

ARINN DEMBO

SISTERHOOD OF THE SKIN

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"Sisterhood of the Skin" is Arinn Dembo's first sale. She attended the Clarion West Writers' Workshop in 1990, and has written some science fiction criticism.

She's from Seattle, and has two children.

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"I wrote 'Sisterhood of the Skin,'" she writes, "after absorbing a lot of horror stories from people who had worked on fishing boats in Alaska. The life of the merchant seaman is atrociously brutal and dangerous, even in this modern age, and there is little or no legal protection for men and women working in international waters-- even less protection than there is for the waters themselves. I suppose I was trying to capture my sense of commercial fishing as a continuous state of violence, not only against Nature but against the finer feelings which make us human."

Ones cut a silkie out of the net today; I came up from the hold to find him trying to kill it on deck with a length of pipe. The rest of the swing shift stood around him, giving him a wide berth; their eyes were hollow and black in the rain. No one wanted to be too near him. He made a broken, high-pitched sound as he struck, squeals of rage wringing out of him in bursts-- as if it were him being beaten.

It looked like a female. It made no sound, ribs already broken over vital organs but nowhere near death -- that flesh is too tough, flexible, packed thick onto bones like rock. The breasts were swollen. It may have been nursing a calf, down there somewhere in the black water. The golden pelt was spattered with blood, so red and dark that it seemed almost purple. Its mammalian blood, based on iron but thick as gravy, the veins in those sleek, supple bodies are like drain pipes.

For just a second its eyes caught mine. I drew my gun and shot it, erasing the eyes, the winged nostrils, the lion's mouth, the misery. Its face was too much like a woman's -- too much like my own.

Jones looked up at me, frozen in his simian squat with the bloody pipe still in his hand. He was beyond speech. I had an endless moment to hold the targeting beam on the center of his chest and wonder if it wouldn't be best to kill him, drop him over the side and try to cut our losses. His eyes were clear, blue, and utterly vacant -- a berserker.

In the end it was simply the fact that I wanted to kill him that decided me against it. I let the barrel of my pistol twitch toward his weapon; he caught the gesture, looked down stupidly at the bent pipe in his hand, and relaxed

his
grip for long enough to let it slip out of his fingers and fall to the rusting
deckplate with a clatter. He lowered his head and wiped at his mouth, like a
man
wakened from a nightmare.; one of the men kicked the pipe away, another
touched
his shoulder. I holstered the gun. Jones the Eider was back, for what it was
worth.

"Let's get this operation back on line before the Captain notices, shall we?
You-- Gallegos, is it ? Get the rest of your crew together and get that thing
down to the lab for me. Don't drag it, either. I don't want blood on those
stairs." I looked at Jones. What to do with him? He was moving slowly, stiff
and
numb, to pick up his gear. "Jones, good work. That's a thousand dollar bounty
on
the silkie, plus the time and a half. You better clock out and spend some time
in the hold, or we won't be able to afford the bill we're running up on you."
He
rubbed the stiff white bristles at the top of his head with his palm and then
nodded, once, in my direction. I watched him go below, his arms swinging dead
from the shoulder sockets, like a marionette with half its strings cut.

The sea rolled under the bowsprit far below, boiling away from the prow like
surf smashing against the base of a cliff. I went to the rail to smoke a naval
cigarette, furtively biting the end to light it. They're supposed to be
pinched
alight with your fingernails, but the sparking fluid they dip the paper in is
mildly hallucinogenic, much more potent than stale tobacco. A lot of the men
don't bother smoking them at all, just sit around sucking the ends, pleasantly
stoned on the spark.

On the horizon I saw a silkie leap. Perhaps it was a male; it's difficult to
say
yet whether there are such things as silkie males. I've had only two specimens
on the table so far, the one I shot today and the other that drowned in our
deep
net, which must have been a calf. There were hints in the immature physiology
which are echoed in the adult; it may be that all the silkies are basically
hermaphroditic. It's only because of their faces and mammaries that they seem
female to us. I looked out over the rain-ragged swells and saw it clear the
waves completely, a thick golden arc far out over the green-black sea.

It leaped over and over, until it became exhausting to watch. That fabulous
strength.

She was too big to fit easily on the operating table. As the men shoved and
dragged the great golden corpse this way and that, trying to get it on the
slab,
I had to think of Wayland Jones -- Jones the Younger-- or rather, the pitiful
remnant which I had examined a few weeks ago; there was nothing left of him
but
his arm.

I've drawn my pistol twice on this voyage. I had to force Benito "Bunny"
Vicarro
to shinny out to the end of the bowsprit at gunpoint in order to recover that
arms it was frozen to a steel safety rung, and the fingers had to be pried off
with a knife. Vicarro cried through the whole operation. I'm sure he thought
it

was vengeance for getting the Jones boy killed. Not true: he was the natural choice. The man is as graceful as a gibbon.

Wayland Jones came out on this trip with his father. He'd never been fishing "off the rock" before-- that is, off his home planet. I don't remember much about him, sadly. He shared his father's terse, powerful genetic code: thick body, heavy arms, bandy legs, mastiff's jaw. A product of unusually high gravity. He had all of his father's virtues as a seaman and a fisherman, without the temper so far as I could tell. He also had dark, curly hair-- a gift from his mother, whoever she may have been.

Hazing is the rule on a first voyage. I'm sure that Jones, Vicarro and Templeton thought nothing of making the poor kid crawl out on the bowsprit to knock off the icicles forming on the gigantic pole --without telling him that it would all melt off in seconds if we sent out a burst transmissions the Albatross can generate several gigawatts of power. Jones Jr. gamely hugged the pylon and bumped his way slowly out over the sea: a hammer in one hand, finding his grip with the other, while the freezing spindle plunged sickeningly over the waves.

I was in the foc's'le tower, looking over our satellite photographs of the area, trying to locate the next school of "fish" in the feeding grounds. I saw Jones Jr. when I happened to look out the window; he had already gone quite a distance from the main body of the ship. He was hugging the transmitter and flailing at the underside with a mallet.

I went to the com to tell him to get the hell off before he got himself killed. The waters of this planet are full of fluorocarbons; they freeze at an extremely low temperature, and even in full gear a man is not likely to survive for more than five minutes overboard-- also, we were making at least thirty knots, and he might very well have been sucked into the static envelope and crushed before we could pull him out of the drink.

He seemed to see something in the sea beneath him. He lost a toe grip and he was suddenly hanging by one hand from the bowsprit, dangling over the swirling water; on deck his father and shipmates jumped up and down in silent glee--a tribe of victorious chimpanzees dressed in men's clothes. From the foc's'le I saw what they could not: the pale shape, skimming fast just under the translucent green surface--I reached for the controls of the forward ice cannon, but I was much too slow.

The silkie reared from the water like a golden-bronze geyser. In the flood lights the men on deck saw it at last, all four meters of the enormous flexing body completely clear of the chop, dancing backward on its tail . . . reaching for young Jones with long, slender flippers open like arms. The monitors did not catch his shriek of terror when its body struck him; twirling him around on the pivot of his wrist like a pig squealing over the slaughtering trough; in the tapes you only see his open mouth, gaping wide for a soundless scream.

It caught him, one limb over his shoulder and the other around his chest -- it hugged him like a girl leaping on to her lover's back, wanting him to carry her

-- and sank its muzzle into the muscle layered over his collar bone, tusks shearing through tendons, shattering bones. For a moment, his arm heroically supported them both. The silkie's weight was so tremendous that the arm ripped free at the shoulder before his grip could weaken enough to drop him into the sea.

The elder Jones lunged over and over against the men restraining him, howling, clawing at them; he would have gone overboard if they had lost hold of him. Several cubic centimeters of thorazine were required before he could be quieted.

It was not the best drug for the purpose, but it was handy in the psych cabinet

and I had no time for subtleties; it took six men just to throw him down the stairs into the lab.

I would have liked to try and trace the silkie: not possible Jones distracted me

for a few crucial minutes, and this ocean smothers our maximum sonar output within three hundred meters of the ship -- our loudest shout is lost in the roar

of the seismic tide. The Captain belayed my order to submerge the Albatross and

search. The silkie took her prey unseen and unhindered down into the dark.

I finished my autopsy of the creature sometime during the first shift this morning, rinsed off my isolation gear under a spray of green antiseptic in the lab and then hiked wearily up the narrow iron staircase to my quarters. The suit

had to be stripped off piece by piece and dropped into the autoclave, and my skin scrubbed until my body stings all over and I'm half-boiled-- still, I feel

a fever coming on; my teeth are already starting to chatter with anaphylactic chills; there must be elements in that thick blood which can penetrate my skin.

The passage of my throat is narrowing. Feels as if the air is thickening somehow, becoming more difficult to breathe. My body is attacking itself -- and

good riddance.

I never have wanted this body. I've applied a dozen times for improvements, been

denied every time-- even the simplest things, like full spectrum eyes. Some of the crew have them. Or a simple immune enhancement; if I had one I wouldn't be suffering like this now. My False Counselor always relays the same message:

"We've found that implants are inadvisable in cases like yours, Ms. Tso. These improvements are poorly suited to a personality motivated by feelings of inadequacy. I can't recommend the procedure, based on your record." One doesn't

have the luxury of hating that placid, smoothly animated face; the computer is perfect, it cannot err. The Counselor program is so realistic that it took me six months to realize that I wasn't actually seeing a human therapist -- a good

one. It provided all the encouraging noises and probing questions I'd come to expect from a psychologist. "If you need to talk, you know I'm always available."

The hate belongs at home. If you have to hate anything, hate this weak, flabby, fallible shell; hate the personal failings that have trapped you inside it.

At any rate, I can't sleep with my breath being squeezed away; might as well record my impressions of the silkie for future reflection.

This was apparently the one that got Jones. I found a naval wristwatch and three old copper coins on a chain -- a good luck charm! -- in its digestive tract. These were in one of several secondary stomachs which surround the much larger primary digestive cavity. I can't determine the purpose for these subsidiary organs: at first I thought I might have stumbled on a second reproductive system-- those nine egg-plant shaped stomachs were beribboned with blood vessels and glands, much more suggestive of a uterus than any kind of gastric organ. The presence of Jones' personal affects seems to suggest that they serve to store indigestible items until they can be expelled. I have recovered stones from two of the other stomachs; these are coated with a thick, nacreous fluid. Do the silkies form pearls in order to protect the delicate alimentary canal?

The intestines are fascinating and also very unusual; the walls are covered with filaments, which seem to serve a double purpose: they absorb nutrients from digested food (an ungodly amount of "fish" in the silkie's gut, in various stages of digestion, they must feed several hours a day) and they also seem to "feel" the food, palpate it as it passes through the digestive tract. The filaments are loaded with nervous tissue, and the area is incredibly blood rich and sensitive. (NOTE: An ingestible poison may be the best way to deal with these animals, should they become a serious problem.) The spinal cord is only inches away from the gut; the nerve fibers are dense in the area, a thick springy webbing which I was not able to examine in fine detail.

The error I made in destroying its skull when I killed it may have been a blessing in the end. If there had been a brain intact, I might have spent all my available time examining it, trying to determine its potential intelligence -- I might not have gotten to the rest of the body at all. The Company xenobiologists would have plumbed the secrets of its carcass in a lab many light years from here.

I'll send a full report to the Captain, along with my recommendations: I don't think the elder Jones needs to be informed of the silkie's payload. The man seems to be teetering dangerously; I'd hate to think that the revelation would destabilize him further. I'd like to keep him functioning for another three weeks, until we can bring the load in. It's the biggest haul on this circuit, our first virgin ocean. Even after three hundred years (subjective time) to restock themselves, the fish parks can't yield the bounty that we're taking now; four cubic miles of fish in a net, two nets full to brimming every week . . . A world never yields its maidenhead twice.

* * *

Woke up after the first shift when my fever broke. Still weak. I can't face the Captain; I've logged my report.

I dreamed of my father. I saw his face, the two paradoxical halves of it; I was sitting on his lap, very small -- small enough again to touch his hard cheek, to polish his glowing golden eye, and feel its heat through a chamois cloth. His flesh eye never seemed as human or real as the other; it was nothing but a sad brown relic. Just so, his flesh hand never seemed as gentle or skilled as the cybernetic one.

My mother was in the dream as well.

My father came to us in the hogan. He walked in without speaking and sat heavily at the table; the chair croaked under him like an old woman carrying a load of firewood. He opened his battered pectoral plate-- his chest split open like a pinata. Candy showered onto the tabletop. He looked down on me, his daughter, and smiled.

Mother stood by the stove, wrapped in blankets and ropes of silver. She was a wealthy woman who married outside her own tribe; my father was a half-breed Lakota before he became a god of destruction. She poured out a bowl of blue corn mush and set it down in front of him, her lips pressed tight. He looked down at the bowl and suddenly went still, shut off like an automaton.

It was too much for her. She went to the corner and bent to pick up his portable generator, because he didn't have a saddle and she had to throw something out the door; I found out later that this is what the women on the reservation do to declare a divorce. He slept, sitting upright at the table with his head bent slightly, as if he were studying his scorched armor. His chest did not move as he breathed.

She dragged the machine to the door, bent nearly double by its weight, while I sat eating my candies two at a time, heedless of the flavors mishmashed in my mouth . . . afraid she would take them away from me. My mother grunted, freeing one hand to open the screen door. She threw the generator out into the red dusty yard. It exploded in a shower of sparks as it hit the ground, and my father snapped upright in his chair, his movement so swift and well-oiled that it could never be mistaken for human.

I don't think he even recognized her. She had cut off his power when he was weak and exhausted; she was a threat. He fired two scissoring beams which plunged into her belly and chest, and she burst into a hot, stinging cloud of superheated red steam. Her four limbs were lost in four directions, and I lay on the kitchen floor, burned and crying-- her blood was so hot.

He had great difficulty remembering sometimes who the enemy was. I woke one

night a few years later to find his golden eye trained on me, sights open. I begged him not to shoot, calling him Poppy the way I did when I was four; he went back to bed, shaking his head slowly from side to side. It took weeks sometimes before the Company repaired the damage to his brain.

They separated us after my "incident." Better for both of us, they said.

Things on deck look good. I've brought miso to the foc's'le and the mid shift reports a school in the nets. There are men on the winches, easing the deep net into the hold to let the seawater drain. I've assigned a few dozen slimers to a watch on deck and on the sonar; I don't want to lose any more chances at a silkie. The women seem grateful for a break from cleaning fish. The machinery can handle it for a few hours; the humans are really only there to maintain standards of quality.

Fascinating creatures, these silkies -- they must be rare, or the probes would have spotted them along with our prey. They wouldn't have sent us here if there were any visible Samoans. Bad policy.

This planet is sometimes very beautiful. If only there were any land, someone would colonize it; the waters are loaded with life. Inuit or Norwegian settlers would do well. I can imagine their hide boats on the water, slipping easily over these beds of vegetation where the Albatross cannot venture -- curachs and kayaks following that trail of twisting green fire which dances on the skin of the sea. They would hunt the silkie as they hunted the orca, with bone-tipped spears.

Lost another man. Still not sure how. Gunther Jones is being held accountable at the moment.

Sometime during first shift today, the crew went in to gas the drained catch in the hold. Simple enough procedure; we've done it a dozen times. The fish are too strong to be gutted live; they have teeth sharp enough and jaws strong enough to snap off a length of two-inch titanium pipe. However, they are susceptible to ethylene gas, which is generally harmless to the men, once it disperses; it asphyxiates the fish within minutes and dissipates quickly enough that they can be processed and packed without danger of spoilage. The crew goes through the job in about twenty minutes, firing their gas hoses into the net.

They claim that this time, the fish fired back.

I've watched the tapes, I attended the interrogations . . . the officers scoured the hold with everything but an electron microscope. There was no weapon. No perpetrator. No fish, either; the net was unmoored in the fracas and dropped back into the ocean. Half a million dollars rained back into the soup and swam as fast as fins could carry them to the deepest, blackest crevasse in the sea. It reflects on us, not the cyborg officers; despite their general disinterest in shipboard affairs, the Company holds them to be infallible.

The tapes, as usual, are useless. Nothing but gouts of red light ripping through the sudden torrent of fish, ethylene canisters howling out their contents without hands to control the flow, men screaming, James Freedman burning. It was obviously a nasty little T-rod that did the job, the sort of laser mining torch that sailors can buy in any port in the system -- nastier than most. I've got a man laid out in my lab who's missing most of the left side of his body. Your average black market laser can't generate that kind of power.

It doesn't matter. Jones has gone insane. He must have dropped his weapon into the water after firing it at Freedman -- or perhaps, much less likely, after firing at a man standing on the other side of the hold. The walls are polished steel; it's not strictly impossible that they could have reflected the energy, some kind of ricochet effect. Jones was standing one man over from Freedman at the time. This is the current consensus: the beams coming out of the net would be just an illusion caused by darkness, gas, confusion.

No sense can be extracted from Jones at all. After the last frenzied assertion that someone in the net was shooting at him, I put him down. His constitution is such that no tranquilizer will hold for long; it may be more economical to put him back into suspension for the duration of the trip. Of course, the extra time will partially drain his tank, but it's more than possible to transfer him to his son's berth for the journey home. Or Freedman's, for that matter.

We're behind, thanks to this appalling accident. We'll have to bring in another load before we can climb the well and get off this spinning ball of slush, and then take the short way home in order to make it in on schedule. The cargo is already promised to half a dozen hungry worlds. If we don't deliver, I can say goodbye to any chance of leaving this kind of duty; for that matter, I might pull worse. I'm the sci-med on this scow, for what it's worth -- an officer, despite the fact that I'm all meat and no metal.

I'll take the obligatory look at Freedman, although I'm sure there isn't anything else to find. I'm getting very tired.

A man crossed himself before obeying my orders. Such a familiar gesture that I stood gaping at him for a few seconds, while he eyed me sidelong his eyes long dark, dubious. The gesture was so pervasive throughout my childhood and youth that seeing it ripped me out of time: Spanish women crossing themselves at my father and me as we ate ice cream in front of the Palace of the Governors. For a moment, I felt what my father must have felt; contempt, indifference, shock. Shame under it all, the nagging shame of one who has surpassed the species in some grotesque way.

There aren't enough places to lay out cadavers in this scabby little kitchenette/laboratory. The silkie occupies the operating table, Freedman's body I've balanced on the open counter by the sink, I only need the one side anyway. Jones is still in the tank, and there shouldn't be any need to lay him out anywhere, if he'll just cooperate. The tank is unwieldy, blocks the door to the

lab, who cares? A crowded little den of science.

Damned glad I managed to get a bead on this silkie when she cleared the water. Of course, I was only being professional; I didn't think I'd hit her, but I knew

I wouldn't get another shot at her. That's the second time I've been lucky.

It's

statistically unrealistic to expect the luck I'll need to get away with this

--

these investigations of mine are pure indulgence. I should be carving up fish, not hunting mermaids.

She doesn't look much like a silkie now. The flippers have become articulated into five digits, one of which looks distinctly opposable. Coincidence?

Impossible. The bones are much more plastic than previously; they actually bend

in the middle like green wood. This, in contrast to the first adult Jones brought in; she had bones like granite. The skull is also softened, unknitted; it has to be. The thing was growing a new face. I can't imagine how it was happening but I intend to find out.

I questioned Jones before he was fully awakened from his deep sleep, still lying

half-buried in the shining shock get of the suspension tank. He stirred feebly as I wiped the cold jelly from his face and peeled away the mask so that he could pull his own oxygen.

"Hello, Gunther. Can you hear me?"

Jones blinked his eyes, slowly and rhythmically. It took me a moment to realize

that there must be a film of the jelly coating his corneas; perfectly clear, but

it would distort his vision. He opened his mouth, sticky threads stretching between his parted lips, and drew in a rattling breath. I had to lean close to catch his word.

"Dead," he said.

I drew away. He did look dead; worse, hideously resurrected. It was not pleasant

to be reminded.

"Am I dead."

His barrel chest seemed to buckle; his shoulders folded together and he sank deeper into the tank. I caught his chin and held his face out of the glistening

ooze, not wanting him to drown.

"You're not dead, Gunther." It took some doing, but I kept my grip on his jaw and pulled him further from the tank without actually having to immerse my hands. The suspension medium is perfectly inert and harmless, but very unpleasant to the touch when chilled.

His eyes rolled up in their sockets, leaving nothing but the sickly blue-white sclera staring out of the parted lids, and he began to speak poetry. I believe the first word was a man's name: Norm, or perhaps Norms. The language was old, some guttural, wet Scandinavian tongue.

Jones opened his eyes again; he seemed to see me quite clearly, suddenly, although it was obvious he had not awakened from his psychotic nightmare. "Oh, he's dead, all right. I've seen you. You and your metal men. Dragon's teeth in the water." His lips pulled back from his teeth and he began a mnemonic exercise, one of the simplest, which fishermen are often taught to help control their panic responses when they lie in the suspension tank, waiting to lose consciousness. It was the one which begins:

"I rowed and rowed until I knowed there wasn't no more to row, For I'd come to the place where the water and waves turn into the ice and snow . . ."

* * *

"Gunther, did you see Wayland in the net?"

He looked at me, cut off in mid-verse. His mouth moved very slowly into the most malicious smile I have ever seen.

"Was he there, Gunther? Did you see him?"

"-- It was all very nice in the mountains of ice . . ."

He continued to recite it until I turned down the temperature of the suspension and pulled the mask back over his stiffening face. It's useless to try to extract information from the man. His mind is broken and I do not have the professional skills or equipment to mend it.

It's a shame, really. I wanted to know whether he had seen his son bite off James Freedman's arm.

Apparently my assumption about the last silkie was incorrect. This one was carrying many small bones in her gastric pouches, all of them recognizably human: a few carpal bones, metacarpi, and the terminal digits of a human hand. There almost seem to be too many of them, even given my previous hypothesis that a silkie in the net succeeded in biting off Freedman's arm when he was killed. The bones were coated in a shimmering calcium secretion, which is very similar in nature to a terrestrial mollusk's --spectrographic analysis reveals nothing more unusual than a few skeins of rare mineral, typical of the sediments we dredged from the bottom. It looks very much like mother-of-pearl, although the dominant colors seem to be yellow and red. There must be infinite variation from silkie to silkie.

I could spend days dissecting one of these ladies, but there were important matters at hand. I unceremoniously ripped apart her head, examining the contents with my microscopes and spectrometer; eventually the tissues were nothing but a blurry, garish soup which I stirred with black pipettes, and I forgot from moment to moment what it was I had been looking for.

The muscles are blood-rich and full of organic compounds, aldehydes, ketones and lactic acid. The silkie must have been using them to fuel its transformation. Opening the skin was remarkably easy; she had lost many layers of dense subcutaneous fat, which made her pelt hang like a loose robe. I had to gather

up

a fistful of it and pull it almost half a meter away from the solid flesh beneath to make a neat incision.

I cut the savage golden features of the silkie from the tightly wound tendons and pulleys which bound her skull, the face of Wayland Jones was beneath it. The likeness to a human was so startling that the scalpel dropped from my hand and I had to turn away for several moments, holding my own face in my hands -- as if I had suddenly thrown back a coffin lid, squatting in the bottom of a rudely opened grave, and found that the occupant was my own brother.

Only the huge, dark eyes had not changed, all pupil but for a rim of muddy brown-black. The orbital ridge was so flexible that I could depress it with my finger, and the upward curve of the cranium was no longer so sleek and dynamically sloped as it must have been before; the curving forehead suggested a more developed cerebral cortex, and the bone of the pate was wobbly, almost cartilaginous. I found the new neural growths forming over the old, folded tight just above the structure which is so like a mammalian limbic system. They looked like buds, densely wrinkled and ready to spread a profusion of meninges like the petals of a mum.

Gallegos finally distracted me from my investigation some time during my fourth consecutive shift in the lab. I did not hear him come in.

"Madre de Dios," he said.

I looked up from the roaring centrifuge and into his wide, staring eyes. I watched, detached, as his face crumpled from shock and disbelieving horror to intense dismay, grief, fear -- and a narrow-eyed, shifting look of guilt.

"Way?" he asked, pointing with a finger which he held close to his own chest, as if afraid the corpse would snap at it.

I stared at him, unable to understand him, for what seemed like several minutes. He offered nothing more, only stood looking at me, obviously waiting for an answer, while the gears in my brain ground slowly, trying to process that one enigmatic syllable. A silent, glazed eternity, two faces as blank as bowls of milk locked in a contest of imbecility. At last I blinked.

"Way . . . land Jones? No . . ." I shook my head like a dog trying to clear the feeling of tiny insects crawling and buzzing in my ears. "No, of course not. Look at the body. It's not Jones -- a silkie."

Gallegos crossed himself with one hand and used the other to yank a tarp over the glistening peeled face of his shipmate. His lips pulled back in a grimace. "It needs to be covered. A la Verga . . . It needs to be buried."

Sharp, naked fear washed over my skin. He was right, of course -- in a manner of

speaking. Gallegos was willing to believe that I'd removed this head from the silkie's stomach, but anyone could have entered the lab during my autopsies and seen the thing -- the men are coming in constantly with cuts, colds, fevers; in my delirium, the reaction that they would have to this spectacle had never entered my mind. I couldn't let it be seen.

I looked up at Gallegos and let him read my face -- the man is quite literate in the language of expression and gesture, for all he signs his name with a leering devil glyph. He looked away, tense and awkward.

"I'll be needing a few men from your crew, sailor. Send them down in an hour." I looked down at the corpse. "I'll be finished by then."

"Aye." He turned and left, rubbing the back of his neck fiercely with one hand as I started up the bone saw.

I had an extremely strong allergic reaction to the silkie's blood; my fever has broken now, but I've been burning for the past several hours. Had strange dreams.

I was holding a tremendous bowl in my arms, filled to the brim with pearls -- pearls as big as a naked skull lay half-buried in seed pearls no bigger than drops of honey. A brown woman stood running one languid hand through the bowl, letting the glowing white sand trickle through her long, slender fingers.

She hefted the biggest pearl in two hands and dropped it into a goblet of wine. The cup seemed small, but it grew as big as a vat to receive the pearl. Thick, dark red slopped over the sides and onto her dress; I smelled hot iron and salt. I dropped my bowl; pearls spilled over my bare feet, and the ground split opens water gushed from the floor, achingly cold. She offered me the edge of her goblet, which she was somehow still able to hold; her hand was gigantic, golden.

"Drink, Beloved," she said, "and you will be transformed." I looked down into the cup, and everything was obliterated but the red reflection of my own face. The red fluid was not wine. It had never been wine. It was silkie's blood, red-violet silkie's blood, with threads of the great pearl in it. A cloud of pale pink boiled up from the bottom of her grail, like milk in a cup of tea. When I wouldn't drink she raised it to her own lips and gulped it down. Blood ran down from the corners of her mouth as she lifted her head.

She put a hand behind my neck and drew me in for a kiss; as our lips met she pushed smaller pearls out of her mouth with her tongue, forcing them into mine.

I swallowed them.

I had other dreams, some even more confusing some more painful. I dreamed of my "incident" again -- it happens often enough when I'm in good health, much more so when I'm sick or over-tired. I've learned how to wake myself up instantly

if
the dream begins, hauling myself out by the scruff of the neck the moment I
see
the signs-- that light buzzing above the bathroom mirror, my own trembling
rust-brown hands in front of my face. This time, I couldn't free myself; I was
too weak to achieve true consciousness, and could only lie there, paralyzed,
while I watched it all again.

It was the final dose of mnemonic booster that did it, combined with the
stimulants I had taken on my third morning without sleep; I was trying to
study
for my mid-term exams in quantum mechanics. I saw metallic flashes in the
corners of my eyes; I became convinced that my eye sockets were made of metal.
If I could only peel off this layer of covering flesh, the rubber mask of
brown
woman-face, I would find my true face beneath it, gleaming; I could recover my
birthright, clean away the blood and polish my own eye with a chamois cloth.

The bathroom, the white basin, the razors my Polynesian roommate used to
maintain ritual scars on her arms and thighs. I picked one up, holding the
little ceramic wafer awkwardly between my fingers, and made an incision at the
hairline.

I watched this for the hundredth time, my own hands working to peel away my
brow. In reality there was nothing but blood beneath my skin -- I was still
red,
red again, an Indian girl down to the marrow of my bones. In my dream, I
pulled
it all away easily, staring at the steely beauty beneath, my jaw elegantly
hinged and socketed. I was delighted, and yet somehow I kept pulling at
myself,
and the steel came away in pieces, like the peel of a strange metal fruit.

Underneath it all was a silkie's face. She opened her lion's mouth, her soft
brown eyes shining. The lips pulled back to reveal her black tusks and
purplish
gums; she was smiling at me.

"Mother," I said, and at last pulled free of the dream. The Captain's face
hovered above mine, gleaming like a steel moon. I looked up into the silver
eyes
of his hologram, and made some effort to compose my own features.

"Report to the bridge in one hour."

The officers' quarters are much larger than those assigned to human crew.
There
are small stairs which lead down onto an audience platform; a chair had been
placed on the platform for me, facing the eight central screens.

"Mister Tso, please sit." The Captain and his staff hung in the rungs and
struts
all around me, each of them bigger than my cabin. Steam rose from the
dripping,
trembling hulk of the First Mate -- he squatted below me on a dais, all
sixteen
legs splayed out to dry.

"I would prefer to stand, sir." Gallegos had betrayed me to them, surely; I
was

prepared for discipline.

"Mister Guon has made several sweeps outside the ship since you submitted your last report on the native predators. He discovered a group of them at the furthest edge of his patrol and recorded their behavior from a distance. We cannot classify the footage. Respectfully request your opinion."

I turned away from them and sat, fighting to control the sudden weakness of relief which swept my body. "It would be my pleasure, sir. Please run at reduced speed."

The curving screen shimmered into a huge curtain of sensuous blue-green, so filled with light that the film could not have been shot more than twenty meters from the surface. Silkies materialized in the softly glowing water, arching their backs. Even at full speed they would have been swimming slowly, gently looping over and over in the water. They swam together, brushing flippers and flukes: I didn't realize until they separated that one of them was partially humaniform -- the flippers bent at an unnatural angle when she reached for the others.

I froze. "One of them seems to be injured," I said. My chest was tight, constricted-- I could hardly breathe. It was ghastly to have to lie to them; but I was suddenly certain of what I was about to see, and the need to protect the silkies was uncontrollable. Tears filled my eyes; I've never been in such conflict before. "Perhaps the others are providing aid or comfort."

"Samoan behavior," the Captain said.

"It would be, yes. But this is certainly not conclusive."

"Continue watching."

Other silkies were dimly visible beyond them, pale and dark circling together in the blue gloom. The group separated and swam one after the other, spiraling down into deeper water. The humaniform silkie rolled over and hung nose down in the water, while the others nuzzled at her flukes and the curve of her anterior surface.

"We found these gestures curious."

I knew what was coming they swam past her one by one and kissed her, rooting in her muzzle for the pearls. I took a deep breath, turned to the council of titans behind me, and lied again -- hoping they would mistake the changes in my vital signs as stress and amazement. "These patterns are similar to others I've studied. A high probability of sentience. They must be Samoans, and we've already murdered three of them-- God only knows how many will starve." I closed my eyes, shutting out the gigantic screen and its circling forum. "The scoop will have to be aborted."

The Captain and his staff sat in silent communion, exchanging frequencies beyond my hearing. At last he spoke: "I concur. We will climb the well at O-eight

hundred hours. Please prepare the crew for flight. All scoop operations will be shut down immediately."

I had very little trouble making my escape.

I loaded Jones myself into a new berth for the trip home. The crew was more than willing to hit the tanks; it was the work of two hours to prepare them for the long sojourn shock jelly and double check their life support systems. There are only fifty-three humans aboard the Albatross, most of them second or third generation fishermen. Getting into a suspension tank is as easy as pulling a blanket over themselves.

I made my own preparations at dawn. I unbolted one of the portside ice cannons and loaded it onto Launch Sixty-three, The Red Shoes, along with my slides, papers and gear. The boat is designed for sampling sea life in a variety of conditions; the generator will continue providing power and heat long after I'm dead of old age. It will still be running when the next ship comes, if it comes -- three hundred years from now, or a thousand.

The timing of the drop was delicate. I couldn't give the Captain any time to abort the launch and retrieve me, so I had to eject during the actual lift-off -- wear and tear on the drive mechanism, waste of fuel is worth more than the launch and any ten of the cyborg officers, much less a human one -- but

I also had to be free of the Albatross and the heavy seas she would cause when she cleared the water. The bed Shoes has her own static envelope, but nothing would prevent my body being pulped if she tumbled end over end in a tidal wave.

In the end I jettisoned the boat at about t-minus three minutes and opened up the engines full bore for ninety seconds, skimming and leaping through the high chop at about three hundred km/hour. I submerged to fifty meters and gunned the rotors to fight the turbulence; it was milder than expected. The Albatross lifted off on time. My little boat shivered in her inertial bubble and wafted through the sea, trembling under the impact of the violent tides.

To you, the someday reader of this journal, to you I offer this explanation of my acts:

All of my life I have been in exile in my own body, forced to live in a stranger's house. Begging, pleading, straggling availed me nothing; I remained a nubbin of helpless flesh surrounded by machines -- an insect scurrying among metal giants. To thrive I needed a titanium shell to cover my nakedness; this was not allowed-- if anything, because I wanted it too badly.

The silkies are not so judgmental. My hands still feel strangely soft; I put on gloves last night to counter the effects of the silkie's blood on my own physiology: Without the catalytic elements in the pearl as a substrate to carry an appropriate DNA pattern, my own body doesn't know what to do with itself. My

carpal bones have softened somewhat in readiness for change -they may firm again
by the time I've determined how difficult it will be to achieve my transformation.

The pearls are the primary form of communication among silkies. If they had a song, it couldn't be heard for long distances, and their numbers are small. They developed a language which they could swallow and pass along; a language which prevents them from being out-adapted by any other organism; any feature which gives an advantage can be absorbed. The story of man's advent is spreading, illustrated among them by blossoming brains and branching flippers.

They seem quite capable of using weapons, given the digits to manipulate them; Freedman was almost certainly shot by the same silkie which ate Jones. She must have been caught in the net with the fish -- armed with Jones's intellect, Jones's opposable thumb, Jones's weapon -- a formidable opponent. Their bodies are like bio-genetic factories; whatever they can swallow, they can become. The DNA sampling kit I have on board should be quite interesting to them.

A pod of silkies approached the boat today. I went out on deck to face them. I've killed and dissected them with my own hands, and I knew perfectly well how serious a threat to my personal safety they could be -- but my reincarnation can never succeed without them, and I think they know what I'm trying to do. They dove and leaped all around The Red Shoes for over an hour, caressing the hull and peering through the observation ports. At last one of them surged up on the starboard side and caught the rail in her gigantic hands; the ship listed heavily to one side until the envelope was able to compensate for her tremendous weight. She threw one elbow -- an articulated elbow! -- over the icy rail and held out the other hand to me; her outstretched fingers were easily long and thick enough to wrap around my waist. In the soft, purplish palm there was a pearl.

Among my own people I was nothing, trapped on the receding shore of evolution. Here, I am the matriarch of a new race. There are always silkies alongside my ship, listening to my voice, to the hum of my engine; they seem to come and go in shifts. I think they've been driving fish into my net. Sometimes they trade pearls with me; if I use the saw, I can easily cut the pearls in half, insert a slip of biomass and return it. I've seen the thickening of a larynx here and there; in my dreams, I hear them singing . . . and although the sound is strange, I know that every voice is my own.

The day will come when I am able to slide naked into the sea, and swim among my new people as one of their number. I will shed this body and grow strong, golden, a ring of rippling muscle and bones like rock.

They will be prepared when humans come to fish these waters again -men will not find them helpless to defend the schools which feed them, the precious pearls of transformation for which Homo sapiens would gladly slaughter them. I give them what they need. When tales of me are passed from mouth to mouth, they will

call

me The Changing Woman. When men and machines are dragged screaming down m to
the
depths, it will be in my name.

I will make them ready, my sisters, my children, my people. Meet us as equals,
stranger -- or do not venture into the sea.