

THE EMPEROR AND THE MAULA

ROBERT SILVERBERG

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Robert Silverberg is one of the most famous SF writers of modern times, with dozens of novels, anthologies, and collections to his credit. As both writer and editor (he was editor of the original anthology series *New Dimensions*, perhaps the most acclaimed anthology series of its era), Silverberg was one of the most influential figures of the Post New Wave era of the seventies, and continues to be at the forefront of the field to this very day, having won a total of five Nebula Awards and four Hugo Awards, plus SFWA's prestigious Grandmaster Award.

His novels include the acclaimed *Dying Inside*, *Lord Valentine's Castle*, *The Book of Skulls*, *Downward to the Earth*, *Tower of Glass*, *Son of Man*, *Nightmings*, *The World Inside*, *Born with the Dead*, *Shadrach in the Furnace*, *Thorns*, *Up the Line*, *The Man in the Maze*, *Tom O'Bedlam*, *Star of Gypsies*, *At Winter's End*, *The Face of the Waters*, *Kingdoms of the Wall*, *Hot Sky at Morning*, *The Alien Years*, *Lord Prestimion*, *Mountains of Majipoor*, and two novel-length expansions of famous Isaac Asimov stories, *Nightfall* and *The Ugly Little Boy*. His collections include *Unfamiliar Territory*, *Capricorn Games*, *Majipoor Chronicles*, *The Best of Robert Silverberg*, *At the Conglomeroid Cocktail Party*, *Beyond the Safe Zone*, and a massive retrospective collection: *The Collected Stories of Robert Silverberg, Volume One: Secret Sharers*. His reprint anthologies are far too numerous to list here, but include *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume One* and the distinguished Alpha series, among dozens of others. His most recent books are the novel *The Long Way Home*, the mosaic novel *Roma Eterna*, and a massive new retrospective collection, *Phases of the Moon: Stones from Six Decades*. Coming up is a new collection, *In the Beginning*. He lives with his wife, writer Karen Haber, in Oakland, California.

Robert Silverberg is the only author in this book with a writing career long enough that he actually produced some of the *Old Space Opera*, back in the pulp magazines of the fifties, decades before most of the newcomers here even sat down at their first computer keyboard. He's lost none of his chops in the intervening years, though, as he proves with the lush and gorgeously colored story that follows, in which an intrepid human woman dares to penetrate to the heart of a hostile alien empire and confront the all-powerful Emperor himself, armed only with her brains and wit and heart, and enter a contest of wills with everything that's important to her—in-cluding her own life—at stake.

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Bogan 17, 82ND Dynastic Cycle
(August 3, a.d. 3001)

The gongs have sounded throughout the ship. We have crossed the invisible line that separates Territorial Space from Imperial Space and now my life is officially forfeit.

And I have chosen to break the code of *tiihad* that demands my life. We will see what happens when we land on Capital World.

Meanwhile here I am—an Earthborn woman, a mere barbaric *maula*, getting deeper into Imperial Space with each passing light-second. I should be trembling with fear, I suppose.

No. Let the Emperor tremble. Laylah is here!

—From the Diaries of Laylah Walis

1

It was an unusual case. No one at Capital World Starport had ever seen anything like it, which is how it reached the attention, finally, of no one less than the Emperor Ryah VII himself, the High Ansaar, the Supreme Omni-science, the Most Holy Defender of the Race.

The chain that led to the Emperor began with Loompan Chilidor, an ar-biter of passenger manifests. He was a short-crested, pale-skinned low-caste person whose job was to check the identity circuits of passengers of newly arrived starships. Routine stuff. But this time, when he ran the transit check on the travelers coming from Seppuldidior on the starship *Velipok*, jagged incandescent green streaks burst forth on the purple surface of the field.

Tiihad violation!

The highest of the six levels of irregularity—higher even than *vribor*, the carrying of infectious disease, and *gulimil*, the smuggling of dangerous weapons, and *shhtek*, the wearing of medallions of the extinct and proscribed Simgoin Dynasty. Violation of *tiihad* was an assault on the structure of the Empire itself.

Loompan Chilidor's long dangling arms jerked in shock. His small yellow eyes turned orange with surprise. He pressed the red button that sealed the luminance field and summoned his immediate superior, Domtel Tribuso, Manager of Passenger Flow.

Domtel Tribuso, stocky and slow, appeared in due course. The purple

luminance field was now a rubbery purple cage. A few dozen travelers were trapped inside.

Domtel Tribuso stared in puzzlement at the green streaks criss-crossing the field. “Green? *Tiihad* violation?”

Most of those in the cage were Ansaar. There were a few Liigachi and some Vrulvruls and a cluster of agitated-looking Zmachs. All those races had held full citizenship in the Imperium for centuries, and surely understood the law.

But one was a creature Domtel Tribuso could not identify at all: a non-Imperial alien, a barbaric life-form from the Territories, a trespasser and transgressor here on this hallowed world. A *maula*. Domtel Tribuso felt amazement and disgust and anger.

The *maula* was thin to the point of gauntness, and its face was as flat as a platter, the features close together, eyes practically next to each other, nose a tiny button just below, its mouth—*was* that its mouth?—a mere slit near its chin. Its legs were much too long and its arms grotesquely short. The creature had no crest, only a short crop of unpleasant dark fur sprouting from its skull. There were two strange round swellings on its chest.

The Manager of Passenger Flow summoned his aides. “Get that *maula* out of there and bring it to Examination Chamber Three.”

That was the holding cell for unauthorized life-forms, normally used for unfamiliar pets or trophy animals that a citizen of the Imperium had brought back and that needed to be checked by an Imperial veterinarian before being released from quarantine.

But this was no pet, no trophy, this *maula*. Plainly it was an intelligent life-form—a ticketed passenger in its own right. It stood quite calmly among the passengers of Citizen rank as though it regarded itself as one of them. It was even carrying several pieces of expensive-looking luggage.

How could a *maula* have been able to buy a ticket to Haraar, and why had it been allowed to board the *Velipok*, and why hadn’t the *Velipok*’s captain called ahead to say that a *maula* was on board? An investigation was needed. Domtel Tribuso summoned his superior, Graligal Dren, and turned the *maula* over to her.

Graligal Dren, a mid-caste woman of a rich olive hue with a high-peaked sagittal crest of admirable narrowness and delicacy, glowered through the thick glass wall and said, “Are you able to understand Universal Imperial, creature?”

“I speak it quite well, thank you.” The *maula*’s voice was clear and high-pitched with a slight West Quadrant accent.

“And do you have a name?”

“My name is Laylah Walis.”

An incomprehensible gargling noise, mere sounds. Well, one would expect barbarians to have barbaric names. There it was on the passenger manifest: *LAYLAH WALIS*. The emigration people who had let it board a Haraar-bound ship must have been out of their minds.

“You embarked from Hathpoin in the Seppuldidorior system?”

“That’s correct.”

“And where did you come from before that?”

“Mingtha, in the Ghair system. Which I reached by way of Zemblano, which is in Briff. And before that—”

“Don’t give me your whole itinerary, creature. Just tell me where you are from originally.”

“Earth,” the *maula* said. “A small world in what you’d call the Northwest Arm. Part of the Empire about twenty years now.”

The Northwest Arm was a zone of scruffy worlds inhabited by bestial creatures—frontier worlds, barely civilized, dismal primitive outposts of the Empire. It amazed her that a creature from a world like that spoke Universal Imperial with such precision and force; and with such haughtiness too. You would think that this *maula* had twenty generations of Dynastic blood in its veins.

But it had made no attempt to assume a posture of respect. It simply stared at her in its ugly flat-faced way. Arrogance! Foolishness! But only an arrogant fool of a *maula* would have attempted to come to Haraar. “Tell me, Laylah Walis,” said Graligal Dren, “are you aware of where you are now?”

“This is Haraar, the Capital World.”

“Yes. The heart and soul of the Empire. And you came knowing that Ter-ritorials may not enter any part of Imperial Space?”

“Yes.”

Madness. “How did you get a ticket?” Graligal Dren asked.

“A long story,” said the *maula*. “I told someone who could get one for me

that I wanted to visit Haraar, and it was arranged.”

The *maula* had a kind of lunatic self-confidence. “This world is sacred,” Graligal Dren said slowly. “The fount and origin of our race. We revere the very dust that blows through its humblest alleyways. We can never let this holy world be desecrated by creatures who are—whom we regard as—who can be defined as—”

“*Maulas,*” said Laylah Walis. “Barbarians. Inferior beings.”

“Exactly.”

“And any *maula* who dares set foot here is put to death.”

“You knew that before you came? And you came anyway?”

“It does seem that way,” said Laylah Walis.

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If what this creature wanted was to commit suicide, it had to do it without the help of Graligal Dren. She passed it to the Director of Immigration Facilities, who sent it on to Starport Security. Commissioner Twimat Dulik of Security interrogated the prisoner and confirmed it was a Territorial, native to a conquered world in the West Quadrant. It seemed intelligent enough, for a *maula*, but a *maula* was what it was: subcivilized, contemptible, and unclean by definition. And for desecrating the Capital World it had to die.

The damnable thing was that the *maula* seemed to understand all that, and didn’t appear to care.

“Since the *maula* knew the penalty for violating *tiihad*, and chose to trespass anyway, it’s obviously insane,” said Commissioner Twimat Dulik to his own superior, Justiciar Hwillinin Ma of the Department of Criminal Affairs. “We are civilized beings. Can we put an insane person to death?”

Justiciar Hwillinin Ma, a mid-upper-caste neuter with dusky yellow skin and a lengthy crest, said, “A *maula* isn’t a person, Dulik. A *maula* is little more than a brute animal. Point two: our legal definitions of insanity can’t be applied to subcivilized beings, any more than to insects or birds or trees. Point three—”

“This isn’t an insect or a bird or a tree, Justiciar Ma. This is an alert, intelligent creature that—”

“Point three,” said Justiciar Hwillinin Ma sternly, “is that the desecration law is explicit. There’s no footnote covering sanity. We must protect the purity of the homeworld and the traditional act of purification is the slaying of the desecrator.”

Commissioner Twimat Dulik nodded. “Very well, then, Justiciar Ma. I herewith turn the prisoner over to you for execution.” And saluted and went out.

But the Haraar City Department of Criminal Justice, Justiciar Ma learned ten minutes later, would not accept the prisoner.

“Oh, no,” said the chief aide to the Prefect of Capital Police. “You can’t ship any *maulas* into town, fellow! Don’t you realize that that only compounds the desecration?”

“But Justiciar Ma says—”

“Justiciar Ma can *gedoy* his *gevasht*,” the aide to the Prefect replied calmly. “Bad enough that this *maula* of yours is polluting the starport, but you think we’d let it be brought into the capital city itself? To have it within a hundred *glezzans* of the High Temple precincts, let alone anywhere near the Imperial Palace? Oh, no, no, no. You keep your *maula* in your own jurisdiction, please.”

“But the execution—”

“Take it behind a fuel dump somewhere back of the terminal and blow its head off. Just remember to point your blaster the right way. The long end faces the prisoner.”

“The police won’t accept the *maula*,” the subaltern glumly reported to Justiciar Ma. “They say *we* have to do the execution.”

“All right, then. Take care of it.”

“Execute the *maula* myself, sir?”

Justiciar Ma stared stonily in the subaltern’s direction and said nothing.

“Sir? Sir? Sir?”

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It was one thing, Justiciar Ma soon discovered, to issue an execution order, and

another entirely to get it carried out. No one at the starport could be induced to put the *maula* to death.

“The law clearly states that a *maula* caught anywhere on Haraar must be killed immediately,” Justiciar Ma said. He was speaking to his old university classmate Thrippel Vree, a Third Chamberlain to His Imperial Majesty. “We’ve already held it for something like fourteen hours. Everyone refuses to do the job, and I don’t seem to have the legal right to compel anyone. Meanwhile we’re all becoming accessories to the desecration.”

“You could always kill it yourself,” Thrippel Vree suggested. “Ultimately it’s your responsibility, right? If you can’t find anyone else who—”

“I can’t *kill* someone. Thrippel! Even a *maula!*”

“And if it becomes known that you failed to take the appropriate mea-sures—?”

“Be reasonable,” Justiciar Ma moaned.

“One quick shot with a blaster would do it. Deep breath, steady hand, ready, aim, fire. File your report. Justice is done.”

Justiciar Ma knew that his old friend was merely being playful. Surely Vree couldn’t be serious. Surely.

And yet—why *not* do it himself?

No. No. It wasn’t that Justiciar Ma was notably merciful, or greatly soft-hearted. The Ansaar hadn’t come to control three fifths of the galaxy by being extraordinarily merciful or tender. But conquering entire solar systems for the greater glory of the Empire was one thing and shooting some hapless subcivilized creature in cold blood was another. Especially when you happened to be a middle-aged bureaucrat of high caste and sedentary nature.

Over the next twelve hours Justiciar Ma grew steadily more convinced that he would pay with his career for the impertinence of this confounded *maula*. A couple of times during those dreary twelve hours he came close to carrying out the execution personally, despite his hesitations, purely to save his own neck.

But meanwhile Third Chamberlain Thrippel Vree managed to save it for him.

The Third Chamberlain chanced to mention the starport episode later that evening to another Third Chamberlain, Danol Giyango. “Perplexing,” said Danol Giyango. “It must have known it would have to die for its audacity. Yet it came here anyway. Why, I wonder?”

That was so intriguing that Danol Giyango spoke of it to his wife, a Lady-in-Waiting, who made mention of it to a High Eunuch of the Inner-most Chamber, who told a Subsidiary Concubine, who happened to be in attendance later on one of the five Cherished Major Wives, Etaag Thuuyal. It was her turn that night to be with His Majesty the Emperor Ryah VII, the High Ansaar, the Supreme Omniscience, the Most Holy Defender of the Race.

“I heard the most extraordinary story a little while ago,” said Etaag Thuuyaal to the Emperor, as they lay amiably entwined in the Imperial hammock. The Emperor, she knew—as who did not?—was a connoisseur of extraordinary stories, with a voracious appetite for the unlikely and the divertingly strange, a man of intense curiosities and powerful whims.

“And what might that be, my dearest one?”

“Well,” said Etaag Thuuyal, “this comes from Subsidiary Concubine Hypoepoi, who heard it from the High Eunuch Sambin, who got it from Lady-in-Waiting Sipyar Giyango, whose husband heard it from somebody whose friend is a Justiciar at the starport. It seems that a starship came in today from the Territories, and it was discovered that one of the passengers was—can you imagine it?—well, the passengers came down the ramp, and most were the usual assortment of tourists and pilgrims and such, but then what do you think marched out of the ship, as blithe and bold as could be—?”

“Tell me,” said the Emperor Ryan VII.

Etaag Thuuyaal smiled with deep self-satisfaction. Great benefits, she had learned long ago, accrued to those who were capable of keeping the Emperor amused.

“Well,” she said—

The Emperor was startled. And fascinated as well.

A *maula* on Haraar? Of course, the creature would have to die. But why had it come, knowing the risk involved? Barbarians might be uneducated and coarse and crude, but never blind to their own survival. Surely they burned within with the furious species-need to live and reproduce and maintain their species' niche in the great chain of being. An animal might gnaw off its own leg in order to escape a trap it had stumbled into, the Emperor thought, but it would hardly stick its leg in the trap in the first place just to find out if the trap really would close on it.

So why—why—

The Emperor sprang lithely out of the hammock and called for the eunuch on

duty. “There’s a *maula* at the starport and they haven’t executed it yet. Delay carrying out the sentence. Have this *maula* brought here first thing in the morning.”

“I hear and obey, O Lord of the Universe.”

The Emperor returned to his hammock. Etaag Thuuyaal stretched out her arms to him, amiably, invitingly.

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4

Laylah Walis was starting to worry. Everything so far had gone according to plan. She was here and she was still alive.

But it was a wild gamble, a thousand-to-one shot. Sooner or later the port officials might decide that the decree about desecration of the Capital World meant just what it said. And then—

Sounds in the hall. People approaching.

One was the stocky little security chief, Dulik. He had seemed intelligent and sensitive, even sympathetic. With him were two brutish-looking low-caste Ansaar in dull green uniforms. Executioners?

Laylah had studied Ansaar body language well. The posture of these three looked ominous: shoulders up almost to their ears, long arms close to their sides. Eyes retracted, a mark of tension among Ansaar. The vertical slits of their pupils were nearly invisible.

The cell door swung open. “You are summoned, Laylah Walis,” the security chief said, in a taut and portentous tone.

“Summoned to what?”

“Not to what, *maula*, but *whom*. The Emperor requests your presence.”

A quick smile flitted across her face. Success! Success!

One Ansaar produced a coil of rope and the other yanked her arms roughly behind her back like a beast being trussed for slaughter. They tied her wrists tightly, then her ankles. Seizing her by the elbows, they propelled her across the room and out the door.

Her legs were dragging as they pulled her clumsily along, and their

sharp-clawed seven-fingered hands dug miserably into her flesh. She felt stretched and bruised and cramped by the time they had hauled her in a series of bumps and jolts down a long tunnel and out into the bright golden-green light of the Haraar dawn.

A sleek teardrop-shaped car waited. “The Palace,” Dulik told the driver. Then, in a muttered undertone: “He delays the *maula*’s death. Must speak with her first. Well, who are we to question the Emperor’s wishes?”

The car rose and floated down the track toward Haraar City, the fabled capital of the Ansaar Empire.

“The rose-red city half as old as time,” a poet had called it—a thousand palaces and five thousand temples, green parks and leafy promenades, shining obelisks and long eye-dazzling colonnades. From here the invincible might of the Ansaar had radiated irresistibly outward over the past ninety thousand years, spreading in ever-widening circles until the Empire’s do-minion arched across more than a thousand parsecs of space. For eons the wealth of all that vast domain had poured down upon this city of Haraar, making it the most majestic seat of government that had ever existed.

But Laylah sat hunched down between the two Ansaar guards, her long legs sprawling far forward and her head uncomfortably buried in a plush cushion; and all she could see was a glimpse of a golden dome here, a pink minaret there, a great gleaming white obelisk jutting into the sky over yonder.

The car floated to a halt. Ungently they pulled her out.

She had a brief glimpse of the courtyard of an incredible palace, high gleaming porphyry walls inlaid with onyx medallions, delicate many-windowed towers, long boulevards lined by strips of immaculately tended shrubbery, crystalline reflecting pools narrow as daggers. Then a thick furry hood came down over her head and she saw nothing further.

“This is the *maula* that the Emperor asked to see,” Dulik said. Her hood was lifted for a moment and yellow Ansaar eyes peered briefly into her own, and then she was swept off her feet. After a time came the sound of a great door being swung back, and the bruising impact of being dropped onto a stone floor.

An intense silence roared in her ears.

She lay bound and hooded on a cold slab of stone. The ropes circling her wrists and ankles chafed and cut cruelly into her skin, and she felt stifled and nauseated by the stale, moist air.

Hours passed. She grew stiff and sore.

Footsteps, finally. People approaching. The hood was lifted. Laylah blinked, gasped eagerly for breath, scratched her chin against her shoulder to gratify the itch that had begun to plague her half a million years before.

It was a bleak, bare, windowless chamber. Around her were armed guards in crimson pantaloons, great green sashes, loose purple tunics with flaring shoulder pads. Like most Ansaar they were short and stocky, with thick chests, long apelike arms, stubby bow legs.

But standing apart from the rest, studying her like some rare zoological specimen, was an Ansaar of such noble mien and grandeur that she knew she was in the presence of the Emperor Ryah VII.

He might almost have been of a different species: tall, well over two meters, perhaps two and a half. His arms reached only as far as his thighs, as a human's arms would. The sagittal crest on his hairless head was the most impressive she had ever seen. Its contours were steep, rising to needle-sharp prominence.

From throat to ankles he was swathed in a brocaded robe of heavy crim-son fabric shot through with threads of silver. His face and hands were the color of richest mahogany, with a fiery scarlet undertone. Out of that mask of a face came the gleam of penetrating green eyes—not yellow, like other Ansaar eyes, but *green*, the lustrous heavy green of pure emerald.

Surely this was someone bred for a thousand generations for the Sapphire Throne of the Ansaar Empire. Despite herself, despite the profound and fierce loathing for all things Ansaar that burned within every human, Laylah felt a powerful throb of awe—and an unmistakable, astonishing shiver of immediate physical attraction.

“Lift it up.” The Emperor’s voice rumbled with authority and sonorous force. “Let me see what this *maula* looks like.”

The guards raised her to a standing position. Her eyes met his directly, the upper-caste style of Ansaar social usage, her head inclined at precisely the correct angle to indicate deference to his majestic person while retaining her own personal dignity.

“A *she-maula*, I’d guess. But look at her!” the Emperor cried. “Is that a *maula* expression on her face? Is that the way a *maula* would stand? She holds herself like a countess! She looks right into my eyes as a high-caste woman would!” He smiled a jagged Ansaar smile. “You *are* a female, aren’t you, *maula*?”

“That is correct, Majesty,” said Laylah coolly.

“And speaks Universal like a lady of the court!” The Emperor’s vertical pupils became slits. His brilliant green eyes gleamed brightly with the insatiable curiosity for which he was famed. “How strange you are. Where did you learn such good Universal, *maula*?”

“A long story, O Supreme Omniscience.”

“Ah. Ah. A long story.” He seemed tremendously amused by her. “Tell me, then. But in shorter form. Three ambassadors wait to see me today, and the Goishlaar of Gozishtandar also. He wants favors from me, as usual, and that always makes him very impatient.”

She was silent.

“Go on,” he said. “Tell me about yourself. Who are you? Why have you come here? How do you know so much about Ansaar ways?”

Laylah glanced down at her tethered hands. “Telling stories is quite difficult, Majesty, when one is in discomfort. These ropes around me—they bind, they chafe—”

“You’re a prisoner, *maula*!. Prisoners must be bound!”

“Nevertheless, Sire—if I am to speak of the matters about which you ask—ah, this pain is hard to bear, and the humiliation, besides! I beg you, High One—have my bonds removed from me.”

The Emperor’s eyes flickered momentarily. But she kept her gaze on him steadily in the deferent-but-not-abased mode, and gradually he seemed to relent.

“Cut the ropes,” he ordered.

They were cut away. Laylah rubbed her hands together and shifted her weight from foot to foot.

“Now,” the Emperor said. “If you would, my lady—a word or two of explanation from you—”

“In this cold bare room? And without having had anything to eat in almost an entire day?”

Maybe that was going too far. But once again the Emperor let himself be charmed by her impertinence. “Yes,” he said, with a flourish. “Certainly, my lady. Some meat and a flask of wine, perhaps? A warm bath?” He seemed not to be speaking sarcastically. “Very well. But then you must tell me what you’re all about, agreed? Why you are here—what you thought you could accomplish. Everything.

I'll come to you late this afternoon, after I've dealt with the Goishlaar and some of those ambassadors, and you'll answer all my questions, and no more of these little requests of yours. Eh, *maula*?" And once more there was the tone of authority.

"I hear and obey, O Lord of Worlds."

"Good. Good." He stared at her strangely. "How different you are from the other humans I have met. They were in a fury all the time. All they did was shout and rant. And then the other kind, those who cringed and whined and bowed and scraped, crawling in front of me, agreeing with every word I said. They were even worse. But you treat me almost as though we were equals! I see neither defiance nor obsequiousness in your manner. You are very unusual, *maula*. You are extraordinarily unusual."

Laylah said nothing.

The Emperor began to walk away. Then he spun around and said, "Is there a name by which I can call you, *maula*?"

"Laylah. Laylah Walis."

"Which of those is the soul-name, and which the face-name?"

"The face-name is Laylah, Sire. Walis is the soul-name."

"Will it be all right, if I call you Laylah? May the Lord of the Ansaar Empire call a *maula* by her face-name?" Again the wry chuckle. But Laylah knew she was in the hands of a lion toying with his prey. His expression changed once more, turning dark and grim. "You have to die tomorrow, *maula*, and there's no way around that. You know that, don't you? Yes, you do. That's interesting about you, that you know it and you don't seem to care. I want to know more about that. Tonight we talk; and tomorrow morning you die. It is the law, and not even the Most Holy Defender of the Race may trifle with the law." He waved his hand imperiously. "I will speak again with you later, Laylah Walis." And he strode from the room.

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They took her to what probably was one of the suites of the royal harem. It was said the Emperor had thousands of wives and concubines; and that might not be far from the truth. She was in a separate wing of the palace, set apart by high walls of black brick. Radiating clusters of spokelike hallways jutted in all directions and a maze of brightly lit chambers was visible in the distance. Women and eunuchs in elegant robes glided about softly, dozens of them, scores, not one of them ever meeting Laylah's eye.

"Yours," said the guard who accompanied her, indicating a faintly aromatic

door inlaid with strips of ivory.

There were five spacious rooms: a bedroom, a richly curtained sitting room, a bath with a crystal tub, a dining chamber with a table cut from a block of black stone, and a tiring-room for the use of her servants, of whom there were three, two maids and a silent, glum-faced figure with the neuter-sign on his forehead.

They stripped her and bathed her and anointed her body with oils. They would have anointed her hair too, but she stopped them. They gave her robes of a filmy fabric that shifted polarity with every movement of her body, so her nakedness glinted through in quick flashes and then vanished again. They brought her a platter of meat and a bowl of angular purple fruits, and a flask of golden wine shot through with startling red highlights, as if powdered rubies had been mixed into it.

Then they left her alone. She went from room to room. In the storage chambers were robes and diadems, a month's wardrobe for a princess royal who never wore the same thing twice. There was a collection of perfumes and cosmetics and a closet full of liqueurs. Did every member of the royal harem have a suite like this? Say, three hundred concubines and a hundred wives—

The cost was incalculable. Was it for this that the Ansaar had conquered the galaxy, so that their Emperor could squander a planet's ransom on the women who were his toys? Fury coursed through her. But then she grew calm again. What did it matter how the Ansaar chose to waste the profits of their conquests?

She lay down and slept, and dreamed of worlds colliding and smashing asunder, and of blazing stars plummeting through the skies, and of fiery comets with the faces of dragons.

Then she heard a sound and opened her eyes, and saw an Ansaar of immense presence and authority standing over her, a formidably tall and astonishingly handsome Ansaar whom her sleep-fogged mind recognized only after a moment or two as His Majesty Ryah VII.

He took a seat facing her. "Everything is to your liking?"

"Magnificent, Your Highness."

"I told them to give you one of the best available apartments."

"Even though I must die tomorrow?"

He flashed his warmest smile, and then, as before, the smile abruptly turned without any perceptible transition to a grimace of fury. "It is nothing to joke about, my lady."

“You really do intend to put me to death, then?”

“The law is the law. This planet is not only the seat of the Imperial Government, it is sacred as well.” His tone was implacable. “There’s muttering aplenty already because I’ve allowed you to live this long. By tomorrow you’ll be dead.” He leaned toward her. His eyes drilled into her like high-intensity beams. “How could you have been so *stupid!*. You’re obviously a woman of intelligence and education, as humans go. Why bring certain death down upon yourself? Tell me that! Tell me!”

“It is, as I said, a long story, Majesty.”

“Make it no longer than you must, then.” He glanced at a pale green jewel on his wrist. “It is the eighth hour of night. At the first hour of morning I must deliver you to the executioner. Between now and then I want to hear all that you have to tell.”

“Listen, then, O wise and happy Emperor.”

And she leaned back on the divan and commenced her tale.

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6

I was born on Earth, in Green River province, one of our most fertile provinces, in our year a.d. 2697—the year Klath 4 of the 82nd Ansaar Imperial Cycle. So I am thirty-four years old by our reckoning; in Ansaar years I am twenty-three. My father was a physician and my mother a scryer, that is, one who studies the nature of the universe. At the time of the conquest I was a girl just entering womanhood. I had a younger brother who intended to be a healer like my father, and an older sister in training for the scrying arts. I myself had not yet chosen a path to follow.

You should understand, O Supreme Omniscience, that Earth at the time of the Ansaar conquest was a world among worlds, a jewel of the stars, a planet to be envied and admired.

Do you know any of our history? No, of course not, Majesty. The universe is very wide and our world is far away; and the Lord of the Ansaar has much to occupy his mind besides the study of distant and unimportant *maula* planets. But I assure you, Sire, that Earth was no trivial world. To us our little world was the center of the universe, a place of wonder and beauty and nobility.

I tell you that, Omniscience, so that you may see that though to you we are barbarians, we had high regard for our world’s civilization. Perhaps some barbarians

are content to think of themselves as barbarians, but that was not true of us. Our history went back more than ten thousand of our years. We had surmounted obstacles, transcended our limitations, had built ourselves a society that seemed to us very near perfect.

You smile, O Lord of the Galaxy, at our mere ten thousand years! But consider: at first we were stammering nomads, living on roots and seeds and the beasts of the field; and we rose from that level to conquest not only over the sea and the sky and the darkness of space, but the most difficult of all, triumph over our own selves. We put aside our brutishness and built a great civilization. Has ever a race risen more swiftly from savagery to civi-lization?

Be aware, O Master of the Ansaar, that we were once a warlike, brutal race, which showed no mercy. I could tell you of great slaughter, the burn-ing of villages and the killing of children, unending cruelties, mindless de-struction. A myth of ours tells of the first people, mother, father, two sons, and how one son lifted his hand against his brother and slew him; and that was in the beginning.

For thousands of years there was no peace among us. One family made war upon another, and one town marched against the next, and country against country, and then empires clashed with empires, so that it seemed certain that in time we would turn all the Earth to rubble and ash.

But that did not happen, O Master of the Ansaar. That is perhaps our greatest achievement: that our harsh and irascible nature might have led us to destroy ourselves, and we did not do it, though we had the capability. We did not do it.

You should know, Lord of All, that by the time of my birth the division of the Earth into nations was only a memory, and the populace of the Earth was no greater than the world could sustain; and we had made a green park out of our planet, with fresh, clear air and pure blue seas, and all people lived in harmony and hope.

And then the Ansaar came.

We knew a little by then of the Empire. Not much, for we had chosen not to venture among the stars. It would have been in our power to do it, had we wanted to. But we did not want to.

Those earlier Earthfolk who built nations out of towns and empires out of nations probably looked to the stars as well, and said, "Someday we will rule those also!" But by the time our race knew how to build ships to travel among the stars, we no longer saw reason to do it. We were content to remain on our own small world.

You are probably thinking, O Omniscience, that that is a profound flaw in us; and perhaps you are right. But we were happy enough as we were. Our days of

striving were behind us, and it satisfied us to live as we lived, in a balanced, harmonious way.

We knew of the Empire because we could by then detect the messages that pass among the stars, though we didn't understand them; we knew the sky was full of worlds, and we suspected that many of those worlds were under the rule of one dominant race. But we believed that the Empire wanted no part of us.

Of course, we were wrong. The Empire knows no bounds and the spirit of the Ansaar knows no peace; and your people will never rest until your power reaches from one wall of the universe to the other.

The day of the conquest—the Annexation, I should say; I know I should call it that—I will never forget. It was in the time of your father of blessed memory, His Departed Majesty Senpat XIV, may he taste the joys of Paradise forever! It was just two or three years since my breasts had grown. These are breasts, Majesty, these swellings here: if I had a child, they would give milk, for—perhaps you know this?—we humans are mammals. The coming of breasts marks the end of girlhood and the be-ginning of womanhood for us.

For me the Annexation began at midday in the brightest time of summer, at a time when my life was tranquil and happy, and the future seemed to unfold with limitless promise.

I lived then with my mother, my father, my brother Vann, my sister Theyl, in a house like a golden dome in a village of a thousand people close to the river. To the east were low round hills like green humps; to the west the land tilted as though a giant's hand had lifted it, and mountains of black stone rose to the sky. There once was a great city on our side of the river, back when the Earth had been crowded and noisy; but the city was long gone, and only its traces remained, a gray line of foundations in the grass.

It was a peaceful place and we hoped it would never change. But nothing in the universe is exempt from change, Great One.

Do you know what an Annexation is like? Let me tell you, O great and omnipotent lord.

First there is the Darkness. Then, the Sound. And then, the Splitting of the Sky. And at last the Voice, announcing to the conquered ones the fate that has befallen them.

The Darkness is total—sudden night at midday. Our power sources were orbital satellites whose great wings gathered the sun's energy and sent it to us in laser-steered bundles. In a single moment the Ansaar invaders inter-rupted the output of every one of our power satellites. The weapon called the Vax did that. It was as if

all the satellites in their orbits had been wrapped in blankets of a material impervious to light. Every electrical device on our planet ceased to function. The Darkness had come to us.

I was in the garden. How could I know that the lights were out all over the world and that all our machines, including our weapons of defense, were inoperative? But in the garden there was Darkness. The sun itself had been blotted out. The sky became a black sheet, so black that it was painful to look at. Your Vax had thrown some world-encompassing screen of opaque force, some gigantic barrier, across the sky. It is the great Ansaar weapon, the thing that lets you rule the galaxy: you interpose your might between a planet and its sun, and choke off all light and warmth and energy in a single moment. Who could withstand such a calamity?

I stood staring at the darkened sky and I thought at first I had been struck blind. I held my hand up and could not even see my fingers, not even very faintly, like the shadow of a shadow. I touched my fingers to my eyelids and saw colors, the dancing islands of blue and gold and green that I always saw when I pressed my eyes; but when I opened my eyes again I saw nothing. The world in all its brightness and beauty and wonder was gone.

Yet I was not afraid, not yet. For it all had been so sudden, and so total, that I could not yet take it in.

Next came the Sound, and the Sound was like nothing anyone had ever heard before, a low droning wail, coming from a point near the horizon, that gradually rose in intensity until a dreadful earsplitting screaming was coming down on us, the siren of our doom, a frightful discordant deafen-ing screeching that would not stop, a noise that fell upon us with an almost tangible force.

Now at last I was frightened. This seemed to me to be the end of the world. I fell to my knees and covered my ears. As I think you know already, O Master of All, I am not one easily frightened; and yet I was plunged into an abyss of fear by your Darkness and your Sound. I thought I would never come forth from it.

We were conquered already. But we did not know that yet.

As the Sound grew and grew in strength I saw long belts of light appear, rippling across that curtain of midnight darkness—brilliant horizontal bands of green and yellow and violet and crimson, quivering shimmers of potent brightness that stretched completely across the sky from east to west and vanished beyond the curve of the world's rim. They were like chains encircling a giant's waist. Staring at them in wonder and fright, I felt a sense of *strain*, for I sensed their tense pulsations, as though the giant were breathing in and out, gathering his force, making ready to throw those dazzling shackles off.

The Splitting of the Sky was starting to occur.

The bands of light danced in and out, the green one bending until it seemed to touch the ground and the violet one retracting like a drawn bow, curving far away into the heavens, and the crimson and yellow ones doing the same; then they reversed, snapping inward where they had been out, and out where they were in. And the Sound assailed us with ever more hor-rendous power. This continued for—five minutes, perhaps? Ten? I became aware, gradually, that the motion of the bands was tearing apart the dense black sheet that lay like a curtain behind them. As they eddied and rippled to and fro, the blackness was strained and stretched to the sundering point.

Then it ripped and the stars came shining through. Thousands, millions, the heavens ablaze with points of light, cold and dazzling, like the reflections of a billion fires in a dark lake.

Then I saw that those myriad lights were moving, moving as stars never move, rapidly growing larger and larger: the ships of the invaders is what they were. The Sound died away, finally. A ghastly stillness took its place, a stillness so total that it was like a roaring in my ears.

And at last came the Voice.

It spoke from the sky, a calm clear deep voice heard everywhere on Earth at once. First in Universal Imperial, of which, naturally, we could not understand a syllable; then again in our own language:

“We bring you the greetings of His Imperial Majesty Senpat XIV, the High Ansaar, the Supreme Omniscience. He instructs us to inform you that you have been gathered this day into the beneficence of the Empire. Thenceforth we of the Empire will shield you from harm, will share with you the greatness of our accomplishments, will guide you toward the attainment of civilization.

“Have no fear. You are in no danger. We come only to offer you the advantages of the Imperial way of life. A new era begins for you this day, people of Earth: an era of security and happiness and prosperity under the benevolent friendship of His Imperial Majesty, the Lord of All, Senpat XIV, may he thrive and prosper.”

And so we joined your Empire.

I assumed—we all assumed—that our leaders must already be recovering from the first shock, that defensive measures long held ready were going into action, that everywhere on Earth at this moment the old warlike soul of mankind was awakening from its long slumber and we would begin to take steps to rid ourselves of the unwanted benevolence that the intruders from space were offering us.

But no—no—

Our energy sources remained inoperative. Nothing moved; nothing worked. There was no government, no army, only the two billion baffled citizens of Earth, facing an incomprehensible enemy.

The truth of that landed upon us like a falling mountain. Our souls were numbed; our spirits were crushed. Which is the Ansaar way of conquest: show in the first moments of conquest that resistance is unthinkable, and thus make resistance impossible.

Already the ships of Ansaar were landing in every province of the world, and the Voice of the Imperial Procurator could be heard again everywhere, announcing to us the new order of things.

We were thenceforth under the administration of the Territorial Government of the West Quadrant of the Empire. We would pay taxes to the Territorial Government and would receive the full benefit of membership in the galactic sphere of mutual prosperity that was the Empire. Those with special skills that might be of use to the Empire would be invited to make them available; for the rest, life would go on as it always had, but now an Imperial presence would reside on Earth to insure perpetual peace.

The rioting, the panic, began even before the Voice had finished explaining the changes that had come to our world.

We showed our lack of interest in the benefits of membership in your sphere of mutual prosperity by letting a civilization that had been ten thousand years in the making topple into chaos in a single day.

Once the Voice had stopped speaking I ran for the phone and to call my father at the hospital. Silence came from the speaker grille, the terrible silence of the darkness between the stars.

“Call my mother, then,” I told it.

Nothing happened; and it was then that I realized that all communications lines must be dead.

The midday darkness was thinning, now. I saw vague shapes through it, like the shadows of a shadow. Fires blazed in the village. I heard far-off sounds—shouts, cries—

It was the beginning of the Craziiness—the Time of Fire.

Demons we had put behind us, monsters and nightmare beings of our bloody

past, burst free again now. Our placid society—two billion people neatly spread out across a green planet, quiet villages with tidy homes and pleasing gardens and gentle, law-abiding citizens—went berserk. Nothing mattered except the need to find food, weapons, a secure hiding place. Neighbor turned against neighbor, friend against friend. The world became a jungle again.

Yes, Majesty, I see your smile. *Maulas*, you are thinking. What else could be expected? Mere primitives, with a pitiful ten-thousand-year veneer of civilization—of course they'd turn into savages again the moment things went wrong for them!

Of course!

You are right: we behaved shamefully. But let me put the question to you, Lord of the Ansaar: What if a Darkness were to settle over Haraar, and a Sound were to rend your sky, and starships appeared overhead, and a Voice said that the Ansaar Empire has fallen, that your domain was now a minor province of a far greater empire from another universe, that you have been conquered by a people to whom the mighty Ansaar were no more significant than insects? What would happen, O Emperor of All? The slaves in your palace—eunuchs, concubines, all the lesser and greater wives—would they gather around you and protect you, O Supreme Omniscience? Or would they not fall upon you and tear you into a thousand pieces and run through the palace like beasts?

I mean no disrespect, O Emperor of All. But think of how it would be if a race greater even than yours came without warning and kicked your Empire to pieces the way a boy kicks an insect nest apart—casually, indifferently?

How I managed to live through the first days after the Annexation—the days we called the Craziness, and which now are called by us the Time of Fire—I can hardly say. Thousands died, maybe hundreds of thousands. It was a war of everyone against everyone.

The only rule of law that existed was that of the Ansaar, and in the early days we saw very little of the Ansaar. Sometimes we heard their Voice, but they themselves were all but invisible.

Our government dropped leaflets from the sky urging us to join in a resistance movement; but nothing came of that. At least I was in the safety of my home. I locked the doors and waited, hardly daring to sleep, for my parents or my brother or sister to return.

They never did. I never saw my mother and father again, or my sister. My father, I learned, had died when a mob broke into his hospital looking for medical supplies. My mother was “annexed” herself by the Ansaar, and taken to one of the new depositories where humans with scientific or technical skills were held.

As for my brother and my sister—

My brother Vann, because he pretended to the Ansaar that he was already a trained healer, was taken to the same center as my mother. But soon he was transferred to another Empire world. It would be years before I found him again, and then—but that is another story, Sire, and a very painful one.

Since my sister Theyl was learning to be a scryer, she was, I suppose, annexed and taken to one of the depositories also, or perhaps she was killed during the Time of Fire. But I like to think that she is alive somewhere in this vast Empire.

As for me, I survived. Somehow.

When the food ran out I gathered berries and seeds like any savage. I crept down to the river and filled pots and jars with water. If I had seen small wild animals, I would have tried to kill them by throwing rocks; but wild animals are not common on Earth.

The Darkness was over. The Ansaar once again let the sun shine by day and the moon and stars at night. I would have preferred the Darkness, I think. I would have felt safer moving about in total blackness. Whenever I was outside of the house and spied one of my neighbors I ran desperately and hid in the bushes, like an animal in fear, and crouched there until it seemed safe to come out.

But gradually the Craziiness ebbed, and we became accustomed to our new lives. We began to trust each other again and to come together like the civilized beings we once had been.

“The cities have all been destroyed, and their people evacuated into the countryside,” I learned from Harron Devoll, the woman who lived just across the stream from me. “And all the government officials are dead.” A great weight of loss and sadness descended on me when I heard that.

I heard also that you Ansaar were emptying Earth’s museums, taking our treasures to your own main planet; that you were doing something to the oceans and rivers to make Earth’s water more agreeable to you; that we would be sent to work in mines on distant worlds; that Ansaar soldiers were raping Earth women.

Was any of it true? Who could say?

But life went on. We formed little groups to raise crops and share such packaged foods as remained to us. We rebuilt much of the village center that rioters had burned the first day. But electrical service still was not restored, nor the communications nets reopened. We had been plunged back into a harsh medieval existence in a single moment.

In the third month of the Annexation three Ansaar came to us in a bronze-colored teardrop-shaped vehicle. They halted in the center of the village and made a tour of inspection, peering at our town hall, at the broken windows of our empty shops, at us.

We had expected demigods; but they were just ugly creatures with crested heads and big-muzzled faces like an animal's, and thick necks, short legs, long arms dangling almost to the ground!

Forgive me, Greatness. They had taken our world in a moment: and surely beings who could do that must be of titanic stature and grandeur. We wanted them to be tall and splendid, with shining eyes and heroic frames. But they were squat, they were coarse, they were ugly. They moved not with the grand swagger of overlords but in the slouching way of those doing a routine job, ordinary troops patrolling an ordinary little conquered planet.

I see you smiling again, Excellency. I know what you are thinking. Such airs this *maula* puts on! She dares complain that the soldiers of the Ansaar weren't grand and awesome enough for her! But I want to speak only the truth. That is how we felt.

"We could kill them," someone suggested. "Only three of them, and so many of us—"

"Perhaps we really could kill these three," someone else answered. "And then others will come and burn the village down to the ground, and burn us with it." And so we did nothing.

The three Ansaar settled in our town hall and made us come before them one by one. I could not stop staring, they seemed so strange to me, so repellent. Yes, Majesty, *repellent*. Yet though I was appalled by them I felt great curiosity too: who are these people who have crossed half the sky to take our world away from us, and why did they want to do it? They had a machine that turned what I said into words they could understand, and what they said into good clear Earth words. They said to me, "What special skill do you have, Laylah Walis?"

"I know how to *learn*. That is my skill."

And as I said it I swore that I would discover for myself all that could be known about our conquerors.

Three days afterward there came a heavy knock at my door, and I heard an Ansaar voice. I was frightened, of course. I was alone. I remembered what I had been told about the Ansaar finding the women of Earth desirable.

But I feared refusing to open the door, so I let him in. He was one of the three

from the town hall. I recognized him by a great welt of a birth-mark across his face, like a cap worn low on his forehead. He was very short and very wide through the shoulders, and his greenish skin had a pebbled texture.

Can you understand the horror I felt, Majesty? Staring into those alien yellow eyes, seeing that jutting muzzle, imagining those leathery, sharp-clawed hands against my flesh?

And then the Ansaar made a rumbling sound deep in its throat, and took a step toward me, arms outstretched and claws spread wide, and another step, and another—

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Abruptly Laylah broke off her tale. “Morning is here, Sire.”

The Emperor glanced at the jewel on his wrist and said, “So it is.” He frowned. “So our conversation must end. At the first morning hour you have an appointment with the executioner.”

She regarded him unwaveringly. “I have not forgotten that either. I hope that I have entertained you at least a little, O Lord of All. And if it is not beneath the dignity of an Emperor of the Ansaar to pray for the repose of a *mania*’s soul, I hope you have a good word for me in your prayers this day, Majesty.”

“Will you at least finish your tale for me before I go?”

“The first hour is here already, Majesty,” said Laylah sweetly. “And my time has come.”

“For an Ansaar soldier to assault a woman of an Annexed species is un-lawful. And outrageous besides. If any criminal actions occurred, the man will be identified and punished, I promise you that. Tell me exactly what took place. Your execution”—he seemed to have trouble with the word— “can wait.”

“Oh, but it is a very long story, Majesty!”

Again the mixture of amusement and annoyance in his expression: “*All* your stories are very long stories, is that not so? Well, leave out those cir-cumstantial details that you paint so well. Simply give me the essence. Did he rape you, yes or no?”

“Majesty—forgive me—it takes time to place the event in its proper context—”

In exasperation the Emperor said, “How much time? An hour? Two? There is

no time, woman! The Debin of Hestagar comes to court at the third hour to discuss this year's tribute, and before that I have the morning observances to perform, and then—"

"I could finish the story tonight, then," Laylah suggested.

"For you, lady, there will be no *tonight*."

"Ah. How true," she said.

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7

From the puzzled expressions of Laylah's maids that morning and from her scowling neuter chamberlain's long face it was obvious that they were surprised to find her still here past the hour of execution. Her studies of Ansaar culture indicated that the lower castes took *tiihad* with the greatest seriousness. Aristocrats might shrug, but commoners, dreading any collapse of the social order, wanted the rules of behavior to be observed.

She waited to hear the knock of the emissaries of death. Once, when she fell into a sound sleep, she dreamed that the knock had come and that at the door, grinning at her, was a gigantic Ansaar with shoulders like a bull's, holding a gleaming hatchet dripping red with blood.

The day went by, somehow.

Then Laylah's sour-faced chamberlain appeared and announced grandly, "His Majesty the Emperor calls upon you once again!"

"Wine!" the Emperor said brusquely, striding through the ivory-inlaid door of her suite. He clapped his hands. The maids scurried to obey.

"A difficult day, Majesty?" Laylah asked.

He smiled, amused, perhaps, by the intimacy of her tone.

"The Debin," he muttered. "The Goishlar of Gozishtandar. The Great Frulzak of Frist! The Gremb! All day long, princes and princelings of the tributary worlds—whole processions of them, prostrating themselves, murmuring hypocritical words of obscenely overstated praise, shoving heaps of gifts toward me. All of them wanting something from me, wanting, wanting, wanting—" The Emperor took a moody gulp of his wine. "I was third in line for the throne, do you know that? I never expected to inherit. It should have been Senpat. But Senpat loved

his little hyperyacht too much; and one day he came out of hyper right in the middle of the sun. Well, there was my brother Iason, the second prince; but when he heard Senpat was dead, he enrolled in a stasis monastery, and there he sits to this day, sealed in beyond all reach for the next ten thousand years, neither dead nor alive but as holy as anyone can possibly be. My father summoned me to the throne chamber—why am I telling you this, I wonder?—he summoned me, tears in his eyes, and he said, ‘Ryah, my youngest—Ryah, my dearest—’ I thought the tears were for Senpat and for Iason, but I soon saw that they were for me. And so here I am. The wives! The concubines! The grand palaces! The absolute power over a trillion lives! But also—the Debin, the Goishlar! The Great Frulzak of Frist! The Gremb!”

“Kings are like stars,” said Laylah. “They rise and set, they have the worship of the world, but no repose.”

The Emperor looked up. “Well said! You have the gift of words.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling. “They are very fine words, yes, but not my own. I quote one of our poets, a man named Shelley.”

“Ah. He understood a great deal, your Shelley. Did you have many poets as good as he?”

“A great many, yes.”

“So many worlds—so many poets,” said the Emperor. “I wish I could study them all. You must recite some work of other poets, Laylah, when there is time.”

“But there is no time, Sire. First I must finish my story; and then—and then—”

“Your story, yes,” the Emperor said darkly. “And then—then—” He peered into his wine cup. “All day long, between the ambassadors and the potentates and the petitioners, what did I hear from my own people? The *maula*, they said. The *maula*, the *maula*, the *maula*! Where is she? Why has there been no execution?” He glared, a strange tortured look. “Oh, Laylah, Laylah, why did you ever come here? And why did I not have your head cut from your body the moment I learned that you were here?”

“My story, Lord of All—may I resume my story?”

He waved his hand in a fretful, abstracted way. “Yes. Finish your story, yes. And see that you *do* finish this time!”

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Well, then, O great and glorious Emperor, it is not long after the Annexation. I am alone, and hear the knock, and admit the Ansaar soldier. There I am like one who is frozen, and the soldier is spreading wide his claws and seems about to seize me and do loathsome bestial things to me. But I can-not move.

How could I know, unfamiliar as I was with Ansaar ways, that his out-stretched arms and widespread claws, menacing as they seemed, were only a request for a stranger's attention?

"You are Laylah Walis?" He spoke with difficulty in heavily accented English.

"Yes."

He was Procurator-Adjutant Jjai Haunt. He had come here to annex me into the service of the Empire.

"Annexed?" I gasped. "Me? Why?"

"Interfacing duties." Haunt consulted a scrap of paper tucked in his belt. "At your interview you said the ability to learn was your special gift. We need those who can learn. When you have, you will help us to administer the Territory of Earth."

So they would train me to be a traitor. But I was too naive to realize that, then. In any case, I had been annexed. I had five minutes to choose whatever I wanted to take with me and then he led me outside.

Haunt took me to an Annexation depository on the far side of the mountains. There were at least five hundred humans and about a dozen un-armed Ansaar. The humans all had the same dull, dazed, stunned expression, as though they had been drugged.

But it was the conquest itself that had stunned them, the suddenness of Earth's loss of its ancient independence. It was like living among ghosts, Excellency, to live with these annexed people.

I asked if they knew anything about my mother or my brother or my sister. No one did. For three days I walked the perimeter of the depository and stared at the dark wall of the mountains and counted clouds and tried once more to come to terms with the thing that had happened to our world. On the fourth day Haunt came back for me.

A loose headcloth hid his birthmark. "I am Haunt," he said. "Who was with you before. Your instruction will now begin."

He took me to a three-cornered building on the other side of the camp: our classroom. “First our language,” he said, handing me a copper helmet designed for human use, fitting over my head. No Ansaar could have worn it because of the Ansaar crest. I slipped it on and a burst of powerful energy hit me: a sensation like icy daggers plunging into my eardrums, and a wild swirling around me, as if I were in some frightful snowstorm. Choking and gasping, I put my hands to my head to pull the helmet away, but it stuck to me like my own skin.

Haunt removed it. “Now we can begin to teach you our words.”

I wondered if the helmet had filled me with your language in one jolt. But no, what I had been given was only the *capacity* to learn Imperial. Your language is so different in basic assumptions, O Lord of All, that our minds must be adjusted in order to grasp them. Such concepts as the unifying divider, the distributive affiliate, the shifter and the reduplicative and the somatic grammatical phase—we find them altogether alien.

Yet—as you see, O Master of the Universe—I speak your language fluently now, thanks to the copper helmet and to Procurator-Adjutant Haunt’s patient and effective instruction.

When I could speak well enough he taught me some of the Empire’s history: its origins on holy Haraar, its ninety thousand years of constant galactic expansion. He explained the powerful need of your people to introduce order into the turbulence and confusion of the universe; and he showed me the great advantages that have come to the annexed races through their affiliation with the Empire. Even so, I still lamented the loss of our independence, Majesty.

Haunt took me up in a little gravity-thrust vehicle that carried us into the darkness that surrounded the Earth. We traveled the circumference of the Earth, looking down together on the newest of the Ansaar worlds. I stared in wonder and awe at the blue-green bosom of the Earth, at shining fields of white snow and vast tawny wastelands, and at forests so green they seemed black, and the great dark ocean expanses, which hurled blinding sun-blinks back up at us.

And I saw, limned like faint ghost-sketches against the distant ground, the outlines of ancient cities, the dim vestiges and shadowy ruins of the crowded, noisy, brawling Earth of the vanished past. “Tell me what those cities were called,” Haunt ordered me. “I want to compile an account of this planet’s history over the past fifty thousand years. We already know that Earth once was covered with large cities. Tell me: which was London? Which was Rome? Which was New York? We know the names, but not the locations.”

Of course New York and London and Rome were only names to me, vestiges of that troubled era of conflict and irrational hatreds that preceded the tranquility and

joy that had been ours. Now, seeing the shadowy out-lines of places that had been abandoned for hundreds of years, the stumps of once-majestic buildings, the sketchy hints of what must have been highways and bridges, great amphitheaters and monuments, I could tell him very little.

I studied our archives and taught myself about the Earth that had been, so that I could teach our history to Procurator-Adjutant Haunt. “That one, that was London. And over there, that was Paris, in a country that was called France. You see the spidery metal tower? And the gray building—the ca-thedral is what that was. For religious ceremonies.” I showed him Egypt’s Pyramids, rising starkly out of the sands, no more troubled by this latest conqueror than by any earlier ones; I found China’s Great Wall for him, zigzagging across the Asian desert; I took him afterward to the sites of other cities, telling him how many millions of people had lived in each: eight million here, I said, and nine million there, and this one, down there, fifteen million, and twenty million in that one in the valley beneath those two lofty mountains.

Haunt was silent much of the time. I desperately wanted him to look up and say to me, “I see now that this was no piddling little world, this Earth of yours!”

I was a naive child then; and how was I to know that this was Procurator-Adjutant Jjai Haunt’s twentieth planetary assignment, that he had helped to conquer at least a dozen huge glittering worlds whose attainments and achievements made those of Earth seem like the doings of children? Well, Haunt had the goodness not to humble my pride. I learned for myself, later on, when I began my travels through the Empire, what *real* planetary mag-nificence was like. But that was later.

Once Haunt took me right to the edge of our little ship’s range to show me how the Ansaar maintain their power over the worlds they annex. We were deep in the darkness above the Earth. He indicated a shining globe floating in orbit nearby that seemed no bigger than my fist. I could have reached out with a boom and gathered it in.

“That is the Vax,” said Haunt. “It disrupts all electrical fields not of our own making and severs communications links.”

I could see the white whorls of Vax power radiating from it, spinning off in writhing knots through the sky. And I thought I could hear the Vax singing with its own immense power, a slow, heavy, infinitely leisurely song of domination.

“Surely letting me see this is a breach of security,” I said. “We could steal one of these ships and come up here and knock your Vax from the sky.”

Haunt was amused. “No. Behind this Vax is another, and behind that one a third. They are in—adjacent spaces, well beyond your reach. You could never locate

them, or harm them if you did.”

I knew it was true; and I knew Haunt had taken me here to show me how futile any treachery would be, that the Ansaar dominion on Earth was unshakable.

I came to like Procurator-Adjutant Haunt very much. How unlikely, a girl of Earth developing warm feelings for one of the invaders. Perhaps it is an overstatement, Majesty, to say that I *liked* Haunt, that my feelings for him were *warm*; but he did come to seem like a friend to me, as much as any Ansaar could have been.

He taught me much. And he was my protector too.

Let me explain, Sire. I have said several times that I was naive, then, and one mark of my naiveté was that I allowed myself to be turned into a traitor to my people without realizing it.

I know it is difficult for you to see service to the Empire as any kind of treason. But I am a member of an annexed race; and we of Earth are particularly proud and stubborn; and though we had no choice but to accept Annexation, we always resented it. Yet there I was, serving our conquerors.

Without helpers like me they would have had little access to the data that could help them understand this latest conquest. Our language is as alien to the Ansaar as theirs is to us, and as language goes, so goes conceptualization itself. So it was necessary for the Ansaar to turn to guides who could explain human ways.

Though I was inexperienced even in the ways of my own world, I was, as I said, skilled at learning things; and also I am good at explaining what I have learned. So members of the Ansaar high command came to me to ask about Earth and I would answer, and if I did not know the answers, I would find them.

It took me a great deal of time to see that this was treason in the eyes of many of my fellow citizens.

I lived now in New Haraar, the newly built administrative capital, and here I worked at my task of finding answers to Ansaar questions. I had difficulty making friends there. At first I thought it was because I was from a village that they did not know. Then I saw they were deliberately avoiding me.

I was cooperating willingly with our overlords, you see. And my relations with an officer of the occupying force were openly friendly. Most humans at the capital viewed themselves as prisoners of war, serving the Ansaar grudgingly, with hatred in their hearts.

I learned the truth one day when I was walking between my lodging and the

Ansaar data repository. I was supposed to meet Haunt and report to him on research I had done on the different racial forms of the human species and the problems that those differences had caused in ancient times. Suddenly a group of people—five, eight, maybe ten—came rushing out of an opening between two buildings and began shouting and shaking their fists at me.

“Ansaar whore!” they cried. “Alien-lover! Traitor!” One spat at me. One pulled my hair. I thought they would kill me.

“Ansaar whore!” they kept yelling. “Whore! Whore! Where’s your Ansaar lover, whore?”

I had never fought in my life; but I fought now, trying to hold them off as they punched me, slapped me, tossed me around. “Wait—” I called. “Stop!”

They only hit me harder. My lip was split now. Blood ran down my cheek. One of my eyes felt puffed and swollen.

And then Haunt was there.

He came out of nowhere into the middle of the whirlwind. His claws flashed brightly in the sun and he caught one of my attackers and touched him lightly along the side of his face, and the man fell to the ground. Haunt touched another, and he fell too. Another.

The others stepped back, glaring at Haunt and me with such loathing that it made me tremble.

“You must not harm her,” Haunt said. “If you do, you will suffer. Now go. Go.” And to me: “Are you all right?”

“Shaken up. Some cuts and bruises. Oh, Haunt, Haunt—were they insane? Why did they jump on me like that?”

“They dislike our—friendship. We are friends, you and I, are we not?”

“Of course.”

“They are not pleased by that.”

All that day I could hear their angry shouts in my mind. Traitor! Ansaar whore! Where’s your Ansaar lover, whore?

Did they think that Haunt and I were—

Yes. A few days later, as I was eating lunch in the commissary, a woman sat

down next to me and said in a low voice, “Are you really sleeping with him, girl?”

“What?”

“The Ansaar. Do you and he do it or don’t you?”

The image leaped into my mind of Haunt’s body pressed against mine, Haunt’s clawed hands wandering across my breasts, my thighs, my belly. His jutting muzzle seeking my lips. But of course there had never been any kind of physical contact between us. “How could you imagine such a thing?” I asked her.

“You want to watch your step. One thing to work for them—we all have to do that—but *loving* them?—Oh, no, child, that will not be tolerated. Do you understand me? Will not be tolerated.”

Nothing could convince her of my innocence.

When I saw Haunt later that day, I could not bear to tell him what she had said. It was too bizarre, too shameful. I looked at him—the squat little Ansaar officer with the scaly skin and the long dangling arms, the short neck and the protruding jaws, the prickly spines of his crest marching across the top of his head, and I thought, *No, no, we could never be lovers. But he is decent and kindly, and I feel no hatred for him.*

Was I a traitor, though?

Yes. Yes, I was. I saw that now. In my naiveté I had betrayed my people, and they hated me for it. And my life was in jeopardy. If I went on working against my own kind, I would pay for it.

Two days later, I was attacked again in the street.

I never saw my attacker. Someone darted out of the shadows, struck me hard in the face, disappeared. Again my lip was cut. It was as though a white-hot blade had been drawn across it.

“Tell me who it was,” Haunt demanded.

I could tell him nothing. He put me under the protection of security robots. Wherever I went I had a robot at my side. I was pointed at, hissed at, jeered at. The robot intercepted things that were thrown at me, but it could not intercept their hatred.

I thought of asking Haunt to release me from my annexation and return me to my village. But I *liked* working for him. I enjoyed helping him learn Earth’s history of Earth. And also I felt I was serving the cause of Earth by working with the Ansaar. I

was studying them while they were studying us, learning not only their language but their nature. That might be useful someday.

Three indecisive days passed. Then a tall white-haired man halted me outside Haunt's headquarters and said, "Do you recognize me, Laylah?"

I stared at him. "No."

"Dain Italu is my name. I knew your father in medical school." He lowered his voice. "Do you know about the Partisans, Laylah?"

"The Partisans?"

Quietly he said, "We work for Earth's freedom. I'm told that you work willingly with the Ansaar, Laylah, and that you even—" He paused. "Well, there are other charges. They proposed a sentence of death. I spoke out for you. I said no daughter of Tomas Walis could be guilty of such things. I hope I'm right, Laylah."

My face turned red and hot. "I'm not sleeping with an Ansaar, if that's what you were trying to say, Dr. Italu. But I *am* working with one, yes." And I told him that I felt what I was learning about the Ansaar could be valuable to Earth's cause.

"Perhaps. But I warn you, Laylah: get yourself free from this Ansaar of yours. Have nothing further to do with him. Otherwise—when the trouble starts—"

His voice had become ragged and uncertain. And it struck me that he was telling me something I probably should not be hearing, out of friendship that had once existed between him and my father.

He left me standing there, confused, deeply troubled.

I went up to Haunt's office. Ancient documents were spread out before him, texts going back to the era of warring nations.

"Look at these, Laylah. They're fascinating—absolutely fascinating. But there are some things here I don't quite understand. Perhaps you can—"

I have things to tell you, I thought. There's going to be a rebellion. You're at risk, Haunt, and so am I.

But all morning we looked at documents and I said nothing. And that night, when the uprising began—

Ah, Lordship, but morning has come again, I think! And so there is no more time for me to tell my tale!

* * * *

The Emperor said, “How sly, Laylah! You lead me along and lead me along, and just as I’m caught up in your story, eager to know what happens next, you tell me morning has come again!”

“But morning *has* come again, Sire. And the executioner is waiting.”

“Let him wait!” cried the Emperor. “Who rules this Empire, the Emperor or the executioner? There’s much that I need to hear. Partisans plotting rebellion—an insurrection against Ansaar rule—why am I learning of these things for the first time? Go on with it. That night, when the uprising began—”

“I have talked all night, Sire. There is so much more to tell; but not now, not now!” Laylah yawned delicately. “I beg your indulgence, for I must sleep now, Excellency. And you—the responsibilities of the throne await you. To-night, when I resume—”

He smiled wryly. “Tonight! Tonight! And so you buy yourself another day of life!”

“Ah, my lord, so I do. But life as a prisoner. What kind of life is that? I’d gladly tell you all in the next hour, and go at last to the fate reserved for me. But I am so tired now, Majesty.”

“I will see you at sundown,” said the Emperor Ryah VII, and she could not tell whether his tone conveyed annoyance or amusement, or perhaps some of each. “Rest now, Laylah. And prepare to bring your story to its conclusion this evening.” And he was gone.

* * * *

9

You have ordered me, O Master of the Galaxy and Lord of All, to be concise. And so I will be; for I am a mere barbarian slave and you are the Pillar of the Empire. I will tell you quickly of what happened on that terrible and violent evening in New Haraar.

Ansaar blood was shed that night. Know, O Highest, that Earth has but one moon, large and brilliant. It goes through its phases every twenty-eight days; and so a time comes once a month when the night sky is dark but for the cool sparkle of the stars. On such a night of no moon the Partisans struck their first blow.

You must remember, Excellency, we were once a violent race who with great

difficulty had learned the way of peace; but now the buried violence in our souls had come roaring back into us with the vehemence of a beast that had been chained too long.

Two billion of us and only a handful of Ansaar: the Partisans reasoned that if they could pick a few Ansaar off, five here and ten there, the flame of resistance would catch and blaze high, and then the Imperial government might decide we were too fierce, too savage, to take into the Empire.

For weeks the Partisans had gathered weapons—not Ansaar weapons, beyond our poor *maula* skills to understand, but the crude weapons of Earth itself, knives and clubs and such. And they struck in the same instant in a dozen parts of New Haraar. With their knives, their clubs, their simple bar-baric weapons.

Jjai Haunt was among those Ansaar who fell in that first onslaught. If I had not left work early that night, I might well have died beside him. He was alone. They came out of the darkness and struck him again and again; and though he fought back bravely—I know he did—there were too many. They struck him down with their knives and their clubs, their simple bar-baric weapons; and so they slew an Ansaar who had seen service on twenty worlds of the Empire.

Twelve other Ansaar died in twelve different regions of New Haraar. The moonless night was lit by the red blaze of fifty fires.

Dain Italu came to me. “Get your things together, fast. The Partisans will be here tonight to kill you.”

He grabbed a traveling case of mine and threw some things into it; and I collected a few things more—clothing, books, pictures of my mother and father. A floater waited in the street.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“To Sinon Kreish’s castle,” said Italu.

Sinon Kreish, Majesty, is dead now; but he was the wealthiest man on Earth, of a grandeur that only an Emperor can understand. To me he was legendary.

“Have all the Ansaar been killed?” I asked.

“Only a few, Laylah. The ones who were marked for death.”

“And I was marked for death too, then?”

“By one faction, yes. Others argued for saving you. You’ve been closer to the Ansaar than almost any of us, and you know them in a way that we’ll need later on.”

We were far from New Ansaar by now. I thought of Jjai Haunt lying dead in the street, and I wanted to cry; but no tears would come. I was too sick at heart, too bewildered.

Pale morning brightness entered the sky. A great black mountain loomed before us.

“Mount Vorn,” said Dain Italu. “The estate of Sinon Kreish.”

The floater landed on the black, craggy summit. And I knew I had come to a place of wonders and miracles.

Golden sunlight ran in rivers across the iron-blue sky. Sweet morning air rushed into my lungs like fine mellow wine. Ancient sorceries penetrated my soul.

A woman of Sinon Kreish’s staff moved toward us with wonderful grace, as though drifting weightless through the strange thin air.

“I am Kaivilda,” she said. “Welcome, Laylah Walis.”

And I entered the dwelling of Sinon Kreish.

Kreish himself, O Master of All, was complex and sophisticated, wealthy and powerful and shrewd; a personage of splendor and significance. An hour with him, Sire, might have caused you to revise your notions of the barbaric qualities of the *maulas* of Earth.

I wandered through his castle in an ecstasy of amazement. The Keep was a vast, gleaming onyx serpent, looping and leaping along the knifeblade-sharp ridge that is Mount Vorn’s highest peak. Its topmost level, a quartz bubble, held Sinon Kreish’s bedchamber, with his conjuratorium just along-side. Below—a horn of pure shining platinum boldly cantilevered out over the valley—was his trophy room; and just beside that, a blatant green eye of curving emerald, was the jutting hemisphere of his harmonic retreat.

A white-vaulted passageway led to the apartments of Sinon Kreish’s family. A row of razor-keen blades that would rise from the carnelian floor of the passageway at any provocation guarded these.

A second passage opened into a pleasure gallery supported by pillars of golden marble. Here the castle’s inhabitants swam in a tank lined with garnet slabs, or drifted in a column of warm air, or made contact with the rhythms and pulses of the cosmos. Here, also, Sinon Kreish maintained patterned rugs for focused meditation, banks of motile light organisms for autohypnosis, and other things whose purposes I did not know.

From there the structure made a swaybacked curve and sent two wings back up the mountain. One contained Sinon Kreish's collection of zoological marvels, the other his botanical garden. Between them were two levels of libraries and chambers for the housing of antiquities and objects d'art, and the castle's dining hall, a single octagonal block of agate thrusting out into the abyss. Below that was the room of social encounter, a cavernous hall where Sinon Kreish entertained guests. A landing stage for visitors' vehicles protruded from the mountain alongside. Behind it, hewn deep into the face of the mountain, were kitchens, waste-removal facilities, power-generation chambers, servants' quarters, and such.

In this miraculous house I spent the next six months, cherished like a member of Sinon Kreish's own family. As for Sinon Kreish himself I saw only an occasional glimpse of a striking, formidable figure moving through the gleaming halls, at least in the beginning. But his kinfolk treated me warmly. It was a time of pure enjoyment—a dream-life, Sire, a time out of time for me. Gradually I began to recover from the shocks and surprises of the time of the Annexation.

They are all dead now, O Lord of All, those sons and daughters of Sinon Kreish, and the castle itself was long ago reduced to rubble by the vengeful armies of the Ansaar. But my stay in that place remains as bright as ever in my memory.

There was no sense there of the Ansaar presence on Earth. The entire Annexation might never have taken place at all.

In time I learned that the New Haraar uprising had failed. Before dawn of that first night Ansaar forces had arrested nearly all the conspirators. Most were dead now. There had been terrible reprisals everywhere. Some of Earth's greatest monuments were leveled; several of our most productive agricultural zones were systematically ruined. Word went forth that any further attacks against the Ansaar would be met even more stringently. So it was clear that the benevolence of the Ansaar regime was no more than a veneer, that we were in fact slaves, that if we were unruly we would be punished like beasts.

In Sinon Kreish's castle the weeks went by, each much like another. My life was strangely static, leading nowhere, containing no meaning. But then there was a great deal of meaning, indeed.

I was taken to Sinon Kreish's private retreat, the emerald-walled globe at the summit of the entire structure. Sinon Kreish stood rigid and upright as a tree. It was the first time I had ever been alone with him, and I was frightened.

"I will tell you a great secret, girl, that would be worth my life if ever it reached the ears of the Ansaar. I am the leader of the resistance movement here on Earth."

I looked at him in amazement. "The Partisans?"

“In a way. Their goal and mine were the same, to win back our planet’s freedom; and so I gave them a certain amount of aid. But the Partisans had no sense, no discretion. They could think only of murder and destruction. What could that gain? We murder ten Ansaar and they kill ten thousand of us. We burn five of their buildings and they destroy five of our provinces.” He smiled, the fiercest, most icy smile I had ever seen. “The Partisans were wrong, and paid with their lives. The Empire is stronger and wiser than we are; and it has dealt with rebels before. How many annexed worlds, do you think, have ever won their freedom from the Ansaar?”

I had no idea; and so I said nothing.

Sinon Kreish nodded. “Correct. None. Not one, in the ninety thousand years of the Empire. Revolts, yes. Wars of independence, even. But not a single planet has ever escaped the Ansaar grasp.”

“Then we will be Ansaar slaves forever?” I asked.

“Perhaps. We can never *force* the Ansaar to set us free. But maybe someday we can have our freedom as a gift, do you see? Not by resisting, girl, but by freely and willingly cooperating.”

I was baffled. Why would the Empire ever relinquish its control over a meek and cooperative world? That was just the sort of world it would want to keep. And how did one resist by cooperating?

He said, as though I had spoken aloud, “I deal with the Ansaar as I would with anyone with whom I am linked by common purpose. The Ansaar don’t want to destroy us. They want us to be docile, manageable members of the Empire. I too want to avert Earth’s destruction. So we have a common purpose, the Ansaar and I. Therefore I deal with them, do you see? I launch no insurrections. I countenance no assassinations, no arson.”

He peered down at me from his great height. “Let’s get down to particulars, child. Dain Italu says you speak fluent Ansaar and that you’ve made a study of their ways and customs.”

I nodded. “But I still have a great deal to learn.”

“And we want to give you the opportunity to learn it. The more you know about the Ansaar, the more useful you are.”

Useful? To whom? I wondered. And how?

Sinon Kreish went on, “I have spoken lately with my friend Antimon Felsert, who is, you know, High Procurator for Earth.”

His *friend*? The word took my breath away.

“The High Procurator,” he said, “will let a few young people from Earth enter the Empire to study Imperial ways. I’ve shown him that mankind needs proper knowledge of the society it’s joining if it is to be integrated into the Empire.” He smiled. “We have been so isolated, so remote from the main currents of galactic life. But if some of our brightest can go forth to travel and study, they’ll ultimately serve to explain the ways of the Ansaar to the people of Earth, and to help the Ansaar learn something of our ways as well.”

I was thunderstruck. This was all so sudden. I searched desperately for words. “Well—yes—I think—that is—”

“There’d be no possibility of setting foot on the core worlds of the Empire, the ones inhabited by the Ansaar themselves. Entry to Imperial Space is forbidden to *maulas*. You know what that word means, do you?”

Reddening, I said, “Yes. Barbarian.”

“Actually it means simply ‘those who are not fully civilized.’ But yes, ‘barbarian’ is basically correct. So you could never enter Imperial Space, but that still leaves the vast region of Territorial Space, where non-Ansaar races that are beyond *maula* status but nevertheless not yet entitled to full Imperial citizenship dwell. You’ll have plenty to study there.”

It was agreed; and I left the castle of Sinon Kreish and traveled back to New Haraar. Where I soon found myself being ushered into the presence of Antimon Felsert, the High Procurator for Earth.

—But I think that morning has come again, Sire. My time is at an end, and I must cease telling my tale.

* * * *

“This Felsert,” said the Emperor. “The name seems familiar.”

“It is morning, Sire!”

“Yes, yes, I know. Felsert, Felsert—”

“He was assassinated by terrorists in the last year of your father’s reign. Sinon Kreish was charged with the crime and he and his entire family were put to death.”

“Yes,” the Emperor said, half to himself. “I remember now. The first High Procurator killed by natives in something like four thousand years. There were

worldwide reprisals, weren't there?"

"Severe ones, Sire. I was on one of the Bessiral worlds at the time, but I know my world suffered for his death. I was shocked by the assassination, myself, Majesty. It seemed pointless to me."

"Indeed." The Emperor seemed oddly unwilling to leave.

Laylah said again, "Is it not morning, Sire?"

He swung around and glared at her. "It is morning, yes!"

"And the executioner—"

"The executioner, the executioner, the executioner! *Vipraint* the executioner! Why are you in such a hurry to die?"

"I'm in no hurry at all, Majesty. But the law requires—"

"Do you presume to teach me the law?"

"A thousand pardons, Sire. I was only reminding you—"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes."

"But if in your great mercy, All-Powerful, you choose to let this poor *maula* remain alive another day, I would offer thanks to the gods of all the worlds."

Sourly the Emperor said, "I asked you to tell me why you had come here although you knew it meant death to do so. So you told me the story of the Annexation of Earth. I asked about what appeared to have been your rape at the hands of an Ansaar soldier, and you told me that the Ansaar had come to you to ask your help, and that he became your friend and protector. I asked for the details of the conspiracy that cost your Ansaar friend his life, and you gave me an account of your visit to the castle of some rich Earthman who eventually was found guilty of treason against the Empire. Three nights have passed in this storytelling, and I have come to know a great deal now about who you are and what you have experienced, and yet I've had no proper answers so far to any of my questions. What am I to do with you, Laylah Walis? What am I to do with you?"

"You are the Guardian of the Law, Majesty. You are free at any time to deliver me up to those who carry out its precepts."

"I want answers from you first!"

"Even so, even so. Come to me again tonight, and I will try to tell you all that

you desire to know. But surely you must not stay here any longer this morning. The duties of the court—”

“Yes, the duties of the court,” said the Emperor. “The duties of the court! Who but me knows what the duties of the court are like? No wonder my father wept for me when I became the heir. The duties of the court!” His voice was rising. “Today, Laylah: the Twelve Despots of Geeziyangiyang arrive to pay their courtesies. Then the trade delegation of Gimmil-Gib-Huish, with a gift for the Imperial Zoological Gardens: poisonous serpents, most likely. Next the League of the Fertile Womb, presenting the winner of the Imperial Order of the Crystal Egg. Then the Guild of Prophets, with the annual predictions; the champion *verbish-breeder* of Zabor Province, to get her medal; the Imperial Architect, to complain about modifications I want for the Pavilion of the Grand Celestial Viewing; and then—then—ah, it never ends! What’s the point of absolute power, if you fritter it away on a hundred ceremonial audiences a day? Lord of All! Master of the Universe!” The Emperor laughed wildly. Then, his voice quieter again, almost eerily contained, he said, “The duties of the court, as you say, must not be shirked. Ah, but if I could! If I only could! *Thraak* the duties of the court! *Gedoy* the duties of the court! I’ll go now, and will return at sundown.” He crossed the room, and studied her a moment at close range. Then his hand reached out—his claws, she noticed, were elegantly trimmed and rounded—and lightly touched the curve of her jaw, running his hand up almost to her ear in a gesture that seemed to be one of tenderness. In a soft voice he said, “How fascinating you are! And how maddening. Until later, then, Laylah.”

Once more he was gone.

* * * *

10

If I may resume, Majesty—Light of the Cosmos—Supreme Monarch of the Million Suns...

I was brought into the presence of the High Procurator for Earth, Antimon Felsert. Never had I beheld an Ansaar even of the middle castes. High Procurator Felsert was different from other Ansaar. I saw it in the color of his skin, the shape and size of his crest, the proportions of his limbs.

He said, in excellent English, “So you’re the girl that Sinon Kreish has sent us for the study program. How old are you, girl?”

“Sixteen,” I said. “Almost seventeen.”

“You speak Universal Imperial, girl? And read it? Here, then. Glance through

this.” He tossed me a glossy memorandum cube and told me how to activate it. Jjai Haunt’s report on me materialized in bright red letters in the air.

... intelligent, eager to please... a fast learner... almost suspiciously trustworthy... somewhat immature for her age, considering that human females are capable of reproduction by the time they have lived twelve or thirteen years...

“What do you think he meant, ‘almost suspiciously trustworthy’?” the High Procurator asked, speaking in Imperial.

“I have no idea, sir,” I replied in the same language.

“And ‘eager to please.’ Why be eager to please an Ansaar?”

“You are our masters,” I said simply.

“Reason enough to hate us, then.”

“I hate no one, sir. It seems a waste of emotional energy.”

He asked me a few questions more. But they were only routine. My fate had already been decided. My long years of exploration and study were about to begin. Eighteen years, from Earth to this holy world of Haraar and the presence of your majestic self.

Twelve men, seven women, were in the first group sent to the Territories: poets, scholars, scientists. We went forth in groups of three or four. I was sent to Bethareth in the Hklplod system: a golden world of a golden sun, where sleek beautiful creatures, limbless as serpents, worship a monster-god dwell-ing atop a great mountain. I lived there a year, and watched them as they pressed their jewel-studded foreheads against their god’s stone flank. From there I went to Giallo Giallo of the Mirilores, a world of eternal snows and frozen oceans, and traveled with Ansaar explorers into an underground realm of torrid caverns and turbulent lava rivers. It would take me six of these nights to describe that strange world.

Then to Sepulmideine, the World of Chained Moons, where the sky burns with fragrant fires—to Mikkalthrom, where the Emperor Gorn XIX lies buried in a stasis tomb that will not open for fifty thousand Imperial years—to Gambelimidinul, the pleasure world of the Eastern Territo-ries—

Each held more than one could see in a dozen lifetimes; and yet I knew that this was only the edge of the edge of the Empire’s myriad Territories, that I could travel forever and never see the whole of them.

The highest moment—and the darkest—came for me on a world called Vulcri of the red sun Kiteil, as I stood staring at the ruins of Costa Stambool, the capital of

an empire that had fallen long before the first Ansaar had ever gone forth from Haraar.

I saw layer upon jumbled layer. The crooked streets of the oldest levels, dating from the dying days of an era called the Second Mandala and con-temptuously built upon by the glorious successors of that impoverished civilization: its primitive walls were hidden beneath the accretions of a thousand later centuries, and yet they glowed with a proud scarlet phos-phorescence. Above were the chalcedony halls of the Concord of Worlds, and above those the streets of the City of Brass, and sprawling over those the remains of the slopes and slideways of gaudy Glissade, the pleasure suburb of Later Costa Stambool. Over everything else was brutally superimposed the final scars inflicted by the vandals who ushered in the climactic Fourth Mandala of Costa Stambool with fire and the sword.

Here were the palaces of obsolete dynasties, the temples of forgotten gods; here were shops that dealt in treasures already incalculably ancient when the Ansaar were young, taverns peddling vintages long turned to dust, parks green with trees and shrubs of species no longer known to the uni-verse. A great marble slab proclaimed in an undecipherable language the glories of an empire that spanned ten solar systems whose name is lost beyond retrieval.

I stood stock-still, letting the splendors of this ancient civilization flood my soul: the palace of the Triple Queen, and the courtyard of the Em-peror of All, and the marble cells where the Tribunal of the People, that fifty-minded entity which had governed here for thirty centuries of grimly imposed harmony, lived chin-deep in pools of luminous nutrients drawn from the dissolved bodies of their citizenry, and the celebrated Library of Old Stambool, where books in the form of many-faceted gems, contain-ing in their rigid lattices every word that had ever been written, spilled from iron-bound chests. I peered into the Gymnasium and it seemed that a howling triple-headed beast in fetters was glaring back at me from the Field of Combat with fiery eyes. I entered the Market of All Wonders, where merchandise of a thousand worlds once was laid out in open arcades, every-thing free for the taking, gift of They-Who-Provide, loving guardians of this greatest of all cities. I was numb with a surfeit of miracle.

Then a voice by my side said, “Someday, perhaps, the capital of the Ansaar will be a ruin like this, eh?”

I whirled. A man—a human!—had quietly come upon me while I still stood in that trance of wonder.

“Are you shocked, Laylah?”

“How do you know my name?”

He laughed. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

I looked—looked—the eyes, the shape of the lips. The curve of the smile. “Vann?” I said, hesitantly.

“Your long-lost brother Vann, yes! Who comes up to you at the edge of nowhere and says hello! Can you believe it, Laylah? Two needles we are, in a haystack a million light-years across!”

We fell into each others arms, laughing and crying, there beside the ruins of lost Costa Stamboul.

I have never known a more wonderful moment, Sire, in my life. But it turned to ashes almost at once. For as we walked back to the visitor lodge, babbling to each other of all that had happened to us since the day of the Darkness and the Sound and the Voice, Vann said something that brought me up short with horror and fright, something so dark and mad that I could scarcely believe he had said it. What my brother said to me—it was utter treason, Majesty.

Ah, but it is time to halt for tonight, eh, Majesty? I have taken so many hours in my descriptions of wonders that I will have to tell you tomorrow of my brother’s words, and the effect they had on me, and what happened afterward. So you must spare my life for one more day, if you will. What shall it be, Majesty? The executioner’s block for me, or another day and a night of life? For the decision is yours, O Master of All, O Lord of the Universe.

* * * *

The Emperor was smiling. “You won’t *ever* finish the story, will you, Laylah? You’ll go on spinning it out for a hundred years, and then a hundred years more, if I allow it.”

“There is so much to tell, Majesty!”

“Yes, and you’ll insist on telling it all. Whereas all I wanted to know from you was—well, you know what I wanted to find out. And instead you tell me this, you tell me that, you tell me one thing after another—”

“It is all part of the story, Majesty. Everything is linked to everything else. But I do confess that I have been in no hurry to reach the conclusion. If you will grant me one more night, or perhaps two, perhaps then I would be able to—” She glanced sharply at him. “Or if I have begun to bore you, perhaps we should stop for good right here. The executioner’s patience was exhausted long ago; and now, I think, yours is also. Very well. I will prolong the story no longer. My tale is over. I bid you farewell forever, Majesty. May you reign and prosper for seven times seven thousand years.” And she began to make the Ansaar sign of blessing, that is made only by those who are about to die.

The Emperor caught her hand in mid-gesture and brought it back down to her side. “No,” he said.

“No?”

“There’ll be no executions today. And there’ll be more story-telling to-night. But promise me one thing, Laylah!”

“That I finish it this evening?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.”

She bowed and made the sweeping gesture of submission.

“I will do my best, Majesty. Tonight will see the last of my story. That much I promise you with all my heart, O Light of the Cosmos—O Supreme Monarch of the Million Suns—”

* * * *

Bogan 27, 82ND Dynastic Cycle
(August 15—I think—a.d. 3001)

I have him! He’s caught good and proper, that much is certain! And he will sit and listen to me—and sit—and listen—as long as I want him to—as long as I need him to—and, truth to tell, I would gladly go on speaking with him forever—

—From the Diaries of Laylah Walis

11

But this was the night of nights, and she could not bring herself to begin.

“Tonight,” the Emperor prompted at last, “you said you would tell me what your brother said to you at Costa Stamboul, and what effect it had on you.”

“Yes.” And still she hesitated, for this was the most difficult moment of all. Everything she meant to say tonight had been arranged properly in her mind, but now, suddenly, for the first time since her arrival, words would not come.

Again he spoke into her silence: “Let me say it for you. What he told you was that he was a key member of the anti-Imperial resistance, that he knew you were expert in Ansaar language and customs, and that he had come to you to ask you to

make the journey to Haraar, inveigle yourself into my palace, win my affection with your extraordinary charm...and assassinate me.”

He said it quietly, but his words struck her like hammer blows. She sat frozen, stunned, lost in a maelstrom of panic.

“Is this not so, Laylah?” He was smiling. “Speak. Or have you lost your voice?”

Hoarsely she replied, “These are the things I meant to tell you tonight, yes. But how is it you know them already?”

“From your diary, of course.”

“My diary? How could you read my diary? My diary is in English!”

“Which is the main language of Earth. And Earth is a world of the Empire.” His tone remained gentle. He was not speaking as an Emperor might speak. “Do you think we’d annex a world and not learn its language? While you were asleep an expert in your language entered and read your little book. But tell me, Laylah: *would* you assassinate me?”

“No. Never. Never!” She was trembling. She could barely get the words out.

“I believe you,” he said, and he sounded sincere. “Yet that is what you came to Haraar to do. Is it because you find me so fascinating? Because you have fallen in love with me?” He was playing with her again, the lion toying with his prey. “Or because you have come to see the uselessness of killing me?”

“All of that,” she said. Some strength returned to her voice. “Killing you would have been pointless. The Empire has survived the deaths of hundreds of Emperors, and will go on and on regardless of who is on the throne. But why should we discuss this? The game is over, Majesty. Summon your executioner.”

“Not just yet. The other part, first: have you really fallen in love with me? With the archenemy of your people?”

His gaze grew fierce. She could not meet his eyes.

“I admit being fascinated by you. That’s not quite the same thing as love.”

“Agreed. I feel a fascination too. You know that, don’t you? Why else do I listen to you, night after night, when I have so much else to do? The lovely *maula* who risks her life to come to Haraar—who talks her way right into the Emperor’s presence—who tells him tales of her world that hold him helpless night after night—”

“I played a dangerous game, and I lost.” The trembling had stopped. She felt very calm. “Shall we end this little session now? I no longer wish to prolong our conversations.”

“But I do, Laylah. What if I were to offer you Earth’s freedom from Ansaar rule?”

She gasped. Once again he had caught her unawares and sent her reeling. “Earth’s—freedom—?”

“As an autonomous member of the Empire. An end to Ansaar occupation, and freedom for its citizens to travel in Imperial Space. Such a thing is within my power to grant. I saw these lines in your diary too, from one of your ancient poets: ‘Titles are shadows, crowns are empty things; the good of subjects is the end of kings.’ So I believe, Laylah: the good of subjects. I am no tyrant, you know. I will set your little world free.”

“This is an ugly joke. It’s cruel of you to trifle with me like this.”

“I’m neither joking nor trifling. The freedom of Earth is yours, Laylah.” And, after a moment: “As a wedding gift, that is.” His Ansaar hand reached for hers. “‘I would gladly go on speaking with him forever,’ you wrote. The opportunity is yours. You fascinate me to the point of love, Laylah. I invite you to become one of my Cherished Major Wives.”

When she could speak again she said, “One of how many, may I ask?”

“You would be the sixth.”

“Ah. The sixth.” She was past the first rush of astonishment, almost calm now. But not the Emperor. His eyes were retracted in tension, the vertical pupil-slits barely in view. “Cherished Wife Number Six! What a strange fate for a quiet girl from Earth!” She mused on it while he stared tautly, knotting and unknotting his fingers. “Well, we can discuss it, Majesty. Yes. We can discuss it, I suppose, in the days ahead.”

He nodded. “By all means. We can discuss it. I will come to you as before, and you will tell me your tales, and perhaps, by and by—”

“By and by,” she said. “Yes. Perhaps.”

She forced herself to maintain her eerie calmness, for otherwise she would break loose entirely from her moorings.

Sixth Cherished Wife! And Earth an autonomous world! Yes, but could she? Would she? By and by, perhaps. Perhaps. By and by.

“Tell me the next story, Laylah.”

* * * *

Very well. I must tell you, then, Majesty, that from Costa Stamboul I went onward to the forbidden world of Grand Binella, the planet of the Oracle Plain, of which they say that in its shapes and colors are the answers to all the questions that have ever been asked and many that have not yet been framed. Near the Plain are the mountains called the Angelon, where one walks on a carpet of rubies and emeralds. Farther on—almost at the hori-zon—one sees a body of motionless black water, the Sea of Miaule, with Sapont Island smoldering just offshore, a place of demons and basilisks.

I made my way to this terrifying world, Sire, at my brother’s suggestion, because he felt that among those demons and basilisks I might learn certain useful things, things that would stand me in good stead if ever I found myself in the place where I find myself now. And so, upon my arrival there—

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