

ASHES OF CANDESCENCE

VIRGA | BOOK FIVE

KARL SCHROEDER



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VIRGA

5000 miles

Virga is a balloon 5000 miles in diameter, orbiting in deep space. It is one of many similar objects scattered through a region known as "the arena." Virga contains air & a weightless environment lit by man-made fusion micro-suns and one central heat source named Candesce.

Virga contains hundreds of floating nations, each lit by its own artificial fusion sun.

Lit volume: 300 miles

Farms, towns, industries throughout lit volume

Slipstream sun

City of Rush & Rush Asteroid hover near the sun

Unlit areas of Virga are known as "winter"

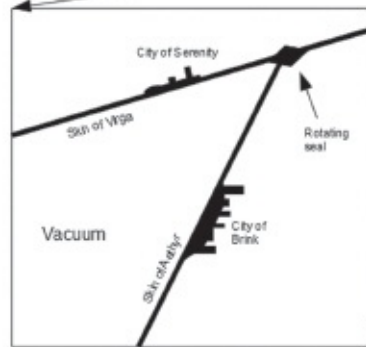
Region of Candesce

The principalities of Candesce (Spyre was here)

Abyss

The door into Aethyr

Aethyr is a spinning bubble attached to Virga



The flying suns
The poles

Aethyr rotates around this axis to provide gravity on its inside surface

AETHYR

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Tor Books by Karl Schroeder

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DARKNESS, AND A rope road.

“Champagne?” asked the flight attendant. Antaea Argyre raised her hand to wave him away, then turned the motion into acceptance of the helix glass. It wasn’t as if she was on duty, after all. She sipped the tart wine from one end of the glass coil that surface tension held it to, and watched the undulating rope ravel by outside the window.

None of the other passengers were watching. In knots of two or three or five, they preened and posed, drank and laughed at one another’s jokes. The gaslights of this passenger ship’s lounge lit the space brightly, highlighting the gold filigree around the doorjambs and the deep mazelike patterns on the velvet of the cushioned pillars. Everything held sumptuous color and texture, except the floor-to-ceiling window that took up one entire wall. This was black, like the uniform Antaea wore. She was the only passenger close enough to touch the cold glass; the only one looking out.

The last hour had somehow managed to be tedious and nerve-racking at the same time. The lounge was full of diplomats, military commanders, politicians, and newspaper reporters. They were all attentive to one another, and all were adept at negotiating today’s social minefield.

They had all stopped talking when Antaea entered the room.

Even now she felt eyes on her back, though of course, nobody would have the courage to actually approach her.

She took a bigger drink of the champagne, and was just regretting not having started in on it earlier when the doors to the lounge opened and a new knot of officials sailed in. They caught various discreet straps and guide ropes and glided to a unified halt just as the distant drone of the ship’s engines changed in tone.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said a bright young thing in a sequined corset and diaphanous harem pants. “we’ve arrived.”

There was a murmur and polite applause; Antaea turned back to the window. As her hand felt for the railing, it fell on someone else’s. “Oh!”

“Excuse me.” The voice was a deep, commanding rumble. It came from a man with the craggy features of an elder statesman and silver hair tied back in a short tail. He was dressed in a silk suit of red so dark it was almost black. He seemed quite relaxed in the company of so many powerful people, but his accent pegged him as a foreigner.

He’d shifted his grip and she put her hand on the rail next to his. Only then did she notice that they were still the only ones at the window; everyone else was listening attentively to the government delegation. Of course they were. They couldn’t very well ignore their hosts.

The rope that their ship had been following through the weightless air of Virga ended at a beacon about a mile ahead. This was a heavy cement cylinder with flashing lamps on its ends. Right now the flickering light was highlighting the rounded shapes of clouds that would otherwise have been invisible in the permanent darkness. Without the rope and the beacon, it would have been impossible for any ship to find this particular spot in the thousands of cubic kilometers of darkness that made up Virga’s sunless reaches.

“We thank you all for coming with us today,” the young thing was saying breathily. “We know the

rumors have been intense and widespread. There've been stories of monsters, of ancient powers awakened in the dark old corners of Virga. We're here today to help put any anxieties you might have to rest."

"There." The man beside her raised one hand and pressed his index finger against the glass. For a second she was distracted by the halo of condensation that instantly fogged into existence around his fingertip. Then she looked past and into the blackness.

She saw nothing there but the ghostly curve of a cloud bank.

"For some months last year, our nation of Abyss felt itself to be under siege," the spokeswoman continued. "There were reports of attacks on outlying towns. Rumors began to circulate of a vast voice crying in the dark. Ah! I see by the expression on some faces that some of our visitors from the war-torn interior of the world have already figured out the mystery. Don't tell! You must understand how traumatic it was for us, who live here in the permanent dark and cold near the wall of the world. Many of the things you take for granted in the principalities are never seen out here. Maybe that makes us provincials, I don't know; but we had no reason to expect the kind of attack that really did happen."

The man next to Antaea removed his finger from the glass, leaving a little oval of frost behind. "You don't see it, do you?" he asked in obvious amusement.

She shrugged in irritation. "Behind that cloud?"

"So you think that's a cloud?"

Startled, she looked again.

"The crisis culminated in an attack on the city of Sere," the spokeswoman said. "There was panic and confusion, and people claimed to have seen all manner of things. The hysteria of crowds is well known, and mass hallucination is not uncommon in such circumstances. Of course, the stories and reports immediately spread far beyond Sere—to your own countries, and I daresay beyond. A deluge of concern came back to us—inquiries about our safety, our loyalties, the stability of our trade agreements. It's become a big mess—especially because we long since sorted out the cause of the problem, and it's been dealt with."

The officials from the Abyssal government moved to the window, not too far from where Antaea and the stranger perched. "Behold," said the spokeswoman, "the Crier in the Dark!"

She gestured dramatically, and floodlights on the outside of the ship snapped on. The thing Antaea had at first taken to be a vast cloud blinked into view; at least, part of it did.

There were shouts of surprise, and relieved laughter; then, applause. "A capital bug!" someone shouted.

The spokeswoman bowed; behind her, the (entirely male) group of officials were smiling and nodding in obvious relief at the crowd's reaction. Their backdrop was a cavern of light carved by the floodlights out of an infinite ocean of night. The lights barely reached the gray skin of the city-sized beast that hung motionless and dormant in the icy air. Antaea could see a rank of tower-sized horns jutting from beyond the horizon of its back. In a live bug those horns would be blaring the notes of a chord so loudly that no ordinary form of life could survive within a mile of the thing.

Everybody was talking now, and the reporters were throwing questions at the Abyssals: *When did you discover it was a capital bug? Why is it silent now? How did you save the city from it?* The stranger next to Antaea shook his head minutely and his lips quirked into a faint smile.

"The gullibility of people never ceases to amaze me," he murmured.

Antaea realized that she'd bought this explanation, too, and frowned now in confusion. "You think it's a lie?" she asked quietly.

He gave her a pointed once-over—taking in, she assumed, her uniform, though not without a slight

pause here and there. “You tell me,” he said. “I’m sure the Abyssal government doesn’t tie its collective shoes without the permission of the Virga Home Guard.”

Rather than answer that, she pointed to the obvious. “They do have a bug, don’t they? Capital bugs aren’t native to this part of Virga. It’s too cold for them. So if one strayed this deep...”

“Oh, yes, if one strayed this deep.” He shook his head. “But I happen to know that a bug that’s been living on the fringes of Meridian for years disappeared about a month ago. There were witnesses saying they saw ships circling it in the evening sky—heard the sound of artillery being fired. Now, tell me about those horns there. Do they look intact to you?”

She did think she could see dark pits in the giant horns, now that he’d mentioned it. Behind her, one of the men from the government was saying, “It took weeks for it to cool down enough to fall into a dormant state. We didn’t really have to do anything, just keep it away from the city until it finally began snowing in its body cavity. Now, as you can see, it’s in hibernation.”

Antaea frowned at the frost-painted hide, more landscape than flank, that curved far beyond the range of the ship’s floodlights. She had to admit, she wanted the monster to have been something ordinary like this. It would be so much simpler; so reassuring.

If she thought this way, though, how much more so would the officious, conservative bureaucrats who ran Abyss these days? *Monster* was not a column heading in their ledgers. So, would they invent an answer if they couldn’t find one? Of course they would.

She shot her companion a sour look. “Are you going to mention your little theory to our hosts? And how did you hear about it anyway?”

“I pride myself in listening well,” he said; then he put out his hand for her to shake. “Jacoby Sartor.”

That was definitely a name from the principalities of Candescence, thousands of kilometers from here. “Sayrea Airsigh,” she said as they shook, and she saw his eyes widen minutely. He noticed her noticing, and grimaced.

“Excuse me,” he said. “You look like another Guardswoman of winter wraith descent...”

Had he seen a photo of her somewhere? That wouldn’t be unusual, what with her notoriety after recent events in Slipstream. “Well, there’s more than one of us in the Guard, you know,” she said, and then added icily, “and I’m told we all look alike.”

He refused to be baited. “So the Virga Home Guard agrees with Abyss’s official story, that the monster was a capital bug all along? — Even though there are dozens of Guard cruisers patrolling the sunless countries even now?”

“Are there?” She didn’t have to pretend her ignorance; this man seemed to know details of the situation that Antaea had only been able to wonder about.

He gazed at the pebbled hide of the capital bug. “Some of us are keenly interested in the truth of the situation. Of course, as a member of the Home Guard, you know everything already. That being the case, I really have no reason to give you my card”—and here a small rectangle of white paper suddenly appeared between his fingers—“nor tell you that I’m staying at the Stormburl Hotel, off Rowan Wheel.”

Damn him, he had her figured out. She opened her mouth to say something dismissive, but his gaze flicked over her shoulder and back; she quickly snatched the card and palmed it before turning to find that two Abyssal cabinet ministers were closing in on her. “Gentlemen,” she said with a gracious smile.

“It’s a magnificent beast, isn’t it?” said one of the two. Antaea glanced over her shoulder; Sartor was gone.

“Yes, beautiful,” she said. “I’ve seen them before, but never up close, of course. Their song kills.”

“Yes.” He nodded vigorously. “We trust that the Guard is, ah, in agreement with us that the disappearance of the outlying towns, the battle with the sun lighter—these were all caused by the one?”

The battle with the sun lighter. She’d heard about that; well, practically everybody in Virga had by now. Hayden Griffin was fabled for building a new sun to free his country from enslavement by the pirate nation of Slipstream. He had been constructing another sun for a client here in Abyss when the monster interrupted his work. The stories had him pursuing it to its lair and incinerating it with the nuclear fire of his half-built generator. Antaea hadn’t really believed this part of the rapidly mutating legend, but here was an Abyssal government official, offhandedly confirming it.

She belatedly realized he wanted some response from her. “Um—sorry?”

He looked impatient. “Do you think this explanation works?”

“Oh. Yes, yes, of course. It’s very, uh, convincing.” She gestured to the bug. “Especially having the actual bug to show. A nice touch.”

He relaxed. “The response has been good, I think.” Around them, the guests were chatting animatedly, and some of the reporters had left with a steward to find a good vantage point from which to photograph the bug. “I think we can finally lay this incident to rest.” The official hesitated, then said, “But we’d understood that we had the Guard’s consent to do this. It was a bit of a surprise to see you here. Was there any problem...?”

“Oh! No, no, I’m just observing.” She gave him a sphinxlike smile. “Everything is just fine.”

“Good,” he said, as he and his companion nodded to one another. “That’s ... good.”

They bowed themselves away, and she watched them go with mixed contempt and bemusement. Then she turned back to examine the bug.

This was indeed a clue. Maybe she should rent a jet bike from one of the wheelside vendors back in Sere, and slip back here to check the thing out herself. Those horns did look shot up—though the Abyssal navy would have targeted them first if the creature really had been threatening the city. No. Any evidence she might find here would be inconclusive. She would need more if she was to disprove the government’s story.

Even assuming that she did, what then? Clearly, whatever was going on, the Home Guard knew about it. What could Antaea do here but satisfy her own curiosity?

Well, there was one thing. A life to save, maybe. She should focus on that; this bug, and all the furor around it, was just a distraction.

With a sharp nod she turned from the window. Before she left the lounge to join the photographers in the fresh air on the hull, she looked for Jacoby Sarto among the crowd. She didn’t see him; and by the time the dart-shaped passenger liner had finished its tour of the capital bug, she had put him and his cryptic comments out of her mind.

* * *

BY THE TIME the streetcar deposited her in front of her hotel, Antaea was exhausted. She had been in Sere a few days now—long enough to have gotten over any residual nostalgia from her college days. The city was the same as always, after all: locked in permanent darkness, its mile-wide copper wheels lit only by gaslight. Rings of windows turned above her head, and the streets soared up either side to join in an arch overhead; nothing unusual there. Each window, though, spoke of some isolated room, some tightly constrained human life. There were thousands of them.

It was raining, as it often did here. Rain was something that happened only in town wheels, and she’d used to think it was a wonderful novelty. The wheel cut into a cloud, and droplets of water th

had been hanging in the weightless air suddenly became little missiles pelting in almost horizontal paths. They were cold, though. The novelty wore off fast; so she hunched her shoulders and trotted across the verdigris-mottled street to the hotel, where the permanent fans of light and shadow had faded the paint in the entryway, and thousands of footsteps had worn a gray smear in the once-red carpet.

The boy behind the desk sent her a covert, hostile glance as she walked past. It was the thousandth such glance today and she ignored it. They might hate her kind, but as long as she wore this uniform no one would dare lay a hand on her.

In the elevator she pulled back her black hair and wiped the rain from her face. The dimly lit car thumped at each floor, monotonously counting its way up to her room. No one else got on or off. When it stopped, she fumbled for her key as she counted the doors to hers, and, in a state of nonthinking exhaustion, slid the key into the lock.

Antaea just had time to realize that the lights in the room were on before iron fingers clamped onto her wrist and yanked her arm behind her. She automatically went with the motion but before she could finish her recovery somebody'd kicked her leading foot out from under her, and then she hit the floor and the wind went out of her.

Some heavy body was sitting on the small of her back, holding her wrists against the floor. She snarled, furious and humiliated.

"Just like I thought," said a familiar male voice. "She's wearing it."

"Crase?" She craned her neck and saw a small forest of black-clad shins and boots. After struggling to breathe for a few seconds, she managed, "What are you doing here?"

"Today, I'm chasing down an imposter." Lieutenant Anander Crase of the Virga Home Guard knelt to look into her face. "You've no right to wear that uniform. Not since the trial."

She hissed. "All I wanted to do was come home. Without the uniform, I'd have been arrested by now, or strung up by some vigilante gang. You know how they feel about winter wraiths here."

He'd been looking her in the eye, but now that she'd highlighted the racism they both knew was common here, his gaze slid away. "Why did you come back, then?" he asked sullenly. "If there's no one welcome here for you?"

"It's not up to me to justify returning. It's up to *them* to justify keeping me out. Let me up," she added to whoever it was that sat on her back.

Crase looked up, shrugged. The pressure on Antaea's back eased, and she rolled into a crouch.

There were six of them, all men, only their standard-issue boots betraying that they were Home Guard. They'd tossed her room efficiently and ruthlessly. She almost smiled at the thought of how disappointed Crase must be at finding nothing.

He went to sit in the small suite's one chair. "You almost make sense," he said, "but not quite. You lived here for a while, but Abyss isn't your home. You grew up on the winter wraith fleet."

"—Which I did *not* want to return to. They're the most isolationist people in Virga, even if it's for a good reason because normal people are always trying to kill them ... Crase, where did you expect me to go? I have no home anywhere. The Guard was my home. Without that..."

"You have friends here?" He was skirting very close to the truth, but she had no option now. She nodded.

He leaned forward in the chair. "Then where are they? And why did you use your *disguise*," he nodded to her frayed old uniform, "to wrangle your way onto a government-sponsored expedition today?"

"I'll tell you that if you tell me why the Guard is lying about the Crier in the Dark."

He exchanged a glance with another of the men. Then he stood up and walked up to loom over her.

“I want you out of here on the next ship,” he said. “None of this concerns you. You’re not Home Guard anymore.”

She could probably have put him and his friends on the floor, if she’d been training the way she used to. As it was, she had to stand there and take his intimidation. She hung her head, and consciousness kept her hands from balling into fists.

Crise shoved past her, and he and his goons clotted the doorway. “You know what happens to people who pretend to be Guardsmen,” he said before closing the door. “You got off lucky this time.”

The click of the door locking itself surprised her into motion. Antaea went to her bags and began assessing what they’d done. Crise really had let her off easily; imposters usually disappeared. Although they’d gone through her luggage with trained efficiency, they hadn’t taken anything. When she was sure of this, she sat down on the edge of the bed and let out a heavy sigh. Her chest hurt, and her arm. There would be finger-shaped bruises there later.

Crise might have stayed to interrogate her further, but they had a bit of a history. He knew her well enough to suspect that she was tougher than he was. She half-smiled at the thought, then reached into her jacket for the item that, if they’d frisked her, would have told them why she’d come here.

She hadn’t lied about this being the only place where she had ties—it was just that those ties were almost impossibly thin, and left to herself, she would never have come back because of any of them.

The letter in her hands was so worn from travel and folding and refolding that it was practically falling apart. Still, she smoothed it carefully onto the bedspread. She didn’t have to read it; she just needed the reassurance of knowing it existed at all.

Dear Antaea, it read.

My name is Leal Hieronyma Maspeth. I don’t know if you remember me, I studied with your sister at the academy. We had supper together, the three of us, one time. Your sister once told me she wanted to join the Home Guard and I told her it was a myth. I guess I was wrong.

She *did* remember Leal Maspeth; she’d been her sister’s timid, academically minded roommate when Telen went to college here in the city of Sere. Maspeth was one of the few people in the world who’d known of Telen and Antaea’s plan to track down the supposedly mythical Virga Home Guard and join up.

I’m writing you, Maspeth continued, because we have a problem, and the government refuses to admit to it, and they refuse to let the Home Guard in to investigate. I don’t know who else to turn to, so I’ve asked the Guard to bring this letter to Slipstream and maybe they can get it to you.

There is something in the dark.

Antaea stood and walked to the window. It looked out over Rowan Wheel’s main street, providing an unchanging vista of lit windows and deep shadow. No sun ever rose here. No one born and raised in the Abyss should be afraid of the dark.

Nobody will talk about it. Officially, things are fine. But people have been disappearing—whole town wheels! They’re outlier communities, fringe places whose people only show up to market once or twice a year. Now they’re not showing up at all. Far as we are from any sun, the darkness has always seemed normal. You know, you grew up here. Lately, though, it broods. I

believe something has awakened in one of the cold abandoned places of the world. It is picking off the weak and those who get separated from the group and it is growing bolder.

If you make inquiries no one will admit to anything, so don't even try! I know I'm asking a lot, but you must trust me. We need someone who has experience with this world's mysteries, Antaea. We need a hunter.

Nobody cares about Abyss. We're all like you and Telen, as far as the sunlit countries are concerned: just winter wraiths of no account. Maybe you no longer care about your old home, either, in which case I shall never hear from you.

But if you do care—if you believe me even a little—please come home. I don't know who else to turn to.

—Leal Maspeth

Once, the darkness hadn't bothered Antaea, either. There had been a time when she wondered what waited there—oh, not in the unlit cloud banks and fungal mists beyond the lights of Sere, but beyond past the iceberg-choked walls of Virga itself, in the vast universe that bounded and, lately, threatened this little world. Telen had wondered and had found out, and been more than killed for that knowledge. Antaea had chased her, too late to catch her, and didn't know what it was that she'd found other than that it was horrible.

Leal Maspeth was missing, too. The government wouldn't talk about it; the officials Antaea had spoken to acted like she should already know, and she'd been afraid to push lest they begin to question her authenticity. So far, though, Antaea had learned that somehow, impossibly, timid little Leal had gotten to know the famous sun lighter and adventurer Hayden Griffin, and then ... The rumors spoke of murder and of the Crier in the Dark, and then she was gone.

Antaea unbuttoned her jacket, aware with each twist of her fingers that she would never be putting it on again. She'd kept it out of sentimentality uncommon for her; it was time to let it go. She dropped it on the bed and forced herself to turn away.

Then, she dressed herself in civilian clothes, slid knives into the boots still hidden under her trousers, and added one to the back of her belt.

Crise wasn't going to make her leave. She'd failed to save her own sister from the dire mystery thrust upon her world. Walking the streets here was about to get much more dangerous for her, and the ministries and offices she'd been able to enter as a Home Guard member would be closed. From now on, her appointments would be in the alleys and at the docks. It was going to be hard.

She would find Leal Maspeth.

“LEAL, HURRY!”

Leal Hieronyma Maspeth took a look back to see how close their pursuer was and felt the screech under her feet give way. Suddenly on her knees and then her side, she began to slide. She heard shouts and half-visible hands reached for her. Darkness opened below and, in desperation, she grabbed for a half-glimpsed jut of rock.

She swung, suddenly and shockingly, above open air. The gravel made a trickling sound as it sped past her, but she couldn't hear it land. It just disappeared.

“The rope's just to your left, Leal, can you see it?”

“No,” said Leal. “That's okay. I'm going to reach for it now. Tell me if I...” She forgot words as she stretched out her left hand, and felt her right slip another inch. Now she was hanging on by just her fingertips.

She had an awful moment then. The thing that was following them was close. If it caught up to them, if it was the one to rescue her—for she was sure it would neither kill her nor leave her in that predicament—would she regret not having just let go?

Should she let go?

“Leal!” That was Piero Harper's voice ... She blinked; something brushed her face. “Grab the rope!” He was only a few feet away, but above her.

“You've got to keep going!” she hissed at him. He shook his head.

“This'll only take a second. Take hold, ma'am.”

Damn his politeness. She flailed for the rope and met empty air. Her fingers slipped, were about to lose it—

Something tapped her knuckles, and then she felt cool fibers coil around her fingers. With relief, Leal let go of the rock, but again there was that damned gravity pulling her straight. Stretched and jolted, she yelped with pain as, in jerks and yanks, she rose rather than fell.

Rock banged her shoulder and she felt herself being dragged over the lip of a rough ledge. “Are you okay?” said Piero as the rope unwound itself from her lacerated hand and slithered back. It was visible now in lantern light and she watched in abstract amusement as it inched and twisted its way back into the body of the large, four-footed creature standing next to Harper.

“I-I'm fine. Thanks,” she said to both of them. Once again the emissary had taken a hand in saving her life. The emissary! She brought up her hands to touch her shoulders. “Are you there—”

“Yes,” said a tiny voice near her ear. She felt little pulls on the cloth of her collar as a small doll regained its accustomed seat on her shoulder. “I fell down your back,” it said, “but hung on.”

“Good.” She wilted with relief. “We've lost too much of you as it is...” The doll was made of junk. A coiled wire made up its left arm, a couple of broken pencils its right. Its head was the porcelain knob from some electrical device, with bright screws attached that moved uncannily like eyes. Its mouth was the reed from a ship's horn.

There was no magical spirit animating these random pieces, but fine, hairlike threads of something called nanotech. This body—this doll, so unlike the ones Leal had collected back when she lived in Sere—was part of the alien. It was the part that she spoke with, and could cup in her hand.

and so treat, if only for moments at a time, as a being like herself.

She fully intended to start moving, but for a long moment remained at the edge of the cliff, staring downward. She'd seen faces as she dangled: of poor Dean Porril, huddled in permanent mourning behind his great iron desk in a wind-rattled office deep underneath the university; of Easley Fenchel who could never keep his lanky elbows and knees from sticking out, nor his equally awkward thoughts and attitudes. Of her friend Seana, in the bright metal exoskeleton that kept her upright in the unfamiliar gravity of the city. Of fire, bright and orange and frantic, as it consumed Easley's home with Easley in it ...

"We'd best get going," said Piero quietly. The rest of the group had already moved on—predictably, with the limping silhouette of Eustace Loll, high official in her country's government, in the lead.

"For somebody who's half-lame, he sure moves," she muttered; Piero saw where she was looking and grinned.

They made to catch up, unspeaking. There was no sound for a while then, but for the muttering of the breeze and the distant crack of glacial ice falling from the wall of the world. Their pursuer had stopped yelling for them to stop, wait, just hold on a minute and talk to it. It must know it was going to catch them now, so why bother talking?

They'd had a seemingly insurmountable lead when they set out this morning. Leal had stood on the promontory and scanned the steep, seemingly infinite slope below their campsite. Far down there, barely visible in the gray light that only indicated a sky, something was heaving itself across the rocks. As usual, somebody had been watching it at all times, as the rest of them slept. She'd taken her turn, and she could see that it hadn't gotten very far since then.

They'd walked on up the slope, reassured. And then, an hour ago, she'd heard that familiar voice again.

And here it came again, from only a few hundred yards back: "*Leal! Wait, please!*"

As if in agreement, there came a deep grumble of sound from far above. At first, as they'd toiled their way up steeper and steeper slopes, those occasional bellows of thunder had seemed familiar. Leal had waited to see lightning, but there never was any. Gradually, she'd come to realize that she wasn't hearing storms. Thunder here meant something different than it did at home.

"*Leal, come back! I can help you!*"

"Come on, what are you waiting for?" she snapped at the little group of men whose faces were painted by lantern light in shades of worry and doubt. "All we need is a big overhang. We'll be fine."

She'd slipped because there was as much ice up here as rock. Generally you could tell the difference, but not always. She'd been careless; now she stalked on, head down, fiercely focused on the uneven tumbled stones ahead of her. Piero walked next to her; in another time and place, he might have gallantly demanded that she rest, but they had no time for that.

Another man had been walking beside her when they'd set out on this journey. He was gone now. He wouldn't be back, despite her doubts, despite the promise of that distant voice that followed her through her waking hours and even into her dreams. She shuddered and tried to bring her attention back to the tilted, broken slabs of the ancient roadway under her feet.

This worked for a while, but then a series of cracking sounds, like distant gunshots, echoed from far overhead. In the silence that followed, Leal and her men met one another's eyes; then somebody said "Move!"

Everything was tilted at an absurdly steep angle here, but luckily gravity had been lessening as they climbed. It was easy to balance on the narrowest of ledges or blades of shattered pavement, and so

could jump distances she would never have considered on the daylight plains they'd come from. Like fleas on some vast monster's back, they popped from stone to stone, trying to get away from what was coming.

The whole slope shuddered and slid down a few feet. Leal stumbled, luckily, as something slashed through the air just above her. Clattering and pattering, splinters of shrapnel ice shot from the point where some glacial mountain had hit the rocks behind them. Distant booms signaled the landing of other house-sized chunks of hail.

"Maybe it's a seasonal thing." Piero's voice sounded very small in the sudden quiet.

Leal shook her head. The icefalls had been increasing in frequency for days. Something was peeling away the great glacial sheets that built up above the rock line. Up there, the world's wall was black and smooth, a fine weave of carbon nanotubes that was only a meter or two thick. Thin as it was, it transmitted the chill of interstellar vacuum from the other side. Water—and even air—froze to it. The glaciers that resulted would normally split and fall away in their own time, but they were hurrying now, as if they sensed the presence of intruders coming from below.

The only door home from this strange and perilous world was past those glaciers, at the very top of the wall. Leal and her companions had no choice but to come this way if they were ever to see their countries and people again.

She eyed the silhouette of Eustace Loll, who had fallen back from the lead and was watching the skies fearfully. The politician had branded her a traitor, and though he'd promised to lift the accusation if they ever made it home, he couldn't be trusted. If she ever walked the copper streets of Sere again, she feared it would be as a paraded prisoner, in chains and spat upon by the countrymen she had tried so hard to save.

One foot ahead of the other. Just keep walking ... She ignored her pounding headache and the ever-present knot in her stomach. She had a job to do.

They'd gone about a mile when Piero held up his hand. "Wait," he said. They all stopped, and in the new silence Leal heard it: cracks and pops and splintering sounds, layered over one another in an almost continuous grumble. This was like the sound that presaged the fall of a glacier, but stretched out, as if not just one berg but an entire sky full of bergs was about to come down ...

Piero swore, and Loll stumped back to blink at them both. "What do we do?"

The little junk-doll suddenly grabbed her ear. "There!" It stood up, pointing past her eyebrow at something ...

Miles above, a little string of lights broke the total darkness. It was impossible for them to be there—Aethyr was an empty world, and nowhere was as desolate as this long treacherous slope—and yet there they were:

Windows.

* * *

THE SOUND OF children playing faded as Keir Chen took the down stairs three steps at a time. He didn't have much time; recess would be over in fifteen minutes.

The stairwell was pitch black, and he had no light; to guide him, Keir relied on the little cloud of buzzing dragonflies that accompanied him everywhere. They were his second set of eyes, and they did pretty well in low light. Now they showed him the knapsack he'd stowed here yesterday. It was heavy as he picked it up—stuffed with food, clothing, and other supplies. He'd carefully spent months accumulating it all, taking his time so the others wouldn't see the pattern.

He wanted to run, but even if the gravity was low here in the city of Brink, he couldn't risk a fall.

Some of these stone stairwells plummeted for miles through the foundations of the city. It took too many seconds to pick his way down, so when he reached the bottom he began pelting at full speed through a succession of dark, empty corridors and chambers where his footsteps were the only sound. His dragonflies had been gamely trying to catch up, and when he reached one particular side chamber and finally stopped, they came to *zizz* around his head angrily.

This little room had two doors, one leading inside where he'd just come from, the other letting out onto a balcony. There was a spot next to the entrance where he'd stood a few times; he went there now and put his back to the wall. Then he knelt and picked up a sharp rock that lay by the door. When he straightened with his back against the wall, he lifted his hand to scratch it behind his head.

Keir lowered the stone, his eyes fixed on the black-on-black doorway that led outside. "*Don't worry about such things,*" Maerta had told him when he'd revealed his suspicion to her. "*You're a kid, Keir. Why don't you just enjoy being a kid?*"

He took one more deep breath, squared his shoulders as he'd seen some of the older men do, and stepped away from the wall. He turned around and, summoning his dragonflies, peered at the latest mark he'd made. There was at least a half-centimeter gap between it and the last one he'd made.

There was no doubt about it.

He was getting shorter.

He'd talked to the other kids, and he'd been watching them. They were all growing up; but he wasn't. They were learning new things every day, a fine layering of knowledge on knowledge that was taking them all to adulthood.

Keir knew that he knew less than he once had, not more.

He stepped out onto the balcony, and turned around to look up.

From this little balcony the city was visible only as black piled up on black, its cornered intricacies lost in permanent shadow—all save for that one ring of windows in one high tower. With the aid of his dragonflies' eyes, he could see the city's overall shape, and size. Their vision gave him a little courage, too, when the distant winds sighed like voices from the empty apartments, and when he fancied he saw movement in the blackest shadows of the stone gardens. They let him see and verify that, no, nothing ever spoke here, and nothing ever moved.

—Which was good. He couldn't afford for anyone to find what he'd been doing on this little parapet, half a mile from the inhabited halls.

He took a deep breath and stepped up to something that sat swaying slightly on the parapet, a folded angles and parchmentlike planes. "Are you ready?" he asked the ornithopter he'd been growing. "Tell me you're ready."

"Not ready," it said in its mindless monotone. "Feed me."

"You said you'd be ready!" he burst out. "You said you'd be ready to fly!"

"Yes. Can fly. Cannot carry."

"That's not what I—!" He punched its wing. It shuffled aside. Keir stepped back, clutching his knapsack and nearly in tears. He couldn't go through with his plan today, but Gallard was going to catch him for sure if he went back, and then he'd never get another chance. Or maybe he could be extra sneaky; maybe he could pretend to be a dutiful student for another few days. He could hide feedstock for the ornithopter, maybe make it down here one more time to feed it ...

With a curse at his own indecision, he stalked back into the tower. He hadn't brought anything to feed the aircraft, because stealing feedstock was risky and anyway, he'd thought it was ready. But there was another potential source of the stuff here ...

He waited for his dragonflies to catch up and when their eyesight supplemented his, he could see

what he was after in one corner of the room. He hunkered down and shuffled toward it.

A tiny pinprick of light suddenly glowed there, then another, then a dozen. Little gleaming midges flew up from the experiment he'd begun here a week ago. A pipsqueak voice sounded in his head: *am the mighty Brick! Tremble before me, mortal!*"

"That's okay, it's okay," he said in a soothing tone as he reached slowly for the half-open bag of feedstock lying next to the brick. His fingers were almost touching it when the little midges dove at his hand. "Ow!"

The air was suddenly full of dragonflies, and little dogfight battles erupted all over the room, complete with the pittering sound of minuscule machine guns firing and tiny smoking death spirals. "*Do not defy the mighty Brick!*" cried the brick. Keir ducked under the aerial battle and snagged the bag of feedstock. Then he ran from the room before the brick was able to bring its little howitzers to bear on him.

He'd had some compelling reason for making a minitech AI think that it *was* the brick. It had been some sort of reminder to himself, he knew that. But the details ... they were gone, like so much of what he'd done and intended lately. All he had left was a terrible feeling of apprehension, a certainty that if he didn't get out of this place, and soon, something terrible was going to happen.

Shakily, he went out to the balcony again and dumped the bag of feedstock in front of the ornithopter. As it eagerly scarfed down the mixture of metals, silicates, and rare earth elements, Keir leaned on the balustrade, looked out, and sighed.

This world had suns—dozens of them—but they were too far away to provide even a hint of radiance to the sky. The city was as invisible as it ever was, its cornered intricacies lost in permanent shadow. Only that one ring of windows in one high tower betrayed habitation.

Brink crested above that and over itself, in wave after frozen wave whose dark caps faded into obscurity in the heights. The near-infinite wall to which the city clung rose at an eighty-degree angle. Farther down, the angle decreased to a mythically distant, sunlit plain, while above it steepened to the vertical so far away that all gravity would cease by the time you got there.

Giant knuckled slabs of glacier and stone were the city's only companions at this height. Patrols wove from one patch of scree to another, avoiding the perilously slick black skin of the world's walls whenever possible. Eyeless goats brayed from their rock perches, and fungi and meatshrooms blossomed from cracks in the stone. He could hear booming sounds from distant avalanches; those had increased in frequency lately, sometimes shaking Complication Hall with the power of their passage.

He'd thought about just walking off down that slope, but if he were to try it he'd surely be killed by an icefall before he got ten kilometers; and anyway, *down* led only to the realm of the oaks, who had filled Aethyr with grasslands and forests that were prowled by strange predators, and sometimes by the oaks themselves. He'd hoped his ornithopter would take him high enough that they'd become weightless, and then it would have been easy to cross Aethyr to the wild but free worlds of the arena. Wild, free—and in their own way, far more dangerous than any encounter with the oaks.

If he and the ornithopter sailed off to the arena right now, no one would see him go. Of course, there would be no one to see him crash on the steep slopes below the city, break a leg or a collarbone, and slowly freeze to death. Even if they noticed his absence right away, they wouldn't know where to look for him.

He should have tried the other door, the one that led to the one world he knew would be safe for his kind. The door to it wasn't even closed. —No, not closed, merely guarded by monsters.

Keir hugged himself, feeling miserable. He scowled down at the darkness, and one of his dragonflies soared away from the miniature battle in the room, spiraled into the air over his head, and

spotted something.

In the dark below the city, a cluster of lights wavered.

They were fantastically small pinpricks, hovering on the very edge of visibility, but now the rest of his dragonflies could see them, too. Kilometers down the gradually decreasing curve of the world wall, something had carved a little cave of illumination out of the dark.

“Hey,” he said to the ornithopter, “are you ready to carry me yet?”

“Need to digest,” it said. “Two hours.”

“Hmmpf.” He stared at the little lights. Who could that possibly be? Nobody from the Renaissance ever went out on the slopes; the constant avalanches made it too dangerous. There was nothing down there but blind goats and unstable scree, anyway. Visitors came to Brink occasionally—but they only ever came by air.

Whatever those lights were, he had other priorities.

—Although, if somebody had wanted to sneak up on the city, coming up from below like that would certainly be the way to do it.

“Not my problem,” he said to the ornithopter. It turned its camera eyes to him, then resumed munching the feedstock.

“The grown-ups can take care of it,” he continued.

It said nothing.

He stood for a while looking down at the faint lights.

“Could you fly down there and back?”

“Yes,” it said. It didn’t move.

Keir opened his mouth, closed it, then, cursing his own curiosity, ordered one of his dragonflies to clamp itself to the ornithopter’s foot. “Go on, then,” he said. The mechanical bird dropped the feedstock bag, bunched up its wings, and leaped awkwardly into the air. Startlingly graceful once aloft, it swooped away and disappeared into the gloom.

A minute later it returned, and as it collapsed in some sort of mechanical relief onto the flagstone at his feet, Keir received a download of images from the dragonfly that had ridden with it.

The people down there weren’t part of the Renaissance. Some dozen or so of the climbers looked human, though with them were things that had the unmistakable air of morphonts: artificial life-forms that built bodies for themselves from strands of nanotech. These morphonts walked on legs, and they had heads. They also twined together, forming something like a mobile fence, and they stayed downslope from the humans, a sort of living guardrail.

The humans looked ragged and half-starved, and some of them were limping. The morphonts were clearly friendly, and morphonts meant the sophistication and resource-rich worlds of the arena; but the humans seemed neither sophisticated nor rich. He’d seen photos of people like them—telephoto images taken through kilometers of air. Keir’s recent memories were fuzzy, but he did remember the pictures: of a people who lived in permanent weightlessness, building rotating cities for gravity and flying chemical-powered aircraft in a world where only the most primitive of technologies worked.

But it couldn’t be. *They* couldn’t be *here*.

He scowled and barked a laugh and walked to the edge of the balcony to get a look at those lights with his own eyes. They were still there.

He heard the gunshot cracks that signaled an avalanche—they went on and on, signaling a big fall this time. Squinting, he thought he could actually see something way up the wall above the city, like a vast pale hand reaching down. Keir turned all his dragonflies to that view, and now he could make it out: a veritable continent of ice peeling away from the slope ten kilometers or more overhead.

He called up his scry, the collection of processors, communications systems, and interfaces that helped him keep up with the multilayered, surreal world the adults of the Renaissance had built. He tried to call the nannies, then anybody else in Complication Hall; but it was too far away.

This far up the world's slope, gravity was less than half a standard g. He looked up at the majestically bowing facade of ice, then down at those wavering, faint lights below the city; and he asked his scry how long it would take before the one landed on the other.

The answer came back almost instantly; but then Keir stood there frowning for long seconds, as his breath frosted in front of him.

Then he cursed and ran inside, down two halls, and out to another stairway. His instinct was to hesitate, but he'd set a timer in his scry telling him exactly how long he had before the ice reached the slope below. So he tested the top steps and, when they held him, leaped down the rest recklessly, accompanied by a cloud of watchful eyes. Soon he was standing on the round parapet of a minaret, and in the upper right corner of his visual field, the timer was still ticking down. He went down this new staircase, but in the darkness it took much longer than he'd hoped. When he emerged from an outside doorway to stand on unworked rock, he was sure it was too late.

This slope lay in the shadow of Complication Hall's lights, but it wasn't completely dark. A faint red glow permeated the air from the far distance, and this gave just enough light for him to make out tumbled stones and a nearby goat path.

Here he made the mistake of looking up. With the help of the dragonflies he could plainly see the ceiling of white, kilometers wide, lowering toward the city.

He could see the strangers' lights—they were close at hand now—and, very close by, the entrance to a tunnel that doubtless ran into Brink's foundations. It was clear the people with the lanterns couldn't see that archway, because it lay above them and behind some tall boulders, and their little lights could only reach a few meters anyway.

"Heeeyy!" He jumped and waved his arms, but nobody noticed. The strangers were picking their way one step at a time, heads bent and focused on their task. Yet they must have heard the cataclysmic cracking of the ice sheet; must know that even now it was silently bearing down on them.

Now that he was close enough Keir tried to hail the newcomers through his scry. It didn't register them at all. And according to his timer the ice would be here in a matter of seconds.

He swore and began leaping down the rocks toward them.

Now the orange-lit ovals of their faces turned in his direction. They all stopped walking and he could see them talking—verbally—among themselves; there was a sudden flurry of movement and just as he half-slid down the last few meters, four of them produced odd, compact handheld devices and pointed them at him. Keir's scry identified these as weapons—but the idea that *they* might threaten him more than what was approaching was simply laughable.

"Run!" He pointed in the direction of the entrance he'd spotted, which really was invisible from here. "Ruuuuun! There!"

One of them stepped forward. She was pale-skinned, her features oddly mis-composed, as though she'd never taken the effort to adjust her bone structure or skin type. "Who are you?"

"Never mind! Run!" And, because his timer had about fifteen seconds left to it, he bounded past them, making for that other entrance. "Come on!"

"Why?" she shouted after him. "Is it—"

"The ice!" Belatedly, they began to move. With eight seconds left, Keir made it to the archway. Two blind goats were cowering in the entrance, but beyond them, it ran back into indeterminate blackness.

Eleven seconds, and the first of the strangers reached the arch.

~~Thirteen, and the strange goat-railing creatures scabbled up, one was carrying a man on its back.~~

Fifteen seconds and the rest of them were in. Nothing happened, and the last of the strangers—including the woman—were only meters away.

A new silhouette appeared in the doorway. It looked like a man, but when the woman saw it she screamed. One of the men raised something that looked like a primitive weapon and shouted, “Keep back!”

“Let me in!” shouted the stranger. “I just want to talk.”

Keir jumped at a loud bang and the silhouette staggered back. The woman ducked her face in her hands, the others were standing, shouting, and—

Whump! The stranger disappeared behind a wall of white. The entire slope bowed under the impact of something gigantic. A roar beyond sound, a physical wall of noise, hit Keir. He was tossed about the tunnel, hitting wall and ceiling and floor as the thunder went on and on, and outside the cave mouth all that was visible was a churning chaos of grinding and hammering snow.

Gradually that vast cry, like the thunderous rage of a giant, dwindled to ordinary thunder, then to grumbling and sighs interspersed with pattering and sliding sounds. Though the floor still swayed and dipped beneath him, Keir staggered to the entrance to look out. Towering thunderheads reared to all sides, their bases rooted in the world’s slope. Yet for a dozen or more meters to every side, the rocks were clear of ice.

Keir found he was trembling. He’d known the tunnel would survive the avalanche; the metropolis that called itself Brink had built itself strong enough to withstand the occasional glacial fall. Yet it was terrifying to be so close to the avalanche that he could feel its wind on his face, and taste the flavor of ancient ice.

His ears were ringing and he was sure the others were half-deaf, too, but a little deafness wouldn’t stop scry. As she picked herself up and dusted herself off, Keir tried pinging the woman again; when there was no response, he tried the others. There was no reply from the humans, but an icon cloud rose from the backs of the strange, trunk-to-tail-entwined guardrail goats. A glyph of men fencing appeared in the upper left corner of Keir’s vision as his scry did a handshake with theirs. The humans remained dark to data; they didn’t even seem to be able to see the data cloud he was emitting.

The shaking subsided; the thunder and hammering echoes rolled away and away, and a great sloshy sigh of icy air wafted into the tunnel, causing the survivors to huddle together.

“Thank you,” shouted the woman. Keir barely heard her; his ears were still stunned.

He pointed at the entrance. “But why did you shoot that man?”

“That wasn’t a man.” She walked among her people, touching each in turn and speaking to them. Some nodded; some shook their heads. Keir estimated there were about a dozen of them, an impossibly tiny party to deploy for the purposes of scaling a world’s wall.

She returned and now gave Keir a frank, head-to-toe appraisal. He wanted to ask more about the incident with the gun, but she spoke first. “Where did you come from?”

“I—I live here,” he stammered; and in the pale light of the strangers’ lanterns, he took in her archaic, hand-sewn apparel, the tightly drawn-back hair and her intriguing, imperfect features, and knew that his earlier guess had been right. “Are you from *Virga*?”

She nodded, then shot him a suspicious look. “But you’re not. Who are your people?” Then, in a somewhat dazed tone, “We saw lights.”

“That’s Complication Hall. Where I live.”

Another man, red-faced and mustachioed, came to stand next to the woman. They exchanged

glance, and she shrugged. Behind him, several of the others were moving outside, presumably to look for the one they had shot. Keir knew it would be futile, that the ice would have scoured him away nothing.

“Do you have water, and a place to sleep?” asked the red-faced man.

Keir shrugged wryly. “A whole city’s worth of guest rooms. None ever slept in. I—”

“I’m not sure we can pay,” she said quickly.

Keir thought through these words, and he had to smile. “Nobody’s ever offered to ‘pay’ me for anything before,” he said. “I think that would be ... amazing. What is it you pay with?”

“Forget I mentioned it,” she said, frowning quizzically. She put out her hand and Keir gingerly took it in his own to shake. He’d never actually performed this particular ritual before, but again she didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m Leal Maspeth,” she said. It took him a moment to realize she’d given him her name, since the words were just a garble of sound buried in her accent. She swept an arm to indicate her companion. “We were stranded on the floor of Aethyr, some weeks ago. We’re walking back to the axle of the world, so we can get back to Virga with some important information.”

“Really?” His scry had finished handshaking with the goats’ and subtitles were starting to appear under Maspeth’s chin when she spoke. A sizable cloud of tags hovered over her party now, so Keir no longer needed to pester her with questions, which would be rude. He’d review their records as they walked.

The men who’d gone to look outside returned, shaking their heads grimly. They could all return the way Keir had come, but there might be straggler avalanches; better to take this tunnel back to one of the central stairwells.

Keir commanded his dragonflies to explore the tunnel. They’d been clinging for dear life to his jacket and now wafted off of him in a little cloud. The Virgans looked startled at this sudden motion. After a short sortie the dragonflies reported that the tunnel was clear, and so Keir began walking up it.

“Um...” said Maspeth. After a few moments he heard her and the others following him, whispering among themselves.

According to the scry, Leal Hieronyma Maspeth was from a country called Abyss. These people really were from Virga! Maybe they knew a way back there, and now that he’d saved their lives maybe ...

“Uh,” Maspeth said again, hurrying to catch up to Keir. “What’s this place called?”

“Brink,” said a pipsqueak voice issuing from somewhere around her shoulder. She craned her neck to look at a little doll-shaped figure sitting on the ragged felt of her coat. Keir hadn’t spotted the little man-thing before, but its presence didn’t surprise him; it was obviously a bodily extension like his own dragonflies.

“How do *you* know what it’s called?” she asked it in irritated surprise.

“Keir Chen has given us guest citizenship in his scry,” said the golden doll. “I’m reading his records now.”

Belatedly, Keir realized that since she herself couldn’t read his scry, his silence might not seem polite to her. “Brink,” he said, spreading his arms to encompass everything above the tunnel’s ceiling. “Looks like a city, but it’s not. We’re the only people living here. Only people who ever lived here.”

She looked puzzled. “How many of you?”

“About a hundred.”

“What do you do here?”

He might have intended to run away today, but even if he had, Keir wouldn’t have told the truth

this point. “We’re trying to find new patterns of meaning in the metropoloid’s architecture,” he said smoothly as his scry supplied him with a plausible story. “They could be the genes for a new urbanoid.”

She gave him a look so eloquently uncomprehending that he almost regretted having lied to her. “We’re city breeders,” he clarified. Maspeth blinked, then shook her head.

She batted distractedly at the air. “Damn bugs,” she said. “Never seen any until now.”

She was actually trying to swat his eyes! Keir ordered the dragonflies to stay away from the Virgans from now on.

“We were following a road,” said Maspeth urgently. “Does it continue up past the city?”

Keir shook his head. “I’ve looked, believe me. The slope’s too steep to keep the rock on it up there. It’s bare carbon-nanotube weave, smooth as silk. It’s impossible to climb beyond this point.”

She gave a stifled wail and stopped walking. Keir blinked at her in surprise; she *looked* for all the world just like he often *felt*. “Then—” She fought to say or not say something. “Then where does that damned road *go*?!”

“It goes no farther ... but it does come here,” he said gently.

“Yes ... yes, it’s not a total loss maybe.” She had fallen in beside him. “You took a huge risk coming down to warn us,” she said suddenly. “I want to thank you on behalf of all of us.”

Suddenly shy, he looked away.

Why had he done it? The whole episode was so totally out of character for him, and yet while he had been racing down here, no other course of action had been conceivable. It was as though some side of himself that had always been in darkness had suddenly lit up; and, in fact, he felt somehow that he’d acted this way before—selflessly, and foolishly.

“Yes, thank you!” Somebody was pushing his way up from the back of the group. He was stumping along using a stick like a third leg. He was lank-haired, with a chin that seemed to have been designed for a larger person, and small darting eyes. The guardrail introduced him as Eustace Loll, a “cabin minister” in the archaic control system Abyss called its “government.”

Still faintly embarrassed, Keir said, “Think nothing of it, Minister Loll,” and at the sound of his name Loll nearly fell over. Leal Maspeth steadied him, and Keir now saw that one of Loll’s ankles was bundled and bound with pieces of wood and cloth. Keir looked for a tag cloud in his scry but of course he had none—and that was when Keir realized with horror that the man was nursing an untreated *injury*.

“Tell me, how is it that you spotted us?” asked Loll in an innocent tone. Keir was too shocked at his obvious pain to organize his thoughts; luckily his scry was popping up plausible explanations. After a few awkward seconds he said, “I accidentally dropped something on that path yesterday. I’d finally gotten a chance to come down and look for it when I spotted you.”

They seemed to accept this explanation, so he led them on, to a round chamber from which a spiral stairway led up. As their lights supplemented his dragonflies’ vision, Keir saw that the wall behind the steps was covered with carvings of eyeless goats.

Before he could stop himself he burst out laughing; even to himself, the sound had a slight hysterical tinge to it. Maspeth looked at him with wide eyes, which just made him laugh more. “Sorry, sorry,” he gasped. “Sometimes I can’t tell whether the city’s just recording what it sees, or whether it has a sense of humor.” He shook his head, embarrassed again, and added, “I’m a little out of myself after what just happened. I didn’t mean to laugh.”

To his surprise she nodded. “Nobody’s going to fault you,” she said. “We’ve all endured some big shocks lately, and people react ... well, however they react. So—do we go up now?”

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