



# Stitch & Split

*Selves and Territories in Science Fiction*

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NALO  
HOPKINSON

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Delicious Monster

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The tree was still there. Condos and office buildings growing floor by floor all around formed an organic of the city--urban fractals, patterns repeating, random, but inexorable; yet there in the middle of it was the tree, caged in a small empty lot scattered about with unseasonable thistles and rogue lawn grass.

Looked like that lot was slated for construction too. One of those clapboard condo sales offices had been erected at the other side of it; the kind with a storefront painted to look like a manor house in a magazine. There were stacks of lumber and fat aluminium pipes beside it.

Cars rushed past Jerry on Spadina, speeding irritably to Friday afternoon freedom. The dusky sky spat the occasional dirty snowflake which tumbled onto the sleeve of Jerry's jacket and lay there twinkling for a second, six-clawed, until it melted.

Jerry knelt by the rusting chicken wire that kept the tree in. He peered through one of the fence's rusty diamonds. He reached to steady himself, to twine the fingers of one hand in the fence, but an angry roar startled him, and he yanked the hand back. He looked up to see what had made the noise, so much louder and closer than the fractious bleating of car horns.

There it was. Bloody excavation machines, biting and biting at the ravaged ground. The thing lurched away from the fence, bellowing. It brandished a toothed hopper, a maw on a stalk. The tree hunkered there smugly, in the lee of its machine protector. "You just wait," Jerry said quietly to the tree. "Pretty soon, it's you the excavator'll be coming for."

Once, as a child visiting the zoo, Jerry'd disobeyed his dad and stuck his hand inside the fencing of the puma cage. There had been no harm in doing so that he could see. The thick wall of clear lucite that kept the puma penned was a good two feet beyond his reach; the wire fence just an extra precaution in a litigious world. A gaunt great cat had lain panting behind the lucite, regarding him with a dull, disinterested stare. Its tan coat made it look baked, like biscuits. Glancing to make sure his dad wasn't looking, Jerry'd waggled his fingers at the puma.

Later, thinking about what he'd done, he couldn't say what reaction he'd hoped for, exactly, from the puma. Something. Some acknowledgement that it'd seen him. His dad had barely said a word to him all weekend. Jerry'd knelt and stared hard at the puma. Look. Look over here. He hadn't seen the other one flying at him until it was a big golden blur in the corner of his eye. A milisecond later it slammed against the lucite with a heavy thump. Jerry'd thrown himself backward onto his behind. That's when his dad had turned and asked in a puzzled voice why Jerry was sitting in the dirt. Jerry hadn't been able to take his eyes off the puma that had charged him. It had looked at him, licked its bruised nose. A fixed, hungry stare. The sunlight had played in its fur, making it glow.

It'd been a few years since Jerry'd walked this far north on Spadina. The tree's swollen middle still flowed in rolls like lava down to the ground. He could see the cincture that bit into the tree's trunk about two-three feet from the ground. Something had been chained there, tight around

the tree, years ago, then abandoned. Must have been only a sapling then. It was sturdy enough for climbing now. It had grown, the living tissue of its wood welling and swelling around whatever it was that it now held trapped. Same as he'd done last time he'd passed the tree, Jerry peered closer, trying to see what it held in its folds.

"Mister, you got any change you can spare? I'm trying to get a coffee." The guy standing jittering with his hands in the pockets of a shredding jeans jacket was young. He'd shaved off all the hair on his head, except for a limp tuft of it at the front, dyed green, that flopped into his eyes.

"Uh, yeah," Jerry said, lurching to his feet. "Think I got some here." He started fumbling in his pockets. Had he put any change in there? He usually did when he was flush, to give to homeless people who asked for it. Sandor always teased him for being a softie when he gave change to beggars. Teased him and then rewarded him with a kiss or a squeeze of his hand.

"Thanks, man," said the guy. "Really 'preciate it."

Sandor didn't give money, but he always seemed to have extra smokes in his pocket to give away.

Something was funny about the way this guy stood. One shoulder was clearly higher than the other. One hip canted up at a sharp angle.

Damn. Empty pockets. "Hang on." Flushing with embarrassment at the delay, Jerry took his wallet from his coat.

While Jerry fumbled, the young man looked politely off to one side. "God, is that ever freaky-looking, eh?" he said.

He was looking at the deformed tree.

"Yeah," Jerry replied. "Well..." There was a twenty. He wasn't going to give the kid that. He tried to surreptitiously shield the contents of his wallet from view, to riffle through the remaining bills with his other hand.

There were more snowflakes falling now. The young guy was shivering in his thin jacket. "It's a monster, that tree," he told Jerry. He said it with a familiar air. If this was his beat, he'd seen this tree before. "A monster like me, right?"

"Delicious monster," Jerry heard himself mutter. The young man had a gnarled beauty about him, like a skinny rock star who cut his own body with razors, or like a bonsai tree.

"What'd you say, Mister?"

Shit. "Uh, nothing." Perversely, the twenty kept jutting up out of the pile of grocery receipts and bus transfers in Jerry's wallet. He sighed, yanked it out. "I mean, uh, here. Hope you have a delicious dinner."

He handed the twenty to the guy, whose face brightened in delight. "Shit, thanks, man!"

"No problem."

The young man pocketed the money, then looked inquisitively at Jerry. "Not a lot of people stop to really look at stuff in the city. Not ratty old growing stuff, anyway."

"I'm curious about it, is all."

"Flower gardens, maybe. They'll look at the neat, pretty things."

“I mean,” Jerry continued, “what’s that thing stuck inside it?”

The young guy shrugged, his green hair tumbling onto his beautiful face. He looked at the tree’s bulge, looked up at the sky. “It’ll be during the eclipse,” he said. “That’s when it happens.” Then he lurched away into the darkening day, one hip hitching higher than the other, one foot hitting the ground sooner than the other, arms windmilling awkwardly to propel him forward.

Delicious monster. That’s what Jerry’s dad had really taken him to the zoo to see; *Monstera Deliciosa*, the massive Swiss Cheese plant that flourished in the South American Pavilion. It had been warm in there, and damp. It’d smelt green, a stuffy fetor of growing, living and dying things that clung inside the nose. Jerry’d taken his coat off. The heat had baked into his skin, his hair. It had felt like moisture was condensing on his eyelids. He’d gone heavy, slow. His dad was finally animated. “This stuff comes from my part of the world,” he’d said. “From Guatemala.”

When he was young, Jerry’d thought his dad had lived in the middle of a jungle, in a tree house, or something. Had thought his dad had spent his days feeding orangutans, the gentle old men of the forest, and wrestling massive boa constrictors that could consume an entire child; swallow a whole person until all you could see of them was a series of lumps in the constrictor’s middle. Dad was forever on about centipedes the size of snakes and eels that could electrocute you with a touch. But... “no,” Jerry’s mother had said, “orangutans are from Borneo, whatever they call it now. That’s Asia. Your dad’s from South America.” But Jerry still hadn’t really understood. From his northern city home, where the biggest trees were the low, cultivated rowan trees that shed their orange berries in the fall, Borneo might as well be Guatemala. It wasn’t until Mum had shown him pictures of Dad’s family’s house in Guatemala City, where she and Dad had gone on their honeymoon, that Jerry had realised that his dad was a city boy, too. Probably the only electric eel Dad had ever seen was the one right here in the Toronto zoo.

The excavator was quiescent now, crouched beside the condo sales hut. The snow was heavier, but melting as it fell. Beads of freezing water hung off the thistle leaves. If he looked carefully at the water droplets, he could see car brake lights reflecting red in them. Spring was pouncing in like a lion, all right.

No use putting it off any longer. Jerry turned north towards his dad’s condo. The snow was turning into biting hail.

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“How’s your mum?” Jerry’s dad took Jerry’s coat, hung it in the hall closet. Jerry followed him into the living room.

“She’s fine. Says she’s got a new plant cutting for you, and you should go by and get it. Dunno where you’ll put it, though.” A ficus rioted in one corner of the living room,

nearly touching the ceiling. The spider plant hanging from a nook was a veritable cathedral of foliage. Trifoliate, an ornamental shamrock blushed hugely purple. Dad grinned.

Sudharshan rose from the couch, came and gave Jerry and awkward hug. “Good to see you,” he murmured. Jerry gave a kind of grunt back.

“And how’s Sandor?” Dad asked.

Jerry sat on the arm of the plush burgundy couch. Sudharshan frowned.

“He’s great. Settling into his new apartment.”

A trilling noise came from over by the dining table. Jerry turned to see what it was. He was up and standing beside the cage before he knew it. He reached to touch the wire bars. “Yikes. Dad, what the hell is that thing?”

The bird--Jerry figured that’s what it was--tilted its head at the sound of his voice. It sidled on its perch, closer to Jerry, one eye beady on him. Jerry pulled his hand back from the cage. The thing was tiny, bald and fucking hideous. No feathers on its head, none on its wings. Looked like something out of the grocery’s freezer. Probably no feathers on its body, either. Hard to tell, in the weird little suit it had on it. “And what’s that it’s wearing?”

Sudharshan laughed. He came over and stroked one of the cage’s wires with a beatifully manicured hand. “You like his jumpsuit?” he asked Jerry. Sudharshan’s face always made Jerry think of chocolate brownies, dark and sweet. “I crochet them for him. He’d freeze to death otherwise, wouldn’t you, my numbikins?” Sudharshan cooed at the disgusting little thing. It screeched back at him, tossing and tossing its beak up into the air.

“Why doesn’t it have any feathers?”

“Birdie alopecia,” his dad said, coming up behind Sudharshan and putting his arms around Sudharshan. Sudharshan put his hands on top of Dad’s, smiled. He leaned back into Dad’s embrace. Jerry looked away.

“It’s a rare condition my birdie has,” Sudharshan told him. “He’d have died in the wild.”

Jerry snuck a look back at his dad and Sudharshan. They were still cuddling. He sighed and deliberately kept his eyes on them, trying to look cool. His gaze slid back to the creepy bald bird in its bright green wool jumper. “How does it, you know?”

“Hole in the base of the suit,” Sudharshan told him. “Want some chai?”

“Uh, yeah.” Something to do.

“I’ll get it.” His dad headed for the kitchen.

“Not too much cardamom, okay, sweetie?” Sudharshan called after him. Jerry could feel his face heating up.

Sudharshan pulled chairs out for himself and Jerry. They sat. Then he leaned over the cage, made more smacking noises at the bird. His long nose with the dip in it echoed the bird’s hooked beak. He opened the cage door, reached a hand in. “Come, darling, come. Say hello to Uncle Jerry.”

The bird mumbled its beak against Sudharshan’s brown hand. Jerry held his breath, afraid that it would peck. The bird climbed onto Sudharshan’s hand, windmilling its wings for balance. “Where’d you get it?” Jerry asked. In the kitchen, the kettle began whistling off key.

“They’ve been in my family for years,” Sudharshan said. “His grandparents’ parents belonged to my grandparents. Each new generation of children looks after the new generation of birds. It’s kind of our duty. How’s work?” He carefully brought the bird out of its cage. It screeched loudly. Jerry put his hands over his ears.

“Work’s going okay,” he said. “Sold a big mansion up in Aurora. Rich couple, one kid. Six bedrooms, that house has.”

Jerry went silent. Sudharshan said nothing. The bird crab-walked up Sudharshan’s arm, perched on his shoulder and nibbled at his ear. Sudharshan giggled and chucked it under its chin. It still looked to Jerry like plucked freezer chicken, walking. He swallowed and looked around the room. One whole wall of the apartment was painted with images of suns. They flared and wheeled through space. Each one was different. They seemed hand-done. “Your art work?” he asked Sudharshan.

“We did it together,” Jerry’s dad said, coming out of the kitchen. He was balancing a tray, a white lace doilie on it under a teapot, three mugs and a saucer. The mugs were a fat, sunny yellow. He put the tray down on the table. Jerry recognized the doilie. It was part of a set that his mum used to save for when they had company. “Three sugars, right, Jerry?”

“I don’t take sugar, Dad.”

“You like sugar.”

“I never liked sugar. You always gave me too much, and I never liked it.”

Sudharshan busied himself with his ugly pet. Jerry watched the way that his long black hair caught the light, gleaming. Looked at Sudharshan’s handsome face, sucking in light and reflecting gorgeousness, and hated him.

With a squawk, the bird threw itself off Sudharshan’s shoulder and onto the table. It started stalking Jerry, its tiny body strutting. It stared him down. Sudharshan laughed. “Rudy, stop it.” The bird ignored him. It was almost to the edge of the table where Jerry’s hand was. It was bigger than he’d thought. Jerry pulled his hands away, into his lap. Sudharshan scooped the bird up and cupped his other palm protectively around it. “Stop it, I said.” He beamed at Jerry. “That’s his snake-eating glare.” He tucked the bird back into its cage and locked the door.

“A parrot that eats snakes?”

Jerry’s dad began pouring chai. “It’s not a parrot, son. We never said that it was.”

Jerry took the yellow cup that his dad held out. He sipped the chai. It was too sweet. “What the fuck is it, then?”

“Jerry. Language.”

“I don’t know the word for it in English,” Sudharshan told him. “I just call him Rudy. He knows his name. They all do.”

Dad poured chai for himself and Sudharshan. As he lifted the teapot, his biceps swelled against the rolled-up sleeve of the tight white t-shirt he was wearing. He looked better nowadays, Jerry had to admit. He hadn’t

heard his dad complain once about his bunions. Blunt-toed army boots had replaced the pointy Italian leather shoes. Well-worn jeans sat better on his hips than the polyester dress pants that used to be his uniform. His gut had shrunk. It was now just this cute little suggestion of paunch, yet another manly bulge beneath his form-fitting t-shirts. A chain of fat silver beads encircled his neck. They shone against the warm yellow-brown of his skin. Jerry wondered where the tiny gold cross on its sallow gold chain had gone. The stiff brush cut in which Dad now wore his black hair suited his solid, square face. The lines in the corners of his eyes were the friendly signs of someone who smiled a lot, not the creases with which Jerry’d become familiar as a child; the disappointment and anger that had once been incised there. Now Dad’s brown eyes were happy. Who was this man?

Dad offered Sudharshan the cup of chai along with a tender gaze. Jerry felt a lump forming in his solar plexus. The mug disappeared behind Sudharshan’s long, wide hands. There was just a little bit of yellow china gleaming out from between his fingers. He sipped from his cupped hand. The colour of the mug made his chin glow. Jerry thought of butter, of chocolate brownies, warm and sweet in the mouth. He pushed the thought away.

Sandor thought it was all very cute. *Your dad’s one of the boys now*, he’d said. *Hey—maybe the two of them can come to the Box with us some day*. Jerry’d told him to shut the fuck up.

“Eclipse soon,” Sudharshan said. “You going to watch it?”

“That’s why I came,” Jerry reminded him. “That’s why you invited me.” His dad only looked at Sudharshan, stricken.

“Where will you go?” Dad asked Sudharshan.

“I thought we’d go up onto the roof,” Sudharshan replied. “We can see the sky more clearly from there.”

His face remained open, friendly, but Jerry’d been looking at his dad, so he knew that Sudharshan hadn’t answered the question Dad had asked. Dad stared into his mug like someone had hidden the sun in there. He looked up at Jerry, baring a too-bright smile. “Hey, Jer; you seen my Monstera?”

“Say what?”

Dad pointed to a shady corner of the apartment. Sure enough, there was a Swiss Cheese plant there, a static explosion of large, oval leaves riddled with holes. Jerry hadn’t really noticed it before, huddled in the dark like that. “Wouldn’t it be better in the sun, Dad, like the rest of the plants?”

Dad sucked back the rest of his chai, put the cup down. He had an angry look. He pointedly didn’t direct it to Sudharshan. “It prefers to have its roots in the shade. But it gets more than enough sun. Look at where it’s growing to.”

With his eyes, Jerry followed the trailing growth of the plant. It had made its way along the bottom of the wall to the big picture window, and sure enough, was climbing to the light, using a thick, succulent tree in a pot there

as its ladder. The leaves of the Monstera were so mixed in with the leaves of the tree that Jerry couldn't tell what the tree was.

"It's a banana plant," Sudharshan told him. The Monstera needs it, but it's strangling it. I'll have to have my cousin get me a new one."

Dad reached for Sudharshan's hand, but Sudharshan pulled away. "Delicious," Sudharshan said. "The chai, I mean. It was perfect, lover." He smiled at Dad, hesitated, took the outstretched hand, kissed it. The longing on Dad's face! And now Jerry was afraid, like when he was a kid. Like when his parents would fight, and then try not to fight, try to make up, but one of them would be closed, arms folded, the light shut from their face, and the other would look with longing, would try to touch, would be rebuffed and then finally taken in again, reluctantly, and the child Jerry would feel relief, but with a hard little stone of fear left there, below his breastbone.

"Isn't it about time for that eclipse?" he asked Dad and Sudharshan. In his cage, peeled Rudy screamed and flapped his raw limbs, swinging back and forth on his little trapeze.

Sudharshan checked his watch. "Yes, soon." He went to a beautiful pale wooden cabinet, all carved--the doors looked like strips of bamboo--and got out three pairs of goggles. The eyepieces had a funny gold sheen to them. "Welders' glasses," he said. "Rated safe for looking at the sun." He handed one to Jerry.

"I'm not coming," Dad told them. He sat at the table, mug in his hands, staring at the window where the banana and the Monstera plants wrestled.

Sudharshan just stood there, looking at Dad. His face did something complicated, moved through shock and sadness to an unbending calm. "Carlos," he said softly, "don't you want to see what happens? I don't know when I'll see you again."

"Why?" Jerry asked. "Where're you going?"

"He's leaving me," Dad told Jerry.

"I am not." Sudharshan went to the front door, began pulling on his boots. "I'll come back."

"When?" Dad asked.

Sudharshan reached into the hallway closet, pulled out a long, black wool coat. He shrugged into it, stuck the two pairs of goggles into a pocket. "As soon as I can, lover."

"Where are you going?" Jerry asked again. Rudy swung harder and harder on his trapeze, warbling a harsh and complicated song. Sudharshan reached into the closet, pulled out something round and shiny, about the size of a Frisbee.

"I'm travelling for work. I have to go."

"You're leaving me."

"What's that thing you're holding?" Jerry asked. What in hell was going on?

"If you don't come outside with me now, we won't be able to say goodbye."

"You're leaving after the eclipse?" Jerry asked. Rudy hit an ear-piercing note. Dad's eyes were wet with tears. Sudharshan walked over to him, touched his shoulder.

"Please, Carlos. It's about to happen. Please come."

"Will someone tell me what's going on?" Jerry said. They didn't even look at him. Dad stood, got his coat, a sexy biker jacket in heavy brown cowhide. Jerry hated it that his dad looked sexy.

"Let's go," Dad said. "Jerry, why're you just standing there?"

Sudharshan did something to make the gold disc disappear into the inside pocket of his coat. It should have been too big to fit. Jerry slipped into his own coat, and when he turned back, Sudharshan had Rudy out of the cage again. He put the bird inside his coat and cinched the belt of the coat tight. Rudy shifted around inside, stuck his creepy little head out. "Ready?" Sudharshan asked.

"You're taking Rudy to see the eclipse? Won't it damage his eyes?"

"He'll be okay," Dad told him. "Come on."

As Sudharshan unlocked the front door, Jerry's eyes fell on the picture window. The Monstera was fruiting. The spike that it thrust up towards the light would plump. In a year, it would be a scaly fruit with pale yellow flesh. It would taste delicately sweet to some, like a mix of banana and pineapple. To others, it would irritate their throats and make them cough in vain efforts to dislodge the miniscule hairs with which the fruit was filled.

The three men and the bird went out into the hallway of the apartment building, heading for the elevator. Jerry remembered something. "Dad? I thought that Monstera never fruits if you grow it in a pot?"

Grumpily, Dad replied, "strange things happen around Sudharshan."

In the elevator, no one spoke. Rudy peered around him with interested, birdseed eyes. Jerry wondered what Sudharshan would do if his pet pooped in his coat.

They stepped out onto the roof. The cold, bluish light of late afternoon made Jerry squint. There was a fractic wind. It poked fingers down his collar, up his sleeves. "There's the sun," Sudharshan said, pointing.

"I know where the sun is," Dad responded. But he didn't look where his lover was pointing. Instead he went to the side and looked over. They were 32 floors up. There was a ledge, but it'd be easy to leap. Jerry moved towards his dad.

"Carlos, come over here and put your goggles on," Sudharshan said. "You too, Jerry."

Rudy punctuated the command with a high note. Both Jerry and his dad obeyed.

The goggles made everything a calm, non-reflective yellow. The sun no longer bit at Jerry's eyes. Dad looked bug-eyed, strange. Jerry went back to the ledge, looked over. He could see the construction site, the excavator, the gravid tree.

Dad said to Sudharshan, "aren't you going to put your glasses on, too?"

"I don't need them."

"And did you bring a pair for me?" said a voice from over by the door to the elevator. Jerry looked. It was the man from the street. He tossed the lick of green hair out of his eyes and hitched his way over to Sudharshan, scowling.

Sudharshan only nodded. "Good to see you, Gar. You'll be fine, you know that."

"You two know each other, then?" Jerry was way out of his depth. He only wished he knew whose waters he was floundering in.

Gar regarded him bitterly. "His family knows my family."

"I'd take care of Gar, if he'd let me," Sudharshan said.

"I just bet you would." This from Jerry's father. "It's him you're going away with, isn't it? The rest was just some story."

Sudharshan replied, "Carlos, it's not what you think." The sky began to darken, unnaturally.

"I don't know what to believe any more, Vick."

Vick? Victor? Wasn't his name Sudharshan?

Dad let go of Sudharshan's hand. Or Vick, or whoever he was. Dad adjusted his goggles more comfortably on his face. "Gar. That's your name, right?" he snarled.

"Yeah."

"Well, you should cover your eyes or something."

"I'll be okay," the young man replied gently. He turned his angry face full on the darkening sun. Jerry was frightened. People went blind like that, staring at eclipses.

"Hey, Gar," he whispered, but the young man ignored him.

A whistling sound came from the front of Sudharshan's coat. Rudy worked his way right out into the open, and with a happy warble, jumped onto Gar's shoulder. Gar looked to see what had landed on him, and his face softened. "Hi there, little brother," he said to the bird. He reached an open palm to Rudy, who leapt into it, chirping. The bird nibbled lightly at one of Gar's fingers, a gesture of avian affection. Gar grinned broadly down at Rudy, then up at Jerry. "He's just a fucking little sport, isn't he? He and I."

"I'm sorry, Gar," Sudharshan said. "Sometimes it happens that way." The sky was blackish-gray now. "Pollution, toxins leach into the eggs. You know." The air rushed, whooshed around them. "We look after you. All of you." Looking up at the sun, Jerry's dad gasped, put his hands to his mouth. Jerry didn't dare look. The wind beat like wings.

"Yes, you do, O King," Gar replied. "You extend the hand of charity to us broken ones, whether we're any use to you or not."

"Well I would, if you would take it. You don't have to beg in the streets."

"You don't get it," Gar told him.

Jerry, too unreasonably terrified to think, kept his gaze resolutely down. There, in the building lot; the tree with its swollen middle. The wrecking machine crouched over it, crane-like. As Jerry watched, a shadow washed over it, over half the city.

Out of the dusklight Gar muttered, "I could live with you and be fed serpents' tongues and sweet water."

"Amirta."

"Whatever. Sugar. I could, but I'm not Rudy. I won't die without your care. I don't *have* to stay with you."

Rudy screamed. It was almost full dark now. Whatever was arriving was big enough to blot out all the light, to eclipse the sun. Jerry's dad cried out and crouched against the roof, covering. "I believe you, I believe you," he whimpered.

"It's all right, Carlos," Sudharshan shouted over the rushing wind. He pulled the disk out of his coat. It glowed with light. He held it high and twirled it, signalling.

There was a huge cracking sound from the construction site. By the light of Sudharshan's disk of fire, Jerry could see that the swollen tree had finally burst at the belly and split apart.

Jerry felt the weight of air above them rush down. He refused to look beyond Sudharshan's hand with its spinning circle. Something was coming. He threw himself over his dad. And finally, finally, he looked up.

Pinions wide enough to span creation. A keel of a chest, deeper than the oceans. A man's body with the dimensions of a god. Backlit by the sun it eclipsed, the bird-headed man-thing swooped down, roaring. Talons that could grasp an elephant and bear it away. A raptor's beak long enough to spear a sun. Jerry cried, but couldn't look away. Small, he was so small. The thing swept past them, the wind of its passing nearly knocking them over. The sun peeked back out. The thing's awful cawing stopped.

"Long time no see, Daddy!" Gar called out to the creature.

Jerry's dad mewed under him. Jerry hardly heard it. He had to know. He stood on noodle legs and looked over the side.

The massive bird thing looked briefly up at them. Its deep gaze, absently hungry, sucked Jerry in. A pointed tongue the length of a car snaked out and licked a hooked beak. Then it looked back down. It had folded itself up to sit in the construction site like a brooding hen in a nest. The tree stuck out from among its breast feathers. If the skeleton building or the excavator were still there, they were hidden somewhere under its body. On the street, cars were gathering to ogle. As though it bit on a toothpick, the thing pulled the top of the swollen tree away.

A smaller, ugly head covered in pinny green feathers poked out from beneath the bird-thing's breast. Crazy, Jerry thought of Rudy sticking his head out of Sudharshan's--Vick's--coat. "Oh," said Gar. "Would you look at that? A healthy hatchling at last."

The smaller bird opened its beak wide. It was all red inside there. The big bird-thing retched and vomited into the ugly baby bird's mouth. Frantically, the baby gulped it down. The father fed his child.

"The long thin scrawny ones stick between your teeth, and the short thick ones just squirm..." sang Gar. "Whaddya figure my new brother's dining on, Vishnu? Vishnu, not Victor. "Pre-digested cobras? King snakes? I remember how that tastes."

"He can't do it by himself," Sudharshan murmured.

Jerry's dad had stood up. He was looking down at the insane spectacle in the construction lot. Wonder made his features gentle. "That's some growing boy," he said. "How often will he eat?"

"About a ton of meat, every other day," Sudharshan said. "Garuda will need to hunt down a lot of snakes over the next five years or so. I have to help him. The baby is my new mount."

"So you're going to go away after all," Jerry's dad said. "You're leaving."

Sudharshan looked exasperated. "I told you; not for long!"

"Five years isn't long?"

"Not when you're a god, it isn't," Gar told them.

Jerry looked at his father's eyes filling, at his father bowing over again, shrinking in on himself again. He looked at Sudharshan, at the grief on the god's face. He remembered the picture albums that his mother had shown him, of his dad as a little boy in khaki shorts, grinning for the camera, proudly holding up--

"Dad," he said.

"He's leaving me, Jerry."

"Dad. Listen. Look at me."

"I'm going to be alone again."

"Dad."

"What."

"You used to hunt snakes, Dad," Jerry told him. "As a boy. Remember?"

And through his gold-lined goggles, Jerry's father *looked* at him, really saw him clearly. "My god," Dad whispered. "I did." He reached for Jerry and pulled him into an embrace, laughing, crying. Surprised, Jerry hugged back. His dad's shoulders were broader than they looked.

Over Jerry's shoulder, Dad said to Sudharshan, "I'll help you with your Garuda. You and me, okay? It's perfect."

"No," responded Sudharshan.

Stricken, Jerry's dad released him. From the street below came the sound of sirens. Jerry glanced over the side. Two fire engines were converging on the construction site. As if.

"No," said Sudharshan again. "It won't work, Carlos."

"Why not?" Jerry's dad cried out.

"It's too dangerous."

"I don't care. We'll be together. I can protect you."

The incarnation of an immortal didn't even bother to point out the flaw in his partner's logic. "You can't leave your job."

"Like they'll miss one lousy bureaucrat."

"Rudy, then. I can't take him, he's too frail. I need you here to look after him."

And now, Jerry's dad was at a loss for words. His face began to crumple.

Sudharshan was crying now, too. "Rudy's my responsibility, Carlos. All the garudas are. I thought you'd help me take care of him. Please, lover."

Jerry saw Dad's broad shoulders bunch, the twist of his hip, before he realised what was happening. Dad turned, Sudharshan screamed, "No!" and Jerry reached his hands out to catch Dad, to hold him, but Dad was vaulting over the ledge before any of them could move.

"Fuck!" Gar cried out. Someone in the street screamed.

Dad spread his arms and legs. He plummeted, land-

ed on the garuda's broad back, rolled. Jerry tried to keep breathing. Dad fetched up against a boulder-sized shoulder. He pushed himself to a sitting position. Jerry could see the moon of his upturned face, looking at them. He waved.

The garuda turned its eagle's head, peered down at its new rider. It opened its beak and struck. Carlos barely danced out of the way in time.

"Please, please," Sudharshan whispered. "He's my love. Please don't hurt him."

A god was begging for his father's life.

"Hey, Dad!" Gar called down. The garuda met his gaze. "That's Carlos! He's gonna help you feed the little one there."

The garuda closed its beak. Twisted its head sideways to regard Jerry's dad with one eye. Carlos reached a hand up, stroked the tip of its mane of feathers, each longer than Carlos was tall. The garuda allowed the touch. Turned back to feeding his son.

Sudharshan threw his head back, eyes closed. He let a breath out. His shoulders relaxed. "Oh, you smart-mouthed monster's son, you," he said to Gar. "Thank you."

"Any time I can be of assistance."

Sudharshan looked at him. Calmly, Gar gazed back. "Yes," the god replied. "I'll remember."

"You do that."

Sudharshan regarded the scene below them, his gaze fond. "Now, what am I going to do with that stubborn man? He can't come with me. Rudy needs..."

Gar laughed. "Is that all? Don't sweat it, Vishnu. I can housesit. Keep Rudy in birdseed and earthworms, yeah?" Rudy skreeked.

Sudharshan glared at the two of them, the two failed garudas. He scowled down at the construction site, where Dad was stroking the garuda with one hand, and trying to wave the firemen away with the other. They had ringed the garuda and stood, uncertainly holding limp hoses. Sudharshan sighed. "All right, then," he said.

Jerry laughed. Sandor'd never believe this in a million years.

"Look, we'd better be going," Sudharshan told them. "Those people down there could get hurt. We'll send word, Gar."

Vishnu didn't so much jump as float down into the cushioning of the garuda's feathered body. His dad and Vishnu pulled the ugly baby bird into a cradle between them on the garuda's back. The garuda purred at them as they struggled. Its child was bigger than the two men combined. But they managed.

The police had arrived. They bullhorned at them to get down, pointed rifles. Dad shielded Vishnu with his body. The garuda roared again, and the people on the ground crouched and covered their ears. It gathered its taloned feet under itself and leapt into the air, its wings pumping. They flew. In seconds they were too small to see.

"You'll have to care for the Monstera, too," Jerry told Gar.

"What's that?"

"It's ugly, and it's beautiful. I'll show you."

Sitting in Gar's palm, Rudy made a chirping noise.

"Yeah, but he never remembers," Gar told his brother.

"Never remembers what?" Jerry asked.

"My dad. The garuda. We don't like king snakes. They have this weird sweetish taste to them."

Jerry laughed, trying to make out the speck in the sky.

"He forgets, huh? Yeah, I know how that goes."