

Parturition Phase

A novel
by Lawrence Blair Goral

The Trophy and the Scar

Book One

One who raises his blade against duality would do as well to wage war on light or darkness. For who lives in perpetual defeat will never grasp the sorrow of victory, and who gathers only victories will never acquire the wisdom of defeat. Therefore the superior warrior will accept the trophy but honor the scar, for these are merely reflections: singly each mirrors the other, but in unison they illuminate the way of the cosmos.

—Sra Sanjra Ka'ontinades, *The Book of Contemplations 5:23*, translated by P. E. Suayd

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.

— T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

Prologue

Each night they shuffle in to be shackled to their pallets while the rain rattles the taut amniotic membrane above. He lies between nightmare and nightmare, steeped in misery. No piece of him is free of pain: palms, shoulders, legs, torso, spirit. There is no light, just variances of darkness. His lips shape hollow words, prayer or imprecation: *What ways have brought us where we are, where every moment leads us.*

Each morning he wakes to a sodden cosmos.

The terrors prowling his hemorrhaged sleep dissolve into the incessant choir of water: falling, tapping, trickling, running; the crowd-rush of rain; the muscular thrum of the river passing.

In the early days he would wake with an ember of anger burning. Then Fenn died in a sudden eruption of blood and viscera and chitinous mandibles; after that, mortality and rain devolved the rage into caustic self-pity. Now at every waking he lies in the saturate charcoal light, waiting for the other terror, the waking one, to dissolve too, until he and the others are turned out into the rain to resume their labors.

Each day he and the other slags work their incremental and sacrilegious assault against the jungle. The scruts, pulse rifles slung or brandished, monitor them for telltales of insurrection; but they watch the jungle, too.

He swings the mattock, torn blisters burning. At the last instant the rain-slick handle turns just enough that the strike goes skew and the blade glances off the leg-thick root instead of biting. The impetus throws him to hands and knees in the frictionless mud, the mattock flinging free.

Rannosh, ten meters off, laughs and says, "Looka the fuckun gote, Tiny. Can't even keep his bloody feet under."

Tiny, who is enormous, laughs a treble giggle through missing teeth.

But Nayahl is there, is always there, to help him up. "Porfiry. You are hurt?"

"Just my bloody pride," Porfiry says, but takes his hand, is hoisted.

"Tighten your grip so," Nayahl says, gripping air in demonstration. "As you strike. So the strength connects, here, here, not the shoulder." He traces his own delineated torso from scapula to hip. "And with breathing, as we have practiced."

Porfiry nods. Then another voice jeers: "Pride? What's a slag need with *pride*?"

He turns. Ebraim has come up behind, his favored avenue of attack. He strokes the barrel of his pulse rifle slowly, semiconsciously.

"Nothing," Porfiry mutters.

In a voice so low only Porfiry can hear, Nayahl murmurs, "Not pride, but self."

Cryptic Thrucian, Porfiry thinks.

"Spend too much time in the mud, leech'll get you," Rannosh informs them through a grimace of his own encrusted teeth. He is stringy and grey as something dead at the waterline. "End up like your friend."

Though it hadn't been a leech that did for Fenn, but something different, something no one had seen before. The jungle offers countless such escapes from bondage.

But it—the jungle—is also as austere, as imposing, as humbling as some archetypal cathedral, the trunks soaring tens of meters to even the lowest limbs and too massive for ten large men to circle with arms outstretched. When one is felled the ground heaves up, the seismic impact reverberates through feet and rattles joints. Their carcasses lie strewn across the desecrated ground of the metastatic clearing.

Each day is endless till it ends, with terror lying in complacent wait. The tools are back in the tool locker; the slags hunch in the rain, queueing for food.

"Porfiry?" Nayahl says. "Are you all right?"

He is unfailingly solicitous. It is reassuring and embarrassing and sometimes infuriating. "All right? Sure." He laughs without humor. "No. No—I'm not bloody all right. How can *you* be all right? We don't bloody *belong* here."

So there is still, at least, a vestige of the anger. He thinks, *We crossed lightyears just to get dumped like sewage in this preindustrial hell. We were innocent. We were always innocent. Maybe that was our crime.*

Ebraim has come up behind again. "Ha. Never heard a slag say any different."

Porfiry glares covertly.

“Don’t matter, though, does it?” Ebraim says, or jeers. “Here you fuckun are. And here you’ll fuckun stay.”

After he’s moved on, Porfiry says, “He’s right. We’ll die here.”

Nayahl says, “No. *He* may—perhaps sooner than he thinks. We will not. I shan’t allow it. But first we must choose to live.”

And each night, in his futile resistance against sleep, in the purgatory between nightmares, he retraces the ways that brought him here, the choices layered upon choices, wondering if it ever could have been different.

PART I
EVE OF DEPARTURE

There was, inevitably, some disagreement as to how his last day on Earth should be spent.

“Fuck sake, Pory, don’t go flatworm on me now,” Ish said. “What are you going to do, repack your gear again? Reread your transit docs?”

Which was precisely what he had in mind, not that he’d confess to it. But Ish had decreed a retrospective, and Porfiry had learned even before puberty the futility of resistance.

“Fine. But I think I’ll pass on the riot.”

“Jice. Seriously? It’s not even a riot today. It’s just, you know, a quiet little protest demo.”

Little Erunton existed in a state of perpetual unrest and had done for years, lurching from crisis to crisis without ever becoming quite calm. It owed a substantial portion of its volatility to its location at the feet of a raft of Genertek facilities—a complex of warehouses, a trio of manufactories, a pair of admin blocks—where the largely imported labor force had accreted like flotsam. When residents weren’t clamoring for better conditions, dissidents were squalling about the most recent corporate atrocity, real or mediaplied.

“I’ve worked too hard for too long to risk getting clipped the day before I leave.”

“You didn’t work *that* bloody hard. That shit always came easy for you and you know it.”

Which was true enough, though it diluted his point. “Long, then.”

“All right. So we’ll just do a quick early afternoon flyby. It’s always pretty stable then. But everyone’ll be there. You *do* want to say goodbye, don’t you?”

But in the event it wasn’t a quiet little demo; it was shaping up to be a massive confrontation with city police and what looked to be Sphere Stabilization troops on the prowl. They could hear it blocks away, and survy drones flitted and hovered.

“Bloody hell,” Porfiry said.

“It’ll be fine.”

“How’ll we even find them?”

“Well, you know, it’s Marley. We’ll just go where things are thickest.”

At least it wasn’t an actual riot yet. Handdrawn placards and variegated holotags wobbled over the crowd’s heads. Daylight bleached out the holotags and the physical signs ranged from crude to polished: from ‘Fuck Genertek’ to ‘Peel the Sphere before we All Suffocate’ to ‘Andam’s broken yoke is Terra’s penance’ to ‘Water To Drink and A Place to Shit.’

“So I guess there isn’t a particular theme to today’s festivities,” Porfiry shouted.

“Look, over there!” Ish cried back, pointing and dragging him deeper into the press, to where the building’s legend loomed:

PHARMADYNE

A Wholly Owned Division of General Earth Technologies

Logistics and Personnel

Beneath it the tumult thickened as if an irresistible gravity well were condensing the crowd. Porfiry tried to tell Ish that this was a bad idea, that they needed to reverse out of here while they could but he couldn’t yell loud enough; in fact was on the verge of losing visual contact, too, when Ish, half a head taller than most of the mob, rose up, one arm waving, and just past him Porfiry caught a glimpse of Mandrake’s platinum spikes and in a gap beside him what might be Evita Marley’s cerulean queue and over them a crimson holotag that read, screaming against the building’s olive biocrete façade, ‘Who else must die for our drugs?’

Bodies swayed and shoved and the rising odor of fearful sweat threatened to swamp him. Even if they could reach their friends there would be no goodbyes here—words would just dissolve into the roar.

Something somewhere detonated. It wasn’t large but neither was it distant; a ripple went through the crowd, conducted like current through the contiguous bodies, a shift and contraction, and the volume and the furor ratcheted up. Then another thread weaved itself into the ambient din: liftpacks whining. He looked up amid a forest of arms pointing, someone yelling “SS fuckun aerial!” and saw them, two ranks in riot gear, a phalanx ten meters over the crowd with gas mortars at ready but still at the far side of the Pharmadyne plaza where a waft of smoke signaled the blast.

Ish crashed into him. “Fuck this! Let’s go!” He had Marley by the wrist, diminutive in the crowd, and Mandrake, as tall as Ish but rail thin, dragging along behind her.

A considerable fraction of the crowd had the same idea. The pops of the first gas

cannisters floated over the plaza.

"This way!" Ish yelled, and Porfiry, shoulder to shoulder with Marley now and trying to prevent her getting trampled in the panic, followed: early scents of the caustic riot gas pursued them, but the mob was disaggregating into the warren of Little Eruntun and they were moving faster now, though a fall might be fatal if you couldn't evade the stampeding feet. They made the narrower ways of the residential blocks where people began peeling away into tenements, dissipating ahead of the gas.

Marley beside him was laughing, perhaps manically. She said, "Some bloody sendoff, Pory, isn't it?"

"Talk to bloody Ish," he said, "it was his idea." Understanding they could hear again, could speak, while behind more cannisters popped. At the same time a new if lesser current surged against them and toward the conflict behind. Residents with pipes, chains, cudgels instead of placards; grim, with dripping towels to cover their faces when they encountered the gas. Some wore safety goggles—purloined, Porfiry suspected, from the very manufactories they were protesting.

At an alley's dogleg they almost collided with a quartet of heavily muscled Erunian immigrants. Goggles and soaked scarves round their necks and one with a shoulderslung bag from which protruded a sheaf of pipes or rods, metal or plastalloy; all four carrying contrived weapons of one sort or another.

The leader—a dark striking man who Porfiry guessed was his own age but somehow made him feel like a raw adolescent—said, "Fuckun runnin be, soder."

The two groups stood blocking the alley while others piled behind.

"Got SS aerial back there," Ish said, "slinging gas."

He was beautiful, Porfiry thought, with a hawk's nose and a jaw Ish could have sculpted and cropped wooly hair shining gold against his walnut complexion, raptor's eyes fierce and penetrant with fervor. His lip curled.

"Dillies bein. Come shitstirrin, but runnin be when the pot boilin over."

Marley cried, "We're trying to *help!*"

"*That way?*" he said with a contemptuous head-toss behind—toward safety.

"They're gassing the crowd!" Porfiry cried, because surely he would have to understand.

"Our *homes* bein," he said. "Nowhere to run. Not like you."

The one beside him said, "Move." Hefted a pipe with a knobbed end. "Or us you movin be."

Porfiry, swallowing a sudden clot of shame, stepped aside, then Ish did. The Erunians breasted past and shoved at the crowd behind. Then Porfiry called, "Hey!"

The leader paused, turned back squinting.

"Good luck."

He stared a moment then nodded infinitesimally and led his cadre on, the crowd sealing after them and surging again through the alley while Porfiry and Ish, Marley and Mandrake stood against the walls and eyed one another across the thinning flow.

Marley said, "He's right."

"Difference between a demo and a riot," Ish said. "We need to go."

"I think I'll stick around for awhile."

Ish shot Porfiry an exasperated look.

"I'm with you," Porfiry said to Ish. And to Marley, "There's nothing you can do here."

"Nevertheless," she said.

"Well," Ish said, "if you don't get clipped, we'll likely wind up having drinks later at the Port."

"All right."

"Mandrake?" Ish asked him.

His androgynous face underwent a sequential metamorphosis, demonstrative of struggle. Then he said, "I guess I'll stay with her."

Porfiry said, "Be careful, then. You need to pick what hill to die on."

Marley looked at him for a long moment. "Maybe the hill picks you."

Little Erunton and the soundtrack of civil unrest fell behind. They were quiet, each wrapped in his own musings. Finally Ish said, "All right, so maybe it wasn't my best idea of all time."

"Yeah, maybe."

In ten minutes more they reached Commerce Plaza, glossy and affluent. The Erunian haunted him. The Erunian would never walk here unchallenged, not unless he could make himself over with a corpomerd's wardrobe and diction.

They shuffled to a stop, suddenly aimless, the riot confined safely away in this segmented city. Ish said, "So what do you want to do now?"

"Jice. Your agenda, remember?"

"Come on, don't be all frayed. It wasn't meant to be major."

He sighed. "I know. I'm not. Just ... that merd, what he said got under my skin. *We are*

fucking dilettantes.”

“We are what we are.”

“Marley and Mandrake—”

“Are bloody extremists.”

“Maybe we all should be.”

“And maybe you’ll get your chance—out there. Come on. It’s your last bloody day.”

Pory looked up as if an answer might be hovering. By the texture of light raking the city canopy he could make the time as late afternoon.

“I could use some air,” he said. “Some real air.”

Ish grinned. “All right, then. That was one of my options—an actual sunset. Let’s go.”

The transitpod hub was a half klick the other side of Commerce Plaza. Walking the concourse, passing the tourist adverts, Ish said, “Remember our first time?”

Porfiry smiled. “Could I ever forget?”

“Fifteen years ago.”

“Sixteen. We were eleven.”

“Right. Remember this one? I don’t think they’ve changed it since.”

A holographic montage of beautiful people doing beautiful things. A couple in formfitting wingsuits, hands joined, stepping from a cliff and freeflying (the microjets discreetly out of view) over a landscape of nearly vertical hills with riverlands between, waterfalls and lakes shimmering like embroidery against the verdant flora: *Something in the air*, the silken genderless voiceover purred. The same couple presumably naked in teal-clear water, frolicking with something twice their size, aquatic but somehow benign. *Something in the water*, the narrator said. Then dining on a terrace over the sea, a curving beach and an incandescent sunset softening behind. *Whether it’s freeflying the Roiling Hills, swimming with urdolphins, or sampling the unparalleled nightlife where worlds converge, experience Calypso.*

“I remember,” Porfiry said. “I said I wanted to go out one day and you called me a dreamer.”

“It wasn’t an insult.”

“It was, actually—at the time.”

“Well ... a friendly caution.”

“Look, this one’s new.”

A soaring perspective swept them over mountains that defied scale until a sheer river

gorge came into view, and the texture on the ledges along vertical cliffs on either side resolved into a large town or small city. The luminous river itself threading the gorge's depths as the viewer swept winding along its course then burst out of the canyon into an unimaginable vastness; swung in a broad arc until they were looking back at the edge of a continent from which, in an ax-cut crevice, the river plunged in opalescent freefall to dissolve onto a lavender sea.

... the mountainous mysteries of Tibetia and the Falls of Qur, a narrator saying, the tallest waterfall in known space ...

"Now *that's* something I'd like to see," Porfiry said.

"Maybe you will."

"I doubt it. Doubt my itinerary includes tourist stops. I'll be smalltrader crew."

"You never know, do you. Isn't that the whole point?"

It was, of course: to insert himself, by manageable increments, into the unknown where the unmanageable might occur. A crucible of destiny—then scoffed at that conceit while nevertheless holding it secret and inviolate against his chest.

The transitpod slipped in birthlike eruption through the city canopy into the broader light of the desert. The first stop was the New Vegas ag complex; the second was the Colorado hydro facility and historical park; the third, their stop and terminus of this line, the Mojave–Great Basin Wildlands Preserve Visitors' Center.

They stepped into the fragrant piercing air, hotter than city or transitpod, dry as sand. Porfiry paused, eyes closed, drawing it in. It wasn't summer yet so the heat was luxuriant, not oppressive; but they'd scoured these hills and trails in every season over the years. Wrestled with the demons of maturation and identity; masticated the fibrous meals of cosmopolitics, art, sex; nurtured one another's evolutions. Visits had become infrequent in the last few years, especially as Ish pursued his vocation as a sculptor with increasing brilliance and intensity and Porfiry entered the Interplanetary Transportation Technology Guild school where he had finally obtained his certifications.

"Where did you have in mind?" Porfiry asked him.

"Dante's Point. Best view without slogging half a day to Mount Frankel."

Memories paced beside them. Ish had been right: a restrospective made the most fitting of last days. Sad and sweet ... and severing. The sun was already behind a ridge though they'd raise it again as they climbed. Things rustled in the thorny scrub: lizards, birds. Once, years ago, a pair of coyotes had paused, watched them, ambled on.

From Dante's Point you could look west to a far horizon, the sun fattening above it, thin strata of ephemeral clouds promising to take fire. To the north arid mountains sawtoothed against a cobalt sky; south the desert flattened away, stippled with its desiccated biome; and southeast, gilded in the failing day, the city lay within its canopy, appendages of heat transfer vanes, vents, intakes, communications hardware giving it the appearance of some vast cancerous cactus lying flaccid on the land.

The breeze from the west caressed them. The viewing platform was a scraped dirt area behind a waist-high wall of crudely fitted stones, mortared with biocrete, simulating an archaeological artifact of indigenous design. They were alone. In all their wanderings here they'd never encountered more than a handful of other visitors on any given day. Apparently the few people who wanted to partake of nature preferred the farther and more managed experience of guided visits to the Grand Canyon, Navajo Valley, Bryon Heritage Park. The vast majority chose holotours, safe in VR chambers with the return trip just a cancel command away.

Ish said, "What if you get out there and hate it?"

He didn't answer at first because it was, of course, his greatest fear.

"Then I guess I'll come back."

"But you will anyway ... won't you?"

Ish sounding vulnerable was an uncomfortably rare experience.

"Sure. In time."

"Time. We won't even be the same age anymore."

The megarich would undertake a grand tour: Calypso, Neranthe, Erune, Quutaerin in the innerSphere, then beyond to Thruce, Simridar, Sand, the Shenner Collective, Fyunchenar, New Jerusalem, whatever Noyen Sector worlds were safe to visit and had attractions worth the notice. Then they'd come back four or five or maybe six years younger than the people they'd left behind.

"Well. Depends how many runs. It'll take a lot for the Stretch to have any significant effect."

After a time, the sun scraping the horizon, Ish said, "This day's supposed to be about you, but there's something I need to tell you."

Porfiry turned to Ish's profile, dark hair blowing, knotted forehead washed in golden light.

"Go on."

“Remember that juried show I entered back in January?”

“I do. You bloody won, didn’t you?”

“No—well, I didn’t get best in show. But I got best in single medium multidimensional.

Not that the competition amounted to much.”

“Told you.”

“And a rep.”

“Ish! Bloody hell! Why didn’t you say?”

“I was waiting for the right time. “You’re leaving bloody *Earth*, Pory.”

“And you, my friend, have arrived.”

“I wouldn’t say that. But I did sell *Avatar Twenty-One*.”

“Jice! How much?”

“Six-fifty. So dinner and drinks are on me. Which they were going to be anyway, but now we can go topend.”

They looked at one another, faces washed with the deep ruddy radiance of the last sun. Everyone was beautiful in that light, Porfiry reflected. He wondered if other worlds would offer such splendor.

“There,” Ish said, “it’s going.”

They watched the last dollop of sun suck itself beneath the horizon. The streamers of cloud darkened and did indeed catch fire. They contemplated the world’s rotation into night in silence, the band of sunset deepening to coral, vermillion, blood.

Porfiry intoned, “What ways have brought us where we are; where every moment leads us.”

After a time Ish said, “What’s that?”

Porfiry shrugged. “Just something. Thinking about the paths. The decision points. Random chance. Fate.” He turned to his oldest friend. “Who the fuck knows?”

This Port in a Storm was done up like a station dock, and only a quarter klick from the Guild school, it was frequented by guildies and Spherehopper fantasists as well as the occasional actual hopper visiting motherdirt or retired here, like Demestra the owner. It was also a sometime meetingplace of a certain stratum of the artistic ommunity, generally of the musico-literary genres: poets, musicians, verbal performers. Porfiry had become a semiregular patron during his two-year stint at the Guild school.

The thematic resonance with his pending venture would have been motive enough for Ish to include the Port in his retrospective agenda, but they both knew that wasn’t the main

reason. They stood in the doorway contemplating the sparsely populated establishment: industrial-height ceilings lost in shadow; the bar a replica of a loading conveyor; the stage a broad platform like a cargo pallet, tethered to a liftjack's forks; stools and tables made of shipping containers or facsimilies thereof; cargo nets and retired breather suits hanging from structural ribs. It was still early: a trio of guildies at a table; a couple of solitary pensioners at the bar. Ropy-armed large-breasted Demestra behind the bar, cranial implant glittering, Ridari braids swinging and endbeads clicking as she threw back her head to laugh her raucous hoarse laugh at something one of the oldtimers said.

"Well, we're here," Ish said. "Might as well start drinking."

Yes, here, Porfiry thought, where it all began.

Two-and-a-half years earlier he'd never set foot in the Port. He was in courses at the New Vegas sub-uni—largely as a delaying tactic against more serious decisions. On this particular evening Ellison Hantz, himself a moderately successful poet and writer and the instructor of Poetry, Myth, and the Making of a Modern Socioethical Matrix, had decreed a class outing. This Port in a Storm hosted a monthly recitative freestage. There was to be an hour class discussion before it began and Hantz had encouraged his students to step up and read their original work for extra credit.

There were twelve regular members. Porfiry didn't particularly sync with any of them though he only grated openly against a couple, but Hantz seemed to like him. He'd submitted a few poems and a short story beyond class assignments, and Hantz had evinced a surprised respect.

In Porfiry's estimation the twelve regulars were mostly sycophantic, shallow, pretentious, devoid of talent, or some combination thereof. Except tonight there appeared to be thirteen. Terana Przewallas had brought a guest.

She was all in dark. He recognized Spherehopper garb—dark and closefitting but with roomy gussets at joints and numerous pockets and hidden compartments—it was functional, utilitarian, and had spawned its own emulative subfashion that had flourished for awhile but was now embraced only by a certain set of antidancers, political zealots, and self-styled pseudo-nihilists. She didn't look like any of these. Nor was her attire particularly fashionable. It looked ... used. Her hair was all in lank fine braids, dozens of them terminating in asymmetric beads, and there was a hard intimidating pallor about her, a severe beauty, a bored amusement, that snagged him back and back. Her gaze drifted to him

and hung, expressionless; then passed on.

Two and a half years later he couldn't remember the topic of discussion; maybe he scarcely followed it at the time. It seemed somehow even shallower than usual in her presence. But Ellison Hantz said, "Mer Przewallas, would you like to introduce your guest?"

Terana said, "This is Coren. She's my—"

Coren's lip curled. "Trunc it, Ter."

"—aunt!"

Coren scowled at the girl nearly her own apparent age beside her.

Rastor Guapares, two places down, said, "How long've you been out?" before Porfiry himself could. Rastor considered himself something of a wit; maybe that was why he and Porfiry abraded.

She looked at him with mild contempt, and Porfiry was glad he hadn't been quicker.

"Wrong question," she said. Her voice was low. Porfiry felt Rastor fidget though he was watching Coren. Then she said, "It's moot."

So he understood, and ventured softly into the momentary uncomfortable silence, "How many?" he said. "How far?"

She looked at him. It was more appraisal than contempt. Her eyes were so dark as to seem irisless. She hung fire, deliberate and tantalizing.

"Beyond," she finally said.

Terana looked back and forth between them. Glia Culter, who tended to monopolize class discussions, flared her nostrils and thinned her lips and said, "Does anybody object to returning to the actual *material*?"

But the discussion had passed him by, or he had stepped outside its flow. It seemed to be about power structures through history, with students vying to display their erudition. Nearer and brighter, Coren was like some suddenly revealed landscape, all implicative landforms and enticing terrain; the more alluring for its evident difficulty of navigation. The corners of her tropic mouth might have flickered, while Glia Culter marshaled her latest sally.

The students had fallen into an uncomfortable silence after the last conclusionless exchange, waiting for a guidepost. The gulf between himself and everyone else, he felt—always extant, if subtle—was widening. He could step casually across it and rejoin his fellow students—or else away, in the previously unsuspected direction to the place where Coren dwelt.

Waiting his arrival?

He delved for a suitable allusion and spoke without raising his hand.

“And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, ‘has been one of the dark places of the earth.’”

Everyone watched him now, even Coren, but the quotation and its connotations had taken hold of him.

“Mer Suayd,” Hantz prompted when he didn’t go on, “would you care to expand on that?”

“Suayd,” Rastor Guapares said, “and his bloody cryptic quotes.” Glia Culter rolled her eyes.

After a suitable pause, pointedly ignoring Rastor, Porfiry said, “This is all just ... sophistry. Shallow. Masturbatory. Because in the end it’s just the darkness. In literature, in history, in politics—greed and oppression; fear and superstition; the darkness that’s always there, beneath the polish, at the edges of the manicured garden, underlying every pretentious ideology. Religions gestate out of darkness and darkness waits for us—patiently. Even in the short bright golden ages it waits—has always waited—and in the end darkness bloody well tramples on the light because what we *call* darkness—predator and prey; the triumph of amorality because it doesn’t bother with self-imposed restraint; the rape and pillage we dress up as market forces and call prosperity; or just actual darkness, the absence of light—because what we call darkness is the primal state of being, always there, what things go back to when the lights go out. And the lights always do go out—finally. What most of us never grasp is that there’s nothing but a bubble-wall of illusion separating the best of times—from the rest of times.”

He felt the surge of endorphins but kept himself composed. Hantz said, “Eloquently put, mer Suayd.”

Porfiry shrugged without shrugging, assuming modesty. Let his eyes drift to Coren: one eyebrow arched, and something that might become smile sharpened the shape of her mouth.

After a moment Rastor said, “Will somebody please tell me what the hell he just said?”

“He *tried* to say that mer Hantz’s so-called reiterative socioethical theme is some sort of subliminal perception of the primeval ooze we crawled out of, but it sounded more like some ex-postmodern pseudonihilistic lament.” This of course was Glia Culter.

Terana said, “Well *I* think he’s right. We *do* live in our safe little world of illusion.” She glanced sidelong at her aunt as if for approval.

But then the electricity dimmed and flared; someone was on the stage, and someone else was adjusting the telemetry for the freestage to begin.

Hantz said, "All right, everyone, on that note class is officially closed. I expect everyone to attend to the readings—we'll be discussing this evening's, mmm, events, at our next regular meeting, Tuesday afternoon."

Rastor shoved his chair back and sprang up; others rose more leisurely. Porfiry leaned back but watched Terana bend close to Coren, speaking too softly for him to hear. Coren glanced at him, then turned and answered briefly.

Hantz leaned toward Porfiry and said, "Were you planning to read any of your own tonight, Pory?"

Coren glanced again.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"You should."

He pushed himself up. "Now, though, I think I'm thirsty."

He rose and went to the bar. The woman behind it met him there. Her hair was myriad-braided, like Coren's—but the top of her skull was decorated with a front-to-back band of metallic filigree. Then, no, it was a circuitry pattern. The light shifted; he couldn't be sure.

She said, "I was beginning to wonder if any you eggs planned on burning any credit here or just using up my air."

He smiled. "We're a uni class. We use up a lot. We just had to wait till it was over to drink anything alcohol. School regs."

"What are you sucking?"

Coren's sudden voice beside him said, "You pour Shenner ale?"

The bartender leaned over the bartop to peer close. "Best in the city," she said. "I brew it and I pour it. Demestra." She held a be-ringed hand, all vein and sinew, which Coren took. "You're not part of this," Demestra said, indicating the dispersing class. "You've been out."

"Back for my twoscore."

Demestra's lips tightened; she drew herself in. "It's not quite authentic. But I went a three-year marriage contract with a Shennerite brewer on Simridar and picked up the craft."

Coren turned. "Ever tried it?" she asked Porfiry.

He shook his head.

"Two, Demestra."

Demestra glanced at Porfiry, then back at Coren. “Mm-hmm.” And moved off to get the drinks.

Coren turned toward him, one elbow leaning.

“You might not like it. It’s an acquired taste.”

“Yeah. Like this bloody class, right?”

“I’m not saying a word.” She smiled a bit.

Demestra brought two mugs of deep brown liquid, lightening upward into foam. The foam itself had no defined surface, but gradated into a tiny translucent cloud of amber effervescence hovering above.

Coren took one. “It’s doing like it should.”

“I told you,” Demestra said, challenge and pride, “I learned the craft. I acquired some of the essential ingredients. My first ten years back on motherdirt I cornered the market. Godfucking Gen-u-Flek offered to buy me out. I was still a dreamer then. They co-opted my source and now I buy my ingredients from bloody fucking *them*.” She turned and spat symbolically and made a gesture as if flinging something odious from her fingers. “Seventeen five,” she said.

Porfiry turned his wrist for scanning but Coren put a hand over the credilet.

“My bonus,” she said.

Her electric hand.

“Sure? You don’t have to.”

“I order, I buy. You might not even like it, then I drink both.”

“But next one’s mine.”

“All right then.” She held out her own credilet for Demestra to scan, turned back as the bartender began serving other students, who had by now drifted to the bar.

“Toast first,” she said. He took up his mug, touched it to hers.

“To new things,” he said.

“New things.” The amber clouds merged momentarily while the mugs were close. “There’s a right way to drink it. Start by breathing through your nose. Keep bringing it closer,” watching him as she demonstrated, but squinting as the mist brushed eyelashes, “until you’re almost going to sneeze, then breathe through your mouth. Some hoppers can keep inhaling while they swallow, but you better aim for just not aspirating.”

He smiled; she did—her first, with dimples. Even her eyes smiled—which he’d begun to doubt could happen.

The smell was spice and verdancy; as the mist kissed nose and cheeks, it was like a rich rain, with the faintest breath of sweet wasabe. In his mouth the vapors swirled like a cacophony of outworld blossoms; sharp and sweet and perfumed. Her narrowed eyes watching over her own mug's lifting rim; a smile in them; she was drinking now.

The liquid slipped onto his tongue. It was shockingly bitter at first; he almost drew back, but held it there in his mouth. As it warmed, it began a cascade of gentle detonations, each of another flavor almost but not quite surfacing through the bitterness. He swallowed, and it traced a limpid firefall descending through him.

They lowered their mugs together. The small clouds had mostly been breathed away. She studied him; there was a line of amber foam on her upper lip. He wished he could lick it off; then she did it herself, slowly, like torture.

"Well?"

"Like a symphony orchestra playing in your mouth," he said.

She half smiled. "So let me ask you. That deadly class. You do that how often?"

"Twice a week."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Halfassed moving toward a literature degree."

"That should take you far."

"It's all right. I'm not expecting it to."

She nodded as if she understood.

"So do I gather you're a poet or something?"

He shrugged. He raised his mug. "The cloud doesn't last."

"No. Now you drink it like pretty much any decent brew—sip and savor."

"Like life."

"Which sometimes it's better if you guzzle."

He sipped. The rich tapestry of flavors, if less volatile, was still manifest.

"There's nothing quite like your first," she said archly. "You should read something."

"Yeah? What if I reek?"

"I don't think so."

"Maybe we can strike a deal. I'll read a piece of my work—if you tell me the story of your life."

"My life? You can't be serious."

"But I am."

Rastor bellied up to the bar behind Porfiry. He said loudly, "Watch him, he's a thick talker."

Porfiry half turned. "Rastor—"

But Coren leaned forward, looked past him.

"Get elsewhere, boy."

Rastor flushed.

"Listen, we don't need some jacked-up spacer bitch—"

Demestra from nowhere slammed a hand on the bar like a detonation and there was a moment of silence, then more distant voices resumed. Coren had twirled behind Porfiry and was pressed close against Rastor, leaning body to body, holding a short flat blade next to his jaw.

Demestra, hand still white-fingered on the bartop, smiled a tight predatory grimace that wasn't really a smile at all. She leaned close, cheek to cheek with Rastor; her eyes passed across Porfiry's. She said, lips to Rastor's ear, "You'd leave here gelded, downie boy, if you hadn't come in that way."

Porfiry saw the pallor spread across Rastor's cheek. Coren leaned close to his other ear, the blade still touching his neck. Some other students were looking now, but it might have appeared an active flirtation from more than a couple meters distant.

Coren said, "Us jacked-up spacer bitches aren't to be fucked with, downie boy. Best tuck your prick in your pocket and scurry home to your locopare."

Rastor nodded, rapid jerky nods.

With her empty left hand, Coren reached between Rastor's legs and squeezed. He jumped, twisted his head away from the blade and gaped in wide-eyed horror.

"Scurry," she said.

He shot back a single terrified glance from the door then was gone.

Coren and Demestra looked at each other a moment, then slapped their hands together across the bar.

"You'll be respectful now, won't you?" Demestra said to Porfiry.

"Never intended otherwise, did I?"

The corners of her mouth went down. "Knew I liked you." She winked and moved off.

Coren, now on his left, turned to him. He slid her mug across, turning to face her.

"Sorry," she said. "Habits of a less-civilized life."

They moved to a table between stacks of shipping containers. The tabletop screen

flashed an invitation to sign on for the freestage.

“Go on,” Coren said, gesturing with her chin.

He looked at her, then smiled and shrugged. “All right,” he said and keyed in his name.

“Was that turdeater a friend of yours, by the way?”

“Not even close.”

She nodded, but was subdued.

“Your personal log runs a downworld time program,” she explained, as if it were the continuation of an earlier conversation, “linked to your registered port of origin. There’s a sort of baseline custom. Call it the twoscore—about the time your parents might be starting to get old. A lot don’t make it that long—a couple hops and they want back. They feel it slipping away, the world they came from. Others never blink, just keep going. A lot want a visit at least—which turns out a long retirement for some and a short bounce for others.”

“Hence the niece who looks like a kid sister. How long have you been back?”

She leveled a look. “Too long.”

“When are you going?”

“Soon as I get a berth.”

He nodded. “Then I’m lucky I met you.”

She gave him a soft sad smile.

“Tell me,” he said. “Tell me about your life out there.”

“A travelog? You can get that watching netwash.”

“No. The textures—the colors—the moments.”

She studied him. “The moments,” she mused. “Thought about going out yourself?”

He shrugged; maybe fidgeted. “When I was younger. You grow up it starts to look like a kid’s fantasy. Not sure my politics would tolerate berthing for Genertek.”

“If I thought your politics *would* we wouldn’t be having this conversation, sobby?”

He nodded. “So what, then?”

“I’ll have to berth out on a Genertek contract, likely. They’ve got motherdirt pretty well sealed—for now.” The last words laced with portent.

“For now?”

They were leaning closer, talking low. Behind, a light came on; she looked past his shoulder. “Freestage is starting.”

He shrugged, looked at the screen displaying, on the right, a list of performers’ names, his own midway down. “I’d rather listen to you.”

“What about your class?”

“Fuck my class.”

Her eyebrow left lifted.

“Talk to me about changes,” he said.

“Ears up,” she said. “Downies have no fucking idea.” He noted, cautiously and to himself, that she didn’t say *you downies*. “They still think the innerSphere is *it*: you know, Genertek has the power. Earth, the Belt, Calypso, the Neranthe-Erune Compact, Quutaerin—then out in the Beyond there’re a few outposts, a handful of colonies, the odd tape-and-wire smalltrader, the frontier thing with pirates and rugged individualists—good setting for your netwash druff. But it’s different. It’s harsh different. The Sphere isn’t the end of anything except Genertek’s primary turf. They patrol the borders, pissing on planets to mark their territory. The other powers out there, though—they give UE a run for its money. And plenty boats to berth on—if you know where to find them.”

A woman’s voice amped up behind and around him. Coren looked past. “You want to listen?”

He shook his head. “I’ve heard most of these before.”

An Asian stringed instrument set up a discordant counterpoint to the woman’s recitative, pregnant with pauses.

“Where *do* you find them?” he prompted.

“Lots of places. Stations once you’re outside Terran control. The best, though—the best—is Simridar. They *own* trade over the edge. Point nine *g*. Most of it’s too bloody hot to live in—for anyone who isn’t Ridari.” She gazed at or through him, as if seeing across the abyss of space. “Empires intersect there. *Centuries* intersect. Porttown, a lot of the buildings are mud brick, firstlander built. That’s what you’re after.”

“What, mud brick?”

“No, wise-ass—*textures*. You have these mudbrick hovels without power next to plastalloy extrusion modules—sometimes in the same bloody building. Magsleds and oxcarts. Thrucian *sanjra*-caste and Simridi merchants. Beggars and street-vendors, Ridari nomads, jewel traders, salvage pirates, contract killers.”

“Contract killers?”

“There’s a bar I frequent—the Temple Yard.” She smiled a dreamy smile; her voice was husky. “It’s laid out like a Thrucian clan-compound, just outside the city. About five hectares of rooms and these courtyards and fountains ... The bar is in one courtyard with a second

one next to it where the *cabrell* trains come in from the desert.”

“Cabrell trains?”

“Cabrelli are these indigenous animals, more or less domesticated. Firstlanders survived on them. Like a cross between a camel and some kind of lizard or something. They’re mean and they smell bad, but they can carry a rider and a hundred kilos of supplies on no water and not much more food.”

“So what do they carry?”

“Mastath, mostly.”

“Which is ...”

“A mold—or maybe an algae. I don’t know. Important pharmaceutical—but big in the dark markets, too. One of Simridar’s biggest native commodities. Pricey stuff. So the caravans come in, and the Ridari stay at the Temple Yard while they do their trading, these amazing-looking hoppers with skin like burnt amber and eyes like spun titanium. These are Ridari braids,” fingering her own. “They wear these long robes and scarves like turbans and they carry swords.”

“Swords?”

She shrugged. “Thruce is influential. The whole neo-luddite thing is big in the Thrucian maitradang.”

“Which is -”

“Oh—” she waved away any import that might have attached— “something between a religion and a code of ethics. Last time I was there ...”

She faded. “What?” he said.

Her eyes had drifted off, then focused again. “Time fucks your mind,” she said. “Specially when you come back.” She shook her head again. “Last time I was there. Less than a month ago, subtime. Probably ten months, local.”

“Ten months!”

“It wasn’t a straight run, of course. Straight run would make it no more than eight-ten weeks. Depending on the variables. But we sat there, a bunch of us from the *Shantway*, in the Temple Yard, watching a cabrell train come in. They lead their mounts through the one yard—the one with the bar, you know—they don’t look at you. The cabrelli’s feet make these slapping sounds on the packed dirt, and the harness creaks, and maybe a cabrell snorts or farts but that’s it. The Yard gets quiet while everybody watches. These guys, you know, you just look at them, and they’re some hoppers you genuinely *don’t* want to fray.

The women either. They're from a different time. A different age." She drained her mug, licked the foam languidly from her upper lip. It was the second time she'd done that, watching him.

"Where do you live?" she said.

Which prompted a quickening.

"Klick-and-a-half from here."

She was leading him, in this unexplored terrain, beyond his depth. Though he would follow without second thoughts. "Tell me more."

She tipped her head. Her dark eyes smoldered, reveling in the attention or the memory. "Simridar at dusk—a haze over the city. Lots of small fires—street-vendors, home kitchens—two crescent moons near one horizon and the other, almost full, just up at the other. So the train comes in—at dusk. One of my new shipmates says 'I wonder if that's our load' and I say 'What? I thought we're moving tse'nui botanicals.' She gives me this *how new* are *you* look. Because the Ridari won't deal with Genertek and won't deal with anyone who does, and this is supposed to be a motherdirt run. An independent with a three-run Genertek sub."

"Sub?"

"Subcontract. Mastath shouldn't show up on any Genertek manifest—in fact, it's contraband here, because they lobbied IPTO to proscribe it in its unprocessed form as a dangerous narcotic."

"Is it?"

"That's not the point. It doesn't matter. The bloody fucking Interplanetary Trade Organization is nothing but Genertek's whore. They let in bloody *fleets* of dangerous narcotics—long as it's Genertek carrying the manifests. They just list anything that comes from anyone heels to the boycott—like the Ridari."

"So you have to smuggle it in."

"Look," she said. "Things are shifting. Somebody must have convinced the Ridari to let Genertek pick up half their shipping costs. And we make a detour—to Bavaïs."

"Which is—"

"Thrucian dirt. No shore leave. We offload the mastath and take on a passenger. Next stop Andam, where we pick up our tse'nui botanicals and send off the passenger. And that's all I know."

"Sounds like a holodrama."

“Things are shifting. Maybe they already have. You said it yourself, didn’t you? Something about a bubble-wall’s thickness from the dark ... it couldn’t be anything *but* change. Everybody out there’s hunting—for the big prize.”

“And what is that?”

She shrugged. “They’ll know when they find it. Natural resources; delicacies; something new. Any bloody edge. Something that whoever finds it can corner the market and everyone else will want it. Most of all, of course, first contact. Everybody’s wet dream.”

“First contact—but with who?”

“With whoever might be out there. That’s the mystery, isn’t it? Meanwhile it’s a dance between expansion and consolidation and all the dancers want to lead. Gets bloody confusing.” She blew air through puffed cheeks. “The great powers—motherdirt, Thruce, the Collective, the STA—then all the second-tier characters: Sand, New Jerusalem, freemarketers, smalltraders, local interests, shippers’ guilds; fringers like the Children of High Zion—”

“*They’re* still around?”

“Every next dirtball’s the new promised land. They practically *own* New J, where the Patriarchy lives. Then of course there’s the Noyen Sector—the Zone—the biggest wildcard in known space.”

“You know something?”

“What?”

“You’re verily glowing.”

She seemed momentarily flustered.

Her eyes flared at him. “It’s like a chessgame the size of creation and all the squares and pieces are worlds. No edges. No limits. You spend nine-tenths of your life in spaces you can’t turn around in without cracking your head and take your layovers on worlds with skies and horizons and *that’s* where you get claustrophobic.”

He was staring at her. Falling into her ebony eyes, which met his unflinchingly, perhaps with amusement, perhaps with enticement.

“You ready?” she said in her husky voice.

His pulse jacked. “What?”

“You’re up.” She gestured at the tabletop screen, laughing, where his name flashed.

“Jice.” He laughed, disappointed and relieved. “You’ll wait?”

“I might.” Then smiled. “Unless your little friend comes back and sweeps me off my feet.”

He moved between tables toward the stage. He passed Ellison Hantz and the students who'd remained in his orbit; felt Hantz's encouraging slap on his back, maybe thankful that there wasn't even time to get nervous, but his focus was on Coren despite that he couldn't see her. Still couldn't when he mounted the stage; the lights blacked out everything behind them. He glanced down at his carrypad and scanned the words once quickly to himself then lowered it.

"Diffusion," he said, "please." The lights softened; he lowered his eyes and breathed, then looked into the glare-hazed audience.

"Porfiry Esteban Suayd," he said. And after a moment: "Borderwind." And paused again, then recited—with only a few on-the-fly revisions—staring into the darkness where she likeliest was.

This sheltered earth—
 This shaded—or salted?—Earth
 Is timestream's eddy:
 Not heart, not hub, but eddy.
 You and I root shallow, but we root;
 Trace tight circles in bottommud and call them life.

In restless nights, though,
 In wild sweated dream,
 You press cheek, palm, ear
 Against the shimmering border
 Where wind, border's sinew—
 If you hesitate at interface—
 Might rive bone from soul.

On the shimmer's other side
 Wind hammers, shears, spins
 Or, sensuous, insinuates itself;
 Might sing or sigh,
 Might shriek, might cackle—
 Dying cry or lullaby,
 Funeral dirge or angel choir—
 A syncopating babel-throated anagram:
 "Change"
 Just "Change is all;
 Is life;
 Is genius and creation:
 The dance we,
 Driven, toe until we flee."

If border's wind torments us
 Then stand clear—
 Let loose the stanchions

Of seasons past and dead,
 Too far decayed to change beyond decay—
 Stand clear!
 Arms wide in untrammelled yield
 While wind wraps you in its electric freedom—
 Stand clear!
 Touch passion—
 Embrace the myriad paradox
 Of Then's and Maybe's groin.

He let his hands fall, not knowing he had used them. A hush hung; then applause erupted. Ellison Hantz, he could just see, was standing. Someone whistled.

"Thank you," he said softly, and stepped out of the light. As he passed the students, hands reached toward his; he smiled shyly, moved past.

She watched him, chin on clasped hands, as he sat. Dark eyes shining like polished onyx. Finally he fidgeted.

"Bloody hell," she said.

"Is that an opinion?"

"What are you *doing* on this fucking dirtball?"

He shrugged.

"You have any skills?"

"Well—that. I play some guitar."

"Guitar?"

"It's an old acoustic stringed instrument—"

"I know what a guitar is. I meant marketable skills."

"I know a few languages."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Such as—"

"French. Russian. Hispasiac. Sanskrit. Arabic. I'm learning Chinese."

"Jice. Why don't you study something useful?"

"They *are* useful."

"Hispasiac is. Why don't you learn something that'll get you a berth?"

"Are you serious?"

"Every boat needs a good interpreter. Jice, Suayd, forget that literature druff—spend a year, two at most, in a Guild school, get your certs, shake loose of this mudball. You just said it your fucking self. *Stand clear.*"

He had to smile. Felt the ferment building. "If I did, think we'd cross paths?"

She studied him, expressionless. Then said, "It's wide out there, but it's tight, too. You never know."

"You never do. I wonder if Fate's an operant principle in the universe."

"Bloody lutely. So's magic."

"Magic?"

"If you plan on going out with your mind shut, best stay in."

He wondered at her. Was she just having at him? At what he considered to be his abominable naivete? Or was she serious—and thus either a fool or a mystic?

She narrowed her eyes speculatively, then smiled. She reached across and took his hand, her fingers stroking in his palm. Blood surged. "Let's bunk tonight," she said. "Less some downie girl has her hooks in you."

He laughed, maybe nervously. "No—no hooks," he said.

And of course that settled it.

Ish snapped his fingers in front of Porfiry's nose and said, "Earth in thirty."

Porfiry shook himself out of it. "Right. Drinking."

They went in. Demestra looked past the pensioner regaling her with nostalgia, brows lifting briefly as they bellied up a few places away. She said to the old man, "Give it a rest, you stale old fart. Got customers still have a pulse." Came with her bar rag wiping in front of them. "You two. Wondered if you were going to stand there all night using my air. Think the selection was going to change just by looking at it and wishing hard?" She laughed. "What's your suck?"

"Shenner ale—of course," Porfiry said. "Honor of my last night."

She brightened, maybe moistened, the rag pausing. "You got a berth, Pory?"

He nodded with a tight-lipped grin. "*Zistaya*. Know her?"

She shook her head. "Company boat?"

"Sub. But yeah. Quutaerin run—Bicklesia-seed oil and farmyard parts."

"It's a start. I'm proud of you." A head-tilt Ish's way. "What's this one going to do without you?"

"He'll manage. He's a worldclass sculptor now, you know."

"Is he indeed?" She scrutinized Ish with new interest for a moment before moving away. The taps were down the bar. Pouring Shenner ale took time.

Porfiry said without turning, "I know you never liked her."

“Demestra? Seriously? She’s bloody perfect.”

“Coren.”

A pause. Then, “Didn’t like how she treated you.”

“She was never anything but honest. Waiting for the first berth out.”

“She broke your heart.”

“She shook me out of my fugue state. She got me here.”

“I don’t think you were ever *in* a fugue state. You were writing some brilliant shit.”

“Facile shit, maybe.”

“You *do* know you’re the worst judge of your own work, right?”

“This pearl of wisdom from a semiliterate stonebutcher.”

Ish laughed then Porfiry did, and Demestra brought two goblets with their portable weather systems hovering. Porfiry held out his wrist for scanning but she laid a hand over it.

“My bonus,” she said. “My favorite guildie.”

It tugged at his throat. “My mentor of hopperdom,” he said, hoping his voice wouldn’t break.

She looked at Ish. “See? He’ll be charming those hopper bitches right out of their pants.” Leaned in. “Not that it takes much effort.” And winked.

A gaggle of first-year guildies boiled in, swarmed the far end of the bar. “Fresh meat,” Demestra said. “Same every term. You believe you were one of those two short years ago?” She made her way without waiting for an answer.

Alone again, they lifted their goblets. “To what?” Ish said.

He thought. “Dreams and visions?”

Ish wrinkled his face. “Jice. But all right, it’s your bon vazhe party.” They touched glass and drank.

Flavor strung memories like beads, beginning with that first taste with Coren in this very spot. But suddenly the naked rest of the thread reached out, no longer just a vague eventuality but an imminent threat or promise. He dug in a pocket and set a datacube on the bar between them.

“What’s that?”

“Datacube.”

“Really. Hadn’t scoped that.”

Porfiry laughed. “I put together an encryption program. So when I send you data

transfers I can say what I want. Encrypted it'll look like a generic wish-you-were-here message. In case I have anything to say that won't bear scrutiny."

"So you're going to write?"

"Bloody fucking lutely I'm going to write. You going to answer?"

"If I have a place to send it."

"Well. There's that."

"Yeah. There's bloody that."

Two drinks later the Port had begun to fill. They'd moved to a table. Marley and Mandrake and a handful of others appeared, saw them, made their way, flushed and agitated, though Marley seemed isolated in her own dark cloud.

Mandrake said, "You need a bigger table. What were you thinking?"

"Not that you lot would show," Ish said. Others were dragging an empty table to mate with theirs. "Got tired of the riot, did you?"

Marley dropped herself into the chair on Porfiry's left. "It's over. It didn't end well."

"What happened?" Porfiry said.

"Bloody SS." She put her elbows on the table, leaned her face in her hands. Porfiry and Ish traded a look across her bowed head. "I'm verily fucked," she muttered. "*We're* verily fucked."

"Marley?" Ish said.

Her shoulders heaved in a deep quavering sigh. Mandrake sat beside Ish at the table that had been pulled to; the others had gone to the bar to order. Mandrake's eye makeup had run, perhaps with tears, so he looked like he'd been pummeled. "She's shaken," Mandrake said. "So am I. Lucky I didn't come out as Mandy tonight."

"What bloody happened?" Ish said.

"Bloody is right," Mandrake said. "Those testosterone-riddled cretins we met—"

"They weren't cretins," Marley snarled, lifting her head, eyes blazing.

"Well they weren't very rational, were they, quelfie?"

They stared at one another until Marley sagged. Porfiry turned to Mandrake. Mandrake ticked off fingers. "Hero. Martyr. Fool. Take your pick. It's the same in the end, isn't it?"

Marley said, "That merd who stopped us turned out to be Agga Reff."

"Who?" Ish said.

But Porfiry answered. "Erunian rights activist. One of the founders of Baseline Dignity

Coalition. Jice. I *thought* he looked familiar.”

“Going up against city dogs to say nothing of SS thugs with nought but pipes and goggles,” Mandrake said, “is simply bloody fatuous.”

“I think they killed him,” Marley said.

There was a pause. Then Mandrake said, “You don’t know that, sweet.”

“Those were combat-grade pulse weapons.” Daring him to deny it.

“Jice,” Ish breathed. “How’d *you* two get away?”

“We spent a couple hours in an old woman’s closet,” Mandrake said.

“Bloody dillies is right,” Marley said. “Dillies and cowards.”

Porfiry put a hand on her arm. She looked sharply. “No,” he said, “that would be us. You’re the ones who stayed.”

He expected a grateful smile so was taken rather aback when she pulled her arm away and said, “*That’s* who you’re shipping out with.”

The ones at the bar came back, agitated but not stricken. Porfiry looked a question at Mandrake.

“No, they weren’t there. We found them later.”

Marley pushed herself up. “It’s no bloody good. I can’t do this,” and lurched away. One of the others, a performance artist named Bullock, went after her but she shook him off and disappeared into the street.

Ish looked at Porfiry. In wordless communion they rose. Mandrake said, “Wait. Where’re you going?”

“Have a drink,” Ish said. “You can finish ours, too.”

In the street she was still in sight—angling back toward Little Erunton.

“Bloody hell,” Ish said and broke into a run, Porfiry just behind. As he drew abreast Ish said, “I’m really too drunk for this.”

They caught her up in the next block, falling in on either side. She startled then shot an angry look at each.

“What do *you* want?”

“Where you going?” Ish said.

“Somewhere. To *do* something.”

“Bad idea.”

“Really? Then what’s a good one?”

Ish took her arm, stopping. She tried to pull free but his hand, muscular from his endless

hours with hammer and chisel, was inescapable as a manacle.

Porfiry said, "Waiting till there's something besides adrenaline in your head."

"What would *you* know about it?"

He wouldn't let it sting or anger. "Not much. Only that your passion is too valuable to waste on an empty gesture. *For to die in a worthless cause is the last extremity of defeat.*"

"Another one of your quotes? Please."

"From a woman you'd admire. You have a lot in common."

She looked at him, angry tears quivering on her eyelids. He saw that she was hanging like worn fabric on the sharpened armature of her outrage; that soon she would shred through.

They had reached one of the city's myriad parklets: a widened half-block with a few trees and benches and packed dirt and desperate grass.

"Let's sit," Ish said.

She relented, or her body acquiesced. They kept her protectively between them. She sagged, leaning on her knees. Tears ran down her nose, fell to her thighs, though she remained quiet. *Quiet anguish*, Porfiry thought, *can be far more wrenching than violent grief.*

"It can't go on," she whispered.

"But it's been going on," Porfiry said gently, "for centuries."

She lifted her head. "So do nothing?"

"No. Like I said, just don't throw it away. Anything that's this big, this entrenched, you don't change with a few demonstrations."

She breathed and breathed. "Genertek owns *worlds*," she said in a soft growl. "There's nothing acceptable about that."

"You're right. But the edges are fraying."

"It'll never change till people change it. Till people like you stand up and say *enough*. Instead of taking company credits because it's the easy way to get what you want."

Ish said, "Just a minute, that's not bloody—"

"No," Porfiry said, "she's right. That's what I'm doing."

"How *can* you?" she pleaded.

He thought about it but not for long because he'd been thinking about it for the past two years. "This is the way out," he said, "so I can get to where maybe things matter. It's my intention to jump independent at the first bloody opportunity."

She shook her head. "And what'll you do then, Pory Suayd?"

Self-doubt carried the sickly taste of bitter and ineffective medicine. He'd been struggling with that, too, between spasms of self-congratulation.

"I don't know," he said, as much to himself as to her. "That's why I'm going, I guess."

"Well, I hope the bloody cosmos doesn't interfere with your journey of self-discovery."

After a time he said, "All I'm saying is you should save your efforts for the fights that can achieve something."

"First there has to *be* a fight, though, doesn't there."

They sat in silence for a time. Then Porfiry murmured, "*What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*"

Ish said, "What's *that* mean? That one of yours?"

"I bloody wish. But something's coming. Something's always coming. There'll always be another battle to join."