



THE  
BEASTS  
OF  
DELPHOS

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The Beasts of Delphos  
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# THE FIRST BEAST

## BARRIS

HE WOKE WITH THE REST OF THE CAMP in the same way, startled by the screaming. Somehow screaming always carried louder than the noises of the machines. As the alarms began their clamor he boosted himself off the bunk and dashed to the mines, joining the rest of the stream of bodies to the source of the commotion.

Near the center of the activity the crowd rippled back suddenly, and the faces he could see were contorted with a sick horror.

So it was a death, then.

He steeled himself internally, knowing the pit boss would need the mess — whatever it was — cleaned up quickly so the work could resume. Since he was merely an underling, not yet skilled or grown large enough to be good for much else, he was on the death-cleanup crew.

This one was worse than most. One of the rock-chewers had caught an apprentice machinist, apparently somewhere around his middle, and had separated his body into upper and lower pieces. As Barris shoved through the crowd he saw the separation had not been total; a ribbon of innards still connected the truncated torso to its legs, woven intricately among the teeth of the machine, a shocking pink crochet, unknit and then knit again in unnatural ways. The body halves lay about two meters apart, and the boy was still alive.

He looked around in shock, horrified comprehension filling his features, knowing he had been killed but not dead yet. He stared at his sundered body and screamed again as his separated legs twitched independently, and Barris knew it was his screaming that had roused them all. He shook his head in denial of his own death and his breath began coming in gasps. His hands tried to pull his ruined guts back into his torso and he shuddered. His head fell back and his eyes rolled upward and his chest stilled and he died, in time at last with his body.

Barris didn't know the boy; his camp had many slaves and he was still an underling, high of voice and unhaired, hoping one day to be in training to eventually become

an apprentice machine worker as this boy had been. He only knew the boy was a few seasons older than he, and saw in the eyes gathered around the sundered corpse the knowledge and fear they all had that this could well happen to any of them eventually too.

Pit slaves lived very short, very hard lives, and often died — messily — before they reached full adult stature.

Barris caught the eyes of the rest of the mine's cleanup crew and they nodded to each other, moving quickly to their duties before they had to be told. Slow responses were punishable. He deployed a folding gurney and lifted the upper half of the body onto it as another boy carried the legs over to where the gurney lay. Between them they collected the rest of the remains and placed the quivering pile of guts, still warm, onto the ecmite film between the body halves. The torso shivered a moment, its last life failing, then fell still. With a nod to the other boy Barris indicated his readiness, and they lifted the gurney and took the body to the furnace.

After they slid the wet ruin into white maw of the smelter's waste-heat vent the reaction set in and Barris heaved miserably. This triggered the other boy and they both lost what remained of their suppers to the hardpan beneath the smelter. Barris wiped his mouth and gestured to his assistant. "We need to get back there and help finish with the cleanup."

The other boy — Barris thought his name was Rechis — nodded feebly and they quickly rinsed the gurney, folded it and returned to the pit. The wet red was all over the rock-chewer and it needed to be dismantled, cleaned and re-lubricated before work could proceed. The pit slaves were able to do the basic cleaning but it required the master machinist and his apprentices to actually dismantle and cleanse the titanium grinding apparatus.

Barris and Rechis kept close by with water dispensers and grease guns for the apprentices, watching distantly as what remained of the dead boy's life was worked off the cooling teeth. Every so often a bit of flesh or bone was found and extracted. Having no pockets or pouch — mine slaves were not permitted clothing until they were apprentices — Barris held the bits of meat in his hand as they were passed over to him. They were gelid and sticky in his palm, and they were few; the teeth chewed flesh much finer than stone.

He kept the apprentices in water so they would not be thirsty and so they could clean their hands when they became too sticky. After that came the greasing, bearings repacked quickly as the master machinist moved among the working pubes, making sure all was being properly done. Finally the grinding machinery was reassembled and all the boys fell back as the machinist sparked the rock-chewer back to life. He listened and watched carefully for signs of malfunction, saw none, and nodded approvingly at his apprentices. “Well done,” he said to them. “Nothing like a quick field-cleaning to keep the machines working in top condition.”

The callousness of the sentiment hit Barris harder than he expected, perhaps because he still held pieces of the dead boy’s body in his hand. “Pardon, sir,” he said, “but if our work here is finished...”

“Yes, boy, go,” the machinist waved impatiently, ignoring Barris’s impertinence.

Barris left, disposed of the remains of the remains in the furnace vent, and quickly stole a deciliter of water to rinse himself with. This was not allowed and he moved quickly lest he be caught and strapped to the pain inducer for it. Even though he managed to get all the blood off him he still somehow felt unclean as he went back to his bunk.

There was only enough time left to his rest period for him to just begin dreaming, and Barris woke with the thought still in his head. He had been the boy torn in half and tried to pull his legs back to him by grabbing the slick string of organs that connected them, only to see them tear and spread their contents across the soil in stinking brown clumps. His chest felt tight and hot as he swung his legs off the bunk and sat up, his thoughts churning with his feelings. Opened up to the world. Even death in the mouth of the beast would be better than that.

He shook it off, then hopped to the floor and rapped his bunkmate’s forehead lightly. This was their game, their way for one to wake the other at the beginning of each cycle. Allis’s eyes opened and he grinned at Barris, then frowned as he recalled the events of the night before. “That was bad,” he said simply.

Barris shrugged it aside. Slaves had to learn the habit quickly. “It is the way of it,” he said.

“Did you know him?” Allis sat upright and looked at Barris.

“No. Did you?”

“A little.” Allis stood, looking distressed. “We had some pleasure a few times. His name was Bethos.”

Barris clasped his friend for a moment. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” he said, “and glad you didn’t have to clean it up.”

Allis nodded. “Thanks,” he said. He swallowed his sadness and they went to join the others in the food queue.

Underlings worked hard; no one could deny that. But since they were all as yet undeveloped they could not lift or carry as much as the mid-status laborers and were often ridiculed and treated impatiently. Barris always felt the unfairness of it — a little body hair and a little deepening of the voice and suddenly anyone was allowed to torment the younger boys — but he had learned at a very early age to keep his thoughts to himself, speak only when spoken to, and never give a direct answer to a question about how he felt about anything.

Today was different. The pubes left him alone and it didn’t take him long to realize it was because they had a little sympathy for him. He’d had to do a ghastly job the night before and had borne it stoically and without the slightest hint of hesitation. He smiled bitterly to himself at the horrible logic of it; to gain respect from the pubes he had to clean up a foully-destroyed body, that was all. So simple. Why had he not thought of it before?

Every time he closed his eyes he saw the boy’s — Bethos’s — face in his final moments. So he kept his eyes open as much as he could.

As he carried a satchel of mining dross to the tailing tip — one of countless he’d lift this day — he caught part of what one of the pubes was saying. “...not enough sacrifices to the beast, that’s why.” The boy was shushed by his peers as they caught sight of Barris and he pretended not to have heard anything, but his senses were suddenly keen.

*Sacrifices to the beast?*

“You peeping on us?” The pubes had gathered around him, their developing muscle mass very intimidating. Barris was not weak, of course, and could handle himself in a fight, but there were more of them than of him here, and they were older and larger.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “Now let me back to work.”

The first pube grabbed Barris's arm roughly. His work-callused hands gripped like hard springs. "Maybe *you* need to be fed to the beast," he menaced.

Another pube pointed to Barris's smooth groin. "Wouldn't work. He's still an underling."

The first pube grinned nastily. "Not forever. Next season, I bet. Look at the build of him."

"Spend a lot of time looking at underling bodies?"

The first pube rounded on his erstwhile friend. "You want a faceful of fist?"

Barris took the opportunity to scoot away. "You heard nothing!" the first boy called to his back. "Nothing!"

Barris was rattled and puzzled. What had the pube meant by sacrifice?

The thought returned to him from time to time as he worked the day through, his arms, shoulders and back sore and rubbery by the end of the cycle. As the horn blew he finished tipping his last satchel for the day, turned in the bag, quickly sponged his body free of sweat, grime and odor with the other underlings, and trotted to the food queue, looking forward to seeing Allis. He would be sore as well and they had ways between them to ease their tensions.

Allis looked up at Barris from where he lay in his embrace, their pleasure spent for the time being, the warmth of their kindling together filling their breasts. All about them were sounds of the other underlings in the barracks at loveplay with their bunkmates, wet smacks of lips to lips and other skin, the light hiss of hands over flesh, sighs and groans and gasps hanging in the dark, bunks creaking with their motions. In the dim the bodies joined in bliss were silhouettes, skin shining with highlights as the limbs twined in embrace. All the older underlings, those near to their time of becoming pubes, shared regularly with their bunkmates; tonight was no exception. In the barracks alongside theirs, they knew, the pubes were doing the same with their own partners. For those that worked in the pits, even the roughest day had its softer moments of compensation.

"What's the trouble?"

Barris stroked his friend's shoulders easily, working the muscles he knew so well into deeper relaxation — he knew by experience such things worked best after pleasure — and sighed. "I heard a pube talking today about making sacrifices to the

beast.”

Allis made an *mm* sound as Barris’s fingers worked his tired neck and back.

“What beast?” he said lazily.

“I don’t know. I guess the one that eats men.”

Allis’s fingers reached to lovingly trace the line of his jaw. “Why would they make a sacrifice to that? And what kind of sacrifice?”

“I don’t know that either, but it doesn’t sound very good. One of them said I might make a good sacrifice.”

“Why?”

“He was angry because I overheard them.”

Allis settled his arms along his sides in a clasp and lay his head on Barris’s chest once more, smooth but broad with the muscles even the youngest boys developed quickly in the mines. He closed his eyes and listened to Barris’s heart beating, felt the even rise and fall of his breath. “I was worried you were angry with me because I shared pleasure with Bethos.”

Barris shrugged. “Pleasure is for the taking when it can be had,” he said philosophically. His breast resonated a little with his voice and Allis took comfort in the intimacy of the sound.

“It was before I knew you,” he went on. “Before I came to this detail’s barracks. He was still an underling then but was kind to me and looked out for me and I shared with him when he asked it. I was sad when I was moved here. I missed him until I found you. And I was glad he was prenticed. I hoped to be his bondsman, but wasn’t chosen.”

“You don’t need to explain,” Barris said. “It had to be more than a season ago, now.” He and Allis had known each other that long at least, though as he knew nothing certain of calendars or counting he could not be sure.

“I do need to explain. I thought of him all this cycle. I even cried a little. And — and I feel badly because of it.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m yours now.” The shoulders Barris caressed hunched in a shrug and then let go, Allis’s fingers lightly tickling his flanks at the motion.

“You mourned him, and that’s proper. As you say we’re together — for now,” Barris reminded him. “One or both of us could be moved any time, or —” he bit the thought but it was too late.

“Or we could end up like Bethos. I know. But for now, we’re together and while we’re together I want you to be the only one for me. For as long as it can last.”

Barris nodded at this; in truth he felt the same way about Allis, didn’t want to see him in the arms of another. He drew his face level with his and kissed him and the kisses became enflamed, open-mouthed and full of flavor, and Barris felt Allis grow against his body even as he grew as well, their hips rocking gently together and bringing them both exquisite friction. They smiled at each other, knowing they would share again.

They tasted gently of each other, mouths to nipples and stones and works, fingers gliding over hard muscles and harder flesh, delighting in the intimacy and freedom of the caresses, skin hot and tingling wherever the strokes slid. Allis moved down fully along Barris and the rhythmic motions of his head brought him to the quivering point of finish, backing off just before he could release and propping his heels on his shoulders to kiss him low and deep where he was cleft, his tongue working in smooth even strokes, his fingers trailing over his works and up and down the length of his body, a light tickle that brought his nipples to stiff peaks, reacting everywhere with the feeling.

Barris drew him level with his face for more kisses and traded places with him, mouth moving down his body and pleasing him in the same way, licking along the line where his stones grew into his thighs and below that, lower, drawing the intimate flavor of him as his mate lay still, filled with passion, his body aglow with the pleasure that ran in waves through him as his lover glided the tip of his tongue upward along the center of his joy, solid as the stone he carried from the mine each day yet yielding enough to fit the curve of his body. He formed his lips into a soft O and engulfed him. Allis gasped and pulsed with the joy of it.

The heat between them built with each caress and motion of lips to skin as Barris moved up once more and swung his bunkmate’s body around so they could join in the same way, their tongues rich beds of pleasure for their turgid flesh to lie in, moving with little darts of heat where they were most sensitive. The smooth, easy actions of their mouths became urgent, lights bursting behind their eyes, their brains and their entire beings afire with the thrusting motions, and they found explosive release together in the finest male way, gasping and murmuring words of affection as their bodies slowly unlocked.

They lay a while like that in the following warmth, inverted and sighing, still tasting each other wherever their lips could reach, thighs, bellies, stones, works, caressing

and being caressed, whispers of love and delight misting the air about them. Finally Allis moved off his spent form and kissed him long. “You should go to your bunk.”

They shared a few more kisses before Barris climbed back up to his bed, above that of his bunkmate as Allis nestled beneath him, and let sleep take him, knowing his fatigue was justified — for him the day had begun before the day, and he had seen and heard many things to make him think.

## THE FREEMAN

THE VESSEL SHOT OVERHEAD in a glowing streak, its passage tearing the air with a tortured shriek and a boom. The slaves at the mine ducked reflexively and then stood in awe; all had felt the heat of the crashing ship's passage. It scored a deep rut in the soil several kilometers distant, shuddering and jouncing along the ground, rumbling concussively, burying itself eventually in the dense jungle that lay beyond the mine perimeter. Their ears rang with its noise.

"That was a freeman ship," the pit boss said with certainty. "Better get over there and see to the passengers and crew, if they're still all of one piece."

Barris was already prepared to go, a gurney tucked under his arm. Several other underlings followed suit, all hairless like himself. Once a boy matured to a pube it was no longer safe for him to venture alone into the jungle without several underlings. The older ones needed their smooth-bodied guides to protect them against the lures of the beast — that or females, who didn't feel its influence. But there were no females at the mines, and that meant only the underlings could foray alone into the wilderness and hope to emerge alive.

The boss nodded approvingly at Barris, recognizing his industry for the second time in only two cycles. The boy had brains and mettle, of that there was no doubt. "Take the party out," he said, handing a two-way to Barris, who goggled at it for the merest moment before looping its strap around his neck. By being given the radio he had been appointed leader of the rescue mission.

He stared up at the boss and nodded solemnly. "As you say," he said, then left, leading the little group into a wilderness dangerous enough for them, but lethal to anyone older.

The ship was easy to find. It had left a ragged gout in the soil that pointed directly to its final resting place, foliage smoldering where it came into contact with the body of the vessel. The hull was still very hot to the touch and Barris fashioned a makeshift insulation pad of plant leaves, then used it to tug at the craft's hatch bar. The fuselage had buckled in many places but largely retained its integrity, and the hatch cracked with an

outrush of chilled air. The naked boys shivered in its sudden blast. They were used to living in the heat of the mines, the twin suns burning down on them all through their work cycles, and the air-conditioned interior of the crashed flyer seemed unnaturally cold to them. Barris stepped gingerly up and inside, his feet startled and soothed by the padded carpeting of its deck as moisture from the cooler air condensed, ballooning from the hatch like breath. “Masters?” he called tentatively.

Silence answered.

He cast about nervously a moment, but remembered he was the leader and that leaders must not appear to dither. Looking more bold than he felt he strode into the relative gloom of the ship’s depths and looked down its gangways. “Masters?” he called again.

It was silent, utterly silent.

He gestured the rest of the boys inside and split them up, sending half of them aft to look for passengers, he leading the press fore toward the crew compartments.

In a little while some of the aft search party returned, carrying mangled corpses on their gurneys, laying them gently outside. Few of them had seen freemen this closely and Barris had to remind them to quell their curiosity and tend to their duties.

He sparked the radio and gave his report. “Sir. We’ve found the ship and none of the passengers are alive, pardon. We’re still working on getting into the crew compartments, but, your pardon, sir, I don’t hold much hope.” The fore section of the ship had taken the brunt of the impact and was considerably more damaged than the passenger section had been, and the main access hatch had lodged against its buckled wall-plate. He was having difficulty getting it to move.

“Understood,” the boss’s voice crackled out at him. “Work with all speed.”

“As you say, sir,” Barris replied, and cut the connection. He leaned into the job once more, his work-hardened muscles flexing smoothly under his skin, as the rest of the rescue party tried to help. But the passage was too narrow; it could only accommodate two of them at any one time and that was not enough strength to get the hatch open.

Barris stopped the work and thought a moment, then looked down at the loop that held the radio over his chest. “Cables,” he said. The other boys stared blankly. “Were there cables anywhere in this ship?”

One of the aft party nodded. “In a big place full of storage.”

The hold. Of course. “Show me,” Barris said, and the other boy led the way.

There were cables, strong ones of metal that were used to lift cargo into the ship's hold, spilled among the broken freight containers. Barris searched among them for several moments, looking for one that had — aha. He lifted a coil of cable that weighed more than he did, slinging it over his shoulder, then went fore again and parted the sea of bodies that stood before the stuck hatch. He dropped the coil, careful that it didn't begin to tangle, and raised one end to the hatch bar — the end that had a lifting-hook attached. He hooked the bar and gestured one of the boys to him.

“Hold this hook. Keep it on this bar. Don't let it come off.”

The boy nodded, puzzled, and Barris lifted the coil and carried it back to the ship's waist-hatch, letting the line unwrap behind him as he went. The cable was tough to manage and his wrists flexed strongly, wrestling its unruly loops into a semblance of straightness. When he was outside there were still dozens of meters of it left and he nodded approvingly.

He went back in and took up all the slack in the line, then sent the last boy outside after he saw the hook was still secure. He joined the little throng that stood outside the hatch and directed them to pick up the cable. When all had done so he took anchor position at the back and told them to begin pulling.

The boys leaned into it, their hard hands grasping the cable's slick surface firmly, their shoulders rolling with the effort, spines standing in knobs between the working muscles. As they pulled the ship shifted slightly in the soil, alarming Barris momentarily. Even though the freemen outside the ship were all dead he did not need it rolling over atop them. He almost gave the order to stop but the ship settled and became immobile once more.

The boys began pulling rhythmically, Barris calling out the timing for them to lean together. Their thighs bunched and rippled as the strain of the work ran through their bodies, their bare toes digging for purchase in the churned loam, and abruptly there was a clang from deep within the ship and they all fell back, the cable suddenly lax in their hands.

Barris was on his feet in a moment and rushed back into the gangway. The plan had worked; the hatch stood open. He led the boys into the nose section of the ship and found things to be as bad as he had feared: Much of the crew was wetly adorning the walls of the wrecked craft. He swallowed his bile and directed the others to begin collecting the remains, separating as best they could the bodies from each other. For some of

the pieces they had to guess.

As they worked he heard a faint groan from one of the after sections and glared at the boys who had been sent there, and they disappeared sheepishly. They had not searched thoroughly and this could have won all of them a harsh reprimand — him particularly, as he was the leader. He might even have faced death for the laxity, dropped alive into the furnace.

He followed the noises back to a locker and worked its panel. The door popped open and a freeman, alive and battered but apparently not seriously injured, tumbled out — along with the corpse of a slave-girl, by her dress a pleasure slave. She could not have been much older than Barris. A little trickle of crimson ran from her mouth.

He realized the freeman had been taking his pleasure with her inside this locker — why he could not guess — and her body must have cushioned his in the impact. All the other freemen in the passenger compartment had not been properly restrained when the craft went out of control, and in the chaos they had had no time to harness themselves. But this freeman had been in a confined space and that had saved him. Or rather, the girl's life had been lost in exchange for his, crushed as his body was thrust against hers by the force of the crash.

Barris extended a hand. "Master," he said, helping the freeman to his feet.

The freeman looked about himself dazedly, uttering words Barris did not recognize.

"Your pardon, master?"

The man came to himself and then really saw Barris, and began using different speech. "A party of boys?" He seemed surprised. "This is what they send after us?" His words were colored with a thick accent and Barris recognized he was from offworld.

"Master, your pardon," Barris began, "but it is not safe for pubes or men to walk unattended in this wild."

"Why? Why's it safe for boys and not men?" He glanced at the underlings gathered about him, kept at a respectful distance all save Barris, looking over their mine-hardened bodies. "Even if you seem like strong boys..."

"Master, it is safe for girls and women also. Underlings may walk safely for we, like the females, do not feel the charms of the beast, but a pube or man can be caught in its thrall."

The freeman studied Barris's face, then his bare body. "Underlings? Pubes or ...

Oh. Sexually mature, you mean?”

“Master, I do not know the term you use, forgive my ignorance. Those who can sire are unsafe. Master, your pardon, but this means you as well. We shall have to escort you to safety and we shall have to do it swiftly, for the time of day is drawing to an end and this is when the beast becomes prominent.”

The freeman looked about the wreck of the ship, appearing distracted. “Anyone else get hurt in the crash?”

Barris’s need to leave was urgent and he did not understand why the freeman didn’t grasp the danger. “Pardon, master, but you are the only one who survived. We must leave now. I am sorry, master.” Barris watched the freeman digest this. He was clearly shocked. He lifted his radio and gave another report. “We have found a freeman who survived the crash, sir. He is the only one.”

The boss’s voice came over the line. “Is he injured?”

“He seems not to be, sir, though he is confused.”

“That’s to be expected. How old is he?”

“Too old to be safe,” Barris reported.

“Get him back here immediately.”

“As you say,” Barris answered and let the radio fall back to his chest. “Master, your pardon, but I am directed to bring you from here immediately, and I must obey.”

The freeman looked at him distantly. “Hmm? Oh, yes, I suppose.” He let himself be led out of the craft and blinked around himself at the jungle, not looking too closely at the ruined bodies the rescue party had lain out on gurneys for the haul back to the mine. Few freemen saw much of death, Barris knew, and it made them uneasy.

Barris coordinated the lifting and, when all were ready to leave, said, “Back to the mine and quickly, for the suns are low.”

“As you say,” several of the boys answered, but Barris was too caught up in his concerns for the freeman who walked by his side to notice they had honored him.

The trek out was necessarily slower than had been their entrance, as they were now encumbered with the dead. Were they slaves rather than freemen the bodies would have been left in the jungle to be eaten by scavengers, as had been done with the corpse of the pleasure girl; but freemen required more respect, even in death. As they plodded along,

all sweating in the heat and wet of the jungle save the cooling corpses they carried, Barris kept a nervous eye cocked on the horizon and the suns that were dropping to meet it, looking from time to time at the freeman, watching him for any of the signs he knew.

As they worked their way along one of the gurneys slipped and Barris halted the party, reproving the boy who'd dropped his end. "Do not be clumsy with the freeman dead," he said, and the boy nodded, shamed. Barris turned to begin leading them once more and saw the back of the freeman disappearing into the jungle, off their course.

He groaned and felt a sharp blade of terror pierce his chest. He turned to the first boy in the entourage and said, "Take everyone out of here. Bring the bodies to the mine and see you do it swiftly. I'm going after the freeman." The boy gulped and nodded, knowing the risk Barris was taking on. The beast lured men but it didn't object to boys either. Any living meat suited it. As Barris dove into the jungle after his wayward charge, dark in the gathering twilight, he sparked the radio once more. "Pardon, sir. The freeman has gone into the trees. I fear the beast is calling him. I'm going to bring him back."

There was a silence, then, "Do with all haste."

"As you say."

"And watch yourself as well, boy."

"As — as you say." Barris felt moved, even in the extremity of his worry, that the boss would care for his welfare at all.

He quickly caught up with the freeman, who was wandering in a semi-daze, stumbling unseeing through the profuse growth of the jungle floor in the rapidly falling gloom. Barris saw the prominence of his erection and knew the beast's lure was working fully. He caught at the freeman's arm — in situations of dire peril a slave, even an underling such as he, was permitted such liberties — and pulled him to a stop. The freeman looked down at him, smiling distantly. "Let me go, boy," he said easily, reasonably. "I have —" he looked into the dense clustered trees — "somewhere to go."

Barris felt a tingle at his own groin and knew they were close, dangerously close. Underlings were immune to the full thrall of the creature that lurked in the woods, but very mildly susceptible with immediate proximity. "Master, your pardon, but I cannot. You are lured by the beast."

"Beast? What beast could give such a good feeling as this?" He gestured to his throbbing organ and laughed. "No, it's no beast — it's a beauty."

Barris knew what was happening and knew how to temporarily break the crea-

ture's spell, so he did it, opening the freeman's clothing and bending his head to him where he rose so sharply. In moments the freeman was gasping, his pleasure surging out and flooding Barris's mouth with its hot metallic salt. Momentarily sated he looked down at the boy who knelt before him. "Master," Barris said, "your pardon, but we must leave here now. Your life is at terrible risk."

The freeman nodded slowly, already clearly getting fogged again by the beast's lure, but he allowed himself to be led away by the slave who had, by such personal means, just saved his life.

They emerged into the clear not too long after dark had fully descended. They were expected. Barris radioed frequently with their progress reports, knowing that the boss would need this information, that he too was being watched by bosses of his own and could not be allowed to be ignorant of what was happening.

The freeman had felt the beast's lure still and Barris had had to draw him along by placing his hand on the man's works, cradling his large stones lightly, his gentle caresses enough for the freeman to let himself be led like a small child. The promise of pleasure was what the beast used to lure men to their deaths; Barris had to oppose it with his own promise of pleasure, and the direct touch was enough. When a pube or man was caught in the beast's thrall visions of pleasure filled his mind and his loins with desire and he no longer thought clearly or properly, and he would walk smiling into his death. Only such direct leading could fully work against it.

They were finally free enough of the jungle and back within the pit's perimeter for the freeman's mind to clear — his own loins told him so — and Barris withdrew his hand from the man's slowly-relaxing organ. He stared at the boy, his gaze uncomprehending, as they continued trudging back to the buildings at the center of the mine. "What *was* that?" he said.

"Master, your pardon. It was the beast you felt," Barris told him solemnly. "It draws you with desire to itself, and you are lost if you aren't led away."

"You didn't feel it?"

"Master, underlings and females are immune. Underlings feel it but not as a man does."

"What does it do to the men it catches?"

“It consumes them, master.”

“Consumes? *Eats?*”

“Yes, master, as you say.”

“It lures with sex...” The freeman was staring off into the jungle thoughtfully, and Barris felt a moment of alarm. Was the beast drawing near and working on him again? But then the man turned back to him. “Why did you do that, back there?”

“Master?”

“You — you gave me release.”

“To break its thrall, master. Your pardon for I know it was a great liberty but your life was endangered and I must always protect my masters the freemen, at any peril to myself.”

The freeman’s expression was clouded and he shook his head. “But it was not right —”

Barris fell cold. He had laid hands on the freeman unasked. He knew this was punishable, and unbidden tears welled.

The freeman saw this. “And I see you are troubled by it too. I know there is great license taken on this world with pleasure, and have often felt it to be wrong that boys such as you can be made to bring men to release.” The man reached to him and wiped at his eyes. “Poor lad, to be so ill-worked.”

Now Barris felt confusion “Master?”

The freeman looked surprised. “The release you gave. It sorrows me to think you are made to do such things, for even a slave surely cannot love the act. I hear some of my coll — other freemen speak of the pleasures they find with boys or girls here, and in truth it makes me ill to consider it.” He drew a shaky sigh. “And yet here we are.”

His confusion had deepened. “Master, I was doing duty.”

“Duty? That is how you see it?”

Barris nodded mutely.

“But it did not cause you distress to — to release me as you did?”

“Master, I do not understand what you are asking. Forgive my ignorance, but your thoughts are much higher than mine and I cannot grasp your meanings.”

The freeman hunkered. “Boy, where I live, men do not do such things — take pleasure — with any so young as you. We think it wrong to do so.”

More tears filled Barris’s eyes. “Then I have offended you, master, and beg your

forgiveness for my slight. But you were caught and had to be freed.”

“It did not trouble you?”

“Master, pleasure is always a fine thing to share. To release you caused me no ... trouble.” *How could it have?* he wondered. It was a simple moment of enjoyment, even if it had been taken in a time of tremendous danger to them both. The release had saved the freeman and Barris had not been unwilling, yet the man seemed to believe he should have been. “I am pained that I have angered you with my deeds, master.”

The freeman stood again and stared at him long moments, then sighed deeply and looked about. “Truly I do not understand this world. I thought you were weeping because you felt ill-used, and I discover you weep because you fear *you* have done *me* wrong.”

Barris took a deep breath. “Master, what punishment do I deserve for the transgression?”

“Punishment? Boy — you *saved* me.” He gathered himself a moment, recalling how they had come to be in the jungle in the first place. “Twice.”

“Forgive me, master, for the unasked familiarity.”

The freeman saw Barris meant it and cupped his head in his hand a moment. “All is forgiven. Don’t worry about it. I feel I should ask *you* forgiveness.”

“Master, never. You are my master, a freeman, and need ask forgiveness for nothing.”

“Well. Let us then put this behind us. Come.” He resumed his pace from the trees.

Barris’s eyes cleared of tears and he felt some relief. The freeman could have demanded any punishment he desired for the unasked touch, even death, though the touch had saved him. He began walking again, keeping several paces behind as was proper. “As you say, master.”

“What is your name?”

“Master, I am called Barris.”

“Well — Barris. You’ve earned a reward. Is there anything you may desire?”

“Master, your pardon, but I have earned nothing; I simply did my duty to you as a freeman and my master.”

“Barris, you used courage and intelligence, and you did something that many might have been reluctant to do. I’m personally indebted to you. I’m from offworld and don’t know your customs here, but surely there must be a way for a — a slave to be re-

warded for doing well.”

Barris walked silently, his brow furrowed. “Master, none has ever asked me this before.”

“I’ll talk it over with the man in charge, then,” the freeman said easily. “Speaking of which —”

The pit boss, followed by several freemen wearing uniforms, was plodding out to meet them. He quickly took stock, finding the freeman to be well and unharmed, and then sent Barris off to the food queue with special dispensation. Though he had arrived too late to be fed normally with the rest of the slaves, he had done exceptionally well — particularly for an underling — and was given permission to take his meal with the kitchen crew. The boss told him to finish quickly and return, as he’d want a full account of the day’s events, and Barris agreed. He thought of suggesting he might stay and give his account now, but the slave’s reflex not to question rose — and his stomach was empty and rumbling. So he went to satisfy his first need.

The account was brief; the other boys had reported earlier and Barris did little more than corroborate. Yes, he had got the ship open, using leaves to keep his hands from getting burned on its scorching hull. Yes, he had thought of using the cable to open the stuck fore hatch, and had coordinated the effort. Yes, he had kept the search party focused and on track, as he had been commanded to do. The boss nodded at all of this and looked at him with thoughtful approval, seeming to consider something.

He recounted next his trek through the jungle with the wayward freeman, describing how he’d led him out, using his training. The freeman looked abashed at this and Barris again wondered why, since it was something all underlings and females who lived anywhere near the jungle were taught to do. It was the only way to save a man who’d fallen prey to the beast’s potent charms.

Then he recalled the storage locker where he’d found the freeman with his pleasure girl, and the odd conversation they had had returning to the safety of the mine, and thought he understood a little better. He had heard that some freemen — offworlders, as this one — felt differently about pleasure than his own folk. This must be one of those freemen, then, who enjoyed pleasure as much as anyone but were embarrassed by it. Barris wondered how anyone could feel that way; it was a natural and enjoyable function

of life, like a large meal after a hard day of work or a good bowel movement.

The pit boss was staring at him, sizing him up, and looked as though he had come to some sort of decision. Barris felt shy under the scrutiny. “I beg pardon,” he said, “for not having brought my master the freeman to full safety sooner. What punishment should —”

The boss cut him off with a wave. “No punishment. Most boys your age are far too addlepated to do what you did today. You were clever and resourceful, and showed courage and initiative.”

Barris ducked his head, flushed to his roots.

“You’re a good strong lad,” the boss went on, rising to a locker behind his desk, “a natural leader and damned bright besides.” He shut the locker’s door with a clunk and offered a handful of cloth to Barris. “You’ve earned this, both yesterday and today, and many times over before this. I have had my eye on you a while, boy.”

Barris stared in shock. It was a loincloth of apprenticeship, bearing the mark of the machinists, a stylized hammer and anvil embroidered at the hem.

“You’re to be prenticed tomorrow to the master machinist. Don’t thank me; the other boys will be jealous of you and make your life much harder than it needs to be, but I believe you’ll hold up well under it for all that.”

Barris nodded mutely. The boss was right. Few boys were ever apprenticed at a young age; he could not recall an underling earning the honor before.

“Well, go on, lad, put it on.”

Barris drew the cloth over his thighs, and though he did his best not to show it, all could see the pride in his eyes as he looked down at himself. He was clothed. And marked as a machinist’s apprentice. His chest swelled even as he tried not to display his joy.

The freeman he’d rescued drew the pit boss aside, gesturing in his direction and talking low. The boss studied the freeman for a moment and then nodded. “Our master this freeman has asked that a boon be granted you on his behalf. What do you desire?”

Barris’s mind drew a blank. He’d already been given far more than he had ever imagined possible. The apprenticeship meant he would be undertaking more dangerous work, but his status had just gone up tremendously, he would no longer be in the pit contingent, and would no longer have to barrack with —

Ah.

“Sir, your pardon, but I have a bunkmate. We — kindle.”

“He will be your bondsman, then.”

Barris hid his delight. Apprentices had a bondsman to help with menial chores and tasks while the apprentice himself went about his learning and skill-building. The bondsmen began as underlings and it was considered an honor to be selected for the position. He felt surprised, in fact, that he’d been apprenticed himself rather than made a bondsman today; that would have been more than enough reward.

But to have Allis still by his side — that was richness beyond any dream.

“Go now,” the boss directed, “and gather your bondsman. Barrack with the apprentices. A senior there will show you where you are to sleep from now on.”

Heart thumping with joy, Barris collected Allis and together they bade farewell to the pit slave barracks forever.

## MACHINIST'S APPRENTICE

“AND IF I HAVE THIS PILE AND THAT PILE and I put them together, how much does that make?”

Barris stared at the little clusters of pebbles, his thoughts working for the answer. He was being taught numbers and some days the effort made it feel like his brains would leak out his ears. That pile had four, and this pile had two. In his mind he imagined them forming one pile and brightened. “Six?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

Barris thought again. “I’m telling you.”

The pube shook his head sadly, and Barris’s heart sank. Then he smiled and said, “That’s exactly correct.”

Barris felt piqued at the joke, but hid it and smiled back. “You fooled me.”

“Thought you were wrong, eh?”

“I did.” He studied the face of his mentor, and then spoke again. “No, I did not.” His teacher, a boy who had been an underling himself not so long ago and who had an aptitude for instruction, smiled again. His name was Theossa and he didn’t bear malice toward Barris for his sudden and completely unprecedented promotion.

Unlike some of the other apprentices.

Several of them had, as the boss predicted, worked quite hard to make Barris’s life difficult, sometimes tormenting him, other times simply glaring at him, and occasionally playing jokes on him, some cruel, some merely irritating, most of them having to do with grease, since it was abundant, tacky and nearly impossible to clean.

One evening he’d gone to his two-bunk barrack with Allis to discover his thin mattress had been replaced with packing grease. Another day his apprenticeship loin-cloth had been stolen and turned up hours later being used as a grease-rag in the machine shop. Yet another day he’d been greased himself and covered head-to-toe in metal shavings; they stuck to the grease everywhere and pricked his skin with their sharp edges whenever he moved, especially in his most delicate folds.

And it was many cycles before he learned that their showering facility — entirely

new to him but necessary to get the toxic and skin-clogging machine lubricants off their bodies — had the capacity to spray hot water mixed in with the cold, making the showers much more pleasant. The others simply had not told him everything about the operation of the shower heads and he wondered at how they could appear to luxuriate under what he was sure had to be frigid blasts of icy water. By mistake he had fiddled the head in a different direction one evening and discovered the temperature settings. After that he joined the chorus of *ahhs* and *ohhs* that accompanied the showers, and that seemed to spell the end of his initiation. Many of the other apprentices still didn't treat him well, but they had at least stopped with the jokes and taunts after that.

Well, most of the taunts. He was still called “littlestones” by some of the pubes, a reference to his as-yet undeveloped anatomy. He didn't care; his little stones meant he was safe from the beast, and he knew they knew it.

He'd learned enough of numbers to know he had been apprenticed for twenty cycles now, and was beginning to feel a bit more settled, but the learning was hard.

Theossa elbowed his ribs and set him to another counting task, and his concentration returned to his lesson.

When he got back to the double-bunk barrack Allis rose to meet him and took his loincloth as he peeled it away in the quiet of the empty space. Barris had at first been surprised at their semi-privacy and had trouble getting to sleep the first few cycles, missing the sounds of many pleasuring and sleeping bodies all around him, but had grown used to the relative silence.

He stepped over to the basin they shared with the barrack's other inhabitants, Mellis, a boy about two seasons his senior and Jorris, his own bondsman, and waited as Allis ran water and soap over the cloth, hung it to dry on the footrail of Barris's bunk, then washed Barris as he stood, doing his duty to his demi-master. Showers were bi-cyclic and this was not a shower day, so the apprentices were cleaned by their bondsmen. Allis's soapy fingers lingered over his stones and works, the light gentle friction filling him and making him rise.

They were alone at the moment and Barris took the time to share with Allis, first washing his bondsman as Allis had washed him, bringing him also to fulness, then leading them both to the pleasures bunkmates enjoyed as Allis cooed his delight.

He lay next to him now, dozing slightly after their sharing, and Jorris came into the room. His demi-master was due back from the shop soon and he was to be ready for him when he arrived, to clean his cloth for him, massage his worked shoulders — Mellis did a lot of assembly work and that meant much heavy lifting — and please him as he desired. Barris nodded to the boy, who was actually his own age even though in a subordinate position to him, indicating with the gesture that he was not disturbing the couple that lay on Allis's bunk. Jorris nodded back with a little smile, then sat on his own bunk with a sigh and reclined, awaiting Mellis's advent.

In a while the apprentice arrived, grimed with sweat and grease, and let Jorris clean him as he stood by the basin, then took him to the bunk and had pleasure. Barris closed his eyes as the sounds of passion filled the room. Their barrack-mate took pleasure more often than Barris and Allis did, and he had grown a bit self-conscious with the act for the first time ever. He wasn't sure why but it seemed slightly strange when it was just the two couples, as opposed to an entire barracks-floor sharing with their bunk-mates. He thought of the freeman he'd saved and wondered if that was how he felt about pleasure as well.

When he knew Mellis had finished he propped up on an elbow and Allis turned over; he had not been asleep either. He smiled at Barris when his stomach rumbled audibly and they silently rose, the apprentice donning his loincloth and his bondsman remaining nude, as was proper for both in public, and went to the food queue, leaving the other couple on their bunk, Mellis dozing while Jorris reclined near him, quietly giving himself release as he lay beside his demi-master, his eyes on the older boy's bare muscular body.

Mealtimes were different for apprentice machinists and those that served them. Rather than having to line up within a brief set interval to get their rations, they were able to simply walk in casually over a fairly lengthy period, particularly in the evening, that Barris still didn't fully understand, time-reckoning yet to be taught to him in real depth. Theossa spotted them and gestured them over to his table. They took their trays and sat.

Theossa's bondsman, Adessa, was an underling perhaps two seasons younger than Barris or Allis — who were of about the same age — and reclined easily against the apprentice's larger frame, casually and happily feeding him little crusts of bread from the

roll that remained on his tray. Odd dark shapes circled on Adessa's chest, but Barris had not asked about them. Many slaves were branded or tattooed. The older boy bit playfully at his bondsman's fingers as Adessa giggled, then withdrew and pulled the crust into his mouth with a quick flick of his tongue, finally kissing the younger boy's palm as he gazed up, enraptured and smiling, his eyes half lidded. "Mellis back from the shop yet?"

Barris nodded. "He got in — um —"

"Still working on time-reckoning."

"Yes, I am. Pardon. I know the displays show time's passage but I haven't the grasp of it just yet." There were digital clocks in the walls, counting time in sixteen-hour cycles of forty-five minutes each, and Barris was still trying to get the sense of it, both in terms of handling the numbers and guessing how much time had elapsed from one point to another.

Adessa plucked another bit of crust and put it between his lips, then leaned up so Theossa could catch it from them. Their mouths lingered a moment in contact before they parted. Barris began to feel they were intruding but Theossa seemed casual still with their presence. He was easy with his bondsman, clasping and caressing him lightly, and that set Barris at ease as well.

"Here's a tip for you," he offered, swallowing the morsel. "Just look at the clocks from time to time and note the numbers. Don't try to think about the reckoning and don't try to grasp the flow of the time — just look at the markings. You'll pick it up sooner that way. Thanks, Adessa, I'm full now."

The bondsman nodded and took the trays away, lingering a moment as Theossa drew his cheek to his lips for a fast peck, flushing a little at the gesture and smiling. Barris watched him as he left, bemused. "Do all apprentices get bunkmates for their bondsmen?"

"No, you and Allis are unlike most. Generally you don't choose your bondsman. I didn't choose Adessa."

"But he's clearly — I mean, you and he —"

"Oh, yes, he and I are most certainly fond of each other." Theossa watched as Adessa weaved back among the tables to them, his eyes soft on him. "Sometimes it happens that way. Mellis and Jorris are how it more usually is."

Barris nodded. Mellis took pleasure from Jorris, but never returned it. As the bondsman's demi-master that was his right, but to Barris it had seemed unfair. Yet Jor-

ris did not complain, and Barris supposed it was because he felt being bondsman to an apprentice was good enough. He looked about them and saw that, at several tables, apprentices and their bondsmen had become close and affectionate as the hour wore on, lingering together, laughing, clapping, trading soft touches as Theossa and Adessa had done.

Theossa's words rang in him and he let his arm slip around Allis's waist as they began eating, his fingers gliding easily along his bondsman's bare hip. Allis sighed happily and leaned into his clasp, sometimes lifting little bits of food to Barris's lips as Adessa had done with Theossa. They were ... *fond* of each other as well.

"Are you feeling ready enough with numbers to proceed?" Theossa said after they had finished their supper. Adessa glowed in his arms where they crossed over his chest, stroking the thick muscles lightly with a gentle touch, his eyes distant with happiness, occasionally rocking his hips against where he nestled between Theossa's parted thighs. "Not tonight, of course, but tomorrow?"

Barris considered, then nodded. "I think I can start studying other things now besides."

"Then next cycle I'll begin you on letters. Don't look shocked. Machinists need their apprentices to be able to read as well as count, you know."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Well now you do. Letters are much harder than numbers — they can take on shades of meaning that numbers never hold — but if you've a knack for them you'll find they can be powerful doorways to much knowledge. That tickles, Adessa. All you've learned until now you've had to be shown, either as an info holo or by direct teaching. I didn't say stop it, my light, just that it tickled. There, better. Words — ahh — words let you learn silently, from teachers not visible to you — and some of them in their graves for many hundreds or thousands of seasons."

Barris stared at Theossa, looking for signs of jest. "How is that possible?"

Theossa smiled and winked. "I did not believe it either at first, but it's true nonetheless. Tomorrow you'll begin to see how."

Allis looked into Barris's face, happy for him. "My demi-master a man of letters," he smiled, and clasped him.

Theossa nodded seriously. "Indeed," he said. "And now with your pardon we'll take our leave." He rose and Barris could see by the pitch of both his body through his

cloth, and that of his bondsman, bare of any covering, that they were in anticipation of pleasure.

“As you say,” he answered, and thoughtfully watched the couple as they walked, their arms about each other’s hips, back to their barrack, Adessa laughing at something Theossa whispered to him, meant only for his ear.

## WORDS

IF THE NUMBERS HAD BEEN SLOW GOING, the letters crawled. Barris felt some days that they were actually going backward. In many ways learning was much harder than physical labor, and he almost welcomed the mindless simplicity of his daily chores, sweeping and mopping up after the senior apprentices in the machine shops, re-shelving tools and cleaning the work surfaces. He had begun greasing some of the simpler machines and felt bursts of pride when a senior apprentice would inspect his work and nod approval. Slowly he was gaining their respect.

The first day Theossa took a stylus and pad and made some marks on it, then showed it expectantly to him.

β̃ρω

He puzzled over it and Theossa finally said, “That’s your name.”

Barris glanced up, then back to the odd black marks on the pad’s display. “My name?”

“Yes. This first mark is *ba*, the beginning of your name, and this is *rr* —” he rolled the double consonant, as everyone did — “and this is the *is* at the end.

“There are two syllables — pieces — into which to break your name for pronunciation — *bar* and *ris*, *bar-ris* — but there are three phonemes in it, or parts of spoken speech. Those phonemes are rendered as these three marks, *ba rr is*.

“The flowing mark atop the *ba* is there to indicate that this is a name, your name. If the word written were not a name that mark would not be present.”

Barris shook his head. He was sure his brains were rattling around loose inside.

“And this,” Theossa continued after scrawling a moment, “is your bondsman’s name.”

ᾠλω

“I see the *is*,” Barris pointed. “And the mark at the beginning.”

“Very good. *Very* good.” Theossa was genuinely pleased. “This is another two-consonant word with three phonemes, pronounced *al-lis* but spelled with this mark for the *a* and this for the *ll*. The *is* you already recognize. *A ll is*.”

“There are over three dozen major phonemes in Delphic, as well as nearly twenty minor ones. You’ll need to learn all their marks to be able to read properly.”

“Delphic?”

“That is the name of our language. It comes from the name of our world, Delphos. We are Delphans. Here is how to spell Delphos...”

“The world is called Delphos?”

Theossa looked surprised. “Didn’t you know?”

Barris shook his head silently, digesting this. His world had a name. It wasn’t called simply *the world*.

“Yes, this is Delphos. We live on a world that’s about 300 million kilometers from its suns — well, quite a distance. And there are offworlds too, as you know, since you met a freeman from offworld, numbering perhaps twenty.”

“How far are they from the suns?”

“Oh, much farther. So far that their own suns appear as stars in our sky.”

Barris was certain now. “You’re jesting with me again,” he said.

Theossa shook his head seriously. “I’m speaking truth,” he said. “The distances are vast and crossed in massive craft, much larger than the largest machine you have ever seen; in fact they are great enough to contain a small city inside them.”

Barris’s head spun. Cities flying among the stars. What kept them from falling down?

“You knew none of this?”

“I did not.”

“Where did you think offworlders came from?”

Barris gestured vaguely. “Well, from another world, but I thought perhaps one of the moons.”

“No, the moons are too small to sustain life. They’re cold and barren, like a desert but without even scrub. Their ground is like the hardpan around the mine, but everywhere. They are so small you actually weigh less there, and on the smallest one, Tetros, things are so light you could even lift a rock-chewer all by yourself. And there is no air to

breathe.”

“No air? Then how can anyone travel between worlds?”

“The craft are closed and contain their own air supplies, sources of heat and light, water and food. When they’re moving they go so fast that all of space disappears from outside and they seem to fall forever in blackness. This is because the craft travel faster than light itself can move, thrust by mighty engines.”

“Light ... move?” said Barris weakly. He thought of the suns outside. They moved, but slowly it seemed to him.

“Yes, light moves. I don’t mean the way the suns travel in the sky; I mean that when you activate a lightplate you are triggering a luminous reaction inside the plate’s grid, and though it seems as though the lights come on instantly there is a distance the light must travel to reach your eyes. It moves thousands of kilometers in just one second — actually about 350 thousand kilometers in one second as we reckon time on Delphos.”

“As we reckon time?”

“Time is based on a planet’s orbital period around its sun or suns — what gives us our seasons — and its rotational period — whence our cycles. Well. Each world moves at its own speed, and so time is reckoned differently on them all.”

Barris groaned. He was having enough trouble grasping time here. How could he understand that there were twenty other ways of measuring it?

“We’re off the track,” Theossa said gently. “I know this is much to assimilate but it is true. For now we can focus just on the letters. When you can read, you can read these facts yourself, as I did, and discover that I am telling you the truth.”

“You learned all this from letters?”

“I did.”

Barris’s eyes glowed. “Then I want to learn letters also.”

“Read to me again,” Allis begged, and Barris smiled. He had been practicing for another dozen cycles with letters, and had learned enough that he could now work his way through several simple texts, old stories written for the children of freemen many uncounted seasons before Delphos had even been inhabited.

For, he had learned from Theossa, the Delphans had not always been here. They

had moved here from another world, an offworld, perhaps five hundred or more seasons previously (though no one knew with certainty). He knew he could reckon his own life as being about twelve or thirteen seasons, plus some months of cycles, in length thus far, and he found it hard to imagine such a vast gulf of time. Neither the pit boss nor the master machinist had more than thirty or perhaps forty seasons, and those were the oldest men he knew.

The offworld had been called Dog End, and he did not know the reason for that name, and he did not know if it was even inhabited any more or where its inhabitants had come from — whether they had been there forever, or had moved there themselves from some other offworld of their own. Dog End was not among the worlds that were known and charted now; it had faded into the seasons of the past, as forgotten as a slave's body when he died.

He had begun slowly, first marking his name upon his loincloth and then Allis's name on his bunk, crude awkward scrawls, labeling the few things in his life that were his or that of his bondsman and bunkmate. At Allis's behest he had marked his name on the other boy's skin and his eyes had shone as he was written with his demi-master's script. It was a signal of belonging. It fell unevenly across his chest and the marks faded slowly. Allis wore them proudly, and after a while Barris realized that he was touching them up from time to time, reinforcing their color, and that the shapes had begun to drift. At last he began to understand the streaks on Adessa's body.

He had begun to notice the marks on the doors and in corridors next, and was able to infer meaning for some; that set of markings meant *waste disposal*, this set meant *cafeteria* and the other set meant *master machinist*.

Theossa was pleased at Barris's progress. What he did not know was that Barris had an agenda. He wanted to be able to read enough to learn about the beast. He was still curious about it, recalling what the pube had said on the mine tip many weeks of cycles ago about sacrifices. And he remembered the curiosity of the offworld freeman about the beast. Was it possible no one had heard of it off of Delphos?

He let his arms gather now around Allis, kissed his ear lightly, and began reading a new narrative, this about a small animal that wanted to get some fruit but could not reach it, and stalked off muttering to itself that the fruit was probably rotten. His reading voice was halting and he had to pause many times to sound out some of the words, but Allis didn't care and gazed enraptured at his face, his eyes filled with wonder and adora-

tion, as Barris made the marks on the pad's screen into speech and a story.

Barris and Allis walked easily into the cafeteria for their breakfast. They knew that was its word; the food queue was for the underlings and medium status slaves in the pit. Their meals were taken in different quarters that had their own names. Theossa and Adessa gestured them close and they joined them. Adessa and Allis tickled and giggled at each other, full of morning's life and the memories of the pleasures they had shared with their demi-masters on waking, as Barris and Theossa spoke more seriously.

"You have learned letters well," Theossa said. "Much faster than I thought you might. Adessa says you read to Allis in the night?"

Barris felt a flush of transgression fill him. "Your pardon," he said. "I meant no fault."

"There is none," Theossa said easily. "I read to my bondsman as well. He likes it, as I gather Allis does."

Barris saw his eyes and nodded, feeling safe.

"Barris, you must know this. Words are great ways to learn, but they can be dangerous for slaves."

"How?"

Theossa sighed and looked to his bunkmate, still playing with Allis. He seemed distant as he spoke. "Slaves who read too much ... they begin asking questions, some of them. Dangerous questions."

With a stab Barris thought of his curiosity about the beast. "What questions?" he finally managed.

"About slaves. If it's — right for there to be slaves and freemen."

Barris furrowed his brow. "Right?"

"Yes, natural or proper."

"I know the mean of the word. Your pardon," he added hastily, recognizing his comment had been clipped with irritation. "But why question?"

Theossa looked more vague. "Just be aware it can happen, and if it does, you are to tread carefully."

Barris knew this. He knew what happened to slaves who tried to resist their rightful place, had seen viscasts of several ripped to pieces as punishment for the sin. "I have

no question there,” he said firmly, sure he was being tested.

“I am not a spy,” Theossa said, uncanny in the reading of his thoughts. “You know me better than that and I am hurt you would think it. But never mind,” he went on. “Just be aware it can happen and, if it does, quell it.”

Barris nodded solidly. “I will.”

“Good,” Theossa said finally. “We take lessons together at four on the clock, this cycle.”

Barris stared. “Together?”

The older boy nodded. “You have learned almost as much as I can teach and it is time for you to enter the training courses.”

Barris swallowed. This meant he would be in regular training classes with the other machinist apprentices, would have to work with numbers and words as they did, and he felt unsure of himself. Theossa saw it and clasped his shoulder assuringly. “Worry not, friend,” he said. “I would not have recommended you were I not sure you were ready.”

Barris glowed at the praise, but felt apprehension still.

He needn't have concerned himself. One day into the courses and he saw he was well ahead of many of the pubes around him; they were clever, to be sure, but he was more so, and grasped quickly the new numbers the instructor showed them, was the first to realize that a triangle, if it was shaped properly, had its height and width in a clear proportion to its longest face. Squared at the base, the triangle always had the same predictable measures, and all he needed to know was the measures of two of its faces to know that of the third — any two.

At midday meal he bubbled at Theossa about it. They had been separated into smaller groups for closer instruction, so Theossa did not know of his learning. The older boy looked at him with surprise on his face. “You understand the right triangle?”

“I do,” Barris nodded enthusiastically. “It's easy. I can see it in my head.”

“Do you see numbers?”

Barris shook his head slowly. “I do not, but I see the shapes,” he said finally, “and the numbers — they fall onto the shapes.”

Theossa studied him for a long time. “You have promise,” he said at last, a little

sadly. “Much more than any prentice I’ve tutored before. I should tell the master machinist.”

Barris fell cold suddenly. “Have I done wrong?”

“To the contrary,” Theossa said, snapped from his reverie and jovial again. “You have done better than expected. You deserve to be recognized for it.” He looked a little sad still.

“Then why the sorrow?”

Theossa sighed. “Because,” he said at last, “it means my tutelage of you will end and I’ll be stuck with some dull boy, not so bright as you. I have enjoyed our times together and if I had not had Adessa as my bunkmate I might have desired you.”

Barris looked at Adessa, then at Allis, his bondsman and mate, and thought he understood. He had been sparked deeply by Theossa’s mind, and his loins tickled him at the idea of bunking with the older boy. But he had Allis and drew him near, letting a kiss fall on his mate’s temple as he squirmed at the unexpected boon from his demi-master, given to him in public, a clear mark of his status for anyone to see. “I thank you and beg your pardon, but Allis is my bunkmate and he is all I wish for.” Allis’s eyes welled and he pressed his face to Barris’s chest.

Theossa nodded, then drew Adessa to him and kissed him in the same way. “I also,” he said with certainty. “I meant no transgression and ask your pardon. Adessa is my mate just as Allis is yours, and that is how our hearts sing. I will miss teaching you, though.”

They finished their meal in silence, their bondsmen sheltering with their affections but not quite enough to quell the sadness they both felt.