

The Man Who Lost Red

By Terry Dowling

ERIC DID WHAT THE MEDIC SAID. He did go to the top of Carlieu. It was a good half hour's climb in the wind and the bright sunlight, and not once did he turn from climbing to discover the truth.

Only when he reached the top, sprawling breathless on the hard stones and tufts of grass at the summit, did he look back down at the town—at the green fields and blue-misted hills far off, at the sparkling blue river and the white houses with their grey roofs.

Grey roofs, yes! Grey!

Only then did Eric believe it was true, when he saw the roofs.

He had lost red.

He proved it by locating Mrs Spain's gardens, confirmed it by seeking out the dyeworks near St Benedict's. He found all the places where he had remembered the colour—a post box in the street, certain shop fronts in Daper Avenue, the old faded bus as it crossed the town. In swelling despair, he found their sullen greys.

His gaze became even more intense, searching the landscape, seizing, insinuating. But then Eric sank back in the wind. He stretched out on the hard ground and stared up at the easy spread of morning sky.

Barely two hours ago, down in the infirmary next to the Occlusion Centre where he had been treated, Eric had expected to be deceived. He was sure that would be the punishment for a first offence, contrary to what was said, a glimpse of what it could be like. Or, at the most, a temporary treatment that would wear off after a day or two and leave him shaken, grateful for another chance.

In spite of what he knew about the Seven, he still clung to this. Everyone who was treated did at first, though Eric knew this was not the *iquiri* way.

But, like any human, he had expected to be tricked all the same. The little white First Aid box with its grey cross, that could have been planted just to spite him, though spite was not their way either. The redless streets and sudden unreddened gardens could have been staged too. The paranoia ran deep.

He remembered laughing at the ridiculous cunning of such trickery, at the knowledge that the *iquiri* were highly skilled in the use of things like controlled spectrometry.

As he had rushed across the bridge and out of town, past Mrs Spain's changed gardens, still not believing, these were his two certainties, his dearest truths: the adjustment was real but temporary, or he was in the field of a spectrometric device of some sort.

Then he had climbed Carlieu, doggedly nursing his twin fictions, till he was at the top and the sky was a vast blue bowl and there was no doubting anymore.

He had lost it. One colour gone forever, picked clean from his mind, from his world. Switched off.

Red. Hearts and courage and clowns' smiles, the hot embroidery of war, six roses in ten. Everything from the tones of his favourite Bellini to the firelight-on-paddlewheel effect of the Mayor's bicycle reflectors as he pedalled through the town at night. Gone.

He sat on Carlieu, leaning up on his arms now, legs stuck out in front as he had fallen, and wept for the first time in years. He did it more as a release from tension and uncertainty, because it was not so real yet, more absurd than anything, and he remembered red well enough. He did it because what else do you do when you have gaped and laughed and are still faced with such an astonishing and simple discovery? Knowing, too, that the day would come when the memory of red would not be enough to overrule the greys, to give blood its hue or make a roof red again. Who would have thought that the roofs of Carlieu were red enough to lose?

That thought did it. Eric sat there, legs thrust out like a child's toy clown, and the despair came. Now he wept because he would never again see a red roof or blood or the last blush of sunset, just a gamut of browns and golds, a conspiracy of purples and yellows and hot burnt oranges edging towards their sly treachery of grey. Greys in every shade and depth and wicked taunting imposture. Grey for vermilion, grey for crimson, grey for fire, grey for blood. Grey for the lips of a woman and the cheeks of a child.

He knew then how well he had been punished. For a crime he no longer remembered.

It was two weeks before he returned to the Centre; two weeks in which he discovered colour again, and seeing, and went from despair to elation at no longer being a criminal.

Nights, he found, were easy. Candles and lamps were kind, gave mostly golds and warm yellows, rich alternatives. Eric's eyes sharpened to the nuances of any of the warm colours and he cultivated them. He could walk the darkened streets and sometimes forget what he lacked. A light through a red shade in a window or a diamond-pane of red stained glass was the stillest of grey-whites, like the lambent ghostliness of a television screen. If he moved quickly past such windows, he could never tell.

He avoided Carlieu's few major intersections. Once, in his second day, he played his game with the traffic lights at the end of Daper Avenue, watching the shift from green to amber to grey, timing the shift back to green again, then watching the amber for as long as he could before pressing his eyes shut.

This was his bravado stage, of course, and it lasted the two weeks. Eric took a room at Mrs Spain's and had several of his more sympathetic fellow tenants help him decorate it. A well-meaning old man named Claude had plans for making it a masterpiece of evasion, and Eric at first consented to this, partly for the company and partly to explore his new needs and tolerances.

But after one evening in this foolish, intensely-coloured bower, crowded by the rich curtains and bright walls, Eric moved his few belongings to a room on the other side of the building, a drab quiet room overlooking a lane and starved of light.

As for the days in Carlieu itself, he avoided certain streets altogether. He did not look at the old bus whenever he heard it coming, and kept away from the porch of St

Benedict's where the dyeworks were. He never went to the back of the guest-house either; the gardens were there. By habit, his eyes avoided the roofs.

Nor did he climb Carlieu again in daylight, though at night he would go there, night after night, to look down at the town. That was where he learnt that red is not the worst colour to lose, that blue is the worst, then yellow and green. Red was a highlight colour, Eric discovered, a hue for flourishes and intensities and vivid small doses. Or so he remembered it. Now it had a new dramatic role; now he knew it by so many shades of grey.

Day was the enemy. Eric played the early days with great care. He made his daily visits to the Clinic in the middle of the town so the medics could check for any signs of occlusion shock, each morning striding down the safer streets like a horse with blinders, head down, eyes fixed on the central square.

Then that began to change too. By his twelfth day, he was ready for his biggest test. He took the bus into Ansard, then made the tube connections that took him to Barracamba itself. He used up most of that week's pension to secure a compartment to himself, and when the carriage eased into its platform at Maize Street Station, Eric emerged pale but composed on to the bright windy streets of the capital.

Eric made himself use that day. He went down to the harbour and watched the Casaeri fishing-fleets; he stood by the fence at the spaceport and watched the shuttles going up, his eyes riding each hot fantail. He went to the Tandercote Gallery and saw his favourite Bellini (a copy) and Corben's "Bat Out of Hell" (the original)—seeing this as a sere grey place out of Brontë or Poe rather than the fiery Dantesque field that it was.

By mid-afternoon, the man who could not bear to watch the ends of people's cigarettes was sitting in the Public Smokery near Bosty Market, chatting with the longshoremen.

He returned to Carlieu that night exhausted but victorious. He left the bus in the square—it was no longer high courage to ride the bus—and walked back to Mrs Spain's, making himself take the road that ran beside the flower beds. Night was well-advanced on the town, and all this was easy, a mere gesture after what the day had been; but he did it anyway.

Then he went to bed and sank into a deep welcome sleep, believing he had won.

The next step was just as inevitable.

The following morning he walked back down to the square, to the old-style stone building set there in the cool morning light as if separate from the rest of the town. The single-storeyed sandstone structure with its high-pitched slate roof always reminded him of the old railway stations you came across now and then. The infirmary at the side where he went for his check-ups was a later addition, but built from the same lion-coloured stone as the rest. That was where he had been adjusted and it had its own door marked 'Clinic'.

Today Eric did not go there. Today he went to the door of the main building, the door with the blue iquiri rosette and the sign with the words 'Regional Occlusion Centre: Carlieu Facility'. Below it, a second sign was lettered with words that Eric had

seen a thousand times but only now fully understood: 'Isolation is the ultimate deterrent'.

Once there had been some graffiti sprayed on the wall in black next to it, a desperate plea: 'Send the ikky buggers to Coventry!' The capital 'C' had made Eric look up the word for the first time. He had learned of a city, of a famous ride made by a naked woman named Godiva, and of the isolation of the infamous Peeping Tom by his fellows. Mixed up in the account, too, was how, in Cromwell's time, difficult prisoners were once sent to Coventry for a similar reason. Isolation.

The graffiti had lasted a day and had never appeared there again.

Eric read and re-read the sign that still did remain, smiling ruefully now that he had a little 'coventry' of his own, as the saying had it.

He looked around the square once, at the bright plumes of steam from the dyeworks behind St Benedict's, at the terrace of the Café Milo. The proprietor's son was serving a young grey-haired woman at one of the tables. That caught his eye.

Eric laughed, though his breath caught first as it often did when he was taken unawares. Then, before his thoughts could angle off further, he turned the old brass handle and stepped inside.

The main office of the Centre was as he remembered it from his previous visit: the walls decorated with travel posters and a Chol tapestry (ugly but an original); an iquiri jelly-clock beside the long front desk, the glycerine sluggish in the clear tubes; the same grey-haired receptionist, Mrs Mills, seated at her keyboard. As he entered, the woman stopped typing and looked up, saw who it was and smiled.

"Mr Andlan. Eric. It's good to see you. You've kept all your appointments."

"You expected me about now."

"Well, yes. I did," the woman said, and there was a warm, caring quality to her voice. Mrs Mills was an equate. Her empathy rating, like those of all humans who worked for the iquiri, was very high. Had she been standing close to him, no doubt she would have instinctively rested a hand on Eric's arm—and genuinely, feelingly so, without pretence or intrusion. As it was, she let her eyes do their healing best.

Eric looked about the large quiet room, fascinated by the oh-so-easy marriage of things iquiri with things human. He noticed the careful lack of greys, the medic's report on the desk beside the keyboard, and silently accepted the extreme finesse of this aging woman.

"You've been watching me?" he asked.

"Only now and then, Eric," she said. "Your movements in Barracamba yesterday. That was a big day. You did well."

Eric began to feel angry. In spite of everything, he had not expected surveillance like this.

"What if I walk out right now?"

"Then you walk out. Possibly you'll come back later. If not, then we can't help you."

"Will surveillance stop?" he snapped. Somehow it mattered.

"It already has. The directive was issued this morning."

"From Osiris?"

"No. From Sebek. A new iquiri facility on the Moon."

“They’re spreading,” Eric said. “We’re supposed to be getting more rights and they build on the Moon.”

“Self-government is close, Eric.” Mrs Mills rose to none of the barbs. “The Custodianship will end soon.”

“Could I see Doctor Rite, please?” he said then. “Or one of the medics?”

“I’m sorry. This station operates on a rotation basis. Doctor Rite was here to do an adjustment earlier this morning. Now the team is over in Ichos.”

“Coventry grows!” Eric spoke the old adage, astonished at his own bitterness. He had not come here with bitter thoughts. They were brought on by the controlled calmness of everything, by the casual news of another occlusion in the town.

But the equates always drew this. It was why they were chosen.

“That’s right, Eric,” Mrs Mills said. “But it also grows less.”

“Can you tell me what led to my treatment?”

There, he had said it. He had asked the question.

Mrs Mills shook her head. “No, I can’t do that, Eric. They do not let us do that. We don’t even keep records of such things here. It’s part of our arrangement with the iquiri.”

“But the iquiri know?”

“They do. Yes. The records go to them in return for their services. As Doctor Rite told you, the crime is determined by human law and the Compact; the adjustment according to the iquiri schedule. We don’t know why you were treated. It’s best that way.”

Eric recalled the unreality of that other morning two weeks before, the small doctor talking to him, briefing him. That was before he knew the meaning of the sign on the door, the one below the rosette. Nothing Doctor Rite had said could encompass this.

Now, in the layered silence, Eric gazed past the grey-haired woman (an honest hard-won grey that) out through a window and across the square to the Café Milo, studied the few customers at the white metal tables, the grey-haired girl and two others, noted again the grey-haired girl.

“This is for you, Eric,” Mrs Mills said, gently interrupting, as if knowing exactly where his reveries had to lead and when to cut them short. She handed him a long white envelope stamped in one corner with the blue iquiri rosette and addressed to ‘Eric James Andlan, Adjustee J83902’.

He held it dumbly in his hands, staring at it and through it, trapped in this moment of terrible relapse. Was this occlusion shock, he wondered? Now, after all he had been through? Was this the loop of madness that would catch him?

The questions kept coming. Crime may have virtually disappeared, but what did become of the criminals? Were they able to live their lives in places like Carlieu, accepting their awful punishments, managing to conduct their lives chastened and changed? Could that be done?

It hardly seemed possible.

Eric found he needed to discover what became of the criminals, his fellows in this altered world—the ones with the coventries, with the bits switched off.

“That document,” Mrs Mills (damn the woman!) began, “is from the iquiri offices in Barracamba, straight from Osiris. It explains the special circumstances of your case. Your offence, Eric, whatever it was, no doubt involved aspects of your previous lifestyle, notably your position in the design section of the shipyards at Kent-Molly. Doctor Rite could not easily erase knowledge of the infringement without tampering to some extent with your skills training as an aerospace engineer. Compensation details are in there. You will not return to Kent-Molly. You are to present yourself at Sea Platform on the first of next month. A complete re-orientation program has been logged for you. Your pension will continue until then, of course.”

And when she saw how Eric was looking at her, she did reach across the counter and touch his arm, a dry-leaf, feather-soft touch, a comfort in spite of what he knew of her and still no intrusion.

“No, Eric. I do not know what your crime was either. Only your penalty. I do know that.”

“So what did you change?”

“I beg your pardon? Oh, I see. The tapestry. I changed the tapestry.”

“It’s awful.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Mrs Mills agreed, smiling, looking over to the Chol piece.

“And will you put up the old one when I leave?”

“Just as soon as you leave!” the equate said.

They laughed, and though Eric felt the wave of panic ebb in him a little, the despair remained. All his victories, all his small painful triumphs, came to nothing in the face of it. Tears ran down his cheeks, fell on to the envelope.

Again the hand reached out, but Eric tore away, infuriated by his tears, not wanting to be touched, not wanting to see the mirror tears that he knew would be in the equate’s eyes.

Clutching the envelope, he rushed out into the strong light of the square, careless of whatever newly brutal reds might lie in ambush, angrily challenging Carlieu to display all it had, daring the dyeworks to show their bravest vermilion and richest scarlet.

But the town took him calmly into its morning silence. The bus was not there; at the dyeworks it was a cool colour day, had been all that week. The awnings at the Café Milo were their familiar faded green and white. Only that girl at one of the tables had hair the shining metallic grey of coventried red.

She stood out like a target at that distance. His eye had perfected the skill, refined in Carlieu, tested on the raw streets of Barracamba. He could tell the red greys quickly now and the girl’s was one. Her hair had to be a brilliant shade to cancel into grey like that, not copper, not auburn or golden brown.

Before he quite knew it, Eric was at the Café Milo, seated in one of the chairs and looking from the grey-haired girl back to the building he had left. He held the crumpled envelope, unthinkingly smoothing it out, reading the name and number again, noting the distinctive blue flower—the imprint of the iquiri.

Then he looked at the girl four tables away. She was a mirror-image of himself, one moment staring down into the empty coffee cup in front of her, then across to the Centre and the Clinic, then about the square. The action was unmistakable.

Eric got up and crossed to where she was sitting.

“Have you been adjusted today?” he said, blurting out the words.

The girl flinched, badly startled, and Eric was left looming there, feeling foolish and cruel.

“What?” she said, her clear attractive face still pinched with distraction. Then, hearing his words: “Yes.”

“I’ve lost red,” he told her and sank down into a chair.

She saw his envelope and gave a tight smile.

Eric realised then that she did not know yet, that she hadn’t discovered what her coventry was. He saw that much in the distraction, in the clasped and twisting hands on her lap, in her moments of sudden concentration. She was touring her sensations, mentally ticking them off.

Eric saw how lucky he had been. He’d had the First Aid box with the grey cross, so comical and obvious and mercifully, mercifully, soon after his occlusion.

This girl did not have that comfort.

“We make poor companions, I’ve been told,” he said. “I’ve had two weeks.”

“I don’t mind if you stay,” she said. “I’ve been here all morning going through my senses, trying to find out. I’m pretty sure it’s not visual or tactile, but it’s too soon. I need an ocean. I need flowers. There are textures and sounds . . .”

He held his envelope before her darting eyes.

“Eric James Andlan,” she read. “Oh—I’m Tey. Tey Manton. I’m—I was—a programmer from Branseller before this. Who knows what I am now.”

She went on, sketching in her life for him between intense glances, sudden anglings of the head to listen, a tilt back to smell. In some ways, her story resembled his. Whatever her offence had been it had already ruined a career, a family’s reputation, and the chance of a marriage. The facts emerged in their broken, disjointed way, always overshadowed by the more important task of isolating her penalty.

Without knowing it, Eric began helping her. He used their surroundings, the square, the café, the hills beyond the town. He bought pastries and entrées to test a range of tastes and smells—sweet, sour, tart, pungent, bitter, salty. He made her sing songs she knew, then add octaves and harmonies to one of his; had her think of animals, listen for the wind (and feel it and smell it) and children laughing in a house on the far side of the square. He made her touch surfaces: fabric, metal, wood, stone paving, skin, rough and smooth, all the trivial, unsuspected things. Tey would reach for the smallest pebble with a desperation he keenly understood.

They worked for hours at this, as the sun climbed from mid-morning into a golden afternoon. Each phase of their quest brought first the tension (would it be this?) then relief as they played on in the game that was not a game, trying not to miss the obvious.

Which, of course, they did.

One moment there was laughter, the next a taut silence as they explored a new touch, a different smell, sought out a new sound. Then relief and more laughter, an absurd counterpoint between them. Milo and his son joined the game from time to time, making suggestions, doing their jovial best.

Eric began to be optimistic. Whatever coventry Tey had been given did not seem to be a blatant one. Or rather, nothing too basic. Not like his, he thought, but mentally retracted that. Any coventry would be major and basic and totally precious. Losing the smell of ozone after a storm, the hum of telephone wires in the wind, the thrill of driving over a hill into a sudden dip, the immediate, total, immeasurable gift of smelling the first gardenia of a season, hearing cicadas on a hot afternoon, tasting salt.

He worked harder on her behalf, becoming a friend out of empathy rather than sympathy, an equate to her in fact. He laughed with her, concentrated when she did, suggested things to try, easily forgetting his own loss—that her hair was a blowing, flashing silver grey, that the roofs of the houses reaching up towards Carlieu were tramp's patches of grey against the smooth green curve of the hill.

But in their fourth hour together, the mystery was solved. It was astonishing for both of them how quickly it happened, and what an obvious and precious and cruel coventry it was.

There was a fountain at the south-east corner of the square close to where the café terrace ended and Dose Avenue began, a small bubbling fountain visited by many birds. Eric saw Tey glance at it (she had done so many times), concentrate on it—her eyes widening; saw the blankness of expression twist into silent tears.

He grabbed her hand, his own eyes sweeping from Tey to the fountain and back. "What, Tey? What?"

She turned to him, panic gone, but despair everywhere in her eyes, in the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Can you hear them?" she asked.

"The birds?" Eric said. "Yes. I can hear them."

And knew she couldn't.

He could find nothing to say. He sat holding Tey's hand, watching her trace the course of each bird that landed in the square, watching the small shapes that tumbled and ducked and flicked about the fountain. And sang. She looked up once as if to have him confirm that, yes, they were still singing and chirruping there.

Eric nodded, feeling leaden and angry. He noticed the greys more than ever now, even the safe ones: every roof, every fleck and mote, real and imagined, cherished red, memory red, fantasy red, the strands of Tey's blowing hair.

"What kind of justice is this?" he asked, not of Tey but of everything around him, of himself, the day, the universe.

And what had been a dimming, subsiding urge to know more and persevere, a tolerance and an acceptance, now became the only cause.

Because of Tey. Because he was seeing it, living it all again through her.

He went from sorrow to incredible fury, honest burning fury, while next to him Tey looked up, sensing his rage. He looked at her and his rage doubled.

The tears had stopped, but her eyes were grey from crying.

He lost Tey. She stayed with him that night, as a child, too grieved for love, wanting nothing but to be held, to lose lost birds in sleep. In the morning she was gone, back

to Branseller, back to whatever fragments of her past life were left to her—the residue—so she could sort those pieces and discover what sense they made now.

For Eric, Carlieu became more of a limbo, more of a prison. He was glad to go to Sea Platform as a line-engineer, and then on to Bass Strait III. He worked the European and Oceanian spaceports for a time, earning himself the clutch of names that were to dog his new life in one form or another in the days to come. To most of his workmates he was known as Red Andlan or Red 'Anded or simply Red. A Swede in Naples christened him Eric the Redless after some ancient hero; an Oceanian engineer in Canberra came up with the unlikely name of Blue.

In the first three months he went to most of the ports on Earth, but never back to Kent-Molly or Carlieu. And wherever he went, Eric found he was biding his time. He never forgot his brief intense time with Tey; never forgot the tumbling songless birds he could hear, thank God, but she couldn't. He fell in love with her somewhere between Canberra and Amsterdam, not that he really noticed. It was all part of what drove him, what gave him his plan.

For Eric found he did have a plan. He was the adjustee who asked the questions, the engineer who wanted to know all about the iquiri. Time and time again, everywhere he went, he confirmed all he had ever heard about them, and about the Custodianship. That they had come to Earth on a cool September afternoon in 2014; appeared—the seven of them—at the General Assembly of the United Nations during a full session; just walked in through the great doors, down the aisle to the rostrum.

They looked like men, these invaders, well-made men; each impeccably dressed in a sober three-piece business suit with shirt and tie and neat black shoes. Each wore a ceramic mask fitted to his face and had hair brushed and shining and cut in close to the neck. They had moved calmly to the front of the massed delegates, turned and faced that awestruck crowd.

The middle one of the seven—Bofari Thames, as he came to be known, the one with the smooth plain mask of surging greys fixed in mid-roil—had spoken then in perfect English.

“We shall give you time to arrange adequate global coverage of what we have to say.”

Guards had moved in; guards had vanished in sudden detonations of light. Yes, exactly that. Detonations and the flashes of light. A clap; an implosion for each man. The infamous flash-gate effect.

At the same time, three enormous oblate machines moved into orbit around the Earth, dead black craft picked with light. As a matter of course, satellites and weapons installations belonging to the different nations went into precise action, smoothly, routinely.

More detonations, more quick flashes. Each engaged facility was gone, flash-gated out of existence. For several seconds a receptor on the side of one of the ships then passing over Northern Africa glowed just perceptibly with the influx of energy then went dark.

When the cameras were set in place and running, another of the creatures—the one with the mask of cool pale blue, Barlu Octavian—stepped forward. In a full rich voice, he

announced that a conquest of Earth had taken place, then stated the terms of the iquiri occupancy. The delegates watched in disbelief as the creature listed them.

There was to be enforced cosmopolitanism, denationalisation of Earth's peoples with large-scale re-locations; the formation of a World Council, with elected delegates approved by the Seven; and a careful resources control and development program. The planet was to be one. It was to be very much a rule of non-interference, though the iquiri with the pale blue mask—The Fair Countenance, he also called himself—would be present at all Council meetings, to assess decisions and motives and occasionally overrule. Zero population growth would be in effect for two human generations; efficient male contraception was made available.

Also, the iquiri reserved the right to punish all criminals according to the ancient iquiri schedule, using a system of penalties which usually meant an occlusion plus removal of all knowledge of the crime. The adjusted criminals were left to discover for themselves the full nature of their 'coventry'. That came to be the popular name for it, right from the start. A coventry. Being 'sent to Coventry' once meant being ignored, cut off and isolated from all about you. Now it meant an isolation of a different sort and, more than that, one stage in a potentially unending isolation from all reality.

All these things were made possible by iquiri technology.

There were other stipulations, of course, but they surfaced only when the Custodianship was in force, when the blue iquiri rosette began appearing on the doors of medical centres, libraries and the offices of public utilities. That small blue shape came to mean a great deal, everything from the most effective of warnings to an indication of an absolute and impartial caring—the sign of something necessary and temporary.

For that was the sense of it.

Even from the first intimidating days, the Occupation seemed somehow to be a transitional thing; it would not last. The great ships, now joined into an orbiting tripartite installation called Osiris-Anubis-Set after the ancient terrestrial gods whose functions they usurped—Judgement, Intercession and Destruction—would one day go, running out of system away from Sol to jump free of this place. That was the feeling.

Meanwhile, the iquiri nationals themselves represented the Greatest Enemy, the Greatest Friend, the Greatest Mystery humanity had yet faced. Set destroyed the few armies that were mobilised in those first anxious days, changed land-masses, built viable biospheres on the Moon and Mars. Anubis guided the world's economy, deployed skills, moved people, regulated resources, co-ordinated travel across the world. Osiris judged. With uncanny skill, all criminals were tracked down and sent to one of the occlusion centres. True, some were not found for years, but punishments—the coventries—were adjusted accordingly. Criminals began turning themselves in.

Then there were changes. Not all criminals were punished by occlusion. Some were fined, some set to working on public services for a fixed period though with pay and always the threat of occlusion should they shirk their assigned tasks.

Crime could not pay except as a gesture of rebellion, but when the memory of the act was taken away as well, such gestures were better made by public debate or petition to the World Council. Petitions, handled under iquiri supervision, that were always heard.

For the first time, bureaucracy worked with smoothness and precision. A faltering bureaucracy was counter-productive; it amounted to criminal negligence.

There were so many changes, so many huge projects, so much prosperity with the equalisation of resources. The factors that encouraged crime—the frustrations, the indolence, the disadvantage and opportunism—vanished. There were enough jobs and dangers and challenges, colonies on Mars and Luna, hazardous reclamations, sea-farming, new risk professions. There could never have been a world like it without the Outsider.

Eric relearned all this with new purpose, became sure of all that was known about the iquiri, so he could be informed, if possible impartial, totally fair, unprejudiced. Each new re-location brought him to it again, led to off-hours at the information systems, getting the latest data on the Seven. It brought the sobriquets, rarely original now, rarely a trouble.

Rarely.

One American in Oslo, noting Eric's zealous preoccupation, called him Captain Justice. It was there, the night after that joke had soured in a bar and Eric fought the loud-mouthed man to silence, that his letters began. He wrote to Tey care of the Carlieu Centre, knowing Mrs Mills would do her best to pass his letter on.

Tey,

I thought of you today as I do most days. I want to hear from you. Are you managing? Are you well? Try to write to me at this address, or through Carlieu.

Love, Eric.

(Red Andlan)

He wrote to her again a month later from Cos in the Aegean, then again from Port Michaelmas.

Six more months of this and I'll be back in Carlieu. Full circle. Can we meet, Tey?

Eric (Andlan)

Her first letter to answer his second caught up with him at the big top-security installation near Syrtis Major on the grey planet Mars (though this was Eric's joke—Mars was rarely red enough to bother him).

He was staying at the Major-Minor complex for just six weeks, and there, of all places, her letter reached him, her too short, regulation-sized letter.

Dear Eric,

I've wondered about you too, many times. You'll be pleased to know that I haven't lost all birds—there are raptors I can hear caw and shriek, though no true songbirds. Not like at the fountain. As for the meeting, no, not yet. Too soon for me. And they wouldn't let us. I

haven't done as well as you might think. Programming is finished for me. They won't let me go back to it. I've applied for that new diplomatic corps arm: Population Assimilation. I might become an equate. Did you know many of us do? Mrs Mills is probably one of us. Do keep writing, but let's not meet just yet.

Love, Tey.

Eric sat in his tiny M-M room, holding her letter, not sure what he had expected; not this guarded neutral note, not something as unfeeling as this.

But what should he have expected? What right did he have to expect something more?

Yet even as he resigned himself to the drab, orange-green, brown-green, grey-green tumble of the Martian plains and the silence, he started to recognise just how time and days and distance were wearing him down, turning him away from much of his resolve. It gave him a new determination.

He began to see how the whole year-long circuit from Sea Platform, around the world, off planet to Syrtis Major, was part of a deliberate process, a careful rehabilitation—his own trip to Barracamba on a larger scale—and that Tey was being kept busy in just the same way. He had expected her letter to goad him on, but it had come to him out of that same turmoil somewhere else.

They did meet once during that year as it turned out—two brief days when their duty paths crossed in Amsterdam, which only confirmed it all for Eric, that it was a planned thing. Tey was off to Amazon House again; he was back on Earth and down for Rengal's Gate for a three week stay at the Great Mill.

They met nervously, both of them aware that they weren't even lovers and not really friends. They had met on a morning months ago, shared their occlusions, shared a night together, closeness and distance both, and written letters ever since.

Now they had to back it up or let it pass.

So they began with a walk from the terminal where they met, and hadn't gone half a mile before they spoke of coventries. It was the sort of desperate, selfish, meticulous conversation that only adjustees could appreciate: hard questions, broken thrusting answers, obsessive monologues. Their body language showed them more, fortunately: that yes, they would be—were—lovers even before they could wonder about it; the way they turned in on each other as they walked, leant together as they sat over coffee, gripped each other's hands, assumed that the other would bear unquestioningly with their intense preoccupations.

"I've found that I haven't lost all reds, Tey," Eric said. "My colour vision coventries at about 60 angstroms, around the 606 nanometre mark. I lose at the brownish-yellow shades around Crayfish, Fraise and Madder Red, that whole area. I can see all the lower reds below those, the yellow and brown reds. I lose the very wide middle range, the best intensities, then it coventries out above the 495 nanometre wavelength, at the blue red tints between Flamingo and Cerise. They're the first blue reds I see. Then there are the purplish and greyish reds . . ."

"Precisely?" Tey asked.

“No. Never precisely,” he said. “It’s not that definite, not that regulated at all. It fluctuates. But I can name the hues, tones and intensities that frame it. I usually lose on a heavy shade and regain on a full tint.”

Tey let him talk. He needed to do it more than she did. She could allow him the incredible unthinking selfishness; she knew that one met so few people who had been treated. When a coventry was known, there was more likely to be extreme self-consciousness and caring (and not so caring) jocularly than thoughtful, sober questions. As with blindness or a deformity, it was polite not to ask. Many adjustees avoided the subject of coventries also, pretending the deprivation did not exist. You could not small-talk about such things as the loss of ‘soft’ or the smell of sea-brine or the sound of a closing door. Most often, the coventried ones came to be cut off in the one area they needed to live the most.

So Tey understood. She let Eric talk about Mars and Port Michaelmas and Bass Strait III and Rengal’s Gate, his knowledge of the subjects of the iquiri and colours that he kept coming back to, unable to leave them alone, not with her.

Because she had lost birds, she had given him back birds in a way; because he had lost red, he had given her every red there was—and, in a sense, colour itself.

But one thing threw her as they walked along once more; one thing broke her great control.

“I can read the greys, Tey!” he was telling her. “Read them and red them!” He laughed, excited to be sharing it. “I know the tones and intensities. I know what grey is Scarlet Red and Medici Crimson and Claret and Attic Rose. I even know the colour of your hair now. I know equivalentents. It’s a silver grey, a tint, but I know what it reds out at. I know!” And Tey began weeping. To know just how Eric would have laboured at that one task struck her to the heart; that he now used ‘red’ as a verb hit home like nothing else had.

“Eric . . .” she began.

But like a child at school, jabbering, excited, babbling out what his day—his year—had been like, he kept on.

“Did you know there was a colour called Lizard? You’ll find it in the Mortlake tapestries of the eighteenth century. And Midnight? That’s another name for Ming Blue or Mohammedan Blue. What about Ecru and Smalt and Oporto? Cardinal and Ormolu?”

“You’re making them up! Stop it!”

“No, Tey! No! They’re real, all of them! They exist! Scarab Blue, Satinwood, Kermes, Green Beetle, Gault Grey, Mummy Brown, and Flame. All real colours! I love the blues: Cyanine Blue, Florentine Blue, Lapis Lazuli—”

“Stop it, Eric! Please! Enough!”

She wailed the words and he stopped.

Tey looked at him, blinking back tears.

“Shall I talk about birds now?” she said, and the tears streamed down her cheeks. “Shall I tell you about the forty-seven types of bird I can hear, Eric? You would not love them very much; none them are very beautiful. But, of course, the buzzard sings like a

nightingale for me these days. Shall I tell you what it's like to face Amazon House again without the birds?"

But now Eric was weeping too and Tey stopped.

Now they could be lovers. Now they could leave the streets and cafés and bars and go back to the small hotel near the canal. Now they could leave their obsessions. For as long as they could bear it.

He went back to Mars shortly after Rengal's Gate, spent another three months out on the dreary plains, breathing stale air and avoiding windows. He found that Mars was redder in places than he remembered.

He thought a lot about the motives for the coventries too—about the whole issue of occlusion, of the differences between imposed, unknowing and even wilful desensitisation.

Some of his companions at M-M, he discovered, did not see Mars when they gazed out through the ports. They refused to see it, internalised it, made it just another inhospitable desert, so that the installation could have been in Mongolia or Antarctica for all the difference it made.

These men and women gambled and doped and filled their off-duty hours as if no gulf existed between the worlds, as if Mars did not take its chill plains and tiny frantic moons off to the far side of the Sun from Earth.

They terrestrialised almost anything that said Mars, calling the shallow riff leading away from the base Happy Valley, giving the surface vehicles their names: Easy Joe, Maisie J, Slow Wally Walker. Many of the crew were engaged in the long slow process of terraforming Mars, but they would not willingly see it until it wore more of an Earthly face.

One thing impressed Eric with the desperate edge of this more than anything.

In the main rec room of the M-M complex was a big, slightly convex window, double-layered, a huge thing and a luxury in any pressurised environment. When Scroff Hanley was rostered to Major-Minor for a brief stint, they persuaded him to paint a terrestrial landscape on this space, concealing the real Mars beyond with a false though splendidly detailed Earthscape, using the Marslight to bring it alive. This, with the plastic leaves stuck around the air vents, the newscasts relayed from home, the subliminal sound-tapes of birdsong, insects sawing, wavefalls and voices talking, did the very opposite for Eric. He felt Mars more keenly than ever, there beyond the scenic glass. He wanted to pick away at Hanley's glass-painting, to take a coin and scour just one line down the magnificent vista of valleys, sky and mountains. One line would be enough to force Mars back on them.

But how they would hate him for it.

That blind window fascinated Eric. He would suit up and walk the plain outside, trying to allay the fear, sometimes going up to the glass to run gloved hands over the back of the painting, making sudden spiders on the sky for those within.

Or would he visit the cells of those who, in imitation of Hanley, took paints to their own cabin ports? Only once did he make that mistake. He paid a morning visit to the only other adjustee at M-M, an aging geologist named Valerie Henty, who had painted a

stained-glass Judgement scene on her window—the whole thing lit beautifully by the early morning sun.

The cabin had oppressed Eric. The impulse to deny Mars in this woman who had lost the sense of touch in the third finger of her left hand was disturbing, even frightening.

All the same, it was while visiting Valerie Henty that Eric learned of the most recent development in human-iquiri relations: the appearance of what the media were calling the Riddle System. She played Eric the tape of that particular newscast, and he heard of how the iquiri had now taken to asking some of the adjusted ones questions, sometimes answering questions in return.

A lot was being made of this; it betokened a new open-door policy from the Seven, even if the questions and answers often took the form of conundrums.

Eric was excited, revitalised by the news. It showed that things could happen—were happening. But, as with so many other things relating to the iquiri, he was unable to get further details from the M-M information systems. He had to file it away with the other things he wanted to ask about. He had to be patient again and wait.

In spite of everything, Eric used Mars well. It was Mars, more than anywhere else, that kept him aware of what an awful commonplace occlusion was, imposed—like his, but also the other voluntary kind he saw all about him. He found it was true, that people didn't really notice the streets they walked down, the views from windows, the door handles they reached for, the cups and tools and pieces of clothing they used. He saw the extent of the crisis it represented: the gradual elimination of the keenest edge of perception, the wearing down of the survival alertness, the awareness of subtleties and detail.

He understood how people threw a light-switch and expected to see light, how they pressed call buttons and expected to see elevator doors opening, not on an empty shaft, but on a lighted interior. That was the logic of it, the cause and effect. Throw a switch: light! Turn the ignition of a car: it started! The whole middle ground of wires and circuitry, the technology of function, eliminated except for an attentive few.

By extension, he observed how people 'neutralised' themselves, the lack of eye contact disguised by posture and gesture, the body language for discouraging approaches outside the safe, set forms. That was another side of it: lose touch, withdraw individual peculiarities by adopting conventions, bland out the input to self and the output from self. These things were all there at M-M.

No wonder the windows were painted over, Eric realised—the rec. room one in particular. If you cannot make Mars tolerable and cannot switch it off, then make it safe from within, switch yourself off just a little. Coventry up the facts until you can live with them, handle them. Most of his companions on Mars, in the labs, out at the mines and observatories and testing stations, were self-occluded in some shared conspiracy of survival, shut off and coping.

That is what Mars showed him—between Scroff Hanley, Valerie Henty and the news from Earth.

And it was as if the iquiri knew. For when the lesson had been driven home, not obliterated but re-enforced every day, another letter came, brought to him in his cabin by a petty officer off a supply freighter. It was sealed with a blue flower.

Andlan, Eric James. J83902. Charge of Hand/Sebek 910. Return to Carlieu, 1100 hours exactly, April 10/24. Mills. JA492.

Eric was fascinated. Why the letter? Why not a screen transmission direct from Sebek or Osiris or whatever iquiri centre handled this sort of thing? The protocols of the Seven were often quaint like this, ultimately beyond knowing.

But there was no disputing the nature of the orders. His term at Major-Minor had ended. It was back to Earth, to Barracamba and then out to Carlieu. Home.

Almost a year to the day, Eric occupied a table at the Café Milo, sunning cold Mars out of his bones, watching the square come alive as morning advanced on the town.

The Occlusion Centre had not changed, nor the houses facing the square. Nothing in itself seemed different, not really, but of course everything had that quality of being totally altered at the same time.

As the hour of his appointment drew close, Eric noted that the Centre was becoming unusually busy. Several cars arrived, waited while people got out, and left. He could see shapes behind the windows, moving about inside.

He was glad when 1055 came, so he could cross to the building and satisfy his curiosity.

Again, it was like stepping through a slip in time. There was Mrs Mills at her keyboard, busily at work, though the ugly Chol-work had gone. A magnificent piece hung in its place—oranges, rusty browns, coventried reds everywhere.

At the very moment Mrs Mills looked up, three other staff members appeared from an inner office carrying a desk and some files, and the *déjà vu* was short-lived.

There was no mistaking the feeling in the air. Something important was going to happen.

The equate came out from behind the counter, smiling. They shook hands—a strange and intense thing to do, he found. Too formal. The male and two female assistants returned to the inner office then and once again, suddenly, there was the double time-frame, the sense that the year had not existed.

“You’ve earned yourself a great privilege, Eric,” she said, before he could speak any of the courtesies that would make their handshake bearable, safely a formality. “Today, any time now, one of the iquiri will arrive to speak with you.”

The scale of it escaped Eric. “An equate?” he asked, thinking of the top-ranking human officials from Barracamba, New York or Sestos.

“No! No, Eric! An iquiri! One of the Seven. They do it now, talk with humans they’ve adjusted.”

“And they brought me back from Mars?” He was amazed.

“Yes. But sit down—over here—and I’ll get you coffee.”

Eric was glad for the chance to sit, though the coffee did not come at once. There was too much to do. The equate went off to scan some master continuity photographs, as if the room had to be arranged just so. It was eight minutes before one of the young women brought him a cup from the little urn they carried in from the Clinic next door. After another ten minutes, Mrs Mills surrendered her photographs to her staff and came to sit with him.

“They don’t want us to give you too much advance warning, Eric. That’s why I left you to yourself. Are you feeling better?”

Eric nodded, and she smiled and drank strong coffee with him.

“They’re strange masters,” she said. “They will excuse all sorts of lapses in the running of their centres—files not processed on the day, employees late back from lunch, the obvious things. But they will remark on a four-volume set of books not grouped together on the shelves, or a blind down too far to permit a view of the east face of Carlieu that was visible on a previous visit by one of them. It’s become a game for us, spotting the alterations before they can and putting them right.”

“Will it matter which one of them comes?” Eric asked, directing her back to this visit.

“It shouldn’t. It never has,” Mrs Mills replied. “The last iquiri to set foot in this office two months ago was The Bright Hand. That’s Bromarti Warrender. He stayed twenty minutes and was utterly charming, but didn’t once let on why he had come.”

“These names . . .?”

“What the reports say. Affectations. They chose them. The Masks are the real names. Do you know the Masks?”

Eric nodded. “I’ve learnt them.”

“I thought you would. After today, you’ll be seeing Derek Tartule from the World Council Department of Cohabitation Studies. He’ll want to talk with you when you’ve spoken with your iquiri.”

“The Riddle System?”

“You know about it? Good. Tartule monitors it all. A nice little fellow.”

She left him then for a last-minute check.

At 1130, they heard the drop-ship approaching, the distinctive whine descending the scale as it got nearer and slowed for landing, the snuffling back of engines as it came down in the square.

The staff arranged themselves in a reception line just inside the door, with Mrs Mills at the open doorway ready to step out and greet their distinguished visitor.

Eric still sat on the long waiting-bench, but he could turn his head to look out at the landing ship through the window. The others standing by the door couldn’t do that.

It was silent in the room. Only the dribbling of the iquiri jelly-clock marked the silence, the glycerine moving sluggishly in the tubes and tumblers, catching the light, the little air-bubbles riding round and round, down into the time-house at the bottom, ascending again to repeat the endless journey through the maze.

Eric’s attention shifted from the clock back to the ship. He watched the craft settle in the square, saw the iquiri step from it. The visitor was attended by two human flashmen, as they were called, wearing their brown service coveralls marked with the

blue flower at the shoulder. These companions walked halfway to the Centre, then stopped and turned to watch the square.

The iquiri came on alone; in his grey three-piece suit, his hair brushed and shining, this immaculate creature seemed nothing more than a tall elegant human.

A human male.

Masked.

There was no doubting which one it was when Eric saw that Mask.

The Sky Face.

Jeuen Samuels.

As the iquiri strode to the door, Eric studied the glorious porcelain visage, the pattern of full cumulus clouds in a bright spring sky; the regular, vaguely muliebrile features of the face depicted. He felt the extreme presence of the creature even at this distance.

“The Sky Face!” he heard Mrs Mills tell her staff. “It’s The Sky Face.”

There were murmurs of excitement at the news. Then the creature was at the door and had taken both of Mrs Mills’s hands in his own.

“You are Beth,” The Sky Face said, and the voice coming from the Mask was rich and full, the perfect voice for a ruler. “And this is Helga, Mara, and Tony. And over there, Eric. Good. I’m glad to meet you all.”

He moved into the room, studying it, fixing every point of it with that sealed gaze.

“Carlieu is one of the good towns. I have been told about it. And you are alert to security.”

“Pardon, Mr Samuels?” Beth Mills said, puzzled by the last words and forgetting herself.

“Jeuen. Please call me Jeuen, Beth. You have replaced the lock on the door of the inner office there.”

“Why, yes,” the equate said. “We have. We lost the key . . .”

“I believe the game goes to me then,” he added, utterly charming.

There was a moment of absolute silence, then they all laughed. The Sky Face walked about the room, then approached Eric, who had risen to his feet when the creature entered.

“It is very good to meet you, Eric,” he said, and shook hands.

Before Eric could form his words, the iquiri had turned back to the others.

“I don’t have much time today, I’m afraid. But we will be meeting again. I will see your town and the bright new locks, and you can have your chance to test the iquiri eye for detail. Now Eric and I must talk. Excuse us, please.”

Jeuen Samuels indicated the inner office. Eric led the way into the room and took the chair before the bare wooden desk, automatically expecting The Sky Face to take the chair across from him.

Jeuen Samuels did not. He stepped to the window, closed the blinds, and stood with his back to them, facing Eric, who wondered if he too should stand and made as if to rise.

“No. No. Do sit, please! I want you to be comfortable. There are some questions I would like to ask you.”

“If you were to sit as well, Jevuen, I could relax more.”

“Very well. And you call me Jevuen. Good. I prefer the first names always—Eric.”

Eric smiled. He found that he was less tense than he had expected to be. He liked the creature. That much he knew for certain.

“Today,” The Sky Face continued when he had seated himself at the desk, “I have only two questions to ask you—and I would like your fullest answers. At a future meeting, we can spend more time together. Tell me, please, what you fear most about us, our power or our anonymity, our lack of background? Answer quickly!”

“Your power!” Eric surprised himself by saying it, the speed of his reply.

“You did not hesitate, Eric. You are so certain?”

“I believe so, Jevuen. I fear your power. I prefer your anonymity.”

“Do you really? But, yes. I understand you, I think. Power in the hands of the incorruptible, faceless few. You’d rather the powerful had no faces?”

“I think so. But only if—”

“Yes, I tricked you. I made you hesitate. Only if we are the Outsider. You find now that you really prefer the opposite. You ordinarily prefer to know the identities of those who have the power.”

“Yes,” Eric said. “But it’s because you are different, I—”

Jevuen Samuels interrupted smoothly. “We get to my second question, Eric. We are the Invader. Do you think we would gain anything by being better known to you?”

“Without your Masks?”

The Sky Face paused for the barest moment.

“In a sense. Yes, that too. Do we lose or gain? Advise us on the position we should take.”

Caught out once, Eric watched the *iquiri* shrewdly.

“You are asking this because you are in the process of revealing yourselves,” he said. “I can’t answer you yet.”

The Sky Face stood.

“Of course,” he said, reaching out to shake Eric’s hand again. The touch was cool, very human. “We’ll talk again soon. Beth will notify you.”

And that was it. Jevuen Samuels walked out, spent a few moments with Beth Mills, and departed the Centre.

Eric vaguely heard the drop-ship lift and go. He closed his eyes and listened hard, straining to hear, but the small craft had gone and there was only the deep silence where it had been.

Minutes before Eric reached Mrs Spain’s guest-house, the downstairs phone rang. It was from the University of Barracamba, from the secretary of the Department of Cohabitation Studies. Mrs Spain took the call, and relayed to Eric the message that Professor Emeritus Derek Tartule would like to meet with him at his earliest convenience, if possible that evening at 1900.

Eric was glad to keep the appointment. After the anticlimax of actually meeting his *iquiri* (for in terms of what it could have been, it was very much that), he needed to

meet with the ones who lived the doings of the Seven every day of their lives—the equates, the Beth Mills, the Helgas, Maras and Tonys, and the Derek Tartules.

Eric arrived at the University well before time so he could wander the darkening avenues and shadowed quadrangles, taking his precise colour advantage of the hour and collecting his thoughts.

At the appointed time, he knocked on Derek Tartule's door, and let the vigorous little man sweep him into his cluttered office. Nothing in plain view pertained to the iquiri—no photographs, no promising titles on the bookshelves, no curiosities or replicas, not even the near-mandatory jelly-clock.

"Sit down! Sit down, Eric! And be welcome," Tartule said. "You had trouble finding me?"

Eric assured him otherwise, took the seat, and found it hard to restrain a smile at this intense little academic, this specialist on the iquiri with his thick, antique-style glasses and the explosions of grey hair behind each ear.

Professor Tartule sat forward at his desk, scrutinising Eric intently. It was unnerving, even comical, until Eric realised that in a sense his coventry had made him into an iquiri artifact, and that this was how Tartule was now seeing him.

"To think, you actually met one," Tartule said. "So many humans never will." His voice trembled with excitement.

"Jeuen Samuels."

"Oh, yes. I know, Eric. Beth told me. The Sky Face himself. There are only the Seven here, you know. Forgive me, but of course you know. The Masks mean a great deal. Your Jeuen Samuels is a good one. I've met him twice. I wondered when he'd participate in these question and answer sessions. I sometimes think it is he who heads the iquiri nationals here on Earth. He is so calm, so composed."

"Just the Seven?" Eric said, partly to get the old scholar back on the track, partly because, even now, it was still hard to accept that there were only that many.

"Seven." Tartule confirmed it with a vigorous nod. "Jeuen Samuels you've met. There is Barlu Octavian, The Fair Countenance: that's the cool eggshell blue. He sits in on the World Council sessions. He says little, though occasionally when the Council is not in session and the place is deserted he sings. No words, just a keening really. Very beautiful. I have tapes.

"Mack Sown is The Sand Garden. His Mask is usually buff-coloured, pitted, the only Mask not to have the smooth porcelain finish. It sometimes changes colour too, very slowly, from bisque to a deep Genoese gold. Beautiful to see. He supervises the big building projects around the Mediterranean and in Brazil."

"Amazon House?"

"Yes," Tartule said. "There too. He looks after it all. Bofari Thames is The Storm Face, that roiling grey Mask we see on television all the time. He's the most active. He could be their military specialist, a strategist, but it doesn't do to speculate too much. Jacob Glass is The Heart Face, a name not easily fathomed. His Mask is that brilliant rainforest green. Bromarti Warrender eludes me as well. His Mask is almost the Yin-Yang division, half-black, half-white. He calls himself The Bright Hand, make of that

what you will. Then there is Jack Haunts, The Sea Face, another shifter. His Mask changes from indigo to sea-green. Marvellous to watch, just marvellous! We used to call him The Chameleon but he didn't like it."

"All males?" Eric said.

"We don't know that. The voices are regularised by the Masks. They sound masculine. The physiognomies, too, suggest they are males, but we don't know the iquiri physiotype. The Masks could be the iquiri for all we know; the bodies might be organic or robot carriers, though we believe they are not."

"It's a novel thought," Eric said, fascinated by the idea.

"We are never short of novel thoughts, Eric. Oh, no. Like: the iquiri as we see them are puppets, android extensions from the real iquiri who remain in orbit operating them. Or just one iquiri with seven extensions. Or a computer. We don't believe that, incidentally. Our instruments show localised vitality signs, separate encephalic activity. They may be deceiving us, but we think they are people. Their names for themselves, the Earthly apparel they have chosen to wear—these things strike us as eccentric and whimsical. The force behind our novel thoughts is simply a determination to stand back and be as objective as we can. We watch; we monitor the occlusions they choose to inflict. It's down to less than a thousand a day now, did you know that? Can you believe it? World crime figures: one thousand a day! The iquiri always seem to know when a crime has been committed. It makes me shudder to think of it, as if they are a race of mind-readers. They always locate the culprits."

"And you interview all these people? The thousand a day?"

Professor Tartule shook his head vigorously. "No! Impossible! We get all the figures sent to us naturally. Of what occlusions are dealt out, that is, not the crimes. In case there are patterns. When duplications occur and where, that sort of thing. The iquiri computers keep the details of the crimes."

"So I'm here because of Jevuen Samuels?" Eric said.

"Because he spoke with you, yes. You, Eric. He went to—where is it again, your town?—Carlieu, and spoke with you. Because he's indicated he will speak with you again. Please, what did he say?"

Eric described the meeting, explained the questions put to him by The Sky Face, tried to give him the exact words that were used.

"Does it tell you much?" he asked when he had finished.

Tartule nodded, bobbing his head happily.

"Two things occur to me. The obvious one is that you are a test case for them, a random sampling from whom they can learn the consequences of their justice, possibly even gain results to some experiment."

"I felt I was confirming something for him."

"I'm sure of it. The other possibility is that your crime was such that they wanted a first-hand dealing with the person who committed it."

Eric didn't care to face the implications of that just then. "Which do you think it is?"

Professor Tartule smiled suddenly, an absurd flash of teeth, like the function of a mechanical toy. He shrugged, bobbed, an odd dipping of the toy head.

“The former. I believe it is the former. There are fewer occlusions now, comparatively speaking.”

Eric smiled too, but grimly, then peered out through the small leadlight panes to the lights in the quadrangle.

Tartule continued. “What this means for us, my group, the observers, is that we have a unique chance to try drawing the iquiri out a little. They permit it. For a year now, whenever an adjustee is visited, there have been subsequent conversations. One had five meetings with Mack Sown over a two-month period following his adjustment. Another met with Jack Haunts seven times; a third had three visits from Bofari Thames after losing the ability to feel wind.”

“So you do feel I will see Jeuvan Samuels again?” The thought, Eric found, was pleasing.

“That’s the way it has been. And this is where you may do us and yourself a service. For a long time, these interviews were one-sided affairs; the iquiri asked their questions and presumably got and recorded what they hoped to learn. When we here at DCS realised this was going on—and it took a little time; none of it was publicised then—we tried to make it known generally that adjustees invited to have these meetings should contact us first, at the very least so we could record what was being said.

“Paul Litger was our first real success. He was both alert and very shrewd, a good observer. He’s on our team now. Litger helped a pattern to emerge. He discovered, during his interviews, that he could get a question answered too. It was an undivulged privilege; nothing was said. Unlike yourself, Eric, Litger didn’t lose the memory of his previous vocation. He had been an anthropologist; his training made what he asked a reasonable, self-directed request. He was able to manoeuvre Mack Sown into revealing all their names; a simple enough thing really, but a marvellous breakthrough. One day he posed the question; at the next meeting he was given a list—the chosen names matched with photographs and Mask-names. We’d only known a few before that.

“The iquiri don’t lie as far as we can tell. They evade. When we got the list, we thought we had been given a key. We tried to find connections, significances, but there seemed to be none. But from the day Litger got his list, all iquiri will discuss the subject, answer to the names, just like that. It’s as if we have to work for these disclosures though. They seem prepared to divulge a great deal, but only if we earn it.”

“The Riddle System?”

“Yes.”

Eric watched the old man closely. “What did Litger have to do?”

“Mack Sown asked him what the Great Consistency was. Just that.”

“And the answer?” Eric was fascinated.

“You’ll laugh,” Tartule said. “Litger had no idea, so he became rather sardonic. After days of thinking about it, he said: ‘We endure!’, having assumed that the question meant the Great Consistency between us and them. The answer seemed to please The Sand Garden. At their next meeting he gave Paul the list. Litger tried to deal again. He asked Mack Sown what his crime had been. The iquiri gave him another riddle: ‘What are the Three Traps?’ Not one of Paul’s answers would do. He was clever; he tried

everything, but none of the answers satisfied Mack Sown. Eventually the meetings stopped.”

“But now you have all the Masks and names?”

Tartule nodded. “Yes, we have those. But only those—their chosen names and their Mask-names. Very tantalising. The media picked up on the affair; they called it the Riddle System. Our second success was Michele Tyman. Some adjustees refused to have anything to do with us; others demanded exorbitant fees. But Michele we were able to persuade. As with Litger, the first question would be for us, the second for her, the next for us, and so on. It seemed a fair arrangement.”

“What happened?” Eric asked.

“Michele saw Jack Haunts. He asked her what the Great Danger was. We mulled over that one for ages, couldn’t get a consensus, finally left it up to Michele herself. She took three weeks over it, living with her coventry. Then one day she asked to meet with Jack Haunts. He came at once. Her answer: ‘Not to know how and when you are isolated. How you are cut off!’ He invited her to comment further. She said that desensitisation was the enemy of all intelligent life. They discussed the iquiri truism that isolation is the great deterrent. Finally, Jack Haunts consented to a question from her, and she posed our choice as agreed: ‘Are you artificial creatures?’ In spite of the life signs, we wanted that settled once and for all. We were testing their essential honesty, you see. We believed we knew the answer to this already, and we felt we could afford to gamble on Michele. We felt she would do even better than Paul for some reason.”

Professor Tartule took a piece of paper from a folder.

“Let me read you the answer The Sea Face gave Michele: ‘No, Michele. Your instruments have already told you. We are not artificial beings. We are not robots, androids, clones, cyborgs, remotes of any kind; neither ambulans nor extensors. We are people, as you. Our Masks contain a great deal of instrumentation: implants, important telemetric aids—you know this. But the Masks are not us.’

“They talked further. She answered his questions, as is usually the way at these meetings. They want to know everything about how the coventried ones feel and react. Michele knew she had another riddle to answer before she could get to ask her own question, but she decided to ask it anyway, not to test the system but just because she probably forgot the arrangement in her preoccupation and excitement. Jack Haunts answered her.”

Eric felt a prickling at the back of his neck. “What did she ask?”

“A woman’s question, Eric. Michele sat across from Jack Haunts and said: ‘What do you fear?’ The question surprised us all. Haunts—Jack Haunts—they dislike being called by their chosen surnames, both names, first or none . . . Forgive me, you know this! He did not speak for several minutes. He did not remind her of her breach of form; he answered her, told her this.”

Tartule read again from the transcript. “‘Michele, we too fear the Great Danger. We fear failure in our task as custodians; we fear loss of face.’”

Eric stared, dumbfounded, about to laugh at the absurdity of it.

Tartule anticipated him. “Go ahead, Eric. Laugh. Michele did. We all did. Those are the words he used. A masked creature speaks words like that. If we take it seriously,

literally, they need their Masks to rule, to control Sebek and Osiris and Anubis and Set. Or maybe as life-support assists. We've considered that already, suspected it from the beginning. Take it sociologically: they are rigidly caste-conscious creatures, behaving according to the most exacting strictures and protocols, codes of conduct we cannot begin to understand. Their Masks, their dress and mannerisms, their magnificent urbanity, the males-only angle, the Riddle System they've recently fostered—all these things re-enforce the idea of caste and ritual behaviour.

"If we take it humorously, then a question out of turn prompts a comical answer. He was reprimanding her, you see. "Michele returned to playing the game by the rules. But she had to answer the same question put to Paul Litger: 'What are the Three Traps?' She came away, consulted with us, and we gave her our best answers, then she suggested her own. None satisfied The Sea Face."

"What were the answers? And Litger's?"

Derek Tartule shook his head. "I won't tell you, Eric. Just trust us that a consensus didn't help at all. Michele's answers, like Paul's, were probably closer to the half-whimsical, spontaneous-seeming nature of the Riddle System. You are the occluded ones. This game is meant for you. The answers from us just don't seem to be acceptable."

"You make me sound privileged," Eric said.

"From where I'm sitting now, you are very much that. A tiny minority of adjustees get interviewed, get the chance to swap questions like this. No World Council member or diplomat or research specialist does. Even if we committed crimes and got treated, we probably wouldn't be chosen. Yes, to me you are privileged. I envy you."

Eric realised the simple truth of the scientist's words, considered for the first time what a small price Tartule would think he had paid to be so eligible.

"So where do I take it up?"

"On two levels, Eric. We wonder about the game itself. Why this trend? Why have the iquiri recently started this, selecting certain occluded subjects?"

"You keep sidestepping that very well, Professor. We are criminals."

Tartule looked at him strangely. "Are you? Can you prove it?"

It was a ridiculous question, but Eric realised that, no, he couldn't prove it. "Are you suggesting I might not be? That the iquiri tampered with me for some other reason?"

"No," the little man said carefully. "But isn't that a possibility you ought to have considered anyway? You have no memory of an offence."

"But the iquiri do not lie!"

"We all lie to serve a purpose, Eric. By omission or commission, we all know when to lie. Parents lie to children about reality all the time, a most heinous and culpable offence since it does involve the way reality is perceived. But, then as now, lying can be seen as a sign of extreme care. It all has to do with the motive and ethic behind the lie, doesn't it?"

"Do they lie to us?" Eric asked.

"They evade, as I told you, and the Riddle System helps them do this. They manipulate situations, and there are questions they will not answer. Before the question and answer format was properly established with Litger, we had one subject who met

with Bofari Thames. Only three meetings. Brian Trace had been a journalist and he kept at The Storm Face about where his race had come from and what they wanted, things like that. Too bold, too aggressively direct. We learned of this later. Bofari Thames ignored the questions, then discontinued the meetings. A wasted opportunity.

“This whole idea of a trade-off to get information isn’t just a game. Oh, no. Seven aliens do not take over a world without reason. Where are their colonists, the demands on our resources? Why conquer and rule benignly what you don’t plan to use? No, they are grooming us. They have not done one thing to harm our planetary society. They seem to want to improve it. They have qualified not removed self-determination. They have raised our consciousness to a global level in, what, twenty years? They’ve provided the Outsider we all knew was the only way to do that. So what is this Occupation, this Cohabitation: a lovely dream or a pending nightmare?”

Eric saw the scholar’s deep concern. “There is an urgency for you?”

Tartule looked up. “Oh, yes. A personal urgency because I have worked with it from the start. A personal urgency because I am old. I would like to know. I believe—prefer to believe—in a noble motive behind what they do.”

“So what should I ask them?”

“A simple question: what their Masks do. What the Masks really are for them. As I said, they are marvellously shielded things, far more than ornamental. We have the fragments given to Michele. We get general readings and deduce function, but no details. A direct question would help.”

“Provided I get past their first question.”

“Yes. Provided you do that.”

Eric did, more easily than he would have dreamed. His second meeting with The Sky Face took place in Carlieu a week later. It followed the same pattern as before—the solitary drop-ship, the two human aides who remained outside to watch the square. This time, however, the formal reception was dispensed with, and Beth Mills let Eric usher Jeuvén Samuels into the inner office by himself.

When they were seated opposite one another at the desk, Jeuvén Samuels began by asking Eric about his reactions to the occlusion he suffered.

Before he answered, Eric switched on the small pocket recorder provided by the DCS and placed it in plain view as Tartule had suggested. Then he went on to detail the different stages of feeling he had experienced.

More questions followed, and Eric found it easier and easier to answer them. They were clearly phrased, and The Sky Face seemed so polite and interested.

What was Mars like?

What did he feel in Barracamba?

What was the red he missed most of all?

What occlusion would he hate more than any other?

Did he feel estranged from his non-coventried fellows?

Were the iquiri good for mankind?

Questions on so many issues, so many subjects. Not once did The Sky Face interrupt before Eric had finished an answer; not once did the iquiri ask to have anything rephrased or repeated or write anything down.

Eric knew the Mask was recording or relaying everything he said. It was disquieting to stare across at that brilliant field of sky knowing that it did such things, and several times Eric realised he had become lost in the cloud pattern before noticing the clear, blue, very human eyes gazing at him through the eye-slits.

One such lapse was Jeuen's cue.

The Sky Face leant forward a fraction, and Eric sensed that the game was about to begin.

"You visited Derek Tartule," Jeuen Samuels said. "No doubt you discussed iquiri riddles and our Masks. Why do you wish to know us so badly?"

This is it, Eric realised, and swallowed, feeling a moment of panic. "What we began to talk about the other day. You are powerful; you have the advantage. We fear the unknown you represent. At the same time, it fascinates us. You have not harmed us. You have become our greatest mystery."

The Sky Face nodded, and Eric wondered if his answer was adequate. He dared not wait any longer.

"Jeuen," he said. "What are your Masks to you?"

"What is a man?" The Sky Face countered at once.

"What? A man?" Eric said, and paused, thrown by the directness of it. The game had started.

His mind raced. Then he knew, something he had read years ago in his childhood. With incredible certainty, he found he had an answer.

"'A child gone sour in the cathedral vault of Time's huge house'."

The Sky Face inclined his head. "That sounds like a quotation, Eric. In a very mannered idiom. Still, it will do. Why is desensitisation the Great Enemy?"

Eric didn't even consider the injustice of a second question. The game was nothing like he had imagined it; he had to answer. "Because we have no choice."

"Very good. Too quick an answer to be anything but wise."

Eric had hoped to last long enough to ask why they posed questions like these, but he saw why. Like looking down some vast corridor of understanding, he knew the reason.

But before he could repeat his prepared question, Jeuen Samuels pressed him again, violating the rules of the game. There were no rules.

"What makes you think the loss of red was not the gift of everything else?"

"I am no longer sure of that, Jeuen. I am a tide on the turn there."

"Ask your question," The Sky Face said.

Eric stared, pleased with himself, thinking too quickly to feel any ego satisfaction from the victory. He found that he was richly, deeply involved now. The conversation with Jeuen Samuels had his complete attention.

"What are the Masks really? What do they mean to you?" When the words were said, Eric worried about the ambiguities, any loop-holes he might have left.

The Sky Face accepted the two-part question however, exactly as Eric had meant it.

“My Mask is a sensorium, Eric. It filters your reality for me, interprets things. You have guessed that we are more alien than we appear. We need . . . scramblers, decoders. Our sensoria do this service; they are computer faces. But here we tell Derek Tartule’s people no more than they have already assumed. In a way, it is a wasted question for you. So let me add more. It is time for more information.

“When we were just *iquiri* — the *iquiri* — we were the Outsider. Now we have names and identities we are personalities, people. Different people, but people. You see our traits. It is even conceivable that we shall become dear to you. Don’t look surprised, Eric. You are already finding that you are very fond of me. You know that we are loyal to you.”

“The motive?”

“That which you see.”

Eric laughed. Always the evasion, the things nimbly fenced. Tartule’s specialists would be alert for the subtleties and nuances of such remarks, but here, now, Eric was on his own. He would have to listen carefully.

Eric tried a new tack. “Professor Tartule has a query to make, *Jeuven*. Pertaining to the schedule.”

“Yes?” Did the voice show a new level of interest?

“You made a copy available to Council and Archives, another to the DCS people. Both the *iquiri* original and the translation were authorised.”

“Yes?”

“Tartule has discovered an error in the translation.”

“Go on. Please.” The voice betrayed nothing. He could have been saying ‘At last!’ or even ‘So what?’

“Whenever the word *andaio* appears in the Charter, we take it to mean the adult *iquiri*. In translation, we have replaced the term with human adult. This raises a curious point for us . . .”

“A technicality?”

“That’s right. We see *andaio* as an exclusive word. A race word for you, like *iquiri* is. It strictly relates to you according to the analogies established at Compact. We suggest *plaire* has to be the word for ‘human’ in your language, as least as you have revealed it to us. Your schedule should not apply to us without a codicil.”

“How do you wish me to respond to this?”

That threw Eric. This damn game, he thought. The playing continues all the time, almost out of grasp. Then he realised the obvious, that The Sky Face—all of the *iquiri*—knew of the oversight, had deliberately left it there for just such an occasion. Tartule had armed him with the information, but Eric hated the thought of using it. This wasn’t the way to proceed, bargaining like this, not over technicalities, not now. Eric had the grace to relinquish the claim.

“You could grant me the privilege of another question,” he said, but humbly, showing that he knew he had demeaned them both by such quibbling.

The *iquiri* nodded once. The calm voice came from that airy Magritte countenance as steadily as before. “Very well, Eric. Ask your next careful question.”

Eric sensed the importance of the moment. Not only was the game broken, but Jeuen Samuels was now ready to deal with a deliberate breach of the Charter—a breach his race had left behind to be found, wanting to be challenged on it. The obvious question was to ask why the iquiri had allowed this oversight to remain. But this could be asked another time, and there was a more important question.

“We are fascinated by your approach. The Riddle System.”

“So you should be,” Jeuen Samuels said. “Before you make it a question, I shall tell you something, Eric. As we see it, a race, like a person, earns its spurs by the questions it asks. It takes courage to ask questions, such real courage. And now we only ever answer the questions of those we punish. The rest of the time, we say what we want. Now we choose from among the deprived ones.”

“The reasons?”

“You have guessed your own, Eric. Say them!”

“You make us observe you,” Eric said. “You slow down the process of discovering more about you. You stall for time so that people really do see you.”

“So that people notice us. Yes.” The iquiri’s voice was more resonant than Eric had ever heard it. Was it his imagination, or had the voice changed, taken on new emotion? “Were we to answer one question a year, the world would wait for that question like nothing else.”

Eric saw that it was true. “Ten questions speed you up. One question slows you down.”

“Exactly. Also, when you get only silences or evasions, you impute to us the motives you wish us to have.”

For Eric, that was even more intriguing. “You benefit from projection?”

“We certainly do. Always. Because we are powerful enough to rule you, to destroy you too, you will not choose to see the worst motives. Naturally you want us to be wise overseers of your destiny. The Riddle System, as we together call it, serves all our purposes. We draw attention to the questions you ask us. Everything becomes important, re-sensitised. But go on! Why do we answer your questions at all?”

Eric had already considered this. “There is something you want us to know about you. At last, the time has come for it, but you wish to set up the revelation properly. That’s it. You’re framing it, setting it up. No doubt you’ve fed us clues we haven’t recognised yet, told us more than we suspect. Like the oversight in the Charter, and why your revelations are only made to adjusted criminals.” And then there was the afterthought. “Or to people you’ve selected who may not be criminals, but whom you think occlusion will affect in a special way.”

The Mask inclined slightly at that, but Jeuen Samuels ignored the terrible accusation. “It accords with the schedule,” he said, “that only adjustees are chosen.”

“I don’t believe that’s it, Jeuen! Why do you choose us, I wonder? What does the criminal of a society have that equips him for your needs?”

“You may be missing the point, Eric. But I pass on these questions anyway. I take them as rhetorical.”

“Too direct?” Eric said, pressing the point.

“At the moment, yes. But more. It is not our way.”

“The schedule?”

“The schedule. We must play the game.”

“Sphinx!” Eric snapped, angry at the evasion, at this iquiri’s return to distance and form on the verge of yielding so much.

“As you say,” The Sky Face said. “I play the sphinx.”

“Jeuven, please! Why do you choose us? Was I a criminal or not?”

“What are the Three Traps?”

The words stopped him short. Here was the warning, the end-game question, the one neither Paul nor Michele had answered correctly or adequately or personally enough. Eric realised that if he answered now and failed, that would be it. He may never see Jeuven Samuels again. Two meetings only. He would score even more poorly than Brian Trace.

“I must have time to think,” he said.

“Of course. But remember, Eric. I would not ask anyone that question unless they had lived the answer.”

A function of the sensorium must have summoned Beth Mills, for the equate suddenly appeared at the door.

“I will go,” Jeuven Samuels said, standing. “Beth will call our central office when you have your answer. We shall meet then.”

Eric rose to his feet also, numbed by the suddenness, the anticlimax of the situation. He watched out the window as the iquiri crossed the square to the drop-ship. He saw the craft lift and slip off into the east, then sat at the desk again, trembling to think of how close he had been to losing this contact, this precious contact. He sat, with not a coveted, coventried red in sight, and thought of traps he had lived.

Three.

A letter came from Tey that afternoon. She had been brought back from Amazon House to Geneva to meet with Barlu Octavian.

Eric marvelled at the news. The only other adjustee he knew well and she had been chosen for the interviews too. Now that he had been given the statistics by Tartule, it seemed amazing.

And yet it was a good choice. Tartule would have more from the iquiri yet, knowing Tey.

Eric desperately wanted to contact her, to let her know that he was seeing The Sky Face, that again they were together in a sense, pacing one another. But after four attempts to get the necessary information out of the Geneva com-comp, he gave up. He phoned the University instead.

Derek Tartule admitted that he knew of Tey’s summons, was in fact waiting for the first meeting to take place so he could arrange a briefing through the DCS agent at the Geneva office.

Eric felt a surge of annoyance that the Professor had not told him of Tey’s induction, then realised it was no doubt a requirement forced on him by the Seven. When he asked the little man if he felt the iquiri were deliberately keeping him apart from Tey, Tartule agreed that they might be held incommunicado as part of a plan, and that the

coincidence of the Geneva interviews did seem to indicate an accelerated interest of some kind.

Tartule's voice trembled with excitement. "It looks promising, Eric: more meetings, fewer major occlusions, The Riddle System, increased selectivity—the iquiri do seem to be assessing the temper of the times. It is leading somewhere, surely. If the question sessions are as controlled as they appear, you must be kept from Tey, for both your sakes, to maintain your sense of isolation, your sureness of intuition, to preserve the one-to-one relationship you have with The Sky Face. Read me Tey's letter. Please!"

After the barest hesitation, a vestige of his earlier annoyance, Eric did so.

My Eric,

Guess what has happened? I am off to Geneva to meet Barlu Octavian, The Fair Countenance, the one who sings. The equate here at Amazon House tells me I'll be contacted by a Professor Tartule at the University of Barracamba. Next door to you. I'll ask him to get word to you of how I do. I haven't forgotten Amsterdam.

Your Loving Tey.

PS: I have a songbird after all, the real thing, a hybrid they've made here called a Crown Spectre. It took me five months to find it.

"Soon now, Eric," Tartule said.

"I believe so too," Eric told him. He bid the Professor goodbye and rang off.

Eric decided to force his own hand. He arranged the date of the third meeting for a week's time, then took leave from the job at Ichos he had never properly started. He gave himself that week to decide on the Three Traps—three that, according to Jeuen Samuels, were to come from what he had lived.

With two days to go, he went in to Barracamba once again, covering more or less the same route he had taken a year before. Eric surfaced at Maize Street, went down to the harbour, then out to the spaceport. The Tandercote Gallery was closed, so he took the slidewalk through Bosty Market to the Smokery again, kept on going, street by street, and found himself at last on the sea-wall at Travnes.

He sat on the rough stones in the bright windy morning, watching the waves fall on his left and the trams swinging around on his right before beginning their long slow climb back up into the city, laden with tourists. Gulls swung in like brittle toys on unseen threads, shrieking, and swung out again. Children laughed and played on the beach below; the trams clanged their ancient bells, completed their turns and were off.

It was the richest focus of life Eric could remember, so full and busy and varied, nothing like the quiet square at Carlieu, or the chill Martian plains or the heaving swells of Sea Platform and Bass Strait III.

He sat there three hours and got his Traps. As simply as that, hardly trying. He sat there another hour and tested them, going past the clever glib answers, proving their honesty by relating them to Tey and himself and the iquiri.

Then he got something more. Out of the strong sea wind and the sunlight and the children playing on the sand, he realised something far more significant than the nature of Three Traps. And the enormity—the simplicity—of what he knew struck him to the heart, so straightforward and amazing it was.

All the way back from Travnes to Carlieu, by tram, slidewalk, tube and the old bus, he turned his discovery over in his mind. He fell into exhausted sleep in his room at Mrs Spain's knowing the Three Traps, and certain now of what it was the iquiri wanted humans to know.

The meeting was almost identical to the two before it: the same time of day, the same chairs in the office, the same morning quiet; nothing like being on the sea-wall at Travnes.

But now there was no evasion, and no preliminaries either.

"You have an answer, Eric?" Jeuen Samuels began, when they were seated and the recorder was going. "What are the Three Traps?"

Eric looked across at The Sky Face, took a deep breath to steady his voice.

"First and least," he said. "There's the Trap you do not know you are in. That's the cunning Trap and the most common, and often the individual is to blame. Mars showed me that, but it's everywhere on Earth."

Jeuen Samuels said nothing.

Eric studied the Mask a moment, then continued.

"Then there's the Trap you are betrayed into. That's the worst, for invariably it means treachery, deceit by someone else. If I have lived this one, Jeuen, then maybe it is that you have deceived me and I am not a criminal at all."

The Sky Face seemed to nod. Seemed to. Eric couldn't be sure, though his eyes never left the Mask.

"So what is the last, Eric? Have you kept the best or worst till last?"

"The best, Jeuen. The Third Trap is the best, the most enduring. It is the Trap you do not care you are in."

The Sky Face considered that for a minute.

"I like them, Eric. I like your Traps. Do you have something to ask me now?"

"No," Eric said.

If it were possible for the impassive sky to show surprise, then that one word had done it. Nothing in Jeuen Samuel's expression could show it, but the stillness, the sudden hushed waiting of the creature, told Eric that this was not expected.

"You surprise me, Eric," The Sky Face said finally.

"I expect I do, Jeuen. I'm glad I do."

"You have broken the game."

"Nothing new. The game doesn't exist. You depart from it when it suits you. It only has the illusion of rules anyway. You use it to prepare us."

The Mask watched him. "Why don't you ask me the question you raised last time?" came the steady voice, genuinely intrigued and showing it now in curious inflections.

"Why don't you ask me one of Derek's questions? He longs for answers."

“Because, first, you will tell us what you want us to know when, and only when, you are ready. And second, because I’ve guessed who and what you are.” There, he had said it. “No proof. I just know. Everything is secondary to that at the moment.”

There was a flash of eyelight behind the sky. “Oh?”

“I know what your Masks are for you and what you are behind your Masks.”

Another flicker of light, the movement of intent eyes.

There was a charged feeling between them now, more than the quiet of the hour: the absolute imminence of knowledge.

Eric knew that, all over the world, the scattered iquiri were listening in, the great iquiri computers were recording. He knew too what was crucially important, that the Seven did want to be known for what they were.

“So?” The Sky Face said.

Eric watched the iquiri, his eyes never leaving that soft spread of spring sky. This was it.

“You are totally occluded,” he said. “Every sense gone. Your Masks—the sensoria—tie you in to phenomenal reality. Without them—”

“We lose face!” Jeuven Samuels said, completing the horribly ironic joke, explaining it. “The greatest thing we fear.”

Eric actually laughed, a single jarring bray of surprise. To think: he hadn’t suspected that, the inconceivable loss of it. It shook him, so cruelly obvious now.

“What else, Eric?” The Sky Face said. “What else do you know?” The eyes inside the sky never left his.

“You are the criminals of your race. Your sentence is to serve and care. For this they give you back—”

“Everything, Eric! Oh, everything! Life! Our respite from Coventry. Can you imagine it? We get back wind and sunset and feeling. The sounds of cataracts and furnaces and laughter. The smell of roses and semen and hot oil; the sharp smell of railroad tracks in the rain and grass in hot sunshine. Catspaws and cloud-shadow; everything there is, everything! There at the end of the corridor of our Masks, filtered through a veil, Maya, but there! Plato’s shadow on the cave wall. Framed and distant, but there!”

And the fists clenched, or rather drew into a clench, slowly, then as slowly relaxed out again. Jeuven Samuels was once more in total control.

The silence continued for a time in that closed room, with the sounds from the square half-heard, the rumbling of drays, the ordinary sounds of day. They underscored the heaviest, fullest silence Eric had ever known, with realisation funnelling down on him, every thought triggering another, all of them leading back to the inescapable tragedy of it.

Then the Mask spoke. “Do you want red back?”

Eric was startled by the question. There was only one answer. “No,” he said, and was surprised to discover it was true.

“Why not?”

Eric faltered over his reply, his thoughts not yet clear. He was afraid he wouldn’t know why, though of course he did. That realisation was there too.

“I want to . . . remember . . . what it’s like. I can’t afford not to remember.”

“A small price, Mr Ambassador.”

“Pardon?”

The voice came softly. “You are an envoy to us, a go-between.”

“I can reveal this?” Eric said. “What you’ve told me?”

“What you’ve told me,” The Sky Face reminded him. “What you’ve guessed. Yes, go and tell them. The outcome will be interesting. You will make us the perfect custodians; perhaps you will ask us not to leave you. We keep a tidy house. Perhaps you will go forth into space knowing that your housekeepers are doing their job, grateful for their chance to do it.”

Eric got up to leave. He moved towards the door, pausing only for a final question.

The Sky Face answered him before he could say it.

“No. We do not know our crimes either, Eric. But it doesn’t matter, does it? It is your third Trap. The chance to be what we are for you makes it so.”

Nothing could surprise Eric after that, so finding Tey waiting for him in the square, back from Geneva, here where everything had started for them, simply made him smile.

“Did your answers satisfy him?” Tey asked, her silver hair blowing in the morning breeze.

Eric took her hand and they started walking towards Carlieu the hill.

“They love us, Tey,” he said, feeling exhilarated. “They really do. And we must care for them.” He wondered suddenly about her own time with Barlu Octavian. “What did you ask The Fair Countenance?”

Tey smiled. “I asked him why the iquiri had brought us together, me with my red hair and all.”

“What did Barlu Octavian say?”

She laughed. “He said that now I had asked him a hard question, and that he would need time to think of an answer.”

“Sphinxes!” Eric said. “Damn sphinxes!”

And they walked on across the square, this man without red and the woman who had lost birds, both silently grateful that, in a world of cruelties and such clever traps, neither of them—and none of the Seven—had suffered the greatest coventry of them all, the ultimate isolation, the loss of all that had grown between them, all that surrounded them and held them even now. The love.