

Robin Williams, Speaking Spanish by A. R. Morlan

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“Amazing ... that’s amazing. He should work for NASA or something like that.”

...

“So much for NASA...”

Ronald Bass and Barry Morrow,
Rain Man, 1988

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Case # 290727DD/I-R

03-01-58/T. Kenward, caseworker

Day 1: Contact

“The Jones’ cabin’s down past Storage Module Four ... don’t bother to knock. Ain’t like he’s gonna get up to greet ya—”

“Throw some cheese balls in first, he’ll never notice you’re in there—”

Sabriah put one hand on my shoulder and pressed her dark fingers into the soft hollow between my collarbone and the top of my upper arm, as she told the two asteroid engineers, “Dalton wouldn’t appreciate that ... he’s lactose intolerant.” Turning her scarf-wrapped head my way, as she steered me down the diffusely-lit corridor, away from Broga Hastings and Moire Payne, Sabriah continued, her voice loud enough for the man and woman behind us to hear easily, “I also have Dalton on a yeast and gluten-free diet. I’m not all that sure that it’s helping him, but between that and his meds, he does seem to be content.”

I guessed that the last part was strictly for my benefit: every ship’s nutritionist on every asteroid-tracking or asteroid mining vessel I’d visited in the last eighteen months inevitably managed to toss off some sort of comment about how “happy” or “content” or “integrated” his or her Savvy happened to be. Even when the rest of the crew was attacking their Savvy, taunting him, teasing him, or calling him names like “Rain Man” or “Equipment” or (on the last vessel I’d been on before boarding the *Isen-Rodor* a few hours ago) “Ballast.”

Nodding my own head, I said, “That *is* the goal here ... although I have to admit—” twisting my neck as far to the left as it would go comfortably, I made sure that the pair of engineers were out of hearing range “—it doesn’t look like the rest of the crew is all that content with Mr. Durwin’s presence on this ship. Not that that’s

uncommon,” I added quickly, when I saw what seemed to be a moue of consternation pucker the nutritionist’s mouth. “The presence of a Savant-Contingent usually does create some interpersonal difficulties ... which is why I’m here—”

“Listen, Ms. Kenward. You can cut the socio-worker babble with me. You’re here for pretty much the same reason Dalton’s here ... there’s a big damn glut of social workers running around on Earth and the Moon, tending to all the Savvy-babies who’ve grown up to be a bigger damn burden on the economy than anyone could’ve guessed when they were all born some thirty-odd years ago. Only thing is, at least someone got creative when it came time to find all those Savvies jobs ... I don’t see much of anything creative or useful in your job. Especially when it comes to the Savvies.”

“Well, I do think what I’m doing *is* ‘useful’ when it comes to Savant-Contingents. Have you *been* on some of those other ships—”

“Do you think things actually change once you’ve been on *any* of those ‘other ships’? I doubt anything you can do will make asteroid monkeys like Moire and Broga change when it comes to how ‘content’ they are with a Savvy like Dalton. As long as all *he* does all day and all night is sit around, doing however little he does, while *they’re* floating around a damned asteroid out in the middle of nothing, with just a few cables attached to glorified harpoons keeping them from really floating away for good and—” here she deliberately stared at me, her dark hazel eyes boring into mine “—they’re getting paid the same as *he* is, I’d say that it isn’t too likely that they’ll ever be ‘content’ with a Savvy taking up space on their ship.”

“If by ‘space’ you mean room, I don’t think that’s the problem ... this vessel was assembled over the moon, so keeping it streamlined or even small wasn’t a consideration. There’s plenty of room for—”

“Do they have a course in Obtuse down in Social Worker School?”

“No, there’s no course in—”

The nutritionist let out an open-mouthed sigh and backed away from me, until the top of her scarf-wrapped head was resting on the slightly curved corridor wall behind her. Finally looking my way after letting her chin sink low against her neck, she said, “I was being facetious. I’m sorry, I know you were sent here, and I know I should co-operate. Dalton’s room is just ahead. One with the picture of a cat pasted on the door. Not that he did that ... I don’t know if it was Moire or Broga who’s responsible for that. But the guys in navigation and astrometrics aren’t into *Alien* movies, and I know the Captain’s strictly a reader. Go on ... Broga was right about the knocking part. Dalton won’t notice, and I don’t think he’ll care.”

As I watched the woman walk away from me, back toward those “asteroid monkeys” who’d been so quick to ingratiate themselves with me from almost the

minute I'd boarded the *Isen-Rodor*, I finally made the connection between Hastings' "Jones" reference and the typical Savvy nicknames—Jones, that "ship's cat" from the first two *Aliens* films. The orange tabby who was ultimately the only survivor of that mining ship's original crew, since that woman (Ripley?) left him back on Earth before heading back to the Alien's planet. I'd have to make a note of that one in my report—calling a Savvy a "Jones" would have to be added to the official list of non-PC phrases included in asteroid-mining training classes. Not that it had helped so far when it came to the words "Rain Man."

Sabriah was right about the picture pasted on the door. An old shot of the cat food spokescat, Morris, crudely clipped from a calendar. Orange cats—anything orange, for that matter—mostly look alike to me, but there was a bit of lettering from the calendar cover slanting across this cat's front paws. Wondering if Dalton was a redhead (and hoping he wasn't—bad enough Moire had dark red hair, so dark-yet-bright it hurt my eyes), I nonetheless did knock first, before pressing the palm-pad to the left of the sliding pocket-style door, and letting myself into the Savant-Contingent's room. As the door slid into the bifid sidewall, the cut-out of Morris rasped against the narrow opening, and tore a bit more along the cat's right side. A few more trips back and forth, and that picture would be decapitated. I'd have to remember to rip it off the door before that happened.

For a second, I was mentally torn—shut the door behind me, risking a possible panic attack on the Savvy's part, or allow those asteroid monkeys to listen in, in case they happened to follow me down the corridor? While my eyes acclimated to the darkness, I slid my hand along the smooth surface of the interior wall until I found the palm-pad, then reflexively pushed it in. As the door emerged from the recesses of the bifid wall, I turned around, taking in the Savvy's quarters.

Personal quarters on asteroid ships tended to be large by Terran or Lunar standards, thanks to the vessels being constructed in space—the need to streamline was gone, since the ship wasn't designed to land, let alone move through an atmosphere. The design of the *Isen-Rodor* was common to all the other asteroid miner/trackers I'd visited. Navigation, astrometrics/ main computers/locking springs for asteroid-landings and launches were lumped on one end, with a short, thick axial connector (giving each ship its gravitational spin) between, surrounded by a series of smaller, well-shielded walkways which allowed the crew to enter the assemblage of prefabricated units which made up the other end of the "dumbbell," including storage units, crew cabins, and reserve air/fuel/food/water units. From the outside, the *Isen-Rodor* was lumpy, asymmetrical, and studded with solar panels and undeployed space-sails (another contingency measure, this one less subject to crew-member ire than the Savvies). But on the inside ... there was an astonishing amount of personal space.

Personality clashes might have been inevitable, but every crew member could retreat to a twelve by fourteen private room, complete with a personal bathroom—no shower, but their own sink and toilet—whatever sound/movie system he or she

desired (within reason; each person could consume a limited amount of power for their own entertainment devices), plus enough space for whatever tchokies each crew member deemed necessary for his or her continued sanity while trapped in what some miners called intergalactic trailer parks. (The “intergalactic” part made no sense to me, since none of the asteroid ships ever left this galaxy, but the “trailer park” part made sense, especially since the assembled units which made up each end of the rotating “dumb-bell” did tend to be rectangular in shape.)

Dalton Durwin’s cabin—once my eyes grew acclimated to the dim interior—seemed little different than that of any of the Savvy cabins I’d seen so far during this assignment. Lots of MDVD’s, tall thin stacks of them like upended packages of soda crackers. And just as big as a square cracker—they looked like the old DVD’s but held more information per disk, for less mass. Virtually all the Savvies watched movies; while they’d been unlucky enough to be born during such a severe economic recession that even the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—not to mention the already failing SSI benefits—couldn’t guarantee the children of the Savant-Syndrome catastrophe previously standard treatments like music therapy, Lovass-type behavior programs, augmentation devices, facilitated communication, sensory integration, social skills programming, or auditory training, it was soon discovered that selecting the proper movies for these children could be of limited (i.e., cheap) benefit. At the very least, it kept them occupied while their parents and educators tried to figure out what to do with a second baby boom comprised largely of severely autistic, mathematically inclined savants. That this Savant-Syndrome was the result of a drug company foul-up of the highest order was of little help to either the children or their parents. After the manufacturer realized that a mix-up between what was supposed to be several batches of a common antacid and a newly-designated over-the-counter testosterone supplement for men was what had triggered an epidemic of autism, said drug company promptly filed for Chapter One bankruptcy. So even the lawyers were shafted some thirty years ago.

Before the Savant-Syndrome mess, perhaps one in ten autistic persons (most commonly a boy) was also a savant, but within a single generation, over 100 thousand expensive-to-educate savants were born. All of these children had no left/right brain division, but instead had one combined brain which was a full one third larger than the average human brain. The Social Security safety net was frayed to breaking by an ever-diminishing birth rate, and the whole SSI system was virtually cleaned out. True, the old system of reimbursing companies to hire the handicapped was still in place, but how many companies actually *needed* a worker whose lone talent is remembering long strings of numbers, or calculating square roots?

As I slowly looked around the cabin, with its stalagmite-like deposits of MDVD’s sprouting from every horizontal surface, I tried to find Dalton amid the clutter. I had to smile when I remembered how the bulk of the Savant-Syndrome babies managed to find their way into the astro-mining sector ... The phrase “Rain Man” was now considered to be both unPC and possible grounds for job termination after at least five written complaints within one year for any miner or

tracker stupid enough to keep calling the ship's Savvy by that name. But none of the children of the '20's Savvy-Boom would've ever been *on* an asteroid ship if it hadn't of been for that movie.

I'd seen the film so many times myself, I knew the whole sequence by heart—after the autistic savant, Raymond Babbitt, gets on his brother Charlie's nerves once too often, the younger man takes his older, autistic brother to a small-town doctor. And the doctor just has to try something he's read about, specifically asking Raymond some difficult calculating questions, which Raymond answers easily. And is his brother ever amazed ... he immediately thinks his older sibling is ready to work for NASA. Only, after doing those amazing feats of calculation, Raymond quickly reveals that he has no concept of numbers as they apply to money ... to him, a candy bar and a car cost the same amount of money. So, so much for NASA.

But Charlie Babbitt forgot something ... NASA-style calculations have nothing whatsoever to do with the cost of either candy bars or automobiles. For them, numbers are numbers, to be crunched, calculated, and compiled. So one day, someone at NASA who also happened to have a neighbor whose wife had given birth to a Savant-Syndrome son a few years earlier suddenly remembered a forty-some year old film, and a short scene within said film—and within a couple of years, when the oldest of the Syndrome boys were close to their teens, first NASA, then the private mining companies, began their Savant-Contingent training programs.

Which, in a few more turns, had brought me to this particular ship, where I now stood in this specific Savvy's cave of a cabin, trying to figure out exactly where he was—then I noticed the reflected light on his face and body, as he sat with his legs crossed in a semi-Lotus position on the far corner of the bunk attached to the one narrow end of his cabin, with a portable MDVD player resting on his knees. The rectangular back of the unit—which resembled a standard laptop—hid most of his chest, but the suddenly brighter light illuminated his arms and face rather clearly.

I must have walked into the room when he was loading the movie into the player; the first few seconds of play time usually showed a black screen with a white inset ratings symbol. He must have been wearing a private earphone—I couldn't hear any sound at all, save for his slow, steady breathing. Wondering if he could see me, I cautiously made my way toward his bunk, saying loudly-but-evenly, "Hello, Dalton? Can you hear me? I've been assigned to work with you during this run, by Social Services—hello?"

I wasn't expecting him to do anything specific—when it comes to dealing with minimally socialized savants, no set reaction can be anticipated, or expected—but what happened next did surprise me.

He looked at me. Directly eye-to-eye. Then ... smiled.

Not that his behavior was *impossible*; after all, the Rain Man character was something of an extreme case, in that he virtually never made eye contact. Autistic people, even savants, could make eye contact and sometimes did so without previous social skills training.

Aside from the asteroid-monkey twins, and the nutritionist, I'd also spoken to Gremian Penn, the bored, deeply wrinkled captain, as well as Kevan Lawler, the navigator, and Sloan Garrick, head of astrometrics—one as mild as the other was openly aggressive. Judging from the brief conversations I'd had with all of them, Dalton Durwin was not only not welcome in the rest of the ship, but he had never expressed any inclination to venture out past his own cabin, regardless of the feelings (or more properly the lack thereof) his crewmates had for him. Kevan and Sloan couldn't recall saying more than each asteroid-run's successive approximations to him over the intercom. And I don't think the captain even knew what Dalton looked like; he was so utterly disinterested in talking about him after I'd given the man my orders that the most I could get out of him was that Sabriah was more or less responsible for the man's care and feeding.

So he wasn't in the habit of holding extended conversations with anyone, save perhaps for the nutritionist, and I already gathered that she wasn't the most gifted person when it came to give and take conversations.

I smiled back at him, thinking that his smile may have merely been a reflexive action, something he'd learned from watching all those movies. Anyone can learn a lot about a nation's culture from watching its films, and considering that his brain literally had no barriers to information, that just about everything which went in stayed there, ready to be accessed, perhaps he simply picked up the notion of smiling-as-a-greeting from what he'd seen.

But he kept on looking at me. None of the other Savvies on any of the other ships had done that. A couple of them barely spoke to me after I'd spent days working with them.

Telling myself, Don't become overeager, he hasn't said anything yet, I kept on smiling, before coming a few steps closer, and asking, "May I see what you're watching?"

Standing about three feet from him, I could see the thin wires snaking from the back of the player up along his chest, where they puffed out to form two dark foam rounds over his ears. Simultaneously yanking the small earphones off his head with his left hand, and pushing the screen around toward me with his right, he said, "Standard Model's scattered in the names," as I slowly began to hunker down so that my eyes were level with the screen. One look toward that flat rectangular image, and I immediately knew what he was talking about—although hearing that unmistakable Danny Elfman score helped, too. The Savvy was watching that old Disney remake of *The Absent-Minded Professor*, *Flubber*. The Robin Williams

vehicle, with the opening credits that mixed physics symbols, including the unique letters which comprised the Standard Model, along with the remaining letters in each cast and crew-member's name. I'd loved that film when I was a child; my grandpa had one of those original DVD players, and he also had a small toy made for one of the fast-food places which featured a translucent bright green man-shaped blob of flubber dancing on an even older VHS videotape box. He'd bring out the toy whenever he played the film for me ... but it wasn't until I was much older that I figured out what all those "funny" letters in among the people's names really stood for.

When the credits were over, just before the film itself began, Dalton suddenly said, "Still looking for the one for the Higgs boson."

Physics was one of the subjects I almost didn't pass in college, but I remembered that it was a tiny particle, something still theoretical after being proposed in the 1960's, which had something to do with mass. I think. I did remember that there was no sign for it in the Standard Model. Just as I remembered that most of the Savant-Syndrome children were lucky if they received the equivalent of a high school education ... and subjects like physics were definitely considered unnecessary for them.

But there was no way he could have learned about Higgs bosons by watching a family-oriented comedy film ... even if the main character was a physics professor, let alone understood that they were something to be searched for, be it in the film's admittedly imaginative credits, or elsewhere. Maybe he'd seen a Standard Model chart somewhere, but to connect that with movie credits—

I was about to assure him that he wasn't the only one looking for the Higgs boson when I noticed something was off-kilter in the movie: Everyone, even the professor's cute little yellow flying robot, was speaking Spanish. I dimly recalled that Grandpa's DVD had some alternate language tracks, Spanish and I think even French, so I found myself asking him instead, "Do you speak Spanish?"

No answer at first, so I tilted my head just enough to be able to watch the Savvy instead of the film. He was trimmer than most of the other Savvies I'd seen in the past year and a half; considering that he seemed to spend his time watching movies on his bed, he looked to be the right weight for his height. No roll of fat pushing out the middle of his standard-issue tan cover-alls, no tell-tale creases over the thighs. Sabriah's special diets did seem to be doing him some good.

And thankfully (for me) he didn't have red hair; it looked dark, either black or brown. Like his eyes; those were definitely brown, with long, thick lashes. A little soft around the jawline, but not excessively so. No laugh or frown lines to speak of anywhere on his face. Not unexpected, there. He wasn't bad looking by any standards, either savant or average male. If his mouth hadn't been so immobile, with the lips pulled in a virtually straight horizontal line, he most certainly would have been

considered “cute” by any standards. Not handsome—his features were a bit too slack—but unequivocally attractive.

I’d noticed how Moire was all over every man she happened to be within close proximity to, regardless of who he was (including the obviously gay navigator Lawler, who not-so-tacitly slid away from her), so I realized that there was no way she’d ever been in Dalton’s room. She would not have been able to leave him alone, regardless of his emotional deficiencies. So there was no possibility that he’d been doing any socializing on his own—

“Robin Williams, speaking Spanish.”

Five minutes or more had to have passed since I’d spoken to him. But it was more or less an answer to my question—

“So you don’t speak Spanish yourself?”

“He is.”

I took that to mean No, as far as Dalton went.

“Uhm ... I don’t think that’s the *actor* on the *screen* speaking Spanish ... most actors can’t speak too many languages and I know they sometimes dub these films into more than one language. Do you know what dubbing is?”

Silence from Dalton, more unintelligible Spanish from the speakers.

“The studio hires someone who does speak Spanish, or whatever, and they record another audio track for the film. Then, when you make the selection, you hear *that person* speaking Spanish. Or whatever. Like French. There’s a French track on this, isn’t there—”

“French sounds wormy.”

I had to agree with him there. I had no facility for languages myself so all I could do was nod, then say, “Yes, it does sound... ‘wormy.’ But I can’t understand Spanish, either. Can *you* understand it?” Considering that he’d somehow picked up more than a rudimentary understanding of physics seemingly by watching the opening credits of a Disney film, I thought it worth a try to ask him about languages again.

And again, I got the same answer:

“Robin Williams speaking Spanish.”

No pause this time, no verbal comma. I supposed that he felt that Robin

Williams' body with a different-sounding Spanish voice equaled *that* actor speaking *that* language. Deciding that this Savvy's linguistic skills were both unknowable and unimportant at the time, I decided to try a new approach.

Turning away from the viewscreen, I strained my eyes in the sugary haze and looked for the nearest stack of MDVD's, before I began counting them softly, from the bottom to the top of the thin square tower. "—Eighteen, nineteen ... twenty. One, two, three ... four, five—" Gradually, Dalton turned down the volume on his player, and I let my voice grow louder as I began counting the last stack of films resting on the low stool near his bunk, "—Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. That's twenty, nineteen and ... twenty on the stool—"

"No. Twenty, twenty *and* nineteen. Nineteen's twenty is in the machine."

Hoping that he couldn't see me smile in the darkness, I said, "You got me. I never was any good with numbers ... but you are, aren't you?"

"Very good." He went back to watching the gelatinous leafy-green dancing blobs of flubber on the viewscreen.

Resting my crossed arms on his bunk, I asked him, "Do you like that color?"

"Nice color."

"But do *you* like it?"

"It's nice." I hated to make assumptions, but that seemed to be a yes.

"You like this movie, though. In Spanish and English?"

"Nice movie."

"Are your other movies just as nice?"

He watched the fluorescent green goop hop across the Professor's floor, replicating bounce by bounce for a few seconds, before I noticed a thin vertical frown line appear between his dark eyebrows. A change in expression could mean just about anything with a Savvy, and I subtly shifted my body away from him, just in case he started hitting himself, like the Savvy on the *Ignance-Roche* did five months ago. But he remained in his Lotus position, moving only his left hand as he began pointing at the various narrow piles of MDVD's around the room, while speaking in that low, slightly strident but still basically pleasant-sounding voice of his, "Twenty-two, twenty and twenty are good. Eighteen, eighteen and twenty ... ok. Twenty, twenty and nineteen, nice. Twenty-one, twenty-one, twenty-one ... don't watch much. Sixteen, sixteen, sixteen ... ok."

He went through every stack of films in the room (odd, how I'd not noticed how he had them in sets of three before), rating them by his own system of "don't watch much" to "nice" which—judging by the ever-so-slight emphasis in his voice—seemed to be his version of thumbs up, four stars, or "highly recommended." For some reason, to Dalton, "nice" was better than "good"—whether that was a strictly personal, idiosyncratic determination, or a deeper insight into what qualities made up that which was merely *good* as opposed to that which was intentionally *nice*, I had no way of knowing. And I doubted that he could tell me.

"Dalton, did you choose these movies, or were they given to you? By the mining company." I knew that everything Dalton owned was courtesy of the multi-national mining conglomerate which owned and operated the fleet of asteroid miner/tracker ships now scattered between the Earth, the Moon and Mars like so much debris in the heavens, the same company which was forced to seek out ore-rich asteroids once the majority of the Terran and Lunar mines were depleted of their mineral riches. But it was important to the people I worked for to determine whether or not the Savvies understood where they fit into the mining conglomerate's personnel structure. In short, did they think of themselves as employees, or as equipment?

"Given." A pause, then, unexpectedly, "I choose among them."

"I'm glad to hear that," I found myself blurting out, before I refocused, and continued, "So you did watch them all. Before you chose." (I had to know if he was selecting his "favorites" by content, or by some more intangible system, like how he reacted to the jewel-box artwork. It was something my employers felt was important.)

"All of them. Once or more. Nice ones most."

For once, I regretted my habit of not reading a Savvy's personnel file before speaking to him—usually, those first, unbiased opinions were far more useful than static clinical assessments stored in a data file—since Dalton was just so *different* from every other Savvy I'd spoken to so far. Despite the darkness in that cabin, I had this feeling that he was studying *me*—

"Dalton ... may I ask you a favor?"

That thin vertical furrow reappeared between his brows, then: "Oh ... kay..."

"I have trouble seeing in the dark ... everything looks really grainy. I can barely see your stacks of movies over there ... once the movie is over, could you please turn up your lights?"

From his silence, I realized that I may've overloaded him with too many

requests, but as soon as the end credits of the movie were over—he obviously watched every disk from beginning to end—he reached over to the light panel above his bunk and flicked it on with his left hand. His action took me by surprise; I had to steady myself against the side of the bunk when I realized that his bunk had a red blanket on it. The intense color made my eyes ache, as the hue filled my range of vision.

“You ok?”

Narrowing my eyelids over my throbbing eyes until I was peering through a rainbow haze of eyelashes, I looked up into Dalton’s face. Limited as my view was, I could see that he was a rather good-looking young man. And I’d been right, his eyes were brown, a deep mahogany, like his hair. He’d put the player on his bunk, and had shifted around so that he was facing me, albeit with his legs still crossed. His hands were resting palms up on his thighs, the fingers loosely splayed. I didn’t expect him to put his hand on my shoulder, anything like that, but his voice did have a distinct note of concern.

Nodding, I shakily got to my feet, then—as I patted the nubby surface of his painfully cochineal blanket with my right hand—asked, “May I sit down?”

I wasn’t offended when he simultaneously nodded even as he edged closer to the cabin wall. Personal space was more than an issue with the majority of autistics, especially savants.

Positioning myself at the far end of the bunk, barely resting my weight on the mattress itself, I smiled at him, saying, “Red hurts my eyes. Just something I was born with ... it’s not your fault. You know how it is, to be born a certain way. You’re good with numbers, I’m bad with red. Yours is useful, mine isn’t. But it’s the way my brain is—” I was about to say “wired” but I still wasn’t sure if he thought of himself as employee or equipment, and a simple word like “wired” could so easily be misinterpreted by a Savvy, so I finally ended with “—structured. Genetically.”

“GATC.”

He said it so quickly, I wasn’t sure if he’d said it at all.

“Pardon me, I didn’t hear—”

“*Geee. Aaay. Teee. Ceee.* Genetics. Like *Gattaca*. Good movie.”

One mystery solved. At least he was paying attention to the dialogue in the films. Then, he continued:

“VIP ... CGRP, BDNF ... NT four. Proteins. In the brain. My brain.”

He was right. Autistic people tended to have high levels of those four proteins in their blood samples, which indicated that non-normal brain processes were in play before birth. Did he hear that when he was a child, perhaps when some doctor spoke around him, as if he were an inanimate object in the examining room?

I was making too much of what he'd been saying. Dalton was simply plugging in accurate responses following general observations I'd made.

He had to be of at least normal intelligence; every Savant-Contingent had to have an IQ of at least 99-100 in order to be employed by the mining company, which just happened to be a subsidiary of the remains of NASA in the United States. So of course he could link up random nuggets of information with my comments. Just as he could input, store and recite the successive approximations for figuring out where and when to launch radio-transmitter-tagged asteroids toward the nearest mining ship, or toward the Moon itself, once Lawler and Garrick used their computers to calculate those approximations, then transmitted the figures to him in his cabin. Which was literally all he was expected to do on board the vessel; he and his fellow Savvies were nothing more than computer backups, riding each vessel for months at a time, simply waiting for their laptops to spew forth rows of figures which they'd remember, on the off-off-off chance that something unforeseen might happen to the ship's main computer. A random solar flare, or an on-board fire. Something statistically unlikely to happen in the first place, but—just in case—the Savant-Contingents were there, ready and waiting, with the necessary information right when it might (i.e., when icicles formed in hell) happen.

Thanks to the effect of various gravities working on both the target site—be it another ship, the Moon, or wherever—and the ship launching the asteroid toward the target site, elliptical orbits and ever-changing flight times, successive approximations were the backbone of the asteroid-mining industry. Those figures had to be there, when needed, and if for whatever unforeseen reason they *weren't* there, ready to be inputted from the main computer to the navigational console, things could go wrong. Not life-threatening things, but money-wasting things. Things which might necessitate changes in schedules, which in turn affect the timing of each ship's other mining operations ... miss one mining ship, and a radio-tagged asteroid might keep on going, to interfere with the orbit of yet another ship, or asteroid or—

—or the mining company could take advantage of the existing government programs set up to encourage firms to hire the handi-capable.

A simple extension of supply and demand ... over 100,000 savants ready to be the flesh and blood back-up for silicon and gold computer chips. The company gets a truly nice tax break for hiring them, the government doesn't have to shell out SSI payments, and the Savvies get pensions after age sixty. All for remembering a few numbers (which they'll never be called upon to actually recite) with complete and unwavering accuracy—an accuracy so precise, it eliminates the ever-so-slight

possibility of a crew member in navigation or astrometrics inputting the figures off their own laptop, or from jotted down notes, and making a mistake. The basic detachment of the Savvy is another prized factor ... since they don't understand the gravity of their gift, or of the information entrusted to them, they can coolly rattle off the missing successive approximations without nervous hesitation.

Or without the possibility of making a mistake, or transposing any numbers out of panic.

Granted, some Savvies occasionally hit themselves, or flailed out, but things other crew members found catastrophic never fazed them. On the *Ignacio-Silvio*, a fire once broke out in a fuel storage unit, and that Savvy didn't so much as turn his head in the direction of his running crewmates, or seem to notice anything unusual when the corridor beyond his room was sundown bright with reflected flames, let alone covered with slippery billows of extinguisher foam.

But, considering that it sometimes took hours, even days for the crew to calculate said successive approximations, then more days might pass between the time when the calculations were made, then relayed to the Savant, followed by even more days before the figures would be needed there was precious little happening on any mining/tracking ship which directly concerned the Savant-Contingent. So, there was virtually no reason for them to consider themselves a part of the crew per se, which in turn was the reason I was now sitting on Dalton Durwin's red blanket, listening to him blurt out tid-bits of genetic information.

Information I hadn't specifically requested, though, which was interesting. And unique. Not that getting to the essence of what any Savant was thinking or feeling was ever easy, but in this particular case, I suspected that the study of science itself actually interested him. For the time being, I pushed aside all those rote questions I'd been hired to attempt to ask in the interest of making sure that the Savvies were treated humanely by their fellow crewmates, and instead leaned forward ever so slightly, not an overt invasion of his space, but a gentle sign of interest, and asked, "Do you ever talk to Sabriah, when she brings you your food—talk about science?"

"We talk ... not science. About food. What I eat. No lactose. No yeast, no gluten. But the food is good. She makes it."

"How about the other people in the crew? Do you talk to them? About science?"

"They talk about science ... with each other. I ... listen."

That furrow appeared between his eyes again, and he was definitely looking away from me, at his open palms. Which, finger by finger, became cupped palms. I had suspected as much. Dalton's door wasn't locked in any way, and he had to

know the layout of the ship, after having spent months at a time on each asteroid-seeking trip.

But I couldn't come out and accuse him of eavesdropping on the other crew-members; I knew from experience what open denunciations might do to an autistic person. Gradually, his gaze rose to about the level of my jawline—not quite eye contact, but for him, it was close enough.

“The things the others say ... they're interesting to you?”

“Like the movies ... only different every time. No pause. No fast forward.”

“For whatever bores you?”

Those round dark eyes were now level with my nose.

“Bores me ... like Moire and Broga. Always saying the same things. Putting ... things on my door.”

“Like ... the picture of the cat?”

“Jones.”

“From *Alien*... yes, Jones was the ship's cat. But you aren't a cat, are you?”

“Leo ... that's a big cat.”

His birthday. Late July. Why wouldn't he know Zodiac signs, too? They were more common than Higgs bosons.

“Do Moire and Broga know that? Do you think they might?”

“Dunno ... they climb on the asteroids. Attach the radio transmitters.”

“Does that make them smart? Smart enough to know your birth sign?”

“They're engineers, too. Sabriah calls them asteroid monkeys.”

“That's because they climb on things with very strange surfaces ... they have to be agile,” I soothed, thinking of that wiry twerp Broga and that harpy Moire and wanting to strand both of them on an asteroid sans life support, “and most monkeys are agile.”

“Monkeys sound wormy.”

I wondered if Dalton had placed any *Planet of the Apes* movies or anything

else with chimps in it in one of his “don’t watch much” piles.

Not really wanting to pursue the subject of those backbiting idiots much longer, I awkwardly crossed my own legs as I tried, “But Kevan and Sloane are more interesting?”

This time those eyes met mine, and didn’t waver as he said, “Yes. Listen to them ... talk about science, space ... everything. Not boring. Make fun of Moire and Broga. Make the Captain yell sometimes.”

I’d only spoken to Gremain Penn for perhaps a minute or so after boarding the ship, but I’d sensed that he had little patience for anything but staying in his small command room just off navigation, with his nose illuminated by his e-book. I could almost feel the cursor blinking on the last page he’d been reading before I interrupted him, beckoning to him like a light-house beacon.

“The Captain’s not very friendly, is he?”

“I dunno.”

He’d finally said it. There *was* an “I” in there.

Hoping he hadn’t noticed my excitement, I continued smoothly, “Do you know what his name is?”

“Gremain Penn. He’s old. Wrinkled. Up and down on his cheeks.”

Penn did have deep vertical creases on his cheeks, amid dozens of other wrinkles.

“Does he know you’ve seen him?” This question might be dangerous, but I was willing to risk it.

“I don’t think so. He never looks up from his reading. Unless someone making noise.”

“Do you know what Kevan and Sloan look like?”

“Kevan’s dark-haired, like my hair. Young. This tall—” here, Dalton uncrossed his legs in a fluid motion, and stood about three feet from me.

He was about the same height as the navigator, roughly five ten or eleven.

I just nodded, and he continued, standing there with his arms dangling limply by his sides, “Sloan is smaller. Skinny. Blond hair, big forehead. Narrow face,” and

he used his left hand to indicate a pinched, small face in front of his own, before dropping his arm again.

“And Sabriah has a scarf around her head,” I added, hoping Dalton would take the bait. He did.

“She’s a Muslim. She doesn’t like dogs. She likes cats.”

“And Leo is a big cat, isn’t he?” I smiled, resisting the temptation to get up and stand near him.

“A very big cat ... more hair, though.” He wore his hair short, like Kevan and the Captain did.

“Hair grows,” I said, not expecting any answer, and not getting one. “But Sabriah does have hair under her scarf, I’m sure. She does like you, takes good care of you. But ... I think Kevan and Sloan might also like you, might want to talk science with you. GATC, Higgs bosons. Standard Models, too. Do you think you’d like that?”

His hands pressed down hard on the loose rough fabric of his jumpsuit but his eyes stayed level with mine.

“I ... don’t know. Maybe. Just Kevan and Sloan. About science.”

This wasn’t part of my job description; my heart was lopping in my ribcage as I uncrossed my legs, and let my feet drop slowly to the floor of the cabin, before I got up, and stood perhaps four feet or so away from Dalton, hands placed on my own thighs, making myself into a small, unthreatening presence before him. No, socialization wasn’t a goal during my stay on this ship, nothing was ever specifically said about it during the training courses—I was supposed to make sure the Savvy felt reasonably good about himself and his job, that he didn’t feel like an inanimate object, and I was also to make sure that the rest of the crew treated him like a human being ... albeit a very unique, very special human being, and not a living calculator.

I wasn’t supposed to be a social co-ordinator ... but none of the other Savvies were anything like Dalton, either. Sabriah had told me that I couldn’t change anything on the ship, that nothing I might do would make any difference once I was gone.

But Dalton was interested in science. *Interested*. Like Kevan and Sloan were. The situation with the asteroid monkeys might not change, but Lawler and Garrick seemed reasonably polite, at the least.

And as long as I was there, supervising the conversation—

“I’ll ask them, about you talking with them. Would that be all right with you?”

A pause, then, “All right. Kevan and Sloan. Science. Talk about science?”

Nodding, I assured him, “Science. With Kevan and Sloan. I’ll let you get back to your movies now, Dalton—”

“Who are you?”

I stopped so quickly I almost fell over from the forward momentum of my body. I’d started to tell him who I worked for, then completely forgot to give him my name. Feeling my face flush, I turned around and said, “My name is Temple Kenward. I’m a social worker. I go from ship to—”

“Temple. Like Temple Grandin?” he asked, naming one of the most famous autistic scientists and authors from the late 20th century.

Pausing to pull a bit of dead skin off one lip, I nodded and said, “Yes, Temple is my first name, and hers too.”

Obviously, he’d been exposed to either her work, or someone who followed her physical-closeness theories. While she’d been primarily involved with livestock science, some educators had utilized therapies based on her experiments with close, steady physical contact to calm animals.

“Temple-not-Grandin.” Was he looking at me expectantly?

“Temple, period, is okay. No ‘not-Grandin,’” I said patiently.

“Temple, per—”

“Temple.”

Behind me, the pocket door swooshed open, and Sabriah was framed in the empty doorway, a tray of food in her dark hands. “Dalton, time for lunch,” she said softly, before motioning for me to leave with a couple of quick jerks of her cloth-swathed head.

“Dalton, it was a pleasure talking to you. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Talk science later?” Sabriah kept staring at me as she walked into the cabin, and placed the Savvy’s tray on the end of his bed.

“Later. Enjoy your meal,” I said over my shoulder, before hurrying into the corridor. I wasn’t fast enough; within ten strides I could feel the vibration of the nutritionist’s footsteps behind me.

“Ms. Kenward, what was *that* about? ‘Talk science’? With *whom*?”

“That’s a privileged conversation ... client confidentiality,” I said over my shoulder.

“Clichés won’t cut it with me—” she began, but I slapped my open hand against the palm-pad next to my cabin door, and slid through the door before it was half-open—and immediately pressed my palm against the interior pad before she could say anything else I didn’t want to hear.

* * * *

Dalton Durwin’s case files didn’t tell me much more than I’d already been able to surmise from merely talking to him: Diagnosed shortly after birth via blood tests for the proteins VIP, CGRP, BDNF and NT4 and neural-imaging tests which revealed small, densely packed cells in the limbic region of his brain, he was immediately given up for adoption by his unwed, college-student mother. Raised in foster care until he was fourteen, at which time he was enrolled in the Savant-Contingency training program. Prior to that time, he had not received much more than drug therapy—mostly mild antidepressants to control some moderate compulsive behaviors. No Applied Behavioral Analysis, no treatment for what the mining corporation discovered to be a mild-to-moderate case of sensory integrative dysfunction involving certain sounds (the “wormy” French he’d mentioned), no one-on-one Lovass therapy ... he was moderately verbal from an early age, so no Facilitated Communication therapy was deemed necessary. True, most of the treatments he never received were simply too expensive; unless an autistic child was lucky enough to be born into a well-to-do family nowadays, most of the long-standing therapies developed in the latter half of the 20th century were simply out of reach. And foster-care homes—forget it.

Nothing was mentioned in his case files concerning his diet, so apparently Sabriah had taken it upon herself to try the still-disputed diet-therapy approach.

Since he was fairly articulate for his condition, an IQ test had been administered shortly before he joined his first asteroid-tracking flight, shortly before his 18th birthday. It was listed as a “probable” 111—and, according to my fraying and flaking copy of George I. Thomas and Joseph Crescimbeni’s *Guiding the Gifted Child*, that meant Dalton’s IQ (“probable” IQ) placed him in the high average/bright/fast learner category. Or, at worst, if the estimate was a bit high, he was still likely to be an average learner.

Average or above-average enough to have a passing knowledge of physics—and to be able to make what may well have been a joke about finding the Higgs boson in the opening credits of an old Disney film.

I wondered if Sabriah was jealous of my progress with Dalton—she may have taken it upon herself to adjust his diet, but healing the body should also mean healing the mind. She may have read up enough on the subject of autism therapy to attempt a yeast/gluten free diet, but there was so much more she hadn't tried. Simple things, really, like inclusion therapy. Dalton wouldn't get that as long as someone brought him his food tray three times a day.

* * * *

Case # 290727DD/I-R

07-01-58/T. Kenward, caseworker

Day 5: Initial inclusion

It took me a few days to figure out exactly when Sabriah took her five breaks for daily prayer, days spent watching movies with Dalton (a daily screening of *Flubber*, but also other “nice” films like *Cast Away*, *Raising Arizona* and what seemed to be his second-favorite film, *Con Air*—he liked the part when the one cop's sports car was attached to the wheel of the airplane, and “flew” through the air), but once I knew when she'd be occupied, I waited until Dalton's latest disk had finished the final line of on-screen credits, then gently suggested, “How about if we go talk science now? With Kevan and Sloan?”

It had only taken me a couple of days to work on them; initially, Sloan was annoyed to learn that the ship's Savvy had been listening in while he and Kevan were discussing their work, but Kevan seemed to be mildly bemused by the prospect of anyone finding shop-talk so interesting. The day before, they'd agreed to “talk science” with Dalton, provided the Captain was holed up in his quarters—Penn was close to retirement age, and considering that most of the ship's basic navigation was on a form of gloried auto-pilot, he seemed eager to begin practicing for a remaining lifetime of doing virtually nothing—and Moire and Brogan were off doing whatever it was they did when not planting radio transmitters on the asteroids ... which, judging from the sounds which alternately could be heard through either of their cabin doors, was unabashedly carnal.

“Talk science in the daytime?” Figuring out when Dalton had been roaming the ship hadn't been difficult—like many autistic people, he had sleep disorders which often kept him awake well into the postmidnight hours, or he'd intermittently wake up during the night. I heard him myself the first night I'd spent on the *Isen-Rodor*, walking with that stop-start gait down the corridor, occasionally patting the walls as he walked. And since Sloan and Kevan sometimes visited each other's cabins, talking shop, or occasionally stayed in the other part of the ship, working on their approximations after the ship's sensors picked up an ore-rich asteroid in the distance, Dalton had had many opportunities to listen to them.

“In the daytime ... that’s right,” I said, getting up off his bunk and motioning for him to follow me out of the cabin. According to my watch, Sabriah should be on her cabin floor, praying, head pointed toward wherever Mecca (or, less specifically, Earth) happened to be. And she usually stayed in her cabin for a half hour or more afterwards.

Not able to physically steer him in the right direction, I was forced to keep on motioning for Dalton to follow me. I didn’t dare say anything, lest Sabriah hear me. He did pause for a moment in front of the navigator’s cabin door, but quickly picked up on my forward-pointed finger, and followed me.

I hated walking the connecting corridors between the cabin/storage units and the ship’s main navigation section; while the ship’s artificial rotation was moderately noticeable elsewhere, here it was a physical impossibility to *not* notice it. The walls were well-rounded here, with only a narrow “floor” and “ceiling” whose surfaces were level and flat. I’d had a mild inner-ear imbalance since childhood, one which I’d been trained to virtually ignore, but in this twenty-yard stretch of unvarying straight closeness, I’d began to feel disoriented. But Dalton didn’t mind—in fact, his hesitant gait actually improved the closer we came to the cluster of console-filled rooms.

Kevan noticed us first.

“Welcome to Navigation, Dalton ... want to see what it looks like in the daytime?” Consistently the most openly polite of the crew members, even if he did tend to slip into what might be deemed (in most un-PC terms) as “gushing” gestures and vocal flourishes, he stepped up to Dalton—I had been right, they were the same height—and, mindful of the latter’s need for physical space, extended one hand in what could either be construed as an impending handshake, or a simple welcoming gesture. A few steps behind him, Sloan leaned against a wall largely given over to luminescent star charts, his narrow face twisted into a bemused smirk. Glancing away from Sloan after his eyes suddenly grew wide, I turned to see Dalton tentatively extend his right hand, and briefly align it just under Kevan’s hand, their palms almost touching, before Kevan smiled, and led Dalton into the Navigation section, with its myriad of blinking lights, computer screens, and small windows revealing a thick swath of grainy stars against blackest-black. Too many of the lights in there were just too red for my comfort, so I hung back, only half-listening as Kevan began showing Dalton the various pieces of equipment within.

Kevan was saying something about how fast the Earth and Moon rotate, and how fast the ship could accelerate when Sloan reached out to grab me by the upper arm, saying, “How did you sneak him past Our Lady of the Scarf?” Gently shaking off his fingers without trying to appear openly offended that he’d touched me, I leaned against the opposite wall of the short corridor and said softly, “You must’ve been dozing during Tolerance Training in high school ... she’s busy in her cabin. Tell me, Sloan ... has Sabriah always shown that much interest in Dalton’s welfare?”

He shrugged against the wall, the rough fabric of his uniform rasping against the textured metal behind him. “Yeah, I guess ... she’s been bringing him his meals ever since I’ve been here. That’s five years come March. Kevan would know, he’s worked this ship longer. Probably since the Sav—Dalton was instal—assigned here.”

“Installed” was a common term for Savant-Contingent placement on asteroid ships. But I was grateful that Sloan was making an effort for my sake, at least.

“So Kevan’s around Dalton’s age?” I had to move a few steps into the corridor proper—and a bit closer to Sloan—to see what Dalton and Kevan were doing in Navigation. Kevan was showing him a computer screen, saying, “—you have to figure how long it’ll take the asteroid to reach the mining ship, which can be a problem because there’s no standard amount of time for—” while Dalton leaned forward, peering at the screen. Sloan crossed his arms, before replying, “A few years older. Thirty-four, thirty-five ... a year or two younger than I am. Not that the bastard looks it,” he added, “Must be a hormone thing.”

I knew and he knew that homosexuals didn’t have excess estrogen, so I let the gibe pass.

A few beats of silence, then: “Is this some new thing the government’s cooked up for Sav’s? Take Our Savant to Work day? Every other ship I’ve been on, they’ve just holed up in their cabins.”

“Can you blame them?” I whispered. “I’ve been on other ships, too. Nobody’s actually welcomed the Savants into their cliques—”

“Lady, how can you—oh, screw it.” He slumped against the wall.

“Screw what? I mean, they’re *crew* members, same employer, same damned uniforms, same missions ... I realize that they’re unique, but every person I’ve ever met has been unique in his or—”

“You got a talent for understatement, I’ll give you that. Christ, how do you talk to someone like him? If they do say something back, it doesn’t make sense ... believe me, I have tried, and eventually, after blank stares and non-sequiturs, you get god-damned tired of trying. Like *they* did,” he added tersely, motioning with his head of lank blonde hair toward the connecting corridor ... where the monkey twins, Moire and Brogan, were walking side by side toward us. Wincing at the sight of her sleep (or whatever) tousled hair, I started to make a move toward the room where Kevan and Dalton were talking, but Sloan shook his head, saying, “Stick around ... see for yourself. It’s *not* us—”

“I thought it was intermission time ... come up this way for some popcorn?” I

felt as if I'd known Brogan Hastings—or someone all too much like him—my entire life: the eternal smart-ass with the witty jibe, too wiry and short and not-too-good-looking to impress anyone otherwise. I'd even met a few men like him while earning my degree in social work. One or two of them were working the same job I was—the wave of pity I felt for *their* Savvies was interrupted by Moire's "No, I think he ran out of toothpicks ... the butter on the popcorn's hell on the wood."

They were worse than Dalton was when it came to thinking in movie.

I tried staring them down; aside from being roughly the same height (tall for a woman, short for a man), and wiry-but-muscular, they were so utterly ill-matched—she had that thick, waving mass of painfully bright hair, framing a face that might have been pretty if she'd done anything besides pull her small lips forward in a pout, while he was runty-faced, with greasy, thinning salt-and-pepper hair, with an equally sparse mustache—that their status as a couple was solely based on their joint job titles. On Earth, the Moon, or virtually any other floating body with a minimum of gravity, her kind would never look once at his kind, let alone a second time.

But they sensed that the ship's cat was out of his cage, and both of them elbowed past Sloan and me to see what Kevan and the Savvy were doing in Navigation.

"Hi, stranger ... how long has it been?"

"Look who's learning how to fly this junkheap—"

"God, he'll never understand what they're jabbering about," I started to say, as I went to follow them, but Sloan shook his head, and held up one hand in front of me, palm out. "No, don't ... they won't hurt him, for Chrissakes. They're teasing him, not taunting him. If you'd have spent some time with them, you'd know what they're like. Damned 'stroid monkeys, that's all. Goof-balls. What they do, on the rocks ... the pressure is intense. It's that way for every monkey ... we sit in here, they get to do the real hands-on work. So when they aren't risking their lives, they make the rest of ours miserable." I couldn't figure out why he said "miserable" in such a light tone, but I kept my silence as he went on, talking so fast I couldn't make out what the others were saying: "You spend so much time with Savvies, you forget what the rest of us are going through on these junkheaps. We could use some social work, too."

"Something better than the movies and playthings they send up here with us on every run. Something—" here he leaned in uncomfortably close to my face "—to help us deal with all the waiting we have to do before we reach those damned flying chunks of minerals. I've requested transfers from six different ships—including two mining vessels—because I couldn't *stand* my crewmates. You think this bunch is bad—"

“I’ve seen plenty of other crews. I’ve witnessed their group dynamics. I know there’s as many assholes as asteroids out here in space, but my job is to just make sure the Savvies are well-treated. And respected for being the crew members they are—”

“Who here has said different about him? You’re freaked ‘bout the ‘Jones’ poster on his door? Moire did that. When she and Brogan were playing out some weird *Aliens* sex-game scenario. Her Ripley, him ... whoever Ripley had the jones for in one of the sequels, the one where she’s got no hair. The doctor dude, I think. Those two, they get weird, play their games, and the rest of us ignore them until they’re actually on the rocks out there. But remember how everyone on the first mining ship ended up dying, while Ripley was out looking for the cat? That ball of fur *was* crew to them. Like he—” Sloan jerked one thumb in the direction of the Navigation room “—is to us. We act stupid, but we aren’t retards—everyone here is aware of what he ‘does’ on the ship. You might drive your car for a hundred thousand miles and never blow a tire, but you’d be nuts not to have a spare in the trunk. He’s a spare that watches a lot of movies. In his cabin. Which is what every Savvy I’ve ever known has *wanted* to do. I think they make out like they don’t understand people ‘cause they don’t want to. What’s up in their heads is a lot better than what’s running around the corridors.

“Hell, I was pissed when I found out he was eavesdropping on me, but mainly ‘cause I don’t like it when anyone sneaks up on me. Has it occurred to you that he had all damn day and night to wander around? He can watch movies whenever he wants. And there’s no lock on the—”

First Sabriah, now Sloan. God, I was getting so tired of being harangued by these people, I wanted to hole up in my own cabin, and cover my ears with earphones, too. I’d dealt with some obnoxious crews before, but these people seemed to have issues with me, as a person. Everyone else had tried to steer clear of me, considering my status as a government-sent social worker, but *these* people—

“—an accelerator ... one loop is larger, the other ... one third as big. Put together like a snowman—”

Dalton’s voice was far less hesitant than normal, while Kevan’s was gushier than before as he said, “*That’s* the Tevatron accelerator ... and the spot where the protons and antiprotons are produced sticks out from where the ‘neck’ would be like—” I entered the room just in time to see Kevan miming what looked like a necktie against his neck, while the monkey twins watched in bemusement as Dalton puzzled out Kevan’s charade, then said, “Like a scarf, only with a small circle on the end.”

Moire actually smiled when he said that, and side-stepped closer to where Dalton was standing. As if he were attached to her at the hip Brogan inched over a

couple of feet, too.

Obviously uncomfortable, Dalton in turn stepped away from Moire, and, as he noticed me, said, “We’re talking science. Accelerators.”

“We’re listening science. Atomic drag races.” I wondered if Brogan realized how funny he wasn’t.

But everyone was laughing at that ... and Dalton was smiling. So I decided to keep my peace, and wait to see if Brogan would move on to ridiculing Dalton himself, and not just his speech patterns.

Making sure that he moved slowly, Kevan placed one hand lightly on Dalton’s forearm, before saying, “I hate to run you out of here, but I think our friend Sabriah will be coming around soon ... I’d hate to have her bring a meal to an empty room, wouldn’t you?”

“No one to eat it.” Dalton didn’t seem offended, and as he walked out of the room, and back down the connecting corridor toward his cabin his face was unlined and placid. The same way he looked after watching one of his “nice” movies. Once he’d gone, I found myself saying, “I appreciate that you all put up with him ... I think it went well. He might not want to come out again, but he did seem interested in science.”

“No need to apologize,” Kevan smiled, even as he didn’t bother to try laying a hand on my arm, “He is fairly knowledgeable about physics ... high school level, but considering ... his circumstances, that’s not bad at all. For him, excellent, actually. Too bad he’s been holed up in there so long,” he added, and Moire cut in too quickly, “‘*Too bad*’ ... he can be funny, once he gets going.”

It wasn’t until I’d gone back to my own cabin that I realized that Kevan had subtly put me down, stressing that Dalton was interested in *physics*, not science per se. But any residual feelings of inadequacy I felt over that were brushed aside by my surprise over how well Dalton had done—even with the monkey twins. And he’d been reluctant to talk to them at all just a few days earlier.

I was just glad that the Captain, not to mention Sabriah, hadn’t seen Dalton roaming outside his cabin.

* * * *

Case # 290727DD/I-R

11-01-58/T. Kenward, caseworker

Day 9: Personal Interface

For the first time since he'd been assigned to the *Isen-Rodor*, Dalton received the successive approximations for the upcoming asteroid boost directly from Kevan and Sloan, rather than via a message on his in-cabin laptop. It was also the first time he'd watched exactly what the monkey twins did once they were jettisoned from the ship in their two-person-sized landing craft. The craft utilized a locking spring due to the near-zero surface gravity of this particular asteroid, which was perhaps the size of a domed football stadium. As Kevan explained to him (and to me, since I was perhaps less knowledgeable about asteroid mining than even Dalton was), the surface gravity of this asteroid was less than one-ten-thousandth of Lunar gravity which in turn meant that “—escape velocity is oh, around 0.3 kilometers per hour, or 0.1 meters per second. Not very fast ... which means they have to descend to the planet differently than ship-to-ground shuttles do. Once they've landed—see, they've turned on their helmet-cams, they're getting out of the lander now—they'll need to use those power anchors, those harpoon-like things ... see, Moire's shot hers into those rocks. If it wasn't powered, it'd take minutes to hit the ground.”

Dalton watched the live feed from the monkeys' cameras with the same rapt, unblinking attention usually reserved for his “nice” movies in his cabin. I wondered if he realized that what he was watching was happening in the now, as opposed to something which was filmed, edited, then recorded decades earlier.

“—now Brogan is spiking in the transmitter, that's what the mining ship uses to track the asteroid after we boost it into the proper orbit ... which is where your successive approximations come in. Every orbit is different—”

“Different by x-number of days and x-number of hours,” Dalton said.

“Exactly. Once the mining ship gets the asteroid, they despin it, then erect the solar-powered mining equipment. Or blow off sections, depending on the asteroid's size. Then again, there's tunneling, and sometimes strip mining is necessary, but none of that can happen unless we get that tagged asteroid into the right orbit.”

“So the mining ship can catch it.” On the screen before us, the pair split up, each moving with surreal slowness against the mufti-faceted, scabrous asteroid's greatly foreshortened horizon, until one of them was standing directly in the sightlines of the other's helmet-cam, resulting in full-body views of both engineers. After fumbling with the main bib-like “pocket” which covered the chest area of their exploration suits, each of them slowly withdrew a sheet of that thin, mylar-like “netting” the engineers on the mining ships usually carried while doing surface work (in zero or near-zero gravity, small chunks of chipped-away rock tended to float unless covered with a canopy, then netted prior to the engineer's return to the ship), and unfurled the sheets to a reasonable facsimile of “flatness,” revealing the messages darkly scrawled on their individual squares of mylar:

Camera One: “Hello—” Camera Two: “Dalton!”

As soon as I read that, I turned to look at him: Dalton was smiling, not showing his teeth, but his mouth was unmistakably turned up at the corners. Beside him, Kevan—very gently—patted his shoulder, and said, “See that? They knew you’d be watching ... what do you think they’d like to hear when they get back to the ship?”

(Next to me, Sloan leaned over to whisper in my ear, ““Up yours’ might be interesting—”)

“Hello Moire and Brogan?” Dalton seemed to have completely missed being touched unexpectedly, he was so excited about what he’d seen on the screen. On the screens, each of the engineers let go of their hand-made signs, and the mylar continued to flutter in space, even as the two asteroid monkeys made their way next to each other, so they could continue to watch the ever-so-slowly falling glittering squares of metallic fabric against the inky backdrop of star-dusted deep-space “sky.”

I wondered if Dalton realized just how beautiful the sight was; his dark eyes were focused on the screens, darting from one camera’s viewpoint to the other, but I’d seen him stare like that at CGI green goo doing the mambo, too. He’d come so far in the last few days, but there was no way to measure just how much emotional distance “far” *meant* for him—

“Is this what my god-damn taxes are going for now?”

I hadn’t spoken to Captain Penn in so many days, his voice was virtually unfamiliar to me. Kevan, Sloan and I all turned around as one when we heard that obviously pissed-off snarl behind us; Penn was standing, arms crossed (invariably a bad physical sign), pale eyes glaring like sunlight sheeting across ice, furrowed face a craggy twin to the convoluted surface of the asteroid which still filled the screens on the console.

Dalton turned around a few beats after the rest of us; he wasn’t smiling this time.

“Since when—what the hell is this? Ms. Ken ... whatever, is this your doing? I take it you brought him—” the captain pointed at Dalton with his e-book-holding hand “—up here? Were you aware that this is a working ship? All you’re supposed to do is check on the status of our Savant. Which I assume you did. What’s he doing up here?”

“He wanted to come out ... he’s not causing any problems,” Kevan quickly soothed, “I already gave him the figures, so that part of his job is done ... Ms. Kenward was just supervising him. Sloan and I are fine with him being here—” Sloan let out something between a grunt and a snort, then turned his attention back to the engineers, typing in something on his keyboard “—so we didn’t want to bother you.

The transmitter's in place, and working—we'll be in boosting position in a few hours. Milk run. No problems with having him up here..." Kevan punctuated his short speech with a smile, one that showed virtually all his front and side teeth.

"So what was that on the screens?"

"Moira and Brogan being themselves," Kevan schmoozed; obviously, he had some sway over the Captain, for the older man uncrossed his arms, and merely warned before quitting the room, "Just as long as everything works..."

Down on the asteroid, the monkeys had finished climbing the surface leading up to the lander; once they got in, and removed their helmets, voice contact resumed: "*Isen-Rodor*, this is the *I-R One*—" Brogan's voice.

"*I-R One*, copy. Guys, your half-time show reached a larger audience than anticipated," Kevan teased, while punching in something on his own keyboard.

"Male or female demographics?" Moire asked, her voice brittle over the receivers.

"Male ... but he's switched channels. Didn't like what he saw—"

Kevan let the tip of his tongue extend past his front teeth while shaking his head at the unseen engineers.

"No frigging kiddin'. He didn't send the Sav—Dalton back, did he?" It may have been the slight static, but I thought Brogan sounded concerned.

"Nope ... the man's here. Come over here, speak into this mike—"

"Hi Brogan ... hi Moire—"

"Hi, kid ... did the Captain chew you out?"

"No ... Moire. He went away."

"That's nothing new—"

"I'm surprised he came out of his cave in the first place ... Sloan, everything a go up there?"

"Yeah, Brog, lander doors are open—"

Something Brogan said about the Captain leaving his cave made my eyes grow hotly moist: it had all been so obvious, Dalton and the whole Plato's cave-shadows-on-the-wall analogy. Only in this Savvy's case, it was more like

voices beyond the walls—

Now that Dalton had come this far out of his cave, I didn't think he needed me to stand next to him, out here in the place where voices and shadows became flesh. Quietly backing out of the navigation bay, while the men sitting near Dalton continued to bring him into their conversation with the returning engineers, I went as far out into the semi-circular corridor as I could while still able to see and hear what was going on in Navigation without actually being a presence in the room.

“Congratulations. You must've aced Obtuse 101.” Sabriah's voice wasn't bitter, just ... resigned? Under the over-hanging folds of her scarf, her smooth dark face was almost as expressionless as Dalton's used to be, mere days before. Glancing away from those staring dark eyes, I noticed for the first time that she wore the skirt version of the standard-issue mining company cover-alls.

Finally, I admitted, “I'm sorry ... I don't understand what you're talking about. I'm just doing what I was sent here to—”

“Oh, stuff it, would you? You weren't listening at all a few days ago, were you? Didn't I tell you he was content? You're acting as if I wasn't doing my job—”

Not wanting the others to hear us, I motioned for her to walk a few yards down the corridor with me. Judging by the sharp *swicks* her uniform skirt made as she walked, she was still upset, as I tried to explain, “I never said or assumed anything about the way you were doing your job—Dalton's in excellent physical shape, he seems healthy ... I'm just doing what I was sent here to do, as I tried to tell you before. I'm improving communications between one crew member and the other crew members. They're treating him better, and he's responding to them in a positive manner. Things are going much better than they have on any other ship so far ... they've stopped calling him names, and he's interacting with them. Dalton has progressed so much in such a short time,” I stressed, hoping she'd understand that my efforts were in no way contradictory to hers ... but I realized she wasn't open to my ideas as she deliberately crossed her arms over her breasts, and just shook her head slowly, the ends of her scarf making that same slightly mocking snicking sound as they slid over her uniformed shoulders.

“Ms. Kenward ... how old are you? If I may be so impolite as to ask?”

“Forty-three, as of a week ago. It took me ... a while to finish my degree, but that should be beside the point—”

“I wouldn't have guessed you were that old,” she mused, her voice somehow softer, less condescending. “You don't look it at all ... before you received your degree, you were—?”

“A student ... I've more than one degree,” I added, trying not to sound as defensive as I felt. Then, figuring that she'd ask me anyhow, I added, “Yes, my

family was able to send me to more than one college and university. They value education—”

“So they’re educated themselves?” Her voice was still soft.

“I’d say so ... they both have Master’s degrees. But that has nothing to do with Dalton. I’ve made a genuine difference in his life, here on this ship. Which impacts everyone here ... even you. Eventually, he won’t rely on you to bring him his food, like a servant ... he’ll be eating with the others. Like a real crew member—” I stressed, but she cut me off with an upward-raised palm in the air between us.

“Truce ... truce. I won’t interfere ... my faith urges me to be tolerant, so tolerant of your actions I will remain,” she said in a strangely light tone, which contrasted with the intricate formality of her words, before turning away from me and walking toward the corridor which led to her quarters in the other half of the ship.

Behind me, I actually thought I heard Dalton laughing, as he greeted Brogan and Moire from their expedition on the asteroid.

* * * *

Case # 290727DD/I-R

15-01-58/T. Kenward, caseworker

Day 13: Solo

I’d only fallen asleep a short time earlier, after what seemed like hours of flipping from side to side under my covers, when I felt the jarring impact of movement, shuddering me awake. Not a floor-vibrating motion, such as I’d felt when the *Isen-Rodor* had maneuvered itself to a position behind the asteroid, and forced it from its orbit with a powerful explosive charge aimed opposite the radio-transmitter-imbedded end of the massive rock, but something more specific, localized ... and intermittently repeating.

Then, I heard the indistinct, wall-muffled sound of voices, male, in the corridor beyond, followed by another *whump* against the outer wall of my cabin. Silently cursing the obviousness of pocket doors as I padded over to the source of the sound, I slowly moved along the wall, trying to make out what was being said beyond in the corridor.

They were speaking too softly to be plainly heard, but one of the men was doing most of the talking, an undulating, continuous vibration punctuated only sporadically by the other, lower voice. Only when the voices and the minute vibrations ceased did I dare to palm open my door, and then only part-way. During

the “evening” time, the already nebulous corridor lights were further dimmed, so all I could make out in the distance were two men, of identical height and dark coloring, walking closely side-by-side toward the forward half of the ship. From the rear, I couldn’t tell which was which, even as I realized who they were. Releasing my palm from the pad near the door, I shuffled back to my bunk, and slid between the enveloping covers.

I tried to tell myself that Dalton had to have done this many times, leaving his room at night, to go eavesdrop on the others while they worked late, but I’d been on enough ships following enough asteroid boosts to know that once the target asteroid had been located, tagged and sent orbiting toward a waiting miner ship, or planetary body, no one spent much time at all in the forward compartments of the ships come evening time. And nothing I’d experienced so far explained the sounds against my wall, the resonating *whumps* which had woken me. Telling myself, One of them must’ve tripped, fallen against the wall, I tossed myself back to sleep.

* * * *

That morning, there were no sounds coming from Dalton’s cabin, no daily morning matinee (a part of his routine he’d never missed before), but I forced myself not to palm-open his door to check on him. I’d be leaving the ship once the *Isen-Rodor*’s path intersected with that of the *Berde-Pedar*, a comet-mining vessel with a rare female Savvy on board, so I realized that the time was drawing near for Dalton to start learning to function as a solo Savvy—he’d have to continue living with these people, his crewmates, once I was gone, and I wouldn’t be around to serve as a personal facilitator, he’d be on his own—completely.

That brief, noisy interlude from last night only came back to mind when I found Dalton and Kevan sitting together at the main console in Navigation, their swivel chairs positioned facing each other, each with a cup of something dark and steaming in their hands. At least one of them had chocolate; I could smell it as I stepped into their space, and asked, “You two have a good night?”

Kevan turned to face me, but his glittering eyes seemed to move everywhere but in alignment with my own eyes. Balancing his half-full cup on his crossed knee, he said, smiling, “Excellent. We were going to be passing through the tail of a small comet, and I wanted Dalton to see it. What did you think of it?”

Dalton started nodding before he spoke, “Excellent ... I enjoyed it. It was ... excellent.” But he never did look my way, instead glancing at Kevan between sips of his chocolate. I felt a twinge of sadness that he no longer felt it necessary to address me specifically, even as I knew his conduct was utterly within the parameters of autistic-savant behavior.

It was good to observe that Dalton and Kevan were maintaining eye contact; feeling somehow that I was intruding on them, I said my farewell for the moment,

then left them to their talk of comets and Standard Models. As I quitted that end of the ship, I saw Brogan and Moire coming toward me, both of them far less friendly-looking than they'd been after tagging that asteroid a few days earlier. I tried to merely squeeze past them, but Moire grabbed my upper arm just as I was about to walk past her.

“Temple, where’s Kevan? And Dalton?” She leaned in toward me as she spoke, her mouth a tight puckered moue, her eyes dark. As she spoke, Brogan slid in front of me, so our three bodies formed a tight triangle.

“In Navigation ... sitting at the console. Talking—” I began, and the engineers glanced at each other, as Brogan echoed, ““Talking’... ohhh-kay.” Moire’s grip on my arm tightened, as she asked, “Did you hear anything strange last night? An argument, in the corridor?”

“Something hit my wall a couple of times, but—”

“Did you hear voices? Someone fighting?”

“No ... talking, but I wouldn’t call it—”

Brogan began striding toward Navigation, and motioned for Moire to join him; as she let go of my arm, the engineer said, “And you didn’t go out there to see what was... *jeeesus*—” before running off to join Brogan.

Wanting to tell her, What kept *you* from seeing what was happening? I debated what to do—if this was something between Kevan and the navigators, it was none of my business, but if Dalton was involved...

The uncertainty was paralyzing. Wondering if I should go find the Captain, I started to walk in the direction of his cabin, until I heard a powerful echoing voltaic *snap!* back in Navigation, a sharp, hot burst of sound that left a full, rubbery feeling in my mouth. A series of brief, sizzling snaps followed, tiny percussive fizzles of noise, then the human sounds took over—concussive thuds of flesh hitting unyielding surfaces, flesh-sheathed bone hitting thick skin, and the shuffling squidge and squeak of rubbery-soled boots moving fast and sloppy against hard flooring. And the voices ... mewling animal sounds of pain, angry whispered hisses, and over everything else, the inarticulate keening of someone rendered near mute with fear—

Behind me, footfalls pounded closer, closer, then Sloan and Sabriah pushed me aside, as they ran forward toward Navigation—

That keening. *Dalton*—

Apparently Brogan had grabbed him and held him just outside the room before Moire and Kevan went at each other; he was still holding Dalton around his

midsection, pinning both arms down, the muscles in his own thin forearms taut from the effort of restraining the larger, younger man. For his part, Dalton strained to release himself from the engineer's grasp, trying to kick his way free, but Brogan was faster and more agile than Dalton, and adroitly avoided the younger man's jerking legs. Still making that horrible shrill moaning sound, while unshed tears turned his eyes a dark shimmering copper hue, Dalton kept trying to look into Navigation, but every time his head was parallel to the doorway, Brogan jerked his body back into the corridor.

Moving past Dalton and Brogan, I saw why the engineer refused to allow the Savvy out of his grip. Kevan was slumped on the floor, his arms and legs jerking spasmodically, his fingers spread wide in clawed cages of twitching flesh. His eyes were glazed, as he stared up past Sabriah, as she knelt next to him, murmuring, "It was just a shock, it's over, you're all right," even as the console above him kept on sputtering and sizzling where someone (Moire?) had doused it with coffee, prior to throwing something heavy (Kevan, I realized) against the panel, which not only broke the keyboard, but shattered most of the underlying structure of the console surface.

Thanks to the navigation computers and the ship's main power being controlled by separate electrical systems, it was painfully easy to see all the damage done by the battling crewmen. At least one entire bank of computers was fried, probably down to the hard drives. And from the way the lights on the surrounding banks were flickering, the damage might be more widespread. Glancing away from the ruined console, I noticed Moire leaning against the far wall of the room, hands pressed flat in back of her against the smooth wall, her chest rising and falling as she hyperventilated through slack, open lips.

Finally, she began talking, her voice wheezy, but still strident in its intensity: "Your ... your fault. Had—had to bring him out, didn't you? Didn't you realize what ... what'd happen? Are you that *stupid*?"

"I'm not the one who trashed the—" I began, but Moire kept on, "Couldn't you figure things out? I can't believe a social worker would be so utterly blind to this sort of thing ... what the hell do they *teach* you people, anyhow?"

On the floor, Kevan protested, "I didn't do anything wrong ... or illegal. He's a god-damn *adult*... he's thirty damn years old—"

"And he's a *Savant*, you prick! His brain isn't wired like yours or mine—emotionally he's a damned baby! I don't care how old he is, he's just *not like us*. He doesn't *think* the same! You took advantage of him, you horny son of a bitch! He didn't understand—"

"I'm not retarded—" Dalton's voice cut through the throb of angry voices and sparking components, as he pulled himself—and Brogan—into the threshold of the small room. "No, not a baby ... I'm not retarded—"

“No one said you were, Dalton,” I tried to soothe, but I knew he’d heard everything we’d said, all the insults Moire had thrown Kevan’s way,

“Like you ... like ... Kevan. Brain’s wired all right. Understand. Not a baby. Am like you. Not a retard...” He’d stopped fighting, so Brogan released his hold on the Savant. I wondered if he’d go over to Kevan, but Dalton simply stood there, staring at the ruined console just above the navigator’s head, until he muttered, “Gone for no good” to no one in particular.

“That’s right, Dalton, the console’s gone. I’ll have to fix it,” Sloan said; until he’d spoken, I hadn’t noticed him there in the room, but he walked away from the wall where he’d been standing quietly, and approached the damaged console, a small fire extinguisher in hand. Motioning to Sabriah to move Kevan out of the way, he aimed the nozzle at the ruined plastic and freshly exposed circuits, and sprayed a layer of foul-smelling foam over the sparking mess. Sabriah pulled Kevan to his feet, while Moire went to take Dalton by one arm, to lead him out of the room while Sloan worked, only he shook off her offered hand, and left the area on his own. I started to follow him, but Brogan blocked my way with one arm, asking, “Don’t you think you’ve done enough today? For the past few days?”

That was it. I couldn’t stand the way these people kept on attacking me, verbally, for things I hadn’t *done*—

“What is this about ‘done enough’? I didn’t do any of that—” I motioned to the spot where Sloan was already starting to dismantle the ruined portion of the console “—and I had nothing to do with whatever happened between Kevan and Dalton. All I did was try to get this crew into something resembling a working *unit*—a *whole* crew, not six people and something everyone treated like a freak—”

“Who is ‘everyone’? Moire asked, as she came over to stand next to Brogan, “Nobody was treating Dalton like a ‘freak’—like a Savant, yes, because that’s what he is. He’s not like us in that way. Which affects everything else he does. We weren’t trying to force him to be something he wasn’t ... sure, we made fun of him, but we make fun of each other. No one ever regarded him as something less than a crew member ... we just couldn’t talk to him. Haven’t you noticed? No one talks to the Savvies that much. They stay by themselves, and remember things all day—that’s what they’re *paid* for. Not to be mascots, but to *work*. Hasn’t anyone *told* you about—”

“Ohhh... *shit*.” Sloan’s voice was oddly buoyant, as he quickly said, “I hear you, *Arianrod*. There’s going to be a delay on those approximations—”

An unintelligible gurgle of static, then Sloan went on: “We’ve had ourselves an accident, with one of the computers—nothing the Savvy can’t cover. Lemme get him—”

Turning around, Sloan whispered, “Get him, *now*—”

Brogan sprinted off down the corridor, while Sloan told the crew of the *Arianrod*, the silver-mining ship whom Kevan had told us would be intercepting the asteroid the *Isen-Rodor* had boosted five days ago ... only, the *Arianrod* needed to get those successive approximations at least three days before it could in turn estimate its own successive approximations for when the orbits of the ship and the asteroid would meet, but it hadn't been close enough for radio contact all those days ago.

Back when there was nothing wrong with the computers, and back when the Savant-Contingent's input was still theoretical at best.

“Yeah, our Savvy's hard to coax out of his shell, too—” even as Sloan tried to joke with the *Arianrod*'s crew, he kept on motioning with his left hand for us to get Dalton *here, now*—

The pound of several pairs of feet on hard metal behind us, then Brogan pulled Dalton—who obviously didn't like the feel of Brogan's hand clamped down so tightly on his wrist—into the area, where Sloan quickly said to him, “Take this mike and tell the crew of the *Arianrod* the successive approximations Kevan gave you a few days ago. They need those figures.”

Nodding his head, Dalton grabbed the mike awkwardly with his right hand, and began repeating a series of numbers, saying them slowly and clearly, just as he'd been taught years before by the mining company, back when the whole Savant-Contingent program began merely as a way for the conglomerate to score a legal tax break for hiring people like him ... in all the months I'd spent on mining and tracking ships, no Savant had actually been called upon to recite those successive approximations.

But he sounded something close to confident, as he went through that long string of figures, then repeated them upon request from the other ship's barely intelligible crewman, millions of miles away. It was impossible to tell that he'd been crying and keening only a few minutes before.

When he was through, Sloan gently took the microphone away from him, and finished speaking to the other crew, telling them, “No, just a couple of circuits got fried ... the navigator spilled his coffee on them. No biggie...”

“Ms. Kenward, you're confined to your cabin—” the Captain's voice took me by surprise; I hadn't realized that he'd come forward along with Brogan and Dalton.

Turning around, I began, “Captain Penn, you don't have the authority to do

that—the company’s orders were—”

“Screw the company, and screw their god-damned orders. You’re out of here. And he—” the Captain pointed at Dalton with his free hand “—is back in his cabin. Where he *belongs*,” he added, slapping his e-book against one thigh for emphasis as he stalked down the corridor back to his cabin.

Next to me, Moire said, “Which is what I was trying to tell you. Savvies belong in their cabins. Didn’t anyone tell you that before? They’re not locked in, but they just stay in there anyhow. It’s what they do.”

Shaking my head, I told her, “It’s what they do because they don’t know any better. Or aren’t curious. Dalton ... that wasn’t enough for him. And as for Kevan ... he is right. Whatever was going on wasn’t illegal. You might not approve, but they’re both of age—”

“That’s not the *point*!” Moire started to grab for my upper arms, but I pulled away before she could touch me. “That’s not the kind of one-on-one therapy he needs ... it isn’t *necessary* for his job—”

“But you were willing to talk to him when I brought him out,” I protested, to Moire and to all of them, “You all paid attention to him—”

“Because you pushed him on us ... because you were acting like that was what the company wanted ... the company sends a damned social worker, we try to co-operate with her. Because that seems to be what the company wants ... but I can’t see the company wanting *this*—” she pointed to the ruined console, and to Sloan as he began taking out circuit boards “—so I can’t see them wanting him out, either. Social worker my ass, you’re a damned menace,” she finally hissed, before quitting the tight circle that she and the others had formed around me.

Kevan was the next to leave, after Brogan told him, “And you stay the hell away from him, understand? I don’t care if he did let you—”

Brogan started to say something to me, then closed his mouth and shook his head, before he, too, walked away. Which left Sabriah.

“Make that an A-plus in Obtuse,” she said softly, before taking my arm and leading me back to my cabin.

* * * *

Case # 290727DD/I-R

19-01-58/T. Kenward, caseworker

Day 17: Status—limbo

Sabriah was the one who told me, when she brought me my noon meal.

“The figures were wrong.” She was actually standing in front of the closed door, her hand moving toward the palm-pad, when I asked, “‘The figures’... you don’t mean the approximations, for the other—”

Turning around, she crossed her arms over her breasts, and nodded her head until the scarf began sliding around on her hair beneath.

“Yes, they were wrong ... only two transposed numbers, but guess what? Those two transposed digits were enough for the *Arianrod* to lose the asteroid. The thing orbited right past them, and they couldn’t intercept it. So ... since it was loaded with silver, they had to break their orbit, and try to catch up with it. Which took them off course for the rest of their run. Because if they didn’t go after it, and miss it, it would’ve gone on to crash into the Lunar mines. The orbit was that far off the figures Dalton gave them ... Sloan managed to get the original figures off his own laptop, but *that* was back in his cabin, while Dalton was right there with the wrong figures—”

“Brogan got Dalton ... he wasn’t there in the—”

“I don’t care about that. Dalton did what no Savant-Contingent is supposed to do. He messed up. Got the data wrong. Savants usually don’t do that ... unless they’ve been socialized for too long. Personally, I’d hoped that what you’d done wouldn’t set him too far back, but I guess whatever it was Kevan was doing with him really rewired his brain—too many new emotions, too much stimulus ... you do know, don’t you, how the autistic brain differs from ‘normal’ brains ... how changes in routine can affect previous function. And you know how that can mostly be a good thing, don’t you? It was good for you, when you were young, wasn’t it?”

She’d had the time to radio Earth, maybe to even get a response, but I had been assured—no, *promised*—by both the last university I’d attended as well as by the mining company itself that information about my condition would be kept confidential. There were laws about that, after all—

I wasn’t obligated to say anything, but I’d been away from the others for so many days, with no stimulus, no interaction, save for Sabriah’s brief, virtually wordless intrusions into my cabin three times a day, I simply needed to talk to her.

“Yes, it was ‘good’—being autistic can be so *lonely*... especially when a person is affected with sensory integrative dysfunction. Mine was so *bad*... colors seemed to scream and claw at my eyes, red and green especially ... certain sounds were all wrong ... and no one understood, they just talked around me, or through me.

“You cannot imagine what it was like ... or how long it took, how many different teachers my parents had to hire ... you can’t imagine. And once I could think, more or less like the rest of you, I did not want to ever go back to where I’d been ... I wanted the companionship, the interaction, the interface ... was that so wrong of me?”

That dark scarf-covered head now moved from side to side. She didn’t answer me, but did say as she opened the door, “I’ll try and get you some movies, and a player. I don’t use mine much,” then the door slid out of the bifid wall, and I was alone again.

* * * *

Case # 290727DD/I-R

23-01-58/T.Kenward, former caseworker

Day 21: Status—missed connection for *Berde-Pedar*.

Sabriah told me that the Captain had contacted Earth, not her. Said he told the company everything, and that they gave him the information they’d promised they wouldn’t. She said the Savvy is all right, that he’s in his cabin, watching movies. She brought me some of his, the one from his “don’t watch much” pile. Two of them are Robin Williams movies, *Dead Poets Society* and *Awakenings*. I know she put them on top of the stack on purpose. I only watched them once myself. I know she meant for them to show me the error I’ve committed with Dalton, that I’d done little better than that prep school teacher who set a chain of events into motion which resulted in that one boy killing himself, or that bearded doctor who’d given all those frozen people that drug, so they improved ... only for a brief, brief time, before going back into that metaphorical cave of theirs. As if I don’t know that already.

Perhaps two of us graduated from Obtuse 101.

She did write me a note, folded up small and square like the MDVD jewel cases, and slipped between some of the movies in the stack.

Lately she hands me the food tray and leaves immediately, so I’ve had to re-read the letter quite a few times, while waiting for whatever ship is going to pick me up, and I assume take me back to Earth:

“Temple,

It looks like you won’t be playing Anne Sullivan to that female Savant over on the *Berde-Pedar* anytime soon. I heard the Captain requesting an immediate transport back to Earth for you, as soon as we cross orbits with an Earth-bound

ship. Which might take a while. Until then, you're off limits to everyone on board. Me included. Dalton, he's about back to normal—*his* normal. Watches his “nice” movies every day. Kevan's behaving himself too—looks like you'll have company on the ship back to Earth.

I realize that you must think me a bitch, or worse, but I have orders to follow, too. We all do, or did, until you came here. But I do realize how tempting, how necessary, it must have seemed to you, to try and bring Dalton out of his isolation. Even as you weren't able to ‘read between the lines’ so to speak. Perhaps that was one of the hard things for you to overcome—I do suspect you still haven't mastered reading people yet. Not the way you seemed to have misunderstood all of us so thoroughly. Just as I noticed that you still seem to have an aversion to the color red. Perhaps, after you managed to earn all those degrees of yours, you might've considered all of your autism-related difficulties conquered. But there's no way to completely erase autism, even though science has discovered the responsible genes, even after all those therapies have been tried. Not that you should want not to be autistic—from the brief ‘conversations’ I've had with Dalton, I do realize that he lives in a special, perhaps even beautiful world. A cave, as Plato may've thought of it, but such a warm, cozy, nicely-decorated cave. And a cave he has always been able to leave as he chose. I never had to urge him to exercise—he took walks at night, on his own. And came *back* to his cabin, afterward. On his own.

Back when I was a small girl, living in Kentucky with my mother, my grandmother was rear-ended in her car, several times, many years before that whole 9-11, World Trade Center thing made us conspicuous, by the local rednecks. So they did terrible things to her, and to my mother. Because they looked different. Because they prayed differently. I remember asking my Nana, Why don't you take off the scarf in your car? It's like being in a small house, only she told me, Sabriah, honey, I can't live in that car. I gotta come out, too.

I know you're not a Muslim, and I know you don't live in a car. But you are what you are, *everywhere* you are. Hiding it will only cause you grief. Your parents must've known you were autistic right from birth, probably why they named you Temple, after that autistic scientist, Temple Grandin. Only no one's ever forgotten she was autistic. And she always said she was.

It didn't make her accomplishments any less important. But it did put her and her work in context. Lose the context, and the meaning is lost, too. I hope you can understand. Without his context, Dalton's just another cute guy for someone like Kevan to hit on. And maybe hurt—I don't know what did or didn't happen, nor do I really want to know. As you said, they're both of age.

Even if Brogan and Moire don't see it that way. But as good looking and as young as Dalton is, he's not *just* a good looking young man. He's special, and he has a purpose in this world. Even if that purpose is to sit around all day watching movies to escape boredom, and wait for someone to give him a set of numbers to

remember and not mess up. It isn't an unbearable life for him.

I do admire your effort to transcend your uniqueness—but I cannot condone someone ignoring that uniqueness in the process. Hope you enjoy the movies.

Sabriah”

I wonder how someone like her ended up working with people. When all she does is try to hold people back, make them bow down low under a yolk they cannot tolerate any more.

But the movies help ... just as they helped when I was small, and the colors jumped up at me, tearing at my eyes. Mostly the red and the green. Until Grandfather showed me that movie with the harmless, transparent green goo, and gave me that little burger-place toy, the one with the dancing green blob I could cover over with my hands when the color was too bright, until it didn't hurt my eyes so much after all. I never did get used to the red Thunderbird the professor in the movie drove around, but I liked when it rode up into the sky, and hovered there. Like the sun, only not as painful in the eyes.

I didn't realize how much I'd missed that movie until I saw Dalton watching it. Or remember how much it helped me. Only I'd never seen it with the other language tracks—foreign languages sound so harsh, so bristly to me. Not wormy like Dalton hears French, but still strange.

Sabriah didn't tell me so, but I found out I'm not locked in this cabin. Last night when I couldn't sleep, I opened my door, and walked out into the corridor. The others were asleep, but Dalton wasn't. I heard Robin Williams in there, speaking Spanish.

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A. R. Morlan

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A. R. Morlan's fiction has either been published in or accepted for publication in over 110 different magazines, websites, and anthologies, including *Sci-Fi.com/SciFiction*, *F&SF*, *Space & Time*, *Weird Tales*, *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Vanishing Acts*, *Night Screams*, *Prom Night*, *The Definitive Best of the Horror Show*, and *100 Twisted Little Tales of Torment*. Her novels *The Amulet* and *Dark Journey* were published by Bantam, and her co-edited anthology *Zodiac Fantastic* was published by DAW Books. Her first collection of short stories *Smothered Dolls* (which includes “The *Gemütlichkeit* Escape” from

Challenging Destiny Number 8) is coming out in March from Overlook Connection Press (see www.overlookconnection.com/sd.htm). A. R.'s stories "Dora's Trunk" and "Etamin at East 47th" appeared in *Challenging Destiny* Number 12 and Number 16 respectively.