

## TROJAN HORSE

Michael Swanwick

*Science fiction is for the most part a literature of rationalism, but this has never prevented its writers from speculating about matters that go beyond scientific knowledge. The subject of God turns up in a large number of thoughtful stories, from Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star" to Walter M. Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz... and now in this intense novelette about human-computer interfacing on a future space station.*

*Michael Swanwick's short fiction has often been nominated for awards, and his first novel. In the Drift, was published early this year.*

"It's all inside my head," Elin said wonderingly. It was true. A chimney swift flew overhead, and she could feel its passage through her mind. A firefly landed on her knee. It pulsed cold fire, then spread its wings and was gone, and that was a part of her, too.

"Please try not to talk too much." The wetware tech tightened a cinch on the table\* adjusted a bone inductor. His red and green facepaint loomed over her, then receded. "This will go much faster if you cooperate."

Elin's head felt light and airy. It was huge. It contained all of Magritte, from the uppermost terrace down through the office levels to the trellis farms that circled the inner lake. Even the blue and white Earth that hovered just over one rock wall. They were all within her. They were all, she realized, only a model, the picture her mind assembled from sensory input. The exterior universe-the real universe-lay beyond.

"I feel giddy."

"Contrast high." The tech's voice was neutral. "This is a different mode of perception from what you're used to-you're stoned on the novelty."

A catwalk leading into the nearest farm rattled within Elin's mind as a woman in agricultural blues strode by, burlap gourd-collecting bag swinging from her hip. It was night outside the crater but biological day within, and the agtechs had activated tiers of arc lights at the cores of the farms. Filtered by greenery, the

light was soft and watery.

"I could live like this forever."

"Believe me, you'd get bored." A rose petal fell softly on her cheek, and the tech brushed it off. He turned to face the two lawyers who stood silently nearby, waiting. "Are the legal preliminaries finished now?"

The lawyer in orangeface nodded. The one in purple said, "Can't her original personality be restored at all?"

Drawing a briefcase from his pocket, the wet ware tech threw up a holographic diagram between himself and the witnesses. The air filled with intricate three-dimensional trac-ery, red and green lines interweaving and meshing.

"We've mapped the subject's current personality." He reached out to touch several junctions. "You will note that here, here, and here we have what are laughingly referred to as impossible emotional syllogisms. Any one of these renders the subject incapable of survival."

A thin waterfall dropped from the dome condensers to a misty pool at the topmost terrace, a bright razor slash through reality. It meandered to the edge of the next terrace and fell again.

"A straight yes or no will suffice."

The tech frowned. "In theory., yes. In practical terms, it's hopeless. Remember, her personality was never recorded. The accident almost completely randomized her emotional structure-technically she's not even human. Given a decade or two of extremely delicate memory probing, we could maybe construct a facsimile. But it would only resemble the original; it could never be the primary Elin Donnelly."

Elin could dimly make out the equipment for five more waterfalls, but they were not in operation at the moment. She wondered why.

The attorney made a rude noise. "Well then, go ahead and do it. I wash my hands of this whole mess."

The tech bent over Elin to reposition a bone inductor. "This won't hurt a bit," he promised. "Just pretend that you're at the dentist's, having your teeth replaced."

She ceased to exist.

The new Elin Donnelly gawked at everything-desk work-ers in their open-air offices, a blacksnake sunning itself by the path, the stone stairs cut into the terrace walls. Her lawyer led her through a stand of saplings no higher than she and into a meadow.

Butterflies scattered at their approach. Her gaze went from them to a small cave in the cliffs ahead, then up to the stars, as jumpy and random as the butterflies' flight.

"-So you'll be stuck on the moon for a full lunation- almost a month-if you want to collect your settlement. I. G. Feuchtwaren will carry your expenses until then, drawing against their final liability. Got that?"

And then-suddenly, jarringly-Elin could focus again. She took a deep breath. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I-okay."

"Good." The attorney canceled her judicial-advisory wetware, yanking the skull plugs and briskly wrapping them around her briefcase. "Then let's have a drink-it's been a long day."

They had arrived at the cave. "Hey, Hans!" the lawyer shouted. "Give us some service here, will you?"

A small man with the roguish face of a comic-opera troll popped into the open, work terminal in hand. "One minute," he said. "I'm on direct flex time-got to wrap up what I'm working on first."

"Okay." The lawyer sat down on the grass. Elin watched, fascinated, as the woman toweled the paint

from her face, and a new pattern of fine red and black lines, permanently tattooed into her skin, emerged.

"Hey!" Elin said. "You're a Jesuit."

"You expected IGF to ship you a lawyer from Earth orbit?" She stuck out a hand. "Donna Landis, S.J. I'm the client overseer for the Star Maker project, but I'm also avail-able for spiritual guidance. Mass is at nine, Sunday mornings."

Elin leaned back against the cliff. Grapevines rustled under her weight. Already she missed the blissed-out feeling of a few minutes before. "Actually, I'm an agnostic."

"You were. Things may have changed." Landis folded the towel into one pocket, unfolded a mirror from another. "Speak-ing of which, how do you like your new look?"

Elin studied her reflection. Blue paint surrounded her eyes, narrowing to a point at the bridge of her nose, swooping down in a long curve to the outside. It was as if she were peering through a large, blue moth or a pair of hawk wings.

There was something magical about it, something glamorous, something very unlike her.

"I feel like a raccoon. This idiot mask."

"Get used to it. You'll be wearing it a lot."

"But what's the point?" Elin was surprised by her own irritation. "So I've got a new personality; it's still me in here. I don't feel any weird compulsion to run amok with a knife or walk out an airlock without a suit. Nothing to warn the citizenry about, certainly."

"Listen," Landis said. "Right now you're like a puppy tripping over its own paws because they're too big for it. You're a stranger to yourself-you're going to feel angry when you don't expect to, get sentimental over surprising things. You can't control your emotions until you learn what they are. And until then, the

rest of us deserve-"

"What'll you have?" Hans was back, his forehead smudged black where he had incompletely wiped off his facepaint.

"-a little warning. Oh, I don't know, Hans. Whatever you have on tap."

"That'll be Chanty. You?" he asked Elin.

"What's good?"

He laughed. "There's no such thing as a good lunar wine. The air's too moist. And even if it weren't, it takes a good century to develop an adequate vineyard. But the Chanty is your basic, drinkable glug."

"I'll take that, then."

"Good. I'll bring a mug for your friend, too."

"My friend?" She turned and saw a giant striding through the trees, towering over them, pushing them apart with two enormous hands. For a dizzy instant, she goggled in disbelief, and then the man shrank to human stature as she remembered the size of the saplings.

He grinned. "Hi. Remember me?"

He was a tall man, but like a spacejack, lean and angular. An untidy mass of black curls framed a face that was not quite handsome but carried an intense freight of will.

"I'm afraid..."

"Tory Shostakovich. I reprogrammed you."

She studied his face carefully. Those eyes. They were fierce almost to the point of mania, but there was sadness there, too, and she thought she might be making this up—a hint of pleading, like a little boy who wants something so desperately he dare not ask for it. She could lose herself in analyzing the nuances of those eyes. "Yes," she said at last, "I remember you now."

"I'm pleased." He nodded to the Jesuit. "Father Landis."

She eyed him skeptically. "You don't seem your usual morose self, Shostakovich. Is anything wrong?"

"No, it's just a special kind of morning." He smiled at some private joke, returned his attention to Elin. "I thought I'd drop by and get acquainted with my former patient." He glanced down at the ground, fleetingly shy, and then his eyes were bright and audacious again.

How charming, Elin thought. She hoped that he wasn't too shy. And then she had to glance away herself, the thought was so unlike her. "So you're a wetware surgeon," she said inanely.

Hans reappeared to distribute mugs of wine, then retreated to the cave's mouth. He sat down, workboard in lap, and patched in the skull-plugs. His face went stiff as the wetware took hold.

"Actually," Tory said, "I very rarely work as a wetsurgeon. An accident like yours is rare, you know—maybe once, twice a year. Mostly I work in wetware development. Currently I'm on the Star Maker project."

"I've heard that name before. Just what is it anyway?"

Tory didn't answer immediately. He stared down into the lake, a cool breeze from above ruffling his curls. Elin caught her breath. / hardly know this man, she thought wildly. He pointed to the island in the center of the lake, a thin, stony finger that was originally the crater's thrust cone.

"God lives on that island," he said.

Elin laughed. "Think how different history would be if He'd only had a sense of direction!" She wanted to bite her tongue when she realized that he was not joking.

"You're being cute, Shostokovich," Landis warned. She swigged down a mouthful of wine. "Jeez, that's vile stuff."

Tory rubbed the back of his neck ruefully. "Mea culpa. Well, let me give you a little background. Most people think of wetware as being software for people. But that's too simplistic, because with machines you start out blank-with a clean slate-and with people, there's some ten million years of mental programming already crammed into their heads.

"So to date we've been working with the natural wetware.

We counterfeit surface traits-patience, alertness, creativity- and package them like so many boxes of bonemeal. But the human mind is vast and unmapped, and it's time to move into the interior, for some basic research.

"That's the Star Maker project. It's an exploration of the basic substructural programming of the mind. We've redefined the overstructure programs into an integrated system we believe will be capable of essence-programming, in one-to-one congruence with the inherent substructure of the universe."

"What jargonistic rot!" Landis gestured at Elin's stone-ware mug. "Drink up. The Star Maker is a piece of experi-mental theology that IGF dreamed up. As Tory said, it's basic research into the nature of the mind. The Vatican Synod is providing funding so we can keep an eye on it."

"Nipping heresy in the bud," Tory said sourly.

"That's a good part of it. This set of wetware will suppos-edly reshape a human mind into God. Bad theology, but there it is. They want to computer-model the infinite. Anyway, the specs were drawn up,

and it was tried out on-what was the name of the test subject?"

"Doesn't matter," Tory said quickly.

"Coral something-or-other."

Only half-listening by now, Elin unobtrusively studied Tory. He sat, legs wide, staring into his mug of Chanty. There were hard lines on his face, etched by who knew what experiences. / don't believe in love at first sight, Elin thought. Then again, who knew what she might believe in anymore? It was a chilling thought, and she retreated from it.

"So did this Coral become God?"

"Patience. Anyway, the volunteer was plugged in, wiped, reprogrammed, and interviewed. Nothing useful."

"In one hour," Tory said, "we learned more about the structure and composition of the universe than in all of history to date."

"It was deranged gibberish." Landis tapped Elin's knee. "We interviewed her and then canceled the wetware. And what do you think happened?"

"I've never been big on rhetorical questions." Elin didn't take her eyes off Tory.

"She didn't come down. She was stuck."

"Stuck?"

Tory plucked a blade of grass, let it fall. "What happened was that we had rewired her to absolute



consciousness. She was not only aware of all her mental functions but in control of them-right down to the involuntary reflexes, which also put her in charge of her own metaprogrammer."

"Metaprogrammer is just a buzzword for a bundle of reflexes the brain uses to make changes in itself," Landis threw in.

"Yeah. What we didn't take into account, though, was that she'd like being God. When we tried deprogramming her, she simply overrode our instructions and reprogrammed herself back up."

"The poor woman," Elin said. And yet-what a glorious experience to be God! Something within her thrilled to it. It would almost be worth the price.

"Which leaves us with a woman who thinks she's God," Landis said. "I'm just glad we were able to hush it up. If word got out to some of those religious illiterates back on Earth-"

"Listen," Tory said. "I didn't really come here to talk shop. I wanted to invite my former patient on a grand tour of the Steam Grommet Works."

Elin looked at him blankly. "Steam..."

He swept an arm to take in all of Margritte, the green pillars and gray cliffs alike. There was something proprietary in his gesture.

Landis eyed him suspiciously. "You two might need a chaperone," she said. "I think I'll tag along to keep you out of trouble."

Elin smiled sweetly. "Fuck off," she said.

Ivy covered Tory's geodesic trellis hut. He led the way in, stooping to touch a keyout by the doorway. "Something classical?"

"Please." As he began removing her jumpsuit, the holotape sprang into being, surrounding them with rich reds and cobalt blues that coalesced into stained-glass patterns in the air. Elin pulled back and clapped her hands. "It's Chartres," she cried, delighted. "The cathedral at Chartres!"

"Mmmmm." Tory teased her down onto the grass floor.

The north rose swelled to fill the hut. It was all angels and doves, kings and prophets, with gold lilies surrounding the central rosette. Deep and powerful, infused with gloomy light, it lap-dissolved into the lancet of Saint Anne.

The windows wheeled overhead as the holotape panned down the north transept to the choir, to the apse, and then up into the ambulatory. Swiftly, then, it cut to the wounded Christ and the Beasts of Revelation set within the dark spaces of the west rose. The outer circle-the instruments of the Passion-closed about them.

Elin gasped.

The tape moved down the nave, still brightening, briefly pausing at the Vendome chapel. Until finally the oldest win-dow, the Notre Dame de la Belle Verriere, blazed in a frenzy of raw glory. A breeze rattled the ivy, and two leaves fell through the hologram to tap against their skin and slide to the ground.

The Belle Verriere faded in the darkening light, and the colors ran and were washed away by a noiseless gust of rain.

Elin let herself melt into the grass, drained and lazy, not caring if she never moved again. Beside her Tory chuckled, playfully tickled her ribs. "Do you love me? Hey, tell me you love me."

"Stop!" She grabbed his arms and bit him in the side-a small, nipping bite, more threat than harm-ran a tongue over his left nipple. "Hey, listen, I hit the sack with you a half hour after we met. What do you want?"

"Want?" He broke her hold, rolled over on top of her, pinioning her wrists above her head. "I want you to know"- and suddenly he was absolutely serious, his eyes unblinking and glittery hard-"that I love you. Without doubt or qualification. I love you more than words could ever say."

"Tory," she said. "Things like that take time." The wind had died down. Not a blade of grass stirred.

"No they don't." It was embarrassing looking into those eyes; she refused to look away. "I feel it. I know it. I love every way, shape, and part of you. I love you beyond time and barrier and possibility. We were meant to be lovers, fated for it, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that could ever keep us apart." His voice was low and steady. Elin couldn't tell whether she was thrilled or scared out of her wits.

"Tory, I don't know-"

"Then wait," he said. "It'll come."

\* \* \*

Lying sleepless beside Tory that night, Elin thought back to her accident. And because it was a matter of stored memory, the images were crisp and undamaged.

It happened at the end of her shift on Wheel Laboratory 19, Henry Ford Orbital Industrial Park.

Holding theta lab flush against the hub cylinder, Elin in-jected ferrous glass into a molten copper alloy. Simulta-neously, she plunged gamma lab a half kilometer to the end of its arm, taking it from fractional Greenwich normal to a full nine gravities. Epsilon began crawling up its spindly arm. Using waldos, she lifted sample wafers from the quick-freeze molds in omicron. There were a hundred measure-ments to be made.

Elin felt an instant's petulant boredom, and the workboard readjusted her wetware, jacking up her attentiveness so that she leaned over her readouts in cool, detached fascination.

The workboard warned her that the interfacing program was about to be shut off. Her fingers danced across the board, damping down reactions, putting the labs to bed. The wetware went quiescent.

With a shiver, Elin was herself again. She grabbed a towel and wiped off her facepaint. Then she leaned back and transluiced the wall-her replacement was late. Corporation regs gave her fifty percent of his missed-time fines if she turned him in. It was easy money, and so she waited.

Stretching, she felt the gold wetware wires dangling from the back of her skull. She lazily put off yanking them.

Earth bloomed underfoot, slowly crept upward. New De-troit and New Chicago rose from the floor. Bright industrial satellites gleamed to every side of the twin residential cylinders.

A bit of motion caught Elin's eye, and she swiveled to follow a load of cargo drifting by. It was a jumble of containers lashed together by nonmagnetic tape and shot into an orbit calculated to avoid the laser cables and power transmission beams that interlaced the park.

A man was riding the cargo, feet braced against a green carton, hauling on a rope slipped through the lashings. He saw her and waved. She could imagine his grin through the mirrored helmet.

The old Elin snorted disdainfully. She started to look away and almost missed seeing it happen.

In leaning back that fraction more, the cargo hopper had put too much strain on the lashings. A faulty rivet popped, and the cargo began to slide. Brightly colored cartons drifted apart, and the man went tumbling, end over end, away.

One end of the lashing was still connected to the anchor carton, and the free end writhed like a wounded snake. A bright bit of metal-the failed rivet-broke free and flew toward the juncture of the wheel lab's hub and spokes.

The old Elin was still hooting with scornful laughter when the rivet struck the lab, crashing into a nest of wiring that should not hav» been exposed.

Two wires short-circuited, sending a massive power transient surging up through the workboard. Circuits fused and melted. The board went haywire.

And a microjolt of electricity leaped up two gold wires, hopelessly scrambling the wetware through Elin's skull.

An hour later, when her replacement finally showed, she was curled into a ball, rocking back and forth on the floor. She was alternating between hysterical gusts of laughter and dark, gleeful screams.

Morning came, and after a sleepy, romantic breakfast, Tory plugged into his briefcase and went to work. Elin wandered off to do some thinking.

There was no getting around the fact that she was not the metallurgist from Wheel Lab 19, not anymore. That woman was alien to her now. They shared memories, experiences- but she no longer understood that woman, could not sympathize with her emotions, indeed found her distasteful.

At a second-terrace cafe that was crowded with off-shift biotechs, Elin rented a table and briefcase. She sat down to try to trace the original owner of her personality.

As she'd suspected, her new persona was copied from that of a real human being; creating a personality from scratch was still beyond the abilities of even the best wetware techs. She was able to trace herself back to IGF's inventory bank and to determine that duplication of personality was illegal-which presumably meant that the original owner was dead.

But she could not locate the original owner. Selection had been made by computer, and the computer wouldn't tell. When she tried to find out, it referred her to the Privacy Act of 2037.

"I think I've exhausted all the resources of self-discovery available to me," she told the Pierrot when he came to collect his tip. "And I've still got half the morning left to kill."

He glanced at her powder-blue facepaint and smiled politely.

"It's selective black."

"Huh?" Elin turned away from the lake, found that an agtech carrying a long-handled net had come up behind her.

"The algae-it absorbs light into the infrared. Makes the lake a great thermal sink." The woman dipped her net into the water, seined up a netful of dark-green scum, and dumped it into a nearby trough. Water drained away through the porous bottom.

"Oh." There were a few patches of weeds on the island, where drifting soil had settled. "It's funny. I never used to be very touristy. More the contemplative type, sort of homebodyish. Now I've got to be doing something, you know?"

The agtech dumped another load of algae into the trough. "I couldn't say." She tapped her forehead. "It's the wetware. If you want to talk shop, that's fine. Otherwise, I can't."

"I see." Elin dabbed a toe in the warm water. "Well, why not? Let's talk shop."

Someone was moving at the far edge of the island. Elin craned her neck to see. The agtech went on methodically dipping her net into the lake as God walked into view.

"The lake tempers the climate, see? By day it works by evaporative cooling. Absorbs the heat, loses it to evaporation, radiates it out the dome roof through the condensers."

Coral was cute as a button.

A bowl of fruit and vegetables had been left near the waterline. She walked to the bowl, considered it. Her orange jumpsuit nicely complemented her cafe-au-lait skin. She was so small and delicate that by contrast Elin felt ungainly.

"We also use passive heat pumps to move the excess heat down to a liquid-storage cavern below the lake."

Coral picked up a tomato. Her features were finely chiseled. Her almond eyes should have had snap and fire in them, to judge by the face, but they were remote and unfocused. Even, white teeth nipped at the food.

"At night we pump the heat back up, let the lake radiate it out to keep the crater warm."

On closer examination-Elin had to squint to see so fine- the face was as smooth and lineless as that of an idiot. There was nothing there; no emotion, no purpose, no detectable intellect.

"That's why the number of waterfalls in operation varies."

Now Coral sat down on the rocks. Her feet and knees were dirty. She did not move. Elin wanted to shy a rock at her to see if she would react.

What now? Elin wondered. She had seen the sights, all that Magritte had to offer, and they were all tiresome, disappoint-ing. Even-no, make that especially-God. And she still had almost a month to kill.

"Keeping the crater tempered is a regular balancing act," the agtech said.

"Oh, shut up." Elin took out her briefcase and called Father Landis. "I'm bored," she said, when the hologram had stablized.

Landis hardly glanced up from her work. "So get a job," she snapped.

Magritte had begun as a mining colony, back when it was still profitable to process the undifferentiated melange soil. The miners were gone now, and the crater was owned by a consortium of operations

legally debarred from locating Earthside.

From the fifteenth terrace Elin stared down at the patch-work clusters of open-air laboratories and offices, some separated by long stretches of undeveloped field, others crammed together in the hope of synergistic effect. Germ-warfare corporations mingled with nuclear-waste engineering firms. The Mid-Asian Population Control Project had half a terrace to itself, and it swarmed with guards. There were a few off-Swiss banking operations.

"You realize," Tory said, "that I'm not going to be at all happy about this development." He stood, face impassive in red and green, watching a rigger bolt together a cot and wire in the surgical equipment.

"You hired me yourself," Elin reminded him.

"Yes, but I'm wired into professional mode at the moment." The rigger packed up his tools, walked off. "Looks like we're almost ready."

"Good." Elin flung herself down on the cot and lay back, hands folded across her chest. "Hey, I feel like I should be holding a lily!"

"I'm going to hook you into the project intercom so you don't get too bored between episodes." The air about her flickered, and a clutch of images overlaid her vision. Ghosts walked through the air, stared at her from deep within the ground. "Now we'll shut off the external senses." The world went away, but the illusory people remained, each within a separate hexagonal field of vision. It was like seeing through the eyes of a fly.

There was a sudden, overwhelming sense of Tory's presence, and a sourceless voice said to her, "This will take a minute. Amuse yourself by calling up a few friends." Then he was gone.

Elin floated, free of body, free of sensation, almost godlike in her detachment. She idly riffled through the images, stopped at a chubby little man drawing a black line across his forehead. Hello, Hans, she thought.

He looked up and winked. "How's it hanging, kid?"



Not so bad. What're you up to?

"My job. I'm the black-box monitor this shift." He added an orange starburst to the band, surveyed the job critically in a pocket mirror. "I sit here with my finger on the button"- one hand disappeared below his terminal-"and if I get the word, I push. That sets off explosives in the condenser units and blows the dome. Pfffft. Out goes the air."

She considered it: a sudden volcano of oxygen spouting up and across the lunar plains. Human bodies thrown up from the surface, scattering, bursting under explosive decompression.

That's grotesque, Hans.

"Oh, it's safe. The button doesn't connect unless I'm wetwired into my job."

Even so.

"Just a precaution; a lot of the research that goes on here wouldn't be allowed without this kind of security. Relax-I haven't lost a dome yet."

The intercom cut out, and again Elin felt Tory's presence. "We're trying a Trojan horse program this time-inserting you into the desired mental states instead of making you the states. We've encapsulated your surface identity and routed the experimental programs through a secondary level. So with this series, rather than identifying with the programs, you'll perceive them all indirectly."

Tory, you have got to be the most jargon-ridden human being in existence. How about repeating that in English?

"I'll show you."

Suddenly Elin was englobed in a sphere of branching crimson lines, dark and dull, that throbbed slowly. Lacy and organic, it looked the way she imagined the veins in her forehead to be like when she had a headache.

"That was anger," Tory said. "Your mind shunted it off into visual imagery because it didn't identify the anger with itself."

That's what you're going to do then-program me into the God-state so that I can see it but not experience it?

"Ultimately. Though I doubt you'll be able to come up with pictures. More likely, you'll feel that you're in the presence of God." He withdrew for a moment, leaving her more than alone, almost nonexistent. Then he was back. "We start slowly, though. The first session runs you up to the basic metaprogramming level, integrates all your mental processes, and puts you in low-level control of them. The nontechnical term for this is making the Christ. Don't fool around with anything you see or sense."

His voice faded, she was alone, and then everything changed.

She was in the presence of someone wonderful.

Elin felt that someone near at hand, and struggled to open the eyes she no longer possessed; she had to see. Her exis-tence opened, and people began appearing before her.

"Careful," Tory said. "You've switched on the intercom again."

/ want to see!

"There's nobody to see. That's just your own mind. But if you want, you can keep the intercom on."

Oh. It was disappointing. She was surrounded by love, by a crazily happy sense that the universe was

holy, by wisdom deeper than the world. By all rights, it had to come from a source greater than herself.

Reason was not sufficiently strong to override emotion. She riffled through the intercom, bringing up image after image and discarding them all, searching.

When she had run through the entire project staff, she began hungrily scanning the crater's public monitors.

Agtechs in the trellis farms were harvesting strawberries and sweet peas. Elin could taste them on her tongue. Somebody was seining up algae from the inner lake, and she felt the weight of the net in callused hands. Not far from where she lay, a couple was making love in a grove of saplings and-

Tory, I don't think I can take this. It's too intense.

"You're the test pilot."

Dammit, Tory!

Donna Landis materialized on the intercom. "She's right, Shostakovich. You haven't buffered her enough."

"It didn't seem wise to risk dissociative effects by cranking her ego up too high."

"Who's paying for all this, hah?"

Tory grumbled something inaudible and dissolved the world.

Elin floated in blackness, soothing and relaxing. She felt good. She had needed this little vacation from the tensions and pressures of her new personality. Taking the job had been the right thing to do, even if it

did momentarily displease Tory.

Tory... She smiled mentally. He was exasperating at times, but still she was coming to rely on having him around. She was beginning to think she was in love with him.

A lesser love, perhaps. Certainly not the love that is the Christ.

Well, maybe so. Still, on a human level, Tory filled needs in her she hadn't known existed. It was too much effort to argue with herself, though. Her thoughts drifted away into a wordless, luxurious reveling in the bodiless state, free from distractions, carefree and disconnected.

Nothing is disconnected. All the universe is a vast net of intermeshing programs. Elin was amused at herself. That had sounded like something Tory would say. She'd have to watch it; she might love the man, but she didn't want to end up talking like him.

You worry needlessly. The voice of God is subtle, but it is not your own.

Elin started. She searched through her mind for an open intercom channel, didn't find one. Hello, she thought. Who said that?

The answer came to her not in words, but in a sourceless assertion of identity. It was cool, emotionless, something she could not describe even to herself, but by the same token absolute and undeniable.

It was God.

Then Tory was back and the voice, the presence was gone. Tory? she thought. / think I just had a religious experience.

"That's very common under sensory deprivation-the mind clears out a few old programs. Nothing to worry about. Now relax for a jiff while I plug you back in-how does that feel?"

The presence was back again, but not nearly so strongly as before; she could resist the urge to chase after it. That's fine, Tory, but listen, I really think-

"Let's leave analysis to those who have been programmed for it, shall we?"

The lovers strolled aimlessly through a meadow, the grass brushing up higher than their waists. Biological night was coming; the agtechs flicked the daylight switch off and on twice in warning.

"It was real, Tory. She talked with me; I'm not making it up."

Tory ran a hand through his dark, curly hair, looking distracted. "Well, assuming that my professional opinion was wrong-and I'll be the first to admit that the program is a bit egocentric-I still don't think we have to stoop to mysticism for an explanation."

To the far side of Magritte, a waterfall was abruptly shut off. The stream of water scattered, seeming to dissolve in the air. "I thought you said she was God."

"I only said that to bait Landis. I don't mean that she's literally God, just godlike. Her thought processes are a million years more efficiently organized than ours. God is just a convenient metaphor."

"Um. So what's your explanation?"

"There's at least one terminal on the island-the things are everywhere. She probably programmed it to cut into the intercom without the channels seeming to be open."

"Could she do that?"

"Why not? She has that million-year edge on us-and she used to be a wetware tech; all wetware techs are closet computer hacks." He did not look at her, had not looked at her for some time.

"Hey." She reached out to take his hand. "What's wrong with you tonight?"

"Me?" He did not meet her eyes. "Don't mind me. I'm just sulking because you took the job. I'll get over it."

"What's wrong with the job?"

"Nothing. I'm just being moody."

She guided his arm around her waist, pressed up against him. "Well, don't be. It's nothing you can control-I have to have work to do. My boredom threshold is very low."

"I know that." He finally turned to face her, smiled sadly. "I do love you, you know."

"Well... maybe I love you, too."

His smile banished all sadness from his face, like a sudden wind that breaks apart the clouds. "Say it again." His hands reached out to touch her shoulders, her neck, her face. "One more time, with feeling."

"Will nof!" Laughing, she tried to break away from him, but he would not let go, and they fell in a tangle to the ground. "Beast!" They rolled over and over in the grass. "Brute!" She hammered at his chest, tore open his jumpsuit, tried to bite his neck.

Tory looked embarrassed, tried to pull away. "Hey, not out here! Somebody could be watching."

The agtechs switched off the arc lamps, plunging Magritte into darkness.

Tory reached up to touch Elin's face. They made love.

Physically it was no different from things she had done countless times before with lovers and friends and the occasional stranger. But she was committing herself in a way the old Elin would never have dared, letting Tory past her defenses, laying herself open to pain and hurt. Trusting him. He was a part of her now. And everything was transformed, made new and wonderful.

Until they were right at the brink of orgasm, the both of them, and half delirious, she could let herself go, murmuring, "I love you, love you, God I love you..." And just as she climaxed, Tory stiffened and threw his head back, and in a voice that was wrenched from the depths of passion, whispered, "Coral..."

Half blind with fury, Elin strode through a residential settlement. The huts glowed softly from the holotapes playing within-diffuse, scattered rainbow patterns unreadable outside their fields of focus. She'd left Tory behind, bewildered, two terraces above.

Elin halted before one hut, stood indecisively. Finally, because she had to talk to somebody, she rapped on the lintel.

Father Landis stuck her head out the doorway, blinked sleepily. "Oh, it's you, Donnelly. What do you want?"

To her absolute horror, Elin broke into tears.

Landis emerged, zipping up her jumpsuit. She cuddled Elin in her arms, made soothing noises, listened to her story.

"Coral," Landis said. "Ahhhh. Suddenly everything falls into place."

"Well, I wish you'd tell me, then!" She tried to blink away the angry tears. Her face felt red and raw and ugly; the wet ware paint was all smeared.

"Patience, child." Landis sat down cross-legged beside the hut, patted the ground beside her. "Sit here and pretend that I'm your mommy, and I'll tell you a story."

"Hey, I didn't come here-"

"Who are you to criticize the latest techniques in spiritual nurturing, hey?" Landis chided gently. "Sit."

Elin did so. Landis put an arm about her shoulder.

"Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Coral-I forget her last name. Doesn't matter. Anyway, she was bright and emotional and ambitious and frivolous and just like you in every way." She rocked Elin gently as she spoke.

"Coral was a happy little girl, and she laughed and played, and one day she fell in love. Just like that!" She snapped her fingers. "I imagine you know how she felt."

"This is kind of embarrassing."

"Hush. Well, she was very lucky, for as much as she loved him, he loved her a hundred times back, and for as much as he loved her, she loved him a thousand times back. And so it went. I think they overdid it a bit, but that's just my personal opinion.

"Now Coral lived in Magritte and worked as a wetware tech. She was an ambitious one, too-they're the worst kind. She came up with a scheme to reprogram people so they could live outside the programs that run them in their every day lives. Mind you, people are more than the sum of their programming, but what did she know about free will? She hadn't had any religious training, after all. So she and her boyfriend wrote up a proposal and applied for funding, and together they ran the new program through her skull. And when it was all done, she thought she was God. Only she wasn't Coral anymore-not so as you'd recognize her."

She paused to give Elin a hug. "Be strong, kid, here comes the rough part. Well, her boyfriend was brokenhearted. He didn't want to eat, and he didn't want to play with his friends. He was a real shit to



work with. But then he got an idea.

"You see, anyone who works with experimental wetware has her personality permanently recorded in case there's an accident and it needs to be restored. And if that person dies or becomes God, the personality rights revert to IGF. They're sneaky like that.

"Well, Tory-did I mention his name was Tory?-thought to himself: What if somebody were to come here for a new personality? Happens about twice a year. Bound to get worse in the future. And Magritte is the only place this kind of work can be done. The personality bank is random-accessed by computer, so there'd be a chance of his getting Coral back, just as good as new. Only not a very good chance, because there's lots of garbage stuffed into the personality bank.

"And then he had a bad thought. But you mustn't blame him for it. He was working from a faulty set of moral precepts. Suppose, he thought, / rigged the computer so that instead of choosing randomly, it would give Coral's personal-ity to the very first little girl who came along? And that was what he did." Landis lapsed into silence.

Elin wiped back a snuffle. "How does the story end?"

"I'm still waiting on that one."

"Oh." Elin pulled herself together and stood. Landis followed.

"Listen. Remember what I told you about being a puppy tripping over its paws? Well, you've just stubbed your toes and they hurt. But you'll get over it. People do."

"Today we make a Buddha," Tory said. Elin fixed him with a cold stare, said nothing; even though he was in green and red, immune. "This is a higher-level program, integrat-ing all your mental functions and putting them under your conscious control. So it's especially important that you keep your hands to yourself, okay?"

"Rot in hell, you cancer."

"I beg your pardon?"

Elin did not respond, and after a puzzled silence Tory continued: "I'm leaving your sensorium operative, so when I switch you over, I want you to pay attention to your surroundings. Okay?"

The second Trojan horse came on. Everything changed.

It wasn't a physical change, not one that could be seen with the eyes. It was more as if the names for everything had gone away. A knee-tall oak grew nearby, very much like the one she had crushed accidentally in New Detroit when she had lost her virginity many years ago. And it meant nothing to her. It was only wood growing out of the ground.

A mole poked its head out of its burrow, nose crinkling, pink eyes weak. It was just a small, biological machine. "Whooh," she said involuntarily. "This is awfully cold."

"Bother you?"

Elin studied him, and there was nothing there. Only a human being, as much an object as the oak, and no more. She felt nothing toward or against him. "No," she said.

"We're getting a good recording." The words meant nothing; they were clumsy, devoid of content.

In the grass around her, Elin saw a gray flickering, as if it were all subtly on fire. Logically she knew the flickering was the firing of nerves in the rods and cones of her eyes, but emotionally it was something else: It was time. A gray fire that destroyed the world constantly, eating it away and re-making it again and again.

And it didn't matter.

A great calmness wrapped itself around Elin, an intelligent detachment, cold and impersonal. She found herself identify-ing with it, realizing that existence was simply not important. It was all things, objects.

She could not see Tory's back, was no longer willing to assume it even existed. She could look up and see the near side of the earth. The far side might well not exist, and if it didn't, well that didn't matter either.

She stripped away the world, ignored the externalities. / never realized how dependent I am on sensory input, she thought. And if you ignored it-there was the void. It had no shape or color or position, but it was what underlies the bright interplay of colors that was constantly being destroyed by the gray fires of time. She contemplated the raw stuff of existence.

"Please don't monkey around with your programming," Tory said.

The body was unimportant, too; it was only the focal point for her senses. Ignore them and you could ignore it. Elin could feel herself fading in the presence of the void. It had no material existence, no real being. But neither had the world she had always taken for granted-it was but an echo, a ghost, an image reflected in water.

It was like being a program in a machine and realizing it for the first time.

Landis's voice flooded her. "Donnelly, for God's sake, keep your fingers off the experiment!" The thing was, the underlying nothingness was real-if "real" had any meaning. If meaning had meaning. But beyond real and beyond mean-ing, there is what is. And she had found it.

"Donnelly, you're treading on dangerous ground. You've-" Landis's voice was a distraction, and she shut it off. Elin felt the desire to merge with what was; one simply had to stop the desire for it, she realized, and it was done.

But on this realization, horror collapsed upon her. Flames seared and burned and crisped, and there were snakes among them, great slimy things with disgusting mouths and needle-sharp fangs.

She recoiled in panic, and they were upon her. The flames were drawn up into her lungs, and hot

maggots wallowed in her brain tissues. She fled through a mind that writhed in agony, turning things on and off.

Until abruptly she was back in her body, and nothing pursued her. She shivered, and her body responded. It felt wonderful.

"Well, that worked at least," Tory said.

"What-" her voice croaked. She cleared her throat and tried again. "What happened to me?"

"Just what we'd hoped for-when your mind was threat-ened with extinction, it protected itself by reprogramming back down to a normal state. Apparently, keeping your ego cranked up high works."

Elin realized that her eyes were still closed; she opened them now and convulsively closed her hand around the edge of the metal cot. It was solid and real to the touch. Such a good feeling.

"I'll be down in a minute," Tory said. "Just now, you need to rest." He touched a bone inductor, and Elin fell into blackness.

Floating again, every metaphorical nerve on edge, Elin found herself hypersensitive to outside influences, preternatu-rally aware, even suggestible. Still, she suspected-more than sensed-Coral's presence. Go away, she thought. This is my mind now.

I am here, and I am always. You have set foot in my country and are dimly aware of my presence. Later, when you have climbed into the mountains, you will truly know me; and then you will be as I.

Everyone tells me what I'm going to do, Elin thought angrily. Don't I get any say?

The thought that came to her was almost amused: You are only a program caught in a universal web of programming. You will do as your program dictates. To be free of the programs is to be God.

Despite her anger, despite her hurt, despite the cold trickle of fear she tried to keep in the background, Elin was curious. What's it like? she couldn't help asking.

It is golden freedom. The universe is a bubble infinitely large, and we who are God are the film on the bubble's outside. We interact and we program. We make the stars shine and the willows grow. We program what you will want for lunch. The programming flows through us, and we alter it and maintain the universe.

Elin pounced on this last statement. Haven't done a very good job of it, have you?

We do not tamper. When you are one with us, you will understand.

This was, Elin realized, the kind of question-and-answer session Coral must have gone through repeatedly as part of the Star Maker project. She searched for a question that no one else would have asked, one that would be hers alone. And after some thought she found it.

Do you still-personally-love Tory Shostokovich?

At first there was a slight pause, then: The kind of love you mean is characteristic of lower-order programming. Not of program-free intelligence.

A moment later Tory canceled all programming, and she floated to the surface, leaving God behind. But even before then she was acutely aware that she had not received a straight answer.

"Elin, we've got to talk."

She was patched into the outside monitors, staring across Mare Imbrium. It was a straight visual program; she could feel the wetwire leads dangling down her neck, the warm, humid air of Magritte against her skin. "Nothing to talk about," she said.

"Dammit, yes there is! I'm not about to lose you again because of a misunderstanding, a-a matter of semantics."

The thing about Outside was its airless clarity. Rocks and shadows were so preternaturally sharp. From a sensor or the crater's seaward slope, she stared off into Mare Imbrium; it was monotonous but in a comforting sort of way. A little like when she had made a Buddha. There was no meaning out there, nothing to impose itself between her and the surface.

"I don't know how you found out about Coral," Tory said, "and I guess it doesn't matter. I always figured you'd find out sooner or later. That's not important. What matters is that I love you-

"Oh, hush up!"

"-and that you love me. You can't pretend you don't."

Elin felt her nails dig into her palms. "Sure I can," she said. She hopscotched down the crater to the surface. There the mass driver stood, a thin monorail stretching kilometers into the Imbrium, its gentle slope all but imperceptible.

"You're identifying with the woman who used to be Elin Donnelly. There's nothing wrong with that; speaking as a wetsurgeon, it's a healthy sign. But it's something you've got to grow out of."

"Listen, Shostokovich, tinkering with my emotions doesn't change who I am. I'm not your dead lady friend, and I'm not about to take her place. So why don't you just go away and stop jerking me around, huh?"

Tiny repair robots prowled the mass driver's length, stop-ping occasionally for a spotweld. Blue sparks sputtered sound-lessly over the surface.

"You're not the old Elin Donnelly either, and I think you know it. Bodies are transient, memories are nothing. Your spontaneity and grace, your quiet strength, your impatience- the small lacks and presences of you I've known and loved for years-are what make you yourself. The name doesn't matter, nor the

past. You are who you are, and I love you for it."

"Yeah, well, what I am does not love you, buster."

One of the repairbots slowly fell off the driver. It hit, bounced, struggled to regain its treads, then scooted back toward its work.

Tory's voice was almost regretful. "You do, though. You can't hide that from me. I know you as your lover and as your wetsurgeon. You've let me become a part of you, and no matter how angry you might temporarily be, you'll come back to me."

Elin could feel her body trembling with rage. "Yeah, well if that's true, then why tell me! Hah? Why not just go back to your hut and wait for me to come crawling?"

"Because I want you to quit your job." , "Say what?"

"I don't want you to become God. It was a mistake the last time, and I'm afraid it won't be any better with the new programs. If you go up into God and can't get down this time, you'll do it the next time. And the next. I'll spend my life here waiting for you, re-creating you, losing you. Can't you see it-year after year, replaying the same tired old tape?" Tory's voice fell to a whisper. "I don't think I could take it even once more."

"If you know me as well as you say, then I guess you know my answer," Elin said coldly.

She waited until Tory's footsteps moved away, fading, defeat echoing after. Only then did Elin realize that her sensor had been scanning the same empty bit of Magritte's slope for the last five minutes.

It was time for the final Trojan horse. "Today we make a god," Tory said. "This is a total conscious integration of the mind in an optimal efficiency pattern. Close your eyes and count to three."

One. The hell of it was that Tory was right. She still loved him. He was the one man she wanted and was

empty without.

Two. Worse, she didn't know how long she could go on without coming back to him-and, good God, would that be humiliating!

She was either cursed or blessed; cursed perhaps for the agonies and humiliations she would willingly undergo for the sake of this one rather manipulative human being. Or maybe blessed, in that at least there was someone who could move her so, deserving or not. Many went through their lives without.

Three. She opened her eyes.

Nothing was any different. Magritte was as ordinary, as mundane as ever, and she felt no special reaction to it one way or another. Certainly she did not feel the presence of God.

"I don't think this is working," she tried to say. The words did not come. From the corner of her eye, she saw Tory wiping clean his facepaint, shucking off his jumpsuit. But when she tried to sit up, she found she was paralyzed.

What is this maniac doing?

Tory's face loomed over her, his eyes glassy, almost fear-ful. His hair was a tangled mess; her fingers itched with the impulse to run a comb through it.

"Forgive me, love." He kissed her forehead lightly, her lips ever so gently. Then he was out of her field of vision, stretching out on the grass beside the cot.

Elin stared up at the dome roof, thinking: No. She heard him strap the bone inductors to his body, one by one, and then a sharp click as he switched on a recorder. The program-ming began to flow into him.

A long wait-perhaps, twenty seconds viewed objectively- as the wetware was loaded. Another click as the recorder shut off. A moment of silence, and then-



Tory gasped. One arm flew up into her field of vision, swooped down out of it, and he began choking. Elin struggled against her paralysis, could not move. Something broke noisily, a piece of equipment by the sound of it, and the choking and gasping continued. He began thrashing wildly.

Tory, Tory, what's happening to you?

"It's just a grand mal seizure," Landis said. "Nothing we can't cope with, nothing we weren't prepared for." She touched Elin's shoulder reassuringly, called back to the crowd huddling about Tory, "Hey! One of you loopheads-somebody there know any programming? Get the lady out of this."

A tech scurried up, made a few simple adjustments with her machinery. The others-still gathering, Landis had been only the third on the scene-were trying to hold Tory still, to fit a bone inductor against his neck. There was a sudden gabble of comment, and Tory flopped wildly. Then a collective sigh as his muscles eased and his convulsions ceased.

"There," the tech said, and Elin scabbled off the couch.

She pushed through the people (and a small voice in the back of her head marveled: A crowd! How strange) and knelt before Tory, cradling his head in her arms.

He shivered, eyes wide and unblinking. "Tory, what's the matter?"

His terrible eyes turned on her. "Nichevo."

"What?"

"Nothing," Landis said. "Or maybe 'it doesn't matter' is a better translation."

A wetware tech had taken control, shoving the crowd back. He reported to Landis, his mouth moving calmly under the interplay of green and red. "Looks like a flaw in the pro-gramming philosophy. We were guessing that bringing the ego along would make God such an unpleasant experience that the subject would let us deprogram, without interfering- now we know better."

Elin stroked Tory's forehead. His muscles clenched, then loosened as a medtech reprogrammed the body responses. "Why isn't anyone doing anything?" she demanded.

"Take a look," Landis said, and patched her into the intercom. In her mind's eye, Elin could see dozens of wetware techs submitting program after program. A branching wetware diagram filled one channel, and as she watched, minor changes would occur as programs took hold, then be unmade as Tory's mind rejected them. "We've got an imagery tap of his Weltanschauung coming up," some nameless tech reported.

Something horrible appeared on a blank channel.

Elin could take only an instant's exposure before her mind reflexively shut the channel down, but that instant was more than enough. She stood in a room infinitely large and cluttered with great, noisome machines.

They were tended by malevolent demons who shrieked and cackled and were machines themselves, and they generated pain and madness.

The disgust and revulsion she felt was absolute. It could not be put into words-no more than could the actual experience of what she had seen. And yet-she knew this much about wetware techniques-it was only a rough approximation, a cartoon, of what was going through Tory's head.

Elin's body trembled with shock, and by slow degrees she realized that she had retreated to the surface world.

Tory's head was still cradled in her arms. A wetware tech standing nearby looked stunned, her face gray.

Elin gathered herself together, said as gently as she could, "Tory, what is that you're seeing?"

Tory turned his stark, haunted eyes on her, and it took an effort of will not to flinch. Then he spoke, his words shock-ingly calm.

"It is-what is. It's reality. The universe is a damned cold machine, and all of us only programs within it. We perform the actions we have no choice but to perform, and then we fade into nothingness. It's a cruel and noisy place."

"I don't understand-didn't you always say that we were just programs? Wasn't that what you always believed?"

"Yes, but now I experience it."

Elin noticed that her hand was slowly stroking his hair; she did not try to stop it. "Then come down, Tory. Let them deprogram you."

He did not look away. "Mcfcevo," he said.

The tech, recovered from her shock, reached toward a piece of equipment. Landis battered her hand away. "Hold it right there, techie! Just what do you think you're doing?"

The woman looked impatient. "He left instructions that if the experiment turned out badly, I was to pull the terminator switch."

"That's what I thought. There'll be no mercy killings while I'm on the job, Mac."

"I don't understand." The tech backed away, puzzled. "Surely you don't want him to suffer."

Landis was gathering herself for a withering reply when the intercom cut them all off. A flash of red shot through the sensorium, along with the smell of bitter almond, a prickle of static electricity, the taste of kimchi. "Emergency! We've got an emergency!" A black and white face materialized in Elin's mind. "Emergency!"

Landis flipped into the circuit. "What's the problem? Show us."

"You're not going to believe this." The face disappeared and was replaced by a wide-angle shot of the lake.

The greenish-black water was calm and stagnant. The thrust-cone island, with its scattered grass and weeds, slumbered.

And God walked upon the water.

They gawked, all of them. Coral walked across the lake, her pace determined but not hurried, her face serene. The pink soles of her bare feet just touched the surface.

/ didn't believe her, Elin thought wildly. She saw Father Landis begin to cross herself, her mouth hanging open, eyes wide in disbelief. Halfway through her gesture, the Jesuitical wet ware took hold. Her mouth snapped shut, and her face became cold and controlled. She pulled herself up straight.

"Hans," the priest said, "push the button."

"No!" Elin shrieked, but it was too late. Still hooked into the intercom, she saw the funny little man briskly, efficiently obey.

For an instant, nothing happened. Then bright glints of light appeared at all of the condenser units, harsh and actinic. Steam and smoke gushed from the machinery, and a fraction of a second later, there was an ear-slapping gout of sound.

Bits of the sky were blown away.

Elin turned, twisted, fell. She scrambled across the ground and threw her arms around Tory.

The air was in turmoil. The holes in the dome roof-small at first-grew as more of the dome flaked away, subjected to stresses it wasn't designed to take. An uncanny whistling grew to a screech, then a scream, and then there was an all-encompassing whoomph, and the dome shattered.

Elin was flung upward, torn away from Tory, painfully flung high and away. All the crater was in motion, the rocks tearing out of the floor, the trees splintering upward, the lake exploding into steam.

The screaming died-the air was gone. Elin's ears rang furiously, and her skin stung everywhere. Pressure grew within her, the desire of her blood to mate with the vacuum, and Elin realized that she was about to die.

A quiet voice said: This must not be.

Time stopped.

Elin hung suspended between moon and death. The shards and fragments of an instant past crystallized and shifted. The world became not misty, exactly, but apositional. Both it and she grew tentative, possibilities rather than actual things.

Come be God with me now, Coral said, but not to Elin.

Tory's presence flooded the soupy uncertainty, a vast and powerful thing, but wrong somehow, twisted. But even as Elin felt this, there was a change within him, a sloughing off of identity, and he seemed to straighten, to heal.

All around, the world began to grow more numinous, more real. Elin felt tugged in five directions at once. Tory's pres-ence swelled briefly, then dwindled, became a spark, less than a spark, nothing.

Yes.

With a roaring of waters and a shattering of rocks, with an audible thump, the world returned.

Elin unsteadily climbed down the last flight of stone stairs from the terraces to the lake-front. She passed by two guards at the foot of the stairs, their facepaint as hastily applied as their programming, several more on the way to the nearest trellis farm. They were everywhere since the incident.

She found the ladder up into the farm and began climbing. It was biological night, and the agtechs were long gone.

Hand over hand she climbed, as far and high as she could, until she was afraid she would miss a rung and tumble off. Then she swung herself onto a ledge, wedging herself between strawberry and yam planters. She looked down on the island, and though she was dizzyingly high, she was only a third of the way up.

"Now what the hell am I doing here?" she mumbled to herself.

She swung her legs back and forth, answered her own question: "Being a piss-ass drunk." She cackled. There was something she didn't have to share with Coral. She was capable of getting absolutely blitzed and walking away from the bar before it hit her. It was something metabolic.

Below, Tory and Coral sat quietly on their monkey island. They did not touch, did not make love or hold hands or even glance at one another—they just sat. Being gods.

Elin squinted down at the two. "Like to upchuck all over you," she mumbled. Then she squeezed her eyes and fists tight, drawing tears and pain. Dammit, Tory!

Blinking hard, she looked away from the island, down into the jet-black waters of the lake. The brighter stars were reflected there. A slight breeze rippled the water, making them twinkle and blink, as if lodged

in a Terran sky. They floated lightly on the surface, swarmed and coalesced, and formed Tory's face in the lake. He smiled warmly, invitingly.

A hand closed around her arm, and she looked up into the stern face of a security guard. "You're drunk, Ms.," he said, "and you're endangering property."

She looked where he pointed, at a young yam plant she had squashed when she sat down, and began to laugh. Smoothly, professionally, the guard rolled up her sleeve, clamped a plastic bracelet around her wrist. "Time to go," he said.

By the time the guard had walked Elin up four terraces, she was nearly sober. A steady trickle of her blood wound through the bracelet, was returned to her body cleansed of alcohol. A sacrilegious waste of wine, in her opinion.

In another twenty steps, the bracelet fell off her wrist. The guard snapped it neatly from the air and disappeared. Despair closed in on her again. Tory, my love! And since there was no hope of sleep, she kept on trudging up the terraces, back toward Hans's rathskeller, for another bellyful of wine.

There was a small crowd seated about the rock that served Hans as a table, lit by a circle of hologram-generated fairy lights. Father Landis was there, and drinking heavily. "To-morrow I file my report," she announced. "The synod is pulling out of this, withdrawing funding."

Hans sighed, took a long swig of his own wine, winced at its taste. "I guess that's it for the Star Maker project, huh?"

Landis crossed her fingers. "Pray God." Elin, standing just outside the circle, stood silently, listening.

"I don't ever want to hear that name again," a tech grumbled.

"You mustn't confuse God with what you've just seen," Landis admonished.

"Hey, come on!" Hans said. "She moved time backwards or something. I saw it myself. This place exploded-doesn't that prove something?"

Landis grinned, reached out to ruffle his hair. "Sometimes I worry about you, Hans. You have an awfully small concept of God." Several of the drinkers laughed.

He blushed, said, "No, really."

"Well, I'll try to keep this"- she leaned forward, rapped her mug against the rock, "fill this up again, hey?-keep it simple. We had analysts crawl up and down Coral's description of the universe, and did you know there was no place in it anywhere for such things as mercy, hope, faith? No, we got an amalgam of substrates, supraprograms, and self-metaediting physics. Now what makes God superior to us is not just intellect-we've all known some damn clever bastards. And it's not just power, or I could go and buy an atomic device on the black market and start my own religion.

"No, by definition God is my moral superior. Now I myself am but indifferently honest-but to Coral, moral considerations don't even exist. Get it?"

Only Elin noticed the haunted, hopeless light in Landis's eyes or realized that she was spinning words effortlessly, without conscious control. Deep within, the woman was caught in a private crisis of faith.

"Yeah, I guess." Hans scratched his head. "I'd still like to know just what happened between her and Tory there at the end."

"I can answer that," a wetware tech said. The others turned to face her, and she smirked, the center of attention. "What the hell, they plant the censor blocks in us all tomorrow-this is probably my only chance to talk about it.

"We reviewed all the tapes, and found that the original problem stemmed from a basic design flaw. Shostokovich should never have brought his ego along. The God state is very ego-threatening; he couldn't accept it. His mind twisted it, denied it, made it into a thing of horror. Because to accept it would mean giving up his identity." She paused.



"Now we don't understand the why or how of what hap-pened. But what was done is very clearly recorded. Coral came along and stripped away his identity."

"Hogwash!" Landis was on her feet, belligerent and un-steady. "After all that happened, you can't say they don't have any identity! Look at the mess that Coral made to join Tory to her-that wasn't the work of an unfeeling, identity-free creature."

"Our measurements showed no trace of identity at all," the tech said in a miffed tone.

"Measurements! Well, isn't that just scientific as all get-out?" The priest's face was flushed with drunken anger. "Have any of you clowns given any thought to just what we've created here? This gestalt being is still young-a newborn infant. Someday it's going to grow up. What happens to us all when it decides to leave the island, hey? I-" She stopped, her voice trailing away. The drinkers were silent, had all drawn away from her.

"Scuse me," she muttered. "Too much wine." And sat.

"Well." Hans cleared his throat, quirked a smile. "Any-body for refills?"

The crowd came back to life, a little too boisterous, too noisily, determinedly cheerful. Watching from the fringes, outside the circle of light, Elin had a sudden dark fantasy, a walking nightmare.

A desk tech glanced her way. He had Tory's eyes. When he looked away, Tory smiled out of another's face. The drinkers shifted restlessly, chattering and laughing, like danc-ers pantomiming a party in some light opera, and the eyes danced with them. They flitted from person to person, materi-alizing now here, now there, surfacing whenever an individ-ual chanced to look her way.

She heard a quiet voice say, "We were fated to be lovers."

Go away, go away, go away, Elin thought furiously, and the hallucination ceased.

After a moment spent composing herself, Elin quietly slipped around to where Landis sat. "I'm leaving in the morning," she said. The new persona had taken; they would not remove her facepaint until just before the lift up, but that was mere formality. She was cleared to leave.

Landis looked up, and for an instant the woman's doubt and suffering were writ plain on her face. Then the mask was back, and she smiled. "Just stay away from experimental religion, hey kid?" They hugged briefly. "And remember what I told you about stubbing your toes."

There was one final temptation to be faced. Sitting in the hut, Tory's terminal in her lap, Elin let the soothing green light of its alphanumeric wash over her. She thought of Tory, of his lean body under hers in the pale blue earthlight. "We were meant to be lovers," he'd said. She thought of life without him.

The terminal was the only artifact Tory had left behind that held any sense of his spirit. It had been his plaything, his diary, and his toolbox, and its memory still held the Trojan horse programs he had been working with when he was-transformed.

One of those programs, she knew, would make her a god.

She stared up through the ivy at the domed sky. Only a few stars were visible between the black silhouetted leaves, and these winked off and on with the small movements she made breathing. She thought back to Coral's statement that Elin would soon join her, merging into the unselfed, autistic state that only Tory's meddling had spared her.

"God always keeps her promises," Tory said quietly.

Elin started, looked down, and saw that the grass to the far side of the hut was moving, flowing. Swiftly it formed the familiar, half-amused, half-embittered features of her lover, continuing to flow until all of his head and part of his torso rose up from the floor.

She was not half so startled as she would have liked to be. Of course the earlier manifestations of Tory had been real, not phantoms thrown up by her grief. They were simply not her style.

Still, Elin rose to her feet apprehensively. "What do you want from me?"

The loam-and-grass figure beckoned. "Come. It is time you join us."

"I am not a program," Elin whispered convulsively. She backed away from the thing. "I can make my own decisions!"

She turned and plunged outside, into the fresh, cleansing night air. It braced her, cleared her head, returned to her some measure of control.

A tangle of honeysuckle vines on the next terrace wall up moved softly. Slowly, gently, they became another manifestation, of Coral this time, with blossoms for the pupils of her eyes. But she spoke with Tory's voice.

"You would not enjoy godhood," he said, "but the being you become will."

"Give me time to think!" she cried. She wheeled and strode rapidly away, out of the residential cluster, through a scattering of boulders, and into a dark meadow.

There was a quiet kind of peace here, and Elin wrapped it about her.

She needed that peace, for she had to decide between her humanity and Tory. It should have been an easy choice, but-the pain of being without.

Elin stared up at the earth; it was a world full of pain. If she could reach out and shake all the human misery loose, it would flood all of creation, extinguishing the stars and poisoning the space between.

There was, if not comfort, then a kind of cold perspective in that, in realizing that she was not alone, that she was merely another member of the commonality of pain. It was the heritage of her race. And yet-somehow-people kept on going.

If they could do it, so could she.

Some slight noise made her look back at the boulder field. Tory's face was appearing on each of the stones, every face slightly different, so that he gazed upon her with a dozen expressions of love. Elin shivered at how alien he had become. "Your need is greater than your fear," he said, the words bouncing back and forth between faces. "No matter what you think now, by morning you will be part of us."

Elin did not reply immediately. There was something in her hand--Tory's terminal. It was small and weighed hardly at all. She had brought it along without thinking.

A small, bleak cry came from overhead, then several others. Nighthawks were feeding on insects near the dome roof. They were too far, too fast, and too dark to be visible from here.

"The price is too high," she said at last. "Can you understand that? I won't give up my humanity for you."

She hefted the terminal in her hand, then threw it as far and as hard as she could. She did not hear it fall.

Elin turned and walked away. Behind her, the rocks smiled knowingly.