

BARBARIANS OF THE BEYOND

MATTHEW HUGHES

A novel set in Jack Vance's Demon Princes universe



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The Star King © 1964, 2005

The Killing Machine © 1964, 2005

The Palace of Love © 1967, 2005

The Face © 1979, 2002

The Book of Dreams © 1981, 2002

by Jack Vance

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Prologue

In the late fifteenth century (New Reckoning), some three hundred families left Earth, heart of the interplanetary civilization of the Oikumene, for a sparsely settled world, Providence, in the largely lawless Beyond. Led by a utopia-inclined minor aristocrat, they established a farming colony in a place they called Mount Pleasant. These were hard-working folk, most of them of an independent character, and their community prospered. A small town grew up at the center of the colony, providing the farmers with whatever goods and services they could not produce for themselves. The town and its surrounding farms eventually came to support a population of more than five thousand.

Providence was one of many worlds in the Beyond whose inhabitants paid forced tribute to five master criminals of the Beyond: Attel Malagate, Kokor Hekkus, Viole Falushe, Lens Larque, and Howard Alan Treesong — the so-called Demon Princes. Once the colony was well established, the Demon Princes' collectors came to Mount Pleasant to inform the newcomers of their obligations. But the colonists would not pay, neither in funds nor in kind — especially since “kind” to the criminals meant human slaves. The Demon Princes decided to make an example of Mount Pleasant, while at the same time deriving profit from the atrocity by staging a raid on the colony.

In 1499, their ships descended upon Mount Pleasant, disgorging a surge of heavily armed pirates. The colonists who resisted were massacred. Those who surrendered were herded into the pirates' holds and carried off to the slave markets of the Beyond. None ever returned to Mount Pleasant.

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The only survivors were a few colonists who had been out of town during the raid. Two of these were Rolf Gersen and his grandson, Kirth. They left Providence soon after for Earth and other worlds of the Oikumene, never to return. Mount Pleasant became a ghost town, standing empty for years, until a sect of religious enthusiasts whose neighbors had found them troublesome left their home world of Tantamount in the Oikumene and came to occupy the abandoned steadings and business premises.

No one knew what became of their stolen predecessors, until one day...

Chapter One

When the tramp freighter *Festerlein* touched down at the spaceport at Hambledon, on the world Providence, Morwen Sabine was no more than three paces from the forward cargo hatch, her ditty bag in hand. The moment the hatch cycled open to admit the health inspector and her team, Morwen squeezed past them with a soft-voiced, “Excuse,” and headed quickly for the embarkation shed. Here she showed her spacer’s card to an uninterested official in a wrinkled uniform who glanced at it only long enough to see that her face matched the image thereon, before waving her through the entry chicane.

The card said Morwen’s name was Porfiria Ardcashin, an identity she had acquired a year previously, along with a false resume of ships on which she had supposedly served, for an appreciable number of Standard Value Units on Cafferty’s Reach, a world deep in the Beyond — where cash in their pockets meant more to most people than regulations written in some functionary’s book. Since then, Morwen’s abilities as a fast learner had led her to accumulate some of the spacer’s skills, but most of her time on the *Festerlein* had been spent in the galley, with brief stints as a cargo roustabout when the freighter put into this or that port.

But now, after so many stops on so many worlds, she had finally landed on Providence, an agricultural backwater an appreciable distance beyond the Pale that separated the civilized worlds of the Oikumene from the lawless Beyond. She passed through the rudimentary terminal building, her typical spacer’s two-piece costume of dark blue and gray rendering her almost unnoticeable, then stepped

out onto the surface of the world that should have been her own. The yellow sun was two handsbreadths above distant hills, her ultimate destination, making this late afternoon, local time.

The terminal had smelled like all such facilities, a mixture of fuels, disinfectants, and dust, but now she took her first inhalation of Providence's air. Every world had its own characteristic odor. Immediately, she sensed a mix of scents: a sweet headiness underlaid by a faint sulfury tang and a whiff of the pines brought by the original settlers from Earth. Not an unpleasant combination, but even if it had been, by tomorrow the smell would have become unnoticeable, as her senses became inured to it.

She crossed an expanse of pavement on which several ground vehicles were parked, moving quickly toward a carryall that was backing out of a space. As she reached it, it stopped and turned its front wheels toward the road that connected the spaceport to the city of Hambleton. Morwen rapped on the driver's window. He pushed it down and stared a question at her, a sandy-haired man with watery blue eyes set in a face that had not seen many hardships.

"Any chance of a lift?" she said.

"Where are you going?"

"Right now, to find a place to stay."

"And after?"

"A town called Mount Pleasant," Morwen said.

The man considered her statement as if it might hold some minor mystery, then his face cleared as he accepted it as merely a plain stating of facts. He said, "It's not called that anymore. The name for several years has been New Dispensation."

"Oh," said Morwen.

"There's a hotel not far from there. It's as close as I come to New Diss on this run. I can drop you off there."

"That would suit me," Morwen said. She went around the front of the vehicle and got in the passenger side, her ditty bag between her feet. The driver did things with the controls and they drove away.

Morwen shifted in her seat to see the rearview screen, found no one exiting the port terminal after her. She saw the driver glance her way and his gaze drop to where the cuff of her right sleeve had ridden up,

exposing some of the tattoo on her inner forearm. She tugged the cloth down and stared ahead.

The man said something that sounded like nonsense.

“I’m sorry?” Morwen said.

“Tosh Hubbley,” he said, this time more clearly, releasing one of the steering controls and tapping his chest. She realized it was his name.

A silence followed, as he waited for her to name herself.

“Tosca Etcheverria,” she said, using another false name she had abandoned a year earlier, once she had escaped from confinement on Blatcher’s World, before she became Porfiria Ardcashin, the spacer. The latter could now also be abandoned, having served its purpose.

“First time on Providence?” said Hubbley, and Morwen recognized that the price of transportation was conversation with a man who found boredom in his own company.

“Yes,” she said, and hoped she could leave it at that.

“Not much to do here,” he said, then left a gap for her to fill in. She made a wordless sound of affirmation and looked out the side window.

Hubbley was not deterred. “Me, I’ve seen a lot of it: the Bowdrey Uplands, the Tapping Plains, Coldstream Valley, the Great Gorge, the Blue Fjords. I travel, you see. My work.”

He gestured with a thumb toward the vehicle’s cargo compartment. Morwen looked through the rear aperture and saw boxes stacked three and four deep, each bearing a logo of a tracked vehicle and the legend: *Traffard Heavy-Duty Motilators*.

“Spare parts,” Hubbley added. “They’re good machines, but the filters have to be replaced regular or the fuel lines clog up.”

Morwen made the same neutral sound again. Another silence ensued.

“So you’re a spacer,” Hubbley offered. When she didn’t respond, he said, “Don’t get many of them around here.”

He waited again, then said, “Just visiting?”

Morwen accepted the inevitable, turned toward him. “Distant relatives. Family business.”

He thought for a moment. His tone when he spoke again was cautious. “You’ve got people there? In New Diss?”

Morwen realized she had said more than she should have. “It’s complicated.”

“I imagine so,” said Hubble. “Most people with kin in New Dispensation were left behind when the Dispers relocated to Providence from Tantamount.”

For a while he said nothing and just operated the vehicle. They were passing through crop lands now. Morwen saw tall spindly plants with feathery tassels at their tips and fat, fleshy leaves that began halfway up the stems. The setting sun lit the top fronds but the closely packed leaves below were dark.

Hubble seemed to be one of the simple kind that cannot exercise the mind without the effort showing in his face. Eventually, he gave her a considering look then returned his gaze to the road ahead. “The Dispers, themselves, are not unfriendly. It’s the Protectors you have to watch out for.” He briefly glanced again at the cuff of her right sleeve. “You might be all right, though.”

He was silent for a while, then said, “I don’t know anything for sure. I go in there, deliver whatever people have ordered, and I’m on my way. I’m just saying, those Protectors, they’re none too friendly toward strangers. Don’t get many of them saying, ‘Hey, Tosh, why don’t you sit for a spell and enjoy a beverage?’”

Morwen said, “I don’t intend to cause a stir.”

He said, “Do you know what a weasel is?”

There was no law in the Beyond except local law, and in some places not even that. On the other side of the Pale, in the Oikumene, there was not only local and planet-wide law but an organization called the Interplanetary Police Coordinating Company. The IPCC collaborated with law enforcement bodies and provided them with research and forensic capabilities, databases that allowed criminals to be tracked from world to world, and assistance in carrying out arrests and transporting extradited felons. It also sent surreptitious agents into the Beyond to gather intelligence and even stage surgical raids to capture high-value suspects. In the Oikumene, IPCC operatives were colloquially referred to as “Ipsys.” Throughout the Beyond, they were known as “weasels.” Weaseling was a very dangerous occupation. Merely to be thought a weasel could be a death sentence.

“Everyone who lives in the Beyond knows what a weasel is,” Morwen said.

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“Then you know that strangers need to be careful. Especially in some places.”

“I will be.”

“Good, because New Dispensation is one of those places. Because of the business they’re in.”

Morwen knew that curiosity about the “business” of others was not encouraged in the Beyond. She let the conversation lapse. Sunset became dusk, became night. Hubblely turned on the forward illuminators, and the carryall rolled on. Few other vehicles passed them, none overtook them, though they were moving at a sedate velocity.

“Got to be careful driving at night,” he said after a while. “Hoppers.”

“Hoppers?” Morwen said.

“Local wildlife. What I’ve heard is they were brought here from Earth by the Originals, figured they’d eat the native plants, help clear the plains, make way for the plows.”

“And?”

“Nobody knows. Maybe somebody from the Institute could study them and say for sure —” he chuckled at the absurdity “— as if you could get some Institute grandee out here. Anypart, twenty or thirty years back, something changed the beasts — something they ate, probably.”

“What happened to them?”

“In a couple of generations, they stopped eating plants and started eating what ate the plants: little things that lived in burrows, and long-legged things that ran and jumped. Except the hoppers dug up all the burrows and ran down all the jumpers.

“Now they eat whatever they can catch, including each other. And including us, if we’re not careful — though they tend to avoid towns, where they’re shot on sight.”

Morwen stared out at the tall plants. “I’d never heard about them.”

“Why would you?” Hubblely said, then continued, “Sometimes they throw one of the old dams out onto the road, see if they can make you crash or turn over. Then they swarm in. Big ones can pull a door open.”

Morwen said, “Perhaps you should give full attention to the road.”

“I do talk too much,” Hubblely said. After that, he was silent, focused on the driving.

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He pointed ahead and off to the north. “Those lights behind the hills? That’s New Dispensation — Mount Pleasant that was. I turn south a few minutes from here.”

“Thank you for the lift,” Morwen said.

“At the crossroads, that’s where the hotel is — Brumble’s. You’ll be all right there if you lock your door.”

Morwen ignored the implication. “Is there transport from the hotel to Mount... New Dispensation?”

“An omnibus comes down from Deeble whenever there are enough passengers to warrant the trip. It stops at the inn.”

“Thank you again.”

He was chewing over something. After a while, he said, “Watch yourself in New Diss. The local scroots are all right, but the Protectors can overrule them.”

“Scroots?”

“Scrutineers. New Diss’s version of a town constabulary.”

Morwen nodded. “I mean to be discreet.”

“You might need to be more than that. Don’t ask too many questions.”

He was letting the vehicle slow now. Morwen shifted in her seat, lifted her ditty bag onto her lap. “You begin to worry me.”

“Good,” Hubbley said. “Stay worried until you leave.” He pursed his lips then added, “If they let you leave.”

They arrived at the crossroads known as Brumble’s Corners. Hubbley steered the car a little northward then pulled into a paved open space that surrounded a three-story building built of blond stone and black wood, the beams rough-hewn as were the blocks of masonry. Light shone from multipaned windows shielded by iron bars on the ground floor — “Hoppers,” Hubbley explained. Smaller windows showed on the upper floors, few of them lit.

Several vehicles were parked in rows, most of them able to carry cargo as well as passengers, all of them showing the marks of long use.

Morwen stepped out of Tosh Hubbley’s carryall, gave him another thanking and added a farewell, then climbed the flagstone steps to the inn’s double doors. Inside, she found no reception desk. Instead, she entered a lamp-lit common room, with a bar to her left behind which

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stood a bald, round-shouldered man who interrupted his wiping of the counter to regard her with a blank expression from wet eyes.

The rest of the large room was provided with round wooden tables and chairs, most of the latter filled with men dressed in shirts, smocks, and trousers of dull-colored, sturdy cloth, an ensemble that suggested their labors never took them far from the soil. She saw cards, counters, drinking mugs, plates with the remains of suppers.

A young woman in a dirndl dress and a mobcap was clearing away the meals' detritus, loading dishes and cutlery into a square tub of dull metal on wheels. She paused and gave Morwen a quizzical glance, then frowned and looked away.

All eyes in the room, except the girl's, were turned Morwen's way, the farmers continuing to regard her with bucolic interest as she made her way to the barman.

"Are you Brumble?"

His grunt sounded like an affirmation. "Have you a room for the night?" she said.

The wet eyes turned toward the staring faces, then came back to hers. "For just yourself?" he said.

Morwen ignored the suggestion. "I presume your doors lock? And from the inside?"

The barman shrugged.

Morwen lifted her ditty bag onto the counter, loosened the cord that compressed its top, and took out a wallet. It hit the circle-stained wood with the sound of substantial coins. Then she reached in again and brought out a projac in a clip-on holster attached to a wide spacer's belt. This she buckled around her waist so that the weapon hung within easy reach.

"How much for the room and supper?" she said.

"Three svu." The currency, standard in the Oikumene as well as throughout the Beyond, was the standard value unit, each one equal to one hour's pay for an unskilled laborer. "Four, if you want glawken."

"What is glawken?"

A rattle of dishwares told Morwen that the serving woman had come near. "A hard liquor made from torquil fruit," she said. "It takes some getting used to."

Morwen saw the innkeeper frown. Some plan had just evaporated from his mind. She reached into her wallet and extracted three coins, slid them across the bar to the man's hair-bedizened hand. Then she found a fourth coin and gave it to the young woman, saying "Thank you."

The server smiled a knowing smile and tucked the money away, then rattled off along the bar toward a door.

"I'll eat in my room," Morwen said, extending a hand for the key. With her head she indicated the door through which the young woman was pushing her wheeled tub. "What's her name?"

"Madalasse," said the barman, then added, "Maddie, we calls her."

"Have Maddie bring up the food," Morwen said. She placed a hand on the butt of her projec. "Wouldn't want any misunderstandings."

Another frown from the barman, but he passed over a heavy brass key and pointed with his chin toward a door at the other end of the bar. "Stairs, two flights. Room's at the end of the corridor."

Morwen put away her wallet, closed the ditty bag, and hoisted it onto one shoulder. She turned and surveyed the room again, saw gazes drop or find other directions. Now she noticed something she had missed: at a far table, ill-lit under the mounted head of a long-necked creature with almond-shaped eyes, long ears, and protruding fangs, sat two men dressed differently from the farmers.

They wore tight-fitting shirts of some shiny material, black with blue piping, pockets, and epaulets, the collars and cuffs snug around necks and wrists. Their legs and lower torsos were clad in breeches of gray twill, buckled at the knee, below which they wore black stockings with a subdued pattern, ending in square-toed halfboots of patent leather.

The men had been watching Morwen's colloquy with the barman and looked away when she turned around. But their attitude was not like that of the rest of the assembly, who dropped their gazes diffidently. These two, narrow-headed men of a mature age, with dark hair slicked back over their ears, looked her way again and continued to study her for several heartbeats. Then they looked at each other.

Morwen climbed the stairs, found the room, and entered. She tested the lock to make sure it was sound, then inspected the place. A narrow bed covered in a well-worn quilt, a single chair but no desk, and an armoire that had once been ornate but had lost some of its wooden

arabesques and inlays over a long and apparently eventful life. A faded rug covered the plank floor beside the bed, rough curtains hung over a window that gave a view of the road, the croplands, and the distant lights of what had been Mount Pleasant.

Morwen put her wallet under the flat pillow, placed her bag beside the head of the bed so she could lay the projac on its top, close to hand while she slept. Next, she sat on the bed and pulled off her boots, stretched, then interlaced her fingers on her thighs and waited.

She was practiced at waiting, and did not move until she heard a rap on the door and a female voice saying, "Sera? It's supper."

Morwen rose and opened the door, said, "Come in."

Maddie entered, carrying a tray to which were attached folding legs that created a table. She placed it in front of the single chair, then gestured to the steaming bowl of stew and the cob of bread, and said, "I put it out myself."

Morwen sat and took up a spoon. "I thank you."

The young woman shrugged, gestured toward the door and what was beyond it. "They're not really that bad," she said. "When they drink, they get ideas, but you can slap them down. In the morning, their toes turn inward and they mooch around."

The stew was hot and salty. Morwen had eaten worse. She dipped the bread in the hot liquid and bit off a soaked piece. "What about those two in the corner?"

Maddie's expression changed. "Those two," she said, with a nod and a brief look inward. "Protectors. From the new regime at New Dispensation." She corrected herself. "Well, not so new, now. The Dispers have been there seventeen, eighteen years. The Protectors, they took over the reins about ten years back."

Then she cleared her mind with a shrug and said, "They don't spend much time here. They just come when there's maunch money to collect."

"Maunch?"

"They grow it. Fact is, Dispers don't grow much else these days."

"What is it?" Morwen asked.

Now Maddie looked at Morwen as if noticing her for the first time, a long look, up and down. "You don't know what maunch is?" She

studied Morwen's face, while Morwen returned her a gaze of innocence. "You're not a weasel, are you? They don't do well in New Dispensation. The Protectors." Her expression invited Morwen to reach an inevitable conclusion.

"I'm not a weasel," said Morwen. "Just a spacer, passing through."

"Protectors will kill you, if you are," Maddie said. "Even if you aren't, they might kill you in their efforts to find out."

There was only one interworld organization in the Beyond: the Deweaselng Corps, numbering hundreds of highly intelligent and completely vicious operatives, was expert in the skills of interrogation and torture. Its personnel could be summoned to any world where the IPCC was suspected of having infiltrated its agents, or they might arrive on their own initiative. The Corps also regularly trained local authorities in its techniques, providing refresher courses. In places where those local authorities oversaw criminal activities, the application of deweaselng practices created unfortunate results for persons who wandered into those territories.

Better safe than sorry was the Deweaselng Corps's motto. The safety did not extend to suspected weasels.

Morwen repeated, "I'm just a spacer, but I come from deep in the Beyond, and have only been a year off. . . my home world." Now it was her turn to study her interlocutor, to see if her brief hesitation had triggered any reaction. It appeared it hadn't.

Morwen continued, "Providence is the closest I've been to the Pale and the Oikumene. There's a lot I don't know."

Maddie's mouth turned sideways a little as she took this in, then her shoulders moved in a gesture of acceptance.

"Maunch is what brought the Dispers to Providence," she said, "that and the fact that there was an entire town standing empty. Nobody had ever gone there, once they'd buried the bodies. It would have been like walking on a grave."

"I know about the raid," Morwen said, keeping her voice neutral. "Everybody knows about the Demon Princes and Mount Pleasant."

Everybody, Maddie said, included the adherents of the Doctrine of the New Dispensation. These were a tight-knit society that had arisen on one of the worlds of the Rigel Concourse — either Tantamount

or Xion, she wasn't sure — but their ethos had clashed with those of neighboring communities.

The cause of the disagreements was maunch. Formerly, it was a herb that grew wild in the tropics of the Dispers' world of origin, and was picked by locals who chewed it for its mild psychedelic qualities. Then a visitor from another region encountered the drug's effect and carried back some samples, roots and all, to his home.

His name was Porleth Armbruch and his home happened to include a well furnished laboratory, the fellow being an instructor in natural chemistry at a collegium. He grew new plants from his specimens and began to experiment with altering maunch's gene plasm. The result: with the addition of a few extra molecules, he created a much more potent version of the mind-expander.

When Armbruch tried the new substance, Maddie related, he was cast out of the universe into a new realm. A disembodied voice addressed him by name, telling him that he had been chosen to deliver unto humanity a new dispensation that would free them from all misery.

"I know this," Maddie said, "because the Dispers used to come to our meeting house every Contemplation Day and harangue the parishioners. Finally, they were met by a crowd armed with tools and told to take their New Dispensation home and keep it there.

"There was ill feeling for a while, but the Dispers came to understand that it would serve them not at all to be driven from another world so soon after they arrived. So we agreed to live and let live, and now we get along. Some of us even go to their Fifthday dances. When it was Mount Pleasant, the original farmers used to ship their produce by barge along the Parmell River. Now our farmers truck the Dispers' maunch to New Hambleton along with our leeks and sweetpods, our chupi melons and sassafranch. We sell it to offworlders for a good price and keep twenty percent."

The "offworlders," it appeared, were criminals who sold maunch on several worlds of the Oikumene where there was both a lucrative market and a prohibition on its importation. They had warned the Dispers that agents of the Interplanetary Police Coordinating Company — known as weasels throughout the Beyond — would try to disrupt the illicit trade.

Morwen, having grown up on Blatcher's World, a haven for pirates

and slavers, knew what everyone in the Beyond knew: the Deweaseling Corps was generally skilled at identifying and neutralizing the agents the IPCC sent from the Oikumene. And what the Deweaseling Corps lacked in skill it made up for in viciousness. Identification was always followed by harsh interrogation to acquire new intelligence as to the IPCC's operations. The interrogations were often followed by summary execution. Morwen had seen two such killings in the town square of Boregore, near to the estate where she had grown up.

Maddie was well informed. As the maunch-peddling enterprise grew in the scope of its interworld outreach, she said, the Corps sent experienced deweaselers to instruct some of the Dispers in the techniques of deweaseling. These trainees were mostly Protectors, identifiable by their black and blue uniforms and uncompromising attitudes, but the town constabulary of New Diss, the scrutineers (or scroots), had also been trained.

"The Protectors see any newcomers as suspect," Maddie said. "They're liable to take immediate action, if you know what I mean. You should stay away from New Diss." She looked at the door. "You might not be safe there — or here, now that those two downstairs saw you."

"I'm not a weasel," Morwen reminded her.

"That probably wouldn't matter," Maddie said. "Better safe than sorry, they say." She cocked her head and said, "Brumble's calling me." She crossed to the door, opened it, and said, "Leave the tray outside the room." She began to leave, stopped, turned, and added, "If anyone knocks, better not answer the door."

Morwen lifted the projac from beside her bed. The motion again caused her sleeve to ride up and she saw Maddie's eyes drawn to her tattoo. But the young woman suppressed any reaction and left. Morwen rose and locked the door.

In the morning, Morwen went to the ablutory at the end of the hall, relieved herself and cleaned up, her projac never far out of reach. When she returned to her room she found Maddie waiting outside, a bundle under her arm.

"If you go to New Dispensation wearing spacer gear," she said, "you'll stand out like a pimple on a flibbet's nose."

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“Flibbet?”

“What I used to be before I left school and became this.” Maddie gestured with her free hand to the faded dirndl dress.

“I’m not sure that would be any better than what I have on,” Morwen said.

That brought a “Huh!” and a chuckle. Maddie pinched some of the dress’s fabric. “This is only to work in. I was a farm girl and looked it.”

Morwen unlocked the door and they went in. Maddie’s bundle turned out to include a knee-length skirt of heavy homespun, a pale-yellow cotton blouse printed with red and blue blossoms, and a sleeveless vest, green with yellow edging, that closed with loops of twisted cord. Knee-length stockings that matched the vest and a hat of stiff linen, complexly folded, completed the ensemble.

“Your boots are close enough to local wear. Just don’t draw attention to them.”

“No kicks or saltations,” Morwen said, with a wry smile. “Understood.”

“Take it seriously,” Maddie said.

Morwen reached out, touched the young woman’s arm. “I do. And I thank you for considering my well-being.” She found her wallet and extracted a five-SVU certificate.

Maddie waved it away. “They’re only a loan. You can give them back before you leave.”

“What if the deweaslers take me up? You might not want them then.”

Maddie sighed and took the certificate, tucked it into her bodice. “Don’t let that happen,” she said. “I really like to wear that vest when I go out dancing.”

Breakfast was porridge and bacon, washed down with sour ale or a green tea that tasted tart and peppery. Morwen was enjoying her second cup when the omnibus rolled in from the north and pulled up outside the inn. She hoisted her ditty bag and looked about for Maddie, meaning to say goodbye, but a clatter of dishware from behind the kitchen door said the server was occupied.

Wearing her borrowed clothes, Morwen stepped out into the gray

morning, the sun barely risen above the chain of hills that included the broad elevation that had given Mount Pleasant its original name. The omnibus was a long vehicle, yellow with red stripes, mounted on eight inflatable wheels as tall as Morwen. She climbed a set of steps that led to where the driver sat, paid him the fare he asked for, and took a seat at the rear of the compartment.

The projac tucked into the waistband of Maddie's skirt galled her back, so she took it out, put it on her lap, and rested the ditty bag on it. None of the other passengers, all with the look of country folk except for one man who sat halfway up the aisle, paid her any out-of-the-ordinary attention. She studied the back of his corded neck for a while and ultimately decided he had no interest in her. She returned the weapon to the bag.

They waited a little while, but no one else boarded at the inn. The driver sounded his klaxon twice, waited another brief interval, then put the vehicle into gear and steered it out onto the road.

The omnibus rolled quietly, except for the swish of its great tires on the pavement. Morwen gazed out the window at the fields under the brightening day. She felt a growing sense of dissociation: she was entering a landscape she knew, though she had never been here. Images that had been inculcated in her mind during her childhood were now encountering the reality on which they had been based.

Here was the crossroads marked by a spreading horcanthria tree, with a bole-ringing wooden bench for foot-travelers to rest on in the heat of the day, and next to it the simple hand pump that would draw refreshing cold water from underground. It was much as she had imagined it. Not mentioned in her education was a stout cudgel hung on a cord suspended from a nail driven into the trunk, its business end stained red. *Hoppers*, Morwen assumed.

Not far beyond the horcanthria, the road began to rise toward the hills, dominated by the great broad hump of Mount Pleasant. Morwen's father had drawn it for her, along with many other sites he recreated from memory. It, too, was recognizable, for all the difference between the sketch and the reality.

Now the road leveled off for a stretch, crossing a saddle between two

hills. Off to the right, down a dirt lane, was Rolf Gersen's farm, with its great barn, looking much as it had been described to her. There was a difference, though: a broad stretch of land running down to the river had been pasture for the Gersens' dairy herd; now it held row upon row of greenhouses, their panes glinting in the sun.

More fields now, separated from the road and from each other by head-high stone walls. Srivana's Wood on the left, maples, sweet chestnuts, and smoothreds, looking neglected, untended for many years. Then the road descended into the Hollow, with a high and wide wooden bridge crossing the placid Parmell River, derelict barges hauled up on shore or left to sink where they'd been moored the day the space pirates came.

And now the road rose to enter the town itself, in a natural amphitheater ringed by seven hills, including the broad almost-mountain for which the place had been named. Morwen looked at the familiar sights she was seeing for the first time, and remembered her father saying that it had never occurred to the inhabitants of Mount Pleasant that their geography created a ready-made corral, ideal for men with projacs, neuronics whips, and tumblethrusts to land their ships on the edges of town and herd everyone into the center — then call down the carriers and take them away to be sold in the slave markets of Barrantroy, New Fogo, and Interchange.

The main street of Mount Pleasant, Broadway, was as it had been described to Morwen, except that many of the shops stood empty. But the town's only restaurant was open for business, though the sign above the windows said it was now known as The Eatery. And the community hall had been recently repainted. A sign outside the wire-fenced playground in the hall's forecourt said, *Social Dance, Fifthday, 7 pm* and *Meet-Up Firstday 10 am, Sacrament 9 am*.

The omnibus slowed, then with a hiss of brakes it stopped at an intersection outside what Morwen recognized as the town hall, built of red brick with a steel roof painted green. A flight of steps led up to the double doors of black ganfo, the wood scarred by the signatures of energy weapons. The hall had also housed the Mount Pleasant jail and constabulary, all of whose members had died in a vain attempt to defend their fellow townsfolk.

Across from the hall was the hotel. Morwen was surprised to see that

its sign still read *The Llanko Inn*, as it had been named when her parents stayed there immediately after their arrival. The omnibus's front door stood open and Morwen was the only passenger to descend from the vehicle. She entered the hotel straight away. The reception area was small, shabby but clean, and she was sure that every appurtenance she was seeing had been here since the raid. A gray-haired woman stood behind the desk, a stylus raised over the registry book as if she had been in the midst of some writing when the unexpected suddenly hove into view. A sign in front of the registry read, *Dedana Llanko*.

The suddenly unexpected must be Morwen, because the woman's raised brows now descended into a compressed chevron as the new arrival crossed the worn carpet, stood her ditty bag against the veneer panel that fronted the reception desk, and said, "I'd like a room with its own facilities, please."

At first she thought the woman was going to turn her away, then she saw a change of strategy. "How long for?" was the response.

"My plans are not yet formed," Morwen said. "At least a few days, maybe more."

She was being sharply scrutinized now. "Depending on what?"

"Does that matter?"

"The scroots will ask me," said the woman. "Probably the Protectors, too. What will I tell them?"

"You can tell them," Morwen said, with a pause for emphasis, "to ask me."

That brought a grunt. The woman reached down below the counter between them and brought up a card of stiff paper. "Name?" she said.

Morwen became Porfiria Ardcashin once more, giving her address as a house she had once stayed at for a week in Biddles Town on Vladimir, while the *Festerlein* was having its holds fumigated and its galley rid of an infestation of arthropods that came aboard with a cargo of teetee pods. She watched as the information was carefully recorded.

"I'll pay a week in advance," she said.

"You certainly will," said the old woman, setting down the stylus and slipping the card into one of several slots that made up a wood frame attached to the wall beside her. From the same slot, she fetched a key and stood holding it in expectation. "Twenty-one SVU."

Barbarians of the Beyond

Morwen brought out her wallet and counted out certificates and one coin. The key was handed over and she was directed to climb the stairs and take the first door on the right. The woman went back to the papers in front of her, as if the guest had ceased to exist.

Morwen climbed the stairs, its carpet held in place by brass rods and smelling of disinfectant and old wool. The door to her room was loose in its frame, as if it had dried out over the years. The lock was sturdy enough, but probably easy to pick.

She opened a free-standing wardrobe that took up most of one wall and was rewarded with a waft of the sharp scent of furniture polish. The narrow bed was hard but there was an overstuffed armchair to rest in. She hung up her spacer's garb and put away her small clothes in the drawers at the bottom of the armoire. She decided to keep the projac handy.

The window looked out on a street that crossed Broadway and ran past the old town hall: Mallaby Lane, she remembered as its name. Mallaby ran on, straight toward the low hills to the south, passing between two of them, until it met the ring road that circumscribed Mount Pleasant. Beyond that lay fields and woodlots, but again Morwen saw greenhouses where she had been told to expect open land.

She laid her head against the side of the window so she could peer north along Mallaby. The glass distorted her view, but she could just make out where the straight street left town and became a series of switchbacks climbing the eminence for which the town had once been named. Halfway up was a blob of white.

"And there it is," she said to herself.

The door rattled as someone on the other side struck it three hard blows — a fist, not knuckles.

Morwen tucked the projac under the pillow on the bed. "And here we go," she said. She opened the door but stood, leaning against the jamb, in a silent denial of entry.

She was expecting Protectors, clad in black and blue. Instead, she saw two men in dark shirts and gray breeches. Around their waists were buckled wide black belts from which hung the paraphernalia common to police agents in both the Oikumene and the Beyond.

One of them, a little older than the other and with an intelligent

face assembled from hard planes, held the card the old woman had filled in at the reception desk. He glanced at it now and said, “Porfiria Ardcashin?” as if it were a comic collation of syllables.

“That’s right,” Morwen said.

“From...” He read from the card, “Biddles Town on Vladimir?”

“Uh-huh. Who are you?”

“Leading Scrutineer Eldo Kronik.” He looked at her the way police look at those they suspect of malfeasance — which, in the Beyond, could be anyone and was often a safe bet. Morwen saw him decide to leap past the preliminaries.

“What are you doing in New Dispensation?”

Morwen let her face show mild puzzlement. “What does one do in a town like this?” she said. “I intend to see the sights, absorb the ambience, profit from new experiences.”

The scrutineer stepped closer, until his face was less than a hand’s width from Morwen’s. “If that was meant to be amusing, it failed. I will now ask you one more time: what are you doing here?”

He stepped back and put a hand on a holstered weapon.

Morwen had an explanation ready. She had signed on as an ordinary spacer on a tramp freighter. She named it. Because she could cook — “My parents once ran a restaurant,” — she had been assigned to be assistant to the ship’s cook.

“All was well for the first few voyages. But the captain, who was also the owner, eventually revealed himself as a ‘man with a horn,’ if you know what I mean. I got tired of being chased around the galley. I resolved that come the next world we put into, I would jump ship, find a place to lie low until the *Festerlein* departed, then return to the spaceport and find a new berth.”

“You’re a cook?”

“So I said, though on the ship I was cook’s flunky.”

The scrutineer looked at the card again, then back to Morwen. “Come with us.”

“Am I being arrested? I have done nothing wrong.”

“Not arrested,” said the man, with a smile. “Tested. We’re going to the restaurant across the street.”

• • •

Breakfast was finished and it was still too early for lunch. A wiry, dark-haired man in a calf-length apron and cloth hat, both once white but now stained beyond redemption, was sweeping the floor while a red-haired woman in a cotton-print dress and apron was wiping down a table. They looked up in slight surprise as the two scrutineers escorted Morwen through the door.

“Kronik?” said the man. “We’re not serving yet.”

“We’re not here to eat,” said the older man. He pushed Morwen down past the counter with its row of stools and through the swinging door to the kitchen, beckoning to the man in the apron to follow.

The kitchen was adequately equipped, the cleanser humming as it washed the breakfast dishes. The counters were clean, with nothing on them except the remains of some animal’s leg, that Morwen assumed was last night’s roast.

Scrutineer Kronik said to the man in the apron, “Gisby, I want you to choose some stuff at random, greens, roots, whatever.”

Gisby’s face registered puzzlement. “Why?”

“Never mind why. Just do it.”

The cook went to a walk-in larder, stepped in, and emerged with handfuls of green stuff.

“Lay them on the counter.”

Morwen saw some sad-looking leeks, some greens that resembled parsley, a few small potatoes. Gisby stepped back, his expression showing that he was waiting for an explanation.

Kronik said to Morwen, “All right, you’re a cook, cook that.”

“What?” she said.

“Make something out of that. A good cook can make something out of anything.”

Morwen studied the ingredients, lifted the sort-of-parsley and sniffed. It smelled a little like thyme. She turned to Gisby. “Is that meat like lamb?”

“A little gamier,” was the answer. “It’s called shumkin.”

Morwen remembered the name. It was a species of herbivore native to Providence that the early settlers had domesticated.

She thought for a minute, then said, “I could make a stew. Got any garlic?”

Gisby gestured to a wall-mounted rack that held small bottles. “Powdered,” he said. “Doesn’t grow well, but we import it from off-world.”

“No problem,” Morwen said. “Give me a knife.”

Kronik stepped back, his hand going to his holstered weapon, unhooking the flap.

Morwen paid him no heed. She took the leeks and chopped them into fine pieces, the blade going up and down at high speed and with precision. Then she did the same to the herb. She sliced meat from the bone and cut it into cubes, then cut the potatoes into bite-sized chunks.

She reached for a steel bowl, combined all the ingredients, and flavored the mix with garlic and ground pepper from the spices rack. She sniffed the result and grunted softly.

Then she turned to Gisby and said, “I’m thinking this will make a decent stew, but it would make a better pie. Have you got some pastry?”

Gisby took the bowl from her, sniffed for himself, and said, “In the cooler.”

He opened an enameled door and brought out some rolls of ready-made pastry, sprinkled some flour from a container on a wooden cutting board, and handed the pastry to Morwen. “Rolling pin’s in that drawer.”

“Put the oven on,” she said.

Not long after, Morwen put a filled pie, its top fluted along the edges, into the oven. To Gisby, she said, “You know your oven. What do you think?”

“Forty minutes?”

She turned to Kronik, saw a scowl. “So, am I a cook?” she said.

Gisby answered before the scrutineer could, “She’s a cook.”

Kronik grunted a reluctant acceptance. “We’re not finished. No reason a weasel can’t cook.”

Gisby said, “Well, when you’re finished, you can send her back here.” To Morwen, he said, “You’ve got a job here any time you want it.”

“Maybe so,” she said. She looked to the scrutineer. “Let’s go finish,” she said.