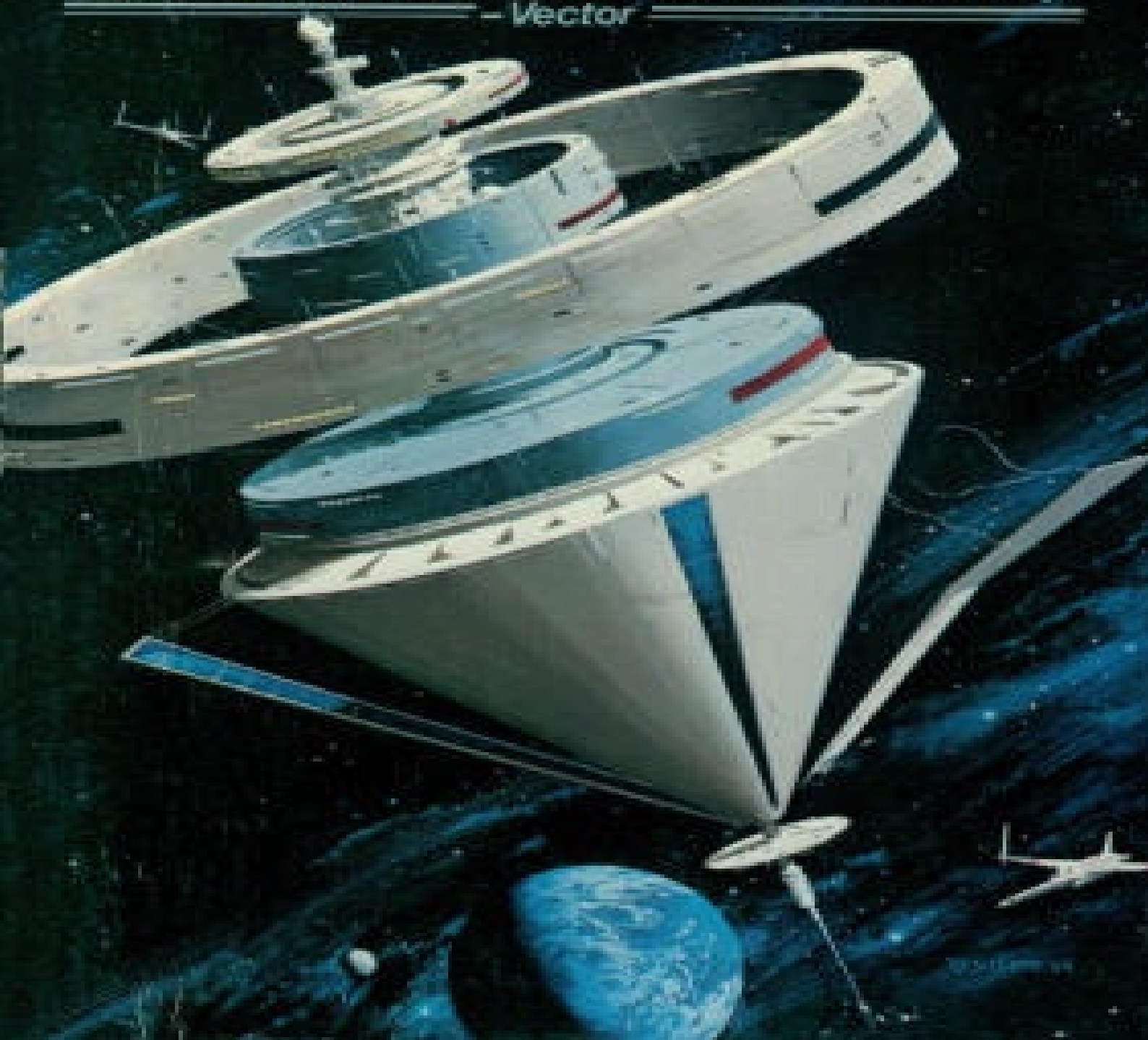


BOB SHAW
**THE CERES
SOLUTION**

"Shaw is like Arthur C. Clarke with added humanity."
— Vector



Prologue

Observe!

The whole universe lies before us—a billion galaxies frozen in flight.

The focus narrows.

*Now we see a single galaxy, beautiful but unremarkable, a conglomerate of a billion burning orb
Now we observe a single sun; now a planet; a continent; a sunlit hillside. A creature moves on the
hillside—slowly, painfully, without grace.*

*He is a member of his planet's dominant species, but immature and sickly. Name: Denny Hargate
Age: twelve years. Illness: multiple peripheral neuritis. Prognosis: not good.*

*Is this, we may ask, a random sampling? What reason could there be for singling out this insignificant
being whose worldline is destined to be so pitifully brief?*

What reason indeed?

We must decide for ourselves...

The handgrips of the duralloy crutches had become buttery with sweat.

Denny paused for a moment, wondering if it really had been a mistake for him to try reaching Cotter
Edge alone, and with his own silence the sloping meadow seemed to come to life. The rustling of the
dry grasses, endlessly multiplied, gave him the sense of being adrift on a murmurous ocean. He closed
his eyes, rejecting the surrounding multi-hued brilliance, and reviewed the morning's inconclusive
skirmish with his mother.

Twice he had nailed her, with neat verbal sniper-shots which would have silenced anybody but his
mother for days. During the night there had again been dreams of being able to walk and run,
and he had allowed himself to be completely deceived by them, with the result that the awakenings
had been very bad. The illusions and memories had been persuasive, though, and when he rose and
saw the brightness of the day he had made a genuine attempt to stand. Perhaps, on such a morning, the
universe would have relented a little. He had commanded his thighs to stiffen and lock the knee joints
into useful rigidity, but there had been an immediate sagging when he had attempted to move forward
without the crutches. Obviously the universe was not going to play ball.

"How are you this morning, Denny?" his mother had said. Her voice, as always, had been light and
casual, masking the fact that she was really asking if a miracle had occurred.

"Better than I would have thought possible," he had replied, smiling and waited until a naive hope
appeared in her eyes. "I do believe my dandruff is going to clear up altogether."

Denny snorted with triumph as he recalled the way in which Kay Hargate had turned away from him
her face wan and introspective. Later, when he was preparing to go out, she had watched him
struggling into his bomber jacket and had asked if he would not be wearing an overcoat. "I'm going

wear my overcoat," he had said, "but I always find it's best to put it on last. Any other arrangement looks plain silly." Again, she had reacted like someone struck in the face and he had wondered if it would mean an end to the hovering nearby, the continual solicitude and damned stupid questions, but the respite had lasted only a minute. She had even tried adjusting his collar as he headed for the door and that had been the final annoyance which had decided him that he was going all the way out to Cotter's Edge, to visit the secret place.

As he stood swaying slightly in the centre of the pasture the decision began to appear childish. Getting out of the Greenways housing development and across the near-derelict interstate highway had been easy enough, but the strip of woodland for which he was aiming was more than a kilometre from the road and it was uphill most of the way. The effort needed for driving the crutches through the long grass had tired him out. Perspiring freely beneath his layers of clothing, Denny opened his eyes and fixed his gaze on the trees which plumed the crest ahead. They were etched in all the optimistic colours of April, picked out against a wind-busy sky in which there was a constant shifting of sunlight and rearrangement

of white and blue, light grey and dark grey. It had been on a similar morning, two years earlier that he had discovered the secret place and now he could feel it calling to him.

Denny tightened his lips and began moving forward again. Ten minutes later he was entering a stand of field maples. The ground here was covered with dry leaves and he found he could progress with comparative ease. He skirted a rocky outcrop which marked the crest of the ridge and began the gradual descent towards the concealed clearing which was his destination. The air already seemed alive, possessed of a tingling sense of imminence.

Denny had been in the literate stream at Carsewell Junior and some of the classic children's books he had read had acquainted him with the notion that there might be "special places", secluded natural nooks which could be recognised only by young people and towards which they felt a strange attraction. He had never expected to find one in the real world, however, and might have doubted his instincts had not the other ten-year-olds in the party been similarly affected. The four of them, two boys and two girls, had sat in the brown silence of the clearing for the best part of an hour experiencing a rapport which was profound, vaguely sexual and—as far as Denny was concerned—deeply thrilling. But later, when he had tried referring to the incident, the others had joshed him with unexpected fierceness. It was as though they had all taken part in something shameful, something which was best forgotten.

Social pressures exerted by his friends had prevented him returning to the clearing as often as he would have liked; then had come his illness and the drastic reduction of his mobility, but he had made a number of visits to the secret place and had always been rewarded, though not necessarily in ways he understood. There was a silence there that was somehow articulate, a solitude without loneliness. The outside world was reduced in importance until it was no more than a bright diorama, partially glimpsed through the screens of vegetation, and that was one of the secret place's principal charms. Denny liked the idea that life was merely a shadow-play, that he was not going to miss out on much.

He carefully negotiated an area where roots patterned the ground like upraised veins, ducked his head to enter the clearing proper, and came to a halt—numb with shock—as he saw the auburn-haired young woman who stood there. She spun to face him, apparently as surprised as he, and for a long ringing moment he was transfixed. The girl appeared to be about twenty, was dressed in a simple

bottle-green jacket and knee-length skirt, and was flawlessly beautiful in a way that Denny had never known was possible for any human being. He experienced a pang of reverence, the only immediate reaction of which he was capable, then saw the change in her eyes as she assimilated the fact that he was crippled. The sequence was a familiar one to him—concern, pity, diplomatic cheeriness—and he hated it all the more because she was unlike any girl he had ever seen and everything about the meeting should have been different.

“Hello,” she said in a low and unaccented voice. “Lovely morning, isn’t it?”

Denny turned his head, insolently, assessing the morning like a prospective buyer. “It’s all right.”

“You don’t seem too sure about that.” She smiled a challenge, and merely looking at her filled Denny with a sense of loss. Life was not a shadow-play, after all.

“I have to go now,” he muttered, beginning his laborious turning manoeuvre.

The girl started forward. “You don’t have to leave on my account.”

Denny gave her what he hoped was an obscene leer. “You don’t know what I came here to do.”

Then he was fleeing, lurching away through the trees, gasping with the effort needed to move quickly and keep his balance on the uneven ground. *That was a good one*, he thought vindictively. *You don’t know what I came here to do. Bet that shook her up a bit. When are they going to learn that I’m not a&133;?* The tip of his left crutch slid off the rounded surface of a root and skidded sideways before jamming beneath another. Pain encircled his ribcage. He teetered wildly, realised he was fighting a losing battle and went into a semi-controlled fall which stretched him face downwards on the blanket of dead leaves. The disturbed humus smelled of mushrooms.

“Please,” he whispered, “don’t let her know.”

He lay quite still and listened for any sound which could indicate that the girl had seen or heard him fall and was coming to investigate, but the woodland remained quiet. The silence seemed to intensify with each passing second, and for the first time since the start of the odd little encounter Denny found himself thinking rationally. Surprise and resentment over the girl’s presence in his sanctum had diverted his thoughts from the question of why she had been there at all. He was certain she did not live in Carsewell, but even if she happened to be a visiting relative of the Reigh family, owners of most of the surrounding farmland, what had drawn her to that particular spot in the woods? Was it possible that although grown up she felt an affinity for the place? Perhaps she had been there as a child, and he was the intruder...

Denny gathered the crutches closer to him and raised himself up on them, thankful for the strength in his arms. He brushed some dried leaves off his clothing and looked in the direction of the clearing, his face warming with embarrassment as he recalled the way he had spoken to the girl. In addition to being rude he had been utterly stupid—she had been friendly, and by making the proper responses he could have extended, perhaps indefinitely, the privilege of looking at her. The sensible thing to do would be to go back and apologise, but that called for social graces he had not yet acquired. Besides, could any apology be adequate, and would she even be interested in hearing it?

He stood for a time, frowning, his body and the two duralloy supports in delicate equilibrium, then he went slowly in the direction of the clearing. Doubts about what he was proposing to do caused him to move with unconscious stealth. He paused, disturbed by a sudden voyeuristic thrill, as he reached a vantage point from which he could see most of the secret place. There was the spring which in winter weather became the source of a noisy brook, there was the mossy limestone shelf which formed a natural armchair, there was the overturned stump whose roots were at exactly the right height—height double as the control levers in a nuclear submarine or spaceship. And, in the centre of it all, there stood the girl, the incredibly beautiful girl.

Her arms were by her sides and her face was tilted up to the light, eyes closed as though in prayer. The vertical illumination emphasised her breasts, created a triangular shadow at the juncture of torso and thighs. Denny's cheeks and forehead tingled hotly as, without warning, the girl's sheer sexual allurements began to flow over him. He held his breath, fascinated and at the same time wildly afraid, as the conviction stole over him that he was about to witness something secret and sacred—something he had no right to see and which was therefore totally irresistible.

The girl raised her right hand and traced a complex curve in the air. And vanished.

The disappearance was instantaneous, complete and magical. Denny, whose gaze had not wavered, gave a tremulous sigh. He waited in the same place for more than an hour, not daring to advance into the clearing, and only when the strain on his shoulders and legs became unbearable did he accept that he would not see the girl return. Not on that day, anyway, and perhaps never. He turned his back on the place and—with frequent stops for rest—made his way out of the wood and down the sloping pasture towards the buckled and weed-infested strip of the old interstate highway. His progress became slow and more painful as the minutes passed, and by the time he reached the Greenways security fence his narrow face was pale with exhaustion.

The gate opened in response to the coded signal broadcast by his identity disc. Denny passed through grateful to be back on firm pavement, and turned left to go along the perimeter path to J Precinct. He would have been quicker to head straight through the shopping area, but his toes were now dragging noisily on the ground with each forward swing and he knew he would have attracted more attention than usual. When he turned the corner in J-12 he saw that his mother was waiting at the door of the ground-level apartment. She was dressed for going out—it was the day of her smoke-sculpture class at the community centre—and he realised she had waited until he returned home. He squared his shoulders and did his best to approach her in his normal manner, but Kay Hargate was not deceived.

“Oh, *Denny!*” Her eyes, sombre with concern, traced a zigzag course down his body as she moved back to let him enter the apartment. “Where have you *been?*”

“Just out. Nowhere special.” He tried unsuccessfully to take evasive action as she reached out and plucked something from his coat. It was a dead leaf, looking like a scrap of dark leather.

“Not Cotter's Edge,” she said. “You haven't been away up there again.”

“If you say I haven't—then I haven't.” Denny lowered himself into an armchair and lay back, yielding to his fatigue. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to float in a sea of after-images.

“Is everything all right?” his mother asked, and a troubled quality in her voice told him she had once again performed her own kind of miracle, one which was almost as awe-inspiring as being able to vanish into nothingness. “Did anything happen while you were out there?”

He briefly considered telling the truth, weighed up the consequences, then decided that life was difficult enough as it was. “Happen?” He injected a note of mild surprise into his voice. “What could have happened?”

Chapter One

Gretana ty Iltha had devised a technique for dealing with mirrors.

She knew the location of every reflective surface in her own home, in her friends' houses and in her place of work, and before glancing at them she invariably made certain preparations. First, and most importantly, she drew in her upper lip to help disguise the fact that it was as full as the lower lip. The mouth was a principal focal point in the Mollanian culture of perfection, and for that reason its proportions had to conform very closely to those of the Lucent Ideal. Gretana also made sure that she only saw herself in three-quarter profile, a flattering angle which minimised the excessive flare of her nostrils and the projection of her ears. Finally, she always widened her eyes as far as was possible without giving herself an expression of perpetual astonishment.

With all those precautions taken she could look into a mirror and see an image which, although far from beautiful, did not necessarily inspire a pang of pity or self-revulsion. Some of her other physical flaws—being a little below ideal height and having an unacceptable shade of pigment in her hair—were more intractable, but she had come to accept that nothing could be done about them. There had been times in her fourth and fifth decades, just at the beginning of womanhood, when she had briefly considered rebelling against her active upbringing. As a member of the passive classes she would have been free to increase her height by wearing built-up shoes and to modify her whole appearance through the use of cosmetics, but—and her commonsense had always asserted itself in good time—those sacrifices would have been too great. A counterfeit beauty, a spurious conformity to the Lucent Ideal would have been poor compensation for loss of the right to serve.

Gretana reminded herself of that fact as she performed the unavoidable morning chore of actually facing the mirror in her sleeproom and arranging her hair.

She finished pinning her hair into place, then put on a white one-piece suit which was decorated at the collar and cuffs with tablets of green-veined gold imported from the tenth planet. The garment was one of her favourites and when she surveyed the overall effect, having first adopted her mirror-watching attitude and drawn herself up to her full height, she judged it quite passable. No man would give her a second glance, of course, but other women should appreciate the effort she had made.

She left the sleeproom and tuned the windows of the circular main lounge to a degree of transparency which admitted the full force of the morning light. The bright panorama which sprang into being clamoured at her senses. She paused momentarily to look at the view which might have been contrived as a sampler of contrasting geographical features. To her left the opposite slope of the valley was powdered with many shades of green, shelved down in a series of chalk-rimmed steps to the Karvin River which opened to form a triple-fingered delta before disgorging into the salty waters of Karl Bay. The cliffs forming the northern rim of the bay grew steeper as they receded into the distance, gradually merging with a mountain range which provided a hazy blue backdrop for a chain of hummock-backed islands.

It was high summer on Mollan and even at that early hour the sky had a purple tint which presaged a day of continuous sunshine and warmth. Gretana gazed at the familiar scene for some time, eyes intent, wondering what was different or missing, and was on the point of turning away when there came a sudden insight into her own mood and its causes. Everything beyond her window was exact

as it had always been—the lack was in herself. There had been no pleasurable response.

Early morning had always been the best part of the day, a tranquil period—before there had been too many reminders of her problems—in which she felt uplifted by the mere sight of the white and pastel coloured buildings of the city, random scatterings of flower petals, glimmering all through the middle distance, on the triangular islands of the delta and along the valley sides. She had been able to feel one with family, community and race, reassured that all the centuries lying ahead of her would be good and meaningful. This morning, however, she had felt...*nothing*.

She went into the kitchen and prepared a breakfast of vegetable protein and fruit, the former in the shape of a savoury cake garnished with herbs. From the rear of the house she could glimpse among the trees the other dwellings of the Iltha family, including one which was being built for eventual occupation by her, as yet unborn, nephew or niece. Her father and mother were doing the work themselves, using a stalagmite technique in which mineral-laden water was directed along narrow channels to accrete very strong walls over a period of several centuries. By changing the mineral content of the water once or twice as decade it was possible to produce a structural material which was as beautifully striated as a gemstone, but the principal attraction of such a house was that it was extremely durable—some had been known to last a full Mollanian lifespan.

Annoyed at her apparent inability to keep her thoughts on a positive level, Gretana disposed of the remains of the breakfast, cleaned her teeth and decided to leave the house even though she was perhaps an hour earlier than usual for work. She went outside and looked all about her, breathing deeply. The air was warmer than she had expected, heavy with the smell of foliage and freshly cut grass. Trying to choose between going directly to the hostel or taking some time in the coolness of the mountains, she approached the nearest of the white-flowered shrubs in her garden and made a bird-like whistling sound. The flowers, deceived as always, chirped and twittered back at her.

Gretana made a sudden decision to visit the mountains.

Walking quickly to the path, which itself was a tributary to one of the larger paths winding through the Iltha estate, she turned right in the direction of the minor node used for local travel. In less than a minute she was within sight of the circular paved area, focal point of many paths, which marked the position of the node. Physical indicators of that kind were not necessary for recognition purposes—Mollanians could easily skry junctures in influence lines—but for aesthetic reasons it was the custom to have an elaborately tiled plaza at much-used nodal points.

It was early in the day for anyone to be up and about, and she was surprised on actually reaching the node to see two small boys standing near the mosaic star marking its centre. She recognised them

both. One was Stedran tye Lthanne from the neighbouring family and the other was Clath tye L from a newer estate further up the hill. They smiled as she drew near and Gretana smiled in return.

“Fair seasons, boys,” she said. “What brings you out so early? Can’t you sleep?”

“We like being out early,” Stedran replied. He was standing with his hands behind his back and the face he turned up to hers was absurdly perfect.

“So do I.” The sheer beauty of the boy was painful to Gretana, a reminder of all that was denied to her

“It’s the best time.”

Gripped by a sudden yearning to be alone on the cold high slopes of Mount Reckann, she advanced to the middle of the circular mosaic. She cleared her mind of all extraneous thoughts and images, and began to conjure on a mental screen the elements of her destination’s spatial address. As the mountain was on the planet of Mollan, actually on the same continent as Gretana’s home city of Karlth, the key equation was a relatively uncomplicated one—a modified quartic—and she was able to assemble it in a fraction of a second. At that point it was not sufficiently precise to effect a spatial transfer. Gretana raised her right hand and began to trace a curve in the air, a three-dimensional mnemonic containing the numeric coefficients of the transfer equation, and she began to feel a subtle and indescribable *loosening*—the sensation that always accompanied Mollanian internodal travel.

Her eyes were partially closed with the effort of concentration, but she was still in visual contact with her surroundings. All at once she became aware that Stedran was watching her intently, and that his smile had become a broad grin. He had brought an object from behind his back and was running his fingers over it. Gretana realised, too late, that it was a variable mathematical model of the type used in teaching children the techniques of internodal travel. The very presence of the model in her vicinity, plus the fact that it was acting as an enormously powerful amplifier for Stedran’s thoughts, shattered her fragile mental imagery. She tried to withdraw from the transfer mode, to blank out her mind, but there was no time. The instantaneous leap took place.

Gretana cried aloud with shock as she found herself standing knee-deep in cold water.

Loose sand was shifting beneath her feet, making her struggle to retain her balance while taking stock of her surroundings. She was in the sea, about forty paces from the water’s edge. Scimitars of white beach curved away on each side, both surmounted by near-identical headlands upon which were perched domed belvederes built of pink stone. Gretana gasped as a swelling wave surged around her from behind, chilling the backs of her thighs, forcing her to take a step forward.

“The little *monster!*” She gave a shaky laugh which was inspired by a blend of anger and admiration for the expert way in which the child had shunted her to a destination of his own choosing. In all probability he had done so in full awareness that the target node was at that moment in tidal shallows. She shook her fist at the empty air, then came the realisation that Stedran’s prank had misfired.

Had the deserted bay been unfamiliar to Gretana she would have been forced to wade ashore and either arrange cursive transportation back to Karlth or obtain information about a suitable nodal point in the area which would enable her to transfer home. Either way a considerable time would have elapsed, but the boy could not have anticipated Gretana’s knowing exactly where she was. Mollan had no moons, and, as was the case with any planet where only the weak solar tides reigned, broad sandy beaches were comparatively rare. That had provided the first clue to her location, and the twin headlands with their distinctive gazebos had confirmed that she was in Ulver Bay, some six hundred miles to the north of Karlth. She had been there many times as a child and, furthermore, could remember the precise reciprocal address of the node upon which she had been standing a few seconds earlier. The mischievous youngsters, Stedran and Clath, had no way of knowing it, but they were due for surprise.

Gretana cupped her left hand and scooped up some sea water. She then gathered her thoughts, half

closed her eyes and sculpted a unique quartic curvature in the air.

The transfer occurred.

So rapid had her recovery been that Stedran was still facing the circular mosaic when Gretana materialised at its central point. She darted forward with a mock-ferocious snarl and sent droplets of cold water spraying into his face. The reaction was not what she had expected. Stedran, his mouth contorted with fear, dropped his model—causing it to collapse into the neutral configuration—and at the same time sprang backwards so violently that he fell. Clath fled immediately, leaving his friend scrabbling frantically on the pavement. The white-rimmed terror in Stedran's eyes as he stared up at her swamped Gretana with remorse. She knelt and tried to help him to his feet, but he beat her hands away with a ferocity that took her by surprise.

"It's all right, Stedran," she said, trying to soothe him. "I was only..."

"Don't touch me!" He whimpered like a small animal, rolling away from her as he got to his feet.

Gretana shook her head and smiled a reassurance. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"You better not try!" The boy seemed to feel safer standing and as he recovered from shock his panic turned to anger. Watching the change take place in him, Gretana felt a cool premonition about what was coming next and did her best to forestall it by picking up the fallen model and offering it at arm's length.

"Here's your trainer, Stedran," she said in a soft voice, despising herself for wheedling but unable to do otherwise. "Don't you want it?"

"Not after you touched it." Stedran's eyes widened with gratification as he saw the effect of his words. Still backing away from her he funnelled his hands around his mouth.

"Ugly," he shouted. "Ugly, ugly, UGLY!"

Gretana turned, throwing the model aside, and ran. She kept on running, plunging down the hillsides through widening avenues, even when the sound of the boy's repetitive chant was lost behind her, even when salted froth had begun to gather in the back of her mouth. *Now you're being stupid!* The inner voice was angry, but coldly clinical. *You have a long time to go, Gretana ty Iltha. Are you planning to fly away like a scissor-wing each time some brat says aloud what everybody else is thinking? If that's the case, you're going to cover a lot of ground, Gretana ty Iltha. Better wear lightweight shoes in the future. And an exercise mask...*

She came to a foot-slapping halt, suddenly aware of being near a populated area surrounding a fairly major node which had spatial links with several other cities. Some vehicular traffic was on the move in a freight arterial a short distance ahead of her, and many roofs of dwellings and commercial buildings were "visible among the surrounding banks of white-flowered foliage. She could not see any people in the immediate vicinity, but it was possible that others had already observed her actions and had been amused or intrigued by them—it was rare for anyone to run without donning an exercise mask to protect the face in the event of a fall. Glancing selfconsciously from side to side, Gretana began walking in the direction of the hostel. The violent exercise had shed all the sea water from her

clothing, but it would take some time before her breathing and complexion returned to normal, and she had no wish to arrive at work looking flustered. She decided to complete the whole journey at a gentle stroll, thinking cool and untroubled thoughts, regaining her composure.

Lucent Ideal, Twelfth Rubric: Charm lies in the animation of the features, beauty in their immobility.

In spite of her resolve and attempted concentration on the Twelfth Rubric, she found herself reliving the pointless incident and wishing she had handled it differently, thus avoiding the pain and humiliation that was throbbing behind her eyes. There was no question as to why Stedran had wanted to hurt her—she had startled him, robbed him of his dignity—but how had he known what to say? A child barely out of his first decade could not have studied the Twenty Rubrics, a fact which seemed to indicate that there was nothing arbitrary about them. There had to be an ideal configuration of the features which was as right and universal as the sphericity of the planets, and any serious deviation from it was an affront to nature. Gretana unconsciously drew in her upper lip as she tried to remember the first occasion on which she had looked at herself in a mirror and had known...

Doctor Kallid was already waiting in the spacious atrium when Gretana entered. He was a blue-eyed man with ice-smooth blond hair and a casual mode of dress which belied his position of authority in the hostel. Gretana knew him to be entering his ninth century, but—largely because of his unflagging enthusiasm for his work—she tended to think of him as being only slightly older than herself.

“Fair seasons, Doctor,” she greeted him. “Am I late?” “According to yesterday’s schedule, no—according to today’s, a little.” Kallid made no move towards the inner geriatric wards, which Gretana had been expecting to tour for the first time as part of her training. “Your programme has been altered. I’m afraid.”

“I wasn’t notified.”

“Neither was I,” Kallid said, showing some annoyance. “We’re desperately short of staff here, and Vekrynn knows it, but he puts his own requirements first—and it isn’t fair to you.”

“I still don’t...” Gretana paused, frowning. “Vekrynn? I know of only one man with that name.”

Kallid nodded, his face now carefully impassive. “It’s the same one—Vekrynn tye Orlltha, doyen of the Warden class.”

“But what possible interest could Warden Vekrynn have in me?”

“It appears that he is short of staff, too. Very short.” The doctor spoke in a casual manner which made the content of his words all the more shocking. “I think he wants you to go to Earth.”

Chapter Two

I'll never go to Earth.

The thought sustained and comforted Gretana as she waited in Vekrynn's pearl-walled reception chamber, but it had the unfortunate effect of adding to her nervousness.

Warden Vekrynn's visits to Karlth were very short and took place only a few times a century. That fact, combined with his absolute pre-eminence in Mollanian society, meant that few citizens could aspire even to set eyes on him, and far less had any hope of meeting him in person. His presence, however brief, at one of the glittering parties on Silver Island or Mount Elux was enough to elevate the fortunate host and hostess to a new pinnacle of respect. As a natural consequence of her physical shortcomings, Gretana was unable to attend any of the more prestigious social functions and, had she given the matter any thought, would have estimated her chances of ever being under the same roof as Vekrynn ty Orltha at less than one in a million.

Now she—of all people—was about to have a private audience with him, and furthermore was planning to give a flat refusal

to any request he might make of her. The knowledge of what she had to do made Gretana both queasy and restless. She roamed about the large apartment inspecting its sparse furniture and ornaments while she strove to prepare herself for what was to come. In retrospect, the morning's tour of the inner ward seemed a relatively minor incident and she longed to be back among the familiar surroundings and circumstances of the hostel.

She was returning to her chair for perhaps the tenth time when a courtesy bell chimed to announce that Warden Vekrynn was about to enter the room. Gretana whirled to face the door, standing as tall as possible while at the same time drawing in her upper lip, widening her eyes and turning her head a little to one side. Observing the little ritual, so essential to her self-esteem, added to the tensions that were racking her body and as the door opened she felt the blood tingle painfully away from her face.

Gretana's first impression of Vekrynn as he entered the reception chamber was that he resembled a magnificent statue cast in various shades of gold. The darkest metal of all was represented by the tanned skin of his face and hands, a yellow gold had been used for the thick cap of closely waved hair, and something close to platinum for his embroidered tunic and trousers. His eyes, which were deep-set and alert, were cabochons of brown quartz radially needled with gold. Gretana knew him to be of great age—he had held the Wardenship of Earth for some thousands of years—but nothing in his appearance or manner revealed the fact. There had been no vertical compression of the body due to the millennial action of gravity, nor did his expression betray any of the morbid languor which sometimes troubled the faces of very old actives. Indeed it was his expression which had the most profound effect on Gretana, for his eyes regarded her with warmth and interest, and in doing so held perfectly steady. There had been no flicker to one side followed by that forced gleam of geniality which was meant to disguise pity or repugnance. She felt a positive and vital response to his presence, a reaction which was enhanced through being completely unexpected. *I'll never go to Earth*, she reminded herself.

"Fair seasons, Gretana ty Iltha," Vekrynn said in a resonant baritone, surprising her by using the commonplace form of greeting.

~~“Fair seasons, Warden.” She cleared her throat, resisting the temptation to try repeating the words more clearly.~~

“It was good of you to come to see me. Under normal circumstances I would have preferred to call your home, but I am very short of time.”

“I understand.” Gretana had never heard anybody but the most pretentious of her acquaintances claim to be pressed for time, but in this case she accepted it as a statement of fact.

“If you would care to sit down we can talk in comfort,” Vekrynn said. “I’d like you to relax because I can see that Doctor Kallid has already told you why you are here.”

“I’m sure he was only...”

“It’s perfectly all right.” He silenced her by raising one hand. “He has done that sort of thing before and in a way I’m quite glad because the very fact that you came here at all tells me a lot about your character. You could have gone into hiding.” Vekrynn’s smile was perfect, with a hint of ruefulness which suggested he was pleased to have met an intelligent person who could understand his problems.

Gretana was flattered and simultaneously made wary. “I couldn’t go to Earth,” she said, more forcefully than she had intended and immediately felt embarrassed. “I’m sorry, but I...”

“Your feelings are perfectly natural, perfectly understandable, and I appreciate your honesty.” Vekrynn again gestured towards a chair and this time waited until Gretana had sat down. “Now you’re asking yourself why, as you have made your position so clear, I want to prolong the discussion—especially as I have pretensions of being a very busy man with all the problems of the universe on my shoulders.”

Gretana eyed the Warden in silence and then, realising she had made the mistake of facing him directly, turned her head a little. The move did nothing to lessen the sheer impact of his physical presence.

“All right, Gretana! I’m going to be totally honest and admit that I intend to persuade you, before you leave this room, to join my personal staff and work for me on Earth for a short period of, say, five or six decades. Do you think I’ll succeed?”

“No.” She was persuaded to smile. “I don’t see how you could.”

“In that case you can be generous. You can afford to relax and hear what I have to say.” Vekrynn walked to one of the high windows and stood looking out, the intensified light glowing like a nimbus around his hair. “How old are you, Gretana?”

“I’m in my sixth decade.”

“Your life has hardly started, and if I’m not mistaken that ring on your left hand is a life recorder. Why do you wear it?”

Gretana was taken aback. "I...It's the way."

"Oh, I know all actives use them. They are part of the activist philosophy, a means of preserving coherent memory and a single identity throughout a greatly extended lifespan—but how many entries have you made in your recorder in the past year?"

"I don't know," Gretana replied, trying to anticipate the point. "Several."

"Several! And no doubt you'll make several more next year, and in the following year, and in the year after that."

"I expect so."

"Why?" Vekrynn turned to look at her, his face hidden in a corona of reflected sunlight, and his voice was both sad and compassionate. "Why will you do that, Gretana?"

"I don't understand."

"It's so that you won't forget, so that you won't lose those years from your memory, from your life. Don't you see what that means? What you are saying is that you are not really alive." Vekrynn took one step away from the window, changing the light patterns on the nacreous walls of the room. "This is only your sixth decade—what's it going to be like in your sixth century? Will you be like all the others? Growing coral sculptures and tree sculptures for excitement, and filling your recorder with notes of their progress?"

Echoes of her own early thoughts brought a return of the smothering sensation Gretana had experienced.

"I'm offering you the gift of your own life," Vekrynn said.

'Go to Earth for me and you'll have material for a thousand entries a year in your recorder, but you won't need to make them, because you can remember what happens to you when you're really alive.'

Gretana drew a quavering breath. "I couldn't go to Earth."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes."

"Good! I'd have no use for you if you didn't have sense enough to be afraid." Vekrynn moved closer to her. "Is it the people, or the presence of the—?"

"It's the people." Gretana pressed the back of a hand to her lips. "I couldn't face them."

"Doctor Kallid says you could."

Gretana strove to marshal her thoughts, to present an ordered and logical case which would bring the interview to a speedy conclusion. “It isn’t the physical aspect of the people,” she said quietly. “I know I could become reconciled to the presence of disease and deformity, perhaps even death. It isn’t even the fact that they only live for eleven or twelve decades...”

“Seven,” Vekrynn cut in.

“Seven?”

“The life expectancy of an individual living in one of the developed regions is a little over seven Earth decades. As the Earth year is slightly shorter than ours, that works out at almost exactly seven Mollanian decades.”

They begin to die from the moment they’re born, Gretana thought, chilled and distracted. “What couldn’t ever cope with is...I mean, supposing I actually saw someone being...”

“Killed?” Vekrynn placed a chair in front of Gretana and sat down, bringing his face almost on a level with hers. “You won’t see anything like that. Believe me, you won’t. Any of my observers who find himself in a zone which is threatened with war is immediately withdrawn from the planet.”

“That isn’t what I meant.” The concept of mass slaughter was so far beyond her comprehension as to be irrelevant. “I’m talking about murder.” Gretana felt she had defiled herself merely by uttering the word, and she was startled when Vekrynn began to laugh.

“My dear child, you really must forget any stories you have heard about the people of Earth being blood-soaked monsters.” He shook his head, obviously deeply amused. “They are unique and handicapped, but they come from the same human stock as ourselves. The planet is hideously overpopulated, and it didn’t get that way through the inhabitants going around killing each other. Some of our people have worked there for two or three centuries at a stretch without ever witnessing anything more violent than a lovers’ quarrel.”

“But I’ve heard that...”

“Gretana!” Vekrynn leaned forward and gripped her shoulders. “Are you trying to tell me about Earth?”

The realisation that Warden Vekrynn was actually holding her, that he was looking into her face with a kind of humorous amiability and no trace of revulsion, obliterated Gretana’s thoughts in a cascade of whirling emotional shards. The surge of pleasure, confusion, timidity and awe was so intense as to produce a moment of actual giddiness. She stared in Vekrynn’s gold-needled eyes, breathless and floating, unable to speak as his psychic aura enveloped her. And it was almost as an act of self-preservation, an attempt to stave off the complete submergence of her own identity, that she began the silent avowal. *I’ll never go to Earth. I’ll never go to Earth.*

Vekrynn released her immediately, as though telepathically aware of her reaction. “It occurs to me that I have gone about this thing in completely the wrong way,” he said, smiling apologetically. “I’ve spent most of my life away from Mollan, you see, and the Wardenship is so much a part of me that I tend to forget how strange and perhaps disconcerting it must seem to a person who leads a normal

existence here on the home world. For instance, I have blithely assumed that you—in spite of being young—are familiar with the history of the Preservationist movement and that you believe in its ideals.”

“I do, of course.” Gretana wondered uneasily if, in an abrupt change of tactics, Vekrynn had hinted that her refusal to work for him indicated disloyalty or lack of responsibility.

“I wasn’t implying anything to the contrary,” Vekrynn said reassuringly. “I was merely wondering if you appreciated the historical origins of Preservationism and how vital it is to the future of Mollan.”

Gretana’s uneasiness increased. “My parents included some politics when they were designing my tutorial programme, but...”

Vekrynn shook his head. “Please don’t use the word politics in this context—it implies there can be more than one approach to the central issue. Look, Gretana, will you allow me to make one impression on your mind? It’s a straightforward educational outline, very simple and guaranteed to be without hidden bias. Do you mind?”

“I don’t mind.” Gretana inclined her head forward as Vekrynn reached into a pocket of his tunic and withdrew two small gold medallions linked by a short length of metallic braid. He laid the braid laterally on the crown of her head, working it down through the upswept hair, and positioned one golden disc above each ear. He moved a disc slightly to bring it into perfect alignment with its counterpart, and in that instant...

Just as the position of a single particle is governed by probability density in the form of an asymptotic curve racing to infinity, so may the position of a conglomerate of particles—a human body—be altered by conscious adjustment of probabilities. A gifted individual should be able to position himself at any location in the cosmos, but that would require assessment of infinite probabilities. There is, however, a way of bringing the number of possibilities within our mathematical scope.

The cosmos is permeated with influence lines which link star to star, galaxy to galaxy. Where two or more of these lines intersect they form nodes. Knowledge of the relationship between any two nodes enables us to make a conscious selection of probabilities, to exist at one point or the other.

There is no conclusive evidence that Mollan was the world upon which the human species originated, but the likelihood is high. In Mollan’s distant past philosophical awareness rose to a pitch at which some individuals became capable of teleportation, probably from one local minor node to another for the first. Expansion into space must have begun later and continued until the radial impetus failed, establishing the human species on a known total of 172 worlds.

The significant point is that there is not one example of a civilisation having survived continuously since its establishment. Furthermore, *there is no example of a civilisation which has survived as long as 20,000 years.*

The implications for our own culture are obvious.

We have extended our life expectancy from the six centuries which is normal for the species to an average of fifty centuries, we have complete control of our environment—but the message from the

stars is that all we have attained will some day be lost to us. The indications are that there is a late instability in all human civilisations which, sooner or later, destroys them.

But Preservationism is not a philosophy of despair.

It is our belief that we can and will break free of the cyclic pattern of history which has characterised all other human social organisations.

Many measures have been taken towards the attainment of the Preservationist goal—one of the most positive being the founding, at the beginning of the Third Epoch, of the Bureau of Wardens. It is the continuing task of the Bureau to gather sociological data on one hundred selected human civilisations; to centralise, organise and interpret that data; and to forge from it a practical philosophical tool for the use of the World Government in its guidance of our social evolution.

There can be no more worthwhile objective, no loftier ideal.

...the knowledge was born in Gretana's mind. Most of it had been familiar to Gretana from her general studies, but it had never occurred to her that the placid and mellow civilisation of which she was a part could ever suffer a reverse, nor had she ever viewed the Bureau of Wardens as its cornerstone.

“Did you say that was without bias?” she murmured, hoping the query would not sound too bold, but Vekrynn removed the medallions and returned them to his pocket.

“*Hidden* bias. I'd say that for a recruitment imprint it's very restrained.” Vekrynn remained seated close to her, adding a distracting hint of intimacy to the exchange. “It doesn't even refer to the fact that the social credit rating for an observer is at least four times what you're getting now.”

“I'm sorry—it doesn't make any difference to me,” Gretana said doggedly, wishing the Warden would move away and give her the chance to compose herself. “I don't want...I *couldn't* go to a place like Earth.”

She forced her eyes to meet his, expecting to see the beginnings of anger or disappointment, but Vekrynn's expression was still amiable, sympathetic.

“Tell me, Gretana,” he said, “do you know what the natives of Earth look like?”

“No.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “I presumed they were just like us.”

“Not quite—there has been a certain amount of divergence. Look here.” Vekrynn touched his wrist console and the solid image of a woman appeared in the room several paces away from where they were seated. She was small and was wearing a crimson blouse and a knee-length grey skirt, garments which had a certain kind of style to them, but which appeared crude to Gretana because of the coarseness of the weave and the fact that the seams were easily visible. The woman's shoes, which were blatantly designed to add to her stature, drew a glance from Gretana, but it was the head and face which held her attention. They were incredibly narrow by Mollanian standards, creating a disproportion of the features which both repelled and fascinated Gretana. She stood up to get a better look at the simulated face and was almost overcome with a curious blend of pity for the woman

ugliness and relief that she herself, for all her physical imperfections, had been spared imprisonment behind such a countenance.

"I...I've never seen anything so..." Gretana checked herself, remembering the pain a single word had inflicted on her that morning. "Is she normal?"

"On Earth she would be considered so, perhaps even beautiful. The Lucent Ideal is a parochial concept." As Vekrynn made an adjustment on his console the image of the woman vanished and was replaced by a series of representations of women and men, each persisting for only a few seconds. The men were generally smaller than Gretana would have expected, and she was also struck by the great variety in colorations, bodily shapes and proportions, and the actual arrangements of features. Virtually the only thing the images had in common was the small narrow head which gave their eyes the appearance of being much too close together. Ugliness was the common denominator.

"Were a native of Earth to arrive here on Mollan he would see the people as being tall, large-headed and very much alike," Vekrynn commented. "We would all be brothers and sisters in his eyes."

"I must have misunderstood something," Gretana said, unable to turn away from the constant merging image. "I don't know much about the work of the Bureau, but I thought observers had to live as part of the societies under study."

"Oh, they do. In your case you would have to go to Earth and live in one of their communities as one of them, and it would be essential that you did so without being noticed. If they were to discover that visitors from another world were living among them the data would be invalidated."

"But..." She gave Vekrynn a perplexed smile. "How could they fail to notice us?"

"Surgery, of course." Vekrynn leaned back in his chair and spoke in casual tones. "It's a matter of cutting some sections out of the cranium and facial bones, then reassembling the skull to Earth proportions. The brain has to be shrunk a little to suit the reduced volume of the cranium, but odd enough that's one of the easiest parts of the operation. I'm told the surgeons simply spray it with chemicals."

The idea of saws cutting into her head made Gretana feel that the floor was tilting under her. "Warden, are you making fun of me?"

"No. What I'm describing is standard practice."

"But nobody would..."

"The process is reversible, of course. The excised bone sections are preserved, and at the conclusion of an observer's tour of duty the skull is rebuilt. The whole process is quite rapid, it's painless, and the end result is always perfect."

Gretana stared at the Warden in disbelief. "Are you trying to tell me that all the people who work for you on Earth—perhaps hundreds of them—have voluntarily submitted...?"

“Gretana, you weren’t giving me your full attention.” Vekrynn rose to his feet, majestic and radiant as he breasted a slanting prism of sunlight. “I told you the end result is always perfect.”

“I must go now,” she said faintly. She tried to move past Vekrynn, but he put an arm around her shoulders and drew her to him with the ease of an adult constraining a small child. He turned her face the centre of the room again and her resistance faded as she saw that the image at the focus of the hidden projector had steadied and changed.

It was now in the form of a Mollanian woman, possibly the most beautiful Gretana had ever seen. The woman had the same upswept hair-style as Gretana, but there all resemblance ended, because the simulated creature had a face which matched the Lucent Ideal so closely, so perfectly, that looking at her filled Gretana with joy shaded with an obscure anguish which had something to do with the realisation that even fifty centuries was too brief a time for such loveliness to exist. She allowed the vision to fill her eyes, drawing in to herself every detail of the ideally proportioned features and the incredibly, as her cognizance of the beautiful, blind, immobile face increased there came a stirring of something like familiarity. The woman’s eyes could almost have been those of Gretana’s mother, and there was something about the curve of the chin where it merged with the neck...

“This is a simulation based on just one scan of your bone structure, but I can assure you of its accuracy,” Vekrynn said. “That’s how you would look after returning from Earth.”

There was a prolonged silence during which the air of the room seemed to pulse in time with Gretana’s heart. Across a murmurous distance she heard herself say, “Cosmetic surgery is illegal.”

“The Bureau is allowed certain indulgences,” Vekrynn said, beginning a lengthy reply which Gretana heard only in part. “The law prevents the disguise of what are almost regarded as genetic defects. The idea being to ensure that no partner in a marriage can be deceived, especially with regard to the probable appearance of future offspring...observers returning from Earth...special category...amassed social credits...with the proviso that sterilisation is accepted...won’t worry too much if the Bureau’s surgeons ’accidentally’ fail to restore an observer’s exact former appearance...whole new life before you...my consort at Silver Island...future is yours...”

The words flitted through Gretana’s consciousness like windblown leaves, making brief brittle contacts, tumbling on their way again without having left any real impression. There was room for nothing in her mind but the vision of the face that could be hers, the face that was so perfect, so still, so painfully beautiful.

Chapter Three

The ground began to tremble as the huge nuclear-powered prime mover approached the Carsewell pick-up point. It had left Montreal nine hours earlier, lightly loaded because not many people wanted to travel through the night, and for the greater part of the long haul southwards through the Champlain and Lake George Valleys its twin traction cables had been quite empty. Dawn had been breaking as it rumbled nonstop through the string of towns between Whitehall and Albany, and from that stage onwards transfer modules—many of them bound for New York—had attached themselves to it with increasing frequency. By the time the engine reached Carsewell it was trailing upwards of eight modules in a double row and the cables were full almost to the point of overcrowding.

The situation was made worse by the fact that a number of the module drivers, having successfully clamped on to the cables, were not closing up to the regulation separation of twenty metres. This was because the automatic points on the southern stretches of the line were badly in need of maintenance and had become tardy in operation, with the result that modules sometimes missed their turn-offs and were carried inexorably onwards to later exits.

Hargate kept those factors in mind as the massive grey hull of the 8.30 nuke rolled past the Carsewell pick-up station and it became increasingly apparent that there would be very little room left on the west cable. He and his wheelchair were in the baggage section at the rear of the module, and from this vantage point he could note the growing restlessness of the passengers as the seemingly endless succession of carriages rolled by.

“Move up closer,” one man shouted at the tense, hunch-shouldered figure of the driver. “How d’you expect to grab on from here?”

“I don’t know why we aren’t on the east side,” a plump woman just in front of Hargate said resignedly. “The east cable always got more room since the fire up at Cohoes. You’d think the driver would know that much, wouldn’t you? That’s not too much to expect even these days, for God’s sake.”

She half-turned in the seat, seeking approval for her comments, and her expression changed as she gave her first good look at Hargate. He smiled maliciously, knowing that the paralysis affecting the left side of his face would make him look deformed and idiotic. The woman’s gaze wavered and she quickly turned away, nudging the red-coated woman seated next to her by the window. There was a whispered exchange and Hargate watched intently, maintaining his smile in case he would need to use it against the second woman, but she did not look back. *Got one of them anyway*, he thought. *And I watch out for the other one.*

The lateral procession of modules came to a sudden end, giving way to multiple catenaries and unoccupied cable strung out on their support bogies, and a short distance away to the north the flashing red lights of the rear-frame came into view. A sputtering whine and a tang of ozone rose from the module’s electric engine, positioned somewhere beneath Hargate’s feet, but there was no accompanying movement of the vehicle. The driver appeared to be struggling with a floor-mounted lever.

“Go, go, go!” An elderly man halfway along the car rose up and shook his fist at the driver’s back. “Move it out, fella, or we’re gonna be here till Christmas!” The module lurched forward, turning at the same time and causing the man’s legs to buckle. He sat down suddenly, half-spilled into the aisle and

had to drag himself back to an upright position, muttering disconsolately as he brushed grime from his hands.

Serves the old puke right, Hargate thought, deeply amused. The module converged on the main railway line and there was a forward surge as its magnetic clutch locked on to the moving cable. Points clacked noisily beneath the wheels. The vehicle gave a yawing shudder, creaked a little, then was part of the train, settling down for the leisurely journey to Poughkeepsie. At a nominal forty kilometres an hour the trip was going to take almost three hours, and Hargate had plenty of time to ponder on why his quarterly visit to the Dutchess County neurology clinic had been brought forward by several weeks.

There were two possibilities, one of which he did not dare to think about. During his last visit he had received confirmation of something he had intuitively known for some time, that the polyneuritis had seriously affected his heart. The official verdict was that there were only three or four years left for him. It could be that Foerster wanted to see him because the prognosis had been drastically revised, but if that was the case—had the figures been pushed up or down? Was he not even going to make it to his mid-thirties, or had he a chance of reaching the grand old age of forty?

Abandoning speculation, he unlocked the wheels of his chair, moved a little closer to the window so that he could look out. The transporter module was a veteran of many passes through urban Bombay Alleys, with the result that its armoured glass was liberally flowered by impact of rocks and occasional sniper bullets. Hargate found a relatively clear area and began staring nostalgically at the slow-drifting scenery which reminded him of the countryside near his boyhood home in Carsewell.

Twenty years had gone by since the spring morning on which he had struggled all the way up Cotter's Edge and there, in the secret place, had seen a beautiful girl who had scribed a sign in the air and had vanished. He knew that the event had happened, although he had never mentioned it to anyone. He had no trouble distinguishing between memories of dreams and memories of reality—his illness had not progressed as far as the Korsakoff syndrome—but the fact remained that his "reality" did not totally correspond with that of other people. One element he knew to be factual would be classed by anybody else as fictional or illusionary, so where should he draw the line?

The generally accepted reality of AD 2024 was one which contained and also was bounded by things like energy crises, the third world war which seemed both inevitable and imminent, attritive strikes, terrorism, failing resources, social decay, famine, and advertising campaigns for children's knife-proof undergarments. Hargate's composite picture was like a grainy, black-and-white photograph, but with one particle of colour in it—a bright-hued fleck representing his memory of the lovely and mysterious girl who could cast spells and make herself disappear.

Hargate shook his head in annoyance as he realised the extent to which he was still allowing childhood memories to occupy his mind. He turned away from the window and concentrated his attention on the other passengers, passing the time by trying to make Holmesian deductions about their occupations and reasons for travelling. In particular he kept an eye on the plump woman and her red-coated companion in the seat immediately ahead, half-smiling every now and then in preparation for one of them turning to look at him. Getting up at 6.30 to catch the early train had cost him some sleep, and before long—encouraged by the muggy atmosphere and the swaying of the module—he was drifting into a light doze. The feeling was pleasant, and he surrendered to it for the rest of the journey.

Poughkeepsie, occasionally rousing himself with an extra-loud snore and almost at once sinking back into unconsciousness.

The day was mild and sunny, but Hargate felt cold, irritable and generally ill at ease as a result of having slept on the train. Taking advantage of the fresh charge in the wheelchair's battery, he bowled his way out of the 10th Street station at an inconsiderate speed which led to several near-collisions with pedestrians. He turned south in the direction of the Dutchess County clinic.

He considered spending the extra time sunning himself in the plaza outside the clinic, but groups of employees were already drifting out to spend early lunch breaks in the open. Staying there would involve him in a series of mimed skirmishes with strangers who showed too much curiosity about his condition, and after the long train journey he was too tired to face the daily battle with the rest of the human race. He decided to go straight up to Doctor Foerster's office and see if Vince Debrou was on reception duty. Debrou, possibly because of his work, was one of the few who knew how to respond to Hargate in a totally natural manner and Hargate liked talking to him. There was also the possibility that Debrou had obtained some new orders. He rolled into the shabby redbrick building and took an elevator to the ninth floor, scowling over an increase in the surcharge.

"Hi, Denny," Debrou said, when he entered the outer office. "Congratulations!"

Hargate, who had expected to find at least six other patients waiting in the reception area, glanced around the empty room in some surprise. "Congratulations? Have I just got myself engaged and pregnant?"

"Come on, Denny, you know what I mean." Debrou, who was a pale young man with a permanent corrugated forehead and weightlifter's shoulders, went on sorting through a pile of X-ray slides on his desk.

"I have no idea what you mean," Hargate said, his impatience increasing the nasal quality of his voice. "If I had any idea what you mean I would say so, but I have no idea what you mean and that's why I'm asking you to tell me what you mean."

"I thought they..." Debrou paused, eyeing him intently. "The doc's down in the canteen—how about coffee while you're waiting?"

"What if I tell your boss you've been talking out of turn?"

Debrou shrugged. "For starters—you lose out on the coffee."

"Cream, but no sugar," Hargate said resignedly. He nodded his thanks as Debrou handed him a plastic cup and, without needing to be asked, a square of absorbent tissue. Within the last year the polyneuritis had seriously affected his palate, a weakness which—as well as imparting the nasal timbre to his voice—caused him to regurgitate fluids through his nose during the act of swallowing. As a rule he only drank when alone, except when he was deliberately setting out to embarrass somebody, but his rapport with Debrou was something special. He drank the warmish coffee, snorting and dabbing his nostrils after each mouthful, and decided against pursuing the reasons for his visit. There was a minor mystery which would soon be resolved. He nodded in the direction of the small abstract

sculpture which glowed on a shelf behind Debrou.

“I haven’t heard much from you recently,” he said. “Nothing doing?”

Debrou shook his head. “A couple of people showed some interest last week. Leastways, they were interested till they heard the price. Nobody can afford handmade stuff these days, Denny.”

“Are you telling me?” His coffee finished, Hargate sat with the tissue pressed to his nose and stared moodily at the sculpture, a sample of his work which Debrou displayed for him on a purely unofficial basis for a commission on orders received. It was a symbol of the lasting effects—both mental and physical—that the strange fleeting encounter on Cotter’s Edge had had on his life. For several months after that unique day, each time circumstances had seemed intolerable he had hidden in his room and tried to escape by tracing talismanic signs in the air.

Later he had discovered in himself a genuine talent for mathematics, and had been subtly astonished to find that—far from expunging the remnants of his belief—the new field of learning had shown him undreamt-of ways of correlating the Cotter’s Edge experience with the mundane world. His attitudes, reactions and thoughts were both complex and vague, but they sprang from one clear-cut, even simplistic, idea. The gesture which had preceded the disappearance had been made up of curves, and curves were embodiments of algebraic formulae, therefore there could be a link between mathematics and “magic”. After a brief and disappointing excursion into numerology, he had become fascinated with the construction of mathematical models, a pursuit which—purely as a by-product—had solved the problem of how to supplement his state disability allowance.

During that period, although illness had continued to make inroads into his system—eventually confining him to a wheelchair—he had retained virtually the full use of his arms and hands. Kathleen Hargate, ever on the look-out for a wink from divine providence, had persuaded herself that the remission could be permanent and had even managed, at times, to begin treating him as an independent adult. For more than ten years Hargate had known something akin to happiness, then his mother had died—swept away with frightening suddenness in a minor outbreak of food poisoning—and soon afterwards had come the first chest pains and black-outs, fresh intimations of his own mortality.

He had continued his solitary existence in the same ground-floor apartment in Green ways, reading a lot—usually mathematical treatises—and working whenever he felt strong enough. And in visions he returned again and again to Cotter’s Edge, striding towards the maple-plumed ridge on legs that were limber and strong, breathing the bright air of an April morning and exulting in the certain knowledge that she was there, waiting for him, and that this time he would get it right ...

“Hey, Denny!?” Vince Debrou had half-risen from his chair in his efforts to interrupt Hargate’s reverie. “I said the doc’s back early. Want me to tell him you’re here?”

“No, let it be our special secret,” Hargate said, angry at himself for having wandered into dreamland.

“Funny man.” Debrou flipped an intercom tab and within thirty seconds Hargate was rolling into the high-windowed inner office. Doctor Foerster was a broad-faced, balding man of fifty with weathered skin and large, work-roughened hands which were clues to the fact that he was passionately fond

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