

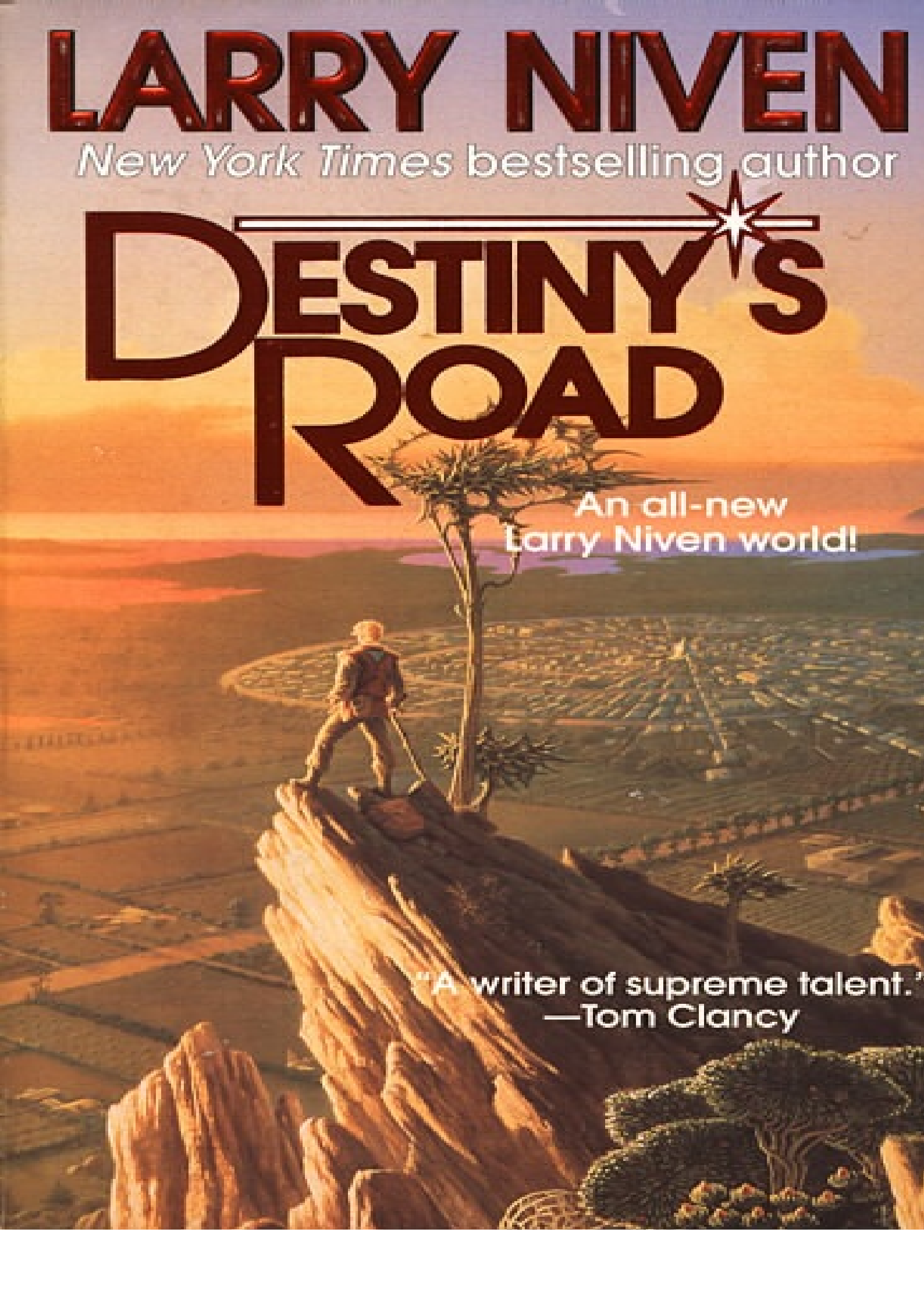
# LARRY NIVEN

*New York Times* bestselling author

# DESTINY'S ROAD

An all-new  
Larry Niven world!

"A writer of supreme talent."  
—Tom Clancy



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# **Destiny's Road**

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## The Caravan

We have experience of the earlier interstellar colony, Camelot. Considerable information reached Earth from Camelot, describing both mistakes and success, before communication stopped. Destiny is our second try. Destiny ~ succeed.

-Naren Singh,

Secretary-General,

United Nations, 2427 A.D.

2722 AD., Spiral Town

Junior at fourteen had grown tall enough to reach the highest cupboard. She stretched up on tiptoe and found the speckles shaker by feel, and brought it down. Then she saw what was happening to the bacon. She shouted, "Jemjemjemmv!"

Jemmy's eleven-year-old mind was all in the world beyond the window.

Junior snatched up a pot holder and moved the pan off the burner. The bacon wasn't burned, not yet. not quite.

Sorry," Jemmy said without turning. 'Junior, there's a caravan coming.'

'You never saw a caravan.' Junior looked through the long window, northeastward "Dust. Maybe it's the caravan. Here, turn this."

Jemmy finished cooking the bacon. Junior shook salt and speckles on the eggs, sparingly, and returned the shaker to the cupboard. Brenda, who should have been stirring the eggs, and Thonny and Greegry and Ronny were all crowded along the long window-the Bloocher family's major treasure, one sheet of glass a meter tall, three meters from side to side-to watch what was, after all, only a dust plume.

They ate bread and scrambled hen's eggs and orange juice. Brenda, who was ten, fed Jane, who was four months old. Mom and Dad had been up for hours doing farm work. Mom was eating poached platyfish eggs. Platyfish were Destiny life; their bodies didn't make fat. Mom was trying to lose weight.

Jemmy wolfed his breakfast, for all the good that did. The rest of the children were finished too. The younger kids squirmed like their chairs were on fire; but you couldn't ask Mom and Dad to hurry. They weren't exactly dawdling, but the kids' urgency amused them.

The long window was behind Jemmy. If he turned his back on the rest of the family, Dad would snap at him.

Junior emptied her coffee mug with no sign of haste, very adult, and set it down. "Mom, can you handle Jane and Ronny?"

Seven-year-old Ronny gaped in shock. Before he could scream, Mom said, "I'll take care of the baby, dear, but you take Ronny with you. He has to do his schoolwork."

Ronny relaxed, though his eyes remained wary. Junior stood. Her voice became a drill sergeant's. "We set?"

Brenda, Thonny, Greegry, Ronny, and Jemmy surged toward the door. There was a pileup in the lock while they sorted out their coats and caps, and then they cycled through in two clusters, out of the house, streaming toward the Road. Junior followed.

The younger three were half-running, but Junior with her long legs kept up with them. She was trying to catch Jemmy, who at eleven had no dignity to protect.

The sun wasn't above the mountains yet, but Quicksilver was, a bright spark dim in daylight.

The line of elms was as old as Bloocheer House. They were twentyfive meters from the front of the house, the last barrier between Bloocheer Farm and the Road. To Jemmy they seemed to partition earth and sky. He ran between two elms and was first to reach the Road.

To the right the Road curved gradually toward Spiral Town. Left, northwest, it ran straight into the unknown. That way lay Warkan Farm, where four mid-teens stood in pairs to watch the dust plume come near.

The Warkan children had been schooled at Bloocheer House, as had their parents before them. Then, when Jemmy was six, the Bloocheer household computer died. For the next week or two Dad was silent and dangerous. Jemmy came to understand that a major social disaster had taken place.

For five years now, Jemmy and his siblings and all of the Warkan children had trooped three houses around the Road's curve to use the Hann computer. The dust plume no longer hid what was coming toward Spiral Town. There were big carts pulled by what must be chugs. Jemmy saw more than one cart, hard to tell how many. Children from farth up the Road were running alongside. Their voices carried a long way, but it was too far to make out words.

His siblings had filtered between the trees. They lined the Road, waiting. Jemmy looked toward the Warkan kids; looked back at Junior; saw her shake her head. He said, "Aw, Junior. What about class?"

"Wait," Junior said.

Of course there had been no serious thought of rushing to class. Not with a caravan coming. They'd make up missed classes afterward. Computer programs would wait, and a human teacher was rarely needed.

Children began to separate at Junior's age. Boys spoke only to boys, girls to girls. Jemmy knew that much. Maybe he'd understand why, when he was older. Now he only knew that Junior would speak to him only to give orders. He missed his big sister, and Junior hadn't even gone anywhere.

If Junior went to join the Warkan girls, the Warkan boys would stare at her and rack their brains thinking of some excuse to talk to her. So Jemmy almost understood why the whole family simply waited by the elms while the wagons came near.

The wagons had flat roofs twice as high as a grown man's head. They moved at walking speed. You could hear the children who ran alongside carrying on shouted conversations with the merchants. There were deeper voices too: adults were negotiating with merchants in the wagons.

When the caravan reached the Warkan farm, the Warkans joined them, boys and girls together, it didn't matter. A few minutes later the troop had reached the Bloocheer children.

It was Jemmy's first close view of a chug.

The beasts were small and compact. They forged ahead at a steady walking pace, twenty to a cart. They stood as high as Jemmy's short ribs. Their shells were the color of beach sand. Their wrinkled leather bellies were pale. Their beaks looked like wire cutters, dangerous, and each head was crowned by a flat cap of ocher shell. They showed no awareness of the world around them.

The wagons stood on tall wheels. Their sides dropped open to form shelves, and merchants grinned down from inside.

Jemmy let the first two wagons pass him by. Junior had already forgotten him; the rest of the children went with her, though Thonny looked back once. No eyes were on him when he reached out to stroke one of the chugs. The act seemed headily dangerous. The shell was paper-smooth.

The chug swiveled one eye to see him.

It was hard to tell who was what among the merchants, because of their odd manner of dress. As far as Jemmy could tell, there were about two men for every woman. They enjoyed talking to children. A man and woman driving the third cart smiled down at him, and Jemmy walked alongside. He asked

"Can't you make them go faster?"

"Don't want to," the man said. "We buy and sell all along the Road. Why make the customers chase us?"

A golden-haired woman with a trace of a limp, Mom's age but dumpier, passed money up to a dark-skinned merchant on the twelfth and last cart. That was Ilyria Warkan. The merchant reached way down to hand her a speckles pouch.

It was transparent, big as a head of lettuce, with a child's handful of bright yellow dust in the corner. You never saw these pouches unless a merchant was selling speckles.

Jemmy ran his hand down a chug's flank. The skin was dry and papery. Belatedly he asked, "Do they bite?"

"No. They've got good noses, the chugs. They can smell you're Earthlife, and they won't eat that. Might bite you if you were a fisher."

The merchants seemed to like children, but nobody ever saw a child with the caravan. Did they keep their children hidden? Nobody knew.

The Road was beginning to curve. More children joined the caravan:

Rachel Harness and her mother, Jael; and Gwillam Doakes, a burly boy Jemmy's age; and the very clannish Holmes girls. No more adults came, unless you counted Jael Harness, who hadn't got enough speckles as a child and was therefore a little simple. Jemmy could see people walking away, far down the straight arm of the Road.

The merchant woman caught him looking, and laughed. "Too many people now." Her words were just a bit skewed, with music in her voice. "Serious customers, they see the dust, they come to meet us. Give them more time to deal. Now we get no more till the hub. How far to the hub?"

"Twenty minutes... no, wait, you can't take cross streets. They're too narrow." The caravan would just have to go round and round, following the curve as the Road spiraled toward Civic Hall. "More like an hour and a half. You could get there faster without the wagons."

"No point," the merchant woman said. "I would miss the cemetery too, wouldn't I?"

"Don't go in there," Jemmy said reflexively.

"Oh, but I must! I've heard about the Spiral Town cemetery all my life. We follow the Road around by almost a turn? It's all Earthlife, they say."

"That's right," Jemmy said. "Spooky. Destiny life won't grow where the dead lie."

The merchant said, "I've never seen a place that was nothing but Earthlife."

She was strange and wonderful, swathed in layers of bright colors. It was a game, getting her to keep talking. Jemmy asked, "Have you seen City Hall? There's painted walls, really bright. Acrylic. Dad says."

She smiled indulgently. He knew: She'd been there.

He asked, "Where do speckles come from?"

"Don't know. Hundreds of klicks up the Road when we buy 'em."

Hundreds of klicks... kilometers. "Where did they come from before the Road was here?"

She frowned down at him. "Before the Road...?"

"Sure. We learn about it in school, how James and Daryl Twerdahi and the rest took off in Cavoria and left the Road behind them. But that was eight years after Landing Day. So...?"

The man was listening too. The woman said, "News to me, boy. The Road's always been here."

Jemmy would have accepted that, accepted her ignorance, if he hadn't seen the man's lips twitch a smile. In his mind, for that instant, it was as if the world had betrayed him.

Then seven-year-old Ronny was beside him, saying, "I'm tired, Jemmy."

"Okay, kid. Junjunjunior-"

One wagon ahead, Junior stopped walking. So did Thonny and Brenda, and the Warkan girls the

Junior had been talking to, and the Warkan boys, all without consulting each other. Sandy Warkan said, "Twerdahl Street's just ahead. We can stop for a squeeze of juice at Guilda's and wait for the caravan to come round again."

"School," Junior reminded them.

"Can wait."

The Road itself was magical.

Bloocher Farm was soft soil and living things and entropy. Plants grew from little to big, grew and withered, changed and died. Animals acted strangely, and presently gave birth to children like themselves. Tools rusted or broke down or rotted or ceased working for reasons of their own.

Closer to the hub, you saw less of life and more of entropy. The

houses were old, losing their hard edges. New buildings were conspicuous, jarring. At night there were lines of city lights with gaps in them. Things that didn't work were as prevalent here as among the farms, but you noticed them more: they were closer together.

But the Road was hard and flat and not like anything else in the world. The Road was eternal.

The Road was a fantastic toy. Things rolled easily on its flat surface. Here, just short of Twerdahl Street and half a klick southeast of Bloocher Farm, was a favored dip used by the high-school kids. Sandy and Hal Warkan had showed Jemmy how to sweep the Road to get a really flat surface, so the balls or wheels could be rolled back and forth over the dip. They'd go forever.

No time for that today. They turned off at Twerdahl Street, and some of the merchants waved good-bye.

Rachel Harness chattered to Junior, pulling her mother along. Rachel's mother Jael seemed to listen, but answered rarely, and when she spoke her words had nothing to do with what she'd heard. Jemmy liked Jael Harness, but Junior and Brenda found her a little queer.

Children who didn't get enough speckles grew up like that.

But Rachel was a bright, active girl, Junior's age, who treated her mother like a younger sister. Neighbors had helped to raise her, but speckles were expensive. Rachel must have had a steady source of speckles since her birth.

One wondered. Who was Rachel's father?

The Harness farm was to the right, and that was where Rachel was pointing, Junior looking and nodding. Jemmy couldn't hear them, but he looked. A silver bulge in the weeds... it was Killer!

The Council had sicced Varmint Killer on the Harness farm!

The old machine wasn't doing anything. Just sitting. Weeds and vegetation that had been crops ran riot here. It wasn't all Earthlife. Odd colors, odd shapes grew in wedge patterns, wider toward the southwest, toward the sea.

More than two hundred years ago, the great fusion-powered landers had hovered above Crab Island and burned the land sterile. This land was to serve Earthlife only. But the life of Destiny continued to try to retake the Crab.

Weeds tended to cluster, reaching tentatively from an occupied base, as if they did not like the fertilizer that made Earthlife grow. Black touched with bronze and yellow-green; branches thick and divided, divided, divided, until every tip was a thousand needles too fine to see. One could rip up an encroachment of Destiny weeds with a few passes of a tractor. One day the Harnesses' neighbors would do that.

But Destiny's animals were another matter. They lived among Destiny's encroaching plants, and some were dangerous. These were Killer's prey.

Killer squatted in the wild corn, a silver bulge the size and shape of a chug pulled in on itself. The children watched and waited. Older children bullied the youngers onto Warkan Farm's long porch where Destiny creatures weren't likely to be hiding.

One would not want a child to come between Varmint Killer and its prey.

They waited, waited...

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Ssizzz!

Even looking, you might not see it. Jemmy just caught it: the line flicking out like a slender tongue, snapping back; a drop of blood drooling down beneath the little hatch cover.

Junior's hand was on his arm. He obeyed, remained seated, but looked. Something thrashed in the weeds. Killer's tongue lashed out again.

The caravan and the crowd were trickling away slowly but steadily, off down Twerdahl Street. The Bloocheer family gathered itself. Junior called, "Sanity check. If we skip Guilda's now, we can get through school time and still beat the caravan to Guilda's. Vote!"

Reality sometimes called for hard choices. They looked at each other.



Lessons

The planets

L(c)K.I- DUICKSILVER NORN DESTINY

asteroids, a sparse and narrow ring

VOLSTAAG

HOGUN in Volstaag's trailing Trojan point

HE LA, black giant or brown dwarf

inner comets

Missing school was not a problem for the Bloocher kids, nor for the Warkans either. Computers had infinite patience. A teacher wasn't usually needed. Kids who didn't make up lost lessons would gain a reputation, but delays would have been more serious at harvest time.

The Hann Farm was one loop inward from the Bloochers'. It was smaller than most. Maybe the first Hanns had been cheated. Maybe not. The land was fantastically fertile, and Hahn machines must have been among the best that had come from the sky.

Or else the Hanns made things grow by using intensive care, treating each separate plant as an individual; and maybe their machines lived longer than others because they were kept clean inside and out. There were things Jemmy would never learn, things nobody knew. He was already beginning to resent that.

Nine children trooped into the Hann front yard in late afternoon. The yard was a rich lawn with islands in it: round patches of dark soil three feet across marked with a big, strangely shaped rock and two or three Destiny plants, or driftwood and a cluster of multicolored irises, or . . .

Deborah Hann had a Julia set growing on a dwarf. redwood. The Destiny vine wound around the straight Earthlife tree, spraying out green spines that bifurcated in fractal fashion into a nearly invisible lacework. Mrs. Hann smiled at the children and started to get up, but Junior had plenty of time to wave her back down. Deborah and Takumi were old. Their knees were going.

They entered the Hann house via the airlock.

Curdis Hann, at sixteen, fancied himself a teacher. "Hi, Sandy. Do you know why these double door things are called airlocks?"

Sandy Warkan, the oldest boy and nominally in charge of the boys, said, "Keeps the wind out."

Curdis grinned. "In. Look it up."

The kids separated inside the airlock. Junior went with Marion and Lisette Warkan downstairs to the cellar. Sandy and Hal Warkan went upstairs to join Toma and Curdis Hann. Jemmy had never been up there.

That left Jemmy in charge of the younger ones, in the company room. Jemmy let Greegry log in. The kid was getting good at that. The rest read over his shoulder as he typed, find: airlock.

Diagrams, etymology...airlocks were for spacecraft. They held air in against the vacuum of space as long as both doors couldn't open at the same time. The first settlers had built airlocks into the houses against the ferocious coastal winds. Curdis had scored a point.

Jemmy asked, "Brenda, what've they got you studying? Path of the Cavorite, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Greegry said, "Hey, I'm supposed to be doing algebra."

Jemmy asked, "You like algebra?"

Greegry grinned over his shoulder. "Sorry, Dad, Jemmy wanted to know where the caravans came

from.' Okay?"

~~"If he asks. I just want something to catch Curdis. Brenda, see what you can get."~~

Brenda reached past Greegry and typed, find: Cavorite\*caravan\*Road.

Nothing.

"I think these records are older than the caravans. Let me try." Thonny typed, find: Cavorite\*Road\*map.

The screen lit with visuals, and Thonny got up to give Brenda his seat. Jemmy crossed to the smaller screen. "Greegry, let's get you going on algebra. Have you got a lesson on file?"

Greegry worked. Jemmy watched because he could use the brushup. The program was a good one and Greegry wasn't stumbling much. Jemmy's attention strayed.

On Brenda's screen, Cavorite and Columbiad settled on pillars of flame: huge squat cylinders with flared skirts and bullet noses. Jemmy had seen this lesson before. It looked real, then and now, but Jemmy thought it must be a computer-generated cartoon. How could a camera have watched the first ships land?

Probes had been leaving Earth since the 1950s. Over the centuries they ranged farther, past the gas-giant worlds, over the sun's poles, out among the comets, ultimately to the nearer stars.

Humanity knew the local neighborhood well, long before they could build a starship.

Tau Ceti was a yellow dwarf star not far from Sol. One of its planets showed the blue of an oxygen atmosphere. Only living things can maintain an oxygen atmosphere.

Apollo was a star eight to ten billion years old, redder and smaller than Sol. There the probes found another blue world. They named it Norn. Norn, Apollo 4, held life... but Tau Ceti 3 was closer to Sol, and that world-Avalon-became the first interstellar colony.

The colonists aboard Geographic had settled on a great island and called it Camelot. Whatever lethal surprises waited on an unknown world, they could be restricted by choosing an island. That decision must have saved the Avalon colony from destruction, for a time.

Cryogenic sleep didn't quite work. Ice crystals formed in the brains of the first colonists. Some died of it. Some woke brain-damaged. Some lasted a few years, then died of strokes. Survivors faced local predators and weird weather cycles. Whether Avalon survived was in doubt: over the decades the broadcasts had slowed, then ceased.

The launching of Geographic had nearly broken Sol system's economy. All things considered, it was no wonder that Sol system waited two hundred and twenty years to send forth another colonizing ship....

"She's blowing smoke," Jemmy decided.

Brenda tapped to pop up a window. The author of the teaching program was-"Allison Berkeley Ph.D... . string of letters. You think she's lying?"

"More like confused. It bothers her. She's looking for reasons herself." Brenda tapped, and the lesson's headings disappeared. She didn't need to say We'll never know. Allison Berkeley string-of-letters must have died centuries ago, light-years away.

In 2490 AD. Argos arrived in Apollo system. The starfarers had already renamed the blue world. No longer Norn: Destiny was waiting.

They chose a narrow-necked peninsula with a ridge of weathered mountains, like Malaya in size and shape. As on Avalon, so on Destiny:

they would isolate the problems.

Cavorite and Columbiad, the landers, were massive spacecraft designed to explore a solar system or a world. They sat low on groundeffect skirts. Riding the fusion drive alone, either ship could hover a meter high until the land beneath turned to lava; or above a lake, until the water boiled and rivers downstream ran steaming. It was thus that they cleared the Crab for farming and ranching.

Argos had been long in the building. The Apollo Project had sixty years to breed plants and animals of Earth for life on Destiny. Probes had shown them a shorter year, redder sunlight, a circular orbit and a mere ten degrees of axial tilt, stable wind patterns and no ice caps, a small moon that moved too fast to pick up much of a tide. Weather would not be a persistent problem. They got that wrong! But the dimmer, reddened sunlight would. The Apollo Project planners tried to breed plants to survive that.

Cavorite and Columbiad settled high on the wider, southwestern side of the Crab Mountain fifteen miles inland. The settlers wanted easy access to the sea, but not too easy. There might be Bay of Fundy tides, despite the little moon, or amphibious sea monsters.

They dredged the sea for Avalon seaweed and used it to fertilize Earthly crops.

And Argos disappeared.

"I can see why Argos's crew got bored," Brenda said, greatly daring.

Heads turned, but nobody spoke. Argos had betrayed them all, marooned the settlers and their descendants to the end of time. The crew of Argos had been tried and convicted of mutiny, in absentia. Later the lander Cavorite had abandoned Base One, Destiny Town. Lives that crossed between sun and sea would drown in the mundane work of farming. Jemmy felt the same, some days.

Here is the farm, there is the Road. Take off go.

Thonny's screen showed something like an octopus made of clouds, curved arms, a body that bulged in the middle. An old view from orbit. Jemmy had seen that once and never found it again.

Greegry wasn't having fun. Nobody does algebra for fun. He kept leaning back through the text. There was a block to keep him from seeking the Answers file, but Jemmy had cracked that block long ago, and maybe Greegry had too.

The Hanns had once had a window like the one at Bloocher Farm. Eternal winds had finally cracked it. What they had now was brick set

into the Roadside wall, and four panes cut from the old window and set in the brick. And nothing much was going on out there.

This room was not where Jemmy Bloocher wanted to be.

He wanted to be where Cavorite was, at the far end of the Road.

Columbiad became the colony's power source. Cables ran into the base, with a tent to protect the join. (Jemmy and Brenda were amused. The tent by their time had become a thick-walled building.) Cavorite was kept ready for an emergency evacuation of the Crab.

Inevitably, some of the half-a-thousand first settlers thought more like interstellar explorers than like farmers. Forty of them followed an alternative path—"the path less traveled by," in Groundcaptain Radner's words.

They waited eight years before the rest of the colonists had enough faith in their growing crops and enough surplus to make the trip worthwhile. In 2498 A.D. there was a glut.

Cavorite had carried half the colony from orbit down to the Crab. Leaving Spiral Town, the same craft carried forty in roomy comfort along with a hydroponics garden, stores of seeds and fertilizers, eggs, considerable medical facilities and lab equipment. The animals were thriving too, but none would be left on this first trip. They'd have nothing to eat. The plan called for Cavorite to return, and eventually to make a second journey, scattering animals and birds along the path.

This trip, Cavorite would leave seeds and growing plants, and one thing more:

A road.

Sitting on the fusion drive alone, Cavorite would ride a meter in the air, with flame mushrooming out around the skirt, hot enough to melt rock. That was the idea. Cavorite would move off along the foothills of the Spine, the Crab's mountain ridge, leaving a snail's trail of cooling lava.

Jemmy recognized what was onscreen: a view from space taken ages ago from the mother ship.

before Columbiad and Cavorite landed.

~~Water covered most of the planet. Destiny's core was deficient in radioactive elements. Its shell was thick. Ages ago it had cracked: an upwelling of magma had become a long, relatively narrow ridge of continent.~~

Most of the continent, Wrinkle, lay north, under the broad ice cap. One end reached south of the equator, then curled over. A constriction nearly split the end off from the main body. A spinal ridge ran along Wrinkle, along the constriction now called the Neck, and down the length of the Crab Peninsula, splitting the Crab into broad and narrow halves. That was the land that the settlers settled.

As he and Brenda watched, the computer drew the Road in neon pink. Down at the tip of the Crab the Road curved out from Columbiad in a perfect little spiral. Where it got too big, where Blooch Farm was now, it drew a tangent, a straight line that ran toward the mainland, parallel to the spinal ridge. As it approached the Neck it became a string of dots, then trailed off.

"Are those dots all we get?" Brenda asked him.

"They made the Road after everyone was down. There wasn't anyone in the sky to take pictures. Except Argos, and they don't talk."

Now the computer was drawing in Spiral Town, filling in the curves of the spiral and spreading out down the straight section... and fuzzing out into terra incognita.

Brenda complained, "Jemmy, it just trails off."

"They never came back. They were going to, but they never did." Everyone knew the Cavorite story. Nobody knew how it ended.

Brenda said, "The caravans must know where Cavorite went. The Road goes there and so do the caravans. Why not just ask?"

"Okay," Thonny said obligingly, mocking her.

Jemmy tasted the idea. "Traders wouldn't tell anyone anything. But Brenda's right. They know."

The Road was a spiral, and Radner Street was a radial path, not quite straight. The straggling line of children crossed the Road's next inward arc, and saw the last wagon receding. They crossed the next arc ahead of the wagons. Soon thereafter they walked between fruit orchards. The Road curved more tightly now. The intersection ahead was Guilda's Place.

Guilda's Place sprawled like three or four buildings pushed together around an open space, a courtyard. Bird feeders stood in the corners, and the courtyard swarmed with little birds. The buildings were old, of poured stone, with every corner rounded by two hundred years of winds; but the roof of the biggest building was new Begley cloth sheeting, dark silver-gray. Walks led through the fruit orchards out back.

The orchard wasn't enough to keep Guilda's going. The family had to buy fruit from farms farthout. The Bloochers supplied her with melons and grapes; their neighbors supplied other produce. And everybody stopped at Guilda's.

It wasn't as if farmers couldn't make their own juice. But Guilda Smitt sold sherbet. Guilda had a working freezer, and a storage battery, and

a roof covered with Begley cloth to soak up the sunlight and turn it into electric power.

In the courtyard the boys and girls formed separate lines to get juice, then settled at four big round tables close enough for eavesdropping. Jemmy would have liked to listen to Junior reporting his conversation with the man who drove the second cart. But then his siblings wanted to hear about his conversation.

"She said, 'The Road's always been there.' And he laughed."

Eight-year-old Thonny scoffed. "We know better than that."

"They did too," Jemmy said.

Guilda's four daughters were replacing the juice. Junior stepped up and spoke to them. The

listened, then moved briskly inside. Adults were gathering; the courtyard was filling up.

~~Other customers had gathered around Guilda's Place to hear Jemmy and Junior tell of the~~ merchants. Turning heads and sudden quiet alerted Jemmy, and he saw what the rest had seen: a single chug pulling a small cart along the radial road, with a single merchant walking alongside.

He was more than twenty and less than thirty: hard to tell, with those pointed features. He had long black hair and a black beard trimmed short. Where other merchants wore several layers, this one wore only a woven vest, loose pants, and an elaborate cummerbund with a wide pocket in it. His feet were bare, and his arms and shoulders.

He seemed to speak to the chug, and the chug waited while he went inside. They saw him speak to a massive woman whose wealth of dark hair was piled into intricate curves: Guilda herself.

When the trader came out he was carrying a massive drum of sherbet. His arm and shoulder muscles rolled like boulders, and Jemmy envied him that. He didn't acknowledge the regard of the girls.

He set the big drum in the cart, all in one smooth motion, and drove back up along the Road.

Conversation started again when he was gone. "He'll meet the rest of the caravan coming the long way," an old man said.

Guilda herself came out. She clapped her hands for attention, then spoke rapidly. "Sherbet and coins for any of you who helps me this day!"

Jemmy downed his juice and stood up. Sibs and friends were doing the same. A horde moved into the fruit orchards. Wagons were in motion too, bringing fruit from markets nearer the Hub. The Bloochers, sticking together, fetched chairs and tables from nearby houses.

Guilda's contract was good, stated and implied. Guilda's neighbors knew. When the caravan was in town, chairs and tables were needed;

the loan would be repaid. For the labor of the children and young adults now spilling out of the courtyard, money would be paid tonight. Sherbet might come during a slack moment, or days from now, when the merchants were gone.

So chairs and tables were brought and stacked. The ancient freezer ran at its humming maximum using power stored for months. Guilda's extended family occupied her huge kitchen, and there they turned fruit into juice and whipped it while it froze.

In midafternoon the caravan flowed around the curve of the Road. The wagons were nearly hidden within the crowd of customers. Every level of Spiral Town society had something to buy or sell or trade. Around the shell of customers seethed an outer shell of Spiral Town children.

Now Jemmy and his friends could deploy tables and chairs and silver umbrellas, competing for speed, competing for how many chairs a boy could stack and lift. In the wake of the wagons Guilda sprawled across the square.

And suddenly there was nothing more to do. The caravan stopped near Spiral Town's hub, and business was being done there. Sherbet was ready, but the merchants were not.

The rules were known. Jemmy had never heard them. Perhaps they'd all learned them through osmosis. This was one: children would not interfere between merchants and the adults who wanted to meet them. The front of Guilda's was the square. The back was a slope of hill that became Endersin Ranch at its top. Spiral Town's youth now began collecting on the grass behind Guilda's.

Guilda's daughters moved among them, serving minuscule cups of sherbet. Sheeko Radne, Guilda's eldest and as tall as most men, wove a contorted path, pushing a tub on rollers, doling out refill scoops.

The merchants were gathering out front. Yatsen's Far East would be gearing up to serve their dinner. The square must have filled with amazing speed, because merchants were already moving here to the grass slopes.

Four merchants. One was the brawny man who bought the drum of sherbet. Jemmy and the other made haste to make room, and the four traders sat in a circle.

Thonny, eight, was whispering to Ronny, seven. Jemmy couldn't hear. He kept his dignity for a long moment, then glared at them. "What?"

"They've all got guns," Thonny said, louder than he intended, his eyes invading the merchant's privacy. "See, the fat one has his in that loose

jacket, and him and him have those holders in their pocket belts, and the guy with the muscles-

"That's you, Fedrick," the fat one laughed at the guy with the muscles. A wagon was pulling up the radial street. More produce for Guilda's sherbet. Sheeko Radner waved prettily at a tableful of farmers. The six obliged: they followed her to the wagon and began lifting watermelons.

Fedrick grinned at Thonny. He pulled an L-shaped object from his belt. Jemmy too had been half-sure it was a gun. The brawny merchant made as if to hand it to Thonny, but he was pulling it back even as the fat one's hand blocked him. "I can't let you handle this, boy," he said, or something like that; his words were twisted almost beyond recognition. "I can show you, maybe."

Six farmers carrying six watermelons were trooping toward the kitchen door. The merchant named Fedrick fired at the sixth.

The watermelon in Davish Scrivner's hands exploded. It splashed in all directions, a sudden scarlet flower.

Scrivner stared at his arms, his clothes, hardly believing that it wasn't blood. For that moment he was too flabbergasted even to be afraid. Then, amid a sea of laughter, he turned.

He studied the tableful of merchants, and the roar in his throat didn't emerge. If it had been the fat one... well. But the grinning man now pushing a gun into his armpit looked like he could lift a wagonful of watermelons.

And he was coming forward with helpless laughter on his face and money in his hand. "It was for the children," he told the farmer. "Think, they'll never see a sight like that again! Friend, this should be the price to clean your clothes and a steam bath too. Really, I did look to see there was nothing behind you but hill. Forgive me! Come, share sherbet with us."

Thonny said, "Damn! Did you see that?"

In truth, Jemmy would never forget it. What the gun had done to a watermelon, it could do to a man. Davish Scrivner could have exploded like that. Would the merchant still have been laughing?

It never faded, never lost a trace of color: the watermelon exploding in Scrivner's arms, the purple splashing every part of him like blood, the horror in his face as he gave up his hope of life. It was there in his mind eight years later, on Jemmy Bloochee's last night in Spiral Town.

Warkans Tavern

"Dr. Maners, do you represent the crew of Argos?"

"I do."

"How do the defendants plead?"

"On the charge of mutiny, not guilty. On the charge of sabotage, not guilty. On the charge of treason, not guilty. On the charge of grand larceny, not guilty"

-Eric Maners, advocate for the crew of Argos

2730 A.D.

The Bloocheer clan gathered in wilderness for the third time in three days. Mountains stood above them, the spinal ridge of the Crab. A stream ran foaming over rocks. The water had cut a shallow channel across the Road below, and somebody-merchants-had built a bridge across that.

The New Hann Holding would be here, four kilometers down the Road from the Bloocheer Farm on the inland side.

Two hundred and forty years ago, Earthlife had been seeded over the entire peninsula in a random mix. You could make bread out of these waist-high grasses, corn and rye and wheat and a sprinkling of sesame. Apple and orange and pomegranate groves grew randomly. The tallest trees, twenty and thirty feet high, were both redwoods.

An early-morning fog had burned off. The Bloocheer clan rested beneath a handful of oaks, the girls around Junior, the boys around Curdis Hann. Jemmy tended a cage that held Destiny tree lace and a pophopper. The pop-hopper was a Destiny burrowing creature, and nobody knew how to take care of it. After two days it looked to be dying. Here and there were patches of darker vegetation, black trunks and branches and lacy extrusions touched with green and yellow-green and bronze. That was local life. Destiny life. Three patches below the clump of oaks had merged.

Varmint Killer rested within that patch.

Killer's surface was very like poured stone, Jemmy thought, pocked with small apertures for light threads, tiny glass-bead eyes, whips and pellets, all retractable into an ovoid shell. It sat like a statue or a rock, but it had moved in the night.

Killer had siblings.

A myriad tiny machines, specks just bigger than speckles, turned rock and ore into Begley cloths within a cave in Mount Apollo. Similar machines made Earthtime watches in Mount Chronos. Jemmy had looked at both kinds under a microscope. In the places where tools branched out, and in the ovoid shell itself, Jemmy saw an artistic relationship to Varmint Killer. Then again, he'd known in advance these machines had come from Sol system aboard Argos.

The Bloocheer clan watched for a time. Then Greegry got bored and tried to climb a redwood, and Thonny began taking bets on when Killer would move again.

Junior had married Curdis Hann.

She was twenty then and twenty-two now. It was time and past time, and Curdis was a good man and a boyhood friend to all of them. Still, it made things awkward.

Two years had passed since the communal tractor failed. Most of Spiral Town thought of it that way, and blamed the driver and his ill luck. But the terrible machine had sent its lightning like an ancient stored flame through William Bloocheer's nervous system. Dad was a helpless cripple now, h

mind damaged too. And Jemmy, his oldest boy, was only nineteen.

So Junior had charge of the Bloocheer farm, and Junior's husband must live with the Bloocheers for now. They must call Junior Margery. Now the Margery, Margery Junior's mother, was Mom to everyone, even Dad, even Curdis. Curdis Hann became another brother, at twenty-one an older brother who didn't have property yet.

In a year Jemmy would be twenty. Curdis and Junior-Margery- would have their land, the New Hann. Then Bloocheer land would be Jemmy's to farm.

They'd picked a plot not far beyond the last reach of Spiral Town's farms, where a stream ran down from the mountains. It was infested with Destiny weeds, of course. In the lazy days of midsummer they'd leased Varmint Killer from the Council.

Killer didn't require much supervision. It didn't take orders anymore. Jemmy had led it here by offering it Destiny prey wiggling in a patch of Destiny weeds. Now it just sat in the weeds and waited.

It would not harm life of Earth. It sensed Destiny life, somehow; Jemmy had never heard an explanation that made sense. It wasn't smart enough to see what a human being would: that Destiny life didn't have proper leaves. Photosynthesis went on in lacy extrusions from the branches, and on the branches and trunks themselves.

If a creature of Destiny moved, Killer killed it. When no prey surfaced for a time, it would kill some weeds, then move on.

It wasn't doing much right now.

Greegry had actually reached the top of the redwood. His perch didn't look comfortable, and Jemmy wondered if he was afraid to descend. There weren't any branches on that long, smooth trunk.

Greegry called, "Hey!"

Jemmy waved languidly.

"There's a dust cloud way down at the end of the Road. Jemjemjemmy! Curdis! I think there's a caravan coming!"

"Great!" Curdis called.

Caravans came three times every two Destiny years: midsummer, first days of spring, last days of autumn. This was midsummer, idle time: neither sowing nor reaping season, a good time for a caravan to visit.

Killer's long tongue lashed into the bronze vegetation and out. Then Killer itself lurched in motion. "Something must have come out of a burrow," Thonny said softly. "It wants the rest of the family."

Jane called, "Thonthonthonny! You owe me four checks!" Jane was only eight.

Greegry called, "Curdis, there's someone on a bike. He's stopping near our bikes!"

"I'll go see," Curdis said. He stood, and Junior joined him. Jemmy got up too, but Curdis gestured him back.

Killer was in the Destiny weeds. They heard the snap! snap! snap! of Killer's whip tentacles. Jane had crawled close to watch.

Thonny was probably right: it was trying to reach prey in a burrow. A whip could be trapped that way.

The whip sounds came less frequently. And here came Curdis, jogging. "We've got to move Killer," he panted. "Jemmy, see if you can get him to follow the pop-hopper."

Jemmy picked up the cage. The pop-hopper didn't look good. "What's up?"

Margery was in range by now. "That girl was from the Council," she called to all. "All fees forgiven if we take Varmint Killer to the Tavern before sunset. The caravan's come early."

They could use the money! Jemmy moved toward the Destiny weeds. Killer had to be approached with respect. He stopped twelve meters away and lifted the cage into view. You never got closer than



ten meters, because that was the range of its whips.

Killer was motionless.

So was the pop-hopper.

The wind would be out to sea, and that meant he was downwind. Jemmy began to circle, the cage held high. Dad swore that it didn't matter; Killer couldn't smell; it sensed Destiny life by some other means.

Curdis lost patience. "We'll have to catch another one. Greegry, get down from there. Thonny, find a stick. You get to the far side of that clump-that clump, way away from Killer-and you beat your way through. Anything jumps up, whack it. You're trying to scare it this way, right? Greegry! Find a stick and go help Thonny. Jemjemjemmy?"

"It's dead, Curdis."

"Dump it and stand by with the cage. Get your gloves on."

Jemmy opened the cage and dumped the little shelled corpse and the withering weeds he'd put with it. He began picking fresh yellow and bronze lace.

Killer wailed, a long, loud cry of warning. Then its whips began flailing around it, lashing the Destiny plants at root level. It slid slowly through the dark patch, lashing everything in its way. Though it was not moving straight toward Jemmy, Jemmy eased back.

The decrepit machine didn't take orders anymore. It sought Destiny weeds and Destiny animals. When they were not about, its tropism was weak and it went where it would.

A tree-sized Destiny plant balked it. Killer pulled in its whips until it had rolled past. Plant life was only part of Killer's job. A human- Curdis-would pull up the stumps Killer left behind.

"Hyah!" Curdis bellowed, and three boys leapt on something that tried to sprint out from under them. Jemmy ran toward them. Thonny trapped its beak in a bag. The others were sitting on the shell; its short legs scrabbled in futility.

The Destiny thing was a bit big for the cage. They pushed its bulk in with the butt of a stick. "Good enough. It's jammed in, it can't crawl out," Junior said.

Killer had slashed away most of the weed patch. It rested now. Curdis picked up the cage and walked toward it.

Killer began to move.

Curdis retreated. Killer wasn't fast. They moved down toward the Road, Curdis and the cage, the old machine following.

The heavy cage was passed to Jemmy, then to Junior, and back to Curdis before they'd crossed three and a half kilometers to Warkan's Tavern. Curdis had Thonny and Brenda making bike runs to get lemonade to the others.

The sun was still high, and Quicksilver a bright spark above it. The dust plume that must be an oncoming caravan was closer now, but not close. Other young adults were beginning to gather.

The Warkan place was the Bloochers' neighbor, down the Road on the seaward side. It was still part farm. The four Warkan kids and their parents ran the tavern in the evenings. They kept a distillery and a truck garden going, and an extensive orchard. They did less weeding than most, and parts of the Warkan farm were often overgrown with dark Destiny plants.

The Tavern's waiters and waitresses were in their mid- and late teens. They had to talk to each other, if only to coordinate their tasks. Jemmy had worked through two caravan visits. He hoped to see them again.

Land that was allowed to become infested was subject to confiscation by the Council. But the Warkans could afford to lease Varmint Killer frequently. Likely they would pay the Council a premium to get Killer to Warkan's Tavern by sunset, for the entertainment value.

Mom and Dad weren't as friendly to the Warkans as in time past. They preferred Harry's Bar, near

the Hub, that catered to an older crowd.

But Warkan's Tavern felt like home.

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Youngsters in the gathering crowd danced near Killer, or hovered well back and shouted advice while the Bloochers led the machine through the garden gate and around back.

Destiny life hadn't gained much of a foothold here. Jemmy had visited as a kid. He knew this place better than Curdis did. He took the cage and led Killer to the near edge of the pear grove.

Earthlife found Destiny's sun a little cool, a little red. It was Destiny life that sought shade. The trees of Earth had overly black shadows around their trunks: Destiny weeds.

Older men and women were finding vantage places across the Road. There was plenty of room on the ridge. A bonfire was a pale glitter. The Martinas were roasting potatoes up there. Curdis found people for a murderball game.

From the ridge you could see down to the shore and farther, out to where Carder's Boat had been anchored since Dad was a boy. That had been the fastest thing on water before the motor died. Dad's generation used to swim out to it with lunch bags, use it as a raft. Then Destiny devilhair weed moved in. Now weed blackened the water from the boat to the beach and further.

In a time now lost, Carder's Boat would carry a child anyplace he could dream. Now there were only the caravans, and that too was a dream.

They were all on the ridge when the dust plume arrived.

This had changed since Jemmy was a boy: caravans no longer came into Spiral Town. Merchants did, but not with their wagons. Caravans stopped about where Bloocher Farm began, where the Road turned. It was better for everyone. Here the chugs had a straight run down to the ocean, and chug droppings need not soil civic pavement.

The wagons began stopping along a kilometer of Road. They stopped well apart. Then the wagonmasters went among the chugs and released their harness.

Twenty chugs pulled most wagons, with here and there a chug missing. From his high perch Jemmy was able to count eighteen wagons. Close to four hundred chugs streamed across black sand grass, then sand, toward the ocean and in.

There was not much to be seen after that. The merchants were opening their wagons. That was of interest if you had money. The teens on the ridge were generally disappearing in the direction of dinner, and so did the Bloochers.

Jemmy took the speckles shaker down. He measured a careful half-jigger and kneaded it into the bread dough, pulled it into two loaves, and put it in the oven. He shook the speckles jar again, reached up, and put it away.

"Curdis," he said, "we need more speckles."

"Margery?"

She'd heard. "It's a big caravan this time. Wait till tomorrow. They'll go cheaper."

Mom had three pots on the fire. She asked, "Margery? Can you handle this?"

"Yeah."

Mom went into the dining hall and sat beside Dad.

Margery reached for pot holders. Curdis moved up beside her and whispered something. She moved aside so that he could pull the heavy casserole out of the oven and take it to the table.

Dad said, "Saw the dust plume."

"Caravan's in town," Curdis said, and talked about moving Varmint Killer.

Dad nodded and nodded and presently asked, "Master Granger there?"

"I saw him," Jemmy said. Master Granger was an older man, proprietor of the lead wagon, though a younger woman drove. He and Dad had been friends. Jemmy and Dad had taken Granger and his driver to Harry's Bar, before Dad's accident.

Dad nodded and didn't suggest doing that again. Some days his mind worked better than other. Dad could barely get out of the house.

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He wanted to know everything about today. Jemmy talked, with some help from Thonny, who Mom helped him eat.

The New Hann. The caravan. Chugs in a sand-colored wave rolling down the sand into the ocean. Mom and the girls were talking about marriages, crops, weather, prices.

Jemmy had heard this too often, endless permutations, endlessly the same. He waited for a instant's pause and jumped into it. "Dad, how far down the Road have you gotten?"

"Oh, hell, Jemmy. Not far. We used to visit the Warkans, swim there, when the Warkans were the farthest. I hear tales, but.... don't think I ever got as far as where you were today."

The Road. He might never learn more of the Road than he'd learned from the schooling programs.

"Your uncle Eezeek had to go down the Road for awhile. Folk at Haven took him in-"

"Eezeek died years ago," Mom said.

But the merchants knew. Maybe somebody could get them talking.

Quicksilver glowed among lesser stars, just on the horizon.

A cart moved silently past the Bloocheer clan toward Warkan's Tavern, moved by electricity and an old motor. It carried huge rolls of Begley cloth sheeting from the cavern in Mount Apollo: the most important product Spiral Town had to sell. It ghosted past the tavern and stopped by the lead wagon.

Normally roomy for the crowd it pulled in, Warkan's was just adequate. When a caravan was in town. It wasn't just the merchants. Every human being between fifteen and twenty-five was at Warkan's Tavern tonight.

The older Spirals wore dancers on their feet. No room to dance in here. Outside, later, on the Road in the dark rooms normally closed had been opened. The big bar would be inhumanly crowded, and Jemmy led his brethren into one of the outer rooms. They'd be able to breathe here, and Varmint Kill was sparkling, darting, spitting threads of green light, and putting on a fine show outside the big windows.

Tunia Judda was here, far across the big room. Tunia and Jemmy had been watching each other for years. Their parents were friends, and something might come of that, but they hadn't spoken anything permanent. They'd dance on the Road later tonight.

Jemmy played at catching her eye. Never worked. Women probably did the same thing men did to get a friend to do the looking.

A few merchants were already here. Jemmy knew he shouldn't stare, but... They dressed in layers in bright colors and patterns. Each man carried a gun, and each woman too.

Rachel Harness had grown up lovely and a little twisted. She'd been feeding herself and her speckles-shy mom since she was a little girl. When the rest went to their homes for dinner, Rachel and her mom had stayed on the ridge to picnic and to watch.

"We didn't see a trace of the chugs for over an hour," she told the girls at her table, unmindful of the clear fact that boys were listening too. "The merchants were all settling in, pitching tents, setting up cookfires. They didn't look worried at all. Then here came the chugs, a great long wave of them, and the chugs at once. The merchants all dropped what they were doing and climbed up on their wagons. They settled on their bellies and pulled their guns out."

The merchants waited for service with more patience than locals did. They were listening to Rachel Harness with discreet amusement, men and women both.

"Now here came-I don't know any word for them," Rachel said. "They look like big toothy fish swimming through sand-"

A merchant, a man, turned in his chair and spoke to Rachel. "Sharks. They're all along this coast."

Rachel didn't quite know how to handle that. She pretended she hadn't heard, but she was blushing.

"-Fins all along both sides of them, low down along the belly. Nasty beaks. They were faster than the chugs, but the chugs had a head start. They came plodding back to the wagons and hid under them. The merchants started shooting. For ten minutes they shot at the, the sharks. They killed maybe ten before the rest turned tail. Warkan's Beach is going to stink in three days' time."

Next to the man who had spoken, a merchant woman spoke to Rachel. "Willy's new to the trade. Forgive him."

Rachel nodded graciously. "But sure. I'm Rachel."

"Hillary. It's a good bargain for the chugs, Rachel. Pull our wagons, get our protection. The lungsharks are the reason we carry guns-"

"Will anyone sell me speckles?"

The merchant woman turned in some annoyance. The noise level had dropped. Many were turning to the doorway, or turning away, pretending nothing had happened.

Everyone knew that merchants didn't sell when they were at dinner.

But everyone knew Evleen. She was nine when her dad died. After that she didn't get enough speckles, until someone noticed. Deprived late like that, she didn't have the look of a speckle-shy. She looked like any eighteen-year-old girl. But it had touched her mind.

The merchants were trying to ignore Evleen. So were the Spiral women. Wouldn't any of them speak to her? But no man could speak to her, so Jemmy turned back to his table. Look for conversation, start a quarrel, any kind of distraction.

But his attention snagged on a familiar face-a merchant, he'd seen that man before!-as the man reached out and pulled Evleen into his lap.

The merchant was big and brawny. His speech was slurred by a merchant's accent, and something more. Hard to believe that he could get himself drunk so soon after shooting down a pack of, what had the woman called them? Sharks?

Evleen's response was friendly. She and the brawny merchant said a few words to each other. The merchant pulled out a transparent pouch of speckles.

Jemmy was on his feet. He had to do something. He had no idea what he would say to the man. Suddenly it didn't matter, because Thonny was shaking the man's arm, shouting into a thick silence, and then the man's arm swung out and Thonny went down with his arms across his face.

Jemmy's hand closed on the merchant's shoulder from behind.

Evleen went flying. The merchant was up and turning, one hand under Jemmy's chin, and he lifted him. His scruffy-bearded face was half the universe, and now Jemmy remembered him.

Eight years ago. He'd carried a tub of sherbet from Guilda's Place. He'd blasted a hole through a watermelon for all the children of Spiral Town to see. Vivid as Hell, Jemmy remembered the watermelon exploding like blood all over Davish Scrivner.

Fedrick. He was hideously strong, and Jemmy hadn't ever been this frightened.

Evleen was trying to get up. She cried, "Nooo, Jemmy, I don't want to be like Rachel's ma!"

His feet were off the floor. A wall was against his back. In an instant his throat would be crushed. Fedrick was in his face, and he remembered.

Remembered the gun.

In Fedrick's belt.

Here. Jemmy had the gun butt. Jemmy had seen what such a weapon could do to a melon. He lifted it and turned it and pulled the trigger.

The sound was deafening. The gun lurched in Jemmy's hand. Fedrick gaped in horror and let his head go loose.

Jemmy dropped to the floor. He looked down at what he'd done, and it was worse than he could have imagined.

There was a hole in Fedrick, in his left side, pumping blood. Blood spilled down his shirt and pantaloons. A man Fedrick's size had Fedrick by the shoulder, and that man's horror was a match for Fedrick's.

Fedrick's eyes turned up and he started to fall. The other man took a moment to ease him to the floor. Evleen gibbered in fear, staring wideeyed at Fedrick. Now the big trader let go of Fedrick, and Fedrick fell, and Jemmy saw what Evleen saw.

The hole in Fedrick's back looked as big as Jemmy's head.

The silence was ending, and men were starting to stand up.

Jemmy ran.

The near door was past several merchants, and they were all getting up. Jemmy ran through tables of Spiral women instead. A lone merchant gaudy in gray and yellow had his belt for an instant before Jemmy ripped loose.

He almost took the stairs; pictured how many guns would pick him off if they all had a clear shot. He ran around and out the Warkans' front door.

The window above the front door was one that opened. He remembered Addard and Sandy and Telema Warkan shouting through it, heads together, long ago.

Jemmy jumped and had the sill; pulled himself up, pulled the window open and was back inside on the landing halfway up. Flat on the floor, catching his breath, while traders and Spiral men swarmed below him and outside.

He crawled the rest of the way to the second floor. Through Addard's room to the balcony, down the outside stair to the truck garden.

The truck garden was a jungle in spots. Killer was busy at one end. Jemmy worked his way through shadow and weeds at the other end, into the less cultivated regions of the Warkan farm, making away from the Road.

## Leavetaking

Probes have gone before. We expected an Earthlike world, Norn, and from orbit it seems all the we hoped. I've renamed it Destiny.

-Daryl Twerdahl, Defensive Ecology

Warkan farmland trailed off toward the sea. The land was barren rock and sand. It would barely support Destiny life and it barely hid Jemmy Bloocheer.

The old fence was another ancients' miracle. Corrosion had not touched it in more than two centuries. It ran for over a mile between Bloocheer and Warkan land, all the way into the shallow waves. The fence was three grades of mesh laid over each other, filters to stop anything from seeds to sharks to chugs.

Spiral children learned early: those fine strands would cut flesh.

The first settlers must have been anal-retentive about property rights. Or was this another attempt to confine Destiny?

The fence would cut a chug's mouth. Merchants never released chugs close to the fence.

But the fence didn't stop Destiny seaweed.

Here at the shoreline a grove of black and yellow-green devilhair ran into the sea and out as far as Carder's Boat. Weed had nearly swallowed the boat; had entirely swallowed the fence. By using the fence as a frame, the weed gained access to sunlight and the sea's nutrients too.

Jemmy reached the beach at a run. He swarmed over the humped weed onto Bloocheer turf and kept running. Adrenaline raged in his blood. He wanted to run until the breath seared his lungs....but even Spiral knew where he must come. Any of them might tell a merchant.

He spared a moment's glance for the settler's miracle offshore. They'd never find him there! and for good reason. A swimmer would never reach Carder's Boat. He'd be tangled in the weed and drowned.

He stopped, his chest heaving. Then he made himself crawl through the rows of wheat, up toward the house.

It seemed quiet. Merchants would have flooded the house with light and noise.

Jemmy went in through the root cellar, then up into the kitchen, softly, softly.

Loaves of bread were still in the oven. He left them for the moment.

More stairs, well lighted. There was light under his parents' door, and under Junior's. Margery and Curdis. He reeled into his room and stood in the dark, thinking.

The Warkans had their reasons to let the fence go like that, but the Bloocheers had no excuse for such slovenliness.

Not his business, now. Jemmy Bloocheer wasn't going to be running Bloocheer Farm after all. What could he take? Just the backpack and the hiking gear in it. Real shoes. A flash, a canteen, blanket, thick hiker's gloves, because much of Destiny life was armed with thorns or poison. He added underwear and socks and shirts, going by feel in the dark. He was already wearing a jacket. What else? Anything he left behind now was gone forever. Pen and a pad of paper- He heard the front door slam. Only minutes now, he thought-and

his own door slammed back against the wall and light blazed in his eyes.

Jemmy was standing with his hands spread wide and showing empty when the ceiling lamp came on. Curdis lowered the flash. "Jemmy," he said. "Thought it might be some thieving merchant."

Jemmy said, "I've killed a merchant."

Curdis's eyes only narrowed, but Jemmy heard Junior's gasp. She wedged herself around Curdis and squeaked, "Jemmy!," swallowing the scream because they'd wake their parents.

Curdis turned out the lamp. "We're too close to the Warkan place," he said.

Why would you-even-" Junior caught herself and was silent.

The dark was welcome. Jemmy said, "I have to run."

Thonny's voice spoke from the hall. "He was trying to save me. Even SO, Jemmy, that was crazy."

"I know-"

"Crazy, Jemmy!" Brenda.

Curdis said briskly, "Just hide for a while. Get your camp gear and- you've got it already? Hide in the hills. Wait for the caravan to go away. We don't know anything, didn't see anything, can't guess-"

"They come three times every two years. Everyone knows where Bloocheer Farm is. Everyone knows who I am!"

"Three times every two years, you just aren't here. Caravans come, you go. Bloocheer F-Farm" Curdis stopped.

That was the sticking point, all right. Margery was Bloocheer Farm for now, but in half a year she and Curdis Hann would be farming the New Hann Holding. The head of Bloocheer Farm had to deal with merchants, if only for speckles.

Jemmy said, "Curdis, I want to take the speckles bread that's in the oven. Okay? Thonny, you have Bloocheer Farm when Curdis and Margery move Out." They'd have to postpone moving, Jemmy thought, until Thonny was older. Curdis must see that already. "If merchants want to search the farm for a fugitive, go them one better. Lead them down to where the fence goes into the sea. It's covered with enough weed to feed a caravan, the chugs would have a head start on the sharks, and we'll get the shore cleaned off to boot."

Thonny nodded, eyes glassy, mouth open.

Curdis said, "Hold it. Jemmy, caravans use the Road."

Jemmy hadn't thought quite that far.

"The merchants only just got here. They'll stay awhile," Thonny said. "Jemmy, if you can get around them they can't catch you. Chugs don't move fast."

"They'll send someone to block the Road," Curdis said.

Thonny and Brenda and Margery came into Jemmy's room and found seats on the bed, the bureau, the footlocker, This was going to take some thought.

"One step at a time," Curdis said. "The merchants will search Spiral Town. They'll demand that and nobody will stop them. You can't hide in town."

"I've got to leave."

"Have you thought of just hiding in the hills?"

Jemmy said, "We hike the hills, but merchants must know that whole range end to end. And if they found me-Curdis, they wouldn't have to take me to trial. Bang and plant a tree. Who'd know?"

"You'd be pretty conspicuous on the Road, too. How do you think you'll get around them?"

"It's our Road too," Thonny said tentatively.

Brenda said, "Yeah. Let's go for a walk."

In the dark one could just see Thonny's disgusted look. But Curdis tasted the notion. "Go for a nice long walk down the Road? Me and Thonny? Jemmy, you go over the hills. You can stay hidden in the brush for a few days, can't you? Meet us-"

"I'm coming too," Brenda announced.

Curdis ignored her. "Meet us somewhere down the Road, Jemmy.

~~Then I'll trade packs with you. From then on, you're Curdis Hann: me.~~

You come back by Road, with Thonny. I'll come back through the hills.

If I'm caught, hey, I'm just off camping. I'll-"

"Come back by way of the New Hann," Margery said. "You're tending our own land."

Curdis nodded. It would give him legitimacy if he were caught.

"I'm coming too," Brenda repeated. Margery said, "All right, Brenda."

"Margery-"

"Darling, you'll need her to talk to merchant women!"

Thonny suggested, "Bicycles?"

"Good," said Curdis. "We can let things settle for a day or two and still beat Jemmy to... where shall we meet?"

"There aren't that many bicycles on the Road. I'll find you," Jemmy said. Curdis sat in the dark, moving his lips, while they watched him. Presently he said, "The merchants search Spiral Town and don't find you. Your camping gear is gone. So's our store of speckles, so you buy some more." Margery-

Jemmy said, "I wouldn't take your speckles-"

"You would if you were going forever. Instead, we can bring you home after the merchants have searched the farm and Spiral Town. You take my place here. They're searching the hills by then, but at worst they find just me, camping on my own land. After they're gone you can grow a beard or something. Lie about your age, marry someone, move to another farm. We'll have time to work that out."

"I like it," Junior Margery said. "I wish I could come-"

"You're in charge here," Curdis said gently.

They were deciding his future.

Margery said, "Okay. Thonny and Brenda and Curdis on bikes. Don't look at me like that, Thonny. You're brother and sister! Not betrothed. Oh, hell!"

"What?"

"Curdis, you can't pass for Jemmy."

Curdis had straight black hair, yellow-dark skin, eyes with an epicanthic fold. Hmmm? Jemmy said, "I only have to pass for Curdis coming back. Going out is when they'll be looking to be sure he's not me. Me, escaping. Going out, you're innocent. Let them look."

They closed the curtains and turned on the lights. Margery posed Jemmy next to Curdis, examining them and said, "No."

And Brenda was a girl.

But Thonny moved up next to Jemmy, shorter by three inches, and Margery said, "Maybe on a bicycle."

They took all of Jemmy's clothes out of the bureaus and carried them in armloads into Thonny's room. They began putting together matching outfits.

"You can switch scarves and hats," Margery said, and they tried it. "Right. Thonny, you stay on the bike. When you're not on the bike, you don't lean on the bike, don't lean on a wall, don't lean. Stand up like a man. Be careful coming back. Camp out on the New Hann land until someone comes for you."

"Jemmy, coming back, you're Thonny. You always lean on the bike, or a wall. Don't be seen standing straight up. Curdis, you wear those dancers going out, but you put those high-heel shyster stomper boots in your bike bag. You're taller than Thonny going out, you'd better be taller than Jemmy coming back."

Curdis nodded in the semidark.



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