

LINDA NAGATA

OLD MOTHER

Long strings of fire-crackers sparked and exploded in the moment of the New Year, roaring across the seaside pavilion like an assault of armies. The violent odor of gunpowder invaded the clouds of salt spray thrown up by the huge combers that boomed against the beach: a baseline rhythm for the drums and gongs that drove the lion to dance. The lion was a fantastic animal, fifteen feet from nose to tail, neurocell plastic glittering white and red and gold, great green eyes winking under heavy lashes, huge maw snapping open and shut as it charged about the crowd pursuing invisible demons. Asha ducked and stumbled backward, laughing as the lion raced past her. Clay caught her; stood her back up on her feet again with a grin. The drums pounded a blood rhythm into her head, a pulse that hammered at her doubt. She crowed with a hundred other voices when the lion reared up on its hind legs to roar at the stars winking overhead.

The stars, the stars. They teased her in the night, faint and shimmering in mystery. Never confuse the stars with the planets. The planets were bright and close and too well understood. But the stars . . . no one had ever tried for the stars before. That would soon change. This time tomorrow she'd be off on the first leg of her journey to Dragon -- the almost-living biometal ship that had been growing in orbit for five years. All was ready now.

"Time to make the offering!" Clay shouted over the thunder of surf and drums. A farmer would remember that, Asha thought. Even in the new century, it didn't hurt a farmer to pay attention to luck and omens and gods.

Nodding, she reached into her skirt pocket. Little rectangles of gold foil were already shimmering in the torch light, held over the heads of the crowd by eager hands. Asha added her own to the glitter. Clay's strong hand encircled hers, left over right. For luck, for prosperity. She smiled and leaned against him, feeling the strength of the land in his body, his lean muscles like the binding roots of the orchard he tended on his grandmother's farm. For a moment, fear glittered in her sight like starlight on broken glass. But she turned away from it. That was for tomorrow. Tonight they would dance together to the rhythm of the drums.

The lion was working the other side of the crowd now. She could see its handler, seated behind the musicians, studying a video display of the pavilion, directing the lion's dance with the aid of a collision avoidance program. And his partner beside him -- Clay's grandmother, Electra -- a dark and heavy old artist in a flowing blue dress who used smart paint and guile to make lifeless things suddenly seem alive. Around Electra, reality became slippery. Any inanimate object could suddenly awaken to a new and animate identity. Nothing was fixed. Nothing was quantifiable. She'd raised Clay in a world in which dreamtime could hardly be distinguished from the waking state.

Asha's gaze fixed on Electra's wide, brown face, on her dark eyes that managed

to scowl despite the joyful bend of her mouth. Clay had been nothing more than a bit of embryonic tissue when his grandmother had taken him in. She'd raised him in her womb, nursed him at her breast, filled him with her own primal vision of the land as a mother-deity and they'd been happy -- until Asha came along.

From across the pavilion Electra seemed to sense Asha's gaze. Her head turned; triumph sparked in her eyes. Then a drunk tourist whirled across Asha's line of sight, blonde hair flying as she spun her own dance to the New Year. Asha tipped her head back to look over her shoulder at Clay. He misread her mood and kissed her, his scraggly black mustache rough against her lips.

"You two ought to be married!"

Asha looked around, startled to see the blonde tourist swaying in front of her. The woman lifted a lei of knotted hala leaves from around her own shoulders and held it up with a brilliant smile. Then she reached out and quickly tied it around Clay and Asha's outstretched hands, binding them tightly together. "Make your offering to the lion," she advised. "And leave the bondage on until it falls off naturally. Then you'll be married well and long. I guarantee it! And I am a licensed witch!"

She whirled away to spread her benedictions elsewhere, while their friends laughed around them. "You have to marry him now, Asha!" "Go for it, Clay!" "Do it for real! Log it on the P.A. net." Do it, do it, do it, the chant started at once on all sides. Then the lion charged. People screamed and fell back. The great beast wove up and down against the straining crowd, its mouth snapping shut over gold foil after gold foil. "Feed the lion," Clay intoned in her ear.

Together they extended their offering. Asha stared at their bound hands for a moment, touched by a sense of wonder. Clay's hand was trembling as it closed over hers.

Suddenly, multicolored jets of flame ignited overhead. Paper lanterns began to burn with the ferocity of rocket fuel. The lion snorted in fear and bounded backward while Asha ducked instinctively, pulling Clay down with her. Within seconds the fire cut through the rope that suspended the lanterns above the pavilion. The rope fell to the concrete floor in neat, arm-length sections that began to writhe, gleaming and hissing and rearing up, forked tongues tasting the sudden scent of fear. Asha recognized the arrow-head and spiny tail of death adders, serpents that had long ago cut a niche for themselves in the island's deranged ecology. The crowd gasped and fell back before the snakes' collective gaze. For a moment silence engulfed the pavilion while the angry snakes flattened their coils against the ground and debated attack. But they waited too long. The lion had recovered. It charged toward the line of death adders on great, padded feet. They seemed to sense it and turned as if to flee, but too late. The lion caught them and crushed them. One-by-one they exploded in purple fire under its trampling feet, each ignition accompanied by hysterical screams of approval from the crowd. Asha's throat was raw with her own passion as she cheered the destruction of what must be Electra's artful demons.

"The lion!" Clay cried, reminding her why they were there. And suddenly it was

upon them.

Clay yanked their bound hands up with the offering and the lion's maw flew open like double doors slammed wide. Its red tongue lolled. It pounced upon the foil, its jaws slamming shut bare millimeters from their fingertips. The offering slipped out of their hands. The lion batted its brilliant green eyes and moved on.

Asha sagged against Clay, a grin on her face and a sense of elation in her heart. Across the pavilion Electra wore an expression that made her death adders seem almost kind.

"You have to do it," Stuart said seriously. "I've heard of that witch. She has a lot of celebrity clients. They say she gives good advice." Like Asha, Stuart was Cured. But he'd been on Maui only six months.

"Do it," Kemmy agreed. Another Cured, on her last month before eviction back to the Celestial Cities. "Make the marriage official. You know you want to."

"But it won't work," Asha said softly. She glanced at Clay from under lowered eyes . . . an unCured farmer rooted to his land. He'd said nothing since they'd made their offering to the lion. He sat on the picnic bench, staring at their bound hands clasped together on the table. Of the mixed emotions on his face, worry was the one she recognized most clearly.

The euphoria of the dance had faded for her too, leaving behind only a great hollow fear of the morning's reality. She bit her lip. "How can we do it? Tomorrow -- no, it's already today -- today will be our last day together --"

Clay flinched. But Atlanta laughed. "What's tomorrow? Tomorrow may never come."

"For you," Asha whispered, knowing no one would hear over the surf. Atlanta was unCured. Time was more uncertain for her. She'd lived near the beach at Makena since she was seven and she'd go on living there until she'd used up all her tomorrows and died of old age.

The Cured had made a different deal. They'd bought youth. Didn't cost much. Just their land, their homes. Whatever bound them to Mother Earth. Cost calculated on a sliding scale according to net worth. We turn no one down.

Youth, and a luxury apartment in the Celestial Cities. Fair enough, Asha thought. Old Mother had no room for ageless geezers determined to live forever. Asha reckoned they were lucky to get one year in ten in the cradle. But her year was up. New Year's Day. Vacation over. Time to move on -without Clay. She'd chosen Dragon, and if she ever came home again, it would not be in Clay's lifetime.

She sighed deeply. To love a man who refused to take the Cure, who was as tightly rooted to the Earth as the trees he tended on his grandmother's farm: it was absurd, and yet it was. Until it all ended tomorrow.

The chant started up around them again: Do it, do it, do it. So-called friends feeding like psychological vampires on their dilemma. Do it, do it, do it. For they wanted a fine, romantic story to tell in the years to come.

Still, Clay said nothing.

Asha felt hands at her elbows. "Come on! There's a public access booth on the corner." Sheer force of numbers moved them. Clay didn't resist. Asha didn't want to. By the time they reached the booth, someone had already called up the wedding contract and filled in the blanks from their public access bios.

"All it takes is your signature!" Stuart shoved a screen pen into Asha's hand.

She held it, open-mouthed, while her eyes scanned the contract. They couldn't do this. She knew it was wrong. Marriage was not meant to last only a day.

Then Clay took the pen out of her hand and signed. He studied his signature for a moment, his face uncertain, bemused. Then he looked at her, the expectation in his eyes bordering on fear. Asha knew they were making a mistake. But she could not disappoint those eyes. She took the proffered pen and signed. The computer downloaded the contract with their signatures into the public access net. The screen cleared. A new message appeared: Congratulations to the new Mr. & Mrs.!

Morning found them in Clay's room at his grandmother's farm house. Asha had awakened here many times over the long summer and fall, so that the scene held for her a pleasant familiarity. Outside, she knew, the air would be crisp and cold this far up the flank of the old volcano. But Clay's room was warm and pleasant.

Clay was still asleep. But he must have been awake earlier, because someone had told the curtains to open, admitting the blindingly bright rays of the morning sun as it climbed over the mountain's shoulder. Asha stretched, blinking in the sunshine. A few meters beyond the window was the upper persimmon orchard. It covered the rising slopes of the old farm for nearly half a mile. The trees' knobby gray limbs draped their supporting scaffoldings, stark and leafless in winter.

Asha lifted her head. Her long black hair was matted with dried perspiration and smelled of smoke. It fell about her brown shoulders in a tangled mane. She smiled at Clay as he lay on his back, his left hand twisted around on the pillow where it was joined to her right. It had been interesting making love with that bondage. Using the toilet had been a bit embarrassing. But she imagined they could make up for that in the shower. She giggled and nuzzled his chest to wake him. "Clay."

His eyes opened briefly, then squeezed shut again. He threw his arm over his face. Then he sat up suddenly, grinning. He checked their bondage and looked at her. "It was real."

She nodded slowly, unwilling to look further ahead than this moment. He leaned over and kissed her. The sun seemed to press them together with a heat that

threatened to melt and mingle their bodies. But after a few minutes, Clay pulled away. He leaned back against the pillow with a sigh, his dark eyes half-closed in the light. "How I love the sun," he mused. He raised his bound hand and hers, studying the knotted hala cord in the sunshine. Abruptly, his idle smile winked out. "The house doesn't know your voice. How'd you open the curtains?"

"I didn't. I thought you did."

His eyes widened in sudden fear. Startled, Asha followed his gaze to the hala cord. It seemed to shimmer for a moment. Then the green color flowed out of it, as if sucked out by the sunlight. It turned a tired gray with darker stripings. It developed scales. Angry eyes glittered in a tiny, arrow-head. A baby death adder, wrapped twice around their wrists, its slit of a mouth biting its own bony tail with needle-sharp teeth.

Asha gasped and yanked her hand away from the hated thing. The snake disintegrated. It fell across the bed in a thousand tattered shreds of hala leaf.

The bond was broken.

Asha found herself crouched like a cat on the foot of the bed, her breath tearing in and out of her lungs. Clay was on the floor, his left hand still extended toward her. He looked at her in shock that quickly hardened into anger. Leaping to his feet, he threw his head back and bellowed, "Grandmother!"

"Clay --"

He turned to her, teeth bared. "It was Grandmother."

Asha nodded slowly. The old lady had shown off her talents last night. "It was the sunlight. She must have sprayed the substrate on while we were sleeping, and the program was activated by sunlight." As if by explaining the vision, she could make it less real.

"You two had no fight to make this marriage."

Asha flinched at the unexpected voice. Clay's grandmother was standing in the door. Asha slipped off the bed, pulling a blanket around her body. Electra was a tall, imposing woman -- unCured -- and unbent by age or disappointment. Her thick gray hair, swept up on her head and bound with a string of cowry shells, emphasized her regal carriage. A lifetime spent in this farmhouse, watching friends and family give in to fear or doubt and move away, take the Cure, had left a tang of bitterness in her personality, like the aftertaste of medicinal tea. But she'd hung on, thriving on a profound sense of place, on a certainty that she was no entity unto herself but that her consciousness flowed into the land and the consciousness of the land into her in a relationship that would not tolerate physical separation, and that couldn't be bettered by the simple longevity promised by the Cure. Her gaze skewered Asha. "You're a thief," she said, in a voice filled with quiet menace. "You came here, and accepted my hospitality, all the while contriving to steal my legacy."

Then she turned her wrath on Clay. "And you. What do you mean by this marriage? Do you mean to go away from here? Do you mean to seek the Cure and leave me and this farm? You are the last one, Clay. The last one. All my children have betrayed me and left this land that nurtured them. Are you going to leave too?"

Clay crumpled before her like hollow aluminum under a fist. "It's not like that, Grandmother. You know I'd never leave." He glanced nervously at Asha. "She's my wife now. She can stay with me until I die. Won't you, Asha?"

Asha felt her mouth open. Tears started in her eyes.

Electra took one look at her face and hissed in disgust. "She won't stay with you. Look at her. She'll be gone before the sun sets and she'll never set foot on this land again." She stomped her hefty heel and turned to go. "You belong to this land, Clay," she called over her shoulder. "Your life is here."

Asha listened to the soft thump of footsteps as Electra walked barefoot down the hallway of the sprawling house. When silence had descended once again, she turned to Clay. "We have to talk --"

Her words seemed to break him from a trance. "I don't want to talk!" he screamed at her. He grabbed his pants from the back of the chair and stepped into them, the armor weave hugging his thighs like a second skin.

"Clay -- !"

He yanked a stained and tattered sweater over his head. "Get dressed," he growled. "And get out. Go away now because I don't want to see you again." He slammed open the back door of the bedroom and stomped into the boots that were waiting outside on the porch.

"Clay, wait!" she pleaded with him. But she might have spoken to the wind, He leaped off the porch and took off running through the orchard, flushing a bevy of doves from the frost-burned kikuyu grass under the leafless trees.

Asha found him nearly an hour later at the top of the orchard, seated on the ground with his back against one of the trees, pruning shears idle in his hands while he stared out at a view that encompassed the house and the lower orchard, and below that, in a vista that seemed to fall away forever, the isthmus of Maul thirty-five hundred feet below, and onward, the western mountains and the long blue march of the sea. A grand, pastoral spectacle that never failed to stir in Asha a sense of awe. Yet I'm leaving. In this moment, her intention seemed nonsensical. There could be no finer home in all the Universe than right here with Clay. Yet she remained determined to go. In the light of paradise her innate restless nature was revealed: a kind of insanity.

Clay refused to look up as she approached. She ducked under the scaffolding that supported the gnarled tree limbs and crouched down beside him. Thick clouds had come up since the blazing sunrise. They clung to the upper slope of the old volcano, white and gray and deepest black, so close overhead that the farm, less

than halfway up the mountain's flank, seemed perched under a roof at the top of the world.

Asha loved this mountain. She'd been born in a house less than five miles from here, had spent much of her childhood on the slopes of this volcano. But when she was eleven, her parents had sought the Cure, taking her with them to live in the Celestial Cities. A year ago she'd acquired a special pass, and come back, to spend her last days on Earth while Dragon was readied. With all the world to choose from, she'd returned to this mountain. It was home, she realized. It always would be. More so now than ever.

As she looked at Clay, she could feel her heart begin to race even above the accelerated pace it had taken for the climb. "Your grandmother's right," she said. "I am a thief. I do want you. It's not too late to change your mind. There's room on Dragon for you. You know I've made it so."

He stared glumly downslope, making no answer. Her fists clenched in frustration. Didn't he realize she had to leave by sunset? How could the unCured be so profligate with time/She reached down, brushed aside a layer of dead leaves with her hand and plunged her fingers into the soft soil, pulling out a fistful of dirt. "Look at this, Clay." She grabbed his hand and poured the cold soil into his palm. "This is what you're suffering for. Dirt. Earth. Soil. You were even named for it! Clay."

His fist closed over the rich, dark earth. He finally turned to look at her. "I'm just a simple farmer, Asha. I belong here with the land. Why can't you understand that?"

She looked up at the heavy clouds. She could feel their cold, moist breath blowing down on her -- an ineffective draught against the heat of her rising anger. She knocked the dirt out of his hand. "I wish this mountain could conjure up one last lava flow -- aimed right across this farm! Maybe that would free you from this place."

He rubbed his palm against his pants to wipe the remaining dirt away. Then he took her hand in his. "You came to me, Asha. I didn't seek you out. You came here to my island, my home, and you made me love you. Now you want to change everything I am, everything I stand for. But why should I change for you? You've taken the Cure. You have forever to live. Would it hurt you so much to stay here a single lifetime, and keep me company while I die?"

His hand felt warm and rough against her own. She imagined this hand growing older, more calloused, as the years rolled by and old age slowly claimed him. What would it be like to live a lifetime with him? To watch him grow old and weak and weary while her own youth remained as constant as the stars. She shivered, knowing she could never endure it, knowing that she would nag him every day to seek the Cure until the love between them finally soured in to hate. Dragon would be long gone without her, and she still would not have Clay.

"Walk with me," Clay said.

She nodded. They sidled out from under the tree, then walked hand in hand past the upper boundary of the orchard. She paused by a rock outcropping on the edge of the forest. The successive bands of two ancient lava flows and one ash fall could easily be counted in the exposed rock. Clay had chiseled off the weathered gray surface of both bands, carving the black rock underneath into intricate scenes of farm life: planting, spring growth, the constant battle with birds and insects, the harvest, the bare branches of winter and children playing amongst the trees. That last bit was purely imaginary. Clay had been the last child to grow up on this farm. She touched the scene wistfully. His skill astounded her. Yet his stubbornness made her want to cry in frustration. For Clay would never carve a free stone. He used his art only on the substrate, on the structure of the mountain itself so that his work could never be moved from the land.

Perhaps she was foolish to try to shake him loose; perhaps that's what she loved in him. Certainly there was a seduction in his permanence, a dreamlike quality in the smooth, predictable pattern that had been laid down for his life.

He tugged at her hand impatiently. He hadn't brought her here to see his art. They walked on through the forest of black wattle, their boots crunching against a thin carpet of tiny fallen leaves and seed pods. Daylight dimmed under the closely spaced trees. The trunks overhead creaked against each other as the wind stirred their tops.

"If I took the Cure I'd have to leave this land," Clay said. "I'd have to ask permission to return, obtain a special permit just to visit this farm once every ten years. And it wouldn't even be mine anymore. Can you see me living in an apartment in one of the Celestial Cities?"

She tried to imagine it, but the image wouldn't gel. "No," she admitted. "But we won't be living in the CC. We're bound for another world, Clay, one that no one has ever seen before --"

"As beautiful as this one?" Clay asked. "My family has lived on this land for five generations --"

Asha yanked her hand out of his in a sudden surge of anger. "They've all left!" she said. "All but you and your grandmother. Even your parents ran out on you. Before you were born. They paid for their freedom with you, Clay. They gave you to your grandmother as solace when they abandoned her for the Cure. Have you ever seen your mother? Do you ever hear from her? And where are you going to get a wife? Except for a few nostalgic tourists like me, this island is almost abandoned! What's the point of staying on? To grow old without children. To be the last beat of a generational rhythm that will end with your death."

Clay's eyes flashed. "There are families left; women who believe in the old ways. Atlanta for one --"

"Then what are you doing here with me?"

His anger faded. A bemused smile crossed his lips and he shrugged helplessly. "What's a simple man supposed to do, when his heart is stolen by the cruel hand

of a heavenly goddess?"

"You are cruel," she answered resentfully. "I've never taken anything from you that you didn't offer willingly."

He shrugged, as if that didn't count. "Come. I want to show you something."

They came to the edge of a steep ravine, one of many that ran like wrinkles of age down the face of the mountain. He followed a faint track down, a deer trail she guessed, that skirted sheer cliffs and crumbling slopes. If there were any snakes around, surely they'd flee at the noise.

She saw no more of his carvings, though there was abundant exposed rock. At the bottom, dragonflies hovered and dipped over a few stagnant pools left by the last rain.

Clay began to climb the other side. She looked after him in dismay. 'Clay, you're not serious." The whole far side of the ravine was covered with a thicket of blackberries. Asha had no desire to challenge those brambles . . . or the slithery creatures she felt sure must abide there.

"It's not far," Clay said, looking back over his shoulder. "And I've cut a path. Come on."

The "path" was little more than a rabbit run. She had to crawl on all fours, and the brambles still grabbed at her sweater and caught her hair. She cursed as a thorn pierced her palm, but she struggled on, until she found Clay crouched in front of a dark hole on the precarious slope. As she came up, he turned around without a word and wriggled through the hole, his shoulders scraping the edges as he squeezed through. "Clay!" she cried, as he disappeared inside.

She hesitated. She did not like small dark places. And for the first time in their relationship she was afraid of what he might intend. She listened to the mournful sound of the wind in the trees; the angry buzzing of a solitary yellow jacket. Then she cursed again, and followed him into the cave.

The entrance was a narrow crevice, taller than it was wide. She could fit through on her belly, but barely. Clay must have wriggled through on his side. She crawled for at least ten feet, until she ran into a wall. It was absolutely dark this far in. She felt with her hands until she found a small opening below her and to the right. Her hands were shaking and her breath came in harsh little gasps. She could hear no sound from Clay. There was no way she could turn around. How long would it take her to wriggle out backward? She twisted her body around to the side and crawled into the little invisible hole.

This passage was even tighter than the first. Icy water dripped onto the back of her neck. Spidery tree roots grabbed at her hair. Tears of despair started in her eyes as she worked her way down the steeply sloping crevice. Then suddenly the darkness expanded. She could lift her head; taste a draught of cold, moist, stale air. She felt carefully around, but could find no walls except the one behind her. "Clay?" she whispered.

"Over here." His voice came to her through the dark, strong, amused. A light flicked on and she could see him across the cavern, flashlight in hand, sitting in a niche halfway up the cave wall like an icon set in the wall of a church.

The cave wasn't as large as it had felt. Perhaps a hundred people could fit inside. She began to pick her way toward him across jumbled rocks. "Why are we here?"

He smiled at her, that beatific smile that had caught her eye last spring when she'd first seen him fishing on the beach at Makena. "This is where I'll come when my life is at an end."

"Clay, stop it." She halted halfway across the cave floor.

Clay said: "I think ninety-nine years is enough for any man. I should be able to make it to ninety-nine, don't you think? Baring any major accident."

"You could easily make it to a hundred and fifteen before old age takes you."

"Could be. But ninety-nine is enough." His eyes gleamed with a fey light. "I like it here, don't you?"

She looked around. The cave was an old lava tube that looked as if it had suffered in an earthquake. The walls were broken and crumbling. White calcite crystals showed here and there in snowy patches on the roof, otherwise the rock was unspectacular. She saw no carvings. Neither were there bones or other obvious sign of prehistoric burials. She shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest. "I've heard there are interesting insects to be found in caves like this."

He laughed, as bright and cheerful now as if he'd taken the sun inside him. "And they'll have me in the end."

"When you are ninety-nine." She could feel a nascent purpose building in the air, and resolved to wait quietly for its appearance.

"Yes," Clay said. "It'll only be a few years from your point of view. I hear the clocks will run very slowly aboardship when Dragon makes her run between the stars. I want you to think of me."

"I will do that."

"You'll probably be the last one alive to remember me."

"I feel the obligation. I'll remember you well."

His eyes were glittering in the flashlight's illumination. "I'll squeeze out all the time I can. I'll wait until the last day of my ninety-ninth year, the day before I'm one hundred. Then I'll come to this cave, and I'll sit right here in the dark until I die. Think of me: a naked old man on a shelf."

"You'll be too fat to fit through the entrance."

He gave her a nasty look. "You don't get it, do you, Asha? This cavern is a special place. No one ever saw it before me. You're only the second human being to come here. Doesn't that interest you? Isn't it important? Why are you leaving on Dragon except to see things no one has ever seen before? Well, here. I've fulfilled your wish and you didn't even have to leave Earth. What do you think?"

She squatted down slowly on the cave floor, cold seeping into her body through the soles of her boots. Her gaze swept the black walls once again. "It's just a cave, Clay."

To her surprise, he nodded, satisfaction rolling like a wave across his face. "That's right. And even if it were halfway across the Universe, it would still be just a cave. It has no soul. No one's ever lived here. No one's ever died here. Nothing's ever happened here at all. Who cares?"

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"That you have to live in a place to imbue it with soul. Someday my grandmother will die. But she won't be gone from my life. I'll know her in the trees that she planted as a young woman, in the paintings that hang in our house, in the songs that I sing that I first heard from her lips." His eyes grew distant. "Everything on our farm has been touched or shaped by someone who loves me. By someone in my family. Even if they never knew me. Even if they died a hundred years before I was born, their love still fills my home. They knew I'd live here someday."

His gaze shifted back to Asha. "You'll never know the satisfaction my grandmother enjoys. You'll spend yourself searching for mysteries, but you won't find them. In the end, everything out there will be mundane, as secular and uninteresting as this cave. The only real mysteries are those of the human heart."

Was that true? Was it? She couldn't deny it outright. She'd seen the grandeur of nature and of human things. Palaces in the sky and mountains upon the Earth. Vast oceans, solar sails. And she'd known wonder and awe and joy at her surrounds -- but never in absolute quantity. Always, under the surface, doubt whispered and made her uneasy. The beauty of the grandest vista, the perfection of the tiniest insect -- what did it mean? In the end, she'd turn away, dissatisfied. The only experience she'd ever had that left her fully easy and content was her sexual relations with Clay.

The notion of being driven by biology didn't offend her. But could Clay be right? Was the human mind so constructed that it could not be satisfied except by something as simple and commonplace as love? "There's more," she said. "I know it. I want to see other places, Clay. It's the way I am." She gazed up at him. He still sat in his niche, one knee drawn up to his chin, the other leg dangling. He watched her -- critically -- as a director might watch a play. She took a step toward him. Then another. "And I will not stay here to watch you

grow old!"

He pulled his leg up and looked at her sharply. A new excitement glinted in his eyes. "Let's gamble our love," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's make a bet on it. I want to stay. You want to go. We can't settle this rationally, so let's give it to chance. Do you think you could find your way out of here in the dark?"

She scowled. "Sure. It's just a simple chamber, and --" She looked around. Where was the entrance hole? She couldn't see it. Suddenly, she was unsure of the exact direction.

But Clay overlooked her distress. "Good," he said. "Then we're on." He hefted the flashlight and threw it across the chamber. It shattered against the wall and the light went out. His voice came out of the darkness, proud, challenging. "You lead us out of here, and I'll leave with you."

Her mouth was suddenly dry. "You'll take the Cure? You'll leave this place?"

"I'll do that." His voice had gone hoarse. "For you. For you."

He'd given up! Given in. Her heart pounded in an adrenaline rush of joy as she turned back the way she'd come. But . . . which way? False colors danced before her eyes as her brain drew hallucinations to populate the darkness. Which way had she come? "What if we can't find the way out?" she asked.

A bitter laugh greeted her question. "Then obviously: you stay here on the shelf with me."

"That's not funny, Clay."

"It isn't meant to be."

So perhaps he hadn't given in quite yet. "You think you'll keep me in here just long enough to miss my passage, right? That's the game you're playing."

"Is it a bet?"

She chuckled. She wasn't afraid of the dark. And she wasn't afraid of losing either. "You're on." She heard him climbing down from his niche. She imagined his body, lean and strong in the dark. Imagined his hands, from out of nowhere, clasping her. She giggled. This could be fun.

Suddenly there was a clatter of rockfall. Clay grunted and cursed. "Ow! What the --?"

"What happened? Are you all right?"

"Something bit me." He sounded as if he were speaking through gritted teeth. "On my shoulder. Uh --! Dammit!" She heard him slapping at the wall. "Sucker got me twice."

"Clay, what is it?"

"I don't know! Something . . . Shit. Adder. . . ." His voice lurched toward her. Suddenly he fell against her, and they both went down. A rock dug into her side, and she winced in pain. "Aw man," Clay moaned. "My shoulder's going numb already --"

"Clay, if this is a joke --!"

Then she felt his shoulder and the line of his neck. They were already swollen.

The paramedic completed her examination of Clay while her equipment was still being ported into the cave. She rocked back on her heels, to meet Asha's gaze. "There's nothing we can do," she said. "I'm sorry. If we'd been on the scene when it happened. . . ." She shrugged helplessly. "But he's gone."

Asha nodded. The snake's neurotoxins had stopped Clay's heart long before she'd found her way out of the cave. It had taken her nearly three hours to discover that the cave entrance lay under a shelf that appeared to be part of the cave floor. Nearly three hours. In other circumstances, that wouldn't have been so long. In retrospect, the task Clay set her had been easy. Lead us out of here, and I'll leave with you.

"You'll still do that," she promised, kissing gently his cold lips. Then she looked up at the paramedic. "I want to take him out of here now."

It required another hour to bring the body out of the narrow cave entrance and up the side of the gully. Clay's grandmother stood on the edge of the slope, watching the progress of the gurney, her wringing hands the only sign of the distress she must be enduring. Where would her love go now? Asha stood behind her, listening to the soft beat of an approaching helicopter. A police officer had tagged a landing zone between the orchard and the wood. She watched him as he waved the ship in. "I'm Clay's wife now," she said to Electra's back. "Officially, that makes me next-of-kin."

Electra didn't respond, but Asha could sense the bitterness of her thoughts. Thief!

"I'm taking Clay for the Cure," Asha said.

For a moment Electra continued unmoved. Then a shudder ran through her body, as if Asha had reached out and physically shaken her. "They told me he was dead," she whispered. She looked over her shoulder. For the first time in that terrible afternoon she met Asha's gaze. "They told me he was dead."

Asha had never shared Clay's fondness for this domineering old woman. How could she, when circumstance had pitted them against each other from the start? Yet

they'd both loved Clay. She was acutely conscious of that as the gurney bearing Clay's white-wrapped body was lifted over the lip of the ravine. "Yes," she explained softly. "By the standards of the unCured, Clay is dead." She stepped aside to let the body pass. "But his pattern remains. The structure of the cells within his brain is still apparent. It'll be no great challenge for the technicians of the Celestial Cities to restore him." She tore her gaze away from the body as it was being loaded on the helicopter. Her gaze fixed on Electra. "But when he's restored he'll also be Cured. His life here is over."

Yes, she was stealing him away, like a thief. . . .

A medic leaned out of the helicopter to look at her. "You the wife?" he shouted over the beat of the rotors. "You want to ride along while we put him in cold storage? Then come on!"

She started forward. But guilt stung her conscience, slowing her. She was leaving Electra with nothing, not a grave to visit, or a presence to be half-sensed from the corner of the eye. She looked back. "Clay was ready to go!" she blurted. "He just couldn't bring himself to make the decision."

Electra's chin rose. "That's what you've never understood: the decision wasn't his to make." Her tired face seemed suddenly flushed with pride. "He belonged to the land. The land looked into his heart . . . and let him go."

Asha's lips parted in astonishment. A half-sensed truth rang inside her like a bell note on the edge of hearing. "The land?"

The medic leaned out of the helicopter again. "Come on, ma'am. Let's go!"

His shout jarred her from her reverie, shattering a vision that suddenly seemed lost to all recollection. "Coming!" she called, and ran hard for the helicopter. Electra shouted something after her. She caught the words as she scrambled into the cabin:

"A tree may be cut down for wood to make a ship, but it roll always bear the grain of its youth!"

"Wouldn't have it any other way," Asha cried. She waved fiercely as the helicopter began to lift. In the beat of the rotors she could hear the sound of drums, in the purr of the engine, the throaty roar of a lion.