
I SOMETIMES THINK THAT none of the rest of the things would have happened if we hadn't performed the Scottish Play that night at Mezel-Goull. Nothing good ever comes from putting on the Scottish Play—if we remember any history at all, we know that—and much bad often does.

But I doubt if there have ever been ramifications like this before.

The *Muse of Fire* followed the Archon funeral barge out of the Pleroma into the Kenoma, slipped out of its pleromic wake like a newborn emerging from a caul, and made its own weak-fusion way to our next stop on the tour, a world known only as 25–25–261B. I'd been there before. By this time, I'd been with the Earth's Men long enough to have visited all of the four hundred or so worlds we were allowed to tour regularly. They say that there are over ten thousand worlds in the Tell—ten thousand we humans have been scattered to, I mean—but I'll never know if that's true. *We'll* never know.

I always love the way the *Muse* roars down through cloud and sky on her thundering three-mile-long pillar of fire, especially at night, and the descent to the arbeiter community on the coastal plateau below the Archon keep of Mezel-Goull was no disappointment.

We landed on the inner edge of the great stone shelf separating the human villages from the acid-tossed sea cliffs. One glance at the *Muse*'s log had reminded me that 25-25-261B had only three variations in its day and weather: twilight-bright dimness and scalding spray blown in by winds from the crashing black ocean of sulfuric acid for fourteen hours each day; twilight-bright dimness and sandstorms blown to the barely habitable coasts by hot winds from the interior of the continent for another fourteen hours each day; and full darkness when no winds blew for the final fourteen hours. The air was breathable here—all of our tour worlds had that in common, of course, since we only travel to planets where the Archons keep *arbeiter* and *dole* slaves—but even in the middle of their twenty-one hours of daytime on this bleak rock, the sky brightened to only a dim, brooding grayness because of the constant layers of clouds, and no one ventured out unprotected during the hours when the scalding spray blew in from the black, sulfuric sea.

The *Muse* touched down during the hours the hot *simoom* winds blew. No one came out from the huddled stone city to meet us. The thousands of *arbeiter*s were either sleeping in their barracks between shifts or working in the mines, dropping down to darkness in rusty buckets and then following veins miles deeper underground to harvest a gray fungus that the Archons considered a delicacy. The few hundred local *doles* in their somewhat higher huddle of stone hovels were doing whatever *doles* do: recording, accounting, measuring, file-keeping, waiting for instructions from their masters via the *dragomen*.

We stayed inside the ship while the hot winds roared, but the *Muse's* cabiri scrambled out through maintenance hatches like so many flesh-and-metal spiders, opened storage panels, rigged worklights, strung long cables from the hull, pounded k-chrome stakes into solid rock, unfolded steelmesh canvas, and had the main performance tent up and rigidified within thirty minutes. The first show was not scheduled to begin for another six hours, but it took a while for the cabiri to arrange the lighting and stage and set up the many rows of seats. The old Globe Theater in London during the Bard's time, according to troupe lore, would seat three thousand, but our little tent-theater comfortably seated about eight hundred human beings. We expected far fewer than that during each of our four scheduled performances on 25–25–261B.

On many worlds we have permission to land at a variety of arbeiter huddles, but this world had only this single major human population center. The town has no name, of course. We humans gave up naming things long ago, abandoning that habit along with our culture, politics, arts, history, hope, and sense of self. No one in the troupe or among the arbeiteres and doles here had a clue as to who had named the Archon keep Mezel-Goull, which apparently meant “Devil's Rest,” but the name seemed appropriate. It *sounded* appropriate, even if the words actually had no meaning.

The hulking mass of Archon steel and black stone dominated an overhanging cliff about six miles north of this plateau upon which the humans were housed. Through binoculars, I could see the tall slits of tower windows glowing yellow while pale white searchlights



stabbed out from the keep and up to the highlands, then probed down over the human escarpment and across the *Muse*, then swept out to the sulfur sea. None of us from the troupe had ever been to the keep, of course—why would humans, other than dragomen (whom most of us do not consider human), have any business with Archons? They own us, they control our lives, they dictate our actions and fates, but they have no interest in us and we usually return the favor.



THERE WERE TWENTY-THREE of us in this Shakespearean troupe called the Earth's Men. Not all of us were men, of course, although we knew through stage history that in the Bard's day even the women's roles were acted by males.

My name is Wilbr. I was twenty SEY old that day we landed on 25-25-261B and had been chosen for the troupe when I was nine and turned out to be good enough at memorizing my lines and hitting my marks to be on stage for most productions, but by age twenty I knew in my heart that I would never be a great actor. Probably not even a good one. But my hope remained to play Hamlet someday, somehow, somewhere. Even if only once.

There were a couple of others about my age in the Earth's Men; Philp was one of them and a good friend. There were several young women in the troupe, including Aglaé, the best and most attractive Juliet and Rosalind I've ever seen: she was a year older than me and my choice for girlfriend, lover, and wife, but she never noticed me;



Tooley was our age, but he primarily did basic maintenance engineering on the *Muse*, although he could hold a spear in a crowd scene if pressed to.

Kemp and Burbank were the two real leaders of the troupe, along with Kemp's wife (and Burbank's lover) Condella, whom everyone secretly, and never affectionately, referred to as "the Cunt." I never learned how the nickname got started—some say it was her French accent as Catherine talking to her maid in *Henry V*—but other and less kind guesses would probably have been equally accurate.

Kemp had always been a clown in the most honorable sense of the word: a young *arbeiter* comic actor and improviser when he was chosen for the Earth's Men by Burbank's father, the former leader of the troupe, more than fifty years earlier. One of Kemp's specialties was Falstaff although he'd lost weight as he aged, so he now had to wear a special suit fitted out with padding whenever he played Sir John. He was a brilliant Falstaff, but he was even more brilliant—frighteningly so—as Lear. If Kemp had had his way, we would have performed *The Tragedy of King Lear* for every second performance.

Burbank had the weight for Falstaff but not the comic timing, and since he was in his early fifties SEY, was not quite old enough—nor impressive enough in personality—to make an adequate Lear. Yet he was now too old to play Hamlet, the role his father had owned and in which this younger Burbank had also excelled. There was something about the Prince's dithering and indecisiveness and self-pity that perfectly fit Burbank. Still, it was a frustrating time for Burbank and he marked it by getting hammier and hammier in the roles Kemp allowed him