



RICH SHAPERO

Rin,
Tongue
AND
DORNER

A NOVEL

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

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Arms from the Sea

The Hope We Seek

Too Far

Wild Animus



ON THE WINDS OF SLEEP

It seemed to Dorner, asleep and twisting in his sheets, that gusts had descended, bringing a fierce heat. They chafed and smothered him. He turned on his hip, unhunching, raising his hand, feeling for calm, for coolness. His neck was lathered with sweat, his lips trembling.

He heard voices in the winds. Female voices. Singing.

One, breathy and fervent, bloomed like smoke. Another yowled out of the distance, flaring as it approached. A third pierced him, sharp with pain and denial. Voices of wisdom, heavy with age; voices of youth, buoyant, slurring over hard enunciations. Others brassy, throaty, troubled and warbling; or sine-simple, urgent as a crisis siren or sweet as a flute.

They were braided with yearning. They had a desperate need, and they entered his ears, goading, promising, caressing his chest and drubbing his thighs, circling his belly and the hooked organ rising from his groin.

Dorner fought his arousal. He covered himself with his hand, but a low blast batted it away. He turned facedown, and a heartsick moan bulged the mattress beneath him. Trills tugged at the bedding. Whispers skipped on his back and fiddled his sides. Then an amorous wail yawned over his ears, consuming his mind, swallowing it whole.

The voices were irresistible. They could stir the stars and make galaxies whirl. They could melt the earth, turn buildings to smoke and men to steam.

Why him? Why tonight— Dorner didn't care.

He threw off the sheets, ready to open himself. *I want you*, he thought.

Shame gripped him. He recanted, hiding his face, praying the voices away.

They objected as one, volleying through space, drafting around him, shaking his frame and filling his ears with vicious complaints. But as close as they seemed—hot against his skin, reading his thoughts—something protected him. His fear, his memories, a web of scars. It was a veil they rippled and bulged but couldn't pierce.

Dorner woke suddenly, lathered with sweat, searching the darkness. He propped himself on an elbow and touched his thighs and genitals. No trace of semen. Relieved, he used the sheet to mop his chest and rose. The room seemed unusually cool. He groaned. His stomach felt like a clenched fist.

First light was leaking through the drapes. He stumbled through the dimness, dizzy and muddled, to his bureau, patting its top with one hand, finding the injector. He twisted

its top. When the eye blinked blue, he removed the cap and worked the trigger till liquid appeared in the barrel. Then he jabbed the needle into his bicep. Heat and odors, echoing voices—

He had never had a dream so vivid. So treacherous, so troubling.

He stepped to the window and parted the drapes. Beyond the glass, day was dawning on the crowded heart of Clemency, the colony where he'd spent most of his life. The sight calmed him. His focus retreated to the glass itself, seeing his reflection—the steep cheeks and high brow, the snarled hair and hawk nose. And the eyes, with their unexpected ferocity, lit by a private fire.

He made his way to the bathroom, reached into the shower stall and turned on the cold tap. A breath to steel himself, and he stepped into the stall. The icy spray struck his chest. His heart shrank, and he began to shiver. A moment later, his erection was gone.

When he was dry, he put on an undershirt, faced the mirror and combed the black hair back from his brow. Then he raised his shaver and ran its crystal head over his cheek, removing the stubble. He drew it close to his ear, shaving hair from around the flesh-colored nipple of his signaler. The shaver's hum calmed him. As it smoothed his cheek, the sound became a soothing whisper, a caring safeguard against whatever trials the new day might present.

Dorner paused to depress the yellow mole on his wrist. His signaler turned on, and as he returned to shaving, Joinspace

spiraled open in the outside corner of his right eye. In a translucent circle, alerts were posted.

Dorner focused on the Joinspace rim, pulled it to the center of his visual field and expanded it. His first call was to Maisy.

Joinspace flickered and Maisy spoke. “Busy day. The Homestead burn starts at ten. In chambers, we have seven hearings. Four of them are appeals.”

“I’m not seeing you.”

“I’m dressing,” she said.

“Sorry.” Dorner adjusted the Joinspace to glass-clear and switched his shaver off, regarding his face in the mirror.

Maisy appeared, smiling through her freckles, lifting her ginger locks. Trying to decide whether to wear them loose or piled, he guessed. “There’s some sort of situation brewing at the Ibarra,” she said. “Is something wrong?” She cocked her head.

“I didn’t get much sleep.” He smiled. “See you downtown.”

He relaxed his focus and her image vanished.

Dorner shifted to the snowflake, checking his personal temp. His libido was moderate, within normal limits, but his mood was far from cool. Maisy had sensed his upset. He pulled the Joinspace back to its corner and switched on the shaver.

As it smoothed his chin, he recalled the voices he’d heard in his sleep. Distant, then closer—insistent, imploring. Ancient and childish, threatening, pleading.

They were more than vestiges of an unruly dream. They

took him back to longings he'd buried. Longings he feared. Longings that had marked him for life.

Some things take hold of you. Invade you. Own you. You want to be free of them, but you never will be.

Dorner felt his cheeks. He set the shaver down and looked at his reflection. His face was innocent, his blue eyes sensitive. And there was nothing to see on his chest. His undershirt covered it, and he had a towel around his waist. But the scar on his left arm was clearly visible. It was long and scaled like a snake, coiling around his bicep and down his forearm, its bulbed head seeking. Dorner turned his left hand over and gazed at his palm. An oval scar obscured the lifelines. It was swirled and pimples where the flesh had melted.



Minole, the super's wife, was short and round, and her hair was draggled. She'd responded to his knock in seconds, her face glowing with affection. She wore an apron, and baking scents billowed around her.

"Squid," she said, handing him a sandwich wrapped in white paper.

Dorner slid it into the pocket of his midnight blue morning coat.

"There's something else," Minole said, turning to the shelving beside her. When she turned back, she held a small box, black with gold filigree. "Miss Bez came by last night."

“Bez?”

Minole handed the box to him. “She wants to see you.”

Dorner put the box in his pocket with the sandwich.

“You didn’t reply to the note she left.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Minole put her hand on his arm. “Don’t hurt her.”

Dorner nodded. “I won’t.” Her advice touched him. She cared for Bez, but she made allowances for him, without prying.

“There’s no one like her,” Minole said.

“No one,” he agreed.

On the stoop, the old vet Franklin was parked in his wheelchair. He reached for Dorner’s hand. “I hear we’re burning the Homestead woodland.”

“This morning,” Dorner said.

Franklin wore the brown sash that had identified Planning officers in decades past. Dorner untwisted the old man’s lapel. His wife had died the previous winter, and his eyesight was failing.

“Controlled burns are dangerous.” Franklin’s tone was confidential. “We burned Homestead when I was your age. She got away from us.”

“I’d like to hear about that.”

“You’re in a hurry,” the old man said, respect in his eyes.

Dorner squeezed his shoulder.

Franklin gave him a proud salute.

As he descended the stair, Dorner grasped the rail to steady himself. His chest ached. He felt a hollow in the pit of

his trunk. Lust forgone. *Longing*, he thought. His dream had revived it, and the need made him weak.

He drew a breath and raised his head, scanning the dome. The air exchangers were doing their job. No fog, no condensation. The sweep of transparent glass above him was crystal clear, and the skies beyond were cloudless, pink and purple, taking color from the sun rising in the east. To the north, rains descended from conduits in the spars of the dome, watering the orchards and farms below.

Dorner reached the bottom of the stair and scanned the thruway. People seemed in good spirits, hastening to work, talking to each other or conversing with family or co-workers over Joinspace. He straightened himself and stepped forward. As he merged with the foot traffic, the morning howl of the gibbons began. Of the creatures selected to inhabit the Clemency dome, the apes were the colony's most striking success. They were part of the tribe, sharing humanity's triumphs and setbacks. Seated on tree branches and the dome's lower spars, hundreds of them were whooping to greet the dawn.

On either side of the thruway, shops were opening. Dorner skirted a kiosk and a small group beside it. A little boy smiled at him, and he smiled back. Heads turned, eyes followed. His morning coat marked him as a Planning head, and people knew his face. No one could see behind the mask. The thought reassured him.

The role he played— It was an honor to play it. The colony depended on him. And in dawn's gentle light, they both looked their best.

Clemency's structures were sheathed in white polycrete that was soft when applied. The polycrete could be molded, which had allowed a guild of sculptors to fashion a forest of fantasy towers, cornered with minarets and spires, hollowed by alcoves and grottoes, ornamented with arches, cupolas and rosette windows. The molded curves sparkled like snow when the morning sun hit them.

Here, where the tightly packed buildings cut off views of the glaciers, structures had been raised to the limit—forty stories. All that remained was an eighty-foot airflow gap between the rooftops and the curving glass.

As Dorner turned into the arcade that led to the tube train depot, a young woman pointed at him. An older one stood behind her, following him with her eyes while she drank from a cup. She was short, with gray hair and puckered lips. As he watched, she lowered her cup and her gaze shifted. Then it returned, brazen, unflinching.

There was recognition in her eyes, but it wasn't the face on the news she saw. And there wasn't a hint of curiosity or respect.

She saw things that were hidden. Her eyes burned with naked desire.

I'm imagining things, Dorner thought.

The arcade fed into a courtyard. A group of Kiribati refugees were standing by the fountain, singing a hymn from their native home. Despite the passage of years, the emotions were so rich, a few who had stopped to listen were crying. The Kiribati men were wearing their white bandannas, and their

thicket bodies and swarthy features set them apart. One hurried toward him.

“Dorner—” The man clapped his back. “Sing with us.”

“I know that one,” Dorner nodded.

“My cousin,” the man gestured toward the fountain. “He has to meet you.”

“I’m in a rush. You understand.” Dorner waved at the crowd around the fountain. Two dozen arms waved back.

On the far side of the courtyard, the depot came into view, a retro roundhouse with a bell tower and archway. To the left, the southbound tube train was rising from its tunnel, torpedo nose flashing, chrome car capsules hissing behind.

A woman barged into him, turning, lips parted, eyes bluer than his. Dorner reached out, but before he could grab her, she fell to her knees, dropping a bouquet of scarlet freesias.

“My fault,” he said, kneeling beside her. “I wasn’t looking.”

He retrieved the bouquet and extended his hand to help her up. The woman’s eyes flooded with fear. She shook her head, as if he’d suggested something obscene. Then her barbed look relented. Her eyes burned with deep feeling, lids narrowing.

You’re aroused, Dorner’s signaler warned, using his voice.

He rose slowly, helping the woman up.

Caution, his signaler warned. A crimson temp alert blotted his Joinspace.

The woman eyed his hand. It was gripping her arm.

“Alright,” she whispered. “Where should we go?” She touched the yellow mole on her wrist to turn her signaler off.

Caution, caution, caution, Dorner’s guidance looped.

Something's wrong with her, he thought. A mental case—
“Forgive me,” he said, releasing his grip.

“No,” the woman shook her head, eyes wide now, face pale. “Forgive *me*.”

She had come to her senses.

“You're alright?” Dorner asked.

She ignored the question, grasped the bouquet and hurried away.

Dorner turned and strode toward the depot.

A crackup, he thought. Some personal crisis. Everyone has a breaking point. Dorner touched his pant pocket, relieved to feel the injector.

As he joined the passengers filing beneath the polycrystalline arch, the *caution* loop stopped, and the temp alert winked out. *Arousal clear*, his signaler said.

Dorner sighed. In addition to their other functions, signalers monitored personal temp during waking hours, watching for emotional swings and libidinal spikes. Adherence to signaler guidance was voluntary, and the signaler could be switched off. But the advice was important, and few chose to ignore it. Least of all, Dorner.

What had begun as an effort to keep the dome's atmosphere within narrow temperature limits had evolved into a belief in emotional restraint. By managing temperature and temperament they could control their fate. In addition to asking citizens to shun open fires, an array of other behaviors were discouraged, including violent arguments, feverish athleticism and extravagant sex. Like everyone, Dorner had been taught

the strictures as a child, along with the history of the early Planners who had fathered this wisdom.

He'd been a renegade. He'd learned the hard way. But he championed the strictures now and was determined to follow them. Optimal Temp meant harmony. Rising Temp endangered them all. Around the equator, Clemency was known for its culture of caring. Disputes were few. Optimal Temp was their hope, their future. From a Planning perspective, curbing sexual excess put a damper on reproduction. Keeping the population static was critical to their survival.

Inside the depot, Dorner made his way to the boarding platform for downtown commuters. Repair work was underway, and the grills over the track switchers had been taken up. A tube train approached from the west, hissed around a hillock, slid beside the platform and halted.

He crossed a cordoned catwalk and boarded a car. There were bench seats on either side. The weight of the incoming passengers rocked the car on its airbed. When all were seated, the doors closed. Heads turned, eyes met his. A man with white hair raised his cane to him. A woman pointed him out to her child. The impellers hissed, and the train lunged, leaving the platform and the depot behind.

They entered a tube, and the windows dimmed. Dorner closed his eyes.

The *whish* of the train on its airbed reached him. And the shrilling, as it took the bends at high speed. There was a low note too, a resonance. He'd heard the sounds all his life, but he'd never listened so closely.

An enormous *boom* filled the car, and Dorner jackknifed forward. He opened his eyes. The earth was shaking beneath them. He turned and looked out the window. The train was still moving. They had risen from the tube and were approaching the Hub. Above the speeding car, the dome was shivering.

The passengers were wide-eyed, shaking with the transmitted motion, gripping the stanchions or clutching their seats.

We're out of level, Dorner thought, wondering if the others could sense that.

As he stood, the train's brakes screamed.

Using the overhead bins to brace himself, he maneuvered around the lurching car, peering through windows. To the south, he spotted a plume of ice dust fronting the Ibarra Glacier. An aerial ice-cutter was circling the plume. Dorner expanded his Joinspace and called Maisy.

As the train slowed, two men rose. A woman yammered. The car pitched and grunted, and the brakes screamed again. Then it shivered to a halt. Half of the passengers were on their feet now. Maisy wasn't answering.

Dorner faced the riders. "No cause for alarm," he said.

Through the forward windows, the causeway circling the Hub was visible. Crowds were ganging, frightened, clamoring. The Patrol was nowhere in sight.

"A berg hit us," a bearded man guessed.

Dorner shook his head. "There's been a collapse."

"Where?" a mother asked, cradling her infant.

Others nodded. Where was the danger? They wanted to know.

“The Ibarra Glacier,” Dorner told them. “Everything’s under control.”

“We’re tipping,” a boy said.

“Nonsense,” a man in overalls replied.

“I can feel it,” the boy said.

“Look at those buildings,” a woman pointed through the window, “and the trees.”

Heads turned, groans sounded. The bearded man raised his glasses.

“We’ve had our eye on the Ibarra,” Dorner assured them. “Response teams are in motion. We’ve handled a lot of collapses just like this. You can all remember.”

A score of fearful faces stared at him.

“Calm,” Dorner said. “Calm is everything.”

The man with white hair raised his cane again and smiled at him.

A young woman bowed her head, lips moving in silent meditation. The mother drew her infant beneath her shawl, and as the babe began to suckle, she closed her eyes. The bearded man put a pill on his tongue. Dorner focused on his Joinspace and called the Crisis Center. The circuits were busy.

“Honest, Mister Dorner,” the boy said softly. “We’re crooked.”

“I know,” he nodded.

“We’re sinking,” the bearded man said.

A woman sobbed. She fell to her knees on the car floor.

Dorner closed the distance and knelt beside her. “Stay with us. Hang on.” He clasped the woman’s hand and turned her

face toward his. “We’ll get through this together. Please—help me,” he enjoined the others.

The bearded man knelt and stroked the woman’s forearm. The nursing mother stooped to touch her cheek.

“Quiet your heart,” Dorner said, circling the woman’s back with his arm. “Calm your fears. We’re all here with you.”

“Calm,” the man in overalls echoed. “Be calm.” And the magic word spread. “Calm, be calm. That’s right. Don’t forget— We’re in control. We know what to do.”

Faith in Optimal Temp flowed like a balm between them, commending restraint to the frightened woman and to each other.

“Can you hear us?” Dorner said.

The woman gazed at him through her tears, seeing his devotion and the concern in the circle of faces. She sobbed again and embraced him.

Dorner felt Clemency’s truth shining through.

“I don’t know you by name,” he said, scanning the passengers. “But I care about you. Every one of you. I won’t let you down.”

The last phrase was part of their catechism. They echoed it back, embracing and patting each other. “I won’t let you down, won’t let you down—”

“Dorner—” Maisy’s voice crackled in his ear. “A heliopper’s on the way.”



The ice dust was thick, and the rotors of the descending hopper churned it. Inside, through the convex glass, Dorner could see others parked at the landing site.

A Planning van met him. In the van, he removed his morning coat and put on an arctic parka, leggings and a pair of spiked boots. While he laced the boots, he watched a clip of the collapse in his Joinspace. From the Ibarra's turquoise face, a sheer panel of ice keeled out, unpuzzling into jagged blocks as it fell. Some went into the sea. Others crashed onto the dome's lip at the bottom of the frame. The van halted. Dorner closed the clip and focused on a live feed as he stepped out of the van.

The feed's camera was underwater, panning across drowned cropland and farms. The collapsing ice had cracked the dome's seal, and the ocean had rushed in. The homes were submerged. The hull of a hatchery skiff appeared. Men were throwing lines to those struggling in the water, hauling them in like fish.

Dorner hurried toward the southern portal. Reporters were gathered there, and the cameras were rolling. He shouldered through them, shaking his head. The portal guards recognized him and opened the airlock.

A moment of warmth and quiet, then he clambered from the chamber's exit onto the weatherworn skirt of Clemency's tilting raft.

He clung to the brace rails, planting his feet on the deck. The freezing cold bit his face. Before him, the sheer blue of the Ibarra towered into the sky, its crest bristling with spikes. The

great arc of the dome rose on his left. The declension was serious, worse than he'd expected. Waves were lapping two stories over the colony's rim. Giant blocks were piled on the glass, and a flotilla of bergs bobbed beside it. High above, jagged flukes creaked and groaned on the glacier's brow, threatening to come down.

Aerial cutters swooped before the turquoise cliffs, firing artillery to pulverize the loose fins. As the shots landed, hanging blocks burst or calved and flashed, plunging into the sea.

The dome was moored to the ocean's bottom in a lane of water. There were four sublevels below waterline, and in the lowest, massive furnaces generated the colony's heat. Furnace exhaust was vented around the dome's rim to keep the lane open. But Dorner could see: something was wrong. The water in the lane was boiling, and from the boils, plumes of ash and smoke whirled, rising up the Ibarra's front.

Heat, he thought. Loosening, prying, dividing— Heat made the ice crackle and hiss.

"The charges are set," a male voice said.

The blasting crew's captain was standing before him.

"What's going on?" Dorner motioned at the boils.

"I thought you might know," the captain said. He pointed at the blocks piled on the dome, explaining how many charges there were and where they'd been set. It was a terrible responsibility, and Dorner was there to share it. If the charges were too large or they weren't placed properly, a blast could shatter the dome.

The captain raised his hand. "Excuse me." He turned,

answering a call coming through on his signaler. When he turned back, his face was pale.

“A man’s still in there,” the captain said.

Dorner could imagine the blaster crawling among the giant blocks, hearing them grind as he wired the charges, wondering if he’d escape with his life. Dorner knew what that was like.

A deafening crack filled the air, followed by an unearthly rasping. The captain shouted, and his men dove for cover. Dorner threw himself to the deck and hooked the brace rail with both arms. Above, a jagged mass broke away from the Ibarra’s heights, smoking and turning as it fell. The ice struck the dome, crashing onto the earlier collapse, jolting the colony and rocking its raft.

Amid a blizzard of ice dust, Dorner sprang to his feet. The captain was huddled nearby.

“What’s his name?” Dorner asked.

“Kenton,” the captain replied.

Dorner unclipped the captain’s ax belt, fastened it around his waist and headed into the flurry. He slid the ax from its holster, climbing the crusted glass, picking his way among the piled blocks.

“Kenton,” he shouted. Below him, through the settling dust, the rim of the dome was sinking deeper in the turbulent waters.

“Kenton. Where are you?”

The blocks groaned and creaked, tipping and grinding as Dorner scrambled between them. “Kenton—”

A croak rose from a nearby pit.

Dorner dropped into it and peered through a crack.
“Speak to me.”

“I’m caught,” the man gasped.

“Can you see the sky?”

“No,” the man said. “My boots are on glass.”

“Is your signaler live? I’m Dorner. Send me your position.”

A moment later, Dorner’s signaler bleeped. He expanded his Joinspace and a diagram appeared. Edging around an icy shelf, he stepped onto a slab that was fluted with rime. His spiked boots held, and he crossed it slowly. The diagram led him into a trough. The powder squeaked beneath his feet. At the trough’s end, two blocks were balanced together, meshed like gears. He knelt and belly-crawled between them. When he rose, he was in a chamber, shadowed and icy purple.

“Can you hear me?” he shouted. His breath fogged the air.

“You’ve faded,” Kenton sighed.

Dorner shook his head. He checked his bearing, faced a gleaming panel of ice and swung the ax. Chips flew, the panel cracked and fell to pieces. Through the broken window, Kenton was visible. He was on his belly, covered with shards, with a giant cake wedged over him.

“Crawl to me,” Dorner said.

“I can’t.” Kenton struggled to free himself.

The giant cake groaned and shifted.

“It’s got your parka,” Dorner said. “Open it. Slide out.”

The blaster did as he said. With his arms at his sides, he squirmed through the crush like a larva shedding its skin. He

was shuddering and drenched, but there was nerve in his eyes. His blue lips smiled, parting around a cracked incisor. Dorner helped him to stand and hurried him into the purple chamber. Shrieks sounded behind them. The wedged cake spidered with cracks.

“Are your charges wired?”

Kenton nodded.

“Let’s get out of here,” Dorner said.

He took the lead, belly-crawling back between the geared blocks. They padded through the trough and crossed the fluted slab. As they rounded the icy shelf, the pit appeared.

“My ax,” Kenton groaned. He’d left it behind. The walls of the pit were too steep to ascend without it.

“We’ll find a way,” Dorner said.

“There’s no time.” Kenton’s jaw quivered.

“Grab my belt,” Dorner ordered.

Kenton shook his head. “Clemency needs you.”

“Grab,” Dorner raged, hurling himself at the wall of the pit, sinking the ax blade and driving his spiked boots in.

Kenton grabbed and hung, while Dorner chopped and spiked his way up, hauling the blaster with him. As the wall curled back, Kenton dangled. Dorner turned, grappled the man’s trunk with both hands and pulled him over.

As they descended to the raft, the charges fired. The large blocks shattered and slumped from the rim into the sea. As the dome righted itself, scrubbers on leash cables scrambled across the glass to remove the crusts and loose debris.

The captain and his team surrounded Kenton. Dorner

dropped the ax, unclipped the belt, pulled off his parka and handed it to the shivering blaster. Then he continued to the airlock and passed through it. He was making his way through the clutch of news people, when a voice tinged with irony caught his ear.

“Our hero,” the woman said.

He’d forgotten her name, but he remembered her face.

“You never called,” she said, bringing a microphone forward. Behind her, a man aimed a camera over her shoulder. “Mister Dorner, why didn’t the cutters trim those hangers before they fell?”

He headed for the van, but the woman and the camera were on his heels.

“Mister Dorner. Why is the water boiling?”

A roar followed her question. One of the aerial cutters hit a cornice of hanging ice. As it crashed into the water, a cheer went up.



Downtown, at Clemency’s center, was a green round called Hub Park. Large public buildings circled it—the Archives, the Academy, the Museum of Memorable Creatures, Clemency Hospital and others. Each had forty floors, as did the apartment towers nearby, with connecting bridges on multiple levels. Chief among them was Planning headquarters.

The Planning roof was crowded with radio towers. Its polycrystalline flanks were graceful concaves, and with its weft of

bridges, antiquarians likened the building to an hourglass hung with webs. On the ground floor, above the entrance, was the Planning insignia—a three-pointed star.

Dorner crossed the lobby. When he reached the lifts, he swiped his wrist over the green sensor. Copper doors facing west depicted events from the past: the dark cloud that cloaked the earth, the expanding ice packs, the hurried design of equatorial colonies, the construction of the Clemency dome. Dorner preferred riding in the lifts facing east. Their doors portrayed a future to come: the great melting, the return migration, the earth's resettlement. The last door showed a beaming family before a one-story home.

A door slid heavenward and Dorner boarded the lift.

As it rose, the park appeared through the glassed-in shaft, then the Jubilee Icefield and the Felosia Canal beyond the dome. He watched the numbers mount on the light panel, feeling the floors stacking beneath him. At forty, the lift stopped.

Rivelle was in his office, barking orders through his intercom. He loomed over the circular desk, an imposing figure with his silver brushcut and blue morning coat. Behind him, through a large window, the western sweep of the dome was visible: a giant terrarium floating on a wind-stippled waterway, with glaciers and icefields on either side. Rivelle slapped off the intercom.

"We undercut the ice," he said, glaring. "The exhaust regulator for the southern sector gave out." He struck the desk with his fist. "That furnace is a curse."

"Any drownings?"

“None reported. They’re still fishing them out. We had to dam the break, so those in the drink don’t get washed out to sea.”

“A lot of ice fell.”

“I was watching from here.” Rivelle glanced at the Ibarra. “The second shake knocked me down.” He smirked. “Dorner to the rescue.”

“What do you expect, with all those reporters.” Dorner laughed while he gauged Rivelle’s temp. The boss was very fearful. “Can they fix the regulator?”

“That’s the plan,” Rivelle said. “We closed the ducts a few minutes ago. Cruisers with blast teams are patrolling the southern rim. They’ll clear bergs and trim the shelves until we can get the exhaust system working.”

“Those blocks came down a hundred yards from the fuel bunkers.”

Rivelle sighed. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

Dorner regarded Planning’s chief and the view behind him. From the 40th floor, the colony looked like the work of an unhinged eccentric—intricate and labyrinthine, crowded beneath a bell jar surrounded by ice. The transparent canopy swept from its circular base to an apex five hundred feet above the sea. The high point was Zenith. Dorner could see the Zenith waitstaff setting tables on the outdoor deck. A track spiraled up the underside of the dome, and the little black tram cars were ascending, carrying the lunch crowd.

Clemency was engineered to last a hundred millennia, on the assumption that the ice would have retreated by then.

But many of the inventions hadn't proved out. The dome's glass, for example, was designed with nanopores that opened and closed to regulate temp and humidity. When the pores clogged, Clemency was plagued by fungi and mold, and a network of air exchangers had to be added. And now the furnace system was failing.

"It's time," Dorner said.

"That's a longer discussion."

"The governors are frightened."

"And you aren't?" Rivelle said.

A new furnace system had been designed five years before. In secret, under the tightest security, components had been fabricated. The fabrications met spec, and the subassemblies were complete. But the system was so complex that only parts of it could be tested. The installation team spoke with confidence, but every time the governors considered it, the date was put off.

"We still don't know if the fuel cranes will work," Rivelle said. "Or the igniters. Or the ducting robots."

"I spoke with the crane team last week—"

"Once they start to make changes," Rivelle said, "we'll never get the old system back." He motioned at the icy landscape behind him. "When I think about replacing that furnace, you know what I imagine? I'm opening a deep freeze, escorting my kids in and closing the door."

Of the glaciers surrounding them, some were sheer and posed the risk of collapse. Others were gently sloped, providing a speed ramp for gales. Blizzards were common year-round. Outside their bubble, conditions were arctic.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Dorner said.

“Four hundred thousand people,” Rivelle whisked his brushcut with his palm. He stiffened abruptly. His signaler wanted him to calm himself. Dorner watched the boss press the yellow mole on his wrist, muting his guidance.

“I didn’t create this world,” Dorner said. “I just live here.”

“We have a responsibility,” the boss replied. “To all of them.”

“We’re out of time. A reporter at the collapse asked me why the water was boiling.”

Rivelle stared at him.

“The four hundred thousand are going to find out,” Dorner said. “When they do, we’ll lose their trust. That’s my opinion. They’ll be frightened. They’ll know they’re not safe. And then the furnace will burp, and we’ll have a panic. Just like Mammoth.”

Mammoth was a seaborne settlement in the region that had once been Borneo. It was heated by a hydrothermal vent. The colony, then the largest on earth, was destroyed when an earthquake shifted the vent beneath it. Not because the damage couldn’t be repaired, but because of the ensuing disorder. There were protests at first, then riots as public confidence eroded. Some buildings were heated and some were not, and in the second week of the freeze, violence broke out. There were warring factions, battles in the streets. The authorities were still trying to restore the heat when the public buildings were overrun. Thirty days later, everyone in the colony had perished from the cold.

“This isn’t Mammoth,” the boss said. “Our people—”

“Our people were terrified an hour ago. Have a look at the videos of the crowds in the Hub. If there’s a spark of fear, the press will fan it.”

“No one cares less about the strictures,” Rivelle conceded.

“If it were up to me,” Dorner said, “the message would be simple: ‘We saw this coming. The new furnaces are built. They’re flawless, and we’re going to install them. We’ll have a few days of cold. Expect a chill and bundle up.’”

Rivelle lifted his chin, eyes edged with doubt.

“They don’t need our fear,” Dorner said. “They need us to drive fear out. Inspire confidence. Deny the possibility of failure. They need courage. Hope. Unflinching resolve. ‘Clemency is going to survive this.’”

Despite himself, Rivelle laughed. “That’s why they love you.”

Dorner laughed with him.

“You’re an oddity here,” the boss said fondly.

“We are what we are.”

“I’ll talk to the governors.” Rivelle regarded him. “I’m going to have a hard time sleeping until this is behind us. You don’t have a family, Dorner. It’s different for you.”



The object in the filigreed box glittered in the sun. It was a pin, with the letters G and D carved out of polycrete. “Guardian of the Dome.” It honored four decades of service

managing Clemency's blast teams. Dorner closed the lid and handed the box back to Bez. "I can't accept this."

"He would have wanted you to have it."

Dorner had suggested they meet in Hub Park, on a knoll they both knew. A stream bordered its base, watering trees and reeds, making a home for thrush and dragonflies. When he arrived, she was seated on the bench, in an amber blouse and a green skirt, with sprays of trellised bougainvillea arcing over her.

"His kindness changed everything," Dorner said.

"Dad loved you." Bez set the box between them.

Mardy had sponsored his promotion to Planning. The relationship with Bez had been on and off as Dorner's star was rising.

"You're news again," Bez said.

"The press is treating me well?"

"Don't play that game with me." Her eyes were as bright as ever. "You know how important you are. How much trust they put in you."

"It was a job on the train, getting the commuters to calm down."

"When their home tips, they lose their minds." Her gaze narrowed. "The broadcast I heard— They were asking a lot of questions."

He didn't reply.

"Do you know what caused the collapse?"

"Yes, we know."

Her gaze returned to the box on the bench. A moment of

silence, then she opened it, removed the pin and reached for Dorner's shirt collar.

"No, Bez."

"Stop moving. Damn."

Despite his protestations, she attached the pin. When she drew back, there was a spot of blood on her finger.

"Sorry," he said. "It means a lot to me."

A breeze rustled the bougainvillea, and the shadows of blooms flitted like butterflies across her blouse.

He took the box. "I'll never forget him. Or you."

"Oh Dorner—"

"Please. Don't. No more messages, Bez. No gifts. No invitations."

"I only—"

"You're the perfect woman. But not for me."

Silence.

"I miss you," she said.

"You don't know who I am."

"How can you say that? We've been as close as a man and a woman can be."

"I value the memories. Let's not spoil them."

Bez looked down the knoll. Then her gaze drew in and she stood.

Dorner rose with her.

She took a breath, seemed to settle herself and faced him. "I like the pin on you. Goodbye, Dorner." She turned and descended.

He stood there, feeling the weight of his solitude.

The view corridor to the east caught his eye. Beyond the sweep of the dome, the icy cliffs of Patience Palisades were visible. Admiring them was something people did in the park. Or they could follow the gibbons as they crossed the concave glass. He was like the apes, Dorner thought. An unlikely member of the Clemency family. His success, like theirs, was a lucky accident.

The Clemency founders were latter-day Noahs. They selected plants and animals from around the globe with little attention to how they would interrelate, like a wardrobe purchased at a closeout sale. A few gibbons were included, a choice that seemed odd until a bright Planner got the idea that they could clean the dome. He bred them for the task, and they excelled at it, nesting in the orchards at the dome's perimeter and using the transparent struts to climb and cross it. At any moment, you could look up and see dark asterisks shifting over the glass like hydra in a drop of water.

A gibbon knew what his job was, Dorner thought, starting across the park.

He returned to Planning headquarters and rode the lift up to his area on the 29th floor. As the doors opened, the sound of a party reached his ears. There was a birthday celebration in progress for Nidlers, his chief engineer. Colored streamers hung from the ceiling-mount video screens, and his team turned to hail him as he joined them, blowing whistles and waving paper fans.

Nidlers seemed distracted. He stood by the cake, trying to

look merry, eyes shifting, his bald head and spectacles glancing light.

Dorner stepped beside him and clapped his back.

“I’m facing a tribunal on the furnace valves,” Nidlers said under his breath. “In ten minutes.”

“Who else knows?” Dorner asked.

“No one. Yet.” Nidlers smiled and raised a knife to the crowd. He hunched over the cake, angled the blade, plotting his radii. Then his wiry frame twitched and the knife descended. He handed Dorner the first piece.

“Perfect.” Dorner held the plate out and turned to share the exacting cut with the rest of the room.

The broadcast news was running clips of the morning emergency. There was footage of the blocks piled on the dome and a sequence showing the blast.

As the pieces of cake were handed around, Maisy swung a ginger braid over her shoulder and slid beside Dorner, her broad face beaming. A model Clemencian, even-tempered and self-possessed.

“The Homestead burn was delayed, but it’s underway now. I switched the fire chief’s feed to your office.” She consulted a docket on her Joinspace. “Justus attended two hearings, so you have five now. They’re all floor additions.”

At the time of Clemency’s creation, property was deeded to resident groups and partnerships. Additions were overseen by Planning. The need for new work and living space was urgent, but there was nowhere to build.

“Every one of them violates code,” Maisy said.

“Ask Justus to attend them. I’m spending the afternoon on something else.”

She nodded slowly. “Can you tell me?”

Dorner’s face appeared on the overhead screens. All heads in the department turned to watch. He was approaching the blasting team, with Kenton shivering beside him. Dorner removed his ice-crusting parka and handed it over.

Nidlers whistled and a round of applause filled the room. Dorner raised his arms, making a show of accepting the acclaim.

“You’ve got frosting on your nose,” Maisy said.

He let her wipe it away, then he turned and stepped into his office. She followed him. He set the cake on his desk and settled behind it. The video screen on the wall opposite showed a reporter interviewing Kenton. The blaster’s hair was matted, and he was shaky from his narrow escape. But he kept his poise and showed some humor, smiling through his broken tooth.

“Call Consent,” Dorner said. “I want the summary Install Plan for ‘Vapos.’”

“Here?” she eyed the video screen.

“No, here,” he tapped his right temple. “And let’s scratch our café chat after work.”

“I invited Noreen,” Maisy muttered.

“Please—”

“It was going to be a surprise,” she sighed.

Maisy turned, skirted the folding cot and closed the door behind her.

Dorner expanded his Joinspace and set it to glass-clear.

While he waited for the Install Plan, he switched the video channel to the Homestead burn. In the foreground, men in blue heat suits were lined before the moving front of fire. On the ridge above, the flames were scarlet. They ribboned and snapped, turning amber as the wind pulsed.

Beneath the video screen, a statuette stood on his credenza—a golden man, naked and trim, arms raising a golden disk. The Invincible Sun, the colony's highest honor, given six years before to a junior Planner.

Thousands of miles separated Clemency from Kiribati, but when the sudden advance of a glacier cracked the Kiribati dome, Dorner felt it. It wasn't just empathy for the many who were threatened. It was anger that the other colonies turned their backs. In Clemency, everyone went about their business as if nothing had happened, while the killing cold invaded the Kiribati home. The pundits of Optimal Temp preached dispassion. The Equatorial League rejected the alternatives and the Kiribati perished. Dorner was appalled.

He drafted a plan and fought to be heard, speaking on walkways, on trains and in the park, to whoever would listen. He had little support at first. Then a news crew covered him, and people took notice. Because he was a Planner he got an audience at headquarters. The colonies were overcrowded. Resources were strained to the limit. But he fired their sympathies and melted their hearts, pleading on behalf of those the world had chosen to abandon. At the last hour, his desperate speech in the Round Room with the cameras rolling shamed them into it.

There were six helijets on earth, used to move fuel and raw materials between the colonies. For the airlift, he was able to get all six. Kiribati were loaded, eight hundred at a time, and flown to Clemency with a fuel stop midway.

His detractors were right. Resettlement was a nightmare. The refugees created a crisis in the food supply. There weren't jobs, and there wasn't enough space. Aged parents and children without offspring were asked to rejoin their relatives. Emergency construction pushed the limits of Clemency airspace, shelters were erected in marginal places. And residents were provided new guidance on reproduction and libidinal control.

His memories of the airlift were vivid. At the time, the news focused on the rescuers' heroism and the gratitude of those who were saved. But Dorner rode in the transports, and every time the belly bays closed, there were hundreds still on the ice, scrambling for cover. They saved forty thousand, but more than twice that number were left behind.

With all that, the rescue was as the broadcasters portrayed it and as people remembered it—frantic and joyous. A helijet circled the foundering settlement, spotting a place to land. The roar of the blades was drowned by the wind as the transport set down amid the remains of a city square. The earth was heaving. Ridges of ice rose on either side. A Kiribati emerged from the rubble, a woman with blood on her dress. As she raced toward the transport, others followed. Ragged gangs, families and stragglers— Dorner made his way to the transport's belly.

The hatch motors rumbled, and the giant doors opened.

The wind blasted his face and froze his lids. He reached for the woman, caught her arm and helped her aboard. She was cold and grimy. Others poured past him. A man in tears, another limping. A teenage girl and a boy half her size, his crushed arm in a sling. A man was shouting, a woman wailed— He couldn't understand what anyone was saying. He was gripping them, shirts and shoulders, arms and waists, pulling them aboard, overwhelmed by their smells, their shuddering bodies and the rags they wore, crusted with ice and blood. And by the disbelieving faces, wet with tears. The Kiribati were sobbing and the rescuers too, and Dorner sobbed with them, overcome by the proof that there was someone who cared.

The flutes of a pipe organ appeared in Dorner's Joinspace. He focused on the flutes, and the Install Plan for the new furnace system unpacked, a crowd of documents filling his view.



By the time Dorner had set aside Vapos, the other Planners had left. He rode the tube train back to the eastside and walked to his neighborhood haunt, a place that had once been "Lizzie's." It was "Soledad's" now and the menu had changed, but his seat had not. They kept a table at the back for him.

"Welcome," the waitress said.

Dorner looked up from the menu on his Joinspace. "Who are you?"

“Zuna,” she replied. “Annette got married. You’re Dorner.” Zuna was tall and olive-skinned. She put her finger through a coil of hair and twirled it.

“I’ll bet you know,” she said.

“Know?”

“Why the ice fell this morning.” Zuna leaned toward him. “We’ve been wondering. Me and my friends.”

Her cheek put him on guard.

She leaned farther, giving him a view of her cleavage. Her lips were snaky, and she had smoky eyes.

“You’re flirting with me,” he said.

She smiled and nodded. Then the smile dissolved and her eyes grew hard.

Dorner felt his gut hollow. Zuna’s pupils bored into him.

“I want you,” she whispered.

Dorner’s signaler beeped. *You’re aroused*, his guidance told him.

“I’m being warned,” he muttered, looking at the menu.

“There’s a special tonight.” Zuna put her hand on his. “For you.”

“What is this?” He faced her. “Why are you acting this way?”

She stiffened, her eyes still brazen. “I’m a bad girl,” she said. “And I can smell a bad boy.” Her words came slowly, as if she was in some kind of a trance.

Dorner shook his head. Zuna’s stare was unflinching.

“I’ll have the broiled sea duck,” he said.

Without a word, Zuna turned and stepped away.

Smell? he thought. He remembered the strange signals he'd gotten earlier that day. The gray-haired lady peering over her cup. The woman with blue eyes and scarlet freesias. Was there something they could smell? Something they sensed?

He *was* a bad boy, and he'd been visited by voices. When he returned to his apartment, would the voices be waiting? Would they invade his sleep again, pricking his longing? The old cravings were stirring to life, like the heat that had undercut the Ibarra. They threatened him, just as the exhaust threatened the dome.

Dorner peered around the room, checking faces, profiles and the backs of heads. A young man's misdeeds haunted him. A naive young man who imagined he could flout the strictures without any consequence. A young man with a secret.



When he'd finished his meal, Zuna returned. She seemed a different person. The brazen stare had vanished. Her manner was casual, the overtures forgotten.

"Do me a favor," Dorner said. "Go to the door and stick your head out. See if there's a woman waiting outside. An older woman with curly hair. On the walkway, under a lamp, beside the building."

Zuna raised her brows.

"An old acquaintance," he said. "You understand."

Zuna did as he asked. She returned, shaking her head.

Despite her assurance, his exit was cautious. He opened the door slowly, scouted the walkway and started forward with slow steps.

The algal lamps were on, gracing streets and footbridges with their blue-green glow. He wondered again if the voices would reach him once he'd crossed over the threshold of sleep. Could he resist them? His memories of the wretchedness into which his libido had led him were vivid. But the stifled impulses were crying for release. He touched the pin Bez had attached to his collar, praying for the strength to deny himself.

The thruway that fronted his apartment block was empty, and so was the lobby. He rode up in the lift, paused before the entrance to his two-room single, and inserted the passkey. Then he crossed the threshold and closed the door on the rest of the world.



LET ME THROUGH

The next morning, after a lengthy deliberation, the governors voted to proceed with the new furnace system. Using the Install Plan milestones, dates were set. A public announcement was scheduled, and Dorner was chosen to make it. He freed Nidlers to work with the implementation team and asked the rest of his staff to cover, so he could give the speech his full attention. He had four days.

He was seated at his desk now, staring at a blank page on his Joinspace.

Confidence. If the colony was going to get through this, that's what mattered. People needed confidence and resolve. He began to dictate, moving his lips silently, watching words appear on the page. He had another thought, jumped to it, then paused and filled in the gap, humming to himself.

A phrase of song had lodged in his mind.

A long build-up would be a mistake, Dorner thought. People would be worried about the cold. He had to answer their fear, quickly. “What will happen to us when the old furnace shuts down?”

The song was still playing in his head. He had heard it in his sleep the night before. A ghostly voice. It echoed as he listened. Then the echoes grew louder. Other voices swelled around the first like a practiced choir. The strange dream had returned, and its rapturous voices had provoked him for hours. They had printed themselves in his mind and were replaying their summons. Or his need was so acute, he was replaying them himself.

As he stood naked by the bed, he’d flirted with the idea of leaving himself unprotected. He’d stifled the impulse, faced the blinking blue eye, squeezed the injector trigger and jabbed his thigh.

Dorner leaned back in his chair, imagining what might have happened if he hadn’t injected himself. The limbo of sleep, dark and secret— Drowning in the sea of voices. Not waking, not fighting. Letting them storm him without resisting.

An hour later, he was still leaning back, lids barely slit, the Joinspace just a ringlet at the corner of his eye. He imagined the voices were insistent. Shrill and bass, nubile and earnest, familiar and sage— The longing he felt, they wanted to know. He opened himself. He spoke from his heart. And they understood.

He urged them to come again that evening. If they did, he promised, they would find no obstacles in their way.

When Dorner left the building at the end of the day, he was angry. Baffled by his fugue. Upset that he'd wasted so much time. He'd written next to nothing. He skipped his dinner at Soledad's, returned to his apartment and placed his injector on the bedstand, vowing to resist the allure of the voices. Then he stayed up half the night working on his speech. He opened with the defects of the old system, highlighted the strengths of the new one, and addressed the dangers of the cutover. Satisfied he'd made a decent start, he rolled into bed. In his exhaustion, he forgot to inject himself.

Within minutes of falling asleep, the choir reached him. It was braided, but as it drew closer, the voices unwound, fervent and trilling, deep and resounding, whistling and mewling enticements.

His vow forgotten, the sleeping man welcomed them, shuttering his past, forgetting the dome and everyone in it. Where had they come from? Were they spirits of his own creation? Was his smothered desire rising up to consume him? Or were they a gift from some other realm. He couldn't see them. But he could hear them clearly, and he could feel their desire as if it were his own. Frenzied, feverish, timeworn, testy and reckless—

Could he give himself over without anyone knowing?

"I'm yours," they sang, "only for you."

Dorner jerked upright. He was aroused and quivering, about to climax. He grasped his erection, then tore his hand away. Where was his injector?

He rose, dizzy and trembling, stumbling through the darkness while the hot winds circled and the voices raved. *I'm*

awake, he thought. What kind of dream was this? He bumped into his dresser, found the injector and stuck the needle in his arm, rocking as the cold wave washed through him. Then he found the second drawer, pulled it open and felt beneath the clothing. There was a photo he'd kept as a reminder. He couldn't see it, but the feel of it and the memory of the scarred creature it depicted was enough to wither what remained of his lust.

The singing grew dimmer. And dimmer. The drug, like a pliable membrane, isolated him from the urgent voices. When the membrane was thick around him, he lay back down.

Dorner woke the next morning leaden with shame. He refused himself breakfast. He kept the curtains closed while he dressed, denying himself light. He buttoned his shirt, retrieved the Guardian pin, attached it to his collar and assessed himself in the mirror. Then he removed the pin and put it back in the box.

At headquarters, he shut himself in his office and dove into the draft. Three hours later, it was complete. He reached Rivelle, and after a hurried lunch they reviewed it.

"Your original idea was better," the boss said. "Expect a chill and bundle up." He stepped from behind his desk, scanning Dorner's text in his Joinspace. "There's too much here about risk."

"We need to brace them," Dorner said.

"This bit about potential ignition problems—" Rivelle tapped the air before him with an accusing finger. "Let's not get into that."

“It’s the most likely reason for failure.”

Rivelle regarded him. “A peculiar sentiment, coming from you.”

Back in his office, Dorner reread the words he’d written. Rivelle was right. They were riddled with doubt. The voices had shaken his confidence.

He deleted everything and attacked the speech with fresh determination, toughening his tone. His outlook was bold and hopeful, and the words came quickly. With a strong delivery, the message was one they would all believe.

On the evening train, he lectured himself. Whatever was happening to him at night— He couldn’t think about that. He needed his rest. He had to be sharp. Again he missed dinner.

Back in his apartment, his preparation for sleep was thought out and precise. He injected himself twice and jogged in place to get the drug into his system. He looped a collection of Kiribati hymns through his signaler, so they’d play while he slept. Then he stood naked before the full-length mirror.

Remember, he thought. The lamp on the bedstand lit his front. An attractive chest, muscular, with well-defined pectorals and a tapered waist. But you had to look past the scars. And he wasn’t looking past them. The webbed mass that erased his nipple and fringed his stomach. The waffle on his hip, sectored like alligator skin.

What twisted sweetheart would smile on this? he thought.

That quashed his desire and shriveled him up.

You’re a monster, he thought. Dorner switched off the lamp and lay down.

But his precautions did nothing to ward off the voices. As soon as sleep found him, the seduction began. The winds approached, unbraiding, weaving around him, circling the membranous envelope. They clamored and shook it, offering, pleading. “Open your ear,” they sang. “Open your heart.”

The choir mounted as new voices arrived, thronging, lapping against his shelter. The Kiribati hymns faded beneath them. “Open,” they moaned. “Open, open—” As they multiplied, they seemed to blur into each other. For the first time, Dorner could hear a common cadence, a rhythm the voices shared. As if they were the expression of varying moods, time-shifted but sprung from the same throat.

“Don’t resist me,” they sang. “Don’t turn away.”

They knew him, knew him well. In some lost past, in some previous life, had he heard them before? Louder and louder, and more united.

“Open your nerves,” the choir demanded.

The membrane held, but the winds were punching and battering it.

Dorner curled, trying to hide himself.

“Open your nerves and let me through.”

Dorner quaked and gasped and covered his groin.

With a roar, the harem cohered, driving against the flexing shield. The membrane split, a sere blast tore his shelter open—

“Tongue,” a voice stormed, “do you hear?”

Winds, voices— One complex nature. A woman of vast proportion, frenzied, frantic for recognition.

“Tongue,” she stormed, “Tongue, Tongue—”

An awful heat rushed upon him. The rasp of the wind had claws and teeth, and from the blasts thrusting and thrashing around him, rage emerged. He felt her fury, his body huddled now, taking the punishment on his back and sides. The promise of unfulfilled pleasure turned to pain. She swarmed over him, clawing his ribs, burning his face, plucking his nerves until he thought they would snap. Her voice shrieked and chanted around him, like a demon stirring a sinister sabbath, some leftover madness from the dark ages of man.

Dorner woke feverish, knotted in his bedding, stunned and gasping. He staggered into the kitchen. Through the window, beyond the dome's glass, stars were winking. The sky was starting to pale.

His back felt raw. His thighs were stinging and his shoulders ached. His side was striped red where the claws had dragged. Who was Tongue? Where had she come from? What was happening to him?

He sat naked at the kitchen table, dictating an account to his Joinspace, recording what he had heard and felt.



Dorner stood before the super's door in his midnight blue morning coat, with his jet hair combed straight back.

Minole answered his knock and handed him a sandwich wrapped in white paper. "Squid again," she said with a regretful smile. He traded salutes with the old vet, Franklin, and headed for the tube train depot.

On the thruway, eyes followed, but Dorner ignored them. His mind was on Tongue. His hands slid into his pockets. *There are worse things than squid*, he thought.

He rode the train to the downtown depot, but when he debarked, instead of heading for Planning, he followed the walkway that verged Hub Park. He passed an open-air bakery where cakes were cooking. An aproned woman beat dough in a tub. "Tongue," Dorner heard when her spoon struck the tub. "Tongue, Tongue." Ten feet ahead, a boy pushed a barrow, and at each seam in the paving, the barrow said "Tongue." A man lowered an awning over his food stall, and every turn of the crank was "Tongue, Tongue."

The Academy appeared on his left. Then the Archives, where information about the colony's tech was stored. Records of mankind's achievements were housed there, along with genetic samples of vanished lifeforms. Perhaps Tongue was like them, a lost creature from another dimension, looking for lodging in a disordered mind.

Beyond the Archives, the giant white drums of Clemency Hospital rose. Polycrrete angels looked down from the roof, cowed seraphs with spreading wings. The angels gave Dorner no comfort. The sight of the hospital filled him with dread.

In the rush to establish the equatorial settlements, much of science had been left behind. Travel in space was forgotten, along with the know-how to split the atom. In medicine, however, little was lost, and in some domains, knowledge had advanced. The striking progress in neuroscience was spurred

by necessity. The people of Clemency were a case study in stress. Mental breakdowns were common.

Dorner had managed to keep clear of doctors who tinkered with minds. But he'd lived with the fear that, some day, he might have to face them.

He left the walkway and mounted the steps. The hospital lobby was like a submarine grotto, rippling with disinfecting blue light. Behind the reception desk, a holographic whale appeared, jaws wide, humming and sweeping the space with its combs.

Dorner passed through the sweep and boarded a lift. His signaler beeped, confirming his arrival, and the lift started up. He watched the floor count, feeling the stories stacking. The lift stopped at the 19th floor, his Joinspace flashed "Neuro" and directed him down the hall.

The floor was spongy, sighing beneath him, removing microbes from his shoes. Small robot sleds skimmed the walls, casting blue light down the corridors. Dorner halted before an unmarked door, opened it and stepped through.

A nurse was seated at the receiving station. As he approached she raised her head, but before she could speak, sobs sounded from the archway behind her. A woman stood bent, with her face in her hands, and a little girl was crying, shaking with fear. The child held a stuffed animal to her cheek, a dolphin with blue button eyes.

A doctor in a white coat was on her knees, facing the child. The doctor was short, with black hair to her collar. Like most

in the colony, her racial mix was obscure, but there was an Asian flatness to her cheeks and brow.

“Is Dolphy hungry?” The doctor touched the child’s nose.

The little girl nodded and wiped her cheeks.

The doctor rose and faced the woman. “Your husband’s going to be fine.” She nodded at the nurse. “Take them to the cafeteria.”

The nurse stood and escorted the pair past him. The doctor turned, her eyes brightening.

“Mister Dorner,” she said. “I’m Doctor Rin. You’re right on time.”

Her smile was efficient, her eyes dark and impenetrable.

Dorner shook her hand. *No frills*, he thought. Beneath her white lab coat was a gray shirt and black pants. She was without makeup or jewelry.

“My office is down the hall,” Rin said. And then, as if the thought had just occurred to her, “May I show you my lab?”

She was proud of her procedure, he thought. Or she was looking for funding. “I’d like that,” he said.

He followed her through the archway into an open area with cabinets, gurneys and carts of equipment. On both sides were doors, most of them closed. One was ajar, and through the gap Dorner saw a small windowless room.

She was leading him toward the rear. Her lab coat swiveled, lacking curves to cling to. “You’ve seen our device?” she asked over her shoulder.

“On the news,” he said.

“We’ve made some important changes.”

They entered a well-lit workroom, the shelving crammed with bins and parts. On the counter were bundles of surgical instruments—clamps and scalpels, and a gadget with a black nozzle and a trigger grip. On a red pedestal, inside a glass box, was the object Dorner had seen in the broadcasts.

A shiver scaled his neck. It looked like a silver spider, six inches wide. Its legs were flexed, and antennae protruded from its bulbous head.

Rin lifted the glass, grabbed the spider and set it on her palm. “The future of straddling,” she said, fingering its back. “More precise. Much more sensitive.”

“It’s as intimidating as the original,” Dorner said.

“Would you like to hold him?” Rin’s eyes laughed.

Dorner held out his hand.

He expected the feet to prick him, but their bottoms were soft.

“We’ve strengthened the grippers,” Rin flexed one of the spider’s legs.

She took a loop of cable from a peg, plugged one end into the spider’s rear and the other into the console beside her, and depressed a switch. Orange lights flickered across the console’s face. “The critical logic is here,” she said, “but contact with the patient’s nervous system will make or break a session.”

She faced him, grasped the spider and turned it on its back. She rotated a dial on the console and a hum sounded. A silver needle emerged from the spider’s belly.

“Feel the tip,” Rin said.

Dorner pinched it with his thumb and forefinger.

“Hundreds of threads, each tapered so finely, it’s microscopic at the end.”

“How dangerous is the procedure?” he asked.

Rin retracted the needle, switched the console off and put the spider back on its pedestal. “For the patient, not at all.” She gave him a curious look.

She’s guessing why I’ve come, he thought.

“For the therapist,” she said, “there’s potential risk, depending on the patient’s condition. If he or she is hallucinating or psychotic, it’s possible for the therapist to lose track of reality.”

“That could be unpleasant,” Dorner said.

Rin nodded slowly. She was waiting for him to declare himself.

“Being inside someone else’s head,” he added.

“We use filters,” Rin said, “to reduce the danger. They give the therapist enough distance to make observation safe.”

“Filters?”

“Elements of unreality. Physical locations are reduced to two dimensions. People’s faces are blurred. Jitter is added to their movements. Voices are frequency-adjusted to make them less present. In the latest version, we’ve added a white halo to anything moving in the patient’s frame. Would you like to see?”

“Is that possible?”

Rin motioned him to follow.

They exited the workroom, passed a half-dozen chambers and stopped before a closed door.

“She’s asleep,” Rin said softly. “No talking, not even a whisper. She’s not a patient. She’s a student volunteer. Once you’re seated, I’ll connect you.” Rin pointed at his signaler nipple. “Open your Joinspace all the way and go black.” She smiled. “You’re new at this, so I’m going to turn up the filters.”

Rin opened the door and Dorner followed.

The chamber was small, just large enough for a padded table and a chair, and it was lit by a single red bulb. A young woman lay on the table in a tunic and pants. She was on her side, with straps around her. A silver spider was perched on her neck, its needle deep in her signaler. A man in a lab coat sat in the chair, staring. A cable descended from his signaler nipple. Its far end was connected to the straddle console on a stand beside him.

Rin touched the man’s shoulder. He pulled the cable’s end from his neck, rose and passed the cable to her. She motioned and Dorner sat in the chair.

He felt her fingers below his ear. A pressure on his neck, and then the pin of the cable connector entered his signaler nipple. Dorner shuddered, took a breath, expanded his Joinspace and blacked his vision.

He heard a shriek and laughter. Colored images shifted before him, but they were hard to make out. He saw a half-dozen naked boys, their backs to him, seated in a row with their hands on their knees. Before them was the cut-out of a tree. Something was swinging in the tree. *A gibbon*, he thought. The ape chattered, then it talked, face blurred, its

black body outlined in white. It scolded the boys in a pedagogue's voice, then it held up a tube train schedule and began to read stops and times aloud.

Something touched his shoulder. A crackle in his ears, a pinching in his neck, and the sights vanished. Disoriented, Dorner shrank his Joinspace and rose, back in the chamber. Rin nodded and they tiptoed out.

"Could she tell I was watching?" he wondered.

"That depends on the intensity of her thoughts," Rin replied. "She might have noticed, or she might not."

She led him through the open area. An orderly was escorting a young woman to a straddle chamber. Both her wrists were bandaged.

"This must be hard for you," Dorner said.

"A doctor faces affliction. You can't turn away from it."

They passed the receiving station, exited the lab and started down the hall.

"We aren't often visited by senior Planners," Rin said.

"No, I suppose not. I'm curious— How can you tell when a patient is having mental problems?"

"Patterns reveal themselves," she said. "Waking thoughts are like badly told stories. They're confusing. Dreams, especially so. The mind uses metaphors that require interpretation. What we learn through straddling is piecemeal and progressive. We can perceive what the patient perceives. We can feel what the patient is feeling. We can't see the psyche all at once, but over time, we can build a picture of what's going on in a patient's mind."

“Is there anything hidden? Can you hear and see everything the person experiences?”

“Almost,” Rin said. “Every mind has a few things that are closely held.”

A blonde physician approached, holding a rack of test tubes. She beamed and nodded to Rin, her eyes darting at Dorner.

“This started with overgrown signaler shoots,” he said, half amazed.

“Yes, it did. I was trying to get a girl through Joinage.”

Nerve shoots were germinated in vitro and transplanted into every newborn’s head. The shoot sprouted during infancy, and the ganglia became part of the youth’s brain. At Joinage, a rite of passage for seven-year-olds, a signaler nipple was surgically connected to the shoot, and the Joinspace was loaded through it.

“My dream—” Rin spoke quietly.

Dorner met her gaze.

“—is to link two spiders. To make the experience bi-directional.”

“So disturbed people can share their troubles?”

Rin smiled. “If I could be in your heart and head, and you could be in mine, it would give us a new kind of intimacy.”

She held up her hand. “Sorry.” A call was coming through on her signaler.

“Mom,” Rin shook her head. “I’m in the middle of something. I know it’s drafty. We’ll file a complaint. I promise. Run a hot bath and warm Tad up.”

As the call ended, Rin halted before a door, opened it and ushered him into her office. She motioned him toward a chair and sat behind her desk.

“Well,” she said. “Are you going to tell me why you’re here?”

He took a breath. There was a photo on the wall beside her. An elderly woman was flanked by Rin and another about her age. There was a gibbon in Rin’s arms.

“Someone,” he said, “is invading my mind.”

“You mean—”

“A voice. I hear her when I’m sleeping. It was pleasurable at first. But now— She’s attacking me. I don’t know what she wants.”

“And you’ve come to me because—”

Rin’s brows were thin as pencil strokes, her lips full and straight. In the harsh light of the lab, her face had looked planar. But in the glow from her desk lamp, it had a graceful dimensionality. It was a sensitive face, and her expression was caring.

“There’s this brilliant doctor,” he said. “She has a way of listening in. If she hears this voice, she’ll know what it is. And she’ll know how to treat it.”

“When you say she’s attacking you—”

“Last night, she lashed me,” Dorner said. “I can show you—” He touched his loin, then sighed. “Maybe they were self-inflicted. But— I could feel her claws and teeth. Her voice was so loud— I lost myself. There was nothing, nothing but Tongue.”

“Tongue?”

“That’s her name.”

Rin blinked.

“She’s not real,” he said, feeling like a fool. “She can’t be. I know that.”

“Is she with you when you’re awake? Are you hearing her now?”

Dorner shook his head. “Only when I’m asleep. But— I can’t get the sounds out of my head. They keep replaying.”

“When you’re sleeping, is the voice always there?”

“No,” he said. “She comes and goes.”

“I can imagine how distressing that would be.”

Dorner bowed his head. Now someone else knew.

“Does Tongue remind you of anyone?”

“No.”

“Is she cautioning you? Urging you to take any action?”

Dorner laughed. “She keeps trying to make me spill my semen.”

“She’s seductive.”

“She can be,” he said.

“Has she caused you to ejaculate?”

Dorner shifted in his chair. “No. I’ve resisted her.”

“How often do you have intercourse?”

“I don’t.”

“Are you masturbating?”

He looked away. “No.”

“Any spontaneous emissions?”

“No. I took a vow two years ago,” he said.

“A vow?”

“Of abstinence.”

“As a Planner,” Rin guessed, “you want to be a model of responsible behavior.”

Dorner didn’t reply.

“Are you using an anti-libidinal?” she asked.

He drew the injector from his pocket.

Rin nodded when she saw it. “That’s as good as castration, for as long as it lasts.”

She folded her hands together. “You’re a discerning man, and self-possessed. So I’m going to speak frankly. Tongue may be a product of sexual frustration. I’m inclined to regard her as a recurrent dream fueled by wish fulfillment.”

“I can’t see her. She’s a voice in the darkness.”

“A dream woman can take many forms. All she needs is trauma to feed her.”

“It doesn’t feel like a dream—”

“The strictures of Optimal Temp are trying,” Rin said. “For many of us.”

“If you straddle me—”

Rin shook her head. “We work with difficult cases, where diagnosis is a problem. There are a lot of talented people who treat repression effects.” She slid a notepad toward her and drew a pen from her pocket.

“If you knew how hard it was to come here—”

“I can appreciate that,” she said, scribbling on the pad.

“No you can’t.”

She raised her hand to calm him. “You’re going to be okay. He’s wonderful.” She removed the note from her pad.

Dorner stared at her.

She waved the note under his nose.

“Something bad is going to happen,” he said. “She’s going to break me. I’m going to violate my abstinence.”

“Under the circumstances,” Rin said, “that might be a good thing.”

Dorner stood. He gazed at the note, took it from her and put it in his pocket, trying to keep his poise. “Thanks for your time.”

He stepped into the hall, closing the door behind him. When he turned, he was struck in the chest by a man in a straitjacket who was struggling to free himself from the two officers accompanying him. The four fell to the floor. The struggling man kneeed and kicked, crying in outrage.

Dorner got up.

The officers pulled the man to his feet. His eyes rolled at Dorner and he gnashed his teeth.

Dorner strode down the hall, swatting the dust from his coat. When he reached the lift, he fished in his pocket, retrieved the referral Rin had given him and dropped it in the refuse can.



“You’re wearing Mardy’s Guardian pin,” Rivelle said.

The noise from the crowded Round Room made it hard to be heard.

“Bez wanted me to have it,” Dorner replied.

“It’s a lot to live up to.”

They were standing in the wings, behind the curtains, waiting for the preliminaries to end. They’d spent the past two days tuning the speech, arguing over message and wording. Between Dorner’s fears about the announcement’s impact and his dread of Tongue, he’d gone without sleep, and when he entered the Round Room, he was dizzy on his feet.

With all that, as the moment approached, Dorner felt relieved. The speech was clean. Rivelle was optimistic. The governors had read it and blessed it.

“That’s my cue,” the boss said, straightening his coat. He left Dorner’s side, headed for the thicket of mics at stage center.

The walls of the Round Room were hung with midnight blue drapes, and the front seats had been cleared to make room for the press. Reporters and photographers were standing, seated or kneeling, and the live cameras were rolling. While Rivelle introduced him, Dorner expanded his Joinspace and went glass-clear, reviewing the text he would read. At the rear of the Room, the boss’s head filled a giant monitor.

Rivelle finished and looked his way. Dorner buttoned his coat, combed his hair back with both hands and stepped onto the stage.

He drew close to the mics and acknowledged Rivelle. The size of his voice startled him. He drew back a few inches, greeted the colony and thanked the press.

“The furnace system that provides our heat and protects us from the withering cold,” he told them, “hasn’t lived

up to its designers' expectations. Because of its failings, we have endured the damp, morning fogs, damage to our crops, breathing disorders and collapses of ice like the one the Ibarra so recently let loose. I am proud to tell you, and happy as well, that we saw the problems and faced them. Five years ago, we began designing a new furnace system. And while I regret having to announce that the old system is unseasonably infirm and approaching the end of its life, I'm pleased to announce that the new furnaces have already been cast and tested and are ready to install."

The surprise and regard in the Round Room was palpable. On the monitor at the rear of the Room, Dorner's smile was ten feet wide.

"These furnaces are marvels of engineering. Their heating capacity far exceeds the aging units, and their service life should be measured in thousands of years."

Dorner felt a breeze at his back. A warm wind raised the hair on his neck.

"Unlike the old system, each of the new furnaces will be linked to its partners with a Nidlers Valve, giving us a failsafe array. New igniters, new output regulators. And the new components will integrate seamlessly with our fuel conveyers and robotic ducts."

A whisper from his night visitor hissed in his head. Dorner ignored it, fixing on the text before him.

"The new system is being staged as I speak. The cutover will be brief. We'll have a few days of cold—"

A blast from nowhere wuffed around him. Groans and sighs grew thick in his ears. “Let them freeze,” Tongue sang, “let them drown. Do you think I care?”

Dorner raised his hand, breath caught in his throat. Spotlights glared above the throng of faces. A female reporter stepped toward the stage, eyes fixed on him, brazen with desire. *I’m imagining this*, Dorner thought. But the storm was mounting. Tongue’s voices shrilled and moaned, louder and louder. Not echoes, not vestiges— Somehow she had crossed the boundary of sleep.

“Expect a chill, as I said. Our plan for the cutover—” He touched his temple to quiet the chorus.

“Plan, plan,” Tongue squalled. “Did you plan for this? I’m strangling. I’m starving. Do you hear me, Dorner?”

“We will install the new furnaces—”

The winds were fierce. He was shouting to make himself heard. “A week, it may take a week—”

Rivelle was in the wings, his expression severe. He was motioning, mouthing.

Dorner lurched. The blast struck his back and hooked his chest. Groans, screaming. Cries swooped at his face, clawing and pecking. The mad woman was unleashing another howling walpurgisnacht.

“Choke them, skewer them. Eunuchs and spinsters, the shriveled and maimed—”

“There may be a week,” Dorner said. “A week without heat.”

The press corps looked shocked. Guards hurried toward

the stage. The hair on every head was flying, every coat flapped while the storm blew through the Round Room, chanting obscenities.

“Prick your nipples, milk your glans— Tear your sphincters and chop off your fingers!”

Through the tumult, Dorner saw himself on the screen at the back of the Room. No wind, no storm. The drapes behind him were perfectly still. His shoulders shifted, his lips were twitching. His head bobbed on his neck like a marionette.

“The furnace system that provides our heat,” he started over, “and protects us from the withering cold—”

The words made no sense. Tongue’s heedless emotions were churning inside him. *Why am I here?* he thought.

“Helpless,” he bellowed. “We’re helpless—”

A hundred heads faced him, lights beamed and cameras zoomed in, but no one could hear a thing he was saying.

“Nothing will save us. We are outside the Viable Band,” he raved. “Everyone, all of you: this is the end.

“This time of—” He raised his fists and shook them. “Affliction! Rabid fantasy. Uncontrolled Temp. Boiling, frantic—”

Tongue’s madness consumed him. “Your home, your dome— A mountain of bodies, convulsing, seething— Scrabbling, clawing, seeking the zenith, blind to those smothered and broken beneath.”

The house lights went out. Rivelle was beside him, waving his arms. Dorner felt a crush of bodies around him. Hands laid hold and he was dragged from the stage.



Rivelle put his hand on Dorner's knee. "I've always comforted myself that if anything happened, you could take my place." His words were reassuring, but his tone was resigned. "I've asked Bayliss to make a fresh announcement. He's going to manage the furnace cutover. Your team will report to him for now."

They were in the private lounge on the 36th floor. Through the window, Dorner could see the morning sun over the boss's shoulder. He was trying to concentrate on what Rivelle was saying, but the words seemed to reach him from a distance. The winds were gone. Tongue's raving no longer tyrannized his mind. But her presence had numbed his senses.

It had been a terrible night. Tongue had remained with him till the early hours. When she finally left off, he was in a ward room. A place he'd never seen before. The lighting was low, and the nurses wore flowing gowns. Maisy was seated beside him. When he was able to talk, she listened and responded, helping him to reconnect. When he felt strong enough, she escorted him to a helihopper and accompanied him back to his apartment so he could shower and dress.

"The message from Planning," Rivelle said, "is that you're having some personal problems. I'm sorry, but— There was no other way."

Dorner nodded. He remembered the cameras and his contorted face on the giant screen. "The broadcast—"

Rivelle looked down. "It's hard to watch. We tried to

persuade them to hold it back.” He shook his head. “You know how they are. It ran all last night, and they’re hard at it again this morning.”

Dorner straightened himself. “How bad is it?”

Rivelle searched his face, as if unsure how much he should share. “By nine, every signaler in Clemency was on high alert. We sent a nitrous sedative through the air exchangers at ten. And we spiked the oxygen just before dawn.”

“Bayliss will get them back on track.”

Rivelle didn’t reply.

He’d betrayed them all. His boss and the governors. His team, the Planners who respected and trusted him. And the sea of believing faces for whom he was a cipher of confidence.

“I’m through,” Dorner said. “I quit. Tell them the truth.”

“What truth?”

“Dorner was weak.”

Rivelle threw up his hands. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve got a meeting with Bayliss in twenty minutes to discuss his speech. You’re going to do everything in your power to make him successful. After that, there’s a manpower review for the cutover tasks.”

The boss rose. He extended his hand, but Dorner stood without his help.

“What we do—” Rivelle’s tenor was private. “It’s an impossible job.”

A gnawing look surfaced in the boss’s eyes.

“I’m sure I bear some of the blame,” Rivelle said. “Lean on Maisy. She can help with your personal affairs. We’ll scout

around, find someone you trust. This needs attention, and you deserve the best.”



Another new day, and the old vet was parked on the stoop. Dorner didn't want to see or talk to him.

He was stepping past, when Franklin grabbed his arm.

“I had a few moments like that,” Franklin said. “They thought I'd flamed out.”

Dorner laughed and patted the old man's shoulder.

“They were wrong,” Franklin said, “weren't they.”

On his way to the depot, and in the train car, Dorner mustered his arguments.

At the lab on the 19th floor, the nurse said Doctor Rin was in her office. Dorner rehearsed his appeal one last time as he strode down the hall. Rin answered his knock.

“Yes?”

She had her back to him. She looked over her shoulder as he opened the door.

“I'm not crazy,” Dorner said. “Tongue isn't—”

She held her hand up to stop him.

“No,” he insisted. “You're going to listen—”

“I saw the broadcast,” Rin said, stepping around her desk. She glanced through the doorway. “Let's see what we can find out.”



Dorner stood in a straddle chamber, wearing the tunic and loose pants he'd been given. He was barefoot and the tile floor was cold. He seated himself on the padded table, looking at the bare walls, the chair and the stand beside it.

A nurse entered and closed the door. She wore rubber sandals.

"Mm," she admired his togs. "Very handsome. I'm Firooka."

"I'm Dorner," he said.

Firooka was big-chested with mock black lashes and too much lipstick.

"You don't look very cheerful," she said.

He eyed the vent in the crotch of his pants. "There aren't any buttons on this thing."

"So?"

"I may get excited."

Firooka smiled. "We see that all the time. Now. In addition to straddling you, we're going to have a look at your sleep waves."

She set a basket on the table, retrieved a tube and wire, and applied some gel from the tube to an electrode at the wire's end.

"This goes right here." She parted his hair and affixed the electrode to his crown.

Firooka continued attaching electrodes until there was a bundle of wires descending from his scalp. Then she grasped his chin and rotated his head, checking her work.

"Alright," Firooka said, "let's stretch you out. On your left side."

Dorner raised his legs onto the table, feeling her cradling his head in her hands. His cheek touched the pillow.

“Gently,” she said. “Let’s protect the sensors. That’s the way.”

He could hear her shifting the cables, felt them pull at his scalp.

“Flex your legs for me,” she said. “Perfect. I’m going to put these straps on you. Shoulders. Hips. And your thighs. So you won’t roll around.”

The straps were thick. Firooka cinched them tight.

“You can move your arms if you like. Is your Joinspace fully expanded?”

“Yes.”

“When I say ‘bedtime,’ I want you to go black.”

Dorner shivered. The prospect of trying to sleep in that room, strapped to the table with a spider on his neck, was unnerving.

“Where’s the doctor?”

“Here she comes. She’s got your spider in her hand. Are you ticklish?” Firooka chuckled and patted his arm. “You’ll be fine.”

The chamber door opened and Rin entered. She held a console under one arm. Firooka took it and mounted it on the stand. Rin’s other hand held a glass box with a spider in it. She set the box down on the table by Dorner’s feet.

“How’s he doing?”

“Dandy,” Firooka replied.

“Comfortable?” Rin asked him.

“Sure.”

“I have a brand new spider.”

Dorner heard her open the case. He caught a glimpse of the creature’s bulbous head and its wiry antennae, then he could see Firooka attaching a cable to its tail. The nurse turned and plugged the spider’s tether into the console.

“You’ll feel his feet shifting,” Rin said. “I’m getting him seated.”

Dorner fought the idea that the spider was alive, crawling on his neck.

“There,” Rin said. “We’re in position.”

He allowed himself a breath. The creature was still.

“I’m going to lower the probe now,” Rin told him. “You’ll feel a twinge.”

He saw her turn to the console. The thing on his neck began to hum. Dorner imagined the needle descending from the spider’s belly, entering his nipple.

“The probe is touching your neural shoot,” Rin said.

It was painless. He couldn’t feel it. And then he could.

An icy rill, sharp and cold. As it drove deeper, the rill branched and the branches became an icy web.

“We’ve got him,” Rin said.

Dorner heard the snap of a switch and darkness swallowed the room. Another snap, and a small red bulb by the console lit up.

“Bedtime,” Firooka said.

Dorner blacked his Joinspace.

“I’ll be back,” Rin told him, “once you’re asleep.”



Dorner was motionless. His mouth was slack. One arm dangled over the table.

Rin stepped into the chamber and closed the door behind her. She sat in the chair, unlooped the cable in her hand and plugged one end into the console. The other she fitted into her signaler nipple.

She scanned the readouts, put her finger to the console screen and engaged the straddle. She was expanding her Joinspace to fill her field of view, when something stopped her.

A noise.

A faint whine. Like a fly.

Faint, and then gone. Rin wasn't sure she had heard it. She blacked her Joinspace. The whine returned.

She watched and waited. The straddle was active. But all she could hear was the whine, and there was nothing to see. Nothing but darkness.

The whine divided. It ebbed and swelled. Like listening to a group talking in the distance— Rin could hear what sounded like words.

Were Dorner's lips moving?

She switched her Joinspace to glass-clear, stood and drew close to the table. His lower lip trembled. A thin stream of air was passing over it. The sound from his chest was labored, wheezing.

She held her fingers an inch from his mouth. She could

feel his wind, but it had no rhythm. It was broken, erratic—
As if there were vocables emerging.

Rin raised her hand, eyeing the unconscious man in the scarlet light. All at once, the talkers seemed closer, louder. There were many more voices than she had thought. Dorner's chest was heaving. She lowered her hand again, feeling his staccato breath. His frame jerked against the straps.

An unearthly sound, half drone, half shriek, rose from the throng. Rin recoiled, cupping her ears as if to protect them. She caught herself, took a step back and sat in the chair, turning to the console to switch the sound off.

She straightened herself, took a breath and looked again. His sleep was restless and his wind was erratic. But the chamber was silent. He was just a fitful sleeper, dreaming on the table. She turned the straddle back on.

Voices, loud voices, circled her like a violent storm. Rin tried to listen, but within a few seconds she had lost her bearing. The cyclone of voices sucked at her senses, she felt herself vanishing into it.

Rin switched the straddle off and faced the console, checking the settings, making sure the safeguards were active. Groom filters, frequency fences— She adjusted presence to the lowest setting, then faced Dorner again. In the crimson glow, his shoulders were twitching, and his arms too. His fingers curled as she watched.

With trepidation, she turned the straddle on.

It was madness Rin heard. An inhuman frenzy of fierce

emotion. Was this Tongue? The gyre of voices had a female core. She was pleading, sorrowful, ravenous, unforgiving— Rin felt the fury in the cellar of her gut. And Dorner— He was feeling it too. He was hunching and writhing against his straps, menaced but aroused, straining for contact.

Rin's signaler beeped, her temp alert flashed. Her hand went to the mole on her wrist and turned the guidance off. Tongue, it was Tongue— What was she saying? Words swam in the flood of emotion. "Starving," she shrilled. "Gaping, crawling— You vain thing."

Tongue's fury choked Rin's throat, squeezing her lungs. Cries she shouldn't set free, pangs she couldn't bear—

The brutal voice overpowered the filters. Despite all the straddle's safeguards, Tongue was running wild. "You," she raved, "Litters of flesh. Never, not ever!"

Rin's higher mind was swamped, but a nether self recognized the outpouring. It was as if she had known nothing of mirrors, and now she was peering into one. For the first time, Rin saw who she really was. Naked. Raw. She didn't have any skin. The mad furor was blood, her blood, thick and scarlet, and it was gushing out of her.

Rin grabbed at the console, pushing sliders, smacking switches, swinging her arm to fend Tongue off. She cut the volume in half, but the voice didn't subside. It grew louder, slyer, more insistent. Tongue was the probing nose of a serpent gliding out of Dorner, into her ear. Tongue was inside her mind, angling, wriggling, out of control, coiling around her brainstem and down her spine.

Rin stood.

Shrieks travelled her nerves, moans rattled her bones. Tongue slid between her lungs and ensnarled her heart, clenching it, wringing it, battering her kidneys and roping her liver. Rin clutched her middle, feeling Tongue in her bowels, distending her belly. A dark expectancy churned in Rin's groin. Tongue's jaws yawned at the head of the canal, her scaly length tangling in the tubes and trees.

Madness a hidden Rin craved, a bright oblivion, was about to be hers. But when she gave herself over, she found herself in the cold. There was heat in Tongue's fangs and rapture in her venom. But it was all for Dorner.



Dorner sat on the padded table while Firooka removed the electrodes from his scalp. Six hours had passed since he'd fallen asleep. "Did she—"

"Talk to *her*," Firooka said.

Had he done something wrong? The nurse seemed upset.

Rin entered the chamber, turned her back to close the door and removed a brimless cap from her head. "Sorry," she said. "I came directly from surgery."

"You're a surgeon?" Dorner said.

"That was my training," Rin muttered. She avoided his gaze, consulting her Joinspace, distracted by other business. "Tired?" she asked.

"Exhausted. Did you hear her?"

“I’m not surprised,” Rin said. “Your sleep was anything but restful.”

Firooka removed the last electrode. She put her hand on Dorner’s crown, as if to smooth his hair back into place. But the hand just sat there while the nurse and doctor gazed at each other in the space above his head.

“She was with me most of the night,” Dorner said. “Did the straddle work? Were you able to—”

“Yes,” Rin said, “the straddle worked.” She turned to Firooka. “Thanks.”

The nurse gathered up the electrodes and left the chamber.

“So you heard her,” Dorner said. “Tongue.”

“I heard a female voice,” Rin said. “Vaguely. At a distance.”

Dorner laughed. It was a nervous sound, infused with relief. “You were with me. I thought it might be you. I felt like a kid, hiding in the closet with a friend. You were warm. I could smell you. And then—” He peered at her. “You were gone.”

“I was called away,” Rin said. “I had to cut the session short.”

“But you were listening. Could you tell— You’ve heard voices like that before?”

“Suppressed desire is a possible cause,” Rin replied. “There may be a mutiny aboard the good ship Dorner. Or Tongue might be a phantom from the past. Something unresolved, returning to shame you. To wound you.”

Dorner’s lips parted, then he shook his head and gave her a mystified look.

“You were right about one thing,” Rin said. “She isn’t a

dream. You weren't in REM when Tongue was with you." She touched her brow. "You were in non-REM, stage three. Technically, your captivation by Tongue is a parasomnia, like sleepwalking or night terrors. But—" Rin closed her eyes and took a breath.

"But what?"

"I'm sorry," she muttered. "It's been a double shift. I'm a little light-headed."

Dorner stood and reached for her arm. "Should I get someone?"

"No. I'm alright. It will pass." She removed his hand from her arm. "I spent last night in the lab. I was on my way home when you showed up this morning."

Dorner checked his Joinspace. "It's dark outside."

"Tomorrow—" Rin straightened, using her finger to move the black drape of hair from her eye. "I'll be here at eight. Let's see if we can make more sense of Tongue then."

"I'm sorry," Dorner said. "I didn't realize—"

Rin waved his concern away.

"I really appreciate—"

"Of course." Rin pointed. "Your clothes are in the far cupboard."

And she turned to exit the chamber.

As Dorner opened the cupboard, he caught Rin's last glance. It was the look of a schoolgirl in the Museum of Memorable Creatures, seeing a monster from the Mesozoic for the first time.



“You’ve never been married,” Rin said, “according to your medical records.”

“No.”

“Prior to your abstinence, you were intimate with women?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve adhered to your ‘vow’ strictly? For two years?”

Dorner nodded. “The esteem of the colony has been enough. It’s faceless, but it’s been a kind of love for me.”

“Going back to the period preceding your abstinence, can you describe your relations with women?”

“I’m not sure that’s important.”

“If you’d rather discuss this with a—”

“No, no—” Dorner sighed. “I was with a professor at the Academy for almost a year. A smart woman, with a radiant spirit. She was good to me. It didn’t work out.”

“Can you tell me why?”

“I wasn’t—”

The doctor waited.

“I couldn’t keep my impulses within bounds.”

“The strictures are difficult,” Rin said.

“I violated them.”

Rin pursed her lips. “You’re not alone, you know.”

Dorner didn’t reply.

“Was this a repeated pattern? Did you go through this with other women?”

He nodded. “Many.”

Rin frowned. Something about his answer rankled her. “You felt these ‘impulses’ were unseemly for a Planner?”

Her harshness surprised him.

“I’m sorry,” Rin said. Her look softened. “I want to understand. Your violations— What did you do that felt so wrong? And your partners. How did they react?”

“We’re on dangerous ground,” he said quietly.

“Fertile ground for Tongue,” she suggested.

“Tongue is my guilt,” he said, guessing her diagnosis.

“Maybe. Maybe she’s your rage.”

He lowered his gaze. “Or maybe she’s a kind of punishment.”

“For what?”

“I haven’t been successful in love.” He spoke without looking up.

Silence.

“Things only went well when I wasn’t myself,” Dorner said.

“Are you sure—”

“With a few, I let them see who I am. That was always the end.” Dorner raised his eyes.

Rin was leaning forward, hands cossetting the air, as if to coax an answer from it. “Does Tongue know who you are?”

“She knows how to arouse me.”

“But you don’t reach a climax.”

“I hold myself back,” he said.

Rin swallowed, and her head quivered. A shudder, not a denial.

Dorner studied her. “She scared you. Didn’t she.”

Rin didn’t reply.

“You’re probably not supposed to admit that to a patient. Be honest with me. What were you feeling, listening to Tongue?”

Rin’s black hair fell across her cheek, leaving one eye visible.

“I’ve done nearly two thousand straddles,” she said. “I’ve seen and heard lots of bizarre characters and creatures. They’re always distorted aspects of the patients themselves.”

“You think Tongue is a part of me.”

“How could it be otherwise,” Rin replied. “But—”

“I’ve been getting some unusual attention lately,” Dorner murmured. “It’s as if there are women who can see Tongue inside me.”

“It’s too early—”

“I want to be rid of her,” he said. “I don’t want to hear her.”

“One step at a time. We’re going to do another straddle, with a real-time scan. I’d like to know which areas of your brain are active when she’s with you.” Her gaze narrowed. “Let’s not think of Tongue as a stranger you can choose to part ways with. It may not be that simple.”

3

TONGUE TAKES CHARGE

Have you ever spoken to her?” Rin asked.
Dorner shook his head.
“Maybe you should try.”

They were in a different chamber of the lab. A console was beside the observer’s chair, and a scanner was parked by the padded table, its ivory yoke suspended over the pillow. Dorner sat on the table in tunic and pants, chilled and nervous.

“It would make her more real than I want her to be,” he said.

Rin powered up the console and looked back at him.

“You’re past that point. Don’t you think?”

He searched her eyes. They were dark and emotionless.

“What if she answers?” he said.

“Ask her who she is, what she wants.”

Dorner tried to imagine how Tongue would respond.

“Maybe she’ll tell you why she’s singing,” Rin said. “And arousing you.”

“I’m here to unload her. I don’t want to know her better.”

“If you’re talking to her, it will make it easier for me to identify the circuits she’s using. I’ll see that in the scan.”

“And then?”

“There might be some clue about who she is and what she’s doing.”

Rin was eyeing the console. Dorner could sense her trepidation. She was as nervous as he was.

“I know you’d like more than that,” Rin said.

“You’re the doctor,” he sighed.

He lay down, and after Rin had cinched the straps and mounted the spider, she maneuvered the yoke, lowering it to bracket his head. Then the overheads blinked out, the red bulb came on, and she left the room.

Dorner considered her advice. Speak, to Tongue? Would he speak firmly? Politely? Should he be indignant? That’s how he felt. The scanner made a pulsing sound. Every time he budged his head, he could feel the yoke, and the spider legs were tickling his neck. How did Rin think he was going to get to sleep?



Tongue reached his ears thinly at first, hesitantly, as if she knew something was afoot. After circling at a distance, she grew bolder. The winds blowing out of her mounted quickly,

then all at once she rushed upon him, and the darkness was filled with her voices. They were swooping over him, weaving past, clipping his flanks and yipping in his ear. One puffed in his face, peeved and provoking. Another wowed as it wailed, like a harpy beating her chest. And then the great braid of Tongue's choir was winding around him.

Dorner braced himself.

Can you hear me? he thought.

The voices whipped and streamed, unchanged.

Are you listening? he asked.

If she answered, would he have the nerve to respond?

I'm talking to you, he tried again.

Tongue seemed not to notice.

More forceful, he thought. *Who are you?* Dorner demanded.

His voice joined Tongue's, echoing in the blind abyss of his mind.

All at once, the voices changed. One faltered, one choked, one faded to a whimper. The thick braid was loosening. Then a deep moan rose, drowning the others.

"Forgotten." Tongue's voice filled the void. "Utterly forgotten."

She was troubled, grieving.

Is it true? You're inside me?

"We've been together from the start."

I was born with you inside me?

"No, my precious. I came first. I am your source."

The last was spoken softly, with pain and regret.

Dorner didn't reply. The winds sighed and suffed, raveling around him, expressing a mournful isolation, a solitude much deeper than his own.

"Dashed from your thoughts," she whispered.

In Tongue's breath was a plea, and the plea wrung his heart. A memory, the vestige of a child's loss, denied and ignored. Like the stranded innocent he had once been—

"You're my world," Tongue said.

You're torturing me.

"Torture?" she cried. "Affliction. Is that what I am? You scorn me, starve me—"

The streaming winds stiffened and whipped, binding tighter.

"You're a vile imp," Tongue raved, "a spinster's devil. Me, me— You've done this to me!"

What have I—

But she was drowning him out. Her reweaving braid was a howl of vengeance and a chorus of rage. The moment for answers had ended. She was storming now, shaking him as if she meant to eat him alive.

Tongue was no frightened child, he thought. Look what she'd done to his purpose, his dignity, the little peace he'd found. She'd endangered everyone around him.

You're ruining my life, he said. *There's no one but you now. No one and nothing,* he seethed. *Goading me, thrashing me, flogging me—*

"From the start," she'd said. Maybe it was true. Tongue had been with him all his life—the voice of defeat, potent and

inward. He had deafened himself instinctively, knowing she had the power to destroy him.

In the hall outside the observation chamber, Firooka was briefing Rin.

“Shallow for the first twenty minutes,” she said. “But he’s deep now.”

Rin turned to the door. It was time to join Dorner, and Tongue.

“Are you alright?” Firooka asked.

“I’ll be fine.”

Rin took a breath, opened the door, stepped through and closed it behind her. She peered at the chair in the dim red light, the straddle console on one side and the scanner control on the other. Then she turned to Dorner.

His head was motionless, but his body was restive. His shoulders bulked, and his legs fought the straps. The pulse of the scanner filled the room, but there was another sound with it. A small sound, coming from Dorner’s lips. It would be loud and real when she plugged the cable in.

She approached the console and raised the sliders, setting the filter fences at max. Her hand shook. Her lips were trembling. *There’s a shield between you*, she thought.

A brushing sound made her jump.

When she turned, she saw Dorner’s arm had slid off the table. The sleeve of his tunic was bunched at the elbow, and the red light gleamed on the naked limb. A scar wound around it like a scaled serpent. Rin extended her hand and touched the scar. The serpent’s skin was stiff.

She sat in the chair, expanded her Joinspace and blacked it. Reducing the straddle volume, she unlooped the cable, plugged one end into the console and nerved herself. Then she raised the cable's free end and fitted the pin into her signaler nipple.

"I'd rather die," Dorner was raging.

"Deaf, you're deaf," Tongue wailed. "Listen to me—"

The voices assaulted Rin's senses. She could feel the fear beneath Dorner's fury. *He's getting more than he expected*, she thought. The Joinspace was black, as before. There was nothing to see. She pulled it to the corner of her eye.

Gall burned like an acid inside Rin. She was filled with it. Her stomach was twisting, fumes seared her throat. Rage, the rage of betrayal— Was it Dorner's emotion? Had he trusted Tongue? The two seemed so close— No, Rin thought, sorting her turmoil. The gall wasn't his. The rage of betrayal was coming from her.

From him— Rin felt fear. The snarl of guilt, of doubt and weakness. What had he done, she wondered, to call this plague down on himself? One leg was jerking. His shoulders tugged at the straps. *Who is he really?* Rin thought. Tongue was so biting, so bitter. What heartless offense could have—

Suddenly everything changed. Rin felt a yearning, rash and deep. Was it Dorner's? No, he was still resisting. The yearning was Tongue's. Feral, mindless— She was yielding to Dorner. Surrendering.

Rin came forward in her chair.

Tongue's voices were wounded, her song was weeping. And Dorner, so incensed and heedless the moment before, turned slavish and meek. Between the man and the woman inside him, a desperate need bloomed.

Tongue's braided voice turned silky. Dorner softened, accepting her caress. Rin felt it gliding over her, and when she looked at the man on the table, she could see how aroused he'd become. Tongue's tenderness touched her. A beautiful voice, so rich with emotion. Could any woman on earth feel things so deeply, or express them so keenly?

Rin reached for the console, then stopped and drew her hand back. *Reckless*, she admonished herself. *What are you thinking?*

Dorner's neck craned, and his lips parted. The spider winked scarlet light. In Rin's ears, Tongue's song wormed, fervid, ascending. Dorner was swept away.

She checked the scan, studying the screen. What Rin saw confused her. She shook her head, trying to make sense of the image. Then she shuddered, and her heart lost its beat. There was a peculiar object at the edge of the screen, and as Rin zoomed in, the object came alive. It was swelling and shrinking, throbbing in time to Tongue's song.

Tongue's voice was suddenly bigger than life, unmuffled, present. Rin stood, astonished. It was as if Tongue had slid out of Dorner's head and was coiled on the floor before her, singing to them both. The walls of the chamber seemed to quiver and bend. Rin reached to steady herself. The walls were

squeezing, like the sides of a bellows, and the red bulb flickered in time. She turned to the console. All the settings had changed. The safeguards were gone.

Tongue was lost in an ardent entreaty. Dorner was quivering on the table. Rin hung breathless between the two. Lovers were feasting on each other, and she was in the room adjacent with her ear to the wall.

Tongue's song pulled her inside out. Longings, hidden and buried, welled to the surface. Aspirations, long flown, returned all at once. Rin imagined the voice was her own. She was finally unleashing the stirrings she felt. She put her hand to the cable, frightened, but she didn't remove it. She couldn't stop listening. Tongue's song had no claim, no thesis, no rational frame. There was nothing but need, blind and unyielding—

Dorner groaned. He lay twisted, half on his back, with his spider glimmering. His face was sweat-glossed and bathed in red. Through the vent in his pants, his erection emerged. Rin took a step toward him, Tongue thick in her ears. *Close the vent*, she thought. She couldn't ignore it. She took another step, and her hip touched the table. She reached her hand out, then drew it back.

Tongue's orison swelled. Rin felt faint, her whole body trembling. A moment of madness. The bowed organ gleamed before her, scarlet in the spectral light, quivering like a serpent about to strike.

She drew a breath, getting control, reaching again to close the vent.

Suddenly Dorner's eyes opened. Wide.
He grabbed her arm, pulling her toward him.
Rin cried out, wrenching free. She yanked the cable out
and hurried from the room.



"The speech is this afternoon," Maisy said.

"Bayliss will do it justice. What about staging?"

Dorner was dressed, standing in the straddle chamber, talking to Maisy over his signaler. He was foggy. He put his hand on the padded table to steady himself.

"Manifolds, strikers, pipes and grates have all been moved," Maisy told him.

The plan was to stage the furnace components in a blocked-off thruway.

"How are they treating you?" she asked.

Firooka opened the chamber door.

"I'll call you back." Dorner disconnected. "What happened last night?" he shook his head at the nurse. "I feel like someone vacuumed my brain out."

"We gave you a hypnotic and a memory blocker." She looked troubled. "You needed some sleep."

Firooka led him out of the chamber to a viewing room at the rear of the lab. When he entered, Rin was standing beside a large monitor. "Rested?" she said.

"I suppose."

"Tongue continues to surprise." She turned to the monitor.

Something that looked like a quartered citrus, pink and gold, filled the screen.

“It’s a sectional view of your brain,” Rin said. “A recording of the left hemisphere taken last night, at 2 a.m.”

Dorner stared at the filamentous glitter, uncertain what he was supposed to see.

Rin pointed at the center of the citrus. “When Tongue is singing, this area is lit up. When she’s silent, it’s not.”

“What does that mean?”

Rin zoomed in while she spoke. “Because the singing is intermittent, it seems she comes and goes. But she doesn’t.” On the screen, an image grew larger and larger: two orbs glowed above an egg-shaped structure; below the egg, three trunks descended like the legs of a stool. “That’s her.”

The image was four feet across.

“She’s an anomaly,” Rin said.

Dorner gazed at the image, speechless.

“The ovum-like object,” she raised her thumb and forefinger with a small gap between, “is the size of a snap button.”

“Anomaly?”

“Something we haven’t seen before.” Rin’s hand moved to his head, touching a spot above his left ear. “Here—”

Dorner’s face felt hot. The floor seemed to shift beneath him.

“—between your reasoning brain and your amygdala. I can’t tell you if she’s a neoplasm—a tumor—or just an unusual bit of brain tissue. And I can’t tell you how she got there. But she’s a physical reality.”

He could see the agitation in her eyes. And amid it, this mooring, this new fact.

Rin zoomed out. Tongue grew smaller and smaller. “She’s suspended above this area bordered in black. The old brain mappers called it the Island of Reil, because it’s separated from the tissues around it. Sexual impulses are often triggered here.”

Dorner stared at the image.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Can you remove her,” he asked, “without damaging my brain?”

“I’m not sure that she needs to be removed. Or should be. And— She’s in a difficult place.”

“Cancer,” he said.

“I’ve never seen a cancer that looked like that.”

Dorner closed his eyes. “I don’t want her in my head.”

“An operation could change you,” Rin said, “in ways we might be sorry about. Look what happens to you when she sings. If Tongue goes, some of the best of you might go with her. Not just your sex drive. Your desire, Dorner. Your passion for life.”

“What can you do?”

“Quite a few things. You may be surprised.”

He was silent.

“We learned a lot last night,” Rin told him. “But this is going to take time.”

“You look exhausted.”

“A straddle as intense as that one,” she replied, “strains the observer.”

“Do you ever sleep?”

“When I work nights, I often go home in the morning. Sometimes I sleep here. I have a bed upstairs.”

“I’m grateful,” he said, “for what you’re doing. I trust your judgment.”

“We’re going to find our way through this,” she told him.

“It’s strange,” he said, “that something so small could be so terrifying.”

After Dorner departed, Rin exited the viewing room.

Firooka was waiting by the door.

“I’d like to know what’s going on.” The nurse put her fist in her pocket.

“It was a grueling straddle,” Rin said. “I needed a break.”

“Again? Why did you ask me to give him a blocker?”

Rin’s eyes shifted with taxed patience.

“When I came in,” Firooka said, “the console was at full volume and all the filters were off. And his trousers were open.”

Rin waved her away. “Everything’s under control.”



It was a neighborhood filled with grand old apartment buildings raised two centuries before. The graceful towers evinced the taste of the architects who’d pioneered the style. Portholes ornamented their heights, and trees fountained from the roof gardens. A buzzer sounded on the 21st floor.

Eudriss stepped toward the door. An older woman, she

was Rin's height, with Rin's rounded nose and planar brow. She wore a sweater and a knit hat.

"Yes?" She peered at the three men standing before her.

"You're having problems with airflow?" Dorner said.

"Finally," Eudriss sighed. She tucked a straggle of gray hair behind her ear. "Come right in."

He crossed the threshold, feeling the air with his hand. "Definitely breezy."

"It never stops blowing," Eudriss said.

He turned to the technicians.

Eudriss' gaze narrowed. "You're Dorner, aren't you?"

Rin entered the front room. "What are you doing here?" she said.

"Repairing your air system," Dorner replied. "We'll need to see the utility closet."

"By all means." The old woman extended her hand to him. "My name is Eudriss."

He shook it. "Yes, I'm Dorner." He motioned to the technicians, and they filed past. He avoided Rin's gaze, eyeing the furniture and wall hangings. They were of mixed vintage. It looked like an apartment that had been held in the same family since the colony's inception. At the room's rear, a gibbon peered suspiciously from behind a potted plant.

"Very thoughtful," Rin said.

Eudriss peered at her daughter. "You know Dorner?"

"Yes, Mom. We . . . met on the tube train."



When the repairs were finished, Dorner escorted the technicians to the door.

Eudriss hurried out of the kitchen with her apron on. “Wait—”

He turned.

“I want to thank you.” Eudriss took his hand in both of hers.

Rin rose from a wing chair. “I do too.”

“Guess what?” Eudriss turned to her daughter, eyes glittering. “Dorner’s staying for dinner.”

“No, Mom—”

“But you’re friends.”

“I can’t,” Dorner said.

Eudriss kept hold of his hand. There was more than gratitude in her eyes. Dorner saw tenderness and care.

“Yes you can,” she said.



“You saw the speech this afternoon,” Dorner said. “What did you think?”

“He was reassuring,” Rin said.

They had finished setting the table. From where Dorner stood, he could see a colony broadcast screen in the front room. “Our Planners thought it went well.” He gazed at Eudriss. “It was the speech I was going to give.”

Rin was silent. Eudriss looked pained.

“The new furnace— How hard will it be to get it working?” Eudriss asked him.

The buzzer sounded.

“My niece,” Eudriss said, moving toward the door.

A taller woman strolled into the apartment, gave Dorner a glance and approached a full-length mirror, adjusting her scarf, regarding him in the reflection. The scent of anise reached him.

“Anja works at Fili,” Eudriss explained.

A high-end clothier. Anja was occupied with her lips, her lashes and her hair.

“Dorner’s going to join us for dinner,” Eudriss told her. “Imagine that.”

“Glad to meet you,” he greeted Anja.

“Our air’s back to normal. Can you feel it?” Eudriss said. “Dorner saved us. No more sweaters and caps.”

“Sweaters are foul.” Anja turned to face him. Her dark hair was coiled to one side. There was a yellow bird, a cloisonné canary, nested in the coil. “You’ll see more flesh this winter. Low necklines and thighs. Does that appeal to you, Mister Dorner?”

The question surprised him.

“Not all of us favor revealing garments,” Anja said, looking at Rin, who was wearing a knit pullover.

“There’s more to a woman than her clothing,” he replied.

Anja nodded. “How do you know Rinnie?”

A shriek sounded from the apartment’s rear. The gibbon

leaped into the front room, snarled at Dorner and hugged Rin's knees.

"Tad—" Rin spoke the ape's name to comfort him.

Tad's face was dark, and the ring of white fur around it gave him a bottled look. He whimpered.

"Don't be jealous," Rin said.

Tad climbed into her arms.

"All that blowing was hard on him," Eudriss told Dorner. "His ancestors lived in the jungle, you know."

When they were seated in the dining room, Eudriss brought out a large steaming bowl. Tad carried a smaller one. Gibbons were common pets. Their intelligence enabled sensitive interactions, and the tidiness bred into them for glass cleaning made them well-suited for household chores. After placing the bowl on the table, Tad took an elevated chair between Rin and Anja. As the food was being passed around, Eudriss spoke.

"This dinner is our 'thank-you' to Dorner. He's helped so many, and today he's helped us."

"You're very kind," he said.

"Saving the Kiribati was a gift to the human family." Eudriss looked at Dorner as if she knew who he was. "An example of compassion none of us will forget."

"Too bad about the crack-up," Anja said.

Rin pursed her lips.

Eudriss pretended she hadn't heard. "They met on the tube train," she said, passing a vegetable platter to Anja.

"Really." Anja's eyes were as dark as Rin's, but they had a cynical glint.

A silence fell over the table. They continued serving themselves. On the wall opposite, Dorner saw framed diplomas, certificates and children's drawings.

"He got his start as a blaster," Rin said.

"We all know that, dear," Eudriss nodded.

"Actually," Dorner said, "I dreamed of being a Planner when I was a kid. Before public access was banned, I visited the furnace level on a school excursion."

"Use your fork," Anja scowled at Tad. "Look at this." She picked gibbon hair from her thigh.

Tad sniffed and chewed on a cube of squash.

"Anja has a date tonight," Eudriss explained. "Do you travel a lot?"

"I was in Eden last spring," Dorner answered, "to negotiate our fuel contract."

Eden was moored in the vicinity of oceanic methane deposits, and they did a good business providing fuel to the other colonies.

"Rin and I talk about getting away," Eudriss said, "but it never happens."

Inter-colony air shuttles had been terminated, but limited seating was available on helijet transports.

"She's busy at the hospital," Eudriss went on, "and I have my volunteer work. And of course there's the question of where to go. Too much crime in Penguin. They say Avalon's on the brink of civil war."

Ten minutes later, Anja's date arrived. Rufus was a floor manager at the Hall of Builders. He had a black velvet coat

and long orange locks. Anja stood and faced him, opening her arms with a huff. “Look at this. I’m covered with hair.”

Rufus led her to the mirror and picked the hairs from her dress while she reapplied her makeup. When Anja was satisfied, they returned to the table to say goodnight.

“All better,” Rufus assured them. He gave Anja an open-hand tribute. “Isn’t she gorgeous?”

Anja turned and stepped toward the door. “Good luck with Rinnie,” she said, glancing at Dorner.

He stared back, stone-faced.

“Dorner might enjoy hearing some of our history,” Eudriss suggested as they cleared the table. She retrieved a box of old photos and a candelabra with three flame-shaped bulbs, and led the way into the front room. She set the candelabra on the low table. Rin switched off the overheads, and they sat on the well-worn sofa together. Tad curled in Rin’s lap.

Eudriss pulled photos from the box and shared memories of years past. There was a picture of Rin with baby Tad, Rin receiving her university laurel, and earlier pictures from excursions and birthdays. As the years rolled back, a man appeared in the photos, tall and jet-haired like Dorner, but with a playfulness Dorner had never known. He made faces to amuse his daughter.

In one, Rin stood on a garden wall in a heroine costume, while her father watched from below.

“She thought she could fly,” Eudriss said. “She was a brave little girl.” Eudriss raised another. “And the famous picture—”

Rin smiled at Dorner. “Famous to us.”

Dorner recognized Tropica Bay, home to Clemency's automated beach. The man was waist-deep in the water, holding Rin in both hands, sailing her over the waves. There was joy on both their faces.

Eudriss turned to him. "He was tall, like you, with blue eyes. And your jaw is like his. Strong. Manly."

"Mother," Rin said.

Eudriss waved the objection away. "Dorner knows he's handsome. Here— Before I was married." Eudriss raised another photo. She was waggish in this one, attractive, with a sportive gaze and a smart figure. She camped between two other women, touching her necklace and biting her lip. "During the epidemic," Eudriss said. "We brought meals to the sick."

Eudriss showed him photos from her childhood. On the Homestead Trail, watching the quetzals fly to and from their nests in the mango trees. Building a snowman on the Jubilee Icefield. In a tram car, halfway to Zenith. As she relived the ride, her vernal spirit filled the room. Rin laughed and made opportune comments. She'd heard the stories many times before. Tad examined the photos with them. When the talk was thoughtful, he made a circle with his lips. When there was laughter, he rocked and shook his head.

Eudriss sighed and leaned back in the sofa. "When I'm troubled and I can't get to sleep," she told Dorner, "you know what I think about? I picture us all together. All of us clinging to life, and all of those who had to let go. I imagine the ice has melted, and the earth is once again a home for us all."

The hope in her eye jumped the distance between them. Dorner bowed his head.

Her recollection of the past had reminded her of a past they'd all lost. He felt the loss too, in a different way. The photos, with their unskilled composition and blatant poses, were windows on a world he had never known. A place where moderation wasn't forced. A place where real clemency was alive and well.

"The past few days have been difficult for me," he said.

"I'm sorry," Eudriss murmured.

"Your daughter's trying to help me."

"I wondered about that."

"I'd be sunk without her," he said.

"I'm sure she's doing the best she can."

He was a stranger to Eudriss, Dorner thought. But she'd shared so much with him.

"I'm still full-time at Planning," he said. "Out of public view."

"You're important to all of us," Eudriss nodded.

Her warmth was softening something inside him.

"The people I work with know I'm in trouble, but—" Dorner paused. "Only Rin knows about Tongue."

"Tongue?" Eudriss said.

Rin shook her head. "That's confidential."

"I want to tell her."

"I'm listening," Eudriss assured him.

He looked into her eyes. "There's a woman," he said, "inside me."

Eudriss didn't recoil. Her expression was thoughtful.

"She says she was there when I was born."

"She talks to you?"

He nodded. "And she sings. She has a powerful voice."

"We all have memories," Eudriss said.

"She's more than that."

Eudriss looked to Rin for help.

"Tongue is a part of Dorner," Rin said, "he never knew was there."

Eudriss took Rin's hand. "We haven't been troubled by anything like that. Have we?"

"No, Mom. We haven't."

"I'm afraid this is beyond me." Eudriss seemed to be asking his forgiveness. "You're a good man. I know that."

"We get closer to an answer," Rin said, "every time we're together."

Eudriss rose. "I'm going to say goodnight."

He stood.

"No, no," Eudriss waved him down. "Thank you again for fixing our problem." Then to her daughter, "Don't let Dorner miss the last train."

Eudriss turned, clasped Tad's hand, and they disappeared down the hallway.

Rin gathered the photos and put them back in the box.

"Be honest," she said. "Was this all terribly boring?"

"No. It was kind of your mother to include me."

He was sincere, and he could see his sincerity touched her. She drew back the black drape of hair. They sat there in

silence, reading each other in the soft light.

I'm falling, he thought. Her command. Her intelligence. Her boldness in braving the perils inside him. Her warmth and deep feeling. And the allure of her cryptic eyes. He remembered what it was like to have sex with a woman. And he wondered what it would be like to have sex with Rin. To experience that intensity together.

Dorner looked away. He'd turned off his signaler earlier. He took a breath and reached into his pant pocket for his injector. Rin shifted toward him and put her hand over it.

"You don't need to do that for me," she said.

He regarded her, then he put the injector back in his pocket.

"I'll walk you to the door." Rin rose. "It's warm in here, isn't it." She raised her arms and removed her pullover. Beneath was a black chemise.

Rin was silent as they crossed the front room. When they reached the threshold, she turned to him. "Tongue is a riddle," she said. "But there's something I want to try."

"During a straddle?"

She nodded. "I want to see if I can turn on your sight. I've done this before, a few times, with paranoid psychosis. When a patient hears voices but the straddles are dark."

"You think I'm psychotic?"

"No," she said, "but sight might help. For psychotic patients, adding vision can make their voices disappear. We don't know why. Maybe sight undermines the aural delusions.

Even when the delusions persist, eyesight may help. If the patient can see the threat, he can face it directly. Understand what it is.”

“How do you—”

“By stimulating your ocular pathways during the straddle. I use chemical injections and electric probes. It’s all non-invasive. The chemicals are encapsulated. I can trigger their release without touching you. The only risk is—”

She paused. Dorner noticed a flame-shaped birthmark on the curve of her breast.

“—the sights themselves,” Rin said. “Sometimes they’re more than the patient can handle.”

She leaned her head, as if to evade an unwanted thought.

“Is this safe for you?” he asked.

“Turning on your sight is—”

“I mean the straddles.” Dorner caught her drape of hair with his finger and drew it aside. “Look at me. You said an observer could be consumed by a patient.”

Her eyes were suddenly limpid and frail.

“Listening,” she said, “has been hard for me. The first straddle— This hasn’t happened before.”

“What hasn’t happened?”

“What goes on, between you and Tongue— The way I’m reacting—”

“I’ve been worried about that,” he said.

Rin’s hand curled against her sternum. “It’s crazy. It’s not what I—”

“You’re in danger,” he said.

“So are you.” Her eyes searched his.

Dorner touched her cheek.

She put her palm on his chest.

His arm circled her waist, and she pressed against him.

Their lips crept closer, then Dorner drew away.

Silence.

“You’re an unusual man,” she whispered.

“If things were different—”

“Different?”

“Well,” he said. “I’m with someone.”

Rin laughed and opened the door.



Freight transports began hauling the new furnace components to the combustion arena. Dorner spent the day on the furnace level with the engineers, laying conveyance track for the new pipes and igniters. That night, he was back in the scanning chamber, strapped on the table with the ivory yoke bracketing his head.

While Firooka prepared the injections, Rin stood with a metal tray at her elbow, arranging instruments.

“Tongue knows what we’re doing,” Dorner said.

Firooka raised her brows.

“I suspect she does,” Rin replied. “Where are the spare probes I asked for?” She turned to Firooka.

“We’re waiting on the shop.”

“You tell those slugs, if I don’t have them before noon tomorrow, they’ll be herding bergs in a longboat this Christmas.”

“Yes ma’am.” The nurse turned and spoke into her signaler. Rin glanced at Dorner. “I’m a dragon in surgery.”

She raised one of her probes so Dorner could see it. The thin rod had a copper pommel and a rickrack head. “You won’t feel a thing.”

Dorner closed his eyes.

He could hear Firooka’s carping, the *clink* of instruments and the pulse of the scanner. Then he felt the spider settle on his neck.

He blacked his Joinspace and tried to relax.



A descending whine filled the void, like an emergency van approaching. He was in darkness again, blind and helpless, hearing the braid of Tongue’s voices winding toward him. Longing, pain, wrath and supplication— The emotional storm drew closer and closer, an onslaught that meant to rule and consume him.

Then, strangely, the darkness rippled like a window being splashed.

The murk below eddied and dissevered. An image appeared, shifting, confused. He could make no sense of it. And then—

I’m in the sky, Dorner thought.

He was looking down. Through the murk, he could see the transparent lens of the dome, and the hive of buildings crowded within. It was night, and the tiny windows were lit. There was Hub Park, Planning headquarters and Clemency Hospital with the angels on its roof. The radiating thruways were marked by the blue-green dots of algal lamps.

Tongue's voices were loud now. She was drawing close.

He shifted his gaze. He could see, he could really see—

Above him, ribbons of color were swimming through the slurry, scarlet and amber. The ribbons moved with Tongue's sounds, alive with her voices, kinking and streaming with cadence and feeling.

She sang in hot colors, painting the darkness, her long moans and harrowing cries rippled and scalloped like fingerprint trails. Closer and closer—

A silver nodule was floating in space, and the ribbons parted around it, like the fibers of a stream flowing around a rock. As he watched, the silver mass grew, bulging and lobing. Its curved sides gleamed, its top frothed with silver bubbles. And then— It began to throb.

A heart, he thought. His heart.

He could feel its rhythm, the pulse jarring his senses, brightening his thoughts. A silver halo surrounded the heart now, and with every chug, the halo expanded.

My chest, Dorner thought. He could feel his chest swelling, with the silver heart throbbing inside.

From the borders of his chest, chrome limbs pushed

out; arms at the sides, thighs below. Around his thoughts, a chromed head was growing.

He was a physical creature, a silver man, suspended in space, skin sheening as Tongue's singing winds streamed past.

You've done it, he thought, hoping Rin could hear.

In the hospital chamber, Rin stood by his slumbering body, Joinspace wide, cable hanging from her neck, her rickrack probe raised like a magic wand. She smiled, hearing what he heard, seeing what he saw, as if his sleek figure belonged to her.

The straddle's filters were off and its fences were down. Rin floated with him, the night sky above her, glittering with stars. Her head and heart had silvered like his, and the hot colors of Tongue were ribboning around her.

Rin felt a rush of warmth, a surge of gladness. *Dorner's feelings*, she thought. Or were they her own? A welling of gratitude for the gift of sight, or for the care she had shown him. The gladness mounted, crowding her insides— If these were Dorner's feelings, she had opened more than his eyes.

There's no one like you, he said.

Was he speaking to Tongue, or to her? Or were these her words, spoken to him?

Rin set down the probe and closed her eyes. His sleek arms reached. She could see them extending from her own body, as if she might touch him. His silvered heart beat, and it was her heart too, beating for him.

Can you hear me, Rin?

Rin nodded. She choked, and a tear slid down her cheek.

“Dorner,” Tongue cried, “Dorner, Dorner—”

The winds drubbed his back and chafed his sides, jolting his senses, ending the tender moment with Rin, shaking them apart. Into the gap, Tongue’s craving poured. Her strands coiled thickly around him, orange and red, ropy and scaly.

“She’s given you eyes,” Tongue exulted.

His sight hadn’t banished her. Tongue was more real than ever. Her ribbons glittered in the distance, streaming toward him through the inky night.

“You think you can reach me?” Tongue whispered.

Could he? Dorner wondered. How far was she? In what dark cavity of his mind had she lodged? What was waiting at the end of those ribbons?

Peace or terror. Sense or madness—

“Is that what you want?” she asked.

Yes. That’s what I want.

To understand Tongue. To meet his seductress, his raving tormentor, face to face. Rin would be with him, seeing what he saw, hearing what he heard, feeling what he felt. Rin was listening, he thought, hoping he would accept Tongue’s challenge.

And it was much like he imagined. Rin stood in the chamber, gazing at her Joinspace, praying the invitation from Tongue would be a path to self-knowledge, and that Dorner would have the courage to follow it. *I’m with you*, she thought.

Dorner looked at his body. It was flawless, gleaming. He could feel the strength in his chest and his arms. He twisted his trunk, and the chromed flesh flexed, not soft, not fragile.

Impervious to burns or bleeding. A body Rin had given him to discover himself. Could he control it?

He pressed his arms to his sides.

Stretch, he thought. And his torso stretched, legs spinning behind.

Forward, he thought. His body inched forward.

What was he doing? Who was Tongue really?

Her clamor ceased, and the braided chorus converged on a single high note. It pierced him, thrumming every nerve with unfulfilled longing.

“Come to me,” Tongue whispered.

Fly, Dorner told himself. And he shot through the night like a rocket.

Around him, Tongue’s choir swelled. The orange whips fluttered, the red ribbons curled, the golden streams twisted, lighting the trail.

Taper, he thought. His torso thinned, his legs tapered behind. Twenty feet, thirty feet— *Wings*, he thought. His arms turned into blades, long and flat, cambered like airfoils. *Hawk-headed*, he thought, and speed flattened his lips and stretched his eyes. His brow receded, his beak cut the night.

“My one,” Tongue said.

Her sigh quickened his pulse. Her whine pricked his ears. He shot through a billow of dust and her breath filled his head with heaves and smoke. Ahead, scarves of purple gas drifted on either side, and Tongue’s braided trail ran between, glowing through the darkness like the line of a fisherman reeling him in.

His heart was full, his pulse in his ears. His chrome body quivered with ardor and speed. But the idea remained: a woman on earth—a woman he loved—was somehow along.

Are you near? he thought.

“Nearer,” she sang, “nearer—”

He remembered the image he’d seen on the screen. Bizarre. Inhuman.

“Imagine,” Tongue said. “Can you, can you?”

Stars sprinkled and thistled every reach of the sky. He recalled the first night he’d heard her, how irresistible she’d been. On his left: a transparent orb, blown by a star at its center, like a child’s soap bubble. On the right: a trail of green gas, riffled like a mermaid’s wake. He curdled the air as he passed, leaving a knotted white tail.

“Deeper,” Tongue sang, “deeper, deeper.”

Ahead, a glittering nebula bobbed from the darkness, wrinkled and rolled around its natal sun like a golden cabbage. The braid of Tongue’s voices ran beside it—fuller now, woven thickly, oily and gleaming, dripping with stars.

He was far from the earth. And the woman—was she still with him? Rin was her name. A moment of clarity: he was disappearing into Tongue’s realm. *I can’t turn back*, he thought, aiming the message behind him.

Beyond the cabbage, a great wormhole appeared, flaring like a tube train tunnel; and through it, at its end, a red light was pulsing.

“Deeper,” Tongue sang.

He shot past the cabbage. The Wormhole gaped, the red

light grew bigger and brighter. Tongue— He'd see her, he'd know— Every atom of his being trembled with anticipation. How easy: to let everything go, every thought, every memory—

“Deeper,” Tongue sang, “deeper, deeper . . .”

A *click* sounded in Dorner's head, and his vision shook.

He was in the Wormhole now, and Tongue owned his mind.

In the hospital chamber, Rin's Joinspace went dark. She shrank it, turned to the console and checked the settings. In her ears, there was only silence.

“Firooka,” she barked. “I've lost him.”

The nurse lifted the scanner yoke and swung it aside. Dorner's body was stiff and straight.

“Give him a jolt,” Rin said, eyes wide.

Firooka pressed a metal waffle to Dorner's forehead. His body jumped on the table, but he didn't wake.

“Don't do this—” Rin's voice was threatening. She reached for the instrument tray, raising a syringe with a long needle and a barrel full of copper liquid.

Dorner was in the Wormhole, flying beside Tongue's deafening braid. Desire screamed inside him. The fleeced walls were flowing, and the pulsing red egress filled his sight.

Something spiked his right wing. When he looked, he could see the ghost of a human arm. Without warning, his long silver body collapsed like a spyglass, and his momentum reversed. An invisible force sucked him back through the Wormhole.

He hurtled from its entrance, past the Golden Cabbage and the Mermaid's Wake, metallic no more. He was frail and fleshy, splayed and flailing, tumbling through the dust and purple smoke. The stars winked out. There was only darkness. And then below him, a white snowball some child had formed.

He was plunging toward a frozen planet.



Rin tried to nap in the chair by the console, but her eyes wouldn't close. For five hours she stared through the scarlet gloom at the man asleep on the table. She rose when Dorner lifted his head.

He squinted at her. "You brought me back."

Rin exhaled. She unfastened his straps.

Dorner sat up slowly. "You saw?" he asked her. "The braid, the Wormhole—"

"Until you entered it."

"And then—"

"Nothing. The straddle couldn't follow you in. Your mind is guarding the opening."

Dorner remembered hurtling through the Wormhole, crazed, engulfed by the pulsing light, Tongue's chorus roaring around him.

"Did you see her?" Rin asked.

He shook his head.

"I don't like losing my connection," she said.

"I understand." Dorner peered at her. For a time, he'd

forgotten Rin. She must have felt that through the straddle. As a doctor, she'd worried about his return. As a woman— "I'm going to ride back with you on the train," he said.



The car was empty. Neither had spoken on the way to the depot or while they were boarding. They sat together, and as the train took a curve they leaned as one. Dorner put his hand on hers.

Rin didn't remove it. She pinched his sleeve and hiked it, looking at his wrist. "That's a burn scar," she said.

"A memento from Kiribati. We were evacuating the last refugees. A fuel station exploded."

The tube train righted, accelerating on its airbed.

"Last night, when you gave me eyes—" He peered at her.

Rin was silent.

"You heard my thoughts?"

She nodded.

"That's how I feel," he said.

Her head turned. The drape of black hair hid her face.

The train hissed on its bed. It was slowing.

"I feel the same about you," Rin said.

Dorner rose. "We're getting off here."

"It's not my stop."

"No," Dorner said. "It's mine."



Rin stepped inside Dorner's apartment, halted by the sofa and looked around. It was tidy, but the lamps needed polishing and the curtains were worn. On the wall above the desk was the Planning insignia, a three-pointed star with each leg labeled: Temp, Conscience and Perpetuity.

"It's not much," he said. "You can see the Cayambe Cliffs from the roof."

"How long have you been here?"

"Two years." Dorner took her coat.

"You have it to yourself," Rin said. "Mom and I are always in each other's way."

Dorner stepped toward her and circled her with his arms.

"Are we going to do this?" she murmured, leaning against him.

"I don't know. Are we?"

Her presence filled the modest space. He wondered if the bleakness would return when she left.

"Moderation, yes. But abstinence—" Rin looked at him. "It's not healthy."

"I'm going to close the drapes."

He moved around the room, sealing the windows, and when he returned the apartment was dim.

"You're not afraid of me," he said.

"A little. I am. I'm not very experienced." She touched her brow. "I've watched a lot of patients in the lab, but—"

Her voice seemed to belong to a stranger, someone he'd never met.

"I've never seen anyone . . . act like that." Rin was barely

audible. “The second straddle— I had to leave.” She put her arm across her middle, as if to protect herself.

Dorner put his hands on her hips. The doctor had vanished. The woman before him cared nothing about spiders and scans. She sighed and then she pressed against him. Her breath grazed his neck. He put his lips to hers.

Rin’s mouth was warm, and her tongue sought his. In the darkness, his heart spoke. And in the quiet, hers answered.

He felt her palm on his chest.

“My guidance is unhappy,” she said.

Dorner found her wrist and depressed the mole. “I turned mine off on the train.”

“Will you undress me?” she asked.

He kissed her again and unbuttoned her blouse. Her skin was poreless, smooth as porcelain. When her breasts were free, she stared at him, trying to be bold. Dorner caressed her shoulders and removed her skirt. Her body was simple, lithe and trim.

Rin’s lips trembled. Was she trying to speak?

She’s been nursing a fantasy, Dorner thought. He took her in his arms and lifted her onto the sofa. Rin hid her face.

“Relax,” he said softly. “Close your eyes.”

He touched her lids to seal them. Then he spoke again.

“Tell me what you’ve imagined Dorner might do.”

After a long silence, she began to whisper. It was a rambling list, innocent and predictable. He put his finger over her lips.

“I’d like to try the first,” he said. “Would that be alright?”

“Yes,” Rin said.

Twenty minutes later, when her spasms were abating, Dorner held her.

Rin began to cry.

“What is it?”

She shook her head. “You were so selfless. I’ve never been treated that way.” She put her hand on his shirt shoulder. He was still fully clothed.

Rin raised herself from the sofa and drew Dorner up. Holding his hand, she crossed the floor and entered his bedroom. Dorner closed the door. The darkness was thick.

She crawled onto the mattress, folded her legs and motioned him to sit opposite.

“I want to know who you are,” she whispered. “Really.”

Dorner sat across from her. *What did you expect?* he asked himself. There was no way to avoid this.

Rin touched his knee. “Your love life. Tell me.”

“How far back—”

“The one who understood you best,” she said. “Start with her.”

He could see her silhouette, but her eyes were lost in the darkness.

“It’s not something I’m proud of,” Dorner said.

“Please.”

“I was a virgin. She was the mother of one of my classmates.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve, when it started.”

“Did anyone—”

“No. Nobody knew. At first, I thought I had what every boy wants. An experienced guide. I felt lucky. But— It was wrong. All wrong.”

“She took advantage of you.”

Dorner shook his head. “It wasn’t that.”

Stray sensations surfaced from memory. Her scent filled his head. Her curls were a cave. His shoulder blade prickled, and he squeezed her waist.

“I had some strange ideas,” he said. “I was reckless. And she—”

Rin waited.

“I followed my imagination,” he said. “It led me to a sorry place.”

“What was it you did?”

Dorner took a breath. “This is hard to think about.”

She shifted closer, touching her folded leg to his. “Is there a picture I can see?”

“She was tall,” he said. “My height. Cinnamon curls and blue eyes, and skin that was perfectly pink.”

“She was beautiful,” Rin said.

He nodded. “I couldn’t let go of her. Even after I began seeing girls my own age. I moved to Libreville, thinking the distance would finish us. But my affairs with women at college made me miserable. I expected furnace doors to open, to be consumed by the heat and the roar. I thought they would all be like YoEllis.”

“YoEllis.” Rin spoke her name.

“When I returned to Clemency, I went back to her.”

“And when you joined Planning—”

“I couldn’t do without her. I was friendly with other women. I treated them the way I thought they wanted to be treated.”

“And?”

“Some responded. It didn’t matter. There was nothing for me.” He looked away. “With a few, I took off the mask.”

“You mean—”

“I acted like I would have with her.”

“What happened?”

He didn’t reply.

“Tell me,” Rin said.

“They were frightened. Repulsed.”

The pain in his voice hung in the space between them.

Rin touched his thigh.

“When I took the vow—” Dorner exhaled. “I had to.”

The silence closed over his words.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Some other time.”

“No,” Rin insisted. “Now.”

Dorner eyed his palm, rubbing its scar with his thumb. “It was terrible.” His voice was hushed. “She had already lost her husband and her looks. She started doing things to . . . hurt herself. To make a show of her own destruction. She didn’t care.” He took a breath. “Finally, I ended it. And then—”

“Then?”

“She tried to kill herself. She thought it would bring me back.”

Rin sighed in the quiet.

“That night— I wish I could forget it,” he said. “Getting the call. Stepping into the room. Seeing what she’d done to herself. Watching her open her ruined arms, smiling, expecting everything would be forgiven.”

It’s happening again, Dorner thought. His past was poisoning his future.

“You called Tongue a punishment,” Rin said. “You were thinking of YoEllis.”

He nodded. “I’ve earned my haunting.”

“And you’re afraid the same thing might occur with other women. That’s why you were so generous with me on the sofa.”

Dorner didn’t reply.

“What was it about her?” Rin said.

He rubbed his palm with his thumb.

“Why couldn’t you stop?” Her voice was soft and dark.

“She understood me,” Dorner said, choosing his words. “She loved me. Loved who I was. There were no hesitations, no regrets. The things I felt with YoEllis, I’ve never felt with anyone else.”

His candor put a wall between them. *I’m sorry*, he thought.

“I want to see you with your mask off,” Rin said.

Her words alarmed him, and so did her brusqueness.

She leaned toward him to open his shirt. “It won’t be like it was with the others.”

He grabbed her wrist. "That's not what you want."

"Don't tell me what I want."

He rose onto his knees. Rin rose with him.

She reached and pulled his shirt tails out. "Be the man I felt through the straddle." Rin slid her hands up his back.

"Understand *me*. Love who *I* am."

Insistence curled her fingers. He could feel her nails digging into his back.

"Take your clothes off," Rin said.

He knew he shouldn't. But her command and her naked body overruled his judgment. Dorner wiped his brow, edged off the mattress and stepped into a dark corner to remove his clothing.

Rin pulled back the bedding. "Can we have a little light?"

He turned on a lamp in the bathroom, leaving the door barely cracked.

They stretched out together.

"Don't be too quick to indulge me," he cautioned.

She kissed his ear.

"Stop me if things get out of hand," he said.

"Dorner," she whispered. "Do whatever you like."

The memories were stored in his nerves. The licks returned quickly. From a grave dug with denial, his libido rose. The first prongs of pleasure were like flames struggling up, and with them came a likeness of YoEllis. Her smoky fragrance, her scarlet lips. He buried his face in the cinnamon curls. *Rin*, he thought. Dorner forced himself to replace his ideal with the black-haired stranger, slighter, smaller, but eager and close.

He inhaled her scent. He clasped her waist, he kneaded her thighs, feeling her flesh and the bones beneath. His flames twisted, and as the heat rose, he made her groan and cry out.

Rin was flush with new sensations, aswarm in gasps and thrusts, clutches and muffled entreaties. She kissed his face, her legs tensed and relented. Her hands wandered his neck and back. The skin was smooth and then rough. Pitted and pocked. A band of tatted flesh ran from his shoulder to the knobs of his spine. Her fingertips followed it. Her other hand felt a patch on his loin, a swirling thing, where the flesh had been stirred. And another below it, rigid and sectored. *Scars*, she thought, like the one on his arm. Were they all burns? How many were there?

Dorner paused. He said nothing, but her discovery echoed between them. He'd foreseen a moment like this. Rin felt his dread, and it chilled them both. Then her courage returned, and her heart along with it. Forty thousand lives were saved. These were a deliverer's wounds. Who was she to call them defects? She closed her arms around him and kissed his lips.

Dorner returned to the fire he'd been nursing. In the depths of his mind, fresh flames rose with a billow of smoke. He saw oiled skin, and as embers fell, the skin blistered and popped. His limbs grew hotter, crooking and cramping, sinews taut. From his throat came brute rasps, and from the kettle of his bowels, a rumble as his churning vitals reached full boil.

He felt Rin responding. She came weakly through the ferment, vanished completely, then surfaced again, louder now, as if she'd found something matching inside her.

This was no Bez, he thought. Rin was unpracticed, but inside, she was like YoEllis. Impulsive, feral. Teeth pierced his shoulder and her claws dragged. He saw flames dancing around them. The heat was intense. Their skin was gummy, and their bones were creaking. “Rin,” he whispered. Her face bloomed in his mind like a portrait in a shrine, dripping with sweat and tattooed with blood. Behind it, a fan of scalpels spread like a rising sun. “Rin, Rin—” The scald of antiseptis. Scarlet incisions. In blood to her elbows without losing her nerve. YoEllis leached from his mind and Rin took her place. His imagined fire raced over her, blackening her skin, dripping from her hair.

“I’m here,” she answered, pressing against him.

An angry gust chafed his back.

Dorner slowed, trembling. The wind mounted abruptly. Its throbs beat the earth, shaking the building.

Tongue? he thought.

A thick braid of song blared in his ear, and then his mind was lit by Tongue’s streams. Red and gold, they were flashing around him.

“This is my time,” Tongue said.

Dorner hugged Rin’s body, keeping her close. Tongue’s ribbons whipped and chorused, prying, insistent. “Mine,” they sang, “mine, mine.”

Could Rin hear? he wondered. No, not without her spider. Her ardor persisted. He felt her caresses as if nothing had happened. But Tongue’s fury was mounting, her lashes biting, her choir snapping, honed and spiteful—

Dorner spoke fond words in Rin's ear, keeping the pace, trying to mask his alarm. Tongue clouted his hips and clawed his back while the bright ribbons shrilled. What were they saying?

"Blood," Tongue moaned, "our blood."

Dorner felt her inside him. In his heart, in its throb, in the sensations he felt. Her breath drove his thrust, her yearning was his, the fire in his loins belonged to her.

"Fuel," Tongue sang, "your fuel—"

Her flashing streams, all crimson and gold, were the long tongues of flame snaking inside him, licking Rin's body. His nerves crackled, his head clotted with smoke. Rin and Tongue—he could feel them both.

"Burn—" Tongue's fury burst like an overdriven heart, and the flames went wild, winding around Rin, hissing as one. "Burn, burn—"

For a moment, there was nothing but Tongue. Then Rin's groan pierced the tumult. He felt her legs clinch him, and her fingers dug in. "Dorner," she gasped. But the flames tore them apart. Tongue's lashes, Tongue's forbidding cries— He tried to shout them. "I'm here, here—"

Did Rin hear him?

His hope dimmed. Tongue had consumed her like a log on a grate.

Dorner searched with his hands. Mud or putty, soft and wet. What was he touching? Leaking innards, hair and goose-flesh slicked with sweat—

"You've left her behind," the choir sang.

Tongue had taken charge. Her thundering lows, her ominous cries—

“Other paths, other nights, other flames—” She mined the past. “You saw me then,” Tongue grieved. “You didn’t hear what I was asking.”

Asking?

“Listen,” Tongue implored. “Hear me, hear me—”

He tried to resist, he tried to fight free.

“All I am asking—”

Something grabbed his hair and shook his head.

“Look at me,” Rin screamed.

Dorner opened his eyes. Rin’s pierced his mind, tearing through the blaze. The inferno exploded, sending crimson spatters and a crowning groan far into space.

In a heartbeat, his two-year debt was paid. The storm of Tongue’s fury beat helpless around him. Then Dorner was pitching, falling headlong into a cold abyss. The keening and droning faded quickly.