



Gingerbread Boy



PHYLLIS GOTLIEB



*He was a boy. He never could be a man.
He could only help them—and love
them—and flee from them—*



BENNO was sitting in the closet with the door closed. It was dark and stuffy, and the toe of a shoe was digging into the base of his spine, but he liked the closeness. He had been grown in

a tank as narrow as this closet, in dark, warm liquids. He had no real memory of that time, but he closed his eyes and imagined that he could remember the warmth, and the love and kindness that



seemed to be around him then . . .

There was a thump and a yell of laughter, and he blinked. Poppy and her ball. Well, she had nothing to worry about. He had been playing with her a few moments ago. He would throw the ball and she would miss it and run after it shrieking.

"Come on, Benno, throw it, Benno!" and Benno threw it, mouth drawn in the thin, ironical line that served him for a smile.

Finally, running to catch it, she overreached herself and fell. She sat there a minute, lower lip shoved out and mouth drawn down at the corners into a deep inverted U before it opened into a howl.

"No, no, Poppy. Don't cry, lovey," said Benno, pulling her up as Mrs. Peretto ran into the room.

"Benno, what did you—" She bit off the words and turned to the child. "Tell Mummy what happened, sweetie."

Benno said quietly, "Mrs. Peretto, why don't you ask Poppy *what I did to her?*"

The woman whipped around and he saw that she was trembling. She loosened her hold on the little girl and stood up.

"Benno, I—I don't know what's got into you. You never used to be like this. You used to call me Mom—" Abruptly she went out of the room.

But she had left the child behind—*afraid to let me know she doesn't trust me*—and Poppy trotted up to Benno and yanked on his trouser leg. "Come on, Benno, let's play some more."

"No more for now, Poppy." Benno gently pulled away from the sticky fingers. "Go find your Mummy."

So he went and sat down in the closet with the door shut and brooded. He would have enjoyed one of Wenslow's cigars now, but the closet was no place to smoke it. Anyway, this was no good. But as he was about to rise he heard a different sound: Mrs Peretto dialling on the intercom. He stayed still.

"Helen? Oh—fine, I guess. Nothing new really, but—I've been having a bit of trouble too. Thing is, I can't even say it's anything I haven't made up in my own mind. But I'm beginning to be a little frightened. . . ."

Benno waited for a while to be sure she had gone. For her to know he skulked in closets when he felt moody wouldn't have helped at all. As he opened the door, he saw himself in the full-length glass, an image of a broad stocky twelve-year-old boy.

But he was five years old, not twelve. He had been made in this shape and he would die in it: pseudo-male and sterile, hairless except for the strong, dark line of brow and the

close-cropped head of hair so black and wiry it looked artificial. Even the temper of his skin was dark and sullen.

He ran a hand over his face. He had been grown from a piece of Peretto's flesh, so the features were Peretto's; but Peretto was a man, and Benno a second-hand copy pretending to be his child.

He sneered at the image and slipped out of the house.

PERETTO and Wenslow shared one of the shabby portables in Administration. It contained the lab where Benno had been born and a small private office, and when Benno reached it he was glad to find Peretto in and Wenslow out.

Peretto looked up as he closed the door behind him. "What's eating you, Benno?"

"Not me," said Benno. "You."

"I don't think I'm giving you any trouble. What is it?"

"Mrs. Peretto thinks I've got it in for Poppy, or something. She thought I hurt her when she fell today."

Peretto shrugged. "It's not unusual for parents to be worried about jealousy problems between older and younger children."

Benno helped himself in Wenslow's humidor and lit up.

"She's not worried. She's frightened. I heard her saying so to Mrs. Metzner on the phone when I was sitting in

the closet thinking. She's scared of me."

Peretto said hesitantly, "That's not so, Benno. I think she's feeling a little guilty, like a lot of the rest of us."

"Because it's hard to keep loving made-up things like us when you've got real kids of your own."

"We put a lot of love into you—"

"But that was different. That was when you thought you couldn't have any kids."

"Earth was pretty hot when we left it. We couldn't be sure we wouldn't be sterile forever. We had to have something, Benno."

"So now you've got something and you're stuck with it." Benno looked out of the window where the yellow sun of Skander V was shining on experimental plots and groves of trees, on Residential, on the dunes and the salt lake and the rest of the Colony beyond. "And it makes you sick to look at us and think you wanted and loved us."

"Benno!"

"But it's true! Dickon told me Wenslow said that to him."

"Oh, Wenslow."

"Well, maybe you don't like him so much either. But you and he are on the same side."

"Do we have to pick sides?"

"We can't help it. A lot of the guys are talking funny, too."

Peretto waited. The an-

droids were unable to lie and he was unwilling to make Benno compromise himself.

Finally Benno said uncomfortably, "About Bimbo Harrington . . ."

"But you know he drowned. We couldn't do anything for him."

"Nobody ever saw his body."

"It wasn't a thing to see. He—the android body decomposes so—it's not anything we can help."

"Well, they think—" Benno was beginning, but the door opened.

It was Wenslow. His pale eyes flashed and his thin nostrils twitched at the smoke in the air.

"At the cigars again, I see, Benno," he said pleasantly. Benno blew a mouthful of smoke into his face and walked out.

After the door had closed he could hear the voices:

"I swear to God if that thing belonged to me—"

Peretto interrupted wearily: "You leave cigars around because you get a good snide laugh out of seeing him smoke them. If he manages to do it without amusing you, too bad for you. Now let's stop niggling and get to work."

"AND then she said, 'I don't know what's got into you, you used to call me Mom until—'"

"And if you tried it she'd

twist your ears off for you, the bitch!"

Benno watched Dickon's face across the campfire and realized that Dickon had probably paid very bitterly for his own enjoyment in blowing smoke at Wenslow. He would have to be more careful of his pleasures in the future.

He said, trying to keep the peace, "The Perettos aren't bad, Dickon. You have to be fair to them."

The shadows in Dickon's eyes were as deep as the humps of the dunes against the night sky. "You can say that, smoking cigars and turning yourself into a clown to suck up to them."

"If I did that, I'd be selling my soul," said Benno. "But if I left off smoking when I like it just for fear of anything they might do, I'd be selling my soul twice over."

"Soul! I'd like to see you show me where you've got a soul."

"Nothing *you* could see! Oh, hell. I guess if I had to live with the Wenslows I'd be as big a bastard as you are."

Dickon answered him in kind, and he waited for a slackening.

"—but don't you see? They loved us and made us love them, so they think we've got immortal souls. That's the only thing that's keeping them from wiping us out."

"So what makes you think

they haven't started wiping us out already?" asked Rudi Metzner. "What about Bimbo?"

"I asked Peretto about that today," Benno said slowly. "He said he'd drowned."

"And you believed him? Sure he drowned. But it was in one of those tanks, you can bet. Did you know they'd started up the tanks again? What's your guess about what they're doing?"

"I don't get you."

"Take a look in one of those tanks," said Dickon softly. "Try it in the middle of the night, sneak around the back where the guard won't see you. You'll see they've got a thing in there, something new they're making, and I'll bet they started it with Bimbo. Maybe Peretto and Wenslow wouldn't bloody their hands on us, but that don't stop them from making a new kind of android to do their work, a killer that's not so scared of souls! Take a look and see."

"I'll promise this," said Benno. "You try messing around with the Perettos and I'll kill you dead, Dickon. Because *you* haven't got the soul of a flea!"

THE stars were dim beyond the two moons that made the shadows shift and fall; rustling trees covered his footsteps in the grass. He cursed them, he didn't believe them,

he had sworn he wouldn't go. But here he was. He had wakened in the middle of the night as though he had planned it, and dressed and crept out. He stood still for a moment. If his world broke now, he would never be able to love the Perettos again, and there was nothing else. Yet he went on.

At the back of the fence he had the whole building between himself and the guard. He climbed the chicken-wire and dropped down silently. He knew that the lock of the tank-room window was broken. No one was worried about theft. The guard was there only to prevent the disturbance of delicate adjustments.

He pushed at the window. It creaked, but the wind covered the noise.

Inside it was very dark, but he knew this room well. Two steps and he had found the bank of switches on the first tank. One dim light was all he dared. Even in the dusk beyond the peephole that one was certainly empty. He pressed back the toggle and moved on. The second was empty too, and he began to hope. But the third—

He was afraid to turn on more than one light, and the liquid was cloudy, but there was definitely a creature there.

In a second it became sensitive to the light and began to turn and thresh about. The

cloudiness enveloped it again, but he had seen it. Sickened, he turned the light out and groped for the window. He dropped down and climbed the wire again, but without caring where he was going or whether he was caught.

A few steps away from the fence a group of figures emerged from the bushes and encircled him.

"Couldn't resist, eh, Benno?"

"What do you want?" he whispered.

"We had a bet on you," said Dickon, grinning. "Go ahead, tell us what you saw there."

Benno was silent for a moment, and said finally, "All right, I saw something there, but not clearly enough to tell what it was."

"But we told you what it was and you know. Go on, won't you?"

"Yes," said Benno.

"Not feelin' so snotty now, are you, Benno?"

Hurrah for our side. He would have lashed out at them, and turned to find the weak point in the circle, but they were his equals.

"Let me go," he said.

"Okay, for now. But remember, we'll be calling on you one day. You'll come."

He ran, and their laughter followed him.

IT was afternoon and, with Poppy swinging on his hand, Benno tramped along

the stretch of sand that threaded through the tufted dunes and separated the back gardens of Residential from the lake. The sun was shining, but not for Benno.

He tried to tell himself that he had no proof for anything, but he felt weak inside in the face of Dickon's hatred of the humans.

"Let's dig here," said Poppy, "and we'll find the treasure." Benno sat down while she went to work. Her presence was Mrs. Peretto's way of saying: I was a fool yesterday, and didn't mean what I said. If that was the case, he had nothing to fear there. He looked around. The beach was quiet, the waters rippled sluggishly.

A few houses down, a woman came through the back gate and out onto the sand, a naked baby tucked under one arm and a flannel blanket under the other. It was Mrs. Harrington. She was wearing brief red shorts and a fluffy blouse; a black ponytail bobbed on her tanned neck.

She trotted down to one of the sundecks near the water and sat there, sloshing her feet while the baby kicked on the blanket beside her, making bubbly sounds.

Then Harrington, out from work, swung down the garden, leaped over the gate, and ran across the sands. He grabbed the ponytail, pulled

the woman's head back, and kissed her upside-down face. He whispered in her ear, gesturing back toward the house. She shushed him, glancing at Benno and Poppy. He cajoled; she resisted. Finally he pulled her by the arm and she shrugged, tucked up the baby, and followed him back to the house. Benno could hear them giggling as they went.

"When I get big, I'm going to be a mummy," said Poppy. "And you can be the daddy, Benno."

"Yeah," said Benno.

He crouched there, trapped in the amber of twelve-year-old boyhood on Skander. Peretto had said to him, "We would have been happy to make you—complete, if we could. We just don't know enough." But Benno, watching the Harringtons, knew very well what he would never be.

Poppy put aside her pail and shovel and came over to him, bracing herself between his knees and resting her forehead against his. Her breath was like apples; she scratched his face gently and he kissed her, rich with the pleasure of feeling a living being against him. *This is all I'm good for.* He hugged her as she giggled, and ruffled his hair in her neck, grunting like the wild pigs the colonists hunted for sport.

Someone shrieked behind him: "You filthy beast! Let

go of that child at once, do you hear?"

He was so taken with surprise that he fell back in the sand, pulling the child on top of him. Mrs. Wenslow was standing over him, fists tight, face contorted:

"Dirty, dirty thing! Wait till everybody hears about this! Oh, to hear the Perettos, butter wouldn't melt in your mouth! I'll tell them different, you—"

But Benno righted himself and ran, leaving Poppy howling behind him. The woman knew he couldn't—! But it was no use stopping to argue. He ran.

In the hills he knew a few caves, under a matting of low gnarled trees. He squatted in one of them, nursing his hurt as the sun sank and the moons swung by. He thought and thought till his mind turned sickly and his head ached. Was he as innocent as he thought? He was afraid to search into the unexplored reaches of his mind, but he knew for sure that his loins were empty, and he cursed himself and his makers.

Exhausted finally, he groped in his pocket for one of the cigars he had filched the day before. He stared at it, shrugged and lit it.

He sat there smoking and watching the stars as they filtered in and out of the leaves. He didn't know what he was waiting for.

"PUT that out, you nut! You want to get caught?" Benno peered ahead; he could see nothing but stars and branches.

"Dickon?" he called tentatively.

Pushing aside the boughs, Dickon slipped in and sat beside him. "Go on, put it out. They'll see us a mile off."

"I don't care."

"I do, God damn it, the thing's suffocating me."

"You wouldn't have found me without it," said Benno sensibly as he put it out.

"Now they're not going to find us," said Dickon. "What happened? I was out hunting, and they rounded us up and sent us to bring you in. Huh!"

"I was playing with Poppy, horsing around. Somebody thought it was something dirty."

"Boy, I love you for that!" Dickon thumped him on the back. "It's what I've been waiting for, but I never thought you'd be the one. Who was it? Not Peretto?"

"No. It was Mrs. Wenslow."

Benno was shocked by the silence. No sneers, no laughter. He turned to look for Dickon's face in the dark, and thought suddenly: *he loves them.*

Dickon said in a low voice, "Nobody would play with that scrawny kid of theirs. They've got him so he's scared to let out a peep."

"I'm sorry, Dickon."

"What for, you bloody fool? What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Benno.

Dickon raised his head: "Listen, there they are. Halloo! Halloo!" he called softly down the hill.

"Who?" asked Benno.

"The rest of us; I've got two dozen down there, only ten missing." He divided the branches and called, "Come on up, you guys, I've found him!"

"But what—" Benno began, but Dickon was waving the others in.

"Hi!" they cried. "What was all the business about?"

DICKON guffawed. "He was horsing with the Perotto brat and they thought he—"

He elaborated to an extent that made Benno glad the darkness hid his flushed face. He could see their eyes glittering in the dimness. They were staring at him with respect.

"Gee, lemme touch you! You been holdin' out on us, Benno? Maybe you got—"

"Shut up, shut up, for God's sake!" snapped Benno. "He's feeding you a line. I'm just the same as you are." His people!

Dickon laughed again, nastily. "All right, forget about that for now. We've got to get the others together first. Then we can start out."

"Start out for what?" Ben-

no felt the incredulous stares around him.

"You all there? What do you think we've got these guns for? We're all set to knock the lot of them off the planet."

Benno caught his breath. "Just for me?"

"Who else? Think we're gonna let 'em get away with it?"

Benno stared at their set faces in the dusk. "But they're not mad at you, you damn fools!"

"What do you mean? Think you're going to back out after getting us all up here?"

"I didn't. You came after me." He tried to keep his voice level. "They got nothing on you. I just came up here to think for a while. Let me go back and take my lumps and we'll forget the whole business."

"Forget it!" Dickon swung up the rifle. "You're coming down with us right now. I'm giving the orders and you're gonna do what I say!"

"Yeah? You want to fight, okay, but you don't pin it on me." Benno grasped the rifle barrel and pulled it to his chest. "Go on, kill me."

Dickon stood indecisive. Everyone knew that if Benno were dead the whole affair would collapse. Then he pulled the rifle out of Benno's hands and set it aside, snarling.

"Okay, you guys. Put away the guns and let the scab have it!"

WORDS rattled at him: ". . . betbetbetterterter i-i-idededea . . ." He shook his head and the words sounded in his ears as he pulled himself out of his sleep or coma, he never knew which.

Mist was pushing into the cave. The trees outside seemed clotted with cobwebs. His lids were heavy and crusted. His body felt flayed to the bone, sore in every joint, muscle, nerve. His tongue pulled away from his palate with a wrench and his arms flopped like dying fishes. He looked at them and saw that the wrists were bound.

". . . don't know why I never thought of it before . . ." Benno moved his head again and nearly groaned. There was no comfort in the sickly early dawn rolling by in wet drifts of fog.

"Much better idea," Dickon was saying. "We can't just run down there waving guns. They'd have us knocked off in an hour. But if we pick up one of their brats they'll come after us. They'll never know where to find us in all these holes, and we can do what we like with them."

Benno pulled himself up till he sat hunched over his knees. He didn't dare touch his face, even to rub his eyes.

"All we have to decide is whose kid," said one of the others.

"There's the scab up," said Dickon. "Knock him on the head, somebody."

"Leave him alone, Dickon, he never hurt you." Dickon cocked an eyebrow at the speaker and went back to his plan.

"Whose! Think anybody'd miss Wenslow's brat? We want Peretto's. They'll put it on Benno, and if he gets killed, nobody'll worry."

Benno stared at Dickon with horror and pity. His personality had disintegrated like a child's in a tantrum, leaving only an idiot rage. But the other androids were shifting about, looking at each other.

Finally, Rudi said, "We didn't figure on anybody getting killed in this, Dickon."

Dickon turned on him: "What did you think, you were playing tiddleywinks?"

"We wanted to get even a bit, get them under our thumb and give them a scare—"

"Yeah, and end up with love and kisses and an all-day sucker!"

Benno said, "Isn't that what *you* want, Dickon?"

"You shut up! Keep your mouth out of this!" He was almost sobbing. "I could kill you now easy as—"

"No you couldn't, Dickon," said Rudi quietly.

"Jesus, a bunch of cup-

cakes! I used to think you wanted to be men! But I'll do it, I'll do it myself, and I'll pull you in with me. Watch, you'll see I'll split the whole damn planet in two!"

HE LEAPED out and flung himself down the slope with a crash of branches and was lost in the mist.

"Oh, God," said Rudi. He was about to follow when Benno cried out, "Don't do it! It's too thick to find him in that."

"But if he hurts the kid they'll wipe us all out!"

"Undo my hands," said Benno. They freed him.

"What do you think you can do?"

"I shouldn't have run off in the first place." Benno peered into the mist that was slowly settling like water down a clogged drain. "He won't get much of a head start in that; if I can reach Peretto he'll listen to me."

"But you're a mess."

Benno rubbed his wrists. "We'll all be pretty messy if I don't go."

Rudi said, "We've got the guns—"

"We'd end up killing somebody. Besides . . . this is really between the Wenslows and me, and that's how it'll have to be settled."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Oh, wait around here half an hour, and when you get

back, tell them I got away. That way your tongue won't tie up on you, it's true as far as it goes."

"But hell, they'll know there's something fishy there!"

"Sure, but they won't do anything about it." Benno rubbed his sore head. "They might even respect you for sticking up for me."

Rudi said awkwardly, "Don't rub it in, Benno. Here, take a gun anyway."

"Nuts. I don't want to shoot anybody. Or give them an excuse to shoot me."

HE scrambled down, aching at every move, catching drunkenly at the dripping branches. At the bottom he stopped to get his breath and pull together his ripped clothes.

How would Dickon go about stealing a child from the midst of Residential?

The children usually played outside after breakfast when the mist had cleared and the grass dried off a little. Sometimes the androids took care of them after their work in the fields and vegetable gardens. Today there would be no androids, and perhaps the children would not be trusted outdoors. Would the humans be expecting an attack? Dickon would take the chance and find out.

Benno cut over towards the lakeshore and the dunes, in

spite of the possibility that they might be ambushed. There weren't enough men to hide behind every dune. As the sun came out he climbed a rise and checked his direction. The quarry might have changed plans a hundred times already, but with Dickon's anger, and the rifle under his arm, Benno thought the chance was small.

He dipped in and out among the dunes. He saw no one else on the sands yet, but he knew that his dark moving figure would be eminently noticeable. He scrambled on, glancing uneasily at the buildings across the way. Dickon might have ended up at Administration with an attempt to attack Wenslow, but he thought there would have been more noise and running about in that case. No, he would have to assume that Dickon, like himself, was still skulking. But there was very little time.

Here, now, was the place where he and Poppy had been—yesterday? And where Mrs. Wenslow—he closed his mind on it, but here, also, was where he had watched the Harringtons with lewd eyes as they whispered together:

—don't start on me here, Bob, for God's sake. There's Benno and Poppy over there, watching us.

A kid and an android? What's it got to do with them anyway?

I don't know. Some of those androids . . .

Some of those androids lie awake at night, listening for sounds of love.

BENNO lay on the hillock of sand, the sun was risen. The throbbing aches in his body washed away, he was comfortable. The warmth of the sun told him this was all he could ever want; men were hateful, he did not need them, but the warmth and the sun . . .

Dickon! Where was Dickon? He leaped up, afraid that he had slept an hour, and what Dickon could have done in that time—but the sun hadn't moved. His drowsiness had only stretched the moment. But the danger of sleep was real. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes.

Then he saw his first man, down behind him where the sundecks began.

He couldn't tell whether he was armed, but he was moving east and heading for Benno. Benno scrambled for the next hillock. The man speeded up. *That's done it.* He would never make the last quarter mile at this rate. He gave up and began to run.

“. . . or I'll shoot!” came the end of a yell. Benno thought he was a liar. The noise of the shot knocked him off his feet with fright. He scurried on, glancing back once to see the pursuer run-

ning, not stopping to aim. *Because I'm not armed.* He had no idea how he would stop Dickon without a gun, but if he had brought one, he would have been dead by now. He looked back again. Now there were two of them. Good!

He cut north, straight through the trees, and made a beeline across the central green, gathering pursuers and frightening children with his beaten face.

Then he heard a shriek from back of the Perettos'.

In the yard he found Dickon at last. Poppy screaming under one arm, rifle in the other hand, Mrs. Peretto at bay. Benno stopped at the look on Dickon's face. It was as though he had evolved from some other feral animal and were now reverting to it.

Benno screamed, “Dickon! Dickon!” and without thinking tore up a lump of sod from the border edge and threw it. It struck Dickon in the face, but almost before it struck Benno heard the sound of the rifle, and Dickon fell, shot through the heart.

Behind them, Wenslow lowered the rifle.

Dickon sprawled grotesquely, his face tamed at last, and his mouth full of dirt.

I didn't have to do that to him . . . and I'm the only one who's sorry . . . Poppy flung herself against him, Pe-

retto and his wife crowded them. Peretto said teasingly, "I think you love him more than us, don't you, Poppy?"

"He has perverted the child," snarled Wenslow furiously.

BENNO was packing. Since nearly all he owned had been given to him by humans, he was too proud to take everything he wanted. But he had a knife, the clothes he wore, a few things he had made himself . . . He left off a moment, went over to the window and looked out at the familiar scene.

Below, the children were playing, and he watched their wheeling patterns on the grass; their cries were like birdcalls in the misty verge of evening. . . .

The door opened. Peretto came in and closed it behind him. His eyes took in the colored handkerchief in the best tradition spread out with Benno's possessions.

"You need an icebag for that face," he said. "I brought it."

"I don't want it." But he took it and held it to his swollen jaw.

Peretto drew in on his cigarette and let the coil of smoke drift away on his words. "Why are you running away?"

"You saw what he did," said Benno. "You heard what he said."

"Do you know anyone who agrees with him?"

Benno looked away.

"They're all afraid of us," he said after a moment, not very loud.

"You've shown them not to be. The rest are back and there won't be any trouble now. You know, you didn't have to go running off yesterday, nobody believed that woman."

"I—I'm not going because of her."

"You're running away so you can be by yourself. And pretend you're a man."

"That's a lousy thing to say!"

"You're an android, Benno," Peretto said gently. "You can only be a man between the ears."

"I'm nothing." They stared at each other, two cloudy images peering from beyond the looking-glass.

"The men and women who have the androids love them and—"

"They ruin them and kill them," Benno said stubbornly.

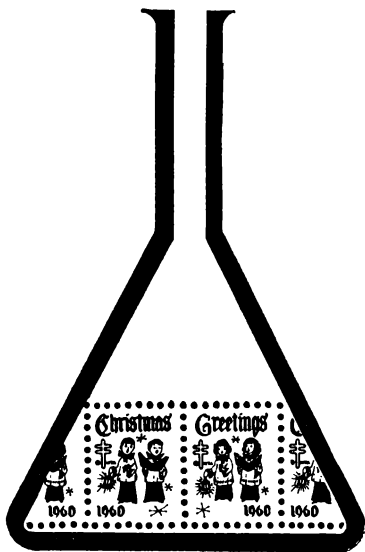
Peretto sighed. "There were some wild stories flying around about what was in the tank, weren't there? Dickon started most of them. Don't deny it."

"Well?"

"It's only that the Harringtons wanted another android in their family. Another Bimbo."

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"OH..." said Benno. Then he sneered. "So he can mind the baby while they—" He clapped his hand over his mouth and sat down on the bed, trembling, unable to make himself stop.

Peretto said very quietly: "You sounded exactly like Wenslow when you said that. You even looked exactly like him."

Benno saw a black gulf falling away before him, the proud goal he had been running for, a cave in the hills where he would eat hate till his soul was consumed, his humanity gone, and he had become the animal looking out of Dickon's eyes when he died.

"What am I to do?" He clasped his aching head in his hands.

"What can you do, except learn to live without envy or hate?"

When he looked up, Peretto was gone. The dark was rising to blend him with the room, the house, the Colony. There was nothing else. All he could ever have was right here.

He sat there while the moons rose and swung in their eccentric orbits. When he stood up finally, he did not unpack his bundle. Not yet. But he left it behind him on the table and went down to the Perettos.

END

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