

DAUGHTER OF ELYSIUM

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JOAN SLONCZEWSKI

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For Matthew
The star with a face...



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The Snake

CHAPTER 1

The sky of the Ocean Moon was blue enough, impossibly blue, bluer than the eye of a newborn. But its surface was not blue at all, as Doctor Blackbear Windclan had expected from the picture-perfect video brochure. As the shuttlecraft bore him and his family ever closer through the clouds, the curve of ocean appeared dusty green, as if a featureless meadow covered the globe. Could this really be Shora, the Ocean Moon?

To reassure himself, Blackbear squeezed the ankles of his two-year-old Sunflower, seated on his shoulders, then he touched the hand of his goddess, Raincloud. Raincloud was a linguist whose training in the tongue of a forbidden world had earned her a job on this free one.

Raincloud returned his look confidently. A goddess of elegant stature, she had the earth-toned complexion typical of their people, the Clickers of Bronze Sky. She carried on her hip their six-year-old Hawktalon, whose cascade of black braids twined in spirals like her mother's. The braids, full of patterned beads, were works of art which Blackbear spent hours redoing each week. Mother and daughter wore their best *rei-gi* garments, as did Blackbear: russet linen trousers that flared like skirts, their hems bordered with embroidered volcanoes and fireweed. A belt tied the garment at the waist—for Raincloud, a black belt.

Blackbear adjusted his turban at his forehead. "This planet looks more like a swamp than an ocean." *Shora*, home of the native Sharers and the ageless Elysians, was an ocean world—the only inhabited world covered entirely by ocean. And yet, the closer came the ocean's surface, the more it looked like a field of vegetation, scraggly green and brown patches with brackish puddles in between. It made his stomach churn, already unsettled from the shifting g-forces of the shuttlecraft.

"Maybe it's Valedon, by mistake," he added, referring to Shora's dryer moon-twin. A country doctor from the frontier of Bronze Sky, a world still largely uncharted, Blackbear distrusted all spacecraft and, for that matter, any contrivance that produced light and speech from no discernible origin.

But he would put up with it. For what he sought on this ocean, countless doctors would give their lives: the secret of immortality.

Raincloud laughed, eyeing the vast “swamp” some ten thousand meters below. “You could herd a lot of goats down there.” Her voice clicked crisply, in the language that had earned their people the epithet “Clickers.” Clickers farmed the Caldera Hills of the Dark Goddess, beneath a volcanic bronze sky. Twenty light-years distant, yet Bronze Sky was just a *rei-gi* tumble away from here, through a hole in the galactic Fold.

Hawktalon’s braids bounced, and she pulled herself up a notch on her mother’s back. “Can we really keep our goats after all, Mother? And have room to let the dogs run? Oh please, let’s send for the dogs—”

“No,” clicked Raincloud. “I told you, we’ll be indoors the whole time, within a giant Elysian city.”

“Shaped like a bubble, you said,” Hawktalon added.

Elysium, the republic of “immortals.” Elysians never aged. They lived a thousand years or more, within their twelve opulent “cellular cities” that floated upon Shora’s ocean.

“But even in Founders City,” Hawktalon reminded her mother, “people kept dogs.” The capital of Bronze Sky was the only city the six-year-old had ever known.

Raincloud looked up from the observation deck and turned toward the back of the carpeted oval compartment. “Servo, please,” she called. Raincloud spoke Elysian, the language of the ageless ones, as well as Sharer, the speech of the ocean-dwelling natives who long predated the Republic of Elysium. Most important, she spoke the language of Urulan, the dreaded barbarian world whose missiles threatened the worlds of the Free Fold. Elysian intelligence had recruited her for her knowledge of Urulite. “Servo, please tell us what makes this ocean brown when its sky is blue.”

The azure sky was no disappointment, Blackbear conceded, coming from a world whose volcanic dust painted its noontday sky yellow, with hours of blood-red sunset.

“A very perceptive and interesting question, Citizen,” came a sibilant voice from nowhere.

Blackbear frowned suspiciously. On his shoulders Sunflower bounced and craned his neck with interest, his stuffed wolf cub doll dangling in his father’s face.

“The answer, Citizen,” continued the servo voice, “is this. On Shora, by this time of year, the raft seedlings overgrow the entire ocean.”

So that was it. Living “rafts” like radial tree branches grew out onto the water. Unlike Elysians, the web-fingered Sharers actually lived outdoors upon the larger rafts.

As the servo spoke, Raincloud murmured simultaneous translation for Hawktalon. This talent had earned the goddess a job as interpreter for the Sharer embassy in Founders City, where Blackbear had studied medicine. Elysium, of course, had Sharer experts aplenty; their treaty with the ocean-dwellers required continual consultation. For Elysian Foreign Affairs, Raincloud would be translating signals from spy satellites at Urulan.

And Blackbear would do medical research, at the Longevity Laboratory of the famous scientist Tulle Meryllishon.

"In just two weeks," the servo voice told the Windclans, "the giant seaswallowers will migrate from the south pole, consuming the overgrown raft seedlings you see below, along with anything else in their path. Despite our best efforts, one or two Sharer rafts are lost each year."

"Lost?" Blackbear exclaimed. "But—what about us?" Elysian cities, like the living rafts, floated upon the ocean, each one a great sphere of nanoplast some four kilometers across. The city of Helicon, the Windclans' destination, lay ahead now, a gleaming pearl set in the seedling-choked sea. The pearl grew steadily larger as they approached. A single dwelling for a million immortal souls; the sight of it took his breath away. Yet even a structure so huge could be swamped by the sea.

"The city of Helicon could be lost, Citizen," the voice added. "Its surface was breached, once, forty years ago. If the leak had not been fixed, the city would have filled and sunk in fifty-three point six days."

Sunflower bounced happily on Blackbear's shoulders. "Snake, Daddy," he clicked. "Ss-ss, I hear snake." The sibilant Elysian voice, which the child could not understand, sounded like hissing.

Blackbear asked, "But what happens if—"

"Snake, Daddy."

"All right, it's a snake. Now be quiet, Sunny." The child insisted on hearing his pronouncements repeated, to make sure their wisdom had sunk in.

Hawktalon laughed. "Sunny thinks he heard a snake. What a baby. It's not even Snake Day yet."

The servo added, "Does my vocalization fail, Citizen?"

Blackbear said, "No, but—"

"If so, please report my defect to Service Sector Oh-three-twenty in the Nucleus of Helicon, for training. Actually, Citizen, the sinking of Helicon or any other Elysian city is most unlikely; no such event has been recorded in nine centuries since the founding of the Republic. The city's compartments are pressurized at all levels, and a buoyant fluid fills its transit reticulum, like a great living cell. Attention: Helicon's surface lies just beneath us. See the sunlight sparkle on its shimmering dome? Prepare for landing."

An indentation appeared in the city's surface, as if an invisible giant had pressed a thumb into it. The thumbprint deepened and widened, and the shadow of the shuttlecraft fell across it.

At his side, Raincloud clicked, "Strap down again."

The four of them returned to their seats, which automatically strapped them down for safety. Blackbear zipped Sunflower's empty juice cup into his travel bag.

Hawktalon announced, "I'll carry my own bag off the shuttle."

"Sorry, you'll ride for now," her mother insisted. No respectable Clicker adult would walk in public without a child on her back, or his.

Hawktalon pouted, and her much-worn stuffed fruitbat hung listlessly. A bit old to be carried, she would have to put up with it until Raincloud conceived another child. Back home in Tumbling Rock, the clan always had a number of little ones to hold; but here, of course, they had only these two. Clicker goddesses spaced three or four years between children, to prolong the nursing of each.

The craft shuddered to a halt. "Thank you, Citizens, for enjoying my service. A reminder: You will be met at the transit node of Octant Six by your host, Alin Anaeshon, mate of Tulle Meryllishon..."

Tulle Meryllishon was the lab director. Meryllishon was not a clan name, for Elysium had no clans. The *shon* name referred to the nursery of birth. Each city had its central *shon*, where the children were born and raised in common.

This arrangement was incomprehensible to Blackbear, for in Tumbling Rock even orphans had extended families. But then, the Elysians could have no children of their own. Immortality came at a price.

The Elysians were sterile. Their lack of germ cells was a side effect of the genetic treatment of their embryos, in the artificial wombs of the *shon*. The embryos, all derived from non-Elysian sources, had to be grown in culture.

What was the link between aging and fertility? No scientist had yet cracked it, but Tulle Meryllishon was trying. That was the Fertility Project, which Blackbear had come to work on. There were frontier worlds to populate, new fertile hills to fill with growing families. Few non-Elysian parents cared to produce children who could expect no children of their own. But if the Fertility Project succeeded, every child in the Fold could be born immortal.

Outside the shuttle, the chill air brought a scent of orange and salt from Shora's ocean. A wind shrieked overhead across the lip of the cavity which held them in the surface of the Elysian city.

Hawktalon winced and covered her eyes. "The sun—it burns, Mother."

"Look away from it, dear," Raincloud reminded her. This sun blazed without mercy through the clear blue sky, untempered by volcanic haze.

The lip of the cavity rose around them and constricted, blocking the sun. Now the lemon-colored disk of Valedon, Shora's moon-twin, appeared against the blue. Then the shuttle lifted off out of the cavity, and the lip soon closed overhead.

The cavity now became an enclosed vesicle, diffusely lighted. Within the vesicle, so small after the expanse of sky and ocean, Blackbear felt trapped. But Sunflower caressed his forehead and leaned forward with interest. "Going downstairs," the child clicked softly.

"Yes, Sunflower, 'downstairs.'" The vesicle was floating downward at about a sixty degree angle, along a fluid-filled branch of the transit reticulum. The flow of liquid carried the vesicle in its path.

"Welcome, Citizens, to Helicon, capital of Elysium, home of butterflies for a thousand years." Another disembodied servo voice. Blackbear's hair stood on end. "Would you be seated, Citizens?" the voice added.

Raincloud said, "Yes, thank you," in faultless Elysian.

Behind Blackbear, a lump of nanoplast pushed up and molded itself into a chair. The entire vesicle must be made of nanoplast, an "intelligent" material. But how could that stuff form such intricate shapes? Similar chairs took shape for the four of them. Hawktalon exclaimed with delight, and the beaded braids jangled about her face.

"If I ever fail to serve promptly, please report my defect to Service Sector Oh-three-thirteen. Now, the latest news. The Urulite Imperium claims that the Valan freighter *Sardonix* entered Urulite space before it was destroyed. Urulan threatens Valedon itself with interstellar missiles..."

Ghostlike figures sprang up on a little holostage, before the incurving wall of the vesicle. Hawktalon shrieked and clapped her hands. Blackbear shuddered, wondering where such a backward planet as Urulan could have gotten interstellar missiles. What if they hit Shora as well as Valedon? At any rate, the news was bad enough without showing it in three dimensions.

The chair oozed to fit his shape as he stretched. Was there anything in Elysium not “alive,” responsive and motile? Or rather, were there any *live* Elysians, other than holo figures?

From the left, another vesicle entered the stream and approached alongside. Its surface touched and seemed to melt in. The two vessels fused, their walls joined and widened to reveal several passengers.

Elysians were small, compact people, rarely taller than Blackbear’s shoulder; they were designed to make the most of their living space. Their complexions ranged from pink to brown, one of them pale as cream; their genetic stock, Blackbear knew, included sperm and ova from all worlds of the Free Fold, even Bronze Sky. They wore Valan talaris with long patterned trains, now bundled up by pairs of “trainsweeps.” Trainsweeps were beetlelike servos, with their six legs poking out beneath their polished shells, scurrying behind their masters to keep the trains in order. Their Elysian masters did not speak or even smile in greeting; a custom common to cities, Blackbear had learned during his medical training at Founders University. Back in Tumbling Rock, however, in the Caldera Hills, if one failed to recognize a passerby, one immediately said hello to make the acquaintance.

The nearest of the seated Elysians wore a train of unusual length, requiring two pairs of trainsweeps to carry the folds of pale green silk. He must have been at least five hundred years old, therefore; she or he, Blackbear could not tell which, he realized with a shock. A goddess, after all, he decided, much embarrassed, adjusting his turban self-consciously. A “woman,” an Elysian female, though the Elysian word did not connote all that the Clicker “goddess” did. Her hair fell unbraided to her shoulders, and her talar reached to her sandaled feet. The portion of her train that clasped her back was embroidered with butterflies, deep blue heliconians, their long wings marked by red bars and edged with white.

Each of Elysium’s twelve cities took a different butterfly as its emblem; heliconians, for Helicon. Blackbear had forgotten why this was so, but nonetheless he sighed to see something familiar. Bronze Sky, like Valedon and most other inhabited worlds, had been terraformed long ago with stock from ancient Torr. Shora had not; thus the native rafts and seawallowers remained. But the first Elysians had brought butterflies from their terraformed home world.

“And now—trainsweeps and housekeepers on sale,” the servo voice continued. “The very best from Valedon.” Shora’s moon-twin was well known for the manufacture of servos. “All at The Golden Fritillary...” The shop address went beyond his grasp of Elysian.

“They’re selling goddesses,” clicked Raincloud mischievously.

Startled, Blackbear asked, “How’s that?”

“Well, in Urulite, our word ‘goddess’ would translate as ‘domestic property,’ which is what the Elysians have put on sale.” A trilingual pun.

“Well,” said Blackbear, “we’re far from Urulan and its barbarians, thank the Dark One.” Twice as distant as Bronze Sky, Urulan had closed itself to foreign-

ers for two centuries, and allowed few of its own to venture out. Fortunately Raincloud would see no live Urulites in Elysium.

“Urulites aren’t all bad,” she reminded him. Raincloud had studied Urulite with an émigré professor, an escaped slave.

“The good ones leave or die.” Like Shora, Urulan had never been terraformed, but its people were as uncivilized as its plated fourteen-legged carnivores. In an age when most worlds traded freely across the Fold, Urulan’s goddesses were herded like sheep, and their male warriors fought each other with crude nuclear bombs. They even bred gorilla hybrids as slaves—like Raincloud’s old teacher.

Sunflower was tugging insistently at his father’s collar. “Doggie,” clicked the child.

“What’s that, Sunflower?”

“Sunflo’ see Doggie. Sunflo’ fly down. Fly down, see Doggie.”

Blackbear looked down. At the end of the Elysian’s bundled train, one of her six-legged trainsweeps wiggled back and forth slightly. “Sunflower, that’s not a dog, and you can’t fly down now.”

“Sunflo’ fly do-own!”

Raincloud shrugged. “Let him down, why not.”

“Me too!” Hawktalon slid to the ground.

There was no place to run, after all. Blackbear let Sunflower down and watched him toddle off on tiptoe after his sister, both swinging their animal dolls behind them. They inspected the trainsweep, taking in its every move.

Seeing them, apart, in this world of strangeness, Blackbear fought back a wave of anxiety. It was an old fear he had, about losing his child. It must have started years before, at age seven, when he had lost his youngest brother in the swollen river. He barely remembered what his brother looked like, now; whenever he recalled the incident, or dreamed it, it was Sunflower he saw in his arms.

No children. Those Elysians with their unburdened shoulders and smooth complexions, yet they might be eighty, or eight hundred...

Of course, there were Elysian children, Blackbear reminded himself. Raised in the artificial wombs of the *shon*, seeded from the best imported genetic stock, just enough children were born to offset mortality by accident and rare disease. Just enough to fill the jobs the city needed. But not enough for each one to carry one.

“Transit node, Octant Six,” said the voice. “Prepare to disembark.”

The vesicle had fused to several more vesicles by now, including one that descended from above and had to lower its occupants onto the platform. It had formed itself into a great length of sausage. After some minutes, its rate of flow lessened. Out of the translucent fluid ahead there appeared a white wall, into which the vesicle merged and opened. The Windclan family gathered up their bags and stepped out.

They entered a vast pulsating cavern. Here, vesicles fused to the cavern, while elsewhere new vesicles pinched off, flowing down other branches of the reticulum. The ceiling played a lightshow of butterflies, their long golden wings sporting black spots; another heliconian variant, he guessed. Below thronged the Elysians, their hair neither braided nor bound up in turbans, their trains extending back several meters to their trainsweeps. Countless servos mingled about, tall loud-spoken ones vending drinks and sweets, broad flat ones offering

transport, disconcerting little insectlike ones quietly vacuuming the spotless floor. Even overhead, little bell-tinkling hovercraft glided by. And still, not a child to be seen....

It was not just that in the Caldera Hills, the fertile slopes and endless forests needed many hands for harvest, and children were the growth industry of a world with a dozen empty continents to populate, facing floods, fires and landslides along the way. Beyond that—

What was an adult without children? How could one even begin a conversation, without presenting one's offspring or younger sib? Among Clickers, even children presented their dolls. Could these Elysians *feel*? Could they care about others? Was eternal youth worth the price?

Blackbear thought of his father with prostate trouble, and his last patient, the elderly woman from the next town whom he had treated for kidney failure just before he left home. *Why was aging linked to fertility?* Blackbear hoped soon to learn. The Fertility Project could change everything. Everyone might then have ageless children of their own. It was too late for Hawkton and Sunflower, he thought with a pang, but then he and his goddess expected another six or seven children.

From Raincloud's back, Hawkton exclaimed, "Oh, look who's here!"

The trainsweep had left its master and followed behind them. Astonished, Blackbear stared at its polished silver surface, which reflected splotches of gold from the ceiling butterflies.

Raincloud glared at her daughter. "It's the one you were pestering."

"Oh Goddess," exclaimed Blackbear, his stomach in knots. "What if someone thinks we stole it?"

"We *didn't*, Dad." Hawkton was indignant. "Go away, bad Doggie," she told the trainsweep, but her cheerful tone belied her words.

Raincloud said, "We'll leave it at 'lost and found,' somewhere. Servo?" she called. "Where's that damned servo voice when we need it?"

He winced, wishing she would watch her language in front of the little boy.

Just then, Sunflower half slid off his shoulder and leaned toward a vendor, a servo shaped like a lamppost attached to a tray of scooped sweets. "Ice cream. Sunflo' hungry."

"No," said Blackbear. "No ice cream, that's that." Wherever was that Elysian to meet them, he wondered.

The child tensed ominously. His eyebrows wrinkled, and the corners of his mouth pulled down. Then he let out a wail that caused heads to turn.

Blackbear hurriedly brought him down and rocked him in his arms, but it was no use. Sunflower screamed and flailed his limbs in all directions.

"Sh-sh." Hawkton covered her ears.

Raincloud was searching around. "Try to spot an 'information vendor.' They look like—"

A ringing bell sounded overhead. It was an airborne hovercraft. The hovercraft landed right in front of Blackbear. It spouted an Elysian phrase which he did not catch. Two servos emerged, emergency lights blinking around their heads.

"Please lay patient on the floor, head raised." A stocky machine, about as tall as Hawkton, spoke in the soothing tones of a flight attendant. "Some hyperventilation, we see."

The other servo, shaped more like a lamppost, extended two long tentacles snaking around the child in Blackbear's arms.

"No," he shouted, adding in Click-click, "get off, by the Goddess!" He bent at the knees, his left foot slid back, then he twisted the grasping servo over in a somersault. *Rei-gi* aimed for gentle disengagement.

"Do not damage City property," the lamppost intoned as it rearranged itself. "A fine may be charged."

The stocky servo observed, "The child is foreign, a defective. We are not equipped to treat defectives. We must call reinforcements. Meanwhile, please lay patient on the floor."

"Nonsense," snapped Raincloud. "We'll put *you* on the floor." Raincloud had earned a black-belt, as did all goddesses, several levels higher than that permitted men. "Defective, indeed," she muttered, her eyes dark as those of the six-armed Goddess of the Hills.

"*Hai!*" Hawkton swung her hands up in a practice move.

"Pardon me..." An Elysian man stood nearby. "Doctor Windclan, I presume?"

The childless man wore a talar of tawny brown, almost like the sky of Bronze Sky. His train had a border of what looked like autumn leaves, unlike the gaudy butterflies of the other Elysians. Tall for an Elysian, he still had to look up to Blackbear's face. His complexion was smooth as a baby's, yet his impeccable grooming and composure marked his maturity.

"Yes?" said Blackbear hopefully.

With a slight bow, the man added, "I am Alin *Anaeshon*, mate of Tulle *Meryllishon*. Meeting you is my highest duty; my mate has told me so much about you."

Of course, Blackbear recalled. The Director's "mate" would have to meet him first, an Elysian custom. The same would be true for Raincloud's supervisor, and for any other Elysian they had to meet.

Raincloud nudged him, whispering a phrase in his ear. Blackbear nodded stiffly; it was hard to bow, with the child on his neck. He returned the formal phrase. "My mate Raincloud will hear glowing reports of you." He hoped his accent was not too bad. The word "mate" still bothered him; it could mean either goddess or consort.

"Such an honor," said Alin. "And your... little friend; has he received proper care?"

The child was still sobbing on and off.

Blackbear said, "Let me present Sunflower, my..."

"... *shonling*," prompted Raincloud.

"And here's Fruitbat," clicked Hawkton, extending her stuffed animal.

Sunflower buried his face in his father's shoulder, but held out Wolfcub by its tail.

"The defective was hyperventilating," insisted the servo. "The foreigners obstructed our care. Reinforcements will arrive."

Sure enough, a second hovercraft was settling beside the first.

"Your training is defective," Alin calmly told the servo. "First, foreigners require consent for treatment. Second, the patient is clearly a *shonling*."

The servos immediately drew back. "He is not registered with any *shon*," said one. The lamppost-type added, "Please report our defect to Service Sector Two-seven-twenty."

Immediately the servos reentered their hovercraft and took off. Sunflower was calmer now, just sniffing at intervals. "Bird," he clicked, eyeing the departing hovercraft. "Bird fly away."

"Well." Alin smiled slightly. "Sorry, the medics were only trying to help. If you register your child with the *Helishon*, you'll have no more trouble." The *Helishon* was the main nursery-womb of Helicon.

"We plan to register," said Blackbear. "But we've only just arrived."

"I say..." Alin was looking past Blackbear to something behind him in the street.

Blackbear turned. There was the runaway trainsweep still, behind him now, as if carrying an invisible train. His heart sank again. "It followed us out of the vesicle," he explained, much embarrassed.

Alin gave a peal of laughter, like a delighted child; for the first time, the Elysian seemed to come alive as a real person. "I expected you in native dress, but—a trainsweep without a train? Tulle will love it!" His look of gravity returned. "Never mind; its network must have crossed connections and oriented to you by mistake. Just look up its owner and give his mate a call."

Raincloud asked, "Couldn't we just turn it off?"

Alin shook his head. "It might take a while to retrain. Let's get you to your house, shall we?" He motioned them to follow. Blackbear thought of his long-house on the mountainside, with the goats scampering down to pasture below. "We'll just take the next vesicle, this branch, and tell the servo your address. You'll need rest; we'll get acquainted tomorrow, on the way to the lab. No problem, tomorrow's another Visiting Day for me." The Elysians had a three-day work week, restricted by law. An inefficient way to do business; but then, the immortals could take their time.

Hawktalon clapped her hands. "Oh Daddy, can I go to the lab, too?"

Raincloud answered, "Not tomorrow. You must come with me, to meet important people." Raincloud wanted to show off her firstborn goddess at Foreign Affairs.

"Next week," Blackbear promised. As the long golden train behind Alin passed before him, he suddenly saw that what looked like dead leaves in the border pattern were in fact butterflies after all, anaeans, their crinkled brown wings evolved to resemble litter on the forest floor. Clever camouflage; these butterflies were more than they seemed.

Their Elysian host led them down a "street" that felt more like a tunnel, Blackbear thought. The facades at either side were all shaped like the profile of an hourglass, their foundations curving down into the street while their upper stories arched into the luminous sky-ceiling. The shop windows were wide open, without even mesh screens to keep out insects. Not that he had seen any insects, save for an enormous garden of butterflies; the sight drew his gaze backward as they passed.

"Here's your house," said Alin at last.

Blackbear saw what appeared to be the faint trace of a doorway in the wall before him, at the end of a gently sloping ramp. He gave Alin an uncertain

look, trying to muster up the courage to ask the location of the handle. But before he did so, the center of the door pinched in and molded outward, until a doorway had formed, jambs and all. His toes curled within his shoes.

"You'll get used to nanoplast," Alin assured him. "It always startles foreigners at first. Think of it as a sort of modeling clay inhabited by billions of molecular servos. That's what they told me when I was a *shonling*."

Blackbear smiled despite himself. This Elysian had not forgotten his own childhood, after all his centuries.

"Thanks for your help," said Raincloud. "When should we expect our luggage?" Traveling on Bronze Sky, their luggage had always seemed to end up behind.

Alin paused as if surprised. "Is anything missing?"

Blackbear blinked, then looked inside.

The solid oak dining table, its legs fully assembled, stood in the near room, upon the woolen rug woven by Blackbear's brothers for his wedding. The curtains, which he had sewn to fit the windows back home and expected to have to redo completely, now hung upon windows shaped perfectly to fit. Raincloud's clan portrait, with her three sisters, twelve brothers, and assorted nieces and nephews, and himself beside her, hung right there on the wall. He had packed it away in three layers of wrapping.

Blackbear felt shock and indignation. Who had dared to go through their things?

Hawktalon skipped through the doorway. "Look—it's our house already!"

"Not bad," Raincloud admiringly told the Elysian. "Your people are most considerate."

"Oh, the house took care of everything."

Blackbear's anger subsided. As usual, his goddess was less particular about interiors than he was. He should be grateful, he realized, for packing and unpacking was the one thing that could drive him and Raincloud to snap at each other. Still, as he went inside to look around, he wondered at the lack of privacy. In Tumbling Rock, no stranger would enter a house unasked.

"The Dark One will need a shrine, though." Raincloud had located the figure of the Dark Goddess, standing most inappropriately at the rear of the sitting room. The black glazed figure, about half height, had the traditional six arms of the Goddess: her lower two hands held a baby to the breast; her middle two grasped a fanged snake at its head and tail, its midsection caught in the Dark One's mouth; and her upper two hands lifted overhead in a gesture of the dance, their fingertips aflame.

Alin said, "Just tell your house to push out another room. You've not yet filled your quota."

"Twelve hundred cubic meters is your quota," said a voice. "Your rooms at present total seventy percent of quota."

Blackbear gave a start, and looked around.

"I am your dependable housing unit," said the voice, "manufactured by the Valan House of Chrysolite. If I ever fail you in any way, citizen, please report my defect to..."

Blackbear's mouth fell open, and a chill reached his toes. He thought, *Even our home has a ghost.*

From the doorway, Alin observed, “The holostage should connect right here. Let’s have the news,” he called to the house.

A gossamer shell of light appeared in the sitting room, above the holostage. It formed a man, full-size, wearing a talar with cut stones arrayed across his chest. It was the prime minister of Valedon, Shora’s sister world, standing right there in the Windclans’ home. “The Ministry categorically denies this allegation,” the man’s voice boomed, too loud for comfort; Hawkton clapped her ears. “It is inconceivable that any Valan vessel would violate the recognized space boundary of Urulan, or of any sovereign world. Surely the Free Fold will accept our word, the word of a peace-loving democratic society, over that of a state mired in feudal barbarism—”

“Silence, please,” ordered Raincloud.

The voice ceased, but the speaker remained.

“Valedon used to be feudal enough, a few centuries back,” muttered Raincloud.

A house full of ghosts, thought Blackbear.

The house obligingly tunneled an extra room for the shrine of the Dark One. It also reshaped Hawkton’s bedroom at her impudent request, giving it a domed ceiling like that of the Temple back home. Then it produced their dinner out of a “window” in the kitchen, roasted goat flesh with potatoes, steaming hot, as if by magic. Before Blackbear even looked for a broom, several servos like large cockroaches came out and sucked all of Sunflower’s crumbs off the floor.

It fascinated him, yet annoyed him, too. “Those servos will try to do your braids next,” he grumbled to Raincloud as he undid his turban and shook out his hair, then slid exhausted into their ready-made bed.

“Nonsense. I’d toss them out, first.” Her arms stretched back amongst the braids, and her breasts rose, as beautifully dark as the rich soil of the Hills. Then she reached up and pulled him over on top of her. Suddenly she was as hungry and desirous as the Dark One devouring the snake. They weren’t quite so exhausted after all, Blackbear decided.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, the Windclans were up early for morning prayers to the Dark One. The Goddess Mu, her name too sacred to be uttered, existed in forms infinite in number, smaller than the smallest particle, and ever present. The six-armed form was her favored aspect among humans. Hawkton lighted the beeswax candles before the polished image, under the watchful eye of her mother. The fragrance of the candles helped Blackbear feel more settled. Perhaps the hand of the Dark One would protect them, even here, so many light-years out from the Hills.

After prayers came *rei-gi*. The Dark One forbade all instruments of death, but the defensive art of *rei-gi* helped ward off highwaymen and starving gold miners on the frontier. The main principle of *rei-gi* was to apply a small force, precisely timed, to deflect an attacker's thrust and tumble him down.

The house obligingly tucked their furniture into its walls, and Blackbear spread out the mat. The living room was just long enough for one good tumble over the shoulder, ending with a resounding thump of the foot. After the tumbles, over and over, they practiced throws and escapes. Hawktaion was already good enough to toss Blackbear overhead when he caught her from behind, the "Tumbling Rock" move, which gave its name to their home village. Even Sunflower could squiggle out from his mother's arms when she held him up.

Since *rei-gi* was designed especially for people carrying children, Blackbear and Raincloud practiced with a twenty-pound sack of beans strapped to the lower back. Hawktaion practiced, too, with a smaller sack. Then Raincloud sat Sunflower behind her hips, in a leather harness designed to protect his head. He laughed with delight as she sparred, unaware of the meticulous training required to keep him safe.

At last Raincloud set out with Hawktaion to meet the mate of the Sub-Sub-guardian, her supervisor at the Nucleus. "Look, Mum," exclaimed Hawktaion as she stepped out the door. "There's Doggie!"

"There's Doggie!" echoed Sunflower, running outside in his bare feet.

Sure enough, the runaway trainsweep was still there. It had waited all night outside. It was no longer moving, though.

Raincloud frowned. "Didn't you report it last night, dear?"

"I told the 'house'" said Blackbear, exasperated. "I hope its owner claims it today."

"I'm sure they will. At least its power has run down, so it'll stay put."

"Excuse me, Citizen," spoke the house; Blackbear gave a start. "This trainsweep has nearly exhausted its reserve. If it goes out completely, it will require costly retraining."

"It obviously needs retraining already," Blackbear muttered.

"Very well, Citizen, that can be arranged—"

"Never mind," he interrupted, shying at "costly." "How do I..." His vocabulary failed.

"Recharge it," completed Raincloud.

An extension cord snaked out of the house and connected to the trainsweep for half a minute. The little servo promptly woke up and jiggled toward them, to Sunflower's delight. Blackbear felt as foolish as if he had just fed milk to a stray cat.

"You'll have to take it inside," said Raincloud, "so it won't follow us all the way to the Nucleus."

Hawktaion waved good-bye, walking alongside her mother—a significant concession, Blackbear noted.

With a sigh, Blackbear shooed the trainsweep inside. As it turned out, the little servo kept the two-year-old's attention while Blackbear spent an hour rearranging furniture and rediscovering packed clothing. He was anxious enough to get started at the Fertility Lab, but he had no idea when the Director would deign to see him. Whatever was her mate Alin to "report" about him? This Elysian social ritual was trying.

“Good morning, Blackbear,” called Alin’s voice, apparently from the sitting room. “Are you there?”

Disconcerted, Blackbear hurried over. There stood the “ghost” of Alin *Anaeshon* with his train of dead-leaf butterflies, in a column of light upon the holostage where the Valan minister had harangued them the day before.

“I hope you slept well, your first night in Helicon? It will be my highest duty to introduce you today. Tulle wants to show you an exciting discovery in heart development.”

“Thanks,” said Blackbear, collecting himself. This holostage must take incoming calls, like the visiphones in Founders City. “I am eager to get started—”

“Come along, then,” said Alin, “and meet me at the swallowtail garden just outside Science Park.”

Alin’s train made a graceful arc as he swept around, his sandals tapping quietly, their soles curved up in front of the toes. As he shrank away in the distance, the image of his surroundings remained in the column of light. There were tall trees, beautifully sculpted, and what seemed to be thousands of butterflies flitting about them. The sight caught Blackbear’s heart, despite his eagerness to get to work.

A discovery in immortal heart development, that did sound exciting. He quickly packed Sunflower’s diaper bag, reminding himself it was about time for potty training. Then he carried the child out the door, managing to keep the trainsweep inside before the door closed. A sort of squeaking sound emanated from inside; servos squeaked like that, now and then.

Blackbear navigated the street-tunnels between the concave facades, and then the vesicles of the transit reticulum. He could appreciate the “cellular” structure of the city, with its membranelike network of channels, culminating in the central Nucleus. The founders of Helicon, who had created the ageless Elysians, had been doctors from the planet Helix, come to learn molecular biology from the Sharer lifeshapers. The Heliconian Doctors, like their Sharer hosts, had shaped Elysium through biology; and yet, they went much farther. No Sharer could have dreamed of nanoplast.

The avenue leading up to Science Park was wider and taller than the residential street. Upon the radiant skylight giant birds of paradise alternated with the blue shapes of heliconian butterflies. Below, the Elysians passed with their trains like flowing streamers. On a shop windowsill, a medical helicopter set down, bells ringing, and a couple of servos scrambled out. Blackbear wondered who was getting “treated” this time. No Elysian need call a doctor a day’s journey off across the mountain.

A butterfly dipped before him, a large yellow swallowtail with black ribs and rows of blue and red spots. It hovered, then fluttered off ahead. As he walked, there came another, then another.

On his shoulders, Sunflower tried to raise himself higher. “What that, Daddy?”

“That’s a butterfly, Sunny.”

“But-ter-fly,” Sunflower repeated carefully.

Trees rose before him, right up to the sky-ceiling, covered with shimmering butterflies. The scent of blossoms, where the insects sipped nectar, was compelling. The little black-lined tails of the nearer ones seemed to wink at him.

Closer, one could see the fat orange-stalked caterpillars devouring the leaves; the trees must require special care.

Beneath the trees, Elysians stood or sat upon crescent-shaped benches of nanoplast. A few conversed quietly, but most simply stared or meditated, seeming lost in thought, as they viewed the butterflies. "Butterfly viewing." They almost seemed to be praying. Did Elysians have any sense of worship? The Sharers worshiped their entire ocean as a Goddess. Clickers served the Dark One; but could She reach here, across the light years, Blackbear wondered uneasily.

He caught sight of Alin at last, staring up at the trees. Alin wore a talar of pale green, bordered again with anaeon leafwings. His train and trainsweeps were missing. At first he did not quite see Blackbear; then he looked up, as if emerging from a dream. "I still wonder, what it would have been like," Alin said in a low voice. "I had a chance, you know, to visit Helix...."

Blackbear blinked at him. The planet Helix had been destroyed, nine centuries before.

Alin's gaze sharpened. "Excuse me, Doctor Windclan. I trust you slept well, your first night in Helicon? Do you enjoy the garden? The swallowtails are my favorite, I must confess. In Helicon, of course, heliconians are favored. They're the longest lived of the lepidoptera, and the original emblem of our people. 'Elysian' is an old misreading of 'Helishon.'" He smiled apologetically. "Words interest me. I'm a *logen*, after all."

A *logen* was a sort of public philosopher. The *logens*, Raincloud said, were inspired by the "wordweavers" of *The Web*, a Sharer classic.

Sunflower dug a foot into Blackbear's chest. Wincing, Blackbear gave in and let the child down to toddle off.

"Is your *shonling* registered, now?" Alin asked, his gaze following the child curiously.

Blackbear nodded. "The house took care of it." The house seemed to know everything, serving almost as a surrogate family. With a pang, he suddenly missed all his brothers and sisters again. It was more than he could bear; even the secret of immortality might not be worth a year of loneliness.

"And you gave birth to him yourself."

"Not myself." Blackbear chuckled. "The 'goddess' gives birth; the man nurtures."

"Of course, I've seen Tulle's capuchins give birth. Tulle raises all sorts of rare creatures from dead worlds, in her preserve in Meryllion. Still, that would be something to give birth to a human child, however defective."

Blackbear frowned. His toddler was considered "defective" here because he would age and die. "Are Elysians never born defective?" he asked suddenly. "Does the embryo treatment 'take' every time?" Medicine was rarely perfect.

"Ninety percent. The rest are unbalanced, somehow; they die of premature aging, within the first year. Much of Tulle's research aims to reduce that. But the embryo treatment is amazingly efficient, when you think of it, all the thousand-odd genes to be modified within a single fertilized egg."

Ninety percent... One in ten infants died? The idea shook him. He must have seen that figure before, but somehow it had not sunk in.

Alin eyed him quizzically, and Blackbear realized he had missed the Elysian's last remark. "Excuse me?"

“Just a suggestion. Every *shon* has a visitor’s program, to teach our children cultural diversity. They’d be delighted to accept yours for a year or two. Think of it: the best education in the Free Fold.”

Blackbear thought of it, and he nearly passed out. Just to imagine Sunflower out of sight was impossible. “No thanks,” he forced himself to say. How could he ever explain to this perplexing immortal? Amongst the turbulent Caldera Hills, when any moment might be one’s last, it was a comfort to know that one’s last would always be spent in the arms of those one loved.

“Won’t you tell me about yourself?” Alin gestured toward one of the half-moon-shaped benches, near the pavilion. A servo with a tray came out, bringing tea and delicacies shaped in extravagant forms of birds and ocean creatures. “Tulle will want to know all about you. Tell me, Blackbear, what do you do for excitement, on your world?”

How long would Tulle’s mate keep him here, he wondered. “Excitement?” he muttered vaguely. “Three volcanoes overlook Tumbling Rock, one extinct, but one never knows. We have earthquakes, about once a month. We all run outside and try to guess how many houses will stay up.”

“You’re an outdoorsman! You’ll get along with the L’liite student in Tulle’s lab; he actually lives *outside*, on a raft on the ocean,” Alin said with a slight shudder. “Tulle and I rarely leave the cities. It’s too much bother, with all the medics you have to take along.”

A L’liite student—then he would not be the only foreigner in the lab, Blackbear thought with relief. L’li was the planet from whence the first Clickers had emigrated, two centuries ago, when Bronze Sky was terraformed and settled.

“Your mate,” Alin added, “is she an outdoorsman, too?”

Blackbear was trying to locate Sunflower, who was exploring beneath the next table. This garden had no children’s corner. “Raincloud serves the *Dark Goddess* at the Temple. She has borne two children. She is fluent in five languages,” he concluded with a touch of pride.

“She’s the Urulite translator, yes?” Alin sipped his tea. “Urulite experts are scarce.”

“Yes. The Prime Guardian recruited her, but now she’s only to work for a Sub-Subguardian.” The Prime Guardian chaired the Guard of Twelve, representing Elysium’s twelve cities.

“You mean Sub-Subguardian Verid *Anaeashon*? Well, better a rising star than a setting one.”

That was a thought. He would tell Raincloud her supervisor was called a “rising star.”

Sunflower finally gave up trying to catch a butterfly and tiptoed back to his father. “Read book,” he clicked, his hands leaving damp marks on Blackbear’s shirt. “Read book *now*.”

Alin watched curiously. “The child makes such delightful noises.”

“That is our language,” Blackbear explained self-consciously. “Click-click is spoken only by our people.” Clickers had been a rural religious minority on L’li; they remained a minority on Bronze Sky.

Sunflower climbed up his father’s leg and settled himself in his lap. “Book, *now*.”

Alin leaned forward confidentially. “Now that we know each other better,” the *logen* said, “tell me something; I’ve always wanted to ask a ‘parent’ of children.”

“Yes?”

“What do you think of compassion?”

His mouth fell open. “Compassion” was an Elysian word he vaguely recalled from the lexicon.

“You know what *The Web* teaches, about compassion,” Alin went on. “Of course nowadays, different readers teach differently; but *The Web* itself speaks plainly, I think. Do you believe compassion is a virtue, or is it a form of selfishness, in fact the deadliest of all desires?”

Blackbear had never read the Sharer classic, although of course Raincloud had. Maybe he had better, if these Elysians made such a deal of it. Why this riddle game—would they never let him get to work? Meanwhile, Sunflower was squirming insistently, and Blackbear caught a distinctive odor from his diaper. “Please excuse me.”

He escaped to a nearby pavilion, where he changed the child’s diaper and, to make up for the lack of storybooks, recounted the folktale about the rabbit who longed for wings.

When they emerged, a hovercraft had set down in the garden, and a couple of servo medics were attending someone. People had gathered round to look, talking excitedly. Alin stood at a more respectful distance. “He slipped and twisted an ankle,” Alin explained. “The medics want to do a scan on it, to make sure it’s okay. Only two legs to last a millennium.”

“Or longer,” Blackbear graciously responded. “For the ‘immortals,’ who knows?”

Alin’s look changed, and for a moment his face darkened. “The oldest of us has barely reached a thousand. Even ten thousand years would be just a speck of time.”

Taken aback, Blackbear tried to frame an apology; but the Elysian had already regained his composure. “Let’s be going, shall we? Ordinarily, I entertain Tulle’s students for two days, but I know foreigners are always anxious to get started.” Alin stopped at the pavilion for his train of leaf-winged butterflies which he had left there with those of the other Elysians. His own four train-sweeps recognized him instantly, springing up and scurrying out behind him.

They strode down the cavernous street-tunnel, coming at last to Science Park, the oldest laboratory in Elysium, the birthplace of immortality. A long, sloping ramp curved around, melding into the concave facade. Nowhere in Elysium had Blackbear seen a stairway; with good reason, he realized. Alin’s train swung neatly around the ramp as he ascended, kept in order by his trainsweeps.

At the top of the ramp, a sheer face of marble stood before them. There was no sign of an entrance, save for an arch of illuminated inscription, whose sense Blackbear tried to puzzle out. Something like, *Where learning is shared, the waters break through...* Perhaps that was, *the waterfall breaks through the cataract.*

Beneath the inscription a cleft formed in the “marble,” like an embryonic cell dividing in two. The cleft molded itself out into a doorway, a fancy one with fluted trim and an ornamental arch.

“Door, Daddy, door.” Sunflower bounced happily on his shoulders. A magic doorway was no stranger for him than anything else in life.

“Yes, a door,” said Blackbear. “But don’t fly down, now,” he warned the child.

A column of warm air met his face, like a summer wind except for a faint medicinal odor. Elysian interiors were kept too warm for Blackbear’s taste. Alin removed his train for the servo arm which slithered unnervingly out from the wall. The walls of the hallway were plain, save for panels of blinking lights that made Sunflower stretch out a hand and cluck with interest.

From the ceiling, positioned as if to greet all who entered, hung a holographic display. It showed an animal, like a transparent snake with its hollow gut tube visible, undulating sinusoidally. The image must be magnified, for only a microscopic organism would look so transparent. A worm, a nematode perhaps; he could just distinguish the individual cells of its intestine. The worm traced an S , over and over again.

A female Elysian approached: at last, the Director, Tulle Meryllishon. More than five hundred years old, with the figure of an adolescent, her long blond hair hung straight as a waterfall to her shoulders, where a single clasp at her right held up her loose-fitting gown. The border of her talar flashed a pair of metalmarks, pink wings with metallic black edges.

Up the talar scampered a live monkey, a capuchin with its hood of black fur. Reaching the Director’s shoulder, the capuchin twined its tail and blinked at Blackbear.

Alin bowed to his mate. “My duty is fulfilled. Doctor Windclan meets our highest expectations.”

“Yes, yes, thanks,” Tulle replied, bowing with a smile. “I shall call on your mate at the earliest opportunity, Blackbear.” She followed his gaze to the display of the magnified worm. “Do you recognize our friend up there? *Caenorhabditis elegans*, the first organism in which a gene for aging and fertility was discovered. This specimen was a mutant which lived twice as long as wild-type, but produced only a fifth as many eggs. The mutant gene was known on Torr, in the pre-interstellar era. Today, we know a thousand such genes—in humans. And yet...” She looked back over her shoulder.

A man and a goddess were approaching, too tall and large-boned to be Elysian. “Here are the people who really run the lab,” Tulle explained. “Our students, Onyx and Draeg. The Elysian students will send their mates to see you tomorrow.”

Draeg was the L’liite “outdoorsman” Alin had mentioned. A tall fellow with unruly auburn hair, well developed in the shoulders, Draeg wore a rough knee-length tunic, his legs bare. He would have made a scandal in Tumbling Rock, in front of the goddesses; what if one demanded his favors?

Unconcerned, Draeg grinned and patted Sunflower on the head. “That’s some kid you’ve got, Brother,” he said in L’liite, a language Blackbear knew well. Bronze Skyans all spoke L’liite, for most of their ancestors had emigrated from crowded L’li.

“A sweetheart,” agreed Onyx, the senior student, a goddess from Valedon. She raised a hand to touch Sunflower, who in turn reached for the flashing red stone hung at her neck. Her ringers were webbed in between; Blackbear tried not to stare, intrigued though he was by this sign of Sharer ancestry. Inter-marriage between the twin worlds must be common. “Watch out, little imp,” Onyx told Sunflower, “or Tulle will nab you for the Preserve.”

“Hey, don’t scare him off,” Draeg protested. “Just when we need the help.”

“Of course not.” Onyx touched his arm. “I’ve been here the longest; any machines you need to get working, just ask.”

Blackbear smiled bravely.

“Come along,” beckoned Tulle, “we must show you Draeg’s latest discovery. You recall the *heartless* gene? This new *heartless* mutant develops an ageless heart, yet it makes fertile gonads, too.”

The first *heartless* mutants had failed to develop hearts, but this one must be a subtler change. And the secondary effect on the gonads was most interesting. Developmental genes rarely had a single function; rather, they acted on different body parts at different stages.

“I can’t wait to get started,” Blackbear told the Director as they walked down the corridor, passing doors that appeared and disappeared disconcertingly. “Must I really only work three days a week?” The Elysian “Right of Visitation,” which restricted the work week, seemed a pointless hindrance.

Tulle laughed, as if he had told a good joke.

“As a foreigner,” Onyx explained, “you can get an extra work day if you cite ‘religious law.’ It does help pay the bills.”

Draeg intoned, “We are all most religious, around here.”

Onyx gave a low chuckle. “The cost of living’s notorious in Helicon. But Foreign Affairs set you up, didn’t they?”

At that moment Sunflower was attempting to fly down from his shoulder and enter a door that had just appeared. Fortunately, the door turned out to be their destination at last.

The room contained a simple holostage without control panels. “The servo simulates development of the embryo,” Tulle told him. “Most longevity genes also play key roles in early development—and *heartless* is no exception.”

“Lights down,” ordered Draeg. The room darkened. “It’ll work this time, you’ll see.”

“The central servo came back with a brand new program,” said Onyx. “It had better work.”

“That new program’s just what I’m afraid of.” Draeg barked some more commands.

An image appeared, fully dimensional, about one meter tall, of a human embryo. The squarish bulb of a head was tucked under, while the limbless back section with its track of somites curled upward, ending in a pointed tail. Through the bulge of the heart, blood pulsed rhythmically.

He watched as if transfixed. The detail was breathtaking, clear enough for him to count the somites. About six or seven weeks, he guessed; the living embryo would be smaller than a fingernail.

“Let’s look at the heart,” said Tulle. “Focus in.”

Draeg spoke again to the servo. The bulging heart grew larger until it filled the stage. Its twisted tube of tissue had already ballooned into ventricles and auricles.

Tulle explained, “We can test any model by simulation. We can mix and match different alleles for each gene, and see what the model predicts. This model predicts both an ageless heart and fertile germ cells.”

Blackbear nodded. “How can you tell?”

"You can't, at this level," said Draeg. "You have to go subcellular." He addressed the holostage again, this time interrupted by Onyx.

"I don't think you want to do that," Onyx warned. "If I were you, I'd try..." Blackbear was lost.

The image wavered and shuddered. Then it burst into a snow of light. The room went completely dark.

"Damn. *Reset*, will you?" came Draeg's voice. "I said, *reset*."

A whimper, then a sob, came from Sunflower. Then the child broke down altogether. "Light out," he sobbed. "*Light!*"

Blackbear took the child down and tried to comfort him. The door reappeared, filling the room with light from the corridor. Still, it was no use; the child had had a long day. He had missed his nap, Blackbear realized.

"You must have overloaded the program," Onyx was telling Draeg over Sunflower's screaming.

"But that's what we sent it out to fix," said Draeg.

"Sh," said Tulle with a stern wave of her hand. "The *shonling*—can't you see he's in trouble?"

Sunflower was still racked with sobs, his little chest heaving in and out. "Poor dear," agreed Onyx, patting his shoulder.

From outside, bells rang. A panel opened in the wall, and the medic hovercraft appeared.

Blackbear's mouth fell open, and he held the child close. "It's all right," he exclaimed. "We don't need any 'care.'"

Tulle eyed him closely, then she nodded. "It's all right, off with you," she called out to the emerging servos.

"Get lost, metalmen!" added Draeg.

"Sh, Draeg," said Onyx.

"They're just machines. Can't I get out some frustration?"

"I don't know," said Onyx uneasily. "Those servos make me wonder sometimes."

The medics had left by then, and Sunflower was rocking to sleep in Blackbear's arms.

"Machines," muttered Draeg. "You've got to get away from them. That's why I live outside on a Sharer raft. Cheaper, too."

Onyx ran a diagnostic series on the controls, calling one unintelligible command after another, with occasional input from Tulle. At last the living fetal image returned.

"It is beautiful," Blackbear said at last. "Where do you take it next?"

"We'll test our model *in vivo*," said Tulle at last. "Not in humans; not just yet."

Onyx said, "We'll test it in the simian hybrid first. The Elysian students culture the simian embryos. You'll meet them tomorrow."

Draeg frowned fiercely and looked away. Of course, Blackbear thought, there would have to be testing in humans.

CHAPTER 3

It was well past six when Blackbear got home. The door to the apartment oozed open at the sight of him. With a sigh he swung Sunflower down; thumb in mouth, the child curled up on the floor, half asleep. The imprisoned trainsweep scurried over, but for once the child took no notice.

A column of light remained above the holostage, just as before he had left that morning.

“Raincloud?”

No one answered. Raincloud and Hawkton must still be out. Why would the holostage be on? It still displayed the butterfly garden where Alin had called. “Goddess—did I leave it running all day? House,” he called in Elysian, “why didn’t you turn that off when we left?”

“If I failed to hear your request, Citizen, please report my defect to—”

“Never mind. Please turn it off, now. How many credits did it cost?”

The holostage went dark. “No cost.”

That was right; he had received the call from Alin. Relieved, he took a step toward the kitchen.

The sitting room—something had changed. The far wall, where Blackbear had removed the figure of the Dark One, now contained a wide blank panel with a frame that reached from floor to ceiling. What was this? It was unlike Raincloud to redecorate.

As he moved closer, the panel came to life with an ocean scene. Great white-tipped waves rolled in the distance, and the roar of the spray shook his feet. The image was so designed that as he moved, the view in the “window” moved with him, just like a real ocean in the distance outside a window.

“Greetings,” spoke the window. “I am a climate window, a greeting-gift from Citizen Alin *Anaeashon*, mate of Citizen Tulle *Meryllishon*. Please choose your view. I have many selections: sunrise and sunset, of twenty types; snow-capped mountains, sunlit or rain, eighteen varieties; plains with stampeding herds of ten different exotic animals; volcanoes, gentle or explosive...”

Blackbear shook his head in amazement, as the list droned on with the rolling waves.

“... Citizen Alin *Anaeashon* hopes that I prove pleasing to an outdoorsman like yourself. If not, I may be returned or exchanged at *The Golden Fritillary* for six hundred credits. Please choose your view.”

A touching gesture, thought Blackbear, recalling Tulle’s mate with some warmth. But what if he had to reciprocate? Where would he get that kind of cash?

He returned to the kitchen. “Sunflower, what do you want for dinner?”

“Grill-cheese,” came a sleepy voice.

The “kitchen,” too, was a talking window where things appeared—real food, at least. If only the “climate window” in the sitting room could provide real mountain grass, too, he would feel much better.

“House?” he called. “May we please have two servings of grilled cheese?” He could have had himself a good steak, he realized, but he was too tired to

bother changing the order. Raincloud still had not come home; she would be cross from traveling so late past dinner.

“What kind of cheese, Citizen?”

“Goat cheese.”

“We have two hundred varieties of goat cheese, from five different planets—”

“Just plain goat cheese.” He waved his hand aimlessly. “The local brand. Same for the bread.” He frowned to himself. Where would the housing unit store two hundred varieties of goat cheese?

“Local butter, too?”

The climate window in the sitting room was talking again, asking Sunflower to choose a view. Sunflower watched mesmerized, tracing the surface of the ocean waves with his right hand. His other hand pulled absently at his left ear.

The child was prone to infections of the middle ear. Concerned, Blackbear pulled out his otoscope and peered inside both of Sunflower’s ears. Each ear contained a healthy pink cavern of little hairs, surrounding the pearly disk of the eardrum.

“A visitor, Citizen,” intoned the house.

Blackbear jumped up and went to the door. There stood a blond goddess in a pink gown and train bordered with swallowtails; a *Papilishon*. Behind her, the sky-ceiling had darkened. Blackbear wished he had checked first; it was unwise to be seen with a strange goddess after dark.

“Greetings,” she said. “My apologies; I’ve come at last for my mate’s trainsweep. Thanks so much for reporting it.”

The runaway trainsweep was still there, all right, just inside the sitting room. It immediately scurried back to the bedrooms.

Blackbear breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m so sorry for the trouble; I did my best, you know—”

“Oh, no, the fault is ours entirely. We ordered a new brand of trainsweeps; we should have stuck with the Chrysolite House as usual. Is there anything we can do for you? My mate, you know, is a *Helishon* of nine hundred years. He’d love to show you the city; he knows all our history, from the day the Heliconian Doctors landed.”

“Thanks, I’ll remember.” Blackbear realized he had been right at first, after all; the trainsweep’s owner, with the free-flowing hair, had been a man.

Blackbear went and dug out the trainsweep, which he found hiding beneath Sunflower’s bed. Despite himself, he felt sorry for the machine. Was he going crazy? He would never get used to this place.

The Elysian goddess sighed. “I’ll have it retrained.” She bent over and pressed something beneath the machine’s underside. Its gentle humming died. Another trainsweep left her train to come over and hitch the runaway to its back, then returned to its position behind her. She bowed. “My mate will hear glowing reports of you. And remember, if you ever want a tour...” She turned to go, her train sweeping around forming a wide half-moon.

“*Doggie!*” wailed Sunflower from behind his father’s legs. “I want *Doggie!*”

“Sh, dear; dinner must be ready.” But the child was inconsolable. Completely worn out, he would not eat his dinner; it was all Blackbear could do to sing him to sleep in his darkened bedroom. The child’s head nestled on his shoulder, its scent sweeter than perfume. In the darkness thoughts of the day past whirled

in his head, the giant embryo looming in the shadows with its ageless heart. *Where learning is shared, the waterfall breaks through....* This work would be even more exciting than he had hoped.

Footsteps sounded faintly outside the room. Raincloud and Hawkton were home at last. Blackbear gently laid Sunflower in his bed and adjusted a pillow on the floor in case he rolled out, for he had only just switched from the crib.

In the kitchen, Raincloud sat at the table looking tired. Blackbear gave her a good hug and massaged her shoulders. "You must have had quite a day. What can I get for you?"

She shrugged. "How about veal stuffed with mushrooms and water chestnuts." Raincloud had taken advantage of this "kitchen" in no time. How did it ever prepare things so fast? he wondered. It was fine for now, but he hoped she would not be spoiled for his own cooking back home.

"And you?" he asked Hawkton, wrestling her arm.

"Mm—how about chocolate marble cake with ice cream?"

"She's been eating ice cream all day." Raincloud sounded exasperated.

"Ice cream?" Blackbear asked. "At the Nucleus?"

"We never got to the Nucleus."

"Never? What happened?"

"We toured the entertainment district all day with Iras."

Iras Letheshon was the mate of Sub-Subguardian Verid Anaeashon. Verid's mate was not a man but a goddess like herself. Such pairings were common among Elysians, between men as well. Blackbear could see it for goddesses, but he found it hard to imagine a man worshiping another man.

"The circus, the arcade, the swallowtail garden," Raincloud ticked off her fingers. "Iras said the Sub-Subguardian was booked solid all day, with one ambassador or another."

Hawkton wandered off into the sitting room. The climate window introduced itself and commenced its catalogue of views.

Blackbear relayed Raincloud's request for veal to the house, making it a double order. "That's a shame," he sympathized. "These Elysians are a chatty lot. You'd think they've got nothing better to do."

"Iras had plenty to do. She's a loan officer for Bank Helicon; she kept getting calls the whole time, to finance solar power satellites on L'li and servo factories on Valedon. A servo warned her now and then about Visiting Hours."

Blackbear grinned. If Elysium was famous for one thing, it was banking. Where else could you pay back a loan over two centuries? "Well, I'm sure the Sub-Subguardian will see you tomorrow," he said. "Alin called her a 'rising star.'"

Raincloud stared thoughtfully, then nodded. "Iras said the same."

The veal was as good as it smelled. He savored each forkful, thinking that onions and garlic might make it even better next time.

A thunderous roar shook the floor beneath their feet. An earthquake? Blackbear leaped to his feet, and Raincloud ran out to fetch Sunflower to safety.

But there was no "safety," trapped as they were in this sphere of a city. For that matter, how could there be an earthquake?

In the sitting room, the climate window displayed a massive volcanic eruption, complete with chunks blasting out of the mountainside and red lava spray-

ing into the sky. Hawkton had her hands clapped over her ears, jumping with glee, her beads dancing around her head.

“*Quiet,*” he yelled.

The room was silenced. The window display continued its lurid eruptions, giving viewers the unnerving sense of flying in an airplane right overhead. “How dare you, Hawk,” he exclaimed. “You’ll wake your little brother.”

She giggled. “I only did what it told me, Daddy. ‘Please choose your view.’”

Raincloud came in, cradling Sunflower. “That’s not half-bad,” she said, admiring the window. “Does it do earthquakes, too?”

“Earthquakes of ten kinds, Citizen, and three tidal waves,” said the window.

“What a great idea for earthquake drills. We must keep the kids in shape, after all.” She settled in the chair and undid her breastflap for Sunflower to nurse.

“We can’t keep this gift,” Blackbear told her. “It cost six hundred credits. How could we reciprocate?”

“They won’t expect such expense from us. They think we’re dirt poor. Besides, we’ll have to entertain Alin here; he’ll see if you kept it.” She thought it over. “Still, it would dishonor our clan not to reciprocate. I’ll come up with something.”

After Sunflower dozed off, Raincloud beckoned Hawkton to come up for a token sip. Then, looking up at Blackbear, she added mischievously, “Your turn.”

“I’ll have mine later,” he returned with a smile. He was feeling better, settling in; they were still a family, even so far from their clan.

He watched Raincloud soaping her back and arms before bed, a truly divine sight. “I should redo your braids again.”

“Tomorrow, let’s plan on it. You can do Hawkton’s, too. I’ll make sure I get home earlier.” She frowned; something was on her mind. “Blackbear... I think they want me to leave Hawkton home.”

His fingers tightened. “Did they say that?”

“Iras didn’t *say*, but you know, I can read people.” Raincloud got out of the bath, and Blackbear wrapped a towel around her. “Iras kept on talking about her *shon*, and how Hawkton would enjoy it with all their activities.”

He clasped her arms. “I wouldn’t let her near a *shon*.”

Raincloud turned her head and regarded him curiously. “Really? The *shon* is supposed to be a model nursery, not that I believe in nurseries. But one day a week wouldn’t hurt. They enroll foreign visitors free of charge; it’s considered a ‘cultural experience’ for their children.”

“I wouldn’t trust them. All of us foreigners are ‘defective,’ remember.” He paused. “And what about you? How would you get on without her?”

“I went to class alone, when she was little,” Raincloud reminded him. “You couldn’t bear to part with her. You took her to anatomy lab, where she drank formalin one day.”

“Only a taste,” he muttered, wincing at the recollection. “Well, I’ll take her with me again. She wants to see my lab, after all.”

“Are you sure? What will your Director say?”

“Tulle won’t mind. That Science Park is full of foreigners. They adored Sunflower.”

Raincloud nodded. "Elysium runs on cheap foreign labor."

"We'll give it a try."

She flashed him a smile. Still, it saddened him to think of her alone in this bizarre city, without even a friendly little pair of eyes to share the view.

In the morning Raincloud left to meet Iras again, and Blackbear set off for Science Park with both children. Hawkatalon skipped ahead gaily in anticipation.

At the laboratory, Tulle was out for her Visiting Day, showing Alin's colleagues about town, Onyx explained. Onyx and Draeg were delighted to see Hawkatalon, and they offered to put her to work on the spot. "She's a beauty," added Draeg, nudging Blackbear in the arm. "My little sister back home is just her age." Onyx, who as senior student had the best lab space, had already cleared out a place by her desk for Sunflower to play. Draeg had purchased a rattle and a toy servo from a tourist shop.

Blackbear was deeply touched. This place was already feeling like home.

They worked all morning at the embryo program, trying to fix the bug at the cellular level. Onyx kept shouting "I've got it!" and they seemed to make progress, though after two hours the program still overloaded. Draeg swore his head off like an angry goddess. Disconcerted, Blackbear knew that a man would never dare talk like that in Tumbling Rock.

"What do you expect to see inside the mutant cells?" Blackbear asked. "What makes the heart tissue immortal?"

"A new protein appears," Draeg explained. "This protein scavenges oxygen radicals whose damage accumulates over time. It will prevent heart failure up to eight or nine hundred years."

"Eight or nine hundred years? What happens after that?"

"Who knows?" said Onyx. "The *Helishon* itself has only existed a thousand years."

Blackbear nodded. "A thousand years without aging—that sounds immortal, to me."

Draeg and Onyx exchanged glances. Onyx said, "We never say 'immortal,' only 'ageless.' Most Elysians who escape accident will make it to a thousand, but a small percentage won't. Nothing's perfect. And in the future, say, by the year ten thousand, who knows?"

"I see." Blackbear considered this. So the Elysians had their "defectives," too.

Draeg chuckled. "Who do you think pays our salaries?"

"Death pays a good wage,' as the Sharers say," quoted Onyx. "The Guard pays our salaries, of course, to work on longevity. Tulle manages a dozen students, scattered around Science Park. Only the three of us emphasize fertility, an offshoot of her main project. You'll probably look at egg cell development; that's hot right now. The Fertility Project attracts foreign students."

"The Guardians," said Draeg, "are all quincentenarians at least. For them, we're the Longevity Project."

"That's right," she teased, shoving Draeg in the arm, "Draeg just loves those Elysians; wants to help them live longer."

Draeg gave her a dirty look. "As you said, it's all related."

Blackbear smiled. "It's fascinating, but I still find it hard to see why aging and fertility are so inextricable."

Onyx said, "Remember the nematode—long life, fewer eggs? Evolution picks genes that make *more* eggs, *early on*, at the expense of later lifespan. It's inevitable."

"Still..." Blackbear wished he could put into words what troubled him.

"I have a hard time with that one, myself," Onyx admitted. "Ask Tulle."

They broke for coffee in the lounge, where a service window overlooked a small garden of heliconians feeding at passionflowers, their scent filtering in. By the service window, a holostage displayed two Elysians seated within its column of light. One wore the motif of dead-leaf butterflies.

Blackbear stared at the illuminated ghosts. "Say, that's Alin."

Alin was speaking calmly to the other man, who was tall for an Elysian, draped in royal blue heliconians. "Is it not the case that Bank Helicon financed the construction of interstellar missiles for Valedon? And perhaps some of those missiles found their way to Urulan, as well? What will the Sharers say, I wonder."

"We violated no clause of the Sharer treaty," said the man in the blue heliconians.

Alin nodded. "The Sharers would say, 'Let one fleshborer devour another.' Where does that place us, I wonder."

The man looked tight in the face, and his hands gripped the sides of his chair.

At Blackbear's shoulder Onyx explained, "It's a *logathlon*, a sort of trial by words. In public, of course. The defendant is the president of Bank Helicon."

A burst of applause came from an unseen audience. Blackbear remembered that Verid's mate Iras worked for Bank Helicon; Raincloud would be interested.

"The audience will vote in the end," added Onyx.

Draeg looked over. "Those *logens* are all *Anaeashon*. Alin's okay, but some others cause us no end of trouble." He tapped his knuckles on the service window. "Tea for three, metalman."

Onyx frowned and snapped her fingerwebs. "Wait till you get home to L'li and find yourself talking like that to your father."

Draeg laughed. "That will be the day. Where I come from, a man gets respect. You don't take crap from Elysians."

Blackbear wondered at this. He had found Elysians reasonably respectful, in their own odd way. He watched Hawkton approach the window, grasp it with her hands, and pull herself up. "Chocolate marble cake, with ice cream on top," she said in impeccable Elysian.

His mouth opened to speak, but he thought better of it. Raincloud would have to have a talk with the girl; it was better for a goddess to discipline young goddesses.

"Newsbreak," announced the holostage. The scene in the column of light had shifted. "Sharers at Papilion seek to ban motor-driven boats. The underwater noise of the boats drowns out the long-distance sonic communications of their giant starworms...."

Two Elysian students he had not yet met entered the lounge. "Students," of course, might be anywhere up to fiftyish in age; Elysians took their time about

education. Blackbear rose automatically for introductions, but they walked past him, the man skipping to touch the ceiling.

“Good morning, Pirin,” said Onyx.

Pirin bowed with a flourish. “Good morning, Onyx. It is my highest duty to see you, as always. I hope the program for your heart model is running better?”

“Oh, it’s just about there,” Onyx said with a hopeful grin.

“Our new simbrid clone looks very promising,” Pirin offered.

The other student, a goddess, clapped her hands. “We can’t wait to try out your predictions in the simbrid embryo.”

Simbrid, or simian hybrid embryos, were bred from several primate strains to reach a pattern of development which closely matched the human. Any finding from the model program had to be tested in the simbrid before applying it to human embryos.

Pirin told Onyx, “Our mates will be taking the new student to lunch today.” Presumably he meant Blackbear, whom he was unprepared to address until introduced by his mate.

“A good arrangement,” said Onyx. “He will meet them with pleasure.”

The two Elysians went to the window to order tea.

Draeg stood and stretched. “Time’s wasting—let’s have another go at that program before lunch.”

They left the lounge. Onyx’s sandals scraped softly on the nanoplastic floor.

“That Pirin,” muttered Draeg. “Thinks just because he’s a *Helishon* he’s *God’s gift*,” he finished in L’liite.

“Come on, Draeg,” objected Onyx. “They’re just kids, barely out of the *shon*; they take everything seriously. Give ‘em a couple of centuries, they’ll loosen up like Tulle.”

“Pardon me, I haven’t the time.”

“If you’d knock that chip off your shoulder, maybe they’d loosen up sooner. Don’t mind them,” Onyx told Blackbear. “After your lunch with their mates, they’ll be perfectly civil. You see, if you were Elysian, and they spoke to you without introduction by your mate or theirs, it would be the worst possible insult.”

Blackbear nodded. “It’s something like that, in the Hills. If you approach a man without asking his goddess, you might be shunned.”

The L’liite eyed him skeptically. “What sort of man needs the word of a female?”

“It’s for our own protection,” Blackbear assured him. A man who lost his honor might as well leave the Hills forever.

“Protection! Have you no strength of your own?”

“A man is built strong, to carry the children,” Blackbear said. “The ‘goddess’ bears them one at a time; the man carries them all.”

Draeg grinned. “Say, I like that. Blackbear, you’re all right, and your kids are the greatest.” He put a playful armlock around Hawkatalon.

The girl caught Draeg’s hands, while bending her knees slightly. She took a deep bow forward, and Draeg somersaulted over her onto the floor.

“Hawkatalon!” Blackbear cried, adding in Click-click, “You might hurt someone. You will definitely talk with your mother.”

“But Mother taught me to.”

Rubbing his elbow, Draeg scrambled to his feet. He was not at all displeased. "Where'd you learn *that*, you little devil? We've got some sparring to do."

The Elysian students' mates treated Blackbear to a lively luncheon at a nearby pavilion, complete with acrobats who tossed juggling pins across the tables and would have tossed Sunflower, too, if Blackbear had not fetched him back at the last moment. Although the skin of the young Elysians could scarcely be smoother than that of their elders, their youth was unmistakable in their spontaneity and careless laughter; they made Blackbear, with his two children to keep his heart on edge, feel old. Outside, of course, the Elysians were marked by their trains, the length of which increased a meter for each century of life.

Upon his return, Pirin and Lorl greeted him with enthusiasm and pressed upon him several reports of their work, which he stacked in the growing "to read" pile on his new desk. Then Onyx rounded up everyone for a surprise conference with Tulle, who had managed to slip away from her visiting duties for an illicit conference with the lab.

Draeg was worried. "Working on Visiting Day—she could end up in the Palace of Rest for a month."

"That's why we're meeting her outside the lab, at the swallowtail garden," said Onyx.

"The walls have ears. The servos will tattle."

The five of them, along with three other students whom Blackbear did not yet know, met Tulle in the same garden where he had met Alin. Tulle's capuchin scampered to the floor; Hawktalon and Sunflower were soon in hot pursuit. The lab talk flew thick and fast, quite over his head.

"Blackbear?" Tulle was addressing him. "What do you think of the new egg gene? Would the project interest you?"

He swallowed and tried to think of something to say. Draeg observed, "He's only just arrived."

"He's got some good questions, though." Onyx nudged him. "Ask Tulle what you asked us, this morning."

"Well—" He hoped he could frame the question so as not to sound foolish. "I just wondered, why is there such a tight link between fertility and aging? If the Heliconian Doctors were smart enough to beat aging, why couldn't they unlink the functions of fertility?" The answer had to be obvious; he wished he had not asked.

There was silence. Heads turned toward Tulle, but she looked around at the group.

Pirin waved his hand. "The evolutionary link is too fundamental. For example, the *int* gene is needed for spermatogenesis, but it also functions in the central nervous system. The *int* alleles which yield the highest sperm count happen to cause aging of the brain. A thousand genes like that have evolved, enhancing fertility in youth but linked to aging. To reengineer that is as daunting a task as, say, making lungs into gills."

"That's been done, hasn't it?" someone asked. "The Sharers shaped themselves to breathe water. That's why the Heliconian Doctors first came here to learn from them."

“The Sharers did a lot, but not that,” corrected Onyx. “Sharers get some oxygen through their skin, from the microbes that turn them purple; but even they can’t breathe water forever.”

“That doesn’t prove it can’t be done.”

A heated discussion ensued, ending with the students falling silent one by one and looking at Tulle.

Tulle spoke at last, oddly reluctant. “The truth is, we have no clear answer to Blackbear’s question. The records of the Heliconian Doctors who made the first ageless humans were lost after the Fall.”

The Fall of Torr. Once humanity’s birthplace, Torr had been consumed by its own machines. The machine-world then sent its rule to all living words, and death to those who would not obey. When the planet Helix learned to jump the space folds, cheating the speed of light, their first jumpship brought an end to Torr.

But their ship was too late. Ten years after, at near-lightspeed, came Torr’s last ship of death. The Fall of Torr meant the Fall of Helix, too. Thus, Shora’s Heliconians became orphans, amid a chaos of awakened worlds tasting their first freedom.

Onyx shuddered. “I can’t imagine what life was like before the Free Fold.”

“Sure you can,” said Draeg. “Just visit Urulan, and watch them nuke their rebel provinces.”

“But what do *you* think, Tulle?” Onyx persisted. “Why are the ageless infertile? You must have an opinion.”

“My own belief,” Tulle said carefully, “is that the Doctors did not try too hard. They did not deliberately suppress fertility; they didn’t have to, given the natural link with aging.”

Silence again. Lorl nodded slowly. “It’s interesting, you know. Only the reproductive functions are defunct in our bodies, not the sexual ones. That is, we lack wombs and eggs, but our sexual response is normal.”

“Better,” corrected Pirin succinctly. “Males retain the potency we reach at age eighteen.”

At that, Draeg made a crude hand sign at him. “The butterfly stud,” he muttered in L’liite.

Onyx jabbed Draeg with her elbow. “But Tulle,” she objected, “you haven’t said *why* the Heliconian Doctors failed to fix fertility.”

Tulle said, “They believed reproduction belonged to the Republic, state, not the individual.”

“To the *shon*,” corrected Pirin. “The *shons* are independent corporations. They purchase their gene pool from all the planets of the Fold.”

“And each *shon*, through its alumni, elects a Guardian of the Guard of Twelve. The *shons* are the Republic.”

That evening Blackbear got the kids home early enough to order a gourmet dinner and oversee a lesson from Hawkatalon’s correspondence school. He bade Hawkatalon to add up all the goats on each hillside before playing at the climate window again.

“Blackbear?” called Raincloud from the door. “You have to come out and see.”

Raincloud was resplendent in full Elysian regalia down to the sandals, with just enough of a train to require a pair of trainsweeps behind. The background color was bronze yellow, a comforting hue, bordered with butterfly wings of pale yellow with orange-ringed black spots like rows of coins.

"You had to see this outdoors," she said, "before the trainsweeps insist on folding it up. Well? Do you like it?"

He found his voice. "It's—it's fantastic. They give you an extra couple of centuries?" he asked, estimating her train.

"The base length is two meters; anything less would look ridiculous. It's a gift from Iras."

Of course, a gift from the mate of the Sub-Subguardian, just as Tulle's mate had sent the climate window for him. Blackbear shook his head, thinking, their debts were mounting.

"Don't worry," said Raincloud. "I told you, love, I'm working on that. Anyway, Iras said that at the Nucleus, robes and trains are *de rigueur*. She took me to *The Golden Fritillary*, where we got the stuff, then spent the afternoon helping orient the trainsweeps and teaching me how to walk so it doesn't tangle."

Blackbear smiled. "I'll definitely redo your braids tonight. Perhaps I can pick up some of the pattern."

"Thanks. The main thing is," Raincloud explained, "now that I'm dressed 'official,' Iras promised that the Sub-Subguardian will see me tomorrow."

CHAPTER 4

Despite her new Elysian train, Raincloud walked light on her feet, as if the Goddess held her up in Her dancing arms. A ridiculously confining garment for a goddess, she thought, but of course she would not deign to say so. She thought of Nightstorm, her eldest sister, who could wrestle a bear to the ground or pull children out of quake-collapsed buildings. Raincloud would face her own job with equal confidence.

At the entrance to the transit reticulum, three servos awaited her. Their build was the "floor lamp" type, their "lamp" heads bending forward now and then. News reporters again, she sighed.

"Are you the new Urulite translator?"

"Was the Valan freighter really a spy ship?"

"Is it true that Urulan now targets Elysian cities?"

Raincloud shook her head politely, as she had for the past two days. Iras had warned her that any word she spoke might be resynthesized by the less reputable networks. She adjusted her sleeve at the shoulder, glancing backward where her two trainsweeps neatly bundled up her train. These trainsweeps seemed content, not about to run off like the one that had followed her children. She kept expecting to see Hawktales behind her, but of course the girl was on her way to Blackbear's laboratory.

Her heart had skipped a beat to watch the family part from her, *all three of them*. It had been easier before, somehow, when it was just Hawkton going off with Daddy to see his patients while Raincloud completed her exams. She half felt nauseous, as if a new one were just stirring in the womb. It was about time to start one, she thought, although she hated to give up nursing Sunflower. Her sister now had five children, by two husbands.

But here in Elysium, Raincloud's education would bear fruit. In Founders City she had interpreted for Sharers—here, she would meet them on their own ocean. For years she had studied the Urulites—here she would translate their own broadcasts and, perhaps, help promote peace. Peace and freedom, the longings of her old teacher...

Rhun. That was his name, the escaped simian slave who had taught a handful of students at Founders University. Rhun had given her all he knew of Urulan, and more; he introduced her to the Sharer classics, too. He died young, as those of gorilla ancestry often did. Yet despite everything, even the horrors of his own past, Rhun had dreamed that someday Urulan would join the Free Fold.

Within the transit vesicle a nanoplastic seat arose, molding itself to meet Raincloud as she sat. The air inside breathed of floral perfumes, which Elysians wore liberally as if to attract the butterflies. Their trainsweeps emitted an occasional squeaking noise. Iras had told her this squeaking was just a byproduct of the circuitry. If so, it must be a common byproduct; the waiters, the windows, even the hall servo that took the trains at the door, could be heard squeaking softly if one listened. She imagined it was a language, "servo-squeak," and idly tried to puzzle out its sense now and then.

"News, please," she requested.

"Which network?"

"The Anaeon." Anaeon offered the most reliable news.

A Valan jumpship freighter sprang up above the holostage, the one hit by Urulites enroute to L'li.

"The Emperor of Urulan has issued a statement..."

The Emperor's face was never seen in public, but his voice crackled out from the holostage, presumably a broadcast recorded from Urulan. "Death to the Valan thieves and liars!" the voice exclaimed. "And let the Elysian money changers beware. We know all their plans to terraform our world and sell it off to the highest bidder..."

Terraform? How could Elysians terraform Urulan—an inhabited world? This was overblown rhetoric, even for the old Emperor. His threats would only further strain the Free Fold; some would even call for Urulan's destruction. She shook her head. If only people everywhere would learn, as Clickers taught, to leave destruction to the Dark One. Humaneness was for humans.

But a war with Urulan might yet destroy the Fold. And if they ever attacked here... Elysian defenses were strong, but if one in a thousand missiles sneaked through, it would not take much to demolish its twelve cities, pearls floating upon the sea.

Raincloud considered this fact calmly, the same way she would wonder which of the Hills would next erupt to claim its blind sacrifice. Someday, Elysium and L'li and the others would have to look up from their petty squabbles over shared fold-points on the trade routes, and make peace with Urulan.

It was hard to imagine, though, what peace could be made with a nation that battered its own provinces to dust, and mated its own females to apes to produce slaves. A pity, for Urulan's language and ballads were rich, and its landscape, never terraformed, bristled with fourteen-plated carnivores amid forests of giant ferns.

"Now," spoke the sibilant voice-over, "a response from the Prime."

The Prime Guardian, leader of the Guard of Twelve, appeared on the holostage. Across his talar he wore a golden sash, the sign of a Guardian. The sash seemed to glow, almost outshining his person.

"Elysium stands for peace," the Prime declared, his voice filling the vesicle with an unusual resonance. "We will pursue peace with every inhabited world in the Fold, and beyond." Raincloud's Sub-Subguardian worked with the Prime; she wondered what that would be like.

"Raise seat level," ordered an Elysian behind her, without the "please." Servos counted for nothing. Raincloud, though, had been taught that courtesy to inferiors was a sign of goddesshood. She thought it best to maintain the habit, even though the only "inferiors" in Helicon were these machines. Elysians thought they made everyone equal, even man and goddess; but only their machines would call Raincloud "citizen," instead of "foreigner." A childlike people with their endless protocol and their meters of silken butterflies....

Not childlike, she corrected herself. Not at all, she thought again as the vesicle slowed to a halt, preparing to fuse with a longer vesicle that snaked along a deeper branch of the reticulum. As the two vesicles fused, her own seat became a platform which gently melted down into the lower floor, as the "snake" incorporated the smaller one.

"Elysian Fields Boulevard, next, Citizen," reminded the voice.

"Yes, thanks." Iras would meet her there, to take her to the Nucleus.

The vesicle fused to the reticular wall, and the walls melted through. Ahead and behind her, the trainsweeps squeaked softly and moved together, prepared to unfold the trains of their citizens. Raincloud stood, and she followed the Elysian before her as he entered the transit node, his train unfolding and stretching out behind him between the trainsweeps. She felt the tug at her shoulders as her own train did the same. The silken trains took some time to unwind and flow ahead, particularly as most of their wearers were engaged in lively conversation. Elysian transit, she thought, was made inefficient on purpose, to give the passengers ample time for gossip on their way, as if four days a week of visiting could never be enough.

The stark cream white light of the skyvault still disappointed her; if only they would bathe their mornings and evenings a proper red. The people, too, were of mostly white or amber complexion. A rich, dark-blooded planet—that was what Raincloud missed. But she brushed these thoughts aside with a faint condescension for these people who might live for years indoors without experiencing the natural product of her namesake.

There stood Iras *Letheshon* upon the gleaming white pavement, speaking to a hand-sized square box, a portable holostage, probably a call from a client. Iras had long ruddy curls and an upturned nose, the kind of face that would have made freckles outdoors. Her butterflies were cornflower blue, with rows of orange-ringed spots like coins. Her train extended back a good five meters, with two pairs of trainsweeps; a quincentenarian, at least.

"No, *shonsib*," Iras was telling the hand-sized square box, "I assure you, it's quite preposterous. Why, the Sharers won't let us terraform even uninhabited planets, much less Urulan." She raised a hand to wave at Raincloud. "My dear, you carried your train off like a native! Anyone would have thought you were raised in a *shon*."

Inwardly Raincloud shuddered at the thought, but she smiled. "Thank you," said Raincloud. "I hope that I now satisfy the dress code of the Nucleus."

"To the letter. Just remember, don't change pace too fast, lest your retinue can't keep up and your train sag."

Not that it would get dirty if it touched the street, Raincloud thought. Every bit of floor space was kept spotless by little sucking servos that scurried like rats from the gutters. There were no vehicles to spill oil, and certainly no farm animals to deposit dung. Only Elysians passed, with occasional pet birds or monkeys, heading up their trains like silk ribbons floating lengthwise down a river.

"Verid can't wait to see you," Iras assured her. "She has an urgent assignment."

Urgent, indeed, she thought ironically. Iras and Verid were "mates"; the idea still intrigued her. Two men might be lovers, but how a goddess could expect worship from another goddess was hard to see. Raincloud herself thought of men as almost another species, exotic birds who carried hidden beauty in their plumage like peacocks. She adored watching men, especially demure, unworldly men, and wondering what secrets they might unfold. Nightstorm had teased her about taking a second husband, but that was not for her. Blackbear alone was worth more than two.

Iras's holo box called again. A L'liite face appeared, requesting something about a loan. "I'm sorry," said Iras, "I told you, that's the best rate I can quote on a fifty-year term. I'll be back in the office tomorrow..." She smiled apologetically at Raincloud. "I'm up to my neck closing the deal on a fleet of solar satellites the Valans will build for L'li."

L'li's population had swelled to an impoverished twenty billion since the Clickers left. The L'liites badly needed solar energy, microwaved down from the satellites; but how would they ever pay the bill, Raincloud wondered.

"The L'liites are stalling for concessions; I've run up huge fines for my Visiting Day. But the Valans will quietly compensate me. I love dealing with foreigners," she added as if it were a compliment. Unusually ambitious for an Elysian, Iras took a creative attitude toward Visiting Days. A dangerous sport, in a community whose Right of Visiting replaced any notion of "right of privacy."

"Is it true," Raincloud asked, "that the Sharers won't let you terraform?" On Bronze Sky, the Sharer delegates never let Raincloud forget that she inhabited a murdered planet, its ecosphere erased for the sake of human habitation. For two centuries since, Elysium had declined to finance another one. It surprised her to learn that the ocean-dwellers held such influence over interworld affairs.

"It's true," Iras admitted. "We can't finance anything to do with terraforming, at least not directly. Indirectly... well, that's not my department." She shuddered. "It's bad news to mess with Sharers. But really, don't you think L'li will need a new world soon, to resettle their excess billions?"

The traffic of silk paused at an intersection, as a group of *shon* children passed, probably from a tour of the Nucleus. The word *shon* derived from a native Sharer

word for “water cradle,” a bassinet which floated in a pool of water to generate a rocking motion whenever the baby stirred. The children of the *Helishon* wore brightly colored pantaloons that ballooned at the wrists and ankles, with shiny slippers that tapered to a point and curled back. Trainless until age twenty-one, they skipped and cartwheeled across the street, for all the world like a troupe of clowns. No wonder Elysians maintained that impish sense of humor in later life; whenever Raincloud turned unexpectedly, she could catch that look of “something’s up” in the corners of Iras’s eyes.

A man followed them, his train undulating across the street. His long, sandy hair flowed straight down his back; a sight enough to shock all of Tumbling Rock, to see so much manhood exposed.

“That’s the *generen*, who runs the *shon*,” Iras explained. “A *generen* acquires much influence, as the ‘parent’ of future voters.

Raincloud nodded. “Wasn’t Verid once a *generen*?”

“Yes she was,” said Iras, sounding pleased. “*Generen* of the *Anaeashon*, of course, in *Anaeon*, three centuries ago. How I remember those days; hardly a night she spent without a call to one troubled child or another! Many of our leading *logens* were once her *shonlings*.”

The way cleared. Ahead lay the sphere of the Nucleus, immersed entirely within a spherical “moat” of transit fluid. Its surface was pockmarked with vesicles pinching inward or outward to cross the moat.

The trainsweeps gathered up their trains again, as Raincloud and Iras prepared to enter a vesicle. As the vesicle enclosed its passengers, a servo built like a sea star frisked Raincloud, its eight whiplike arms passing lightly over her body.

“Sorry,” Iras apologized, “don’t mind the octopods. You’ll get security clearance soon.”

The interior of the Nucleus was given to marble facings and imposing velvet drapes. Most people wore their trains inside, although the trainsweeps had to keep them half-folded-up, making their wearers look more ridiculous than ever. Following Iras’s lead, she kept hers on until they reached the suite of the Sub-Subguardian.

With relief she at last unhitched her train and passed it to the servo arms at the reception desk. The office suite was paneled in walnut, quietly elegant. A man walked out as they entered, a striking figure in red black-striped butterflies. “Good morning, Lem,” said Iras, who of course could not introduce him. The man was well muscled and carried himself with the tautness of a *rei-gi* assistant. Raincloud stared at him frankly, thinking, had he been a goddess, she might have invited him to spar sometime.

Lem nodded to Iras. “Tell her my mate will call soon.”

“Please be seated,” the room told Raincloud. “The Legate of Imperial Uru-lan is running overtime.”

An Uru-lite legation—here? Uru-lan had no official embassy anywhere in the Free Fold. Raincloud glanced sideways at Iras.

“For ‘cultural affairs’” Iras whispered. “A small operation, it covers espionage, I think.”

Raincloud nodded thoughtfully. Still, what business would this legate have here? The thought of the lost Valan ship chilled her. Never mind, she told herself: Walk in the shadow of the Dark One.

A thicket of reporter servos stood in the corner, their lamp heads bending forward now and then. A half an hour passed with only the reporters bobbing patiently by the door, a real door with solid walnut panels and grooved trim. A good job of carpentry, Raincloud observed admiringly. This Sub-Subguardian had some taste.

At last Verid's door opened, a real wooden door, on its hinges. Out strode the Legate of Urulan, a bearded man in his forties. His shoulders were broad and thick, like those of her old Urulite teacher, the result of growing up in a stronger field of gravity. Barely taller than the Elysians, his heavy frame might have weighed twice as much; his shape gave him the look of an outsized dwarf. A tunic of fine chain mail over garments of deep blue silk covered his broad torso, and at his elbows and knees were jointed rings of silver. At his waist, from the right, hung his ceremonial sword; from the left, what appeared to be a particle blaster, although it must have been disarmed to be permitted anywhere near Helicon, let alone the interior of the Nucleus.

Her memory quickened at the sight of him. To be sure, his blue eyes and aquiline nose had little in common with Rhun's dark complexion and simian brow. And yet, his build and his gesture were the very image of her Urulite-born professor. She felt as if she had known the man a long time.

The servos immediately bent their body-necks forward at the Urulite, blurt-ing questions in Elysian and in Urulite. He faced them squarely but ignored their questions. "The fate of a Valan spy ship deliberately entering the space of Imperial Urulan is no concern of yours. Should the *immortal* Elysians choose to meddle in Imperial affairs, let them beware. We'll find out just how immortal they are."

With this threat, the man took a sharp turn. Raincloud and Iras had risen respectfully, but the Urulite, distracted by the reporters, nearly walked into Raincloud on his way out. The man caught sight of her, and Raincloud automatically lifted her right arm to clasp his left shoulder, as she would have greeted her teacher. Her palm felt the cool mesh of metal beneath. "May the sun rise behind you," she spoke quickly in Urulite.

He clasped her shoulder so hard it startled her. "The sun rise for you! Can it be, a civilized soul in this barbaric land?"

Iras intervened. "Your Excellency, this is Raincloud Windclan, our new translator. And... Lord Zheron... Imperial Legate for Cultural Affairs." Iras faltered, her face pale with shock at the breach of protocol.

Raincloud told Zheron, "I have studied the classics of your people, especially the ballad of Azhragh and Mirhiah."

Zheron laughed heartily. "Imagine, the ballad of Azhragh! Lord Raincloud, you must dine with us at the legation. You will hear from me soon." With that he departed at last, the reporter servos trailing behind.

She blinked with surprise, then turned to reassure Iras. These Elysians were so sensitive.

"Are you all right?" asked Iras in a hushed tone.

"Yes, of course. I only..." She paused. Framed by the walnut doorway, she saw the Sub-Subguardian Verid *Anaeashon*.

Verid was bowing to the reporter servos as they left, an unusual courtesy. Slight of stature, even for an Elysian, Verid had rounded shoulders and coarse

black hair. Her eyebrows were thick and expressive. They lifted ever so slightly, now, as Verid turned to Iras.

Iras sighed with relief. "It is my duty to present Raincloud Windclan, who meets our highest standards."

"Thank you, dear. Sorry we ran late." Verid smiled affectionately at Iras, then bowed to Raincloud. Her thick eyebrows rose as she added, "This citizen meets our *very* highest standard."

"Thank you, Sub-Subguardian," Raincloud said, her face warm from the unexpected praise.

Her composure recovered, Iras laughed. "You must call her 'The Owl,'" she mischievously told Raincloud. "We all do."

"Enough!" exclaimed Verid with a wave of the hand. "Back to your visiting. Don't make too many loans today, or the *logens* will get after you."

Iras bowed and departed, the coin-spotted butterflies flashing down her back.

Verid's shoulders shook heavily with silent laughter. Then she beckoned Raincloud to enter the conference room. Her figure did indeed resemble an owl; the thought was distracting.

"I hope I said nothing amiss?" Raincloud asked, as the door closed automatically behind them.

"It's not what you said," Verid explained. "You put your hand on the man, in public—a stranger whose mate you'd never even met. Even our closest friends would never touch in public."

"Of course." Elysians never so much as shook hands; they bowed, and left just enough room. It seemed a way of keeping space in this rather claustrophobic city.

"But Urulites expect physical contact," Verid added, "among men of the ruling class. Obviously you know that. It's one reason they distrust us. Never mind young Zheron's threats," Verid added, a remark which reminded Raincloud that despite his mature appearance, Verid might be ten times his age. "His statement was for the press. What is significant is what he left out. He did not call the Elysians treacherous slaves of the Valan barbarians. He did not accuse us of scheming to terraform Urulan. He did not even denounce me for summoning him for this insulting conference. Most important," Verid added, her eyebrows rising, "he did not deny that the incident of the Valan freighter represented a serious error of judgment on the part of the Imperial Command." Verid nodded to a chair.

Raincloud sat on the chair, which was made of polished wood with legs curved back elegantly. From above dangled the usual servo arms, discreetly overhead. Verid sat across from her and leaned forward, flexing her knuckles. "I am honored, indeed," Verid said, her eyebrows arching to her hairline, "to host 'a goddess from the Hills of the Dark One.'" The last was spoken with just the right accents and clicks.

Raincloud was pleased, though caught off guard. Verid herself clearly knew a language or two. She lifted her chin and risked a return. "It's an equal honor to meet one known as a 'rising star.'"

At that Verid's shoulders shook again, and she laughed loudly, the sort of laugh that probably carried outside the room. "One of my *shonsibs* must have told you that." Verid flicked her wrist to a servo arm which slithered down

carrying two glasses. “Yours is plain spring water,” she assured Raincloud, not identifying the contents of her own. “Now then. Why would a ‘goddess’ leave the Hills to learn languages spoken on worlds many light-years away?”

This question felt patronizing. “Light-years mean little, within the Fold.”

“Of course. How did you learn Urulite ways? Have you lived there?”

“Oh, no.” Urulan had been closed to foreigners for several generations. “But Professor Rhun was a native.”

“So I understand.”

“He was a pedagogue in a noble household. He escaped on a stolen ship,” she explained, answering the obvious question. “He traveled twenty years at lightspeed, then backtracked for two years because he’d overshot, subsisting all the while on recycled greens. As a ‘pioneer,’ he was lucky to land a post at Founders University. I was doubly lucky to have him,” she added, although it had been hard at first to accept correction from a man. She added, with some hesitation, “He was a ‘sim.’”

Sims were descended from gorilla-human hybrids, a slave population bred on Urulan. But in succeeding generations, most progeny were sired by human masters, as the “human” look fetched a better price on the market. Today many sim descendants were barely distinguishable from purebred humans; but on Urulan, they remained slaves.

Verid nodded. “Regardless, he taught you well. Now before we discuss your assignment, please bear in mind that nothing of what passes between us must go beyond you—not even to your mate. If I hear otherwise, your value to us will be lessened substantially.”

“I am accustomed to confidential work.”

“Yes, with the Sharers—what a contrast, by Helix! You do avoid reporters, that’s good. But do you realize that secrecy will be a greater challenge here?”

Verid knew about the reporters. Raincloud’s scalp prickled. “Do all the walls have ears?”

“Not in my office.” Verid grinned, tapping the wood paneling with her knuckles. “One needs a special permit for sonic isolation, to get around the constitutional Right of Visitation. We’ll arrange it for you, once your clearance goes through.”

So this “Right of Visitation” was also a “right of eavesdropping.”

“You know why you’re here,” Verid told her. “You’re one of a handful of Urulan experts in the Free Fold. We have reams of intelligence to decipher. For years, we’ve just passed it on to Valedon—but can we trust them?” She paused reflectively. “Valan intelligence assures us the Urulites have about six thousand interstellar missiles, give or take a thousand. But how do they arrive at that guess? Not a clue. How good is their estimate? Could it be off by a factor of ten?” Verid leaned forward. “Even more to the point—where did those missiles come from? A Valan House, perhaps?”

Raincloud swallowed. “How did Urulan pay for them, I’d like to know.”

“Another good question. Urulan is virtually bankrupt, but it has massive mineral resources.” Verid spread her hand on the desk. A page of light appeared beneath her fingers, several characters blinking red. Raincloud recalled a similar servo table at the apartment, in a side room. The apartment contained a number of unfamiliar objects whose purpose remained a mystery to the Wind-clans. “I have released a file to your account; it will open to your hand only, and

will disappear when observers approach. These are signals intercepted from the Imperial Command. See what you make of them.”

Raincloud nodded.

Verid paused, stroking her chin between her thumb and forefinger. “As for our friend Zheron... if he follows up, I would accept the invitation.”

So that little “meeting” with the legate had been more than coincidence. Her pulse raced. “Just what have you in mind?”

“It wasn’t in your job description,” Verid admitted. “But the opportunity is ripe. The Emperor is dying, we know that. There’s a chance for change; and Lord Zheron is one who wants change. We need to help him find the way.”

“I’ll have to think about this.”

“We’ll double your pay.”

“It’s not that,” said Raincloud sharply. “I must think of my ‘family.’” She used the Clicker word.

Verid nodded. “Of course. You’ve got your own little *shon*. Raincloud, in all seriousness you are safe in Helicon—safer than anywhere else in the Fold. You know how we Elysians feel about personal safety.”

“I’ve noticed.” They got foreigners to do their dirty work.

Verid leaned forward. “One last question. You have observed us Elysians, rather intently, I would guess. Tell me what you think. Where lies our greatest danger?”

Raincloud drew a breath and thought quickly. The seconds ticked by. “The Urulite missiles threaten us,” she began. “Yet the real danger lies here, in Elysium. Elysians are—” She felt like saying, “overgrown children.” “Elysium is one great protective *shon*. Your people, with all their civility, cannot understand the mind of a people that can sell and trade human flesh...”

But Verid leaned back, her face politely blank. Clearly Raincloud had disappointed her this time. “The monster swallower swallows itself,” Verid quoted from *The Web*, a text Raincloud knew well. “You are right, though, that the danger lies here.”