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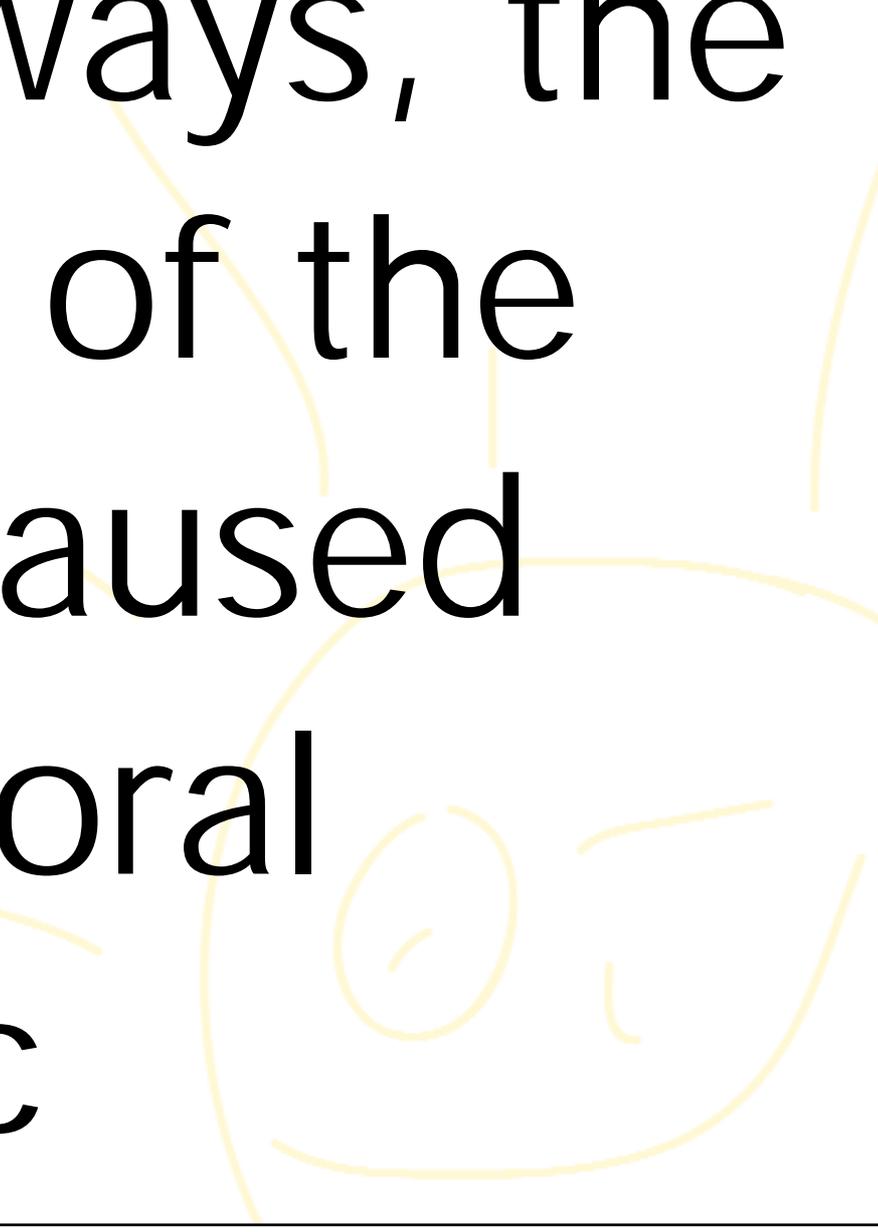
New Year Special

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EDITORIAL

Back to the World of Fractured Time 2

NEWS

J.K. Rowling in Time Travel Danger Warning! 2

Next Issue News 2

Where to Find Your Recommended Viewing 2

VALIANT RAZALIA

The Stealthy Craving 3
Michael Wyndham Thomas

THE QUARTERLY REVIEW

Jericho 39

Heroes 40

THE BACK COVER

Helen and Her Magic Cat
Steven Gilligan

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Editorial

Back to the World of Fractured Time

This New Year special of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is devoted to a lengthy self-contained portion of Michael Wyndham Thomas's journey

into speculative fiction: *Valiant Razalia*. We were previously able to bring you the prologue to this tale six issues ago, in TQF#8, but if you didn't catch it then, don't worry – like literary quicksand – in a good way! – this is a tale that will suck you in wherever you set foot on it for the first time. Elsewhere, Walt Brunston offers reviews of the latest in US telefantasy. – SWT

News

J.K. Rowling in Time Travel Danger Warning!

Science fiction, horror and fantasy readers all over Britain are this month being asked to check their shelves for the 2021 edition of the collected works of J.K. Rowling. Apparently a passing time traveller has “hidden it in a bookcase” as “a prank”. Downing Street 2007 got word of this “prank” from their replacements in Downing Street 2021 – we are told that the unexpectedly early publications of these works in 2009 caused havoc in the world economy, changing forever the course of futurity! If you find this book, tell no one, read it if you must, and destroy it immediately after! And no placing bets on who gets killed off at the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*!

Next Issue News

With TQF#15 the magazine switches to A5.

Where to Find Your Recommended Viewing

Of the two programmes discussed by Walt Brunston in our review section in this issue, *Jericho* is currently being shown in the UK in the backwaters of the Hallmark Channel, while the reportedly superb *Heroes* is bafflingly set to appear on the Sci Fi channel (though a BBC2 showing is planned for later in the year).

It seems that last year a lot of UK channels got burned, having paid high prices for the rights to the quickly cancelled wave of fantasy programs inspired by the early success of *Lost* – *Threshold*, *Invasion*, *Surface*, *The Night Stalker*, and so on, with *Supernatural* the only one still alive and kicking – allowing the lesser channels to nip in and get some bargains this year.

Despite some flaws, according to our American correspondent, both *Heroes* and *Jericho* are well worth searching out, even if it means putting up with the pre-apocalyptic horror of a 4:3 picture!

Valiant Razalia

The Stealthy Craving

Michael Wyndham Thomas

Small, unfinished, more like a blueprint for a world than the real thing, Razalia props up one end of the Arc of the Fifteen Planets. The Razalians are an accepting race, long used to the fact that, in some places, their landscape looks like the efforts of a water-colourist suddenly called away from his easel. They live with the gaps – those spaces of unfathomable white – in many of their ridges, valleys, forests. Until the white begins to move and colonise, apparently seeking to satisfy its appetite by devouring the white planet. In this chapter, Tharle of Mopatakeh – the leader of the planet – calls upon one of his most trusted fellow leaders, Tharle of Kidresh, to decide what can be done. Unbeknownst to Mopatakeh, Kidresh elects to arrive with Tharle of Dreest. Recently made leader of his territory, Dreest is really no-one's idea of an authoritative figure. But he is an inventor of rare capacities – and he might just have found the planet's saviour – who might be revealed in the next chapter.

The sun heaved itself into its westward spiral. Its after-light fanned out like a bow-wave, then

blurred like spillage on a cloth. All round Razalia, the skies turned amethyst as the raging galleon steered further away. Another fortnight had passed. Another grudging visit was over – a full day, this time. Razalia had been poked and prodded, its surface daubed with a bare sufficiency of warmth and light. And now, as always, its lower air seemed to thrum with solar contempt, nipping at Razalian ears, turning the planet's term for space on its head. For Razalia itself would now become a “forsaken midnight”, while the silences beyond crackled with energy and the vast emptiness became a spring of fire, hugely uncoiling as the sun spiralled in slow majesty towards Carolles. As if defying their planet's fate, the three umber moons darted in turn at the tails of the burning bow-wave, like kids who cheek a bobby's retreating back.

And, as always, the wake of the sun caused temporal havoc. A Razalian hour passed normally enough, then shrank to ten minutes, then sneezed out a good half-day, then stabilised at an hour and a bit. Bobbing on the top of planetary time like corks in a bucket, the three

moons spread out and were still – this time like kids glued to a screen. For, as the sunlight disappeared and the minutes passed more confidently, Razalia shook off its desolation. Across its face, a million torches shone under the amethyst skies: Razalian faces, each its own sun.

On a heathery knoll just beyond Razalia's capital, one face shone with especial intensity. Tharle of Mopatakeh had long disregarded the haughtiness which defined the sun's visits and departures. Like most Razalians, he felt neither belittled by the sun's manner nor saddened that its visits were so rare. The sun was haughty, he reasoned, in the same way that a stream was wet or a sapling green. Should it wish to change, to smile long and benignly on Razalia, it must needs look deep within itself, not expect change in others. If it saw the glow of Razalian faces, their "watching light", as a mockery of its own splendour, the sentiment was its responsibility alone. Besides, he had other things to consider. Evening was coming on. He knew it, and it had nothing to do with the forsaking sun. Though the glow on his face was bright, he could feel a nub of darkness at its core, heralding an end to the day's toil and, presently, the descent into sleep. All over the planet, his brothers and sisters, young and old, were sensing the same.

Turning round, planting his feet apart on the knoll, Tharle regarded the fields and thoroughfares, workplaces and dwellings of Mopatakeh. Tiny ovals of light were everywhere about their business. This one nodded along behind a plough. That one bent down in a doorway, above hands that shook a mat or wiped themselves on an apron. Here, a crimson-tinged oval reared back as a hammer set sparks dancing on the amethyst air. There, amid cries and laughter, a jostle of especially tiny ovals broke apart on a street corner: the young of Mopatakeh, their learning done for the day. Tharle smiled upon the place of which he was leader. It was a full, broad smile – indulgent, some might say. After all, as Tharle, he wore his mouth nearly all the year round, only sealing it off when he felt that a period of fasting would sharpen his judgement. But it was a smile of deep affection, too – although, as he turned from Mopatakeh and

braced himself to look elsewhere, affection became sadness, a sadness pricked with fear.

On the opposite side of the knoll, two mighty arms of water converged and raced into the distance. For Mopatakeh was spread out on an island, southernmost in a chain of seven. The chain was washed by the generous waters of the Billomingow, a river so broad that, even from the knoll, its banks were barely visible. Mopatakeh was the largest island, the others decreasing in size from south to north. Aside from the Billomingow, they shared a common shape, something like a teardrop. Viewed from high in the air, with one island seeming to drip onto the next, the chain suggested the grief of some inconsolable horizon. Now, watching the course of the Billomingow, Tharle tried not to think of tears and grief. Allowing himself another minute or so before he looked where he didn't want to, he considered Mopatakeh's happy position. Not only was it the Razalian capital – it also stood smack dab in the middle of the planet. To use the crude linearities of Earth, the zeroes of longitude and latitude crossed on its fertile ground. This was as it should be – symbolically, of course, but practically as well. For Razalians loved to visit their capital whenever they could, and the fact that none of them had to come excessively far took the pressure off the planet's transport system, a fleet of twenty-seater chara-jets. Fragile, apt to loop the loop if a passenger stirred suddenly, or even sneezed, they loafed rather than sped through the air. Many moons since, they had been gifted to Razalia by the ever-upgrading Carollessa. A corps of Razalians had been trained in their maintenance, the knowledge passing from one generation to the next. Sadly, the stock of spare parts had long dried up – as had the minerals, peculiar to Carolles, from which they were made. Scouring the technical archives of the *Aeonodrome*, their famed planetary museum, the Carollessa offered to replace the fleet with another, identical in design but wrought from up-to-date materials. Ever grateful to their generous neighbours, the Razalians declined, opting instead to keep the fleet going with a mixture of trust and improvisation. This deci-

sion, it has to be said, was not without calculation. Throughout the arc of the sixteen planets, Razalia was loved for its antique quaintness. The proud Sehundan, the gruff Baraskian, the barmpot of Galladeelee and many more – all came to the planet as believers might enter the room of a chosen child: frail, tiny but possessed, they were sure, of unfathomable wisdom. How could that image benefit from a pack of chara-jets, however primitive of aspect, zipping dependably about, dodging the vagaries of Razalian time and keeping their noses straight?

Hands loose at his sides, gaze just above the flow of the Billomingow, Tharle kept his thoughts light for a moment longer, considering the events of that morning. As usual, half-a-dozen chara-jets had flown nose-to-tail above Mopatakeh's western bridge, bearing artisans to their work in the capital, relatives to their families and alien travellers agog for their main destination. As befitted his position and power, Tharle's was the first face on the island to be fully aglow. Like all other Tharles in all other settlements, he used this advantage to act as a kind of dawn-watchman, doubling his height so that he could stroll at speed from the eastern bridge, through the capital proper and out to the west, checking that all was well. After standing for a while at the middle of the western bridge, gazing on the Billomingow, he began to hear those familiar noises – rattling wheels, cries of greeting – which announced the traffic of work on and off the island. Shortly after, the incoming chara-jets came ambling down the sky, their engines blessing the new day with their trademark noise, a cross between a cleared throat and the snapping strings of a cello. Tharle stared at them in some amazement. The line was holding steady, not lashing like a speared snake as it normally did. For once, it looked as though there wouldn't be the usual ballet – the spirals, the bucking-bronco capers – as they tried to land in the airfield on the far side of the capital. Soon, the western bridge was thronged. Everyone else stopped too, pointing upwards, mouths taking shape in faces for cries of astonishment, ears flowering on heads to acknowledge them. As more mouths and ears appeared on more heads,

speculation flew about. The jets were perfectly, almost freakishly aligned because the intimidating sun had disappeared. Everything – animate and inanimate – was relaxed, composed, like schoolkids after the king bully has been dealt with. Or Razalian time, itself relieved that the sun had gone, was making a special effort, suppressing its tics and glitches and creating a tunnel of smoothly ticking minutes for the landing. Or the extra-planetary visitors on board had bet the pilots that the Mopatakeh touchdown would be as endearingly shambolic as ever. Nothing supported these theories. The sun had abandoned Razalia a million times. The alien visitors were usually too engrossed in the view to talk, never mind lay bets. But this did not diminish the joy with which they were advanced.

In fact, the visitor theory was nearest the mark. As the jets went slowly over, Tharle reared up to twice his height again and began striding to the airfield. Flying low now, they were clear to his view. He tracked them as they began their final descent, their path still as straight as an arrow's. But then the second jet sprang out of line, the fourth thrashed like a beached fish and the sixth wavered and dropped below the rest like a great-aunt dying for a sit down. Something burst from the windows of all three – a convulsion of eels, it seemed. At the edge of the airfield, Tharle stopped and groaned, as did the stream of Mopatakehans jostling breathlessly behind him. They should have known – could have done, too, with a little telepathic oomph. But it hadn't been strictly necessary. After all, the three jets hadn't been in actual peril. They had, however, been commandeered by a singular species of tourist: a tribe of Galladeelee youngbloods who, it turned out, were visiting Razalia (or rather, extending their endless home-party) to witness the sun's disdainful transit. Sure enough, the eels turned into the familiar, apparently uncontrollable arms and legs of the goofy Galladeeleean, which proceeded to wallop the roofs of the jets or kick out at thin air. From inside the jets came the sounds of whoops, shrieks and the traditional Galladeelee salutation, raucous yet somehow respectful, to the

glowing Razalian faces: “Hey! Hey, you stars! You stars in the water!” Then, through the rear window of the last jet, one of them spotted and recognised Tharle and gave a long, three-mouthed, hiccuppy cry. It must have carried down the whole haphazard line: the thumps and whoops ceased instantly. And, next moment, the jets were neatly aligned again, and the countless arms were sculling the air in unison, ensuring a landing that was gentle, quiet and most un-Galladeelean.

Tharle smiled at this recollection. Boisterous they may have been (though they were ungainly charm itself when they emerged from the jets) – but at least the Galladeeleans had made a proper visit. More frequently, they used their huge catapults to *boing* clear across the eastern stretch of the system and yell their cheery, crazy greetings. Of course, a few Galladeelean wildmen always tagged along for the Baraskians’ yearly festival – their brash yet somehow mystical celebration of the famed gaps of nothing in the Razalian landscape, their often trance-like worship of the whiteness that their planet didn’t know. Tharle stopped himself and took a deep, mind-swirling breath. He’d sprung the moment on himself. He had to look now. Making a half-circle on the knoll, he gazed towards the eastern limits of Mopatakeh. Far off to the right a hillock rose up, round at the sides, level at the top, like a bottle sliced at the neck. Once upon a time, Razalians believed that the hillock was their creator’s first stab at a landmark on the planet. Though that belief had long died on Razalia, it had been taken up among those Baraskians who believed that – in some special, inexplicable way – Razalia was the mother of the whole system. Some of them devoted a good half-day of their festival to circling the hillock, claws interlocked, creviced brows a-sweat, intoning gruffly, their words roughly translating as *O prime bloom of life, O firstborn of nature...* Far off to the left was the airfield, from which, before long, the last fleet of chara-jets would depart for the day. Artisans and relatives would return to their remote settlements; the Galladeeleans (who had promised Tharle that they would all depart on the same jet, even paying for its shell to be

specially expanded and reinforced) would go whooping off westwards, pretending that they, in fact, had forced the sun to scarper. Between airfield and hillock was the usual run of Razalian landscape: gentle undulations, copses, a ridge or two. And, in the middle of all that, Mopatakeh’s gap of white – site of the tragedy half-an-aeon ago, that dark hour in the annals of the Baraskian Festival. Like everyone else, leader and led, Tharle knew the whole grim story: the Baraskian chorus standing in attitudes of bravado against the gap; the squabble over some small word from their extraordinary anthem; the heated words; the tugging and swaying; the choral plunge into the white, whose raised surface remained as still as a summer pond; the gawping, fatally curious Galladeelean whose errant jaw was likewise claimed by the unfathomable nothing. By all accounts, uproar wasn’t the word for what had followed – chiefly among the Razalians, who feared that the Baraskians would take their yearly trances elsewhere and that, far from being the mascot of the system, Razalia would become its pariah. But the Baraskians, with their characteristic, growly geniality, had immediately acknowledged the stupidity of their songsters, seeing their fate as an even stronger argument for worshipping Razalia’s lethal patches of white. Indeed, next day, they had arranged the next Festival, down to the last lodging and flagon-cart. As for the jawless Gallideelean, it had long been thought that he would have been better off staying on Razalia, rather than submitting to the charge of freakery and its attendant punishment back home. Certainly, it would have been better for his kith and kin. Who could possibly count all of Galladeelee’s rouge catacombs? It was said that he’d only managed three thousand at the time of his death, the sentence then passing to his wife, then son, then daughter, then son-in-law (who counted eight before being buried in a rock-fall) – then to a nephew who was apprehended on the day he was due to emigrate to Carolles. Around that time, however, a sea-change had occurred in the Galladeelean style of government, which shifted itself into line with the general goofiness of its population. The nephew was reprieved

after his first hundred catacombs. He lived out the rest of his life on Carolles, a beneficiary of a Galladeean pension which would have kept the dozen inhabitants of Lachbourigg, planet of the roving forests, in food and drink for an aeon.

“A good end to a bitter story,” thought Tharle. “I need that now.” And, reaching into the deeps of his mind, he drew up every last drop of visionary strength and stared across the east of the island to the Mopatakeh gap. His gaze, heightened a thousandfold, travelled all round its limits, drinking in every inch. They looked as they always did, perfectly still, as though the white had been penned in with invisible wire. But then they quivered and blurred, suggesting the reproductive jostle of cells beneath a microscope. The demands of focus nearly sent Tharle into a swoon, but he planted his feet yet further apart, he held on. A moment later, the limits sharpened again, and his fear hit him harder and colder than ever. Yes. They had moved. Outwards.

Like a mile-long telescope collapsing section by section, Tharle’s vision shrank to its everyday strength. He turned away, staring out again over the Billomingow. Only recently had his suspicions been aroused. Three nights before, white had entered his dreams, flapping, spilling, upending like a sail maddened by gales. The following dawn, he had visited the controller of the airfield for their usual conference about the post-solar glitches in time and their possible impact on flight schedules. The controller was herself a naturally early riser. After Tharle’s, her face was the first to reach optimum glow. Tharle had made his usual dawn patrol, then doubled back to the airfield. As always, the controller had devised contingencies galore for even the most volatile time-storm. The citizens of Mopatakeh were just stirring when the conference finished. With time on his hands (pretty stable, too, since the sun wasn’t due for another day), he’d made a consitutional of his return to the capital, passing along beside the gap and rounding the hillock. He’d just emerged from the far side of the hillock when his mind was filled again with his dream. Though gazing on rolling fields and gentle crests, all he could see was an ecstasy of

white. Then his gaze had cleared and he looked back at the gap. Its further limits seemed to be settling like the edge of a shaken blanket. He’d trebled his vision and looked again. The very lowest swell of a ridge seemed to have vanished.

As soon as he reached The Guiding, his official house near the main market-square, he’d thought his puzzlement off to Tharle of Kidresh, the second largest settlement on Razalia. On the other side of the planet, Kidresh lay at the foot of Maker’s mountain, the very one that had figured in the planet’s creation theories. It, too, had a gap, which partly skirted a wood to the north of the settlement and had claimed not a few foolhardy lumberjacks. Tharle of Kidresh had thought back immediately. He too had dreamt in white. And, after his morning patrol, he had been drawn to the wood. On its gapward side, two trees had been left branchless and hollow, as if in the wake of blight. A rivulet of white fingered its way between them.

Sensing that Tharle of Mopatakeh was about to sense the need to make an official request, Tharle of Kidresh promised to be on the island next day, once the sun had fully vanished. He could have come sooner, but there was prudence in his delay, an admixture of sense and superstition which Tharle of Mopatakeh endorsed. If the sun suspected that something was amiss – indeed, that Razalia was starting to eat itself up – who knew if or when it would return, or what spite it might visit on its cuckoo? After this exchange, Tharle of Mopatakeh had sat tight, his mind full again – not with daydreams of white but with messages from Tharles all over the planet. The gaps in their dispensation, too, were twitching into hungry life. But he also established that ordinary Razalians knew nothing about the alarming development – yet.

So, that very day, the sun had arrived to find Razalian business as usual. Its presence went unremarked by most – certainly on Mopatakeh, where talk was all of the chara-jets. It was only the young who delighted in the scant handfuls of heat and light the sun threw down, devoting their schoolbreaks to splashing about in the brightness as though it were a levitating puddle. Adult Razalians simply attended to their affairs. Like

the generations before them, some briefly regretted the sun's scorn for their half-finished world. But, like Tharle of Mopatakeh, all rejected any culpability in the matter. Not that Tharle had time to spend pondering his planet's gentle defiance of the moody sun. After ensuring that the Galladeelean roisterers had every last foot planted on firm land, he had returned to the Guiding, spending much of the day thinking back and forth with fellow Tharles from all four corners. Again and again, the debate had veered towards the same questions. What was to be done? The gaps' rate of advance was between slow and standstill at present, but who knew when they might start acting like Razalian time, leaping forth, pouncing on hills, rivers – people? What had caused the encroachment? Could it be stopped? Reversed? Amid the warm colours and sturdy beams of the Notionary, his special conference room, Tharle had shuddered as his peers' anxious musings flowed through his head. He wondered if the bounds between creation and non-creation had always been so fragile – the former a crust of bread, the latter a cavernous mouth simply biding its time. He'd intended to keep the thought silent, since it wasn't strictly relevant to the present moment. But out it had slipped. From all over the planet – town and hamlet, headland and plain – the other Tharles had echoed and endorsed it. "Vital point" had been the characteristically clipped thinking of Tharle of Venacarr, Razalia's smallest, hilliest settlement. "Kind of thing we need to get on top of. Sentient being, is it? Been planning and hatching, has it?"

The conference and questions filled Tharle's mind again. Absently, he peered over the knoll, as if assuring himself that no white was lapping against its base. Then his face briefly flickered. A message was coming through from Tharle of Kidresh, who estimated that he would be on the knoll in twenty or fifty or five minutes: "I'd incline to twenty," he thought. "Sun's way off now. The hours look to be settling down."

As soon as his words had echoed away, they were replaced by a chorus of twangs and ticklish throats. The chara-jets were lifting clear of the airfield. Tharle watched their cabin and tail-

lights as they lolloped into the sky. Though hardly as clean as it had been that morning, their formation was passable. The controller must have reached the same conclusion as Tharle of Kidresh: time was beginning to settle, providing a smooth enough tunnel in which to release the jets. Doubling the strength of his vision, he could see that the third jet was appreciably thicker than the rest, its casing unusually bright: "Ahh," he said involuntarily and, his vision now quadrupled, he looked inside its cabin. The Galladeeleans were unwontedly calm, their many arms and legs laced about them. "I wonder how much they paid to have the jet expanded." His eyes went into a momentary swoon. "Hmm," he said then, as the figure settled on a ledge of his mind. "Reasonable – we should get the whole fleet seen to." Their jet gained height with something approaching grace. "Well, they're being good as gold," he said to himself – then almost instantly panicked. Did their behaviour mean that they knew about the gaps?

"No, they don't," Tharle of Kidresh rang out in his mind. "And stop trying to keep your worries to yourself, Mopatakeh. Now, I shall join you in twel – fifteen minutes. Oh, and I'm bringing a companion."

Tharle was about to divine who it was, but a distracting peal of hiccuppy laughter streamed down from the skies. The third jet was now swinging about like washing on a windy line. Before he knew it, he was laughing aloud. Those Galladeeleans and their attempt at serenity – as unnatural to them as an unlit Razalian face at noon. Still, he saluted their effort.

Descending a little way down the knoll, Tharle let his gaze sweep from south to north of the capital. The young had left their street corners. Now, ploughman and blacksmith, apothecary and scribe were quitting their labours. In scores of homes, pots were being stirred, tables given a final rub prior to setting. He rubbed his chin and sighed, his laughter at the Galladeeleans now seeming misplaced, almost wicked. He'd just have to put up with Kidresh's good-natured chiding, for there was nothing he could do to stop his anxiety. What if, tomorrow morning, the whole island was just a

pool of white? And what about that sound it was supposed to make if you went right up to it – that ghostly murmuring? Tharle had never heard it himself with either outward nor inward ear. He'd never met anyone who had, either, though the belief persisted: part of the fear, no doubt. Anyway, what if the morrow brought not a murmur but a shriek of hideous jubilation, rising from the white like the thickest steam? And would he be there to hear it? Would he have been wolfed down with everyone else?

Tharle blinked. On the thoroughfare nearest the knoll, three or four ovals of light had clustered and were beaming straight at him. Reflexively, he trebled his vision, discovering that they were engineers from the airfield who, having recognised his unmistakable form, were flourishing their hands as if indicating a priceless jewel: the Razalian gesture of good-night. Tharle's mind swept through theirs – ah, they were the ones who'd kitted out the Galladeeleans' jet. He flourished back. His thanks for their labour slipped into their minds and they moved away. As their ovals dwindled, Tharle felt a pang of fatherly keenness for their safety, for Mopatakeh's, for the planet's. Chiding himself for indulging thoughts of white islands and deafening shrieks, he applied himself to practicalities.

First among these was his decision not to hold what translates roughly as *a Candling of Eyes*, a counsel at the Guiding with all Tharles present. Not a few of his peers had clamoured for one during the day's discussion, but Tharle had declared – and declared again to himself now – that a *Candling* was the shortest way to panic. *Candlings* were infrequent and, anyway, tradition decreed that Razalians were always consulted on the reason for holding one, even before it was officially arranged. If their Tharles said nothing and simply turned up in Mopatakeh, they would be breaking a whole skein of confidences between them and the people. Worse, the people would forsake their usual, careful attitude to their own telepathic powers, which some dwellers on Earth might best understand through the words "Sunday best". The thoughtways of Razalia would

instantly clog up with bafflement, then speculation, then discovery, and all would be chaos. In time, perhaps, a *Candling* might be all too necessary. For now, it was best to see what could be done by remote conference alone. Of course, it wasn't uncommon for Tharles to meet in twos and threes, be their dispensations adjacent or distant. So there'd be nothing untoward about Kidresh arriving with – again Tharle wondered who his companion was and, with no raucous Galladeelean to distract him now, flickered the question to Kidresh.

"Ten minutes," came the reply. "It was seven a second ago. Sorry, Mopatakeh, still a few twitches of time to beat. Taking up all our efforts. Who is my companion? Ah, you'll see when you – nine minutes – when you see." And Tharle heard a kind of crump, as of a huge book being closed with care: the unmistakable sound of Kidresh sealing his mind.

"Well, I hope the twitches let them through soon," thought Tharle, stroking his face, suddenly aware of his isolation. For a brief, un-Tharliian moment, he wondered if, in addition to creeping, the Mopatakeh gap could see. He imagined a spur of white spotting him alone and lunging like the tongue of a colossal lizard. To shake off this child's fancy, he sought the rough path that ringed the knoll, walked round to the west and faced Carolles. If asked, a delegation of Carollessa would be there as soon as they could – brimful of concern for their dearest sibling, laden with instruments to measure this, that and the other, even – he could hear them now – offering to take Razalia back with them – people, houses, schools, workshops and all. The Carollessa were indeed a good, kind, not to say handsome people, albeit that their world of whooshing gadgetry stupefied the average Razalian head. But what could they actually do about the wakening gaps of white? Tharle knew that, since nothing comparable distinguished Carolles, their *Aeonodrome* would contain neither account nor experiment of practical use. Besides, wondrous and unerring though their spacecraft were, it would still take them a while to arrive. Then there was the matter of Razalian time, which, in turbulent mood, had been known

to catch visiting craft just at the point of landing and bounce them back by as much as three weeks. The thought of turbulence made Tharle groan inwardly. The first of the bi-monthly alignment times was approaching, when Razalia's three umber moons strung themselves out south-west to north-east. It would happen with a precision that was somehow in the moons' gift, for, in all senses, they were above the planet's temporal shenanigans. And then, of course, the dazzling shoreline that marked the place of the Nine Oceans would go berserk, heaving and furrowing as though eager to run the whole gamut of shape. If the whiteness were a sentient being, as Tharle of Venacarr had curtly suggested, might it use that time of convulsion to do its own heaving across meadow and ridge? He groaned again – audibly, loudly now. And the Baraskian Festival! It was due to start between the next two alignments! Miserably, Tharle pictured the sealess tides, surging and scrambling on the Nine Oceans shore; and, beyond them, the modest, mud-like plain separating shore from ocean. On the very night that the Festival was due to commence – give or take hours lost or gained – the cracks of the plains would hold their own celebration of frenzy, knotting and whipping for all they were worth. And there was nothing to stop Razalia's famed sliceblossom from joining in: it was as apt to feed by night as by day. Tharle imagined it curving out of the cracks, taking deep draughts of Razalia's air, puffing its leaves like inflatable fans, then jewelling the mud and the amethyst skies with its petals of breathtaking red. The whole carnival fascinated some Baraskians – almost as much as the white did. Often, if they arrived in time, they'd all troop down to the Nine Oceans shore, each with a sort of surfboard under a treelike arm. Riding the lone tides, they would watch the whole spectacle. Before them, on the plainward side of the tides, flanks of figures would kneel: Razalians who had slept during the day for a whole week, so that their glowing faces would light up the night scene for their guests. Tharle's groaning became a long, weary sigh. What if the white pounced on that night of interplanetary joy, spilling death over

surfer and tide, washing along the flanks of light like a demon river? It would be the fate of the Baraskian anthem-singers again, magnified a thousandfold. The Baraskian temper was reflexively well-disposed to all – save their sometime adversaries the Sehundans, where some effort was required. But it would hardly tolerate the – well, the consumption of a festival's-worth of subjects. Razalia would become the new Sehunda. Barask would wage a ferocious war against – what? If the gaps pounced everywhere, what would be left to attack but a ball of white, far more lethal than the biggest, ugliest Baraskian war-machine? Or perhaps just a wisp of white smoke hanging frozen in space, sole reminder of the cuckoo of the arc? He'd simply have to make contact with Barask, soon, and – and what? Arouse the very suspicions he sought to avoid – on two planets? Again he thought of the Razalian people telepathising like mad – and, this time, of word spreading like a plague across the whole arc. Tharle beat his brow with a broad hand. He was no nearer a practical solution than he had been when –

“Five minutes,” cut in Tharle of Kidresh. “We can see the western bridge.” Kidresh's mind crumpled closed again.

Tharle looked dully about – at the path, the capital, the airfield. For a moment he thought to meet Kidresh and his companion on the thoroughfare from which the engineers had greeted him. But the soothing flow of the Billomingow filled his ears; for a self-indulgent moment, he sprouted a third ear at the back of his head to absorb it fully. Far better to talk, he decided, overlooking the river, that symbol of reliability, of comforting ceaselessness. As he ascended the knoll again, he willed himself not to wonder if anything was reliable or ceaseless any more. But he couldn't stop Tharle of Venacarr's words slipping in again. Was the white itself a thinking being? Had it blocked all Tharlian thought-waves on some unknown level? Was that why not a single one of them had known what was coming?

“The sun!” Tharle of Kidresh's words flew in with such force that, about to gain the top of the knoll, Tharle nearly lost his balance. Vision

quadrupling, he looked back towards the western bridge. Two figures were just leaving it, about to turn onto the thoroughfare that would lead towards the knoll. As Tharle had been that morning, they were double their height – understandably, since they’d had half a planet to travel and, drawing on their special powers (and abjuring the vagaries of a chara-jet), had done so on foot. Tharle recognised the features of Kidresh, kindly if a little severe. He smiled – in anticipation of their meeting, but also because Kidresh could never tower convincingly. Even now, he was appreciably smaller than his companion. This, however, was no disadvantage. If anything, Kidresh’s stride was the more focused and assured. It was the companion who kept falling behind, having to double his steps to catch up. This, Tharle saw, was partly because of a shoulder bag, capacious and unwieldy, which kept swinging about as if with a life of its own, at one point nearly toppling him over; and partly because of who he was – Tharle of Dreest. Boyish of face and temperament, unable to shed the puppy-fat of his youth, he had been Tharle for little over two months. Hesitant and bashful, he had distinguished himself in his one *Candling* so far by alternating between his own kind of silence, a sort of breathy blubbing, and a torrent of words which, at one point, had been so forceful that, clutching his Guiding Seat for support, Tharle had seen octuple. Tharle of Dreest seemed to breathe his own air, a compound of bewilderment and anxiety which thickened when he reflected, as he often did, that his election must be a mistake. His predecessor had led Dreest, by no means a small settlement, with due humility but also clear-eyed wisdom, making him admired throughout the whole planet. Like all Tharles, he’d been at liberty to eat the otherwise poisonous sliceblossom. And, as Razalians liked to believe, this power expanded the already formidable frontiers of their leaders’ minds. Yet Dreest’s predecessor had never touched a morsel, apparently. Thus, it was said by all – and with particular veneration by the citizens of Dreest – that his mind had happily expanded itself, and his wisdom was its own, natural, bonny child. By contrast, his

successor harvested sliceblossom whenever he could, keeping a specially treated jar of it in a secret cupboard at his residence and reaching for it as some dwellers on Earth might reach for what, it seems, they are pleased to call a snifter.

The other Tharles knew that the years would bring no change in his style, that he would never grow into the job. During wakeful nights, when the glow came and went in confusion on his face, he recognised as much. “Sham-bling, stout, un-gain-ly boy!” was Tharle of Venacarr’s sing-song estimation. Yet Tharlian regard for him echoed the system’s regard for Razalia. Beneath his unpromising mien and behaviour lay something they could never hope to possess. Only he couldn’t see it. “I know we are simply chosen, Mopatakeh, no bones about it. But when your last hour comes tiptoeing in, press for Dreest to fill your boots. The planet’s soul is within him.” That was Venacarr, too.

Mopatakeh considered these words as the two figures came striding towards the knoll – or rather, as Kidresh came striding and Dreest hopped one way and the other like a man crossing a ravine on two widely-spaced planks: yet another effect of his impossible bag.

“The sun,” repeated Kidresh, aloud this time. “I think, Mopatakeh, we were wiser than we knew to delay our meeting. It’s not just a question –”

But Tharle silenced him with a raised hand. In the air, his finger traced the traditional greeting of Tharle to Tharle: in rough translation, *the doubled-oval*, a figure-of-eight pattern symbolising two Razalian faces with the glow of life flowing between them. Kidresh stopped, open-mouthed: “Oh, yes, yes,” he said in mild irritation and returned the sign. By now Tharle of Dreest had hauled himself alongside Kidresh. “Dreest,” said Tharle of Mopatakeh quietly, at which the novice Tharle cried, “Master! Trimmer of the Glow!” and prostrated himself at the foot of the knoll, his bag square across his back as though it had dropped from the skies and felled him. This form of address for the planet’s leader had last seen regular adult use a good three aeons ago; now, it was only used by schoolchildren if Tharle of Mopatakeh made an

especially formal visit to their settlement. But Dreest practised it, and a score of other moribund customs besides, in hopes of subduing the idea that he couldn't lead a toddler by the hand, let alone a settlement.

In reply, Tharle narrowed his eyes and held both hands out. Dreest levitated, hanging in the air a moment like an indecisive chara-jet. Then he landed gently on his feet to a welcoming smile from Tharle and, from Kidresh, a sigh which turned into, "The *doubled-oval*, Dreest. How many times did I remind you on the way here?" No answer forthcoming, verbal or mental, Kidresh furrowed his brow: "You managed it at your first *Candling* didn't you?" he said, half to himself; but then he conjured a memory of the occasion, with Dreest's well-covered form dropping to one knee and pitching sideways, a form of greeting known only to Galladeeleen funsters with too much Baraskian serpent-river ale inside them. "Hmm," he added, his tone fainter still. "Of course – no *oval* there."

His smile now fatherly, Tharle gave the sign again. This time, Dreest copied him but so zealously that it he looked as though he were hanging on to an uncontrollable sword. At this, Tharle decided that the air was thick enough with formality, and he bade Dreest put down his bag. Rattles and thuds filled the air round the knoll. Tharle's inner eyes were about to rummage in the bag, but Kidresh raised a forestalling hand: "In good time, Mopatakeh." So instead, Tharle gestured that they should ascend and take their ease on the knoll's summit. Shrinking to his usual height, Kidresh started forward. Forgetting both his bag and the need to copy Kidresh, Dreest followed. For a petrifying moment, Tharle saw and felt what life, or rather its end, would be like if he were a teeny Carollesan elder, caught in the careless shadow of a Razalian boot. There was no time for formalities or even a bark of fear. Lunging at Dreest's mind, he shrank him as deftly as a Sehundan genie-bottler. For his part, Dreest didn't notice a thing. At last they settled down, facing the Billomingow: Kidresh compact and purposeful, Tharle momentarily faint-brained

from his efforts, Dreest a picture of bottomless anguish between them.

"Now, two questions fall to my charge," said Kidresh, who could match Venacarr for briskness when he chose. "First, why are we wiser than we know, Mopatakeh, in delaying our meeting? The sun! It's my belief that the sun is behind this dreadful business. But I'd estimate that it's larking about above Carolles right now, so we can at least think and talk in safety."

Tharle said nothing for a moment. Still steadying himself from his vision of accidental death beneath the lolloping, puppyish Dreest, he let his eyes rest upon the river. Shards of light clustered and danced on its surface. Reflections of his face, they joined and broke apart like so many uneasy spirits. He, too, had pondered whether the sun had any part in the present peril. But there was protocol to observe, and he knew Kidresh of old. Even now he could sense Kidresh's chest expanding as he prepared to deliver himself of a full-blown theory on the sun's malice, complete with his familiar lobe-tickling and hand-rubbing.

"And the second question in your charge?" asked Tharle, smiling inwardly as he heard Kidresh deflate. He knew it already, of course, having turned aside a flap of Kidresh's mind as he was about to lambast the sun. But no Tharle, least of all the leader of the planet, ever openly anticipates the words of another in a meeting, however informal. The malpractice – which translates as *filching gold from the gullet* – is dismissed as offensiveness itself. Even Dreest, for whom protocol was almost as terrible as a ravening patch of white, had that rule by heart.

In reply, Kidresh patted the novice's arm: "Why does good Dreest keep me company? Because, Mopatakeh, a mere handful of time after I informed you of my visit" – here an exploratory finger got busy with the folds of his ear – "he troubled me for my attention. And very interesting trouble it is, too."

Tharle turned to regard Dreest, whose glow bulged and rippled with nerves: "You communicated with Kidresh?" Too late he realised that the question, meant neutrally, would flood the

novice with guilt. Dreest's glow looked fit to explode.

"I should have," he blurted, "I would have, had it been... well, it was, but I thought, well, should have thought, should have known, really..." He looked fearfully at Tharle, who was now attending his own ear, seeking to hush the wind that Dreest's outburst had set whistling.

Kidresh rubbed his hands, as though the business of speaking for Dreest would be physically akin to hauling wood.

"What he means to say," he began, "is that he felt he could not think to you directly. He desired the benefit of a second opinion."

Tharle was intrigued: "Opinion on?"

"His invention – which may, Mopatakeh, be the saving of us all."

"Ah... an invention, Dreest." This time Tharle ensured that his tone was encouraging. For, prior to his elevation, Dreest had been a full-time inventor. In a million different ways, his creations and refinements had improved the life, domestic and commercial, of his settlement. Their fame had spread wide – and how could they not? Who, after all, would impugn the usefulness of a device for luring mallowberries – a Razalian staple for garnish and pie – from inaccessible bushes? Or that polished and thickened the ice on ponds during *The Silver Quiet*, Razalia's winter, for the delight and physical advancement of the skating young? Dreest's inventions, or variations thereon, had popped up all over the planet. In fact, his name had crossed Tharle's mind but a short while ago, when he'd pondered the re-fitment of the chara-jets. Again, Tharle considered his newest colleague in a fatherly way. Poor lad: in his previous life, he knew, Dreest been steady of eye, calm of mind. Thus had his inventions, large and small, succeeded. Now, as leader of his settlement, he was all psychic fingers and thumbs. Would he ever accept that he was chosen fair and square? Would he ever believe that, in Venacarr's words, he had the soul of the planet within him? Tharle felt the answers staring at him like a pair of Baraskians at the foot of his bed, enthralled by the way his face-glow danced at the point of sleep. Like his counterparts all over the planet,

he knew Dreest was probably unchangeable. But that didn't preclude any attempts to guide and embolden him, to... well, give him an occasional holiday from himself, however brief. Of course, such guidance was no more than Tharle's duty. It was just that, in the two months since Dreest had shambled into his new responsibilities, Tharle had been as nonplussed by him as everyone else. But he could hardly spin that out as an excuse. Telepathic tongues would start wagging. He could just imagine Venacarr's clipped tones bearding him as he squirmed in the Guiding Seat: "Have to try taking Dreest in hand somehow. Save him from his turmoil whenever you can. Rest of us will support you to the hilt, Mopatakeh – but-it's-up-to-you." (It should be noted that, were Venacarr a creature of Earth and a member of that sub-sect dubbed "English", he would possibly top his sentences with "Thing is, old man" and tail them with "chum".) But now Tharle was smiling again, and not only at the imaginary counsel of the bluff, well-meaning Venacarr. Here was the perfect chance to still Dreest's many agitations, if only for a while. Here was his new invention, which had obviously lit up Kidresh's seasoned, deliberation-worn eyes. He laid a hand on Dreest's arm, which almost stopped jiggling about.

"Show me what you've brought with you, Dreest," he said gently.

Free of any deliberation for now, Kidresh's eyes simply rolled and one of his lobes got a furious tickle. He could see Dreest mouthing "What I've brought with me," sense his mind slipping its slender leash. Careless of Tharle's kindly pressure on his arm, Dreest began gingerly patting the folds of his cloak. Tharle guessed what was happening and, despite himself, felt a twinge of vexation where his fatherliness had been.

Hearing the change of mood from deep within Tharle's mind, Kidresh muttered, "Here we go again, Mopatakeh."

Tharle, eager to make sure of his suspicions, leaned into Dreest's thoughts like a watcher over a parapet. Sure enough, Dreest had misinterpreted his request. All thoughts of his invention gone, he was fumbling about for a clipping of

shrub from Maker's mountain. Protocol once dictated that any Tharle visiting Mopatakeh should bring the shrub as an offering of respect for Razalia's leader. But the protocol had lapsed even before the use of "Trimmer of the Glow". Yet again, Dreest had enlisted a scrap of arcana in a bid to make his new destiny intelligible to himself. Besides that, he had never actually clipped any shrub from the mountain. His settlement lying at its foot, Kidresh would have known if he had. In fact, both he and Tharle knew that Dreest had brought no offering of any kind. More, they knew that Dreest knew it, that naked anxiety had tucked the truth under a cloak-thick fold of his mind. Vexation did not come naturally to Tharle – nor, fundamentally, to Kidresh, though he could make more colourful use of it when it did. So it was that, with a preparatory flick of a lobe, Kidresh reached into Tharle's mind, extricating his spasm as though it were a ripe mallowberry and he, with a family pie to bake, were using Dreest's famed contraption to hook it free. Then he placed an apparently kindly hand on Dreest's other arm and squeezed. At this, Dreest let out a yelp, shook himself free of both Tharles, dug deep in his cloak, produced a jar of grated sliceblossom and stuck the neck, teat-wise, into his mouth.

"No shrub," he wheezed between gulps. "Oh, I forgot, forgot, forgot. So what have I brought, what did I – ?" Dropping the jar in his lap, he pressed his fingers to his brow like a vaudeville mesmerist. "Bear with me, Trimmer of the Glow," he pleaded, rocking to right and left.

The motion becoming more dramatic, Tharle leaned out of his way, and was about to drop the simple nudge, "Your new invention, Dreest," into his mind when Dreest rocked low in the other direction, found no resistance from Kidresh, cried, "Oh, Trimmer! What have I done with him?" and froze bolt upright. Very gingerly, he pawed the ground to his left. It was deserted. In the midst of his panic about being shrubless – and giftless altogether – Dreest thought that he'd pulled a wrong lever in his mind and spirited Kidresh away to – where? The Mopatakeh gap? The waves of the Billomingow? The forsaken midnight?

Not daring to look round, Dreest cried, "My Master Trimmer, un-Tharle me this moment! I have *enchaffed* Kidresh (another Razalian archaism, meaning to scatter something or reduce it to nothing; Tharle remembered that, when he was a child, the planet's oldest farmers and brewers used it, but only *when the lone tides wove into a fountain*, which roughly translates as "once in a blue moon").

Now Dreest was almost sobbing: "And he was so kind, my Master Trimmer. He it was who –" He stopped, slack-mouthed, as though a tale from long ago were drifting back to him. "He it was who had such faith... in what I" – his eyes widened – "have brought to you... my –" At that moment, the hand that had squeezed his arm clamped itself on his shoulder. All a-tremble, Dreest turned to his left. There stood Kidresh.

Emphatically unenchaffed, so to speak, he had decided that the easiest thing all round would be to leave Tharle to the novice's mad pantomime, descend the knoll and drag up the invention-bag himself. Now he laid it across Dreest's lap. Tugging its mouth open, the novice gazed on the response to Tharle's command from, it seemed, aeons ago. "My invention," he mouthed.

A briskly purposeful hand-rub challenged the sound of the river. "Tomorrow, Mopatakeh," said Kidresh, "we hasten to your Guiding, install ourselves in your Notionary and spend a demanding but, I hope against hope, not fruitless hour in ridding our young friend's mind of every pick and speck of antique *fol-de-rol*." He sighed to himself. "*Maker's shrub... Enchaffed... Oceans lave us!*" ("God help us" comes nearest to his last phrase. Given the planet's provisional state – and now, the threat from the gaps of white – it would be foolishness itself for a Razalian to invoke any kind of god in a pleading oath. Ever pragmatic, the Razalians direct what passes for their prayers to something they can see and depend on in their planet's singular nature.) The next moment, however, Kidresh surprised himself with a yelp and stepped back, nearly pitching down the knoll. For Dreest had gently cast the bag aside, pocketed the jar of sliceblossom, stood up and taken a pace or two towards him. Tharle plumbed the novice's mind

on Kidresh's behalf. There was no wrongful assumption that Kidresh had played some trick on him, no intent to offer violence – nor did Tharle think there would be. Instead, there was the imminent threat of a deliriously grateful bear-hug, one that would do for Kidresh as surely as, a little while before, the double-sized Dreest would have done for Tharle himself. Summoning twice the power he'd used to shrink the novice, and nearly as much as when, alone and troubled, he'd scrutinised Mopatakeh's creeping gap, he brought Dreest to a dead halt. Hastily collecting himself, Kidresh laid hand again on the novice's arm. This time he didn't squeeze, but drew the novice into a biddable consciousness.

“Set it up, Dreest,” he whispered. “Here on the knoll.” Then he pressed his hands together, at which Tharle intervened deep in his thinking: “Rest your palms and earlobes, Kidresh, until good Dreest is done.”

A great and merciful change came over Dreest as, with Tharle and Kidresh standing either side and a little away from him, he emptied the bag and set to. In this moment, he was no longer a baffled leader but an inventor only, his mind on nothing but why he and Kidresh were on Mopatakeh and what he had devised. With relief, Tharle realised that this had nothing to do with any telepathic prod from Kidresh or himself. Dreest's clear-sighted focus was all his own work. Briefly, Tharle pondered his duty of care to the novice. Might it not be a good idea to ensure that he always had some invention bubbling in his head? That way, he could always have at least one sizeable foot planted back in his old life. Wouldn't that keep him... well, on the steadyish side of confusion? Sealing his mind against any remote rummaging, he thought again about Razalia's chara-jets. Facts had to be faced: it was no good just reinforcing them here, expanding them there. Refitment on the hoof wasn't enough – ordinary Razalian know-how had its limits. Look at the way that extra-fat Galladeeleean charter had flapped about just a short time before. Dreest, though – he could see to them, all right: keep the same quaint design, but re-build them from the nose backwards with

completely new material, stuff that he could work his magic on so that they would fly without their old, familiar lurch and swing, withstand Galladeeleean high jinks and the concertina solo that was Razalian time. As for what that stuff might be – well, Razalia had nothing suitable, and everyone knew that Carolles, the jets' planet of origin, was now clean out of the material from which they'd been made. Of course, the Carollessa had offered to build new ones for their sister planet, to the same curious specifications. Most folk knew that, too – Dreest among them, no doubt. He'd probably give Tharle some rambling, bashfully-worded reason why Razalia should still take up the Carollessan offer, asserting – as far as he could assert anything – that he was unequal to such a task. But Tharle could command – no, firmly suggest that he forget Carolles and go scouring other planets in the arc. Bound to be something somewhere. Lachbourigg was rumoured to have rich deposits of anything you cared to name. Getting at them might be a problem, of course. Tharle thought of the planet's strange forests, how they were apt to rove about at each Lachbouriggian sunset. But its inhabitants were notable wizards – surely they'd conjure up a way. They'd be happy to, Tharle hazarded, since almost no-one visited them. Not surprising, really: there were only a dozen of them, and they spent their time either quelling restless trees or lost in wild incantations. But Venacarr had spent some time there (accidentally, after a trip to Galladeelee, when one of the goofy planet's catapults had lost its *boing* halfway to Razalia) and had found them uncommonly hospitable. They would make a proper fuss of Dreest. Then there were the arc's infamously martial races. Tharle could imagine the Sehundans and Baraskians falling over themselves to mine, melt and press some indestructible substance – leagues and leagues of it – and ship it out to their little sibling without hearing of any recompense. Yes... Dreest could go roving through the arc – at and for a specified time. As for his settlement, Kidresh could keep an eye it. Capable to a happy fault, able to brook no nonsense while somehow endearing himself to Tharle and commoner alike, Kidresh could

run at least three settlements on his own – Mopatakeh included, thought Tharle, without a hint of false humility. And who was it that Dreest had turned to about his invention? A bond was obviously there, for all Kidresh's displays of annoyance – in which, Tharle had anyway observed, there was irrepressible affection.

Tharle was dimly aware of some rattling and clanking, a voice saying, "Now for the deep angle... hope this knoll's sturdy enough." But his mind, at that moment, was tight around Dreest's future like wadding round an heirloom. Yes – say two Razalian years for the chara-jet project, from Dreest's voyage to the last tap of... well, whatever he last tapped with. Razalia could put up with its present fleet for that much longer. Anyway, two Razalian years sometimes had a way of folding into a tiny pile of months like a half-baked mallowberry fancy. Long or short, it would surely be time enough for the resourceful Dreest. Of course, this wasn't a question of barring him from his Tharlian duties. The good people of Dreest would be up in arms if they suspected that. Dropping the commoner's usual coyness about telepathy, they'd fire off chunks of their mind at Tharle like so much *Sehundan quashbuckshot* (bullets which, in Earth terms, would compare in shape and effect to an unripe Cox's Pippin). Tharle could just see himself, so vividly that it almost hurt, gripping the arms of his Guiding Seat as their indignation battered his brain. Then, of course, there'd be the delegation, the whole of the settlement clumping along to his Guiding, with dire consequences for its joists and foundations. No: the whole point, impossible though it may seem, would be to settle Dreest into his new calling with a reaffirmed sense of his old one. Couldn't his confidence in the latter drip onto – or preferably flood – his dread of the former? The odds might be... yes, longer than the whole planetary arc. But Dreest couldn't simply be left to welter in his anxiety. Who knows, it just might –

"Mopatakeh, where have you got to? Flame up! Flame up!"

Bundling his thoughts away, Tharle saw Kidresh just as his mouth was settling from his command. He saw Dreest's invention, which

looked just like – but then an avalanche started in his head, a thousand knife-edged pebbles dashed themselves about from his crown to his neck. Oceans lave us! He'd clean forgotten his own glow, his watching light. Razalian day was nearly at its end now. All over the planet, people's faces were darkening in readiness for sleep. But he and the others had to stave sleep off, which meant *flaming up*, a special Tharlian power which allowed the boost of watching light. This had to happen in good time – otherwise it was like waiting with a new candle until the old one had guttered, and the attendant torrent of mental pebbles was enough to split wide the most sagacious head. Usually, whenever the need arose to shine into the Razalian night, Tharles flamed up without thinking. Tharle of Mopatakeh had done so himself, a thousand times, often when he was distracted by far weightier matters than Dreest and the charajets. But, he realised as the knife-pebbles rained down, the Dreest business hadn't been the real distraction. He'd taken his eye off the lower caverns of his mind. And now, wafting up from these, seeming to cloud the pebbles in a noxious mist, there returned the image that had somehow hoodwinked his automatic flaming-point: Razalia's gaps, their white now as baleful as the form of malign spirits, their edges terrifyingly on the move. Screwing his eyes shut, he flamed up at double-speed, experiencing the usual sensation (equivalent, in Earth terms, to flipping backwards over a high-jump bar, then bouncing up and flipping backwards again, at least half-a-dozen times). The pebbles disappeared like marbles rattling down a chute. The plans for Dreest rolled quietly onto a secure shelf in Tharle's mind, to be lifted out again at a proper time. Opening his eyes, he saw that Dreest was a little to his left, having stepped back to the edge of the knoll, his assemblage complete. On the novice's far side, Kidresh was standing as before. Both had flamed up when necessary. Now, three Tharlian faces converged on what looked like a colander stuck on the burnished pole of a hatrack. Jutting out from the middle of the pole was a pair of something between straps and stirrups.

Kidresh flicked his eyes in Tharle's direction: "None of your Carollessan flash here, Mopatakeh," he thought to him. This was no derision at the expense of their bright and shiny neighbour. Tharle saw that, yet again, Kidresh's admiration for their unlikely colleague had fought through all the usual perils, the grumps and agitations, emerging as a plaudit which, for him, was almost Galladeelean in its playfulness. Then Kidresh leaned back, flipping up his hands in a sorry-to-interrupt manner. For Dreest was stepping gravely forward, as if to accept a great prize. Gripping the strap-stirrups with either hand, he pressed his bulk against the pole and stuck his head in the colander. After a moment, the knoll vibrated to a string of determined inbreaths. Anyone passing the landward side of the knoll might have concluded that some creature – perhaps the beast at the core of Razalia, famed as the maker's nemesis in one of the planet's dusty old theories – was breaking the surface of the Billomingow after a leisurely thrashabout. Anyone watching from Earth might have concluded that Dreest was lamenting a fifth pint of beer, that the colander was a bowl paying dearly for a night's excess. Dreest's own behaviour would have encouraged the notion. Raising his head for a second, he seemed to deflate round a dying groan. Then he sank forward again.

Tharle and Kidresh's watching lights played around the colander's curves and the shoulders of their novice-colleague. For a moment or two, Tharle toyed with a matter of protocol, then decided that he couldn't wait for Dreest to finish his singular performance and explain all. His thoughts tiptoed up to the crest of Dreest's mind, as though he were physically closing in on the man himself. But all at once two interdictiones seemed to fly up in his face like the crossed sabres of a Paladin guard: "Wait, good Mopatakeh," said one. "Can you not trudge one final mile of bafflement?" the other demanded. Respectful but insistent, the silent voice belonged to Kidresh. Tharle swung his glow up at him, at which Kidresh shook his head: "Dreest won't let us in till he's ready," he added in Tharle's mind. Suddenly, Kidresh's glow

wavered a little, and in that brief weakness Tharle saw the whole tale of his colleague's wearying day. There was his surprise role as the novice's confidant – what a storm he must have withstood there. Then there was the journey across half the planet, with Kidresh doubtless having to wait again and again while his ungainly companion slung down the bag and hitched it to his other shoulder, or stopped dead and checked his cloak for the sliceblossom jar. Tharle could just see the pair of them miles from the western bridge – Kidresh rolling his eyes like peas in a shaken cup while Dreest intoned his unearthed relics of popular speech and Tharlian civility; or reminding the novice about how to execute the *doubled-oval*, the modest but proper greeting for the present times, and then rolling his eyes anew as his advice whistled through Dreest's ears like the swooper-bird of the Venacarr region, returned from some far corner of the planet to familiar eaves again. For all that, Kidresh clearly didn't begrudge an elastic minute of his journey.

Realising this, Tharle thought profuse apologies to Kidresh for his uncustomary impatience.

"I understand, Mopatakeh," Kidresh thought back. "And he is almost done, I think. You and I are but half-a-dozen paces from the moment." Tharle's apology seemed to steady Kidresh's glow. For a second his eyes twinkled, as though Tharle were another and more excitable Dreest, fit to bust from all this waiting, about to shoulder the novice aside and push his own head deep into strangeness.

Dreest raised his head again. Something else seemed to be weaving through his patterns of breath. Kidresh inclined his head as though this change were precisely what he'd been expecting. But Tharle watched the novice anxiously. What had Dreest caught in the net of his breathing? Was it the murmurs that reputedly played on the surface of the creeping gaps? The cries of lost souls within them? Was it the crackle of some doomed traveller's last words, uttered a hundred aeons ago out in the forsaken midnight and only now coming to rest in their hearing? Was it Razalia's Maker itself, filling Dreest's body with a plan for their salvation or a

declaration of their end? Now the sound divided, seeming to become a duet between a child and a dying man, but still unintelligible. Lifting his hands, Dreest traced the colander's rim, then stepped back and fell silent. But the duet continued from the mouth of the colander. Gradually, Tharle and Kidresh began to make some sense of it, although the eerie sound that had first coloured Dreest's breathing still broke in.

"I got it to translate itself," whispered Dreest, "except for" – he made an apologetic face – "well, some things wouldn't give up their meaning. And –" apology turned to agony in his eyes – "I couldn't steady the voices out. They both go high and low."

So it was that Tharle and Kidresh heard a Razalian minute of talk between, it seemed, two voices that could not decide between the morning and the dusk of their years:

"Are you?" asked the reedy pipe of one voice, before sinking into hoarse old age with, "because it won't take a moment."

"No, I said not." The second voice took over the hoarseness, then soared into childhood, then crashed again. "When do I ever go out on a –" Here, and at certain points following, the eerie sound broke in like a neatly folding tide. "Anyway, I'll have to wait in for... won't I? Did she tell you what time she'd be back from...?"

"I thought," said the first voice, rising as uncertainly as a chara-jet, "she was staying over at... That's what she told me."

"Well, she never... a word about that. Still" – the second voice, fluttering between youth and age, suddenly managed a tone which even struck the three leaders as false – "don't you go worrying about it. And she deserves... with friends after all her work. I can... her at... and get some approximate time."

"Someone else pestered by approximate time!" cried Kidresh. "That's heartening."

Tharle silenced him. The first voice was swinging from angelic to catarrhal, insisting that whatever it had said before wouldn't take a moment.

"Well," tooted the second voice, "all right, go on – then it's done for when... get here

tomorrow." And now it growled: "especially since... nearly broke his... off last time they came."

"So he's definitely coming as well?"

"Oh, honestly... I did say." There was that troubling false tone again. "He was supposed to be... up to... but now they want him... And... said he was well and truly... about it. Well, he can make a killing when they have to pay him for..."

A shared frown shone down the three watching lights. Shared questions baffled their owners. How were killings made? Since when was death an act of creation? What manner of creature possessed such dark skill?

"I'll tuck the... right against the... They won't have any bother... either side then." Despite its haphazard twitch from bass to soprano, the first voice clearly sounded agitated.

"Actually – no, look, I'll move it," said the second voice. "You get going. Don't want... and... wondering where you are."

"I'll see to it."

"... you'll be late!"

"Won't take a second... it's a... of a clamber up into the... you know that. And the key needs a good... in the... All right, I was thinking of your –"

The eerie tide folded in on the last word, but Tharle was sure he'd grabbed it.

"Back," he said.

"What, us?" His eye still on the colander, Kidresh began an awkward, reverse shuffle to the edge of the knoll. "Is there danger, Mopatakeh? What, is your gap splashing round this very –?"

"Back!" Tharle accompanied the repetition with a single thump to his own spine. "That's what it said. The agitated one." Dreest involuntarily shushed them, then plunged into more agony at his presumption, then was ignored as the second voice said,

"Told you, it's fine... not one twinge... a half-hour's soak and stroke with the... then five minutes... on my... while I played the... of the... skybells... and a quick, light... to finish. Had my doubts, but it worked a treat. Better than those bathsalt pyramids I got from... but they're best

as preparation anyway, when you need to give your... a proper... so there was no harm using them last night.”

Above river and knoll, three watching lights clashed in delirious confusion.

Then Dreest raised a hand. The voices were fading. “Leave me your key, then,” said the second voice, hollowly affectionate as before. The first voice said that it would be back by – then the tide folded in for good.

Kidresh started to think something to the other two, then changed his mind. Suddenly, silent chat seemed a bit cloak-and-dagger. This was a matter for clear words on the night air. In that very moment, the other two decided the same.

“Actually, Dreest,” he said, “I couldn’t help thinking – all those trills and grizzles back and forth – are you sure there weren’t more than two?”

The novice shook his head: “I just couldn’t undistort them enough – they’ve come a long way.”

“Very long,” said Kidresh. “Making killings, indeed. You wouldn’t even hear that from a Sehundan.” He nearly gave a lobe a concerted twang but collected himself in time. A brief silence fell. Then, slowly and reverently, Kidresh and Dreest swung their watching lights towards Tharle, who, distracted, was playing his own light across the Billomingow, watching it break up gently on the sleepy ripples.

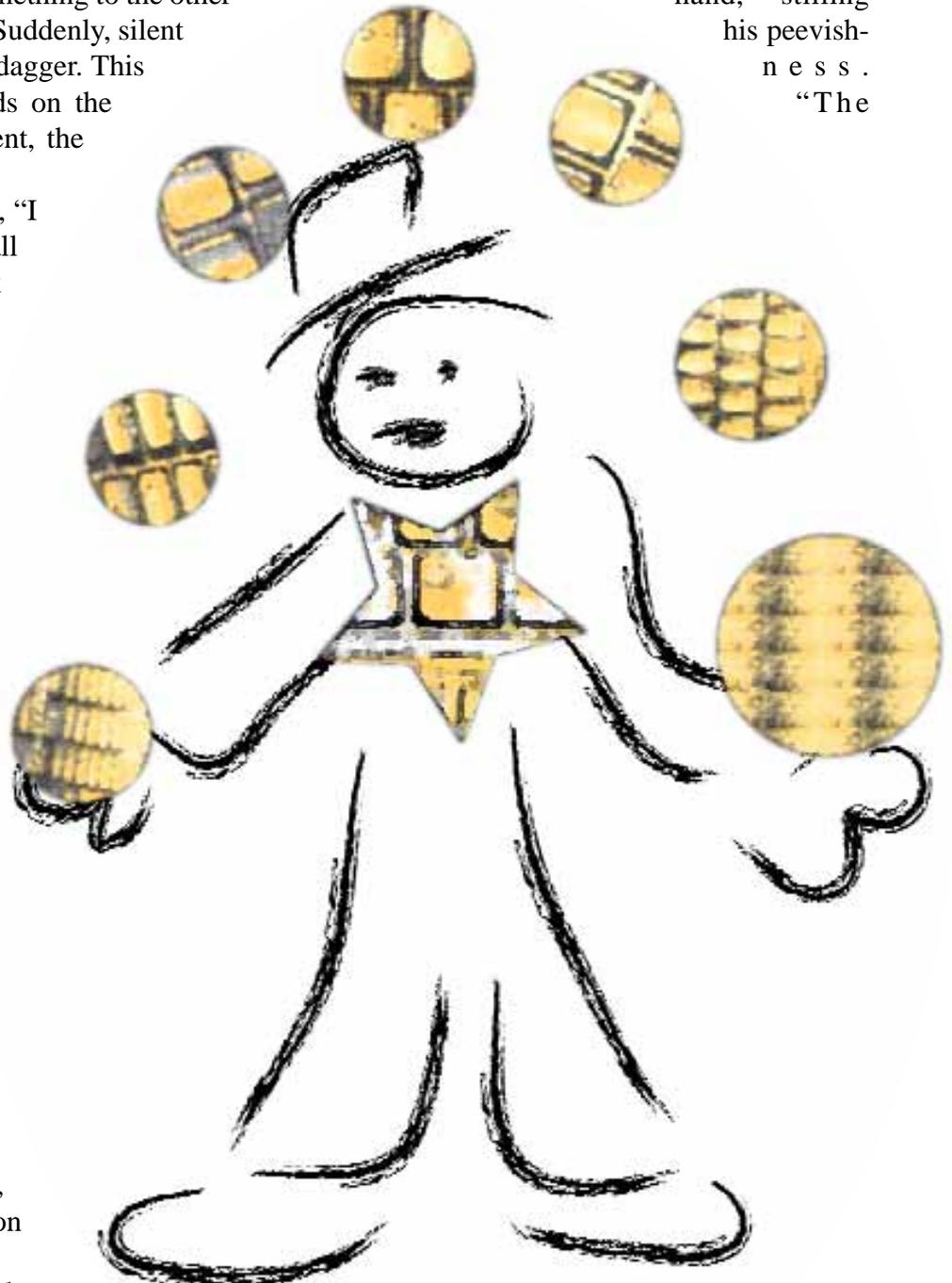
“So,” said Tharle, “we have learnt of beings visiting other

beings, an object that must be moved, an irksome key and a bathing ritual unlike any on which Razalian time has been wasted. Who have you fished from your bowl of voices, Dreest?”

Dreest gave the colander a last peek, as though another rogue word or two might come wispig up. Then, stepping back again, he said, “The... well, affectionate one –”

“Pah! If that’s affection,” broke in Kidresh, at which Tharle raised a hand, stilling his peevishness.

“The



troubling one," Dreest corrected himself. "That's the consort, I'd say."

"The consort of?" his companions demanded. Tharle's light threatened to set the novice's face aflame. The brightness seemed to wear Dreest's features away, until there was nothing but a pair of anxious eyes flickering between Tharle and Kidresh. "Of?" they repeated, voices raised.

"Of the one responsible," said Dreest.

"Responsible for?" Dreest couldn't bear their chorusing. While he had assembled his invention, bent to the colander and set the voices in motion, he had seemed to assume – give or take the odd quake and apology – exactly that confidence which Tharle sought to draw out through the chara-jet project. But now – if ever eyes could squirm, Dreest's did.

"For Razalia," Dreest managed, his eyes now swooning away as though he were twisting his body in anticipation of a blow. "He of the agitated voice – the one who was worrying about a –" He trailed off and Tharle's light lost its fierceness – just in time to reveal the novice mimicking his master's thump to the spine.

Dreest's words reduced Tharle and Kidresh to a pair of fish, mouths opening and closing on words that would not come. At last, Kidresh managed "Our Maker," in the voice of a penitent who craves blessing at his moment of death. Tharle, his mind on the Mopotakeh gap, on all the gaps across Razalia, made a sort of singing noise which seemed to slide from hope to anger and then to despair, before dropping into his boots. After that, neither made a sound. Astonishment emptied all thought from their minds like mallowberries from a baking-gourd. Even when the power to think came back, it dragged them where it pleased. Tharle tried to hear again those edgy, bitten-off phrases. It made no sense that they'd been uttered by Razalia's Maker. No, that wasn't right: look at the state of the planet, all that white where proper creation should be. In fact, it made perfect sense that their Maker's words should be unfinished – never mind Dreest saying he couldn't translate the lot. But if someone, something, were so inept, how did they become a Maker in the first place? There must have been

something there... enough for some... well, say some master-teacher to draw out, to nurture. Or did Makers just happen? Did creation itself say *yes*, as Razalians did when new Tharles were chosen, and there it was? If so, perhaps Razalia's Maker was another Dreest, formidably capable but plagued by cruel doubts. Or had something external intervened? Had Razalia's Maker been distracted by something that challenged its Makerhood? All the ancient theories about the planet ended with its creator's demise. But what if the Maker had been called away to deal with some threat to its project... some danger from... Tharle's inward sigh was weary indeed: "Oceans lave us," he thought, "danger from what?" Speculation defeated him. He felt that he was prodding about with a newborn's helpless hand. He gave up.

Meanwhile, Kidresh had fastened on the voice of the consort. Consorts, as far as he knew, were wives or husbands with gilded bells on. In this case, however, the phrase *licensed leech* had stuck fast in his mind and would not be shaken out. Kidresh recalled the consort's tone of voice. No, untrue: it needed no recollection but broke hard over his thoughts, dousing them like a noxious downpour. Glittery and hollow, it was a wheedler's voice – and as easily a moaner's. No wonder Razalia's Maker was all agitation. Presumably she, or it, had been there as the planet bloomed in forsaken midnight. Kidresh imagined her, or it, dogging him, or it – but there he stopped and breathed deep. It was no good riddling this fancy with qualifications. Slippery already, it would vanish altogether, abandoning his mind to scraps of words and images that made no sense at all. So: he imagined *her* dogging *him* as he fashioned a hill and went up it, carved a valley and scrambled down. He heard her voice in full moan: "Call this a planet? Look at all that you've missed. Where's the green for this bit? You'll be doing something with all the white, I presume? No? Planning to cart it off? Well, I tell you this, boy, you needn't expect me to roll up my sleeves –" Kidresh clapped his hands to his head. This was worse than thrashing about in senselessness. Never mind imagination: it was as though she were

right there – as though he were the Maker and she was lambasting his every effort, made or to come, deriding him before he so much as drew the first shoot from the first cake of soil. And since when had that word *boy* sounded so vicious and ugly? No-one on Razalia would use it thus. His head felt like Tharle's when he'd neglected his *flaming up*. Pebble-storms lashed and pounded it, till he was convinced that his skull was done for. At the last second, something freed him from that terrible inquisition, and he reverted, like Tharle, to utter blankness.

Dreest stared at the two statues his revelations had created. He'd planned – no, hoped – well, prayed, really – that his words would emerge, and be received, in perfect calm. Instead, they'd brought up the rear in a skirmish of questions. Just his luck: just his destiny. He felt his old, capacious glumness taking hold. But then, reflexively doubling his height, he pulled clear of it, even stamping his feet as if to close it off. This was no time for shambling and whimpering, for calling on the skies to *enchaff* him for good and all. His elders were dead before him. He had to bring them back to life. Resuming his normal height, he played his glow from one face to the other: "I found him yesterday," he began. "Our Maker." So pleased was he with this show of assurance that he didn't notice uncertainty looming behind his relief: "Well, their yesterday," he babbled now, "about two days ago for us, though sometimes it was two-and-a-half... no, two-and-a-bit... no, it was less than... more like" – he paused to count on his fingers, seemed to make a hash of it, then started again with his earlobes.

Still, his performance had the desired effect. At least, it gave Tharle and Kidresh time to come to. Blinking, working his shoulders as though he'd been sleeping upright, Tharle told himself that rolling his mind into a ball was hardly suitable behaviour for a leader faced with staggering news. Despite Tharle's earlier request, Kidresh went through a full work-out of handrubs and lobe-twangs, the end of which was a silent but impassioned declaration that he hadn't found the *oomph* to trek across Razalia only to swoon away like a Galladeelean over an empty keg. But

this shared mortification did elasticate their minds. They were able to reach behind them, so to speak, and catch Dreest's half-confident, half-shambolic words just as they finished quivering the air.

"Our apologies, Dreest," said Tharle. "Mine especially. We should have waited on your words, not bearded you like Sehundan helots. Your news astounds, but that hardly excuses our –"

"No excuse at all," Kidresh chipped in, giving his hands a single, dramatic rub as though such un-Tharlian behaviour were dirt to be wiped clean away. "And look how we paid for it" – he pretended to goggle like a circus clown.

But still Dreest hopped and twitched. Watching him, Tharle regretted turning his light so ferociously on the novice's face. That, really, had precipitated the whole episode, along with the way he and Kidresh had pelted him with questions like a pair of bullies. He hadn't intended to stoke his light – hadn't known it was happening, in fact, until Dreest was nothing but a pair of wide eyes. He wasn't, he realised grimly, having much luck with his glow that evening. And for someone of his position, falling back on luck was hardly the way to maintain –

"Compose yourself, good Dreest." Kidresh was all kindness. "We assure you that henceforth we are all sober attention. Now, the swooping and scouring – tell Mopatakeh that."

"Yes, Trimmer of – Mast – Mopata –" Giving up his mish-mash address with a gesture that could have been half a *doubled-oval*, Dreest cleared his throat and fought for the confidence which, in his summoning of the voices, had come so naturally to him. "I swooped and scoured these many days past, called up spiral and planet-shower. The voices of all creation poured themselves into my head."

"And then you heard his voice." Kidresh shook his head in amazement. "And now, so have we."

Tharle turned to him: "So you didn't know until now, Kidresh? What Dreest had actually found?"

"Wasn't I parroting those fool questions along

with you? No, as I said when we arrived, Mopatakeh, I could tell that his invention might be the saving of us all. And I knew of the swooping and scouring.” Kidresh sighed in mock weariness. “Yes, I knew mightily about that.” Gentle laughter rolled along the beam of Tharle’s light; he could imagine – no, why simply do that? He folded back Kidresh’s memories of his journey and, sure enough, heard Dreest’s endless incantation at his ear: “Swooped, scoured, they emptied themselves... swooped, scoured...”

“But,” said Kidresh, “when I asked him what the end of all this” – he waved a hand, supplying Dreest’s incantatory words – “actually was, he wouldn’t say. Which was only right,” he hurried on, in case Dreest should hear a charge of rudeness in his words and drown him in apologies. “He wanted my opinion on the general worth of the thing, and I was happy to give it. As for what we’ve just heard... oh, he hinted alright – after a fashion – but then he sealed off again. Still, his knowing coughs were our companions.” Kidresh’s hand rose to his ear – not for a good flick this time, but because, through mere recollection, Dreest’s explosive hints were trouncing his head anew. “But as for his triumph, he could not tell me before he told you.” Having delivered himself of all this, and once Dreest’s coughing had sunk again into the pit of memory, Kidresh couldn’t help setting up a slow hand-rub, topped off with a graceful tickle of a lobe. Pride in the novice shone through his unlikely pantomime. Like a magician with power over water, Dreest had carried his discovery in cupped hands until he stood before Tharle. Despite himself, he had honoured the most signal point of protocol. “I didn’t even know, Mopatakeh, if he’d set out to find our Maker.”

“Did you know yourself, Dreest?” asked Tharle. In reply, the novice begged their pardon and sank to the ground. Inventing, journeying, babbling, demonstrating – all now exacted their toll. Again the jar of sliceblossom appeared from his cloak; again the draught was deep and, it seemed, restorative. Tharle motioned to Kidresh that they should copy the novice, and they sank in unison either side of him. For his part, Tharle

was happy to take Dreest’s lead. Only now was he taking in the full significance of what they’d heard. With the Billomgow lapping gently below them, with Dreest’s invention rising before them like a baptismal font, he tried his question again.

“I knew I’d find something,” said Dreest, sounding only slightly less exhausted than he looked. “Of course, I had to look beyond our arc first. Past all that yukking on Galladeelee, the Baraskian growls, the whooshing on Lachbourigg.”

“You don’t think of Lachbouriggians as whooshers, do you?” Kidresh was reflective and amused at the same time. “Venacarr never mentioned whooshing when he told me about them. But then he was down among them and their jumpy forests. A different matter, I suppose, getting an earful of their spells from” – he gestured at Dreest’s invention – “the miraculous basin.” He stopped, his face burning in the heat of two incredulous beams. “Tree-proof, that house they live in,” he finished lamely. “Venacarr told me. Enchanted grouting.”

“Sober attention, Kidresh,” said Tharle. “You promised.” He urged the novice gently on, relieved to see that Kidresh’s singular discourse hadn’t jangled his nerves. Probably he was too fatigued to be anxious about anything. Tharle could have tested his theory with a quick gawp into that wondrous mind, but chose not to.

“Once I was hunting beyond our system, though – how to describe it? The things that came up over that rim. When you’re hearing your way over our sixteen planets, yes, it’s a gabble, shrieks and barks and whispers. But there’s... there’s a level floor to it, it’s your system, you know you won’t smack into a mountain of sudden noise or fall down a hole of silence. You move like a stately land-ship, translating as you go. But after that – you’re in quicksand. Sometimes it hardens. You could be hearing along, I don’t know, something like the cracked plains of our outwater. Then, without warning, you’re thrown as high as a Baraskian surfing our sealess tides.”

The comparison unsettled Tharle, who thought again of the Baraskians’ imminent

Festival on Razalia. Would there be tides for them to surf? Would there be any cracks twisting and flexing, mimicking all the known shapes of the galaxy? Would any of Dreest's beloved sliceblossom rise up, flapping and puffing? Or would there just be a white sea, petrified, unwitnessed?

"Patience, Mopatakeh," thought Kidresh at him, sensing some change in his mood. "Hear the boy out." Not bothering to explain his unease, Tharle attended again to the quiet words.

"Or the quicksand opens like a well," Dreest was saying, "and you're tumbling down hundreds of leagues. And the noises – on the crest of those sand-tides, in the caverns deep down. Some are just untranslatable, though not unpleasant – like birdsong, or a mother's wordless lullaby. But some – I heard along a whole system, easily forty planets, that was just one long scream; and another one, three planets wide, which was the same noise repeated over and over, a kind of sob that... well, it didn't translate, exactly, but it sounded like *oh, no... oh, no*, as if all the bad luck in creation had landed on one sorry soul."

Hands planted behind him, Tharle was leaning back. "All these sounds," he said dreamily, as though quite alone. "Seeing with the ears."

"And eyes, Master," said Dreest, at which Tharle sat bolt upright. "Eyes, Dreest? You really saw as well?"

"Whenever I sensed that I might be near something to help us. Then there were deserts in the bowl, Master, swirled with reds and blacks and yellows; and floating valleys that swung like cradles in summer skies; and cities that were toppled pyramids, and other cities that were tiny humpbacked houses in lines like the underside of footprints. Then... whether it was some extra power I can't explain, or" – Dreest smiled – "well, just a most un-Razalian wishfulness... then I could translate, then understanding came. But there was nothing for our case after all. In the whole of the desert galaxy, I found only four beings on one planet, and they'd just placed the roof on a hut. One hut in quintillions of leagues. And they were saying that it was something, what they'd done, it was a start after all that had

happened, whatever that was. And in the valley galaxies they were whistling and cooing because flowers had bloomed for the first time ever, and this one was asking that one what they should call them, what you did with them."

"And in the cities, Dreest?" Kidresh sounded like a child, amazed and scared by fresh tales of Razalia's beginnings.

"Questions," said Dreest. "Questions without answers, even though they were all about things the beings had created themselves. *So what do we do with this now? How can we start it again? Do we have any left? Doesn't anyone know?*"

Tharle looked at Kidresh: "He told you nothing of this?"

His fellow-leader looked nightwards: "He gave me a picture of swirls and running colours, Mopatakeh. A notion, an outline." He placed a hand on the novice's shoulder. "The best you could do at the time, eh, Dreest? Even you, good Mopatakeh, would have a deal of waiting until such visions, such wonders made any sense to you."

Tharle remembered his problem with *flaming up* and how his fatherly glow had nearly crisped the novice. If he'd been Dreest, he feared, these visions and wonders would have had him slumped and gibbering under the Guiding Seat.

"Yes, Kidresh," he murmured, keeping his thoughts close in a pocket of his mind, "I rather think I would."

"Mmm, me too." Suddenly, Kidresh's voice seemed different. Had the business of *flaming up* been too much for him as well? But then Tharle saw that, having prevailed upon Dreest, he was chewing a fistful of sliceblossom. "Haven't had this for years," he said. "Tastes like early mallowberries."

"I crushed some in," said the novice.

"Is that because you're partial to them, Dreest, or did you have a mountain of 'em stashed away after you'd perfected your magic berry-catcher? You know" – he stuffed another mouthful home – "I met our district berry-man just last week. Having a mighty rummage, he was, stripping all the bushes for miles. Big celebration on – Dame Pennater turning twice-ninety in three days, or a week, or tomorrow. Or perhaps she's been twice-

ninety for a year. Really, you'd think our time would stabilise out of respect for the elderly." He leaned forward and winked. "She's all agog for your birthday visit, Mopatakeh. *If you're thinking to him*, says she to me, *remind him about his duty. Twice-ninety, sir, gilded milestone. If he forgets I'll dunk him in the Billomingow*. Her husband was there, picture of exasperation. Well, she's been thinking the news all over the planet, like she was the first to be gilded. Old Gent Pennater rolls his eyes. A year younger than she is, you know... doesn't reckon he'll make his gilding, the way she's carrying on."

"My visit to Dame Pennater is at the crest of my mind, Kidresh," said Tharle, watching as his colleague put paid to another mouthful, wondering where his sober attention had got to now. Never before had Kidresh simply dropped his interest in any matter of grave consequence. But now... Tharle's mind roved at tenfold speed through Razalia's lore of medicine, returning none the wiser. No, no-one had written or proclaimed that sliceblossom was a quick intoxicant, or the juice of the mallowberry. But the two mixed together? Another quick sprint, this time through the annals of sliceblossom (Tharles for the use of), showed him that Dreest was the first to try the concoction. It had had no effect on him. He was young, though, and his invention and discoveries had kept him sharp as a thorn from a Sehundan snow-tree. Trying not to notice the hand that was again busy at the sliceblossom jar, Tharle quietly asked Dreest to continue, hoping that hearing more about sounds and galaxies would remind Kidresh of his wonted gravity.

"How far had your hearing taken you, then, Dreest? When you looked down on the cities filled with questions?"

"Far, far," said the novice, his bright eyes suggesting that he was there again. "Imagine our arc stretched fifty, a hundred times over – then as far again. There were vast expanses, oceans of dark with nothing to hear or see. Then it grew cold, colder than the deepest days of our *Silver Quiet*. All I knew –"

"Anyway, our berry-man." Despite a full

mouth, Kidresh's bellow was fine indeed. "Gathering 'em up for Dame Pennater's Twice-Ninety Pie. Three portions for every mouth in the settlement." His arms seemed to fly apart of their own accord. "Big, big, big, big, big. *Morning, Gent Satherfall*, says I. *Scaring the bushes for the good Dame, I see*. Satherfall" – he snorted and brayed together – "Satherfool, more like. He swings round from the bush, Dreest's marvellous catcher *pyoinnging* here and *totter-tipping* there in his hand – nearly has my nose off with the thing. And I'd only grown it out a second before. Kept it furled away, you see, till I was good and ready to enjoy the scents of the morn. *Oh, the scents of the morn*," he extemporised tunelessly, "*and the per-dee-perp of the dawn*." Then, seeming to think that he was Dreest's cloak, he lunged at the novice and wrapped his arms over his shoulders. "Not-that-I'm-blaming-you-Dreest-not-in-the-slightest-wouldn't-dream-of-it." Like a cloak itself, his voice fell in a draggled chant about the knoll. "No, Satherfool – my good Satherfooooool – he should have brought the thing to heel." Now Kidresh flailed about as though gaps of white had him in a murderous circle.

Aghast, Dreest tried to hunch clear of him, only to catch a pummelling as Kidresh fought his way upright. Meantime, the sliceblossom jar had made its escape and, contents frothing, was rolling easefully towards the Billomingow. With a scream to match a Galladeelean's at the words *you must toil for your keep*, Kidresh dived after it, gathered it in one becloaked arm, scooped a pile of rogue sliceblossom from the knoll and resumed.

"Not that I'm really blaming Satherfool either, for" – clasping his hands, he juddered about, miming a possessed berry-catcher with an old party on the end of it. "He probably couldn't tell where I was. Got a rotten case of half-glow at the moment. Left side in darkness every day. Common among berry-men, did you know that?" Kidresh pulled his cloak about him with righteous fussiness. "I blame the umber moons. Well" – his hand delved deep in the jar – "what use are they? Eh? All our twinges and sores, they could sort them out. Wrap the planet in healing

rhythms, calm it, regulate it. But do they care, jiggling and alley-oooping about? Every Razalian should reach double-ninety, you know, but do they? Do they?" He rounded on Dreest, who was wondering what strange, zig-zag arc had led the talk from his own discoveries to these wayward imprecations. "Look at them!" cried Kidresh, pointing up at nothing. "They see how the sun treats us, but do they lift a finger to help? Call yourself moons! You're rubbish! All your alignment business – what's that about? Just gets the cracks and shingle in a tizz." He staggered to his feet. "Oi! Fairy-beads! I'm talking to you! Right, then –" He stood up, just about, and approached Dreest's colander. "You're for stuffing into this, my lads! See how you like life in the only hut in a desert." Swaying, trying to grab hold of the strap-stirrups, he cried, "Be it known, I am de-mooning Razalia!"

"Master!" The cry had been a long time swimming into Tharle's awareness. Dreest had uttered it the moment the jar had got away from Kidresh – the moment after Tharle had gone into another trance of astonishment. But now Dreest's cry rang clear in his head. He stared hard at Kidresh, who was alternately grabbing for the straps and swaying like a mallowberry bush in a gust of elastic time. He hoped he could do this. He'd only had to do it once before, when he'd come upon a group of foolish young playing a game of chicken at the Mopatakeh gap, racing up to the white, making to plunge in, then skidding to a heartstopping halt. He'd unskidded them, unplunged them, had them all running backwards to their several homes, the urge to play at dying purged from their minds. Now, his watching glow trebled its power. It worked. In less than a Razalian minute, Kidresh had stumbled backwards from the colander, unstood, unsat, unscrambled for the fugitive jar and unlunged at Dreest. Like a pumping-mule at an oil-well, his hand had risen and fallen over the jar, which had rapidly filled with uneaten slice-blossom. A minute later, Tharle's glow had subsided and the jar was back in Dreest's lap. Leaning in with grave solicitude, Kidresh was again saying that, even if Tharle himself had devised the contraption on the knoll, he would

still have had a deal of waiting to do until its wonders made sense. "Now, Dreest," he added, "you were describing cities full of questions." And he pushed one lobe upwards to show he was all concentration. With a brief look of amazed gratitude at Tharle, the novice continued:

"Yes... yes, I said that my ears and eyes were far from here when I came upon the cities."

"You said that?" Kidresh chuckled. "Oceans lave us, my memory's playing the fool." Then, frowning, he glued fingers to lobe again. "Actually, I do feel a bit –" His words trailed into a helpless shake of his other hand.

"No, I can't remember that part, either," said Tharle, eyes widening at Dreest.

"Oh... oh, well, perhaps I... yes... yes, I was far and far. Farther than – than –"

"*Our arc stretched fifty, a hundred times over,*" Tharle thought at him. "*Expanses... oceans... nothing to see or hear... then cold... colder than deepest days of Silver Quiet.*" With a thankful look at his Master, Dreest repeated his own words. This time he sounded uncharacteristically dramatic, more like the decisive Venacarr, so that Kidresh forgot the oddness buzzing about his head and breathed "Goodness" as though he were an ordinary Razalian who, just that minute, had finished a dip in the Billomingow and stumbled on the leaders' parley.

"And then," said Dreest, "I found us."

"Us?" Surprise flashed from Tharle to Kidresh and back, as though Dreest's simple words had set their own glow weaving about the knoll. Independently, it seemed, Kidresh's fingers made a speculative voyage of either ear.

"Us," repeated Tharle in a whisper. As the word sank in, his glow made an aimless sweep of the knoll, Dreest's contraption and the quiet run of the Billomingow, returning at last to the novice. His lips shaped themselves for his next word. For a moment they stayed that way, as though he wasn't sure what the word was or what would follow it. At last, reminding himself that he was not a Sehundan helot, he gently managed:

"And where were we?"

"In our Maker's book."

Whatever Dreest answered, Kidresh had

determined to be as encouraging as Tharle. The novice's response, however, was even more bewildering than *I found us*, and Kidresh's sense of sounds and meanings folded itself away. "Book," he repeated almost nervously, as though he had come upon the word floating in a gap of white. Razalia was filled with books of all sorts: compendia, puzzles for the young, lives of Razalians notable and ordinary. His own Settlement House bulged with them, to the point where Dame Pennater – who saw her imminent gilding as justification for pitching up daily at his door – declared that he was at the point of self-eviction. Still, repeating the word again – stretching it, reducing it to two consonants knocking together – he seemed flummoxed by it. As for Tharle, it looked as though he, not Kidresh, had gorged on the sliceblossom. His watching light played on the air like a distended firefly, finally coming to rest on his own lap. Then he sat motionless, as though he were no longer the leader of Razalia but some elaborate, forgotten storm-lamp.

Between them, Dreest twitched and shuffled. His old anxiety was reclaiming him. A moment longer and he might have been on his feet again, addressing Tharle as *Trimmer of the Glow*, praising Kidresh for dodging his unintentional *enchaffment*. Luckily, Tharle began to think aloud and, realising his duty to lead his Master from the deeps of confusion, the novice calmed himself again.

"So," Tharle said, laying his words out like cards, "our Maker still exists and has us fast in a book."

"Book," intoned Kidresh again, this time letting its vowel flutter and fall to rest against the *k*.

"It grew so cold," Dreest continued quickly, "that I thought I must have reached the end of everything. There was nothing but the rustle of freezing currents, the moan of gathering ice. I wondered if I was hearing pure forsaken midnight, stripped of any clusters or galaxies, rolling out like a one-way tide through the ever and ever."

At these last words, the sound of the Billomingow spread disconcertingly through

Tharle's mind. By then, however, Kidresh had somehow made his peace with *book* and caught up, steeling himself for whatever new perplexity Dreest might throw at them. So it was that he stoically shared the image which now possessed Tharle. They saw themselves with Dreest on his astonishing journey – or rather, they saw the novice as he negotiated the pits and ranges of space, dragging them in his wake as if on leading-strings, their ears filled with the tumult or static of other Makers' works. Reflexively, Kidresh rubbed hands and then ears, momentarily convinced that the fire of life was deserting him.

"But then other noises awoke," said Dreest, "and started to move about. I think I must have reached the last galaxy, or at least a forgotten one, decillions of leagues from the question-cities, the valleys with their first flowers. I heard my way over planets again – tiny planets that spoke in mists and gases, and a larger planet girdled with a sound like a... like a carousel of rocks... and another that had tantrums of red heat and fierce winds."

At this, his hearers relaxed a little. Now, Dreest seemed to speak of living sound, of sights such as Razalia itself might offer. They imagined the tiny planets he described, their babble of mists and gases, and heard the swoosh of their own shores as they bunched and hollowed at the umber moons' command. They pictured the carousel of rocks as a million such moons, leapfrogging and figure-of-eighting as they swung round their circle.

"Fancy," murmured Kidresh, feeling no rancour at all at this far grander display of pointless energy. Gradually, their image faded of themselves as intergalactic toddlers, stumbling behind the pioneering Dreest. They even managed a sigh of relief, albeit barely audible. On the knoll, the air began to warm and comfort. Again the Billomingow was merely lazy, not a torrent of strangeness.

By now, Dreest had shuffled back a little, so that his glow could move with more ease between the two faces gravely agog:

"Suddenly, I sensed help for our case again – stronger than ever. Up to then, I was hearing

much, seeing little. Now I had to see properly, deep down.” But here he broke off with a long, whinnying laugh.

Tharle and Kidresh jumped as one. What comfort and relief was this noise meant to offer? How could it possibly aid his tale? Convinced anyway that Dreest couldn’t run to an amiable chuckle, they found his explosion as frightening as the prospect of a night among the gliding trees of Lachbourigg. They tried to get into his mind, but the way was blocked. Kidresh thought to Tharle that the sheer weight of some hideous recollection must have pushed Dreest’s reason off its perch. Tharle wondered if Dreest’s special compound was finally doing its worst but, mindful of Kidresh’s performance a short while before, he chose not to share this for fear of triggering in him a fresh need to assault the jar.

“Let us see,” he thought back instead. “The peal of bells can green the brownest grasses” (an old Razalian saying which roughly translates as “Laughter is the best medicine”). “Perhaps he is merely recalling some fancy too foolish to share.” But then he saw Dreest’s eyes and berated himself for a fool. Why was he dragging up whiskery old proverbs? Why was he lugging such stuff around in his head at all? The novice looked terrified. Had Kidresh thought true? If he had – oh, oceans lave us, there was no precedent for this, a leader lost in madness. They’d have to get another Dreest – but how long would that take? And how would anyone find out, now, how to use the... well, the bowl on a stick before them? And would they want to, even if Razalia’s Maker was floating about at the bottom of it?

“Mopatakeh!” Reprimand rather than name, the word rang hugely in Tharle’s head. It hadn’t come from Kidresh. He was chiding himself. Again he’d dropped his duty of care, letting it skitter off like that infernal jar of sliceblossom. If Kidresh was right, the novice had sacrificed his reason for Razalia. This was nobility in action, not a fleeting inconvenience. The first thing to do was try, however great the odds, to coax that poor brain back to sanity. The bowl and stick could wait – and the gaps of white. Why, if need be, he’d bring the things to heel with one long stare, fiercer than any pyre-rocket

Sehunda had ever launched at Barask. The main thing –

Something was bothering his vision. It was Dreest’s glow, which was wobbling about as though the sun’s pulses were having their way with it. His hands were clapped to the side of his face. He was still laughing, but now it was just that kind of chuckle of which Tharle had thought him incapable. “Fool, fool, fool,” Tharle heard, and for a moment he thought it was his own mind, still on at him for clogging it up with old, cosy-sounding saws, for his cold pragmatism in the face of his novice’s distress. But it was Dreest, ticking himself off.

“Forgive me, Master, good Kidresh,” he said, steadying his glow. “A proper horror just rushed through me, and I clean forgot I’d survived it. Had I not, how could I be here?” His tone was self-mocking, but quietly so. There was no hint of imminent mortification, not the slightest shuffle or helpless jig of the hands. Tharle wondered if he was growing up after all – if he was realising that his shambling, puppyish self could play no part in these present revelations. He tried his best smile of encouragement to the novice, an effort only partly undermined by his noticing, at the edge of his glow, that Kidresh was eyeing the sliceblossom jar with something like – like what? Dipping into his seasoned colleague’s mind, he found only a bewildered question – *what does a wonder like Dreest need with all that shrubbery?* – and withdrew in relief.

“The thing is,” Dreest went on, “as soon as I gazed deep down, I found something strong all right – but not what a Razalian would call help. White came at me.”

“White!” exclaimed Tharle.

“Leagues of it. At first I thought one of our gaps had streamed along in the wake of my hearing, ready to snuff me out. Never mind just creeping. It was energy itself. It became its own planet, ridges and lakes and all, rolling away to the very edge of my sight. Then it was a crazed thing, mad to wrap itself about me, to get into my mouth, down to my heart. I hung on to the straps for dear life – the bowl spun like a wheel about my face. My sight was dropping, dropping

like a sun-scorched bird, the white still hard round me.”

“What did it feel like?” Kidresh asked.

“Like the brush of a million tiny hairs. Hairs wet and cold from a proper dousing. Hairs that would any moment turn to briars, even nails, and press deep.”

At this, Tharle sprang up and, boosting his glow and vision to their extremes, trained a long look upon the Mopatakeh gap. Taking his cue, Kidresh stood and flickered his eyes shut. His glow broke apart like plumes of breath from a horse pulling fuel or provisions in the depths of *The Silver Quiet*. Doggedly, his inner eye roved all the other gaps of Razalia. They had sat down again before Dreest quite knew what was happening – sat down in guarded thankfulness.

“No movement from our neighbour-gap,” Tharle said to Dreest.

“Nor elsewhere,” added Kidresh. “Sorry, Dreest, it was all that about briars and nails. Didn’t want to turn and find our white was brushing its way over the whole planet.”

Dreest understood: “I can’t say that my ambush of white was the same as lurks in our gaps. If it was, my escape was merciful – it tore apart at last, loosed its hold on me. Now I was seeing down faster, through a kind of blue – nearly what we get when the sun bestirs itself to call, but brighter, more evenly spread across that vastness in my bowl.”

“The kind it bestows on everything else in our arc,” grumbled Kidresh. “Yes, the sun has a furnace-hand in our predicament. Mark me.”

Dreest chuckled again: “Not that it lasted long – not even as long as the fortnightly crumb it throws us. Grey was rising towards me, great bulks and spurs of it.”

At once, Kidresh looked up and flung his arms apart. Tharle wondered if, sliceblossom or no, he was about to flay the umber moons again, damning them as the sun’s henchmen. But he was warming further to his theme of the moment: “Grey! Doleful grey! Exactly how our beloved sun would love to see us wrapped for good and all! Oceans lave us, you can always feel – you can even hear – its reluctance to cross our threshold. I can, anyway. Wheezing down

from the forsaken midnight, all its fancy fireworks popping and pffutting –”

“Kidresh.” Tharle’s hand was light but determined on his arm. “The sun is as it is. We Razalians may lament that... but we accept. You know that.” He glowed purposefully at Kidresh’s brow. “Now, seal the sun away. Our present business is otherwise. If the sun indeed has some part to play in our gaps’ encroachment –”

“Dreest will discover!” Kidresh sailed in, jabbing a hand at the colander-and-stick. “With his miracle!”

“Ah... I’m not altogether sure – ah.” Dreest’s mouth worked between agreement and denial. “Thing is, I haven’t yet –”

“Yet isn’t never, Dreest. No bashfulness, at this of all moments. Proceed.”

“Bulks and spurs of grey, Dreest,” prompted Tharle; then, into the mind of their splenetic companion, *Leave be, Kidresh. See how confident the boy’s tale makes him. We mustn’t jitter him up again. Come to that, we mustn’t crumple like dolls again at any new marvel. We shall consider the sun when we consider the sun.* Kidresh laid his hands upon his chest in mainly gracious, slightly irked accession to his leader’s wishes. “Apologies, Dreest. Let’s have the bulks and spurs.”

“For a moment I thought the white had shot down past me into hostile altitudes and was starting to die. All was dollops of grey. Then came other spurs and twists – dark blue, darker than our amethyst skies. But as I looked, the grey performed wondrously – changed itself to settlements, tiny and huge. And the blue became inland seas, fingers of rivers, and the settlements clung to the blue or raced away from it, climbing hills, tumbling into valleys.”

“Are you sure you hadn’t heard and seen your way back home, Dreest? And didn’t know it?” Tharle felt his puzzlement expand as he spoke. It was as if he was asking more than he properly knew.

“So it sounds, Master. I might say, yes – apart from the birds’ eggs.”

“Birds’ eggs?” Tharle leaned a little away from the novice. Uncharacteristically, Kidresh

stretched out and propped his head on one hand (but not before he'd given both lobes the ghost of a tickle).

Dreest craved Tharle's pardon: "That's how they looked to me, nestled among all that grey. At first I thought them speckled with – well, no colours we have on Razalia. But then they declared themselves. Red like the egg of a Carolles sheenaloft. Yellow like the Sehundan snow-duster. Lemon like our own hop-ridge. And they weren't inert. They were moving on pepper-covered stoneways, lurching and bouncing like the roisterers will doubtless be at Dame Pennater's Twice-Ninety gilding."

"How true," sighed Kidresh.

"So these eggs," said Tharle, "were rolling themselves in drunken lines."

"When they weren't spinning round circles of green – sorrier than the stoneways, those. Grim little attempts at shrubs and flowers on them. They reminded me of that galaxy of valleys I'd heard along, leagues back, where the first flowers had come and no-one knew whether to eat them or marry them or what."

"Hmph," said Kidresh. "They remind me of the average Baraskian's efforts at raising a garden." He shook his head. "Oceans lave us. And eggs spinning about them. I must say, Dreest, you got yourself into a queer nook of creation."

"Not so queer, in the end." Dreest smiled. "It took me some while to shake off the 'egg' notion – to see things as they really were." He gave another chuckle, which Tharle copied encouragingly, thinking that mirth suited their young colleague after all. "No," Dreest continued, "when I magnified my gaze, I saw they weren't eggs – but even then I didn't get it right. Primeval Galladeeleans was my next guess."

"Good Dreest, in the grand long ago, Galladeelee flowered exactly as it is now," Kidresh sounded as though he were orating to Razalia's massed schoolchildren. Like many others, he found it difficult to credit that something had actually troubled itself to create Galladeelee. More appealing was the idea that it had popped out of nothing, like a self-made firework which, instead of dissipating, hung in the

air, refining its gaudiness. "The planet of the rouge catacombs never had a primeval phase. Though I suppose, if you want to look at it the other way round, primeval is the only phase it will ever know."

"But what could he do, Kidresh, save use his knowledge of us, of our planets?" As he spoke, even Tharle's finger now closed discreetly on an earlobe. "Assume, connect, eliminate. I should have done likewise. So should you. He didn't have the name for these drunken oddities. It's doubtful they would have shouted it out as they rolled along. So" – he beamed at Dreest – "what were these non-eggs? And why did you think of riotous Galladeelee?"

"Busy little boxes," said Dreest, "with crazy wheels. Not that they were all little. There were some real bruisers among them, as long as a chara-jet. They had wheels all over, even up off the stoneways, just for show – like a child's drawing of a market-cart. And it was all the jostling – the drunkenness, as I called it – that made me think of our wild-limbed neighbours. Every last box was rocking and shoving away. I actually expected them to sprout a tangle of arms and legs – to start a mighty old flap."

Tharle thought of the chara-jets that morning and evening, their freight of roisterers. He could see why Dreest had assumed and connected thus.

"So these were actual creatures?" Astonishment had narrowed Kidresh's light to a glowing sheet. "Not closed carts with mad... things inside them?"

"So it seemed." Dreest flapped his arms helplessly. "Imagine yourself in a blizzard, good Kidresh. Or on Lachbourigg at midnight with all those trees roving about you. Imagine so much coming at you – not just through eyes and ears but over your whole being. That's how it was for me. I felt that I wasn't just bent over that bowl, seeing and hearing. I was there. The great slabs of distance were crushed. I was hovering right above them. That's why I hung onto the Galladeelee notion, I suppose. It was either that or lose myself completely. And I couldn't do that – I just knew there was something for our case down there."

"Among boxy creatures," mused Kidresh, "dancing about for the sheer foolery of it."

"Well, as for that" – Dreest shuffled about; his glow betrayed a well-reddened face – "I wondered if it was foolery. I wondered," he mumbled shyly, "if they weren't... preparing."

Tharle and Kidresh frowned together: "And what," said Tharle, "might such frenzy be preparation for?"

Dreest drew a deep breath. Hesitantly, he brought his hands to within an inch of each other, twisting them this way and that as if demonstrating a stringless cat's-cradle. He didn't seem wholly aware of what he was doing. Certainly, the three kisses he blew at the Billomingow were a shock all round.

"For mating," he said.

The two other lights turned awkwardly aside. A cough funnelled along Kidresh's.

"It was the noise they made," persisted Dreest. "Little parps and weeps, then a long bellow, then a bit of squawking. I wondered if they were trying to... you know, select... pair up... off... so that..." He sought about for a conclusion to his theory. It was like looking for a pinhead of light at the end of an impassable tunnel.

"Hundreds mating in the open," said Kidresh. "Yes, Dreest, you found something primeval. I doubt if Galladeelee itself could boast such sport. Most troublesome," he concluded wearily. His mind ran on courting couples who, thanks to the zealous patrolling of such as DamePennater, would from time to time be drawn shamefaced from wood or copse around his settlement. Personally, despite his present words, it didn't bother him that much. He was rather of the opinion that love should have its way. But he had to be seen to be properly Tharlian about it, delivering homilies, inserting fleas in ears. It was irksome. And Dreest's theory made him picture, most unwillingly, what would happen if mass passion took hold back home. He could hear Dame Pennater and her cronies holding him personally responsible for the evaporation of all morals. "Decency?" came the Dame's imperious tone. "Decency? Gone from this settlement,

Kidresh. See now? There's the last shred of it going *pfffft* on the top of Maker's Mountain."

"Mind you," said Dreest, "the moons would stop them, ever and again."

"Moons?" repeated Tharle. Like Kidresh, he had been reflecting on courting couples, but they hadn't made him doleful. His strategy for dealing with them spared blushes and forestalled the gripes of his own Dame Pennaters. He exploited his throat, clearing it mightily whenever his patrol of Mopatakeh took him deep into nature, then sealing off his eyes and ears so that anyone who had to could retreat undetected. A little hum topped off his efforts, meaning *don't let me fail to see you again*. Thus far, no ardent youth or maiden had ignored his bidding.

"Trios of moons," Dreest was saying now. "Everywhere. As nimble as ours, too, though hardly as adventurous. They cling to poles like fat old grapes on a vine. Like this –" He trained his glow on the ground before him. The others followed suit. By the tripled light, Tharle and Kidresh saw Dreest's finger score a line in the grass, then prod three points at the top. "And they leapfrog, like ours, so fast you don't see them jump out and back. But they never slide down the pole, or shoot off it. Just the same motions in the same space – no urge to dart about – not like ours – you know, when the sun vanishes and they blow raspberries at its tail."

"And these, too, are natural beings, like the boxes?" asked Tharle. "Not some artificial contrivance?"

Dreest nodded vigorously: "They leap as blithely as fish in a stream," he declared in bardic tones. "A sad little stream, but there it is. And they do their bit for public order. When a particular moon hops to the very top of the pole, whole lines of boxes stop their wheezing and parping. And when another moon does, they start their jostling again, and another lot shut down."

"Moons like proper acrobats," mused Kidresh, "and with restraining effect. They sound positively mannerly – just the thing for our skies." Picking a point where he supposed the umber moons to be, he glowered up, his light sweeping the forsaken midnight like an emul-

sion-brush. Tharle quaked a moment, fearing an inexplicable return of his sliceblossom turmoil. But Kidresh was content to hiss, “Your days could well be numbered,” before returning his attention to Dreest’s line in the grass.

“And you still thought,” said Tharle, “that you’d found some ancient Galladeelee?”

“Not after watching the moons for a while. I saw – method there – a pride in cause and effect – however unseemly the general spectacle might have been. That’s just not the Galladeelee way.”

“No,” Tharle added, “I should have discarded that notion myself.” Despite a look of prompting enquiry from Kidresh, he fell silent. Cause and effect, he was thinking. Nature organising nature. And moons again. Kidresh would hardly agree with him, but wasn’t there some correspondence with their own gadfly moons? They align: the burning shingle makes new landscapes, veritable worlds of itself. Exactly between their alignments, the cracks beyond the tides flex their way through every last shape in the galaxy. And always there is precision: always the moons elude the scrunch and drag of Razalian time – which is far worse, anyway, than their clowning. Yes, the umber moons perplex and exasperate. Yes, you would think they were Galladeeleans themselves, the way they cheek the sun at its departure. But mightn’t that be play well earned – for duties whose method and aim Razalia doesn’t yet understand? He’d had his doubts. Part of him had thought that, despite his conviction, Dreest had dropped down any-where. But that assumption was fading; a connection was firming up. Yes, this was indeed sounding like their Maker’s home. New home. His – what? – second go at creation? A new Razalia? True, the notion that their Maker might be a lascivious box on wheels didn’t bear over-much thinking. Still, best to be patient until Dreest – suddenly Tharle felt something stir at the edge of his mind. *I couldn’t help it, Mopatakeh*, thought Kidresh at him. *I know what we agreed: outer talk for each new revelation this night. But I really had to know what you felt* – there was a long silence then: Kidresh was considering Tharle’s thoughts, as if standing on the bank of his own Billomingow while they

streamed past his inward eye. Finally, *Our moons?* thought Kidresh sharply. *With a purpose? Oceans lave us, Mopatakeh, as tall orders go...* But then a softening in his tone: *I was doubtful myself. But no-one will ever hear and see as much as Dreest – no, not even the admirable Carollessa. And if he’s right, we have indeed heard our Maker. And I think that, if we simply –*

Simply what, Tharle never knew. Nor in fact did Kidresh, who’d decided to raise Tharle’s roof with some grand final pronouncement but had neither words nor sentiment to hand. Dreest’s voice came showering down on them: “So strong I thought I’d explode!” They stared at the novice, who seemed to be shining on all Razalia, his glow waving about like a huge, errant flame. “I was close. Help for our case – the best and only help – was as near as that” – he pointed down the Billomingow to where an islet split the waters. “Once I felt it as strong as that, I couldn’t loiter. So – one minute I was looking down at one of those green circles, with its derelict shrubs and those passionate boxes skeltering round. The next, I was off down a stoneway as if something gigantic was drawing breath and I was aimed straight for its mouth. There were dwellings – as alive as the boxes, it seemed, though that might have been the speed of my eyes. Some came bellying right up to the road; others scuttled back, petrified of something, and hid behind crook-necked flowers and tatty little greens – not a mallowberry in sight, by the way. I just missed a huge creature, a chara-jet and a half – parping away, heaving its rump to the road. And the road! Mad as anything I’d seen, twisting this way and that –”

“Like the crack-plains!” cried Kidresh.

“Exactly so!” Tharle rejoined.

“– dragging me along as if it had me by the nose. And I saw a grey cliff with scores of mirror-windows and lines of the creatures all quiet outside. And the cliff was splashing and squealing –”

Fearfully, Kidresh raised a hand: “Good Dreest, I may not be as crammed with time as Razalia, but I’ve eaten years enough and my face is lined from the chore. I implore you,

humour a fading Tharle and spare us your theory on squealing cliffs.”

“I have none,” said Dreest. “I had scarcely a moment to see it before the wall.”

This he had seen in some detail. He described its restless coping, the way it buckled out and swayed back. He dwelt on its curious cuts of stone, some sticking out like a fist, others seeming to hang unsupported from its side.

“That’s the wall round the Guiding,” said Tharle. “If it’s not, I’m a stranger to my own sight. I stared hard enough at it yesterday, Kidresh, while I was thinking to you of the gaps.”

Kidresh didn’t seem to hear: “That’s the wall Gent Pennater and Satherfall built,” he declared, “to keep the settlement hogs from snouting the Maker’s mountain geese to death.”

“It was playing a game,” said Dreest. “There was thwacking and cries and different parps and beeps.”

“Oh, well, you get that with walls.” Kidresh sounded as solemnly knowing as when he’d meditated on Lachbourigg and its solitary, tree-proof house. Ideally, after the excitement of recognition, he and Tharle would have enjoyed the chance to sigh in unison, lapse into brief repose and catch their breath for the end of the novice’s journey. But Dreest was already leaving the wall behind:

“– like something had my ears by the lobes – hauling me into this curious dwelling. Stairs flapped down past my eyes, then I was plonked on flatness, then more stairs, more flatness – then my eyes shinned a berry-man’s ladder, up into a brown triangle of dust and planking – and there it was, there he was – our Maker, with us in his book.”

His hearers swayed like the exposed roots of the Nine Oceans. Their hands sought the firm earth beneath the grass. No repose now: they felt as though they’d burst up through the dwelling on Dreest’s back. Tharle shook his head vigorously:

“And was he... is he... a wheeled box? Did he parp?”

Kidresh recalled the novice’s mating theory: “Did he pant?”

Dreest, now worn out himself, fanned his face with a fold of cloak: “Just like us,” he said quietly. “Except he seemed smaller.”

“Ah,” said Tharle, “so he made two prime species for his new planet.” On behalf of Razalia, he sounded a little hard done by.

Kidresh glowed steadily at Dreest: “What does he call this planet, Dreest?”

The novice pressed his fingers lightly to his brow. The name fluttered out over the knoll.

“What an odd sound,” said Tharle. “Like someone trying to work a Sehundan sournut from the back of their throat.”

Save for the odd lapse by Kidresh, that was the end of all extraneous comment. No more did watching lights bob and flash in astonishment or irritation. There were no further imprecations against the umber moons. To Tharle and Dreest’s relief, there was no further chaotic business with the sliceblossom jar (which, in any case, Dreest tucked into his cloak and, a while later, transferred to his invention-bag).

“His book,” said Kidresh. “Was it a map of Razalia?”

Dreest scratched his head: “No, not really. It was a queer-looking thing. Sort of an almanac, or – just on the line where an almanac becomes a scrap-book.”

His hearers hmm’d recognition. In their official houses, there was a goodly shelf of such books, whose name is best translated as *Knowscapes*. They were half-printed with general principles and philosophies of use to the practising Tharle; but the other half was blank, so that each settlement’s incumbent could add, verbally or diagrammatically, any experience whose worth might benefit a successor. By the time a volume was filled, the next was ready for the shelf. The printed half varied little, unless a particular *Candling of Eyes*, the counsel of Tharles, led to the adoption of a new general principle or modification of Tharliian philosophy. As for the blank part, its sometimes close-written, sometimes sketched, sometimes three-dimensional contents were shared on an *ad hoc* basis across the planet. One leader might, for example, think most anxiously to his peers about a poor mallowberry season. Another might

discover a predecessor's record of a similar famine in his own settlement, together with opinions on ending the misfortune. At such times, however dire the problem, the telepathically-charged air was almost merry. This, after all, was an exchange-and-mart between some of the most singular thinkers in creation; and a solution to the problem, or at least a brake on any further deterioration, was usually not long in coming. For a moment, Tharle and Kidresh wondered if future *knowscapes* would boast the heading *White, gaps, curtailment of. Eradication*, of course, would be the ideal.

The two of them shared their thoughts with Dreest.

"I don't know if I'd call his book a *Knowscape*," said the novice. "*Hopescape*, perhaps. It seemed to be mainly plans for planets he'd like to create. I didn't get a feeling that they were records of real places. I didn't get any feeling at all, until he found a page and lost it. Then there was the sharpest pain in my head, like strings pulling themselves out of my temples and entwining before my eyes – or a finger jabbing out of my skull. Somehow, I'd just seen us! I might have rediscovered the page for him – I can't remember. In any event, he turned back to it – and there were our valleys, our outwaters" – he nodded to Kidresh – "and Maker's mountain to its very tip."

Tharle's voice came softly: "And the white?"

"That, too." At this, Dreest's hearers sighed.

"I didn't see it immediately," said Dreest, "nor any of it – not in detail. I had to expand the whole picture to make sure. I think it shocked him."

"I wonder if he planned it?" said Tharle. "The white. For some purpose. As our umber moons might be." He blinked before Kidresh's gaze: "Might incredibly be," he corrected himself.

"There was... something else." For a second, Dreest looked about to succumb to a fresh burst of twisting and apologies and pleas to be *enchaffed*. Tharle laid a firm hand on his arm.

"Good Dreest, it is hardly as though we know this tale you tell us – every scrap from dawn to eve – and are testing your knowledge of it. In all of this, you are our leader. Who contrived this

voyage of ear and eye to make these discoveries? Not Kidresh, not me. We are resolved not to" – he turned to Kidresh – "what did I say we shouldn't do, however astonishing his news?"

"Crumple like dolls," muttered Kidresh. "Though I should much have preferred "Like the Razalian rose at glowfall." I've been called some things in my time, most of them by Dame Pennater, but a doll is –"

"The something else, Dreest." Tharle raised a hand square into Kidresh's glow, which dimmed grudgingly.

"There was so much in the picture. Hard against its left was a cluster of dots and blobs. I'm sure they were the planets I'd heard and seen along, just before I reached – again he pronounced the name of the Maker's new planet; his hearers winced.

"He'll have to call it something better than that," said Kidresh. "Come to think of it, I heard the very same noise at one of our Baraskian Festivals once. A Galladeelean waiter – waiter, mark you! When did Galladeeleans ever wait, except till the danger of honest work disappeared? – anyway, a so-called waiter was just draining the dregs of a flagon when he let fly –"

"His new planet must have been amongst them," the novice drove on. "But then the picture glided into something different. Our arc. From such a strange angle. Such as the sun might see if it circled our eastward side alone. I could make out Sehunda. I think I saw Carolles. But they fell away in a line of curves and satellites. Razalia was at the head, right against my eyes."

His words warmed Tharle and Kidresh, reminding them of how the other planets in the arc saw theirs: as keeper of time before their times, image of their long-buried, fledgling selves – a beguiling conundrum of wisdom and frailty. Razalia at the head: right that it should be. They smiled benignly on Dreest, who now spoke of writing.

"It was above the picture, strung from left to right. Exactly what it meant, I couldn't tell. I was weakening quickly. It was... the end of some record. A *knowscape* memorandum? An account of Razalia's creation, perhaps? An epic of storm

and battle? Something, it said, was speeding past the Arc of the Sixteen planets, right over us.” In his weakened state, Dreest had got only the barest gist of the writing on the Maker’s page. The embroidery – describing Razalia as *unfinished, overlooked, the very runt of that system* – had happily defeated him. “I could see it, too,” he added emphatically. “The creature in the sky.”

“What was it?” Kidresh was agog. “What was speeding?”

By his own confession, Dreest had seen nothing of the epic over which their Maker had pored. He knew nothing of “The Magenta Line,” or what it might signify. He knew nothing of the creatures Broom and Anstey, or Goody Trower or Squire Evershed. Still, he’d gleaned enough to provide an answer for Kidresh – though he feared that it would take a prodigious effort to find the intelligible Razalian for “Farhanva, Planet of the Rising Age” or “twenty-foot pregnant seahorse”.

Again he pressed his brow like a medium, as he had when conjuring the name that seemed so crude for their Maker’s new home.

“A *curiotwist*,” he said finally.

Tharle and Kidresh started. A *curiotwist* was a Razalian question-mark, far more elaborately inscribed than its abused counterpart on Earth.

“A flying *curiotwist*?” Kidresh’s lobes came in for some mighty prodding.

“Shaped like that... no, it was... a limbless, baby-bubbled horse with fans for shoulders, three Razalians high. It was from –” But “Planet of the Rising Age” emerged as “old clod waking up”. As for “Farhanva,” the name seemed to make his voice melt, so that Tharle and Kidresh were treated to a gargle, a whistle and a belch. Understanding that, whatever it was, the word had stuck fast between Dreest’s brain and his gullet, they didn’t press him. Besides, the baby-bubbled horse was enough for now. Not that Tharle or Kidresh were especially dismayed by the sound of it. In their own system, several planets were home to creatures as bizarre – even more so. Sehundans, for example, were so improbable of structure and aspect that, on Razalia, a kind of proverb had developed about

them, best translated as *once seen, never remembered*, implying that they were so hard to credit, except as the stuff of night-fever, that the average mind voided their image. Most of the other planets had similar sayings about them – with the inevitable exception of Barask, whose inhabitants, never noted for abstraction, had spent much of their remoter history trying to ensure that there was no Sehunda to forget. But it was the very existence of this horse, this limbless *curiotwist*, that filled Dreest’s hearers with awe. Here was a creature which had played some part, crucial or literally fleeting, in Razalia’s conception. Why else would he be in the Maker’s book?

Now Dreest had a fresh surprise for them; “I can... I think I can conjure its likeness,” he said. “Weak I might have been, but its image went deep.” He thumped his chest. Tharle nodded assent, at which Dreest stood up and began lightly drumming his brow with the fingers of both hands. From centre to temples and back they moved, as if stuck in one figure of an eternal dance. Slowly, the limbless *curiotwist* rose over the Billomingow, its tail just clearing the water. Once at rest, it resembled a moon which, having found its place in the heavens, starts to melt and flow back to its lair below the horizon. Dreest had managed a fair approximation of the creature in the Maker’s book, save for its bodily texture. The book presented its skin like crazy paving. But Dreest had so much on his mind when he looked upon the book – enough, indeed, for two more minds besides – that he’d been momentarily distracted when his Maker lost the page, thereby absorbing a blink of an image from elsewhere. So it was that, from curled head to questioning tale, the *curiotwist* was now clad in the discreet check sometimes favoured by Eddie Beplate, “Clarinetist Against Crime”.

The image compelled attention. Tharle and Kidresh didn’t hear Dreest when, fatigued by the conjuration, he groaned and sank back down between them. Under its spell, Tharle began throwing out theories as though compiling a list of highly speculative advice for the the Mopotakeh *knowscape*: “Perhaps it was the

Maker's apprentice, and it went rummaging through the system for ideas to complete us... as far as Sehunda, where they took one look at it and" – here his finger described the creature's ignominious trajectory. "Or was it a rival Maker, an adversary who went boasting of how it had thwarted the Maker's plans to finish Razalia – even stolen them from his head – so that there was only white where there should have been natural beauty? And did our sister planets tire of its boast – even fear that it might have terrible plans to reshape them? Did they catch it off-guard and hurl it from our midst?"

At this, Kidresh's concentration broke. He pulled his cloak tight round him, tut-tutting away. "Yes, yes, Mopatakeh," he said, "but its business wasn't with the Sixteen Planets alone. Dreest said it had travelled over the galaxy where the wonder-boy is hiding his face."

Tharle arched an eyebrow: "Wonder-boy?"

"Our Maker, so-called." Kidresh was decidedly peevish. "My apologies, Mopatakeh, but at present I'm none too impressed by him. Ah" – he held up his hands in a forestalling gesture – "I'm not courting agreement. I don't even wish to sound your minds in the matter. But Dreest only found him at the uttermost end of the line. What being skedaddles that far from its offspring? Even Sehundans acknowledge their young until they can stand upright. As for your theories, Mopatakeh, I don't discount them, but I'm much oppressed by the thought that they might be true." Now he spread his hands wide, as if determined to grab the knoll by its sides and uproot it. "Self-respecting Makers don't have rivals, do they, in or out of their systems? Or if they do, surely they see them off before getting down to the business of making. And you vet apprentices, don't you? Every last Razalian farrier will tell you that."

Tharle said nothing. He didn't resent Kidresh's words – which were, after all, food for much meditation. But his mind was presently in thrall to the *curiotwist*. There its likeness was, hanging resplendent before them. At that moment, it was more real than their Maker. It looked as if it would turn its head and charm fresh speculation from him. Besides, for all his

prodigious powers, Dreest couldn't keep it there much longer. Luckily, Kidresh gave his special string of coughs, which always struck any stranger as one cough and a stutter of echoes. Simultaneously, he lowered his hands, rubbed them with exquisite lightness, then gave three claps. Tharle knew what his antics meant: *profound grump suspended*. So did Dreest, who'd seen them more than once on the way to the capital, and who now broke in with, "I think it's at my lips... the name of the *curiotwist's* home." The others looked at him as he wrestled again with "Farhanva, Planet of the Rising Age". This time, after a near-swoon, he got the words out.

"The Rising Age," repeated Tharle, gazing on the *enceinte* shape before them. His voice grew gentle, almost fatherly. "Perhaps I do it a disservice. Perhaps its flight across the Maker's page was intended – nothing to do with banishment." He pointed with a child's finger. "Brimming with young – you see? A benefactress of the universe, birthing planets on its way, hanging comets by their tails in the sky. A master-Maker, aiding our own – bringing forth umber moons, so that the Razalian sky might not be barren." As Tharle uttered the last words, Dreest gave a long sigh of relief, and the image gracefully vanished. Disregarding the sigh, Tharle couldn't resist the idea that the image had lingered until he was right.

"Perhaps, Mopotakeh, perhaps." Kidresh sounded sleepy. "Perhaps all of it at different times – perhaps none. But why bequeath all that infernal white, without telling our Maker what it was or should become?" Again he flicked up a hand. Though seeming to invite it, he didn't have the stomach for further reflection. "All I know now is that my glow is near done for this night. As yours must be. And especially—" He gestured at Dreest, who was now rocking slowly, all but spent from his exertions. "And, Mopatakeh, I can no longer fight you about our umber moons. See? That's how tired I am."

For several moments, the only sounds came from the knoll's rustling grass and the ripples of the Billomingow. At last, Tharle stroked his face, then studied his own glow. Yes, he too had

boosted his last for that night. The light was thinning away, beyond even Tharlian command. He gazed at Dreest, who stretched, yawned, then turned his attention to husbanding his own light till the meeting was done.

"What you have shown us, Dreest," said Tharle, shaking his head, "is beyond miraculous." He wasn't sure where the next utterance came from. Perhaps it was tiredness. Perhaps, all that evening, his no-nonsense colleague from Razalia's smallest settlement had been mad to get into his thoughts. At any rate, his next words were Venacarr's. "You have the soul of the planet within you, Dreest," he blurted.

Sadly, the blessing seemed to transport Dreest back through the hours to the foot of the knoll. Again, the novice squirmed and fumbled – if anything, worse than when he came staggering up with his magic bag – until Tharle feared that he might double his height and go stomping into the Billomingow, simply to shake his mind loose from this redoubled attack of agony: "Master," he said, "I hardly feel that, as if I, as if such praise, as if I should acknowledge it – I mean I *do* acknowledge it, accept it, but when I say 'acknowledge' –" His voice folded into his waning light. "When I say 'accept'," he tacked on in a miserable whisper.

During all this, Tharle could only shake his head. Venacarr having spoken through him, he had no words of his own, brusque or soothing, to add. He was therefore relief itself when, despite his own confession of weariness, Kidresh fixed the novice in a final bright glare: "Dreest!" he said. "You have taken us a journey of journeys. You have gathered all that is into your sight. We have listened like children at Gent Satherfall's knee, while he tells old tales of the first berry-men on Razalia. You are no petrified puppy."

As though hypnotised, Dreest began intoning heavily, "I am no –"

"No, no, good Dreest," Kidresh pressed on. "No need of that. What I tell you is, Mopatakeh blesses you truly, with all good cause. And one day, we hope, you will know it."

Awoken and emboldened by these words, Tharle laid a gentle hand on the novice's shoulder. His gaze unwavering, he looked a

maker of galaxies lodging the final moon in place.

"Indeed, Dreest," he murmured. "Now – our beds hail us. But Kidresh and I must know the journey's end. Can you do it?"

Kidresh looked bewildered, then annoyed: "Oh, speak it out, Mopatakeh. I *am* about to crumple like a doll." But Tharle said nothing and so, with an *oh-very-well* sigh, he stood alongside Dreest in their leader's mind. He stared at the words, smiled and echoed them aloud.

After a final spasm, the petrified puppy disappeared. Dreest gave a three confident nods, as if to bounce his reply out into the night: "Yes. Yes, I'm sure so. I'll need four days – provided our time holds steady. Five or three if not."

"How many of his days is that?" asked Kidresh.

"Two, I think. So that should be –" Pausing, he raised leaden hands to his brow and ran through the days of his Maker's week. "Yes, that should be the day he calls... Soo... Sana... Sunday."

The others gasped. The word was a pointless noise – even worse, really, than the name for the Maker's new hidey-hole. Kidresh spoke, but this time with great reluctance:

"I suppose... I suppose she'll be coming with him." Deliberately, he avoided saying "the consort". He was mindful of the run of his thoughts after Dreest had conjured the voices – the way her imagined moan had roamed about his head. But it was too late. *Call this a planet?* she shrilled anew. *Look at all that you've missed. Where's the green for this bit? You'll be doing something with all the white, I presume?* Somehow, Dreest's response broke through, fighting her off: "No, good Kidresh, I doubt I could manage the two – not the first time, at least."

"Oh." Suddenly Kidresh sounded as breezy as if he'd just got up. "Ah, well, right that you shouldn't. We need... time alone with wonder-boy. Time to see what fist he makes of our questions. About Mopatakeh's beloved *curiotwist*. About" – he snapped his fingers, recalling the first question he'd fired at Tharle when they settled down on the knoll – "about our singular

sun.” Sitting bolt upright, he thrust out a dramatic arm. “Maker,” he said sonorously, before breaking up his words like Tharle of Venacarr at his most insistent. “A-bout our sun. Our twi-sting, lur-ching, snee-ring sun. Friend-or-foe?” He tapped his brow. “Now,” he muttered, “there was that saying the consort used in their extraordinary chatter. Ah, exactly” – and he reverted to his drama – “life source or ma-ker of ki-llings?”

Dreest chuckled. Tharle, however, simply stared at his over-weary colleague.

“And our other question, Kidresh?” he inquired quietly. Then, like a mother coaching her child through a speech, he mouthed, *Peril*.

“Oceans lave us!” cried Kidresh, dropping his arm. “Has it moved again? Leave it to me, Mopatakeh. I can do it – I can survey all! I’ll gee up some light from somewhere. Just let me –”

“Kidresh, give up your agitation.” Tharle spread his hands. “I just gee’d some up myself. And I roved the whole planet, though where I got the strength from, I hardly know. No movement. The white is as it was when we ascended this knoll.”

“Ah... ah... ah.” Kidresh sounded worse than Dreest at his most bashful. “Now I understand you, Mopatakeh. What does he propose... does he know... can he vanquish – ?” He broke off and, copying Tharle, mouthed *gaps*. Then, in a single breath, “Well, of course, that would be my final, my steeliest question, that was where I’d lead him, I’d fully intend – lulling, you see, a good inquisitor lulls, feints, works his way about, you see – think of a boat, Mopatakeh, on the Billomingow, tacking, you see, bringing its prow –”

“Our Maker has work to do,” Tharle cut in. “If it involves explaining suns and *curiotwists* – as well it might – than that will be more work besides. But our planet stands to be eaten alive. Before all else, our Maker must roll up his sleeves against that.”

Chastened, Kidresh ruckled and unruckled a handful of cloak. “Well, yes,” he said quietly. “Of course, Mopatakeh. I assure you, the white was at the peak of my mind.” Despite his

awkwardness, however, he was all admiration for Tharle. He’d spoken like the leader he was.

“Good Dreest,” said Tharle now. “Whatever you need – I mean, in addition to” – he gestured at the colander and stirrups – “I shall provide for you. Tomorrow, we shall plan.”

“What about Venacarr and the others?” Kidresh asked, cocking his head. “Surely you can’t delay a *Candling*, Mopatakeh. But how do we manage it without telling Razalia? How do we avoid suspicion, rumour, all-out telepathy?”

“Tomorrow, Kidresh, tomorrow we unlock our minds to Venacarr and all our colleagues. Tomorrow we decide everything. At this moment, we are three lights that need their dark rest.”

“Vales and ridges.” Dreamily, Dreest’s voice lapped round the others’ practicalities. With a start, they turned to find him staring far down the Billomingow. On tiptoe, they crept into his thoughts. Whether through fatigue or thankfulness that this present, covert *Candling* was done, they were fastened on one thing. At last, the novice was pondering the dimensions of what he’d achieved – and the demands of what he would shortly do. “Our Maker leaves Razalia – the vales and ridges he himself has fashioned – the heathland and tides. He goes far, far... horizon after horizon... brow of a hill, brow of another, out and out. Peaks and ocean floors. A desert planet with one hut to its name – whatever that name is. Valleys where flowers are a mystery. Planets that rage, planets that weep. Out and out, far and far. And I follow... a leaf in a storm. Somehow I follow.”

“Hardly as erratic as that, Dreest,” said Kidresh kindly. “Though you may never know it. As for your quarry, well, he can just come back and back. Gallumph his way over all his pretty horizons. What choice does he have? Good Dreest, he is fixed like a star in your eye –” He broke off. A boyish grin, such as he hadn’t managed for countless years, now tricked out his face. “No, I shouldn’t. Mustn’t.”

“Kidresh.” Tharle spoke his name in some alarm. Kidresh gave him a faintly pleading look, then continued in yet another rush:

“Dreest – yes, I know, our glows must be off

to their beds, and if you can't, you can't, and if you won't, you won't, but" – his voice sank to a bare whisper – "can we see him? Could you drop him in the bowl? For a second, Dreest – no more. So we can" – he shrugged – "fix him in our own eyes?"

Dreest looked at Tharle, who couldn't deny the same boyish urge. "It is for you to pronounce, Dreest," he said, secretly hating to sound so proper. "We shall be fixing on him enough before long. We've waited aeons – we can wait on the morrow. You more than anyone need deep, earnest rest."

"It's no so much that," said Dreest. "It's – well, I conjured the voices a goodly while ago. They'll be deep in their own sleep. You see, it's early their next morning now."

"Of which of their days?" asked Tharle. "I'm sorry, Dreest, there was something of the Sehundan about the noises you made. They're gone from me."

Again, Dreest made use of their Maker's tongue.

"Sa-tur-day." Repeated Kidresh, sounding now like Venacarr uncharacteristically stumped. "It's not a language, really, is it? More a riot of the throat. I can just hear some of the roisterers at Dame Pennater's Gilding – especially if a brace of Galladeeleans drop in. They'll all be hacking it fluently."

Instantly, all three were knocked flat on their backs. The knoll swung from side to side like a warning finger. The rich spray of the Billomingow soused their cloaks. Dreest's contraption shuddered like a lightning-rod. "Sorry, Maker!" cried a petrified Kidresh. "Sorry, umber moons! Forgive, oh, forgive an old Tharle's unbelief!"

As quickly as it had stirred, the tumult faded. The knoll stilled itself; the contraption stood motionless, almost upright. The trio scrambled to their feet. Tharle and Dreest had known instantly what had befallen them – and the whole planet. As for Kidresh, mortification at his foolishness, at the childish fear that had found shape on his lips, left him in a rare old froth. "Our infernal, useless, drunkard time!" he cried. "I thought it had been too quiet while we were up

here. Saving us up for a right old shake. And those moons egging it on, no doubt – falling about up there, chortling like those Galladeelee toppers who'll drink Dame Pennater dry." He goggled at the others. "Mark me, both of you, mark me, when our Maker sets his foot on our sorely-used planet, I shall fling him into a mallowberry –"

"Wait!" Dreest looked wildly about. Then, once more, he began that semi-chant of inbreaths he'd emitted with his head deep in the colander. At last he broke off: "Our time! It has shaken us back through his. Now it's just after I found their voices – hours before their sleep." He turned to Kidresh. "You can see him."

And so the three Tharles clean forgot fatigue, *curiotwists*, umber moons and consorts – and even, briefly, the capricious gaps of Razalia. The Billomingow flowed smoothly. The grass on the knoll stirred as gently as could be. Slowly, they advanced on Dreest's contraption. Setting it properly upright again, the novice motioned to them to take a strap-stirrup each, while he cupped his right hand against the colander's rim. Then, at his signal, all three inclined their heads.

At the far side of Razalia's nine oceans, a Carolla who is not keeps guard on a free-floating pier. In shape and beauty, she is as the Carollessa, but they have no record of her being. Nor did any Carollessan or Razalian hand construct her vantage-point. Nor has any living Razalian spoken with her. Nor has she in any way revealed the secret of her mysteriously comforting presence. Still, while Razalia toils or feasts, while light creeps into its faces or whirls on their drooping lids, she glides back and forth between splendid white columns, under a canopy of teal green, scanning land, ocean and beyond, a graceful hand shading her vision.

That, at least, is her usual, inscrutable round. But while three astonished Tharles bent over a colander on a pole, a further cause of astonishment came gliding toward them. A boat moved under its own motion, leaving silken traces on the Billomingow.



The Quarterly Review

Jericho

CBS, US, 45 min

I briefly mentioned Jericho in my previous review of *Three Moons Over Milford* – see TQF#12 – and now I have had a chance to watch it. As predicted, this show does indeed deal with similar themes in a more serious way. Whether it is a better or worse show is hard to say, but it is certainly more interesting.

To sum it up briefly for the British I might call it a remake of *The Survivors*. How do you get by after the apocalypse? In this case a small town, Jericho, sees one day a mushroom cloud forming over the nearest city. What to do next?

In terms of presentation, style and plotting, this is very much a post-*Lost* show. Most of its good qualities derive from its more sophisticated predecessor. For example, it knows to keep its cards close to its chest. Secrets are kept, revelations parcelled out slowly, motivations obscure. Viewers are trusted to be patient and attentive. However, it does not push them too far – unlike last year's slow-burning *Invasion*, each episode does present a crisis of some kind that must be resolved by the episode's end, even as ongoing storylines smoulder on.

However, Jericho has its own problems. For one, there is a troubling and pervasive feeling that things are better since the apocalypse. The chattering classes are gone, and while the loss of those big city folks is mourned, there is a strong feeling that the people left are those who really get things done. The effects of fallout are minimal, refugees are generally considerate enough to die before reaching town, and risks always pay off. One typical scene sees three characters wondering about the safest way to open a canister full of petrol that might explode at the slightest spark. Ignoring the safety-conscious twitterings of the big city girl, the

ballsy farmer knocks the lid off with the butt of his rifle, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Another frustrating episode sees a library on fire, and not one character stops to consider just how crucial books might be if the rest of the world has been blown up. It's just art in there, and who needs art when there's shooting to be done?

One of the most stomach-churning plot threads is that of the class geek who becomes friendly with the hottest girl in class, due to their shared and sudden status as orphans. Whenever I see them together, especially the early scene in which they seal themselves into a house to avoid any possible fallout, "Let's Do It for America" (from *Grease 2*) plays so loudly in my head as to drown out any dialogue. There might have been a nuclear holocaust, but he's gonna get lucky (maybe)!

The people of Jericho seem to have something of a schizophrenic attitude to capitalism. The farmer who would rather burn his crops than let the townspeople share them is just standing up for his rights, whereas the store owner through whom everyone trades is a shameless, grasping profiteer. Inconsistent? Maybe, but then the farmer is a salt-of-the-earth All-American boy. In contrast, at first I thought the store owner was a Jewish stereotype. Or at least that's what I thought until I noticed her name: Gracie Leigh. And then I began to wonder if that had originally been Gracie Lee... rather than a stereotypical Jewish money-grabber, maybe the character began life as a stereotypical Korean money-grabber. Either way, it goes without saying that she gets a number of come-uppances...

The strong and capable female protagonists of *Lost* are utterly absent here. At times it feels like whole episodes go by without a female character being the protagonist in a scene, as opposed to being the nursemaid, lover, mother, etc of one of the husky male heroes.

The nominal female lead is Ashley Scott, perhaps best known to genre audiences as The Huntress (the daughter of Batman and Catwoman, in TV continuity) in the short-lived action series *Birds of Prey*, or as the female equivalent to Jude Law's Gigolo Joe in *AI*, who spent little time on screen but whose publicity photos launched a thousand wallpapers.

She was also, interestingly, the actor originally cast to play Joey's next-door neighbour in his spin-off from *Friends* (though after the pilot she was replaced by Andrea Anders, now doing good penance for those crimes against comedy in the rapidly improving new sitcom, *The Class* – the first sitcom to take to heart the new popularity of serialised drama).

Here Ashley Scott plays Emily, who spends the first half of the season moping after various men – her old boyfriend, her fiance, her dad – while playing absolutely no role whatsoever in the town's efforts to re-establish life after the apocalypse. She spends a lot of time in the bar, though, commiserating with the girls about the menfolk running around playing soldier.

One female character who does get to take the lead occasionally is the big city, uptight tax collector who comes to repossess a farm, only to find herself sticking around for the lack of somewhere to return to, and slowly noticing the strapping charms of the aforementioned insolvent, tax-evading farmer. It's classic bodice-ripping stuff, but worrying, in that a city had to die in flames for this big city gal to achieve some personal growth.

There is in general a lack of appealing or interesting characters, with most, in contrast to the rich and varied players in *Lost*, being fairly standard cookie-cutter types, who might just as easily have come from *Everwood* or *Judging Amy*.

The one stand-out is the mysterious newcomer to the town, Rob Hawkins, played by Englishman Lennie James, recognisable in particular from an eye-catching turn in *Guy Ritchie's Snatch*. Everything about Hawkins is a mystery, even to his own family, and waiting to find out the answers about him is the biggest reason for watching at the moment.

The odd thing about *Jericho* is that despite the bland characters, the slightly dull stories, the illiberalism and the jolliest nuclear holocaust ever depicted on screen, I do keep watching it – I want to find out what happens, I want to find out what has happened, and I have a feeling that it's going to get better.

I expect I could get almost exactly the same amount of pleasure from just reading a *Jericho* episode guide at the end of its run, but for the time being I will carry on watching. – *WB*

Heroes

Tim Kring (creator)

NBC, US, 45 min

Heroes, an interesting new science fiction superhero drama, is a bit like *Lost* or *24* – there is very little you can say about it that will not add up to a spoiler, which makes writing a review a tricky job. But the premise is simple: there are powers in the world, and we follow the stories of some of those who have them. The characters are varied enough in background and temperament that everyone will find someone to empathise with. If it has a potential flaw, it lies in its greatest strength. It has immense gravity, but if it does not follow through on that constant portentousness it may come to be seen as a hollow shell, much as happened to *The X-Files* when the answers to some of its much-discussed mysteries gave every sign of having been thought up on the hoof – I'm thinking in particular of the dreadful, ultimate revelation that Mulder's sister was abducted, not by aliens, but by fairies, to save her from a child abuser... *Heroes* is making a lot of big narrative promises, but so far it has kept them.

It does share two flaws with *The X-Files* – an inexplicable urge to rattle on irrelevantly about God, and a near-total lack of understanding of evolution. (Those flaws may be connected!)

But it also shares many strengths of the earlier programme – it is dark, scary, gripping, mysterious and very well made, and I doubt I will ever miss an episode. – *WB*

HELEN AND HER MAGIC CAT

