

How odd that he should think that! The idea must have floated up from somewhere deep within the dreaming girl's subconscious. But, right now, Nathi felt as if it were his own.

Aye for the world of dreams! He thought that he could almost see the spacemen mice throw their little hard hats up in cheers—no, these were geysers of abiogenic oil, breaking out from beneath the ice and sublimating in thin air.

They skimmed over the almost geometrical patterns of “dalmatian spots,” marked by the interacting streamers of the solar wind. Here, the lines of the interplanetary magnetic field passed almost vertically though the surface, having skirted over the local magnetic field anomaly.

The girl laughed, spun. What Zulu wouldn't break into a song at times like these? The song was pulsing, bursting from his mind. He didn't care what the words. It was the very act of singing, his being able to sing, that gave the song its meaning, that confirmed his self—a geno-song. He felt alive.

They danced up in the air on magnetic wings. The famous layered terrain of the Cryptic Region spreading out far below—terrace upon terrace, a filigree of color bands. They flew above the wrinkled land of Australe Sulci—so dense it looked as if the planet's brain had been left bare by the sharp edge of Australe Chasma, cleft into hard rock. They skimmed it, veering northeast.

The Needle loomed before them.

“Needle ahoy...”

The words trailed out into silence. They had stopped. Sky-tall, the Needle looked as if it pierced through the heaven's firmament itself; its top was lost to space. Encased in spinning flywheels—rungs of an impossibly tall ladder up—the Needle thrummed with energy. It pulsed through their skin. It gripped like deep vibrations of a *kwaito* beat. It pulled. It made him want to *touch*.

*Must go.*

The urge was pounding inside his mind.

Must reach.

Must find the Fairy.

*Must touch.*

“Please?” the girl asked. “Let's go, hurry! We must turn the wheels. She's waiting.”

“Who?”

“The Fairy. You haven't heard?”

“No.” Nathi was too old for fairy tales.

“Then listen. Once upon a time...”

...THERE WAS A FAIRY. BUT SHE WAS STRANGE, UNLIKE the other fairies. She didn't swim inside the Sun. She didn't ride on comet tails. She didn't even grow Martian blueberries in her cupped hands.

“What good is she?” said everyone.

They asked her questions, told her what they wished to see her do—this thing or that one, going from up to down on the entertainment value scale. But she ignored them.

For the fairy was deaf.

“What powers does she command?” they wondered.

They waited for her word—of power or wisdom, even for a squeak to laugh at. But they only wasted time.

Because the fairy was mute.

“Then let us show her the things we fear, everything we crave for.”

But they tried in vain to move her or to scare her, to plead before her, to embarrass her, to push her, to caress her, or to beat her. For she didn't feel a thing.

And she was blind.

“My, what a worthless fairy!” the people said. And they decided to forget her, for a worthless fairy makes worthless memories, and memory comes at a price.

Except one little girl. “My, what a poor fairy,” she said.

She didn't know what she wished for. But she had to speak, for someone had to listen *for* the fairy. She spoke from her heart—and listened.

For the fairy was deaf.