Polystom climbed into his biplane one morning, having made up his mind to fly to the moon. It had come to him upon waking, the sudden whim to visit his uncle Cleonicles – the great Scientist Cleonicles, none other – in his mansion on the moon. It so happened that Cleonicles, the revered old man, the great scientist, had only three days of life left to him. Polystom knew nothing of this, of course, any more than did Cleonicles himself. Our lives are so densely filled with the atomic particles of existence, perception, memory, that taken together they accumulate into a sort of haze, and this prevents us from seeing very far into the future. Not knowing that his uncle was mere days from a violent death, Polystom was happy as he dressed. War was an impossibly distant blur on the horizon, nothing more.

It was a dim morning, yellow clouds reducing the sun's tack-head of light to a bleary focus of brightness. Far to the west, sunlight reflecting from the silvery rocks of the Neon Mountains seems artificially bright, throwing sharp black shadows long across the airfield. But apart from the silver-grey mistiness in the air the morning was good. Stom particularly liked the smell of the ground warming, a kind of acidic, gravelly, earthy smell. Like newly washed hair. He stopped and scratched his skull. The airfield reached flat to the line of trees, and then the forest swept away, before him, encircling the estate, reaching up and covering the hills in the middle distance. Beyond those hills the Neon Mountains rose in spectacular triangles and wedges of pure light. Look away, look up, and there was the deeply thrilling purple emptiness of the sky. Today, Stom thought to himself, it will be my sky.

. . .

[*three lines missing*]

. . . up the steps, the la[dder, and] into the cockpit. His leather

[helmet] was here, where the servants had placed it, and he fitted it over his head, snapping the goggles into place. It required only a sharp action of his thumb down on the contact to start the propellers. A choked-sounding series of barks, and then the engine thrummed, a rising arc of sound, grumble to moan, screech, whine and the plane rolling and jogging over the turf. A hop into the air, jar the ground and up again. The propellers catching in the air like a comb snagging a tangle of hair, and pulling – pulling Stom upwards, his spirit lifting in tandem with his body. He knew of no other sensation that came close to this. The thrill of lifting upwards.

He was up.

He circled, flew back over his own airfield, tipping the plane to one side to take in the view of the oblong runway, the sheds at the far end, and over to his house, its Γ-shaped magnificence (eighty rooms! As his co-father had boasted, many times – nearly twice as big as Cousin Hera's!). Then over that and there was nothing but woodland beneath him, trees and trees and away to the left the swordblade flash of sunlight on the water.

The controls were sluggish, the wings still dew-soaked, and lift was elusive, but as Stom eased the stick back and flew a gentle upward spiral, they started to dry. Soon the whole biplane was humming. The fabric on its wings was drying and shrinking in the overblow of air, singing slightly, a high-pitched wail just audible over the rush of the wind. Stom wedged the fingers of his left-hand glove under his thigh, pulling the hand free, nude; he reached out with his free hand and touched the nearest of the wires that linked lower wing to upper wing in a crisscross of Xs. Twanged, it thrummed like a guitar string. He slipped the hand back into its glove.

He banked, and looked down upon his home. This time the house was a mere comma, his own extensive woods a bent stretch of dark green. Mostly he saw the snout of the Middenstead sea where it rounded in innumerable coves on the border of his estate. The water looked shining but depthless, a range of textures from smooth-lit to pewter-dappled white-grey. Another circle and spiral upwards through the air and the wood had reduced to a curled finger, and the whole of the Middenstead could be seen: sausage-shaped, nestling in amongst the perfect miniature details of mountains, splotches of forest, stamp-sized squares of cultivated land.

One last look. Goodbye! I leave my world behind.

That morning, as Nestor had brought him his breakfast on a tray, he had said *Nestor, I think I shall visit Cleonicles today.* Nestor had only said *Very good,* with that blank look in his eyes so characteristic of servants, and had held the tray out towards him. But once the idea was in Stom's mind it was as if he were possessed by it. He hadn't so much as touched his breakfast, had bounced out of bed. *My silk underclothes, Nestor, if I'm to be flying today. Very good, sir, immediately. Tell the mechanics to prepare the biplane. Which one, sir? The* Pterodactyl. *My favourite!*

The plane is sprightlier now; Stom pulls back the long stick and sweeps upwards again, singing tunelessly in the sheer delight of it, an approximate operatic aria, except that he has no ear for music at all. Up and into the clarity of the blue sky. Surrendering himself to the great oceanic upper depths of the sky, up, up, up. *Ortheen,* he sings, *orthe-e-e-en keleu-e-e-es, heeto dendron fai-ai-ai-ainetai!* He remembers the words, but not the tune. When he next looks down he can see half a hemisphere, the whole of his estate and half a dozen other ones, the Middenstead and the Farrenstead seas, the scaly-looking chain of mountains stretching far to the west. The horizon still seems, by that strange trick of perception known to fliers and mountaineers, to be on a level with him, giving the panorama a weird, concave appearance, as if everything Stom owns is located in the base of a gigantic bowl. But an hour flying higher and the world has flipped round, bellied out. Now he can see the curve of the planet, the perfect arc marking off the browns and greens and blues of his world from the blue-purple of interplanetary space. One last look down, but now he couldn't even pick out the three-hundred-mile-length of the Middenstead sea amongst the variegated textures of the world below him.

The sun was still misty, a fingernail-sized smudge of brightness; the moon, forty times the diameter of the sun, glowed in the reflected light. Stom hauled his plane round, still singing, and positioned his nose straight at the heart of his destination. He pressed the engine-pedal down, and slipped the catch across it with his toe. The engines roared, heaved, and the plane started pulling towards the pock-marked green of the moon.

The interplanetary air was weirdly thin, breathable of course but not relishable. Some fashionable newsbook opinion pieces made great

claims for the purity of it, even to the point of suggesting merely breathing it as a treatment for various ailments. But it always made Stom feel slightly headachy. Nothing too serious, but enough to take the edge off the experience. As air it was never quite enough for him, made his lungs labour in an asthmatic manner. It was extremely cold, of course. He buttoned up his Zunft flying jacket and pressed the button that warmed the heating coil in its back. The cold, unpleasant, started to recede, although his sinuses still stung with chill.

But he did love the view. Up here the sky was not the darker blue a ground-dweller saw; it was a rarefied, purified air, a delicate violet-blue, the colour of methylated-spirits. He could stare into the depths for hours at an end. It was almost a process of meditation.

For ten minutes, as his plane pulled away from the world and towards the moon, Stom busied himself. He undid his harness, and rustled around in the compartment under his seat. His servants had provided him with some food, two flasks of drink (one alcoholic, one not), extra layers of clothing should the cold prove unusually sharp, some books to read. Polystom liked to read poetry, and his servants knew this fact. They also packed a medical basket, including painkillers, and Stom reached for this first. He took out two lenticular pills, and washed them down with one of his flasks of drink. What was it? Some fruit whisky or other. Blackberry whisky, possibly. It didn't really matter.

The plane droned on.

The flight was necessarily lengthy, but Stom wasn't in any sort of hurry. He stood up in the cockpit and turned to face the rear of the plane. This brought him within reach of the storage compartment, and this he opened, drawing out of it a thin bundle as long as a man's height. Resting this upright in the cockpit, Polystom killed the engine and waited for the propellers to slow and stop. Coasting through the violet depths of interplanetary sky Stom's plane would fly onwards, losing speed in small but inevitable increments until the gravitational tug of his world ceased and eventually reversed his trajectory. But Stom didn't wait for this; he clambered out of the cockpit and lay over the warm engine casing, pulling free two bolt-catches and unfixing the propeller. This, hot from use, he removed and, turning, shoved it back into the cockpit. He had to wriggle backwards a little to retrieve the parcel, but then he easily untied it, unfolded the bent-up blades once,

twice, three times, clicking each component into place. Finally, manoeuvring the enormous spindly thing easily enough in the miniature gravity, he slotted it into place and pushed the bolt-catches home.

Back in the cockpit he folded up the regular props and pushed them into the storage compartment. Then he gunned the engine to life again, and the vast arcs of the high-sky props spun round. Too fragile for use in the thicker air closer to ground, these interplanetary propellers pulled the plane harder through the ethereal medium that occupied the spaces between worlds. It was a long journey; too long to travel the whole way on take-off-landing props. There was a kick, jerking Stom against the back of his seat, as his plane roared onwards. Up up up!

For a while Stom listened with pleasure to the rapid whish-whish of the propellers, the contented purr of the engine. The speed rose, until he was travelling three times the speed the smaller blades could manage, five times, ten. Then he fine-tuned the direction, positioning the plane a little more precisely so that it was angled at the very heart of the moon. Already the great globe seemed closer. Dusty green and greys on the patched surface swelled minutely before him.

Polystom retrieved the bottle. He ate one of the sandwiches and moistened his throat between bites. Then he finished the blackberry whisky, and lolled in the cockpit for an hour or more, staring out at the blue-violet depths of interplanetary sky. Being cradled in the near-nothingness of space drunk was a peculiar pleasure. Eventually Stom dozed, hushed by the rushing of the air around him.

He woke thirsty, and drank some water. Then he ate another sandwich. With these physical needs addressed, he looked around. The moon directly ahead was conspicuously larger; more detail visible on the cracked and cratered green of its surface. Stom swivelled, kneeling on his seat to give himself a better view of the world he had left behind. His world, the world of Enting, was receding slowly behind him. Most of its arc was visible; clouds draped the mosaic fineness of the ground in intermittent shreds. The stretch of the hemisphere-crossing Great Ocean gleamed dark-blue, with strands of cloud gathered like folds in clothing, or like the ripples in sand at low tide, covering half its surface.

Stom turned again, and played with the engine, gunning it,

dethrottling. He pulled to the left, to the right, to check responsiveness. It was so delightful, the way it responded, the way it fitted together, every component working in mechanical harmony with every other one. It sang in Polystom's heart.

He refixed the throttle fully out, settled back in his seat, dozed again. On waking he scanned the sky in all directions; left and right, up and down, before and behind. Away to the fore and several miles below he picked out the shape of a balloon-boat, pen-shaped, bringing in some cargo from another world. Strictly speaking, planes were supposed to give balloon-boats a wide berth, but Stom disregarded the rule; of course it didn't apply to him. He flipped off the catch and heaved the stick forward. The plane tipped forward, and within ten minutes the finger-sized balloon-boat was as big as a cathedral. A half-mile-long dark-green bladder of attenuated gas and storage compartments, piled above and below with towers to which were appended rank upon rank of mighty propellers. The passenger cabin, as big the south wing of Stom's own house, looked like a slug upon a giant marrow, nestling underneath. Polystom flew over the structure, coming close enough to see a steep-jack clinging to one engine carrying out some repair or other, and then circled round to sweep under it, where he could make out the faces of passengers in the observation globe. He waved, half-frantic with the excitement, but nobody returned the gesture.

These two vessels, tiny biplane and giant balloon-boat, in the violet sky between earth and moon, and nothing else. Stom circled for a while, until he finally provoked a response from the pilot, a blue-uniformed figure just visible in the wide porthole at the front of the command cabin. As Stom flew across the balloon-boat's line of flight for the fourth time the miniature figure of the captain flapped his arm angrily, waving him away. Stom cheerily waved back, and then pulled the stick towards his body and flew up, over the vessel's back, and away. He repositioned his plane so that it was aimed once more at the centre of the moon and flew straight on.

He saw little else on his flight, and took to reading one of his books. Once, several hours later, he caught a glimpse of a skywhal, drifting mouth-open on a trajectory that took it behind the moon. It was unusual to see one of the great beasts so close in to a planetary body, and Stom wondered excitedly whether it was going to beach itself. But,

on closer examination, it was a small creature, its fronds little developed, and so was almost certainly still a youngster, still exploring, not yet settled into one of the great cometary orbits that mature skywhals preferred, away from the gravitational disturbances of planets.

Stom flew on.

He regretted, now, having finished off his whisky so quickly. He was sober again and a drink would have been very pleasant. He tried to concentrate on his book but kept nodding off. He dozed, half awake, half asleep.

Hours later the moon had grown until it filled most of the sky. Stom could make out features in its enormous face; lakes, canals, mountain ranges like trails of crushed nuts; broad patches of algal green, very sharply coloured in the eternal light of interplanetary spaces. There were narrower strips of cultivation, darker green. The desert areas, grey-silver, scattered a paler albedo across the great landscape. Three seas were evident, each of them, Stom knew from experience, no more than a few feet deep, though many tens of miles wide. His uncle Cleonicles lived on the shores of one of them, the Lake of Dreams, the *Lacus Somniorum*, as it was rather fancifully called. A sludgy pond stretched miles wide, too shallow and treacly with algae even to swim in. But Cleonicles' house was pleasant enough; not as large as so famous or senior a man deserved, Stom thought, and too much filled with machines and artefacts, but pleasant nonetheless. Four-legged birds, stork-boars, polopped their quiet way through the shallow waters, dotting the green sea out to the horizon; trees grew to spectacular height and slenderness in the lesser lunar gravity; vegetable worms crawled sullenly across the lawn. Some of Polystom's happiest days had been spent sitting in a comfortable chair on his uncle's lawn, overlooking the stagnant Lake of Dreams, chatting earnestly away whilst his uncle nodded and hummed. Cleonicles was a peaceful man, in this respect resembling his dead brother, Stom's father. He was not as silent a person as Stom's father had been, but neither was he the sort of person to monopolise the conversation. Stom had visited the moon many times since his father's death. He regarded it as something of a sanctuary.

Polystom's father had been dead four years, his co-father almost as long.

Polystom had married after his father's death, but the marriage had not prospered. The looked-for solace had not materialised. Stom had spent months in mourning for it. He lived alone now, often lonely and with a distant sense of something amiss in his life. To speak of the woe that is in marriage!

And so he came again to the moon. Picking out the horned shape of the Lacus Somniorum, away on the right-hand border of the moon, Polystom swung his plane's trajectory away from its dead-centre targeting. The gravity of the satellite was strong enough now to render the larger props redundant, and Stom spent several minutes changing them for the regular blades. Then he pulled into a shallower and still shallower approach as the moon swelled to encompass almost half the sky. Finally, as he had done many times before, he saw the curve of the Lunar Mount to his left, and set a course for a notch in the horizon that had opened up before him. The air grew warmer, and Stom turned off his flying suit, unbuttoned his jacket. His scarf sank slowly as it rediscovered weight, until it was draped in his lap. Soon enough the Lake of Dreams unfurled beneath him, glisteningly green and dotted with stork-boars. He passed over his uncle's house, circled round, and dropped easily down to land on the back lawn. The plane rolled, slowed, shuddered to a halt.

He had taken off his helmet and goggles and was clambering out of the cockpit before the engine had even started slowing; servants scurried towards him, and behind them he could make out the genial shape of his uncle waving his stick in greeting.

Cleonicles, Polystom's uncle, was at this time perhaps the most famous scientist in all the System. For long years he had worked on the celebrated Computational Device, the enormous valve-and-crystal machine that could undertake all manner of mathematical operations on a fantastic scale and with fantastic speed. He had been one of the party of three (this was many years ago, in his youth) responsible for initiating the project, his own, and later other patrons' money boosting construction of ground-based and later free-floating devices, vast scaffolds of electrical connection. The newsbooks called it the Greatest Work of Man, or sometimes the Summation of Human Knowledge.

Polystom, who knew his uncle as a genial old man with threads of

white in his grey beard, had come late to knowledge of his uncle's celebrity. *Fame*, he realised belatedly, was something different from breeding, although of course his uncle was amongst the best bred in the System. This was something *else*, the young Polystom had realised with a jolt. His uncle, his pleasant-faced old uncle, was revered not just for what he *was*, but for *what he had done*. Understanding this marked, in an understated way, a revolution in the young fellow's thinking. He had been thirteen years old, and visiting Cleonicles on the moon in the company of his father. To stave off boredom on the flight, being too young to take the controls himself, he had read one of his father's discarded newsbooks, the *News Volume* for November. It was mostly given over to ecstatic reporting of the latest incarnation of the Computational Device, one larger than all the previous ones put together. The name Cleonicles appeared on every page, and towards the back of the book there was a lengthy word-portrait of him.

> *Latterly, Professor Cleonicles has withdrawn himself from the grander designs of the Computational Device committee; he lives now in 'splendid isolation', if we may be permitted to borrow a metaphorical phrase from the Political Military, on the moon of Enting, 'to be near my close family' he has announced. He devotes himself now to that arcane branch of scientific knowledge, star-research. 'I find the very notion of these superb, barren mountains of fire hanging in nothingness – literally nothingness! – to be poetic and engaging to the highest degree,' the Professor has said.*

All through that visit, taking wine-lees tea on the lawn of his uncle's house, looking over the Lacus Somniorum, Polystom had been too excited to sit still. Had his co-father been there he would have been rebuked for fidgeting, but his father was too placid to care, and his uncle smiled his understanding smile.

'They called the Computational Device the great achievement of humanity!' young Polystom had said. 'And *you* invented it!'

'Hardly, my boy,' said Cleonicles. 'There were three of us in the initial team, and many more helped turn our rough-ready theories into the practice of the CDs themselves.'

'They're building the biggest Computational Device of all!' Polystom had gushed. 'It said so in the newsbook!'

'They've built it,' said Cleonicles, pouring his brother some more tea. 'Now they're just fine-tuning it. There are experiments, for which the machine was designed. Actually, they've run into a spot of trouble.'

Polystom's father, the elder Polystom, sighed and smiled as he lifted the cup to his mouth, as if to imply that trouble and error were inevitabilities in this System of theirs.

'Why did you leave that project, uncle?' Polystom asked earnestly. 'How could you leave something so exciting?'

One of the things that Stom loved about his uncle was that he never shirked or side-stepped a question. He always answered directly. 'Partly because the nuts-and-cogs of Computational Devicery aren't as exciting as they sound to young ears like yours. Partly because I had disagreements with the others on my team.'

'Distressing,' murmured Polystom senior, sipping his tea.

'Very,' said Cleonicles, with a sharp nod that made his beard waggle. 'But partly, my young bear-cub, I left because I found something *more* exciting.'

'Stars?' said young Polystom, unable (though he knew it was poor manners) to keep disdain out of his voice. At thirteen Polystom had never seen stars, and accordingly his imagination had no purchase on the idea of them.

'Certainly stars,' said his uncle, with pronounced though not unfriendly emphasis. 'After tea I can show you some photo-lithos that I've recently taken out near the upper-limit of the System.'

But Polystom was unconvinced. When tea was finished he trudged into the house after his uncle and duly gazed at some filmy pictures of what seemed to him very little indeed: black squares, each one an image, nine to a sheet; some pure black, like press-sheets at a printing house; most black but scattered with a dozen, or two dozen, white dots and smudges. What was so exciting about that? It looked spotty and miniature to Stom. Even his uncle's enthusiasm for *enormous globes of fire, burning in nothingness* failed to rouse his imagination. The whole business was just too fanciful.

So, now, seven years later, Polystom the adult, Polystom the seventh Steward of Enting, climbed out of his biplane and jogged over the lawn towards his uncle. Things had changed, of course. Old Cleonicles

had been wearied and a little broken by the death of his brother, and his brother's partner. The war on the Mudworld had erupted into extraordinary violence. For long stretches of fighting as many as a hundred people, including two or three people from important Families, were dying every day. Cleonicles wrote dignified but furious letters to the newsbooks about the conflict, a war he viewed as a ghastly error of judgment by the Political Military. He had the grace not to force his views on his nephew, a discretion that greatly pleased the more warlike boy. But when a scientist of the stature of Cleonicles spoke, many people listened. *Blockade would be easier, less destructive and infinitely more humane than the senseless war being waged now. I urge all families of note to petition the Political Military, with a view to calling a panel to review strategy. Lives are being lost every day!*

'Helloë, uncle!' Polystom called.

'My dear boy,' returned Cleonicles, a little breathlessly. 'My dear boy!'

They embraced. 'A good crossing?' the old man asked, ushering Stom to a chair.

'Uneventful. Passed a balloon-boat; splendid thing. I saw a skywhal, too, in what looked like a close swing about this moon of yours.'

'I think I saw him myself, dear boy,' said Cleonicles, gesturing with his left hand at a five-foot-long telescopic tube erected on the patio. 'Very young one. Sometimes,' he added, as if unable to resist the urge to lecture, 'sometimes the things beach themselves on moons, you know, and I wondered if that was why he came in so close. But it's always mature fellows who beach themselves, and this one was clearly immature. Lost his way a little, I expect.'

A servant appeared, bringing a tray. On it was an exquisite blue glass samovar filled with coffee. Next to this was a bottle of black wine.

'Still *star*-gazing, uncle, eh?' said Polystom, throwing one leg over the arm of his chair, and tossing his flying helmet and gloves onto the grass beside him, in a rather self-conscious attempt to play-act *carelessness*. Maps and charts were spread on the table in front of the old man.

'Yes, dear boy,' said Cleonicles.

'I've been thinking about your passion for these *stars*,' Stom said brightly, putting just a hint of impertinent emphasis on the final word. 'Don't you think that they don't make sense? According to some of the

books I've been reading, there are theories that they don't exist at all. I'll tell you: I was talking to my Head Grass-Gardner, you know, about seeding a new lawn. And in amongst other things he told me that *he* doesn't believe in them, and he's an excellent fellow. At Grass-Gardening, anyhow.'

'If you can't see them they don't exist, eh?' chuckled Cleonicles. 'A veritably Grass-Gardneresque philosophy, that. If you can't run the seeds through your fingers, or feel the pressure of roller on lawn, then it's just a dream, eh? No, *coffee* for me, man. *Wine* for my nephew,' this last, in more severe tones, addressed to the servant who was about to pour a glass of wine for Cleonicles.

'But stars – you say that these things burn? In *vacuum*?'

'I am impressed,' said Cleonicles, smiling. 'You're keeping up with at least some of the latest science writing, if you know that word.'

'I'll admit,' said Polystom, grinning, 'that I dropped the word in for effect. But burning means eating air – don't it? How does a thing burn in a vacuum? It really makes no sense.'

'There's certainly vacuum at the limits of our system, you know,' said Cleonicles. 'That, at least, has been scientifically proven. Now, I agree with you, there are conflicting stories as to what the "stars" are – how far away they are, whether they are real phenomena or somehow fragmentary reflections of something else, whether they embody genuine fire or some pseudo-electrical phenomena. But you must concede me vacuum, at least.'

'What I read,' said Polystom, 'is that when scientists make up vacuum in a chamber in some laboratory, the effort is enormous; and that vacuum they make is the delicatest bloom of all the delicate blooms – the *least* thing destroys it. Now how can such a fragile and fundamentally *un*natural thing as this vacuum surround our system? Wouldn't mere contact with the ether collapse it?'

'This is a surprisingly good point, my boy,' said Cleonicles, sipping his coffee. 'I say *surprisingly* only because you've always devoted your energies to poetry and suchlike, so I'm surprised by the acuteness of your observation. But evidently you have the makings of a scientific mind too. It's a good point, and difficult to answer. Well, all we have are theories. Clearly you're right about the inherent instability of "vacuum" – all of nature detests a vacuum, you know. If we imagine a space the size of our system filled only with vacuum, you see, then it's

clear – the maths confirms this – that any objects *at all* within this space would be vaporised and dissipated throughout the space, to produce – well, to produce what we see around us, the natural order of things, a more-or-less level pressure gradient, uniform ether. It is *in*conceivable that matter in gaseous, liquid or even solid state could survive the savage differences of pressure that "vacuum" physics implies.'

'And yet you say,' drawled Polystom, drinking his wine in great gulps, 'that outside the sphere of our system . . .'

'I know, I know. You sound like one of my scientific colleagues, dismissing my research! Well,' said Cleonicles. 'Well. One theory is that some from of force-field surrounds our System, to preserve the integrity of the vacuum beyond it. This is hypothetical, and goes beyond Science (if by science – I say, by *Science*, you mean experimental data and observation), but it has certain strengths, as a theory. And if "stars" are, as I think they are, bodies in the vacuum, burning and emitting light, then some similar force-field must exist to preserve their unity.'

But after his initial enthusiasm, Polystom was growing bored of discussing metaphysics with his uncle. 'Well,' he said. 'I'm sure you scientists will figure it out.' He stopped.

Now Cleonicles was silent, smiling slightly. Another thing that Polystom loved about his uncle was his sensitivity. His enormous tact. It was more than good breeding; it was a positive virtue in the old man. Cleonicles knew that Stom would not fly all the way from Enting to the moon merely to talk about physics. Something else must be bothering the young man. But the way to approach this was not to badger Stom, not to rain questions upon him, but rather to allow him the time to tell his own story, to unburden his heart.

'Do you know what?' said Polystom after a while, looking past his uncle at the mud-green stretches of the lake, and blushing slightly. 'I'll tell you; trouble sleeping. It's the oddest thing. Trouble sleeping.'

There was a pause. 'Go on, my boy,' prompted Cleonicles.

'That's all there is to it, really. That's all. Just that. I can drift off to sleep, in front of the fire, with a bottle at my elbow, very pleasant I'm sure. But I always wake up a couple of hours later, and then I can hardly ever get back to sleep after waking again.'

Cleonicles nodded; waited.

'Makes me muggy in the head. Tired all the time.' Polystom's blushing had taken on a deeper hue, now; but still he couldn't meet his uncle's eyes.

'Is there any particular reason for waking up?' Cleonicles suggested, gently.

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know.' Cleonicles spread his old hands on the table before him, the skin of them thin and sagged, marked with brown ecchymotic spots like a negative photo-litho of one of his own star-maps. 'There might be various things.'

'Do you mean,' said Polystom after a pause, still not looking at his uncle, 'things like . . . nightmares?'

'For instance,' his uncle agreed.

'Yes,' said Stom. He breathed in, but the breath caught in his throat and started throbbing out again in gasps. Alarmed, he realised that he was crying. Tears were leaking down his face.

'My dear boy,' said Cleonicles, with infinite compassion. 'My dear boy.'

He reached his hand over the table, and Polystom dropped his own hand on top of it. Just that human contact. The tears still came, languidly, wetting his cheeks and his lips. Polystom sobbed. Soon enough, the crying softened, and died away. Away in the lake behind him, the four-legged stork-boars took their gloopy steps through the shallow waters. Only that noise, and the rustle of the breeze.

'You miss her, I think,' said Cleonicles.

Polystom wiped his face on a napkin, and dropped it to the lawn with a snort. 'I'm ashamed of myself uncle.'

'Oh we shouldn't be ashamed of our feelings,' said Cleonicles. 'Not when we are amongst our loved ones. It's not as if we're entertaining guests!'

'Still, uncle, I hate to cry.'

'You miss her,' Cleonicles repeated, more matter-of-factly. 'There's nothing shameful in that fact, nothing hateable. Of course you miss her.'

'To think,' said Polystom, almost laughing at himself now. 'That she is still keeping me awake after all this time.' 'She' was his former wife, the only wife he had ever had. She had been called Beeswing, although her name had been Dianeira.