

To the Resurrection Station

by

Eleanor Arnason



Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

Print copyright © 1987 by Eleanor Arnason
Digital copyright © 2015 by Eleanor Arnason

Digital ISBN: 978-1-61976-068-4
First published by Avon, 1986

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the author.

This is a work of fiction. The city, characters, and events to be found in these pages are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual places or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover images: Humanoid robot, © CanStock Photo Inc. / artshocks
Forest background, © CanStock Photo Inc. /ildi

For Patrick Arden Wood

Contents

The Ghost of Gorwing Keep

Further Revelations

Forty-five Years After

The Green Hills of Brooklyn

Afterword



The Ghost of Gorwing Keep

Rain ran down the carriage's windows. They were all closed. Nonetheless, Belinda could hear the grunts and moans of the thornbucks that pulled the monstrous conveyance down a muddy country road. Jolting and splashing, on the carriage went. Toward what end? Belinda wondered. She looked at her guardian, sitting across from her and toying with his music ring. Back and forth he twisted the ring's crystal. From it came the faint sound of a bone harp and sometimes a few bars from one of the Brandenburg Concertos. She stared at his pale thin face, remembering his sudden appearance at her school. She had returned to her room after a lecture on astrophysics and found him there, pacing back and forth, rain dripping from his overcoat, spotting the worn, old wireroot carpet, which her roommate had bought at a native fair.

"Pack!" he'd said.

"Why?"

He stopped in front of her, took hold of her shoulders, and shook her. "You are a year short of your majority, my sweet. For the time being, you'll do what you're told and ask no questions."

What choice did she have? She had packed and gone with him, weeping a little when she kissed her roommate good-bye. Dear Marianne! Where would she find another friend like her? Certainly nowhere

in this desolate landscape. She looked out at the bare-branched dripping wood and shivered.

Just then the carriage bumped around a turn in the road. Ahead of her she saw a huge old house. It had been built in the settlement days. She was sure of that, after one look at the low concrete walls, the shallow domes, and the narrow plastic windows. By this time, two centuries after settlement, the pale concrete was streaked dull red and brown. Most of the metal domes had collapsed. The plastic windows had gotten cloudy. Ick, Belinda thought.

Her guardian leaned forward. He looked excited and happy. “That is Gorwing Keep.”

Her guardian’s home. Was it to be hers, too? She sighed, remembering her room at school—small, neat, and bright, full of her plants and the native artifacts Marianne collected.

The carriage went through the Keep’s front gate, past the gate house, and up to the front door.

“The house was built by Godfrey Hernshaw, the captain of the settlement ship,” her guardian said. “He named the planet. Did you know that?” He looked at her.

Belinda shook her head.

“New Hope was the name of the ship. It was his idea to give it to the planet. Here humanity would begin again, and do better than it had on Earth.” Her guardian paused. “—What a man he was! In his time, this was at the center of the largest estate on the planet. He had seven sons. Three of them were presidents of the world council. There has been a Hernshaw living in this house ever since Godfrey. I am the last.” The thought seemed to upset him. He frowned, leaned back, and said noth-

ing more till the carriage stopped at the Keep's door. They got out. The door slid open, and her guardian said, "Welcome to Gorwing Keep, my dear."

Belinda shuddered and thought—be resolute. What else was there to do? She went into the dark front hall. An ancient humanoid robot stood there. It bowed, making a grinding noise, then said, "Please follow me, miss. Your room is ready."

After a moment's hesitation, she followed the venerable machine. Clanking and grinding, it led her through a series of corridors, going farther and farther back into the house. The air was cold and damp and had the musty smell of long-shut closets. Belinda shivered. Oh, to be back in Port Discovery! At last the robot stopped in front of a door that slid halfway open, then ground to a halt.

"Nothing works the way it should anymore," her guide said. "And what does the master do about it? Nothing, except play with that old music ring. The captain's first wife brought it from Earth. If only the captain were still alive!" It pushed the door the rest of the way open. "After you, miss."

She went in. The room was large, paneled with rust-wood, and lit by a fire in the fireplace. An old-fashioned bed, its posts carved by native craftsmen, stood in the room's center. On it lay a native gown made of bark-cloth and decorated with the tiny brightred shells of river clams.

"The bathroom's that door there, miss," the robot said, pointing. "The master would like you to put on the gown on the bed."

"Why?"

“Who can say, miss? The Hernshaws have never explained anything. They get that quality from the captain. It’s the only quality of his that they still have. You should have seen the captain, miss—so tall, so full of energy, with such a bright quick eye. He had only one eye when I knew him. The other was injured on the trip out and had to be removed. I’ll wait outside and guide you to the dining room when you’re ready.”

She waited till the robot was gone, then went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The shower nozzle hissed, then rattled. Finally it produced the spray she wanted. She undressed and showered. Ah! How good the water felt, after a full day spent in that awful carriage. She scrubbed herself all over, then stood, her eyes shut, feeling the spray beat against her back, and the hot water run down her body. At last, reluctantly, she got out and dried herself. The towel around her, she went into the bedroom and looked at the dress on the bed. It was pretty, all right. But she didn’t want to put it on. She didn’t like the planet’s natives. Even their artifacts made her a little uneasy. The one thing about Marianne she didn’t like was her mania for native art. She shivered, remembering the red-shell eyes of Marianne’s idols. Well, as much as she feared the gown, she feared her guardian more. She picked up the gown and took it into the bathroom to put it on.

When she was ready, the robot led her through more corridors to the main dining room. Her guardian was there, sitting at the great table, drinking wine. He looked at her and smiled slightly. “Sit down, my dear.” He filled a glass for her. She sat down and tasted it. It was some wonderful old vintage—mellow and sweet, far

different from the cheap wines she'd drunk in student bars in Port Discovery. She sipped it slowly and looked around. The room was lit by dim lights and paneled with the dark wood of the indigo tree. Starmaps hung on the walls. She'd seen a few of them before at the Port Discovery observatory. From the side, they looked to be two or three centimeters thick—as, in fact, they were. But from the front, they were windows into space. They seemed to go back forever. Even after two centuries, points of light still burned in their black depths.

“Wonderful, aren't they?” her guardian said.

She nodded. “I've never seen so many.”

“They're heirlooms, part of the Hernshaw treasure—as is my music ring and the robot. They were great collectors, Godfrey and his sons.” He stared at the fire in the fireplace and absently ran a finger around the rim of his glass. At last, he sighed and looked at her. “I suppose I'd better tell you why I brought you here.”

“I'd certainly like to know.”

“How to begin?” He drank the rest of his wine, then refilled the glass. “In the first place, my dear, your name isn't Belinda Smith. It's Belinda Hernshaw.”

“What! I'm related to you, then?”

He smiled slightly. “Does that bother you?”

“It's good stock,” the robot said. “Or it used to be, anyway.”

Her guardian frowned. “You may go, Number 39.”

The robot clanked away. Her guardian waited till it was out of the room, then went on. “You are my niece, Belinda, the daughter of my brother—a young fool, if ever there was one!” His right hand was resting on the table. He clenched it, then noticed it was clenched and

opened the fingers. “Ah well. He’s been dead a long time. He fell in love with one of the gray folk, my sweet, and he married her.”

The gray folk. That, she knew, was a backcountry name for the natives. She waited anxiously for her guardian to continue. Where was this story leading? She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

He drank more wine. “After a year or so, the woman had a child. She claimed it was my brother’s.”

“That’s impossible. Humans and natives cannot interbreed.”

“I told Gilbert that. But he believed the woman—the more so, because she died soon after the babe was born. He had nothing except his daughter then.”

She began to suspect what the story’s end would be.

“I’ll be brief,” her guardian said. “My brother died when the child was a year old—killed by a ghostbear we were tracking through the snow. It turned and attacked him.” Her guardian shut his eyes and shuddered. “I still dream about that.” He opened his eyes. “I killed the beast, but too late. Gilbert lived just long enough to make me promise to care for the child.” He stopped and sipped his wine. “I kept that promise, Belinda, though I never believed the child was really a Hernshaw. Still, my brother had acknowledged it. I found a respectable family that was willing to care for the child and sent it—sent her—to all the best schools. You are that child, Belinda my sweet.”

She could feel the quick beat of her heart, feel the tightness in her throat. “No. It’s impossible. I don’t look like a native.”

“You never did, even in infancy. But there’s no question about it. A native woman bore you.”

“There are physiological differences between humans and natives. Different blood types, different heartbeats. Surely my doctor would have noticed them.”

Her guardian nodded. “He did. But I paid Dr. Boucher to keep quiet, and to make sure no other doctors saw you.”

He was right, she realized. She’d always been treated by Dr. Boucher. She had a rare cardiovascular condition, the doctor had told her, and it required a specialist’s care. She could still hear her heartbeat. She listened. Was there an alien pattern there? No. Of course not. The whole story was ridiculous. She looked around at the dark walls, the dark old furniture, intricately carved by native craftsmen. A place like this was certain to produce morbid fantasies. Her guardian had gone crazy.

But she could hardly tell him that. “This is all very interesting,” she said finally.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“It’s very confusing, guard—I mean, uncle. I need time to think.”

He gulped down the rest of his wine, then picked up the silver bell that rested on the table and rang it.

Clank, whirr, clank, whirr. In the robot came.

“We’ll have dinner now, Number 39.”

Belinda stood up. “I don’t feel well, g—uncle. I’m not hungry.”

Her guardian nodded. “Show Miss Belinda to her room, and bring me another bottle when you return.”

She said good night, then followed the robot through dark hallways.

“So you’re a Hernshaw, miss,” it said. “I suspected as much. You look like the captain’s first wife. Ah, there was a lady! A little dainty thing, but a crack shot, with a black belt in karate. She was the armaments specialist on the settlement ship. All the captain’s best sons were by her.”

“You heard what my guardian said?”

“It wasn’t hard, miss. Mind the stairs here. They’re starting to crumble. My hearing is excellent. The captain used to say that I could hear the wool growing on a sheep’s back. I can’t, of course, since there are no sheep on this planet. I’ve often wished there were, so I could find out if the captain was right.”

“It’s all impossible,” Belinda said. “I can’t be half Hernshaw and half native. Humans and natives can’t interbreed.”

“This far out in the backwoods, anything is possible, miss. Just remember that. This is your room.”

They stopped, and the robot forced the bedroom door open. Belinda went in. “There’s a flask of brandy on the bedside table, miss. Good night.”

The door ground shut. She heard the robot clank off down the corridor. All at once, she was weeping—almost silently but with great sobs that shuddered through her body. She pulled the native gown off her and dropped it on the floor, then sat down beside the fire to weep.

By the time she stopped, the fire was almost out. She was cold, dressed only in her underwear. Her eyes and her throat hurt. She got up, groaning because she was stiff, and went into the bathroom to wash her face.

When she was done, she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. Was that the face of a half-breed, of a semi-alien? She refused to believe it. True, her hair was a native color: soft, dull brown with silvery highlights. Her face was pale, and her eyes were light gray. Those were native colors too. But her features were human—delicate, not sharp and bony like native features. “No,” she said out loud.

She turned out the bathroom light and went back into the bedroom, over to the bedside table. The flask was there: small and made of silver, with “To Iris from Godfrey” engraved on it. Iris. Was she the captain’s first wife, the armaments specialist? No matter. Belinda opened the flask and gulped down half the brandy in it. She shuddered and recapped the flask. Her gut felt warm. Already things around her were beginning to get fuzzy. She looked at the gown, which lay crumpled at her feet, then slowly bent and picked it up. It had been woven, she knew, from threads twisted from the fibrous bark of the clothbark tree. The fabric was coarse and lumpy and felt harsh against her skin. Still, it was pretty. She laid it gently over the back of a chair. Time to go to bed, she thought. Things would seem better in the morning. She pulled the covers back and climbed in.

She woke the next day to the sound of the robot pushing her bedroom door open. She sat up. Her eyes felt dry and scratchy, her head ached, and things seemed no better than they had the night before.

“Good morning, miss. I see you’ve been crying.” The robot set a tea tray on the bedside table, then clanked to the closet. “Have some tea. You’ll feel much better. The master wants you to wear this today.” It pulled out

another native gown, this one dyed red and decorated with lots of fringe. At the end of each piece of fringe was a tiny, pearly spiral shell. “Those shells are from a snail-like creature that the natives consider sacred. The captain used to eat them stewed in a kind of bouillabaisse. The snails, I mean. Not the natives.”

She sighed. “All right. I’ll wear it.”

The robot nodded. She poured herself a cup of tea and sipped it. The room was cold, she noticed. Gray light came in through the cloudy plastic window. She could dimly see the trails raindrops made as they ran down the outside of it.

She didn’t believe she was a native. But she felt disoriented. Everything safe and comfortable seemed to be moving away from her. Already she had trouble visualizing Port Discovery—the streets of painted houses and the rows of flowering iris trees. The house she’d grown up in had been pink. She was sure of that. But what about the tree that shaded it? Had its blossoms been lavender and yellow or violet and pink? She was no longer certain. Belinda sighed and finished her tea, then got up and got dressed.

As before, the bedroom door opened only halfway. She squeezed through and saw the robot waiting in the corridor.

“Now I see your mother in you,” the robot said. “That was her dress, the one she wore when she married Mr. Gilbert.”

“Oh no.” She stopped and looked down at the fringe and the tiny shells.

“Yes indeed. This way, miss.” The robot clanked off down the corridor. She followed. “Quite a spectacle it

was. Be careful,” it said as they turned into a new hall. “The ceiling’s falling, and there are bits of it all over the floor. A native shaman performed the ceremony—right here, in the main living room. I thought the master—the present master, I mean—was going to be sick at the sight of all those gray folk, doing their marriage dance on the captain’s fine old carpet.”

“This is all too confusing for me,” Belinda said. “I can’t make sense out of it.”

“Who ever said that life had to make sense?”

They turned another corner, went up a flight of stairs, and ended in a little room. The walls were windows, all of them cloudy with age. There were plants in pots on the low window ledges: firefern, groundstar, and tiny dwarf iris trees. A table was at the room’s center with breakfast waiting on it and a young man sitting at it, who stood as they entered.

“Miss Hernshaw, this is Claud Alone-in-the-forest,” the robot said. “You two are cousins.”

“Oh,” Belinda said.

The young man nodded and mumbled something she couldn’t understand. Though he wore human clothes, he was clearly a native—tall and slight, with pale skin and light brown hair. His face was all sharp angles: prominent cheekbones, deep-set slanted eyes, a jutting nose, and a pointed chin. In her opinion, he was ugly—except for his eyes, which were a pale greenish brown and fringed with long thick colorless lashes. His eyes were lovely, she decided, though pretty strange looking.

“The master will be here shortly,” the robot said and left them.

As soon as it was gone, Claud said, "This is terrible." His English was good, but his voice was the voice of a native. It was high-pitched; it lacked resonance; and it lilted oddly.

"What is terrible?" Belinda asked.

He pulled out a chair. "Please sit down, and excuse me if I pace."

She sat down and poured herself a cup of coffee. Claud paced to the end of the room, then turned and paced back.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Do you know yet why that fellow brought you here?"

"To tell me I was a Hernshaw." She added cream to her coffee. Her hand was trembling a little, she noticed. Claud's nervousness was making her nervous.

"No." He shook his head.

She added sugar to her coffee. "Then why?"

"Your maternal relations demanded you back. A marriage was arranged for you when you were born, Belinda, and now it's time for the ceremony to be performed."

"What!" She dropped the sugar spoon into her coffee cup.

"You're supposed to marry me," Claud said, sounding anguished. "Why was I ever born?" He kept on pacing.

She ought to be horrified, she realized. But so much had happened in the past two days that she was no longer capable of responding properly to anything. She pulled the sugar spoon out of her cup, then used it to stir her coffee. "You speak very good English for a native."

Claud nodded. “I went to the native school in Port Discovery and then to New Harvard. It was while I was there that I met my true love at one of the native fairs. I went to buy some pickled nashri. There she was, buying a wireroot carpet. What a sight she was! Her hair was dark red like a firefern, and her face was ruddy and freckled, like the blossom of the spotted iris.” His voice had grown soft. He stopped and stared at one of the cloudy windows.

“Red hair? She was human?”

“Was and is. We have to meet furtively, of course. What would her friends and relatives say? And now I’m supposed to marry someone else.”

She looked down at her coffee cup. Oh Marianne, Marianne, she thought. Why didn’t you tell me? For her roommate’s hair was red, and her face was covered with freckles. Who else could it be? She imagined Marianne in the arms of a gray man and shuddered. Why didn’t these people shut up? She didn’t want to know their secrets. She drank some of the coffee, then looked at Claud. “Can’t you refuse to marry me?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?”

He looked at her. A fleeting glance. She had a sense that he was surprised. “I am not human, Belinda, though I have lived among humans for years.”

“What does that mean?”

“Humans love to confront one another—and us, when we let them. They are always taking a stand on one thing or another. They think it is a virtue to be inflexible—like a miredrake that has lived too long. The skin grows hard. The animal cannot move. It lies under

the house, locked in position, hissing angrily at anything that comes near. Someone has to crawl in with a knife and put the poor animal out of its misery.”

He paused for a moment. Belinda drank more coffee. He went on. “To us, there is nothing to admire in this kind of rigidity. We think reality is complex and not always certain. It is hard to know the right and wrong of a situation. Listen to other people! Especially to the other people in your tribe. And always be ready to compromise.”

“Oh,” said Belinda. This fit with what she knew about the natives. They were timid. They hated any kind of quarrel. Though it was possible to push them too far. Then they exploded into a brief violent fury. The anger did not last long, but while it lasted, the natives could be dangerous—as the early settlers had discovered. Nowadays, humans left the natives alone as much as possible.

“You are willing to let these people ruin your life?” she asked. “And my life too?”

He nodded. “Yes. I have no desire to imitate human behavior. I have seen where it leads.” A shudder went through him. “I think that’s why I’m so nervous. I have lived for years with people who *like* to argue. It has not been easy.” He bit a fingernail. “Another person might have learned to argue, if only in self-defense. I did not. I have become more and more timid.”

Belinda said nothing.

Claud went back to pacing. After a moment or two, he spoke again. He seemed to be thinking out loud, arguing with himself. No. He could not be arguing. He had just told her that he hated to argue. He was having a discussion.

“I will not stand up to the elders of the tribe. They’d be furious, if I told them that I would not marry you. I was raised to marry you. That’s why I was sent away to school—so I’d know how humans thought, since you were raised a human.” He paused and scratched his nose and frowned. “I have to be fair. The elders had no choice. I am the only male in the tribe who’s the right age and the right degree of kinship. I have to marry you. If I don’t, who will?”

“I might possibly be able to find someone.”

“But not in the tribe. As you may or may not know, among our people alternate generations are endogamous. Since your mother married outside the kinship group, you have to marry within it. The elders told Gilbert Hernshaw that all his wife’s children would have to marry back into the tribe. He said that was fine with him.”

“Now, what right did he have to decide my life for me?”

Claud stopped at the table. He fiddled with a butter knife. “He was in love, Belinda. He was willing to agree to anything in order to get your mother.”

“That was Gilbert,” her guardian said behind her. “Always inconsiderate. I begged him not to marry that woman.”

Belinda looked around. Her guardian was standing in the doorway, dressed in an old-fashioned tight-fitting suit.

“I was his brother, his twin,” her guardian said. He came into the room. “Who could be closer to him? But do you think he paid any attention to my opinions? No.

Never. Only one person ever mattered to him. Gilbert Hernshaw.” Her guardian sat down. “Coffee, please.”

She poured him a cup of coffee. Claud went back to pacing.

“Claud doesn’t want to marry me, g—uncle, and I don’t want to marry him.”

“You have no choice in this matter, my dear. Nor does—Will you please sit down? You’re making me nervous.”

Claud sighed, then took a seat and helped himself to a roll.

“That’s better.” Her guardian sipped his coffee, then uncovered a warming dish and spooned stewed ebony pears onto his plate. “You may not realize it, Belinda, living in Port Discovery, but most of this planet still belongs to the natives. Out here in the backwoods, we do our best to get along with them. The elders of the Stone Tree tribe want you to marry Claud. I’m certainly not going to argue with them about it. I advise you not to, either.” He sprinkled sugar on his pears. “I don’t see what the problem is. The elders don’t care where you live or how you live. They’re only interested in bloodlines. You and Claud can live like humans, if you want to—even live in Port Discovery. You won’t be forced into one of those wretched hovels.”

“Just a minute,” Claud said. “I spent my childhood in a native house. They’re not all that bad.”

“I defer to your experience. More coffee please, Belinda.”

She refilled his cup, then set the pot down and shook her head. “It wouldn’t work, uncle. Claud loves someone else. So do I.” I most certainly do, she add-

ed to herself, thinking of Marianne's red hair shining in the sunlight and her wonderful green eyes—Slavic eyes, almond-shaped and slanted. Things were getting so complicated, she thought. If only the past two days could be undone. If only she could be back at college. But college seemed so far away. Even if she got back to Port Discovery, things wouldn't be the same. She knew about Marianne and Claud now. What a betrayal that was! How could Marianne have done it? She sighed and buttered a breakfast roll.

Her guardian finished his pears, uncovered the scrambled eggs, and helped himself to them. "To be brutal, my dear, you have no choice. We are fifty kilometers from the next human estate, and there is no way out of here except by carriage. My coachman, as you may or may not have noticed, is a native, a member of the Stone Tree tribe. How far do you think he will drive you? My radio is not working at present. And finally, you are a native, my sweet. According to treaty, you are subject to native—not human—law. If you got to a human settlement, you'd only be returned here." He took a roll and bit into it. "Reconcile yourself to the situation," he said as he chewed.

She looked at Claud's pale, sharp-angled face and thought of Marianne. Never. Somehow she would get away. But she said nothing to her guardian except, "We'll see."

She finished her breakfast, then excused herself. Claud stood too. "Can I go with you?"

"Yes," her guardian said. "Get to know each other better. Go visit the terrarium. Number 39 will show you the way."

Belinda nodded, and the two of them left together. The robot led them through dark hallways to a huge, domed room. The dome was transparent. Below it grew plants brought from Earth two centuries before. Their foliage was an extraordinary, intense, almost luminous green. The air itself seemed to have a greenish tint, which paled into gray in the room's upper reaches, close to the dome. Belinda stopped and stared. "How wonderful!"

The air was warm and moist, full of strange odors. Pale green flowers bloomed right above her, hanging down out of pots.

"Our house is full of wonders," the robot said. "Those things above you are orchids. The captain's second wife liked them. I never did like her. I'll be outside if you want me, Miss Hernshaw."

It left. Belinda and Claud looked at one another. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

He frowned and bit his lip. How human he looked, she thought. But he wasn't. His almost human appearance was an accident of evolution. In spite of it, he was utterly alien, utterly inhuman, utterly different from her. Then she remembered that she was supposed to be a native.

Claud looked up at the leaves above them—enormous, frilly, and bright green. "How can I think here? This place makes me nervous."

She was nervous, too, though she hated to admit it. The plants' green was too vivid. The warm, moist, rich air made her dizzy. "There has to be a way out!"

"What?" Claud began to pace again. "Hernshaw was telling the truth. We can't get away. The woods are

full of Stone Tree warriors. They even have a couple of mind-watchers watching us. Can't you feel them?"

"No." She felt a prickling sensation spread across her back. Like all humans on the planet, she knew that the natives had psi powers. Like most humans, she preferred to forget the fact. It was too horrible, imagining those woodland skulkers looking into human minds or making ashtrays move in human houses.

Claud stopped pacing and stared at her. "That's odd. One of the watchers is old Starbird. You can always tell when he's watching you. His presence is like a rock in the middle of your head."

"I can't feel anything."

"I don't understand that. Your mother was very gifted. She could mind-watch from a hundred kilometers away, or so my mother told me. She could bring birds down out of the sky and fish up to the water's surface. She could even mind-move small objects, and that's a rare talent. My father said it was a great pity Ania Groundstar was born into the exogamous generation. She would've been a wonderful wife. What man could fail as a hunter or a warrior, if he had her help?"

"I suppose so."

"Are you sure you can't sense Starbird? He's got a hard, cold, slick, feel to him like a polished stone." She shut her eyes and tried to figure out what was inside her head. The usual memories were there—Port Discovery in the summer sunlight, her foster mother fixing fish stew, and the expected anxieties—would she get out of this mess and back to school before finals began? She noticed as well a lot of facts about natives, stars, stones, and birds, also a slight tension headache. But she couldn't

find the hard, cold, alien presence Claud said was there. She opened her eyes and shook her head.

“You must be a psychic idiot, Belinda. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed.”

“You can still lead a useful life, though there are things you’ll never be able to do.”

“All I want to be able to do is get out of here.”

Claud shook his head. “It can’t be done.”

She felt herself growing furious. What was wrong with this oaf? He had gone back to pacing. Up and down the concrete aisle he went. “He’s lying about living in Port Discovery. The elders aren’t going to let us out of their sight, at least until we procreate. We’ll be stuck in a hut in some native village with rain dripping through the thatch and miredrakes grunting underneath the floorboards—and the elders listening at the door to make sure we’re making love.” He stopped, twisted a leaf off one of the plants and shredded it.

“I don’t see why it’s so important that we marry.”

“Part of it is religion. If certain things aren’t done in certain ways, then the ocean monsters will rise to the ocean’s surface, causing terrific tidal waves. Didn’t you learn that stuff in Introductory Comp. Soc.?”

“I haven’t taken it yet.”

“Oh.” He tossed away the plant shreds. “The rest has to do with your mother’s psi powers. Such powers are hereditary. The elders don’t want the tribe to lose whatever powers you have or are carrying.”

“This is all too silly for words.”

“It may be silly, but it’s going to ruin our lives.” He pulled another leaf from one of the plants and tore it up.

“No.” She shook her head. “I refuse to let it.” She looked around her at the strange wonderful plants from Earth. “Maybe there’s something in this house that will help us. It’s full of ancient marvels.”

“What?”

“Robot?” she called.

A moment later, she heard a clanking and whirring behind her. She turned.

“You called, miss?”

“Yes. Did you hear our conversation?”

“I couldn’t help it, miss. You were talking loudly, and the terrarium door isn’t very thick.”

“It doesn’t matter. Do you think the captain would approve of what my guardian—my uncle—is doing?”

The robot stood still, humming loudly. In this light, she could see it clearly. Its steel surface was crisscrossed with scratches. One of its eyes had gone dead and was dull gray instead of luminous blue. Why hadn’t she noticed that before? Had it just gone dead? At last the robot swiveled its head from side to side. Its neck joint made a grinding noise. “No. He would not approve. He took care of his own. He would never have surrendered one of his family to a bunch of barbarians.”

“Watch it,” Claud said. “Those are my people out there.”

“Can they tell what we’re doing?” Belinda asked.

Claud shook his head. “All a mind-watcher can do is tell where a person is and what kind of mood they’re in. The really good ones can pick up fragmentary images, but old Starbird is just barely adequate. I don’t know who else is with him, but it’s no one first-rate. The

Stone Tree tribe doesn't have a first rate mind-watcher. We are very hard up for psychics."

"Good," Belinda said. She looked back at the robot. "Is this the right way for the Hernshaw family to come to an end? With this kind of betrayal?"

After a moment the robot said:

*"Broethr munu berjast ok at bonum verthask.
Munu systrungar siffjum spilla."*

"What?" Claud asked.

"It's a stanza from the captain's favorite poem. It's about the end of the world, and it means—

*"Brothers will fight and kill one another.
The children of sisters will break their kinship."*

The poor old machine, Belinda thought. Its world really was ending. It had been programmed to serve the Hernshaws, to see this one family as everything. Now the last two Hernshaws were turning on one another. With a start she realized she was starting to think of herself as a Hernshaw. Well, as bad as that was, it was better than being a native. She looked at Claud. He was biting his lip, and one of his eyelids was twitching. How ugly he was! Even his wonderful hazel eyes didn't help all that much.

"I'll help you, miss," the robot said. "The captain would have wanted me to." After it said that, it stood for a while, staring straight ahead. Belinda bit her fingernails. Claud shifted from foot to foot, as if anxious to get back to pacing. At last the robot said, "Most likely the master will drink himself into insensibility after dinner. He does that most nights. After I've put him to bed, I'll

take you into the storage wing. Maybe we can find some means of escape there.”

Claud shrugged. “It’s better than doing nothing, I suppose. I’m going to take a walk. Maybe I’ll meet some of my kinfolk and find out what the elders are planning.”

“What shall I do?”

“Be patient, miss. If you want, I’ll show you to the library. The captain’s collection of Earth music is famous. Or was famous, anyway. You humans forget so quickly.”

“All right.”

They went to the library, a large room with lots of windows. For some reason, the windows’ plastic hadn’t gotten cloudy. Belinda looked out and saw a brown lawn. Beyond it was the forest. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still low and gray.

“Make yourself at home, miss. I’ll bring you some coffee.”

The robot left. She looked around at the room. There was little in it: a pair of easy chairs covered with thornbuck hide, a rug made from the pelt of a ghostbear, and a huge desk. Behind the desk was a chair, its high back carved with native monsters. There were two wooden gorwings atop the chair, their wings spread wide, their long necks stretched forward, their beaks open to show rows of tiny white shell teeth. Yech. Belinda shuddered, then started looking at the crystal cases along the walls. She found “Highlights of The Flying Dutchman” and put it in the ancient crystal-player. Strangely enough, the machine still worked. But the crystal was mislabeled. She had heard parts of “The Flying Dutchman”

performed by the Port Discovery Symphony Orchestra. This wasn't it. Instead of Wagner's wonderful music, she heard a lot of whining string instruments and a man's voice singing:

*"If we can make it through December,
Everything's going to be all right, I know.
It's the coldest part of winter,
And I shiver when I see the falling snow."*

What was this stuff? The recording sounded incredibly old, full of crackles and hums. The singing went on:

*"If we make it through December,
Got plans to be in a warmer town come summer-
time,
Maybe even California.
If we make it through December, we'll be fine."*

The robot returned, bringing a cup and a pot of coffee or—to be more accurate—pseudo-coffee. The colonists had brought real coffee with them from Earth in their store of frozen genetic material. But the plant did not thrive here. A local bug, the coffee weevil, ate every bean. The colonists made do with a drink brewed from the fruit of the yellowpod tree. It didn't look like coffee, but it stimulated, and it had a wonderful aroma. Not like the aroma of coffee, the old records said, but almost as good.

The robot set the cup down and filled it with yellow coffee. The singer in the crystal sang:

*"Got laid off down at the factory,
And their timing's not the greatest in the world.
Heaven knows I've been working hard,
Wanted Christmas to be right for Daddy's girl."*

She switched off the player and took the crystal out. On one of the facets in tiny silver letters was “The Golden Hits of Merle Haggard.” Who was Merle Haggard? Why had Captain Hernshaw brought his music with him from Earth?

“Do you like that song, miss? It’s appropriate enough. From the looks of the sky, we’re going to have snow.” The robot went to the desk and got out a bottle half-full of brandy. “Do you want some in your coffee?”

Belinda nodded. “Who was Merle Haggard, anyway?”

“I don’t really know, except that the captain liked his songs.”

“Well, I don’t.” She put the crystal back into its case. She took down “The Jupiter Symphony” next and looked at the writing on the crystal. It said, “Thus Spake Zarathustra” by Richard Strauss. She put the crystal back.

The robot poured brandy into her cup, and the coffee darkened a little. “That’s the captain’s desk.”

“I suspected as much.” She glanced at the sharp-toothed gorwings and the writhing interwoven monsters that were carved in the wood.

“He used to sit there and listen to the reports his sons radioed in from all over the estate. You should’ve seen him, miss. In his last days, he had a long gray beard, and he’d twist it and tug at it while he listened. If you’re a Hernshaw, you’re his heir. You know that, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Gilbert Hernshaw was older than the present master. By some ten minutes, as I remember. My memory isn’t what it used to be. Faulty circuits, I suppose.”

“Are you sure of this?”

“More or less. Things come and go, miss. Sometimes the world seems so clear and certain. Then I forget the crucial connections, and everything falls apart.”

How could that metal voice sound pained? But it seemed to her it did. The robot bowed, making a grinding noise, and left. She kept looking through the recordings till she found one she thought she'd like—“Folksongs of the Asteroids.” The crystal was inside a case labeled “Great Moments of Chinese Opera.” She put it in the player. While the music played, she curled up in a chair and drank the coffee. She must have slept badly the night before, for she was soon drowsy. She finished the coffee, leaned back, and shut her eyes. For a short while the music kept her awake with shrill whistling and plinking sounds and the sad tale of a spacewreck. Then she went to sleep.

When she woke, several hours later, it was snowing outside—large fluffy flakes that came straight down, melting as soon as they touched the ground. The crystal player had shut itself off. She felt groggy and headachy. For a moment, she didn't know where she was. Then she remembered, sighed, and stretched.

“You may well sigh,” Claud said.

She looked around and saw him sitting in the captain's chair, smoking a native cigar. He waved at the windows. “They're all out there, every male in the tribe who's old enough to hold a spear. They plan to hold the marriage ceremony tomorrow night. The moons will be in the 'ru' configuration, which is considered lucky for marriages, night-fishing, and the making of narrow-necked pots.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes.” Claud puffed on his cigar. The tip remained ash-gray. He sighed, picked up a lighter and flicked it on. “The old women are coming here tomorrow morning to purify you. I have to go off in the woods and take a ritual bath in running water. In this weather, mind you. I’ll probably catch a terrible cold.”

She stood up. “We’d better tell the robot.”

“I already have.”

“Oh.” She sat down.

Claud lit the cigar, then snapped down the lighter’s top. “The only good news I got was that old Starbird is uttering dire prophecies. He says he can sense Godfrey Hernshaw’s ghost. The ghost is somewhere close by, he says, and it’s very angry. According to him, no good will come of this.”

“Of what?”

“Forcing the two of us to marry. Unfortunately, no one believes Starbird. They say he’s not good enough to sense a ghost.”

Could the mind-watchers really sense disembodied spirits? Was this the proof of an afterlife that humanity had always wanted? She decided to worry about those questions later. She had too much on her mind as it was.

“The robot said it would bring our lunch here. Your guardian rarely eats lunch. He drinks it instead.”

“Oh.” Her guardian was a problem drinker. How little she had known about him up till now. Not that she had particularly cared. She had always been interested in the here and now. Marianne said she was narrow-minded. True, perhaps. But she’d been happy enough, concentrating on her schoolwork and her plants and Marianne. She got up and went to one of the windows.

It was still snowing. Now the snow was staying on the ground. Already there was a thin cover of white over the lawn. She felt cold and depressed. Her life seemed as desolate as the landscape in front of her. She turned suddenly and looked at Claud. "Marianne Duval was my roommate at college."

"What?" Claud dropped his cigar, then picked it up before it could burn the desk.

"Did she tell you anything about me?"

"Only that you are terribly prejudiced against natives. Are you?"

She nodded.

"But you are a native."

"I didn't know that till yesterday. Besides, I thought I was supposed to be only half native."

Claud shook his head. "That's impossible, Belinda. Humans can't interbreed with us. Gilbert Hernshaw couldn't possibly be your father."

"Then who was?"

He shrugged. "Some passing stranger, a member of another tribe."

"I'm getting more and more confused." She went over to the player and turned it on. "The Song of the Bare Rock Miners" began.

Claud frowned. "Turn that off, will you? I've never been able to tolerate Earth music."

She turned the player off.

"Thank you. It sounded awful." He relit his cigar.

"Well then." She took the crystal out and found another one. The case was labeled "Whalesongs and Other Sounds of the Deep." The crystal itself contained bone harp music, as she'd discovered earlier. She put it in the

player. They listened to that till the robot brought them lunch.

After lunch, Claud suggested that they go look at the stables. Belinda glanced outside. Everything was white now, and the snow was falling more thickly than ever. It did look inviting. Snow rarely fell in Port Discovery. When it did, it usually melted as soon as it hit the streets and the bright-tiled rooftops.

“All right. I’ll have to change, though.”

Claud nodded. “I’ll meet you in the front hall.”

She went back to her room and changed into pants and the warmest shirt she had. There was a heavy jacket in the closet, also a pair of boots that were only a little too big. She put these on and went to meet Claud. Together they went out into the snow, across the white lawn, their heads bent and their hands in their pockets. A wind had started to blow. It whirled snow into their eyes and whipped their hair back and forth. Around the house they went, through a little side garden, between leafless bushes. It felt good to get outside, Belinda thought. She’d been suffocating in the house. She looked at Claud. His hair was white. There were snowflakes caught in his eyebrows and on his thick lashes. For some reason the snow made him look less alien. They crossed the back drive and entered the stable courtyard.

“What do you want?” someone asked. Her guardian’s native coachman came out of one of the boxes. He was leading one of the thornbucks, a huge beast with long legs and powerful-looking shoulders and haunches. Its gray coat was winter-shaggy. Atop its head were two long curving horns with sharp spikes all along their

upper edges. The coachman stopped. The thornbuck looked at them with pale yellow eyes, then snorted.

“Don’t think you can steal any of my bucks,” the coachman said. “They’re none of them broken for riding. Besides, I’ll have my eyes on you.”

“You certainly are suspicious,” Claud said. “All we wanted to do is take a look around. It’s stifling inside that house.”

“Well, be careful what you do in my stable.”

Claud nodded. The coachman led the buck across the courtyard and into another box. Claud stamped his feet to get the snow off his boots. “So much for that idea. It wouldn’t have worked, anyway. We couldn’t have gotten past the Stone Tree sentries.”

“You were thinking of stealing a thornbuck?”

“Yes. The important word is thinking. I doubt if I’d steal a buck, even if I could. As I said before, I’m terribly timid. Would you like to walk in the woods?”

She nodded. They left the courtyard and crossed a little river on a bridge. There was ice along the banks, but the river’s center was still unfrozen. The water was clear with a slight greenish tinge. She could see right through it, down to the pebbles on the river’s bottom. She stopped and watched the water slide below her. How lovely it all was—the white banks, the falling flakes of snow, the fast-moving water. She shivered from a combination of coldness and delight. After a moment, they went on into the woods. The wind decreased, and the snowflakes came straight down. Overhead, something screeched. Snow fell on them. She looked up and saw a tiny furry silver-gray manikin, that shook the branch it clung to.

“That’s a timish,” Claud said. “The humans around here call it a snow monkey. It’s supposed to be a relative of ours.”

The creature screeched again, then leaped into another tree and started climbing. They watched it until it disappeared around the tree’s trunk, then went on. The path turned a corner. They saw a native warrior ahead of them, standing in the path’s center, leaning on his spear. He was taller than Claud and even uglier, his face very long and narrow with a pointed nose and chin. His hair hung down in little braids with shells dangling from their ends. Even his moustache was in braids: two long ones that ended in silver bells. His leggings were buckskin, decorated with fringe, and his jacket was brown fur. “What want?” he asked in English.

Claud answered in one of the native dialects.

The warrior frowned and tugged at his lower lip. “No,” he said at last. “Go back.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him we were taking a walk. He doesn’t like the idea. I don’t know if you are interested, but his name is Rissa Needleburr, and he’s a cousin of yours.”

“Yes,” the native said.

It was impossible. How could she have anything in common with this savage? The savage smiled, showing broken teeth. “Good meet—” He stopped, then looked at Claud. “Na?”

“Kin,” Claud said. “It’s good to meet kin is what he’s trying to say.”

Oh yeah? she thought.

Claud scratched his nose. “I guess we’d better turn back. He won’t let us go any farther.”

She shrugged, and back they went. The snow fell more and more lightly. Belinda looked up at the gray sky and saw a pair of birds circling way way up.

“Gorwings,” Claud told her. “They’re pretty unusual around here this time of year. Those two probably belong to old Starbird. He keeps all kinds of nasty pets.”

She shuddered. “I feel so trapped.”

“You ought to. You are.”

They recrossed the bridge and went back around the house to the front door. A native was there, drawing something in the snow that lay across the doorstep. He straightened up and turned to face them. How ancient he was, how bent and wrinkled! His bare legs were bone thin: his sandaled feet were covered with cord-like veins; his barkcloth shirt was open to show a sagging belly and shriveled privates. “Woe! Woe!” he cried in English. He waved his hands in the air, then hobbled away.

“That’s Starbird.” Claud looked at the design in the snow. “I think that’s to ward off ghosts. He must really think the captain is around.”

“In that case—” She kicked the snow till she’d obliterated all the lines the shaman had drawn.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” He rang the doorbell.

“I don’t believe in ghosts, but right now I’ll take anyone’s help,” Belinda said.

The snow had stopped. The air was still and seemed colder than before. Half way across the lawn, Starbird was dancing or having a seizure, she wasn’t sure which. The door opened.

“Come in. Come in,” the robot said. “The master has passed out early today. We can go and look at the storage wing right this minute.”

“Give us time to thaw out.”

“Certainly, miss. This way, if you please.”

It led them to a room with a fireplace and lit the fire, then brought them coffee and brandy. They took off their coats. Claud stood in front of the fire, his hands stretched out toward it. The ruddy light gave color to his face and made his hair a human shade of brown, or so it seemed to Belinda. She settled herself into an easy chair. The robot poured the coffee.

Claud sighed. “I can’t take this weather anymore. I’ve spent too much time in Port Discovery.”

“Why did you come back?”

“Don’t you remember what your guardian said? We’re subject to tribal law, to tribal authority. The elders sent for me. I knew if I didn’t return, they’d have me brought back in manacles.” The robot gave him a brandy snifter. He emptied it with one gulp. “Do you think I liked leaving? Do you think I liked the look on Marianne’s face when I told her?”

“Did you tell her you were going to get married?”

He shook his head. The robot refilled his glass. “How could I? I couldn’t bear to hurt her that much.”

She would’ve been hurt all right, Belinda thought, knowing that her two loves were going to marry one another and leave her alone. Or did Marianne have more loves, who would comfort her? Belinda felt tired. She sipped her brandy and watched the fire.

“About the storage wing, miss,” the robot said. She shook her head. “Not now. I have to have time to rest.”

Claud finished his brandy. "I'll go."

"You're sure you won't, miss?"

"Yes." She set down her snifter and shut her eyes. After a moment, she heard them go. She kept her eyes shut a while longer, then opened them. The flames flickered. The wood snapped and crackled. Belinda felt depressed.

"Thirty-nine!" It was her guardian, shouting in the corridor. "Where are you, machine?"

She went to the door and opened it. There he was, his hair all tousled, his clothing wrinkled, his face pale and sick looking.

"G—uncle?"

He stared at her, bleary-eyed. "Where is the robot? I want something to drink."

"There's brandy in here, uncle."

He pushed past her, stumbled to the table and poured himself a snifter of brandy. With one gulp, he drank half of it, then shuddered and sat down. "I had the dream again, my sweet. Gilbert and the ghostbear. Pray God you never have such dreams." He drank some more brandy, then refilled the snifter. "It's always the same, Belinda. The ghostbear coming out of the thicket. Then Gilbert raising his gun and pulling the trigger. Then there's the click, when the hammer hits the empty chamber." He stopped and drank more brandy.

"Empty?"

He looked up at her. His face was flushed and his eyes unfocused. "Yes. Of course. The bullets were in my pocket." He drank the rest of the brandy, then refilled the glass a third time.

Oh no, she thought. Not more confessions.

He nodded, staring at the fire. “You would’ve had the house, the Hernshaw inheritance, everything. A native bastard in the captain’s high-seat. That couldn’t be, Belinda. I had to stop that.” He shivered, then laughed shakily. “And I did. I did. Tomorrow, you will be where you belong.”

“But why did you take care of me, if you felt that way? Why didn’t you simply give me to the natives when I was a baby?”

“I couldn’t do that. I promised Gilbert. I couldn’t break my promise. Not a promise made to a dying man.”

He was crazy, she decided. They were all crazy—her guardian, Claud, the robot, the entire Stone Tree tribe. Maybe there was something bad in the air around here.

All at once, her guardian clutched his forehead, then slumped back in his chair. The brandy snifter fell from his hand, its dark contents spilling across the pale brown carpet. Was he dead? she wondered. She went closer. As she did so, he started to snore. No. Merely dead drunk. She picked up the snifter and set it on the table, then got her own glass and sipped from it.

She sat down in the chair opposite her guardian. He snorted and groaned, then went back to snoring. Belinda drank a little coffee. Well, she wondered, who was she? The heir to Gorwing Keep or a native bastard? Or neither. She liked the last idea best.

The fire snapped loudly. She jumped and spilled a few drops of liquor on the chair’s barkcloth upholstery. She rubbed at the spots, but they didn’t go away. Maybe it didn’t matter. Maybe the house was hers. Not that she’d ever get it, the way things were going.

Instead, she'd get a hut in a native village and Claud for a husband.

The room's door whined open. Claud came in, followed by the robot.

"Did you find anything?"

Claud shook his head, then helped himself to some brandy. "There's nothing there except a lot of dusty old machinery that doesn't work."

"We can't be sure of that, sir. We didn't get a chance to try all the machines. I thought I heard the master calling me," the robot said to Belinda. "So we came back."

Belinda pointed at her guardian. "He came in here looking for you and had a drink. Then he said he'd murdered his brother."

"What?" Claud said.

"Do you think he did, Number 39?"

"It's hard to say, miss. He says a lot of strange things when he's drunk. Some of them are true and some aren't. If you'll excuse me..." It gathered her guardian up in its metal arms and carried him out of the room.

Claud sat down. "What now?"

"I don't know. But I'm not going to give up—I don't think I am. I wish I had some idea of how to get out of here!"

Claud nodded in agreement. He sipped his brandy, staring at the fire. It was burning low. The dim light softened the angles of his face. She felt a sudden frightening rush of affection for him. Good old Claud. He wasn't all that bad, really, for a native.

After a moment, she recovered herself. It must be the brandy, she thought and set her snifter down. "I'd better go to bed. I'm feeling funny." She stood up.

Claud nodded a second time. “Good night.”

She went back to her room. There was a light on, and a fire burned in the fireplace. One of her nightgowns lay on the bed. The ubiquitous Number 39, she thought. She picked the gown up. The soft feel of its fabric reassured her, as did the delicate floral print. How could harm come to anyone wearing a flannel nightgown? She carried it into the bathroom, hung it on a hook, and turned the shower on.

She was a long time showering. She refused to think about her present problems. Instead, she worried about what courses to take next semester. She never studied well in the spring. What she needed, she thought, as the water hit her shoulders and back, was something easy like art history. But she’d already taken as much art history as she needed. Music history then? Or Introductory Earth Lit.? She got out of the shower, still undecided, dried herself, and put on the nightgown. She climbed into bed and lay a while, looking at the firelight on the ceiling. Then she went to sleep.

She slept badly, waking often. A couple of times, she woke shaking and turned on the light, looking around for something that shouldn’t have been there—a monster or a native. But there was only the bedroom furniture. She lay with the light on till she felt more or less calm. Then she went back to sleep.

The last time she woke, it was morning. Gray light came in the clouded window. The robot came in the bedroom door, carrying a tea tray. “Good morning, miss. How did you sleep?”

“Terribly.”

The robot made a clicking sound and set the tray down, then poured her a cup of tea. "I thought about the master's confession last night."

Belinda sat up and took the teacup. "Yes?"

"It took me a long time to think it through. I don't think as well as I used to. Did I tell you that?"

She nodded, sipping the tea. It was a pale transparent red color and very bitter. She liked it, though a lot of people didn't, including Marianne.

"In the end, I decided to go to Gilbert Hernshaw's room. The present master told me to close it up, after Mr. Gilbert died. No one's been in it for almost eighteen years. I found this."

There was a silver warming dish on the tray. The robot lifted the cover. Underneath was a crystal cube. Belinda picked it up and turned it in her hands. It was maybe ten centimeters along each side. Within it, silver wires crisscrossed. They were so thin that she couldn't see them except when the light hit them at just the right angle.

"Do you know what that is?" the robot asked.

"A memory cube." She felt around it till she found the slight depression on one side. She pressed in there. All at once, the cube was full of light, and there was a human head in it, tiny and perfectly three-dimensional. She was looking at its back. She turned the cube till she saw the face. It was a man's face, very like her guardian's, but younger, with a far-healthier appearance. The strong features seemed full of energy. There was a look of intelligence in the large light-colored eyes. Surely the curl of the full lips indicated good humor.

The man said, “This is for you, Belinda.” She almost dropped the cube. “If you’ve been properly educated, you’ll know Tennyson’s lines in *In Memoriam*:

*“Be near me when my light is low,
When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick
And tingle; and the heart is sick,
And all the wheels of being slow.”*

“That’s how I feel tonight, Belinda. You’re in the next room, asleep in your crib. My brother Godfrey is in the dining room, drunk as usual. There’s no one else in the house except Number 39, the old family robot. I’m sitting here, missing your mother and feeling sorry for myself. So I’ve decided to record a message to you, to explain what happened, how you came about.” The man in the cube stopped talking. She saw him lift a glass to his lips and take a drink. He lowered the glass, then said, “I wish you could have seen your mother. She was beautiful, though not the way humans are. She wasn’t soft and delicate. She had the harsh hard beauty the natives have. I loved her the first time I saw her. As Shakespeare says, ‘Whoever loved, that loved not at first sight?’”

“That’s balderdash,” the robot said. “I remember—” It paused. “I forget what I remember.”

“In any case, I married her. She had more than beauty, Belinda. She had intelligence, too, an extraordinary force of character and psi powers.” The man in the cube sighed. “I’ll never find another woman like her. I know that.” He drank some more of whatever he was drinking. “I wanted to have a child by her. I wanted the next heir of Gorwing Keep to have her qualities instead of

the damn sickly Hernshaw qualities that Geoffrey and I have.”

“The young whelp,” the robot said. “What did he know about being a Hernshaw? He spent his life reading books and thinking in poetry.”

She looked at the old machine. How its one blue eye glittered! Was it breaking down? Its conversation was getting increasingly strange.

“I know interbreeding is supposed to be impossible. Supposedly, humans and natives are two entirely separate species—similar only because they both evolved to fit similar ecological niches. I never believed this. Myself, I believe in Dr. Sigbert Schwartz’s ‘Diffusion Theory.’ According to Dr. Schwartz, both species evolved from the same original stock. I studied with him at New Harvard, Belinda. I can still remember him stomping back and forth in front of the class, saying, ‘Look at the natives, ladies and gentlemen. What do they look like, except to the blind eye of a bigot? They look like *us*.’ He’d stop for a moment and glare at his students. And then he’d go on. ‘Appearances do not always deceive. They tell us much that is true— Go to Settlement, to the museum! Look at the displays that show us life on Earth. Compare a lion and a house cat. They look alike. They *are* alike. They are related, as everyone knows who has read a book on evolution.

“We have not had the time—nor the resources—to compile a history of the evolution of New Hope. Still and all, we know the goldwattle and the gorwing share a common ancestry— As any fool can see! The relationship is visible.

“So is the relationship between us and the natives. But for the natives we make an exception. We deny the importance of appearance. We babble on about convergent evolution; and we look for anything—any minor difference—that will make them seem stranger and more alien.

“Why do we do this, ladies and gentlemen? Because of prejudice. Racism. Blind folly. False pride. And every kind of unscientific stupidity.’

“At this point, Belinda, he would turn bright red and have to stop and drink a glass of water and take a pill.

“In any case, he argued that both Earth and our planet had been colonized by a people that he called ‘The Master Race.’ The colonization was comparatively recent; and the two groups of colonists have not yet evolved into separate species. He believed that it was possible—in theory—for humans and natives to interbreed. We are genetically compatible, according to him; but—over the millennia of separation—we have become immune to one another. When a crossbreed is conceived, the mother’s immunological system perceives it as alien and attacks it and aborts it. ‘In isolation, in a test tube,’ the doctor said, ‘human and native cells show no aversion to one another. Ova and spermatozoa match easily and naturally. If I had the scientific resources of our ancestors, I could produce a crossbred test tube baby. Alas, I do not.’”

Suddenly, she couldn’t bear to listen. She turned the cube off and watched its picture disappear. Then she drank some tea. The room was cold. She shivered.

“Aren’t you going to listen to the rest, miss?”

“Later. Rebuild the fire, will you, please?”

The robot nodded, then set to work.

Belinda finished the tea and poured herself another cup. She had reached the point where she had too much new information. She couldn't assimilate any more. She'd felt this way before, while studying for tests. She looked at the fireplace and saw the first small flames leap up out of the kindling. At least she would be warm. She sipped the tea. "Could I have breakfast here, robot?"

"Certainly, miss."

The robot brought her breakfast, and she ate it beside the fire: fresh ebony pears from her uncle's greenhouse, an omelet, toast, jam, and coffee.

While she ate, the robot got out a new dress, this one so covered with shells that she couldn't tell the fabric's color. The shells were white, pale pink, and slate blue. They were tiny and sewn into a floral pattern—a blue vine with white flowers that went up and down the dress, over a shimmering pink background.

"That's your wedding gown, miss. Lovely, isn't it? It took the tribal seamstresses half a year to make it. But you can't wear it till you've been purified. Right now, you have this to wear." It brought out another gown, sleeveless, made of dark brown barkcloth.

"I'll freeze in that."

"Be that as it may, you have to wear it. Think of your poor cousin out in the woods in a loincloth."

"Claud?"

The robot nodded. "They took him off for his cleansing a little after dawn."

Belinda shuddered and set down her coffee cup, then picked up the memory cube. She pressed the depression. The man's head reappeared. The bright light

of the room he sat in shone out of the cube's sides and through her hands, making her fingers glow red. She set the cube down.

The man said, "As I mentioned, your mother had remarkable psi powers. She was telepathic, which is pretty common among the natives, and she was telekinetic. That's a rare talent, Belinda. She could only move small objects and those not far. But it was an amazing sight—ashtrays floating in midair, dice tumbling across the table, apparently of their own volition, my slippers sliding across the floor toward me. And while there was an upper limit to the size of the things she moved, there was no lower limit. I firmly believe that she could have moved subatomic particles, if I'd been able to explain what they were to her. But I couldn't. I confess, I have trouble myself understanding what goes on inside an atom. Microbes, however, she could understand. I taught her how to use a microscope. Once she saw the microbes, she had no trouble moving them. In time, Ania discovered she could sense microbes without seeing them, the same way she could sense birds and fishes and river clams. After that, she moved the cells around without using a microscope to look at them." The man sighed, then sipped from his glass. "Those were happy days. We were both terribly excited, both full of tremendous energy. Nothing seemed impossible. As Wordsworth says, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven.' In the end, we devised a plan. Ania would use her telekinetic powers to protect our baby against her own immunological system. She would keep her lymphocytes—those are the cells that attack alien organisms—away from the foetus."

“That is ridiculous,” Belinda said loudly.

“...Of course, the baby would be vulnerable to disease until it developed its own lymphocytes. But we had to take that risk.”

The man in the cube stopped. There was a frown on his tiny face. “I never really knew how Ania did it—how she was able to maintain a psychic filter day and night, waking and sleeping for eight months. Obviously, her psi powers were subject to subconscious control as well as to conscious control. She told me all she had to do was say to herself ‘do such-and-such’ before she went to sleep, or when she wanted to think about something else. But there had to be more to it than that. She was terrible at explaining things.” The man sighed. “In any case, for eight months any lymphocyte that came close to you was transported to another part of Ania’s system. The effort exhausted her. How much I did not realize until the end. After you were born, she was unable to regain her strength. She lingered for a while—then died.” He stopped and looked down, then looked up again. “That’s how you were bred, Belinda. That’s how you came to be.” The cube went dark. The recording had ended.

Belinda shivered. “Can that be true, robot?”

“What am I to say, miss? But Gilbert Hernshaw was a very honest man.”

So she was a half-breed! A native and a Hernshaw at the same time. Surely this changed her present situation. If she was half human, she could hardly be subject to native law. She stood up. “I have to take the cube to my uncle.”

The robot swiveled its head from side to side. "He won't care, miss. He wants Gorwing Keep. He wants you out of the way."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. If you show him the cube, he'll destroy the recording."

She sat down. "What'll I do?"

"Get dressed and go to meet the old women. There's still a whole day before the wedding. I'll think of something."

"What if I refuse?" asked Belinda. "What if I say, 'I won't put on the dress. I'll stay in this room. I won't have anything to do with the ceremony of purification.'"

The robot looked at her for a moment. Then it spoke. "I cannot force you to do anything, miss. But the natives can—and will. If need be, they will drag you screaming through the ceremony. Think of your dignity! Remember that you are a Hernshaw!"

"Oh," said Belinda. She thought for a while. "All right. I'll take part in the ceremony. But not in the wedding!"

"Of course not," said the robot. "I promise you, Belinda, I will think of something."

"I hope so."

She put on the brown dress. The robot led her to the front hall. The old women waited there. There were a dozen of them, all dressed in their finest clothes: shell-covered dresses and tall cone-shaped hats with clusters of feathers at their tops. They carried ceramic whistles, wooden rattles, and smoldering firepots.

"Welcome, Belinda," someone said in English. Out from among the old women a young woman came. She was thin and pale with light blue eyes and flaxen

hair. Her dress was dyed blue and decorated with white shells. "I am your cousin Lusa Windingvine. I'm here to interpret for you, so you'll understand the ceremony."

"Oh," Belinda said.

The old women set down their firepots. The room was filling with fragrant smoke. Belinda felt a little dizzy. Was there something in the smoke? Two ancient ladies hobbled forward and took her hands.

"Go with them," Lusa said.

They led her to the center of the room and tugged at her arms till she sat down. Then they hobbled off. Lusa sat down next to her. "The first part of the ceremony is the singing, Belinda. I'll translate the songs for you."

"Where did you go to school?"

Lusa smiled. "I didn't. I am Geoffrey Hernshaw's mistress. He taught me English."

"But I thought he hated natives."

Lusa shrugged. "Who else can he sleep with, this far into the backwoods?"

The old women seated themselves in a circle around Belinda and began to shake their rattles.

"As for me," Lusa said, "I belong to the exogamous generation. I can't marry the man I love, since he's a member of the tribe. I don't much care who I sleep with."

"What a lot of silly customs you people have."

"Are human customs any better?"

"I'm not sure."

The old women began to sway back and forth. They shook their rattles and blew on their whistles.

"They are going to tell the story of the creation of the world."

An ancient, shriveled, bent-over lady began to sing. Her voice was shrill and uncertain.

“She is telling how the Great-Fish-That-Is-The-Origin-Of-Everything shaped a nashri bean from the phlegm in its throat, then spat the bean out.”

Another woman took up the song, a huge fat lady wearing a cone-hat covered with red shells. Her voice was deep and hoarse.

“The bean floated on the water’s surface for days,” Lusa said. “Then, all at once, its hard shell broke open and two people climbed out. They were the Divine Twins, Istai and Nu. They sat on the floating bean for days, not knowing what to do, till a passing monster decided to eat them. Then Nu took a sharp piece of the bean shell and stabbed the monster to death.”

The fat lady stopped singing and gasped for breath. A third old woman began to sing.

“After that, Nu made a loom from the monster’s bones, and Istai took the monster’s sinews and wove all the land in the world.”

Belinda was getting stiff, sitting in one position, but she was afraid to move. The smoke from the firepots made her eyes water. She felt dazed. Where was Claud? Where was the robot and their means of escape? The song went on.

“Tiny bits of sinew fell into the water and became fishes,” Lusa said. “Other bits flew up into the air and became birds. Still other bits fell on the new-made land and became animals. In this way, the world was created. As for Istai and Nu, they paddled their bean to land and built a house from the bean shell. They lived there together and had many children.”

The song ended. Several women began to blow softly into their whistles. How sad, how eerie that sound was! Belinda felt suddenly cold.

“This song is about the children of Istai and Nu.”

The fat woman started singing.

“When the children were old enough to marry, they decided they didn’t want to marry one another. They sent for Ashai Isaru, the great magician, the wisest of them all, and said, ‘Brother, make more people, so we can marry outside the tribe.’

“Ashai said, ‘I can’t make more people, nor can anyone, except for the Great-Fish-That-Is-The-Origin-Of-Everything. But if you want, I’ll go ask him.’

“His brothers and sisters said, ‘Yes.’ Ashai tied stones on his feet and jumped into the ocean, sinking all the way to the bottom, where the Great Fish was.”

Now all the women sang together, shaking their rattles loudly.

“They’re describing the Great Fish,” Lusa said. “Its eyes were like two moons. Its nostrils were like two caves. It was so long that Ashai couldn’t see the end of it. As for its scales, they were like the shields warriors bear into battle. Its fins were like the sails of fishing boats. When it opened its mouth, its teeth were like spearheads or the peaks of mountains.”

The women stopped singing, all except the ancient bent-over woman. She kept on in her quavering voice.

“Ashai said to the Great Fish, ‘Grandfather, please make more people, so we won’t have to marry one another.’

“No,’ the Great Fish answered. ‘I won’t do that. There are too many of you already. You make too much noise and disturb my sleep.’

“So Ashai untied the stones that were tied to his feet and swam up to the ocean’s surface. After that, he went home and sat in his house and thought. He thought for many days. Then he went to see his sister Ania and asked her to weave him a dreamcoat.”

The women started singing again, shaking their rattles and swaying from side to side.

“They’re describing the coat. It was woven from bright feathers and decorated with shells. There was nothing in the world that was lovelier.”

The women stopped. One woman sang alone. She was very thin and had a wart at the end of her nose. Her eyes were light brown, close to yellow.

“When the coat was done, Ashai put it on and entered the Great Fish’s dreams. With his magic, he created an illusion: a land full of villages. In every village there was a shrine dedicated to the Great Fish. People came to the shrines, bringing gifts and singing the Great Fish’s praises. The smoke from the sacred firepots rose on every side. ‘All this will happen,’ Ashai said, ‘if the people on the land above you continue to breed. But if they find no mates, they will have no children. There will be no one left to worship you, Great Fish. I am a true dream, and I do not lie. If you listen to me, all will be well.’

“After that, Ashai left the Great Fish’s dreams and went home. As for the Great Fish, as soon as it woke, it made more people.”

With that, the singing ended. The women put down their instruments and stood. Lusa helped Belinda to her feet. “Now, the ritual bath. It’s supposed to take place in a bath hut, but Geoffrey hasn’t built one. We’re going to have to use one of the bathrooms here.”

They led Belinda to the master bathroom, singing and blowing their whistles. They bathed her and smeared her body with aromatic lotions. The oldest woman painted a design on her belly with red paint. It blurred at once, intermixing with the lotions.

“That is to promote fertility,” Lusa said.

The woman painted two more designs, one on each thigh, using black paint this time. “Those are to ward off malevolent beings, such as midnight clutchers.”

“What?”

“They are invisible beings that try to attack women at night. If they manage to impregnate the women, they bear monsters.”

Ick, Belinda thought. Her head ached. The women had brought their firepots with them, so the bathroom was full of steam and smoke. She felt more and more dizzy. Somehow, the women had gotten hold of the wedding gown the robot had shown her. They put it on her, put shell necklaces around her neck and bracelets on her arms.

It couldn’t be evening, Belinda thought hazily. What was the hurry? She was pretty sure now that the smoke was drugged. The old women were all grinning foolishly.

“Come,” Lusa said and took her hand. Back they went through the dark cold corridors, all the women singing. Something was wrong, Belinda realized. It seemed as if the marriage was going to take place at any moment.

She tried to worry, but the smoke had done its work. All she managed was a kind of numb grief.

They reached the front door. Her uncle was there, in a shimmery dark purple formal suit. She saw the robot standing in a corner. In through the front door came dozens of natives, dressed in their best clothes, playing whistles and bone harps, and beating on xylophones that they'd bought from human traders. Claud was among them. She stopped and stared at him. He was wearing a shell-covered loincloth, a shell necklace and tall boots made of snow monkey fur. His hair was braided. On his arms were bracelets made from bone and wood. He looked tired, unhappy, and very ugly.

No, Belinda thought. This couldn't really be happening.

A silver-haired old man led Claud forward, singing all the while in a shrill flat voice. When they got close, she saw how dark Claud's eyes were. The pupils were enormous. He too had been drugged. The old man took her hand and placed it within Claud's, then shook a rattle, looking up at the ceiling. The natives formed a ring and began dancing. The room was full of sweet-smelling smoke, full of the shrill voices of the natives and the sound of their rattles, all shaking in unison. Her head throbbed. She felt as if she were about to pass out.

"The shaman is invoking the Great Fish," Lusa said. "Also the spirit of Ashai Isaru and the spirits of your ancestors. He's saying, 'Be present, oh ancients. Protect your children.'"

One of the young men stepped out of the ring of dancers and blew his whistle. How sweet the piping

was! The shaman raised his arms and shouted something.

“He’s crying, ‘Great Fish, bless us. Great Fish, bless us,’” Lusa said.

Another youth came toward them, carrying a bowl made of polished indigo wood.

“That contains water from the sacred fish pond at the shrine of the Great Fish. When the shaman pours that over you and Claud, you will be married.”

She clutched Claud’s hand and looked around desperately. Off to one side her uncle stood, smiling faintly, tapping his cane in time to the music. The robot stepped out of its corner. What was it going to do?

She didn’t find out, for at that moment the front door slid open. A gust of wind blew in. In staggered old Starbird, a gorwing on his shoulder. The creature flapped its wings and shrieked.

The dancers stopped. Starbird raised one hand. He held a staff in it, elaborately carved and inset with bits of shell. The gorwing folded its wings and hunched down. Its steel gray feathers looked shiny and hard like scales. Its eyes were red. It opened its beak and made a clacking sound. Belinda saw its tiny sharp teeth. She shuddered.

“Nesh ini ashu,” Starbird cried. “Otai otana!”

“He’s saying the house is haunted,” Lusa explained. “There’s a ghost here, that has to be driven out.”

“Retin,” the old man beside them said.

“The shaman has answered, ‘The excrement of thornbucks.’”

“Oon, oon,” Starbird screamed and pointed at the robot. The gorwing stretched out its neck and hissed.

“He said, ‘There, there.’ The robot is haunted.”

The robot moved forward. In the sudden silence, Belinda could hear the grinding and whining of its internal machinery. Its blue eye blazed. The natives near it moved away. When it reached the room’s center, it stopped. After a moment, it said, “A mind transfer. We tried a mind transfer.”

“What!” her uncle cried. “What’s wrong with you, 39?”

The robot turned its head and looked at him. “I’m regaining my memory, Geoffrey.”

“How dare you call me that?”

The robot made a crackling noise. It was laughter, Belinda realized.

“It was after my third heart attack,” the robot went on. “My body was failing fast. I was going to die, unless I got out of it. But where could I go? Fortunately, one of my sons was a neurologist. My second wife taught him. She’d been the chief neurologist on board the ship. It was possible, I knew, to record the electro-chemical patterns that make up a human mind and transfer them into an artificial brain. It had been done on Earth. My son said he thought he could do it, here on this planet. It was risky, but I had no choice.”

The old machine paused. Everyone was staring at it. Her uncle looked sick, and Claud seemed to be waking up finally. He looked surprised.

“Something went wrong. Or did it?” The robot paused again. “No, by God! Those young whelps of mine tricked me. Now I remember the sidelong looks, the whispers, the snickering. I was so sick I didn’t understand what was going on. Guy must have put a

standard servant program into the robot, after he transferred my mind. A fine joke that was, to make their old father think he was a robot servant.”

“Godfrey Hernshaw!” old Starbird shouted and pointed his staff at the robot. The gorwing shrieked. The crowd of natives moved uneasily.

“Retin,” the shaman said.

“It’s a lie,” her uncle shouted.

The robot turned. “Did you know about this, Geoffrey? Damn you.” It started toward him. Her uncle screamed and ran out of the room. On his way, he kicked over a firepot. Burning resin spilled out onto the wireroot carpet.

Now the natives were fleeing through the front door, yelling and flinging aside whistles, rattles, and harps. Belinda stayed where she was, hand in hand with Claud, watching everyone else run.

“Well, that was certainly odd,” Claud said after the last native was gone.

Several firepots has been turned over, and the carpet was burning in several places. But she still couldn’t manage to get worried about anything. She watched the spreading flames with mild interest. “What do we do now, Claud?”

He scratched his head. “Damned if I know. I’d like to get out of these clothes.”

“Later,” the robot said as it came back into the room.

“Did you get him?” Belinda asked.

“No. I decided it was more important to get you out of here. You’re my last living descendant, except for that cur. And I suddenly remembered something about the storage wing. Come on.”

“What about the fire?”

“Let it burn. Worse things are going to happen to Gorwing Keep.”

They left the room. The robot led them back through the dark damp hallways. How strange, Belinda thought. A few days before, she'd had no relatives. Now she had dozens of cousins, a wicked uncle, and a five-times-great-grandfather, who was still alive inside a robot. Did she want this much family? If not, what was she going to do about it? They came to a door that didn't open till the robot pushed a button in its center. Slowly then it swung forward. They went through into a hallway that was metal, not concrete. The door swung shut. The robot turned a wheel on the door's back. “No one can follow us now. Hurry. I want to get out before the natives come back. I don't want to hurt them.”

They followed it down the hall, through a series of doors that opened, then closed behind them. There was a different smell in this part of the house, a smell of metal and machine oil. The hall wasn't lit by daylight coming in through cloudy windows, as was the rest of the house. Instead, it was lit by a dimly glowing rod that ran along the ceiling. The floor was thick with dust. The air was still. When she breathed it, she tasted metal.

Clank. Clank. The robot's footsteps echoed between the metal walls. Where were they? Belinda wondered.

“Is this the storage wing?” Claud asked. “I thought the doors along the hall led into rooms full of broken machinery?”

“We haven't gone far enough forward,” the robot said. “The passenger quarters are further on.”

“The what?”

“This is a spacecraft, Belinda. It’s one of the settlement ship’s lifeboats. I built my house around it. I figured someday I might need a quick getaway.”

“But doesn’t Geoffrey Hernshaw know about this?” Claud asked.

“I don’t think so. My first wife knew, but she knew how to keep a secret. I never told my second wife or any of my sons.”

“Why not?” Belinda asked.

“I like knowing more than other people.” They went through another door. The robot said, “We’re in the passengers’ quarters now. It’s only a little further to the bridge.”

The light-rod glowed more brightly here, and the dust was thicker. They kicked it up, as they hurried onward. Claud started coughing. The robot stopped and pulled open a tiny door halfway up the wall. Inside were rows of buttons. The ancient machine pushed one. After a moment, Belinda heard a low whine. Her ankles felt suddenly cold. She looked down. The dust was moving, being sucked into vents in the wall and floor.

“It doesn’t sound too bad,” the robot said. “I just hope the engines sound as good. Come on.”

They continued forward, through section after section, till they came to a door that didn’t open.

“The bridge is just beyond. The door’s set to open when the right message is spoken. Now what was it? My memory isn’t what it used to be. Have I mentioned that to you?”

“Yes.”

“You see. I’d forgotten. Two centuries wasted, and now this body is breaking down, the way my old body

did. Let me tell you one thing, Belinda. If there's an afterlife, those sons of mine are going to suffer."

She had a sudden vision of the captain hunting his sons through hell: an old man, stark naked, his gray beard flapping in the fire winds.

The robot stood still for a while, evidently thinking. Claud shifted from foot to foot and scratched his nose. At last the machine chanted:

*"Geyr Garmr mjok fyr Gnipahelli.
Festr mun slitna, en freki renna."*

Claud frowned. "What's that?"

"A line from my favorite poem. It means—

*"Garmr bays before Gnipahellir.
The bonds break and the wolf runs."*

"What does that have to do with anything?" Belinda asked.

"I thought, if I ever used this boat, it'd be because things had gotten very bad. And I was right, Belinda. This is the end of the House of Hernshaw. When this boat takes off, it'll blow Gorwing Keep apart."

"What about my uncle?"

"He'll die. Do you mind?"

She thought a moment. "Not very much."

Just then, the door began to open, whining and grinding all the way. Beyond it was a dark room, where lights suddenly appeared, flickering across screens and shining in rows. All over the domed ceiling, panels began to glow. There was enough light now so Belinda could see the acceleration couches and the instrument clusters atop poles beside the couches. Scenes began to

appear on the ceiling panels: gray clouds, bare woods, a wide white lawn.

“Get on the couches and make sure you have all the straps fastened,” the robot said.

They did what they were told. When they were done, Belinda turned her head and saw the robot fasten itself in. After that, it pulled the instrument cluster into position above it. “Two centuries,” it said. “I wonder if either one of us can still fly, old lady.” It reached up, twisted a rod, then pulled it downward. More lights came on. Overhead, a speaker crackled.

A woman’s voice—deep, soft, and very pleasant—said, “Welcome aboard Lifeboat Number 11. I am fully automated and programmed to take you to a place of safety. Have no fear. Now—everyone please look at his or her instrument pole. If all the lights are green, then you are safely strapped in. If any of the lights are red, please check all your buckles. If there is anything you do not understand, ask your cabin monitor for help. I am now going to blast off. Get ready, everyone.”

The engines roared, the rockets fired, and the boat took off. A sudden terrible weight pushed Belinda into her couch. Just before she passed out, she wondered, Where to next?

Other Aqueduct Press E-books
by Eleanor Arnason

Daughter of the Bear King
The Sword Smith

Big Mama Stories
Tomb of the Fathers
Ordinary People