

THE GROOVERUNNER'S WIFE

*

Cavendori had been travelling for three hundred and fiftynine years when he reached the shore of the Mirinjii Ocean. During his voyage he had collected almost half a lightminute and unearthed the relics of five distinct Falloons. Each time Kimberley had risen again and resumed its slow clockwise rotation, more magnificent than ever. The civilization of Kimberley clearly knew the secret of the Phoenix, a way to compress the inevitable dark ages into mere decades, and Cavendori wanted to know it, too.

He was a historian: for him such knowledge was priceless. He was a good citizen and though all of his friends and relatives would be dead by now, his own nation altered beyond recognition, he still dreamed of a return to High Harbor. And he didn't want to arrive with empty hands.

Cavendori was in the prime of his life, as he always would be, but soon his fertility would start to fail. It was time he started looking for a wife.

He didn't know it, but three thousand miles clockwards I was already waiting for him, our fate written in the curling cloudlines and sanctioned by the Perigori Data Bank for Preliminary Extrapolations.

*

I had just turned eight, the clashing of copper cymbals still resounding in my ears, my stomach upset by a surfeit of honeycakes, when a traditional vocational guidance wizard visited our village.

My father was wealthy. At least the other villagers considered him a man of substance, being dirtpoor themselves. We lived in a house that was no better than their own, albeit of a sounder construction, the poles ironwood instead of the usual laquered reeds. Still, the only real measure of wealth in our eyes was farmland and my father owned no less than six acres of full-bearing mango trees. As a badge of his exalted position he kept a real huge, scruffy illtempered bird that ate more in a single day than our whole family in a week. A kick of its muscled stiltlegs could cave in your chest.

As the village's only aristocrat he was expected to follow the fashions of the distant capital. Vocational guidance was the big rage that year. Wizard and cloudgazers were predicting the careers of babies still in the womb, the embryos blissfully unaware they were being typecast as holy beggar-peltrat skimmers.

Our wizard arrived in a palanquin carried by no less than four hundred homunculi. None of them was bigger than my thumb and the vestigial limbs showed they were derived from mouse stock. The cumbersome contraption seemed to drift several centimeters above the ground, its motion

