

Wolf Mari

Homo Inferior



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The world of the new race was peaceful, comfortable, lovely – and completely static. Only Eric knew the haunting loneliness that had carried the old race to the stars, and he couldn't communicate it, even if he had dared to!

The starship waited. Cylindrical walls enclosed it, and a transparent plastic dome held it back from the sky and the stars. It waited, while night changed to day and back again, while the seasons merged one into another, and the years, and the centuries. It towered as gleaming and as uncorroded as it had when it was first built, long ago, when men had bustled about it and in it, their shouting and their laughter and the sound of their tools ringing against the metallic plates.

Now few men ever came to it. And those who did come merely looked with quiet faces for a few minutes, and then went away again.

The generations kaleidoscoped by. The Starship waited.

Eric met the other children when he was four years old. They were out in the country, and he'd slipped away from his parents and started wading along the edge of a tiny stream, kicking at the water spiders.

His feet were soaked, and his knees were streaked with mud where he'd knelt down to play. His father wouldn't like it later,

but right now it didn't matter. It was fun to be off by himself, splashing along the stream, feeling the sun hot on his back and the water icy against his feet.

A water spider scooted past him, heading for the tangled moss along the bank. He bent down, scooped his hand through the water to catch it. For a moment he had it, then it slipped over his fingers and darted away, out of his reach.

As he stood up, disappointed, he saw them: two boys and a girl, not much older than he. They were standing at the edge of the trees, watching him.

He'd seen children before, but he'd never met any of them. His parents kept him away from them – and from all strangers. He stood still, watching them, waiting for them to say something. He felt excited and uncomfortable at the same time.

They didn't say anything. They just watched him, very intently.

He felt even more uncomfortable.

The bigger boy laughed. He pointed at Eric and laughed again and looked over at his companions. They shook their heads.

Eric waded up out of the water. He didn't know whether to go over to them or run away, back to his mother. He didn't understand the way they were looking at him.

"Hello," he said.

The big boy laughed again. "See?" he said, pointing at Eric. "He can't."

"Can't what?" Eric said.

The three looked at him, not saying anything. Then they all burst out laughing. They pointed at him, jumped up and down and clapped their hands together.

"What's funny?" Eric said, backing away from them, wishing his mother would come, and yet afraid to turn around and run.

"You," the girl said. "You're funny. Funny, funny, funny! You're stu-pid."

The others took it up. "Stu-pid, stu-pid. You can't talk to us, you're too stu-pid..."

They skipped down the bank toward him, laughing and calling. They jumped up and down and pointed at him, crowded closer and closer.

"Silly, silly. Can't talk. Silly, silly. Can't talk..."

Eric backed away from them. He tried to run, but he couldn't. His knees shook too much. He could hardly move his legs at all. He began to cry.

They crowded still closer around him. "Stu-pid." Their laughter was terrible. He couldn't get away from them. He cried louder.

"Eric!" His mother's voice. He twisted around, saw her coming, running toward him along the bank.

"Mama!" He could move again. He stumbled toward her.

"He wants his mama," the big boy said. "Funny baby."

His mother was looking past him, at the other children. They stopped laughing abruptly. They looked back at her for a moment, scuffing their feet in the dirt and not saying anything.

Suddenly the big boy turned and ran, up over the bank and out of sight. The other boy followed him.

The girl started to run, and then she looked at Eric's mother again and stopped. She looked back at Eric. "I'm sorry," she said sulkily, and then she turned and fled after the others.

Eric's mother picked him up. "It's all right," she said. "Mother's here. It's all right."

He clung to her, clutching her convulsively, his whole body shaking. "Why, Mama? Why?"

"You're all right, dear."

She was warm and her arms were tight around him. He was home again, and safe. He relaxed, slowly.

"Don't leave me, Mama."

"I won't, dear."

She crooned to him, softly, and he relaxed still more. His head drooped on her shoulder and after a while he fell asleep.

But it wasn't the same as it had been. It wouldn't ever be quite the same again. He knew he was different now.

That night Eric lay asleep. He was curled on his side, one chubby hand under his cheek, the other still holding his favorite animal, the wooly lamb his mother had given him for his birthday. He stirred in his sleep, threshing restlessly, and whimpered.

His mother's face lifted mutely to her husband's.

"Myron, the things those children said. It must have been terrible for him. I'm glad at least that he couldn't perceive what

they were thinking."

Myron sighed. He put his arm about her shoulders and drew her close against him. "Don't torture yourself, Gwin. You can't make it easier for him. There's no way."

"But we'll have to tell him something."

He stroked her hair. The four years of their shared sorrow lay heavily between them as he looked down over her head at his son.

"Poor devil. Let him keep his childhood while he can, Gwin. He'll know he's all alone soon enough."

She nodded, burying her face against his chest. "I know..."

Eric whimpered again, and his hands clenched into fists and came up to protect his face.

Instinctively Gwin reached out to him, and then she drew back. She couldn't reach his emotions. There was no perception. There was no way she could enter his dreams and rearrange them and comfort him.

"Poor devil," his father said again. "He's got his whole life to be lonely in."

The summer passed, and another winter and another summer. Eric spent more and more time by himself. He liked to sit on the glassed-in sunporch, bouncing his ball up and down and talking to it, aloud, pretending that it answered him back. He liked to lie on his stomach close to the wall and look out at the garden with its riotous mass of flowers and the insects that flew among them. Some flew quickly, their wings moving so fast that they were just blurs. Others flew slowly, swooping on outspread bright-colored

wings from petal to petal. He liked these slow-flying ones the best. He could wiggle his shoulder blades in time with their wings and pretend that he was flying too.

Sometimes other children came by on the outside of the wall. He could look out at them without worrying, because they couldn't see him. The wall wasn't transparent from the outside. He liked it when three or four of them came by together, laughing and chasing each other through the garden. Usually, though, they didn't stay long. After they had played a few minutes his father or his mother went out and looked at them, and then they went away.

Eric was playing by himself when the old man came out to the sunporch doorway and stood there, saying nothing, making no effort to interrupt or to speak. He was so quiet that after a while Eric almost didn't mind his being there.

The old man turned back to Myron and Gwin.

"Of course the boy can learn. He's not stupid."

Eric bounced the ball, flung it against the transparent glass, caught it, bounced it again.

"But how, Walden?" Gwin shook her head. "You offer to teach him, but – "

Walden smiled. "Remember *these*?"

... Walden's study. The familiar curtains drawn aside, and the shelves behind them. The rows of bright-backed, box-like objects, most of them old and spotted, quite unhygienic...

Gwin shook her head at the perception, but Myron nodded.

"Books. I didn't know there were any outside the museums."

Walden smiled again. "Only mine. Books are fascinating things. All the knowledge of a race, gathered together on a few shelves..."

"Knowledge?" Myron shrugged. "Imagine storing knowledge in those – boxes. What are they? What's in them? Just words..."

The books faded as Walden sighed. "You'd be surprised what the old race did, with just those – boxes."

He looked across at Eric, who was now bouncing his ball and counting, out loud, up to three, and then going back and starting again.

"The boy can learn what's in those books. Just as if he'd gone to school back in the old times."

Myron and Gwin looked doubtfully at each other, and then over at the corner where Eric played unheeding. Perhaps Walden could help. Perhaps...

"Eric," Gwin said aloud.

"Yes, mother?"

"We've decided you're going to go to school, the way you want to. Mr. Walden here is going to be your teacher. Isn't that nice?"

Eric looked at her and then at the old man. Strangers didn't often come out on the sunporch. Strangers usually left him alone.

He bounced the ball again without answering.

"Say something, Eric," his mother commanded.

Eric looked back at Walden. "He can't teach me to be like other children, can he?"

"No," Walden said. "I can't."

"Then I don't want to go to school." Eric threw the ball across the room as hard as he could.

"But there once were other people like *you*," Walden said. "Lots of them. And you can learn about them, if you want to."

"Other people like me? Where?"

Myron and Gwin looked helplessly at each other and at the old man. Gwin began to cry and Myron cursed softly, on the perception level so that Eric wouldn't hear them.

But Walden's face was gentle and understanding as he answered, so understanding that Eric couldn't help wanting desperately to believe him.

"Everyone was like you once," Walden said. "A long time ago."

It was a new life for Eric. Every day he would go over to Walden's and the two of them would pull back the curtains in the study and Walden would lift down some of the books. It was as if Walden was giving him the past, all of it, as fast as he could grasp it.

"I'm really like the old race, Walden?"

"Yes, Eric. You'll see just how much like them..."

Identity. Here in the past, in the books he was learning to read, in the pictures, the pages and pages of scenes and portraits. Strange scenes, far removed from the gardens and the quiet houses and the wordless smile of friend to friend.

Great buildings and small. The Parthenon in the moonlight,

not too many pages beyond the cave, with its smoky fire and first crude wall drawings. Cities bright with a million neon lights, and still later, caves again – the underground stations of the Moon colonies. All unreal, and yet —

They were his people, these men in the pictures. Strange men, violent men: the barbarian trampling his enemy to death beneath his horse's hooves, the knight in armor marching to the Crusade, the spaceman. And the quieter men: the farmer, the artisan, the poet – they too were his people, and far easier to understand than the others.

The skill of reading mastered, and the long, sweeping vistas of the past. Their histories. Their wars. "Why did they fight, Walden?" And Walden's sigh. "I don't know, Eric, but they did."

So much to learn. So much to understand. Their art and music and literature and religion. Patterns of life that ebbed and flowed and ebbed again, but never in quite the same way. "Why did they change so much, Walden?" And the answer, "You probably know that better than I, Eric..."

Perhaps he did. For he went on to the books that Walden ignored. Their mathematics, their science. The apple's fall, and the orbits of planets. The sudden spiral of analysis, theory, technology. The machines – steamships, airplanes, spaceships...

And the searching loneliness that carried the old race from the caves of Earth to the stars. The searching, common to the violent man and the quiet man, to the doer and the dreaming poet.

Why do we hunger, who own the Moon and trample the

shifting dust of Mars?

Why aren't we content with the worlds we've won? Why don't we rest, with the system ours?

We have cast off the planets like outgrown toys, and now we want the stars...

"Have you ever been to the stars, Walden?"

Walden stared at him. Then he laughed. "Of course not, Eric. Nobody goes there now. None of our race has ever gone. Why should we?"

There was no explaining. Walden had never been lonely.

And then one day, while he was reading some fiction from the middle period of the race, Eric found the fantasy. Speculation about the future, about their future... About the new race!

He read on, his heart pounding, until the same old pattern came clear. They had foreseen conflict, struggle between old race and new, suspicion and hatred and tragedy. The happy ending was superficial. Everyone was motivated as they had been motivated.

He shut the book and sat there, wanting to reach back across the years to the old race writers who had been so right and yet so terribly, blindly wrong. The writers who had seen in the new only a continuation of the old, of themselves, of their own fears and their own hungers.

"Why did they die, Walden?" He didn't expect an answer.

"Why does any race die, Eric?"

His own people, forever removed from him, linked to him only

through the books, the pictures, and his own backward-reaching emotions.

"Walden, hasn't there *ever* been anyone else like me, since they died?"

Silence. Then, slowly, Walden nodded.

"I wondered how long it would be before you asked that. Yes, there have been others. Sometimes three or four in a generation."

"Then, perhaps..."

"No," Walden said. "There aren't any others now. We'd know it if there were." He turned away from Eric, to the plastic wall that looked out across the garden and the children playing and the long, level, flower-carpeted plain.

"Sometimes, when there's more than one of them, they go out there away from us, out to the hills where it's wild. But they're found, of course. Found, and brought back." He sighed. "The last of them died when I was a boy."

Others like him. Within Walden's lifetime, others, cut off from their own race, lonely and rootless in the midst of the new. Others like him, but not now, in his lifetime. For him there were only the books.

The old race was gone, gone with all its conflicts, all its violence, its stupidity – and its flaming rockets in the void and its Parthenon in the moonlight.

Eric came into the study and stopped. The room was filled with strangers. There were half a dozen men besides Walden, most of them fairly old, white-haired and studious looking. They

all turned to look at him, watched him gravely without speaking.

"Well, there he is." Walden looked from face to face. "Are you still worried? Do you still think that one small boy constitutes a threat to the race? What about you, Abbot?"

"I don't know. I still think he should have been institutionalized in the beginning."

"Why? So you could study the brain processes of the lower animals?" Walden's thoughts were as sarcastic as he could send them.

"No, of course not. But don't you see what you've done, by teaching him to read? You've started him thinking of the old race. Don't deny it."

"I don't."

The thin man, Drew, broke in angrily. "He's not full grown yet. Just fourteen, isn't he? How can you be sure what he'll be like later? He'll be a problem. They've always been problems."

They were afraid. That was what was the matter with them. Walden sighed. "Tell them what you've been studying, Eric," he said aloud.

For a minute Eric was too tongue-tied to answer. He stood motionless, waiting for them to laugh at him.

"Go on. Tell them."

"I've been reading about the old race," Eric said. "All about the stars. About the people who went off in the starships and explored our whole galaxy."

"What's a galaxy?" the thin man said. Walden could perceive

that he really didn't know.

Eric's fear lessened. These men weren't laughing at him. They weren't being just polite, either. They were interested. He smiled at them, shyly, and told them about the books and the wonderful, strange tales of the past that the books told. The men listened, nodding from time to time. But he knew that they didn't understand. The world of the books was his alone...

"Well?" Walden looked at the others. They looked back. Their emotions were a welter of doubt, of indecision.

"You've heard the boy," Walden said quietly, thrusting his own uneasiness down, out of his thoughts.

"Yes." Abbot hesitated. "He seems bright enough – quite different from what I'd expected. At least he's not like the ones who grew up wild in the hills. This boy isn't a savage."

Walden shrugged. "Maybe they weren't savages either," he suggested. "After all, it's been fifty years since the last of them died. And a lot of legends can spring up in fifty years."

"Perhaps we have been worrying unnecessarily." Abbot got up to go, but his eyes still held Walden's. "But," he added, "it's up to you to watch him. If he reverts, becomes dangerous in any way, he'll have to be locked up. That's final."

The others nodded.

"I'll watch him," Walden told them. "Just stop worrying."

He stood at the door and waited until they were out of sight. Then and only then did he allow himself to sigh and taste the fear he'd kept hidden. The old men, the men with authority, were the

dangerous ones.

Walden snorted. Even with perception, men could be fools.

The summer that Eric was sixteen Walden took him to the museum. The aircar made the trip in just a few hours – but it was farther than Eric had ever traveled in his life, and farther than most people ever bothered traveling.

The museum lay on an open plain where there weren't many houses. At first glance it was far from impressive. Just a few big buildings, housing the artifacts, and a few old ruins of ancient constructions, leveled now and half buried in the sands.

"It's nothing." Eric looked down at it, disappointed. "Nothing at all."

"What did you expect?" Walden set the aircar down between the two largest buildings. "You knew it wouldn't be like the pictures in the books. You knew that none of the old race's cities are left."

"I know," Eric said. "But I expected more than this."

He got out of the car and followed Walden around to the door of the first building. Another man, almost as old as Walden, came toward them smiling. The two men shook hands and stood happily perceiving each other.

"This is Eric," Walden said aloud. "Eric, this is Prior, the caretaker here. He was one of my schoolmates."

"It's been years since we've perceived short range," Prior said. "Years. But I suppose the boy wants to look around inside?"

Eric nodded, although he didn't care too much. He was too

disappointed to care. There was nothing here that he hadn't seen a hundred times before.

They went inside, past some scale models of the old cities. The same models, though a bit bigger, that Eric had seen in the three-dimensional view-books. Then they went into another room, lined with thousands of books, some very old, many the tiny microfilmed ones from the middle periods of the old race.

"How do you like it, Eric?" the caretaker said.

"It's fine," he said flatly, not really meaning it. He was angry at himself for feeling disappointment. Walden had told him what to expect. And yet he'd kept thinking that he'd walk into one of the old cities and be able to imagine that it was ten thousand years ago and others were around him. Others like him...

Ruins. Ruins covered by dirt, and no one of the present race would even bother about uncovering them.

Prior and Walden looked at each other and smiled. "Did you tell him?" the caretaker telepathed.

"No. I thought we'd surprise him. I knew all the rest would disappoint him."

"Eric," the caretaker said aloud. "Come this way. There's another room I want to show you."

He followed them downstairs, down a long winding ramp that spiraled underground so far that he lost track of the distance they had descended. He didn't much care anyway. Ahead of him, the other two were communicating, leaving him alone.

"Through here," Prior said, stepping off the ramp.

They entered a room that was like the bottom of a well, with smooth stone sides and far, far above them a glass roof, with clouds apparently drifting across its surface. But it wasn't a well. It was a vault, forever preserving the thing that had been the old race's masterpiece.

It rested in the center of the room, its nose pointing up at the sky. It was like the pictures, and unlike them. It was big, far bigger than Eric had ever visualized it. It was tall and smooth and as new looking as if its builders had just stepped outside for a minute and would be back in another minute to blast off for the stars.

"A starship," Walden said. "One of the last types."

"There aren't many left," Prior said. "We're lucky to have this one in our museum."

Eric wasn't listening. He was looking at the ship. The old race's ship. His ship.

"The old race built strange things," Prior said. "This is one of the strangest." He shook his head. "Imagine the time they put in on it... And for what?"

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