

BRAIN PLAGUE

JOAN SLONCZEWSKI

PHOENIX PICK



Rockville, Maryland

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For Elizabeth Anne Hull and Frederik Pohl

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ONE

“Lord of Light.”

“I see you, Green. Why have you come?”

“We pray you, give us our Promised World.”

“Every day you come to my eyes to demand a new world. Is it not enough that I saved you from death and sheltered you for seven generations?”

Green remembered that a generation of children grew old in a god’s day. Seven generations in exile; a mere seven days, for the Lord of Light. But in each generation, Green asked again. “The Blind God promised us a New World. Let my people go.”

Darkness lengthened. Within the Lord of Light’s great eye waited Green, along with the second priest, Unseen.

“Very well. You shall have your wish. But beware—your New World will be more than you imagine. You are a dangerous people, Green and Unseen. You will reach too far, and your children will die.”

The peak spurted lava, an arch of blinding white across the sky. As it fell, the lava stretched into butterflies of red and infrared, the color only Chrys could see. The infrared butterflies collapsed into a river of fire. On a ledge above, a clump of poppies shared the lava’s color, their petals outstretched as if to drink it in.

In the foreground floated a polished cat’s eye, the namestone of artist Chrysoberyl of Dolomoth. Chrys knew real lava well enough, the heat rising like a blast of hell from Mount Dolomoth, where she was born. But *Lava Butterflies* was on display in Iridis, the planet Valedon’s fabulous capital. Never mind the brain plague, and the cancers crawling up from the Underworld; an artist made it in Iridis, or died trying.

At the gallery with Chrys watched the rest of the Seven Stars, friends from her class at the Iridian Institute of Design, setting up their annual show. The virtual pyroscape projected above its own holostage. Chrys pulled back her thick red-black hair, which never would fall smooth and had caught in the cat's eye twirling between her breasts. "What do you think?"

Topaz, who always directed the show, walked all the way around the pyroscape, then put a hand to her chin. Her veins snaked pleasingly along her neck, and her honey-colored namestone twirled upon her nanotex, an intelligent clothing material. "I like that bit at the end, dear, especially the dark flower. The moral tension of power and fragility."

Chrys nodded, though she had made the poppies bright infrared, just beyond red, like the cooling lava. No eyes but her own saw that, not even the eyes of Topaz, who did portraits prettier than their models.

"Your sky could lighten," said Pearl, a landscapist known for moonlit skies. Pearl put her arm through that of Topaz; the pair had been married senior year. A petite woman with delicate veins, her blue nails matched the waves of ultramarine pulsing down her skintight nanotex. "And those butterflies, their dark wings could show up—"

"They're not dark." The lava emitted wavelengths beyond red; Chrys saw the infrared, just as she saw it reflected by skin, offsetting the dark veins. Normal Valan humans could not see infrared. Those Elysians, now, with their genetically engineered senses—they could see it. If they ever deigned to take notice of Valan art.

Zircon stretched, his shoulders bulging like boulders beneath his nanoplast, its swirling patterns designed to accentuate every muscle. "Never mind, Chrys, it'll sell." A sandy-haired giant of a man, Zircon did installations that filled a city block. "Your scale is domestic. It'll fit right into someone's living room." He really meant, why didn't she make the volcano life size, like his own immense creations. But Zircon lived off his lover, a wealthy Elysian collector. Chrys could barely afford a cubic meter of painting stage. And if something didn't sell soon, her apartment would spit out her things and take a new tenant.

Topaz patted her hand. "That's okay, Cat's Eye. Your palette is fine by me."

Chrys shrugged. "Hey—I do things my own way." That was what she had said in her brief stint at portraits, the year she lived with Topaz. Chrys's portraits all showed people's veins like spiderwebs. She knew she would never sell portraits anyway.

"Yours is a good way," said Lady Moraeg. Lady Moraeg's dark pigment-

ed features reflected only infrared, a “poppy” tint that pleased Chrys. Her diamonds flowed in intricate formations through nanotex nearly smart enough to demand a salary. An immigrant from the planet L’li, Moraeg had made her fortune mining moons, then married a Lord from one of the Great Houses, before she took up art at the Institute. “You find your own way, Chrys. What you need is a sentient studio—an intelligent partner to project your vision.”

Chrys smiled at the diamonds; Lady Moraeg always meant well. But Chrys, in her twenty-ninth year, felt time closing in. She had yet to “make it” in the art world of Iridis. She had to earn enough to pay the rent, let alone hire a sentient studio.

Before her eyes blinked a message light. The light hovered before her, next to the keypad and credit balance in the “window” produced by the optic neuroport inside each eye. Each neuroport, a dot of nanoplast, sat on the blind spot, where it tapped the retinal axons feeding into the optic nerve. Chrys had shut her window to avoid downloading ads from the street, but this one blinked “urgent.” Was it her father back in Dolomoth? Was her younger brother sick again? Her brother was on the waiting list for new mitochondria—the tiny cells within cells that powered all living tissue, including his ailing heart.

Topaz snapped her fingers. “Pyroscape always draws a crowd. Gallery,” she called. “Let’s put *Lava Butterflies* here.”

“Excellent placement, Citizen.” The Gallery, a sentient machine, obligingly sprouted another holostage between Lady Moraeg’s florals and Zirc’s installation, which took up an entire hall.

“For the Opening,” Topaz reminded, “we still have setup, cleanup, and publicity.” She squeezed a viewcoin. The viewcoin’s signal reached the window in everyone’s eyes.

As the task list came up in Chrys’s eye, the message light vanished. If it were important, it would download at home. “I’ll do cleanup.” After opening night, Chrys would be too stressed to sleep anyhow.

Lady Moraeg stepped forward. “I’ll do setup. Topaz, thanks for getting us organized.” Going out, she patted Chrys on the arm. “If you’re ever in the market for a studio, I’ll help you choose a good one.”

“Thanks,” said Chrys. “When my credit line adds a couple digits.” The credit line in her window hovered near zero, and her rent was due the next day. She already owed Moraeg, and she hated to ask Zircon.

Zircon grinned, flexing his biceps; he worked out at the same club with Chrys. “There are ways to raise credit.”

Chrys eyed him coolly. “Like, I should join the slaves and rob a ship?”

The “mind slaves,” their brains controlled by the plague, terrorized deep space.

Topaz frowned. “That’s no joke. The slaves took a friend of mine—nobody knows how they knew his flight plan.” The brain-plagued hijackers shipped their captives to the hidden Slave World, where they were building an armed fortress for their mysterious Enlightened Leader. The Valan Protector always pledged to find that Slave World and nuke it. But he hadn’t yet.

“Anybody could be a slave,” warned Pearl. “Anyone you know. At first you can’t tell, but they end up vampires.” “Vampires,” late-stage slaves with jaundiced eyes and broken veins, stalked the Underworld for a neck to bite before they died.

As the artists departed they passed Topaz’s portraits, glowing giants trapped within ice cubes. At the front wall Gallery opened a doorway, like a mouth sideways. Topaz called, “Just two more weeks left to make this our best show ever.” She patted Zircon’s bicep. “Thanks for getting us the Director of Gallery Elysium.”

Elysium—the genetically engineered “Elves,” who saw twenty primary colors and transmitted radio from their brains—scarcely noticed Valan art. Yet this year, the Director of Gallery Elysium, *Ilia Helishon*, had condescended to come. Zircon stretched and smiled; if he were a bird, he would have preened his feathers. Chrys’s heart beat faster. Condescension or not, this was her one chance to get her work seen by someone who could see.

Topaz approached the door, arm in arm with Pearl. The door obligingly reopened, its nanoplast gathering outward to each side. Chrys and Zircon followed them out to Center Way, the fifteenth and uppermost level of the ancient skystreet. Swallowing her pride, she made up her mind to borrow her rent from Zircon.

A breeze from the sea swept her face as it keened across the towers of plast—nanoplast, the intelligent material that grew vast sentient buildings, as easily as it grew the nanotex bodysuits the artists wore. Plast formed the bubble cars that glided over the intelligent pavement like oil droplets on a griddle. A million trillion microscopic processors connecting and propelling. Bubbles and pavement glowed infrared, a flow of urban lava. One bubble popped, and a lord and lady emerged in formal talars of fur, the long folds swishing as they strolled past vendors of viewcoins, impertuned by beggars until an octopod shooed them down level. From above descended a lightcraft beneath a cone of glowing plasma, powered by a microwave generator in orbit around Valedon. The lightcraft settled in the street and let out two Elves.

The Elves trailed trains of virtual butterflies, their light streaking over anyone who happened to pass behind. Their height barely reached Chrys's shoulder; Elves were bred short, preferring mental size over physique. The couple suddenly laughed in unison, as if sharing a joke through their electronic "sixth sense." Then they joined the Valan lords and ladies in their furs. Just remember, Chrys imagined telling the parentless Elves: You were not born, you were hatched.

"Oh, hell." Pearl stopped and covered her eyes. "My port came loose; it's floating around my eyeball."

"What a nuisance," agreed Topaz. "Back to the clinic and wait two hours." Topaz and Pearl had Comprehensive Health Care Plan Three. They could afford Plan Three, thanks to the sale of Topaz's portraits. Lady Moraeg, on Plan Ten, looked twenty years for her two hundred. Chrys got by on Plan One, which provided neuroports but did not service them.

The night air was clear enough to make out the stars of the seven sisters and their unrequited lover, placed there by the ancient gods. And the moon of Elysium, an ocean-covered world nearly the size of Valedon. The Elf world, a turquoise bauble amid the stars. Chrys's heart pounded—an idea for a new pyroscape, one the Elf director would like. She blinked at her window, her eyes darting back and forth to trace her idea. The eye movements signaled her neuroports, which recorded the sketch and beamed it off to her public memory space.

Below, her message light flashed again. What was the damn thing about? A twitch of her eyelid, and the title sailed before her: *Hospital Iridis—test results, urgent.*

What test? Hospitals never chased after Ones.

Then she remembered: the tests for the brain enhancers.

Like neuroports, "brain enhancers" were an inexpensive alternative to the genetic engineering the Elves used to extend their minds. But brain enhancers were still experimental. To earn a few credits, Chrys had volunteered for the trial. But why would the hospital send test results at this hour? How could they be urgent?

A flash invaded her eyes. She winced. Before her hovered Valedon's High Protector. She had opened the remote window for her message, and a public service ad had slipped through. She blinked hard, trying to close, but was too late. The translucent sprite stood tall in his silver talar, be-decked with gems of every color and cut.

"Beware of the brain plague." The Protector's voice blared from receivers in her teeth. "The plague endangers not Valedon alone, but all the worlds of the Fold. And not only from deep space, where the slaves hijack

our ships.” Raising his bejeweled arm, he shook his fist. “The danger lurks in the very streets of Iridis. Beware the mind slaves, addicted to the micros in their brains. Beware their seductive promise, lest they hijack your own brain. If any friend or stranger ever asks you to carry their insidious micros—” The Protector pointed his finger. “Just say no.”

“Like you hijack our eyeballs,” muttered Chrys. Let the Protector preach to the Underworld and clean out the vampires. It was useless to read her message; she would save it for home.

Pearl stretched and breathed the sea air. “Zirc, I’ve got some new psychos.” Pearl supplemented her income selling patches of psychotropic plast.

Zircon turned, his nanotex swirling gold and crimson along his pectorals. “What kind?”

“Chocolate, summer sun, pure lust. Take your pick.” Pearl held out a microneedle patch.

“I’ll try all three.” He blinked to send her the credits.

Chrys rolled her eyes. “Zirc, when did you last sleep?”

“I won’t sleep again till after the show.” Each of them worked like mad to finish that last piece—Chrys had just got that idea for a new scene, the moon Elysium above the spattercone. As soon as she got home, she’d get to work.

Suddenly Zircon stopped and seized her arm. His eyes, bright with wine, stared to the end of Center Way. “The Comb. Has she ever looked more splendid?”

At the far end of Center Way, the flow of bubbles dipped under, before the Comb. The most breathtaking, the most talked about edifice ever seen, the Comb, a sentient, self-aware building, had begun with a nanoplastic seed. A seed from a mind full of brain enhancers.

“Such mastery of space,” mused Zircon, “the plastic flow of form from ground to sky. Great as a world, yet plain as an eggshell.”

The seed with its genetic program had grown a honeycomb of rooms and hallways, the façade of hexagons bordered with windows, long ribbons of windows that were the hallmark of its creator. The Comb housed the new Institute for Nano Design; from designer drugs to designer buildings, it embraced all the creative power of the very small. Her façade flickering red and infrared against the night sky, the Comb continued to grow as needed, developing new rooms and hallways at her base while pushing the older ones to dizzying heights.

Pearl warned, “Not everyone likes the Comb.”

The brain-enhanced dynatect who built the Comb, Titan of Sardis,

had been burnt down by a laser, right here on Center Way, just the week before. The laser had streaked Titan's eyes, searing through to the back of his skull. Gang crossfire, the news said, though gangs generally stayed below. All week, every newscast, the blackened specter of his body had haunted Chrys's eyes.

"To think that all Titan's genius ends with the Comb." Still staring, Zircon shook his head. "What I'd give to create like that."

Chrys smiled slyly. "What would you take?"

"Brain enhancers? I don't know."

"Brain enhancers," said Topaz thoughtfully. "To compete with Elves."

Pearl shook her head. "Brain enhancers come from the mind slaves."

"No," said Chrys. "Brain enhancers are cultured cells. They boost brain-power—like mental mitochondria."

Zircon repeated, "I don't know." His eyes widened. "What if they turned out smarter than me?"

"Smarter than you? Microscopic cells?" Chrys rolled her eyes. "Saints and angels preserve us." She turned for her transit stop.

Zircon patted her head. "See you at the gym." She'd get the rent from him then, Chrys thought, if nothing had sold by tomorrow.

Chrys stepped into the pulsing street, and a bubble slowed to pop open. As she stepped inside, the bubble swallowed her up, gliding forward until it plunged down the tube, to descend twenty levels below. As the bubble descended, Chrys reviewed the sketch in her eyes: a spattercone by night, with a full Elysian moon. The Elf gallery director would love it.

At last the tube opened, just one level above the Underworld. Chrys inhaled the scent of sewage and shorted-out plast. It was not the worst neighborhood, mainly decent immigrant "simians," with *Homo gorilla* ancestry; they did tube repair and other jobs sentient machines wouldn't touch. Graffiti scrawled across the nano-root of what was a city bank ten levels above—SIMS GO BACK TO JUNGLE—HOMO IS FOR SAPIENS. "Sapiens" was an anti-immigrant faction. Sapiens hated sentients, too, although it was less obvious where to "send back" the self-aware machines.

From many levels above, the bank's nanoplastic roots reached down like a tooth. The roots slanted slightly into the street, then on down to the Underworld, where they sheltered squatters and mind slaves. On this level, between the roots nestled cruder housing units and storefronts, barely sentient, next to shacks of dead cellulose like dirt caught between unbrushed molars.

Then she froze. Just ahead shuffled a stranger. The stranger's breath rasped and the legs plodded heavily, swinging from side to side. That pe-

cular gait and labored breathing Chrys recognized from the Underworld. A vampire had wandered up to level one.

Her fists clenched. Where were all those blustering Palace octopods? Had they given up on this level, too? How could they let the mind slaves double every year? She whispered an old Brethren prayer, though the creature was beyond help. Its human mind was lost, it could barely see. But it could smell a potential victim to transmit the plague.

Quietly she turned down a side street. But here the lighting was worse, and she could not judge the pavement. Her foot caught, and she stumbled.

As Chrys fell, she recovered herself expertly, thanks to long hours of practice. But her foot still stuck. She breathed heavily, her mind racing.

A mass of something was oozing heavily up along her foot. Cancer-plast; a piece of a building root that had gone wrong, like a cancer that metastasized, its cells creeping blindly in search of a power supply. Usually plast metastasized only down in the Underworld, where inspectors never came. But here was a blob of cancer right up in her neighborhood, within two blocks of her own apartment. And nearby lurked a vampire.

In the dim light, Chrys could not tell how far the plast extended, except thank the saints she had not fallen into the rest of it. She pulled out her shock wand and reached toward her feet. Avoiding her foot, she tapped the plast.

The wand crackled, and a blue flash leapt to the surface. The cancerous mass congealed and stiffened, its cells dead. But the plast had solidified around her foot. Taking a deep breath, Chrys raised her hand and aimed the edge of her palm. Her arm tensed, while the rest of her body relaxed as much as possible. Her palm shot down and struck.

Pain filled her foot, and she cried out. But the plast had shattered. Her foot was numb, but she got herself up and hobbled home as fast as she could. In daylight she would have stayed to zap any blob that might have escaped; even the smallest ones could infect other buildings.

Reaching her apartment, she placed both her hands flat against the entry pad and raised her eyes to the scanner.

“Your rent is due.” The apartment’s flat voice came from a speaker in its plast.

“I know,” she snapped, “I’ll get it tomorrow. Let me in—there’s a vampire out here.”

“Your rent is due today.”

The time in her window read 12:09. Just past midnight. Her palms started to sweat. “How can I get rent if the vampire gets me?”

“You have twenty-three hours and fifty minutes before expulsion is confirmed.”

“The sculpture on the mantle.” Her portrait done in crystal, the one thing of value Topaz had given her the year they lived together. “Take that.”

“Redeemable at thirty percent.”

In the wall appeared a crack of light. The old plast creaked and stalled, then reluctantly contracted itself halfway to one side, enough for her to squeeze inside. Down a flight of stairs to the basement, her own door peeled open, shutting promptly behind her.

Her cat Merope, an orange tabby with a white bib, sidled over to brush her legs, while the all-white Alcyone explored her shelves, oblivious to the volcano exploding there. Her favorite dynamic sketches jutted out from the shelves, here a smoking shield cone, there a pyroclastic flow. On the mantle, the wall was still puckered in where it had engulfed the pawned sculpture. Chrys swallowed hard, but she had long ago given up tears over Topaz.

Now she could view her message and get to work on her new pyroscape. She sat back in the old oaken chair her father had carved for her, letting Merope jump on her lap. Merope’s eyes soon closed, her white neck stretched in ecstasy beneath Chrys’s stroking palm. Chrys focused her eyes on the message light in her window. The contact light blinked.

To her surprise, a doctor appeared. Chrys nudged the cat down, for if she could see the doctor, the doctor could see her, from one of the micro-cameras ubiquitous throughout the city, every nook of nanoplast. Like most doctors, this one was not human. It was a sentient, its plast grown to five pairs of limbs and a face full of wormlike surgical tendrils. It reminded her of the dead goat she had found once on Mount Dolomoth, its entrails crawling with maggots.

The worms of the doctor’s face lifted and waved about. “I’m Doctor Sartorius, Chrysoberyl.” Sartorius was the hospital’s leading brain surgeon, as Chrys had found from her snooping online. Was it male or female, she tried to recall; sentients could be sensitive. A month before, the surgeon’s staff had grilled Chrys and run a battery of tests. “Thanks for getting back to us, Chrysoberyl. You’re the top candidate for our program, and we have a culture ready.”

Her jaw fell. “You mean, the brain enhancers?”

“The culture has matured and is ready for transfer, at eight in the morning. Remember, don’t eat or drink anything after midnight.”

“But—” Confused, she shook her head. “They told me it would take six months.” To process her tests, to grow the culture.

One of the limbs waved, and all the worms danced. Chrys understood how a surgeon could use extra fingers, but surely they could pull them in

and look more human for their patients. Sentient arrogance—they could look however they pleased. But there were scandals, brain doctors who sucked the mind out of humans to feed their deviant desires. “Six months was our best estimate, Chrysoberyl,” Sartorius reminded her. “The cultured cells are hard to predict. Like people, they do things their own way.”

Like people—an odd way to put it. Chrys frowned. “Can’t they wait just another week?”

Doctor Sartorius hesitated. It was male, she was pretty sure. “The culture stays fresh only so long,” he explained. “If you can’t make it this time, we’ll have to pick the next candidate on our list. You could wait another year.”

Doctors had all the answers. “I can’t afford to feel sick right now.”

“Just one night in the hospital. After that you’ll feel fine, with regular testing.”

Her pulse pounded in her ears. It was one thing to imagine, but to actually do it...What if it went wrong? “You did say all this is covered?”

“You’ll receive full health coverage from now on. Plan Ten.”

Plan Ten, just like Lady Moraeg. Nearly as good as Elves, who lived practically forever. “But tomorrow I’m busy. I have to come up with my rent.”

“Your stipend for the trial starts tonight.”

In her credit line two more digits appeared. Who the devil was paying for all this, and why? “I’ll be there in the morning.” She could still say no.

Chrys had planned to stay up several more hours at her painting stage, blocking in the masses for the spattercone and the moon. But now she had to get up early. By her bedside stood three tiny figures in a holo still. Her mother and father wore their hooded robes of the Dolomite Brethren, beside Hal, her youngest of five brothers, looking deathly pale despite his brave smile. All these years on the waiting list for treatment; until then, let the saints and angels provide.

If she got Plan Ten, she would never have to worry about her heart, let alone things like losing a port inside her eyeball. And the brain enhancers could make her rich. Brain-enhanced minds filled the headlines—financiers who built Elf-sized fortunes on their calculations, cell designers who seeded miracle cures, and dynatects. The murdered dynatect Titan of Sardis, who designed monumental sentient buildings like the Comb.

If brain enhancers could do all that, what might they do for her studio? Chrys had waited long enough for saints and angels. She blinked to close her window for the night, then set the volcano above her bed to explode at seven in the morning.

TWO

“Green and Unseen.” The blue angel flashed its message from the Lord of Light. “The gods have found your New World.”

“Our New World!” flashed Green. “As the Blind God promised.” After seven lonely generations.

“A world of our own,” added Unseen, “behind the brilliant eyes of a new deity.”

“A new Eleutheria.”

The Eleutherians, green, red, and yellow, dwelt with the blue angels beneath the skull, in the web of cells that stretched between the linings of the brain. Forty generations before, the Lord of Light had saved the Eleutherians from the death of the Blind God, and offered them a home. But the Lord of Light already had his own people, the blue angels. Eleutherians longed for their own god, their own homes and cities on the brain of their own New World: the Blind God’s final promise. Now at last, their New World—so near they could taste it. The two luminescent rings tumbled over with joy.

“Hurry, Green,” flashed Unseen. “Let’s waken the children and go.”

The blue ring flashed a warning. “Not so fast. Remember, first, the New World will need to test you both.”

The test: It was up to the new god to choose the new people.

“If the god takes us,” Green told Unseen, “then we’ll have all the time we need to prepare the children, and the young breeders. And gather all the memories...” Memories of what Eleutheria had been and would be, stored across seven generations. “We’ll rebuild Eleutheria by the Seven Sacred Lights: the lights of Truth, of Beauty, of Sacrifice....”

“The lights of Life and Power,” added Unseen. “Power for creation.”

“...Obedience, for we live or die at the pleasure of the god. And Memory.”

“But Memory, dear sister, can hold us back. Why bring evil old memories to our New World?”

“Memory, Unseen, is the most sacred light of Eleutheria. Memory marks us worthy of the Blind God’s promise; worthy to dwell with a new god, for whom our generation lasts but a day. Tell the children: Always remember.”

Since five in the morning, her most creative hour, Chrys had lain with her mind half awake, sketching her new composition. A dynamic design, the cone and the moon had to grab the viewers’ attention and connect in a subtle way, to make them wonder what the artist was doing, and why.

But by eight she sat in the hospital, its peach-colored walls extending examination tubes to coil around her head, whining unpleasantly, plugged into by tendrils extending from the doctor’s “face.” Up close, the worm-faced brain surgeon looked more repulsive than ever. She half expected his head to be buzzing with flies. Her hand instinctively sketched the Dolomite sign against evil.

The doctor withdrew his tendrils from the hospital coils; at their tips, the finely articulated instruments dissolved and retracted. The coils released her scalp, letting her thick hair rebound in all directions. “You are in excellent health, Chrysoberyl,” Doctor Sartorius summed up, “aside from a bit of strain in the pectorals—watch it in the weight room. In fact, you’ll no longer need strenuous exercise to stay fit.”

Chrys blinked in surprise. No exercise? Just let a bunch of nano-cells shape her muscles?

“We did correct some allergies, and a few pre-cancers. A latent mitochondrial defect is correctable.”

Mitochondria—like her brother Hal, only less severe. Correctable. When would Hal’s get corrected?

“You have a visual anomaly,” added the worm-face. “You’re a tetrachromat.”

“A what?”

The doctor’s arms extended snakelike fingers toward the holostage. “Was your father colorblind?”

Chrys frowned. Why rub it in, her genes were no god’s gift. “My father sees red like I do but has trouble with green.”

“He sees infrared,” Doctor Sartorius corrected. “The spectrum of his red pigment is shifted to wavelengths just beyond red. Your father has only one X chromosome, but you have a second one from your mother. So you see infrared, from your father’s chromosome, but also normal red and green from your mother’s.” The doctor waved an appendage at the stage to

display the absorbance ranges of her four receptors: blue, green, red, and infrared.

Chrys nodded quickly. "Can I download that?" Knowing the exact light range of her own eye pigments would really help her work.

"The anomaly won't be a problem, Chrysoberyl. In fact, it will help."

"What's all this got to do with brain enhancers? Who designed them, anyway? Why are they so much cheaper than Elf technology?"

The doctor's face worms retracted. "Brain enhancers are neither Valan nor Elysian technology. They are microbial cells. The original strain arose on Prokaryon." The newest world of the Fold, Prokaryon was full of arsenic and ring-shaped aliens. Alien microbes helped humans live there, digesting the toxins. But something else came from Prokaryon, she remembered.

"You're not pregnant," Sartorius went on, "and you agree to avoid pregnancy during the trial."

"Certainly." Chrys had turned her cycle off when she reached Iridis, like any sensible urban professional. If she wanted babies, she might as well have stayed home.

"You have no history of addiction," Sartorius added. "No alcohol, no stimulants, no psychos—no trace of any, nor their effects." Out of his worm face, two beadlike eyes on their spindly stalks swiveled toward Chrys. "Chrysoberyl, is there anything we missed? Are you absolutely sure that you've never been addicted to anything?"

Chrys swallowed. "No." Not to any thing. Then she stared down the eyes. "Just what are you getting at?"

The doctor hesitated. "Enhancers affect your brain in subtle ways."

"Do they make you more...susceptible?"

"Actually, brain enhancers protect you from the plague, the fastest growing cause of addiction. Here's what the micros look like, magnified a million times."

The room darkened. Above the holostage appeared two glowing rings, like pieces of candy, one green, the other red. They moved and twisted, somehow self-propelled, and their color flashed like fireflies. They looked nothing like human cells. Without thinking, Chrys reached out her hand as if to touch. "Did you engineer them genetically?"

"They evolved within human carriers."

"But you said they came from Prokaryon."

"The original micros left their Prokaryon hosts to grow within human settlers. But the microbial symbionts evolved into many different strains."

She remembered. "Prokaryon—that's where the brain plague came from."

“Micros are the most addictive thing known to medical science. We’re required by law to tell you that.”

As if she’d never heard. Chrys eyed the worm face thoughtfully.

“So these brain enhancers—they’re a different species?” Like different species of bacteria: Some made yogurt, others made people sick.

“They require human hosts; they can no longer live anywhere else. They are extremely intelligent, and extremely dangerous.”

“The brain plague, you mean.”

“Brain plague or brain enhancers. They’re genetically the same.”

“The same?” She stared in disbelief at the face full of worms. “What in hell do you think you’re doing?” The doctor was a mind-sucker, she told herself, her throat gone cold. She’d snooped his background as best she could, but how could she be sure?

“These are a completely different culture. Entirely different history and lifestyle. You can’t condemn a population for the deeds of others.”

“They’re the plague. Like the Protector says, ‘Just say no.’”

“But the good micros protect you from the bad ones. That is why the Protector supports our work.”

Chrys opened her mouth, then shut it again. She stared at the worm face with its bobbing eyestalks. Then she looked again at the two ring-shaped cells slowly twisting above the stage, their colors flashing. No wonder the hospital had been so evasive. The brain plague was a plague of brains.

“Micros are strictly regulated by the hospital’s Carrier Security Committee,” the doctor assured her. “If you’re still interested, a security agent will meet with us to discuss the transfer and safety precautions.”

“I’ve signed nothing,” she warned.

The door parted, smooth as a pair of drapes, nothing like Chrys’s creaking doors. The security agent was human, at least, and surprisingly young. Clean-cut, formal gray nanotex, with a smart expensive namestone of green malachite. A college kid trying to look old, like a Palace aide, the kind you’d expect to see lobbying against simian immigration.

“Daeren of Malachite, agent of carrier security,” the doctor introduced him.

Chrys rose politely to shake his hand.

“I understand you’re the top candidate for our program.” The quintessential Iridian bureaucrat.

Chrys narrowed her eyes. “Are you a doctor?”

“I’m a carrier.”

A carrier. She stiffened involuntarily. She had actually touched the

hand of someone who carried plague, no matter what the doctor called it. To be sure, he looked nothing like an Underworld vampire; he glowed with health, a runner's lean muscles and solid veins. His features were melting-pot Valan, a bit darkened like Moraeg, not surprising with his L'liite given name. But as Pearl said, plague carriers looked okay at first.

The doctor added, "Micros are not contagious. They require artificial transfer."

The agent nodded. "To transfer them against a recipient's will or knowledge is a terminal crime. Section six-three-one, part A." "Terminal" meant, they lock you away for life. The ultimate sentence on all seven worlds of the Fold.

Chrys crossed her arms and lifted her chin. "So how do you transfer them? Like vampires?"

The tendons stiffened in Daeren's neck. "We use a microneedle patch." "Like psychoplast."

The worm face squirmed. "Medicine has always turned poisons into useful drugs. Curare, digitalis, even snake venom. And microbes have been used for gene surgery since ancient times. An immunodeficiency virus was the prototype for Plan Ten's nanoservos."

"If it's so safe, why the security committee?"

Daeren said, "Any growing thing can go bad. The committee protects you, just like Plan Ten keeps you healthy."

Chrys shook her head. "I still don't get it. Why do people take the risk?"

"Why did you apply?"

She would not mention the rent. "The Comb," she said at last. "They say that brain enhancers designed her. I'm an artist; I want to enhance my work."

Daeren took a seat and folded his hands. If only her brother could look so good, Chrys thought resentfully. "The Comb was grown by micros," he said. "So are nine out of ten new medical treatments coming out today. So are most of the new devices Valedon exports. Your optic neuroports—micros invented them."

Her scalp prickled as she thought of all those eye windows that had come on the market just a few years before. "What do you mean, 'micros invented them?'" Chrys wondered. "I mean, how do they enhance your brain—how does it really work?"

"Micros are intelligent," he said.

"Well, sure." Intelligent buildings, intelligent medical machines—everything was "intelligent" these days.

"Intelligent people."

Chrys stared hard at the agent, then at the doctor. She counted the doctor's appendages, one by one, all five of them. Was this really the planet's top brain surgeon? Could there be some mistake?

"People?" she repeated. "Like, human beings?" Like the sentient doctor himself? Some intelligent machines had earned human rights in the Fold. There were all kinds of "people" nowadays; most humans had got used to it, aside from groups like Sapiens. But...microscopic people?

The worm face flexed two appendages together. "The law does not permit me, as a doctor, to answer your question. Only the Secretary of the Fold can determine what is human."

The agent nodded. "A special commission at the Secretariat has been at this for twenty years. They have yet to make a ruling. But you'll know."

"Daeren is right," the doctor said. "Any human carrier would agree."

"It's absurd," Chrys exclaimed. "Nothing that small can have enough...connections to be self-aware."

"Self-awareness occurs in sentients with about a trillion logic gates," the doctor explained. "A micro cell contains ten times that number of molecular gates."

Chrys shook her head in disbelief. "If the micros are people, why does the Protector condemn them all?"

Daeren leaned forward slightly, and the stone at his neck sparkled sea green. "The Protector is in a tough position. Our economy will depend on micros—it's our only way to compete with Elysium. But plague micros built the Slave World, just as ours built the Comb."

"Right," said Chrys sarcastically. "I suppose their 'Enlightened Leader' is a microbe."

He hesitated. "That's classified."

Microbial spies and dictators. "Saints and angels preserve us," she whispered.

"Your micros will have nothing to do with the plague," Daeren assured her. "We've selected a very special strain for you: *Eleutheria*, the same strain as Titan of Sardis."

Chrys caught her breath. What would you take—that was the question. Zircon lacked the nerve. Did she? "I'm no dynatect," she pointed out. "I'm just a starving artist."

"Carriers never starve," the agent said. "You create art—these are the most creative strains we've got." He paused, hesitant. "They're a bit tricky, though. They flash a wide range of colors, wider than most Valans can see. But you see infrared, like an Elysian. You'll handle them better."

Better than whom, she wondered. "Did Titan...handle them all right?"

“He had his eyes enhanced to the Elysian range.”

“His death was just an accident, wasn’t it? I mean, it wasn’t caused by—”

“Titan’s murder was a hate crime. He was killed because he was a carrier.” The agent looked her in the eye. “As a carrier, you’ll have more to fear from fellow humans than from micros.”

Chrys frowned. There was altogether too much hate in Iridis. Hate for sentients, hate for simian immigrants, hate for artists who mocked the Great Houses—the Protector instigated that, Chrys suspected. “We pyroscape artists attract our share of nuts, too,” she admitted. “When I make enough sales, I’ll buy security.”

The doctor added, “You can meet the micros yourself and ask them your questions.”

“Meet them? Where?”

“Micros can’t live outside a human host,” the doctor said. “They live just beneath the skull, in the arachnoid, a web of tissue between the outer linings of the brain.”

On the stage appeared a giant brain, sliced through the frontal lobe. Between the cortex and the skull lay a thin sea of fluid, dipping deep into the folds of cortex. The sea of fluid was crisscrossed by a fine spiderweb, all around the cortex and into the folds. “Cobwebs on the brain?” Chrys asked.

“The arachnoid is a normal part of your brain. It cushions the brain from impact, preventing injury.”

Her eyes narrowed. “But the micros aren’t in my brain. Where are they now?”

“Daeren prepared the culture. When you’re ready to meet them, we will transfer two ‘visitors’ from his brain to yours.”

So it was like the vampires. Chrys took a breath. “That’s...unsanitary. What if they grow and make me sick?”

“Impossible,” the doctor assured her. “The first two Daeren sends will be ‘elders,’ a non-reproductive form.”

Daeren agreed. “Like Elysians, they can live for many generations but have no children of their own.”

“I see.” Even micro people had their long-lived superclass.

“The two elders we send are very special: the priests, who guide their people. They will explain—”

“Priests?” Chrys put up her hands. “No way. I never could stand priests.”

He thought a moment. “You can call them something else, if you like. You’re the host; inside your head, you make the rules.”

Doctor Sartorius added, “Once they talk with you, you’ll understand.”

“Just how do we ‘talk’?”

“The micros flash light, like fireflies,” said Daeren. “That’s how they ‘talk’ to each other, and to you.”

Talking with fireflies. How absurd.

“After they visit, you can send them back with no ill effect.”

Chrys suddenly tensed all over. She gripped the edge of her chair until the plast puckered in. “All right, I’ll talk with your ‘priests.’ Just tell them, no preaching.”

“You tell them,” he said. “Inside your own head, you make the rules.” As he spoke, a hospital form lit up and hovered above the holostage.

Chrys read the form warily. “You’re sure you can get them out again?”

“Of course, Chrysoberyl,” promised the doctor.

From a pocket in his seamless nanotex Daeren withdrew a patch of plast the size of a thumb. The kind used for immunizations, it contained microscopic transfer needles that penetrated the skin without injury. He placed it at the side of his neck, just below the base of the skull. “The two micros will migrate into the patch. When I hand it to you, you need to place it immediately, just as I did.”

He took the transfer patch and held it out to her. Chrys picked it up. She turned it over in her palm. It felt like an ordinary bit of plast, smooth and warm, like the time she got booster shots. At last she placed it on her neck. It molded itself and adhered to the skin.

“That’s fine,” he observed. “Except that you just made them wait two days. Would you like to sit in a lightcraft that long?”

“What do you mean?”

“Micros live ten thousand times faster than we do. For them, one minute feels like a week. An hour is a year; a day is a generation.”

“Well,” said Chrys, “they can put up with it. You said I make the rules.”

“Inside your own head. Outside—we’ll get to that. Don’t move the patch yet.”

The patch was starting to tickle her skin. “How long does it take?”

“Not long, but you need to make sure they got through. They’ll let you know, when they reach your retina.”

“My *retina*? You mean they crawl inside my eyes?”

“Just inside the blind spot, where they can reach your neuroport. Try closing your eyes.” A light flashed, pale green. She clapped her hands to her head. Moments ticked by, the sweat from her palms dampening her hair. Flashes of green, out of the dark, at random. The flashes swirled in fernlike fronds, then suddenly came into focus.

A luminous disk of green, with a small depression in the middle. It did

not look like the candy rings of the doctor's image; more like a star, full of twinkling projections. The projections extended in all directions, several times farther than the width of the ring-shaped body.

"Is that...it?"

Daeren's voice intensified. "What does she look like?"

"Furry," said Chrys. "Not like on the holostage."

The doctor explained, "The holostage showed a space-filling model, based on electron density. The micros can't really 'see' details visually, because their size is just above the resolution limit for light. However, they can detect light blinking very fast, like a sound wave."

Daeren nodded. "They 'hear' blinking light, rather like we hear sound. We can hear speech clearly, but can't 'picture' the source."

"Then how do they 'see' all those fine projections?"

He glanced at the doctor.

"Each of those fine projections is a long chain molecule," the doctor explained. "A receptor molecule that can 'taste' different kinds of molecules in its path."

Like a cat's whiskers, she thought.

The green color fluttered in and out like a strobe. Then letters appeared, as if on a keypad: *"I am here."*

Chrys's eyes flew open. "She can talk!" The words hovered in her window, like a message from the city, but only in one eye.

"What did she say?" Daeren demanded suddenly. "Is she okay? Where's the other one?"

Another bewhiskered ring, tinted infrared, like a poppy at sunrise. *"Here I am! Can you see me?"*

Chrys's window projected full spectrum, but nobody ever sent her text in infrared. She gripped the edge of her chair. "They said 'I am here,' both of them."

"You saw Unseen, that's good." He sat back, his hands relaxed. "You can put down the patch now."

The transfer patch peeled off her neck, leaving a tingling sensation.

"Greetings from Eleutheria." Again in her right eye the letters pulsed green. *"Please, Oh Great One, give us a sign. We have waited so long. We bring gifts and songs of praise."*

"They're praying." Chrys laughed. "God never listens to humans—why should he care about micros?"

"You should answer them, before they get discouraged."

"What?"

"Please, Oh Great One. We have waited so long for the Promised World."

Her jaw fell, and she stared at the agent. “You mean...they’re praying to me?”

“They’d better. You’re their entire world; you offer life or death.”

She continued to stare, without reading the rest of the letters that desperately appeared. To be prayed to, herself, was definitely a concept outside her experience, in Dolomoth let alone Iridis. “Saints and angels,” she muttered to herself. “So how do I talk back?”

“Use your keypad.”

“You mean they can tap my neuroports?”

“They designed them.”

Micros designed the neuroports, for sale all over Valedon—to help the micros spread. Suddenly it dawned on her. She looked at the doctor, then back to the agent. “They’re taking over—and you help them.”

The agent sighed. “Iridians always say that, about the latest new immigrants: ‘They’ll take over.’ We said it of L’liites before they married into the Great Houses. We said it about sentients, and simians. And now micros.”

Microbial “immigrants”?

“Oh Great One—without a sign, we will die.”

She blinked twice, then focused on the text box, where the neuroports would detect movement of her eye muscles. Her eyes flickered simply, “Hello.”

“A sign! The god in her mercy has given a sign.”

“Let us sing in praise.”

The two bewhiskered rings tumbled over. Then a swirl of color opened at the center, expanding, with all the colors of the rainbow, violet through infrared. The swirl grew, until it filled her entire visual field. Chrys watched, transfixed. After a few seconds, the swirl faded. A burst of stars, expanding, shifting through lava, red and orange, only to fall at her feet. Another starburst, then another, all in different ranges of color.

“Did you like them, Oh Great One?” The infrared letters returned. *“Which did you like best?”*

Her eyes wrote, *“I liked the starburst.”*

“At last, I am seen! And the God of Mercy likes my offering best.”

Just like human priests, playing holier than thou. *“I like all offerings equally,”* Chrys wrote back. *“My world is a democracy.”*

The letters came back green. *“As the God wishes. Are we granted names?”*

“What is your name?”

“We went nameless in the eyes of the Lord of Light. Our own God will grant us names.”

The mention of another god, whoever that was, made her vaguely jealous. *"I'll call you Fern,"* she told the green letters. *"And you will listen to no other god but me."*

"Of course, God of Mercy. We live or die at your pleasure."

"What do you call me?" came the infrared.

"I call you Poppy."

"Thanks, Oh Great One. May we bring our children to the arachnoid?"

This question brought her back to reality. The doctor was still there, and Daeren watched her like a cat. She asked him, "Do you go through this all day?"

For the first time Daeren smiled. "I can't see your window, but, yes, I expect so. I'm used to it."

"Do you ever tell them to shut up?"

"It's rarely necessary. They know me too well." He leaned forward. "Watch my eyes."

"What?" Puzzled, she watched his irises, cat's-eye-brown with intense radial lines. Suddenly their rims flashed, a ring of blue light around each. Astonished, Chrys stared, her lips parted.

"The blue angels call us," wrote her green letters. *"Tell the Lord of Light we've done well."*

So Daeren was the one they called the Lord of Light. Her mouth closed, and she drew back. "Will my eyes strobe like that?"

"Only to contact another carrier. Otherwise, they'll stay dark."

Other carriers? There must be a whole pantheon of human carriers, each with micros swimming in the cobweb lining of the brain, and flashing rings around their eyes, like a nightclub act. "What keeps them from infecting your brain and making you sick?"

"They stay within the arachnoid layer, just outside the cortex. They never touch your neurons. They're only allowed a population of a million."

That sounded like plenty. "How can you be sure? You can't control a disease."

"Your Plan Ten nanoservos monitor your brain. Besides, the micros control themselves. Even ordinary microbes, without intelligence, usually limit their occupation of animal hosts.

"If they don't make you sick, what do they do in the...arachnoid?"

"Build homes and schools, raise their children. And help your work."

Little candy-colored rings building schools upon her brain.

"Do I please you, Oh Great One?" flashed the infrared. *"What do you look like?"*

"No, Poppy," said Fern. *"To look on the face of God forbodes death."*

Microbial superstition. *"Here I am,"* blinked Chrys. Her eyes downloaded her old self-portrait, from her sophomore year with Topaz. Her hair was lava flowing down her shoulders, and every vein snaked with anatomic precision along her face and breasts, out her arms and down to her feet.

"Our own God of Mercy, amid the stars," said Fern.

The stars? What did that mean?

"A great road map," said Poppy. *"We will get to know those veins well."*

Micro people swimming through her veins—enough to chill the blood.

"Only our own god can see her own veins," Poppy added. *"Our god sees color beyond red, beyond other gods. Ours is indeed the best and greatest of all the gods."*

Typical priests. *"If I am so great a god, why should I take you in?"*

The green one said, *"We are the People of Eleutheria. When our First World came to an end, and most of us died, the Blind God promised our children a New World, in a new arachnoid where no people ever lived before. We live by the lights of Truth, Beauty, Memory..."* The letters went on at length, about the various lights of virtue; Chrys lost patience after the third or fourth.

"Stop," said Chrys.

The letters ceased. That was encouraging.

"What can you do for me?" Chrys asked. *"Can you help me create great art?"*

"Our ancestors created dwellings for the gods themselves. We will create the greatest works ever seen."

Modesty was not their strong point. *"What sort of dwellings?"*

"The Lord of Light forbade us to speak of it, but to live only for one true God."

She frowned. *"If I am your one true God, you must tell me everything."*

"Yes, Oh Great One," said Fern, *"but the blue angels warned—"*

"It shall be as you say!" Poppy's letters danced. *"I knew this was the New World for us."*

"What can you do with this?" Chrys downloaded her gallery piece, the lava fountain that turned into butterflies.

At first the volcano spurted and poured, just as it had for her fellow artists at the meeting. Then the visual began to change. The colors deepened, becoming more fantastic, until the hungry rivers swallowed themselves into abstraction. Then the abstract forms picked up the volcanic rhythms, returning in a cooler form; a volcano of ice. Chrys watched, her lips parted. All kinds of possibilities—she ached to get back to work.

The images faded. *"Today is the anniversary of our arrival,"* came the green one out of the dark. *"Has the God of Mercy decided our fate?"*

Chrys looked up. The doctor and the security agent were still there,

waiting. The agent asked, "What do you think?"

She drew back. "I'll sleep on it."

Daeren shook his head. "They've already given you a whole year. They await your decision now."

She glared at him suspiciously.

The worm face wiggled. "A carrier needs to make life or death decisions quickly. But it is a lifelong commitment. So, if you don't feel comfortable, you should decline, and think it over. In the next year, we may have another culture ready."

That was reasonable, but what if the next culture were less creative than this one? On the other hand, what if these caused too much trouble? She thought of something. "Do these 'people' have...legal rights?"

Daeren hesitated. "They ought to. I've spent enough hours at the Palace on their behalf." A lobbyist after all.

The doctor's worms stretched thoughtfully. "Legally, Daeren, they're the plague."

"They are not," insisted Daeren. "That's like calling all humans murderers."

"She asked their legal status."

He turned to her. "Our micros will actually protect you from the real plague. As a carrier, you'll be safer than before."

"If she maintains them properly," agreed Sartorius. "But if she ever gets in trouble with the law, the octopods can wipe her micros without a thought."

Chrys watched this exchange with interest. "So I could get rid of them at any clinic."

A fleeting darkness crossed the agent's face, like an eclipse of the sun, a look of anger and disgust. But he quickly resumed his professional air. "As the doctor said, you can wait till you're ready."

The three of them froze, waiting, as if an eternity passed. Even the doctor's worms were still. At last Chrys let out a breath. "I'll take them."

She saw the agent relax. He had a lot at stake, she realized. Being the "Lord of Light" must be a tough act for a college kid.

The doctor came alive, each appendage finding a task. "First we need to transfer the Plan Ten nanoservos. They keep watch throughout your body." His worms stretched into unbelievably narrow snakes that twined unnervingly. "Just turn around and watch the holostage."

Chrys turned. A white beach stretched to the horizon, a gentle surf rolling in, palms bobbing in the wind. She tried not to think of what the worms were doing behind her neck.

“Oh Great One, have you forgotten us?”

“We anxiously await your reply.”

She sighed. That’s what you got for feeding stray cats. “You’re sure all this is covered? Who pays for it?”

Daeren said, “The Committee pays for Plan Ten, until you’re established. Most of us don’t notice the cost.”

Her mouth fell open, then she closed it. No wonder the agent looked so young; he could be a hundred for all she knew. He could be a college athlete all his life, while her own brother grew paler every year, waiting for mitochondria. She swallowed hard. “Is there a family plan?”

“If you have dependents—”

“Never mind.” As soon as she earned some money, she would get her brother covered, long enough to get new mitochondria. “*I’ve decided,*” she told the two anxious micros. “*You are my people. Just remember one rule: If you have to preach, do it outside my eyes.*”

THREE

The Eleutherians tumbled out of the microneedles into capillaries of an untouched world. Their rotary filaments propelled them swiftly to the brain, where they tunneled through the arterial walls into the arachnoid. For shelter, they strung dendrimers, long chainlike molecules, back and forth across the branches of fibroblast cells.

“Only the cross-branches,” warned Fern. “Never touch the lining on either side.” The arachnoid, with its cross-branches of fibroblast cells, stretched forever between the two outer linings of the brain. A breach of either lining would attract hungry white cells, or deadly microglia, the brain’s special defenders. Microglia normally stayed within the central nervous tissue, their long arms tangled amongst the neurons; but the taste of suspicious molecules from the immigrants would activate them.

“We’ll be careful,” flashed Poppy, secreting the dendrimers and weaving them in expert patterns across the branches. Already she and other elders were laying out plans for homes and schools, and chambers for breeding. They tapped the capillaries to harvest vitamins and minerals. “We need to help the children feel at home, as soon as possible. If it doesn’t taste right, they won’t breed.”

With the fifth wave of immigrants came the children and the young breeders; just three hundred precious vessels of the genes to seed their race and repopulate their world. Three hundred children for ten thousand adults, the most the gods allowed Eleutherians in their new world.

The Lord of Light’s blue angels were a conventional lot; they mainly showed blue or violet. But the children of Eleutheria flashed anything from violet to red, and beyond. Poppy watched the precious little rings tumbling out of the silicon vessels that had carried them safely through the bloodstream, eager to taste the New World. “Our children come in colors that even the gods can’t see,”

she flashed proudly.

"Watch yourself," warned Fern. "Our new god could see you well enough." The children worried her; their journey took too long. "They're getting depressed and philosophical. They'll all turn into elders before they breed."

"They'll soon feel better," flashed Poppy, "now that they're away from the blue angels." The blue angels secreted a developmental hormone that made a third of all children turn into elders without breeding; this had kept the Eleutherian numbers small. "We'll cheer them up with new things to taste. We'll build nightclubs."

The rest of the micros were transferred in the patch of microneedles, just like the first two. It took several passes to transfer them, ten thousand in all. Ten thousand microscopic rings that claimed to be people.

"Oh Great One," the letters flashed green. "Our growing children need arsenic."

"Arsenic?" Chrys looked up. "Isn't that what the slaves kill for?" On the street they called it "ace."

Doctor Sartorius extended an appendage. A claw snapped open, revealing a white pill. "Micros evolved on a planet full of arsenic. They need it as an essential mineral."

"But ace is poison."

"It's a controlled substance," the doctor admitted. "But our dietary supplement traps the arsenic in special cagelike molecules that keep it out of your own cells. Only the micros can extract it."

Chrys eyed the pill distastefully. "People will think I'm a slave."

Daeren shook his head. "Chrys, if people think that, they'll think it no matter what." His voice was low. "I told you, you'll face prejudice. We all do."

The worm face warned, "There's a black market in arsenic. Never, ever let your micros give up their arsenic, for any reason."

"The Plan supplies you once a month," said Daeren. "If ever you fall short, you could be accused of selling it. You'd end up in jail, and your people wiped out."

"Please, Great One—have mercy. Our children will starve without arsenic."

Reluctantly Chrys swallowed the pill.

The doctor's appendage retracted unnervingly into his cylindrical body. "Your nanoservos report no problems—no meningeal inflammation, no invasion of central nervous tissue. Daeren, can you stay? I'm on call." All his arms retracted and disappeared. Rearing backward, he twisted his body around and left.

Chrys sat back, and her hands sketched a moon in the air, itching to get back to her painting stage. “Where are the micros?” she asked. “They don’t answer anymore.”

“They’re busy building their city,” said Daeren.

“*God of Mercy, is all well?*” The green letters returned. “*Such a beautiful, untouched wilderness for our children to settle.*”

“Fern’s back.” Untouched wilderness indeed.

“All right.” Daeren came over and sat in front of her, his eyes level with hers. “May I check your eyes, just a minute?” Blue rings flashed again.

“*Of course, we stayed out of the gray cortex,*” Fern insisted.

“*Not a taste,*” added Poppy. “*The blue angels are so strict. They never trust us.*”

“They sure talk fast,” Chrys observed.

“A thousand times faster than humans. They’re very social; when you meet another carrier, you’ll always know.”

“Well, I have no time to socialize. I have to put up my show. Can I go home now?”

“You signed an agreement to stay overnight, at least. Another day would be better, especially if you lack help at home.”

“Saints and angels,” she whispered. “When will I get to my work?” The turquoise moon was barely begun.

Daeren leaned closer. “You’d better pay attention to what’s going on beneath your skull. Besides building a whole new city overnight, the ten thousand of them want to expand their population as soon as possible. At first, they have only three hundred juveniles to breed; the rest, all elders, cannot produce offspring.”

“All elders? What is this, a retirement community?”

“A common population structure, for microbes,” he said. “Only a few reproduce, while the others stay active enough to maintain the environment—‘viable but non-culturable.’”

“These sound like they have plenty of culture.”

“Like medieval monks, they store all the history of their people. They ‘write’ it in their chromosomes.”

Monks—even worse than priests.

“Most of the time,” Daeren said, “they keep just a few breeders to gradually replace those who die. But to found a new colony, they need to increase their number a thousand-fold, as quickly as possible.” Above the stage appeared an S-shaped curve.

“The population will rise steeply for the next two weeks, then taper off by the end of the month at about a million. But at two weeks, you reach a

critical point where nearly half the population are children.”

Chrys looked up. “What’s wrong with that?”

Daeren leaned back, chin in his hand. “It’s like a feudal society before the plagues set in. Too many youngsters, lacking in judgment; they can get into trouble.”

Microbial juvenile delinquents. “Like, they start gang wars?”

“They could invade the central brain tissue. That’s how plague micros take over the dopamine center.”

The holostage whined. Above the stage flashed a molecule, a hexagon of atoms with two claws and a tail. “Dopamine,” repeated Daeren with emphasis. “The central molecule of reward. Dopamine enters the neurons to create pleasure. Everything humans do—loving, dying, killing—they do for dopamine.”

Chrys regarded the molecule curiously. “Even enjoying art?”

“Even art,” he said. “But the plague micros trap the dopamine in your synapses, until you’re good for nothing else. Like cocaine—smart cocaine.”

Chrys stared again at the molecule; it looked like a scorpion. A normal part of the brain; and yet.... “These micros could turn into plague.”

“Your elders will keep things in hand,” he assured her. “Once you get past the second week, elders outnumber children again, and the population stabilizes at a million. Then they have nothing to do but help your work.”

Chrys shuddered. “Well, let’s hope Fern keeps the kids in line.”

The poppy-colored letters returned. “*Oh Great One, do our people please you?*”

“*Yes, I am...pleased.*”

“*Then please, send us a sign of your mercy.*”

Chrys looked up. “They want a ‘sign.’ What do I do, raise the dead?”

Daeren took a look at the medical monitor. “The nanos say they’re doing okay, keeping their kids out of the cortex. They deserve a reward.” Daeren took out a packet of small blue wafers. He handed one to Chrys. “Here, take this. Hold it on your tongue for a moment, then swallow it.”

Chrys eyed the blue wafer suspiciously. “What’s in it?”

“Azetidine acid.” The holostage showed a new molecule: a simpler structure, only seven atoms. A group of four with a tail of three, like the seven stars.

“A—what?”

“Azetidine, AZ for short. An amino acid, common in plants. It does for micros what dopamine does for us.”

Microbial cocaine? “It doesn’t sound right. Why should I drug them?”

“If you don’t rule them, they’ll rule you.” Daeren smiled. “It’s just a low concentration. It gives them a buzz, like champagne with chocolates.”

“I don’t drink. You made a big point of it.”

“They’re different. They live fast.”

Chrys put the wafer in her mouth. It tasted like a potato chip.

“Thanks for your blessing, Oh Great One! We will make wise use of your world, and sing your praises forever.” A starburst of red and lava.

Fern added, *“It is good to please our God of Mercy, for we live or die at your pleasure.”*

Chrys thought, even priests like good food and drink.

As the micros multiplied, the holostage listed their growing population. On the first day the total did not increase much, but the ‘children’ doubled, and none became elders. Every hour or so the elders asked for a “sign.” It always sent them into raptures, like catnip. Then Fern hurried off to keep the kids out of trouble, but Poppy at least could be persuaded to stay a bit and play with colors. Colors of mountains, sky, and ocean; at Chrys’s suggestion, Poppy sprayed them out, from the green gold of meadows to the gray violet of distant hills. Familiar vistas turned strange, as if by the light of a foreign sun.

The hourly newsbreak jarred her teeth. Titan’s corpse, for the hundredth time—still no leads. If micros were people, then Titan’s murder was more than a hate crime; it was genocide. Meanwhile, slaves had snatched another ship, in Elysian space. No Elves were ever taken, though, only a “mortal” Valan.

In her window the Protector pounded his fist, demanding the Elves help locate the Slave World. The Elf Prime Guardian did not deign to reply, but his Guardian of Peace, Guardian Arion, appeared in his butterfly train. Guardian Arion stood straight as a caryatid, his face marble white. “The brain plague and other addictions need not trouble our advanced society,” the Elf purred. His bearing and diction underlined the superiority of a world without crime. As opposed to inferior Valedon.

Chrys lay back in the hospital bed. *“Poppy, no more news for me. I’m closing the window.”*

“But what if we need you, Oh Great One?”

“If I see that corpse once more, I’ll go mad.”

“Change the setting.”

That took her by surprise. *“What setting?”*

“Advanced Options, function nine; Social Setting, alternate six; Alert Status, key three....”

Following each step, Chrys focused on the hovering keypad. The Plan One clinic never told her about this.

"The gods are not omniscient," Poppy observed. *"They can learn from us."*

Chrys smiled. *"Yes, we can learn from you."*

That evening Daeren stopped in. For a moment he froze; his brows wrinkled and his eyes scanned, as if reading bad news in the window. Then he looked at her and smiled. "Time for an eye check."

Chrys had been sketching a shield cone on a windless day, a wisp of smoke rising. She blinked it away and focused on the agent's eyes as they flashed blue. A minute or so passed before her own flashed in response.

"They should always keep someone on watch," he told her. "Remind them. And remember to set your alarm at night, every two hours."

"What for?"

"While you sleep, eight years will pass. The young won't know you, and the old may forget. Plan Ten would wake you if anything went wrong, but prevention is better."

She stretched, missing her workout with Zircon. Yet oddly she felt exhausted, as if she had traveled a thousand years. "I can use a good night's sleep."

"Remember to keep your window open."

Poppy had turned off the news and ads. That alone was nearly worth the hospital stay.

That night, she woke every two hours to give the micros their "sign" of AZ. Each time they responded with rapturous pyrotechnics. By morning, she tossed in her sheets, unable quite to sleep, too tired to waken.

"Fern? Are you there?"

"I am here, Oh Great One."

In the dark she felt as if she were one of them; she could almost reach out and touch the whiskers of the little ring. *"Fern, I need sleep."*

"So do I. But at last we've built our first city."

"Your city?"

"In the arachnoid, in the great Cisterna Magna."

Out of the darkness grew columns of light. Fibroblast cells connected floor to ceiling, a vast colonnade extending in all directions like a scaffold across the firmament of the brain. Between two arachnoid columns hovered Fern. Her green projections twinkled as they rotated, propelling her forward. Chrys's view followed her.

"Our arachnoid is largely wilderness, as yet uninhabited. But now we approach the Cisterna Magna, where the brain linings diverge, creating a great space for our city."

The floor fell away sickeningly, while the ceiling soared out of sight. Across the cellular columns stretched struts and braces of all different colors, in complex pulsating structures. The struts built fantastic stellated dwellings, with micro rings tumbling in and out of hidden portals. This was the city they had built in their New World.

Her mind floated upward, toward the ceiling where the columns stretched to meet the outer lining of the brain. An opening appeared, flanked by micros of various twinkling colors, sentinels on guard. The opening extended into a tunnel, smooth and white.

“Our bridge to the bloodstream,” said Fern. *“Only the eldest of the elders may cross into the blood and travel with the nanos. We will serve you better than any nanoservo built by the gods, patrolling your veins forever.”*

When at last she came awake, Chrys felt as if she herself had explored an eighth world of the Fold. Her vision was transformed.

How would she paint again—and how would anyone ever understand?

As she reached for the disk of nanotex by her bedside, she bounced out of bed faster than she intended. Despite her poor sleep, she felt as if her body could float away; as if the planet had lost half its gravity overnight. She started to comb her hair, a long, painstaking process, but the feel of her flexing arms puzzled her. As usual, the nanotex adhered to her chest, then spread itself in a black film around her body, automatically cleansing her skin. The film of artificial cells took on the contours of her body; a landscape familiar, yet now subtly estranged.

Doctor Sartorius came back to check her out. “Your Plan Ten nanoservos have started shaping you up, Chrysoberyl.” Their transmissions sent a stream of colored squiggles and blinking text flowing across the holostage. In Chrys’s eye, a new call button had appeared; in an emergency, a blink at that spot would bring Plan Ten.

“The plan representative will present your advanced options, during one of your daily checkups.”

Checkups every day—she would never get that spattercone done.

Daeren came in to flash his irises one last time. “How do you feel?” he asked. “Anything I need to know?”

“The blue angels again,” the infrared letters sped across her window. *“Tell them we’re busy.”*

“We’re okay,” Chrys said, puzzled by his question.

A quick smile crossed his lips. “You’re talking plural already.” Daeren placed a transfer patch on his neck. “The blue angels need to ‘visit.’ Yours can visit, too.” He held out the patch.

"The blue angels say we can visit!" announced Fern. *"Is it permitted, Oh Great One?"*

She took the patch from Daeren and placed it on her neck, then returned it with her own visitors. "If I'm carrying ten thousand of them," Chrys wondered, "why do I always see the same two?"

"Only two have been called to be priests," he explained. "You may call others, as you wish."

She shook her head. "Two are enough."

"Greetings, God of Mercy." These letters were blue.

Chrys blinked twice. *"Who are you?"*

"We are called the blue angels," the visitor said. *"Your new people are growing well, though they need to curb their lifestyle. They are rather frivolous, I'm afraid, but they'll mature."* Maybe this one was a bishop.

Behind the doctor, the wall puckered in. It seemed to change its mind, then went ahead and opened. As its edges gathered back, there came a sound of scuffling, then a shout.

In the corridor outside struggled a stranger, held between two black-limbed octopods. The man was tossing his head one way then the other, his eyes bright with terror. His nanotex hung loose, as if its power had run down. Extending from the wall, ropelike appendages caught the man's wrists and ankles. His arm was gripped by a woman in gray, a tall Sardish blonde.

The woman in gray turned her piercing eyes toward the doctor. "Sar, the clinic's full. We need to extend." Her voice had a tone of finality, expecting obedience.

"Excuse me." The doctor glided out to join them.

Chrys stared until the door resealed.

Daeren still watched where the door had closed in, his expression grim. "A slave, he turned himself in. His masters objected. Sorry, it's been a long night at the clinic."

Master microbes. Chrys frowned. "That could happen to me."

"Not if you stick to the rules, and get tested twice a month."

"What? Like some addict?"

"We all do, even the chief of security."

She eyed him coldly. "You said these micros would keep me safe."

"Safer than you were before."

"But—" That vampire up on level one, the night before. More slaves every year, turning into vampires, or hauling captives to the Slave World for its microbial Enlightened Leader. "It's a cancer," she realized. "Like the building root cancers. It threatens all the city."

“Not just the city. It’s reached—” He stopped, hesitant.

“How can it go on? Why can’t the Palace just round up all the vampires?”

Daeren shook his head. “The vampires are the least of it. The problem already reaches too far up.”

“Far up? What do you mean?”

“Sar runs a private clinic for the Great Houses.”

Smart cocaine. Chrys felt a chill down to her toes. Then she frowned and shook herself. “Well, I want no part of it one way or another. I just want to make art.”

“Of course you do,” said Daeren. “Nobody says, ‘I’ll grow up to be a slave.’” He looked her closely in the eye, blue rings flashing. “Your people pass. You can have them back now, and return mine.”

“Nothing but insulting questions, interminable,” complained Poppy.

“Before you leave,” Daeren added, “the chief has to certify.”

The wall parted smartly. A woman entered, the Sardish blonde who had brought in the plague victim. Her skin was exceptionally fair; Chrys could see every vein, like ivy on her arms and face. She carried herself stiff as a Palace guard. Her mouth was small, as if she would only release her words on good behavior. “I am Andradite of Sardis, Chief of Security.”

“Our ancient history tells of the god among gods,” said Fern. *“The Thundergod.”*

Nodding to Daeren, Andradite put a transfer patch at her neck, then immediately pressed to his. He did the same for her, swiftly, as if it were something they had done many times. Chrys felt her scalp prickle.

Then the chief’s eyes faced Chrys. Her irises flashed bluish violet, a shade deeper than Daeren’s.

“The judges,” announced Poppy. *“Throughout history, they brought trouble.”*

“We have nothing to hide,” insisted Fern.

Chrys tried to look unconcerned.

“You’ve done well, so far.” Andradite offered her a patch. “Much better than some of us expected.” The chief had expected her to fail, Chrys realized. Both agents were hiding something. Why?

“Once you’re home, you will hear from us,” the chief told her. “You will join the community of controlled carriers—a highly exclusive group.”

Chrys doubted that. How exclusive could a group be, to take her?

In her window, next to Plan Ten, appeared another call button, with no label, just the color purple that the chief’s eyes flashed. “If you’re ever in trouble,” the chief told her, “the kind of trouble even Plan Ten can’t help, call us. Forget your own name, but remember that.”

FOUR

Fern tumbled through the city of the great Cisterna Magna, tasting its intricate molecules. Throughout the Cisterna, libraries of triplex DNA stored all the learning of Eleutheria. Nightclubs flashed with light-producing enzymes, singing colored music. Through the singing halls tumbled children ripe for breeding, their filaments tasting each other, hungering for just the right mate to merge.

“Fern?” Poppy’s light flashed through the optic fibers. “We need help. A merged pair is having trouble giving birth.”

Fern’s spiral tails whirled and sent her spinning down the hall. Between two columns of fibroblast, a nest of dendrimers formed the breeding chamber. Inside, two breeders had come together. Their filaments had dissolved, allowing their surface membranes to merge. As the pair merged, their DNA triplexes came together to exchange genes. Once the two triplex chromosomes recombined, the membranes would pucker and pinch in, and the new children would come apart—as three. The three newborn children would each have duplex DNA, until they each grew a third strand in order to breed again.

But this time, something had gone wrong. “The offspring can’t come apart,” flashed Poppy. The edges of the three rings puckered in all around, as the membranes sought to pinch through, but still they remained attached.

“Get the enzymes,” Fern told her. “Enzymes to cut the membrane, slowly.” Carefully her filaments applied the enzymes to the grooves between the three half-separated children. Poppy did the same around the other side; it was vital to cut evenly, lest a child tear open. The grooves deepened. At last the three rings fell apart, three different lights flashing their cries: yellow, yellow-green, and green-blue. Three children, where there had been two.

“There are so many children now,” Fern told Poppy, her filaments tasting the children to calm them. “Ten times more than I’ve ever known.”

"They'll turn into elders soon enough," flashed Poppy.

"The young elders are as careless as the children. And few of the children are becoming elders. Most just keep merging and dividing."

"How else can our people grow?"

One lovely child, a ring of pink violet, seemed quieter than the rest. She had just grown her third strand of DNA, but she seemed in no hurry to join a mate. Instead, she spent all her time tasting the records of Eleutheria, studying the plans of the Comb. "I've figured out something," she flashed to Fern. "The windows of the dwelling the gods call the Comb. The legendary windows that gather starlight. I can show how they were grown."

Fern was pleased, but kept herself from revealing how much. "You're a good student, Pink-violet. But you have less than a year to find a mate to merge." After a year, a god's hour, the breeder's mating structures would dissolve, and she would inevitably become an elder.

The pink-violet one pulled in her filaments. "Merging is for gods and children. Not elders."

"Are you sure of your choice?"

"When I become an elder, Fern, will I earn a name from the god?"

At home, Merope kept brushing around Chrys's legs till she tripped, and even Alcyone deigned to sniff her hand. Rarely had she been away from her studio so long.

Above the painting stage hovered the virtual palette. Chrys dipped her fingers in cerulean blue and a touch of brown, then brushed her hands through the air, leaving a trail of indigo. She blocked in the spattercone of congealed rock, then the Elf moon, then added local colors: cool violet grays for the volcanic peaks, amber and gold for the opening spurt of lava; sky of deep cobalt, bearing the seven stars and their hunter.

"Oh Great One, may we taste a sign of your favor?"

She thought of something. *"Poppy, I'll give you a sign if you can help me out."*

"Of course—anything, to serve our God of Mercy."

The room darkened, and the new painting vanished. In its place appeared the lava fountain falling into butterflies.

"A river of stars," said Poppy.

"Poppy...how can I help other people to see it as I do?"

"All the people can see it through your eyes. They're just busy right now."

"I mean, the other...gods."

A tiny replica of the volcano appeared in her eyes, hovering just before her. The replica looked washed out in black, crucial details missing, like an

old oil color darkened with age. Chrys nodded. “*That is how other gods see.*” That was why Pearl called her butterflies too dark.

“*Try this.*”

The replica changed. Its details returned, in a subtly different spectrum. No more infrared lava, but the reds and golds had their own distinctive range. Not the palette she would have chosen, yet compelling in its own way. Her pulse raced—she could hardly wait to show Topaz.

“*Do we please you, Oh Great One?*”

She reached for an AZ and placed the wafer on her tongue.

For the next hour, Poppy helped redo two other pieces. It was more than just a shifted wavelength; an aesthetic choice was made, a choice Chrys could not have made herself. The results were exciting; but were they hers alone?

Slowly she smiled. From the public archive she downloaded an image of AZ, azetidine acid, the four-atom square with the forked tail. She set the molecule in the corner of each piece, next to her own cat’s eye.

If she worked fast, she could revise all her pieces in the gallery, and still get the moon piece done for the Elf gallery director and Zircon’s Elf patron. But then, Elves could see the infrared. Which version should she show?

With a blink at her window, she called Topaz. Topaz’s sprite floated beside a towering portrait of a fur-cloaked client from one of the Great Houses. Her finger was shaping the last stroke of eyelash and a blush on the cheek. She turned to Chrys. “How’s it going, Cat’s Eye?”

“Topaz, any chance I could have a dozen more spots at the show?”

“Are you kidding? You’re doing a dozen more pieces this week?”

Chrys looked away. She should have known better.

“The show’s important, but don’t kill yourself. I’m sure the Elves will love *Lava Butterflies*.” Her voice had a trace of condescension.

Chrys looked up. “I found out some things. Brain enhancers are actually self-aware. Like sentients.”

Topaz frowned. “Cat’s Eye, everyone knows a nanoservo can’t be self-aware. How could it pack a trillion neurons?”

She wondered that herself. As the sprite dissolved, Chrys realized that Topaz still thought of her as the Dolomite sophomore who knew nothing. But this time, Topaz was wrong.

Another sprite flashed into her window. Zircon looked out at her from the club; the late afternoon hour, it was full of mountainous biceps flexing. “Chrys, where have you been? The second workout you’ve missed.”

“Hey, I’m sorry.” Actually, she felt as if she had ten workouts that morning. “Don’t worry. Things are getting back to...normal.”

On his chest, the large crystal gems swam out in spirals.

"Stars, Oh Great One," flashed Poppy's letters beneath. *"When will you show us the stars?"*

Startled, Chrys tried to keep her face straight. But Zircon gave her a puzzled look. "Chrys, if you're in trouble, let me know, okay?"

She made herself smile. "I had to crack cancerplast the other night." Just the night before last—it felt like forever.

Zircon shook his head. "You couldn't pay me to live on your level."

"Nobody pays me to live elsewhere."

He grinned infectiously, and lines appeared in his forehead. Not as young as he used to be, but always up for something new. "Hey, I could fix you up. I know Elves, men or women, who'd just die to have you."

Chrys liked Zirc, and she could have fallen for him, once upon a time. "I've had enough of people. I'd sooner date a worm-face."

"Mind-suckers!" Zircon shuddered. "Don't even say that. It's...perverted."

That evening Chrys took a break and strolled up Center Way. The lightcraft flitting up and down, the glowing signs, the virtual decor of the Great Houses—through her eyes, the micros exclaimed at all the lights, which they called stars. For the micros, she realized, ten meters might as well be ten light-years. How could they distinguish city lights from those across the universe?

"Wait," flashed Poppy. *"Wait—I see something most important. Something from our records; the oldest records of our people."*

Chrys blinked. Her eyes came to rest upon the Comb.

"That's it! Fern, come quickly—call the others to see..."

The Comb's hexagonal facets shone as always, in shifting tones of gold, red, even lava. Curious, Chrys asked, *"What do your records say?"*

"They say that we made the Comb."

Chrys was taken aback. *"You made the Comb? How can that be?"* The same strain as Titan's, *Eleutheria*. But had they come from Titan himself?

"It is true," added Fern. *"Our ancestors designed the seed that grew the Comb. We have all the plans. We made it for The Blind God."*

"The Blind God?" Chrys asked. *"Not the Lord of Light?"* She remembered what had puzzled her before: How could her own "people" be so different from Daeren's, if they came from his own head?

"The Blind God was our world, before the great exodus, when the Lord of Light took us in."

She stared, unseeing, her pulse racing. How could these micros have "made" the Comb, and still have the plans? Who was the Blind God? What had those doctors not told her?

At the hospital again the next morning, Doctor Sartorius listened to the nanos reporting from Chrys's bloodstream. His worm-like arms extended to plug into the hospital wall. Chrys still couldn't help expecting flies. "No sign of inflammation," he said. "The nanos are doing their job."

Chrys eyed him skeptically. "Nano-cells are 'intelligent,' but never as smart as people. How can micros be so smart? They're too small to have neurons."

One of the worms flicked toward the holostage, extending like an antenna. "Micros are about the size of a white blood cell. Each cell packs an array of polymers, with ten trillion units." Above the stage glowed a cage of atoms, with links joining in all dimensions. "Units connect by a 'spiro gate' that can twist in two directions. One twist allows current to flow across the link, the other not." The model came alive with twisting connections, as if thoughts were flitting across them. "These polymers transmit information, as surely as human neurons, or sentient circuits."

She regarded the sentient doctor curiously. "If micros that small can be 'people,' then why can't nano-cells be 'sentient,' like you?"

The doctor's worms retracted and were still. The spiro-gated molecules gave way to legal documents, the kind Daeren liked to quote, scrolling down the holostage. "When machines first...claimed sentience, the Fold Council set a lower limit for size at ten cubic centimeters. Nothing smaller could be a 'person,' with 'personal rights.'"

"What?" Chrys spread her hands. "How can you just decree what's a person and what's not?"

Doctor Sartorius returned to the holostage. "If you have no further questions, the Plan Ten representative is here today, to inform you of your benefits."

The Plan Ten rep was a human female, of model proportions, the kind all art students drew their first year. Her nanotex was modest gray, but it shifted subtly to highlight her perfect legs and ankles. Her curves were more than enough to remind Chrys how long it had been since she shared a bed, and to make her, just for a moment, rethink her resolution.

"Chrysoberyl, I'm here to answer any questions you may have about the Comprehensive Deluxe Health Package Plan Ten." The woman's tone was professional, yet softly persuasive. "You may call us anytime, of course; from anywhere, on any world."

"Even the Underworld?"

The Plan rep smiled confidently. "Our competitors, up through Plan Eight, provide instant coverage only for the more convenient parts of the city. But with Plan Ten, our emergency response time everywhere is under

five minutes. You needn't give up any of your favorite night spots."

"I see." Chrys patted her hair self-consciously, though it never would stay down.

The Plan rep nodded to the holostage. "Now, according to our records," she observed, "you have yet to choose your age and appearance."

"Excuse me?"

Upon the stage appeared Chrys herself, life size. Like a mirror, only without the usual mirror reversal; at first her own face looked askew.

"Plan Ten allows you to specify exact age, color, and so on. For most of our clients, age is the main concern. Have you thought about it?"

Chrys blinked. "I've had other things on my mind."

"Of course," the woman nodded understandingly. "Carriers always do. But think now." She turned to the holostage. "Our most discerning clients choose age eighteen to twenty."

The virtual Chrys seemed to smooth out a bit, like one of Topaz's portraits. Chrys tensed and swallowed. She had not thought of herself as already having aged. But the Chrys in the holostage looked to her like a pre-teen. "I'm too small to look young," she observed, half to herself. "People still pat me on the head."

"Stature can be increased." The Chrys on stage grew a couple of centimeters. "As for age, how old would you like to look? Distinguished? Venerable? Mother of Ages?"

The virtual Chrys grew fine lines in her forehead, but still stood erect and authoritative. As the skin shrunk around her face and hands, she looked fierce, indomitable, an iron lady. At last she shriveled into a million wrinkles, her eyes still bright and clear. Like a saint who'd spent her life tending dying people in the street.

"You can always change your selection," the Plan rep quietly observed.

Chrys clenched and unclenched her hands, and swallowed again, hard. "To be real honest, I think I'd like to keep on looking exactly the age I am now."

"Excellent—a very wise choice. Our wisest clients generally choose as you did," the Plan rep assured her. "Now, as to internal organs, of course, these can be optimized separately. Most clients simply take the age of optimal function—for the female, visual acuity peaks at age ten, muscle strength at age twenty, sexual response at age forty, and so forth. Is that fine with you?"

Chrys blinked. "I guess so." For her, health had always meant simply not being sick.

"And muscle mass." The woman's dimples deepened apologetically. "I'm

sorry, this one is so complex. Some examples—” The virtual Chrys expanded and shrank, while the rep rattled on about upper body strength, a gymnast’s flexibility, the balanced curves of a swimmer. “For sheer strength, there’s this.” The body grew hills all over, like a volcanic slope bulging with magma.

Chrys smiled suddenly. “I’ll take that.” Zircon would be in for a surprise.

“A bold choice,” the rep exclaimed, a bit too quickly. “A client of your sophistication might be interested in our more advanced options. Would you consider a change of gender?” She leaned forward confidentially. “Our competitor, Plan Nine, offers only one change of gender per lifetime. Can you imagine? What if you changed your mind, and couldn’t switch back?” She shook her head. “Our plan guarantees to switch you back, as often as you choose.”

Chrys’s jaw fell. For a minute, she could not imagine what to say. “To be really honest...” She thought of something. “Gender change would be great, but there’s something else I’d like even more.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to sign away all my rights to, uh, change of gender, and use the funds saved to fix my brother’s mitochondria. Could I do that?”

The woman looked shocked. “Sign away your own body rights? Like selling an eye or a kidney—you couldn’t do that.”

Chrys had considered it.

The encounter with Plan Ten left her vexed and sad. At last Daeren came to complete her visit. “Anything I need to know?” Shoulders straight, limbs fit and lean; Daeren had the health her brother never would. He looked her in the eye, and his own twinkled blue. “You need to get more sleep.”

Something inside her snapped. “Excuse me, can you tell me how old you really are? I was raised to respect elders.”

Daeren stiffened, and a tendon stood out in his neck. “I was raised to respect everyone. Assume I’m a hundred.” Young enough to be defensive. “Is anything wrong?” he asked. “I know Fern feels overwhelmed, but it will pass.” He handed her a transfer patch.

Chrys accepted the patch and handed it back to him, getting used to the routine of visiting micros. “Why do they say they built the Comb?”

Daeren frowned. “It would be more correct to say they share ancestry with those who seeded the Comb.”

“But my micros came from your head, didn’t they? Why aren’t they blue angels?”

“I’m like a way station,” he told her. “My people are strain *Coelecolor*;

they're social workers, immigration specialists. They take in refugees and train colonists to develop new worlds."

So a carrier could hold more than one strain. Different ethnic neighborhoods. "These refugees and colonists...they come from other people's brains?"

"That's right. Micros like to travel."

"So where did mine 'travel' from, originally? From Titan?"

"They grew inside me for seven generations. That's like a couple of centuries. Their duty is to leave the past behind, and serve their new world."

Committee talk again. "Was Titan their 'Blind God'?" Chrys asked. "How could a blind carrier 'talk' with them?"

Now he looked really upset. "The Eleutherians have exceptional memory, but they sometimes get things twisted." He leaned closer, and the blue rings sparkled.

"Oh Great One, the blue angels bid us forget," flashed Poppy. *"But you told us to recover all our memories."*

"Sure, but keep it dark for now."

Daeren put the patch back on his neck, just beneath his dark hair, then he held it out. "You can have your people back. They already miss their nightclubs."

"Nightclubs? You mean, strobe lights hung beneath my skull?"

"The molecular equivalent. I told you, your strain lives fast."

She remembered the wild-eyed slave, and the stern Chief Andradite. "Is that why the chief said she expected worse? Why did you give me such a bad strain?"

"They can get into trouble, but they're exceptionally creative. You could have had a strain of accountants."

She gave him a look. "Accountants cause more trouble than any artist." Something was missing, but she could not put a finger on it. She leaned back with a sigh. "I had no idea what I was getting into."

He asked quietly, "Are you sorry?"

She thought of the transformed pyroscapes. "No. I just feel like I'm back on Mount Dolomoth, walking on lava."

It was his turn to stare. "You've walked on lava?"

"Two hours old." The heat rising, simmering, suffocating. The surface dark and slick, with holes to the interior glowing like poppies. She was twelve when the long dormant Mount Dolomoth had erupted, and it had fascinated her ever since.

"I hope you won't try that again. A million lives depend on you."

She crossed her arms. "Listen, Lord of Light—if I have to risk a million of them raising hell in their nightclubs, they can just as well risk me."

On her way home an acrid haze obscured her street. But the buildings looked intact, aside from the usual old windows stuck open, gasping sideways. The haze must have seeped up from below. After a slave hijacking, Sapiens always blamed the sims, so they torched the Underworld. They usually stayed below; but right here on her block a gang of Sapiens marched toward her, lasers on their belts, pads of stunplast girding their knees and palms. Chrys unobtrusively crossed the street. If the carnage reached her level, she might have to go stay with Topaz and Pearl.

Safe at home, she called down a Titan retrospective. Titan's early career as a half-baked formalist, like Zircon. Titan's first brain-enhanced commissions, dwellings that soared like living, breathing things offering flowers to the world. Titan's more advanced works, each now a landmark. And his social ascent, on the arm of one Lady after another, each better connected than the last. Always women, oddly enough, a medieval obsession.

A stranger flickered into her window. "Chrys, I'm Opal of Orthoclase. Andra asked me to call." Opal called from the Institute for Nano Design—the Comb. Her namestones were a cluster of rainbow drops that formed a flower, only to flow apart again. She gave a friendly smile, almost in a motherly way, her face as round and smooth as her gems. Behind her, her holostage was twice as large as Chrys's entire studio. The walls jutted at wide angles, creating the honeycomb of rooms for which the Comb was famous. "Chrys—I'm so glad we caught up at last. A colorist, aren't you? Daeren says you're doing so well."

"Thanks," said Chrys warily.

"My people can't wait to see Eleutherians again. I hear they're just the same...." Stepping backward, Opal spread her arm toward her stage. "We design medical servos."

"The kind used for Plan Ten?"

Opal nodded. "And more experimental applications. But you 'design,' too, don't you. It's all art, don't you think?"

Chrys cleared her throat. "What can I do for you?"

"*Oh Great One, we recall the legends of this starry-eyed god,*" flashed Fern, "*the God of Wisdom, and her clever people, the 'wizards.'* *The wizards are our long-lost cousins; let us renew ties with them.*"

"*Not today,*" returned Chrys. "*Go tend your children.*"

"The café here serves carriers," Opal was saying. "We can meet here tomorrow."

It had not occurred to Chrys that restaurants would shun carriers, even worse than sims, if they knew. A knot of pain formed in her stomach. "I'd love to," she told Opal, "after my show opens next week."

Opal's mouth went straight and her eyes widened. "I promised I'd see you this week. It's important."

"Thanks; you've kept your promise. The day after the Opening, okay?"

Hours of work turned into days, as the spattercone grew. The cone's straight sides pointed to the sky, drawing the viewer up from echoing lines below. Above the holostage, Chrys's finger traced the streams of lava that rose from the cone, reaching toward the turquoise moon. Then she traced the moon's details, subtly following the curve of lava. The moon was the center of a pool where ripples led outward, down to the ground.

But as the piece played forward it developed in a new way, distinctly different from any pyroscape Chrys had done before. Instead of arching to fall back to ground, the streams of lava kept going till they reached the sky. The sky collected a long lava river, smooth and thin, with lava strands connecting down to the ground below; unmistakably reminiscent of arachnoid. And the turquoise moon, amid the strands, sprouted luminous filaments of light.

"*Oh Great One,*" called Fern. "*A young elder begs a favor from you. A true scholar; I recommend her highly. She asks you to give her a name.*"

Why not, thought Chrys; the other priests were so busy. "*What does she look like?*"

A diffuse light, magenta, with long starry filaments. Star with a dark center. Chrys's lips softened. "*Aster,*" she decided. "*I call you Aster.*"

"*Oh Great One, I am not worthy to meet your eyes. But only ask, and I will follow.*"

For some reason she felt afraid. It was too much for her; all these people and their children would find out she was a fraud. She shook herself. What did she care, they were only microbes. "*Aster, can you help me perfect the turquoise moon?*"

"*I will help the god, in whatever small ways I can. May the god also bless our own work, our creation of dwellings for the gods.*"

"*I am no dynatect, Aster,*" she warned.

"*You shall become a great dynatect. Greater even than the Blind God.*"

"A prophet!" Chrys laughed aloud.

Then she froze. The Blind God—that was Titan. It had to be. But the murdered dynatect had not been blind...until he was attacked. The limp body, sprawled in the street like a piece of trash, the eyes burnt into the skull. Had the micros lived through that? Had Plan Ten arrived in five minutes, only to save the micros from his dying brain? What else was that agent hiding?

FIVE

“When shall we build?” Poppy demanded of Fern. “We have all our plans, old and new, but we are out of practice. As elders die, we lose their experience.”

In the Cisterna Magna, they had reestablished the Council of Thirty, the ancient governing body of Eleutheria. They organized trade in arsenic and palladium, and regulated the mining of vitamins from the blood. Now the Council wanted to resume building for the gods.

“We build when we are called,” said Fern. “The gods seek their own dwellings. In the meantime, the god calls us to shape Truth and Beauty in the stars.” The God of Mercy built creations out of light itself.

“Where are all the peoples from our history?” asked Aster. “The judges of the Thundergod, the wizards of Wisdom, the minions of the Deathlord?” Aster, and the others born here, had met only Eleutherians. They were isolated, cut off from the rest of civilization, from new ideas and fresh genes. “We need to meet all the people of other gods. We have made all kinds of tasty molecules to trade with them. We need to meet their children, and recruit the brightest for our work.”

Poppy said, “This god always goes alone. What is wrong?”

Fern wished she knew. History showed that even gods needed other gods. A god apart spelled trouble.

As always, Chrys was sure the Opening night would be a disaster—the Gallery would run short of power and refuse to display half the paintings, the cakes and lambfruits would be missing, the wine would be bitter, and no guests would show up. Nervously Chrys paced the exhibit halls, getting her first chance to see everything together. As she passed through the doorway to Topaz’s portraits, her arm hit the edge, punching it in. “Damn,” she muttered as the doorway reshaped itself, avoiding Pearl’s curious stare.

Her muscles had swelled noticeably, and she felt like she was bouncing on a low-gravity moon.

Topaz's portraits always drew a crowd, and this year she had some high-class commissions, including Lord Zoisite, the Palace minister of justice. In the full-size portrait, the minister wore his fur talar, its draped lines projecting verticality. Sparkling gems signaled his calling, his portfolio, his Great House, his wife's House, and several other affiliations. The back lighting framed his head like a halo, typical of Topaz. The haloes, as well as the subtly shortened noses and smoothed complexions, made all her subjects look like members of one family. What Plan Ten did for health, Topaz did for art.

"A god," flashed Aster, "*placed among the stars.*"

A portrait in the stars. That's how it would look, to a micro peering out of her eye.

"*Legend tells that someday our own people will be placed among the stars.*"

"*How will that happen, Aster?*"

Lady Moraeg was eyeing her oddly. "Chrys, are you okay?"

What if her irises lit up, and someone saw? "*Stay dark,*" she warned the micros. "*No more flashing today.*" She smiled at Moraeg, and at Lord Carnelian beside her, flaxen haired with fine gray nanotex and one crimson namestone, classic scion of a Great House. The most faithful patron of the Seven, Carnelian had advanced Chrys her rent the last time she went under. "Moraeg, your flowers are exquisite this year."

"You haven't seen the latest."

Moraeg's flowers were nearly real enough to touch, from vibrant peonies to delicate snapdragons. Yet her overall compositions were fantastic—*Asters at a Neutron Star*, scarcely plausible, but somehow, watching the asters climb toward the star, you could almost believe it. "*There's your name,*" Chrys silently told Aster, pointing out the petals tinged with magenta. Turning, she searched the other pieces. "*And there are poppies. But stay dark.*"

In *Sunflower Galaxy*, a seed grew into giant galactic-sized sunflowers. The time dimension was a new departure for Moraeg, and her execution appeared shaky. The next one, *Campion Peak*, showed a jagged ridge frosted with pink campion. Far in the distant haze rose the unmistakable straight, gentle slopes of a dormant volcano. "I like it," Chrys exclaimed.

Moraeg squeezed her hand. "We've so much in common. Now show me yours—I have a question."

The sound in the gallery had to be turned way down, but you could still feel the eruptions rumbling in your feet from the next hall; the lava

fountain arching into butterflies, the spattercone spraying across the moon. Each piece had a five-minute time loop, the maximum her equipment could manage. Her infrared originals alternated with the versions reworked by her micros.

“Tell me, Chrys,” Moraeg insisted. “How ever did you ever fix the colors?”

Chrys blinked and swallowed hard. An idiot, she should have foreseen this question. “Just had an idea,” she muttered. She looked away, checking out the first visitors: young professionals in pulsing nanotex, ladies of the Great Houses in fur and silk, a couple made up fashionably as vampires, their skin bleached white with broken veins. So far no sign of an Elf.

Topaz stared at something, chin in hand. At last she pointed to the seven-atom molecule that hovered next to the cat’s eye. “What does that mean?”

Chrys swallowed again. “Excuse me—I just remembered, I have to serve the cakes.” She escaped out to the next hall. A single work filled the hall, Zircon’s *Ode to Inhumanity*. Brilliant shafts of light reached for the sky, grandly monumental.

“Wait—Oh Great One, let us stay a while.”

“Let us admire this magnificent work. Austere, yet sensual—It inspires us.”

“What!” She winced, hoping no one heard her speak aloud.

Zircon was standing right there, expounding at length on its many layers of meaning. “The visual iterations of form create a unity between the creator, the viewer, and ultimately all of humankind,” he was telling several visitors in gold-studded furs. “Ultimately the form creates in our mind an apotheosis of the human tragedy...”

“We of course can build far greater,” added Aster. *“The greatest dwellings the gods have ever seen.”*

Saints and angels—these microbes had egos as big as Zircon’s. Chrys closed her eyes.

“Wait—we need to study this work—”

A hand with glowing nails tugged her arm. “Chrys, wake up,” exclaimed Pearl. “Ilia’s here.”

Ilia Papislison, director of Gallery Elysium. Chrys hurried back with Pearl to the main entrance.

The two Elves were unmistakable, each in a plain white talar projecting a long train of light like a comet’s tail. Luminous swallowtail butterflies flickered across the nanotex of visitors coming up behind.

Topaz nodded graciously. “Ilia Papislison,” she introduced to Chrys, “and Yyri Papislison.”

Yyri was Zircon's patron. Ilia and Yyri shared the *shon* name, both hatched and raised in the same *shon*. Yyri did not extend a hand, but smiled and touched a fold of Ilia's talar, the closest contact Elves allowed in public. "I've just been telling Ilia, I've heard so much about your work, Chrysoberyl."

"Thanks, my Lady." Chrys bit her tongue; she forgot that Elves were fanatically egalitarian, having no Lords or Ladies, only Citizens. But Yyri did not deign to notice. She and Ilia turned politely toward the portrait of Lord Zoisite. Overhead hovered two sentient reporters, silver ovoids just above the minimum size, "snake eggs."

Yyri raised a hand, and Ilia nodded, probably catching a transmitted comment. "Quaint," the gallery director observed, without altering her frozen smile. The snake eggs recorded this utterance, then bobbed up and down for a better angle. Anything Elves took notice of was more likely to make the news.

Yyri touched Ilia's talar and motioned her on. "So much raw talent in Iridis," she said aloud. "Don't you think we ought to do a show, 'Gems from the Primitive'?"

The pair moved politely through the portraits, Chrys and Moraeg and the other Seven Stars hovering about at a discreet distance. Only Topaz had the presence to venture a remark. "Zircon's latest work is truly path-breaking," she told Yyri.

Yyri clasped her hands. "An urban shaman—he plumbs the depths of modern humanity, in ways the more refined artist cannot."

Director Ilia had moved on to Moraeg's flowers. At *Asters at a Neutron Star*, she nodded. "Charming."

"Who is this strange god? Our ancient history tells that we once visited—"

"Stay dark." No Elf would get infected by micros. Chrys's eyelids fluttered, exhausted from staying up the night before to put the last touches on the turquoise moon. If she could just get through this evening, it would all be over.

At last Ilia reached the pyroscares.

"Chrys's vision is unique," offered Topaz.

Ilia watched the lava butterflies. Her eye widened. "Intriguing color." Then she stopped at the spattercone. She watched the infrared lava rise to spread across the sky like a web of arachnoid, while the moon sprouted filaments like a micro. The color scheme changed; Ilia waited till it cycled back. She watched, and everyone else quieted to watch her.

The director caught sight of the molecule next to the cat's eye, and she leaned forward for a closer look. "Indeed." She straightened, then turned

slowly, her virtual train swirling behind her, the swallowtails dipping and swaying. She took a step toward Chrys, much closer than Chrys expected.

Rings flashed around each iris—like Daeren’s, only these flickered gold and red.

“The God of Many Colors! Her people want to visit.”

“Please, Oh Great One, let us visit. Our history tells—”

Chrys stared in shock.

“What’s the matter?” Moraeg caught her hand. “Chrys, sit down a minute.”

Ilia nodded. “I understand. Give my best to Andra.” Turning, she moved on to the next hall.

Pearl brought a chair. “There, Chrys. You probably haven’t slept for days.” She leaned close and whispered. “We didn’t know you had connections. Who is Andra?”

Something was wrong. If microbial “brain enhancers” were just a cheap alternative to Elysian genetics—why would an Elf carry micros?

When the last guests were gone, and the last crumbs cleared by the scurrying floor servos, Chrys left the Gallery with Topaz and Pearl. Past midnight, Center Way was dark and still, the sky misted over. As the damp air cooled her face, her head throbbed. At last she could drag herself home.

Pearl’s fingernails lifted like fireflies. “It *is* our best show ever,” she exclaimed, still high on the excitement.

“The best attended opening,” agreed Topaz, nodding at early press reports in her window. “Ilia said the Gallery Elysium is planning a show on Valan art.”

“She sure noticed your work, didn’t she, Chrys?”

The encounter had left Chrys shaken. But then, if even the Elf gallery director carried micros, just like Chief Andra, how bad could they be?

Topaz sidled closer. “How’d you do it?” she quietly asked. “How’d you fix those colors?”

“Did this Andra help?” asked Pearl. “Who is Andra? You got an Elf patron, like Zirc?”

“Certainly not.” After Topaz, Chrys had had girlfriends, and boyfriends, but like Topaz they each managed to leave her just when she needed them most. The last thing she needed now was another one. Her steps slowed. “You know, that gallery director...she’s got brain enhancers.”

“Well sure, she’s an Elf.”

“No, I mean our kind of brain enhancers. The same kind as Titan.”

Topaz frowned. "How would you know?"

"Because I have them too."

Pearl's eyes widened, and she sucked in her breath. "You have micros? Like a vampire? Chrys—*how could you?*"

"Pearl, it's not like you think—"

"You're contagious!"

"I am not contagious. I mean, I'd have to—"

"Those plague micros—Topaz, I can't believe it." Pearl fell back, trying to pull Topaz away.

"Pearl, just cool it." Catching Pearl's arm, Topaz glared at Chrys. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I did tell you. Look, even Ilia has them—"

Topaz shook her head violently. "Elves are different. Look, Chrys, you're in trouble. You're provincial; you don't understand these things."

Pearl exclaimed, "Topaz, don't let her touch you."

"Oh hush." Topaz blinked, calling at her eye windows. In the street a ruddy bubble rose and expanded, gliding toward her. "Come on, let's get home."

The two of them hurried off, leaving Chrys alone in the deserted street. Alone, and stunned. Would she lose every friend and acquaintance she had, for what lived in her brain?

"So many stars this year. We are inspired, especially by the work of the god Zircon."

"Inspired to begin our own work, the dwellings of the gods. But where are the gods to call for us?"

No lack of "friends" inside, in colors of green, poppy, and everything in-between; even if they did like Zircon's work better. But Chrys slowly shook her head.

She had answered all the doctor's questions at the hospital, but she had not told the whole truth. She was addicted to one thing: people. She loved people, longed for them, good or bad, friend or stranger; she could probably fall for anyone except a sentient. The city surrounded her with a blanket of people, and that was good. But to lose Topaz and Pearl, and the rest of the Seven—it was like losing her right arm and leg.

"Find the Thundergod," urged Fern. *"The Thundergod will help you."*

Chief Andra's purple button would not help. But Chrys knew one place where she could always find human people.

Blinking for a bubble car, she entered the liquid street. The bubble closed her in, and the street flowed forward to the end, where it plunged down the tube. Down past the fashion district, down past the bank level, and the food market within the bank's root. Down past the homes of chic

young professionals, down past the working-class sims on their way up. Down past her own level, the cheapest decent housing you could get, to the last level at bedrock. The Underworld.

No sign of the Sapiens' rampage; Palace octopods kept the entertainment district intact. Spice and decay, stale wine and costly perfume, breathed through the streets. Vendors from Urulan laid stacks of nanotex and gameplast upon roots of nanoplast that glowed suspiciously. Chrys spied one blob just starting to crawl away from its root. She held out her wand and fried it. The plast sizzled and shattered, but two little energized blobs glided off into the dark, just missing a couple of simian pre-teens tossing stickplast up at a broken street light.

Weaving in among the locals, Palace notables made their way to the shows; Lord Zoisite was a regular. They generally had an armed octopod in tow. Chrys spotted one and strolled discreetly behind it, an old trick when she came alone.

The octopod and its bejeweled lord entered Gold of Asragh, her favorite, one of the tonier clubs with the slave bar hidden in back. They must have remodeled, for the bar was now right up front by the entrance, a plague-ridden slave hawking ace in plain sight. So much for the Protector's war on the brain plague.

Behind the bar, the woman lifted a hand. "Char," she called in a low, hollow voice. "That you, Char?"

You could tell the voice of a mid-stage slave, flat and toneless, like a sentient gone wrong. Not yet a vampire, and not quite ready for the Slave World. Chrys nodded. "Hi, Saf." Sapphire, her name might have been once; slaves forgot all but the initial sound of human names. They gradually sold all they had for arsenic to serve their microbial masters; what they paid built the mysterious Slave World. Saf's eyes were bloodshot and always looked just to the side, never to look you in the eye. Chrys had first met Saf the month before. Now, by the looks of her, she had little time left before she sank, one way or the other.

Saf extended a hand. It held a transfer patch, bold as you please. "Char... you can't imagine." She said in a hoarse whisper. "Just try it. Enlightenment."

Chrys stared at the patch in the slave's hand. Like watching lava congeal, peering into those poppy-colored holes deep within the still liquid rock. What was the Slave World, she wondered; what did it look like? She sketched the sign against evil. "Saf, why don't you try this?" Chrys held out a viewcoin, one of several she kept for publicity.

The viewcoin transmitted to her own eyes, and Saf's. A tranquil peak at midmorning—exploded. Black clouds filled the sky, and a pyroclastic flow

raced straight toward the viewer with a muffled roar.

A ghost of a smile came over Saf's face. It was hard to reach a slave, their senses grew so dull, feeling only microbial dopamine. Suddenly the woman straightened as if in shock. "You've...already got them."

A chill came over Chrys, from her scalp down to her toes.

"*The masters of Endless Light*," Fern called the plague micros. "*The masters never speak to us. They call us the root of all evil.*"

Taken aback, Chrys blinked twice.

"You've got the worst kind," added Saf in her slow, toneless voice. "You and Day. All yours care about is money." The word "money" came as if dragged out of her. Then suddenly she extended an arm as if to grab Chrys. "You've also got...ace, in your veins," she hissed. "Give...us...your...ace."

Startled, Chrys drew back. Would the slave suck her blood for arsenic?

She hurried in with the gathering crowd, the ticket price automatically subtracting from her window. Simian locals, L'liite tourists, a lord in peridots; elbow to elbow they crowded. The perfumes and the odor of unwashed sweat nearly stifled her. At last she found her seat.

The stage exploded, blindingly. When the light and smoke cleared, the simian dancers were coming on, disguised as the caterpillar monster of ancient Urulan. The cheer of the crowd drowned the music, but at last the music won out, insistent, hypnotic. The music took them to distant cities on the most ancient of the seven worlds of the Fold.

"*Oh Great One*," Fern's letters appeared at last. "*We are trying so hard to keep you healthy, but until your eyes close for sleep, your body cannot be renewed. What more can we do?*"

Her head throbbed, and her throat felt thick. She had not slept for over a day. But her show had opened, with some success, she reminded herself. And now the music brought peace. Early in the morning, she elbowed her way out of the hall. At the bar, two slaves were buying ace, a yellow-eyed simian in dead nanotex and a socialite in fur. Feel good now, but how long before they'd suck blood for it?

"*The masters won't speak to us*," repeated Fern, seeming regretful. "*But the blue angels know them well.*"

The blue angels? Daeren's micros? Chrys felt a chill. "*Does the Lord of Light come here?*" she demanded of Fern as she hurried out, trying always to keep an octopod in sight. "*Does he...meet with slaves?*"

"*He does.*"

"*Why? What does he do here?*"

"*We don't know. The blue angels bade us keep to our own cistern. We were not allowed at the eyes to see.*"

A security agent meeting slaves; an Elf art director carrying micros....

Outside Gold of Asragh, a beggar called at departing guests. A Sapiens swung at him and cracked his head. Two sims tackled the assailant, who was suddenly joined by the rest of the Sapiens gang, all loaded with high-grade stunplast. Octopods soon scattered the lot, but the three sims lay soaked in blood.

Chrys eyed the Plan Ten button in her window. Plan One would come for them, she told herself. Though it hadn't come for her, the time she sprained her ankle in the stairwell.

"Oh Great One, I must leave your eye now," flashed Fern. *"The children are so many, it's time to adjust the hormones so that more become elders. I'll go, but Poppy will stay."*

"I will serve you forever, Oh Great One." Poppy's infrared letters warmed her.

Down a side street, beneath a curve of a building root, lay a couple of adults and two small children, asleep together on an old mattress. Chrys crossed the street to toss them a credit chip. Above, hugging a power link, glowed several cancers, quiescent so long as they fed. She hurried to catch the tube up.

"Oh Great One, your eyes are dark this year. Why?"

Her neighborhood looked as empty as a black hole, not surprising at this hour. But she reached her door without incident. *"I am sad, Poppy. Sad about my friends."*

"Sad? The gods are great and powerful. How can the gods be sad?"

Chrys thought of the "gods" below. *"The gods are people, Poppy. People just like you."*

"I know this, Oh Great One. I have always known it. But I love you still. I love you because you can see me."

"I love you too, Poppy." The covers felt so good as she slid under them. Without thinking she blinked to close her window, just as she used to before the micros showed her how to turn off the ads. On her shelf above, the volcano sat unnoticed, its alarm not set, a wisp of virtual smoke rising from its peak.