

Vox Domini

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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In a canyon of blue sandstone, a man is digging a hole. It's a deep hole, long and narrow. It could hardly be anything other than a grave.

There's a stream flowing nearby. Overhead, the sky is tinted orange with dust, with the color of the setting sun. The wind is blowing hard up there. In this region of the planet, the wind always blows hard at sunset. But down here in the canyon, at the base of these high blue walls, the air hardly stirs.

There is no sound but the soft snick of the shovel cutting through the sand.

* * *

Mohr half opened his eyes when he felt Boursai wiping his mouth again. The cloth was cold and rough, but Boursai was gentle with it.

"That's better," Boursai said. "Isn't that better?"

Mohr tried to turn his back on Boursai, but he was still too drugged, too weak. All he could manage was to turn his head and face the other way.

The light coming through the open doorway was brilliant. The blue cliffs and canyons looked washed out and unreal in the distance. There by the door were the remains of the yellow hexes, tiny cracked shells like dead insects. And between the doorway and the cot where Mohr was lying there was the still-damp spot where Boursai had tried to scrape the floor clean.

"Do you want some water to drink?" said Boursai. "It will wash away the bitterness from your mouth."

But not from my soul, Mohr thought. And then he thought to himself, *Shut up. Stop thinking.*

Mohr heard water trickling from one of the jugs, and then Boursai was in front of him again with a cup in his black hands.

"Take it. Drink."

Mohr closed his eyes and gestured toward the door.

"Gabriel, drink it."

Mohr tried to lift his arms to tap a message into his wrist communicator, but he couldn't manage it. He flicked his wrist impatiently toward the door again.

"I'll go soon enough, Gabriel," said Boursai. "But I must attend to some things first. You've been letting things go around here." He held out the cup. "You need to take better care of yourself and your trees. You've been neglecting your trees, Gabriel."

Mohr tried again to bring his right hand to the keyboard on his wrist. This time he managed to type in a message by feel. Boursai leaned forward to read it. It said: "FUCK TREES."

"You don't mean that. They'll die. Your trees need you, Gabriel."

Mohr keyed in another message. It said, "GO AWAY. DONT CALL ME GABRIEL. GO."

"It's a good name," Boursai said. "It was the angel Gabriel who brought God's words to the prophet, and..."

Mohr tried to tune him out. He didn't want to hear more talk of God and the prophet, and he didn't want to hear his name again. Gabriel. His adopted name, the name the Catholics had given him. The

name for the fool who had wasted years and years listening for the voice of God. Gabriel. The name Tieren had liked so much. Mohr felt his body stiffen, his heart accelerate. Tieren. Damn Boursai for that, for making him think of Tieren.

Summoning all his strength, Mohr lifted his arm to knock the cup from Boursai's hand.

He keyed the communicator to display, "GO AWAY" and to keep scrolling those words across its screen. Then he closed his eyes and slept.

* * *

When Mohr woke, Boursai was not in the room, but Mohr could hear him moving outside in the compound. The wind had come up, blowing so hard that it had to be midafternoon.

Boursai moved for a moment to where Mohr could see him framed by the doorway. The man stood swaying in the wind like some tall, black sapling. On his back he carried a water tank, and in one hand he held the dripping nozzle.

Mohr sat up slowly, making the cot creak. His head throbbed, and his body felt like it was made of rags. He looked around the room. Everything had been ordered, tidied up. Even the litter of empty hexes by the door had disappeared. Mohr reached into the breast pocket of his fatigues.

There was nothing there.

He patted the pocket to make sure, then pushed himself up from the cot and shuffled to his foot locker. It was unlocked. He *never* left it unlocked. He touched his neck, feeling for the string that held his key. It was gone.

Hands shaking, he threw the locker open. The bag had been right on top. But not any more.

The empty water tank scraped on the ground outside. Boursai came in, ducking through the doorway.

Mohr punched keys on his wrist. Then he shook the word at Boursai. "WHERE?"

Boursai stepped close. Too close. Mohr turned his face away and keyed in, "GET AWAY!" His hands were shaking. "WHERE'S STASH?"

Boursai, arms extended as if to catch him, said, "Careful! You shouldn't be on your feet so soon."

Mohr started to key something in, then stopped. This was taking too long, punching one key at a time. He half walked, half stumbled past Boursai to the com-link sitting beside his sink. He switched it on and typed in: "If I fall, it's my own business! If I want to god damn take a fistful of hex and god damn die, that's my own business! Where the hell is my stash?"

Boursai stood just close enough to read the screen. "I took them away," he said. "I put them somewhere."

Mohr glared at Boursai as he typed in: "I suppose you think you're doing me a favor! I'm an addict. Hex is something I need!" He held down the word repeat key so that the screen filled with, "need! need! need! need!"

"I'll give them to you," Boursai said quietly. "I'll give you one a day."

Mohr closed his eyes. His hands felt rubbery. "Thief!" he typed. "What did the prophet say about thieves?"

"I'm sure you know the words of the prophet as well as I do," said Boursai.

"Did once. Trying to forget such crap. Give me my hexes."

Boursai's answer was a soft, "No."

Mohr brought his trembling hands to his face, then raised them in a frustrated, angry gesture. *Why are you doing this to me?*

"All men are brothers," said Boursai.

Mohr spun back to the keyboard. "Bullshit! All men are brothers, the beloved children of God? Hah! God's gone, Boursai! God's in hiding!"

"It's a wondrous universe, Gabriel. Even if God is remote." Boursai thought for a moment and said, "Isn't this planet proof to you of God's benevolence?"

Mohr shook his head. He had heard this argument before. Not from Boursai, but from other recruits to the Planters Corps. Onazuka's World did seem like a Godsend to some. It was a world with an

earth-like atmosphere but with almost no native life forms, the perfect place to colonize. But how had this wonderful situation come into being? Onazuka's World had evolved over billions of years, just like the earth. Artifacts and bones only a few hundred years old showed that there had been a rich and varied biosphere here, the product of an evolutionary process that was just beginning to produce tool makers. In fact, it seemed there were several tool-making species. And then, just centuries before the first humans set foot on this world, a massive meteor collided with the planet, cloaking it in dust. The planet froze. When the dust settled out and the surface warmed again, few native species came back. It was like the world had been made and wiped clean for humanity to colonize with earth life.

"Benevolence?" Mohr tapped in. "A God who murders a world for our convenience is benevolent?"

"If you are as cynical as you seem," Boursai said, "then why did you enlist in the Planters Corps?"

Because, Mohr thought, I wanted to get out of the Live Free Cluster, out of all of the clusters, if I could find a way. I wanted to make planetfall. Any planetfall. And because the recruiter showed me the biggest bag of yellow hex that I had ever seen and said the magic words: *Signing bonus*. But what he typed was, "None of your damn business. Give me my hex and get out!"

"You're a good planter," Boursai said. "Until recently, you've always been very careful with your trees. Whenever I came to see you, you would be at work."

That's because they'll send me back to Onazuka City if I don't do a good job, Mohr thought. Or back to the clusters. But he had no stomach for explaining things to Boursai. "Come on!" he typed. "Give me my hex and get out! Out! I want to be left alone!"

Mohr turned to look at the other man. He could read the thought in Boursai's eyes: If I'd left you alone today, you'd be dead. But Boursai didn't say this. He didn't have a chance, because at that moment, his wristwatch began to sing in Arabic. His electronic muezzin was calling him to prayer. He excused himself and went outside, consulting the display on his wrist to see what sector of the sky he should face for his obeisance to earth, to Mecca.

Mohr staggered to the door to shut it behind the man, but instead he leaned in the doorway to look out at the blue cliffs, to think of the canyons where he sometimes planted his trees. The coolness of those streams. The solitude.

While Boursai prayed, Mohr thought of Tireen again, and something stabbed at his heart.

Long ago, when Mohr had gone to the Holy Cluster of the Catholic Church, an old woman named Sister Sarah Theresa had been assigned to instruct him. She was little more than a body suit stretched over bones, and her hair was too white and too thin to hide her skull. She was, secretly, a heretic.

The stabbing in his heart made Mohr think of her now. "It's like a worm in your heart, Gabriel," she had told him. They were floating in the zero-g cathedral-so many religions put their holy places in the hubs of their clusters, as if weightlessness put them closer to God. Mohr and Sister Sarah Theresa were in the apse, looking at the statue of the Son of God and Man. Stars wheeled slowly by in the windows behind the Savior's head.

"The catechism teaches that there is no guilt," the old woman said, looking around to see that she was not overheard. They were, in fact, alone in the cathedral. "They say now that there is only Affective Spiritual Dissonance." She chuckled. "They water God down until there is nothing left but psychology." Then, more seriously, she pointed a bony finger: "There *is* guilt, Gabriel. It's like a worm eating away at your heart from the inside. God can take away that worm, but you have to confess. You have to speak aloud what sin you have committed, in the hearing of another human being."

"Why must it be spoken?" Mohr had asked her.

"Because that's the only way to release what's in your heart. That's the only way God will hear you. Speak aloud what you have done-- you can't just think it or write it. It's still in your heart, then. You have to confess. The heart and the tongue are connected. When you confess, you poison that worm in your heart with truth."

Boursai was finishing his prayer, and Mohr felt the stab in his heart once more. He remembered the way that Tireen had clawed at his hand on the airlock button, then on the override switch. He remembered the look in her eyes. The disbelief. He remembered what the vacuum did to her face. Guilt is a worm. Guilt is a worm. Confess, Gabriel Mohr!

But he would have to use words for that, wouldn't he? Spoken words. That's what it would take to confess.

He reached into his pocket out of reflex. If only he could shut off this chatter in his head, these memories! His knees had weakened, and as he slid toward the ground, he felt Boursai's grip seize him. Touching him. Boursai was touching him.

Mohr pulled away, felt the bile rising in his throat. But his stomach was empty. He only gagged. He thought, half amused, *It's nothing personal, Boursai, you thieving bastard. It's just that I can't stand human beings.* He smiled weakly.

"Come back inside," Boursai said. "Lie down." He offered his hand to help Mohr up. Mohr looked at the hand. No, his reaction to Boursai was more than his ordinary revulsion. There was something about Boursai that made him cringe.

Mohr got to his feet without help. He went back to the com-link. "You're the problem, Boursai. When you don't come around, I need one hex a day, maybe two. But you visit and I take four, I take five or six." He pounded the counter next to the keyboard. "Leave me alone! Give me my hex and go!"

"I will go," Boursai answered, "but I cannot return your drugs to you."

Mohr picked up an empty water jug and hurled it. It went wide of Boursai's head.

"I am sorry for this," Boursai said. Mohr waved angrily, as if to say, *Just get the hell out!*

The door closed. Mohr waited a few minutes, then went outside. The wind gusted and Mohr flinched. He didn't like wind. In the clusters, he had never felt more breeze than the gentle exhalations of the ventilation shafts.

Boursai was already a small figure striding near the horizon.

Mohr went back inside and checked under the convex bottom of one water jug, and then reached into the space between the counter and the wall, and then checked the hole he had hollowed out from the dirt floor and covered with a stone. They were all there, his emergency stashes. Boursai hadn't found any of them, probably hadn't thought to look.

First Mohr refilled his breast pocket, then put a hex between his teeth and cracked it. He inhaled through his mouth, felt the warmth travel down his throat, into his lungs and body. Then he spit the empty yellow shell onto the floor.

He looked at the bag and felt his pocket. This supply wouldn't last long. He'd have to convince Boursai to return the rest. What was it with that man, anyway? Why did he insist on coming around here? He had his own compound to attend to, his own trees to get into the ground. Maybe Boursai was lonely. It was just the two of them for a hundred miles in any direction. So what? It wasn't Mohr's fault if Boursai couldn't take a little solitude.

Mohr closed his eyes, and Tieren's face floated up from his memory. Damn Boursai. Damn him! Mohr cracked another hex.

The sun wasn't quite setting when Mohr turned on his com-link and opened a channel to Boursai. Mohr hardly ever turned his unit on, but now he had a reason. He couldn't stop thinking of that bag of hex.

"Boursai," he transmitted, "bring back my property."

The red contact light came on as Boursai turned on his machine miles away and received the message. And his reply came an instant later: "You took an overdose."

"That's my damn business," Mohr wrote, then wiped it out and replaced it with, "I need the stuff."

"You think you need it."

"I *need* it, Boursai. Return it!"

"Why? Why are you convinced you need to poison yourself?"

Mohr stared at the screen for a moment. If Boursai knew even half of Mohr's story, the ways people had changed him, the things they had done to him, the things he had done...

"It may make you feel good for a little while," Boursai's message continued, "but it could kill you. It almost did."

That was the idea, Mohr thought. Poison wasn't such a bad idea. If Boursai only knew...

"You've got to adjust to this world, Gabriel."

Adjust! That's what he had done more than anyone else he knew, adjusting to one cluster after another. The only place he hadn't really tried to fit in was Holdham, his home cluster, and the only reason he couldn't fit in there was because he happened to be curious about the wrong things! "Where do you get those ideas, boy?" his instructors asked him. And when he told them, they'd say something like, "Those entries ought to be wiped from the encyclopedia. That's ancient history. Useless stuff."

No one else on Holdham was interested in religion. Holdham was a poor cluster, one that barely clung to existence by making its organic cycle as efficient as could be. "There's no room for nonsense in Holdham," his teachers said. "If you can't count it, it isn't real. Spend your time studying Life Support. That's your religion."

But there were questions Mohr wanted answers for, questions that were only half-formed in his mind. Since no one on Holdham even thought the questions were worth asking, he applied to emigrate.

It wasn't easy to get out. The Holdham Cluster saw Mohr as an investment. Not only was his body a storehouse of valuable organics, he was the product of long schooling as a Life Support engineer. But he insisted, and they had to let him go. The laws of the Great Swarm applied to every cluster. Every person had the right to choose another cluster in the Swarm.

The Catholics were the first to take Mohr in. They paid the cost of ferrying him from the Holdham Cluster to their own. Most of the religious clusters would pay this expense, happy to have a convert.

Boursai's words were still on the screen: "You've got to adjust to this world, Gabriel."

"I have adjusted," Mohr typed. "I've adjusted to so many worlds that my head spins. I've adjusted to life on two dozen different clusters, damn it, but I still need my yellow hex!"

He felt uncomfortable having typed this much, and he hadn't revealed anything new. Boursai had already figured out this much about Mohr's past. Mohr thought of breaking the link, but then he thought of the yellow hex Boursai had taken. His only hope of getting it back was convincing Boursai of his need.

"Tell me about that," Boursai prompted.

Nosy bastard, Mohr thought. And then he thought, All right. Maybe-- it wasn't likely-- but maybe it would even do him some good to write about these things. Some of these things, anyway. There was a lot he would have to leave out.

"If I tell you more, will you return my hex?" he typed.

"I will do what I believe is proper."

"Hell of a guarantee," Mohr wrote, but then he continued:

"All right, I'll make you see why I need what I need. And then you'll have to do the right thing."

"That is what I have promised: the right thing."

"When I was young," Mohr typed, "I did some wandering. I started with the Holy Cluster, but I didn't get what I wanted from the Catholics."

Mohr stared at that last word, thinking of the huge, ornate collection of pods and corridors and great rooms that made up the Holy Cluster.

"What were you looking for?"

"You figure it out, Boursai. Anyway, they weren't it. They weren't anything like the believers I had read about in some encyclopedia. The Catholics were so rational that they weren't Godly. They weren't passionate in their beliefs. Their faith was cold and scientific, infected with technologies. It was more psychology than religion. You didn't go to confession to expiate your guilt, as I had read. No, you went to a Process Group to work out your Affective Spiritual Dissonance. God wasn't even in the loop. What mattered in atonement was not that you would make yourself at one with God, but with yourself."

"Faith is tested," came a message from Boursai, "and men speak openly of their doubts. In this way are religions transformed."

"Transformed to the point of meaninglessness," Mohr fired back. Then he froze. He looked back at what he had already written. He was putting down more than he absolutely had to, was feeling more caught up in this than was safe. He had never told his story, the whole story to anyone. But he couldn't just end the transmission, not with his yellow hex hanging in the balance.

He could at least abbreviate what he wrote, not be so detailed. "So I left," he wrote, "and tried elsewhere. I went to the Wahabi Cluster and the Cluster of the All. I tried the Chen Buddhists, the Sikhs, the Baptists and the Bleeders and the Templars of the Void. I lived in the clusters of the Sufis and the Jews. Each time, I held out hope that the answers would be waiting for me at my next destination. Each time, I was disappointed."

"Was your soul unnourished in every place? Did you feel no rumor of God in your heart?"

It was strange that Boursai had put it that way, for that was just the thing Mohr had decided he was looking for: a rumor of God, some whisper of God's voice. A personal revelation. In the face of religions watered down by reason, he wanted direct contact with the divine. He demanded it. Yes, he wanted a rumor of God.

But what he wrote on the com-link was, "God is a lie. But I ran after that lie. I ran to the City of God. For the Citizens of God, God wasn't mere philosophy or a therapeutic tool."

Yes, in the City of God, Mohr remembered, God was still great and absolute and revered. God was God. But He was also a hoax.

Mohr wrote about the City of God haltingly. He didn't really want to remember all of this, but it was the experience that explained his addiction, that would make Boursai return that plastic bag full of oblivion. He thought for a bit, wrote a sentence, thought, and wrote a sentence more.

The first thing the Citizens of God did when he arrived was shoot him full of muscle relaxant and wheel him into surgery. They knocked him out and put a cochlear receiver in his head. All without asking him, almost before they asked him his name.

"The implant," they told him as he came out of surgery, "will teach you obedience to God." And then they taught him the catechism of the Citizens of God while he was still woozy from the drugs.

Obedience was everything to the Citizens-- obedience to God's commands. The core of their doctrine was this: God summons each mortal to serve Him, but we are usually so distracted that we hardly hear His voice, and when we do hear, we are too willful to obey. Because of this, God does not call most mortals again, but consigns them to eventual oblivion.

Only those who listen carefully for God's word and prepare to obey Him without thought will know the "release of obedience," the joy of serving a divine master. And so life in the City of God was a continuous drill in servitude.

Several times a day, Mohr would hear a voice in his head, a command spoken directly into his cochlear nerve. In the morning, it would tell him where to report and what to do for the day's labor.

"That part was easy," Mohr wrote for Boursai. "What was difficult was the other half of the day, the evenings in the Hive."

The Hive was a matrix of glass walled rooms in the hub-- the weightless center of the City of God. From any room, you could see the six adjacent rooms, and other rooms beyond each of those, stretching on and on until imperfections in the glass made the farthest rooms dissolve into a milky haze.

The voice in Mohr's head would tell him at dinner where he was to report-- which cell number. He would undress in his quarters and proceed naked, with all the other Citizens, to his cell. There he would find one or more other Citizens, and the voice would command him again. Sometimes he would be commanded to perform some sex act, or to float at a distance from the other Citizens in the cell, not touching them, not touching himself, he watched couples or trios in the neighboring cells having sex. Sometimes he was commanded to beat someone. Sometimes he was beaten. Once he was told to push a needle and thread into his palm and draw the thread all the way through his hand. He did it. He'd have done anything. This was the path to God.

"Then one night," Mohr wrote, "I was ordered to beat a man with my fists. Without hesitation, I hit him in the face, time after time. He let himself be bloodied. We would drift toward one another, and then the force of my blow would send us apart. We'd push off from the walls, drift together again, and I'd hit him again. He never raised his hands to stop me. His face was swelling. His lips were split, and the air was red with droplets of blood. I could taste his blood with every breath I took, and the thought came to me that this was madness. So I left the cell. Though the man begged me to go on hitting him, to test his obedience to God, I left the cell."

The wind gusted outside and the walls of Mohr's shelter shook. The wind would stop soon with nightfall. He kept typing: "I went to the elders and I told them that I was going to leave the City of God, that I was returning to my home cluster of Holdham. But they refused me.

" 'You can't stop me,' I told them. 'The laws of the Swarm provide that I may go.'

"And they said, 'What are the laws of men compared to the will of God?' And they told me to return to the hive, to go back and bloody that other Citizen some more."

But he didn't go back. He went to his sack in the dormitory and crawled into it. The voice inside his head ordered him back to the hive, but he refused to get out of the sack. He no longer believed that the City of God could be the path to the divine.

"I refused. They were having none of my apostasy, though," Mohr wrote. "I was trying to escape, but there were a hundred thousand souls in the City, a hundred thousand tools for making me see that escape was impossible. So first, the implant shut up, and then the two biggest men I had ever seen came to the dormitory and beat me while I was still in my bag, beat me until I crawled out and went back to the Hive as they told me to. And in the Hive, they beat me some more. It's strange, but I felt it much more now that I was taking the punishment for punishment alone, not as a step along the path to God. The blows stung as never before."

Mohr stopped for a moment to stare at what he had written. He stared long enough that Boursai queried, "Still there?"

The story was getting closer and closer in time to Tireen. Mohr realized his breathing had become fast and shallow. But if he got the hexes back, they would protect him from the memories he was getting so close to. So he continued, trying to write too fast to think about what he put down: "It wasn't just the beatings. I was used to that. But my whole life in the City changed. The voice stopped speaking to me. I didn't know what to do next, and my actions produced unpredictable results. Whatever I did, some person near me was commanded to do something to me-to give me pleasure or pain, and I would never know which to expect. I would follow the others to work, find a job to do, and try to do it, and some guy would cuff my ear one moment, then pray aloud for me the next. The woman next to me might jab my side with a tool or reach inside my body suit to fondle me. If I enjoyed what she was doing, she might continue or she might bite me. If I stayed in bed, I might get a slap or a kiss. I might be beaten or seduced. I never knew what to expect. I had no control over how people treated me. And so the sight of another human being began to sicken me with anxiety."

He stopped typing and stared at the screen. Was it helping to write these things down? No. Sister Sarah Theresa had been right. A confession had to be spoken aloud. As it was, he was just making himself feel more and more vulnerable. But he still could not turn off the com-link when he thought of what Boursai had and how much he wanted it back.

"You going to give me my hex?"

"Tell me what happened in the City of God."

"They broke me, Boursai. They broke me. When the elders had me carried to their chamber, I begged them to let the voice speak to me again, to order my life once more."

Words on the screen could not say it. They could not represent what had been done to him. For a while he stared at his hands while the wind rattled his shutters and sand hissed against the outer walls of his quarters.

"I see," prompted Boursai.

Not half of it, Mohr thought. He wrote, "People make me sick. All people. I want to be alone. All the time alone."

"But how did you escape them?" Boursai wrote.

"They let me go." Boursai's reply was long in coming.

"But why? Wouldn't they expect you to go to the authorities, to notify the Court of the Swarm? And haven't you done so?"

"That's my story," Mohr wrote, "or all that matters." He thought of Tireen clawing at his gloved hand, then trying to get her helmet from him. That look. The change in her face, blood boiling under her skin...

Writing all of this down was a stupid mistake. Mohr reached into his pocket for a hex.

"Give me my hex," he typed. "It's mine."

Boursai's reply was a question: "Did you ever hear the voice of God?"

Mohr closed his eyes, made no move to reply. When he opened his eyes, there was more from Boursai: "I ask because that is the thing I hope for," the message said. "I hope that one night, when I am on the edge of sleep, God will say to me, 'Momoudu Boursai, there is no God but God. I am He, and Mohammed is my prophet.'"

Mohr typed: "You're a fool. Give me my hex."

"So you never heard the voice of God."

Oh, but he had. He had heard the voice of God all right!

"I heard a voice in my cochlear implant. Not the usual voice. A deeper voice. I was supposed to believe it was God. It told me to go to the Live Free Cluster and make money any way I could. It told me to buy organics and ship them back to the City of God. I was to enrich the elders, all for the greater glory of God." And now he'd really had enough of this. He had told Boursai all he was going to. "Give me my hex, damn you!"

"Well," Boursai replied, "a message from an impostor does not preclude the existence of God."

Mohr felt flayed open, exposed by what he had written. He was furious with himself for letting Boursai lure him into this exchange. He pounded the keys: "Give me my hex!"

The wind was calming a little, and raindrops sounded on the corrugated roof. It was always like this: strong wind in the early afternoon, then calm, then wind again near sunset and rain at night. The weather on Onazuka's world, a planet with no axial tilt, was as reliable and monotonous as the ventilation cycles in a cluster.

Boursai: "I do not wish for you to suffer."

"My hex, damn it!"

"No matter what the elders did to you, no matter how they broke you down, you are still a human being. You still need other people. Some day, you'll have to come to terms with this."

"Bastard! Thief!"

"You will run out of them eventually. I have the bag before me, now. How long will they last? How will you possibly get more?"

"I need them! I NEED THEM!"

"I will bring them to you. And I will stay away. May you find peace, Gabriel Mohr."

Mohr took a deep breath of relief and turned off the com-link without formally logging off. Then he put his face in his hands and shook. This had been a trial. He felt raw and exposed. But it was worth it if Boursai would now give back his hexes and stay the hell away.

There were, of course, important things that he had left out of the story. He hadn't told Boursai how he had lost his voice. It had no physical cause, his speechlessness. It was his own act of defiance. If God would not speak to Mohr, Mohr would not speak to God. Or to anyone. He would turn his heart and mind to stone.

God had let him search through the clusters, let the corrupt elders break him like an animal, and still God had not whispered one syllable into Mohr's ear, had not dropped one hint, had not said simply, "I am."

The elders in the City of God seemed unsurprised by this loss of speech. Perhaps they were pleased that they had driven Mohr's voice from him. They gave him his wrist communicator.

Mohr also hadn't told Boursai about Tireen, his wife in the City of God.

Once the elders were convinced that Mohr had been thoroughly conditioned, once they were sure that he thought the new voice in his cochlear implant was truly the voice of God, they assigned him to maintaining the hull of the cluster. Perhaps one day, they told him, if God commanded it, he might be made a missionary, might leave the City of God. But for now his task was to work on the hull, to learn its construction and drill himself on how to repair it should some rare piece of debris come hurtling across the void and strike the home of God's obedient servants.

They gave him a wife, assigned Tireen to him like some cell partner for the Hive.

Mohr went to his door, opened it, and stood listening to the rain. If he'd found wind difficult to adjust

to, he had found rain instantly to his liking. He stood outside and felt it fall on his head.

What would Tireen have thought of rain?

And why had he trusted Tireen? She wanted so much for him to trust her, but that should not have been enough. How did he overcome his revulsion, let her touch him? That had been a mistake, letting someone get close to him like that.

She was dangerous, this woman they had given him. She whispered things into his ear, his right ear, for she said that the implant could hear what was said in the left one. She whispered her doubts, her certainty that the City of God was a hoax, a sham that made the elders rich and enslaved the Citizens. She whispered to him her hopes of escaping, of being made missionaries and running away when they had the chance.

Sometimes he was certain that she had been assigned as his wife to trick him, to make him reveal his own doubts and longing to escape. So he did not answer the things she said to him, did not key in any reply on his wrist communicator. But if he was sometimes certain she planned to betray him, he was at other times just as certain that he could trust her, that she meant the things she whispered. But even then he would not answer her with even a glance of encouragement. He was afraid for her. He was afraid that the elders would find out that her faith was pretended, and then they would break her like they had broken him.

But, of course, the thing that had finally happened to her was far worse.

"We must pretend absolute obedience," she whispered in the darkness of their sleeping cell. "Absolute devotion."

As Mohr recalled these things, he found himself taking another yellow hex from his pocket. Hexes numbed him generally, but worked especially on his speech centers. They turned off his inner voice, separated him from memories.

No, he hadn't told Boursai about Tireen, about how he had trusted her so much that one time as he lay in her arms he found himself whispering, uttering words into her ear. He broke his promise to never speak again by telling her that he was with her, that they would escape together, that they would make a life somewhere else and never even remember the City of God. He gave her his word, his spoken word. And she gave him a conspiratorial smile.

And then, an hour later, standing in the airlock together, he looked at her and saw her otherness, saw what a stranger she was. And he was sure, as she helped him to attach his helmet, that she would betray him. She had contrived to make him speak. She would tell the elders that he was not really mute, that he was a blasphemer and spoke of defying them. And the consequences of that? They would return him to the hive. They would try again, try harder than before, to break his will completely. Mohr he activated the vacuum. The airlock sensors knew that Tireen's helmet wasn't attached to her suit, so he had to hit the override, too.

And Tireen, not believing, did nothing at first. Then she was clawing at his hand on the switch, grappling for her helmet. The expression on her face, before her face was something else altogether ... the expression of fear and bewilderment...

No, he hadn't told Boursai about Tireen. And he hadn't told him, either, why he had taken a handful of yellow hexes and cracked them open, one at a time, inhaling one after another until he could scarcely move, could scarcely remember who he was, but still went on cracking and inhaling. It had been because Boursai had insisted on visiting, had returned time after time to Mohr's compound, no matter how unwelcome Mohr tried to make him feel. It was because Boursai talked and talked about God and the beauty of Onazuka's World and doubt and faith and all the things that Boursai was liable to talk about whether you answered him or not. And Mohr had found himself liking this man. Even as the thought of being within fifty yards of another human being made him queasy, he found himself liking Boursai. And he began to imagine Boursai's face smashed in with a shovel.

Mohr cracked the hex he was holding. There was time enough for one more memory before the hexes covered over his mental past. He remembered the first thing he had felt when he was coming to. The overdose had almost killed him. He had stopped breathing. And now he remembered the feel of Boursai's breath filling his lungs, breathing him back to life. The man's hot, wet breath. And *that* made

him reach for one more hex now to crack between his teeth. And then one more. And then just one more after that.

When he awoke the next morning, the bag of hex was there on the ground outside his door.

* * *

In a canyon of blue sandstone, a man is digging a hole. It's a deep hole. It's a grave.

There's a stream flowing nearby. The water is tinted green with algae, an indigenous species.

One of the few.

The man digs in silence. There's the sound of the shovel cutting the blue sand. The sound of his breathing. But there's no birdsong. The man is not accustomed to birdsong, anyway, but one day there will be birds in this canyon. And soon, very soon, there will be the buzzing of bees, bees imported from a long way off, light years away, brought here to pollinate the trees. But for now, silence.

* * *

At first, Mohr was afraid that Boursai would come visiting in spite of his promise to stay away. For a week, he cracked yellow hex after yellow hex as he constantly scanned the horizon, always expecting Boursai's distant silhouette. But Boursai was a man of his word. When he said he would stay away, he stayed away.

Finally, Mohr tapered off on the hexes and paid attention to his work. He had neglected the trees in his nursery too long, and some of them were dying. He worked hard to get them transplanted and to pamper them once they were in the ground. There wasn't an hour of daylight when he didn't have either his shovel in hand or the water tank on his back. It felt good to work, good to feel the weight of the shovel as he carried it here and there. He worked, in fact, like a man who cared about what he was doing. But what he truly cared about was having something to do that kept his mind from the tiny worm that was eating at his heart.

Sometimes he caught himself gazing in the direction of Boursai's compound, thinking that perhaps he could trust the man enough to tell him about Tieren, to finally poison that worm. To even speak the words aloud. But then he'd think of God, smug and distant, listening, too, to the confession, eavesdropping as Mohr bared his soul. If God existed, God would know already what Mohr had done, but he would not speak of it, not mention it aloud. And whenever Mohr thought of Boursai now, he remembered Boursai's breath filling his lungs, and he'd have to fish a hex from his pocket and crack it in his teeth.

Why did he kill Tieren? That he had suspected her of setting him up, of preparing to betray him, seemed only part of the answer. So he sometimes found himself thinking that thought when his mind was briefly clear of yellow hex. Why did he kill her?

The elders had wanted to know the same thing. Why did you kill her?

"BLASPHEMER," he had keyed onto his wrist.

"Did God command you to kill her?" He shook his head. "I COULD NOT BEAR THINGS SHE SAID. LIES. BLASPHEMER."

It was easier to lie in writing, much easier than saying the words aloud. And they believed what he said. They made him a missionary to Live Free Cluster, where he was to win, not souls, but wealth. Any way he could, he was to earn money, to buy organics for the City of God. And he obeyed. He stole. He sold his body, repelled though he was by the bodies of others. He did whatever it took to get enough money to keep them happy and to set just a little aside. He bought yellow hex, a lot of it. And when he had enough money he paid a drunken medtech—a real surgeon was beyond his means—to fish out the cochlear implant with a stimwire. That finally shut up the day and night whisperings of the false God in his ear. It was when he was healing from this, unsure if his hearing would return, that the Planters Corps recruiter had found him.

* * *

As Boursai continued to stay away, Mohr's life returned to the comfortable rhythm he had known before. He concentrated on getting his trees into the ground and on listening for the hum of the ground skimmer that came to re-supply his nursery. If he could, he would make for the cliffs and hide himself in the canyons until the skimmer crew had unloaded the trees and re-supplied his larder. But if he was too far from the canyons, or if the skimmer surprised him, he would have to endure the conversation, the questions of the crew while he worked alongside them to speed their departure. They would ask him again why they could never reach him on his com-link, and he would key a sentence or two onto his wrist about how the com-link had been down, but he had managed to fix it himself. Or he would say that he had just forgotten to turn it on. And on almost every visit, one of the crew members would ask, "How do you stand it out here? Don't you get lonely?"

Mercifully, such visits were rare, and Mohr could always count on the crew's being in a hurry to finish the day's run and get back to Onazuka City with its closed-in spaces full of people.

Alone again at dusk, he could listen to the rain falling on his metal roof, crack a hex, and drift into silence. No people. No memories. No worm gnawing at his heart.

Then one morning, as he was digging a hole, Mohr heard his name in the still air: "Gabriel!" He looked up to see Boursai striding toward him like some impossibly tall bird, hallooing from the shimmery distance and waving his hand.

Mohr felt in his pocket for a hex.

"I'm sorry," Boursai called out as he drew near. "I'm sorry, Gabriel, but I had to come. There's something I have to tell you about, something I must show you."

Mohr spit the empty yellow shell onto the ground. He held the shovel between himself and Boursai, and he tried to look as unwelcoming as he could.

"If I had a choice, Gabriel, I would stay away. But someone has to know about this. And who else can I tell? Who else can I trust?" Boursai was gesturing wildly as he spoke. Mohr had never seen him in any state but calm and peaceful. Now Boursai moved his arms like some excited stork in a wind storm.

So Mohr keyed the word "WHAT?" onto his wrist, and Boursai stepped close enough to read it.

"You must come with me. Come, and I'll show you."

Boursai was already turning to lead him away, back in the direction of Boursai's compound. Mohr looked at the hole he was digging, at the sapling that needed to go into the ground. Then at his own compound of squatty buildings.

Boursai wasn't waiting for him, nor looking back.

Hell, he thought. He cracked a second hex, breathed in through his teeth, and then ran on his drugged, rubbery legs to catch up. He brought along his shovel. He was so used to having it in his hand that he didn't think of leaving it behind.

It was an hour and a half to Boursai's compound, and they didn't stop there. Boursai kept leading him on toward the cliffs to the west, cliffs much like the ones near Mohr's own compound. There were canyons here, too, Mohr discovered, and Boursai led him into one of these.

What Boursai want to show him was a spring, a six-foot depression in the blue rock. It was ringed with moss that Boursai himself must have planted.

Mohr made a gesture that said something between, "This is it?" and "So what?"

"Look down into it," said Boursai. "Look carefully."

Mohr bent closer to the water. All he could see was a scattering of blue stones at the bottom of the water. What did Boursai expect him to see?

One of the stones moved. Mohr squinted, looked closer.

Again something moved, but now Mohr could see that it wasn't a stone. Mixed in among the stones, blue like the surrounding rock, were a few tentacles or worms of some sort.

"Indigenous life form," Boursai said excitedly, as if he had invented the thing and not merely discovered it.

Mohr nodded slowly and keyed in, "SO?" It was meant to stand for many things: So what? So why bother me about it? So why not just radio it in if it's such a big deal?

"I had to show it to you," Boursai said, "because if I told anyone else, they might try to stop my little experiment." He began to unbutton his fatigues at the collar. "I drank water from this spring before I saw there was something living on the bottom, you see."

He opened his shirt.

Mohr almost spoke. He almost said, "Name of God." Instead, he only mouthed the words and keyed in, "WHAT?"

"I don't know what it is," Boursai answered. He touched the thick, raised welt that stretched across his chest, and something beneath his skin twitched and wriggled. "But whatever it is, it's growing. See this?" He traced what looked like a vein that went from one end of the welt, up his neck, and on to the place where his jaw joined his skull. There it stopped. There was another such vein or filament on the other side of his neck.

Mohr felt his stomach twist, and he dug deep in his pocket for another hex. Cracking it, he keyed in: "GO TO ONAZUKA CITY. GET IT OUT!"

Boursai read the message and said, "No."

"DISEASE!" Mohr keyed in. "PARASITE!"

"No," Boursai said softly. "It's nothing like that. I feel calm, Gabriel, more calm than you can imagine. It's as though ... Gabriel, it's as though God has touched my mind to tell me to trust this, that this is meant to be."

"CALM," Mohr punched out, "BECAUSE DRUGGING YOU. COMMON IN PARASITES. STRATEGY. PRODUCE TOXINS TO DRUG HOST, BLOCK FEAR, STOP PAIN."

Boursai said, "Perhaps you are right. But then you must look at it this way: what are the chances that a parasite would evolve on this world with a chemistry compatible with mine? Our species evolved light years from one another, beyond contact or influence, so how could we be compatible? How, without the mediation of God?"

"MADNESS," Mohr wrote. "YOU'RE TAKING TOO BIG RISK."

"It's a miracle, Gabriel. So I'll wait to see what develops. I'll be all right, if that is the will of God. Whatever God wills."

"WHYD YOU BRING ME HERE? WHYD YOU SHOW ME THIS?"

"Why didn't I just use the com-link or write this down in my log? So that someone else has seen the spring. So that there is a witness in case ... in case it is the will of God that I should die. And also, Gabriel, I had to tell someone. I just had to speak of it. Can a man make a secret of something like this? Can he carry something like this only in his heart? I had to tell someone."

"GO ONAZUKA CITY. GET HELP." Mohr gestured as though he were tearing the thing from his own chest and flinging it away. Then he keyed in, "DIDNT HAVE TO SHOW ME. DAMN YOU!" He let Boursai read this last message, but then picked up his shovel and turned before the man could reply and started to walk out of the canyon.

Damn Boursai. Damn him! he thought. Boursai had given him the burden of a secret, and, damn it, he felt like he had with Tureen, knowing about the things she whispered to him, the blasphemies that were dangerous to both of them. Only this was dangerous only to Boursai himself. No, that made no difference. It was an unfair burden. He didn't want Boursai to die. In spite of everything, his longing to be utterly alone, he didn't want Boursai to die. Not like this. Not with some foul parasite eating away at his flesh...

Stop it! he commanded his inner voice. *Shut up!* And he took two yellow hexes from his pocket and cracked them both at the same time.

It was past noon when he got back to his own complex. He went out to where he had been planting the tree, but he just stood looking at the hole, the tree, and then the small, white sun overhead. A breeze tousled his hair. Before long, it would be a wind, and he would want shelter from it. He worked some more on the hole, dug it deeper than it needed to be and put the tree into it. While he packed the sandy soil around the roots, he tried to concentrate on what he was doing, tried not to think.

But it was no good. Thoughts of Boursai, pictures of what he might look like when the thing in his chest was finished with him, kept creeping into his mind. *Damn him!* He threw the shovel to the ground and walked away, leaving the tree only half planted, exposed to the wind. It didn't matter. He didn't care.

God damn that man!

Back in his quarters, he emptied the hexes from all his hidden stashes into the one bag. That at least made his supply look a little bigger. And then he put two more hexes between his teeth. He would shut up the voice inside his head if it took a dozen hexes.

The next day was a little better. He was able to work, at least. But he found himself looking again and again toward Boursai's compound. He was afraid, his guts knotted with fear.

It was like the fear he'd once felt for Tireen.

And damn Boursai once more! Why, when he thought of that man, was he endlessly thinking Tireen?

What would happen to Boursai? How large would the thing in his breast grow to be?

Dig like a machine, Mohr told himself. *Dig. Don't think. Just dig.*

All day he was like that. And the next day, and the day after. He would think of Boursai and of Tireen and he would tell himself to work harder, always harder, until his back ached and his arms shook with fatigue. But he could not resist at some point reaching for a yellow hex, and the first one made it easier to reach for the second.

Finally, he felt he must act. He must do *something*.

He picked up his shovel and set out for Boursai's compound. What he would do when he got there, he was not sure. Was he only going to go to see that Boursai was all right? Or to tell Boursai about Tireen, to burden Boursai as Boursai had burdened him? He didn't know. He just had to go. He shouldered the shovel and walked.

Boursai was not there.

Mohr walked twice around the compound, gingerly opening the doors of the nursery and of Boursai's living quarters. He was not there. Not in the tool shed, not anywhere in sight among the saplings that dotted the land.

He looked toward the canyon mouths that opened in the cliffs. He thought of the spring. Boursai would be there, perhaps, next to the water with the writhing blue things. Doing what? What would Mohr see if he went that way?

Mohr shuddered, imagining Boursai's body covered with twitching welts that hatched, releasing blue worms that wriggled their way back to the water. Or worse. It could be even worse than that, and Boursai would be smiling, drugged by the worms feeling fine. *Whatever God wills*. What a mistake Boursai was making, to trust the will of God, to trust that *thing* inside his body. To trust anyone or anything at all.

Boursai was going to die. The thing would kill him. That was what came of trusting.

Mohr ran, still carrying the shovel, toward the spring. When he could no longer run, he loped until he could run again. He had brought no water with him. His throat seemed to swell with thirst, but still he hurried on to the mouth of the canyon, into the blue shadows, toward the spring.

When he rounded the corner where he thought the spring was, he thought he Boursai stretched out on the ground, covered all over with blue worms. And he called out, "Boursai!" His voice cracked. "Momoudu!" The sound of his voice echoed back from the canyon walls.

Then he saw that it was not Boursai at all, but only a pile of stones colored a little darker than the ones around them. This was not where the spring was. He had to go further up the canyon.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and went on. When he found the spring, Boursai was not there.

Mohr sat to catch his breath. He looked at the waters of the spring. Two words, he had called out, the two words of Boursai's name, and his throat was hoarse from shouting. And his throat felt thick with thirst, too, but he would not drink here. Nor from the stream below. He would rather die of thirst.

The blue tentacles waved in the basin of the spring.

Mohr shuddered. He looked around one more time for Boursai, and then he went home.

* * *

Eventually, it was Boursai who came to him. It happened late at night, after the winds had died and the rain was only starting. Boursai's voice startled him out of sleep.

"Gabriel," it said again as he lay in the dark, listening. The rain tapped lightly on his roof.

Mohr went to the door without turning on the lights. Boursai was standing away from the buildings, silhouetted against the stars that shone through a break in the clouds.

"I bring you news of paradise," said Boursai. He stood too far away to read Mohr's wrist communicator, so Mohr just stood silently waiting for whatever came next.

The rain continued to fall, tapping on the metal roof and whispering on the ground. The two men stood for a long time in the darkness, listening.

"It is the end of loneliness, this thing I carry in me," Boursai went on. "And you are lonely, aren't you, Gabriel?"

Again there was only the sound of the rain. Boursai lowered himself to the ground. "I hear the voice of a god, now," Boursai said. "Not Allah, not the all-powerful, all-knowing, but an eternal voice. A wise voice. I am never without it." And then he told the story of what the thing in his chest had become.

It was not long after Mohr had come and seen the spring that Boursai began to feel lightheaded and a little ill. Still, he was confident that he had made the proper choice to let the parasite, or whatever it was, continue to grow. In spite of his physical queasiness, he still felt that things were as they were meant to be, that however things turned out, it was the will of God.

The welt was growing thicker by the day, and so were the cords that ran up the sides of his neck. Sometimes Boursai would touch them and feel them throbbing with a pulse that was not his own.

Then one night, he woke with the feeling that someone was watching him. It was no mere uneasiness. This was an almost physical sensation, a certainty that there was another presence with him in the room. In a panic, Boursai switched on the light.

There was no one else in the room, of course. The light shone brightly into every corner, onto the secure latches of the shutters and the door. But even as he assured himself that there was no one else in his quarters, the sensation of being watched did not go away. If anything, it intensified. Was there someone or something outside, peering through a crack in the shutters? No, it was closer than that. There was another being quite near. Inside this room, inside this...

Then it dawned on him. Inside his body. There was another mind with him, inside his head.

And with a certainty that defied explanation, Boursai understood that the second mind in his body was discovering the same thing he was: *There is another here. I am supposed to be alone, but there is another.*

Following that thought came this one: *We must go to the water.*

Which meant, of course, the spring.

"So that is what I did, Gabriel. I went to the spring, and the voice inside my head told me to drink. Not by cupping my hands and drawing the water up, but by putting my mouth into the water, drinking like an animal. And when I did this, the thing that was inside me emerged part way..."

Mohr stiffened at those words. *How?* he wondered. *Where did it come out?*

"... and it stretched itself into the water, and the being in the spring reached up to meet it. They touched. They knotted around one another, and they spoke without sound. It was a chemical exchange, I think, one brain trading information with another, and it lasted a long time. I could not rise... without pain."

The clouds had closed behind Boursai, so that Mohr could no longer see even his silhouette. He was just a voice floating in the darkness.

"Perhaps I am making you afraid," Boursai said. "You must understand. This is a miracle, a blessing."

And he went on to tell Mohr about the thing that lived in the spring. The blue tentacles were only a small part of it, the tongue-tip of an enormous creature with many mouths, many tongue-tips stretching

out to taste the world. Deep below the rock was the main part of its body, winding through the underwater passages of Onazuka's World. From springs here and there, its tentacles emerged to feed, to reproduce, and to communicate. But the being consisted mostly of neurons. It was a huge, ever-lasting mind, and it had been the source of all animal intelligence on the planet before the cataclysm of the meteor.

"The part of it that lives in my breast," Boursai, "is like a remote unit. It has a mind of its own, this thing inside of me, a mind as complex as mine. But when I drank at the spring, it drew upon the intelligence, the knowledge of the greater being beneath the ground. What the greater mind knows, the smaller mind may know by touching it. And so it received an education, this thing inside of me, while I drank at the spring."

The rain fell a little harder now, and the sound of it on the roof was not so gentle.

"PARASITE," Mohr keyed in, but Boursai could not see the glowing letters.

"I carry with me the experiences of a thousand generations," Boursai said. "What each individual mind learns in its life, the great mind receives and remembers."

Again, Mohr thought of the thing emerging somehow from Boursai. Any way that he pictured that happening, it sickened him.

"It thought I was just an animal, Gabriel. It sought to give me a mind, to give me intelligence and direction. But since I already have my own mind, my own volition, it does not struggle with me. It does not command. It asks. It wants me to bring food to the spring, wants me to feed the greater one, which has hungered so long."

"WANTS TO ENSLAVE YOU," Mohr keyed in.

"No it doesn't," Boursai said. He had moved close enough to read the communicator. The hair rose on Mohr's neck.

"I control my body," Boursai went on. "We are two minds in one body. This being is my partner, my companion. Not my master."

Mohr tapped a message out: "WHY DO YOU COME AT NIGHT?"

"Gabriel," answered the voice in the darkness, "this is a miracle. My companion shares my body, shares my life. It knows the wisdom of the ages. Inside my body with me, how can it be my enemy? How can it be anything but a brother to me, a closer brother than any man can be? When it speaks, I feel as though God speaks to me. And I am like the prophet, receiving the holy word, opening my heart."

Again: "WHY DO YOU COME AT NIGHT?"

"I know it is not truly the voice of God, but this thing stands in God's place. Perhaps God speaks to me through it, in some fashion. I am at peace, Gabriel. For me there is no loneliness." Boursai's voice was much nearer now. "Gabriel, there is an end to your fear. There is release from suffering. Come to the spring with me. Come drink at the spring."

"STAY AWAY!" Mohr keyed in.

But the voice came even closer, softened to a whisper in his ear, his right ear, so that he remembered the sound of Tireen's whisper. "All men are brothers, and how much more deeply they may come to know this! Gabriel, I would see you healed!"

For a moment, Mohr was frozen with the memory of Tireen. Then he shook himself and stumbled backward through his door. He turned and made for the light switch by his cot. He tripped, went sprawling.

"I mean you no harm," said the voice outside. "It is up to you, Gabriel. You must choose what you will."

Mohr switched on the lights inside and out. Then he rummaged through his foot locker until he found the hand torch. He went to the doorway, but Boursai was not within the glare of the compound lights. He walked to the edge of the compound and flipped the torch to life. The powerful beam cut through the intensifying rain as he swept it over the flat ground beyond the compound lights. Left, right, in every direction he cast the beam, there was no sign of Boursai.

Mohr walked the perimeter of the compound twice to make sure, directing the light into the shadows of his buildings, the out into the surrounding dark. Boursai was gone.

He went in, took a yellow hex from the bag, and stood looking at it for a moment, reminding himself that he had a choice. He always had the choice of not using. And they were almost gone now. The bag that had looked like an endless supply was almost empty. Maybe, he thought, he should start to ration them. Then he set the shell between his teeth and bit down.

For the rest of that night, Mohr did not sleep. He went from shutter to shutter, to the door, and back to the shutters, checking the latches. Now and then, he cracked another hex.

He needed to do something, but he didn't know what it was. He tried to think about it, tried to decide, while he was in a non-verbal stupor, a haze of yellow hex. As his supply grew smaller and smaller, he grew more and more desperate. But he still didn't know what to do. He tried cutting back on hex, but then there were all of these thoughts and memories flooding in.

He thought of Tireen. He kept seeing his gloved hand on the airlock switch, on the override.

He thought of Boursai, who really did believe that this was a miracle, the thing that had happened to him. And maybe it was. Maybe having that thing living inside your chest, stretching its tendrils into your brain, maybe that was as close as you could ever come to communing with God.

He thought of the worm gnawing at his heart. It twisted and turned inside of him, and he needed to confess, to finally tell someone, anyone, about Tireen. Boursai. He could tell Boursai.

Then he remembered the sensation of Boursai's breath filling his lungs. The hot moisture of Boursai's lips. He remembered how, coming to, he had turned away from Boursai, felt the sandy floor on his cheek, and vomited.

He thought of what it would be like to never be alone again. *Never.*

Thinking these things drove him back to the yellow hexes. He took the last four, and they washed the words from his head. And in that wordless haze, he acted. He shouldered his shovel and walked to Boursai's compound.

Boursai saw him coming from a distance, and he disappeared into his quarters. When Mohr arrived, Boursai had wrapped a cloth about his face so that only his eyes showed. It was afternoon. The wind was blowing and sand was in the air.

"Do you want to come with me to the spring?" Boursai asked.

Mohr nodded.

"Why don't you leave your shovel here?" Boursai said. Mohr put it down, but felt strange without it. He picked it up again.

"Too used to carrying it?" Boursai said. Mohr could hear the smile in his voice. "Very well. Come."

They walked wordlessly to the spring, but all the time they walked, there was some thought, some urge that was swimming up through Mohr's mind, trying to rise through the fog of yellow hex. There was something he wanted to say, something he wanted to speak aloud. He was grateful for the hex. It kept the words down. At the same time, he could feel it beginning to wear off.

When they arrived, Boursai knelt and gazed into the water. Mohr leaned on his shovel and did the same, peering over Boursai's shoulder. Boursai took a bundle from inside his clothes and unwrapped it. It was grass seed. With a stone and water from the spring, Boursai pounded the seeds into a mealy mass which he then dropped into the water. The blue tentacles squirmed, wrapped around the course dough, and disappeared into the depths of the spring.

"I have so little to give it," Boursai said. "It is hungry. It has had only itself to feed on, eating its own great body, swallowing some of its memories, its wisdom as it did so." He stared into the water where the tentacles were now re-emerging. Then, almost whispering, he said, "Go on, Gabriel. Drink."

Mohr shook his head.

"I thought you came to drink."

Again, Mohr shook his head. A word formed on his lips. A name. *Tireen.* But he made no sound. "What is it?" said Boursai. "Something is wrong, isn't it?"

Mohr's hands were shaking. The fog of yellow hex was lifting.

"It's the drug, isn't it?" said Boursai. "You've run out."

Mohr nodded.

"We'll talk," Boursai said. "We'll go back to my compound and you can use my com-link. But first..." He looked at the spring and began to unwind the cloth from his face. For a moment, however, he paused. "There is a price one must pay for this miracle," he said. He let the last of the cloth drop.

There were slits beneath his eyes, jagged-edged openings with something wet and blue shining from inside.

He dropped the cloth at the edge of the spring. "It is a small price to pay, Gabriel." And he bent toward the water. Blue tendrils slithered from beneath his eyes like snakes, and the tentacles in the water twisted upward to meet them.

"Tireen," Mohr said aloud. Boursai jerked with surprise at the sound of his voice, but he couldn't rise. The tentacles held him in place, and they seemed to keep him from speaking, too.

"There's something..." Mohr said. His voice was thick. His whole body was shaking now. The yellow hex had worn off completely. "There's something I..."

He felt sick. It was hard to breathe. And how could he say it, what words could he use? "I... Tireen..." With both hands, he raised the shovel, shaking with frustration. "A thing I did. Didn't mean to..." He shut his eyes and felt himself bring the blade down hard on Boursai's neck. Once. Twice. Again and again. He opened his eyes, but kept raising the shovel and bringing it down.

Boursai pulled free of the tentacles for a moment, and the next blow caught him in the face. And the next one.

Mohr didn't stop for a long time. When he did, he said, "Tireen," in an impossibly high voice. He bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut. It didn't matter what he said now. There was no one to hear him.

There was a tree growing not far up the canyon, a tree that Boursai had planted himself. At its base, Mohr began to dig.

In a canyon of blue sandstone, a man is digging a hole. It's a deep hole, long and narrow. It could hardly be anything other than a grave.

There's a stream flowing nearby. Overhead, the sky is tinted orange with dust, with the color of the setting sun. The wind is blowing hard up there. But down here in the canyon, at the base of these high blue walls, the air hardly stirs.

There is no sound but the soft snick of the shovel cutting through the sand.

When the hole is long enough, and wide enough, and deep, the man goes to where the body is. The dead man is tall, his skin black except where it is marked with blood. On his battered face, there are two slits beneath his eyes, and two blue tentacles stretch up from these, twisting and turning in the air. The man raises the shovel and lets it fall again, but the blue worms still twist, still reach for something they can't find in the air.

The man leans on the shovel and is sick.

* * *

Why, he wondered as he pulled Boursai into the hole. Why?

Even with his wounds, even with the blue things still waving beneath his eyes, Boursai was beautiful. Why had Mohr killed him?

How could Boursai be dead?

It was the yellow hex, he thought as he shoveled. No, it was seeing him with those parasites in his face, seeing him reduced to a slave, to an animal. Or it was the blue tentacles he wanted to kill, the things that had taken Boursai over?

He filled the trench and scattered the pile of sand that remained. Walking home, he absently reached into his breast pocket, but of course there was nothing there.

His hands shook for a few days, and he sometimes found himself looking in the places where he remembered hiding an extra hex or two even though he had already looked there two or three times

before. But that anxiety, that nervous searching, was all that he suffered with the withdrawal. There were no convulsions, no hallucinations, no headaches.

He didn't sleep, but that had another cause. Sister Sarah Theresa's worm of guilt kept him awake, gnawing at his heart.

No. Not one worm. Two.

He would lie awake and think of three things: the air lock, the sound of Boursai's gentle voice, and the thing that still lived in the spring, that abomination, that horror.

To never be alone again, what could be worse than that?

Days passed. Mohr cared for his trees as if in a trance. As he worked, Boursai's face would float into his awareness. Or Tireen's face.

When Mohr slept, it was fitfully. He would wake to hear the sound of Tireen or Boursai whispering into his ear, then would realize it was only the rain.

He hardly ate. Sometimes he would stand under the sun and stare for an hour at the blue cliffs, and finally he began to understand.

He had spoken to each of them. Then he killed. He had broken his pledge to seal his heart from God and from all others.

If he hadn't killed them, who knows what might have come flooding out of his soul? All his fear. All his loneliness. All his longing for God, a God who had sealed His heart against him. Mohr was not worthy of even a divine whisper.

He longed to speak of these things. If only he could tell someone what he had done, and why. He would stand before the com-link an hour at a time, hand trembling on the switch. Then he'd go outside to stare at the blue cliffs, kick at the dust, chew his lip for a while before he returned to hold his hand above the com-link again.

He stopped caring for the trees and they wilted in his nursery, shriveled under the white sun of Onazuka's World.

But if he wrote it down, if he transmitted his confession, what would they do? They would try to help him. They would put him somewhere to watch him, to change him, somewhere close to lots of other people. Bodies all around. Other men breathing the air that he was breathing.

Another man's breath filling his lungs.

The airlock switch.

Boursai lying alongside the trench, eyes half closed and the thing in his chest still throbbing with life.

The twin worms eating at Mohr's heart, digging, burrowing, poisoning his blood.

"When you confess," said Sister Sarah Theresa, "you are poisoning that worm with truth."

He looked one more time, turned the compound inside out. There were no forgotten hiding places, no last stash of yellow hex.

So one afternoon he walked to Boursai's compound, and from there to the spring. He watched the repulsive twisting under the surface. Then he bent toward the water.

It was weeks later that he was lying on his cot, tracing the welt on his chest with his finger. He felt a presence. Some shadow sat at the edge of his mind, looking in on him. He could feel that it was surprised to see him here, astonished to find his head already occupied.

Mohr shuddered. But he tried to ignore the coldness in his gut, the feeling of being flayed open, hopelessly exposed.

It wasn't words that he heard then, but the thought came to him so clearly that it might as well have been spoken. It was an urge, an insistence: We must go back to the water.

The thing inside of him would know his thoughts whether he voiced them or not, but Mohr answered aloud. "I know," he said. His throat felt thick. He did not like the sound of his voice. He coughed and spoke again, "Back to the water. Yes, I know." He felt ill, but he fought the feeling.

The air lock. The shovel.

"But first," Mohr said, "there is something I have to tell you."

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