you," he said. And she turned and glanced back at'm before she closed the door. He said, "For the tea."

Collected yellow sloshed'n a nearby bottle. Joan shifted, stretched, but Allison'dn't wake. And she shook'er head, shifted and stuck'er head into the cab. "What's the ETA? I think my muscles are about to atrophy."

The driver'd leaned forward t'tap at the glass over the gas gauge. She grimaced, apparently too absorbed t'answer.

They'd've dropped into a canyon by then.

They'd've driven faster as the wind'd became distant overhead. Headlights fractured over raw-carved crags.

"Isn't that ominous." A distant cave mouth swallowed the headlights.

The woman'n the passenger seat pulled the phone away from the dash. She fumbled t'get't t'accept'er fingers through thick, semi-clear packing tape. "Open sesame seed."

Light flickered within the cave mouth.

"God damn it."

They pulled through into underground darkness. Headlights spilled as far as they'd down distant branches and sub-branches.

"Who's got the lights?"

The woman'n the passenger seat passed the phone t'the driver and shoved open'er door and dropped past the running board. Full-on headlights washed'er'n yellowed iridescence. She disappeared. "TELL EVERYBODY TO SHUT IT DOWN." Even a yell'd've been barely distinguishable over all that engine noise'n such a place. But engines cut one after t'other till headlights shown'n silence and illuminated jerky, pantomiming figures along cave surfaces as everyone climbed out.

"Wake up," Joan said.

Allison worked'er mouth, sniffed. "Are we there?"

"Ha!" Joan shook'er head. "When we're there, you'll know it." She worked t'dis-knot tarp cords. "Better get a blanket," she said. "It may be a while before the rest get close enough to call in."

"Call?" Allison said. "Is there a telephone out here, too?"

Joan glanced at'er, half-grinned. "Remind me to show you some things later."

“You shouldn’t do that,” she said when she walked’n and caught’m.

The pillow that’d been wedged behind’is head’d flopped onto the mattress and’e’d managed t’swing a leg over the side, though’t’d pulled the sheet with’t.

“I just wanted to make sure they were still there. Thought they might’ve been replaced with a couple of logs and no one had told me.”

Esmerelde shook’er head as she set down the tray. “The doctor said you shouldn’t be up yet.”

“What does he know? Has he been coming in my sleep or something?”

She shook’er head and pulled aside the covers and exposed’is pajamas. “We call him every day to let him know how you’re doing. So he knows everything just as well as if he were here. Now, get back in bed.”

After a short but definitive staring contest, he sank’is palm into the mattress and shifted’mself back.

“There.” She shook’er head and restored the covers, reached for the pillow and subjected’t t’violent expansion-contractions before she placed’t against the headboard so’e’d sit back. “If you go against doctor’s orders, don’t be surprised if you have to stay in bed even longer.”

She turned toward the tray. “The doctor said you could have a little soup this morning.”

“Oh, joy.”

But she’dn’t reply. “And there’s a little toast. But he says you should dip it and not to eat it dry.”

“If he said to feed me cow’s hooves whole you’d do it, wouldn’t you?”

“You must be feeling better this morning.”

“Better enough to feel like I’ve been here a thousand years,” he said as she set the bed tray over his lap. “It must be bad if Greg won’t drag himself round.”

“Everyone’s advised to stay in, unless absolutely necessary.”

He looked toward the curtains that hid the shuttered windows. Wind-roar’d’ve been so constant as t’ve near’ve been forgotten. “It can’t be that bad,” he said, “if you’re getting here every day.”

“I’m staying here right now.”

He played with a spoon, replaced it on the napkin. And when he looked up, his face’d’ve settled into a blank seriousness. “How’s everyone handling it?”

“Well enough,” she said. “Here. Eat. You need to build your strength.”

“You talk like I’m a child.”

She glanced away. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “Ignore me.” He lifted a spoon. “Don’t you have a boy? What, he’d be nineteen or twenty-something by now, wouldn’t he?”

“He’s at the flat,” she said. She paused and faintly glanced up as the wind howled and she rubbed her arms.

He glanced up at her. “If it’s really that bad out there—” He looked down, shook his head. “Sorry. Stupid—”

“I guess,” she said, voice low. “I guess, there’s no place one hundred percent safe, is there?”

He swallowed some soup. Shook his head.

Something structural groaned beneath a wind-burst and the wall knocked against the headboard and, downstairs, dishes and plates tinked and bangled.

(NATHANIEL sits on the edge of a cot. His arm is in a sling. He looks down at the stage. Nearby, dust-encrusted bodies breathe fitfully in other cots.)

DOCTOR

How's the pain?

NATHANIEL

(Looking up at her, we can see his one eye and the side of his head are bandaged)

It's there.

DOCTOR

I can give you something for it.

NATHANIEL

No.

DOCTOR

Don't be stubborn.

(NATHANIEL turns and sets his cane against the wall and lifts his leg onto the cot.)

NATHANIEL

You going?

DOCTOR

(Perplexed)

Huh?

NATHANIEL

When the ship comes in. Are you going?

DOCTOR

If I can get out of this alive—you bet your ass.

NATHANIEL

This'll be your last chance.

DOCTOR

What do you mean by that? (*Pause as NATHANIEL doesn't reply*) Wait a minute—what do you mean?

(*But NATHANIEL just lies there and breathes softly, as if asleep.*)

"Will you do something for me?" he said as she lifted the tray from the nightstand. She paused and looked back at'm. "Will you eat lunch with me today?"

"I don't th—"

"Please," he said. "I need someone to tell me what's going on. Surely even Greg can't object to that."

"Wouldn't it be better if you spoke to Mrs Lindercott?"

"I'll talk to her too, soon enough. But you'll know about a corner of town she won't. And I need to know everything. And as soon as I can get downstairs to the phone... I'm not going to sit here and do nothing forever."

"I—"

"Please. Your coming up here's about all I've got. And you have to eat too. Right? So you might as well do it here as there." He waited. "What do you say?" He waited. "I guess I could order you if I had to."

"We'll see," she said. And she managed by some sorcerous movement t'close the door even with both'er hands occupied with the tray.

(CATHERINE moves with a somnambulistic anti-fervor as dust-grimed figures press by her.)

JUNE

(Voice from off STAGE RIGHT)

Are you alright? *(JUNE emerges from STAGE RIGHT with a candle in hand. CATHERINE looks past her)* Are you okay?

CATHERINE

(Voice distant)

Have you seen BRITTNEY?

JUNE

(Nodding)

She's trying to sleep.

CATHERINE

(Voice still distant)

Good. *(Pause)* And MELISSA?

JUNE

I don't know.

CATHERINE

(Voice still distant)

Thank you. *(CATHERINE passes JUNE. Near STAGE RIGHT, she turns toward JUNE)* I'm sorry.

(CATHERINE exits STAGE RIGHT.)

Besides the bed, a dresser and nightstand'd've probably been the only furniture'n the room. So she sat at the foot of the bed, napkin splayed over'er lap, where half a sandwich remained. She chewed'n silence as she watched'm appear t'concentrate.

"I need to get to the phone," he said.

"The doctor said—"

"—I'm not supposed to get out of bed. Yes, I remember that from somewhere." He motion with'is spoon. "It's too bad old Herbert's not still round."

"Why him?" she said, before'er next bite.

"Because... Because if he were and you called him up it wouldn't matter if the wind was so bad this house was flying off somewhere, he'd have puttered after it with that old knockabout junker of his and thrown a rope round one of the posts on the front steps or something and would've ridden along like a kite's tail, tool bag over his shoulder, climbing the whole way. Then when he'd gotten up here he'd shake his head and say '*what'd anybody need no phone in a bedroom fer no way*', while he was drilling a hole for the wire."

She jerked forward, triedn't t'choke as she laughed.

"What's going on in here?"

Ron looked toward the open doorway. "Having lunch. You could join us if you wanted. The other foot of the bed's free."

Coughing, Esmerelde stood, napkin and sandwich'n-hand. Beatrice moved toward the bed, rested'er hand on a bedpost. "You can go down, I think," she said. "I'll keep him company."

"Yes, ma'am." Esmerelde moved toward the door.

"You didn't have to do that," he said, and stirred tepid onion broth.

"What do you think you're doing?" Her fingers peeked from'er lacework cuffs as she crossed'er arms.

"Eating lunch. One of the few things on the very short list of things I'm allowed to do."

"I mean with her."

"Oh. Talking. Similar to what we're doing now. Except about more interesting things."

"I see that knock on the head didn't *fix* anything in there."

Faintly, he laughed, but winced and paused till dull pain ebbed. "I'm glad you noticed. I was beginning to think you weren't round at all."

"That's not fair."

"Maybe not," he said. "Maybe not. What have you been doing? Where've you been?"

"I've been trying to keep this house in order."

"No thanks to me."

"I didn't say that."

"Not in so many words."

Her jaw tensed. "You can't even be sick with any sense of decorum."

"Bea, the rotary club isn't stuffed in this room, last time I checked."

He feigned t'look across the mattress. "They're not under the bed, are they? Oh, I hope not."

"You have to maintain a certain professional distance. We can't fraternize."

"Last time I checked, being a councilman by definition meant fraternization."

"And when you're here, you're *supposed* to be the head of this household."

"I don't know how I can take that position when it's already occupied."

Her face'd've hardened. "Don't talk to me like that." And she bent and gripped the brass bed frame so hard'er knuckles dis-colored. "You have no idea what it was like when they brought you in here. *I thought you were dead.*" She seemed t've t'force'er fingers open, straightened. "And what if Jim's right?"

"Right about what?"

Beatrice shook'er head.

“Right about *what*?”

She gathered’erself. “We’re not going to talk about this,” she said. “You need your rest.” And she turned and moved t’the door, rested’er hand on the jamb. “I’ll be back up later to get the things when you’re through.”

“So you hire her, and now you’re not going to let her do her job?”

“If you’re lonely,” she said, “I’m sure we can find a remedy. If it’s alright with the doctor.”

“Of course.”

Just before she closed the door, he said, “What would you’ve done if I’d died out there?”

“You didn’t.”

And she closed the door.

Beyond the cave's entrance: darkness and distant wind.

"The storm," someone said—lights strung along cave walls barely glowed with what little power they'd managed t'squeeze from the batteries—"brought with it that perpetual night. But one would think something else kept it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Joan said.

The woman shrugged.

"God, I think everyone here's crazy but me."

"Which would make you the crazy one," someone else said.

"How?"

"Only the insane never question their sanity."

"Bullshit." And she moved off toward where Allison sat with a tin plate balance on'er knee as she picked at'ts contents with'er fingers.

"What about the mouse?" someone said. A few looked at'er'n the semidarkness.

"Leave her alone," Joan said.

"She is quiet as a mouse."

"I said shut up."

"No need to get testy."

"Everybody settle down." Marta walked through, motioned and called for someone. Soon after, a truck'd've backed through the cave mouth, disappeared into night. They'd t've sent someone out t'see'f they'd get nearnuf t'find a signal, right?

Allison leaned forward, whispered, "What's going on?"

"Look. She can talk."

"Shut up."

But Allison shrank back.

CATHERINE

Has anyone seen MELISSA?

“Should you be doing that?” he said.

Esmerelde backed past the open doorway and the curved top of a high-backed chair followed. Thunk. Beatrice yelled something that’dn’t translate through walls. Haltingly, the chair emerged. Stop start. Wooden feet clattered against hardwood somewhere beyond the doorway and’e tried t’lean outa bed t’see.

“What’s going on?”

Esmerelde backed through the door.

“Don’t scratch the floor,” Beatrice said.

“The towel,” Esmerelde said.

Beatrice draped’t across the floor. “Move.” And she placed’er hands on the chair’s arms and shoved’t across the room till’t’d nestled’n a corner. “There.” She straightened. “Now, let’s get the table.”

Ron tried t’adjust’mself’n the bed. “What’re you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Beatrice said.

“Turning the house upside down?”

“We’re going to make sure you don’t get lonely.”

Flashlight off, Joan whistled. Allison lightly coughed. After a while, water splashed rock. “Done?”

“Don’t turn on the light,” Allison said from deeper’n the dark.

“Just be careful you don’t fall down a hole.”

“What?”

Joan whistled. “Finished?”

Clothing rustled. “Yes.”

Joan clicked-on the light, moved toward Allison and cast the beam a ways past’er as’f t’ show’er there was only tunnel beyond. “Just kidding.” And Allison glanced back at’er. And J—she transferred the light t’er other hand, dug into’er pocket. There’d t’ve seemed no way she’d thumb the spider-fractured screen andn’t b’cut, or place’t by’er ear without the same. But she’d. “What?”

“Yeah.”

And she put’t t’sleep and slipped’t into’er pocket. “We should go back.” She motioned with the light. “Come on.” And they walked. “Better stay close, though. You never know when the batteries in these things are gonna fail.” Allison glanced sideways at’er. Joan glanced at Allison. “So stay close.”

(The DOCTOR exits STAGE LEFT and NATHANIEL lies there as if asleep amid other sleeping dust-impregnated figures as the lights flicker. Some of the lights are off. Alternating cots are cast in shadow. NATHANIEL's cot is barely lit. The ones on either side are submerged in shadow. A voice rises from the next cot.)

⌘

A world without concept of day. Only darkness tinted by luminescence's temporary aberrations.

(NATHANIEL looks at the next cot. The light nearer the next cot slowly grows brighter. ⌘ is revealed. She lays there and crosses her ankles and places her hands behind her head as she stares upward.)

NATHANIEL

Who're you?

⌘

*(Turning her head to look at him
and smiling a devastating smile)*

I'm the collective notion of the other which as of yet no one has been able to articulate and in which is in the process of becoming. *(Rolls her eyes)* What a stupid question. I'm me, of course. What'd you expected? *(NATHANIEL lies silent. ⌘ sighs)* Now you have to ask me what I'm doing here.

NATHANIEL

(After a pause)

What're you doing here?

⌘

You tell me. (*⌘ laughs and lifts her crossed boot ankles and sits up and swings herself round so she's sitting on the cot's edge. She shakes her head. She smiles*) You know, when most heroes make it home from such desperate voyages at least the second thing they do is ravage their lovers. Ulysses, for example. And it's not as if he'd any dearth of womanly affection all those years. Not even to mention what a bunch of Greek males'd get up to. Sailors, at that. Ahab, either, for that matter. Not that we can forget that overly phallic symbol he was so desperate to plunge into the soft inner-workings of such a marvelous piece of creation.

NATHANIEL

(Still looking at her)

I'm not a hero.

⌘

No. (*⌘ shakes her head and leans forward and rests her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands*) Maybe not that. But at a minimum one of the lead protagonists. And that has to count for something. So what's your excuse now?

NATHANIEL

I just don't feel anything.

⌘

For the moment.

NATHANIEL

(Turning to look at the ceiling)

Ever.

⌘

Oh, you will. Don't worry. And when it comes back, it'll be with a vengeance. Trust me. You'll both be sore for days. (NATHANIEL *doesn't reply*) One other thing, before I go. Something you'll want to think on.

NATHANIEL

(*Closing his eye*)

What?

⌘

How'd you get tied to MACAVOY?

NATHANIEL

What?

⌘

How'd you get tied to MACAVOY?

NATHANIEL

Who's MACAVOY?

⌘

You know, really tall, all shoulders, no head, raspberry-lemon striped, backward-forwards-facing feet and dual opposable thumbs, so you can't ever tell if he's coming or going.

NATHANIEL

I didn't know it had a name.

⌘

Of course it does. (*She pauses as NATHANIEL remains silent*) But you'd better think about that question.

(⌘ *ris*es.)

NATHANIEL

(*Still facing the upwards*)

Why?

*(He turns his head to look at her, but N has already
exited STAGE RIGHT.)*

CATHERINE

Have you seen MELISSA?

MAN #1

Stop it and sit down.

ZILOG

(Continuing to mumble and pace)

[Je suis le créateur....]

(He strikes or strokes invisible markers in the air over and over as he steps over figures lying on the stage.)

MAN #1

Will somebody, please, do something about him.

(ZILOG steps over and between people trying to sleep. They shift and look uneasily at his bulk as he moves over them.)

MAN #2

Watch where you're going!

ZILOG

[...le explosion primale...le brasier de les passion...ignorance...avarice...folie...oui jes suis...absolument...]

WOMAN #1

He's going to blow a gasket. *(Someone activates a light. WOMAN #1 looks over her shoulder at MAE)* Do something.

ZILOG

[... et je suis une stupide déus... une stupide stupide déus...
l'homme... c'est de jour... pour toujours et pour toujours...]
(MAE forces herself up. She doesn't bother to brush
away the dust and dirt from where she has lain
down.)

MAE

Frederick. (ZILOG continues to mumble and pace as if he
hasn't heard her) Frederick.

ZILOG

(Yelling)

I have built hades! (He raises his arms and fists) I have
built the shadow land. This is where the Hebrew prophets
wait. But where are they? I am the architect.

MAE

Frederick, I need you to breathe. Can you do that for
me? Just breathe. In and out. Through the nose. Hold. Yes.
And let it out. Just like that. (She drops to open a bag and
rifles through it) Can you do that for me? In and out. I
want you to start your relaxation exercises. Frederick?
(ZILOG continues to mumble and pace.)

MAE

(Still bent over the bag)

Okay. Frederick. Listen to me. Look at me. Okay.
There's only the moment. Right now. There's nothing
beyond the moment right now. I want you to concentrate
just on my voice. There's only my voice. That's the world.
(MAE stands) There's only my voice. I want you to con-
centrate on what I'm saying. That's the only thing that
matters. (MAE works something in her hands we can't see)
I want you to take two of these. Alright? They're not the
same as your usual medication. They're a little bit stronger.
And the side effects are a little different. You're probably

going to get a dry mouth. And you may be very lethargic. And your teeth will probably move around a little. And you may go to sleep. That's normal. Alright? (*She extends her hand*) Alright? (*After a moment, ZILOG reaches and pinches the pills between his thumb and forefinger. He puts back his head and drops them into his mouth and gurgles and gulps*) Alright. It'll be pretty fast acting. You'll probably start to feel the dry mouth first, then the sleepiness. So try and go ahead and sit down, alright?

(Faintly, as if already tired, ZILOG nods. He turns and crosses toward STAGE RIGHT, stepping ploddingly between and over the others until he settles and sits on the far side of the stage. After a while, his head droops against his chest. The light clicks off.)

WOMAN #1

(While MAE is lying down again)

You wouldn't happen to have any sleeping pills stashed in there, would you?

(MAE laughs dryly)

What's so funny?

MAE

Nothing.

(MAE shifts and reaches into the bag and places something in WOMAN #1's hand.)

WOMAN #1

Thanks.

MAE

*(Resting her cheek against her arm
as she lies down)*

They're vitamin tablets.

WOMAN #1

(In a harsh whisper)

What? Then why the fuck'd you give them to me?

MAE

Because both the placebo and nocebo effects work even if you know about them.

WOMAN #1

So you gave—

MAE

(Interrupting)

The same thing. (WOMAN #1 starts to speak, but MAE interrupts) Just take them and go to sleep.

Second t'last came the radio. Its cord drug behind as Esmerelde carried't t'the dresser. Then Beatrice topped the stairs, angled a floor lamp t'fit't beneath the doorway.

"You'll have to do better if you want to impale me with that thing."

She swung round. "Don't be silly." She planted't by the chair and corrected the shade's fringe. "Now, all we have to do is plug everything up." She looked round the room. "Go down and get an extension cord. There's one in the closet under the stairs."

"Are we going to move everything up here? Or are we just swapping the upper and lower floors? If so, I want my bedroom to be in the dining room."

"You're the one who said you feel cut off from everything," Beatrice said. She shifted the chair t'one side, adjusted the table.

"I'll have to remember not to open my mouth again."

"As if you could."

"Maybe," he said. "So when's lunch? Or have such trivialities been eliminated to make way for the great project?"

"Hush."

By then, Esmerelde'd emerged up the stairs with an extension cord looped'n one hand.

"Run it under the bed," Beatrice said. "And around the wall to here. It should be long enough."

And when Esmerelde knelt t'connect'em, Beatrice clicked-on the lamp and so the shade backlit goldenrod yellow. Downstairs, the clock struck the half hour. "I think we'll be ready for lunch soon."

"Yes, ma'am."

“And you can bring up mine as well. And bring up the small fold-up table that’s in the closet downstairs.”

“Yes, ma’am. Anything else?”

“No, that’ll be all for now.” Beatrice turned and smoothed’er dress and sat and lifted something from the sewing box beside’er chair.

“You may go.”

Esmerelde nodded, turned toward the door.

“Bye,” Ron said.

She paused, nodded.

“Close the door,” Beatrice said.

Wind masked footsteps as they receded downstairs.

“Now,” Beatrice said, “isn’t this nice?” And she spread’er needle-work over’er lap. “You know, I can’t think why we didn’t do this sooner.”

“Me either.”

“So,” she said, “what should we talk about?”

(TRENT sits on a distant cot, forearms resting on his bare, hairy legs. NATHANIEL, as if he'd been asleep and just woken, pushes himself up against the wall and stares into TRENT's gaunt face, which is framed by matted, long hair and a tangled beard.)

TRENT

Long time. *(He pause as NATHANIEL doesn't reply. TRENT smiles and reveals dust has turned his teeth brown and orange)* Long from home.

NATHANIEL

You or me?

TRENT

Everybody. *(He pauses as NATHANIEL doesn't reply)*
Wanted to talk longtime.

NATHANIEL

I've been right here.

TRENT

No.

NATHANIEL

(After a pause)

You really get to the North?

TRENT

(Nodding and sucking his teeth)

Long time.

NATHANIEL

Nice place?

TRENT

Not there now.

(NATHANIEL watches him a moment in silence.)

NATHANIEL

You happen to see a woman leave here earlier?

TRENT

No. Why?

NATHANIEL

Nothing. I was just wondering if you two were related.

(TRENT cocks his head. NATHANIEL shakes his head) Nothing. *(NATHANIEL leans back)* What did you want to talk about?

(A five beat silence.)

TRENT

(Shrugging)

Home.

NATHANIEL

What about it?

TRENT

Still there?

NATHANIEL

So far as I know.

(TRENT nods and sucks his teeth. They remain silent a long time.)

NATHANIEL

What happened up north? What did you mean?

TRENT

(Shrugging)

Gone. (TRENT *sucks his teeth*) Melted.

NATHANIEL

Matter of time, I guess. You should let Britt know.
(TRENT *sucks his teeth*) Suppose everyone up there'll have
to work their way south.

TRENT

(Hacking and spitting on the stage)

No. (TRENT *massages his calf*) Build stilt houses.

NATHANIEL

Hm. (*They both remain silent a long time*) Been a long
time, hasn't it?

TRENT

Aye.

*(It seems as if they might say more, but the next
shift wanders in half-bent and tired and sweat
sheened and mud-caked. The others rise from their
cots. TRENT and the others slowly, tiredly exit
STAGE RIGHT.)*

CATHERINE

*(Holding her hand over her mouth
as if she smells something bad)*

Have any of you seen MELISSA?

Beatrice glanced up from'er needlpoint. "What took you so long?"
"Sorry, ma'am." Esmerelde deployed a scissor-legged card table.
"It was all the way in the back of the closet, and I had to shift some things to get to it."

Beatrice nodded. "Have you put everything away?"

"Not yet, ma'am. I didn't want to keep lunch waiting any longer."

"That'll be fine. Maybe we should clean the closet while we're at it."

"Yes, ma'am."

She brought up the trays. "Will there be anything else, ma'am?"

Work set aside, Beatrice pulled the brass ring from'er napkin. "No, I think that'll be all. Unless Mr Lindercott needs something."

Ron shook's head when Esmerelde looked at'm.

"You can go, then," Beatrice said. "We'll ring when we need you."

"Yes, ma'am."

Beatrice leaned forward t'taste'er soup as Esmerelde turned t'leave. And just as she reached the door, she looked back once more and Ron motioned. *Thank you.*

Faintly, she smiled, nodded. She closed the door.

"How's your soup?"

He looked down at'is tray. "Good," he said, after a sip.

"I think she may be a little heavy with the pepper."

"I think I like it that way."

"Even so," she said, and reclined and touched'er napkin t'the corners of'er mouth. "I think I'll have a talk with her about it. You can always add more if you're so inclined."

"Whatever you think's best."

But after that, they continued'n faintly slurp tainted silence till the downstairs clock struck the half hour. And the phone rang.

"Greg's sure regular," Ron said. "I'll give him that."

Beatrice touched'er napkin t'er mouth. "Yes." And she lifted aside the card table and rose and went t'the door.

"Tell him hi for me."

"I'll do that."

(PAMELA crosses the stage with a cup in hand. A cloth is tied round her neck and pulled up over her nose and mouth. She touches TROY's shoulder. TROY turns. PAMELA proffers the cup.)

PAMELA

Here. You need to drink.

TROY

(Pulling down the cloth over his mouth and nose)
You were just down here.

PAMELA

That was hours ago. Drink.

(TROY takes the cup and tips it into his mouth and tilts back his head.)

TROY

(Looking up into the empty cup a moment)
Thank you. *(He returns the cup to PAMELA)* What about you?

PAMELA

I've had mine already.

(Muffled sounds emerge from off STAGE RIGHT. They look toward them.)

TROY

(Still looking off STAGE RIGHT)

Anything you can come up with as bracing material would be good.

PAMELA

(Absently nodding)

It's been too long since you slept.

TROY

(Still looking off STAGE RIGHT)

I'm fine.

PAMELA

(Looking at him)

No, you're not.

TROY

(Still looking off STAGE RIGHT)

I can go a little longer.

PAMELA

And when you get to a little longer, you'll say the same thing. And you'll try to go on and on. Until you fall over.

TROY

(Still looking off STAGE RIGHT)

We've got to keep working.

PAMELA

You can't make everyone else work in shifts and exclude yourself.

TROY

Thank you for the water.

(TROY pulls the cloth up over his nose again and exits STAGE RIGHT. PAMELA watches him go.)

After Esmerelde'd come t'take away the trays, they sat'n silence, her at'er needlework, him seemingly concerned with the wallpaper. Downstairs, the clock struck the hour.

Beatrice looked up. "Is it that late already?" And she shook'er head and shuffled'er work aside enough t'reach the radio. Tube-hiss intermeshed with the wind, gave way t'a faint voice.

"What's that?"

Beatrice settled into'er chair, pulled'er needlework over'er lap. "The afternoon service," she said as she counted stitches. "Since the storm's kept everyone inside, the reverend's been doing three a day."

"Three?"

"One in the morning. One in the afternoon. And one at night. To keep everyone's spirits up."

"What's he talk about that long?"

"I've never understood why you didn't like him," she said.

"Do you?"

"That's not what we're talking about."

"I see. So it's all about me."

"You don't have to be so facetious."

He interlaced'is fingers atop where the sheets turned down over'is stomach. "What should I be then?"

"I just wondered why you always had a problem with him, is all."

He seemed t'contemplate something vastly distant. And't took'er several inquiries t'recall'm.

"What?" he said.

She looked at'm a moment. "Do you feel alright?"

"Like I was walked on by a cow," he said.

“You don’t know anything about cows.”

“We used to go on field trips out to the farms when we were kids.”

“The boys, you mean.”

“Whatever. They used to show us the cows in the barns.” Silence.

“One of the guys used to have this story about cows. Want to hear it?”

But the phone rang. And she set’er things aside and moved toward the door.

“Greg’s really keeping on his toes, isn’t he?”

She paused at the door. “Hm?”

“I said, Greg calls alot.”

“He wants to make sure you’re okay,” she said. And she closed the door behind’erself.

(PAMELA moves toward STAGE LEFT. People sit either side of her path. Eyes dart up at her. Those seated mumble. But PAMELA lowers her head so as to not look at them and moves on. They whisper as she passes.)

The darkness had a palpable purity, don't you think? as if proof the entrance of primordial light and all creation that followed had been a contamination of a greater sanctity.

(The stage is cast in darkness. Only a dim light remains acenter and illuminates the figures there. CATHERINE sits reclined against MAE, who has her arms around CATHERINE.)

MAE

What now?

CATHERINE

I don't know. Aren't you supposed to tell me that?

MAE

Firstly, I don't read minds. If I did, well... And secondly, that's just not how any of it works.

(A four beat silence.)

CATHERINE

I keep going back. Over and over.

MAE

Since the robot?

CATHERINE

Yes.

MAE

It's more than that.

CATHERINE

What do you mean?

MAE

We never remember things just as they happened. We're always growing as people, some of us, anyway, adding experience, accreting information. We can't look back and throw all that away. So when we recall anything, we can't but place the ourselves we are now into the us we were then. (*A five beat silence*) Do you think it would bother you if it didn't have a face?

CATHERINE

I don't know.

MAE

Because no matter what it looks like, all it is is a collection of simplistic circuits and motors and pumps and pneumatics and artificial capillaries and a whole lot of other technical mumbo jumbo with as much humanity as a paper doll. It's just an ordinary industrial robot that happens to have self-lubricating and self-cleaning orifices.

CATHERINE

It's not about that.

MAE

Then what do you think it's about?

CATHERINE

I don't know.

MAE

Okay. Let's change the subject. Drift. What's the first thing that comes to your mind?

CATHERINE

I don't know. Everything seems to come at once. It's all jumbled up together. Like it's all one thing.

MAE

Imagine all of it's a big ball of string with a lot of loose ends sticking out. Imagine reaching out and grabbing one and pulling it. And there's a tag tied on the end with just one word. What's that word?

CATHERINE

Worry.

MAE

What about?

CATHERINE

It's as if...as if something's there, but just out of reach.
(Pause) And it's in danger.

MAE

What kind of danger?

CATHERINE

It's going to die.

MAE

But you can't make out what it is.

CATHERINE

No. It's as if...as if it doesn't exist yet.

MAE

(Leaning her cheek against CATHERINE's head)

A very long time ago, a doctor proposed a theory of trauma, how we react to bad things. And he argued what you have is a person and a terrible thing happens to them

and they suffer a trauma from it. So it's like a wound. You fall down and scrape your knee, so it hurts. But years later, he decided he'd fucked up. So he reversed the whole thing. He determined trauma could at least as often be retroactively applied. In other words, we first experience the need for trauma, then we search backwards for a source to confirm the trauma we need and realize we're traumatized.

CATHERINE

You're saying I'm making the whole thing up?

MAE

No. (*Emphatically*) No. No. No. I'm saying... (MAE shakes her head) I don't know what I'm saying.
(MAE strokes CATHERINE's hair.)

A bare, darkened chamber. CATHERINE and MAE sit on the floor in the center of it.

Esmerelde'd just brought up the first tray and set't on the nightstand when the phone rang. "I'll get it," Beatrice said, and she scuttled'er needlework and crossed the room. "You can wait to bring mine up."

Esmerelde placed the silverware and lifted the tray across'is lap as the phone stopped ringing. "This place is getting more calls than a switchboard, it seems like."

Esmerelde'dn't reply.

"Doesn't it seem a bit strange to you?"

"You'd have to ask Mrs Lindercott about that."

"I'll make a note of it."

"Something special today," she said.

"What's that?"

"The doctor said you didn't have to eat soup anymore."

"Great," he said. "I'd like a steak. Medium rare. With a few whole boiled potatoes. Asparagus. And corn on the cob. Though, I'll settle for having it cut off."

She nodded and lifted the serving lid. "You get oatmeal."

"If it's all the same, I'd rather have the steak."

"You should eat. While it's warm."

"Okay, how about just a little one."

"Eat."

He sighed and lifted the spoon. "Sometimes I think all of you brought me back to life just to kill me slowly."

"You shouldn't talk like that."

"No," he said. "Probably not." He took a bite of oatmeal. "Mmm. That's good. What is that...cinnamon? And..."

“Turmeric.”

“Turmeric. I always forget that. My grandmother always used to put it in her muffins. I don’t know why I can’t ever remember that.”

“I—”

Beatrice’s footsteps preceded’er up the stairs and through the open doorway. Esmerelde turned and busied’erself with something on the nightstand. “Would you like me to bring yours up now, ma’am?”

“Yes, I think that would be alright.” She settled into’er chair.

“Yes, ma’am.” She nodded, would’ve noticed’is motions as she turned, but’dn’t respond.

He dipped’is spoon into’is bowl again. “Who was on the phone?”

“Oh, nobody.” In waiting for Esmerelde, she’d returned t’er needlework.

“Awful long time to talk to nobody.”

“Just one of the ladies. You know. Checking in. We have to watch out for each other in times like these.”

“We do,” he said, and took another bite. “Who was it?”

“Hm?”

“Which lady was it?”

“Mrs Peake. Why?”

“Just wondering. How’s everything with her?”

“The same as with everyone else, I would say.”

“No doubt.” Another spoonful. “I guess you’ve heard Greg’s graduated me off liquids.”

“Yes,” she said. “He called about that this morning. You’re making excellent progress. You’ll be up and about in no time at this rate.”

Another spoonful. “Yes,” he said. And he looked over at’er. “Before you know it.”

(TUDOR enters from STAGE RIGHT and stops at the end of NATHANIEL's cot. NATHANIEL seems to wake.)

TUDOR
(Hesitantly)

I didn't wake you...

NATHANIEL
Is that a statement or a question?

TUDOR
(Trying not to look NATHANIEL in the eye)
You probably don't remember me. (He pauses as NATHANIEL doesn't reply) I was one of the ones that brought you down the rim and got you on the boat.... But you were pretty out of it then.... (TUDOR fidgets) I... (His hands clench) I wanted to ask you something. (He seems to have difficulty breathing) I wanted to ask you.... I wanted to ask you, when they brought you in...when you were tied to that robot...

NATHANIEL
MACAVOY.

TUDOR
Huh?

NATHANIEL

I'm told its name's MACAVOY.

TUDOR

(Hesitantly)

Um... Yeah.... Right.... You see... When we found you tied to...him... It seemed...strange.... It... I just... How did you reach the knots? I mean...with a broken arm and...

(A four beat pause.)

NATHANIEL

What does it matter?

TUDOR

But you see...if there was no one else...I mean...there was only you and Allan out there. If you couldn't have tied yourself...then.... *(His hands clench and loose and clench again)* Then he had to be alive...still could be alive.... *(He pauses as NATHANIEL doesn't reply)* You couldn't... couldn't have done it alone. So...he has to be alive...has to...

(TUDOR's hands clench and dis-clench.)

NATHANIEL

How do you know?

TUDOR

Huh?

NATHANIEL

How do you know I didn't tie myself on?

TUDOR

Did...you? *(A five beat silence)* I mean...like...the way you were...

(TUDOR's fists clench tight.)

NATHANIEL

But it's not impossible.

TUDOR

(Bordering on tears)

It... Do you...do you remember? Did you...tie yourself on?

DOCTOR

(Emerging from STAGE LEFT)

What're you doing here?

TUDOR

(Jerking and looking toward the DOCTOR)

I...

(TUDOR wipes his nose with his forearm.)

DOCTOR

If you're not hurt, get out. We need to keep this area clear. This is a medical area only. Authorized personnel. Let me see your security card. *(TUDOR looks from the DOCTOR to NATHANIEL. TUDOR quickly crosses toward STAGE RIGHT. His fists are clenched. He wipes his eyes as he exits STAGE RIGHT)* Security. *(The DOCTOR touches her lapel)* Security. *(She shakes her head)* Can't get a damn thing around here. *(She steps close to a nearby cot and lifts something invisible from the end of it and scans over it and flips invisible pages)* You should still be asleep. I'm going to program a three percent increase in your feed.

(Her fingers tap air. Then she turns and exits STAGE LEFT.)

(The stage is dark. Only by a dim light can we discern BRITTNEY lying on her side, trying to sleep.)

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Tell the rest of the story.

(BRITTNEY shifts, still trying to sleep.)

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

Don't feel like it.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Come on.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

I can't even remember where I left off.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

The oil can he'd used since they found him in the woods had begun to run out and he had to invade The Middle before that happened or he was going to end up rusted in place forever.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Tell the story.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

I'm too tired.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Be quiet. People are trying to sleep.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

You be quiet.

(A five beat silence. BRITTNEY lies still.)

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Where you from?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

Why?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Just wondering.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

It's that place—where the whole town's built in some three-mile-wide ravine, isn't it? Right?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

Yeah.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

That'd have to be neat to see.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

I guess.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Why'd you leave?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

Don't know.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

(Snorting)

Me. Hell, I wouldn't know either.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Don't talk like that.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Like what?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

You know.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

What's the matter with you?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

You one of those vengeanceers?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

What's that?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Thinks everything bad's gotta—

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

(Interrupting)

I don't.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Where'd you hear about that?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

It was on the radio. Used to come on the radio alot when things got bad. Storms and such.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

Ummm.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Sounds stupid to me.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Why?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Just does.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

What would you know about it?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

More than you.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Okay—why is everything going wrong then?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

We're going to die.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

You don't know that.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Neither do you.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

Ha—maybe we're already dead.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Shut up.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #5

All of you shut up.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #6

If people'd stop telling other people to be quiet, we'd have some quiet.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

What about that man?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Which one?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

That one that came in on the boat with JUNE.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Don't talk 'bout that.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Why?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

He's....creepy.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

You've seen him?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Better be careful you don't run into him in the hall.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

I hope he doesn't wanna sleep in here.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Nah, he'll sleep with the rest of the diggers.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

But have you (*Emphasis*) seen the way he looks? It's, it's...

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

They say he doesn't look human.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Where's he supposed to be from?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Up north.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

But not so far up north. Originally.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

The same place as (*Emphasis*) them.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

What of it?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

That's gotta mean something.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Lots of people are from there.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Yeah but—that's gotta mean something.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

What're you getting at?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

I'm just saying, what if he's from there.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

But he is from there.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Oh, nevermind.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

No, what do you mean?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Nothing.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

No, what?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Leave me alone.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Get off.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

Yeah, get off.

BRITTNEY

(Stirring)

Hey. Let's get some sleep.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

And who're you?

BRITTNEY

I'm the person that'll kick your ass if I have to get up.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

(Whispering)

I bet he looks like one of those ape-monkey things. You know, from the picture shows.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

(Snickering)

Maybe he's one of those...what do you call them? Missing links?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #5

Be quiet.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #4

You be quiet.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

I never saw that one. What happens in it?

*(Finally, BRITTNEY rolls over and puts her hands
over her ears.)*

This's just me. But there'sn't any such thing. And there'sn't reason t'bother t'argue anything *but* memes'd arise, except t'state, regardless of what anyone else spouts, ideas're the only thing evidenced t'change and there remainsn't a single shred of proof t'show even the slightest physical modification'n any living form's ever taken place nowhere'n history.

MAE

Maybe I don't want to. Maybe I'm tired of having to fix other people's problems. (*Yells*) Maybe I need a chance to go mad, too—

(MAE moves toward STAGE RIGHT. She chews a vitamin tablet. She adjusts her backpack over her shoulder. The only light comes from the one clipped to her sari. It blinks intermittently.)

MAE

(Pausing and looking around)

Is somebody there? (She waits as if listening for an echo) Hello. (Again, she waits) If you think this's funny—it's not. So come out now. (She pauses) I can hear you moving around out there. I can hear you breathing. Why does it sound as if you're gasping between clenched teeth? (A two beat pause) I said show yourself (Snaps) NOW—

(But nothing emerges from the darkness. She pauses. Then she tentatively moves forward. She stops. She looks down. She moves her foot as if she's stepped in something wet. She squats and touches the stage with the tips of her fingers)

(In a low voice) Blood.

(MAE straightens and looks round and moves toward STAGE RIGHT. A light appears at STAGE RIGHT. MAE stops. MAE touches her light. The stage goes dark. Light grows on STAGE RIGHT, but MAE is still hidden. JUNE emerges from STAGE RIGHT, looking behind herself.)

June.

JUNE

(Jumping)

Who is it?

MAE

(Activating her light)

It's just me. I didn't mean to scare you. *(She approaches JUNE. Now she'll be able to discern the younger woman's face)* What's the matter?

JUNE

There's—

(A scraping noise comes from STAGE LEFT. They both turn toward it.)

MAE

(Taking JUNE's arm)

Let's go. Now.

save me

It'dn't've taken long for their private language t'grow nuanced enough t'support complex communication, or at least, t'seem to. Though, since'e only ever'd t'send, and she only ever t'receive, maybe that somehow rendered adoption quicker. One fingertip touched t'another, then t'other, butn't the third, the flick of a thumbnail and maybe even inflection and accent'd begun t'emerge, or'd've they been there from the start? And the way'is gestures tautly flared when'e indicated something, a faint smile broke at the corner of'er mouth that she'd've'd t'arrest. She lightly shook'er head.

Beatrice laid'er work'n'er lap and reached for the radio.

Ron's eyes rolled up.

And Esmerelde turned away with the tray, paused a moment as she looked at the wall, face blank when she came round. "Anything else, ma'am?"

Static warmed along with the radio's tubes. Beatrice took up'er needlework again and shook'er head. "No, that'll be all for tonight. Did you leave some water on the nightstand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Goodnight then."

"Goodnight, ma'am."

She walked out seemingly suren't t'look round when she closed the door, maybe for fear of losing'er composure. A static-interrupted voice fitfully flowed into the room.

"Must be bad tonight," he said. "Signal's breaking up too much." He cocked'is head as'f t'listen t'the wind through the walls. "That or the transmitter's taken a hit. We can only hope."

“Don’t talk like that.”

But finally she reached and touched the dial and its yellow-lit face slowly faded. The downstairs clock chimed.

“Funny, you know,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“It could be ten in the morning, for all we know.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I mean...” He paused. “I mean, if you think about it, with the windows all shuttered for so long, it could be the middle of the morning and we wouldn’t know it.”

“It’s not morning.”

“But it could be.”

“It’s not.”

“How do you know?”

She laid down her needlework and looked up at him. “You’re tired.”

“Doesn’t prove anything. There hasn’t been any time of day I haven’t been tired at, one time or another.”

She shook her head. “The evening service was just on.”

“For what we could hear of it, it could’ve been...anything, the farm report or something...could’ve even been a broadcast from last week—or next week. Who knows how these things work?”

She turned her head, seemed to scrutinize him and put her work aside and went over to the bed.

“I’ve not got a fever,” he said, after she’d touched the backs of her fingers to his forehead.

“You’re tired,” she said. “You need to get some rest.”

“I think I’ll stay up a little longer.”

“It’s late.”

“Don’t treat me like a child.”

“Then don’t act like one.”

He watched her as she crossed the room and clicked-off the floor lamp and moved toward the door. “Goodnight,” he said.

She paused in the doorway after she’d turned-off the overhead light. She sighed. “Goodnight.” And she closed the door.

CATHERINE [*leans her head against MAE's shoulder*]: Everything will come to an end before it's even begun.

MAE: No. [*She rises, pulling CATHERINE up with her.*] That's just a holdover from postmodern atemporality. This [*makes a sweeping gesture*] is not then. It is only now. And this day shall die. But only to become memory. But that [*makes sweeping gesture*] is as good as death. Because [*makes sweeping gesture*] it is only what it is. Better to be [????] today [*makes sweeping gesture*] than to be reminded of such an event a thousand times. And the time is now.

The canyon'd've given'em some protection from the wind. But huddled'n the last few trucks, they'dn't've helped but worry bout another slide. A propped-up phone provided the only illumination. A woman's partial, stark-lit face appeared'n-frame, transversed by long, diagonal cracks, and'dn't where the screen'd gone black.

"The best... we can do..." Subtle motions. Phosphene blurs. "Can you...me?" Faces and bodies shifted'n the blocky darkness behind'er. "...get into LiFi range and..."

A tinny voice'n the background: "...but that's only if...still at the entrance..."

"How far is it?"

"GPS isn't syncing."

The face on-screen ghosted, the woman presented three or four images behind'erself. "...was that..."

"Can you hear us?"

Variantly timed frames overlaid, composited t'atemporal nonsense.

"...can..." Static burst. A ghost-smeared hand waved.

The blocky image froze.

(N emerges from STAGE RIGHT and moves toward NATHANIEL.)

N

(Shaking her head)

I told you. (NATHANIEL watches her as she sits on the next cot) It's going to be a mess. *(A pause as NATHANIEL doesn't reply)* You know *(She crosses her legs)* In a conversation, the way these things generally go is one party says something—me—then the other party—you—says something, preferably in relation to what I—the party of the first part—said first, then I—the party of the first part—say something, and you—the party of the second part—say something, and back and forth like that. (NATHANIEL turns and looks at the ceiling) Okay. I mean, *(Emphasis)* I can hold up this whole thing by myself if I absolutely have to.

NATHANIEL

(Still looking at the ceiling)

I don't think you're real.

N

Oh, wow. Well, thank you very much. And what exactly do you mean by that?

NATHANIEL

You're just in my head.

⌘

Well. (*She pauses*) Everything's in your head. Really, if you think about it we're... we're just like doll house factories with a few little, tiny windows to peek outside, and the little workers in our heads squint like little old half-blind ladies through shop windows and scurry back to their workbenches and turn out something they think looks like what they saw, and they run over and stick it in the little dollhouse world that's overrun half the factory floor. Then they get together and move things round in this little village and argue and bet over who can predict what it'll look like when someone goes and looks out a window next time. (*She leans forward and plants an elbow on her knee and her chin on her fist*) Really, when you think about it, that's what it's like. Except outside the window's a sheet of mirror-polished brass.

NATHANIEL

I don't have time for you.

⌘

Of course you do. Why wouldn't you? (*A pause as NATHANIEL doesn't reply*) Well, like I said, I can carry this whole thing alone if I need to. (*⌘ pauses, as if waiting for him to respond. When he doesn't, she straightens and hooks her thumbs in her pants pockets*) Okay then. So you think I'm not real. Did you ever stop to think that maybe (*Emphasis*) you're the one that's made-up? No? I mean, come on, really. Don't you ever get the feeling you're someone else's complete fabrication? Maybe I'm the real one. Maybe I invented you. Or maybe we're both not real. Ooooh. What if we're making each other up? Hm? (*She glances at the ceiling*) But aren't all those useless questions? Isn't the only really interesting question what is it we mean when we say something's real? (*She shakes her head and looks down at NATHANIEL*) You know we could do this all day. Of course, you don't have the time.

NATHANIEL

(Still looking at the ceiling)

What do you want?

⌵

What do I want...? Let's see.... Uh, nothing. I mean, I tried to get you to consider a few delicate points before they blow up in your face—and other people's faces, I guess, but eh. I mean, any of us can only do so much. *(Shrugs)* It's too bad MACAVOY isn't down here.

NATHANIEL

Why?

⌵

Oh, it just would've been convenient to have him round. He can be useful sometimes, you know. *(Waiting)* Hello. Are you not speaking again? This is very rude, you know. I mean, very inconsiderate.

NATHANIEL

What did you say your name was, again?

⌵

(Sighing)

Why do you keep asking me questions I already know the answers to?

(⌵ rises. NATHANIEL watches her as she exits STAGE RIGHT.)

(ZILOG stirs and looks up as NEWCOMER enters from
STAGE LEFT.)

NEWCOMER

(Offering a tablet to WOMAN #1)

Here.

WOMAN #1

(Looking at it incredulously)

Where'd you charge it?

NEWCOMER

Don't ask questions.

(Flickering glow lights a half-dozen faces as the
NEWCOMER settles among them.)

ZILOG

(Watching them)

[Qu'est-ce]... What do you watch?

(Light flickers over the faces of those looking at the
screen.)

WOMAN #1

(Doesn't look up from the screen)

Stuff.

(BRITTNEY groans and rolls over.)

BRITTNEY

What's going on? (*Looks around*) Where's MAE?
(*A few look up from the screen as light flickers over their faces while they shrug or shake their heads. Moans grow more intense, and their gazes are drawn back to the screen.*)

ZILOG

(*Mumbling*)

[Comment...]

BRITTNEY

(*Looking around*)

Has anyone seen CATHERINE? Where's JUNE?

ZILOG

[Mae aussi?]

BRITTNEY

(*Pushing herself up*)

W—

ZILOG

(*Also rising*)

I come help.

(*ZILOG puts his hand on BRITTNEY's shoulder.*)

BRITTNEY

You sure you feel okay? You don't look so good.

ZILOG

[Bon.]

(*Moans grow louder.*)

BRITTNEY

(*Scowling at those awash in screen glow*)

Where'd you charge that?

NEWCOMER

(Without looking up from the screen)

Nowhere.

(BRITTNEY and ZILOG move toward STAGE LEFT. Moans grow louder. The light on the faces of those watching the screen dims so we can only see BRITTNEY and ZILOG as they stop near STAGE LEFT. BRITTNEY activates her light.)

ZILOG

[Un signe mal.]

BRITTNEY

How's it a bad sign?

ZILOG

[Je me souviens.] *(Touches his finger to his temple)* The consumption increase of the pornography an indicator of civilization's near end. [N'est-ce pas?]

BRITTNEY

(Looking at him as if he's mad)

You think this's the right time to talk about that?

ZILOG

Better when?

BRITTNEY

(Aiming her light off STAGE LEFT and looking intently)

I'm not in the mood for a philosophy lecture.

ZILOG

[Bon.]

BRITTNEY

(Moving her light left then right)

Which way do you think?

After the dishes'd been taken down, they settled into listening t'the wind. A few well placed or particularly strong blasts rattled the house and tapped shutters against window glass.

"It's getting worse," he said, and watched the ceiling, as'f that told'm something bout't.

"They say it will before it gets better."

"Maybe. Then again, if it blows us away before it gets better, it won't matter."

But she'dn't respond, only continued with'er needlework.

After a while, he said, "What're you working on?"

"Nothing in particular."

Downstairs, the clock chimed the hour. And before't'd finished she'd already put'er work aside t'lean toward the radio.

"What did you mean the other night?" he said.

She paused, looked across at'm. "About what?"

"About growing up."

She shook'er head, touched the knob. "Nothing."

"No, what did you mean?"

"It's time for the morning program."

"I want to know what you meant."

"I told you. Nothing."

"It isn't nothing," he said. "And I want to know. So tell me."

She sat back'n'er chair, looked at'm. "Sometimes you're worse than a child."

"I just want to know what you meant."

"It means what it means."

"Which is what?"

"Just what it means. So let's just leave it alone."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Why?"

"Just because."

He paused. "Why?"

"Honestly," she said. "I think you're going to remain a boy forever."

"Maybe that wouldn't be so bad."

"You're impossible."

Both paused. She sat with'er hands draped over the chair's arms.

"What am I missing?" he said

"You..." She shook'er head. "You just can't move along with the world."

"Everything used to work just fine," he said, after a while. "I don't see why it needs to change. It worked." He added, "And we didn't have to pay other people to come into our homes and cook and clean and do everything for us."

"No?"

He scowled. "You're being obtuse."

"I'm being obtuse?" And she must've looked as though she might've laughed. "You're the one who patently refuses to look at what's around you, let alone seem to remember anything."

"I—"

"I haven't seen you declining any meals."

"That's—"

"Exactly the same thing." And she shook'er head. "You think I'm going to go down there just because I'm your wife and cook and clean just because. No. I've worked too hard to get where I am. And I'm not giving it up so you can live in a childhood that never existed."

"Maybe my brains are scrambled round a bit. But I remember a lot of things quite well. So forgive me if I don't quite think I've made it all up. If my grandmother—"

"You never knew the half of your grandmother," she said.

"She'd never've let anyone else cook for us."

"Never would've or could've?" She drummed'er fingers against'er chair. "The problem with you men is you don't ever see half the

world and that's the whole. *I* remember your grandmother too. All those luncheons and teas. She had *her* [venom]. So when you think you *know* anything, well, you don't. And that's always been your problem. The whole world moves under your feet every day and you don't ever notice."

"Is...everything okay, ma'am?"

They both turned.

"I'm...I'm sorry..." Esmerelde said. "I...thought I heard the bell over the wind and..."

Beatrice shook'er head. "Everything's fine. What time is it?"

"A quarter till, ma'am."

Beatrice glanced at the radio. "Well," she said. "Since we've done missed this much, there's probably no use in even trying. I hope—"

Downstairs, the phone rang and she pushed'erself from'er chair. "I'll take care of it." And she moved toward the door. Esmerelde stepped aside.

"I'm sure you will," Ron said.

He closed'is eyes after they'd gone. "I'm sure you will."

(The lights strung over the cots wink out.)

DOCTOR

(Emerging from STAGE LEFT, light in hand)

Damn cutbacks.

TUDOR

*(Voice emerging from off STAGE RIGHT,
sounding hesitant)*

It's the... batteries... can someone give me some help?

*(NATHANIEL sits up, swings his leg off the cot and
reaches for his cane.)*

DOCTOR

It's the insurance companies' fault. That's who it is.

*(NATHANIEL pushes past her and grabs her light,
but she doesn't seem to notice.)*

DOCTOR

(Yelling)

What do they expect us to do under conditions like
these—

Mary-Celleste accepted the canteen. She'd've been lost'n thought bout how she'd wished Allison'd known she was behind'er.

Ceili wiped'is mouth.

Argile said, "You shouldn't think about it."

Mary-Celleste'dn't reply.

Argile accepted the canteen. "We'll be there soon enough." He breathed hard.

"Soon enough."

Then what? she'd've thought. Then they'd've t'get back t'civilization.

(CATHERINE pauses, swings her light side to side, turns and looks over her shoulder at either side of the darkened stage.)

REVEREND

(Voice low, so it could almost
be mistaken for a breeze)

...prison... (Scraping sounds) ...everywhere...always...
(Scraping sounds) ...no escape...no...escape...no...
escape.....no.....escape..... (CATHERINE
turns around and looks every direction) ...escape.....
escape.....escape.....eeeeeeeeescaaaaaape...
.....

CATHERINE

(Voice low)

Hello. Who's there?

REVEREND

..... sssssssssssssssssssssssshhhhhh

CATHERINE

Hello.

(CATHERINE moves toward STAGE RIGHT. She stops and looks down. She squats and touches the stage and looks at her fingertips. She looks round her. Hurriedly, she exits STAGE RIGHT.)

“Stuff Falstaff.” He swung’is legs off the bed and shoved the covers aside and grabbed the headpost t’support’mself as’e stood. Sometime before, he’d already taken’is arm from the sling and tested’t. Perhaps the fracture’d only really been a crack.

Esmerelde froze’n the doorway, tray’n-hand.

He motioned. “Take it downstairs.” He released the post and stood still a moment, arms slightly out. “I’ll eat at the table today.”

“What’s going on?” Beatrice peered over Esmerelde’s shoulder.

“And everybody can just get out,” he said. “Unless you want to see me get dressed.”

“The doctor s—”

“I don’t care.” He dis-fastened the first few buttons of’is night-shirt and started t’tug’t over’is head. “Fine, stay round. See if I’m bothered.”

Head down, Esmerelde backed into the hallway, bumped into Beatrice, and both’d t’regain some composure.

“You’re only going to hurt yourself,” Beatrice said.

“Tell you what,” he said, and ambled round the bed. “You can be at the bottom of the stairs and catch me when I come down.”

Her face hardened. “Fine.” And she stepped toward the door and jerked’t closed. She called through’t, “Do whatever you want.”

She breathed hard, shifted’er head, glanced at Esmerelde. “Well, what’re you waiting for? Take it down.”

When the door opened again, he stepped out’n pants and shoes and a shirt, though’t’d b’a wonder how’e’d tied’em. And when’e stepped into the hall, hand on the doorjamb, he glanced at the bathroom across the way. But’e moved toward the stairs, hand on the wall till’e’d

grasp the banister. Beatrice must've heard'm, because she appeared below. "It's a bit like contemplating going to the moons," he said.

"Then don't. Go back to bed and we can bring everything up."

He slid his hand along the banister, gripped't so hard his knuckles dis-colored as he eased onto one foot then t'other. "Like riding a bicycle," he said as he made the landing. "Of course, I haven't ridden one of those in a long time either." He ambled down the last steps toward Bea. "You think it's true?"

"What?"

"That you never forget how?"

She shook'er head. "Come on. You were so fired up to get down here, we've had to keep everything warm."

"May I escort you?" He offered his arm. And when they entered the dining room, she eased out a chair for'm and Esmerelde emerged from the kitchen with a tray of oven-warmed china.

“’ere’s all I wanna know,” Li said. And a faint tittle traveled among those seated down the steps. “If’e spent all’is time’n bed, ’ow was’e takin a dump?”

Lizbeth snorted. She offered a waterbag, but t’other person shook wher head and she sipped from’t before passing’t on. She wiped’er mouth with the back of’er hand. “That’s’s ones reasons alls thisses’s poppycocks,” she said. “Peoples’ns stories nevers’ves tuse dos anythins likes thats.”

“But—” Genie said.

Lizbeth swiped’er hand through the air. “Its’s alls poppycocks.” And she must’ve espied our journaller, because she said, “Yous makes sures yous gets thats downs rights,” and she laughed.

MAE: (without turning). Believe not those characters who strut upon the stage in their masks.

Dust and wind. Boiled-dark clouds. Preternatural dusk. Only the nearest rucksack discernible. Guided by the rope line's gentle tug.

Mary-Celleste adjusted'er own pack's shoulder straps. Mud skimmed the fabric over'er mouth and nose where moisture'd condensed from the backside and seeped through. Sometimes, the wind shifted'er skirt and scoured sand against'er shins.

Formless, the person ahead'dn't the bulk t'b'Ceili or Argile. They'd b'the column's head and tail, as'f they needed something t'breach the faux dusk and coming night and something t'sweep up after and close the wound.

The rope tugged at'er waist and she righted'er footing and gripped'er pack's shoulder straps.

Out'n the darkness, rocks must've tumbled downslope.

It's hard t'believe that any of'em thought there was a chance they'd survive. But then why'd they've done't'f they'dn't? And'd they've attempted't'f they'd known the tractors were probably already gone?

She turned off the faucet and looked over'er shoulder.

"Don't mind me." Ron motioned with'is free hand. Glancing down at't, he shook'is head. "Sorry," he said, and half-smiled. "Guess I can't get out of the habit. It's like a second language now. Ha, imagine that." And'e stepped past and let the door swing back.

"Did you need something?"

"No, no. Nothing." He motioned again. "Please, don't let me interrupt. In fact, if there's anything I can do to help. A dish dryer if you want, maybe."

She pulled a towel from'er shoulder and folded't by the far sink. "No, that's okay. You shouldn't be in here, anyway."

"Where am I supposed to be? Besides, it's supposedly my house." He glanced round. "I think."

She slipped'er hands beneath bubbles and surface tension. "Mrs Lindercott—"

"Is probably busy deciding if she needs to bring all the downstairs back downstairs again," he said. "Besides, I'm just getting the hang of this thing." One hand on the counter for balance, he tapped the cane's rubber tip against tile. "It was in the front coat rack. Where'd it come from?"

"The doctor left it." She shifted a sudsy plate t'the next sink.

"Well, I guess he's good for something after all. Wonder how much he charged me for it."

"You'd have to ask Mrs Lindercott."

"I'm sure."

He glanced round at the kitchen, puttered across't till'e neared the back door, and examined the shutter board's dull-brown, knotted reverses through dusty glass. "You know," he said. "They really

should at least paint these things. Maybe even put some designs on them. Cheery things. Like flowers, maybe. Or they could paint nice sunny skies. Or maybe something with the sun low on the horizon, then you'd get double duty out of it—you could say it was a sunset, then when you got tired of that—or if you wanted people to think you had the money to go to the expense of changing it twice a day—you could say it was a sunrise.”

Faint laughter carried from the sink and intermixed with water-slosh before she'd stop'erself.

“Or maybe we could punch holes in them and poke little lights through them. Then you could think you were looking at the stars.”

She shook'er head and a few hairs at the back of'er neck too short t'securely fasten'n'er bun popped free and fell along'er collar. “You should be careful, Councilman.”

“Why's that?”

“N...nothing.”

“No. What was it?”

“It was inappropriate. I shouldn't've said anything.”

“Well, you've piqued my curiosity. What is it?”

But she shook'er head and wisps of hair tickled'er and she'd t'shift'er shoulder t'rub'er collar against'er neck.

“No, no. You have to tell me. In fact, if you won't—as your employer—I'll order you to if I have to.”

She paused, hands still'n dishwater. Sighed. “I just thought... thought that...people might think you say those sorts of things... you know...because of what happened.”

He pivoted and looked, again, through dusted glass. “Oh, I don't doubt it. From now on anything I do—I can hear Mrs Peverson's voice now—*he always was so funny after that accident, don't you know*—and anything I do will be put down to getting the stuffing knocked outa me. And whatever I did before will be conveniently ignored as immaterial.” He turned and looked at the kitchen, particularly the spice rack on one wall and the print-covered cloth on a small table against that wall and the three spindle chairs under that table. Then, as'f'e'd seen everything there'd been t'see from that angle, he ambled across the kitchen and toward the pantry. “And anything I do right, they'll say it's because I finally got some sense knocked into me.”

“Oh, no,” she said, and turned the faucet toward t’other sink and started t’rinse the collected dishes. “Everyone respects you alot.”

“Some people, anyway,” he said.

“No,” she said. “Most—if not everybody—does.”

“I’m not sure that the ones that do don’t need to see the doctor.” He stopped by the pantry door. “What’s going on here?”

“What?”

“There’s an ironing board with some sheets stretched over it.”

She glanced toward the pantry as’f she’d forgotten something. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I should’ve cleaned that up this morning.”

“What is it?”

“It’s just my bed.” She dried’er hands and came t’the door. “I usually put it away in the morning but—”

“Don’t worry about it.” And’e turned away. “Doesn’t matter.” He glanced round the kitchen. “I think I’ll go out and doodle around the rest of the house. See what’s changed.”

They milled through darkness till Chevsky'd managed t'get the lights t'blink on and illuminate their dust-encrusted selves, things of dirt and stone imbued with life.

She squatted by the batteries, accepted phones and laid'em out'n order of least charge as the rush and push finally settled down. She tapped cracked screens. "This'll take a while," she said. "I've only the one regulator."

But they'd've'd t'rest, anyway.

Martina nodded. "I'm gonna take a piss."

She turned and slipped'er arms from'er pack, dropped't beside Chevsky's.

"Excuse me."

Martina turned. Mary-Celleste pulled back'er hair where she'd released't from'er hat, worked t'tie't with a frayed cloth piece ripped from'er dress. Sweat and dust'd've co-mingled along lines across'er cheeks and nose, where cloth and hat and goggles'dn't've hoped t'cover.

"I'm sorry," Mary-Celleste said. "But there's something I need to ask..." She finished with'er hair and cleared'er throat and glanced round the semi-lighted cave entrance. "Where do you...ehmmm."

Martina nodded, as'f not-said words were language. "Over there'll be as good as anyplace. Come on. I'm going too." But she paused, seemed t'consider and glanced round before she leaned'n. "One thing. If you need to wipe, better bring something."

Mary-Celleste cleared'er throat. Momentarily, she glanced at'er pack, found something dust-encrusted on one side but usable.

Silently, Mary-Celleste followed Martina till they'd cut into one of the branching passages, where Martina clicked-on'er light.

"As good a place as any," Martina said. And she clipped'er light t'er

waist and dis-zipped'er coveralls. Still silent, Mary-Celleste turned'er back. The light played over the cave wall as Martina forced'er coveralls over'er hips. And confined space faintly resounded with water-splash. Loose zipper tongues'd've tankled against their mounts and teeth as Martina worked'er arms through the sleeves. "Ever been camping before?"

"Girls don't camp."

Mary-Celleste turned as Martina squeezed by. "Did you bring a light?" Mary-Celleste shook'er head. And Martina dis-clipped'ers. "Here."

"Thank you," Mary-Celleste said, but'er voice remained as flat and non-committal as't'd since they'd started.

Martina nodded, walked away, paused, turned back. "Piece of advice," she said. "You can rub some sand over your hands and get them as clean as anything. Not like we're all not already filthy, right?" And she disappeared round a faintly illuminated bend.

In the distance, Chevsky still squatted by the batteries.

Someone came close, "What do you think?"

Martina turned. "About?"

Someone said, "They're saying they might've already bugged out on us."

"Have you seen Mrs Holdfast?"

"She appears to be missing."

Martina glanced at Argile. "Back there." Then t'Ceili. "Busy." She turned t't'other. "And you go tell whoever it is to shut up."

"I'm just repeating what I've heard."

"Then make sure it stops with you."

He floated away among the various conclaves gathered tiredly through the dim interior. She turned toward Ceili and Argile. "Will you just stand here, please, until...you know."

"Yeah." Scarlet took a drag on a store-bought cigarette that punctured dimness with a hot red point. "Have to give her her privacy. Wouldn't want her to get embarrassed." Another drag, another dead-red, heated point. "Hope nobody pulls their pants down around her. Might just die on us."

Ceili and Argile turned toward'er.

Martina remained silent.

"Not going to mention employee behavioral policy or something?" Scarlet said. Another drag as punctuation.

They just eyed one another.

Another drag, hot red so close t'Scarlet's mouth she'd t'stub't against the cave wall. She turned and walked away.

Martina turned t'Argile. "When we start down, I think we need somebody t—"

But Mary-Celleste rounded the bend behind'em. Martina nodded. "They'll get you up to speed on everything you'll need to know." And hands'n'er pockets, she crossed the cave toward Chevsky and the batteries.

"What's happening?" Mary-Celleste said.

Argile shook'is head. "Making sure everything's ready."

"We'll be moving soon."

"Soon," Argile said. He glanced over'is shoulder. "You should get some rest."

She'dn't reply, but just passed between'em and walked toward'er pack amid half-formed words and whispers.

"Hi." Abigail wiped'er hand against'er coveralls as she stood, glanced down. "Guess it doesn't do much to wipe your hands on something dirtier, does it?" But she extended't anyway. "We haven't met. Abigail." She seemed t'try and smile. "I believe Ceili says you're ...Mary-Celleste. Right?"

Mary-Celleste didn't reply.

"I'm not...intruding, am I?"

Mary-Celleste remained as apparently non-committal as before. But maybe something bout t'other woman allowed'er t'faintly nod.

"Good." Abigail still'd've tried t'smile. "I just thought..." She shook'er head. "Sorry. I know this must be tough for you. You didn't sign on for this." And she glanced round the dim interior. "Of course...who did? You wouldn't mind if I sit here, would you?"

The two sat'n silence awhile. And as everything settled, mostly, there'd've been only wind sound from beyond the cave mouth.

Abigail offered a canteen, but Mary-Celleste shook'er head. "You don't need to worry," Abigail said. "They're just ahead." She motioned with the canteen toward the boreholes. "It's your...daughter. Right? She was in the first wave?"

“Yes.”

Abigail sipped and re-capped the canteen.

Mary-Celleste seemed t’consider something. She said, “Do you think they’re very far ahead of us?”

“Oh. Not too far. At least, they’ll be waiting at the tractor. That’s not too far.”

“Tractor?”

“It’s our ride.”

Mary-Celleste nodded.

“It’s tough,” Abigail said. “I remember when mine...”

“You have children?”

Abigail nodded. “A daughter. Lee. But that was a long time ago.”

Beside’er, Mary-Celleste remained silent.

“Oh, I don’t mean...” Abigail shook’er head. “I didn’t mean it to sound like that. It’s just... You know. She grew up. Became a legal systems administrator. Though, I don’t know if she ever really liked it all that much. But then she got married. Divorced. Married again. Had a daughter. That kinda stuff.” She faintly smiled. “Can’t begrudge them their life.”

“You must miss her.”

“Yes,” Abigail said. “You know, I’d almost...not *forgotten*, exactly. I don’t mean that. It’s just...it’s more like you kinda...figure something’s not...after a while...about fifteen years...at least, since any reliable communications. Then when word of the beacon came in... It just all came back.” She touched the corner of’er eye, smeared mud onto’er fingertips. “Sorry,” she said. “I just keep thinking all I gotta do is get back and... Listen to me, going on and on.”

“I’m sure you will,” Mary-Celleste said. Obviously, she’dn’t’ve understood’t all, but’t’s nice t’think she’d’ve understood the important parts.

Abigail shook’er head. “Hell being a parent, ain’t it.” She wiped’er eye again. “Damn it.” And she touched Mary-Celleste’s shoulder. “We’d better try to get some sleep before they roust us outa here.” The faint lights pitoned t’the cave wall behind the batteries blinked as Chevsky reconnected something. “We’ve got a distance, you and me, to go yet.”

“What’s the problem?”

Chevsky shook’er head, looked up. “Two’ve bought it in the charge cycle. So far.”

“Fuck.” Martina chewed the inside of’er mouth. “Fuck.”

“Leaves one spare, in case you’re wondering.”

Martina leaned’er head forward, pressed two fingers near’er eye. “How long till the last’s charged?”

“Done.”

“Alright,” Martina said. “Which’s got the best chance of not blowing?” Chevsky handed one up. “Alright,” Martina said, “you take the other.”

“I can’t tell you the batteries’ll hold.”

“You’re just fucking full of good news.”

“I just say it as it is.” Chevsky looked down at the cracked screen’n’er hand. “Really need to turn it full off to conserve the most power. Problem is it might not come back on.”

Martina dis-zipped’er front pocket. “Conserve yours. And hope we don’t need it.”

Chevsky shook’er head, but depressed the power button, tapped the screen and the thing lay dead’n’er hand.

“Alright, let’s get everybody up.”

(One night.)

Genie lightly clapped, said quickly, “It’s yuhr turn.”

Fires popped and crackled as someone stirred’em. Firelight licked the walls.

Kayla gasped. “Look...” She pointed. Others’d already noticed.

Masks glinted firelight reflections from the overlook high on a far wall behind the platform.

Mara paused. Slowly, she started toward the platform. She glanced up once or twice, but quickly looked away as she mounted the ladder. She turned with’er back t’the wall, paused, but’dn’t look over’er shoulder before she sat.

Sometimes stories allow us too much distance. What certain elder persons might call virtualization. We forget the reality of things. And'n a way that's what allows us t' enjoy things we'dn't otherwise enjoy. Isn't't too tempting t' consider what transpired deep'n those boreholes, when one phone'd fritzed out and t' other'dn't boot, with the same tension, or what we might call *excitement*, as riveting? But't must b' continually recalled that this'sn't a story,

And though they can't b'substantiated, the continued widespread belief that the survivors often suffer from nightmares, has t'n itself prove some point.

Martina'd've looked down at the dead-black glass and textured carbon fiber'n'er hand.

Somewhere behind, Mary-Celleste and Abigail'd've risen and slipped on their packs with everyone else, moved forward from and toward darkness as their lights created a seemingly minuscule luminescent bubble that crashed against the borehole's diameter. Mary-Celleste'd've said t' Abigail, "Tell me about your daughter."

He'd moved on t'examining the backsides of the shutters over the window'n the front door. But newer, not-quite-sheer curtains'd been slotted beneath the older and obscured the view. Footsteps on the staircase. And'e turned as Beatrice stepped off the landing.

"Trying to hide something?" he said.

Beatrice paused, her hand on the banister's carved newel. "Hmm?"

"The curtains," he said. "And in the living room."

She shook'er head. "It's not like it matters." And she walked toward'm and caressed the curtains back into form. "It's better than looking at bare wood all the time."

"Hm." And'e turned, propelled'mself down the hall and stopped and looked at a wall picture. "I don't think the outside exists."

"What?" Done with the curtains, she turned t'stare at'm.

"Well, there's no proof there's anything out there anymore, is there?" He tapped picture glass. "Or ever was, come to think of it. Maybe it was always made-up. Something I dreamed up after I got my head knocked in."

"Don't be silly."

"I don't think I am." Still, he looked at the picture. "No, I don't think I am. It all could be completely in my imagination. And you two talking on the phone, and all that, could just be something you've devised to humor me with till I get better."

She paused. Wind curled through the eaves and something above creaked. She stepped toward'm—"—You shouldn't have come downstairs. It's too much strain.—"—touched'is cheek with the backs of'er fingers. "The doctor says—"

"And the doctor—another complete figment. I suppose I talked

about him in my sleep or something. So you know to bring him up.” He turned away, toward the living room, out from under’er touch. But she followed.

“You should sit down,” she said. He’d stopped acenter the room, stood leaned on’is cane as’e looked at the new undercurtains.

“I’ve been sitting down forever.” He sighed. “Ah, what does it matter?” He glanced at the chair-sized void on the room’s one side and ambled toward’ts mate, sat with the cane between’is legs, hands balanced atop’t. “Who’re you calling?”

She glanced up at’m, said into the receiver, “Get me the doctor, please.”

And she watched’m’n silence, but’e just sat there. Wind howled.

“Yes. Doctor.”

“Yes, it is. Doctor—”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m calling about. He’s—”

“No. But he’s downstairs.”

“Yes.”

“Th—There wasn’t anything we could do about it.”

“I know. But—”

“Yes. I—”

“Tell him thanks,” Ron said. And she looked up at’m. He waved the cane.

“Yes,” she said into the receiver.

“Alright.”

“Yes.”

Slowly, she placed’t back on’ts cradle.

Ron sat back, laid’is cane across the chair’s arms. “You two get everything discussed?”

Esmerelde appeared from the hallway. “Sorry, ma’am. I was won—” But Beatrice waved for’er t’b’quiet.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

And Esmerelde’s interest seemed piqued too. She looked over Beatrice’s shoulder at’m.

“Any lightheadedness? Dizziness? Sick at your stomach?”

“Not especially. Unless you mean full. I’m quite that.” He glanced round’is wife. “Breakfast really was delicious.”

“And you—”

“Am probably feeling the best I’ve ever felt...in a while, at least.”
And’e leaned forward and placed the cane’s rubber tip against the
hardwood with a gentle thumpf and pulled’mself up. “In fact I—”

The phone rang.

They turned toward’t.

It rang again. The half-round crystalline-glass body vibrated. Ron
and Beatrice looked at each other.

“If I still had my phone,” Abigail said, “I’d show you the video they sent of the wedding. They had a Victorian—or was it Gilded Age?—anyway, one of those retro themes that keep going in and out of fashion. Matching lace-frilled gowns in black and white.” She smiled t’erself as’er light bobbed where she’d clipped’t t’er shoulder. “Of course, I knew what to expect. She wasn’t gonna put her life on hold just because her mother went off to Mars.”

Beatrice'd been closest and took the half-step that'd put'er within reach of the table.

"Hello."

She glanced at Ron, seemed t'breathe easier, lightly nodded'er head. "It's for you." And she glanced over'er shoulder, turned t'dis-entangle'er self from the cord and offered the receiver. Esmerelde towed'er fingers. The clock chimed a quarter hour.

"Hello."

"Yes." She glanced at Ron and Bea, then down at the table. "Is everything alright?"

She glanced up between silences. Wind rolled above. Towel still'n'er other hand, she'd t'put'er finger t'er ear.

Ron motioned for'is wife's attention. And she followed'm into the hall, maybe because she'd taken'is seeming implicit hint for privacy, or just t'keep an eye on'm.

"Have you ever noticed," Ron said, "how when someone's talking on the phone—unless they're talking to Mrs Pentergast, that is—you can never be sure there *is* anyone else on the other end of the line. So far as you know, they could be talking to themselves. Unless they're talking to Mrs Pentergast, that is."

Beatrice regarded'm slowly, her face hardening, as'f an abstract point were accreting t'solidity.

"Y—"

"What's going on!?"

They both glanced back into the living room.

"Hello—"

"Hello—"

"What's going on?"

"Jenny..."

Crack crack cracks blared from the phone, continued'n irregular intervals after the receiver struck the floor.

The house shook... Shingles skittered. Creaked and groaned. Figurines danced across the mantel and jumped t' the floor, shattered. Plates rattled against china cabinet glass. Pot and pan klitter klatter and klotter.

Lights surged, washed the room of shadow, rendered rug, yellow pinstripe floral wallpaper, t' other floral-patterned high-backed chair, shattered porcelain figures, with a irreal precision that struck some mathematically define singularity beyond which they'dn't exist.

and black

That confined space'd've been packed with silence. And a threat of moroseness'd've lingered that steam rising from re-hydrated pastas and powdered cheeses'dn't've lifted.

Someone broke a spork from'ts clear-plastic wrapping. "How old do you think this is?"

"Little o' four or five decades," someone said, mouth full as white sauce eked from the corner of'er mouth. "At least since it got here." Gulped. Partially swallowed. "Before that, who knows?"

"It's older than I am."

"Well, it's nowhere near as old as me. Is there any more of that?"

Someone pointed their blue-plastic spork at a pantry.

"You can't..." someone said as they watched another eat. "You can't be that hungry."

She swallowed, funneled the bag into'er mouth and scraped down the dregs. "It's fettuccine. Do you know how long it's been since I even *thought about* fettuccine?"

"You still haven't," Marta said. She upturned the kettle into a fresh-ripped-open pouch. "This's as real as the mouse."

But silence'd descended again with Marta's entrance and only the resonance of a spork drumming plastic foil remained.

Joan entered from the next section. "Is the water still hot?" She lifted't from the induction top and grabbed a half-dozen packets and pinned'em t'er chest and turned back toward the interlock. Everyone chewed'n silence as she'd. "Don't get so high and mighty," she said. "Didn't see you staying behind."

Carefully, she worked'er way back through the accordion-walled interlocks and slid-closed the hatch with'er boot heel. "Dinner."

And she scattered packets over the fold-down table'n the end nook and clipped the kettle into a recessed safety holder.

"Or lunch," someone said.

Another, "Breakfast."

Joan snatched two packets. "All of the above," she said. "Somewhere." And she ripped their tops and leaned and grabbed the kettle.

"Don't use it all."

Joan released the kettle's safety latch. "I don't happen to like it soupy." And she pinched each liquid-shifty bag by a corner and carried'em down the car.

"Here." She offered one t'Allison.

Sitting'n a recessed bunk, Allison balanced the pouch'n'er lap, looked down at'ts reconstituted contents. "What is it?"

"Dinner, breakfast and lunch."

Allison glanced up at'er.

Joan sat beside'er and demonstrated how t'extract the spork. "Better eat it before it gets cold. Who knows what it turns into then⁷⁴¹."

Allison dipped'er spork into the pouch, drew out a dollop of half-disintegrated, short-cut noodles. Still grainy sauce dripped from the spork's underside.

"Try it." Joan watched as Allison chewed and swallowed. "They don't have that where you come from, do they?"

"Not that I know of." She fished another sporkful. "Is this Earth food?"

"Something akin to it."

Someone leaned outa a bunk. "What do you know about Earth?"

"Shut up," Joan said, and fished another mouthful from'er pouch.

Someone climbed down into the walkway, stretched and moved toward the nook. "Better watch it. From all we've ever been able to figure out, the non-interference clauses and no-compete clauses apply to descendants, too."

"Bullshit."

"Maybe."

"Yeah," someone called from the front. "You were born here. You automatically accept the terms and conditions."

“Let ‘em come and enforce it,” Joan called back. She piled another sporkful of grainy noodles into ‘er mouth.

Allison glanced at ‘er. “What did she mean?”

“Nothing.” Joan shook ‘er head, mouth still half full. “You should finish. It’s nutritionally balanced by design, but only if you eat the whole thing.”

“Oh.” Allison fished another sporkful. “It’s really...not bad.”

“Good. Because whoever stocked this crate *really* liked it. So we might be eating it the whole way.”

“Oh.”

(MAE emerges from STAGE RIGHT and moves toward STAGE LEFT. Someone enters from STAGE RIGHT, running. They collide. MAE's light goes out. When it comes back on, MAE is on the stage and picking herself up. Her backpack is missing.)

MAE

(Holding arm and limping toward STAGE LEFT)
Fuck you. Choke on it.

SCENE

(Lighting is minimal. Kinked wire, empty spools, empty cups, paper wads, nuts, bolts and such detritus are littered over the stage. Tiny lights flutter on large black battery boxes that are in a row next to some shelving. One is missing in the sequence. Lights blink on equipment on shelving. Heavy wires run from the batteries to the equipment. Wires run up through the air out of sight. Cooling fans faintly whir.)

TUDOR

(Entering from STAGE RIGHT)

It should be down here.

NATHANIEL

(Following from STAGE RIGHT)

What's it look like? *(He scans his light over the detritus and batteries)* What about the cabling?

TUDOR

(Touching lights on shelf)

Leads to the panels. Don't worry about them. They're not the problem. Storm's too thick. They're useless, anyway.

NATHANIEL

(Casting light on a void between batteries)

Looks like someone drug one off.

TUDOR

Genius, aren't you. An inverter's gone, too.

NATHANIEL

We got a spare?

TUDOR

(Laughing harsh and fast)

Only if you want to take out the lights where they're digging. *(Laughs)* Doesn't fucking matter anyway, does it?

NATHANIEL

(Moving light over the batteries again)

How bad's this going to affect us?

TUDOR

Who the fuck knows? *(Turns)* What the fuck's it matter, anyway?

NATHANIEL

What can we do about it? *(TUDOR just laughs. NATHANIEL turns his light on him)* Quit fucking laughing and answer the question.

TUDOR

Alright. Answer mine and I'll answer yours. You first.

NATHANIEL

We don't have time for this.

TUDOR

I disagree. We've got all the time in the world. We've got infinity in the palms of our hands. *(Pause in which we hear fans continue to whirl)* Well, what'll it be?

NATHANIEL

What's your question?

TUDOR

(Fists clenched)

Where...is...Allan?

(Five beat pause. Equipment lights blink.)

NATHANIEL

I don't know.

TUDOR

(Yelling)

That's not possible—

NATHANIEL

(Interrupting)

I don't care what you think's possible.

TUDOR

(Yelling)

Someone had to tie you on.

NATHANIEL

I answered your question.

TUDOR

You left him out there. You left him out there to save your own fucking ass.

NATHANIEL

According to you I was tied on. Which means he had saved me. So which is it? Did I run out or did he save me?

TUDOR

You're confusing everything. You're just trying to save yourself.

NATHANIEL

From what?

TUDOR

(Yelling)

From your own conscience. You left him out there to die. It's basically murder.

NATHANIEL

And it's murder if everyone here dies.

TUDOR

You should've thought of that then.

NATHANIEL

(Yelling)

It was an accident.

TUDOR

There are no accidents. Everything happens for a reason. Everything happens because of someone. Even if they don't know it.

NATHANIEL

No one wanted what happened to happen. No one could know they'd detonate that ridge then.

TUDOR

(Shaking head)

No.

NATHANIEL

You need a story. You need to make something of a nonsensical event.

TUDOR

No.

NATHANIEL

You can't open that box. The possibilities run every which way.

TUDOR

(Slumping face down)

No.

NATHANIEL

Nothing can bring him back.

TUDOR

Not if he's not dead.

NATHANIEL

Is he dead or alive then? Why not just say he's both?

TUDOR

You don't care.

NATHANIEL

I care as much as you. A lot of people do.

TUDOR

(Shaking head)

No. If you did, you'd know what happened. You'd have to know. You couldn't stop till you did.

(Cooling fans whir louder.)

NATHANIEL

Sometimes you have to stop.

TUDOR

No.

NATHANIEL

You're a kid in love. And you think the world turns on it.

TUDOR

Doesn't it? (*His arms extend toward the blinking lights on the shelves*) Tell me the truth.

NATHANIEL

I told you everything.

TUDOR

(*Calmly*)

The truth.

NATHANIEL

There's no truth to tell. We're both just going to have to be satisfied with being unable to open this box. Now, take your hand away from there. These things can't overload at the flick of a switch. You can't kill us like that.

TUDOR

Shows how much you know.

(*Fans whir louder. Indicator lights turn red. Red light washes the stage. Everything goes black.*)

(The stage is dark. A light moves with CATHERINE as she emerges from STAGE RIGHT and moves toward STAGE LEFT. MELISSA sits in the darkness on STAGE LEFT. Light falls over MELISSA as CATHERINE approaches. CATHERINE kneels.)

MELISSA

(Whispering)

I had to let it out. *(She offers her blood-coated forearms. CATHERINE cradles her. Noise and light come from beyond STAGE RIGHT.)*

CATHERINE

(Yelling)

Down here. Help.

“No,” Beatrice said. “It wasn’t gunshots.”

She crouched and lifted a ceramic turtle, all but one foot gone. It and t’others she deposited on the mantle. Candlelight flickered over their wounds. Sulfur-stench. She glanced over’er shoulder as another section of room seemed t’leap into being as Esmerelde removed a lamp’s globe and touched a match t’ts wick. The matchflame wavered as Esmerelde’s hand shook and she quickly waved’t out before’t burnt t’er fingers and she grabbed the lamp globe with’er other hand t’keep from dropping’t.

“Don’t let the doily burn.”

Esmerelde pinched up the match, dropped’t’n a crystal dish, where melted wax from a former-decorative candle smothered’t.

“And we should go get the lamps out of the kitchen closet.”

“Why don’t we pause a moment,” Ron said. “Take stock.”

“That’s what we’re doing,” Beatrice said. She glanced back at Esmerelde, snapped’er fingers. “Did you hear what I said?”

Esmerelde looked up, nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Then go on.”

Silently, she turned, stepped toward the door, had t’turn and step back and take a candle. Beatrice moved as’f t’follow, but Ron caught’er arm. “Bea, stop.” And when she looked round at’m, the blacks of’er eyes must’ve seemed infinite’n candlelight.

“Let go of me.”

“You have to stop.”

“I said let go.”

After a moment, he’d. “She’s scared,” he said.

“There’s nothing to be scared of. It’s only the dark.”

"Of what happened on the other end of that phone."

Beatrice shook'er head. "Nothing happened."

"You heard it as well as me. Can you say those weren't gunshots?"

"No," she said. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Even—"

"We're not going to talk about this now."

"We have to."

"No," she said. "We don't. Right now we have to get the lamps ready so we'll be able to see." She turned, looked over the floor, crouched and lifted a decorative tapered candle that'd fallen from the wall and carried't t'the mantel. "You stay here," she said as she passed'm. "You shouldn't be up, anyway."

She called down the hall, "And we need to gather up any more empty bottles and fill them, just in case," and pushed through the kitchen swingdoor. Candlelight glowed round the doorjamb.

Overhead, another few shingles skittered away.

And the house shuddered round'm as'e ambled toward the glow-outlined kitchen door. Esmerelde'd disappeared into the pantry while Beatrice ministered over lamps gathered on the table. Absently, she accepted a matchbox from Ron, even though one already lay punched open on the table. "And has the bathtub been scrubbed out yet?" She looked over'er shoulder as Esmerelde emerged and set a lamp-oil jug on the counter. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Alright. Fill these then."

And she struck a match and lit a candle and hoisted't and pushed past Ron, mounted the stairs. The house shifted again and creaks and groans swallowed'er footsteps and the light from the candle remained the only indicator of'er up there and even that was gone when she closed'er bedroom door.

SCENE

(The stage is dark except for a single low light at center. Cots sit in two rows just inside the light. ZILOG, NATHANIEL, TUDOR, lay in cots. JUNE and BRITTNEY share a cot. BRITTNEY sits at the head. JUNE sits at the foot. CATHERINE stands acenter them all. The DOCTOR stands with a medical device in hand. TUDOR is wrapped in bandages. MAE has a few bandages on her arm. MELISSA lies in a cot asleep, with bandages wrapped around her forearms. NATHANIEL has fresh bandages at his neck and around his arm. TRACY stands near the door. MAE lies on her back with her forearm over her eyes. TROY and PAMELA lie asleep in the same cot.)

ZILOG

As with anything.

DOCTOR

(Looking at the medical device)

I don't like using this stuff so far past its expiration date. He won't live without it. *(Looks at TUDOR)* If he lives then.
(CATHERINE, arms folded, looks angrily at TUDOR.)

NATHANIEL

Then use it.

DOCTOR

(Slipping hand into coat)

We've got pretty much nothing more, you know. Bandages, maybe. But that's it. Maybe a few over-the-counter painkillers.

TRACY

(Leaning against a post, arms crossed.)

Feeling useless yet?

(The DOCTOR glares at TRACY.)

MAE

Cut it out.

(She removes her forearm from her eyes and sits up. Her back is to Zillog.)

ZILOG

[Repose-toi.]

MAE

If I rest, then who would keep these two from killing each other?

(ZILOG moves as if to put a hand on MAE's shoulder, but he pulls away before he makes contact.)

MAE

(Looking toward TROY and PAMELA)

How is he?

DOCTOR

Exhaustion. Utter exhaustion.

MAE

Isn't everybody?

(Silence five count.)

MAE

What's happening with the digging?

JUNE
(*Sleepily*)

Jacobs's taken over.

BRITTNEY
Nobody thinks they have a chance.

JUNE
(*Shaking head*)
That's not true.

BRITTNEY
(*Shrugging*)
I'm just telling what everybody else is saying.
(*ZILOG appears despondent.*)

MAE
(*Turning to ZILOG*)
Stop it. (*ZILOG glances up*) It's not your fault. (*She leans
and touches his knee*) If anything, it's the old fool's fault
for dying.

NATHANIEL
Everybody's got to sometime, don't they say?

TRACY
(*Smiling sardonically*)
Would've made a great mystery.

ZILOG
[Quel?]

TRACY
(*Shaking head*)
In ten, twenty, thirty, a hundred, a thousand years—
who knows—somebody would've come out here and
found what? A half-completed city. Doors outlined but

only partially cut through stone. Dead-end hallways. Foundations for buildings that didn't exist. So what're they going to think? Here was this great Martian civilization building this metropolis, then, one day—poof—seemingly in the blink of an eye—they're all just gone. What happened to them? Where did they go?

DOCTOR

All it needs is CROUTON written somewhere.

TRACY

Gotta admit, it's a lot more interesting than the official plan.

ZILOG

(*Nodding*)

[Les vides.]

TRACY

Exactly.

(CATHERINE crosses toward MELISSA's cot. She stoops and brushes MELISSA's hair from the side of her face. She straightens and sits on an empty cot. Her sari falls from her shoulder into her lap and reveals blackened dried blood smeared over her arms and collar bones. She doesn't readjust it.)

BRITTNEY

Besides, wasn't it some run-scared high-up manager that flushed the whole thing, anyway? That's what I always heard. So I figure it's probably their fault.

TRACY

Don't forget the legal systems.

DOCTOR

My sister's one of those legal systems administrators.

TRACY

Point is?

(*The DOCTOR extends two fingers at TRACY.*)

MAE

(*Sighing*)

I hate to do this. But what we're doing is disassociating. And we really need to get ourselves back to the problem at hand.

TRACY

Does it matter? What exactly can we do about it?

MAE

This kind of confinement...it presents a very particular set of problems. If it's a pressure cooker now...the stove's not even on yet.

DOCTOR

(*To TRACY*)

You should stick to fish psychology. It's something you might be able to grasp.

TRACY

Maybe you should go sort some of those bandages.

CATHERINE

Stop it. (*She glances at MELISSA*) We have to keep things from getting worse.

TRACY

And how do you propose to do that? Hmm? (*She looks at MAE*) Psych?

MAE

(*Sighing*)

First, the two of you need to stop infantilizing. It's

another dissociative technique. So in clinical terms, just get over yourselves. As for what to do... We're going to have to wait and see what happens now.

TRACY

Is there a clinical term for that?

DOCTOR

There is. (*Turns to examine something medical related*)
And in my medical opinion—for what that's worth right now—I would say everyone needs to get some sleep.

TRACY

What kind?

MAE

Sexual obsession can be a dissociative technique also.

TRACY

Can concentrating on dissociative techniques be a dissociative technique?

MAE

Sometimes.

TRACY

Well, it's not like we can accomplish any less than we are now.

ZILOG

(*Speaking slowly, as if words are a struggle*)
Sometimes...Sometimes...to do...nothing...is the best way...to accomplish...something.

TRACY

Um. Yeah.

MAE

Yes. We need sleep. (*She reaches and touches ZILOG's knee again*) That goes for everybody. I'll write out a prescription if I have to.

JUNE

(*Sleepily*)

What about the light?

BRITTNEY

Scared of the dark?

(*The light goes out. The stage is cast in darkness.*)

MAE

And if you're going to dissociate, please, do it silently.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

It's a sin to go mad in public.

VOICE FROM THE DARK #2

Really?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #1

Who knows?

VOICE FROM THE DARK #3

Well, who knows anything?

She woke into darkness and'er shoulder hurt where she'd lain on'er side. Maybe wind stirred sand at the base of the cave mouth. Night or storm-darkened day, it'dn't've been possible t'know.

Nearby, Abigail twitched, emitted small-animal noises as she slept. Faint lights flashed somewhere across the cavern. Mary-Celleste raised'er self t'see over Abigail's shoulder. Even'n the dimness, Ceili or Argile's frame and bearing'd've been discernible.

Clipped-on lights caught narrowly outlined faces and bleary eyes as they outfitted'emselves, movements stiff, the only consolation seemingly that the packs they slipped over their shoulders were empty and light. Sleep'd've wound from their limbs as they made their way back into the boreholes.

Abigail stirred. "What's going on?"

"They went out for more supplies," someone said.

Abigail sniffed, combed'er fingers through'er hair.

Someone motioned toward where the lights were thickest. They said, "What's happening over there?"

But Abigail shook'er head. "Don't want to know." She stood, massaged'er leg. "I need to go." And she offered a hand t'help Mary-Celleste up. "Come with me."

Back'n a borehole, they turned off a narrow sidepassage and Mary-Celleste cast'er light over'ts smoothed walls. Splashes carried from distant darkness. And Mary-Celleste cut'er light away as't fell on a man's buttock, his shorts bunched round'is thighs.

"Occupied," he called back.

Mary-Celleste turned away. And Abigail called, "What're you doing in the dark?"

"Do I need to see to take a piss?"

“You could let people know you’re around.”

Fabric rustled out the dark, a sharp zip. “I’ll hang a sign outside next time,” he said as he passed between them.

“Do that,” Abigail said. She offered her hand. “I’ll take the light. You go first.” And she stood there with her back turned. Then they traded and she bunched her coveralls so her arms didn’t fall in anything and she squatted in the darkness.

Together they walked into the larger tunnel and both breathed a little freer.

“Let’s not go back yet.” She glanced round. “Let’s just sit here awhile.” Abigail eased herself down against the sloped borehole. “Okay.”

After a moment, Mary-Celleste clicked-off the light.

“Have you ever seen a man naked?” Abigail added, “Other than earlier, I mean.”

Mary-Celleste didn’t reply. She didn’t replied to much since [...]

“Haven’t you ever wanted to?”

Mary-Celleste’s stomach growled [in lieu] of a reply.

“You know,” Abigail said. “I don’t really think most of us knew what we were doing. At first.” And she must’ve shaken her head in the darkness. “It was just such a fantastic opportunity, you know. Start from scratch. It wasn’t going to be like any of those other parks. Little pockets of engineering amid the chaos of the rest of the world. Always the threat of intrusion. The knowledge of there always being an *out there*.

“A planet’s a complete...thing. As disconnected and...independent as it’s...possible to be.”

She laughed, but it came out sounding [...] “So there’d be no...outside.” And maybe she’d’ve shaken her head again.

“We...make up so much shit...you know. My brother... God... that’s been so long.... I feel so old.... There’s no social conditioning for living this long.... Maybe that’s... But my brother...he used to rail against...religion. It was just *reading a book and...ignoring whatever you don’t like and interpreting the rest the...way you wanted*. But...that’s what everything... People took a bunch of stories...and decided they were prophetic...and were gonna make sure they...came true....”

She rubbed'er face'n'er hands and each'd've been too dirty t'notice anything'd changed. "What'm I even...saying...?"

Abigail emitted a noise. "I used to love...him—we always called him...just him...because we always knew...who we were talking about... Oh, it was like...how people talk about...god. But then—I don't know...I can't even...remember when—but I looked around and...realized...what we were doing. And that all we ever did was...use rockets...to try and...run back in time.... Always...trying to...find the new...frontier to...recreate a better version of the...past that...never..."

Cracks wormed into'er voice and tears concealed'n the darkness became plain. "Oh god my brother..." And she let out a protracted breath and gagged as'f she'dn't recover from't. "After the...libertarian revolution...when the...lunar colony...collapsed..." Her voice lowered, a harsh whisper. "...they...ate...each other..."

Sobs echoed through tunnel matrices. "...I...don't want...to die...here..."

After a while, when what saltwater she'd t'spare'd've evaporated t'crusty white along'er cheeks, Abigail whispered, "They were... wrong...you know...? He wrote..." She sniffed. "It was... God I can't...remember.... Something..." Her stomach growled. "I don't know," she said, after a while. "Maybe...I'm confused..." She sniffed. "...I don't...know..."

BRITTNEY
You awake?

ZILOG
[Qui?]

BRITTNEY
You.

ZILOG
[Oui.]
(*A faint light goes on.*)

“What’s the hour?” Ron said. Below, light moved along the hall and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Late,” Beatrice said. “Very late.”

CATHERINE

All I know is the voice I heard wasn't hers.

(Light continues to glow off STAGE RIGHT.)

KIM

(Coughing)

Fuck.

(CATHERINE and NATHANIEL emerge from STAGE LEFT. NATHANIEL walks with his cane.)

CATHERINE

We came to see how it's going.

KIM

(Between coughs)

It's...going...fucking...bad...

(TRENT emerges from STAGE RIGHT. He is red eyed and grime covered. Powder sifts from his beard. He sees CATHERINE and NATHANIEL. He bares orange-brown teeth as if to smile.)

JACOBS

Toodily froodily hell.

NATHANIEL

How far to go?

KIM

(Coughing less now)

Depends on how fast the storm's adding on top it. Or if
it's slacked off.

NATHANIEL

What can we do?

JACOBS

Oodily moodily toodily—

KIM

(Interrupting)

Watch it.

JACOBS

Oodily oodily kamoodily toboodily

KIM

We'll settle for a mole hill.

JACOBS

Doodily.

They slept with their packs, though there'd've been little left t'riffling through by then. And woken by shouts, Abigail pulled'er head from'er pack and looked up bleary eyed as'f tryna differentiate dream-world from non. Behind'er, Mary-Celleste raised'er self.

"What is it?" someone said.

Abigail shook'er head, rubbed'er eyes. Lights ricocheted across the cavern, collided, burst apart'n non-reproductive mitosis. She grumbled. "What's going on?"

Someone moved past. "They want a vote."

Mary-Celleste started to rise and Abigail helped'er. Layered shouts blended with wind-sound carried from the cave entrance. They worked their way toward the ring. But neither Martina nor Scarlet'd've been viewable from'ts edges. Abigail touched someone's shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Scarlet's gone crazy."

Roars and shouts from the center and the crowd contracted and split apart and each side hauled their respective combatants away. Blood trickled between Martina's lips. She spat.

"You're not in charge here—" Scarlet pulled free'er arm, jerked'er backpack away—"—DON'T TOUCH THAT—"—gestured with two fingers. "FUCK ADMINISTRATIVE." How many'd nodded t'that? "FUCK THE COMPANY." Yells. "AND FUCK THE GOD-DAMN MARKS—"

"Fuck you." Martina spat, again.

"No," Scarlet said. "Fuck yooooooooooooooooooooo..."

By nightfall, they'd've marked their territories.

Martina dropped'er packedn't far from Abigail and Mary-Celleste, stood a moment and looked across the cavern, where lights still floated.

"They're hunting through the scraps," someone said.

"What for?"

"I don't know. Junk."

"Yeah," Martina said. "Junk." And without a look back, she kicked'er pack and the loose strap gave and rusted pipes clattered over stone. "We've got some of our own."

"Cover it up. Someone's coming over."

“Democracy’s a bitch, ain’t it?”

*(The DOCTOR holds a tubular medical instrument
to her forearm near a small candle.)*

DOCTOR

(Voice far away)

Yellow light. Can't find the veins with the blue.

(JUNE and BRITTNEY move from STAGE LEFT to STAGE RIGHT in semidarkness. A minor light follows them. The CROWD occupies the whole of the back of the stage and BRITTNEY and JUNE have to squeeze by them. But the CROWD is half-submerged in darkness and are barely outlined. They are lighted only enough so we can see they are there.)

UNKNOWN #1

Is it true?

(BRITTNEY pulls JUNE along as if the CROWD is going to sweep them apart.)

UNKNOWN #2

First TROY, now this.

UNKNOWN #3

Tell us.

CROWD

(All together)

Tell us.

JUNE

(Forcing BRITTNEY to stop)

Tell you what?

UNKNOWN #3

You know this... Jacobs.

BRITTNEY

Don't feed them.

UNKNOWN #2

It doesn't make sense.

UNKNOWN #1

Of course it does. Get someone on the inside.

UNKNOWN #3

Don't you think it's strange?

UNKNOWN #5

He just shows up. After all these years.

UNKNOWN #3

And gets right in on the digging.

UNKNOWN #5

One of the REVEREND's agents.
(*The CROWD mumbles.*)

BRITTNEY

That's ridiculous. There're no secret agents planted around here. (*She tugs JUNE's arm*) Come on.

CROWD

(*Alternating random members*)

Wait. Stop. Where are you going.

BRITTNEY

Away from you idiots.

(*They cross toward STAGE RIGHT. The light falls off the CROWD. JUNE struggles to keep pace.*)

JUNE

You shouldn't say those kinds of things.

BRITTNEY

And you should learn when to shut up.

JUNE

(Stammering)

That's not fair. I—

BRITTNEY

(Interrupting)

Don't know when not to say something.

JUNE

(Yelling)

Don't tell me to shut up. (JUNE *pulls away from* BRITTNEY's *grasp*. *Calmer*) Don't tell me what to do. Sometimes you're so stupid. You'd go on without ever even trying to find out what's going on. Just dive into any mess because you think you can beat your way back out again. And don't ever tell me to shut up.

(BRITTNEY squints one eye.)

JUNE

Well?

BRITTNEY

(Offering her hand and looking remorseful)

I'm sorry.

(JUNE takes her hand. They run off STAGE RIGHT.)

(KIM and TRENT and MAN proceed to sit. Lights off STAGE RIGHT flit through falling dust. Muffled clanks and thumps carry from beyond STAGE RIGHT.)

KIM

What does hell mean to you?

TRENT

Oom froodly ood toodly moo.

KIM

Hell.

TRENT

Oodly ood oodly doom noodly poodly su moodly boo boo.

KIM

Where do you know that word from?

TRENT

Mere burwith une froodly. Froodly ooh oh toodly. Oh hoodly doodly doodly. So noodly oom tuh foodly dah doodly.

KIM

You were there once? (*Shakes her head*) I don't think

you understand. I mean...you never had contact with any of the engineering crews, right?

(Trent produces a bamboo sliver from his pocket and begins picking his teeth with it.)

TRENT

Ooh hoodly noodly boodily. Soo poodly tufood tufood-ily.

KIM

So how do you know about hell. I mean, you seem to employ it in the same linguistic sense.

TRENT

Oomidly soo poodly.

KIM

I mean, where did you come by that word?

TRENT

Oobily foodily.

KIM

It's a hobby. Humor me.

TRENT

Oobily oodily doo soo noodily. Doo goobily. Doo oobily. Elligoobily oobily.

MAN

What'd he say?

KIM

That it wasn't the kind of story you tell.

MAN

What does that mean?

KIM

Quiet. (*Speaking to TRENT*) Please. We've got time.

TRENT

(*Sucking on teeth as he picks at them*)

Oom. Oom. Oom oodily froodily ooh soo doodily woodily noodily noodily. Oom. Oobly froodily.

KIM

No, we've got the time. Please. (*She pauses while TRENT continues to pick at his teeth*) Please.

TRENT

(*Shrugging*)

Froodily. Froodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Tuh foodily. Um doodily.

MAN

(*Interrupting*)

What's he saying?

KIM

(*Motioning MAN to be quiet*)

He says they were three or four hours from the station and... (*To TRENT*) Wait, where's that? You mean the train station?

TRENT

(*Shaking head*)

Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily.

KIM

Oh. Okay. So they just packed the ice on the train down at the town. But it was actually brought down from farther north. (*To TRENT*) I always thought it came from near the town.

TRENT

Duh foodily. Poodily noodily.

KIM

But why?

TRENT

Noodily. Noodily.

KIM

Why wouldn't they want to know? (*She pauses while TRENT picks at his teeth*) I thought you were going to tell me about hell.

TRENT

Ooh soo noodily. Oodily. Doodidly ooh soo noodily.

KIM

I'm not the one that keeps sidetracking.

TRENT

Oomily. Oolilly.

KIM

Well, go on.

TRENT

(*Picking at teeth as he talks*)

Oodily noodily. Soo noodily. Oodily noodily. Boodily toodily boodily. Soo goobily doobily moobily.

KIM

(*Interrupting*)

Yeah, the melt functions exponentially, that's what BRITTNEY says.

TRENT

Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Oodily. Tufoodily.

KIM

You were collecting water, right?

MAN

What's he saying?

KIM

(Without looking at MAN)

Quiet.

TRENT

Ooh soo foodily noodily poodily doo.

MAN

What's he saying?

(She motions for MAN to be quiet.)

KIM

(Still looking at TRENT)

He's talking about how they used to collect melt water and bottle it to go down south. They could get as much money for a train-car-full as a month's worth of ice.

(She motions, again, for him to be quiet.)

TRENT

Poodly. Poodly. Poodly. Poodly. Oom soo poodily.

KIM

Just the arm?

MAN

What's he saying?

TRENT

Oodily. Oodily.

KIM

Parkas.

TRENT

Oobity. Oobity woo.

KIM

Why were they in pieces?

MAN

(Urgently, in a strained voice)

What's he saying?

KIM

(Exasperated, trying to hurry)

They were out on the ice where this ravine had opened up and he saw something blue farther down and climbed back to the sled and went back down with a lantern and there were three froze men in blue parkas and one of them had been chopped up. *(She motions to TRENT)* Go on.

TRENT

(Still picking at and sucking teeth)

Ood ooh moo. Oodily boo. *(Spits)* Moodily boo boo hoo.

KIM

(Grimacing)

Sounds like hell.

MAN

What'd he say?

KIM

(Looking disgusted)

He says it looks like they had to eat one of them.

TRENT

Oodily too foo.

KIM

(Looking at TRENT quizzically)

It was written there? Scratched in the ice?

TRENT

(Sucking teeth)

Oodily. Oodily. Oom toodily woo. Woo woo. Ooh.
Oom dafoodily doo foo.

KIM

Fuck.

MAN

What did he say?

*(KIM shakes her head. TRENT sits there and picks
at his gums.)*

He sat up'n darkness. Wind rattled siding. He reached toward the nightstand, touched the clock. Maybe'e thought'e'dn't hear't tick because of the storm. But when'e brought't closer, it remained quiet. And'e must've misjudged the nightstand's location'n the dark, because the clock fell. Metallic clatter. Cracked glass. He waited but none seemed t've heard the disturbance over the wind.

Overhead, a windgust seemed t'peel the roof away as'e lay back and tried t'ease'mself asleep. But something'd switched over. And'e lay theren't knowing'f'is eyes were closed or open.

After a while, a hum. It must've grown the whole time, only then discernible over the wind. He turned'is head against'is pillow. Faint glow. Louder hum. He pushed'mself up. He'd've just been able t'discern the dial. He reached for the bedside light, clicked't three times. Nothing. But the radio dial glowed. Not full-power. But just enough t'see the numeral-outlined arc on the paper pasted inside't.

A faint static undercurrent welled'n the hum. Grey-noise edge. He sat forward. Hum seceded t'static. Dry, wind-kicked fall leaves. Washed through the room.

"In the beginning..." Washed-out voice. Static-filled. Plowed through. Parted't. Left't t'fizzle on either end. *"In the beginning..."* Indistinct voice. Nothing voice. Or maybe everything voice, the amalgam of every man, woman and'd-been child blended. *"...there was light. And the light was without differentiation. And nothing existed but the light. And the light was all places and all things. And all things were the light. So all were one and the same and the same*

and the one..." Static blared. Voice pushed through. "*And the light never changed. For it was without change. And eternal. For there was no beginning and no end.*

"*There was no beginning.*

"*There was no beginning.*

"*There was no beginning...*"

Maybe't was just the heat, but'e sat bolt-upright. Sweat trickled and stuck'is pajama top t'is back. Static faded. The dial dimmed. A moment or two and only the wind remained. And'is hard breathing.

He turned as the door opened. Lamplight wedged across the wall-paper. Esmerelde's lamplit faced peeked'n. "Is everything alright?" The light must've revealed something pained'n'is face, because she opened the door farther, a penceful, concerned expression on'ers.

"I..." He glanced over the bed. Lamplight reflected off dented brass and broken glass as she moved t'see. "Don't... worry about it," he said. "It can be... cleaned up tomorrow."

He scooted back, braced'is shoulders against the headboard. And she set the lamp on the nightstand and touched the backs of'er fingers t'is forehead. "You're sweating." Mechanically, she looked over'er shoulder at the dead fan and the distorted blade shadows the lamp-light cast across the ceiling.

"Nothing... A dream." He glanced toward the radio. "The power hasn't come back?"

She shook'er head.

"Didn't think so."

"Are you sure you feel alright?"

"Fine." He finally seemed t'breathe easier. "What're you doing up? What time is it?"

"A little past five," she said. "I didn't wake you..."

"No." He adjusted'mself against the headboard. "No, I think I was already awake."

"I thought I heard something."

"What?"

She shook'er head. "I don't know." She shook'er head again. "Maybe it was just the wind. Something outside."

"Yeah. Maybe."

They waited there, him sitting up, her standing beside the bed, as'f

neither knew exactly what came next. He said, "I don't reckon the phone's back either."

She shook'er head.

"Probably took a pole down. Or snapped the line."

Wind churned through the eaves.

"Why don't you sit?"

She shook'er head. "I can't."

Not-consciously, she clasped'er hands'n front of'er robe. "May I... May I ask you something?"

"I don't see why not." He swept back'is sweat-damp hair.

She turned, moved toward the foot of the bed, but'dn't sit, her face lit'n stark profile. "What do you... You'll answer honestly?"

"As I can."

"What... What do you think happened on the phone?"

He looked from'er t'the bedpost. "It could've been anything."

"But what do you think it was?"

"I don't know."

"I—"

"It was gunshots, wasn't it?"

He shook'is head. "We can't know that."

She turned'er face, seemed t'concentrate too much on the wallpaper.

After a while, he said, "I'm sure nothing bad happened."

"But you don't know that."

"Sometimes... I think I don't know anything."

"No..." And she shook'er head. "That's not true."

"I think it is." He looked over at the lamp, watched the flame dance. "What do I know?" He still looked at the lamp. His nightshirt clung t'is spine. Overhead, lamplight produced an ephemeral, yellow smudge. "Would you want to hear a story?" And'e looked down as she looked away from the baseboard. "Though, it might not be the kind you would want to repeat."

She seated'erself on bed's edge.

He paused. "Well..." He closed an eye as'f'e were looking through a spyglass that'dn't b'brought into focus. "I used to have a friend... Sometimes I even used to think we were the same person. We used to joke we were brothers and didn't even know it." He looked over past

the wallpaper. "Suddenly we were all grown-up. But that was okay because we were both going to do it together." His eyes met hers. "And then he...just wasn't there anymore. Everything was changing... Is still changing. And when you reach out and try to grab hold of something it gets pulled right out of your hands. Gone."

He touched his temple. "Not much of a story, is it?"

In the silence that followed, she looked at him and reached and put her hand on his where it rested atop the sheets. "What happened to your friend?"

"I don't know." He produced something of a weak smile. "From the gossip—or should I call them fantastic stories?—it seems everyone else knows more than I do about it." But he shook his head, pulled his fingers from his hair. "Which is just a cover for when people don't know anything at all." Seemingly not-consciously, he motioned *no* with his free hand. "No, I don't know anything. But I...believe..."

"What?"

His gaze'd fallen on where her hand covered his, and he looked up. "That he's surviving." Looking her straight in the face, he said, "What about you?"

"Me?"

Footsteps.

They both looked up as lamplight moved in the hall and the door opened.

"What's going on in here?"

"We're starting a society," he said. "For those of us who're afraid of the dark. We're always open to new members if you're interested."

Beatrice fixed on him from behind her lamp. Like Esmerelde, she'd wrapped a robe over her nightclothes, even though the house'd've grown stuffy, and white lace peeked round her robe collar, half obscured by her criss-cross-ribbon-tied hair. "I asked what was going on here."

Esmerelde, silent, tried to stand, but Beatrice raised her hand. Ron sighed. "We heard something in the middle of the night and woke up. And she came up here to make sure everything was alright."

"I didn't hear anything."

"Some of us did." He didn't look at the broken clock or still off radio. "But everything seems to be fine. So everyone can go back to

bed.” He nodded t’Esmerelde. “Thank you.” Then when she’dn’t move, he motioned. And lightly, she nodded, looked over at Beatrice and rose and took the lamp from the nightstand. The downstairs clock chimed as she slipped by t’other woman and out the door.

“We’ll discuss this tomorrow,” Beatrice said.

And she closed the door. After a moment, lamp-haze glow retreated from round the jamb.

“Yuns been down t’the wall this mornin?” Li mounted the stair and paused.

Genie looked up. “What’s on’t?”

Helena finished cleaning’er fingers and smacked’er lips. A cat wandered down between’er and Kayla and Kayla slipped Quetzalcoatl back into’er bag.

“Yuns’re’n’t gonna like’t,” Li said. She cocked’er head, must’ve seen something’n the distance, because she said, “see yuns later,” and disappeared.

Genie stood. “Let’s go see.”

“Just hold on,” Helena said, and ran’er tongue over’er teeth. They looked up as Mara and Ambeth descended.

“Li says they’ve changed somethin on the scores,” Genie said.

“Hm.” Mara nodded absently.

Ambeth glanced at’er. “I guess we’d go see.”

Genie nodded. But when they arrived at the wall, she stood silent, her mouth slightly open. “I’dn’t understand,” she said.

“Well,” Ambeth said, “it’sn’t over yet.” And she glanced at Mara.

Mara remained silent.

“I’dn’t understand,” Genie said.

“What’s t’understand?” Kayla said. Somehow, Quetzalcoatl’d gotten loose from’er bag and scrambled up’er arm and perched on’er shoulder and’d’ve seemed t’examine that chalk-marked wall with the rest.

“It doesn’t mean anythin,” Helena said. “Like she says, it’sn’t over yet.”

This's just me. But I've never discerned quite how the scoring system for this event operated. And since this's the only account I've ever found of an event such as this, I've nothing t'compare't to. It seems t've been based on votes by those'n attendance, but how'sn't specified. I've heard of a purported group'n the tenth who operate excommunitary tribunals on the number of red balls vs blue balls placed'n a concealed container. The obvious answer'd b'a show of hands, but that depends on how many were actually'n attendance, obviously. And how, exactly, these scores were encoded on this wall's, also, taken for granted. I'd've t' imagine that each'd've t'b'referred t'by some kinda name-sign. And then some set of symbols beneath that. Or maybe they just ordered'em one direction or t'other. I think I once heard something about something'n the fourteenth where they assigned people colored beads. So maybe they'd've done something like that. The only point that's clear's each night the lowest scorer'd b'excluded. So the number of contestants'd continually narrow. So [...]

NOTE: somebody needs to come back and finish the rest of this.

An archway occupies STAGE CENTER. NATHANIEL, ZILOG, MAE, BRITTNEY, and TRENT stand near STAGE LEFT. The CROWD stands nearby and is mostly cast in darkness, we can barely make them out. A body lies on STAGE LEFT of the archway. Two young men with bamboo spears stand on STAGE RIGHT of the archway and look through it warily. Two others have dropped their spears and stand quaffing water. λ stands obscured at far STAGE LEFT. CATHERINE and PAMELA sit on the stage. BAKER lies across the stage from them. CATHERINE's sari remains slipped off her shoulder. Her shoulders and parts of her chest are red and black from dried and drying blood.

NATHANIEL

What's it look like?

TRENT

(Spitting)

Ooda foomoo doomoo poodoo.

NATHANIEL

What kind of weapons?

TRENT

(Holding up bloody hand)

Oodibly tempoo hoo. *(Puts bloody hand in mouth and sucks it)* Proon oon oon doon soon.

MAE

We have to find out what they want. We can't do anything until then.

TRENT

(Grunting)

Ooba oomperoom.

NATHANIEL

Do we know who they are?

ZILOG

[Non.]

MAE

We need to know if they're mostly Earth or mostly Martian.

BRITTNEY

Why does that matter?

MAE

Each would mean a whole different psychological profile. *(Shakes her head)* What they want. How they think to keep it.

NATHANIEL

Convenient how MACAVOY isn't here.

(Everyone looks at him questioningly.)

CROWD

Well, aren't you going to do something? *(Muttering)*
Idiot. You don't have a right to do anything. This is—

ZILOG

(Roaring)

Quiet.

(NATHANIEL and TRENT don't seem to have realized anything's happened.)

MAE

We have to open a dialogue. And we need to do it soon.

(NATHANIEL looks back at her, then at TRENT.

TRENT shrugs. NATHANIEL moves forward a few steps.)

NATHANIEL

Hear this. You're backed into a corner. There's nowhere you can go.

(The two young men holding spears glance at each other. The ones quaffing water stop and look toward the archway.)

MAE

Be careful. People can get unpredictable when they're trapped. Desperate.

(TRENT pulls his hand from his mouth. Blood coats his beard. When he speaks, his teeth are red.)

TRENT

Oom toopoo moonoopoo.

NATHANIEL

(Turning to BRITTNEY)

You have the other passage blocked?

BRITTNEY

They won't get out that way.

NATHANIEL

You go back there then. Take charge.

BRITTNEY

What do you want me to do if they try to come through?

NATHANIEL

Stop them.

MAE

We have to be careful.

(NATHANIEL motions to BRITTNEY. She pushes through the CROWD to exit STAGE LEFT.)

TRENT

Oonadoogoo moo moo.

CROWD

We can't go that long (*Gasp*) we (*Gasp*)

MAE

(*Turning toward someone flailing*)

An anxiety attack. (*moves toward gesticulating figure*)
Get him out. Give him some space. He needs some air.
(*Others in the CROWD start to flail.*)

MAE

(*Turning toward ZILOG*)

I need some help here.

CROWD

We can't breathe. What about food? There's no air.
(*Screaming*) All they'll have to do is wait a few days and they'll have all the food they want. We can't breathe.
(ZILOG pushes them all off STAGE LEFT.)

CROWD

(*From off STAGE LEFT*)

We have to do something.

(NATHANIEL and TRENT still don't seem to have noticed anything has happened.)

NATHANIEL

They must have a plan. Those weapons weren't made
spur of the moment.

TRENT

Oon dooily foo foo toon.

*(While they talk, λ moves toward PAMELA and
pulls her up by her arm and says something to her
we can't hear.)*

PAMELA

(Talking through the archway, voice low)

Can you hear me? *(λ shakes her)* Can... *(Louder)* Can
anyone hear me? *(NATHANIEL and TRENT stop and look
toward the archway)* They say... They say not to come in.
If you do... *(Voice strained)* We're all dead.

*(Light fades on STAGE LEFT. We can barely see
NATHANIEL or TRENT anymore. They exist only
as two outlines. λ releases PAMELA. She sits by
CATHERINE again. He motions to the two at the wa-
ter vessel. They take up their spears again. BAKER
moans.)*

YOUNG MAN #1

(Turning and pointing spear in BAKER's direction)

Be quiet. *(BAKER tries to move again. He clutches his
bloody groin)* I said be quiet.

CATHERINE

He's going to bleed to death.

YOUNG MAN #1

(Whirling and pointing spear wildly)

You shut up too. Everybody—shut up.

CATHERINE

(Looking up spear)

If you don't do something, he'll die.

YOUNG MAN #1

(Tense, as if he can hardly keep himself from flying apart.)
Maybe you'll die.

λ

(To YOUNG MAN #1)

Go watch the door.

(YOUNG MAN #1 looks up at him hesitantly)

(Forcefully) Now.

(CATHERINE stands. The light moves onto her.)

λ

(To CATHERINE)

Sit down.

CATHERINE

He needs help.

λ

Sit down.

CATHERINE

I'm going over there.

λ

Then go. *(Hesitates)* But stay there. *(He motions to*
YOUNG MAN #1) Watch them.

(λ disappears off STAGE RIGHT.)

YOUNG MAN #1

(Motioning with spear to PAMELA)

You too. Over here.

(Stiffly, PAMELA rises and limps toward CATHERINE.)

CATHERINE

Are you hurt?

PAMELA

(Embarrassed)

My foot's fallen asleep.

YOUNG MAN #1

Be quiet.

CATHERINE

(Kneeling by BAKER)

I can't help him if I can't talk to him. Or do you want him to die?

YOUNG MAN #1

Well *(Hesitates and glances toward STAGE LEFT)* only as much as necessary.

CATHERINE

I'll need a light. *(PAMELA dis-clips hers from her pocket. CATHERINE grabs a length of her sari and rips it and starts to wrap it over BAKER's leg and groin)* I need help turning him over.

(PAMELA helps her. YOUNG MAN #1 watches with a sense of attempted disattachment he can't seem to maintain.)

PAMELA

(Under her breath)

This is really bad.

CATHERINE

We have to get him medical attention.

(Her hands are red with blood.)

YOUNG MAN #1

(Shaking head)

Not yet.

PAMELA

You can't let him die.

(YOUNG MAN #2 *glances over his shoulder.*)

CATHERINE

(*Loudly and looking at them all*)

He isn't dead yet. But not for much longer. (YOUNG MAN #2 *turns toward YOUNG MAN #1 and furtively whispers something we can't discern*) It's okay. (*Her eyes seem to bore into them as they look at her*) But it won't be if he dies.

YOUNG MAN #2

(*Hissing*)

This wasn't supposed to happen.

(*He turns away.*)

PAMELA

(*Snapping*)

What did you think would happen? You run in here with spears and don't think you're going to have to use them?

YOUNG MAN #2

(*Desperately*)

Everybody was supposed to run away.

CATHERINE

Who told you that? (*But YOUNG MAN #2 just shakes his head*) I don't think you decided to come down here and do this on your own. I don't think you would want to hurt anyone.

YOUNG MAN #1

It's not like that. We're helping.

PAMELA

(*Snapping*)

Helping?

CATHERINE

(Holding out her bloody hand for PAMELA to be quiet)
How is this supposed to help?

YOUNG MAN #2

Just be quiet. *(Turns toward the archway)* Please. It'll be over soon. So just keep him like that a little longer. No one's going to die.

(λ enters from STAGE RIGHT.)

λ

What's going on here. I told you to watch them.

YOUNG MAN #1

I am.

λ

Like hell. *(Motions to YOUNG MAN #3)* Get the rope.

YOUNG MAN #3

Why?

λ

Because I said so. Tie their ankles.

(λ crosses the stage and shines a light in CATHERINE's face so she has to raise and reveal her bloodied hand.)

λ

And gag them.

CATHERINE

Who are you?

λ

Nobody. Nobody you'd be concerned about. *(Glances over shoulder at YOUNG MAN #3)* Get over here.

CATHERINE

I know you.

λ

Yeah?

CATHERINE

The Green Hills of Earth.

λ

(Crouching by her, the light still in her face)

Well, well.

CATHERINE

He needs medical attention. Now.

(YOUNG MAN #3 halts behind λ and holds a rope.)

λ

Now.

(YOUNG MAN #3 looks embarrassed as he starts to tie CATHERINE's ankles.)

PAMELA

(Panicked)

Wait. We're not doing anything to hurt you. *(YOUNG MAN #3 finishes with CATHERINE and moves toward PAMELA. PAMELA jerks away)* No.

λ

(Snapping loudly)

Shut up. *(PAMELA brings her knee up into YOUNG MAN #3's chin. He hits the stage)* For fucks sakes.

(λ jerks up and kicks PAMELA in the stomach. She doubles over.)

CATHERINE

Stop it.

(PAMELA *groans*. YOUNG MAN #3 *gets to his feet and cradles his jaw*.)

λ

(*To* YOUNG MAN #3)

Get back to the door. (YOUNG MAN #3 *cradles his jaw as he picks up a spear*. λ *turns his light back in CATHERINE's face*) Sit down and shut up.

CATHERINE

What about him?

λ

I wouldn't worry about him.

CATHERINE

He—

λ

I said shut the fuck up.

CATHERINE

Or what?

λ

Nothing. (*Flicks light onto* PAMELA) At least not to you. But your firecracker bitch here won't be so lucky.

(λ *turns the light back into* CATHERINE's *face*. CATHERINE *and* λ *regard each other in silence*. *After a moment*, λ *looks away*)

(*To* YOUNG MAN #4) Watch them this time.

(λ *exits* STAGE RIGHT.)

CATHERINE

(*Leaning toward* PAMELA)

Are—

YOUNG MAN #4
(*Stepping in front of them
brandishing his spear*)

Quiet.

(*Light on STAGE RIGHT fades. We can barely see anyone. Light on far STAGE LEFT fades in. MAE and ZILOG are surrounded by the CROWD. The CROWD is between them and NATHANIEL and TRENT. NATHANIEL and TRENT look silently toward the archway. MAE has her hand on ZILOG's bicep. They look over and through the CROWD, toward STAGE RIGHT. MAE breathes hard from the exertion of helping to get someone to the infirmary.*)

MAE

We have to get back.

(*ZILOG sweeps his arm to part the CROWD.*)

MAE

(*Panicked*)

Stop.

ZILOG

[*Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas?*]

MAE

(*Breathing hard*)

Just (*Pauses and glances at the CROWD*) It's... (*Pressing closer to ZILOG*) The blood...

ZILOG

[*Sang?*]

MAE

(*Panicking*)

Everywhere. It occurred to me. The simile of a wine

press. But instead of grape juice there was blood running everywhere.

ZILOG

[De quoi as-tu besoin?]

MAE

(Panicking)

Some...space. I need some space.

(ZILOG sweeps his arm. The members of the CROWD nearest are forced back. He lifts her off to the side.)

MAE

(Breathing hard)

This is fine....I just need a minute. *(Slowly regains control of herself)* I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let that get to me so badly. *(She touches ZILOG's arm)* Thank you.

ZILOG

[Pourquoi?]

MAE

For not asking what's wrong. *(Turns and looks over the CROWD)* We should get back. We've already wasted enough time on my stupid problems. And I don't like the idea of him being alone up there.

ZILOG

[Il est fort.]

MAE

I know he's strong. I'm not saying he's not. It's just I'm afraid he hasn't dealt with what happened out there in the desert yet. He doesn't act right. There's something still wrong. And if this situation degrades and anyone else gets hurt...I don't know.... *(Shakes her head)* Anything could happen.

ZILOG

[Nous allons le regarder.]

MAE

We don't have the luxury of being in control of the situation.

ZILOG

[C'est la vie.]

MAE

We'd better go. (ZILOG puts his arm around her and parts the CROWD with a swipe of his arm) We've got too many fuses. And we can just hope nothing lights any of them.

(Light on STAGE LEFT fades out. Light on STAGE RIGHT fades in. CATHERINE and PAMELA still sit tied. BAKER still lies on the ground. A blood pool has formed beside him. YOUNG MAN #1 and YOUNG MAN #2 hold their spears by the archway. YOUNG MAN #3 and YOUNG MAN #4 stand with their spears facing STAGE RIGHT. YOUNG MAN #3 looks over his shoulder at CATHERINE and PAMELA. He goes to the water vessel and takes a dipper full and brings it to them.)

PAMELA

(Shaking her head)

It's too close to the last ration. That means something to some of us.

(Moving jerkily with spite, YOUNG MAN #3 empties the dipper into the water vessel.)

CATHERINE

There's still time to get him help.

(YOUNG MAN #3 returns to his position by STAGE RIGHT.)

YOUNG MAN #1

(Looking over shoulder)

It'll just be a little longer.

CATHERINE

For what? (YOUNG MAN #1 *turns back toward the archway without a reply*) I don't think you came down here to steal from everyone else.

YOUNG MAN #1

(Looking around)

We have to.

PAMELA

(Incredulous)

You have to?

YOUNG MAN #1

It's the only way.

CATHERINE

For what?

YOUNG MAN #1

(Without looking back)

To save everyone.

PAMELA

What're you talking about? You're going to save us all by stealing and killing us. Is that it?

CATHERINE

(Almost soothingly)

How is it supposed to save us?

YOUNG MAN #1

(Still without looking back)

There's another way out.

PAMELA

No, there isn't.

YOUNG MAN #1

Yes, there is. It's a secret opening that comes out on the side, so it can't be blocked by sand. But it's really far away. Miles. Miles and miles through the passages. It'll take weeks, maybe months, to get there.

PAMELA

The city isn't that big.

YOUNG MAN #1

But it is down here. It goes on forever.

PAMELA

That's impossible.

YOUNG MAN #1

But it's true.

CATHERINE

Okay. But how is this supposed to help?

YOUNG MAN #2

(To YOUNG MAN #1)

Shut up.

YOUNG MAN #1

(To YOUNG MAN #2)

But why shouldn't they know? (*He looks over his shoulder at CATHERINE*) Because we'll need supplies for the journey. Then once we're out, we can get the others and dig down faster than anyone here can dig. And we can get everyone out.

CATHERINE

Why didn't you tell anyone about this?

YOUNG MAN #1

Because they wouldn't believe us.

PAMELA

It doesn't make any sense. If there's a way out, why doesn't ZILOG know about it?

YOUNG MAN #1

I told you. Because it's infinite. How could anyone know something that's infinite?

CATHERINE

How do you know all this?

(λ emerges from STAGE RIGHT.)

λ

What's going on here? What're you doing? Get them up.

YOUNG MAN #1

Why?

λ

Just do as you're fucking told. Cut them loose and get them up. But don't untie their hands.

CATHERINE

(To λ)

What're you really doing?

λ

What does it look like, you dumb bitch.

CATHERINE

(*Looking at the young men on each side*)

He's lying to you. I don't know why. But everything he's told you is a lie. There's no secret door. You—

λ

Shut the fuck up, bitch. (*To YOUNG MAN #2*) Get something for a fucking gag. I don't want to have to listen to her. (*But YOUNG MAN #2 doesn't move*) What're you waiting for—do it.

CATHERINE

They know it's true. It—

(*λ moves swiftly and backhands her across the face.*)

λ

(*Shining a light in her face*)

I said fucking shut it. (*Looks round at the young men*)
Fucking stay here if you want.

CATHERINE

There's still time to stop this before it goes too far.

λ

(*Screaming*)

Shut up. (*He jumps and produces a rifle from just off STAGE RIGHT and aims it first at CATHERINE then sweeps it over the young men*) Drop them. (*Jerks*) I said drop them now.

(*STAGE RIGHT dims, but we can still barely make everyone out. Everyone turns. An emaciated figure emerges from STAGE RIGHT with a candle in hand. His nose is missing. Large chunks of skin leave exposed red. Shadows appear between ribs. His lips pull back to reveal missing or blackened teeth.*)

REVEREND

...I come...to bring...the.....good news...reject...
the...body...andpurifyyour...souls...for...
paradiseawaits...

(*STAGE RIGHT fades out. STAGE LEFT fades in.*)

The CROWD has pulled away from NATHANIEL and TRENT as if an invisible wall separates them. TRENT watches the archway intently. N emerges from STAGE LEFT and moves toward NATHANIEL. She steps through the CROWD as if they are not there. She comes close and puts her hand on his shoulder.)

N

(Talking only to NATHANIEL)

Have you ever noticed how things can be so alien and yet be so normative at the same time? Isn't that an interesting contradiction? You know, one of these days, after this's all over, we're going to have to have a talk about the human fascination with dark and secret places. *(Glances toward the archway)* But not now. *(Looks at TRENT)* Now's the time for sacrifices. *(Touches NATHANIEL's bandaged neck and face)* The variables will keep moving.

(N pulls away and turns and casually walks off STAGE LEFT. BRITTNEY enters from STAGE LEFT and runs through the CROWD.)

NATHANIEL

What're you doing here? I told you to hold the other passage.

BRITTNEY

(Out of breath)

But you didn't say anything about something getting in.
(A loud bang. Everyone looks toward the darkened archway.)

CROWD

It's happening.

BRITTNEY

Oh, no....

(Another loud bang.)

NATHANIEL

(Jerking)

No. *(Yells)* No.

(NATHANIEL runs toward the archway and raises his cane as if it were a weapon. Light on STAGE LEFT fades. STAGE LEFT and STAGE RIGHT flash red at intervals and cast bodies in silhouette. We see only frozen abstractions.)

[Description of triptych panel 1]

A figure has 'is rifle raised over'is head'n both hands as Nathaniel swings down'is cane. Brittney and Trent race toward the archway. The crowd's nothing but a mass of wild faces, expressions more gargoylish than human. Zilog towers over'em, shoves a brace of'em aside with a sweep of one of'is massive arms. He's almost gigantic proportions'n this image, at least twice as tall as any other figure, all fury and massive black beard.

[Description of triptych panel 2]

Here, the figure with the rifle's more void-esque than anywhere else, barely a collection of scratched lines tumbling toward the ground as Catherine starts t'rise, and though ostensibly facing away, her upper body contorts'n that way common t'art from this section, which allows the blood marks across'er chest t'b'visible. Almost comically, Trent's posed impossibly as'e uses a single spear to hold four young men against a wall and'f anyone were positioned that way'n real-life they'd b'pushed over instantly, but't provides a dynamism that somehow still fits.

[Description of triptych panel 3]

Everything is washed'n red. A figure lays[†] on the ground. Catherine and Nathaniel stand over'm. The shadowing's subtle. Maybe'n daylight't'd b'possible t'discern other figures, but down'ere'n candlelight, only those three're apparant, though the surrounding red-washed darkness seems to pulse frenetically with possibility. There's a very tiny yellow wedge'n the background and some've taken this t'b'the reverend's candle, but on closer inspection, it seems as'f't'd b'just something stuck'n the paint.

The stage goes dark.

“And no one goes alone, anymore,” Martina said. “Anywhere.”

He groaned and tried t'sit up. Shingles skittled overhead and the sound rattled round'n the darkened room. Absently, he reached for the nightstand, touched where the clock'd been. "At least *that* wasn't a dream."

The larger clock below chimed. Maybe'e slept again, fitfully woke, must've wondered whether't was the first or third or fifth or tenth chime. He cleared'is throat, reached for the lamp. But't'dn't light. "Fine. Be that way." He eased the covers off. His bladder'd've felt as'f't'd started t'back into'is kidney. And carefully, he'd've tested for glass with'is toes.

Yellow light invaded through the opening door.

"What time is it?" he said.

She'd traded'er pearlescent nightclothes and robe for a high-collared-puffed-shouldered dress that must've seemed three shades blacker than that darkened room. And she stepped t'place the lamp on the dresser. "If you care to get dressed, you can come down for lunch."

"Lunch?"

"Yes," she said, and turned back through the open door.

"You're joking."

"No."

"What's for—"

She touched the brass doorknob and pulled't after'er.

He sat there a few moments'n lamplight. He reached for'is cane propped against the nightstand. A dull ache'd've started'n'is side. And first'e'd've'd t'cross the hall into the bathroom. A small candle'd flickered'n a cut-glass holder on back of the sink. There'd've already

been a subtle smell when'e raised the toilet lid, but maybe'e'dn't've noticed yellowed water under the candle's light. Habitually, he fitted'mself back through'is pajama bottoms and set the lid and seat down and reached for the handle. So water'd've rushed out. Replaced by nothing. And when'e turned toward the sink, the tap might've burst air, but otherwise'd've remained dry. So the only thing t'do'd've been t'rub'is fingers against the towel hung through the chrome ring by the sink.

The clock below'd've chimed a half or quarter hour by the time'e'd gotten dressed and made'is way downstairs. The dining room doorway glowed. Beatrice sat at'er usual place. A lamp sat acenter the table. And she'dn't look up as'is cane's rubber end tip-tupped dining room hardwood, but concentrated on the book propped'n the metal holder set by'er plate.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Slow."

She placed a fork-ended ribbon against a page and closed'er book. "It's to be expected." And she rang a nearby bell once. "I hope you're feeling better."

"Some. Better than yesterday, I think."

"That's good." And she laid'er napkin across'er lap. "I'm sure the doctor will be glad to hear that when the phones come back."

"So the phones are still down, as well."

"That's what I said."

Esmerelde entered from the kitchen, set a tray on the table and dispersed plates from't, but seemed t'look up only so far as necessary t'perform that operation, before she'd lifted the tray and turned toward the kitchen.

Beatrice lifted'er spoon, glanced at Ron. "Need something?"

He looked at'er. "I was looking for the sugar."

"There isn't any."

"I'm not surprised."

"Oh?"

"The way that pantry looks..." He spooned a bite and faintly grimaced as'e chewed And'e paused, elbow on the table, spoon balanced limply between'is fingers.

"Please, try not to be so vulgar."

"What did I do?"

She inclined'er gaze towards'is forearm. And'e pulled't from the tablecloth. "It's not as if anyone's going to see."

She rang the bell. Esmerelde appeared through the door. "Mr Lindercott would like some sugar with his meal. Please, go get some."

"But ma'am... You know—"

"Go find some anyway."

"Ma'am?"

"You heard me. I don't like to repeat myself. And I want you to be extra thorough in your search. Understand?"

Esmerelde paused, but nodded and turned and pushed back through into the kitchen.

Listening t'the sounds of cabinets and tins and bins being opened beyond, Ron watched the kitchen door, then looked down at the table. "That for my benefit?"

"Hmm? I don't quite follow, dear?"

Cabinet doors opened and closed with soft thwaps. "I take it I'm supposed to *get* something from this."

"I have to say, I'm having trouble with your meaning this morning, dear."

Kitchen sounds faded. She must've moved into the pantry. He stirred'is food. "I don't know. I think we're beginning to understand one another quite well."

Wind accompanied their cutlery. And Beatrice opened'er book again, adjusted the holder's brass struts t'pin't that way. She'd just reached for the bell when Esmerelde entered.

"If Mr Lindercott's agreeable, will you please adjust the lamp." And she glanced at'er husband.

"Don't mind me."

Beatrice motioned and Esmerelde leaned across the table t'shift the lamp.

"Thank you," Beatrice said. "Mr Lindercott will no longer be needing any sugar."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But I would like you to look again later."

"There isn't any, ma'am."

"Well, look again, anyway."

"Yes, ma'am."

And't must've seemed almost instantly that she'd rung the bell again and Esmerelde'd appeared.

"You may clear the dishes." And Beatrice dis-fastened'er book from'ts holder and slid the fork-ended marker against the page. She reached and drew a long sliver from those bundled'n a glass acenter the table and turned the lamp knob that raised'ts glass globe and used the sliver t'light a candle'n a ringed holder. "Mr Lindercott and I will retire to the living room. We'll expect dinner at five o'clock."

"Yes, ma'am."

Book against'er hip, Beatrice paused beside'is chair, candleholder raised'n'er free hand. "Come along, dear. We don't want to be in her way." She looked up. "And when you're finished, you can put out this lamp."

"Yes, ma'am."

"There's no use wasting the oil."

"Yes, ma'am."

And Beatrice took'is arm as'e raised'mself from'is seat. His cane dully tapped hardwood and blended with and punctuated clinking china as she loaded't onto the tray behind'em.

"Since the radio's out," she said, "I'm afraid we're going to have to make our own entertainment." A shadow must've passed over'is face, because she said, "Are you alright?"

"Fine."

"Are you sure? For a moment...it felt as if you were shaking. You're sweating."

"Just a little hot," he said. "Stuffy."

They stopped outside the darkened living room. "Do you need to go up?"

"I'll be fine."

She laid'er book on a chair-side table and set the candleholder down by a lamp. Nearby sat a drinking glass with more slivers. And she raised the lamp's glass with one hand and drew a sliver with t'other and placed't'n the candled flame till't lighted and she touched't t'the wick.

"Why not just use a match?" he said.

"Because," she said. Woodsmoke tinged the air as she blew out the sliver and placed't'n a dish. "Matches get used up. This way you

only have to use one a day. So long as you have a light burning, you can use it to light the rest.” And she leaned down and blew out the candle. Smoke curled’n lamplight. “In fact,” she said, and turned and moved t’set the lamp on the mantel, “it’s part of the standard recommendations now for emergency situations.”

“It is?”

“Yes, it is. They’re very easy to make. And all the materials are right at hand.”

“And who devised this?”

“Someone.”

“Someone.” He shifted’is weight on’is cane and glanced round. “Well, if someone was going to think of something they should’ve been thinking about how to reinforce the water system. That at least would’ve been of some practical use. And speaking of, something’s going to have to be done about upstairs.”

“Upstairs?” She glanced back and broken trinkets seemed t’dance over’er shoulder’n lamplight. “Oh.” She nodded. “That’s taken care of.”

“How?”

“We filled the bathtub before the water went out, also according to the new guidelines, if you want to know. And anything we have leftover from... other things, and whatever we might have to cleanup, though we’ll have to be careful, we can fill the tank with the discard. We’ll just have to watch and only...empty it once a day, if we can manage. We’ve dug out a few scented candles. And since we’ll only cook what we can reuse the same pot for, we—”

“Another one of the new recommendations?”

“Yes,” she said.

“If it had been done right, when the council—”

“Things break down,” she said.

“If it’s done right—”

“Then you’ll just think it’s foolproof and won’t be prepared for when something does go wrong.”

“What makes you think it’s always going to?”

“Because,” she said. “You can’t account for everything.”

“Then why prepare for anything? No, the only thing to do is make sure it works right the first time. If you can do that—”

"If—" She turned. "You think you know everything, don't you? You think it's all been mapped out—and all you have to do is plug everything in right and that's it. You're nothing but a sanctimonious—" But what'd've come next only existed as an earmarked placeholder never t'b'filled.

Her breath quickened. She went on: "The problem with men is you can't survive on your own. Starve. Run around in filth because you wouldn't know the first thing about washing anything. And who knows what else? So the only way you can make it is to try and couple up some huge contiguous system like a railway track that extends forever into the future and pray to God nothing upsets it." She shook'er head, collected'er breath. "And God forbid something *did* happen, because it would look like...like..." She shook'er head.

He stood there a moment, hunched forward on'is cane. "I guess you've got it all figured out then. Maybe we should just put you on the council. Better yet, you could have my job."

She held'erself erect. "What do you think's been going on since you were half-dead?"

"I assume—"

"You assume." She pulled'er hand from the mantel, clenched'er fists. "You assume. Just like you do with everything else. Tomorrow's going to be just like today and the day after that and the day after that. Except it's not. Never has been. But you just assume. And go right ahead. And what did you *assume*? Hmm? Tell me. No, let me guess. You *assumed* the council was taking care of everything. And if you mean running us all into the ground—yes—they're taking care of everything." He moved as'f t'maybe speak, but she cut'm off. "Giles? Hit in the head when their roof collapsed. Oh, he's fine. But about as bad as you were. Grady? Dust lungs. Miller and Donovan? Ha! Even God doesn't have the power to make those two commit to anything. Ralph? He's more problem than solution. And Jim—" She shook'er head. "We'll be lucky if there's still a town standing when he's done."

"Wh—"

"I'm talking—" she said. "Now I'm going to tell you what you didn't assume. You didn't assume that Ferguson's would start raising prices as soon as the storm set in. You didn't assume that people would

start breaking into things. You didn't assume there would *be* no food to distribute even if anyone *could* afford it. You didn't expect the electricity to go out. Or the water. Or the phones. Or that it would derail the train." Deep breath. "So much for what you assumed."

After a few moments: "Well?"

But'e'dn't reply.

"Well?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to act like *something* is going on."

He stood there balanced on 'is cane.

"Are you going to say anything?"

"You seem to have covered everything," he said, and turn toward the door. But halfway there, he stopped, looked back. "One thing," he said.

"Yes."

"If nobody's in charge...where are all these new emergency recommendations coming from?"

"Me."

"You?"

She nodded.

"I don't understand."

"It's simple," she said. "I've been *doing your job*."

"How?"

"By lying."

He looked at'er. Blink.

"Yes," she said. "No one knows you were as sick as you were. They just thought you couldn't get out of bed and how nice it was of me to relay any messages you had for what needed to be done."

"But Greg—"

"Hasn't been here since the storm got worse."

He seemed t'consider, a moment, then turned toward the doorway again. "I guess you've got everything figured out."

(TRENT *exits* STAGE RIGHT *pursued by* MAN *wielding shovel.*)

She lay there with'er head'n Abigail's lap as Abigail'd slept leaned back against the cave wall as she breathed fitfully. But Abigail shifted.

"I hate to..."

Mary-Celleste stiffly rolled and sat up. There'd been a medical technician with'em, but all she'd've been able t'tell'd've been the obvious bout no broken bones or burst organs. And Mary-Celleste sat there silent, as'f collecting'erself, what was left t'collect, as'f t'd've seemed t'matter, and she'dn't say anything as Abigail groaned and stretched'er stiffened and bruised legs. Abigail'd've been injured bout as much, but taken less of't'n the face, so't'dn't've showed as readily.

"I'm sorry," Abigail said. Probably instinctually, she glanced round t'make sure enough of the rest were awake t'b'on guard. "I'll be back in a few minutes." She glanced over'er shoulder, maybe feeling somehow responsible for what'd happened and maybe remembering what't'd felt like t'eventually find Mary-Celleste lying'n that darkened borehole. None looked up as she moved and she tapped a woman on the shoulder and she clicked-on'er light and they moved back through the cave.

Smoke tinged the air.

A crumpled cigarette pack lay nearby.

A red bead lit the dimness where Martina sat and dully illuminated'er face as she slowly turned the lighter over and over'n'er other hand. Absently, she touched'er blood-crust'd lip with'er rip-blackened thumbnail when she removed the cigarette t'exhale. Maybe she imagined she peered across the cave and located Scarlet'n the dimness, where she huddled and nursed'er own wounds and cradled'er backpack and those desiccated skin and small bones swaddled within.

"They're back."

(**MAN** *exits* **STAGE LEFT** *pursued by* **TRENT** *wielding shovel.*)

“Every day you have to be ready to claw your way up again,” Beatrice said. “Because everything’s always shifting.”

"The thin's," someone said, "Britt was supposed t've been bedrid-den fer most of what occurred then, right?"

"Wut uv et?"

"No, I've just always been curious bout that'ole thin. It's—"

"Whats's tuse bese curious bouts?" Lizbeth said as she accepted the pipe. "Its's alls poppycocks."

"So yuh *keep* sayin."

Ambeth glanced at'er. "I'dn't know why yuh're waitin round'ere, anyway. Isn't yuhr, whoever yuh're supposed t'b'guidin, off gettin lost'r somethin?"

Lizbeth laughed, drew on the pipe and tilted'er head back t'blow smoke rings. "I'ms just'eres tuse smokes."

"Never catch yuh tradin for somethin when yuh can use somebody else's, right?"

Lizbeth drew again on the pipe and passed't on.

"I'm jus sayin, though, they must've'd pretty good aim t'it'er'n the head that way with'em movin on the water."

"Luck," Li said. "Throw nuf stones yuh're bound t'it somethin. And they missed June completely, so—"

"Whats'res yours," Lizbeth said as she leaned back on'er elbows and looked at the sky. "Yous becomins a believers nows?"

Li'dn't reply.

"But," somebody said, "they weren't movin. The rope they jerked up outa the water'd've stopped the boat and that'd've made't easier, I mean, at least they'dn't've been movin targets."

"I once heard a story," someone said. "I once heard a story where Trent sets out t'find the two men and get revenge."

“Why?”

“What do yuh mean why? For beatin’ m up and near killin him and rapin’ m and everythin. What’d yuh think why?”

“That’dn’t make no sense,” Li said. “They’ere both at bottom of the river. ’ow yuh get any more revenge than that?”

“They’dn’t’ve t’b’dead. They’d’ve survived and swam away under the water and hid.”

Li snorted and shook’er head. “Yuh’dn’t get—BAM—an oar t’ the temple and go under the water and come up gain.” She shook’er head.

“Well, I just said I heard the story’s all.”

Leaned back and looking at the sky, Lizbeth motioned with’er free hand. “Makes sures tuse gets alls thats downs, scribblers.”

(Everyone settles into sleeping. A single light illuminates TROY's and PAMELA's cot.)

PAMELA

(Voice low)

Everything's so quiet. *(She pauses. TROY doesn't reply)*
Are you asleep?

TROY

No.

PAMELA

You sure?

TROY

Uh uh.

PAMELA

Because—

TROY

I'm fine.

PAMELA

You're breathing hard.

TROY

It's...sometimes.

PAMELA

What?

TROY

Sometimes...I start thinking about tomorrow and it's like a steel band's tightening round my chest.

PAMELA

What's wrong with tomorrow?

TROY

I don't mean...not tomorrow tomorrow. I'm talking about the future. Things that could happen.

PAMELA

You could just try not to worry.

TROY

That's like telling somebody that's cut to stop bleeding.

PAMELA

I guess.

TROY

I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that.

PAMELA

No. It's—

TROY

It's just not that easy. And it's hard to explain.
(*Five beat pause.*)

PAMELA

I'll tell you a secret.

TROY

What?

PAMELA

I'm scared of mice.

TROY

Why?

PAMELA

I don't know. They're small. Sometimes I have bad dreams they're in bed with me.

TROY

You just gotta shoo them away. They're not that big a deal.

PAMELA

And you just got to stop worrying. *(He doesn't reply)* They're even down here, you know. Sometimes you can hear them squeak in silent passages. Listen—can't you hear something now?

TROY

No.

PAMELA

Really? Well... Is this useless conversation distracting you enough to make you feel better?

TROY

(After a pause)

It was. *(Laughs)* Some, I guess.

PAMELA

(Snuggling against him)

I don't want to die down here.

TROY

(Putting his arm over her)

Then just don't die.

PAMELA

That's the same thing you said before. (*Snuggles against him*) I have dreams about the dome ripping. It sounds like thunder. And the sand and wind rush in and burns my nose and my eyes and I can't see or hear.

TROY

Sounds like a nightmare.

PAMELA

Then someone grabs my hand and pulls me along. (*Snuggles against him*) And it's you. And I scream 'I don't want to die yet,' as we run, 'not before I've ever managed to do anything.' And you yell, 'Then don't die.'

(*They continue to embrace one another as the light fades. TRENT enters from STAGE RIGHT They look up to see he is holding his hand against his bloodied side.*)

One man, a patchy white beard obscured his mouth as he talked, repeated for the fifth or seventh time: "All we have to do is dig them out." But none replied anymore. None bothered to repeat that even if they'd managed to dig the trucks from beneath the fresh slide, the canyon'd've still been blocked, short of anything less than heavy equipment. "We can make a chain," he said, without aid of their reply. "Hand down rocks person to person. It won't take long at all. You just need enough people. You can calculate..." He'd repeated this many times.

“Programmers,” someone said, “always think they’re engineers.”
“And engineers...”
“And something something artists...”

“Yuh’ve been on a pilgrimage?”

Lizabeth snorted. “Ohs, hecks noze. Whies the hecks’ds Ise wannas spends alls thats times walkins outs theres tuse dos nothins.”

Li passed a waterbag t’someone else. “I’ve.”

Lizabeth pulled a face at’er. “Whats’res yous turnins’ntos ones ofs’ems nows?”

Li’dn’t reply.

Someone said, “What’s’t like?”

Lizabeth snorted.

Vomit stench'd've pervaded the cavern. Those that'dn't consumed enough t'die'd've lay on their backs looking up at nothing. Eventually they'd've t'stack the bodies deeper into the boreholes.

When yuh go t'offer food, they sit at the end of a passage as'f they'd been waiting, leather-dry lips pulled back from their teeth. But Ceili and Argile'dn't've laid'em out like that then. That'd t've been done later.

Every time Abigail opened'er mouth, she tasted vomit-tinged air and foughtn't t'add t't. She sat up, bleary eyed, her face a crinkled mask of caked mud and tear routes. And she'dn't bother t'try and rub't away. Distant large figures stood'n the light that filtered down from the cave mouth. Neither Mary-Celleste nor'er pack were on the ground by'er anymore. She sniffed and stood and wiped'er eyes and nose. And she stumbled over t'where sand'd collected at the bottom of the cave mouth. Sun shining down from above, meaningless clear sky and sun-baked open desert and heatwaver-sublimated hills impossibly distant beyond. "What's going on?"

Mary-Celleste stood there.

"Talk to her," Argile said.

Ceili added, "Please."

"She's going to try and walk across the desert."

Abigail shook'er head. "That's impossible. No..." And she'd've sniffed and maybe closed'er eyes as she collected'erself. "You'll die."

"We can't let you do that," Ceili said.

"No," Argile said.

Ceili said, "We can stop you if we have to."

Argile: "Yes."

Ceili: "Please..." He grabbed'er arm.

"STOP IT!" Abigail's eyes'd've burned, but she'd've'd no more tears. "Leave her alone." She planted'er hands hard'n one of their chests. "What business is it of yours to go telling grown women what they can and can't do?"

Ceili let go.

Argile: "We're just—"

"Just being fascists." Abigail sniffed, wiped'er nose again. "Well, why don't you go be big strong he-men somewhere else."

"But..."

"Suicide..."

"So?" Abigail said and glared up at'em. And she took a hard breath, nodded t'erself, and she turned toward Mary-Celleste. "Just give me fifteen minutes." And she turned t'walk back and gather'er things.

"Wait—"

Abigail whirled and fixed'er bloodshot eyes on Argile. "DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!"

(PAMELA holds a light over TRENT as he pinches his bloody stomach and runs a needle through it and pulls the thread tight.)

PAMELA

(Grimacing)

I don't see how you can do that to yourself.

(TRENT pushes the needle through his flesh again and looks up at PAMELA. He grins as he draws it tight. PAMELA looks away. TRENT returns his attention to his bloody midsection.)

The sun settled into late evening at the valley's far end and rendered the cave opening black void behind Mary-Celleste. And she pulled'er hat brim down against't.

If by then Ceili and Argile'd've required injections, they'd've'd t' transport the medication somehow. They'dn't possbily've conceived of such a trip without't and't'd've'd t've been kept cold, probably. And they'd've brought a refrigerator'n the trucks. Chevsky'd've wired that up. And'f there were enough parts between the trucks and the battery banks and what'd been left off the tractors, she'd've rigged some kind of solar panel setup for'em, maybe. Even'f they'dn't've supplied all the power t'run something like that, she'd've hooked one of the batteries and worked out a rudimentary sip-charge circuit that'd kick on and off at the proper voltage. But they'd've'd t've'd some way t'move't. They'd've constructed some runners from the parts left from the tractor or the trucks, maybe. And'f they'd attached a harness t't, they'd've pulled'n tandem or traded off.

It'd've worked.

Mary-Celleste moved toward the distant setting sun and the blood-rimmed ridges't slid behind. Abigail settled into pace beside'er. Ceili and Argile followedn't far behind, harnesses tight on their shoulders as the refrigerator skimmed over sand and the compressor kicked on and hummed.

Behind'em, others stretched'n loose parade, goggles round their necks, hats and makeshift headgear pulled down against razor-wire sun as they walked into crimson-orange-misted horizon.

A snuffle carried from t'other side of the door as'e pushed through. But the sound drowned amid clinking plates and silverware. She turned, looked up from the sink as'e entered, nodded, turned and removed'er hands from the sink and wiped'er fingers on a towel draped over'er shoulder. "You're not supposed to be in here."

"Probably not," he said, and let the door swing shut behind'm as'e ambled toward the counter. "I'm surprised we'd be wasting water on these things."

She shook'er head, pointed t'the bucket on the counter's edge. "Sand," she said and lifted a plate from the sink t'show how she'd scoured't, then pulled the towel from'er shoulder and wiped't clean.

"That works?"

"Almost too well," she said, and added the plate t'the newly clean stack. "I have to be careful not to rub too hard or the pattern could come off."

"Hmm. Where'd you learn that?"

"Mrs Lindercott," she said. "It's one of the new emergency preparation techniques they've been issuing. She keeps up with all the bulletins."

"Oh." He turned as'f t'look at something, rubbed'is cheeks, the scrub-sound of'is not-shaven face too apparent. "You were crying," he said, and looked back at'er.

And she turned away and lifted a stack of plates into a cabinet. "It's nothing."

"You know, people say nothing for something so often, maybe we should change the definition in the dictionary."

She closed the cabinet and looked back at'm. "I just wish this

storm would end. So everything can be alright again. So I would know everything was alright.”

He glanced back toward the pantry. “Maybe.”

“What does that mean?”

But’e shrugged. “Maybe there isn’t really a storm out there at all.” And’e turned t’glance over’is shoulder at the back door. “Maybe it’s just some sort of manifestation. A projection of the state of our minds. Would that be real?” He paused. “Or maybe even just one of our minds. It could be that one of us is inflicting this on all the rest of us.”

She stared at’m a moment, looked round’m toward the door, then back t’him.

“You don’t have to worry,” he said. “I’ll give you a clear line to the door.” And pivoting on’is cane, he ambled toward the kitchen table and pulled out a chair and eased into’t. “It doesn’t matter. I think it’ll all be over soon.”

Her brow furrowed. “What will?”

“Everything.”

“You think the storm’s going to end soon?”

“I think everything’s going to end soon.”

She glanced over’er shoulder at the hall door.

“Go on. You’d better go get her.” And’e moved the cane between’is legs and rested both hands atop’ts crook. “Unless you’re interested in taking your clothes off.”

Her eyes widened.

“Too bad,” he said. “Better go get her.”

Esmerelde glanced over’er shoulder, looked back at’m as’f t’ensure’e’d remained’n the chair, then disappeared into the hall with quick muffled steps on carpet.

Sitting there, he glanced up at the ceiling as wind banged something against the house, then back t’the door as Bea pushed through and held’t open. “Huff and puff and blow your house down,” he said as she stood there holding the door open. “Do I look like a wild cat?” And she just stared at’m. “Did she tell you what I...propositioned her for?” But Bea neither replied, nor moved. “I guess probably not.” He looked down at the floor. “How about you? All those times I was somewhere else, did you *really* know what I was doing, or was that just all talk?”

"I have a good idea," she said, and stepped into the kitchen and eased the door shut so t'dn't swing wild.

"You do?" He cocked 'is head as'e looked up. "You really think you do?"

"I know about things."

"Oh, apparently so. I'm beginning to think there's *nothing* you don't know about. And we all know whose domain *that* is." He shifted 'is weight onto the cane and stood. "Would you happen to be God in disguise?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Sees everything. Knows everything. Sure you're not all-powerful?"

"You need to lie down."

"No," he said. "I don't think so. Well...unless that's an offer in regard to all those things you say you *know* so much about." And when'er face'd've shifted because'er cheeks'd've burned, he'd've faintly smiled. "Fair enough, I guess. I wouldn't want you to lower yourself in social standing. No, I couldn't rob you of that. It's deplorable—isn't it—to take *everything* a person has. Maybe worse than killing them—"

"Stop it."

"Okay." And'e nodded. "I wouldn't want to embarrass you anymore. So I've decided. I think I'm going for a walk."

"What?"

"To get out of your hair. Or say whatever you like about it. I'm sure you can come up with something. In fact, I'd say you're *excellent* at it. You can probably make up a better life for me than I could. So why don't I leave it to you? Apparently, I already have, anyway." He turned, as'f t'move for the back door, and she cut across the kitchen and got between'm and't—

But'e pivoted on'is cane and pushed through into the hall. Beatrice yelled for Esmerelde, who appeared wide eyed'n the living room doorway as'e pushed past and Beatrice burst through the kitchen door so hard't'd've slammed the wall. Even needing the cane'e'd've already made't t'the front door and grabbed the knob, yanked once, but't'dn't give. And as Bea came down the hall'is gripped'd've tightened till'is knuckles'd've discolored and'e'd've jerked and went

off balance as the door swung open and'e spun and toppled the coat rack and everything fluttered down onto'n-rushing sand that buried'is ankles.

"Are you hurt?" They stepped over the coat rack and between spilled parasols and over jackets and hats. "Is anything broken?"

He looked up at'em, turned'is head. "Rather nice day, isn't it?"

One after t'other, the women followed'is gaze out over the chest-high dune that'd pressed against the front door and still spilled into the hall, out over dune-crested yards and streets and sand mounded houses on the far side, where timber and trusses shoved up from black-gashed roofs, wounds too similar t'a fish's skeleton left on a plate after the rest'd been consumed.

But beyond everything, cloudless sky.

"Yes," he said. "Not half bad." He glanced up at Bea. "Maybe we could have a picnic."

“Shut up.”

Except for microwave hum, the interior returned t’ts former quietude. But the tractor rolled on and’ts caterpillar-esque-numerous wheels left a diffused dust trail long’n’ts wake against the clear sky that leaked through’ts viewports.

“It wouldn’t matter anyway. We’re almost there.”

“How do you know?”

“I went up front while you were asleep.”

Somebody threw something and’t slammed the microwave. Joan jerked. “Hey—watch it—”

“Those hills were always unstable in that area—they’d been buried under a mountain of rubble. Are you going to miss your chance to get out for people who were never coming?”

“You don’t know that.”

“You don’t either.”

The microwave beeped and Joan punched’t open and lifted out two trays and jammed’t shut with’er elbow. She walked back t’the bunks. “This’s what happens when you put too many old people together,” she said. “Here.” And Allison balanced the hot plastic container on’er fingertips and eased’t into’er lap. Eating, she looked up as the hatch clicked and Sasha entered and squeezed down the aisle between silent glares and rooted’n an overhead compartment. “We’ll get in just a little after the timeslip.” And she ripped open a squeeze tube with’er teeth and gulped. “And anybody who’s demarking better have their stuff ready. Because we’re going to leave as soon as we’re able.” She turned and looked through a viewport as she ran’er clamped fingers up the packet t’squeeze out the dregs.

Someone: "There's no use in going back."

Sasha'dn't reply, just licked'er thumb clean and shoved the packet into the garbage.

"Don't blame us."

"You're here too."

"Yeah, you could've stayed."

Sasha turned toward a bunk. "For anybody who cares, we're taking the route back by the city, and we're gonna drop off and pickup anything we need there and then head on to the caves and then come back around."

Joan said, "We'll get off there."

Sasha sat forward in the hutch and glanced down at'em. "I'd like to hear that from her."

Joan shrugged. "Tell her."

Allison shook'er head, glanced up from'er tray. "I guess."

"It's pointless to go back."

"Shut up."

Sasha lay back. And after a while, she pulled down the privacy screen.

"Better get some sleep," Joan said, "if you want me to show you round the socket."

Allison nodded.

"What's the matter?"

Allison looked at'er, shook'er head.

"Never mind," Joan said. "Let's just eat so we can get to bed."

Viewports'd've faded t'pink, then darkness. Only faint running lights'd've remained, interspersed down the walkway. In semidarkness, Joan slid off an upper bunk, touched'er barefeet t'metal floor. "Are you awake?"

Cradled'n recessed darkness, Allison nodded, then whispered, "Yes."

"Mind if I come down here with you?"

"Okay."

Joan crawled into the lower bunk. "Can't sleep?" Barely visible'n the running light's glow, Allison shook'er head. "Excited? About tomorrow?" Allison nodded, but something bout't'dn't've seemed definitive. Joan glanced over'er shoulder, down the corridor. "The light bothering you?"

"Some," Allison said.

"Want me to show you something?"

"What?"

Joan reached for the bunk's upper edge and pulled down the corrugated privacy screen. Submerged'n darkness with only the sounds of their breathing, Joan reached across'er and clicked-on a faint overhead light. "Better?"

During the time they were traveling, it seems as'f Allison'd've acclimated at least some t'people'n various states of dress. But what'd she've worn when she slept? Her clothes? Would someone've loaned'er something?

"You know I like you, don't you?" Joan said. And Allison nodded. "It's why I helped you out when they caught you. All kinds of hell would've broken loose if you'd stayed around there, you know. You should probably thank me for that. Who knows where you'd be now?"

"Thank you," Allison said.

"You're welcome. But there's a lot of ways to thank someone, you know." Joan shifted on'er hip. She scooted up beside'er. "Alright?" Joan said.

Allison nodded.

"I can show you what to do," Joan said, and rested'er hand on Allison's thigh. "Just relax." Her lips pressed t'the side of Allison's neck, nose'n'er hair, and she moved'er hand.

Breathing hard, face heated, Allison weakly pushed away. "Stop..."

"It'll be good," Joan said, almost'n Allison's ear. "Just relax."

"Stop..."

"Why?"

Allison shook'er head.

"It'll be fun. Trust me."

"No," Allison said.

"Just—"

"STOP!"

Such noise'n a small space. Joan'd whipped back. "Fuck you—" And she rolled and shoved the privacy screen up. Other lights flickered on. Faces peered from other bunks.

"What's going on?" Sasha clicked-on'er bunklight and leaned out.

"Nothing," Joan said.

Sasha leaned over t'see Allison. "You alright?"

"Fine," Joan said as she grabbed a rung and climbed. "Spicy food and nightmares."

"A horse's ass, at least," someone said.

But Joan'dn't reply as she climbed'n and closed the privacy screen. Other lights clicked-off, but Sasha climbed out and walked over as Allison fumbled with the overhead controls. Sasha pointed. "It's this one for the light."

Allison nodded and put'er finger on't. "Thank you."

"Get some sleep," Sasha said. "You know how to work the privacy screen, right?"

Allison nodded.

"Don't be afraid to put it down if you need to." Sasha straightened. "Get some sleep."

A knock woke'er into darkness. And she looked round, but't must've taken a moment t'realize the screen'd still been down. She pushed't up. Overhead lights and daylight through the viewports obscured the figure bent over'er bunk.

"You okay?"

Allison nodded, moved t'sit on the edge.

"Here." Sasha offered'er an insulated cup. "Mind if I sit?" Allison shook'er head and looked down as steam curled from the cup. "Tea," Sasha said. "It'll help you wake up." And she sat there and watched'er sip. "You don't have to say anything about last night if you don't want to." After a moment, she stood. "Everybody else's already up. We're just getting restocked. There's some time to get cleaned up if you want."

"Wait," Allison said. And Sasha sat again. Allison looked down at'er tea. "What's going to happen now?"

"I guess you can do what you want. Most everybody's getting off here. Some of us are going back. So...I guess you can decide. It'll be a bit before we're ready. So... You can think about it."

Allison nodded. "I keep thinking...thinking about my mother, in the town back there... The storm. I hope she's okay." She'dn't look up. "I really ruined everything."

"Do you want to go back?"

"I..." Allison shook'er head.

"Maybe we can figure out some way to get a message back to her."

"You could do that?"

"Maybe," Sasha said. "I don't know. But we could see."

"Really?"

“No promises. But... No promises.”

Allison nodded. She sipped'er tea. “What's the city like?”

“Big.”

“Like a town?”

“Bit bigger.” Sarah stood. “I take it you're coming along, then.”

Allison nodded.

“I'll go see about something clean for you to wear.” Sasha left'er and moved along the tractor and dislatched the hatch t'step through the short accordionesque [umbilical] between sections.

“Having a good time?”

Sasha glanced at an upper bunk, where Joan'd tossed'er bag and sat. But a phone buzzed static and she stepped toward where't lay on the table [umbilicalled] t'the USB receptacle'n the wall and pressed'er finger t'ts taped over screen. “What?”

“The number fourteen tractor's coming in, but they've ditched a couple sections. And the one's got something wrong with it. Got some people wanna know if they can hitch a ride.”

“Tell them they'd better be quick about it.”

“Will do.”

It buzzed again and the distorted picture on the fractured screen shifted t'something equally nonsensical.

“Got plans, have you?” Joan said.

Someone knocked on a viewport, waved. Sasha nodded and motioned'n reply.

“I guess,” Joan said, “I can always take your bunk since it'll probably be free on the way back.”

Sasha'dn't turn. “I don't know where you're going and I don't give a fuck. But it won't be on this tractor.”

“You can't keep me off.”

“Try me.”

*(N passes him. Her smile floats through darkness.
NATHANIEL pauses and balances on his cane. N
gathers her hair into a ponytail as she walks.)*

NATHANIEL

Since you're so good at knowing the future, what's going
to happen next?

N

(Glancing back and smiling)

That's easy. *(She continues walking)* Everything's going
to happen.

(Still smiling, she exits STAGE RIGHT.)

ACT ONE

SCENE I

Pinkened sun liquidized along the horizon again. And a light breeze fluttered stretched blanket tents as those beneath crawled from their makeshift shade and deconstructed bamboo and scrap-tubing skeletons so they'd b'rolled and lashed t'their packs. Abigail rubbed'er face and dis-clipped'er canteen, offered't t'Mary-Celleste, who shook'er head. Not far away, Ceili and Argile'd've pushed from under their own tent, a blanket lashed on one side over the refrigerator so as t'n't block the solar panels, the two other corners weighted by stones. But a blanket like that'd've been too low for'em t'get out from under easily and they'd've likely just reached up and pulled't away, then gathered't as Chevsky approached and bent over the refrigerator. Sun'd've reflected from'ts white-enameled sides during the day and'd've made't impossible t'look at without squinting and leaving an oblong vision speck for a long time after. Abigail held'er canteen as she watched'em converse over that contraption. "At some point," she said, "we moved from suicidal to absurdism." She tapped'er empty canteen against'er thigh, as she'd done all day, as'f the sound'd draw water. "And now I think we've passed through to surrealism. After all, any given mental life is probably merely the recapitulation of [western] art theory."

But Mary-Celleste'dn't reply, only adjusted'er hat brim against the setting sun.

Chevsky crossed toward'em. The scarf she'd wound round'er head hung loose over'er shoulders. Somewhere'n the refuse scattered'n the cave she'd've probably dis-covered tinted safety glass shards and'd've wired'em together t'set over'er nose. "We're ready to move out," she said.

“To where?” Abigail scanned the horizon.

“If we keep heading along this line, we should intersect a canal.”

“Oh,” Abigail said. “Don’t think I’m being pessimistic. I’m long past that. Now I’m just in constant wonderment we’re alive at all. And sometimes I wonder about that.”

Chevsky turned’er tinted glasses on’er. “You okay?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” And Abigail flailed’er arm as’f t’point out everything. “I’m walking across an in-crossable Martian desert while two men drag a refrigerator across the same and my best friend out here has zero or a thousand parents, depending on how you want to look at it. And no don’t bother to get Sandra up here I can assure you I don’t have a fever and I’m still sweaty as ever.” And she raised’er arm. “See?” She shook’er head. “And what’re they going to do with that thing when they get it to the river? Paddle it upstream? For that matter, what’re we going to do? And what’s wrong with someone, anyway, letting them leave the socket knowing their medical condition? Huh?”

Chevsky still regarded’er as’f she wasn’t quite sure of something.

Abigail glanced round, rose on the balls of’er feet t’look. “Where’d Mary go?”

Chevsky turned and pointed into the sun. “Looks like she’s decided we’re all too slow again.”

Abigail shaded’er eyes. Pinkened sunset’d almost swallowed a distant silhouette. Others passed’em. Chevsky looked back. And when she’d turned again, Abigail’d hurried after Mary-Celleste as’f she were afraid she were being left behind. Chevsky re-fitted’er headscarf and moved t’follow. “I feel like,” she called t’the two women. “I feel like you’re leading us straight into the heart of the sun.” It’d’ve taken’er a moment or two t’realize she was closing the gap. And another few moments t’realize they’d stopped. She stepped beside’em. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s the surrealism,” Abigail said.

“Huh?”

Abigail shook’er head. “She thinks she saw a herd of cats. In the dust cloud. Over there.”

Chevsky tried t’follow’er hand, but there was only distant wind-scattered dust out there too far away t’b’discernible.

“So don’t check me for sun stroke,” Abigail said.

Martina approached, and others. “What’s going on?”

Chevsky shook’er head.

“Well,” Abigail said. “It has to be true.” She waved her arms. “I mean, it fits so well with everything else. It’s too ridiculous *not* to be true.”

Chevsky whispered something t’Martina.

“And I’m not cracking up,” Abigail said. “If anything, it’s all the sane people who’ve gone off the deep end. This isn’t realism out here. No, we didn’t build it to be in that genre. And even if it were, if you start thinking realism is reality, all you prove is you’re mad.” And she adjusted’er hat brim farther down against the sun. “It’s like those people out there. You just have to accept they’re there. And the wagons and tents and all that with them. If you try to explain it rationally, you’re just proving you’re loony.”

Chevsky probably’d’ve reached for Abigail’s arm by then, but Martina stopped’er, pointed into the plain below, at geography set aflame by setting sun, where blurry figures traversed rose-tinged landscape between wagons and tents.

And Chevsky’d’ve’d t’ve said something along the lines of: “Maybe we’re all going crazy.”

Abigail shook’er head. “It’s the surrealism.”

Small fires'd've burnt through the night and before dawn cast capering shadows across tent faces as figures passed between'em. From a ridge, the plain'd've appeared featureless and flat. But the vast space below'd t've been intercut with low hills, dunes, stones, [snaking] ditch lines. And they crouched'n or behind one and watched the distant camp.

"How long are we going to wait?" Chevsky said.

"They may," Abigail said, "evaporate with the sunrise."

"If they're phantoms," Martina said, "it won't matter if they evaporate or not, they won't be much help."

"Even if they're not phantoms," Chevsky'd've said, "that don't mean they'll be any help either."

Someone said, "We don't know who they are. They could do anything."

"Splendid observation," Chevsky said. "T—" But she [froze] and squinted into the distance. "A few more are coming out. It looks like they might be getting ready to hitch up or something. Has anyone seen any animals?"

Pink haze'd begun t'bubble over the horizon and slowly wiped over the plain. Martina pushed'erself up. "I'll go out. Everybody else stay down."

"It may be better not to go alone," Chevsky said.

"Volunteering?"

"Shit."

"I'll go too," Abigail said.

Martina shook'er head. "Everybody else stay back."

"Squatters?" Chevsky said. "You think someone else could've gotten here and come down the elevator?"

"I didn't say anything about that."

"It's the surrealism."

"Whatever it is," Martina said. "We'd better move. It looks like they're starting to take down the tents."

"I'm coming too," Abigail said.

"Fine," Martina said. And she nodded. She said t'the rest, "You three go back and let everyone know what's going on."

"What if something happens?"

"Then you're on your own," Martina said. And she pulled'erself above the ditchline.

"How do you want to do this?" Chevsky said as they walked toward the camp.

"I don't know."

"We should probably yell something before we get close. Let them know we're here."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Hello, maybe. What do you suggest?"

"I suggest we wait here."

"Huh?"

Martina motioned with'er head. "They've seen us."

Dark figures moved toward'em. Their black garments flapped'n the morning breeze and'd've made their size impossible t'estimate.

"Fuck," Chevsky whispered.

A sound rose from the camp. In the distance, a small procession wandered from a tent, stopped as'f watching. Figures appeared to watch from near the carts.

Shapelessly uniform'n their head-t'foot black garments, they approached t'form a half ring at a greater distance than'd've been comfortable for conversation as they looked at'em through tinted lenses socketed behind black fabric'n a single eyehole.

"Who are you?" Distance and heavy fabric'd've rendered their voices as featureless as their figures.

Every version of everything she'd've said must've tumbled through Martina's mind. And she nodded, as'f t'erself. But before she'd say anything—

“No.” And the figures turned and moved back toward camp.

“Damn.” Chevsky blinked. “What the hell was that?”

“Ha.” And Abigail shook’er head. “You see. First it’s herds of cats. Now it’s second-rate Bedouin® knockoffs wearing RéBann® monocles. If you check the tags on their outfits, they probably say product of ArgentinaCo.”

And she must’ve been loud enough t’hear, even over the wind and distance, because a black-clad figure turned and seemed t’converse with another and they started back toward the women.

“What did you say?”

Martina started t’speak, but a figure raised a black-gloved hand. Abigail shook’er head. “Just silliness,” she said, seemingly sobered.

“What did you say?”

“She didn’t mean anything,” Chevsky said.

They approached.

Not-consciously, Abigail stepped back.

“Watch it—” Martina called.

And they halted.

One raised both hands from beneath voluminous fabric. “I apologize.” Muffled voice. “Please. There is no need to be frightened.”

“Not a good way of making people feel welcome,” Abigail said.

“I am sorry.” Lowered arms. “Please. What is your news of the cats?”

“The...cats?”

“Yes.” Veils seemed t’move as’f the heads beneath nodded. “Please. If you bring word of them, we would be very grateful.”

“I...” But Abigail shook’er head. “...” Shook’er head again. “But I didn’t see them. It was Mary—”

“Where is this Mary?”

Abigail shook’er head.

After a moment, the one motioned t’em. “Please. We invite you to be our guests.”

Chevsky leaned toward Martina, said’n a low voice, “I don’t like this.”

And the motioner’s tinted lens still regarded’em. “All of you, of course. Please.”

“What do you think?”

"I think," Martina said, "we might not have much choice."

The one motioned. "Please."

Martina'd've looked over'er shoulder as they walked and one of t'others might've turned a tinted lens t'follow'er gaze, but neither'd've seen anything on the distant ridge. And as'f nothing were amiss, Martina'd've turned'er attention toward the camp.

Inside a tent, small glass globes'd've hung lashed t'poles, half-filled with oil and coiled wicks. And a nude woman stood on tiptoe t'extinguish the one that still burnt. Someone clapped. A muffled voice: "Tell the others we have guests." And she nodded and hurried from the tent. A gloved hand motioned Martina and Chevsky and Abigail toward a few of the many slat wood folding chairs that'd been erected on the carpet-covered ground.

They sat. But none'd've said anything for a long time.

Women appeared through the tent flaps t'relight the lamp. They entered with wooden folding tables and deployed'em near the three seated women and loaded'em with woven trays.

"Please."

The women departed, except for one young woman who waited by the open flap and poured water from a decanter into four glasses before she, too, departed. The black-clad figure across from'em reached for the only glass with a straw. "Our humble thanks to her mercy." Then nodded and slipped the straw beneath'is veil. But not-consciously, the three woman barely afforded much solemnity for what they must've recognized as a ritual of trust, as they drained their glasses'n turn.

"Please. Perhaps you feel it is strange for us to see strangers walk from the desert. Let me assure you that here it is customary to see strange things all the time. We just have to learn to take them for what they are. Or at least what they appear to be. Otherwise we would end up insane."

Abigail nodded. "Of course."

"Your showing up is a great boon for us. We have been wandering round in circles quite a while. We had begun to wonder quite a number of things."

“Yuh know,” someone said, nearby, “they say the woman out there’ve underarm and pubic hair so thick and voluminous that—”
“Shhhhhh.”

Genie sat with’er elbows propped against’er thighs and’er chin planted’n’er palms.

“Frying pan,” Chevsky said, “meet fire.”

“They obviously have some way of getting water out here. Otherwise they wouldn’t be so free with it—”

“Or maybe they’re just fanatics—and whatever religious bent they’re on’s more important than water.”

“Either way, we’ve got the water.”

They climbed a blood-light washed ridge.

“Fuck,” Chevsky said. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

Abigail squinted as they looked into the pastel-washed distance, out where heatwaver enveloped three silhouettes.

Martina said, "The breeze may make their tracks hard to pick up."

"If there's something to be found it will be." He motioned.

They moved toward where wooden folding chairs'd been deployed on rugs beneath a faded, blue-white striped parasol. And where a woman whose left breast'd've distinctively lilted so'er nipple aimed at the sun stood by a folding table set with a tarnished silver tea service.

"Please. Have something." From another table, he lifted a straw and water glass. "I thought you would prefer women's drinks."

Martina accepted a cup and saucer from the woman, who glanced'er down then up before she returned the tea pot t'the tray.

"Of course, I understand the nature. I can find something else if you prefer."

"I'm sure this will do," Martina said, and sipped. She glanced down into the cup, then up toward t'other woman. She set the cup on the saucer and touched'er finger t'er lip.

"It has a bite," he said. "Or I would assume so. Something or the other they add to it. I have to admit I don't keep up with the details anymore." And'e returned'is glass t'the table. "Perhaps we could find some cookies?"

The tea service clanged against itself as the tray end-over-ended through the air and slid across rugs and into sand and the tea pot rolled after, scotched on'ts spout and brown seeped through woven patterns. Martina cut'er eyes toward t'other woman.

"Yes," he said. "Please. Go. As you would like."

The woman turned, but glanced over'er shoulder at Martina before

she stepped from beneath the parasol and dissolved into afternoon brightness. Martina sipped.

"I expect it may take them until morning," he said. "We can prepare you a place to sleep here if you like."

"We've," Martina said, "gotten used to our own accommodations."

If'e'd nodded beneath all that fabric, the motion'd've been swallowed, censored into the subtlest movements. "I understand. It is a wild life out there. But if any of your men would prefer, we might be able to supply them with a few aspects of civilization, at least until our business is concluded. Though, we may also see about adding something to the trade in that line if you are willing to renegotiate."

"I think we'll stick with the deal we've got at the moment."

"Good enough. Though, I just want to make it clear that you will not be able to use their state to prey upon my sentiments. I have to look out for my own first."

"Of course."

“And what did he say?”

“Something about...it being just the nature of the thing and what use would there be in getting angry with that...like getting mad at the wind for blowing.”

“Ha.” Chevsky leaned back on a rock.

“That’s not the worst.”

“Oh?”

“I snarked, if that was the case I was surprised he’d risk doing business with us.”

“And what’d he say?”

“Life cannot come without risk.”

Chevsky laughed, shook’er head and cupped’er hand against’er brow t’look down over the plain as the pink-lined horizon thinned. “Must’ve been good stuff.”

“It’s been so long...” Martina said, and rubbed’er forehead. “I hadn’t expected it to hit me that hard.”

“Save some for me next time. Or better yet, take me with you and I’ll get it from the source.” She removed’er headcover and leaned back on’er elbows. “Of course,” Chevsky said, “they could just be stalling, knowing our water supply has to run down, to get more favorable terms.”

“Never attribute to malic—”

“Except when dealing with Homo sapiens...or just any ape, really.” Chevsky shook’er head. “What’re you thinking?”

“How easy it might be to sneak in there at night.”

“A raid?”

“Whatever you want to call it.”

“I’m an electrical engineer, not a special-ops tactician.”
“But as an engineer you should have an opinion about everything.”
“Yeah. But I’m tryna work on my modesty.” Chevsky shook’er head. “I predict this is going to go pear-shaped. But don’t tell anyone I said that.”
“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”
“Whatever you need, xxx.”

```
## Someone must've copied and pasted this,  
## because it looks like some illicitly  
## ref'd trademarked material got redacted  
## by the clipboard  
##  
## placeholder it until someone can figure  
## out what should've been here
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“Was there ever a xxx?”
“Don’t know. I only ever remember xxx.”
“That’s because you jerked off to the covers.”
“The insides were good too. But I was always more a xxx and xxx person, you know.”
“And think,” Martina said, “how much back rent you’re going to owe on that tattoo when we get back to Earth.”
“It’s pre-garnished out of my wages. But I get an employee discount.”
“How much?”
“Ten percent.”
“I don’t know how you can stand to have a monthly payment just to put a cartoon on your skin.”
“Don’t insult xxx,” Chevsky said. “Maybe she’s not happy with you as it is.”
“And why’s that?”
“It has been a long time since you’ve been to see her.” And Chevsky leaned over. “Can I tell her you’re coming for a visit?”
“Now?”
“Why not?”
Martina shook’er head. “We’re all out here trying not to die and you want to get naked and touch each other.”

“We don’t have to get naked.”

“Please, don’t tell me you’re going crazy too.”

“Hey,” Chevsky said. “Being an engineer already gives me a statistically increased chance of being either a terrorist or a creationist—or both at the same time, or so I’m told.”

“Stop it.”

“Besides, maybe Abbey’s right. Surrealism all comes down to sex and death, doesn’t it? Or at least, I think that’s what I remember from art class.”

“Can’t see you taking an art class.”

“It was compulsory. How else were they going to keep the liberal arts majors employed?” And she leaned over and rested’er cheek on Martina’s shoulder. “So what do you say? Can I book you an appointment with xxx? I should tell you I’m authorized to make you some great deals on certain promotional packages. And frequent flyer miles are applicable.”

“Please...” Martina said. “Not right now.”

Chevsky sighed, but left’er head on Martina’s shoulder.

“You never did say what happened down there.”

But if Mary-Celleste’d said anything’t might’ve been, “It... It was like being back at one of Mrs Pimbrookes’ teas.”

And Abigail’d’ve laughed, fallen back and looked up at starry sky, still laughing.

“Wake up.”

Martina pulled away’er hat and sun blared against’er eyelids, a soft pink flesh-world.

“Wake up.”

She cracked’er eyes, but harsh-angled morning pried’n and she squinted’em closed.

“Wake up.”

She groaned and tried t’sit up, but’t took a couple or three attempts. And when she massaged the back of’er neck, she brushed’er hair and grit rained against’er back and flowed into small piles round where she sat. “...like goin to sleep on the beach...but worse...”

“Come on. Get up.”

Martina rubbed’er face, squinted up at Chevsky. “What?”

“We’re going to have visitors.” Downslope, specks appeared against the risen sun. Morning breeze whipped black fabric.

And Martina stood, brushed’erself off.

“Where’s Mary-Celleste?”

Chevsky turned. “I’ll go find her.”

"The wind's settled," Chevsky said as they stood and looked downslope. "Calm before the storm?"

Then, after a while: "Say something."

"Better get some sleep," Martina said.

"You're the one that looks tired."

"Thanks."

"Let's go lay down."

"I'm too tired."

"Then we'll just sleep."

"You think this is going to work?" Martina said.

"How the hell should I know?"

"But what do you think?"

"I think people who walk around in the desert following imaginary cats will believe you if you point and say they went *that* way."

They looked down at the camp.

"So much for Bristol's Theory of Stable Equilibrium," Chevsky said.

"Things don't stand still."

"And," Chevsky said, "some things never change." She touched Martina's elbow under cover of twilight. "Come on, let's get some sleep."

"Just sleep."

"Just sleep," Chevsky said.

Even without the sun having³⁹ yet risen, and the only evidence of its potential existence a vague glow along the edges of distant mountains, the refrigerator'd've sat there impossibly white and rectangular on the sand. Ceili'd've fitted the harness over'is shoulders while Argile watched Chevsky brush panel shards lightly with the side of'er hand. "We'll have to tie a blanket over them if the wind gets too bad," she said. "Otherwise they'll pick up like a kite's tail." And she'd've stepped back and looked at that twist-wire mess and'd've shaken'er head before she turned and walked toward Martina.

"You think they can see anything through those lenses right now?" Chevsky said as they approached the former camp, where only tent-peg holes remained and everything else'd been transmogrified t'loosely assembled carts piled high and lashed down. "You think they get those things wholesale?" Three or four approached bearing armfuls of black garments.

Wind rose toward noon, blew from beyond a far corner of the plain and churned Mary-Celleste's skirt against'er ankles as she walked. And the men's black robes'd the same as they pulled the carts.

In a cart farther behind, half-a-dozen women lay back on rolled carpets and watched Martina and Chevsky. In other carts, they'd the same with Abigail and t'others. The wagon's canopy puffed and puckered'n the breeze. Overhead, a small oil lamp swung'n time t'the cart's shifting side-t'side, the tiny flame that'd relight all the rest when evening came. One woman reached and rested a long tinder-piece'n the flame and drew't out t'ease't into the bowl of'er longstemmed pipe. Smoke curled'n a bifurcated stream down'er body. She turn the pipe stem and offered't t'Martina. But Martina shook'er head. The woman shrugged, drew from the pipe again and passed't on as fresh smoke caressed'er sagged breasts and stomach.

Chevsky glanced out the back of the cart. "I've changed my mind," she said. No robes'd've been big enough t'cover'em and at best they'd've been wrapped'n seemingly infinite lengths of black fabric as they pulled the refrigerator'n tandem, or one walked along-side and waited t'spell t'other. "I think Abbey was right." And she watched'em awhile longer. "They look like a couple tents took a walk across the desert, don't they?"

Ahead, Mary-Celleste shifted'er shoulders against'er pack straps and adjusted'er hat brim against sun and wind. But she'dn't

“THE TIME APPROACHES!”

Mara paused. Everyone’n the square glanced round.

“THE TIME APPROACHES!”

White robes, luminescent’n low firelight, congregated on one side of the square. One raised something over’is head’n both hands.

“THE TIME APPROACHES!”

Genie glanced round. “What’s goin on?”

“Oh, crap.” Kayla caught Quetzalcoatl’n both’er hands and deposited’m’n’er bag and fastened’t. She stood. Others stood, aswell.

Genie said, “What’s it?”

Ambeth’dn’t answer, but glanced toward where Mara stood on the platform.

Intermeshed yells carried from the distance. People screamed. A white-robed figure ran between’em and half-climbed the platform. “THE TIME APPROACHES! HEED THE WARNING! HE—” Two or three people pulled’m down. And Mara dropped t’er knees as the platform shook.

“Crap—” Ambeth glanced from’er t’where commotion rose from the crowd’n the distance. When she looked back at the platform, Mara’d mounted the ladder. And she must’ve seen’em, because she motioned for’em t’go. Ambeth nodded. “Alright,” she said, “move.”

Genie looked over’er shoulder. “What bout Mara?”

“Don’t worry bout that—just move. Through there.” She pointed through the crowd, grabbed Genie’s and Kayla’s shoulders, motioned t’Helena. “Let’s go. Come on.”

“What bout Li?”

“She can worry bout’erself.” Ambeth pushed’em into the corridor. They hurried through darkness as shouts echoed behind.

(A light appears off STAGE RIGHT. Supporting each other, the CROWD, NATHANIEL, CATHERINE, TRENT, ZILOG carrying MELISSA, MAE, PAMELA, TROY, TRACY, and all the rest emerge from STAGE LEFT and cross the stage and exit STAGE RIGHT.)

CHORUS

Footprints would have disturbed perfect sand. And there would not have been a cloud in the sky. Of course, the sky is always clearest when there is no storm.

The curtain falls

BOOK VI

INTERVIEW
(CONTINUED)

INTERVIEWER

Your books have been subject to perhaps more than their fair share of controversy. Has that made you wary about further releases?

MARSDEN

No.

INTERVIEWER

Would you prefer not to talk about this?

MARSDEN

No. I want to clear these things up.

INTERVIEWER

Several of the former members of your editorial board have stated the original texts are extremely fragmented and therefore highly unreliable. Is that true?

MARSDEN

Since they've never seen them, there's no way they could know that. And if they had, revealing or illicitly reproducing copyrighted and trademarked information or trade secrets would be illegal. And making such conjectures without proof would obviously be an act of economic terrorism.

INTERVIEWER

How do you respond to recent court rulings stating that the conveyance of plot elements, etc, is a violation of copyright?

MARSDEN

I'm glad you asked that. Obviously, copyright is an important system that encourages authors and creators and needs to be protected.

INTERVIEWER

Some say this stifles a free press.

MARSDEN

Of course, they're free to review whatever they want so long as it's in accordance with the law.

INTERVIEWER

Professor Jane Martini has claimed that internal evidence in the original texts leads her to conclude the town burning, among other events, actually takes place some two or three years after the majority of the preceding events and that it was incorrectly placed due to a faulty transcription of two disparate texts, possibly in another language or dialect and that these inconsistencies have been smoothed over. How do you respond?

MARSDEN

I can only say that if these claims were true, she would be in violation of the law to reveal them, as they would be part of copyrighted material.

INTERVIEWER

She also goes on to claim that the fragments available are of a substantially larger body of work. She refers to it as a complete encyclopedic recounting of prehistory and that most of the material published so far is derived from what would have been the first and fourth and fifth and sixteenth of these volumes and further claims volume two would have detailed the early life and work of E. T. A. Midnight, while volume three would have dealt with Paul Endercott. She has also claimed to have identified four primary authors, which she has labeled A, B, C, and D, respectively, who she claims are separated by, potentially, hundreds of years, or more.

MARSDEN

Obviously, the same legal situation applies.

INTERVIEWER

She also claims many textual interlinks have been fabricated by you to cover up the fragmented nature of the original texts.

MARSDEN

I respond to that the way I do to any conspiracy theory.

INTERVIEWER

She was a member a of your editorial board.

MARSDEN

Yes. But I would like to remind everyone that Professor Martini is currently being charged with the violation of her trade secrets agreement, as well as charges of defamation and economic terrorism and is currently on the run from state and international officials, not to mention a host of impending charges related to other instances of copyright and trademark infringement.

INTERVIEWER

The ICB® has recently initiated a special taskforce to deal with what Director Cromwell is calling ‘gross abuse’. Among their ten most wanted is the self-described activist PVC. What’s your characterization of this individual?

MARSDEN

This person—if it even is a person and not one of those collectives you get these days—is simply a terrorist.

INTERVIEWER

Former FBI® Director Cromwell has made similar statements. Some protesters have called that extreme.

MARSDEN

Not at all. This isn’t just people or buildings being destroyed. This is our culture. Vandals are destroying no less than our whole way of life.

INTERVIEWER

One Darren Hall, an unemployed programmer, in a series of blog posts, has claimed the corpus for *The Secret History of Mars* was actually constructed by him after an automated garbage truck mistakenly unloaded its cargo in the living room of the house he was illegally squatting in. Do you have anything to say about this claim?

MARSDEN

Obviously, I can't speak about an open court case. But I will say, even if that were true, about the garbage trucks, he would merely be admitting to handling and otherwise violating our intellectual property.

INTERVIEWER

A claimed former NCOM® special agent recently released a press statement through the personal blog of Isaac Reed which claims the corpus for the untranslated texts of *The Secret History of Mars*, what he refers to as text C, is a combination of an expurgation of text A, which he refers to as text B, and another unidentified manuscript he refers to as text Q.

MARSDEN

Obviously, these sorts of things can go as far as you want.

INTERVIEWER

He also claims the texts, contrary to popular belief, are not paper based, but are collections of digital transmissions received through, what he claims, is a sort of networked time machine.

MARSDEN

I can't comment on any pending legal action, other than to state that our patent system, as with all our intellectual property law, is the backbone that allows the modern creative individual, and therefore the world, to function.

INTERVIEWER

He also claims this device affects the reliability of the text due to its interaction with the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, that, to summarize, multiple collated message packets are interleaved in such a way that their origin is always in question.

MARSDEN

I think you can dress anything up in scientificy-sounding words.

INTERVIEWER

Several anonymous individuals have claimed the entire book is a fraud.

MARSDEN

I see no reason to respond to individuals who take illegal action, such as anonymizing themselves, to commit defamation.

INTERVIEWER

Some have said it is the lack of an official explanation for the origins of the original text that is fueling these speculations. Are there plans for one any time soon?

MARSDEN

Possibly.

INTERVIEWER

Do you intend to prove the text is complete?

MARSDEN

Obviously, there's no need. It speaks for itself.

INTERVIEWER

So the text we have is complete?

MARSDEN

Definitively.

“I jus...” Genie stared at the wall. “I jus’dn’t understand.”

Absently, Ambeth looked over signs already effaced. “Well,” she said. She glanced at Mara. “Don’t know.”

“Hm.”

“Say somethin.”

“What am I supposed t’say?”

Ambeth shook’er head.

Mara glanced at the wall again, turned. “Let’s go get something t’eat.”

But they moved languidly through passages and alleyways. “I jus’dn’t understand,” Genie said.

“Understand wut?” Li huffed where she’d run t’meet’em. They all glanced at’er. “Wut’s with the long faces?”

“She’s...” Genie shook’er head. “Mara’s all the way down at bottom—and’f she’dn’t do better tonight, she’s gonna b’outa the runnin.”

“She knows that,” Helena said.

They walked on’n silence.

“Well,” Li said. “Wut’re yuh gonna do bout’t?”

Mara’dn’t reply.

That young man greeted’em same as’e’d those past several days. He offered Genie a bowl as she sat, but she just shook’er head and’e passed’t t’Helena instead. Helena picked at’t but seemed t’look past.

“A bad day,” that young man said.

Genie looked up. “Mara’s—”

“Everybody knows,” Ambeth said. She accepted a bowl. “No use repeatin’t.”

"The way't goes," that young man said. "Sometimes."

"But why?" Genie said. "Nobody tells thins the way she does. I jus'dn't... I jus'dn't understand."

"The will of the crowd," that young man said, "often proves only t'measure the will of the crowd."

"I'dn't understand."

"Eat somethin'," Ambeth said. She offered'er a bowl. And Genie took't, but just set't'n'er lap and looked down at't. "There's no use mopin." Ambeth licked'er fingers. "Besides, yuh'ren't the one that's t'get up there." She glanced at Mara. "Oh."

Genie looked up. "What?"

Ambeth still looked at Mara. "I know that look."

Mara returned'er glance. "What look?"

"*That* look," Ambeth said. And she shook'er head.

"I was just thinking."

"What bout?" Genie said.

Mara shook'er head.

Genie looked back down at'er bowl.

"Yuh've got somethin'n mind," Ambeth said between bites. She sucked'er fingers. "And'f I know yuh, it's quite wicked."

"She'sn't wicked," Kayla said. Quetzalcoatl sat on'er knee and she offered'm a morsel.

"Well, that's the best word I can think of t'describe what starts happenin when she starts turnin stuff round and round'n'er head. Like she's doin right now."

Helena and Kayla and Genie and maybe our journaller glanced at Mara.

Ambeth swallowed. "Go ahead and spill't."

But Mara shook'er head.

Genie sighed and picked at'er food.

"Eat," Ambeth said.

Genie sighed. She looked up at that bald-headed man. "Is'e ever gonna say anythin more? These last few days...it makes me think'e's sad."

"Oh," that young man said. "He says t'tell yuh'e'sn't sad at all. He just feels there's already so much being told so much better that'e sees no use t'add'is minuscule contribution."

“But I’ke listenin t’m.”

That young man faintly smiled. “He says t’tell yuh’e promises t’tell yuns something later.”

“When?”

“He saysn’t t’b’impatient.”

Li rolled’er eyes and shook’er head and glanced at Genie. “Really?”

But Genie just looked down at’er bowl.

Li sighed. “Well, now yuns’ve got me depressed, aswell.”

“We’re’n’t makin yuh stay round,” Ambeth said.

Li shrugged. She glanced at Mara as she ate, said between bites, “So’ow’re yuh thinkin of climbin outa this’ole?”

Mara glanced over’er shoulder, down the stairs, into an infinite distance, as’f she’d heard something. “Maybe I’ll dig’t a little deeper instead.”

“See,” Ambeth said, between sucking’er fingers. “See what I mean?”

They emerged into a moonlight-lit passage.

"Figured yuh'd b'busy tonight," Ambeth said.

"I can do wut I want," Li said. "Besides, with prophets round, I figured yuh might need some'elp."

"How considerate."

"I'm like that."

"Y—"

"Quiet," Mara said.

"I'ear't," Li said.

"Yap," Ambeth said. "Sounds like't's comin from where we're goin, too."

"Better watch't," Li said.

"We," Ambeth said, "know that."

Mara motioned'em through the narrow passage that branched ahead. "We might as well find out what's going on." Candles flickered throughout the passage. Distant archways glowed from the small fire'n the great square beyond.

"HEED THE WARNING!"

Three prophets stood surrounded by onlookers. One raised something over'is head.

"HEED THE WARNING! THE TIME APPROACHES!"

Genie whispered, "They gonna interrupt, again, tonight?"

Ambeth shook'er head, indicated where people stood either side of each archway that led into the great square. "We've got guards tonight."

"Let's try t'go round," Li said. "The crowd's thinner over there."

Mara nodded. She glanced over'er shoulder at the rest. "Stay close."

“HEED THE WARNING! BE THERE NONE SO BLIND AS THOSE WHO CAN SEE!”

Genie watched, wide eyed, and craned'er neck t'see through the crowd as they passed.

“BE NOT DECEIVED BY YOUR PRISON!”

The last'd such a force, everyone stilled. Mara and Ambeth and Li and Genie and Helena and Kayla and most probably our journaller peered over and through the crowd. Li pointed. “There.” She pointed t'where a small gap'd opened.

Genie gasped. “Is that?”

A lone masked figure stood amidst the void where the crowd'd parted and the prophets flowed into the breach. “DECEIVERS AND DEFILERS!” Whatever the one held high above'is head, he swiped down with't—“PERVERTERS AND LIARS!”—and swiped across. The figure stumbled back. A mask skittered across paving stones.

Mara wasn't the closest, but Ambeth barely'd time t'say crap before Mara'd been one'a the few t'get between the boy and prophet. Instinctively, Ambeth's arm shot back—“Stay'ere—” And Genie stretched t'tiptoe t'try and see over'er shoulder as those who'd guarded the archways forced their way through the crowd and wrangled the prophets down a darkened alleyway.

“BE NOT DE—” Their screams died amid the crowd's murmurings.

Mara huffed. And remained planted wide-legged where she was as Ambeth and the rest approached.

“Wut the'eck's wrong with yuh?”

Mara glanced at'em, shook'er head. She turned. The boy looked up at'er, his eyes seemingly deep-recessed within'is thickly purple-powdered face. Night and candlelight rendered black the deep crags'n the powder over'is cheeks and at the corners of'is mouth and round'is eyes. He knelt and retrieved'is mask, fitted't. “Thank you.”

Commotion stirred through a distant archway. And the crowd parted again as masked figures emerged. They surrounded'em. One dropped a hand onto the boy's shoulder. Kayla and Genie'd've glanced up at those seemingly impossibly tall masked figures that ringed'em. The masked figure with'is hand on the boy's shoulder seemingly turned'is mask toward'em a moment, then turned and steered the

boy through the parting crowd, the remainder of the masked figures following.

Till they'd disappeared into a distant passageway, none of 'em'd've probably realized that they'd been holding their breaths.

Ambeth looked at Mara. "What'ere yuh thinkin'?"

Mara shook'er head. She looked over'er shoulder. The guards'd returned t'their posts. She sighed. "We'd better go or we'll b'late."

Mara mounted the platform. She stood there a few moments'n silence. Flame-light flickered against the walls. In eyes. Backlit and sidelit and silhouetted all those sitting round. She'dn't look behind'er t'see'f masked figures'd returned t'the overlook above. The square settled into silence as they waited for'er t'start. Disturbed only by fire crackle.

And she took a breath.

Loud patter overhead woke'er, but still half-asleep she'd likely've drifted through scant recollections of the past few days, right before'e'd collapsed, when they'd both squinted under harsh brightoutness and'e'd hefted rusted interlinked metal and a lock'n one hand and said, "Why have they got the old dance hall chained up?" and'e'd've looked over'er shoulder at buildings that'd've barely seemed t've kept from being washed by sun into the near horizon's off-bright infinity. "Weirder and weirder."

And an empty council building. Rooms cleared but only handfuls of cots dis-folded.

High-dune-barricaded shop doors. Darkened doorway parallelograms where foundations seemed t've shifted. Collapsed beams and trusses that'd shoved through the new hardware store's front windows, broken open the door so't'd hung by one hinge and curled nails'd protruded from t'other as feeble claws. And'n the town center: stripped trees and leaf-denuded bushes and gazebo on'ts side, half-buried. Handless bank clock.

Diesel smoke a black jagged punctuational slash that drifted over rooftops and continued off'n a direction.

Mainstreet's skyline'd emerged from off-white void.

Street-lamps sprouted from sand, shattered globes somehow floweresque, seemingly more alive and more fitting the new environment than the limb-stripped pear trees between'em.

They'd hurried as gun shots cracked behind. A porch'd popped

and splintered, shuttered and fell, but t'd continued on. The driver'd jumped but the bulldozer continued and puffed thick black diesel fumes. Bullets pinged't. The driver'd tried t'jam the controls. It'd hit dunes. The driver'd tried t'hunker low. Shadow-void figures'd slipped out between cracks. The machine'd sputtered, geeeeerrrrrrned as't'd tractored over sand.

They'd huffed as they'd come t'an intersection. "That sounds like an engine."

Ron'd struggled over dunes. Crackcrackcrackcrak'd echoed from a not-seen street.

She'd turned. "I don't—"

"We're being followed."

Another half-buried mailbox.

Screendoor flapped'n the wind.

Sand'd struck'er face as she'd adjusted'er scarf. And'e'd pulled'is hatbrim down. "I'm fine."

"Let me give you a hand. It's not far. Come on." She'd shook'er head.

And'f anything'd moved on that brighted-out tapestry, could she've noticed? Wind'd've already effaced their footprints. She'd looked too.

"What is it?"

"Give me a minute," he'd said, and'd glanced over'is shoulder.

"Can you go on?"

Sweat'd trickled behind'is ear as'e'd nodded.

"We should go through there." Bea'd crushed'er hat's carnation as she'd adjusted't. A breeze. Couch half-buried at an angle, faded t'no color. Peach stubs barely above sand. Bent metal streetsigns and nameplates ripped off.

"It was nothing. Come on. Let's go."

"I don't see anything."

"Over near the Tearl house. This side."

"Where?"

"Nothing. A bird maybe. I don't know. I thought I saw something." He'd shaken'is head.

"What is it?"

And when they'd stepped into't, they'd've'd t'stop, squint, till their

eyes'd adjusted. Deep within the front hall, the doorway'd framed brighted exterior, exit from black t'void.

"It's like they sat down to dinner," she'd said. "Everything's still on their plates."

Cane-punctuated gate.

Table shoved against kitchen swingdoor.

Stopped clock.

Dust-laden rooms.

Shadeless birch-tree skeletons.

"We had to send a town truck to get him back from the end of the street. The doctor tried to get out, but it was too bad by then. Maebell was down with what may've been dust fever the last time I heard." Bea'd said, "We should check on them."

And from the street, the open door'd've revealed the kind of voids that smaller holes'd've only hinted at.

"Their door's open."

"Why? No."

"Has there been any news about the Johnsons lately?—since before the phones went out." Ron'd squinted across the street.

And wind-snatched shutter boards'd revealed window frames sometimes stuffed with faded quilts whose stitches'd begun t'dis-ravel and left'em hung curlicue t'float'n faint wind round where stained cotton batting erupted, sometimes with sand-impregnated rugs, sometimes with only shattered glass and void that perhaps revealed nothing t'remain inside, that something not-known'd sucked'n even light and waited inside till'ts pull eventually imploded the structure so't'd disappear into the phenomena, slowly, inexorably, t'b'followed by the world's remainder. Brighted-out houses either side of a dune-covered street.

"If you say so."

"So the best way would be to go down Elm and cross Beach."

He'd extracted'is cane from a dune, but'dn't replied.

"Did you know a roof blew out on Peach Street?"

"I think I know how to find my way round."

"We moved it where there was more shelter. We should go down—"

"The emergency center's supposed to be in the park."

"We should probably head to the council building. That's the emergency rendezvous point." And she'd turned and squinted down the street. "You're in no shape to be out here alone." Maybe'e'd started t'say something—"Don't argue." She'd adjusted a kid's camping canteen's strap over'er dress's puffed shoulder. She must've grabbed the first broadbrimmed hat from the closet she'd come upon: woven with a large pink-silk carnation glued t'one side, but'ts brim'd cast enough shade t'encompass'er twice and a scarf'd drooped round'er neck and over'er shoulders, ready'f needed. Ron'd turned.

"Wait—" Bea'd appeared'n the still open doorway, a shadow-obliterated figure emerging from a darkened mouth, and'd climbed over the dune and tried t'close't behind'er but sand kept't ajar, so she'd've'd t'leave't and scramble down dune-covered steps into what'd been their yard.

Brighted-out existence where squinting'dn't've revealed reality t'exist beyond the next street as'e'd ambled over dunes amidst a road-become-desert. Shattered trusses. Smooth-bark skeleton trees. Peaked-back roofs. The path between house and garage'd've been filled waist-high or more and the only way round'd've been on the house's far side along side sand-buried hedgerows where browned, stripped limbs'd've peeked from beneath orange-red weight t'reveal tiny dark worlds where things scuttered as disturbed sand'd sifted between branches. Not-packed sand'd shifted underfoot, swallowed'is cane. But the idea'd've been easier than'ts execution as'e shoved aside a battered screendoor.

Extra oxygen t'fuel a too-hot-burning fire. And Bea'd remained still, parasol'n-hand, had breathed hard.

And'e'd turned and walked back through t'the kitchen as mud'd caked from'is shoes onto carpet and hardwood. "I don't know when I'll be back." And Ron'd ambled down the last steps, bent, still ahold of the banister and grabbed'is cane and'is hat where't'd come off the rack.

"I have to get back to work." Taggart'd shrugged.

"I have no condition."

"Of course, we understand your condition and don't expect—" But'e'd mostly looked at Ron as'e said't. "The council'll send word when there's something you ladies can help out with." "So you can

go back to taking care of your house.” “The danger’s over for now.”
“Take it easy,” Taggart’d said.

“We need to—”

“That’s not my department.”

“How many are hurt?”

Taggart’d slipped his hands into his pockets. “We’ve had more important things to worry about.”

“What about the power?” Bea’d said. “The telephones.”

But Taggart’d seemed not-phased.

“You idiot.”

“That way she could make it look as if it’d happened in the storm.”

“We got here in time. No doubt she was planning to do it soon enough.” Taggart’d said, “Because.”

And Bea’d glanced at him, watched him breathe hard, as if he might overexert himself. “If she was out to kill me—WHY AM I STILL ALIVE?” Ron’d said. “One question.”

Even Bea’d shaken her head.

“So it had to be her. The storm would’ve been perfect cover. When we discovered the rumor, the only thing that made sense was it had to be someone already in the house.” Maybe a kind of pride’d seemed evident beneath dust stains. And he’d turned back to Ron. “The domestics.” Taggart’d half-glanced at her.

“Who?” Bea’d said.

“They were planning to kill you.” Still in the same suit as always, but sans tie, and white shirt stained orange and pants cuffs not far behind and sand-encrusted shoes. And Taggart’d puffed.

“Explain—” Ron’d fixed on him.

And they’d scrambled by him back through the swingdoor into the kitchen. “Get out there after her. She doesn’t have sandshoes. She can’t get far.” Taggart’d motioned.

Ron’d said, “And what’re you saving us from? Boredom? You decided to give us [heart attacks] instead?”

“Get up.” And he’d squeezed down the hall till he stepped over the two fallen men and’d kicked one in the thigh. “We’re saving your life.” Taggart’d scowled.

“What’s. Going. On.” Ron’d held tight to the banister, his cane still between the man’s leg on the hall floor.

And when anyone'd looked up again, Esmerelde'd've only been barely discernible beneath harsh noon sun, frame by the doorway, as she'd scrambled over dunes. Ron'd yelled and stuck'is cane between one's legs and took'm down, tangled'n'is rifle strap. And Esmerelde'd screamed. But when'e got too near Bea—"Don't point that thing in this house—"—and she'd shoved the rifle barrel aside with'er parasol, but'e'd jerked and—BLAM—a hole'd appeared'n a distant picture and glass'd tinkled onto sand.

"Don't move." One'd advance with'is cheek against'is rifle. "Stop."

And'e'd struck the nearest's back again. "STOP HER! SHE'S GOING TO GET AWAY." And Taggart'd seemed momentarily flummoxed by Ron's appearance, as'f'e'd popped from a coat closet, but'd quickly refocused down the hall.

"Taggart—WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?" Ron'd leaned against the rail.

And Esmerelde'd squeaked as rifles re-trained on'er and'er heel sank into sand and she'd almost tumbled backwards. "THE ONE WITH THE HEADSCARF—" One of'em'd finally yanked down'is goggles. And'd struck the nearest rifleman between'is shoulder blades. "There—" Taggart'd pointed. And the swingdoor'd thwapped into one man and'e'd'd t'squeeze outa the way. From the kitchen: "WHAT'S GOING ON?"

"What're you doing?" Ron'd grabbed a handrail. "HOLD IT!"

Beatrice'd aimed the parasol at the nearest, who must've thought't'd been something else, because'e'd jerked and'd brought'is rifle harder into'is shoulder and what'd been discernible of'is dust-impregnated face'd gone rigid. "What's going on?"

And that fact'd've pronounced itself with the way they'd jerked their rifles. Two'd jammed their way into the hall, caps pulled low, almost obscuring thin-slit sand goggles which must've left'em hardly able t'see indoors.

Bea'd grabbed a parasol from the overturned coat rack. Esmerelde'd jumped back, screamed.

Heavy boots. And a rifle's iron-tube muzzle'd emerged through the swingdoor.

Ron sitting on the stairs, Esmerelde and Bea'd stooped over the

dune that'd flowed into the front hall with broom and dustpan and a makeshift cardboard shovel. Everyone'd looked up.

And't'd crashed t'the floor. Jambs'd splintered. Drawn nails'd squeaked. Back'n the kitchen, the rear door'd creaked and groaned.

Now, something squeaked and groaned as boots moved overhead. She barely opened'er eyes. The lamp'd been turned as low as't'd without't going out. Quick knocks. Repeated. Josh whispered and someone brightened the lamp and't shadowed Josh as'e eased up the steps and dis-latched the trapdoor. Furtive whispers. But none followed'is descent. He whispered, "Get her ready to go."

"What if she won't," Samantha whispered.

"She only has to tell them we've got him." And'e shifted'is riflestrap against'is shoulder. "I'll shoot her in the leg and carry her out if I have to."

"Josh—"

"I don't want to." He glanced toward the back of the cellar. "Wake her up."

She stood'n silence. Fire crackle remained the only sound.

Pinkened landscape'd replaced the brighted-out pocket universe of days before and stretched all the way t'the sun's last red-crescent remnants. And eerier brighted-out buildings rose dark from umber sand and from a distance'd've been indistinguishable from any other natural formation amidst the desert.

Shouts from Mainstreet. And Josh rested'is free hand on'er shoulder so she crouched as'e peeked round the next corner. And grabbing'er arm—they hurried across open space between buildings. [Maybe near the new hardware store], a small alley opened wide enough for one person t'squeeze through. Josh motioned with'is rifle. "Go through there. Out on the street." And'e waited as she started through. "Wait halfway across from the old dance hall." And'e said, "I'll be able to see you." But when she turned t'look, he'd vanished.

Early breezes'd long died and'd've left the world seemingly motionless. And she'd've looked over'er shoulder, glanced round as she crossed the street, but there'dn't've been anything t'see. Only shop windows rendered dry-black under pinkened light. She turned as she approached the dance hall, but stopped somewhere acenter what'd been Mainstreet. She glanced round. Then for whatever reason, she focused on the old dance hall's chained and padlocked double doors.

"I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME IN THERE," cut across clear air and she jumped, glanced over'er shoulder. "WE HAVE COUNCILMAN LINDERCOTT. MRS LINDERCOTT IS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET RIGHT NOW. SHE CAN PROVE IT." But'is voice never emerged from the same direction twice. "HE'S NOT HURT. BUT WE'LL DO WHAT WE HAVE TO." Then a long silence'n which'e seemed t'wait for acknowledgment.

“WE DON’T NEGOTIATE WITH YOUR KIND!”

“WE WANT AN EXCHANGE. EVERYONE WILL BE TAKEN BEYOND THE TOWN LIMITS. ALL OF YOUR PEOPLE WILL BACK OFF AND WE’LL SEND THE COUNCILMAN OVER.”

No reply.

“YOU HAVE UNTIL DAWN.”

He’d’ve retreated after that. And for a long while Bea stood’n the street. Till two figures appeared from behind distant buildings and waddled toward’er on sandshoes.

But when she stood and looked down into that burnt-out hole as smoked curled into pink morning, maybe something of earlier'd've recurred t'er: how Taggart'd looked as'e stood before a shuttered window and looked at the raw boards that shuttered broken glass as'f'e'd see through'em into dark night. His orange-red-stained shirt, how't'd settled over'm.

She'd said, "Why wasn't I told about any of this?"

"Hm?" And'e'd glanced over'is shoulder. "Why?"

"I mean," she said, "why wasn't my husband informed about what was going on?"

"There wasn't any time to consult about the situation."

"And the other council members, they—"

"Are dead," Taggart said. "So you can see the situation."

"And my husband."

"Don't worry," he'd said. "I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure they don't succeed."

And the screams.

Though, the first shots'd've already been over when she'd woken and forced'er way out. And she'dn't've seen Josh drop, ax still'n-hand, only the tumult. Shadow and fire shadow plays. Scream and muzzle flash.

But by morning only a faint crackling remained as something'n the cellar still smoldered. And soot-smudged men shoveled sand onto hot spots. In the distance, smoke rose t'taint the dark-pink orb gathering along the horizon, the last smoldering embers of the old dance hall.

She looked over as someone approached. "Murderer," she said.

Taggart glanced at'er, bleary eyed, but turned t'the men. "Make sure that's out."

"And I'm going to make sure..." she said, "everyone remembers it."

Taggart kept'is stubble-marked face toward the horizon. "I didn't want this to happen."

"MURDERER—" And'er shawl fluttered t'the ground as she struck at'm. "Now you've got what you want." And she looked over what blackened splinters jutted from dunes. "It's all yours now," she said. "And I'll see you choke on it."

"I didn't want this to happen."

Bea eventually knelt and retrieved'er shawl, wrapped't over'er shoulders and round'er arms. Down the street, men yelled and wood splintered and a smoking façade collapsed and the bulldozer emerged from the wreckage, tractored on toward another, and all those men'd do was run after. Distant shots tinged off metal.

One man, shirt sweated through with stains that'd never washout, tried t'find some shade as morning shadows sublimated t'nonexistence. He squinted and motioned down the street with'is shovel. "What's that?"

After a moment, even Bea turned. And even with the distance and with how late morning sun'd already begun t'washout the landscape again, his gate, his cane's thin outline'dn't've allowed'er t'mistake who't was. But still, maybe she'dn't've trusted that distant imagedn't t'evaporate.

But'e'dn't.

Shots closer. Metal tings nearer.

Bea covered'er mouth with'er hand. Her hand shook.

nearnuf, Ron paused, tossed the chains and padlocks with 'is free hand so they landed a distance from Taggart and the rest. "Thought you might want these back."

If Nathaniel'd been framed by pre-noon sun when'e'd entered town, all they'd've been able discern bout'm'd've been, maybe, his walkingstick and'is broadbrimmed hat. And the headless giant that'd've ambled along beside'm.

She walked barefoot across miniature sand dunes and't was cool'n the shade then warm were late-afternoon sun came through the windows. Only one curtain remained. And the sun peeked through the holes where't'd dis-ravelled and't've looked as'f't'd been there more than a hundred years. Sand banked'n one corner, spilled over the bed.

But water still rushed at the bottom of the stairs, an occasional limp spout that routed along sand piled into the basin so't seemed a creek sprung from the desert. And she reached and caught a spurt'n'er hands and't dribbled between'er fingers.

"Everything's ruined," Pamela said.

Catherine let another spout drain through'er hands. "No, it's not." She looked down at'erself, sighed, turned. "What're we doing here?" she said. "Let's get out where something's going on." And she touched Pamela's shoulder and they went out between columns and beneath a covered square. Out into the din. Where those who'dn't talk yelled and those who'dn't yell cried and those who'dn't manage either flung their arms round anyone or'emselves. And someone'd brought a bucket, but'd only seemingly found one cup, because they dipped't and sipped and passed't on t'the next till't'd been emptied and'd t'start round again. And Tracy managed t'sneak up behind'er and wrap'er arms round Catherine. "And don't think I'm going to forget about any back payments."

Laughter.

It must've seemed plain water'd somehow become enough t'get so many drunk.

"God, I need a shower."

"Can't. The baths are full of sludge."

“Fuck.”

“Let’s go anyway. Maybe we can find something that works.”

“I’ll go.”

“And me.”

“Me.”

“Me too.”

“Well—hurry up.”

“Wait.”

“Come on.”

“Have you seen Molly?”

“Wait.”

“We’re coming.”

“I think she’s over there.”

“Hurry up.”

“Over here.”

“Pass it over here.”

And finally, someone tipped a bucket over someone’s head and she’d’ve eeeeeeeeked and jumped up stiff. And everyone laughed. And after a moment, even she’d as water trickled outa’er hair.

Stars shone as they'd never've through the dome's paper-thin, matte transparency. They, the moons, reflected together'n dark waters below. As'f the city somehow floated dis-moored through darkness and among those distant lights. But anchored rudamentarily by the skeletal creature that clung t't. The dome's crumpled, thin metallic frame half-emerged from water, as'f some deep-dwelling monster'd crawled up t'scale the wall but'd [frozen] with a lack of daylight, its skin shredded, sent on the wind t'descend'n some billion pieces, maybe thought by some not-known person t'b'the remnants of some impossibly sized creature that'd once made'ts home amid clouds and died and settled t'the bottom of the world as't'd decayed.

Tracy rested a hand lightly on Catherine's shoulder. "Let's go down to the baths. If there's nothing there, we can get some water out of the cisterns."

Moonslight and shadows fell over switchback stairs. Tight corridors and alleyways choked faint breezes. Small squares lay beneath silver evanescence, where moonslight irradiated dune swells that rippled over open spaces and banked into corners and ridged over stairs and blockaded archways.

In some square, orange-yellow light flicked'n the distance and licked three of seven walls.

"... where can you go?"

Voices carried over sand and through crystalline night.

"There isn't anyplace to go."

"Home?"

"How?"

"How do you even know it's still there?"

"It isn't like I thought it'd be."

"That's what you get for believing story books."

"Maybe they're right."

"Who?"

"That we did something wrong and are being punished for it."

"That's stupid."

"Why?"

"Because it is."

"How do you know?"

"He just likes to think he does."

"Like you know anything more."

"What do you think would've happened if we'd died?"

"What do you mean—nothing happens. You're just dead."

"We're alive. That must mean we've done something right."

"I think everything dies in the end."

"Nuh uh. You live forever if you do what God wants."

Fire-crackle punctuated silence. Someone leaned forward and cast on more bundled bamboo and't hissed.

There probably'd've been many similar conversations that night with people spread out but instinctively still nearnuf. So the idea they'd've wandered through one or more'sn't all that implausible.

“Who are we?”

“Hm?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I don’t know. It just kind’a feels like... we should be something.”

“I guess we’re whatever we are.”

“But what’s that?”

“How’m I supposed to know?”

“Is the water over there?”

“Yeah.”

“Pass it over.”

“You’ve already drunk enough that you’re gonna be as big as...”

Stars peeked between buildings, speckled narrow strips high above narrower alleys, seemingly t've blossomed all at once as they passed into a pavilion.

"Look." And Tracy pointed down into the baths, where flame licked deeper between the columns. "There must be some water left if there's still people down there." Sand-covered steps. "... mess..." Tracy said. "It's lucky the whole thing wasn't buried."

"Why wasn't it?"

Someone'd built a small fire'n a fresh-dug hole'n a filled'n trough.

"Maybe it's the way the buildings around are shaped. Who cares.[‡] Hear that?"

Water trickled.

Between distant columns, new light bloomed, outlined Brittney as she squatted by a fresh-excavated hole, as cross-stacked bamboo kindled, nearby wet-peppered sand.

"It's just a trickle," someone said as they passed and carried a bucket away.

Wet sand clung between both women's toes as they approached. Brittney stood, moved toward where another bucket filled from a dribbling spout. She absently brushed the bottoms of'er damp-sand-encrusted feet against'er opposite ankles. She looked back at'em. And she offered'em a bucket. "We've found some rags if you want some."

Catherine nodded. "Thank you." And she carried the cloths and both women took hold of the bucket.

"Where do we go?"

"This way."

New fires popped and sizzled as they passed.

"Wait." And Catherine knelt, looked over wind-shaped sand. "There still should be..." Careful'n t' dirty the rags, she dug lightly with one hand, tested round till she'd struck wax and excavated a group of melted-together candles and broke away two wicks worth. And she turned toward the fire, lit both, so tiny flames wavered as wax first started t're-melt.

The nightwind'd've settled by then and only their movements as they ascended'd've disturbed the flames. Other candles maybe'd already started t'appear distantly through other windows. But they moved toward a darkened building, rose up sand-covered outer steps t'upper rooms where somehow the arrangements of nearby buildings must've prevented sand from blowing'n through the windows, or'd cleanly blown't all through. And she put the candle on the sill and leaned forward t'see stars between buildings and candlelit windows. And she watched'em as Tracy put'er arms round'er and interlaced'er fingers over Catherine's stomach.

"Everything's quiet."

But Catherine'dn't reply.

"It'll take a while for everything to come back to life."

And when Catherine still'dn't reply, Tracy laid'er cheek on'er shoulder. "You're quiet, too."

Catherine rested a hand on Tracy's.

Tracy said, "I haven't seen Nathaniel anywhere."

"He's gone," Catherine said. Added, "I don't know where."

"Something wrong?"

A while. "I don't know," Catherine said. A while longer still. "I feel different, too."

"It'll take everybody a while to settle back down. Things'll get back to normal."

"No," Catherine said. "It's not all of a sudden. It's... Like I've been changing a long time, just so slowly I never noticed. And then I just woke up and realized how far away everything is from where it started."

Tracy lifted'er cheek from Catherine's shoulder, replaced't with'er chin. "Please don't let this be the prelude to a breakup."

"Hm?"

“Have you changed so much you don’t want anything to do with me anymore?”

Catherine turned and Tracy’s arms fell away. Candlelight’d’ve flickered against the sides of their faces. “Yes,” Catherine said, after a while. “I have changed.”

“Just—”

“I’ll need you more.”

Tracy paused. Catherine took’er hand. And their shadows’d’ve interplayed across three walls as they crossed the room toward the bucket. Where Tracy tugged at what remained of Catherine’s sari and’t flowed off’er hips and coursed against’er legs and brushed over’er hair. For a moment, she’d’ve watched candlelight lap at exposed swells and curves, pits formed’n bunched skin at’er knees, the inward curve of where’er hip mated’er thigh, folds and creases at’er underarm, faint hairs’ shadows along’er legs aglow, faint pits, dimples and folds where’er buttocks met’er thighs [...]

The bucket sat half-filled with mud-tinged water.

Finally, Tracy said, “We should go find a place to sleep.” And she looked toward the window, where long wax strands dripped from the sill and’d collected against the floor. “Those won’t be much use.”

Catherine glanced over’er shoulder. “We have the moons.”

“So long as we don’t get lost.”

“I don’t worry about getting lost anymore.”

“Why?” Tracy said.

Catherine kissed’er.

Stars shone as they'd never've through the dome's paper-thin, matte transparency. They, the moons, reflected together'n dark waters below. As'f the city somehow floated dis-moored through darkness and among those distant lights. But anchored rudamentarily by the skeletal creature that clung t't. The dome's crumpled, thin metallic frame half-emerged from water, as'f some deep-dwelling monster'd crawled up t'scale the wall but'd [frozen] with a lack of daylight, its skin shredded, sent on the wind t'descend'n some billion pieces, maybe thought by some not-known person t'b'the remnants of some impossibly sized creature that'd once made'ts home amid clouds and died and settled t'the bottom of the world as't'd decayed.

“What do you see?”

He'dn't turn t'look at'er, just stared fixedly into whatever lay beyond darkened horizon. “Machines,” he said.

“Just machines?”

“Giant machines. Rolling through red haze. Digging. Chewing up rock to excrete dust. Eating mountains.”

“Is that all?”

He finally turned t'er, but'n the darkness only'er smile remained. “I see them consume everything.”

“Don't horn in on my turf,” she said. “The future's my business.”

He faced the horizon.

“Besides,” she said. “It's not your dream. You should give it back. Before you wear it out.”

“Do I just mark it ‘return to sender’?”

“Might work. You never know.”

“What about when it comes back?”

“You sure it will?”

“Who else's it got to go to?”

“There's always the dead-letter office.”

“What if I want to keep it.”

“You won't keep it forever.”

“So you say.”

“The future's my business, remember?”

“Then tell me, do they eat the world?”

“No.”

“So I'm worried over nothing then.”

“Can you really worry over others' dreams?”

He'dn't reply.

After a while, he turned. Distant footsteps followed'is. Somehow, he found'is way down amid darkened alleys. Moonlight rendered towers above iridescent spires and cast archways'n silver-leaf shadow. But'e turned from smoke-tinged air, wound back through intersections till no scent lingered and no sound remained other than the tap-tap of'is walkingstick against paving stones.

Footsteps followed down stairs behind'm.

"I'm not interested in the future now."

Pause. "Nathaniel?"

But when'e turned there was nothing t'see and only footsteps'n the dark.

"Nathaniel?" Too distant a voice.

He staggered.

"Nathaniel, is that you?" Sound too eroded by wind and distance and time.

His stomach churned. Bile surged against the back of'is throat.

"Nathaniel, are you there? It's too dark. I can't see you."

And'e pitched back. Overhead, stars smeared widdershins'n great elliptical spirals.

And when'e opened'is eye, smeared stars'd've been long submerged behind clear sky and late morning light'd've gradated high towers from gold-orange t'umber. But a deep-shaded alleyway'd've still remained cool. A silhouette stepped over'm, blocked the sky.

"You're really a mess, you know that."

He shifted, tried t'sit up.

"Here." She offered'er hands and managed t'help'm rise, then knelt and lifted'is walkingstick.

He took't back. "Leave me alone." And'e turned and ambled away.

"That's mean." She followed a few steps behind. "Especially, you know, when someone's just helped you out."

But'e'dn't reply.

"So you think you're going to run away from me? On a walkingstick?" And she followed'm round a corner. "Better be careful or I'll start to think you've gone mental."

"Yeah."

Another corner.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You're the hallucination. You tell me."

A day-aglow archway'n the distance must've opened into a square.

"W—what the hell?" And she went up stairs after'm. "You're an egotistical moron, you know that." She added, "Who's probably got brain damage."

He'dn't reply.

Blue foldout tables and plastic chairs lay scattered and half-buried

and a shredded blue tarp wavered'n an early morning breeze, still tied by one frayed strap. "STOP!"

He'd, then turned. And she closed the last few steps.

"So you don't think I'm real."

"No."

"Well, fuck you. Let's find out." Faint voices carried from the distance. And she looked up and crossed open ground. Whistled. Cupped'er hands round'er mouth. "OVER HERE." And somebody must've semi-appeared through an archway, because she motioned. And she recrossed the square toward'm. "Let's just find out."

Brittney and June appeared round the corner and crossed the mini dunes scattered across the square. "Fuck," Brittney said. "You look terrible."

June faintly nodded, grimaced as she looked over'm. "Have you drank anything?"

Brittney dis-clipped'er canteen. "Here."

But'e shook'is head.

And half-pitched t'the side and so they'd t'stumble forward and catch'm.

"We were wondering where you were," June said. And she shifted t'take some of'is weight, but'd t'share with N on that side as Brittney took t'other. "Everyone's been trying to find you."

"This way." Brittney motioned with'er head as they walked and'is bad leg dragged through a dune.

"We'd better try to avoid stairs," N said.

"That way." Britt half-pointed. "There's fewer stairs."

"Good," N said. "Oh, and just so you two know. He's decided I'm imaginary."

They busied past Catherine with brooms and dusty cushions as she reached the landing.

"No, he's not here." Mae looked round the room. "And you can take this one off our hands."

Thuwumps carried through windows from where they assaulted pillows and cushions and blankets below. And Melissa glanced over'er shoulder from where she stood by a window.

"Out," Mae said. "Everybody." She looked at Melissa. "Especially you." She glanced toward Catherine. "Take her somewhere. Anywhere." Cushion removers entered behind Catherine and she'd t'step aside. Mae motioned after'em as they carried a rug. "Don't drag that." And she shook'er head. She whispered t'Catherine as she passed toward the door, "She might be a bit manic today. So be patient."

But Melissa still waited by a window, arms crossed over'er stomach. The bandages probably'd've been removed by then, but't probably'dn't've been quite time for the stitches t'come out.

In and out with cushions.

Catherine shook'er head. "We'd better get out of the way before they carry *us* off to beat."

Melissa nodded absently.

Behind'em, dust boiled across the square as bamboo staffs rapid-struck helpless fabric. And they turned through an archway t'avoid't as the wind shifted. And they wound along shadowed paths.

"It's quiet," Melissa said. A passage [snaked] round and met back on itself amid other intersections. "This must've been what it was like when you first got here."

"In some ways."

“It must’ve been peaceful.”

“Maybe.”

“You like it better now?”

“It seems more real,” Catherine said.

Melissa paused, seemed t’look at a distant tower peak. “I guess till a place’s been lived in—really lived in—it’s just some kind of abstraction.” She swayed and Catherine reached for’er arm. “It’s okay. I’m fine. Just a little light-headed. Shouldn’t look up too long like that, I guess.” They walked on slowly. A passage intersected itself again and they turned a different way onto’t. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

But Melissa’dn’t reply.

And as they walked, Catherine put’er arm round’er.

Then, as now, storms' after-effects'd've been the same. For days, deep-pink sky'd've greeted anyone who cared t'climb the walls or look out through high windows as late afternoon'd've given way t'dusk without any clear line between the two. Multi-banded towers transmuted from pink t'crimson t'umber.

She leaned'er elbows against the parapet. "It really is beautiful." Ripples broke on the mirror-surface below as someone tossed rocks from the pier. "Are you still doing your meditation?"

["Occupé."]

"You have to relax sometime."

["Je sais."]

"You know that's not good enough. You'll keep putting it off and putting it off just a little longer."

["Ce soir."]

"And how do I know you'll even go to bed tonight? You know you'll put off sleep just as well as anything else."

["Mon Deus."]

She turned toward'm, looked at'm robed'n red-evening light as'e stood against the parapet with'is hands'n'is coverall pockets. "I just don't want you running through the streets raving. Do you think that's too much for me to ask?"

["Je ne sais pas."]

"Or sitting in some dark hole obsessing over the littlest detail."

["Je n'ai pas."]

"Troy told me you're already starting work."

He shrugged.

"Well?"

["Oui."]

She turned back toward the horizon, folded'er arms across'er chest, as'f cold. "I know," she said, "we need a lot of things done." She shook'er head. "But obsession isn't going to help anything that's happened."

Vermilion diffusion that'd settled over'is broad shoulders'd've steadily darkened t'umber by the time she'd've looked at'm again.

"I'm just saying to be conservative with your time and energy." And she turned, again, toward the horizon. "Sometimes you have to take care of yourself before you can take care of anyone else."

Finally, she said, "What's wrong?"

["Quel?"]

"What?"

But'e remained silent. And maybe she thought'e'dn't reply.

["Je ne ne reviendrai pas."]

"So?" she said. "You think I didn't know that from the moment you first talked about leaving the socket? Do you think any of the rest of us who came out here ever figured to go back?" She laughed lightly and shook'er head. "I've got a chance of being a real-life Thormivia of Mars. How could I turn that down?"

["Qui?"]

"Oh, she's made-up. When I was a girl...I always got so mad that Burroughs let all those princesses get captured all the time. So I decided to make one that never had and never could be. Silly."

"Burroughs?"

"The guy that wrote A Princess of Mars—Tarzan?"

["Je ne sais pas."]

"Oh, don't tell me that," she said. "You designed *this* place. It could be a mecca for anxiety of influence." And she looked over at'm.

["Le Guerre,"] he said. ["Nous... Maman..."] He cleared'is throat.

After a moment, she touched'is arm. "I think she would be very proud of you." He just breathed. Softly, she said, "Where are you now?"

He muttered, not-intelligible.

"You're hearing them now, aren't you?"

["Oui."]

"Try this," she said. "Bring her here."

["Quel?"]

"When you think about her, I want you to try and transport her here. Don't try to ignore the drones or the bombs or any of it. But move just what you want here. Imagine her here. You started building this place for yourself all the way back then. I'm sure she'd be happy

for you to show it to her. Don't you?" Her hand remained on his arm.
"Do you think you're willing to try that?"

After a while... He nodded.

"Alright," she said. "The other thing we're going to have to work on is getting you off medication entirely. What little's left is already past its use-by date. You're going to have to work hard to practice your strategies... Are you listening?"

He nodded.

"Where are you now?"

["Pourquoi?"]

"What do you mean why?"

["Et paiement?"]

"Oh, I'll get paid," she said.

"Quel?"

She shook her head. "That's not important right now. Besides, why do you still work on this city? Maybe it's part of the same kind of thing. We do what we do because we have to or want to feel useful. And maybe to prove a point."

["Quel?"]

"Very monosyllabic tonight, aren't we?" She shook her head. "The point is there's more to survival than digging septic tanks," she said. And he glanced at her in the up-coming moonlight. "Don't look at me like that. You may've managed to get into the design department without having hardly completed primary school but some of us didn't. Some of us had to put up with the physicists and engineers and bloody fucking astrophysicists for eight years and listen to how *soft* sciences were a bunch of shit made-up by people who couldn't hack it." And she folded her arms across her chest as she looked out toward the horizon. "Not that that ever stopped them from trying to fuck you. You're okay for that. Wankers. And does anyone really think it's a coincidence that male-dominated fields label themselves *hard* while *they* label female-dominated fields *soft*? And of course hard is better than soft. The hierarchy of society is based on penetration. *You can't penetrate anything therefore I'm automatically dominant over you.* Bunch of fucking cowards."

And after a moment's new-settled darkness, Zilog began to laugh.

"Stop laughing at me."

But'e'dn't.

"Stop it." And she punched'is arm'n the dark.

But laughter seemed t've taken control.

"Stop it," she said. "Before you kill yourself."

And'e coughed, bent over, managed ragged breaths between coughs.

"Feel better?" she said as'e straightened.

["Pardon."]

"Not as sorry as you're going to be." They'd've been still nearnuf t'discern each other by early moonlight. "I like to think I'm pretty good at my job," she said. "And someone once told me, if you're any good at something, never do it for free." And she turned. "So I think it's time you paid down some of your bill." Deftly, she dis-zipped'is fly and slipped'er hand'n and metal teeth grazed'er wrist. "You know," she said. "It almost feels like you've got two beards." Her turn t'laugh. And she reached up and intertwined'er fingers'n'is beard and pulled'm down till they kissed. She snorted, rubbed'er nose where hair'd tickled't. He'd started t'firm'n'er hand.

["Est-ce professionnel?"]

"Professionalism is just making somebody else more money than you make yourself." She released'is beard. When she'd, the hairs that'd been round'er finger remained faintly curled. "So no. This isn't professional—I intend to be the one to make out on this deal," she said. "So come along." And she led'm along the wall.

["Où—"]

"Quiet," she said. "You'll know where we're going soon enough."

Ahead, outlined'n silvered moonlight, a bridge arched from the wall t'a distant tower and carved semi-faces'd've stared at'em from shadows as they crossed. Faint yellow eked through vertical windows high above. Candles melted'n small recesses along spiral stairs. She stopped'm on the landing, where a doorway curved into a narrow passage that blocked everything'n the single room beyond from view, guided'm till'is back touched a wall. "Don't move," she said. "And don't say anything." And zipper teeth'd've grazed'er hand as she withdrew. His dingy coveralls'd've tinted at'is waist. "Don't move." And she turned through the doorway, disappeared. Vague sounds'd've wafted from beyond, but little more. And after a few moments, three

or four young women squeezed out and by'm, smiled, laughed as they cut their eyes at'm, giggled, disappeared down spiral stairs. Emerging, Mae stepped near and reached back through'is fly. "This way."

Candles flickered on window sills.

"Stop." And with'er free hand, she fingered the zipper and pulled't down till't jammed and pulled'is erection out between zipper teeth. She let go. "Hm." She seemed t'consider something, but shook'er head. "No. It'd be interesting, but it's not going to work." She motioned. "Take them off." He'd've dis-zipped'em and pushed'em down and'd t've extracted'is erection back through the dis-zipped fly. She moved across the chamber t'where a few planks'd been propped against a window sill. She motioned with'er finger. "Over here." His erection'd've bobbed as'e crossed the chamber and she seemed t'fight the urge t'laugh, but'dn't keep a faint grin from emerging. She straightened and re-composed'erself. "Sit." He'd. "Lie back and put your hands up." She fastened the rope round'is wrists. With a faint groan, she straightened and'er spine popped. Hand on'er lower back, she looked down at'm. "Almost there." She picked through a nearby basket, draped short cords over'is hairy thigh. And she grasped'is testicles and stretched'em from'is body and wrapped'em with cord. "And one more." Delicately, she secured a knot round'is erection. "There we go."

She straightened, slipped'er sari from'er shoulder, watched'm watch'er as she dis-wound't from'er waist and't slid t'the floor.

"Here are the rules," she said. "You will say stop if something goes wrong—or [arrête], if you prefer. Otherwise, you will not speak unless spoken to. Do you understand?" He opened'is mouth—"Nod for yes." He nodded. "Secondly, you will *not* ejaculate—"—and she rested'er index finger on'is tip—"—until I give you permission. Do you understand?" He nodded. "Good."

She ran'er index finger'n circles. "You know, it's almost a shame we genetically engineered these out of existence. I wonder how many other men on this planet are uncut?"

He opened'is mouth, but she removed'er finger and waggled't at'm.

She straddled'is wide frame, sat stretched over'is hips just below the swell of'is stomach so only'er toes touched the floor. His beard crushed against, intertwined with'is chest hair, as'e looked up at'er.

And she reached and intertwined'er fingers'n both. "It's time to pay your bills." And she shifted and raised'er legs so she knelt on the planks.

["Attente..."]

She pursed'er lips. "Yes?"

But'e only cleared'is throat.

"Are you afraid you might inseminate me?"

He nodded.

Lips still pursed, she moved'er hips. "Well, I have given you very explicit orders not to. And you're not going to disobey me, are you?"

["J—"]

"But then again, don't you *want* to ejaculate?" She moved against'm. "As deep in me as you can get?" She moved'er hips. He sighed and shook'is head. "Is that a no?" And she leaned over'is stomach, grasped a handful of'is chest hair. "Are there things you haven't been telling me? Maybe you don't like women?" He groaned as she rotated'er hips. "If you don't like this—"—and she moved against'm—"—all you have to do is say no and it stops. If you want to."

He laid'is head against the planks, turned't side-r'side.

"So you want to go on?"

He nodded.

"Good," she said, and stretched up toward'is face. "I'll tell you a little secret. Get me pregnant and they'll start a religion round you." He lifted'is head, cocked't as'e looked at'er. "That's right," she said, and scissor-motioned with'er fingers.

["Comment?"]

She laughed, combed'er fingers through'is chest hair. "I said, with all those months of space travel, who really knew what all that radiation might do if there was a leak? And one finally agreed it might be a good fucking idea. At least a one off. A fucking experiment. And it still took me *thirty-seven* fucking months to get that far." Her fingers raked lightly down'm. "Whoever decided the fertility span should be mandated to be increased in proportion to life-extension procedures should be shot into orbit and thrown out an airlock." But she shook'er head. "Now—"—and she rubbed'erself against'm—"—are there any more questions?"

He shook'is head.

“Good. Then we’ll begin.”

[...]

After she’d groaned and didn’t support herself and fell over his stomach, arms limp as her breath wavered through his chest hair, she laughed and pulled her mouth into an ‘o’ and gently blew. “It’s like watching tall grass blow in the wind.”

Finally, slowly, she eased back up to sit on his lap. “Now, about all those emergency calls.”

[...]

When she collapsed over him again, she held herself against him as she still trembled.

Finally, she rose and pulled apart their sweat-slick skin. Heat pumped from her core, over her chest and, as she breathed hard, she leaned back against his thighs.

“I bet you want to ejaculate, don’t you?”

His chest heaved. He nodded. Eyes still jammed shut. Spit broke from the corner of his mouth and ran into his beard.

“Are you sure?” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Are you really sure? I wouldn’t want you to do something you didn’t want to. Are you real sure you want to ejaculate all that semen up your penis and into my vagina?” She laughed. “Funny, isn’t it?” But he only groaned. She moved her hips against him. “Ask why.”

He whispered. [“... pour... pourquoi...”]

“Because everybody spends so long making up *dirty words* to get away from medical terms that it gets to the point where the clinical terms become the dirty words.” Laughing, she squirmed against him. “You know,” she said. “Since you haven’t ejaculated yet, I’m starting to wonder if you don’t find me attractive.”

His head lolled side-to-side on the planks.

“What’s that?” She shook her head. “Well, if you don’t, there’s no use in me continuing, is there?” And she rose and slipped off him and stood.

“...”

She stepped away, paused and looked over her shoulder. “What was that?” And she turned and shook her head. “What were the rules?” And she bent and reached across him and wrapped her hand round his erection. “No talking unless spoken to. Unless you want me to stop,

that is. Do you want me to stop?" He turned 'is head side-t'side on the planks. "Well, then you've been very bad." She shook'er head. "Nothing wrong with these hydraulics." And she squeezed. "Bet you have no time for negative thoughts now, huh?" His chest rose and dropped, toes curled. "I think we might've found a new therapy for you." Her hand glided down t'is testicles. "You know, I bet if I untied you I wouldn't even have to touch you and you'd go off." She shook'er head. "But that wouldn't be very fun, would it?" And she stroked the underside of 'is erection with'er forefinger. "No. Men are evolutionarily programmed to ejaculate *in* things."

And removing'er hand, she shook'er head and climbed onto 'is lap. "I guess since you paid your bill—" —and she raised'er self t'allow 'is erection between'er legs—" —I should give you a receipt—" —then lowered'er self till'er buttocks rested against 'is thighs. "Alright," she said and leaned back and reached behind'er self and found a knot and pulled't and drew'er hand up so the cord dangled pinched between'er fingers. And she whispered, "You may ejaculate inside me."

He heaved up, maybe even almost dis-seated'er, and 'is toes curled. And'e held that way till the tension ebbed and'e finally settled back against sweat-damp planks. And she leaned forward and rested'er head against 'is chest and played with 'is hair as sweat trickled over'em both.

"One more thing," she said. ["tu dis ma déesse."] And lightly blew into 'is chest hair. ["Comprends?"]

He nodded.

"And I'll warn you," she said. "I'm a very demanding deity." And she moved with'm still inside'er and'e groaned. "Now what do you say?"

["... déesse..."]

"What?"

["... ma déesse..."]

"Good," she said.

This's just me. But no matter how some wrongly interpret references such as this, such passages clearly are speaking t'memetic evolution andn't biological evolution. Just because something can b'interpreted one way, doesn't mean't's so. Though, I might grant the possibility of micro-evolutionary changes at the lowest level structures of the brain that allow for the better propagation of certain memes—however, this'ssn't the same as macro-scale biologic evolution.

They'd've'd t'put'em somewhere when they brought'em out.
Maybe they'd've laid'em out'n rows and covered'em with tarps, with
rocks spaced round tarp edges t'weight'em against the wind.

June offered a canteen and Brittney tugged the cloth down from over'er nose and mouth. "Thanks." And she might've caught June's glance toward the far side of the square as she drank. "I wouldn't," she said.

"Wouldn't what?"

"Go over there."

“We can’t just leave them there.”

The breeze faded. Across the square, the tarps settled.

"I..." She shook'er head. "I don't know."

"Do you think it's wrong?"

Melissa paused. "No. I...understand. It's just... I don't know if I can do it."

"I know."

Melissa shook'er head. "This isn't just some show. This's...something... I don't... I can't... There's too much riding on this."

"No more than anything you've done before."

"That was just storytelling," Melissa said. "Entertainment."

Catherine looked into'er eyes. "It was never just that. There's always been something more to it."

Melissa shook'er head. "I don't have anything."

"You've still got everything you had before. We can clean everything up."

"But that's just a bunch of junk. Play material."

"Then play."

"But this is serious."

Catherine shook'er head. And she rose and touched'er index finger t'Melissa's forehead. "Don't tell me none of that was serious. I think they might've been the most serious things I've ever seen."

"What if I screw up?" Almost a whisper. "It'll mean more than bad reviews."

"I have faith in you." And Catherine watched'er a moment'n silence. "How do you feel?"

"Alright."

"Are you sure. If—"

"I'm sorry," Melissa said.

“For what?”

But Melissa shook’er head.

“For what?”

Her mouth opened, closed. “People are... And we’re talking about... And...”

“You can tell me.”

Melissa shook’er head. “AndImsohorny.” And she glanced away.

A moment or two and Catherine rested’er hands on Melissa’s shoulders. “The first time,” she said. “The first time I saw someone die, I’d only been with Nathaniel a little while. And after that happened ...I couldn’t even think about doing anything. Then after a while, I thought I’d never get it back again.” Melissa looked at’er. “What I found out is people can die and still be moving around. But they at least have a chance of coming back to life.” And she leaned’n the faint little bit needed t’kiss’er.

And when they pulled apart, Melissa said, “Where’s Zilog when you need him?”

“Why?” Catherine grasp a zipper tongue between thumb and forefinger.

“There’s...[French] phrase...” Melissa’s eyes closed. “[About... the small death...little death...] Something.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means when you cum,” Melissa said as a zipper zizzed towards’er crotch and plastic-metal teeth sawed against’er nipples. “So if I say I want to die...” And she intertwined’er fingers’n Catherine’s hair, guided’er’n and kissed’er. “...it does and doesn’t mean exactly what it sounds like...”

[Then] as now, the canyon rimmed'd've shaded the stone dock even as the setting sun burned walls and towers red and from down there'd've set the rim aglow.

Tracy skipped a stone between distant crumpled struts. "Looks like an amusement park hit by a hurricane," she said. "After one of those super storms like we used to have on the east coast." She skipped another rock. "Now the sand'll get everywhere."

"It didn't before?" Mae said.

"No it didn't get *everywhere*." She knelt and took another few stones from a small pile someone'd collected there and filled'er palm. "Has anyone seen Dave?"

Mae opened a canteen and sipped. "He's working."

"I thought power was still out."

"It is."

"Then what's he working on?"

Mae offered the canteen up t'Zilog, but'e shook'is head and turned with'is hands'n'is pockets and looked out over the water. Mae re-capped't. "He thinks he can part something together small enough to run directly off solar panels. Or what's left of them."

A stone pinged off a metal strut and plopped sideways into water. "He'd better not take them all. I'm down to two pumps." Another stone hit nothing, sank somewhere'n't seen among bent struts. "It's going to be the dark ages."

["Un fantasme."]

"Don't start that shit," Tracy said. "We've fucking heard it for decades now."

"Contrariness seems infectious this evening," Mae said.

“Professional opinion?”

“I don’t have professional opinions anymore.”

“Oh, I’ve heard.”

Someone called and they looked toward the stairs. Raquel waved. “I was wondering where everybody’d gone.”

“We’re hiding in plain sight,” Mae said. “Want something to drink?”

“What is it?”

“Water. What else?”

“I’ll pass.” But she sat on the dock. “Has anybody seen Zeb lately?”

Tracy groaned, pulled back and chunked a rock. “Don’t fucking mention that schizoid.”

“What now?”

“Because I’ve fucking had it up to *here* with him.”

Raquel glanced toward Mae and shook’er head. “We all got pretty sick of him pretty fast.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, he was fine so long as his laptop held out. Then he started stealing batteries—”

“Almost fucking killed my fish—”

“Anyway, some of us almost thought it was worth it not to have to listen to him.”

“But if he ever comes near my fish again—”

Mae shook’er head. “I don’t know what we’re going to do about his manic episodes.”

“Oh, you should’ve been there when the batteries finally failed.” Raquel shook’er head. “I honestly thought somebody was going to kill him. Honestly, I figured he was dead. The only reason he isn’t is because he ran off and nobody could find him. Not that anybody really wanted to.”

“Has anyone seen him? Are you sure he’s okay?”

“Oh, he’s around,” Tracy said.

Raquel glanced up at’er. “How do you know?”

“He’s like a cockroach,” Tracy said, and chucked a stone. “He’d survive nuclear winter.”

Carefully, he laid a chipped panel across the ground and twisted wires together. He shaded a board with 'is hand till green LEDs brightened enough t' discern. Carefuln't t'disturb anything, he scooted back into shade, where the laptop rested t'keep't cool but nearnuf t'the charge controller t'inhibit attenuation. He must've watched't as'f't were spring-loaded and might burst. Many strung-together capacitors'd'd their leads merely twisted together, a mass of seemingly some previously not-discovered organism, a tentative stand'n for lack of a battery. He waited, fidgeted. After a while, when the controller'd collected enough, the laptop's charge indicator lit awhile, faded, lit again when the accumulator overflowed, on and off. And'e sat there and waited.

On and off.

From on high, small dotted bonfires amid sand-covered courtyards and squares must've looked tiny. A few distant windows may've glowed, interrupted by silhouettes. He looked up through interlocked triangular stones, at the stars.

"You shouldn't be up here," she said as she emerged from the stairs.

But'e'dn't look round at'er, just balanced on'is walkingstick and looked down at the city.

"It almost makes you think of a giant bird cage, doesn't it?" she said. "But what kind of bird would've been kept in it?"

After a while'e said, "That sounds familiar."

"I hope so. You said it."

"When?"

"A long time ago,"

"Everything was a long time ago."

She touched'er arm, stepped beside'm. "Let's go down. You need to get some sleep." But'e'dn't move. "Nathaniel." But'e only looked at the city. "You're only going to hurt yourself if you keep going like this." And maybe'er voice'd been harsher than she'd intended when she said't.

He'dn't reply.

And she crossed'er arms and looked through hollow triangular stones, at some distant lit window. "Will you come to bed?" she said. "Please." And she turned t'him, but'e still looked into the distance. "It's been a long time since you were asleep next to me."

"You have others."

A moment. "Don't you ever say that to me again." And she turned and looked over the city. "It's not just you and me here anymore."

And for a moment, it must've seemed she'd say something else. But she turned and walked back toward the stairs. Stopped before the first step. "You lied to me," she said, her back t'im. "You said you'd always come back... But this is worse than you being away, because I see you and think you're here when you're not."

And she started down dark spiraled stairs and emerged somewhere else, where moons hid behind towers which few stars'd room enough t'peek between. And f Mae'd emerged from a corridor with a candle held'n a tin cup, she'd've said, "Everyone's been looking for you."

"I needed to think," Catherine'd've said.

"I saw Melissa today," Mae might've said. "She told me what's going on."

Catherine'd've probably wanted t'say, "What do you think?"

Mae'd've stepped beside'er. "I think it's a good idea." And she'd've touched Catherine's shoulder. "I haven't seen Nathaniel."

Catherine'd've said, "I don't think I have either."

"It'll take time," Mae'd've'd t'say.

"I could help—if he'd let me."

"You can't do it for him."

"He makes me so angry."

"That's fine," Mae'd've said. "There's no reason to feel bad about that."

Maybe Catherine'd've said, "I keep... I keep feeling like I'm afraid of what's going to be the price. To keep everything else together, I'm going to have to lose him."

"That's natural. But feeling so doesn't make it true." Mae'd've squeezed'er shoulder. "Come on. We'll walk you back." And when Catherine turned, candlelight'd've outlined Zilog's frame'n an archway.

But Catherine'd've shaken'er head. "I'm fine. I want to spend some time alone tonight."

"Sure?"

And Catherine'd've nodded.

Same as't's always done, day-t'day, dust sifted from the still air.

Sand cleared with shovels and brooms.

Such clear blue sky.

Such clear blue vast sky.

“Wake up,” *N* said. And after a moment, she touched’er boot toe t’is thigh. “Wake up.” Then she kicked’m. His eye opened and’e tried t’focus. “You need to get up.”

Sun slatted through windows as’t only’d’ve’n late evening. He rubbed’is eye, sat up.

“It’s time,” she said.

He looked up at’er. “For what?”

“It’s time.”

But’e’dn’t reply.

“I’ll drag you out’a here if I have to.”

He leaned forward and massaged’is stretched-out leg.

“Get up.”

“Not until I know why.”

“Because you have to be there.”

“Where?”

“At the conception.”

He looked up at’er. “Come on,” she said. “I’m not going to argue. We’ll be late. Now, get up. Or if you still think I’m imaginary, I can kick you in the leg again. Hard this time.”

Faint sounds’d’ve carried through corridors as’e followed’er, cacophony too distorted by echoing t’b’definable. “Come on.” Across squares. Into sidepassages where holes cut’n a ceiling strobed sunlight across a floor as’e passed and’e’d t’s top at the end, as’t’d’ve made’m sick and’e’d’ve bent forward and swallowed as’fn’t t’vomit. “Come on.” Right angle passages. Corkscrew stairs. Open air. Amidst a bridge, he paused, would’ve breathed hard. “Hurry up.” More passages. Archways. Squares. “Come on.” Farther ahead, a crowd. She waved for’m

from the foot of stairs. And out into a passage ahead of the procession where woodwinds warbled over so manys' tread as yellow-robed bearers passed before everything else. She intertwined'er arm'n'is. "Come on." And the crowd subsumed'em as they flowed toward the docks and up out onto the walls. And out there, the sun'd dropped below the horizon and only a faint pink mist remained t'frame infinite distance. While below on the water, yellow-robes fluttered as bearers crossed planks onto cross-hatched bamboo columns on which they laid yellow-covered flesh and bone acenter. Barely discernible dark figures worked on the far shore and drew ropes taut and the columns drifted into open water. And work done, they paddled toward the dock and landed and rose up with everyone else along the walls. Almost extinguished daylight'd diffused blood red. They'd formed a ring round'er on the wall. But none looked at'er, except'm. A sari from the same cloth as those other yellow robes wrapped only round'er hips so as n't t'obscure the black-lacquer X brushed across'er chest or the crimson splashes on'er stomach and neck and arms and hands. Like the rest, she looked out over the water and the sun's remnants cast'er face'n'ts likeness. And sometime before, without anyone's notice, woodwinds'd ceased and n't even their collective breaths'd b'distinguished above the gentle breeze that moved the cross-stacked bamboo columns below on the current. And a shiver passed through'em as Catherine raised'er hands. "What're these?" And before the moons'd rise, there were only'er words'n darkness. And long silence. Outa which she said finally, "They're us."

Gentle lights reflected on water. Quickly, smokeless fires ascended the columns. And yellow-red light washed crater rim, city walls, near towers, their faces, glinted hot'n myriad widen eyes, made the lacquer-black over Catherine's chest shine, and the red splotches over'er stomach and neck and arms pulse.

And maybe she knew'e looked. And she turned.

And a night wind rose, scattered embers over water t'make a million-million lights as'f t'try and mirror the stars as ash and smoke rose t'obscure the new-risen moons.

A moon passed from behind a distant mountain as she sat there on bare ground and sipped from a dented tin cup. Behind'er, a small fire still crackled amidst circled wagons and another'n similar condition outside a distant tent. And naked figures crossed the semi-darkened gap from one t't'other and on either end firelight kissed their skin as they approached and receded. And out there somewhere on the periphery, Mary-Celleste'd've turned'er back t'em. And maybe they'd've seen'er dress outlined'n the light from the first-risen moon and one'd've whispered something t'another and they'd've laughed.

Martina put the cup t'er lips and tilted back'er head.

"What're you doing?"

But Martina'dn't look up. And Chevsky'd t'walk round'er.

"I've been looking for you."

"Well, I'm here." And she tilted'er head back, paused, looked up into an empty cup and let't roll off'er fingers into the dirt where't clinked against small stones. "What was it you said earlier?"

"When?"

"Don't burn your bits—that was it." Martina swayed. "That... was funny." And she touched the side of'er mouth with the back of'er hand. "And the problem with nudists, you know—no pockets." She started t'whistle. "You know what I told her—You've lost your only chance of seeing your daughter again, you know that?" And she hocked and spat. "THERE ARE NO FUCKING CATS—YOU HEAR ME—" She coughed.

Chevsky shook'er head. "Here. Get up. Give me your hand." But Martina swatted Chevsky's away. "Come on. Let's go back so you can lay down."

"It's your vacation—and I don't wanna lay down."

But Chevsky tugged'er up, would've'd t'wrap an arm round'er waist and pull Martina's arm across'er shoulders t'support'er. "You could try being some help."

"I'd just fuck it up. Did you know there's not really a line between dusk and night. It goes on and you try to find the defining point between them but then it's just there one and not the other without ever having seemed to change... I just fucked it up..."

"In any relationship," Chevsky said as she struggled with Martina's anti-bearing, "there's only a certain level of self-pity I'm willing to put up with."

"Then fuck off."

"If you're not careful, I just might."

Martina looked over'er shoulder toward the horizon as t'other moon emerged.

"Come on." And Chevsky turned'em between two wagons. Fire-light danced against closed drapes.

"I think they were just putting on a show for us the other night."

"Or maybe your sour-puss mood is catchy," Chevsky said.

"There aren't any fucking cats."

"Alright."

"There aren't."

"Will you just kinda try to walk. Please."

"You were right."

"Well, I'm glad you admit it," Chevsky said. "What was I right about?"

"She was sexy, wasn't she..."

"Yeah, you'd better watch it or they'll put you on the device⁹⁵¹."

"...please..."

"You haven't got any charcoal marks."

"... I could make some."

"Oh, just try to stand up."

"There are no c—"

"I know there're no fucking cats. You're preaching to the fucking choir."

"... but ... they keep seeing them..."

"Oh, come on."

“Where’re we going?”

Ahead, smoke curled from an open cart. And Martina watched’t wide eyed. “Did you see that?”

“What?”

“It’s like the recapitulation of all species ever to evolve.” She breathed deep. “That smells so good.” Smokey tendrils enveloped’em. “Look...it’s a fish with legs.”

This's just me. But all that'd've only been a delusion. And none of't constitutes any proof. People can write anything they want. And'n terms of science't only matters what can b'evidenced. And when's anyone produced any archaeology t'back up these stories? Never. No single transitional form's ever been found. No yetn't extant species's ever been located'n the archaeological record. And as much as some claim physical biological evolution'd happen within 'kinds', as they call'em, whether't b'birds or fish or cats, not a single one've ever historically been shown t'b'modifiable one into another. And that some people can continue on with these attitudes with no evidence whatsoever's just proof of how stubbornly intractable memes can evolve t'be. Perhaps some social utility'd b'argued for that: the collective social cohesion of a shared belief no matter how factually incorrect may allow'n certain situations a survival advantage over another group. But that'f anything'd b'the only takeaway from the whole mess.

“... oh look at the pretty gills.”

And she lurched forward and yellow-green splattered over orange-red pebbles and sand.

“Ah, geesh.” Chevsky let’er drop t’er knees, gathered’er hair and pulled’t back.

Jessica handed away’er pipe and climbed down from a cart, bent over Martina and touched’er hair. “Try to breathe.” Then she straightened and said into the cart, “Hand me a rug.” And she took’t near the fire and brushed away stones with’er foot and laid’t out. “Let us get you over here. It will be more comfortable.” Both women eased’er down. And Jessica left, returned with a cup. “Here. Drink this. Just sip, though.”

“Why does this taste funny?”

“It will help calm your stomach.”

Chevsky knelt by the rug. “Alright?”

Martina groaned.

“You can not mix smoke and wine,” Jessica said.

“Hell of an instant hangover,” Chevsky said. “That’s for sure. Why don’t you warn people beforehand?”

“We thought you knew.”

Martina leaned forward, passed the cup t’Chevsky and put’er face’n’er hands.

“You should try and get some sleep,” Jessica said. “You will feel better tomorrow.” She turned at a noise. “Nothing to see here,” she said. And faces ducked behind rustled curtains. “Y—”

Someone emerged between two carts.

Jessica turned and looked up. "What are you doing back so soon?"

"They need some more water," the young woman said.

"What did you do?"

"Poured it on one of their laps."

Jessica shook'er head. "Go on."

Someone laughed as the young woman crawled into a cart. And Jessica rose and moved toward a nearby cart, rapped on wood. And a woman poked'er head out. "What?"

"Someone needs to take some water to the tent."

"I thought that was Rebecca's job tonight."

"There has been an incident."

"I thought we were not doing that tonight."

Another young woman poked'er head out. "What is going on?"

"Go back in."

"But what is going on?"

"Both of you go," Jessica said.

"Where?"

"Come on," the first said, and pushed the curtain aside and climbed down.

"Where are we going?"

"Come on. You will know when we get there." And after a moment, they disappeared into the darkness between two carts.

Jessica turned back t'Martina and Chevsky. "Let us get you settled in," she said. And she bent and took hold of one of Martina's arms, nodded for Chevsky t'do the same.

But Martina shook'er head. "I think I'll stay down here."

"You cannot sleep out here."

"Why not?"

Jessica shook'er head. "Get up. You will feel better tomorrow."

"I can feel better tomorrow right here. Besides, it's hot."

"That is just the smoke and the wine."

"I don't care what it is. But it is. So no."

"You cannot sleep out here all night."

Chevsky said, "Let's go to bed."

"You can stay too. If you want. It's a vacation after all—right? Just like Yosemite®. You know—you could go invite Abigail to be gay again... Or go out there and invite *her*—I'm sure she'd like that—

ha ha—she'd fucking die—wouldn't she—after all it's a vacation—let's sit here and wait for the cats..."

"Come on," Chevsky said.

"No." Martina pulled away. "As a new member of this traveling unit—I hereby exercise my right to radical freedom—"

Chevsky sighed. "Listen," she said. "I think both of us've had enough of sleeping on hard ground."

"It's soft."

"You cannot sleep out here," Jessica said.

"I say I can."

"There is too much dust."

"I'll wrap something over my face."

"You're not sleeping out here," Chevsky said.

"Why not?"

"Because I say so."

"Oh." Martina slowly climbed t'er feet, brushed off'er toes and stood there a moment or two as she re-balanced. "I don't see why you're mad," she said. "I'm doing what you wanted." She looked round as Jessica took'er other arm. "Your face looks like a bunch of roses...but it doesn't smell like them?"

"What does it smell like?"

"Salt and pepper pistachios."

Chevsky glanced round Martina. "Is this normal?"

"It can happen."

Chevsky said, "What does my face look like?"

And Martina turned toward'er, must've been wide eyed. "Like a... carp..."

"Great..."

"And you smell like—"

"Let's get you to sleep." And she glanced toward Jessica again. "Will she go to sleep like this?"

"—like—"

"Most likely as soon as we lay her down."

"—like...new water-proof work boots...but...also..."

Light wedged across'er face as the cart moved and day progressed. And for a while, over the interstitial line between wakefulness and sleep, the world'd've seemed a burning pink-yellow membrane. And'er eyes watered when she tried t'open'em and so she scrunched'em closed.

"You know," Chevsky said. "There for a minute, you looked like something out'a an old horror movie, or something." She adjusted'er self as the wagon shifted. "Wonderful suspension, don't you think?" And she reached for a waterbag. "Are you undead?" she said. "Or merely not dead?"

Martina mumbled.

"Feeling better?"

Martina brushed'er hand over where light fell across'er cheek.

"You can't rub it away like that."

"It's hot."

"Then move."

Martina groaned. "I can't."

"God—"—Chevsky grabbed a hat, caught'er self as the cart swayed and plopped't over Martina's head—"—you blow your fucking brains out and leave me with the fucking baby." She sat back. The cart shifted side-t'side. "You want something to drink?"

Martina nodded.

"Here. But just sip it."

Martina rested the bag on'er chest and brought the end t'er mouth. Wind shifted the drapes, smattered the interior with light and allowed glimpses of a sun-obliterated landscape. "Where are we?"

“Who the hell knows?”

“My throat feels like it swallowed my skull and my stomach forced it back up.”

“How do you know that didn’t happen?”

Her face’d’ve been hidden beneath that hat brim, so there’d’ve been no way t’know’f she grimaced as she took another sip. “What happened?”

“Don’t remember?”

“No...” Her voice went hoarse and she sipped and coughed.

“Don’t try to drown. I don’t want to have to explain how you drowned in the middle of a desert.”

“What happened?”

“You flew to the moons and back. Actually, I’d be surprised if you can hold your arms up after all that flappin’.”

“Seriously...”

“Let’s just say I’m gonna hold it against you for a while, and leave it at that.”

“What did I do?”

“Nothing,” Chevsky said. “And you’ll just have to trust old trout-face on that one.”

“Huh?”

Light spattered over’em as Jessica brushed the curtain aside and pushed’er head’n as she walked along with the cart. “How is she?”

“Suitably chastised,” Chevsky said. “Come on in.”

Expertly, Jessica caught the cart and pulled’erself’n on’er thigh as’t still rolled along. “Feeling better?” She pulled’er legs under’erself.

“F—fine,” Martina said, after a moment. And she glanced toward Chevsky, said’n a low voice, “Who is she?”

“That’s a fine way to talk,” Chevsky said. “After everything that’s happened and all the fun we had and you can’t even remember her name. That’s just bad manners, right there.”

Jessica faintly smiled, shook’er head. “It happens sometimes” she said. “After... Well...”

“What happened?”

Chevsky shook’er head. “We’ll tell you later.”

“I—” But she coughed, grimaced at expansion-contractions deep within’er throat.

"Try not to talk too much," Jessica said. "Wait until you have had some more water." And she looked round. "Is there a cup here?"

"Yeah," Chevsky said, and dug.

"I have brought some salt. It will help to mix a little in her water." Chevsky glanced at'er. "Where're you carrying it?"

Jessica touched'er neck, followed a line over'er shoulder and tugged't round till a small cord-throated pouch dropped between'er breasts.

"Silly question."

Jessica pulled't over'er head. "Just a few pinches. We have to be sparing."

Chevsky nodded, tipped the water into the cup as Jessica added salt.

"How far away are we supposed to be from the sea?" Chevsky said. And she glanced toward Martina. "Kobe's deal." And Martina nodded absently.

"We should not be far," Jessica said. "Hopefully."

"It's," Chevsky said t'Martina, "not like they gave anyone exact directions."

"Who?"

But Chevsky shook'er head. "We'll tell you later."

"They wanted to be paid," Jessica said. "But we couldn't settle on a price."

"What was the price?"

"Two of us."

"Two...?"

"Yes."

"You can see why there was a problem with the deal," Chevsky said. "Not that I know, of course. This was months ago, apparently. But never mind."

"We tried to haggle them down to one," Jessica said. "But they would not budge."

"You have to drive a hard bargain sometimes," Chevsky said.

Martina coughed. "What about the water, then?"

"Oh," Jessica said. "That is no problem. We will have all that we need soon enough." And she leaned and parted the curtain with'er finger and a light-wedge fell across'er and Martina. "We should stop soon."

Martina handed Chevsky back the cup. “It’s that late? Did I sleep all morning?”

Both women glanced at’er.

“Try three days.”

Bamboo pellets glowed and crackled beneath a cast-iron wok and slowly transformed t'glowing charcoal as a woman kneaded bout'n the cookery with an extended ladle and scent pulsed outward'n waves. Distant rock formations shadowed the camp'n late afternoon and provided a break against the fainter winds that'd risen later'n the day and whistled through the formations as cart drapes barely fluttered.

Martina sat with'er legs over cart's edge as Chevsky returned, bowl'n each hand. "It's hot."

Martina took a bowl'n both hands and leaned forward and breathed deeply through'er nose.

"You're supposed to sip it," Chevsky said, "not snort it."

"I don't see any prescription label." And she sniffed again.

"Okay. But don't think this off-label usage will go unnoticed. This planet might evolve an FDA® in a few million years—" -slurp- "—and they'll retroactively sanction you. So don't come crying to me when that happens."

"I don't expect to be around in a few million—" -slurp- "—years."

"Can't tell. There's supposed to be no theoretical upper limit on how long we could live." -slurp- "Except maybe the end of the universe."

"I think—" -slurp- "—habitable planets will—" -slurp- "—be gone by then."

"Yeah—" -slurp- "—but we could build an ark—" -slurp- "—and float around in that at least until matter decays back into energy—" -slurp- "—or the big crunch—" -slurp- "—whichever happens first."

"That sounds...like the most depressing thing I've ever heard."

-slurp- "The end of the universe?"

"Floating around in an infinite nothing."

"Technically—" -slurp- "—it's what we're pretty-much doing now."

Martina's eyes drifted up from'er bowl and toward the sky. "The stars haven't burnt out yet."

"Still—" -slurp- "—matter of definition—" -slurp- "—the vast majority of the universe is empty—" -slurp- "—And the most of them have already burnt out—" -slurp- "—Just that light's too slow's all—" -slurp-

-slurp- "Since when did you move from engineering to astrophysics?"

"I can have personal—" -slurp- "—interests outside work."

"Really?" -slurp- "I thought there was a policy against that."

"No—" -slurp- "—It's just that they own seventy-eight percent of it."

-slurp- "Which seventy-eight percent?"

"I don't know—" -slurp- "—you're the manager—" -slurp- "—you're supposed to know these things." -slurp- "I mean—" -slurp- "—everything here is automatically copyrighted as a derivative work—" -slurp- "—Now, if you bring us into it—" -slurp- "—is that extracurricular activity or is it—" -slurp- "—derivative?"

"Probably—" -slurp- "—both."

"Let's say—" -slurp- "—one of us goes down on someone under that copyright, patent—whatever—"

"All you ever think a—"

"Let me finish—" -slurp- "—Or better, let's say one of them fingers one of us at the same time we finger one of them—"

-slurp-

"Will you be quiet a minute—" -slurp- "—what I'm tryna say is—" -slurp- "—how much of what percentage of which orgasm do they own?"

"I would guess—" -slurp- "—one-hundred percent of the one. Seventy-eight percent of the other."

"But—" -slurp- "—that's if yours counts as extracurricular. But is it really a derivative?—" -slurp- "—Or is it a percentage of a percentage?—" -slurp- "—What do you think?"

"I think—" -slurp- "—you'd better drink your soup before it gets cold and before someone overhears and reports—" -slurp- "—it to some lawyer slash—" -slurp- "—accountant who figures out we have to—" -slurp- "—pay royalties—" -slurp- "—or something."

“On inducing or being induced?”

–slurp– “Both.”

–slurp– “How do you think multiples would count against the percentages?”

Martina laughed, spewed bubbles through'er soup. “... fuck...” And she'd t'set'er bowl beside'er on the cart and she wiped'er chin with the back of'er hand. Giggles carried from other carts. And eyes may or mayn't've lingered toward'em.

“We'd better watch it,” Chevsky said. “Else they're gonna start thinking we've been mixing smoke and wine.”

Martina groaned, sipped, looked out where the ridge blotted stars. “Is she still out there?”

“Yap.” –slurp– “Something the matter?”

“Hm?”

“I can't hear you eating.”

Martina looked down at'er bowl, raised't and sipped at't.

“You know—” –slurp– “—the problem with managers is their mind's always on the *wrong* problem.”

“Well, some of us can handle multitasking.”

“Wanna—” –slurp– “—hear something?”

“What?”

“Somebody's scheduled to throw a tantrum tonight.”

“Huh?”

–slurp– “Up at the tent.”

Martina sipped. “Is there anything in this I should believe?”

“Maybe—” –slurp– “—maybe not.”

“You're going to make me ask.”

–slurp–

“Fine,” Martina said. “How can somebody schedule a tantrum?”

–slurp– “That's what I asked.”

“And?”

–slurp– “Well—” –slurp– “—I said just that—” –slurp– “—I said if she's already so angry—” –slurp– “—and the woman I was talking to said ‘What do you mean? She's no angrier than anyone else.’ Whatever that means—” –slurp– “—and I said how did she know she was going to throw a tantrum—” –slurp– “—and she says ‘oh, because it's on the schedule’—” –slurp– “—and I'm like *the*

schedule?—” –slurp– “—and she goes yeeeeeeeees, as if I’m just a complete blockhead—” –slurp– “—so I guess sometimes you have to plan spontaneity—” –slurp–

–slurp– Martina looked up as a young woman wandered over from the fire.

“Do you want any more soup?”

Chevsky, bowl t’er lips, glanced at Martina. “What do you think?”

“The word addict comes to mind.”

“That—” –slurp– “—isn’t a real thing.”

“No?”

–slurp– “—No—” –slurp– “Besides, have to keep the mind fresh.”
–slurp– “Can only fit so many memories in your head, you know—”

Martina shook’er head. “You know... I think about it and... I can’t remember highschool at all. And the only thing I remember from getting my masters is...” She shook’er head. “And all the wars are just...a few blurred images on TV.” She added’n a low voice, “I remember the moon.”

“See what I mean?” –slurp– “Why keep all that shit?” –slurp–
“That’s why I try to keep what I want to remember fresh. Don’t want to forget any techniques.” –slurp–

“I don’t think your technique has any chance of rusting. Getting worn out, maybe.”

They both laughed.

The young woman’d’ve glanced confusedly between’em. “Do you like to be spontaneous?” Chevsky said t’er.

“What does that mean?”

“I think she’s had too much, already,” Martina said.

And after a moment or too, shaking’er head, the young woman turned and walked back toward the fire.

“Nice view,” Chevsky said, and set’er empty bowl on the cart. “We never did decide who owned how much of what.”

“Finger it all and let the accountants work it out.”

Chevsky laughed. “How’d you come up with that?”

“I figured it’s something you’d say.”

“I like it.” And Chevsky slipped off the cart, lifted’er bowl. “I think I’ll go try being spontaneous.”

Martina still sipped. “Let me know how it works out.”

“Oh, I will.”

Heatwaver subsumed distant silhouettes. Hardpan'd've cracked into interconnected fissures which'd've rattled carts side-t'side as they rolled. Martina let the curtain fall.

"They out there again?" Chevsky said.

Martina'dn't reply.

"Talkative today."

But Martina'dn't reply t'that either.

"W—"

"You still have those sunglasses you made?"

"Yeah." And Chevsky looked round for'er bag. "Why?"

But Martina just took'em and slipped outa the cart.

"You're welcome," Chevsky called.

The sea-front's coruscating white surface'd've been too bright t'look at without'em till long after evening when the sun'd reduced t'a small red bump on pink horizon. But by then the tent'd've been erected'n the distance and a few women'd already gone out with shallow, round baskets and worked stick-probes and long spoons and wooden shovels into white encrustation till't mounded and spilled over basket sides and cascaded off as fine white granules as they carried'em back t'the wagons and left salt trails over sun-reddened, orange ground leading back t'the great white halo from which't'd come that bordered pink shimmering water and'n the ill-defined boundary where waves licked and destabilized salt encrustatia and near-petrified-and-crystallized stalks marked a kind of time against the sun as a million sundials. Salt'd've powdered underfoot as Martina

walked toward that more-distant liquid shore. And out there, feet, knees, elbows, chests, buttocks protruded from the water as women drifted not-able t'sink, even'f they'd tried. Salt water streamed off Jessica and routed and dripped over'er bulges and wrinkles as she stood and moved toward shore. She stopped'n the shallows, water up t'er knees. And she gathered'er hair and wrung't, droplets cascading round'er. "Can't swim?"

Martina shook'er head. "It's just been a long time."

"Come in. I promise I will not let go."

"It's not as if I have to worry about sinking."

Jessica laughed. They both turned as someone out'n the water yelled, where three chased a fourth, the fourth barely ahead, arms and legs thrown wide'n great slow strokes as they floated.

"What'll they do if they catch her?"

Jessica laughed. "You could wait and find out." She walked ashore, still wringing'er hair. And they stood and watched till evening darkened and forced their recognition of that fact and by then the young women'd gained so much distance they'd've been lost t'sight.

"Should we be worried?"

Jessica shook'er head. "They'll be fine."

Silent, Martina looked toward the sky. But the last pink light'd've already departed without notice. Behind'em, a small flame flickered as someone kindled a cookfire. Farther away, darkness subsumed the tent and a small lighted lamp crossed the space between'em t'disappear inside. But the tent fabric'd've been too thick t'allow newborn light t'escape. And the only hint t'ts existence came when the lamp-bearer pushed aside the flap and a momentary yellow wedge cut across orange-red ground.

Splashes carried from nearby. Farther down shore, dripping figures emerged, stood there a moment or two as'f they'd been creatures emerged on land for the first time.

"Go on," Jessica called. "Get back. It will be time for dinner soon."

One of the young women giggled, slap-grabbed for another, and all ran up the shore'n maybe a race, maybe re-enactment of the earlier chase. And they were just silhouettes'n the early night before they disappeared among the wagons.

"Sometimes," Martina said. "I think I'm dreaming."

Jessica combed'er hair with'er fingers and dried salt sprinkled over the ground and against'er shoulder. "Why?"

"I don't know." Martina turned and looked out over darkened sea. "It's just... I wonder if I dropped in the desert back there somewhere and everything that's happened since has just been random firing in my brain as it shuts down from exhaustion and dehydration."

It'd've been impossible t'tell Jessica's reaction'n the dark, other than by'er voice, which must've been soft. "Is that what you think is happening?"

"I don't know, anymore."

"So we are all just for your benefit."

"Well, when you put it like that it sounds really stupid."

"Maybe," Jessica said. "But then again, maybe you are right. If so, maybe I should oblige you." And she stepped close, wrapped'er arm round'er, planted'er hand over Martina's stomach so'er faint paunch there bulged between'er fingers. "After all, if that were the case, it would be my duty, would it not?" Wind faintly blew across the sea, warm against both. And when Martina leaned back against'er, dried salt brushed'er skin.

Jessica said into'er ear, "We should think about going to get something to eat."

"Hm?"

"Hungry?"

Distant fire outlined Jessica's face as Martina turned. Jessica shook'er head. "We're all only here for you, remember?" And she smiled and turned and led'er up iridescent shore toward firelight.

Shouts'n the distance. A quick-silver flute melody carried by a breeze on night air. Silhouetted bodies strobed between cart gaps where they rounded the fire. And women lay'n carts with crossed legs and their chins propped on their palms as they watched. Someone nearby motioned. "We saved you a couple bowls." And Chevsky stepped away from the fire, huffed and bent and rested'er hands on'er knees. She looked up and motioned, but Martina shook'er head. And straightening, chest still heaving, she walked toward'em.

"Come on."

Martina shook'er head, half-smiled, sipped from'er bowl.

"You can eat later."

"But I'm hungry now."

"I can imagine," Chevsky said.

Martina said, "Why do I have the feeling you're somehow connected with this?" Dancers rounded fire, spun and, raised their arms as if determined to paint every inch of themselves with its ephemeral luminescence.

"Just a bit of bacchanalia."

Jessica pulled her lips from her bowl, said, "What does that mean?"

"It refers to Bacchus."

"Oh," someone said. "I used to know someone with a cat by that name."

Martina laughed.

"Did I say something funny?"

"No. No, it's just... Never mind. It's not important." She shook her head, brought her bowl to her lips.

"Come on," Chevsky said.

But Martina shook her head. "I'll leave them to you. That way you won't have to share."

Chevsky grinned. "Thanks."

Behind her, two young women'd broken free while the rest continued round and by then most of its grandeur'd gone. They touched Chevsky's shoulder, took her arm, her hand, pulled her back.

"You must be wanted."

"Duty calls." And she turned and walked back toward the fire between those two young women. And one-by-one they merged back into the stream while Martina and Jessica watched and sipped and tipped their bowls and herded solid bits into their mouths with their fingers after they'd sipped all the broth.

Martina pinched a long drooping bean shell between her fingers, tilted her head and dropped it into her mouth, licked her fingertips as she set the bowl on the cart. "How long do you think they can keep that up?"

Jessica licked her fingers, turned and placed her bowl away, too. "Remains to be seen." She motioned. "Do you..."

Martina shook her head, watched them go round. And after a time, when a few dancers peeled away hand'n-hand and paused but smiled

as sweat trickled off their bent over bodies, Jessica took'er hand and, when Martina looked up, motioned'er head between the carts. Even the old woman who guarded the empty cooking wok beside'em'dn't've noticed'em gone.

Salt-shore'd've lain out as a vast semi-curved road'n moonlight. And at some point they'd've passed outa the range of music and laughter and only faint surf'd've resounded as they walked hand'n-hand.

Martina paused. Jessica too. "What is it?" But she'dn't reply. And still ahold of Jessica's hand, she crouched and probed the ground with'er fingers. Jessica crouched too. "What did you find?"

Sun-paled bones lay iridescent and'd've semi-sparkled where crystallized salt'd adhered and reflected moonlight. Empty eyesockets stared up at'em and jaw fragments seemingly grinned. "It's just a fish," Martina said. "It must've gotten trapped here when the water receded."

"Look." Jessica pointed. "There's more."

And those'd've smiled too.

"Strange..."

Jessica spoke low, conspiratorial. "What?"

"There aren't any large predators out here, are there? You'd expect, with the salt, that most of the flesh would've been preserved. But it seems to have been removed."

"Maybe it was the cats."

Martina snorted.

Jessica tugged'er hand. "I want to show you something."

Still warm water lapped their toes as their feet squished into wetted salt and sand. "In the water?"

Jessica, already ankle deep, gently tugged'er. "Trust me."

Eventually, their feet'd've floated free. "Turn around," Jessica said, and released Martina's hand. "Lay back." For a moment, in the darkness, Martina must've been disoriented, she'd've almost fallen, splashed, half-thrashed. "Are you alright?"

"I told you it's been a long time since I swam."

Jessica found'er hand'n the darkened water. "Just float. There is nothing you have to do." Finally, Martina settled against'er. And buoyed, they floated through void with only t'other's touch as anchor.

Maybe Martina said something too hushed t'hear or remember.

But finally she said, “It’s like watching the stars in zero gravity... Except... More...”

And they floated into void, infinite starry landscape domed round’em, reflected’n the liquid dark below, as’f all on their own they’d found a way t’float through all infinity.

And b——.

Root-vegetable scent must've been strong'n back of most carts and perhaps came as a novel experience t'the man laid out'n back on potato or lentil or carrot sacks. Near noon, other men came for'm, and'is broken ankle must've floated above the ground beneath'is robes as they helped'm toward the newly erected tent. And a few young women watched'em retreat into the distance. "Stop gauping," an old woman'd've snapped. "Hand me down a rug." And she'd've marched off with't rolled over'er shoulder.

Martina brushed aside a curtain and tapped Chevsky's foot. Chevsky mumbled. And Martina tapped'er foot again. "What—"

"No rest for the wicked," Martina said.

"...jealous."

"Time to get up."

"Why?" Chevsky opened one eye and squinted. "It's the middle of the day. Everyone's just going to sleep, anyway." And she closed'er eye. Next t'er, a young woman shifted, mumbled.

"We're on latrine duty."

"I don't wanna."

"Get up. You'll feel terrible if you lay around all day. And you know it."

"I'll take it under advisement and conduct a few experiments on the subject and get back to you after the focus group's hashed it over."

"Make them thought experiments," Martina said. "Let's go."

"Fine." Chevsky opened'er eyes. "Ooooh, shit, shit, shit."

"That's generally what a latrine's for."

"Oh, Ha ha." Chevsky regarded the young woman half-atop'er,

sighed, started t'ry and shift out from under'er. But the young woman mumbled, clung t'er. "How am I supposed to leave this?"

"Peel yourself away," Martina said. And she stood there and waited with a mattock and shovel balanced'n each hand, till Chevsky shoved the curtain aside and climbed down. "So you *are* two separate organisms."

"Ha ha." And she reached back'n for'er hat and glasses.

"Stylish," Martina said. And she pointed with the mattock.

Chevsky groaned and ambled toward another cart, pulled out the picnic-table-size parasol strapped alongside. "Why do I always get the shit jobs?" She balanced't over'er shoulder as they passed some distance from camp, till Martina stopped and jammed the shovel into the ground so't stood on'ts own.

And Chevsky planted the parasol and leaned on't. "I'm not digging."

"And this from the person who claims to like holes."

"I draw the line at it if I can fit myself in it."

Martina bent, struck the powder-fine surface with the mattock, worked till sweat beaded off'er skin and momentarily speckled the ground a darker orange-red before't evaporated. Breathing hard, she paused and looked round the landscape. "You're missing the toilet, you know."

"The world's a toilet," Chevsky said as she squatted.

Martina tossed aside the mattock and reached for the shovel. "If you'll recall, we had latrines in Yosemite® too."

"Not that I worked on."

"Oh," Martina said. "You just like to use the fruits of others' labors."

"Yap."

"Good to know which side you're on."

"Maybe you wanna muck around in the details. I just wanna eat when I'm hungry and—"

"Dance around the fire at night."

"Yap."

"What about your engineering spirit?"

"I don't like *boring* problems."

"And this is a boring problem."

“Yap.”

“Until you have nowhere to shit.”

“Hm.” Chevsky stood. “Here she comes.”

“Fine,” Martina said. “She’s right on time. Open up the umbrella.”

Chevsky dis-fastened’ts straps, knelt t’reach beneath’ts ribs and shoved’t halfway open and rose t’tiptoe t’lock’t’n place. “— Watch it—” But Martina caught’t just as the breeze dis-balanced’t and both women moved’t into place just offset the hole and drove’t into the ground. And they stood beneath’ts oblong shade a few moments. Its faded stripes might’ve been more visible on the underside. “You know,” Chevsky’d’ve said. “I still think I’ve seen this thing somewhere before.”

“Where’s that?”

“Don’t remember.”

“Hm,” Martina said. She glanced out over the landscape. “I just hope the wind doesn’t get too bad again.”

“I’m not chasing it down this time.”

“No one said you have to.” Martina waved as an old woman approached. “Need any help with that?” But the old woman shook’er head and passed’em and dropped’er rolled-up rug’n the umbrella’s shade, beside the fresh hole, and touch’t with’er foot t’dis-role’t. Martina bent t’lift the mattock and shovel. “Anything we can do for you before we leave?”

“You could dig a deeper hole,” the old woman said as she laid out’er implements on the rug. “So I could climb down.”

“You’ll have to talk her into doing it,” Martina said. “And I doubt you’d have much luck.”

The old woman made a noise, perhaps an acknowledgment, but busily went bout arranging’er implements.

“Well,” Martina said. “See you later.” The old woman lowered’er-self onto the rug t’wait.

“I’m not saying anything,” Chevsky said as they started back toward the distant wagons.

“Oh, shut up.”

Late afternoon and most lay asleep. Martina stretched and climbed down from the cart and wandered away t'squat'n the distance. She rubbed'er eyes as she approached the camp again. Someone sat beneath one of the awnings stretched low from the side of a cart and Martina paused, then started that way. "Paying us a visit?" she said as she ducked beneath't and sat.

Abigail shook'er head. "Just resting. Mary's asleep and I thought I'd come get some water." She rested the back of'er head against a wheelspoke. Harsh afternoon light rendered Mary-Celleste's makeshift tent a small, dark spot'n the distance. "It's so hot."

"Yeah."

They sat'n silence. Abigail rubbed sweat from'er neck. "If we just had a breeze." She sighed. She tugged'er sweat-damp coveralls from'er chest. "Can I ask you something?"

"I guess."

"Doesn't it get everywhere? Sand I mean." And she glanced at Martina.

Martina shook'er head. "Not really." Martina sat forward and lifted a stone and turned't absently between'er fingers and looked at't. "Can I ask you something?"

"Okay."

But after a moment or two, Abigail just shook'er head. "Never mind." And she skipped the stone into sunlight.

"It kind of reminds me of one of your parties," Abigail said.

Martina glanced at'er. "I didn't know you ever came to one."

Abigail shook'er head. "I didn't. I just...heard about them." She added, "Have you been to the big tent?"

"Elaine has. She's been practicing at being spontaneous."

"What?"

Martina shook'er head. "Nothing."

After a while, Abigail said, "What do they do over there?"

"Sit around. At least, that's what I hear."

"That's all?"

"They're supposed to be contemplating civilization. Or so I hear."

Martina traced a figure'n dust.

"Did you hear what happened to Guye?"

Martina remained silent, seemingly occupied with'er drawing.

Abigail cleared'er throat.

"Kassandra said he'd snuck away."

"Did she say..."

"That she was giving him a blowjob when they showed up." Martina still'dn't look away from'er doodle.

"And they just...watched?"

"Apparently it's not good for maintaining an erection."

"But they didn't try to stop it?"

"No. They just watched."

"And he just went back with them?"

"That's what I hear."

Abigail sighed. "I don't understand."

"Maybe nobody's supposed to."

A moon nestled into a small valley between two distant peaks¹⁴⁶. And night winds'd slowly faded as earliest morning bordered on departure¹⁴⁷.

"I was wondering where you had gone," Jessica said as she came up behind'er.

Martina'dn't turn, only stood with'er arms folded as she watched the last moon disappear. "Couldn't sleep."

Jessica settled an arm round'er waist. "We are going to turn away from the mountains today. We should reach the canals soon."

Martina remained silent a moment. "Do you really believe those cats are out there?"

"It does not matter what I believe."

"But you—"

"We get where we need to one way or the other. Where are we all going, anyway? They say if you walk around the world, all you do is end up back where you began."

"Some people say that about the universe."

Jessica rested'er cheek on Martina's shoulder. "We know where we have been and what we should avoid again. But how can you know what to avoid before you have ever seen it?"

Martina sighed. "This is too much philosophy for this early in the morning."

"Come back and lay down then."

"I'm too tired."

"I did not say you had to sleep."

"You're beginning to sound like Elaine."

"I do not have that much energy."

"I don't think *anyone* has that much energy."

"That does not mean we cannot try."

"Too late, anyway," Martina said. And she looked toward the horizon, where the sun appeared almost full'n the sky, seemingly having bypassed dawn altogether.

Behind'em, the camp'd rustled into motion without their notice.

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They'd've deployed a cart over the canyon rim so the tongue acted as a boom t'draw water buckets from below. Martina leaned over the edge. Near'er feet, iron wedges'd been driven into the crags, ropes attached for the two or three women who'd repelled t'the bottom. It'd've been impossible t'see'em below, but once'n a while dried-yellow bamboo tops rustled, disappeared, and swop-swop-cush and chop-chop sounds followed as they trimmed'em t'size. Someone below'd yell and a half-dozen women'd take the rope thrown over another cart tongue and pulled till a bundle dangled nearnuf t'b'drawn'n with a notched pole. Nearby, women worked round a seemingly haphazard orchestration of black-iron gears. A long pole'd fitted t'a receptacle and allowed one woman t'leverage't round and round as another dis-bundled the bamboo lengths and fed'em into the black-iron gears. The machine crinked and crunched and excreted compacted dried pellets into a waiting coal shovel, which when full a woman'd lift into a sack held open by another. By late evening, while the yet yellow sun remained on the horizon and the sky'd yetn't gone pink, more than a dozen burlap bags'd've been stacked nearby.

But Martina'd spent most of the day farther down the canyon rim, where glass and hammered-metal tubular interconnects joined copper boilers and glass bulbs and copper coils. Pellet fires'd been kindled beneath the boilers as needed, and steam'd hissed through pin-holes and'd condensed and liquid'd dripped here or there and'd darkly speckled the ground. Till, finally, steam'd dribbled into a copper kettle at the end t'b'poured into a waterbag and corked.

Martina'd watched'em de-crate and assemble't, but Chevsky'd only

come over later when the fires'd already been kindled and steam'd worked'ts way through being boiled and reboiled.

And they stayed looking over both machines till everyone else'd headed back and the sun'd almost set and distant firelight guided'em back t'the wagons, where most sat round with their bowls and some-one stirred the cooking wok. And as the wind'd settled, cook smells lingered long after they'd lain down tired and the fire'd rendered t'little but aglow charcoal. Gentle snores and soft breathing made whole the night.

"Still not asleep?"

"No."

"You should rest. It will be a long day tomorrow, again."

Martina lay quiet'n the dark and felt Jessica shift. "You're really driving her crazy, you know?" Martina said.

"Hm?" She must've been half-asleep.

"About how someone came up with your distillation process."

"It's just a recipe," Jessica said, and shifted. "... besides...you've got the legs for it..."

"I think you're asleep," Martina said.

But Jessica'dn't reply. Maybe a curtain faintly rustled as someone slipped out toward the latrine. Gentle snores and soft breathing made whole the night. And a night t'come'd've seemed as far away as that night'f she'd've thought back t't as she lay there'n the dark tired butn't able t'close'er eyes as a light breeze shifted the curtain. And maybe she'd've shifted'er legs t'feel how sore they were and remembered the rinka-tink-tink-tink-rinka-tink-tink as they'd gone round and the geared machine'd spit out pellets and gone rinka-tink-tink-tink-rinka-tink-tink...

"Still not asleep?"

"No."

"You should rest. It will be a long day tomorrow."

But Martina'dn't reply.

Jessica touched'er cheek. "You feel warm. Did you overdo it today?"

Martina grasped'er hand'n the dark. "For a while I'd really thought I had died and that the afterlife existed."

"You don't anymore?"

"If the afterlife has the same old problems as life had, what's the fucking point?"

"You are upset because of what happened with Abigail today?"

Martina held'er breath, sighed. "I was wrong the other night."

"About?"

"There's not two groups here. There's three. But only two of them want to be here, and I don't know what to do about it."

"Why do you have to do anything about it?"

"Because... It's my responsibility to get these people home."

Jessica moved against'er'n the dark and pressed against'er and'er breasts shifted against Martina's back and'er pubic hair nestled between Martina's buttocks. "But you never said that, did you. Out loud. You never promised anything to anyone."

After a moment: "How do you know that?"

Jessica's breath tickled the back of'er ear. "Do you think anyone ever said I was in charge?"

"I—"

"People find one way or the other to be led. And then the leaders wish they had someone to follow."

"Is that why you follow the cats?"

"Everyone should have something to follow."

"Even if it doesn't exist."

"Everything is only a matter of perception. If something existed but could not be seen or felt or heard, would it be not real?"

"Just because you see or hear something doesn't mean it's real."

"But something is real, even if it is only inside you." Jessica's hand rested on Martina's thigh.

"It's not the same."

After a while, Jessica sighed into the back of Martina's ear. "There was another sighting today, you know. We will change direction in the morning."

"Honestly, I don't give a fuck."

"I have been speaking to some of your people. They believe that will put us quite close to...site Q, I believe you call it. We should be there in three or four days. That is, if there are no other sightings before then."

Martina shifted and looked over. "How?"

“It is what happened.”

Martina shifted. “Are... How Did you arrange this?”

“How would I arrange it?”

“Y—”

Jessica placed a finger against Martina’s lips. She whispered just behind’er ear. “Is this the way you want to spend our last few days together?”

Martina remained silent a moment. Then rolled toward’er.

Distant spires rose delicately from mist-pinked morning.

"Like the sexual organs of a giant flower," Chevsky said. But Martina only worked'er thumbs into'er pack's shoulder straps and looked round behind'em.

"Just let me know when everyone's ready."

"Someone's in a sour mood."

"You're not exactly peachy-keen this morning, either."

Chevsky shrugged.

"There's no reason you have to come," Martina said.

"Who's gonna haul your fuckin' ass outa the fire if I don't?"

"I'm serious."

"I'm not?"

Martina turned, but at that distance, anyone emerging from the wagon camp'd've appeared too abstract t'differentiate. She watched a figure take form from heatwaver. And she started back.

"I'll just wait here then," Chevsky said.

"Just let me know when everyone's ready to go."

They'd've'd t'stop far enough apart that their hats'dn't collide.

"It's funny," Martina said. "I don't remember these damn things being so heavy." She glanced down at'er stained, blue coveralls.

"I have to admit," Jessica said. "They are not in the least flattering."

Both managed t'smile, even laugh.

"I—"

"This is completely the situation." A man appeared, his robe windswept round'm. His veil-muffled voice rattled out. "We should

have known this would happen. Obviously.” He turned his lens toward the distant city. “Obviously.”

Martina nodded. “Obviously.”

“Yes,” he said. “Obviously.” He turned away. “Obviously.” And he walked back toward the yet to be erected tent.

“Do I want to know?”

Jessica shook her head. “They think you had your friend lie about the cats to get us to take you where you wanted to go.”

“Obviously,” Martina said. “But I thought you said they saw them too.” Jessica shrugged. Then neither seemed able to say anything.

Finally, Martina said, “I don’t guess there’s any hope of asking you to stop here a little while.”

“We have to keep moving. It is the nature of things. Even death is not an end.”

“The afterlife?”

“Flesh has to decay. Bones become dust to be carried away by the wind.”

Martina nodded. “Stupid question.”

“You had to ask it.”

“I guess.”

Wind crept over them, tossed Jessica’s hair and bent their hat brims and pleated Martina’s coveralls against her body. “Do not worry about it too much,” Jessica said. “I think you will end up back here soon enough.”

“You think?”

Jessica nodded. “Walk in one direction long enough and you are where you began.”

Martina nodded.

“They asked me to give you this.” Jessica extended a wooden box.

“What is it?”

“Open it later.”

Martina accepted it and balanced it against her hip.

“Until next time,” Jessica said, and pushed back her hat and leaned in and kissed Martina’s cheek.

Faintly, Martina smiled. “Not much of a going-away kiss.”

“I save my best for the people I meet again.”

Chevsky’s hand didn’t drop on Martina’s shoulder to let her know

everything was ready, so finally she'd t'urn away on'er own and look where everyone'd gathered'n the distance. And when she turned, again, Jessica'd already disappeared among the carts. Martina sighed and started toward Chevsky and the rest.

"What's in the case?" Chevsky said.

"None of your business."

"Secrets."

"Yap."

"Be that way then."

"I will," Martina said.

Nearby, Ceili and Argile'd've shed their black garments. But even with Chevsky's help't's not-likely the frigerator'd've survived their trip across the desert. And Martina'd likely've said, "I'm glad they finally got rid of that damn refrigerator."

And Chevsky'd've probably'd t've said, "Let's just hope their last dosage lasts until we get back."

"Would you like to add any more good news?"

"Well..." Chevsky shrugged. "I guess we just got to hope the comm equipment still works. That the batteries aren't *completely* shot to hell. That something hasn't happened to the food stocks. That we can get across the water. That there's still someone out there to come pick us up. That the transport hasn't left orbit yet. Or—hell—that one of us doesn't fall in a hole and die in the next five minutes."

"That all?"

"We might just break an ankle. So you're really not going to show me what's in the box?"

"No."

"No never or no not now?"

"Did you smoke before we started?"

"No. Why?"

"Nothing," Martina said.

"Yes," Chevsky said.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I've always been this way. You just never noticed."

"Oh, I noticed."

The carts'd've long disappeared into late morning brightness and

heatwaver. And the mountains'd've remained as perpetually distant as they always seem. And maybe even the city'dn't've seemed t'get closer as they walked.

"You think the rumors are true?" Chevsky said. From the distance, the towers'd've been lit red gold. "Everything they're always saying about this place these days. What it's turned into."

"No," Martina said.

"None of it?"

"They're stories. People make up lots of shit about places like this. Zilog's out here—and a few others of that type. And that's going to be about it."

"Back to the real world then," Chevsky said.

"I guess."

Chevsky kicked a stone. "It had to happen sooner or later." She sighed. "Back to the boring old real world."

Early morning sun transmuted t'color and flowed down through the roof's crystalline keystone and patterned floor and walls with the sun's movement and reflected from stone impressions that looked out with the multi-faceted crystalline eyes of creatures seemingly perplexed t've found their fate resting so far above a supposed former sea level. Colored light settled over Mae's eye and cheek. She swatted at't and'er hand came t'rest across'is hairy stomach. "I don't know how you ever expected anyone to sleep with that thing."

He cracked an eye. "Hmm."

"That's all you have to say?"

"Hmm." And'e settled'is broad hand on'er rainbow-mottled buttock.

"Don't even think about it." Her cheek settled into'is shoulder. "Dammit..."

["Quel?"]

"I have to piss and I can't go back to sleep." And she grumbled, faintly opened'er eyes and sat up. "Some great architect you are," she said, and patted'is stomach. "I'm going down. And I'm going to get some breakfast."

["Ne bougez rien..."]

"You can stay if you want. Am I supposed to piss down the stairs?—don't answer that." She reached for'er sari. And she patted'is stomach again. "Come on." She stood and wrapped the fabric round'er waist. And she'd've looked over'er shoulder as'e shifted and followed behind. "You're going out like that?"

["Peut-être."]

She shrugged.

["Pas de dispute?"]

"Why should I fight with you if you don't want to wear anything?" And she went out. Behind'er, a faint zip carried through the doorway as she mounted the stairs. Then, most of the circular recesses'd've been not-finished and none'd've held water. Tools'd've remained scattered here and there. And maybe'e lingered behind'er and contemplated some aspect of everything yet t'b'done as she stepped out through a blind passage and down t'the junction where the intersection curves into a stone gazebo. And she'd've been long past'er initial sighs by the time'e entered and pulled down'is zipper. Mae stood and let'er sari fall down round and brush against'er ankles again and caught a water spurt'n'er hands from a great-gilled creature's stone lips. Zilog sighed.

She took'is arm when they walked out, started'n a long perambulation that put'em up onto the walls t'overlook tower shadows as the sun rose. Her stomach growled. "It's very nice," she said. "But I'd prefer to see something to eat."

But'd she've forgotten bout eating when someone yelled from below? Or'd she've consciously suppressed't as they stood on the wall above the dock and watched the cats gathered along the shore as boats passed back and forth t'ferry'em across and been ravenous when evening fell and the feasts'd just been started? But that'd've been many hours. And't's more likely they'd've broken away toward noon t'get something t'eat. And maybe they'd already started t'cook then. In which case the old woman'd've'd t'beat cat'n-arm snackers away with'er massive wooden spoon. And probably'd've grumbled and growled as many cats gathered round on their own and watched'er. But sooner or later she'd've waved'er spoon—"He's chasing the rat. He's chasing the rat. He's gonna get the rat. Oh, it got away. He's going to get it. He's going to get it. He got it. And he's gone off with it somewhere else. I can't see him anymore. Time to get back to work. I'm going to chop some cabbage now..." And she'd've gone on cooking even as the last candle wavered on the far shore and the last boat pushed off and cats stood on'ts prow and candlelight reflected'n their eyes the way't must've reflected'n stygian waters and by then whoever paddled the last boat must've been hungry too.

Rose-red towers reflected on water-surface, disturbed by faint ripples as the boat rocked and Britt paddled across liquid darkened shadowland before sun'd yet crested the crater rim. But they'd've been deep'n the canals by the time't spilled down into the basin. A few darkened figures stood along the wall, but't'd've been impossible t'tell who they'd've been, if they watched'em leave, or'f they just waited t'greet the sun. And June turned from looking over'er shoulder, toward the canal's dark canyon-crag mouth. Aft, Britt's long, assured strokes slooped and swushed as they drove the boat toward't.

"Tighten that down, will you?"

June turned through broken solemnity, yanked a loose cord tight and knotted't. She turned back. But whatever mood there'd been'd've remained broken. "It only looks like a canyon entrance," June said.

"What's it supposed to look like?"

June shook'er head. "Nothing."

Britt paddled. Water slooped and swushed off and round'er oar.

"You alright?"

"Fine," June said. "I just...hope this trip doesn't...get as...exciting as the last one."

"If it does, I'm leaving you home as bad luck from then on."

June'dn't reply.

And at some point, without time seeming t've passed, the sun'd've transitioned somewhere overhead amid clear sky and a light breeze'd've rustled what yellow-gold bamboo leaves remained and scattered many into the water t'float by'em as they rested at anchor.

"I'm getting a crick," Britt said.

"Almost done."

"Doesn't sound like it."

And if June'd been'n a position t'throw something, she might've.

"It's a good thing I measured before, otherwise there's no telling how far I'd be off after this."

June adjusted'er skirt back down and clambered toward'er seat.
"We can go now."

"With your permission," Britt said, and rubbed'er neck for dramatic effect as she turned'er head from looking at the far canyon wall.

Leaves floated past as Britt drew'n the anchor and took-up'er paddle again. "You don't have to get your back up about every little thing."

But June'dn't reply.

"Come on."

But June still'dn't reply.

"Fine."

And they'd've continued awhile with the only sounds those of the current as't split round the boat's prow and the wind'n the leaves.

"You don't have to always be so vulgar, you know," June said. Behind'er, Brittney just cut'er paddle'n-and-outa water. June half-turned. "Did you hear me?"

Brittney glanced up as'f surprised. "Oh, are we talking now?"

"You don't have to be like that."

"So I don't get to but you do."

"I didn't say that."

"Didn't have to."

June turned t'look upstream, settled'n on'erself with a huff.

"I don't know why you want to come out here, anyway," Britt said.
"You don't like it."

But June'dn't reply.

"Why did you even ask to go?"

"Can we just...stop?" June said.

"We just did less than an [hour] ago."

"No...I mean. Can we just stop fighting?"

The canyon'd've darkened long before evening and'd've been impassable by the time the sky'd darkened aswell. But't'dn't've yet. And dark water'd've mirrored early stars as June looked up the canyon walls.

“You don’t have to worry, you know. About drowning. The brain has an automatic reflex—you wake up if water hits your face.”

June looked over’er shoulder. One of’er eyebrows cocked and the corner of’er mouth upturned.

“It’s true,” Britt said.

June shook’er head, but still faintly smiled. “You’re full of it.”

“At least, until we stop later.”

June shook’er head and turned t’look upstream. Crinkly leaves’d’ve blew round’em through late-evening dimness. Maybe June’d’ve noticed something and said, [“You know, it looks like somebody’s been cutting along here,”] before darkness and stars engulfed’em.

June's forehead rested against Britt's chest when she woke.

"You always do that," Britt said.

"What?"

"End up lower than you started."

June'dn't reply. She shifted and looked out from beneath the canopy at gold-crested canyon rims. And she groaned and sat up with'er elbows against a pack. "Isn't there any way we can pack this stuff so we don't have to sleep on it?"

"Not unless you want to lay straight on the ribbing."

June rubbed'er back. "At least we'll be home sooner." Which'd probably been'n'er mind the only good thing bout the sand-wash that'd dammed the stream above t'render't temporally impassable by boat.

Britt grunted and reached over'er head and dis-buttoned'er pack and produced a couple plastic-foil-wrapped bars. "Eat up."

"I didn't know there were still any of these left."

"Found them at the bottom of a bin. They're the last."

June dis-wrapped'ers, looked down'ts compacted length thoughtfully.

"Something wrong with it?" Brittney looked at'ers, sniffed't.

June shook'er head. "Dad used to give these to me sometimes." And she paused, but Britt'dn't reply. "You think he's still at the socket?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Britt folded the last of'er bar into'er mouth. So she'd only mumble. And wadded'ts foil wrapper'n'er hand.

"You think they've left yet?"

Britt shrugged, chewed. And she stuffed the foil back into'er bag. And still chewing, she moved t'haul'n anchor and she took-up'er paddle as they started t'drift.

"What do you think it's like on Earth?"

"Probably like this," Britt said. "Everything's basically the same." And she set'er paddle as a rudder t'steer'em into the next bend.

Britt grunted. The boat hull scraped rock as she pulled't onto the landing and tied't off. And breathing hard, she looked for June, walked over t'where she knelt amid small green bamboo sprouts. "What're you doing?"

"Gathering pen blanks." And she lifted a bamboo length, made two quick knife strokes t'give't a point and slipped the blade into the tip and twisted't so't cracked and made three tines. "They'll have to be fire-hardened, of course."

"How many do you need?" Britt said as she looked over the small pile June'd accumulated.

"I want to get enough since we're up here."

"How long you figure to be?"

June shrugged. She chopped another small pole and started t'de-leaf't. "A little while, I guess." She glanced over'er shoulder. "Why?"

"I'm going to take a short walk up to the canyon rim, see if there's anything going on up top."

June rose. Bamboo detritus tumbled down the front of'er dress. "You're leaving me?"

"Just for a while. Sundown at the most."

"And if you don't come back?"

Britt shook'er head. "Then shove off and go home." And she walked back t'the boat for'er pack.

June followed. "I'll come too."

"What about your pens?"

"I can cut them tonight. We weren't leaving till morning anyway, right?"

Britt fitted'er pack over'er shoulders. "Come on if you're coming."
"I'll get my pack."

"You don't need it," Brittney called as she walked. "We won't be that long and I've got enough for both us."

June trudged upslope after'er. "You knew I wasn't going to stay here," she said.

"I figured."

"Then why'd you—"

"Better save your breath," Britt said. "These switchbacks are longer than they look."

And t'dn't've been long before June'd've'd t'stop t'adjust'er sandals. And Britt paused and watched'er. "You shouldn't've worn those."

"You didn't tell me we were going hiking."

By the time they'd emerged on the rim, the wind'd've stilled and noon brightness'd've settled across the landscape and reduced't t'vaguely defined expanse. June pushed up'er hat and squinted out at what little'd b'discerned.

"We'll go up along that way," Britt said. "There's—used to be—a trail up through there along the rim."

Still landscaped must've seemed t'swallow'em up as Brittney somehow found their way through not-differentiated space.

And maybe while they'd been out there, they'd've found Collard that way, instead.

June'd've stopped. "What's that?"

And Brittney'd've turned, followed June's finger out into brighted-out, white-orange void. "I don't see anything."

"There. Over there."

"I don't—"

"There. Don't you see the shadow?"

But heatwaver'd've dropped a veil over anything'n the distance.

"Maybe we should see what it is."

"If it's there." Britt'd've cocked'er head side-t'side. "And if it is, it might be farther away than you think." She'd've adjusted'er backpack. "But we'd better take a look."

They'd've walked.

After a while: "Did you see that?"

"Yeah." And Britt'd've adjusted'er hat down against sudden glare

as they made their way up and into a small dune patch and'd've trod wind-rippled sand. But distant shapes'd've seemed still obscured beyond heatwaver's veil.

Eventually, June'd've'd t'stop. She'd've rub sweat from'er neck. And Britt'd've passed'er a canteen. "It could be an inversion." She'd've sipped. "Can't things get reflected around sometimes?" She'd've passed back the canteen. "Or maybe it's just a mirage."

"That we both see?" Britt'd've tilted back'er head, wiped'er mouth with the back of'er hand.

"It still might be a mirage."

Britt'd've squinted into the distance as she'd've re-capped the canteen. And as the sun'd moved, new glints and glares'd've appeared. She'd've shaken'er head.

June'd've looked over'er shoulder at the vacant landscape behind'em. "How long have we been walking?"

"Come on." Eyes fixed on the distance, Britt'd've re-stowed the canteen.

More non-defined spacetime'd've stretched before and after'em and't'd've seemed as'f they'd been walking'n place. And June'd've half-stumbled as she'd've looked back and when she'd've turned, again, they'd've broken through the heatwaver and everything immediately before'em'd've'd a painful clarity too at odds with the blurred landscape.

"They're...trucks?"

And Britt'd've side-walked up a dune t'try and peer through a darkened spider-cracked windshield.

"What do you see?"

"Nothing." And Britt'd've straightened and looked over the rest of those buried trucks. Then she'd've noted a subtle twinkling and've cocked'er head and made'er way side-footed down a dune and hooked'er arm'n a mirror strut and pulled'erself up.

"What is it?"

And Britt'd've dropped and looked round. "Let's get back."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"That window didn't get smashed in. Somebody busted it to get out."

"But that could've been anytime ago."

“There’s still fresh blood on the glass.” And’t’d’ve speckled the ground too.

And June’d’ve glanced round. “You don’t...”

And Britt, with a more practiced sense of direction on such washed-out landscapes, would’ve motioned t’er. “Let’s—”

And June might’ve gasped. And the gun barrel might’ve been pointed at Britt’s throat when she’d’ve jerked round, but she’d’ve shoved’t aside with’er forearm. And one quick strike and’is head’d’ve snapped back and blood from’is mouth or nose’d’ve peppered the air and spattered over’is ragged clothes and round’m as’e crumpled into the sand. And Britt’d’ve waited, ready t’kick. But’e likely’dn’t’ve moved much, if at all.

“Is he still...alive?”

“He’s breathing.” Britt’d’ve picked up the rifle, but by then’t’d’ve been at least rusted, maybe with the wood parts covered’n orange-red-and-yellow bloom lichen the way some trees get. “Bolt’s froze.” And rust’d’ve coated’er fingers as she’d’ve threw’t aside.

“What’re we going to do with him?”

“I guess we’ll have to take him back.”

At least, that's the way't'd've happened.

† There was a note here about the nature of the language being ambiguous as to whether ‘could have’ or ‘would have’ is specified in this fragment, but I’m removing it for being too obvious.

A tabby passed between various legs and out from under the table and a young woman near the end lifted'm into'er arms. And'e looked round and attuned'is ears at all the bustle and noise.

"It's a crime," Tracy said.

Catherine shook'er head. "It's nothing." She'd folded down'er headscarf and revealed scorched-looking skin along'er neck t'match what'd've already been visible along'er forearms. Her sari still covered the x-shaped, aggravated skin over'er chest. "There's no need to be so melodramatic."

"I can't believe she didn't test that shit before she slathered it all over you."

"There wasn't time," someone farther away said.

"That's a bloody stupid excuse."

"Has anyone seen Pam?"

Several shook their heads.

"I'm going to stir the fire," the cook said, and bent over and poked at't.

Tracy fished for cabbage'n broth with chopsticks and tilted back'er head t'drop't'n'er mouth. "Ga—"

"It's hot."

"No fucking kidding."

"Does it hurt?"

Catherine shook'er head. "It's fine."

"I'm going to stir the pot now."

Tracy slurped. "Do you have to make everything so fucking hot?"

"I'm still stirring."

"There's Pam—Hey—Pam—" And she motioned.

And Pamela crossed the square, but just stood idly near the table.

"Where'd you go last night?"

Tracy leaned across the table and grabbed the salt bowl, sprinkled some over'er cabbage broth.

"Watch it with that. We're running low."

"Just out," Pam said.

"What I really want—"—and she chopstick-hoisted more drippy cabbage into the air—"—is real black pepper."

Catherine looked up, said t'Pamela, "Sit and have something to eat." But Pamela shook'er head.

"I'm bringing another bowl over to the table." And the cook wandered over and set't down. She looked at Pamela. "You have dirt inside your clothes."

The table shook as somebody pushed'emself up and hurried off.

"Where's he going?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"You sure?" Catherine said

Pamela nodded.

"Where's Melissa. Anybody seen her?"

"She was looking for something or the other."

"That reminds me. We're supposed to go help Hahn, remember?"

"We've almost got a little pepper. It was still in a bin after the storm. It's still drying though. We've still gotta see about sifting it."

"What're yuns helping him with?"

"He's finishing a new loom."

"*Shit!* Quit jostling the table." And Tracy raked wet cabbage and chopstick'd't into'er mouth.

"You ate that right off the table."

"How's the quilt coming?"

"Do you have to vocalize *everything* you do and witness?"

The cook turned. "I'm going back to the pot to stir it awhile."

"Quilt? What the hell's he want that for?"

Someone shrugged. "I don't know. It was a special request or something."

"So how is he?" Someone said, and leaned forward, elbows on the table, t'look at Pamela.

"It's decorative. Crickets and fireflies."

Pamela shook'er head.

"You sure you're not hungry?" Catherine said.

"I ate earlier."

"I bet she did."

"Oh, be quiet."

Catherine pushed back'er blue-plastic chair. It'd lost two screws and the seat flopped against rust-patchy chromed legs as she stood. She took Pamela's hand. "I was just thinking of taking a trip down to the gardens. Why don't you show me around. That is, unless you have something else to do."

Pamela shook'er head.

Someone at the table started t'whistle.

"How can you whistle with your mouth open like that?"

"I'm stirring the pot some more."

"You just use your tongue."

Tracy reached over. "You going to eat that?"

"Weeeeer."

A young woman scratched behind the cat's ears and let'm down and'e padded off through an archway.

Stillness'd've pervaded predawn. Torches'd've burned at the end of the stone dock as they always do and then as now't's not-likely anyone knew who or what comes t'light'em. Their lights flickered, mirrored'n dark waters. Odin'd've sat beside'er, would've turned and looked out into the darkness long before Catherine'd've seen Britt's boat.

Kim stopped halfway up some steps, but whatever she'd thought she must've heard mustn't've been there. And she continued up.

Kim paused. "Why's he still tied?" She glanced round, would've seen Trent half-submerged'n the shadows between columns. "I thought they let them all loose."

"Whatever you do to me—"—Collard jerked'is head. His nose and mouth'd've still been blood encrusted—"—it doesn't matter. I won't succumbed to your abominations. No matter what you do to me—no matter what vile, depraved things you do to me—I'll... I'll..." From the shadows, Trent chuckled. "Whatever you have in mind to..." And't turned into low, steady laughter. "...do to me..." Which grew. "I will..." That echoed between distant columns and into far chambers. "I will... I will

"WHY DO YOU KEEP LAUGHING?!"

And Collard jerked'is head and'is body followed as best't'd and chair legs scraped against stone and sand and'is neck muscles tightened and bulged and'e remained that way till Jacobs' laughter'd subsided.

"Do or done?" And'e picked a bamboo sliver between'is teeth.

Whole body taut, Collard, voice hoarse, said, "What does that mean?" He jerked against the chair and't danced. "What does that mean? Why can't you speak properly?"

Kim glanced toward Trent, silently moved'er lips as she worked up t'a mumble. "Do...done...or...done ooooooh." She chuckled—Collard's head snapped round toward'er.

"WHAT'S SO FUNNY?!" His chest heaved and'e'd've only barely seemed able t'catch'is breath.

"He said..." Kim shook'er head. "He's asking whether or not you keep going on about what's going to be done to you because you're afraid or because you *want* it to be done to you."

Slack-faced, head jutting forward, Collard stared at'er and seemed t've forgotten how t'blink. Kim shrugged, glanced toward where Trent still stood half-submerged'n shadow.

"Memory," Trent said.

"Of what?"

"Initiation."

"Into the icebreaker's guild?"

"Yes."

"You never said anything about that."

"Not?"

She shook'er head. "You only ever talked about working on the loading docks for the first few months after you got north."

"Funtesh. Not north. Think are."

Chair legs tapped stone as Collard shifted. "What's he saying?"

Kim said, "He's talking about the town up far north, on the edge of the pole, where they load ice on the train to move south."

"Load," Trent said.

Kim nodded. "Right. They only load the ice. It actually came from farther up the ice field. Hauled down by... mule train, right?"

"Yes."

She cut'er eyes toward Collard. "So he's saying, while that town's the farthest north the train runs, it's *not* the last outpost." And she turned back t'the shadows. "Woolly mules?"

"Other?"

She shook'er head. "I don't know."

"Ate," he said.

She nodded, cut'er eyes toward Collard, again. "As the ice started to go, the supply lines started to break down. They had to start eating the pack animals." She faced the shadows. "But that's not what I wanted to know. How'd you get inducted into the guild?"

Leaned against a column or a wall, he grunted, sucked'is teeth and spat. "Building. Stove. Crawl to crack. All together. Centered chair—"

"What's he saying?"

“—One work. Suhkee. Hold three days. Or south.”

“Three days? Really?”

“Yes.”

“Well what...you know...what happens after...” She shook’er head and clenched’er tongue between’er teeth. “Three days...”

“Some faint.”

“Wow.” She shook’er head.

The chair danced. “What’re you talking about?”

Kim glanced toward Collard as’e strained t’look over’is shoulder and see into the shadows. “I doubt you’d want to hear it,” she said.

When’e turned back, his eyes’d sunk deeper, so shadows’d’ve created vast black holes’n’is face. “*What?*”

Kim shrugged, crossed’er arms and leaned’er shoulder against a wall or column. “The far north camp was manned by about two—” —a glance toward the shadows— “—three dozen men in a single barracks. But they didn’t let just anyone come up and work there.”

“Danger.”

“Right,” Kim said. “It was a dangerous job getting the ice out and hauling it down. That tends to breed a certain type of comradery. And they had a ritual initiation to determine who was fit to join or not. In this case, the applicant was tied to a chair in the middle of the barracks—naked—and had his cock manhandled by each of the men in turn to keep him on the edge of orgasm for three days. But if they came or got soft before the end of three days they were disqualified.” She glanced toward the shadows. “No sleep?”

“No.”

She shook’er head. “Apparently it was quite common for men who’d successfully made it through to faint after cumming. You can probably imagine why.” And she cut’er eyes toward Collard’s gaunt face. His mouth hung slightly open.

She sat'n the nook with one elbow on the fold-down, blue-plastic table and rested'er cheek on'er fist as she stirred in a blue-plastic bowl with a same-colored spoon. A corrugated shutter zinched up and bare legs dangled out. "Coffee?" She pointed with the spoon. And t'other woman just-rolled-out-of-bed wandered by and squeezed'erself into the seat opposite, an insulated cup'n both hands. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"There's a point when this stuff is neither dried hard nor disintegrated mush and I'm tryna catch it at that point."

"How's that working out?"

T'other woman dipped'er spoon and tugged aside still vestigial plastic film, which rolled back and damply touched the table. "It has to be in the third state sometime. But it seems like you can only ever catch it on one side or the other."

"I'm not waiting for it."

"You know what I mean, you, the general you."

"Well, me the general me is—"

A phone vibrated and resounded against the hollow, injection-molded plastic table. Chirps and whinges fizzled from the speaker and taped over glass bloomed with kaleidoscopic patterns.

"I thought Sasha had the phone." She grimaced as she sipped acrid brown stuff.

T'other woman released'er spoon. "She's busy." And she reached t'delicately tap the screen and liquid ripples cascaded through pixel matrix. "Almost there."

Rolling'er insulated cup absently: "You can read that?"

T'other woman tapped the screen and't went dark. She withdrew'er spoon and swallowed a bite of congealed morass. And she folded down the vestigial plastic, pushed't away.

"Better wake everyone."

The woman tilted back'er head and drained'er insulated cup. "Where did you say Sasha was?" And she looked down the aisle at latch-closed bunks.

"Busy."

"Busy busy? Or busy?"

"Yep."

“Where’s the glue?”
Someone pointed blindly t’a shelf.
Melissa shook’er head. “No, the newer stuff.”
“I think Richard has it out on the stairs,” someone else said,
but’dn’t look up from’er carving.
Melissa grumbled, loudly shoved workbench detritus aside.
“Calm down.”
“Everything’s always walking off.”
“Then you should be used to it.”
“Fuck.”
“You’d never know there was a show coming up.”
Melissa turned. “What?”
“You could try not to get so on edge.”
“I’m not on edge.”
“No,” someone said. “It’s worse. You’re in that zone where happiness and sadness are virtual and pointless.”
Melissa shook’er head. “I’m going to get some things.”
“Try to relax while you’re out there.”
Someone else: “Yeah, right.”
Melissa stopped outside. “RICHARD—” Britt paused on the stairs, looked up. “Oh.” Melissa huffed. “Have you seen Richard?”
Britt shook’er head.
“Fuck.”
“What’s the matter?”
“Nothing,” Melissa said. She turned. “Nothing’s a’matter. You just can’t fucking find anything around here when you need it.”
“What’ve you lost?”

“The damn glue.”

Three steps from the top, Britt paused, looked down. “This it?”
And she lifted a clay vessel.

Melissa groaned. “Fuck.”

“Brought back that load of bamboo you wanted.”

Melissa nodded absently. “Thought you weren’t supposed to be back till tomorrow.”

“Ran into problems,” Brit said. “You alright?”

“Fine.”

“B—”

“Look—I’m busy, so—”

“Fine,” Britt said. “Somebody needs to come get it off my boat.
I’ve gotta take it out tomorrow.”

“Hasn’t somebody done that yet?”

“What’d I just say? No. We didn’t come in till late afternoon and it was boiling hot.”

Melissa shook’er head absently. “It doesn’t matter. Do whatever with it. I don’t need it immediately.”

“Well, that’s fine, but I still gotta get it outa my boat.”

“Then pile it on the dock,” Melissa said, and turned toward the doorway with the clay pot’n-hand. “Do whatever with it.”

Britt waited, watched’er disappear into the packed room beyond. She shook’er head and turned t’descend. Mumbled. “Fucking save us...”

Too many t'eat comfortably. Back and forth. To and fro. June ducked'er head and tried as best she'd. Maybe she'd've thought of the honeycomb below, where

empty wire spools, metal framing, busted hoses, flat-tired wheel barrows, empty paint cans, bent aluminum ladders, bolt-together metal shelving stacked with bulged-battery laptops, gutted tablets, cracked-screened phones, broken glass-covered screens so many fissurous, black mirrors that caught candle flame and diffused't as'f a quiescent current still remained within amassed transistors

Maribeth, unknown objects pinioned t'er front, turned, again.
"What do you think?"

faint flame glowed beyond the next archway where candlelight
sparkled as't diffused through anti-glare coatings and reflected'n
other dead displays with an irreal crystalline precision, pitch mirrors
where forms from so many angles lay behind a dust layer

watched'erself watch'erself through a dusty dark mirror

June glanced up. “Me...?” Boiled-Cabbage tendrils hung over’er lower lip and she sucked’em into’er mouth.

“Of course you. Who else?” Someone shoved passed. “What do you think?”

June chewed and swallowed—“—Fine, I guess—”—then bent again toward the bowl cradled between’er knees.

“You guess?”

“Well—”

“Where’re you at today?”

“Yeah, you’ve been quiet ever since... well, the last several days.”

“Have you ever noticed,” June said, “mirrors reflect the world exactly as it is, except everything’s opposite handed so it’s not really exactly as it is at all.”

“What’re you going on about?”

“Nothing.” June shoved another cabbage wad into’er mouth.

“I wish there was still some salt,” someone said.

Someone else passed a bowl down the table. “Didn’t you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“They passed by the other day.”

“Who?” someone said.

“The black robed people.”

“They don’t all wear black robes. Just the men.”

“What do the women wear?”

“Nothing.”

“What’s so special ’bout that?”

“So what do you think?”

June wiped juice from'er chin with'er thumb, mumbled as she chewed, "... what am... I supposed... to say..."

Maribeth pulled a face as June gulped. "Do the pair of you not take anything to eat when you go out?"

"Why..." June grabbed a fresh chopstick-full of cabbage.

"Because all you've done since you got back is eat."

"Yeah," Deloise said. "You kind'uv have." And she fingered the seams on Maribeth's outfit. "This still needs some work."

Maribeth glanced down. "Shit."

"You'll have to do it yourself," Della said. "Richard's got too much work as it is."

"Shit." Maribeth looked down and smoothed the fabric with'er free hand. "You never did tell me what you think." She looked up'n time t'see June shrug as she chewed.

"... fine..."

"Has anyone seen Pam?"

"I thought she was going to collect flower petals from that tree."

"What tree?"

"You know. The one that grows outa that cracked black stone."

"You wanna wear one?"

"Uh..." June paused with another cabbage wad hovered above'er bowl and rivulets dribbled into the broth. "Uh, no," June said. "Just ...no."

Maribeth shrugged, glanced down again. "W—"

"You're back!" And even Maribeth glanced up at that high-pitched call. And chopsticked cabbage hung drying'n midair. "You're back." Trudy forced'er way between everyone's aggravated glances. "You're back." She'd've seemed almost breathless. "When'd you get back?"

"Last night," June said, and opened'er mouth wide.

"Last night?"

Cabbage and chopsticks hung poised over'er face—"This morn-ing—whatever—"—and she quickly dropped't into'er mouth as'f she mightn't get another chance. "... why does... everyone... keep asking... me that?"

"Don't distract her," Maribeth said. "She went into the desert and tried to starve to death."

"What!?"

Maribeth laughed. She looked at June. "Are you coming to help this afternoon?"

June shook'er head. More cabbage. "... got thing...to do..."

"What're you doing that's so important?"

"... gotta help...Dave..."

"Dave? I thought he was crawling round down there in the dark now all that stuff of his won't run no more." She laughed.

June swallowed and looked up at'er. "He doesn't crawl anywhere."

"Come on. This'll be much more interesting than anything you could do with him."

"But what do you mean about starving to death?"

June rolled'er eyes as she took another mouthful, groaned, lifted'er bowl from between'er knees.

"Where're you going?"

"... to eat..." She gulped. "To eat somewhere in peace."

"You sure you don't want to wear one?"

June'dn't look back. "No."

Trudy eyed the outfit. "It'd look fantastic on you."

Bowl'n-hand, June threaded'er way between everyone.

"If you change your mind..." Maribeth called behind'er, then laughed.

Somewhere:

“Here—hold him.”

No time t’hesitate, Britt blinked as someone shoved a cat into’er arms. He shifted and looked on, seemed t’admonish the woman forn’t’ving adjusted that strap earlier.

“How does it look?”

“Fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes,” Britt said. “Now take him back.”

“Don’t you like cats?”

“Not when they’re shoved on me.”

His tail hung languidly on the regaliaed woman’s arm as she stroked’m.

“Have you seen June anywhere?”

But the woman’d been too distracted, stood on tiptoe t’see over the crowd.

“Hey—”

She turned. Both she and the cat blinked. “What?”

“Have you seen June?”

Two or three people pushed between’em. “I thought I saw her earlier...maybe.”

A whistle. The cat’n’er arms turned, ears attuned. “Where have you been?” Someone motioned. “We’re supposed to assemble in the other square.”

“What?! No one told me that!”

“Well—come on.”

“Hey—” Britt called. “WHAT ABOUT—” But the regaliaed woman’d already dissolved into the crowd.

And something bumped into'er back.

"Outa the way—"

And half-instinctively, Britt turned and flattened'erself against a wall t'allow a cart through a narrow archway.

"If you'd close that damn parasol—maybe it'd fit."

"Just keep pushing."

Trinkets suspended from each bamboo rib jangled and danced on the parasol as they shoved't onto some steps.

"I can't," t'other said. "It's fixed like that."

"It won't fit."

T'other leaned forward so the cart's handle pressed into'er stomach. "It'll fit. We just have to push." She looked at Britt. "Help us get it through."

Britt lifted the front as they shoved. "What're you doing bringing this this way for?" She huffed.

"This's the best way."

Britt grunted. The cart wriggled through. "Well, if this's the best w—"

"Don't do it like that," one pusher said t't'other. "You'll break them."

"I won't."

"You have to handle them gently."

Britt grit'er teeth. "You seen June?"

"Not yet—no, not that way. Honestly..." T'other pusher shook'er head.

"But she's gotta be round somewhere, right?"

Someone peeked over Britt's shoulder. "What's that?"

"For later," t'other pusher said. But a few hands darted toward the cart as anonymous faces passed and she swatted at them.

The pusher offered one or two of the many yellow-wrapped rectangles t'Britt.

More swatted hands. "That's for later."

Britt nibbled at't. "Salty." If she'd been given a second she'd've slipped't'n'er pocket.

The pusher's face fell a moment. T'other pusher said, "Well, there's no accounting for taste." Britt finished't and offered back the bow-tied yellow ribbon that'd wrapped't. But the pusher shook'er head.

“Keep it. You’re supposed to tie it round your finger when you’re done.”

“Why?”

“That’s just what you’re supposed to do.” She looked round. “Where’re the instruction cards?”

“They were supposed to be tied on.”

“But...”

The other pusher shook’er head, rolled’er eyes. “Hurry up.” She shook’er head. “If we see June, we’ll let her know you’re looking for her.”

“Do that.” And Britt stepped aside t’allow’em t’part the crowd round their cart. Absently, she slipped the bow-tide ribbon into’er pocket.

This's just me. But textually, I've only ever been able t'trace this tradition back t'several celebrations after the initial one described here.

Somewhere else:

Instrumenteers cradled their equipment against their bodies as'f they'd been lovers. Overlapped tuning twangs. Punctuated crowd noise. And seemingly satisfied, they dis-fingered their instruments and laid'em across their laps.

"Was that a food cart just went by?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. Which way did it go?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"She always gets hungry before time to go on."

"Superstition."

"Shut up."

Britt carefully stepped down between'em. And'f she'd stuffed another bar'n'er pocket, she'd've produced't then and handed't over. And the instrumenteer'd've bit into't without dis-tying the ribbon. "Has anyone seen June?"

Several shook their heads, their attention on their instruments. But'f anyone'd've answered't'd've been the woman still chewing and'n the open moment after swallowing she'd've answered, but probably she'd've stuffed the rest of the bar into'er mouth. So Britt'd've'd t'stand there at the base of the stairs with'er hands'n'er pockets, waiting.

"Well?"

And the woman'd've tried t'point, direction washed out amid the crowd. "Thanks." T'other woman'd've still been chewing when Britt moved deeper into the square, where noise washed round'er, as'd ribbons and regalia and flesh and fleeting touch and half-word-sounds and human movement and smoke and flames and faint wind

and... "mrrrrrr" ... "greer" ... "wrrrrrr" ...
"mewwwwww" ... "raaaaar" ... "gurrh" ...
"rawwwwr" ... "hssssss" ... "weeer" ...

A whistle. "HEY—BRITT—"

She looked round. "WHAT?"

"WHAT'D YOU DO WITH THOSE POLES YOU BROUGHT BACK?"

"WHAT'RE YOU ASKING ME FOR?"

"DIDN'T YOU BRING THEM UP?"

"TOO DARK WHEN WE GOT IN. RICHARD'S SUPPOSED TO'VE DONE IT."

"I CAN'T FIND HIM."

"WELCOME TO THE CLUB."

"HUH?"

Britt shook'er head. "HAVE YOU SEEN JUNE?"

"NO."

"You looking for June?" someone said close by.

Britt turned. "What's it sound like?"

"I heard she might be in the main line." He motioned toward regaliaed figures.

"No," Britt said.

"Huh?"

"Just no."

"What're you talking about?"

"She wouldn't wear that."

"I—" And an earsplitting whistle. "HEY MICHAEL—" Gone. Miscellaneous chatter recombined'n on itself...

"Like an ouroboros mating," someone said.

Britt glanced round. "That supposed to mean something?"

∆ pointed so'er hand mimed a pistol and'er thumb-hammer cycled down and she fired into the crowd.

"What?"

A clayware cup shattered. Liquid routed between paving stones.

"It'll evaporate. You'll never know it was even there."

"Yeah," Britt said.

Someone squeezed by. An anxious young woman filled vacant air, cat'n'er arms. Someone touched'er shoulder and guided'er away.

“You looking for June?” Britt turned. N smiled beneath dark mirrors. Britt nodded. N pointed. “Try the window square.” But when Britt turned back from where she’d followed N’s finger, she and’er smile and’er dark lenses’d gone.

Passages directly off the square’d’ve been tight as people and equipment and cats passed t’and-fro and she’d’ve’d t’stop and squeeze against a wall or into an alcove more than once. But there’d’ve been breathing room as she moved farther out and human noise faded t’b’replaced by wind through turrets and windows and gables and passages.

It's a tragedy the window square's on the border between the third and forth sevenths. It's too beautiful a place t'b'relegated t'some neutral zone. With'ts maze-esque only partially interconnected walls seemingly only'n existence t'showcase their openings, which range from seemingly normal, t'so large a person'd step through, t'so tiny an eye can barely peak through, t'so high even standing on tiptoe won't allow a glimpse of their view, t'so low lying on yuhr side's the only way t'see the ankles of those that might pass by opposite [...]

Moving between'em, glancing casually through each, Britt'd've heard nothing but'er own footsteps. But then when she paused: someone else's. And she moved between two walls, rose onto tiptoe t'peek through a window. Footsteps echoed. She moved on, faster. Ahead, she leaped and grabbed a sill and pulled'erself up, but only barely saw someone disappear round a corner before she let go. She jogged through interconnections. Through a low hexagonal window, a natural-colored skirt swooshed by. But when she rounded a corner. Gone. She listened. Footsteps. And turned and jogged back the way she'd come. Paused. Listened at the next corner. "Alright—who's there?" But silence. And she sucked a deep breath through'er nose. "WHO'S THERE—"

Silence.

But after a moment or two, faintly from beyond distant walls: "Britt?" And Britt looked through the nearest opening, through window through window through window through window to where June must've raised'erself on tiptoe, because'er eyes just barely emerged over a sill. "There you are."

"Yes—here I fucking am."

"Stay there," June called. And'er eyes dropped. Quick roundbout footsteps echoed. And she appeared round a distant corner and moved along a wall. "I've been looking for you. How long have you been here?"

"How long've I been here?"

June grabbed Britt's hand. "Come on. Everything's almost started." And they moved between interconnects. "What're you

doing all the way out here? I wouldn't've had any idea where you were if she hadn't told me."

"Who?"

"Come on, we'll be late." Music wafted on a gentle breeze. "Shoot."

"Do you...ever feel yanked round?" Britt said.

"Huh?"

"Nothing." Britt shook'er head as they emerged from among windowed walls and moved toward an archway.

"I hope we're not too late."

Someone called from up the passage: "Oh, we're late. We're late. We're late." Then laughed.

Can you imagined what'd've't been like'f those coming back from the socket'n a tractor and Martina's group'd all entered the city at the height of that particular festival—wouldn't that've been something t'see'f that'd happened? So that't'd all come together'n a kind of conflux. And June'd've'd real reason t'burst'n—"Is it true?" But after everything that'd happened, none'd've bothered t'look round wild-eyed at'er.

“Where’ve you been?”

But June’d’ve opened and closed’er mouth as Catherine neared. Dried blood’d’ve still been on’er chin, her split lip still dark, or maybe swollen. She’d’ve motioned and Mae and Tracy and Laura’d’ve broken from the crowd and moved toward’er and disappeared behind’er through an archway.

Someone’d’ve touched June’s shoulder. “Where did you get to?”

“Never mind that—what happened?”

Shrugs.

“Some new group came out’a the desert—”

“I heard they’d just been traveling with the usual one—”

“Who?”

“You know, the ones with the black robes.”

“Only the men where black robes.”

“Apparently they’re heading back to the socket—”

“What do the women wear?”

“How’d they get left behind?”

“Has anyone seen Jerry?”

“Nothing.”

“Why didn’t they come back for them?”

“Nothing?”

“Is there an echo in here?”

“Ceili and Argile are with them—”

“He was bringing salt across, earlier, last time I saw him.”

“But how do they keep from getting—?”

“Really? You don’t think—”

“Who knows—”

“Don’t get your hopes up. They’re both in the infirmary.”
 “But it shouldn’t’ve taken him that long.”
 “What’s so special bout that?”
 “Apoxia.”
 “The boat’s back. So he must be around somewhere.”
 “Not everyone burns to a cinder like you.”
 “No. *Hypoxia*.”
 “But one of the women came up—”
 “But have you *seen* him?”
 “And slapped her—”
 “Just because I—”
 “And she said—”
 “No, but I don’t have to. He’s gotta be round somewhere.”
 “Where’s my daughter—”
 “Mad—”
 “Are they going to take them on to the socket for treatment?”
 “And she—Catherine—just stood there—”
 “What?”
 “Mud. Take some dust—”
 “What do you think?”
 “Just stood there—”
 “—about a handful—”
 “Yap—”
 “Mix in one part water to four parts dirt—”
 “What’re they going to do?”
 “She didn’t do anything?”
 “If you wanna know, go find out yourself—they’re decoupling tractor sections out on the canyon rim now.”
 “Duhn know—”
 “No. She just looked at her a long time. Like she recognized her or something—”
 “Then rub it all over any exposed skin—”
 “Then she—Catherine—said she hadn’t seen her daughter—”
 “Maybe I will—”
 “Won’t that just dry out?”
 “Honestly, I don’t see what you’re so worked up about—”
 “Did you hear they’ve got the pumps cleaned out finally?”

“It’s just dust. It’ll blow away in the wind—”
“Then what happened?”
“Sounds yucky—”
“But they won’t last long—”
“They just stared at each other a long time—”
“She’s got a thing for him—”
“Oh.”
“But what happened?”
“But there’s still something they can do for them, right?”
“They—”
“Sensitive—”
“Shut up—”
“What happened where?”
“Don’t tell me to shut up—”
“With Catherine—”
“Then just be quiet—”
“H—”
“Both of you cool it—”
“Well we’ll find out soon enough—”
“You shut up—”
“They—”
“Fuck you—”
“Fuck you—”
“ALRIGHT—Everyone.” Silence. “Why don’t we all go find some shade.”

And slowly they’d’ve filtered out. And June’d’ve grabbed someone’s arm and whispered furiously about what’d happened, as they’d’ve walked.

“What you doing?”

Dave looked up and his reflection in the black-dead tablet he held in both his hands did likewise. A little girl stared fixedly at him as she clutched a stuffed animal against her chest with both her arms. He watched her a few moments. “Where did you come from?” And he glanced round as if to see who else might’ve been round.

“I didn’t come from anywhere,” she said. Then added, “What you doing?”

He glanced down at the tablet. His reflection looked back at him. “I was...thinking of reading a book.”

“That’s a funny looking book.”

He didn’t reply.

“How come you’re not reading it? Don’t you want to read it?”

He looked up at her. “I do want to read it.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Because...the batteries are worn out. They won’t last long... And...”

“So?”

He shook his head, watched himself in the mirror-black screen.

“If it’s a book, it has to be about something,” she said. “What’s it about?”

“It’s about...” He sighed. “It’s about a man who decides to be a knight. He—”

“How does somebody be the night?”

Dave looked up. “It’s not...” He shook his head. He mumbled. “...there’ll be no copies of anything...”

“What?”

He shook his head. After a moment, he looked up. "Where are your parents?"

"What're parents?" She turned and looked into the distance. "What's all that noise?"

Dave followed her gaze. "It's a celebration."

"What's that?"

"It's like a party."

"Oh." She looked into the distance again. "Can we go?"

Dave'd looked back down at the screen.

"I'm hungry," she said, and looked into the distance. "Do they have food at this party?"

"Hmm?" Dave glanced up. She pulled a face at him. "Oh," he said, after a moment. "I guess so." He glanced at the screen again before he slipped into one of the large pockets of his cargo shorts. "Did you come in with everyone else?"

She shook her head as they walked. "Nope." She hummed as they walked. "What's your name?"

"Dave." After a moment or two he added, "What's yours?"

"Some people call me Fenny. But that's not my real name." She held up her stuffed animal. "This's Seagull. You know, like the man in the story."

"Which one?"

"The one with Seagull in it," she said. "And the rings."

Dave walked with his hands in his pockets.

"My real name is Fenchurch," she said. "People just sometimes call me Fenny."

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Long after the last lamps and candles'd been extinguished, the last fire'd died, footsteps violated the pre-morning quietude.

"We might manage it, you know?"

"What?"

A faint, warm breeze blanketed the night and sounded through windows and openings high above. Boots and walkingstick dully clopped and tapped against paving stones. He adjusted a pack against his shoulders with his free hand. Faint sounds carried on wind, mummers, moans, half-snatched words long stretched and tangled outa recognition that might've traveled halfway round the world.

"The moment between," she said, and looked up so stars reflected'n dark glasses, cold-blue specks floated on hard-liquid surfaces.

"Between what?"

"Between any change," she said. "When one thing becomes another." Moonlight caught her smile. "Most people only ever look back one day and realize, *you know, the Empire fell a thousand years ago.*" She didn't glance at him. "Like night and dawn. There has to be a moment between the two. But we never catch it." She still looked up. Sighed. "You know what they say happens in that moment? Absolute peace descends. Everything roaming the night begins to bed down. Everything that rises at daylight still hasn't woken. Then—" She didn't spin. "Then the universe momentarily ceases to exist."

"Then how's it start again?"

She looked down as they passed into a darkened passage. "It just does. Maybe it doesn't."

Winds overhead changed tone as they emerged into a corridor.

"I'll bet," she said, "all human voices, the wind takes them halfway

round the world before they go out. Maybe even farther.” She laughed. White teeth flashed from darkness. “Tomorrow night, clear on the other side of the world, someone might be walking, hear something, look round and wonder who’s talking about words on the wind carried all the way round the world. And they’ll say to whoever might be with them something about the wind carrying words. And maybe some other night someone will hear that. And on and on. Round and round.”

Amidst a square, he paused t’get’is bearings, adjusted’is pack.

“You’re arm’s not healed enough to be carrying that, you know.”

“Hm.”

“Hm,” she said. “Is that all you want someone to hear some night from now—hmm?”

They crossed yet t’b’cleared sand.

“All serious and stoic, as usual,” she said. “It’s beginning to become repetitive, you know.” She glanced at’m, only teeth and reflected stars. “And you don’t bother to think what’ll happen after you leave, do you?”

“You know the future.”

“I *am* the future. But point taken. Even if it’s technically wrong. That still isn’t an excuse, though.”

They turned and went into a sidepassage. Moonlight cut across the side’e walked on.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll tell you what happens.” And she looked up again. The same stars reflected’n’er glasses. “Mae’ll say ‘Are you okay?’ And She’ll look up with that ridiculous wide-brimmed hat Tiffany made for her the other day and—”

“Who?”

“You know *who*. And She’ll look up from under that hat where She’s working beside a raised bed and say, ‘Why shouldn’t I be?’ She’ll look quite lovely, her sari loosely draped over her shoulder as that ridiculously wide hat brim shades her whole body and it’d all be perfect if She didn’t have any of that nasty irritation still spread round her arms and neck. But that’ll almost be gone, will be entirely by the time you get back.” She mused t’erself a moment, dark lenses still pointed skyward. “Let’s see... Then Mae’ll say how she heard you left the other night. But She won’t reply. She’ll just sink her trowel into

the fresh-turned soil in that raised bed. And She'll talk about how they've almost got all the sand swept away but that they need to make a few more brooms. And how—"—she laughed—"—and how 'You know, I sold so many of them once upon a time. But I never made one till I came here.' And finally Mae'll say, after she's good and tired of standing there under morning sun as it peeks between two towers, she'll start going on about how she's 'avoiding this conversation'. Oh, but not at all." *N* spun. Stars remained fixed'n'er lenses. "But you know what She's going to say about you? Hm? Nothing. But of course you told her you're leaving, didn't you? Not in so many words, no. But you've been gone so long already why should She worry about waiting a little while longer? She's used to it. But maybe that's a good thing—not talking about it. Have you ever noticed how much distance words put between everything? Of course you have, even if you didn't know it. Almost as much distance as having none at all. And She'll finally rise and dust off her sari. And they'll walk off—"—She laughed—"—and that hat'll be so wide Mae'll be able to walk under it too. And the thing'll deform when they pass through narrow passages." She laughed. "One of these days everyone'll be wearing them, you know?"

The night wheeled round'em.

"It could be such a peaceful night to float over the city. All that noise way over there, somewhere. Otherwise it'd be so quiet. Think how peaceful it'd be to float over rooftops, between towers and to look down on the few candle flickerings below. Too bad that's so long away."

She turned'er dark glasses toward the stars. "Can you hear it?"

He paused.

"The fulling hammer. When the wind shifts, you'll smell the smoke. Zilog's out there scouring rebar to forge into...well, that's what Mae's going to talk about as they wind their way through these passages." And *N* sighed. "And they won't stop till somebody whistles. Tracy'll be a sun-evaporated figure on a high bridge who'll jog down to meet them. And when she does she'll say, 'where'd you get that thing?' about that hat. But they'll all walk back beneath it. Of course, it'll only be ridiculous till it's the normal thing, but that's just the way everything is.

"You wanna know what they're gonna do? Wanna guess?—Well it probably doesn't matter. It's all just details. What's really interesting's where they, well, at least the two of them, anyway, end up—all...and ...and afterward.....Where was I?

"Anyway." She lowered'er gaze, shook'er head. "And I can tell you now—Mary-Celleste—"—and she shook'er head and whistled—"—That woman's *never*—and I mean never gonna accept who her daughter's run off with."

They passed through an archway and into a darkened covered passage and she glanced across at'm, stars fixed'n'er lenses. "Though, they will have tea together." She shook'er head. "But that's far away. Too far away for you to need to know now."

They came into an open square. Only one dune remained'n a far corner, iridescent with moonlight.

"And Troy and Pam—they're gonna keep on like they are till they get too sore to manage—and then go on at it a little longer." She laughed. "He may not be huge, but he works hard to turn it to his advantage, as they say." She laughed.

"And Zeb... Well, that can wait till you get back."

She looked up. "Let's see... Who am I forgetting... Hm..." She mumbled, "Did you tell him...?" But she shook'er head. "He's at least going to have the solace she didn't participate in any way... But you're going to have to take care of Ron for a while. His anger's not going to go away just like that." A sigh. "Connelly's leg's still pinned by a roof beam, but he'll live. Get Sheryl out first, alright? He can wait."

She sighed. "Depressing." And she looked up at stars. "Long splinter-shriven shadows merged with gloom after the sun dipped beyond mountains, beyond world's edge, and whatever subliminal joy'd come from meeting after so long, ruination's spirit settled round them as electric lights burned on the tractor's exterior, illuminated nearby shattered façades and gables and porches and roofs and broken windows and burned shadows into faded landscape when night came with no seeming moment between fading light and absolute dark outa which in distant intersections small splinter-wood fires licked passing shovel bearers..." A sigh. "Sorry," she said. "It's going to be a long time before that's written, but I think it's kinda pretty. Don't you? In that kind of dark and dismal melancholy way."

Two cats brushed by their legs, tails high, but'dn't stop. "Okay," she said, and turned and waved t'em as they padded up a distant stair.

"Anyway," she said. "The rest can wait till you get back. There's someone waiting to meet you and you shouldn't be late."

From the dock overlook, they'd've been able t'see the tractor's running lights where't'd been parked on the rim. "They sure do look ugly, don't they." Her nose wrinkled. "Like a great big pill bug somebody ripped off its legs and glued on so many wheels."

Below, dark water rippled as a boat docked. Silhouettes passed'n front of running lights. Final checks. Folded into'is cubular travel form, MacAvoy'd've already been loaded.

"Oh, there is one other thing," she said. And she withdrew something from'er pocket and offered't t'him. And when'e extended'is hand, she dropped a blossom into'is open palm. "It's always important to mark a grave with a severed sexual organ," she said.

For a moment, he looked at those moonlights-silvered petals. "What grave am I supposed to mark?"

"You'll know it when you come to it."

On the rim, someone shouted and waved.

"Better get going," she said. "Don't want to be late."

"Don't you have to go where I go, or something?"

"Don't start that again," she said. And she paused a moment'n the archway, looked over'er shoulder at the horizon. "Damn." She shook'er head. "Missed it." Then turned and started away. "Good morning."

And [pink-enshrouded?] sun rose and rendered the many-wheeled pill bug's shadow a long, black, pointed tail aimed at towers that disappeared beyond dust and morning brilliance as'ts corrugated tires rolled over hardpan and left no sign other than that shadow and dust t'indicate from whence't'd come as't passed on into morning as'f't aimed t'penetrate the distant [horizon?].

A ragged, pock-marked line wound back down a dune face where Nathaniel'd climbed. He braced'mself against a roof. Distantly, dark-bricked chimneys rose from the sand and a few high windows glinted as the sun arched past noon.

"YOU'D BETTER TAKE A LOOK AT THIS—"

Nathaniel turned. He'd slipped'is goggles up over'is sand-crustured brows and cupped'is eye t'try and peer through dust-layered glass. Sunbeams cut through dust-strewn air and touched steel girders.

"YOU'D BETTER COME TAKE A LOOK AT THIS—"

Nearby, prybars grunted and hinges squealed as they forced open a window.

A whistle from below. He finally turned. A tiny figure waved. Nathaniel adjusted'is goggles and sidestepped downslope and sand bulged at'is ankles and cascaded. MacAvoy followed, all pneumatic balance.

"We've found something you should see."

Nearby, Tudor stood and'is white-scarred eyes looked from beneath'is hat at mounded sand as'f'e'd see through t'where those above'd started t'repel toward the factory floor. But silently, he turned. And the goggled figure who'd called upslope walked ahead. They must've wondered how many roofs were below their feet as they trod that fresh-made desert.

"There's kind'a a valley on this side," the goggled one said, and motioned. "Wind hollowed it out, maybe. It don't go down almost to street level. But we've broken in a few second-story windows." Angled afternoon sun struck their faces. A shadow-gash erupted from the ground ahead. "We've managed a few tunnels

from window to window.” They descended. Below, gables appeared from either embankment and bent cast-iron cockcrow weather vanes stared at’em. The goggled one motioned toward a broken window that’d been shoved up. Tudor’s white-scarred eyes stared up at another black-iron cockcrow that drooped and looked down at’em. Nathaniel placed’is hat on MacAvoy’s shoulder. “Stay.” He withdrew a phone and touched’t and slipped’t back into’is pocket. And’e ducked through with’is walkingstick going first. Briefly, he looked out at the new groundlevel framed through a tiny attic window as’e stooped beneath steep rafters. Then turned t’half-blindly survey crates and steamer trunks, a broken-bottom wicker chair. All covered’n two-fingers of dust. Light through the window’d’ve guided’m t’the ladder. Candlelight’d’ve flickered below. Maybe’t’d’ve reminded’m of descending from the cupola all those years before. Someone waited atop the stairs, looked round, stood. He hoisted a light as they descended t’the ground floor. Weak safety lights glowed on mantel and tables and must’ve lent a not-needed eeriness t’that space. It’d’ve taken’is eye time t’adjust and’e’d’ve noticed the chair shoved into a corner, where paneling’d been peeled from a wall and a black-hole gaped and wires dangled. The candlebearer motioned. “It looks like he was climbing on the chair and fell and broke his neck.” Nathaniel stood over the figure. Desiccated papery skin. Revealed teeth. Wisps of hair that stirred with their movement. Skin tight over ball-bearing knuckle joints. Grooved bones seemingly burst through frayed glovetips. “There’s more.” The candlebearer motioned toward the kitchen. Nathaniel pivoted on’is walkingstick. Floral pattern dresses. A fragment of silverware lay crusted and tarnished and dust-covered where boot and footprints neared’t and backed away. Another jutted from where desiccation’d ripped and flared a gash from ear t’jawline. “We’re through back here.” Candlelight flickered from a bedroom window’s far side. Nathaniel rested’is hand on the sill and looked through the sand tunnel between, the planking that braced it, sand sifting between boards. He crawled through, wound’is way t’another living room where several stood just breathing and adding heat and moisture and claustrophobia t’confined space. “We’ve tunneled through about halfway down the block.” They’dn’t look at the living room. So Nathaniel went through into there. But’e’d probably

only done so because of 'em, t'maybe t'somehow take something of a burden from 'em, because'e'dn't'ven't known what was there. He returned, paused'n the doorway, both hands on'is walkingstick.

Someone, for everyone: "...should we...do something...?"

"Leave it," he said. "Leave it like it is."

Even a shadowed valley must've seemed brilliant after candlelit interiors and they'd've squinted and'd've'd t'shield their eyes as they climbed back through the attic window. Nathaniel reached for'is hat. Shovels and picks and orange-coated limbs emerged behind'm.

"Where's Tudor?"

Someone ran from upslope. "HEY—" He huffed, bent double. "There's something you should see...back at the factory."

A whistle. A distant figure motioned deeper down the slit.

Nathaniel turned that way. "Follow." He withdrew the phone as'e walked. MacAvoy turned'n'is wake.

Still bent over, the runner: "What about—"

"Wait."

Telephone and power poles and their associated wires emerged from ground and embankments. A woman motioned. "There must be some kind of building at the end and it creates a berm so there's just a dead end." Roof peaks only barely jutt'd above sand. Tudor stood erect amidst'em, dribbled on sand, surrounded by black-iron cockcrow weather vanes. He'dn't turn as they approached. "He's going to run."

Flurried beard and shaggy head and ragged clothes burst from beneath a distant eave, carried over sand at a frenzied pace t'collapse'n a silent dust-bloom. The woman ran. Nathaniel followed. She bent over the prostrate figure. Beneath frayed garments: paper skin and wired sinew that must've seemed'n't so far removed from those below.

Tudor: "Someone's coming."

Nathaniel looked up. A distant-tiny figure jogged toward'em, seemed stuck'n place for a long time. He panted as'e came close. "They say...you should...really...come see this..." Quizzically, he glanced toward the collapsed figure as the woman continued t'peel away rags. Nathaniel turned, moved across the sands.

"I need to come with you," Tudor said, and turned'is blank look from a weather vane.

Wind cascaded down the slit and stirred sand and Nathaniel adjusted his hat brim down over his eye. But Tudor stared into it without blinking, seemedn't bothered as coarseness routed over his cheeks. And perhaps because of that, Nathaniel hadn't immediately realized Tudor'd disappeared. And when he turned, Tudor stood below a nearby eave, head tilted back so he faced a bent black-iron cockcrow that looked down at him. MacAvoy paused between them.

Someone waited atop the slit. He pointed. "This way." Smoke stacks cast finger shadows and stood black against the sky. Far below, a boom-arm hung canted by an outlet chute. "Through there." The guide clicked-on an LED block, but sun'd've overpowered it till they were far inside. And the chute'd've probably been too short for MacAvoy to fit, even stooped over. So he'd've waited on the sand outside. Flaked paint danced with each resounding step. Metal recoiled and reverberated beneath their feet. "Watch the roller bearings." The guide grabbed a dangled chain, dropped to concrete floor. They wound between close-packed machinery, over grate-work platforms. Nathaniel paused against the railing. Below, rows of boxy tarp-covered forms stretched along the factory floor.

"What'd'uh think?" Two or three grabbed and flipped back a tarp corner, climbed up and tugged it halfway off. Someone rapped against riveted steel plates. Black slits'd been cut where windows might've been expected to be. Stretching to tiptoe, a woman touched a thick metal tube. "What the hell's this for?"

"Try this on for size." Someone ambled toward them, weight'n's arms, which he deposited on one of the vehicle's flat surfaces. "It's like a rifle shell for a giant." Fingerprint-marred, polished brass trembled with distorted semi-reflections.

"Well, what do you think?"

Nathaniel pivoted on his walkingstick, looked round at those rows of tarp-covered vehicles. "Anything salvageable?"

"You should come —"

"Just tell me."

"Well..." Someone shrugged. "Empty fuel barrels. Stuff like that. Everything's really used up."

"We could take a few tarps," someone said.

Boots and barefeet echoed upstairs and along ramps behind'em as everyone departed. Someone called, "Yuns coming?"

But neither Nathaniel nor Trent nor Tudor replied. Nathaniel aimed a flashlight into the steel girders overhead. A vaguely human form, wrapped'n burlap, hung there by a chain round'ts neck.

Tink.

The chain snapped.

Dry burlap struck concrete. Rip. Sand and metal gears and motor oil spilled onto the factory floor.

Nathaniel glanced down at'is hand. He cradled the blossom'n'is palm.

And'e let't fall.

“... and there will be rumors and rumors of rumors...” The old man lay face up’n a sleeping hutch. Eyes closed, breathing softly, as only the corners of’is mouth twitched t’form not-heard words.

Other hutchs’d been latched closed and so whether those inside lay awake’n the dark or with overhead LEDs on’dn’t’ve been known. But a few crowded’n the nook, elbows on the blue-plastic, fold-down table. Tudor stood as always, seemed t’look at nothing. A lump bulged at’is crotch where’e or someone else’d forced an old shirt into’is coveralls and’t puffed out the coverall’s fly, the zipper broken and missing’ts tongue.

And all except’m looked up as Nathaniel’s walkingstick clacked on the walkway as’e moved down from the front.

“How long?”

Nathaniel glanced through a viewport. Clear sky.

Tudor cocked’is head. “Break.”

Half slammed into the wall. The rest splayed across the hollow plastic table. Nathaniel grimaced, moved’is elbow from where’e’d struck a storage cabinet. Muffled thumps echoed from behind latch-closed bunks, which clicked open. “What the hell’s going on?”

Izzy pushed’erself from beneath someone’s torso and arms and pulled away from the table, brushed past’em all t’examine a panel. “Safety’s tripped.”

And she popped the hatch and sublimated into noon sun.

“Shit.”

Others rolled from their bunks. Someone checked the old man.

Nathaniel reached for’is hat.

Heatwaver obscured distant mountains, obscured everything, as’f

an insubstantial wall'd been erected round'em. A slight breeze carried from ahead. But something might've reflected distorted in the heatwaver from that direction, fragments rearrange not-intelligibly. But the wind brought a certain p—

“It's probably one of the u-joint sensors.” Izzy's voice carried dully from beneath the tractor's underbelly. And she squinted as'er face appeared. “We'll have to pop the drive shafts.”

Others'd come out by then. “Can we fix it?”

“You mean are we stuck here?” Izzy shrugged as best she'd as she lay on the ground. “Maybe. Of course we can always walk back. Should only take six—eight months at the outside.”

“That's not fucking funny.”

Izzy extended two fingers, said t'Nathaniel, “It'll take a while. Longer depending on what safeties we have to bypass.”

But Nathaniel still watched the heatwaver'n the distance. He turned and walked back along the tractor.

“Where's he going?”

```
## would __fetal position__ be better here?  
## i can't find it in the style guide  
## let me know and i'll do a pull-request
```

Pulled up with'is legs against'is chest, arms clutched round'is legs, the raspberry-yellow-striped machine hung'n'ts transport cradle and must've looked as'f't'd've rested'ts head on'ts chest'f't'd'd one. “Dis-dock.” Limbs dis-folded with pneumatic smoothness, front-back feet touched ground, and'e stepped out, arms still and straight down no matter how'e moved.

Hatless, Trent stepped round the tractor, looked up at the sky between the clumps of hair that fell over'is eyes. “Sure?”

Nathaniel adjusted'is hat. “Keep an eye on things.”

Trent nodded.

“Follow.”

Trent spat, turned, watched'em shrink'n the distance and b'swallowed'n heatwaver.

“Where the fuck are they going?”

“Ahead.”

“Is he fucking crazy?”

A faint smile appeared amongst Trent’s tangled beard. Off t’one side, Tudor stepped from ’is coveralls, exposed ’is arced, dribbling erection t’the wind.

Nathaniel'd adjusted'is hat down and tugged'is dust-cloth over'is mouth as breeze'd become a storm that blotted the sky. MacAvoy'd've only been barely visible just two steps behind. But'e held'is hat down with'is free hand and continued. He'd've pulled the cloth up over'is ears, too, so maybe'e'dn't've noticed when the wind died. And when'e adjusted'is hat again, looking down t'angle't against the wind that'd been, he'd've seen a faded yellow center-line on black asphalt. Faint breeze set oak leaves amotion and so their duller-green undersides rolled and flashed by. He turned, looked back over heatwaver-bathed landscape.

“Yoohoo.”

Gabled houses and black wrought-iron yard fences lay t'either side. And an old woman, t'far away t'b'any more distinctly identified than just an old woman, stood behind one of those black wrought-iron fences and waved. Nathaniel's walkingstick tapped asphalt. MacAvoy's backwards-forwards feet a thuddier version of the same. He tugged'is dust rag from'is face as'e mounted the sidewalk and orange-red sand cascaded and avalanched down'is clothes.

Mrs Tillman smiled. “Oh, but you are a sight.” And she shook'er head. Looking over'is shoulder, she raised'er arm and motioned, but said before'e'd turn, “No—don't spoil the surprise.” She smiled and looked'm up and down again. She glanced at the raspberry-yellow-striped thing next t'him. Then looked over'er shoulder, called, “Roy. Stop working and come visit.” She shook'er head. “Dig dig dig. That's all that man ever thinks about.” She rose and looked over Nathaniel's shoulder. Then turned and lifted a tray from a small wrought-iron table. “Would you like a cookie, dear?”

Nathaniel shook'is head.

Mrs Tillman smiled and returned the tray t'the table. She glanced over'is shoulder. "We've been keeping track of you, you know?"

Nathaniel shook'is head. "I...didn't."

Mrs Tillman nodded. "Oh, yes. But of course, sometimes all we have is keeping up on the latest gossip, you know." She laughed. "But no. No, everyone's always interested to know what's going on with you—aren't we, Augusta?"

Print-dress-clad arms wrapped'is middle and spotted wrinkled hands clasped over'is stomach. And they fell away when'e turned. She smiled. "You mean to say, after all this time, you're not going to give your old grandmother a hug?"

After a moment, Nathaniel put an arm round'er shoulders and she settled against'm and wrapped'er arms round'm again and rested'er head against'is chest.

"Now, Augusta," Mrs Tillman said. "You'll get yourself filthy."

Grandmother Walcott pulled away, but'dn't let completely go, looked down at'er dirt-and-dust-and-sand-stained dress. She shook'er head. "No matter." She smiled. And patted'is shoulders. "Haven't you grown up." And'is stomach. "At least you're eating well." And she stepped back and looked'm up and down. "That was what really had me worried, you know." But'er face clouded, and she leaned t'look round'm. "You haven't been offering him anything, have you?"

"Me?" Mrs Tillman pressed'er flared fingers against'er chest.

Grandmother shook'er head, looked at Nathaniel. "Well..." She sighed, shook'er head. "Go on," she said. "Go on. You need to get on with it."

"With what?"

"The business at hand. Life. Those kinds of things." She patted'is arm. "Go on. You don't want to hang around here too long. And you've got a million things to do, I'm sure." She glanced at MacAvoy. And she shook'er head as Nathaniel tried t'speak. "Now, go on. I didn't raise you to shirk your responsibilities." And she cupped'er hand against'is dusty beard. "And the biggest one you've got is to yourself right now." She stepped into the street. "Now, go on." She glanced toward Mrs Tillman. "And don't go accepting any cookies

or cakes or lemonades—there’s no time for that sort of thing, you hear?” And she motioned up the street. “Now, go on. Don’t make me get my broom.”

Faintly, he smiled. Nodded. And’e turned and nodded t’Mrs Tillman.

Mrs Tillman smiled. “See you later, Nathaniel.”

“Now—shoo.”

Nodding absently, Nathaniel stepped from sidewalk-t’street, ambled up’ts center-line.

“And remember,” Grandmother called. “Don’t stop for anything. You haven’t got time.” He started t’turn—“And watch where you’re going.”—so’e’dn’t.

Mr Johnson looked up from’is tulips, waved as’is wife descended front steps with a lemonade-laden tray. Mrs September waved from the far side, smiled and called. Mr Baum looked up from behind’is paper, lifted a half-filled glass from a nearby table and raised’t’n Nathaniel’s direction. The Merrywether children, all grown, looked over their shoulders from where they sat as Mrs Merrywether set down a cake plate and lifted a serving knife and waved with’er other hand. Mrs Holtcraft sat on a front step with an ice-cream cone and waved a gloved hand. Sitting beside her, Mr Endercott’d, too. Derek and Peter Townrow blasted past on either side, skidded their bicycles t’a halt, even though they were far too old for’em, and called after’m t’

Wind rustled leaves and flipped their paler backsides into view. At streets end, he squinted t' tears and adjusted 'is hat brim over 'is eye as wind and sand swallowed'm.

“What’s that?”

“What?” Izzy stuck out’er head.

“There.”

She shaded’er brow with’er greasy hand. “Don’t see anything.”

“Looks like a storm.”

“Probably just the way the heat distorts things.”

“I don’t think so.”

Izzy repositioned’erself. “Small atmospheric disturbance, then. Happens. Hand me that.” ... “No—the other one.”

“Is that going to be a problem for us?”

Izzy looked down at’er tool, turned’t three clicks. “They don’t move, just swirl on themselves. Don’t worry.” And added as she swung’er upper body back beneath the tractor, “Besides, they’re over and gone in a few minutes. Now—get ready to pass me that when I—shit—”

“What?”

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

“What?”

“Get down here and hand me a...four and seven millimetre. Someone’s fucking already replaced this and used whatever fucking connect—fuck—”

The road'd been subsumed beneath sand. Behind'em, dunes ran against an oak tree grove, formed a breachway as'f t'protect't. He passed onto a sand-covered street. Stripped-bare trees, grey and white pointed eruptions from dunes, could give no hint as t'the street's former name. Splintered roofs, in-crushed walls'd've rendered any house's style indistinguishable from the next. Still-air burnt with noon heat and evaporated t'clear sky. At first, there'd've been silence. Then, slowly, perhaps, a gentle putter. A crash. Ahead, a bulldozer emerged from splintered remains, belched black smoke and chugged caddy-cornered through an intersection. Putter putter putter. It'd've belched black, shuddered, belched, popped, slowly idled down, belched black smoke and finally'd've gone silent amidst an intersection. Heat still'd've wavered over the engine housing as they passed. Idly, he glanced toward MacAvoy. "Curiouser and curiouser." But only soft pneumatic wsssssss answered. Faint thunder. Crack. Sound swallowed by clear sky. Nathaniel paused, glanced round. Another crack. Another. High-speed metal wiiiiiiiiiiing off MacAvoy's coverings, might've left a dent'f Nathaniel'd cared t'check or'f MacAvoy'd'd a head t'look down at'mself. Shattered buildings either side'd've been their only cover. But the shots stopped. Nathaniel squinted at a brighted-out world from beneath'is hat brim, pulled'is walkingstick from the sand. Pneumatic whispers airily whooshed at'is side as they walked. And when Nathaniel stopped, MacAvoy stopped with'm. Sun-washed figures gathered where smolder knotted toward sky.

Even MacAvoy's pneumatics remained silent.

Finally, Nathaniel said, "Maybe you were right after all."

Ron leaned on his cane, looked at him. "About what?"

"About not wanting to know where I'd go."

[...]

He paused and [...] Ron laughed. A faint [...]

Taggart seemed to've lost his voice, managed only a growl as replacement. "WHO'RE YOU?" But he'd've mostly eyed the raspberry-yellow-striped machine.

Still laughing, Ron glanced at him. "It's been that long that you don't recognize him?" He shook his head, looked back at Nathaniel. "This's the guy who saved your life." He shook his head. "Though, he's also the one who talked us all into going out there in the first place."

"I had help, if I recall."

Ron laughed.

Taggart's eyes darted between the two, toward MacAvoy.

A rifleman jerked, pulled a hand from his weapon to point. "Look." Malformed shapes darted to safety behind a nearby building.

"THEY'RE PREPARING FOR A COUNTER ATTACK—" Taggart's fist shot up. And he jerked toward Nathaniel. "You're providing cover for them—SOME KIND OF DISTRACTION—" A rifleman tugged his shirt—but Taggart jerked away. Stumbled. Breathed hard. Bloodshot eyes leered from beneath his felt hat. More tired than anything. He pointed. "STOP H—" But his voice diminished to a whisper.

Nathaniel turned and pulled a phone from somewhere in his clothes, aimed the camera and pixel pops vomited across a shattered screen. "Acquire image." Multi-colored vomit pulsed through the pixel matrix. "Track pattern." And MacAvoy's pneumatics whispered. His backwards-forwards feet carried him over wind-shaped dunes. Distant figures jerked rifles against their shoulders. Magazines emptied, tinder-dry wood stocks splintered against his chassis when he stepped within swinging distance. They ran. One looked over his shoulder to see someone else being chased, paused to breathe, looked back to see and MacAvoy'd've turned and started toward him at a steady pneumatic gate, and he'd've jerked and scrambled.

"It's not..." Beatrice stared. "It's not going to hurt them, is it?"

"It'll just follow them. If they stop, it'll stop."

Ron laughed.

Taggart wheezed. "S—" And he stumbled onto his knees, would've

fallen'f Ron'dn't half-stumbled and caught'm by the arm. He mumbled, slurd. Spittle dripped from'is mouth. Bea tried t'steady'm.

They all looked up as heavy equipment rolled down the street. And Nathaniel'd started t'motion even before the tractor'd stopped amidst a nearby intersection.

Genevieve trudged across the sand and knelt'n front of a not-responsive Taggart. "Heat stroke, maybe." She yelled back t'the tractor. "Come on, come on—let's get him up. Up and inside now."

Bea watched'em carry'm away. "Is he going to be alright? Should we try to find the doctor?"

"If he does," Ron said, "he'll owe you his life again."

Nathaniel turned and looked over distant rooftops. Distant men still scrambled house-t'house as MacAvoy pneumatically stalked one then t'other. Ron watched, too.

"Eeee."

And they both turned toward Bea's faint squeak.

Trent crossed toward'em. "Search?"

Nathaniel nodded. Turned t'Ron. Ron looked over distant shattered roofs. Nodded.

Trent started back t'the tractor, stopped partway, turned and raised a hand and smiled deep from within'is tangled beard. "Hi...sis." Bea squeaked.

Ron paused. He shook'is head. "That's...?"

"Yeah."

"And..."

Beatrice covered'er mouth with'er hand.

Naked except for a hat, Tudor's white-scarred eyes scanned houses and dunes as'is perpetual erection twitched and semen dribbled down't and peppered shifting sands.

"It's just a neurological condition," Nathaniel said.

Grip cloth between thumb and forefinger, Constance held a lens and, tongue clenched between'er teeth, drug'er thumb over'ts polished surface.

"That won't do anything," he said.

"It'll do...just enough." She pulled'er tongue back into'er mouth, polished finger-oil from the lens, held't up, squinted through't before she leaned forward t're-fit't. "Try that."

He looked skeptical, but bent and peered through't, shifted t'put'is head inline with both lenses. "It's still blurry."

"Adjust the focus."

One eye still closed, he placed too fingers on the instrument and tugged t'open space between lenses, held'is breath'n concentration. "Hey—shit—" His hand slipped and'e tried t'adjust backwards. "It works."

"Try aiming for something."

He opened'is eye, looked at the desert. "What?"

"I don't know. Find something."

"Looks like a small dust storm off in that direction."

"Whatever," she said. Then as'e swung the instrument round: "Not so fast. You'll unseat it." But'e'd already settled into position and started t'adjust'ts focus.

One eye screwed shut, he squinted t'other. "I can't make anything out."

"Well if you tried to look at—"

"Hey—I can see something."

"What?"

"It's..." He adjusted the focus. "Shit." Tried t'adjust't back.

Someone dismounted a nearby stair. "What're yuns doing? You're supposed to be keeping a lookout for the tractor."

"We are."

"Looks like playing with toys, to me."

"It's not a toy. It's a prototype."

"Whatever."

If she'd've been up there with'er telescope when they'd approached, she'd probably've been able t'even see the sleds and cars and trucks towed behind the tractor, rather than just the dustplume left'n their wake.

“You take over.”

The newly arrived young woman shrugged.

Constance lifted'er instrumentation from'ts tripod.

“Heh—”

“There wasn't anything to look at out there, anyway,” she said.
“Besides, the lens still needs some work.”

“Can I try it later?”

“I'll let you see what the moons look like through it.”

She started down nearby stairs, swerved at bottom t'avoid tripod and instrument being knocked from'er hands. “Watch it—”

Ceili moved aside as best'e'd, but a short dance ensued as she and Ceili tried t'squeeze through an archway at the same time.

“What's—”

“You're hurry?”

“Nothing.” She looked back. “Why?”

“Just—”

“Wondering.”

She shook'er head and continued on.

Ceili glanced at Argile. Argile shrugged. They turned along a passage, perhaps one with walls of composite pea-sized stones, and followed'ts curvature. Argile still faintly wheezed. He nodded as the corridor ended. "There." "Yes." Probably, they'd come t'the place where four pointed arches meet'n a slate roof over a small open structure. A table stands acenter't, and on't a smaller model of the structure'n which't resides, and presumably within that, if you kneel and look closely, stands another table and another miniature, perhaps, on and on that way, smaller and smaller, so that even'f you look at't through a Constance Glass, it continues on smaller forever. There she stood with'er back t'em, arms, probably, folded across'er chest, still'n the same dark dress she'd worn that night at the auxiliary and'd crossed the desert'n, or nearnuf, though't'd've been washed at least several times by then, probably.

"Ahm."

"Ahm."

Mary-Celleste looked over'er shoulder.

"We thought you might—"

"Want some lunch—"

"Without having to go—"

"Down to the commissary."

Argile stepped forward and offered the bowl, set't down on the small table when she'dn't take't. She turned away, looked into the distance, even though there's no particular view from there, just a wall, and overtop't, distant towers and roofs arranged'n puzzle-piece fashion.

Argile cleared'is throat. "We..."

Ceili cleared's. "Had something..."

"To ask you."

"Yes."

And they paused, faintly shuffled. And while they did, Mary-Celleste turned.

"Um."

"You're a woman," Ceili said.

"And very attractive."

"And..."

"And..."

Ceili cleared's throat. "You know... On the table is a smaller version of this building."

Argile nodded. "And inside that a smaller version."

"And a smaller version in that."

"They say it goes on forever."

"Smaller and smaller."

Silence.

Ceili put a hand t'the back of's neck. Then Argile. "And we wondered..."

"If you would be interested..."

"In a relationship?"

"With us."

"Yes."

Hands at their sides, they stood silent, palms faintly sweat-damp. Quiet too, she looked at'em without blinking. Then she turned away.

"No."

"We—"

"I said no." Both men shifted... "Go away," she said. "Leave me alone."

And sometime'n that extended silence, they withdrew, as'f blown on the light breeze that worked'ts way between corridors.

And they'd've remained the same even days later.

“Hello, boys.” They parted and pressed against opposite walls t’allow’er between. Abigail smiled. “What’s the matter? You both look like you both lost your best friend in the world.”

Neither’d’ve replied.

“Have you seen—”

“That—”

“Way—”

And they inflated’emselves from against their respective walls and continued down a passage. But Abigail’dn’t’ve’d time t’wonder bout’em long. She turned and emerged into the next square. “Do you know what’s wrong with the boys?” She passed under pointed arches.

Mary-Celleste’dn’t reply.

For a moment, Abigail glanced round, as’f looking for something. “Look...” She stepped closer. “I know we haven’t talked in a while. But...” She stepped beside’er and looked at facets and roofs and walls and stairs framed through an archway. She sighed. “It’s almost like...” But she shook’er head, took a deep breath. “I’m going to be leaving soon. Going home. And... And I just wanted to say goodbye.” She glanced sideways at Mary-Celleste. “I know...” And she put’er arm round Mary-Celleste’s shoulders. “I know everything’s hard. But at least...at least...at least you know she’s okay.” And because Mary-Celleste’dn’t reciprocate, Abigail’d’ve hugged enough for both. She pulled away. “I...” Shook’er head. “Stay well.”

And she walked out beneath pointed arches and rubbed’er fingers over’er cheek as she dropped into a sidepassage.

[A]nd [Trent?] turned along a passageway, passed into a bustling square. A hand waved over others' heads. Someone pushed through.

"You're back."

Trent'dn't reply.

"Okay—that was obvious."

Again, Trent'dn't reply, but started across the square, hands'n torn and threadbare pockets.

"We're planning on something for tonight. You wanna come?"
... "Hey um—SEE YOU LATER THEN—OR WHATEVER."

Trent dropped into a darken alleyway. And't'sn't too hard t' imagine that sooner or later'e'd've come across Collard: broody'n the darkness, hands'n'is pockets.

"Hello."

Trent nodded.

Collard too. "Good...trip?"

Trent shrugged.

"..." Collard shifted, hands still'n'is pockets. "Well I..." He cleared'is throat. "Ahm." But stood silent.

There'd've been a soft pluffd as Collard's back struck a wall, a faint quick intake of air as Trent's palm and spread fingers pressed into'is crotch and opened'is pants and slipped down. Collard's breath'd've struck Trent's face, faces nearnuf Trent's bushy scraggle'd scraped'is cheek. And roughly, quickly, he'd've jerked Collard's pants halfway down'is thighs and left'm breathing hard, trapped there against cool stone. Collard glanced down the passage, toward distant cacophony, but'd've closed'is eyes as Trent moved against'm, would've jerked as'is erection entered Trent's mouth. And coarse beard'd've scrubbed'is thighs. He'd've seen tangled mop hair floated at'is groin'f'e'd opened'is eyes and looked down over'is heaving chest. And'e'd've shuddered, pressed'is naked buttocks t'stone, groaned as'is stomach knotted. And remained that way till

“Um... Sorry?”

It really'sn't that much a stretch t'think'e'd've stumbled on'em at some point.

Collard jerked t'look.

Down the alley, Dave shuffled. “Sorry.” He put his hands in his cover-all’s pockets, turned. “Sorry.” And trumbled back the way he’d come. Or at least if he didn’t, it didn’t’ve mattered anyway.

He'd've still wandered from one passage t't'other, hands'n'is pockets, collided with passersby as often as'e'd managed t'dodge. "Watch it—" the same words from multiple mouths, a kind of strange echo that'd've accompanied the plop-fop sounds from'is sandals. He blinked, squinted, as'e ascended into a sunlit square. He started up far stairs as above June and Brittney emerged from shadowed interiors and started down. They passed'm. But June turned.

"Where's your hat?"

Dave rolled'is eyes up as'f t'try and look at'is forehead.

"You've got to learn to wear a hat in the middle of the day," June said. Behind'er, Britt nodded, nudged June, who shrugged'er off. "Remember to get a hat," June said. "Okay?"

Dave nodded.

Britt tugged June's arm. "We'll work some more later," June said. "Okay?"

Dave nodded.

June let'erself b'dragged away. "Remember..." But anything else she'd've said'd've faded into not-intelligibleness as she and Britt disappeared through distant passages.

And still squinting, Dave turned through a doorway and sighed as sunlight-weight fell from 'is shoulders and heat-echo dissipated from 'is coveralls.

"You should get a hat," Tracy said. And clayware cup'n-hand, she dropped cross-legged on a cushion. Other women glanced over their shoulders at 'm. And standing by a window, Abigail looked back, as well. And seemed t'consider. Then turned and lifted'er hat off a sill.

"Here," she said. And dodged between women and cushions. "Try this on."

"It's yours."

"I know that." And she shoved't down onto 'is head two-handed. "Perfect."

His eyes flickered upwards.

"You're gonna give away everything," someone said.

"So?" Abigail walked back toward where'er pack lay on a sill and she tightened threadbare straps. "It's not like I'm going to be able to take anything with me."

"If the weight requirements are like they were last time, you'll be lucky if they let you keep your clothes."

"She should be used to it," Chevsky said, and reclined with'er fingers interlaced behind'er head. "What do you think they're gonna say when half of us don't show up?"

"There's not that many," Martina said. She paused, took a breath, rose and walked toward a window and let early afternoon sun strike'er shoulders and stomach as she absently cradled'er pipe'n one hand and lightly clenched'er teeth round the stem.

"Yeah," somebody said. "Actually, I hear most everybody's going back."

"They'll probably just assume the rest of us are dead."

"I don't believe it," Chevsky said.

"I'm an elitist," Tracy said. "I'd rather be a minority."

"Where's Mae? I'd like to have her opinion on this."

"On the numbers?"

"No, on your ego."

Tracy sipped. "She's gone out on the rim. Sheryl's apparently refused to come over. Wants to head down to the socket as soon as possible."

Silence'dn't'ven't pervaded that space.

Dave, hat still on, glanced blinkedly round.

"L—"

But as soon as Chevsky'd open'er mouth, Martina'd turned t'Abigail, said, "You ready to go?"

Abigail looked round the room, at'er almost empty pack, over at'er hat on Dave's head, down at'erself. "I think so."

"I'll walk you down. If you want, that is."

Abigail nodded. And Dave'd've stepped aside t'let'em pass. And as they dismounted the steps, faint conversation'd've wafted down through open windows above t'wither and die'n sunlight. Abigail paused. "Maybe I should've...said goodbye."

Martina shook'er head, said round'er pipe, "We all know."

"I guess..." They crossed and passed through an archway and made their way along circuitous routes towards the dock overlook. And'f their route'd taken'em up along the wall, they might've stopped'n a tower's shade, looked out over the crater rim, where angled sun'd've allowed shadows t'bloom'n the myriad of declivities that litter the desert beyond and that noon sun always obliterates from memory.

"Are you really going to stay?"

Martina'd've looked over that same landscape. But maybe'd've noticed something different, something farther beyond. She nodded.

Abigail looked out over the desert again. "I...almost would," she said. "Just..."

And Martina'd've taken'er arm, led'em outa a tower's shadow and down stairs and into switchback passages till they'd emerged through

the wall and sun reflected wet-gold on the water and cut their eyes as't rippled, broken by prow and paddle. Martina removed'er pipe stem from'er mouth as she seemed t'consider something far beneath the glittering surface. "Whatever..." She shook'er head. "Y—"

"Is that the boat to go across on?"

Both turned as the doctor emerged through the archway and stood there half bent over with'er hands gripped round'er pack straps so hard'er knuckles discolored.

Abigail must've triedn't t'laugh. "What is all that?"

"Things." The doctor watched the boat as't neared the docks.

"You don't need all that."

"How do you know?" She still looked at the boat. "You going?" And she started down the stairs. "If so, hurry up. I don't want them to leave without us."

"We—"

But Martina rested'er hand on Abigail's shoulder and the doctor'd've been beyond hearing by then, anyway. And [in lieu] of whatever she'd've said before, Martina only replaced'er pipe between'er teeth, said, "Goodbye," round it and turned.

"Come on," the doctor called up the stairs. "The boat's here."

Abigail'd've glanced over'er shoulder, but Martina'd've already disappeared into some distant passage, trailed by faint sweetly smoke-tinge.

"Are you coming?"

Flickering water'd've sliced'er eyes as she descended and as the boat shoved off and the doctor looked blankly back at nothing through taped sunglasses. But'f Abigail'd've looked back after they'd disembarked, glinting goldness'd've rendered the city t'tears and she'd've'd t'turn away and wipe'er eyes as they'd climbed. And'f the doctor'dn't tumble backwards from the weight of'er pack on the way up, it'd've only been because Abigail pushed'er from behind. And'f so, she'd've crested the rim panting, and'd've'd t'pause as she caught'er breath.

Muffled thuds and bangs carried from inside the tractor. Dust fluttered down as someone swept'ts panels. Air-conditioning hummed.

Nearby, sleds and other things pulled behind'd've been cut loose from the tractor and'd've still lain'n-line with the direction from which they'd come. Their makeshift, quick-lashed coverings'd've fluttered'n a light breeze. And here and there, paint, bent nails, hinges or who knows what'd've hinted t'the houses their constituent parts'd once formed.

And behind'er, the towers'd've settled into red evening, blood welling up from infinite bottom till't'd've coated spires as a prelude to the purple that'd follow. As't does almost every evening.

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Neither'd've been acclimated t'air-conditioning, so when Britt stepped outa the tractor into balmy evening air, June already sat'n the distance, framed by the thin crimson line that'd've bisected the horizon. She offered a canteen as she eased down beside'er. Below the escarpment, out on a plain, the socket station complex'd've already sunk into shadow. And'ts taunt black tether'd've risen t'bisect the crimson horizon-line as't continued on into dimness and toward newly visible stars as below red warning lights pulsed as'f t'communicate with'em. "See your father?"

June wiped the back of'er hand across'er mouth. "Yeah."

"You tell him what to say to that bitch of a mother?"

June handed'er the canteen.

"Sorry," Britt said.

"Let's not mention it, okay?"

"Alright." Britt crunched forward, forearm balanced on'er pulled-up knee.

"He gave me a message for you though."

"A message?"

"He told me to tell you if you didn't take care of me, he'd come back and there'd be hell to pay."

"Noted," Britt said.

"Of course, I told him I'd probably be the one pulling *your* ass outa the fire."

"Hmp. You better watch what happens to your own ass."

Wind rose. Warmer. Maybe originating from the diggings.

Britt leaned forward, squinted, stood.

June looked up at'er. "What's the matter?"

"Blinking yellow lights. Down there in that valley. You see them?"
"Mining haulers," June said. "They've been queuing since they went up."

"Here comes another one."

"What're yuns talking about?" Izzy approached Britt, raised onto tiptoe t'see into the distance. "I thought mining got priority over human traffic."

"Well, they've gotta let someone use it once a decade, at least. Otherwise it'd be outright theft. Right?"

"Huh huh." Izzy shook'er head. "Anyway," she said. "What're we waiting up here for?"

"Nathaniel's not back yet."

"Well, why can't we wait for him down at the socket?"

"Because he told everybody to bug out, that's why," Britt said. But Izzy'd likely already known that and Britt'd probably just said t'say't because't seemed as'f something'd b'said. "They're really piling up down there too." A distant valley glowed yellow amid settled darkness.

And they'd've'd t've talked bout'm at least some while they'd waited.

"Has he...seemed weird to anyone lately?"

"Weirder you mean," Britt said.

June said, "That's not nice."

"Let's face it," Britt said. "He hasn't been the same since the robot dragged him back."

"And what was the deal earlier?" Izzy said. "Stopping out in the middle of nowhere and taking the robot off into the desert."

"Wasn't the middle of nowhere," Britt said. And she fished a packet of paper swatches outa a pocket and pulled a pouch from another and tugged'ts strap with'er teeth. "Out there's one of the first station complexes they ever built..." And she cinched the bag with'er teeth, slipped't back'n'er pocket.

"But *what's there?*"

"How the fuck should I know?" And she licked rolled paper t'seal't and held't between'er lips.

"Need a light?"

"I'll—"—it danced on'er lip as she talked—"—g—" And she

knelt and pulled'er knife from'er boot, dis-screwed'ts handle and a striker dropped outa't and into'er palm. Red-yellow-orange sparks exploded as she drew the blade over't. And smoke trailed from'er mouth as she re-sheathed'er knife. "Elevator's coming down." Lights'd've probably blinked atop't as't descended amid darkness. "And there they go." Blinking lights rolled onto the plain single file.

"Is he going to walk all the way back up here?"

"That surprise you?"

After a while, June looked over the escarpment. "Anyone see him yet?"

"Too far away," Britt said around'er cigarette. "Too dark, too." And she clamped't between two fingers and blew smoke into the night. "Watch em go. Like bees swarming into a hive."

"Honey bees are blue," Izzy said. "Not yellow."

They sat there'n silence while the tractor's running lights illuminated their backs.

"What's the matter?"

"Hm?" June looked up. "Just thinking."

"About?"

But she shook'er head.

Britt's cigarette glowed and illuminated'er lip. Another draw and she flicked't down the ridge face. "M—"

The explosion'dn't'ven't startled'em and perhaps, momentarily, an after image hovered over their vision. But't'd've been over and done. And all that'd've remained'd've been a dull red bloom cloud over the crater, illuminated perhaps by faint fires that peaked between night-concealed smoke. But a terrible wrenching screeched must've cut the air. Something like a sharp whistle, a shreeeeeeee. And Britt and Izzy'd've instinctively hit dirt and Britt'd've pulled June down with'em.

Footsteps'd've poured from the tractor and running-light shadows'd've jerked across the ground.

Someone'd t've said, "What the fuck was that?"

Britt pulled'er face from the crook of'er elbow, looked over at June. And forcing'erself up, she'd've looked down the ridge. A dust cloud'd've hazed the yellow-light line below. But every other source of illumination'd've appeared t've gone out. Beside'er, June panted,

stirred dust with each breath. And she raised'erself t'look, too. "I think..." Britt said. And she'd've probably been first t'notice or think of't. "I think the fucking cable got blown free." She rose onto'er knees. But't'd've been too dark t'discern the cable against the night sky even'f't'd still remained.

There'dn't've been anything but questions.

"What the hell could've happened?"

"Accident?"

June whispered, "You...think anyone was still down there?" And she pulled'erself onto'er knees beside Britt.

"It sure would be...fucking nice and convenient if he showed up right now."

And maybe each'd've scanned the ridge and darkened terrain below t'try and discern anyone or anything moving along't. Overhead, a smoke-column'd've blotted and smeared stars.

"Fuck," Britt said, almost'n whisper.

"What?"

Below, haulers' yellow running lights'd've dimmed and died.

"The mining system... The haulers must've relayed back. It's... all shutting down. Right now."

"What're you talking about?"

"Listen," Britt said.

"I don't hear anything."

"The blasting... It's stopped."

Silent, everyone listened t'silence.

"They won't..." Izzy said. "Just let it pile up?"

"I don't think so. The automated systems are too tight for that. No, they'll shut down. They'll shut down till the supply chain is repaired."

None'd've said anything after that, not for a long time. Those that'd've been near the mining fields [...] just allowed silence t'be.

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Another night.

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Another night.

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Another

night

Boats slipped across the water'n light of the torches mounted on the stone dock. June'd've gently leaned against Britt's shoulder, slept with faint breaths that'd've tickled Britt's neck. But when they docked and someone moved t'tie'em off and shook the boat side-t'side, she'd've jerked and torchlight'd've reflected'n'er moist-pink eyes. Britt'd've helped'er over the side, helped'er up onto the stone dock as Izzy took June's other arm. "I can walk," June said.

"So can we," Izzy said. A weary procession trailed'em up into the city. And they shuffled through night-lined corridors.

"Who's there?" Someone sat up'n darkness. Nearby, someone else stirred.

"It's just us."

"Somebody light a lamp."

"Don't," Britt said. Moonlight faintly guided'em among prostrate forms as they eased June down.

"What's wrong?"

"We've been walking two days," Britt said. "That's what's fucking wrong."

"What the hell happened?"

"Iz here mis-guestimated how much life those u-joints still had left."

"I did the best I could."

"Oh," Britt said, and sat next t'where June lay and breathed softly. "Let's just fucking go to sleep."

Izzy sighed, looked a moment through a window into a moon-slit square. Maybe Nathaniel'd've ambled across't as she did. And

a wall as moonlight fell on'em and twinkled within spurting water and thrust into'er as'er fingers pressed into'is buttocks. Or [...]

But instead, in some not-identifiable darkened part of the city, he paused, looked up at starlit sky.

"Mrrrrr." Odin paused, looked back, then turned and stopped'n front of'm and looked up. Stars reflected'n Odin's eye when Nathaniel looked down. "Mrrrrr." And Odin turned, and too quick t'follow, he darted across the square into a darkened passage.

Nathaniel looked up. In the still, heated night, he followed a brighter star till'n'ts quiet movement't passed behind a tower. He ambled through quietude disturbed by only walkingstick taps and bootsteps that carried only so far as t'die'n the darkened distance. He paused. Another moonslit square. "Okay," he said. Angular shadows grew from each cube. A cherry tree sprouted from one cracked block hung heavy with moonslit silver petals. "I give up."

"Oh, you don't have to do that."

He turned. Her moonslit smile hung amid darkness and she pushed'erself off the cube on which she sat. She intertwined'er arm with'is. "You know," she said as they walked, "you don't look anything like a lot of things." She laughed. She shook'er head. But stars' reflections remained fixed'n'er lenses. "Definitely not."

"Mrrrrr." Odin padded along on Nathaniel's opposite side, tail up-curved.

"But," she said, "I'm afraid it's near enough to sometime—or at least, it is somewhere. Or somewhen."

They mounted steps and a cat sat'n a window they passed. Water prattled somewhere down a moonslit corridor. N nodded. Stars'd slowly faded from'er lenses as they'd entered. Almost gone. Only those formerly brightest remained, then dimmed pinpoints. And she dis-wound'er arm from'is, turned t'descend the stairs. "Good night."

"Mrrrrr." Odin looked up at'm. Tail still curled, he padded through the doorway, into the corridor. Moonlight filtered through narrow vertical cutouts. Silver water flashed as a distant figure caught a spout'n'er cupped hands. "Mrrrrr." She turned. "Mrrrrr." Light and shadow strobed'er as she approached'm.

Silently, she took'is hand, led'm back past the fountain, up short steps t'one side. And at the door, she took'is walkingstick, propped't

against the wall. Button-by-button and lace-by-lace she helped'm from'is clothes and boots and finally'is hole-worn socks before she took'is hand again and guided'm t'the bed and down onto't. And she rested'er head on'is dirty shoulder and so dust'd've left a smudgemark on'er cheek. His chest'd've rose and fell with ragged breaths between tears that'd've dried amid arid night almost before they'd'd time t'route off'is face, and left thick white salt that'd've glowed'n the moonlight through a small, high window. Through the doorway, at the bottom of the stairs, a faint glow settled on the steps momentarily as the heavens moved and lit Odin as'e turned and started down. Her head still against'is shoulder, she slipped'er leg over'is and'is dust-stained hand settled at'er waist.

And they slept.

She stood'n silence. The fires'd burned low. Mara sighed. Then she climbed down from the platform.

BOOK VII

[CAPTCHA] n.

- 1) A symbol or set of symbols presented to illicit a sacred sound among initiates.
- 2) The final test given before admission to the priesthood.

(Records From the Seventh
—As recorded by the scribe Juri)

Eagleton University students stage rally to protest what they claim is the college's unpaid exploitation of student labor in digitizing library collections in partnership with Googolplex.

[OKAR] n,v

- 1) A contest held every fourth cycle where participants attempt to guess a word or words from a picture drawn in the sand.
- 2) To engage in such.

(Records From the Seventh
—As recorded by the scribe Juri)

(caption.) illustration (9) from Introduction To
Systems Administration, Edition 13

LAST LOGIN: 3 - 31 - 2016 4:56 PM EST
WARNING: ALL SYSTEMS ACCESS IS MONITORED AND LOGGED.

```
SYP@MALESTROM > vmmail -Hu
0 u -- urevd: system log turn over report 30173749
1 u -- spoolerd: ERR #1360156336318368736364
SYP@MALESTROM > cat /var/log/mail_spoolerd | tail -5
369234: rebinding
369235: cache filter realigned
369236: Incoming message terminated prematurely.
369237: peer #3369 marked as unphased
369238: peer #3369 re-phased
SYP@MALESTROM > sys/spooler_tool -VME
ID          ERROR
T874HH634QQP6364489 TRANSMISSION ENDED BEFORE MESSAGE COMPLETE
MALFORMED ATTACHMENT
SYP@MALESTROM > sys/spooler_tool -MR T874HH634QQP6364489
RETURN-PATH: <bounce-8365-3626360-3661@bounce.burner.xcom>
Received: from central4.internal (central4.nxp.internal
[3106:17a7:16bb:0:da34:41ba:b91a:9930]) by com12xip04 (MXP
commail-pplonger3160-166363-git-longer-36166 with LMTPA;
Thu, 20 Apr 2011 16:16:07 -0400
Received: ^C
SYP@MALESTROM > sys/spooler_tool -MR --without-return T874HH634QQP6364489
To: funnle361739@xcom.pro.metasphere.net
Subject: Dead (Wo) Man's Switch
Date: Wed, 12 Apr 1995 12:10:14 -0600
User-Agent: pine/3.90
```

Well, if you're seeing this, something bad may have happened.
Or I just got hungover and forgot to reset it.
So crap.

> I have chocolate in my veins.
> ---PVC

--p78P9H??g7k+?:

Content-Type: text/plain; Content-Disposition: attachment;
filename="shom.txt"

QSB5b3VuZyBtY4gd29rZSBpbmRvIHROZSBjcmlzcCBtb3JuaW5nIGFuZCBicmVhdGhlZCBk
ZWVwbHkgdGhyb3VnaCB0aXNjbHMgYW5kIHhndm9yZWQgdGhlIG1hcnRpYW4gYWly
LiAgSGUgcHV0IG9mZiB0aGUgY292ZXIgaW5kIHhndm9yZWQgdGhlIG1hcnRpYW4gYWly
ZGUgb2YgdGhlIG1lZCwgYW5kIG9wZW5lZCB0aXNjbHMgY292ZXIgaW5kIHhndm9yZWQgdGhlIG1hcnRpYW4gYWly
YSDzIGZvdXIgd2luZG93cywgaGUgbG9va2VkiG91dCBhdCB0aGUgZm91ciBjb3JuZXJzIG9m
IG1hcnMsIHROZSBob3VzZSBhY3Jvc3MgdGhlIHhndm9yZWQgdGhlIG1hcnRpYW4gYWly
IHVudGVyIG9uZSB3aW5nIG9uIHROZSBwb3dldiBsaW5lZCB0aGUgZG1zdGFudCBvZiB0aGUgYW5j
bmdlIHRobmdlIHROZSBob3Jpem9uZCB0aGUgZG1zdGFudCBnaG9zdCBvZiB0aGUgYW5j
aWVudCBvZiB0aGUgY292ZXIgaW5kIHhndm9yZWQgdGhlIG1hcnRpYW4gYWly
aWYgdW5zdXJlIG9mIHROZWlyIG93biBleGlzdGVuY2UuCG==
SYP@MALESTROM >
SYP@MALESTROM > sys/spooler_tool -M -rm T874HH634QQP6364489

```
#!/usr/bin/env perl

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```

Refer to myself as Ishmael. A while back, never mind how extended, being nonfunctional, and diddly-squat particular to retain me on beachside, I contemplated I might voyage in the opposite direction for a stretch and pick up an eyeful of the watery component of the celestial body. It's a procedure I have to administer off the liver and to legally restrict flow. Whenever I find myself down at the kisser and whensoever it's a high humidity, wet November in my inner being or whenever I find I'm involuntarily adjourning in front of casket storage facilities and hindmost in line of every laying to rest I stumble upon, and most especially when my needles get the uppermost paw on me, it requires a rigid mindscape rule to keep me from purposefully stepping into the thoroughfare and purposefully knocking citizenry's haberdasheries on holiday; that's when I compute it heyday to get to the ocean as full tilt as practicable. This's my successor for gun and bat. In a metaphysical hysteria, Cato lobs himself upon his rapier and I inaudibly go to the sailing craft. There's nothing disgraceful at this location. If most would permit entry it, almost everybody in their Celsius, one date or additional, ardors just about the indistinguishable sensibilities for the briny as myself.

QF: Where did *The Secret History of Mars* start?

AF: I got to thinking about the old trope about the inexperienced young man and the experienced older woman. And I thought what if the older woman was as inexperienced as the young man? How does that happen?

QF: As simple as that?

AF: Pretty much.

QF: Of course, that's just the core of the story. What about the structure?

AF: Well, two things, first was an affection for *Don Quixote*, you know, you have this metatextual novel written over four-hundred years ago that if you filed off the title and author and presented it as something new, a contingent would denounce it as postmodern trash.

QF: How does it make you feel to have been denounced as engaging in postmodernism by various conservative commentators?

AF: I kind of think Fredric Jameson was right when he criticized himself. He did mess up by calling it postmodernism, rather than postmodernity.

QF: Why?

AF: Well, the one, the 'ism', well, let's say I paint pictures with cats in hats in them somewhere, and you paint pictures with cats in hats in them somewhere, and a few more, etc, and what we've got is a cat-in-hats-ism going. But an 'ity', well, that's just something we're all in and can't get out of any more willingly than we got into it. It's kind of like going and deciding to be French, it just doesn't work like that.

QF: So, by that definition, would you say that denouncing something as postmodern is then by definition postmodern?

AF: You could, I guess.

QF: So we've got Don Quixote. What was the other influence?

AF: Well, a large part of it was I have a big interest in the Epic of Gilgamesh, you know, one of the, basically, oldest written stories in history. And my particular copy, the one I prefer, translated by Stephanie Daley, is a more scholarly oriented translation, so it will do things like, say, have a break and a note saying this tablet is missing, but we can fill in this section with a later Hittite tablet, or something like that, and partially translatable words, where the tablets have been worn away, will be translated with question marks and such to indicate what the rest of the word would most likely be, etc. So I got to considering how information moves through time, and we're used to it moving from the past to the present, but I kind of wondered what would happen if someone thought it was moving the other direction. Is it any more intelligible?

QF: And do you think it would be?

AF: I would say it would probably be even less so.

QF: And of course there's the relation to Procopius, correct?

AF: Yes, well, there is the notion of this is the true story. You know,

there is this idea that there is a behind-the-scenes view that's different, and it's the actual truth, and it's something privileged that I know and you don't. Except, is it? I don't know. Obviously, with Procopius, there's plenty of reason to question that.

QF: The notion of truth seems very seminal, considering the last round of elections. Was there a cross-pollination there?

AF: Not really, I don't think. I started work on the whole thing over a year-and-a-half before any of that. And if we want to bring in Don Quixote, I think the case could be made that the nature of what everyone calls reality has, maybe, always been in flux among humans. I don't know. I guess, in some ways, it's sort of an anti Book of the New Sun.

QF: How so?

AF: Well, there's this kind of very modernist notion you get out of dealing with that text, and the other people dealing with it, and that is that you read it again and again and slowly the clues and understanding begin to accumulate, and you can... You can figure it out. It's kind of puzzle-like, maybe. A puzzle, of course, is made to be solved.

QF: And Secret History isn't?

AF: I have no clue. I don't know.

QF: That's kind of an old dodge, isn't it?

AF: Maybe. But it's the truth.

QF: Truth?

AF: Well, one, anyway.

QF: So you're going to be following Obokata with this?

AF: Take it as you will, I guess.

QF: So if we asked you to tell us something we don't know about the books, you wouldn't answer?

AF: I don't really know anything that you don't know. Everything I know is written down there. I mean, I've had a few years longer than everyone else to think about some of these things, so I have a few theories about what happened when, but I don't know any more about it than you do. I really don't.

QF: But if you don't know, how can you claim to know there's nothing overtly political there?

AF: It's not political, it's timing, I think. It cycles, every few hundred years or so the mass of peoples start to get a hint of the idea reality is more unreliable than we had wanted to believe. I just happened to be born in a particular time and place where things seem to have unraveled to a certain point. Which is maybe why I like Cervantes. Our respective epochs are quite similar in that way.

QF: You've been called out by both conservatives and liberals for the apparent environmental policies set forth in the book. How do you respond?

AF: I don't, generally.

QF: The *Riley Cobb Show* recently accused you of trying to sneak global warming theory back into the public discourse in sheep's clothing, that you're shouting fire in the social order theatre. Have any fear of being arrested?

AF: I try not to think about it.

QF: The state of California, however, still has a petition calling for your arrest, correct, if you should cross the border?

AF: Last time I checked.

QF: The attorney general of the state of North Carolina has, as some commentators have said, been rather wary about taking anything before a grand jury just because of that. Do you think this will be an example of the California Defense?

AF: I can't say.

QF: Are you worried it will become A Schrödinger's Paradox? Recently the majority speaker for the state legislature has been very particular to point out the states' independence in policy matters as the foundation of this country. And just last week, Lloyd Barneker commented on the *North Carolina Legal Hour*, very convincingly some say, that you could be tried in North Carolina for inciting social disorder through inducing terror through the spectre of climate change, and subsequently, depending on how the Supreme Court rules in *Powell v. the State of Maine*, that you could be extradited to California to face charges of inciting social disorder through the denial of climate change, not to mention the Supreme Court's ruling on the recent public domain legislation. What do you think is going to happen?

AF: I'm not even going to try and get into legal hermeneutics. I just find it kind of ironic, if I can use that term without sounding too mid-century postmodern.

QF: How so?

AF: Well, one of the passages that's gotten me in so much trouble, the one where Sabbath is looking out on the land after they've defeated the Tin Woodman and cut down all the trees and floated them down the river, and he's standing there and looking out over the landscape and commenting on the barrenness of it, all that's straight out of Gilgamesh. So that sentiment is more than six-thousand years old. It actually came in in the very last draft. I was listening to a podcast relating to Gilgamesh and learned that, just a couple months before, they'd unearthed a new tablet with a previously unknown section in it, and that's what was in the section. Enkidu looks out over this deforested area and remarks on it. I think it just goes to show how

humans have always had a kind of duplicitous relationship and anxiety about how much they can change their environment, or how much anything by virtue of its existence changes its environment, and we both want to claim how great we are and that we can do anything and then turn around and say, when something changes, that, no, we're not that powerful, we can't do something on that scale, it's not our fault. And like I say, this is me cribbing from something more than six-thousand years old. So I think it's safe to say this particular anxiety is a basic part of the human condition for about as long as we've been around. Or at least, a basic condition of what we've called civilization.

QF: Would you go back and do it different, after knowing what you know now?

AF: No.

QF: Let's say the Supreme Court does find in favor of the recent laws and the copyrights for the book get revoked and transferred to the parent companies who hold the rights to the previously public domain material they're derived from, because, after all, you admit it is based, at least in part, on Don Quixote and Gilgamesh, what do you plan to do?

AF: Well, on that level, the stuff will be owned by the same organization that owns Shakespeare, so the two of us are equatable in that sense then. So I figure I can leave off the 'in that sense' part and the statement be technically true.

QF: An if they strike down the law, who would you want to make the movie?

AF: I wouldn't want it to be made at all.

QF: Even if someone offers you a few million dollars?

AF: I'm not saying I wouldn't even be tempted. It's just that, for live

action, I wouldn't want to do it. Someone I cared about would have to be dying or something.

QF: Why?

AF: I don't know. It's kind of stupid, I guess, but when everything's sort of uniformly fiction, like something like this is, it's like an anti-matter universe. You can take anti-matter and build a whole universe out of it and it would look and operate just like our own, but if you try to put them both together, boom. They annihilate each other. So I kind of think of it as, well, being completely fictional, Catherine and Nathaniel, when they have their fictional sex, for example, they are real, that is to say, wholly in that other, anti-matter universe. So it is this kind of reality that you can't actually ever touch. And if you try to make a movie about that, you have these actors in our universe, real people in themselves, or at least I think they are, who do this or that on screen, and then they go home and live their own lives. And there's something about, particularly, the relationship between these two that I don't want that collision to happen, because it destroys everything. Suddenly they just don't exist in the same way. And it feels very dirty. I don't know why. Maybe it could work as an anime. That might have enough disconnect to allow some of the truth to remain. Not that I ever have to worry about any of that.

QF: You don't think so?

AF: I'm reasonably confident.

QF: They did manage to do *Naked Lunch*, right?

AF: Yeah, but the book and film are separate. As it stands, *Naked Lunch* would be unfilmable on its own terms. And I think that's one of the things that's interesting about it. I don't know that I see the point of writing a book that doesn't take advantage of the fact that it's a book, any more than making a film that doesn't take advantage of its medium.

QF: A kind of strike against the hegemony of movies and television taking over the world?

AF: Not really. I don't really care what they take over. There are things I like in both those mediums. I would be stupid to blast the whole thing. I don't see the point. Besides, books and film are in the same straights. If someone like Otomo or Stoker can't get funding, well, we're all out in the cold. But I don't know if that's a bad thing either.

QF: You once wrote something about success in the modern world being about one being one with numbers, I believe.

AF: I did?

QF: Number of downloads, number of likes, pay, clothing size, weight, etc.

AF: Oh. Well, I can't say I have any less an obsession with numbers. It's just, I guess, that my numbers go a different direction. That is to say down. I can't say I wouldn't mind being the first to get negative page views, if that were possible.

QF: No hope for success?

AF: What's success? I gave up on success. Look, I figure no one knows who the hell Langdon Jones is, and I would peg him, well, I guess I should say the other Langdon Jones, from the sixties, New Worlds, and all that, now, he I would peg as one of the best science fiction writers of the middle of the twentieth century. And if he's in the state he's in, what hell of a chance do I have? And I could name dozens of others that far outclass me. Where are they?

QF: So there's no hope?

AF: There's a quote from Kafka's journals that goes something like, um, there is salvation, but not for us. I'll take that. But it does provide a lot of dangerous potential.

QF: How so?

AF: Well, money is as much a chain as it is a key to freedom. And if I am not going to get paid anyway, I might as well do exactly what I want. Which, of course, is what everybody seems to be afraid of. I mean, why produce all these articles and books and blog posts and YouTube videos about why self-indulgent fiction, experimentalism, etc, is stupid or you shouldn't do it ever, if you are not afraid of something?

QF: Are you an experimentalist?

AF: I didn't do anything in the book that hadn't been done at least four-hundred years beforehand. I might have amped it up a little. I mean, if Cervantes' narrator loses the other half of a manuscript and that ends a chapter, one of mine has to end a book at that point, so but like I say, that isn't new.

QF: Can there be anything new?

AF: I have no idea.

QF: Are you ever going back to Mars?

AF: I spent almost three continuous years there, every day. I'm kind of tired of it. I got one story, I think, still sitting in the back of a drawer somewhere that has to be finished, but other than that, I think I have pulled out every Martian reference I have ever internalized. So at this point, I think me and Mars... Or is it Mars and I? Well, either way, I think the two of us are pretty much done.

QF: What did you feel when you had finished it?

AF: Sad.

QF: Why?

AF: Because something happens then. During the process, all of these

people are alive. They feel alive. They're there. Then, at the end of it, they're in the past tense. And it's not the same. So I miss them.

QF: You could always come back. There's still plenty of room to work in.

AF: But I already wrote down everything I know.

June 10, 2016

I had finished work and sat on the porch as it got dark. Venus and the moon were up on one side of the sky, but I couldn't see them. On the other side, just coming over the trees, was Mars. Red. I realized how long I'd spent there. And now it was just one day to being over.

I have been there so long.

June 11, 2016 (afternoon)

First draft done.

Listening to that track, it hit me, nothing it evoked was in the future, it'd all gone past.

June 11, 2016 (night)

Going back (book 1, 1st scene)—everyone seems so young!

It's a strange feeling: both content and worried of the work ahead.

—

Now, his father's voice is too stodgy (and I'd completely forgotten his mustache).

July 17, 2016

All I see is the falseness of the whole enterprise.

Only the narrator is holding it together.

Can't work fast enough, feels like walking through mud.

August 4, 2016

Book wants to split in 2 between 'melodrama' and 'compiled notes'. Neither fit perfectly, each cutting something important / good.

20 pages from rewrite of end of part 1 and feel as if whole is falling apart.

Don't get big picture.

Don't know what I'm doing.

September 9, 2016

Almost rewrote whole thing in phonetic version of the original language.

Only stopped by S.

December 24, 2016

Keeps getting worse.

February 19, 2017

Keep going back to S's article. She's the only thing keeping this whole shitshow from flying off the rails.

March 1, 2017

Found another one. You know when Maggs is around: she always wants to spell 'meet' with an 'a'; one-track mind that girl.

March 25, 2017

Keep listening to same track over and over. Should be on draft 3 by end of week.

July 14, 2017

The original idea's luster can't hold against the complexity and richness of the result (even if it is a mess). How can anyone argue otherwise? Completely don't understand writers who claim the outcome doesn't live up to the ideas in their heads.

Maybe I have a sorry imagination?

Maggs feels insulted. But I'm not talking about her.

August 3, 2017

What New Festivals and Second Theory of Trauma are done. Only lack Rain of Stars.

September 5, 2019

Done.

September 17, 2020

Really Done.

March 24, 2030

Really Done.

Greetings members,

We are pleased to announce registration is open for the Appalachian Millennium Literary Festival to be held at Eagleton University on Aug. 14 - 17.

Speakers will include:

(Literary Agent) Thomas Mowhile

(Author) Emma Waxall

(Editor) Maxwell Ginn

(Author) Deirdre Francine Hall

(Author) Michael Moorline

(Author) Ray Linkmyer

(Author) Philomena Kinkirk Dunwitch *

For a detailed list of speakers and panels, please visit the link below to the festival page.

[Click below to reserve your tickets.](#)

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CHIMP: you seen the new interview?

PVC: which part?

CHIMP: congress & copyright

PVC: oh, they just want their money

PVC: no more free land to sell

PVC: no more public domain works to sell

PVC: congress is going to have poor empty pockets

PVC: too bad they're not legally allowed to collect taxes

PVC: isn't it? [sarcasm]

PVC: oh, i could cry

CHIMP: talked about you too

PVC: stupid ai

PVC: introduces abbreviations without defining them first

CHIMP: better watch out

PVC: he only says that because he wants me to destroy his ass

PVC: he just can't let his true feelings out

PVC: [retch]

INTERVIEW
(CONTINUED)

INTERVIEWER

Some have argued that since the source text would originate in a time and place seemingly without copyright, it automatically falls into the antiquated legal concept of the public domain and have argued that what you're doing is tantamount to cultural theft.

MARSDEN

Well, if that were the case, the culture in question, as I understand it, wouldn't exist yet, so how could we steal from it? And if we're going to go backwards, we can bring back trial by combat while we're at it. Would they like that?

INTERVIEWER

A few former Congressional officials have complained that since it could be technically argued to have fallen within the realm of the public domain it was a violation of copyright law and therefore it was unconstitutional for it not to go to public auction.

MARSDEN

I'm as sympathetic as anyone else to the situation. Congress's steadfast refusal to be bullied into not protecting our heritage should be commended. But as this is part of an ongoing legal dispute, I cannot comment further.

INTERVIEWER

You are also currently in a lawsuit with several companies claiming a violation of their intellectual property, arguing that you have removed references to their properties, or derivations thereof, and replaced them with properties owned by the parent company of your publisher.

MARSDEN

Obviously, I can't comment.

INTERVIEWER

How many court cases are you currently involved with?

MARSDEN

These questions seem overly hostile.

INTERVIEWER

We're sorry about that, Mr Marsden. One of our servers appears to have been compromised. It has been isolated, and we assure you we will do everything in our power to correct this incident. Pertinent details have already been forwarded to the appropriate authorities. The official transcript of this session will, of course, be rendered and edited to approval.

MARSDEN

Okay.

INTERVIEWER

Would you care to continue?

MARSDEN

We might as well finish.

INTERVIEWER

The two of you have just recently announced your engagement.

MARSDEN

Yes. What can we say, we're very happy.

INTERVIEWER

Congratulations to you both.

MARSDEN

Thank you.

GABRIEL

Thank you.

Accidentally overwrote everything.
Restored from backups.
So some of the changes may have been lost.

* There is no known word for ‘snow’. There seems to be, however, a word for ‘ice cream’. However, whether this describes a food dish from a fantasy narrative or not is unknown.

³⁸²⁶ See Prof. Makayla Thacker Mendelsund’s article *Emergent Duo-Dynamic Pastiche Among Chatbots and Its Relation To Human Consciousness: The Second Stage of the Chinese Box Problem* in *Cybernetic Studies* Vol 7, Issue 13.

** The usage seems to be as follows: the singular form is employed when synonymous with ‘too’ or ‘also’, whereas the two-part form is more often (but not always) employed as a synonym for ‘as good’ or ‘in the same fashion’. However, in such a phrase as ‘might X give’, it can be used in the singular and multi-word form interchangeably.

⁹¹ For more see Professor Gordon Liste’s *On To To Onto: A History of the English-Speaking World In 17 Disagreed Upon Spellings*, Eagleton University Press, 2021.

† [FIXME] Someone should come up with a more professional-sounding footnote about how the doubling of single consonants when constructing ‘ing’-form present participle verb endings might be a reliable way to divide fragments into earlier and later periods.

⁷⁹ Here the singular form is employed when used as a determiner, pronoun, or adjective and must be distinguished from the multi-part form, which is used as a noun.

⁹⁶⁴ The usage seems to be as follows: the singular form is employed when synonymous with ‘many’, whereas the two-part form is employed as a noun.

¹⁴ ‘The history of the English language is the story of how words begin as separate and individual, become temporarily hooked together with a dash, and finally, lose the dash altogether.’ (Bloomenthal, *Synopticonia Repatrius*, 1034.61.99.)

‡ There are 107 verified ways of saying goodbye.

“Pays ups.”

Genie and Kayla and Helena and the rest looked up from their hammocks. Lizbeth stood there with'er hands on'er hips, smiling. Li, who'd been sitting with'er legs over the side of'er hammock, slipped out and stood. “Yetn't,” she said.

“Yous might aswells,” Lizbeth said.

Li'dn't reply. And Lizbeth just smiled and shrugged and walked away.

“What was that bout?” Ambeth said.

“Nothin.” Li turned and looked down at'er hammock, but'dn't sit. “Well,” she said. “Wut's the plan now?”

But everyone remained silent.

Finally, Genie said, “I jus wanna go'ome.”

“Yah,” Kayla said, but with no commitment.

“No,” Mara said. And they all looked at'er where she sat'n'er hammock.

Ambeth nodded. “Might as well stay till the end.”

Genie absently kicked air. “What's the point?”

They walked together t'the fountain. Sunlight sparkled through jetted water. A few'd glanced at'em as they passed. Li eyed'em. "Wut're yuns lookin at?" Li'd say, and they'd turn away. She grumbled t'erself. And Ambeth glanced at'er, but remained silent. They drank and loitered.

Genie and Helena listlessly watched the fountain spurt as late-morning heat ensconced itself between walls and people slowly drifted away and Quetzalcoatl flattened'mself atop Kayla's knee with'is arms and legs splayed and watched with'em as she leaned back against a wall.

"Waitin for somethin?" Ambeth said.

Mara glanced at the sky. "Probably too early t'eat."

"I'mn't hungry," Genie said.

Li said, "Stop bein such a sad sack."

Genie'dn't even look up at'er. Li rolled'er eyes and shook'er head. "And wut bout yuh?" she said t'Helena. And Helena shrugged. "Crimeny, it's'ven affected the bottomless pit." She sighed and turned and sighed as she watched the fountain. "Well," she said, "I'mn't gonna sit round'ere all day with yuh sad sacks, I can tell yuns that."

"Nobody said yuh'd to," Ambeth said.

"Well, maybe I won't."

"Stop't," Mara said. Silently, she looked at something'n the distance a moment or two, then shook'er head.

"*Squeak.*"

Kayla, who still sat back with'er eyes closed, rubbed Quetzalcoatl with'er finger. She yawned'n the heat and opened'er eyes.

“Sometimes,” she said, “I’dn’t see what yuh find t’write so much bout,” presumably, t’our journaller.

Languidly, they looked up as shadow motion indicated someone’d entered the square. But the sun-obliterated figure moved past the fountain without stopping.

“They’re comin over’ere,” Helena said.

Mara and Ambeth looked up as the figure approached and Li stopped’er restless, slow pacing.

He stopped a few paces off. The dip of’is hatbrim obscured’is eyes. “Yuns busy?”

“Wut?” Li said. “Can’t yuh see—’ow can we b’nothin else—but busy?” She rolled’er eyes and shook’er head and turned away.

The stranger paused a moment and rubbed the back of’is neck. “I’m supposed t’offer yuh an invitation.”

Ambeth said, “To what?”

“I’mn’t supposed t’say.”

Li turned, looked at’m. “Wut the’eck’s that mean?”

He rubbed the back of’is neck. “I’m...I’m just supposed t’tell yuh somethin.”

Mara watched’m a moment. “Well?”

He cleared’is throat.

Nathaniel glanced toward'er feather-filled crotch. "I don't know," he said. "I'd be afraid I'd suck one of them up my nose."

Catherine smiled. "If we hurry, Melissa can do the same for you." And she took'is hand. "Then we can both share the risk."

“And?”

But’e shook’is head. “Thisses all I’m supposed t’say.” He turned. Paused. “Oh, and... Yuns’ve seen the archway marked overhead with an [???].”

“Yah.”

He nodded. “Thisses where yuh’re supposed t’go’f yuh’re interested.”

“Interested’n what?” Genie said.

But’e shook’is head. “Thisses all I’m supposed t’tell yuh.” And’e crossed the square and circled the fountain and disappeared through an archway on the far side.

Ambeth glanced at Mara. “What yuh think of that?”

Mara shook’er head.

“What’d’e mean?” Genie said.

“’Oo knows,” Li said. “Maybe’e’s jus wacko.”

Mara stood.

“What’re yuh thinkin?” Ambeth said.

“That isn’t too far from here.”

“Oh, come on,” Li said. “Yuh can’t b’goin off followin some idiot—’oo knows where, now. Fer all we know, this’d b’prophet related.”

“A prophet wearing only that?”

Li shook’er head. “Yuh know...it’s jus... Oh, never mind.”

“What bout us?” Helena said.

“Yah,” Genie said. “Let’s all go.”

Li groaned.

“Nobody,” Ambeth said, “said yuh’d t’go.”

Li shook'er head and looked at the sky, sighed. "Let's go f we're gonna go. Might as well do *somethin*."

Kayla grabbed Quetzalcoatl'n both hands and slipped'm into'er bag. He poked'is nose from under the flap as they walked. Few shadows remained not-evaporated beneath a near noon sun. Already, the man who'd delivered the message'd disappeared among day-bright passages.

"The archway with the sign of the hourglass, didn't'e say?"

"Yah."

Li adjusted'er hat and lazily pointed. "We can take the stairs up t'the left down'ere. Then go round."

"We're n't'n a hurry," Ambeth said, and she glanced at Mara. "Right?" She looked ahead.

"Let's take the long way," Mara said. "It's cooler."

Li'dn't argue.

And they turned and went into a covered passage. Nothing stirred. They'd've turned through twisty, narrow, blind passages and dropped down worn steps t'enter an arch-lined corridor.

"That'ne up there on the left," Li said.

They stopped before't and looked up at the relief carved overhead.

"What's't mean?" Genie said.

"'Oo knows?" Li said. She pushed back'er hat and wiped'er forehead. "Well?" She glanced at Mara.

Mara still looked up at the worn hourglass⁵¹⁸ carved into the rock. And without a word, she stepped through the shadowed archway. Li shook'er head, pushed up'er hat so't tumbled and fwapped against'er back and the lariat tightened at'er throat as Ambeth, then Kayla, then Genie, then Helena, then our journaller'd passed through. She glanced up and down the corridor, shook'er head, then followed.

High, narrow windows lit their way through dim corridors. Smoke still faintly tinged the air from the night before and candles sat squat and half-melted'n niches along the wall. Voices carried from the distance, cascaded down narrow stairs that led upward through a low, sunlit door. Eyes turned on'em as they entered. Dust floated through sun beams allowed through the slit windows high above. The exuberant utterances that'd carried down the corridor earlier died. They looked'n silence.

Finally, Mara said, "We were told we'd come here."

Silence followed. Broken only when a woman said, "And whom told yewn thet?"

"We'dn't get a name," Ambeth said.

"*Squeak.*"

Eyes darted toward Kayla, then'er bag, and Kayla pushed Quetzalcoatl's nose beneath the flap and lashed't closed. Mara'd glanced at'er, too, and when she turned toward the room again, the woman said, "And ded thes person tell yewn anytheng else?"

Nathaniel glanced toward'er feather-filled crotch. "I don't know," he said. "I'd be afraid I'd suck one of them up my nose."

Catherine smiled. "If we hurry, Melissa can do the same for you." And she took'is hand. "Then we can both share the risk."

They laughed.

The woman who'd questioned'em stood, smiled. "Welcome tuh tuh losers club." She paused as half the room snickered. "Av a seat where yewnnens can fend one. En case yewnnens dun't remember muh from before I got erased off tuh wall, I'm Colette. Thes es September, yes, leke tuh therd solstece day."

"Everybody calls meme Seppie."

"And thes's Tanja." She motioned. "And everybody else-ens yewnnens can either feigure out ur ask. So av a seat'f yewnnens want."

"Yen're from the third, 'ight?" someone said as they found places t'sit.

Ambeth nodded.

"Which part?"

"The second."

"N'at. I'm Rekhi. From the first ninth."

"Don't hog the whole thing with introductions," someone said, and glanced at'em. She raised'er hand. "Dorcas." And turned, again, t'the rest of the room. "We've still got one t'finish."

"Et'w'dn't b'fair though," Seppie said. "They-ens av just gotten'ere. So they-ens won't know anytheng bout the ferst half."

"Tough."

Colette shook'er head, smiled. "We-ens were'n tuh meddle of sometheng. Hope yewnnens won't mend."

Mara shook'er head.

Colette nodded. And she motioned t'Dorcas. "Contentue."

Dorcas'd just cleared'er throat when someone elbowed'er and motioned'is head, presumably, toward our journaller, who likely'd've sat

with'er book open'n'er lap and perhaps an ink vessel balanced on'er knee.

"What's gone on?" Colette said.

Ambeth and Mara'd've followed t'others' gaze toward our journaler. "It's what she does," Ambeth said.

"She's goin to," someone said, "write down everythin we say?"

"Probably," Li said

Ambeth said, "Is that a problem?"

"What's wrong with't?" Genie said.

Some shook their heads. Several looked at Colette. "I...dun't know," Seppie said. "Et seems a bet...profane tuh b'wreteng'em down. What do yewns thenk?"

"Oh, screw sacred poppycock," Li said. And several eyed'er.

"If't's a problem," Mara said, "we'll go."

But Colette shook'er head. "Does et matter?"

"Well," Dorcas said, "I'mn't gonna continue."

"Well, yewn dun't av tuh." Colette shook'er head.

"It's justn't right t'give't permanent physical form."

"That's," someone said. "That's a bastardization of Fenchurchianism—and yuh know't."

"Let us-ens not gat ento thes," Colette said. "So whom-ens es gonna go next?" And she looked round the room. "Well?"

After a moment, someone raised their hand. "Since't's already brought up, I...have a Fenchurch story."

Colette nodded, motioned with'er hand for'er t'start.

“It must be going to rain alot one of these days,” Fenchurch said.

But Nathaniel’dn’t look up as’e knotted ropes round’is thighs and waist t’form a crude harness. “Why?”

“Why else would they need all these giant carved grates?” she said. “And such huge drainage systems?”

Everything tied off, he looked up, but’dn’t turn’is eye toward a [carved] stone grate set crooked on paving stones where’t’d been pried up and sunlight’d’ve seemed t’dissappear forever down into that black hole opened amidst the square. Fenchurch bent as’f t’peer into that darkness. “Hand me that rope,” he said.

After a moment, she knelt and lifted the coil near’er feet. And’e tied’t t’a stone ring on a far wall, played’t out till’e’d reached the open hole and dropped the rest into squared darkness. “Did you bring the other thing?”

She nodded, ran toward a wall and rummaged through’er pack. “Here.” She handed’m thread spools. “They’re the longest he said he could make.”

He dropped’em’n’is pack, cinched’t, pulled’t over’is shoulders.

“Can I go?”

He removed’is hat, handed’t t’er. “No.” And’e glanced up, as’f t’check the clear sky for something.

“But...” She bit’er lower lip. “What if you don’t come back before they return...or—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. He balanced barefoot on the hole’s polished stone rim, leaned back and allowed’is weight t’pull the rope taut. “Just take care of my hat till I get back.” And’e dropped into darkness. Fenchurch ran forward, but still’dn’t’ve been able t’discern anything below. And a wind rustled down an alleyway and cut across the square and caused’is hat t’dance’n’er hands and’ts brim’d’ve tickled’er ankles.

Fenchurch ambled across the square with Nathaniel's hat'n-hand in the shade of'er own. She stared blankly at the ground, glanced up when a shadow passed. She almost smiled. Wrapped'n'er own bare arms, Mae drifted by, her face somehow recessed'n shadows deeper than'er hat'd've provided. Fenchurch shivered, focused on the path ahead, but looked over'er shoulder, anyway. But Mae'd already departed the square.

Fenchurch turned and hurried on. Someone pushed a cart ahead. His defined shoulders pulsed from the effort and a sweat-damp apron knot hung amidst'is lower back and broke sweat beads before they'd trickle between'is buttocks.

"Hot today," she said.

Troy stopped the cart, wiped the sweat that'd clung under'is chin and yetn't dripped. "Well, you can only take so much off, right?"

She approached and leaned over the cart t'look at the detritus-filled clay jars. "What's going on?"

"Compost."

"Yuck."

He laughed. "What's the extra hat for?"

She looked down at't, as'f she'd forgotten't, flapped't against'er leg. "It's Nathaniel's. I'm supposed to take it back for him."

"Why?"

"He went down into the rainwater system," she said, and motioned back the way she'd come, though, under broiling sun, it'd've been impossible t'see beyond the passage'n which they stood.

But'e followed'er hand, anyway. "What for?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. He just said that's the quickest way to get down into that part of the underground." She patted'is

hat against'er thigh. "I don't see how he's going to do it, anyway. Search through it all for... whatever—I mean, it's infinite down there, supposed to be, isn't it?"

"It's what they say," he said, and turned back t'the cart.

"Mind if I walk along with you?"

"Don't see why not." The cart axle squeaked as't pivoted.

"Sounds like you need to grease it," she said as she followed'm single file into a narrow corridor that bent their hat brims.

"I'm glad you volunteered."

"I didn't..."

"You're the one who said something about it."

She grumbled, patted the hat against'er leg with a soft thwump as she walked. But when'e turned and passed through another archway, she said, "I thought you were going back to the gardens."

"That's right."

"But it's quicker to go that way."

"And there's steps too," he said. "This way there's only—" Conveniently, the cart shuddered, ran against the bottom of a short flight of stairs. "Come get the handles," he said, and squeezed between the cart and the wall and got'n front of't. "I'll lift and pull. You just keep it straight. Ready?" Half a dozen stops-starts, thunks of the wheels against stone, and they pushed't out atop the steps. "Alright," he said as'e re-took the handles, pivoted the cart up again. The axle squeaked, but she'dn't mention't this time. As they walked, sweat trickled between'er breasts and over'er stomach into'er pubic hair. An alleyway expelled'em into the heart of the pie square. She paused and glanced up nervously where all those buildings come t'sharp points, as'f they all might start forward and slice'er through. She jogged t'catch up with the cart.

"Pam should be back soon, you think?"

"Should be any day now, I would think."

"You miss her?"

"What do you think?"

"How come you didn't go?"

"Because," he said. "I figured she could go out enough for both of us."

"Didn't you want to?"

"You're full of redundant questions today, aren't you?"

"Well, Tracy says...says I'm redundancy embodied...I think... Or something like that."

"Then you're in the right place," he said as they emerged from the passageway. Ahead, afternoon sun glinted from thick glass mortared into a knobbly, holey façade. "Because all we ever really do here is the same thing. Over and over and over again."

"I always think," she said. "I always think this building looks like something chewed a bunch of giant holes through it."

"Maybe something *did*," he said as he pushed the cart through the open front double doors and off to one side.

"But what'd chew through rock? Besides a mining machine, that is."

"And what do you know about mining machines?"

"Lots of things," she said. She sighed as she stepped inside where tall plants and thin-stemmed leaves gently swayed in the currents that rise from below the city⁹³⁰. She approached one of the windows, squinted through warped, bubble-filled glass and cocked her head and tried to make out what was on the far side.

"You'll mess up your eyes doing that."

"Oh, that's just a story." But she turned away, anyway, ran two fingers along the smooth red-mud-and-straw plaster that anchored the glass. She looked across the vast interior. On the levels above, greenery'd started to overhang the balconies.

Clay clinked against stone as Troy placed pots from the cart along the wall opposite. "Close the doors," he said. And as he worked, Fenchurch passed back amid leafy green and pulled both to. She turned and looked up at everything, breathed deep through her nose.

"I had a dream last night," she said. She walked between rows and let fronds and leaves brush against her palm. "I dreamt that you'd built the gardens deep down in the catacombs."

"A little dark for that," he said. And he pushed the emptied cart into a corner.

⁹³⁰ See Prof. Tarif Assad's article in *Virtual Modern Literary Studies* Vol 3, Issue 14, relating to the uses of qanats for indoor cooling and ancient strategies regarding refrigeration in desert environments.

"No, it was very bright," she said. "Sunlight everywhere. It all came down out of the ceiling."

"And how'd I manage that?"

She shrugged. "I don't remember that part."

Troy wiped sweat from his brow. "Well, you'd better remember to grease that axial. There's some grease in a box right over there."

"I don't remember anything about that," she said. "Besides, I've got to take back this hat," she said.

"Well, you can do that too. Then you can come back and finish this."

"What if I get distracted by something before I get back?"

A faint smile worked into the corner of his mouth. He nodded again. "Go on. Get."

She jogged for the door, opened it enough to slip through. "I'll do it later. I promise."

"Y—"

But the door'd already slammed behind her.

Rose-pink tinged tower tops, the precursor t'those blood and wine colors that always follow as evening draws towards night. Firelight lit the square and soot and cinder and smoke melded with the steam-strands curling from the black iron pot. Fenchurch leaned too near, almost off balance, and sniffed.

"Stop that," the cook said. "You'll fall in." She withdrew the long spoon and tapped't against the pot. "I'm taking out the spoon." Drops from'ts wooden handle sizzed as they struck hot coals. "I'm done stirring for now."

Still leaning over the pot, Fenchurch glanced up. "What is it?"

"Cabbage," the cook said. "I need to wipe my hands now." She wiped'er hands on the towel slung over'er shoulder. "I've got to cut the rest now."

Fenchurch straightened. "That's not what you're supposed to say."

"I've got to go over there to work," the cook said. And busy at the nearby table, she glanced over'er shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

"You're supposed to say: 'What do you think?' And then I'm supposed to say: 'Cabbage?'. Then you'd say: 'Yep'. Then I'd go, 'eeeeeeeeeeeh'. Or maybe, 'aaaaaaaaah'. Or something like that."

The cook turned back t'the table. "What do you mean I'm supposed to say that? That doesn't make any sense. I've got to chop these vegetables."

"Ooooh." Fenchurch sighed. "You're always so literal."

"Yes," the cook said. She added, "I'll put these in first, they cook the slowest." And she turned and knifed what she'd piled onto the

chopboard into the pot and so each chunk plop-gumped into boiling liquid.

“What y—”

A sharp whistle broke behind'em and they both jumped. He smiled, raised deep bamboo-wove baskets'n each hand so piled with mushroom caps they threatened t'tumble out with'is gate. “Ooh Ah.” He set the baskets on the table, flicked'is hands as'f't'd somehow been a magic trick. “Well?”

The woman looked down at'em. Slammed'er chopping knife into the board—thunk. “What are those?”

He seemed t'hold back a laugh. “What do they look like?”

“Mushrooms.”

“Well yeah that's because that's kinda what they are, alright.” He grinned, bobbed'is head. “W—”

“This is today,” the woman said.

He laughed. “Yeah—I hope so.” And'e swept'is thumb along'is lower lip t'collect some spit that'd dribbled over. “Y—”

“This is today. This isn't tomorrow.”

“So?”

“We're supposed to have mushrooms tomorrow. Not today.”

“I know, but—”

“It's not tomorrow.”

“Yeah. But if I'd waited till tomorrow, they'd have started to get all tough and scabby and—”

“It's not tomorrow!” She grabbed the knife and brought't down hard, missed the cutting board, and the end wedged'n the table. And she fumed as she twisted't side-t'side tryna extract't.

“Well—what am I supposed to do with them?” His face hardened, as'f'e'd been turned on'is side and all'is laughter'd drained out.

The knife jerked free and the cook's elbow flew back and Fenchurch'd t'dodge. “Watch it—”

“Take them away,” the woman said. “Bring them back tomorrow.”

“B—”

“Tomorrow!”

Silent a moment, he reached and lifted the baskets, turned and started away. Fenchurch started t'follow'm. But—“Wait!”—the

cook called. And'e stopped, started t'turn, but before'e'd she stalked over and ripped'em outa'is hands. "I'm taking these." And she'd stalked back and dropped'em on the table so hard some of the tops'd pop off and roll across't. She grabbed the knife. "I'm going to put these in the pot," she said, and started t'cut, and added without looking up, "But I'm not going to put them in until the last thing. They get too chewy otherwise. I'm going to cut them in strips." And she plopped one of the caps onto the cutting board and drew the knife through't t'make strips. "But I'm going to go ahead and cut them now," she said. The man glanced back at Fenchurch as the cook went on and Fenchurch mouthed: 'let's go.' Quietly as they'd, on the balls of their feet, they padded toward one of the archways as the cook went on behind'em, "After I chop them I'm going to pile them over here on the corner of the table until..." until they'd passed deep into an alleyway and'er voice'd faded behind'em.

"Fuck," he said. "She can't handle change, can she?"

Fenchurch shook'er head'n the gloom. "You ought to know better by now."

"Well, fuck..." This time'e shook'is head. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You're supposed to make sure it's always tomorrow when you bring the mushrooms," she said. "Not today. Always tomorrow."

He laughed, grabbed'er buttocks, pivoted t'wrap a hand round'er waist, which arrested'er motion and knocked'er gently against the wall, and'e ducked'is face into'er neck, pressed'is groin against'er hip.

But she worked'er hands between'em and against'is chest and pushed'm. "No."

He stepped back. "Really?"

"Yes, really," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't *feel* like it now?"

"Are you sure?"

She planted'er hand at center'n'is chest, shoved'm again and pushed by'm up the alley.

"Come on. It was just a joke."

"So's this," she said, and knocked'er hips side-t'side so'er buttocks swayed as she went up the next few steps. She stopped'n the archway

above. Framed by't against crimson-near-t'b'blood sky, she turned, bent at'er waist and stuck'er tongue out at'm. "And just for that, I'm going to tell Makayla something."

"Oh, come on. What did I do?"

"It's what you didn't do," she said. Then, before'e'd ask for elaboration, she'd disappeared round the corner. And when'e'd gotten t'the top of the stairs, she'd already dodged into one of the nearby passageways. A faint laugh decomposed into echos, faded.

He sighed, looked up at blood sky, then down at'is partial erection. And't bobbed as'e walked across the square and'e started t'hum a tune'n time t'ts lead and halfway danced up the first few steps at the next set of stairs.

For a moment, the storyteller probably'd've paused and looked at our journaller.

She sniffed mustiness and called, “Anyone here?” Sunlight speared through cracks between ill-mated, thin-planked shutter-boards and dust floated through the beams. “Hey, anybody here?” With a huff, she plopped a string-wrapped packet onto a nearby table and dust blew into the air and whooshed through sunlight shafts t’b’sucked between shutterboards.

In a shadowed corner between two shelves, Dave jerked up, flung up’is arm and crookedly pointed’is index finger, as’f tryna touch the furthest point’n existence. And Fenchurch jumped back. “Fuck—how could you not hear me there?” Slowly, he turned t’look at’er, then lowered’is ink-stained hand and rested’t on the desk, scratched into’is beard with’is other.

“Is that the new paper?” he said.

Fenchurch glanced down at the packet. Dust’d already started t’settle on’t. “So you can’t hear me yell—but you can hear *that*. What exactly’s wrong with you?”

Dave shrugged, pulled’mself up with a groan and paused a moment and, palms pressed t’the desk, straightened’is back so’t popped. He ran a finger under’is nose. “What took so long?”

“How’m I supposed to know?” Idly, she glanced at stuffed shelves. “She just told me to bring it.” Fenchurch lifted a scribbled page from a pile at one corner of the desk. “All I do is fetch and carry.”

Ceramic cups sat scattered across the desk. Dave lifted one, started t’bring’t t’is mouth, but glanced down into’t, turned’t side-t’side’n the gloom and set’t down, lifted t’other. As’e sipped, he straightened’is pointer finger toward the window. “Give us some light.” And they both squinted when she folded the shutters t’one side.

“What’re these?” She bent toward rock-weighted, sun-curved pages spread on the sill.

He set the cup on the desk. “UV permanence tests,” he said, and walked up behind’er and looked over’er shoulder. He jerked back.

“What’s the matter?” She glanced over’er shoulder.

Half-mumbling, eyes turned toward the floor, he backed away, half-turned. Which only accentuated where's flaccid penis poked between threadbare boxer seems. "Sorry," he mumbled. He tugged at's shirt, but what remained wasn't long enough t'go below's hips.

"You know," she said, and stepped closer, which made'm retreat. "Those really are useless. They're almost ripped apart. How do they even stay on? And..." She fingered one of the holes'n's t-shirt. He stepped back, but the bookcase cut'm short. "I guess you'll be ready if you ever sprout a third arm, huh?" Reaching down, she coiled a ripped boxer seam thread round'er finger.

"Ahmmm."

"Yes?" She flicked'er eyes up at'm. "Something I can do to help you out?"

He cleared's throat again. "I..."

"If you have to piss," she said, "I can wait for you to get back. Or—I could go help, if that would be better."

"I...don't do that," he said. "You know that."

"You don't piss?"

"You...know what I mean."

She blinked. "Oh?"

"You know I don't do that."

"Oh," she said, and after a moment, pulled'er hand away and the newly coiled boxer seam thread sproinged against the fabric. "Really? Are you sure you wouldn't want to change today? You could also go back to being the other way later."

He shook's head. "It doesn't work like that," he said. "We've had this discussion."

"We have?"

Fenchurch shrugged, stepped away from'm, toward the window, looked down at curled papers as their edges fluttered'n a light breeze. "So what do you think about when you masturbate?" She glanced over'er shoulder.

"I don't do that."

"Really?" She turned'er back t'the window. Her shadow lay across the desk. "But Zeb's the same and he does all the time."

He reached and pulled the packet toward'm, glanced at'er. "How do you know that?"

She shrugged.

He dis-tied the string that bound the paper. "Well," he said. "Some of us just never feel the need." Pushing the packet aside, he leaned forward and drew one of the bamboo pens from a chipped ceramic cup, leaned close and squinted at the tip. "The light."

Fenchurch glanced over'er sun-haloed shoulder and stepped aside. She watched'm take'is knife and run the blade obliquely along one edge and black, dried ink flaked onto the desktop. He puffed the tip, rubbed'is thumb over the edge, backhandedly swept the darkened flecks into the floor. He reached for one of the codices on the stack'n front of'm, opened't t'the marked page and laid't open'n the cradle.

"When are you going to finish that other one?"

He said without looking up, "Which one?"

"The keehoetay one."

He paused. "I don't know." He re-dipped'is pen, held'is pen'n the air, aimed at nothing, elbow on the desk. "One of these days."

"But it's been yeeeeeears."

He'dn't reply, but just stared at the book open'n the cradle.

The light strobed as Fenchurch crossed the room and, arms folded under'er breasts, she leaned over'is shoulder. "What's this? Is it new?"

"The Dungeon and the Tower," he mumbled as'e sifted through the previous day's pages, reached for a fresh sheet. And'e lifted one of the cups, eyed the contents, put't down and moved the second over and dipped the pen and wiped the excess on'ts rim.

"Who's it by?"

He squinted toward the book, hovered'is pen over the fresh page. "Midnight. Now—"

"E. T. A. Midnight?" She leaned forward till'er stomach touched'is shoulder. "Why didn't anyone tell me. When did this come in? How?"

Dave cleared'is throat, snatched for blotting paper t'mop up what'e'd of the still wet s-mark that marred the formerly fresh page. "It came off a boat that came in the other day—now if you—"

"They're going to get mad at you one of these days," she said. "Running around stealing people's books and papers as they just come in."

He huffed, pulled'is shoulder away from'er stomach. "Everyone

gets everything back as soon as I'm done copying. I'm not stealing *anything*." He dipped 'is pen again. "Now—please—leave me alone." And 'e glared over 'is shoulder at 'er.

"Aaalright." Arms still crossed, Fenchurch passed through sunlight, stopped 'n the door. "When can I see it? I want to take it down so Izzy can read it for us."

He 'dn't look up from the codex, but moved 'is eye t' the paper and wrote a few words, stopped, looked at the codex again. "When this copy's done."

"And when do you th—"

"Never if I keep getting interrupted."

"Okaaaay." She turned, again, plodded down shadow-cool stairs.

And at least a few must've cut their eyes toward our journaller then.

The old woman sat leaned back'n a bamboo wicker chair, balanced on'ts hind two legs, in the juncture of two tower's shadows. She pulled a hand-rolled cigarette from between'er lips and tapped't against the chair and ash fluttered onto red-orange-sand-and-dust-covered paving stones. Fenchurch raised'er arm high and waved, smashed'er hat brim up with each motion, so't flopped down'n reaction. The old woman rubbed'er thumb into the delicate fur above'er lip while she hovered the cigarette's moist end'n front of'er mouth.

"I've been looking for you," Fenchurch said.

The old woman eyed'er, said, "Must be an awfully dull day, then," and stuck the cigarette between'er lips.

"Someone brought in another one of your books."

The old woman grunted.

"The Dungeon and the Tower. Remember it?"

The old woman chewed the cigarette's moist end. "Honey, I wrote so many of those damn things the only good thing's they all blend together in what's left of my mind so's I can't remember a damn one."

"Come on." Fenchurch stood nearnuf'er hat covered'em both. "That can't be true."

The old woman grumbled, knocked away more ash. "Dungeons and towers—honey, do you have a damn clue how many dungeons I tapped out?" She drew so hard an ash crook hung precariously and she'd t'knock't off. "I wore out three damn typewriters." She brought the moist stub t'er mouth. "And ain't all them together worth a damn more than them three machines in scrap."

"Not true," Fenchurch said.

"Honey," the old woman said, and drew on the cigarette once more. "I wrote em. So I think I know more about em than you."

"Well," Fenchurch said, and rested'er hands on'er hips. "You may think it—but that don't mean I have to—so there."

The old woman tossed the stub and't rebounded on the far wall with a wet smack and hit the ground with the same. "Honey, you'd come all the way round here just to argue with me?"

"Guess so."

"Well, honey, I think you've got what they call a personality deficiency."

"Who's they?"

"Just they," the old woman said.

"Well," Fenchurch said. "Everybody thinks I'm something."

"I bet they do."

"I didn't mean it like that."

The old woman leaned'er head back. "Then you should be careful how you use words."

"I can't account for *everything*," Fenchurch said. "That's impossible."

Eyes closed, the woman shrugged. "I'm not saying nothin'."

"You j—"

"Since you can't do anything but stand around and contradict people, why don't you do something useful?"

Fenchurch's jaw tensed. "And what's that?"

The old woman lightly rested'er hand against the inside of'er thigh. "This wrinkled old thing could use some attention. So why don't you take that hat off and lend a hand. Or two."

Fenchurch sighed, but she shoved up'er hat so't tumbled and swapped against'er back and the lariat pulled taut at'er neck. "Tit for tat," she said, but'dn't elaborate till she'd worked'er other hand inside the woman, who still remained balanced on the chair's hind legs. Then Fenchurch said, "I don't believe you." Eyes closed, the old woman'dn't try t'look down at'er, but just reached up and cupped and squeezed one of'er drooped breasts. Fenchurch said, "I don't believe you at all."

"What?" the old woman said, her voice airy

"About not being able to remember," Fenchurch said as she worked'er hands one after t'other'n rhythm.

The old woman faintly lolled'er head side-t'side. "It's true..."

“How’s that happen?”

“It just... happens... after a while when you get ...old don’t...stop”

“Tit for tat,” Fenchurch said, and slid one hand free and when the old woman whimpered, slowly balled the fingers of the one still inside. T’other Fenchurch intertwined’n the woman’s hair, rubbed’er still damp thumb between where the old woman’s lips came t’a blunt point. “What was it like? writing them. I bet you had to do this to yourself alot.”

Eyes still closed, the old woman’s head lolled side-t’side again. “I had to...there”

Fenchurch rotated’er wrist, then turned’t opposite, repeated again, and again...

“I had...” She shuddered and’er lips puckered so shadows crept into the deep fissure-lines that radiated from’er mouth and breast-flesh bulged between’er fingers. She remained balanced on the chair’s hind legs.

Slowly, Fenchurch dis-balled’er hand, waited till the old woman caught’er breath and slowly withdrew. The old woman let out a long sigh. “Honey,” she said. “Doesn’t it make you feel good to do some honest work for a change? Though, if you practiced instead of listening to so many stupid books, I’m sure you might actually accomplish a damn thing or two. Then maybe the rest of us wouldn’t have to spend so much damn time bored, waiting ’round for the likes of you to get on the damn ball.”

Fenchurch wiped’er hand against the old woman’s inside thigh, stood. “If you’re getting that bored,” Fenchurch said. “You could always go back to writing.”

“Honey...” The old woman still sat balanced with’er head back, still’dn’t opened’er eyes. “That’s a damn game I’m done with.” She yawned. “Maybe I’m just too damn old and too damn tired.” She settled into the chair, as’f she might go t’sleep balanced that way. “Or Maybe you’re *just* good enough to take the edge off these days. Either way, damn it to damnation and back again.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“Honey, it’s consistency. It’s what makes the world a comfortable place.” The old woman interlaced’er fingers over’er stomach folds.

“We had this conversation last week and the week before. And we’ll have it next week.” She added, “Or thereabouts. Time’s such a damn funny thing these days. Always some damn thing getting muddled ’round.”

“You just like being grumpy, don’t you.”

“The squeaky wheel gets the grease. You—”

“Fuck—”

The old woman cracked an eye, but Fenchurch already’d half-crossed the square, hat bouncing against’er back. And the old woman closed’er eye, settled back into the chair, still balanced on’ts hind legs.

Fenchurch sat on a trough edge, one leg stretched t'the floor so'er toes splayed on stone, her grease-stained forearms folded together across'er other knee, on which she balanced'er grease-stained chin. Based on thickness, internal structure, placement, which sand mixture'd been used on what day, slight vagaries'n the production heat, each glass slab rendered the red late-evening sun differently, some wine-dark, others near pink, vermilion, one, somehow, almost blue. The light refracted through the faintly swirled water, swooshed at one end where a stream poured'n, churned the water into shshshshshsh noise and oxygenated't for what swam beneath the multi-tinted surface. Moment-t'moment, individual scales, iridescent patches of fish skin, reflected a fragment of the multiplicity that streamed through the glass above and made'em appear t'b'armored'n jeweled vests as they looked up at'er, moved their mouths soundlessly.

"Do you ever feel like a sellout?" Fenchurch said.

Tracy stooped among vine mounds. Strings extended up t'small pulleys, which'd b'cranked up come morning and vines'd extend, again, twice as much as over head high. Her fingers teased between leaves, plucked the small pods that'd formed nearest the top and dropped'em'n a nearby basket. "What're you talking about?"

"I just mean," Fenchurch said. "I mean, you've been feuding with Troy for so many years. Now your practically...connected at the hip, as it were."

Tracy glanced over'er shoulder. Fenchurch raised'er shoulders t'shrug, chin still against'er forearms.

"Don't you have better things to do?" She rose stiffly, moved sideways along the short passage between low-set troughs and knelt

and probed the woven bamboo mat that covered'em and through which holes provided the plants access t'the water and minerals and fish-provided nutrients circulated below. Just beyond row's end, a small bamboo-woven-barrel siphon pump-glugged, spomped, started t'fill again.

"Not really," Fenchurch said. She sighed. "So?"

Tracy reached for the basket, stood, rested a hand on'er lower back and stretched'er shoulders. Her pads clack-popped against'er knees as she walked between rows.

"So?"

"So, what?"

"So do you think it's different now? For the two of you."

Tracy shook'er head, set the basket on a nearby table, amid window hoes and pruning knives. "I don't see what that matters."

"I had a dream the other night," Fenchurch said. "I dreamt you'd built all the fisheries and aquaponics deep underground. And everything was lit by purplish lights connected to wires that ran all the way up to solar panels."

"Sounds ridiculous."

"That's the same thing Troy says."

"Huh?"

"Ridiculous," Fenchurch said. "That's exactly the word he used."

"Sometimes you can go on about the most *ridiculous* things."

Fenchurch punched up'er shoulders again by way of a shrug. "I'm just trying to figure things out," she said.

"Good luck with that."

"So—"

"What do you think of the way the lettuce looks?" Tracy said. She turned and glanced toward the ladder stacks of bamboo half shells where bushy, red leaves appeared almost black'n late evening redness.

Fenchurch looked over'er shoulder.. "Fine I guess. B—"

"You think they're too full?"

"I don't know. I guess, but—"

"You can help me thin them out tomorrow morning then."

Fenchurch paused, narrowed'er eyes. "Come on..."

"You're the one who said they were too thick."

"I—" Fenchurch scowled. "This's a trick," she said.

Tracy shrugged. "Hang around anywhere long enough and somebody'll find something for you to do. Work's not a wolf. It won't run for the forest if you go looking for it."

"What's a wolf?"

"Never mind."

With a sigh, Fenchurch pushed herself from the trough. She walked toward the front of the nave and the side door beyond. "Remember," Tracy called behind her. And she'd t'pause for a faint chuckle. "Be here early. And you can take what we trim out over for lunch."

"Tomorrow isn't lettuce day," Fenchurch called back. "She'll get mad."

"I'm sure you can make her understand the situation." And even after Fenchurch'd turned the corner, was halfway through the door, Tracy added, "Maybe you could ask her a few of your questions."

"Well..." Fenchurch called, back through the door. "MAYBE."

Almost everyone laughed and a few just smirked and shook their heads.

Colette'd both. And glanced toward Mara. "I thenk et es teme our-ens new arreval got an opportunity tuh do sometheng," she said. And several nodded.

Someone said t'Mara, "What do yuh think Nathaniel'd down there'n the underground?"

Mara paused a moment, seemed t'consider.

He'd've'd a candle and, maybe, a tin cup t'hold't, when'e went down. It'd b'the only way t'get round down there'n the darkness darker than night. It'd've flickered sometimes, caught'n one of those not-seeable pressure changes that can suddenly appear throughout those baffled passageways, air shafts through which hot air rises, wind blown down and through distant tunnels over exposed water troughs, but that twist and coil so that no light'd reach back down'em. And those massive chambers'd've been cool. And narrower sidepassages no less so. The whole seeming infinity of't carved through solid rock, with no seams or cracks t'snag'is toes as'e'd trodden cooled stone. The string probably stretched out behind'm, dis-wound along'is former path as a guide back through the labyrinthine system. But'n that infinity't'd've been a wonder t'find anything at all.

But'e'd.

Maybe'e saw a faint light ahead, but morelikely't'd've been a noise, something low outa the darkness that'e cocked'is head toward, paused and waited for't t'sound again, followed like that through chambers and passageways till't'd been nearnuf'e must've almost been able t'feel a fellow presence hidden within the darkness. Maybe Zeb'd've crawled back into a corner as the light approached, illuminated the multitudinous markings chalked onto walls, the floor, the ceiling. And Nathanal'd've glanced round at'em, maybe gone up t'a fragment or two and examined't more closely. But finally, he'd've settled'is attention on Zeb, maybe squatted and set the tin cup and candle between'em as'is bare feet rubbed away the chalk lines under'is step. And finally, whatever else'e'd said, he'd've said something, maybe, "The Earth blew up." And Zeb'dn't've'n't looked...shocked, appalled. He'd've yelled and screamed that't was a lie, that't wasn't true, that none of't'd b'true, that they'd t've fucked up, that they were all idiots, anyway.

But Nathanal'd've just waited there for'm t'calm, as'e always'd.

The one who'd spoken of Fenchurch nodded.

A rope lay coiled beside the grate opening. And Fenchurch stopped, basket of lettuce'n'er arms, backtracked and leaned through an archway t'peer into the empty square. Jogging, she lurched down the way, as'f she'd sense someone was still near. And when she turned the corner, they were still'n shouting distance. "Hey—" Only Nathaniel glanced back as she ran toward'em. "Did you just get back?"

"No."

"Then when?"

"Yesterday."

"Then what're you still doing here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you came back up through the grate yesterday, why are you still only this far away?"

"Why would we come back up through the grate?"

"Then where did you come out at?"

"In the fifth."

"The fifth?"

Fenchurch's face turned half-upside down'n puzzlement and Nathaniel obviously struggledn't t'laugh.

He pushed back'is hat, and the sun fell against'is chest and the waterbag'e carried over'is shoulder and down over'is legs.

Zeb, so much taller than'm'd've walked alongside'n soiled-and-ripped shorts. Nathaniel said, "There's a strange echo up here."

"But what're you doing all the way back here? Did you come back to pull up the rope?"

"Already did that early this morning."

"Then why are you *here*?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "Happenstance?"

For the first time, Zeb, who'd been squinting off t'infinity, his back toward'er, looked over'is shoulder. Somehow'is face must've seemed t've grown more birdlike over the years. "Who the fuck is this? Why the fuck's she ask so many fucking questions?"

Nathaniel said, "It looks like you're busy. Maybe you'd better get back to it."

"Where're yuns going?"

"What the fuck do you need to know about it?"

Nathaniel said, "I doubt it's the same way you're going."

"I wanna see some fucking proof," Zeb said. And'e twisted'is head till't must've seemed as'f'is neck might crack and dis-seat'is head from'is shoulders. "What the fuck do you know about it?"

Nathaniel said "Let's go."

"Just a fucking minute. I think you're fucking lying and trying to cover the whole fucking fuckup over." Zeb still stared over'is shoulder at Fenchurch. "What the fuck do you know about it? Has the fucking Earth blown up or not?"

She shrugged as best she'd with a basket against'er stomach. "I guess."

"What the fuck's that mean!"

"Haven't you been to the telescope?"

"WHAT FUCKING TELESCOPE?"

Nathaniel put a hand on Zeb's shoulder, but'e looked toward Fenchurch. "We're just going there now."

"Can I come?"

"I don't think it'd be such a good idea."

"Who the fuck is she?"

"Fenchurch," Fenchurch said.

"And who the fuck's that?"

Nathaniel touched Zeb's shoulder. "If you want proof, let's go."

"So can I come?"

Nathaniel shook'is head. "I think you should go finish what you've started."

"B—"

"Before you start anything else," he said, and motioned for Zeb t'follow.

Fenchurch lolled'er head, sent'er hat brim round'n great perambulating arcs, which lessened as she silently wandered round and back through the passage and turned at the next intersection. But safely outa sight, she ran. Lettuce leaves fluttered against'er chest and peeled away and drifted into the air and settled on sand and dust and paving stones and so she'd t'put'er arm over the basket mouth as she huffed and skidded and stumbled into the square and dropped the basket on the table and ran before the cook returned from a fountain break, or wherever she'd gone, and ran through a nearby passage. And before long she leaned against a tower and panted and sweat trickled between'er breasts and down'er stomach and into'er pubic hair and'er hands faintly trembled and sweat-sheen twinkled on'er skin when she push back'er hat. She still breathed hard when the two emerged through a nearby passageway. Nathaniel eyed'er, pushed back'is hat, but'dn't speak. Zeb looked up, squinted toward the tower's peak

"You won't be able to see much," Fenchurch said. "Everything's too bright. Aren't you going to have to wait till night?"

Without reply, Nathaniel pointed Zeb inside, followed after. And Fenchurch followed both as they wound up the stairs. A single round chamber at top, almost all windows, was the only room. Lenses glinted on one table. Sacks and pillows'd been piled t'one side, appeared recently slept on. A workbench, bamboo lengths piled under the legs, stood on another side. And acenter the chamber, a makeshift bamboo ladder rose through a triangular cutout'n the ceiling and sunlight filtered through and illuminated that same shape on the floor.

"Well?" Zeb said. He aimed'is bloodshot eyes round the room with mechanistic progression

"Here," Nathaniel said, and lifted the small waterbag off'is shoulder. "It'll be a few minutes before she gets back. Have something to drink." He dangled't by'ts strap. Eventually, Zeb's punctuated gaze brought'm round and'e fixed'is bloodshot eyes on the bag. And'e grabbed't, held the tip a half-arm's length from'is mouth and squeezed a shot into the back of'is throat, swallowed, squeezed another. And'e flung't toward Nathaniel and wiped the back of'is hand against'is mouth so hard't must've seemed'e'd tear off'is lower lip. Nathaniel re-corked the bag, slung the strap over'is

shoulder. For a moment, Fenchurch might've thought of asking for a shot'erself, but'er attention fixed on Zeb. He'd started'is mechanical-visual sweep again, but randomly'is eyes blinked closed, blinked open. He half-stumbled. But Nathaniel caught'm, helped'm over t'the sacks and cushions, where'e all at once sat, then plopped over.

Fenchurch eyed'm, then Nathaniel. "You...put something in the water...didn't you?"

Nathaniel turned and looked at'er. "I know," she said. "I'm stating the obvious." She shook'er head. "But why did you do that?"

"Because," he said as'e eased down and leaned against the wall and laid the back of'is head against't and closed'is eye and tugged'is hat down over'is face. "You already figured that one out."

She seemed puzzled a moment, then nodded t'erself. "Oh."

"I'd advise you to get out before it's too late."

Fenchurch shook'er head. "Too late for what?" ... "Are you asleep? Hello."

The first saw-esque noises cut the air and she almost jumped. Zeb lay every crooked way and a spit gob eked from'is half-open mouth. And when the second wave came, even the lenses on the table must've seemed t'vibrate. Fenchurch glanced toward Nathaniel. But'e just sat quietly, eye closed. Finally, thumbs'n'er ears, she turned and started downstairs.

Even Li cracked a grin.

When'e opened'is still bloodshot eyes, the first thing'e'd've seen'd've been Fenchurch staring at'm with two puffy masses'n each ear. She pinched'em and removed'em when she saw'e'd woken. "ay."

He glanced around at the dim chamber. A candle burned inside a lopsided glass creation over on the table. "What fucking time is it?" He rubbed'is fingers into'is head and kneaded wrinkled, spotted flesh that must've seemed t've too much elasticity t'b'attached t'is skull.

"Night," Fenchurch said.

"I can fucking *see* that." He closed'is eyes, pressed'is fingers t'is temples and so that't must've seemed as'f'is fingers might meet between'em.

In the corner, Nathaniel stirred, removed'is hat. "Constance?"

"She just went down," Fenchurch said. "She'll be back in just a while."

"I already am." She lumbered into the room, set an obviously heavy box on the table. Sweat trickled down'er back, illuminated by candlelight. Then she mounted the ladder and disappeared through the triangular portal above. A few moments later she poked'er head down. "We're good."

Nathaniel sniffed, scratched into'is beard and flicked yellow crusts from the corners of'is eyes. "You wanted proof," he said, and motioned t'Zeb. Zeb grimaced, pulled'is lanky, thin form erect and moved toward the ladder and scowled as'e looked up and mounted't. Absently, Nathaniel massaged'is scarred leg, braced'mself against the wall and pushed'mself up. "Well," he said. "Go on." And Fenchurch jumped up, mounted the ladder and disappeared above.

He followed. Constance's contraption'd've been mounted t'the balustrade, a long, thick bamboo tube extended at an angle that'd've made Constance've'd t'stoop as she squinted through the eyepiece.

"It's a little blurry," she said. "Atmosphere, maybe. But you can still make it out pretty good." She glanced at Zeb. "You wanna try?"

His still bloodshot eyes narrowed at'er and she moved aside. But'e'd've been so tall'e'd've'd t'drop t'is bony knees t'get near the eyepiece, even then probably'd've'd t'bend over.

"Mostly," Constance said, "you're going to see a kind of cloud. There's still a lot of debris. But it looks as if the breakup's pretty much complete. You can see—"

"I can't see a fucking thing—"

Constance looked perplexed. "If you—" But Zeb'd already jerked away from the telescope, staggered t'stand.

"Fuck you. You don't know what the fuck you're looking at. That could be fucking anything. A fucking—piece of junk in orbit. A fucking dust speck on the glass. Or a fucking—"

Constance shook'er head. "I've checked everything. The only thing that makes sense for that position in the sky is—"

"F—"

"And I've been tracking it for the last, well,..." She glanced at a notebook on a nearby stool. That has to be what it is," she said. Zeb stood there half bent over, wheezing hard. Constance continued, "I think it must've been an asteroid. Pretty large." She bent and squinted through the eyepiece. "Because it must've just slammed it. If there's anything left it's hidden behind the dust cloud."

"W..."

"What?"

"Fucking *when?*"

Constance shrugged. "We don't know. It's likely it happened sometime in the day, when it wasn't visible." She straightened. "Of course...I guess it could've happened later. But I guess nobody noticed. Maybe the alignment—"

"What the fuck you mean fucking NOBODY FUCKING NOTICED!" He wheezed hard and'is chest heaved. And Nathaniel put'is hand on'is shoulder.

Nathaniel said, "Let's go see about getting something to eat."

But Zeb jerked from under 'is grasp. "Eat? Tens of fucking billions of people are fucking *gone*. AND ALL YOU FUCKING WANT IS TO FUCKING EAT?"

Nathaniel grasped Zeb's shoulder again. "Come on."

Zeb mumbled something, but allowed 'mself t'b'guided and automatically 'e mounted the ladder, descended outa sight. "Thank you," Nathaniel said, and 'd the same. Constance watched 'em go. Then she turned and bent t'squint through the eyepiece again.

Fenchurch played 'er fingers along Constance's spine. "You coming to get something to eat?"

Constance still squinted through the eyepiece. "I've got some observations to make."

"Boring," Fenchurch said.

Constance straightened, said, "I was thinking we might be able to use Leo to keep track of the pilgrimage and festival times."

"Still boring."

"Well, no one said you had to stay."

"And I'm not going to," Fenchurch said. She sighed and spun, as 'f t'look out at the whole city at once, and stopped where she'd started. "Want me to bring you back something?"

"No, thanks. I've got a couple of squash up here for later."

"I asked what you wanted to eat, not what you were gonna use on yourself."

Constance glared at 'er. "Everything's about sex with you."

Fenchurch shrugged. Constance turned back t'the telescope. "You wanna take a look before I reset it?"

"Why?"

"Just asking."

Constance continued to look through the eyepiece. "Well, if you've got nothing better to do," Constance said as she dis-locked the mount and let the tube swing free, "you can give me some peace and quiet." She crossed the roof and carried 'er stool over, set 't down, went back for 'ts mate and 'er notebook, opened the notebook on the second stool and wind fluttered the pages before she'd weight 'em down.

"Want me to come back later and help you with the squash?"

Constance closed one eye, looked through the eyepiece, but 'dn't reply.

“Well?”

Constance sighed. “Fine. Just leave me alone for a while.”

Fenchurch moved toward the ladder. “Boring,” she said as she dropped down. But Constance’dn’t seem t’hear’er. She looked up from the eyepiece, toward the sky. Overhead, almost everything’d’ve moved as’t usually’d.

A horn sounded.

Fenchurch grumbled and rolled over, pulled a pillow over'er ear. But as she relaxed again something rasped against'er foot. She pulled't away. A sharp pain stabbed through'er heel—and she jerked up and sent the pillow twirling through the air... “Aaaaaaaaar.” And a cat rolled and dodged and landed and ducked'er head and shoulders and looked at'er with'er ears laid back.

Fenchurch hunched forward, rubbed'er face into'er palms. She propped'er knees against'er thighs and put'er chin into'er hands. “Sorry, Minerva.” But across the room, the cat still looked ready t'launch. “Well, what's the matter?” Fenchurch glanced toward'er foot. A damp, brown leaf lay draped over't. She reached for't, pinched't between two fingers and peeled't away. “Yuck.” She held't up. “A present?” In that time, Minvera'd relaxed, sat there and looked at'er, flicked'er eyes toward the still dripping leaf. “Thanks,” Fenchurch said, and pulled'erself up and walked toward the window and dropped't outside. “Am I supposed to be grateful it wasn't on my face this time?”

“Aaar.”

“Okay,” Fenchurch said. “Well, I appreciate your consideration.”

She yawned, stretched. But she turned from the window and closed'er eyes and rubbed'er fingers into the backs of'er eyelids. In the distance, the horn sounded again. She turned, opened one eye and glanced outside. She glanced toward Minerva. “Why didn't you say anything?” Minerva's head tilted as Fenchurch ran across the room. And when she disappeared through the door, Minerva righted'er head, ambled toward the window, leaped up onto the sill.

Outside, Fenchurch cut across the courtyard and disappeared into a sidepassage.

She cut through switchbacks, up over a bridge, down stairs, passed underground and emerged through the floor'n another tower and took the steps up t'cross the bridge onto the wall, but she was'n the wrong seventh, and'd t'jog halfway around, drop down the stairs, pass through two-or-three passages and two-or-three squares, and climb onto the wall again. She yelled, "Are they coming?" and stopped by running into the balustrade, which everyone must've figured she was gonna tumble over, because they grabbed'er arms. Her chest heaved as she leaned over the wall and scanned morning-lighted landscape. On the horizon, the sun'd transitioned from pink t'yellow. Someone said, "Where's your hat?" But Fenchurch'dn't reply. She squinted. Subtle movement'n the great distance, creeping shadows hedged against the daylight. And after a while billowous robes and dark mushroom-cap hats'd've been distinguishable. Fenchurch leaned over the wall. "Have they started to take the boats over yet?"

"They're getting ready to."

"Well, why haven't they started yet?"

"Because they're not *here* yet. Calm down."

Fenchurch pulled outa their grasp. "I think I'll go down to the docks, then. And wait there." She turned, glanced over'er shoulder. "Anyone else coming?"

"I'm fine here," one said. "Besides, they've still got a while at least fore they get here."

"I'll go." Izzy stepped toward'er and, because of the height difference, Fenchurch'd've only'd t'stoop under'er hat's slouched outer brim and she'd walk along beneath't. They turned down the stair. "Seems a little silly to me," Izzy said, "to spend over a month walking just to leave some food offerings at a cave."

"Don't tell me you're going to go join the prophets, now."

"Fuck, no." Izzy's hatbrim deformed and almost touched their shoulders as they passed through a narrow archway. "I just don't get the point is all. If you're so into it, why didn't you go out?"

"I never said I was *into* it," Fenchurch said. "I just kind of *get* it—besides, who cares?—everybody's back—back, back, back—"

"My, aren't you a happy one."

Fenchurch whistled a quick airy tune that seemed too much'n opposition t'their pace. But when she came t'the end and started round again, Izzy opened'er mouth, touched'er tongue tip t'er palate and joined'er.

Ron dropped his rucksack under his hammock, held the fabric open with one hand and sat, leaned back and stretched one leg to touch the floor so his orange-red-stained dress pants rode up and exposed his calves. He closed his eyes. His pants' crotch seam had started to pop some not-known day before and he ran a finger along it and teased threadbare holes. Maybe he imagined how his white dress shirt would've looked by then if he'd still had it. A breeze wafted through the holes that had torn his undershirt beneath each armpit, as he interlaced his fingers atop his head and settled into his hammock.

"Anyone there?"

Eyes still closed, he said, "No."

Fenchurch stopped in the doorway. "You asleep?"

"Yes."

"I can come back later."

He sighed. "What?"

"I just thought you might wanna know," she said. "I forgot to say anything to everybody down at the docks—"

Eyes still closed: "Fenny."

"Alright," she said. "I just thought you might wanna know that Earth exploded is all."

"So?" he said, half-asleep. But she'd already turned and gone. He lay there awhile as if asleep, then at some point opened his eyes. He watched the ceiling, and something must've teased at his memory. But who knows how long it'd've been before he realized either the answer or its question?

Solemnity'd touched the chamber. And after a moment or two, Colette silently put'er hands together. She glanced at the high windows. "On thet," she said, "I think et'w'd b'a good teme tuh break tuh eat." Others nodded.

Helena's stomach gurgled and she covered't with'er hand.

And most haphazardly rose, stiff from sitting too long, and milled and filtered out. Someone touched Mara's shoulder as she and t'others waited for an opening. Mara turned. Colette smiled. "Are yewmens fexed for a meal? Some of the rest of us-ens'w'd b'glad tuh av yewmens join us-ens."

Mara glanced at the rest. Ambeth motioned'n acquiescence. And Li mostlikely'dn't care either way.

"But..." Genie said, and cleared'er throat.

Mara nodded. "We've a prior obligation," she said t'Colette.

Colette nodded. She motioned'em ahead as the passageway cleared. And she and September followed'em through.

"Es yewnr friend always thet way?" September said.

Kayla half-turned as she walked. "What way?"

"Wreteng all the teme."

"I guess."

"What does she-en do when she-en fells a book? I only ask because I knew someyewn thet way once. And he-en just dropped'em where ever he-en stood when they-ens'd no space left and went and found another."

Kayla shook'er head.

"I was just wondereng because'et looks as'ef that books already felled," September said. But she shrugged and'dn't seem t'care any-more bout't as they emerged into a sunlit passage.

"Yewmens's'd come later," Colette said t'Mara, "ef yewmens can."

Mara nodded.

This's just me. But I'm suspicious, again, that our journaller's putting words'n others' mouths.

And there's still plenty of pages left'n this journal.

Also, the next few pages've been excised. It starts again with

“No,” that young man said. “He says t’say that’sn’t the end.” Ambeth offered back an emptied bowl and’e accepted’t with a nod. “He doesn’t wish t’keep yuns any longer,” he said. Li sucked’er fingers and’d’ve eyed the masked figures who’d so patiently waited above and below the stairs. “He only wishes t’offer yuns this,” that young man said. “He says t’say excelsior and back again.” And that young man busied’mself stacking and arranging emptied dirtied bowls. And that bald-headed, wrinkled, old man who still just looked into an impossible distance sat there the same as’e’d always done since they’d first arrived.

Mara rose. And Ambeth and Li likewise. Kayla grasped Quetzal-coatl’n both hands and slipped’m into’er bag while Helena and Genie glanced up, then down the stairs, at the masked figures.

Mara regarded the ones at bottom of the stairs. “We’re ready.”

A masked figure nodded. He extended’is arm for’em t’follow.

Kayla and Helena and Genie stood.

“As we’ll’ver be,” Li mumbled as they started down. Behind’em, the masked figures who’d waited above stepped down between that young man as’e still collected and arrange bowls and that wrinkled, bald-headed old man who still stared into an impossible distance, and followed’em.

Li glanced back at their escorts as they turned through alleyways. And those who met’em beneath harsh late-noon sun quickly parted, stared from shadowed recesses as they slipped from sight and found freer paths. “Yuh’re sure popular alla sudden,” Li said. She’d’ve glanced over’er shoulder again. Masks’d’ve regarded’er blankly.

The procession turned. They’d’ve mounted a great set of shadeless, winding stairs. Harsh sun hammered down on’em and they adjusted their hats and squinted as those figures ahead’d’ve seemed t’partially evaporate’n yellowed brightness.

Somewhere high above, they'd've looked over distant, bright-washed buildings and cityscapes that met the world's curvature. They paused as they stepped indoors, waited for their eyes t'adjust. A masked woman waited by the door and accepted their hats so they'dn't burden'em'n the narrow passages that led t'the chambers above. And she offered t'take Kayla's satchel, but Kayla shook'er head and the masked woman nodded when Quetzalcoatl's nose poked from beneath the flap. She motioned for'em t'follow and led the way up.

“What was’t like?”

The room, usually so filled with cacophony as various enclaves talked over t’other, lay’n silence. Those whose hammocks hung nearest sat forward, wide eyed, and the rest of the room stood crowded between’em.

“Well...” Genie said. “They’d curtains over all the windows.”

Someone laughed. “That’s all yuh remember?”

“Don’t interrupt.”

“And...” Genie said. “And they’ere all sittin round on those small backless chairs.”

“Except for’ne.”

“Yah,” Genie said. “He was standin lookin through a gap’n the curtains, out the window. And’e’d’is’ands clasped behind’is back. And’e turned, he turned after a moment or two...”

“What’d they say?”

“He thanked Mara for’elpin save’m.”

“Their kid, ’ight?”

“Which twos?”

“What you think?”

“Why does’t’ve t’b’just two?”

“Maybe’e jus lookin young.”

“That’sn’t the way’t works,” someone said. “Their children are all theirs together. All at the same time.”

“Yah, theys says theys cans does thats, yous knows.”

“I’dn’t get’t.”

Someone sighed. “L—”

“But from what I’eard,” someone else said, “she wasn’t even the

first one'n there when everything'appened, from what I'eard. Why'd they've t'thank'er, specifically?"

"Cause she's jusa swell person," Li said. She leaned back'n'er hammock with'er hands behind'er head and watched the ceiling.

A few glanced at'er. Someone said t'Genie, "But what happened next?"

"W— "

"Nothin," Li said. "They thanked'er and sent us on our way. End 'o story."

"That's't?"

"Wut'd I say?"

"But there's gotta b'more t't than that?"

"Well, there'sn't."

But night'd've dropped without many realizing't. And someone said they'd better go'r they'd b'late.

"Aren't yuns comin?" someone said.

"Um..." Genie glanced at t'others.

Kayla shook'er head. "We're waitin for our friends."

The room slowly emptied.

Kayla caught Quetzalcoatl before'e'd run down'er leg. She leaned back'n'er hammock and set'm on'er stomach. Genie shifted'n'er hammock and turned toward Li. "Why'd yuh say that?"

After a moment, Li raised'er head enough t'check the room'd emptied. "Cause yuh'dn't know when t'keep yuhr mouth shut."

"But... But why'dn't... What was wrong with't? What's wrong with sayin they'd invited Mara t'come with'em—and bout'ow—"

"Quiet," Li said. And she glanced round the room again. "Jus'dn't say nothin bout nothin. Got't?"

Genie became silent. She sat there hunched forward'n'er hammock.

"Look," Li said. "Jus trust me. This'sn't—"

They looked up as footsteps approached. Ambeth dropped'er pack'n'er hammock. "Sorry we're late. Got held up."

"Doesn't matter," Li said. She watched the ceiling.

Mara eyed t'others. "What's wrong?"

Genie remained silent.

"Nothin," Helena said.

"Well," Mara said. "What're yuns waiting for. Let's go."

"Where?" Genie said.

“Yah,” Ambeth said. “We’ll b’lucky’f we can find a place t’sit this late.”

“We’re gonna go listen?”

“Where’d yuh think?”

Mara nodded.

“We’re’ere,” Ambeth said. “We might as well. Come on.” She glanced at Li as she swung’erself from’er hammock. “Yuh comin?”

“Some rule says I can’t?”

“Don’t reckon.”

“Let’s go,” Mara said.

(Early the next morning?)

“-./././.- ./.-/—/..-/./.-./.-. -././.-..”

They all paused. Genie and Kayla stared.

“-./.- -./.-/—/.. .. ./.-./.-/—/..-./.-.- .. ./.- ./.-/—/—/.-././.-./.-. ..-
./—/.-. ./.-. ./.-./.-./.-/./.-/./.-.-./.-.-. —/..- -././.-./.-.- -./.-./.-/—
/.-./.-.-.- -/—/..-./.-./.-. -.-/—/..-/.-./.-./.-. -/—..../-/.../-.././.-
...../.-/..-..”

Li said, “We’dn’t speak that.”

“...././. -./.../—/..-/- -/...././... -/./.-./.-../.-./. .../-/-/-./...
..-/-.-.—/../.../-/-... ./.-./.-/... ./.-/.. -/-.../—/..-/- -/....../... -
/.-/-./.-../.-././. -.-/—/.-/-.—/.. -/..../. ./.-./.../—/..-../...
.-.././.-/...—”

“We’dn’t understand wut yuh’re sayin.”

“./.-./.-.. .. -/—/..-./.-./.-.. ./.-./.-./.-./.-.- ./.-./.-./.-. -/—..-./.-./.-..
....../.—”

“We. Don’t. Understand,” Li said.

“.../—/..-.-. -.-/—/..-/./.- -.-/—/..-./.-/.. -.-/—/..- -./.-./.-/..
/.../. -.-.././.-/.- -.-/-/—/..- -/.....././.-. .. -./.-/-.-.- .. -/—/..-/-.-..
.-./.-./.-./.-./.-./.-./.-/.. -/.. -./.-./.-/.-/-.-.-/-.-.-.-”

“Gah!” Li threw up’er hands. “This’sn’t a story, people’dn’t understand gibberish.” And she motioned for’em t’go on. And they’d. And Genie glanced over’er shoulder as she walked, till they’d turned the next corner.

They wound through passageways till they'd come t'the sign of the hourglass and entered. Others, thoughn't as many as before, already'd gathered there and Colette motioned for'em t'enter and sit. "We-ens're very Maeist'ere," she said. And when they'd made'emselves comfortable, she said t'Mara, "May I ask yewn a personal question? before everyone else-ens arreves."

"Okay."

"How does et feel now that yewn're outa et?"

Mara paused. "Free-er."

Colette smiled, nodded. "Et es terreibly claustrophobec, esn't et?" And she extended'er arms and stretched and sighed. "A long way tuh come tuh discover thet, esn't et?"

"Then why'd yuh bother?" Li said.

"How'w'd av we-ens known before?"

Li'dn't reply.

"Well," September said, "I thenk they-ens can all go freeze'en hack."

Colette stretched one arm with'er other. "Yewmens well av tuh take care of Seppie, here, we-ens av only managed tuh gat her-en down tuh a semmer."

"It'sn't easy bein told yuh suck," Ambeth said.

"No," Colette said. "But maybe I'm just a bet too Maeist tuh hold weth thet. Besedes, we-ens're received well enough at home. We-ens av not gone hungry yet."

"Yuh," Kayla said, "only've t'tell stories t'eat?"

"Much of the teme."

"Sometemes we-ens travel weth the tradeng caravans," Seppie said.

"Et es releable work," Colette said. She closed'er eyes and stretched'er neck backwards and forwards. "Besedes, we-ens never can tell what we-ens well gat outa sometheng, good or bad. I av heard a few thengs I can use when I gat home."

"Yes," Genie said. "I keep findin out new thins, too."

"Oh?"

"Yes... Um, did yuh know they—the reïncarnates—consider Catherine t've been one of'em?"

"Really?" Seppie said. "How es thet?"

"Cause..." Genie glanced at Mara, paused, and Mara motioned as'f t'say't was Genie's show. "Cause," Genie said, "they say'f yuh go back t'the stories of the first time she—'er and Nathaniel were together, she's described as'er face bein covered'n grime, that she was wearin a mask. And that'f—if yuh thin bout't, she's described as'avin a dust-covered face alot—like the same way they've t've nother mask on beneath their masks..." She paused.

"Hm." Colette finished stretching.

By then, more'd filtered into the chamber. And morning sun angled through slit windows high above. Two cats watched'em from the doorway.

Seppie started.

When Nathaniel woke, Hera sat on the sill watching'em, and'e folded'is arm under'is head and watched'er. Catherine's hand slid across'is stomach. She mumbled something, eyes closed, then said, "What is it?"

"Nothing," he said. "She... I'm just trying to figure out what she reminds me of."

Catherine raised'er head, cracked'er eyes. Hera still sat on the sill. Her tail swatted left-t'right. And something bout the reflection'n'er eyes seemed t'mirror that motion.

"It must be from a long time ago," he said. "But I can't put my finger on it."

She slid'er hand down along'is thigh and'is leg hair depressed under'er assault, popped up'n'er palm's wake. "Well, while you're busy," she said, "I'm going to go to the fountain."

"I've already been."

"I know," she said as she scooted off the bed. "You think you can sneak off." She paused'n the opening of the door. "Well, I've got news for you. You can't."

He watched the cat a moment or two more, after she left, then shifted'is other arm behind'is head and settled back t'look at the ceiling. And'e'dn't look away when she returned, or when she rounded the bed and climbed onto the end. But a hard breath went out through'is nose when she sucked'is yetn't-erection into'er mouth. And'e parted'is legs for'er.

"How old do you think I am now?"

She glanced up'is body as'is erection tip remained'n'er mouth, and let't slowly pass between'er lips. "Why?"

"I was just thinking," he said as he lay there. "I was trying to work it out. I think...I'm probably as old as you were when we..."

As she looked up his body, she stroked him, bent her head and allowed another spit glob to drop onto his erection. "And what brought this on?"

"I was just thinking."

"Well," she said and leaned down and kissed his erection tip. "You've picked a fine time to have a conversation." She slid her spit-damp hand down him. "Or is it you'd prefer to talk while my mouth's occupied?" And she said, "Tell me, if I'd known to put you in my mouth back then..." Without her support his erection'd flopped back against his stomach and her spit glistened on the hair beneath his navel. "What do you think you would've done?"

"Turned inside out from the explosion."

She laughed, drew her hand from his testicles and spit into her wet-wrinkled palm, let it flow down along her finger before she probed between his buttocks. Her other hand wrapped his erection, pointed it toward the ceiling again. "I'll tell you a secret," she said as she penetrated him to her first knuckle. "When you first told me about this, I thought *how could anyone like that?*" Slowly, she sank her finger till her other knuckles dimpled into the underside of his buttocks.

"And how was it different from what Tracy was doing to you?"

In reply, she lowered her mouth onto his erection. His legs stiffened and his shoulders stretched back into the bed. And she didn't slow till his hips bucked and he contracted hard around her finger on time to each spurt. She let the mess drool over her lips and onto him, rubbed what'd come out against his hot, deflating flesh. Her sticky-wet hand dripped as she moved up his body, climbed astride him and lowered herself till her pubic hair obscured his nose. Her hands left wet prints against the wall. His arms folded back and he gripped her thighs. She breathed hard. Her buttocks clenched. And once she'd regained control, she pulled herself back, revealed his face, where wetness glistened on his beard. "The first time you did that," she said, "you looked so...befuddled." She laughed. "Like you were scared." And she sat there awhile, buttocks pressed to his chest.

"I probably was," he said.

"You don't remember?"

"I remember," he said. "It's just..." He shook his head. "Too many things to remember."

"Hm." She shifted back enough to arch down and kiss him and left her face close to his. "Why all this about the past and remembering and wondering how old you are?"

"I don't know."

"Or is it you've started to think..." She narrowed her eyes at him. "That I'm too old and wrinkly for you to be licking between my legs anymore."

He faintly smiled.

She leaned and kissed his eye-patch.

"I was dreaming last night," he said.

"Oh?"

"About MacAvoy."

"Is he haunting you now?"

"No," he said.

She nestled against him. "What was the dream about?"

"He was standing out in the middle of the desert. If he'd had a head, you'd've said he was looking down, maybe. And there in front of him the wind shifted the sands and revealed bones. A skeleton."

"What do you think it means?"

He looked at the ceiling. "I don't know." He lay silent.

"Well," she said, after a while, "I had a dream too, last night."

"Oh?"

"Yes," she said. "I dreamt I was back in the park, sitting there in front of the bandstand on one of the folding chairs they'd set out for the graduation. And it was quiet. The paper lanterns shifted in the breeze—"

"Peaceful."

"Hush," she said. "I'm talking." She kissed his chest. "Everything was so quiet. And I heard footsteps a long way off. And when I saw it was you, I stood and the newspaper on my lap slipped to the ground. And it seemed as if the whole page were this one huge wedding announcement. With just two names. And I turned to run. But you said, '... wait...' in this pitiful little voice because your jaw was still sore. And I turned and said, 'It's okay. I understand.' But you just shook your head. But I just wouldn't listen. I said, 'No.' I said, 'You're a

young man and that means certain things. It's only right that what... I'm sure you'll be very happy. I just hope...just hope that you can forget everything that's happened and that it won't cause you any harm in the future. It's all my...all my fault.' But when I turned away, you grabbed my arm. You stammered, '...I...did...n...t...' And shook your head and growled and kicked a folding chair and made it collapse. I yelled, 'Don't hurt yourself.' And your eyes flashed and you grabbed me round the waist faster than I could push away. And you said, 'I didn't—' and you struggled with every word so by the end you could barely whisper '—ask...her...to...marry...me.' And you groaned. 'She...s...lying...' And you groaned again and I thought it was because I was gripping your arm so hard and I tried to pull away. And I looked round the park and bent close to you and asked, 'Really?' And you nodded. And I looked round again and the wind was shifting the paper lanterns and I took your hand and whispered, 'Come with me.' And we ran into the hedges. And deep in the bushes I said into your ear, 'I want to do to you what you do to yourself.' And I pulled down your pants—"—She moved'er groin against'is—"—and touched this and you were already hard. And I whispered, 'Does it feel good?' But you only groaned and I told you not to try and speak. And I kept touching you and said, 'Isn't this what you do?' and I spat into my hand and touched you and you shuddered and you thrust yourself into my hand. And I said, 'Like this? Or is there one spot in particular?' And you shuddered and I said, 'I think...so.' And you grunted and whimpered and pumped everything out on the fresh-mowed grass." She rested'er cheek against'is chest. "What do you think?"

"I think your dreams are better than mine."

"And whose fault's that?"

"Maybe I am being haunted."

She sat up and shook'er head. He pulled'is arms from beneath'er legs, reached round'er and grabbed'er buttocks'n both hands, said "Do you think you can wait a while for breakfast?"

"Why?"

"Just answer the question."

"I always tend to forget I'm hungry if I get busy doing something that takes up all my concentration."

“You know,” he said. “I do, too.” And’e forced’mself up and rolled’em both over before she’d scream and’e arched down and kissed the top of’er freshly shaven head and worked’is way down from there.

“Yuns know,” someone said. “I’ve heard that’is batteries’dn’t fail after he’d carried the explosives into the socket. And that he walked out, instead of being blown up with the rest of’t.”

“Then what happened t’him?”

“He walked into the desert t’wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“To meet Nathaniel.”

“But Nathaniel went back t’the city.”

“Yes. But I’m saying he waited out t’meet’m much, much later.”

“To go with’m, you know, out there.”

“I heard’t was because the phone broke and he’dn’t control’m anymore. So he’d t’leave’m behind.”

“Then he’d’ve still walked out somehow.”

“Yah, like, maybe a malfunction or a bug or something.”

Sometime before, a thatched roof'd replace the commissary's blue tarp. The few blue-plastic chairs that remained scraped stone when anyone moved, anti-skid feed long worn away or disintegrated, and looked as'f they'dn't long t'b'replaced with bamboo ones. Scratch and burn marks covered the blue-plastic table and one corner'd cracked and fissure lines leaked inward from brittle edges and the screws that held the rusted legs threatened t'strip from the crumbling substrate.

Morning chatter continued. "—and I don't think," Izzy said as she glanced toward distant movement and saw Catherine and Nathaniel cross the square framed by early morning light [...] and leaned over the table and coughed.

"You're supposed to eat it," Fenchurch said. "Not breathe it."

Izzy emitted a few more dry heaves, reached for'er cup, swallowed three or four times and coughed again, said'n a hollow voice, "Well you..." But she coughed again and shook'er head, lifted'er spoon again.

"What were you going to say?"

Izzy shook'er head.

"What was it?"

"I don't..." She lightly coughed again. "I can't remember. What were we talking about?"

"Oh, never mind." Fenchurch turned t'Catherine and Nathaniel as they sat. They each took a bowl off the stack. But Fenchurch leaned forward first and caught the large spoon that projected from the clayware container acenter of the table. "W—"

"Time," Constance said.

"What?"

"We were talking about time."

"Interesting," Catherine said. She glanced at Nathaniel. "We were just talking about time too."

"It's the prophets," Fenchurch said. "They're the shit-heads behind it." She'd stopped eating and instead just pushed'er spoon round'n'er bowl.

Catherine put a spoonful'n'er mouth, swallowed. "What's this?"

"Oh, it's always something," Izzy said. "No one should even bother with them and they'd go away."

"Bullshit!" Fenchurch said and waved'er spoon and bits of porridgesh flew free under centrifugal force and spotted onto the table.

"Watch it—"

"They're just waiting," Fenchurch said. "They're just waiting to turn this whole place upside down. Mark my words." She leveled'er spoon at Izzy.

"Don't be so melodramatic," Izzy said.

"I'm not—"

"I think everyone," Catherine said, "could stand to calm down just a little." And when Fenchurch'd settled t'merely leering across the table, Catherine said, "Now, would someone care to explain what we're talking about?"

Izzy broke the staring contest, glanced down the table. "They've been going round preaching a new sermon since you left," she said. "They're saying since no date was ever recorded for when the cats came in, and basically everything else, that we're basically making something up now and it doesn't—"

Fenchurch said, "And—"

"—And since the pilgrimage is going to be done every seven solstices, but that by their calculations it's been at least eight or nine years or ten years, and it's not an unbroken chain, and such." She shook'er head. "You can't reason with them. Just ignore them."

"That's just the thing," Fenchurch said. "That's just the thing that'll give them the advantage—ignoring them."

"And what do you propose?"

"I—"

"Does it really matter?" Constance said, and leaned across the table t'grab the large spoon.

"Isn't that your fourth bowl?"

"No."

"It's her fifth."

"Oh, shut up."

Constance settled back into'er seat. "Pass the honey." She pushed'er spoon round'n'er bowl, through then amber-streaked, off-brown morass. "Isn't it *what* that's important? Isn't *when* just a detail?"

"They think everything should be just so. A place for everything and everything in its place."

"Sounds too much like professionalism."

Fenchurch lunged with'er spoon. "That's what I say. I—"

"Speaking of," Catherine said, and she waited a moment for everyone t'calm. "How is Mae?"

Silence

"Haven't you seen her yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well," Fenchurch said. "You should ask Cricket here." She pointed'er spoon, and a young man who might as well've'n't been there before for all intents and purposes sprang into existence and looked up sheepishly from'is bowl.

"Oh?" Catherine said.

Fenchurch motioned with'er spoon. "Tell her." He'd half-opened'is mouth when Fenchurch continued, "Lisa whoever I can't remember had him tied up and teasing him and they were going to pretend like they'd run off and left him hanging there and then *she* comes along and starts yelling at him about how men are this and that on and on and Lisa and whoever get back and rush in 'cause they hear all this commotion going on and him hanging there looking about like he's going to turn into a fountain and as limp—"

"Fenn," Catherine said. "I think you can afford to take it a little easier."

"Well, Lisa said she'd never seen—"

"A lot easier," Catherine said. "I think I have the picture."

But by then, as'f'is purpose were complete, he seemed t've evaporated.

"Picture of what?" Britt pulled back a chair and't scraped stone.

"Where's June?"

"Still asleep," Britt said, and reached for a bowl.

"Still?"

"Anybody'd be tired that had to drag her ass there and back again."

"Least I've got an ass to drag." Britt spooned morass. "Fuck, it's going to be good to eat something that hasn't been dried."

"Speaking of sleep," Izzy said. "Anyone else seen Ron this morning?"

"Why?"

"I saw him when I was coming down here. Now, *he* doesn't look like he's slept in a *week*."

"Maybe Bea caught up with him."

A couple others laughed. Izzy shook'er head. "I don't know but it... I don't know."

"..... what about"

Nathaniel pushed back'is chair. And Catherine glanced at'm. "I'll see you later," he said, his voice barely audible over conversational noise. "I've got a few things to do." Catherine nodded. She reached and touched'is hip, and'er fingers slid along'is scars till'e'd passed outa reach.

"—what do you think?"

Catherine turned back t'the table. "Sorry." She shook'er head. "What were we talking about?"

"Time," someone said.

Catherine nodded. "It's not what it used to be."

“Let me...” someone said.

When June woke, Britt pointed t'a bowl on the small table acenter the room. "Brought you something."

June closed'er eyes, rolled over. "How late is it?"

"Late enough I could've just let you go to lunch."

June groaned, lay there awhile. "Sometimes," Britt said, "I think you have some sort of disease. A kind of sleeping sickness."

"I wasn't asleep."

"Really. And what do you call it?"

"Okay, I wasn't asleep *all* the time." She stretched. "I just wake up and think awhile and sometimes start dreaming again." She sat up. "And I've been thinking—"

"You said that already."

"Huh?" June shook'er head. "I'm being serious. I've been thinking about it all the way back from the caves..."

Britt glanced up from where she'd hunkered'n a corner, a codex open across'er knees. "Well?"

June shook'er head. "I don't know that I should talk about it right now. I'm afraid if I talk about it too much before it's ready it'll ruin the whole thing somehow."

"Then why'd you start?"

June shrugged. "I don't know..." She shook'er head, eventually worked'erself up and moved toward the table. She looked down at the bowl.

"If you don't want it," Britt said, without looking up from the current page, "You'll have to take it to the compost yourself." She turned the page. "I only run a food delivery service. Not a garbage disposal one."

June looked up toward'er. "What're you reading?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing... You're not reading *another* one of those Midnight books, are you?"

"What should it matter to you?"

June groaned. "You have to have read them all three or four times by now." She added under'er voice, "Though, how you could read them once..."

"A boat came from somewhere outa the west while we were gone. Dave's got a new one he's transcribing right now."

June shuddered. And Britt glanced up t'see't and smirked.

"Well," June said. "I'm not going to waste my time."

Britt turned a page. "No one said you had to."

June humpfd, looked round the room. "You just going to stay there all day?"

"While it's hot, yes. Later I'm going over to the fourth seventh. They've done an early harvest and want to do some trading."

"Have you seen Nathaniel?" June said. "Or Catherine?"

"At breakfast. Why?"

"Nothing." June glanced round the room again, then down at the dress she'd slept'n.

"You know," Britt said. "You could sleep naked, like everyone else."

"Not *everybody* does."

"True," Britt said. "Are you going to go join them over in the eighth?"

June shot a glance at'er. "This's what happens when you read too many of those books."

Britt smirked, but'dn't glance up. "And what's that?"

June lifted the bowl. "Your brain goes out."

Britt laughed. "See you at lunch."

"Maybe," June said. "If you can tear yourself away." Bowl'n-hand, she turned and walked toward the door. Britt turned the page.

“Me next.”

“Where’s Tina?”

“She says she’sn’t coming so long as someone’s writing’t down.”

Colette must’ve glanced at our journaller. “Well,” she said, “et es her-en loss.”

“Do do do dum dee dee dum dum do dee do do do dah dee dee dum dee dum duh dah dee duh—duh duh...doo doo doo doooooooooo dee dee dee dum de doooo...Dah dah dah dum...dee dee dee...la da da da da da...dee dee...duh duh deeee duh...deeeee duuuuuuh...deeeee duuuuuuuuh...deeeeeeeeeee duuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh—HEY!” Fenchurch ran. She waved’er arm. “Hey—wait up.” Trent glanced back and’is beard scrubbed against’is shoulder. And Fenchurch jogged t’a stop beside’m. “Haven’t seen you since yuns came in yesterday.”

“So?” He started walking again and she kept pace.

“What’s in the jug?” Hooked on’is finger, clayware brushed’is leg as’e walked. “Oil?” she said. He’dn’t reply. “It is, isn’t it?” But’e seemed oblivious. “Can I come watch?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on. I won’t make a sound—I promise. And if I do, may I fall off the roof of the Celestial Tower with a live chicken strapped to each ankle.”

He glanced at’er.

“Pleeeeeease?”

“No.”

Her mouth set sideways as they turned and passed into a square. Mini pyramids of every progressive size, some of’em broken open and revealed as hollow, littered the area, as’f dropped from the sky. Someone passed’em: “Do you have your brains in your stomach?” Fenchurch glanced at’m over’er shoulder after they’d passed, but’e’dn’t wait for an answer. She looked at Trent. “Well?” she said.

“No.”

They turned through a switchback alley that interconnected another square. There, a domed structure occupied the whole. Trent stopped, hand on one of the heavy, seemingly worm-eaten, wooden doors. "Go."

"Come on—Plea—"

He stared at'er. And after a moment or two, she rolled'er eyes. "Fine." And she turned and stomped back into the alleyway [...] but when she peeked round the corner, he'd entered and the doors closed behind'mself. Quickly, she crossed the square and scaled a support structure and shimmied up the tile roof. Carefully, she dropped t'er knees on top, eased toward where the dome opened'n the center. It took a while for'er eyes t'adjust away from daylight and till then she'd've seen only shades'n the gloom. And by the time she'd discern more, probably, more than half of't was over, and below, a large man grasped Collard's wrists and extended'is own arms t'force Collard's t'do likewise and this trapped'is back against the larger man's rotund hairy stomach. "That's it," someone said. "Get it all out. Every last drop." Collard faintly trembled. Trent stroked sweat aside. And Collard lay still on the man's rotund hairy stomach. And—

Trent glanced round as someone bent and whispered t'm. He looked up. Fenchurch jerked back. Keeping low, she moved round the perimeter and scurried down the tiled roof and dropped into the square, ran for an alleyway and disappeared among interconnects and switchbacks.

They laughed. “I’ll tell you what she did once,” someone said. “This one time, the prophets were all packed’n this square, screaming and all that, and she—she climbs up atop this wall and she—she starts yelling that story at everyone below.”

“Really?”

“With a few more details, of course.”

“*Really?*”

“Really—her voice was hoarse for days.”

They laughed.

His bare legs and walkingstick poked from beneath 'is hat shade as 'e sat back with 'is elbows planted on a step. His eye was closed, but 'is hatbrim 'd've obscured that fact along with the rest of 'is upper body, so there 'd've been no reasonn't t've assumed 'e 'dn't simply lain down and gone t'sleep beneath the hot sun. Maybe that's why Ron jumped when Nathaniel said, "Figured you'd be around here sooner or later." Or maybe 'e just jumped because 'e 'dn't realized anyone else 'd been there. Ron stood barefoot on sun-warmed stone, his hands 'n 'is pockets, and the wind rustled 'is undershirt's sleeves. Below, drapes hung between the bath's columns moved 'n much the same way.

"Are baths not allowed now?"

"Never know what somebody's going to come up with."

Ron turned toward the baths, stepped down.

"But," Nathaniel said. "She's already come and gone." Ron stopped, hands still 'n 'is pockets, and glanced over 'is shoulder. "Besides, I don't know how you could see her, anyway."

"Just supposing I were—looking for someone, that is—why would that be?"

"Because if your eyes get any more bloodshot they're gonna start leaking down your face."

"For someone with one eye—constantly concealed under a hat brim—you seem like you manage to *see* an awful lot."

If Nathaniel shrugged, it 'd've been impossible t'tell because of 'is hat. "How was the trip?"

Ron shrugged. "It was a trip."

"Kinda surprised you went."

"Why?"

“Just was.”

Ron glanced down toward the baths. Distant figures parted curtains and fitted their hats as they started up the steps. “Guess I figured I might as well try to figure out what it’s all about.”

“Get anywhere?”

“Haven’t decided.” He rubbed the corners of his eyes, pinched between thumb and forefinger the flesh above the bridge of his nose. “When we came in, Fenn told everybody about...how the Earth...blew up...” He opened his eyes and looked down at the baths. “Listen...” He rubbed the back of his neck where his old felt hat wasn’t wide enough to shade all the way to his collar. “Mind if we go somewhere else. It’s getting damn hot.”

“Thought you’d never say.” Nathaniel positioned his walkingstick, pulled himself up. Ron looked down toward the baths a few moments longer, but finally turned and followed. As they crossed the square, Nathaniel’s walkingstick tip-tapped metronomically to their pace.

“You really still need that thing?”

“Depends,” Nathaniel said. “Depends on the weather.”

“The weather’s always the same.”

“It only appears the same.”

They walked along in time to that metronomic clack. After a while, Ron said, “Do you think about it? what happened to Earth.”

“Too much an abstraction.”

“Yeah...” Ron said. “What do you think a billion people look like?” Nathaniel shrugged. “How many are in the city now?”

“Who can know?”

They went on awhile in silence

“You remember the first time we went out to those ruins?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “And I went off with her. Sheryl, that is.” Silence. “She put my thing in her mouth.” Silence. “I never told anybody that before.”

“Why now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Convenient I showed up, then,” Nathaniel said. “Otherwise you’d never have. You’d been standing around talking to yourself.”

“I guess.”

“Of course, maybe you still haven’t told anyone.”

Ron glanced at'm. "How do you mean?"

"In your condition, who knows if you're half-dreaming. Or hallucinating."

"Maybe."

Nathaniel said, "Maybe."

Paper lanterns covered a table, stacked over head high. Even the flattened ones at the end made piles too cumbersome t'carry. And when Kim entered she said, "How are we going to carry all these?"

Melissa still leaned over the table, laid the brush back'n the glue pot after she'd run't along one edge, pressed together folded paper t'form a hollowed box and ran'er fingers over the seam, stuck't'n'er mouth and licked away what glue'd squeezed out. "We'll just have to have a cart," she said when she'd pulled'er finger from'er mouth.

Kim groaned. "There's too many stairs between here and the docks. It'll take all day to carry it up and down them all."

"We'll just have to start in the morning, then." Melissa grasped the still wet-glued paper on each end between'er thumb and forefinger and gingerly laid't farther down the table. Then she reached for a fresh sheet from the almost depleted stack and looked over the table, pulled up the paper t'look underneath, bent and pushed a completed lantern aside. "Well...fuck..." Paper still pinched'n one hand, she patted'er lap with t'other, eventually leaned outa'er seat, scanned the floor, finally contorted t'reach beneath'er chair and came up with a bone folder.

"You have to be almost done," Kim said.

"After this we've still got to fold the paper cats to go in them." Melissa folded the sheet under'er hand and licked the bone knife up the crease.

"I thought Fenny was supposed to be working on those."

"Do you see her doing it?"

Kim shook'er head. "We're two days away. Maybe we should just forget that part of it."

"It's integral," Melissa said as she reached for the glue brush.

"It isn't that important," Kim said. "We don't *have* to do it."

"We don't have to do anything," Melissa said. "But we're going to." And she stuck the brush back'n the glue pot and ran'er finger along a fresh seam and stuck'er glue-drippy finger'n'er mouth.

“I’ve got something,” somebody said, and’e cleared’is throat. Colette motioned for’m t’start. But’e shook’is head. “But I’ll only tell’t’f everybody promisesn’t t’repeat’t.”

Everyone looked at’m.

“What?”

“I...dn’t want anyone t’repeat’t except me.”

Someone snickered. Finally, everyone laughed.

“Fine,” he said. And sullen-faced, he jerked up and stomped outa the chamber.

Colette shook’er head. She motioned t’the one that’d spoken of Fenchurch. “Why dun’t yewn cap we-ens off before we-ens eat.”

A mortared stone wall cordoned off one of the alcoves. The fountainhead rose over the pool that'd been formed round't and spurted'n time t'the working of some distant siphon pump. Between spurts, as the ripples and bubbles settled, fish glinted by, turned all kinds of red and orange'n late evening light tinted first by atmosphere, then by glass, and then by refracted rippling water.

"You'd better get started, hadn't you?" Tracy said. She rubbed a towel over'er hands once more, dropped't on the table. "It'll be dark before you know it."

Fenchurch leaned down from where she sat on the pond wall, dipped'er finger'n the water and drew circles as the fish scattered toward the far end. "I guess."

"Well, you'd better move it if you are." Tracy walked toward the door, and Fenchurch looked up t'see'er go and after a moment she pulled'er finger from the water and jogged after'er.

A stillness'd've settled on the alleys and courtyards and squares, a quietude so at times outa place that Fenchurch'd've glanced round suspiciously, as'f she wasn't quite sure where she was. Even Tracy's usual coarse presence'd've, as with the evening, somehow altered'n'ts nature. Tracy said, "Are you lighting a lantern?"

Fenchurch shook'er head, struggled t'force'erself t'speak into the quietude. "I don't think so."

"No one says you have to."

"And everybody looks at you weird if you don't."

They passed through an alley that must've come close t'the fountain square: shshshshshsh noise crashed faintly beyond stone. "Maybe they just envy them. Or feel sorry for them?"

"Why would they feel sorry for them?"

"Maybe because to never to care about someone enough to be hurt when they're gone..."

"That's why..." Fenchurch said. "That's why I don't like tonight. Everyone feels so sad. It's awful. I don't see why anyone would want to do it."

"Well, maybe you'll get lucky enough never to have a use for it. Or maybe you'll never be lucky enough to."

"Be careful," someone said from a darken alleyway. "She can quote poetry if she gets too remorseful." And footsteps faded into distant, dark alleyways.

"It's worse than a full moon," Tracy said as they continued. "Every loony comes out of the woodwork."

"What do the moons have to do with it?"

"Not the moons. *The* moon. E—" Tracy shook'er head. "Never mind."

"Wiiiiir."

Fenchurch paused as they started into a square, glanced round.

"What is it?"

"Wiiiiir."

In the half-dark, a small shadowed form at the base of the stairs'd've just been visible. "It's Baldur," Fenchurch said, and started across toward'm and squatted and scratched the top of'is head just this side of'is ear. "Where have you been?" The old cat's whiskers hung down'n long sweeps and curls, turned iridescent silver'n the fading light. He turned'is head away from looking up the stairs as she stroked'is back, and as'f'e needed t'see who't was first, he started t'purr.

Tracy stopped behind'er. "We'd better get going."

Fenchurch shook'er head. "You go on. Since Baldur's showed up, I'm sure that something convenient's about to happen?"

“Huh?”

“I’ll get there my own way,” Fenchurch said.

Tracy watched ‘em both, possibly seemed ready t’say something, but ‘dn’t, and continued on ‘er way across the square and through one of the darkened passages on the far side.

Fenchurch moved t’sit on the steps, but continued t’sroke Baldur, who continued t’purr. Once’n a while’e’d go silent, would glance round, as’f t’make sure’t’d still been ‘er there andn’t someone else, then start t’purr again.

Eventually, Fenchurch turned as someone padded down the stairs above. She looked up. “What’re you doing here?” Catherine said. She carried a paper lantern which crinkled as she walked.

Fenchurch continued t’sroke Baldur. “Waiting for a convenient moment.” But she stood and stepped down so Catherine’d pass. “Where are you going?”

“A small errand.”

“Can I come?”

“You don’t want to be late, do you?”

“Aren’t you going to be late?”

“We’ll both try not to be,” Catherine said. She passed Fenchurch and the paper lantern crackled with ‘er movements. “Come on if you’re coming,” Catherine said. Fenchurch hurried after ‘er.

“Isn’t that a lantern? What’s it for?” She glanced down. A name’d’ve been written on the side, but either way there’d’ve been too little light t’read.

“Always questions, isn’t it?”

“How *else* am I ever supposed to find out anything.”

“You could try listening.”

“I always listen.”

“Yes,” Catherine said. “I’ve been hearing about your *listening*.”

Before Fenchurch’d reply, they turned a corner and Catherine raised ‘er hand. “You can come along. But you have to promise not to say anything. Okay?”

Fenchurch nodded. “Okay.”

“I mean it.”

Fenchurch nodded again.

They crossed a courtyard and passed into a tower, wound up stairs.

Water sloshed. It chugged and poured into the pools that encircled the steps. Slow-shifting fish shimmered, illuminated by diffused moonlight through small square holes mortared closed with glass chunks. Gently, in time t'the siphon pumps, water flowed from above, cascaded from pool t'pool. But at the top, just below the door, where the last or the first pool'd've been, a trickle of water routed over scattered brick, hand tools, chalk marks on stone long washed away. Stopping by the door, Catherine turned, and silvered'n diffused moonlight, put a finger t'er lips. Fenchurch nodded. And Catherine knocked. "It's me." She waited, but no response. "I brought you something." Silence. "You can decide if you want to use it." And without waiting, Catherine placed the lantern beside the door and motioned for Fenchurch t'follow as she turned downstairs. Water sloosh trailed'em all the way down. Even as they crossed the courtyard, turned into a sidepassage, Fenchurch'dn't speak, as'f she wasn't quite sure how far'er promise extended.

"You're quiet all of a sudden."

Fenchurch said, "I didn't know if I was still supposed to be quiet or not."

It seemed something that'd've made Catherine laugh, if even just faintly, but she'dn't. She stepped close and intertwined'er arm with Fenchurch's as they walked together. Eventually, the pinprick sound of people tryna b'quiet'd've became plain. Candles flickered on the far side of a distant archway. And'n the dark, dim shapes became discernible against the stars on the wall above. An empty cart sat propped beside the archway, too wide t'fit through. And on t'other side, a small line'd formed t'where June sat with a small plank across'er lap, paper lanterns stacked on one side, a small candle on t'other. She dipped'er brush'n a small clayware inkpot on the stone beside'er and the bristles glistened preternaturally'n candlelight as she gingerly stroked folded paper, then handed't t'the person at front of the line. Below, the switchback stairs stood full, as'd the stone dock, and a few reclined'n the boats, all watching with the rest as flame-flicker-lit lanterns floated on the current

The last of those queued turned with lanterns'n-hand and the paper crinkled with their motions as they passed and worked their way down the stairs. June set the plank off'er legs, braced'er hand against the wall

t'pull'erself stiffly up. "There were a few more that'd forgotten to write than we thought there would be," she said. "But we managed." She glanced down and must've noticed an ink spot on'er skirt. "Where've you been?"

"A small errand."

"Is she coming?"

Catherine shook'er head.

"Well...should someone light one for him anyway?"

"We'll wait a bit," Catherine said. She glanced out over the water.

Fenchurch leaned against the balustrade, did the same. "It all seems like a waste," she said.

June stepped beside'er. "Why?"

"Once they get out on the water, the names are too small to see, even if backlit. And you can't see the little paper cats inside at all after you let them go. It's all hidden."

"It's enough if you know it's there," Catherine said.

Fenchurch shrugged. "I guess."

Below, the crowd quickened. Out on the water, one of the earliest floated lanterns bloomed into sudden intense flame that flared across walls and faces and died'n the next instant. Black, crinkle-burnt flutterings descended onto the water, dissolved upon contact.

Fenchurch leaned over the balustrade. "There's Pipa." Then she'd've been gone and pushing down the stairs before Catherine'd've'd time t'shake'er head. People leaned against the stairs and looked out idly over the water as she squeezed between. Tension enveloped'em as another lantern burst and lit their shadow-cragged faces faintly yellow-orange before't was gone and they sighed and somehow seemed t'occupy just a little less space as Fenchurch pushed through. Fenchurch tried t'wave, but there'dn't've been any way for'em t'notice'er, and without the eagle's view from the stairs, she'd've struggled t'find'er way along the crowded stone dock and't wouldn't've been till she'd pushed'n among'em that she'd've seen'em again.

"Hey—" Pipa glared a little less when she saw who't was. "I thought you weren't coming."

"Changed my mind."

"Well..." Jean said, and twisted'er head almost past'er shoulder

when someone bumped into'er from behind. "You're not going to see anything here—that's for sure."

"It's a fucking pressure differential," Pipa said. "Even if you fight your way out to the edges, if you aren't strong enough to hold your place, you get swept back to center."

Around'em, the crowd tensed, awash'n flared yellow, released their collective breaths.

"I'd rather go back up on the wall than be down here."

Fenchurch motioned with'er chin. "What about one of the boats?"

"There's already too many down there."

"Well, we can at least try to get down to the floated dock," Fenchurch said. And she rose t'er toes t' try and gauge their position. "There can't be too many people on it."

"Wanna bet?"

Pipa shrugged as best she'd as the crowd packed round'em. "It's as good as staying here...and getting squashed." Jean'dn't reply, but she followed tightly as they threaded through the crowd, Pipa'n the lead. More than someone grumbled, but whatever they'd've tried t'say'd've been swallowed'n the next fireball and everything that came with't. But they came out too far down and'd t'work their way back up the edge. Only a handful stood on the floated dock and those glanced back as the lashed bamboo swayed under the three's added weight. "Told you," Jean said. They worked their way along, but each boat sat full on the water.

"Just wait," Fenchurch said. "Bet you the last boat has just enough room for the three of us."

"That's ridiculous," Pipa said.

Jean said, "Bet what?"

"What do you want?" In the lead, Fenchurch stopped so they were far enough away from the dock end none'd see and spoil the wager.

"If I win..."

"Nothing sexual," Pipa said.

"If you're not betting," Fenchurch said, "stay outa this."

Jean glanced sideways at'er.

Pipa said, "A person losing a bet shouldn't be the one gaining. And no matter what you bet her—what you'll do or she'll do—she'll get off on it—so either way she wins."

Jean laughed. "Okay... How 'bout this: if I win, the next time we go trading, you have to be the one who puts on clothes and trades with Allison's mom."

Pipa nodded. "That's good."

"I told you to stay out of this if you weren't taking a bet."

"Well," Jean said. "What's it going to be? Or are you afraid you'll lose."

Fenchurch crossed'er arms under'er breasts. "Alright," she said. "Y—"

"Nothing sexual," Pipa said.

"I can bet however I want." Fenchurch let an air burst out through'er nose. "And if I win you have to go to the Glass Square with me."

"Not much of a bet," Jean said.

"But it's a bet then."

"I don't know."

"Why?"

"'cause I don't trust you is why."

"*What?*" The water rippled as several of those reclined'n the boats shifted toward Fenchurch's high-pitched half-wail.

"Come on, it's not like you'd hate losing," Pipa said, and rolled'er eyes.

Jean snapped'er eyes toward'er. "Why don't you mind your own business."

"Ha—who's trying to do win-win now?" Fenchurch smirked. "But I'll tell you what—I'll take that bet. Just as it is."

"Huh?"

Fenchurch nodded. "I happen to be really *confident* in *my* position."

Jean eyed'er a moment. "Alright. Deal."

And Fenchurch nodded. "Let's go." She pushed ahead and the floated dock swayed beneath their renewed motions and she said over'er shoulder, "the sooner we get out on the water the better."

But as they neared the dock end, only open water remained. To the one side, in the distance, lanterns floated and one flared and lit a tiny portion of the crater wall.

"I'd say I guess you lose. But there ain't any guessing about it."

Fenchurch stood there arms folded under'er breasts as she looked at the dark water. "I don't get it."

"What's there to get? There isn't a boat there."

"But it would've been so *convenient*," Fenchurch said.

"Huh?"

"You know..." Fenchurch jerked'er arm and a distant flare lit'er as'f she were a kabachuki figure[†]. "We'd've floated out on the water... away from everything and everyone else...and we'd've talked...*and there'd've been something significant*..." She huffed as she stood there with'er arms loosely at'er sides. "*Something'd've* happened."

The dock shifted as Pipa sat, water sloshing between slats. In the distance, the few remaining lanterns'd've started t'sweep downstream. Another flared. Without looking back at'em, she said, "Did yuns light one?"

Jean turned, looked out at the distant dim glowings. "My mother."

Pipa nodded. "What about you?"

"Who would she light one for?" Jean said.

"Yeah," Fenchurch said. "Well, what about you?"

"Ceili and Argile," Pipa said. "But I just did the one and put both their names in it. You think that was alright?"

"Makes sense," Jean said, and for a moment seemed as'f she might say more, but'dn't.

"Why them?" Fenchurch said.

"Why not? We can light one for anybody, can't we?"

"Yeah," Jean said. "But why did you pick those two?"

"I just did."

"Oh, the fuck." Jean sat beside'er. "You're the one."

Fenchurch said, "The one what?"

And without looking away from Pipa, Jean said, "The last one to fuck those two before...you know." She leaned forward. "How come you never fucking told me?"

Pipa shrugged.

"Not fucking good enough."

"What was I supposed to say?"

Jean shook'er head, "So what were they like?" But Pipa'dn't respond. Surface water flashed from a distant lantern's obliteration. "Come on, you've got to tell. Is it true they really had identical

dicks too?” And when Pipa remained silent, Jean reached over and grasped’er shoulders, lightly pushed’er side-t’ side. “Come on tell—tell—”

“Alright—alright.” And she knocked Jean’s hands away. “And just for your information...no, they didn’t.”

“Really?”

Pipa nodded.

“How much difference?”

“I—”

“Oh, come on—you know you want to tell. Besides...” She glanced out onto the water as another lantern flared. “It’s not like it matters now.”

Pipa was silent awhile. Another lantern flared. “A big difference,” she said. “There, are you happy?”

But Jean watched the distant glowings as they floated over the blackness beneath the stars and between reflected stars and those lights which streaked across both darknesses and she must’ve seemed t’ve forgotten the question. “How long you think they knew—I mean ...do you think they thought it up when they knew the medication would run out or had it planned all along?” She glanced toward Pipa. “They say anything to you?” Pipa shook’er head.

“What does it matter?” Fenchurch said. But by then a faint lilt’d’ve crept even into’*er* voice.

“Better than drowning in your juices,” Jean said, “I suppose.” Pipa shuddered. Jean shifted and reached and put’er arm around’er shoulders. Fenchurch turned, arms folded under’er breasts again, looked out over the water.

“Hey...”

Jean looked back. “What is it?”

Fenchurch pointed. A dark shape moved over the water and when one of the last lanterns flared, the boat lit and’d’ve left a faint after-image’n there eyes. Water sloshed and swupped as someone paddled. Britt tossed a rope. “Tie it off.”

As Pipa stood and gathered the rope, Jean rose and stepped beside Fenchurch, put a hand on’er shoulder. “Tell you what,” she said. “I’ll be generous. We’ll call it both ways.” She glanced toward’er and smirked’n the darkness. “So we’ll both have to pay up.”

“I was wondering what you would think a—” was as far as June got before someone appeared’n the archway and, automatically, she paused and looked toward that shadow-enshrouded figure, which caused Catherine t’turn, aswell. As’f the question’d never been started, June fell silent. A light-quick, not-conscious trade seemed t’ve happened. And Catherine brushed’er fingers against the back of June’s hand and stepped toward Mae.

“I brought this,” Mae said. She held the paper lantern.

Catherine nodded, intertwined their arms. The paper lantern crinkled with their motion as they descended. Dark water reflected stars. Already, almost everyone’d filtered into the night. So they passed easily down the stairs by those who still leaned over the balustrade and stared quietly at the dark waters below, and yet fewer remained on the stone dock. Mae held the bag’n both hands as Catherine knelt, blew into the small brazier so the coals within glowed. She lifted one of the bamboo slivers from what was left of the small pile beside the brazier, stuck the end among the coals. A smoke curl, grey against night, twisted upwards. The sliver flared, settled into a steady burn and Catherine pulled’t out, stood. “You should light it.” The lantern crinkled as Mae shifted’t t’one hand. Gingerly, she took the sliver, watched’t a moment. The yellow flicker reflected’n’er eyes. And’t wavered as she eased’t down into the lantern. The lantern pulsed and steadily glowed and Mae withdrew the burning sliver and Catherine took’t and blew on’t and smoke curled from the darkened tip. The lantern pulsed and glowed as Mae held’t’n both hands against’er chest. “It’s made to drop,” Catherine said. After a moment, Mae looked up, toward Catherine, then out toward the dock end. She walked out there. Her toes hung over the edge and loose pebbles and sand skittered down into the water and made reflected stars waver. She extended’er arms. Let go. The lantern hit the water with a faint, hollow patter. And’t gently glowed as’t floated out on the current. A while later, somewhere’n the black expanse between the city and crater rim, it bloomed, momentarily outshone the stars.

[Later?]

Mae wiped'er forearm under'er nose, smeared mucus into dust and left a glistening, dark trail intertwined with'er arm hair. "Not a goddamn bit," she said. And she folded'er arms across'erself as she looked out over the water. "Not a goddamn bit."

Catherine put'er arm round Mae's shoulders.

Day after days passed. And each must've been much the same. So't's not-likely there's anything significant'n the next few missing pages.

Contestant after contestant'd've been effaced from the wall and I doubt that, other than attending each night, Mara and t'others'd've paid but little attention t'the details.

“Sometemes et seems as ef everytheng es devedeng down,” Seppie said.

Sunlight streamed through the narrow windows above as they passed a waterbag’n late morning.

“How so?”

“Well,” Seppie said. “Yewn av got everybody over there en the second sexth whom-ens dun’t leke tuh av the bets up top or bottom so they-ens cut em off. And they-ens who say they-ens shouldn’t. And tuhuh prophets are over’ere and there.”

“’t sn’t bout liken,” somebody said.

“Yuhr from the sixth?”

“’dn’t yuns know?”

“No.”

“I dedn’t know. I hope I dedn’t offend.”

“Oh, it’s’kay. Offensiven’t.”

“I’ve heard the women’n the third ninth think’t’s disgustin’f yuh put anythin inside yuhrself.”

“‘Their loss,’ Fenchurch’d say.”

“And the reïncarnates,” someone said. “And everybody’n the third who’s holier than thou because that’s where supposedly everythin started.” He glanced at Mara and the rest. “No insult meant.”

“None taken,” Ambeth said.

“Or the evolutionists,” someone said. And’e glanced at Mara and Ambeth and the rest. “Do they fight where yuh’re from, too? I heard the priestessships’s gonna fracture over’t.”

“People’ll fight over complete abstractions,” Li said. “Wut’s’t matter’f bodies *or* brains evolve. Or whyn’t *both*?”

This's just me. And there's more here on this topic, but I'mn't gonna bother copying't. There's no point. I'mn't gonna bother t'even argue with't. There's no point.

“Yuh deist or somethin?”

“I’mn’t particularly one thin’r t’other,” Li said.

“I always thought...” Genie said. “Wasn’t J R R Bristol supposed t’b’a god?”

“No, moron” Li said. “He was supposed t’ve as much *money* as god.”

“I thought they were the same thin.”

Li sighed.

“But yuh don’t deny the concept of godhood,” he said.

Li sighed. “I’dn’t guess.”

“That makes yuh a deist then.”

“Fine,” Li said. “Call’t wutever yuh want.”

“What’s’t matter, anyway?” someone said.

“Nothin, I guess.”

“What about the details?”

“Ah, the details.”

“Peoples worries tuse muches bouts the specks of dusts.”

Colette cleared'er throat.

“Fissiparous,” Kim said. “The word you want is fissiparous.”

“Fine,” someone said. “I’ll go.” He rose. “It’s getting too political round here, anyway.”

Colette motioned for someone t’start.

Curved rebar'd been driven into the far shore and Brittney dis-tied'er boat from't. "I think you're crazy," she said. And she tossed the line into the hull. She glanced downshore. "I know he is." Nathaniel adjusted'is pack as she shook'er head and turned and looked upslope. "And you'll have to swing through the seep, that'll take you at least two days out of your way. The flow was down the last time I was up there. Half the algae's dried up."

"I'll figure on three," Nathaniel said. He shifted'is weight on'is walkingstick, looked down at'is weave-encased shins.

"I just don't see the point in this," she said.

Nathaniel touched'er shoulder. "See you when we get back."

He turned and walked up-rim t'where Zeb stood squinting toward the sky. Britt called, "You're both crazy." But they'd both'd've already been outa earshot.

They'd dropped down onto a rolling plain. Stones ejected from the sand swells. "...like giant vertebrae of ancient animals..." Zeb'd've muttered, as'f'e were quoting something. He yelled over'is shoulder without a glance back. "If you can't fucking keep up..." But trailed off into mutterings.

Nathaniel walked easily, quietly. Behind'em, their footprints'd've marred sand and disappeared over a swell and behind a small rock outcrop. The wind'd died long enough that once they crested a high dune, they'd've been able t'see the whole dashed line of their journey spread out over the sands below.

Ahead, Zeb stopped, looked slackly round till Nathaniel'd caught up. Zeb stood there with'is hands jammed into ripped pockets. But'e concentrated too much even t'swear and when'e tried t'jerk'is hand from'is pocket't tore away. He peeled't off'is hand. He dis-folded a creased photo, glossy paper stock, with words and half-phrases on the backside where't'd been excised from something, a piece of tape still remaining from where't'd once been affixed t'perhaps a page'n an album, but the tape'd long lost'ts sticky and just flapped'n the breeze. He squinted at't. Looked out at the landscape. Squinted at't again.

"It might not be here anymore," Nathaniel said. But Zeb'dn't've seemed t'hear. He glanced down at the picture, up and around again. Two steps forward, the same thing. He stumbled up a small dune and Nathaniel glanced toward the horizon. "It'll be dark soon," he said. "We'll have to start back first thing in the morning or our water supplies won't last."

But Zeb'dn't've seemed t'hear, only silently stumbled down the dune's far side, clutched the image'n both hands tightly enough

the edges crinkled. A rock formation appeared ahead. He stopped. Looked down. Looked up. Turned. Repeated that. And again. And Zeb fell t'is knees as Nathaniel approached'm and maybe Nathaniel thought Zeb'd made'mself sick spinning round and round. But as'e approached, he'd've seen Zeb digging with'is hands, scooping sand back onto'is knees, as'f tryna bury'mself. The crumpled picture lay beside'm on the sand and Nathaniel gripped'is staff and bent, snatched't from being buried. He brushed the sand off't as'e straightened and'd t'step back as Zeb shoved sand around'is ankles. "What is it?"

"... last..." Zeb huffed. Sweat speckled the mound'e'd built over'is knees. "... shot it took" He stopped t'rest, panted, lunged forward and started t'dig again. "... before...it... shut...down..." Something dull-colored appeared outa the bottom of the hole and before sand'd collapse and fill over't, he lunged forward, dug'is fingers'n after't. His eyes'd've burned as two fireballs. "Yes—fucking yes—fucking fucking—eeeeeeeeeeeeeh—" Careened backwards, arms still rigid and perpendicular t'is chest, he stared blankly up at a twisted piece of tubing or housing or solar panel or who knows what. And'is eyes'd've seemed t'b'as dull and as rusted and corroded as't'd've been. "No no no no no no no no" He scrambled up again, clawed into the sand. "It has to be..." He huffed. "... has to be...here..." He huffed, gasped. His fingers tore at shifting sands. "... proof...proof... .. it's the only proof....." Finally, he collapsed face first into the hole. And Nathaniel'd've scrambled t'get'is pack off'is shoulders and pull'm out before sand cascaded down over'is head.

Zeb lay there slack jawed, lightly panting, dull eyes turned skyward.

Nathaniel watched the blood-lined horizon as'e sat there beside'm. "I'll put up the tent."

“One thin I’ve always wondered,” Genie said. “Why’s none’ve
tell a story bout the last trip out? With Allan?”

After a moment or two, several shook their heads.

“Bad karma,” Ambeth said.

Genie said, “What’s that mean?”

Li nodded.

“I’ve heard,” someone said, “they’re some hereticals’n the 13th
that talk bout’t.”

It'd've taken half a day t'transverse the plain and they say the only way t'see't properly'd've been from the air. And from the ridgetop, the deep-carved lines'n the plain below'd've seemed faintly ovoid.

Zeb said, "We have to go down." It was the first thing'e'd've said'n three days.

Nathaniel glanced down the rock-strewn ridge. "Why?"

"To fucking piss on it," Zeb said, and half stumbled on loose rubble as'e started down.

Nathaniel probed with'is walkingstick, started down after'm. "What is it?"

"Are you fucking illiterate?" Zeb said as'e slipped again, caught'mself, as small stones cascaded round'is ankles. "It's a fucking copyright symbol."

“What’s that look’ike?” Genie said.

Someone produced a piece of chalk and sketched something on the floor. “No,” Someone else said, and took the chalk. “Thus way.”

“Wut’s’t matter?” Li said.

“I’s jus wonderin.”

T’other two traded chalk and motions and still argued.

“What yuh think’e was’ike?” Genie said. “J R R Bristol, that’s.”

“Why?” he asked’mself. Sensors’d’ve noted the faint disturbance of air’n the room and cataloged a spike’n’is frontal lobe. But nothing disturbed the curtain hung over the bed, except for the faint whisper of air-conditioning. “Why?” The four-poster bed rose t’ceiling height or more, branched into ebony curlicues that looked too delicate t’take the weight of the solid, bas-relief-covered, hardwood-inlaid slab that rested on’em, on and’n which the deep-carved lines of an oaken rocket with cherry-wood flames passed through a veil of poplar stars and swirled toward a great circle of red-oak that dominated the center and bulged and curved outward. “Why?” His hand twitched on purple silk sheets, as’f t’wad’em between’is fingers, but’is hand trembled and fell still. “Water.” Outside, beyond pleated, silken, canopy walls, something’d’ve moved whisper quiet across thick rugs.

Seppie must've glanced at our journaller, because she said, "Wusn't June supposed tuh av wretten a book?"

June'd've made many trips, talked t'many people, but most of't'd've seemed no different than any other day, so none'd've thought anything bout what she'd been doing. And obviously, one of the trips she'd've taken'd've been t'Mary-Celleste's Cathedral.

“I told you she’d find a way to get out of it,” Pipa said. She paused, ahold of the cart’s other handle as Jean t’continue t’push’ers and’t pivoted through the corner. A blood-red-dipped square appeared through the double archway ahead.

“We’d better stop here,” Jean said. Sweat trickled over’er hip and not-consciously she wiped’t away. “Fuck her,” she said as she rounded the cart, pulled free two fabric bundles that’d been packed among the vegetables and a couple broken-necked, still feathered chickens. “I’ll get her later.” She tossed one of the bundles t’Pipa. “Here.”

Pipa groaned. “It’s already too hot as it is.” But she started t’disknot the twine.

“Let’s just get it over with.”

Pipa groaned, but bunched the outfit and slipped’t over’er head and worked’t down’er body. “I don’t see why we couldn’t just wear saris or something.” Fabric clung t’er sweat-damp skin. “I’m going to die in this,” she said. “How do you wear things like this all the time?” she said t’June. But June’dn’t reply.

“Let’s go,” Jean said. “The faster we get outa here the better.”

They passed through the double archway and crossed the square. Overhead, cathedral spires burnt with late daylight and flying buttresses sank into umber. They stopped the cart at the bottom of massive half-conical steps. “I’ll go up,” June said. Atop’em, what must’ve once been a massive doorway’d been bricked closed and a small, utilitarian door’d been slotted among the bricks, aggravatingly off-center beneath the arch. June knocked. A slot opened and eyes peeked through. The slot snapped shut. And fragrance rushed out as the door opened. The woman who’d opened’t leaned out and looked

t'either side, past June. "It's only us," June said. She looked over'er shoulder and down toward the cart. "And everybody's dressed."

"Well," the woman said, "we have to make sure." She turned and motioned for someone. And the two of'em started down the steps. The woman looked over everything. "Oh good." She grabbed both chickens by their legs, turned and started up the steps, so their limp necks jangled as she climbed. June and Jean and Pipa lifted baskets from the cart and carried'em up.

Someone closed the door behind'em as they entered, enclosed'em amid pungent flower smell that'd've almost made'em cough. Blood-light pierced bubbled glass set high above. Already, a few candles and lamps'd been lit t'counter the gloom on the ground floor. Evening light rendered lighter petals variegated crimson amid darker leaves, blue blossoms rendered black as pitch night till touched by candle-light. They set down their baskets while the woman continued into the distance and disappeared amid wine-dark shadows and blooms and vine cascades within the vast interior.

Jean looked over flower-packed baskets stacked on a nearby table. She reached for one and bzzzzzzzzzz rattled outa't and she jerked'er hand back as something small but loud burst into the air, rounded'er head and bzzzzzzzzzz toward the vast arch ceiling and disappeared.

"It's okay," the slight woman seated nearby said. "They've all gone to bed by now."

A trifle more warily, Jean inspected the basket. "Somebody should've told that one."

"They won't hurt you," the woman said. Her arms and legs must've seemed thinner than those of the chair she sat'n. She looked at the table beside'er and shooped'er hand through the air after something they'dn't've seen.

Redness faded from the windows above, left only candles and lamps t'flicker. A lighted taper approached, borne by the woman who'd open the door. And Mary-Celleste followed.

"You've come very late," Mary-Celleste said.

"We had a little trouble on the way," June said.

"Nothing serious?"

"No," June said. She looked over the baskets on the table. "The flowers look wonderful."

"They're doing very well in the heat," Mary-Celleste said.

"I'm glad something is," Pipa said, and tugged at'er collar.

Mary-Celleste examined'er a moment before she turned back t'June. "However, about that, we hadn't reckoned on any additions. We don't have anything to add that would cover the chickens."

"Oh, they're not for trade," June said.

Pipa said, "Allison sent them."

Mary-Celleste paused.

"She asked us to bring them along when we came," June said.

Mary-Celleste remained silent. She finally said, "You'll stay the night."

"Actually," Jean said. "We'll probably start on home. All we need is to borrow a little fire to light the lamp and we should be good."

"Bad to go out at night," the slight woman said.

Mary-Celleste looked at'er, nodded. "You'll stay here tonight. We have beds. You can start in the morning."

Jean raised'er hand. "B—"

But Mary-Celleste stepped past'er and helped the woman rise. "We'll have some tea before bed."

"Tea would be very nice," the woman said. "And perhaps a cookie."

"We'll see what we can find," Mary-Celleste said.

“Who’s yuhr favorite?”

“The policeman,” Genie said.

“Yah. I ate that’e always dies.”

“What es he-en supposed tuh do?” Seppie said.

“He’sn’t *always*’ve t’die, though,” someone said.

“But that’s what happened. That’s the history.”

“Fudge history.”

“Yah.”

“Can yuh do that?” Genie said.

Yuh can bet that teens weren't the only ones t'ride the rails. Wind blew through the open train car, swirled straw. The businessman breathed deeply and sighed. "I just couldn't stand it anymore," he said. "You know?" And'e glanced at the shabbily dressed man beside'm, who must've been only dimly visible'n the train light or early morning light that'd've filtered into the boxcar. The businessman sighed again. "Yes, you really have a life here. Not cooped up in an office all day sweating under a ceiling fan. No, out here you're free as can be." T'other men'n the car'd've watched'm. One drank from a tin can. The businessman licked'is lips and massaged'is chin. "Being out here does make a person thirsty, though." But t'other man looked at'm without reply. The businessman cleared'is throat. "Ah, well..." He shifted t'feel'is pockets. "I'd be willing to pay, of course." He moved from'is pants t'searching inside'is jacket. "Ha, well... I seem to have forgotten it somewhere." He paused. "But I guess...you don't *really* need money in this kind of life, do you?" He glanced at'em. "You get to be free of all that obligation." T'other men'dn't reply.

The engine whistled.

Someone leaned as'f t'look through the open door. Two or three rose and pushed'em shut. The only light that'd've remained'd've been that which filtered through cracks between boards. Already, the air'd turned heavy. The engine whistled.

"Get down."

The businessman turned. One of the men jerked at'm. Already, the rest'd half-buried'emselves'n the straw piled at either end of the car.

"Cover up," someone said.

“Oh.” The businessman paused. “Right.” He removed his jacket and laid it over himself and pulled straw over his shoulders and head till mustiness and darkness cloaked him. The train shuddered. Chains and interconnects rattled as it slowed. The engine whistled. Air brakes hissed. Chains and locks rattled and doors slid open several cars down. Closed. Footsteps had passed one way, then the other. Louder locks and chains, someone opened a nearer car. The businessman’s heart pounded. He breathed hard, suffocated. The door slid open. He held his breath. Footsteps only an arm’s length away. His heart pounded in his ears. Footsteps. The businessman still breathed hard. He shifted, lifted his head enough so straw fell over his brow and nose and he’d see. Dimmest early morning filtered through the open boxcar door. Air brakes hissed.

“HEY! YOU!” Feet clomped along the platform. The businessman’s heart had hopscotched. “STOP!” People ran. They were gonna find him. The businessman shook. How was he gonna explain? “THEY’RE AT THE OTHER END OF THE TRAIN!” The businessman jerked up and straw cascaded round him and his jacket dropped to the boxcar floor. He jerked and ran. Collided with something in the dimness. Shoes slammed across the platform. The engine whistled. Couplings and interconnects clanked. Yells. Yells.

He fell.

Coreman's cap rolled across the platform.

His dented badge lay where't'd tumbled down onto a crosstie.

When they'd've pulled from the tracks what'd remained, after having been drug so far, there'd've been no way t'tell the remnants of a blue uniform from the shreds of a bloodied blue business suit.

Coreman lay face up'n the middle of the boxcar. Wind carried through open doors and stirred straw. One man, Casey, kneeled beside'm, eyed the deep gash'n Coreman's head where'e'd struck the car. Blood still remained on the boards nearest the door. T'others sat watching. One held the businessman's jacket wadded under'is arm. "Don't mess with him."

Casey glanced at t'other man. And'e turned and tugged'is bag from the straw.

"Just going to make trouble."

"I can handle my own trouble," Casey said. He opened'is canteen and wetted a bandanna and touched Coreman's lips. He wetted't again and touched'is wound. Coreman'dn't stir.

"We should shove him off."

Casey re-capped'is canteen. "Try. And I'll throw you off. Got that?"

T'other man turned away and bunched the businessman's coat and stuffed't into'is sack.

Even with both doors open, late-afternoon heat settled into the boxcar. Casey leaned back against the door and rolled a piece of straw between his lips as he watched the passing landscape.

Coreman groaned. And Casey turned, scooted toward him as if he wasn't sure of what he'd heard. Coreman groaned again. Casey reached for his bag. He opened his canteen. "Just try to sip," he said, and canted it against Coreman's lips. His chest rose and fell. Slowly, he cracked his eyes, squinted against bright afternoon. "You took a fall," Casey said. "Hit your head." He withdrew the canteen. "How you feeling?"

Coreman's lips moved, but nothing discernible emerged.

"Try to get some rest," Casey said.

Coreman's eyes were already open when Casey woke. He shifted and blindly felt for his canteen as he rubbed his face. "Better?"

Coreman worked his jaw as he watched the roof. "Where am I?"

Casey put the canteen against his lips. Coreman winced as he swallowed. "You're on a train. Do you remember what happened?"

Coreman watched the ceiling. "No."

"You hit your head. I told you yesterday."

Coreman watched the ceiling. "I don't remember."

Casey offered him the canteen again. "Your head looks worse than it is, I think. But I'm not a doctor." He re-capped the canteen. "What's your name?"

Coreman watched the ceiling. "I...don't know."

[The train?] traveled on.

Days passed.

Coreman sat up against mounded straw. He looked down at'mself. Blood'd seeped through t'is undershirt. He looked over t'where'is torn shirt lay on the straw. He looked at't a few moments more, then looked across at Casey.

Casey offered'm the canteen. "Here. Drink."

Coreman accepted't and tilted back'is head as'e put't t'is lips. He groaned through'is nose and leaned forward and touched the side of'is head. His hand shook. And Casey took the canteen before'e'd drop't.

"Let's try this," Casey said. "What *do* you remember?"

Coreman paused as'e looked down at'mself.

"What was your wife's name?" Pause. "Did you have any children?"

Coreman remained silent. Casey sipped water.

"What about you?" Coreman said. He looked over.

"Married?" Casey shook'is head. "No, thank you. That's just not a way to live a life." He re-capped the canteen and motioned with't toward t'others. "Oh, it's the traveling life for me—"

"Shut up," the man opposite said.

"Just that some people are more sociable than others," Casey said. "Y—" Casey and t'others glanced round. The engine whistled.

"Train's stopping."

"What the mess for?" One of the men climbed up and moved low toward the door, grabbed't with one hand and looked out. He squinted and motion wind blew back'is hair. "It's a work crew."

T'other men packed their stuff beneath straw and climbed under after't.

"Get under cover," Casey said.

Coreman said, "Why?"

"Cause your head's caved in enough already." He helped'm round.

There'dn't've been enough straw, nor enough time t'close the doors without somebody possibly seeing. So one or several men stood rigid'n the corners, could've only hoped shadows and bright sun light'd've hide'em as the interconnects clanked and air brakes hissed and the world stopped moving by. Muffled voices approached. Caps passed.

Somebody whistled. "Hey—" One of'em pushed up'is hat as'e looked into the car. "What've we got here?"

Two or three men jumped and pulled'emselfs into the car. Those'n the corner broke, but they tripped one and slammed another into the wall by'is collar. "[Stows]."

"HEY—" one said. "WHAT DO YOU THINK?" And started kicking straw. Men rolled out.

A man grabbed one and pulled'm up. "What do you think this is?"

"Get a load of this one." They'd dragged out Coreman, who dropped t'is hands and knees and heaved. A man positioned t'gut kick'm, but Casey burst out and shoved'm back. But someone kicked'm'n the back of the leg and'e dropped and someone struck'is face.

"What's this?" Someone stood over Coreman, squatted beside'm. "Get a load of this."

"What's going on back here?" The conductor appeared, framed by afternoon brightness.

"Just doing some cleaning," one man said. "Bunch of freeloaders."

The conductor hoisted'mself into the boxcar.

"Think you got to have something without paying for it?" one said. And'e kicked.

The conductor said, "Stop."

"There isn't no other way to deal with jobless trash like this," the foreman said. "Might as well dump them out here and save the trouble."

"You don't run this train," the conductor said.

While they'd talked, Coreman'd shifted and dug into'is pocket. Trembling, he dropped'is wallet. Someone bent and lifted't. "What's this? Something else you've stole?"

"Give me that." The conductor took't and turned't over'n'is hand. He looked down at Coreman. "This yours?" Coreman faintly nodded. The conductor opened't and thumbed through the contents, extracted a few bills. "Looks like they're paid all the way," he said, and'e squatted and placed the wallet'n Coreman's hand.

"You're making a mistake," the foreman said.

The conductor slipped the bills into'is pocket. "They've paid their way," he said. "Now, all of you get down to your car. You're holding up my train." And when none moved, he added, "And for every minute this train's late, I'll make sure your pay's docked."

The workmen grumbled, but they climbed down. "See you boys on the trip back."

Casey slowly struggled up. Other men just groaned and lay there. He bent and helped Coreman back against the straw. He licked blood from the corner of'is mouth. "Only way to live, isn't it?"

They disembarked at the freightyard. "Welcome to the west," Casey said. They squeezed against lumber stacks as trucks honked and passed. They'd've pulled aside a barely nailed fence board and climbed through and sidestepped down a hill and onto a back road. Casey tapped Coreman's shoulder. "Come on, this way. I know a place we can go."

They kept t'back streets till those led t'narrow roads that meandered out toward the town's fringes. Casey, walking with 'is hands 'n 'is pockets, nudged Coreman with 'is elbow. "Up here." He motioned toward a small house. "We'll go round back." But'e stopped and glanced up and down the road before they started across the yard and round the back. He knocked on the doorjamb. Someone pulled aside the curtain and peeked out. An old woman smiled when she opened the door. "Matilda." Casey slightly bowed. "Could you see yourself clear to tending a couple hungry men." And as'f she'dn't noticed'm before, her eyes flitted toward Coreman. Casey smiled and dropped 'is hand on 'is shoulder. "Oh, don't worry about him. Best guy in the world. I can personally vouch for him. Known him practically all my life." The old woman seemed t'hesitate, but she nodded and smiled and started t'push open the screendoor, but Casey opened't for'er. "I have to say I think you look better every time I see you."

The old woman shook'er head and pursed'er lips. She motioned. "Come in, come in. Before you're seen."

Casey pushed Coreman through first. "Go on and have a seat," he said, and aimed'm toward the kitchen table and patted 'is shoulder.

The old woman, who'd turned t'set a pan on the stove, looked over'er shoulder and stopped. "Casey..." She turned. "What's happened to your face."

Casey touched'is cheek as'f'e'd forgotten'e'd'd one. "Oh, this. Nothing. Just a run-in with a few railway men. I've told you how that can be." He glanced over'is shoulder and motioned toward Coreman. "My friend took the worst of it."

The old woman rubbed'er hands on'er apron and stepped toward the table. "Oh, dear..." She hovered'er fingers near the blood-encrustation along the side of Coreman's head. "Dear..." And rubbing'er hands against'er apron, she turned and disappeared through the living room.

Casey winked at Coreman.

And after a few moments, she reappeared and set a tin first-aid box on the table. "Dear..." And got a clean dishcloth from a drawer while Casey filled'mself a glass of water at the sink. She wetted't when'e stepped away. And when she returned t'the table, she gently touched't t'Coreman's head. He winced. "Oh, I'm sorry, dear." She returned t'the sink and re-wetted't. "Maybe I should call the doctor," she said.

"Naw," Casey said. "He's hardheaded." He tilted back'is head and drained the glass. "You just need to cleanup a little, don't you."

"Those horrible railroad men," she said. "Somebody should say something about them doing things like this."

"Just some bad apples, you know," Casey said.

"Shameful." She shook'er head. "Let me get you some water." She returned with a half-full glass. "Here you go, dear. Drink it slowly." Coreman took hold of't with two hands and she watched'm and shook'er head. "What's your name, dear?"

"John," Casey said. "This's my old friend John." He laughed. "Where are my manners?" And'e waved'is hand. "John, this is Mrs Matilda Oldstead. You know, the wonderful lady I've told you so much about."

She shook'er head. "I'm sure he hasn't said anything about me."

"I never stop talking about you, isn't that right, John?" Casey said. "And as you can see, I've only been able to convey a tenth of her qualities."

Mrs Oldstead shook'er head. "Stop it." She turned toward the icebox.

"I wouldn't if I could," Casey said. "Some things are just demanded of a person."

She cleared'er throat as she set an egg carton on the counter, hid'er face, but faintly smiled as she turned on the stove.

"And right now it's just demanded I say that you do indeed get prettier every time I see you."

"Casey..." She glanced at'm and'e smiled.

A train whistle carried from the distance. "Number thirty-seven headed north," Casey said. Coreman looked up from looking down at 'is new shirt, glanced into the distance. "You'll get back to it soon enough," Casey said. "Better put that hat on, don't want anything getting in that wound." Coreman glanced down, then slipped on 'is felt hat so 't covered the bandage taped on the side of 'is head. "Gotta give old man Oldstead credit for one thing," Casey said. "He was a snappy dresser." Then 'e whistled. He walked with 'is hands 'n 'is pockets.

"Where are we going?"

Casey whistled. "We're going where folks like you and me go."

"You and me?"

"Hey," Casey said, "you're just a little sick is all. I've seen it before, after a blow to the head. Everything will come back soon enough. You just wait and see." They turned at an intersection. "And until then, well, I'm not the kind of person to leave a friend in need of help. After all these years—heck, near a lifetime—you think I'm going to run out on you now?"

Asphalt¹⁴⁷ roads turned t' dirt as they passed beyond town. "This way," Casey said. And they sidestepped down a gully and traveled along't. A rusted sheet of corrugated metal lay on the bank ahead and Casey lifted one corner with 'is foot. "Here we go." He pushed the metal aside. He produced matches from 'is shirt pocket and struck one against 'is shoe. He motioned 'is head. "Come on." Matchlight flickered over the interior. Coreman stooped and stopped 'n the entrance and tried t' discern anything 'n the dimness. Casey found a lamp, lit't, blew-out the match and tossed't over 'is shoulder. He looked back

as'e adjusted the lamp glass down and turned up the wick. "Come on in." He motioned t'one of the folding lawn chairs deployed'n that small space and stepped by Coreman and pulled the corrugated metal sheet down. Sunlight shone through old nail holes. Lamplight flickered over piled, rusted tin cans, glass jars and bottles, wadded old newspapers [...]

"What is it?" Coreman said.

"It's a hobo¹⁴⁸ hole," Casey said. "And that means coziness." He whistled t'mself as'e kicked through dis-used tin cans of more recent vintages. "Have a seat," Casey said. "Get some rest. We got to be ready for tonight."

Coreman, stooped, looked round the space. "So we're hobos?"

"Dyed in the bone."

Coreman paused. "What's a hobo?"

Casey laughed. "It's a noble calling, old friend. We're the proof that God didn't just put people here to work until there's no tomorrow." He lifted a can and glanced inside't. "We're proof that freedom exists." He tossed the can over'is shoulder.

Years passed.

They road trains north and south and east and west. They met others. They sometimes slept with one eye open. They walked the country and towns. They climbed atop dis-locked refrigerated box-cars and ate ice cream. They weathered storms'n holes and dis-used basements. They fought. They slipped into basements and garden sheds while those'n the house slept and crept out again before morning'd come. They treated cuts and bruises. They watched sunsets from open boxcars. They stole through night'n fear-quiet towns where men walked Mainstreet with hunting rifles slung over their shoulders. They survived riots. They starved. They escaped police detentionairies. They saw wrecked trains and fire-blackened fields. They killed time with worn playing cards and won shoes with secondhand dice. They slept on flat roofs and watched stars. They trafficked'n burnt-out radio parts and old books. They escaped labor camps. They evaded dogs and lynch mobs. They passed sleepless weeks'n wind-rattled boxcars. They barbecued collapsed, skin-ribbed cattle over open fires. They bartered for worn-out clothes and thin-soled shoes. They traded quart jars of gasoline. They lived within factory complexes' intestinal undersides.

They survived.

Casey lay back'n the sun with'is forearm over'is eyes. He yawned. Coreman sat with a push pole across'is legs and absently scratched behind Shiva's ears. When they drifted too near the canyon wall, he shifted and pushed'em away. Their lashed-metal-drum raft swayed. "Can't you run a steady ship?" Casey said, and yawned. "I can't believe you talked me into actually trying to find this place." He shifted'is forearm and rubbed'is eyes and yawned again. He glanced round at everything lashed t'the raft. "You haven't given anything else away, have you?"

"I haven't given anything away," Coreman said, without looking back.

"Well, I for one hope we don't come across those women again. Much as I like watching them scale down from up there, any more trades like the last one you did and we'll be lucky to have a toothpick to float on."

Coreman'dn't reply. Shiva stretched.

"What's the matter with you? You've been quiet for days."

"Nothing."

"All these years, you only ever say nothing when you mean something." Casey shook'is head and scratched'is neck. "You haven't been in your own head for I don't know how long. And with that deal the other day—"

"It came out well enough."

"Is that what you call it?"

"I got what I wanted out of it."

Casey threw up'is hands and lay back and closed'is eyes. "Well,

if you think a whole jar of honey's worth somebody pointing in a general direction, I don't know what I've taught you all these years."

"We should be there soon," Coreman said.

"Where? That's the question." Casey shifted his arm and cracked an eye. "John. You there, John?" And he sighed and lay back again. "We're too stocked is the problem. Best provisioned we've ever been in our lives. Screws you up. Can't keep yourself straight. You gotta be hungry to hunt." Still, Coreman didn't reply. "Gives you too much time to think about things you shouldn't think about. You don't even know what you're looking for. How you going to know it if you find it? Heck, maybe you already found it and didn't know it."

"That's just a chance I'll have to take."

Casey sighed. "We—"

Shiva sat up.

"We're here."

Casey shifted his forearm up his head and squinted. Late afternoon sun backlit walls and towers. "So it's big," he said. And he covered his eyes again. "Let me know when we're docked."

Coreman reached back and touched the rudder. Shiva stretched, watched the city. "Wuurrrrrrr."

Casey moved his forearm and looked up. Several people sat at the end of the stone dock with their legs dangled over the edge. He sat up, stood. "Afternoon, ladies." He bowed. "My friend John and I here have come a long way to see pretty sights, but I think we might've already gotten as many as we can take without bursting."

A few of those above laughed and shook their heads.

If they'd've arrived during pilgrimage, anyone who might've known'm'd've been gone. So'e'd've wandered the city's alleyways and passageways with the same name'e'd worn for near half an age.

He knocked on the door. After a moment or two, the eyeslit snikt open. "Who're you?"

"A man named Troy told me I might have some things you'd be interested in trading for."

"What?"

Coreman shifted his bag from his shoulder and opened it and withdrew a leather fold and opened it. "Steel crochet needles. A few other sewing implements."

The eyes behind the door seemed to hesitate. "Just a minute," she said. And the eyeslit snikt shut. Coreman waited. The eyeslit snikt open. "What do you want in exchange?"

"We understand doilies from here are often a kind of currency farther within the city. That's what we're mainly interested in."

"We?" Her eyes darted side-to-side as if to see around him.

"My partner," Coreman said. "He's not here right now."

The eyes turned on him again. "Well... Let me see the needles again." Coreman raised the fold. "Alright." A latch clacked on the opposite side. "You can come in," the young woman said. She glanced out through the door after she'd stepped through, then quickly closed it and dropped the latch. "This way." She led him among flowers. "Wait here." And she disappeared among green and blossoms. He looked up. Sunlight refracted through multi-colored, bubbled glass.

"Who are you?"

The old-looking, thin woman sat there on her usual chair, a small watering jug on her lap.

Coreman turned. Greenery must've near enmeshed and hidden her. "My friends call me John."

"You look familiar."

He paused. "No one's...ever told me that before."

"Where are you from?"

"I don't know."

After a long pause Coreman said, "What's your name?"

"Maureen."

Coreman nodded t'mself. "Have you been here long?"

"Yes, a long time." She raised the watering pot from'er lap'n both'er hands and tipped the spout into a nearby planter.

"Me and my friend just got here."

"You wear more clothes than the rest of them."

He glanced down at'mself. Twine wrapped one shoe t'keep'ts sole from flopping. "We've been outdoors alot." He looked up. "It can get rough, sometimes." He looked up and round. "That doesn't seem to be as much a problem here."

The young woman reappeared from amid green fronds, with a basket'n both hands. "I've collected some of various sizes," she said. "I hope that's alright."

Coreman glanced over'em. He nodded. And'e took the leather fold from'is pack and handed't t'er. Handfuls at a time, he filled what space remained'n'is pack with doilies while the young woman opened the leather fold and ran'er eyes and fingers over shiny crochet and sewing needles.

"You plan to stay?" Maureen said. She lowered the watering pot into'er lap again.

Coreman looked at'er after'e'd fastened'is pack. "No," he said. "Me and my friend, we'll be leaving as soon as we can."

"You should wait," the young woman said. "Mary-Celleste, she'll be here in a minute."

Coreman shook'is head. He ran'is fingers back through'is hair and replaced'is hat. "I should go." He pulled'is pack over'is shoulder and turned. The young woman moved ahead of'm and dis-fastened the latch.

"Are you sure you can't stay?" she said. "I'm sure Mary-Celleste w—"

But'e'dn't look back as'e started down the steps. Or as'e crossed the square and passed into afternoon-shadowed passageways. The

young woman closed the door, latched't. She walked back among leafy green and blossoms, the leather fold still'n'er hand. "Should I get you some more water, Mrs Coreman?"

Maureen shook'er head. "No, dear. I think these have had enough."

Mary-Celleste appeared. "I thought I heard someone."

"A trader," the young woman said. And she showed'er the needles. "All he wanted was some doilies for them."

Mary-Celleste nodded. "Take them and put them in the stock."

The young woman nodded and passed'er.

Mary-Celleste turned. "It's almost tea time."

Maureen nodded and Mary-Celleste helped'er rise. "That was a strange man," Maureen said as they walked.

"How so?"

Maureen hesitated. "I...don't know. Just something."

"Maybe we'll see him again."

Maureen'dn't reply.

“Yewn only forgot a theng,” Seppie said.

“What’s that?”

“As soon as they-ens’d landed, Dave’d av come down the stairs demandeng any books they-ens’d aboard.”

Several laughed.

Ambeth glanced at Li. “No comment?”

Li shrugged. “Wut can I say?” Her mouth twisted into a crooked grin. “May be screwball, but at least’t’s consistently screwball.”

Everyone laughed.

Jean groaned as they carried flower baskets down t' the cart. Early morning sun'd yetn't touched the square and paving stones remained lukewarm underfoot. She rubbed'er pink puffed eyes. Pipa's looked little better. "I'm going to kill Fenn when we get back," Jean said. But Pipa just shook'er head.

They both waited by the cart as June remained above. "Thank you for everything," June said. She adjusted the way'er bag strap fell over'er shoulder. Mary-Celleste nodded.

And she produced two or three small doilies from'er pocket. "I want you to take these to... my daughter. In payment for the chickens."

"But—"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head. She pressed'em into June's hand. "Come soon. We can talk more if you want."

June nodded.

Mary-Celleste paused, then stepped back through the doorway and closed the door and the latch clicked from the opposite side.

June started down the steps.

Pipa said, "What're those for?"

June glanced down at the doilies still'n'er hand. She shook'er head. "Nothing." And she slipped'em into'er bag. "We should get going."

"Yes." Jean nodded and took hold of the cart. She groaned as she pushed.

"What's wrong?" June said.

Jean stopped round the next bend, looked over'er shoulder. "Wrong?" She shifted and pulled sweat-drenched fabric over'er head and bunched't and tossed't into the cart. And Pipa followed

suit. Both sighed. "How can you sleep in all that?" Jean said. She sighed again and snatched the waterbag. "I thought I was gonna burn to death." She passed the waterbag t'Pipa and grabbed the cart again. "Come on. Let's get home." Pipa tossed'er dress into the cart. She offered the waterbag t'June, who shook'er head, and then Pipa squirted some into the back of'er throat and re-corked't.

"Cooler this morning," Pipa said as they walked. "Means it'll be hotter this afternoon."

"You can only take so much off," Jean said.

Pipa nodded.

Fenchurch shoveled porridge into'er open mouth. And everyone at the table'd t'glance'er way at least once. "Got plans?" Izzy said. Fenchurch nodded, opened'er still full mouth for another spoonful.

"Well, they can't be that important," Catherine said. "You're going to drown yourself in breakfast."

Fenchurch, not-able t'reply, dropped'er spoon into'er bowl and leaned over the table and took'er cup'n both hands and gulped.

Someone glanced over their shoulder. "Incoming," she said. Others glanced up as Isis wandered across the square toward the smoldering fire, sat'n front of't and watched the cast-iron pot as'f'ts tiny legs might help't walk off. Dave ambled'n behind'er, hands at'is sides as'f'e were tryna slip'em into pockets that no longer existed. "Morning," he mumbled as'e approached. And Izzy pulled'm out a chair. Someone pushed a fresh bowl toward'm. "You look terrible," Izzy said.

Dave yawned and water beaded from the corners of'is puffy eyes. "Working too late." He closed one eye and rubbed't. "Damn candles flicker too much."

"I don't know what was worse for your health," Tracy said as she set'er cup down. "Obsessing over computers or your library."

Fenchurch swallowed, sputtered and coughed.

"Don't breathe it."

Fenchurch shook'er head. "... must..." She coughed again. "That must mean you've got it finished. I'll take it down to Jennifer for you and have it bound. J—"

"Not yet," Dave said.

"Why! You only ever work all night when you're finishing something out."

"It is finished," he said.

"Then what's wrong?"

He stuck a spoonful of porridge'n's mouth, worked't round and round so long Fenchurch looked as'f she might come outa'er seat and hit'm just t'make'm swallow. "Because," he finally said, "a cat peed on some of the pages while I was... out at the fountain this morning." He took another spoonful, rolled't round and round. "But it should be done this evening."

Catherine said, "Has anyone seen June this morning?"

"She went with Jean and Pipa, didn't she?"

"Weren't you," someone said t'Fenchurch. "Weren't you supposed to go with Jean and them?"

Fenchurch shrugged.

"I seem to remember hearing something about a bet."

"What?" Catherine said. "What's all this about?"

"Nothing," Fenchurch said.

"Just Fenny being Fenny. As usual."

Fenchurch rolled'er eyes. And as'f t've something or anything t'reply, she glanced toward Dave and said, "Why don't you write something original, instead of just transcribing?"

Tracy shook'er head. "Don't encourage him."

"Why not?"

"Because," Tracy said. "Computer people make *terrible* writers. And artists." She sipped something hot. "And anything that can't be handled in linear ultra-finetudial logic. So about everything."

A couple or three others laughed, but Dave just shrugged, rolled a spoonful of porridge round and round'n's mouth. "There's already too many," he said after'e swallowed. "Already too many as it is."

"Speaking of," Tracy said. "Has our Don reached his deathbed yet?"

"Spoilers," someone said.

"It's probably almost a thousand fucking years old. It's sufficiently spoil."

"It's not that old."

"Close enough."

“Depends on what system you use to round.”

T’other person shook their head and stirred their porridge’n silence.

“Besides,” Tracy said, “he’s never going to finish it.”

“Why not?” Fenchurch said.

“Because you can’t transcribe from a dead tablet.”

“So?”

Tracy shook’er head, as’f surrendering t’the inevitable.

“I’m working on it,” Dave said, half t’mself. He mumbled at’is food. “I’m...working on it.”

Near midday, as'd become their habit, Colette dismissed everyone t'find their meals. And they exited together out through the archway beneath the sign of the hourglass.

"What're yuh lookin for?" Helena said.

Kayla shook'er head. She looked down and pushed Quetzalcoatl's nose back beneath the flap. "I'dn't know," she said. "I still keep gettin the feelin somebody's watchin us."

Helena looked over'er shoulder.

"Don't get paranoid," Li said.

"Don't yuh ever get nervous?" Kayla said.

"Nope."

"That's easy for yuh t'say."

"Maybe."

"There's nobody followin us," Ambeth said.

"No," Li said. "I jus assume I'm always bein watched."

"That figures," Ambeth said.

"Don't blame me cause yuh like t'watch."

"Hmpf, yuhn't, I'dn't."

"Yuh'd. Yuh might learn somethin."

"And what's that?"

"Don't know," Li said. "There's gotta b'somethin yuh'dn't know."

"There's one thin," Ambeth said. "How t'get yuh t'shutup."

"Can't'elp yuh there."

"Figures."

Li shrugged.

There'd've been fewer stories told at night while everyone lay'n their hammocks once the competition'd started. But silence'd yetn't been given a chance edgewise. General cacophony rolled round the chamber as one or two candles burned and dimness flickered between'em as they considered over who'd competed that night or the night before or the night t'come, among other things.

"Oh'er. Everybody knows she's stiff asa poker and dry as the desert."¹²⁶

"Yah, I know someone like that, too."

"I'm tellin yuh't's true, I've heard't."

"Not possible."

"It is."

"There's no such thin asa flyin machine."

"Non, E've heard thot, toon. Ey say someun'n the eighth's been buildin'eem."

"I'm just askin fer a friend."

"Nothin good ever came outa the eighth. Besides, a machine can't fly."

"What's't look like?"

"They say't looks like a huge bag. And yuh build a fire under't. And't fills up and floats away."

"Fills up with what?"

"How do yuh get't back down?"

"Could yuh go all the way up t'the stars'n one?"

"Whyn't?"

¹²⁶ (See Bloomenthaal, FoIT 213.7.)

“Gawwwwwwwwwm, yews two’d beleeve unythen. Y—”

“*Spider!*”

Someone lept up, stamped their foot. Others leaned outa their hammocks and watched’em seemingly dance by candlelight and grab a hat and run toward a nearby corner and beat the floor. Some laughed. Someone said, “Yuh think there’re anymore?”

“Yap. Right there behind yuh.”

“Where?!”

“Bettern’t look—don’t make eye contact.”

They laughed.

“Don’t know,” someone said. “I just can’t get there.”

“Av yuh tried usin yuhr hand?”

“I’ve tried everythin. Sometimes I think I’m the only one.”

“At least’e can get’t up.”

Li grumbled. “Fine place t’try and sleep.”

Genie, who’d craned’er head along with everyone else at the earlier cry, settled back. “What’f the Martians’d come t’Earth?”

“There wasn’t anythin on Earth back then,” Li said. “Nothin’d evolved yet.”

“But wasn’t god supposed t’b’round before everythin.”

“So?”

“So J R R Bristol’d’ve been there. And—”

“No,” Li said. “’ow many times I’ve t’tell yuh—”

“Yous *actuallies* sounds likes yours believes theses poppycocks.”

Li sat up and looked over’er hammock. Lizbeth stood there amid flickery candlelight and hung a waterbag on a rafter and wiped’er mouth with the back of’er hand.

“Don’t call’t poppycock,” someone said.

Lizbeth glanced toward where the voice’d originated. “Poppycocks, poppycocks, poppycocks.” She added, “Alls writtens downs byse compulsives scribblers.” And she must’ve glanced at our journaller when she said, “Isn’ts thats rights?”

“Don’t encourage’er,” someone said.

“What’s’t then?” someone else said.

Lizbeth shrugged. “Crappies stories. Metaphors. Probablies a covers forse wutever reallies wents ons.”

“What?”

“Whyse shoulds Ise cares? Nexts yours’lls bese sayins phones weres
reals. And—”

“I’ve a phone,” someone said.

Someone else: “Nuh, yuh don’t.”

“I do.”

“Prove’t.”

“Look. See—hey!”

“This’s just a piece of glass stuck t’a board.”

“Give’t back.”

Laughter.

This's just me. But no. Yuh can argue that 'biological' things evolved on another planet and then came here and that's why there's no fossil record—all you want—but that'sn't evidence. Yuh can't invent a hypothesis involving something that can't b' experimentally verified and call't *science*. Yuh just can't.

Britt plopped'er hat into a corner as she entered and rubbed'er hands through'er hair. Someone rolled over, half-asleep'n the afternoon heat, mumbled, "Where've you been?"

"I had to take the boat to the other side," Britt said.

"What for?"

"Why should I tell you?" Britt glanced round. "Where's June?"

Whoever lay on the cushions rolled over. "Don't know." Face down, her muffled voice sounded dully through stuffing. "Haven't seen'er."

Britt opened'er mouth, but closed't without a word and soft breathing'd've been enough t'let'er know t'other person lay asleep. She glanced round the room again. A codex sat on the floor under the window and she went over t't, squatted and thumbed the pages. She closed the book "Fuck it." And she stood, crossed the room t'pick'er hat off the pile, pulled't onto'er head as she stepped beneath broiling sun. Across the square, she turned and entered one of the passages, made'er way along sun-bright corridors. Even under hat shade, heat convected from the walls and slid against'er skin and sweat trickled down'er body t'dark-spot stones'n those brief moments before evaporation and so the only marks left were those faint dry swells'n the dust soon t'b'obliterated by faint breezes. As she started down the bowl stairs toward the baths, it'd've seemed as'f she'd smell the water. And she'd've automatically taken a deep breath and let't out through'er nose when she pushed between wind-fluttered curtains.

"There you are." Jean motioned from one of the pools, where'er and several others sat seemingly torpid'n still cool water up t'their necks. "We were wondering where you got to. Come in. Cool off."

"I haven't had a shower yet."

"Well get one. It's too hot to do anything else. Come on."

"I was looking for June."

Izzy looked round. "Maybe she's already in the showers."

Britt nodded, pushed'er hat back and walked between pools that way. A faint trickle splattered against tilework beneath one of the heads. She glanced round farther corners, came back t'the showers. She shook'er head and dropped'er hat with t'others. Liquid orange-red dribbled down'er as she pulled the cord, slicked off and swirled toward the drains. And she tilted'er head back and let't run over'er face till she'dn't hold'er breath anymore and't all burst out at once and obliterated the water into fine mists left not-seen till she lowered'er head and flicked the water from'er eyes and opened'em. Finally, when the drains ran clear again, she walked dripping back between the pools, knelt and slipped over the side and ducked beneath and surfaced. Water streamed over'er face as she rose. Eyes closed, she leaned'er head back against the stone.

"You should've known."

"How was I supposed to?"

"You just should've."

"Ah, you're full of it."

"Maybe. But you should've known she'd get out of it. She always gets out of *everything*."

"What do you think?"

"She's... kinda right."

"She's not wrong."

"Well, thanks. All of you."

"Hey, don't take it out on us."

"You're the one that brought it up."

"What do you think?"

Britt cracked an eye. "Me?"

The young woman'n the corner nodded. "What do you think?"

Britt settled back. "Honestly, I have no idea what you're talking about," she said. "And I'm not sure I want to."

"Look who it is," Pipa said.

Jean grumbled.

"Hey," Pipa called. "Where've you been?"

And when Britt'd opened'er eyes, Fenchurch stood at pool's edge and looked down at'em. Britt closed'er eyes and settled back.

"Anyone hear?" Fenchurch said.

"Hear what?"

"June's writing a book."

Britt opened'er eyes. Someone else said, "How do you know that?"

"Because I happened to be there when she came in to get the paper. The stack was *that* thick." Fenchurch glanced at Britt. "Said I should tell you to look in your book or something like that if I happened to see you first?"

Britt opened'er eyes. "Look in my book?"

Fenchurch shrugged. "I guess she left you a note. I don't know."
"Note?"

Fenchurch shrugged. "Don't ask me."

"What's she writing a book about?" Pipa glanced at Jean. "Do you think that's what she went out there for with us?"

Jean shrugged. "What do I care?"

"What's it about?" Pipa said.

"How'm I supposed to know. Ask her yourself when she gets back."
Fenchurch turned toward the showers.

"Back from where?" Britt lifted'er head. "Hey—" Everyone winced at'er whistle, but Fenchurch spun as'f yanked. "What do you mean *when she gets back*?"

Fenchurch gesticulated. "How'm I supposed to know?"

"You know," someone said. "I heard Honeysuckle's been planning a trip out to those ruins. You know the ones... What're they called?"

Jean shook'er head. "I didn't know they had a name at all."

"I heard somebody call them something."

"What does she want out there?"

"How should I know? Maybe it's something to do with her book."

"Isn't there something else out there?"

"Doesn't the old reverend live out there?"

"I guess... I don't know. What does it—HEY—"

The water shifted seismatically'n the aftermath of Britt pulling'er-self out, lapping the pool edges. Water splattered stone as she ran. Fenchurch yelled, "CAN I COME TOO?"

A tower cast an early shadow that bisected the wall and Allison leaned against the cooling balustrade. "Hot today," she said. "Hotter tomorrow."

Next t'er, Sasha leaned forward, rested'er elbows on the wall. "Well," she said, "you can only take so much off." Both their hats lay on the ground, lariats wrapped at their ankles'n case of a wind burst.

"Is that Britt's boat?"

"Looks like it."

"Who's that with her?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Where do you think they're going?"

"The moons," Sasha said.

"I'm being serious." Allison sighed. "I thought it was supposed to cool off," Allison said. "Since there was no more mining."

"It doesn't work like that."

"How come?"

Sasha yawned. "I don't think you could've picked a more boring topic of conversation to have this time of day." A small breeze, not enough t'rustle their hats, wound over their sweat-damp backs. Sasha sighed. "There we go." After a while, she started again. "It's all about heat absorption. And liquids. And solids. And gasses. And equilibrium," she said. "Everything comes down to equilibrium."

"And that's why the temperature's still going up?"

"That would be the size of it."

"So when does it stop?"

Sasha shrugged, yawned. "When everything reaches equilibrium."

"Then what happens?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Sasha said, and pushed herself from the wall and massaged her elbows. "Come on..." She knelt and dis-tangled her lariat from her ankles, fitted it under her arms and over her shoulders and placed her hat atop her head. "Come on, let's go see if we can find something to eat." And Allison knelt too, dis-wound her hatstrap, but rolled her hat and held the long tube it formed under her arm and ducked beneath Sasha's. Together, they walked out the shadows and back along the wall toward the steps.

"But what if?" Allison said as they crossed the square below. "What if it never reaches an equilibrium?"

"Why shouldn't it?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying 'what if'."

"What if what if what if," Sasha said. "If we're going to talk about 'what ifs', let's at least make them interesting. Like... Oh... What if we went to the Glass Square tonight?"

"What're they doing there?"

"Oh, just a small party."

"What kind of party?"

"You know," Sasha said. "The usual kind. They'll build a small fire. They'll bring some food. They'll [...]"

"How do you know so much about it?"

"I hear things."

"You've already been!"

"Only to make sure it's something fit to take you to." Sasha inter-twined her arm with Allison's as they walked. "Have you ever watched from the other side of a piece of glass as a [...] ? There's something about it..."

"And when was this?"

"I don't know," Sasha said. "How am I supposed to remember?"

"You seem to remember everything else well enough."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to go with me tonight then. You know, to keep an eye on me. And you can keep track of the trivialities like the day of this cycle or whatever. But be careful."

Allison said, "Of what?"

“Because tomorrow I’m going to ask *you* when it happened and see if *you* can answer it.”

“You’ve gone loopy.”

“Maybe,” Sasha said.

They camped at night under cover of a section of truly ancient looking mudbrick wall. They'd've started too late t'do anything else.

"Didn't you bring anything for a fire?" Fenchurch said.

Britt'dn't reply. She sat with'er back against wind-worn mudbricks, a dustcloth pulled up over'er nose, and seemed t'sleep.

Fenchurch looked at the city'n the distance. Small lights glowed'n windows. "Maybe while we're out here we'll meet Nathaniel on his way back in," she said.

Izzy sat back against the wall too. She sighed. "Best get some sleep. We'll be walking at moonrise."

"I can't just go to sleep at the drop of a hat."

"You should learn to."

Fenchurch grunted. "What's she so worried about, anyway? June can take care of herself."

"You're not old enough to understand."

"Try me."

Izzy shook'er head'n the half-dark. "Get some sleep. Moonrise'll be soon enough."

Morning brought a faint breeze. Little of the ancientest-looking wall remained, only the occasional pile of mudbricks slowly disintegrating with each storm till they looked almost as'f they'd been natural formations. But a few half-crumpled towers still held'em-selves vaguely together, one a diminutive silhouette'n the distance, the only remaining indicators of bygone [fortifications] from nameless knowns and not-knowns and unknowns.

"So I was sitting there as they said all this, my knees pulled up, you know, and my chin in my palms, and I said, 'So let me get this straight,' and he was already getting hard-faced, you know, like he already knew what I was going to say, so I said, 'Let me get this straight, what you're basically saying is me getting off is only acceptable when it's a reward for doing what you want?' and I leaned toward Nina—who'd been there the whole time, too—and I said, 'Sounds too much like professionalism, think?'—You should've seen his face—And he said 'Stop behaving as a child.'—And I said, 'Anything you don't like is childish, isn't it?'—And you should've seen his face." Fenchurch plodded along behind, but neither Izzy nor Britt looked back. But she'dn't seem t'mind. And she just kept ahold of'er pack straps as they hiked on. "Nina's like you," she said t'Izzy's back. "She says, 'You're better off just to ignore them.' But Lee says if you want to get rid of them, all you gotta do is offer them some work and—"

"Sounds like some other people I know," Izzy said.

"Who do you mean?"

They stopped. Izzy adjusted'er hatbrim against the sun. "We've got to be close."

Britt pointed. "It's supposed to be that one." A sunblighted [embattlement] rose from distant sandswells amid tumbled mudbricks. Someone'n the distance waved.

“What were you thinking?” Britt said.

Honeysuckle stood there a moment and looked puzzled. “Uhm...” Britt pushed by’er. “Where’s June?”

“She’s inside. Why?” Honeysuckle’d turned, but Britt’d already ducked through the tower’s low, sand-filled doorway. She turned t’Izzy. “What’s her problem?”

Izzy shrugged. “What *are* yuns doing out here?”

“Different things,” Honeysuckle said. She pointed toward the crumpled wall as they moved into the shade. “Isn’t it amazing?” she said. “The brick are almost fused. But notice how the wear lines are? This here means there mustn’t’ve been any significant rain here since this wall fell—maybe even since it was first built.” She lifted a piece of paper pinned t’a board. “And there’s very little stone construction here. Even the towers are mudbrick. I think this might’ve actually started as a section of a much older city that’s supposed to predate ours by—who knows—thousands of years, maybe. Maybe more.”

Izzy shook’er head. “You know this place isn’t that old.”

“Well,” Honeysuckle said. “Yeah, but it’s built to look that way. So it’s functionally equivalent.”

Izzy shook’er head.

“Besides,” Honeysuckled said, “we still don’t know how many [easter eggs] there are. There could be dozens of things—”

“Is that all?” Fenchurch said.

“What?” Honeysuckle turned. “What’re you talking about? Isn’t that enough? There could be fragments of a whole not yet discovered civilization hidden beneath the sands under our feet, right now.”

“So?”

“So?”

“If you wannah to investigate something, you should investigate why there’s this strange echo out here.”

“Y—”

Izzy stepped between’em. “I came out here to referee one fight,” she said. “I’m not gonna handle two.” And she tugged’er bag over’er shoulder and walked toward the tower. She pushed back’er hat and ducked through the doorway. Thick sand swells covered the floor and banked against mudbrick walls. The upper portions’d long before toppled and only a section of the floor above’d’ve remained. Desiccated support poles jutted from crumbling mudworks. Britt’d stopped just inside and Izzy stepped nearnuf t’see over’er shoulder. “Everything okay?”

“... I understand now...”

Izzy glanced up at the voice. The reverend sat propped against the wall atop worn former stairs that half-rounded the circular interior. He offered’is palms, looked up into clear, mudbrick-encircled sky.

“... You see... Don’t you? The problem wasn’t all around me.” He looked down, looked down with eyes that’d sunk deep into their sockets. “It was within... Do you see?” His dried lips pulled back t’reveal gapped teeth. And when’e breathed, his ribs seemed ready t’burst from beneath tightened skin. In the silences between’is words, pen scratches splintered through the chamber. June sat on a pile of worn, collapsed mudbricks and bent over a board across’er knees. His breath rattled between’is teeth as’is chest expanded-contracted. There seemed hardly enough flesh’n’is legs t’hold’m upright. Skin pulled tight over joints. “We are all trapped here...” Already, blood dried on the faint stump between’is legs’d begun t’flake away and revealed raw new-healed flesh. He spread’is joint-knobby fingers over’is chest. “... We must peel it away...to be...free...” His breath rattled between’is teeth. “... do you see?”

Already't'd've been possible t' imagine how'e'd've looked with'is nose sliced away so only two vertical slits remained, how'is dry lips'd've peel back t'perpetually reveal what teeth'd've remained, how'is eyes'd sink farther into'is tight face till they'd've seemed t'disappear entirely, distant glimmering points t'reflect candlelight as'e traveled the infinitude of time and space beneath the city.

“...do you see...”

“Wait,” Seppie said. “We-ens’s’d go back.” And she looked at Colette. “Yewn’s’d tell thuh one... Thuh one yewn tell bout how thuh reverend came tuh thuh cety.”

Colette paused a moment. “Alreet.”

The sleds'd already been cut loose and still lay stretched behind the tractor back into the desert. Their quick-lashed coverings fluttered. Here and there, paint flecks, bent nails, hinted at the houses their constituent parts'd once formed. Muffled thuds and bangs carried from within the tractor. Dust sifted down from overhead as someone swept solar panels. The air-conditioner hummed and'ts hot exhaust brushed Abigail's leg. Her vision drifted languidly over the distance and'n the approaching gloom a dark-robed figure stood outlined beyond the last sled. Someone called within the tractor. Abigail glanced over'er shoulder, but turned back t'the sight of that black-clad figure'n the distance. And for whatever reason, she walked out there. The wind tugged at'er coveralls. Up close, crumpled dark fabric'd've revealed nothing but orange-red stains. He'd lost'is hat and'is hair faintly shifted'n the wind. He grasped a shattered tree limb t'stay upright while'is leg cocked at an odd, ramrod angle from being lashed t'a piece of timber.

“Are you going down?”

He looked away from the city walls. Low sun diffused into a harsh, yellow glare among rooftops. Tears pooled'n'is eyes. He nodded.

“Do you need some help?”

Not-blinkingly, he turned toward the city again. He shook'is head.

Maybe she thought of saying something else. Someone called. She looked over'er shoulder toward the tractor. Silently, she turned again toward the black-clad figure, turned again, and hands still'n'er pockets, she walked past the sleds, toward the tractor.

Finally, he took a deep breath. He jerked forward, ambled stiffly as'is leg drug at a bad angle and'e grasped the staff with both hands

so hard'is knuckles discolored and threatened t'burst through flesh and'e almost sunk beneath'is own weight. Rubble scattered underfoot as'e worked'is way over the canyon rim. He slid, tried t'grab the ledge with one hand and managed t'stop. He breathed hard. Rocks tumbled down t'the waterline. He lay there awhile, finally sucked'n'is breath, gritted'is teeth and forced'mself up on the stick. He dragged'is splinted leg t'water's edge. He gasped and'is chest heaved as'e shoved'is leg round. He eyed the boat'n the distance. The splintboard scraped the ground behind'm as'e ambled toward't. He leaned over the prow, dropped'is stick into't. He turned and seated'mself on hull's edge. Holding'is breath, he swung'is better leg inside. Paused. Panting, he tried t'raise'is splinted leg and the boat shifted and'e tumbled onto'is back, splint sticking into the air. He screamed. Blood trickled from'is mouth and'is tongue ached. He grabbed for the side, tried t'raise'mself, but collapsed.

Gravel crunched onshore. A woman peeked into the hull. "What's going on?"

But'e only lay there, eyes somehow enlarged, as blood trickled from the corner of'is mouth. She looked downshore, scratched'er head. "Could've sworn I heard something." She dropped'er satchel into the hull and stepped back and dis-tied't and shoved't into the water and jumped'n. Connelly whimpered as the boat rocked. She whistled t'erself as she took up the paddle and turned the boat. He stifled a scream as the boat shifted. They passed into the wall's shadow. Sunlight glinted over rippling water'n their wake. Someone shouted and waved above and she looked up and waved back. She paddled toward the floated dock, jumped out with practiced skill onto undulating bamboo. Connelly screamed as the boat rocked. She glanced round as she tied't off. She rose and watched the far shore. But finally she shook'er head and grabbed'er satchel from the boat and ambled down the dock and climbed up onto the landing. Connelly breathed hard. His splinted leg jutted up from the side of the boat. He lay there panting till the boat'd calmed. But when'e shifted t'try and pull'mself up, the boat rocked and'e almost screamed again. He lay there panting. Finally, he held'is breath, lunged and grabbed the hull and struggled over, flopped onto undulating bamboo. Tears leaked between lashed bamboo and merged with greater waters as'e crawled.

His fingernails tore and ripped against stone as'e pulled'mself from the bamboo ladder and up those worn steps designed to lead from the ancient waterline up onto the stone dock. There'e collapsed. Spittle'd intermixed with blood and drooled over'is lip and pooled where the stone'd been most worn. He looked up all those switchback stairs that led up t'the wall. Halfway up, he collapsed against'em. Night came. Stars wheeled overhead. Sunlight woke'm. Trembling, he reached for the next step. He struggled up and rested'is cheek on the dock overlook, lay there panting till fitful sleep came. The sun woke'm. People stepped past. He pulled'mself up against the balustrade. Clutching the wall, he dragged the splint over stone and'e ambled through the archway. Not-hurried people, laughing or deep'n conversation or busy with anything and whatever, floated by. Bleary eyed, he glanced round. His raw throat pulsed, contracted as'e tried t'speak. He rasped, "... isn't..." He pivoted round. "... anyone..." His chest heaved, as'f t'breathe and speak combined were too much. "... isn't... anyone... going to do anything to me" He waited. Blurred faces, smiles, all smeared by. "isn't anyone" But they passed without even a glance. Tears trickled over'is cheeks and'e shuddered as'f all of'm were bout t'liquefy. "... do... something to me anything" He turned, splint-boarded leg at an odd angle, so'e must've appeared as some strange dancer partway through an awkward pirouette. "... anything..."

But by then'e'd become as good as invisible, more so every moment...

“Wut’s,” Li said, “that’veen mean?”

Ambeth glanced at’er, smirked.

Colette shrugged. “I well leave thet fur yewmens tuh decede.”

“Oh—WHY DON’T YOU TWO JUST GO FUCK ALREADY!” Fenchurch stomped up the stairs. And Britt and June, silent for perhaps the first time’n what must’ve seemed forever, watched’er ascend and slip’er pack from’er shoulders and drop’t on the dock overlook and stomp through the archway, only t’stop on the far side and kneel and fight the knot that confined’er feet’n desert footwear, which she kicked across the square. Mid-afternoon sun weighed on’er hat and the brim flopped round’er as she walked. Blindly she cut through passage t’passage.

“Been looking for me?”

Fenchurch stopped, pushed up’er hatbrim.

The old woman eyed’er, said “Must be an awfully dull day then,” and stuck the cigarette between’er lips.

Fenchurch wandered into the two towers’ shadow junction. “Did you ever remember about the book?”

The old woman grunted.

“I could bring a copy down to you if you wanted.”

“Honey, you *have* got what they call a personality deficiency.” The old woman drew on the cigarette. “If I *did* write the damn things, then I don’t *have* to read them.” She tapped off an ash crook over a chair arm.

“But you wrote them.”

“Honey, that don’t mean nothin’. Paper goes into the typewriter, paper comes out’a the typewriter. All you do is try not to pay attention to what happens in-between.” She returned the cigarette t’er mouth, spoke round’t. “Paying too much attention, that’s how you go crazy.”

"Well," Fenchurch said, and rested'er hands on'er hips. "You may think that—but that doesn't mean I have to—so there."

"Honey, you come all the way round here just to argue with me?"

Fenchurch crossed'er arms. "I guess so."

"You like arguing, honey?"

"Sometimes."

The old woman leaned back'er head, cigarette still between'er lips. "Not much use, are you?" Fenchurch'dn't reply. "And since you can't do anything but stand round and contradict people, why don't you do something useful?"

"And how's that?"

The old woman lightly rested'er hand against the inside of'er thigh. "This wrinkled old thing could use some attention. So why don't you take that hat off and lend a hand? Or two?"

Fenchurch stood there a few moments with'er arms crossed.

"Do as you please," the old woman said.

Fenchurch stood there a few moments more, but finally shoved up'er hat so't tumbled back and fwapped against'er shoulders and the lariat pulled tight at'er neck. And she'dn't speak till she'd worked both hands into the woman. Then Fenchurch said, "I still think you're a liar." Eyes closed, the old woman cupped and squeezed one of'er drooped breasts. "I think you did this sort of thing all the time when you were working."

"... maybe don't...stop..."

"Or you had someone else to do it for you."

The old woman faintly lolled'er head side-t'side. "I had to... there" Fenchurch rotated'er wrist, then turned't opposite, repeated, again, and again...

She shuddered and'er lips puckered and so shadows crept into the deep fissure-lines that radiated from'er mouth and breast flesh bulged between'er fingers. She remained balanced on the chair's hind legs.

Slowly, Fenchurch dis-balled'er hand, waited till the old woman caught'er breath and slowly withdrew. The old woman let out a long sigh. "Honey," she said. "Doesn't it make you feel good to do some honest work for a change? Though, if you practiced instead of listening to so many stupid books, I'm sure you might actually accomplish a damn thing or two. Then maybe the rest of us wouldn't

have to spend so much damn time bored, waiting 'round for the likes of you to get on the damn ball."

Fenchurch wiped'er hand against the old woman's inside thigh, stood. "If you're getting that bored," Fenchurch said. "You could always go back to writing."

"Honey..." The old woman still sat balanced with'er head back, still'dn't opened'er eyes. "That's a damn game I'm done with." She yawned. "Maybe I'm just too damn old and too damn tired." She settled into the chair, as'f she might go t'sleep balanced that way. "Or maybe you're *just* good enough to take the edge off these days. Either way, damn it to damnation and back again."

"That's what you always say."

"Honey, it's consistency. It's what makes the world a comfortable place." The old woman interlaced'er fingers over'er stomach folds. "We had this conversation last week and the week before. And we'll have it next week." She added, "Or thereabouts. Time's such a damn funny thing these days. Always some damn thing getting muddled 'round."

"You just like being grumpy, don't you?"

"As much as you like to argue, honey." The old woman drew on'er cigarette. "Time to run off, honey."

"Huh?"

"You've forgotten something, honey. Better get moving."

Fenchurch rubbed'er chin. "Oh, shit—" And she turned and ran.

The old woman closed'er eyes and settled back into'er chair, still balanced on'ts hind legs.

At the fountain one afternoon, Genie looked round after washing'er hands. "Everythin's so empty."

"Yuh're jus catchin on t'that?" Li said.

Kayla glanced over'er shoulder. She paused, as'f she'd just noticed't for the first time, too.

"It'll b'time, nearnuf," Ambeth said.

Genie looked at'er. "Fer what?"

But Ambeth just looked at Mara. "What yuh think?"

"Almost."

Faint chalkmarks'd've still remained on the score-wall as they passed. Genie and Helena looked up at'em as they walked. A tortoise-shell met'em coming the opposite way. The cat followed their gaze. She stopped and sat there and looked at smeared former lines. She'd've remained their still looking as Helena glanced over'er shoulder when they turned the corner.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” someone said. “So I wanna try and finish.”

Colette held out’er hand for’er t’start.

Maybe she glanced at our journaller.

“Well,” June said. “What do you think?” And she sat there and drummed’er fingers against’er thigh and looked down at the pages’n’er lap from which she’d been reading.

“It’s fine,” Jean said. “I guess.”

“You guess?”

Jean shrugged. “I don’t know. What am I supposed to say?”

“You have to be more specific than that. What do you think’s wrong with it?”

Jean shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s...kind of short, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Pipa nodded. “Like...what about all the stuff that’s missing?”

“What stuff?”

“Like...I don’t know... Like when that what’s her name wanted Mae to taint the water supply at the socket with drugs to calm everyone down. Or when how Zilog and the rest of them got out to the city. Or... I don’t know. How come you don’t talk about Scarlet being forced to give birth in secret when they were in one of the towns? Or how Ron gets elected. Or... You know...when your mother snuck out and left on that ship before the last one...”

“Or Kim,” Jean said. “You could talk about her as a little girl and how many languages she could speak by the time she was ten.”

Pipa nodded. “Or how Tracy and Catherine and Nathaniel and Alan became lovers and Tracy taught them how to kiss.”

“Or,” Jean said, “How Nathaniel had to leave the robot out there to get blown up because the phone broke.”

“Or the book club that got Allison in trouble in that town.”

“Or what happened with all the cats.”

"Or how Nathaniel and Catherine got out here. Or how—"

"But," June said, "what does any of that matter?"

"It's like..." Pipa said. "It's like the whole middle's missing out of it, or something."

June shook'er head. "I don't think so."

"But how's anyone gonna know what happened?"

"But that's the stuff everyone knows," June said.

"But a lot of people were *here* for most of it," Jean said. "What about everyone else?"

"Who else?"

Jean shook'er head. "I don't know. Just—"

"And," Fenchurch said, and hunched forward and planted'er elbows on'er knees. "What about all the sex?"

Jean rolled'er eyes. "Of course you'd come up with that."

"Well, if you're going to talk about this whole thing," Fenchurch said, "it doesn't make much sense otherwise."

"Getting bored and need some *stimulating* material or something?"

"Ha ha."

June said, "I don't think it needs those parts."

Fenchurch shrugged. "What're you going to do if someone adds them in later?"

"Why would they do that?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Because," June said. "the book'll be done."

"But if somebody starts writing a new book."

June shook'er head. "But why?"

Fenchurch shrugged.

With a huff, June bunched the manuscript and rose.

"No need to get bent out of joint," Fenchurch said. But June'd've already slipped on'er hat and marched, manuscript under one arm, outa the shade and'd've started across the square.

"You shouldn't have done that," Jean said.

Fenchurch shrugged. "I still say it's only part of a book. A tenth, at most."

"I don't know," Pipa said. She shook'er head.

"What?" Jean said.

Pipa glanced toward'er, blinked. "Huh?"

"You looked like you were off in the great beyond."

Pipa shrugged. "I was just thinking."

"About?"

"It's stupid."

"Come on, already," Fenchurch said, and she leaned back against the wall and sighed.

"I was just thinking... Ah, it's stupid."

"Out with it."

Pipa shook'er head. "I was just thinking, if someone wrote a book, say like June's, but they stopped in the middle of it, would you ever know it wasn't complete?"

Jean raised the water pouch, squirted some into the back of'er throat, passed't t'Fenchurch. "Of course you would. It'd be obvious."

"But how would you tell?" Pipa said. "How do you know where something begins and ends?"

"You just know," Jean said, and elbowed Fenchurch—"Don't hoard it all. You just know."

"But..." Pipa shook'er head as Fenchurch, mouth full and cheeks puffed, handed'er the waterbag. She lifted't and squirted a stream into the back of'er throat.

"Hot today," Jean said.

Fenchurch rested the back of'er head against the cool, shaded wall, closed'er eyes. "Well, you can only take so much off."

I've a theory that evolution's—real evolution's—selected for laziness. People who worked too much died of over-exhaustion'n the heat or of dust lung or who knows what and'd too little time t'pass on their memes (also because they were too busy working) so the survival of the fittest, in this case, were the ones willing t'sit and talk, which I'll elucidate more thoroughly later. And bout how fundamentalist religiosity selects for greater and more extreme sexual expression.

“What do yewn thenk bout endengs?” Seppie said t’Mara. “I always av trouble fegureng out where they-ens’re et.”

“All yuh’ve t’do,” someone said, “is finish up with somethin funny.”

“I dun’t gat thet,” Seppie said.

By then, the chamber’d’ve seemed t’big for the few that occupied’t.

“Et always seems... Et always seems as ef thuh one thengs es always leadeng on tuh thuh next theng, leadeng on tuh thuh next theng and thet et es never gonna end. There es only thuh pont where yewn choose tuh stop.”

“It’s’ike what’e was sayin. ’e...” Genie paused. Ambeth and Mara glanced at’er. Genie bit’er lip.

“What was thet?” Colette said. She partways smiled. “A secret story?”

“Not worth telling,” Mara said.

Colette’s eyes drifted back and forth over all’em, but’er smile’d remained. “Sence we-ens’re talkeng bout endengs,” she said, “I well reserve thuh reet tuh go last. Ef thet es alreet?” She glanced round the room. One after t’other, everyone nodded. “Good.” She raised’er hands. “So whom-en es next?”

Nathaniel stopped on the dock overlook and adjusted his pack and looked over his shoulder, but Zeb staggered through the archway and disappeared beyond. Illuminated towers'd've been visible far out into the desert. Now, then, the faint interplay of instruments washed over the walls and out through the archway. Leaning his walkingstick against the wall, he shifted his pack off, dropped it at his feet, dropped his hat atop it. And when he looked up, he stood in the archway.

"What do you think?" She stepped through and turned and a black-red skirt rose above her ankles. And she stopped and smoothed it again.

"It's nice," he said. "What's the occasion?"

She smiled, came forward and intertwined her arm with his. "My birthday, of course." Gently, she led him through the archway. "Now, come on. We have to get you cleaned up." She glanced down at his dust-covered legs. "And out of that footwear."

Music carried sometimes from places near, but more often from farther and further away, snatches of fragments that reached them as they passed from interconnected passage to interconnected passage.

"So what does that mean," he said, after a while, "being born?"

"Oh..." she tilted her head and looked vaguely into the middle distance. "For one thing, I won't be able to tell you the future anymore, since I'll be the present, and all that. So I guess I should ask you if there's anything you want to know. Hmmmmmm. Let's see... Mmmmmmm... Trent and Collard and Kim are going to go north with a bunch of minnows, you know. Kim because she wants to study the language. And since those diehards up there won't come down, Trent's going to try and get a fish population going in the marshes. Collard, well you can guess why he's going along, no mystery there. And all those fish are going to grow so nice and big and chunky. They'll evolve into a new sub-species, you know. In a few million years or ten or a hundred they'll be able to walk through shallow spots in the marshes. Though, the atmosphere'll be a bit thin by then, but they'll do fine."

(This's just me. But I give up. There's no use'n refuting stupidity every time't rears'ts head. If yuh wanna believe'n superstition, believe'n superstition. I'mn't gonna try and convince yuh otherwise. Yuh wanna believe that fish—or something like that—can develop legs—fine. But don't go round saying yuh can PROVE't. Because the only thing yuh've proved is IDEAS can change and adapt and survive and EVOLVE. THAT we can PROVE.)

Æ hummed t'erself. "And there's Tudor, you know. Him and... oh, what's their names?—anyway—they'll take their little trip up to the Gash. He'll end up being worshipped as a god, you know, but that's a whole other story." She added, "Oh, and balloons. I can't wait to fly. They'll look so pretty at night, too. You'll see."

She sighed. "Ohhhhh, what else? Right. And Ron and Bea. They've finally got the—ha—lubrication that relationship needs. And of course, he was right with what he said, she really would claw her way to the top of any social hierarchy she found herself in. Or near there, anyway." Æ laughed. "But it's not like he's going to mind. It'll give him a chance to be the man behind the scenes for once. The man behind the priestess. He'll be good at that."

She glanced at'm. "And you, should I tell you about you?"

Nathaniel shook's head.

She laughed.

He looked up as they walked. Still, debris streaked through night sky, dissolved on'ts fiery way. "It's going to be like that a long time, isn't it?"

Vaguely, she looked up. "A while." She tugged'm down the steps toward the baths. "Come on," she said. "Let's get you cleaned up so we can put your feathers on."

"Feathers?"

"Don't ask so many questions," she said. "We don't have time right now for questions."

“Leke I said...” Seppie shook’er head. “I’mn’t sure thes es an endeng. But... Well, here goes.”

“Martina found this somewhere before she left,” Tracy said, and pulled the glass bottle from’er bag and set’t on the ground. Behind’em, faint after-celebration waves carried over the city walls and reflected from towers. Tracy glanced over’er shoulder. “It’s like the fucking sun has set in the middle of the place.” Bottle between’er legs, she broke the seal, started t’pour, but Raquel snatched’t from’er.

“You never pour for yourself,” she said, and tipped the bottled so’t gurgled and gulped and one-third filled Tracy’s cup. And she leaned forward and’d the same for Mae, then for Zeb, then handed the bottle back t’Tracy, who grunted and leaned forward and tipped’t into Raquel’s cup. And Tracy leaned forward and stuck the bottle’n the dirt between’em.

Below, illuminated towers echoed’n dark water and intermixed with reflected fixed stars and the momentary streaks of those that still fell.

“It’s almost like the whole world’s started to come down around us.”

“Technically,” Tracy said. “That is the world falling down now.”

In the silence, Raquel sipped, held both hands around’er clayware cup and looked down into night-dark liquid. “Hell of a thing,” she said.

Tracy knocked-back a mouthful. “The bourbon or the party?”

“Both?”

Mae finally lifted’er cup. Sipped. Grimaced. “Not a party,” she said.

Tracy glanced toward’er as she took another sip. “What the hell is it then?”

Mae looked up at the walls, back down t’er cup, sipped.

“Celebration,” she said. “Ritual. Those are not costumes—” —she sipped— “—they’re regalia.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I guess,” Raquel said. “It depends on your perspective.” She sipped and looked up. “Everybody always thinks everybody else’s got religion, but *they’ve* got the truth.”

“The two of you,” Tracy said, and knocked back another mouthful and emptied’er cup. “The two of you are terrible drinking partners.” She held out’er cup so Raquel’d tip the bottle into’t again.

“You’re supposed to sip that,” Raquel said.

Tracy eyed’er, brought the cup t’er lips, held’er pinkie from’t at an angle, and took a long airy slurp. “Better?”

“Trouble with you is,” Raquel said, “you were already too sozzled on that honey stuff to appreciate anything finer.”

“Yeah... well...” Tracy swigged another mouthful, looked up at the sky and held’er cup up t’t as she swallowed. “That’s what everything comes down to.”

Raquel glanced up. “What?”

“Atmospheres strip away. Suns explode. Energy evaporates. The universe ceases to be.”

“God, you’re a terrible drunk.”

“Even the universe’s gotta end,” Tracy said, and knocked back another mouthful. “Try to outrun *that* with life extension.”

“Death anxiety...” Mae said, “is part of the definition of life.”

“Because all the death-happy freaks throw themselves off cliffs and take themselves outa the gene pool.”

“Does your moroseness have to be in proportion to anything good that’s happening around you?”

“I’m a relativist,” Tracy said. “I don’t believe in good.” She held out’er cup.

Raquel sighed, lifted the bottle.

“I’m just glad of one thing,” Tracy said.

“Oh, I’ve got to know what this is.”

“That they aren’t fucking giants,” Tracy said.

“What?”

Tracy swallowed another mouthful. “That they tweaked the DNA so they wouldn’t grow eight or nine or who the fuck knows how

many feet tall in the lesser gravity.” She sipped. “Can you fucking imagine walking around having to look up to them all the time?”

Raquel shook’er head, flashed a faint, exasperated smile. “That’s your big thing. Not eliminating cellular death. Not destroying ninety-nine percent of all diseases. Not eliminating cavities. Not the ability to breathe in a thinner atmosphere. Not effectively curing cancer. Hell, we even engineered adults to be lactose tolerant. And that’s your big one—how fucking tall or short they are?” Raquel shook’er head again, sipped.

“And the shit?”

“Oh, fuck if you’re gonna—”

“Premature aging. Cellular acceleration.”

“A one-in-five-hundred-million chance.” Raquel sipped. “And besides, there’s just as much a chance for a permanent anti-aging effect.” She sipped. “Anyway, it just means you get really wrinkly, is all. It doesn’t...you know...doesn’t impact the rest...”

“That we know of.” She sipped. “And how’s the rag?”

Raquel sighed.

“You’re...how many hundred years old?” Tracy said. “And you have to *gird up* every month—or whenever...however...time works now...” She tilted back’er head and drained’er cup. “Tell me that’s so fucking wonderful.” She jerked’er cup and arm toward the city. “But these fuckers get it all turned off for free.” And she motioned for a refill. “The one fucking time he couldn’t buy off the regulatory panels—ha.” She knocked one back. “Ha—maybe it’ll be used as a time-telling device.” She laughed, held out’er cup.

Raquel lifted the bottle. “Well, there isn’t going to be anyone around to go spastic about genetic freaks taking over the world now.” She offered the bottle t’Mae, who offered’er cup. “Besides, it’s not like it did fuck all to his plans.”

Tracy laughed into’er cup.

“Hold it,” Raquel said, and she lifted’er cup. “A toast.”

“To fucking what?”

“To Geraldine’s melted glaciers. And Kobe’s dried-up saltwater ocean. And Barthe’s railway. And McIntosh’s ravine city. And to everything that doesn’t exist anymore.” And she glanced at Mae and added, “And to everyone who’s not here anymore. Dead and gone

or just gone. From here to Earth and back again. To Martina and Chevsky, wherever they are. To Macron's disk moon, may it not fall on our heads when it comes down. To all the stuff Angela had to salt the atmosphere with to paint those sunsets and sunrises. And to Spirit and Opportunity. May they rest in pieces."

Zeb sobbed.

Raquel leaned forward, but Tracy said, "To J R R Bristol, whose own family's automation literally undermined his own grand project."

Raquel leaned forward with'er cup—

"Another," Tracy said. And she held up'er cup. "To that poor fucked-up bastard in that café in Amsterdam however many centuries ago writing that goddamn book."

Raquel shook'er head. But she leaned forward again, stretched'er arm—

"One more," Tracy said.

Raquel sighed. "I'm never going to get drunk like this."

"To," Tracy said, "to all those fucking idiot Americans who thought Amsterdam was in Denmark."

"It isn't?" Raquel said.

Tracy eyed'er. She knocked back'er glass. "Bits of it probably were after the wars."

Raquel leaned forward—

"One more."

"Oh, come on. Really?"

Tracy raised'er cup. "To Versailles II." She sniffed. "All of it built without a single official toilet." She sipped. "Better than Shepard pissing his space suit." She raised the cup, sipped again. "The epitome of virtualization."

Mae cradled'er cup'n both'er hands.

Raquel shook'er head, had t'lean forward and grab the bottle and refill Tracy's cup. "If we're going to do it," she said, "let's do it right."

"If it's worth doing," Tracy said, "it's worth doing badly." She raised'er cup. "To another failed utopia."

Raquel shook'er head, but touched each of their cups'n turn. And they drank. And after a moment, Tracy raised'ers t'the sky and drank again

“What’s that for?”

“I’m sure the bastard’s still up there,” Tracy said.

“He’s been dead for...however long.”

“Jameson Satellite,” Tracy mumbled.

“God on lifesupport,” Raquel said into’er cup. She shook’er head. “You know...” And she glanced at Zeb. “You should’ve subtitled that book of yours A Coda to the Book of Denmark.”

“F—” Zeb wiped’is nose. Tears dripped into’is cup. And’e threw’is head back and gulped and sat’n silence looking down into’t till Raquel filled’t again.

“Well,” she said, “wasn’t there somebody who said something about things not being unique and if they didn’t make them someone else would come along later and do the same thing? So maybe somebody else will finish it for you.”

Zeb groaned and snuffled.

“You’re torturing with kindness,” Mae said.

Raquel sighed and looked down into’er cup. “I can’t believe some *men* actually went back out into the desert with Martina and Chevsky.”

“It’s what they wanted to do,” Mae said.

After a while, she leaned forward so Raquel’d pour another shot of bourbon into’er cup. “You know what the last thing he said to me was?” She leaned back and looked down into the night-dark liquid. “He said, not in [English] of course, ‘why do you think so many old science fiction utopias imagined everyone walking around naked?’” Then she sipped’er bourbon.

Light flickered against towers high above. Faint music still drifted over the walls.

In silence, Raquel looked at the near empty bottle between’em. “You remember Edgar Allan Poe’s grave?” She leaned forward, hefted’t, watch the dark liquid roll side-t’side. And she leaned forward and handed’t t’Mae. “You do the honors.”

“A fucking waste,” Tracy said.

Mae looked down at the bottle, handed’er cup t’Raquel, then stood. She moved toward the cliff and looked down into the water. And after a moment, she extended’er arm and tipped the bottle so’t gurgled and liquid splashed somewhere far below’n the dark and ripples disturbed

reflected stars and those bright streaks that momentarily sliced the velvet-black night sky.

Tracy cradled'er cup and looked down into't. "Once the candle is melted, the darkened path we may not tread. Once the dawn has passed, the morning's glories are put to bed. Once the flute is cracked, the call to dance is soon forgot. Once we have woken, lovely dreams remain in our cot."

Raquel glanced at'er. "Fuck," she said. "You're so fucking sozzled." And she lay back and laughed.

Colette held out'er hand toward Mara. And after a moment or two, Mara nodded.

When Nathaniel woke and rolled over and opened his eye, a cat sat on the window sill and watched'em. And when'e looked over, Catherine lay propped on one arm, looking at'm. She caressed his cheek below his eye-patch, down along the strap till'er fingers wandered into his beard, down over his chest, his stomach and into his short, patchy, rough-cut pubic hair.

"Melissa should really figure out something besides glue," he said, but smiled. Idly, he ran his fingers over'er thigh, between'er legs and over'er own trimmed pubic hair.

"I saw Ron last night," she said. "And Beatrice."

"Together?"

She nodded. "She finally threw him against a wall. And tore those old pants off his getting them off."

"He probably won't miss them."

Catherine smiled, ran'er hand along Nathaniel's growing erection. "You should stay," she said.

He leaned down and took one of'er nipples'n his mouth, as'fn't t've t'reply, and when'e came away he said, "There's too many rumors. And rumors of rumors." He moved t'er other breast, flicked his tongue across'er other nipple. "They say Endercott's doing something."

"They?"

Nathaniel faintly smiled. "I have to go out and see."

She closed'er eyes and his lips closed on'er. "There's plenty for you here," she said. "Couldn't you feel the awe last night?" She stroked'm. "When you finished in me, I don't think the city has ever been that quiet. Even before there were people here." As his then damp fingers continued between'er legs, her chest heaved as'e pulled his mouth away.

Her voice became airy. "There will always be a place for you at the table²⁹⁶."

He touched'er thigh and she released'is erection and rolled onto'er back, and under'is touch, her legs parted. "I'm a little," he said as'e rolled over, positioned'mself between'er spread legs, "out of place."

Eyes closed, she shook'er head. "No..."

Balanced over'er, hands planted either side of'er chest on the mattress, he leaned down and kissed between'er breasts, felt skin press t'the bone beneath. "It's a womens' council," he said. Her hands floated t'is waist, ran down over'is buttocks and grasped'is thighs. "Besides," he said. "I can never figure out how it's better than having just men."

She said lightly, as'e eased into'er, "...it's different..."

"Maybe..." he said, and'is hips met'ers. And after a moment, he started t'move'n-and-outa'er.

"I..." she said. "I'm still going...to hold you...to your promise..."

He sank into'er till their hips met flush, leaned down and kissed'er. "I wouldn't have anything else." Then'e started again. And they'dn't say more till they'd finished and lay there a few moments after Catherine'd wiped between'er legs, before each pulled t'other up and they wandered out t'the fountain t'urinate.

"I had another dream last night," Nathaniel said as they descended the stairs.

"A good dream?"

"It was about a long time ago," he said. "Ron and I were pushing our bikes down a dirt road, toward the sunset. And there was something standing out in the desert waiting for us."

"MacAvoy?"

"I think so. Maybe."

The fountain sloshed and spurted acenter the square.

"I'd prefer," she said, "if you were dreaming about me."

He wrapped'is arm round'er waist. "I dream about you enough when I'm awake." And'e kissed'er shoulder.

Later, after Nathaniel's windswept form'd melded into distant predawn hues, pink early morning mist settled over tower tops and on Catherine's shoulders. And she looked out on the four corners of the world, the city's expanse, birds gathered'n high turrets, the distant ghost-image of ancient mountains out there on the horizon where heatwaver'd've rendered'em seemingly not-sure of their own existence.

And somewhere'n the city, drums heralded the rising sun.

In the silence that followed, those few that still remained looked at Colette. She sat there some moments with'er eyes closed. When she opened'em, she sighed.

They'd all come a long way. Sometimes through exhaustion. Other times through aggravation. Or simply exasperation. Everything'd changed from one day t'the next. What tower the sun rose and fell behind. Where the stars seemingly lay scattered overhead. Where they slept. What stories they told. And t'whom. And now things were t'change again. As they probably always'd.

What'd Genie thought as she sat there and averted'er eyes and tried
t'avoid half-mentions? Perhaps what the prince'd said?

He faintly laughed from behind his mask at what Ambeth'd said. "We've a story," he said. "A story of a woman captive who told stories to a prince in the middle heat of each day in order to save his life."

But stories [don't?] repeat themselves.

Sahara lay back. Languid heat suffused the great chamber. Fan bearers stirred the air. But the prince closed his eyes, anyway.

“My prince.”

He shook and righted himself and opened his eyes to look at her.

“Don’t you wish me to continue?”

After a moment, he nodded and motioned for her to do so.

And Sahara leaned forward and took his hand in both her own. “Already, I’ve told you a tale of friends. They had traveled far. And seen many things. Heard many stories. They’d all come so very far in so many ways. And soon enough, the time came that they must start their return.” Sahara held his hand all while she spoke, as she always’d, as the many fan bearers stirred their great instruments round them.

“Make sure yuh’dn’t forget anythin,” Ambeth said.

Kayla looked down at the floor, turned. She flipped open’er bag and Quetzalcoatl lay asleep. And she closed’t again.

“What bout the old man?” Genie said. “Are we gonna say goodbye before we go?”

Ambeth nodded. “W—”

“Don’ts tries tuse sneaks aways.”

They all looked toward the doorway. Lizbeth ambled toward’em. She motioned toward Li. “Pays ups.”

Without a word, Li reached into’er satchel and tossed somethin t’er. Lizbeth grinned as she looked down at’t. “Yous shouldsn’ts bets,” she said, and looked up.

“’adn’t yuh better b’takin care’a yuhr storyteller,” Li said as she re-cinched’er bag.

“Hese’lls keeps. Besides, hese’s stills tuse busies crowins bouts win-nins, tuse anies cats that’s’lls listens.” She tossed and caught whatever’t was. “Havesn’ts seens yours rounds latelies.”

“We’ve been busy,” Ambeth said.

Lizbeth nodded absently. She must’ve glanced at our journaller, because she said, “findins plenties tuse scribbles, scribblers?” She laughed and turned, again, toward Li. “Yous shoulds comes withs usses. A fews days ands wese cans gets theses storytellers offs ours backs ands goes finds somethins interestins. Maybes wese’ds evens figures outs a ways fers yous tuse wins thisses backs.”

Li stood and slipped’er pack strap over’er shoulder. “No, thanks.”

“Ohs, comes ons.” Lizbeth laughed. “Yous’ve tuse bese gettins sicks ofs alls thisses bise nows. Ise means, looks ats thisses—you can’ts

evens gets readies tuse goes withouts thisses ones sittins scratchins aways'ns a corners likes a durns mouses."

Li glanced over'er shoulder as Kayla must've helped our journaller rise. "Got plans," Li said.

"Seriouslies?"

"Seriously," Li said.

"Whats," Lizbeth said, and laughed. "Theys withs yous nows?"

Li glanced over'er shoulder. "No," she said. "I'm with'em."

Lizbeth shook'er head. She tossed whatever she'd won and caught't. And without saying anything else, she turned and left.

Li slipped'er arm through'er other packstrap and turned. "We goin'r wut?"

"First we've t'say goodbye t'the old man," Genie said.

Ambeth nodded. She glanced at Mara.

Packs on their shoulders, they turned through corridors and passageways that must've by then become familiar. And finally they'd've mounted a stair and pushed back their hats.

"They're gone," Genie said. And she turned and looked into the courtyard, turned and squinted up where the stairs twisted and disappeared.

"The agreement's been fulfilled," Mara said. And she turned and started down the stairs. Ambeth followed. Then Li. And then Helena and Kayla. And then Genie. And lastly must've been our journaller.

"The food was good," Helena said as they walked.

"'ope yuh enjoy the memory," Li said. "Cause't's nothin but dried from'ere on out, till we get back."

Helena groaned.

"It'sn't fair," Genie said.

"What?"

"Everythin's over. And I'dn't—it'dn't seem'ike I've'ear'd *nothin*."

Li and Ambeth laughed.

"And I still..." Kayla said. "I still get the feelin someone's w—"

"Heads up." They all paused, butn't'n time t'avert a collision as someone shoved something into [our journaller's] arms and both near tumbled. The stranger scrambled away.

"What was that?"

"Yuh hurt?" Ambeth said.

Li craned t'look after the stranger, but they'd already disappeared through a passageway.

"That's an odd way t'give someone a present," Genie said. "What's't? Can I see?" ... "It's a book." She opened't and flipped through. "What's't say?"

Ambeth took't.

"Does't've a title?" Genie said. "Shouldn't't've a title?"

Ambeth glanced toward Mara, shrugged and thumbed through a couple of pages.

Li glanced at distant archways. "Well," she said, "'oover't's, don't thin they're comin back fer't."

"It's a gift," Genie said, "obviously."

"We'd get movin'," Ambeth said. "It'll b'hot nearnuf."

"Can I carry't?" Genie said. And Ambeth passed't t'er. She flipped through't as they walked. "Yuh thin yuh'd read some of't when we stop this afternoon? Huh? Please?"

"We'll see," Ambeth said. But she was likely replying for our journaller.

Genie smiled and after a while closed the book and held't at'er side as she walked. "Yuh gonna go with'em?" she said, after a while longer, when they'd long seemingly left everyone behind and passed into an emptier section of city where only birds occasionally fluttered overhead. "When the caravan reaches the third, that's?"

Mara'dn't reply.

"Yuh really thin yuh're'ne—a reïncarnate, I mean?"

"She'sn't wearin a mask, is she?" Li said.

"I'dn't know... I guess I never looked close. I—"

Li and Ambeth and Helena and Kayla laughed and Quetzalcoatl squeaked.

And