

And Dragons in the Sky

by
Glen Cook

It has been a good year for Glen Cook. He won an Honorable Mention in last year's NAL prize contest; he has increased his magazine sales; he has just sold a fine novel to New American Library; he has married a lovely girl (whom he met at Clarion); and he has written a gripping account of a future civilization in which loyalties -- to lovers, friends, and nations -- conflict very much as they do today.

Of "And Dragons in the Sky" Glen writes: "Sometimes the world sweeps over my dikes and I just have to get alone, with my typewriter, where I can drain off the emotions in a long, hot draught. Sometimes -- sometimes I'm lucky and a story appears on the paper. This is one of those."

In this frenetic, quick-shift, go, drop-your-friends -possessions -roots - loyalties like throwaway containers age, heroes, legends, archetypal figures are disposable: as brilliant and ephemeral as the butterflies of Old Earth. One day some researcher may wrest from Nature a golden, universe-changing secret, some brave ship's commander may shatter the moment's enemy, be a hero, legend for a fleeting hour -- and fade to dust with Sumer and Akkad. Who remembers on the seventh day? Who remembers Jupp von Drachau rinding those Sangaree? Mention his name. Blank stares reply. Or someone may say, "He's too old," meaning, too long gone. A whole year, Confederation.

I think of heroes and legends as, toolcase in hand, I wander toward the gate of Carson's Blake City spaceport, wearing a name a size too small -- latest in a list of dozens -- the clothing of a liquids transfer systems tech -- which work I loathe -- and, within me, the nerves of an instel radio. A small, dying pain surrounds a knot behind my right ear. Each slow step drives spikes of agony into the bones of my legs. They've been lengthened three inches, hastily. My stomach itches where twenty pounds have been taken off, hastily again. This is a hurry-up job.

But, then, aren't they all? There's no time, these days, for carefully executed operations. Everything is rushed. Nothing is permanent, there are no fixed points on which to anchor. Life is like the flash floods of Sierran rivers in thaw time, roaring and cascading past too swiftly for any part to be seized and intimately known. But wait! In the river of life apassing, there are a few fixed rocks, two long-lived legends that're heavy on my mind. Like boulders in Sierran streams, they're all but hidden in the turbulence of our times, but they endure, go forever on.

There has to be something for me. I want! I cry, but what I don't know. I've been trying to find it through all my years with the Bureau.

Ahead, I spot my small, brown, mustached Oriental partner, Mouse. Making no sign, I turn in the gate behind him. We don't know each other this time.

I wish there were something solid to grasp, to know. Everything moves so fast. . . . Only in legends. . . .

There is Star's End; there are the High Seiners. Sheer mystery is Star's End, fortress planet beyond the galactic rim, with automatic, invincible weapons to kill anyone foolish enough to go near -- without a shred of why. In the lulls, the deep, fearful lulls when there's nothing to say, nothing being said, we moderns seize Star's End as strange country to explore, explain, to extinguish the dreadful silence -- we're intrigued, perhaps, by the godlike power there, destructive as that of ancient, Earth-time deities. Or we turn to the High Seiners, the Starfishers.

We should know them. They're human. Star's End is just a dead metal machine's

voice babbling unknown tongues. Yet, in their humanness, the High Seiners are the greater, more frightening mystery. Destruction is familiar, though to encompass its purpose is sometimes impossible. The quiet, fixed culture of the Seiners we comprehend not at all, though we yearn for it, hate them for their blissful stasis: their changelessness oddly twists our souls.

But such thoughts fade. Work comes first. I enter the terminal, great plastic, glass, and steel cavern with doors opening on other worlds. Light crowds it. We need light these days, fearful as we are of entropic night. (I wanted to be a poet once. An instructor assigned me a paean to Night. I lost my want then. Too many dark images crowded my mind.) People are here in their multitudes, about the familiar business of terminals. Several men in odd, plain High Seiners' garb wait behind a distant table. My new employers.

Mouse passes small and brownly with a wink -- why that name I don't know. He looks more like a weasel.

I study faces in the crowd, mostly see bewilderment, determination, malaise. I'm after the nonchalant ones. The competition is here somewhere. The Bureau has no copyright on interest in Starfish. "Uhn!"

"Excuse me?"

I turn. A small blue nun has paused, thinking I've spoken. "Pardon. Just thinking out loud." The Ulantonid wobbles off, leaving me wondering why all modern Christians are aliens. But it fades. I return to that face.

Yes, Marya Strehltsweiter -- one name I remember -- though she has changed too. Darker: skin, hair, eyes, darker, and heavier. But she can't disguise her ways of moving, speaking, listening. A poor actress, unusual in her race. She's Sangaree, who have passed as human for ages -- who, also, are almost always murdered on discovery. Marya has talent. She stays alive.

She sees me looking. Eyebrows raise a millimeter, questioningly, then consternation briefly, before a smile. She knows me, remembers the last time we crossed swords -- I think of a place in Angel City on the Broken Wings, of lifting the papers Von Drachau needed to nail the Sangaree. Perhaps, she's thinking, this'll be her game. She nods ever so slightly.

Other faces tease my memory, though I think they serve no governments. Corporation agents, perhaps, or McGraws. Considering what we're after, I'll not be surprised if there are more agents than job-hungry techs here.

The crowd. I now see it as a whole, much smaller than expected. Maybe two hundred. The Seiners advertised for a thousand. Hard to find techs romantic, or hungry,

enough to plunge into an alien human society for a year....

Speculation dissolves. The Starfishers are checking us in. I shuffle into line four places behind Mouse, wondering why he's so shaky. He's always shaky.

"Mr. Niven." A whisper, warm rubbing my arm. I look down into eyes dark as Sangaree gunmetal coins.

"Pardon, ma'am? BenRabi. Moyshe benRabi."

"How quaint." She smiles a gunmetal smile. My bed she has shared, and would share, I know -- and, in the end, she'd drink my blood. "And the Rat, eh?" Meaning Mouse. "So many people want to bleed for a little Seiner money. Orbit in an hour. See you." More gunmetal smiling as she takes her gunmetal-hard body toward the Ladies.

The nervousness begins, as it always does before I jump in the lion's den. Or dragon's lair. They say, to the uninitiated, the Starfish appear as dragons a hundred miles long. . . .

Before liftoff, a briefing. The officer-in-charge is brutally honest. "We don't want you," he says, "we need you. You'll mock us as anachronisms. Oh, yes," to a lone head-shake. "You're here hunting the myth of the Starfishers, or to spy, but you'll find neither romance nor information

-- just hard work and strangeness. We won't ease you into our culture. You're here only so we can meet our harvest contracts." I suffer a premonition, a

feeling this man has more than harvests on his mind. Plainly, through his words, I sense disappointment, a touch of hatred for landsmen. They have a wounded ship out there, badly mauled -- I'm not sure I believe that -- which needs a thousand techs to salvage, and they are only getting two hundred. He pauses, fumbles in pockets -- a pocketed, cloth jacket

-- produces an odd little instrument. Only after it's lit and belching noxious clouds do I recognize it. A pipe! I shudder. Romantic techs, I see, are wondering what greater horrors lurk ahead. Good psychology, the pipe. The Seiner is easing us in after all, preparing us for bigger shocks to come.

"Among you," he says after his pause grows squirming long, "are spies. So many interests want a Starfish herd." He smiles, but it quickly fades to grimness. "You'll learn nothing. Till your contracts end, you'll see nothing but the guts of ships -- and only when you work. You'll not come in contact with those who have the information you're after. You, who'd steal our livelihood and culture,

be warned. We're a nation, a law unto ourselves. We hold to old ways, still execute for espionage and treason." While the pause for effect lasts, I think of the many times Confederation has tried to bring the Seiners into the fold, to impress upon them "enlightened" justice. They always fail, yet annexation remains a major government goal.

A nervous stir runs through the room. The briefing officer meets pairs of eyes one by one. The romantics are finding their legend toothed and clawed. The disquiet grows. Executions. You don't execute people any more....

Soon we're herded aboard a shuttle -- first landsmen for the fleets in generations -- that is obviously no commercial lighter, just stark functionalism and steel painted gray. We're lifting blind, I see. Weedlike clumps of wiring hang where viewscreens have been removed -- no chances are they taking.

The knot behind my ear, the nondispersable parts of the tracer, seizes me with iron, spiked fingers. I've been "switched on" by the Bureau. I stagger. The thin, pale Starfisher girl seating us asks, "Are you ill?" On her face, shocking me more than talk of execution, is a look of true concern, not bland, commercially dispensed stewardess's care.

I want fires across my mind, as it so often does. "Yes." Dropping into my seat, "A touch of migraine." But I can never discover what I need.

Her eyes widen a fraction. She'll report this. But, somewhere in my medical file, a tendency toward migraine is noted to cover the pain of the tracer. I am susceptible, though it hasn't bothered me in years. There are pills. Why, I ask myself again, do they have to use an imperfect device? Of course, it's all we've got, the only way to track them to the herd. Completely nonmetal, the tracer is the only undetectable device available.

I want is in my mind. The Bureau has supported my years of search, knowing I'm searching (Psych doesn't miss much), knows it's showing a good return on investment (the sane make poor agents, axmen, or whatever). Years, and I still have no intimation of the absence in my soul.

The vessel shivers. We're on the way to the orbiting Starfisher. Three rows ahead, Mouse shakes. He's terrified by space travel.

"The Rat's chicken." She's beside me. I didn't see her sit down. "Sorry to startle you. Maria Elana Gonzalez, atmosphere systems, distribution." Gunmetal smile.

I want. What? "Moyshe benRabi." In case she has forgotten. We exchange nothings all the way to the Starfisher, too wary to probe for clues to one another's missions.

I'm forgetting she's Sangaree, that once I used her to find and kill a lot of her people. I don't feel guilty, either -- not that I hate Sangaree, as is common. In my mood of the moment she doesn't count. Nothing does. I'm the uninvolved, uncommitted, unemotional modern man. I'm concerned more with Mouse

than the steel-souled death beside me.

According to our pasts on file, our paths have never crossed. But this is our fourth team job and, though he's always afraid, he's a good partner -- especially when the roughhouse begins. He's the only person I know who has killed a man (except the Sangaree lady who, being Sangaree, doesn't qualify as a person). Killing isn't uncommon these days, but the personal touch has been eliminated -- ergo, the shock of "execution." Anyone can punch a button, hurl a missile to obliterate a ship of a thousand souls. There is no lack of nice remote space battles (against Sangaree, McGraw pirates, in the marquee-and-reprisal antics of governments, in raids and overnight wars), but to do in a man face-to-face, with knife or gun . . . it's just too personal. We don't like to get close to people, even to kill.

I'm afraid. I'm getting close to, growing fond of, Mouse. We work together too much. Bad for our detachment. The Bureau promised no more jobs together last time, but then came this hurry-up, top-men job. Always the rush. Somehow, sometime, one of us will get hurt. We're so much safer as islands in motion (Brownian), pausing for interaction, moving on before roots can take, be ripped up, leave painful wounds.

There's a clang through the shuttle, rousing me. We've nosed into the mother ship like piglet to sow's belly. The pale, helpful girl leads us into the starship, to a common room where notables wait.

They're unceremonious. One says, "I'm Eduard Chou-teau, Ship's Commander. You're aboard Number Three Service Ship from Danion, a harvestship of Payne's fleet. You're to replace people Danion lost hi a shark attack. We don't like outsiders, but we'll try to make your stay comfortable. We've got to keep Danion alive until we receive replacements from our schools ..." I have the feeling he isn't telling all Starfisher motives.

Most everyone, via the romantic entertainment media, knows of the Seiner schools, the creches within asteroids of deep space where Starfishers hide their children. They are nursery schools, boarding schools, military academies, technical colleges, safehouses where children can grow up unexposed to disasters of Danion's sort. Unlike landsmen, though, Seiners send their children to professional parents out of love. We do so to be rid of cargo that may slow us in shooting the rapids of life.

"Lights," says the Ship's Commander. They fade. Central to the common, a spatial hologram appears. "Those aren't our stars. The ship is ours. Danion." Something focuses, something like octopuses entwining -- no, like a city sewage system with buildings and earth removed, vast tangles of tubing with here and there a cube, a cone, a ball, with occasional sheets of silverness, or great nets floating, between arms of piping, raggedly bearded with hundreds, thousands of antennae. In theory, a deep space ship needs not be contained, needs have no specific shape, yet this is the first such I've ever encountered. I realize I've discovered an unsuspected rigidity of human thought. The needle-shaped ship has been with us since space travel was but a dream.

My surprise is shared. A stir runs through the common. But now I'm suffering another surprise.

Mouse and I once studied the Seiner from Carson's surface. She's a typical interstellar vessel. A ship of her class approaches the harvestship in the hologram. The surprise is relative size. The starship is a needle falling into an ocean of scrap. The harvestship must be thirty miles in cross-section. . .

Light returns, drowning the hologram. Around me are open mouths. We thought we were aboard a harvestship. I begin, with distress, to realize how little prepared I am to go among these people, how little the Bureau has told me. A more than usual job-beginning nervousness sets in. Until now, with change the order in my fast-paced universe, I've assumed I can handle the strange, the

unknown -- but this space-borne mobile, it's too alien. True alien handiwork suddenly seems less foreign, less frightful. It's the size. Nothing human should be so big.

"This's all you'll know of Danion," says the Ship's Commander, "of her exterior. Her guts you'll know well. We'll get our money's worth from you there."

And they will. Fifteen hours a day, teamed with Seiner technicians, we landsmen will labor to keep Danion alive and harvesting. Scarce four hundred of us will manage the work of a thousand -- and, in our free time, we'll repair the shark attack damage responsible for the original casualties. Daily, we'll work to exhaustion, then stagger to our bunks too weary even to think about spying. . . .

But there're problems first, a time of distress two days after departure. The ship drops from hyper. I, and everyone, assume we've arrived. We gather in the common room, a custom of travelers, somehow expecting view-screens and a look at our new home. Shortly, however, the First Lieutenant appears.

"Please return to your quarters," he says. He seems paler than the usual Starfisher. "We're ambushing Confederation Navy ships following us from Carson's."

I'm dumbstruck. The Navy shouldn't move in yet. Nor should Seiners so casually turn on pursuers -- not, at least, on my Navy. I look around. The few angry faces I label "competition dismayed." Across the room, Mouse appears bewildered. The Sangaree woman is in a rage, face red, fists clenched. The First Lieutenant fields a few questions before retreating, all with a single explanation. "We've entered a hydrogen stream, taken station with a fleet. Starfish noise is being broadcast from scoutships. We often do this to cover the withdrawal of our vessels forced to enter 'civilized space.'" He leaves us thinking.

We go too, Mouse and I glumly wondering if we're now expendable.

The general alarm sounds. Engagement is imminent. I hope the admiral (I'm considering my own survival, not his comfort) recognizes the trap and gets out. I'm hoping the Seiners don't do angry, rash things afterward.

I've hardly strapped in. The vessel rocks. Departing missiles. I'm amazed. She's got batteries heavier than her appearance suggests.

I took this job expecting the total boredom of unchange, nul-novelty, but find surprises come almost too fast to assimilate.

The all-clear sounds shortly, and with it a buzz from my cabin door. It opens.

A crewman asks, "Mr. benRabi? Come with us, please." He's polite, oh, polite as the spider inviting the fly. His teeth seem all white sharp and pointy.

Behind him are ratings with angry guns. Yes, I'll go with him.

As I join him in the passage, another door opens with a characteristic squeal. Yes. A group is collecting Mouse.

Done already, I think, and by space gypsies centuries behind the times. How?

"Ah," says the Ship's Commander as we enter his office, "Commander Igarashi, Commander McClennon." My eyebrows rise. I didn't know Mouse's name, but Igarashi it might be. He's got me nailed, though McClennon I haven't used in fifteen years. "Please be seated." I sit, glance at Mouse. He, too, is stunned.

"You're wondering about your Navy friends? Decided discretion was the better part. Admiral Beckhart must be perturbed." He chuckles. "But that's not why you're here. It's those tracers you've got built in."

This startles me. He's talking plural. I thought I was the only one with a unit, and Mouse was along for the ride. Mouse, it seems, thought the same. Wheels within wheels, and I should've guessed. It's the Bureau's way.

"All biological, eh? Interesting development. Passed our detectors easily. But we're a paranoid people -- and think of everything." Smugness. "We've watched

the hyper bands since liftoff, had you pegged in hours. Dr. Du-Maurier. . . ." Hands seize me. The doctor examines me quickly, numbs my neck and the side of my head with an aerosol anesthetic. He produces an antique lase-scalpel. The Ship's Commander says, "This'll be fast and painless. We'll pull the ambergris nodes . . . and sell them back to the Navy next auction, I think." He chuckles again. I smile. There's a curious justice in it. Mouse and I, and others, are aboard in hopes of locating the great night-beasts which produce just that little item.

Ambergris, the High Seiner calls it. My studies say ambergris is a "morbid secretion" of Old Earth whales, very valuable. Others, landsmen, call the material star's amber, spacegold, skydiamond, any of many names. It's the wealth of our age. In the old tongues its name is hard, pithy. It's the solid wastes of Starfish -- crap, but crap without which interstellar civilization, as it exists, could not be. There would be no fast star-to-star communication. In a way I don't understand (having no knowledge of the physics), a tachyon flow is generated in a gap between an ambergris node and a Bilao crystal anode. These are the only materials that will do. Neither can be synthesized. Bilao crystal, mined on Sierra, is many times cheaper than ambergris. The tachyon stream is formed into a coherent beam which computers impress and aim at a receiver. Each tachyon carries an impressed hologramatic portrait of the whole message. The receiver need catch but a few. Thus distance, diffusion, beam spread, small aiming errors are overcome. Every planet in The Arm, of six races and countless governments (the Sangaree not included) is part of an instel net: military, government, or commercial. The demand for ambergris far exceeds the supply. Such a vast market can never be saturated.

Communication is the foundation of civilization. There are trillions of beings in The Arm, thousands of planets, millions of ships, all wanting instel -- and all the Seiner fleets produce less than a hundred thousand nodes each year. No wonder the vultures gather.

Vultures. Mouse and I are vultures -- no, rapacious birds, falcons hurled aloft to bring down game information. We're to locate a herd, tell Navy where, let it be seized for Confederation. A better ownership than the Seiners', who sell to anyone meeting their price. They're too democratic, from Confederation's viewpoint. Often, under their system, the stones go to belligerent, imperialistic governments, or unscrupulous corporations. We're here to stop that. Uh-huh. Sometimes you tell yourself tall ones, else you ask questions, worrying no-matters like right and wrong.

My soul, slithering past morality shyly, merely mumbles I want. There is pain in it I can't withstand. I must find my Grail, and soon, or abandon this secret quest. I've seen men so, in grim places on beautiful worlds, zombies with humanness gone, defeated by the universe, time, and all-too-rapid change, the little ones in madhouses, the big ones masters of corporations or governments in which people are the cattle of machines. Not for me, no. . . . My soul howls at an invisible moon.

"One down." The doctor tosses the node-anode piece to the Ship's Commander. I feel no pain. I'm glad he interrupts the thoughts. I'm on the edge of a scream. He turns to Mouse.

"We don't like spies," says the Ship's Commander. We. Always these people say we. The worm within me squirms. This man touches my need. I try to seize something, to know, but like a wet catfish it easily wriggles from my grasp.

"But Danion's dying. We love her. We'll keep you alive, keep our contracts, work you till you drop, till Danion can live without you, then we'll send you away. Please be no more trouble than you've been. We need you desperately, but we'll not be pushed too far.

Return to your quarters. We'll get underway soon, for home."

I rise, touching the small bandage behind my ear. There is no pain, but its

presence makes me think of bigger cuts on my body and soul.

Mouse is done. We walk glumly along a passage, unescorted. There is nothing to say, so we're silent. Finally, as we near my cabin, he asks, "What now?"

I shrug. We're partners, neither senior, but I've been hoping he would decide. "Go for the ride, I guess. We have a year. Can they keep their guard up forever?"

Beyond Mouse I see the Sangaree lady. She smiles and waves. There's a hint of gloating in her manner. She somehow helped betray us, probably by pointing out which men were Navy agents.

Mouse catches it too. "Should've killed her on the Broken Wings," he mutters. He's shaking. His brown face wrinkles nastily. "Maybe this time."

I shake my head. "Not here, not now. We've got enough trouble already."

Mouse has never liked her. (I shouldn't, but I haven't his singular gift of hatred. Everyone, everything is too transient for more than mild aversion.) He frequently needs restraint. "She'd better move fast when we hit dirt." I hope our year here will temper his feelings, but fear it won't. His hatred's beyond the usual. I think someone close was a Sangaree stardust addict ("the dream that burns, the joy that kills," the poet Czystewski said as he was dying). His assignments, he says, are all counter-Sangaree. Those I've shared, he prosecuted with fanatic zeal.

The Sangaree. Who, what are they? Like the Seiners and Star's End, another legendary force, but satanic, one we seldom mention. Like the savage in the night before his fire, we withhold the name of the demon for fear of invoking his presence. After centuries of sullen, subdued conflict, we know little about them. They are humanoid, pass for human, even produce mule offspring on human women. They come from afar, planet unknown. Their numbers are limited, supposedly because their women conceive only under their native sun.

A particle from that sun, long ago, buzzed through space, atmosphere, flesh, ricocheted through a chromosome, rearranged DNA, obliquely fathered a race of brigands. All the worst characteristics of Mongol, Viking, Caribbean pirate, Mafiosi, Chinese Tong hatchetman, name it, are stamped on Sangaree genes. For themselves they produce little. They raid, they steal, they deal in drugs and slaves and guns -- anything profitable (in their own view, they do nothing wrong). They are cunning, hard to find, operate as shadow-masters of native syndicates complex as Minoan labyrinths -- all as government agents. Crime is their racial industry.

They are considered a nuisance, prosecuted at opportunity -- except by Man. In us the Sangaree inspire irrational hatred, deadly retaliation -- I think because in them we see mirrored the demons lurking on the borders of our own benighted souls. Sangaree are what we would be if freed from social restraint. Thus Jupp von Drachau's bloody action after Mouse and I located Sangaree headquarters for their human operations. Their privateers he destroyed, their drug farms and refineries, the laboratories where they force-grew pleasure slaves to the fantasy specifications of wealthy, evil men. . . .

"I hope we find their world before I die," Mouse says.

I feel a twinge of jealousy. Mouse has his Grail. It's a cup of blood and hatred, but I envy him his wholeness. Would that hate were simple enough for me.

We reach the harvestship. In the pressure of work I forget my screaming need. It haunts me only at night, or when I encounter the Sangaree woman, inevitable because air ducts and liquids pipes follow the same service passages. Then I'm ripped from my peace for, invariably, she'll taunt Mouse (we work together for the convenience of Security Department), and the wholeness of being that permits him a predictable response reminds me of my own incompleteness.

"Well, Rat," she may say, "killed anybody lately? Lots of non-Confeds here. Why not me? Or don't you have the guts?" She knows he has, but thinks she can take him. She's sure he's a strike-from-behind man, but he's much more. Mouse

wants to demonstrate, but he fiercely represses temptation. She's playing some game. We want the stakes and rules before getting in. She's no actress. Her easy confidence gives her away.

During the passing months I learn of Starfish. Once they were just a wonderful concept. Now, with my contract half complete, I know that there are many forms of "life" in the hydrogen streams, though it's life difficult to comprehend, consisting more in fields of force than in common matter. A grandfather Starfish two hundred miles long and a million years old contains fewer atoms than a human adult, most unbound by molecular energies. They are more foci upon which forces are anchored, gravity and subtle electromagnetic forces which permeate the twists and folds of time and space surrounding a Starfish "body." Within his vacuole universe, the creature supposedly exists as solidly real as we. What the Seiners sense with their instruments is but a fraction of the beast, like a shark's fin seen cutting the surface of an Old Earth ocean.

They feed on hydrogen and the other elements in the fusion chain. Once I asked a Seiner why they don't gather at stars. He said they can't remain integrate in the field stresses about masses much greater than a harvestship, nor can they "digest" matter more complex than the water molecule.

Within a Starfish, surrounded by awesome fields and spread across all their many dimensions, is a fire violent as the heart of a sun. Atoms, primarily hydrogen, are fed in, fast-shuffled through dimensions and a fusion chain, are mixed with antimatter from another universe in which they simultaneously exist; there is annihilation. The energies they bind with dimensional shifts are truly fearsome.

Physics? I don't know. Beside this, the goings-on in a supernova are kindergarten stuff. I understand only that some wastes are evacuated as the ambergris nodes used in instel transmitters.

The greatest, most unsettling surprise to date comes when I discover this is no man-cattle relationship, it's a partnership. Starfish are intelligent and, via machinery whose sophistication we landsmen never suspected, Seiner techs maintain constant mental contact with members of the herds. Starfish produce ambergris, but demand a service in return: protection.

For they're not alone out here. Like oceans, the hydrogen streams teem with life -- some "carnivorous." The Starfish have a natural enemy which, at the coming of Man, threatened to end their species. "Sharks," the Seiners call them, after habits cruel as of those sea-killers of Old Earth. They're smaller than Starfish and hunt in packs like wolves and men.

Both species hyper short distances.

Most herds are shadowed by shark packs which, at opportunity, cut a beast from the herd. The Starfish aren't defenseless -- they burp up balls of gut-fire and fling them

about like granddaddy nuclear bombs, but with sharks so fast and the burping so slow, they seldom get more than a single shot. The packs recently grew tremendously, why unknown. Herds dwindled, unable to cope. Man arrived.

The Starfish touched the minds of the early Seiners, explored them, contacted them, made the Bargain. (Sometimes they touch my mind, I think, though my imagination may play me tricks. In my dreams I see great swimming space as if with unhuman eyes. Each time I dream, I wake with a screaming migraine.) The Starfish would produce quantities of ambergris in return for protection.

Human guns serve, and missiles. Sharks' binding forces are easily disrupted -- then they are feasts for their attendant scavengers.

But sharks, in their slow fashion, are intelligent. They now associate high casualties with ships about the prey. An old fear became fact the day sharks turned on Danion. Now they hit harvestships before approaching a herd. So it's war -- Seiners won't take attack stoically -- a war to be lost. The Seiners are too few, the sharks too many, and the slow thought of the enemy seems the

only hope.

The pale Seiner who explained this knew more, but when he was about to tell, suddenly fled. They often do. I'm the visible hand of another ancient foe: landsmen.

He was speaking of a need for more powerful weapons when he broke off, left me with a cold premonition. Something grim's happening. I've felt it since coming aboard. This is no ordinary harvest. Danion has been under drive for months, sometimes in hyper, which isn't ordinarily done. Near Starfish, a harvestship maneuvers only on "minddrive" (I've heard the term but once -- the Seiner wouldn't explain). Other drives harm the beasts.

Seven months have passed. Yesterday the Sangaree woman almost reached Mouse. Whatever her game, it's in its final moves. She's pushing hard. Wish I could figure her, but there's no understanding a Sangaree mind.

The engines are two weeks dead. Wherever we were bound, we arrived. I know little. The Seiners are more closemouthed than ever, speak only when they must.

Nervousness and fear haunt the ship. I hear great shark packs are gathering. I sometimes see weary Seiners from our constantly busy service ships, wonder if they are fighting those packs, or are at something else. Though we landsmen are permitted little knowledge of it, there is

a great race on. In some desperate gamble, the Fishers are trying to finish something before the sharks finally throw themselves against us. My ignorance grows trying.

It's evening. Mouse and I are playing chess. Despite ourselves, we grow increasingly close. We're forced together. The Sangaree woman is one of the few who will speak. Others avoid us, fearing guilt by association.

My game's bad. I'm piqued. The I want, so long played down in my soul, has burst upon me again, louder than ever, mocking, saying I'm at the threshold but too dense to recognize my discovery.

"I can't hold off much longer," Mouse says, capturing a pawn. "Next time she shows, or the next, I'll bend her."

Moving to protect my queen, "We're almost in. Five months. Don't ruin it."

With a quick hand he slaughters a knight. "Platitudes coming?" I glance at his expressionless face, back to the board. I see disaster.

"Yield." Another pattern of disaster grows clear. I know what she's doing, and how. Unthinking, I stand abruptly. "We may have to!"

"Eh?"

"Bend her. Just figured how she's doing it. Assume she's got a tracer, broadcasting random bleeps. . . ."

"Got you. Easy for the Sangaree to triangulate on, but a worm in her guts Danion might never pin down. Let's not bend her, let's chop it out." Coldly, that, with anticipation of pain inflicted. He returns chessmen to their box, takes a wicked, homemade knife from beneath his mattress, says, "Let's go." I have a hundred reasons for not, for his going alone, for many alternatives, but am able to articulate none. It's time she was stalemated.

We're halfway to her cabin when a notion strikes. "Suppose she's got us bugged." We assume the Seiners listen, but this is the first I think of spying by a third party.

"Then she'll expect us." He shrugs. "Better think about it." While he is at it, a squad of Seiners appears.

"Looks like the job gets done for us." They stop at her door.

"They're not thinking!" Mouse is shaking, excited and afraid.

My heart begins a flamenco beat. The Seiners push through the door. As Mouse said, they aren't thinking. Two fall before they get out of sight, dropped by what's

waiting there for Mouse and me. Loud reports (later: gunpowder pistols, homemade). Some grunts, a scream. The remaining two men are inside.

"Come on!"

I don't know what he has in mind, but I follow. In the door low he goes, pauses to lift a weapon from a dying Seiner. As I do the same, I see the Sangaree woman beyond him, back to us, struggling with the last Fisher. She disarms him. Her hand darts past his guard, smashes his windpipe.

My grunt tells her of our presence.

"Slowly," says Mouse as she turns. "I'd hate to shoot." Hope is thick in his voice.

For once she does as told, has no instant, sharp reply. As she faces us, her distress is very evident. But it fades into her oppressive smile. "Too late. The last signal's already sent. They'll be here soon. . . ."

Underlining her words, strident alarms hoot. Shortly, Danion shivers -- service ships launching, I think. "I'll go on station," I say. "Watch her till the masters-at-arms show." I start for Damage Control Central.

How fast news travels! By the time I arrive, the duty section is abuzz about the appearance of fifty Sangaree ships. Frightened landsmen are certain these are our last hours. I don't comprehend till I overhear Seiners out-admiraling Payne himself. They're certain we'll fight.

I shudder.

The Sangaree maneuver in the darkness beyond these walls. Outnumbered service ships race toward them. I wonder if Payne will call for help from other fleets -- no, he won't know where they are. Security. Unanswerable questions dash across my mind, the biggest, still: what do I want?

The attack that comes isn't Sangaree. Sharks, distressed by the new arrival, strike in all directions. News filters in from Operations, some good, some bad. The Sangaree are having a hard time. The sharks are concentrating on Danion.

In the sea of nothing our ships are killing, being killed by, sharks. The Sangaree fight an enemy undiscoverable while, foolishly, trying to move to a position of vantage vis-a-vis the fleet.

Danion shivers constantly, all weapons in action. In the heart of the great mobile we wait, wait, wait for a shudder and alarms to announce the sharks have scored. There is fear aplenty, and courage brewing. For once there is no tension between landsman and Seiner. We are brothers before an unprejudiced Death.

And, though I note it not, my soul is quite content.

Danion reels. Sirens hoot. Officers shout. A damage-control team piles aboard an electric truck and hurries to aid technicians in the affected area. Behind, here, the mood turns quickly grim. Though we feel so little, the damage is tremendous there. Two thousand persons, ten percent of Demon's population, perished in a moment -- an oppressive weight indeed.

And here I sit, awaiting my dying turn.

Somewhere offstage, the Sangaree decide they've had enough, leave us their ghostly foe.

"Suits," says the bleak-faced Seiner directing D.C. operations. He sees the end. From lockers come space-suits one by one. I slip into mine, remembering I've never worn one except in fun, or way back during midshipman training. I think of Mouse, not yet here, and wonder what has become of him.

Danion screams. She whirls beneath me and I fall. Suit servos hum and force me to my feet. The lights pale, die, return as stored power's injected. In my heart I know we're dead. The sharks have gotten our power and drives. The end. Someone is yelling my name. "What?" I reply. I'm too scared to listen closely, hear only that my team is going out. I jump at the truck. Seiner hands pull me aboard.

Twenty minutes later, in an odd part of the ship devoted to nuclear plant, my team captain sets me to sealing ruptured piping. Here whole passageways are open; occasionally I glimpse a starless night. I think nothing of it for a

long while. Too busy am I, doing the work of a Seiner.

Only hours later, when the pipes no longer bleed, when I spy a vacuum-ruined corpse tangled in a mass of wiring dark against an outer glow, do I pause. Space. This is what I'm not supposed to see. I must look. I walk to the hole, see nothing but the tangle of harvestship.

I stand there frozen, disbelieving, I don't know how long. No stars. Where can we be that there are no stars?

The ship is revolving slowly. Something gradually appears, the source of the glow on Danion's hull. I recognize it. The galaxy, edge on, as seen from outside. My premonitions return to haunt me. Far, I see another harvestship coruscating under shark attack. My own has shuddered to several while I've worked. But my eyes hurry on, to a coin-sized brightness in the direction of spin.

Self-illuminated, no sun. Beyond the galactic rim. My heart stutters, my fear redoubles. There is only one place. . . .

Star's End.

What are the Seiners doing?

Something breaks, something blossoms across the night. Fire. Fire like a dying star. A harvestship is burning in a flame only a multidimensional shark could ignite. They're getting more cunning, hitting us with antimatter gases. My grief is like a physical blow. In the corner of my mind, a strange voice asks, as a Fisher would, if the death does good for the fleet. Are sharks there dying too?

Star's End. My eyes return. All my myths have hemmed me in. I serve the most pleasant, am trapped between the wicked and ugly -- I have no doubts the Sangaree will soon return. It is not in their nature to quit when the stakes are so high.

The permanencies of my universe are here awarring, and doubtless one will fall . . . I fear it.

I comprehend why the Seiners have come. As all who seek Star's End do, they want the fortress world's fabulous guns. For centuries opportunists have tried to master this planet. Who owns its timeless weapons is dictator to The Arm. No defense of today could stand against Star's End's power. This is the salvation for which the Seiners faintly hope. What I don't see is how they hope to penetrate the planet's defenses. Battle fleets have failed.

A touch. A voice comes by conduction. "Let's go. Danion's hit inboard of us." In the words I imagine great sadness, but none of the fear I feel. I follow the man, rejoin my team. We return to D.C. Central, through locks, through regions of ship ruined as by weapons of war. Hard to believe it is done by a creature I can't even see.

They've prepared a room for us to relax in, safe enough to shed our suits -- nothing there, except people, that sharks can harm. I see Mouse, freshly wounded.

"Should've bent her," he says. "Waited me out. Now she's up to deviltry."

I look at his arm. It's mangled. His face is drawn, but he doesn't complain. She must have really surprised him. "Thing like a hatchet," he says.

Unless that arm is quickly tended, hell lose it. I find an officer, ask for a doctor, get told he's on his way. I think of the Sangaree woman.

I've had a feeling for her, I realize, a strange, miscege-nous desire (I've had feelings for many people, though I've long lied myself into not caring). My emotions kept me from letting Mouse do what should have been done -- and now I pay. Before me, blood of a friend; in my mind, a gunmetal smile. "I'll take care of it."

From the tool crib I draw a laser cutting torch, no questions. The attendant assumes I need it. Outside D.C. Central I open an access plate and make the adjustments taught me in Navy schools. I have an unwieldy gun. I borrow an electric scooter.

She will be somewhere where she thinks she can take out the crew without damaging the ship. To her mind, something involving air. Hydroponics? No. Central blowers. From there, by cutting off air or introducing chemicals, she can neutralize most of us.

I arrive, see I've reasoned well. Dead men guard the door. Beyond is a vast place, as it must be to serve a ship so huge. Somewhere in this mechanical jungle she waits. . . .

Time so swiftly passes. A half hour departs and still I'm creeping among Brobdingnagian machines. Danion still shivers, but the battle is so old it no longer forces itself on the consciousness. I'm tired. I've been up for twenty hours. Finally I spy the mighty consol from which Danion's lungs are controlled.

I crawl, I climb, I find myself a perch on a high catwalk from which most all the board's visible. I see only empty seats where technicians once manipulated our air, a couple of corpses. She's well armed.

From somewhere she appears, as if spontaneously generated. My eyes have wandered. I lift my weapon and aim, but . . .

"Maria . . . Marya . . ." It rips itself from me. She has been closer to me than most women -- I never met my mother.

Her head comes up in startled play, searching. Suddenly there is an explosion of that mocking smile. "Why Moyshe, what are you doing here?" She's looking for me, eyes narrow over the smile, hand on her gun a-twitching. "You're trying to destroy us."

She steps over a dead Seiner. "Moyshe!" Accusing. "Not you. You'd be repatriated."

The lie's as tall as a mile. After the Broken Wings and Von Drachau's raid, she'll have my guts on her

morning toast. She crosses my aim repeatedly, but I won't end it. I can't. My aim falls.

In moving I give myself away. The gunmetal smile is replaced by clashing-sabers laughter. Her weapon jumps up.

To this I can react. The blast reddens metal where I crouched. I'm in the open, running. I fire wild, get behind some great machine. Her shouts mock -- I catch no words -- and beams lick about my covert.

I'm terrified. I've swum too deep. I've feared this since need drove me to the Bureau. Now I'll die. . . .

She's too confident of my ineptness. Something within me breaks; I realize there is something in which I can believe, something to grasp, to serve. I grin, laugh at my laughing soul. The Grail. We've found it. We. This ship, this I, we're part of a We. . . .

In all marvelous stupidity I step into the open. The woman is so startled she hesitates. Against the conditioning of my pyramid of years, I shoot first.

I'm standing over her when Fishers arrive. I have tears. I've always wondered about that -- Mouse cries as though the dead one were his brother, or more, for we value brothers little these days. One takes the cutting torch. Another asks, "Moyshe benRabi?" He knows, of course. They've been watching. Ship's security doesn't fold because a battle is on. These, I discover, were coming to do what I've done. They received orders concerning me while on their way.

"Yes."

"Fellow with the headaches?"

I nod.

"Follow me, please."

I do, though looking back at Maria. Now she is dead, she isn't just "the Sangaree woman." She is Maria, Marya, a woman I may have loved some odd, unexplainable way. Perhaps I've had a deathwish.

I follow, and somewhere along the line note we're entering forbidden territory, Operations Sector, where landsmen dare not go. Nervous, I look

around. It's quieter, more remote than the rest of the ship. The people we pass seem more aloof than the technicians to whom I'm accustomed. They must be. They are the men and women who will think us beyond defeat -- maybe. We enter a vast room filled with damaged machinery. Here there has been death aplenty; casualties still wait on a dozen stretchers. My guide leads me to a man. "BenRabi," he says, departs. This room is much like a ship's bridge, though larger, and the machinery unfamiliar. I see people on reclining couches, heads hidden in great helmets. Technicians grumble over them and damaged gear. A spatial display globe lurks blackly in a corner. Centered in it are seven golden balls, harvestships. Golden needles are service ships, maneuvering against sharks portrayed as scarlet fish. Tiny golden dragons at the periphery mark what must be distant Starfish. No Sangaree are to be seen.

"Mr. benRabi!" I realize the man is after my attention. "Why dragons?" He stops an angry word. "Image from our minds, archetypal. You'll see." "I don't understand."

He ignores me. "The drives are dead, except minddrive. For that we need power from the Fish. But sharks have burned out most of our mind-techs." He points to the nearest stretcher. The face of a girl, a child just out of creche, smiles in vacant madness. "We haven't standbys to replace them, so we're drawing marginal sensitives from the crew. You're subject to migraines?" I nod. I'm reeling. What strange thing . . . "We want you to go into rapport with a Fish." Fear. Memories of terrible, haunting dreams, of the pain resulting. "I can't!"

"Oh?" This man has eyes that reach for my soul -- which cowers, though it knows not what to fear. "I don't know how." Somehow, this feels lame. "You don't need to. You just hook up. The Fish will push the power through to the Helmet. You're just a receiver."

"But I'm tired. I've been awake for . . ."

"So is everybody." He gestures impatiently. A couple comes. "Put him in Number Three." They nod. Departing, I hear, "That the last one?" wearily.

I want to protest, but get no chance. The techs put me on the couch. Ah, well. I've undoubtedly faced worse for the Bureau.

One tech is a woman reminiscent of the professional mother of my childhood. She is gray-haired, cherry-faced, chatters comfortably while strapping my arms to the couch's. She points out grip-switches beneath my fingers, does my legs.

The other, a quiet man, efficiently prepares my head for the helmet. He rubs me with an unscented paste, covers my hair with a thing like a hairnet. My scalp protests a thousand little stings that quickly fade. "Lift, please." I do. The helmet devours my head. I'm blind.

A green ogre with dirty claws shoves his hand into my guts, grabs, yanks. My heart plays battledrums. Words from Czyzewski's *The Old Gods*: ". . . who sang the darkful deep, and dragons in the sky." My body's sweat-wet. Surely the contacts won't work.

In my ears, a voice. "Ready, Mr. benRabi." A sweet-voiced woman, ancient trick for calming -- which works. "Depress the right grip-switch one click."

I do. Fear returns. I've lost all sensation, I float, see, hear, smell, feel nothing.

"That's not bad, is it?" The voice of the professional mother again. I remember that plump old woman's lap and arms and love (but we must all depart that nest), the comfort she gave when I feared. . . . "When you're ready, depress the switch another click, then release it. To withdraw, pull up on the left switch."

I depress the switch.

My dreams return awake, space swimming, the galaxy wrong in color, Star's End strangely bright. Things move. I remember the display tank. This is like being at the heart of that. Service ships are glimmering needles (invisible to ordinary sight), harvestships glowing balls of wire, sharks red fish-shapes. Far, Starfish are golden Chinese dragons, drifting lazily closer.

My terror fades as if a hand is pushing it back. . . .

Gently warm, a hint of voice trickles into my soul. "I do it. Starfish, Chub." There's a wind-chimes tinkle of laughter. "Watch. I show me."

A small dragon soars from the distant herd, does a ponderous end-over-end roll. Shortly, "Old Ones don't like. Dangerous. But we winning, new friend. Sharks running. Most destroyed."

The creature's joy is obvious. He has the right. The sharks are abandoning the fleet.

My terror is still great, but the night creature holds it back, infecting me with his excitement. Time passes. He learns the ways of my mind. He could play me like a musical instrument if he wanted.

"First battle won," he says when I'm under control, "but another fight come."

"What?" I speak in return with my mind.

"Ships-that-kill, bad ones, return."

"How do you know?"

"No way to show, tell. But come, hyper now. Your people prepare."

I go silent. So does he. I take in the wonders about me, the rippling movement of sharks far out, the ponderous approach of dragons, the shimmering maneuvers of service ships, preparing for another fight. The galaxy hangs over all like a hole in the night. Nearby, Star's End sits, waiting.

"Coming," says my dragon. My attention turns. Glimmering ships appear against the galaxy. Sangaree. Down in my backbrain, behind my ears, there is a gentle tickle. "Power."

Sangaree ships radiate from the arrival zone in lines like octopus legs, form a hemisphere. They intend to englove us. Far, the sharks mill uncertainly, retreat.

A light-ball flares among the Sangaree. A Fisher mine has scored. But it makes no difference. This battle we can't win. The service ships number but ten, all wounded, and even the most hale harvestship has lost power and drives.

Minddrive and stored power just aren't enough.

The Sangaree maneuver closer, but there's no firing. My dragon says they're treating with Payne for surrender -- a herd's no good without a fleet.

The herd drifts closer, almost onto the Sangaree. They'll join this battle, but cautiously because sharks still watch from afar.

"Fight soon."

The Sangaree fire on the service ships, our most expendable vessels. They'll force us to submit.

The slow, stately dance of enmity ends. The Sangaree move fast, service ships evade, missiles are everywhere like hurrying wasps. Beam-fire weaves beautiful webs of death. My terror is replaced by depression. I see no way to win.

Far, a Starfish approaches a Sangaree. Dangerous. The ship's weapons can easily destroy him -- the ship stops firing.

"We do shark-thing," echoes in my mind, "but more power. We stop fleet fast if no guns." Another Sangaree falls silent. A Starfish burps gut-fire. The ball hurtles through space, so slowly seeming -- Sangaree burning.

The hemisphere closes about us. The open side, toward Star's End, grows rapidly smaller. The diameter shrinks, two harvestships unleash fire of fantastic magnitude, yet scarcely enough to neutralize the growing attack.

The Starfish mind-burn another Sangaree, turn to run.

They've waited too long. Their central fires are seen. Chub's sadness touches my mind as a dragon dies.

The Sangaree globe closes. Like a squeezing fist, they tighten up, pile up toward Star's End. Their attack grows terrible. They begin pushing -- and I see their goal, the confused sharks milling against the galaxy. I suppose they think we'll give up before enduring that again. . . .

"It works well," my mindvoice says. "Is hard to think thoughts in bad commander. Sangaree heads twisted." The Sangaree are thickly massed now, pushing hard. The sharks are more agitated. The Starfish are cruising their way, ready to cover if we retreat.

The trickle in the root of my brain waxes, becomes a flaming torrent. It hurts, my God; it hurts! Burning, the power surges through me. I'm scarcely able to observe.

Then the harvestships surge toward the Sangaree, all weapons firing -- I think with no aim, just to hurl all destruction possible. The Sangaree push back -- but waver, waver.

In pain, I sweep the night. Sangaree ships burn, service ships the same. A harvestship stops shooting. The Sangaree begin knocking it apart -- they've lost all patience. I suffer another sadness, my own, for those were my people.

. . . .
The Sangaree withdraw -- not retreating, but pushed. We may not last long, but our ferocity is, for the moment, greater than theirs.

Something screams across my mind. It's a mad voice babbling, shrieking fear, incoherencies. I sense little sense, but warning touches me, terror. Phantoms taunt, grotesqueries as of the worst medieval imagination gather in space before me, gargoyles and gorgons, Boschian nightmares writhing, fangs and talons and fire. They shriek, "Go away, or die!" Insanity. They're not real. I'm trapped in the thoughts of a mad mind. . . . I scream.

Nightmare is after me like a drug dream (it's like descriptions of stardust deprivation), burning now, with salamanders. I must escape this haunted place. Again, I scream. The madness deeply holds my mind.

Then the warm feeling comes, gently calms my soul, soothes my fear, pushes the terror and madness away. My dragon from the stars. . . . He tells me, "We succeed. Maybe win." Then, darkly, "Fear is Star's End mind-thing. Planet is mad machine. Mad machine use madness weapons.

"See!"

Shielded by his touch, I turn to Star's End. The Sangaree are silhouetted against the right planet. The face of the world is diseased behind them, spotted blackly, covered with sudden clouds.

I see we are no longer advancing. Indeed, the planet is receding. We're running full speed, dispersing. I know that, if we could, we'd hyper. But we can't on minddrive. Nor can the Sangaree while they're combat-locked. A hundred miles closer than we, they're scattering, breaking lock -- too late! The mad machine's weapons arrive.

"Close mind! Get out!" my dragon shrieks. "Not need power now." I understand because of the earlier nightmares -- Star's End's are weapons of a terrible kind, of the mind. I stop looking -- though I have no eyes to close here -- lift the switch beneath my left hand.

I feel the helmet now, the couch, and loss. I miss my dragon, and, in missing him, I understand Starfishers a little better, why they enjoy being so far from the worlds of men. This Fish-Fisher thing is a whole new experiential frontier. . . . My body is wet with sweat, I'm shivering cold. The room is silent. Where are my techs? Am I alone? My head is a thundering migraine. Rational thought is impossible. I want free of the straps that bind my limbs.

. . . .
Danion staggers, staggers, staggers. I hear screams -- I'm not alone! Loose things racket around; I suffer momentary visions of beasts of hell. Terror grips me anew. The Star's End weapons have arrived, and I'm pinned here, helpless. . . .

Slowly, slowly, it fades. The screams die (some, I think, were my own), are gradually replaced by excited chatter -- I can distinguish no words. My head is tearing itself apart. I was a kid the last time it was this bad. I shout. Someone finally notices me. The helmet comes off, a syringe stabs my neck. Tingles spread. The migraine begins to pass.

The room is cloaked in gloom. Stored power is almost gone, I guess. A drain, the fighting. But the faces I see are joyous -- with the exception of those gruesomely vacant few of mind-techs who didn't get out in time.

"We've won!" says the motherish half of my tech-team. "Star's End killed them." Not all, I suspect, though I say nothing. Some broke lock, and will carry a grudge. . . .

"And four harvestships," says a sad-faced man passing.

A Pyrrhic victory. We won, but there is nothing to celebrate. Our joy dies. I'm ready for collapse, yet hours pass before I rest. First, I search for

Mouse, find him in D.C. Central, un-

conscious on a stretcher, his arm crudely bandaged and splinted. Then it's back to my team, patching pipes. There is so much to do, just to keep Danion alive. But power we eventually restore, life support we repair, drives we jury-rig. It's not too hard. The damage is more to people than plant (over half the crew is gone). The surviving service ships are recovered. A watch for sharks is set, but those nightmares have gone to places of easier hunting. There is no time for mourning, so fierce is the battle for life. We save Danion, but abandon the Star's End project. The war with sharks may well be lost.

Months pass. Something dread approaches: time to return to Carson's.

It is five months since I want drank of the blood of my soul. Five peaceful months. I belong, finally -- but I'm afraid to ask to stay. For weeks I worry asking, decide, undecided. I'm so terribly afraid of being turned down; and a little afraid of being accepted.

Even the days are gone now. We're down to the hours, and still I haven't asked, still I haven't found the courage to seize what I need. I think of creche days, of story time, of heroes who were never undecided, never afraid -- all from the past. There is no room for heroes in the kaleidoscope universe of today. (Strange. I'm suddenly certain that was one of the things I've sought: heroism, to be a hero. The Broken Wings was as close as I came. . . . But that conjures visions of Maria.)

The ship for Carson's departs in two hours. What can I do? I know what I should, but still I fear committal, rejection. I don't want to leave, but what if staying is a mistake? The questions I ask myself would fill a book.

Finally, with just an hour remaining, I seek Mouse. He never has doubts, no matter how much he fears -- paranoia has its rewards. Maybe he can help.

We've seen little of one another since the battle. I've spent most of my time in Operations Sector, still forbidden him (I'm being used as a mind-tech -- are they expecting I'll stay? Or is it just because they're forced by circumstances?), so he is bright when I arrive. "Hey, how about chess while we're waiting?" he asks. He is addicted. "Nobody else will play." He is still an outcast.

Maybe a game will relax me. I nod. He's very excited, shaking a little. I hardly notice. Over opening moves, I try to broach my problem. "Mouse, I want to stay. . . ."

He looks at me strangely, as if with mixed emotions, as if he expected this, but was hoping for something else. "Let's talk about it after the game. Drink? It'll unwind you."

A man about to undergo acceleration and temporary null-gravity shouldn't, but I nod. He goes to a cabinet, gets a bottle of something pre-mixed. While he's getting glasses, I look around. Everything that is Mouse is gone, except the chess set. So nice to be sure. My gear is packed, but I still haven't sent it

to the service ship. . . .

A glass breaks. Mouse curses, gathers the pieces, curses again as he cuts himself. Wish he'd quit using his bad hand. . . . I see why. With his good he's pushing gooey stuff into and over Security's bug -- we hunted it up one day after Star's End, when we wanted to talk. He brings the drinks, returns to the game.

It's a slow one. He studies each move so carefully. I down several drinks, grow relaxed, turn off the troublesome part of my mind. I get involved. I'm holding my own. Unusual. He's far the better player, but he seems remote, disturbed. Time swiftly passes.

Sudden, rapid moves. My queen goes, then, "Check-mate!" The alcohol no longer helps. This defeat just adds to a growing depression, a small symbol of my big-time losing. A moment later, while boxing the pieces (he fumbles with his bad hand), he says, "I kept this out, hoping we'd play on the way back. You want to stay?" "Yes."

"That's why I'm here." He turns. I see the fumbling wasn't purposeless. In his good hand is a Fisher weapon. I groan.

"You should've figured, Moyshe. Wheels within wheels." (Maybe I did down deep, and came to Mouse for an easy answer.) "Psych figured you'd fall, figured you'd get where I couldn't. So they sent you out as a remote data-collecting device -- and I'm your keeper. That is the worm gnawing around the core of all the rotten plans." This is a long speech for Mouse. He's doing something more than trying to explain -- maybe he doesn't like what he's doing. "We're friends, so let's play it gentle, eh?"

Yes, gentle. As in chess, he outskills me here. I'm the half of the team who always does the "soft," people stuff. He does the "hard." He may like me, but he will, and easily can, kill me if I don't cooperate. I look at his face. There's pain there. There's something he wants to tell me -- maybe, just maybe, he doesn't want to go himself. I'd best not push if he's under stress. Hell overreact. My shoulders slump forward. I surrender. Back to being a chip in the stream.

Dread voice through Danion, godlike, calling us to the departure station for pay-off and check-out. Mouse pockets his weapon. "Sorry, Moyshe."

"I understand." But I don't, of course.

He nods at the door. We go. I give him no trouble all the way, even when opportunity occurs. I'm sure I could do something in the crowd there. But I've surrendered all. No home. Guess I'll never have one. Back to being a chip in a universe like Sierran rivers raging. Back to the beginning.

No home. . . .

"Mr. benRabi?" Here's a man coming through the press, my bags in his hands.

"You left these."

I know this man. He's Security, the fellow who first took me into Operations Sector. He steps between Mouse and me. Landsmen mill excitedly around us, talking excitedly of home, rushing to the paymaster when their names are called. I don't really notice in my shock.

"The gun, please?" There are several of them now, all around. Mouse surrenders his weapon meekly. "I told Beckhart it wouldn't work." He looks shattered.

"We'll have to hold you."

There's a stir among the landsmen, a confused shout, screams. A Seiner twists past me, falling, an expression of incredible surprise on the unburned half of his face. Now there's screaming, running, Security men plunging into the crowd. . . .

"Wheels within wheels, and this was mine," Mouse says. "I thought Beckhart would have a fail-safer aboard." (Fail-safer. Trade term for a fanatic sent on a mission, unknown to the mission, to assassinate agents about to defect or be captured. Didn't know we used them any more. Sure didn't think Mouse and I were that important.) "Sorry, Moyshe. I couldn't tell you. Had to have you

thinking I meant what I was doing." Did he? Or was he just bending with the breeze? "Had to spot him before we went over. Otherwise . . ." He shrugs, then smiles. So do I. I'll believe him. There're more shots, then the Seiners catch their man -- now we're home free. Home, after all -- and with a friend.