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The Dispossessed

Ursula Le Guin

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Extract

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Anarres • Urras

There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared; an adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall.

Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.

Looked at from one side, the wall enclosed a barren sixty-acre field called the Port of Anarres. On the field there were a couple of large gantry cranes, a rocket pad, three warehouses, a truck garage, and a dormitory. The dormitory looked durable, grimy, and mournful; it had no gardens, no children; plainly nobody lived there or was even meant to stay there long. It was in fact a quarantine. The wall shut in not only the landing field but the ships that came down out of space, and the men that came on the ships, and the worlds they came from, and the rest of the universe. It enclosed the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free.

Looked at from the other side, the wall enclosed Anarres: the whole planet was inside it, a great prison camp, cut off from other worlds and other men, in quarantine.

A number of people were coming along the road towards the landing field, or standing around where the road cut through the wall.

People often came out from the nearby city of Abbenay in hopes of seeing a space ship, or simply to see the wall. After all, it was the only boundary wall on their world. Nowhere else could they see a sign that said No Trespassing. Adolescents, particularly, were drawn to it. They came up to the wall; they sat on it. There might be a gang to watch, offloading crates from track-trucks at the warehouses. There might even be a freighter on the pad. Freighters came down only eight times a year, unannounced except to syndics actually working at the Port, so when the spectators were lucky enough to see one they were excited, at first. But there they sat, and there it sat, a squat black tower in a mess of moveable cranes, away off across the field. And then a woman came over from one of the warehouse crews and said, 'We're shutting down for today, brothers.' She was wearing the Defence armband, a sight almost as rare as a space ship. That was a bit of a thrill. But though her tone was mild it was final. She was the foreman of this gang, and if provoked would be backed up by her syndics. And anyhow there wasn't anything to see. The aliens, the off-worlders, stayed hiding in their ship. No show.

It was a dull show for the Defence crew, too. Sometimes the foreman wished that somebody would just try to cross the wall, an alien crewman jumping ship, or a kid from Abbenay trying to sneak in for a closer look at the freighter. But it never happened. Nothing ever happened. When something did happen she wasn't ready for it.

The captain of the freighter *Mindful* said to her, 'Is that mob after my ship?'

The foreman looked and saw that in fact there was a real crowd around the gate, a hundred or more people. They were standing around, just standing, the way people had stood at produce-train stations during the Famine. It gave the foreman a scare.

'No. They, ah, protest,' she said in her slow and limited Iotic. 'Protest the, ah, you know. Passenger?'

'You mean they're after this bastard we're supposed to take? Are they going to try to stop him, or us?'

The word 'bastard', untranslatable in the foreman's language, meant nothing to her except some kind of foreign term for her people, but she had never liked the sound of it, or the captain's tone, or the captain. 'Can you look after you?' she asked briefly.

'Hell, yes. You just get the rest of this cargo onloaded, quick. And get this passenger bastard on board. No mob of Oddies is about to give *us* any trouble.' He patted the thing he wore on his belt, a metal object like a deformed penis, and looked patronisingly at the unarmed woman.

She gave the phallic object, which she knew was a weapon, a cold glance. 'Ship will be loaded by 14 hours,' she said. 'Keep crew on board safe. Lift-off at 14 hours 40. If you need help, leave message on tape at Ground Control.' She strode off before the captain could one-up her. Anger made her more forceful with her crew and the crowd. 'Clear the road there!' she ordered as she neared the wall. 'Trucks are coming through, somebody's going to get hurt. Clear aside!'

The men and women in the crowd argued with her, and with one another. They kept crossing the road, and some came inside the wall. Yet they did more or less clear the way. If the foreman had no experience in bossing a mob, they had no experience in being one. Members of a community, not elements of a collectivity, they were not moved by mass feeling; there were as many emotions there as there were people. And they did not expect commands to be arbitrary, so they had no practice in disobeying them. Their inexperience saved the passenger's life.

Some of them had come there to kill a traitor. Others had come to prevent him from leaving, or to yell insults at him, or just to look at him; and all these others obstructed the sheer brief path of the assassins. None of them had firearms, though a couple had knives. Assault to them meant bodily assault; they wanted to take the traitor into their own hands. They expected him to come guarded, in a vehicle. While they were trying to inspect a goods truck and arguing with its outraged driver, the man they wanted came walking up the road, alone. When they recognised him he

was already half way across the field, with five Defence syndics following him. Those who had wanted to kill him resorted to pursuit, too late, and to rock-throwing, not quite too late. They barely winged the man they wanted, just as he got to the ship, but a two-pound flint caught one of the Defence crew on the side of the head and killed him on the spot.

The hatches of the ship closed. The Defence crew turned back, carrying their dead companion; they made no effort to stop the leaders of the crowd who came racing towards the ship, though the foreman, white with shock and rage, cursed them to hell as they ran past, and they swerved to avoid her. Once at the ship, the vanguard of the crowd scattered and stood irresolute. The silence of the ship, the abrupt movements of the huge skeletal gantries, the strange burned look of the ground, the absence of anything in human scale, disoriented them. A blast of steam or gas from something connected with the ship made some of them start; they looked up uneasily at the rockets, vast black tunnels overhead. A siren whooped in warning, far across the field. First one person and then another started back towards the gate. Nobody stopped them. Within ten minutes the field was clear, the crowd scattered out along the road to Abbenay. Nothing appeared to have happened, after all.

Inside the *Mindful* a great deal was happening. Since Ground Control had pushed launch time up, all routines had to be rushed through in double time. The captain had ordered that the passenger be strapped down and locked in, in the crew lounge, along with the doctor, to get them out from underfoot. There was a screen in there, they could watch the lift-off if they liked.

The passenger watched. He saw the field, and the wall around the field, and far outside the wall the distant slopes of the Ne Theras, speckled with scrub holum and sparse, silvery moonthorn.

All this suddenly rushed dazzling down the screen. The passenger felt his head pressed back against the padded rest. It was like a dentist's examination, the head pressed back, the jaw forced open.

He could not get his breath, he felt sick, he felt his bowels loosen with fear. His whole body cried out to the enormous forces that had taken hold of him, *Not now, not yet, wait!*

His eyes saved him. What they insisted on seeing and reporting to him took him out of the autism of terror. For on the screen now was a strange sight, a great pallid plain of stone. It was the desert seen from the mountains above Grand Valley. How had he got back to Grand Valley? He tried to tell himself that he was in an airship. No, in a space ship. The edge of the plain flashed with the brightness of light on water, light across a distant sea. There was no water in those deserts. What was he seeing, then? The stone plain was no longer plane but hollow, like a huge bowl full of sunlight. As he watched in wonder it grew shallower, spilling out its light. All at once a line broke across it, abstract, geometric, the perfect section of a circle. Beyond that arc was blackness. This blackness reversed the whole picture, made it negative. The real, the stone part of it was no longer concave and full of light but convex, reflecting, rejecting light. It was not a plain or a bowl but a sphere, a ball of white stone falling down in blackness, falling away. It was his world.

'I don't understand,' he said aloud.

Someone answered him. For a while he failed to comprehend that the person standing by his chair was speaking to him, answering him, for he no longer understood what an answer is. He was clearly aware of only one thing, his own total isolation. The world had fallen out from under him, and he was left alone.

He had always feared that this would happen, more than he had ever feared death. To die is to lose the self and rejoin the rest. He had kept himself, and lost the rest.

He was able at last to look up at the man standing beside him. It was a stranger, of course. From now on there would be only strangers. He was speaking, in a foreign language: Iotic. The words made sense. All the little things made sense; only the whole thing did not. The man was saying something about the straps that held him into the chair. He fumbled at them. The

chair swung upright and he nearly fell out of it, being giddy and off balance. The man kept asking if someone had been hurt. Who was he talking about? 'Is he sure he didn't get hurt?' The polite form of direct address in Iotic was in the third person. The man meant him, himself. He did not know why he should have been hurt; the man kept saying something about throwing rocks. But the rock will never hit, he thought. He looked back at the screen for the rock, the white stone falling down in darkness, but the screen had gone blank.

'I am well,' he said at last, at random.

It did not appease the man. 'Please come with me. I'm a doctor.'

'I am well.'

'Please come with me, Dr Shevek!'

'You are a doctor,' Shevek said after a pause. 'I am not. I am called Shevek.'

The doctor, a short, fair, bald man, grimaced with anxiety. 'You should be in your cabin, sir – danger of infection – you weren't to be in contact with anybody but me, I've been through two weeks of disinfection for nothing, God damn that captain! Please come with me, sir. I'll be held responsible—'

Shevek perceived that the little man was upset. He felt no compunction, no sympathy; but even where he was, in absolute solitude, the one law held, the one law he had ever acknowledged. 'All right,' he said, and stood up.

He still felt dizzy, and his right shoulder hurt. He knew the ship must be moving, but there was no sense of motion; there was only a silence, an awful, utter silence, just outside the walls. The doctor led him through silent metal corridors to a room.

It was a very small room, with seamed, blank walls. It repelled Shevek, reminding him of a place he did not want to remember. He stopped in the doorway. But the doctor urged and pleaded, and he went on in.

He sat down on the shelf-like bed, still feeling light-headed and lethargic, and watched the doctor incuriously. He felt he ought to

be curious; this man was the first Urrasti he had ever seen. But he was too tired. He could have lain back and gone straight to sleep.

He had been up all the night before, going through his papers. Three days ago he had seen Takver and the children off to Peace-and-Plenty, and ever since then he had been busy, running out to the radio tower to exchange last-minute messages with people on Urras, discussing plans and possibilities with Bedap and the others. All through those hurried days, ever since Takver left, he had felt not that he was doing all the things he did, but that they were doing him. He had been in other people's hands. His own will had not acted. It had had no need to act. It was his own will that had started it all, that had created this moment and these walls about him now. How long ago? Years. Five years ago, in the silence of night in Chakar in the mountains, when he had said to Takver, 'I will go to Abbenay and unbuild walls.' Before then, even; long before, in the Dust, in the years of famine and despair, when he had promised himself that he would never act again but by his own free choice. And following that promise he had brought himself here: to this moment without time, this place without an earth, this little room, this prison.

The doctor had examined his bruised shoulder (the bruise puzzled Shevek; he had been too tense and hurried to realise what had been going on at the landing field, and had never felt the rock strike him). Now he turned to him holding a hypodermic needle.

'I do not want that,' Shevek said. His spoken Iotic was slow, and, as he knew from the radio exchanges, badly pronounced, but it was grammatical enough; he had more difficulty understanding than speaking.

'This is measles vaccine,' said the doctor, professionally deaf.

'No,' Shevek said.

The doctor chewed his lip for a moment and said, 'Do you know what measles is, sir?'

'No.'

'A disease. Contagious. Often severe in adults. You don't have

it on Anarres; prophylactic measures kept it out when the planet was settled. It's common on Urras. It could kill you. So could a dozen other common viral infections. You have no resistance. Are you right-handed, sir?'

Shevek automatically shook his head. With the grace of a prestidigitator the doctor slid the needle into his right arm. Shevek submitted to this and other injections in silence. He had no right to suspicion or protest. He had yielded himself up to these people; he had given up his birthright of decision. It was gone, fallen away from him along with his world, the world of the Promise, the barren stone.

The doctor, spoke again, but he did not listen.

For hours or days he existed in a vacancy, a dry and wretched void without past or future. The walls stood tight about him. Outside them was the silence. His arms and buttocks ached from injections; he ran a fever that never quite heightened to delirium but left him in a limbo between reason and unreason, no man's land. Time did not pass. There was no time. He was time: he only. He was the river, the arrow, the stone. But he did not move. The thrown rock hung still at mid-point. There was no day or night. Sometimes the doctor switched the light off, or on. There was a clock set in the wall by the bed; its pointer moved from one to another of the twenty figures of the dial, meaningless.

He woke after long, deep sleep, and since he was facing the clock, studied it sleepily. Its pointer stood at a little after 15, which, if the dial was read from midnight like the 24-hour Anarresti clock, should mean that it was mid-afternoon. But how could it be mid-afternoon in space between two worlds? Well, the ship would keep its own time, after all. Figuring all this out heartened him immensely. He sat up, and did not feel giddy. He got out of bed and tested his balance: satisfactory, though he felt that the soles of his feet were not quite firmly in contact with the floor. The ship's gravity field must be rather weak. He did not much like the feeling; what he needed was steadiness, solidity, firm fact. In

search of these he began methodically to investigate the little room.

The blank walls were full of surprises, all ready to reveal themselves at a touch on the panel: washstand, shitstool, mirror, desk, chair, closet, shelves. There were several completely mysterious electrical devices connected with the washstand, and the water valve did not cut off when you released the faucet, but kept pouring out until shut off – a sign, Shevek thought, either of great faith in human nature, or of great quantities of hot water. Assuming the latter, he washed all over, and finding no towel, dried himself with one of the mysterious devices, which emitted a pleasant tickling blast of warm air. Not finding his own clothes, he put back on those he had found himself wearing when he woke up: loose tied trousers and a shapeless tunic, both bright yellow with small blue spots. He looked at himself in the mirror. He thought the effect unfortunate. Was this how they dressed on Urras? He searched in vain for a comb, made do by braiding back his hair, and so groomed made to leave the room.

He could not. The door was locked.

Shevek's first incredulity turned to rage, a kind of rage, a blind will to violence, which he had never felt before in his life. He wrenched at the immoveable door-handle, slammed his hands against the slick metal of the door, then turned and jabbed the call button which the doctor had told him to use at need. Nothing happened. There were a lot of other little numbered buttons of different colours on the intercom panel; he hit his hand across the whole lot of them. The wall speaker began to babble, 'Who the hell yes coming right away out clear what from twenty-two—'

Shevek drowned them all out: 'Unlock the door!'

The door slid open, the doctor looked in. At the sight of his bald, anxious, yellowish face Shevek's wrath cooled and retreated into an inward darkness. He said, 'The door was locked.'

'I'm sorry, Dr Shevek – a precaution – contagion – keeping the others out—'

'To lock out, to lock in, the same act,' Shevek said, looking down at the doctor with light, remote eyes.

'Safety—'

'Safety? Must I be kept in a box?'

'The officers' lounge,' the doctor offered hurriedly, appeasingly. 'Are you hungry, sir? Perhaps you'd like to get dressed and we'll go to the lounge.'

Shevek looked at the doctor's clothing: tight blue trousers tucked into boots that looked as smooth and fine as cloth themselves; a violet tunic open down the front and reclosed with silver frogs; and under that, showing only at neck and wrists, a knit shirt of dazzling white.

'I am not dressed?' Shevek inquired at last.

'Oh, pyjamas will do, by all means. No formalities on a freighter!'

'Pyjamas?'

'What you're wearing. Sleeping clothes.'

'Clothes to wear while sleeping?'

'Yes.'

Shevek blinked. He made no comment. He asked, 'Where are the clothes I wore?'

'Your clothes? I had them cleaned – sterilisation, I hope you don't mind, sir—' He investigated a wall panel Shevek had not discovered, and brought out a packet wrapped in pale green paper. He unwrapped Shevek's old suit, which looked very clean and somewhat reduced in size, wadded up the green paper, activated another panel, tossed the paper into the bin that opened, and smiled uncertainly. 'There you are, Dr Shevek.'

'What happens to the paper?'

'The paper?'

'The green paper.'

'Oh, I put it in the trash.'

'Trash?'

'Disposal. It gets burned up.'

'You burn paper?'

'Perhaps it just gets dropped out into space, I don't know. I'm no space medic, Dr Shevek. I was given the honour of attending you because of my experience with other visitors from offworld, the ambassadors from Terra and from Hain, I run the decontamination and habituation procedure for all aliens arriving in A-Io; not that you're exactly an alien in the same sense, of course.' He looked timidly at Shevek, who could not follow all he said, but did discern the anxious, diffident, well-meaning nature beneath the words.

'No,' Shevek assured him, 'maybe I have the same grandmother as you, two hundred years ago, on Urras.' He was putting on his old clothes, and as he pulled the shirt over his head he saw the doctor stuff the blue and yellow 'sleeping clothes' into the 'trash' bin. Shevek paused, the collar still over his nose. He emerged fully, knelt, and opened the bin. It was empty.

'The clothes are burned?'

'Oh, those are cheap pyjamas, service issue – wear 'em and throw 'em away, it costs less than cleaning.'

'It costs less,' Shevek repeated meditatively. He said the words the way a palaeontologist looks at a fossil, the fossil that dates a whole stratum.

'I'm afraid your luggage must have got lost in that final rush for the ship – I hope there was nothing important in it.'

'I brought nothing,' Shevek said. Though his suit had been bleached almost to white and had shrunk a bit, it still fitted, and the harsh familiar touch of holum-fibre cloth was pleasant. He felt like himself again. He sat down on the bed facing the doctor and said, 'You see, I know you don't take things, as we do. In your world, in Urras, one must buy things. I come to your world, I have no money, I cannot buy, therefore I should bring. But how much can I bring? Clothing, yes, I might bring two suits. But food? How can I bring food enough? I cannot bring, I cannot buy. If I am to be kept alive, you must give it to me. I am an Anarresti, I make the Urrasti behave like Anarresti: to give, not to sell. If you like. Of course it is not necessary to keep me alive! I am the Beggarman, you see.'

'Oh not at all, sir, no, no. You're a very honoured guest. Please don't judge us by the crew of this ship, they're very ignorant, limited men – you have no idea of the welcome you'll get on Urras. After all you're a world-famous – a galactically famous scientist! And our first visitor from Anarres! I assure you, things will be very different when we come in to Peier Field.'

'I do not doubt they will be different,' Shevek said.

The Moon Run normally took four and a half days each way, but this time five days of habituation time for the passenger were added to the return trip. Shevek and Dr Kimoe spent them in vaccinations and conversations. The captain of the *Mindful* spent them in maintaining orbit around Urras, and swearing. When he had to speak to Shevek he did so with uneasy disrespect. The doctor, who was ready to explain everything, had his analysis ready: 'He's used to looking on all foreigners as inferior, as less than fully human.'

'The creation of pseudo-species, Odo called it. Yes. I thought that perhaps on Urras people no longer thought that way, since you have there so many languages and nations, and even visitors from other solar systems.'

'Very few of those, since interstellar travel is so costly and so slow. Perhaps it won't always be so,' Dr Kimoe added, evidently with an intent to flatter Shevek or to draw him out, which Shevek ignored.

'The Second Officer,' he said, 'seems to be afraid of me.'

'Oh, with him it's religious bigotry. He's a strict-interpretation Epiphanist. Recites the Primes every night. A totally rigid mind.'

'So he sees me – how?'

'As a dangerous atheist.'

'An atheist! Why?'

'Why, because you're an Odonian from Anarres – there's no religion on Anarres.'

'No religion? Are we stones, on Anarres?'

'I mean established religion – churches, creeds—' Kimoe flustered easily. He had the physician's brisk self-assurance, but Shevek continually upset it. All his explanations ended up, after two or three of Shevek's questions, in floundering. Each took for granted certain relationships which the other could not even see. For instance, this curious matter of superiority and inferiority. Shevek knew that the concept of superiority, of relative height, was important to the Urrasti; they often used the word 'higher' as a synonym for 'better' in their writings, where an Anarresti would use 'more central'. But what did being higher have to do with being foreign? It was one puzzle among hundreds.

'I see,' he said now, another puzzle coming clear – 'You admit no religion outside the churches, just as you admit no morality outside the laws. You know, I had not ever understood that, in all my reading of Urrasti books.'

'Well, these days any enlightened person would admit—'

'The vocabulary makes it difficult,' Shevek said, pursuing his discovery. 'In Pravic the word *religion* is seldom. No, what do you say – rare. Not often used. Of course, it is one of the Categories: the Fourth Mode. Few people learn to practise all the Modes. But the Modes are built of the natural capacities of the mind, you could not seriously believe that we had no religious capacity? That we could do physics while we were cut off from the profoundest relationship man has with the cosmos?'

'Oh, no, not at all—'

'That would be to make a pseudo-species of us indeed!'

'Educated men certainly would understand that, these officers are ignorant.'

'But is it only bigots then who are allowed to go out into the cosmos?'

All their conversations were like this, exhausting to the doctor and unsatisfying to Shevek, yet intensely interesting to both. They were Shevek's only means of exploring the new world that awaited him. The ship itself, and Kimoe's mind, were his microcosm. There were no books aboard the *Mindful*, the officers

avoided Shevek, and the crewmen were kept strictly out of his way. As for the doctor's mind, though intelligent and certainly well-meaning, it was a jumble of intellectual artifacts even more confusing than all the gadgets, appliances, and conveniences that filled the ship. These latter Shevek found entertaining; everything was so lavish, stylish, and inventive; but the furniture of Kimoe's intellect he did not find so comfortable. Kimoe's ideas never seemed to be able to go in a straight line; they had to walk around this and avoid that, and then they ended up smack against a wall. There were walls around all his thoughts, and he seemed utterly unaware of them though he was perpetually hiding behind them. Only once did Shevek see them breached, in all their days of conversation between the worlds.

He had asked why there were no women on the ship, and Kimoe had replied that running a space freighter was not women's work. History courses and his knowledge of Odo's writings gave Shevek a context in which to understand this tautological answer, and he said no more. But the doctor asked a question in return, a question about Anarres. 'Is it true, Dr Shevek, that women in your society are treated exactly like men?'

'That would be a waste of good equipment,' said Shevek with a laugh, and then a second laugh as the full ridiculousness of the idea grew upon him.

The doctor hesitated, evidently picking his way around one of the obstacles in his mind, then looked flustered, and said, 'Oh, no, I didn't mean sexually – obviously you – they . . . I meant in the matter of their social status.'

'*Status* is the same as *class*?'

Kimoe tried to explain status, failed, and went back to the first topic. 'Is there really no distinction between men's work and women's work?'

'Well, no, it seems a very mechanical basis for the division of labour, doesn't it? A person chooses work according to interest, talent, strength – what has the sex to do with that?'

'Men are physically stronger,' the doctor asserted with professional finality.

'Yes, often, and larger; but what does that matter when we have machines? And even when we don't have machines, when we must dig with the shovel or carry on the back, the men maybe work faster – the big ones – but the women work longer . . . Often I have wished I was as tough as a woman.'

Kimoe stared at him, shocked out of politeness. 'But the loss of – of everything feminine – of delicacy – and the loss of masculine self-respect— You can't pretend, surely, in *your* work, that women are your *equals*? In physics, in mathematics, in the intellect? You can't pretend to lower yourself constantly to their level?'

Shevek sat in the cushioned, comfortable chair and looked around the officers' lounge. On the viewscreen the brilliant curve of Urras hung still against black space, like a bluegreen opal. That lovely sight, and the lounge, had become familiar to Shevek these last days, but now the bright colours, the curvilinear chairs, the hidden lighting, the game-tables and television screens and soft carpeting, all of it seemed as alien as it had the first time he saw it.

'I don't think I pretend very much, Kimoe,' he said.

'Of course, I have known highly intelligent women, women who could think just like a man,' the doctor said, hurriedly, aware that he had been almost shouting – that he had, Shevek thought, been pounding his hands against the locked door and shouting . . .

Shevek turned the conversation, but he went on thinking about it. This matter of superiority and inferiority must be a central one in Urrasti social life. If to respect himself Kimoe had to consider half the human race as inferior to him, how then did women manage to respect themselves – did they consider men inferior? And how did all that affect their sex-lives? He knew from Odo's writings that, two hundred years ago, the main Urrasti sexual institutions had been 'marriage', a partnership authorised and enforced by legal and economic sanctions, and 'prostitution',

which seemed merely to be a wider term, copulation in the economic mode. Odo had condemned them both; and yet Odo had been 'married'; and anyhow the institutions might have changed greatly in two hundred years. If he was going to live on Urras and with the Urrasti, he had better find out.

It was strange that even sex, the source of so much solace, delight, and joy for so many years, could overnight become an unknown territory where he must tread carefully and know his ignorance; yet it was so. He was warned not only by Kimoe's queer burst of scorn and anger, but by a previously vague impression which that episode brought into focus. When first aboard the ship, in those long hours of fever and despair, he had been distracted, sometimes pleased and sometimes irritated, by a grossly simple sensation: the softness of the bed. Though only a bunk, its mattress gave under his weight with caressing suppleness. It yielded to him, yielded so insistently that he was, still, always conscious of it while falling asleep. Both the pleasure and the irritation it produced in him were decidedly erotic. There was also the hot-air-nozzle-towel device: the same kind of effect. A tickling. And the design of the furniture in the officers' lounge, the smooth plastic curves into which stubborn wood and steel had been forced, the smoothness and delicacy of surfaces and textures: were these not also faintly, pervasively erotic? He knew himself well enough to be sure that a few days without Takver, even under great stress, should not get him so worked up that he felt a woman in every table-top. Not unless the woman was really there.

Were Urrasti cabinetmakers all celibate?

He gave it up; he would find out, soon enough, on Urras.

Just before they strapped in for descent the doctor came to his cabin to check the progress of the various immunisations, the last of which, a plague inoculation, had made Shevek sick and groggy. Kimoe gave him a new pill. 'That'll pep you up for the landing,' he said. Stoic, Shevek swallowed the thing. The doctor fussed with his medical kit and suddenly began to speak very fast: 'Dr Shevek,

I don't expect I'll be allowed to attend you again, though perhaps, but if not I wanted to tell you that it, that I, that it has been a great privilege to me. Not because – but because I have come to respect – to appreciate – that simply as a human being, your kindness, real kindness—'

No more adequate response occurring to Shevek through his headache, he reached out and took Kimoe's hand, saying, 'Then let's meet again, brother!' Kimoe gave his hand a nervous shake, Urrasti style, and hurried out. After he was gone Shevek realised he had spoken to him in Pravic, called him *ammar*, brother, in a language Kimoe did not understand.

The wall speaker was blatting orders. Strapped into the bunk, Shevek listened, feeling hazy and detached. The sensations of entry thickened the haze; he was conscious of little but a profound hope he would not have to vomit. He did not know they had landed till Kimoe came hurrying in again and rushed him out to the officers' lounge. The viewscreen where Urras had hung cloud-coiled and luminous so long was blank. The room was full of people. Where had they all come from? He was surprised and pleased by his ability to stand up, walk, and shake hands. He concentrated on that much, and let meaning pass him by. Voices, smiles, hands, words, names. His name again and again: Dr Shevek, Dr Shevek . . . Now he and all the strangers round him were going down a covered ramp, all the voices very loud, words echoing off the walls. The clatter of voices thinned. A strange air touched his face.

He looked up, and as he stepped off the ramp on to the level ground he stumbled and nearly fell. He thought of death, in that gap between the beginning of a step and its completion; and at the end of the step he stood on a new earth.

A broad, grey evening was around him. Blue lights, mist-blurred, burned far away across a foggy field. The air on his face and hands, in his nostrils and throat and lungs, was cool, damp, many-scented, mild. It was not strange. It was the air of the world from which his race had come. It was the air of home.