

River of the Queen

By Robert Reed

I

Every voice spoke of the Queen. "Where is She? Ascending! Do you see Her? In my dreams, yes! Do you smell Her? Absolutely, yes! The All ends, the new All walking in its tracks! Praise the Queen! Bring us the Queen! Where is She now? Ascending!" Stirred among the voices were animal grunts and hollers; better than any words, they captured the wild anticipation—a chorus of piercing, wordless roars that almost obscured the tumbling thunder of the great river. And behind the voices and roars were the percussive clack of nervous limbs and the extruded symphonies of pheromones, a giddy sense of celebration laid so thick across the setting that even a pair of human beings—mere tourists—could appreciate the unfolding of great, glorious things.

Queen Lee shivered beneath her robe, purring. "This is wonderful. Remarkable. And really, it hasn't even begun yet."

Her husband nodded and smiled, peering over the edge.

"Can you see Her?" she joked.

"But I see some of Her entourage," Perri admitted. "Down in the mists. Can you make them out?"

The railing was made from thick old vines grown into elaborate knots, golden leaves withered, dried spore-pods ready to burst. Queen Lee leaned against the top vine. A beautiful woman in a thousand ways, she gazed into the mayhem of plunging water and endless snowstorms, her smile widening when a few wisps of black appeared for the briefest instant. Long albatross-style wings were trying to rest inside bubbles of calm air; a few of the Queen's devoted assistants were gathering themselves before resuming their long climb.

"Will the wind-masters reach us?" she inquired.

"Most won't." Perri had a young, almost pretty face, fine features amplifying a pair of clear bright eyes that could only be described as sweet. He had turned to the right, watching the main lane, watching thousands of Dawsheen wrestling for position. "The last time I was here," he allowed, "only a handful of those big flyers survived the climb."

"Is it too far?"

The cliff was more than eleven kilometers high.

"It's more the cold and snow, I think. And not just the wind-masters suffer. Most of Her entourage dies along the way." Then in the next breath, with an easy conviction, he added, "But still, this is the best place to be. This is Her final gathering point. Being here is an enormous honor."

"I know," Queen Lee sang. "I know."

Perri didn't mention costs. His wife had donated a substantial sum to the Dawsheen, and nothing would come from it but this one opportunity to endure the glacial cold, standing among the alien throngs to catch a glimpse of the fabled Queen. Their private vantage point was an ice-polished knob of black basalt. The river was to their left—a shrunken but still impressive body of water hugging the cavern wall, flowing hard and flat until it reached the neatly curled lip of the towering cliff. The city lay to their right, perched on the higher ground. Beneath the city, where the cliff was a dry black wall, a single zigzagging staircase had

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reason, the Queen never took a step upward. Her assistants carried her beautiful bulk, using the honored old ways. On foot and with the fading strength of their limbs, they were bringing her up the final eleven kilometers of a grand parade that began centuries ago, in the warm blue surf of the Dawsheen Sea.

“She won't arrive for a little while,” Perri cautioned. Then he touched Quee Lee with a fond hand, adding, “This is our ground. Nobody can take it from us. So why don't we go somewhere warm, and sit?”

“I don't want to miss—”

“Any little thing.” Perri winked with one of his sweet eyes. “But remember.

This is a wonderful city in its own right, and in another week or two, there won't be anything left to see."

"We should walk around," she agreed.

Stepping back from the dying vines, he suggested, "And maybe we can treat ourselves...."

"To a little drink or two," she said, doing a seamless imitation of her husband's voice.

"To be social," he said, imitating his wife's voice and mannerly sense. "To be polite."

Then together, inside the same moment, they thought of the city's fate. In another week or two, it was dead and buried under the relentless blizzards;

and with that thought, a sudden respectful silence fell over the two of them, accompanying them as they moved hand in hand down their own little set of carved stone stairs.

II

Perri had that young face, for in a fashion, he was a youngster. Born on the Great Ship, he possessed an immortal's durability and memory, his body endowed with relentless good health. In ancient times, he would have looked like a man in his early twenties—adulthood just achieved, childhood still lurking in the face and manners. But time and age were different creatures today. The youngster was a few centuries more than forty thousand years old, and in that busy

long life, he had explored just a tiny fraction of the avenues and caverns, chambers and odd seas that lay inside the Great Ship. By contrast, Quee Lee preferred an older, more mature appearance. She moved like a woman who had forever to accomplish the smallest deed—a suitable façade, since she was considerably older than her husband. Born on the ancestral Earth, she still remembered that magical day when the first alien words and images were captured by telescopes. An explosion of learning and change was unleashed, her wealthy family becoming wealthier, and her own life extended beyond all calculable measure. Humanity expanded to the stars, but

without Quee Lee. She preferred home and its comfortable pleasures. Then an automated probe discovered the Great Ship—a world-sized derelict still on the fringes of the Milky Way, falling out of deepest space. Humans claimed the Ship as their own. They made it habitable and sent it on a looping cruise around the galaxy. For a muscular fee, anyone could book passage. For a fortune, a wealthy individual could travel in seamless luxury. From the time of the pharaohs, old women had been embarking on great voyages. Starships and river barges served the same function: Here was a chance for novelty and learning, and maybe a little adventure or two, which was all the reason a lovely and rather

naïve woman needed to abandon one comfortable life for another, beginning a lazy stroll around the Milky Way.

Husband and wife were perfectly at ease, walking up the wide lane, hands clasped and heads tipping toward one another whenever one of them spoke. Sometimes a finger would point, some little question asked and answered, or the question was repeated to a buried nexus, dislodging a nugget of information from some data ocean, another tiny piece of the Dawsheen existence explained to the curious tourists. The little lane was covered with hard sheets of living wood, turquoise and photosynthetic when the weather was warm, but now turning black and soggy in the cold. No

one else used the lane. Heaps and ridges of hard dirty snow stood to the sides, and behind the snow were vegetable masses, dome-shaped and crenulated where they pushed through the snow, their sides punctured with doorways leading into chambers of every size. What passed for leaves had died with the first hard freeze. The masses themselves were dying, choking under the snow while their roots froze with the soil. But the hollow chambers in their wooden hearts remained inhabited. Sheets were hung across the doorways, the heated air inside making them ripple, and the sloppy, half-melted ice on the thresholds was littered with the long, faintly human prints of busy feet.

In one sense, Dawsheen biology was perfectly simple. Diversity was low, ecosystems few and trimmed to a minimum of trophic levels. One species always held prominence based on intelligence and tools. For convenience's sake, the rest of the Ship referred to them as the Dawsheen. Tripeds with a single burly arm in front and two flanking arms tipped with delicate hands, in the high country they tended toward round-bodied and short. Their skin was the color of sun-bleached straw, and their hair turned from black to gold as they aged. They were normally vegetarian. The Dawsheen home world had small continents, and feeding a mature civilization meant eating low on the food

chain. But whenever the All collapsed into winter, meat became a cheap, holy indulgence. As the lovers strolled away from the edge of the cliff, the smell of burning fats and spiced vitals began to fill the air. With a hungry sigh, Perri mentioned, "There was a restaurant, last time. On that hilltop, overlooking the river."

"Last time," she countered.

That was nearly a hundred centuries ago. But with a tug on the arm, he reminded Quee Lee, "The Dawsheen don't like change."

Sure enough, another eating establishment was perched on the summit. But the hill was smaller than Perri remembered, the rock scraped

down by the last glaciation. And the view wasn't quite the spectacle that he had promised Quee Lee. For that, he apologized. Snow was falling again, fed by the drenched air and the gathering cold. They sat together in one of the communal booths, on the steeply tilted bench, gazing at a gray expanse of water and the swirling white of the snow, and except for the occasional slab of ice being carried toward the falls and its death, nothing seemed to change outside. But that was fine. There was the building itself to enjoy—a great home-tree hollowed out by worms, the flat floor and immovable furniture carved with a million relentless mouths. They could happily study the creatures sitting and

walking about. There were tourists of several species, plus Dawsheens too old and feeble to stand in the cold, waiting for their Queen. The indoor air felt warm and smoky. Most of the patrons stared at an interior wall sprinkled with live images from downstream. The Queen Herself was never quite shown; She was too important to be reduced to a mere digital stream. Instead, audiences were treated to the celebrations held in distant cities. Beneath the illusion of a warm blue sky, millions of Dawsheen stood in the open and sang, wishing their Queen luck and bravery on the trails awaiting Her, and in the trials awaiting their species.

What passed for a waiter approached

the two humans. Speaking through a translator, he called out,

“Adore the Queen!”

“Adore the Queen!” they replied, amiable words transformed into an amiable singsong. The alien face was narrow and stiff, the crest of hair turned a dull whitish gold. His breath smelled of broiled fish and exotic oils. Three pearl-colored eyes regarded them with no obvious emotion, but the translator made the voice sound angry. “She is a slow Queen,” their waiter exclaimed. “A late Queen, at this rate.”

Quee Lee glanced at her husband, waiting for advice.

With a shrug of shoulders, he told her to say nothing.

“If this weather worsens,” the alien continued, “we will all be dead and frozen before she can Gather us.” A few of the elderly patrons growled in agreement.

The tourists shifted their weight against the polished wood. They had no menus, and no fees were expected. Where was the value of money when the world was dying? An enormous fire pit was dug into the middle of the room and lined with rock. Perri was ready to point at one of the platters of blackened food. But Quee Lee was a problem. As a rule, she didn't appreciate heads on her dinner —

“You've still got time,” another voice called out. “The glacier isn't going to

beat your little Queen!" For an instant, Perri didn't notice what was different about the voice. Then he heard the singsong translation following in its wake, and curious now, he turned. Four humans were sitting in a distant booth. The largest man was glowering at their waiter. Two other men were cutting at the seared flesh, eating with a famished urgency. The final man stared out at the falling snow, saying nothing and apparently paying no attention to his companion's complaints.

The waiter turned toward them, lifting one leg while standing on the other two—the standard Dawsheen insult.

The talking man didn't seem to notice the gesture. "I want a fresh plate," he

called out. "And I want you to stop badmouthing your Queen."

The Dawsheen dropped his leg and faced Quee Lee, a tight little voice asking, "What would you like to eat, madam?"

"Nothing," she allowed.

"Ask me," the loud man called out. "I want something. Come here!"

"And you, sir?" the Dawsheen said to Perri. "I have a large pudding char that died of old age. For an adventurous set of stomachs, perhaps?"

Perri began to say, "Yes—"

"Hey!" the loud man shouted. "Before you're dead, old man. Why don't you pay a little attention to—" Crack.

The sound was abrupt and

astonishingly loud. No one was watching the loud man, and then everybody was. His face was beginning to bleed. His shattered nose hung limp on his face, too damaged to heal itself quickly. Two of his companions laughed quietly while they ate, enjoying his discomfort and embarrassment. The other man continued to stare out at the relentless snow, his face and posture unchanged, while his left hand slowly and carefully set an empty iron platter back on the worm-carved table where it belonged.

III

The Dawsheen home world was a cyclic snowball.

Many worlds were. Even the young Earth passed through its own snowball

phase. Watery bodies with a few small continents were most susceptible, particularly when their continents lay scattered along the equator. If its sun's energies flagged, or if the world's orbit shifted by the tiniest margin, the dark open waters at the poles would abruptly freeze over. Sea ice was a brilliant smooth white. Light and heat were suddenly hurled back into space, allowing the climate to cool further. The newborn icecaps then expanded, reaching into normally temperate regions. And with the world brightening again, it cooled again, and again, the ice spread, and over the poles, it began to thicken. Seven hundred million years ago, the Earth's climate collapsed. A

murderous cold reached to the equator. Glaciers born on the high peaks rumbled into once-tropical valleys. The ocean froze to a depth of nearly a full kilometer, and the water beneath was black and choked of oxygen. The cold was enormous, and enduring. Without evaporation, there were no clouds or fresh snows, and the glaciers began a slow retreat. Deserts of glacial till covered the barren land, frigid winds piling up towering dunes. But even in the most miserable cold, volcanoes kept rumbling and churning, spitting carbon dioxide into the sky. Without rainwater or plant life, the greenhouse gas built up to staggering levels. A tipping point was reached, and the seas began to melt, and

snows fell again, the glaciers growing even while the heat continued to soar.

In a matter of decades—in a geologic blink—the glaciers burned away, and the world moved from snowball to furnace.

On the Earth, climates eventually moderated. The continents gathered together and drifted away from the equator, while the aging Sun grew warmer. But with each snowball phase, earthly life was battered. Entire lines of multicellular species were pushed into extinction. The biosphere that eventually arose—the world of grass and men and jeweled beetles—owed its existence to those tiny few survivors that had clung to the deep-sea vents or swam in the hot springs on the shoulders of the great

volcanoes. But the Dawsheen world never moderated.

The largest moon of a massive gas giant, it was a blue body with tiny continents and tidal-churned tectonics. The climate continued swinging in and out of the snowball state with the precision of a pendulum clock. Predictability was a blessing. Predictability allowed the ancient Dawsheen to adapt to their suffering. Obeying the season, terrestrial plants threw spores on the wind, trusting that one in ten trillion would survive the cold drought. Animals climbed into the high mountains, building nests inside deep caves and stuffing them with thick-shelled eggs. The ocean's creatures

changed their metabolisms, borrowing the slow, tiny ways of anaerobic organisms, living sluggishly in the deep darkness while the ice creaked and roared above them.

Every winter was a savage winnowing.

And every thaw left the world stripped and lifeless, defenseless and full of promise. Surviving the winter wasn't enough. Success meant spreading quickly, producing children ready to adapt to a landscape transformed by glaciers and eruptions. Success meant being first to swim into the first dark thread of ocean seawater, and breeding first, and fending off every rival to your rapidly growing empire.

Cooperation brought the greatest successes.

The early queens were ensembles: Species hiding together in the largest, most secure redoubts, existing as totipotent spores and fertilized eggs along with a dowry of mummified bodies and dried shit—organic wealth brought to feed and fertilize what was, in simple terms, an ark that was waiting for the next All. That was a billion years ago.

Life on the Earth was a little more than a film, a gray tapestry woven of single-celled bacteria; while on Dawsheen, the Queen was gradually and inexorably becoming more interesting and more elaborate, evolving into an

absolutely beautiful woman.

IV

“Bride of the world, Bride of the All!”

They could scarcely hear their own translators. At this penultimate moment, the city's entire population was standing along the main lane, every Dawsheen chanting in an eerily smooth chorus, the melded voices loud enough to shake stone and passionate enough to make humans shiver and smile at one another. Quee Lee turned to her husband, winking in a certain way, remarking, “It's as if we've wandered into——”

“What?” Perri shouted. “What did we ——?”

“An orgy!” she hollered. “We've

stumbled across an orgy!" Then she reconsidered, saying, "No, no! It's a salmon run. Coho spawning! Isn't it a little that way, Perri—?" Their translators screamed:

"Accept our selves, our offerings, our souls!"

The crowd was a blur, a vivid living mass of the Dawsheen lining the parade route, plus another twenty or thirty, or perhaps forty animal species visible from that little knob of basalt. The bulky species stood alone, clambering little bodies dancing on their shoulders and backs. Limbs rose high. Every creature was full-grown, and many were elderly. Why make children when this world was about to end? Trembling bodies shoved

against their neighbors, forming two astonishingly straight lines. Nothing mattered but the Queen. Nothing else existed. The exhausted vanguard of Her entourage moved onto the wide lane. The intelligent Dawsheen led the procession, each wearing elaborate ceremonial robes and carrying relics from great, long-past Alls. Behind them, big work-grazers pulled wagons filled with a tiny sampling of Her wealth—sacks of blessed soil, and armored plates made from titanium and cultured diamond, and slabs of pasteurized fat sealed in plastic, and one long banner lit from within by electrified gases, showing the redoubt that had already been prepared for Her at the top of the

cavern, at the birthplace of the Long River.

“There ... I see Her...!” Quee Lee cried out.

The Queen was being lifted up the last long flight of stairs, rising over the cliff's lip at a slow pace that might have been majestic, but more likely signaled great fatigue. She was huge. Her body looked like an enormous caterpillar, turquoise and gold plates shining in the snowy light. What might be legs were wrapped securely around the trunk of a sky-holder tree. Handles and saddles had been fastened to the tree, and every possible species helped carry Her. Work-grazers and Dawsheen and bounce-maidens and three-cautions and whisper-winds; and

in the middle of the tree trunk, a pair of massive hill-shakers strode along, each with six pillar-like legs, each leg stepping with practiced care, setting the pace for the others.

A centuries-long climb was nearly finished.

But the achievement wasn't quite as astonishing as it seemed. The sky-holder tree was mostly hollow, saving weight. And the Queen's body was nearly as empty. The carapace was a tough, enduring contrivance—diamond fibers woven into a structure able to endure the angry weight of entire glaciers. The Queen's true self was astonishingly small. But as Perri liked to explain, “It makes sense, being small. A little body

is easier to move and protect. A little body can fall into hibernation faster, and then awaken first.” Over the recent centuries, on various occasions, he had reminded his wife, “Really, you don't need much space to hold a world's genetics. A sampling of every species ... a few million examples, each no larger than a single cell ... well, you could hold that treasure inside one trustworthy hand....” The thundering chants reached a higher, brighter pitch. It felt as if the cliff were shaking, ready to collapse. And then the enormous Queen was in view, and the mood changed, the crowd falling into a perfect, sudden silence.

Queen Lee sighed, and shivered.

Perri looked back across the city.

Thousands of spore-pods began to leap high, home-trees and vines and the living lanes throwing their genetics into the damp, snowy wind. And in the next instant, the pods detonated, filling the air with talc-like dust. Perri coughed, and Quee Lee sneezed. But the natives remained silent, focused on this ultimate moment. As the Queen passed, each Dawsheen stepped forward. The two lines pushed inward, bodies clambering on top of bodies. With the aliens came the rough equivalent of rats and scorpions, dogs and sparrows, and underfoot, furry worms and tiny bugs. With a quiet solemnity, every creature opened its clothes or parted its fur—in some way exposing itself—needle-like

penises and distended vaginas delivering their cargo with a minimum of fuss, and just enough bliss.

Queen Lee nudged Perri with her elbow. She gestured, and he followed her gaze. Half a dozen giant wind-masters were still trying to finish their long climb. Exhausted, ancient, and nearly starved, their movements were weak but precise, using a last little updraft somewhere in the cold, dense air. Perri began to say, "Too bad." They were majestic creatures. He had hoped they would see at least one of them glide in above the parade; that would make the spectacle complete. Not today, he thought.

Then a new motion grabbed his gaze.

Another wind-master was skimming along the edge of the cliff, just above the falls. It was black and elegantly slender, and large even at a distance. After a moment, it flapped the wings and twisted its body, and the body rose, rising up level with Perri. He nudged her with an elbow, and nodded.

Queen Lee whispered a few words.

"What—?"

"Stronger," she whispered. "Than the others."

It was. The enormous flyer was powerful enough to flap hard, gaining velocity as it continued to ascend. Suddenly it was above them, vanishing into the snow and spores. For an instant, Perri thought he could hear air moving

fast. Which was ridiculous. The deep rumbling of the waterfall wouldn't let him hear anything as subtle as wings ... and then, inside that same instant, he heard what seemed to be a new chant, unexpected and sloppy, and not half as loud as the Gathering had managed before.

“No, no, no!” their translators cried out.

And then with a bluntly descriptive voice, the machines shouted, “PANIC. THIS IS THE SOUND OF. PANIC.”

Again, there was a rush of air overhead.

Almost too late, Perri looked back at the Queen. A strange little fire had erupted along Her back, a haze of blue

plasmas brightening, lifting up like a flap of iridescent flesh. There was a clean sharp crack, and the Queen collapsed into three pieces. The carapace shattered and fell off its perch on the sky-holder tree, and out of the clouds came something narrow, black, and wingless. It dove hard and stopped instantly, absorbing that terrific momentum; and an instant later, mechanical hands delicately reached inside the Queen, retrieving a squirming gray body not much larger than a human being. Queen Lee moaned, calling out, "What is it—?"

The machine had lifted again, vanishing into the falling snows.

"What was that?" she asked, more puzzled than worried, more disappointed

than angry. Perri said nothing.

He was staring at the enormous panic—arms swaying in agony; voices cursing wildly; waves of tiny sparrow-like flyers struggling to chase after their stolen Queen—and then with an expression that looked a little amused, and thrilled, and focused, he turned to his wife and shook his head, telling her, “Stay with me. Stay close!”

V

The building only resembled its neighbors—a home-tree façade encompassing a set of rounded rooms that pretended to have been shaped by determined worms. But every surface was cultured diamond braced with threads of hyperfiber. The furnishings

had a slick, impervious feel promising durability as well as ease of cleaning. One of the back rooms, visible at the end of a remarkably straight hallway, was enclosed with hyperfiber bars—horizontal, not vertical—and inside that cage stood half a dozen curious Dawsheen, with a single harum scarum sitting behind them, threatening to crush anyone who came near her.

Many things in the universe were not universal, Perri reflected. But police stations very nearly were.

“I have no authority,” said the officer on duty.

Queen Lee halfway laughed, admitting, “And I'm not precisely sure why we're here.” The Dawsheen looked at Perri. “I

have no authority,” he repeated. “Do you claim special knowledge about a criminal incident?”

“Maybe,” Perri said.

The alien spoke, and three separate translators asked, “Which criminal incident?” with a flat, incurious sound.

“The kidnapping.”

The translators struggled to deliver that simple concept. A blur of barks and tweets ended with the station's translator taking charge of the interview. Its AI asked Perri directly, “Do you mean the Queen?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know Her whereabouts?”

“No.” Then he shook his head, deciding that wasn't quite true. “Or

maybe I do. Maybe."

"But you have some useful knowledge?"

"I think so. Yes."

The officer sat listening to the conversation between machine and man. One leg was thrown behind his tilted bench, while the others were locked in front. Every hand lay in a pile on the little desk set before him. He wore a greenish-black uniform of densely woven yarns. His face was covered with bristly golden hairs. Every eye was open, but there was no way to determine if he was even a little interested in what was being said.

Finally, he muttered a few syllables.

"My superiors are searching for Her,"

he offered. "I have no authority, but I will listen to whatever you say."

"I saw some men," Perri began. "Human men. My wife and I noticed them before the Gathering." Quee Lee glanced at him, sensing some little portion of his reasoning.

"I recognized one of those men," Perri claimed.

"What did you know?" the officer inquired.

"He's a smuggler, on occasion."

Quee Lee was not particularly surprised, nor disappointed. She knew her husband well enough to leave this matter until later. For now, it was enough to make a dismissive cluck with her tongue, smiling and staring back at

the jail cell.

“You recognized this smuggler?”

“I think so,” said Perri. “Yes.”

“His appearance was familiar to you?”

“No.”

“No?”

“His face had been modified. Disguised. Smugglers have a thousand methods—”

“But you recognized his voice,” the officer pressed.

“No. It's a new voice, and that also means nothing. Every time that I've seen him, he sounds different.”

Perri cut the air with one hand—a Dawsheen gesture promising that he was telling the truth. “I've known this man for

thousands of years. I know his manners, his methods. I know how he moves his hands, and his tongue. Lately, he's been working with a pair of brothers. The fourth man in their party was a stranger, and he seemed to be in charge."

Like any cop, the Dawsheen had to ask, "How is it, sir, that you are familiar with a notorious smuggler?"

"I know just about everybody," Perri replied without hesitation. Quee Lee flinched. It took all of her willpower to say nothing.

"I have no authority," the Dawsheen said once more. "My superiors are searching upriver. The Queen will be recovered soon. Soon." An unreadable expression passed across the narrow,

bristly face. "In a matter of moments," he promised. "But you can be sure, I have already relayed your words to every one of my superiors."

"How can you be sure?" Quee Lee blurted. "That you'll find her, I mean."

"Every escape route is closed," Perri offered. Turning to his wife, he explained, "Up and down the Long River, every tunnel and little doorway has been closed. And sealed. No one can get inside this cavern, much less escape." Then he looked at the officer, asking, "Is that why you're confident?" The Dawsheen replied and the translator snapped, "Yes."

"Loon Fairbanks," Perri offered. "That's the smuggler's name. And

believe me, he anticipated everything. He knows all about your security systems. Your psychology. The weather, and every other factor. Loon will have a good, solid plan. That plan's unfolding now. If those men and your Queen are still inside the cavern, it won't be for long. And if he can get Her out, what chance do you have to find Her inside the Great Ship?"

The officer fell silent, his white eyes dulling slightly.

"I can help you," Perri said. "I want to help you. I don't particularly like that man, and I wish to be of service to your Queen."

The alien stood abruptly.

"I have the authority," he shouted with

an astonishing energy. A cabinet jumped open, a hyperfiber vest and two weapons flying across the room. He put on the vest and pocketed the weapons, and then one of his little hands touched a control, causing the cage in the back room to open. The horizontal bars fell into a neat triangular pile at the feet of the prisoners. In a near-scream, he told the Dawsheen, "You have been freed. Go home and wait for the glacier."

The harum scarum rose to her feet, towering above the rest. From her speaking mouth, she snarled,

"What about me?"

"I do not like you. You have earned my scorn and my distrust, and if you can live with that burden, you also are

welcome to leave."

VI

Slowly, slowly, the Dawsheen biosphere grew more sophisticated, intricate, and robust. The brutal winters both delayed and inspired the wheel of evolution. There were never many species, but each was highly adaptable. Native genetics were intricate and miserly. No gene, useful or otherwise, was thrown away. Who could guess when or how one of these developmental oddities might become precious?

In little steps, intelligence arose. Simple civilizations flickered into existence—in the scattered valleys, typically—and each was summarily crushed under the next river of ice. Yet

there are advantages in the occasional Death. Wipe your world clean and begin again; what society wouldn't relish that chance now and again? The young Dawsheen began to educate their Queens, leaving them with instructions. Each All began with hints and advice, and clear warnings left behind by the wise departed. Each All blossomed with the help of thousands of past Alls. Every new city was superior to its forebearers. Every new society was quicker to grow and more likely to remain at peace. Gradually, the Dawsheen acquired industry and high technology. Like humanity, they cobbled together enormous telescopes—radio ears listening to alien gossip. With that burst

of knowledge, they built starships and found empty worlds. But where most spacefarers embraced some flavor of immortality, the Dawsheen resisted. Their winters and the cleansing glaciers were too important, too deeply embedded in their bones. They bolstered their lifespans, but only to a few thousand years. And when they learned to control their climate, they made their winters as brief as possible. But they wouldn't surrender their most powerful myth: The Dawsheen regarded themselves as creatures of endless change, born from a world of relentless reinvention. The occasional Death was a blessing, and each new All was fresh and full of potentials. In their lustrous

white eyes, most alien species seemed humdrum, and stodgy. And pleasantly, even deliciously, contemptible, too. VII

Perri sat in the back of the little ship studying his own holo-map.

“You may examine our map,” the Dawsheen remarked. He was sitting at the ship's controls, carefully touching nothing. The AI pilot was keeping them close to the river's face, ice piled on ice, tiny leads betraying the cold black water beneath. “My map is accurate to the millimeter, and updated by the instant.”

“Thank you,” Perri replied, his voice distracted. “But no, thank you.” Queen Lee glanced over her shoulder. She was sitting beside the Dawsheen, her robe pulled snug across her squared

shoulders. Suspicious and a little amused, she watched her husband as he stared into that maze of colored lines and pale spaces. "My husband is very proud of his map," she mentioned. "He loves it more than he loves me, I think. There are entire months when I can't pry his nose away from it." Perri acted oblivious, enthralled with his own narrow business. The tiny projector in one hand threw up a comprehensive view of the Long River, and with his free hand, he poked and prodded. For no obvious reason, certain points needed to be enlarged and studied in detail. He let his instincts steer him. Quietly, he explained, "You have an enormous area to search. The river starts under the

ship's hull—here—and twists and turns its way back and forth, down down down, into your little sea. The drop is nearly three thousand kilometers. Except near its source, it's a lazy river. A couple meters down for every kilometer crossed. The river is nearly one and a half million kilometers long. The longest river in the galaxy, no doubt. And since the cavern has an average width of twelve kilometers, your living area is about equal to the lands on your home world...."

"It is a satisfying relationship," the officer interjected.

Passage on the Great Ship was expensive, even for a single entity. To lease an enormous habitat required

frightful sums. The Dawsheen had surrendered titles to half a hundred worlds—difficult planets with climates too stable or seas too tiny to feed deep ice ages; perfect for an inventive ape that could terraform, then colonize, making homes for billions of prosperous souls.

“This is a maze,” Perri cautioned. “A huge and intricate, beautiful maze. And I don't think you can search it. Not in the time left, no.”

For the umpteenth time, the officer remarked, “We have sealed every exit. There is no way to escape.”

“You're searching upriver,” Perri continued. “But they could have taken the Queen downstream.”

“No,” the Dawsheen replied. “We tracked them coming this way.” Perri said, “I bet so.”

He touched an approaching sector, asking for an enlargement. A thousand square miles of ice and raw stone appeared before him. And again, he fingered portions of the map, gazing into the wasteland's corners.

Queen Lee smiled gently.

“It just occurred to me,” she said. “I don't know your name.” The Dawsheen uttered something quick and soft. His translator said, “Lastborn Teek.” With genuine sadness, she repeated, “Lastborn.”

“A common name,” the Dawsheen explained. “As Firstborn is common at

the beginning of an All." The river was entirely frozen. And the weather continued to worsen, snow falling in thick white waves, hurricane winds trying to push them out of the sky. The worst gusts made the ship tremble. But shape-shifting wings and powerful engines kept them on course. Lastborn studied his controls and listened to reports from distant search parties, empty hands closing and opening again with a palpable nervousness.

Quee Lee looked over her shoulder.

"Darling?"

Perri didn't react.

She said, "Darling" again, with a certain weight.

He noticed. A soft sigh proved it, and

his eyes blinked, his poking hand held steady for a moment.

“What are you thinking, darling?”

He wasn't sure. Until the question had been asked, his thoughts were utterly invisible to him.

“Our friend deserves to know.” She reached back. Her hand was small and warm, soft in every way, little fingers wrapped around his elegant young hand as she pulled gently, insistently, saying again,

“Lastborn deserves to know.”

“The flyer is up in the glacier,” Perri guessed. “It's going to be buried, but not that deep. Camouflaged, but not that well.”

Lastborn said nothing.

“And there's going to be at least three trails worth following. Heat trails, boot prints. Signs of another flyer, probably. That's how it will look.”

Alien fingers tightened into knots.

“Have there been any ransom demands?”

With a touch, the Dawsheen took the controls away from the AI pilot. In a near-whisper, he spoke for a long moment. Then his translator admitted, “The flyer was discovered a little while ago. It was left empty, hiding in a rock crevice. Not in the ice.”

Queen Lee smiled with a nervous little pride.

“The flyer was empty almost from the beginning,” Perri explained. “If I was

stealing Her ... I think I would have slipped the Queen into a second ship. A better ship. Then I'd double back. Somewhere below the city—"

"Where?" Lastborn asked.

Then in the next instant, he reminded Perri, "Every passageway out of our world is closed, and secured, and—"

"Here," Perri interrupted.

In an instant, he pulled his view back a hundred kilometers, passing over the city and dropping with the enormous falls. "A lot of things in this universe are difficult," he explained, enlarging the map again. Beside and beneath the Dawsheen cavern were more caverns and tunnels, plus innumerable fissures too tiny to wear any name. "But cutting a

new door isn't difficult," he muttered. "In fact, with the right tools, it's about the easiest job that there is."

VIII

Ten thousand years ago, Perri came home from a long wandering. His wife greeted him in every usual way. She made love to him, and he returned the pleasure. She fed him and let him sleep, then woke him with fond hands, using his body until both of them were spent, breathless, and dehydrated. Then they staggered into Quee Lee's garden—a many-hectare room filled with jungle and damp hot air—and naked, they kneeled and drank their fill from a quick

clear stream. Where the stream pooled, they swam and bathed, tired legs barely able to carry them back onto shore. With a voice frank and earthy, Quee Lee spoke to her husband. She explained how much she had missed him. She had craved his voice and stories and his pretty mouth against her mouth, and in her dreams, she had played cruel, sordid games with his cock and fat balls. She never spoke to anyone else with those words. No other lover, not even to pretend. Perri had been gone longer than usual—several years, and without a word. “Where were you?” she finally asked. “Where did you take that lovely little dick of yours?”

Perri laughed, gently and happily.

Then with a matching voice, he described his adventures. With some like-minded idiots, he had explored one of the Great Ship's engines—a moon-sized conglomeration of machines with pumps as big as cities and sentries lurking at every turn. That consumed most of his time. Then he went gambling, playing twenty-deck poker with a platoon of humans and harum scarums and Blue Passions and AI souls. In less than sixteen days and nights, Perri managed to surrender most of the allowance given him by his very generous wife. He had let himself look embarrassed and a little desperate, smiling painfully at the better gamblers, asking for one more chance. “One more

hand? With a fresh twenty-decks, maybe?" He charmed and begged, and of course when the cards were dealt, every suspicious eye was fixed on Perri. But his awful luck held. He had nothing. A Blue Passion at the far end of the table gathered up the enormous pot with her suckered fingers; and three days later, in an entirely different corner of the Ship, the same alien surrendered Perri's share of the profits, along with her weepy thanks.

"She was in awful trouble," Perri explained. "She absolutely needed that money."

"You're so noble," Quee Lee teased. "A woman in need—"

"Anyway," he interrupted. With his

earnings, he bought a used slash-car, and in the depths of the Ship, in a looping tunnel used only for racing, he had raced. And won. And won again. He described driving the car, hands wrapped around an imaginary wheel, the stone and hyperfiber walls blurring around him. Then just as Quee Lee was about to ask to see his new toy, Perri admitted, "I crashed it. Mangled it, and myself. I was clinically dead for a full week. It took most of my winnings to rebuild my body. The autodocs asked if I wanted improvements, but I honestly couldn't think of one. Being perfect, as I am." Both laughed.

And then, with a very slight change of tone, Perri said, "The Long River." He

rolled onto his back, asking, "Do you know much about it?"

She said, "I've heard it mentioned. Yes."

"And the Dawsheen?"

She knew about them, but not much.

Perri explained the snowball world and its enduring biosphere. Quietly, slowly, he described the city perched beside the eleven-kilometer falls, and its inhabitants, and the amazing parade. A Queen had been carried past. An entire world gave Her its seed. And after the Queen was gone, safely entombed in a redoubt high above the blue ice, Perri had waited, watching the river freeze solid while the enormous snows fell, thousands of Dawsheen buried in their

homes, happily falling into the eternal sleep—their bones and souls crushed beneath the newborn glacier.

It was a sad, spectacular thing to witness.

The voice that began soft and happy turned softer and awed. Perri was lying naked on the bank of the stream, on his back, staring at the illusion of stars floating inside the room's high ceiling. With her frank, practiced hands, his wife measured his mood, and when nothing happened, she admitted defeat. She curled up beside him, and tenderly asked, "What happens to the Queen?"

"She waits," he promised. "Safe and high, she waits. Everything below her is frozen now, glaciers stretching down to

the sea. But in another century or so, spring comes. The heat soars, and the ice melts, and inside that tough shell of hers, she rides the flood down to the sea."

"And then?" she whispered.

"The Queen is a repository," Perri reminded her. "She's a living, sentient ark. But she only holds the land-dwelling species. Fishes and sea creatures ... they rely on a second ark ... a different sort of body that's waiting under the sea ice...."

"A second Queen?"

"Yes," he said. Then in his next breath, "No. It's not a Queen. It's something else entirely—"

"Her King?"

He said, "No." And then with a

second thought, he allowed, "Maybe. In a certain fashion, I suppose so." Queen Lee slid her hand across his newborn chest and belly. In countless ways, she was grateful that Perri had survived. There were moments when she wanted to beg him to remain home, giving her the same devotion that he willingly gave to his adventures. But that would never happen. Outside of a daydream, there was no way for that to happen. Rubbing the bare chest, she took a deep breath, and finally, with a quiet firm and determined voice, she surprised both of them.

"Take me," she said.

She said, "The next time winter comes. Show me."

Here was a fresh twist on a very old conversation. Perri tried to smile, reminding her, "You don't normally enjoy my adventures."

"I want to meet the Dawsheen," she persisted. "I want to see their Queen."

"Maybe someone should take you," he allowed.

"Maybe I should go myself."

"It's going to be cold and uncomfortable," he promised. "Watching a world die ... it's going to be grueling. Do you think you're strong enough to endure that sort of fun?"

"And you think you're strong?" she countered.

Then with her smallest finger, she touched the corner of a newborn eye,

gathering up the glistening remains of a tear.

IX

The world was white, and damned. The snow fell in waves, burying the dead lanes and high roofs, wiping away every last trace of the city. Huddled inside their homes—inside their graves—its citizens could do nothing but wait for any good news, nursing little hopes amid wild despair. Only the river held the thinnest promise of life. Flat slabs of ice moved in a great parade, immune to fear or caution, holding their pace until their prows pushed out into the air, and dipped, each slab falling with smooth inevitability, dropping over the brink of the falls, still floating on the face of the

water as it plunged into a cold, fierce maelstrom. Lastborn took them over the brink, and down.

Eleven kilometers of air and spray and thunder lay below them. Behind the water stood the basalt cliff. Sensors began working, hunting for things that were surely trying to hide—a few bodies and probably some machinery, plus every trick of camouflage that a smuggler could drag along. The sensors found plenty, none of it remarkable. Each vertical kilometer was examined in detail, and then the Dawsheen took them back toward the sky, flying along the waterfall's lip, peppering the current with tiny probes better suited for other, easier jobs.

Perri ignored the search, or pretended to ignore it.

“No one is here,” Lastborn declared.

Perri was squinting into his elaborate map, studying an empty maze of tunnels situated on the far side of the cliff.

Again, the Dawsheen said, “There is no one.” Then with an improving sense of things, he turned to Quee Lee, confessing, “My tools and patience are exhausted. I will leave you inside the jail, where you will be safe—”

“No.”

Both of them said that word. Quee Lee spoke with a begging tone, while Perri nearly shouted. Then again, he said, “No.” The map dissolved and he pocketed his tiny projector. “Leave us at

the base of the falls,” he told Lastborn. “I’ve got one good place to look.”

“There is, I promise, no one.” But the alien relented, dashing over the little knoll where the couple had watched the Gathering, then dropping fast. Where the cliff was exposed, it formed a massive black wall decorated with that single zigzagging white line. The line was the staircase covered with snow. Now and again, little shapes came into view, crawling their way up through the snow. Half a dozen secondary parades were attempting the long, hard climb. These were the Queen’s little sisters. Evolution and pragmatism demanded their existence. What if disaster struck? But no Queen had been lost during the last

ten thousand Alls. They were symbols only—emergency repositories of genetic matter accompanied by smaller entourages, each encasing only a fraction of the genetic wealth held by their big sister. The base of the cliff was bare rock, the freezing mist reducing visibilities to a soggy arm's length.

“Where?” Quee Lee asked.

Perri looked at her for an instant.

“Maybe you should—”

She leaped first, and again, with a half-scream, she asked, “Where?”

“We'll work our way along the base,” he allowed. “Move closer to the falls.” The rocks were treacherous, slick and jumbled. Sensing the terrain, their boots sprouted crampons. Their robes shed the

freezing water, channeling it off to their downstream side. Too late, Quee Lee turned to say, "Thank you," to Lastborn. But he had already lifted off. Then to her husband, with a modest concern, she asked, "Won't the water crush us? Or the falling ice?"

"Probably," he said, stepping into the lead. "But most of the ice is slush before it reaches the bottom, and the river's down to a trickle. Compared to what it was."

"You pray," she said.

He laughed grimly, saying, "Help me pray. That just about doubles its effectiveness." They marched. Rock litter and massive boulders quickly vanished beneath a frosting of new ice.

In a sense, it was an easy walk. The cliff was always to their left, always close. A foot might plant wrong, but the boot invented some way to faultlessly hold the balance. Sometimes Perri moved ahead too quickly, and vanished. But later, as Quee Lee grew accustomed to the pace, she began to catch him, a gloved hand set firmly against his back, reminding him of her presence and urging him to hurry. At some ill-defined moment, they moved behind the great falls. Half a kilometer later, they were utterly blind. Their robes were pushing against their functional limits. The falling sleet sounded like an avalanche of gravel. Quee Lee refused to quit, but she was regretting her stubbornness.

Never again, never, would she let herself ignore her rational instincts, following after Perri in one of his little miseries....

Perri stopped in the wet blackness. Crouching, he activated his holo-map. But instead of checking their position, he ordered up one of the Ship's main reactors. Then he magnified that portion of the map, peering inside the reaction chamber. The light was sudden, brilliant and pure. This was a traveler's trick: Dial to a bright place, and let the map illuminate your surroundings. The image couldn't be brighter. Draining the projector of its charge, it threw a white glow against the base of the cliff. They could see a cavern, or maybe some

overhanging spur of rock. A glimmering light came back at them. Perri stood and walked toward the glimmer. It brightened gradually, and lifted, and after a long while, Quee Lee looked up to see motion overhead. She was watching two figures apparently walking on their heads.

The ceiling was hyperfiber.

The bones of the Great Ship lay exposed. Tumbling waters must have chiseled away the basalt, revealing the supporting strata. She looked at herself—a sloppy, pale version of herself—and then she looked ahead again, hurrying after Perri, the air drying and the roar of the sleet falling into an angry rumble. She didn't see the kidnappers.

Perri slowed and dimmed his map, and he kneeled, saying nothing. With a hand in the air, he asked her to drop beside him. Then he extinguished the map, letting a second light burst into view. In the distance, the cave ended with a wall of low-grade hyperfiber. Three men stood before it, manipulating a plasma drill, using slow measured bursts to peel away the barrier in millimeter bites. Work fast, and someone might notice the energy discharges. Work too slow, and someone might stumble into their hiding place. The men seemed perfectly attuned to their task, urgency and patience joined together. Burn, clean the new surface, and wait. Burn, clean, wait. Burn, clean,

wait. The rhythm was steady and relentless, and very nearly silent. The only voice belonged to the man who had yelled at the Dawsheen waiter. “Now,” he would say every minute. And the other two men would step behind opaque shields, letting the drill spit out another carefully crafted pulse.

“How did they get here—?” Quee Lee began to ask.

“We just walked past their ship,” Perri interrupted, expecting the question. “It looks like a boulder. Because it is. A big hollowed out rock, reequipped and very sneaky.” She nodded, and squinted.

The drill pulsed, but she couldn't see what she wanted to see.

“The Queen—?” she began.

“I don't know,” he admitted.

A minute later, the man called out, “Now.”

And again, the drill pulsed. This time, Quee Lee happened to glance to her right, spotting two figures. The human was sitting on a flat slab of gray-black stone. The Queen was sitting, too. Was it Her? They weren't that far away. In the gloom, she resembled any Dawsheen. But there was a smoothness to her features, a plainness, like a hurried sketch of something infinitely more complicated. She was wearing a plain cloak, nothing about her distinctive. There was no hair or plumage, no flourishes. She was sitting across from her kidnapper. Again, the drill pulsed,

and the hyperfiber continued to glow. With a voice that wasn't right for a Dawsheen, the Queen said a few words. The man was wearing an odd wide smile, and he said a few words of his own, his voice sounding like the bleating of a child's toy. Quee Lee tried to make sense of the scene.

And then she felt something, or heard something. For no conscious reason, she looked back over her shoulder, turning in time to see a boot perched on an adjacent rock, and the trousers tucked into the boot, the trousers lifting into a rounded body that was wearing the dark, thoroughly drenched uniform of a Dawsheen police office.

She put her elbow into Perri's side.

He started to turn.

Lastborn aimed his weapon with a practiced touch, but his nervousness fought against an easy shot. It took another moment for him to feel sure enough to fire. The gun drained itself in one full blast, and the world turned white, the screaming ball of plasmas rolling toward its target, a set of transparent diamond shields absorbing the blast, keeping the Queen from being incinerated. Perri said, “Shit,” and stood.

Lastborn unholstered his second weapon, and with that same nervous earnestness, aimed at the Queen. Her shields had evaporated. She tried to run, and the human threw himself between

Her and the attacker—a fearless, useless gesture—and Perri managed to throw a loose rock overhand, catching Lastborn on the back of his head.

The second blast hit the ceiling and faded.

In reflex, Quee Lee ran, sprinting at Lastborn.

The alien was working with his first gun, trying to find enough residual power for a second shot.

“Why?” she screamed. “Why?”

She grabbed the lead foot, and yanked, accomplishing nothing.

“Why—?”

And then what felt like a great hand descended on them, and there was nothing else to see. X

Every morning, She would walk with her instructors, and listen. The beach was sand made by the glaciers and living wind-reefs built from the sand. The Sea was blue and warm and just a little salty. When her instructors spoke, the tropical blue air filled with words about duty and history and honor and the great noble future. The duty was Her own, demanding and essential; while the honor was entirely theirs. Who wouldn't wish to nourish and educate the newborn Queen? Together, they shared a history reaching back into a mist of conjecture and dream; while the future lay before Her, as real as anything can be that has not yet been born.

She was an empty vessel walking

beside the warm blue water—a large vessel filled with countless empty spaces, each space begging to be jammed full of important treasure. Her powers were obvious. Every animal fell silent and still as she passed, staring at her simple body with the purest longing. Every bush and fruited blade threw out its spores, hoping to find Her blessing. Even the tiniest microbe struggled to reach her, crawling wildly across a dampened grain of quartz while one of Her vast and noble feet rested on the sand.

The Queen's little sisters didn't elicit such dramatic responses. One day, She looked back at them and at their own little entourages, and with a simple

curiosity, She asked, "What will happen to them? What is their future?"

Her first instructor was an elderly Dawsheen woman. She answered with a dismissive tone, as if to say,

"What happens to them does not matter." But then, sensing the Queen wasn't satisfied, she explained,

"They will follow you, always. And hibernate in their own safe havens. And your children will eat their sleeping bodies. Except for the one or two of them who will be sent away—"

"Sent where?"

"Another world, perhaps." The face was full of indifference. The little sisters couldn't be less important to this old woman. "We roam the galaxy for a

purpose,” she reminded her student, gesturing to the illusion of a blue sky. “At this moment, my people are searching for suitably empty worlds.” Even at that early age, the Queen had the good sense to say nothing else. Then there was a different walk, on an entirely different day. She sensed eyes staring and a silence. But the stare didn't come from the trees or soil this time. She looked out at the little waves, and what resembled a mossy stone bobbed in the surf, a pair of enormous black eyes watching nothing but Her. She had never seen one of the Others.

For the briefest instant, with a mixture of curiosity and desire, She returned the gaze. And then her instructor covered

Her eyes with every hand, and a tight sudden voice warned her, "It should watch your sisters, not you.

"That one is not yours," the old woman cautioned.

"Your Magnificence ... your Other has already been chosen ... infinitely suited for You and Your glorious duty ... please, please, turn your eyes away ... that Other is sick, and peculiar, and you do not want to know anything more about it...!"

XI

Perri woke slowly. "There's a general alert," someone said. Then after a pause, the same voice said,

"Shit."

He pried his eyes open. And breathed.

His pain told him that he still had hands and feet, and an intact body. His skin was warm and bare. His arms and legs were lashed down. Someone sat beside him, similarly restrained. Quee Lee. Was she awake? Maybe. He wasn't certain. Then he looked at two figures sitting on the floor opposite him—a human hand lay hidden inside the Queen's Dawsheen-like hands, and what was meant to look like a human face betrayed a mixture of bliss and simple horror. Suddenly, finally, Perri understood.

Again, the voice said, “Shit.”

The male creature sitting before him spoke in a whisper, and a translator buried in his false throat asked,

“What is wrong now?”

The smugglers sat in the front of the little cap-car, each eavesdropping on a different sliver of the security net. Loon's voice said, “Shit,” a third time. And then he turned and grimaced, claiming, “We'll slip past anyway. I've got emergency routes waiting. I've beaten these general alarms plenty of times.” Quee Lee stirred.

Quietly, she called to her husband.

Perri nestled against her. “You're all right now.”

“And you?”

He didn't answer. With a rapt intensity, he stared at the Queen, and after a moment, he asked Her,

“Why?”

The man-figure looked at him now.

"Why?"

Neither entity answered that deceptively simple question.

Then Loon threw up his arms, saying, "This shouldn't have happened. If you'd let me kill that Dawsheen—"

The Queen bleated, and her translator said, "No."

"No killing," said her companion. "I explained—"

"An old, doomed Dawsheen. Good as dead already." Loon shook his head, frustrated and enraged, and helpless. "But of course we had to leave him. We had to give him the chance to get off a warning." Again, Perri asked, "Why?"

Queen Lee was naked. Her robe, like

Perri's, had been taken away, along with every link to their buried nexuses. But they were unhurt. Loon was a smuggler. In the right circumstance, he might kill an alien, but murdering another human being was an entirely different crime.

"I don't understand," Perri confessed. "Explain this to me. Why?" Quee Lee said, "Love."

Dipping her head, she said, "Don't you see? The two of them ... in some sense ... they're in love with each other...!"

Perri shook his head, a thin laugh breaking out. "Except that's not what I'm asking them." Now both aliens stared at him. Wary, but curious.

"I know what you want," Perri

claimed. “You want each other. You're hoping to escape, to get onboard one of the little starship taxis heading somewhere else ... another world, and freedom ... and that's why you've gone to all this work and risk—”

“Yes,” the Queen rumbled.

“And that's why they want you to die,” said Perri. “You're a traitor, in their eyes. A danger. An abomination!”

“Shut up,” Loon told him.

“But you're not dangerous,” Perri continued, “and you're not any kind of abomination. Believe me, I understand. All you want is to be together. You want only what Queens and Others have wanted from the beginning of time. An empty world, a fresh beginning, and the

chance to realize your own future...." Loon started to say "Shut up" again.

But the human figure lifted a hand, in warning. And with a smooth male voice, it said, "We have a beautiful, beautiful world to build."

"I can believe that," Perri replied instantly, without any doubt. The Queen spoke, the musical voice diluted into the inadequate words, "A new world unlike any. A lovely, elegant All!"

An alarm sounded, loud and urgent.

Loon cursed and abruptly changed course.

Queen Lee leaned forward, her lovely face smiling at them. "It must be very important to you, to sacrifice so much. It's the only thing that matters in your

lives, I would think." The Queen said, "Yes."

Despite the simple translation, Her voice held a longing and a sad desperation and the faint, dying hope that something worthy would come out of all this crazy wanting. Again, Perri said, "I still want to know why."

They stared at him, puzzled.

"Why did you ever hire Loon Fairbanks? Why did you think he was going to be your salvation?" No answer came.

Then Loon rose to his feet, telling everybody, "Will you just shut the hell up now!"

"That man smuggles objects, and he's not even the best at that." Perri shook his

head with a growling disappointment. "You needed the finest. You deserved nothing less!" Quietly, the Other asked, "Who is the finest?"

"Me. I am."

Silence.

"What you should do," Perri advised, "is fire Loon. Dismiss him, and do it now. This minute. Then I'll hire him and his crew as my subcontractors, and I'll try to get you what you desire, and deserve." The Queen spoke, no translation offered.

With the tone of a sorry confession, her partner/mate admitted, "But we have no more money to give."

"Goodness, that's no obstacle," Quee Lee blurted. Then she grinned and patted

her husband on the bare knee, exclaiming, "Believe me. This darling man works for surprisingly little!" XII

Her neighbors let her live alone for the next few years, enduring her shame. Her embarrassment. Her shocking notoriety. And then in a gradual but relentless process, they began to invent ways to cross paths with Quee Lee. She might be shopping in a market or walking in one of the local parks, and one of her human acquaintances from a nearby apartment would appear without warning, wearing a benign smile, muttering, "Hello," before mentioning in the same breath, "We haven't seen nearly enough of you lately."

Even alone, they always spoke for the

“We.” That tiny word implied that each person stood among many, many like-minded souls. “We’ve worried about you,” they might say. Or, “We miss you, Quee Lee. Come visit us, when you have the strength.”

Strength wasn't a limiting issue. She couldn't remember when she had last felt this strong. And their worry was genuine, but only to a point. No, Quee Lee kept to herself for other fine reasons. She let her old friends speak among themselves, and gossip, and out-and-out spy. Only when it felt right did she begin walking the neighborhood again, visiting one or two of the wealthy souls who lived along her particular avenue. About her troubles, no one said

a word. About her adventures ... well, nobody could stop thinking about what had happened. She saw it in their staring faces. The wondering. The outrage. The almost comical fear that blossomed whenever they remembered that their dear friend had been involved in things illegal, violent, and strange.

About Quee Lee's husband, nobody asked. Fifty years had to pass before a woman-friend felt bold enough to say the name, "Perri," while looking at the ancient woman with a mixture of concern and simple nosiness.

"What about my husband?" Quee Lee asked.

"How is he?" the woman inquired. Then fearing that she had overstepped

her bounds, she added, "Is he comfortable, where he is?"

What could she say? The truth?

Never that, no.

Instead, Quee Lee shrugged and remarked, "He's comfortable enough. And he looks reasonably contented."

"How often do you see him?"

"Every three weeks, for twenty-one minutes per visit," Quee Lee reported. "Those are the terms of his sentence. One visitor every twenty-one days, and the rest of his time is spent among the general population."

"You poor soul," the friend moaned. "We're all so sorry for you."

"Don't be," was Quee Lee's advice. "Really, it's not that awful. It's not even

that unpleasant, considering." The wicked truth was that Perri adored prison. He found himself surrounded by strange aliens and dangerous people, and the Ship's enormous brig was an entirely new wilderness open for his explorations. During Quee Lee's visits, he spoke in whispers, hinting at great new stories that would have to wait for another century to be told. In principle, they were supposed to be alone in the visitation chamber, but you could never feel sure about your solitude. The chamber was a hyperfiber balloon. A molecule-thick screen stood between them. Permeable to light and sound, but to nothing physical, the screen allowed them to undress and perform for each

other, and sometimes that was what they did. Sometimes Quee Lee didn't care who might be watching them. And with an honest longing, she always told her husband, "I miss you. I want you. Make the years hurry up, would you?"

"I will," he always replied, his perpetual laugh quiet and sweet. Perri's sentence was one hundred and one years. An excellent attorney and a surprisingly law-abiding record had helped reduce his punishment. What hadn't helped was his stubborn refusal to implicate any other player or players in that very peculiar crime.

For more than sixty years, none of the neighbors dared mention the crime. It was another good friend who finally

brought it up. He was sitting with Quee Lee, sitting in her little jungle and helping her drink some of her more exotic liquors, and when the drugs and silence got too much, he blurted out the words, "What in hell were you thinking?" She knew what he meant. But to be stubborn, she asked, "When?"

"Because you had to know all about it," he argued. "You went off with Perri, on that little vacation of yours, and ship security claims that you were with him and those two Dawsheen—"

"They weren't Dawsheen," she interrupted. "They were sentient genetic repositories."

"According to the Dawsheen, they were criminals." Sixty years of waiting

was erased. The man was too drunk and self-consumed to let this issue pass for another moment. "I saw those security digitals, Quee Lee. Everybody has."

"That isn't legal," she rumbled. "Those are confidential."

"It's a little crime," he countered. "Call the Master Captain, if you want." She fell silent.

Again, he said, "I saw the digitals. From twenty angles, I watched your husband and that Dawsheen criminal. Sorry, I mean that sentient genetic repository criminal. Dressed up to look human, and walking with Perri and that storage trunk with the Queen stuffed inside—"

"I know what happened," she

mentioned.

“Your husband was trying to slip them onboard that star-taxi. He had them past security ... I don't know how ... and he waved good-bye, and turned away ... and then someone noticed something wrong, I guess....”

Queen Lee said nothing.

“That alien with the plasma gun. Now that was a real Dawsheen, am I right?”

“He was one of their police officers. His name was Lastborn—”

“The trunk was floating next to that human-looking repository, and then it was gone. Destroyed. The Queen was dead.”

“I know.”

“It was a public place, for goodness

sake. Some innocent could have been hurt, or killed." She held her tongue.

"Then the repository screamed and exposed its own weapon, and dropped to its knees, and...." His voice failed him. The memory of that human face—the agony, and the devastation—still bothered him after all these years. "He shot himself. I mean, it shot itself."

"I know."

"With a thousand innocent travelers running everywhere, screaming in absolute terror."

"I saw it myself," she confessed. "I know."

Eyes widened. "So you really were there?"

She didn't answer him.

“In disguise, were you?”

With a little finger, she wiped at her eyes.

“We've heard that your husband refused to implicate anyone else. He was protecting your good name, I suppose.”

“Maybe.”

“Protecting his sweet money tit,” the man barked.

A cold moment passed. And then with a black, hard voice, Quee Lee said to her long-time friend,

“Really, it would be best if you left. Now. And if you can, I think you should run. Because in another moment, or two, I'm going to find a knife, and I'm going to cut out your ugly heart.”

XIII

A century and a year had passed.

Perri strolled out of the Ship's main brig, and before anything else, hugged his wife; and then together, they went on a very long journey. Like honeymooners, they stayed at various resorts and beaches and odd, out-of-the-way hotels that specialized in supplying fun to people who were accustomed to nothing else. In the middle of their travels, in full view of any watchful eyes, they rented a private suite in one of the deeper districts. For a full week, as far as any eavesdroppers could assume, they didn't leave those luxurious confines.

A hidden passageway and an

unlicensed cap-car allowed two people to travel a thousand kilometers, reaching an empty corner of the Great Ship.

A second, equally anonymous cap-car carried them elsewhere.

Pressed close together, Perri and Quee Lee crawled up the narrow confines of a nameless fissure. He didn't know their precise destination. He relied on his wife to say, "Stop," and then, "There. That wall." A hidden doorway let them pass.

The cold was abrupt, and brutal, and wonderful. The tilted floor of the cavern wore a river of blue ice. Above them, hidden in the rocks and snow, was a tiny redoubt; and fifty kilometers downstream was a brief, deep lake with

just enough room for a single creature to swim in the dark, waiting for the inevitable spring.

“Another few years,” Perri said.

The Queen would awaken and ride the spring floods, following her own little river to its mouth. In this relatively tiny volume, the two Dawsheen repositories would merge into one, reshuffling and reformulating their genetics, creating an entirely new lineage of species and phyla. The basis for an entirely new world would blossom inside a few dozen square kilometers; and later, when the time was ripe, another new Queen and her Other would be born.

That's when Perri would finally slip them off the Ship.

When nobody was looking, he would send them to their own empty world.

"It'll be lovely," said Quee Lee. "Whatever they manage to make here, I'm sure it will be wonderful." Perri looked across the rugged ice and snows, and then he turned, smiling happily at his wife.

"Let's walk around," he suggested.

She shivered under her robe, asking, "Now? What could we possibly find here now?"

"I don't know," he allowed with a boyish giggle. "That's why it's worth walking around."