

Shanidar
a novelette
by David Zindell

I have heard the eschatologists deny the future of our kind. Man, they say, is a bridge between ape and superman, a rusty old bridge that we can neither preserve nor restore, any more than we can stop the stars beyond the Vild from exploding or turn the snows of deep winter into rain. For man, or for a man, there can be no new beginnings. The story I tell here is a story of restoration and resurrection, of how the philosophers of this doomed city were both right and wrong, a story, if you will, of endings and beginnings which sometimes are, as old men such as I well know, one and the same thing.

For me, the end of civilization came on the seventieth night of my fiftieth--or was it fifty-first?--deep winter in this City of Pain. Icefall, some called it, or Unreal City, city of lights and mists, the topological and, some say, spiritual center of a thousand decaying worlds. The eschatologists called it Neverness, which means, I think, "Last City" or "Lost City." I prefer the latter name, though it isn't names that matter. What matters is ice and snow and cold so deep that your breath shatters into ice crystals on the hard air, and flesh -- should any man be foolish enough to let the air of this forsaken city touch his naked flesh -- flesh turns to stone as you watch. What matters is men who deny the importance of flesh, men who seek new beginnings.

He came into my cutting shop on a quiet night when the air was black and still, the only sound the far-off hissing and humming of the machines as they hovered over the city streets, melting and smoothing the ice for the following day. He was a pale young man with brown, lively eyes beneath the white hood of his parka, and he wore a beard so dense and black that you would have thought him born on Gehenna or Sheydvog and not, as he claimed, on Summerworld where the men are nearly hairless and their skin is as dark as coffee. With his heavy brows and large, muscular face he nearly had the look of the Alaloi which had been the fashion -- you will presently understand why -- some twenty years ago. As he stood there in the stone hallway knocking the slush from his skates, he explained that he had need of my services. "You are Rainer, the cutter?" he asked me in a low, conspiratorial voice. I told him that was what the people of the city called me. "I want you to use all your skills," he said. "I want to become an Alaloi."

I led him into my tearoom where he ejected the blades from his skates and flopped his dripping mittens on top of the marble table which I had imported from Urradeth at great cost. And though I didn't feel much like playing the host -- my white tunic was spattered with blood and brains and I had matters to attend to -- I offered him kvass or coffee and was surprised that he chose coffee.

"Kvass fogs the brain," he said, ignoring the frescoes on the stone walls around him and staring me in the eyes. "Drink makes men forget their purpose."

I sent for the domestic and I asked the young man, "And your purpose is to look like an Alaloi?"

He shook his head. "My purpose is to become an Alaloi. Completely."

I laughed and I said, "You know I can't do that; you know the law. I can change your flesh as you please but -- "

"What about Goshevan?"

"Goshevan!" I shouted. "Why do the young men always come asking about Goshevan?" The domestic came and I embarrassed myself by shouting out an order for coffee and kvass. As it rolled away, I said, "There are more stories told about Goshevan than dead stars in the Vild. What do you know about Goshevan?"

"I know that he wanted what I want. He was a man with a dream who -- "

"He was a dreamer! Do you want to know about Goshevan? I'll tell you the story that I tell all the young men who come to me seeking nightmares. Are you sitting comfortably? Then listen well..."

The domestic brought our drink bubbling in two of those huge, insulated pots that they blow on Fostora. It clumsily poured the dark liquids into our delicate marble cups as I told the young man the story of Goshevan:

"There lived on Summerworld a young noble who took a greater interest in antiques and old books -- some say he had been to Ksandaria and bribed the librarians into selling him part of the Kyoto collection of Old Earth -- than he did in managing his estates. He was an erudite man who claimed that the proper study of man was man -- not how to produce five tons more coffee per cubage. One day he tired of his life and said, 'My s-sons are weak-faced maggots who exist on the diseased flesh of this rotten civilization. They p-plot with my wives against me and laugh as my wives sleep with other men.' And so Goshevan sold his estates, freed his slaves, and told his family they would have to make their living by the sweat of their hands and the inspiration of their brains. He paid for a passage on a Darghinni long ship and made his way toward the Vild.

"Now everyone knows the Darghinni are tricksters and so is it any wonder they didn't warn him of the laughing pools on Darkmoon? Well, warn him they didn't, and Goshevan spent two seasons on that dim, lukewarm planet coughing at the lungmelt in his chest while the surgeons painstakingly cut the spirulli from his muscles and waited and watched and cut some more.

"When he was well, he found a Fravashi trader who was willing to take him to Yarkona; on Yarkona he shaved his head and wrapped his body in rags so that the harijan pilgrims he befriended there would allow him a corner on one of their sluggish prayer ships in which to float. And so, gray of hair and stinking of years of his own sweat and filth, he came to Neverness like any other seeker.

"Though it was late midwinter spring, and warm for that season, he was stunned by the cold and dazzled by the brightness of our city. And so he paid too much money for snow goggles and the finest of shagshay furs lined with silk belly. 'The streets are colored ice,' he said disbelievingly, for the only ice he had ever seen had been brought to him in exotic drinks by his slaves. And he marvelled at the purples and greens of the glissades and the laughing children who chased each other up and down the orange and yellow glidderies on ice skates. The silvery spires and towers were frozen with the ever present verglas of that season, scattering the white spring light so that the whole city gleamed and sparkled in a most disconcerting manner. 'There is beauty here,' he said. 'The false beauty of artifice and a civilization gone to rot.' And so, dressed in deep winter furs and wobbling on his newly bought skates, he struck out into the streets to preach to the people.

In the great square outside the Hofgarten where the people of the Unreal City, high and low, meet and take their refreshment, the scryers, eschatologists, and cantors as well as the harijan, splicers and whores, he said, 'I s-speak to that inside you which is less than m-man but also m-more.' And he raged because no one would listen to a short, overdressed farsider who stuttered and could barely stand on his skates. 'You p-pilots,' he said, 'you are the p-pride of the galaxy! You travel from Simoom to Urradeth and on to Jacaranda in less time than the Darghinni need to prepare the first of eighteen Jumps from Summerworld to Darkmoon. You penetrate the Vild, lost in your mathematics and dreamtime and tell yourself you have seen something of the ineffable and eternal. But you have forgotten how to take pleasure in a simple flower! You foreswear marriage and children and thus you are more and less than men!'

"When the pilots turned away from him to drink their kvass and eiswein, he told the historians and fabulists that they knew nothing of the true nature of man. And they, those haughty professionals of our city, snubbed him and went on talking about Gaiea and Old Earth as if he were invisible. So Goshevan spoke to the programmers and holists, the Fravashi aliens and Friends of God, the harijan, the wormrunners, the splicers, and at last, because he was filled with a great sadness and longing, he zipped up his furs and went deep into the Farsiders' Quarter where he might pay for the company of a friendly ear.

"Because he was lonely and had been without a woman for many years, he took his pleasure among the whores of the lesser glidderies, which at that time were stained crimson and were narrow and twisted like snakes. Because his soul was empty he smoked toalache and awoke one fine morning to find himself in bed with four courtesans from Jacaranda. They asked him if all dark little men were as potent as he and advised him that the joys of conjoining with the alien Friends of Man were such that no man who had known only women could comprehend them. Goshevan, horrified at what he had done and forgetting where he was, began swearing and shouting and ordered that the courtesans be sold as field slaves. He threw a bag of diamonds at them, clipped in the blades to his skates, and raced up and down the back glissades for two days before he came to his right mind."

I paused here in my story to refill our cups. The young man was staring at me intently, watching my every move with those piercing brown eyes and, I felt, stripping my words bare for lies. The room was very quiet and cold; I could hear his slow, even breathing as he nodded his head and asked, "And then?"

"And then Goshevan made a decision. You see, he had hoped to win people over to his dream, which was to go out into the wasteland and live as what he called 'natural man.' The Alaloi, of course, had been his model. When he found he could not emulate them, he decided to join them."

"A noble vision," the young man said.

"It was insane!" I half-shouted "Who were these Alaloi he so admired? Dreamers and madmen they were -- and still are. They came to this world on the first wave of the swarming, when Old Earth was young and, some say, as radioactive as plutonium. Cavemen! They wanted to be cavemen! So they back-mutated their chromosomes, destroyed their ship, and went to live in the frozen forests. And now their great-grandchildren's great-great-grandchildren hunt mammoths for meat and die long before they've seen their hundredth winter."

"But they die happy," the young man said.

"Who knows how they die?" I said to him. "Goshevan wanted to know. He sought me out because it was said that once as a journeyman I had pioneered the operation he wanted, cutting on my very own self to prove my worth as a flesh changer. 'Make me into an Alaloi,' he begged me, in this very room where we presently drink our coffee and kvass. And I told him, 'Go to any of the cetics in this quarter and they will cure you of your delusions.' And he said, 'I will p-pay you ten million talanns!' But his farsider money was worthless in the Unreal City and I told him so. 'Diamonds,' he said. 'I've two thousand carats of Yarkona bluestars.' 'For that price,' I said, 'I can add eight inches to your spine or make you into a beautiful woman. I can lighten your skin and make your hair as white as a Jacaranda courtesan's.' Then he looked at me cunningly and said, 'I'll trade information for your services: I know the fixed-points of Agathange.' I laughed at him and asked, 'How is it you know what the pilots of our city have been seeking for three thousand years?'

"Well, it happened that he did know. With the riches from the sale of his estates, he had bought the secret of the location of that fabled world from a renegade pilot he had met on Darkmoon. I consulted our city archives: the librarians were very excited. They sent a young pilot to verify my information, and I told Goshevan we might have to wait two or three hundred days before we would know.

"Ten thousand city disks his information was worth! The pilot who rediscovered Agathange was very good. Phased into his light ship, the Infinite Sloop, proving the theorems of probabilistic topology -- or whatever it is that our famous pilots do when they wish to fall through the space that isn't space -- he rushed through the fallaways, fenestering from window to window with such precision and elegance that he returned from Agathange in forty days.

"'You can be a rich man,' Goshevan said to me on a clear, sparkling day of false winter. 'Do as I ask and all the disks are yours.'

"I hesitated not for a moment. I took him into the changing room and I began to cut. It was a challenge, I lied to myself, a test of knowledge and skill -- to a dedicated cutter, it wasn't disks that mattered. I enlarged the basal bone of his jaw and stimulated the alveolar bone to maximal growth so that his face could support the larger teeth I implanted. The angle of the face itself I broadened so that there would be more room for a chewing apparatus strong enough to crack marrowbones. And of course, since the face jutted out farther from the skull, I had to build up the brow ridge with synthetic bone to protect the eyes. And though this shaping took the better part of winter, it was only the beginning.

"As he writhed beneath my lasers and scalpels, all the while keeping his face as quiet and blank as a snowfield, I went to work on his body. To support his huge new muscles -- which were grown by the Fravashi deep-space method -- I built him new bones. I expanded the plates and spicules of the honeycombed interior and strengthened the shafts and tendon attachments, adding as much as three millimeters to the cortices of the longer bones such as his femur. I stippled his skin. I went

beneath the dermis, excising most of his sweat glands to keep him from soaking his furs and freezing to death at the first hint of false winter. Because his dark skin would synthesize too little vitamin D to keep his bones calcified during the long twilight of deep winter, I inhibited his melanocytes -- it is little known that all men, light or dark, have nearly the same number of melanocytes -- I lightened his skin until he was as fair as a man from Thorskalle. The last thing I did for him, or so I thought at the time, was to grow out his fine, almost invisible body hair so that it covered him like brown fur from toe to eyebrow.

"I was very pleased with my handiwork and a little frightened because Goshevan had grown so strong -- stronger, I think, than any Alaloi -- that he could have torn my clavicle from my chest, had he so desired. But he was not pleased and he said, 'The most important thing there is, this thing you didn't do.' And I told him, 'I've made you so that no one among the Alaloi could tell you from his brother.' But he looked at me with his dark fanatic's eyes and asked me, 'And my s-sons, should my s-seed by some chance be compatible with the Alaloi women, who will there be to call my weak-jawed half-breed sons brother?' I had no answer for him other than a dispirited repeating of the law: 'A man may do with his flesh as he pleases,' I said, 'but his DNA belongs to his species.' And then he grabbed my forearm so tightly that I thought my muscles would split away from the bone and said, 'Strong men make their own laws.'

"Then, because I felt a moment of pity for this strange man who only wanted what all men want -- which is a son after his own image and a few moments of peace -- I broke the law of the civilized worlds. It was a challenge, do you understand? I irradiated his testes and bathed them with sonics, killing off the sperm. I couldn't, of course, engage the services of a master splicer because all my colleagues shunned such criminal activity. But I was a master cutter -- some will tell you the best in the city -- and what is gene-splicing but surgery on a molecular scale? So I went into his tubules and painstakingly sectioned out and mutated segments of his stem cells' DNA so that the newly produced germ cells would make for him sons after his new image.

"When I finished this most delicate of delicate surgeries, which took the better part of two years, Goshevan regarded himself in the mirror of my changing room and announced, 'Behold Homo neandertalis. Now I am less than a man but also more.'

"'You look as savage as any savage,' I said. And then, thinking to scare him, I told him what was commonly believed about the Alaloi. 'They live in caves and have no language,' I said. 'They are bestially cruel to their children; they eat strangers, and perhaps each other.'

"Goshevan laughed as I said this and then he told me, 'On Old Earth during the holocaust century, a neandertal burial site was discovered in a place called Shanidar near the Zagros mountains of Irak. The archeologists found the skeleton of a forty-year-old m-man who was missing his lower right arm. Shanidar I, they named him, and they determined he had lost his arm long before he died. In the burial site of another neandertal, Shanidar IV, was the pollen of several kinds of flowers, mixed in with all the bone fragments, pebbles and dust. The question I have for you, Cutter, is: how savage could these people have been if they supported a cripple and honored their dead with bright colored wildflowers?' So I answered, 'The Alaloi are not the same.' And he said, 'We will see, we will see.'

"Here I freely admit I had underestimated him. I had supposed him to be a lunatic or at best, a self-deluder who hadn't a chance of getting ten miles away from our city. The covenant between the founder of Neverness and the Alaloi allows us this single island -- large though it might be -- and to our city fathers, this covenant is holy. Boats are useless because of the icebergs of the Sound, and the windjammers of would-be poachers and smugglers are shot from the air. Because I couldn't picture Goshevan walking out onto the Starnbergersee when it freezes over in deep winter, I asked him somewhat smugly how he intended to find his Alaloi.

"'Dogs,' he said. 'I will attach dogs to a sled and let them pull me across the frozen sea.' And I asked, 'What are dogs?' 'Dogs are carnivorous mammals from Old Earth,' he said. 'They are like human slaves, only friendly and eager to please.' And I said, 'Oh, you mean huzgies,' which is what the Alaloi call their sled dogs. I laughed at him then and watched the white skin beneath his hairy face turn red as if slapped by a sudden cold wind. 'And how will you smuggle such beasts into our city?' I asked him.

"So Goshevan parted the hair of his abdomen to show me a thin band of hard white skin I had taken

for an appendectomy scar. 'Cut here,' he said, and after nerve-blocking him, cut I did until I came to a strange looking organ adjoining the large intestine where his appendix should have been. 'It's a false ovary,' he said. 'Clever are the breeders of Darkmoon. Come. Cut again and see what I've brought with me.' I removed the false organ, which was red and slippery and made of one of those pungently sweet-smelling bioplastics they synthesize on Darkmoon. I made a quick incision and out spilled thousands of unfertilized ova and a sac of sperm floating in krydda suspension to keep them fresh and vital. He pointed at the milky sperm sac and said, 'The seed of Darkmoon's finest Mutts. I had originally hoped to train hundreds of sled teams.'

"How Goshevan brought the dogs to term and trained them, I do not know because I didn't see him again for two winters. I thought perhaps that he'd been caught and banished or had his head split open and had his plasm sucked out by some filthy sleel necker.

"But as you will see, Goshevan was a resourceful man and hard to kill. He came again to my shop on the deepest of deep winter nights when the air was so black and cold that even on the greatest of the glissades and glidderies, The Run and The Way, nothing moved. In the hallway of my shop he stood like a white bear, opening his shagshay furs and removing the balaclava from his face with powerful, sweeping motions. I could see beneath his furs one of those black and gold, heated kamelaikas that the racers wear on festival days when they wish to keep warm and still have their limbs free for stroking. 'This is my noble savage?' I said to him as I fingered his wonderfully warm undersuit. 'Even a f-fanatic such as I must make some concessions to survival,' he said. And I asked him. 'What will you do when the batteries die?' He gave me a look that was at once fearful and bursting with excitement, and he said, 'When the batteries die, I will either be dead or I will have found my home.'

"He said goodbye to me and went out onto the glidderly where his dogs were up on their hind legs, straining at their harnesses as they whined and barked and pushed their black noses into his parka. From my window, I could see him fumbling with the stiff leather straps and thumping the side of the lead dog with his huge mittens. He adjusted the load three times before he had it to his liking, taking pains that the sacks of dog meal were balanced and tightly lashed to the wooden frame. Then he was off, whistling in a curious manner as he glided around the corner of the cetic's shop and disappeared into the cold."

The tearoom felt cold as I said these words. I noticed that the young man was pursing his narrow lips tightly as he fiddled with his coffee. All at once, he let out his breath in a puff of steam that seemed to hang in the air. "But that isn't the end of your story, is it, Cutter? You haven't told the moral: how poor Goshevan died on the ice brokenhearted and disavowing his dream."

"Why is it you young people always want an ending? Does our universe come to an end or does it fold in upon itself? Are the Agathanians at the end of human evolution or do they represent a new species? And so on, and so on. Is there any end to the questions impatient young men ask?"

I took a quick gulp of the bitter kvass, burning my lips and throat so that I sat there dumbly sucking in the cold air like an old bellows. "No, you are right," I gasped out. "That is not the end of my story."

"Goshevan drove his dogs straight out onto the frozen Starnbergersee. Due west he went, running fast across the wind-packed snow for six hundred miles. He came to the first of the Thousand Islands and found mountains shrouded in evergreen forests where the thallows nested atop the steep granite cliffs filling the air for miles with their harsh cawings. But he found no Alaloi, and he urged his dogs carefully across the crevasses of the Fairleigh ice-shelf, back out onto the sea.

"Fifteen islands he crossed without finding a trace of a human being. He had been gone sixty-two days when the crushing, deadly silent cold of deep winter began yielding to the terrible storms of midwinter spring. During a snow so heavy and wet that he had to stop every hundred yards to scrape the frozen slush from the steel runners of his sled, his lead dog, Yuri the Fierce, pulled them into a crevasse. Though he dug his boots into the sloppy snow and held on to the sled with all his strength, the pendulating weight of Yuri, Sasha and Ali as they swung back and forth over the lip of the ice was such that he felt himself being slowly dragged into the crevasse. It was only by the quick slashing of his hunting knife that he saved himself and the rest of his team. He cut the harness from which his strongest dogs dangled and watched helplessly as they tried to dig their black claws into the sides of the crevasse, all the while yelping pitifully as they fell to the

ice below.

"Goshevan was stunned. Though the snow had stopped and he was within sight of the sixteenth and largest of the Thousand Islands, he realized he could go no farther without rest. He erected his tent and fed the dogs from the crumbly remnants of the last bag of food. There came a distant hissing that quickly grew into a roar as the storm returned, blasting across the Starnbergersee with such ferocity that he spent all that day and night tending the ice-screws of his tent so that he wouldn't be blown away. For nine days he lay there shivering inside his sleeping sack as the wind-whipped ice crystals did their work. By the tenth day, the batteries to his heated kamelaika were so low that he threw them in disgust against the shredded, useless walls of his tent. He dug a cave in the snow and pulled the last two of his starving dogs into the hole so that they might huddle close and keep each other warm. But Gasherbrum the Friendly, the smartest of his dogs, died on the eleventh day. And on the morning of the twelfth day, his beloved Kanika, whose paws were crusted with ice and blood, was as still as a deep winter night.

"When the storm broke on the fifteenth day, Goshevan was so crazy with thirst that he burned his frostbitten lips upon the metal cup in which he was melting snow. And though he was famished and weak as a snow worm, he could not bring himself to eat his dogs because he was both father and mother to them, and the thought of it made him so sick he would rather have died.

"From the leather and wood of his sled he fashioned a crude pair of snowshoes and set out across the drifts for a huge blue and white mountain he could see in the distance puncturing the sky. Kweitkel it was called, as he would later learn. Kweitkel, which meant 'white mountain' in the language of the Devaki, who were the tribe of Alaloi who found him dying in the thick forests of its eastern slope.

"His rescuers -- five godlike men dressed in angelic white, or so it seemed to his fevered, delirious mind -- brought him to a huge cave. Some days later he came awake to the wonderful smells of hot soup and roasting nuts. He heard soft voices speaking a strange, musical language that was a delight to his ear. Two children, a boy and a girl he thought, were sitting at the corners of the luxurious fur which covered him, peeking at him coyly through the spread-out fingers of their little hands and giggling.

A man with great shoulders and a beard as black as a furfly came over to him. Between his blunt, scarred fingers he held a soup bowl made from yellowed bone and scrimshawed with intricate figures of diving whales. As Goshevan gulped the soup, the man asked, 'Marek? Patwin? Olorun? Nodin? Mauli?' Goshevan, half-snowblind and weak in the head as he was, forgot that I had made him so that no one among the Alaloi could tell him from his brothers. He thought he was being accused of being an alien so he shook his head furiously back and forth at the sound of each name. At last, when Lokni, which was the big man's name, had given up trying to discover the tribe to which he belonged, Goshevan pointed to his chest and said, 'I am man. I'm just a man.' 'Iaman,' Lokni repeated. 'Ni luria la Devaki.' And so it was that Lokni of the Devaki welcomed Goshevan of the Iaman tribe to his new home.

"Goshevan gained strength quickly, gorging upon a salty cheese curdled from shagshay milk and the baldo nuts the Devaki stored against the storms of midwinter spring. And though Katerina, who was Lokni's wife, offered him thick mammoth steaks running red with the life's blood beneath a charcoaled crust, he would eat no meat. He, who all his life had eaten only soft, decerebrated cultured meats, was horrified that such gentle people took their nourishment from the flesh of living animals. 'I don't think I can teach these savages the few right-actioned ways of civilized man,' he said to himself. 'Why should they listen to me, a total stranger?' And so for the first time since Summerworld he came to question the wisdom of what he had done.

"By the time Goshevan had put on fifty pounds of new muscle, the storms of midwinter spring had given way to the fine weather of false winter. There came cool sunny days; the occasional powdery snows were too light to cover the alpine fireweed and snow dahlia which blanketed the lower slopes of Kweitkel. The thallows were molting and the furflys laying eggs. For Tuwa, the mammoth, came calving time, and for the Devaki, it was time to slaughter mammoth.

"Goshevan was sick. Though he had quickly learned the language of the Devaki, and learned also to tolerate his body lice and filthy hair, he did not know how he could kill an animal. But when Lokni unsmilingly slapped a spear into his hand, he knew he would have to hunt with the eighteen

other men, many of whom had come to wonder about his strange ways and questioned his manhood.

"At first the hunt went well. In one of the lovely valleys of Kweitkel's southern foothills, they spotted a mammoth herd gorging on arctic timothy and overripe, half-fermented snow apple. The great hairy beasts were carousing and drunkenly trampling through the acres of alpine fireweed which were everywhere aflame with bright reds and oranges and so beautiful that Goshevan wanted to cry. They drove the trumpeting mammoths down the valley and into a bog where three calves fell quickly beneath flint-tipped spears. But then Lokni mired himself near the edge of the bog, and Wemilo was trampled by an enraged cow. It fell to Goshevan to help Lokni. Though he reached out with his spear into the bog until his shoulder joint popped, he failed to close the distance. He heard voices and shouting and thunder and felt the ground moving beneath him. As he looked up to see the red-eyed cow almost upon him, he realized that the men were praying for his ghost, for it was known that no single man could stand against Tuwa's charge.

"Goshevan was terrified. He cast his spear at the mammoth's eye with such a desperate force that the point drove into the brain, and the great beast fell like a mountain. The Devaki were stunned. Never had they seen such a thing, and Haidar and Alani, who had doubted his bravery, said that he was more than a man. But Goshevan knew his feat was the result of blind luck and my surgery, and thus he came to despise himself because he had killed a magnificent being and was therefore less than a man.

"In the cave that night, the Devaki made a feast to mourn the passing of Tuwa's anima and to wish Wemilo's ghost enlightenment on the other side of day. Lokni sliced his own ear off his head with a sharp obsidian flake and laid the bloody flap of skin on Wemilo's cold forehead so that he might always hear the prayers of the tribe. Katerina bound her husband's wound with feather moss while the other women scattered snow dahlias over Wemilo's crushed body.

"Then Lokni turned to Goshevan and said, 'A man, to be a man, must have a woman, and you are too old to take a virgin bride.' He went over to Lara, who was sobbing over Wemilo's grave. 'Look at this poor woman. Long ago her father, Arani, deserted her to live with the hairless people of the Unreal City. She has no brothers. And now Wemilo dances with the stars. Look at this poor beautiful woman whose hair is still black and shiny and whose teeth are straight and white. Who will be a man to this woman?'

"Goshevan looked at Lara and though her eyes were full of tears, they were also hot and dark, full of beauty and life. He felt very excited and said, 'A man would be a fool not to desire this woman.' And then he thought to comfort her by saying, 'We'll be married and have many fine children to love.'

"A hush fell over the cave. The Devaki looked at each other as if they couldn't believe their ears. And Ushi wondered aloud, 'How can he not know that Lara has three daughters and one son?' 'Of course I know,' Goshevan said. 'It only means she is very fertile and will have no trouble bearing me sons.' Then Ushi let out a cry and began tearing at her hair. Katerina hid her eyes beneath her hand and Lokni asked, 'How can it be, Goshevan, that you do not know the Law?' And Goshevan, who was angry and confused, replied, 'How can I know your law when I'm from a faraway tribe?' Lokni looked at him and there was death in his eyes. 'The Law is the Law,' he said, 'and it is the same for every Alaloi. It can only be that the storm stole away your memory and froze part of your soul.' And then, because Lokni didn't want to kill the man who had saved his life and was about to marry his sister, he explained the Law.

" 'She may have but one more child. A woman may have five children: One child to give to the Serpent's Breath of deep winter, one child for the tusks of Tuwa, the mammoth. One child for the fever that comes in the night.' Lokni paused a moment as the Law passed from lip to lip, and all the tribe except Goshevan were chanting: 'A boy to become a man; a girl to become Devaki, Mother of the People.'

Lokni cupped his hand around the back of Goshevan's neck and squeezed as he said, 'If we become too many, we will kill all the mammoth and have to hunt silk belly and shagshay for food. And when they are gone, we will have to cut holes in the ice of the sea so to spear the seals when they come up to breathe. When the seals are gone, we will be forced to murder Kikilia, the whale, who is wiser than we and as strong as God. When the animals are gone, we will dig tangleroot and eat the larvae of furflays and break our teeth as we gnaw the lichen from the rocks. At last we will be

so many, we will murder the forests to plant snow apple so that men will come to lust for land, and some men will come to have more land than others. And when there is no land left, the stronger men will get their sustenance from the labor of weaker men, who will have to sell their women and children so that they might have mash to eat. The strongest men will make war on each other so that they might have still more land. Thus we will become hunters of men and be doomed to hell in living and hell on the other side. And then, as it did on Earth in the time before the swarming, fire will rain from the sky, and the Devaki will be no more.'

"And so Goshevan, who really wanted only one son, came to accept the Law of the Alaloi, for who knew better than he the evils of owning slaves and lying with whores?"

"He married Lara at the end of false winter. In her long black hair, she replaced the snow dahlias of her mourning time with the fire flowers of the new bride and set to sewing him the new shagshay parka he would need when deep winter came. Each Devaki made them a wedding gift. Eirene and Jael, the two giggling children who had first greeted him so many months before, gave him a pair of mittens and a carved tortrix horn for him to fill with the potent beer that was brewed each winter from mashed tangleroot. His finest gift, a work of breathtaking art and symmetry, was the spear that Lokni gave him. It was long and heavy and tipped with a blade of flint so sharp that it cut through cured mammoth hide as easily as cheese."

I finished my drink, pausing a moment to catch my breath. The sounds the young man's marble cup made against the cold hard table seemed gritty and overloud. I smelled cinnamon and honey; a minute later the domestic served raisin bread spread with honey-cheese and brought us fresh pots of coffee. Outside the tearoom, I could hear the soft clack-clack of steel skates against the ice of the gliddery. I wondered who would be so foolish, or desperate, to be out on such a night. The young man took my hand in his, staring at me so intently that I had to look away. "And Goshevan?" he asked. "He was happy with the beautiful Lara? He was happy, wasn't he?"

"He was happy," I said, trying to slip my old hand from the young man's grip. "He was so happy he came to regard his body lice as his 'little pets' and didn't care that he would have to pass the rest of his days without a bath. His stuttering, which had embarrassed him all his life and caused him great shame, came to a sudden end as he found the liquid vowels and smooth consonants of the Devaki language rolling easily off his tongue. He loved Lara's children as his own and loved Lara as only a desperate and romantic man can love a woman. Though she had none of the exotic skills of the courtesans with whom he had been so familiar, she loved him with such a strength and passion that he came to divide his life into two parts: the time before Lara, which was murky and dim and full of confused memories, and the time after, which was full of light and joy and laughter. So it happened that when, the following midwinter spring, she pointed to her belly and smiled, he knew with a sureness that he had not spent his life in vain and was as happy as a man could be."

The deep powder snows of winter were falling as Lara swelled like the ripened baldo nuts which the women picked and stored in great barrels staved with mammoth ribs and covered with mammoth hides. 'It will be a boy,' she said to him one night in early deep winter when the slopes of Kweitkel were silvery with the light of the moons. 'When I was carrying my girls I was sick every morning of the three seasons of growing. But with this one I wake up as hungry as Tuwa in midwinter spring.'

"When her time came, Katerina shooed Lokni and Goshevan, uncle and father, to the front of the cave where they waited while the women did their secret things. It was a night of such coldness that old Amalia said comes but twice every hundredyear. To the north, they could see green curtains of light hanging down from the black starry sky. 'The firefalls,' Lokni said. 'Sometimes they are faint and green as you see and other times as red as blood. The spirits of Wemilo and all our ancestors light the deep winter night to give us hope against the darkness.' And then he pointed at a bright triangle of stars twinkling brightly above the eastern horizon. 'Wakanda, Eanna, and Farfara,' he said. 'Men live there, I think. Shadow men without bodies. It is said they have no souls and take their nourishment from light.' And so they sat there for a long time shivering in their shagshay furs, talking of the things men talk about when they are full of strange longing and wonder at the mystery of life."

"There came a squalling from the cave. Goshevan clapped Lokni on the back and started laughing. But the cries of his newborn son were followed by a low wailing and then a whole chorus of women crying. He felt a horrible fear and leapt to his feet even as Lokni tried to hold him back."

"He ran to the warmest, deepest part of the cave where the men were not supposed to go. There, in the sick yellow light of the oil-stones, on a blood-soaked newl fur, he saw his son lying all wet and slippery and pink between Lara's bent legs. Katerina knelt over the struggling infant, holding a corner of the gray fur over his face. Goshevan knocked her away from his son so that she fell to the floor, winded and gasping for air. As Haidar and Palani grabbed his arms, Lokni came to him and with such a sadness that his voice broke and tears ran from his eyes, he said, 'It is the Law, my friend. Any born such as he must immediately make the journey to the other side.' Then Goshevan, who had been full of blind panic and rage, looked at his son. He saw that growing from the hips were two tiny red stumps, twitching pathetically where they should have been kicking. His son had no legs. And to Lokni, who had gathered up the baby in his arms, he said, 'The Devaki do not kill each other.' And Lokni said, 'A baby is not a Devaki until he is named.' Then Goshevan raged so that Einar and Pauli had to come hold him as well. 'I name him Shanidar,' he said. 'Shanidar, my son, whom I love more than life.' But Lokni shook his head because life is so hard the Devaki do not name their children until four winters have passed. With his forefinger, he made a star above the screaming baby's head and went out to bury him in the snow.

Lokni, whose white parka was stained crimson with frozen blood, returned alone with his hands shielding his eyes as if to protect them from false winter's noonday sun. Goshevan broke free and picked up the mammoth spear which had been his wedding gift. He threw it at Lokni in desperation, too blind with pain and fear to see the point enter his stomach and emerge from his back. And he ran outside to find his son.

"An hour later he returned. And in his arms, frozen as hard as a mammoth leg, he held his quiet, motionless son. 'Lara,' he said. And like a drunkard, he stumbled towards his wife. But Lara, who had seen what had passed between her legs and what her husband had done, opened the great artery of her throat with her hide scraper before he could get too close. And when he cried out that he loved her and would die if she died, she told him that the essence of the Law is that life must be lived with honor and joy or not lived at all. So Lara died as he watched, and the best part of him died with her. Knowing that his life had come to an end, he unknotted the ties of his parka, exposing the black matted hair of his chest so that Einar and Alani and the others might more easily spear him. But Goshevan had learned nothing. Lokni, lying on his back with the blood running from a great hole in his abdomen, said, 'Go back to the City, foolish man. We will not kill you; we are not hunters of men.'

"They gave Goshevan a team of snarling dogs and a barrel of baldo nuts and sent him out onto the ice. And he, who should have died a hundred times, did not die because he was full of the madness which protects desperate men, and a new idea had come into his head. So he made his way back across the ice of the Starnbergersee. This time, he ate his dogs when they died and didn't care that his beard was crusted with their black, frozen blood. He came once again to Neverness as a seeker; he came to my cutting shop, wretched, starving, covered with filth and dead, frostbitten skin rotting on his face. He came to me and said, 'I seek life for my son.'

"He stood in this very room, above this table. From a leather bag full of snow and rimed with frost, he removed a twisted, pinkish lump of frozen meat and laid it on the table. 'This is my son,' he said. 'Use all your skills, Cutter, and return my son to me.'

"Goshevan told me his story, all the while cradling in his arms the leather bag to which he had returned his poor son's corpse. He was mad, so mad that I had to shout and repeat myself over and over before he would cease his ranting. 'There isn't a single cryologist in the city,' I told him, 'who can bring your son back to life.'

"But he never understood me. He went out onto the glidderies and glissades, telling his story to every cutter, splicer and cetic who would listen to him. Thus it came to be known throughout the city that I had tampered with his DNA and tampered badly. I was brought before the akashics and their accursed optical computers which laid bare my brain and recorded my actions and memories for all to see. 'If you ever again break the laws of our city,' the master akashic told me, 'you will be banished.' To ensure that I would obey the law, he ordered me to submit to their computer on the first day of each new year 'so long as you live.' Curiously, although I had scandalized most of the city, my 'Neandertal Procedure' became immediately popular among the many farsiders who come to Neverness seeking to be other than what they are. For many years thereafter, the glidderies of our quarter were filled with squat hairy supermen who looked as if they could have

been Goshevan's brother.

And Goshevan, poor Goshevan -- though he pleaded with and threatened every cryologist in the quarter -- death is death, and no one could do more for him than give him a hot meal and a little toalache and send him on his way. The last I heard of him, he was trying to bribe his way to Agathange, where, he said, the men were no longer men and miracles were free to anyone who would surrender up his humanity. But everyone knows Agathanian resurrection is just a myth dreamed up by some fabulist drunk with the fire of toalache, no more real than the telepaths of The Golcanda. And Goshevan disappeared into the back alleys of our Unreal City, no doubt freezing to death one dark winter's night. And there, my young friend, the story ends."

Painfully, I stood up to indicate that our conversation was over. But the young man kept to his chair, staring at me silently. His eyes grew so intense, so dark and disturbed, I thought that, perhaps, all men who desire the unobtainable must be touched with some degree of madness. I felt the acids of the kvass and coffee burning in my stomach as I said, "You must go now. You understand now, you understand why."

Suddenly, he slapped the table. The tearoom echoed with the loud rattle of teacups and the young man's trembling voice. "There the story does not end," he said. "This is the end, the true end of Goshevan's story that they tell in the silver mines of Summerworld."

I smiled at him then because the story of Goshevan is now a legend, and the endings to his story are as many as the Thousand Islands. Although I was certain to be bored by one of the fabulist myths in which Goshevan returns triumphantly to the Patwin or Basham or some other tribe of the Alaloi, one can never be truly certain. As I am a collector of such myths, I said, "Tell me your ending."

"Goshevan found Agathange," the young man said with conviction. "You yourself said he was hard to kill, Cutter. He found Agathange where the men -- I guess I really shouldn't call them men because they were many-sexed and looked more like seals than men -- where the Agathanians brought Shanidar back to life. They fitted him with mechanical legs stronger than real legs. They made him fifty sets of replacement legs, in graduated lengths to accommodate his growth. They offered Goshevan the peace of Agathange's oceans, the wisdom and bliss of cortically implanted bio-chips. But Goshevan, he said he wasn't fit for an ice-world that was less than civilized and that he certainly wasn't worthy of a water world that was beyond civilization. He thanked his hosts and said, 'Shanidar will grow up to be a prince. I will bring him home to Summerworld where men such as we belong.'

To Summerworld he came many years later as an old man with white hair and a stooped back. He called upon the favor of his old friends, asking for the loan of rich delta land so that he could reestablish his estates. But no one recognized him. They, those wily, arrogant lords swathed in their white summer silks, they saw only an old madman -- who I guess must have looked more like a beast to them than a man -- and a strange-looking boy with proscribed Agathanian legs. 'Goshevan,' said Leonid the Just, who had once helped Goshevan put down Summerworld's forty-eighth servile revolt, 'was as hairless as an elephant. He stuttered, too, if my poor memory serves me right.' And then -- are you listening, Cutter? -- then Leonid ordered them sold into the silver mines. Sondevan, the obese slavemaster, removed Shanidar's legs and strapped a cart to his abdomen so that he could wheel himself along the steel tracks that led into the ground. And though Goshevan was old, he was as strong as a water buffalo. They shoved a pick at him and set him hacking at a vein of sylvanite. 'Goshevan,' said the slavemaster, 'was my father's name. He was small and weak and let the Delta Lords buy his land for a tenth a talann per cubage. This ugly animal is not he.'

'The mines were cooler than the rice paddies, but they were hellishly hot compared with the frozen forests of Kweitkel. Goshevan -- do you remember how you removed his sweat glands, Cutter? -- Goshevan lasted two hours before he keeled over from heatstroke and fell into delirium. But before he died, he told his son the story of his birth and explained the Law of the Devaki. His last words before the slavemaster's silver mallet caved in his head were, 'Go back!'

"So I've come back," the young man said. The cutting shop was silent around us. As I stood there on the cold tile floor, I could hear the ragged hissing of my breath and taste the bittersweet tang of coffee coating my tongue and teeth. Suddenly, the young man rose to his feet so quickly that he bumped the table with his hip, sending one of my priceless teacups shattering against the

floor. He opened his furs and dropped his trousers. There, badly fitted to his hips as if by some ignorant apprentice cutter, I could see the prosthetic legs -- the kind they make badly on Fostora or Kainan -- where they disappeared beneath reddened flaps of skin.

"I've come back to you, Grandfather," he said. "And you must do for me what you failed to do for Goshevan, who was my father."

And there my story really and truly ends. I do not know if the young man who came to me was the real Shanidar. I do not know if the story he told of Goshevan's death is really true. I prefer to believe his story, though it isn't stories that matter. What matters is precision and skill, the growing of new limbs for the legless and the altering, despite the law of civilization, the tampering with a young man's DNA when the need to tamper and heal is great. What matters is men who aren't afraid to change the shape and substance of their flesh so that they might seek out new beginnings.

When, on the first day of midwinter spring, I am brought before the master akashic and banished from my mysterious and beloved city, I will not seek out Agathange, tempting though the warmth of their oceans might be. I am too old to take on the body of a seal; I do not wish for the wisdom of cortically implanted biochips. To paraphrase the law: A man may do with his DNA as he pleases but his soul belongs to his people. It is to my people, the Devaki, that I must return. I have bitterly missed all these years the quiet white beauty of Kweitkel and besides, I must put flowers on my daughter Lara's grave. I, Arani, who once came to Neverness from the sixteenth and largest of the Thousand Islands like any other seeker, will take my grandson back across the frozen Starnbergersee. And for Goshevan, child of my lasers and microscopes, for my poor, brave, restless son-in-law I will pray as we pray for all who make the great journey: Goshevan, mi alasharia la shantih Devaki, may your spirit rest in peace on the other side of day.

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