THE MYTH

Paulette Callen

Teraia loves books. Especially the fantasies and stories, myths and legends from the Old Times, before the Great Dying. She has her own collection, which grows as she grows. She likes the stories about King Arthur and Merlin; she likes the legends of Karon Gy, the hero who was the first pioneer on the New Planet. Her favorite stories are about a great mythical being that had wonderful qualities and was marvelous to behold—a giant with tusks and a long snout that was the most sensitive thing, and at the same time, the most powerful thing you could imagine. The pachyderm, also called the elephant, was, in legend, both a friend to humankind and a most formidable creature—loving, loyal, capable of tears and of drawing pictures as well as ripping out trees.

Like the stories and poems about King Arthur and his knights, those of the pachyderm are sometimes very sad. She remembers the last page of one of her favorite elephant poems:

*not for misdeeds, not for crimes
for food, nor clothes, but bangles and beads
you die*

*sawed-off faces
majesty sacrilegied*

**LET THE IVORY
BURN! BURN!**

*in barns and stockpiles
let it burn*

*in warehouses, on shelves let it burn
burn in jewel-cases*

*burn off wrists and fingers
to appease your spirit*

*let us dance dance
slowly and in sorrow mourning and wailing
in grief and repentance around the fires
it will not be enough
and there isn't time*

Teraia lives in a colony on the New Planet where life forms, transplanted from the Old Planet, are all quite small, the largest being the dolphins that swim freely in the human-made bay in front of the house where she lives. (She swims with them every day. They are her best friends.) When she grows up, she wants to be an archaeologist, or maybe a paleontologist. She wants to be in one of the teams that are regularly going back to the Old Planet to research the way things were before the Great Dying, to try to figure out what led up to it. The Old Planet is cautiously being resettled, but only by trained ecologists and scientists. Teraia wants to be one of them. She reads the papers every day looking for the latest reports of their findings.

Today, there are headlines. Bones found. Put together. The article goes on at length about this great find. The news has been kept quiet until enough evidence was gathered. Now it is certain. No doubt about it. Teraia is weeping before she finishes the article. Her mother enters the room and sees her daughter, face contorted, in such grief as she cannot imagine the cause.

"My child, what is the matter? What has happened?"

"Oh, Maman," Teraia weeps, "they were real. The elephants.....were real."

FICTION