

the celebrants
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novelette ~ alex jeffers



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The Celebrants

GADJI BERI BIMBA GLANDRIDI
LAULI LONNI CADORI GADJAM
A BIM BERI GLASSALA GLANDRID
E GLASSALA TUFFMI ZIMBRA

—H. Ball/Talking Heads/Brian Eno: “I Zimbra”/*Fear of Music*

Our ancestral sun rose up out of the bleeding sea and the grey sky became white. I felt very much alone and in many ways uneasy. Beside me on the moist sand, kneeling, Karidann began to keen. Her voice, sharp as a laser, burned through the dawn in the old lament—which I had heard for the first time only three Earthmonths before. Somewhere behind us in the city Cyasi-Festival her two companions Jailé and Mist would be moaning too. On their world of Eles the sun is a demon to be appeased and whose advents signals fire and despair.

Neither did I welcome this sun, old Father Sol. He woke the whole island to rotting lushness: even some of the buildings bloomed and let loose a stifling fragrance. I couldn't adjust to that.

It was a morning of festival—a festival within the grand hundred-year celebration of Earthpeace. Our hosts had not told us the human name of the rite, but in the language of the tiyn it was Luy. Who knew what to expect? The entire affair was alien to us—more alien than we were to each other. How grand the news had seemed to me in my youth and inexperience when the emissaries arrived on Sartayl and proclaimed: The Interdict is ended! Earth is at peace! All we knew were the stories: how the tiyn fell out of the sky on defenseless Earth, took possession of the planet, and left the few human colony worlds (among them my Sartayl, Karidann's Eles, and Kasteryl,

Fist, and Halar, the homes of our seven comrades) to moulder back to savagery without the motherworld's teachings and technology. But now it was over! claimed the mixed team of tiyn and humans, and Earth was jubilant for one hundred years....

Her song ended, Karidann rose to her feet and shook out her black hair. Her eyes were hidden: even the nights of Earth were too bright for her cavern-bred eyes and she always wore lenses. It bothered me that I didn't know the color of her eyes, and that she saw me as a smoky ghost.

She smiled at me—she thought I was much too solemn—and said, “Of course it's foolish, Rogathy. Even Turath-Sarisay Mist admits that. Allow us our eccentricities.”

“Did I say you were foolish?”

She took it at its least value, and smiled, and looked through me again. Taking my arm, she turned me around to face the city. “Our hosts wait to serve us,” she said. “... I'll race you back.”

And without warning she was off, running effortlessly, her hair bobbing down her back. I broke after, laughing, caught up, and we ran side by side into Cyasi-Festival. It rose up out of the jungle like a stand of exotic trees, part mineral and crystalline, part vegetable. In effect it covered the entire island, pieces of it springing up unexpectedly in unlikely clearings, but the center of it was this collection of crystal trees, metal fungi, flowering towers and living dwellings. We trotted beneath an arch woven of vines and strands of white glass that whistled in the breeze, into the court before our Envoys' Quarters. Jaïlé, a tall somber woman with her grey hair and impenetrable lenses, and her slender husband, Turath-Sarisay Mist the dancer, were there before us, seated at a small table in the arcade.

With them was our tiyn proctor, whose name we could not pronounce: we called him Mercury with his amused permission. The tiyn are only approximately hominid. Mercury was bipedal and stood erect, but there the similarity to a man slowed and became unmanageable. He was small and narrow and appeared to be wearing armor of enameled metal, blue and green—this was his exoskeleton. He had an inner skeleton as well, but it was of tensile cartilage and served mainly as anchor to his muscles. The plated exoskeleton provided the major structural strength. This gave him something of the appearance of a huge insect. His eyes were large and soft, watery looking, protected by a casque of green chitin; his mouth, small and perpetually pursed, was almost hidden behind the juncture of two plates. He waved his clawed hands at us and his throat clicked in the tiyn greeting.

“Good morning,” said Karidann. She swept her hair off her face and sat

demurely at the table. There was tray with a pitcher of cold juice and glasses. We were well served.

Mist poured juice for us without speaking, though with a speaking glance at me, of whom he disapproved. After an uncomfortable moment or two, Jaïlé laughed brittlely. “When does the celebration start?” she asked of Mercury.

“At noon,” he said, “in the ring of stones.”

“Will you tell us about it?” I asked, desperate.

“No.” He seemed to smile—which was sheer anthropomorphizing on my part, as he had neither the equipment nor the emotional bias for it. “We have found that it is more effective for our visitors to come to the rite unprepared.”

“Have found?” Mist’s tone was sharp. “You mean we’re not the first?”

“Of course not. You are the third group of former colonists to participate in Cyasi-Festival.”

“Where are the others?”

“Most of them have returned to their homeworlds to report the truth of Earthpeace to their peoples. A few have remained.” His mandibles clashed as he leaned forward urgently. “You may meet them today.”

Jaïlé smiled beautifully. “How wonderful,” she said.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel walk. Three men approached: the mysterious Halarene delegates with their nasal glottalized names, Valennit ‘i, Wu’abwi Tao, and Mrinawek Fo. They were small, dark, and hairy. On their world of ices and snows they cocooned themselves in leathers and furs—on this tropical island they sweltered and went naked. Valennit ‘i, who had authority over the others, greeted us shortly. He and his companions had had the most difficulty in learning the common language and were not yet fluent.

“Good morning, sirs,” said Mercury, then a phrase in their own tongue. Valennit ‘i replied; the trio continued to another table. A soft-voiced Earthman came from the interior of the Quarters to serve them.

A woman brought us fruit and pastries. Like all the native humans I had met thus far she was meek and reserved—as though, despite all assurances, they were still enslaved. This being a large part of my unease. I’d grown up on bogey tales of the tiyn who were, my mothers said, very devils, eaters of children, torturers of men. Through the mist-haunted nights in the nursery at Mattinshouse they stalked, brandishing fearful weapons, blood dripping from their teeth. (They have no teeth, but neither my mothers nor I knew that.) Painted demons with leathery wings and blazing eyes sank needles into me until I howled with pain; others spattered me with their saliva which burned the skin with a furious cold so I broke out in rashes . . . until my uncles

divined the cause of my continual ill health and had me educated.

But then, even the two women and the man who had stepped out of their sudden silver needle of a spacecraft onto the black rock pier at Martinshouse had been quiet and self enclosed. A crowd had gathered by the shores of the mistsea when the ship lighted, even I, back from the Academy and blasé. (One of my teachers once told me that the twentieth is a year of boredom, when everything interesting has been done and nothing interesting to look forward to save thirty or forty years of responsibility. Before twenty there was all of one's adulthood to await; after, one's childhood to recollect. At nineteen I thought her cynical and age bitter. At fifty, no doubt I'll quote her as a great wit.) A long silver ramp reached out from the floating craft—three unrealistically tall figures appeared at the port. The woman in the lead called out, "Greetings, folk of Sartayl. We come from Earth."

Karidann nibbled at a hot roll and looked over it—I thought—at me. I wished again to know her eyes. I'd asked her once what color they were. "What do you mean—*color*?" she'd said. I wondered then if she were color blind, but she didn't know the word and I couldn't define it closely enough for her to find its equivalent in her own language. We gave up on it.

She brushed her hair off her face again, with the backs of her wrists. She yawned. She said, "We've several hours yet, haven't we?" Mercury nodded. "I'd like to go exploring."

"I'll go with you," I said.

Mist looked at me sharply. "I too," he said. His mouth was twisted unpleasantly.

I wanted to ask him why, but Jaïlé placed her fine weathered hand on his forearm and scratched it with a fingernail. He straightened out his lips, with some apparent effort, and shook out his thick pale hair.

Karidann seemed oblivious to this silent interchange. She peered down the arcade where the envoys from the Band of Grey on Kasteryl sat at another table and argued in sharp, high-pitched voices. Sint Andries remained convinced it was all a trick, a trap set by the voracious tiyn. Her brother Kisil Tretah counseled patience and trust. Their proctor (they called him Lucifer) sat by quite silently.

"Shall we be up and off?" Karidann bounced up out of her chair. "Jaïlé, would you like to come with us?"

"No," the older woman said. Her lips twitched. "I grow aged and weary. I'll stay and talk with Mercury. If I probe enough beneath his armor perhaps I'll learn something interesting."

The tiyn's head swivelled sharply.

Jailé laughed. "Not literally."

"I hope not," said Mercury. "I'm quite fragile."

"Really?" asked Mist.

Mercury's throat ratcheted several times. "Yes," he said finally.

"Let's go!" yelped Karidann.

Mist and I stood up. He looked at me again with the set to his lips and chin that I didn't like. Then he grinned, jovial, slapped me on the back, and started after Karidann. (I had seen those lips and that chin before, on the face of my cousin Tarost. He wore them for a long time, before finally he assassinated our Eldest Uncle. I couldn't be sure of the connection but nevertheless I avoided close contact with Jailé's husband.)

We left the court under the singing arch, which gave us a few bars of sprightly melody. Karidann turned inland along a path paved in slabs of blue slate. It led beneath a canopy of huge feathery leaves and grey-blue blossoms like giant moths. The air was filled to dripping with moisture and the rich fragrance of decay. Sunlight slanted through like pinprick lasers. It was nothing like my own home, a world quiet and slow moving most of the year, lacking strong colors and abrupt actions. Here butterflies like chips of brilliant glass clustered in pools of sunlight. Here birds bright as the insects screeched and swooped. Here leaves were so greenly shining as to seem freshly washed. Here threatening, colorful blooms hung from vines, smelling like a perfume shop. This part of the jungle was all natural—that is, though it was an artefact, it wasn't manufactured.

Karidann loped in slow silvery motion, dappled with sunlight like one of the little herd of homedeer that live in the gardens of Mattinshouse. Mist paced slowly and dangerously as a salmon. His head turned blindly from side to side, from Karidann to me. I allowed myself almost to believe he was simply jealous.

The trees thinned out and we passed a weathered sculpture of volcanic rock festooned with flowers. It represented some nonhuman creature—though not a tiyn, nor was it from any human mythology I recognized. I assumed (with a quiver of distress) that it was some other starfaring race that had had contact with Earth. It was squat and semi-hominid; its head rested low between hunched shoulders, crowned with what I took to be a circlet of eyes. In large hands with three digits each it held a long sliver of glass, which uttered a piercing chime as we passed. Karidann started. I felt a knife of calm pierce my spine.

The leaf mould and earth of the forest floor gave way to grasses as the now scattered trees didn't hinder sun. In the center of this clearing stood a

roughly built, tiered platform of the same porous grey stone as the statue. From its top rose a flashing pylon of transparent glass. In its core twined a vine with blossoms like golden balls. As we came closer I saw that the vine grew from the cracked chest plate of a dead tiyn. Its blank eye sockets stared at us.

Mist was a few steps ahead of me. He looked back over his shoulder and his lips curved into a smile of strong white teeth.

"What does it mean?" I asked of the air.

"I don't want to know," said Karidann, as if in reply.

The risers of the platform bore weathered unreadable hieroglyphs, arcane relief impressions, curls and ovals and bars, and shapes that might be faces, hands, tear or blood drops. Whatever they might have been meant to convey, to me they communicated a complicated sequence of feelings that, articulated, seemed trite and unconvincing. They told of hands that could not hold what they grasped, of eyes that wept blood, of blind faces mouthing words into a vacuum. *We welcome you with arms and open hearts*, they said. *Take from us: we will willingly and with pain give.*

With an uncharacteristic tonelessness Mist said, "Most likely it's a tiyn memorial from the Conquest."

I shook my head. "I have a feeling that's too appropriate to be true." I somehow didn't think the glass pillar and its macabre tableau were a post-script: they had been conceived of a piece with the platform. "No, it's something much more important, and apposite."

"To what?" Mist grinned at me again. Then he stepped carelessly onto the first tier of the platform. The pylon suddenly began to speak, in the high-pitched liquidly clicking language of the tiyn.

Mist jumped back. The pylon's voice ceased in mid-chirp.

Karidann stepped back a pace and touched my hand. We sidled guiltily out of the clearing, Mist following.

Now the trees were larger, some of them big enough to contain apartments (some of them undoubtedly did), and the ground began to rise. On either side were occasional sheer outcroppings of rock, one of which had been hollowed into a series of caves. Children playing outside their doors waved and greeted us shyly as we passed.

"To what?" Mist asked again.

I feared sounding pontifical. "To the whole thing. To the fiction of Earth-peace."

"Fiction?" asked Karidann.

"Evasion is a better word," Mist said.

“Exactly.” I glared at him. “There’s a peace, but what kind is it? As far as I’ve seen, humanity might as well still be enslaved.”

We came to a broad terrace where the hands of intelligence were more noticeable: ranks of figural sculpture ran along both sides of the path, human on the left, tiyn on the right. The path itself was flagged and the terrace formally landscaped with lawns and distinct beds of foliage—not all of which was native to Earth. One bed, shadowed by a great werecypress, was planted with the dingy flora of Sartayl.

If the landscaping appeared of a human shaping, the building it surrounded was purely tiyn: a vast, pulsing, multicolored mound of linked and semi-linked heptahedral crystals. It had no doors or windows as such: rather, within the constant flux faces would from time to time become transparent or revolve out of the way.

Karidann giggled nervously. “I wouldn’t want to live in that.”

“I’m not even sure I’d want to visit,” I said. “It looks almost alive.”

“It probably is,” said Mist.

Slowly, reluctantly, but as though we had no choice, we approached. The leisurely kaleidoscopic shifting of colors across its surface was hypnotic. Now I saw several hundred tiyn wandering with great purpose around it. Every so often one would enter or exit the building, which was so like a gem-encrusted or crystallized human heart. When I pointed out the resemblance to my companions, Karidann shuddered elaborately. Mist only smirked.

Several humans circled among the tiyn. One of them hailed us: a woman of middle years and agonizing height. We stared up at her big golden eyes as she said, brisk, “You must be from the new party of envoys.”

“Yes,” Karidann replied. “I am Karidann Asteril, and this is Turath-Sari-say Mist. We are from Difallo on Eles.”

“Our companion,” said Mist, twisting the intonations mockingly, “is Rogathy Sitor, of Mattinshouse on Sartayl.”

“Welcome to Earth and Cyasi-Festival,” the woman said. “My name is Lakdailále. I was born on Tyauv, but this is my home now.”

“That?” I said, unbelieving, pointing at the tiyn hive.

“Oh, no.” The woman laughed from deep in her lungs. “I don’t believe any human could reside in the kyitl, not if she stay sane, and human. No, I have a tree on the coast.”

“Why did you stay?” Mist asked, suspicious.

“That,” she said, “is too long a tale for standing, and in the shade of the kyitl.” Her laugh was wonderfully hearty, yet I felt there was a catch in it, a hesitation. “Come with me. We will go to a place I know and refresh our-

selves.”

We left the garden by a different path, which led precipitately down the terraces grabbing for hand holds on twining roots and branches. A leaping stream followed us down, chattering noisily to itself, until our path wound around a cliff over which the stream fell into a deep, brown pool. Lakdailále halted on its verge. She turned to us almost shyly. “I am going to swim,” she said. “Will you join me?”

“Of course,” said Karidann.

Lakdailále pulled her pale blue shift over her head. Beneath it she was naked and appeared stronger than a man her size might be. She sank gracefully into the water, blue-grey hair floating around her head like streamers of algae. Mist surprised me by leaping from a rock by my shoulder, his dark slender body spearing into the depths with only the smallest splash. His head popped out of the middle of the pool, pale hair curled wetly against his skull, lenses glinting. Karidann slid in with nearly as much grace as Lakdailále.

Only I held back, held back by the somber mistsea of Sartayl, which has no buoyancy to uphold a swimmer but drops her into hidden depths, and strangles her. Eventually I pushed it back behind my mind and slipped gingerly into the water.

Lakdailále had anchored herself near the center by a rock that thrust up from the floor. Karidann floated near her, on her back with only her face the tips of her breasts above water. I grabbed a projecting ledge of the rock and held on, still expecting the water to go gaseous and drop me. (There are no visible expanses of water on my world—all are shrouded in meters of mist. Even a bath, left to itself, will collect wisps of mist out of the air. I had learned to swim in my time on Earth—and enjoyed the recreation, in the rocking surf. But dark still water was too like the placid surface of the mistsea.) Mist took hold of the rock and floated by me ... too close.

Lakdailále peered at the sky and began to speak. “I came to Earth five years ago. I was very suspicious. Tyaav had, I believe, more technological base than most of the colonies, and retained much of it, so we *knew* how powerful the tiyn must be to conquer Earth. They were. They are. I was afraid much of the time.

“That is why Luy is so wonderful. It shows ... how we need not fear. It is a demonstration of the tiyn’s intent, of their need....”

“But what is it?” Mist demanded. His voice rocked him in the water so his flank brushed lightly against mine.

“I ... I do not think I should tell you that,” she said. “It would diminish the impact.”

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"It must be tawdry," Mist said, "to depend so on suspense."

"No," she said urgently, "no. It is an experience of tremendous intensity and ... complexity. It is the foundation of the trust that informs Earthpeace."

"I'm not convinced," said Mist.

I wasn't either.

"You needn't be," Lakdailále said. "Luy will convince you." Yet she sounded wistful.

Mist touched me again, with his hand this time. I turned, but couldn't read his expressionless lenses, only my own suspicion reflected. He eddied away.

"I am hungry," Lakdailále announced after a while. Pushing away from the rock, she swam slowly to the edge of the pool, whistled a short refrain.

A door hidden in the bark of a tall patriarchal tree opened and a slender old man stepped out. "Bring us food," said Lakdailále. Her voice was flat: it wasn't a command, but still less was it a request. The old man nodded and retreated into the depths of his home.

"How can you justify that?" called Mist, mocking.

"What?" she asked, unperturbed.

"That the people of Earth are treated as slaves, and accept the treatment as though they believed it too."

I recalled the cloying obsequiousness of the human crew that brought us to Earth; but also I remembered that the tiyn among them were equally subservient.... *We will willingly and with pain give...* What did that statement mean, to me, to them?

"It needn't be justified," she said steadily. "It is their choice, their free choice. It is how they acknowledge the responsibility of Luy."

"Is that an answer?" asked Karidann.

"Not yet," Lakdailále said.

The old man re-emerged from the interior of his tree bearing a low table spread with breads and cheeses and a flask of wine. He set it on the ground and turned meekly away.

"Thank you," I called.

He looked back at me, startled, and a nervous smile fled across his face. He backed into the tree and it closed around him.

Mist and Karidann and I (clumsily, fearfully) stroked over to shore, pulled ourselves out of the water. A light breeze breathed through the trees, running swaths of goosebumps up my side.

Mist made a great show of sitting by Lakdailále, slicing cheese for her and pouring her a glass of wine before he served Karidann or me. She

watched him out of the corners of her great fanatic eyes. I couldn't grow used to his sudden surprising shifts of mood—which I suspected were not shifts of mood but only the angle of his attack on whatever it was in the universe that roused his icy anger.

"On our way to the—the kytit," I said, "we came through a clearing that contained a ..."

"An artefact," said Mist, "a very peculiar artefact."

"A glass pillar?" asked Lakdailále.

"Yes," said Mist. "It talked."

"What is it?" I asked.

She leaned back. "It is," she said slowly, "difficult to explain. It's a monument."

"That's reasonably obvious," Mist said. "You're not helping."

"You're not either," said I.

"It has to do with the basis of Earthpeace," said Lakdailále, "—the price that must be paid."

"By whom?" asked Mist.

She looked at him. Her cheeks were white and her eyes narrow. "By us all—tiiyn and human alike. Peace is too precious a thing to be allowed to lapse from fear."

"You're not answering the question," Mist said, harsh.

Lakdailále stared at her hands. "You don't understand. I can't. It is not a question that can be answered from the outside. You must find the solution in yourself."

"Mystification." Mist was dismissive.

"No," I said, careful, reluctant despite myself to jeopardize the truce he appeared to have declared with me. "I don't think so. There are questions that can't be resolved verbally." Remembering, *We welcome you with arms and open hearts.* "There was writing on the platform: do you know what it means, Lakdailále?"

She peered at me acutely. "It is the human history of the ... arrival of the tiiyn."

"The Conquest," Mist said.

"No! No, it was not a matter of *conquest*." She was adamant. "It was an advent, with profound precursors."

"Profound mystification."

Lakdailále glared at Mist.

"Mist has a gift," I said, "for rousing antagonism in all he touches."

He laughed. "That is unkind, Rogathy."

"Truth is that."

"And at times an inconvenience. At other times—" he looked sideways at the woman of Tyauv—"an inspiration."

Karidann had been silent much too long. She drank her wine and chewed meditatively at a slap of cheese. I touched her knee. "What are you thinking about?"

"Noon." A smile balanced for a moment on her mouth. "In Difallo we would all be deep asleep, in the heart of the cliffs." She nodded to Lakdailále. "On Eles the days last five hundred hours and the planet is so much closer to our sun that at noon the seas boil. All vegetation will have long since burned away," she continued dreamily, "and the land will be shrouded in ash. The sky will be covered by a pall of cloud bright as mirrors. But we would be inside, in the safe dark."

"And then at twilight would come the storms," Mist continued. "Even in the caverns we can hear the drumming of the rain."

"When the storms cease the land comes to life; plants spring up visibly, and the animals, which estivate like us, break out of their burrows."

"And we would emerge too, into air hot and thick and moist, and, though it's night, bright with the sun's glare on the under sides of the clouds so we must wear our lenses." Mist moved away from Lakdailále. "You and I would hunt. We would capture soft little thoau in our hands as they gathered seeds, and after we broke their necks we would drink their blood, hot as the air..."

Karidann's chin had fallen progressively, into her throat. Now she snapped upright and walked into the jungle.

"What was that about?" I demanded, angry.

Mist stretched and yawned and curved his lips ... tenderly. "We were simply," he said, leaning back so his head lay on my thighs and his lenses glinted up at me, "acknowledging our responsibilities."

Lakdailále rose to her feet. "I must go." Her voice was remote. "Perhaps I will see you at Luy." Going down the hill, she became a shadow among shades.

"She knows," said Mist, "where she's not wanted." Reaching up, he twisted his fingers in my beard, pulled my head down. His lips were hard and dry on mine. His lenses dug into my throat. I wanted to pull them off and blind him.

After a moment, he said, "That must be a frightfully uncomfortable position." He released me. "Lie down."

His lips like fingers and his hands like little mouths searched blindly over my flesh. My eyes closed. I was terrified, without reason. The cold in-

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termittent touch of his lenses let me believe it was Karidann, but then the stubble on his chin would tell me who it was pulled every sensation he could from my skin. Who it was drew me out of myself and would not let me back. But I didn't know who he was....

Afterward, when I lay still confused in the rook of his arm, I said, "What did you mean, *acknowledging our responsibilities?*"

He sighed. "When I reach six hundred fifty days we will be married, Karidann and I. Just as when Jailé was six hundred fifty she married me, and when Karidann reaches that age she will wed her friend Caddio. It is how we hold ourselves together."

"I don't understand. Whose choice was it?"

"Mine," he said, and kissed me.

"And she objects?"

He looked at me, astonished. "Of course not. How could she?" He growled in the back of his throat. "You're full of foolish ideas."

I tried to pull away from him.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't like being played with. I'm not your toy."

"But you are Karidann's!" He was amused.

The door to the old man's tree opened and he and his family emerged. They paid us little attention: one of the children stared curiously, a man's eyes narrowed. They filed past us along the way into Cyasi-Festival's heart. I watched them pass and felt no surprise when I saw Karidann had joined the queue. "Where are you going?" I called after her.

She didn't respond but a little boy laughed and crowed, "To Luy! To Luy!" I wondered if he had witnessed the rite before, if he more than we knew what he was getting into.

"Well," Mist said, cheery, "time passes."

We joined the line, which filed slowly back the way we'd come from the tiyn kyitl. As tributary streams converge and become rivers, we were joined by other files of women and men, young and old. But no tiyn walked with us. When we came to the garden spread around the hive it was deserted, and we continued up the sloping sides of the volcano.

The full heat of forenoon beat down hard at us. Here, higher, the air was less dense with moisture and the vegetation less exuberant. Craggy, eccentric boulders shouldered through thinning soil. The few birds I saw were wary, brilliant, shrieking and flapping up in shards of color when we approached their roosts.

The slope was implacable. Mist walked beside me. From time to time he

took my hand with a tender, cruel smile. We didn't speak. Nor did any other of our companions in this pilgrimage. Even the children were quiet now. Although it wasn't a subdued silence: tension and anticipation sang through the toiling line like the vibrations in a plucked string. (But why were we so tense? What did we anticipate?)

We came, ultimately, to the lip of the caldera. Long ago it had been sheered off smoothly and a five-meter-wide pavement of greyish-black basalt laid down. The cup of the volcano's dead mouth was carpeted with thick grass. A ring of standing stones stood at the center of the depression, encircling another glass pylon. From this distance, I couldn't see if it contained such a grisly relict as the other.

We gathered on the black basalt circle, Mist and I and Karidann and the human population of the island in a hand-linked ring. I could feel the tension in the hand of the woman to my left: her fingers flexed and kneaded my palm. A low thrumming hum rose from us in sharp erratic rhythm. I hardly realized that my diaphragm vibrated with the same urgency as everyone else's.

In the cup of the caldera, five hundred or more tiyn revolved and circled in a strange, threatened minuet. None of them ventured in among the standing stones. They moved with agitation, describing arcs, circles, collisions, the dance of molecules. I feared for them.

Our humming became a chant, wordless and menacing, punctuated by the slap of thousands of bare feet against the pavement. I could tell from the echoes that the sound of it must be deafening within the caldera. The stone beneath my stamping feet rang. We swayed forward and back, and on every forward swing the agitation of the tiyn below increased.

"What are we doing?" I muttered, panicked.

The woman who held my hand turned to me. Through the exaltation transfiguring it, I recognized the face of the woman who had served us breakfast at the Envoys' Quarters. Oh, she was no longer meek or unassuming. Something jubilant and unrestrained and terrifying raged through her now. "We worship," she said, and it became part of the chant: "We worship! We worship!"

"But what?"

"What!" "What!" "What!" echoed in expanding rings. I wanted to break out of the swaying stomping circle before I was answered.

Now the tiyn clustered about the ring of stones. Their arms waved aimlessly. Were these the omnipotent invaders who stole Earth from humankind? ("No, it was not a matter of *conquest*," said a voice full of hope.) They were like helpless insects whose nest has been broken open to the blinding light.

And the light blazed with terrible clarity. It was noon. The sun hung directly overhead like an empty eye. The moment was frozen. Everything stopped. We stood, discrete persons once more, with space around us.

The glass needle seemed to pierce through the sun. At its foot crouched the monolithic stones, and below them the unhappy tiiyn.

I pulled out of the circle. It didn't resist my departure. Mist shifted his balance a little and linked hands with the woman who was suddenly again the quiet server of breakfasts.

I stood behind the curving excluding rank of rigid, anticipatory backs, and feared. I started pacing the basalt circumference. The backs, breathing in unison, unreeled. I saw the monumentally tall Lakdailále but passed her by. A crown of thick grey hair surely belonged to Jailé but I didn't stop to make certain.

But then I came to Karidann. Somebody had hung a coronet of scarlet blossoms in her hair. Her breathing was ragged, out of true with the vast throbbing hush. One hand was held by an ancient woman whose back was as straight as the pylon, the other by a tiny child who appeared scarcely old enough to walk.

I touched Karidann's shoulder. She gasped, turned her head. Her lenses were black as interplanetary space, her lips trembled. She steadied her breathing with terrible effort. "No! Leave me be. This is important."

Even she, I thought as I moved vacantly on, even she.... My resolve had strengthened. I had lost, but I would not lose.

I passed the hairy Halarenes, clinging together in the face of strangeness, yet part of it. I saw Kisil Tretah, and later his sister Sint Andries. I recognized, at wide intervals, the two women from Lat on Fist, Gods in ota Lut and Mirio ota Kya. And hundreds more. Some, I was sure, were offworlders, from the two earlier embassies to Cyasi-Festival. And all were quiet, stolid as stones and nearly as still. Between unmoving shoulders I caught glimpses of the interior bowl. The tiiyn were as still as their ... tormentors, arranged in a complex rosette about the focus of the pylon and its encircling stones. Sunlight refracted in brilliant stationary shards from tiiyn armor. I felt time had halted: the sun stood motionless. Only I moved—and I was of no consequence at all.

When I came around again to Mist, I stopped and looked out, away from this eye in the mountain that stared blindly up at the eye in the sky. The slope fell away in rippling broken folds that were soon obscured by the shroud of jungle, which itself halted at the edge of the encircling white sand beach. A few hundred meters out into the ocean lay yet another white ring,

where waves clashed with the reef. Beyond that lay the broken circle of islands and the limiting wheel of the horizon; and beyond that, I recalled from our descent from orbit, was the ellipse of continental shoreline that bounded the ocean.

I grappled with sudden nausea. Here I stood, having passed through increasing resistance almost to the center of this concentric maze. Was I to continue through the last few tensile boundaries to the focus and my fate...?

A sharp high note struck through the air and the sun moved!

I turned. The pylon keened and the rosette of tiiny had begun to revolve in precise orbits. Now they too sang, in harmony—though not the same language—with the pillar of glass. I remembered something I'd once seen, a hologram of an ancient child's toy (Where had I seen it? At the Academy? No, it was part of cousin Tarost's collection): a mechanical box that played a tune while on its top tiny enamelled effigies of miraculous beasts circled and curved in complex paths about a pavilion where an orchestra of insects pretended to play. And I waited for the huge pudgy hand that would reach down to disconnect this tiresome toy.

And now the circle of humanity sang, in yet a third voice, a droning chant that swallowed its words so I couldn't make them out, and to dance: two paces to the right, a step to the left, a hiss, a stamp, and an abandoned shake of the head.

I realized Mist was moving away, so I followed. It was hard not to adopt their compulsive movement. Side, side, back, *hsss*, stamp, shake. Side, side back, *hsss*, stamp, shake! *Side, side*, BACK, *hsss*, STAMP, SHAKE! More than tight, infections, the beat took hold and rattled me. I felt it insinuate. The chant shook me.

The wild song was changing now—hard on it the rhythm of the dance. The beat was the 4/4 grunt of our breath, and over it they took a long slide to the right, five quick steps and another slide, five steps back, stamp! Slide, step-step-step-step-step, slide, step-step-step-step-step, stamp! It throbbed deep inside me: we moved in slide, step, and *stamp!* I watched for Mist: he was with them beat by *stamp!* They propelled me with them: I could not break free, must *stamp!* I watched Mist's twisting steps: he was caught in step and *stamp!* I needed to break free—he as much as I but *stamp!* I let the circle dance: it took me up in its *stamp!* I caught his hand and held it tightly and *stamp!* I set myself to fight: to burst the overpowering *stamp!*

Forced myself to break step. To slide when they stamped. It threw Mist off balance and key. Took the advantage and pushed him out of the circle. But he flailed at the wrong instant—and went down into the mouth of the

caldera.

I was ready to leap after. Then my hands were caught from both sides: they drew me, pulled me back into the closing ranks of the dance. I saw Mist falling down, more slowly than he should yet in a way more fast. Strange shadows creased my ears and eyes. It seemed that I began to catch some understanding of the song we danced. Over, under, throughout: it told a tale I held in hands shaking with remorse. The pylon spoke to me of eyes weeping blood, blind voices. I feared, pulled back from the tolling voice, would not listen: turned in search again of some sight of fallen Mist.

The bowl below seemed to fill with mist. I couldn't see a thing. It rolled and boiled under my feet like a damp grey sea. I knew within myself and it lay something like icy hands ready to grasp and hold. The song circled back. The fog began to clear. I saw dull eyes watching, clear, watery, crystal eyes: tiiny eyes. Then their voices came ringing up out of the mist. Were they speaking to me? I turned my back. *Listen to us*, they said. *We come from underneath a skin of stars, the skin of mankind. Our hands and minds are open to you. Listen. Listen.*

I would not. Let the dance take me, round in round, circle and down. *Listen, here are our eyes. Take them. Take them in your unhappy hands.* I closed my eyes. We sang down into the mist, through its hazy barrier, down and under to the tiiny. I wanted, could not turn back.

Down, they promised, singing, *in down and back to the peace that should be ours, can be, will be, in joining*, and down we floating went, down, under, to the clear spaces where we could feel their eyes full of joy. They welcomed us into the misty light of their eyes, their hearts and open hands.

Take hands, ponder options, give them back. Watch your eyes and ours. Can you see into the mist of hate and fear and find understanding. Can you penetrate the strong thin skin of anger and in it find the joy and wonder of being? Careful. Easy to sunder. Voices thick and calm as water. We came to them in a clearing of clouds among thunder: they welcomed us with joy, with eyes the same as ours, open arms, wide minds. Said they, *Lame peace is not our object. Any goal worthwhile requires sacrifice, not to be a maimed poor thing. We give, we take.* I felt a smile awaken in us. *You take, you give*, they said. *So we become whole.* Something hit my head.

I struggled back through the mist. "You can't." Somebody had a viselike grip on my arms. "I won't let you."

"Karidann?"

"No, no, Karidann is too busy to be here."

"I don't understand. Where is she?" I heard a childish terror in my

voice.

“Killing people.”

Somehow this was the correct answer. I concentrated on finding my way back. I acknowledged my senses one by one. Whoever held me (I knew it was Mist) was rank with emotion—mostly fear, but also a great deal of anger. He held me so tight his hands trembled. There would be bruises on my forearms later. Sound was slow in returning; the voices of the tiyn still thrummed in my ears. Behind it hung a confused mumbling multi-voiced shriek.

“They don’t even make an attempt,” Mist whispered.

My eyes opened. Mist stared over my shoulder, his mouth drawn into an unpromising line. I wrenched myself out of his grasp and turned to see what he saw.

I couldn’t comprehend it. The pylon still sang, serene and unchanging, a vertical pyre of white light. And the tiyn rosette still wheeled, though spasmodically, with huge gaps torn in its delicate symmetry.

“That can’t be what they meant...” I feared and knew it was.

A savage, wordless song ripped at the air. It rose from a multitude of throats—human throats. I had been singing too, I knew, until Mist stopped me. But the song was merely accompaniment, incidental music played behind an exotic drama. (I tried to view it through the eyes of a jaded sophisticate. Mist’s hands were like rings of irons piercing my shoulders. I was too involved. I could not.)

The tiyn made no noise save the crack and sigh of fractured exoskeletons as the humans—my people—we fell on them with hard fists to crush fragile chitinous skulls and thumbs to gouge out watery eyes and feet to break legs like twigs. It was numbing. I couldn’t close my eyes, could only watch them die (only watch us killing them) over and over and over. Was Mercury, our calm, sardonic proctor, among them, dying unprotesting ... for the good of Earthpeace?

Individuals took shape in the gory tapestry. One of the Halarene envoys—from the distance I couldn’t tell which—(I) broke a tiyn’s back across his sturdy knee. The woman who served us breakfast brought her capable hands, bound up in a double fist (my fist), down hard on a tiyn’s neck. Lak-dailále twisted the head off another tiyn: his (my) body continued its dance for perceptible moments. The old man who gave us cheese and wine gave the edge of (my) his hand to a tiyn wrist. It shattered. Karidann ... Karidann—Karidann (I broke Mist’s hold on me, pushed him savagely away) prised apart the face plates of a tiyn’s head: she did it with great delicacy and the skull split neatly down the middle. Tiyn blood and brain matter spilled into her hands.

She pushed her hair off her face with her wrists and smiled, radiant.

“Rogathy!” Mist’s cry was filled with more terror than was possible, and I was torn between the terrible need to break Karidann’s every smallest bone or to...

Mist lay on his face, screaming, voice harsh, broken. I stumbled to him through the thick tangled grass. Thinking it was only reaction to the vision below us, I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. Then I saw. His lenses had cracked right across, let in the burning sun. I saw his eyes. They were milky grey, and blind.

I broke then. Pulling him close to me, I held him around his chest and wept. So this was the foundation of Earthpeace. What monstrousness was to be raised on the quagmire of blood and guilt. *We give, we take. You take, you give*—but if the giving was death and the taking ecstasy—

A chime rang out of the pylon when the last tiiny died. It began to whisper to itself in a preoccupied tone, and the murderers suddenly appeared lost and afraid. One of them held up her hands, stained with gummy brown tiiny blood, and moaned aloud. I saw her black lenses: Karidann. I couldn’t care.

Mist’s tentative hand brushed my cheek. “What is it?” It was heartbreaking, that he could still feel concern.

“They’re all dead,” I whispered.

He clenched my hand.

“They’re all dead—we killed them.”

“I stopped you—”

“I blinded you. They’re equivalent.”

“They’re not. It was an accident. You didn’t intend—”

“No more did they! They *intended* to build a peace everlasting.”

“It’s hard.” He had his strength back. “Let’s go.” With blind assurance he pulled me to my feet.

I led him slowly and carefully—though he moved with ever increasing deftness and confidence, subsuming his anguish into what I suspected to be a cold rage; I had no such place to put mine—back down the mountain, through the jungle and to the beach. We sat in the shelter of a dune and I attempted to put into words the songs the pylon sang, the lies it told, the promises it made, the delusions it fostered: peace is at hand, despite irreconcilable conflicts peace is possible—inevitable. “Peace is not based on lies,” I said, bitter.

“No,” he said. (I gently removed his useless lenses. His eye sockets blazed brilliant white in the dark promontory of his face. His eyebrows were so pale and thin they were barely visible. And his eyes were dead grey.) “Peace

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is founded on misunderstanding and distrust, on meaningless sacrifice, on weariness and guilt. Earthpeace is a mighty impervious edifice. It should be thrown down.”

When Karidann found us the sun was falling behind the mountain. She knelt on the sand before Mist and touched the bare skin around his blind eyes with clean, precise fingers. “I’m sorry,” she breathed.

“I’m not,” said Mist, short. “The price you paid was higher, and bought less.”

She fell back on her knees. Her shoulders shook. “But now I see.”

“I don’t. If you gave me new eyes I still wouldn’t. It’s not reconcilable.”

Her head dropped, her hair fell over her face and hid her lenses. “I wish you did.” Then she went away and left us in the new dark.

The next morning our new proctor—I could not bring myself to give her a human name—asked us if we wished to return to our homeworlds. There was hesitation on all parts. Eventually all three of the Halarenes said yes. So did Sint Andries and her brother, and one of the Lat women. Mirio ota Kya opted to stay. Her eyes were bright with a brilliant, unfocussed, and terrible light. Her companion argued with her for a long time in their own language, but she was resolute and calm, and ultimately walked off.

Jailé Turath said yes with a little pause.

Karidann looked at Mist and at me. Then she agreed.

Mist said no. He said, “I will not lie to my people.”

I let go of his hand. I said, “I will tell my people the truth: I’ll go.”

Mist groped for my arm. I looked at him. His blind eyes were unwavering and the determined saboteur set was on his chin and lips. “I’m sorry, my wife,” he said. “I’m sorry, Karidann.” They peered at us from far away, from behind their space-black lenses. “I’ll come with you, Rogathy,” he said, “if I may?”

“And in time we will return.”



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