



RICH SHAPERO

BALCONY OF FOG

A NOVEL

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

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Rin, Tongue and Dorner

Arms from the Sea

The Hope We Seek

Too Far

Wild Animus

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Through a ceiling of fog, the storm flashed, blanching the night and the drenched forest. The men in the narrow canyon looked up. Each wore a head bulb strapped to his brow. One of the bulbs was shorting. Arden juggled the bulb, but it wouldn't stop blinking. The rain slashed, the wind hooked him and rasped in his ears, while the invisible thunderhead rumbled, brewing a fresh charge.

His face felt raw, and his arms were prickling—he might have been sick with a fever. He could feel the electric field in his blood and his bones. “Put it down,” he shouted to another toiler. Neely, tall and thin, was working a long metal pry bar between the loose sections of a sluice. They were there to repair the breakage. The torrent ate at the canyon's right bank, threatening to overtop it.

“Go,” Arden yelled, motioning the toilers forward. Together they threw their weight against the uncoupled section,

trying to move it back into place. Each wore a harness with a twin cable attached—one to prevent them from being washed down the sluice, the other to power the bulbs on their heads. Their effort moved the broken sections closer together, but not close enough. The torrent crashed past, disappearing over a steep drop-off eighty feet beyond.

“Use the bar.” Jiggers, the foreman, stood on the left bank, snarling. “Neely—”

Arden swore and wiped the mud from his face. Neely looked at him, and Arden shook his head. Beneath his leather leggings and sheepskin slicker, he could feel the electric pins in his flesh. His brawny body quivered. His large hands buzzed, knuckles glowing.

“Neely—” Jiggers waved him forward.

Neely gripped the pry bar with his bare hands.

“Close the break,” Jiggers ordered the gang.

“Fool,” Arden muttered. Was it rain or the charge hissing? The air was crackling like fat in a fire.

The men put their weight against the sluice section, while Neely worked the pry bar. Then the section pivoted, and the men recoiled. The flood mounted the right bank and flowed over it.

Jiggers turned his anger on Neely. “The bar, damn you.”

Arden ground his jaw, thick and unshaven, eyes deep. Neely, always willing, followed Jiggers’ orders and turned to attack the sluice again. Then he stumbled. Struggling to keep his balance, he raised the pry bar over his head.

With a deafening crack, a wire of lightning flashed through the fog, crowning the pry bar with a bursting star. Neely juddered and collapsed, folding into the torrent. The mitered joint of the sluice caught him and ripped through his arm. The water carried him toward the drop-off. Ten feet before, he reached the cable's limit. He bobbed there, hunched and tumbling.

Arden wheeled and descended the canyon, feeding his cable through his wet hands. His head bulb's circuit closed, the beam solid again.

"Get back to the break," Jiggers shouted. "We'll fish him out later."

Arden ignored him. The torrent swirled and foamed through the dark rocks of the drop-off. He could see it curling, plunging down the sheer cliff. He reached Neely, knelt on a boulder and circled the man's chest. Half drowned, Neely stared at the drop-off, arms jerking, the torn one bleeding from elbow to wrist.

A motor roared to life behind Arden. The cable attached to his harness was moving. They were winching him in. He kept his feet beneath him, levering his legs, dragging Neely with him. As the winch drew him closer to the gang, Jiggers yelled at him. "Alright, you're a hero. Now fix that sluice." He pointed at the break. "Both of you."

Neely cradled his lacerated limb.

"Lift him out," Arden said, arm still around him.

"I'm at my limit with you," Jiggers warned.

“He’s hurt,” Arden said.

Jiggers raised a club and swung it at him, short by a foot.

“Raise him,” Arden yelled.

Neely was shaking and jabbering. The other toilers were motionless, watching. One had retrieved the pry bar. Jiggers roared at them all, then he waved his arm at a man standing between him and the rusted control box. “Hoist him up.”

The twin cable was raised over the wheel of a derrick, lifting Neely out of the canyon. His head sank with relief. Blood flowed down his forearm and dripped from his fingers. The derrick rotated and released its load. Neely buckled in a heap on the bank.

Jiggers barked at the toiler by the control box. The man pulled on his sap-soled overboots, unclipped Neely and attached himself to the cable. Manning the controls, Jiggers pivoted the derrick, lowering the toiler into the canyon to join the gang. Arden turned back to the break in the sluice.

Without warning, the winch motor roared again, and Arden was jerked off his feet. Jiggers was raising him on his cable, yelling at the gang to finish the work. As they grunted and muscled the sluice section closer to its mate, the derrick swung Arden over the bank.

Jiggers didn’t lower him. He watched Arden hanging there, smile ripening as he raised his club. “Coward,” Arden said.

Jiggers struck his thighs, then his hip and his chest.

“Rat, slave,” Arden gasped. His arms swung, but his fists didn’t connect. Jiggers struck his belly. Arden groaned, sucking for air.

“You want this?” Jiggers huffed. “Take as much as you like.”

The club squealed as it struck the wet leather over Arden’s groin.

Arden curled, knees jerking up, hands raised to his head. Jiggers barked and stepped closer. As he raised his club, Arden yanked the electric lead from his head bulb and jabbed it at Jiggers’ neck. The foreman did a dance, eyes blank, mouth wide, his body spasming. Then the circuit broke.

Jiggers drew back, raising his club.

When he powered it around, the blow struck Arden’s head.



A toiler can dream. No tyranny on earth will quell hopeful thoughts.

As Arden lay in the mud beside the river, he dreamt he was free. On his back, in the bottom of a boat, gazing up at the stars. Drifting.

When he woke, the storm was still raging above the fog, and the rain was heavy. He was soaked, but his body had been covered with a tarp. In the mud by his hip was a hand weapon, a cat dart. There was a toiler’s bandana too, with three hard-cakes inside it.

Arden rose to his knees and then stood, seeing the sluice. The sections were mated, channeling runoff into the torrent. The gang was gone, and so was the control rig and derrick. All that remained were the power cables, coiled and snaking over the ground. His head throbbed, and when he put his fingers

to his brow, they came away bloody. The bulb was still on his head.

He put the hardcakes in his slicker pocket, gripped the cat dart and scouted the riverbank. Arden took a step. His belly ached, but his legs seemed fine. In the east, a half-moon glowed behind a veil of mist, and the flashing of the thunderhead lit the riverbank's puddled soil. He started along it, shivering with cold.

Downhill was the forest, the trunks of tall trees silhouetted by fog. Uphill, the ziggurat came into view, vivid then dim as the sheet lightning flashed and the rain poured down. From its gleaming mass, power mains descended the slopes like the arms of a centipede, touching outbuildings and winding into the forest. The settlement was on high alert. A bolt had blasted the granary, the brickyard was flooded, and the rows of lit windows were flickering. Even at Apex.

Arden started up the pathway toward the ziggurat. He could see the Colonnade at its summit. At the center of the pillared enclosure, smoke was rising. It coiled through the pillars and above the peaked roof, where the wind caught it and carried it into the sky. Priests were making offerings to the rain god that threatened them.

He cursed and halted. The smell of the smoke sickened him. A fresh stab of pain drove through his head. *Have you had enough?* he thought. Arden turned, peering into the forest. He looked down at the dart in his hand. Its housing was rusty. He touched the dart's head and the coiled spring, wondering if it would fire.

He checked the pathway again, then he headed in the opposite direction, hurrying his steps, entering the woods, finding his way through the swirling mist with the storm flashing over him.

The leaf mold was thick. He stumbled his way between giant trunks, skirting thickets, scouting the way, dart at the ready. The light in the sky strobed on the sword ferns and huckleberry. The rain fell in silver curtains, folded and glittering. He watched for the long, lithe shadow in the scrub, or the glint of eyes in the web of branches above. Knee-deep fog essed before him, hiding the earth. The loam was puddled, and as he moved, he heard the splash of his boots.

Arden paused by a snag. Behind him, nothing but rain and forest; and above, the storm, flashing through the branches. As he watched, the high fog thinned, and the thunderhead appeared. White thorns and wires glinted within, lighting the char-colored boils from beneath. A glowing bolt plunged into the forest, the earth shook, and the *crack* stung his ears. There was no denying the storm's power. It was fearsome to behold. A creature of flesh felt small, slinking beneath it.

The fog thickened, hiding the storm again. Arden skirted a large boulder and halted before a tangle of boughs. He checked the forest around him again, then he put the dart in his pant pocket and began clearing the boughs away. They choked the mouth of a dark ravine, hemmed by firs.

A strange noise stopped him—a deep sucking, like the sound of a flood in a storm drain. The sound grew to a *whoosh*. As Arden straightened himself, the earth seemed to

sink beneath him. Rain was no longer falling. The drops were suspended, moving sideways, circling slowly. The *whoosh* continued to mount. The trunks around him quivered and the raindrops expanded, filling the air with glittering bubbles.

What was happening? Was it the wind, the storm? The peculiar sound, the strange sensations— He'd never felt anything like it.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the *whoosh* faded. The bubbles burst, and the trunks were once again motionless. The storm's rumble returned, along with the showers. Arden gazed through the treetops, trying to pierce the fog. A rain god's magic, he thought. That's what the priests would say. They would spin some foolish story about it—a story that would frighten children and invade their dreams. As much as he despised the beliefs, the fears were still with him. They were part of a past he couldn't erase.

Arden returned to his task, and when the entrance to the ravine was clear, he stepped down into it. On either side of the entrance, spears were ranked. It was like a dark cave, roofed over with branches, sheltered from the rain. He felt his way through the dimness and plugged in his head bulb. Light filled the space, powered by a buried cable he'd spliced in on the sly.

To one side was an oblong shape, thirty feet in length, with blankets draped over it. Arden peeled off his slicker and his soaked shirt. He removed the blankets, and the hull of a boat appeared. Arden shook one of the blankets, shedding needles and bits of lichen and moss. He wadded its corner

and used the cloth to polish the name chiseled on the prow: *Mariod*. Then he draped the blanket over his shoulders and set to work.

A mast lay to one side, half covered by duff. He dug out the rudder assembly, placed it in the boat's stern and packed it with moss. Next came the patchwork sails, and with them, the memories of the weeks it took to stitch them together. He secured them in the bows. He paused to inspect a joint on the stern, fingering the heads of the pegs, and then he ran his hand over the hull's waist caring not to pick up splinters. He could feel the boat's desire to be in the water. And he could see where the seams were sealed and the narrow band above the waterline that remained to be caulked. He would finish that once she was afloat. The plan was finally in motion.

Then he turned to the piles of crates filled with stolen supplies and began lifting them into the craft. As he worked, he spoke softly—to the boat, or the spirit within him that longed to escape. Or perhaps he was speaking to the wood from which the hull had been fashioned. The boards had been trees, tough trees, and they still held the memories of all they had endured. Then the words melted into a murmur, a hum, following a melody he'd learned as a child. A song Mariod had taught him about enduring tribulations and keeping hope alive.

His need and his hope, the song from his past and the rumbling and flashing—wove a spell. And out of that spell, a strange presence emerged.

He had shifted the light from his head bulb to the roller logs ranked at the rear, when he stopped, sensing something.

Between the storm's rumblings, he heard a twig crack.

When he turned, a woman was standing at the mouth of the ravine—naked, dripping, lit by flashes, with the fog boiling behind her.

Their eyes met.

She covered her breasts with her arm.

The woman looked desperate. Mistrustful. She was shivering. Her blond locks were drenched and dragged. Arden glanced at the *Mariod*, wishing there was some way to hide it. Then he faced her again and stepped forward.

She stiffened. He halted.

He motioned her toward him.

She didn't move.

"You must be freezing," Arden said.

She didn't reply. With one eye on him, she probed the ravine.

"What are you doing here?" Arden asked.

She took a step, and another, trailing a scarf of fog behind. She faltered, extending her arm, fooled by the uneven ground, as if she was carrying a burden she was unused to. The shadow of a trunk halved her face. She paused, swaying, touching her thigh, grasping her shoulders, regarding herself as if her body was strange to her.

"Come out of the rain," he said.

He closed the distance. She cried out when he picked her up. Then her head tipped and she went soft in his arms.

Arden set her down on the duff beside the *Mariod*. In the light from his head bulb, he saw her face clearly: lips like waves

trimmed by the glare; arched brows, a high forehead; and the soft edge of her nose.

He removed the blanket from around his shoulders and covered hers.

“You escaped from the Rink,” he guessed.

Before she could answer, the forest was shaken by thunder.

Her eyes flared. She looked behind her, then up at the sky, as if she expected some doom to descend at any moment.

“You’re frightened,” he said, trying to understand.

Another flash and a nearby *crack*. The wind howled, beating the roof of branches.

“Ingis,” she hissed, still looking up.

“The rain god?” Arden laughed.

“How bad is it here? This blanket feels like wool. And the light on your head— You haven’t returned to the stone age,” she said.

Arden wasn’t sure how to respond.

“He didn’t want me to leave,” she said. “If he finds me, he’ll take me back.”

“Who?” Arden asked.

“Mad,” she said. “Impossible. Fawning, degradation— It was endless. I was no better than a common cumulus to him. Food for his ravenous ego.”

She’s barely aware I’m here, Arden thought.

“He’s going to destroy himself,” she said. “That’s how it will end.”

A flash overhead silvered her hair. She pursed her lips and shuddered.

“You’re cold.”

She flinched and looked up. The branches above her clacked in the wind.

She’s beautiful, Arden thought.

The woman shook her head. “All a dream. A delusion. I never loved him. I never did.”

He grasped the blanket. “You have a name?”

“Estra,” she answered.

As he closed the blanket around her, Arden noticed a frond-shaped scar, branched like a bolt, embossed on her left breast.

“Ingis did that.”

Her eyes were clearer. She’s seeing me, he thought.

“I was seduced by his charge. It was— Irresistible. Addictive. I was afraid I couldn’t live without it.”

She glanced at the boat and the web of branches that formed the cave. Her arms fell. She looked ill.

“King of Heaven,” she smirked. “Where am I? What land is this?”

“America. The western coast. You’re not from around here.”

“Are you listening to me? Do you live here, in the forest?”

Arden shook his head.

“Is there a city nearby? Is that where you’re from?”

“A settlement,” Arden said. She’s from a city herself, he thought. Schooled. Good with words.

“Is it safe in your town? I need a place to stay. Out of sight. I don’t know— Maybe he’ll give me some distance. For a while—”

“Our settlement isn’t a good place for most of us,” Arden said.

“Who is it good for?”

“A few at the top.”

Estra pulled the blanket around her. “You’ve been patient with me.” She squinted, as if she was trying to see him more clearly. “What shall I call you?”

“Arden,” he said.

She noticed the sharpened stakes resting against the fir trunks behind him. Her gaze narrowed and shifted, spotting a pile of torches and clubs, and the spears by the entrance. “You’re well armed.”

“Not well enough. There are cats in the forest. Crag Cats. They hunt at night.”

“Why are you here?”

He regarded her for a long moment. “I’m working on the *Mariod*.”

“Your boat.”

He nodded. “I don’t want anyone to know about it.”

“I can keep a secret.” Silence filled the space between them. Then the storm cloud resumed its grumbling. “Maybe I could help you.”

Arden didn’t reply.

“Where do you live?” She cocked her head.

“In the ziggurat. A communal lodge.”

“Can I stay here, under your boat?”

“That wouldn’t be safe.”

“Because of the cats?”

He nodded.

“Is there somewhere else?”

“You could—” He stopped himself.

“What?”

“Stay in my cell.”

Her eyes were edged with suspicion. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing. I’d sleep on the floor.”

“Can I trust you?” She spoke softly now, gently.

“I’d have to sneak you in.”

“Because—”

Arden imagined how his return would be received.

“It’s not allowed,” he said.



When they reached the edge of the forest, he led the way along a cutbank, holding a blazing torch in one hand and a spear in the other. Arden was bare chested. Estra wore his slicker with the hood pulled over her head and the blanket around her waist. Her pace was slow, her steps cautious.

The trees were dark and dripping, and above the ceiling of fog, the storm still thundered and flashed. The ziggurat appeared at the top of the rise, a stepped pyramid with nine levels. The lines of windows flickered, the power still wavering.

“What were you humming?” Estra asked.

“An old song,” he said. “‘Hard Trials, Great Tribulations.’ Mariod taught it to me.”

“Mariod again. A woman you loved?”

“She was my nurse at the Nest,” he said, “on Level 7.”

He waved the torch at the cutbank, lighting the round mouth of a storm drain.

“This is secret too,” he said. “I come and go without being seen.”

“Don’t worry,” she said.

Arden hid the spear in the scrub and stepped into the drain. The flow reached his calves. He could feel Estra’s hand on his shoulder.

When he turned, he saw fear in her face. “Move slowly,” he said. “Don’t stumble. The drain steepens as it climbs the slope.” Then he sent his legs forward, sloshing through the flow, holding the torch in one hand, moving the other along the curving wall.

A scream sounded behind them—raw, agonized, rising in pitch, like some beast being flayed. Estra halted. When Arden turned, her face looked chalky. The scream came again, echoing in the drain.

“A cat,” Estra guessed, eyes wide.

Arden nodded. “A female.”



The grill of the storm drain lifted. Arden doused the torch, hid it in the weeds and rose. He grabbed Estra’s arm and helped her out. They were at the border of the brickyard, behind the ziggurat. Thick power mains snaked from the

generator bunkers. Arden hurried her beside one, scanning the grounds. The roof of the curing shed was gone. The mill wheel had frozen and the slaughter pens were flooded.

A deafening crash, a blinding strike—

Estra raised her head. “That’s him.”

The storm cloud was above them, its neck thick and sooty, the roiling crown lit by a brewing charge.

“Hurry.” Arden pulled her with him.

As they reached the delivery bay of the commissary, the rear doors of the ziggurat swung open. The low notes of an organ sounded, and a pair of cowled priests appeared. A cortege followed, bearing the burnt remains of the sacrifices toward the holy plot beyond the sheep paddock. The bodies were covered in sacramental cloth, but as the bier moved, a blackened arm joggled loose of the wrappings.

Wind blasted the commissary. The earth shook and a dazzling bolt drove from the storm’s livid head. It touched the roof of the livestock barn and the walls exploded. People appeared, shouting and shrieking; animals lurched and raced in every direction, their backs on fire. Arden pulled Estra into the stockroom and through the kitchen.

They entered a corridor lit by flickering sconces, crowded with jostling men. Guards were shouting orders. One led a group toward the explosion, while priests moved among the others, urging calm. The organ was audible, tragic, ponderous, groaning and shrilling in the narrow passage like a wounded mammoth. Arden led Estra through the melee toward the first floor landing.

Her grip was firm. He could feel the tension in her arm and the fear in her stride. He felt fear too—fear of the storm’s rage, and fear of discovery. As they approached the landing, Arden spotted Jiggers hurrying toward them. Did the foreman see him? His head turned, but he strode right past.

A group of nurses had gathered on the landing and were leading a prayer beseeching the god. One recognized Arden and smiled. He returned the greeting and led Estra up the stairwell to Level 3. He paused at the top and peered down the corridor, looking for the foot patrol. Nothing. Then they were stepping past the cell doors. A man exited one and started toward them. Arden nodded to him.

“Around the corner,” he murmured to Estra.

He halted before a narrow door, turned the latch with his key, entered his cell and drew her inside.

In the darkness, the small bed was visible, his dresser and the chair by the window. Arden hung his head bulb on a hook over the dresser and plugged it into a loose wire. The light flashed on. Estra moved to the window and drew the curtains apart. He came up behind her.

The thunderhead was no longer over the settlement. It was moving toward the forest again, its dark billows churning like a thick stew. All at once, the earth beneath it erupted. A sooty funnel reached down, sucking everything into its vortex. The sky around the storm was crazed with electric webs, the boiling head glowing and furrowed. It was an image from Arden’s childhood, a picture in a storybook: the mushroom cloud loosed during the Four-Day War, source of the faith,

father of rains that had plagued the people before he was born.

“He thinks I’m in the trees,” Estra said. “He’s trying to drive me into the open.”

Arden searched the billows for human features. He could see what might have been the curve of a brow and the hollow of a temple. “I don’t understand—”

“Those burnt bodies—” Estra regarded him. “They were sacrifices to Ingis?”

Arden nodded. “We’re taught to fear the gods. When I was a child, I could see their faces.”

“You don’t believe anything I’ve told you.”

“I believe you’re frightened, that something terrible happened to you.”

“And Ingis?”

“You can see anything in a cloud.”

Estra glanced through the glass. “That’s no god.” Her voice was edged with malice. “Ingishead has a face, and it’s a reflection of the man inside it.”

Arden stared at her.

“I was born in America,” she said, “in the east. So was Ingis. We dreamed of a life in the sky, and we left the earth together. I was a young woman then.” She turned away from the storm. “I was up there with him.”

“How did you come down?”

“Would you believe me if I told you?” Estra cocked her head.

Arden didn’t reply.

“I swam,” she said.

Over her shoulder, he could see the storm crossing the ridge. Arden imagined a man aboard, sullen, grumbling. As rage twisted him, his bolts lit the mountains and his rains flushed the forests.

“It’s moving away.” He closed the curtains.

“He was venting his spleen, taking it out on your village.”

“The priests will say they appeased Ingis with the sacrifices.”

She sighed. “If it were only that simple.”

Her pain seemed real. What had happened to her?

“If they find me here,” Estra said, “what will they do?”

“Put you with the single women.”

“And you?”

“I’d go to Soak. You stand in a tank of cold water.”

“For how long?”

“It was three days last time.”

She looked around, the bare bulb lighting her lips and her cheek. “Just the one room?” The mud brick walls were bare.

“I’m a person of no importance.”

“It isn’t much, is it,” she said.

He stepped across the room. Estra followed. “It’s enough for most of them,” Arden said.

“But not for you.” She lifted her chin.

“No. Not for me.” He opened a closet door and handed her a towel.

She wiped her face. Then he handed her a toiler’s shirt and pants, and motioned her behind the door. She changed while they spoke.

“What work do you do?”

“I dig culverts and repair sluices. It’s always something. The battle with the rain never ends. Whatever we build, it tries to wash away. Without it we’d have no crops, but sometimes it takes those too.”

“How long has the settlement been here?”

“It started as a bomb bunker during the Four-Day War. They built the ziggurat at the end of the nuclear winter.”

“How many are there?”

“Close to three thousand,” he said. “Most of them men like me. Toilers take up the first six floors. Level 7 is the Nest. Level 8 is for single women. Level 9 is Apex, where the priests and overlords live.”

“Why are you—”

“At the bottom?” He spoke softly. “My grandmother belonged to a conquered tribe. I was born to toil, and raised in the Nest.”

“Bad luck,” she said.

Was it pity she felt? Dismay?

Estra stepped from behind the closet door. His clothes fit her poorly. The pants were baggy, and she’d cinched the waist. As she drew close, he realized she was exactly his height. Not an inch shorter, not an inch taller. He was peering into her eyes. They were mirrors, and he could see the reflection of his own affliction and longing. Whatever reserve existed between strangers, for a moment, dissolved.

“What you saw in the forest— It’s taken me four years,” he said.

“Please, don’t worry. I’m not here to betray you.”

“I want my freedom.”

Did his words touch her? He waited for her to speak, but there was only the quiet of the mud brick cell, the harsh light of the head bulb, the fading sound of thunder and the dwindling rain.

“You’re a smart man,” Estra said finally.

“I’d like to be smarter.”

She spotted his keepsakes on the dresser, and she stepped toward them. Tree cones, pieces of quartz, bark, petrified wood.

Estra picked up a rounded stream pebble.

“I dream of freedom,” he said quietly, “and I dream of love.”

He could see the suspicion in her eyes.

“Two people,” he said, “knowing each other, thinking the same thoughts.”

“Is love like that?”

“When you’re free, really free,” he said, “love makes freedom worth having. Doesn’t it?”

“That depends on who you love.”

Was she wary of him, or attracted? Arden couldn’t tell. Her eye glinted with an animal keenness.

“I don’t know what freedom is,” he said. “Or love. But I’m going to find out.”

“Are you?” She laughed and set the pebble on the dresser.

Her lips were moist, her teeth small and sharp.

“A determined man can do anything,” he said.

“Maybe you wished me here.”

He raised his hand. Estra saw the caress coming and she

drew away. Arden touched the air a foot from her cheek.

“I’m not like him,” he said.

She raised her brows.

“I would honor your spirit,” he said.

“Would you.”

The bulb’s glare edged her hairline, the flare of her lip, the beam of her nose.

She lifted her arm between them. Then she touched his chest and edged closer.

Arden clasped her shoulders and kissed her lips, and as the contact was made, a fresh hurl of rain rapped against the window.

They drew apart, regarding each other. Her lips closed, and the silence stretched out. Then she was leaning toward him again, lips parting. Arden met them with his, and this time the reserve vanished. He was lost in the kiss for what seemed a long time.

Estra’s hands fell to her sides as the embrace ended. “I shouldn’t be doing this.” She turned, her face in shadow, the bare bulb sheening her golden hair. “I’m so thoughtless about the future. Always— Gambling everything on a moment’s impulse.”

Was it remorse Arden heard, or an invitation? Where was she from? Who was she really?

“Are you glad I fell into your forest?” she said.

His flight to freedom— Could he trust a woman who claimed she’d come from the sky?

“I’m glad.” Estra’s eyes glistened. “It’s not too late for me. For us, Arden. Is it?”

He put his arms around her. “It’s just beginning.”

This kiss was still deeper.

When it was over, Estra let her breath out slowly. She touched his sternum. “You’ve made love,” she said, “with the singles?” Her fingers toyed with his shirt button.

“Not with the women on Level 8. There’s a place down the valley.” He looked away. “The Sweat Rink. They cart us there every two weeks. The women wear masks. It’s relief, not love.”

She shook her head. “We won’t think about that.”



They were naked, beneath the sheets on the small bed.

Arden paused, sensing her agitation. “Are you with me?”

“Trying to be.”

“I’ve never felt . . . this exposed.”

“It’s different for me too,” Estra said.

“Am I doing something wrong?”

“No. It’s just so physical.”

Arden didn’t know what she meant.

“Hold me,” she said.

He put his arms around her, and as they pressed together, her face lost its border. The rays of her iris were sage-colored spokes, and the hub was a fathomless pupil.

“I’ll be fine,” she whispered. “You won’t hurt me.”



Arden's limbs loosened. Their chests drew apart, letting the chill air between.

Estra caressed his cheek. "I've spent half my life dreaming of a man like you. And now you're here."

He touched her breast. It was like driftwood, smooth except for the frond-shaped scar, the mark the current had left, branched over her heart.

He'd felt foolish at first, brutish between her perfect thighs. And then, as her ardor rose, he had worried he would disappoint her. He couldn't match her passion, this animal-woman, this creature who said she'd come out of a storm—

Then, as the end approached, she grew caring, tender. It was her fullness of spirit he felt—a joy rooted in kindness and a generous heart. He'd been a beast of burden, covered with hide; and as he drew close to her, his hide had dissolved.

"I'm in love," he said.

Steps sounded in the corridor.

Arden rose on one elbow and faced the door.

He'd forgotten to wedge the shim under his door. He hurried to the entrance and secured it, feeling stupid and careless. Estra was standing, stepping toward him.

They embraced.

"So frightened," she murmured. "Both of us."

"I hate it here. Every man I rub shoulders with, the women in the Rink—" He touched her lips. It was the first time he'd

lain with a woman who wasn't wearing a mask. "I still have my hope. And an angel."

"Your dream of freedom," she said. "Tell your angel about that."

Arden weighed her words. "It's dangerous for you to know."

"Are we going to let fear rule us?"

He regarded her for a long moment. Then he stepped to the dresser, retrieved a knife and strode to the wall above the foot of his bed.

Arden inserted the blade between two bricks, waggled it and slid a brick out. He reached his hand into the hole and removed some folded papers.

"There are clans up and down the coast," he said. "No one knows which ones might welcome a stranger."

"People have left here before?"

He nodded. "Two men, eight years ago. They didn't come back. It's anyone's guess what happened—if they found a settlement, if they tried to survive on their own."

He unfolded one of the papers. A hand-drawn map.

"You could start your own colony," she said. "Make your own rules."

"That would be hard. Where the earth isn't poisoned, it belongs to the cats." He put his finger on the map. "There's the ziggurat. I'm going to float the *Mariod* down this river. And launch it here, in this bay." He spread another map. "This is the coastline north."

"How accurate are these?"

“I’ll find out.”

“No villages are marked.”

“I’m going to follow the coast, and hope,” he said. “I’ll put ashore to trap and forage.”

“And at night?”

“I’ll sleep on the water. I’ll live like that for the rest of my life, if I have to. I’m not staying here.”

Beneath the maps was a yellowed page. When Estra raised it, she saw a rough sketch of a woman’s face.

“Mariod,” she guessed.

Arden bowed his head.

“Is she here?” Estra asked. “Is she going with you?”

“No.”

Estra noticed script on the drawing’s backside.

“Something I wrote,” he said, reaching for it.

“Please. Let me read it.”

Arden sighed. Estra scanned what he’d written.

“I’ve never been good with words,” he said, “but that night, they poured out of me. She died at Apex.”

“‘My never-setting sun.’ Beautiful thoughts.”

“I vowed if I ever found out who condemned her, I’d cut their throats.”

The threat startled her. “She was executed?”

“Sacrificed.”

Estra was speechless.

“I was supposed to die with her, but she let go of my hand at the last moment.” He touched what he’d written and turned the page over, peering at the crudely drawn image.

“Your hand?” Estra muttered.

“An overlord said she was plain. I guess that’s true.” He slid the drawing beneath the maps. “She wasn’t like you.”

“Mariod saved your life?”

Arden nodded. “I’ve never understood why.”

“She knew who you are,” Estra said softly.

The cell was silent. She took his hand.

“You’re a brave man,” she said. “You don’t care what others think. You want a good life.” She turned his hand over and touched his calluses. “And you’ll have one.

“When will the boat be ready to launch?” she asked.

“It’s ready now. The sails are done. I’ve got blankets and cloth, rope, hides, canvas and knives. I can rig the mast and finish the caulking when it’s in the water.”

“How will you get it down to the river?”

“There’s a runoff channel. I’ve cut roller logs.”

“I can help you.”

Arden stared at her.

“What about food?” she asked.

“I’ve been pirating from the commissary. I’ve snuck a few sacks out. I have a friend in the kitchen. Another week or so, and I’ll be ready to leave.”

Estra clasped his hand with both of hers and peered into his eyes.

“Do you want me to go with you?” she said.

2

On the north side of the meal hall, the seats were vacant and the benches were wet. A curtain of murky water descended from the ducting. The windows behind were spidered with cracks. Men in the food lines moved past the serving counters, while a pair of young girls from the Nest stood by the water dispenser, singing hymns.

Arden watched the soup being ladled into his bowl, feeling the eyes on him. As he raised his tray and moved among the men seated at the plank tables, the eyes followed him. There was space on the bench beside Neely, and he headed toward it. Neely looked up, shifting nervously as Arden set his tray down and lowered himself.

“They know you’re here,” Neely said, glancing at a guard posted thirty feet away. “You’ll get time in Soak.”

“I’m expecting that,” Arden replied.

“Soak won’t be enough for Jiggers.” Neely tried to spread lard on a hardcake with one hand. His other arm was bandaged, in a sling.

Arden moved the cake from his tray onto the table.

Beyond the drizzling curtain and cracked windows, the sky was visible, white and blue. On a platform above the kitchen was a pipe organ. Its silver tubes were quiet, and the organist’s stool was empty. Arden glanced to the side, put his palm over the cake, and slid it to the edge of the table and into his coat pocket.

When he turned back, he saw an overlord striding toward him, flanked by two guards. The white caftan swirled behind, brushing the seated men’s legs. Arden didn’t react. The guards wore dirty leathers like himself, with red caps. Both carried eight-foot pikes, and the cables trailed behind them. He could see the boots of one slowing.

Men across the table stopped eating. Their eyes crept, then froze.

Arden stared at his plate. The overlord and the guards halted behind him.

“On your feet,” a guard ordered.

Arden was motionless.

“What’s the man’s name?” the overlord asked the guard. And when he was told, “Don’t be difficult, Arden.”

Arden exhaled, swung his leg over the bench and stood, facing the lord. He recognized the man’s pinched chin and square spectacles. Above his rolled white collar, the lord’s long

locks were braided and woven into a crown. His front was crossed by purple sashes.

“We hear you have a visitor in your room,” the lord said.

Arden didn’t respond.

“Is that true?” The lord squinted.

Arden said nothing.

The lord sighed. “We’re picking her up right now.” He turned to the second guard and nodded. The man raised his pike, pointed its silver tip at Arden and extended it till it touched Arden’s side.

The tip crackled and sparked, and Arden’s legs folded beneath him. The pike followed, feeding him current. Arden groaned and twitched on the mud brick floor.

“Enough.” The lord raised his hand.

The guard raised his pike, breaking the circuit.

Neely watched.

The guard turned. “What do you know?” He moved the pike’s tip toward Neely’s bad arm.

Neely’s mouth sagged. “He’s stealin’ food.”

The second guard fished in Arden’s pockets and pulled out the cake.

The lord sucked his cheek. “Give him a little more.”

The pike dipped, jolting Arden again.

“Please—” The lord gathered his caftan and stooped. “Don’t force a good-natured man to be harsh. You know the rules.”

The lord’s shortwave buzzed.

He straightened himself, took the burnished box from his hip and placed it to his ear. “Yes? I see.” He glanced at Arden. “That makes sense to me. Well then— The matter’s at an end. I can get my breakfast.”

The lord returned his shortwave to his hip. Then he turned to the guard with the lowered pike. “Stay your power.”

As the guard righted his weapon, the lord extended his hand to Arden. “It seems a mistake has been made.”

Arden stared at the man’s hand.

“Come on now,” the lord said.

Arden took his hand, and the lord helped him up.

“Your room is empty,” the overlord smiled. He spread his arms to the watching toilers. “Let’s eat.”



Arden dipped his head, scanning the cutbank as he emerged from the storm drain. The duffel on his back caught on the drain’s flange. He freed it and crossed the stream, winding his way through the trees, stopping now and again to peer behind him. He had hoped he would have a week, at least. They needed food. What he had on his back wouldn’t last long.

Estra— She’d appeared in the night, like dew on the scrub. He could picture her lips. And her eyes were green. But she was still a stranger to him— He couldn’t recall the sound of her voice or bring her face to mind. And the affair with Ingis— He wished she would tell him the real story. Did she even know it herself?

He passed between the two giant firs, and the mouth of the ravine appeared. The branches weren't as he'd left them. "It's me," he said, and began to clear them away. Estra's arm showed through the tangle, moving branches away from inside.

Then the gap was wide enough, and she was in his arms, whole and alive.

"We were seen," he said.

Her eyes met his. "What does that mean?"

"Things have changed. We're not going back." He set down the duffel. "Food. A little. We're rolling *Mariod* to the river."

"Now?"

He nodded. "We have to leave."

He stepped into the ravine, bent, and began removing duff from around the mast.

Estra moved beside him, looking at the roller logs and the shell of the hull.

"Help me with this," he said.

She knelt and dug her hands in, clearing the humus away.

Then Arden froze.

He could hear a rustling, at a distance. He raised his hand to her, and they listened together.

A moment of silence. Then rustling again. Something was moving through the forest. Arden rose and stepped to the mouth of the ravine, looking back the way he had come, trying to see through the wooden web.

A man rose slowly above a hill lined with saplings. Was it Jiggers? A guard appeared, then two more, each with a spear;

and a fourth was behind, with a pack of hounds straining at a pull rope.

The leader stopped, and the guards did too. He spoke and motioned to the others.

“I should have known,” Arden muttered.

Estra, beside him now, squeezed his arm. The hounds began to bark.

Arden grabbed the duffel and pulled it into the ravine. Then he clambered out, with Estra behind him, and the two dragged branches back into place, trying to cover the entrance.

“Follow me,” Arden said.

He skirted a deadfall, hurrying her through waist-high sword ferns, into a grove of giants. The trunks were blackened, scaly and charred. He straddled a fallen one, weathered to cork and dust, and started up a steep incline. The earth reeked of fungus, the scrub was mottled with lichen. When the incline leveled, he paused and looked back.

The hounds and the men were at the foot of the slope, climbing toward them. Estra’s chest was heaving. One of the dogs spotted her. A frenzied yapping, and the others joined in.

Above, the slope grew steeper, climbing to a ridge. The surface was rocky. Arden scrambled up a lane of gravel. Estra followed. When they reached a blocky scarp, he boosted her from below. From there, the way was steeper still and more exposed. They hung on to taps and wiry roots emerging from chinks. On an incline of shards, Estra slipped, splitting her pant leg. Blood soaked through the cloth, but they continued up. Jiggers and the hounds found a more gradual route,

vanishing to one side and then reappearing higher on the slope.

As Arden and Estra approached the crest of the ridge, Jiggers halted seventy yards below.

Estra sank to her knees. Arden lowered himself beside her. They were slick with sweat.

“Is he giving up?” she wondered.

Jiggers was watching them, while the hounds leaped and barked. Two guards turned back. The other two remained.

Jiggers raised his arms, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Where do you think you’re going?” he shouted.

“He can see,” Arden gazed at Estra. “We have nothing. No food, no shelter.”

“She’ll be cold,” Jiggers yelled, “and hungry. How long will that last?”

Estra took a breath and straightened herself, about to answer. Arden grasped her shoulder, shaking his head.

“Come down,” Jiggers shouted. “They’ll send her to Level 8 or the Rink. If you don’t, these hounds are going to eat her liver.”

Arden exhaled. “The earth would be a better place without people.”

“So would the sky,” Estra said.

Her hair was tangled. Below the knee, her pant leg was red with blood. Arden raised the cuff, tore a wad of moss from the mat beside him and sponged the wound. Then he used the heel of his hand to wipe a smudge from her brow. “He’s right. We’ll be hungry and cold. And at night, there’s the cats.”

He felt his pant pocket. The cat dart was there.

Estra sniffed. "Can you smell that?"

Arden frowned. "Smoke." He scanned the forest below.

From a shaded hollow, gray clouds were lifting.

"The *Mariod*," he said.

"No—" Estra's face crumpled. She crossed her wrists over her breast.

Arden imagined the brave boat burning. The prow and stern, the keel, the tiller he'd fashioned with so much care. The lone mast, and every carved peg— His dream of escape had ended. So quickly.

"It's my doing." Estra's cheeks were wet. "I'm the cause."

Arden huffed, confounded. Almost a laugh, but he was too pained for that. He turned away from the coiling smoke, gazing at the ranks of wooded slopes and sawtooth ridges. "I'm not going back," he said. "I'd rather die here."

Estra embraced him.

All at once, the hounds were barking again. Jiggers and the dogs were headed toward them, with the two guards right behind.

Arden stood, and Estra rose with him. He grabbed her hand, and they hurried toward the crest.



They had crossed a stream and mounted a snow gully when the scream of a Crag Cat reached them. Arden stopped, scanning the traverse and the forested valley below. The trunks

were twisted, as if a giant hand had tried to uproot them. The sky above them was dark, but the horizon was red.

Jiggers, the two guards and the hounds were silhouetted on a spur nearby, moving quickly along it. As Arden watched, they halted. The hounds were still baying. Then, one by one, the baying stopped.

“What are they doing?” Estra wondered.

The men huddled, and a moment later, the three of them started back down the spur with the dogs, descending into the dimness. The cat screamed again.

“Are we on our own?” Estra said.

Arden pulled the cat dart out of his pocket.

“What’s that?”

He checked the trigger release. “If we’re lucky, it will fire one shot.” He put the dart back in his pocket and scanned the ground. “We’ll need other weapons.” He stooped and picked up a stout bough, gripped its end and struck his palm. “Move at night, sleep during the day. With piles of rocks close by.”

“Could we climb a tree?”

Arden shook his head. “They’re experts at that.” He gazed at the dim traverse ahead of them. The moon wasn’t up, but the sky was clear and the stars were bright. He handed the bough to Estra, then he faced the traverse and started forward.

Hours passed. The half-moon rose, and the stars rotated over them. Arden headed west, toward the coast and the sea, as if hope lay in that direction, the plan for his escape still with him. They were descending a rocky incline when Estra spotted the cat.

“I see eyes,” she said quietly.

“Where?”

“On the left, moving through the boulders. It’s following us.”

Arden looked, seeing only rocky silhouettes. Then a long, lithe body appeared, gliding between them. The cat’s eyes glittered like embers.

“Keep moving,” he muttered. “Not quickly. Our pace should be steady. Think angry thoughts. We’re ready to fight. Don’t smell like fear.”

He pulled the dart from his pocket.

Long minutes passed. They reached the base of the rocky incline and crossed a dry streambed. The cat was still behind them.

Then a second appeared. Arden led the way up a slope of shelving slabs. The second cat descended toward them, circled to the side and climbed a block, peering down at them as they passed. It lowered its head. Its whiskers quivered, and its tail switched. The cat’s nostrils flared and drew in their scent.

All at once, the cat at their rear was bounding toward them.

Arden spun and howled. The cat didn’t spook.

With twenty feet between them, the cat sprang, foreclaws reaching, jaws agape, breath hissing in his throat.

Arden fired the dart. The cat roared and buckled, tumbling at his feet.

The cat’s eyes glittered. It lifted itself. Still alive, still strong— The dart had torn out a piece of its shoulder.

“You’re dead,” Arden said, raising the empty housing as if he would fire it again.

The cat shied and bounded into the canyon below.

As Arden returned to Estra’s side, the second cat vanished.



Exhaustion finally stopped them. They found a steep-sided spur with a curved reef of rock at its center and bald ground around it. After collecting a battery of fist-sized grenades and padding a small space with moss, they settled themselves.

The moon nestled in the night’s velvet. Stars pierced the darkness at every angle. To Arden, the sky seemed enormous—boundless, infinite. His own powers—his command over a perilous future—seemed very small.

If the two cats no longer threatened them, others would soon. Assuming they survived the night, the next day would bring the challenge of food, water, refuge from the weather, and the need for tools. They had nothing. Only each other.

“You may have picked the wrong settlement,” Arden said. “And the wrong man.”

“Don’t say that.”

Estra looped her arm through his and gazed at the sky.

“If it’s a boat we need,” she said, “there are a million to choose from.”

High above, a fleet of cumulus clouds were drifting past.

“That would be nice.”

“You don’t believe me,” she said.

“I’m not like you.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

He laughed. “You’d take me with you.”

She nodded. “I would. We belong to each other now.”

Arden gazed at the fleet, teased by the notion that people could live in the sky. When a real escape was at hand, the fantasy had troubled him. Now it pleased him.

“You’d be different,” she said. “Your body would change. And your heart and mind.”

“I like the idea. I’ve had enough grief down here.”

“We would live for freedom and love,” Estra said. “I could make your dream come true.”

“What about Ingis?”

“The sky’s a big place.” There was a dodge in her voice, as if she was trying to persuade herself. “We could find a peaceful corner, out of the way.” Her eyes crossed the heavens, scouting its edges. “A place for dreamers.”

“That’s what we are.”

She raised her arm, pointing. “Look.” Estra put her temple to his and sighted along her arm.

He could see it, at the sky’s border. A small cloud, floating toward them from the south. Its underside was smooth, like the hull of a ship. Streaks rose above it, like naked masts.

“A simple cumulus,” Estra said. “Just mist. No running water or electricity. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Arden put his lips to hers. He could feel her breath and the throb of her pulse. For a moment, it seemed they had left

the earth. They were floating together, with the wind blowing through them, in a place of light and wonder.

“Why not,” he said. “We’re as fragile as clouds. And our fate is to disappear. To be forgotten.”

“Forgotten.” Estra whispered, as if praying for that.

She looked back at the sky, and he did too. They watched the clouds drift among the stars. Some twisted. Some lobed. Some had scarves that peeled off like leaves from a cabbage. Her gaze returned to the lone cumulus floating at the edge of the sky.

“Can you hear the swells slapping its bow?” she said.

Arden listened. The call of a screech owl reached him, and he imagined it was the ship’s creaking bulwarks.

“You’re not afraid?” she said.

“I’ve been afraid all my life.”

“And now?”

“I’m only afraid I’m going to lose you.”

The silver light of the moon made the cloud look spectral, ghostly. A wind from the west grooved its underside and canted its streaks. As they watched, billows rose from its top, and its front turned toward them, as if a following wind had filled the cloud’s sails.

“I want to know how Mariod saved you,” Estra said.

He peered into her eyes, seeing regard and a fierce determination. He took a breath and began.



In autumn the rain gods came, and as usual, ritual offerings were scheduled to appease them. That year, the priests were especially fearful. There was a war in heaven, that all could see. The defeated god was one the priests knew and revered. The victor was a stranger, unhonored, unknown.

A sacrifice was planned to exalt the victor. The Choosing, as always, was in secret. Mariod was prized by many she tended, and she taught the canons. Her respect for authority had never been questioned. Arden was twelve and contrary, often in trouble, but he was well-instructed in the rites of worship and understood that being Chosen was an honor bestowed on few.

The ceremony was rushed. It was midnight, the heavens were pouring, and the new storm was on the move. The two of them were hurried to Apex, and from there, they were led up the stair to the roofed Colonnade. With a guard's permission, Mariod stopped midway to straighten Arden's hair. She looked into his eyes, smiled and kissed his cheek. As they continued up, Arden began to cry.

On top, the rain was fierce and the winds battered the assembly. But the priests and overlords were dressed for the occasion; and despite the pressure of time, the rituals were precisely observed.

The mood was solemn and pious. The priests, all women in black robes, stood in a circle, chanting. A half-dozen overlords, men in white caftans, sat on a dais to witness the ritual.

Mariod's clothing was removed by a priest. A litany accompanied each garment. Naked, she was escorted to the

Throne—a font elevated three feet above the terrace and filled with blest water. The priest helped her up. Mariod took her position facing the assembly, ankle-deep in the pool.

Another litany, and a second priest stepped before Arden and began removing his clothing. When he was naked, she led him to his place on the pavers below the Throne. The wind blew stiffly. He began to shiver. When the priest guided his hand to Mariod's, she was shivering too. Once their hands were clasped, the priest returned to her place in the circle.

An overlord led the group in song. Then a priest wearing a golden crown rose from a hatchway and approached the naked pair. She wore boots and thick gloves. She was holding the end of a long black cable that trailed behind her like a giant worm. She halted when she reached the Throne.

The chanting mounted. Tension showed in the watching faces.

Courage was part of being chosen, and Arden knew that he had to be brave. Mariod began to chant along with the priests. He tried to join in, but his voice rasped and warbled. She squeezed his hand, and her message, he knew, was *be strong, be strong*. At the moment of Contact, all their energy would pass to Him and would be one with His.

The priest with the golden crown lifted the black cable and extended it toward Mariod's head.

Another litany, this one spoken by all. Then a spark leapt from the cable. Mariod shook as the current went through her. When the priest drew the cable back, she collapsed in the pool, smoke rising from her body. Arden was still standing.

The chanting ceased.

He was shaking, but not from the charge. Every eye in the assembly was on him. Mariod had let go of his hand.

Winds caught the smoke and drew it through the Colonnade's piers. Arden stood shivering, waiting. The storm thundered above him, and when he looked up, he saw the face of the god for whom Mariod had died.

Had her faith dissolved at the last moment? Had she balked at taking the life of a child she'd raised? Did she go to her grave thinking she'd betrayed the settlement and its gods—for him?

Finally, the priest who had led him to the Throne motioned him toward her. He was placed in quarantine, until they could decide what to do.



Estra was shaking him. Arden rolled over and rubbed his eyes.

"They're opening," she said.

"Opening?" His head was in her lap.

"The Tunnels." She pointed at the heavens.

Arden didn't know what they were or why he'd never noticed them. But as her finger passed over them, the Tunnels appeared. He raised himself.

The darkness was pierced by silver straws, and there were people swimming inside them. In every direction, near and far, humans were ascending or descending the starry night.

"I'm dreaming," he said.

"Believe what you like. It's time to leave." She craned her head. "We'll use that one."

Arden could see the mouth of a straw above them. Its circular entrance was bright and clearly defined. A *whoosh* mounted in his ears. The air below it was whirling with bubbles.

He peered at her. "You're going back."

She nodded. "And you're coming with me. Take off your clothes."

Arden was too stunned to move.

She pursed her lips and unbuttoned his shirt.

Estra was a different creature than the one he'd snuck into his cell. Unexpected, unearthly. He looked up. Inside the Tunnel was a glittering fog, a slow vortex. The *whooshing* grew louder. Was he going to do this?

They were both naked now. Estra clasped his wrist.

"Imagine you're lighter," she said. "Much lighter."

"That's all it takes?"

"That's all."

As he watched, her body shimmered and misted like frosted glass.

"Come on now," she urged him.

Arden shrugged his shoulders, as if he was shedding a heavy burden.

"You feel lighter?" she said.

She's not human, he thought. She'd been pretending. He could see through her.

"Are you feeling lighter?"

“It’s not working,” he said.

Her lucid eyes softened. She put her lips to his. They were cold and dewy.

Arden’s chest tingled. When he looked, his arms had fogged. He could see through his legs.

Estra rose slowly, and he was rising with her.

“Don’t worry,” she said.

Arden could see the earth below them, the bald spur with its rocky reef, snow-covered peaks, thick forests that rolled to the sea.

Estra’s cheeks were translucent now, her brow, her whole face— She was turning to motes—of water or breath. And so was he. His outline remained. He still had his earthly margin. Some vestige of human integrity held him together.

“What’s happening?”

“You’re graduating,” she said, “from solid to vapor.”

Above, the bright mouth of the straw grew larger. Its edge was pearled.

He could feel the agitation of his atomized flesh, and the agitation was mounting. He was like water, boiling, turning to steam. He was losing his center, his border, his shape—

“I don’t like this,” he said.

They had reached the Tunnel’s mouth. As they moved inside it, the sparkling fog swirled around them. Estra let go of his hand.

“Swim,” she said.

The transformation slowed. His diffuse body quivered and jelled.

Estra reached with her arms and flexed her legs, and she rose like a silver fish. The Tunnel was all around them.

“You’re one of us now,” she said.

Us, he thought. People rising into the sky. People retreating from it.

He sent his arm into the fog and flexed his trunk, joining the strange migration.

“Angry,” she said, “hurt and betrayed. Abused and abandoned.”

“Are they all so desperate?”

“Only they know their reasons for leaving. Or the reasons why, defeated by life in the sky, they choose to return. Swim, Arden. Swim.”

He took long strokes with his arms, torso gliding, trying to keep up. The fog churned and glittered around him. Below, out of sight, the earth he’d deserted was falling away.

Would he return? Would he ever be a man of flesh again? He struggled to calm himself. Estra looked blissful, a creature from fable, serpentine, graceful, her hair streaming back.



They emerged from the Tunnel, and invisible currents caught them. They were like two floating twigs drifting away from an upwelling spring. A body so light needed little strength to keep it in motion. Above, the sky was crystalline, jeweled with stars. Time passed as it does in a dream.

Then Estra spoke. “There,” she said.

Arden could see it ahead—the cloud, their craft, riding the waves.

Cords of vapor trailed down like mooring ropes. Topside, its billows swelled like sails catching the wind. Opaline light shone on the cloud's gunnels, while above its waist, the moon flashed silver on a rounded mount, like a ship's bridge.

Estra pulled through the roiling sea, a sea of wind and vapor. Arden swam behind her. "We're coming aboard," she cried.

As her voice faded, the moorings dissolved, and their intended home rolled toward them on the evening tide. Arden did his best to follow, stroking, finning his legs and flexing his trunk. The cloud rode up a hill, gleaming before them, sapphire gray. Then it sank, crushing a wave, splattering the bows with copper foam.

Estra was closing the distance. He followed, floating and sinking in the hillocks of fog. The cloud's hull was draped with nets of spume. As she reached the waist, Estra grappled the netting. Arden surfaced beside her and clung.

"She's ours," Estra said, and they rose together, climbing the netting hand over hand. When they reached the gunnel, she rolled over it, onto the quilted deck. Arden followed.

He lay huddled there, catching his breath. The deck supported him, but his chest and limbs were inches deep, motes intermingling. The changes in his body frightened him. The rush of blood in his ears was gone, and so was the thump in his chest. He felt his exertion in his breath. A great volume of

air was moving inside him. His lungs had expanded to what had been the borders of his flesh.

When he raised his head, Estra was standing by the bridge, gleaming in the moonlight, looking around, as if there might be others aboard. Above him, wind rusked the billows. On either side, pennants of mist fluttered from the bulwarks.

“I think we’re alone,” Estra said, turning to face him.

He rose slowly. He could feel the wind on his hip, and as it blew, his legs bowed. The motes shifted, but they didn’t drift far; as the wind faded, they returned to their places, and his legs straightened.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

She raised her arms to embrace him, and vapor trailed beneath. The arms lost their lines, became nearly transparent; then they halted and the motes caught up, refilling their hollowed containers. The rounded mount—the ship’s bridge—was behind her. Arden could see it through her.

He was speechless, trembling in every part.

Estra’s face fell. “Don’t panic,” she said.

3

Sun flared in Arden's eyes, and when he turned away from the brightness, a pliant coolness brushed his ear. His head was resting on a pillow of fog. A quilt of mist lay over him, its lavender swells sequined with gold. Estra was seated beside him, watching.

He raised his hand and peered through it.

"Welcome to the intangible." She stood.

He rose slowly, reaching for her. Her hand was feather-soft, but it helped him steady himself. Gravity—he still felt it. But standing was more like inflation, being buoyed up.

Mist hid the deck. Scarves and veils were drifting around them, obscuring the view on all sides. "It will take some getting used to," Estra said.

He didn't answer, and he didn't move.

She lifted her knee. He watched her leg stretch, separate

from the mist and grow a foot at the end. When she set it back down, the foot melted into the mist.

“Try it,” she said.

“I feel like I’ll fall through.”

“You’re not as heavy as you think.”

He raised his leg and it stretched like hers had. “I’m still human, aren’t I?”

“You’re a spirit, Arden. You’ve come home.”

He felt very different—sensations were missing. He was high in the sky, so he should have been freezing. He was chilled, a little; but it was like he’d put on a fur coat. Every mote of his body floated in a pocket of air. Gone too were the familiar noises—the twinkle in his ears, the beating of his heart. He was silent now, except for his breath. As the wind entered and left him, it did so with long, low sound.

“The mind can be troubled,” Estra said, “and the heart can ache. You can still feel pain. But the physical shackles are much looser.”

Arden’s motes felt like they were about to uncenter, to cross boundaries they were meant to honor, each floating away on its own.

“You still have a memory of greater weight,” she said, “and it’s the memory that tells you you’re going to fall.” She let go of his hand and took a step back. “Come to me.”

They were near the port gunnel. Arden looked down, seeing the empty fathoms beneath the ship and a dark ocean far below.

“Come to me,” she said again.

Arden lifted his leg from the fog and moved it toward her. He felt himself tipping and his arms shot out, but he didn’t fall. He floated. He grabbed Estra’s wrist and it compressed to a dowel. As his feet found the deck again, he felt the furred edge of her hip against his. Where was the map for his body? He was no longer sure where he ended and the air began.

The branching frond was visible on Estra’s breast, but it looked like white frost now. Their chests were both foggy, and the light passed through. Below his belly was an alarming sight. His organ was gone. Arden touched himself.

“What’s happened to me?” He glanced at Estra’s groin. The cleft in her mons had vanished.

“Coupling on earth—” Her brows lifted. “It’s a clumsy arrangement.”

His loss was painless, but the sight stung him. “Will it come back?”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“Is this normal up here?”

“In the sky, love is different,” she said. “I don’t think you’ll be disappointed.” She looked around her. Then she raised one hand. “We’re moving. Can you feel the wind?”

Before Arden answered, she started forward, plowing a path through the mist. Bollards of vapor rose on either side, appearing and disappearing in the boils and glare.

He did his best to follow. His motes hung together, shifting around the axis of his lost spine.

“Fog is sensitive,” Estra told him. “Try to calm yourself. Answer its subtlety with all the lightness you know. Glide. Coast. Make your gait fluid, like a bird in flight.

“Everything here is infused with wind. This cloud has a breath, and we breathe along with it. Wind whirls our flesh, inflates our hearts. Wind carries the words from my tongue. Wind rises out of you and rejoins the sky.”

Through the mist, Arden saw the side of the rounded mount.

“The Bridge,” Estra said.

“Can you steer a cloud?”

“Intention could give us direction,” she said, moving past. “But we’re going to let the wind carry us. We want to look uninhabited.”

A gap appeared in the shifting scarves. Through it, he could see the top of the Bridge: the ship’s helm. A new fear rose among the many stirring. If all this was real, was the man in the thunderhead real too?

“Maybe he’ll forget,” Arden said.

“Ingis won’t forget.”

He heard the trouble in her voice. Estra had fears of her own.

“The cats are gone,” Arden said. “We have a place of our own. And each other.” He spoke with all the confidence he could muster.

Estra’s eyes fixed on him. He could see gratitude in them, and hope.

As they reached the front of the cloud, the air cleared around them.

“Look at this.” She turned and motes sifted loose, swirling like the skirts of a dancer around her waist.

“The Prow,” he said. “The other end will be the Stern.”

The cloud was floating in a vast expanse, all white and blue, with a golden sun rising before it. Supple bastions, shifting barricades, twisted spires and gaping wells— Every chink let a morning beam through, and beyond the glittering maze lay an amorphous blanket, level and fleecy, waiting to be shaped.

“It’s enough just to breathe, isn’t it?” Estra spread her arms, as if contentment was a miraculous thing. “Do you feel free now?”

Her voice, so soft and uncertain— Her beautiful face, framed by the shifting clouds. There was frailty here, unlike anything he’d known on earth.

“I do,” Arden said. The sky seemed infinite. There was nothing to bound it.

“Our cloud is like the *Mariod*,” she offered.

“It is,” he nodded.

“You’re not hungry?”

“No.”

The ship’s stem hit a swell, and the icy spray traveled through him. He turned away from the Prow, seeing the sun and the breeze had stripped the cloud’s veils away. The gunnels curved back to the Stern. Above, sheets of fog hung from the masts, luffing and swelling.

“Let’s explore,” Estra said.

She stepped over the quilted surface and crossed in front of the Bridge, headed to starboard. Arden followed. The vapor parted to admit them, leaving smooth-sided banks that compressed and whorled, resealing as they passed.

“You’ve been on a cloud like this?”

“They’re all a bit different,” she said. “And they’re always changing.”

The way sloped down. As they descended, the mist settled.

“Look. It’s glittering,” Estra said.

The surface was level before them, reflecting the sun like a noonday beach.

“It’s flat as a deck,” he observed.

Estra turned. “The Glitter Deck,” they said together.

She started across it, and when she reached the gunnels, Arden coasted beside her. Over the curled edge, he could see a vastness of sky, and waters below.

“Smell.” She drew a gust in, and he did the same.

A tang of salt hung in the air.

“He must have been crazy,” Arden said, “to drive you away.”

Estra bowed her head.

“I know how lucky I am to be with you,” he said.

The morning glow lit the motes of her face. “Two days ago,” she said, “my life was hopeless. I keep thinking, ‘I fell into his arms. He was waiting to catch me.’”

He touched her middle, and his finger slid into it.

“Look there.” Estra pointed aft.

Swells of haze mounted to dunes, and the dunes ascended

to motionless hills. Here was a softness and airiness no ship ever had.

“They’ll be our Lofts.” Estra smiled.

She crossed the Glitter Deck and hurried through the dunes, leaving a sinuous trail, like a finger passing through loose sugar. “You’ll like this place,” she said with delight in her voice.

The Lofts were plush and soft as oakum. The fog around them was thicker here, and the sun was higher. As weightless as Arden felt, he seemed to be growing lighter.

“There’s nothing on earth like this,” she said.

Motes lifted from Estra’s face. Motes in layers—masks of care, each a bit different, each drifting away. Arden was sloughing atoms from his head and chest, like a fungus sheds spores.

“Every fair-weather cloud has a calm spot,” she said.

“Estra—”

“I’m remembering,” she said, “my fair-weather faith.”

“Faith?” The sun’s heat was leavening what remained of him, warming his motes, pulling them apart. He was losing definition, growing more translucent.

“There was something before us,” she said. “The first breath of the cosmos, the warmth that first blessed us, the breast that first fed us the wondrous fog.”

“People don’t speak this way to each other.”

“They don’t,” she agreed. “But we’re no longer people.”

“I’m too light—”

Estra drew closer. Their borders overlapped. “What is freedom?” she said. “Who are we really, when we’re free?”

“I’m sorry—”

“What’s the matter?”

“I feel like I’m losing myself.”

“That’s part of the sky’s magic.” Her eyes darted, searching. “It’s what the soul wants. And it’s practice for love. Giving yourself to another. Remember Mariod—her care, her devotion— The love she poured into you, like cream down the throat of a white orchid.”

“She’s gone,” he said. “She’s been gone a long time.”

“The child is still there, smiling and crying inside you.”

“I’m not ready for this.” Arden scanned the Lofts, shuddered and turned his back on them, shifting his legs slowly. Estra moved beside him.

“We have time,” she said. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to—”

“I’ve been a toiler all my life,” he said. “Wanting. Not having.”

“I know.”

“The one person I loved— I cried when she kissed me goodbye. I screamed when I saw what was left. Every night, I prayed she’d come back.”

“You don’t believe life can be kind,” Estra said.

“I want to be here. I want to be with you. I want to be free.”

“It’s a matter of trust,” she said, “isn’t it. When things are uncertain, you fear the worst. I understand. I have fears too. I smother them. I bury them deep inside me. And then, when I’m not expecting, they rise up and pierce my heart.”

“As long as I worked on my boat,” he said, “I dreamt of

failure. In my dreams, they found me out—in the forest, hauling the *Mariod* down to the bay, on the shore as I was about to launch her. They carried me back. I was soaked and tortured. My nights were filled with punishments. Will the nights here be any different?”

He took a breath. They were out of the Lofts. He was denser and more opaque. “It’s always with me: the curse of being powerless.”

“Everyone has failures, Arden.”

“You’re talking about Ingis.”

She turned her head. “I was happy here once.”

“I can see that.”

“My heart and mind—” She swallowed her words.

“You said you were never in love with him. That’s not true, is it.”

She sighed and shook her head. “We had something, but he destroyed it.”

Arden looked into her eyes. “I don’t know what’s going on in your head.”

“You could ask me.”

“Are you thinking about him?”

“No.”

“You’re saying that to spare my feelings.”

“I don’t care about Ingis,” she insisted, scanning the sky, as if trying to see a way out of their plight. “I came here with such high hopes, and this beautiful world ended up being a torment to me.”

A tear appeared on Estra's cheek. It vanished as he watched, like a raindrop in the sea. "Forgive me," he said. "I wish I was stronger, nobler—"

"You're right. It's true. I've been thinking of him. I've been fearful too, and angry the memories won't leave me.

"Your thirst for freedom— When you spoke of it on earth, my spirit soared. And now—we're here. But freedom frightens me too. The mind can justify anything." Her eyes searched his. "Where will freedom lead you? To inspiration? To hope and love? Other desires are lurking inside us. You can cut your moorings, free yourself from an imprisoning world. But your desires go with you."

"I want to be loved," he said, "by someone like you."

"Someone." Her voice sank. "I'm poisoned, Arden. Poisoned with anger and all the abuse I endured. When his thoughts are labored, I am the midwife. When they're weighted with guilt, I ease his load. When rage shorts his circuits, I take the blame. I'm his better, his confessor. His concubine, his whore. I'm food when there is nothing to eat." Estra shook her head. "We need a vat."

"A vat?"

"To flush the misery of bondage out of your system," she said. "And to wash away my anger at Ingis. We can't make this ship our home until we've done that."



A pole of fog turned in the wind, rising from behind the Bridge like a mainmast. Estra and Arden stood by the pole's collar, gazing up. She put her arms to her sides, flexed her legs and pushed off.

Estra rose into the air, spreading her arms, toes pointed down, turning a slow spiral around the mast. As she reached its top, she sculled, slowing and circling, scouting the cloud fore and aft. Then she tucked and rolled, diving back down.

"We have one," she said when she was back beside him. She gasped with relief. "And there are Spindles nearby."



The Vat was at the top of a swell. The cloud had cracked around it, and the perimeter was littered with puffs. Estra halted before it.

"Careful," she said. "Have a look, but keep your balance."

Arden approached the rim. The Vat was twenty feet across and full of fog. The surface was whirling, furrowed and spiral-striped, gray and black, with an ebony pock at its center.

"We're going in?"

"For a few seconds," she said, "and not together. You'll go first. I'll pull you out."

"What does it do?"

"It will wash away memories. One of the sky's sorceries." She regarded the Vat with respect. "There's some guesswork. Memories are tricky things."

She edged against him, putting her hand on his loin. “Those at the front of your mind go first. Focus on the things you want to forget. Think about the sorrows of being a toiler. Fill your mind with the memories that harry you. Don’t let your mind wander.”

Arden eyed the dark whorls. They were corded and foaming, and the center sucked with intent.

“Concentrate,” Estra said. “Your mind is full of memories you don’t want to lose. Rest your middle on the rim and ease yourself in. The solvent weights you, so levitation’s impossible. Keep one hand above the surface. I’ll count to four, then I’ll pull you out.”

Arden faced her, seeing a blink of fear.

“The length of time matters,” she said. “It starts here,” she touched her hairline, “and works its way down. The longer you’re in, the deeper the wash.”

He remembered the night he and Mariod were led to Apex.

Estra’s brow creased. “Let’s make it three. I’ll count to three.”

He nodded.

“One, two, three,” she prepped him. “Keep your hand up. You’ll feel me grab it. We don’t want to erase too much.”

“One, two, three,” he murmured.

She moved to one side.

Arden squared himself and faced the gyre. He could hear Estra’s breath in his ear. He put his hands on the rim, composed himself and curled his trunk over it. Then he dipped his head down, loosened his grip and plunged in.

His mind blanked as the cold took hold. He forced his attention back—blood, wounds, the sting of humiliation—The thoughts were like slippery fish. He was moving, face down. The spiraling surface admitted some light, enough that he could see into the Vat. It was smooth-sided and funnel-shaped. He raised his right arm.

“One,” Estra counted.

As the whorls swept through his mind, he saw, he remembered, reliving the pain. Priests in their robes; the one he loved best, her face blackened and smoking. Hunted by hounds, beaten, shivering in Soak.

“Two.”

Desperate wishes, hopeless hopes. Aching, heartsick and shaking; the city on a hill, and in every window, the staring souls.

“Three.”

His mind clouded, his vision gave out. In the darkness, curls glowed, curls and circles, circles and spirals where the evils had nested.

“I’m here,” Estra said.

The curls and circles began to slow. They broke into hooks and crescents that dimmed and shrank. He opened his eyes, seeing Estra’s face with the sun behind her.

“Who am I?” she said.

“My salvation.”

Estra laughed.

He raised himself slowly. He was lying amid the puffs beside the Vat. Over Estra’s shoulder, the mizzenmast rose,

sheets of fog hanging from its spars. A raft of mist floated beyond the port gunnels. He could measure their progress against it. The cloud had a razor clarity. And his servitude—
The memories were dim now, and the pain was gone. It had been a long dream, a bad one, and he had finally awoken.

“What was it like, back on earth?”

“I’m not thinking about that,” he said, touching her cheek.



“One,” Arden counted, his eyes fixed on Estra. She was bobbing on the Vat’s furrowed surface, circling on her side like a fitch of half-rendered fat. “Two. Three.”

He hooked his arms beneath her shoulders and pulled. Her neck compressed and her torso stretched.

Estra’s chest emerged, then her waist. Her knee caught on the rim, and his left arm came loose. Arden yelled, caught her and hauled her over the rim.

She was cold and her eyes were closed, but he saw breath in her nostrils. A shadowy tide waxed through her translucent chest. He lay her down and stretched beside her, pressing her close.

She grew warmer. Her breath deepened, and her motes seemed to pack together. Finally, her lids parted.

Her eyes had a wondering look.

“We’re on our cloud,” he said.

She fixed on him, frowning. She raised her shoulder, eyeing her body, as if it was strange to her.

“You were in the Vat.”

She squinted. “Arden.”

He nodded.

She looked around her, and the breeze blew off her frown. It hovered like a mask in the air between them, and then the motes of her face were reshaping.

“I’m better,” she said. “Much better. Will you help me up?”

He rose with her.

“You’ve been in?” she said.

“Yes. I’m better too.”

“I’m so glad.” She opened her arms, and he did the same, and their bodies lapped over each other, motes intermingling. Arden heard her tears. Tears of relief, grateful tears. Her brow met his, and they shared them.

The Vat had purged their demons, he thought.

“The past isn’t love,” Estra said. “Love is the future.”

They stood there, holding each other. Then Estra led him to the Spindles, where—she said—those who live in the clouds sometimes go, after a rinse in the Vat.



Through veils of mist, cones appeared in a murky hollow—cones of vapor, turning slowly, each at a different speed. Estra led Arden among them. They were twisted and spiraled, and they gave off puffs of vapor as they turned. The tallest were at the hollow’s center. What was their purpose? How long had the cones been turning?

“A mournful place,” he said.

“Here, wishes can’t hide. You can see them.”

Estra halted before a cone twice her height and turned to face him. “You’re not afraid,” she said. “You want to know.” She was asking for his assent.

“I trust you,” he said.

She kissed him. Then she raised her hand and brushed his chest. As he watched, she pushed her fingers into it.

“Above your heart,” she said. “An odd little thing, like a piece of lint.” Her brow furrowed. “I’ve got it.”

Arden felt a tugging.

“Here it comes.” Estra’s fingers emerged with a cord of fog, twisted and raveling. It twitched in the air before him, like a seeking sprout.

She continued to pull, drawing it through the motes of his sternum.

“Ready?” she said.

She touched the cord’s end to the turning spindle, and the spindle caught hold of it. As the spindle turned, the cord wound around.

Now Estra reached inside her own chest, facing the cone beside his. She pulled out a frayed leader and attached it.

“The Spindles are wish collectors,” she said, watching hers turn.

“They make wishes come true?”

“No,” she said. “They can only reveal them.”

Arden felt it moving inside him, like a rill of ice water. Before him, dew dripped from the taut cord. As the cone

spooled it up, the cord ticked like a clock. His heart throbbed, racing, unruly—resisting. Where the cord spooled round the cone, a mist was rising, greenish and glittering, filling the air with the wish hidden inside him. He could see it now; he could feel its need and sense its meaning. Why was his heart so unwilling?

Estra began to whimper, softly, to herself. She was peering at her own green cloud, with longing, with sorrow and hope.

“What does the spindle tell you?” she asked.

His continued to drag out the cord, but he knew the answer.

“I wish for courage in love,” he said. “To be brave enough to receive it.”

The hollow resounded with his declaration.

“I wish for modesty in love,” Estra said. “Purity and contentment.”

The spindles let go of the wishing lines, and their hearts snatched them back. The loose end of Arden’s line whipped and vanished into his chest.

He turned, regarding her through the green glitter.

“Simple wishes,” he said.

“I see now the reason for our attraction.” Estra moved closer, searching his face. “You imagined I could grant your wish. And I imagined you could grant mine. Life went wrong for us, but things have changed.”

She cocked her head, hesitant, as if she had something to hide.

“I got a glimpse of the future,” she said, “at the top of the mast. Our future together, here on this cloud.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have a lake,” she said. “A small one.”

Arden waited. Estra’s manner had changed. She seemed resolute, determined.

“You were born with a gift,” she said.

Arden shook his head, unable to guess her meaning.

“Candor,” she said. “Truth. Deep feelings—the deepest.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re going to declare them,” she said, “and I’m going to help.”

“Declare them?”

“With words,” she said, “like those you wrote on the back of Mariod’s portrait.”

“I have no skill—”

Estra motioned. “Follow me.”



The little lake was midway between bow and stern, near the starboard bulwarks.

“The Pond,” Arden said when it came into view.

It was gleaming and kidney-shaped, at the bottom of a foggy incline. They descended side by side. The cloud was running downwind now, pennants flying from mast and rail.

“I’ve never written anything for anyone else.”

“It will all be private, just for you and me.”

“What will I say?”

“We’ll find out.”

White tufts idled around the Pond's rim. As they approached, the pearling surface grew rings and eyes.

Estra surveyed the shore by the water's edge. "Why don't you sit here."

Arden lowered himself onto a pallet of fog. She sat beside him.

The Pond was an uneven mirror. He could see the warped reflection of a school of scuds drifting by. Estra reached with her arm, gathering mist from the margin and sweeping it toward them, spreading it evenly over the surface.

She glanced at him. "There's our paper."

Arden laughed. He pointed his forefinger, set it down on the "paper" and scribed the letter *E*. The skim of mist took the impression.

"Wonderful," she said, edging closer.

"I'm going to need your help."

"I'll whisper encouragements in your ear."

"I'll need more help than that," he said.

"We'll work on the ideas together. I'll stir your emotions. I'm good at that. I loved what you wrote about Mariod," she said. "Let's start with something romantic."

"Something short," he said.

"We have plenty of time."

Arden looked up. The sun was directly above them. Below it, cirrus hoods—windblown cowls—were dragging across the sky.

"The Night We Met," he said.

"Perfect."

He hunched over the misty page, casting for an entry. Estra watched.

She was wet, he wrote, shivering. He stared at the silver-gray sheet. *I could barely hear her over the rain.*

He looked up. "I thought you were going to help me."

"You were bold," she said. "You picked me up and carried me into your shelter."

"I don't think this will work."

"What's wrong?"

"It doesn't feel natural to me," he said gently.

"Be patient," she said. "Please."

I picked her up, he wrote, and carried her into my shelter.

He paused.

I felt bold— Arden winced. He used the heel of his hand to erase the mistake, but the movement blurred all the words on the page.

"I'm sorry." He knew he was disappointing her.

"Don't be." She kissed his shoulder.

"I'm not a poet. I dig culverts. I repair sluices. It took me years to make my boat."

"I just know," Estra said. "Our wishes will find their fulfillment here."

"If I had learned—"

"I want you to bare your soul to me, Arden. And I'm going to bare mine to you. Here. We'll talk about love, and we'll find your courage. I know it's there. And— I'll tell you about my struggle for peace. For contentment. With you, I'm going to find it." Her smile was tentative. "Is that too soppy?"

Arden shook his head.

“I can start things,” she offered. “I’m not a poet either. But let’s see how I do.”

She rested her chin on his shoulder and put her lips to his ear.

“*I was desperate that night,*” she said. “*Frightened and alone.* Go on. Don’t worry about legibility.

“*How could it be? The love I’d dreamt of and longed for— Eager and close, holding me? Ready to blind himself to everything else and sail away.* You’ll need to write faster if you’re going to keep up. Don’t think about the words. Just let them flow through your finger. Here. This will help.”

She leaned her head against his, and their atomized brows overlapped. When she resumed speaking, her voice seemed like his own.

Estra’s words were naked, rich with emotion. A breeze shunted the page as Arden wrote. Her voice slowed and then raced, was gentle then forced, grave and lighthearted. His confidence mounted. She paused, reaching for a thought but not finding, and he jumped in. Words poured from his lips—or were they hers again?

“*That unforgettable night. A night of ardor. A night of questions. To find our freedom and live for love, only for love—what would that mean? We would be creators. Love would be a new kind of expression. We would devote ourselves, spend ourselves, lose ourselves in our creation.*”

“A new kind of expression,” Arden repeated.

He raised his finger from the Pond.

“It’s done,” Estra said.

Using her fingers, she peeled the sheet off, and as Arden watched, the feathered edges curled and turned into wings. A large crane, silver-gray, lifted from the surface, neck reaching, legs trailing back. The words were visible on its wings, each line on a pinion. The crane rose with a stuttering cry, its long beak aimed, climbing quickly.

Arden was amazed. “You knew—”

“Let’s just say I expected.” Estra leaned back.

Together they followed the bird as it circled over them.

“Only love can do that,” she said. “Shall we go again?”

“What’s next?”

“How we left the earth. What we found on our cloud.”



The hours flew by. To Arden’s surprise, Estra’s energy didn’t flag. And his focus didn’t waver. When a page was complete, she stripped it from the Pond and released it into the sky. Then she carried a fresh layer of mist over the mirror and they started on another.

They created cranes to honor their tie, then they took up more arcane and fanciful things. Secrets—buried, never before shared. Somnolent thoughts, dreamy, narcotic. A mad impulse, an unaccountable dream, an obsession with name. His finger raced, her lips moved like mumbling in sleep.

My deliverance, my soul, the sacred five letters. At dawn, I’ll

see them climbing above the horizon. At twilight, I'll paint them across the sky. At midnight, I will write them with the tip of my tongue on your thigh.

Arden, the name—its tuck and glide—wings dew from my heart and pearls from my eyes.

By sundown, a small flock of cranes circled the ship.

Arden's eyes burned. Estra's breath was steaming.

She rose, watching the birds, listening to their stuttering cries. "Not a word we've written is false," she said.

He raised himself, admiring the cranes in flight. He would never have imagined their efforts at the Pond would turn out so well.

"We're different now," he said. And when she met his gaze, he could tell: she knew what he meant. Where their heads had mingled, a new mind had been born.

They stood side by side, regarding their reflection in the watery mirror.

"Your words fill the air," he said. "But I see them here too." He touched his chest. "You have written on me."

"And you see," Estra put her hand on her breast, "what being your muse has done. This lonely soul finally has a mate."

They studied their reflection in silence, then they turned and started up the slope.

"Will there ever be a day like this again?" Arden said.

"They will all be like this," Estra replied.



When they reached the Spindles, it was dusk and the hollow was dim. Estra found a trundle of fog and was patting it down. “We can sleep here tonight.”

“What is that?” Arden said.

On the rim of the hollow was an unexpected sight. A large curl had risen and was frozen there, like the back of a band shell, stained coral by the raking light.

Estra gave him a mystified look.

“It wasn’t there this morning,” he said.

They wound their way through the rotating cones, and when they reached the Band Shell, they circled it. A rippling terrace appeared, and there were puffs like bolstered divans on either side. Beneath the front of the Band Shell, a mesh of mist was suspended: a hammock strung amid colored smokes.

They crossed the terrace to a pair of misty veils hanging like drapery. Estra parted them. They were standing by the port bulwarks, staring into space.

Arden leaned over the gunnel and looked down. There was land far below, dun-colored plateaus with eroded slopes. The cloud was gliding effortlessly. Its hull was sleek, without joints or planking.

She turned away from the view. “A bower,” she said, scanning the space. “Made for us.”

They approached the hammock together.

Estra steadied the mesh and eased herself down. Beneath the Band Shell, the shadows were thick. “Perfect,” she sighed, and a small plume of steam emerged from her lips.

Arden lay on his back beside her, the mesh stretching beneath him.

At the Pond, all had seemed stable; but here, things were shifting. The Band Shell trembled. A wave crossed the terrace. The misty drapes opened and closed on their own.

A breeze passed, and the hammock began to sway.

He rolled onto his hip, facing Estra. The ship would drift while they were asleep, at the mercy of winds, however they blew. The thought was unsettling.

As if to comfort him, she put her lips to his. He felt a sting of frost in the kiss, and as they nestled together, the fog thickened. The divans blurred, and so did the terrace. The ship was breathing, and the Bower along with it, every surface stirred by the wind's infusions.

"We'll spend our lives here," Estra said.

"How long do we have?"

"As long as we would on earth. If no misfortune intervenes."

"There's a natural end?"

She nodded. "Your motes won't change, but your will weakens until it's unable to hold them together." She raised her hand, covering her yawn with her fingers. Then she edged against him.

Her cheek softened, her shoulder, her hip— She was joining the mist, and so was he. His limbs evanesced, then his waist and his chest.

"A solitary dream is an illusion," she said. "But a dream that two share is real."

Then their heads met, as they had at the Pond, and the voice seemed his own. The voice and the thought.

The ship cruised into the darkness, losing its borders. The stars winked and disappeared.