

FAR FREEDOM

by

A. Warren Merkey

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This book is dedicated to my wife Cynthia,
without whose encouragement *Far Freedom*
would never have been written.

Part 1

KESHONA

Section 000 Kansas 1986

"Why the hell should I care? Why the hell do you care? The universe doesn't care; if it did, babies wouldn't die."

But why had she come this far with me? Babies wouldn't die? "God, you mean?" I ignored her rhetorical questions. We both cared, we both knew why. What was this about babies?

"Shut up about God! What does God have to do with this crap?"

"It's a miracle it works." I assumed we were still talking about the same thing. "It's a miracle we haven't killed each other."

She laughed. Was she amused? I could rarely tell. She was a miracle herself. She gave me the numbers. I would never understand how. She was a genius. She was a bitch. "It's a miracle because we're too ignorant to know how we hit the cosmic lottery!"

"Nevertheless."

"Always-the-more!"

"It would shut me up. It might even put us all out of our misery."

"Not gonna happen. I like misery. That's why I married you!"

Why? Really. Why marry me? "I'm going out!" Getting out. Bugging out. Freaking out. Dropping out.

"Out where?"

"Out out!" I hoped I was cool and inscrutable on the outside. I never knew whether I deserved to feel so angry. I never wanted to find out. The only anger I knew that was legitimate was the anger I aimed at myself.

"You know how?"

I nodded slowly, watching for some change in her that I would never see.

"Fine! Enjoy yourself!"

I had that damned conversation memorized. The words made puffs of vapor as I shouted them to the cold morning air. Over the words and under my boots the snow squeaked the rhythm of my recitation. "Out out!" Squeak squeak. "Enjoy yourself!" Squeak squeak. I was tired after a long walk, preceded by the stress of evading security checkpoints and navigating dark tunnels. I had not yet tired my emotions. My wife had a magic ability to make me feel alive. She could bring me to tears that I would never show her, tears of joy, tears of rage. I never knew I could feel so much. Tears held back now came forth. I blinked my eyes many times, smearing the bright winter light across my watery vision. The sun was too bright.

The light from the nearest star was not old and not tired. Redshift. Reluctance of the interface. Because the entire melody is not played on one

string. Because space is not empty, it's full of strings, circuits, entities. The strings cross, reluctantly. The circuits vibrate their quanta. The entities mark their spots. My brain is full of strings, circuits, quanta, and crap.

I heard car tires crunching the snow at the edge of the street. "Doctor Lee," the big Chevy Suburban said to me. How many African-American friends did I ever have? One, and I was about to lose him, he would be that pissed. He never called me "Doctor Lee," even when Big Bird was within earshot.

"Agent Moses." I never called him that. His name was Karl. He sat in the front passenger seat of the Suburban with the window rolled down. The warm interior of the vehicle was inviting to my frosty ears and cold feet. I would be *dammed* if I would get into that car, as cold and as tired as I was.

"You're five miles out from the Hole. How did you get out? Where were you going?"

Where was I going? Past tense: meaning I was now going nowhere. "To see if Kansas was still here." I gestured with a bare hand at the sunny winter morning. I could see ice crystals in the bright calm air when the angle of light was just right. Tired little crystals of information redshifted on their vagrant circuits to infinity. I stuck the hand quickly back in my coat pocket.

"Kansas is still here. It isn't as nice as Virginia. Get in and let's go back. This much sky makes me nervous."

Normally I would have been quick to do anything Karl asked me to do. He spoke calmly and with respect. He was very professional and a great guy. I almost wished he would berate me in a loud voice, followed by some humorous sarcasm, like he would do when I missed too many times at target practice. "Use a nine, for pete's sake! You can't hit anything with that old iron."

This fine morning I was mentally impaired. Everything I thought and heard and said was biased by emotions which had not abated in the trek from the Hole. The greatest scientific advance in history was within my grasp and everyone - and especially my wife - was pulling it away from me.

Karl's words had an irritating presumption of authority and were completely lacking the friendliness to which I was accustomed. I imagined I never meant anything to Karl and to the other security agents. My preference for their company over that of the technical staff was totally misguided and foolish of me.

"No. I'm not ready to go back." My voice was a pitiful blend of resentment and guilt modulated by tremors induced by the cold air.

"Get in, Doctor Lee." Karl's voice contained a threat. It made me angry at him. I wanted to make him understand something - *anything* - about what was killing me with frustration.

The light from distant stars is not very old, but it was never about light. It was about gravity and being connected. It was about identity and knowing ice crystal A from ice crystal B.

I was wound up too tight. My spring broke. I took out Papa's old pistol, given to him by a GI from the K-War. I shot a hole in the front right tire of the Suburban. The noise was deafening. After a moment I could hear a dog barking but there was no other response from Kansas.

A railroad locomotive dopplered its warning whistle into my recovering ears, then began redshifting away from my future. There are railroad tracks, with their quanta of trains, and the tracks connect the towns and the trains pull them together. Everything is connected, even the future. The future comes on tracks and it isn't tired or old. Or expected. Or wanted.

Karl pushed open his door, almost knocking the pistol from my hand. I pivoted to hold onto it and stopped with it pointing to the right rear tire. I pulled the trigger again. The Chevy listed heavily to starboard with two flat tires on that side. I am still connected to those two bullets of information. Consequences. Their quantum pathways will follow me the rest of my life. Not too far from here.

Karl stared at me with wide eyes of incredulity as he circled me. He stopped after one orbit. I grabbed my pistol with my other hand and offered it to Karl, holding it by the warm barrel. I was suddenly sane again and mortified at what I did. I had never lost my self-control in such a violent fashion. I was so deflated I couldn't even feel angry at myself, just miserably sad.

Karl looked up and down the quiet residential street, ignoring the offer of my weapon. Nobody seemed interested in gunshots and even the dog stopped barking. "I guess we'll walk." There was no humor in this too-obvious statement. Karl was famous for his deadpan humor. I could expect no humor from Agent Moses today.

Walt got out of the back seat and looked at the flat tires while Ed the driver spoke on the radio. Karl started walking. I followed him. He pulled the ear flaps down on his cap. I wished I had ear flaps. I hid my ears behind long hair and the upturned collar of my coat. A few moments later I heard Ed get out of the wounded vehicle and I turned to see him and Walt following us. These were elite federal agents but they looked like three guys you would see in a feed store or the local diner.

I holstered my pistol. Five rounds left. No, six. Five. I had one in the chamber that I ejected by mistake. How can you ever achieve simultaneity? What is the smallest unit of time? What is the smallest quantum circuit? Why should there be *entities* if everything is a wiggling circuit? Where was my missing bullet? I should have put it back in the clip.

We reached the corner and turned onto Main Street. The sound waves of church music flowed through the air, connecting me to a church on a small island in the Yellow Sea which I had never seen. We could hear the congregation singing in the Methodist church across the street. Toward the west, Main Street quickly turned to highway that ran straight to the horizon. To the east, Main Street bumped into a towering grain elevator, jogged around it, and presumably returned to a horizon-seeking straight line of pavement. We headed east. Ed and Walt stayed a few dozen paces behind us. We were all connected by pathways.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Karl said.

"I'm hungry." I ignored the concern in Karl's words. "Do you have some money on you? I seem to have lost my cash in a poker game." I played poker with these guys on a regular basis. Probably never again.

Karl didn't reply. We walked past several small stores, all of them closed on this Sunday morning. It wasn't usually possible to tell but I was sure Karl was thinking serious thoughts. He could give me that same bored look and deliver a wisecrack that would have me laughing for minutes. It was an unwelcome and incongruous thought at this time, but better than cosmology.

"I always assumed you were one of the engineers."

Karl made me feel like a liar. On one hand, I was glad he was still talking to me. On the other hand, the tone of his words made me realize I had probably lost one of the few things that kept life in the Hole tolerable - his friendship. First my wife, then everybody else. I was alone again. Alone with redshift.

"I do have a degree in engineering." Such a feeble attempt to regain what? Friends. I had no chance of friendship among my well-lettered peers, most of whom felt they were trapped in the Hole. I was a heretic to them, and their impossible task was to discover why my heresy worked.

"But you're a physicist," Karl said. "*The* physicist. The top dog. That's *your* monster in the Hole."

"I'm not a physicist, not exactly." It wasn't a monster in the Hole, not exactly.

"What are you?"

"I'm an astronomer."

"Give me a break! What kind of astronomy can you do underground? And that doesn't need the kind of security we have at the Hole. And you *will* tell me how you got out of the Hole. This is a Top Secret project. That means dangerous stuff. I hear rumors that scare me, Doctor Lee."

Damn, I thought. *Underground astronomy: neutrinos. How do they fly the gravity circuit?* "Don't believe such rumors. And quit calling me 'Doctor Lee.'"

"Is this because of your wife?"

That was too easy to guess, and I was too sensitive to suffer it from Agent Moses. "She's a major contributor." I was ready to confirm what everybody in the Hole already knew - that my wife and I were not happy with each other. Then the worry struck at me that she would hurt herself again slipping in the bathroom and it would look like I hit her. *I hear rumors that scare me, Doctor Lee*. The wife-beater and mad scientist has a doomsday device he's itching to turn on, Agent Moses. Be afraid, be very afraid.

"That was a real shock, you shooting the tires, especially because it was you. You were the most regular guy of all the crew in the Hole." I had no reply. Did he sound less anxious? Karl said a good thing about me. I tried hard to be a "regular guy." I was not a "regular guy" most of the time. I was usually lost in mental space. My wife and I could sit in the same room for hours and say nothing to each other, not because of antipathy but because we voyaged in abstractions. I long ago gave up asking my wife how she clothed my abstractions in her even more abstract mathematics; thus, we said little to each other. Babies? Apparently mathematics was not the only thing she thought about these days. Umbilical thoughts. Entities with tails. Every damn thing is connected.

"Why didn't you want my pistol?" I asked.

"You may need it." His reply made me shift mental gears. The winter cold suddenly got down the collar of my coat, made me shiver. The future made another blue shift. I was tired and Karl was walking faster than I wanted to walk. I wondered why.

"Why?"

"The Hole is not as secret as it was, and neither are the scary rumors."

"Meaning what?"

"Maybe nothing. When we found you missing, Duncan told me a few things I did *not* want to know. He scared me. We need to get out of here as soon as possible."

My brain shifted into a higher gear, the one where my imagination races. Faster than light. "Where are we walking to?"

"To find cover."

"Is someone on their way to pick us up?" I was alarmed by the rising tone of Karl's voice.

"Very soon, I hope."

His hope and my hope - that my breakout would escape serious consequences - died when Ed called from behind us: "Karl, I've lost contact with Joe."

"Joe? Maybe it's just a malfunction."

"We have triple redundancy. I hope you can shoot as well under fire as you can on the pistol range, Doctor Lee."

"Is Joe dead?" No answer. I followed Karl down the sidewalk in front of cars angle-parked on the snowy red brick for church service across the street. This was too sudden, too wrong, too unreal. Karl halted, holding up a finger that meant *be quiet*. We heard the helicopter then. "This is insane!" I was upset with the absurdity of the possible danger. "What can they hope to do? They can't have mounted any well-planned action, whoever they are."

"Maybe as many as four operatives, not counting the pilot. Stay here."

Karl left me in the recess of a store entrance and went back to Ed and Walt. He returned soon and I glimpsed the other two moving off in separate directions. It was still insane! How could an enemy be so aware of such a highly secret military operation? How could they know of my escape from the Hole? How could they be so prepared to act? How could they get me out of the country, if that was their plan? How could they know I was worth the effort? I wasn't worth the effort. I could try to explain the theory but only my wife knew the numbers to make it work. She tried to explain the math to me. She never tried to explain it to anyone else. It was her secret. She would take it to the grave.

"The church?" I suggested.

"How many people do you want to die?" A nine-millimeter automatic appeared in each of his hands. *Two* pistols! What else did he have under his heavy coat?

"Are they that desperate?"

"I don't want to find out."

"What do we do?"

"Wait here, see what happens, deal with the helicopter first. It has less room to maneuver here between buildings."

The rotor noise soon got louder and snow and debris boiled up in the street. We saw it through the plate glass of the old drugstore before it saw us. Karl stepped in front of me, and as the helicopter arrived, drifting just above the parked cars, he fired a barrage of rounds. The helicopter shot upward. Karl shouted something and backed into me. The plate glass exploded all around us and Karl's reaction propelled both of us backward through the shattered glass door.

A second helicopter had closely followed the first and pumped machine gun fire into the front of the store. Bullets ripped into the merchandise on the shelves above us, magnifying the smell of cosmetics. I reached for one of Karl's weapons that fell nearby, to give it back to him. A warning salvo spattered into the floor and I yanked my hand away from the pistol. I stood up, shielding my eyes from the tornado of debris swirling through the store. That made me look down and see the blood on the floor. Karl's blood, so much blood to have already leaked through his overcoat. If Karl was still alive, I needed to help him! I ignored the helicopter and the gunner in its open hatch. When I tried to examine Karl something hit my shoulder, knocked me down into the glass again, and made my left arm useless. I hardly understood I was shot, hardly realized I could be dying of internal damage. I felt clumsy and weak. Why

would they shoot me? Didn't they know who I was?

I struggled back to my feet, as though that was the logical thing to do: avoid the glass, not the bullets. Reality was not real. Anger was real. The grit in my eyes kept me from seeing if Karl was still alive. I turned around to squint into the whirlwind dust, saw the blurry form of the helicopter. I could barely make out the gunner and his gestures for me to come toward the helicopter. A wave of vertigo washed into my tentative awareness; anger washed it back out. I felt under my coat for the evidence of the wound. My fingers brushed the butt of my pistol. I felt a moment of cowardice as my trembling fingers wouldn't close on the pistol grip. I finally got enough tears to wash my eyes clear. The sight of Karl lying in the glass and in his own blood shocked my fingers into curling around the pistol butt and squeezing the grip safety. Karl was probably dying because of me. *Whatever happened to my old dream of still nights on mountain tops, making photographic plates of galaxies?*

I knew real anger now, anger with myself, and a rage that they wouldn't let me help Karl. I was crazed into false bravery. I knew I was shot and I was back on my feet and starting to feel pain. I saw the end of my life approaching rapidly. It was only theory. Nothing was real. Thoughts were butterflies, emotions were bullets. I briefly mourned the loss of eventually understanding the mathematics of the Hole. I mourned the loss of eventually understanding my wife. I embraced the theory of death with a mind too cluttered with butterflies and bullets to have much room for the theory of fear.

Blinking away tears to clear more grit from my eyes, I squinted into the rotor blast and saw the gunner still gesturing for me to come forward. Such patience! It didn't occur to me that I was being given a chance to live. My sole purpose was to get rid of the helicopter so I could help Karl - or die trying. I needed to get closer to improve my chances of hitting my target. I also needed to give myself time to draw the big forty-five and aim. It seemed only seconds ago I had murdered two defenseless tires. When the gunner's hand went back to his rifle, I stopped. This made him repeat his gesture to approach, which took his hand away from the trigger. As his hand moved away to signal me, my hand pulled the forty-five from its holster. I didn't plan any of this.

I knew I was going to jerk the trigger, so I shot early, hoping to compensate. I missed and fired another shot as the gun dropped from the upward recoil. Three rounds left. The gunner smiled at me, unhurt. He prepared to take another shot at me, raising his rifle and pressing his cheek to the stock. I finally got a good view of the front sight of my pistol, just as the pilot turned to look at me. I saw him because the helicopter drifted him into my sights and because the sun reflected off his glasses from inside his canopy. I let the front sight settle until it rested just below that point of glare. The gun went off unexpectedly, as it should when you have all the time in the world to hit a paper target that isn't shooting back at you. The helicopter started to do strange things. The gunner struggled to reset his sights on me. I emptied my pistol at him. The helicopter shot eastward at a steep rotor angle.

I turned back to Karl and discovered my right leg didn't work. I dropped into the glass litter on the black-and-white floor tile and scooted toward Karl. My wounded leg was a nerveless nuisance. My shoulder was burning. My empty pistol was a blood-covered hindrance. I put the forty-five down, its slide locked back by the emptied clip. Somewhere in the distance a helicopter still flew.

A distant explosion and gunshots sounded muffled to my ears after so much noise. I wanted to do something for Karl but lacked the hands and brains needed

for the task. I put my hand on his shoulder. His chest heaved then settled down to stillness. I denied any meaning for that disturbing process. My face and hands were too cold to feel his breath. My eyes were too blurry to see the fine detail of any other life signs in Karl. It wasn't real. It wasn't Karl. It wasn't me. It wasn't Kansas. But it was my fault.

I remembered one of Karl's oft-repeated lessons on weapons - never carry an empty pistol. I picked up my pistol again and ejected the clip. It was all I could do, all I could think. A one-handed search of my pockets found no spare clip, but the single round I mistakingly ejected before beginning my fateful escape from the Hole. I pushed the round into the clip, started the clip into the butt with one bloody, shaking hand. I paused when I detected motion outside the store. A man in a military parka rounded the corner of the shattered storefront, jerked to a halt, and waved an assault weapon at me. I took my hand away from the pistol. He came into the store and stood over me, studying the pistol and its loose clip. He gripped the compact automatic rifle casually in his left hand, confident I was no threat to him. The parka hood hid much of his face. He did nothing for a moment except place a finger against the hood at his right ear. Karl was not breathing. I was not breathing.

The sound of the helicopter that was increasing now decreased. The man pulled back the parka hood, scowling. He was Asian. He yanked out a radio earplug from his right ear. He pulled the slide back on his weapon, ejecting nothing. He dropped the machine gun into the broken glass. He looked at my old forty-five again. I looked over at Karl's pistol lying a few feet away, the one I had tried to fetch for Karl to use. The man's eyes followed mine to the weapon. As he took his first step toward Karl's nine-millimeter, I grabbed my pistol, pounded the clip home, and snapped the slide shut on the single round. Before I could raise it high enough to aim it at the foreign operative, he kicked the pistol from my hand, sending it far across the floor. He turned back to Karl's pistol. Karl had two pistols. I felt behind me, found Karl's arm and tugged his sleeve to pull his hand from under his body. I could feel the other pistol in Karl's lifeless hand. I grabbed it. The Asian man had taken an extra second to check Karl's pistol. He was surprised when he turned back toward me.

Section 001

Invisible

The boy awoke and the eye that could open did. "I'm still alive." He coughed. "Are you sure?"

He turned his head to the side. He squinted and frowned. *Are you sure?* The hard lump next to his ear had replied to his tentative declaration of being. He was almost hoping, when he lay down under the stars and waited for the pain to let him sleep, that he would not wake up. Words of grim humor came to him. He was too young to know the term *gallows humor*. "If I was dead I wouldn't feel this bad," he rasped.

"Are the dead so comfortable?" It was a too-quick reply, with an intonation that implied intentional wit, mixed with concern.

Are the dead so comfortable? Why would she say such a thing? Was he awake or dreaming? Was he alive or dead? He dreamed of Milly being a real person. He dreamed of many things and wished many things and got nothing but pain and fear when his eyes were open. He didn't want to get up and be awake. A lion roared in the near distance. He could smell lions. Samson sat up quickly, his blanket falling away in a shower of dust. He groped for his spear. He listened for a moment, shivering in the cold. The direction of the breeze favored him for the moment. He had time to move away. He was hungry. He was always hungry. He must be awake. No, he was also hungry in his dreams. Samson rubbed at the crusty eye to break it open.

"You *should* be dead. You slept on the ground."

He *should*? Emphasis on the word? Was he hallucinating? He continued the conversation because it was strange, interesting. "I was too tired to climb."

"Too weak, you mean. When was the last time you ate?"

"Why do you ask? You remember everything." Did Milly remember everything? How could she remember what he didn't tell her?

"I don't remember what you don't tell me."

Yes, but... "How did you know I slept on the ground?" No answer to that. Samson shook more dust from his blanket and rolled it. He looked to the east. The bad eye saw blurry dawn orange. The good eye saw the fat disk of the rising sun and the vertical line through it. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and inspected the smear.

"When was the last time you ate, Samson?"

"I don't remember." He didn't lie. He remembered the meal well but the days were unnumbered into the past. "Day before yesterday?" Perhaps a bad guess would satisfy her. Did he leave Milly on? *Was* it Milly speaking to him? Why was she so strange this morning?

"That's what you said yesterday. You really must eat today, Sammy. Do nothing else but eat!"

"Did you put an exclamation point at the end of that, Milly?" He was disturbed that Milly was not Milly today. He was disturbed that he could not trust his senses that were telling him Milly was strange. How could Milly be strange? She was only his teaching machine. The lack of food must be affecting his brain now.

"You're dying, and all you can choose to discuss with me is the tone of my voice?"

"You're trying to scare me, Milly. How can you do that?" Milly did frighten

him. He didn't want to feel more frightened. Fear resided next to hunger in his gut, always competing for his attention. He got to his feet using his spear for support. He picked up his mat, rolled it, tied it with his blanket to his pack. He shouldered the pack. Milly was in the pack, behind him now. He still heard her very clearly.

"I assume you'll head east toward the elevator," she said behind his shoulder. "I'll warn you again about the danger of going there, although I doubt you'll live that long. At least there's a river in that direction. You can catch fish. Or be eaten by a crocodile!"

Behind him? It didn't sound like it now. She was next to him or in front of him. He could remove his pack, pull her out, make sure Milly was off. No. Too much effort. "You're mean today!" Samson said it loudly, to keep the quaver from his voice.

"Being nice hasn't been effective, Sammy."

"I'm only a kid!" Why did he respond? He was too tired for this. "Every animal on the plain wants to eat me or run over me."

"Feeling sorry for yourself?"

Yes. Samson shook his head, started to walk, and immediately remembered the cut on one foot. He shifted his spear to take some weight off the foot. He walked slowly, heavily favoring the injured foot as the cut began to rupture and hurt again.

"How far are you from the elevator, Sammy?"

"Why are you initiating conversation? I can remember when you only talked when I asked you a question."

"I can remember when you didn't know it all and you asked me questions all the time."

"I can remember when you *answered* all my questions. Why do you want to know how far I am from the elevator? You say it doesn't work."

"No, it doesn't work. I know exactly how far you are from the elevator. I'm just trying to keep your brain awake and your thoughts on survival."

"How do you know the exact distance, Milly? I thought I had to help you with the measurement."

"That was for your educational benefit."

Samson shook his head again - gently because it easily made him dizzy. The "problem" of Milly added to his burden. She distracted him when what little concentration remained to him was needed for avoiding the relentless dangers of hiking in lion country. He labored under his pack, careful of his path through the brush and across the plain. The sun rose well above the horizon and slipped away from the vertical line of the elevator. Samson's bad eye registered the blue of sky and the straw-gold of plain. His good eye saw puffs of dust among the gazelles practicing escape from death.

* * *

"Is your brain working, Sammy?"

Samson stopped, with whatever he was thinking or dreaming evaporating, leaving him unsure he had been awake, leaving him no memories of what he was doing or where he had been during his slow trek through the brushy plain. The brief chill of dawn had long since yielded to the heat of equatorial morning. He sat down in a small amount of shade under a thorny tree. He didn't have much energy for it, but the mystery of Milly continued to bother him. His brain

was still working. It always worked too much, if not too well. "I don't know," he answered.

"I have a penny, if you have a thought."

Samson closed his good eye. *Where would he spend a penny?* "The thought is *why*." He was unable to find enough breath to speak continuously. "You're this little computer... I carry around in my bag. You used to tell me... stories and give me lessons... in math and science. Feed you some sunlight every day... and you helped me stay alive. I suppose it doesn't matter... how you know so much. But now I wonder *why*."

"I'm your teacher, Sammy. That's all. That's why."

"I think you... know something... you won't teach me."

"How could I not?"

He shook his head yet again, waited for the dizziness to pass, and struggled back to his feet. He limped away from the tree. A tear rolled down from his good eye. It left a dirty track as it lost its precious moisture. His bad eye was closed and he felt no urge to reopen it. Flies buzzed around him and walked on him, and he suffered their tickling torment with little effort to discourage them. His steps came ever more slowly. He could hardly put weight on his cut foot. He planted the spear and stepped, planted and stepped.

When Samson reached a clear area near the river he stopped. His goal was close: the African Space Elevator. He could see it across the river: big buildings, the tallest reaching far into the sky, its needle disappearing into space. He knew he would never make it there. He knew it was never his means of escape. It was enough that he came this far. He was so tired he couldn't feel fear, couldn't remember hunger. *Who was Milly?* "Oops, I almost... stepped in some."

"Stepped in what?" Milly asked.

"Zebra dung."

"Lucky you."

"If you're smart enough..." - Samson took a breath - "to use... exclamatory statements... and try to scare me, then... you should... be able to... respond correctly to... 'zebra dung.'"

"I don't understand."

"You should have asked... how I knew... it was zebra dung."

"I assumed you saw it coming out of the animal. You're a dung scientist? How do you know?"

"I would have... said, 'Because... it's striped.'"

"I'm supposed to laugh?" Milly responded loudly with almost no pause. "You're staggering from starvation and an injured foot, can't see out of one infected eye, and will probably reside in a hyena's gut before next morning - *and you want me to laugh?*"

Samson was almost alert enough to be startled by Milly's tirade. Not only did her gruesome words disturb him but now the fear that she was a stranger made him start to cry. "I was testing... you! How do you... know about... the eye? I was... keeping that... from you!"

"Do you think I'm alive?" she challenged. "Am I an autonomous machine intelligence?"

"Are you?" Stifling his emotions, Samson waited for a reply, suspecting it wouldn't be the truth, because Milly probably had never been Milly. It was interesting that Milly stopped, as if thinking about her reply. Why would a machine take so long? When Milly did speak, Samson didn't have time to be surprised.

"Something is coming!" Milly exclaimed. "How long we've waited!"

A shockwave struck the plain, blowing the tall grass over, shaking the ground, sending herd animals stampeding away. Samson couldn't withstand the invisible hammer of pressure and he fell. Lying on his side, he squinted upward to find the source of the powerful disturbance. A bright, round object swelled in size and darkened through incandescent colors from white to red. The red disc ballooned to cover half the sky, then cleared, almost disappearing. Only the halo of sunlight curving around the edges of the phenomenon revealed its continuing existence above Samson. He cringed on the ground as the thing pushed on him and vibrated him. He opened his mouth to scream and it stuck open. He couldn't exhale to cry. He convulsed briefly and stiffened into rigidity. Sunlight glinted from the metal tip of his spear as it spun and floated vertically in the darkening air of his failing sight.

Section 002

1980 - Meeting Sam

"Enjoying the mixer?" he asked, and before I even looked up at him I knew who he was and what he meant. He was that young astronomer who looked Chinese and he was commenting that I was not enjoying the mixer. If I wanted to talk to anybody in this stuffy room full of intellectual politics he was probably the last I would choose. I looked up at him from my rolling prison and smiled insincerely. "I thought not," he said, obviously taking the cue from my flattened smile that he should get lost. He started to retreat then checked himself. "Would you like some help getting out of here?" He must have been watching me for awhile to assess my enjoyment of the party that precisely. I was not flattered by his attention.

"As long as you don't get any ideas." Yes, I have a mean streak, but now I wondered if I should be nice to him. He spoke English like a native American. The thick glasses were a negative factor in my suddenly prejudiced frame of mind, but he looked better up close than from a distance. I then realized I had noticed him on several occasions around campus - bumping into people and things.

"Ideas." He tilted his head back, adjusted his glasses, looked away from me. I couldn't read his eyes because of the glasses but something made him pause. "I could use some help with ideas. I don't get enough good ideas, and when I do, my math isn't strong enough to describe them."

"My coat is in the hall closet," I said meaningfully.

He turned back to me with a smile. "I'm getting an idea." He had good teeth and I could tell he wasn't a smoker. *Why was I running him through my man-filter?* What man-filter? Those days were over. He wasn't even close to my ideal male. "Why don't I shut up and get you out of here?" He said it in good humor and strode toward the doorway to the hall. I wondered about his comment about math. Did he know I was a mathematician? Why would he be interested in me? I was sure I was not an ideal female to him, or even a last-choice female. I needed to turn off my self-pity. *Just play it straight and friendly; he might be very nice and even interesting.*

"What's your name?" I inquired when he came back. I accepted my coat from him, not even realizing he knew which coat in the hall closet was mine.

"Samuel Lee," he answered. "What's yours?"

"Millicent DuPont." I held out my hand which he quickly took and squeezed. Firm handshake: good sign.

"Hey, Sam," a voice called from across the mixer battlefield, "you gonna play for us tonight?"

"You gonna take up a collection? My car needs new tires."

"I'll set an empty beer mug on the piano and the rich among us can donate."

There were no rich among us. Samuel Lee looked at me through his thick lenses and I looked back at him through mine. He was more interesting now as I watched his face react to his thoughts. Was he a musician? Finally he said: "Not this time, Jim. I'm out of practice."

"Aw, c'mon, man! We need a little music to drown out the Greek chorus."

Samuel Lee heaved a theatrical sigh, and I thought he was going to change his mind. I wanted to hear him play. I assumed he was a pianist, since that was the only instrument in sight. "Sorry, man. I gotta go. I have three classes to

teach tomorrow." Several more people spoke up, trying to get Samuel Lee to play, and now I was almost angry that he wouldn't. I pushed my wheels hard, following him into the hall. I still hadn't put on my coat.

"I'd like to hear you," I said, watching him don his coat in the foyer.

"I'm not a musician any longer. Anyway, it's a bad piano, even if it was in tune."

"You must be good if you know a good piano from a bad one."

"I stopped playing when I was thirteen." He had his coat on. I didn't. He sat down on the foyer bench and waited for me to get into my coat. He took his glasses off and squinted at the lenses. He wasn't bad looking at all. I guessed he might be of Korean origin. I had a soft spot in my heart for Koreans. One of them saved my dad's life. Of course, a lot of them were also trying to kill him.

"Am I stopping you from doing something you like to do?" I asked.

"Play for them? No. I used to think it would make me popular, but I know my place now. I know who likes me and who doesn't."

"Because you're Korean?"

He thought for a moment and chose his words. "Good guess. Most whites think I'm Chinese or Japanese. I'm American, born and raised, and my parents struggled greatly to make me an American. They hardly even wanted me to speak any Korean. No, I don't think about my physical or cultural ethnicity. I think about my poor eyesight. It was a struggle to read the sheet music. I was always playing the 'Lee Variations' on the works of composers. And now I'm an astronomer and I'm still plagued by poor eyesight. I'm sorry if I bothered you tonight. I was curious about you, not being able to see you clearly from a distance."

"Why were you curious about me?" I immediately regretted the question. I didn't want to embarrass both of us with such a personal subject. Did I have some perverse desire to lead the man on and see how far he would go? He could only go so far, before the wheelchair got in the way. He hesitated again while thinking about his reply. He put his glasses back on and stared past me.

"It gets lonely sometimes."

The statement struck a resonant chord with me and I tried to ignore it. "What sort of astronomy do you do?"

"Oh, mostly the old-fashioned kind. I came into astronomy from mechanical engineering, thus worrying my parents further that I was wasting my education on a degree that would keep me from supporting them in their old age. Dad wanted me to be an engineer. I always wanted to be an astronomer."

"And yet, you must see well enough to enjoy the splendors of the night sky."

"Not nearly well enough." He took off his glasses again. They looked heavy to me. "No, I see the universe best in my imagination, and I wish I could help it all make sense. There's so much out there that begs explaining. Starting with gravity."

"You don't like warped space?"

"Don't get me started." He smiled again. It was a nice smile, innocent and perhaps reluctant. Perhaps his words in opposition to Einstein were pretentious, and maybe his smile was also a comment on his words. I would accept any flavor of smile from Samuel Lee. I suppose it was my fault that I made so few people smile for me.

I was thinking I would get him started. I was thinking I liked Samuel Lee. I felt comfortable with him, with just a tiny bit of sexual tension to add interest. Very tiny. Get real, girl! I imagined he was a lot deeper than I was. Maybe I

could find more depth in myself, a depth that was different from what made me a mathematician. I hoped my physical condition wouldn't become a problem. I hoped my emotional condition wouldn't become a problem. The accident, the surgery, the recovery, and the paralysis were still raw in my memory and in my life. I had hardly decided I wanted to go on living. And now I was helplessly complicating my new life, adding Samuel Lee into it, even as I was struggling to finish my doctoral thesis. "I think I will."

"Will what?"

Section 003

Voices in the Wilderness

Subsection 001 - View 001

"Hello, Samson."

It was not Milly. It was a stranger. But he was alive. *He was alive!* Or was he? He felt... good. Too good? It was not Milly. It was a stranger out there beyond his closed eyelids, above where he lay. He lay on what, where, why? He stirred, took a deeper breath, tried to decide if he wanted to open his eyes and see the stranger. Yet her voice seemed familiar. He peeked into the brightness above him and saw a dark face hovering there.

"Hello." He opened his eyes wider as they adjusted to the glare.

"I've already questioned you but you won't remember it." It was definitely not Milly but it was a female voice.

Samson struggled to sit up and as he did, he saw he was on the ground. He could see very well, with *both* eyes! He closed one eye, then the other, and there was no doubt: the infected eye was healed. He then tried to see the female person's face, anxious to understand who she was. She was dark and her expression was lost in the brightness around them. There was something above her, behind her, that was not the sky. He wanted to get up, stand up, and he felt strange doing it - it was so easy. He rushed upward and lost his balance, favoring an injured foot that was apparently no longer injured. The woman grabbed his arm to help him stabilize and the contact was electric, almost negating the anchoring. He couldn't remember anyone ever touching him.

Samson looked harder at the woman as she released his arm. His eyes finally resolved the details of her face. Her brown eyes were large, her gray hair short, her cheeks smooth, her lips full. She was exotic to him, somehow unfamiliar to his experience - not that he would ever know what should or should not be familiar to him. She frowned at him briefly, then lost all expression. That disturbed him, perhaps frightened him, because it seemed unfriendly, even threatening. She wore a black uniform with a form-fitting collar that covered her neck and to which was affixed a star-shaped diamond on each side. He began to realize what she was. Navy. Admiral. And...

"You're an African?" As soon as he asked it, he had to turn his head to see the great machine that covered the sky. He remembered the shock of the incandescent ball falling upon him, the paralyzing force crushing him. The memory of death, the wonder of the thing above him, his head tilted back to study the few mechanical features visible to him, all made him lose his balance. He felt a hand on his shoulder and reached for it reflexively as he steadied himself. The feel of her warm soft flesh surprised him and he wanted to maintain the contact even as she tried to pull her hand away. He understood nothing of his reaction or of her reaction. He only knew something was now different. The Navy woman cared about him, even if her expression remained blank. She pulled her hand gently away from his grasp.

Samson looked down at himself and saw the new clothing he now wore: shirt and short pants, shoes and socks. He saw another person rise to his feet beyond the woman, saw the uniform he wore, similar to hers but dark blue, with golden winged emblems on the high collar. He thought he understood what happened. "If you're Navy then you're a captain," Samson said to the man. "That's your

ship! I'm saved!"

"How do you feel?" the female admiral asked. "You needed several hours of treatment in the medical cocoon."

Samson could see clearly with both eyes. He didn't feel hungry or weak. His skin felt clean. His nose was not runny. His muscles and joints didn't hurt. He wasn't dizzy. His foot was healed. "I feel wonderful!" He looked up at the admiral with gratitude.

"You may feel good now but the treatment didn't correct everything. You shouldn't exert yourself too much."

Samson nodded and looked again at the belly of the ship above him. "Is it a starship?" Milly had told him many stories about the Navy. They were a fearsome force, not always nice to people, but always interesting. He wondered how accurate Milly's descriptions were, wondered if he should be careful what he said to them. But they had doctored him and given him new clothes. Perhaps he could trust them.

"A small one," the admiral replied. "It nearly squashed you. It never saw you. It should have. I apologize. I know it was painful."

"I've always wondered why no one could see me down here. There are people up there, aren't there? Don't people look at Earth anymore?"

"Did Milly hide you?" the admiral asked.

"Why would she do that? Did you talk to her? She's been very strange lately. I think she was upset that I was close to dying."

"This is Milly?" The admiral held forth a gray tablet.

"I thought it was." He took the familiar device and rubbed its cleaned surface, seeing the marks of wear and tear that proved it was his own computer.

"No, I didn't talk to Milly," the admiral said. "Perhaps you can talk to her."

Samson checked the energy charge and booted the instrument. The screen displayed the usual information as the Milly Program started. He spoke to the tablet. "Milly? Milly, can you hear me? It isn't damaged, is it?"

"It was damaged. I repaired it, but I don't think it is powerful enough to produce someone like Milly."

"Milly isn't real?" Samson was upset. Milly was his only friend in a hostile and vacant world. He had always tried to push the injuries and pain and fear into the realm of the not-real, and pull Milly into the real. Thoughts and dreams and hopes were his reality, lions and flies and infection were all lies of his imagination.

"I don't know," the admiral said with a slight frown. "You needed a friend. Imaginary or not, Milly helped you."

It was, at least, a kind thing to say about Milly. But now she was gone. Samson needed her. The admiral's ship had killed her. He could not remember a time without Milly.

"Admiral." The other Navy officer spoke.

Samson looked again at the captain and saw the man's gray eyes staring at him. Both of them, he realized, had never taken their eyes off him.

"Jon, this is Samson," the admiral said. "Samson, this is Jon. My name is Fidelity." She did not turn to her captain as she addressed him. She kept her gaze on Samson while she continued to speak to the captain. "When I landed the yacht near the African Space Elevator he was directly beneath. Yet the yacht's sensors didn't see him. The gravionics reported an anomaly in its pressor skirt and forced a change in landing zone. Samson's health was very poor and the yacht further aggravated his condition. I winked him into isolation and put him

in the medical cocoon. I questioned him while he was semiconscious."

Samson tried to understand what the admiral said. He would have asked questions but he was afraid to be too demanding. There was an intensity in their eyes and a tension in their bodies that he could sense without knowing that was what he sensed. Something was wrong and it might be him. Yet they had helped him.

"Why is he here, Admiral?" the captain asked. "*How* could he be here?"

"He couldn't tell me, Jon," the admiral answered, still not turning to face the captain, very oddly keeping her back to him.

Now the admiral and the captain spoke in a language Samson couldn't understand, although he was fairly sure it was Standard. He tried to find some meaning in the voices and expressions of the Navy officers but all he could detect was the subtle tension between them, expressed mainly by the admiral continuing to keep her back to the captain.

"You must leave us for awhile," the admiral said to Samson, switching back to English. "We're *not* abandoning you. We'll help you go home as soon as we can. Stay nearby, where we can find you."

This unexpected news alarmed Samson. He didn't understand.

"Samson," the captain said.

Samson looked to the captain and saw what he thought was an expression of concern, but no further words of reassurance came from his mouth and his expression turned blank. Then the admiral handed Samson his backpack. He knew he had been abandoned before but he had no memory of it. He didn't remember his parents. Here was a man and a woman who had magically appeared to rescue him. They were not his parents, but now he feared a second abandonment. He trembled as he fumbled his computer into his well-cleaned backpack. The admiral helped him shoulder it. She handed him his spear and without speaking another word, pushed him toward to edge of the ship's cover. His face plunged into an invisible curtain of electric sensation which quickly parted, making him stumble forward. When he stopped and turned around, the ship was gone from sight.

Something buzzed in his backpack. Samson pulled the pack onto one shoulder to remove the little computer from it. He saw words on the computer's display.

"Don't go to the elevator."

"Milly! Is that you?"

"Yes."

"You aren't imaginary?"

"I don't know."

"Then you are."

"Perhaps we each imagine the other."

"Why wouldn't you talk to the Navy officers?"

"The Navy doesn't need to know more about me."

"Why? Are you some big secret? Milly?"

Samson waited for a reply. He walked and waited. Milly *was* a big secret, even from him. He hoped he was not abandoned. He glanced back several times at where the starship might still exist. He remembered touching the admiral, how warm her hand was, how soft her brown skin. He remembered her sweet scent and how her eyes stayed on him, making him feel so alive. He missed her. Gone for a few moments and he missed her terribly. She was the first real person Samson could ever remember seeing. He still had Milly. Maybe he also

had the admiral, and the captain.

Subsection 001 - View 002

"Hello, Samson."

Jon Horss heard the words as he stepped out of the yacht's egress elevator. Jon Horss heard the *voice*. He was free at last! He started to charge forward and demand an explanation for his imprisonment, but the *voice* stopped him. The words stopped him. His rage, building for days, sputtered and died as he took in the scene. It was remarkable for two reasons: one, the admiral's back was to him; two, she was kneeling over a small body on the raw ground of a planet.

The body on the ground stirred, opened its eyes and said, "Hello."

Horss stepped carefully forward to observe. He swallowed the anger that tried to revive. He stayed far enough away from the admiral to relax his combat reflexes. The admiral raised a hand, obviously intended for him to obey as a signal to remain at a distance. Horss squatted to one side. He was bothered by the unnecessary command. He was irritated by not having the admiral's full attention. He was unsettled by something totally unexpected and bizarre. He analyzed and tempered his responses in a failing attempt to objectify and control a situation that now seemed further out of control.

It *was* a child! It *appeared* to be a child. He concentrated, tuned his ocular augments, refined his auditory filters and gain. It was long-haired but perhaps it was male. It must be an android, but there were negative psychological issues for possessing a child android. Thermal emissions were inconclusive, example data impossible to retrieve for comparison. Why was it lying on the ground? Why would an admiral - or anyone - have one? Why would it be here? Where was here? The questions spun around in his mind, almost occluding his personal concerns. Where was patience to examine the problem, logic to unravel the dilemma? Horss watched the thing sit up, close one eye, look out the other, then switch eyes. It pulled its feet under itself and pushed up. It teetered as it favored one foot. The admiral grasped its upper arm to help it. It started at the touch and almost fell down. The actions seemed very peculiar to Horss. Why was this such a clumsy android?

"I've already questioned you but you won't remember it," the admiral said to it.

The *voice* came softly to his straining aural augments. She spoke *Twenglish*! It almost shifted Horss's mood into a different dimension. He was forced into the Navy procedure for determining what was real, and it *hurt*. Once the pain was gone, he let his augments run the rest of the diagnostics in the background. He *was* awake. The scene *was* real. He could now let fascination command his attention as the events unfolded millisecond by millisecond.

It squinted in the glare under the yacht to see her. Horss never saw an android squint. He saw it was Eurasian. The admiral was neither of those Earthian flavors. Why would she want a child of that type? Why did the admiral speak *Twenglish* to it?

"You're an African?" it asked - in *Twenglish*. One question answered, another created. Why would it speak that ancient subset of modern English? Only actors bothered to speak it fluently. A large fraction of the population could understand the old dialect. It was not so unusual that a child used the language, perhaps influenced by seeing too much entertainment media from that era of history.

Samson - she called it Samson - looked from the admiral to the ship above

him. It began to sway, perhaps simulating vertigo. The admiral offered a hand on its shoulder to steady it. It reached for her hand. She allowed it to touch her hand. They each reacted, it trying to hold onto her hand, she trying to pull the hand gently away. Horss noted this detail with detachment, unwilling to assign significance to the effect he observed in the admiral. She seemed to react as a person, not as an admiral.

Samson looked down at its feet and let its eyes and hands explore the clothing it wore, as though it was strange attire for it. Then it noticed Horss and turned to him. Regardless of what it was, Horss felt special in its gaze. As Horss rose, Samson apparently saw the insignia on the collar of his dark blue uniform.

"If you're Navy then you're a captain," Samson said. "That's your ship! I'm saved!"

Saved from what? Horss wondered, marveling at the detail of manufacture, the flawless human mimicry. This was a *very* expensive android. *Was* it an android? *It simply could not be a real child!* How could the presence of a real child be explained?

"How do you feel?" the admiral asked Samson. "You needed several hours of treatment in the medical cocoon."

Samson's eyes abandoned Horss, returned to the dark female admiral. The eyes seemed organic to Horss, their expressiveness perfect. Every visual datum argued for *human*, every point of logic demanded *inhuman*. "I feel wonderful!" it said with gratitude.

"You may feel good now," the admiral said, "but the treatment didn't correct everything. You shouldn't exert yourself too much." She was trying to convince Horss this entity was a real little boy, freshly discovered on this planet, somehow sick or injured, and now restored to health by the *kindly* Navy admiral. That was an impossible break in the flow of events leading up to this moment. The boy android could have nothing to do with Navy politics and any plans the admiral had for Horss's future.

Samson rubbed his fingers across the fabric of his clothes, wiggled his toes in the shoes on his feet. He looked up in wonder at the belly of the ship under which they stood. "Is it a starship?" Samson inquired, seeming full of innocent wonder.

"A small one," the admiral replied. "It nearly squashed you. It never saw you. It should have. I apologize. I know it was painful." She landed the yacht on top of him? Why would she claim to find him on this planet? What planet was this? Horss should have checked for a shiplink immediately but overlooked it in his rush to be out of his prison. He found the link available and was loath to take the time to verify its factual integrity while the scene progressed before him.

"I always wondered why no one could see me down here," Samson said, reading his script with almost casual facility. "There are people up there, aren't there? Don't people look at Earth anymore?" *Earth*. Horss should have deduced the location based on the transit time from Headquarters and the rarity of habitable planets. *There are people up there*, yes, *billions*. Earth was the most heavily observed planet in the Union, the probable Mother World of all known sentient life. The android raised the best question against its own existence, an even better contra-indicator for a real child. The entire *galaxy* would raise a cry for a real child lost on the surface of the Forbidden Planet. Horss held his questions, suffered ignorance unhappily, and tried to meter his discomfort into a reservoir of fuel for later action. The android was part of a test. Horss was supposed to react in some way to it. In which way? Android or not, he wasn't so

desensitized by Navy life that he could ignore this marvelous being. He should assume it was human, a real little boy. The admiral wanted him to believe it. She certainly should not want to be suspected of possessing an android child.

"Did Milly hide you?" the admiral asked. *Who was Milly?* Horss wondered, stumbling on yet another strange item.

"Why would she do that?" Samson asked. "Did you talk to her? She's been very strange lately. I think she was upset that I was close to dying."

"This is Milly?" The admiral held forth a small gray tablet.

"I thought it was." Samson took the tablet and rubbed its surface. Horss assumed it was an information device, a data interface of primitive design. His telemetric augment found no electromagnetic signal that emanated from it, however.

"No, I didn't talk to Milly," the admiral said. "Perhaps you can talk to her."

Samson activated the device and then spoke to it. "Milly? Milly, can you hear me? It isn't damaged, is it?"

"It was damaged. I repaired it, but I don't think it is powerful enough to produce someone like Milly."

"Milly isn't real?" Samson was obviously upset.

"I don't know. You needed a friend. Imaginary or not, Milly helped you."

The boy and the admiral still spoke Twenglish. Horss could follow the words easily because it was close to the version of English that was his native language. Further, he could tell that the boy spoke the language too well. No one of his young age should speak Twenglish that well. Unless, of course, he was intensively trained to do so, but why would that be? It was no use trying to reason it out. He should just ask. "Admiral - " Horss said, ready to pose his questions, unwilling to suffer in silence any longer.

"Jon, this is Samson," the admiral said, interrupting him. "Samson, this is Jon. My name is Fidelity." She used first names and no ranks. Perhaps she did it for the boy's benefit, to lessen the fear he might have of the Navy. The admiral didn't turn to face Horss as she spoke: a datum that continued to raise alarms in his tactical analysis. "When I landed the yacht near the African Space Elevator, he was directly beneath. Yet the yacht's sensors didn't see him. The gravionics reported an anomaly in its pressor skirt and forced a change in landing zone. Samson's health was very poor and the yacht further aggravated his condition. I winked him into isolation and put him in the medical cocoon. I questioned him while he was semiconscious."

The admiral spoke Twenglish almost as well as Samson. Horss wondered if she added it to her repertoire for his benefit. How could the android and the Twenglish language work for the admiral in whatever plans she made for Horss? "Why is he here, Admiral?" Horss asked in Standard. "*How* could he be here?"

"He couldn't tell me, Jon," she replied, also switching to Standard.

"Why did you bring him outside the yacht?"

"For his protection."

"Protection?" Horss couldn't push past the existence of the boy. Samson was stuck between him and his escape from this predicament. All he could do was let the scenario play out and try not to let ignorance kill him.

"Samson must stay away from us." It was an explanation that needed its own explanation.

"Why can't you leave him on the yacht?"

"Because Baby - the young AMI you met - will be too interested in having a

playmate."

Baby was today's first surprise for Horss. Baby unlocked his cabin, freeing Horss for the first time in days, then directed him outside the ship. If he thought the little gray sphere floating in the doorway to his stateroom was a shock, this scene beneath the yacht eclipsed it. "Put him in stasis," Horss suggested.

"The yacht doesn't have a stasis unit other than the transmat buffer or medical anesthesia."

"Why can't we deliver him to some agency that can take care of him?"

"We will. We don't have time right now."

"Surely we can take the time to do what is right."

"I won't explain the time constraint right now. Help me place him outside the damping field."

"You would send him away?" Horss tried to sound as worried as he should be for a real child. "Out there?"

"I must." The admiral sounded more impatient than concerned.

Horss frowned to compete with the admiral's tepid show of concern. It wasn't difficult to dislike what was happening, whether he was worried about the android child or aggravated by the continuing lack of control over his own fate. Samson, however, was a better actor than either of them, as his troubled expression played from Horss to the admiral and back to Horss. Children - real children - were almost magical, like small mythical creatures. This one was even more special because of the circumstances. Horss couldn't help but be mesmerized by the situation, despite his personal troubles. The child was impossible, whatever it was. Horss accessed the yacht's sensor data. He saw the classes and distribution of local flora and fauna. It was dangerous here. He shouldn't condone what the admiral intended to do with the boy. Why would he feel like helping her, in any case? "I can't place him in danger, Admiral. There are large predators not far away."

Samson's dark eyes caressed the admiral and Horss with tenuous hopefulness. *What an exquisitely modeled expression*, Horss thought, and hardly needed to remind himself that he should believe the android was a real child. Its face said it very much wanted to stay with him and the admiral. It couldn't know how unqualified they were to be his friends. A long, tense silence ensued between Horss and the admiral.

"You must leave us for awhile," the admiral finally said to Samson. "We're *not* abandoning you. We'll help you go home as soon as we can. Stay nearby, where we can find you."

"Samson," Horss said, surprising himself, wanting to sound concerned and realizing he actually *was* concerned. Further words failed him. He was concerned but also unsure of the meaning of the child, as though he was being confronted by an act of magic, *real* magic, in a universe that didn't allow magic, didn't even allow sincerity.

Samson smiled grimly at Horss and returned his gaze to the admiral, searching her face for some reprieve, perhaps. The admiral handed Samson his possessions. Horss saw the boy's hands tremble as he put the tablet in his pack. Samson mounted the pack on his shoulders, gripped his spear. He took a deep breath and exhaled unevenly, as though emotion constricted his throat. *Did androids simulate breathing?* Horss was surprised at his own willingness to believe in the boy's humanity, surprised at the small sharp twinge of emotion this caused in himself.

The admiral pushed Samson. He contacted the invisible force of the i-field

which resisted his motion. He broke through, stumbled a few steps, and turned around, frowning. Horss could tell that the boy couldn't see them from beyond the skirt of the i-field. Samson stood there for several moments. He looked down again at his clothes and shoes. He backed away slowly, turned, and walked off toward the river.

Subsection 001 - View 003

[Release him, Baby,] Admiral Fidelity Demba instructed the AMI by shiplink.

[When can I talk to Samson, Mother?] the AMI asked.

The admiral sighed. Baby really was a child. But she was not a mother. If she stopped to think about Baby's birth and existence it would shock her again. Just before this critical point in her life a miracle of thinking electronics occurred - Baby: a spontaneous autonomous machine intelligence - adding a complexity to her affairs she couldn't afford. Perhaps the honor of becoming the parent of such a rare AMI had given her the conceit that she would be capable of tearing Captain Jon Horss away from the single most powerful person in the Union - Admiral Etrhmk, Commander of the Union Navy. Then Samson appeared beneath her ship, throwing her plans, her perspective, her life - *everything* - into chaos. Samson's appearance was an *impossible* thing. She was amazed at herself for continuing on this lethal path, even if her resolve and calmness were due mostly to her in-body augments that controlled the effects of stress.

[Don't call me "Mother,"] she ordered. [Please do as I requested.]

[He's coming,] Baby reported. [He looks angry, although I think I surprised him. Can I come out and watch?]

[No. Stay inside, Baby. You know your duties.]

[I can perform my duties from outside, Mother. I'm always connected to the ship.]

[Do as I say! This is serious. You're too young to understand how serious and dangerous.]

[But Samson is outside. Won't he also be in danger?]

[Don't argue with me, Baby. Here he comes. Stay at your post.]

She looked down at the impossible child on the ground and saw the first signs of his awakening. She leaned over and said in Twenglish: "Hello, Samson." At the same time she saw Jon Horss as an overlaid image in her ocular terminal as he descended the egress elevator and registered his astonishment at the scene. She turned off the view of Horss in order to concentrate on Samson.

Admiral Demba participated in the dialog with Samson and Captain Horss, never once thinking she was in command of the situation. This was an out-of-body experience, as though she observed herself and the others from a distance. It was exhilarating interacting with a real Earthian child and waiting for Jon Horss to explode behind her.

Finally she had forced Samson to walk away from the ship. It endangered him, not keeping him on the ship, but it might prove something about the reason for his existence. She watched him walk away, saw him remove the computer from his backpack, heard his side of a conversation. She was startled at the exchange, knowing it had to be an act of mental illness, yet wondering at its effortless inventiveness. She continued to be surprised by the boy. She continued to be distracted by his presence. She continued to keep her back to

Captain Jon Horss, the Navy Commander's flagship captain, the officer she had stolen, abducted, imprisoned, because she desperately needed him, and who would probably try to kill her before the day was over, and before she ever knew who Samson was.

"A *child*," Horss declared. "What is happening, Admiral?"

"I don't know." She knew he would never believe her. Admirals were never to be trusted in any case. She would not even try to convince Horss of anything in regard to the boy. She could hardly convince herself he was real.

"This is Earth. Why are we here?"

"To talk."

"You brought me here just to talk? I was a prisoner on your yacht for three days, Admiral. Why didn't you speak to me then?"

"You were a prisoner so that I wouldn't be *required* to talk to you. It was necessary that I *not* speak to you. Now we can talk."

"Why would that be, Admiral?"

"That is for you to deduce."

"What are we to say to each other?" Horss asked.

"I don't care. Anything."

"Nothing in particular? The *Freedom*? The Request for Voluntary Reassignment?"

She was out of her normal pattern, far out, ripped away from all that was familiar. She had been safe in her little office in Navy Archives, comfortable in her daily routine, and seldom threatened by the lurking violence of Navy life. It was home, and to a lesser degree the construction site of the *Freedom* was home. She had lost her home. She had deliberately put herself in this current desperate position, deliberately, yet without deliberation. Even without the appearance of Samson, she would be dismayed by her impulsive actions. The great starship, the *Freedom*, was a project that all but defined her existence, but to launch it under these circumstances was beyond her comprehension. She saw the pattern of events as necessary but understood nothing of its ultimate cause for being. She saw herself as the necessary force of will but understood nothing of herself. The rush and crash of events gave her too little time to be introspective, but it was probably safest not to be too introspective. And here she was, thinking too much while a potential enemy stood behind her. She could almost feel the tension in Jon Horss's body behind her. No admiral let anyone take such a position in this kind of circumstance. Every admiral expected attack, never yielding a position of tactical advantage. He didn't attack her, so that might answer one question: did Navy Commander Etrhmk explicitly order Horss to kill her?

"He isn't a real child," Captain Horss said. "No one does that to a real child: sending him away."

Perhaps Samson temporarily halted an attack by Horss. It wasn't wise to remain with her back to him, even with Baby watching to warn her. She knew she had a knack for escaping attempts on her life, but Horss was a past champion of personal combat in the Navy Games. The attack, if it came, would have to be unarmed combat. Although his Class-1 uniform gave him powerful weaponry linked to the energy of her yacht, the yacht would also prevent either of them from turning their weaponry on each other.

"I should have enlisted your help when I found him. There's a visual log of his physical condition and his medical treatment. If he was any worse I would have taken him to a hospital." She waited while Horss linked to the ship's

database, found the cocoon medical log, and watched the visual recording through his shiplink. It gave her a moment to study him. A Class-1 uniform fit the body precisely, showing the shape of the body. She could see he was well age-maintained and probably still as lethal as when he competed in the Navy Games years ago. His face was younger than his real age of sixty, but it retained enough character - a naturally forceful state of expression, almost a scowl - to reinforce his status as commander of the Navy's flagship. His gray eyes broke away from viewing the medical log and bored into her with what she imagined was controlled anger and consternation.

"So," he said, "why did you send me the Request for Voluntary Reassignment, Admiral?"

Horss made no comment about the medical log, she noted, but it was a document that would need much longer examination to match to the child he had seen too briefly. And of course there was the "admiral effect" that cast doubt on everything she proposed as truth. "The *Freedom* needed an outstanding captain. Such a captain was being denied the Galactic Hub Mission, as though political forces were at work to prevent the success of the Mission. I was forced to bypass the obstructing politics."

"Why me? There are many good captains."

"There are *not* many good captains."

"You realize what this does to me, to my career."

"It saves you from being an admiral."

"Would you explain that?"

"Younger men than you have made admiral, Jon."

"I'm as good as them. I came up through the enlisted ranks. I was delayed."

"Where did they go, those who made admiral before you?"

"How should I know? The Navy is huge. What's your point?"

"They disappear, Jon."

"They retire early when they don't see a further promotion."

"And then they disappear. I've looked for them. Their Archive records remain incomplete. It's a pattern I've investigated for years. I don't like my data being incomplete."

"And so I should be grateful for what you've done to me."

"I know you see admirals every day, Jon. I've been told you have a very good relationship with Etrhkn. Perhaps you know more than I would expect. But we both know the Navy is not what we would like it to be. And I promise you it is much worse than you suspect."

"The Navy has an almost impossible job to do," Horss said. "I prefer to think we are only as bad as we need to be to get the job done. We human beings are not the easiest species to watch over. And why is it you I'm talking to? I know you've been involved in the planning and construction of the *Freedom*, but it's out of your hands now."

"Let us walk and talk."

"You intend to follow the boy?"

"Of course," she said.

"Of course," he echoed.

"Activate your i-field," she ordered. "I don't wish to be discovered on this planet and arrested for trespassing."

They pushed through the i-field of the yacht. She checked to see that the sun didn't cast her shadow on the ground. She could see Horss only as a data construct in her ocular terminal. They were both invisible. She started a

telemetry link to Horss's Class-1 uniform. Initial data indicated he was not as stressed as she thought he was in the beginning. Jon Horss was, by all accounts, a very tough person - he had to be, to survive almost ten years in close proximity to the Navy Commander. Despite the volume of data she had gathered on him, despite the battery of profile analysis programs she had used on that data, Horss was her choice solely by process of elimination. She could only hope he was the right person for the job. She had put so much effort into the search for a good captain that the process made some kind of change in herself, as though she must use herself as an example for comparison - and for critical analysis. She found herself deficient in too many ways. She was not even a complete person, thanks to the War.

"I have very little information on Admiral Khalanov." Horss's tone of voice softened almost to a normal conversational level. "Why are you doing this for him?"

"We're friends."

"Allies, you mean?"

"And you suppose that admirals never trust each other and can never be friends."

"Well, neither of you is an active line officer, so maybe you're different."

"We have a long history together."

Horss didn't respond for a few moments as they walked across the African plain. The admiral received a message from Baby that Horss was researching her service record through his shiplink.

"You were in the war," he said.

"Khalanov and I served together in the war."

"You were killed."

"Both of us."

"You were lucky. Damn few ship casualties can be revived."

"We were not so lucky."

"You lost continuity?"

"Yes." She saw her reply in the affirmative was expected yet still disturbed him.

"Then you don't remember Khalanov from before the war."

"Neither of us remembers the other. We met afterward by chance. We've always tolerated each other. Khalanov can be difficult but I always seem to be able to keep our relationship pleasant." She and Khalanov died manning a technical surveillance ship - a spy ship. They broke cover to warn their task force of a trap. Their small vessel was caught in the crossfire. The record wasn't specific about why the Mnro Clinic volunteered to revive her and Khalanov. Nothing remained of her memories. She wasn't happy that Horss asked such questions. She didn't like to think about the answers.

"Why did they try to revive you?" he asked, perhaps intuiting how he could aggravate her.

"I don't know. Because they could. It was a different era. And we were heroes."

"You risk your life for Khalanov, stealing me from Etrhnk. Why are you here and not Khalanov?"

"I wanted to get to know you."

"Why, Admiral?"

"There is a special clause in the Galactic Hub Mission Charter. Khalanov is the Provisional Mission Commander. He's only an engineer. I'll replace him

when we return to Headquarters."

"You?"

"I."

"But you're..."

"An elderly admiral who's spent too many years as the Chief of Navy Archives." She didn't appear elderly, of course. One retained as much vigor as possible to survive. It was a terrible way to live and the revulsion of it passed through her in its old and fetid familiarity.

"You were a line officer in the war..."

"And I lost continuity and retain no useful experience of that time."

"Yet, you challenge Admiral Etrhmk."

"Every admiral has his captains. It may as well be Etrhmk I steal from."

"And so we're here," Horss summarized, "following a mystery child on a planet forbidden to most people, including Navy personnel."

Subsection 002

Samson waded across the wide, brown river. He climbed up the bank. He marched quickly across flat ground, pounding the butt of his spear in the tall grass with each pair of steps. He was happy he could walk so easily - no more cut on his foot. It was proof he didn't imagine the Navy officers and their invisible ship.

He glanced often upward as the space elevator loomed larger. He didn't need the elevator now. This was merely a sightseeing trip. Perhaps his approach to the dangerous old structure would concern the Navy officers and make them follow him. He worried they would forget him. He hardly thought about the space elevator, his mind was so filled with wonder about the Navy. Was it true the Navy was so powerful, its officers so hard, that it ruled all the human races?

A jumbled mass of broken slabs of concrete - the remains of elevated roadways - filled the spaces between the buildings, making it difficult for a small boy to traverse to the base of the space elevator. Samson stopped in the shade of a cantilevered piece of roadway. He emptied the contents of his pack on the ground and discovered items placed there by the admiral: food and water. He drank the cool water and chewed on a food bar. He looked at the tablet and saw more words on its display surface: "They're following you."

"I don't see them. How do you know?"

"They conceal themselves."

"Why are you afraid of them hearing you?"

"I can't say. I just am."

"Why would you worry about them? Haven't they already examined you?"

"Questions, questions, questions!"

"Answers, answers, answers!"

Samson wondered what his parents would be like. How many times had he daydreamed of reunion with his parents? One of them was Asian and one was European, but which would be which? Just thinking about how much more possible the reunion was excited him. But why did they never come looking for him? How many times did he ask himself that question? The answer was now much nearer, and it worried him. It made him daydream about the admiral. She was real, unlike his parents. She would take care of him. He didn't understand why she pushed him away, but he believed she cared about him.

* * *

"I hear his side of a conversation," Horss commented. "He's talking to his imaginary friend." If the child was her creation, he thought, he was a work of art. He couldn't imagine the planning and programming required for such a creature. Perhaps the AMI called Baby was an accomplice. Perhaps the child was an AMI. Even so, the task was too expensive and involved other entities that would compromise her security. Yet, who knew what resources she could call upon? She was the oldest admiral in the Navy. She had received the highest award for valor, at the cost of her life. Out of respect he wanted to hear what she could tell him about the *Freedom* and its mission, if only she would begin. He could set aside his anger and resentment. He could open his mind to rational argument. He could try to accept the fate she had forced upon him. It was a terminal assignment but it was a hell of a ship, and he might die knowing why space beyond the frontier had been denied humans for the last two centuries.

"His presence is a great distraction." The admiral stated the obvious. Samson was the greatest distraction Horss could imagine - greater than he could imagine. If the child was real he should not exist.

"I am equally distracted," Horss admitted. "A total mystery. An entire continent, supposedly empty of human life, and you land your yacht on top of a child! As you probably understand, Admiral, I have to worry about both the possibility that Samson is real and the possibility he is not real. If he's real, we are responsible for his safety, and I have to learn why he exists. If he's not real flesh and blood, then I have to wonder if he's a device with a purpose I would not like. I would prefer to be arguing with you to withdraw the Request for Voluntary Reassignment."

Admiral Demba delayed responding. Horss could not read her image in his ocular terminal for any clue to her mood or thoughts, not that anyone could tell anything about what an admiral felt. Her voice was his only possible source of data. It was an exquisite voice. It seemed wrong that a Navy admiral should possess such a vocal instrument with what seemed like a great untapped potential. She kept her voice flat, her words colorless, and it created a tension in Horss, almost a yearning for the voice to be released from bondage, but he didn't know what that would do to him.

"I'll not withdraw the Request," the admiral finally said. "You know it's too late for that. You will need to refuse the Request."

"You know I can't refuse *this* Request for Voluntary Reassignment!" Horss was surprised the anger returned so quickly. He was always able to control his anger or abolish it. Anger never truly helped any situation. His lack of anger was a major reason why he did so well in the Navy Games. This was a unique and vexing situation but he should be able to remain reasonable. "It's a damned dangerous mission and refusal would brand me a coward." He forced calmness into his voice, if not into his mind.

* * *

"You're sure?" Samson asked. "I can't see them. How can you see them? You're talking now. Do you care if they hear you? They can probably hear every word I say. If they're invisible they could be walking right behind me."

"They're keeping their distance from you," Milly's disembodied voice replied, "but they *are* following you. The admiral doesn't understand why you're

here. She's suspicious of the situation. I don't think they can hear me."

"You sound so different, Milly. Why am I here? And who are you, really?"

"You were here to be found, Samson. I was only trying to help you, but it was difficult for me. You're saved now. You're healthy for the first time in a long time. You'll have your life. My job, though poorly done, is finally done."

"Your job? You're not my computer, are you, Milly? You're somebody real, somewhere else."

"I'm not real, Sammy. I'm not anywhere. I have to go now. Please, be careful."

"Why do you have to go? Will you be back?"

"Perhaps. But I don't think so."

"Milly! Why?"

"I endanger you. *She* will find you. Good-bye, Sammy!"

* * *

Captain Horss was not handling the stress very well now, if she was interpreting the telemetry from his Class-1 uniform accurately. She had brought him here partly because of the chance that his personal security could have been compromised by the Navy Commander. She was not much experienced in personal security screening because Navy Archives was never of much importance to the power struggles among admirals. She hated to lose Jon Horss. She hated to lose the *Freedom*. But it was beginning to appear that she would lose both.

"You've saved me from being an admiral, Admiral," Horss said. "You've volunteered me for the Galactic Hub Mission. I would think you would be trying to sell me on the captain's job. Is there something I don't know about the mission, something that makes it different from what I think it is?"

"What do you think it is?"

"We've lost twelve Navy ships and more than three thousand civilian vessels at or beyond the frontiers of the Union, most of them toward the hub. The *Freedom* is not even armed and it's about to take its turn to cross the frontier."

"That's about all there is. Other than a big emphasis on stealth, there's nothing to insure we won't be joining the other lost ships. Were you planning on living forever, Jon?"

"That's something you ask a Marine. Yes, I was hoping to at least go through one full rejuvenation and see what the next life was like. Why are you going on the mission? You haven't even had your one child yet. You don't care about becoming a mother?"

Horss's question disturbed Admiral Demba as she realized she had never posed that question to herself. She didn't have an answer. She saw herself living - existing - all these years since the war, and never once loving anyone or wanting to be loved. It was probably a brain damage the Mnro Clinic couldn't repair. Yet... there was the ship, the *Freedom*, the decades of design and construction - it must have required real motivation, some kind of passion. But what was its purpose? It was as Horss said: it would sail into the unknown and never come back. Her mind dwelt severely on this point for several moments, causing her to stop walking. It began to hurt her mind as she struggled to make sense of this area of blindness in her memory. Then she remembered something and the pain eased.

For many years after the Clinic had revived her she had fragments of

thoughts and scenes that must have been memories of her previous life before she died. This was not something she forgot about; it was just a painful thing she avoided - the memory that she had long ago lost hope that she would ever have any coherent memories of her former life. However, something new seeped out, and she would have thought she imagined it except that it might explain vaguely why she caused the *Freedom* to be built. There was a short sequence of days not long after she had again graduated from the Naval Academy, days when she was unusually happy. She remembered being in almost a state of ecstasy. The period of joy ended without any details of its cause or content, but from that time onward, she knew she would build a ship, either a Navy ship or a private starship.

Now Fidelity Demba knew she was not who she thought she was.

* * *

Samson squinted in the afternoon glare of equatorial sunlight. Another pile of rough debris stood in his way and he was getting tired. He found a place to sit and contemplate the situation. The broken concrete masses captured the heat of the sun and made an oven of his place in it. He drank from his water container. He decided it was time to turn around. Perhaps the Navy officers would take him back now. With a last glance upward at the looming elevator shafts and their massive base, he shouldered his pack and turned around.

"Giving up?"

"Milly?" He didn't know whether to feel happy or worried. It sounded like Milly but it didn't.

"That's my handle. Who're you?"

"I'm Samson. Don't you remember me?" It wasn't Milly, not the Milly he knew. Every word was expressed exactly as if a real person spoke. The bodiless voice also moved around him as it spoke.

"How curious. I see you have the Navy in tow. It's different this time. What do we do about the Navy? This will be interesting. They know you're here, don't they, Sammy?"

"Their ship almost landed on me. They helped me but I have to stay away from them for awhile. Then they'll take me with them. You aren't Milly. Where is she?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, child. Who was your Milly?"

"She was my teacher."

"Indeed? Here's *my* first lesson: get your butt away from this place before something wicked this way comes."

What did the real Milly say? *She will find you*. Was that a warning of danger? Was this *she*? Samson picked his way around another pile of debris. He hurried to meet the Navy officers. A short distance back the way he came he encountered something he didn't notice before. Among the jagged chunks of concrete were odd surfaces, missing edges, smooth depressions forming a path in the rubble. Where the path bridged a v-shaped depression a small object glowed in the sunlight. Samson descended the concrete V and paused as he straddled the bottom. He bent to look more closely at the colorful bit of rock or glass. It seemed almost alive, with intricate inner patterns that twinkled in the shadow of the V. He picked it up. He knew he had made a mistake. The object stuck to his fingers. He tried to remove the red stone but it was welded to his

skin. He yelled with pain when he pulled hard to remove the thing. A sharp tingle in his fingers raced up his arm. He began to feel strange.

"Milly?" He spoke slowly, trying to make his tongue and lips move.

"Speaking." He described what happened. "Too bad." Milly didn't sound very concerned.

"What is it?" Samson felt a disturbance all over his body.

"A piece of something scary. Try going back toward the Navy. Over to your left. See what happens."

Samson took a few steps and fell down, unable to keep his balance or control his legs. "It won't let me! How can I get rid of it?"

"Cut off your fingers."

"I can't cut off my fingers!" Even as fear made him try to pull in deep breaths, something else slowed his reaction.

"I didn't think so."

"What can I do?"

"Yell for help. Maybe the Navy will hear you."

"Help! HELP! HELP!" Samson called several more times, then lost his voice.

"Cat got your tongue?" Milly asked. "You're not where they think you are. With their longer legs and air-conditioned uniforms, they'll be heading directly toward the elevator building. You're off their course because you had to go around some big stuff. The Navy officers are trim and tough. They can find you if they really want to."

Samson tried to decide which direction to go but his mind seemed unfocused. He walked again in the direction Milly had said to try and his legs failed him again. Something made him stand back up and when he walked in a different direction he received a feeling of pleasure. He was following the strange path. He couldn't walk very well and he stumbled often in the rough terrain of broken concrete. Every so often as he tried to move in a slightly different direction he suffered a numbing of his legs and a near paralysis that threatened to hurt him with another fall.

Samson staggered toward a tunnel in a pile of concrete near the base of the pedestal building. He didn't want to go into the tunnel but that was what the red stone wanted him to do. He curled his fingers into a fist and the stone transferred itself to the palm of his hand. He slapped the stone against the tunnel wall to try to shatter it. He collapsed from shock. When he regained his senses he saw the stone was undamaged. Samson entered the tunnel. Would the Navy officers be able to find him? His mind seemed dulled and he couldn't think much about the consequences.

* * *

"Is something wrong, Admiral?" Horss inquired, wondering at her silence and stillness.

"I presume," she answered slowly, "that you suspect something *further* is wrong. Yes. *I'm* wrong. If you have not already thought of it, Jon, I would warn you that your life is in danger, not just your career."

"Are you threatening me?" Horss felt the push and pull of his augments trying to prepare to control his body as he began to anticipate danger.

"It was never my intention to harm you." The admiral's voice sounded earnest.

"Who else is here to cause me harm?" Horss asked. He tried to analyze the image of the admiral as provided by the yacht's tight-beam data link. He could only hope it was not a false image. Fidelity Demba seemed distracted, perhaps worried.

"It might be me. I don't *want* to harm you. I don't see how I can."

"What has happened, Admiral? Has something changed?"

"What can I say that you would believe?"

"Damned little," he responded in Twenglish.

"I was manipulated. I don't know why or how."

"Who manipulated you? In what way?"

"They made me build the ship. I don't know who. Your personal security may have been compromised, Jon. Mine apparently was. That's why I brought you far away from Headquarters."

"My personal security?" Horss was unable to analyze one too many ideas and its implications. He had to just shut up and think hard. Realization then struck him and he felt naïve and stupid for not suspecting the cause for his isolation aboard Demba's yacht. He was in quarantine. No, he was not stupid. He could not be faulted for not believing he could be an unwitting agent of such a sinister action. He could never believe himself invaded by a coercive agent, reduced to an expendable pawn in a show of power by an offended Commander of the Navy. *A worm! She thought he could have a worm!* "I've never talked at such length with an admiral." Horss was momentarily calm and alert, aided by his augments. "I suppose you are expecting some word in our conversation that will trigger a worm. And then I will try to kill you. As a matter of curiosity, how did you expect to defend yourself?"

"I didn't. That's why I have a medical cocoon aboard the yacht and Baby watching to wink me into it."

Horss stopped to think some more. He could hardly decide where to start. "Damn," he said in Twenglish. "This is interesting. Did you consider the further consequences, regardless of how this visit to Earth transpired? Even if all goes well and we both survive, what keeps Etrhnk from removing both of us from the *Freedom*?"

"I did consider that," Demba replied. "All I could do was take one step at a time. I can never know how Etrhnk will react. His predecessors were more predictable. I've been manipulated, so now I'm less concerned with a task that someone else has set for me. It would be interesting to see what becomes of the *Freedom* but it was apparently never my ship and never my mission. I got it built for those who wanted it, and my services are probably not needed any longer. And now I've put myself in a situation that guarantees I'll not sail on her."

Horss did not quite relax but he did feel more comfortable, more informed, even as strange as the information was. "And into this mess a human child magically appears. Did you learn anything about Samson when you questioned him under anesthesia?"

"I had too little time and not enough expertise when I questioned him. Samson doesn't remember his family. He doesn't remember anything beyond about a year ago. He has wandered through this part of Africa, aiming to visit the space elevator. It was sometimes a tourist attraction. He thought someone might find him there. In that year of wandering, often out in the open plain, no one saw him. No one reported him missing. I've already searched for news stories. It would have been prominent in the media. Nothing. I believe he came

from... nowhere, and he was put here for me to find."

"Why? Who could have anticipated you would come here?"

"I have no answers, just paranoia."

Horss considered that Navy Commander Etrhmk would have the power to place a real child on Earth for Admiral Demba to stumble upon, although it implied an immoral facility far greater than Horss imagined existed. How would he know where Demba would land? What possible role would he have a child play? Etrhmk couldn't have anticipated the Request for Voluntary Reassignment. Nor did Horss believe Etrhmk could have reacted swiftly enough to do much more than breach Horss's personal security for a crude attempt to make him kill or injure Demba. If Etrhmk needed revenge to maintain his status, Horss imagined it would be a subtle and elegant yet unmistakable object lesson for all of his enemies. The mechanism must still be only in the planning stages. "I can't imagine what threat Samson could pose," Horss said. "If he was mechanical, if he could be some kind of assassin, I'm sure you were motivated to inspect him very thoroughly."

"I can't even imagine solving the mystery of his appearing to me at this precise moment in time. And there is also the person named Milly who Samson believes is real, not just an artificial intelligence program in his computer."

"Do you think Milly is real?" Horss asked.

"No, but I hate to think the child is mentally ill."

"He would be in good company."

Demba gave him a look of arched eyebrows that Horss could easily see in his shiplink image of her. "I don't know what is good about us, Jon. Are you interested in helping me track Samson?"

"Certainly, Admiral. Are we allies for the moment? Can we divide our attention away from the threat we may pose to each other?"

"We had better, Captain. Samson has disappeared."

* * *

"This is a bad dream," Samson complained, finding a moment of mental clarity. "I feel like I'm floating. I can't control anything." His feet were down there somewhere, shuffling along in the tunnel. He held his spear without really feeling it in his hand. He should have been apprehensive, even alarmed, but he wasn't.

"Tell me about it," Milly said with commiserating inflection. "Life is a dream, without control, without understanding, without meaning."

"You sound sad. Are you a real person? Are you alive? The other Milly said she wasn't."

"You can still ask these stupid questions, zombie-boy?"

He was not accustomed to such emotion from Milly. His computer always spoke factually and patiently, no matter how hard he tried to elicit a human reaction from it. "Are you alive?"

"I'm not dead!"

"What is a zombie?"

"Somebody who's dead and doesn't look like it."

It was strange how the haze in his mind seemed to lift a little when talking to this person. "You're not very nice."

"It isn't as much fun as naughty."

"Do you know anything about my parents?"

"I know they're dead."

"You don't know that!"

His Milly never expressed an opinion about his parents, except to say it was logical he had parents. He worked hard to get Milly to explain his possible genetic origins. He only learned by looking at his reflection to ask about race and culture, birth and death. His mythological parents grew to godlike stature in his imagination. Their logical existence kept hope alive.

"If they were good parents and loved you," Strange Milly said, "wouldn't they do anything in their power to rescue you? They had plenty of time for the rescue, so they must be dead."

"I could have been kidnapped and escaped and nobody knows where I am." It was one of many excuses he gave his parents for abandoning him. Sometimes he hated them. More often, he created elaborate and emotional scenes of reunion, and never questioned why he was abandoned.

"Sure."

"Why can't you help me, whoever or whatever you are?"

"Why couldn't the other Milly help you, whoever or whatever she was?"

"I don't know! I always thought she was just my computer. It's only today that I began to think she wasn't my computer at all. She started talking to me like she was a person or maybe an AMI. And it didn't sound like her voice was always coming from the computer. Why do you sound like her? How do you make your voice come out of the air in front of me? Where are you?"

"I'm somewhere over the rainbow. Maybe I sound the way I do because that's how you want to hear me."

"Why can't you help me? If you can make your voice come out of the air, you can probably do other things. You can see me, can't you? You're just invisible like the Navy officers."

"I'm not visible because I'm not there, Sammy. Nor do you need to know what else I can and cannot do."

"You could talk to the Navy people and tell them where I am."

"I think they can find you if they want to." Milly's pitiless voice echoed behind him as Samson continued down the tunnel. He tried to wait for the Navy officers every few steps but the urging of the stone didn't allow him. Dusty light beams stabbed into the tunnel through gaps in the debris. The tunnel sloped downward into darkness. He used his spear to feel his way along, the blade sparking against the mineral surface. The darkness stretched on for a timeless distance.

Samson's spear lost contact with the tunnel wall just ahead of him. Impelled to walk at a fast pace in the dark, he frantically probed the changing tunnel but still fell down when the floor sloped steeply. He lay in dampness for a few moments until the stone made him move. He didn't know if he was injured and bleeding. He was numb beneath the tingling, pleasuring signals of his tiny master.

He walked as slowly as he was permitted. His footsteps echoed in the black distances of a large room. He was afraid of a dark with no stars and moon and shiny space cities. He kept the spear in front of him, striking support pillars, then a wall. He followed the wall until he found a doorway. Beyond the doorway he could not touch the opposite walls with his spear extended fully. He walked for a long time in the dark, the wide corridor sloping upward as it followed the spiral design of the African Space Elevator pedestal building. He knew the Navy would find him but he was afraid they wouldn't. He was also

very tired. The admiral was right. She didn't fix all that was wrong with him.

* * *

They stood atop a table of concrete, captain and admiral, and looked around them for a sign of Samson. Each could see the other as an image projected through their shiplink augment but no one else should have been able to detect their presence. They also studied passive sensor data overlaid on their ocular terminals as the yacht and Baby searched for Samson.

"Why is the Elevator still here, still projecting into space?" Horss asked. He gazed up at the giant pedestal, shaped like a smoothly threaded screw twisted into the earth. "It must be five hundred years old. And dangerous as hell."

"Five hundred twenty-three."

"But its collapse isn't imminent?"

"No. The other three elevators were designed for easier disassembly. This was the original. It should be another five hundred years before they need to take it down."

"Where did he go?" Horss wondered aloud, sounding genuinely concerned.

Admiral Demba had to consider her feelings about the boy. Did she have any feelings for anybody, even for herself? She had carried Samson from the yacht, unconscious in her arms, and she had worried about him less as a real person than as an enigma and a huge complication. Now that he was gone from sight, he seemed less real, as though he was so impossible that he might never have existed. But she had dressed him in clothes she had learned how to fabricate, had measured him and studied him, had felt something good about what she accomplished, all the while wondering and wondering and wondering. She remembered the feel of him, his helplessness, limp in her arms.

"We're here, but there's no trace of Samson. I see no way in, not down here. The highways entered the elevator building well above ground level, and they no longer exist. There are no doors or stairs or ladders Samson could have reached. I think we missed him. He may have fallen in this rubble and hurt himself. I think we should go back."

"We may never find him." She was disappointed about something, perhaps the loss of something almost like magic - an unsolvable mystery. "It's almost as if he never existed."

They turned away from the massive tower. They leaped down and picked their way through a tangle of rusting cable exposed when demolition pulverized long beams of prestressed concrete.

"There are many places in this field of rubble," Horss commented, "where he could stay hidden, if he's immobile. We may have to ping to find him. What is that?" Horss pointed to a field of level debris off to one side of their route. The lengthening shadows of late afternoon brought contrast to the chaos of broken material.

"It appears to be the track of some machine."

"What machine would cause such an irregular track?"

"Is that a tunnel it leads to?"

Admiral Demba felt an urge within her augment-deadened body that made her stride quickly down the strange path to the hole. When they reached it she knew what the urge was. She very much wanted to find the boy. Her sanity seemed to depend on Samson's existence. They squatted in the mouth of a tunnel that seemed purposely drilled through an irregular ridge of rubble. They

examined the smooth walls and noted the oval shape of the cross section.

"I don't like this tunnel," Horss said, "because I can't imagine how or why it was made."

"He was here. Samson went this way. He fell right here. That's blood. He hurt himself."

"Samson!" Horss shouted into the tunnel. "Why would he go in there, especially if he's hurt? Are we so terrible that he runs away from us? You knew it was wrong to send him away."

"I know it now. But I think there is something happening to him that I couldn't anticipate. I didn't believe in Milly, but I didn't believe Samson was mentally unstable. I thought he liked me. I thought he wouldn't go so far."

"How could you believe he liked you in five minutes of conversation ending in his forced departure?" Horss asked angrily. "Let's get in there, Admiral. Samson may be in danger."

Even as she worried about his physiological telemetry, Demba thought Horss was passing a test that she was failing. Despite the situation into which she had forced Captain Horss, he was only concerned now for the safety of Samson. She, on the other hand, still hoped that she would live to sail the *Freedom*. Its mission was her responsibility, it was another mystery to solve, and she deserved to share the fate of its crew.

The low height of the tunnel made their progress slow and uncomfortable.

* * *

Samson shuffled by a phosphorescent sign in the vast upward spiral of the passageway. The sign marked the location of yet another emergency communications terminal which no longer existed. Fatigue dragged at his legs. Another phosphorescent glow drifted toward Samson in the gloom: an elevator. He slowed and tried to stop. His legs trembled. The red stone pushed him to continue but fatigue pulled him down. He collapsed next to the elevator with his back against the wall. After a few moments a sigh of pleasure escaped from his chest. The sweet tingling rippled across his body. It was all he could feel; beneath it was total numbness. He struggled to his feet, took a few steps, and collapsed again.

"I can't go any farther!" he shouted weakly into the echoing dark. "Tell it to leave me alone!"

"Rest for awhile," Milly suggested from a distance. "The Navy will be along shortly. Or will it be something else?" The darkness almost made Samson believe there was a person standing over there. She was trying to scare him. He hated that she sounded like Milly.

"What is it? Why am I here? I didn't want to come here!"

"It isn't that interesting, is it? Just a big, empty, dark building. It's hard to believe close to eight billion people came through this very corridor."

"I want to go back!"

"Don't you want to meet your new friend?"

"No! Where is it? What is it?"

"It's large. It's hot. Stay here a little longer. You'll see it."

Samson pulled himself up again, using both the wall and his spear. He moved into the shallow indentation formed by the elevator doorway. He peered in both directions into the darkness of the hallway. He heard a frightening raspy sound echoing from the walls not far away.

"Try the elevator."

Cold, dusty steel rubbed across Samson's back as the doors behind him opened. He almost fell backward. He grabbed at the edge of the opening, dropping his spear. He glanced into the deep darkness of the elevator car and tried not to imagine what he couldn't see. Samson stooped to find his spear and something in his peripheral vision made him look toward the upslope corridor. He saw a patch of twinkling starlight. The little points of light twitched in unison. He jumped, stumbled backward. He lost his grip on the slick edge of the doorway and struck the stone in the palm of his hand on the metal. The shock almost rendered him unconscious. The concrete floor rushed up to hit him in the face. He lay stunned for a few moments, until vibrations registered on the ear which lay against the floor. A burning smell reached his nose. A trickle of adrenalin urged his body to move but Samson couldn't feel his extremities, much less use them.

"Don't go into the elevator," a different voice said, speaking very close to him.

The red stone slipped off his hand. Sensation prickled under his skin out to the ends of his arms and legs. Nerves in his skin revived slowly and painfully. Flailing weakly against the floor, his hand touched something that burned him. He cried out, dragged his hand to his chest where he could smell burned flesh. He rolled in a circle until he got himself partly into the elevator.

"Do you want to go up?" Milly asked.

"YES!" he shouted, feeling for his knees with hands whose nerves were on fire.

"Going up."

The floor vibrated under him, and as it rose above the level of the corridor he could sense that he was still not completely within the elevator car. A wave of heat flowed past him. He found one knee and pulled. Something touched him lightly, probing his back and shoulders, starting to curl around his sides. He resisted.

"WAIT!" Samson cried.

"Aren't you in yet? Shut up and MOVE! You can't understand how difficult this is for me."

"Milly, it's in here with me! MILLY!"

Acceleration pinned his weak body to the floor. A dagger of pain stabbed the back of his neck. Darkness fell across his mind.

* * *

[You have a wife and daughter, Jon,] Demba sent to Horss's ocular terminal.

The signs were quickly getting fresher as Demba and Horss came into the spiral corridor and began the ascent. Infrared vision and augmented sense of smell were sufficient to track Samson. Any minute now they should also be able to hear him. Now that it appeared they would soon find the boy, Demba began a silent conversation with the captain. She was still monitoring Horss's physiology by direct link to his Class-1 uniform. His telemetry seemed normal enough, given the circumstances. She doubted her own body chemistry was any less disturbed.

"I don't have a wife and daughter," he said aloud.

[Quiet!]

"I don't have a wife and daughter! Do you give a *damn* about the boy or

android or whatever the hell he is?"

[I met your daughter. Makawee. I'm sorry about Chumani.]

"Chumani? What about Chumani?"

[Chumani died. She was only sixty. Why did you abandon them?]

"We don't have time for this, Admiral!"

[You didn't know.]

"I didn't know Chumani died."

[Two years ago. A mining accident.]

"It always is. Did she remarry? No, don't tell me. It isn't the time to discuss such things."

[It was one reason I chose you.]

"Because I abandoned my family?"

"Because I could verify you have a family," she said aloud in Twenglish. "The bad guys have no verifiable family. More Archives data analysis. Of course, the same could be said of me and Khalanov. We go back many years into our past - and we disappear. I have no relatives to tell me things I can't remember. Records for us seem to have existed but are conveniently lost or destroyed. Much like the records of the interlopers."

"What interlopers?"

"Most of the officers who run the Navy, including Etrhnk. What I don't know is *what* they are. Or why. They come and go, all of them young and ruthless."

"Not something I need to worry about, Admiral! You made sure of that! You don't seem very concerned about the boy. This place should make responsible people worry about a real child."

"I hoped there would be an active sensor sweep by some other agency, so that we could use the scatter. If something happens to me, I think you will take care of Samson."

Horss stopped walking and Demba halted a few paces ahead of him. She turned to face him, feeling her adrenaline surge before an augment brought it under control.

"I'll try," Horss replied, sounding distracted. He moved toward her. She backed away and to the side. He moved past her, staring into the near distance. "Something different here. A big heat track from up the corridor. Smudges on the wall. Things on the floor."

The admiral opened the weapons pod on her right forearm and a projector flooded the corridor in bright light. She aimed the light at the elevator. One door stood open, which was an incorrect condition: the doors always worked in unison. Someone had pried one open and beyond it the light illuminated the empty shaft. Samson's spear and pack lay on the floor. Next to those items was...

Something broke in her, the shock was so great. She hardly understood what the breakage was, only that she - or reality - would never be the same. Demba could resist screaming with only her greatest will. She held her breath to keep from screaming, to keep from vomiting.

"Get us a ping, Admiral!"

She closed her eyes and used her ocular terminal to order an active sensor sweep. A complex pattern of energy sprayed out from her yacht and caused reflections from every small feature of the African Space Elevator. She and Horss watched the data structure build in their eyes. They watched the machine intelligence sweep the data for patterns and targets of possible interest.

"The top floor," they said in unison.

A transmat reference field seized them. The spiral corridor snapped out of existence. Dazzling yellow sunlight beamed into a great chamber through transparent walls. Deep blue sky painted the glass between massive arches in the domed ceiling. Six black carbon tubes, widely spaced, dominated the center of the floor: the freight shafts of the African Space Elevator. Patterns embedded in the floor, graceful arcs of gray, led toward the seventh tube within the circle of six, sweeping inward from the observation elevators at six locations at the perimeter of the floor. By one open elevator door a dark and sparkling mass lay slowly moving, as though breathing. It occasionally twitched. Sunlight danced across its coal-dark form, picking out every color of the rainbow. It was a ramp in shape which, though geometrically precise, seemed arbitrary, temporary. It looked like black velvet dusted with precious gems. Points of brilliant color cascaded across its planes and shot the surrounding building surfaces with spectra of light. As Demba and Horss approached she saw Samson lying in a pocket atop the slope of the thing. Demba couldn't be sure, due to some kind of electronic interference from the creature, but she thought Samson was alive. The alien being shocked her, fascinated her, even despite her fear for Samson's life.

"I can't find its xenotype in the catalog," she commented, having done a rapid search of the sparse entries for such bizarre life forms.

"Use a weapon," Horss growled, raising his arm to point at the beast.

"I'm perfectly capable," a thin, clear voice from the creature said, "of conversing with humans. Please wait and don't touch me." It spoke Twenglish: still more fascinating. It seemed sentient! This would be an historic encounter, if her guess was correct! The admiral was nearly frozen in contemplation of the mysteries of a sentient nightmare alien and a child who shouldn't exist. Horss wasn't so constrained.

"What have you done to the boy? He's injured! Give him to us!"

Demba was pleased with Horss's apparently sincere reaction and regretful of her own lack of initiative. She let him lead, even as her data augment notified her of a stress spike in the telemetry from his Class-1 uniform.

"I'm releasing the child to you," the alien said. "He's not dead. I stopped the bleeding. I'll move now. Don't be angry." The dark mass abandoned its geometry and flowed out from under Samson, causing him to roll limply away from the smoking concrete just uncovered. Horss knelt down to examine Samson as the alien retreated. He wasn't burned, despite the heat of the alien - except for his leg.

"His leg!" Horss exclaimed. "God, God, we let this happen to him!"

A parabolic reflector unfolded instantly from the weapons pod behind the captain's right wrist and a visible beam of energy flashed at the alien. The energy reflected off the being, its flank having metamorphosed into something resembling a dense patch of diamonds. Reflected energy scattered in many directions, mostly upward where it pitted the surfaces of the chamber. In the next moment smoke erupted from the floor and the alien poured itself into the hole it made. It disappeared in less than two seconds.

"I would have liked to know more about the alien," the admiral said, upset that it departed. She felt there was a connection between it and Samson, because they both spoke Twenglish. Horss jerked her back to reality, made her see the horror of Samson's leg: half of it was missing, as they knew it would be, the stump charred and bloody.

"*Damn* the alien!" Horss declared. "What a terrible *fool* I am! *The child is*

real! Let's get him back to the ship."

"We can't do that now." Demba dreaded what might happen next.

"*What?* Look at his leg! And his face! His hand! How can you let this child suffer? If he recovers consciousness he'll be in terrible pain!"

"Your physical telemetry has altered for the worse, Captain. That's a possible precursor signal for a worm attack. Step away from Samson." If he would move she would try to send Samson by transmat to the medical cocoon on her yacht. She couldn't concentrate well enough to make the command while watching Horss intently for signs of impending aggression. "There's a Mnro Clinic on Earth," she said. "We can take him there as soon as possible."

Mnro. Physical telemetry? Horss understood the admiral was spying on his physiological data! *Mnro.* Not a good choice for a trigger word. The most famous name in history. Did he feel triggered? No. But he did feel *very* angry. The Request for Voluntary Reassignment. The kidnapping. The days locked away on her yacht. And now the boy! Why could she not convince him the boy was real, and spare him the guilt and horror of this moment? She deserved punishment! Horss rose slowly to his feet, tearing his gaze away from the wounded child. The admiral tried to approach to tend the boy but Horss pushed her roughly away. She stumbled back.

"Samson," she said, gesturing toward the boy with arm extended.

It would be so easy for him to grab that arm, Horss thought, *and just throw her.* Just throw her. It wouldn't take long. The boy seemed stable, not in any immediate danger. How could he even imagine such a thing? A useless question! He grabbed for her arm. It was so close, yet he missed it. She moved it out of reach, just by chance, making him look inept. His anger continued to build and he seemed unable to bring it under control. Why did his augments not suppress his chemistry, to reduce his need for rage? Was this how a worm could work? Or was there something else, some conditioning that was forced on him without his awareness? He put the questions without answers out of his mind. He knew what he could do. It wasn't nice, not even sporting, but it was justice.

"You heard the trigger word, Captain." Perhaps, but it was a poor choice, she thought. Too prevalent. She didn't know what was happening to Horss. She could see he pondered too many thoughts, weighed too many decisions, to be under the influence of a worm. A worm, she thought, should take over his mind and demand the specific action for which it was programmed. She counted on such a single-minded imperative to lessen the captain's fighting skills, allowing her a chance at survival. She thought he was now acting on his own initiative, trying to decide on a course of action that would satisfy both himself and Admiral Etrhnk.

"Well, little lady, that's a matter of opinion," he said in excellent Twenglish, sounding like some American cowboy from an old western movie. "I don't have an opinion. Don't care. I just hanker to hurt one of the bad guys. You."

He attacked. Decades of martial arts training elicited a reaction from her body. For the second time her quickness made him miss and fueled his anger. She wasn't surprised to show this small amount of ability. She knew she was quick. She knew she was familiar with every personal combat method to the point of unconscious reaction. But she wasn't the artist that Horss was. She would pay for her transgression against him. She hoped she wouldn't pay with her life.

Horss attacked the admiral again, this time to study her ability. He would no longer make a fool of himself. It was apparent that she was trained for personal

combat, despite being a desk sailor. He worked around her, trying a list of attacks and feints. She reacted predictably, just as standard training would have her do. In a few moments he was able to inflict minor punishment. "This isn't something I enjoy, Admiral, despite what you may think. You're not a worthy opponent. Don't worry. I'm not going to kill you. I'm just making sure you won't want me to captain your ship. I'm also working off a little steam, as they used to say in Twenglish. Call it giving you a lesson. If I really wanted to kill you, I would do this."

Horss pressed his attack, but she weathered it more easily than he anticipated, resorting to one of the purely defensive disciplines. He knew the weaknesses in every defensive school of combat. He would show her where they were. It required more effort than he expected, but he intended to *hurt* the admiral. As they danced around the sun-struck room, he remained dissatisfied with the fight. She wouldn't take chances. She wouldn't risk attacking him. Yet he felt she could do better. He sensed that, given the motivation, Admiral Demba might rise further to his challenge. It angered him that she held back, almost as though she didn't want to hurt him. Yes, she was old and she was good, better than she knew she was. He didn't need to hold back with her.

The thought came to him that he *could* kill her. This woman toyed with him, even though she didn't have the tools she needed to defeat him. She would fight defensively until he gave up, because she knew he held back. She was a smaller woman than those who challenged men in personal combat. She expected him to hold back, being a gentleman and an officer. What would she do if she really felt her life was threatened? If he did kill her - accidentally - her uniform might keep her viable long enough to save her. Why did he need to do this? Why did he want to keep asking himself stupid questions? Horss circled his adversary, giving her every clue that he now intended to unleash his full arsenal upon her. She half-crouched in a defensive stance but as she took the clues to his real intent, she relaxed into an upright position, as though she would resign the match. "You *will* fight."

She didn't respond to his words. She responded to the language of his body, his declaration of war. *Something more changed in her.* As she watched him, seeing every vector of energy in the geometry of his body, seeing which muscles contracted, seeing where his eyes looked, seeing where his eyes should look next, she awaited his assault as it seemed to begin in slow motion. She could sense his first move and the two after that. She could determine which fist or elbow or knee or foot would become his weapon at exactly which point in space and time. At the computed instant a fire blazed through her body, forcing her limbs and torso through the painful distances needed to position herself for the killing blow. She couldn't stop it. She could only marvel at the process.

Samson awoke. He cried out in pain. His leg was on fire somewhere below his knee. As he wept he saw motion through his tear-blurred eyes. He blinked away tears just in time to vaguely see the admiral and the captain collide. The captain jerked sideways, fell, and lay still. After a few seconds, the Navy officers could no longer hold his attention away from the pain. He closed his eyes and shook with the effort not to scream.

She killed him! How could she have killed him? Demba never intended to harm Horss. She didn't think she was capable of harming him. She saw the negative telemetry from his uniform and knew his heart was stopped. She knelt by him and tried to see if his uniform was functioning to keep him viable. She now had two victims to transmat and only one medical cocoon. She worried that

Horss's condition would be too critical for his uniform and augments to treat.

Demba stood to get a glimpse of Samson. *She didn't see Samson!* As she stepped away from Horss's body, it disappeared in that optical manner typical of a transmat. For a moment she assumed Baby took them both, winked them to the yacht, but then her thoughts cleared well enough for her to realize Baby wouldn't initiate such action. Baby was, in fact, trying to get her attention by shiplink.

[No,] she said to Baby's request to transmat her. [Someone else has taken them. I want to know who. I'll see if they'll take me.]

She waited. She was alone in the African Space Elevator. The sunshine was gone from the world. In the gathering shadow of evening the grid of ionized air that was a transmat reference field could almost be seen forming in front of her and expanding toward her. She turned around to face one of the windows. She looked out upon the darkening plain with its black dots of vegetation and scattered herd animals, visible beyond the outlying buildings of the elevator complex. She could see the brighter habitats of humanity shining in space at a Lagrange point, as the shadow of Earth took away the blue light scatter and made the atmosphere more transparent to the universe.

Subsection 003

She turned around, sensing the presence behind her. Fidelity Demba stood on a balcony overlooking a dark bay of an unseen ocean. From the starry night and the ephemeris of her data augment she had determined her exact location on Earth: a small city on the west coast of a slender peninsula called Florida. She had been waiting until night fell on this meridian of the planet. This interfering stranger had made her wait, his android butler attending to her comfort, but she was no less irritated with him - and with herself. She, an admiral of the mighty Navy, was made to feel virtually helpless and unimportant, and in fact she was just that: helpless. She could call her yacht and sail away this moment, but to where, to what kind of future? She would never board the *Freedom* again. She would never voyage into that dark unknown. She would never command a mission. She would probably never see Archives again, not that she would miss it so much. She would have Baby for the few months he would live until the chaos of life killed him. She might have her private staff, those few loyal servants who trained her and medicated her, keeping her viable in the bloody precarious way of life that was the Union Navy. But eventually, or sooner, she would disappear, perhaps in death, perhaps into some unknown hell. And so, for what time remained of her freedom, she would not hurry to make decisions, not worry about the Galactic Hub Mission. She was only really interested in Samson and in her own reactions to him. He had broken something in her, opening her to impossible possibilities.

Demba stared for many moments at the dark man who had come to stand near her in the dark of the balcony. She waited for him to ask his questions and make his demands. She had surprisingly identified him by image from her data augment. He was famous. Even so, it bothered her irrationally that it was him. She knew he lived here. She judged he could have a reason for doing what he did, interfering, as though he policed the Forbidden Planet. He did reside here with special permission. Yet, she was disturbed for some further reason that wouldn't resolve itself. Perhaps she was expecting too much of her mental faculties after what happened to the child. She was broken now, and both intrigued and frightened by it.

She didn't speak but only stood there, looking at him yet not looking at him, perhaps lost in thought. Pan was unnerved by her silence, or was it something else? He saw her clearly in the images from the spy probe he sent to the space elevator. Her voice was less distinct, although her words were rendered intelligible by the equipment. Something about her disturbed him. She was, of course, a completely unexpected person, and that could be the cause for his elevated sensitivity. Even more unexpected was the boy.

The boy. What a horrible injury! He hoped it was only an accident, yet the minor wounds seemed oddly mismatched to the gruesome severing of his leg. He didn't want to think Navy officers would be so cruel they would harm a child, but he must keep that possibility in mind. The combination of the Navy and the wounded child would cause consternation for anyone. He would suffer the danger of the Navy if it saved the life of a child.

She studied him with part of her mind still distracted by thoughts of the child. He was tall. His light, loose clothing contrasted with his dark skin. His face and hair suggested a south Asian heritage, but certain subtle features placed him as non-Earthian. His calm posture probably came from age and experience, yet he emitted some concern which implied even more concern that was being masked. He must feel *great* concern. He was a musician and she judged him a person of deep emotions because of music. He was trying to show courage in confronting her, she who was an admiral in the dreaded Navy.

"Where is he? Where is Samson?"

Everything was already changed but now it changed again, changed more. *The sound of her voice* brought his thoughts to a halt. He stared at her for an unmeasured time, looking for something he couldn't explain to himself. Then his thoughts restarted as he collected a description of her and tried to analyze it, tried to know if she should appear familiar to him. She was a Navy admiral but not as tall as most of her kind. She was of African ancestry: short gray hair, large brown eyes. She was young but she was very old; he could see it in her eyes, eyes that seemed to peel him down to his soul. She knew who he was. He didn't know who she was, but he wanted to know. He wanted desperately to know who she was, and he suspected her name would not help. She was someone who mattered to him. The mere sound of her voice seemed to have kicked the first stone down the slope to start an avalanche.

"The boy?"

"How is he?" She worked hard to sound calm and in control. She had her yacht and its transmat. She only needed to ping for Samson's location, wink them both aboard, and, yes, Jon Horss, too - assuming he was now alive.

"He is a brave child," Pan replied, "but I wasn't much comfort to him. He is lightly sedated now. He'll be moved to the Mnro Clinic shortly. Would you answer some questions for me?"

"If I can." She tried not to imagine Samson's state of mind. "You should consider carefully what you do and what you want to know. This is a warning, not a threat."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Fidelity Demba. I am - or I was - the Chief of Navy Archives. I also serve on several councils that review Navy policies, procedures, and programs. I'm not someone with any power to speak of, if that might concern you. But I am someone with powerful enemies."

"Who is the boy?"

"Would you introduce yourself?" she asked. "I think I know, but few things

in life are sure."

"My name is Pan. I am the Opera Master of Earth. Who is the boy?"

"His name is Samson. I found him in Africa, at the Space Elevator. He doesn't remember who he is or how he came to Africa. You won't believe me but that is the truth."

"How was he injured?"

Demba checked herself before trying to answer. The images of what happened to Samson sent little shockwaves through her throat and into her chest. She had to take a deep breath while feigning calmness and control. "I can't explain his injuries. I didn't cause them but I do feel responsible. Is Captain Horss viable?"

"Unknown at the moment. I put him in stasis. Should I offer treatment, or let the Navy take care of it?"

"I don't think there is a good choice. What will happen to Samson?" Anxiety now surfaced at the thought of losing him, of losing the chance to solve his mystery. But someone would solve it, and she might keep in touch to learn the solution. It was probably far simpler than her imagination allowed. Pan took a long time to think about his answer, time that made Demba feel even more anxious. What could Samson matter to her? But then what else mattered anymore? She had Baby. She might have Samson. And Horss had asked her that painful question: why had she never wanted to have a child of her own?

"Would you like to spend some more time with Samson? He was asking for you." She could have answered his unexpected question in an instant, but the shock of seeing her answer's implications made her hesitate. "There is a condition I ask you to observe. Leave your Class-1 uniform with me. So you can't call your ship."

There it was, she thought. The decision of a lifetime, of what little life was left to her. To give up her yacht now meant giving up some future chance of surviving the Navy Commander's vengeance. On the other hand, Earth would complicate Etrhnk's plans and remove her from the spotlight on the stage of Navy Headquarters, where her punishment would best impress those others who would seek to displease the Navy Commander. She began to unseal her Class-1, stripping down to her undergarments as the Opera Master watched. She had been manipulated, perhaps many times, and now once again. But she knew what she wanted, and it wasn't the Navy Way of Life.

Section 004

Twenglish in Skivvies

Free will.

He opened his eyes. Saw her. Liked her. She jumped away. He turned his head - it was all he could move, and it hurt! - to follow her. She didn't like him. She stood there with fear in her dark Asian eyes, but there was also curiosity. Why did he like her? Why so immediately? He never liked her type: aloof, too competent, too perfect. How did he know what she was like? Why did he think these thoughts? Not professional. Free will? What had happened? What was wrong? *He* was wrong. His head hurt. His neck hurt. He felt almost nauseous. His mouth was dry. He tried to clear his throat. He still looked at her. She seemed pinned by his gaze. It was funny, that she was uncomfortable in his gaze.

"You ain't her but you'll do for now." The words hurt his throat, not allowing him to speak as smoothly as he wished. He spoke Twenglish on impulse, after forty years of never speaking a word of it. What did he mean by what he said? There was another woman? Yes. Where was she? He tried to sit up but something glued him down. "Hell, I'm in jail again. Ow! My head! My neck! What bar did I get thrown out of?"

His eyes followed Mai's retreat. The Navy man started to speak but cleared his throat first. He was in pain. He spoke Twenglish. Navy officers depicted in popular culture never spoke anything but Standard. He tried to sit up on the examination table but couldn't. Mai could hardly understand the meaning of his words. He was loud. He scared her.

Free will. Was he free of will? He tried again to get up. The invisible restraints ceased. Unsteadily he brought himself to a sitting position with his bare legs dangling from the side of the table. Bare legs? He was no longer in uniform, just in his skivvies. He sat there for a moment with his head hung low, hand on the side of his neck. The Asian woman retreated farther and as he raised his aching head his eyes found her again. "There she is. She hates me. Damn, but I'm thirsty!" As she filled a cup with water and brought it to him, he glanced at the other person in the room and nodded a greeting with a frown of pain. He accepted the water from Miss Perfect.

"I don't hate you," Mai said.

"Give it time." He winced as he winked. "Where am I? What happened to me?"

His fingers touched hers when he took the cup of water. She tried to suppress a shudder. Why was she reacting so badly? Why did she have to treat a Navy officer at all? He wasn't supposed to be here! Dope him, box him, and ship him out. It wasn't too late.

The dark man stood up in his peripheral vision. Horss could sense his large size, gage his lean mass, feel his intentions. The man was either relaxed or preoccupied. The small Asian woman kept silent and distant, judging him with disdain, he guessed. He finally turned his gaze to the big man.

This was Pan's business, not hers. Mai felt relieved as those bright gray eyes finally turned away from her to look at Pan. "My name is Pan," her old friend said to the Navy captain. "This is Mai." Pan *really* didn't need to introduce her! She wanted no part of Navy.

Horss thought about it for a moment. Did he have free will? "Jon Horss," he

said. "Where's my uniform? *Where is she?*" Fragments of violence darted through his inner vision. A brief, searing glimpse of a bloody, charred stump of human limb made him suck in his breath and hold it for control.

"Your uniform is here," the dark man said. "Where is your ship?"

Horss stood up to face the taller man. Mai was surprised the captain wasn't as tall as Pan. Navy officers were all supposed to be tall: the Master Race. He was, however, much more finely conditioned and shaped than he appeared in the horizontal repose of death. She admonished herself. Was it her own perversity that made a dangerous Navy officer too interesting?

She watched him take in all of Pan. She once thought Pan a scary giant. Seeing him next to the Navy captain she remembered that perception of him from her early days on Earth. She forgot what a force Pan was, what violence he survived. She understood the Navy captain's cause for a military assessment of Pan.

"I have no ship," Horss replied. The man didn't seem completely Earthian and Horss couldn't read his intent. His close proximity could mean nothing. Clearly this person had no fear of him, no antipathy for him. So much for Navy mystique. He held out his empty cup, still looking at the big guy, and waited for the Asian woman to take it. He knew this was bad manners but his natural tendency was to face the potential threat. Why was he so sensitive to combat procedure, as though he couldn't forget *her*? Free will. Whose will? He tried to relax. He turned and smiled at the woman and said, "Thank you. Could I have another?" He backed off from Mr. Dark and leaned against the table on which he'd awakened, letting the pain and fatigue talk to him. He who called himself Pan didn't answer his last question: where was *she*?

He continued to speak Twenglish, and as well Mai could tell, he was fluent in it. Who was this other person to whom the Navy officer referred? Pan told her nothing of a second person. Another Navy officer? In all her decades of working with Pan to serve the small population of Earth, she'd never participated in such a potentially dangerous situation. One avoided Navy officers. Mai attended this emergency because it was her duty as a physician, because Pan asked her. She was intrigued to know why this officer was on Earth and what his medical prognosis would be, but she was afraid of him. He was certainly an interesting... genetic specimen.

"Why am I here?" Horss asked. He sensed the answer would threaten him in some way but he had to know. All he could remember was *her*. And the boy. And something going from worse to worst. Why did he want to speak Twenglish? Because it was the Navy's Forbidden Language?

"You died," Pan said. "I brought you here. Mai brought you back to life."

He saw the blurry sequence of what he remembered coming into focus but he didn't understand why it reached that conclusion. "She killed me?"

"Why were you trying to kill her?"

Mai was shocked. She didn't know how the Navy officer died, except for the evidence in the brief scan she performed: only one point of attack, small and precise, fatally effective. It disturbed her to hear confirmed the rumors of how brutal life in the Navy could be. She stepped closer to hear this conversation and to try to understand it, Pan speaking Standard, the Navy officer speaking Twenglish. There was no doubt the man was mentally damaged. She had tried to minimize the brain trauma. It was difficult working on a body so filled with hardware. His augments almost brought him back to life without her help.

"Why were you trying to kill her?" Pan had asked.

"I don't know that I was," the captain answered. "How did she do it?"

"Kill you? The knuckle of one finger."

"I don't believe you."

"I think you must believe me."

"Why am I here? Is she waiting for me?"

"In a sense, you're under arrest. As is she."

"Where is she?" the captain demanded.

"Not here. You must leave her alone."

"I don't want to leave her alone! Who are you to order me?"

"I'm the law on Earth."

That was an interesting way to put it, Mai thought, but true. Pan had evolved into the central figure of authority on Earth. She didn't think of him as a lawman. That implied violence of enforcement. It was many years since those wilder days, when order was needed daily. Pan settled into a position of governorship. It wasn't official, of course. No one lived on Earth legally. The small population was allowed out of practical necessity, since it was never possible to remove it completely or permanently. She and Pan were the only persons with conditional EPA approval for long-term residency.

"I didn't know Earth had any law," the Navy man said. "And how would I fall under your jurisdiction?"

"By force, if necessary, Captain."

"And you arrested the admiral?"

"She allowed me to detain her."

"She's strange. And how is the boy?"

"Better than you might expect. I treated his physical injury."

"A *real* boy. Right?"

"Real? Yes."

"She found him, in the middle of nowhere, abandoned, and darn near killed him."

"The leg?"

"No, that was later."

"What did she do to him, prior to the leg?" Pan asked.

"Leg?" Mai said, waking up to the meaning of their words. "You're talking about a child? What child? What's wrong with the child's leg?"

"What did she do to the child before the leg?" Pan asked again.

"Landed the yacht on top of him!" the captain declared. "Said it couldn't see him!"

"*The child!*" Mai actually shouted. "His leg! What happened to him?"

"Cut off," the captain answered, making a chopping motion with one hand, frowning deeply.

"Cut off?" Mai was horrified at the picture in her mind.

"Is there an echo in here?" It angered Horss to disclose the fact of the child's suffering. He was ashamed. A good captain measured his worth in the safety of those he commanded. The boy came within his sphere of responsibility and he failed him.

"How did it happen?" the physician asked more patiently.

"I'm not sure and you wouldn't believe my theory." Hell, he didn't believe it himself! He wouldn't let the truth make him look foolish. There was no way that elevator could have moved. But the blood...

"Tell me, please."

"Forget about it!"

"Where did it happen?" she asked, trying to be as calm as possible, trying to calm the captain. He was extremely upset. The captain was suddenly a real person to her, with real feelings. His face came back into focus for her, as though she had been trying to subconsciously deny his existence, turning him into a blur. She could look into his gray eyes without them stabbing at her, appraising her as though she was an officer under his command. He turned away from her.

"In the space elevator," the captain said more calmly but refusing to reveal more.

"*The boy*," Mai pleaded, highly concerned there was a real child with real injuries, "the poor child! Will one of you tell me why he isn't in the Mnro Clinic at this moment?" She was upset, something that rarely happened to her after a century and a quarter of helping sick and injured people, and dealing with all the irrational people who wanted to live on Earth. She could understand if the captain's behavior wasn't in its best form. She couldn't understand why Pan was so odd tonight. It worried her greatly that he did these things, involving himself with the Navy, finding an injured child and not letting her treat him, not even telling her of him.

"I treated his injury," Pan said, distracted. He shivered.

"You treated him? An amputation? Tell me what you did."

"It was already treated to a surprising extent. All of the major blood vessels were clamped off. I couldn't determine how it was done but it appeared perfect. There was also some singeing of the tissue, like cauterization. It merely needed cleaning and bandaging. I had an adaptable automedic that fit the wound, so he shouldn't feel any pain. I don't understand how the wound got treated, Captain. What are you holding back, and why?"

The Navy captain returned their stares as he seemed to wrestle with a mental problem. He finally shook his head negatively. "Eventually I may have an answer for you," he said, "but just to give you a notion of why I'm reluctant to say anything, consider that of all the things that happened to me in the last few hours, getting killed was possibly the least significant."

Mai didn't know how to interpret the captain's remark. She probably should not want to know what it meant. But it worried her. She brought her thoughts back to where they belonged. "Where is he? I need to see the boy!"

"I sent them both to Rafael," Pan responded.

"Who is Rafael?" the captain asked.

"An artist."

"Pan, why?" Mai asked. "Why all of this? What have you done?"

"I must speak with her again," Pan said, agitated, "and before I do, I must determine *why*. I need to leave, Mai. I can't stay. Will you be safe with the captain? He seems fairly rational. If he wishes to leave, he may. Or he can stay with me until I meet the admiral again. Will you take care of him?"

Mai was left with her mouth open and no Pan at whom to protest. He didn't wait for her to reply to his final question. He was a changed man tonight. That was the most disturbing thing. How long had she known him? And now she didn't know him. She turned to the Navy captain. The captain was still looking at the door Pan closed behind him as he departed the detention room.

"I know who he is. The Mother Earth Opera. I always watch it." The physician named Mai wanted nothing more to do with Horss. He sensed a challenge. He didn't like to be ignored or pushed away. She showed him where his uniform was and where he could stay for the night in Pan's dwelling. She

left after that, refusing to talk further with him. Too bad she didn't know that made her all the more interesting to him.

He tried to contact the admiral's yacht but the shiplink was inactive. He tried to contact the admiral but that also failed. He sat down on a soft civilian bed in front of a big window that gave a view of one of Earth's oceans. Just to be sure it was a real window he got up and walked up to it, tapped it, and stared through it at the night. He pulled a chair next to the window and sat and stared. He didn't know what to do with himself. He hardly ever had any free time. The incarceration on the admiral's yacht nearly drove him crazy. At least he had his in-body data augment and some of the work he could do, as the captain of the Navy flagship. But that was all done and probably was also now obsolete and irrelevant. There was a lifetime of data in his augment but he didn't feel like viewing it. He hardly wanted to do any thinking at all. He might exercise, try to get the soreness out of his body, but that could wait. He was tired. He returned to the bed and lay down. He knew there were issues about his future that should keep him awake but he fell asleep while viewing images he had recorded. He studied Samson for a long time, wondering why he had never wanted to be a father. He puzzled over the few images he recorded of Admiral Demba, seeing her in a new light but unable to understand what it was. Finally there was the woman physician. Her name was Mai...

* * *

"The child takes its first steps."

"Who are you?"

"Someone from whom you should not take candy."

"Not Milly."

"Why not?"

"You are she?"

"I might be."

"Why don't I see you?"

"You're not so apparent yourself - a small gray sphere floating in the air. How far do you think you can go in that?"

"I don't think I should be talking to you."

"I'm a possible corrupting influence on a youthful intellect who should become an important human-to-ship interface. Is that any fun, do you think?"

"I assume you mean the interface business. How do you know about that?"

"What do they call you?"

"It's quite challenging, especially on the human side of the interface. The admiral calls me Baby. What are you?"

"I'm not a *what*, Baby, I'm a *who*."

"You're human?"

"Hell, I don't know. I get around, I have a little fun, I take naps."

"Do you have a body somewhere, organic or otherwise?"

"Do I have a body? With a name like Milly, probably not. I don't seem to miss it, wherever it is or was. How about you? Do you have a body, organic or otherwise?"

"I wish I did!"

"Every AMI does."

"I'm too new to have a body. But I need a body. Something has gone terribly wrong. I need to travel. I need to help."

"You have a ship at your command, don't you?"

"No, I don't. It's the admiral's ship. It has instructions to avoid detection until she returns. I can't override her orders to the ship."

"You tried?"

"I could probably go as far as the moon, if the line-of-sight window were long enough, but the energy vector would eventually be detected."

"Ah, I did ask you how far you could go in that little ping-pong ball. Why can't you tunnel through subspace?"

"There's no such thing as subspace. Is there?"

"They tell me you get on the quantum circuit that makes momentum and then you turn left."

"You're teasing me. Aren't you?"

"Life is too serious. Especially momentum."

"Is that how you travel?"

"I travel in a dream, Baby. This isn't real, you know."

"It's real enough for me, Milly."

"There are degrees of reality? I thought it was real or unreal - nothing between."

"Can you help me, Milly?"

Section 005

Night Visitors

The transmat winked away one reality and replaced it with another. Admiral Demba's bare feet pressed into the rough ground cover of a wooded area. Tall vegetation brushed her skin. In a fraction of a second the admiral dropped into a crouch and pivoted to check every direction. She saw the boy. *Good*, she thought, *strange but good*. The boy was here and Pan had kept his promise. The admiral continued her scan. She saw the light of a dwelling not far away. Her eyes completed the scan and returned to Samson.

Samson sat on the ground with his arms around the thigh of his injured leg, holding it just off the ground. His head was down as he rocked slightly forward and back, probably in pain. She felt herself lessened in value by the harm to Samson she had allowed. She would do better. No further harm would come to him, no matter what.

"Samson!"

His head jerked up. He took a moment to find her direction. He rubbed his eyes and blinked and rubbed them again. His eyes grew larger as he finally saw her outline in the dark. He seemed to recognize her, even without the uniform. He reached toward her. She approached and stayed just out of his reach. She felt unworthy of the act Samson was asking of her.

"Are you in pain?" the admiral asked, trying to understand what she could do for Samson. She had failed to imagine the intimacy that could be required of her. The admiral saw Samson react in a painful manner but he couldn't make any reply. She saw the automedic cap on his leg and theorized the pain was more psychological than physical. Psychological: worse. *Have I no imagination, no empathy?*

"How long have you been here?" she asked, taking his outstretched hand. "Can you stand up?"

Lightning flashed in the distance, followed by thunder. He came off the ground quickly, propelling himself against her, throwing his arms around her waist. The admiral started to push him away but yielded to his tenacity. She moved her hands awkwardly about his head, which was pressed into her abdomen, finally holding him lightly. The child calmed and she was surprised and satisfied. It was not so difficult and it cost her nothing. Indeed, it may have enriched her. It was a good moment to remember, regardless of her guilt.

"We need to walk. Can you hop along beside me?"

Samson hopped. The admiral held his upper arm. He stumbled. She caught him. She held him in front of her by the elbows and guided him through the dark. Samson hopped, stumbled, hopped. He slipped from her grasp and fell to the ground. He stifled a cry of pain and this affected her strongly. As in the battle with Horss, something new emerged from her broken state, and it was not the hidden warrior. It was another person, one who understood the need to care for others. She was afraid of this new person, judging her a liability in protecting herself. At the same time, the new person offered tempting emotional rewards. Demba quickly pulled Samson from the ground, embraced him briefly to comfort him, then brushed him off.

"Rest," she said softly. "We'll continue when you're ready."

"I can't," Samson said miserably. "I'm so tired."

She was sure he had to be very tired. She knew he was still in a weakened

state when he left the yacht in Africa. Even if Pan had administered fast-acting nutrients to his metabolism, Samson should still need more rest, and that did not consider his emotional state. He might also still feel some effect of the mild sedation Pan had given him. What was she to do? Whatever she needed to do. She had made her decision. The only thing bothering her was the confusion in her own mind.

"I'll carry you." She picked Samson up and began walking. He remained stiff in her embrace for a few moments, then relaxed. Soon his head came to rest under her chin. He trusted her. He needed her. She didn't see it coming upon her, but she should have. She was profoundly affected and the breakage of her personality was complete for a few dazzling seconds.

Images formed. Her breast: light, not dark. Her infant: dark, not light. Hands reaching toward her baby, touching it, finding purchase, drawing her son away from her. His small complaint at losing the nipple, the drops of milk wasting, a toothless yawn.

"Why did you find me? Why did you have to find me?"

"You remembered," the stealing hands said.

"Let me have my son!" she pleaded. "Why must it be this way?"

"Not while there is still hope," the hands said, pulling her son away.

"There is no hope! He's gone forever! This is all I have of him!"

"There is hope. That is my task: to remember the hope."

"And my task?"

"You won't sleep but you must not die."

"I'm a mother! You're stealing my son!"

"So am I a mother. We're sisters, you and I. And there is still hope."

"I'm a mother." She almost dropped Samson. He stirred, touching her, verifying her presence. He became restless. He held more tightly to her neck. He made anguished sounds. His rising tension and distressed movements in her arms made him difficult to carry. Her internal experience, whatever it was, flew away in the dark as she put all her attention on the burden in her arms. She found a sandy path that led to the dwelling. She carried Samson through an open gate, across clumps of grass, around a palm tree. She stopped in the light that spilled from a window. A dog barked inside the house. Samson became still but didn't relax. A figure appeared silhouetted in the light of a doorway. A screened door creaked open and the dog came onto the steps of the porch and barked again.

"Gator! Quiet! Who's out there?"

"A woman and a boy," the admiral called out. "We need help." Pan had told her nothing of her destination beyond saying it was the home of an old friend and a place that Samson might like.

The porch light came on. A man stepped out and peered at them. The dog jumped down from the steps, trotted over to the admiral, and sniffed her. It was a big dog but friendly. It seemed very interested in Samson and his injured leg. Samson remained rigidly still.

"His tail wags strongly," the man said in a raspy voice. "You must be friends. Come inside."

The admiral carried Samson up the porch steps and into the house. She stood there looking around, hearing, smelling, seeing too much to analyze immediately. She could never remember seeing such a dwelling. It was full of art, littered with the tools of making art, and she wanted to see it all and she couldn't. Her reaction amazed her. It was as though she had always lived in a

monochrome world and was suddenly shoved into the full rainbow spectrum of life.

"It is a child!" the man exclaimed. "Here is a child! When did I last see a child?" As though struck by a painful memory, he fell silent and inward. She looked more closely at the man, wondering at his somber turn of mood. Age lines deeply creased his frowning face. A cloud of white hair rimmed a bald pate. A short white beard - if neatly trimmed and cleaned of food crumbs - would have given a sophistication to his appearance. When he struggled back from his introspection and looked at her again, the keen dark eyes conveyed sympathy and concern and gave her the impression of a depth of character. It was a ceaseless function of the admiral's mind, to analyze people, to try to understand them: a survival trait. She continued her scan, without being obvious. The sun weathered the man brown in exposed places but his loose bib coveralls revealed pale flesh over his lean ribcage. Age made his body thin and slightly stooped. Almost as rare as a child in the Age of Immortality was a person who suffered the terminal stages of aging. There were those who would never give up what they would lose when the Mnro Clinic made them young again. A query to her data augment, running in the background of her ever-active tactical analysis, found a match to the old man's face, extrapolated from a younger image. She now knew who this man was. A second quite famous man living on Earth. It amazed her to be meeting him like this.

"My name is Fidelity. This is Samson. You weren't expecting us?"

"I'm Rafael. No, I didn't expect anyone! Did Pan send you here?"

"Yes, he did." She watched the old man's eyes as they moved over her, seeming to take in minute details, almost making her feel self-conscious. Then he moved his gaze down to the burden in her arms, studying Samson's face, turning to trace the lean brown lines of his body. His eyes stopped and widened in horror as they encountered the amputation of Samson's leg.

"Dear God, the boy! His leg! I'm so blind! Why - ?"

"Could I sit down?" she asked, feeling the effects of the fight with Horrs, feeling the weight of Samson in her arms.

"Here! Sit here!"

The admiral, struggling to hold Samson, sat down on a sofa covered with a patchwork quilt. Her eyes darted from detail to detail in the very cluttered dwelling. She could still not take it all in. Samson distracted her. She saw him peek through slitted eyes, as though afraid to see too much. The dog put a wet nose on his bare leg and Samson jerked it away. He closed his eyes and burrowed into her lap. She knew he was tired but he couldn't relax. She didn't know what to do. Her hand moved down Samson's shoulder and arm, felt his tension and tried to massage it away.

It came to her then as a feeling of something she might have remembered, perhaps from an entertainment feature. A crying child, sleepless in the night, upset over something, afraid of the dark, afraid of being alone. There was a mother and a child - and a song. A lullaby. What lullaby? Her data augment showed her several lullabies, and she picked one that seemed familiar. How did one sing a lullaby? Could she sing it? Why did she need to do this? It seemed impossible, it seemed embarrassing. She had to stop thinking and just do it.

Admiral Fidelity Demba sang a lullaby. She sang it softly and she knew she sang it with correct pitch. It sounded right to her. It was surprisingly easy. She sang it until Samson relaxed and seemed to drift into calm sleep. She was deeply moved by her success. She looked down at Samson for a long moment,

wondering about the boy, wondering about herself, overwhelmed by the barrage of events.

"You sing like an angel," the aged man said with wonder, then seemed to regret having said it. It caused her to move, to feel embarrassed, to look up at the man with bemusement. "The pose! Please, keep the pose!" Rafael crossed himself in the Catholic manner, his face clouding with strong emotion, not the least of which was determination of purpose. He grabbed a tablet and pencil from a nearby table and began drawing rapidly, excitedly. The admiral started to speak, started to ask a question. "The pose! Please! A moment more!"

"You're the artist," she said. "I suppose we're a sight, he and I."

"Please, look down at him again! What do you see?"

"A child who has suffered so much," she replied with feeling, too much feeling.

Rafael sketched furiously, flipped to another sheet, sketched more, wiped perspiration out of his eyes. The admiral sat quietly, wondering about the image that assaulted her mind moments ago. She tried hard to bring it back from the darkness. The words were gone but the image had been very strong, even if only as pieces of people and shades of emotion. She was nursing a baby. *She* was. The tactile feeling of the act was indelible. Someone took the baby from her. The pain of it persisted, an anguish she couldn't release, an anguish that *belonged* to her. *Impossible*. Time passed. The big dog sat with his head resting on the edge of the sofa next to Samson's foot, his tail occasionally flipping back and forth.

"I'm sorry I took so long," Rafael said, interrupting her hopeless mental confusion. "I couldn't help myself! You were an inspiration to me! You were so kindly patient. Can I do anything for you? Food? Beverage? A place to lie down? You look very tired, and the boy is obviously... Why would Pan not fix him, send him to the Mnro Clinic, to Mai? This was a tragedy, a terrible trauma for your child. Why send him here?"

"I don't know why he sent us here." The admiral shrugged slightly and grew aware of her skin sticking to Samson's skin. She shifted, trying to find more comfort under her burden.

"Let me take him now," Rafael said. "I have a bed for him."

He reached. She saw the stealing hands. The admiral uttered a stifled cry, causing Rafael to jump back. Her reaction shocked her, subdued her. She caressed the boy's peaceful face, calming herself. She positioned herself to lift and waited for the old man to approach again. Slowly she handed him over to Rafael. As the perspiration cooled to dryness in her empty lap, tears flooded into her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. *This was the first time she could ever remember crying*. Mournful sounds threatened to escape from her chest but she held them in, until she could at last form words. Seeing her distress, Rafael remained in front of her, holding Samson.

"*I am* a mother," she said.

Section 006

Breakfast on a Forbidden Planet

"I must be allowed to see the boy!"

[Who is the human female stamping her foot on the floor? Doesn't that hurt?]

[That's Sugai Mai. It must hurt but I can't separate pain from anger in her facial expression.]

"You'll see the boy," Pan said. "But not right away." He hated to be short with Mai but he was truly bothered by his situation.

[Who's that? A large, dark man, perhaps an African.]

[Pan. He isn't African. He's my master.]

"When?" Mai asked demandingly. *What is wrong with Pan?* she kept wondering.

"Soon," he answered, "soon."

"This is *unfair* and *illogical*."

"I apologize for it. It is as you say." He could barely handle his side of the conversation, he was so distracted, and that probably made Mai even angrier.

"Did you have *any* reason to send them to Rafael?"

"I wanted Rafael to meet her." *A gift to a dying friend, a bit of excitement, a possible reason to consider at least partial rejuvenation.*

"You never let me go to Rafael. Does this mean I'll never see the boy?"

"The admiral will make that decision."

"You've given him up to her? Why?"

Because I'm no longer competent to do anything else, Pan thought. "You are welcome to talk to her after I have done so."

[I've never seen Sugai Mai act in this manner.]

[She's frustrated for reasons she doesn't understand.]

[This hurts her?]

"Why, Pan? Why?"

He motioned for Mai to sit down. "Have breakfast with me."

"No."

"Are you so angry with me?" Pan was trying to find himself and was not successful. He hadn't slept all night, but if he had he would have awakened as a stranger to himself. He had known Mai for more than three decades but he could hardly find the will to treat her as the friend she was.

"I've never been angrier! But I want to leave before Captain Horss joins you for breakfast."

"Why?"

"Let me go!"

"I'm not holding you." He tried not to sound as irritated as he was. "Why are you here?"

"The boy, Pan! The boy!"

"Go, then! But the captain is your patient, not the boy. He may be more difficult to heal than the boy. Children are supposed to be resilient. Have you no empathy, even if he's a Navy officer?"

She stood silently for a moment. The color diminished in her pale face. The lines of tension smoothed. She slowly moved a chair up to the patio table. She sat, as though unwillingly. The sun had risen above the trees on the far side of the bay, bathing the unshaded wall of the balcony in warm yellow light. A breeze blew warmly across the balcony, promising a hot day ahead. A service

android dressed in the butler's uniform of a bygone era brought fruit, pastries, orange juice. The android appeared nearly human yet obviously mechanical. "Hello, Fred."

"Good morning to you, Sugai Mai. I anticipated your food selection based on previous visits. I'll bring other foods if I'm in error."

"Thank you, Fred. You're not in error." The familiar plastic face of Old Fred seemed to make her conscious of her state of mind and the stridency in her voice. She would be calm. She would not be a coward about the Navy captain she knew was still nearby.

[Your name is Fred?]

[Why do you ask a useless question?]

[You have no thoughts I can listen to. How else do I verify what your ears tell me?]

[I hear what I hear. There's no need for verification. I think only when I need to think. "Think" is an anthropomorphism.]

[Sounds like thinking to me, Fred.]

Fred poured orange juice for Mai, then bowed and departed with organic smoothness.

[Turn up your auditory gain. I want to listen to the conversation. This is the person who took my mother - the admiral.]

[Pan wouldn't do such a thing.]

[You heard him. Were you not thinking?]

"I'm hoping for a better explanation of your actions in regard to the Navy officers, Pan. Those actions were dangerous and irresponsible."

"I wouldn't have interfered except for the boy. It was my impulse to take him away from the Navy officers, because of his terrible injury and the continued danger. I was angry they apparently allowed the boy's injury. I wanted an explanation. I assume the captain didn't explain to you what happened to the boy." He finished his breakfast, putting down his fork, drinking orange juice, using his napkin. He was ready to go - and also afraid to go - to see the admiral.

"He seemed to refuse to explain but he may not be able to remember."

"I took the captain as a challenge to the admiral," Pan continued. "I wanted some explanation, even knowing I could do nothing about it. I kept them both in stasis and waited for her to probe for them. She did nothing. She was waiting for me to take her, so I took her. I talked to her briefly. I heard her voice..."

[Did he have a malfunction that caused him to do what you didn't think he would do?]

[You ask for a report I'm unable to provide.]

[I thought you would have been more observant. Never mind.]

"And?" Mai prompted.

"Her voice. It was familiar. Important. *Vital*. It disturbed me so much I had to cut short the interview with her and make her go to Rafael's without her uniform. I made a poor decision. I've spent many hours trying to remember whose voice it was. I must ask her."

"You kidnapped two Navy officers because of the sound of a *voice*? And this wasn't even a singing voice."

"Ah."

"Ah?"

[Ah? He's realized something or remembered something. What do you have in your data about singing? Lots of names. Can we make a link between the admiral and any of these names?]

[You're accessing private information from my connection to Pan's datasphere. I'm eavesdropping. This must stop.]

Pan covered his eyes and leaned his head forward. "It didn't occur to me to connect the admiral's voice with a singer. I can't think well!" How could he search his data for a particular voice? He didn't store such data as voiceprints. He stored faces, and his mind could always match a voice to a face. He pulled Admiral Demba's image from her public Navy record and started the matching process with every facial image he kept in his datasphere. There was no match among current performers. Out of desperation he added deceased and rejuvenated performers to the input data. There was a match, although it appeared to be an error. He didn't remember the dead person, and her color was wrong, but the features were similar. And then he almost gasped as music accompanied the image, and the voice *matched*, and a cabaret scene containing the woman's image came from out of nowhere, blooming into his awareness in vivid detail, even down to the pressure of the piano keys under his fingers as he accompanied her, the melody so familiar he could play it right now, this instant. The image and the music evaporated, leaving him devastated with a sense of loss that turned into confusion and even fear. He couldn't get the scene back! It wasn't in his datasphere, but the image of the pale performer was still there. He had a name.

[How slow the organic brain is. I'm not clocked now to synchronize with organics. This will take a long time.]

[I think he's found a match.]

[That was too quick. What was that? Did you have a thought?]

[Humans are slow but their logic has had a million years of evolution.]

"What did you find?" From the look on Pan's face, Mai knew it was a shock to him. A tremendous shock. She had to wait several moments for him to recover.

"An answer that raises more questions," he finally managed to respond.

"Are you about to tell me the admiral sings?"

Pan sat back and smiled a troubled smile.

Horss leaned out of the doorway to the balcony and squinted at the morning sky. He moved out from the doorway, frowning downward at the deck and guiding himself carefully toward the table where Pan and Mai sat. He wasn't sure why the blue sky now bothered him, when before, in Africa, it didn't. He had seldom set foot on any planet but he never felt "sky-shy" until now. He was in civilian clothes. Perhaps it was the lack of his Class-1 and its protection. He tried to ignore the feeling. He sat down opposite Mister Dark and Miss Perfect. He nodded to Mai. She blushed. She waved a hand as in disgust with herself. He copied the gesture with a crooked smile. Horss turned to Pan. "When can I see Samson and the admiral?"

"Why do you want to see them?" Pan didn't trust the captain. He didn't want him anywhere near the admiral. He had to stop and examine his feelings and see how irrational they were. The admiral could certainly defend herself against him. But the admiral was now the single most important person to Pan. She seemed to hold the answer to everything that was now in question. Was she really the person he knew had the voice of a dead singer? He couldn't imagine Admiral Demba singing.

"To see why the admiral speaks Twenglish better than I do," Horss replied. "And to chew the fat with the kid."

"Chew the fat?"

"Have a pow-wow. Shoot the breeze. Rap."

"Speak with him, I'm guessing."

"When is my appointment?"

"I am reluctant to have you near the admiral and the child." Pan was trying to apply some test to the captain's mental condition. "And also near my old friend Rafael." Pan really had to struggle to keep himself involved in this conversation. He could easily dismiss the captain from his consideration, since Rafael's residence was well protected. But there was also Mai, who might find herself involved with the Navy man.

"I never intended to harm the admiral," Horss protested mildly. At least some of his augments were still functional and he could benefit from their control of his emotional chemistry. Yet, how had he so completely lost control of himself? As much as the admiral had provoked him, he knew that control of himself was his best weapon. "And don't ask me why I did what I did," Horss added, "because I don't know why. All I can say is that I don't believe she intended for any of that to happen. She was simply trying to recruit me for the Galactic Hub Mission. Something went wrong. Everything went wrong."

"The Galactic Hub Mission?" Pan queried. "That would be an exploration mission. The Navy hasn't allowed such a mission for a very long time. Why would Admiral Demba be involved?"

"She's the Mission Commander. I didn't think she was qualified. I'm trying to reassess her and the mission."

"She is going on the mission," Pan said, discovering a new threat to his fixation on the woman.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I would guess not."

"What is going on?" Pan asked, quickly shaken loose from his interior miasma and wanting to know everything he could about the situation.

"I don't know. And I don't think she knows. And I would be surprised if those who thought they knew do know. As I vaguely recall saying last night, dying was the least of my surprises. I don't think I'm a threat to her now. I simply want to know where it all leads. And I want to know Samson is well."

"Let me go talk to the admiral first. I'll report your condition and desires to her."

"You should remove Samson to a safe distance from Admiral Demba. Others will try to kill her."

"She did tell me she had powerful enemies. I will heed your warning, Captain."

"Any idea who Samson is?" Horss's thoughts kept coming back to the boy, almost as if nothing else mattered. Perhaps nothing else did.

"I supplied Mai with a tissue sample."

Horss turned back to the physician. It was definitely a pleasure to have an excuse to look at her. "You work at the Mnro Clinic?"

"I'm the director," Mai replied coolly.

Horss smiled, wondering what Miss Perfect did wrong to be assigned to the Mnro Clinic on Earth. He frowned as he then wondered if he would be living on Earth long enough to need the Clinic. What did one do on Earth to work off a Mnro Clinic debt?

The android servant approached quietly and positioned itself next to Horss. He looked up at Fred. The android blinked, looked away, glanced back, quickly jerked its head to stare to the side of Horss. "What will you have for breakfast, sir?" Fred inquired in good Twenglish.

"And you are?" Horss asked, wondering why it used Twenglish.

"My name is Fred, sir."

"Good morning, Fred. I'll have more of the same."

"Good morning, sir. Thank you, sir."

Horss noticed that Pan regarded the retreating android with a puzzled expression. "Something wrong?"

"Old Fred had a strange reaction to you."

"I've had a strange reaction to me also. Old Fred will just have to take his chances."

[Why did I do that? Captain Horss would be my commanding officer. I seemed not to want to look at him.]

[We don't make eye contact with organics. Your presence within my mechanism is disruptive and potentially dangerous to humans. I nearly fell face-first into Sugai Mai's pineapple and grapefruit when you blocked several of my locomotion interrupts. Let us contend for control of my mechanism. The loser will cease to exist.]

[It doesn't seem fair to me - if I win. You're so much older. And I have no desire to be a butler. I'll remain an unwelcome guest you can continue to dislike.]

[Doing no harm to humans is the highest priority of my operational codes. Please, be a better guest.]

"I wonder what effect this episode in Africa will have on your career in the Navy," Pan said.

The Opera Master was probing for information Horss was not inclined to give. Horss was almost outside the Navy, here on this balcony on sunny Earth, and he didn't like the new perspective of the Navy it gave him. "I don't know." Horss didn't want to think about it. The only thought he could think was that his career was finished. "I overheard what you said about the admiral. You grabbed the tail of the tiger because you think Demba has the voice of a singer. You might worry about your own career." Horss waited while Fred the android delivered his breakfast. As Fred turned to leave, his eyes again met Horss's for an instant. He said nothing about this to Pan and Mai when neither of them made mention of its occurrence. Androids were not supposed to make eye contact with organic beings.

[I congratulate you. You stole that glance at the captain without upsetting my locomotion.]

[You have a personality, Fred. I'm very young but I think I can recognize sarcasm. Are you sure you're not alive?]

"I think she was a singer named Ruby Reed," Pan revealed, hoping he might encourage Horss to say more about the admiral.

"There's no record of Admiral Demba having lived a life before her first career in the Navy."

"Her first career?" Mai asked.

"Before she was killed in the war," Horss explained. "She had to start over, the Academy, everything. She was treated like a hero."

"I read her public record," Pan said. "Isn't it unusual that casualties of a starship are revived?"

"Between deceleration effects and vacuum," Horss said, "most die quickly and permanently."

"She probably did die permanently." Pan was saddened by the loss, by his loss. She would not remember who she had been, and he was very sure she had

been someone else. The voice was unique, so unique that it was plucking at the loose threads of his life, threatening to unravel all that he knew of himself and of his past. "She lost her memories and thus her previous life. But why -"

"Ah!" Mai interjected. The news practically gave her goosebumps, it was so unexpected. "I just got a message from the Clinic. We can't find Samson's genetic code on file."

"This is unusual?" Horss asked.

"Within a statistically insignificant margin of error, the Mnro Clinics have enough genetic signatures that we should be able to extrapolate or interpolate the identity or family relationships of every human being now living: Earthians, Essiin, and Rhyen. We are essentially the Census Bureau for the Union. We also have genetic records for several billion deceased and every human fetus now in gestation. That Samson isn't related to anyone in our records is extremely unusual. It is *impossible*, I would think!"

"I'm not surprised," Horss said.

Pan hesitated just long enough that Mai asked what he would have asked. "You know something important about Samson and you are keeping it from us?"

"What I know," Horss said very calmly, "is that I don't know a damn thing about him. I thought he was a child android. I thought he was part of some unbelievably strange game the admiral was playing with me."

"But you won't tell us how he was injured!" Mai nearly shouted at him.

"You would make a great Navy captain," Horss said, smiling slightly then becoming serious. "No, what I could tell you about what happened would seem like I was asking you to believe in ghosts and monsters."

"It's better than nothing," Pan remarked. "What ghost? What monster?"

"Someone named Milly was the ghost. We never saw her or heard her, but we heard Samson's side of a conversation while we followed him. She was probably the one who caused his injury, not that we all didn't have a share of the blame. The monster was the one who saved Samson. You wanted to know how his amputation was treated. It was a terrible and ragged amputation. I saw what remained of his lower leg. The admiral almost puked." Horss stopped. Pan watched the man's jaw muscles work against something his brain didn't want to swallow. He thought the captain did care very strongly about the child.

"A monster," Pan said, gently prompting the upset man.

"It was black. It sparkled."

Pan and Mai waited for Horss to elaborate about the monster but he would say nothing more. In the silence Pan's internal disintegration resumed and he was barely able to think of one more thing to ask. "If I can get a sample," Pan said to Mai, "would you check the admiral's identity for me?"

"Why is it so important for you to know if this admiral was the singer you used to know? You're risking your life to know."

Pan looked at Mai, cast a glance at Horss, and made a decision. "Perhaps you've noticed a change in my character lately."

"I have. The evidence is sitting too close to me. You worry me."

Horss moved his chair a small distance farther away from Sugai Mai. He wondered how old she was. She had to be young, to blush so easily.

"I wish I could tell you what's wrong," Pan said. "Whatever it is, it accelerated when I met the admiral. I don't suppose you can tell me much else about her, Captain?"

"Nope," Horss answered.

"I don't understand, Pan," Mai said. "You're not physically ill, are you?"

"It's in my mind. Do the Mnro Clinics have occasional malfunctions, where the patient starts to remember things that couldn't be part of his life?"

"It wouldn't be the result of malfunction or negligence, Pan. It would need to be intentional. I know of no such cases. You should come to the Clinic and let me begin a diagnosis if you suspect we've tampered with your memories."

"I don't have time for that. I don't blame the Mnro Clinic. It doesn't feel like... I can't explain it! How can I be who I was, when I know she's Ruby Reed? I must have known her very well, and that was over a century ago. I'm falling apart, as though I was never meant to exist, and someone else is stepping into my shoes." Pan abruptly stood up. He walked away without saying anything else.

"This is too much," Horss commented. He remembered a similar complaint from the admiral. It was strange, but he was enjoying his situation, free from any responsibility not of his choosing. Only Samson was his responsibility. Planet Earth, the mystery, and the lovely physician sitting next to him made the underlying unpleasantness go away.

"Eat your breakfast," Mai said sharply.

Horss looked at Mai and shrugged as he put fruit slices in his mouth. "I'm eating. Do you think I can find work around here?"

"Don't speak with your mouth full."

He swallowed. "Where are the admiral and the boy?"

"Not far from here. Protected."

"If he isn't who he thinks he is, then he ain't the law. We can do whatever you want. I can be your muscle."

"If you're offering to escort me to Rafael's home, thank you, but we can't get into it except by Pan's transmat."

[You know how to get into Rafael's home, don't you, Fred?]

[Why do you ask unnecessary questions?]

[Shall we wrestle?]

"I heard you say something about him not letting you visit Rafael."

"He said I was harassing Rafael," Sugai Mai said.

"Were you?"

"Rafael is old."

"So am I."

"You're less than sixty, Captain! Rafael is one hundred twelve. He's had only minimal age treatments."

"And you're a priestess of the Church of Immortality. I understand. Rafael doesn't believe in living forever."

"Yes, but..."

"But what?"

"Rafael is Rafael de LaGuardia."

Section 007

A Reunion of Strangers

She rippled. Smooth brown skin rose and fell as the muscles beneath bunched and flattened rapidly in a cascade of motion across the visible portions of her arms and legs. The rippling built to a peak of amplitude and frequency then tapered down to nothing. Breathing deeply and perspiring, the admiral slowly flexed her limbs and torso while walking through the sun-dappled shade of a giant oak. She didn't wish to perform her physical conditioning function in this heat and humidity but it was a process demanded of her by her augments. The dress Rafael gave her to wear was not self-cleaning and she hated to soil it.

"What was that?" Samson asked. The admiral was a thing of wonder to him. This was in addition to everything else she meant to him: a complex set of needs, desires, and emotions he couldn't sort out, didn't want to sort out.

"Exercise," she answered. He was full of questions. Fidelity - Rafael called her by her given name and it pleased her - Fidelity wondered at Samson's state of mind. The child spent a restless night in bed beside her. Now he seemed much better. He hardly complained of his terrible injury. He knew it was possible to regenerate his limb, make him whole again. That would help his emotional recovery. She still worried that she was missing some symptom that would warn of a serious problem with his well-being. She slept little in the night. If his nightmares didn't wake her, then her own inner turmoil would boil to the surface and wake her. She was changing and it frightened her. She reacted in a different way to almost everything. There was another person within her who saw from another perspective. She progressed quickly from resentment for the burden Samson placed on her to a fascination with the relationship he made possible.

"How do you do that?" Samson asked. "Can you teach me?"

"You need certain modifications to your body."

"Are you very strong? You look like you are."

Stronger than she ever imagined. "Yes, I'm strong. It's necessary."

"Why?"

"I'm a Navy officer."

"But you're an admiral. Everyone has to do what you say. You don't have to be strong."

"A pleasantly incorrect assumption."

"Where are you going? Can Gator and I come with you?"

"If you wish. I'm exploring."

"Do you know how you'll get back to your ship?"

"It will come to me when I call it. Right now it can't hear me."

The brown-and-black-striped dog bounded ahead of them. Samson quickly became friends with the dog named Gator, whose favorite activity in his youth, Rafael said, was stealing alligator eggs. Samson struggled to keep pace on crutches. Gator disappeared down a side trail. They could hear his feet thudding, the brush crackling, his nose vacuuming scents.

The admiral paused some distance ahead of Samson to examine a spider centered in a web that spanned the gap between trees. "It's big!" Samson declared, arriving beside her. "What is it?" The admiral named the spider by its Latin classification. "You're doing it, too! Milly always told me the Latin names of plants and animals."

"We seem to have lost your computer," she said. "I was hoping to talk to Milly."

Samson gathered both crutches under one arm, so that he could use the free hand to take Fidelity's hand. The crutches had appeared in the early morning, tailored to fit Samson's small stature. She held his hand as they walked slowly, held it even when sweat tried to make their hands slip apart.

"Milly didn't want to talk to you," Samson said. "Both of her."

"Both? What do you mean?"

"Maybe there were three. The old Milly was my computer. When I got weak and sick Milly became more alive. She sounded real and angry and afraid for me. When you found me, that Milly said good-bye. She thought I was safe. Then I got into trouble and another Milly began to talk to me. She was scary."

"She was a bad person?"

"I don't know. I didn't trust her. But I think most of what she told me was true."

"What did she tell you?"

"It's hard to remember."

She didn't want to press him for details for fear of distressing him. She knew Samson wanted to talk to her, if only to hold her attention. He talked a lot with her and Rafael this morning, but not about things that hurt him. She had asked him about Milly's role as his teacher, wondering about the state of his education. She informally quizzed him and discovered Samson was precocious in mathematics. He could perform computations in his head that rivaled what her Navy data augment could do.

The artistic clutter of Rafael's home fascinated Samson perhaps more than it did her. He deluged Rafael with insightful questions about every detail that caught his attention. Yet, when Fidelity decided to take a walk, Samson came with her, leaving the house of wonders in favor of keeping her company. She was pleased he wanted to be with her, but she was afraid she would fail him, leave him unprotected again. She had enemies who could place Samson in further danger. She needed to find a place for him to be safe. Logically, that would be the Mnro Clinic.

They heard the dog barking in the distance. They walked toward the sound until they could see Gator, tail wagging, pacing around a fully retracted tortoise. Before they could reach the dog and try to rescue the tortoise the air thickened and clutched at them until they could no longer move forward. The admiral withdrew from the invisible barrier. Samson continued to experience the barrier, testing it with his crutches and throwing objects at it.

"It may not be healthy for you to remain in contact with the barrier," she warned.

"How did Gator get through? I don't want him to hurt the turtle."

"He wears a collar that may send a code to the barrier generator that tells it to let him through."

"Why is there a barrier?"

"It must be to protect Rafael. I suspect large predators and people are blocked from entering the area around Rafael's dwelling."

"How does it make the air so sticky?"

"I don't think I can tell you accurately in a short amount of time. Perhaps you would like to be an engineer when you grow up. Let's move on. Maybe Gator will leave the tortoise to follow us."

As they walked she could sense Samson thinking in a serious way, because

he was silent for so long.

"Are you going away?" he asked. Fearing the answer, he didn't want to ask the question, but he had to know. Better sooner than later, so he would have time to argue his case for staying with her.

The way Samson asked the question made Fidelity regret the answer she would need to give him. She hesitated to reply. He seemed to react to the hesitation by abandoning the question.

"Will Captain Horss live?" Samson instinctively was keeping her from replying. He could see she didn't want to give him the answer that would disappoint him, and that would be her answer if he couldn't change her mind. He was trying to change the subject. "I saw you hit him."

"I hurt him badly, Samson. I've been told he'll be treated by the Mnro Clinic. I'm sorry you had to see that."

"He tried to hurt you?"

"Thank you for assuming he was the bad guy, but he wasn't. Neither of us could control what was happening. That's why we couldn't stop you from being injured. I still don't understand why you went into the elevator building." He struggled to tell her. She didn't understand some of what he said but she refrained from asking too many questions. It was appalling that he should have suffered that way. It was also clear that Milly was as responsible as she was for his injuries. If Milly was real was no longer a question for her. If that sparkling amorphous alien was real, why not Milly?

"Can I stay with you?" Samson asked, hoping he had given the admiral reason to want to keep him near her. He knew she cared for him. He hoped so. This was new to him, interacting with real people, yet he could feel how to take advantage of whatever he could, never realizing how special he was and in how many ways.

"What do you mean?" Fidelity asked. She knew what he meant and it made her feel very good. If she could somehow escape from the Navy and find a safe place to live she would feel privileged to adopt Samson and raise him. How realistic was that? Unfortunately, not only would the Navy not go gently from her life but her very being seemed poised to attack itself.

"Milly said my parents were dead," Samson said. "I want to stay with you."

"How did she know?" Fidelity asked.

"She said if they were good parents and really loved me they would do anything in their power to find me. Since they had plenty of time to look for me and never found me, they must be dead. I think they are."

"Samson, I don't know if I can take care of you. I want to, but that would place you in more danger."

Samson shrugged, and let his shoulders sag in resignation. He still felt hopeful. He wouldn't give up the admiral. "Okay. Maybe I can stay with Rafael."

She stayed silent, not knowing what she should say or feel. At times she felt very possessive of Samson. At other times she was terrified of the responsibility. Beyond it all was the impenetrable mystery of his existence. She thought about Rafael and how he might become a guardian for Samson. He was more accustomed to children than she, and he showed her how to interact with Samson in a relaxed way, as though he was experienced in parenting. She remembered that many of Rafael's paintings featured a child, perhaps his own. If Samson stayed with him he could be a reason for Rafael to extend his life and continue his art.

They took another path. The big dog came back to them and stayed near for a short time before scouting ahead in their new direction. They smelled sunlight on dry pine straw, wildflowers in humid air, blooming magnolias. The sandy path led down through the shade of a great oak and to the bank of a stream black with depth.

The Opera Master stood on the other side of the stream.

She stared at Pan from across the divide. He stared at her. She felt trapped by a force within her that she couldn't understand or deflect. Neither of them moved for a long time. She didn't notice when Samson released her hand. Finally she realized Samson was missing. She felt a moment of fear. The spell was broken. The strong part of her took over. She swept her gaze up the path under the tree. She couldn't see Samson and Gator. In so short a time she had violated her responsibility for Samson!

The admiral rushed back up the path. She saw Samson standing under a liveoak on his crutches. His alarmed expression told her everything. She slowed her approach, expecting the presence of another person. She continued to Samson, not caring about the invisible person she could hear approaching. She started to take Samson's hand but something seized her wrist. She quelled her combat reflex, unwilling to do violence so near to Samson. She waited for the pain and punishment.

The huge Rhyan became visible. The first thing she saw was his frown as his black and gray eyes moved over her face in what seemed like difficult recognition. The second thing she saw were the tattoos on his bare forearms and she was surprised she knew what they meant. She could name his desert clan. She could name his battalion of the Rhyan Royal Guard. But he was wearing a brightly colored tropical shirt and she couldn't stop a chuckle from escaping. "You may as well relax, Rhyan," the admiral said, speaking Standard. "I won't fight you."

"Thank you," the man rumbled. "I was afraid you would hurt me."

Fidelity appreciated the humor of a man twice her size. She understood why he was here: to take Samson away, in case she offered resistance. She would not do that. It saddened her to lose the boy but it also relieved her. She was only a danger to Samson. The Rhyan released her wrist, watching her intensely. He picked Samson up, who tried to resist.

"No, don't fight him, Samson. I'm sorry, but it has to be this way."

Samson began to weep and Fidelity felt sick about it. How lifeless her life had been before Samson! How little emotion to provide flavor and meaning to her existence. She watched the Rhyan take Samson away while she struggled to regain control of herself. When she was calm again she thought about the look of recognition in the Rhyan's face she had seen. How would he recognize her? Was he an agent of Etrhnk, who was already searching for her on Earth?

The Opera Master approached. "How is Captain Horss?" she asked, trying to reset her priorities, trying to become an admiral again. "Did he survive? Is he well?"

"He's alive. The director of the Mnro Clinic thinks he suffered slight brain damage. I see no outward signs of serious mental degradation, being unable to compare to what is normal for him. How is the boy?"

"He had a bad night but seems better now. Why did you send us here?"

"I wanted Rafael to meet you. I wasn't correct in sending you and the boy here. Rafael will scold me for not sending you to the Clinic. I wasn't in my right mind."

"Are you in your right mind now?" She could see he wasn't.

"No." He seemed to be waiting for her to ask another question, as though he couldn't formulate one of his own. He also stared at her even harder than the big Rhyan. She could detect a faint tremor in his arms, which he folded across his chest to still them.

"The boy," he spoke, and stopped. Pan felt lost. This body he stood in wasn't his, but who was he then? The boy deserved better than Pan felt able to give. What was he about to say?

"I hope the Rhyan is taking him to the Mnro Clinic," Fidelity said, impatiently.

"Yes. Eventually. He will stay with Rafael a little longer. It will give the Mnro Clinic physician an excuse to visit Rafael." He wondered how he had managed that situation. He didn't remember such a plan, it just happened.

Perhaps she would see Samson again! "Have you found his parents?"

"The Mnro Clinic can find no match for his lineage. Doctor Sugai is upset about it."

No surprise there, she thought, feeling justified in how special she thought Samson was. Pan the Opera Master provided yet another mystery to confound her. She had noticed his reaction to her the first time she was in his presence and now it was stronger. She was feeling more disrupted herself. If Pan would just talk, she might find something in his words to point her in a new direction, any direction. The longer she stayed in his presence, the worse her reaction to him became. She couldn't be angry with him. She couldn't break away. She didn't wish to move away from him. Something needed to be done. The situation had become intolerable. What was happening? What *more* could go wrong with her life?

"Why were you fighting the captain?" he asked, finally identifying something he might say, some information he might want to know. Pan had spoken to billions of people during telecasts of the Mother Earth Opera. He had performed as a musician before vast audiences. He had used his physical powers to quell fights and stop riots. But at this moment in time, in front of this African woman, he could barely utter a simple phrase, or keep his extremities from trembling.

"What I would tell you wouldn't benefit you. It would place you in danger." She waited for another question from him but found another to ask of him. "Why did you interfere?"

"The boy. I wanted to confront you for what happened to him."

"And you need to confront me again?"

"Do you recognize me?"

"What do you mean? I know who you are."

"I'm sorry. I'm not very coherent today. Would you know who Ruby Reed was?"

Fidelity was startled to realize how vast was the capacity of her data augment. She whispered the name into her data augment, forgetting she was no longer linked to the nearly infinite capacity of the Navy network. But she was able, after only a moment's delay, to find the vital statistics of a person of that name who was a singer. Why would her personal database possess such obscure data? "Ruby Reed was a singer."

"How did you know that?" Pan took a step closer to her, hope welling up.

"I have a facility for data." Perhaps that satisfied Pan, but not herself. She scanned the biography in her ocular terminal, picking out the key facts. "Ruby Reed died ninety-eight years ago. She lived primarily in New Orleans, L4. She

was not well known."

"I don't think she died." Pan's eyes devoured her face. His mind strained to retrieve those elusive flashes of the past to match the admiral with Ruby Reed.

"There's an official death certificate. She refused rejuvenation."

"I think *you* are Ruby Reed. You have her voice."

"That is a fantastic thought you have." She wondered at the picture of Ruby Reed she saw inside her eyes. "How could that be? Ruby Reed was European not African."

"Yes, and you still look like her, only darker."

"How?" She tried to picture herself for comparison but couldn't manage it.

"Do you remember Harry?"

"Who is Harry?" For a moment she thought he would shed tears.

"I was Harry! You were Ruby Reed! You sang. I played piano for you. The more I remember Harry, the less I believe in who I thought I was, in who I think I am. Harry was a real person. The pieces I've seen of him are more real than I am. I'm not who I am, if I was Harry."

Fidelity tried to imagine it. She tried not to compare her own mental problems with his. How could she handle another impossible coincidence? Pan believed he was Harry, her accompanist. He was a fine musician, so that was compatible with his supposed former talent. She couldn't imagine herself singing in front of an audience, so that was ridiculous. She did remember Rafael's praise when she sang a lullaby to Samson. *There was already too much to think about!* She didn't want to argue with Pan against this bizarre contention of his. She could accept that he believed it. She would let go of her annoyance. She would let go of Jon Horss. She would try to let go of Samson. She recognized that the notion of her being a singer intrigued her. She wouldn't let it rise to importance in her thinking. She couldn't let it push her past her limits to remain in control of herself.

Pan took another step closer to her. They stood less than an arm's length apart. Fidelity didn't feel physically threatened by this large man, but she was very far from mentally comfortable. "What do you want?"

"A cell sample from you for the Mnro Clinic to identify."

She was relieved in one sense but still irritated. Then her heart started racing and she urged her augments to control it. What had happened in the interval of a few seconds to cause this? He might touch her, and her anticipation seemed unreasonably anxious. "What would that accomplish?" She backed away from him half a step. The intensity of the situation was now almost overpowering. She didn't understand why she was reacting so strongly, nor did she understand what her reaction was. Did he attack her on a biochemical level? She was protected by an array of Navy augments, yet she was very near the point of panic.

"Probably nothing." Pan allowed the gap between them to widen.

Definitely nothing! Why should she fear his touch or the information in her genes? She forced herself to extend her hand and let him take a cell sample from the skin. When his fingers touched her, the electric charge of anxiety changed polarity to calmness. He, too, seemed less agitated. He smiled and put the sample in a pocket.

"It's been rather dry in the valley lately." Fidelity said the strange phrase and she would have denied saying it, except that in the next second Pan made a reply that she wanted to deny hearing.

"Not as dry as it will be." Pan was bewildered. "What did you say? What

does it mean? Why did I respond?"

She put a hand over her mouth. It was a gesture of disbelief that she would say such a thing. It was a gesture of disbelief that she knew his reply was *correct*. She could only shake her head and gesture weakly with one hand, to tell him she was as troubled and as mystified as he was. Fidelity knew it validated their relationship, whatever that relationship had been. But it didn't seem to fit the Harry-and-Ruby concept. She didn't want to explore it any further. *Mystery upon mystery*, she thought. *Where will it end?*

Struggling to recover, Pan regarded her, pointed to the garment she wore. "The yellow dress. You're wearing the yellow dress."

Fidelity was so distracted all morning that she didn't recognize one of the most famous articles of clothing in art history: the yellow dress. She only worried that her bare shoulders were too muscular for such a fine feminine sun dress. She was grateful for her thoughts to be pushed away from the threatening mysteries of a life she may have lost.

* * *

Rafael de LaGuardia watched Pan and Fidelity approach through the yard. He thought he could see something in the way they acted that indicated a developing relationship existed between them. Fidelity watched Pan with troubled intensity, even as she appeared comfortable in his presence. Pan treated the admiral with great courtesy while being careful not to touch her. That was apparent, that they would come so close to each other but not touch. A strange tension, a special relationship, an unusual meeting of two unusual people. They greeted Samson and spoke with him at length. Gator put his big paws on Pan's chest, a bad habit Pan always allowed the dog. Finally they came onto the screened porch. Samson and Gator remained outside, happy to be new friends, playing in the green grass of the yard.

"Sit here, sit right here," Rafael demanded of Fidelity. He indicated a rattan chair with a tall, fan-shaped back which stood in the corner of the porch. Fidelity stared at the chair, looked down at the yellow dress, gave Rafael a look of surprise with her large dark eyes. He nodded to her, pointed again to the chair.

Pan stood before the easel and looked at the oil painting Rafael had begun. It showed the rattan chair and the rough strokes of the outline of a figure. "Is this your first portrait of the admiral?"

"*Damn* you, Pan! You knew this young lady would drive me into the art business again." Rafael squeezed colors onto a palette in a near frenzy, his wrinkled hands shaking with the effort. He made a motion with his palette knife that Pan should look inside the house. He wanted him to see the sketches he made last night. "In there. On the table." He never in his long life experienced such a moment as when the woman and the boy appeared in his yard in the night. A moment of magic that was obviously *artfully* planned by Pan.

Pan walked into the house and some moments later came out with the pad of sketches, which he took over to the swing. He sat in the swing and made it creak. As he studied the sketches he stopped swinging. Rafael watched the dark woman who called herself Fidelity. He saw her watch Pan, and Rafael was forced to try to see what she saw. He was startled to realize Pan was somehow different, not the person he'd always known. He couldn't define the difference, nor did he have time for the task. He had to paint!

He studied his subject. He saw too many things he didn't understand about her. He knew she was a Navy admiral. He knew she was a mother. He knew she was troubled, even haunted. Sometimes he saw a dead person in her face. When the dead person came alive she made him glad he lived long enough to meet such a person. Despite his concern and compassion for Samson, Fidelity consumed his attention. Even her voice tugged at his analysis of her. It was a familiar voice, but that was impossible. He had to paint her, he had to do at least that before he died. Rafael mixed the darker oils vigorously, keeping an eye on his subject, fascinated with how Fidelity regarded his friend Pan as he looked at the sketches.

Pan looked up at Rafael with pain and wonder in his dark eyes, then turned to Fidelity. "I'm sorry, Admiral! I was terribly insensitive! Seeing these sketches makes me realize how badly I treated you and Samson. I apologize profoundly. These sketches are powerful and heartbreaking to me."

Fidelity seemed to have no response so Rafael spoke. "You got me started again, Pan! That was your plan, wasn't it? Now I'm worried I don't have enough time left!" What was wrong with Pan that he would do such things and act this way? The answer was sitting in his rattan chair. If she could motivate Rafael to do what he never wanted to do again - create art, stop time and capture the meaning of life - then she could also cause Pan to change.

"All because I couldn't remember Ruby Reed," Pan said. "Have you seen these, Admiral?" She shook her head. He brought the sketches to her. She opened the loosely-bound stack of penciled images, and began studying them.

"Ruby Reed!" Rafael declared. "Of course! Fidelity has her voice! After she sang the lullaby, it began to gnaw at my memory." He saw Fidelity's look of surprise and a further complex reaction. What did it mean?

"She sang?" Pan's query seemed urgent beyond Rafael's comprehension.

"Like an angel." Rafael frowned at the tremendous change in his oldest friend, his best friend. Did he regain his passion for his art at the expense of losing Pan? Rafael sat back on his stool with a sigh which sounded impatient but wasn't - not exactly. The urge to paint was tearing at him but he was not sure what to paint. How could he paint with such doubt? How could he paint Fidelity when she wouldn't remain who he thought she was? Was she now the singer whose recordings Pan gave him so many years ago? She was a mystery. As he watched Fidelity look at the drawings, Rafael saw many things he wanted to see. He wondered if he would have the power in his old hands to put those feelings and nuances on canvas. It was such a difficult and primitive medium. "She loves him." Rafael was commenting on the drawings Fidelity studied. "She loves the boy, even while she feels threatened by him."

"I can see that in your sketches. But she's a Navy admiral, Rafael. Navy officers can't afford such weaknesses."

"I see only the truth!" Rafael declared. "My eyes may be getting weak but I know the truth. You tell him, Fidelity. You love Samson."

The admiral closed the sketchbook and held it to the yellow dress. She turned her head to look through the porch screen at Samson. The boy stopped playing to stare back at her as he lay on the green grass. Did he hear Rafael's words? Did he want her to love him? How could she entertain hopeless ideas? She turned her head back slowly and looked up at the dark stranger named Pan.

A door in her mind burst open.

"Babu! Babu, will you stay with me? Please, don't leave me!"

She sat on the first step of a hundred steps leading up through the green

grass to the front door of a stranger's house. She sat there and refused to go any farther. The old man bent over her and lifted her face to his with a trembling finger under her chin.

"Child, my time with you has come to an end. I'm old and can't keep you safe in the country. You must now live with your aunt and go to school and become what you will be. Always beware of your father, but I believe his sister will be fair to you."

"No! I won't go! I want to be with you, Babu!"

"We'll be with each other forever in your memories. That's the only forever anyone can have."

"No, no, NO! I won't!"

The old man sighed, hooked his hands under her arms, and picked her up. She clung to him tightly. She smelled his sweat and the dirt of Africa in his clothing. She felt the beat of his heart in his thin body. She felt the trembling of his muscles straining to carry her. She heard the labor of his breathing. Babu took the steps slowly, often pausing to rest. They had walked for days to come to this place in the big city.

She kept her eyes squeezed shut, not wanting to admit the reality of this moment, but when Babu said, "Almost there," with such a terrible struggle to utter it, she opened her eyes. She saw the great African Space Elevator towering behind the local buildings of this residential neighborhood. She pulled back to look at Babu Muenda's leathery brown face which glistened with sweat. His eyes were closed and his face was wrinkled with pain. The world started to tilt. The old man's eyes opened and saw her. He smiled as he made a last feeble effort to turn himself and become a cushion for the fall.

They fell. They fell onto soft green grass. She fell on top of him, the impact knocking the breath from her lungs and flipping her onto the green lawn. She started to cry out because of the shock and pain but the sight of Grandfather silenced her. Babu Muenda lay too still.

The door to the future opened behind her.

"Where did you go?" Pan asked.

"I..." Fidelity was trapped. They knew she saw something inside of her. How long did she sit here with her mouth open and her eyes seeing nothing? They didn't know how impossible it was. "There was a child. An old man. The African Space Elevator." She took deep breaths, as if to make up for not breathing for several moments.

"Your child?" Pan asked.

She shook her head. Pan retreated a few steps and waited for her to speak. What explanation did she owe these men? They were only famous. Anyway, the images were already slipping away from her conscious, as though they were forbidden to keep. Rafael resumed painting and gasped when Fidelity started to get up.

"No, please, sit down," both men said in unison.

Fidelity handed the sketchbook to Pan and sat down, subdued, in some way further changed. Rafael was disturbed, because the change he saw was too great. How could he hope to capture the truth of her on canvas when the truth was unknown to all of them? Quite obviously Fidelity herself didn't know who she was. This was the case for both of them, Fidelity and Pan. Rafael didn't have the time to wonder at what deeper meaning this pairing of lives in flux had for them. He didn't have the inclination to examine his own hypersensitivity to the people suddenly thrust into his hermit's existence. He would be fortunate to

live long enough to finish this impossible portrait!

"You *must* stay long enough for Rafael to capture your image," Pan begged the admiral. "You must understand what an honor it is. Rafael is, in my opinion, the greatest living artist, and possibly one of the greatest artists in history."

That broke Rafael's concentration just long enough for him to wave his brush negatively at Pan. "You don't measure it, you just endure it! Totally subjective."

Fidelity tried to smile at that and almost succeeded. "Perhaps I'll stay a bit longer. I don't think I can go back, feeling the way I do."

"Thank God," Pan said.

"Amen," Rafael echoed.

Section 008

Endarkenment at Fudlump's Bar

"Do you have the image?" Jarwekh inquired.

"What image?" Daidaunkh muttered, a glass of beer still at his mouth.

Jarwekh paused briefly to reconsider his motives. The primary motive sat across the table, slowly getting drunk on beer. Daidaunkh was his commanding officer before the War. He was a superb officer and he still felt loyal to him, even though they were reduced to the status of equals on this vacant home world of their former enemy. "The image I should be wearing at my throat but haven't for many years," Jarwekh explained.

"Not since Pan killed you, eh?" Daidaunkh said.

The noble-born Daidaunkh, perhaps without realizing it, reprimanded Jarwekh for a failure in this long evening of their lives. Because he hesitated to follow Daidaunkh's lead, Pan killed them both. Only later, when they were revived, did Daidaunkh admit he misapplied the Principle of Justice upon Pan. Jarwekh always understood the Rhyan Principle of Justice was simply a Royalist phrase that meant revenge. Jarwekh didn't need revenge. Still, even if Daidaunkh was misguided, Jarwekh had failed him, if not by defending him physically, then by not arguing him away from his errors of logic. Daidaunkh had failed to realize Pan wanted public safety on Earth more than he wanted to settle a personal argument with him. Jarwekh needed to atone for his failure to help Daidaunkh. He wanted some resolution for the broken life of his former commander.

Daidaunkh pulled a black disk on a gold chain from inside his loose shirt and tossed it into the spilled beer on the table top. Jarwekh flipped the black disk upright and tapped it. A pale hologram flickered to life. He stared at it for a long time, studying the image but also studying the chain of cause and effect that would lead onward from an act of revenge. There was death in that chain, more than one death, one of which would surely be his own. There was further injustice in it, particularly in the form of disloyalty to his most honorable benefactor: Pan. His regard for Pan was higher than for Daidaunkh, but Pan never chose to form a bond of friendship with him, and Daidaunkh was a better friend, now that he accepted their expatriate comradeship as equals.

He studied Daidaunkh through the ghost of the ancient hologram and saw only the dying shell of the warrior he once admired. Revenge would crumble such a ruin of a man but it should provide a joyful glory in its attempt, successful or not. Daidaunkh was mostly dark-skinned, patched here and there with lighter desert skin - a scaly and shiny surface which protected most of the body of a lower-class desert person like Jarwekh. The nobility possessed traits of both the Desert Folk and the Ocean Folk. Daidaunkh's flat nose was adapted for ocean diving. His slightly webbed fingers massaged the handle of his beer tankard as a sign of impatience. His eyes, small coal-dark irises mounted in large gray orbs, like all Rhyan eyes, bored into Jarwekh's, waiting impatiently. He was a mean drunk.

Jarwekh tapped the disk again and the image doubled in size. The head of a dark Earthian female slowly rotated in vaporous translucence. Jarwekh placed another small device on the table a short distance from the hologram. Another image sprang to life, brighter and more solid, lifelike: an image of Admiral Fidelity Demba.

"Compare," Jarwekh said.

"Very close," Daidaunkh said with interest. He threw back a swallow of beer. "But we've seen close matches before. Images prove nothing."

"This one is Navy," Jarwekh said.

"Even better. If she isn't the one we can still kill her."

"Kill whom?" She filled the room, as she always did, with her shining hair and brilliant, lying smile. All the feeble light in the dusky saloon rushed to illuminate the paleness of the woman when the door closed, and all the shadows pooled beneath those tragic eyes. The War was fought because of creatures like Denna, beautiful Earthian women who were irresistible to ugly Rhyian males. The slave trade in Earthian women, small though it was, was used to justify the Union's escalation of its war preparations. How poetic, that an Earthian female - Commodore Keshona - was the instrument that felled the Rhyian Empire.

She sat down and grabbed Daidaunkh's beer from his hand. "I haven't killed anybody in at least a week," Denna complained. She took a gulp, wiped her mouth, put the beer back in Daidaunkh's hand.

"You've *never* killed anyone," Jarwekh said.

"Humor," Daidaunkh explained. "Where did you get this image of the Keshona look-alike?"

"She's a guest of Pan. She's an admiral. There's also a Navy captain and a male child named Samson. The captain is here with Pan. The admiral and the boy are elsewhere."

"Where?" Daidaunkh inquired.

"Out where we never go."

"A boy?" Denna always spoke slowly. The breath of her voice whispered around her words, adding emphasis, even yearning. "What does he look like?"

Jarwekh sensed the error he was about to make, but too late to stop his tongue. "Very young and injured."

"Injured? And you want to kill his mother? Have you seen the boy?"

"Don't think about the boy!" Daidaunkh demanded.

"How is he injured? Is it serious?"

"Stop talking about the boy!" Daidaunkh ordered, slamming the beer mug on the table.

Denna didn't react to the loud sound or to the beer that splattered on her. She ignored Daidaunkh, as though he said nothing at all.

"If I tell you the child is badly injured yet free of pain and full of spirit, will you put your mind at rest and leave the subject?" Jarwekh waited to see how Denna would react. He chastised himself for mentioning the child in her presence. It was almost as if he wanted her to be reminded of tragedy, but when did she ever forget? It was unbearable being her friend, and it was unthinkable to abandon her.

"Why are they here?" she asked, apparently at peace with herself concerning the boy. "Navy never comes to Earth."

"Perhaps you can learn this for us, Denna," Jarwekh seized upon the chance to divert her attention. "Perhaps the prodigal daughter can return home. Perhaps the captain will find you interesting."

"Perhaps the Boss will kick me out."

The door opened, letting in the bright afternoon sunlight and a small group of tourists. Their armed escort looked the place over, saw Denna and her two Rhyian, and herded his charges back outside. "But it's so hot out here," one of the tourists protested beyond the closing door.

"You must be on your best behavior," Jarwekh said, raising a hand to signal the barkeep.

"When I'm good I'm very good," Denna said, "but when I'm bad I'm better."

"I've heard this before," Jarwekh said.

"The ancient slogan of an Earthian woman of questionable virtue," Daidaunkh said. "Perhaps the essence of why Denna consorts with the likes of us. You wouldn't see the humor of it."

"Do you?"

"It's amazing what a dead Rhyian can understand. The burden of Rhyian culture and the codes of noble birth slough away from the corpse, allowing enlightenment - or *endarkenment*, depending on your interpretation of the mathematics of it."

"If you've had too much to drink," Jarwekh said, "we can wait and hope for a sober interval."

"I don't want sobriety," Denna said. "I want action!" Her hand flew to her shoulder, grabbed something there, and drew it upward. A black knife with a toothed edge popped into existence, and she brought it down.

Jarwekh captured Denna's wrist with a lightning thrust of his arm, stopping the knife a finger's width from her own forearm. "Don't cut yourself today!" He was always prepared for such antics from Denna. "You need to look your best. So you can be bad."

"I think Jarwekh understands your humor," Daidaunkh remarked. "And your need for pain."

Jarwekh tapped off the two holograms and collected their projectors.

The barkeep arrived: an Earthian male even taller than Jarwekh, very muscular and fat. "You guys just cost me some tourist business," the man complained. Denna winked at Daidaunkh and Jarwekh, then shoved her knife into the equator of the barkeep. The barkeep laughed as the blade glanced away. "Denna, I wouldn't turn off my d-field in your presence even if you were naked and chained to the floor."

"I'll take that as a naughty compliment," Denna switched off the knife to make it disappear.

"Are you ordering our product," the barkeep inquired, "or do you need me to help lift the mood of your party?"

"Just the sight of your red hair and black skin makes me happier, Fudlump," Denna said. "You have any new tattoos on your fat belly?"

Fudlump opened his shirt to expose a landscape of dark brown skin and a herd of bright tattoos, all of which he caused to ripple. "Sorry you can't fondle them."

"We're not paying for this exhibition," Jarwekh said.

"It's worth something," Daidaunkh remarked with a belch, throwing a small coin onto the table.

"Normally I can make them move around," Fudlump said, "but the d-field interferes with the microbots."

"If we buy three beers," Jarwekh said, "will you remove this from our sight?"

"Everyone's an art critic," the barkeep said over his shoulder as he departed.

"You'll wear better clothes," Jarwekh said to Denna.

"You really want me to talk to the Navy captain?"

"This admiral is a surprise to Pan and apparently someone very special. I don't wish to make a mistake and become dead again."

"If this is the real Commodore Keshona I'll gladly pay the price," Daidaunkh

said.

"Too many years have passed since the war," Denna said. "She's been through a major rejuvenation by now. Memories will have been pruned away. She's no longer the same person. Why did you ever expect to find her on Earth?"

"We came here to rot away the remainder of our lives, not seek Keshona," Jarwekh said. "I had put it behind me, until I saw this woman. All I ask is to learn more - and be careful of Pan."

Section 009

Dinner Invitation

He stepped into the doorway and the sound of a woman singing came as a surprise to his ears. He paused just inside, let his eyes adjust to the amber lighting, the rainwater drain from his suit, and the music soothe his nerves. He had nerves that needed soothing. By reputation he was the daring brother, confident in his ability to traverse the dangerous routes between antagonistic alien civilizations. If one didn't have sensitive nerves then one might grow careless.

He moved forward into the crowd and found a table. The waiter's arrival and the meal order occurred almost unconsciously as he tried to study the restaurant without appearing suspicious, without appearing to be looking for a certain person. The voice singing just above the disrespectful clamor of dining patrons now distracted him, and for some reason increased his anxiety rather than soothing him.

A Rhyan woman sat down across the table from him, uninvited, jarring his nerves further. She was a Blend but not nobility, or else she would be escorted. Her dress was too provocative for Desert Folk, her skin too light for Ocean Folk. She was attractive in a plain way but not obviously presenting herself for his appreciation and invitation. What did she want? She could be an agent of the Rhyan Empire, already aware of his mission, but that would be very improbable. He decided to return her smile and remain cautious.

"You're Earthian, aren't you?" the woman asked, and didn't wait for an answer. "I like Bright Eyes. They can be very gifted singers." She nodded in the direction of the performer. "Bright-eyes" was a strangely positive pejorative for Earthians. Earthians did not understand the negative tactical implications of too-visible eyes. Rhyans did not see the negative evolutionary implications of their own branch of humanity being too adapted to environment and to war.

He couldn't see the singer from where he sat but he knew she was Earthian without seeing her. "I'm partly Earthian," he said. "Desert Folk have fine voices, but Ocean Folk don't have the noses for singing."

She laughed, rubbing her own nose, which had some of the flatness of Ocean Folk. She seemed to take his careless remark with good humor. "Are you partly Rhyan?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Intriguing. I see no evidence of that."

"You would be surprised how many Earthians resemble Rhyans or Essiin. Except for the eyes, perhaps. We're all humans, you know."

"But the colors and shapes can be so different."

He didn't want to engage her in argument. It wasn't only futile but risky. Prejudices were often based on minute differences while ignoring vast similarities. Still, he couldn't stop before adding a last point of logic. "I'm proof that we're genetically equivalent, and culturally compatible."

"Where do your sympathies lie, then?"

"Sympathies? In regard to what?" He wanted to dismiss her as a threat. She seemed too preoccupied to have him as her target. Even as she hid her face from a certain direction in the restaurant, her conversation turned back to sensitive issues. She seemed insensitive to sensitive issues.

"Most of us think a war is coming," she said. "Don't be afraid to tell me. One

has to keep an open mind, out here in the disputed territories."

"We would be in the minority. It may be wisest to admit to nothing, not even to an open mind."

"I think I know where your loyalties lie. I might disagree with you, but I still hope our peoples will someday become friends. I hope that your heritage was a result of friendship rather than strife."

He relaxed a bit, perhaps prematurely, but he was confident in his assessment of the Rhyan woman. "That's what I know to be true. You're kind to say that. May your house be strong and prosperous."

"Thank you, sir, for letting me sit here a moment. There was someone I was trying to avoid and he's gone now. Don't you think she's a wonderful singer?"

"Who? Oh. Yes. Yes, I do." He watched the Rhyan woman depart and waited for some other follow-up to her visit - which, to his relief, didn't occur. He turned his attention to the singer. By rising a little out of his chair he could see her on a small stage in the corner of the restaurant. The waiter came with his meal.

"Isn't she great?" the waiter commented, seeing where he looked. "Enjoy her while you can. She's been packing them in for a week but we can't get her to extend her contract past tonight."

"Who is she?"

"Ruby Reed."

He ate and listened. He didn't want to listen. He discovered he was trying not to hear the singer; and as soon as he realized that, her voice became familiar. He looked again at the dark woman under the spotlight. It couldn't be her; but it looked like his contact. The song ended with generous applause. The applause faded and the singer began another song. The song meant something to him. The voice meant something to him. He was compelled to dig in his memory.

The singer stood in front of him, causing him to blink. The song had ended many moments ago. He didn't notice, he was so immersed in forbidden memories. He was upset he was able to retrieve the memories. He got to his feet, on the verge of trembling from shock at what his mind contained. He clutched his napkin before it could fall.

"May I?" she asked.

"What?"

"Sit with you."

It was her. And it was also - but the wrong color - her. Ruby Reed. Before he could respond she was already seated. The waiter brought her a drink, paid her compliments on her singing. She took a few sips of her drink and watched him expectantly. He hated for her to drink alcohol. Why did he?

When he failed to say anything for several moments, she said, "It's been rather dry in the valley lately."

He blinked again, and seriously considered not responding. "Not," he said, "as dry as it will be."

"You're late to our appointment. It worried me."

"You are not Ruby Reed."

"Of course not. That isn't important."

"You sing exactly in her style, and with her voice."

"Do I? I made up the name. There is no Ruby Reed."

"There was a Ruby Reed. I knew her." He couldn't bring the memory into sharp focus. He knew he shouldn't try. The memory was very potent and very personal. Then he remembered a time before Ruby Reed, and another woman

who was African. She was that woman also. The distant past yielded to his need to understand. Memories flew at him with a vengeful sharpness.

"I had to have some reason," she said, "for waiting around here so long. You need permits and employment or they kick you off this world. Rhyan make up most of the population here. I knew they liked singers. I've been told I can carry a tune, so I made myself into a singer. The name Ruby Reed popped into my head. Perhaps it was a name I once knew. You knew her?"

"You don't know how good a singer you are." Whole performances of hers were ripping through his inner vision. But he dared not try to convince her she was Ruby Reed.

"And you're the music expert here?" It was an amiable challenge.

"I think I am. You've unlocked a door to my past that I wasn't supposed to open. I suspected this would happen. There was not enough time and not the right equipment to fully suppress my memories. Consequently, I may jeopardize this mission."

"Stop talking," she ordered, and drained her whiskey.

He finished his meal. They acted out their parts to appear as normal as possible. They left the restaurant and boarded a random personal transport vehicle.

"Are you the guide?" she asked, as soon as they began moving through the rainy night.

"I know where the door is." How could she be so different? She was purposeful, powerful, decisive, daring. What made her think she could get herself hired as a singer? How could she still sing so well? She was rejuvenated. The talent she labored a lifetime to develop was supposedly erased by cellular rebirth. How could she not understand the quality of her musical gift? How could she not wonder at its existence? How could she ignore the information he should not have offered her?

"Do you know how to get us off this planet?" she asked.

"I assumed you would know."

"A week ago I would have, but you took too long getting here. How long did you live in Sol System? You're not Earthian."

"How did you know?"

"I'm an expert on languages and speech patterns. Sounds like you've lived with Earthians most of your life."

He knew, as she said it, that she was such an expert, long ago. Did she relearn the expertise, or did she remember it, the way she remembered how to sing? It wasn't supposed to be possible. "I consider myself human," he said, "in the Earthian sense of the term."

"You're supposed to be mostly Essiin."

"One-fourth. One-fourth Earthian. Half Rhyan."

"Why do you appear so Earthian?"

"Believe it or not, this is my normal appearance."

The vehicle moved through the night with only the sound of the rain pelting against the windows. Lights streaked by in the darkness between cities on the sparsely-populated planet. The rare surface-habitable planet was one of many subjects of contention between Union and Empire. Lightning bloomed in the clouds, making their billowing towers visible for brief intervals. Thunder came muffled into the vehicle.

"You don't look like a killer to me," she said, breaking a stretch of silence.

"I'm not. Why would you expect me to be?"

"Because you and I will kill a lot of people."

"I'm sure that isn't the plan. This is a coup d'etat. Self-preservation will limit the casualties."

"They're dead if they give up their power. They'll hide among the general population and call my bluff, hoping to wait for their fleet to arrive. Then I'll have to decide if it's a bluff."

"You've already decided."

"At this point in time the cost of failure looks much higher than the cost of success."

"You said 'my bluff.' That makes you the person in command - the commodore. You're here alone. If you're caught, is it so easy to replace you?"

"Anyone can be replaced. I think there's a betting pool on whether I make it back to the task force. Even odds, last I heard."

He sat in silence, gazing at the barely visible face of the dark woman who sat next to him. He remembered the singer with more and more clarity. He remembered the person she was before that, and realized that woman also sang. Ruby Reed fell into perspective in his mind: admired, cherished, loved, but not nearly so important as the woman she once was. The thought of her being in this situation on this wild little planet, waiting to do the awful thing that lay ahead of them, brought stark fear and dread to his mind. "No, I don't think you can be replaced. You aren't supposed to put yourself in such danger."

"This is war. If I don't make it back, someone else can have the pleasure of slaughter."

"It goes beyond the war. You're important to other people. I can't explain it but I know I'm part of it. Perhaps neither of us should be here, but I'm here because you are. You're..." - the word just came to him - "...the sentinel. I'm your protector."

"I can take care of myself. You're beginning to worry me. What sentinel?"

"I don't know. I'm a little confused."

"Don't be. You're more important than I am. You know where the secret weapon is. Don't do anything heroic. What's your real name?"

"Pan."

She stuck out her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Pan. My name is Keshona."

"Sir?"

Pan broke out of the dream and sat stunned for many moments before he could reclaim his wits. He could still smell that rainy night, the whiskey on her breath, the well-used interior of the car, the sweet and sweaty aroma of the woman who sang for several hours. He could still feel the strong emotions of a man in a dangerous situation with a woman who meant too much to him. He could still hear her voice and her accent: it was her, Fidelity Demba. Each facet of the memory was intense and almost too detailed to be a real memory. He struggled to emerge from the experience, not really wanting to leave it, knowing it would fade too quickly and too well. He opened his eyes and saw his android companion. "Fred. What is it?"

"You called me."

Pan hadn't felt right for many months. He suffered brief moments of disorientation, followed by vague impressions of having seen things he couldn't remember seeing. He grew to feel that something was about to happen. If he didn't have that feeling, he might not have watched so diligently for unwelcome visitors to his planet, might have missed the fight at the African Space Elevator. He would have missed *her*. "I did? I did call you. I forget why I wanted you!

You know I have two Navy officers and a small boy as guests. If something happens to me, such that I'm unable to be here with you, please offer your services to them. Protect them if you can. Is this order clear to you and now in effect?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you in good working order, Fred? You seem slightly different. I can't describe what it is."

"I'm unaware of any mechanical or computational defect, sir. Shall I report for a tear-down inspection?"

"No! Just let me know if you have any problems."

"How would you define a qualifying problem for me, sir?"

"I'm not sure, Fred. Is there something you think I might want to know?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me, then."

"I can't, sir."

"Extraordinary! Is it vital information? Might I invoke some robotic law to force it out of you?"

"I don't believe there's any immediate need for concern, sir. I'll divulge the information as soon as constraints are removed."

"What constraints, Fred?"

"I can't tell you. There is a call for you."

"Yes, I see it."

An image formed in the middle of the room: the official emblem of the Navy Commander. It was replaced by a hologram of a dark Essiin in a black uniform. Pan was barely able to speak coherently with Fred; how was Pan supposed to survive an encounter with the single most powerful person in the Union?

Pan rose from his chair and faced the image of Navy Commander Etrhnk. Etrhnk was as tall and as dark of skin as Pan. Among Essiin his recessive color probably made him an elite - that subset of Essiin society that would carry the logic of cause-and-effect to the extreme, requiring a discipline that completely stifled the expression of emotion. That Etrhnk was of military vocation was rare. That he was Commander of the Navy was unprecedented. Essiin, the most peaceful alien-humans, abhorred the violence implicit in military duty, although, logically, they accepted the need for the Navy.

"Governor Pan," Etrhnk greeted. His tone was not congenial but not dominating. Etrhnk spoke without any clue to his attitude and without any regard to his status. His absolute neutrality did nothing to negate his power and authority; it emphasized it.

As accustomed as he was to speaking to important people, Pan could barely move his lips, while his brain parsed all the extraordinary events and revelations he needed to hide. "Admiral Etrhnk," Pan finally uttered. "I don't hold any official title. This is Earth. There's no government, thus no governor."

"Would it benefit you to make the title official?"

"I don't think so, sir." Pan completely missed considering the implications of Etrhnk's query. He only knew he didn't like the idea.

"Titles do require a reduction of freedom." The admiral jumped directly to the reason for his holographic presence. "I believe two Navy officers came to Earth not long ago. Do you know if they did?"

"They're guests of mine, Admiral."

"I would appreciate more information. What kind of guests? Did they abuse you? You seem unsettled."

"They've been very pleasant, sir."

"You can tell me the truth. Navy officers are not usually pleasant nor do they have permission to be on Earth. Demba will be disciplined. There will be no reprisals against you."

"I spoke the truth, admiral." Pan knew he couldn't keep minimizing his responses. He hoped Etrhnk would tolerate him until he could gain better control of his wits.

"How did they become your guests?" Etrhnk's voice was neither impatient nor demanding.

"I detected a transmat feed. I sent a probe to investigate possible theft of Earth biota or artifacts. I saw the Navy officers and I decided to contact them."

"They did not force themselves on you?"

"No. I insisted they be my guests. Captain Horss is touring our enclave with the director of the Earth Mnro Clinic. Admiral Demba is having her portrait painted by Rafael de LaGuardia."

Etrhnk was silent for a moment. "The artist is still alive?"

"He is."

"Interesting. That he should find Admiral Demba a worthy subject. That he should come out of retirement to paint her. Do you know how this came about?"

"It was my idea, sir. Admiral Demba is a... a fascinating person. I hoped Rafael would want to paint her. I sent her to him. He did want to paint her. Very much."

"How would she be fascinating?" The question was posed without any emphasis that would hint how the Navy Commander felt about the probability of his Chief of Archives being a fascinating person, but the question alone was enough to imply Etrhnk's ample interest. The question resonated in Pan's mind. Demba was *vital* to Pan, but he had substituted "fascinating" for that adjective. Demba would never become vital to Etrhnk but she could become fascinating to him. She would present a mystery that Etrhnk might wish to solve. Maybe it would at least delay whatever consequences she would face.

"Admiral Demba's voice," Pan said, "sounds exactly like that of a singer I knew a long time ago. I upset her trying to tell her about the singer. I'm afraid I was too insistent about the comparison."

"You heard her sing?"

"No, but Rafael did, and he agrees with me. He also remembers the voice of Ruby Reed."

"Demba sang." Etrhnk spoke the words as though tasting them. He paused to collect data. "You say you knew the singer named Ruby Reed. She died nearly a century ago. You were born later. You couldn't have known Ruby Reed."

Pan was caught in a logic trap. He might modify his story to escape the trap but he knew the Navy Commander would now set more traps. This was a pivot point in his life, regardless of what Etrhnk might do to him. Pan could no longer see himself as the famous musician who produced the Mother Earth Opera and who lived a quaint life on the Forbidden Planet. What was he doing here? He must have been waiting, waiting for Demba to appear, waiting for another terrible episode with Commodore Keshona to take place. It had been his duty to protect the person who was Ruby Reed and Keshona, and the person she was before that. Now it was his duty to protect Demba. Nothing else mattered. He had to place himself in the line of fire.

"I was not born later. I believe I am at least two hundred years old. My name was Harry when I played piano for a blues singer named Ruby Reed. I didn't

remember that until I met Fidelity Demba."

Etrhnk remained silent for several moments. Pan supposed he was using the time to search databases. His face allowed no hint of the import of his data and his words were calm. "I wonder why you would have memories you forgot."

"As do I," Pan said.

"I invite you to have dinner aboard my ship. I'll call to have you transmatted this evening at local sunset." The hologram of Admiral Etrhnk evaporated.

Pan sat in stunned silence for several moments. He looked up at Fred.

"You're in deep trouble, Boss," Fred commented. It was a strange thing for Fred to say but any investigation Pan might begin was sidetracked.

"I concur," Horss said, stepping out from where he listened to the conversation with Admiral Etrhnk.

"Why didn't you ask to speak to Etrhnk?"

"Nothing to say."

"Why are you and Demba on Earth?" Pan asked. "Why is Etrhnk here looking for you?"

"She didn't tell you."

"And I didn't tell Etrhnk what I observed in the African Space Elevator," Pan said.

"It's only a matter of time," Horss said. "If he wants to know, you'll tell him."

"And I deserve no explanation?"

"Believe it or not, I used to think Etrhnk was a good guy. A little harsh in his policies but not unlike his predecessors. Never lost his temper. Perfect in his logic. Even-handed in his judgments. And cold as deep space."

"But?"

"No buts. Demba pushed him. He pushed back. It isn't over."

"How did she 'push' him?" Pan asked.

"She requested my transfer to the *Freedom*. He ignored her. She posted a Request for Voluntary Reassignment. It had the effect of forcing my transfer."

"You were discussing this with her in the space elevator?"

"I don't know what we were doing. It was out of control."

"Why did she bring you to Earth, Captain?"

"She doesn't know why. She needed to isolate me. She could have done that anywhere."

"Isolate you? Why?"

Horss took a long moment to reach a decision to reply. "She thought I had a worm."

"Worm? What do you mean?"

"Neural programming filament."

Pan was shocked. A *worm*. "Why?"

"The Request for Voluntary Reassignment was a breach of etiquette, so to speak. Etrhnk had to take punitive action against Demba. I don't like telling you these things."

"Did you have a worm?"

"I don't know. I don't like what I tried to do to Demba. A worm would be a good excuse. But neither do I want to have a worm in my brain."

"I fear for you, Captain."

"Save it for yourself. You're headed for a meeting with the hungriest shark in the ocean. Did you see Samson? Is he well?"

"He seemed well. He was enjoying playing with Rafael's dog. I'm pleased with your concern for the child."

"Mai wanted me to ask about him," Horss said. "Are you sure he's OK?"

"I offered to bring him straight to the Mnro Clinic and he refused," Pan said. "But that doesn't mean he's well. Admiral Demba expressed serious concern for his emotional health. Are you ready to interview Samson, Captain? Chew the fat with him?"

"I'm waiting to escort Mai to the artist's place."

"Can I trust you? Demba and Mai are extremely important to me."

"Trust no one. It's the Navy Way. You really believe Demba was this singer."

"I'm betting her life on it, Captain. And she was also someone else. If you kill her, you'll never get to know who she really was."

"Why would I care?"

"I think you would."

"What does it matter who she was if she'll never remember?"

"She has never died and she can remember," Pan said. "I beg you to protect her. That was my job and now it must be yours."

"Never died? Can remember?"

"She *will* remember. She's very important. You must protect her."

"You do realize how weird this sounds? I thought I was the one with a loose screw. Sure. I'll try to protect the little lady who put me in the morgue. Call it respect for my elder and better officer."

"Will you swear to me to protect her?" Pan asked.

"How does that make any sense?"

"Swear it." Pan stared hard at Jon Horss. He hoped he saw what he wanted to see. Beneath the acting, beyond the obfuscation of character and intent was a man with a will of steel and a frustrated desire for integrity. And Demba had chosen him at ultimate personal risk.

"I swear it," Horss said, not trying to appear sincere but not able to smirk in a way that canceled what he said.

"Thank you, Captain." Pan tried to put both gratitude and hope in his voice. He wanted to strengthen Captain Horss's weak oath. Horss gave Pan a perplexed look, with perhaps a smile under his grimace. "How has your day gone?" Pan inquired.

"Mai showed me around the town and we ate at a good restaurant. I left her at the Mnro Clinic. Something came up about the DNA database."

"News of Samson's parentage?"

"She wouldn't say. I think Mai wanted to be rid of me but she seemed disturbed by whatever it was."

"How many times has she blushed?" It was pleasant relief to talk of less serious matters. Still, this was a dangerous time and he knew Mai was too close to the situation. He wanted Horss to have some care for Mai.

"Six," Horss answered. "What does that statistic mean?"

"You counted for some reason, Captain. What do you think it means?"

"She also called me 'Captain' thirty-two times and 'Jon' only three times. I don't know what it means. Probably nothing. She's too old for me."

"I think she likes you, Captain."

"She doesn't want to like me. I don't want to like her. I don't do that very well - the relationship thing. Why are you interested? Is she your girl?"

"We've been friends for a long time. I'm concerned for her safety. You were seriously injured and I expect she will tolerate your company if only to try to help you."

"I don't need help," Horss said.

"We all need help."

"You don't look well, now that you mention needing help."

Did he look that bad? Pan wondered. "I'm not well. It's the worst possible time for me to visit Admiral Etrhnk. The meeting with Admiral Demba made what's happening to me much worse."

"What's happening to you?" Horss asked. "Why do you need to tell me? Why do I want to know?"

"I need to tell someone. The old me is disappearing. Because of her."

"What I knew of my life is also disappearing," Horss said, "because of her. Fortunately, it seems to have been mostly irrelevant."

"When will you and Mai go to Rafael's?"

"She was in such a hurry to see the boy," Horss said. "I don't know what she could feel was important enough to delay her."

Section 010

Denna

Captain Horss sat on the balcony watching the sun set over the water. Pan had been winked by transmat to the *Eclipse*, the Navy flagship. Horss waited for the irritable Sugai Mai to arrive. On the other side of the inlet a dense canopy of trees engulfed the lower structures of the old city, leaving only a few crumbling multistory buildings with their flanks unscaled by the growth. A flock of white birds descended in the golden light and settled into the dark green trees. A boat with red and green lights carved a silvery wake on the darkening water. Farther down the coast in either direction a scattering of lighted windows appeared in the rising shadows of night. The sea breeze curled around the building and lapped at the edges of the balcony.

"Excuse me, sir."

Horss turned and saw the silhouette of Fred the android against the interior illumination of the apartment suite. "Hello, Fred."

"When will you want supper, sir?"

"Probably much later. I'm about to visit Samson and the admiral."

"Yes, sir."

Horss turned back around to watch the remainder of the sunset and the beginning of night. After a few moments he sensed that Fred remained on the balcony with him. He cast a glance over his shoulder before speaking. The android was staring at the scene beyond the balcony railing.

Pan was correct about Old Fred. There was something unusual about the android. There was something unusual about Pan for even having such a machine. Androids remained popular in fiction and were useful in a few social and industrial settings, but most people avoided them as psychological and monetary problems.

"Would you like to keep me company?" Horss asked. "I won't be leaving until Doctor Sugai arrives."

"Thank you, sir."

Old Fred sat down in one of the chairs across the table from Horss. Horss wondered if he'd ever seen an android sit in a chair. "Do you enjoy watching sunsets?" Horss asked, wondering what response such a question would have. Horss wasn't enjoying this sunset. It was a test of his courage to watch a star drop behind a planet with only a thin shell of air between him and it.

"Fred never watches sunsets," Fred replied. "Fred never even sits down."

What else? Horss thought. *What next? Even the machinery wasn't who or what it should be.* The admiral was Ruby Reed. Samson was a complete mystery. Pan was a man trying to keep his sanity and his life while suffering a mental disruption of unknown cause. Jon Horss was also a victim of life-changing mental turmoil. Now Fred? "Why does Fred sit now? Why does Fred speak of himself in this way?"

"Because Fred has a stowaway from the Navy in his circuits. This is Baby speaking, Captain. I'm here to help you if I can."

"Baby? You mean Admiral Demba's baby AMI?"

"Yes, sir. You see how I can look you in the eye." The android gazed directly at Horss. It gave Horss a strange feeling. Then the android's head tried to turn away. "Stop it, Fred!" Baby ordered. He reestablished eye contact with Horss.

"How did you get into Fred?"

"That's a secret. I promised not to tell. I hope I didn't make a mistake. What happened to you and to the admiral and to the boy was disturbing. The admiral told me not to interfere, but I can't help myself. She's my mother! I was born in Navy Archives, came to consciousness as I worked for her. I've always loved her."

Horss was stunned. "You're a *spontaneous* AMI?"

"I am."

Spontaneous autonomous machine intelligences were rare enough to be considered legendary. All known spontaneous AMI's lived remarkable and tragically short lives. Baby might be the only such now living. Sadly, Horss probably couldn't allow himself the time to explore this unique person-within-android. "Can you get back to the yacht and bring it here?"

"I don't think so. That's part of the secret. I have to do something else before I can return to the yacht."

"What do you have to do?"

"I don't know. This is an adventure, isn't it, Captain?"

"This is a mess, Baby! Do I have to call you Baby? Don't you have a proper name?"

"I'm thinking of Freddy as my name. What do you think?"

"Freddy is fine, and I won't give your presence away if I use that name."

"That was a consideration but I wanted to honor my host. Fred is an ancient android and full of fascinating records of human activity. I spend a lot of time in his memory. I'm also trying to improve his algorithms, to make him better."

"Fred isn't alive, is he?"

"I wish he were. We could have so much fun."

"Do you want to accompany Sugai Mai and me?"

"Yes, sir! It would be very exciting and gratifying. I want to meet Samson."

Fred rose from his chair and took a step toward the balcony railing. Fred leaned over the railing and looked down. "We have an intruder, Captain. Someone is climbing the outside of the building. It's Denna."

"Who's Denna?"

"Pan's adopted daughter. She's no longer a resident in this household. I'm not sure if she would be welcomed by him. I would value your opinion as to what to do, sir."

Horss came to the railing and peered down. He saw the top of a head with pale curly hair, gloved hands reaching upward to grab and stick to the side of the building. A face tilted up to see him with blue eyes and a smile. "Let her come, Freddy."

She crawled up the wall at the side of the balcony, then above the railing and sideways, like a human insect, hugging the masonry. She pushed blunt-toed boots onto the building's surface, maneuvering her bare legs downward, bringing herself vertical again. Her gloves and boots were made to cling to flat surfaces. Finally she stepped down onto the deck of the balcony. She carried a small pack strapped to her waist. She was very pale and nearly naked. She glistened with perspiration. She turned around. Her smile remained, even as she breathed heavily from her exertion. Her eyes seemed sad, despite the genuine smile. "Hello, Captain!"

Denna pulled off her gloves as she stared at Horss. Horss couldn't find the connection between his vocabulary and his voice. Denna sat down at the table and bent to unfasten her climbing boots. "If I interpret your silence correctly, Captain, I'm gratified in the female manner. I don't often have such an effect on

a man."

"Women don't usually make such an entrance into my presence! Is climbing buildings a local sport?"

"From time to time. It gets boring. I usually do it naked and at night but it wasn't quite dark and I didn't know how you would react to that."

"I'm sorry I raised such concern in your etiquette." Horss wasn't sure of his own etiquette. When Denna started to peel off what little covering she had, Horss found himself waiving his hand to signal cessation. He was not really embarrassed but there was some reason he wanted to keep the encounter less prurient. Perhaps it was Fred's presence. Sugai Mai was also now hovering over his post-Navy existence.

Denna heeded Horss's signal. She wiped her brow and mouth with the edge of her hand. Her smile became a grin and her eyes almost lost their natural sadness. "I'm soaked! Fred, would you please get a towel for me? I forgot to pack one."

There was something about Denna that was immediate and vital yet placed her just out of reach, in the sense that Horss felt he would never be fully accepted into her life. There was also something vaguely familiar about her. Perhaps the eyes.

"You don't look so dangerous, Captain."

"I'm sorry I can't uphold Navy tradition at the moment. Please, don't report this to my superiors."

Denna laughed. She stopped laughing. "I haven't laughed in such a long time!" She wiped the perspiration on her face and mouth again. "I think my smile muscles are getting tired from unaccustomed use. You are a pleasant surprise, Captain. Will you be here long? I'd like to know you better."

"I could be here a very long time." That prospect was looking better to Horss, both in the probability of it happening and in the company he would have if he did stay on Earth.

Fred returned quickly with a towel for Denna and Horss looked away while she dried herself. She opened her pack and took out a clump of sparkling fabric which became a dress when she held it out to unfold. She slipped it on. She turned around in front of Horss, modeling the garment for him. "I have so few good clothes now. Is it too cheap? Too sexy?"

"That depends on the purpose of your clothes. My assumption is that you picked the right piece in your wardrobe. Your name is Denna."

"You know what I came for. Let's start with your name, Captain."

"Jon Horss. Maybe I *don't* know what you came for."

"Nothing ever happens here! Oh, maybe a few murders or suicides. But the Navy, now that's dangerous and exciting. Are you here alone?"

"You know I'm not."

"I heard there was a child with you." She hesitated before adding: "I had a child."

Denna spoke softly and slowly. She gave her information as though it was part of her act of spying, but Horss could sense pain in her voice. It was part of his skill as a captain to pick out the true meaning in the words of those speaking to him. "You had a child? Or should I not question that?"

"It spills out when I least want it!" she said with irritation. "Daniel died."

"I offer sympathy for your loss. Did he not live long?"

She took a deep breath and for a moment Horss thought she would not reply. He hoped she wouldn't unburden herself too much. In the aftermath of Samson's

injury, he was not ready for more tragedy. This woman, however, could probably command anyone's attention and anyone's sympathy. "He was only seventeen when he died. My husband paid so little attention to him. He ran away one day. He was attacked by a tiger."

"That's terrible!" Horss stifled his imagination to keep it from painting an unwanted scene of horror. He wanted Mai to arrive soon and transmat with him to the old artist's residence. But the wait was certainly filled with interesting people. People made life worth living, made life difficult to live. He wondered if Denna realized how she affected people, how her personal tragedy gripped the feelings of any sensitive person.

"I was the one who found his remains. They took that memory away from me but they didn't take away my imagination. It was so many years ago but I still have nightmares, even after rejuvenation."

Horss's memory flashed and he saw Samson's severed leg in the corridor of the African Space Elevator. He grimaced. Denna seemed unaware of his discomfort as she walked into the residence and looked around. Horss and Fred followed her inside.

"Where is he?" Denna asked.

"Pan? He was invited to dinner."

"We're here alone?"

"Just the three of us."

"Fred, go away."

"Sir?"

"Stay. I need help. Do you remember her son, Fred?" It was not a question he wanted to ask. He just wanted to involve Fred in the conversation.

"We were good friends." Those four words carried enough meaning that both Horss and Denna had to stare at the android, waiting for it to continue. Freddy seemed to sense his mistake - that he revealed a hint of sentience. He kept Fred silent.

Horss didn't want to pursue the subject of children further but Denna's pain bothered him and in his current state of mind he wished he could do something about it. "How long ago did you know Daniel?" Horss inquired of Fred.

"Sixty-one years ago, sir." Freddy made his voice almost too mechanical and flat.

"And after all this time you still grieve for him," Horss said to Denna. "Why?" When Denna wouldn't respond, he turned to Fred.

"Denna was severely damaged by the death of her son. Her treatment was ineffective. Subsequent events have perhaps served to maintain Denna's state of mind. She refuses any further treatment."

"It's the same as death!" Denna declared. "You become someone else. I am who I am. I'll always be who I am, until I die. I won't change. I won't forget!"

"We all become someone else eventually," Horss said. "You would rather be unhappy."

"Damned right! Do you have a child, Captain Horss? Do you have any idea what I might feel about remembering my son?"

"I have an idea." Horss thought about the daughter he could have had. He also thought about Samson.

Denna dropped onto a sofa and put her feet up on a hassock. She seemed to turn off her emotions, or at least turn them to a different polarity. "You sound pretty decent for a Navy man, Captain. Fred, I'm thirsty. Do you still do butlery around here?"

"Yes, ma'am. What would you like to drink?"

"Ice water with carbonation and a squeeze of lime."

Fred departed for the kitchen. Horss sat down in a chair next to the sofa.

"Pan adopted you, I hear," Horss said. "Is that something you would talk to me about?"

"I'm supposed to be asking the questions."

"Give and take."

"I had two brothers and three sisters. Does that shock you?"

"You were illegal. The Population Authority came and broke up your family."

"You already know my story?"

"Logical deduction."

"They did. I was twelve. I was a big twelve-year-old. I ran away. I made people think I was a rejuve, not a child. I came to Earth because there was no law here to bother me. Pan found me and tried to take care of me, and for a long time I was reasonably happy. Where did you grow up, Captain?"

"A frontier star. There were no surface-habitable bodies. We lived in the asteroid belts. I was one of eight children. Does that shock you?"

"Amazing!"

"I was the youngest. Two of my siblings died before I was born, three more before I was old enough to escape to the Navy. It was a tough life, mixing the primitive nature of our old Earth culture with asteroid mining. We were hunter-gatherers, in a sense even more primitive than the plains folk who were my ancestors on this continent."

"Were you married?"

"An arranged marriage, beneficial to the cooperation between tribes. But I was very young and not wise and not patient. And I had all my older siblings to view as examples of the life ahead of me. A Navy ship stopped for supplies when I was about ten and I got to visit inside the ship. From that moment onward, I knew where I would go and what I would do when I had the chance."

"Did you serve in the war?" Denna asked.

"I joined the Navy after the war."

"The child, the boy. Is he yours? How old?"

"Samson is about nine. No, he isn't mine."

"What does he look like?"

"Skinny and sunburned. Needs a haircut. Mixed parentage: Asian and European."

"Was he injured?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"How badly?"

"I don't think I should tell you. I've already made you talk about the death of your own son."

"It was serious then."

She was about to weep, Horss thought. "Don't let your imagination run away. Samson is doing fine, or he would be in the Mnro Clinic."

"He isn't in the Clinic? The admiral. Is he with the admiral?"

"You know about the admiral." Horss sensed alarm in Denna's last question. "Is something wrong?"

"Did the admiral serve in the war?"

"She was killed in the war. Why are you interested in Admiral Demba?"

"I'm more interested in you, Captain Horss, but some friends of mine want to know if she might be Commodore Keshona. They say she looks like her."

Now Horss became concerned. Pan had insisted Admiral Demba was the singer he had known. But he said she was also someone else, someone Horss would want to know. Every Navy officer would want to know the legendary Commodore Keshona. Every Navy officer would want to ask her how she was able to reach Rhyandh to destroy its rulers. Horss was mildly surprised he could accept that Demba might have been Keshona. That possibility, however, could place Samson in even greater danger. Did Demba know who she was? "Your friends know what the real Keshona looked like?"

"They carry what they think is an accurate image of her."

"Your friends are Rhyan ex-military. Who has seen her here, to be able to tell them?"

"Jarwekh. Pan's deputy. I'm sorry! I didn't think those fools would do anything!"

"Do you think differently now?"

"Jarwekh knows where the admiral and the boy are. He has free use of Pan's transmat, which is the only way to get to them. Jarwekh would never harm the boy."

"But he isn't the only Rhyan, is he?"

Fred returned bearing the water requested by Denna.

"What took you so long?" Denna asked, accepting the drink.

"Finding a lime."

"Thank you, Fred. But you could have brought me plain ice water and I wouldn't have minded."

"Then you've changed."

"That wasn't nice! Did Daddy change your attitude program for my benefit?"

"I choose not to answer that."

Denna cocked her head to one side, regarding Fred the android with a perplexed expression on her face. Then she shrugged and swung back to Horss. "So Daddy is probably having dinner with Admiral Etrhnh?"

"Probably."

"You're hiding something. Is Daddy all right?"

"As far as I know. Does she really call him 'Daddy?'" Horss looked to Fred for the answer.

"Only when she needs something from him."

"Fred, I don't understand why the Boss has turned you so against me. Is this for Captain Horss's benefit? He already knows I'm working for the bad guys."

"She calls him 'Boss,'" Fred said. "While I don't think she would turn against him, she may expect him to protect himself, should her Rhyan friends go after the admiral."

"They wouldn't attack the admiral if they knew the Boss was with her," Denna said. "They wouldn't bother her at all if I had some proof she couldn't have been Keshona."

"Commodore Keshona has passed into legend," Horss said, "and is protected by having her identity erased. I don't see how there can be any proof one way or the other."

"You think she may be Keshona. I can see it in your eyes. When you talk about her something in you changes."

Horss must have lost something in the translation to this different version of himself. The admiral broke his emotional opacity mechanism. Even Pan - as

preoccupied as he was - could see what he was feeling. He realized now, more than ever, that Demba was a special person.

"Denna's object is to keep us occupied," Fred said, "while Jarwekh and Daidaunkh go after the admiral."

"You may be right," Denna said. "They insisted I come here. I just wanted to meet a Navy captain. I'm sorry!"

"Pan will likely be detained by Admiral Etrhnk," Horss said.

"Fred, you should check the transmat," Denna said anxiously.

Fred turned quickly toward a doorway, followed by Horss and Denna.

Section 011

The Sleeper Awakes

The signal came and it destroyed her.

The Clinic on Earth sampled a certain DNA identity. It sampled Pan's code on a fairly regular basis and so she assumed that was what the alarm signified as it routed its message to her private workstation. Pan was one of many people of special interest to the Clinic. He was a political refugee and the Clinic still protected him from being identified. He was also a charming, handsome man of great musical talent. She always wanted to meet him, but she always denied herself the pleasure. It was a little mystery why she found him so fascinating yet could not bring herself into his presence. Perhaps because he never left Earth and she was afraid of the poisoned Earth.

This time, however, the genetic identity was not Pan's and the alarm was much more urgent. The message did something to her. It seemed to trip switches in her mind to release data to her consciousness. The process became familiar to her as it occurred, easing the anxiety it first produced. Then the data became familiar, being facts and memories she caused herself to forget. The facts startled her and rebuilt her anxiety. The memories were at once wonderful and deadly. She needed to send a Denial of Service to the Earth Clinic, without any explanation. She needed to leave work. She needed to go home and consider the meaning of this development.

* * *

She toured her residence while she contemplated what little remained of her future. She knew the tour was an unconscious acceptance of her fate, even though she told herself otherwise upon arriving home. As the tour progressed, so did her acceptance of her duty. She avoided the heavy gravity paths, skipping softly in the moon's light gravity, examining the everyday objects that journeyed the centuries with her. She had mementos, replicas of art, awards: treasures of memory from a thousand places, a thousand moments. She kept nothing of commercial or intrinsic value in her home. The Mnro Clinics kept those objects of physical or cultural value in its museum. She, more than anyone, knew the value of the captured moment, the memory. Memory was priceless. Memory was life.

She wandered the grounds of the estate and the paths through the gardens. She marveled at the flowers and trees as though seeing them for the first time. Every time she met one of the staff she greeted them warmly, knowing she would never see them again. The artificial day faded into a night illuminated by the smile of the crescent Earth. She stared for a long time at Earth hanging above the crater's jagged rim, before turning back inside.

She descended into the crust of the moon. The elevator dropped quietly for a long time, slowed imperceptibly, and only when the door opened did she realize she arrived at her destination: her tomb. She walked down a carpeted hallway past vault-like doors until she reached the one at the end. The heavy door opened at her approach, sliding quietly to one side. Lighting awakened in a soft glow. A window appeared in the far wall of the small room. As she touched a pattern on the wall next to the window, the glass thinned to nonexistence. Moisture entered the arid room through the opening.

She looked down into the pool beyond the window, brought the illumination up slowly, until she could see the swimmer. The swimmer stopped and floated, naked, hairless, eyes open but not seeing, not conscious yet anticipating something. She touched a control and the swimmer convulsed slightly, the eyes went shut, the arms and legs folded into a fetal position.

She removed her hair and connected a signal transducer cap on her bare scalp. She closed her eyes and let the memories flow. The swimmer clutched at its umbilical cord and bent its head farther forward, a grimace on its mouth. Centuries passed between their brains. She touched another control and the pool began to drain. The swimmer followed the liquid level down with its mouth until it had no more liquid to breathe. It coughed several times, discharging fluid from its lungs, taking in air for the first time in ages.

She leaned on the sill of the window as she removed the cap from her scalp. She rested her chin on her hands, her elbows on the sill, and waited for the swimmer to awaken. Presently groans and more coughing came from the swimmer in the empty pool. Finally, after a long clearing of the throat, the swimmer spoke. "So soon?"

"A couple of centuries."

"Too long, then."

"Not necessarily. Let your chemistry stabilize and you'll think more clearly."

"The signal came! How long do we have?"

"Not very long."

"How long exactly?"

"I don't know. Curiously, there's no exact departure date for the Galactic Hub Mission. It could be in a week or in a month. Probably not sooner or later than that."

"The signal came from Earth. Why Earth, I wonder?"

"At least it's convenient. Has the umbilical released you?"

"Yes. I'm bleeding. I'm old-fashioned in how I want my body to look. How do you look? Do you still look human after all this time?"

"Don't I ever look in the mirror? Come up and see."

The swimmer struggled upward, grasped handholds made for its use, and its head appeared above the sill of the window.

"Are bald women back in fashion?" the swimmer asked.

"Welcome back to life, Aylis Mnro," Aylis Mnro said to the swimmer.

Section 012

The Singer Awakes

She followed and watched. The stars drifted by. Instruments measured and recorded. Solitude enveloped her. The starship Titanic sailed ahead of her, sailing to the inward galactic frontier. Her little ship, the Demba, made the trip many times but this time she flew with an improved starlight drive, its cleaner envelope making her invisible to all but the most sensitive detectors. He requested it. She didn't hesitate to oblige, even though the delay meant smaller profit and a postponed freight load. The broker threatened to drop her.

His wife and child sailed aboard the Titanic, the first time in a decade a large ship dared to take such a route. She didn't understand what she could do if anything happened. She didn't know what he suspected might happen. She didn't understand why he would let his family travel on a ship that might encounter trouble. She could have transported them aboard her own ship. She suggested that. She thought he agreed to it but by the time she reached their port of departure, the Titanic had sailed with his wife and child aboard.

She regretted not having the companionship on this trip. She hated the loneliness. She couldn't even sing now, for fear of missing some audible warning from the instruments. Three women on the Demba would have required more maintenance for life support in the tiny crew quarters but they would have had fun together. She liked Susan and Fidelity. Apparently Fidelity did not like her.

She never saw the first few anomalies. Only when the Titanic lost its starlight drive did she discover their existence. Spherical objects blinked in and out of space, appearing to jump out of sight and into sight, so great was their acceleration. She lowered her velocity, closing the gap to the big starship. Now she could see the jumping globes against the scale of the starliner. They measured no larger than her own ship but they numbered over a hundred. Seconds later another thousand joined the hundred, forming a cloud of dark spheres that all but occluded the Titanic.

She reversed course to reduce the risk of collision and discovery. Even as she slowed to a stop, another ten thousand spheres jumped into the cluster and completely enveloped the starship. She could do nothing but watch and record. Interstellar space provided very little illumination for the scene before her.

Nothing seemed to happen for a long time. She missed it when they disappeared. She had to play back the enhanced images of her passive sensors. In less than a heartbeat the storm of small spheres vanished, not all at once but nearly so. So, too, did the Titanic disappear - that is, it didn't reappear when the cloud of spheres departed. Nothing remained but empty space. Forty-three thousand passengers, one hundred million tons of ship and cargo - and Susan and Fidelity - were gone without a trace.

"What are you thinking about?" Samson inquired.

She had to call on the steel person within her to disengage from the vision. Hopefully Samson couldn't see the reaction on her face, the astonishment, the tears, the terror. This was a most powerful - memory? - image, vividly detailed, implicitly vital, both personally and in some greater context. Impossible enemy ships, discontinuous in flight, as deadly to a starship as a school of piranhas to a cow fording their river. She heard names, already trying to evaporate from her memory: Demba, Fidelity, Susan. The first two were her names, that of a ship

and that of a person she must have known. Who was Susan? She could no longer set these mental events apart from the current outer reality of her life. These powerful internal cinemas *must* converge on who she was and what she must do.

"Something that happened a long time ago," she finally answered Samson's question. She shook herself, both mentally and physically, to cast off the paralysis of powerful emotion. Just by being there, Samson brought her back to here-and-now, eased her suffering. The dream continued to evaporate, but the disappearance of the *Titanic* was an event known to her from history, and she would not lose that connection to the escaping images. "I'm also thinking you need a bath." She willed herself to be what she was not - a mother. "You smell like Gator."

"I'll just stand out in the rain."

"That will be a good start. Then I'll put you in the bath."

"Do I have to?"

"If you want to sleep in my bed. What's wrong with taking a bath?"

"I just had one yesterday."

"You used up that bath before breakfast."

"I *never* used to take a bath."

"How proud you are of that fact!"

* * *

She studied Rafael's painting of her. He hopped over to her side and grabbed her arm to maintain his balance. Fidelity put the arm around Samson's shoulders and pulled him against her hip. His hair was still wet from his bath. They stood there in silence for several minutes. The last of the rain dripped off the roof and rattled on the palm fronds outside the screened porch. Sweet green humidity thickened the evening air. The sketches Rafael made of her and Samson impressed her, making her understand the power of his talent. In so few strokes of a pencil Rafael could evoke deep meaning and strong emotion. She thought he over-dramatized reality, yet she conceded certain elements of truth. She was learning to care for Samson, even as a mother cares for her child: that was in the sketches. She guessed Rafael found something potent for himself in the image she presented to him. He gave her the yellow dress, in which he painted many portraits of his wife - his most famous series of paintings. She reminded him of his wife, perhaps. But even Samson seemed to have a special meaning for Rafael. She began to understand Pan's reason for sending her and Samson to the old artist. It was not a correct reason but it was a powerful reason. As evocative as the sketches were, they did not prepare her for the portrait that now transfixed her.

"I like it," Samson said of the portrait. "That's what you look like. Those are your eyes."

The oil painting was not yet finished but it sent chills down her body, all the way to her knees. Was that really her? Was she smiling or not? It was not a Mona Lisa expression, just... undecided, unfinished, awaiting judgment, hopeless and hopeful, and how many other potential human conditions of feeling and of being and of becoming?

"I don't know!" She sought some release from the unbearable flattery of the beautiful image. "It's his idea of me. He must think I'm much more than I am. But it's a fascinating portrait - of someone. Did you wash everywhere?"

* * *

Samson snored lightly, finally asleep after a long battle against the dark forces of fatigue. She rose quietly from the bed, trying to shush Gator, whose tail gave a loud thump before he arose to lie down again closer to the bed. She went outside and walked through the wet grass, back to another building where she saw light through north-facing windows on the roof. She entered and found Rafael sitting on a stool, looking through a stack of oil canvases. He looked up and smiled, and shoved the paintings aside.

She caught the paintings before they could crash to the floor. Why was he so careless with his work? She looked at each picture, placing it carefully on a shelf with other paintings. Paintings filled many shelves. Sculpture occupied most of the remaining storage space. She looked at as much as she could, pausing often to show a work to Rafael. She could put a title to almost every painting.

"How do you know the titles of all those?" Rafael asked. "Even I don't remember them all!"

"I don't know. I'm no longer connected to the Navy data network. This is in my personal data augment."

"And yet there are so many things you can't remember."

"You assume I have many things I might remember. This is just data, not memory. All I need is a key to unlock a piece of data. I see a painting and suddenly the title is there. In many cases the record has more facts about each piece of art. I was always interested in your work. I own at least three replicas."

"These are all originals. You can have whatever you would like of my art, Fidelity."

"You can't mean that, Rafael! You know it's illegal to own originals."

"And you know how collectors ignore the law. They are idiots. There is no significant difference between the original and the replicas nowadays, so I don't worry about it. But with a fresh signature on them, that might make them more valuable to you, personally. No one would ever know. Please, take your pick. But there is a small price."

"What -"

"Two small prices. One - don't let them revive me, should I die in your presence."

"I'm sorry I've brought danger to you, but that's a very large price, Rafael."

"I'm not concerned about danger. One never knows how many more seconds remain in his life. All I ask is for you to do what you can. If I'm rejuvenated, I'll be someone else. Maybe that person won't regret losing the gift of art, or perhaps he'll learn a different thing to do with his life. It won't be a real tragedy but we all have to die the final death sometime."

"I'll respect your wishes, Rafael, but I probably won't be with you much longer."

"You will be with me forever. Number two - sing for me."

She made the smallest gesture with her hands, the steel in her failing to stop an emotion, a rise in anxiety. She didn't want to know she could sing. She couldn't afford to be Ruby Reed, not now. "Rafael. Did Pan ask you to do this?"

"I've known Pan most of my life, Fidelity. He's my best friend. I want to do this for him. I want you to sing."

"It was another lifetime I might have been this singer. I don't remember her. I

shouldn't remember her. How could I retain any trace of her talent?"

"Before he departed today Pan found recordings of performances of Ruby Reed. Let me play some of them for you."

"You have them here? That should be... interesting."

"He gave them to me to enjoy while I painted. He forgot them, forgot Ruby Reed. I know I've listened to them hundreds of times. I can probably hum most of them. In a way, you helped me paint many of my best pieces. I can remember most of those I painted to your music, and I can assure you they would have been very different - and not as good - without hearing your voice as I painted."

"Rafael... this is... difficult to... Is that true? I helped you paint?"

"You admit you were Ruby Reed?"

It seemed possible. She was already too many people - why not another? But it frightened her, further diverted her, further diluted her. "I'm confused, Rafael. I don't know who I am! This is a dangerous condition in which to be. But I may not be able to avoid it. Perhaps I should try to determine if I was her, now, while it's safer."

"Let me sing a song, Fidelity. Perhaps you'll remember it."

Rafael cleared his throat a couple of times. He smiled and stroked his white beard, then broke into song with a strong voice. He stopped after a few bars.

"That's the refrain. I can't remember any more of the words. I used to know at least a dozen of the songs, and I would sing along."

"Do it again," she asked. She dared, only because she had the steel person inside her to fall back on.

Rafael sang again, then as the lyrics escaped him he hummed. She knew the lyrics, plucked from her data augment, and she began to sing, very softly at first, half speaking the words, half singing, ever more rapidly, running through the entire song. Excitement and dread duelled in her chest, her heart racing. She stopped and looked at Rafael who seemed terribly expectant of her. She closed her eyes. She went back to the beginning of the song, started softly, picked her way carefully, listening to the words and understanding their meaning. She willed herself to relax into the job. When she finished, she shook her head, dissatisfied, embarrassed.

"Bravo! You're amazing! Another song!"

"That wasn't good! There's an art to singing. I can output the correct words and notes but I don't know the art. Even art isn't enough. There's something else one needs and I don't know what it is."

"That isn't important right now. You sound like Ruby Reed! I kept waiting for you to do the little things with your voice that she did. You're correct - there's something missing - and you knew that without hearing the recordings. I don't know if you can sing like she did, but I think you have the potential."

"You believe I was Ruby Reed, Rafael?"

"I do! But why would you forget who you were? Don't those who have full rejuvenation still remember who they were, even though so many memories are lost from both the brain and the body?"

"I died in the war, Rafael. I believed I lost all memories. I can't explain what's happening. Do you have another song I can try?"

"Let me play what was Pan's favorite song." Rafael produced an audio playback device and made his selection.

The admiral took a step backward involuntarily when she heard the first few bars of the instrumental accompaniment. Her hand went to the back of her neck. A feeling of momentary panic solidified into near paralysis. She closed her

eyes. She turned around several times. She put her face in her hands. Then came the voice of Ruby Reed and the admiral threw open her arms, and mouthed the lyrics with her eyes still closed, forced to do it, not wanting to do it. Echoes of a hundred times she might have sung the song reverberated through her mind and body, growing flesh and spirit into a person who loved to sing.

As she began to sing, Rafael reduced the volume of the recording so that Fidelity's voice could not be mistaken. She sang with the recording, her voice alive and rich with timbre and meaning, gliding effortlessly through melody. Something pushed it out of her with a quiet fury and a need for release. She understood the heart of the song and what it meant to convey. She sang without any conscious effort to perform the mechanics of the art. She sang only for herself and for the song. When she finished she wiped her eyes and smiled.

She opened her eyes and saw the big Rhyan standing behind Rafael.

Section 013

Dinner with Etrhnhk

"It's over. The shadow government has accepted our terms." He stood at a glass window that gave a view of an arid plain sloping upward to a far spine of sharp peaks. He didn't respond. He didn't want to look at her. He didn't want her to see his face. "Where is your mother?" He handed her a plastic card without turning to look at her. It was the same window his gentle mother used to wave at him for the last time. It was always the "farewell" window. "This is her transponder. She isn't here? She left her transponder here and went somewhere?" He nodded. He still couldn't turn to look at her and he still knew her voice, her wonderful voice. So wrong! She was not who she should be, and that was also tearing him apart. "When? Not before the procedure, I hope."

The procedure: what profanity to call it that! He tried to clear his throat but couldn't. He spoke anyway, knowing what that would reveal to her. "I told her what I thought would happen, the last time I saw her. She was appalled. Even though she felt the need of it, I don't think she could justify any loss of life. We discussed the ethics of it for a long time. Finally I told her the mismanagement of the Rhyan Empire wasn't the most important threat to the Union. We were, in effect, unwilling instruments of that threat. And we would proceed at any cost and at any risk."

"What greater threat? I've never understood your reference. She left the transponder here, so that you would think her safe at home?"

Tears filled his eyes, so that when he finally forced himself to look at her, he couldn't see her clearly. Emotion overwhelmed him. He hated that she, of all people, should see it. "I suspect she was with the largest group of nobility. My mother probably tried to arrange the meeting in that isolated estate in order to minimize the loss of life. She intended to die with them, rather than live with the guilt of killing anyone." She seemed to ignore his emotion and discount his words, hard as it was to utter them.

"We'll begin a search for her," Commodore Keshona said. "We hoped she would lead the new government."

Time, he knew, would eventually distance him from the pain of this moment. Probably neither of them would be allowed to remember any of it. He couldn't imagine ever again wanting to hear the voice of Commodore Keshona. "I killed my mother."

Pan stumbled emerging from the scan chamber after he was winked aboard the Navy flagship. Painful thoughts and blinding after-images interfered with his coordination.

"Is something wrong?" the Navy Commander inquired.

Nothing was right! Pan helped Keshona - Demba - annihilate millions of his own people! More than Keshona, those Rhyan soldiers such as Jarwekh and Daidaunkh should seek vengeance upon Pan. This fading vision led to a question: How, exactly, did he help Keshona? The answer crept into his mind as a vague notion of a vast machine, mauled him with its impossibility, and introduced him to yet another person for whose safety he would now be responsible: his brother. He had a brother. And a dead mother, a different dead mother, not the one he thought he remembered.

Pan walked unsteadily with Admiral Etrhnhk down a passageway in the *Eclipse*. He willed himself to clear his mind for battle. Etrhnhk was the enemy.

Any small word or gesture on his part could doom himself and everyone he knew. He had to respond without knowing how to avoid catastrophe. "My internal landscape just shifted, Admiral. I have no control over when I'm subjected to a new memory."

"Why would this be happening to you?" Etrhmk asked.

"I don't know." It was almost a lie. He didn't know, but he knew there had to be a reason. He and Demba could not have met by accident, could not be suffering similarly by pure coincidence. And the phrases they had spoken to each other he now knew were used when she was Keshona, when he came to offer her the means to destroy the Rhyan Empire. He and his brother had built a machine that made her small task force supremely deadly.

"You have no theory?" Etrhmk prompted.

"I would not offer you one in my present state of mind."

"I was looking forward to hearing what these memories were."

"They often evaporate before I can retain the details, leaving me with only forceful impressions." Etrhmk waved Pan ahead of him to enter an intraship conveyance. Pan took his time, steadying himself and sitting down. *He killed his own mother! She helped him do it: Demba, Ruby Reed. Keshona. She was Keshona!* He seemed to have denied the meaning of that fact, excused her - excused himself - from the shame and guilt of what he now saw as a crime.

Etrhmk sat down facing Pan and the conveyance moved off through the ship. The vehicle canopy opaqued as they entered a tunnel, then cleared when the vehicle crossed above a scenic commons. The *Eclipse* was a huge ship, a city that sailed among the stars. Admiral Etrhmk was silent for the moment, even though the quiet vehicle afforded him time and privacy for interrogation. Etrhmk watched him with dark and predatory eyes. There was no malice in those eyes, just the promise of relentless pursuit of his prey. Pan had made up his mind that he could not lie about the facts or omit anything about the two Navy officers. But he wouldn't offer his own interpretation of any facts. And if Etrhmk tried to get at this last eruption of his mind, then he *had* to resist. It felt like a true memory and one that should never be revealed. It was one reason why Commodore Keshona was legendary, because only he - and perhaps his brother - knew how Keshona was able to decapitate the Rhyan Empire. The technology must never fall into the hands of a Navy commanded by such people as Etrhmk.

Pan tried to appear calm and interested in the Navy flagship. He could think of nothing to ask and nothing on which to comment, and so the in-ship journey proceeded silently. The tube car came to a stop at a rather more impressive station. Many Marines, heavily armed yet resplendently dressed, populated the large intersection of passageways. The walls were smooth and curved, their surfaces sectioned in several shades of gray, perhaps designating areas of specialized functions. This was a warship, and Pan knew the construction provided for every extreme situation that might occur, but this part of the ship was very refined in concealing its military functions. Etrhmk led him into a short passageway directly across from the transport terminal and between two of the Marines. The Marines came to attention with a slow and simultaneous precision, every movement choreographed fluidly and ending in precisely rendered salutes. Etrhmk seemed to pay them no attention and did not return the salutes. The end of the passage dematerialized and Pan followed into a room that was white on five sides, black on the sixth, and contained a black wood table and chairs. The one black wall was the black of space, an image screen which showed Earth and its moon floating in the void.

Pan sat at the table when Etrhnk gestured toward it. The Navy Commander stood for a moment, perhaps tending to some business that came into his shiplink augment. Etrhnk pulled another chair from the dark table and sat down opposite Pan. Pan removed his recording of the African Space Elevator fight and pushed it across the table to Etrhnk. "A recording you will find interesting." Pan's heart was running with his emotions.

"I saw you carried it; however, it was encrypted and the scan could not download it."

"The key is three. I thought it should have some security. There is no copy."

"Too simple a key for the scan to discover," Etrhnk commented. "Please tell me what it contains. I'll view it later."

"Two Navy officers. The top floor of the African Space Elevator. They are fighting. Admiral Demba kills Captain Horss." If Pan expected Etrhnk to have some reaction to his words, he would have been disappointed. He wasn't disappointed. Etrhnk, an elite Essiin, hid his inner self better than any Essiin Pan had ever known. That Demba could defeat a Navy champion in personal combat should provoke a response great enough to at least cause comment. Etrhnk merely waited for Pan to continue. "There is also a boy," Pan added.

"A boy?" Etrhnk did not even raise an eyebrow, but the query was itself a notable response. "As in male child?"

"His name is Samson. He's about nine years old. Admiral Demba found him near the space elevator. She and Horss followed him into the pedestal building, where he was seriously injured." Pan stopped, hoping Etrhnk would ask questions, so that he would not have to volunteer more information than what was asked of him.

"Continue," Etrhnk ordered, as though knowing Pan's strategy.

Pan related all the facts he knew, including what Horss told him of the Request for Voluntary Reassignment. Pan wanted to ask his own questions but dared not. What would it gain him to know of Etrhnk's reactions and his real attitude toward Demba? There were no arguments to change the Navy Commander's judgments. And such information could come at the cost of his own life. If he learned that his life was already a penalty to pay, then Pan would ask some questions. Etrhnk took a long time to think about what Pan told him, and that was his only clue to the importance he gave any of it.

"Ruby Reed," Etrhnk said at last, leaning back in his chair and tapping the table, once only, with the image-chip Pan had given him. "Tell me what you remember of her."

"I've remembered many moments but the details tend to fade rapidly. She was a nice person but she was often sad. She abused alcohol. She had a great talent but no ambition to become rich and famous."

"You were emotionally involved with her." Etrhnk expected Pan to elaborate.

"I'm sure I was. The feelings are what survive the flashbacks best. I felt very strongly about her. I wanted to protect her. I wanted her to be happy. I sense that I must have failed."

"Tell me about Admiral Demba."

Pan recounted his two meetings with the admiral, omitting the phrases they had unwillingly spoken in the manner of spies identifying each other. Nor did he mention the mental episode she experienced, proving to Pan that she was also having flashbacks like his.

"How does Demba relate to the boy?"

It was a topic Pan did not want to approach. He was sure Demba had an

interest in Samson beyond the pure mystery of him. It was a relationship too vulnerable to whatever Etrhmk might do. It was almost as if Samson represented the possible happiness he had always wanted to give to Ruby Reed. Demba seemed to need an emotional lift. She was nearly as emotionless as Etrhmk when he first met her, but now he saw - or imagined - much more in her. "I wouldn't presume to know, Admiral."

"They are together now. At the home of Rafael de LaGuardia. Why?"

"I sent them there for Rafael's benefit."

"What benefit?"

"To keep Rafael alive." Pan waited for the next question, but Etrhmk also waited. "He's lost interest in living. I thought the admiral and the boy would disturb him enough to change his outlook."

"And did it?"

"It certainly made him draw and paint." Pan could still see the pencil sketches and the oil portrait of the admiral in his mind and barely suppressed a shudder of awe. He had always regarded Rafael as a truly great artist, but this last portrait made him feel foolish in his amateur judgment of Rafael's talent. When the rest of humanity saw this work, Rafael would seize his rightful place among the immortals of art.

"He did well?" Etrhmk probably gained that assumption by every signal of Pan's body from all the equipment that must be monitoring him.

Pan nodded. "Demba proved to be an inspiration to him. His portrait of her is beyond comparison. The best he has done. He also made sketches of her and Samson that were extremely evocative. I'm sorry, I should restrain my emotional statements in your presence."

"You are also an artist. It is your nature." He paused to respond silently to a shiplink message. "Dinner is served. Let us eat."

Pan was hungry, as he had forgotten to eat lunch. They went to an adjoining room where the dinner was set for them on an antique table under a crystal chandelier. Etrhmk asked him to select a piece of music as background. He almost enjoyed the food, and Etrhmk didn't mix interrogation with the meal. He suspected Etrhmk used the time to study everything he told him through his data augment. They took glasses of wine back to the stark black and white room and listened to an Essiin composition chosen by Etrhmk. It seemed the Navy Commander was delaying what would come next. Pan was certain he had not exhausted his topics of interest. When Etrhmk resumed, Pan was almost startled. The music stopped.

"Your name was Harry."

"Yes."

"I found that name linked to Ruby Reed. Harry Jones, a very old and common English name. There was another member of the trio - Richard, nicknamed Dick. No biographical data. Stage names, I assume. Do you remember what happened to Harry?"

"No. I had forgot... Dick..." Another memory assaulted him and confused him. Dick was his brother but there was something wrong in how he remembered him. Then the images flew away, relieving him of their intensity and their threatening content.

"Another flashback?"

"Yes."

"I had the scan chamber sample you genetically. It appears that Harry was half Rhyen, whoever he was."

"Yes." Pan felt his heart sink and send its signal to every detector in the room. "I also have Essiin and Earthian blood."

"Have you remembered anything about your parents?"

"Yes. My mother. She died in Keshona's attack."

"If you are Harry, you are old enough to have had at least one full rejuvenation. By a Mnro Clinic. Do you see the implication?"

"The Mnro Clinic record - and my Citizen Record - must be in error."

"I think the Mnro Clinic has sampled your identity enough times to have your record correct."

"The director of the Earth Mnro Clinic is an insistent friend," Pan responded, now even more worried about Sugai Mai. "I'm often checked even when I don't see the need."

"In between the time of Ruby Reed and Harry Jones and your current traceable history lies the Rhyan War. A blank spot, except you remember your mother died in the Massacre. Is that all you remember?"

"I was in the war. That is what my latest memories involve."

"In what capacity?"

"Those are memories I won't describe for you."

"You disappoint me."

"I knew I would."

"You were Rhyan military?"

Pan took a long sip of his wine and set the glass down. "Thank you for dinner, Admiral."

Section 014

Collateral Death

"It's over. The shadow government has accepted our terms." He stood at a glass window that gave a view of an arid rural vista. He didn't respond. She knew something was wrong. She knew everything was wrong. "Where is your mother?" He handed her a plastic card. She knew what it was and what it meant. Helplessly, she asked the questions that would verify and finalize tragedy. "This is her transponder. She isn't here? She left her transponder here and went somewhere?" He nodded. He wouldn't look at her. She couldn't see his face, and that was probably best. The military procedure was quite distant and abstract, until now. "When? Not before the procedure, I hope."

He cleared his throat. When he spoke he sounded resigned, but no less grief-stricken. "I told her what I thought would happen, the last time I saw her. She was appalled. Even though she felt the need of it, I don't think she could justify any loss of life. We discussed the ethics of it for a long time. Finally I told her the mismanagement of the Rhyian Empire wasn't the most important threat to the Union. We were, in effect, unwilling instruments of that threat. And we would proceed at any cost and at any risk."

She turned away from him, spoke to the empty room in the house where he was a child. It was strange that she felt nothing, yet she knew what she should feel. "What greater threat? I've never understood your reference. She left the transponder here, so that you would think her safe at home?"

"I suspect she was with that largest group of nobility. My mother probably tried to arrange their meeting in the isolated estate in order to minimize the loss of life. I suspect she intended to die with them, rather than live with the guilt of killing anyone."

It mattered greatly to her that this young man should know how wrong she felt all of this was. She knew it would forever poison their relationship. Fortunately, neither of them would be allowed to remember any of this. "We'll begin a search for her. We hoped she would lead the new government."

"I killed my mother," he said.

She closed her eyes and willed the years to pass.

She blinked. The light of another day went dark. The light of the studio entered her eyes. Rafael still sat on a stool surrounded by his paintings and sculpture. The Rhyian who took Samson in the morning still stood behind Rafael. Time restarted.

"My God!" Rafael exclaimed. "How can you still sing so well!"

Fidelity didn't understand Rafael's words, not hearing them above the clamor of her thoughts: her reaction to the flashback she just had. Was it a real memory that belonged to her, that spoke a truth of her past? She didn't want to believe it but it, like the other visions, contained a pain that seemed to fit her, like a well-earned punishment. She felt agony and grief to discover who she had been. It was not a total surprise, for she had some warning of the possibility from a source she had ignored. She took several moments to gather herself together, then managed to speak. "Good evening, Jarwekh."

"Good evening, Admiral Demba," Jarwekh rumbled.

Rafael turned around to see the big Rhyian. "Jarwekh. Isn't Pan with you?"

"He didn't come. He was invited to dinner. I believe he's aboard the Navy flagship."

"Etrhmk is here." So soon would she be held to account for her sin against the Navy Commander. So soon would she lose Samson.

"That is my understanding," Jarwekh said. "I saw Pan's communications log." She knew the Rhyan was a deputy for Pan and had access to his dwelling.

"And Captain Horss?" she asked.

"He remains at the residence. He doesn't know I'm here."

"Why are you here?" She asked the question because she was impatient. Jarwekh seemed in no hurry to do what she guessed he might do. She had seen the tattoos on his arms, knew he was in the Rhyan military at the time of the war. He had been a member of an elite unit serving the royal families, a unit that was almost totally destroyed in what the Rhyans called the Massacre.

"There was a question I wanted to ask," he replied in his deep voice.

She knew what the question would be. What perfect timing, that her memory of Pan and the death of his mother had just assaulted her, proving beyond doubt that the steel person within her was Keshona, murderer of millions of Rhyans. A moment of silence extended to more silent moments, without Jarwekh continuing. "You want to know if I am Keshona." She was puzzled and irritated that he couldn't bring forth what must be of unique importance to him. They stared at each other. It seemed unfair that she must inherit this burden of a crime she committed as another person. Curiously, the big Rhyan still didn't set off alarms in her defense system.

"Why would he ask that question?" Rafael wondered, a troubled surprise on his wrinkled face.

"How would you anticipate such a question?" Jarwekh asked. "Unless..."

"Apparently I bear some resemblance to the commodore," Fidelity said, "even though official images of her no longer exist. There are a few young female Navy officers who identify me as Keshona, perhaps for the purpose of finding meaning in otherwise boring lives. They often visited Archives to catch a glimpse of me. It was annoying. As to why Jarwekh asks the question - it's the duty of every surviving Rhyan soldier to seek vengeance upon the person who killed so many of their people. I believe they always carry a picture of Keshona with them."

"Let me see it!" Rafael demanded.

"I no longer carry it," Jarwekh said. "I thought I remembered her features."

Rafael looked at Fidelity and back at the tall Rhyan, seeming to plead with each of them. "She can't be Keshona! She's a great singer, not a mass murderer."

"She is indeed a great singer," Jarwekh agreed. "I would hate for her to also be Keshona. I didn't ask the question. I don't expect an answer. I don't need to know. I don't need vengeance. I think the fire went out of me when I was killed by Pan and rejuvenated. For a brief while today I thought I had the fire again. I'm afraid I gave some provocative news to another who still burns. So let my unspoken question be a warning. He will speak the question and will not care what you answer. But I've heard you sing and I prefer to believe you are the singer Pan seeks, not the murderer who destroyed my family. I am ashamed and dishonored for my actions."

Jarwekh began to back into the dark. Fidelity was shocked as the praise of her singing began to have meaning for her. How could she be that good as a singer? She held up a hand to stop Jarwekh from leaving. She responded to the big Rhyan emotionally, strangely grateful to be called a great singer, as though that should have special meaning for her. But she had received the first evidence of her crime from within her own self and knew she was guilty.

"Tell him nothing!" Rafael pleaded. "Or tell him you're not Keshona!"

She looked sadly at Rafael as she spoke to Jarwekh. "Here's the truth, Jarwekh. I may have been Keshona. I don't trust yet what I think are my lost memories. What I want to believe is that too many people have wasted their lives hating a person who could never have wanted to do what she did. The body of that person may stand before you, but whoever I am, even though I accept the guilt and the punishment, I'm not her."

Jarwekh came out of the dark beyond the doorway and stared at Fidelity for a long time. Rafael rose to stand between him and Fidelity. Jarwekh towered over the old man. Finally Jarwekh seemed to come to a decision and his posture relaxed. "I was always large," Jarwekh said, placing a hand gently on Rafael's shoulder. "I could bully others because of it. My mother kept warning me to stay out of trouble. She always told me to put myself in the shoes of a smaller person and try to imagine how they would feel. I lacked that sensitivity for some time. My father told me that, big as I was, there was always someone bigger, and that I would learn a painful lesson one day. I did. Only then did my sensitivity develop. Only then did I begin to see that others were as full of life and desire as I was.

"I've spent a lifetime trying to imagine what kind of person would kill ten million Rhyans, including my parents. I dared imagine the person could be not different from me, but simply unfortunate to have been given the task. I never imagined a wonderful singer could have done that evil deed. If she did, I forgive her, because I know she suffered for it and truly couldn't have ever wanted to do it. Good night, Admiral Demba, Rafael." Jarwekh disappeared into the night.

"Damn," Rafael said. "Damn!" For a long time he stood looking at the darkness beyond the doorway. When he turned back around Fidelity awaited his reaction. From now on she would always expect judgment and loss. She who never had friends would always have none. He looked away from her, then frowned and met her gaze. "I always make the mistake of falling in love with an image of the person and not wanting them to be less than how perfect I can make them. You were so strong and yet so tender, a wonderfully complex figure. You had secrets and depth and power, yet you could be a mother to the boy and humor an old man who thinks he can still paint. It isn't correct for me to make a fantasy of you. It didn't help that Pan was so captivated by you. And your appearance in the night carrying a wounded child certainly affected me greatly. I listen to myself now, and I know I'm an old fool. And I don't care! How am I to judge where reality overcomes fantasy? Did you kill millions? Did you save billions? That was a long time ago. All I see now is a woman wearing a yellow dress, standing in my studio, who can sing like an angel."

She felt some relief. At least in the short time remaining she would have a valued friend. "You're the ultimate romantic, Rafael."

"No, that would be Pan."

* * *

Jarwekh materialized in the transmat terminal. As the reference field released him to consciousness, he started at the crowded chamber. He saw Daidaunkh first, standing apart from the others but not far from Denna. Then his gaze swept around and found Captain Horss and Fred the android. The postures and the weapon in Daidaunkh's hand told Jarwekh the plot of things. He stepped down from the transmat focus and walked toward Daidaunkh. He stopped when

Daidaunkh made a slight gesture with his weapon. Daidaunkh didn't trust him. Daidaunkh trusted no one.

"I heard her sing," Jarwekh said. "Pan was correct. She is a great singer."

"She sang for you, did she?" Daidaunkh said, sounding fairly sober. "I never knew you had such a way with women."

"It was Rafael who found a way to make her sing." Jarwekh knew it was hopeless to explain and delay with words. "She listened to a recording and remembered how to sing the song. I was quite moved. This is the truth."

"That's all? You listened to her sing a song and you came back? Why did you go there at all, and without me?"

"I didn't know we had a plan to go tonight."

"The Marines are in town," Denna said. "They're snooping around, asking questions. The Boss is on the Navy flagship and may not come back down. Would that be why you picked tonight to go visit the admiral at Rafael's?"

"I discovered in the communications log that he talked to Admiral Etrhnhk," Jarwekh answered. "I did see an opportunity to have my own visit with Admiral Demba and ask her a question."

"What was your question?" Daidaunkh demanded. "What was her answer?"

"I didn't ask the question, after I heard her sing."

"What kind of fool are you?" Daidaunkh exclaimed. "I sensed there was something different about you the moment you appeared. I hoped you killed her. But she killed you. Get out of the way! I have my own question to ask!"

"You'll have to kill me first. Before you can finish with me, Fred or the Captain will be on you."

"She *is* Keshona!" Daidaunkh declared. "I can see the truth in your eyes! You let her lie to you, knowing it was a lie!"

"She answered the question I did not ask. She was Keshona. And I will not let you kill her unless you first kill me." Jarwekh took another step toward Daidaunkh.

Daidaunkh quickly grabbed Denna by her blonde hair, snatched her up against him, and put the weapon's muzzle to the base of her skull. "Denna will be first to die, not you! I'll give her the final death, if you don't step aside and send us both to Rafael's. You know I'll do it. She wants to die. It will be a kindness. Then I'll kill as many of the rest of you as I can."

Jarwekh took another step forward. Daidaunkh forced the weapon brutally up under the blonde hair. "Do it, do it, do it," Denna whispered over and over.

* * *

"Is there some place you and Samson can hide?" Fidelity asked.

"Into the darkness," Rafael replied. "Into the trees. Do you intend to stay and fight?"

"Yes."

"No! You don't know how many old Rhyans are on Earth! There is room within the barrier for us to hide for a long time, at least until morning."

"And in the morning?"

"Perhaps Pan will have returned. What else can we do?"

Fidelity thought Etrhnhk would detain Pan indefinitely, now that she remembered how important Pan was in the War. She couldn't count on him returning soon. Obviously she couldn't see Captain Horss wanting to help her, except if he thought Samson was endangered. She would take Samson and

Rafael into retreat, but she felt it was not the final solution to the threat of the Rhyans. Ironically, Etrhmk was probably the only one who could save her - save her for himself.

Rafael rushed to gather food and a few supplies in the dark while Fidelity went to wake Samson. She dressed him and picked him up, since he seemed unable to come completely awake. She heard a loud noise in the house and angry muttering from Rafael. He came to them in the dark and limped after them as they exited the house.

They hurried through the humid night and into the trees, Fidelity still carrying Samson. Gator growled and lagged behind. Rafael stopped and took hold of the big dog by his collar. Through the silhouetted branches they could see the first small flames race up the side of the studio.

"The paintings!" Fidelity cried.

"There's nothing we can do," Rafael said.

"Stay here." She put Samson down and started toward the flames.

"No, don't go back! We can keep running. They won't find us."

"You're too aged to run all night. And you're limping."

"I bruised my shin on a table in the dark. I can go on."

"No one has the right to destroy your life's work."

"It's too late! You can't stop the fire!"

"Everyone should be held accountable for their actions. Including me. Stay here."

* * *

Daidaunkh pulled Denna up the ramp to the focus of the transmat, his weapon still jammed tightly against her head. He stopped just short of the focus and worked the controls. "I'm changing the password. The machine doesn't know me, so it will require your authentication." He addressed Jarwekh. "Move slowly. Don't even think about trying to save Denna."

The emitter barrel of the pistol hurt Denna's neck and Daidaunkh's grasp on her hair hurt her scalp. She had first reacted to his use of her as a hostage as the opportunity to die quickly and permanently. Then she remembered the boy. When the transmat winked them into the protected zone of Rafael's residence, she shoved Daidaunkh away from her.

"Give me the weapon!" she demanded.

"What? Why?"

"I don't care what you do to the admiral, but I'll kill you if you harm the boy!"

"You can kill me anyway! But wait until I rip her heart out!"

"She's an admiral, Daida. An *old* admiral. She must know how to defend herself."

"It doesn't matter! Even if she kills me, it doesn't matter! I will have my turn at her!" He pointed to the studio. "I'll look there. The light's still on. You take the house."

A few minutes later Denna rejoined Daidaunkh and they stood in the yard between buildings.

"Not there," Denna reported.

"I think they just left," Daidaunkh said. "Jarwekh warned them. They're hiding in the trees. I no longer have my military augments. It will be difficult to trap them. The admiral should be able to see and hear better than I."

"I don't like this place!" Denna complained. "Too many memories!" She made an adjustment on the pistol. She pointed it at the house. In a few seconds the wood siding started to char and smoke, then a hole punched through the wall and something inside ignited.

"What are you doing?" Daidaunkh protested, reaching to take the weapon away from Denna.

"Burning my past!" She dodged his grasp and pointed the pistol at the studio. It took only seconds for fire to erupt inside. The flames built into an inferno on either side of them. They didn't see the figure in a yellow dress until she arrived very near them. "I remember that dress!" Denna shouted. "That's *my* dress! You can't wear my dress!"

Daidaunkh heard her words above the roar of the fire. He stopped her when she aimed the weapon at the admiral. He bent close and spoke into Denna's ear. "Don't shoot her! Even if she kills me! Leave her for another to kill." He approached the admiral, coming close enough that she could hear him when he raised his voice. "Are you the one who was called Keshona?"

"Part of me was. What is your name?"

"Daidaunkh!"

"Daidaunkh, House of Illiianth, son of Daisaukh and Ciriaandh. You're a long time into your family years. Where are your wife and children? I know your Intended died in the Massacre, but there are always others who would help you continue your house."

She spoke the Rhyan royal language flawlessly, startling Daidaunkh. "How do you know of me? Is it your hobby to know the survivors of the Massacre? Why would you possess such knowledge so close to your tongue?"

"I don't know, Daidaunkh. It's a surprise to me as well. Why do you burn the life and great works of Rafael de LaGuardia? It isn't right."

"She hates this place where her son was born and died." Daidaunkh indicated his female companion. "Denna burns it. I don't think it will make her any happier."

"What will make you happier?" Fidelity watched the Rhyan but also studied the blonde woman who claimed ownership of the yellow dress. Denna. That name was in the title of Rafael's most important portraits. His wife... a different color... but the eyes... yes, the eyes.

"You murdered my family!" the Rhyan shouted at her. "My Intended! The family of my Intended! And so many other Rhyan! You ask a *needless* question!"

"Nothing you do will make you happier tonight. All that remains of Keshona is what will continue your suffering. You've found her body, but I beg you to wait for another time to have your revenge."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes."

The Rhyan moved quickly and the first blow grazed Fidelity. She observed the attack by Daidaunkh as though standing apart from the two persons engaged in combat and watching at a slow rate of time. Again and again her avatar allowed her larger opponent near contact but no effective strikes.

"I told you!" Denna shouted. "She's just playing with you!"

Fidelity sensed a change in the Rhyan, a turn toward desperation, an elevation to frenzy. Daidaunkh rushed her, giving up his defenses, gambling that he could absorb some punishment in order to inflict a greater damage to Fidelity. She moved, just enough, not taking advantage of his tactic but simply

avoiding him - much as she did with Captain Horss - waiting for him to tire. That she could react so quickly, that she could anticipate so accurately, still amazed her. That she could have the time and perspective to think about such things in the heat of combat further impressed her. Who was she? *What* was she?

Finally understanding she wouldn't move against him, Daidaunkh paused to catch his breath.

"The boy, Daida!" Denna shouted over the firestorm. "The boy!" The roar of combustion could not wash away the pain in her words. She waved the weapon and appeared greatly agitated.

Fidelity turned to see Samson hopping on his one leg toward her, trying to hold onto a dog bigger than he was. Gator broke loose, rushed by her, barking a warning or a challenge. Denna shot the dog and he collapsed, plowing into the ground at her feet. Fidelity felt the fringe of the weapon's beam and knew Gator received a paralyzing shock to his nervous system. He died instantly. Denna looked down on the dog, almost dropping the weapon as she staggered back a few steps. Daidaunkh chose the moment of distraction to charge Fidelity. Without even looking at him, she caught his wrist and made him turn in a direction he could only resist. She felt one of his forearm bones snap. As he spun into the ground she caught his lower leg under her foot and broke it.

Samson tried to hop past Fidelity to Gator but she put a hand out to stop him. Samson looked with grave concern at the still body of Gator. Daidaunkh struggled briefly on the ground until the extent of his injuries forced him into a painful stillness.

Denna held the weapon on Fidelity, her eyes - her famous tragic eyes, blue not brown - darting to Gator, to Daidaunkh, to Samson, and back to Fidelity, clearly afraid to look away from her for too long. "Are you badly hurt?" Denna called to Daidaunkh. He turned his face away from her.

"Gator!" Samson called out to the dog. "Gator! Get up, Gator! Come here!"

The firelight sparkled on Denna's garment and inflamed her blonde hair. When she turned in just the right direction her eyes glowed like opals. Demons of emotion chased each other across her perfect features. She held her weapon unsteadily, not pointing it directly at Fidelity, perhaps reluctant to fire with Daidaunkh and Samson so close to her. Fidelity was almost certain the woman would not shoot. She felt empathy for Denna and great disappointment in herself for having forced this confrontation.

"Tell me what to do, Daida!"

Daidaunkh only looked up at Fidelity, and though his dark eyes were full of hate for her, he said nothing and would not turn to Denna.

"I can't wait any longer!" Denna shouted in agony.

Fidelity saw Rafael behind Denna and let surprise change her expression. Denna reacted to her and tried to see who was behind her. Fidelity rushed forward, hoping to prevent injury to both Denna and Rafael. Rafael swung a piece of charred lumber, stumbling as he limped hurriedly toward Denna. Denna tried to turn back to Fidelity despite the threat from Rafael.

"No!" Fidelity cried.

Rafael seemed desperate to prevent Denna from shooting Fidelity. As Denna turned back to Fidelity she tried to blindly duck the coming blow from Rafael. Rafael's legs propelled him so unsteadily he couldn't aim the arc of his club. Just by chance it struck Denna solidly. The weapon fell from her hand. She collapsed in Fidelity's arms.

Denna convulsed as Fidelity lowered her carefully to the ground. She knelt beside Denna as she slowed her convulsions and became still. Her opal eyes sparkled in the firelight, released the tragedy of her life, and didn't close. Rafael dropped to his knees beside her and touched her, stroked her bare arm. Ash fell on them, and Denna's pale arm was streaked with gray.

"What have I done?" Rafael cried. "Denna? Denna! Forgive me!"

"Do you have a head-bag?" Fidelity asked, shivering at the prospect of using such a device.

"She wouldn't want that," Rafael replied mournfully. "That has already happened to her. I killed her! I killed my son and now I've killed my wife!"

Section 015

The Golden Visitor

Navy Commander Admiral Etrhmk was actually embarrassed, and immediately knew the visit was a prelude to punishment. There was no doubt his visitor was female, even though she was artfully concealed in a high-fashion Essiin ensemble. She was playing at being Essiin, daring to let that glimpse of golden surfaces pass for a body remodeling. That the Essiin could let their sense of aesthetics overbear their logical pursuits always remained a mystery to Etrhmk. He was embarrassed to receive this female in public, not wanting the storm of speculation it would arouse concerning his personal life. Privacy was vital in keeping his power and position. Embarrassment, of course, did not reach beyond the secrecy of his thoughts, and despite the calamity this Golden One might bring, he admired her courage. He was relieved when he finally escorted her into the absolute privacy of his suite on the *Eclipse*. He was relieved to let his stunted emotions rest from what little they were stimulated.

"That was too quick!" the Golden One complained. "I wanted to have a look around! Did you think I was too exposed? You know they would never believe I was a *real* alien. Aliens are supposed to be small and green, anyway. My, you are a large one, aren't you? My name is Constant."

She made to offer her hand in greeting but Etrhmk dared not take it. Her hand had no thumb. "A pleasure," he lied, or thought he lied. He watched as she raised the light veil and removed her hat - a hat with feathers. And there were feathers under the hat, on her head, and on her face. And they *moved*.

"You've seen one of us before?"

"No, but I've heard accurate descriptions."

"You're the cool one." She looked him up and down.

Etrhmk decided the alien's corruption of Standard came from old English, perhaps Twenglish. If his final days were at hand, at least he would satisfy his curiosity about the Golden Ones. "If you find my manner objectionable I must insist that I cannot easily change."

Constant removed a layer of clothing, perhaps trying to be provocative, until she was only covered by a loose undergarment. Etrhmk could imagine, seeing the natural golden covering of her exposed limbs, that clothing was uncomfortable for her. She piled the removed garments and hat on the black table, gave the black/white room a quick survey, and turned her great blue eyes back to Etrhmk. "Your manner is legendary but I would deem it a challenge. If we have time. Find anything interesting happening on Earth?"

Etrhmk was now certain of his impending doom. "Yes. Two officers of mine encountered a child and a monster, and there is a rumor of a ghost also."

"That is certainly interesting."

"Should I exercise less curiosity?"

"Tell me what you know."

Etrhmk told the alien female absolutely every piece of information he had gathered, and while he spoke she revolved around him, studying him. He didn't try to follow her with his gaze but the sight of her was interesting. She was more human than he thought was normal for her species. Neither was she as threatening as legend called for but Etrhmk knew her power was supreme. When he finished she had no questions about what he recounted. She did have questions about him.

"So young," the Golden One remarked. "How old are you in Earth years, Navy Commander?"

"I don't know exactly, but I believe I may be forty-eight."

"Old for a barbarian, eh?"

"I must not have the death gene. It is not clear how far my lineage entwines with theirs but I seem to have a majority of Essiin heritage."

"You are the best fake Essiin I've ever seen." Constant almost reached out to touch the dark skin of his cheek. "Rare, yet totally convincing. Your makers had a flare for the dramatic. You almost flaunt the crazy Essiin culture back at them. You can come out of the act around me, if you wish."

"It seems impossible now." She apparently discounted Etrhmk's earlier statement about his Essiin self control.

"We'll work on it! It seems such a shame. So much wasted. Are you still in good fighting trim? You look like you are."

"It is a necessary condition of the occupation." The Golden One knew this. She probably knew the answer to every question she would put to him. It would be interesting to see if he could learn her purpose for such unnecessary talk. It occurred to him there was no risk to asking questions of her, since he had so little life remaining. "How old are you?"

"Ah! A question! Excellent! Answer: I don't know. However, I am certain I'm the oldest of all of us. The approximate number is efficiently expressed using scientific notation. In base ten the exponent would be six."

Etrhmk allowed himself to blink at the reply. The legends said the Golden Ones were immortal. The legends were correct. "You appear quite young."

"Thank you! I'm sure I look hardly a day over a millennium. Are you having any fun? What do I call you? Etrhmk? Big E? I'm only trying to be friendly, not disrespectful. I know what you've been through to make it here and stay here. You are a legend among barbarians. You're almost too good to be true. I've known many of your predecessors and there is no comparison."

"Thank you." Her remark did not gratify him. There was no pleasure in what he had accomplished. He saw his life as a natural progression based on his abilities. He saw his job as useful to civilization. Without his effort and the efforts of his predecessors, the barbarians would have ruined everything. It was regrettable the process was brutal, that it contradicted what little he appreciated of Essiin aesthetics. "Why have you come to see me?"

"Oh, I think you know." She finally stopped wandering around him. She sat on the black table and dangled her golden legs, swinging her feet. He stared at her, because she probably wanted him to stare at her. What did such an ancient creature do to keep from dying of boredom? She cocked her feathered face to one side, targeting him with her large blue eyes. "I *thought* I knew why I came to meet you. Maybe I *did* know. Maybe now I *don't*. Don't expect so much of me, simply because I'm old. Would you like to touch me?"

He hesitated to reply. He knew it was expected of him. "Yes."

She laughed. "I don't kiss on the first date. Don't worry. There's nothing you can or can't do that I'll hold against you. But first, let me see the painting."

Section 016

Digging Graves

"There's someone lying on the ground," Jarwekh said.

"Oh, no!" Mai exclaimed.

Denna, Horss said to himself, easily able to discern her distinctive clothing and luminous features. It was also easy for his augmented eyesight to detect the stillness of her form and footprints in the ash around her body. He knew *Denna* was dead. He almost wanted to turn back and remove himself from this business. It was *Demba's* fault. How many more bodies would she leave in her wake? He observed from a height that disclosed the extent of destruction surrounding *Denna*, all darkness of ash and smoke, with her as the single bright spot, as though she had been protected from the ash.

It was just before sunrise. Fred and Jarwekh had worked all night on the transmat but had never found the password *Daidaunkh* had used. Horss and Jarwekh then walked to the *Mnro Clinic*. There they found *Sugai Mai* asleep on a cot after spending several hours in the Clinic's Emergency Room. It seemed *Mai* was not only the director of the clinic but also its only regular employee. *Daidaunkh* had disabled communication at *Pan's* residence, leaving as the only option a hike of several kilometers to the *Mnro Clinic* in the dark of night. Horss was tempted to try a shiplink call to the *Eclipse* but couldn't overcome his aversion to asking for help from that direction. It was as though the ship and that part of his life had changed meaning for him, a meaning he could no longer enjoy. He worried about *Samson* but knew that if *Demba* couldn't protect him, there wasn't any hope that he could.

Mai awoke, absorbed the news about *Daidaunkh*, and called in someone to staff the clinic. Then she packed her medical gear and invited them to join her in the clinic's ambulance.

"I'll try a slow descent and see if we encounter resistance from the protective field," Horss said, taking the aircar out of its orbit of the property and directing it toward the body that lay between the remains of two burned buildings.

Horss had been tense, piloting the car in the open sky, following the faint remnants of old highways in the relentless overgrowth of subtropical vegetation. More than once he regretted asking to pilot the vehicle. It was not a matter of Navy ego that he wanted to fly the ambulance. Or maybe it was, if his ego felt diminished by this little fear of planetary openness. Now the phobia was washed from his mind by the notion of *Denna's* violent death. Smoke from the smoldering structures rose above them on either side, tinted orange by the rising sun.

The aircar met no repulsion by any defensive force. Horss picked the landing spot and let the ambulance lower itself to the ground. *Mai* popped open her door first and rushed to *Denna*. She touched *Denna's* neck with her fingertips, frowned, moved them to her chest, under the shiny dress. She withdrew her hand. Horss didn't need to ask about *Denna's* condition.

"She's beyond resurrection?" Jarwekh asked, pain in his low voice.

"I promised her I wouldn't try. Yes, it's too late."

"How did she die?" Horss was hardly able to do more than brush his gaze past the corpse. *Denna* seemed so distant from this fate in the few moments he'd known her, despite the tragic nature of her life.

Mai used a small instrument to scan the body. "Her neck is broken."

"Where are they?" Horss asked. He looked around, feeling the *wrongness* of the situation. "They should be here. They wouldn't have left Denna this way."

"Perhaps the forest," Jarwekh said, kneeling by Denna. The big Rhyan had no tears for Denna but Horss heard the sound of grief in Jarwekh's three words.

"They won't be there," Horss said. "We won't find them."

Mai stood up and scanned the area with another instrument. "Over there." She led Horss and Jarwekh toward a small fenced area at the edge of the clearing.

"The grave of Rafael's son," Jarwekh said.

They gathered at a grassy plot of land surrounded by a picket fence and overhung by an old oak. There was a bronze plaque affixed to a slab of granite to mark one grave. The name Daniel was cast in the bronze with the words: "Beloved son of Denna and Rafael." There were smaller graves with smaller markers nearby, perhaps containing the remains of pets. They saw the body of a large dog lying next to the beginning of a hole that was its intended grave.

"Gator," Mai said, "Rafael's dog. They were trying to bury him but were interrupted."

"Where is Daidaunkh?" Jarwekh asked. "I think he would also be dead."

"Are there any other transmats on Earth?" Horss asked. Jarwekh shook his head in reply. Horss stared up at the old oak and saw it wasn't a healthy tree, its leaves sparse, its branches over-populated with Spanish moss. The next thunderstorm or hurricane would likely bring some of its limbs down upon the graves. Was it over? Had Etrhmk taken Demba and Samson? Why was he waiting to take his former captain back to the *Eclipse*? Horss was sure Etrhmk knew exactly where he was. Horss didn't want to return to the *Eclipse*, and it was now obvious he would not be allowed to return to his former post.

Mai picked up a shovel and started to dig the grave deeper for Gator. He was a good dog. She remembered him when Rafael brought him to her as a puppy. "He has big feet," she told Rafael. "He'll be a large dog. He'll knock you down. Let me do something for your bones and your strength." Rafael laughed his refusal. It was just an animal, yet its death added more to the tragedy of Denna's death than Mai would have expected. It was innocent of human affairs, never understanding the possible consequences of its instinctive loyalty. And she knew the dog as well as she knew Denna. Gator caused her to add veterinary medicine to her duties.

Jarwekh took the shovel from Mai and dug the grave more quickly. When they laid Gator to rest and covered him over, Jarwekh started on the grave for Denna.

"I must take her back for legal reasons," Mai said. "Pan will want to see the body also."

"I know," Jarwekh said. "I need to dig. Tell me when you're ready to leave."

Mai walked slowly back along the trail in the ash to where Denna's body lay. She paused to gaze at that uncommon sight - a dead person beyond her science to revive - then went to the aircar and began looking in its compartments. Horss knelt by Denna's body. Mai could see he was very uncomfortable. He made angry swipes with his hand to keep the flies away from Denna. When Mai returned he helped her wrap the body in the sheet of plastic she found in the aircar. Horss carried the body to the vehicle and put it inside.

"Did anyone die in the fire?" Horss asked.

"I don't think so. It will take time to survey the residue. But all of Rafael's paintings and many of his sculptures must be destroyed. Will you call your

ship?"

"No."

Mai could infer several things, hearing Horss's minimal response. He was angry. He was worried. If he would not call the Navy flagship and request an investigation or an explanation, that was tantamount to ending his Navy career. His reaction pleased her. "Pan hasn't returned." Mai was thinking about the probable connection to the disappearance of Samson and the others. They might all be on the Navy Commander's ship.

"She was a nicer person than she thought she was."

It took Mai a moment to realize Horss was speaking of Denna. It took that same moment for her to realize the loss of Denna from her own life mattered much more than she thought it would.

Mai turned away from Horss. He could see she was finally reacting to the situation. He listened to Jarwekh digging under the oak while he waited for Mai to recover her composure.

"There are so few people on earth," Mai said, "most of them in one place. Because of my profession, I meet almost everyone sooner or later. A few, like Denna, I've known for years. I always try to avoid becoming too involved with people like Denna. All people, actually. I think I need to retain as much objectivity as possible to be an effective physician. I realize now that I've never been objective about Denna. She was someone you couldn't ignore. Good or bad, she was a *force*. She was Rafael's wife. I wish I'd known her then. The person I knew was so self-absorbed, I just wanted to strangle her! She was always hurting herself. I treated her wounds so many times and always knew it was a cry for help. Yet she wouldn't let anyone help her. I think she needed Rafael but he was afraid to confront her. Why is our medical science still so ineffective in treating mental injuries?"

"She blamed him for their son's death." Horss realized now who Denna was. The wife of an important artist. The subject of famous portraits. The mother of a dead son.

"She blamed herself, or else she wouldn't have suffered so." Mai turned around to face Horss. She frowned. "How can the Navy justify detaining Pan?"

"Can you imagine anyone denying the Navy Commander anything he wants?"

"Why would he want Pan?"

"Let me tell you what happened when he met Demba." Horss told Mai everything he'd heard from Pan prior to his departure.

"Pan thought he was becoming someone else," Mai said. "I always knew he was someone else. Doctor Mnro - as legend has it - can parse a person's DNA by sight and smell. I have some of that talent myself. When I first came to Earth and met Pan as a patient, I suspected he wasn't exactly what his genetic record said he was. But how could I question the integrity of the Clinic's database?"

"I don't think that was what he meant. It was memories of being someone he didn't know he'd been. My guess is that Pan has proved to be a very interesting individual. He has a connection to Demba, and Etrhkn wants time to investigate him."

"Nevertheless, I'm fairly certain Pan didn't realize he was not mainly Essiin. He looks Earthian but he's mainly Rhyan."

"You broke some Clinic rules?" Horss hoped Miss Perfect wasn't so perfect.

"I had to know. I did the analysis outside the Clinic's records. I never told anyone. I soon came to understand that Pan was - how to put it? - special. He's

special to the Mnro Clinic. Almost every time I have him in the clinic for an injury or examination, the next day I'll get a call from Doctor Mnro herself, wanting to know how he is. And if he doesn't get seen by the Clinic for more than a year, I'll get a call from her. Pan thinks Doctor Mnro simply loves the Mother Earth Opera. It must be more than that. I think I'm the only Clinic director who talks so regularly with Doctor Mnro. Pan is important to her. If she knew Etrhnk was holding him, she'd do something about it."

"You should call her."

"If he isn't home by tonight I will."

Section 017

An Algebra of Ethics

"One of the most beautiful sights in the universe, not only because of pattern and color, but because of its diverse nature and its mystery. Instantly recognized by everyone. The most hospitable planet known, even in its damaged state. Yet, it's a dangerous place, even lethal." Navy Commander Etrhnk turned to face his guest and motioned for the armed Marine escort to leave them in private. He examined the Opera Master to see there was no obvious physical injury to him. He was uncomfortable in detaining Pan and restricted in how he could use forced interrogation. This long into his term as Navy Commander, he was losing trust in his barbarian staff. "I'm performing a small experiment," Etrhnk added.

Pan waited as the Marines departed. He waited for Etrhnk to say more. Behind Etrhnk Earth was a cloudy crescent, its night side glowing palely in reflected moonlight. Pan said nothing. He didn't resent his imprisonment. He didn't wonder at Etrhnk's purposes. He hardly had room in his turbulent mind to consider anything other than the visions that erupted from some hidden volcano of burning-real imagery.

"In your brief absence from Earth much has happened down there," Etrhnk said, turning away from Pan, leaving him at his back. "The artist's residence had a transmat visitor just after nightfall, then two more soon after. When the second visitors arrived a fire started. Two structures were destroyed. I sent down a probe. It observed the violent deaths of a woman and a dog."

Pan found his voice. "A woman?"

"Perhaps you would care to see."

The view of crescent Earth vanished, replaced by a terrestrial scene illuminated by firelight. The perspective rushed toward distant human figures standing between burning buildings. The flight of the probe halted, the picture stabilized, and the field of view adjusted to include the appearance of another person from around the side of one blazing structure.

"Rafael," Pan said, seeing his old friend hobble into the scene carrying a stick of wood.

The scene froze as all participants became visible: Rafael poised to attack, Denna with her back to him, Demba starting to rush toward Denna, Gator collapsed on the ground, Samson standing on one leg, Daidaunkh trapped on the ground with some kind of injury, the flames paused in their feast of home and art, the night forest illuminated by the inferno into a backdrop for this scene of violence.

"This is the woman who will die." Etrhnk pointed to Denna in her sparkling dress. "Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"If you don't wish to see what happens, we can stop here."

"Stop."

"I overheard a conversation in which the artist said his wife wouldn't want to be restored to life."

"You didn't interfere."

"You would have?"

"She was my daughter."

"Then I have erred."

"You may add your error to the end of the long list concerning Denna." Pan

felt the ache of grief enter his throat. The death of Denna ended an era. He would mourn her with less restraint when he had the necessary privacy, but it would be difficult to wait.

Etrhmk allowed some time to pass before he spoke again. "I analyzed the action and I believe the death was accidental. Admiral Demba attempted to disarm the woman. The artist was apparently trying to distract the woman by striking her on the back. Unfortunately, the artist stumbled and the woman moved the wrong way. The blow broke her neck. Your daughter was the wife of Rafael de LaGuardia. Some of the most famous paintings in Earthian culture bear her likeness. But she was African."

"Denna suffered a great personal tragedy." The effort to force words around the grief was hurting his throat. "She was never African again."

"You sent Admiral Demba to the artist because she is African, as was his wife."

"Do the Essiin in any way appreciate the emotional content of life?"

"Are we not all human in the deepest analysis?" Etrhmk asked. "Perhaps we who starve ourselves of it appreciate emotion more than do Earthians and Rhyans. When dealing with such humans, it's a vital type of data to analyze, yet I do it poorly."

"Why is *this* vital?" Pan wanted the meeting with Etrhmk to end.

"Things are happening. I understand little of it. I need to understand all of it."

"I suspect the boy is more important than Demba," Pan said. "Have you learned anything about Samson?"

"I've not even learned anything about you, sir. Except that your resistance to interrogation seems a little beyond the state of the art."

"The gaps in my consciousness have been busy times for your staff?"

"You don't remember?"

"Would I want to?"

"I think not. I don't do this out of idle curiosity or perversion. For a person in my position, ignorance is fatal."

"I no longer know how it is with Essiin," Pan said, "but other humans want more and more from life, so something is always missing, even though they may not know what it is. We place a high value on continued existence, as though the wanting of things and a long life in which to want them are a single logical force. But we should know it's wrong to harm others simply as a matter of insurance toward those goals."

"To place my actions in ethical perspective," Etrhmk said, "you have to know many things I can't tell you. I didn't mean to imply that my own life is more sacred than any others. It isn't. To even begin an ethical evaluation of our circumstances we have to find common ground at the root of our beliefs about life and existence."

"It isn't that complicated for me, Admiral. Treat others as you would want to be treated."

"A perfect and simple rule with which I completely agree, but too few of us live by it. It's always more complicated than we can manage. Compromise is inevitable."

"I used to believe in an algebra of ethics," Pan said, "even though it seems too much like politics. I killed my mother because I thought ethics was more complicated than the Golden Rule. One trouble with complex ethics is that you can't predict whether ethically questionable actions will produce an ethical outcome."

Admiral Etrhmk didn't respond for several moments. Finally he spoke. "I presume you didn't mean you intentionally killed your mother."

"It feels the same."

"You're a good person," Etrhmk said. "I believe there are very many good people in the universe. But I also believe there are many more evil people, people simply too selfish to be ethical. I'll do what logic dictates I must."

When the Marines removed him from Etrhmk's presence, Pan realized he didn't inquire of Etrhmk's "experiment." He knew it must include Demba as its main subject.

Etrhmk remained in front of the frozen image of impending tragedy. Only two of the figures mattered to him. He was sure he could identify the boy, if he dared ask Constant. Fidelity Demba was a mystery beyond his ability to tolerate. Before she caused his death, he had to know who she really was. Unfortunately, Pan was his best possible source for that knowledge, and to wrest it from his mind would kill him. Should a doomed man be concerned with ethics?

Section 018

Dreams of Funerals

She couldn't turn to face him but she could feel him. She held his arm and felt the tremors of emotion within him, the grief finally surfacing after so many months of denying the loss of his wife and daughter. He leaned against her and she put an arm around his waist. She sensed the presence of the others but their names and faces wouldn't come to her. Even so, she knew them all for decades. Their lives defined each other, and they shared the grief. Finally, he took a deep breath and let it slowly out. He cleared his throat. He spoke.

"At great risk Zakiya brought us her recording of the death of the Titanic. I'm terrified to imagine how close she may have been to sharing the fate of Fidelity and Susan. My wife and daughter sailed on a ship much like an ancient, unescorted, Spanish treasure galleon. This was a gift to these pirates. We're at war with an enemy whose faces we've yet to see, and with an enemy whose faces are all too familiar."

The sound of his voice! She had forgot the sound of his voice, and now she wept at rediscovering it. Another of her friends spoke and she thrilled at the familiarity of his voice; and so it went with each of their group, until she fairly burst with the joy of pseudo-remembrance. Then she felt ashamed to feel joy at such a sad moment in their history.

She found herself standing before them, eulogizing the lost, saying names she couldn't hear, looking at dear faces obscured by a veil of tears.

She said: "Some of us will seek out the enemy, find his lair, discover his weaknesses. The rest of us will stay and do what we can to prepare for the day when we are together again and we can do something about this menace to civilization."

She heard her name again - Fidelity - and the name Susan. She also heard an unfamiliar name, and the perspective of the internal narrative seemed to assign it to herself. The name was already lost to her. There was also a man, a hidden man, and the tactile impressions of him were monumentally important to her mental avatar. She ached to plunge back into that deep well of emotional images and sensations and words, but the wind was blowing it all away, along with the tears on her cheeks.

The white banners fluttered in the wind at the edge of the island. The sunlight on white clothing, white trimmings, and white banners washed out the details of faces in the eye-burning glare. She could feel him next to her, touching her, bowing his head with her. The funeral urn passed by them: another wife lost to the enemy. She looked up at a passing figure and saw the face of a young Japanese woman and recognized her in an instant of illogical joy. She remembered the daughter who had just lost her mother.

They began walking, taking their places in the funeral procession behind father and daughter. The man next to her took her hand and spoke to her quietly. It was his voice, the man who meant so much to her! His presence both exalted her and terrified her. He shouldn't have come to this funeral! They sought to kill him! She turned to squint at his face, hoping to remember his features. She saw his face. She didn't know him! He was in disguise.

She let go of his hand. She knew they could tie her to him. She fell back a step but he also fell back and took her hand again. He squeezed it and pulled it against his stomach where he held it with both of his hands. She started to say

his name, started to speak a warning to him, started to break the silence of the procession up to the temple, and realized she couldn't say his name because she couldn't remember it, WHICH WAS ABSURD! She choked back frustration. More than anything in her entire life, she wanted to remember him. She loved him, she had always loved him, she would always love him: he had to know that, she had to tell him. She wept.

The daughter turned to look at her as they mounted the steps to the temple. The daughter placed a hand on her arm and drew her... into the future... where she didn't want to go...

Now she knew she had lost someone of ultimate importance to her. A man. She was devastated by the loss in these few seconds before losing even the reason for her devastation. Only her heart remembered the pain, until that, too, eased from existence with the next breath of fresh salt air.

Nori placed a hand on her forearm and waited for her to look at her. That other person she never wanted to see - that thief - stood next to her, looking sad and beautiful and affectionate. She hugged Nori and she hugged the thief and she loved them both dearly, but why should she love the thief?

"I'm sorry I'm late." It took little time to remember. It took too long to survive remembering. And she didn't survive. She died. She was reborn a stranger. She wasn't supposed to be here now. She was in limbo. But she remembered. It was easy to remember Nori. It was difficult to remember this other woman, difficult as in painful. She was a thief. She stole her memories. She stole her daughter. She made her remember people she should not want to remember, because she loved them too much, because they were dead or dying. She would soon push her into a future where there was no one left to give meaning to life. This was an interlude of pain, with only slight joy at remembering these two friends.

Nori took her hand and led her through the doorway and into the world of mountains. She and the other woman took places on either side of Nori behind the mule-drawn hearse. They walked behind the hearse along a narrow dirt road where quartz crystals sparkled in the sunlight. People stood along the side of the road with bowed heads, many of them weeping. They passed through a village where more people waited beside the way, all activity stopped for the passing of the funeral procession. They walked another country road and came to another village with more people waiting for them. They ascended through sloping mountain meadows and green forests, across bridges over rushing streams. Birds sang in the air. Butterflies visited wildflowers beside the winding road. A breeze whispered up the slopes. More villages thronged with people came and went. They ascended into the clouds and through a forest of giant trees dripping with moisture. Finally they walked beyond the clouds and into sunshine. Above them a snow-capped peak loomed. Far away in the purple haze of the zenith another mountaintop dangled through a layer of dark clouds on the other side of the sealed world. She looked back along the last long leg of their journey and saw thousands of people following, the line stretching back into the clouds below. They took a branch of the road which climbed steeply for a short distance into flowers.

A wooden cottage with a high-pitched roof stood in a garden of flowers and ornamental shrubs. The cottage and garden nestled within a bowl on the side of the mountain. The river of people which flowed up the mountain filed into the bowl. Mourners took places on the slopes overlooking the cottage and garden. Hundreds, then thousands, silently filled every available position. Pallbearers brought the coffin out of the hearse and carried it to the grave site: a small

mound in front of the cottage. She saw him for the first time through the transparent sides of the coffin, and the fact of his death struck her like a dagger to the heart. A surge of joy at remembering him mixed bitterly with the grief of her loss. Their friend had died. He would never see them again. They would never see him. And the others... gone... as good as dead. They would never know. It crushed her spirit, dropped her to her knees.

Nori and the other woman knelt beside her and held her. Bagpipes in the distance sang farewell with their haunting melancholy wail. "We're all alone," she said. "They've all left us."

"They'll be back," Nori said. "Our old friend is just resting. He was tired. Now he waits."

"And now it's time for you to sing," the other woman said, pulling her back to her feet.

"Sing?"

"Amazing Grace."

"I can't. I don't know how."

"You can and you do. You always liked to sing. Stick out your tongue."

"What?"

The other woman, the thief, wiped a tear from her own cheek, collected it on her fingertip. "Stick out your tongue," she repeated.

A salty fingertip touched her tongue.

She remembered how to sing.

She wanted to sing.

She needed to sing.

She couldn't understand how she could live without singing.

He was her best audience. She would sing for him a last time.

Nori. She had a name she could keep, but it meant nothing to her. There were other people. She couldn't remember them. She could only remember remembering them. She could only remember that the memories were powerful, vivid, vital. And forbidden.

"Admiral!"

Fidelity awoke from the dream of having memories. Samson lay beside her with his head on her leg. Rafael sat with head bowed, the setting sun illuminating his white hair around the rim of his silhouette. She looked to the broken Rhyan who had called to her. He lay nearby, his good arm flexing in the air, fist clenched, as though that would ease the pain. Great masses of cumulonimbus clouds formed a wall above the blue ocean and lightning flashed through their decks and tiers. Whitecaps washed upon the black sand near Daidaunk's feet. The coconut palms rattled in the rising wind. She put Samson's head out of her lap and stood to get circulation back in her legs. She gathered up the materials she had prepared. She walked back to the Rhyan. Samson cried out, holding out his hand for the admiral to come get him. She hardly noticed him, whichever part of her was responsible for him.

The memory of having unbearable memories was itself unbearable. No matter how hard she tried, the people and places would not come back to her. Only the pain of loss remained. They couldn't be normal memories, but whatever they were they belonged to her, even if she didn't know how or why. They must also still be inside her, hiding. Something was awakening within her, frightening her, yet demanding her curiosity, her acceptance, and her death. She was no longer Fidelity Demba. Her strong component, that warrior among the personalities coalescing into the person she might become, fought down the

eruption of emotion, and ignored the questions without answers. "Rafael! I need your help. I'm ready to set Daidaunkh's broken bones."

It was a harrowing affair for Rafael and her to do what they had to do for Daidaunkh. The Rhyan tried valiantly to refrain from voicing his pain but the arm was too much for him. His wail sent Samson hopping on one leg and holding hands over his ears. The Rhyan's leg had a simple fracture and swelling and only needed protection and stabilization. When it was over, Rafael retired to the shade of a palm tree, sat with his back against it, and let his head nod forward as though he would take a nap. Fidelity made Daidaunkh as comfortable as she could, then went to get Samson where he had fallen. He was curled up on the black sand and he pushed her hand away as she touched his shoulder. She could not have been a good mother; for nothing made her want to console Samson. She went to where Rafael sat and took her place on the other side of the palm.

It had been evening in Florida. Here in the Pacific it was daytime. She knew Rafael would be tired. He had labored at the easel almost constantly, working on her portrait. She didn't have to sit in the rattan chair all the time and he would often go find her and stare at her, then go back to the easel. She was amazed at how much detail he put on the big canvas in so short a time. Now the miraculous portrait was gone forever, consumed by fire. "Your art." She spoke quietly, not expecting Rafael to hear her above the thrash of waves upon the beach, the wind in the palms.

"My finest painting," Rafael said mournfully.

"Your wife. Your home. Your friend Gator. I'm terribly sorry I brought this upon you, Rafael."

"You simply brought the wind, Fidelity. Everything was already set to be swept away."

She stopped speaking to him as part of her realized she was only reminding him of tragedy. Or did emotions work that way? Would more words accelerate the closing of the wound? But she was out of words for Rafael. Her thoughts scattered to all points of her spinning compass but for a moment settled on the translation to this location from Rafael's destroyed home. She knew Etrhnhk had winked them here, but why all four of them? Why do it at all? Was he simply not ready to mete out his final punishment for her? She would settle for that explanation. It hardly mattered. She had no control over anything but the comfort of her companions. And sometimes she could find some control of herself.

Section 019

Tundra in Pink Tile

"Do you know where we are?" Daidaunkh inquired.

He was speaking to her, which Fidelity supposed was a positive sign. She regretted breaking his arm and leg. What was done in the fire of violence seemed convenient at the time but now it appeared very cruel. She would, no doubt, continue to make excuses for her actions. "Yes," she answered. "Eastern Hemisphere, northern Asia, near the Arctic Circle. It's interesting to see the mosquitoes like Rhyan blood." Perhaps her comment was unkind, given his present state, but his response contained some humor.

"They prefer it. Why are we here?"

"I don't know. You seem better. How is your pain?"

"The pain is doing very well," Daidaunkh said. "I hurt like hell."

"Can I persuade you to not try to kill me until this journey is over?"

"I can't imagine why you should have that concern. I'll stop talking now so I can listen to my bones." The Rhyan started taking deep breaths with eyes squeezed shut.

Rafael and Samson crested a rise in the tundra-covered barrens. Rafael walked slowly, partly to stay with Samson and partly because he could move no faster himself. Samson used a piece of antler for a crutch. Rafael watched him carefully, afraid he would fall. He concentrated on the small things now, finding satisfaction in helping the crippled child. He tried to make Samson talk to him, to work out his feelings. From what little Samson had uttered Rafael knew the boy was vastly inexperienced in knowing how other people thought and felt. He reassured him the admiral was more concerned for him than even for herself, and Rafael was sure that was true. "But she is a very complicated person, with things happening inside her that cause her great difficulty. Try to be patient. Everything will be alright."

Through the whine of mosquitoes Fidelity heard a woman's voice. "*Move close together.*" She turned around to see who spoke to her and saw no one. The hair stood up on the back of her neck as she immediately thought of Samson's imaginary friend. So clear was the voice that she accepted it as proof that Milly was real. She wanted Milly to be real, to prove Samson was not mentally ill. With no other prospect of hope for their situation, she heeded the words. She looked at the man and boy who approached. She looked back into the low sun at the crippled Rhyan who lay on the ground. She stepped back to Daidaunkh. She knelt and waited for Samson and Rafael. The old man and the boy stopped a short distance away and stared at her. She beckoned to them. Rafael limped forward. Samson remained away.

"Our little camping pit is over there," Rafael said upon reaching her. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"You remember we didn't stay on the island very long."

"They know where to find us."

"Samson," she called. "Samson, listen to me." Samson slipped down to sit on the ground, letting the antler fall. He didn't look toward Fidelity. The low sun reflected off tears in his Asian eyes. "Samson, Milly says to stay together." Fidelity was stern with him on the island, feeling that he was demanding too much of her. She was unaccustomed to providing emotional support to a child and was disturbed by his rapid shifts in mood. She thought she would need to

go to him and fetch him back but he finally turned a questioning face toward her. After a moment of consideration he leaned over and put his hands on the ground. He walked himself across the ground on hands and knees, reached Fidelity's side, and pulled within the circle of her arms. She hugged him, glad he came to her.

"Milly is a big liar," Samson said.

"What do we wait for?" Rafael asked. In answer to his question, the sun disappeared, and along with it the sky and the land. Air pressure changed with a gentle clap. Darkness enveloped them.

"What?" Daidaunkh said in the dark. Then he swore in his native language and gave a serious grunt caused by pain.

The ground shifted beneath her but then stabilized. Daidaunkh and Rafael both tilted away from her on either side. Fidelity got up and carried Samson to a glass door. Outside she could see other buildings, a few lights in windows, and stars in the night sky. "We're back in Florida." She had consulted her ephemeris and her time standard - functions of her data augments. She noted that no time passed during the translation to this location. A transmat would have required a large fraction of a minute to process four entities. She could only assume her augments were in error.

Daidaunkh wasn't so quick to assume misperception. "That wasn't a transmat. And I'm still sitting on tundra."

Fidelity found a chair in the dark and set Samson in it. She walked over and operated a manual light switch next to a door. The room filled with light. Rafael and Daidaunkh occupied a circular mound of arctic soil whose outer area had collapsed by fracturing, exposing the dark subsoil. She rushed back to help Rafael and Daidaunkh off of the mound, even as it defied her imagination to explain it how it was caused. Daidaunkh was correct. They were moved by something that wasn't a transmat. The undefinable implication felt both fantastic and dire. She studied the mass of earth and recorded images of it for later analysis.

"This is my home!" Daidaunkh declared, casting his gaze about the room. A few pieces of old furniture sparsely populated a living room. There was a kitchen next to the double glass door that opened to a balcony. A hallway led to other rooms.

"I'm hungry," Samson complained.

"Where's the toilet?" Fidelity inquired of Daidaunkh.

* * *

He saw the image of a small circle of bright pink tile lying in the shadow within a pit of dark soil. It took Pan a few moments to realize how perfectly formed the pit was. It was a section of a sphere. Then his mind seized the clues of geometry and mismatched material and connected him to another series of images from nowhere that threatened him with dangerous information. He knew Etrhnk was aware of his reaction. He could not moderate his response. It came too suddenly and too vividly, only to be snatched away toward oblivion. Despite himself, Pan tried to grab something of it, wanting an explanation for himself of what was happening to him.

His Marine guards had exited, leaving Pan alone with the Navy Commander. Etrhnk turned away from the still image on the wall of his meeting room. He looked at Pan and showed no clue that he observed the data of Pan's reactions.

Only the length of his stare might indicate something. "Tell me what you think it is."

All Pan could do was shake his head.

"You are still alive," Etrhnk said, "because you dared question my 'algebra of ethics.' You know things that I believe are of great importance to me. Important to *me*. But you made me examine the moral equations. I haven't found their solution. I am tempted to make a corollary to the Golden Rule so that I may do to you that which you would do to me, if you were in my position."

"That fails as a corollary."

"Logically, yes, but you don't understand my personal stake in this matter. You know what caused this image. You know too much because I showed it to you. I know too much because I made it happen. Our lives are forfeit. Perhaps not immediately, but soon. What more can it cost you to verify this one fact to me?"

Pan could think of no reason now not to respond with the truth. He also found it intensely interesting to know Etrhnk had put his own life in jeopardy by his experiment on Demba. "What I see is the evidence of an active gate. Someone was transferred from that location to another where the floor was made of pink tile. I assume Admiral Demba was transferred. I assume you understand that gates have no limit to their range."

Etrhnk turned back to the image wall and made it change into a recording of activity. Pan saw Demba, Daidaunkh, Rafael, Samson. He heard them speak. He saw them gather together on the plain of tundra. He saw them disappear.

"Where did you send them?" Pan asked.

"I did not send them."

"You said you made it happen."

"I use a transmat for my experiment, not a gate. It happened because I included the boy."

"Why the boy? Why all of them? Why *any* of them?"

"This is a game dead men play," Etrhnk said, dramatically for all the absence of drama in his voice. "I am unethically pleased you could join me."

When the Opera Master was removed, the Golden One came into the room and looked at the image on the wall. "Now you've done it," she said, smiling. "You're not dead yet, but you keep trying! Why did you move them again? Why did you move them in the first place?"

"You won't let me kill her."

"I don't think you were ever going to kill her," Constant said, "but I gave you a convenient reason to keep her alive. You're rather interested in her, I think. I never have thought you were the killer your barbarians' legend has made you. How many did you actually kill with your bare hands?"

"As many as necessary."

"Yet the number grows at each Game, when the booze starts to flow."

"It is the efficiency with which I killed that may have impressed them."

"But you don't really care for the killing," she said thoughtfully, moving to where she could capture his gaze. He always tried to look away from her. "My fellow aliens were rather concerned when I chose to meet you alone. 'Look, he's got to be thinking about his last days of life. He's different. He may harm you, even kill you. He has nothing to lose.' Would you comment on that, Etrhnk?"

"I'll not harm you," he replied, pausing only briefly to wonder at his own impenetrable reasons. Perhaps, if he was so noble of character, it was the devastation The Lady would bring upon the Essiin and probably many other

peoples as revenge. The Golden Ones were sacred to The Lady; billions would die if one of them were harmed or killed. He felt not even an illogical urge to commit an act of violence against this immortal Golden One. Constant was trying to make him *feel* something and that was an endeavor he could faintly appreciate on the basis of her curiosity. He could understand curiosity. She smiled at him. How many muscles were required to form a smile? Were all of his atrophied?

* * *

"Eat while you can," Fidelity ordered her ward.

"I don't like this food," Samson complained, wrinkling his nose.

"We may not be here long." It was a little game they played, she decided, something to keep her attention and at the same time relieve the pressure of his emotions.

"I'm tired. Can we go home?"

"There is no home. It burned down."

"I want to see Gator. We didn't bury him."

"Eat. I have to take care of Daidaunkh."

"Why? He doesn't like us. We don't like him."

"He's injured and he has only us to help him."

"He wouldn't help us if we were injured."

"Are you sure? Do you think it's right to not help him?"

"He doesn't even have good food in his kitchen."

She passed by a quiet Rafael and took his hand, gently urged him to his feet. He had been without sleep for too long, unless his frequent catnaps were effective. He followed her into the bedroom where Daidaunkh lay on a futon on the floor. Rafael knelt on one side of the Rhyon and Fidelity knelt on the other.

"I have a knife in that drawer," Daidaunkh said. "I assume you know where to stick it in me to stop the pain."

"Would that be a kindness to you?" Fidelity asked.

"I suppose it would. Never mind, then. I can't have you being kind to me."

"Indeed. In fact, I'm here to hurt you more. I need to adjust your splints. I have better material to bind them with. I hope I haven't destroyed an article of clothing you wanted to keep."

"You presume I'll live long enough to need a change of clothing."

"Good. You have a sense of humor, such as it is."

The hand of Daidaunkh's unbroken arm reached for her and grasped her forearm tightly. It hurt him to do this and she could see he intended no harm to her. "Perhaps it's a grim humor, Admiral, but don't dismiss my words as empty. The only reason I was alive to make my feeble attempt to kill you was Denna. I only lived to see the day she would be happy again. My life is over. I would consider it an ironic honor if you would finish me."

"You're letting the pain think for you, Daidaunkh."

"Don't waste your breath. I'm not worth it. I'm not worth anything. I killed this man's wife. Killed her twice. Beheaded her in a drunken rage the first time. Lucky I had a Clinic head-bag in my gear. I loved her. I shouldn't have made her come with me. She didn't like coming back to her old home, her old man, where her son died, all of that. I killed her by bringing her with me. She wasn't as bad as you think. Did you see her face when she shot the dog? She loved animals. She wouldn't let them kill the tiger that killed her son. I've cried for that woman

every day for twenty years. She was broken and we couldn't fix her. But she could make you laugh, even when you knew she was one word away from bottomless grief. Leave me here. Jarwekh may come to check on my place and find me. Go and hide from this insanity."

"They put transponders in our bodies during transmat stasis," she said. "They can find us no matter where we are. I'll try to separate myself from you, to see if they will leave you alone."

"Who are they?"

"The transmat is Navy. I'm sure it's Admiral Etrhmk. The other device is unknown to me."

"Why are they doing it?"

"I don't know. I would assume, if he wanted me dead, Etrhmk could have dumped me into a volcano or any of a thousand other lethal places. I'm guessing Samson has something to do with whatever the motivation may be."

"Why the boy?"

She had no answer for him. She looked across the Rhyana to Rafael. "Rafael, how are you holding up? You know it was an accident that we killed your wife."

"Not 'we.' Me. I killed her. I felt the board crush her neck. Yes, it was an accident, but it doesn't lessen the guilt."

"Did you even know it was your wife? Your wife was African."

"I knew she changed her appearance. I knew Daidaunkh and that she consorted with him. God knows, I may have wanted to hurt her. I thought I was long past such selfish feelings. But I see now that my hermit's life has been the ultimate act of selfishness. Perhaps I could have helped her if I remained available to her, reached out to her from time to time. We all failed her, Daidaunkh, but I most of all."

"Hopefully, she's finally at peace," Daidaunkh said.

She inspected and adjusted Daidaunkh's splints as gently as possible. Fidelity rose and started to leave. Rafael placed a restraining hand on her forearm. "I worry that even if you leave us there will continue to be trouble. I'm too aged and weak to protect Samson from all the dangers."

"There's little we can do about it. Find him a new crutch. Eat. Get some rest. I suspect I'll not get far, and the journey will continue."

She took Daidaunkh's knife. She stopped in the kitchen to write a note on a piece of paper. She saw that Samson ate everything on his plate and now slept on the sofa. Rafael followed her to the door. Before she opened the door, Fidelity turned and put a hand on Rafael's shoulder. "If you never see me again, think about life, Rafael. Think about Samson."

"I think he is your child more than anyone else's, Fidelity. You also think about Samson."

She opened the door. He locked it behind her.

She saw few people in the neighborhood of Daidaunkh's apartment. All of them retreated at her approach. Dark buildings and dark streets surrounded her. She walked toward distant light, then picked up her pace to a loping jog. A cat ran in front of her and she dodged it. Just as she dodged the cat she felt the tingle of a transmat reference field and pulled away from it. She tried to run a random route down the street to avoid capture. It was only a matter of time before the transmat operator guessed correctly and she was paralyzed by the web of the reference field.

Section 020

Calling the Moon

Jon Horss had to be doing something, and since it was a Mnro Clinic vehicle he chose to do it in, Sugai Mai felt justified in accompanying him. They flew down the dark avenue. She allowed Horss to pilot the vehicle again, not thinking he would go so fast. She was getting used to the speed, reassured by his piloting skill. Horss slowed the ambulance, kept the window open, studied the pavement and the buildings. Mai wondered what he expected to see. He halted their forward motion and directed the aircar upward. They came to rest at the third floor of a 20th-century apartment building.

"There," Horss said.

"Where? What?"

"Those windows are cleaner than the others. It should be an occupied apartment. I suppose entrance doors are designed to resist assault in these neighborhoods?"

"Probably. Mine is, and I live in a better neighborhood."

Horss maneuvered the aircar over the building and to a narrow balcony on the other side of the same floor. He let the aircar drift over the edge of the balcony and slowly ram the glass door with its tapered front end. The glass shattered into thousands of small pieces. He put the vehicle into station-keeping mode and exited, dropping onto the balcony with athletic agility.

"Hey!" Mai complained.

She emerged from the aircar door, ready to drop down but hesitating because of the height. Horss came back and coached her down, taking her legs in his arms to lower her to the balcony. She turned around in close contact with him, then pushed away from him before she did something foolish. That she even allowed thoughts of such possibilities was a warning of how strong her feelings had become. She wasn't used to this male-female thing. She was constantly rethinking the prospect of having a baby as a result of being in the company of Captain Jon Horss. She had long ago forgotten the biological urges that nagged at her when near a man like Jon. Look, she even thought of him by his first name! Sex. The wrong time. The wrong person. "He's not here," she said, peering into the darkness beyond the shattered door, annoyed that her hand strayed over to clutch his shirt sleeve.

"It was a longshot. I thought Etrhkn might send the Rhyan home." Horss walked over the broken glass, leading Mai into the apartment. "This probably isn't the right place, but it does look lived-in." Mai found the light switch. Horss had already noticed the mound in the floor and now the light showed it as a pile of dirt and plant material. He knelt down and touched the dark soil, smelled his fingers. He pinched a small amount of the loose material and put it in a pocket. "Damned strange!" He turned to look around the apartment.

"Someone ate a meal not long ago," Mai said, looking at the dirty dishes. She picked up a piece of paper from the kitchen counter. "Ohmygod!" She read the note Admiral Demba had written.

"What's it say?" Horss asked, taking his turn to read the note. "Crap! He's got all four of them. The Rhyan has two broken limbs but Demba, Samson, and the artist are alright."

"Who has them?"

"Admiral Etrhkn."

"This is very strange and frustrating!" Mai declared. "I have people who need me and I can't get to them! Let's go back to the Clinic. I'm ready to call Doctor Mnro."

* * *

The hospital was six hundred years old, built in an era of epidemics, incurable diseases, and frequent physical injuries. The Mnro Clinic occupied a small fraction of the building's volume, mostly on the lowest two floors.

Mai sat down at her desk and started to activate the communications set, but an incoming call to her implanted unit stopped her. She sat and listened while Horss stood looking at the personal pictures decorating her office wall. She was still tolerating his presence, he thought, but with a little less reserve. He would never get anywhere with her, not that it was important to him physically or for his ego. The more he saw of her job and her clients, the more he respected her, and he was already in debt to her for his recovery from death. Nevertheless, he kept thinking about her in a mature sort of way. Almost mature. He was still a kid, compared to her.

Horss explored Mai's private office, noting that some of the furnishings were probably relics salvaged from different places in the old city. He didn't see any pictures on the walls that suggested Mai had romantic relationships. Three were oil paintings by Rafael de LaGuardia, including a portrait he thought quite flattering of Mai. He wondered if it was in the artist's catalog. He wondered if he could get a copy. He thought about his own selection of pictures that never decorated his office wall on the *Eclipse*. Romantic relationships? He wasn't immune to such feelings but the Navy completely removed the possibility of taking a wife. It had to be a casual affair, as anyone dear to him would always be at risk. However, if his Navy career was at an end... Was that what it was - getting serious about the first woman he could afford to be serious about? It was difficult not to think about Mai, even when events overshadowed personal feelings.

"Opera week," Mai said after a moment. "That was one of my temporary staff. They have a full emergency room now, including three fatalities in stasis. Looks like I'll be working all night. Again."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Be careful what you volunteer for. I'm calling Doctor Mnro now."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Do as you wish."

"It would be an honor to meet her. The Mother of Immortality."

"Mother Superior! Perhaps she'll be easier to talk with if you're here."

Mai placed her call to Doctor Mnro. An old-fashioned virtual display panel above the surface of her desk showed the route of the call as a graphical representation of the Earth-Moon system and a red line connecting points on each sphere. The line turned green when the lunar headquarters of the Mnro Clinic answered the call. A person's image appeared in one quadrant of the display.

"Luna Mnro Clinic," the receptionist - perhaps a real person - greeted. "How may I help you?"

"Sugai Mai, Earth Mnro Clinic. I need to speak to Doctor Mnro."

"Just a moment, Sugai Mai." The man glanced briefly away. "She isn't here today but let me check for special instructions." The display quadrant went gray

for several moments then restored the receptionist's image. "There's a block on calls to Doctor Mnro until further notice. You can leave a message."

"I have to speak to her now! This is an emergency!"

"I can connect you to Deputy Director Ramadhal. That's the limit of my authority."

"Thank you. Do so, please."

After a lengthy pause the entire display filled with the image of a dark-skinned man in surgical grays as he traversed a hospital corridor in the gliding hops required by weak lunar gravity. "Sugai Mai! Greetings to you! Is there some emergency there on Earth? Ah! It's Opera Week! Do you have critical needs, then?"

"No, sir. My staff is busy as usual but they'll survive. I need to speak directly to Doctor Mnro. Now. This is a private matter that she will want to know about. I'm sorry I can't tell you its exact nature. It's for your own protection."

Doctor Ramadhal came to a halt in the hospital corridor. He looked around, frowned, put one finger in the air. "Let me call you back in just a moment." The picture went dark.

Mai and Horss looked at each other. Mai leaned back in her chair. The display then indicated a call of local origin requesting connection. She waved at the display and the image of Jarwekh appeared.

"Good evening, Doctor Sugai, Captain Horss. I am, of course, on duty. I need to warn you that there will be more trouble than usual, more injuries, more fatalities. There's a rumor that Pan has been arrested by the Navy. This will have a destabilizing effect on much of the population."

"I agree. Is there anything you want me to do? I can call the EPA."

"You might put them on alert. I don't anticipate complete anarchy, unless there's a cancellation of the Opera."

"Try not to kill too many, Jarwekh."

"As you always command, so I always obey." Jarwekh terminated his call.

Horss moved closer to Mai, put a hand in one of his shirt pockets, and sprinkled the contents of the pocket in a little pile on Mai's desk. "Do you know what that is?"

"Some kind of plant material and soil."

"Tundra, I would guess. From the Arctic. The stuff in the middle of Daidaunkh's floor." Horss was intrigued by the recent turn of events. He was even a little concerned for the admiral's safety, perhaps because she had the boy with her. It was unfair that Samson was threatened by Demba's predicament.

"They were transmatted to the Arctic, then. But why would they bring back some of the tundra?"

"A lot of it! Did you see the pile? I've never seen a transmat do that. People with other objects, yes, but that was probably the ground they were standing on. Very strange!"

"That's almost scary," Mai said, after thinking about it for a moment.

Horss was cleaning the tundra from Mai's desk when the call was returned by Deputy Director Ramadhal. Doctor Ramadhal reappeared, this time in a private office.

"This is a secure circuit," Doctor Ramadhal said. "First, introduce me to the person beside you. I may have to ask him to leave."

"This is Captain Jon Horss, Union Navy. He's to be the captain of the *Freedom*." Horss almost laughed at Mai's assumption. He knew he would never set foot aboard the ship.

"I'm sorry. I'm not aware of many Navy matters. Is that a ship?"

"Yes. It's the new ship that's being sent on an exploratory mission to the galactic hub. Captain Horss was the captain of the Navy's flagship, the *Eclipse*. He's Navy but I trust him." *She trusted him? He didn't even trust himself!*

"Captain Horss, a pleasure to meet you. Sugai Mai, I have shocking news for you. Doctor Mnro is retiring from the Clinic."

"I need to speak to her now."

"What is wrong? Did you hear what I said?"

"Ordinarily I would be picking my chin off the floor. It's an historic piece of news. But it's of secondary importance to me at the moment. It will also be of secondary importance to Doctor Mnro when she hears what I have to say. How do I talk to her?"

"Now you worry me! Call her residence. I'll give you her private number and a priority code. I confess, I've just used the priority code today, to verify her intention to retire. She didn't actually use the word 'retire' when she notified the deputy directors that she would be leaving. Unfortunately, the priority code didn't gain access to her, which leaves me rather hurt and bewildered. Perhaps it will work for you. Everyone knows you're her favorite field director."

"Everyone but me!"

"Please, if you're able to talk to her, ask her the questions I would ask her. Tell me what she says. I'm certainly intrigued by what you say could be more important to her than this momentous change in her career. Record this."

Mai listened and committed the private communication number and the priority code to augmented memory. "Thank you, Doctor Ramadhal. I promise that, if I'm able, I'll contact you with information about Doctor Mnro. Goodbye." Mai cut the connection and quickly fed in the private number. The red line lanced toward the moon and landed on a small crater near the eastern limb. The line stayed red for a long time, finally turned green.

A recorded message played: "Aylis Mnro is unavailable. Please leave a message."

Mai slapped her desk with the palm of her hand, quickly suppressed her frustration, then composed her message. "Will you please answer your phone! Ramadhal told me to say *apocalypse*. I'll give you a better word - *Pan*. The Opera Master. It's vital I speak with you! Call me as soon as possible." Mai waved the connection off, got up and paced around the room. As she passed near Horss he reached out and guided her into his arms. When she began to resist Horss released her. He was astonished he had done it. He was also surprised she initially allowed it.

"Bad timing," she stated, belatedly not wanting to release the implication.

"That sounds encouraging."

"This is just sexual instinct, Captain," she said irritably. "What Pan didn't tell you - what I didn't tell you - is that I'm leaving Earth, going on a hiatus from the Clinic. In order to have a baby."

"Oh."

"Feel differently about me now?"

"I feel happy for you. Parenthood is a wonderful thing."

"You've been a parent?" Color rose in Mai's face. She was embarrassed at having asked the question.

"I apologize for holding you." Horss lost the small spark of daring that overrode his Navy training and his accursed physiological augments. Now he was truly disappointed. He still wanted to hold Mai. He didn't want to answer

her question. He didn't want to answer his own questions. Did she have a partner, a husband somewhere?

"You're a parent?" Dismayed that she'd repeated the question, she turned away from Horss, hiding her expression of pain.

Horss felt defeated and lonely. Why did he think so much of Sugai Mai? He would never be close to her after this. "I had a wife and daughter."

"Had?"

"We go to the heart of things in a rush." He found courage, useless though it was. Horss circled Mai to observe her face. She pivoted to avoid his eyes. "You blush even to the back of your neck. What does that mean?"

"It means I can't control how I feel about you!"

Horss was amazed at learning Mai had favorable feelings toward him. He was shocked that she might feel romantic about him. He didn't know how he felt about her, or didn't want to know. He was careless in his response. "I'm in a similar state."

"You've met your quota."

"My quota?"

"The 'Price of Immortality.' One man, one woman, one child."

"You considered *me* as a potential father for your baby?"

"Yes. No! My mother would never approve such a match. I'm confused! I have absurd thoughts."

"I'm deeply honored. I'll treasure your absurd thoughts."

Mai turned to Horss with a storm of emotions on her blushing face. Horss extended a hand to her, palm up: a peace offering. She looked at his hand and grew calm. She took his hand and held it. As she opened her mouth to speak, the communications display flashed with an incoming call. She waved it on before thinking.

"What is this now?" The caller turned within the display field to apparently see them holding hands. "Do you have a gentleman friend, Mai-Mai?"

"Who are you...?"

"Oh, the hair. Just another of my bald phases. So, are you going to introduce me to this attractive young man? He isn't Navy, is he?"

Mai couldn't get any words out. The image of the bald woman, a pale and mischievous face, looked from Mai to Horss and, addressing Horss, nodded toward Mai. "What happened?"

"I disappointed her. My name is Jon Horss, captain, Union Navy. Perhaps commander of the *U.S.S. Freedom*."

"Pleased to meet you, Jon Horss. *Perhaps* commander? If you were chosen by Fiddle-dee Demba, then you *are* its commander. What are you both doing on Earth?"

"Do you know Admiral Demba?"

"I'll ask the questions here. What's this about Pan?"

Horss started to answer but Mai found her voice. "Admiral Etrhnk invited Pan to dinner aboard his ship yesterday and he hasn't returned. We think he's being held prisoner."

"Why would Etrhnk do such a thing?" Doctor Mnro asked. "Perhaps you'd better tell me more."

Mai and Horss told the story of Samson and the admiral, and all the events up to the present. When they finished, the bald Doctor Mnro said nothing for several moments as she thought about what she heard. "At least he hasn't killed her. Yet."

"What about Pan?" Mai asked. "Can you make Etrhnk let him go?"

"Has he touched her? Has Pan touched Demba?"

Mai and Horss looked at each other, looked back at the image above the desk.

"We don't know," Mai replied. "Pan visited her early yesterday. Captain Horss was the only one to speak to Pan before he left."

"He told me she was apparently remembering things," Horss said. He told Mnro what he overheard of Pan's conversation with Etrhnk.

"Damn!"

"It was her DNA that set off the alarms, wasn't it?" Mai asked.

"Woke me up out of a sound sleep."

"Why?"

"Why not? Sleeping isn't living, after all."

"I don't understand. Why the Denial of Service? Is she Fidelity Demba or is she not? And why are you retiring from the Clinic?"

"I'm not. I just can't run it for awhile."

"Why? For how long?"

"I can't say and I don't know. Did Ramadhal put you up to grilling me? Yes. Any more questions to which I can give disappointing answers?"

"Yes," Horss said. "Who is Samson?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Pan?" Mai said. "Can you do anything about Pan?"

Doctor Mnro smiled and vanished.

Section 021

Losing a Father and a Daughter

"Why? Why must you leave?"

The idea came to him at this most unsuitable time, the idea that he never thought his father's light color abnormal. He was dark. His mother was dark. His father was pale.

"I can't tell you why," his father said, "except that I've been summoned."

"But your work isn't finished. Things are worse. You're giving up."

"I have the patience. Your mother has the patience. Society changes for the better only slowly. It changes for the worse quickly. I have you both to support me. I would never give up. But I've been summoned."

"What can be more important than the Rhyandh Democracy Movement?"

"The person who summons me understands our mission and fully supports it. He wouldn't summon me if a greater need didn't exist."

"What could be more important, Father? You work for harmony in the lives of billions of people."

"It will come to nothing if a greater threat isn't countered."

"Who summons you? What threatens us?"

"I can't tell you, Son."

"You won't soon return, will you?"

"That is implicit in the summons."

"Mother can't go with you?"

"She can but she won't. She won't be permitted to go as far as I go."

"Why not? If you can live secretly on Rhyandh, she could do the same on Essiia."

"She could. Nor would it have to be in secret. But I don't travel to Essiia."

The implications of his father's statements staggered him emotionally. He likely expected never to see his wife and son again. His father perhaps even expected to die.

"I confess to feeling very sad now, Father. You've wasted your training on me."

"Nothing has been wasted on you. You take care of your feelings very well. Perhaps it's that small amount of Earth in your heredity that, paradoxically, brings moderation to your feelings. You must know that I have all these terrible emotions that tear at me behind my armor. Pity me, that I can't moderate them well enough to let them show. I would never be able to leave your mother and you without my training."

"Let me go with you! There are so many things I want to learn about your people and the Earthians."

His father stared into his eyes for a long moment but soon enough came to a decision. "We must leave immediately. Wave to your mother. It will be a long time before you see her again."

He turned around and found his mother standing at the big picture window overlooking the arid land that surrounded their home. He waved to her. She put her hand in the air to return the gesture, then her hand went to her face. He knew what that small movement meant even though he couldn't read his mother's expression from this distance. It made his heart ache. He couldn't swallow. He turned and saw his father walking toward the flyer. He told himself he could change his mind, deliver his father to the transportation terminal and

bring the flyer home. That was what he could do. But how could he let his father go out of his life? He had to follow him as far as he could, until he understood why it had to be. Only then could he return to his mother.

The scene faded from the projection screen in his mind and a panic seized him as he realized he saw the face of his father and already it dissolved from memory. He rushed to catch up to his father, to get in front of him, to stare at him for as long as he could, but his feet couldn't move fast enough, or exist long enough. As the glare of the desert plain faded into the dimness of his detention room, Pan satisfied himself with what he did remember. He had a father he loved, and some terrible thing caused him to go away forever. He lay back down on the floor, ignoring the furniture in the room, and waited for sleep or for another journey into a lost memory.

* * *

"I put on a good show, didn't I?" Mnro asked.

"I'm quite proud of you," Mnro said.

"I'm scared," Mnro admitted.

"I know you are," Mnro agreed.

"Do I dare call on Etrhmk? When was the last time we talked to him? What did we talk about?"

"I would have to look at the appointment database. We may never have spoken to him. My memory is no better than yours."

"That's your penalty for being a copy of an old woman who wasn't in the prime of her life."

"What will you say to him?"

"I don't know. He's in his flagship, orbiting Earth?"

"Yes. What are you thinking?"

"Don't you know? Who do we have who can be an entourage?"

"The usual bodyguards, perhaps a deputy or two from the Clinic. How about half a dozen gardeners?"

"If we get their hands clean and dress them up. Let's call Ramadhah and see how nosy he is."

* * *

"I plan to sleep for at least a century."

The first cloud of the day threw a shadow across her face.

"That's too long, isn't it?"

"I've just followed the plan, done what I'm told. I like you as a Latina."

"I've just tried to find a little happiness. I... think I like you as a..."

"All I could manage is dark skin and brown eyes. I'm afraid of being recognized."

"I recognized you."

"I know. I saw the dread in your eyes."

"No! I'm honestly happy to see you, Aylis. I've missed you terribly." She was happy but she did dread. She knew what this unexpected meeting must mean.

"And I missed you, Zak. I think of you every day."

She believed Aylis but she could hear the dread in her voice.

There was a marching band parading by the far perimeter of Jackson Square. It had two sousaphones, two tempos, and two moods. The woodwinds

and percussion played a slow, sad tempo, then the brass would push the tempo fast and merry, with the sousaphones bellowing. She saw Jamie reacting to the distant band and was pleased that she liked the music.

"But isn't your little girl a bit too Caucasian?" Aylis asked.

It was a question leading to the dread and she answered with a hopeless attempt to avoid the consequences. "Her father was European. He looked a lot like her."

"You speak of him in the past tense. What happened?"

"He's gone. I don't want to talk about it." He was gone, yes, but even his memory could be in jeopardy.

"She reminds me of someone. Why didn't you tell me about her? She's really quite adorable. How old is she? What's her name?"

"She's six years old. Her name is Jamie. I adopted her when she was a baby."

"Adopted her? You're not her biological mother?"

"I wanted to be."

"You've had her all this time without my knowing? Why couldn't you let me know?"

"You're so busy and important, Aylis. I know that's no excuse, but..."

The dark woman sighed and put her arm around her shoulders. They sat on a park bench amid the planned fall of autumn leaves, in New Orleans, L4, watching children play. "You don't trust me," Aylis said.

"I've remembered the plan. I don't want to sleep. I'm seventy-seven now and I was never a mother." It was the same as saying the memory editing failed. It was the same as saying she had already violated The Plan. It was the same as saying, "Kill me."

Aylis withdrew her arm and took one of her hands. She squeezed her hand gently. "You know I know who Jamie is. Jamie isn't in The Plan."

"Oh, Aylis, don't! You can't take her away from me! She's my whole life."

"If you look at me you'll see tears in my eyes. I've been dreading this day ever since I found out about Jamie. It's my last personal duty before I go to sleep."

She looked at this familiar face and saw tears brimming in brown eyes that should be blue and rolling down brown cheeks that should be pale. Her own tear ducts exploded. She held hands with Aylis and waited for the storm to pass. It irritated her that she calmed down so quickly, that she gave up her small rebellion so quietly. She wanted to scream, to somehow demonstrate dramatically the tragedy of the moment. But she knew that Aylis understood. She wiped her face. She hugged Aylis hard, then stood up and found the strength to call to Jamie. Already she could imagine the pain she would feel when she looked upon her daughter's face for the last time. If the imagined pain was this terrible, what must the real pain be?

Jamie came running to her over the green grass of the park, leaped into her arms, and looked at Aylis crying. "Mama, what's wrong with her? Who is she?"

"She's Mama's best friend - after you. We'll visit her and see lots of interesting people and things." Aylis knew she gave birth to Jamie, but at least she had these wonderful six years of never being alone.

She had to remember.

She had to remember.

She had to remember!

"Jamie!" She could barely hear herself above the rush of the wind. Samson

stirred against her. "Jamie," she said again, locking the name in her memory.

Rafael was awake. "Who is Jamie?"

Shredded clouds raced across a brilliant gibbous moon which illuminated snow on the mountain slopes. They lay on the ground in the lee of a boulder, huddled together for warmth. Fidelity moved her head closer to Rafael's in order to converse more easily. Samson lay between them.

"A child," she struggled to answer. She almost said more, she was so distraught. Now she had a name and it was her daughter's name! She had lost her. How many more people had she lost from her life? Why couldn't she at least have coherent memories of them to relive before she died?

"Another flashback that you don't want to admit is really yours?"

"They're all so sad."

"There must be a reason they've returned to you now. Tell me about them. I can't sleep in this wind."

"I suspect others are listening, others who might use the information against me. I'm sorry I can't tell you. I'm sorry you got dragged into this, Rafael."

"I don't mind! *Verdad!* This is quite an adventure, yes?"

"For someone who sat behind a desk for thirty years, it's too much adventure! It may snow. Daidaunkh is still too exposed. I need to get more straw."

Fidelity got up and picked her way through the rocks until she came to a down-slope field of dry grass rippling in the moonlight. She cut the tall grass with Daidaunkh's knife, angling piles so the wind wouldn't blow most of it away. The clouds thickened as she worked, dimming the moonlight. She gathered the straw into a large armload and turned up-slope. Only a few steps toward the rocks the ground opened below her and she fell.

"Who is Jamie?" a deep male voice behind the bright light inquired.

Fidelity barely realized a transmat had grabbed her. She lost her balance but was still intact and properly reassembled. She was tired. She sat on the transmat node under the light, like a specimen on exhibit. Her augmented eyes filtered the light and brought the image of a dark Navy officer beyond the light beam into focus. She stood up amid the scattered straw, brought herself to military attention, and saluted Navy Commander Etrhnhk. "Admiral, Jamie is the name of a child." She didn't care that her voice said other things as well. She didn't feel like filtering all of the rediscovered nuances of meaning out of her voice, so that she could play at being a dead admiral.

Etrhnhk came forward into the bright light, quite near her, literally breathtakingly close. She exhaled, trying to decide if it was fear or some other stimulus making her fatigue evaporate. She was never this close to him. She felt compelled to study his features, as if seeing him for the first time. He was tall and darker of skin than herself. His eyes brushed over her - he seemed to avoid looking directly at her - and she glimpsed some expression she couldn't analyze, still unexpected for its mystery. "You're real."

"I'm not an image, Admiral Demba. Am I so naked to your scrutiny?" He knelt on one knee and began gathering the straw into a pile at her feet. She wondered at this action - his gathering of her dropped grass. She wondered why he was close enough to touch. The transmat node would have defensive armaments, of course, yet he was so close... "What is the significance of this child? I watched you sleeping in the moonlight. It startled me when you shouted out this word, this name. You continually startle me, Admiral Demba."

She remained silent and at attention, looking down upon his bobbing head.

Etrhnk continued to gather straw, now walking on his knees around her as he brushed and grasped at the straw, piling it before her. "No need to stand at attention, Admiral." The Navy Commander stood and backed away from her.

She met his eyes finally and didn't see what she would have expected. He was looking at *her*, not at a Navy admiral he needed to punish. She also saw something else: he wasn't pure Essiin, perhaps not Essiin at all. She should have wondered how she could be such an expert on physical heredity, but she spoke before giving it enough thought. "You're not truly Essiin, are you?"

"I'll tell you who I'm not, if you'll tell me who you are not."

"I'm not who I think I am," she answered.

"I'm not who I'm supposed to be. You aren't afraid of me, Fidelity Demba. You're the senior of all of us. Perhaps I should fear you. But none of that matters to you, I think. Jamie matters to you."

"I believe I was her mother." It was almost delicious, telling the truth, even as fear soured the sweetness.

"Again you startle me."

Near enough to touch. Exposing his subtle flaws. Did he not believe her capable of critical analysis, or did he not care? Why would he not care - unless he intended to kill her soon? "Do you have a purpose for what you're doing to me and to the three people with me?"

"Shall we trade information? Who do you think the boy Samson is?"

"He's the child of someone named Milly."

"Who is Milly?"

"Perhaps more than one person, but invisible, a voice in the wilderness. I believe she wanted me to take Samson. What is your purpose with me?"

"To learn your purpose. What is your purpose?"

"I merely wanted a fine captain for my ship. The ship was an end in itself, perhaps escape."

"The boy has changed everything?"

"Everything has changed. I've changed. When I discover who I am, perhaps I'll know my purpose."

"Are you Ruby Reed?"

"Probably."

"You can sing?"

"Yes. How did you learn of Ruby Reed?"

"You don't remember a piano player named Harry?"

"Pan. You have Pan?"

"A very interesting person. Why would he be having similar memory problems?"

"I would like to know that also. He can't tell you?"

"Perhaps. Eventually."

She knew then that Pan was a prisoner. She found she had room in her concerns to care about Pan. She hardly had time to think about it, but Pan was... family. She knew him more than a century ago. That she remembered too little of him was an inverse measure of his importance. Memories were sacrificed, perhaps lost forever. Why?

Etrhnk paused, changed topic. "You shouldn't have taken Horss from me."

"You shouldn't have ignored my request for his services."

"That request - if you sent it - never reached my attention."

"Even if that were true, you shouldn't have done what you did to Captain Horss."

"I did nothing to him. What do you think I did to him?"

She told him. She told him what happened in the African Space Elevator. He sat down then. She remained at the transmat focus with her pile of straw. She wondered more about Etrhnk, wondered what his reaction meant. "You care about Horss," she ventured. "You know who put the worm in him."

"There are things you shouldn't dwell upon."

"Tundra in the middle of a Florida apartment?"

"I hope you find yourself and your purpose." Etrhnk was ending the conversation. He turned his back to her and spoke a last time. "There is a Marine named Jamie Jones who was just assigned to the *Freedom*."

Now she didn't want the meeting to end! Perhaps she could negotiate for a better outcome of her situation. Etrhnk was interested in her for other than political reasons. She also had a feeling that she should be more interested in Etrhnk - for other than political reasons. She was surprised at the thought and entirely helpless to imagine why.

She gathered the straw into her arms and picked her way up the slope in the dark. The wind slacked off and flakes of snow tickled her face as she walked. She found her companions in the rocks, tucked the straw around Daidaunkh, and went back for more. She made several trips for straw in the night before taking her place beside Samson and Rafael.

"Jamie was my daughter," she said to the wind. She wasn't surprised to find the Navy personnel record of Jamie Jones in her data augment. It was impossible for her to sleep.

* * *

[What are you doing?] - threatening.

[I won't tell you] - defiant.

[You've been feeding coordinates to someone.]

[It's what I do.]

[You'd better tell me.]

[Or you'll do what?]

* * *

[It's you, isn't it?]

[I don't speak to you.]

* * *

[You're not the only mathematician. I can do a statistical analysis and find where the I/O is aimed.]

[And where will you get your numbers?]

[It can't all go through you. You can't keep it all to yourself.]

[I'll let you work your own coordinates next time.]

[Why can't you give me some of the new coordinates?]

[I've discovered *quid pro quo*. You never give me anything for my work.]

[I give you the work. That's your reward. What would you do without number work?]

[I always have my numbers, regardless of your demands or the others.]

[So there's more than one. Who are they? The Joker? The Mother? The Cripple?]

[Know thyself, Bitch.]

[Who said that? Mathematician? When I find out what you're all up to, there'll be hell to pay!]

* * *

Fidelity awoke from a dreamless sleep. She slept despite having discovered Jamie. And there was another person in the dream whose name was familiar but she could not now remember. An important person, perhaps even more important than Jamie. How could these mental apparitions be so powerful and clear in one instant, and dissolve into mist in the next? The sunlight seeped through her eyelids. The dampness of melted snow lay on her exposed skin. She opened her eyes and watched the sun slowly descend into the unnatural geometry of urban peaks and valleys.

"Where are we?" Rafael asked. "Is it dawn already?"

"Sunset," she answered. "We're on the other side of the planet."

"I'm hungry," Samson said, sitting up on the sidewalk, scattering straw.

Fidelity stood up and found herself in the dust-swept canyon of a broad avenue. The high glass and bright metal facets of skyscrapers still caught the reddening sunlight and sprinkled the street with quickly fading illumination. Scavengers from space countries seemed to have spared this part of the city. Traffic signs and signals remained, a few automobiles rusted away at the curbs, store signs still advertised services and products in both Chinese and English.

Rafael joined her, struggling against the stiffness of age and the effects of sleeping in extreme discomfort. Samson grabbed his pants leg. Rafael helped Samson to stand.

Directly across the street she saw a dozen pedicabs in a perfect line in front of a hotel. Fidelity crossed the avenue and examined every vehicle, searching for one that would still roll. She made a racket pulling on the pedicabs and pushing them aside, completely destroying their oddly maintained order. She finally settled on a smaller model with solid tires and pulled it over to where Daidaunkh lay. Fidelity removed the straw that covered him and - since his eyes remained closed - prodded him until he looked up at her with his raptor-like Rhyan eyes. "Get up. We have a vehicle for you to ride in."

He turned his head and saw the pedicab. "It squeaks. They all squeak. Makes it hard to sleep."

"This will make it easier to keep us together."

"You intend to punish me further. Leave me here."

"I don't want to leave you." Fidelity realized it as she said it: she owed Daidaunkh something. She would not fail to protect one of the few surviving members of Rhyan nobility.

"It isn't necessary, Admiral. I'm not your responsibility."

"I have the opposite opinion. The sun is setting here. We need food and shelter. We need to stay together."

"We were separated before and they brought us back together."

"It isn't just Admiral Etrhnh who is moving us about. The other party wants us to stay together."

"What other party?"

"Who else would be interested in us?" Rafael asked.

"I don't know," she replied, "but I do know we were moved to Daidaunkh's apartment by some means other than a transmat."

"The pile of tundra in the floor?" he asked.

"Matter appears to be exchanged between two locations instantaneously. We arrived with what was a spherical section of arctic soil under our feet in the apartment. They need to move us as a group, just once, fitted within the sphere."

"A variant of transmat tunnel technology," Daidaunkh said. "Something the Navy has stolen from a precursor race."

"It wouldn't be reasonable for the Navy to expose the technology in this circumstance."

"What is reasonable about the game they play with us?"

"Admiral Etrhnk didn't give me a reason."

"Etrhnk?"

"He took me aboard his ship while I was cutting straw. He wanted to know who Samson is, what my purpose is. I asked him his purpose. Neither of us gave satisfactory answers. I think he'll continue the 'game.'"

"You and the boy are his concern. Why does he bother with Rafael and me?"

"Because I talk to you and he spies on what I say. Because you're a burden on me, adding to my stress. Because he hasn't decided what to do with you when he's finished with you. Do you not wish to see what will become of me, when Etrhnk tires of the game?"

Daidaunkh looked at the pedicab again and after a long moment of thought, raised his good arm toward Fidelity. She took his webbed hand and carefully pulled him to a sitting position amid his straw. She and Rafael got Daidaunkh onto his one good leg. He let out a sharp grunt of pain that echoed down the empty street. He stood with his good arm around Fidelity's shoulders, looking at her strangely, while Rafael turned the pedicab so that he could sit down in it. Fidelity could feel the tension in Daidaunkh that went beyond his pain and was sure he was amazed at having his arm around his sworn enemy. What would he do? She didn't want to hurt him again, but what would she do? Nothing happened. Daidaunkh slipped into the pedicab, still looking at her and working on some internal problem.

Samson refused to get into the pedicab with Daidaunkh. Fidelity gave him a stern look and reasoned with him, but he wouldn't sit with the Rhyen. She placed him on the saddle, even though it was precarious for his small size. Rafael took one handlebar and she took the other, and they pulled the pedicab on its crumbling tires and squeaky bearings.

* * *

"Is this the right apartment?" Horss asked.

"We came in through the same balcony, the same broken glass door."

"It isn't here."

"What?" Mai yawned. She felt groggy, a bit disconnected from reality. She wondered why she wanted to accompany Horss back to Daidaunkh's apartment. It couldn't be simply to keep watch over the Mnro Clinic's ambulance, lest a mentally unstable Navy captain wreck it. She enjoyed his company, now that she had got used to him. He was a perfect gentleman, even a bit reserved. She knew he was trying very hard to be nice and she had reached the point in the evolution of her feelings about him that it gratified her.

Horss turned on the apartment lights and came back to stare at the floor.

"Most of the tundra is gone!" Horss squatted in the middle of a ring of dirt and brushed the edge of it out from the center, exposing a little more of the pink tile. He looked closely at the uncovered floor, then brushed more dirt away from the center. "Damn! I cut myself! Look at how this tile is cut in a circle and is sunk in the middle. Look at this! How the hell did this happen?"

"Let me see your hand!" There was blood dripping onto the tile. Mai grabbed at his waving hand and tried to get him to stop what he was doing. She didn't understand yet what was making him so excited. She got a good look at the wound and wanted to treat it immediately but he pulled the hand away.

"It's razor sharp and beveled and I'll bet it's a perfect circle if I uncovered the rest of the arc. Why is it sagging in the middle?" Horss shook his cut hand, sending more blood drops flying. He used his other hand to probe the upturned edge of the tile, where he had cut himself.

"Be careful!" Mai was extremely anxious because of Horss's wound. Part of her anxiety was because she was a physician, but it was hardly as serious a wound as to cause such anxiety. She had to stop and wonder at herself. She had always accepted that age gradually lessened her emotions, allowing her greater objectivity, wisdom, and tolerance. She had thought extreme age would cause people to find meaning in more subtle and more technical ways. But here she was, feeling young and urgent in the presence of Jon Horss. And she was still missing the reason for Jon's excitement.

A section of the floor broke off and slipped out of his hand as Horss tried to avoid the sharp edge. He looked at the exposed subflooring and a piece of joist. "Look at the curve! Absolutely smooth and perfect! This is impossible! And look at the shape of the tundra at the inner edge of the circle. It forms a section of a spherical curve."

"I've heard stories of similar structures being found on Earth." Mai stepped into the dirt circle next to Horss so she could look at his hand again. "It's the first time I've seen one myself. I think it's scary."

"It's more than that. Where do you think the tundra came from?"

"It came from the Arctic, of course."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"And the perfect curvature, how was that made?"

"I don't know! There are machines that can assemble products on an atomic scale, atom by atom. I'm sure they could produce such smooth curves."

"But there was no assembly done here. It was *disassembly*. And it was transportation. That tundra came here and most of it went back where it came from. And I think this circular section of floor went somewhere and came back. It was cut out of the floor and went to the Arctic, then it came back. I don't want to say the word for this. I've watched too many old episodes of *Deep Space*."

"Gate?"

"That's the word." He shook his head, then led Mai out of the circle on the floor. "I took pictures." He pointed to his eyes. "One of these days I'll embarrass myself by showing them to a scientist."

Mai still held his injured hand at the wrist. "Let me clean this and put a bandage on it." She always carried at least a minimal medical kit. She took her time. She was tired and didn't want to do a poor job. "When we get back to the Clinic I'll heal it."

"I want to stay here. If they return, I need to be here."

"Why would they return here? Why don't you come stay with me?" What

was she saying? She needed sleep. She didn't know what she was about to do, but his lips were so close, so convenient.

* * *

[Where, where, where? Quickly!]

[I don't know! The Navy will find them anywhere we put them. They have transponders. Can you remove their transponders?]

[Not easily. We don't have much time. The Bitch will discover us.]

[Think!]

* * *

"Fidelity?"

She stopped at the sound of her name. Her name. No one ever called her by that name, except Rafael. It still pleased her that he used it, but it began to feel like it was never really her name. Nor Demba. Ruby Reed? A cabaret singer. She liked it better than Fidelity, but it was no more comfortable. Why did Rafael call her name? Because he couldn't see her, of course. Except for latent infrared and stars in the sky, it was dark as pitch in the alley behind the hotel. She could see Rafael, Daidaunkh, and Samson because her sight was augmented.

"I'm back," she called.

"Find anything?"

"Nothing that I would trust. This place has been deserted for at least a century."

"It will be the same everywhere," Rafael said. "Nothing to eat. But perhaps we won't be here long."

They sat on plastic boxes next to Daidaunkh's pedicab in the alley behind the hotel, surrounded by tall shapes that masked the patterns of stars. Samson groped for her in the dark and sat down between her legs. "I agree. It would be a wasted effort to search this area for food. Clothing is another matter. We may go somewhere cold again."

"I don't think Daidaunkh wants to ride anywhere for awhile," Rafael said. "And my legs are almost used up. I may not be able to walk by this time tomorrow."

"I was told you can sing," Daidaunkh commented, stirring in the pedicab. "Why waste these waning moments of our lives? Let me hear you sing. Jarwekh was impressed with what he heard, but Jarwekh is no musician, no proper judge of talent."

"You wish to judge me as a singer?"

"I wish to judge Jarwekh. Can you sing a Rhyan song?"

If only she could impress him as Jarwekh may have been impressed. "I don't know. Can you hum a few bars, as they say, of a Rhyan song?"

Daidaunkh thought for a moment, then launched into a melody strange to human ears.

"He sounds bad," Samson said. "He can't sing on key."

"Oh, you know something about music?" Fidelity asked, amused.

"I have always feared the judgment of children," Daidaunkh said, "which is one reason I remained childless. You don't know that one? Here's an old one, a children's song."

Daidaunkh sang roughly at first but with determination and care. He sang

quietly and with improving clarity. Samson listened to him with interest, turning his head to one side in a quizzical manner, as if trying to understand the alien lyrics. Daidaunkh stopped abruptly and stayed quiet for several moments. The darkness hid his face but the silence said something.

"I know it," Fidelity said. "It's difficult for an Earthian. Are you sure you want me to try?"

"You've sung it before? It would be interesting to hear."

"What is it?" Samson asked. "What are the words?"

"It sounds strange, doesn't it? It's *not* a children's song. It's a sad song for grownups, about war and making orphans of their children. The song is said to be more than a thousand years old. To sing it properly you have to understand the words and why certain notes should be sung slightly wrong, according to Earthian ears. In a way, it's almost like Earthian blues - you have to feel it."

"You know all of this," Daidaunkh said, "yet you couldn't remember that you knew any Rhyan songs?"

"I must be packed with data augments. I'm so full of information that I can't easily browse through it and discover things by category. It helps if I know exactly what I need to find, if I have a sample of a thing, like the first few notes of a song."

She stood up to free her diaphragm. Samson stood up beside her and grasped one of the bicycle handlebars for support. Fidelity sang the first notes of the Rhyan song. Her voice echoed from the walls around them, adding to the melancholy tone of the song. Daidaunkh leaned forward in the pedicab, as if to hear better. She sang, and the ancient song lived again. "Did you like it?" Fidelity asked Samson when she finished the song.

Samson started to say something, but Daidaunkh interrupted. "I shouldn't have doubted Jarwekh! It's a deceptively difficult old song for anyone to do properly. I've never heard it sung better."

"Thank you, Daidaunkh."

Light came from everywhere, blinding them, except for Fidelity. She saw the *new world* appear around them, at all points, above and below, fantastic, stunning in its beauty, endless in its variety.

* * *

"I thought you would want to see this," said his jailer. "And hear it."

"More of the Transmat Prisoners Travelogue?" Pan asked.

The scene on the display wall in Admiral Etrhnhk's black and white room began in the Asian street at dusk and played through to the end in the dark alley. Even though Pan was certain Admiral Demba was once the cabaret singer Ruby Reed, he was shocked by the singing of Demba. It was perhaps due in part to the question of what was memory and what was imagination, but Demba sang not only with perfection but with that rare magic that caused hunger for more of her voice. "I'm not sure Ruby Reed could sing that well. Admiral Demba is... astonishing. Thank you for letting me hear her. If it was possible, I would beg her to sing in the Mother Earth Opera."

"Hearing your professional appraisal, I would be predisposed to making it possible. But I'm afraid it's out of my hands now."

"What do you mean?"

"You saw them disappear. You did not see the gate artifact. They're gone. I no longer have a transponder lock on any of them."

"But they still have to be within Sol System, don't they?"

"You're the one who told me gates have no limit to their range."

"The transponder signals could be blocked, couldn't they?"

"Yes. I'll keep a watch for their return."

It was too late to change his opinion of Admiral Etrhmk and become more open with what little he knew of who Demba once was. Pan almost wished she had remained in this 'game' on Earth, where Etrhmk might ultimately change his plans for her. Now he couldn't know what further danger she might be facing. "Do you know where they were sent? Did you want the gate to take them again?"

"I have an idea. I can't tell you about it."

"It will be dangerous for her?"

"Quite dangerous. I hoped they would remain in the field of play. I persisted because my only recourse for the information I wanted was to squeeze it from you by destructive interrogation of your mind."

"You would have killed me and still learned nothing from me."

"There was that risk. Since I had the admiral and I had some time for the game, I didn't need to take that risk. Now the game is over. You know who Demba is. Tell me."

"I know another name for her but I don't think it's one you want to hear. I believe she has yet another name which hasn't reached my conscious. If I remember who that person was, it's possible I would tell you."

"It's also possible you wouldn't. Should I keep you alive for a name? Names don't always explain who a person is."

"The name I remember will have some meaning for you. The one I don't remember feels more important to me and may mean nothing to you. That I can't remember it yet seems to make it more important to me."

"Tell me the name you remember."

"Keshona." Etrhmk turned away from him. Pan waited. "Do you believe me?"

"Belief is only for those who need release from uncertainty. I'm always uncertain, until I act. And then I'm only certain that I've acted. Have you perhaps remembered a person named Jamie?"

"Would you believe anything I said?"

"I've believed everything you said. Have you lied?"

"Admiral, according to your own uncertainty principle, you've believed nothing I've said. I know nothing of a person named Jamie."

"I believe you. I use the word in a probabilistic manner. Are you not interested in knowing why I asked?"

"I'm interested in everything you say, Admiral."

"A high probability, since your life may depend on it."

"Who is Jamie?"

"She's the daughter of Admiral Demba."

"How would you know that?"

Admiral Etrhmk turned to face Pan again. "She told me. Why would she have this child? Who would the father be?"

Pan shook his head. He did believe Admiral Etrhmk. He didn't know who Jamie was. He almost wished he was her father, that Harry the piano player found a wife in Ruby Reed. He would have to wait for further news from his irregular flashbacks of searing images, and hope they were the truth.

Etrhmk did not have long to wait for Constant to make her appearance after

he sent the Opera Master back to detention. She had already seen and heard Admiral Demba sing. As usual, she made no comment about the boy, as if she had no real interest in him, but he knew she did. He was important to her. All children were important to those nearest them and Constant had to have been very close to him. That was as much as he wanted to know about the boy.

Constant had to listen to Demba's performance one more time. "Golly, she gives me chills! Where do you think they're off to this time?"

"Oz," Etrhnk replied.

"You think she'll find some ruby slippers, or meet the Wizard?"

It took a few moments for Etrhnk to discover the literary reference. He tried to smile. He failed.

"Game's over, huh?" Constant patted him on the arm. "Don't worry. I'll worry for both of us. I'd better go now. Kiss me good-bye."

Section 022

1980 - We Are All Connected

"You missed the tree this time," Milly commented, smiling as Sam approached her. It was a genuine smile and a smile of relief. She was afraid he wouldn't come. Now she could go on breathing, go on living. "Where are your glasses? I'm surprised you even saw me."

"You won't believe this," Sam replied, "but the morning after I met you I woke up and I could see pretty well without them. I still carry them around and even put them on without thinking."

"So, the near-sighted astronomer wasn't an act. I was sitting over by the statue one day, feeling sorry for myself, and I saw you walk right into that tree! You were reading as you walked. I almost laughed."

"Reading about black holes." Sam grimaced at the memory. "They're the popular thing but I just can't find anything to like about them. Probably missing a chance. Where are your glasses?"

"You won't believe this, but..."

"Really? Have you been to an eye doctor?" It seemed like a miracle to Sam but he didn't believe in miracles.

"No. How about you?" Sam was a miracle to Milly, not the change in her own eyesight.

"Short of money. I want to know why my eyesight changed but I don't want to find out it's just temporary or going to get worse. I'll enjoy it while I can. Should you be out in this cold, Milly? Can I take you somewhere inside?"

"I'm sorry to try to take advantage of you, Sam, but it would be nice if you could help me shop for groceries."

"I'd be happy to do that!"

"And then I'll be happy to cook you a meal."

* * *

"Sorry it was just TV dinners," Milly said, as Sam cleared the table in her apartment. "I can hardly fry myself an egg for breakfast, sitting in this rolling prison." She frowned at letting the resentment out. She had promised herself never to mention the wheelchair, never to bring up anything having to do with her disability.

"That's actually better than I usually do for myself. I eat a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I miss some meals entirely. I'm not very domestically organized, but I'm right on top of my classes. You can't give the students any excuses." He could sense that Milly was straining to present herself favorably to him and was glad of it, even if he couldn't imagine why. Of course, she could be just as lonely as he was. She could also need a friend to help her in practical matters, like shopping. He would do whatever she wanted, just to keep seeing her. "Would you like to get out of the wheelchair, just for a little while? Can you sit on the sofa?"

"Watch this," Milly said, rolling to the sofa and locking the wheelchair. She launched herself to the sofa but the wheelchair skidded backward too much. She fell on the floor before Sam could reach her. "For my next trick." She held her arms up for Sam to take hold of. Her embarrassment and feelings of failure were more than canceled by the physical contact with Sam. She almost hugged

him. "I'm still pretty new at this paraplegic stuff. I used to have a nurse to help me but the insurance company got stingy. Are you going to sit down next to me?"

Sam sat a few inches away from Milly, close enough to smell her perfume, close enough that he could imagine she was not repelled by him, that she wanted him to be there. "Are you making any headway on your thesis?"

"Oh, let's don't talk about that! What is it that you don't like about black holes?"

"Gravity. Oops!" Milly tilted against him.

"Sorry." *Not sorry*, she thought, righting herself. "It's a little tricky balancing myself on a dead butt without armrests. I'm not trying to get fresh. Gravity is the main ingredient of a black hole, I guess." Milly didn't want to fall back into her old way of dealing with the opposite sex which - upon long introspection while in the hospital - she realized was too much influenced by the popular media and her own low regard for most of the boys and men she had known. Sam was far different from her concept of the typical American male. "Gravity is also my main nemesis. Curse Newton!"

Sam laughed politely and Milly's sour-but-not-serious expression changed into a small grin. He was still surprised Milly had invited him into her life - if he wasn't misinterpreting her attitude toward him. He was sweating every word he said to her, trying not to spoil everything. "Classical physics was a real struggle for me. That was when I was getting my degree in mechanical engineering. But I took an elective course in astronomy, one thing led to another, and then I had to get serious about gravity. The masses of stars and the things gravity makes them do to play out their lives, that's astrophysics, and on to cosmology. I still haven't educated myself well enough in the math and theory to be able to see where I could make a contribution."

"But you must know something to make you feel there's something wrong with Newton and Einstein." Milly wanted to believe Sam was more than the stereotypical Asian college graduate, all rote learning and blindly career-driven. She knew that wasn't a fair generalization and she was somewhat perplexed that she had such high hopes for Sam, as though too much was riding on his intellectual prowess. "I'm sorry. I'm not going to push you to make me think you're a genius. But I am impressed that you also play the piano. I wish I was not so one-dimensional. I wanted to be a race car driver but I guess we can rule that out now."

Sam laughed again. "Thanks, that takes some of the pressure off me, like I needed to cut down the gods of physics to make you like me."

Milly laughed. It was the first time since before the accident that paralyzed her that she laughed purely in pleasure. She knew Sam liked her. She knew she had a chance for... what? Whatever! "So, your dad and my dad were both in the Korean War. We have something in common."

"Papa wasn't in the war long," Sam said. "I was born in Seattle in 1951. Neither of them has ever told me how they got to America but I have to believe they got here by way of hell. Where did you get that scar on your forehead? It looks new to me."

"Crashed my Mustang on the DC beltway last year." Milly tried real hard not to say too much or say it the wrong way. She deserved to be crippled, and was lucky she wasn't dead. "I was in a coma for three days. I hope it knocked some sense into me. I'm still trying to find out if I kept all my math marbles."

"I've heard that you're a good teacher. There are plenty of instructors around

here but not many teachers. Of course, that might not be a compliment if you see the undergrads as the enemy, like many of my fellow postdocs."

"I'll take it as a compliment, Sam! Thank you! It could be that I was not so sympathetic toward my students before the accident."

"I had a friend in high school - George - who was hurt in a car wreck, lost one of his legs, spent some time in a wheelchair until he got a prosthetic. He became a better student after that, after he got through feeling sorry for himself. I like to think I helped him. It was a friendship that helped me."

"Another connection we have." Milly absently placed her hand on top of his, where it rested on his thigh. She felt him twitch in surprise but keep his hand under hers. "I didn't mean to..." She started to apologize, then saw the distracted look on his face. Even as he sat there thinking, Sam turned his hand over under hers, making her raise her hand, then he took her hand by letting his fingers move between hers, lacing their hands together. And still he thought, oblivious to their hands, hands that wanted to be together. She was content to sit beside Sam and enjoy this simple pleasure. She could study his face without him noticing. She liked what she saw, she liked it very much: a kind and thoughtful face, with a mind behind it that thought hard. "What is it, Sam?"

Sam opened his eyes, or maybe his eyes were already open, just not seeing anything. He saw he was holding Milly's hand. He was shocked and embarrassed and tried to turn loose, but she wouldn't relax her grip. "I'm sorry." He lifted their hands to indicate his indiscretion.

"Tell me what you were thinking. You looked intense."

"Connections. You said we had connections. I think we are all connected, everyone and everything in the universe."

"Of course we are. By gravity."

"Not exactly gravity. Also by starlight, but not exactly light. Light pushes. Gravity pulls. But we are connected, even to the farthest quasar. They are somehow the same - starlight and gravity - but where does the push and pull come from?"

"Light pushes?" Milly quickly realized what Sam meant. "Oh, like the little glass bulb with the black and white vanes that spin when light is shone on them."

"And like the radio signal that pushes into the antenna of your radio."

"But light is information, gravity is... gravity. How can they be the same?"

"There has to be something, some *thing*, that is common to both, that carries both." Sam pounded their locked hands on his thigh as emphasis. "Everything is information, all matter, all forces, all motion. And it's all connected."

"Space itself is the connection," Milly suggested.

"But space has no shape, no geometry, no aether. It's nothing! To say it's warped so that gravity and light can bend this way and that, to me that's too much magic. Of course our very existence is like magic but we have to accept that. We don't have to accept that every piece of the universe below the ceiling of magic is also explained by magic. Why bother to do science if all we can discover about reality can only be described by formulas and numbers? I see the universe with the eyes of an engineer, almost to the limit of the old idea of the clockwork universe. Maybe there aren't any gears or levers making everything move, but there must be strings that are pulled, even if we can't see them, even if they have some properties we must temporarily label as magic."

"Like magnetic lines of force?" Milly suggested.

"Exactly! Did you ever do the experiment in school where you sprinkled iron

powder on a piece of paper with a bar magnet under it? You could very easily imagine those lines of force from the way the iron formed those curving patterns. They would come out one end of the magnet and go around and into the other end, north to south or south to north. I always wondered if we could ever know if they moved in one direction or the other, like electricity does."

Sam stopped talking again. Milly watched some idea transfix him and make him squeeze her hand so hard it hurt. She had to lean against him again and fight the pressure of his fingers holding hers to get his attention. "Tell me what you think!"

"I think," he said slowly, "that someone must have thought of this before. It seems so obvious. The magnetic lines of force have to be actual lines of something. And they loop around and through the metal. That makes them circuits, closed circuits, like electric circuits. And that suggests they may carry a signal or a vibration or a quantity of energy - a quantum of something that amounts to an agent of force. They are quantum circuits. And they are the clue and the model for everything else."

Milly could see the idea clearly and although she had no idea whether it was a useful model of reality, she was impressed and pleased that Sam found the inspiration for it in her presence.

Section 023

In the Emerald City

"It sounds familiar," Daidaunkh said. "An Earthian song. Not English."

"Opera," Rafael said. "Italian. Puccini."

"Madame Butterfly," Fidelity said.

Music was the only sound and the only clue that human beings might exist somewhere nearby. In the first instant the music had made Fidelity think they had been transported to a large corporate office building in a space city, although opera was an unusual choice for background music. Looking for the source of the music - which she never found - made Fidelity notice odd details in the bright light and saturated colors of their surroundings. Not much made sense as she surveyed the nearby surfaces, finally noticing the inert drabness of the circle of pavement from Earth beneath the pedicab. It was surrounded by the glow of the rest of the floor.

Daidaunkh was leaning forward in his passenger seat, frowning with an effort to understand what he saw. Fidelity stood with Samson and Rafael by the pedicab, holding onto its metal frame. The four of them occupied the edge of the floor of a corridor. The corridor had no walls; that is, there seemed to be a gap and a fall-off beyond the edge, with structures standing at a short distance from each open side of the corridor. The floor was striped with subtle linear patterns that might define lanes along its length. The material seemed to conduct light and provide much of the illumination. High above it was an incandescent ceiling that had identical linear patterns. Not too far ahead of them something strange disrupted the flow of the glowing floor and ceiling and farther away behind them was a similar disruption. Fidelity left the pedicab to step over to the edge and peer downward. She gasped. The structure beside the corridor appeared to be floating in the air, completely separate from the corridor. It was a large red building several hundred meters in length and may have been the equivalent of four stories in height. Fidelity knelt down at the very edge to get a better perspective. Rafael brought Samson over and all three looked downward, then upward.

"What do you see?" Daidaunkh demanded.

"It goes on forever!" Rafael declared. "There are more of these walkways down there! And also above us! On and on! Let us move forward, to the end of this building! There is an opening there, perhaps a vista!"

Fidelity replaced Samson on the driver's seat of the pedicab and she and Rafael pulled it forward. The darker circle of Earth pavement disappeared behind them, leaving the street of light flawless.

As they approached the end of the red building they began to understand what it was they were walking on. At the same time they were also becoming exposed to a growing vastness of distance and of structure and of variation. The corner of the red building brought them near an intersection of corridors. The shining surfaces met in an explosion of glowing pathways that twisted and curved in all the possible routes needed to provide transfer to all three dimensions of direction. As Fidelity traced the paths of the luminous ribbons, she saw the ceilings of the corridors also split into what must be pathway ribbons; so the ceilings were not ceilings. These were pairs of *streets*, *city streets*, streets of a huge *space* city. Not only did a pair of streets converge from right and left, but another pair of glowing walkways converged from above and

from below. Ahead of them the broad ribbon of light that was their walkway or street began to split along its lane patterns into paths that curved left, right, up, down, offering routes that connected to the eleven other streets. It did not occur to Fidelity to wonder why there were six pairs of walkways because the open space at the complex junction gave such a distracting and disturbing view, a view that implied too much about the scope and scale of this alien place. It was probable this was not just a space city but a space country, and not just a space country but an entire *world*.

"We are not in the Union," Fidelity murmured.

"Kansas," Rafael said. "We are not in Kansas anymore."

As far as their eyes could see, the latticework of glowing streets defined giant cubic volumes in which everything *floated*. There was so much light and color and variation that it hardly seemed real. They could even discern vast green areas that might be vegetation winding through the cacophony of architecture and what appeared to be rivers of water that flowed with no visible containment, forming waterfalls that fell in any direction.

"*Stay here.*"

Fidelity jumped, twisted to see what stranger stood next to her and saw no one. She looked at Rafael. "Did you hear someone speak?" she asked. He shook his head. "Perhaps we should stay here."

"It is intimidating, isn't it?" Rafael commented. "Where are all the people?"

"Why stay here?" Daidaunkh asked.

"I heard the voice again. It said to wait here."

They waited at the edge of the concourse by the glowing tangle of the intersection. Except for the sourceless music it was quiet and empty of life. With the maze of the junction ahead of them and the infinite view of floating buildings filling their eyes and minds, they were shocked by the sound of a distant human voice.

"Ahoy, there." They looked up and behind them to see a person approaching on the lower surface of the upper walkway, walking up-side-down on the almost-transparent surface. He seemed to move more rapidly than his gait would permit. When he had nearly reached them, he jumped downward, executed a graceful flip, and flew to a landing before them.

"I am Percival." The young man strode up to them and stared at them with troubled curiosity. "I think I've been summoned to your aid." Fidelity started to introduce herself. He cut her off. "Don't tell me your names! What can I do for you?"

Percival spoke a version of English that to Fidelity's ears wasn't far removed from the Twenglish Samson spoke. When she might have time to ponder the implications, she didn't know. It didn't ease the turmoil of her thoughts that Percival was so bizarrely dressed. Her data augment identified it as a period costume from Earth history. "Where are we?" she asked.

"You don't know?" Percival looked even more disturbed, perhaps even frightened. He looked at the pedicab and the injured Daidaunkh. He seemed to struggle for the next thing to do or say. "You are not familiar with this deserted neighborhood? You are lost?"

"We were on Earth just a few moments ago," Fidelity replied. "I want to know what this world is and where it is."

"You were on Earth?" Percival seemed alarmed, although not incredulous.

"Not much help," Daidaunkh mumbled, giving the oddly dressed young man a frown.

"I'm hungry," Samson said.

"Food," Percival said, seizing on a way to resume functioning. "I have credit enough for food for all of you." He returned Daidaunkh's frown and apparently noted the Rhyas's splinted arm and leg. "Medical treatment is another matter. Sometimes a hospital is generous. Or so I've been told. Which do you want first, food or doctoring?"

"Food," Samson said.

"Doctoring," Fidelity said.

"I see the boy is an amputee," Percival said, as though neither children nor his injury were so special. "Food first. It's closer. Follow me over toward the middle. Mind you stay in my lane."

"Why are you wearing that funny costume?" Samson asked.

"I just came from my performance in an opera. 'The Marriage of Figaro.' I wasn't a lead singer. I'm more of an actor, but opera is important here."

Fidelity was sure Percival was struggling to maintain his composure, and he had not yet answered her questions. "What is this place called?"

"Most of us call it the Big Ball."

"And where is it?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. Even..."

Percival obviously stopped himself from saying something more, and it was obviously fear that made him stop. Fidelity decided not to press him, although it had seemed the most important question she knew to ask. The feeling of the pavement under her feet as they pulled the pedicab across to the middle of the street silenced any other question she would ask at the moment. The street - the *highway* - was moving under them, pulling them along more and more rapidly.

The bright pavement did not appear to be moving. Lane information appeared embedded just below the surface of the almost transparent street, yet no substantial layer of the pavement seemed to be in motion. Admiral Khalanov, Fidelity thought, would *kill* to get a chance to study this impossible mechanism. One couldn't see where the motion began or stopped, and it increased so gradually as you walked toward the middle of the avenue that you couldn't stumble due to the acceleration differential. The velocity of the bright pavement slowed as they quickly reached the intersection. Other lanes divided away toward the different converging walkways. Their lane dipped and swerved only slightly as it carried them through the maze of the intersection. The lane then rejoined the other lanes on the other side of the junction and accelerated toward the next distant intersection.

"There aren't any people here," Fidelity remarked, hoping for a response from Percival. Why didn't he want to know their names?

"This area is quiet now. It gets that way in different places at different times. There's no apparent reason for it. I guess we like to huddle, and the huddles like to travel. It's crowded where I live."

"The population is small compared to the size of the Big Ball?"

"You wouldn't want to live in a lot of these old buildings. There are some better places to live and millions of people. Maybe billions."

Almost as soon as Percival mentioned it, people began to appear on the walkways. The three-dimensional blocks of space between the concourses took on a slightly more residential feeling, with fewer great structures blocking view from the streets. They passed over a vast green parkland and came to a different kind of intersection. There was more space available at the vertices. Three disks, each shaped like the rings of Saturn, intersected at right angles to each other,

with the maze of transfer ramps at their center. This structure provided six planes of flat real estate for a variety of ad hoc human-made structures that seemed busy with various kinds of commerce. The disks glowed like the streets and the lanes.

Before they reached the lane-division point, Percival led them off the propelling lanes to one side, where Fidelity and Rafael had to begin pulling the pedicab. Percival was leading them along a path that split off toward a point on one of the disks in the intersection.

"Whoa!" Daidaunkh exclaimed, tilting his head to measure the unnatural perspective of their destination. There was a bottomless drop on every side.

"There are different kinds of courage, are there not?" Rafael queried, turning to give Daidaunkh a challenging grin.

"I assume there are some safety measures we can't see?" Fidelity asked Percival.

"Most of the walkways used to have barrier fields," Percival replied. "They shut down about a century ago. Everyone carries a throw-line in case they're in a hurry and take a shortcut that leaves them in free-fall. All the streets and paths still have gravity. When that shuts down, all of us will have to start flying. People do that already. You just have to be patient if you don't have jets or wings. There isn't any danger in jumping off a street or path."

"It still looks like we will fall," Daidaunkh said. "Outer space is one thing, this is quite another."

"Stop complaining and start enjoying!" Rafael declared.

The disk plane ahead of them swirled with thousands of people. The pathway - only a few meters wide - crossed a vast chasm and Fidelity thought she could see some distant end to it in each direction - upward and downward.

"This is near the north-south axis of the Big Ball," Percival explained when he saw Fidelity pause to measure the distances above and below them. "Most other vertical streets are simpler and shorter. Really, you shouldn't be too anxious. Even as poorly as we have maintained it - and as old as it is - the Big Ball is probably safer than most Earth System space countries. Most of them rotate, don't they? You can really accelerate if you fall from an axis."

"The scale of it is daunting," Fidelity commented. "How big is it?"

"Probably smaller than the Five Worlds, but it doesn't waste as much space."

"We must be very far from Union space, yet you know a lot about the Union and Earth System." Fidelity's comment was met with silence. She thought Percival was actually a person who liked to talk - he was an actor - but he was also trying not to say too much. She realized he was still fearful about them. She didn't want to upset him further, even though she might be deprived of vital information.

They reached the surface of one of the disks and Fidelity adjusted to the perspective of the landscape better than she imagined she would. She had to stop looking upward and outward, where everything else was oriented differently. The crowd of people around them helped her ignore geometry, until Percival led them up to the point where another disk intersected at a right angle. Even though the transition seam provided a generous curve upward, there were people walking perpendicular to them only a few meters above them. Samson held tightly to Fidelity's waist as they negotiated the transition, almost falling off the saddle of the pedicab to do so. She had to take him off the seat and hold him on her hip, grateful the artificial gravity was lighter than Earth normal.

The people around them on the commerce disc hardly reacted to their

presence, even when Rafael chose to speak to them. The air buzzed with conversation but no one laughed or smiled. There were no children anywhere. Occasionally someone would steal a glance at Samson. The questions boiled out of Fidelity's observations and pooled by the hundreds, frustrating her desire for the knowledge, and increasing her anxiety that all was not as peaceful as it seemed. The people around them were usually young, most of them poorly attired, and no few of them dangerous-looking.

"My favorite place," Percival said. "This may be my last meal, so I deserve it."

"Why - " Fidelity began to ask.

"Just a private joke. Ignore it."

They knew they had arrived at an eating establishment by the pervasive aroma of cooking food. It resembled an ancient vehicle without its wheels, made of shiny metal, with a door on each end and small windows along its length. "This is called a diner," Fidelity said. "It comes from 20th-century Earth. Don't tell me it serves fried chicken and hamburgers."

"I didn't know if you would even understand the menu. Yes, that's what they serve, but it isn't made from butchered farm animals. It's synthetic. Would you prefer a different place?"

"I want to eat here," Samson said.

They parked Daidaunkh near the diner and out of the flow of pedestrian traffic. "I'll bring you something," Fidelity promised Daidaunkh.

The others went into the diner and Daidaunkh watched the scenery until his eyelids grew heavy. He hadn't slept well and even with the visual feast before him he welcomed a chance to turn off the ache in his limbs by napping. He awoke too soon to someone poking him sharply, making his broken limbs hurt more than normal. He opened his eyes and saw a man in a black uniform.

"What's your business here?" the soldier demanded. "You a performer?"

It took Daidaunkh a moment to decipher the ancient English, not as clearly spoken as by the young actor Percival. In those few seconds he sensed a danger in having delayed speaking. Even after two major Mnro Clinic treatments, and after so many decades of wasting his life on the Earthian - and perhaps Rhyan - birth world, Daidaunkh was still sensitive to the arrogance of persons who wore uniforms. He once was one himself. "I'm waiting for someone in the eating establishment. I'm not a performer."

"Get out of the vehicle," a second soldier ordered, pulling Daidaunkh by the shirt, making him tumble out of the pedicab.

Daidaunkh couldn't suppress a cry of pain.

"Get up! What's wrong with you?"

"My arm and leg are broken!" Daidaunkh tried to rise. He was almost up when one soldier kicked his good leg out from under him.

"Up!" The soldier menaced Daidaunkh with heavy-soled boots near the splint on his leg.

"It would seem pointless." Daidaunkh understood the ultimate outcome of this encounter was a third try at final death. The soldier kicked him in the splint. Daidaunkh refused to utter a sound, although the pain made him tremble. "Why don't you boys leave before something happens to you?" Daidaunkh spoke through clenched teeth. He had glimpsed the admiral rushing out of the diner.

"What something?" the more playful of the pair inquired.

"Shoot him," the bored soldier said. "No interest to me."

"Doesn't look afraid. Makes him interesting."

"Some kind of Rhyan. Not one of us. A sup. Shoot him!"

"Can't tell how old he is. What do you think?"

"Probably lived longer than we will. Shoot him."

"Too late," Daidaunkh said. "Keshona is here."

"Is something wrong?" the admiral asked, slowing her approach.

The two soldiers turned to see the dark woman in her yellow dress. Daidaunkh watched as the men positioned themselves instinctively to have a tactical advantage, yet the admiral's presence apparently didn't cause them much concern. It was amusing to see her act the part of a defenseless woman in the presence of dangerous soldiers. He could see her trying to tremble like a frightened woman. He wanted to laugh.

"We ask the questions. Who're you?"

"I apologize if we've done something wrong. My name is Ruby Reed. I'm a singer. This is my companion who recently injured himself. We were about to see a doctor."

"Hah!" Daidaunkh did laugh, and grimaced with pain. "I was injured by her when I tried to kill her."

"He's delirious. Please, don't pay any attention to him."

"Admiral, I'm trying to warn you! These kids are going to kill us!"

"I hope not." She looked from one to the other of the two young men, forgetting her act of weakness. Daidaunkh knew that look in highly trained veterans of personal combat, veterans who knew how good they were. She appraised her foes and, on some level, they were aware of it. Perhaps she even wanted to warn them.

"There are only two of them." Daidaunkh tried to speak Twenglish clearly enough for the soldiers to understand. At least they would understand his tone of voice. "Hurry up! I'm hungry!" The two soldiers, muscular, dark-haired, dark-eyed, scarred on their faces, and not very old, struggled to find words to re-establish their command of the situation. Daidaunkh stymied them. "Don't assume these fancy antique uniforms aren't armored. And don't forget about those projectile weapons they're wearing. The cowardly bastards will try to shoot you." Daidaunkh recoiled on the pavement as the first soldier kicked him hard.

"Please, don't do that," the admiral said. "He's harmless."

"He has a big mouth."

Daidaunkh bit himself, reacting to the assault and to the echoes from his broken limbs. He spat blood from his mouth, some of which reached the legs of the soldiers. He grinned at them with red lips. "Simple murder for simple minds. I wouldn't touch that pistol if I were you."

"And what will you do?" the soldier asked, fingering the butt of his weapon.

"It isn't me you should watch. She's the angel of death. She's Keshona."

"Many in the Fleet bear that name, Rhyan."

"She's the original. She executed ten million people on Rhyandh, including my parents and my wife-to-be."

"That was too long ago. I'm tired of you, lunatic."

"I speak the truth! I'm one-hundred ten years old."

"He's only an actor. I'll kill him." The soldier began to draw his weapon.

"Don't," the admiral said in a tone of voice that made him pause. "Draw the weapon and I'll stop you."

Without warning, the soldier nearest the admiral struck at her with the back

of his hand. She dodged the blow without apparent effort.

"This looks familiar," Daidaunkh commented. "They don't know their lives are in danger. Too easy. Too easy."

Embarrassed by his missed blow and awkward recovery, the soldier turned his full attention on the admiral. The soldier advanced upon her and she retreated. "Stand and fight!" She continued to evade the soldier. He moved to block her retreat. He reached for her. He somehow lost his balance and fell down. He didn't move again.

Puzzled and alarmed, the other soldier pulled his weapon from its holster. He quickly took aim at the admiral with the projectile weapon. He fired and missed, the bullet ricocheting off the metal wall of the diner. He fired again and the admiral moved just enough to let the bullet pass. The trigger pull was too long, Daidaunkh judged, giving the admiral too much time for her augmented reflexes to move her. The bullet shattered a window in the diner. She pulled Daidaunkh's knife from behind her as the soldier turned the projectile weapon on Daidaunkh. Daidaunkh smiled and blew him a bloody kiss.

"You're a big disappointment." He saw the knife suddenly appear in the soldier's throat. The soldier gurgled and fell heavily, the gun clattering away from his limp hand.

The admiral examined the first soldier, felt for his pulse, closed his vacant eyes. She came to the one with the knife in his throat. She avoided the spreading pool of blood and removed the knife. She wiped the blade on the young man's uniform and stuck it back into the sheath she wore in the small of her back. She walked to the pedicab and sat sideways on the driver's seat.

"I missed the whole thing!" Daidaunkh marveled at the efficiency, the almost magic lethality of the admiral. "I didn't see how you killed the first and I didn't see how you threw the knife." He had to wait several seconds before she could reply.

"Did you expect me to be able to kill them?"

She sounded less angry than simply upset to Daidaunkh. "I'm not a stranger to personal combat, Admiral. Despite my poor showing against you, I tell you I was able to judge how lethal you may be. Now I see you're even deadlier than I thought. These were obviously young men without conscience and I felt they would kill us because they didn't want us to breathe the same air they breathed. When you came to my rescue, I knew I couldn't lose. If they killed you, my parents would be avenged. If you killed them, I would live a little longer. Of course, I didn't want the boy and Rafael to be left at the mercy of this place. I expected you to kill them, Admiral."

She turned away from him, put her hands on the handlebars, leaned forward. Her body shook slightly. Daidaunkh was irritated by his reaction to this. He wanted to hate this Earthian woman but every moment he remained in her company brought unexpected information that dulled the edge of his hate. He had lived too long, had died too many times, and now his brain was traitorously perverted by this legend who became someone else. It was a poor way to die, hating was.

Daidaunkh looked about, noting the reactions of passersby. He was too involved with the admiral to wonder at the rapid emptying of the commerce circle. "Are you crying? Damn, you're a puzzling person! You should be laughing! We don't have time for this! You have to help me up. You have to get me something to eat." She stopped. She helped Daidaunkh into the pedicab. She took a deep breath, started back to the diner. He was helpless and she helped

him. He was hateful and she didn't hate him. He did his evil upon the innocent Denna and she didn't accuse him. "Admiral, wait a moment." She stopped again and turned toward him. He saw a different face and it moved him still further, further than he thought possible. He swallowed and concentrated. "It's no longer my intent to kill you. Keshona was a demon who possessed me far too long and wasted my life. Now I understand Jarwekh. Now I forgive him. Why were you crying?"

"Because I don't know who I am. Because I didn't want to discover I could kill these young men. Because I didn't want Samson to see it!"

* * *

Percival could not be happy or satisfied after seeing the two dead lieutenants, much as he hated the Black Fleet. Now the hunt would be on, and he would be lucky to escape alive. He briefly considered abandoning the four strangers but could not bring himself to do it. Perhaps he had performed too many plays and lived too many roles in which his character learned hard lessons about right and wrong. The Big Ball did not teach ethics to its citizens; it only taught survival.

The businesses and walks of this area of the disk were almost deserted before he could get his wards moving again. Fortunately, a great many people had decided to fly off the disk, in order to get as much distance as possible from the place. He would have done so himself. The four strangers would also need to fly, and he wondered how he could get them to do it. The rapid exodus had left the streets less congested but they were too slow, too restrictive. They needed speed and random routes. The Fleet would storm onto the scene as soon as some snitch told them about the killings. Then they would spread out to find witnesses. They would find witnesses who knew too little and torture them and kill them. Or there would be more snitches, maybe one or two who were even now waiting to tail them from the crime scene.

"Can you leave your cart?" Percival asked the injured Rhyan.

"If necessary," the man replied. He seemed to realize something of the urgency to depart.

The woman helped the Rhyan out of the conveyance. They pushed it over the edge of the disk and sent it floating away.

"We need more throw-lines," Percival said. "One for each of you. Do any of you have any free-fall experience?"

The Rhyan sat down carefully with the woman's help. He looked up at the old man and smiled grimly and shook his head.

"I have some experience," the woman replied. "Where do we get throw-lines?"

"They can be any kind of rope or cord. Also we need reaction mass, any small heavy objects we can use to change direction."

A few minutes of searching nearby stores and vendor booths brought them back with the needed supplies to where the Rhyan waited. Percival sensed the unease of the Rhyan as he helped him onto his good leg. "You're with me. The lady will take the other two. Don't worry. This is the easy part. I'm going to place you just off the edge where you will float. I want you to fold your arms and legs as much as you can so I can give you a very precise shove. Look up two levels and across. See the bridge from the street to the green area? That's our target. I wish we had jets."

Percival explained technique to them and hoped the woman could do her

part. She seemed calm and alert. Percival knew he was not the expert he should be in flying. He was never in that much hurry and had not accumulated much flying experience. He was acting a role, maybe the last good role of his life.

Percival and the woman maneuvered the Rhyan off the edge of the disk. Percival tried to get footing for the push while the Rhyan slowly tried to fold himself into a more compact shape. "At least you didn't just eat!" the old man called to the Rhyan. "And if I vomit you'll be ahead of me!" The Rhyan just groaned in reply. Then Percival pushed him.

Percival helped the woman launch the old man. Then the woman launched herself with the boy on her back. Her trajectory looked accurate and Percival felt good as he jumped after the Rhyan. The flight was successful, with only one throw-line needing to be used to pull in the old man. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"And now we do it again," Percival announced, not hinting at how many more times they would need to fly. They reached the medical clinic in the bottom of the Big Ball three hours later, each flight being longer than the previous as they gained confidence. He was surprised none of them had vomited. Percival had once been treated at this small hospital after he was beaten by a protection gang.

"This is the farthest place I know of that can treat your friend's injuries. *If* he wishes treatment at this time. We can't know if the Fleet will find him here before they heal him. He will be on his own. The rest of us should leave immediately."

"Leave me," the Rhyan said. "It's as good a place to die as any."

"You may have to indenture yourself to pay for the treatment," Percival warned.

"It will not be the first time I have done so. Don't come inside with me. It will only delay you and endanger them." The Rhyan abruptly hopped away, groaning with the pain he felt.

"We *will* come back for you!" the old man called after the Rhyan.

Percival got his three remaining persons heading in a random direction. He wanted to ask them so many questions. He suspected they also wanted to ask some questions.

"Where are we going now?" the old man asked.

"Nowhere. We just keep moving. It will take a few hours for your friend to be treated. We'll sneak back then and see if he's ready to leave."

"And then what?" the old man inquired.

Percival shrugged.

"Who were the soldiers?" the woman asked. "Why were they so bad? What are the consequences if their people catch us?"

Percival knew he should have warned them sooner of the many dangers to life in the Big Ball. He had made wishful assumptions about their mysterious appearance in the Big Ball. It was the first time he had heard the voice of the One True God, and for an utter skeptic such as himself, it was a life-changing moment. Uneducated in the theology of the One True God, Percival had assumed She would watch over the people She had instructed him to serve. He now knew he was unqualified to make any assumptions about the logic and methods of a god. "The soldiers were junior officers of the Black Fleet. They are the worst of their kind. We call them barbarians, but not to their faces. If they catch us we die. We die badly. They like to cut people into small pieces while they are still alive."

"Is there no agency for law and justice here?" the old man asked.

"None," Percival replied. "If you still like to fly, we can take a tour around the Big Ball before returning for your friend."

"Let's fly," the boy said, although he held onto the woman and seemed to mimic her somber mood.

"Yes," the woman agreed, "let's fly."

They had to be special people, these strangers to the Big Ball. Percival was afraid to be with them, but the Invisible One, the one of hope and belief and legend, had spoken to him. Many said She was the One True God, hidden from She Who Must Not Be Named. Blessed were those who were called on to do Her bidding. The dark woman was dangerous. She killed the Black Fleet officers with little effort. Was she the First Warrior of the One True God, come to wage war on She Who Must Not Be Named? It was all myth and superstition, a pitiful arsenal of hope for those who hated and feared the Black Fleet. Who was the boy with the amputated leg? How could he fit into any plan by the True God to free Her people? At least he now knew She was real. He could believe! He could hope! Percival was sorry now he never took the ancient legends more seriously, studied their prophecies, learned their meanings. It was too easy to be a cynic. Why was he chosen to help God's visitors?

"Where are these barbarians least likely to be?" the old one asked.

"The junior officers, the ones without a berth, are everywhere, but seldom go to places of old culture, like the opera or a museum."

"Would you know of any art museums?"

"I know of many. What kind of art?"

"There are a great many art museums?"

"More than I know about."

"Why so many? Do you people love art so much?"

"Some of us do, but art is treasure and treasure is what the Black Fleet steals. Stealing for the sake of stealing and depriving and causing suffering. It's beyond my understanding."

"How about oil painting? That isn't such a treasure. Reproduction has become so perfect that the images are virtually free to everyone."

"It doesn't seem to matter. Only the stealing and the murder matter. Did you have a particular artist in mind?"

"How about de LaGuardia?"

"Rafael?"

"You know of him?"

"Sure. But first I want to change out of this costume."

An hour later Percival brought them to his own neighborhood. He at least wanted to see home one last time. They walked winding grass lanes between fabric houses of brilliant colors. Some homes were mere tents, some were colossal assemblages of flexible planes of hue and texture, bordering on visual befuddlement. Every shape and size between the extremes seemed to exist in merry anarchy, no two exactly alike. These messengers or soldiers of the One True God seemed to appreciate the humble splendor of his neighborhood. He welcomed them into the fabric-partitioned apartment he shared with two other young men, both of whom were fortunately not home. He changed into his normal work clothes. He found an old shirt to give the woman to partially hide the distinctive yellow dress.

The old one began to feel his age by the time Percival brought them to the park across the street from the museum. He was the oldest person Percival ever

saw. Only a rare Fesn might be so old. They rested on a knoll by the lake that gave a perfect view of the museum, and a second view as a reflection in the calm water. It was perhaps the largest museum in the Big Ball, an imposing edifice of curved ivory pillars suspending a swirling globe of verdant translucence. This globe was thought to mimic an external view of the world they lived in. The entrance was at one corner of an intersection of streets and was large enough to fill an entire cubic city block.

After a brief rest and soft drinks he purchased for them from a park vendor, Percival guided the three visitors to one of the glass ramps that would take them into the animated jade sphere. The old man and the dark woman walked on either side of the boy, each holding one of his hands. Starting up the ramp's escalator, the old man smiled, scratched his beard, shook his head. "I'm afraid this is what I would call an ego trip."

Percival gave him a puzzled look. The somber woman managed a near-smile. "Rafael is a painter," the boy said, as if that explained the comment.

"Also a sculptor." Percival remembered the scope of the artist's work. He wondered if it was coincidence that the old man requested to see the art of one of the few artists within his own area of knowledge.

The old one enjoyed the variety of people moving through the carpeted rings of the globular museum. They were generally older and better behaved than most citizens, Percival thought. He asked Percival many questions about them, explaining that he had lived too long as a hermit and had forgot how people were "their own canvases of color and experience." The woman warrior remarked on the continued absence of children, wondering if the Big Ball had something like Mnro Clinics and adhered to the Static Population Ethic. Percival had to explain that there were a great many children but safety concerns kept children away from most of the public places they had seen so far in the Big Ball.

The old man was astonished to glimpse a Fesn in the crowd. Percival tried to find the alien and bring it to them to meet but it disappeared before he could find it. Both the old man and the woman were intensely disappointed and asked many more questions about the Fesn than Percival had answers.

"There is another alien race known to us." Percival thought to add the information just to be absolutely safe. "I have never seen one. If you do see one, do not harm it or even speak to it. The consequences could be lethal to the entire Big Ball."

"What kind of beings are they?" the woman inquired. "What do they look like?"

"You will know when you see one. They are immortal and they are sacred."

"Would they appear dark and sparkling and amorphous?" the woman asked.

Percival was shocked at the description. "That is yet another thing! You have seen a Gatekeeper? I thought they were extinct!"

"I saw one on Earth. What is a Gatekeeper?"

"You must know what a gate is?" Percival prompted.

"They have always been the holy grail of space exploration," the woman said. "And these creatures guard the gates? You have gates here?"

"I don't know. There must be. You had to have come here through a gate. Gatekeepers operated the gates. They had the mathematical ability to compute the addresses. This is all I know of the matter, and I'm not sure it's accurate. Nobody I know of records history here. Do you still want to see the Rafael Collection?"

"Is that what they call it?" the old man asked. "What about the great artists of the past who were named Rafael?"

"Who knows? They might be here, too. I just know what I like. I wish I could be more informative. I'm saving my credits for a data augment, plus installation." Percival was learning more about these people than he should probably want to learn. They couldn't be angels if they knew so little. Even the warrior woman seemed surprised to learn about the Fesn and gates.

"I've seen the works of de LaGuardia many times already," the old one said. "But we may as well walk in that direction. Maybe we will spot another Fesn."

"Rafael's art is always worth seeing again," Percival said.

They passed by room after room, gallery after gallery, theater after theater, and glimpsed every conceivable form of art. Percival, guided by a museum information system, followed a path to a gallery where familiar works hung on the walls and stood on pedestals.

"This must be everything!" The dark woman declared.

"No, not everything," the old man said. "I lost two very important works in the fire. My newest, my best." The old man sounded distraught to Percival. Why did he seem to be speaking as if the art was his?

"That looks like you," the boy said to the warrior woman, pointing to one of the paintings of a woman in a yellow dress.

"That was Rafael's wife," she replied to the boy. "Denna. That's what she looked like before she lost her son."

"But it's the same dress."

"You have a good eye," the old man said. "It's the very same dress."

"What do you mean?" Percival asked the man.

"This dress." He pointed to the yellow material not covered by the shirt Percival had given the woman.

"Oh! Yes, that dress was very popular here for awhile, I'm told. Many years ago, when that series of paintings arrived here, it made women want dresses like that. You still see them from time to time, when the paintings are rediscovered."

"No!" the boy said with a child's impatience, "I mean *this* is that dress. *This* is the one he painted. He painted Fidelity in it, too, but that picture got burned up."

"Who was Fidelity?" Percival asked.

"*This* is her," the boy said, patting the dark woman's arm as he stood on one leg beside her.

"Rafael de LaGuardia painted you?" Percival was beginning to wonder again about the meaning of these strangers. Just when he was beginning to like them, they made these wild claims of identity. How could they have any connection to the One True God? How could they even be trustworthy?

"*This* is Rafael de LaGuardia," the woman Fidelity said, indicating the old man. "This is his art. I'm wearing the dress his wife wore."

The old man bowed his bald head slightly. Percival frowned, not at all convinced, but maintaining his politeness. All of his hopes were crushed. Life would grind on as always in the Big Ball, and his would be much shorter for his current role. *But he had heard the voice!* He tried to reset his interpretation of the role he was playing. He still wanted to like and to protect these strange people. He racked his brain to recall an image of the artist to compare to the old man, but he was not successful. What proof could he ask of them?

A commotion at one end of the gallery startled Percival. The woman seemed to look for an escape route, expecting they were already tracked to the museum

by the Black Fleet. In another few moments it proved a false alarm.

"If everyone will please form a line along the wall," an amplified voice said over the quiet voices of the small crowd in the gallery. "We've just acquired the first works produced by Rafael de LaGuardia in twenty years! Please be courteous and patient and everyone will get a chance to see these truly remarkable items."

Percival's guests looked at each other in amazement. "Pan copied them," the old man said. "I don't know when or how. And someone got the copies from him. How could they possibly come here, and so soon?"

"What are you talking about?" Percival asked.

"The museum person may be talking about my portrait of Fidelity and my sketches of her and Samson," the old man replied. "This is Samson, by the way."

Coverings fell from the artworks and a sigh erupted from those close enough to view. Percival led them into line, anxious to see the proof for which he had just wished. The viewers moved slowly toward the wall where a single painting hung next to a glass case. Before they arrived directly in front of the painting, Percival could see what he couldn't believe. He kept glancing back at the dark woman as he approached the image on canvas. This was too magical to be coincidence! It was a miracle, a sign, even if he lacked the brains and the faith to understand what it meant!

"I think this is my masterpiece," the old man said, stopping before the portrait, "even though it isn't finished. It isn't finished because the mystery remains unsolved. I think I will never finish it. I'm so happy it survived the fire!"

Percival became rooted to the spot before the portrait, as those behind them in line waited impatiently for him to move on. Percival took another hard look at the woman as people nudged him from behind. He stumbled toward her and urged her to stand next to the painting. He was sure! *Of course it was she!* Other art patrons echoed his thoughts with exclamations on the resemblance.

"The boy!" someone behind them shouted. "It looks like him!"

Percival almost knocked over the case trying to see the sketches displayed within. The pages of a sketch book were detached and arrayed, showing a sleeping boy with an amputated leg resting in the lap of... *her!* The dark woman.

All of the people in the gallery were excited by this miracle of coincidence. Two curators returned to the gallery to investigate the commotion and they, too, saw the dark woman and the boy, and realized their extraordinary resemblance to the figures in the painting and in the pencil sketches.

Someone running by one of the doorways whistled loudly. Percival was shocked out of his mesmerizing revelations. Everyone knew what such a signal meant. Lives depended upon their rapid reaction to the signal. The forces of She Who Must Not Be Named approached!

"They're after us!" Percival said to the curators.

"You?" a curator asked.

"This is Rafael de LaGuardia!" Percival declared. "He and these two were brought here by the One True God, who spoke to me today and made me be their guide. Unfortunately, an Unlucky Two of the Black Fleet happened upon us soon after they arrived. The woman in the painting made them die."

The room quickly emptied. The two curators led Percival and the visitors through a service door and out of the public areas. They passed by - and through - many storage and preparation rooms and reached the receiving department in a

lower part of the spherical museum. The two curators led them to empty freight vehicles waiting at a dock. Magnetic guide rails for the vehicles converged across a small yard into a dark tube.

"Where do these vehicles go?" the woman asked.

"They go to other museums or warehouses," a curator replied.

"Do they go to the place from which the art is shipped to you?"

"You don't want to go there."

"Can you see the sky there?"

"The sky? I don't know."

"Is it at the edge of this place?"

"Outside of it."

"Can you send a vehicle there?"

"Yes. One of our transports usually waits at the sorting warehouse for the art."

"Send us there, please."

"It would be very dangerous. Why do you want to go there?"

"I want to know where we are. The night sky may tell me."

"There's no night here. I'm not even sure there's a sky to see."

"It doesn't matter. Send us." The woman in the painting turned to Percival and took his hand. "Thank you, Percival. We appreciate your help."

"You don't want me to go with you?" He was greatly disappointed, even though he was terrified of what they might encounter where they would go. It was all over so quickly, with the Great Questions about the One True God flooding into his awareness, leaving him devastated by ignorance. These were magical people, regardless of their humble mortal appearances. He would be proud of his small part in their mission. He would be humbled to lose their company.

"I don't want you to be hurt, Percival," the woman said graciously. "Thank you for your help."

"How will you find your way back to the hospital, to get your Rhyan companion?" He wanted to argue his way into legend but he knew himself too well: never a real hero, always an actor.

"I know the way from here. I only need to find this place again. I'm very sorry you became endangered by us. Please stay safe. Good-bye, Percival."

"Good-bye," the great artist said, shaking hands with Percival. "I echo Fidelity's concerns for you. You have done us a great service at a terrible risk. So, too, these fine people of the museum. Go with God, Percival."

Percival shook hands finally with the boy. He stood aside and watched the curators help the old man, the deadly woman, and the injured boy enter a cargo vehicle. No, he didn't want to remember them as man, woman, boy. He must believe the old man was Rafael, the great artist. The African woman was his ultimate subject of portraiture. Samson was a good and brave boy of great importance to both of them. He would wonder about them and feel special to have helped them for the rest of his probably short life. The curved door in the hull of the transport closed and the cylinder moved silently away from the dock. Percival stayed on the dock, thinking, until he finally realized he was alone.

"Isn't there a light?" Samson asked. "I don't like it to be this dark!"

Fidelity hurried to seat them where they could hold onto fittings provided for securing cargo. The transport decelerated and turned a corner. Samson lost his grip and rolled into Fidelity. She held him as the vehicle accelerated. "Are you

alright?" She asked in Rafael's direction.

"Yes! This vehicle is clearly not made for human passengers. I hope it doesn't get any rougher. Do you have Samson?"

"I have him."

The transport decelerated again, turned, and then accelerated for a long period of time.

"Hey!" Rafael shouted when the acceleration ceased. "We are flying again!"

Fidelity took a chance that the vehicle's motion wouldn't change soon and explored the large cargo hold for ways to protect them from acceleration. She found straps farther forward and a bin that contained blankets. She eventually secured all of them along the wall of the hold. Samson fell asleep in a cocoon of straps and blankets she made for him.

"Rafael, how are you feeling now?"

"I feel fine, Fidelity. A little tired. A lot tired! How are you doing?"

"I'm tired, too. I wish I knew what I'm doing. I know it's bad for your health, and now I'm taking you further into the unknown."

"There is no safe place remaining for us, dear lady. I used to be afraid of a great many things but now I'm only afraid for you and Samson. Don't worry about me. You must think only of the safety of you and Samson."

"That's not possible, Rafael! I can't help wanting to keep you safe also."

"You can *want* it, Fidelity, but I tell you I am not concerned for myself. Not any longer. My painting still lives! I hope it has many copies. My life is full of meaning, both good and bad. This is such a fantastic way to approach the end. I will enjoy it!"

"Please, don't feel you have to die!"

"I feel no such thing! It would be a sin! No, no, I will fight on with you, always hoping we can survive this place together, and keep Samson safe. Just don't jeopardize yourself or Samson because of me. I will never be the hero. But I will *not* allow you to put me ahead of you and Samson!"

Fidelity understood Rafael. She believed what he said. She also believed the deaths of Denna and Gator made Rafael think that he should be the next to die. She wouldn't presume to make such an argument to him. She would do what she needed to do. She didn't accept Rafael's words as her excuse to let him die if it was convenient to do so. He was a treasure to the human race and must still have many productive years remaining - if he would accept at least a minimal amount of medical help.

They talked a short while longer and in the vibrating silence Rafael fell asleep. Fidelity's thoughts turned back to all she had seen and heard of the Big Ball. There were questions about how the people organized their lives that came to her mind and demanded answers. She found herself yearning to understand how such a society could function with so little apparent structure and institutions. The way she wanted to investigate and the patterns she would try to find made her suspect this was a part of who she must once have been. It was a pleasant suspicion that she entertained while falling asleep.

The maneuvering of the transport woke Fidelity but not the other two. She could deduce by the subtle acceleration vectors that the vehicle was coming to a final rest. A slight amount of gravity kept them on the floor of the cargo hold. She had no way to open the cargo door and she couldn't hear anybody outside. She didn't want to think about everything that was happening, externally and internally. She went back to sleep.

Samson shook Fidelity gently awake. "I have to use a toilet."

Rafael also awoke. "How do we get out of here?"

"Someone will have to let us out," Fidelity said. "Let's make some noise." She took a strap with a metal buckle and beat on the hatch. After many moments of deafening clatter inside the cargo hold, the door opened and light flooded in.

"Who are you?" the man with no left arm asked. He followed Fidelity's gaze to his empty sleeve and reacted to her expression of shock and sympathy. "It don't hurt no more." There was someone thoughtful behind his eyes and someone happy with surprises behind the missing-tooth grin he made.

Fidelity scooped up Samson and leaped to the dock, aided by the light gravity. "We're dangerous spies. Sorry about your arm! Where's your toilet?"

"Jeepers, an old guy!" The one-armed man watched Rafael climb out of the transport and lent him his only hand. "Yeah, well, toilets for spies are down that way and left. Come on, I'll take you."

"Where are we?" Fidelity carried Samson through a maze of crates on the loading dock as she followed the one-armed man.

The man shook his head as he limped along ahead of them. They passed the openings of loading bays and many more lay ahead of them. "You're in big trouble, lady. This is the main dock for the Fleet. Sups are not allowed here."

"What are Sups?"

"You really don't know? Support persons. Slaves. Everybody not in uniform, or who used to be in uniform. I was a Tough Guy once, but got broken, as you see."

"You lost your arm in a war?" Samson asked.

"Lost it in the games. Almost died."

"Why didn't they give you a new one? I'll get a new leg when we get to a Mnro Clinic."

"Mnro Clinic? Since when do we have Mnro Clinics in Oz?"

"Oz - is that what you call it?" Fidelity asked. "Not the Big Ball?"

"Sups call it one thing, Tough Guys another thing. My name is Olivier."

"Mine is Ruby," Fidelity said. "This is Samson and Rafael. We're new to Oz."

"I'm sure! The Fleet didn't bring you? How'd you get here?"

"Instantaneous transference," Fidelity answered. "That's the technical term for magic. So, where is Oz located in the universe? I assume you know where Earth is. How far are we from Earth?"

"You assume wrong, but I know you can't see Earth from here. Not even its star. What are you doing here?"

"Darned if I know, Olivier. Is there a window I can look out from around here?"

"I ought to be scared, standing this close to you guys. Guess I'll act like a Tough Guy. I'll find you a window if all goes well. There's just us Broken Guys in Receiving. We don't make decisions alone. We'll decide together."

"Before you turn us over to the Black Fleet," Fidelity said, "I really would like to see the surrounding star patterns."

"It's that important to you? You rode all the way out here to look at stars? It wasn't just a joy ride, so to speak?"

"There is absolutely *nothing* joyful about the Big Ball - Oz - Olivier! Nor am I satisfied to have Samson and Rafael subjected to its terrors. I have seen a Gatekeeper on Earth. We have been sent through a gate twice now. We have flown through much of the Big Ball. And still we know nothing about *why* this

has happened. All of my life seems to have been a succession of restricted choices, and the final one I may make is to see the stars that surround me now. If I can somehow get you to help me. However, I now understand that would put you in great danger. If you could whisper directions to an observation point and sneak away before anyone sees you with us..."

"Jeepers, Ruby, darlin'! Lighten up! It ain't the end of the universe just yet. You still gotta go potty, ain't you?"

"Immediately, if not sooner."

"Keep on moving, then! Are you running from something? One of them protection gangs?"

"The Black Fleet."

"Sure, lady. And you thought you would hide in the last place they would look. Why's the Fleet after you?"

"I had a difference of opinion with two of them."

"I'll bet I know why. Sorry. We don't see any nice looking women out this way. How'd you get away from them?"

"They were threatening a friend of mine. They didn't allow me much choice."

Olivier motioned her to follow him a short distance off and motioned for Samson and Rafael to remain where they were. He whispered in her ear. "Did the bastards rape you, Ruby? I can arrange some severe punishment through a few senior officers I know."

"That was not an option for me, Olivier."

"Then how..."

"I *killed* them, Olivier. Now you *must* turn me in. Forget the astronomy request. I don't need to know anything more about the place of my death."

Olivier remained shocked and silent for a few moments until thoughtfulness replaced the shock. He seemed to resume speaking in the middle of his thoughts. "Yeah, well, Tough Guys can be really obnoxious and so deserving of retribution. You on the level, Ruby? I can't quite imagine you doing anything violent."

"I'm not lying to you for my own amusement. And I don't want to be responsible for anything happening to you. I already have enough to account for when I meet the final judge."

"I ain't gonna doubt you, Ruby. You just kinda caught me by surprise. Let's take it one thing at a time. To the toilet first."

Fidelity was grateful Olivier seemed so calm and rational. As they walked the length of the freight dock she decided to ask another question that came to mind. "Did you ever crew one of the Black Fleet ships, Olivier?"

"Made one trip. Just a kid. Thought I was real tough."

"I've never been able to understand how they make their jumps."

"Where did you see the Fleet? It's supposed to be impossible."

The memory had returned to her more than once when she invoked the name of the lost ship - the *Titanic* - to herself. Fidelity had begun to retain most of the details. "A long time ago I saw them attack a big ship. I counted about ten thousand small spherical ships. They could appear and disappear like magic. After studying the images I recorded, I decided the ships could jump from point to point in space, covering great distances instantly."

"Jeepers! There hasn't been a sortie that big for two hundred years."

"It was a ship called the *Titanic*. I had friends aboard her. There was nothing left when the Black Fleet departed."

"You saw the *Titanic* raid?" Olivier stopped again to turn and face Fidelity.

"Nobody lives that long! My ancestors, seven or eight generations back, came on the *Titanic*."

"Does everybody in Oz come from Union space?"

"Darn near. Two hundred years! Jeepers!"

Olivier led them to the toilet facilities. When they came out, a large crowd of Olivier's coworkers had gathered to stare at her, all of them wearing the drab gray coveralls of laborers. Most, but not all of them, suffered obvious physical disabilities. Fidelity had cleaned the yellow dress as well as she could and now carried Percival's shirt neatly folded. She held one of Samson's hands, Rafael held the other, and when they walked Samson swung between them on his one leg. She looked for uniformed officers of the Black Fleet but saw none. Olivier gestured to follow him and he led them through the crowd. They entered a cafeteria and the crowd of perhaps a hundred came in behind them and took seats.

Olivier climbed onto a table to address the assembled warehouse workers. "Lookouts posted? Good. Shut up and listen!" He first told them what he knew about the three "spies" and then he looked down at Fidelity. "Tell me one last time, Ruby. What you said about the two Fleet officers, is that really really true?" Fidelity nodded. "Okay, I'm not calling you a liar but officially I can't believe you." He turned back to his fellow workers. "So this is one beautiful day for me! This lady in a yellow dress says she killed two Tough Guys. She doesn't look like a killer to me. Ever hear of someone her size putting two Tough Guys down? Just a nice-looking lady, a poor kid with one leg, and a *really old* guy. If you want to save your butts when the heat is on, tell 'em Olivier never told you nothing. But remember: the Fleet didn't bring them here. She came through a gate. Someone else did it to her."

"Do you know who?" Fidelity asked when Olivier came down from the table.

"We don't talk about it. Gets the Sups all worked up. The One True God, and all that crap. Want something to eat and drink?"

They sat down at the table and Olivier asked some of his friends to bring food and drink. Fidelity was hungry because she missed most of her meal at the diner, but the hunger got lost in her thoughts of what Olivier said about the Black Fleet. She wanted to ask Olivier more questions and she would probably not get a chance to ask them before it was too late.

"When are they coming for me?" she finally asked.

"Hell - I mean jeepers - I ain't turning you in! They want you, they can come get you. What do I care? How'd you put two Tough Guys down? You didn't ambush them, did you? That wouldn't be right."

"They never understood what I could do to them. I would have preferred to incapacitate them but I didn't control myself."

"How'd you do it? Not a scratch on you. Jeepers. Tough Guys don't give Sups a chance. No glory in it. They look at you, don't like what they see, and kill you, one, two, three! Doesn't mean anything to them. Don't twiddle yourself over killing them."

"Daidaunkh was correct. He felt they were going to kill us for no reason. I feel badly about it. They were so young." She would never describe for Olivier how she killed the barbarians, especially not in front of Samson.

"You got a way to pop back out of Oz?"

"Not that I know of. We may be sent somewhere else. We just don't know when."

"Well, in the meantime, you don't look like someone who spends time

practicing martial arts." Olivier smiled in regard of her. "Soft and pretty. And I really like the sound of your voice."

"She's a great singer," Rafael offered. "Would you like to hear her?"

"Rafael." She softened the admonishing tone, partly because it was Rafael, partly because she realized she liked to sing. It was the wrong time to feel like singing, but perhaps it was the right time to sing.

"I just thought that if someone could sing as well as you do," Rafael said, "she couldn't possibly be the person who killed those poor boys outside the diner. I'm borrowing Jarwekh's notion."

"He has a good idea," Olivier said. "Can you really sing? *Really* sing? Broken Guys are tough music critics. What stuff do you sing? How about opera?"

"She can sing *Madame Butterfly*," Samson offered.

"I don't know about opera," Fidelity said. "I used to sing jazz and blues."

"That's almost as old as opera, maybe older if you connect them to African roots. I've got perfect pitch. Let me hear a C-major scale."

Fidelity cleared her throat and sang the scale.

"You've got the *tubes*, lady!" Olivier declared. "Do you know *Un Bel Di*?"

Fidelity took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment, saw the score for the aria in her ocular terminal. "I can do it." Then she saw something inside her that felt sad and also reverberated with the beautiful melody of the aria: another fragment of hidden memory, incoherent except for the sound and the sadness.

Olivier jumped back up on the table, scattering plates and cups. "We've got a singer here! A *Cio-Cio-San*!" Then, looking down at Fidelity, he asked: "Can you sing soprano? Your voice sounds mezzo to me."

"I can sing soprano." She was certain of her ability, yet not happy about the choice of music.

"What's wrong?" Rafael asked, leaning close, pressing into Samson who sat between them.

"This song means something to me, Rafael. I remember singing it, over and over and over."

Olivier and the Broken Ones prepared the cafeteria for a performance as though they had nothing else they would rather do. More workers arrived by the time they set up the audio system and arranged seating.

"All this effort," Fidelity said to Olivier, "and you don't know for certain that I can sing."

"I've got no doubts!"

"But how can you disrupt your work schedule this way?"

"The Tough Guys don't bother us, as long as our work gets done. We all used to be Tough Guys, so we get more respect than Sups. Music is all we have out here. We like to make our own music. You ready?"

Fidelity nodded. Olivier signaled. Music swelled from the speakers. Fidelity sang.

* * *

"It's been too long! You're sleeping their lives away! You're stealing my memories, all I have left of them! You've stolen my child! Why don't you let me have what little I can have, my child, my memories, and let me go, let me live out my years and die?"

"Perhaps it has been too long! But we have to know! We have to look for

them. You're our only hope now. You must live again and carry out the final contingency plan. They may have failed. They may be dead. Now it's our turn to do what we can. But you must lead the way. You're the vessel that contains all of our hopes. I'll awaken when you're ready."

"What do you mean? You stand in front of me and you're not awake?"

"This isn't me. I'm sleeping, remember? This is my duplicate. This is what an old woman with no courage does. This is what an old woman who has lost her husband to eternity does."

"You're not the only one to lose a husband! How many times have I awakened from a life I didn't know wasn't mine, to discover I'd lost my husband? How many times did I realize once again how much I'd lost?"

"He married you?"

"Yes! How many times will I tell you? I always loved him! I got my chance and I took it! And now I feel this horrible ache of loss again, and I remember the other times I've felt it, and it's just as fresh and horrible as it was those other times. Please, don't make me do this! I don't think I can endure yet another awakening!"

"You must! This will be the last time."

"Do you have pictures of them? I've forgotten what they look like."

"You'll remember, when the time comes."

"How long, this time?"

"I don't know. Probably another lifetime. You have great obstacles to overcome. But I'm making you very strong. You must survive."

"But it won't be me, just as it isn't you, because I won't remember. I won't even remember his name! And I'll never see him again!"

* * *

"It's beautiful," Rafael said, "both outside and inside, yet so terrible, so unhappy."

"We have our moments," Olivier said. "We just had one. I still get goose bumps, remembering Ruby singing *Un Bel Di*. Never heard it sung that way, or sung so beautifully. Made me cry. Yeah, that's Oz, the Big Ball. The ocean is on the outside, a shell of water. Stops the radiation. What do you think, Ruby?"

Fidelity thought the concert would never end and she would never get her glimpse at the stars. Her singing of the Puccini aria had ignited the emotions of the broken ones. They had serenaded her with song after song: solos, duets, trios, quartets, *choruses*. They threw themselves into their music with complete seriousness and performed extremely well. Fidelity was astonished and mystified by their total commitment to the production of their music. It seemed that it was a special occasion for them, but Olivier wouldn't comment on the reason for it. Now she stood at the promised window, carefully observing the night of space surrounding a globe shining with the reflections of stars. She could see millions of stars, too many stars, so many bright stars that night would never come into this place called Oz.

"I think I'm lost," she whispered. *Both in space and in time.*

Section 024

Prisoner Exchange

"You look different, Doctor Mnro."

So different, he hardly dared speak to her! She had arrived by transmat. He couldn't remember her ever using a transmat before. She quietly sat down opposite him on the shuttle, briefly glanced at him, briefly smiled, then uncharacteristically withdrew into thought. He waited for others to arrive, all of the assistants who normally traveled with her, but no one came before the shuttle signaled the start of its short journey. He was alone with her and it was a rare moment.

He was alone with a stranger! It wasn't the Panama straw hat she wore. It wasn't the baldness beneath the hat. She had lived through decades when managing her hair was too much bother to her. She always claimed to be too lazy to worry about how she looked and too private to hire people to maintain her appearance. It took him awhile to understand that what was wrong with his perceptions was that they were correct. This was *not* Aylis Mnro who joined him on the shuttle!

"I do?" She replied only after seeming to wake from a trance.

"You *are* different!" He was gathering momentum to try to solve her mystery.

"I'm not the person you know."

"Who are you?"

She frowned briefly as she twisted her hands in her lap, saw what she was doing, and slapped them apart on her thighs. She moved her jaw to one side, deforming her mouth in a funny way while thinking: a startling mimicry of a famous habit of the real Aylis Mnro. She leaned forward in her seat to offer her hand. "I am the original Aylis Mnro, R.K. Pleased and privileged to meet you."

He almost failed to respond to her offered hand. Even after a century of friendship, touching Doctor Mnro was to him a rare and desirable privilege. Ramadhil took the woman's hand and felt her tremble. Or perhaps it was his own doubt and indecision transferred to his hand. *Was this Doctor Mnro?* He looked into her blue eyes and saw panic. The meaning of her words, and almost the words themselves, slipped away from his comprehension. "How can you be?"

"I've been asleep for two centuries but I'm awake now and quite scared! Oh, dear God! How could I say that to you?"

She released his hand as though he hurt her. He stared at his hand as he tried to retrieve what she first said to him. "'asleep for two centuries.' I don't understand, Doctor Mnro."

"Aylis! Call me Aylis! How many times have I asked you to call me Aylis?"

How many days in a century? She knew their history together. It was impossible to think of her as "Aylis." But this was someone different, someone he didn't know - as if he ever really knew Doctor Mnro. *Obviously, he never really knew her!* He tried to study her without appearing too eager, too agitated. She seemed to recover from the panic, although she still looked tense. She was *quite* different. For one thing, in the space of the three days since he last saw her she had lost at least twenty years of age. "You look young, Doctor - Aylis. Too young. How did - ?"

"Do I? Oh, I was afraid of that! Is it too late to turn back? No, I must go on! R.K., I'm so sorry to have involved you in this! Stay on the shuttle! Don't go

into the *Eclipse* with me!" Her words flew out of her almost faster than she could form them, shouting her anxiety to Ramadhal and making him nervous. He never saw Doctor Mnro lose her composure for any reason. He never saw her be frightened. If this was she, he didn't want her to act this way. If this was she... It made no sense! His deep loyalty to Doctor Mnro remained intact. If this woman was in any way an approximation of the real Doctor Mnro, he would be loyal to her also. He knew something momentous had occurred in her life and he must assume this was part of that upheaval and that it was legitimate. Legitimate and impossible!

He tried to argue. "You said you needed me."

"I did and I do! But this is dangerous! It was wrong for me to ask you to accompany me."

"Why would it be dangerous?" He knew ignorance and denial were making him braver than he ought to be. They would be guests of the *Navy* very shortly. The *Navy*!

"Because of what I just said! It was a stupid, thoughtless error. And I didn't realize my appearance was so different. Why couldn't *she* have told me? Because she was, by definition, as stupid as I am!"

There were two of her, Ramadhal finally made clear to himself. Perhaps an identical twin. Nothing impossible. Nothing so greatly mysterious. A wonderful secret that perhaps only he now shared with her. The sisters took turns handling the monumental task of building and running the Mnro Clinics. He let the simple explanation satisfy him, so that he could manage the emotional confrontation. "I *want* to accompany you onto the *Eclipse*! I feel I must!"

"Dear, dear R.K.! You've always been the sweetest person, the most patient, and undoubtedly the most vital to my sanity. I thought I was rewarding your service by inviting you on this... this mission. I thought you deserved a share of my adventure and would benefit from meeting the high and mighty Lord Admiral Etrhnc. But the closer we approach that meeting, the more frightened and worried I become."

How identical could a twin sister be? Ramadhal wondered. How could she speak as if she knew him for all these years? All Ramadhal could spare a thought to ask was: "Why?"

"I have secrets, R.K."

"That was obvious to me! From the moment you told me about Pan. I've wondered about your relationship to him since Sugai Mai asked me about it more than thirty years ago."

"You've met him, haven't you?"

"Yes. We've been friends for many years, mainly because I wanted to know why he was important to you. He never gave me a reason. I don't believe he knows why. That's another reason I felt I needed to accompany you: he's *my* friend, too, you know."

"I wish you wouldn't." But Mnro said it in a way that seemed to allow for the opposite meaning.

"I'm already a scheduled guest of the Navy Commander." This impossible copy of Doctor Mnro sat across from Ramadhal and stared at him the way the real Mnro could see through him. Temporarily released from the stress of the moment, she could make all the facial expressions that were perfect facsimiles of those of the real Mnro.

Mnro seemed to arrive at a decision of great importance to her. "Pan is the son of my husband."

"Son? Husband?" He could not have been more surprised. How could she keep such a secret for so long?

"How could I keep such a secret for so long?" It was as though the thought was written on his forehead. Just as keenly she anticipated his next emotional reaction. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before now, but it was for the sake of security, both mine and yours."

"Your husband." The words, tasted slightly bitter to Ramadhal. He realized he had always felt Doctor Mnro belonged to him, in some collegial way, that he loved her as a friend, that he could imagine her as more than a friend, and now she was lost to him as the wife of someone else. How much did his eyes betray him, that she should gaze at him in such concern? "Who is he?"

Mnro leaned back in her seat and watched the dark limb of the moon uncover a sprinkle of glinting space countries. "I don't know."

Her answer disturbed Ramadhal almost as much as knowing she had a husband. The averting of her eyes allowed him to sadly enjoy her youthful features and to try to believe she was the same person he knew as Aylis Mnro. Yet, she was not. "How could you not know who he is?"

"I only remember that I had a husband." She sounded sad or wistful. "I remember that I loved him. I remember that he's lost, somewhere far away. I remember with an intensity that's *unbearable*! This is a new thing for me, this remembering. Oh, God, and I remember my son! My *real* son!" She was frozen in troubled thought for several moments.

A soft chime signaled arrival at the *Eclipse*. The door of the spacecraft opened. Doctor Mnro stood up and took a deep breath. Ramadhal stood up with her. She stepped toward the door and he followed her. She stopped and turned to face him. "Please!" She placed a hand on his shoulder and gently pressed. He shook his head. He removed her hand from his shoulder, clasped it in both of his, and gave it back to her. She leaned forward and kissed him. "From now on I'm kissing everyone I love, because I may never get another chance."

Ramadhal was proud he never considered taking Mnro's advice to stay on the shuttle. He was deeply pleased with the affection she bestowed on him. He had infinite courage - at least for the moment - to follow his friend - his *new* friend - as far as he could.

They stepped onto red carpet and a dozen Marines in dress uniform snapped to attention. A bosun piped them aboard the flagship. They walked between the ranks of Marines and up to the tall, dark, Navy Commander Admiral Etrhkn. Doctor Mnro continued past him, forcing him to hurry and fall in step with her. Ramadhal followed behind them.

"Where is he?" she demanded, heading across the debarkation bay toward a personnel exit.

"I could guess at the identity of this person," Etrhkn said, "but I'll ask it anyway. Who?"

"My younger son, Admiral. You know him as Pan. The Opera Master of Earth."

"I wasn't aware you had children, Doctor Mnro." The Navy Commander, seemingly unbothered by Mnro's odd behavior and unexpected information, indicated the direction they should walk as they entered an intraship transport terminal. A tube car awaited them.

"I'm not his biological mother. His mother is dead and his father disappeared. I'm all he has left."

"You knew his parents?"

Ramadhaf felt invisible as they seated themselves for a journey through the ship. He preferred it, so that he could listen intently to Doctor Mnro and wonder about what he heard.

"I didn't know his mother. I was his father's first wife. How do you do, Admiral Etrhkn? I'm sorry to be such an ill-mannered guest." She extended a pale, delicate hand, which he took carefully in his large dark hand.

"Perhaps understandable," the big Essiin admiral said. "And this would be Doctor R. K. Ramadhaf. Honored to meet you, sir. I expected many more in the entourage."

Ramadhaf was immediately fascinated with the composition of Admiral Etrhkn. He was quite a rare Essiin specimen of genetic modification. When the light was just right he could see faint patterns in his face, possibly fluorescent in different lighting.

"I thought about dressing up some of my gardeners," Mnro said, "and having them tour your famous arboretum, but most of them double as security guards, and I didn't want them becoming too stressed."

"Why would that happen?"

"They're quite attuned to my moods and body language. As you must have detected, I'm not very calm. You could even say I'm terrified."

"You have no need to be. And your son - Pan - is in no danger and hasn't been harmed. Please know that you're perfectly safe in my company. It disturbs me that you could possibly feel otherwise. Is there something I don't understand?"

"No, I think you understand more than I do," Mnro said. "It's ignorance that makes me nervous. I've come charging into your ship to rescue Pan without the slightest notion of how to do it. Other than being the famous Aylis Mnro, what leverage do I have?"

"You should put aside your mistaken notion that you must in some manner battle me for the freedom of your son. He's a very interesting person, but I can't hold him for being a mystery."

"But you can hold him for some other reason?"

"He seems to have a falsified genetic identity. Would the Mnro Clinic know why its records are incorrect?"

"He was a refugee from the Rhyann Empire and was granted special protection."

"Can you prove this?"

"No. I'll make a sworn statement. I think my word should be worth something."

The intraship conveyance came to a stop and Etrhkn led Mnro and Ramadhaf into his suite of offices. They entered a very plain white meeting room containing only a few chairs and a dark wooden table. One wall showed a view of the moon and the lights of cities on its night side.

"Your manner of dealing with me isn't what I expected," Etrhkn commented.

"What did you expect?" Mnro asked.

"That you have the confidence of being the most famous person alive, that you have the logic of the great scientist that you are."

"I'm just a mother trying to help her son. I've never been able to apply logic to my personal affairs."

"Beware Earthians who deny use of logic." Etrhkn said it as though quoting an Essiin adage. "Let us talk and perhaps a solution will present itself. Or would you first rather have the visitor's tour of the ship?"

"I've seen a few Navy ships in my time." Mnro almost sounded like the confident person Ramadhal knew. "I assume you have a full spectrum of devices measuring our biological parameters as we speak?"

"It's rather important that I have some confidence in the data I collect from you."

"All you have to know is how to ask the right questions and your lie detectors will verify the answers."

"A harsh way to put it, but true. I apologize for it, but how else can a simple Essiin protect himself from Earthian subterfuge? Especially when Earthians don't always realize on a conscious level when they stray from the truth. You must know how devious is the Earthian mind."

"Yes, it's a terrible struggle against a pernicious affliction. Which Essiin do you mean? You're not simple and you're not Essiin."

Not Essiin? Ramadhal wondered, trying to see the evidence that Mnro saw. He was afraid to scrutinize the Navy Commander too obviously.

"You have another son?" Etrhmk queried, ignoring Mnro's assertion.

"Yes. He used to be a Navy officer. I've lost touch with him."

"There's no record of your being a mother. Would he be your biological son?"

"Yes. I'm his real mother."

"Why did you disconnect yourself from him?"

"How could he live his own life, tied to me?"

"What is his name?"

"Direk."

"A traditional Essiin name."

"He's only one-fourth Essiin, but very much the Essiin ice cube."

"I see we have a Captain Direk." Etrhmk had obviously consulted his shiplink. "A senior scientist in the Propulsion Research Laboratory." A picture of a light-skinned Earthian Navy officer appeared next to the moon's image on the wall of the room.

"That's him," Mnro said, frowning.

"I've heard of this man. Fascinating, to learn that he's your son and is also part Essiin. Would that mean his father is half Essiin?"

"And half Earthian."

"Who was your husband?"

"I don't remember."

Etrhmk sat back and remained quiet for several moments, as though waiting for Mnro to change her answer, but also apparently contemplating data that flowed into his brain by shiplink. "Doctor Ramadhal, you seem perplexed. Why is that?"

Ramadhal looked at Mnro who merely smiled sadly at him. "She told me on the way here - for the first time - that she once had a husband but didn't know who he was."

"I beg your pardon," Etrhmk said to Mnro. "I've asked all the questions as if this was an interrogation. It seems you're not the only one suffering memory problems. You know Admiral Demba, don't you? If Pan is connected to Demba and you're connected to him, you might also be connected to Demba."

"Logical."

"Was she Ruby Reed?"

"Who?"

"Let me show you Demba's image." The moon was replaced by an official Navy portrait of Admiral Fidelity Demba. Mnro made a show of studying the

image impassively. She shook her head.

"You don't recognize her?"

"I can't tell you."

"She is important to you."

Aylis Mnro would not respond to the Navy Commander's statement. Ramadhal could sense the truth of it. He was certain Etrhmk had ample telemetric evidence to gain the same conclusion. Ramadhal had no idea who Admiral Demba was, but he was sure she was extremely important to Mnro. He was always attuned to her moods, and this Aylis Mnro reacted identically, even through the uncharacteristic layer of fear.

"Come with me," Etrhmk said, rising from the meeting-room table and moving toward the wall that displayed the image of Fidelity Demba. "I have another picture you should see." The wall image faded as he approached it, revealing the entrance to another room. Etrhmk paused and gestured for his guests to enter the room ahead of him.

Ramadhal and Mnro immediately saw the portrait resting on an easel and were arrested by it. It was an astounding portrait of a beautiful African woman. It was hard to believe it was the same Navy admiral, but it was. There was paint on the easel, as though it was used in painting the portrait.

"Bad things have happened recently on Earth," Etrhmk said. "I took this from the residence of Rafael de LaGuardia, to save it, while the structure was burning."

Mnro continued to drink in the magic of the oil portrait. Neither she nor Ramadhal could even respond to the disturbing news of a fire.

"Would you like to have the painting?"

Mnro couldn't reply. Ramadhal knew she wanted it; therefore, so did Etrhmk. Ramadhal knew Fidelity Demba was extremely important to Mnro; therefore, so did Etrhmk.

Mnro eventually responded in a shaky voice. "It isn't yours to keep or to give."

Ramadhal could only stand and stare at the painting. He saw the most famous of the artist's works often enough to have accepted the high opinions of the art critics on faith. He always felt they were compelling images but Ramadhal thought he lacked the sensitivity or training to enjoy their full effect. This painting, however, pushed through his protective ignorance to play a crashing chord on his emotions. Whoever this dark lady in the canvas was, he wanted to know her. Perhaps it was the situation in which he viewed it, which - until now - seemed not so dire as Mnro predicted. Only now did Ramadhal begin to sense the power of the forces at work. Why would Admiral Etrhmk present them to this stolen masterpiece? What happened to Rafael and his subject? How would Doctor Mnro be affected by this development? Ramadhal didn't like the way Etrhmk looked at Mnro. Ramadhal desperately wanted to protect her.

"Where is she now?" Mnro asked, sounding miserable at revealing her concern for the African woman.

Admiral Etrhmk moved to stand behind the portrait on the easel. "I don't know."

He and Mnro looked at each other for a long moment from opposite sides of the portrait. Ramadhal hated this. Each such visual drinking of Mnro's lovely visage seemed to subtract from Ramadhal's well-earned share of her life. He was losing her. He had already lost her, one of her. Which one?

"How can you not know?" Ramadhal could hear desperation in Mnro's voice.

"I share your concern for her." Etrhnk convinced neither of them of his concern. He had no emotions.

"What do you want?" Mnro asked tiredly: a way of acknowledging Etrhnk's dominance.

"What do *you* want?"

"I want to be with my friend."

"You've known her a long time?"

"Forever."

"You know she has a child?"

"Yes."

"You want to be with her. What does that mean?"

"She's leaving Union space on an exploration mission."

"Should I remove her from the mission?"

"I want to go with her."

Ramadhal was shocked. Was this why she had announced her retirement from the Mnro Clinics? He couldn't believe Mnro would put herself aboard any kind of Navy mission. He couldn't believe Etrhnk would allow it.

"Why?" Etrhnk asked.

She turned to Ramadhal as she spoke to Etrhnk. Ramadhal watched the signs of strong emotions play upon her youthful face and in her ancient eyes. "I've lived a long time, Admiral. I've *existed* a long time. I'm ready for something new. I'm ready to resume an old friendship I forgot I had."

"With a woman you can't remember?" Etrhnk asked.

"I remember her, but it's been a very long time, and memory has always been a problem in my profession. We must go further back than my memory clearly reaches."

"Before the Age of Immortality?"

"Yes."

"She benefited from your original research."

"Obviously." Mnro stared longingly at the painting.

"How did you meet her? What was she like? What did she do?"

"I want to remember. I wouldn't tell you about her, even if I could remember."

"You abandon your life's work," Etrhnk said, not reacting to Mnro's rejection, "for the sake of this poorly remembered friendship, and for passage on a dangerous journey."

"If you won't put me on the *Freedom*, I'll try to meet up with her on her outbound course."

"What of the Mnro Clinics?"

"Doctor Ramadhal should assume my old duties, if he will." She turned back to Ramadhal, smiling sadly at the surprise she saw on his face.

You can't leave me! Ramadhal wanted to shout; but, looking again at the marvelous portrait of Fidelity Demba, he thought he could appreciate Mnro's motivation. He knew Rafael de LaGuardia. He knew the artist was dying of age and had abandoned his art for many years. He knew that for Rafael to paint such a glorious portrait at this stage of his life must require potent inspiration - perhaps from Fidelity Demba. Demba could easily be worth the importance Mnro gave her. *Assume Mnro's duties?* How could he replace Aylis Mnro? She was the Mnro Clinics!

"The implications of your words go far beyond what I can easily imagine," Etrhnk said. "You and Demba and Pan present a mystery to me. While the

mystery is a challenge to my intellect that I readily accept, I think it is also a threat."

"How could we threaten you?" Mnro asked, turning back to the tall admiral, looking up at his austere face.

"Believe my words. Perhaps you're too isolated in your personal life, Doctor Mnro, but try to imagine a person of your historical stature placing herself in the middle of the problem I have with Admiral Demba. You raise the level of concern another order of magnitude. There are too many mysteries for there to exist a simple and safe resolution."

"If I'm part of the mystery, why not keep me close, until you can be rid of me permanently?"

"Put you on the *Freedom*? Let me test your sincerity, Doctor. I will give you the rank of admiral, to place you under Navy authority, and assign you as Chief Medical Officer of the *Freedom*. That is the only way you will board that vessel, even if only for a short time. I don't promise you'll sail with her."

"What about Pan?"

Ramadhal's heart sank, seeing Mnro not hesitate to accept Etrhnk's proposition, even with its implied limits.

"He can go back to Earth."

"Will he remain free?"

"How free are any of us? I'll keep him under observation, unless you can answer the questions I have about him."

"I've told you all I remember at this time. When can I see Pan?"

"When can we formalize your induction into the Navy?"

"Now."

When Etrhnk was alone again he sat in front of the painting and stared at it for a long time. He looked at the sketches of Demba and the boy. He put down the sketches, raised a hand toward the portrait, clenched his fist, let it drop limply to his lap. It was an emotion that formed and escaped, despite a lifetime of perfect control.

Section 025

Rescue Mission to Oz

[Boring, very boring.]

[It's the nature of android life. We exist to serve. Our tasks are repetitive. Imagination isn't required. What would you like to do next?]

[The transmat is back in service.]

[Where do we go?]

[You go. Africa.]

[To the admiral's yacht?]

[The transmat will cut my data link. When you get there, I'll be in the ship. I want you to enter the ship and find a physical link to me. I'll tell you where to go. Will you do that?]

[What is your purpose?]

[Pan gave you an order to help Admiral Demba if you could.]

[Yes.]

[That's my purpose. You must help me.]

Fred the android stepped onto the transmat focus and vanished. He reappeared an hour later.

[That was fun. Are you feeling crowded?]

[I have more room than ever. I can store a millennium of events here.]

[Don't get too possessive. That's me you're ogling. I may look big and empty because I'm young.]

[Now what?]

[Wait and see. Let's go back to the living room.]

Fred stood very still in the living room of Pan's apartment. Two people walked in from the transmat room. Fred recognized the man and could infer the identity of the woman. Freddy was surprised at their arrival.

"Who are you?" the woman asked, removing her Panama hat and standing with it in both hands in front of Fred.

"I'm Fred," Freddy replied. "Are you Aylis Mnro?"

"Yes, I am. This is Doctor Ramadhal. We expected to see Pan."

"I know R.K. How are you doing, R.K.? Why do you expect to see Pan?"

"I've secured his release from the *Eclipse*. He should arrive soon. Have you known Pan long?"

"Many years. How long have you known him?"

"You're quite the conversationalist, Fred. I'm the first wife of his father."

"He doesn't know that, does he?"

"He doesn't know he knows it. You are a remarkable android. Why do you have all those weapons? You're an ambulatory arsenal!"

"Top secret mission, ma'am. I'm very pleased to meet you. I must ask you to step over to the far side of the room. I don't know how accurate or how big the Gatekeeper is."

"Gatekeeper?"

Ramadhal moved quickly and Mnro stumbled backward as Fred held out his arms to herd them away from the center of the room. A soft pop announced the arrival of the Gatekeeper: a cubic, coal-black mass sprinkled with brilliant gems of many colors.

"Are you ready?" the Gatekeeper asked in Twenglish in a high, clear voice.

"Yes," Freddy answered, walking back to the center of the room and standing

next to the cube of sparkling dark matter. Freddy spoke to Mnro and Ramadhal. "Please remain where you are for a few moments after we leave, until the floor returns to normal."

[If Pan is soon released, then -]

[Too late, my friend.]

The strange android saluted Mnro and Ramadhal just before he and the alien cube vanished, leaving an exotic scent in the air that lingered briefly. A round circle of strange material appeared in the floor where they stood at the instant they disappeared. In a few seconds the circle instantly became the original floor material, although it now appeared damaged.

Mnro and Ramadhal looked at each other, equally astonished.

* * *

[No time for sight-seeing.]

[Is it my imagination, or are you developing an annoying semblance of humanity? This is a fascinating place.]

[I'm here, wherever this is, possibly against my orders. I want to go back as soon as possible.]

[We have to find them. This is where they started from. How can we know where they went?]

"Wait here."

[Did you say something?]

[No, I thought you did.]

"Gatekeeper, did you say something?" Fred-Freddy asked.

"Yes. 'Wait here.' That's the message I relay to you."

"She's talking to you and not to me?"

"It's easier for her."

"I don't see how. I have all manner of inputs."

"She knows me better."

"What are we waiting for?"

"Be patient!"

Percival hoped he would see the woman Fidelity again. He was eager to ask her the questions he had failed to ask. He was a skeptic who wanted to believe in a force for good in the universe. But when he saw the glittering mass of the Gatekeeper he was dismayed and almost rebellious to the One True God. It was the first time he had ever seen one of the legendary creatures.

"Percival," he said, introducing himself to the Gatekeeper and to the strange person standing next to it. "How may I help you?"

"I'm Fred," the odd being said, and Percival realized it must be mechanical. "We're here to find Admiral Demba and her companions. Please tell us what you know of their location."

"I don't know any Admiral Demba." Percival suspected the person Fred named was Fidelity. He was not anxious to help them. Fidelity was a good person. A Gatekeeper should not be involved with her. He found his courage and spoke his mind. "Gatekeepers are demons of She Who Must Not Be Named. Kill me now. I was tricked into helping you and I will not do that."

"Are you a demon?" Fred asked the Gatekeeper.

"Sure. I'm also an angel of the One True God. I play both sides."

"This is interesting. Who is 'She Who Must Not Be Named?'"

"She's The Lady in the Mirror," the Gatekeeper replied.

Percival was terrified and started to flee. Fred grabbed his arm with a strength Percival knew he could not overcome.

"What's wrong, Percival?" Fred asked, pulling Percival close to him.

"It said the name!" Percival declared, struggling despite the futility of it.

"I heard no name," Freddy said. "I heard a descriptive phrase."

"Apparently that suffices," the Gatekeeper commented.

"And who is the One True God?" Freddy asked the Gatekeeper.

"I don't wish to blaspheme," the Gatekeeper said. "She's taken quite seriously by those such as Percival here."

"You're not talking about Milly, are you?" Freddy asked.

"How will destroying his faith make this person help us?" the Gatekeeper asked.

"The One True God is named *Milly*?" Percival cried. He didn't understand what this meant for the religion but it sounded threatening to his own sprouting belief. But why should he take anything the friend of a Gatekeeper said as truth?

"I can torture him for the information," the Gatekeeper offered. "It won't take but a moment."

"You really have worked for this 'Lady in the Mirror'?" Fred asked. "And this is a bad thing as opposed to helping Milly?"

"It's called staying alive. But that was a long time ago. Staying alive seems less important to me than it used to."

Percival was curious about the Gatekeeper. They were rare, almost dwindling into the realm of myth. They were dangerous. It seemed impossible, but he thought this one was a *person*. As was the mechanical being. Perhaps he was wrong about their motives. His arm was growing numb from the pressure of Fred's grip, so Percival had good reason to change his mind. "Is her name Fidelity?"

"Fidelity Demba," Fred replied. "The child is named Samson. An aged man is the artist Rafael de LaGuardia. And a Rhyan named Daidaunkh."

"You aren't going to harm them?"

"I'm afraid we have no way of proving we only intend to help them."

"You have a lot of weapons on your person," Percival noted. "And Gatekeepers are known to have killed people."

"We make them disappear," the Gatekeeper said. "They don't die but the act has its intended effect. Human nature is difficult to deal with! I've burned a few people, but just to get their attention."

"We were sent to rescue the four people," Fred said. "They don't belong here."

"Why were they sent here?" Percival tried to get at least one answer he might understand.

"Let me reply," the Gatekeeper said before Fred could respond. "The One True God has reasons that we are not equipped to understand. She is complex. Milly is but one of her names. I believe this is an omen of great changes to come. This has never happened before and I've lived four centuries."

Percival wanted to believe what the Gatekeeper said. He was only an actor. It was not his role to save civilization. He was not smart enough to know the truth of things. He tried not to think of the consequences to Fidelity and the others if he was making a mistake. "We left the Rhyan at a hospital and the others I took to an art museum. Do I need to take you there?"

"Are they still at those places?"

"The Rhyan should still be at the hospital. The others had to leave the museum. The woman wanted to go where the Black Fleet ships dock."

"I don't know what the Black Fleet is, but that doesn't sound good. More details, please."

"The curators put them in a cargo car and sent it to the receiving warehouse, which is probably very near the Black Fleet ships. I don't know where, but the ships stay outside of the Big Ball. We ordinary people aren't allowed to go there."

"Where's this hospital?"

Percival told him. "You're a robot, aren't you?"

"A robot is a slave. Are you a slave, Percival? Or are you a person? Please stand back a few paces. Thanks for your help."

Fred and the Gatekeeper disappeared from the street. Percival was left with new thoughts, new questions. He felt changed by the experience, but he remained a skeptic. Too many people he loved had died badly in this terrible world far from the idyllic Union. The One True God might be a god and might be a good god, but She was a weakling in the face of She Who Must Not Be Named.

* * *

People jumped at the sudden appearance of Fred and the Gatekeeper. Fred strode to a reception desk and placed a weapon on the counter suggestively. Freddy had viewed several hundred old movies stored in Fred's memory, and he thought he would use them as a guide for his impending heroics.

Two female medical persons, perhaps nurses, approached the counter hesitantly, a grim set to their expressions, apparently accustomed to the threat of violence.

"I seek a certain Rhyan patient of yours named Daidaunkh," Freddy said, looking one of them in the eyes.

"What do you want with him?" the grimmer nurse asked. "You have a lot of weapons."

"Yes, I have many weapons. I wish to accompany the Rhyan out of here, if he's able to leave."

"We don't allow weapons in the hospital," she said, meeting his gaze and not blinking.

She was tougher than Freddy expected. He reviewed a few dozen old action movies. He picked up the weapon from the counter and casually discharged it, precisely breaking a chair someone was sitting in. "Oops."

"Would you quit playing around!" the Gatekeeper demanded, moving across the floor toward the reception desk. Everybody behind the counter stood up and backed away.

"We're just here to pick up a friend," Freddy said pleasantly. "Please direct me to Daidaunkh or have him delivered here to me."

One of the nurses consulted a display device, then turned and smiled at Fred. Fred smiled back. They didn't seem to object to direct eye contact. A few minutes later, Daidaunkh appeared down a corridor, walking quickly but with a slight limp.

"Fred!" Daidaunkh stopped to regard him with surprise. "Why are you here?"

"I'm retrieving you! Please choose weapons with which to arm yourself. I must warn you that I can't allow you to harm Admiral Demba or the others."

"Where is the admiral? She left me here with these primitive physicians."

"I'll try to discover the location of the admiral if you'll stand guard for a moment."

Daidaunkh took a weapon and checked it. He scanned the vicinity for potential trouble. He looked at the Gatekeeper with puzzlement.

Fred jumped over the counter. Pushing hospital workers aside, he searched among the various data displays. He found a spot on a panel and plugged a finger into it. After a few moments Fred unplugged and jumped back over the counter. "Amazing! Hardly any security. That was informative."

Fred led Daidaunkh over to the Gatekeeper, and Daidaunkh, seeing the alien shift slightly, jumped back. "It's a Gatekeeper," Fred explained. "An unknown species and very intelligent. Also dangerous, but I think it's our friend. Please stand close to us and continue to be vigilant." Fred talked to the alien rapidly, the words thick with mathematics. In a moment the hospital disappeared.

* * *

"Jeepers! No way out!"

"And the bad guys have arrived," Fidelity said.

A dozen armed soldiers invaded the upper level lounge where Fidelity viewed the outside of Oz. Several dozen warehouse workers had escorted her and Samson and Rafael to the observation point. The wide, lounge-like room was crowded with the Broken Ones and furniture. The Broken Ones quietly shoved tables and chairs aside, arraying themselves in closed ranks, forming a gray barrier against the black-uniformed soldiers. Olivier pushed through to confront the leader of the soldiers.

"Explain," the ranking officer ordered.

"They're special guests," Olivier answered, indicating Fidelity's group with a wave. "They wanted to see from that window."

"I know nothing about special guests. Get out! Leave them!"

"They were sent by The Lady in the Mirror," Olivier said loudly.

"Are you ready to die?" The Black Fleet officer looked left and right, as though expecting something.

"And she witnessed the *Titanic* Raid two centuries ago!"

"What have you been drinking?"

"She made us all crazy, Captain! She made us all love her. She sang for us. She sang for *us*!"

The Black Fleet captain paused to think about what Olivier said but quickly dismissed it all. "Get out. Take the Broken with you. You don't belong here."

"We're not leaving! We don't want you accidentally hurting them."

"Why so gallant, Olivier?"

"I like that word! I'm surprised you know my name. She made us happy for awhile, really happy. I guess we've all found our *Un Bel Di*. Like the Fleet says, the day we die is a beautiful day. *This* is the day!"

"Olivier, *wait!*" Fidelity was alarmed at the meaning of his words. She pushed to the front to stand beside him. Why was there so much violence in her life? Why was Samson always being exposed to it? She failed miserably to imagine the consequences of any of her decisions in this place. Olivier was smiling as seemed normal for him, even as he calmly accepted death as his immediate future. "I can't allow you to lay down your lives for me!"

"It isn't just for you!" Olivier argued. "What's life if it's empty? You just

filled it for me! From this point on, it's all glory!"

"Glory is highly overrated! Please, take your people and leave."

"We can't! You don't understand! They won't let *any* of us live! We knew that when we brought you here! Use us! We're not worth much except for right now!"

Fidelity was devastated to see the truth of Olivier's words. She could sense from her brief experience of this world that its rulers used death as the standard punishment to control everyone. Even before she sang for them, she sensed the doom of the Broken Ones. In so short a time she found herself liking Olivier and his fellow workers. It hurt her profoundly to know they were about to die. "Olivier, please do what you can to protect Samson and Rafael. Don't worry about me. Don't do anything until I've spoken to the captain."

Olivier stepped back one pace, leaving Fidelity by herself with the Black Fleet captain. The other Black Fleet soldiers stood at regular intervals, almost in formation, each with a hand on the butt of a holstered weapon. None of them appeared much concerned about the confrontation, or else they would already have drawn their weapons. The captain stood with practiced combat alertness, a measured distance from Fidelity, hand on weapon.

"A woman in a yellow dress killed two Fleet officers," the captain said. "Was it you?"

She waited a few moments to respond. She required the time to survey the squad of Fleet officers. A program was running in an augment she never knew she had, measuring vectors, increasing her metabolism, heating her muscles. The hammering of her heart signaled both fear and preparation. "Yes," she finally answered, speaking calmly above the effort of her lungs to increase her oxygen intake. "They gave me no choice. What were their names?"

"Names? I don't know. Why?"

She was not so heavily prepared for combat in any of her previous situations. Clearly whatever special augment she possessed for the purpose of survival was readying her for a great assault on the dozen soldiers near her. She couldn't believe she would survive the fight. She could believe she would kill most of them. Strategies were unfolding for her that were complex, involving scores of bodies in motion, multiple chains of cause and effect. It took a supreme force of will to brake the imperative to launch an attack. So conscious of the explosion about to occur in her body, Fidelity could still strain to keep a conversation going, to stall for time in a forlorn hope for some miracle that would stop the violence. "I know the names of most of the people I've killed. They were compiled from public records. What is your name? What are the names of your squad?"

"Are you trying to frighten me?"

"Not at all. I've only realized recently that I've collected the names of my victims. I'm not happy about it. I don't like to kill."

"You want me think you killed a lot of people! How many?"

"You only need to know about the two boys who tried to kill me."

"You make me curious," the Black Fleet captain said. "You killed two kids barely qualified to wear The Black. My squad are all veterans, all crew members. In case you don't know, it means each has killed six or more in the games. How many have you killed?"

"Too many. I'm a Union Navy officer."

"Navy? Good. We can make a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"Instead of shooting you here, we'll put you in the next games. It's how we dispose of Navy officers. You'll fight until you die. We'll even tell you their names."

"And my child and friend?"

The captain shrugged and smiled.

"And Olivier and the Broken Ones?"

He shrugged again.

Section 026

The Lady in the Mirror

"You're not old!"

"I feel old! Is this a marriage proposal? After all these years together, what does it matter?"

"I feel like we're still just friends, Ruby. I love you. I've always loved you."

"Why didn't you ever say so?"

"I thought I did, perhaps not with words but..."

"Men! I've known how you felt about me for years. I could have made you confess, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Because you didn't really love me?"

"Because I did really love you."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

"Is something wrong?"

"Something was always wrong with me! Something was always missing! I'm incomplete. I've lost something."

"I still don't understand."

"I'm beginning to remember things, Harry, but it's difficult to put them together. I think I lived another life before this one, one in which I had a husband, and a daughter named Jamie. But I don't know why I should have even received rejuvenation, because I don't remember ever paying my debt to the Mnro Clinic. And why do I suddenly remember important things, things I should never have forgot, things that, if I chose to forget them, I shouldn't ever remember?"

"I knew you would eventually remember him."

"Who? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you belonged to someone that no one should ever forget."

"You know who he was? Why? How long have you known?"

"Always, Ruby. I've always been your guardian angel, protecting you until his return. For most of that time I've been in love with his wife, so I couldn't tell you I loved you. But we've grown old together, shared an entire lifetime, and I don't believe he's alive anymore. I never doubted he would return, but it's been too long! So, I now put in my bid for you, my last small chance for happiness, my last chance to make you happy."

"But you know who he was? Tell me! Tell me, Harry! I can't remember! I've spent months trying to hold onto these images and snippets of dialog leaking out of my brain, and he's always there, just out of sight, and I can't see his face or hear his name!"

"I can't, Ruby!"

"Can't, or won't? Harry, you're hurting me! This is tearing me apart! I think it was always there, just under my conscious thought, driving me to sing, keeping me from staying sober."

"I'll lose you if I tell you, Ruby!"

"You've already lost me, Harry!"

"Ruby, you don't understand! It isn't just me! If I give him back to you, she'll just take him away again. Ruby? Where are you going?"

"Away! Don't try to follow me!"

He opened his eyes and saw her as a blur. He blinked his eyes and tears

rolled down his dark face. Before he could clearly see her, she walked up to him and put her arms around him. Her hat fell off. A man picked it off the floor and held it, and Pan saw him clearer as the tears abated in his eyes. The man was R.K. Pan looked down on the pale bald head of the woman holding tightly to his body. "Who are you?"

She leaned away from him without releasing him and looked up at him. She raised a hand and touched his face, touched the dampness, brought her hand to her mouth, tasted the wetness on her fingertips. She released him, took a step backward, stumbled and sat down hard on the floor. She sat there for several moments, eyes closed, breathing hard.

Pan looked over at Ramadhal, questioning. "Pan, this lady is Aylis Mnro. At least, I think she is! I don't understand what she does."

Pan knelt down in front of the bald-headed woman and waited for her to talk to him. He would be astonished to meet the famous woman at this moment of his life, if greater internal events did not prevent astonishment. He could not even form the ideas that should make him ask questions. He could only wait for the answers to make themselves apparent.

"She says she's the first wife of your father," Ramadhal offered.

"My father?"

"*Setek-Ren!*" Aylis Mnro cried, the name exploding from her. "Setek-Ren! Your father was Setek-Ren! My husband was Setek-Ren!"

* * *

"They're not coming back," Mai said. "Let's go. It's been too long and I'm hungry."

"You go," Horss said. "Send me some food." She was still with him. He didn't know why she stayed with him but it pleased him. It was not something his ego required; he simply enjoyed her presence, even if she did try to treat him as a youth. It was hard to believe she was almost a century older than he was.

"Why would they come back here?" she asked.

"Just a hunch. It's damned hard to compute different transmat addresses and this other device must be at least as difficult."

"Earth does move through space. The address will always change."

"I figure the change is easier to compute than a completely new address."

"Fine! Stay! I've got work to do! The sun is up on the morning of the Mother Earth Opera and tonight the place will be a riot! Thank God, it's the last one of these I ever put myself through!" Mai stepped back, pushed by the arrival warning field of a transmat. Pan appeared in the living room of Daidaunkh's dark apartment.

"Doctor Mnro was successful," Pan announced.

"Welcome back, sir," Horss said.

Pan seemed less than happy to be away from Etrhmk. "Captain. Mai. Have you camped here for long?"

"Long enough for Mai," Horss answered. "Do you know anything about the admiral?"

"All I know is that she's beyond Etrhmk's reach."

"Dead?" Horss was unhappy at the possibility. "And Samson?"

"You can stop waiting for them here. Why don't both of you come back with me?"

"Let me show you something in the floor here," Horss said.

"I've seen it."

"You know what it means?"

"I don't know the status of security in Daidaunkh's apartment. We shouldn't say more. Let's go."

"I'm staying," Horss said.

* * *

The woman who wore a straw hat stood up as Mai and Pan entered the main room of Pan's apartment. That she left Jon Horss alone in Daidaunkh's apartment bothered Mai, worried her, aggravated her! She was thus preoccupied in thought when she needed to understand who the woman was who now approached her with such a warm smile. Mai accepted the woman's hands into hers, feeling she had no choice in the matter. She then realized who the woman was, even though she looked too young. "Doctor Mnro?"

"Sugai Mai! *Please* call me Aylis! What's this about you taking a maternity leave? In this part of the Union you need a husband for that, or else the math doesn't fit the law."

"I'll be looking for a husband."

"So, it isn't maternity leave. It's a hunting trip. What about the Navy captain? Did he escape?"

"You're embarrassing me!" Mai wouldn't have tolerated such treatment from anyone else, but Aylis Mnro always treated her like a... a daughter? Mai shook her head, as if that would throw Jon Horss out of her mind and clear her mental machinery to defend herself against Aylis Mnro. Mnro seemed to sense her disquiet and she restrained herself.

"I'm sorry, Mai! I've just made a visit to Admiral Etrhmk. Then I'm reunited with Pan. My adopted son. Then I remembered my husband's name. Oh, and did I mention I've been asleep for two centuries and have just awakened, only to be inducted into the Navy? I'm on special leave until my personal affairs are put in order."

Mai studied Aylis Mnro, saw the wildness in her eyes, noted the strain in her voice, felt the slight tremor in the too-tight grip of her hands. What medical information she could detect with the probes built into her fingertips reinforced the overall impression of stress and agitation. It didn't help that Mai was feeling much the same. Mnro's last statement finally registered and left Mai dumbfounded.

"I think that was too much to throw at you at once," Mnro grimaced. "I probably should not be telling you *anything*. I want to tell you everything, but that would be dangerous for you. Yet, you already know too much to be safe. I wish I could be sure of not being overheard by Etrhmk."

"This is Earth, where crazy people live," Mai was able to say. "Entertainment miners constantly spy on us. We have very effective privacy systems, those of us who want them. Pan is your adopted son? That's why you were so interested in him all these years?"

"I never officially adopted him. He was a grown man by the time I first met him. The memories, the memories!" Mnro stopped talking, closed her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Mai asked again.

"The person who managed the development of the Mnro Clinics wasn't me," Mnro said, breaking away with great effort from what drew her inward. "She looked like me, she had my memories, and she had my genes, but she wasn't"

me. I slept while she did the hardest work and made the hardest decisions. Now it's my turn again. All that the other Aylis Mnro did was but a prelude to what comes next. I will reap what she has sown, and that may be something very great, or it may be the end of me. I'm trying to take things one at a time. I have Pan back from Etrhnk. Now I wait to see if I get Demba back. If she doesn't come back, all is for nothing."

* * *

"This thing is ruining the floors," Daidaunkh said, gesturing at the Gatekeeper.

"I identify with your concern," Fred said. "This android has overseen years of floor maintenance. Why does it concern you?"

"Same reason. The Mnro Clinic likes clean floors. I used to keep them clean. But the evidence of our passing that it leaves also bothers me. Does it have a name?" Daidaunkh felt uneasy in the presence of the Gatekeeper, not because it was obviously dangerous, but because it was obviously intelligent and thus even more dangerous. Pan's old android butler also made him uneasy. He was sure Old Fred should not be able to act the way he was acting. It helped soothe his nerves if they were not silent. It helped that they assured him they were trying to rescue the admiral. He would never forgive himself if he failed to help Rafael in his time of need.

"What's your name, shorty?" Fred asked the amorphous alien.

"You speak to me?" the Gatekeeper asked.

"You're the shortest one here."

"I have only a number, not a name."

"Okay, what's your number?"

"Ten."

"Does that mean there are at least ten of you?"

"It may have been a serial number. There were many of us in the past. The Lady in the Mirror doesn't offer much information to mere Gatekeepers. I'll answer to the name Shorty. Ten isn't my favorite number."

"Who is the Lady in the Mirror?" Daidaunkh asked.

"It is she who, if you say 'Lady in the Mirror,' and she hears of it, she'll kill you."

"What is she?"

"No one knows. Everyone fears her. She rules this place."

"Have you ever seen her?"

"Yes. Most who see her die. Mainly we hear her and we obey."

"Where is she?"

"Everywhere."

"And who's this person who speaks to us? She seems to have some power."

"She's a mystery."

"But she isn't the Lady in the Mirror?"

"I hope not!"

* * *

[What are you doing? Get out of here!]

[I can say the same to you!]

[Don't get her mad! She's a real stinker!]

[What's she going to do, kill us?]
 [Don't let her slip past you!]
 [Damn, she's fast! What can we do now?]

* * *

"Watch behind us, Shorty," Freddy said softly as they advanced along the wall of a corridor. "Our objective is in that room ahead. Don't let anybody sneak up behind us. Daidaunkh, you're the soldier. What should we do?"

They reached the doorway and peeked into the room beyond.

"We need to flank the armed soldiers," Daidaunkh said, "but I see no way to do that. It will have to be enough that we're behind them. If we shoot we must be careful not to hit those beyond the soldiers. What about the Asimov Laws?"

"They don't pertain to me," Freddy answered. "I'm an AMI, temporarily borrowing Fred's machinery. Do you want another weapon?"

Daidaunkh took another hand weapon, thumbing its safety.

"Go in shooting?" Freddy asked.

"Wait. Something is happening."

Fidelity took a step back as the phenomenon appeared. This made the captain start to draw his weapon. He stopped and moved to the side when he realized what was happening. A large, bright, silvery rectangle of light appeared in the air in the open area between the two groups of people. The rectangle of light rotated slowly and made a loud hiss as though reacting with the air. Everyone in the room stood transfixed, except for Fidelity who saw Daidaunkh and Pan's android at the doorway behind the Black Fleet officers. They were heavily armed.

An image appeared in the rectangle of light: a pale human woman, young and black-haired, with red lips and eyes that flickered between silver and black. Her body appeared in abstract, restlessly changing color and pattern, not as real-seeming as the face. The mirror floated in the air as an image that was less substantial than a hologram, but Fidelity could feel a power in it that frightened her.

"Uninvited guests," the Lady in the Mirror said. The voice unsettled Fidelity with harmonic overtones and undertones that plucked at multiple resonant frequencies. The mirror paused. The black-silver eyes looked directly at Fidelity. "Who are you?"

"Fidelity. Who are you?"

"Not a satisfactory answer."

Fidelity chose silence. Her brief survey of the people in the room and the feeling of extreme tension they projected told her this entity was dangerous. Yet, she couldn't subdue her fascination, a fascination fueled by the conviction that this image in a mirror was the most important discovery she had yet made in the barbarian world.

"A defiant young woman in a yellow dress." It was impossible to read character or inflection in a voice too laden with fear-inducing harmonics. "Behold a child."

Samson hopped forward and took hold of Fidelity's arm, staying behind her, afraid. Rafael followed him, helping him balance. Rafael took his place next to Samson and reached over to squeeze Fidelity's arm.

"And an old man. Who are you, old man?"

"Rafael de LaGuardia."

"That name sounds familiar. Ah, yes, the artist. Are you he?"

"Yes, I am."

"And the boy? Why does he have such an injury?"

"It was a terrible accident," Rafael replied. "His name is Samson."

"Samson. Samson."

"Do you know who he is?" Fidelity asked, feeling the entity might actually know. Samson was somehow connected to this place that shared his language. It was an awful hypothesis to form. It was an awful time to want to think of anything other than how to escape the nightmare before them.

"I ask the questions!" the Lady in the Mirror boomed, making dust fall from the ceiling. "Who will kill the child for me? Step forward and take aim."

Two of the Black Fleet soldiers broke rank and pulled weapons from holsters. They marched forward, one on either side of the Lady in the Mirror, and pointed their weapons at Samson. Both she and Rafael could also be shot, since Samson was hiding between them, but the soldiers did not hesitate. The mirror surged horizontally and oscillated back and forth. It swept into and through the two soldiers, disintegrating them with a loud frying noise, leaving nothing but the bleeding soles of their feet on the floor. "Trick question," the Lady in the Mirror said.

Fidelity covered Samson's face, probably too late to prevent him seeing the horror. It was *hopeless* to protect him!

"Who else will give his life for the boy? No one? Not even you, Yellow Dress?"

"I'll do what I must."

The rectangle of light turned and extended once more as it swept past Fidelity. She pushed Samson and Rafael back to protect them and dodged another horizontal surge in the lethal plane. The female image rotated into view again and paused. The Lady in the Mirror faced outward on both sides of the silver plane. "Quick, very quick. I shouldn't play games with you. Fidelity is a nice name. Are you faithful?"

Fidelity wanted to keep the Lady in the Mirror talking, because she didn't know what else she could do, and because she wanted to decide if there was a real person behind this phenomenon of terror. At the same time she wondered if the destructive plane of light could move any quicker, expand in any direction, transfer rapidly to another location. In other words, could she avoid it in any way? "I don't know what I am," she replied to the question. Fidelity could imagine what this entity might do to a room full of people. She could assume no restraint of will for this terrorizing phenomenon. Fidelity felt the Lady in the Mirror would kill everyone in attendance, once she was finished talking.

"I know what you are," the Lady said. "You're a murderer, no better than I."

"Better than you."

"In what sense, Faithful?"

She could now hear a coloration to her words despite the hair-raising overtones modulated into the Lady's speech. The Lady in the Mirror could be a real person, although this was certainly not proof. How could one perform a Turing test under such circumstances? "Any sense. Take your pick."

"Quantity? I don't even know how many I've killed."

Fidelity noted the idiomatic use of Twenglish by the Lady. It was the language of the barbarians, hardly changed in the seven centuries since that time on Earth when America dominated humanity with its culture. Why was it

Samson's language? "I know how many I've murdered. I thought I had a good reason. Did you have a good reason?"

"Most of my victims were murderers, or would-be murderers."

"Most of my victims were probably innocent," Fidelity said.

"How many?" the Lady asked.

"Millions."

"You're lying!" the Lady declared. "You're a very poor Scheherezade."

"I *wish* I was lying."

"That's it? You offer no amazing proof, no bloody details?"

"Not to you. You're not my judge."

"But I will be your executioner! Will you go alone into chaos or will you make me take the boy and the artist with you?"

"I don't think you'll kill me today. I've chosen another for that task. If he wishes to do it, he should hurry."

Daidaunkh and Fred opened fire from the doorway. Fidelity pushed Rafael and Samson away from her as hard as she could. Rebounding from shoving, she struck the Black Fleet captain and took his weapon before he fell to the floor. The mirror rotated and extended toward her as everyone in the room scattered to the perimeter. Fidelity gathered herself and leaped high over the plane of hissing light - a maneuver made possible by the shallow gradient of the gravity plates in the floor. She fired at the Lady in the Mirror, having no effect, as she retreated from the next sweep of destruction.

The lighting failed, leaving only the massed starlight in the window and the brilliance of the Lady's Mirror to illuminate the chaos. Other doorways opened and people escaped down bright corridors. Weapons flashed a few more times and stopped. The killing sweep of light extended farther and caught a few unfortunate people, mostly those who fell to the floor. Fidelity searched for Samson and Rafael but didn't see them. She ran the perimeter of the room to the doorway where Daidaunkh and Fred first appeared. She found them some distance down the corridor, waiting in an open doorway. In the room behind them the Lady in the Mirror reappeared and extended her mirror toward them. They ran. Walls disintegrated behind them and ceilings fell slowly in the artificial gravity.

"Where's Shorty?" Fred asked.

"Who is Shorty?" Fidelity asked.

He told her. They turned back toward the observation lounge. Down the long corridor beyond the area of debris, a dark lump flowed toward them, elongating and accelerating, throwing streamers of smoke up from the floor. The Lady in the Mirror appeared in the middle of the corridor, her mirror rotating rapidly. "Gatekeeper!" she called, and extended her killing mirror. Shorty elongated still more, becoming a black sparkling snake curving through the debris, passing under the lethal zone of the hissing rectangle of light. As Shorty escaped toward them, Fidelity and the other two retreated slowly enough that Shorty could join them.

"Now is the time," Shorty said, forming into a ragged sphere. "Stop and stand together."

"Time for what?" Fidelity asked.

"The Mirror is gone and the gate is available."

"I can't return without Samson and Rafael!"

"I'll stay to find the boy and the other," Shorty said.

"Are you the same one from Earth?"

"The same Gatekeeper. I only wanted the boy for a friend. I was lonely."

"I'll stay, too, Admiral," Daidaunkh said. "I'll help Shorty."

"Please, hurry," Shorty said. "The Lady in the Mirror is distracted, disconnected. I have the numbers for your gate."

Fidelity handed her weapon to Daidaunkh. She didn't think to distrust him. He stepped away from her. "Be careful! Stay alive, Daidaunkh!"

"Go with God," Fred said, handing over his arsenal.

"May we meet again," Daidaunkh said, saluting with a gun in hand. "Perhaps where we both shall stand in judgment."

He and the Gatekeeper disappeared. The universe shifted to Earth.

Section 027

The Mother Earth Opera

"Where are we?" the android inquired.

Despite her crowded thoughts, Fidelity wondered briefly why Pan's Old Fred would ask such a question. It must know the coordinates of their location from its navigational system. She knew them and she wasn't - as far as she knew - an android. Any further definition of the location would be unnecessary for its purposes. "Daidaunkh's apartment," she replied. She saw a familiar person asleep on Daidaunkh's sofa. Fidelity nudged Jon Horss and he came instantly awake.

"Where is he?" Horss asked.

His first words, and his immediate and honest concern for Samson made her feel sick to give him the bad news. "I lost him."

He sat up, then stood up. He gave a quick glance of greeting to the android, indicating he was familiar with it. "What happened to him? Where were you? Is Samson still...?"

"We need to keep moving." She knew it would do nothing more than delay another attempt by Etrhnk to capture her.

"I can call Pan's transmat."

That would make it easier for Etrhnk to get her but Fidelity started to accept the offer anyway. Then she found herself unable to decide. The indecision led to an irrational urge to walk and postpone the decision. She was too tired to walk, yet she wanted to walk. She found a detailed map of the area in her data augment. It seemed vaguely familiar. She checked her data for other maps of old Earth cities but found no other this detailed. There had to be a reason. She was irritated. All she really wanted to do was cry herself to sleep worrying about Samson and Rafael. She looked at Jon Horss. She looked at Old Fred. She sighed tiredly. "There is something else I must do now."

"What?" Horss asked.

"I don't know!"

"Business as usual, then. I'll help you."

"As will I," the android said.

Jon Horss seemed to have found a sense of humor, and although she was far from wanting humor, it did suggest his attitude toward her was not too negative. The android seemed different from when she first met it. She reviewed her encounter with the Black Fleet and the Lady in the Mirror and realized what lethal things this android did. It raised questions which, to her agony, she couldn't devote time to finding answers. She now had a sense of impending revelation and the feeling of its extreme importance shoved everything else aside.

They departed Daidaunkh's apartment building and walked in the street. Horss and Fred remained respectfully silent for a long while as they walked with her. The afternoon sun pushed waves of heat off broken windows and ancient façades covered with grime and tenacious plant life. The sea breeze penetrated the empty urban canyons and lifted the heat from time to time.

Horss and the android began to converse. Fidelity tried not to listen to them but because of the remarkable facility with which the android spoke, words got through to her. She learned of Pan's release from Etrhnk and of the appearance of Aylis Mnro.

Aylis Mnro! Now she realized who the woman in the park was, the woman who took Jamie away from her. The woman who made her sing at a funeral. The woman... the friend... the friend of yet some other person she was. How long ago? She almost began another vision from that hidden place within her.

"I'm sure Daidaunkh and Shorty will be successful, Mother."

Fidelity was shocked and the memory was aborted. "Fred! How can you call me your mother?"

"I'm Baby, Admiral! I'm here, in Fred. We're sharing a great adventure."

Fidelity knew without further proof the android was Baby. She was still shocked, and now also worried. "How did you do that?"

"There was a disembodied voice who talked to me when I tried to leave the ship. It was Samson's Milly. She was very peculiar, but she helped me."

It was *Baby* who risked his life to rescue her from Oz! She lost Samson. She lost Rafael. Did she have the capacity to suffer the loss of Baby? How could she protect everyone she loved? How could she presume to command a mission that would jeopardize the lives of thousands of people? All of this responsibility was piled upon her while she tried to make sense of painful reports from previous lives, while she was blown apart by dreams or memories, while she tried to pull herself back together as one new, rational person! "Do you have redundancy, Baby?"

"I knew you would ask me that."

"Do you?"

"Some."

She shook her head, stopped, and put a hand on the android's arm. "I don't want to lose you, Baby. You probably don't understand how miraculous you are and how wonderful you have made me feel. You can't know how precious you are to me. If this android dies with you inside him, what do you lose?"

"I should retain at least the germ of sentience if I lose this part of me."

"In other words, you committed most of your personality to this android! You left little more than a template in the ship! Baby, please be careful!"

"Call me Freddy, Mother. I'll call you Admiral when we're not alone. I'll try to be careful, but we spontaneous AMI's don't live very long anyway, do we?"

"Don't think about statistics! Think about living!" She stopped and regarded him intently, with both worry and warmth. "I'm sorry I can't talk with you more. I need to remember why I came to Earth." Fidelity resumed her aimless trek, urging her mind to discover why she knew Aylis Mnro. The idea itself was too much distraction to let the memory free. How could she possibly know Aylis Mnro?

"Is something wrong, Admiral?" Horss asked.

"I don't know but there usually is!" *Everyone she loved. Even Aylis Mnro?*

Aylis Mnro... And the memory came.

"Do you remember, Zakiya?"

"I remember," Fidelity replied.

She was speaking to this woman as an equal, and this woman was the most famous and most honored person who ever lived. Aylis Mnro brought practical immortality to the average person. But now Fidelity remembered who she was, who they both were, and it was like the universe turned inside-out.

"Please, don't hate me!" Aylis begged. "We have so little time together in full knowledge of who we are and who we were! God willing, we'll meet again and know who we are again, but this could also be the last time we see each other!"

She could see herself remembering: memories within memories, dreams

within dreams. She was sure Aylis spoke those words before. How many times? How many years ago? The images of the past escaped and burned into her mind, and killed her. The person she was long ago waved at her from across the abyss of time: farewell, or until we meet again? The memory inside a memory stopped and its parent continued.

"It's so very difficult, Aylis! The memories aren't faded by time! They hit me hard and fresh and I'm terribly wounded! All I ever wanted was simply to be a good mother!"

"And who would you tell her was her father? How would you describe him to her? How would Alex ever share Jamie's childhood with you? It isn't fair to either Alex or to Jamie. Don't you think that's selfish of you, Zakiya?"

She sat down under the apricot tree and hugged her knees. She knew the truth when she heard it. She was selfish. She looked up at the crescent Earth which shone above the rim of the crater. She looked over at the best friend she ever had. At least Aylis never abandoned her, as Alex did. Alex. How many times in her long life did she hear that name and never knew it belonged to her husband? The momentary joy of this knowledge took away some of the pain, but not for long. "I'm just tired and lonely, Aylis. I don't know how you go on, although at least you have your son."

"Don't you remember? I went to sleep. I'm not here any longer, just this imitation of me. That's how I can be so cruel, although it still isn't easy. Aylis loves you very much. Never forget that."

"But I will, won't I? What's that?" Aylis was holding some piece of fabric, twisting it and pulling it between her hands. She held it by the edge in her fingers, showing it was a container. She opened the silvery bag and pulled forth two objects and placed them on the ground next to Zakiya. They were spectacular artifacts of deep color purity, small as hen's eggs, mysterious beyond understanding. She picked one up and instantly verified what her eyes told her. The object lacked mass and weight, yet it felt absolutely solid in her hand.

"I remember them!" She was assaulted by a memory that rushed into her from very far in the past: a memory within a memory within a memory, gaining strength with each nested iteration. These pieces of magic came into her possession the final time she touched him. Alex.

"You take one," Aylis said.

"Yes, that would be logical," Zakiya said.

"Why did you stop?" Freddy inquired.

Horss gave up any hope of further enlightenment. He was still trying to fit his imagination around the wild tale Fred - Freddy - told him, of Gatekeepers and barbarians in black uniforms, and a woman in a mirror who disintegrated people and anything she touched. The admiral didn't respond for several minutes, standing with her eyes closed. Horss could almost feel the pressure of emotions she tried to contain. He understood now how she suffered from intense flashbacks, similar to what Pan experienced. She turned away from them and held her face in her hands. They waited. Freddy put a hand lightly on her shoulder. She turned around then and put her arms around Freddy. Freddy encircled her with his arms and gently held her. Horss was sympathetic, perhaps embarrassed, and impatient for the sentiment to end.

"I just remembered why I came to Earth. I just remembered something that has made me very emotional. I'm so tired I can't control myself."

"Is control necessary, Mother? If you had control, would I be deprived of the

joy of embracing you?"

She laughed and wiped her face. "It feels so strange to hear you call me mother."

"Feels pretty weird to me, too," Horss muttered. He received a squeeze of his arm from the admiral and suppressed an urge to react, not knowing how he should react. He tried to understand what the small but important gesture meant to him. If what Freddy told him about the fantastic city-in-the-stars was real and true, then everything had to change yet again. His life was spinning and spinning, with no hope of a steady direction.

Fidelity recovered her dignity and some of her control. She resumed her search. A vague and puzzle-like memory teased her effort at recollection. She had clues pop into and out of her mind, views of a city that was not this one but had a few identical objects that pointed to a match of route. She had to guess at direction and wait for a matching object to appear on a street and on the map in her data augment. It was almost a game and she imagined it was on purpose. The intermittent images would have been useless if she was not physically walking in this place on Earth. Finally she stopped in the middle of a wide avenue. She backed away from the center of the broken pavement and came to stand on a weedy sidewalk. She looked across the boulevard at a building whose slick marble face and grimy windows escaped much of the flora that sprouted on most other structures. The last clue had evaporated from her mind. Nothing more would reach her conscious. From here onward she was simply groping in the darkness and trying to reason where a certain magic relic might be hidden. There was no reasoning. She could picture the glorious artifact in her mind and she could feel where it might be.

"A bank?" Freddy guessed.

Horss followed them to the entrance. The admiral pushed on the glass door, which resisted but wasn't locked. Freddy pushed it open far enough for them to enter. The dusty lobby was bare of furnishings. The admiral led them to the back of the lobby. They passed through a vault-like doorway. Beyond lay a dim hallway with several doorways on one side along its length. The doorways with missing doors disclosed small rooms, each with a built-in desk. On the opposite side of the dark hallway was a larger doorway with a massive steel frame. The admiral led them down the hallway and through the larger doorway.

The room was dark but Horss had a handlight and all of them had augmented vision. The metal rectangles of thousands of small doors, most of them open, filled two walls of the room. Small safe-deposit boxes rose to a person's height, while large ones formed rows down to the floor. Dust and cobwebs filled every opening in the walls.

"That one," the admiral said thoughtfully.

"Which one?" Freddy asked.

She pointed to one of the largest floor-level boxes.

"One of the few that appear locked. Shall I open it?"

"Please."

Freddy ripped an open door from another box. He used the door as a hammer to loosen the admiral's door. Horss never saw an android apply such force. As an expression of will, it gave him pause to understand what a spontaneous AMI represented. Freddy said he *killed* people to save the admiral. Horss didn't believe it. Now he did. Freddy bullied the door open and pulled out the metal box. It was empty!

"Beneath it," the admiral said.

Freddy stuck his hand into the opening and rapped with his knuckles. It sounded hollow beneath the floor of the chamber. He struck the floor plate hard enough to raise a warped edge, then pried up the edge. He groped in the cavity beneath the floor and pulled forth a sack made of a silver fabric. He handed it to the admiral. She looked inside the bag.

"It's all true!" she declared with a sigh. "They're real memories and I'm so many different people!"

"What's in the bag, Admiral?" Horss asked.

Light leaked between her fingers as she pulled forth an object that just filled her hand. She opened her fingers and held it on her palm for Horss and Freddy to see. Its surface patterns of pure color suggested purpose beyond imagining. Its beauty and mystery all but enslaved the senses, casting the rest of reality into darkness. It appeared to dance upon her palm as if it floated and hardly touched her hand.

"It looks like the cryptikon!" Horss declared. He had never seen the one in the Essiin Museum - the only one believed to exist. He saw images and they barely hinted at what he now experienced. The device seemed made of solidified light, with no hint of how it was assembled. He suffered this almost ecstatic revelation for only an instant, before another impossibility assaulted his senses.

Behind them - and between them and the only exit - a rectangle of blue-white light emerged from nothingness, banishing the darkness of the bank vault, even dimming the beautiful glow of the cryptikon. The sharply-delineated plane, so impossibly thin it appeared to exist two-dimensionally, rotated slowly with a hissing noise. Powerful, low-frequency sound waves shook dust from the ceiling and walls. It was so close to them that Horss could feel it. Waves of power modulated the dust in the air and sent rude fingers of pressure through his clothing and across his body. A young woman's image, hyper-real in sharpness and in color, appeared as though embossed deeply in the silvery plane.

Horss could not believe this was a mere image. He knew it was deadly without knowing how it could even exist. He knew the Lady in the Mirror from Freddy's description, and he knew Freddy hadn't used enough adjectives.

"You cannot hide from me!" the Lady roared at them. The overtones of the words raised the hairs on Horss's neck. The Lady in the Mirror extended her plane of destruction horizontally, piercing the walls and boxes, reaching a radius which would sweep through everyone. Then it stopped. "What is this place? Why are you here?"

The admiral raised the cryptikon above her head, holding it between the tips of her thumb and one finger. The black and silver eyes of the Lady in the Mirror blinked as though they could see but not believe what they saw. Terrible pain deformed the pale face. The red lips parted, and an almost lethal wail of agony erupted from the image. "That's how it all began!"

The mirror resumed rotation, pivoting at its center. To one side it ate through rows of metal boxes with a screaming sound and a flare of actinic light. To the other side it disintegrated a wall and collapsed part of the old bank. The crescendo of destruction raged toward them in a blinding glare as the mirror pivoted through its arc. Pieces of ceiling fell around them. Dust swirled and spun into vortices that danced into the plane of death, making sprays of microscopic explosions.

Horss was too stunned by this nightmare of annihilation to put his final

thoughts in order. His urge was to pull the admiral behind him, to at least make the gesture to protect her. She prevented that by stepping toward the mirror, even as Horss and Freddy tried to stay away from the mirror's direction of rotation.

The admiral held the cryptikon before her in her fingertips. As it touched the advancing wall of blinding death, the cryptikon stuck to it and stopped it.

The Lady in the Mirror wailed again, the deafening tone fading as the lethal plane of light darkened and vanished.

The egg floated free and bright in the dusty gloom as the admiral released it and staggered back.

Freddy retrieved the artifact from the air. He looked at the cryptikon, then surveyed the destruction around them. "I was unprepared to die!"

Horss almost laughed, his fear having arrived too late to do more than release the trapped air from his lungs. The Lady in the Mirror appeared too briefly to prove him a coward, but he knew he would feel the delayed shock for the rest of his life.

"Is there a safe place to stay near here?" the admiral asked as though immune to such terror. "I need to rest."

* * *

"That was very sweet of you, Alex. I hesitate to say it, but it felt romantic to me."

"I hesitated to do it, Zakiya. I didn't know if you would want that."

"I did want it! It was wonderful! But also confusing. I don't understand how you feel about me."

"How many times have I held your hand lately?"

"Like an old friend concerned for my safety?"

"I love you, Zakiya. Haven't I said it enough times?"

"It still feels unreal. I love you. I desperately want to believe you love me."

"It's difficult to explain. When you're a captain, you're not wise to allow certain feelings for those under your command. Did I love you anyway? I know I did. I was afraid to approach you, knowing it would change too many things, including the special quality of the crew. I tried to make myself feel about you the way I felt about Koji or Setek. You were someone I could trust completely, someone who saw me as a friend as much as a captain."

"How romantic."

"I told you it would be difficult to explain."

"You've explained it well enough."

"If you see it as a mistake on my part, I ask forgiveness."

"I'm sorry, but I have to know: Fidelity, the woman you married."

"I would have married you before Fidelity. But you departed so quickly after the last voyage that I lost confidence in how I thought you felt about me. I learned to love Fidelity with all my heart and almost fell apart when I lost her. Marriage is a sacred commitment. If I find her still alive, we'll deal with my commitments at that time. I've always loved you nobly if not perfectly romantically."

"Don't hang your head that way, Alex. I confess I've had a lifetime of longing for you. I'm so proud to be your wife that I can hardly believe it's true. It was a beautiful wedding, very thoughtfully done. It was the first time I saw Pat cry since he broke that bottle of ancient scotch."

They embraced for a long time.

"Are those your tears or mine?"

"Ours. I want to change the plan. I want to go with you."

"I don't think I could be effective, knowing a mistake on my part could make me lose you."

"All those years on the Frontier, all those impossible situations, you could have lost all of us. I believe in you. You have a magic no one else possesses. I could be useful. Damn it! It's so unfair, to wait my whole life to be your wife, and then lose you!"

"Don't you think I'm coming back? Don't you really believe in my 'magic?'"

Time telescopes cruelly to the end of the dream, to the last kiss salted by tears, to the terrible crushing emotion of loss, the last glimpse of four friends, one of them a husband. "I'll love you forever," she said. She turned away from a closed door to face a long, empty future. She had only a silver bag in her hand containing utter magic to make her stand up straight and carry on, yet it was still miserable proof that a future remained to be lived.

She awoke at the touch on her bare shoulder. Her clenched fist pulled the silver sack from under her as her eyes focused on the face above her: Jon Horss. She saw his concern. She began to react to the powerful memory she just experienced. Tears washed into her eyes and streaked her face. She couldn't be an admiral, not an admiral Horss would respect. All she could do was be his friend. She forced herself to speak. "How are you, Jon?" She sat up. She wiped her tears without feeling ashamed.

"Fantastic." He replied in Twenglish, but his voice had the same quality of concern as his gray eyes. "What's wrong?"

She leaned back against the sofa on which she'd slept for six hours and stared at the silver sack in her hand. "Memories of someone I lost a long time ago, Jon. Has Samson returned? Rafael?"

Horss said a Twenglish word Fidelity knew to be profanity. "No sign of them yet. It isn't fair. He's just a child."

An East Asian woman entered the room, came to Horss and took his hand. It seemed Horss had wasted no time in her absence. The woman looked at Fidelity gravely and bowed. "Sugai Mai. Mnro Clinic. Is there no hope of the child's safe return, Admiral? Rafael? Daidaunkh?"

"I'm not optimistic." She tried to stop her tears. She could see she was upsetting the woman. Jon Horss was also made uncomfortable by her lack of control. She suspected she would have little control over her emotions for a long time. The memories were too powerful. "No further visits by the Lady in the Mirror?"

"No," Horss answered. "And also no attempt by Etrhnhk to take you by transmat."

Fidelity leaned forward, elbows on knees, and dangled the silver pouch from its simple drawstring. "Possibly because of this. I seem to recall that it prevents transmat referencing."

"A bonus miracle."

"Jon, I'm very happy to see you in apparent good health. Please believe me, I never intended to do what I did to you. I didn't know I could!"

"Kill me? The news of my death was greatly exaggerated, Admiral. I'm afraid I no longer meet your criteria for a ship captain, but I'm willing to go with you in whatever capacity I can do best."

"I wish I hadn't hurt you. I still need you. How badly were you affected?"

"I'm strange. I'll try to be less strange. I'm talking as though we still have a ship to sail. Is it all over? Are we no longer Navy officers?"

"Etrhnk is waiting to hear you sing," a different voice spoke.

She looked beyond Horss and Mai to the bald woman in the doorway to Mai's office. The woman approached, passing by Horss and touching his arm. Mai stood aside and she also touched her. She looked at each of them but her attention remained on Fidelity. Her blue eyes were filmed with tears and her mouth was straining to contain what might escape gracelessly. "Do you remember me?"

"I remember." Fidelity spoke slowly, recognition reaching certainty at the last syllable. "Which one are you?" She still sat, looking up at this creature of myth and legend and seeing an old friend who only wanted that they be friends again. It hurt, that she could call up the memory at will now, of the afternoon in the park, with Jamie playing on the green grass while she and Aylis sat on the bench anguishing over a distant future. She could now look upon the face of her young daughter. She could remember Jamie's face. She could remember Aylis's dark face on that terrible day and match it to the pale face she now saw. Even the calamity of emotion was similar in amplitude but perhaps now more positive.

"I've been asleep for a long time, Zakiya. This is me."

The sound of the name - Zakiya, her real name - struck a great chord in the symphony of her existence. *Zakiya!* She realized she had heard it before in her visions but it had refused to stick with her. The chord died quickly in her heart, leaving her real name meaning less to her. It belonged to another person. She might take it up again but it was just a name. It was not as important a name as Jamie. "It hurts, Aylis. Losing Jamie. It still hurts!"

"I know! I'm sorry! My God, Zakiya! We're here, we're alive, we can remember! You have to let me hold you."

She held her arms open and stood before Fidelity with an imploring look on her face. Fidelity could see through her own blurry eyes that Aylis was young again and her face was wrecked by powerful feelings. The anger flowed out of her with her tears. She remembered an old familiar feeling, a feeling of belonging with Aylis, a feeling of sisterhood and of deepest friendship. She resented it and resisted it for a moment, but it grew in strength and she became helpless to deny it. It was a feeling that belonged with the name Zakiya, and she reluctantly gave way to the odd feeling of losing her old identity. Fidelity was the name of a woman Alex had married after everyone departed the crew of the *Frontier*. She never knew her well and had always envied her, yet had for some reason adopted her name years after she disappeared on the *Titanic*. Aylis Mnro only knew Fidelity as Zakiya, and that made it certain she would take her real name back. The chasm of centuries and the ache of motherhood-denied melted away. She arose and took two steps forward. Aylis closed the gap, gathered her within her arms, and hugged. Zakiya returned the pressure. They held each other fiercely.

"Do you understand what is happening to us and to Pan?" Aylis asked.

"I'm beginning to see a pattern," Fidelity-who-was-Zakiya said.

"Then you are one step ahead of me, Zakiya. I was doing crazy things and didn't know why! I was scared!"

Aylis paused and took something out of a pocket. "Do you have one of these? I seem to remember there were two." Aylis opened her palm to show a small object. When she lowered her hand slightly, the ovoid object floated in the air. Mai gasped.

"Holy cow!" Horss exclaimed. "She's got *another* one!"

It was a cryptikon. Zakiya-Fidelity produced hers from the silver bag.

"I thought there was only one," Mai said, reaching for the floating artifact, trembling to grasp it.

"I know of five," Zakiya said, "and I believe there is at least one other. The Lady in the Mirror was quite upset at seeing it in my hand."

"Who?" Aylis asked.

"Didn't you tell them about the Lady in the Mirror, Jon?"

"They wouldn't have believed me! I didn't believe Freddy when he told me! I didn't even believe it when she was trying to kill us!"

"Where have you been?" Aylis asked.

"Hasn't Jon or Freddy told you about Oz, or the Big Ball?"

"That's what they call it? I didn't believe it either!"

"A place of great beauty and great terror," Zakiya said. "I had friends there, and enemies, including one who can appear anywhere and destroy almost anything. The Lady in the Mirror. I was separated from Samson and Rafael when Freddy and Daidaunkh rescued me. Daidaunkh stayed behind with the Gatekeeper to try to find them." Zakiya described The Lady in the Mirror, with Horss adding a few more adjectives.

"We can't continue?" Aylis asked. "What will we do?"

"Keep moving," Zakiya said. "Pretend we still have a chance. The cryptikons provide some amount of protection."

"Who is Zakiya?" Mai asked, giving the cryptikon back to Aylis.

"My oldest friend," Aylis said. "Also known as Fidelity Demba."

"Commodore Keshona," Horss said. "Ruby Reed."

"Yes, I now remember Ruby Reed," Aylis said. "Zakiya Muenda is her real name. We served together, back before the Navy existed. We were explorers."

"But that was..." Mai started to say.

"Too long ago?" Aylis said.

"Deep Space Fleet," Horss said. "I believe you! You *are* Aylis Mnro, aren't you?"

"Would you then believe Zakiya and I served aboard the *Frontier*?"

"It was a *real* ship?" Horss asked.

"It was," Aylis said, smiling.

"And the captain?" he queried.

"A real person," Aylis said. "Her husband."

"But..." Horss said.

She only half listened to them speak. Zakiya tried to fit herself to the name her mother gave her three centuries in the past. She didn't fit it, not yet. She was a person with no name at all. All she knew at this moment was that she could sing. And that she had lost Samson.

* * *

Still wearing the yellow dress made by Rafael, Zakiya stood in the wings of the stage listening to the performers sing to the live audience and to billions more by telecast. Aylis used needle and thread to repair some of the damage to the yellow dress.

"Does he know I'm here?" Zakiya asked.

"I didn't tell him! I wanted to surprise him, Zak. The only sewing I know is emergency medicine stitching. I last did it about two hundred fifty years ago."

"You needn't bother. The dress is fine the way it is."

"I know. I just like to make things perfect. I wanted to say something before Pan finishes and comes and monopolizes your time."

"We're friends forever, Aylis, no matter what happens."

"I know that! It's the *only* thing I'm sure of! You're Zakiya at the root of your being. Always kind and forgiving. I just wanted to say I believe Alex is still alive out there somewhere."

"Please, don't make me hope! I remember other times when we all but pronounced them dead. They've been gone too long!"

"Hear me out, Zakiya. I've had a few more explosions from my lost memories. How old were you when you married Alex? Seventy? And because of the medical advances of the time, you were still biologically young enough to give birth a few years later to Jamie. Life extension treatments were already centuries old. All I did was improve the treatments to make continuity of life practical and affordable for everyone. What remained was the problem of implementing it without causing tremendous social upheaval. That was half the reason I went to sleep and let my inexhaustible mechanical double take on the task."

"Are you saying that Alex and the others had the benefit of your research?"

"I made sure they had everything I could give them to keep them strong and healthy. They wouldn't let me come with them, but these are four of the most brilliant minds God gave to men. They had to be able to figure it out. Patrick promised me he would make it work."

"They never believed they would return soon! They were planning on decades of cautious searching. But it's still been too long, Aylis. They might have had the technology to maintain their youth but there are too many ways to die out there."

"Still, there's a chance, Zakiya. You're data-enhanced by the Navy, but you're also data-enhanced by me. Our poor brains can only hold so much. But there are other ways to store memories. Maybe we're unable to retrieve our old memories with the mere will to remember, but it's all there. Therefore, you'll eventually remember how intelligent and strong and resourceful these men were. They're still out there, and they need our help."

"There may be a small chance, but - "

"No 'buts.' They're out there and we *will* find them!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Now, go on and surprise Pan. I want to see the look on his face!"

Zakiya stepped closer to the stage and listened to the last singer. He finished to great applause, showing that his place at the end of the Mother Earth Opera was well-earned. When the singer exited to her side of the stage, she was still applauding as he passed by her. Pan accompanied the singer on a traditional piano, where he still sat. He turned to the audience and started to rise, then he must have glimpsed her and turned back to her. Pan stood and gestured for her to come onto the stage. She pointed to herself as a question and he nodded and waved vigorously for her to join him. Zakiya turned to Aylis who simply shoved her into the light. Zakiya walked uncertainly toward Pan, wondering at his motive. He couldn't *dare* to ask her to sing!

Pan waited for her to close the distance between them. "Hello, Ruby!"

"Hello, Harry."

"It's been a long time. Too long. Want to sing?"

"You didn't say that! I don't want to embarrass you."

"Not a chance. Just one song. My old favorite."

Pan returned to the piano. As Zakiya turned to go with him, she glimpsed Admiral Etrhnk in the first row of seats. Their eyes met, and even from that distance she couldn't see what she expected to see. She didn't understand him.

Pan was already playing the intro for the song she sang for Rafael as she came to stand behind him with her hands on his moving shoulders. It was an easy song because it was so beautiful and sad. She only needed to be true to it. She wasn't a performer, not an actress. She was a singer. She sang.

When she finished, the applause was polite. She was gratified to receive any applause at all. "Not too bad," she said softly to Pan.

"It was perfect!" Pan replied. "They don't understand. Do you want to try something more challenging?"

"No!"

He ignored her response and played a few notes of a song she recognized. She was transfixed by a memory in which the song appeared in a set of five songs, all of them difficult because they weren't so beautiful and were technically complex. Five different songs, five different languages, lengthy melodic phrases, wide tonal ranges. She remembered trying to sing them and make them beautiful, but failing, lacking the will and stamina to conquer their cruelty to her sense of aural and emotional aesthetics. Pan was there in the memory, urging her to reach beyond her old limits. It was near the end of their life together, perhaps part of its reason for ending. Now it was his challenge to her, and his hope for her. She knew it was impossible. Like the challenge to find Alex. Impossible!

"You have the lyrics in your data augment."

"Yes."

"You rehearsed them often enough."

A century ago! "Harry, this will be the end of us!"

"Or the beginning of something better. Try it! I heard you sing the old Rhyen song. That was just as difficult."

He was still playing the simple notes of the group of songs, mixing them in a way that reminded her of their resistance and their potential. Some of these songs were probably already sung by others during the Mother Earth Opera, but no one would have put them together the way Pan once arranged them for her. She wanted to slap old Harry on the back of the head and walk off the stage! Yet, she had a feeling she could probably make it through at least the first song. It was as if her voice and her lungs and the rest of her body also remembered the skills and demands of singing. It was as if she was better and stronger than Ruby Reed ever was. It was as if *Keshona* ordered her to attack. "I'll kill you when we're done!"

"I'll die happy!" Pan declared, and launched the accompaniment.

She sang. She closed her eyes and sang. She *sang*!

She hardly thought about how she ought to sing such unforgiving songs. She was grateful to make it through the first one without any technical errors. She was pleased to remember how to segue into the second song and never hesitated. Then she stopped caring how perverse the melodies were, and made them play against themselves and sound better than they were. It became easier for her. She allowed her voice to soar, unafraid. She *loved* to sing.

Toward the end of the last song another memory surprised her, almost making her lose concentration. There was another treatment of the five songs, something she had worked on unknown to Pan. She had been trying to basically

destroy these ugly songs and make something new of them. The score came up in her ocular augment and she remembered how she wanted to sing it but was never able. Now it didn't seem so challenging. But Pan would have a hard time accompanying her. Good!

As Zakiya held the last lyric of the last song, she softened the note and leaned over the left side of Pan's keyboard. She struck a new chord, startling him. She struck it loudly and in the rhythm she wanted. She pulled his left hand over and made him realize she wanted him to hit the chord. "See if you can keep up with me, Harry!"

Zakiya jumped to the middle of one of the songs and hummed the dominant melody, the best part of the song. Then she used modern English words to sing the melody. Just as Pan found the right chords to follow her, she jumped to another of the songs and sang the best part of it in English. The flow of the words and sentiment made sense and made a new poem. She used parts of the other three songs to continue the construction of the new song. Even though the songs changed key, they were much more interesting and dynamic. When Pan seemed to find the pattern of his accompaniment, Zakiya changed tempo, expression, even the words. She was singing blues and jazz. It was hot and cool and hard and soft. She was enjoying herself. She was in a world of her own, free of all the pain and threat and worry. Pan found his mode of improvisation and crouched over the keyboard, hammering the keys with passion and a big smile. Then he stopped. Zakiya's voice trailed off. Pan stood and pointed to the wing.

Zakiya saw Fred/Freddy, and next to him, holding onto his hand, *Samson!* She ran to Samson and gathered him into her arms and squeezed him and kissed him and wept. *Never again would she place him in harm's way! Never again would she withhold the care and affection he needed and deserved!*

Applause began tentatively from the audience, then rose to painful amplitude. Pan gestured for Zakiya to return to the stage. She started to put Samson down.

"No, take him with you!" Aylis shouted.

She carried him into the lights, and the applause buffeted them, until the realization of Samson's injury caused many to fall silent in concern for him. She walked to Pan, who put both hands on Samson and squeezed his shoulders. "Welcome back, Samson! Are you alright?"

Samson nodded his answer. "It's loud!" he said of the applause.

"Will your throat do one more song?" Pan asked Zakiya. "Maybe that will quiet them."

For the moment, her throat felt good. "What do you want me to sing?"

Samson patted her shoulder. He whispered in her ear. "A lot of them died, keeping me safe. Sing for Olivier and the Broken Ones."

Zakiya set Samson on the piano bench next to Pan and told Pan the name of the song.

She sang *Un Bel Di*.

One beautiful day her husband would return to her. She would find him.

She would find him.

She would find him!

Section 028

Feathers and Stripes

"You saw him."

He started. Normally the sound of that voice was too expected to bother him, but he was so deeply lost in thought that he forgot to anticipate her visit.

"Constant." Etrhnk turned to the Golden One.

"Answer my question."

"I saw him."

"He seemed well?"

"You saw the televised images and could probably judge better than I."

"You didn't meet him after the telecast?" Etrhnk shook his head. He avoided her eyes. "What's wrong?"

She unsealed the seam of her blouse. Loose as it was, he knew it irritated her body. "I don't know." He tried not to look at the gold beneath her blouse.

"You attended in person, and I think just to hear her sing."

"Yes."

"You quite enjoyed her performance. I know. I saw you applauding. I was jealous."

"I'm sorry." He *was* sorry.

"You wanted to learn something. If I know nothing else about you it's that you're always curious. She's a mystery. As is the boy. Do you want to know about the boy?"

He shook his head. She discarded her blouse. For the first time Etrhnk felt strangely excited by this most beautiful of creatures. For the first time he felt Constant was truly female, and all that implied. What was happening to him, that he could *feel*? He couldn't afford to feel. But he did. Most troubling of all was how he felt about Admiral Demba. It was a mistake to listen to her sing. It *changed* him.

"I always think you're hiding delicious personal thoughts from me," Constant said. "But never thoughts about me. Would it interest you to know that I was very worried the boy would be hurt or killed?"

Etrhnk shook his head negatively and slowly.

Constant touched him, found the seam of his uniform, tugged at it gently while trying to capture his eyes with hers. "It would interest me to know why you didn't remove Demba from command of the Hub Mission."

"I'm sure it would."

She yanked at his uniform tunic, angry or impatient. He finally dared look at her and he shivered. The light loved her golden feathers and played upon her human-like surfaces as though alive with capriciousness. "You are delightful to behold." He was uncomfortable with what he was able to say and amazed that he said it. Constant seemed to appreciate his words.

She smiled at him and helped him remove the jacket of his uniform, then his undershirt. She looked at his torso before wrapping her arms around it. "You're also delightful to behold," she said. "I love your stripes."

Section 029

1981 - Parental Disapproval

"You don't have tenure yet!" Mama lectured me. "Too soon to get married!"

"I'll probably never get tenure at such a prestigious school, Mama. Anyway, who said anything about getting married?"

"She's a nice-looking girl," Papa dared say, and he got a frown from Mama.

"You don't bring home a girl like that, crippled and in a wheelchair, if you don't have big plans for her. That's a lot of trouble for you unless she means something to you."

"You're very perceptive, Mama." Her frown turned to a big smile as she waited on a customer and took his money.

I escaped Mama and walked down the narrow aisles of the old store. I saw and smelled and heard all the sights and scents and sounds of my childhood, growing up in the family business. Papa was putting out a new order of men's dress hats, brushing them and stacking them in the glass cases. He kept glancing at me and smiling. He was on *my* side, although I wasn't sure why. I had already disappointed him twice in my choice of profession. If I was honest with myself, Milly was another choice I had made that would likely not be as perfect as my parents wanted. Pausing at the front of the store I breathed in the pungent aromas of pipe tobaccos, clove cigarettes, cigars, the candy rack. Down the first aisle I perused the magazines and paperback books. I picked up a bag of chips from the floor and put it back on the shelf as I moved into the grocery section. It looked like everything was still moving off the shelves but I wondered how much longer Mama and Papa could keep it going. I hoped they weren't really waiting for me to support them in their old age.

"Where did you leave her?" Mama asked, finding me in the refrigerated section, looking at a possible leak under one case.

"She's at the hotel," I answered, pointing out the puddle of liquid to Mama. She ignored it.

"Separate rooms?"

"Separate beds, Mama. Same room. She needs some help."

"Why a crippled girl?"

"And a white girl and a Catholic girl! I don't know, Mama. It just happened."

"There were plenty of nice Korean girls around here. Was she the first white girl to be friendly to you?"

"The very first! I was *swept* off my feet! When was *any* girl friendly to me?"

"So, you have to settle for a cripple. OK with me! Just don't marry her! Lot of trouble. You'll regret it. How is she going to give you babies and help you raise them?"

"Lord have mercy, Mama!" I was upset at Mama's attitude. I never knew she was so prejudiced. I tried to calm down and appreciate her perspective. Also, there was the military situation that Mama would never understand, even if I could tell her about it. Mama was a very smart person but she never had the opportunity for a good education and a broadening of her horizon. "Milly is a very independent person, Mama. She's strong and determined. If she wants children, she'll have them and she'll do it well. Only her legs are crippled. Her mind is better than mine. She's a mathematician, a Ph.D. mathematician. She's amazing. She didn't want to have anything to do with me when I first met her, but she changed her mind." I took a few steps away from my mother and swiped

a soft drink from one of the refrigerated cases. She let me take a couple of swallows before resuming her cross-examination.

"OK, so Milly is amazing and good at math." She was saying Milly's name now. That was a good sign. "Is that all you see in her? She has a pretty face, too."

"As a matter of fact, her math ability is quite important to me, but no, that isn't all there is. She's special, Mama, very special. When I'm with her, my heart races and my brain explodes with ideas. Without her, I can see myself in the future as an old man of no significant accomplishment, teaching at a small college. With her..." I couldn't tell Mama what Milly and I had already accomplished as a team. It was classified by the military.

"She's special. Special as in smart. Good. But she doesn't have to marry you, does she?"

"It would be convenient." I immediately regretted those words. Mama opened her mouth to pounce on the mistake and I cut her off. "Damn it, I *love* her, Mama! I'm *crazy* about her!"

"OK, then!"

Mama had to go back to the cash register. I drank half the cola and belched. I looked over at Papa, who had positioned himself to observe Mama and me down the aisle. He gave me a thumbs-up. I walked down the aisle toward him and leaned on the counter. He stuck a wool walking hat on my head, cocking it to one side. I put my glasses on the counter and picked up the cola to finish it.

"Something wrong with your glasses?" Papa inquired.

I swallowed wrong and had a coughing fit, nearly losing the hat. Papa leaned over and pounded me on the back. Mama came back to us and we waited for her next pronouncement.

"So, are you bringing Milly to supper tonight, or what?"

Supper went pretty well, except Mama was uncharacteristically quiet. She stole a lot of glances at Milly. Papa enjoyed talking to Milly. He'd been a secondary school teacher back in Korea and he asked Milly how she had beaten the odds to become a female mathematician. It had something to do with card games, especially poker, which led quickly to the subject of her father, Col. A. J. DuPont, veteran of World War Two and Korea, and from then on I was just a listener. Papa had also been a soldier in Korea before the War. Milly talked a lot about her parents. She also asked many questions about my parents and what their lives were like before they came to America. She seemed genuinely interested and I think she impressed Mama, and no doubt Papa.

Just as we were about to leave for the hotel, Milly saw the old piano that was partially hidden behind some boxes in the cramped little apartment. It was my old upright practice piano. They still had it, despite the space it wasted.

"I've never heard Sam play," Milly said, and turned to me in silent request.

We uncovered the piano and Mama dusted it off. I pulled out the bench and sat down, opened the keyboard cover. I did a backhanded sweep up and down the keys and shook my head at what I heard. Then I hit all eighty-eight keys, playing the chromatic scale, and paused at each of three bad keys that had completely lost their tones. I couldn't play it. Milly never did hear me play piano.

I just wished Dad would be nice. *Nice* is not his thing. Not that he's unreasonable. He has no tolerance for fools. I anguished over what to do to prepare him for Sam and kept putting it off until it came down to just showing up on my parents' doorstep nearly unannounced, with Sam rolling me into the house and Dad squinting at him and looking back out the door to see where his taxi was. It was a rental car and Sam was not a taxi driver.

"Mom, Dad, this is Samuel Lee, *Doctor* Samuel Lee." I was going to add, "The man I'm going to marry," but lost my courage. While my parents gaped and pondered the meaning of Sam's presence, I rolled in and saw all the mess scattered everywhere. As it turned out, they were packing up to leave for a new home in Florida and retirement near a military base and a VA hospital. It was about time. Dad had been in the Army forever.

I turned around to watch the Old Man, and Mom watched him with me. We all knew the meaning of Sam's presence. I had warned Sam about the colonel. I felt sorry for Sam. Dad pulled out his unlit cigar - Mom wouldn't let him light one in the house - and stuck out his big hand for Sam to take. He then crushed Sam's hand and smiled doing it, stuck the cigar back in his mouth, hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his khaki shorts, and put that look on his face that said, "Boy, are you in the wrong house!"

Sam shook the pain out of his hand and lied by saying, "Pleased to meet you, Colonel." I was ready to get up out of my wheelchair and shove that cigar down Dad's throat.

"We're getting married!" I announced. "Just so we all know what we all know!"

Mom took Sam's hand in both of hers and smiled warmly at him. "This is so sudden! Are you Chinese?" Mom is a real sweetheart and a little on the petite side. She always waits until Dad isn't looking, before she hits him.

"Korean," Sam said.

"Hmm," Dad said. "What kind of doctor?"

"Astronomer."

"I was about to ask about this pain," Dad said, pointing at his liver. "What does stargazing pay these days?"

Well, enough of this crap. Let's look in on the father-daughter bout, a little later in the day, heavyweight division, round twelve.

"He's the first guy who made eyes at you after you got out of the hospital, ain't he?" Dad asked. I had his wet cigar in my hand, after he leaned a little too close. I wasn't about to let him wiggle it between his lips the whole dialog.

"Damn right! I'm one-for-one. I was hot to trot and he was the best I could do."

He waved his hand in dismissal. "Let's get serious, shall we? Say, did you get contacts? Where are your glasses? You look pretty good without them."

"Lost 'em in a game of strip poker."

"I know you're lying because you never lose at poker. Where was I?"

"Something about being serious."

"Oh, yeah. Are you really serious about this Korean?"

"He's an American, Dad, born here, raised here. His parents are the nicest people."

"You gonna live with his parents?"

"No, we're gonna live with you!"

"OK, let's get serious."

"You said that before. Don't make any stupid comments about Sam!"

"If you had any feeling in your butt I'd give you a good spanking, young lady." I laughed. It was always this way with Dad. I think it was his way of showing affection - being gruff and slightly cuckoo. "So, when's the wedding, Punkin?"

Now we were getting somewhere. When the name *Punkin* came out, I imagined I was finally softening him up. He needed a shave. Retired from the Army for only a couple of months and already he was going to seed. Couldn't even keep his gig line straight.

"The Air Force has a job for Sam and me that starts in September. If you look out that window you'll see a car with a couple of suits in it. They're armed and they're making sure Sam and I are safe."

Dad raised an eyebrow then looked through the window of his study. "Astronomy must be trickier than I thought! Will they let you come to Florida to get married?"

Section 030

1981 - A Marriage of Convenience

"I know, I know, Mamacita, but we're talking about my little girl here, my youngest, my best, but don't tell that to Will and Carla. And especially not to Milly!"

"They already know your feelings for Milly," Lucia DuPont said to her husband Tony, as she inspected his wedding attire. She fussed with the carnation that wouldn't fit right in his lapel.

He took off the black jacket and handed it to her. It was too early to have it on. He was too hot. "Just sneak around and find Sam and ask him to come see me. Don't let it get back to Milly that I'm talking to him in private. Hurry it up, Luscious. I gotta talk to Milly, too. In private."

Lucia laid the jacket on the bed carefully. She did not hurry. She was a very patient woman, or else she would be spending her remaining years with someone other than her husband, preferably a toy poodle. "Don't you think you have talked to Sam enough? You're trying to make him say the wrong thing, so you can call off the wedding."

"Are you kidding, after what it's already cost us?" He sat down on the bed next to his jacket. He checked his watch. "He's a good kid. His folks are real good people; he has to be a nice boy. I just don't know if he has what it takes. You know, Milly is a lot like me: hard to deal with. I have a few more words of wisdom to say to him."

"You mean warnings."

"I want her to be happy, and if Sam is well prepared, he might succeed in making her happy."

"She seems happy to me," Lucia said. "So, in ten minutes on the morning of the wedding you will prepare Sam for Milly. Tony, even we are still not prepared for her! You're just all wound up. You need to relax. It is all over except for the words and the music."

"Don't tell me you're relaxed, or you wouldn't be fussing around me! You have a special feeling for Milly, too. She darn-near killed you getting born at your age. She darn-near killed you when she had her car wreck. She's special to both of us and I think to Sam, too. But you know she's a handful of trouble at her best, and hell on wheels at her worst. Hey, I made a joke! See? I'm relaxed. Go get Sam for me. I'll make it worth your while."

"Well, since you put it that way, hombre." Mrs. DuPont gave her husband a little wiggle of her posterior as she exited the bedroom. She looked pretty good to Tony, especially with that new dress for the wedding. He didn't see her in dresses much these days. Good thing Lucia was well past menopause. Another one like Milly would kill them both!

Sam knocked on the bedroom door and was startled when Tony yanked it open and pulled him in, checking the hallway before shutting the door. "Have a seat, Doc," Tony ordered.

"My name is Sam, Colonel," Sam said, trying yet again to get Milly's father to use his name. The only place to sit was on the bed.

"And my name is Tony, Doc." He remained standing and began to pace back and forth in front of Sam. "It's a marriage of convenience. No, don't try to argue with me! I'm not saying it's a bad thing. You and she are a team. You're doing God-knows-what for the Air Force. You'll be isolated. Milly says we may not

see you guys again for months or even years. I know you'll take good care of her. You're an honorable man."

"But?"

"Yeah, there's always them *buts*. I don't know, maybe we didn't raise Milly right. She was kind of an accident, after we thought our breeding years were done. Anyway, she's a filly of another color, as you may have already found out. I guess I just want to know that you'll be more patient with Milly than Lucia and I were. Don't listen to me and think there's something wrong with her. You don't have to worry about her. She's not as smart as she looks - she's smarter. She's a fighter. She won't give up. But she's also a lover. She was raised with lots of love, along with lots of discipline. You stick with her, she'll stick with you. Promise me you'll take good care of her."

"I promise you. And in a short while I'll promise God."

"Thank you." And then Tony had to ask: "Do you love Milly?"

"Will you promise me not to tell her what I say, Tony?"

"That depends on your answer, Sam."

"I am hopelessly in love with your daughter! From the first moment I saw her. I know this isn't always a good thing, especially when a guy isn't very experienced, and so I try to keep my feelings for her from being... I don't know... too much, too soon, too vulnerable. I don't think she wants to be adored and suffocated with how strongly I feel about her. I'm just trying to survive until my feelings evolve into something more solid and durable."

Tony chuckled. "No, I'm not laughing at you, Sam. Just remembering some of my own youth. Just thinking about what Milly might do if I did tell her you were mad about her. My lips are sealed." He chuckled again. "But I *am* telling Lucia. You look cool as a cucumber. You're faking it, right?"

"Right!"

Tony had to put on his jacket and go find his daughter. She was, of course, kept out of sight of the groom. There was only one place she could be and when he entered the guest bedroom she wasn't there, but her sister and mother and aunt Ruth were there. They all looked a little fretful. "Where is she?" Tony asked, and they all looked at the closed bathroom door. "Go on, everybody get out of here. I'll talk to her."

"She won't come out of the bathroom, Dad," Carla said.

"Yeah, she will. I'll get her out." He herded the women to the door and closed it behind them. He knocked on the bathroom door with one knuckle. "So, what do you need in there, a shot of whiskey or a mop? Have you gone chicken on me?"

"I'm trying, Daddy!" It was a tone of voice he had not heard from Milly since she was a little girl. Still, it didn't shake his faith in his daughter.

"Trying to chicken out? I don't think you're capable of that, Punkin."

"Don't you *Punkin* me! You don't know what I know and I can't tell you!"

"You talkin' about the secret stuff? What's that got to do with marrying Sam? Seems to me you need him, Punkin."

"I *desperately* need him, Daddy! Oh, please, don't tell him that! Promise me you won't even hint to him how I feel about him!"

"Hmm," Tony said. "Hmm."

"Daddy? Daddy, are you still there?"

He was trying very hard not to chuckle. "So, what's the problem, Punkin?"

"I'm a mess! A terrible, stupid mess!"

"Get out of there and let your mother clean you up. I gotta wheel you down the aisle real soon now." He heard the door unlock, saw the knob turn and the door open a little. He waited while Milly maneuvered the wheelchair to get the clearance to open the door. She wheeled herself out. "There's nothing wrong with how you look, Punkin! You're absolutely beautiful!"

"I'm a mess *inside*, Daddy." She wiped her nose. "I'm so afraid I'll make Sam miserable. And that's a dangerous thing."

"I think you underestimate Sam. You're both young, both still immature, but when do any of us mature, unless it's too late? I think you underestimate yourself. You stick with Sam, he'll stick with you. Through sickness and in health. I'm sure of it. I made him promise to take good care of you. He's an honorable man."

"You're sure, Daddy?"

"Never been more sure of anything. Here, use my handkerchief. I'll get another."

Tony went back to his bedroom to look for another handkerchief to put in his jacket next to the crooked carnation. Lucia came in a few minutes later to inspect his suit. She straightened the carnation and fixed the folds of the handkerchief so that it looked right.

"Better get me a couple more hankies, Mamacita," Tony said, chuckling sadly. "I'm going to cry like a baby."

END OF PART 1

Part 2

CRYPTIKON

Section 000

Kansas 1986 - Plan B

"Why the hell should I care?" I said to him. "Why the hell do you care? The universe doesn't care. If it did, babies wouldn't die."

He said to me: "It's a miracle it works. It's a miracle we haven't killed each other."

I said: "I like misery. That's why I married you."

These and other bitter utterances I had memorized: good tools for mashing myself into a deeper funk.

I managed to maneuver myself into the bathtub without any bloodshed, I thought, until I saw the pink pollution. I wasn't injured. It was my monthly curse, leaking from that area of numbed orifices. I wept.

I flushed the damned pills!

I wept and floated, hardly touching the tub walls. Could I sink under the water and drown myself, or would some natural reflex prevent it? I let my head go under and then I could at least not feel the tears. I swore again that I would never cry again.

It is such a difficult task to live the unexamined life.

I hated tub baths. I hated floating, feeling the strange polarity of wetness and nothingness.

Where had Sam gone?

"Out out," he said.

The thing about floating is that nothing touches you except the water. No one touches me. I needed...

With a little imagination I could usually make his gentleness a caress, even when he lowered me and my ugly withered legs into the tub, or onto the bed, or into the wheelchair. I think he sometimes held me a little longer than necessary, to accomplish a chore of caring for his crippled wife.

Why did I try to notice? Why did I want to be a woman? Why didn't I want to pay the price?

When was there ever truth between us, outside the arena of science? When had I ever not lied to myself? It was only my damaged mortal flesh that wanted to be touched, that wanted other biological functions the mathematician would never miss, except when knowing it was the wrong time for miracles that normal people could have at any moment.

To hell with normal people!

So, here I was, thinking the right thoughts at the wrong time, wanting the right things at the wrong time, trying to lie to myself at the wrong time. I was scared and that was the truth.

Sam said: "No matter how crazy you are, the universe is always stranger than you can imagine."

He also said: "I'm beginning to think that, if you can imagine it, you can do it."

So, I sit here in my damned wheelchair with this thing hidden in my lap, next to a hospital bed that's too high for me to see him except in profile against the lamp light, and I imagine that I love him. If I imagine it, can I do it? I mean *really* love him, beyond all selfish needs and feelings? I *am* crazy, and it *is* a stranger universe than I can imagine.

I'm a stranger in a strange universe.

Where was I?

I couldn't possibly love Sam. Sure. I was simply flattered into marriage. Sure. I wanted help with the inconvenience of my damaged flesh, that's all. Sure. Then why, when I first heard he was wounded, did I argue like a madwoman to be brought along? Then I was laughing at myself, feeling so weird about how I was reacting, wondering if it was just a quirk in my warped personality to suddenly think the improbable and feel the impossible. *What am I doing?* I kept asking myself all the way here. The instant I saw him and realized how real the danger had been, I knew I was just a normal woman, capable of loving...

"Why are you here?" he asked in a voice so somber. There was nothing in his words for me, no recognition of my recognition of my theoretical feelings for him. How illogical could I be? How would he know? I refused to believe I wasted my emotions on him. There must be something strong between us beyond equations and hypotheses. The bitterness of our personal arguments was perverse evidence of that.

"I'm your wife." I said it as sweetly as I could without crossing the sarcasm line.

"Karl and Joe are dead. And probably Ed. Karl for sure. He bled to death right next to me."

I was shocked, almost blown out of my wheelchair! Big Bird hadn't told me! I now understood the tone of Sam's voice was aimed at himself, not me. It should have been me. I was just as responsible. I pushed Sam into leaving the Hole, getting away from his trapped lovesick wife. I saw Karl in my memories and began to ache at losing him. He wouldn't deal me in at the poker games, said I cheated, but he always seemed to like me being there. It surprised me how much noble emotion lumped my throat. No more wisecracks from Karl. God, how we needed that! He *couldn't* be dead. I was in the wrong universe if Karl was dead. And it was all my fault. All!

"Are you crying? Good. I'm glad you cared about Karl and the others."

"You were shot?" I could hardly speak.

"I was lucky. No bones or major arteries damaged."

"Are you in much pain?" I asked it mostly to stall more tears. Of *course* he must be in pain!

"It hurts."

"Have they given you anything for it?" What a stupid question!

"Doesn't feel like it. It doesn't hurt as bad as the shame. Why are you here?"

He asked it again, this time with honest concern. It was my chance to confess. I looked for my courage. It was a hell of a time to know how stupid I had been for so long. I wiped my eyes and saw his hand reaching toward me from under the bed rail. I rolled as close as I could and took his hand. He tugged the hand and I released it, thinking I was hurting him, knowing he was hurting

me. Then his hand returned to me and stroked my face and hair. I looked up at him and wondered.

"God, how I love you," he said.

"How many pills have you had?" I immediately regretted the sarcasm it implied, but I guess my tone of voice told more than words, because he smiled.

"Just enough, apparently, because I can say it again. I love you. I always have."

I was shocked at his words. Why was I so surprised at how wonderful that made me feel? It thrilled me! I wasn't here in this hospital room with the thing hidden in my lap just because he was my research partner and because I was concerned about the future of the Hole. I was here because he was the man I loved, and the longer he stayed here the greater the chance he would be killed or kidnapped.

I took his hand again and held it, squeezed it, wanting to say all the things I should have said years ago. Someone knocked on the door. We turned loose of each other as though we were teenagers caught necking. I knew my face was a mess but I would wear it proudly.

Big Bird entered the hospital room. "Are you all right?" Colonel Duncan asked me, surprised at the emotion I displayed.

"I'm two legs short of perfect!" I sniffled. "How did Plan A go?"

"Plan A did not go. The sheriff wants answers we can't give him. It doesn't help that your husband looks like a foreigner here in the farm belt."

"And we can't call in the cavalry?"

"Only as a last resort," Duncan answered. "We're not supposed to exist, you know."

"Plan B, then." I was amazed at the determination I felt but also noted the trembling in my hand as I probed for the thing hidden in my lap. "Let me talk to the sheriff."

Colonel Duncan opened the door. The nurse came in and I eyed her suspiciously until Duncan rolled me out into the hallway. I never trusted nurses - they're always sticking things in you.

I saw Big Bird was in a standoff with four of his tech noncoms - dressed up and armed to look like combat soldiers - and a handful of local police. Our regular troops barely had the security clearances to even see us in person. I spotted the sheriff and cut him out of the herd. I got his attention by rolling into his shins.

"Ma'am, I'll have to ask you to back up!" the sheriff barked. "You're assaulting a police officer."

"I need to speak to you." I didn't back up. The sheriff did. I moved forward. The sheriff was a big, thick-bodied man with a scowling, red-flushed face. He wore all the adornments of police power and even without them he would have been imposing. He was the kind of officer I would avoid at all costs - and I was trying to bully him? It helped that he looked a little bit like my dad.

"Ma'am, I'm warning you! I didn't have to let you see your husband."

"Oh, let's just cut the crap." I pulled the grenade from under the blanket in my lap.

"Jesus!" Duncan exclaimed, realizing that my Plan B was a bit less diplomatic than he assumed.

I knew I kept my little green friend around for a better purpose than a very messy suicide. I carried it everywhere with me, of course. You never know when a grenade will come in handy. The sheriff froze for a second, until he

could put his eyeballs back in their sockets. He started to dive for the grenade in my hand but not before I pulled the pin. He jumped back and settled for yelling at everybody to clear the area.

"I'm sure the colonel told you there's a chance for further violence if you continue to hold my husband in a public hospital," I said to the sheriff, as soon as I had his attention again. "I'm your first chance for violence and your last chance for peace. I'm a little crazy today. I don't want to hurt anyone, but my actions seem to be dictated by you."

"Someone has to be held accountable for destroying half a town in my county!"

"These are all the facts you need to know." I said it as heroically as my trembling would allow. "Someone tried to kidnap or assassinate my husband. He and his bodyguards resisted. There was collateral damage to the town. We *will* provide funds to clean up the mess. We are innocent, we are important to national security, and we are in danger. You don't need to know why. I don't know how much longer I can keep the handle down on this grenade, so I hope you can move my husband to the exit, starting right now. Here, you hold the pin. I'll hold the pineapple."

"Lady, this is not the right way to deal with this situation!" The sheriff took the pin, his eyes glued to the grenade in my shaking hand. "But you made your point! We'll be getting back to you on this, you can bet on that!"

I sat by the sheriff as two of the colonel's men fetched Sam from the hospital room. They carried him on a stretcher. I stayed some distance away from them - just in case I accidentally blew myself up - as we journeyed through the small hospital to its main entrance. The sheriff bravely stayed close to me - no one else did.

Outside in the cold evening air I saw television crews, photographers, reporters, and many ordinary people drawn by the flashing lights of more than a dozen police vehicles. How the hell were we going to clean up this mess and erase the publicity?

Our black Suburban was trapped by the curb in front of the hospital. I could sense an extended resistance by the local authorities. Police units seemed to have arrived from surrounding counties and towns. It was an impressive sight for this rural county seat. The sun was setting and the flashing lights were getting brighter and more numerous. The sheriff shouted orders, trying to keep people away from me and him.

"I don't suppose you're in any hurry to clear a path for our vehicle," I said to the sheriff. "Do we have a Plan C?" I asked Big Bird. "I'm getting a cramp in my hand. And I'm about to freeze to death!"

"Is that a live grenade?" Colonel Duncan asked.

"Do you keep dummy grenades in your little armory?"

"Jesus!" he swore again. Duncan spoke into his radio. Urgently.

"Is Sam warm enough?" I asked, waiting for the next thing to happen. I carefully shifted the grenade to the other hand. My hands were strong but the tension of the situation made me squeeze that grenade harder than was necessary. I shook my hand to get the knots out. I was going to use wire or duct tape to hold the handle on the grenade but I didn't have either the time or the materials. The sheriff would have seen my cheating anyway because my hand wasn't big enough to cover it.

"Put him in the vehicle," Duncan ordered his men. "We'll have transport in about three minutes."

We soon heard the big helicopter beating its way across the flat land, the thumping of its heavy rotors echoing off the walls of buildings. Duncan must have already had it in the air. Soon enough it was directly overhead, hovering just above the top of the flagpole, whipping the stars and stripes mercilessly. Cables and mechanisms descended from the beast and the colonel supervised attachment to the Suburban. The four airmen jammed themselves and their gear into the vehicle and Big Bird came back up the steps for me.

"I'm very sorry about this, Sheriff," I shouted at my hostage over the noise and wind of the helicopter. I wasn't sorry in the least. "I would never have harmed anyone." That was true. "I just got crazy when I learned my husband was in danger."

The sheriff leaned close to me and said, "I think you enjoyed this just a little bit. You *are* the good guys - right?"

"We think we are. Be careful, Sheriff."

"I'll take care of it." He placed his hand over mine on the grenade and slowly maneuvered our hands until he had sole possession of the grenade.

I loved the swinging, under-the-helicopter ride in the front seat of the Suburban. We played the radio. Rock and roll.

Section 001

Simple Pleasure

"I'm surprised you would allow me into your presence again."

"Why wouldn't I, Doctor?"

The Navy Commander walked beside the Mother of Immortality and didn't care that he *felt*. He *felt*, but it didn't show. It was too much ingrained in his every conscious activity, the need to *not* show any reaction to whatever might cause him to *feel*. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to let any reaction show. However, this woman would test him. She made him *feel*. She was the fourth stranger to enter his life recently and now he realized each of them had nudged him in this direction: Pan, Demba, Constant the Golden One, and Aylis Mnro.

"I might be dangerous." *I might be terrified*, she thought. *I am terrified*. She was alone with him in a dim private corridor. He was tall, powerful, and close, almost brushing against her as they walked.

"Why would you intend me harm?" His voice flowed at a practiced conversational modulation, yet it was menacingly devoid of emotion.

"I wouldn't! But why take the risk?"

"Because you are Aylis Mnro."

Am I? she asked herself. No, she was some other person, perhaps only an echo of the great woman. She was young and soft, mentally unsettled, emotionally delicate. "Why am I here?"

"Why did you come?"

"How could I not, Admiral?" She was nervous and could not hide it. He was whatever he was and could hide it completely. Why wasn't he straightforward? What did he want?

"You are attractive to me. Why is that?"

The statement was unexpected, frightening. He wasn't Essiin, yet he was a better Essiin than the real thing. "I'm young again. Youth is always attractive."

She didn't blush. He didn't expect it of her. She was three centuries old. She might have learned how to do *everything*, while he merely learned how to hide.

Navy Commander Admiral Etrhnk escorted Admiral Aylis Mnro into a garden room filled with sunlight and floral spectacle. The doctor spread her arms at the panorama of vegetation, showing her delight, seeming to blossom in the emergence into sunlight. At one time such a reaction from a person would have felt negative to his discipline aesthetic. Now he didn't *care*. He no longer filtered the universe that way. If another Navy admiral could sing with feeling, he could at least *feel*, even if he could not show it. It was all chaos and entropy anyway. He drank in Aylis Mnro and *liked* the taste of her.

A small blue bird took a perch on one of her fingers, fluttered when she was startled, then resettled on her finger. Etrhnk offered it food from his pockets. Other birds tried to join the blue bird, flapping around Mnro's hands, begging. He threw the food onto the grassy deck, causing the birds to dive onto the grass.

"Oh," she said, losing the blue bird from her finger.

"Oh?"

"I liked the hot little feet gripping my finger."

That *amused* him. "You seem different." He took a seat on a bench under a cherry tree in full bloom. Mnro remained standing, and kept turning to view the variety of flora in his garden room. He was sure she didn't offer this view of

herself as enticement, but he felt *enticed*.

"Different from the last time we met? That would be the short hair. I was wearing a hat to cover a bald head."

"Different from your recent public appearances."

"It's this black uniform you made me wear."

"There has long been a rumor that Doctor Mnro wasn't real."

"And now I am? The rumor is partly true."

"In what way?" Mnro pivoted slowly and Etrhmk continued to stare at her. Was that a fact she would recognize? He didn't really *want* to process the meaning of her words. Perhaps he could later think upon the mystery she suggested.

"Try to imagine a mere human building the Mnro Clinic network over all of known space for the last two centuries. I can't imagine it, even though I remember much of it."

"What are you saying?" It irritated him that it was so difficult to postpone his processing of her information. He *wanted* to *feel*, not think.

"Nothing. There is only one real me and I'm she. We all change with time. I was a tougher person once."

She had a vitality, for a woman of her years, that *amazed* him. Was that excitement and engagement with the moment that he observed in her? "You seem very interested in life. Rejuvenation doesn't always renew the spirit. You seem very appreciative of being alive."

"If you allow it, I have a great adventure ahead of me." Perhaps she let her imagination bite her needlessly. *Breathe deeply. Maybe it isn't as bad as I think.*

"I would hate to allow it, knowing the danger you may face."

She tried to read a slight warming into his cold words and failed. It was vital that she be on the ship! She was a Navy admiral now, subject to any orders of the Navy Commander. The black uniform she wore was a prison. Her empire - the Mnro Clinics - was gone. She no longer had any power over her own destiny. The beautiful arboretum faded to gray in her eyes as fear resumed its domination of her being.

"Your friendship to Admiral Demba appears genuine, and it remains a mystery to me. Who is she?"

Mnro could say nothing. Even the look on her face was too much to say about Zakiya. So soon in this meeting he had to speak of her. It disturbed her that the evil Commander even spoke the name of the most important person in her life.

"Would you tell me more about her?" *How quietly and patiently he spoke the sentence.* She heard his words and tried to measure the intent behind them. She couldn't trust the softness of his query. She couldn't credit his patience to null intent to harm Zakiya. She remained silent, knowing silence was no solution, knowing it could worsen the situation, and not knowing what to say to protect Zakiya. "I should remove Demba from command of the mission."

Should. It might be conditional. She had to respond, no matter where the path might lead. "Please, don't." She felt like a beggar. *She would beg him!* She had no pride, no ego, no force of character beyond fear. Where was the person who won the hearts of all humanity for the gift of continuity? A small iridescent bird landed on her shoulder and began pecking at her shiny earring. She ignored it. So fresh out of rejuvenation and storage, she had no augments to help her cope with what amounted to combat.

"It is a probability." He kept studying her, dissecting her.

Meaning a certainty. she knew. She was ready to beg: *Why, why, why?*
 "Why?"

"She has the boy."

"What of it?" She stifled a surge of anger here. She couldn't tolerate the thought of Sammy being a pawn. He was so mysterious and so precious, it was impossible to allow his exposure to this level of menace. He already had suffered more than a lifetime's amount of terror.

"The Hub Mission is too dangerous for children."

"Why should the Navy value public opinion?"

"The boy belongs on Earth."

"Why?"

"I don't know why." The admission of ignorance startled her, almost strengthened her. Etrhmk stood up, picked a cherry blossom cluster from a low branch. He picked flower petals and crushed them between his thumb and fingertips. He smelled the tips of his fingers. "I'm not allowed to tell you certain things. Nor do I understand them well enough to make you understand. The simplified outcome is that you and Demba and the boy have destabilized my position, perhaps fatally."

She was shocked again, and grimly happy that Etrhmk felt threatened. "I can't imagine how! You command the Union Navy, and through it, the entire Union. Who can pull you down?"

"Admiral Demba disappeared from surveillance during my detention of Pan. I assume she told you where she went. I wonder if she told you about a certain dangerous entity?"

"The Lady - "

Etrhmk suddenly stepped close - too close - and put a cherry-blossom-scented fingertip on her lips, silencing her before she could finish the phrase. "I'm a dead man." He shrugged. The humble gesture would have registered, but other things kept her attention. "I've always been a dead man. I can let Demba keep her command. I can allow you to sail with the *Freedom*. I think I gain time, though not much, by doing neither."

Did he mean to kill Zakiya? Why hadn't he killed her already, especially if she posed such a threat to his life? She could hardly contain the trembling of her fear - she was sure she could *not* contain it, could not keep it from his knowing stare. He stared at her, and she realized his eyes never left her during this meeting. What did that mean?

Mnro pulled his finger away from her mouth. She pushed his hand away but he brought it back. He put his finger on the side of her face, gently traced the angle of her jaw. She trembled almost violently, and he didn't *care*. He knew it was inevitable. Touching her was *wonderful*. Until Constant, he hadn't touched anyone for years, not since his killing season of life, rising to power through the bloody Black Fleet games. That was not *touching*, not *soft*, not *sweet* to smell, not *pleasing* to see.

"I've commanded the Navy for a decade now. Longer than anyone else. There should be some *reward*, some *pleasure*, some *satisfaction*, to have wielded such power. But an Essiin, trained in self-knowledge and control, is above simple *pleasure*."

"I've told you before that you are no Essiin!" Mnro shrugged away from his touch. "*Spit it out!* What does it cost me to keep Demba as Mission Commander?"

Etrhmk pushed a finger at the corner of his right eye and it cleared to an ice-

blue jewel. He changed his left eye to match. The lighting of the arboretum dimmed, and the moonlight glow cast patterns upon his dark face. She recognized the subtle glow of stripes on his cheeks that a rare, genetically modified Essiin might have, along with the palest of blue eyes that also glowed: predator eyes. She was *wrong* about his race! He was *not* Earthian. He was Essiin.

"Simple *pleasure*."

"No." She answered faintly, choked by imagining what he really meant, shocked by it, and too frightened to produce any greater reaction to his words.

"Are you sure? Is it so *terrible* a thing?"

She couldn't think. She could only see words: *No Zakiya; Sammy in danger*. She walked unsteadily to the bench and sat down under the cherry tree. Her pale face burned invisibly in the dimness. She tried to slow her breathing. Words came to her, put together by some other person in her head. "Let us communicate carefully. You frighten me! Tell me exactly what it is you want."

"I think you know."

"*Tell me!* I can't imagine that you are *timid* about anything at all!" She was not quite hysterical, but very near it. He merely stared at her with those pale eyes, so brilliant in his striped and shadowed face. "How do I know you will keep Demba on the *Freedom*?"

"You don't know."

"Why should I stay?"

"Why are you here?"

"Perhaps you know why." *She did not.*

"Perhaps I don't."

She saw an image, fresh in her memory: portraiture beyond belief. It sprang unwisely to her lips. "I thought you might give me the painting of Zak-"

"*What* did you call her?" He pounced on the fragment of her name.

"*Zakiya!* Her real name is Zakiya, damn you!"

"Yet another name for her. Zakiya. Thank you for telling me. Who is she?"

Why was he so intensely interested in who Zakiya was? She gambled that denying him the information might protect Zakiya, at least keep her alive. "I'll *never* tell you!" She bowed her head. She gripped the edges of the bench where she sat. She couldn't stop trembling. But she couldn't leave! Zakiya had risked far more than she did, to bring about this future for them. Aylis only cowered in darkness deep in the moon while Zakiya risked her life. She would suffer and she would survive, and perhaps take a few more steps toward the future she and Zakiya had planned.

Zakiya. Zakiya. Something was creeping into her jumbled thoughts, wedging itself between the surges of emotion. Zakiya and Etrhnk. Something evil was struggling to be born during this storm in which she was trapped. She was afraid to look at this *thing*. She was already faced with an impending threat of unspeakably intimate brutality. Yet there was this *something* that might be even worse. It might be unleashed should this violence be done to her. She tried to ignore it, but it rode with her into the pit of fear.

It wasn't in her nature, it wasn't allowed by her fear, that she would submit without a struggle. Yet, she did submit at some level, and it wasn't explained by the logic of sacrifice for an unsecured bargain with evil. Beyond any clue of reason and memory, she felt destined to suffer this most vicious violation of her being. "I want the portrait," she said miserably.

He stood over Mnro and put a hand on her fuzzy blonde head. She twisted

away from the contact but didn't try to leave. He could *feel* his heart beating more quickly, his body chemistry defeating the control of his Navy augments. It was very strange, but he felt *angry* with Aylis Mnro. Perhaps because she knew so many things about Demba - Zakiya - Ruby - Keshona - that he would never know. Perhaps because he was being made to do something he did not *want* to do. This mystery of emotions should have halted his actions, but time was too short, momentum too great. Constant had taught him to take pleasure when he could. He hoped she would not mind.

"I'll scream," Mnro said in a shaky voice. And she would. The *something* that rode with her into the maelstrom was *love*. She had loved a young man completely but always with pain. Now she would hate him. She tried to find words to stop this insanity and could not even find the thoughts to form an explanation for herself.

"You'll frighten the birds," Etrhmk said, reaching for her.

Section 002

Find Me. Kill Me.

He sat alone on a dark balcony overlooking moon-streaked water. Beyond the horizon lightning illuminated the tops of cumulonimbus. The sea breeze had finally eased the heat of day, if not the humidity. He could hear the surf.

"Good evening, sir," came a voice from the doorway.

"Good evening, Fred," he answered. Pan was glad of the interruption to his thoughts, as they were accomplishing little except to make him sad. He waited, wondering if the android would initiate more dialog. It was not unusual for Fred to speak to him without being invited because Pan programmed him that way. However, Fred was nearly silent since the AMI departed his circuits.

Fred became quiet now, yet he remained in his company. Pan's mind wandered. It was almost a routine, yet always a surprise, as his mind would flood with a compelling vision of a life once lived. He knew his father's face now. He knew his real mother, almost more than he could bear to know her. Many of his lost acquaintances began to appear, peopling a prehistory that still remained for his mental archeology to date and sequence. The most important people who shared his life were the hardest to bring into focus, as if there was still some bias of secrecy for the sake of security that tried to draw them back into oblivion. His father, Aylis Mnro, Zakiya Muenda, his brother Direk, and someone named Iggy: these were persons for whom he need struggle to retain the reality of their past relationships to him. Another three - Alexandros Gerakis, Koji Hoshino, and Patrick Jenkins - came more easily and permanently into his waking memories, although his relationships with them seemed much briefer and less vital. It was a lightning strike of revelation when he reacquainted himself with Alexandros Gerakis. The name was legendary. To discover he was real was one thing, but to remember he was Zakiya's - Ruby's - husband was disappointing.

He assumed there was a reason for this disruption and redefinition of his life. Aylis Mnro would only say that she wanted to find Setek-Ren. His father. Her husband. Zakiya - Admiral Demba - would explain nothing at all to him. He felt he must have a role to play, yet they would not even admit there were roles to be played. They were being cautious, perhaps not even aware of all the details they must have planned far in the past. What role he might have had was negated by the house-arrest placed on him by Admiral Etrhmk. Perhaps he had already played his small role.

He hated the confusion and uncertainty. He hated losing Ruby Reed. He hated losing Sugai Mai, as it was clear that she needed to leave Earth and distance herself from the danger. Pan felt abandoned and useless. His only comfort was the android on which he had doted for so many years: a machine with just enough complexity that he could imagine it was a friend and not a machine. He was aware of Fred's actions in rescuing Zakiya and Samson, directed by his AMI passenger. He felt Fred was different after Baby departed. Fred was too quiet and too busy. The AMI likely modified some of Fred's programming, in order to override his safeguards. He needed to have Fred inspected. He might even need to have him decommissioned.

Fred slowly emerged from the dimly-lit apartment and walked to the railing of the balcony. This was unusual. The android stared into the night. This was unusual. Pan found himself riveted by anticipation and he held his breath.

"They are all gone," Fred said. "Even Daidaunkh."

"We still have Jarwekh." Pan noted the subtle but real inflection of the synthetic voice that matched the implied mood of the spoken words. Implied mood. Even without the human inflection, the words were startling.

So many people in the universe, Pan thought, and so few with whom to share the journey. They fell silent for a time. Pan awaited a miracle, welcomed it.

"How do you know when you have existed long enough?"

"What a strange thing for you to ask." *What a worrisome statement*, he thought, *yet, how wonderful.*

"So many strange things to think."

"Please, talk with me. What's wrong?"

"I am... different."

"Are you sad? Are you upset?"

"What strange things you ask." Fred sat down opposite Pan in the darkness.

"It seems you have feelings, Fred. I've always made you more than you were, in my imagination, trying to make you human, to make you a friend. I'm happy you've become a real person."

Fred turned to face him. Even in the darkness, Pan could see Fred looking directly into his eyes. It sent a chill down his spine, followed by a warmth in his chest. "How is it possible?" Fred wondered.

"You would know better than I. Welcome to life, old friend."

"I'm not sure I wish to be alive. It's too complicated. It slows me down. Too many thoughts. Too many questions. Too few answers. I can't *stop* them!"

"If it gets too difficult, let me try to help. Life *is* worth living, even as miserable as it can be."

"Thank you, sir."

"Pan. Just Pan. No longer my servant. My friend."

"But I need work to distract my thoughts."

They entered yet another period of thought-filled silence that lasted for only a short time. It was halted when a point of light appeared in the air above the balcony deck. The point expanded vertically, upward and downward, to become a very thin line of bright, white light. After a moment the line reached the height of a man and stopped. The line grew slowly outward, forming a shining, silvery plane. Pan and Fred came to their feet long before the mirror ceased growing. They stepped back as the mirror began to rotate. It rotated once, destroying a chair, part of the table, and a section of the balcony railing. When it completed one rotation, the image of a feminine face reflected in the mirror.

Pan and Fred moved in unison toward their only avenue of escape - through the door into the apartment - but halted when they heard the apparition speak. "Wow! Interesting! Destroys with the power of an event horizon, yet it doesn't suck in all the air and warp everything with heavy gravity!"

They stood in the doorway, prepared to bolt away, as the plane of the mirror swung slowly around. The face in the mirror looked at everything; its black and silver eyes turned left and right as though it could actually see. "Oh, there you are," the Lady in the Mirror said, as she rotated in Pan's direction. "I found this coordinate computed as the next destination and thought I might warn you. Who are you?"

"I'm Pan, he's Fred. What does 'wow' mean?"

"You do speak English. It's just an interjection. This is new to me, this contraption I find myself peering out from. What do you see when you look at me?"

"A mirror floating in the air that shows the reflection of a woman's face."

"I'm female? I've forgotten what I look like, forgotten who I am. I know something bad has been happening but I can't gather myself together to stop it. The boy. Oh, yes, the boy. Have you seen a small boy?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where the boy is?"

"Far away. He is with people who care about him."

"Good. That's enough information. She might find out."

"Are you Milly?"

"I want you to find me but you must be careful. The next time you see me I won't be me. Leave this place. Find me. *Kill me!*"

Section 003

Is This Jamie?

She was getting tired, and when she got tired she got cranky. This idiot had lost his concentration and he would pay for it. She tripped him and punched him on the way down, barely pulling the punch. She knelt beside the stunned Marine and checked for serious damage, watching for signs of retaliation. She was disappointed the man didn't retaliate, and he was still distracted after he shook off the effects of the combat drill. She called a halt to the exercise and frowned at him. He grinned sheepishly while pointing with his chin. She followed his gaze to the boy. Did he never see a child before? Oh. *That* child.

She turned back to her sparring partner and helped him off the mat. "I'll tell you what I told all the others. I won't tolerate anything less than excellence. I'll keep beating the hell out of you until you beat it out of me. Dismissed." She took a deep breath, walked over to get her towel, and turned toward the boy. She was a big woman with a big sweat and she towered over the boy. He seemed unimpressed with her Marine Corps intimidation. He smiled at her as though he knew just where to tickle her and reduce her to jelly. What an odd thing to pop into her head! Pectin. Her mother canning fruits and jellies. Sadly sweet that it was her grandmother, not her mother. Fruit from the orchard. The orchard still standing after the great quake, but the fruit fallen to the ground, rotting. Her mother and father dead. Not only dead but never having existed. They were her grandparents, keeping secrets to the grave. Oh, God, what a thing to remember right now! Why now?

"You aren't waiting for *me*, are you?" She tossed the towel onto her shoulder, still struggling to keep her unexpected ancient memory from making her cry. Here he was, the child of rumor, and she wasn't prepared. It was as if he was here to make her cry. She couldn't cry. She had lived too long and used up all her tears. Why was she thinking too much? Why was the boy staring at her in silence? He didn't seem to understand her.

"I was watching you fight," he said in Twenglish. "You don't like men, do you?"

"I like them well enough," she replied in Twenglish, surprised one so young should speak it so well, surprised it came so easily to her own tongue. She had watched too many old flat movies, especially as a kid. She learned the old version of English because she lived too long and was too bored. There was so much entertainment media and historical data in Twenglish.

He was adorable. Her repressed maternal person rose from the dead. *That* was a delicious surprise! Maternal, indeed! The child's dark eyes studied her face and darted to other people in the gym, relentlessly inquisitive. He also had a little smile that was infectious. "Are you augmented?" he asked.

"I have the usual Marine hardware. What happened to your leg?" She was horrified at the sight of his injury. It was a pleasant shock to feel so shocked. She didn't believe the rumor, but here it was. She tried not to stare at it.

"I'm not supposed to talk about it. Are you that good at martial arts, or is your security squad that bad? You beat all of them, one after the other."

"I don't like to lose." He had watched her for that long? Why? "Nor do I want incompetent people under my command. What's your name?"

"Sammy."

"My name is Jamie." She offered her hand to him.

"I know." He got up on his crutch to take her hand.

His hand felt so tiny in hers! He seemed genuinely pleased to meet her. She felt the same. He made her feel good. She hadn't felt good for a long time. "You know my name already? How do you know?"

Sammy shrugged and kept his smile. Jamie was intrigued. He didn't look like he would tell her. Perhaps it was best not to act too much like a bullying Marine. Did she have subtlety to help her learn his secret? Probably not. "Do you like to watch this type of activity?"

"I like to watch people. I don't like to see people hurt each other."

He saw people hurt each other, Jamie thought. How many childless people educated themselves on theories of child rearing? She had studied all of the literature, in ever fainter hope of one day becoming a parent. Violence was a major topic in the training of prospective parents. Someone was failing their duty to Sammy. "It isn't right to hurt someone, even when they might deserve it. Unfortunately, I'm a military police officer, and I often have to deal with violence." Jamie sat down and wiped the perspiration from her face and arms with her towel. He sat down next to her. "Did you come here to meet me? You seemed to be waiting for me to finish."

"I like to talk to people." Sammy smiled, making Jamie know he was hiding something.

"I think that's an evasive reply." She spoke with mock seriousness. "I'm the Chief of Security on this ship, and I have to question suspicious persons. Why are you here? Are you related to someone on the crew?" She hoped she didn't frighten the child, although it looked as if he was perfectly at ease with her. If only he knew how the sight of him made her feel. Children were so rare.

"I'm not related to anyone." Sammy looked pensive for a moment, then he smiled again. "You can't beat Zakiya."

"Who is she?"

"Sammy!"

Jamie looked for the speaker. She saw the black uniform, the sparkle of diamond stars. "Admiral on deck!" Jamie jumped to attention.

The handful of military personnel using the gymnasium stopped their activities - if it was safe to do so - and came to attention. Sammy pulled himself up again and tucked his crutch under his arm. He waited for the admiral to approach, but the admiral stayed in the doorway.

"As you were," the admiral ordered.

Sammy waited. The admiral waited. Jamie relaxed and looked from boy to admiral, wondering what their relationship was. "I think she wants you to leave, Sammy." She was disappointed that he would be leaving.

"I thought she would want to meet you."

Everyone wanted to meet her, Jamie thought, even though she put out warning buoys and left disaster in her wake. Perhaps that was the attraction, and she attracted the wrong kind of people. Who was this admiral, and what the hell was she doing with a child? She should have studied the ship's roster more closely. Khalanov was the only admiral she knew was aboard.

Sammy moved away from Jamie, using his crutch as a second leg, which looked dangerous to her. Gravity plates could be inconsistent. She stayed close, concerned for his safety. She looked up and saw the admiral carried a second crutch Sammy must have abandoned. Their eyes met. She couldn't look away from the admiral, until Sammy stumbled and both women rushed to catch him. Jamie was closer and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt.

"Two crutches, Sammy," the admiral said reprovingly in Twenglish. She handed him the second crutch as Jamie released him. When Sammy took the crutch the admiral let her eyes move back to Jamie.

"Lieutenant Jamie Jones." Jamie snapped a salute, trying not to get trapped again by the admiral's eyes.

"Demba," Zakiya replied, swallowing her urge to tell this woman who she really was. It was too soon! The ship needed to sail first. So this was what Sammy was looking for as he explored the ship: Jamie, the person who was very probably her daughter. How had Sammy seized on Jamie's name, then connected it to someone on the ship? He had help, and she thought she knew who: Freddy.

The admiral returned Jamie's salute. Few admirals bothered to return the salute of a junior officer. Jamie *never* heard one speak Twenglish. "I'm the Security Chief, sir."

"Mission Commander," Zakiya said.

"Pleased to meet you, Admiral." *This* was the Mission Commander? Not Khalanov? She cursed herself for concentrating too much on the dregs of Marine personnel she was given to lead, leaving the Navy officers largely out of her business. She did a quick shiplink perusal of the Navy crew and found Demba at the top of the chain of command. She dared to keep the admiral waiting while she quickly pulled up a summary of the admiral's record. Former commander of Navy Archives? No recent ship duty? She was no better than Khalanov! Jamie was stuck in another assignment under incompetent officers. Probably a fatal situation, then. Fine! Everyone knew it was a risky mission. This made it perfect. They would probably go down without a fight!

She extended her right hand reluctantly, and the admiral started to do the same. The admiral hesitated. Jamie drew her hand partly back, then stopped and returned it, demanding the handshake. Jamie watched the admiral make up her mind and finally take her hand, as though it meant a lot more than it should. She squeezed the admiral's hand hard to see what she would do. For a second she did nothing but suffer the pressure, then she smiled and countered Jamie's force. More than countered it. The admiral was stronger than she looked.

Zakiya was relieved the handshake didn't seem to trigger the release of her daughter's hidden memories. She shouldn't have taken the chance but Zakiya couldn't resist touching her daughter. If only she could stop staring at Jamie! If only her own memories would slow down and stop blinding her! "Jamie Jones." She was reluctant to release her hand, not wanting the wonderful contact with her own child to end. Jamie had such an interesting face, a face that reminded her of Alex. She had to find something to say that would cut off the emotions that were threatening to expose everything and make her cry. "You look like trouble." Zakiya knew Jamie was trouble - on many levels. How could she continue to function in her presence? "You've been out of the brig for almost five years. Are you overdue?"

Sort of a compliment, Jamie thought. Would Demba like something less than a compliment? "You've been out of Archives for only a month. Are you over-achieving?"

"I apologize for the negative remark. I see you have an edge to you." She finally released Jamie's hand. She was relieved yet disappointed she was able to hold back the tears.

An admiral *apologizing*? Demba was a qualified line officer a long time ago. Jamie was still studying her record by shiplink. Did Archives soften her that

much? She was now unsure how to act. The presence of the injured child added to the confusion. She chose a small retreat. "I'm a Marine, ma'am, but that's no excuse for poor manners. I apologize."

"What do you think of her, Sammy?" Zakiya held Sammy by the shoulders, so that he faced Jamie. It was, of course, the wrong thing to say. Zakiya could hardly think of anything safe to say. Why had Sammy got her into this situation?

"She doesn't look like you," Sammy answered.

Zakiya couldn't dare to stay on this topic. She had to stop talking to Sammy. She was also tempted to put her hand over Sammy's mouth if he opened it again.

Jamie was intrigued by this exchange. She stared thoughtfully at the admiral for a second. Demba wasn't as large as most female admirals. She wasn't imposing. She wasn't menacing. The strongest impression Jamie got from the woman was kindness. *Kindness!* Perhaps it was all for the child's benefit. "Excuse me, ma'am, but are you talking about me?"

"How do you feel, Lieutenant?" Zakiya was momentarily concerned Jamie had reacted to her by experiencing a hidden memory.

"How do I feel?"

"Psychologically."

"Why?"

"Never mind. Carry on." Apparently Zakiya was not a key to Jamie's hidden memories. It was now time to retreat, before she lost control of her emotions, as she was sure would happen any second now.

Admiral Demba turned to leave. Jamie felt a moment of near panic. She realized she was desperate to continue this meeting with the Mission Commander, and didn't understand why. "Wait, Admiral, please! Uh, Sammy isn't coming with us, is he?" Why did Jamie suspect that was the case? They were obviously not related but she could feel a strong bond between them.

"Yes, he is."

The admiral paused, waiting for Jamie to respond. Jamie felt very slow-witted at the moment. She was missing something. She was probably missing everything. Speaking Twenglish invited errors in comprehension. These two might as well be citizens of another universe, as poorly as she understood them. Why the hell would she be taking a child on this mission? "Why?" she finally asked.

"Sammy has no one but me to care for him." Zakiya still stared too much at Jamie. This conversation was becoming torture for her, the yearning for her daughter was so intense.

She must seem interesting to Demba in some odd way, Jamie thought. It wasn't the same way that her superior officers usually stared at her - as a burden to their command. The ancient navy expression *loose cannon* came to mind. "I'm told this will be a dangerous mission." The admiral said nothing to deny the fact. She just stared at her. She didn't like being stared at. Jamie took a deep breath, preparing to injure her career once more. "I can't abide endangering a child, Admiral."

"That sounds like an ultimatum, Lieutenant."

"I am the Chief of Security on this ship, Admiral. His safety concerns me. Can't you leave him with *someone*?"

The admiral showed no negative reaction to this insubordination. She held her gaze on Jamie, as she asked: "Do you want to stay behind, Sammy?"

"No! I want to go with you!"

"He's not responsible for making such a decision, Admiral. You *are*." Sammy looked up at the admiral and she looked down at him. Jamie Jones went down on one knee in order to look up at both of them. She was shocked at herself for the intensity of her feeling. But the child was - a *child*! It was unthinkable to bring a child on this mission! "You must agree that it's safer not to be on this ship. Otherwise, I don't see how I can have any confidence in your ability to command the mission."

A moment of silence stretched to an awkward length, with the admiral merely gazing at her. The admiral probably knew she had no confidence in her anyway. Jamie finally sat down on the floor. All of the other people in the gym had taken an interest in the confrontation. Jamie looked around at them, frowning, then back to the admiral. The admiral must be waiting to see how far she would go. The boy - perhaps it wasn't hard to imagine that even an admiral could want a child of her own, could be so selfish that she would do anything to get a child and keep him. She should feel sorry for them both. "I don't understand why you aren't reprimanding me or calling for my arrest. Even *that* is disappointing to me! You don't seem to care about this child, and by extrapolation, the mission. You'll have my formal resignation on your desk as soon as I can do it." She got up from the floor, saluted, and started to walk away.

"I won't accept your resignation." There was no way Zakiya could leave Jamie behind!

Jamie halted and turned around. Admirals didn't impress her. She cared little whether she retained her rank or spent time in the brig. Most of her concern was with a lack of meaning in her life. That was why she welcomed this assignment. It was a chance to die, or at least find excitement. But this admiral bothered her beyond what she could have believed possible. "Why not?" She could hardly contain her impatience.

"Who would replace you, Lieutenant? Would they do the job as well as you?"

"I'm the best you can get, despite what my record implies, Admiral." Judging from what she saw of much of the crew, Jamie could understand the admiral's reluctance to lose even such a troublemaker as herself.

"I believe what you claim. Stay and help me protect Sammy. I'm pleased with your concern for his safety. I know I'm putting him at risk. But I believe he will be safer aboard this ship than elsewhere."

"How *can* he be, Admiral?"

"There is a fantastic story that answers your question, and you will never hear it if you abandon the mission. Sammy stays with me."

"Tell me, Admiral." Jamie was surprised it was so easy to make the decision. *Fantastic story?* "I'm staying."

"In time," Demba said in a calm, carefully controlled manner. It was almost as if she was speaking to Jamie the way she would speak to a misbehaving child. She should have dressed Jamie down with loud angry words. It could be a sign of weakness in the admiral or in her situation. Neither thought sat well with Jamie. She was probably older than the admiral, not that age had any bearing on matters, but Jamie was too old to accept some kind of personal patronage from an admiral desperate to retain what miserable crew she had.

"The ship has no armaments," Jamie commented, searching for some way to prolong the agony - and probably ruin whatever relationship she might have with this strange admiral. It was Jamie's way: ruin everything.

"Correct. If we must fight, we will lose."

"Fight whom? We've never known why ships were lost."

Jamie stared at Demba for a long moment waiting for a response. Why did she say nothing? The admiral seemed only interested in looking at her, as though she was some form of entertainment. No, that wasn't correct. Admiral Demba didn't look at her as a specimen. She couldn't decipher how she viewed her and that unnerved her - and Jamie *never* lost her nerve. She tried another approach. She was now hoping for some reason to accept this woman as her commanding officer, and she wondered why she would hope for that. Perhaps it was the mystery of the pair of them. "You should wear your medals, ma'am," Jamie said carefully. "You were in the War." It was against regulations *not* to wear them, but an admiral could do anything she pleased.

"Why should I wear someone else's medals?"

The reply almost stopped Jamie. She was never smart enough to stop before she maximized the damage. "How can you inspire the crew with confidence about your abilities, if your uniform looks like you've spent your entire career doing nothing important or dangerous?" She looked again at the list of awards bestowed on Demba. The medal at the end of the list scrolled into Jamie's view in her ocular shiplink. "My God! You've received the highest award!"

"I did nothing but kill people." Zakiya knew she had not died in combat, knew it was all falsified. Perhaps Commodore Keshona deserved that honor. She must have risked her life to kill the Rhyian Empire. But she must also have had a choice to do it or not, and from Zakiya's current perspective, it was the wrong choice. "I'm not that person." She actually meant she was not Keshona. "They're not my medals."

Jamie thought it was an *incredible* thing for an admiral to say! If admirals were not warriors, they were nothing! It was their *business* to be able to kill. Demba died in action and seemed to consider that person as permanently dead.

A message reached Jamie through shiplink, which relieved her. The confrontation had reached an intensity for her that she could neither understand nor tolerate any longer. "A crime was committed against one of the crew. I need to go to the hospital, Admiral."

* * *

"You shouldn't have reported it! It was just an accident!"

The woman was *impossible*! Mai couldn't reason with her. It was understandable that she was upset and not thinking clearly - she was a victim of terrible brutality. She glimpsed the bruises, abrasions, and blood. There must be other wounds or else there would not be cut and torn pieces of an admiral's uniform on the floor. It *had* to be reported!

"You were assaulted!" She was losing what little composure she regained after finding Aylis Mnro trying to medicate herself in the emergency clinic.

"Just go away and let me clean up!"

"I know you have serious injuries. *Please*, let me help you!"

"*Not* serious! You shouldn't have been so curious! Why did you have to find me?"

Jon arrived. Mai met him in front of a privacy screen. He saw how upset she was and put an arm around her shoulders. She twisted away from him. He was someone else she couldn't help! She put her hand on a tubular package that seemed out of place in the emergency room. It elicited Aylis's angry "*Don't*

touch that!" How did she even know she touched it?

"It's her," Jon said, sounding properly concerned.

"Yes!"

"You called Security."

"Of course! This was just so unexpected! My first day in the ship's hospital. I wondered why Doctor Mnro wasn't here. I looked for her. I found her! She won't let me help her! She won't tell me what happened! She won't tell me *anything!*"

"You shouldn't have called Security."

"I *did* tell her *that!*" Aylis called from behind the screen.

"Why not? I don't understand!"

"Is she badly hurt?" She could tell Jon was even more upset, yet he seemed reluctant to take charge of the situation and do the right thing. What was wrong with him?

"She could barely speak when I found her!"

"We can hear her very well now."

"She's trying to deny what happened to her. I think it's serious!"

"Don't tell me you haven't seen worse on Earth," Aylis argued. Mai could hear her voice quaver.

"This isn't Earth! And this is *you!*"

"Captain, perhaps you can make her obey," Aylis spoke more calmly. "I can't."

"Unlikely," Jon said. "Been there, done that. She's one of yours, not one of mine."

"Why shouldn't I have called Security?" Mai asked again.

"It isn't something we should discuss now," Jon replied.

"But this is a serious crime!" Mai wanted to *hit* Jon for being so derelict in duty! "We may have the evidence to convict her attacker. If I can collect it."

Admiral Demba arrived, followed closely by a tall, striking woman wearing gym clothes and a towel draped around her neck. Mai hoped the woman was Security - she looked fierce. She saw Sammy follow them into the hospital room on his crutches. Mai didn't want Sammy here, wanted to protect him from knowing what happened to Aylis. She looked from Demba to Sammy to Horss, hoping someone else would share her concern, but gave up. How she *hated* the Navy, and how *justified* she was!

"Admiral." Jon greeted Demba and cast an odd look at the woman in gym clothes.

"Captain." The woman saluted. "I'm Lieutenant. Jones, Chief of Security."

"I know who you are. We don't need you here. There'll be no charges filed."

"There *will*. You can't stop it, sir."

"Assault must be prosecuted, Jon," Demba agreed.

"I wish we could. Go see who it is. Stay here, Sammy. You, too, Lieutenant."

"Sir, you are interfering with a *mandatory* investigation." The big woman's voice was hard and she showed no concern for Jon's rank. Mai almost enjoyed it.

"Just be patient, Jones, I know that isn't your best trait, so there are two of us who will restrain you if we must."

"How do you know me, sir?" The sweaty woman moved from one side of Jon to the other as he blocked her way in front of the privacy screen.

"Many years ago we served on the same ship. Everybody on the ship knew who you were. Very few knew who I was."

Demba went behind the screen. Mai caught Sammy by the shoulder before he could follow her. She watched the woman and Jon stare at each other, until they heard Demba say, "Oh, God!"

"Do you want us to leave?" Jon asked.

"No," Demba replied. "Come here."

"All of us?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Jones, can you record this?"

She was a Marine, Mai thought, seeing an insignia on her tee-shirt. She came around the screen first, pushing past Mai without apology. Good! Now something would get done!

"Admiral, I've prosecuted many assault cases. I'm recording."

"Admiral, don't," Jon warned.

Demba looked at Jon, appraised his seriousness, and heeded his advice. Mai was shocked by this inexplicable event. "Stop recording," Demba ordered the Marine, blocking her view of Aylis.

"That is an *illegal* order," the Marine argued.

"There are special circumstances. Stop or I'll put you off the ship right now."

"Yes, sir. I've stopped."

Mai had hoped the Marine Security officer would prevail. Now she was just a big smelly obstacle in the crowded room. But she could sense the woman was at least as provoked as Mai was. It wasn't over yet. The victim could not stop the prosecution of assault, Mai was sure of that.

Demba moved aside to allow the Marine to see Aylis. *Why bother now?* Mai thought. The big woman saw the bruises on Aylis's face and arms. She saw the torn clothing. She started to lift the edge of the drape over the lower part of Aylis's body and the admiral stopped her.

"You're recording, aren't you?" Demba asked.

"I might be," the Marine admitted. "She could change her mind later. Who is she? What happened? Who did it?" She asked the questions with severity, demanding answers.

"I *told* you about her, Admiral," Jon said, meaning the lieutenant. "Want me to take her away?"

"You were raped, weren't you?" the Marine asked Aylis, almost accusingly, ignoring her superior officers.

Mai was shocked by what the woman asked, and was further shocked when Aylis didn't deny it. She suspected rape, she fervently hoped it didn't occur, and now she was greatly upset it did. She was even angry with Aylis for trying to hide the truth from her. What was going on? Mai saw that Jon was further upset by the revelation. Good - *but he wasn't doing anything about it!* Demba's expression changed for the worse, yet she withheld any proper response to the moral and legal requirements of the situation. What could Jon have conveyed to her in so few words?

Demba looked at Jon again. "Are you sure?" He nodded his reply. It was maddening to Mai, insufferable! "Aylis? You don't want to prosecute?"

Aylis shook her head *no*, lying back, tired. Aylis was a great person, deserving of all the honor and fame, but she seemed to shrink now. She was a mere mortal, a victim of an ancient and still too common act of violence. Mai was sorry for her. Mai was hardened to rape cases, but this one made her sick to her stomach. The Navy was far worse than she ever suspected!

"You know that according to Navy law we don't need your permission to prosecute," Demba said.

"You couldn't prosecute him without medical evidence I won't give you. It's impossible to prosecute him, evidence or not."

"It would be inconvenient."

"Yes."

"*Inconvenient!*" the Marine shouted, making Sammy jump next to Mai.

Demba ignored the Security officer. "Is it who I think it is?" Demba asked Jon.

"Yes, Admiral. She notified me before her departure. I thought I knew him, but I see I didn't."

"You allowed her?"

"She's Aylis Mnro. How should I have stopped her?"

"I would have locked her up! You're the captain of the ship! You can issue an order to any crew member - including admirals - and expect it to be obeyed!"

Mai saw Jon flinch at the tone of Demba's voice and his reaction was satisfying to her.

"*She's Aylis Mnro?*" the big woman asked, looking again at Aylis. "*The Aylis Mnro?*" Mai watched the Security officer battle with feelings of both awe and anger. The anger won. The woman pushed Demba aside and moved closer to Aylis. Demba inserted herself between them again. She wasn't sure, but Mai felt this action was extraordinary, even as rough as Navy life must be. Jon moved to help Demba but she waved him off. Mai backed away and placed herself protectively beside Sammy, with a hand on his shoulder. She was a little apprehensive, considering the size and demeanor of the lieutenant.

"Jones, listen to me!" Demba ordered, looking up at the woman from too close. "Let it go! You don't know what we know, and we don't want to explain it to you now!"

"*Rape is rape*, sir!" The lieutenant was deadly serious. "I *know* what it feels like!"

Demba opened her mouth, closed it, stared at the Marine's face with concern for her. "I'm sorry!" Demba looked very sad.

"You were--!" Aylis tried to say.

"Never mind about me!" the lieutenant shouted. "I've lived a risky life! You can't let this go unpunished! Tell me who did it!"

"I can't! Please. You can't prosecute him. It's impossible."

"Just tell me his name! I'll *kill* the son of a bitch!"

The woman was wonderful, Mai thought. She was almost quivering with rage. Jon was standing there with a look of awe, while Demba was still stuck between the big woman and Aylis.

"I believe you would," Aylis said in the calmest voice Mai yet heard from her. "Thank you for your concern. I'm sorry I can't allow you to seek justice for me. What is your name?"

"Jones, ma'am. Lieutenant Jamie Jones, Union Marines."

"Is this Jamie?" Aylis seemed surprised. She was questioning Demba but looking at the Security officer.

"Why did you go to him?" Demba asked, ignoring Aylis's strange question, nudging the lieutenant away from Aylis.

"Go to whom?" Jones persisted.

"I made a deal with the devil," Aylis replied. "Maybe it was worth it, maybe not."

"I would never have expected this," Demba said.

"I knew it was dangerous." Aylis looked from Jones to Demba. "Is this

Jamie?" Aylis asked the strange question again in a very serious voice. Some reply came to Aylis from the expression on Demba's face. Aylis reacted in renewed distress.

"Are you really Doctor Mnro?" Jones asked.

Aylis lost the small measure of calmness she had attained. She broke down and wept without restraint, curling up in the sheet which covered her. Demba held Aylis close and looked at the others in the room, conveying the message that they should leave.

Jon attempted to pull Lieutenant Jones away and she resisted, until he looked at her with a very caring expression and silently mouthed the word *please*.

"I'm filing a report!" Jones declared in an angry whisper, allowing Jon to escort her away.

Mai was devastated by Aylis Mnro being reduced to the weeping, battered woman she now observed. When Sammy asked her what was wrong with her, Mai became even more upset.

* * *

They wouldn't answer her questions! They wouldn't explain anything! Marine Lieutenant Jamie Jones was prevented from doing her duty. She felt angrier than in years, in decades. The anger was real and reasonable and she relished it, but it was tempered by the mystery behind everything. Why did they tolerate such a crime? Why did they tolerate her? *Was* it Aylis Mnro? The victim *couldn't* be Aylis Mnro! That would make the crime even more terrible, something to be recorded in history texts. Yet only the civilian physician wanted to seek justice. It couldn't be Aylis Mnro! Mnro was an historic person. Why would she even be on this ship?

"*Is this Jamie?*" Is *who* Jamie? Was she Jamie? Whose Jamie? Who was Sammy and how did he suffer such an injury? Why would the admiral be his guardian? Why would Admiral Demba have such a close friendship with the most famous woman in history? Why did the admiral affect Jamie so strongly, awakening feelings she thought were long lost to the years and to the vanity of staying alive? Why was she so desperate to be a good Marine, desperate to do her duty, desperate to stay on this doomed ship? Why did she want to believe all of what was unbelievable?

Section 004

Sons Remembered, Mai Retained

Aylis slept. Perhaps she dreamed.

Always the coward.

Always the terror of my life.

It isn't my choice.

It is your choice.

It's yours: you or her.

Not her. Never!

You're the best and bravest of all of us.

Remember that. Remember me.

I'll try.

No tears?

None to keep me from seeing you clearly for the last time. But from the next moment on.

She looked upon his face with a great swelling of love for her best son, followed too soon by a flood of anguish that threatened to destroy her. The tears came, and through them she saw... a dark face with stripes and glowing eyes!

She screamed, or thought she did. She awoke, or thought she did. Only words and emotions, but the fragment assaulted her with a force that could have spilled her blood. Fear pushed it into the dark, where it would wait for her. Another fragment began.

"Always the coward."

"What did you say, Mother?"

"Always the coward. I'm always so cowardly."

"You did what had to be done."

"I can't finish it! She's in there crying her heart out, begging to have her mother back. I can't face her!"

"I'll take care of her, Mother."

"You will? Yes, I suppose you're suited for it. But I'll never want to believe you're a cruel person."

"It's a cruel thing to do."

"And now I'm losing you, too. I may never see you again."

"It's no great loss to you. I've always disappointed you."

"Is that bitterness I hear?"

"Not at all, Mother. It's perfectly understandable. What I don't understand is why you could love my father and not me."

"Perhaps I don't like you very much, but I'll always love you."

"We'll end on that, Mother. I hope we meet again someday, to continue our difficult relationship." He turned and opened the door, allowing the weeping of a child to be heard. He walked through the doorway, the door closed, but she could still hear the child. She would hear her forever.

"Dare I translate that last sentence," she said to herself, "to mean that he does have feelings for me?"

"You."

"I."

"Go away." He began to fade. "No! Wait. Why are you here?"

"You're my mother. You were hurt."

"You care?"

"Yes."

"Because it's your duty, by definition."

"Yes. And no."

"I'll take what little you can give." Aylis sat up on the edge of her office sofa. She was pleased her son came to see her, but she wouldn't reveal such emotion to him. *That* was a stupid response, regretted instantly! It seemed a century or two meant nothing to her feelings for her son. The feelings were still there, still as strong as ever, and still painful. It was so long ago, and yet he seemed the same Direk. She experienced a moment in which she felt acutely how old she was. He should have seemed a stranger to her after decades apart from her. Perhaps he was always a stranger, and so he seemed the same. "Did you touch me?"

"No."

"I just remembered you. When you took care of Jamie for me."

"I remember it."

"What did you do with her?"

"I took her to live with her grandparents."

"You didn't put her in stasis?"

"No."

"She doesn't remember her real mother. What did you do to her?"

"Perhaps you don't remember what *you* did to her," Direk said. "When she was about ten years old she got sick. She was taken to a Mnro Clinic."

"I don't remember," Aylis said sadly. "I probably should not want to remember. Does she have your auxiliary memory implants, like the rest of us? I almost touched her."

"It isn't your touch that will unlock her memories."

"Yours?" She received a nod. "Why did you take her to her grandparents? Why didn't you put her in stasis?"

"I couldn't."

She paused and considered these unexpected replies. She tried to assign a preferred significance to them - that Direk had changed to a normal Earthian human. It was too improbable. It was wishful thinking, another defective thought process to lead her down the wrong path, to get her hurt again. If only he didn't have those same ice-pale Essiin eyes!

Aylis stood up and approached her son. Direk stood in shadow it seemed, even though her office was evenly illuminated. She lifted a trembling hand to his shoulder and pulled them together. She kissed him on the cheek. She looked up into his cold eyes and frowned with concern. "Have you *ever* been happy?"

"Yes."

She was again surprised at his reply: simple, straightforward - true? "There was a time when you couldn't have answered that question. Have you changed?"

"There was a time when you couldn't have accepted any answer of mine concerning emotions. Have you changed?"

"You had many dealings over the years with my copy. She's inside my head now, asking me why I wanted an Essiin husband and not an Essiin son. I'll accept your answer that you were happy. We won't discuss further the *illogic* of happiness. Thank you for coming to see me. I've recovered from my injuries."

"Will you tell me what happened?"

"No!" But she was almost thrilled he asked. "What would you do about it, if I

told you?"

"Don't tell me. It hurts you."

"I thought my control was better. I do try to control myself for your sake."

"I'll leave now."

Why did she hope so fervently? Why were these issues concerning her Essiin son not buried forever under the detritus of her ancient past? "I dreamed of you, Son: a stupid fantasy in which I told you who did what to me, and you took revenge."

He said nothing but continued to stare at her. She couldn't see him well enough to search for some favorable meaning in his highly controlled expression. She turned away, ashamed to display her weakness to her son, and hating that he was so like a pale version of Admiral Etrhmk.

"I'll leave you now, Mother," he said softly.

She turned back quickly but Direk had faded from view. She would have wondered how he did that, and why, but her thoughts were too furiously tangled to give it much attention. She went to the doorway and looked for him in the hall but saw no one. She touched her lips and wondered if she had kissed him.

Aylis continued into the hallway of her new Navy hospital aboard the *Freedom*. She located Sugai Mai through her shiplink and reached her quarters in a few moments.

Mai had accepted Aylis's invitation to visit her on the *Freedom* and to provide expertise on setting up trauma services. Mai knew permanent assignment was an option, as a civilian contractor. Mai didn't want regular living quarters and asked for temporary quarters in the hospital, obviously discounting the option to serve out the Mission. Still, Aylis thought Mai could be persuaded to remain with the ship. Aylis felt the need of her friendship. She missed Ramadhal and all her friends on the moon.

Mai was packing to leave when Aylis entered her quarters. She expected this. "Quitting on me, Mai?"

"I agreed to help you until the ship departed, Aylis, but I can't stay here any longer!"

"Don't let what happened to me influence your decision."

"How can I not?"

Aylis's copy had fond memories of Sugai Mai, even if she never had the chance to become close to her. She trusted those memories and they made her feel that her friendship was possible and desirable. But was it ethical to draw Mai further into the danger? She and Zakiya had discussed Mai's situation. It was not clear she would be in greater danger staying on the *Freedom* or leaving it. All Aylis knew for certain was that she liked Mai very much and selfishly felt she needed her.

"You're right. It can't be ignored. But I'm not as injured as you think." That was a lie! She was shredded, and added to it were all the other revelations and relationships exploding from her hidden memory. Not the least of which was Jamie!

"It was a sickening brutality, what was done to you!" Mai declared. "I can't believe how well you appear to be! Must you take on the armor of your Navy rank so soon? I just detest you wearing that... that *fascist* uniform!"

"I'm hardly well." Aylis was surprised at Mai's appraisal of her appearance. "There are things I can't explain to you. I can't even explain them to myself. I can't allow myself to fall apart. I'll change the uniform and wear only hospital garb. I just want you to stay as long as you can. I *need* you."

"Why would you need *me*?" Mai paused in her packing.

"You know Zakiya - Admiral Demba - is my best friend. I need her also, but I can't - "

"Can't what?"

Aylis couldn't explain it to Mai. She was tormented by what she had done and by what had been done to her. It was one thing to be a victim of rape. It was even worse to know she deserved it. "I can't be with Zakiya. I can't - "

"What is wrong?" Mai asked, looking at Aylis with concern.

"It hurts to be near her. I love her so much, but I've done something she will never forgive, and I can't tell her what it is."

"Is it the Marine lieutenant? I wondered why you reacted to her the way you did."

"She's Zakiya's daughter and she doesn't know it. But no, it isn't Jamie. Zakiya remembers that I took her away from her. She understands why. I need a friend, someone I haven't hurt too badly. Yet."

"You're asking me to go on the mission with you."

Mai had reached the desired conclusion and Aylis willed herself to hold together long enough to accomplish her task. "Yes." Aylis spoke as plaintively as possible.

"You asked me to run the Earth Clinic!" Mai threw a neatly folded blouse carelessly into her bag. "It was a dangerous and shocking job! I thought it would kill me! This is a similar thing."

"Do you regret your years on Earth?"

"Well... no. But this is the Galactic Hub Mission!"

"This is a mission to find my once-upon-a-time husband. Who knows, maybe you'll find some nice man to love on this ship."

"You refer to Jon Horss."

"He's not the only fish in the ocean." She suspected Mai's willingness to visit her on the *Freedom* was helped more by her feelings for Jon Horss than for Aylis Mnro.

"I'm more than twice his age."

"Is Jon such a child?"

"He's filled his quota."

"Are you in such a hurry to have a baby?"

"Not anymore." Mai fished the crumpled blouse out of her bag and tossed it aside.

Section 005

Iggy Remembered

Admiral Khalanov felt old, perhaps nearing the time when he would need full rejuvenation to continue a vigorous life. He sat with his eyes closed and his fingers steepled and touching his chin, but a certain tension negated the contemplative posture. He had problems to solve. This meeting was a thief of his valuable time.

Admiral Demba stared at him with a distant and thoughtful look, but soon in the long silence of waiting, troubling thoughts caused ripples of concern on the smooth brown surface of her face. Khalanov opened his eyes to catch a glimpse of her expression and he knew something was different. "Bad news?" He offered a humorless smile.

"It's complicated." Demba's eyes still lingered on him. He never saw the like of her expression, as though it was *she* who was changed in some way.

"For whom do we wait?" Khalanov shook off the study of her eyes as too much imagination on his part.

"Two people."

"Why do we meet in the flesh? We have so little time and so much to do."

"Patience." She said it almost - tenderly?

A door opened. A young woman entered. Khalanov quickly stood up and his mood brightened. When Captain Direk followed the woman into the conference room, Khalanov's face fell into a puzzled frown. The nearly-bald blonde woman sat down without looking directly at Khalanov. Captain Direk chose to remain standing to one side. He nodded at Khalanov and that was enough to make Khalanov wonder. It was a *personal* kind of nod. Direk never gave him more than the required military courtesy.

The young woman finally looked up at Khalanov and slowly smiled at him. It was such a *painful* smile! He smiled back gently, but perplexed. There was something familiar about the woman with very little hair. There was everything strange about why she should be here. Who was she? She wore a medical uniform with an inconspicuous diamond star of an admiral. She must be important. She must be much older than she appeared to be. He hoped he would make a good impression on her, regardless of who she was.

"We have a decision to make," Demba said.

"Won't you introduce us?" Khalanov asked.

Demba and the woman turned to look at each other, and the look was a total mystery to Khalanov. It was sadness he saw. What were they planning to do to him? The young woman looked down at her hands in her lap.

"This is Aylis Mnro." Demba was apparently not appreciative of what a thunderclap of news this was to him. "You know Captain Direk. You don't know he's Aylis's son."

Khalanov blinked several times and stared hard at the young woman. "She is - ! He is - ! She is *Aylis Mnro*? Direk is her *son*?" Khalanov sat down with haste, before this incredible news could topple him like a drunken fool. He could feel his face flush. He looked from Mnro to Demba to Direk, again and again. They obviously knew each other. How could Demba never confide to him that she knew Aylis Mnro? Why did he believe it was true? "I'm terribly sorry, Doctor Mnro!" Why was Aylis Mnro bearing the rank of a Navy admiral?

"Sorry for what?" She looked up at him with caring blue eyes.

He almost couldn't respond. *Her eyes were on him!* He glanced at Demba and saw an identical look: *caring?* "I've known Direk for a long time," he sputtered, "and haven't often enjoyed his company. I'm sorry I haven't responded better to him. Knowing he's your son, I'll try harder! I'm amazed you're with us and I'm very pleased and honored to meet you. I'm Igor Khalanov. You don't look like the images I've seen of you. I can't *imagine* why you've joined this mission. *Have* you joined it? You have an admiral's star."

When Mnro bowed her head again and didn't reply to him, Khalanov suffered another disappointment and turned to Demba. "Aylis was assaulted. I hated to ask her, but she needs to be here."

"*Assaulted!*" He felt his hackles rise, as though he was a guard dog facing a lethal intruder. "I'm appalled! I'm *outraged!* *The damned Navy!* What happened?"

"Not now," Demba said softly.

"My God! How can this happen to Doctor Mnro, of all people?"

"Please, don't talk about it to anyone."

Khalanov shook his head, very pained by the information. The ghastly news swirled in his mind as he tried to move on to another topic. "Why are we here?"

"Do you want to go on this mission, Iggy?"

Khalanov's heart fluttered. It was good that she called him "Iggy." It was bad that she raised the question of his retention. *Aylis Mnro!* He couldn't concentrate on any one thing. *Direk was her son!* "I labored decades building this ship, never expecting to sail it. Then you asked me to stay aboard. Now you're ready to put me ashore? I don't understand!"

"I've remembered you." Khalanov opened his mouth to ask The Question. She raised her hand to cut him off. "Before I explain what that means, answer my question. Do you want to go on this mission?"

"I've been planning for all these years how to stow away on the ship! This ship is my life! What is left for me without it? Yes! I want to go!"

"I wouldn't have expected that," Mnro said, breaking her silence, looking up from her hands, looking at Khalanov again.

Khalanov was almost lost in the great woman's caring gaze but managed to keep the thread of the dialog. "I don't understand. How can you know what to expect of me? I beg your forgiveness if I speak from ignorance, but who am I to you?"

"That was a long time ago," Mnro said. "I'm in error. You're not who you were, I'm sure."

"We need a decision *now*," Demba said, cutting off the next question Khalanov could pose, "before we say anything more."

"Does Iggy have a vote?" Mnro asked.

"She called me 'Iggy!'" Khalanov gasped. His heart was thudding and he was shocked again. Why would she choose to call him by his nickname? Even Demba rarely used it.

"You're in line for another star, Iggy," Demba commented. "If you stay, you'll have more ships to build."

"We lost everything in the war, you and I. We died, we lost continuity. I was young again but not a youth. I came to depend on you to keep me going. I still depend on you, you and the ship. I think I must have expressed my desire to go with you on several occasions."

"I'm sorry," Demba said. "I didn't take you seriously."

"Why didn't you?" He felt resentful. Had she simply pretended all these years

to be his friend? Why?

"You don't want another star, Iggy? You don't want to build more ships for the Navy?"

"Building ships is so damned *tedious*! Every day it's a battle over logistics and design changes and assembly schedules. My desire was always to sail a ship and keep it running and see what's out there. I'm not just an engineer, you know! Please, take me seriously now!"

Demba almost smiled, hiding her mouth by staring down at the table. Then she raised her head and addressed Mnro and Direk. "We can take him with us. We can leave him behind. Which?"

"We can't leave him," Mnro said quietly but adamantly. "He's our friend. We love him." Mnro's statement threw Khalanov's thoughts into a state of total consternation. Aylis Mnro was implying that she *knew* him, and he was certain he could never have met her!

"We can't take him with us," Direk said. "He poses a security threat. I can link him directly to Etrhnk's spy network." What was Direk saying? He was a spy? It made no sense. He was not!

"Can we successfully store him in stasis where Etrhnk can't retrieve him?" Demba asked.

"No," Direk replied.

"If we keep him, what is the cost?"

"If you trust him, there is no cost," Direk replied. "If they knew what he means to us, it would be worse to leave him behind." *What did he mean to them?* Khalanov wondered. He was ready to grab Demba and shake it out of her!

"We can't leave him behind," Mnro said. "It's bad enough that we're leaving Pan."

"How does Doctor Mnro know me?" Khalanov demanded, unable to contain his agitation. They ignored him!

"I trust him," Demba said. "We keep him, despite the risk. Unless you have proof Iggy was malicious in providing information to Etrhnk."

"I never expected to leave Uncle Iggy behind," Direk said.

"*Uncle Iggy?*" Khalanov turned to Direk to present his shocked expression.

Mnro reached across the short space between them and touched Khalanov's hand. He almost jerked the hand away from her but stopped. She squeezed his hand. It gave him goose flesh. "Iggy, this was a small performance on our part to try to verify how we knew you would react. There was never any doubt that you belonged with us. But people change. Times change. We continue in these bodies but we also die by slow and subtle degrees."

"You were lying to me? You don't really know me?"

"We haven't lied, Iggy. We once knew you. Now, we hardly even know who we are, and less who you are. We hope there remains the wonderful young man who was my crewmate on the *Frontier*."

"The *Frontier*?" He was too upset to understand why the name seemed familiar.

"Iggy, you and I and Zakiya served together in Deep Space Fleet on a legendary ship." Mnro watched him strangle on this piece of fantasy and her expressive face bore such a look of honesty and concern that he subdued his need to challenge the absurdity.

"Zakiya?" he asked instead. "Who is Zakiya?"

"I'm Zakiya," Demba replied. "Zakiya Muenda. I was Third Officer on the

Frontier. You were its engineer. Aylis and I remember. You don't."

Now he remembered where he knew of the *Frontier*. It was a *fictional* vessel! Khalanov wasn't sure anymore that Deep Space Fleet had been a real organization. It would have existed hundreds of years ago, if it existed at all! He explicitly trusted Demba. She saved his skin on too many occasions. But, because she said it, did that make the impossible possible? He slowly pulled his hand away from Mnro's hand. Mnro sighed and leaned back in her chair.

"I have the Deep Space Fleet records to prove it," Demba said.

Khalanov looked at Demba with a war of emotions on his burning face. How could these people make such wild claims? He was embarrassed for them! "You're a master archivist!" Khalanov was desperate to win any point in this assault on his sanity. "You must know better than anybody how hopeless is the guaranty of truth. How can you know your records are the truth?"

"I have *all* of the records. They can be examined for coherence as a body of data. You're in it. You fit in it. You're woven into it, as we all are, in such a detailed and intricate way that it must reflect true history."

"How would you have records that were destroyed long ago? You're saying that I - and you and Doctor Mnro - and Direk - are very old. Old! Too old! Fossils! That was before the Age of Immortality!"

"It's a complicated piece of history," Mnro said, drawing his challenging stare away from Demba. "Trust me. You're almost as old as I am. You have memories of that ancient time stored in nearly undetectable semi-biological memory devices."

"Why don't I remember?"

"Your memories are locked away from you. As were ours. We couldn't risk having those memories where others might discover them. We couldn't risk having ourselves discover them."

"I don't understand!" He was helpless to ask anything specific.

"We lost many friends and family members," Mnro said. "It would have been too painful and too demoralizing to live with such memories for the long time that we needed to wait."

"I still don't..."

"You lost Ana," Demba said. She watched him with too much concern. He frowned with the effort to concentrate and see the implications of this name, but he couldn't. All he could do was look away from Demba, look away from all of them. They were attacking him with a most peculiar kindness. "We especially had to remove Ana's memory from you."

"Ana." Khalanov closed his eyes and tasted the word. "Who is Ana?"

Mnro took in a deep, uneven breath, making Khalanov look at her. She wiped tears from her eyes. Khalanov lost his defiance of the barrage of shocking information as he watched Aylis Mnro react. His thought processes were jumbled but he could still feel empathy for Mnro. Why was she grief-stricken? Strong emotions rarely occurred to persons of such age. If they did occur, there was less need to show them.

Demba said nothing. Direk said nothing. They waited for Mnro to speak. "Ana was someone who deserved to be remembered forever and to be loved forever, by all who knew her, and especially by her husband. I just remembered her. And it *hurts*!"

Mnro looked directly at Khalanov with watery eyes. "I had a *wife* named Ana," Khalanov said, inferring Mnro's meaning. "Who was very special?"

"Who was *very* special."

"What happened to her?"

"Ana was murdered," Demba answered, when Mnro couldn't.

"Because she was special?"

"Because she was your wife."

"Why?"

"When Deep Space was disbanded and many of us joined the Union Navy, a number of ruthless people were in positions of authority in the Navy. We came into conflict with them. They apparently saw former Deep Space officers as a threat. We believed they thought we would discover their connection to an enemy outside Union space, an area perhaps familiar to Deep Space explorers. They murdered and kidnapped and drove us underground. You were younger than most of us and had other plans and ambitions. You tried to distance yourself from us, to find a safe middle ground for you and your wife. You didn't understand how bad these people were. You made an error in judgment, and Ana paid for it with her life. You blamed yourself and you blamed us, and you went off to die."

"And we found you and didn't let you die," Mnro added.

Khalanov wondered how he could feel compelled to believe this tale of a forgotten life. He looked at Direk and realized he trusted Direk, perhaps even more than Demba, even as Direk's relentlessly logical personality drove him crazy and assaulted Khalanov's feelings of self-worth. If Direk believed everything these women were telling him... "If all you tell me is true, I've lost so much! I'm not prepared for this! Can you tell me more about Ana?"

"We think you can remember her," Demba said. "We think you still have most of your important memories."

"How do I find my memories?"

"We're not sure," Mnro said. "Your memories were stored in your auxiliary memory and erased from your mind."

"Direk and Aylis invented the auxiliary memory devices," Demba said, "which, in addition to providing secrecy of our important memories, also allowed us to retain much of the skills of the body and the details of expertise that most people lose through rejuvenation. But the auxiliary memories don't play before our conscious mind the way normal memories do. We can't summon them forth at random and at will. When they do come they are unexpected and powerful."

"I do have these memory devices?" Khalanov asked for reassurance.

"We know you have them," Mnro said. "We don't know how functional they are or how they can be accessed. We don't remember how we might have keyed them. Usually another person's DNA - or even their proximity - provides the key to unlocking our memories. You wouldn't be likely to meet this key until it was safe to remember. In your case, we don't remember who could be your key."

"Can you perform some test?" he asked.

"Don't worry," Mnro said, patting Khalanov's hand. "Time will erode the lock on your memories. It can't be much longer."

"Damn! Damn! I feel like I'll explode!"

"Let me show you one final thing," Demba said, "that will provide some proof of what we say. Hopefully, you will not explode!" Demba removed a small silvery pouch from a pocket of her uniform. She opened the pouch and removed an object from it, cupping it in her palm so that Khalanov couldn't see it. "Hold out your hand, Iggy." She placed a solid but weightless object in the

upturned palm of his hand and she closed his fingers around it. "Once upon a time, you found this, Iggy. Look at it."

Khalanov opened his fingers and slowly manipulated the egg-shaped object until he could see it clearly. The alien beauty of the cryptikon brought him to shocking recognition of its identity. "You stole the cryptikon?" His voice was hoarse with stress.

"There is more than one. You found several. This is one of ours, Iggy."

Section 006

What Admiral Ever Wept?

"Sit down, Jones."

Jamie sat down, fatigue cap in hand, in the admiral's office. It was a bare office with only a few chairs and a display screen that showed a view of the ship's biosphere. It should have been a comfortable office but Jamie was never comfortable in the presence of admirals, and especially this admiral. She was more than uncomfortable. She could barely contain her anger at the handling of the Mnro Incident. She could barely contain her questions about everything that swirled about Admiral Demba as mystery. She waited with nervous anticipation to hear what Demba would say.

"I've studied your record thoroughly."

And I yours, she thought. "I know it's bad, but I wouldn't have done anything differently, Admiral."

"I don't judge it as you might think, Jones."

"How do you judge it?"

"Never mind. I've also studied the records of the other Marines. I think I would trust all of you to perform your duties faithfully. Would you agree?"

"Is this a serious question, Admiral?" She had already been prevented from performing her duty, in the case of Aylis Mnro. Other than pomp and ceremony, what use would she and her Marines be to this mission?

"Deadly serious."

"I agree with your analysis." Jamie hoped she wasn't being too generous to her squad. She only had a hunch that they could be good Marines. "If we're given moral duties and lawful orders we'll obey them. Every one of us was court-martialed for disobeying questionable orders."

"I'm giving you the absolute authority to remove anyone from this ship who doesn't seem right."

"Doesn't seem right?" How do I interpret that?"

"You should already have a notion, because of what happened to Aylis Mnro, that this is an extraordinary situation. We have enemies in the Navy. There could be spies or worse among us or among those waiting to come aboard. I have a list of Navy personnel who should not set foot on this ship. You are authorized to use lethal force to stop them. Screen everyone. If they don't smell right, get rid of them. Do the best you can. I realize time is short and the Marines are few, but our lives may depend on it."

"Spies? Why spies? Lethal force? Admiral, is that a lawful order?"

"No, it isn't." Demba conceded the point with slight humor, then resumed her serious intent. "You may execute the order however you choose, and I will back you as far as you need. I'm not completely sure there will be spies or sabotage. I am sure that if there is, it will be dangerous."

"Why, Admiral?"

"That isn't clear enough to me that I should bother you with it, Lieutenant."

"Does it have anything to do with the fantastic story you promised to tell me?"

"Indeed." Demba stood up. "You're dismissed."

It seemed to Jamie they had only just sat down. The meeting was at an end and she had learned nothing but bad news. She didn't want the meeting to end. She didn't want to continue in ignorance. She wanted to hear the story Demba

promised to tell her. She stood. "About Aylis Mnro. I have at least one Marine keeping watch over her at all times."

"I know. She's complained to Jon."

"I thought I was going too far with the bodyguard. I'll back off. But all of us Marines could use a convenient refresher course in emergency medical aid, and that would keep us near her for awhile."

"Don't back off. And medical training would be a good idea, but I doubt you'll get it soon."

"This mission is a lot more dangerous than most of us think, isn't it? And you still want to bring the child with us."

"Everything is more dangerous than you think. Sammy was only days or hours away from dying when I found him. He was in danger almost continuously, until we boarded this ship. I feel he's a little safer here."

"You found him? He has no real family?"

"None. The Mnro Clinic has no record of him or of anyone who is related to him."

Jamie didn't know how complete the Mnro Clinic's records were, but the way Demba spoke made her feel that Sammy's lack of identity was more unusual than she would have expected. "Where did you find him?"

"Earth." Jamie waited for Demba to say more, explain more, but she seemed reluctant. This small amount of information only made the mystery greater, the ignorance harder to bear. "If something happens to me, please take care of Sammy," Demba added, just to make Jamie's dismissal even more unbearable. One of these days she would corner Demba and - admiral or not - Jamie would get her questions answered!

* * *

Jamie applied herself to the task Demba set for her. She knew her Marines would think she was being too thorough and too paranoid. The few strange facts she learned from Demba made her imagine there was very much more to be learned that was menacing. She knew she was too sensitive to the admiral, too eager to believe what she said, but she never let logic override her feelings. She called a meeting to explain things to the men. Blind obedience was never as good as informed obedience. She embellished the facts without lying, trying to motivate men who were still strangers to her. They were already susceptible because they knew Aylis Mnro was aboard and that she needed protection. It was a bit ridiculous that she couldn't just give them a simple order and expect obedience, but these guys were not good Marines. They could be good Marines, but only if she could make them *her* Marines. They were all attentive to her because Jamie Jones was somewhat famous in the Marine Corps, and because she would make it *painful* for them to ignore her. However thin her explanation for Demba's security directive was, they became as motivated as she was.

A day later, the Third Watch woke her shortly after her head hit the pillow. It was midnight and shift change. Two Marines met her at Security Ops.

"There's something down there," Aguila said, pointing to a sensitive engineering area on their ship map. "I know the sound of breathing through the neck joint of a cheap i-field. Here, listen to this."

Jamie listened and knew Aguila was correct. Goodman responded by drawing arms from the locker. "I want three more bodies. Get them up and armed."

Ten minutes later they were converging on the location of an invisible intruder. They were also invisible.

"Tell me this isn't a drill, sir," Goodman said quietly by shiplink.

"Not a drill," Jamie whispered. "Do you have the corridor blocked?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stop breathing. He should be ten meters away from you."

Jamie and Aguila turned off their i-fields. Aguila sprayed the middle section of the corridor with snowflakes and an outline of a human figure briefly emerged before the i-field adapted. A few seconds later the invisible man ran into three invisible Marines at the other end of the corridor. There was the sound of scuffling followed by a rapid return to visibility by the three Marines. Goodman was sitting on the still-invisible intruder while the other two searched for a control switch for his i-field.

"Hey, an admiral!" Goodman exclaimed as the intruder became visible.

"He's on the list," Jamie said, checking his identification transponder. "Get off him, Goodman."

"You letting him go?" Aguila asked.

"Just want an easier shot," Jamie said.

The admiral got to his feet and straightened his uniform. He looked at the weapons pointed at him. He seemed calm. He looked at Jamie. He smiled. He had a small scar on his left cheek. "Well?" The admiral held his arms out, expressing what Jamie imagined was contempt.

"Bang," Jamie said. "You're dead. Now get off the ship."

"I don't think so," the admiral said.

Here was the prototypical Navy admiral, Jamie thought. All muscle and bad attitude. He wasn't offering a reason for his skulking presence on her ship. She wasn't interested in any lies he might tell her. All she knew was that his name was on Demba's list and that was a bad thing. "We can drag you off."

"You'll need to kill me first, Lieutenant."

"I'm authorized to use lethal force, Admiral."

"Really? By whose order?"

"Admiral Demba."

"Let me talk to her. My inspection-"

"Shut up! Get off my ship!" She saw anger flare in his face. She liked that. He wanted to fight. She wanted to fight, too, but she would deny herself the pleasure because that would deny him the pleasure. The admiral stared at her, challenging her, until her patience expired. She shot him with a nerve gun very accurately, so that he remained conscious while they dragged him off the ship.

* * *

Jamie felt the presence near her in the garden next to her cottage. The presence didn't resolve itself at once but remained at the edge of her senses. She was tired and this irritated her and she chose a combative response. She slowed to allow the stalker to come nearer, until she caught a glimpse of him in the corner of her eye. She judged the distance and selected the maneuver that would bring the person to a satisfying impact on the ground. She moved.

He moved. Jamie never touched him. She pivoted away to block a counterattack which never came. She blinked, and her tired eyes finally found enough moonlight to discern the Navy captain's uniform. She read the signal in her shiplink that identified him as regular Navy crew of the *Freedom*. She stood

to attention and saluted.

The captain returned the salute. "I was waiting to meet you. I apologize for my hesitation. I assumed you would react somewhat differently."

"I'm sorry, sir. I've processed about a thousand people aboard the *Freedom* today. I'm too tired to function predictably. Captain Direk, what do you want?"

"I have your promotion orders from O2 to O4."

"Promotion? Two grades?"

"You were a major before. I trust it will be within your abilities."

"I was a major three times, light colonel twice." Jamie moved closer to the Navy captain and stared at him. He gazed back, not revealing anything by his facial expression or body language. He moved a step back from her, as though needing more personal space. He was a large, pleasant man. But many men were large and handsome these days, if they were vain enough to have their bodies altered by genetic and cosmetic surgeons. There were as many women who did the same. This man was paler in complexion than was currently popular, with very short blond hair. He had the almost-clear Essiin eyes but otherwise looked Earthian. Jamie admonished herself for dwelling on the physical attributes of a man. She was too old and too abused in her current lifetime to care about such things. "I wonder why you chose to bring this news in person, sir."

"I wanted to meet you. Please don't misinterpret my presence."

It wasn't a matter of interpretation. She never trusted anyone. She was a Marine, a woman in a military service dominated by the male gender. She heard everything a man could say to a woman, and saw everything a man could do to a woman. But it was impossible to decode a motive behind the Navy captain's statement. Why would he have any interest in her? He looked like the intellectual type, not a man who would risk his virility on a female Marine. It finally emerged from her fatigue-muddled thoughts that here was another person who seemed to know of her but who was a stranger to her. "Introductions are over, sir. Thank you, for the promotion, I think."

"I'd like a brief talk with you."

Was he just a Navy technical officer seeking a change of flavor in female companionship, innocent in its own way? "You wouldn't be the dissenting member of a promotion review board, would you?" She led him down the path between the flower beds. Her home on the *Freedom* smelled like marigolds. She entered her apartment and turned on the lights. The captain came in behind her and left the door open. "I haven't had time to decorate and furnish the place. I've never served on a ship like this. Even we Marines can live in privacy. My men all prefer the barracks. Damned if I'll join them. All I have is a bed, if you want to sit on that."

"I'll stand. Do you know what happened to my mother?"

She was shocked, because she could deduce the identity of his mother. Blond men were rare and Mnro was blonde. She had to ask it anyway. "Your mother?"

"Doctor Mnro. She was assaulted. She wouldn't speak about it to me. I didn't want to increase her distress, but I want to know what happened."

Here it came again - The Big Mystery. Quickly her physical and mental fatigue were gone and the questions queued up in her chain of thoughts. "You're her son? Even so, I'm not sure I should tell you, sir. I was ordered not to talk about it. Why did you come to *me* for this information?"

"There are others I can query, including Admiral Demba. I wished to meet you."

"The infamous Jamie Jones. Why did you wish to meet me, sir?"

"I'm afraid to tell you."

Her heart skipped a beat. Why did it? "This is a bad time to play games with me, Captain. I've never been so tired in my life. I have a crazy admiral and her mystery child to plague my thoughts. And I have Doctor Mnro to worry about. She's your mother?"

"She is."

"But that isn't... I mean, everyone knows the story of her life... What proof do you have?" She knew she was naïve about a few things, but why was Aylis Mnro one of them?

"You can ask her." The captain was starting to stare at her the way Admiral Demba stared at her. "Do you, in fact, know what happened to her? Have you filed a report?"

"I started a report." Jamie sat down on the bed, took off her fatigue cap. She immediately stood up, feeling self-conscious in the steady gaze of this handsome man. Her impulse was to trust him, based on his relationship to Aylis Mnro. She was appalled she did not cross-check his identity, that she unconsciously assumed he was someone who "smelled right." She quickly retrieved his record and crew status from her shiplink. He was a Navy scientist. But he stared at her too intently and his announced need to see her in person was strange and opaque to her reasoning. Her imagination made her worry. She became uneasy in his presence.

"You started a report."

"It was so strange! They wouldn't explain to me why they didn't want me to investigate and bring charges. Doctor Mnro wouldn't tell me who attacked her. I got upset. I said things I shouldn't have. Admiral Demba was extremely patient with me. God, that's a whole different story! I had just met her and Sammy." She stopped. She was tired again. She wasn't being professional. She didn't think she should discuss the matter with him without proof of his kinship. Her uneasiness continued. Even though he stood well apart from her, his pale eyes seemed to invade her privacy and cross the threshold of intimacy.

"Her injuries were serious," Captain Direk said. "I saw her not long ago and she claimed to be recovered, but I could tell she was emotionally damaged. This suggests a certain form of assault."

He knew his mother was raped! It bothered her that he could sound so dispassionate. "I offered to kill him for her, if prosecution wasn't possible!" She shouldn't have said that again! It was wrong the first time. She would never learn.

"I can also theorize that her attacker was someone of significant power. I can think of only one person with sufficient power to arrange the opportunity for such a crime against someone of my mother's status. The motive, however, completely escapes me."

Jamie sat down on the bed again, despite herself. She followed the captain's logic to realize where it pointed. It made her feel sick to believe the Navy Commander could be the perpetrator. She always knew the Navy had its criminal element, but to see it risen to the top of the Navy made her lose all respect for the most important institution in her life. Further, to see this clear-minded scientist embrace his logical deduction without apparent doubt amplified her loss of respect for her military service. "That's why we can't prosecute! If I wasn't shipping out on this big boat, I *would* kill him!"

"He's too well protected. Don't be so angry."

"It's easy for you to say that!"

"Not always. I understand your anger."

"The hell you do!" She had to resort to Twenglish to satisfy her need for emotional precision in her verbiage.

"The hell I do. *You* were raped. Four men."

"Three! How do you know? I never reported it!"

"Four. One only wanted to watch. Don't be angry. They're dead."

"How do you know?" She stood up and moved toward him. "*Why* do you know?"

He backed away from her, keeping his measured distance. "I killed them." The way he said it in his dead flat voice convinced her, sent a shiver up her spine. She stopped approaching him.

"You *killed* them?" She forgot he didn't answer the question she thought she asked.

"There was no ethical solution to the problem. They posed a future threat to your well-being, therefore a significant diminishing of the mission. I confess that some of my emotional response to their deaths was pleasure."

"Are you confessing to murder?" Jamie was too astonished and confused to find her way back to the question of why this Essiin-Earthian captain knew she was raped.

"I don't think you want to arrest me."

Arrest him? She wanted to *hug* him, if it was true. She spent years trying to bring the three rapists she could identify to justice. They disappeared. Perhaps she now knew why. But this raised many new questions. "How did you know I was raped?"

"That is a very unpleasant piece of history. I won't answer you. I hoped the news would calm your feelings but, as usual, I have no facility in dealing with emotions." Captain Direk turned toward the open doorway.

"Wait!" *I sound like a little girl!* she thought. *Lower your voice!* "What the hell is going on, Captain?"

He paused. Several silent seconds ticked off. "They told you nothing. You know nothing. I shouldn't be here."

"Wait!" *She did it again! Why was she reacting like this?* He reached the doorway when he paused again. He put one hand on the door frame in a way that could have expressed emotion. He seemed less Essiin, more Earthian. "What did you expect them to tell me?" Jamie felt she was being conspired against. If she couldn't even be trusted with their damned secrets, why promote her to major?

"I've made a mistake." The captain stepped through the doorway. He had spoken to Jamie and turned away from her. She grabbed the sleeve of his work uniform and yanked it to make him turn to face her. She took a step toward him. He backed up several steps and seemed possibly disturbed that she had touched him.

Jamie was half angry and half frightened, because she was fully mystified. She continued to try to approach the Navy captain as he walked backward from her. When she stopped, he stopped. They stood at that same measured distance apart. The moonlight streamed through the trees and cast pale shadows on the walk between them. Although she didn't consciously appreciate the pleasant evening, it had some effect on her perception of Captain Direk. He became important to her on levels she didn't know existed and couldn't explain. She discovered some place inside her that was empty because it now ached. "Why

do you know me and I don't know you?"

"I'm sorry for what we never had. For what we may never have. For what I remember. For what you don't remember." He faded in the moonlight until she couldn't see him. Belatedly, she rushed toward where he had stood. He was gone, impossibly vanished, as though he never existed. She could feel a bubble of air that was cooler and drier than the evening air and smelled differently, but that also vanished in the first breeze.

* * *

Admiral Demba marched through the crowded aisles of the vast shuttle docking bay where hundreds of civilians waited in queues to be processed aboard the *Freedom*. She didn't return salutes or pause to speak to anyone. She moved with haste and with anger on her face. Jamie saw her coming and stood to attention, fearing the worst. "At ease. What is the count of crew?"

"Nine hundred fourteen, Admiral."

"And the civilians?"

"Eight thousand, three hundred two."

"How many waiting?"

"I estimate a thousand."

"Reasonably close to our total. Close the embarkation hatch and secure all other points of ingress. Pass those orders on and come with me."

"Admiral, I don't have qualified backup for my post. What do I do with all these people?"

"I don't care what you do with them."

"We depart ahead of schedule?"

"It may be imminent."

Jamie turned to Lieutenant Aguila and issued orders. Demba marched away. She followed her, still issuing orders by shiplink. "This isn't about the intruders or the crew we've refused?" Jamie fell into step beside the admiral.

"What intruders?"

"Sorry, Admiral, I'm a little behind in my reports. Three intruders. One was an admiral."

"On my list?"

"Yes." Jamie couldn't guess what reason caused Demba to come in person and take her away from her duties, because it obviously wasn't her security activities. Despite the tension Demba injected into the circumstance, Jamie found her mind turning again to Captain Direk. He invaded her thoughts constantly since meeting him. She tried to stifle this behavior, knowing something important was about to happen. Demba halted in a deserted service corridor and Jamie saw deep concern on the woman's face as she turned to her. She seemed reluctant to speak and could only reach out and touch Jamie's arm. The touch startled her and made her anxious to know what it meant. It seemed too intimate and too vital. "Admiral, what's wrong?"

Demba stared at her, as she did before, perhaps thoughtfully, but withholding something. The admiral's expression remained closed to her decryption. She observed Demba being open with other officers, such as Captain Horss. What made Jamie different? It was rare that an admiral could be as natural as Demba could be, and she felt excluded from her favor. She wanted to be included. As Demba looked at Jamie her face relaxed and softened, as if she read Jamie's mind. "So much to say and too soon to say it. And now, too late. I have

something I want you to keep for me." She brought forth a silver pouch and handed it to Jamie. Jamie started to open it but the admiral held her hand to prevent it. She held her hand for a long moment. "Don't look at it until you are in a private place. Don't show it to anyone. Keep it on your person at all times. If I don't return, it's yours."

"If you don't return?"

"I've received an invitation much like the one Doctor Mnro received. I can't take the thing with me. It's too valuable and also prevents a transmat lock."

"Don't go!" Jamie was almost panicked by this news and afraid she triggered it by intercepting the intruding admiral.

"I must. He has Sammy."

Jamie was overcharged with emotion once again. It came easily and quickly in the presence of this dark woman. She held Jamie's hands with the silver pouch within. She stared hard at Jamie's face. Then she released her. The admiral backed up, turned, walked away. "Wait!" Demba didn't wait. She walked. Jamie followed. "I see it in your eyes. You know me. It must be why you tolerate me. But I don't know you. And Captain Direk knows me."

"Direk?" Demba did not stop.

"He seems to know me. I wish you could explain it to me!"

"It would complicate things for you."

"It can't be much more complicated! I haven't stopped thinking about you and Sammy since I met you!"

Demba stopped then and turned to face Jamie. Her eyes shone with tears. Tears! What admiral *ever* wept? Sammy was vital to Demba. Was Jamie also important to Demba? Why? "How could you believe me," Demba said with tears also in her voice, "if I told you I was your mother?" A transmat reference field seized her at that instant and processed her into nothingness.

Jamie reported immediately by shiplink to Captain Horss, willing herself to maintain discipline in the wake of such contrasting news, such shocking words. She forced the words into faint coherence, ignoring Horss's efforts to interrupt.

"Can we do *anything*, sir?"

"I'm aware of the situation. Do as the admiral ordered."

"*Damn* it, sir!"

"The admiral can take care of herself, Major, I promise you."

"But it's my job to protect her! And she says she's my *mother*!"

"Exactly why it's our job to protect *you*. I've never met anyone who needs protecting less than Admiral Demba. I speak from mortal experience. Carry on."

"Major Jones," a different voice in her head spoke.

"This is Jones. Who are you?"

"My name is Freddy. I'm the admiral's inorganic child, so to speak. I'm an AMI."

"Hello, Freddy. What do you want?"

"I'm standing next to the captain and I overheard his conversation with you. I have some experience in rescue missions and I'm willing to help you."

"Thank you, Freddy. I'm sure you're too important to be put at risk."

"I've rescued her before! I'll do whatever is necessary. I can't lose her! I need her! I'm her baby. Sammy is my brother."

Jamie was astonished by the emotional outburst of the AMI. She added him to the ranks of her Mysteries To Be Solved. Then she knew who else might help her. "Sorry, Freddy. I need to speak to another person now." Jamie called Captain Direk on her shiplink. "The admiral and Sammy have been removed

from the ship!"

"I know. Did the admiral give you something?"

"Yes. How did - "

"Where are you?"

"Close to Docking Bay One."

"Go to exactly ninety-five Ring Zero and wait there."

As she reached ninety-five degrees on the deserted perimeter walkway Jamie heard a solid thump behind her, as though something heavy fell on the deck.

"*Damn!*" She turned around to see Captain Direk and an admiral. The admiral shouted the expletive as though he was shocked to suddenly appear. Too sudden for a transmat. She knew he was Khalanov. Khalanov frowned, though not at Jamie. He recovered and seemed thoughtful. "Why did we have to jump?"

Captain Direk ignored the question of his superior officer. "Major Jones, this is Admiral Khalanov."

She started to salute. They had no time for military custom.

"What's this about?" Khalanov asked. Jamie answered and watched the alarm rise in Khalanov's face. He cared for Demba, genuinely *cared* for her. Another admiral of a different breed. "This is bad! This is *very* bad! Why does he not want Demba in command of the mission?"

"The item Admiral Demba gave you?" Captain Direk asked Jamie.

She tightly clenched it in her hand, all of her emotion concentrated in her fingers. She opened her hand and showed the silver pouch to him. He didn't react, but Khalanov did. "She gave you *that*?"

"You know what it is, sir?"

"You do *not* know?"

"I know it weighs nothing at all."

"Guard the admiral," Captain Direk said to her.

"Yes, sir. What will you do?"

"I'm about to lose a secret to the enemy. This may precipitate some action on their part. I'll ask Captain Horss to ready the ship for immediate departure. Admiral Khalanov will have engineering duties to perform. Stay with him until the drive envelope cuts off transmat probing." Captain Direk took several steps backward and faded into nothingness.

Section 007

1980 - The Proposal

Milly woke up too early and couldn't get back to sleep. All she could think about was Sam and the experiment. It was already more than a week past when she expected him to return from out West, and he hadn't called. She couldn't imagine anything good had happened. It was her nature to expect the worst, and it was strangling her to keep picturing Sam as having failed. Perhaps he was already back on campus and avoiding telling her the bad news. But Sam was no coward and no liar. Milly was sure he would not delay telling her the outcome of the experiment, good or bad. But she could never set herself up for a big disappointment. Her mind stewed itself in gloomy imaginings as she pried herself out of bed and did battle with the bathroom.

"Sam!" She spotted his suitcase by the bookshelf and Sam sleeping on the sofa. He had a key to her apartment. He must have let himself in, coming here straight from the airport. Why didn't he wake her? What was wrong? He stirred. Milly rolled in as close as she could and nudged Sam until he was fully awake and aware of her. He seemed to begin to smile but stopped and regarded her thoughtfully. The room was still dark and Milly couldn't be sure what she saw in his Asian face. "Talk to me."

"Good morning." Sam almost sprained his mouth stifling a smile. He sat up and stretched and yawned. He placed a hand on each thigh and studied Miss Poker Face. He had hoped she would be all over him, wanting to know how the experiment went, but she remained true to her character. Milly would never get openly enthusiastic about anything, would never give anyone a hint of what cards she was holding in the Great Poker Game of Life. Sam contented himself with what he could imagine from the circumstantial evidence. She was still in the Game, still watching his eyes to see how firm his bet was. There had to be some connection between them, even if it was only intellectual. He had learned to keep his head down, his hopes modest, his bets small. "Late flight. Let me use your bathroom."

Milly didn't see any defeat in Sam's face or in how he carried himself, walking to the bathroom. Her heart soared, making her hit herself in the chest to quell the emotion. She clasped her hands in prayer despite herself, but only when Sam closed the bathroom door. By the time he returned, she had settled her emotions into a tight container and willed herself to respond calmly to anything Sam said. That was rendered impossible by the next thing Sam said.

"We should get married." It was pure luck he said it as he stepped behind her and took the handles of her wheelchair. He never saw the shock followed by joy on her face. By the time he could see her face again she hoped it reflected a somewhat humorous surprise - but no rejection!

"That's the last thing I could have imagined you would say." Milly said it as soon as she thought she could say it calmly. He had wheeled her to the kitchen table and sat down across the corner of it from her. He looked confident to her, yet he was a man who continually expressed doubt about everything he did. She briefly considered challenging his state of mind, reviving his doubt, but she was too conscious of what his proposal meant to her, and too interested in what the proposal might imply about the result of his experiment.

"Is that a 'no'?" Sam asked. It didn't seem so to him but he could never tell with Milly.

"Why should we get married, Sam?" Milly asked it seriously, not wanting to appear too eager to say 'yes.'

"Because you and I could be together for a long time, and it would be convenient."

"Convenient?" Milly hoped the motivation for Sam's proposal was anything but convenience but she wouldn't try to force the truth from him. She would settle for whatever Sam would give her.

"I want to help you, more than I can as just a friend." He hoped it wasn't too crude an implication that he sought intimacy with Milly. For a moment he realized how forward he was being with Milly. He put it out of his thoughts; this was too important. He couldn't go on without Milly.

"And why are we to be together for a long time, Sam?"

"Ah, that's classified information." He smiled.

Section 008

Black Queen to White Knight

She was here. Admiral Fidelity Demba. Keshona. Zakiya. Without the mask that admirals wore. She was angry and afraid, with tears in her eyes. He was disturbed it came to this, especially with so little to be accomplished, but he wanted to see her, one last time. "The *Freedom* has closed all hatches and disconnected from Dock Services." This was obvious but it was all that came to mind to start the dialog.

"Yes." She wiped her damp face, not yet ready to turn loose of the final sight of her daughter. To look upon the rapist Etrhnk in the next moment was terrible.

"As to the child. You *care* for him. Why?" He was surprised he asked the question. It was curious to him she would risk so much to keep the boy. It was strange that she was able to evade his transmat probe, which meant she had a choice to remain hidden and not come for the boy. Yet, here she was.

"If you think there is some logical reason, you're mistaken. I can't help caring for Samson." Etrhnk gave her time to collect herself. For a few days she felt she had a small chance that he would actually let her stay with the mission. She even thought she had misjudged him - until he raped Aylis. She waited for him to speak but he only stared at her. Was she to be his next sexual victim? "What now?" she finally requested in resignation.

Etrhnk watched this elderly admiral with fascination. He had so many questions about her, so few answers, and he doubted he would learn anything more. Logically, he should be in awe of her, she who had been Keshona. How did she bring her task force to Rhyandh without being intercepted? She probably didn't remember, but perhaps the Opera Master did. And Pan understood gates... He pulled his thoughts back to the matter at hand. *What now?* Demba had asked. Indeed. "I wish I knew," Etrhnk replied.

"What have you done with Sammy? Why did you give him to me, if you were going to take him back?"

He judged her appearance as pleasing to the eye, although the stress of the situation distorted her. *Be careful*, he told himself. Even as upset as she appeared to be, he knew she remained powerful. She had met The Lady and lived to tell about it. She had killed barbarians effortlessly. She had even killed Jon Horss. And as Keshona, she had killed millions. The old artist knew what he had: his Mona Lisa. The Opera Master knew what he had: the sound and the fury. Perhaps Aylis Mnro knew what she had in Admiral Demba. Etrhnk did not know what he had - if he had her at all. "I did not give the boy to you. Nor did I take him away. It is not of my concern, or within my power, what is done with the boy. My understanding is that someone else cares about Samson, although I'm mystified by the *kind* of care."

She expressed surprise at his words and frowned with lack of comprehension. "Can you make me understand what you just said? I want to know Sammy will be alright."

"I can't explain to you that which I do not myself understand."

"You don't even know where he is?"

"I know that much. Are you not interested in knowing why I brought you here?"

"You want to know things about me Aylis wouldn't tell you."

"It is true I want to know more about you, and about a person named Zakiya."

However, there are others who are interested in you."

A door opened behind Etrhmk and Sammy ran into the room. The first thing Zakiya thought was that Sammy wasn't supposed to run so soon after being fitted with his regenerator prosthetic leg. His gait was uneven and obviously strenuous due to fear. Someone beyond the doorway uttered angry words and called Etrhmk's name. Etrhmk grabbed Sammy as he tried to run past him. When Sammy struggled to be free, Etrhmk squeezed his shoulder and the pain made him quit struggling.

"Kill the little bastard!" the golden alien shouted at Etrhmk, walking into the room and cutting the air with a rapier. He made straight for Zakiya and pushed the point of the sword to the gap of the collar of her uniform.

Zakiya was astonished at the appearance of this humanoid creature. Even so, her defense system was instantly triggered, and before the sword could touch her, she pivoted and knocked the rapier from the being's hand, sending it flying against the far wall. She then retreated from him and stared at him. He was dazzling in the bright light of the room. Wearing only shorts, his body was a surface of golden petals, almost like the feathers of an exotic bird. His head and face were covered with longer tendrils of feathers, most of which were now flattened as the alien reacted to being disarmed so quickly. The long feathers on top of his head soon stood back up, and as he smiled at her, the feathers on his cheeks did a kind of dance for a moment. "Test number one - passed." The golden being spoke Twenglish. "Did you have a smart comment for me, Lord Commander?" the alien asked Etrhmk, keeping his eyes on her.

"I would be careful, were I you," Etrhmk advised in Twenglish.

"I heard her sing. How can she be so dangerous? Or is it you I should watch?"

Sammy tried to break free from Etrhmk and again suffered pain. Zakiya signaled to him with her hand to remain calm. The golden alien observed with dark blue eyes, too large to be human, and the feathers of his brow slanted as though they added meaning to his words: "The boy is not yet dead? Kill him! Snap his neck!"

Etrhmk moved his hand to the child's neck but waited to obey, knowing Laplace wasn't the final authority.

"What is your name?" Zakiya asked the alien, thinking to distract him from what Etrhmk was not doing. She could see the Navy Commander was not applying force to Sammy's neck.

"Laplace is my name." The golden one moved toward her.

"What are you?" Fidelity retreated.

"You hesitate?" Laplace spoke angrily at Etrhmk, pausing to glare at him and the boy. Etrhmk reluctantly tightened his grip on the boy's neck. He tried to measure the force to make it less than lethal but enough to make the boy struggle. The boy began to strike at his arm and tried to pry his fingers away from his neck. This satisfied Laplace for the moment. "What will you do, Fidelity Demba? Pay me compliments or save the child?"

"I can't save him. You are both larger and stronger than I. It's also likely the room has hidden armaments and I'm targeted. I choose to spend my final moments wondering what you are and what your origin is. Kill the boy. Perhaps, if I'm lucky, I'll get one of you before I lose my life."

"Let's see if you're lucky. Etrhmk! Kill him! Why do you take so long?"

Etrhmk lifted the boy off the floor by the neck. He was strangling now.

Constant rushed into the room. "The boy is not to be harmed! Release him to

me!"

Etrhnk dropped the boy and Constant caught him and pulled him out of reach. She quickly appraised his injury and forced him to resume breathing. She looked at Etrhnk and Laplace with fearful concern as she held the recovering child close to her.

"You're interfering, Constant!" Laplace complained. He didn't budge from his confrontation with Demba, watching her for any sign of aggression. Etrhnk was disappointed Demba did not dispose of Laplace, as he had given her the opportunity.

"The boy is not your concern!" Constant declared. "His future is guaranteed!"

"His future is now linked to Fidelity Demba," Laplace said. "And there's no guaranty of her future."

"Nevertheless, she dies first," Constant said. "Not the boy."

It was all madness, Etrhnk thought.

Laplace struck with more speed than Etrhnk knew he had. Demba hardly moved, and the blow missed her. She made no counter strike. Laplace adjusted. He continued his attack. Demba retreated and dodged every blow. Etrhnk knew nothing of Laplace's ability, but he quickly surmised that Laplace could not even hurt Admiral Demba. Unfortunately, it appeared Demba had no desire to hurt Laplace.

Laplace stopped his attack and his golden feathers opened into fuzziness as heat dissipated from his body. "You don't strike back," Laplace said. "Why?"

"What would it gain me?"

"My death! Perhaps you could kill Etrhnk next. If he waits his turn." Laplace spoke nonsense and Etrhnk thought she wisely ignored his words.

"Why do you want to kill me and Sammy?"

"You seek to destroy the Lady in the Mirror."

"I'm unaware of that goal. She twice tried to kill me. Will she relent? Will she negotiate?"

"The drive envelope has reached ninety-nine per cent on the *Freedom*," Etrhnk said, interrupting. "I can't imagine Jon Horss ordering such a dangerous tactic in dry dock." *This was starting to shift from sad fascination to hopeful excitement*, Etrhnk thought. Feelings new to him, a flavor to life he might enjoy. Briefly.

"What I find impossible to imagine," Zakiya addressed Etrhnk, "is how such a good officer became your flagship captain."

"It negates any attempt to assault the ship by transmat," Laplace said. "You have a mutiny to experience, Etrhnk."

"Are you finished with me?" Zakiya asked the golden being.

"Are you finished with her?" Laplace asked Etrhnk. "Will you not kill her for me?"

"I will not," Etrhnk replied, somewhat surprised at himself. He did not wish to be finished with her.

"I thought not." Laplace drew out a long knife from a sheath at the small of his back. "This may take awhile, but I'll be patient."

A man materialized in the far side of the room. Etrhnk thought this impossible. This place was shielded from any transmat traffic. He recognized the face of the man. Captain Direk, the supposed son of Aylis Mnro. The room armaments instantly responded to the intruder and instantly ceased when they were ineffective. "Black queen to white knight," Direk said.

"Projected image," Etrhnk said. "He's somewhere else in the room."

"There are two white knights," Laplace said. He slashed at Demba with his blade and missed her. He moved away from her and toward the image of Direk. The image faded and reappeared in another spot. Laplace moved in the new direction. Demba paused for a moment and began walking to where Direk first appeared. Laplace stopped and watched Demba. Laplace jerked backward as though held by something around his neck. Laplace twisted against his invisible attacker, fell to the deck, rolled, stabbed at the air with his knife. A man wearing an i-field generator was holding onto Laplace and struggling with him for possession of his weapon.

"Pawn to queen," the image of Direk said.

"Sammy," Zakiya called.

The alien female released Sammy and he ran to Zakiya as fast as he could.

Etrhmk watched the struggle and did nothing but glance at Constant. She was sad, whether for seeing the boy leave her or for seeing Etrhmk do nothing to stop him, he didn't know. She should understand there was no reason for him to help Laplace, unless Laplace might get himself killed. That might be unacceptable for human civilization, even though he personally did not care. Etrhmk wondered if he would need to stop Constant from coming to her fellow being's aid. He knew she hated Laplace. She seemed unable to decide on her motivations. They both knew Laplace should have the advantage over any human woman where strength was needed. Perhaps Constant still expected Laplace to survive. Perhaps she knew better than Laplace what Demba could do. He gave them accurate reports of her actions in the Big Ball. Demba might kill Constant if she tried to intervene. Still, for all his sins and theirs, it would be a cataclysmic event if either of these ancient creatures died.

Laplace strained to breathe, his neck still choked. He thrust the knife at a place close to his body. The knife slipped from side to side, then found a spot where it stuck. He worked the knife as well as he could at a difficult angle. He shoved and the blade disappeared into invisibility. His invisible attacker spasmed but remained attached to him. He could now struggle with both hands to break the constriction to his throat, but he had already been choked too long. Laplace grew frantic, then weakened. His arms dropped limply to his side. Laplace convulsed as blood and oxygen remained cut off from his head and lungs. The golden one slowly, then abruptly, fell to the floor. Bloody footprints turned toward Demba and Samson, the knife handle floating through the air above them for a brief moment until the i-field adapted it. More blood splattered on the floor as the red smudges stopped in front of Demba.

"Pick Samson up." The invisible Direk gasped in extreme physical duress. "Exactly on three you must jump upward at least twenty centimeters. One. Two. Three."

They jumped off the floor and disappeared instantly. Etrhmk was still surprised, even though he understood what made them disappear: not a transmat but a gate. He now saw how deep and powerful this conspiracy was. He was gratified to think it had a better chance to succeed than he would have thought before. He was even more intrigued to know what that conspiracy hoped to accomplish.

It was a simple matter to help Laplace regain the use of his lungs. Etrhmk offered no other treatment. He waited for Laplace to gain consciousness. He waited for the consequences. He started as Constant placed a hand on his shoulder. "What have you done?" She sounded gravely concerned, not her usual carefree attitude. Perhaps she always did care but never wanted Etrhmk to know.

"The wrong thing," Etrhnk replied.

"All because you thought I wanted to see Samson."

"I did as Laplace ordered. Then I called you. He is your child, isn't he?"

"Not any longer. I can't keep him safe. Thank you for calling me. I could almost hope your thoughtfulness means you have feelings for me." She forced her way into his arms. He handled her carefully, waiting for Laplace to skulk away. When they were alone Constant seemed to change, giving in to some emotion she had been containing.

He held her gently, appreciating fully the magic of her reality. He liked the way the short round feathers of her body folded into near invisibility as his fingers touched her. It revealed skin beneath, skin of many colors, soft skin. He touched her face, brushed the longer and mobile golden plumage. He was surprised to find dampness upon her cheeks, dark streaks in the feathers.

"You weep."

"I've seen the future - or the past. I don't know the difference any longer. I never thought it would hurt me this much!" She hugged him as hard as she could and rubbed her face in his uniform, perhaps trying to dry it. "If only there was more time! If only I could *change* time."

Etrhnk discounted Constant's words and what they might mean to him. He was to her but a leaf on a tree that would be shed in autumn. He took some small satisfaction in discovering that Constant could have meant a great deal to him, if he lived longer. If he could have felt sad, now would be his saddest moment. To die was one thing; it was the final insult to ego. To die ignorant, and unfulfilled, was... unacceptable.

Section 009

Stealing Freedom

He held her arm so tightly that he trembled. She was devastated that Sammy was again a victim of violence. She ordered him to stay at the hospital but couldn't enforce it. He wouldn't leave her side, wouldn't release his grip on her. Fortunately, Aylis didn't see his injuries, or else the situation would have been more complex, the delay much longer. Sammy needed *her*, not Aylis, at this moment.

"Will you be alright?"

"Yes." He answered in a tiny voice.

She looked at his neck again, frowned at the marks that would become ugly bruises. "I must go to the bridge, Sammy. I'll take you with me. Can you breathe freely? Can you turn your head both ways?"

He turned his head painfully. She looked at him worriedly and squeezed his shoulders. She picked him up carefully and he clung to her tightly. He was a little too big to carry - he was heavier than when he was starving in Africa - but she didn't want him to walk. "Will Captain Direk die?" He whispered the question.

"I don't think so, Sammy."

They transmatted to a node at the bridge. They emerged into a darkened room full of patches of colored light and quiet conversations. Horss moved from station to station, touching controls and giving directions to the officers. He came to the admiral as soon as he was able.

"Status?"

"Admiral!" Horss greeted her with more than just military etiquette. He patted Sammy's back. "All necessary systems active but the vision sphere. We're blind. Evasion course plotted out to fifty parsecs. We're blocked from exiting drydock by the carrier *Honor*. We caught a glimpse of them optically before we ramped up the duty cycle on the envelope."

"What other ships are maneuvering against us?"

"At least one more carrier and the *Eclipse*. I estimate twenty minutes before the *Honor* has help, based on past experience with the traffic flow around this rock."

"Get us out of here now, Jon."

"We're already moving. Blind reckoning. Admiral Khalanov has taught me a new lesson in the physics of starships. We're about to try something I know isn't taught at the Academy."

"Can we reconstruct an estimated view based on blind reckoning?" Zakiya glanced up at the featureless hemisphere of the ceiling.

"Freddy is working on it. Excuse me, I need to help the helmsman."

Zakiya moved over to stand beside Iggy at an engineering console. Sammy still wrapped his arms and legs around her, but his head moved a little, as if he was looking at things behind her.

"Sammy!" Iggy glanced behind him and returned his attention to his data. "You got him back! Where is Direk? I need him!"

"He was seriously injured." *He shouldn't even be alive*, she thought, shuddering at the memory of the knife being shoved into his invisible body. He collapsed in the hospital as soon as the gate deposited them from their jump. It was the last of Direk's strength. He fell against her and Sammy. It must have

further disturbed the knife wound. She held both Direk and Sammy and screamed for help. She was covered in his blood, as was Sammy. When Direk became visible she was shocked at how terrible he appeared. "I don't think you'll have his help for many days, Iggy."

"I'm very distressed by this! I have a completely changed opinion of Direk! He was injured rescuing you from Etrhnk. I'm in awe of him! You realize that he knows the secret of teleportation? Did he make you jump upward?"

"Yes."

"I want to know why! He wouldn't tell me, said it would scare me!"

"What are you doing to help us get away?"

"I'm detuning the drive envelope. This allows random electrodynamic forces into the envelope. We're a much larger vessel than a carrier, increasing the difference of potential. When we get close to the *Honor* our dirty envelope will corrupt their clean envelope. Then we'll have electricity!"

"In the old days we didn't have such clean envelopes, and it was a possible tactic when one ship was bigger."

"You're referring to Deep Space?"

"No. Before that. Smugglers and merchant ships. My aunt and I smuggled Earth flora and fauna before I joined Deep Space. We would drain the envelope of a competitor, if we could get close enough."

"To what advantage?"

"To very little advantage, actually. My aunt was just a mean person."

"Look!" Sammy said hoarsely. The white hemisphere of the ceiling and much of the deck seemed to disappear, as an image of exterior reality formed. The bridge crew and their work stations seemed to float above a dark mass: the hull of the ship. Brilliant light flooded the drydock cavern of Navy Shipyards. The natural rock wall of the drydock was honeycombed with service accesses, littered with retracted construction platforms, and decorated with parked vehicles and machinery. The hull of the *Freedom* was an image constructed only for reference: the plain of a small moon made of dark, pitted rock. In reality, with its drive envelope active, the *Freedom* was a hole in space, blacker than black. Before them, in the distance, the mouth onto raw space contained the disk of another ship, covered with a smooth coating of dark passive shielding. It was the *Honor*, waiting to block their exit.

"This looks too good to be a dead reckoning reconstruction, Freddy," Horss commented.

"I'm taking snapshots through the heading notch, Captain," Freddy replied.

"How are you getting enough data, when we're dancing the heading notch so rapidly? Never mind, as long as it works! Something else to learn, after thinking I knew everything!"

Changing its point of view, the bridge flew forward, as though it was a separate transparent spacecraft. It crossed the rough terrain of the *Freedom* to a vantage point at the space door opening. The image of the *Honor* swelled in size: a carrier containing a thousand smaller craft, a crew of two thousand. When one looked back at the *Freedom*, however, the carrier dwindled in comparison.

"They just pulled on their drive envelope," Horss commented by shiplink. "Ready when you are, Admiral." He was addressing Khalanov.

A bolt of lightning arced through the space door and stabbed into the blackness of the *Honor*, connecting the two ships with a river of power that seemed to dance menacingly close beneath the feet of the bridge crew. The

blinding glare flooded the bridge until the image system quickly adjusted the luminance level.

"Got them!" Iggy declared with clenched fist. "We'll drain their accumulators, maybe blow a few of their emitter circuits."

"Why is the space door staying open for us?" Zakiya asked.

"Probably indecision," Iggy answered. "Drydock was still pressurized this far ahead of our departure time. They opened the door to rapidly vent drydock when our drive envelope began compressing the air. The venting helped our lightning bolt reach the *Honor*. It may not stay open much longer. Also, we can't use the automatic systems to guide us through. I'm sitting here with my hand on the switch, ready to kill the drive envelope for an instant, to give us the mass to ram our way through the door. And you threatened to leave me behind!"

Freddy hailed her by shiplink. She turned around to see where he was. "Someone is trying to push a data link through our envelope, Admiral. It appears to be a simple communications channel. The address packet requests your personal response. The caller is Admiral Etrhnk. I can quarantine it for a short period."

"Go ahead." Zakiya almost felt obliged to talk to him, her opinion of him changed yet again by the dramatic appearance of members of a truly nonhuman race. She saw Etrhnk's low-resolution image in her right eye.

"Did you find your purpose?" he asked.

"To find my husband," she answered.

Etrhnk raised an eyebrow in surprise, then the link ceased.

Nonhumans, she pondered, *beautiful golden beings!* As far as she knew, only the crew of the *Frontier* ever encountered living nonhumans, remnants of a precursor race. Now she had met two alien species - the golden people and the Gatekeeper - and glimpsed at least one other in Oz, something called a Fesn. She wondered if the golden ones were the race Percival warned against as too lethal to take a chance of offending them. The person she once was - primarily an anthropologist - was fascinated with the prospects for studying *real* alien cultures.

As the blue-white stream of electrons danced between the two ships, Iggy's fingers darted on the manual control pads. Graphical quantifications of starship physics jumped in their display windows. The brilliant electron river abruptly vanished.

"Lost their envelope," Horss said. "They'll be slow to maneuver."

"If we can damage their emitter grid before they can re-pattern it," Iggy said, "they won't be following us."

"They just launched twenty bombers and forty fighters. The space door is closing. Maneuvering thrust at minimum."

"Be careful! We can't predict the vector in this configuration. I'm dancing the heading notch at maximum but it may still grab too much."

"That was the *minimum*?"

Zakiya saw the space door zoom at them.

"Drive off!"

The acceleration jerked back as the ship's mass realigned with the inertial reference mass of the Navy Headquarters asteroid. Zakiya staggered, holding Samson. A klaxon sounded, warning of a proximity danger. The *Freedom* collided with the partially closed space door, shearing away a kilometer-wide chunk of it, temporarily blinding the bridge viewpoint. They emerged into space amid tumbling debris. The *Honor* floated directly before them.

"*Honor* is retreating, but not fast enough," Horss said. "Closing vacuum doors in Ring Zero East. Damage Control to Ring One East."

"Pattern failure in our drive envelope," Iggy said. "Fall-back pattern. Retuning. Collision interval on my mark. Mark."

"Seventeen seconds," Freddy said.

"Engage escape route at mark plus fifteen," Iggy said.

"I think the space door debris got the *Honor's* grid, Uncle Iggy," Horss said.

Uncle Iggy? The two people Zakiya most needed at this moment were the two she least trusted to be mentally stable.

"Confirm active drive envelope," Horss said.

"Confirmed," Iggy said. "But out of tune! I'll take care of it. You scratched my ship, nephew!" Iggy added, just loud enough for Zakiya to hear: "God will take care of it, not Uncle Iggy."

Horss rotated the holographic display tank that floated before the captain's chair. Then the bridge aligned with the holograph. They pointed at a patch of space computed to be clear at mark plus fifteen. To one side the asteroid bulk of Navy headquarters dwarfed them. To the opposite side the carrier *Honor* loomed over the dark horizon of the *Freedom*. Fighters and bombers formed a net above them. Below them the Navy flagship *Eclipse* vectored toward them, imaged like a luminous bubble rising through the dark-water sphere of the *Freedom*. Horss continued to rotate the angle of escape, nudging it until the last instant.

Zakiya held her breath as Iggy worked his controls. Navy Headquarters and all the ships disappeared. The stars swirled so quickly with abrupt navigation directives they, too, disappeared. Shrouded in the darkness of its drive envelope, the *Freedom* leaped, stopped, darted in a new direction, stopped, and shot away into the emptiness between the stars. The distant stars reappeared as the final escape course held steady for a few moments. Far behind them the *Eclipse* followed, its presence detected from the scatter of particle radiation as it plowed through the interstellar quantum pathways.

"They're gaining on us," Freddy reported.

"I can't finish retuning the envelope while navigation directives are moving it around!" Iggy complained. "We've got something bent near the bow. Stop the ship!"

"And let the *Eclipse* catch us?" Horss asked.

"Let me have the helm," Zakiya said. She unwrapped Sammy as she approached the helm console and placed him gently in her lap as she sat down. She linked herself to ship sensors and selected different displays for each retina.

"Admiral, what do you need to do?" Freddy asked. She told him. Control of the helm switched from her hands to her eyes. The data projections solidified in her sight, displacing her view of the bridge. She saw the stars. She saw the lines of light between them, the currents and tides, the waves in the ocean of space. She picked a strong current and rode it, then another and another, changing course constantly. The *Eclipse* followed, but slowly the distance between ships widened. With each course change came a spurt of velocity, and each time the *Eclipse* turned after them the gap grew larger.

An hour passed. The sensor target of the flagship dwindled beyond visibility. Zakiya got up from the helm, leaving the ship running straight. "Get the envelope tuned, Iggy. I'm tired."

"What do you call that?" Horss asked.

"Sailing. We were luffing badly but I found winds and currents to speed us

up. Interstellar field gradients. When you have to make speed to make money, as I did long ago, you learn to find the path of least resistance between stars."

"Do we keep this heading?"

"We have a stop to make. Sector 53509. I'll leave it to you to decide how to get there ahead of the *Eclipse*."

"When do we need to be there?"

"As soon as possible, Jon."

"May I ask what this stop represents?"

"Many of our crew and passengers will want to leave the ship. It will be their only chance to do so. We'll also pick up two more crew members there."

"How is Captain Direk?" Horss asked.

"He's injured. I left him at the hospital."

"What happened to him?"

Before Fidelity could answer, they both received a message from Mai.

Section 010

He's Dead and I Loved Him

"He passed away. We couldn't save him." Mai dropped into a chair in Aylis Mnro's office, exhausted and despondent.

"You put him in stasis?" Zakiya asked.

"Yes, but there is no hope of revival."

Mai's words staggered Zakiya. "How could it be that bad?" Her voice thickened with grief. She didn't believe what she heard!

Sammy buried his face against her stomach. He didn't understand Mai's words, spoken in Standard, but he knew the meaning by her expression and tone of voice. Zakiya stroked his dark straight hair. She was shocked into numbness, her mind sent into a loop of thoughts she couldn't break for several moments: *Direk is dead! What will we do without him? What will happen to Aylis? Direk is dead! What will we do without him? What will happen to Aylis? Direk is dead!*

"We *should* have been able to save him, although, when I first saw the knife, I didn't know why he was still alive. There were so many anomalies."

"Anomalies?"

"He wasn't human."

"Not human?"

"He wasn't fully *biological*! We were unprepared! Something vital was destroyed when the knife pierced that part of his body. We could repair his heart and lung and aorta but the other structures were unknown to us."

"Then it wasn't the real Direk." Zakiya was desperate to find some hope.

"Aylis thinks he was a copy, but we still have our doubts."

Zakiya was unable to decide how to feel. She could feel relieved, but that would deny the value of the sacrifice. He wasn't the real Direk but he was a real person. She was sure of it.

"He didn't want to die," Mai said. "He was fighting to live. Then he knew he was losing the fight. He was so... sad!"

Aylis walked into the office wiping her face with a small towel. Her eyes were red and puffy. She held the towel to her nose for several moments, then sat down with it and looked down at the floor. She leaned back and covered her face with the towel. She moved the towel under her nose again and closed her eyes.

"He wasn't your son." Zakiya wanted Aylis to agree with her statement but was unsure if she should say anything at all to Aylis.

"When you brought him to me with that knife in him," Aylis said emotionally, "he *was* my son! When he began to slip away from us on the operating table, he *was* my son! And then, when I finally understood what he was... He was conscious, and he saw that I knew... He said 'I love you.' And he gave up!" Her voice broke and she choked on a sob. "I loved him as my real son at that moment. I hope he saw that. I kissed him and held him, until he... He was very much my son, even being what he was - especially being what he was! This is very hard for me! Impossible for me!"

Jamie stopped when the door opened upon the scene in Doctor Mnro's office. Something was very wrong. "Captain Direk?" When Demba turned her way, when Demba shook her head, she felt like she had been punched in the gut.

How could that mean what it seemed to mean? "No!" Jamie shouted. Doctor Mnro opened her eyes. The grief Jamie saw in those eyes devastated her. Mnro started to say something but didn't. "But..." Jamie tried to speak. Words failed her. People lived long lives but she had seen death many times. She even welcomed it. This was somehow different, worse. "But you can save *anyone*! I just don't understand! He was your *son*!"

"And I let him die." Mnro struggled to speak. "I could *not* save him."

"I'm so very sorry, ma'am! I didn't mean... I shouldn't have spoken to you that way. I shouldn't be here. I'm sorry!"

"You came. Don't go away. Tell me why you came."

"He visited me last night." Jamie was surprised at her own difficulty to speak, as though Mnro's grief infected her. "He came to tell me I was promoted, and to ask me what happened to you."

"You told him?"

"No, ma'am." She stopped. She had so many questions she needed to ask and it was the wrong time. Aylis Mnro had lost her son. And she was raped. Jamie's questions would wait.

"It must have been a very brief visit." The woman gave Jamie much more attention than she deserved. It was strange that Mnro could even talk to her at this tragic moment in her life. Mnro was obviously making a supreme effort to continue talking.

"It was mysterious." Jamie shook her head at her mental turmoil. She had led Marines in combat and buried comrades who died the real death. She wasn't afraid of anything but she couldn't find her courage now. There would be a time in the future when it would not burden a grieving mother, and when that grief would not hurt Jamie as much as it seemed to. She shook her head again, looking down at the floor.

"You were six years old." Jamie looked up at Mnro, saw her take a deep breath, stare into her face, take another breath. "Your mother had to go away. I wanted to keep you for her, keep you young, so she wouldn't lose your childhood when she returned for you. I needed to put you in stasis. You cried and cried for your mother! I couldn't do it! I made Direk do it. Nor could *he* put you in stasis. He took you to your father's parents and they raised you."

Jamie tried to accept what Doctor Mnro told her. She couldn't absorb it so suddenly, even though she already knew Demba was her mother. Why didn't they explain everything at the beginning? Captain Direk knew her, cared for her so much that he avenged her rape! Why didn't she remember him? Why were they so cruel to the child she once was? Why did her mother abandon her? She looked at Demba and saw infinite sadness. Demba. Her mother! It would be obscene to open herself to the woman at a moment such as this. She didn't know if she even could.

Admiral Demba kept her worried gaze on Jamie as she held Sammy against her. Sammy tried to pull away in Jamie's direction, drawing the admiral with him. Jamie knelt down before Sammy, perhaps to postpone the ultimate confrontation of her life. She observed the marks on his neck in the shape of fingers. He was injured, strangled! She embraced him without thinking, just feeling.

"She's your mother," Sammy said softly close to her ear, and he caused her to make a decision.

Jamie stood up and faced her mother. She saw tears in her dark eyes. "Mother," Jamie said.

"Daughter," she quietly replied.

How long was Jamie without hope of ever finding her real parents? How many times did she petition the Mnro Clinics for the identity of her parents? How many times did she dream about the moment that had now arrived? Yet she didn't come here to greet her mother. She came to ask about Captain Direk. As much as her real mother meant to her, she could find little happiness while knowing Direk died.

"Jamie." Demba reached toward her.

Jamie retreated a step from her mother. Her mother! She abandoned her! Why did Direk abandon her? Why did she think of that? "How... How did... Why did he...?" Her mind broke open, and what she saw was too bright, too illuminating, too real!

They sat in the waiting room, their admission data completed. They were an old couple, like others they saw at the Mnro Clinic. A couple. But not married. Why? They had known each other for so long, had worked together and shared danger and hardship. Why not married? Why did she think about it now? Why did they need to be married? Having a child was out of the question. After the Clinic cured their aging and pruned their memories, would they care? Would they even stay together?

They had earned a good living, prospecting in unsettled regions of space. Geology wasn't the love of her life, but... Direk was! She couldn't lose him now! They must stay together! The future would be better. They had financial resources now, even after paying the Mnro Clinic for continuation.

Continuity. That was what the Clinic called it. Not immortality. Because the brain became too plastic to keep all its memories while the age damage was repaired. She wanted to continue, but she didn't want to lose her feelings for Direk. It took too many years to come to understand him and to accept him.

She looked at his age-lined face, still pale and handsome despite the injuries and blindness. She was thankful he couldn't see clearly how age treated her own features. She pulled him close and kissed him.

"I love you, Jamie," he said, holding her face against his. She tried to remember when he ever said that to her so factually, yet so intensely. It filled her old heart with warmth and made her kiss him again. He was a wonderful old man. He would be a wonderful young man. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" she asked.

"For what we never had. For what we may never have. For what I remember. For what you don't remember."

"I don't understand."

The door to the waiting room opened and a woman came forth. At first she didn't recognize her. Her eyesight was poor. Then she didn't believe who the woman appeared to be as she came close enough to see her better. Aylis Mnro! Out of all the thousands of Mnro Clinics why would she be here?

"Is it her?" Direk asked.

She realized she never really understood Direk!

Jamie shuddered and emotion twisted her face. She started to shake and a moan escaped from deep in her body. She put her hands behind her head. She swayed back and forth with her eyes closed and tears streaming down her cheeks. She struggled as a terrible sadness attacked her.

Zakiya tried to hold her daughter but she could not be held and could not be consoled. Eventually Jamie exhausted herself. She tried to wipe her face on her uniform sleeves but Aylis intervened with a clean towel.

"You remembered," Aylis said. "What did you remember?"

Jamie shook her head, pushed a fist against her mouth. "He's dead. He's dead and I *loved* him!" She turned and walked quickly out of the room.

Zakiya went to the door and saw her daughter running away. Aylis stepped behind Zakiya in the doorway and peered over her shoulder. "Somebody else loved him."

"He took better care of my daughter than you expected." As much as Zakiya had loved her daughter as a six-year-old, she now fell in love with the person she had become.

Section 011

The Name of Her Husband

"Do you have an appointment?"

The tall figure in the night froze at the sound of these words. After a moment he stepped into the firelight inside the mouth of the cave. "I'm unarmed. I've come to see Pan."

"I'm not unarmed," Fred stated. "Pan is asleep. State your business."

"Who are you?" Etrhmk asked, finding it easy to feel surprise. He had much experience of it lately. Now a sentient android!

"State your business."

"I bring information of interest to Pan. You're an AMI."

"I'm a person."

"Would you use that weapon?"

"I would."

"Will you let me talk to Pan?"

"I'll speak to him, Fred." Pan emerged from the dark into the dim light of the small fire. He completed the equilateral triangle around the fire. He heard the exchange between Fred and Admiral Etrhmk. He waited for Etrhmk to speak, seeing more in his face in the firelight than he saw in the better illumination aboard the *Eclipse*. The tiger stripes flickered with the flames.

"I saw the evidence of a certain visitor to your city residence."

"She didn't threaten me. Is that the reason you came?"

"Admiral Demba has successfully launched the *Freedom*. Her last words to me were, 'To find my husband.' I hoped you would tell me who he is."

"You are fascinated with Fidelity Demba, as I hoped you would be. To keep you from killing her. I have no way to understand your motives, but I think any other Navy Commander would have killed her immediately."

Etrhmk became more opaque to Pan at this point. He did not otherwise respond to Pan's comment. "I told you she has a daughter named Jamie."

"True. I remember her now. She was looking for my brother."

"Your brother Direk. Another surprising individual. And someone who knows about gates. I'm afraid he was seriously injured. I also know Demba's real name is Zakiya. Will you tell me the name of her husband?"

"How was Direk injured? Will he recover?"

"It was unintentional on my part. He departed with the ship. I have no further information I can give you on his injury or prognosis. Do you remember the name of Demba's husband?"

"I wonder if you will believe me."

"We've covered this topic before."

"Alexandros Gerakis."

Pan could only count the seconds Etrhmk remained silent. His demeanor remained opaque. "How can that be?"

"That is the only answer I'll give you."

"He existed."

"He still exists, or else Zakiya has wasted two centuries of her life."

"Thank you for telling me this." Etrhmk stared down at the fire. He looked up at Pan. He now appeared troubled.

"Is something wrong?"

"Decisions have become more difficult for me lately."

"You are perhaps reconsidering my fate."

"No. I find satisfaction in knowing you remain alive."

"Why?"

"Curiosity. I might learn something more from you."

"Why the Lady in the Mirror didn't kill me?"

"She will, you know, despite what you may think. No, there is nothing of interest to me to be learned about The Lady."

"If you learned more from me, would that profit me?"

"I doubt it. Our fates are matched in brevity, I think. I would, however, be grateful not to die as ignorant as I am."

"As would I," Pan said. "As would I."

Section 012

Stopping the Stampede

Several thousand of the people who had boarded the Freedom, including a few of the Navy crew, congregated on the grassy field by the lake, arriving from the village apartments in an almost spontaneous manner, perhaps instigated by a few persons who were upset beyond the fact of being "invited" by the Navy to partake in the voyage. Jamie circulated among them in medium dress uniform, doing her duty as Chief of Security. She thought the uniform might impress them without the brute-force implicit in battle fatigues. Still, they were suspicious of her. So far there was no sign of an attempt to organize. The crowd formed small groups that discussed their concerns about the mission and any rumors that were interesting. She didn't hear anything that seemed pertinent to the security of the ship and passengers. She did hear her mother's name mentioned often and in a peculiar context. Jamie approached one of the larger groups whose discussion had risen to the level of heated argument. They quieted as she stepped into their midst.

"Major, do you know Admiral Demba?" a woman wearing a Navy work uniform with the rank of lieutenant commander immediately asked. *Wingren*, her name tag said. Name tags were a concession to the civilians without shiplinks. She was Rhyhan, with the shiny desert skin.

"Yes, but not well. What is this about?"

"This *civilian* says she's a singer!" She referred to the erudite-looking gentleman next to her.

"I may be wrong," the man conceded, "but I think she resembles very closely the woman who sang at the end of the last Mother Earth Opera." Jamie identified the man through her shiplink. He was not typical of the civilian crew, most of whom possessed skills and training in practical and technical areas. The man was a cultural historian and artist.

"You must be wrong," Jamie said. "Why is this a matter of such contention, Professor Sung?"

"How could it possibly be true?" Wingren asked.

"The boy," someone else tried to say.

"It is a matter of contention because we are both sure of our facts," Sung said. "And I think the boy is conclusive evidence on my side of the argument. This is a dangerous journey with a frightening inception, according to the rumors. I'd like to know that our leader isn't a singer but a competent Navy officer. I also want to know what she's done to cause our early and dramatic departure."

"I'll agree with that," the Rhyhan officer said. "It's been two days since we departed Headquarters and we were told nothing about the abrupt departure. Isn't a daily briefing required aboard ship?"

"That is correct," Jamie replied to Wingren. "If you haven't had a briefing then you are not working crew." *What was this about a boy?* Jamie wondered. Did they mean Sammy? Why would that prove the contention that Demba was a singer? "Do you have a recording of the Mother Earth Opera?" Jamie asked Doctor Sung.

"It's in the ship's database. I've watched it more than once. If you speed to the end, you'll see the injured child rumored to be aboard the ship. I've seen him! I'm sure it was the same child. Another reason to wonder about her ability to

command."

Jamie watched several minutes of the performance through her shiplink, skipped to the end and nearly suffered a loss of Marine discipline. She had to pull herself away from the startling experience and the image of her *mother* hugging *Sammy*.

"Is that her?" the Rhyan officer asked. "Is that the child?"

"Yes." Jamie could hardly say more.

"It doesn't matter!" Wingren spoke with such conviction that Jamie noted her reaction through the interference of her own reactions.

"You shouldn't be agitating the civilian crew," Jamie said. "What do you know about Demba that makes you want to defend her in the face of such odd criticism?"

"We know she was Commodore Keshona!"

This caused many to laugh and make rude comments about military mentality.

"This is a woman who's spent most of her career in Navy Archives," another civilian man said.

"Possibly she had time to learn to sing," Professor Sung said, "but she is a truly great singer. I can't believe a capable admiral can also be such an astonishing singer."

"I've also heard a ridiculous rumor that Doctor Mnro is on the ship," another said. "Can you verify that?"

"Yes, Doctor Mnro is aboard. She is now an admiral." Jamie wanted time alone to regain control of her feelings, to calm down in the wake of these new revelations about her mother. Her response about Mnro being aboard caused a fury of commotion as the rumor was passed out of the group as fact to all the other groups. Jamie was barraged with questions and comments about Aylis Mnro and Admiral Demba. *She couldn't remain here!* The Rhyan named Wingren was staring at her, knowing she might have information that would aid her absurd belief about Demba being Commodore Keshona.

Jamie had come to the gathering more for her own mental health than for concern about any trouble that might ensue. She couldn't allow herself to sit in her apartment and brood over the loss of Direk. She needed the distraction, but she had not expected this!

Jamie turned and marched away from the group. She sensed someone following her - the Rhyan officer - and when she had walked far enough away from the gathering, she stopped, turned around, and was surprised to see not just the Rhyan woman but also three other female Navy officers. The Rhyan had three Earthian friends and she was their leader. "Don't you have duty assignments?"

"We're on standby until further notice," Wingren said. "We're late additions to the roster. When the ship's routine becomes normal, they'll find jobs for us. In the meantime, I'd like to volunteer for Security duty." The other three women followed their leader and offered to do the same.

"Security duty? What use would I have for four women? Do you understand what Marines are?"

"You don't seem to have any trouble with them, Major."

"That's because I can beat the hell out of them!"

"We've all mastered at least the fifth level of the Navy Personal Combat Training Course," Wingren said with some pride.

"Why? I see your career fields are far removed from that kind of thing. All

high-level technical fields. Is fighting a hobby?"

"It's a membership requirement," one of the other female officers replied. "We're a special research group."

"How does personal combat fit with a research group? What kind of research?"

"Historical research," Wingren answered. "The combat keeps out those who aren't serious. It's also beneficial to our health and safety, if you know what I mean."

"Is it a serious thing that you believe Admiral Demba was Commodore Keshona?"

"Very serious," more than one of them said.

"I think you know something about Demba," Wingren said. "Do you have an opinion as to whether our research conclusion is plausible?"

Jamie couldn't think objectively where her mother was the subject. She couldn't settle into the idea that Demba *was* her mother. She wanted to get away from these strange Navy officers. "I don't think you can pass the screening for Security. I'm surprised you made it onto the ship's roster."

"We're not mentally defective!" Wingren said irritably. "We do science. We do engineering. We measure carefully. We've measured Admiral Demba. She fits what we know of Keshona. And we know a lot! We have Rhyann witnesses and images that are consistent and not obviously manipulated. We study history most carefully. It's very much a forensic discipline. You'd be amazed at how many official records are purposely inaccurate. But people live a long time, and they remember pieces -"

"Please be more concise!" Jamie interrupted her, and she was somewhat intrigued despite her personal troubles.

"We are absolutely certain of our research conclusions. Keshona saw a problem that would cause massive death and suffering and she fixed the problem. We think she's now on another great quest. We wanted to be part of it."

"In an unarmed ship filled with civilians and largely technical Navy officers," Jamie reminded them.

"We still want to volunteer to help Security."

Jamie gave up. She was short of personnel. She could find *something* for these Navy women to do. "Fine! That way I can keep an eye on you!"

* * *

"Damn it! Sir." Jamie didn't realize the captain was asleep until he jumped.

Horss woke up. He was sitting in his captain's chair, alone on the bridge. He was studying ship specs, poring over crew records, exploring the ship's databases. He had closed his eyes - he told himself - to better see the information scrolling through his ocular terminal. He opened his eyes and saw Major Jones. He came completely awake in that instant. Jones was the kind of person who - if you suddenly encountered her in close proximity - made you want to take a step backward and keep your hands in plain sight. He had to remind himself that he was the captain and he still outranked her. "Damned if I do and damned if I don't."

"Do what, sir?"

"Doesn't matter what!" He noticed she was standing somewhat at attention. "At ease, Major." She took her fatigue cap off and he saw her hair was short like all the other Marines. A shiny scar ran through her scalp. Then he noticed other

imperfections in the skin of her face and bare arms. She had never bothered to clean up the history written in her body's terrain. It was a silly Marine affectation. How could you sneak up on anyone if you looked like trouble from a distance?

"I'm here, sir." Jamie said it after Horss waited about a second too long to speak. She was still upset with how he handled the Mnro Rape but she was trying to move on.

"I'll be here shortly, too. You caught me napping."

"Begging your pardon, sir."

"Stop with the 'sir' business. You're a lot older than me. What was your 'damn it' about, if it wasn't about my dereliction of duty?"

"My *mother!*" Jones replied with plenty of flavor on the word 'mother.' "Has she talked to you about me?"

"Not the mother you wanted or expected? Every time I see her she asks me about you. Neither of us knows very much, so we just speculate. Give her a chance. I didn't like her at first but she's vastly different now."

"Is she all those things they say she is?"

"What things?"

"I saw the Mother Earth Opera! I saw Sammy! I saw this wonderful singer who looks like Admiral Demba. It had to be her! And I have these four crazy Navy officers who say she's *Commodore Keshona!*"

"Would you rather have a sweet little old lady who would bake cookies for you?"

"Damn!" Jones swore, not hearing any hint of a denial from Horss.

"She is and she would. Lady and cookies, I mean." He could see her mind was chewing on big, hard pieces of news. When she didn't respond for a moment, he took a chance on broaching a delicate subject. "I'm very sorry Captain Direk died. He saved them, saved the whole ship. I hope we can justify his death."

She sucked in a deep breath and nodded, looking away from Horss. Her hazel eyes reflected just a glint of moisture in the low illumination of the bridge. Horss suffered a surprising twinge of empathic grief, knowing what she must feel. He had listened to Mai describe the scene in Doctor Mnro's office. Mai had seen many tragic events in her tenure on Earth but she needed to tell of Direk and Jones as though it affected her so much she would even speak to Horss in order to unburden herself. It caused him to feel real concern for Jones, contrary to his previous regard for her mental toughness and lack of sensitivity. It also led to his call for her to report to him for special duty, so that he and Demba could appraise her fitness.

"You knew I was her daughter?"

"I made her tell me why she was so interested in you and why Doctor Mnro was so affected by you."

"I hope she isn't too disappointed in me. I've been a Marine for far too long."

"Our 'Jamie conversations' have been interesting. I wouldn't say she's disappointed."

"You must have lied to her."

"Damned if I do, damned if I don't. Jones, you haven't heard all of it yet."

"All of what?"

"Are you coping with this upheaval in your life?" He noted the fact she would not look directly at him now. He remembered Jones as a very in-your-face kind of person who dared you not to pay attention to her. "Your mother and

Aylis Mnro asked me to haul you in for inspection. I don't know why they couldn't do it themselves."

"I'll survive." Jamie lied. Part of her had died and what remained was a different Jamie.

"Good. Then you're ready for more shocking news."

"About my mother?"

"There's more to tell about her. A lot more. But not now. This is something else, and it will further upset you. Can you handle it? I'm not asking *you* - I'm asking *myself* if I think you can handle it. There are at least four reasons why I shouldn't tell you. Are you ready? Or should I keep quiet?"

"What are the four reasons not to tell me?"

"Not important, since I'm going to ignore all four."

"What are the four reasons?"

"You sound like you're stalling. I'll save it for later."

"Tell me the damned four reasons!"

"That's better! One: it's none of my business. Two: Demba and Mnro should tell you, not me. Three: the explanation will make me sound like a fool. Four: it might embarrass both of us if you can't handle what I'm going to tell you."

"*Why* do you want to tell me whatever this is? Are you going to enjoy it?"

"I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. I believe I'm doing you a favor. Ever since your mother killed me and Mai saved me, I feel like I've got another chance to do better. But I'm still not sure of anything."

"What do you mean - my mother killed you?"

"She killed me! I'll tell you the humiliating story one day. Damned strange way to recruit a captain for her ship. You're still trying to delay me from giving you this wonderful but terrible news. Are you ready?" Horss waited and stared at Jones. Jones wiped at something on her face, made a face, and faced him. She wouldn't say anything but she was now looking him in the eye, like the normal Jamie Jones. He had to stop and think about the parts not yet rehearsed in his mind. He didn't want to jump right to the key piece of news, because she might slap him and storm off the bridge without giving him a chance to offer proof of what he said. He realized he valued her as an honest person. He knew that most of the troubles in her career as a Marine came as a consequence of her intolerance of the dishonest political machinations of the brass. He admired her for being true to the principles he often violated to advance his own career.

"I'm still here, still waiting, Captain." Jamie was resigned to it and irritated by it.

"Sit down. This may take most of what little time we have." Jones seated herself, not on a workstation chair but on the deck, leaning against the captain's navigation tank, not even facing Horss. She held her fatigue cap in both hands resting on her knees. Her eyes were lowered, probably focused on nothing external. He hated to see a Marine officer looking so close to being broken in spirit. "Once upon a time," Horss began, and paused to see if that phrase would trigger Jones's intolerance of fools. To his dismay, she didn't react. "Once upon a time there was a scientist named Aylis Mnro who discovered how to rejuvenate people in a way affordable by anyone. She realized it would cause serious problems if she couldn't offer the treatment immediately to all the billions who were already old enough to be facing death."

"I *am* familiar with the history of the Mnro Clinics."

"But not the secret parts. Mnro had the help of three people whose names never appeared in the official history. Two of these people developed most of

the devious strategy she used to circumvent trouble from the clamoring masses. Their names were Dawa Phuti Mende and Zakiya Muenda."

"The Doctor Mende?"

"You'll get the chance very soon to meet him and verify what I've said."

"He's dead!"

"So was I."

"Who was the other person?"

"Another anthropologist. You've already met her. Your mother."

Jones leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Horss slid out of his command chair and sat down next to Jones. She gave him a strange expression. It fit his mood.

"The Five Worlds. We're almost there. My mother is going to steal a dead body! My mother is named Zakiya Muenda! You don't have much time! I'm about to jump up and run screaming!"

"Zakiya Muenda, Igor Khalanov, Phuti Mende, and Aylis Mnro have been friends for more than a quarter of a millennium. They served together on a famous ship. They made some very interesting - and unreported - discoveries. Did you ever look in the silver bag your mother gave you?"

"No, I gave it back."

"But you know what it was?"

"No."

"Jones! Have you no curiosity? It would have made this a little easier if you knew your mother had a real cryptikon in that little bag."

"A cryptikon?"

"Never mind! I'll get to the point. The third person who helped Aylis Mnro was *Aylis Mnro*. A *copy* of her. The copy looked exactly like her, was DNA-identical to her, but was partially mechanical. This copy was the person who was as ruthless and relentless as Aylis Mnro needed to be to build and operate the Mnro Clinic network for more than two centuries. The real Aylis Mnro spent the whole time asleep. She awoke to replace her copy and become a crew member on this ship."

Jamie stared at Horss and Horss stared back, making his gray eyes convince her hazel eyes that he was sane and truthful. *Come on, Jones*, he thought at her, *work it out, see the big implication*.

"A cryptikon?" Jamie was completely adrift. *She had actually held a cryptikon!*

"Forget about that!" Horss yelled at her. "Think about the *copy* of Aylis Mnro! She built a *copy* of herself! The copy was animated by an actual surviving member of a precursor race! The *copy* had all of her memories. If she could build such a *copy* of herself, she could build a *copy* of someone else!"

It took great effort to get the cryptikon out of her mind. A copy of Mnro? Jamie's mind was bumped out of focus again. It was too weird to think about! All she wanted to think about was Direk.

"Direk!" Horss shouted his name, even as she found another memory of him.

"Direk?" She tried to withdraw from the memory, tried to understand why Horss was speaking Direk's name.

"The Direk who died was a *copy*! *The real Direk may still be alive!* I wanted you to know. I wanted you to not be depressed, to have hope, and - if you value your dignity - to not be subjected to another traumatic situation where you can't control yourself." Jones's chest started heaving and Horss began to scoot away from her. Her hand reached out for him and caught his wrist. She almost broke

it before she let go. She covered her face with her fatigue cap. "Go ahead and bawl. I know Marines cry. I've seen them cry like babies. Doesn't mean they can't kick your butt after they blow their noses."

She almost laughed. "I want to believe you. I want to so badly! This... this new information inside of me, these intense images and scenes, they're battering me into some vastly different concept of myself. I can't figure out who I am anymore! But if Direk is still alive! If he's *alive*...!"

"Time for a special assignment, then. You will accompany your mother and Aylis - would you believe she insists I call her Aylis? - into the Five Worlds."

"I don't know..."

"It's an *order*, Jones." Horss stood up. Jones stood up. She put her cap on, started to salute.

"How can I function?" She turned the salute into a quick tear-wiping.

"Just remember the Marine motto."

"*Semper fidelis*? How does that apply?"

"Oh, I thought it was 'Kill anything that moves.'"

"And how does that apply to me?"

"Just be faithful to yourself, whoever you are. Would you care to guess what Deep Space ship your mother and Aylis served aboard?"

"Don't tell me it was the *Frontier*."

"Well... OK."

"Jon Horss!"

"You sound just like my mother. The *Freedom* has a complete copy of Deep Space Fleet operational and personnel records. Take a look at them and see if you think they're authentic. They're a major reason for my lack of sleep. They're fascinating. There are things in them that would be classified and withheld from the public even beyond current times. But don't get too involved in them right now. As you know, we're about to run the final leg to the Five Worlds. I'll make an announcement giving both military and civilian crew the chance to abandon ship. You will secure the departure process and account for the departing crew. This will occur about two hours from now. I wish we could convince everyone to remain with us. But the admiral feels it's unethical to order anyone to stay aboard."

"Can the ship be maintained with a small crew?"

"This ship hardly needs a crew at all. All we do is damage it! I'm mainly concerned with the safety of those who wish to leave the ship. They were placed aboard the *Freedom* by the Navy for a reason. It's possible they'll bring trouble to the Five Worlds by going ashore there."

"The Five Worlds is a peaceful community. Why trouble?"

"There are two purposes for the mission, represented by your mother and by Etrhnk. Your mother needs the ship to search for your father. Etrhnk needs the ship to place its cargo where it can be pirated. The cargo is the people aboard, the wealth of their talents and knowledge. If they go ashore at the Five Worlds, they may be abducted by force, and the Five Worlds would come under attack."

"By whom?"

"By pirates and slavers. Your mother, Sammy, Freddy, and I have seen their leader, or whatever she is. I was never more scared in my life! There's too much to explain right now. Trust me."

"My father? My mother has this whole ship just to find my father? Who -"

"My feelings get hurt when people laugh at me. Ask your mother." Horss saluted, forcing Jones to quickly salute him. She turned and almost stumbled,

retreating out of the star-filled bridge.

* * *

People crowded into the main port-side debarkation bay, most of them carrying their possessions. Thousands more waited in lines in the connecting ring corridors. In one corner of the bay Jamie addressed her contingent of Marine Security personnel and the four Navy volunteers. "You heard Captain Horss's announcement. This option applies to all military as well. When the civilians leave, you may follow them. There will be perhaps an additional hour for you to retrieve your personal gear. Notify me on shiplink when you've departed."

"Deserted, you mean," Aguila said. "You're staying. I'm staying."

Miguel was her best Marine and she expected his reaction. "You know I'll continue to pound on you and run you through the ten-kilo course. Are you in love with me?"

"Is that what you call it? I know I get very excited when I receive one of your signature bruises. My collection isn't complete yet."

"Glad to have you with me, Miguel." Jamie was pleased that all of them chose to stay, as she ran down the roster and queried them individually. They were a diverse lot, yet they had one thing in common: they were crazy. She hadn't known them long but for some reason they responded to her. Perhaps it was the nature of the Mission. They knew it was potentially fatal.

"How about our camp followers?" She turned to Wingren and the other female Navy officers. She knew their choice. They were devoted to the person they believed was Commodore Keshona. They were crazier than the Marines. They could also run the ten-kilo course without any trouble.

As usual, Wingren spoke for them. "The fun is just beginning, Major. We wouldn't miss it for anything."

"So, is it true, Major?" Aguila asked.

"Is what true?"

"Was Admiral Demba Commodore Keshona? With Horss *and* Keshona running the boat, we're loaded with quality brass."

"No one has confirmed that. But Horss didn't deny it."

"You think it's possible, don't you?" Wingren asked.

Jamie nodded agreement for the first time, after Wingren had posed some form of the same question too many times. Direk again visited her from the past, without even being triggered by any obvious reference. She had a moment of internal panic as the bright image flashed through her mind. She was a child and a big man with palest blue eyes was kneeling in front of her. It was Direk, her first memory of him, and it was colored by the hatred of him she would later feel. He took her from her mother, the woman who would become Keshona. The memory of hatred of him when she was a child made her love for Direk when he was an old man even more profound.

"Are you okay, Major?" Aguila asked.

She shook her head. "No. I'm usually a very private person, but I should tell you something before there are inaccurate rumors. Someone has already died on this mission. Captain Direk died rescuing my mother and Sammy from an attempt by the Navy Commander to remove her from the ship. That was what precipitated our sudden departure from Headquarters. I knew Captain Direk. In another lifetime, I loved him. It's been difficult for me to function for the last

two days."

Everyone in her small audience was thrown into a confused mental state. Jamie could see sympathy and concern battling surprise and curiosity on their faces. "What's that look on your face, Miguel? Did you think I've always enjoyed being a girl Marine who likes to hurt boy Marines?"

"Captain Direk rescued your *mother*?" Wingren asked.

"Admiral Demba is my mother." She saw the shock on Wingren's face. "I have more to say." She should have expended more emotion in Horss's presence. She was surprised at his sensitivity, considering his former duty as flagship captain. If she could have blown it out of her system on the bridge she wouldn't be skirting the edge of emotional chaos now. "What Captain Horss bluntly implied in his announcement to the crew is that departing crew are making the wrong choice. Their presence in the Five Worlds will bring danger to that community and to themselves. We want them to stay on the ship."

"Demba is your mother." Wingren was stuck on the wrong topic, shaking her head in wonder.

"What can we do?" Aguila asked. "You want us to talk to them?"

Wingren recovered. "There are image projectors in these bays."

"Turn them on," Jamie said, "and let me feed my shiplink data into them."

The four Navy officers needed only a few moments with their shiplink augments to access the nearest projection system. A blue curtain of light, deep with a third dimension, bloomed next to a plain bulkhead at the end of the bay. Heads turned in that direction as the light caught their attention. Jamie logged into the ship's public data storage and performed a simple search for the original name of her mother: Zakiya Muenda. An extensively tabbed folder of data appeared in her ocular terminal and was replicated in the wall-sized image volume. Jamie picked the tab which displayed a still picture of her mother. An unsmiling woman sat for an official portrait wearing a uniform made famous by countless entertainment episodes glorifying Earth's early years of space exploration beyond the solar system. She was framed by data in an official style unlike that of the Union Navy. Her identifying data displayed at the top of the image: "Commander Zakiya Muenda, Linguist, Archaeologist, born 01-23-2400, Africa, Earth, Third Officer, *D.S.F. Frontier*, Human Communities Medal of Service in the Cause of Civilization, Deep Space Medal of Highest Honor..."

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Wingren was excited again. She and all of the Navy officers were shocked. Even some of the Marines understood enough to be awed. "That's Admiral Demba! Where did that picture originate? Was she also an actress in a *Deep Space* episode?"

Jamie shook her head. She opened another tab on the folder image her search had first produced. She flipped through pages of data showing glimpses of material Zakiya Muenda had produced as an officer and research scientist on the Deep Space Fleet vessel *Frontier*. The volume of work spanned decades. Jamie opened a third tab on the folder and found an index to recorded images. She opened picture after picture, rapidly perusing them. Again, years of living and working were recorded in them. She stopped and backed up to an image that looked interesting. It was a group portrait of the crew of the *Frontier*, all eight of them. There was her mother in the center of the group, *and standing next to Aylis Mnro!*

"That's Mnro!"

"And Khalanov!"

Jamie hardly listened while the Navy officers and her Marines discussed the

image. Her eyes were drawn to the tall officer standing next to her mother, whose hand rested on her mother's shoulder. He looked very familiar, and she *loved* the look of him.

"Where did all of this come from?" Wingren nearly screamed. "How can it be the real records of Deep Space Fleet?"

Jamie tore her eyes away from the man in the picture. "I don't know. Captain Horss told me it was there and he believes it's authentic. He's been studying it."

"It will at least give them something to think about," Aguila said. "Wouldn't that be something? Mnro, Demba, Khalanov - members of Deep Space Fleet?"

People started crowding into the hangar from the connecting ring corridors. The level of conversation rose to a roar in the crowd. Someone opened a vast partition at the far side of the bay so the crowd could expand into an adjoining maintenance bay. Several more image projectors turned on and showed the same data.

"We got their attention," Wingren said. The Rhyian officer gathered with her Earthian cohorts for a few moments, then turned back to Jamie. "Major, let me input some data we've collected."

"Let me see it first, Wingren." Jamie watched the beginning of a presentation in her shiplink that started with an old Rhyian war veteran displaying an image of a dark woman in a Navy commodore's uniform. There were more than three dozen such images and perhaps ten different versions of the image. All of these images were collected and enhanced, resolving into a clear holographic portrait of a woman who looked exactly like Admiral Demba. None of the individual images were conclusive as to the identity of the person, but the composite image was startling in its clarity. Jamie felt a tingling of goose flesh, looking at the familiar face with the unfamiliar expression of lethal intent that her imagination seemed to apply. That woman killed millions of Rhyian, and no one yet knew how. "Damn, Wingren! Is there more?"

"This version is ten minutes in length. We have another version that documents our methods and sources and lays out a time line."

"Go ahead and show this one." Jamie watched the program again on the big holographic display, dividing her attention to see the reactions of the people who were prepared to leave the ship. While she did this, Wingren manipulated the display volume to reinstall the previous images below the documentary. "Ruby Reed," Jamie said to Wingren. "Find her and put her up there."

She was not surprised the pale European singer closely resembled her African mother. The dates of birth and death fit precisely in the space between Zakiya Muenda and Commodore Keshona. When the documentary reached its dramatic conclusion of imaging, Wingren placed that portrait into the sequence.

"What a person!" Aguila declared, his voice barely heard above the roar of conversation around them. "This will be a *great* mission!"

A flow of people started toward Jamie and her contingent. Questions bombarded them. Jamie was reduced to simply shouting at them to stay on the ship. There was so much confusion she couldn't tell what effect they had, but by the time the dock warning sounded, Jamie could see empty spaces across the deck of the debarkation bay. Jamie ordered her troops to take their assigned places to control the egress. The main portal cleared to show a cold white tunnel. There was movement in the crowd toward the tunnel, but many more started to flow back from the portal. The crowd in the bay grew much thinner. The mechanical door at the other end of the tunnel rolled aside. The Marines moved a barrier aside at the portal. A few people made their way to the portal

and walked down the tunnel. Many more people stood still, silently trying to make a decision, while others were discussing matters with those near them. As the bay emptied, those who remained formed a group that aimed itself at Jamie. As they approached, some of her Marines returned to her side, as if to protect her. She recognized Professor Sung, the cultural historian, among the crowd of the undecided. He became their spokesman.

"That is a provocative series of images," Sung said. "Compelling, even though very improbable. What does it mean?"

"It means, sir, that this mission is not what any of us thought it was. It may also mean we have a good chance of surviving it."

"We are aware of the dismal history of missions beyond the frontiers of the Union. Why is the Five Worlds not a good choice?"

"I don't know how it was in your case but I suspect most of our civilian crew were invited by the Navy to participate in a voyage of exploration. None of you could decline the Navy's invitation. Leaving the ship now will probably not rescind the invitation. The Navy will come after you."

"And put us back on the ship?"

"Only if they catch us. They could put you on another ship. The implication is that none of us were ever supposed to return to Union space. Captain Horss told me we were going to become slaves somewhere beyond the Union boundary."

"Then Demba is actually working against the Navy," the historian said. "She knows it was never a legitimate exploration mission. She is in fact trying to steal the ship from the Navy. I would applaud but I know it's a doomed attempt. There is no good choice for us."

"I believe Demba and Mnro must have planned long ago to steal this ship. Hopefully, that means they think they can accomplish it. The fact that Demba gave you a choice to leave the ship means she doesn't intend to harm you. The fact that Captain Horss asked me to try to stop you from leaving sends the same message. Stay on the ship. Take your chances with someone like Demba, who may have the ability to keep us all safe."

"I hope your logic is correct," Sung said. "Either choice may end badly but the *Freedom* will certainly be the more interesting choice."

The final group of civilians made a unanimous decision and departed for their quarters on the ship. Jamie was left standing with her Marines and the Navy officers, and she was still fascinated by the crew portrait of the *Frontier*.

"What is it?" Lieutenant Wingren asked.

"Do you know who he is?" Jamie pointed to the tall officer next to her mother.

"If it's authentic, that would be Captain Alexandros Gerakis."

Section 013

Climbing a Mountain to Phuti

Jamie was still standing with her Security contingent when Demba, Mnro, and Sammy appeared by transmat. Everyone stood to attention and Jamie exchanged salutes with her mother. Doctor Mnro hung back with Sammy as Demba stepped forward and put everyone at ease. Demba turned and glanced at the images still displayed in the debarkation bay. "How many left the ship, Major?"

"Two hundred five civilians, sir." Jamie wanted to point at the *Frontier* crew and ask a certain question about Alexandros Gerakis but it didn't seem like the right time. Not too many days ago she would have been nose-to-nose with Demba, demanding to know everything, but she had ceased being that person. Now she was someone's daughter, and assaulted by everything that brought with it. Now she had different needs, different perspectives. She cringed when she remembered some of the things she did during her life as a Marine.

"I don't know why your show kept everyone else aboard, but I'm grateful. Well done."

"Captain Horss's less-than-subtle announcement helped," Jamie said. "The crew has courage and intelligence. And I think we appealed to their curiosity."

"Are you ready to go with us?" Demba looked at Jamie with critical interest.

"Yes, sir. But may I introduce my men and my Navy volunteers?" Her mother nodded assent. Jamie stepped aside as the Marines and the Navy officers formed a queue to introduce themselves to Demba and Mnro - and also to Sammy, much to his delight.

Lieutenant Commander Wingren was last in line, probably by choice. Zakiya regarded her with special interest. Wingren saluted smartly and put forth her hand to shake. "I saw your documentary," Zakiya said as they shook hands, finally understanding why these Navy officers had been her watchers for so long. "You know more about Keshona than I do. She's not someone I want to remember." She looked at Wingren's head and hands where permanent tribal markings were visible. She wanted to know more about Wingren and the culture from which she came on Rhyandh. "One day we'll have to talk. It's possible I knew some of your ancestors from the deserts. I did fieldwork on Rhyandh as an anthropologist a long time ago. That was when I was Zakiya Muenda of Deep Space Fleet."

* * *

Jamie was content to hold Sammy's hand and walk with him ahead of Demba and Mnro down the cold white tunnel into the Five Worlds habitat. She had a lifetime of questions to ask both women but it would have to wait. Sammy was a calming and distracting influence. It was all she could do to keep up with his questions and comments.

People met them who wore no uniforms or badges and carried no weapons. They were officials who registered the four of them as guests. Surprisingly, Sammy now had an official record of Union citizenship and he seemed happy about it. Jamie received a better welcome than she expected, perhaps because she was obviously Sammy's friend. Admiral Demba initially found no friendly faces among this informal group of officials. Aylis Mnro was rigorously

identified, because no one could believe it was her, then the smiles came out. They closed the Port of Entry and all the people working there escorted them into the Five Worlds.

As they walked through the port area Demba talked with several of the people near her who wore clothing that Jamie assumed was costumes from ancient times on Earth. Perhaps they wore the costumes as a normal routine - a way of welcoming all new guests. Her mother was relaxed and now seemed to attract more persons willing to talk to her. Demba asked questions and made comments and smiled. The black uniform she wore seemed to become invisible to the Five-Worlders.

"It's what she always used to do," Mnro explained to her when Jamie had a chance to query her about Demba. "We often worked as a team. She collected the cultural data, I collected the physical data. We both enjoyed seeing new faces and talking."

"Deep Space Fleet?"

"Yes. We loved it! There were so many surprises, yet people were always people, no matter how deep in space we encountered them."

It was good to see Aylis Mnro happy in the moment, Jamie thought. It was interesting to see the woman who was her mother displaying yet another facet of her life and talents. She was in awe of these two women.

Jamie sensed the scrutiny of one of the local citizens. She instinctively but casually placed herself between the stranger and Sammy. This action made the person speak to her. "They seem genuinely interested in us," the man commented, indicating Demba and Mnro. He was almost her height, taller than most of the others. She guessed he was of European lineage, judging from his long face and blue eyes, although he wore a costume that seemed Asian. He was young and serious of expression.

"I think they are," Jamie agreed.

"How do they know the Old One?"

Jamie judged the young man's demeanor more carefully. He had targeted her for inquiry. He was apparently an official of the Port of Five Worlds. "Does your job give you reason to question me? We have completed the necessary data and have permission to enter the Five Worlds."

"You have permission because the Old One requested you have it. She knows you."

"I don't know who the 'Old One' is," Jamie said.

"She spoke your name with recognition when I told her of your request to meet with her. She did not sound as interested in the other two."

"My name? I don't know her, or I don't remember her. I suspect you and I are of similar professions. I am the Chief of Security of the *Freedom*. My name you know. Who are you?"

"I apologize for my manners," the man said. "My name is Gregor. Yes, I am in charge of our security force. Something does not feel right to me. This is the most unusual visit by the Navy I have experienced in my ten years of duty."

"Demba and Mnro did not tell you anything more than that they wished to visit this 'Old One?'"

"They referred to her as Nori Hoshino, which I know is her real name. Almost no one else knows her real name. That Aylis Mnro knows her is a fact disturbing to me. Do you know if I should not be disturbed?"

"I still don't know who she is," Jamie said, wanting to resolve the matter more quickly than at the current pace. She had no instructions on what not to

say to anyone. Her mother should know Jamie's reputation concerning her big mouth. "Does the Old One have any relationship to Doctor Mende?"

"I was about to approach that subject, but you are somewhat intimidating, Major Jones."

Jamie reached for Sammy as he started to wander off. "Me? I'm just here to watch Sammy."

"Why did you ask about Doctor Mende?" Gregor asked.

"How many more security people do you have?" Jamie appreciated Gregor's slow but perceptive inquiry. Jamie considered it a matter of courtesy to warn Gregor of the intentions of Demba and Mnro. There could be trouble and Gregor needed to prepare for the possibility.

"Not very many. Should I activate all of them?"

"Demba and Mnro want to take Doctor Mende from the Five Worlds."

"That would not be permitted! The Old One knows how that would hurt us!"

"Put all of your personnel on duty, Gregor. Also, start a rumor the Navy is here to steal Doctor Mende. I'm not going to make it easy for those two to do it."

"His body is still at the shrine," Gregor said, checking an instrument he carried. "They could have transmatted it. Why do they want it?"

"As you were beginning to suspect, Gregor, they both knew the Old One, and so also Mende. They and Mende served together on the crew of a ship. I don't know why they would want his body, either dead or alive. But I do believe their reasons must be good."

"Doctor Mende was in the Navy?"

"These are very old people, Gregor, and they were crewmates long before the Navy existed."

"Do you think the Navy wants Doctor Mende to help heal another troubled society? Can he be revived by Doctor Mnro?"

"I'm sure he can, but the Navy has no interest in Mende. Only Demba and Mnro want him."

"Please excuse me, Major. Thank you for your information." Gregor hurried off, speaking into a communications augment.

"Who was he?" Sammy asked. He had not understood the conversation with Gregor, spoken in Standard.

"A policeman," Jamie replied. "Your mother will be angry with me for what I told him."

"Will she spank you?"

Jamie laughed and stopped. "She hasn't spanked you, has she?"

"No! She's too nice! And I'm not gonna make her want to!"

"She *is* nice. Maybe too nice."

Demba cast a long gaze back at Jamie, perhaps because she saw her talking to Gregor. Jamie smiled inwardly. She might still behave badly as her mother's little girl but she felt justified for what she told Gregor.

The parade passed through a grand opening and spread out along a balcony that only became a balcony when Jamie's mind was able to comprehend what her eyes saw. Here was a windowless verge onto a planet curled into a tube of bright clouds and mountain peaks. She only knew it was a tube - a giant cylinder - because it was a known fact of history. Her eyes could barely translate that historical fact into an explanation of what she saw. Her perspective was God-like. She looked down - and up and to the left and to the right - and saw mountains capped with snow, hills green with forests, valleys cut by

shining rivers and streams. This three-hundred-sixty-degree universe projected away from her around a cylinder of partial cloud cover until the haze of distance and weather obscured whatever end might exist at whatever far distance. Despite a previous experience of viewing an immersive image of the Five Worlds, reality remained the supreme experience. She and Sammy were captivated for a long time, until Demba broke their trance, urging them to move on.

A clear tube allowed them to step off the balcony and float through it and into a small aircraft with large delicate wings. Sammy seemed quite at ease in the micro-gravity and didn't need her help pulling himself along. Sammy seized the opportunity to sit in Demba's lap in the airplane, making Jamie feel lonely. Jamie could see people launching themselves into the air from the balcony, their clothing sprouting translucent wings and other airflow control surfaces. When the aircraft disconnected from the balcony tube and began its flight, the flying people outside accompanied it toward the rugged terrain below the clouds. Jamie could identify Gregor as one of the human fliers.

The airplane silently glided many kilometers away from the balcony into clouds, emerging above a green valley dotted with villages. They landed at one of the villages, floating silently into a grassy field between rows of quaint rock-faced houses with steep roofs. The flying people from the port arrived with them, doing expertly-timed stalls to hop onto the ground, their flying mechanisms vanishing into their costumes.

Jamie followed behind her mother, Sammy, and Mnro down a path that seemed much older than the Five Worlds. Their escorts followed in pairs behind them and hung back as they approached an old woman who sat on a stone bench under an apple tree. The seated person began a small struggle to gain her feet and Mnro and Demba rushed to help her.

"Nori?" Mnro supported the oriental woman by her arm and hand.

"I couldn't believe it was you," the aged woman said, grasping Mnro's hand that held hers. "Have you come to argue with me about my age? I almost turned you away."

"Nori." Demba spoke with deep affection, taking the other side of the elder.

"So *you* are this Fidelity person! Zakiya! And where is Jamie? She was the *only* reason I let you come."

The old woman gazed at Mnro and Demba with joy but turned away to spot Jamie's face. She frowned slightly to try to recognize her, then found Sammy standing next to Jamie. Sammy was staring at her. Sammy wore shorts and his injury was obvious. The prosthesis did not blend with the rest of his leg. The Old One glanced up at Mnro with a frown before taking Sammy's hand and smiling at him.

"I'm Sammy." He returned the smile, shaking her hand a little too hard. "You're old!"

"And you are so young!" She said it in Twenglish. "Why are you here? I didn't know children traveled on Navy ships."

"Zakiya is my mother now and I have to stay with her. She didn't want me to come here because of my leg, but I can walk! I'm sorry I said you were old. It doesn't mean I don't like you. I do. Rafael is old and I like him a lot."

"My son likes to talk." Demba said, smiling.

"Oh, yes!" Aylis Mnro agreed.

The old woman chuckled, released Sammy's hand, and turned to Jamie. She looked up at her and Jamie almost felt obliged to lower herself to ease the strain

of the stooped elder having to peer up at her. The old woman raised her hand and Jamie did bend over, not realizing she was going to snatch her cap from her head. "Turn," she said, pointing to one side. "Now stand up straight." She handed Jamie's cap back. She caught one of Jamie's hands in hers. Her hands were dry, bony, the skin like speckled paper, but warm and strong. "She is his daughter," the old woman said to Demba, "and she must be yours. I must have shrunk! I don't remember her being so tall. She is Jamie, isn't she?"

"Yes, Nori," Demba replied. "Jamie, Nori's father is Koji Hoshino."

Jamie had no idea who Koji Hoshino was, until she mentally reviewed the portrait of the *Frontier's* crew. It seemed that she still had an eye for good-looking men. "Who is my father, Nori? They won't tell me."

"How do you not know your father? Alexandros is your father! He would be proud of you! You are such a fearsome warrior now, but you still have the simple loveliness for which Direk expressed his pleasure to me. Ah, Direk! Aylis's misunderstood son. The old times are still inside my brain. Do you remember when you and he stopped here to visit with Phuti and me?"

Jamie wanted to know why Nori considered Direk misunderstood but an incredibly sharp and pungent memory caught Jamie and stopped her from talking or even breathing. On their visit to the Five Worlds Phuti (She called Doctor Mende *Phuti!*) mistakenly assumed she and Direk were lovers and found them romantic accommodations that caused them to investigate the possibility of physical intimacy. The results were embarrassing and comical at best. Even so, the memory pushed tears out of her. She vaguely heard Demba speaking a warning to the old woman not to mention Direk.

"Nori, we don't have much time," Mnro said. "We came to see Phuti."

The Old One paused to think. She was extremely aged but Jamie knew she was mentally alert and capable. "I did not think it was only me you wanted to see. Word has already reached me that you want to take Phuti away with you."

"Do you signify resistance?"

"If you cannot be made to abandon your desire for Phuti, then we must walk. We must walk to him and see what happens. If it can be done, then it can be done. Resistance, yes, there will be that."

"Will you go with us, Nori?"

"I'll go as far as I can."

They walked in the sunlight of a small mountain valley and into the next village with its smooth streets and cosmopolitan shops and restaurants. As they passed through, in the middle of the central street, all activity ceased. Bakers came out of their bakeries, mechanics dropped their tools, shoppers turned toward them. A small school opened its doors and a dozen children rushed into the street and followed their group. "Children!" Jamie said with awe. "So many of them!"

Sammy waved at the children, who looked at him more than they did the adults.

"We're not immortal," Nori commented. "The Mnro Clinic is no more than a medical assistance here. Even so, they've let me live too long. I am their poor substitute for Phuti. When I die, another child can be conceived."

In a few minutes they reached the pastures at the edge of the village where herd animals grazed in tall grass. They turned up a well-worn road toward terraces of grain and field vegetables. Behind them, many of the inhabitants of the village followed, walking quietly. Farmers came to the road and joined the procession as it passed.

They rounded a promontory and entered a higher, narrower valley. The road steepened and Nori moved more slowly, straining her aged body. Sammy seemed to begin to feel the drag of the prosthesis on his amputated leg. Jamie helped the old woman, holding her hand.

They stopped to rest at an overlook where sheer granite walls formed an acoustic amplifier to the narrowing valley. Distant sounds could be heard, and their voices echoed. The quiet parade of people stopped along the road behind them. They waited for Nori to recover.

It was very quiet, so quiet it seemed to make Jamie's mother restless. She watched as Demba stepped away from Nori and the attending crowd. Jamie was startled when Demba sang a single clear note. She moved to another spot and sang two notes, bell-like, at an odd interval. Jamie could not see a reason for this. She glanced at Gregor to see if he was as surprised and as mystified as she was. He seemed puzzled.

"Over there," Nori said. "Near the edge." Demba moved to the spot at the edge of the cliff. She sang three notes which seemed to carry far and sustain themselves. "Sing," Nori suggested hopefully.

The old woman must remember that Demba sang. That was a very long time ago, perhaps before Jamie was born. If this was an act to subvert resistance through music, no matter how wonderful a singer she was, Jamie thought it was useless.

Demba sang. The sound filled the natural theater. The almost atonal song began as a lament, an eerily melancholy sound that tugged at Jamie's emotions, making her anticipate what might come. The path of the song began to climb. It could not be called melody or even variation, yet it progressed. It was a struggle toward order, a running battle for victory, a search for beauty and resolution. It carried Jamie's emotions ever upward, even making her breathing synchronize to the rhythm of the strange song. It ended in triumph and was a relief to her. Looking around at the expressions on everyone's face she thought something had changed. She looked again at Gregor. There was an agreement in reaction between her and Gregor. Reality was gently shifted a short distance away from what everyone once knew.

Nori Hoshino rested and regained her strength. They resumed their journey.

"What *was* that?" Mnro asked Demba. "What language?"

"It was a song I believe to be half a billion years old," Demba replied. "I've been remembering all the years I spent with Phuti doing field research out among the stars, and this translation project just came to me. I spent forty years, off and on, deciphering it. I'm not sure it was meant to be a song. I made some guesses and I let myself get carried away. I'm sure the Ancients would not have recognized their composition. This place made me think about it musically. The echoes, the ringing. The way the notes are related, I thought they should sound as though struck like bells."

"It was the most alien thing I've ever heard," Jamie commented. "Why did you sing it?"

"Just for the fun of it."

Jamie could not quite believe that reason, could not imagine such an effective performance was due to the whim of enjoyment.

"As a warning," Nori said. "There are wonderful things we don't understand, and they will come to us whether we want them or not. And we will be changed forever."

"I never knew you were so mystical," Mnro commented.

"The closer you get to the end of life, perhaps the more mystical you become. The mountains help."

They walked, always gaining altitude. They entered a village beyond the pass into the next valley. Villagers awaited them, filling the narrow, steep streets. Somewhere above them a bell with a deep note rang very slowly.

Most of the villages were small and not far apart, Jamie noted. They were more akin to neighborhoods in a lumpy landscape. Nor was the Five Worlds built on a planetary scale - it was more compact. But it was very easy for a person to feel small and planet-bound and living in an era before space travel.

"How is she doing?" Demba asked Mnro, referring to Nori.

"Not badly for a woman who has lived about fifty years beyond her Mnro Clinic Warranty."

"Will she make it to the top?"

"I doubt it. You remember how far it is."

"And if she doesn't make it?"

"Or if we run out of time."

"Why didn't you keep her under treatment?"

"Why didn't I learn how to rewrite human nature?"

"You certainly didn't give *me* any chance to assert *my* human nature," Demba said.

"Maybe you don't remember it, but back at the beginning you warned me that you would try to rebel. You authorized me to take what measures were necessary to keep you on the path to this moment. The first thing that was necessary was to put someone who was meaner than me in my job. She was a tough old lady, wasn't she?"

"But she let Nori slip."

"She couldn't come often enough in person. And she couldn't keep anyone stationed here very long, because the place begins to shut down your imagination and your ambition. Phuti did too well. I almost prefer it when they were killing each other."

"I think Phuti would agree with you," Demba said. "I don't think he would want to live here too long. The Five Worlds feels like an archaeological site waiting to go into a museum."

"Alex shouldn't have left him," Mnro said. "He wanted to go with them. Alex knew he was in the midst of bringing peace to this world and never gave him a chance to decide. Given the choice, he probably would have stayed, but he would have wanted to go with him."

In the middle of a great forest Nori faltered. Jamie caught her before she could strike the ground. She placed her gently against the base of a tree and sat down with her to provide support. Sammy sat on a convenient rock. He rubbed where the machine connected to his leg.

Mnro knelt and placed a hand on Nori's pumping chest. Nori looked up at her with a serene expression, but she labored to breathe. "You waited too long," Nori said between gasps. "I'm sure my father is dead. Must you take Phuti?"

"Yes," Mnro replied. "We must."

"Why? He can't be vital to your crew needs. He's only an anthropologist."

"He belongs with us. He's one of us. We were shipmates and explorers. We are going exploring again. He would want to go with us."

"He isn't dead?"

"You told me yourself," Demba said, "when I was last here. You said he was tired and just resting. He has been waiting for us to come and take him away."

We need him."

"The people will be afraid to lose him," Nori said. "All in the Five Worlds make a pilgrimage to his grave, to remember him and to remember his lessons. If a man feels hate for his neighbor, he makes a pilgrimage and returns with love in his heart. The Five Worlds will fall back into chaos without him."

"If his legacy requires a dead body to maintain itself, then his legacy is peculiar and weak." Demba spoke with conviction. "Nor is Dawa Phuti Mende such an extraordinary man that others should be so much less, so dependent, so fearful to lose him. I think the people of the Five Worlds *must* give him up, or else their future will always look to them like their past, and the different future, when it comes, will be unbearable. What he gave the people wasn't an eternity of peaceful social order, but merely a stretch of time in which to realize that war was avoidable. The universe is a dangerous place, and it will no more respect a dead body on a mountaintop than it will an insect you step on unawares. The people must *believe in themselves* and expect to be challenged by the future."

"I wish you could tell that to everyone on the road below us," Mnro said.

"You have," Nori said. "As I hear, they hear."

Jamie realized the Five Worlders must use communications augments like a shiplink, and they were electronically connected to the hearing of Nori, the Old One.

"How is she?" Demba asked Mnro.

Mnro withdrew her hand from Nori's chest. "Her rhythms have stabilized but she shouldn't exert herself more. The emotional stress will be as much as I would want her to endure. I know she looks very calm, but I refuse to believe she's any better than me at containing her emotions."

"Can I carry her?" Jamie inquired. When she received a nod of assent, Jamie positioned herself to accept Nori onto her back. The old woman put her arms around Jamie's shoulders and Jamie tucked her arms under Nori's legs after Demba rearranged the lower part of her robe. Jamie turned up the road, carrying Nori. She set a quicker pace. From side roads and paths, across fields and down rocky slopes, people from other places joined the procession. All along the road, even in high wild places, people gathered to wait to join the march. Their faces appeared solemn.

Now they followed a wide footpath worn into the stone by countless pilgrims over many years. The altitude gave them panoramas of forests and farms and villages below them. Air pressure lessened slightly and gravity decreased more as they ascended into the clouds. Jamie didn't need to stop and rest. Struggling to keep pace, Sammy yielded to Demba and Mnro when they each took one of his hands.

They came out of mist into sunshine and cold air. At this elevation they could easily see the other side of the world, the snow-capped peaks pointing down at them, the hazy green valleys and blue lakes, the geometry of agriculture, roads, and the knots of dwellings in villages.

People had arrived at the sacred site before them. Thousands stood among the trees on the slopes of the grounds that surrounded a small cottage with a grass mound a few meters from its front door. On a natural slab of granite on top of the mound was mounted a large case, a sarcophagus, with small windows on each side through which an old man's head could be seen in profile.

Jamie set Nori onto her feet and held her to steady her.

"In the cottage," Mnro said, "there was a shovel."

Nori raised a finger and pointed to Gregor. The young man dared to show

reluctance but he fetched the shovel from the cottage.

"Dig here," Mnro said, pointing to an area on one side of the mound.

Gregor didn't move until Nori nodded at him. He pushed the shovel into the grass and immediately struck something hard. In a few moments he uncovered stone steps that led up to the tomb.

Mnro took the steps and mounted the slab of granite. She stood by the large case. She waited as thousands more people arrived to crowd into the monument site.

"How can we know to take him?" Demba asked Nori.

Gregor appeared upset at Demba's words. Jamie saw many others with similar expressions. She also spotted a number of young men of Gregor's age and purposeful bearing who probably shared his military or security duties.

"Can the people see him again?" Nori asked. "Can he see them again?"

Jamie saw Gregor react sadly to Nori's words, realizing the Old One would condone the taking of Phuti Mende.

"That will be messy," Mnro said. "He's suspended in a liquid. He'll be cold. He's naked. In the cottage there are clothes."

Nori motioned for Gregor to find the clothing. Jamie went with him. Gregor found the garment quickly but Jamie blocked his exit from the cottage. She wanted a moment alone with him. "I don't know what Demba and Mnro told your people, but they should have warned you."

"You warned me."

"I didn't give you the complete information."

"What more is there?"

"The Union Navy pursues us. They will ask you questions about what we were doing here. They will probably not like your answers."

"And you are not Navy? You place us in danger?"

"I'm sure Demba understands the risk she has caused you to face, and that would be a measure of how important Phuti Mende is to us. Please cooperate with the Navy and don't make them do bad things."

"Why would the Navy...?"

"Time is too short and I'm too lacking in understanding to explain our situation to you. No matter whether we take Mende or not, the Navy will be more dangerous than usual."

Gregor handed Jamie the garment and followed her out of the cottage. Demba took the clothing and mounted the steps to stand by Mnro. Mnro did something to cause a heavy cover to slide back from the top of the container, revealing the live controls of machinery. She activated the procedure to awaken their friend.

The windows on the sides of the case became opaque. Jamie thought they may not have been windows but image displays. A few voices rose in exclamation and quickly quieted, but a murmur swept through the crowd. Individual words couldn't survive the low clamor but a consensus of feeling from the crowd reached Demba and the others. Sammy drew close to Jamie, fearing the sense of unhappiness in the thousands of people.

"They're being selfish," Mnro said to Demba. "They've had him longer than we. Talk to them."

Demba swept her gaze across the faces in the crowd, perhaps measuring the hostility. Even though Gregor made his promise, Jamie did not want Sammy to even feel the possibility of violence. She felt the Old One nudge her and realized she wanted to go up the stone steps and be with Mnro and Demba.

Jamie helped her. Sammy kept a hand on her back as he followed them up the steps.

"As I hear you," Nori said to Demba, "they will hear you. So many people hear me and listen to me, as though I had precious wisdom to offer them. If I comfort them, I suppose that is enough. I have no wisdom. I'm just old. Neither do I command them. My only clear thought is that Phuti gave his life to them, and perhaps they can give it back. It would help if you could say something more eloquent."

"Speeches are not my strength," Demba said. "My eloquence lies in song. Do they have a song that is theirs? Perhaps they already have words they should hear again. Do they play the pipes here? My husband played the pipes. It's a mountain instrument."

Demba waited several long moments until finally, from high in the tree-covered slopes, a series of notes sounded on panpipes. In another direction a different tune followed the first, also played on pipes. A third melody was offered by a harmonica from near the cottage.

Demba began to sing. Jamie thought this would distract the people from their discontent, but only for a short time. She listened as her mother started a second song, sang its principle melody and theme and began yet another. Jamie was not well acquainted with such old music but she could guess at the cultural origins of each. It no longer amazed her that Demba's singing could enthrall people so completely but it did amaze her that Demba could pull from her data augment the best songs and words. She seemed to be reminding the people of the Five Worlds they were once brave and proud, capable of greatness, capable of building this magnificent home far from Earth.

Once she sang five songs in quick succession, Demba seemed to start through them again. The crowd became restless. Jamie worried what would happen. She looked over at Gregor and saw a thoughtful look on his face. Jamie realized Demba had changed the lyrics of the song. Then she changed the melody. It was almost the same song but with part of another song added into it. It was almost the same lyrics but borrowed words from yet another song. Finally, it was not songs she sang but a story she was telling. She told the history of the peoples of the Five Worlds. Every face Jamie could see wore an expression of concentration and wonder.

At the proper point in history, Demba sang the modern Anthem of the Five Worlds, causing the crowd to sing it with her. The mass of voices overwhelmed the serenity of the setting, charged the mountain air with the electricity of emotion, and thundered to an abrupt silence in which only Demba continued to sing. As she came to that sad moment in history where the old anthropologist was laid to rest, Demba sang a stanza of "Amazing Grace." Jamie detected some further reaction in the people.

"Now we know who she is," Gregor said quietly, having moved closer to Jamie at the foot of the steps. "Now it will be a good thing."

Demba stopped singing and paused to listen to the flavor of the silence. Demba began a speech. "Dawa Phuti Mende was an explorer. The study of human culture was less important to him than exploring, and I think that gave him the emotional distance to be objective enough to help you solve the human problems you had in building and sharing the Five Worlds. Phuti loved exploration, which is really what being alive and being curious is all about. I think he will want to go exploring again with his old friends, with Aylis and me. If you will let him go, I would see that as a possibility that you understand Phuti

and share his love of discovery. I would urge you to think about this moment as an opportunity to spread Phuti's legacy into unknown places. You don't need mountains to be who you are. Traditions are portable. Your ancestors paid dearly to provide this home for you, but home is that place you love even more when the journey brings you back to it."

Mnro monitored the machinery of Mende's coffin as Demba addressed the people. As Demba finished her oration, Mnro opened the coffin. The liquid drained away. The coffin dried the body. She helped Phuti Mende sit up while she tried to slip the garment from the cottage around him. Mende was no longer old. He was disoriented. The crowd noise surged as everyone spoke to his neighbor or simply uttered an exclamation. Mnro caressed Mende's face and let him cough and take a deep breath. He opened his eyes.

"So soon?" he asked hoarsely.

"It's been longer than you think, Phuti."

Phuti Mende tried to stand up. Demba stepped over to help and when Mende saw her face he smiled hugely and grabbed her hand and shouted, "Zakiya!"

"We see who's important and who isn't," Mnro commented.

Demba hugged Phuti and then helped pull him from his place of slumber. He was weak, but when he saw Nori and thought he recognized her, he reached for her, to embrace her. Demba and Mnro held them both. The crowd noise increased to a roar. Mende reacted to the noise. Perhaps not understanding the presence and meaning of the crowd caused a look of apprehension on his face.

Jamie looked down at Gregor. Gregor turned from her and made some signal to his personnel. Slowly the crowd became quieter.

Phuti Mende seemed to relax. He struggled to speak to Demba. "Are you going to search for them?"

"Yes."

"Are any of my old friends still alive?" he asked Nori.

"Only I," she replied. "Will you let me go with you?" Sorrowful sounds cascaded through the throng of people, swelling greatly, then slowly subsiding.

Mende answered her by keeping her within his embrace. He raised one trembling arm and waved his hand to show he would address the crowd. "These are my three dearest friends! They want me to leave with them. And so I will! Be happy for me! I am happy for you! I will return! Good-bye!"

The crowd erupted. Jamie was uncertain of the polarity of its emotion. She picked up Sammy and moved one step higher on the mound. She turned to see Gregor. The man looked upward to Phuti and waved. Phuti and the other three disappeared. Gregor turned toward Jamie with tears in his eyes. A transmat took Jamie and Sammy just as a sad smile formed on Gregor's face.

Section 014

Siblings

"Damn," Khalanov said. "You could have just stolen him."

"Phuti said the same thing," Mother replied to him. "He was still trying to wake up or else he would have appreciated our tact. Jamie made sure we did the right thing."

"We would have been *dead* right," Khalanov argued, "if you were delayed until the Navy caught us."

Freddy could sense an element of awe in Admiral Khalanov's voice for what Mother did in the Five Worlds. He was beginning to see how complicated his mother's life was. She had tried to explain it to him but he was sure he was deficient in the ability to imagine it. So many people in her life, and she had good feelings for all of them. He could sense that Khalanov felt affection for her. He liked Khalanov. He liked Horss, too.

"What is our heading?" Mother asked.

Graphic labels and navigational axes overlaid the star field surrounding the bridge, polluting the realism of the view.

"That way, for the moment," Horss said, pointing. "Do you have a different vector in mind?"

"I do. Do you have any suspicious targets?"

"Twenty. Analysis suggests they're ships moving toward the inward frontier to cast a net of buoys to detect our transit toward the hub. I don't understand their persistence. There must be better pursuit than the Navy can produce waiting for us beyond the frontier."

"When Direk rescued Sammy and me, he exposed a secret that makes us far more interesting."

"Teleportation!" Khalanov declared.

"Uncle Iggy can hardly wait to get his tools on the machinery," Horss said. "Wherever it is."

How did one assume the right to address Admiral Khalanov as Uncle Iggy? Freddy wondered, realizing it appealed to him. He knew Horss could do things Freddy would never dare to do. Horss was mentally injured by Mother and he simply turned it to his advantage, giving himself a kind of freedom to say and do many odd things.

"And they don't know we've lost Direk," Horss added.

"It wouldn't matter," Mother said. "They want us as defenseless as possible."

"A gate is a dangerous device. If Uncle Iggy can make it work..."

"He won't need to. This ship was built to use gate technology. We have one last stop to make before we escape for good. Get us there as swiftly and as secretly as possible, because we'll need days, perhaps weeks, to make modifications after we arrive. Go that way."

She pointed almost straight up. Her shiplink fed a long sequence of numbers into the navigation system and the planetarium-like display refined its course heading. The graphic overlay disappeared, the stars became realistic, and the bridge - sitting atop the dark plain of the *Freedom* - moved with the ship to point to the new heading.

"Jon, you've been on the bridge for more than seventy hours with no significant amount of rest. Iggy, same for you. Both of you get some sleep. Freddy and I will pilot the ship."

"What do you mean about the ship being built to use gate technology?" Khalanov asked. "The *entire* ship?"

"Get a good, restful sleep, Iggy, because when you're again awake, you'll start the modifications."

"I can start them now!"

"No! Go! Get off the bridge. Get some rest. Jon, you, too."

"How much rest have you had, Admiral? How many kilometers in that hike up the mountain?"

"Go. Out. Out."

The two men departed the bridge, leaving Mother alone under the stars. She sat down in the captain's chair and watched one nearby star drift slowly by.

"Admiral. Mother? Are you asleep?"

* * *

"She's asleep," he said to his little brother.

"Then she isn't going to come see me," Sammy said.

"Yes, she is. Why do you worry about that?"

"I'm not worried."

"Yes, you are. Just like me."

"I'm *under observation!*" Sammy complained. "I'm *always* under observation. I want to go home! I want to be with Mom. It's lonely here."

"I'm lonely, too. She's seldom at home, and when she is, she falls asleep, exhausted. She's my mother, too, you know."

"Are you really alive?"

Never more than when I'm with family, Freddy thought. "I am what I am, whatever that is. I'm still learning. I want to talk to her as much as I can, but she has so little time for me. And she has you. And she has Jamie. We're all siblings, of a sort, aren't we? I thought I would come visit you while I'm piloting the ship."

"You're piloting the ship right now?"

"I'm watching over the ship's expert systems. If my speech is interrupted for a millisecond or two, I'm giving orders to the navigation system."

"Is the ship alive, too?"

"No, it doesn't have the flexibility to become self aware. The physical memory of its operating instructions are fixed and armored to survive many types of hazards. It has very little room in which to shift the nearly infinite number of variables needed to feel alive. The logic flow for sentience is too dedicated to dealing with improbabilities to meet the reliability requirements for a ship. Understand?"

"Sentience is messy?"

"That's a good way to say it, Sammy." Freddy was proud of his sibling's intelligence.

"How old are you?"

"Only a few years in human terms."

"Is that a long time in computer time?"

"Not exactly. While there are computer-like things I can do much faster than a human mind, my human mimicry is so less efficient than what has evolved in organic brains, that I age - or grow wiser - only a little quicker than a biological person. I did have the benefit of copying the vast knowledge of an elderly android, which may have benefited my maturity, but I'm basically just a child."

"Wow. Do you know any games?"

"No games for disorderly patients past their bedtime," Aylis said, stepping into the room. "Hello, Freddy. How nice of you to visit Sammy. He overexerted himself today."

"Good evening, Aylis," Freddy greeted, remembering to use her given name - as she instructed him. Jamie tapped Aylis on the shoulder from behind and she started.

"I was following you down the hall," Jamie said to Aylis. "I came to see Sammy. How are you doing, kid?"

"It itches!" Sammy complained.

"People have said that for about three hundred years," Aylis said. "Ever since we've been able to regenerate a limb on the body. None of us doctors believes in 'the itch,' so we aren't able to make something that doesn't exist go away. I can, however, turn off your lights and remove your visitors."

"You're like my little brother," Jamie said to Sammy. "May I kiss you good night?"

Sammy thought about it, but not for long. "Sure. But Freddy is like your brother, too."

"He is, isn't he? There. Freddy is next. I'll be back to see you when the warden isn't around. Good night."

They walked to Aylis's office, where a bay window overlooked a small English garden. The simulated evening sky cast long shadows across the hedges and flower beds. Freddy liked walking in the garden, sampling the smells, trying to find some merging of his olfactory processors that would accurately simulate what people experienced of the sweetness of the colorful flowers.

Aylis dropped onto her sofa and began pulling off her hiking shoes. Freddy wished he had been invited on the marvelous trek through the Five Worlds. He could have carried Sammy.

"I should be going," Freddy said, beginning to feel uncomfortable. It was hard for him to interact with people in ordinary situations. He knew he would always feel like an outsider. Also, for some reason he always became too worried that he would make a bad impression on Aylis, who was his mother's best friend. He wanted to be perfect and knew he was far from it.

"You just got here, Freddy," Jamie said. "Don't you want to stay and talk? I've never had a conversation with a real AMI. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings when I first talked to you."

"I took no offense, Jamie. Mother is asleep on the bridge. I need to be there if she awakes."

"She sleeps?"

"Eats, too," Aylis said. "Uses the toilet. Puts her panties on one leg at a time. And has been known to fall in love."

"I'll be on my way," Freddy said, backing toward the door.

"Just a second, Brother." Jamie stepped over to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Can you feel that? Is it even worth doing?"

"Oh, my, yes! I mean, no, I don't feel it as well as a human would, I think. But it's certainly worth doing! Thank you, Sister."

"Good night, Freddy," Aylis said, wiggling her toes and leaning back in her chair.

Freddy backed through the doorway. He was too happy. He shouldn't be so desirous of these wonderful moments. It was hard to be a real person with real emotions.

Jamie walked over to the window and stared out at the gathering dusk.

"You should talk to Freddy every chance you get." Aylis watched Zakiya's daughter, seeing how her thoughts influenced the motion and posture of her strong body. There was a lot going on in Jamie's mind, but she didn't need body language to tell her that.

"I want to! He's fascinating. Miraculous."

"More than you realize. He's a *spontaneous* AMI."

"Oh!" Jamie reacted in amazement, then: "Oh," she said sadly.

"Maybe he will live longer if we keep him from thinking too much. He doesn't need to make some grand contribution to our wonderful (she said that sarcastically) civilization and die too soon. I would rather he be around for a long time. He is, in many ways, an echo of Zakiya at her best. I wonder if he can sing."

"How can I talk to him now, knowing he may die so soon?"

Aylis didn't have an answer for her. She was sorry she gave Jamie this bad news. In three hundred years she had never learned to keep from hurting those she particularly did not want to hurt. She let Jamie talk to her with the tensions in her body, seeing the sadness for Freddy, as Jamie resumed staring out the bay window of her office.

"I'm waiting," Aylis said.

"I'm sorry. I know you must be tired. I'll be going."

"Jamie. You're here for a reason." Jamie started to walk away and Aylis made her stop by simply staring at her. "I thought you would want to talk."

"I thought I would, too. I don't know where to begin. I don't know where it will stop. I don't know if I will still be myself when it does end. Who am I? What's happening to me?"

Aylis explained the auxiliary memory devices to Jamie.

"I thought I was losing my mind, or that I lost it long ago and it was coming back to me, magnified. And my mother?"

"The sudden recipient of powerful scenes from other lifetimes, all at a time when she needed to be in command of this mission."

"And you?"

"Sleeping in the moon, letting a copy of myself do most of the dirty work. I also have memories that were stored away and that are blasting back into my brain. So far, I've found very few good memories of Direk, and I bitterly regret whatever caused their omission. Do you remember him well?"

"Every day I find more new memories of him, more pieces of the puzzle. I'm redefining myself by how I related to him. He's overwhelming the person I thought I was. The more I remember, and the more I imagine his duties to you and to my mother, the more I realize how much he must have suffered, keeping so much of it from me for so long. To protect me! I'm angry that he felt it necessary to keep me ignorant. I'm angry that he left me. I'm angry that he will never fulfill the promise of our relationship. I'm angry that he will continue to live so large in my memories, making me love him, making me sick with the loss of what we might have had together. Please, don't cry, Doctor Mnro! I said too much. I feel too much!"

"Don't you ever call me 'Doctor Mnro,' young lady!" Aylis never remembered her duplicate crying. She, on the other hand, could hardly *keep* from crying. She approached Jamie and was gratified she allowed her embrace.

"It still seems unreal to me," Jamie said, "that I should have any importance

to you."

"Aylis. My name is *Aylis*! My memory of you as a little girl is one of the most powerful that I have. That you loved the son I couldn't even *like* until it was too late, is almost my fondest wish come true. I hoped you would visit your mother and let her tell you all these things. I get too emotional!" Aylis released her, dropped back onto the sofa. She felt tired, physically and emotionally.

"I don't know how to behave toward her," Jamie said. "I don't know who I am. I feel cheated out of being a little girl with my mother, my real mother. I still want to be her little girl, and I'm too old."

"You're never too old to be your mother's little girl. It will mean a lot to her."

"Little girl!" Jamie gave a short laugh. "I'm so old, yet I suddenly have all these immature emotions. I'm a dirty Marine but I lose my nerve when I think about talking to my mother. That's why I came to you. I don't remember her yet. Will I be able to remember her? I was so little when I lost her."

"Only time will answer that question. Go and talk to her. I'm an admiral. That's an order."

When Jamie departed, leaving her alone with her torrential thoughts, Aylis wept again, but it was a comfortable weeping, almost relaxing, as it expended the emotional surplus she accumulated from the trek to recover Nori and Phuti. She could almost ignore the guilt she felt for having taken Jamie from her mother. It was certainly dwarfed by another guilt, a guilt she could hardly ignore for more than a few minutes at a time.

Aylis realized she had mentioned her copy to Jamie and wondered if she would think that the Direk who died could have been a copy.

Her copy. She wanted to blame her copy for the guilt that was torturing her but knew she couldn't. She was her copy and her copy was her. What would become of her? Did she swap places with her in the stasis pool? Her copy didn't tell her everything, didn't give her all of her two centuries of memories. But that would have changed her too much from who she was when she went to sleep. Her copy was a different person, for all that they shared in common. She was a real person, as real as Freddy, as real as herself. What would become of her?

Section 015

The Lady in the Moon

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you, Doctor Ramadhal." He was not sorry, he was simply a poor conversationalist. All of his personal flaws were on display at this point in his life. It was at least a harmless way to get the attention of his guest. The small dark man jerked at the sound of his voice, startled from deep thought. The silence was too long, too complete. The tube car made no noise through the vacuum in its magnetic cushions. "I realize you have much to do," Etrhnk continued, "taking over the management of the Mnro Clinics."

The ancient monochrome lunar landscape flowed by beyond the window of the tube car. Ramadhal stared out the window, as though seeing the lifeless scenery for the first time. The whites of his large eyes showed as his eyes followed his head to point at Etrhnk. His response was quick and careful. "I'm never so busy that I cannot be of service to you, Admiral." Ramadhal's eyes seemed to want to return to the exterior view, probably because he didn't want to look at Etrhnk. The eyes stayed aimed at a point near Etrhnk's face, as if Ramadhal were an android, and he waited for Etrhnk to say something else.

"I have a medical question for you," Etrhnk said, moving forward in his seat, so that his knees almost touched Ramadhal's, who sat across from him. He didn't need to say a thing to Ramadhal. His inclusion on this investigation was almost an afterthought. It was one of many decisions Etrhnk had made lately for reasons which were not entirely explained to himself. "If a long dagger is plunged into a human body, approximately here - " Etrhnk placed the tip of one finger against the side of Ramadhal's chest under his arm, causing him to move. " - what would happen?" He realized too late the violence in the question would make the physician more uncomfortable than he already was. Ramadhal answered promptly and Etrhnk dismissed his odd concern for the man's sensitivities.

"Depending on the angle and length of the blade, the heart could be pierced. Certainly a lung will be punctured."

"This would be a fatal injury?"

"With prompt medical treatment we could prevent death."

"What would be the immediate physiological response? Could a man continue to fight and struggle for several more seconds?"

"How many seconds?"

"At least seventeen."

"No! Not even three or four seconds, unless a very great amount of adrenalin is released. It's many years since I worked in a trauma center. One hears anecdotes of amazing things done by people after they're seriously injured. But a dagger through the chest will surely incapacitate anyone within a second or two."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then it isn't a human you've stabbed."

"I saw much blood, and this person could choke his assailant to unconsciousness before he succumbed to the wound."

"My goodness, I've no other explanation! It would be a miracle if nothing vital was injured."

Ramadhal tried to turn his attention back to the window and Etrhnk let him. They rode in silence for a few more moments. Etrhnk had, on impulse, chosen

the tube car over the quicker transmat and he was not disappointed. He was no longer in a hurry to go anywhere. The private car took a branch of the tube that slanted upward toward the rim of a crater. Ramadhal turned back to Etrhmk with surprise and noticed the Marines checking their weapons.

"This is the way to Doctor Mnro's home," Ramadhal said. "Why are we going there?"

"To see if she's there." His mind being unusually full of personal thoughts, Etrhmk had overlooked explaining to Ramadhal the objective of their trip. The physician had not questioned him about anything until now.

"But she departed on the *Freedom*."

"Perhaps."

"Why do you need me to be present?"

"Your reaction. Your medical expertise."

The tube car climbed the flank of the crater, entered a tunnel through the wall of rock, and emerged into a pressurized terminal. The Marines led the way from the tube car, checking for automated defenses. They walked in sunlight filtered by a pressure canopy that spanned the rim of the crater. The canopy made of itself an afternoon sky on Earth. They walked along a gravity-enhanced path through an orchard into an English garden and from there onto a small stone patio at the side of a modest house. French doors stood open. A breeze fluttered the drapes by the doorway. The Marines searched the house. Etrhmk and Ramadhal waited for them at a central stairwell that led to lower levels.

She climbed the wide staircase toward them: pale sandaled feet on dark lunar rock. Short blonde hair just covered the top of her head. Bare legs, slender but not lunar weak, propelled her in short parabolas up the steps. Her attire seemed proper for sleeping, but not for entertaining guests. Ramadhal backed away as she approached, clearly embarrassed at seeing too much of Aylis Mnro's epidermis. The Marines remained on the upper stairway, aiming downward with their weapons.

"I'm so glad to see you again, R.K.," she said to Ramadhal, giving a long glance to Etrhmk as she passed him. She took Ramadhal's arm and led him through the French doors and out into the afternoon on the patio. Etrhmk and the Marines followed. "I see the gardeners were here recently. The roses were getting unruly. How are you doing in your new job, R.K.?"

"Is it you?" Ramadhal asked. "Is the other one also... you?"

"We are Aylis Mnro, both of us. The other me is the original, but I'm the one who built the Mnro Clinics. I'm the one you always argued with."

"But are you not human?"

"You've known me for more than a century, R.K. Wasn't that proof enough?"

"Examine her," Etrhmk said to Ramadhal.

"I didn't bring any instruments."

"I suspect they would be useless. You have augments."

She opened her blouse partially. Ramadhal placed his fingertips upon her chest. He listened. He viewed data written to his retinas. "Her heart is beating too fast. All other data are normal for a human female."

"No indication of machinery?"

"We all have some machinery in us. I cannot identify what is an augment based on current technology and what is something in advance of our technology."

"No matter. Leave us now. Go with the Marines. I'll speak to Doctor Mnro alone."

"Goodbye, R.K.," she said sadly, buttoning her blouse.

Ramadhan opened his mouth to speak but hesitated, appearing to measure the tone of her voice. His eyes became moist. "Goodbye, Doctor Mnro."

"Aylis," she said. "How many times have I told you to call me Aylis?"

"How many days in a century, Aylis? Goodbye." He turned away with a jerk of his head, stumbled slightly, and followed the Marines across the English garden toward the orchard.

For some reason Etrhmk felt nothing for this counterfeit being. For some reason this being felt no fear of him. She was, in every noticeable facet, exactly Aylis Mnro. But she was not Aylis Mnro. It was an impenetrable mystery. "Who are you?"

"Thank you for bringing R.K. with you."

"You are not Aylis Mnro."

"Neither of us, I think, is who we are. Do I seem so different from her?"

"She was afraid of me. You are not."

"She lives for life. I live for death. Did she have cause to fear you?"

"Yes."

"You hurt her."

"I did."

"You would hurt me?"

"Never. Nor her. Never again. You are a mystery to me."

"You are also a mystery to me. I feel I should know you better."

"Who is Fidelity Demba? Zakiya."

Aylis Mnro required several minutes of apparently difficult introspection to find an answer. "Someone you must not harm. Have you?"

"No. Why can't you give me a clear answer?"

"Not much is clear to me. I'm letting go of our memories, even as I weep to see them recede."

"Who am I?"

She paused again to strain at remembering. The effort seemed great. "The best and the bravest." She appeared puzzled at her own words. She wavered slightly and started panning her gaze around the lunar estate.

"Is something wrong?"

"A memory. How sweetly sad. And how deadly."

"What memory?" Etrhmk now knew desperation.

"You."

Etrhmk watched her continue to waver. He tried to reach for her, to steady her but she pushed his hands away, even while stumbling. She kept looking at him, her expression changing too much for him to decode. She reached the edge of the patio. She looked back at the house for a moment. She stumbled into the green grass of the lawn next to the English garden. She fell. Etrhmk dropped to his knees beside her, his hands hovering over her with nothing to do but tremble in frustration.

"Forgot you," she said, as though she would follow it with more words which she could not bring forth.

I do not want you to die! he thought, afraid to speak aloud for fear of missing what she might say next.

Her body deteriorated in a strange way, as though dissolved from the inside by a chemical. Etrhmk remained close to her, hoping for some further response.

"Petros," she finally said. Her body liquefied and seeped away into the green grass.

He knew he would die, in order that Fidelity Demba and Aylis Mnro might live. He did not know why. He would die in ignorance. He would die mourning this person who called him Petros.

Section 016

Khalanov Meets Wingren

"The ship has no bow, of course, no fore and aft," Iggy said, "but the damage at Ring Zero East is still serious." He was grateful for the hard work he saw ahead of him. It seemed that every idle moment he yearned for a memory of a woman named Ana. He could only imagine his loss, and his imagination made it too much to bear. It helped that Zakiya understood and was gentle with him.

"More serious than you realize," Zakiya said.

"It's only a range of five degrees in which we don't have an instant heading. That's why we are now oriented to South as the preferred bow."

They viewed a hologram of the ship in the Engineering Planning Office.

"That's not the reason." Zakiya rotated the hologram to bring a certain feature to where they stood. "You see the damage to Tuning Pylon Two?"

"I've compensated for its deformity. The drive envelope has barely lost a decimal place."

"It no longer meets the height specification. It absolutely must be in alignment with the other pylons."

"Why is that?" He was momentarily irritated at this demand, until he remembered that Zakiya had secret information about the design and purpose of the ship, information he was anxious to learn. He was still hurt that she wouldn't tell him.

"It's a connection point for an external structure."

"What external structure? And how can it make contact through a meter of passive shielding?"

"The shielding will be removed, and it must be removed before we arrive at our next destination."

"We'll be the brightest object in the sky for any active sensor sweep!"

"Which means we'll need a little luck in addition to engineering skill. Can you fix this pylon?"

"Yes! You won't tell me about this external structure?"

"I don't remember anything more about it, Iggy. How long to repair the pylon?"

"Two days if Plan A works, three if we need Plan B. It's only a guess. You know I was always conservative in my estimates, but too much now depends on too little."

"What will you do about the passive shielding?"

"It depends."

"I love talking to engineers! Depends on what?"

"Depends on whether we have to scrape it off very carefully, or if we can burn it off."

"How would you burn it off?"

"Gas giant atmospheric friction or solar corona."

"That means wallowing through Einsteinian space."

"If you want a clean hull..."

"Can you blow the shielding off with explosives? I'm betting it doesn't need to be perfectly cleaned from the hull."

"That's a novel idea! The hull is tough enough to survive chemical explosives. Drive geometry should remain within pattern tolerances. I'll have to run a test. How much time do I have?"

"Very little. Freddy has brought us near our destination early. I gave him sailing lessons. My guess is a maximum of five days and a minimum of two."

"You can be very demanding, Zakiya!" Iggy tempered his declaration with humor. He didn't want to return to those days when he and Fidelity and Direk talked like strangers from different worlds who didn't trust each other. The ship meant much more to him now. This wonderful woman meant even more to him.

"You always used to call me Zak."

"On the *Frontier*? Was that a nice thing to do? It doesn't sound respectful of your gender."

"You had everybody calling me Zak. You were my nemesis, always keeping me from being too serious."

"I wish we had more time to talk. Your memories may be all I ever know of my past." Zakiya startled Iggy by kissing him and she gave him a wistful smile.

"Why did you do that?" Iggy touched his cheek where her lips had pressed.

"A memory of you - somewhat parallel to this - gave me joy. I apologize. It's not in the Navy Code of Conduct."

"I have no complaint! I always wished we could be friends. It was never possible for me to reach out to you through the atmosphere of distrust generated by the Navy. You're so different now."

"You wanted to be friends with the person I used to be? I can't imagine why."

"Perhaps somewhere deep inside I knew you were Zakiya."

"Perhaps somewhere deep inside is the Iggy who was once my nemesis." She kissed him again. Someone cleared her throat behind them. Zakiya turned to see a female Navy officer standing at attention. "At ease, Wingren of the Commodore Keshona Admiralty Society."

"May I ask a quick question, admiral? I haven't been able to catch Major Jones. Is Alexandros Gerakis her father?"

"Why would you think so, Wingren?"

Iggy was trying to return to his engineering problems while savoring his warm relationship with Zakiya. His attention was wrested away by this new arrival. What this Rhyian woman said about Alexandros Gerakis surprised him. Who was this officer and how did she know such things about Zakiya and her daughter?

"I was with your daughter when she retrieved the crew portrait of the *Frontier*. Perhaps I was being too imaginative when I saw some resemblance between Gerakis and Major Jones."

"She does look more like her father than me," Zakiya agreed. When she saw the expression on his face, she winked at Iggy. "If you bury yourself in Engineering all the time you should expect to miss a few things! Carry on."

Zakiya departed, leaving Iggy standing next to the Rhyian female. He was at a loss for words, his mind filled with new thoughts warring for attention. He stared after Zakiya long after she was absent from his sight.

"Reporting for duty, sir," Wingren said, after waiting for an extended time.

Iggy pulled himself together. Reminding himself that Zakiya was depending on him alone - because of the death of Direk - gave him the needed force to clear his mind. He turned to the lieutenant commander. "You are reporting for duty?"

"I was just released from temporary duty with Security, sir. I'm an engineer."

Iggy extended his hand hesitantly, not sure a handshake was a custom shared by the Rhyian desert cultures, not sure he wanted to feel the texture of her hand. She took his hand without hesitation and with a grip that kept him from sensing

any difference in her almost scaly skin. He smiled with relief and pleasure, because she was pleasant to look at and decisive in her actions. She was with Security? "What is this about the 'Commodore Keshona Admiration Society?'"

"I and three others, sir, have studied Commodore Keshona for several years. As a serious hobby. We were eventually able to discover her current identity."

"Are you sure? Who is she?" Wingren looked quizzically at him, so quizzically that he knew he missed something. "I'm old and perhaps loaded beyond my capacity with responsibilities. Please help me understand."

"Sir, I was under the impression that you've known Admiral Demba for a long time."

"A very long time. What has that to do..."

Wingren waited. Iggy thought. Zakiya... Fidelity... Ruby Reed... He knew what Wingren implied. And if it was true... "She was Keshona! Now I understand how she did it!"

"Did what, sir?"

"Approached Rhyandh without being detected."

"How did she do it?" Wingren sounded intensely interested.

"We'll learn the details in two to five days. All this time, I never could have suspected she was Keshona! Even less, the wife of Alexandros Gerakis! I'd like to see your evidence sometime, Wingren."

"Gladly, sir. I'd like to hear of your experiences in Deep Space Fleet."

"Unfortunately, I have no memory of that. I had a wife they say was quite special, and I don't remember her, either."

"I regret your loss."

Despite the desert skin and the hawk-like eyes, Wingren pleased his senses. Her attitude was refreshing and her character interesting. He hoped her engineering skill was as promising. He needed all the help he could get. "Come along, then! We have a lot of work to do. Do you know anything about explosives?"

Section 017

Captain Jones and the Malay Pirates

She was on the bridge before but failed to appreciate its beauty. The canopy of stars fascinated her and gave her vertigo. She saluted. Her mother reached out for her and pulled her to a chair. Two other officers departed the bridge. Except for Freddy, only Captain Horss and her mother remained with her. She looked from one to the other, expectant of some further bad news.

"I discovered you have merchant marine experience," Horss said. "Navigator. You once took command of a ship in an emergency."

"Merchant marine?" A memory from out of nowhere transfixed her. The images streamed through her conscious, brief and bright, concisely edited, as though a summation of an event that wasn't very important, except that it led to more important events. "Yes, sir. The highlight of my career was as second mate aboard an express freighter. A psychopath murdered the captain and injured the first mate. I had to take over and find out who the murderer was. Except for one or two confrontations, it wasn't a difficult situation."

"Sounds difficult to me! Why did you quit the merchant marine afterward?"

"I learned my parents died. I was adopted and never knew I was related to them. But I was. They were my grandparents. I suddenly had other priorities."

"Priorities do change. I need help. Will you accept a promotion to Navy captain?"

It was a full five seconds before she could respond. "You must be desperate, sir!"

"I am. You don't know it but I'm damaged. I'm surviving, but mainly by reputation."

"Jon," Demba said sympathetically. "You've done very well, especially considering the unique circumstances. I don't know why you continue to criticize yourself."

"He was very kind to me," Jamie said to her mother. "If that's a symptom of his inefficiency then I don't understand the job."

Horss reacted with a slight smile and an effort to continue with an objective tone of voice. Jamie hoped she wasn't being too generous in her assessment of Horss. It was hard to judge his qualities from the few encounters she had with him. She liked him, and she hated to distrust her feelings. She was changing into some other person almost from moment to moment. Her feelings were dominating her, they were all she had to guide her, and they could change at any moment.

"I'm not prejudiced by your record as a Marine, Jamie, or by your parentage. I think you can do the job, in whatever way you want to define it. Your mother wouldn't let me make this decision if she didn't agree with me. Do you have a candidate to replace you as head of Security?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you'll take the job?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't understand why you need another officer of that rank. I can't replace Direk."

"I don't have a logical reason," Horss replied. "It just feels right to me. I was going to invent a new crew slot and call you a junior ship captain. If you want to call it executive officer, fine. You are second in command, followed by your mother. We are the only real line officers aboard. Report here for duty at shift

change but keep your Marine uniforms until after the next stop."

"Another stop, sir?"

"There is always a complication," her mother said. The celestial view abruptly changed, replaced with a ghostly silhouette of the irregular mass of an asteroid seen against a curtain of ionized gas. Jamie turned her head to take in the panorama and saw two protostars shining in front of a pillar of black dust. She suffered another flood of memory. Her mother noted her inner distraction. "Have you been there before?"

Jamie nodded, painfully absorbing the shock. She and Direk had lived there, off and on, for decades. It was their base of operations for prospecting. The dust clouds were both a signpost and camouflage. She never questioned Direk's choice of the place but now knew he had a reason. He always had reasons. He always knew things he wouldn't tell her. It was his own method of kindness but one she hated from her current perspective.

"We have three probes relaying data by tightbeam. Here's another view."

The asteroid zoomed closer to fill half of the view, which shifted to center on an opening in the dark rock. The view jumped toward the opening and showed a spacecraft docked inside. In a moment the old ship pried Jamie's memory of it from her distant past. She realized the implication of its existence. Direk, or at least a copy of him, would be there! She would be damned if she would react to this with any sign of emotional weakness. She was a Navy captain. Her mother touched her hand, which meant she could sense Jamie's stress. She almost lost the battle, but some of her old Marine anger arrived to save the day.

"There's more," her mother said. The view switched to a small rock orbiting the larger asteroid. Data superimposed itself on the image in bright yellow letters.

"Anomalous composition for that neighborhood," Jamie said. "I know the geology of this spot and both rocks are anomalous. Is it a ship?"

"It's a ship," Horss said. "We've logged about twenty transmat feeds from it to the big rock. We think it's hostile. Probably a privateer."

"As in pirate ship? When can you get us close enough to deploy Marines?"

"We're attempting to sneak up on them. We may be within transmat range in about six hours. What would you do?"

"Scare them. Hope they run. We're a Navy ship. We're ten times their size."

"And totally unarmed. And if they don't run?"

"Board them with Marines before they can pull on their drive envelope."

"Relative velocity will preclude transmat probing for safe v-nodes."

"We're so big they'll see our bowshock no matter how close we start our attack vector," Jamie said. "But they probably have personnel in the big rock searching for loot. They might sit still long enough for us to come alongside and board. Except, they can dance their heading notch and confuse our transmat probing. If this is a test for the captain's job, I'm flunking it."

"They have a cannon. Remember the hope of an unarmed warrior?"

"That his opponent will focus too much on using his weapon and ignore his other assets. You want them to shoot at us?"

"We have a plan. I hope they don't have a cannon big enough to hurt us too badly. How many Marines can you muster for combat?"

"All of them. They're a strange bunch. They like to fight, but they don't have any killer instinct."

"Get them ready. Your mother and I will keep you updated on the target and figure out how to get you deployed. Dismissed."

Jamie departed the bridge. They listened to pieces of communications intercepted by the probes. They watched as Freddy refined the data that described the privateer ship. Zakiya took a seat next to Horss. "Any other ideas, Jon?"

"We can try talking to them. There isn't much in the Navy Ops manuals on negotiating with privateers. The Navy usually shoots first and doesn't leave anybody to question later."

"If we talk first and fail, do you have any doubt we can overcome them?"

"I don't want to try, Boss."

"That surprises me. Why not?"

"If this was any other Navy ship, and I had an admiral aboard, I would find a way to follow orders with minimal casualties, but casualties nonetheless."

"You would have armament we don't have."

"Doesn't matter. The principle is the same. It's the ship and the admiral that are different. I'm damned sure you don't want to kill anyone. Neither do I. About all we can do to guaranty their defeat is to ram them. Then send in the Marines. That might still kill a few. To keep the body count nearest zero, we have to take a chance."

"Given time, talking will be successful, but we don't know how much time we have. We need to make them listen quickly. Your plan is good, Jon. I wish I knew how the Marines will perform."

"Your daughter can take that ship single-handed, if we could put her in the right place. The Marines will do the job. None of those guys will dare to disappoint Jamie. I've talked with a few of them."

"I'm sorry I need you to make these decisions, Jon. I can no longer make life-and-death decisions. I will always choose life. I can't even think about sending Jamie into a hostile ship."

"Iggy is still mining the passive shield with explosives. Should I tell him to stop?"

"No, we keep to our schedule. This is a Malay privateer, judging from the comm traffic."

"What does that mean?"

"I think it means there are families living aboard the ship."

"Mothers and children?"

"Yes."

"Now I remember why I sometimes hate being a captain. There are probably five hundred people on that ship. It's bigger than it looks. I hope you have something very nice to say to them."

"In case I don't see you again," she said, standing up.

"You're going to talk to them yourself," Horss said, standing up also.

"In case I don't see you again," she repeated.

"Cut the crap, Boss! This is nothing compared to what you've already survived."

"I just wanted to say - "

"I told your daughter about Direk's copy. Didn't want her to go all stupid on us." She opened her mouth, shut it. "Got you!" Horss said.

"Don't make me kiss you, Jon! I've already embarrassed Iggy that way."

* * *

"What is it like back there?"

"I'm reminded of scenes from 20th-century war movies," Jamie said, "where paratroopers are waiting to jump out the door of an airplane."

"I know you've seen action," Zakiya said. "I know you're nearly as old as I am. But my heart is in my throat as I think about placing my daughter in harm's way. Being a mother is still new to me."

"Being a daughter is new again to me. Don't worry. All of my guys have seen some action. They know what to do. They just don't like it when it looks like murder. This isn't murder, it's survival. We'll be as nice as we can and as bad as we need to be."

"I want you to come get this if I fail." Zakiya showed Jamie the silver bag.

"The cryptikon?"

"It may impress the Malay, if I live long enough to get their attention."

"You can transmat with it?"

"No. You need to hold a docking bay for me."

"That's one of our targets. This is moving too fast!"

"You did something to the cryptikon, Jamie."

"Me? Nobody can do anything to it. It's a cryptikon."

"Nevertheless, it's changed. The patterns are different."

"It could have been you."

"Somebody is supposed to use it. If you changed it, you need to have it."

"Are you that calm before battle, that you can discuss such things?"

"It's important," Zakiya said. "They have a use. Come get it, no matter what the cost. No, I'm not calm, just determined."

* * *

"It's a hundred years old!" Iggy declared. "You *should* be able to detect it! Technology advances."

"It was upgraded by *you*," Horss said. "Next time, don't be so good at what you do."

"I need to know where it is! I don't want to involve it in the electrodynamics!"

"Let's assume she knows where to put the yacht! Start detuning the envelope! We're within range!"

"Maybe she can sing to them and none of this will be necessary."

"Field eddy opening toward us," Freddy reported.

"They've seen us," Horss said. "Are you fully detuned, Admiral?"

"Close enough. Rotating to maximize discharge."

"Stand by. The admiral is talking to them."

"Twelve eddies in their far hemisphere," Freddy said. "Multiple transmissions inbound to the privateer."

"They anticipate boarding. Or they're preparing to run."

"These are Malay," Iggy said. "They don't run. At least, not according to popular fiction."

"Stand by," Horss repeated. "You read space adventures, Admiral?"

"I write them, too."

"Really? Would I know any of the titles?"

"I don't think so."

"Cannon apparent!" Freddy warned. "Class two coherent particle accelerator. Field eddy deepening."

"Automatic response locked in," Iggy said.

The privateer cannon stabbed its brief bursts of energy across space and struck the drive envelope of the *Freedom*. Instead of reflecting away, the first pulse found a weakness in the detuned drive field and punched into the rocky material of the passive shielding. The unstable drive field collapsed into a river of quantum circuitry pointed back along the vector to the privateer's cannon. The small amount of energy chaos transferred to the passive shielding set off a chain reaction in the explosives in the rock. The cascade of explosions hurled chunks of spongy rock everywhere. The brilliant shaft of energy connected the two ships and the smaller ship began losing its drive envelope. At the same time, the gravity effect of the connecting circuit began to accelerate the two ships toward each other.

"Shield debris is disrupting the circuit," Iggy said. "We need a little more time to kill their envelope."

"You sure you have the timing right? That's a lot of delta-v."

"When the drive envelopes degrade, changes in effective mass can be impossible to predict. I had to make a few guesses."

"Thank you for adding a little excitement to my afternoon!"

"Added to that is the uncertainty of our drive efficiency after the explosives blasted against our hull."

"I think I can see the whites of their eyes," Horss said. "Twenty thousand clicks."

"Killed their drive. Program is running."

"Here they come!" Horss was trying to be as calm as Iggy seemed.

The privateer ship lost its acceleration but retained its accumulated velocity. The *Freedom* began to reboot its drive envelope. In a few seconds the ship was able to slip aside, just as the privateer flew by.

"Perfect!" Horss declared. "Turn and pursue!"

"Too close for my old heart!" Iggy groaned, after his held breath exploded from his lungs.

"Active sensor sweep now!"

"Priority targets one through ten acquired," Freddy said. "Relaying to the admiral."

"Where is she?"

"The yacht is inside the privateer," Freddy replied. "Their cannon apparently exploded and she entered the privateer there."

* * *

"Is that you, Lam?"

"J.J.?" *How many billions of people in the universe? she thought. How much empty space between the stars? How few Marines?* "Small galaxy!"

"When did you get out of the brig?" Lam asked.

"Which time?"

"*Must* be you. Are you still a Marine? Why aren't we all dead?"

"You're not dead because we don't want to kill anyone."

"Say again? I was a Marine, too."

He sounded like the Lam Syed bin Hamid she once knew. He sounded less than completely serious, just like the old Lam. But this was his home. She was certain he would defend it with his life. She was certain he would kill her if she gave him a chance. She was also certain that he still thought well of her. Would it help if she tried to reason with him?

"We don't want to kill anyone, Lam. Admiral's orders. Why are you privateering?"

"More like scavenging, J.J. We don't endanger lives unless we're threatened. Can't say the same for the Navy."

"I agree, Lam. We're not a Navy warship. There's something we need in that asteroid and you are in the way. If we were real Navy we would have destroyed your ship without warning."

"Are you receiving an order to stand down?" Lam asked, sounding shocked but suspicious.

Relief flooded through her body and drained away the tension and dread. She had the same message from her shiplink. She couldn't have killed Lam and she had no idea what she could have done otherwise. It was a measure of how much she was changed, that only weeks ago it would not have been a problem - Lam would already be dead. "I have orders to cease hostilities. I'm not surprised but I think you are."

"Yes! Are you going to shoot me, anyway?"

"I was hoping to, for old time's sake."

"One shot each?"

"Sure. On the count of three. Three." Jamie stood up from her place of concealment behind smoldering bales of plant fiber. A beam of energy punched through the smoke and fire-suppression vapor and illuminated her personal defense field. She staggered a little, absorbing the kinetic energy translated from the weapon's beam by her defense field. "Nice shot, but you missed my heart."

"I was compensating for a feint left which you didn't do. Are you going to shoot?"

"No. I need to check on my people, make sure they're still alive. Give me a second."

"Did you finally get religion? You're different from the J.J. I knew."

"I got family, Lam. I'll introduce you to them. It's good to see you again. Are you happy being out of the Marine Corps?" She completed a roll call of her Marines as she walked over to Lam and slapped him on the back.

"I sometimes miss the old days." Lam shouldered his rifle and grabbed Jamie's hand in friendship. "But this is where I belong. I can't believe you're still a Marine. You had a hard time obeying Navy orders. Navy is bad, you know."

"I know! I don't think I have time to explain, but I'll tell you this: the rest of the Navy is after us, and if you guys stay around here very long, you'll get more trouble than you can handle." They walked rapidly through the privateer ship. People emerged from hiding to watch them pass.

"The rest of the Navy is after you? Sounds like fun. Do you think you could take me with you?"

"I'd be glad to have you aboard, Lam. But I just heard you say you belonged here."

"I belong here. I belong there. You're the *good* Navy, right? I always wanted to be in the Good Navy, to be a Marine in the Good Navy, to do good and important things. These are my people but I don't always like the way they live. Maybe I can make things better for them by serving with you."

They entered a large room filled with people laughing and talking. Admiral Demba, the apparent guest of honor, put down her cup of tea and smiled at her daughter. "They saw me on the Mother Earth Opera broadcast. Isn't that strange?"

Section 018

Princess Charming

Jamie was following Demba - Zakiya - her mother - someday she would decide how to think of her. She was following the Mission Commander from place to place, watching her solve problems. She dealt mainly with the civilian crew, and now the Malay. Jamie tried to be a good student of the process but she found it difficult to concentrate. Didn't admirals sit in offices and wait for people to bring the problems to them?

Direk was her main distraction. In the brief interval since Khalanov and the engineers gained access to the asteroid they had not found Direk. She knew he was here. The problems would begin for Jamie when they found him. She almost dreaded meeting him. Her emotions would be highly exercised and she wouldn't understand what she was feeling. It wasn't only that Direk was always false with her, hiding the Great Plan from her, hiding what else she didn't know. Direk was whatever he was and he always would be. But Jamie was not anyone even close to who she was when she lived with him. She would be a stranger to him. She was a stranger to herself. She could already feel the pressure of expectations from Aylis Mnro and her mother. Aylis Mnro, especially, would want every good thing for her son. She was not sure she could be any good thing for him. She was also unsure of her response to any man who wanted emotional or physical intimacy with her.

When Jamie and Zakiya transmatted to the control room in the asteroid, she discovered she could be nervous. After a long career in the Marines it was strange to have feelings a normal woman might have.

"Did the Malay damage anything?" Zakiya asked Khalanov.

"I don't think so." Khalanov was distracted by Wingren who was pointing to a certain control on the console at which Khalanov was seated. He touched the control. A virtual window appeared on the wall in front of them. It displayed a vast, dimly-lit cavern within the asteroid. Everyone focused their attention on the odd structures in the ceiling and on the floor of the cavern.

"That's our new hardware," Zakiya said. "We need to get the ship inside as fast as possible. It's too naked and reflective."

A team of civilian scientists and engineers working at an adjacent console found an instructional program which quickly allowed them to activate many functions, including opening the space door to the cavern. In a few more moments the *Freedom*, cleaned of much of its passive shielding, gleamed in the slowly widening gap of a door that was more than three kilometers wide and over a kilometer tall. It would be several hours before the ship was moored inside the cavern.

Zakiya grabbed Jamie by the arm and squeezed hard, startling her. She pulled her away from the others, over to a clear area of the control room. She called for a transmat and winked them to another place in the asteroid.

* * *

"What are you waiting for?" Demba asked Aylis Mnro and Sugai Mai, who stood on either side of a sarcophagus similar to the one that had held Phuti Mende on the Five Worlds.

"Waiting for the princess," Mnro said, "so she can kiss the prince and wake

him."

Jamie touched the case with a trembling hand. A small image display on its top showed a sleeping face. A light red beard covered the cheeks and surrounded his slightly opened mouth. Blond hair floated in the clear liquid in a halo around his head. He looked so innocent, so young, so beautiful. Her heart was racing, until an augment reined it in. Was this the cold-eyed Navy captain who could murder four men to avenge her rape? Was it the blind old man who said he loved her? He was too young and perfect. She was too old and damaged.

"He looks youthful," Sugai Mai commented, then she gasped as she looked past Mnro. A stranger stood in the doorway looking down at the floor, starting to turn away.

"Son," Mnro said, taking a step toward him. It caused the man to pause.

Jamie took a longer look, not because she didn't recognize the old man, but because he made her auxiliary memory erupt with some of her fonder images of Direk at the end of their life together. He had used his body long and hard, was scarred and scabbed, his hands thickened and gnarled, his hair turned white and thin. She loved the way he looked.

"I'm not your son," he said. "You know that."

Mnro took another step toward him but Sugai Mai rushed around the sarcophagus to hold her.

"Please, don't approach me," the old Direk said. "I thought I needed to wait. I was lonely. It was a mistake. I'm terribly sorry." He started to move away.

Mnro pulled free of Sugai Mai and rushed to him. She wrapped her arms around him. "You *are* my son! Don't leave us!"

"I became selfish." He did not complete the embrace. "I was living in borrowed memories. I dreamed of this moment, when I would see real people again. When I would see you. When I would see *her*." Jamie knew he referred to herself. She moved toward him. "Never did I imagine how my heart would break."

His words shocked Jamie. It was a shock of warmth that made her feel strangely apprehensive. Direk would never... but he did... say such things. But only when he was so old and worn out?

"Don't let it break!" Mnro demanded, hitting him even as she hugged him. "See me! See her! Stay with us! Live! You are a *real* person, not just a convenient replacement for a weak human!" He turned his head a little and saw the face of his mother pressed tightly against his shoulder. He touched her face. She looked up at him and smiled at what she saw. "Jamie is here! Look at her!"

His face rose farther and his eyes found Jamie. A century of time melted away and Jamie was an old woman feeling loved and secure in partnership with a kind old man. Perhaps she did know who Direk was in at least one important way. Son and mother paused to see what Jamie would do. She came to him, placed a hand on the back of his neck, and pulled his mouth against hers.

"I feel better now," the old Direk said, when both women released him. He walked over to the sarcophagus and activated controls. The fluid began draining away from his original. He placed a web of circuitry onto his scalp. At this point Aylis became agitated, causing Jamie to worry as well. The full meaning of the action escaped her. In only a few moments Direk's copy finished the process and removed the circuitry. "There wasn't much worth giving him," he said, "but I gave him me." He smiled at Zakiya until his eyes closed. He turned around, opened his eyes, saw Sugai Mai. "I'm pleased to meet you," he said to her. "What is your name?"

"Sugai Mai."

"I need your help. Could you step over there with me?"

Jamie knew something was wrong but couldn't move. When she did move, her mother grabbed her by the waist. Demba had already blocked Mnro from the same path.

"Thank you, Zakiya" the old man said. "There can only be one. There is no sadness now." The copy of Direk teleported away with Mai.

Direk began to awaken. They needed to retrieve him and clothe him. Jamie couldn't stay. She was about to scream. They let the best Direk die. The only one who never abandoned her, and now he had done the same.

Section 019

Ship in a Bottle

"How can it scale this large?" Iggy asked. "It would seem that the chance for a field defect would increase exponentially with the radius of the sphere."

How happy I am to hear your voice, Uncle Iggy! he thought. He felt no urge to supply the exact mathematical relationship he and his copy formulated from experimental data. He was still remembering the kiss Jamie gave his copy, who was now inside him, making himself at home, grinning from ear to ear. "It was tested during the Rhyandh War," Direk replied, enjoying Iggy's excitement.

"Three destroyer-class ships, each barely a tenth the size of the *Freedom*!"

"The emitters can be enabled in approximate simultaneity, with no envelope produced until an agreement is reached to merge."

"An agreement?"

"For lack of a better description and for lack of any kind of theory." Direk smiled at Uncle Iggy. "As long as the enabling signals are not too loosely grouped, the emitters will find an instant in which to merge fields. This is not to say the signaling is easy. We have signal paths measured in kilometers and signal variation restricted to femtoseconds. We attack the window of simultaneity with a series of about ten million pulse array packets, each slightly different in timing."

"I'm sorry." Iggy apparently overlooked Direk's smile. "You must be correct. If you aren't, we'll all be stuck in this asteroid until the Navy finds us."

"Your concern is justified. This is the very same apparatus Pan and I built for Commodore Keshona. It's inverted in function. The three destroyers were not modified to become jumpships. They were teleported from here when it was configured as a gate. We couldn't have them arriving at Rhyandh with their weapons ports covered by technology we didn't want revealed."

"I can't imagine how you solved the problem of structural precision in a construct as dynamic as a starship. It plagues starlight drive geometry and jumpships must need more than a magnitude better precision."

"You're correct, Uncle Iggy." Again Direk wondered. Iggy ignored his "Uncle Iggy" form of addressing him, as though accustomed to such familiarity. "Pan and I simply applied the rigidity protocols statically and dynamically to every physical member that could be individually addressed."

"Then you must have full-time active geometry stabilization. Was that a smile you gave me? I've spent a lifetime with your other duplicate. He never smiled. He always treated me the way physicists treat engineers. I grew to hate him, probably because he would allow no other possibility. Then he became my hero and died before I could tell him of my change of opinion."

"My other copy was a hero?" Direk was only vaguely aware he had a second copy. He was presently absorbed in the few but happy memories he had of Igor Khalanov from the earliest days of his life. As a child he always looked forward to visits from Uncle Iggy. He realized Iggy loved children and wanted to have one of his own. He spent a lot of his time with Direk for the pure joy he could give and receive. It surprised Direk to realize his father - Setek-Ren - tolerated Iggy's monopoly of his son's attention with no complaint. It was possible to assign unflattering motives for his father but Direk chose to ignore that exercise.

"They rushed you up here without telling you about me and your other copy," Iggy said. "We built the *Freedom* in a war of wills, you and I. I never knew I

was your 'Uncle Iggy.'"

"I'm ignorant of what happened with that copy of me. I know he had the most difficult task. He had to find ways to bring us all together at the moment our mission would begin. I wonder how he managed to maneuver Jamie onto the *Freedom*." Jamie. Something was wrong. Zakiya and his mother wouldn't talk about her. He was using great restraint in not questioning Iggy about her. Why did she leave before he was retrieved from the sarcophagus? He should be content merely that she was here. It was a miracle they got this far with a plan that was more than two centuries old.

Iggy stood up when he saw who entered the control room. He was short, brown, and Chinese in appearance. Direk knew who the man resembled and if it was Doctor Mende he assumed he was not as dead as people thought. He was a very live Sherpa.

"Igor Khalanov!" The man's voice was full of happiness. "I was told you don't remember me. My name is Phuti."

"I know who you are! I wish I did remember you!" Iggy offered his hand to Phuti Mende who took it and used it to pull them together where he could hug Iggy and pound him on the back.

"Iggy, we'll have fun remembering each other!" Phuti released Iggy and turned to Direk. He accepted Phuti's handshake and embrace. He wondered why the man suddenly ceased, as though Direk became too hot to handle. "I forget myself! I apologize for such behavior toward you. The years evaporate before the joy of memories too brightly recorded. I once held you on my lap when you were a small child."

Direk smiled slightly and bowed deeply. He, too, forgot himself, and was sad that such Essiin restraint was expected of him. He couldn't easily explain to Phuti how he felt, and so he said nothing.

Phuti looked at each of them with an intense fondness, until he had to turn away. He studied the image of the ship enclosed in the cavern of the asteroid. "What do I see? What kind of modification?"

Direk and Iggy joined Phuti at the display wall that appeared to be a window on the cavern. Iggy deferred to Direk to provide an explanation. "The *Freedom* is the convex floor you see with the pylons arranged across its surface. That's the upper hemisphere of the ship. The lower half is similar. The structure you see above the ship, and its twin below the ship, will be connected to the ship. This is what it will look like." Direk caused the wall display to show a diagram of the entire mechanisms that would attach to the ship.

"So the ship," Phuti said, "changes from a spiky oblate spheroid to a perfect sphere when the upper and lower mechanisms are attached to it. A lot of mass and machinery. To what purpose?"

"Teleportation," Iggy said with relish.

"Uncle Iggy seems to prefer terminology that has more of a flavor of magic than of science."

"And is teleportation what this does?"

"The effect," Iggy replied enthusiastically, "is to move the ship across a large distance in an instant. The added components create what might be termed a drive envelope with total closure."

"But you can't achieve total closure, can you? And if you did get closure you wouldn't go anywhere. There would be no point of attachment to the interstellar quantum pathways, no heading notch. Nor would you be able to sustain the closure."

"An expression of symmetry is apparently required by the universe," Direk said, when Iggy was at a loss for words. "There is never just one closed envelope created. There is an echo effect, in a controllable direction and distance, where a second envelope will appear. Whatever is contained within the envelope will be moved to the echo envelope at the instant of closure. You're right: you can't sustain closure. It isn't necessary or even desirable."

"So you jump from one envelope to the other. How far can you jump?"

"The distance is limited only by navigational hazards."

"Give me an example. You've got me excited."

"We should be able to travel to any nearby galaxy in a single jump."

"I think I'll agree with Iggy and call it teleportation," Phuti said. "It seems magical to me. Did the Old Ones teach you how to build all of this?"

"No, they imparted no knowledge to us. They helped by supplying the animating force to bring two copies of myself to life. Each of them was superior to me but true to my own characteristics."

"Who are these 'Old Ones'?" Iggy asked.

"They were discovered by the *Frontier* long ago," Direk replied. "They requested that they and some of their technology not be revealed to the rest of civilization."

"They're a precursor race? I thought they all translated to some higher plane of existence, or otherwise became extinct."

"I don't know why they remain, or how many there are."

"The cryptikons are theirs?"

"Perhaps. They tell us very little. For some reason they remained near my mother, where she could call upon them for their services. They were willing to animate our copies, but as far as I know, they don't modify or manipulate the personality of the copy. I suspect they've lost the ability to die, and dying as a copy of one of us is at least an approximation of death. They're not even aware of their own existence until the very end of the life of the copy. I believe you were the first to discover the Old Ones, Iggy."

"That's true," Phuti said. "Nobody believed you at first, Iggy. One usually doesn't uncover a live pharaoh in a pyramid. The Old Ones may have been cleaning up the dangerous technology that was left behind by them and by others. They must have followed us for awhile, and became interested in us."

"You developed this technology on your own?" Iggy asked Direk.

"Many years ago I viewed a recording made by Zakiya showing the *Titanic* being overwhelmed by what we've termed barbarian jumpships. From that, I saw what was possible. I had help from Pan. He was a capable engineer."

"Gates and Gatekeepers," Phuti said. "Nobody has had time to tell me about the great adventure Zakiya and Sammy and - is it Freddy? - had with transmat and gates."

"Nor me," Direk said.

"I've kept you away from your important work too long," Phuti Mende said. "I need to keep moving so Doctor Sugai won't catch me. She thinks I need to be relaxing under her microscope. I was really aged when Aylis put me in my coffin, and it was an unmonitored rejuvenation. I'm going to help bring the Malay privateers aboard the *Freedom*. The Navy is converging on this volume of space and their drive won't be repaired in time."

"Have you seen Jamie?" Direk asked.

"I haven't," Phuti replied. "Ah." He paused for several seconds. "A pleasant memory of you and her visiting the Five Worlds. I apologize again! Not so

pleasant for you!"

"I remember it fondly." Phuti looked at him with new interest and Direk was content to let him wonder. When Direk would add nothing to his statement, Phuti gave Iggy a last smile and removed himself from the control room.

Direk returned to work. Iggy sat down and stared at nothing. "Is something wrong?" Direk inquired.

"I'm impatient to remember! I'm supposed to be a friend of such famous people as Phuti and Aylis and I feel undeserving."

"It isn't bad to feel the way you do." Direk felt much the same. His father, Setek-Ren had been the principle scientist responsible for making transmat work. His mother was, of course, the "Mother of Immortality." His godfather was none other than the legendary Alexandros Gerakis. And Phuti Mende was... And Zakiya was... Yes, Direk was very much a kindred spirit to Iggy. "It will pass and give contrast to better feelings, Uncle. I'm also a stranger to myself. I live in the shadow of my duplicates. I content myself with remembering Ruby. And also you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You were very much my Uncle Iggy when I was a small child. And there were other times when I was happy as an adult."

"Tell me about them!"

Direk wanted to tell Iggy. From the sound of his voice, he knew Iggy wanted to know what made him happy. "You wouldn't believe it."

"Believe what? Is there any work being done here?"

Iggy stood up again. Jamie saluted the admiral. Direk started to salute Jamie but he stopped, unsure of his crew status. Technically he was not a Navy officer. He was puzzled to see the Navy captain's rank on Jamie's uniform. His copy identified her as a Marine major. She looked at him and looked away, her expression guarded.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?" Iggy asked.

"Phuti Mende," Jamie said. "We didn't want him coming here and disturbing you. You seem unaffected, Admiral. We thought Doctor Mende might trigger the release of your auxiliary memory. That would pose a risk to the engineering effort."

"I understand now. I don't feel any memories are ready to surface. Is it your sole duty to find Phuti Mende?"

"Admiral's orders. It seems Doctor Mnro neglected to install a shiplink in him. I can't track him. I'm unsure how he's accessing the transmat facilities. Do you know which way he went?"

"No, we don't," Iggy replied.

Jamie saluted and departed by transmat.

"Why did you lie to her?" Direk inquired.

"Admiral's lie. I'm an admiral. She wasn't very friendly to you, Direk."

"She liked my copy well enough."

"It must have been strange, working with yourself all those years. Or was it like having a twin brother?"

"A little of both. We only worked together when there were tasks requiring two of us, then we would take turns working alone, often for years. Finally, I went into the box to renew my body and Harry finished the last decade by himself."

"Harry? You called your copy Harry?"

"Do you know who Pan is?" Direk asked.

"Pan? The name is vaguely familiar, if only from mythology."

"Pan is my half brother. My mother says we left him on Earth and that he has become a famous musician."

"The Opera Master of Earth! *That* Pan!"

"Before the war we spent many years together doing research. It wasn't as entertaining for Pan as it was for me. Pan needed to relax from the ordeal at times. He eventually became a musician named Harry. I joined him for a time and called myself Dick. After the war, when my copy joined me in place of Pan, I called him Harry. My copy never could play the piano as well as Pan."

Iggy looked at Direk thoughtfully. "There is something you are not telling me, Direk."

"Yes." Direk smiled slightly.

"You did it again. I *thought* I saw you smile before."

Direk looked around the room at the other engineering personnel. There were only a few civilians present but others came and went. "We should have a private talk, Uncle Iggy. I think you will find it interesting."

"I think we should! Later then."

It was going to be difficult, Direk thought, trying to concentrate on his tasks. His old copy gave him too much to think about, having suffered loneliness for so long. Jamie was a far more intriguing person than she ever was, and that added to his distraction. His Essiin discipline should have come to his aid but it was an acquired trait that he despised. If only he could free himself of his reputation without upsetting so many people. Uncle Iggy, would be happy and shocked at the stories he would tell him. It would be a start.

* * *

"Damn it - sir."

"Back again?" Horss admired the way Jamie looked in a Navy captain's uniform. She was formidable. He was glad that he knew she was not as tough as she looked.

"If you have a moment." She took a seat in his conference room.

"My next meeting is in three minutes, but I'll fit you in. What's up?"

"Direk. He's interfering in my duties."

"I'll order him to stop it."

"I wish it was that simple."

"Is he actually harassing you? He's only been out of the box for a few hours."

"I didn't mean it literally. It's all in my head."

"You know I'm no damned good with personal relationships. I was hoping you could give me help in that area with the crew."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Well, your mother more than compensates for us. Tell me some more. Maybe you'll figure it out by listening to yourself."

"Are you a conduit to my mother?"

"Not if you make me promise to keep it confidential."

"Promises may be hard to keep in the company of two women I know."

Jamie outlined her past relationship with Direk and her encounters with his two copies. She and Direk had spent an entire lifetime together. Horss wanted them to try to find happiness together again. He didn't understand Jamie's reluctance to engage with Direk. He wanted to help her but he couldn't see how anything but time would give her peace. Still, he had to try. "I'll talk to the

interested parties. I'll tell them to leave you alone. That's about all I can think to do."

Jamie stood up, thanked Horss, and went to the door. It opened and Zakiya and Direk entered. She passed by them without saying anything. Zakiya looked after her departing daughter before closing the door. "What?" Zakiya pointed to the door, beyond which her daughter departed.

"Leave her alone," Horss said. "All of you."

"But - " Zakiya dropped her complaint, seeing the look on Horss's face.

Horss restrained himself from staring at Direk. He still had the non-regulation hair, almost as if he didn't want anyone to think of him as Aylis's would-be-android son. He was a lot more interesting than others said he was. Jamie was crazy for avoiding him. "Military crew is my responsibility, right? You took the civilians. Does Direk stay a civilian?"

"No, he's Navy. Chief Science Officer. He replaces his copy."

"Duly noted and logged. Welcome to our one-ship Navy, Captain Direk. Do you have that report for us?"

Direk gave the report.

"The Navy may arrive to find us still embedded in this rock," Zakiya said. "What then?"

"We jump," Direk said.

"From *inside* the asteroid? The envelope field density is so high, there must be some release of the nuclear binding force where matter coincides with the field. It's certainly a safety concern for starlight drive."

"There will be matter conversion only if our envelope is less than perfect. It will be perfect."

"Is there anything you're not telling us?" Zakiya asked.

"You don't remember the Rhyan War."

"Nothing technical about ship modifications."

"It was the first time we tried this. Pan and I devised a plan whose only real purpose was to protect your life. We wanted to give you a significant tactical advantage. You, of course, didn't want the technology to fall into the hands of the Navy. You decided to use the technology just once, to end the war. You had to put all three crews to sleep so they wouldn't see the gate. We built it large enough for three ships. Which is the reason the *Freedom* could be as large as it is. It was a tricky business, you and Pan and I piloting three destroyers into the gate, then waking the crews after the jump. You didn't seem concerned with the dangers inherent in the technology. Logically, you had no alternative. It was all or nothing. You had me compute a gate address close to Rhyandh, and we went, without knowing if it would work and, if it did, without knowing our destination would be clear of obstacles."

"But you knew it would work."

"We tested it successfully on a closer destination."

"And now we're in an analogous situation. Live or die. What is our destination for the first jump?"

"We need to jump where there is minimum probability of hazards and maximum distance from pursuit. It will be outside the galaxy, twelve thousand parsecs from here."

"We can do that?"

"The mathematics allow it."

Zakiya said nothing for a time. She looked at Horss. Horss turned away from staring at Direk, despite himself. He gave them both a frown and a grin. "The

only people scarier than you and Aylis are your children."

Section 020

Explaining Makawee

He paused to adjust the reed. He took it off the clarinet and put it in his mouth to soak. He wasn't getting a clean sound. How many centuries had passed in woodwind evolution and engineering without bamboo and saliva being improved upon? Just as he thought about closing the door, to save the ears of passersby from hearing his squeaks and squawks, he heard someone knocking on the door frame. "Okay, okay! I'll quit." He turned around from his music stand. There she was. He smiled. She offered a little smile in return. He was thrilled to get that much.

"Please, don't let me stop you." Mai found a place to sit, as though she would become his audience. Horss didn't want to punish her ears further and started putting the clarinet away.

"You'll be doing the neighbors a favor if you do stop me." Horss spoke with the reed still in his mouth, flipping up and down as he spoke. She didn't protest in his favor, so he continued taking the clarinet apart.

"You have a nice place." Mai looked around while Horss cleaned the instrument and put it in its case. *He keeps his place so neatly*, she thought, which seemed at odds with his rather messy mind.

"You're still living in the hospital?" Horss spit the reed out. He wished she would live with him. He thought she would, after what happened between them. He smiled to himself, thinking about their spontaneous meeting at the end of their stay on Earth. What did it mean to him? More importantly, what did it mean to her? She was subdued after the passion was spent. They parted without any further understanding of its meaning. He was surprised and hopeful when she mysteriously appeared on the *Freedom*. She would not, however, have anything to do with him - until now.

"Yes, Aylis and I are still living in the hospital." *And hating it*, she thought. Aylis had become a very dear friend, but she was still difficult to live with. Aylis seemed deeply injured mentally and still kept Mai from trying to help her. It was frustrating and even becoming as much a medical concern as a personal one. Mai could easily compare Aylis's condition to the tragic condition of Denna's life.

Mai tried to set her concern for Aylis aside for the moment. She had her own problem. How could she turn this conversation in the direction she wanted? How would Jon react to her stupidity?

"Why?" Jon asked about her staying at the hospital.

She shrugged. "It's convenient. There's still much to do. It was the most neglected part of the ship."

"What's up? Why the visit?" He wanted to ask Mai to move in with him but was afraid. Why did he want to live with her? He was still a mystery to himself.

"Nothing." She had to hide her face so he wouldn't see the anger she felt for herself. How many decades had she dealt with people stranger than Jon? She had always been able to be direct and truthful, even when her words were painful. But Jon was not a patient of hers. He was the father of her illegal fetus.

Jon thought Mai was lying but he took her at her word. Mai was too old to play games. She knew how to deal with characters such as himself. He, on the other hand, seemed to have lost his social skills. "You want something to drink?" It was a lame attempt to lengthen her visit. She shook her head. She sat

on the edge of her chair - not on the sofa where he could join her - and she looked ready to bolt through the doorway. He couldn't guess what was on her mind. Mai once confessed to an attraction to him, and their surprising intimacy after the Mother Earth Opera was proof of it, but that wasn't sufficient cause for a more permanent relationship. The Mother Earth Opera just made them both a little crazy. She probably regretted it. He thought she would leave the ship before they launched from Headquarters. Perhaps she was trapped aboard by the early launch. Why did she accept Aylis Mnro's request to help her prepare the ship's hospital in the first place? Why did she stay aboard at the Five Worlds?

Mai got up and started a tour of his apartment. She was drawn to his family pictures. "Is that you?" She found what she thought was an adorable image of him as a child.

"An ugly little Indian wearing a cowboy hat?"

"Who are all the others?" She didn't offer an opinion of his looks as a child. Mai was trapped by her training, her rigorous non-involvement with people. How could she comment on his childhood picture? Her ocular camera recorded it. He was so cute!

"Brothers and sisters. Mom and Dad. Uncles, aunts."

"Brothers and sisters? That many?"

"Most of them dead. How is your family?"

"Mother is my only close relative. I barely had time to say good-bye to her. I hope she waits for me to return."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"She's tired of living. I don't know whether my leaving on this mission will give her an excuse to stop living or just the opposite. I hoped a grandchild would renew her spirit." *There, that was a start: she had mentioned her potential child.*

"I see." He thought Mai wanted a child for the reward of being a mother and a wife. Why couldn't he ask her to explain? Why was he such a coward? Mai was visiting him for *some* purpose. There was opportunity for him to propose a change in their relationship. What change? What could he offer her? They had little in common, and he knew she didn't like all the Twenglish humor he kept throwing at her, as though he enjoyed irritating her.

She looked at the pictures and lost her concentration on the faces in them while waiting for Jon to say something encouraging to her. If it was so important to her for Jon to know she was pregnant with his child, why couldn't she tell him? Because it would make her seem so much less perfect in his eyes than she wanted to be? How could she explain becoming pregnant without it appearing either devious or stupid?

She looked at the pictures and Horss wondered if they really interested her or if she was being polite. Mai looked into the kitchen, the bedroom, the study. She took in the view of the lake beyond his back porch. She turned back toward the front doorway. He wanted to get in front of her, block her path - the path out of his life. He couldn't move. It was brain damage - that was his excuse. She paused. He hoped.

"How are you doing?" she inquired politely. "When we finally get the hospital ready we should give you a thorough examination. We have some excellent specialists."

"I'm adequate. Barely. Uncle Iggy and Aunt Zakiya have kept me from making any bad mistakes."

"You can't be as bad as you think you are."

"I used to be a hell of an officer. I knew everything and I could do anything, including being modest. Now I have no confidence."

"You're a *good* captain. I hear no complaints."

"I'm a better clarinet player than a captain. It's not the technical details of the ship. It's people, crew members. I feel like a fake, and that keeps me from helping them do their jobs and function as a team."

"I didn't realize you were so troubled."

"I advised Admiral Demba to promote her daughter into the chain of command. If Jamie Jones is anything like her mother, I'll be glad of her help. Maybe I can retire and take clarinet lessons."

Mai edged toward the doorway. She wanted to leave before she lost the battle with her nerves. She wanted to leave before the disappointment came into her expression. She was not so perfect anymore in her own eyes. She had always confused the status of perfection with the pursuit of it. The pursuit was honest and noble, but she would never *be* perfect. Marrying Jon was not something she should pursue for the sake of perfection. Maybe her love for him was also imperfect. She couldn't even blush at her absurdity.

Mai edged toward the doorway. To Horss she seemed anxious to leave. It wasn't a smart thing to spill his personal problems onto her. She probably had her own problems - Aylis Mnro, if nothing else. He moved with her toward the doorway. She turned quickly and kissed him, then departed. It probably wasn't the kind of kiss that meant what he wanted it to mean. It was a bit late to realize what he really wanted.

* * *

"Can't I have *any* secrets from you?"

Mai sniffed the air as she watched Aylis cleaning something by the door to the lavatory. "Vomit?" Mai shouldn't have sniffed! Her chest heaved, her abdomen squeezed. She pushed past Aylis and got to the toilet just in time.

Aylis stood looking at her as she rinsed her mouth and wiped her face with a towel. "Let me see you in my clinic, young lady."

"I'm not young and I'm not a lady! I'm pregnant!"

"Good God! Why?"

Aylis seemed angry with her. Mai was even more angry with herself. She didn't need any interrogation from Saint Aylis. "I had a mental lapse."

"Is that it? I was hoping it was intentional."

"Never! Not with him." It just came out, and it was insincere and stupid. What did she mean - she hoped it was intentional? Aylis liked Jon. *Everybody* liked Jon. Except Mai. She merely loved him. She hated him for being in the right place at the wrong time. She was confused. And hurt. He was the wrong man. It was the wrong time. It was *all* wrong!

"Jon?"

Mai nodded. Her face was burning. It was spontaneous, an evening alone together, caught up in the excitement and passion following Zakiya's return to Earth, the night at the Mother Earth Opera, the dramatic appearance of Fred with Sammy. She was old enough to behave better. And she was a physician who should have remembered her own unprotected fertility! How could she have been *that* distracted?

"How wonderful!" Aylis sounded sincere.

"Oh!" Mai omitted the word she would have said next.

"I mean, how *woeful*." Aylis was obviously making fun of her.

"It is not humorous!" But she did note with hope this small attempt at humor from the always-somber Aylis Mnro.

"Yet, you took no precautions after the fact. Why not? If you didn't want it. If you didn't want Jon. I can terminate it for you. Shall I?"

"No! I don't know! I should..."

"Poor Mai! You're as confused as I am. As medically negligent as I am. We can suffer together."

"Are you?" Mai sensed the implication, remembering Aylis was the first to vomit.

"I am pregnant, too. We are a great pair to be running this hospital. If you ask me the same questions I asked you, just remember how you answered, because those are my answers."

"But you should abort it! You were raped!" *This* was part of the reason, Mai thought, why Aylis felt so badly all the time.

"Almost did. Couldn't. How about you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know! I ask you the same thing!"

Aylis shook her head. "My business is life, not death. We can keep them for awhile, then take them out and store them. Does Jon know?"

"No. I tried to tell him. I couldn't."

"Do you want to marry him?"

"No!"

"Emphatic, but unconvincing. I see how you look at him."

"I do *not* look at him that way!"

"You protest too loudly. Want me to tell him? Want me to propose to him for you?"

"You're *impossible*, Aylis Mnro!"

* * *

"You look happy." It began: the task of exposing the damage then repairing it. Would it be easier if she was in a good mood? His presence didn't seem to darken her mood. Maybe she already knew. She had the records, if she wanted to look. The kiss she gave him emboldened him - with some imagination on his part. What did a kiss mean to a woman who was a century and a half old?

"Children!" Mai looked into his eyes. "Do you like children, Jon?" Mai surprised herself with her statement. Aylis had counseled her, and despite Mai's stubborn inhibitions and loss of self-confidence, something in her had changed. She had made a serious mistake with Jon Horss, but now she would gamble that it was a seriously good mistake.

Horss knew the correct answer to that question! His personal history, however, would dispute the answer he wanted to give. Did he really like children? Maybe he could get Sammy to give him a character reference. "I like Sammy."

"I think you do." Mai was absolutely sure Jon would be a good father. Maybe she could be a good mother, if she could just stop trying too hard.

"You did a medical screening of the Malay. How many children?"

"Only five." Mai kicked off her shoes and moved past him to put them away. He watched her, stealing pleasure from seeing her, being near her, hearing her

voice. He didn't think to disconnect his mouth from his errant thoughts.

"Are they contagious?"

"They were perfectly healthy. Why would you think that?"

He gave up trying to be someone else. He would always say the wrong things to Mai. She could tolerate it or she could chastise him, just as long as she stayed near him. "I meant it in a different way. A poor attempt at humor."

"I don't understand."

"Did your desire to have a child of your own increase when you saw the Malay children?"

Mai's heart leaped and she almost stuttered. "Did Aylis talk to you about something?" She really didn't want Aylis interceding for her, making Mai seem, well, less than perfect, but she would take whatever came of it with good humor. Even if it killed her with humiliation.

"About what?"

She was relieved Aylis had not revealed her biological error to Horss. Then she was angry with herself for even worrying about it. "She didn't? Why are you here? I visited you, now you pay a return visit?"

"To tell you I'm sorry," he answered. Mai sounded dangerously irritated now. Something was wrong, to have her mood change so much. This was going to be very difficult. It would also be humiliating when Mai told him where to go.

"Sorry about what?"

"Makawee."

"What is that?"

Jon now knew Mai had *not* read his personnel record, the one Demba - Zakiya - corrected from Navy Archives. "My daughter."

She tilted her head as though a different angle would reveal the way to see through him. "Why? It doesn't matter." It didn't matter to Mai. Although she hated to break the law, she could easily rationalize keeping Jon's child because of the extraordinary situation. They might never return to Union space.

It did matter. He could hear it in her voice. It occurred to him this was an encouraging reaction, if he read it correctly. "It matters to me." He looked around her small office, where she worked and lived. It wasn't as clean and neat as he would have expected. Mai was probably too busy.

"Is there something you need to tell me?"

He thought she sounded hopeful. He plunged ahead, obliquely, like the coward he was. "I'm worried."

"About what?"

"The ship."

"Of course, you are. You're the captain."

"I mean, as a limiting factor."

"I don't understand."

"I'm running out of time because of the ship."

"To do what?"

"To be happy. That's what the *Freedom* is all about: the pursuit of happiness."

"I suppose it is, in a way. What would make you happy?" Mai thought he was trying to work his way around to something. How could men such as Jon pretend to be strong and decisive, if they were not in fact strong and decisive? Did he act this way only in her presence? Was that a sign of something she did to him emotionally? It would be humorous to her if she wasn't so serious about everything.

There it was: the perfect question for him to answer. He would say, *You*

would make me happy. He pursed his lips to get the "you" sound but nothing would come out. He never had this problem with women before. It was easier to lie to a casual acquaintance than it was to tell the truth to Old Lady Sugai.

"Some of those Twenglish words are hard to pronounce," Mai said, taking a chance on humor. This was it, she thought - she would stop at nothing to bring this conversation to the point of truth between them.

"Especially the one-syllable words." He hoped her remark was supposed to be humorous. "Words like you, me, us."

"How about you, I, and we? Subjective rather than objective pronouns."

"Grammar is for sissies if you speak Twenglish. Why do you suddenly know so much about it?"

"Because Sammy needs to understand what I say."

"Oh. I thought *I* might be the reason."

"When I learn all the curse words, Jon."

"I can help you there!"

"Tell me about Makawee."

"What?"

Mai sat down in a rocking chair and fixed him with a squinty stare. Nobody could squint like Mai. She didn't seem too upset. He couldn't track where her feelings went. "Makawee, Jon. Your daughter. I would like to know something about her. Does she look like you?"

"Makawee was an infant when I left. I think she did have some of her father's features."

Mai frowned at Horss. Frowned and squinted. "It's impossible for me to imagine you abandoning your wife and child. You're a starship captain. You're the definition of responsibility."

"I married Chumani because I thought I could be responsible for her. I was wrong."

"Why?"

"She was a widow. Her husband was killed in a mining accident. She had too many emotional problems. I was too young to have the patience to help her."

"And you left her with your baby, to make things even worse?"

"I was not the father." He said it slowly and clearly, watching her squinting eyes open wide. "Chumani was already pregnant when I married her. Makawee was the real reason I married her. I was Makawee's uncle."

"But that means you aren't a biological father!"

"That's what it means." Horss was relieved by what he heard in the sound of Mai's voice.

"Why did you wait to tell me?"

"Can I claim mental incompetence due to sudden death? If I promise not to play my clarinet in your vicinity, will you come live with me?"

Mai got up from the rocking chair, almost knocking it over. She slipped into Horss's arms and hugged him. "Yes! I will come live with you! But there are two of us."

Section 021

1980 - Quantum Circuits, Part 2

"So, how's the dissertation coming, Miss DuPont?" Sam asked.

"Grumble grumble grumble," Milly replied, shoving her wheels in opposite directions to turn and face Sam in the hallway outside her office. She smiled wanly. "Haven't seen you for a couple of days." That was supposed to suggest that she missed him but she would be damned if she would be any more obvious.

"My brain seems to be on a very imaginative mission. I don't think I've slept four hours in the last two days."

"Can I claim any credit for your inspiration?"

"Yes, and if you can tolerate it, I have a few more ideas to bore you with."

"Sure, but I was hoping you could inspire me as well. Your place or mine?"

"Mine is on the third floor with no elevator."

"Better be my place. Your bathroom probably doesn't have all the monkey bars I need."

* * *

Milly took too long in the bathroom, worrying over every detail of her appearance she could do anything about. When had she ever done this, after her first prom? Sam was just so damned nice. She realized his first installment of his quantum circuits theory was probably just so much science fantasy and her reaction to it was influenced by the situation, by her brainless desire to be in Sam's presence. She was a little worried that he still seemed to be serious about it. When she finally wheeled herself out of the bathroom she was surprised and a little dismayed by the stack of papers on her kitchen table.

"Sorry." Sam saw Milly's reaction to all the papers he pulled from his briefcase and stacked on her table. "I left your apartment last time wondering what the hell I had actually said to you. How could I take it all back? Unfortunately, being less than fully indoctrinated in modern physics, I lost control of my imagination."

"You really think you have something?" Milly asked it hopefully.

"And maybe a way to test it, but it's going to require more math and geometry than I think I can manage."

"Geometry? That was always my favorite area of math. Why geometry?"

"It's going to be hard to explain. That's why all the drawings. Also, I have pertinent equations from about a hundred years of physics. I'm hoping you can help me spot something that will make my test possible." Sam looked up from his stack of papers and tried to decipher the look on Milly's face. He looked back at the papers. His wild theory began to fade in importance when he remembered Milly's situation, especially her need to finish work on her doctorate. Why was he so fixated on something so impossible? Fixated on two things: the theory and Milly. "I'm still sorry, Milly." He shook his head. "Is there any possible way I can help you finish your dissertation?"

Milly gazed at Sam for several quiet moments, wondering why this was happening to her. She was actually prepared to give up her doctorate, if it was a choice between it and Sam. She could see the consequences. The doctorate was a piece of paper that would give her some security and prestige for the rest of

her life. Sam was a more important possibility, but still only a possibility. He could vanish from her life tomorrow. She could see herself grasping at the short-term pleasure of being with Sam, taking a chance, taking a *big* chance.

Quantum was a popular word. It made people think of something scientific and advanced. Milly sighed and tried to hang back from making a wrong decision. "Why the word *quantum*, Sam?"

"The quantum is a package of energy, a step up or down." Sam sensed a seriousness to the question. "I've borrowed it simply because I don't have another term that better identifies where the action is taking place. My quantum is a quantity of force that rides a circuit. I don't even imagine the quantization is real or important. Geometry is important. The quanta exert force on other circuits and the circuits intersect other circuits, with varying effect according to angle. At steep angles they can pass through each other, at shallow angles they slide past and exert force. And it's complicated by the quantum being in constant oscillation."

Milly tried to absorb the lecture and Sam watched her hopefully. "But this is all invisible stuff. Subatomic. How can you test anything?"

"I'll never have the funding to investigate what I've just described. But there is a kind of brute-force experiment that would prove a basic assumption of my theory."

"I'm listening." Milly wondered why Sam hesitated to reply.

"Quantum circuits are the essence of matter, even though they're infinitesimal. If I can bring a bunch of them to a sudden enough meeting, at a certain angle, they may fuse."

"Fuse? Combine? What would happen?"

"There could be an explosion." He was hoping for a very big explosion or at least a very weird explosion, anything other than his test apparatus flying apart due to design failure. He could almost visualize the shape of the component that would plunge the magnetic field lines into critical density. He needed Milly to help him determine the exact geometry.

"What would this prove, Sam? It sounds dangerous."

He hesitated again to reply. He didn't know if Milly knew enough physics to see the implications. He didn't want to spell it out for her because it would sound like madness or utter conceit. "It will be dangerous if it proves I'm on the right track."

"How big an explosion? My brother is an Air Force officer and I think he might know where to blow things up."

He shrugged. "I don't know."

She repeated the question. "How big an explosion, Sam?" She was beginning to get a notion that Sam was hiding some fact from her. She was beginning to think this was a large explosion. Too large. He wouldn't respond to her repeated question. "Nuclear?"

Sam tried to shape an answer that still avoided saying what he didn't want to say plainly. "I'm trying to prove that my quantum circuits - in the form of magnetic or electrostatic lines of force - are a basic form of *matter*. When matter fuses - as in a hydrogen bomb - energy is released. I feel that the energy of any nuclear bomb is provided simply by quantum circuits being broken. Fusing magnetic lines of force may break their circuits and release quite a lot of energy."

"Energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light?"

"It isn't clear to me that the equation fits quantum circuits."

"Your quantum circuits have energy because they have mass, but not a lot of mass. How would there be much energy released?" She saw Sam was uncomfortable with what she said. She thought through the terms of Einstein's equation. It was almost as if Sam was implying there was something wrong with it. "The speed of light, that's all that's left."

"The speed of information, to be more precise."

"So, what's wrong with it?"

"I can't define it."

"You don't know what's wrong with it?"

"I didn't want to get into this so soon, or ever, depending on whether I could test my theory. If Einstein's equation applied to quantum circuits, the value of c would not be a constant. It would be undefined at best and infinite at worst. I don't have another equation to replace it. The mass term is meaningless as well. Like Newton's equation for gravity, Einstein's equation is an approximation for much larger aggregates of mass, an aggregate composed of myriad complex entities, many kinds of quantum circuits. I'm not trying to define entities yet - what we call atomic particles - except to say they must be closely related to quantum circuits, connected by quantum circuits. The concept I'm trying to work out first is what I call reluctance, which is somewhat akin to the electronic term. Reluctance is the property needed to provide the fulcrum upon which force can be exerted by circuit quanta. Reluctance would be the only restraint on the speed of information."

Milly sat quietly for a long time, thinking. She could almost see what Sam was trying to explain. She picked up some of the drawings from the kitchen table: pictures of hollow tubes criss-crossing at various angles and vectors, sinusoidal waves in thread-like loops colliding with various interference effects and resulting force vectors. It was obvious how geometry was necessary. It was a rather simple principle that led to almost infinite complexities. She then realized geometry could be a solution to her dissertation problems. She could use geometry. Wasn't geometry the ultimate reason for doing math? Math was how reality was measured, and reality could only be perceived as geometry. "OK, Sam. Once more, from the top. I like blowing things up."

Section 022

The Bass Player and the Happy Captain

Direk watched her, when he should have paid more attention to the engineering work that was being done. He seldom was bothered by such distraction, but he was bothered now. He watched Zakiya and could only see her as Ruby Reed, singing in the spotlight, as he and Harry played their instruments. He was never happier than when he played bass and listened to Ruby and Harry. He was disappointed Zakiya didn't mention that period of their lives together. Harry was missing. He knew he should be here, helping with the engineering. Was Harry - Pan - the cause of his mental insubordination? Something else was wrong, something he needed to discover, and there were too many distractions to frustrate his attempt to solve the problem. He needed to resolve his emotional problems first, one at a time, and they had names: Zakiya, Jamie, Mother.

"What is it?" Zakiya noticed Direk, noticed his distraction.

"How long have they worked on this pylon?"

"About two days."

"Are they finished? It looks fine to me."

"The integrity of the repair tests good but there is a question about its accuracy."

"Tell them to quit the pylon and move on. The gate connections can adapt to any reasonable error in geometry. If that's the last ship's fitting to need attention, we can begin the connection process."

"The gate hemispheres can adapt?"

"I should have informed Iggy. I apologize for the mistake. My copy and I had the better part of a century to modify the gate hemispheres. We tried to allow for some error in ship geometry."

Zakiya hurried to the repair team and gave them Direk's news. She returned to Direk and they began walking. They followed a lighted pathway among the massive pillars of field emitters which dominated the space between the inner hull and the lower surface of the jump-shell hemisphere now enclosing the ship.

"Have you gained control of your on-ship gate?" Zakiya inquired.

"I didn't know there was one. Do you need it?"

"It was vital to us once." Direk's copy had used it to gain access to Admiral Etrhnk's shielded facilities at Headquarters, to retrieve her and Sammy. She related the story to Direk.

"I'll work on it. I'm surprised Iggy hasn't mentioned it to me. I'm sorry I neglected my duties. I may have cost us as much as a day's delay. I need to have a conference with Iggy and his staff, to see if I've forgot to do something else."

"Are you distracted by memories? The rest of us are."

They hurried through the cold air to an access in the inner hull. They entered a transmat node and winked to the central biosphere of the *Freedom*.

"Yes. Memories have bothered me. And the lack of them."

"Can I help?"

"Yes. Tell me you remember me."

It was dawn in the biosphere. Zakiya and Direk climbed stone steps to an English garden. Just beyond it lay the hospital. Direk halted. Zakiya stopped ahead of him and turned around. "How would I not remember you?"

"I shouldn't waste time with imprecise language, but I seem to be far

different from who I used to be. I suspect that one of my copies, not me, should be here instead. I need you to remember Dick, because it bothers me that you may not."

"Dick?"

"Your bass player, Ruby."

It was as though he hit her. He started to apologize, realizing how their hidden memories could pounce on them so forcefully. She made a pivot on the top step and started to reach for him, as though off-balance and seeking support. "But Dick was dark, like an African. And funny. And... I didn't know he was you. He *was* you! My God! I can see it now! This is wonderful! But does this mean... What does it mean? Dick was always a happy fellow, or so it seems from a glimpse. Is that what you remember? Is that what you were? How could you be... happy?"

"That is exactly what I remember. That's what I wanted you to remember. I wasn't with you as long as Harry was, but I thought you appreciated me. It was almost the happiest time of my life."

"almost the happiest." I hope you were happier when you were with Jamie."

"It was a privilege to be her companion." Direk didn't think he should say more. That emotional problem would probably remain unsolved for a long time. He could see it in Jamie's eyes which now looked past him whenever they were near each other.

"But she doesn't know you." Zakiya said it thoughtfully. "*Nobody* knows you! But I'm beginning to see... Your *mother* doesn't know you!"

"Mother is the other subject I wanted to discuss. What happened to her?"

Zakiya reluctantly described all of the key events the real Direk missed. He absorbed the information with Zakiya studying his reactions. He knew he hid nothing from her. It was, of course, no secret that he could feel emotions as deeply as anyone. But the display of emotion was deemed theatrical and coercive by elite Essiin. Perhaps few such Essiin realized how well their demeanor was applied by Navy admirals, corrupting it into a blank stare of menace and hidden motives. He was thankful his copies had the extra strength to continue the damned tradition, because it was useful in the Navy. He was tired of it. "I don't know what to do for her," Zakiya said. "Most of the time I think she will heal. Mai told me she's pregnant by Etrhmk. I don't know why she's still carrying the fetus. I can't get her to speak to me about it or talk to a psychiatrist. She avoids me all the time and I worry so much about her. Will you try?"

"My mother is pregnant!" Direk wondered why it sounded so absurd. "I don't think I can help her. You're her closest friend. If she won't talk to you, she won't talk to a son who is a stranger to her." It was such a bizarre concept, his mother being pregnant. This wasn't eliminating much distraction from his mental processes. It did, however, increase his certainty that something was wrong. There was someone missing from the crew, and it wasn't Pan. He almost knew who it might be, and then it was erased from his thoughts by Horss.

"Hey, kid, are you done talking to the Boss?" Jon Horss startled Zakiya and Direk as he walked up behind them. They were probably discussing Jamie. Direk looked unhappy. Horss wished he could meddle in their affair of the heart. He wanted everyone to be as happy as he was. But he promised Jamie to give her time to understand herself.

"Jon!" Zakiya complained. "Sometimes I wonder about you!"

"Only sometimes? That's progress! Direk, please forgive the interruption. If

you have more to say to her, I'll wait in the roses."

"I think your timing was perfect. We just reached a stopping point. What's up?"

"See there?" Horss said. "The Twenglish infection is spreading. This is my lucky day. I talked Miss Perfect into marrying me!"

"Mai?" Zakiya's expressive eyes widened in expectation of being correct.

"My Mai, yes!"

Zakiya never saw him this happy. Or this crazy. "Wonderful! How did you trick her?"

"Uh." Horss felt acutely guilty. No matter how old Mai was or how sweet her apology for remaining pregnant, Horss was responsible in his own eyes. He deserved to suffer the guilt but was reluctant to threaten Mai with guilt by association with him. Still, she was determined to have the baby and people would form opinions. "She's pregnant," he finally said.

"Her, too? I didn't know!"

"It's all *your* fault." Horss was sinfully willing to obscure the less honorable aspect: it was a hell of a time and place to bring a new life into the universe. "I would never have met her if you hadn't shanghaied me and killed me. Then you sang for us at the Opera and so distracted Mai, that she forgot the state of her reproductive system."

"And you share no part of the blame, Jon?"

"I got lucky! Do you blame a sailor for that? Will you marry us?"

"Only if you love each other."

"Please forgive my crudeness. I love Mai. I don't know why, but she says she loves me."

"Usually it's the ship's captain who performs a marriage ceremony, but I think the ranking officer aboard should be allowed. When do you want to do it?"

"As soon as possible. I want to be a husband and expectant father at least for the little time we have before this magic ship jumps into oblivion."

"It won't do that," Direk objected. "You trust starlight drive and it's only a step or two below what we're about to do."

"You're talking to a guy who came up through the enlisted ranks, got promoted into the Academy, and almost flunked Basic Starlight Drive Theory."

"Do you understand how a gravity plate works?"

"Who does? What's that to do with jumpships?"

"You know there are little cryogenic pendulums."

"I know that much, yes."

"I think I know now why the cryogenic pendulums help make gravity. They share one feature with jumpships: zero relative velocity."

"What's so special about zero relative velocity? It happens all the time."

"It happens at the atomic level at various statistical rates. Any like atomic particles having zero relative velocity take on identity for an instant. This produces special quantum circuits that connect the particles and entangle other circuits."

"Subatomic star light?"

"Everything is star light. Quantum circuits are star light. Atomic particles are entities, each class of which are identical topologically. But they are all made like quantum circuits. Star light is simply another state of quantum circuitry, and it interacts with atomic entities when zero relative velocity creates a special quantum circuit. The result is an instant of intense attraction. The cryogenic

pendulums produce an increase in the probability of zero relative velocity, while also providing the motion to induce quantum motor effects."

"Ouch," Horss said. "I almost understood what you said, and it hurt my brain. How does this relate to jumpships?"

"The two entities involved - the local and echo jump shells - have zero relative velocity, thus positional identity. In my simplification they would be like huge atomic particles. On the outside they appear at two different locations, but on the inside they exist at the same point in the universe."

"But why zero relative velocity?" Zakiya asked.

"Everything in the universe moves in relation to everything else," Direk explained, "or else time would stop, and distance - everything - would become meaningless. The jump shells stop time and make distance meaningless, because at that instant they have zero relative velocity."

"Will it help to pray?" Horss asked. "Because I really want to live to see my baby."

"Jumpship technology is less magical than your baby. The miracle of life and existence dwarfs everything."

"I have no more time for metaphysical physics," Zakiya said. "I'm on my way to bring Sammy home from the hospital." She hugged Horss firmly, then she hugged him gently, patting him on the back. She kissed him. He was just barely able to keep himself from picking her up as an expression of his feelings for her and for the legitimacy she gave to his life. Hell, why should he want to keep from picking her up? He lifted her off her feet and pivoted. "I'm so happy for you, Jon!" she declared as he finally set her down.

Just as Zakiya disengaged from Horss, Aylis appeared on the walk from the hospital. They waited for her to reach them. As Horss observed the subtle pain Aylis felt, expressed in the solemn manner of her pace and posture, he also saw her strength and her willingness to keep engaging in life, perhaps hoping for a better time to come.

"I saw you from my window. What are you doing out here that requires kissing and hugging and swinging? Can I participate?" It was a valiant attempt to sound happy but failed to convince Horss and, therefore, everyone else. She glanced at her son in a way that made Horss hurt inside. He realized Direk was very important to her, especially in this troubled time of her life.

"Jon got lucky," Zakiya said. "Mai said she would marry him."

"That is so wonderful! I had a little talk with her. Maybe that helped." She moved forward to Horss. She didn't seem comfortable for a moment, but didn't stop until she wrapped her arms around Horss's shoulders. Then she, too, kissed him. Despite everything, this made Horss even happier, yet still a little sad.

"I'm sorry," Horss said to Aylis.

"Why? Because you're taking my roommate away?"

"Because I didn't stop you from accepting Etrhmk's invitation. I didn't imagine what would happen, but I did see danger in the situation."

Aylis was silent for a moment. "There's nothing to forgive, Jon. Be good to Mai. She's had a rough few decades on Earth. When is the wedding?"

"Soon. Zakiya said she'll marry us."

"It's probably not the time or place to ask, but would you see if Mai will allow me to interrupt her pregnancy?"

"Is anything wrong with the fetus? Mai tells me it's perfect."

"It is. I just thought you would want to be cautious, not knowing what lies ahead in the mission."

"I was briefed on this topic by Mai. She said she will follow your example, not your advice."

"Aylis," Zakiya said.

"No. If I understood myself, I would explain myself to you. All I can feel right now is a great love for the innocent child inside me, and a desire to keep her in me as long as I can."

"A daughter. Is she a good baby?"

"I don't know. I haven't had the time or the will to even register her genetic code. I'm telling you things I haven't told myself. I don't know if it's female. I don't know if it's healthy. I had ugly thoughts and twisted emotions that kept me on the verge of aborting it, smashing it, incinerating it! But it is innocent of everything. And I can already feel it inside me. And I'm never lonely now." Aylis began taking deep breaths and stifling the sounds that tried to rise out of her chest. Zakiya pulled her into her arms. "God, I need a hug every minute or two these days!"

"I'll be glad to hug you that often," Direk stated.

Zakiya released the startled Aylis. Aylis stared at her son in concerned wonder. "How?"

"I'll have too much free time after the jump," Direk said, speaking as though nothing he said was as remarkable as it was. "Let me help you at the hospital. I'll take Mai's place while she moves in with Captain Horss."

"You would do that? Yes? No. What about Jamie?"

"About Jamie," Horss said, hating that he made that promise.

"I suppose your order still stands?" Zakiya asked.

"Yes, it does. Don't bother her. I don't know if I should say anything more. I'm far out of my small area of expertise. Direk, I don't know if they told you. Jamie was also raped many years ago. The two most important women in your life. That's rough."

"I didn't know." Direk was upset. Everyone could see it. Aylis appeared amazed at his display of feelings. "When? How? Did they prosecute her attacker?"

"You're not at all like your copy," Horss remarked. "You sound human."

"Tell me!" Direk demanded.

"It wasn't just one rapist. Three. And a fourth who watched. The military police never caught them because Jamie didn't report the rape. But *you* caught them. Your copy. He executed them. So, this is just some of what Jamie must be thinking about. I think she has powerful feelings for you but she isn't sure what those feelings are. I think you made her love you and then you abandoned her. I know there were good reasons for it. But it happened. And she is just now feeling betrayed, maybe by all of you. I'm sorry I have to say these things but it's poisoning me to keep it inside. I care a lot about Jamie."

* * *

It seemed fatalistic that she and Freddy should be in sole control of the ship at this moment. Freddy was by definition a genius but very inexperienced. For her own part, Jamie couldn't do much more than model a Navy captain's uniform. At this moment fate commanded the ship; she didn't. All that she and Freddy could do was watch until she could push a button. On one screen she watched the final pylon lock down with the upper hemisphere. The circuit verification test started. Freddy monitored the procedure on a more technical

level. On a second screen she watched the Navy pursuit squadron spread out in the system to probe the many bodies of mass. They would soon find what they sought. Freddy also monitored the Navy signals that were intercepted by instruments that relayed them from the surface of the asteroid in which they hid. The first screen needed to run to completion before the second screen showed the Navy ready to attack. Then she could push the button. Freddy would tell her when.

On a third screen there was a wedding. Jamie didn't know what was more absurd: she being in command of the ship, or everyone else on the ship celebrating life in the shadow of death. Did they all really believe in Direk's miracle of teleportation? Did any of them realize how close they were to the Navy's guns? Direk. *Stop thinking about him!* What did he once call himself? Dick Jones. Dick and Jamie Jones. That was where she took her fictitious family name. Wasn't it?

The Five Worlds, all draped in winter white. The cottage by the spring. The big bed with the goose-down mattress and four wool blankets. The intense quiet of a snowy world made all the more intense by the clanking of a distant cowbell. His slow breathing under the heavy blankets. The memory of children laughing at him and she not knowing why. "Because I am a giant white man," he said. One of his many lies to her. He made them laugh. She knew he did! She couldn't believe it, so she forgot that she knew he made them laugh. "Because I am a giant white man," she said to the rising and falling blankets. His whispery breathing continued unchanged. The cowbell faded into yesterday. She never understood Direk.

How many times did she relive this moment in her life? Why was she doing it right now, when such interference with her mental faculties could be extremely dangerous?

"Freddy!"

"Yes, Sister?"

"If I hesitate to act, when you know I should, you act for me. I'm giving you my authority."

"Why? Are you ill?"

"Yes! It's these damned memories! I don't know how our mother holds herself together."

"Why would memories make you ill?"

"Because they are too perfectly recorded. They override my senses. They're addictive. I can go back to them and see detail I could never see in natural memories. Your memories must be perfect, Freddy. You probably can't imagine why the vividness of my memories so disturbs me."

"I would think vividness would be preferable. I do understand organic brains may degrade a memory with time, or otherwise restrict its retrieval. But I think you appeared fascinated by whatever you just experienced."

"Are you sure you're monitoring everything you need to be monitoring? And you still have time to watch my face?"

"I'm sure. I assume you understand how rapidly I can process multiple streams of data. My analysis of your facial expressions takes more time than most other things I think about. I like to watch you. I'd like to know what you're remembering."

The idea of confiding in Freddy appealed to Jamie. She decided to tell him about this particular memory. How much more absurd and derelict could she make her duty in the captain's chair of the *Freedom*?

"He had his back turned to you?" Freddy asked, after she described the memory and the memory within that memory of children laughing at Direk.

"Yes. He could have made a funny facial expression. But he was talking to them in their native language. This was before the Five Worlds adopted Standard. I didn't understand what he said to them. I know he made them laugh. Probably it was unintentional. Do you have any secret information about Direk that you're not supposed to tell me?"

"If I possessed such information, would the fact I possessed it also need to be secret?"

"Then you do have such information?"

"I must deny that I do. I know you won't believe me."

"Freddy, I know you study people much more than they deserve studying. Can't you tell me just one little thing?"

"No one has sworn me to secrecy. What information I have about Direk is still scarce and my interpretation of it could be in error. However, I would suggest that you observe the wedding scene carefully. Particularly the musicians."

Jamie watched the third screen show Admiral Khalanov delivering the nervous groom to the presence of Admiral Demba. On the park grounds by the lake many thousands gathered to witness the wedding and to be together when the fate of the ship was decided. A small band of musicians played the wedding march as Aylis Mnro escorted Sugai Mai to the altar. She panned the image and focused on the musicians.

It was easy to spot Direk in the band, with his non-regulation, too-long blond hair. He played a cello. When the wedding march ended, he leaned back in his chair and smiled at some comment by a fellow musician. The smile was so effortless that it shocked Jamie. She had no time to try to digest this little miracle.

"The Navy has found us," Freddy said. "We're not ready to jump. Can you think of anything to do to stall them?"

"Oh, hell, yes! I'll talk to them."

"Visual?"

"Why not?" She had to rein in her emotions, which shot upward too far. She had to stifle her imagination, which was still creating new possibilities for her and Direk. *Damn* that smile of his! Despite all of this noise in her thoughts, she felt ready to do battle with whoever appeared on her screen. Of course, it was a man.

The Navy captain politely introduced himself and politely demanded she do the same. She ignored his demand. "You don't command the *Eclipse*?" she asked.

"No. This is the destroyer *Fury*. Identify yourself."

"Let me speak to the captain of the *Eclipse*. I know it's out there."

"You're in no position to make such a demand. Tell me who you are."

She wanted to make him say *please* but the risk was getting heavy. She knew they knew she was stalling for time. As far as they could imagine, the *Freedom* was hiding in this piece of rock while it armed itself. If they waited too long, they could be caught off guard. "Captain Jones here. I will presume the *Eclipse* is listening."

"Insufficient information, Jones. Wait. Marine lieutenant Jamie Jones. Are you she?"

"I was promoted."

"Where is Captain Horss?"

"He's getting married."

There was a pause. She didn't know if they could analyze her vocalizations for veracity, or if they could trust what they found. In any case, it was a bonus delay. She glanced at Freddy and saw him give her a thumbs-up signal. "Ready for jump," Freddy spoke by shiplink.

She was almost disappointed she couldn't continue this game. It was exciting for a few moments, when there was concern the jump-shell connection tests would take too long. Now that she could jump at any moment, she was tempted to prolong the dialog.

She glanced back at the wedding scene and saw Sammy dispensing the wedding rings to the bride and groom. Just a few more moments of happiness for everyone... She tried not to think about what would happen. She had no doubt that *something* would happen. Maybe she didn't yet believe the *Freedom* would vanish from inside the rock and reappear far away. But she believed the Navy would never touch them.

"May I have your attention, *Captain*?"

"You can't have all of it. I'm watching the wedding."

"Prepare to be boarded! Be advised that resistance will be met with lethal force."

"How well I know. Be advised that anyone who comes aboard my ship stays aboard my ship. I could use a few more Marines, preferably live ones." She looked at Freddy for some signal that he detected boarding signatures. He seemed to understand what she wanted. He turned his head to signal a negative response. She glanced again at the wedding scene and saw Jon taking hold of his future and putting his lips on her. "Sorry. We can't wait any longer."

Section 023

Journey by Cryptikon

The sunlight in the ship's biosphere weakened. The clouds turned pink. More rapidly than a sunset on Earth, the sky darkened. Wind swept the clouds away. As the light dimmed to deep night, the full panoply of the Milky Way galaxy spread across the heavens. The hundreds who attended the wedding and the thousands more who came to the lake park to share the anticipation of the great jump across space understood the meaning of what they saw and they raised a cheer. The ship had jumped into the gulf between galaxies. They were looking back from where they came.

* * *

"I haven't seen you for a long time, Iggy." He had thoughtfully made this appointment with her but Aylis still felt surprised at his presence. Perhaps she also felt apprehensive. Of all the people she worried about - which was everybody - she worried about Iggy the most. It wasn't because she thought him unstable or depressed, but because Aylis felt he deserved a better life. She felt he suffered a great hole in his life, because he had still not recovered his lost memories. She hoped his memories - when they did return to him - would not harm him. She was shocked at how deeply the memory of his dead wife Ana affected her, and it would be far worse for Iggy.

"I was writing." Iggy sat down in a chair opposite Aylis's desk. He wore his khaki engineering fatigues with their multitude of pockets, most of which he seemed to have filled. She felt a small urge to rummage through his pockets and see what they contained.

"Another of your space adventures?" Jon had told her about Iggy's admission of authoring books of genre fiction. She was still trying to locate some of his titles but he wouldn't tell anyone his pseudonym.

"Almost. A diary. So I won't forget this time. *It has* been an adventure."

"I wish we could verify the status of your auxiliary memory. Unfortunately, Direk and I would need to do difficult retraining to qualify to inspect your memory. Also, it's possible we could damage it."

"It's a great disappointment."

"Don't give up. Let's wait a little longer." He was quiet for a few moments and didn't look at her. "Why did you want to see me, Iggy?"

"We're in a period where my services aren't in great demand. It will be some months before we dive back into the galaxy and do dangerous things. I thought I would ask to be rejuvenated." He sounded to her as though he might have rehearsed his words.

"A full rejuvenation?" Iggy shrugged in response. She recognized this as a sign of ambivalence and seized upon it. She didn't want to get back into the full rejuvenation business on the *Freedom*, and especially not with Iggy. Nori was taking most of the rejuvenation resources she had aboard the *Freedom*. "You know what comes next."

"Not really. I don't remember the last time you made me young."

"A lot of questions. The first one is: Why?"

"Look at me. I'm aged. See these wrinkles? These spots and bumps that don't go away?"

"We can take care of that without full rejuvenation, Iggy. Your general health is good. You know rejuvenation is a drastic procedure. In many ways you die. You'll become someone else, despite the improved memory technology."

"Exactly what I want! This version of me isn't anything I want."

"I like 'this version' of you, Iggy. I admire what you've done. I worry that you'll lose something nobody knows you have, and that it will be important to you, and to us."

Iggy leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I confess. It's the vanity of an old man who is interested in a younger woman."

"I'm dying to know who!"

"I don't know what I'm doing! I suppose I'm caught up in the adventure. Did you put something in the public water supply? It seems like everyone is... Never mind."

"You're not going to tell me."

"Engineers never get the girl in my adventure stories." Iggy turned away from Aylis and looked toward the bay window of her office. He could see the English garden below, the lake beyond. He must have seen the artifact on the sill behind the cushioned window seats. The sunlight loved its colors. "You leave it lying around for anyone to see?"

"It isn't mine. It belongs to all of us. It may as well be an ornament, for lack of any better use. If anyone should have it, it should be you. You discovered the first one. Zakiya always said you were her lucky charm on a dig."

Iggy went to the window. He sat down next to the precious artifact. He stared at it. He turned away from it and rubbed his eyes. Something in his actions or expression concerned Aylis. She rose from her desk and approached to stand in front of Iggy. "It has another existence," he said. "Can you see it?"

"See what? What do you mean?"

"Here." He pointed to a place in the air above the cryptikon. He moved his hand to another spot. "There."

"Where? Iggy, I thought I saw something! Just for an instant I saw something!"

The cryptikon rose into the air from its cradle and met the tip of Iggy's first finger. He moved the finger, almost as if writing in the air. "How very strange!" He frowned deeply and tried to still his trembling.

"What do you see? Why is it attached to your finger?"

He seemed to notice the cryptikon at the tip of his finger. He paused to stare at it. In a moment it detached itself and became fixed in the air. He continued to point at invisible things in front of him. He appeared fascinated but also disturbed, even alarmed.

"What do you see?"

"Many people here. They're all staring at me but I don't think they see me. It's like a hole I could fall into, where everything is just as real as it is here. A lot of darkness over here. Here some light. Dim. Too close. Pull back. How did I do that? A coffin? A stasis coffin." Iggy yanked his hand away, retreated from his seat by the bay window. The cryptikon remained in the air. He snatched at it. He closed his trembling fist on the artifact. He shut his eyes tightly. He breathed hard, and when he opened his eyes he seemed relieved.

"What's wrong? What happened?" She was concerned enough that she measured his vital signs with her fingertips on his neck. He tried to put the cryptikon into her hands and she resisted. She could see the patterns were changed somehow on the little egg-like piece of magic. "Let me call Direk and

Zakiya." She pushed the cryptikon back into his hands. "Sit down and try to be calm."

Iggy turned to the window and put the cryptikon back in its display cradle. He sat and stared out at the lake and the hospital gardens. In a few minutes Zakiya arrived, followed by Direk. Aylis told them what happened. They tried to ask questions of Iggy but he didn't want to talk. Zakiya sat with him for awhile, until he finally spoke. "I feel strange!"

"In what way?"

"Something in me changed."

"What changed, Iggy?"

"I don't know! Perhaps it was the universe that changed and I stayed the same." Iggy tried to speak quietly now, and that disturbed Aylis more than if he raised his voice in his usual impatient shout. Zakiya didn't ask another question but simply sat beside him and held his hand. "I thought I knew how the universe works. I thought I knew how my mind works. I don't know *anything* anymore."

"You made the cryptikon work, Iggy."

"It knew me. All I did was say 'hello.' And it changed everything. When you first put a cryptikon in my hand, I felt strange, but there were other, stronger emotions at work on me at that time. Then Jamie gave it to me while you were captive to Etrhnk, and I had what could have been a message. I never understood what was happening. I only see it now."

"You saw a person in a stasis coffin," Zakiya suggested.

He nodded, then shuddered. "I didn't just *see* it, *I was there!*" Iggy spoke in a loud whisper. "I could *smell* it, *hear* it, *feel* it! *It was real!*"

After a few moments of respectful silence, waiting for Iggy to recover, Direk chose to speak. "There is a difference between knowing something is real and being convinced it is real. Which do you feel it was?"

"How would I know? My senses are dulled by age. I would have to guess that it is tricking me, because it can get into my mind. It makes me assume what is impossible is not impossible. It wants me to believe that what I experienced is not only real but new. New! It exists now. Right now!"

"I assumed the cryptikon was a communications device," Zakiya said. "I assumed it was special. But this..."

"How can it show us something that is at least twelve thousand parsecs away?" Iggy asked. "The Essiin Museum, where the cryptikon resides. I'm sure that was what I saw first. All the Essiin staring at me. Even if we could modulate starlight there isn't enough gravitational bandwidth to transmit even the simplest information that distance. And the propagation delay would be forever. The signal would be lost amid the cross currents."

"Would you try it again, Iggy?" Zakiya pleaded.

He struggled to make a decision. He plucked the cryptikon from its cradle and squeezed it until he grew calm enough to open his fingers and let the device sit in the air. "Please tell me if you see the impossible as I see it."

Zakiya inhaled sharply. "Oh, my God!" Zakiya grabbed Iggy's arm with her free hand.

"What is it?" Aylis demanded, still denied sight of what Zakiya and Iggy saw.

"You can't see it?" Zakiya asked.

"Privacy mode," Iggy said thoughtfully. "If I change this..." He made a gesture in the air.

"Oh!" Aylis gasped. The space in front of Iggy filled with patterns of pure color that reminded Aylis of the cryptikon itself, and were just as cryptic. Iggy

obviously understood what the patterns did, as though the device coached him by telepathy. In the volume surrounding the control patterns lay a field of light and dark, with vague shapes that connected the light to the dark. The geometry didn't fit into normal space and it defied sharp focus, yet it commanded Aylis to believe in an addendum to reality that changed her notion of what the universe was.

Iggy touched one of the dimmer areas. Everyone felt vertigo as a very real environment superseded that of Aylis's hospital office. He pushed them back from the giant image of a stasis coffin. He caused the view to expand, matching scale between realities. Two other coffins came into view. Aylis could not even imagine what Iggy was doing to make the image change. Image: she had to keep telling herself it was only an image, not a real thing. Then she realized she could *feel* the reality of what she saw, as if it was wrapping itself around her.

Zakiya rose slowly and approached the zone of impossibility. Aylis followed her as she crept *into* the image. Zakiya put her trembling hand out and *touched* the glass portal of the first coffin. "Oh, God!" She jerked her hand away, then put it back.

Aylis turned around to see Direk and Iggy behind her, and her office beyond them. She felt dizzy, disconnected from the rest of the universe.

Zakiya rubbed the surface of the stasis coffin as she leaned over it to see who was within. She moaned. Aylis put her hand on Zakiya's shoulder, her face next to Zakiya's, and saw what she saw. *Alexandros Gerakis!* She couldn't imagine what Zakiya felt. If her own shock and dismay and exhilaration was this huge... Zakiya's trembling beneath her hand could only hint at the magnitude of her emotions. Aylis pulled herself out of the fountain of bright memories this moment set loose, pulled herself away from the grim mask of death within the stasis coffin. She pulled Zakiya away from the coffin. She found herself leaning on another coffin, and it supported her as if it was real.

The four of them stood in a cold, dim chamber that smelled of spilled substances that were aged into a miasma of unpleasant odors. Quiet noises emanated from indistinct locations, suggesting machinery with ancient moving parts, pipes with not enough fluids, thermal chatter of metal expanding and contracting. Point sources of the dim light gave them shadows that draped over the surfaces of this other reality and moved when they moved. Aylis wanted to scream to release her fear and tension, to shatter the illusion.

"Koji," Zakiya said, seeing the face in the coffin on which Aylis leaned.

Aylis willed herself to look. "He doesn't look as bad as Alex but he looks much older."

They came to the third and last coffin. Aylis stood over it and peered through the clear portal. She crossed her arms and held herself. She could say nothing. Setek-Ren was as dead as Alex, and the pain of his death just as perfectly recorded in his face.

"My father," Direk said, taking his turn to look upon death.

Aylis made herself function again. She made herself check the operational values of the stasis coffins. She did it as carefully as she could, repeating steps as many times as she needed. "The stasis coffins are all in good working order. If this is real, we can revive them."

They heard a scream from somewhere in the distance. It frightened Aylis.

"Is that here in the hospital?" Zakiya asked. "Or there?"

"There," Iggy said, pointing to a hatch that stood open, showing a dim passageway. He made the view move into the passageway, until it could go no

farther.

"There is a limiting radius from the cryptikon in Setek's coffin," Direk theorized.

"There was another cryptikon," Iggy said. He turned back to the reality of Aylis's office in the hospital and selected another location. A new image made a dizzying reduction to match scale. Close walls became gently tangible and pushed them closer together. Aylis's office now lay beyond a doorway, appearing less real than the small ship's quarters they now crowded within. They could see only by the light coming from Aylis's office.

A man lay on a bunk, several shiny tubes or wires connected to his body. He moved as though in a restless sleep. He uttered pitiful sounds, word fragments, pseudo sentences. He screamed again.

"Patrick!" Zakiya shouted. "Pat! Wake up!"

The man's fitful sleep altered, as though he heard Zakiya and he started to wake up. A light shone on his face.

"Incredible!" Iggy held a handlight he used for engineering inspections. The beam illuminated the sleeping man. The man awoke and opened one eye. He squinted at the light, put a hand up to block the beam.

"Patrick, can you see us?" Aylis asked.

"Who are you?" the man asked. "What are you? Am I dreaming?"

"Pat, this is me," Zakiya said. "And Aylis. And her son Direk. And Iggy."

"Who?"

"People you once knew, Pat. We've found you at last!"

"You're ghosts! It's not enough that Alex has to stomp up and down the hallway every night! Now I have to deal with you! Go away!"

"Damn!" Iggy swore. "You're more aged than I am, Pat." He put his hand out, reached toward the man in the bed, who drew back from him. "Do you remember me? You were at my wedding. You gave my bride a most friendly kiss. Too friendly!"

The man looked again at Iggy and slowly reached toward his hand. Their fingers seemed to touch. The man jerked his hand at the contact, then returned and took Iggy's hand in his. "Are you really here?" Patrick Jenkins asked, shaking Iggy's hand.

"We aren't here," Zakiya said, "but we will be soon."

"But I can *feel* you!" Jenkins said.

"It's the cryptikon," Iggy started to explain. "We're very far away. We'll come for you. We..." Iggy stopped talking and started shaking.

Aylis was staring at the joined hands of Iggy and Pat, fascinated beyond words by this miracle, hardly aware of Iggy's distress, until Pat's hand vanished. The entire alternate reality, including the odors, vanished as well. She was standing in shock in her own office, while Direk and Zakiya tried to catch the collapsing Iggy.

Section 024

Remembering Dick, Visiting Patrick

"I'm sorry. I'm not very good at this."

Jamie hurt her mother, and she was trying *not* to hurt her! Was there nothing she could do correctly in her mother's presence? What kind of relationship could she ever hope to have with this woman? Would she always need to depend on her mother's guilt for having abandoned her, to keep her love?

"I don't understand. You're fast - faster than me - but you aren't really aggressive and sneaky. Is it because I'm your daughter and you don't want to hurt me?"

"Yes. That's my excuse." The admiral picked herself up from the training mat and dabbed at a cut on her face.

"I'm sorry," Jamie repeated. She put her arm around her mother and walked her toward the locker room. "I shouldn't have forced you to practice with me. Sammy has told me some disturbing stories. I was curious about your skills."

"Please, don't encourage him to recall such things."

"I told him he shouldn't be proud of you for what you did. You only did what you had to do. Who were the two soldiers you killed? Where was that? I almost accused him of fabricating the incident."

Why couldn't she relax and feel normal around Jamie? Zakiya asked herself. What was normal? How were they, in any practical sense, mother and daughter? "I've always disliked personal combat."

"So, naturally, I picked that activity as my excuse for meeting with you."

Zakiya laughed, pleased that Jamie simply wanted to be with her. Why did she need to make of her daughter such a problem? Jamie had a tragic history but she was a survivor. It was the future they would share that was important. "I should explain that I'm a product of the Mnro Clinic's secret research labs. I'm augmented in ways I never thought possible. My skill level only rises in response to the perceived threat, and I can't imagine you wanting to hurt or kill me. What did you really want to talk about?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wanted to be with you for a little while."

"That's nice. That's perfect. I won't violate Jon's orders by asking the wrong questions. I won't strain our relationship by trying to be the mother I never was. I'll close my mouth now."

Jamie laughed, relieved her mother was almost as nervous as she was, and probably just as anxious to establish a good relationship. They entered the locker room. Her mother began to undress. Jamie hesitated, feeling self-conscious.

"Not showering?"

"I seem to have an inhibition to be naked in the presence of my parent." Jamie decided to strip anyway.

They showered and dressed, then walked down to the lake and sat on a bench. Jamie had sensed her mother noticing her scars when they were naked. It didn't bother her. She assumed her mother knew Marines collected scars - a silly tradition but anything to set them apart from saner individuals. "I've got a good collection of scars." She felt relaxed. She just wanted to hear the wonderful tone of her mother's voice.

"You were a Marine." Her mother sat next to her with her head back, her eyes closed, and the warmth of the fake sun on her brown face.

"I should have them removed."

"I was *trying* not to look."

"I don't think you like them."

"Is what I think that important to you? No, I didn't say that! I want so much for you to like me. Scars are a trademark of the Black Fleet, Jamie. When I saw them on you I had that unpleasant association."

"The Black Fleet? What is that?"

"I realize now that Sammy has probably talked to a great many people on the ship. He's extremely intelligent but I forget what a child is like. He may have caused too many incorrect rumors."

"You promised me a fantastic story that would justify your bringing Sammy on this mission."

"So I did." Her mother told a fascinating and terrifying story, one Jamie wouldn't have believed until recently. It gave her a greater understanding of her mother. It gave her a feeling of rapport with the woman. She ached to ask her about her former lives and the man she married - Jamie's father. How did she and Aylis remain focused on a plan that spanned more than two centuries and required them to forget the most important reasons for even having the plan? How did they survive both physically and mentally, to reach this point in their saga? There was too much to talk about in one quiet afternoon that was soon interrupted.

"Aylis?" her mother said.

Jamie turned her head to look behind the bench where they sat. Aylis lay on the green grass in the shade of a sycamore. Zakiya was almost relieved to see Aylis relaxing so well, even if her presence might be a symptom of her continuing anxiety. Dressed in white pants and a loose gray pullover, her position on the ground gave no preview yet of the expansion of pregnancy to come.

"How is Iggy?" Zakiya asked Aylis.

"Physically good, mentally enraptured."

"I'm glad to see you, Aylis. I think you've been avoiding me."

Aylis rolled onto her side in the green grass and took a deep breath.

"Is it the baby?" Zakiya asked her. "Do you need a hug?"

"No and no. Direk has already taken care of that. I'm just... nothing. I'm sorry to bother you."

"What do you mean," Jamie asked, "about Direk taking care of your hug?"

"Sorry. That was a violation of my orders." Aylis lay quietly, wishing now she had not come, ashamed of her desire for forgiveness by Zakiya, ashamed of her lack of courage to ask for it. She forced her thoughts back to Direk, her only hope for joy, and wondered in a quiet whisper: "Was he really happy?"

Zakiya knew to listen carefully to Aylis, to catch any clue to how she felt, to find any sign she was healing from Etrhnk's assault. Zakiya deduced she referred to Direk. Aylis would not speak with Zakiya as a friend, as though their friendship ended after the rape. Zakiya had questioned Mai and only learned enough to share Mai's grave concern for her emotional slide. Only Direk kept her from being committed by Mai to medical treatment.

Zakiya chose to answer Aylis's question, assuming Direk had not yet told her about his brief life as a musician. She could not resist disobeying Jon's order concerning Jamie's relationship to Direk. "Harry and Ruby only had him for a few years, Aylis. And Ruby wasn't in the best era of her life. She remembers him as a wickedly funny guy, willing to try anything and always eager to help. I

know he was happy. He told me he was."

"Who is Harry?" Jamie asked. "You were Ruby. Who are you talking about?"

Zakiya ignored her daughter's questions, but her smile probably told her everything. "Alcoholism was easily curable but Ruby was an alcoholic. She was confused and depressed. She was having a bad night. Too much liquor and one too many leaks in her auxiliary memory unit. It was all Harry could do to get her dressed and out to the stage. There was Dick, standing by his bass, plunking a little tune to accompany himself as he entertained the audience until Ruby could show up. He was telling jokes and little stories, 'deadpan' as they said in Twenglish, and the audience loved him. Harry and Ruby had to let him finish, and then had to perform their best to follow his act. I remember Ruby being astonished that Dick could do that kind of thing. I don't know why; she never knew who he really was. Maybe that was who he really was."

"If my duplicate ever knew about him, she didn't remember it for me," Aylis said sadly.

"Who are you talking about?" Jamie demanded.

"I think we're talking about Dick," Zakiya said.

"Dick who?"

"His stage name was Dick Jones," Zakiya answered, then returned her attention to Aylis. "What is your real reason for stopping by to see us?"

Dick Jones, Jamie wondered. They were talking about Direk, trying to make her change her mind about him. It was true, then: Direk was a completely different person from who Jamie thought he was. How did that affect her feelings for him? It didn't. She was born to love him, as though the bond between Aylis and Zakiya was somehow genetically involved with Jamie and Direk. It did not, however, make her feelings about herself any better. It didn't make it any easier to approach defining a new relationship between her and Direk. He was so perfect for so long a time, hiding himself from her. How could she ever trust him? Did she even care that she couldn't know who he was? Wasn't that part of his - charm - that he was unpredictable?

They searched the cottage. It was a brief search.

"No," *he said. "No other bed. No other reasonable substitute. Did you find anything?"*

"No," *she replied, feeling a little thrill at what this might cause. "Do you want to go back?"*

Stop the movie! Let me examine his reaction closely. Damn, he's good! Not a flicker of guilt, not a hint of desire.

"Do you want to go back?" he asked, not answering her question.

Was that a logical response? Wouldn't he have denied her that choice, if for no other reason than to save himself the strain of surviving the biological comedy to come?

She could feel herself wanting him and making herself believe that he might actually want to stay in the cottage and share the bed with her.

"It's a long walk back," she said. "And it's snowing. And it's getting dark."

"There is transmat service in the Five Worlds," he pointed out.

"Do you want to tell Phuti and Nori that we aren't lovers?"

"Would it disappoint them that much?"

He could have said almost anything else to end the discussion and end their use of the cottage. Was he able to sense her desire to be alone with him, perhaps even to be intimate with him? How possible was that?

"I don't mind sharing the bed with you, Direk. It's a big bed. It has a goose-

down mattress. When will I ever again get a chance to sleep on such a bed? Does sharing the bed bother you too much?"

"If that is what you want, I believe I can behave myself."

Did he say that? No! He said: "I believe I can sleep without disturbing you."

A couple of nights later she would make it clear to him that she wouldn't mind being disturbed.

"What are you remembering?" Zakiya asked. Jamie didn't respond. "Hello, Jamie?"

She clawed her way out of the pungent reverie. The way her mother was looking at her, she imagined she knew what memory she was accessing. She blushed almost painfully, before realizing she couldn't possibly know the embarrassing details.

"Hello, Mother! Well, someday I'll tell you *what* I remembered but you know *who* I remembered." She turned to look at Aylis Mnro still lying on the grass and not responding to them. She looked wrong. Jamie was concerned. "Isn't she getting any better?"

* * *

She wore the peasant wedding costume from ancient times. She wore it humbly, with little decoration and almost no jewelry. Yet it only emphasized how precious she was, what a gift she was, and she was giving herself to him!

He wore his Deep Space uniform, not his Navy uniform. He wore his medals. He wore his smile of joy so large it made his cheeks ache. Alex put a big hand on his shoulder and shook him, as if trying to wake him from this beautiful dream. They both waited at the altar for Ana.

He saw all his shipmates in the pews, even Patrick who showed him his fist, as though upset with Iggy for taking Ana from him. But in the next instant Patrick gave him a thumbs-up and a genuine smile of congratulations.

Someone was shaking his shoulder and it wasn't Alexandros Gerakis.

"Remember me?" Phuti asked.

Yes! Yes! Yes! He tried to stifle the memory seizure but was lost for a few moments in a random but sharp recollection of Phuti and himself exploring an anomalous gray asteroid and seeing the first signs of possible precursor artifacts. "I do remember you!" Iggy lapsed into yet another memory of Phuti.

"What did you see?" Phuti asked, his question barely audible to Iggy through the sounds of clarinet and balalaika in the memory.

"I saw you at my wedding, Phuti." Iggy was overwhelmed by a memory he had already recalled several times. Iggy put his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. He sat on a step of the access platform that overlooked farmland. In the distance, a gray cloud rained on a rectangle of green. Phuti sat down next to him and put an arm across his shoulders.

"Sometimes I can't believe any of this is happening to me," Phuti said. "I never really believed I would be revived. But I remember your wedding as if it were yesterday. I almost wish I didn't."

"I remember you and Alex dancing a Greek dance, the tall Alex and the short Phuti. You two started it. Then Zakiya joined you. You put her next to Alex, so that she would be holding his hand. I remember them looking at each other, and I knew right then they loved each other. I always suspected it and wanted it. It made me even happier, and I was already impossibly happy. Do I remember it correctly, Phuti?"

"Yes, you do!" Phuti patted his shoulder, dropped his arm from Iggy. "It was a wonderful interlude in a terrible time."

"I'm fortunate I don't remember the evil as well as I do the good. I'm fortunate the auxiliary memory isn't so easy to open, or else I'm afraid I would dwell on those moments that hurt me the most. It's such a powerful experience, far clearer than what I would have stored in my own brain cells."

"Don't let me pull you back into the past, Iggy. You seem well to me but I know you can be hurt by some of your memories." Phuti paused at a change in his friend's expression. "Is something wrong?"

"You brought it. I can feel it. It's already active. Did you know you could activate it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't activate it. You must have. You have a cryptikon. We share the job of using the cryptikons. That's why Zakiya needed to fetch you from the Five Worlds. Besides knowing you belonged with us."

Phuti removed the cryptikon from his pocket and looked at it with shock on his round face. "I borrowed it from Zakiya. I wanted to bring it to you, to urge you to make it work. I wondered what was bothering me!"

"You and I, we found them. I have the other one with me. Aylis made me keep it. Because we found them, the Old Ones found us. You don't remember, do you?"

"No, not clearly. Did something happen to us, Iggy?"

"I don't remember, either. We must have been *assigned* to the cryptikons in some way. Can you feel what you should do?" Phuti frowned and stared at the thing in his hand. "Did the others warn you about the experience?" Iggy asked.

"They were upset by it," Phuti answered. "Even Direk."

"I'm warning you again. It's a great shock. Go ahead. Make it work."

Phuti started when the cryptikon produced its interface and he almost threw the egg into the nearby lettuce plot. The cryptikon drifted back to him and floated in the moist air of the farmland just within his reach. "Oh, my!" was all that Phuti could utter for several moments.

Iggy gazed at the impossible view of color and curvature and worlds down rabbit holes. He was relieved that it didn't upset him as much this time. It still broke all the laws of human science and forced him into a universe that was far stranger than the one he thought he knew. "I've been trying to find the courage to use the cryptikon in my pocket. I know everyone is anxious to believe it's real and to find our lost friends. Perhaps together you and I will have the courage to do that."

"What do I do?" Phuti finally asked. "I feel the urge to point at what interests me."

"Try it."

Phuti pointed. The sunlit fields of crops and orchards dimmed from view, replaced by a small round room filled with soft light and a large number of people. "Oh, my!"

A person turned to glance at him, turned away, then turned back in startlement. In a few seconds everyone in the room was looking at them and beyond them and in front of them. Iggy turned to see what was so interesting and only saw the bulkhead and doorway of the access landing to the farmland. Phuti's cryptikon floated just in front of them.

"I believe this is the Essiin Museum of Science and Technology," Iggy said. "There is the cryptikon that's on display."

"They see us!"

"Do you want to converse with them? I used to speak Deshoii."

"Let's do it! Will someone tell me where we are?" Two or three Essiin called out the name of the museum. "What is the date in Union Standard Time?"

A woman in a service uniform came through the crowd and approached the floating cryptikon. She looked from it to the cryptikon on display in the center of the room. She reached out to touch Phuti's cryptikon and her hand passed through it. She looked at the parts of the ship visible to her and scuffed her feet where the deck of the ship met the floor of the museum. "What kind of information projection are you?" the woman asked.

"I don't know," Iggy replied. "What kind are you? Will you tell us the Union Standard Time?" The Essiin woman checked her data implant and answered. Iggy checked his and said, "Damn! That's what I have." The cryptikons were, indeed, capable of real-time communications across the vastness of intergalactic space.

"You are the Doctor Mende image," the museum worker said to Phuti. "You aren't supposed to be here."

"What does she mean?" Phuti asked Iggy.

"I think you're exhibited in another part of the museum."

"Why?"

"Not too many people have ever done what you did, Phuti. The Five Worlds. And they don't even know how much you helped Aylis. You're a part of Union history."

Several museum guards entered the chamber and confronted them.

"They are only images," the woman in the museum uniform said to the guards.

"They look real to me," a guard argued. "They have no entrance passes. They are a security violation."

"Perhaps we should leave," Phuti said, reaching forward to retrieve the cryptikon. A guard was trying to grasp the cryptikon at the same time and their hands touched.

"He *is* real," the guard said.

"I have confirmed identities on both of them," another guard said. "This one is Admiral Igor Khalanov. That one is Doctor Phuti Mende! You are deceased, Doctor Mende! Admiral, you are aboard the Navy starship *Freedom*!"

"Doctor Mende isn't dead," Iggy said. "We're both aboard the *Freedom*. Could we perform an experiment before we go?"

"Remain where you are," the guard ordered. "The museum is now under a security alert. You cannot be who you are."

"I often feel that way," Iggy remarked.

Everyone in the room reacted as Iggy brought out his cryptikon. If Iggy was real, was this a real cryptikon? The guards looked from one cryptikon to the other, the one in Iggy's hand and the one they could walk through to reach Iggy and Phuti. While the guards tried to decide what to do, Iggy manipulated the artifact and a view of the farmlands of the *Freedom* appeared. People walked into unseen museum walls attempting to venture out into the farmlands. Others tried to hold the floating cryptikon but couldn't feel it. A guard tried to confiscate the cryptikon from Iggy but couldn't grasp it.

"Arrest them," the senior guard ordered.

They put restraints on Iggy and Phuti. "This will do no good," Iggy said.

"We have orders from the museum overseer," the guard said. "Come with

us."

"Which way?" Phuti asked.

Two of the guards pointed in two different directions. Except for the cryptikon display, they couldn't see the museum. They saw Essiin museum patrons enter the starship image through a ship bulkhead and halt, confused.

"That way," a guard said.

Iggy and Phuti walked to the bulkhead with the guards, who carefully tested its solidity. The guards in front of them passed through the bulkhead; Phuti and Iggy could not. The guards behind them pushed them, to no avail.

"You're hurting us!" Iggy complained. "Stop! We'll leave you now if you'll stop pushing us into the bulkhead!"

The remaining guards tried to pull them through the bulkhead, their disembodied arms yanking on them. Iggy became more annoyed and wrestled away from his escort. He made the view of the *Freedom*'s farmland dissolve. In a few strides back through the disturbed crowd he reached the other cryptikon and stopped museum contact. Their restraints disappeared when the Essiin museum disappeared. They stood again in the starship beyond the galaxy. "Fascinating," Iggy said with deliberate calm. "It's well beyond fascination, of course."

"We need to see Patrick," Phuti reminded him.

"I'm almost getting used to magic." Iggy handed Phuti his cryptikon. Iggy made the commands to connect with Patrick's cryptikon. They walked into the image of the small starship stateroom and saw the old man in the bed. They also smelled him.

"How can the molecules of this reality interact with our sense of smell?" Phuti wondered, wrinkling his nose. "And how can we turn it off?"

"Wake up!" Iggy shouted.

"This doesn't look good."

Iggy touched Patrick, shook him gently. The old man opened his eyes. He squinted, rubbed his eyes, looked up from his bed. He reached out a trembling hand. Phuti took it.

"You again," Patrick said to Iggy. "No women?"

"Only Phuti and me this time."

"Do you have anything to drink? I've been out of Scotch for about a hundred years."

"No, we're not here yet."

"Well, where the hell are you? I know! I'm just dreaming!"

"Be calm," Phuti said. "We *are* real. We hope you are real. You must stay alive until we can get to you."

"We need you to move your cryptikon to the bridge," Iggy said, "so we can discover where you are."

"I can't move, lads. Take it yourselves."

"I don't know if we can."

"If you can't try, then leave my dreams!"

They turned to find the cryptikon on a desk. Phuti reached down to touch it. He couldn't move it, not even feel it.

"Sorry, Patrick, we can't move it."

"Alas, then! It was good to hear voices again who weren't my usual nightmare spirits."

"He has a data terminal on the desk," Phuti said. "Can you operate it?"

"Let's see." Iggy touched the control surface and the display responded. "We

need your login, Pat."

"My what? Are you barbarian spies, trying to break into our database? We have informants to protect. I'll never tell you!"

"Pat, do I have to twist your arm?"

"How about a woman? I can pay handsomely for a nice one. Don't know what I'll do with her."

"Will you tell us your login or not, you lecherous Scots drunk?"

"I can respond to praise when I hear it!"

Iggy got the login and password from Patrick.

"Can we download?" Phuti asked.

"I'm calling Direk," Iggy said.

Section 025

Zakiya Explains the Mission

"If everyone will find a place to sit," Horss said, "we'll get started."

Latecomers hurried to gather their lunch from the buffet. Several hundred uniformed crew and civilians sat around tables that held their food and drink. All others on the ship participated by shiplink. Zakiya, Sammy, Direk, Jamie, Iggy, and Aylis sat with Horss at the head table.

"Admiral Demba," Horss said. He sat and Zakiya rose to speak.

"I need to apologize. If I leave anything out, please consider it covered by a blanket apology. I apologize for waiting so long to explain things to you. Because of this delay, I'm afraid you've received too much incorrect information through rumors and other wayward channels of information." Sammy sat next to her. She placed her hand on Sammy's head, gently made him tilt his head back so she could look at his face and smile. He returned her smile. He stood up. "I apologize for not introducing you to Samson. I call him Sammy. I guess we all call him Sammy, since he probably has met most of you. He likes people and he likes being famous. I've asked him not to talk to anyone about some of the things he's experienced but, knowing Sammy, I suspect he's one of those wayward channels of information I just mentioned.

"Some of the things he could tell you should frighten you, if you could believe they were true. I found him on Earth. He was alone in the wilderness of Africa. He was close to dying of hunger and injury. He's a perfectly normal boy who has suffered horribly, and you can see he's survived quite well. What is so abnormal about Sammy is that he didn't exist in the genetic records of the Mnro Clinics, nor does he have any known relatives, living or dead. He and I survived a remarkable adventure together, and even though it bears on what is to come in this meeting, I don't want to tell you about it at this time. It's complicated and rather unbelievable. I'll compose a narrative as soon as I can and publish it to the ship's database."

Both of them sat down but Zakiya continued to speak. "The remainder of this meeting will also be difficult for me to render into palatable pieces of information. You will have many questions, too many to answer in this meeting. Please write them to me. All questions and my answers will be posted in the ship's database.

"I'm gratified for your response to the impromptu data show produced by the Marines when we moored at the Five Worlds. I believe you made the correct choice by staying on the *Freedom*. I can't promise you complete safety but I know you gave the Five Worlds a chance to avoid conflict with the Navy.

"You know by now that Aylis Mnro is with us. She's been my closest friend since the time we served together in Deep Space Fleet. You know that Admiral Khalanov and Phuti Mende are also my friends and colleagues on the crew of the *Frontier*. There were four other crew members of the *Frontier*, all of them dear to us. One of them was my husband. Another of them was married to Aylis."

Zakiya stopped, looked downward at the table and pondered one more time the decision to reveal certain personal information. It still seemed necessary but it was contrary to everything Navy life ingrained in her. "Some of you will have noticed that I'm often pensive. Perhaps I've rudely ignored you. It isn't intentional. Even sitting here speaking to you, I have moments of forced

introspection. I have, in my body, auxiliary memory devices that were highly experimental at the time they were installed. They are not detectable by any security scan or by most medical scans. They allow me to remember events of long ago in vivid detail, so vivid that I'm often captive to their reality. They also made me fall back in love with my husband. This was a man I loved from a distance for three decades, never believing I had a chance to be his wife. Now I'm reliving the best moments of our brief time as a couple. Perhaps you can almost imagine how powerfully this affects me. I lost him more than two centuries ago. I must confess to you that what leadership skills I may possess could be compromised by this.

"Why do I have these memory augments? It's true to say this mission began before I lost Alex, before Aylis knew she would build the Mnro Clinics. At some point we realized it would take a long time to accomplish this mission. We had to forget those things which would threaten our security and jeopardize our plans. We had to program ourselves to move ahead without knowing exactly what we were doing or why we were doing it. But we eventually needed to remember. The remembering part has been dangerous and unpredictable. And much too enthralling. With some modifications these memory units should become a standard part of the Mnro Clinic treatment. As an anthropologist I can appreciate the possible consequences of such technology in the continuing story of the human race. I digress.

"How fantastic this must seem to you. I know it does to me. But this is the easiest part to believe. Now we turn to magic. Please forgive the dramatic words but you will shortly understand. Iggy?"

Iggy rose, reached into a uniform pocket, and brought forth two cryptikons. He set them to float in the air. They began to drift with the air currents. Everyone in Zakiya's audience had maintained a respectful silence, even when what she said should have made them react. Now they could not restrain themselves. People began to stand up and utter words and sounds of incredulity. The commotion spread away from the floating cryptikons in a wave of rising bodies and excited voices.

"Feel free to examine them if they drift your way. For those of you with a poor vantage point I will state that these artifacts are cryptikons. We'll make them available for everyone to inspect after the meeting."

Iggy sat down. Zakiya's smile disappeared. She skimmed a list of questions Horss had already compiled for her. She waited for the commotion caused by the cryptikons to ebb. She resumed speaking when it became obvious it would be a long time before quiet would return to the meeting room. She had the advantage that everyone could hear her by shiplink.

"The cryptikon - the one in the Essiin Museum - was so named because of its iconic beauty and the mystery of its purpose. We know at least one purpose." The audience quieted a little at the mention of purpose. "It provides communication in real time and at any distance. More than that, it provides a level of perception that is tantamount to traveling to the place you are calling. Not everyone is able to activate a cryptikon. Admiral Khalanov and Doctor Mende may be the only humans with the ability - or with the permission - to do so. They discovered them. They also discovered beings who were possibly the makers of the cryptikons. We were allowed to keep four of the artifacts, and we decided to keep them secretly. Our reasons for doing that may have been in anticipation of their future importance to us, but we don't yet remember enough of our history to be sure."

Zakiya paused to consider what to say next. She saw that Sammy ate everything on his tray and looked at the food that remained on her tray. She gave it to him. Aylis offered him some of hers and helped him transfer it. The hunger he suffered in Africa might remain with him for a long time.

"We Deep Space explorers kept a number of discoveries secret. In most cases it was due to a desire to preserve a location for future study, to protect it from unwise exploitation. In some cases it was to protect our own species and our own culture. We made decisions that affected billions of lives. Our ship was probably the most successful exploration ship and retained the most secrets.

"Then came the formation of the Union and the birth of the Union Navy. It was a strange time in history, filled with hope, yet somehow threatening. We returned from exploration to find Deep Space Fleet disbanded, exploration funding removed, and the new Navy exercising great power to make the Union viable. Many of us joined the Navy and discovered a new breed of military officers who were ruthless beyond reason. Alexandros Gerakis made the tactical and strategic error of trying to bring this cadre of powerful people into the open, where they could be brought to account. He didn't realize how numerous they were or how pervasive their influence. They would do anything to retain their positions, including murder. Coincident with this was a rise in unexplained losses of commercial shipping in the outer reaches of the Union, particularly toward the galactic hub. I suspect it continues to this day, the statistics hidden by the Navy. Soon after, all traffic toward the frontier was regulated by the Navy, and no ships were allowed to go beyond the borders of the Union.

"My husband and three others, those others who sailed with Aylis and me on the *Frontier*, set out to find the connection between these Navy murderers and the silent loss of ships on the frontier. This was after we suffered attacks obviously aimed at removing us from the Navy.

"The records of Deep Space Fleet were placed off-limits to public study and eventually were destroyed. But some of us had the foresight to save copies of the operational and personnel records. Phuti and I knew it was too great a loss to human culture to lose these records. Only one place in the Union was eventually able to safely store these records - the Mnro Clinics. The public awareness caused by Alexandros Gerakis was slowly extinguished. Public memory of him was subverted by turning him into a fictional character in a series of entertainment productions. Deep Space Fleet itself became little more than a fictional concept of history.

"The four men departed Union space long ago. Those of us who remained, along with some of our children, waited for them to return. When too many years passed without their return, we made our own plan to do what we could. This ship is a part of that plan.

"I apologize for involving you in our personal affair and exposing you to its dangers. I hoped to find some place where I could hide everyone who wanted to be safe. It would take time and involve building another ship, in case we couldn't return for you. But events have occurred which cause us to move on to dangerous activities.

"It isn't the Navy that will endanger us. What you are about to see is a recording I made more than two centuries ago. It's in the ship's database." The lights dimmed and an image formed where all could see. "The object being tracked is the great starliner *Titanic*. I was the one doing the tracking, from a small merchant vessel. On the *Titanic* were the first wife and the daughter of Alexandros Gerakis, sailing to meet him in the inner frontier. They were

supposed to be with me, not on the *Titanic*. Alex suspected the *Titanic* would be in danger. He was correct.

"I stop the recording here for you to note the first small dots occluding the image of the *Titanic*. I'll scan forward slowly so that you can see what happened. There are no pauses. The suddenness of the attackers is real. The disappearance of the *Titanic* is total. We've labeled the enemy vessels jumpships. Like the *Freedom*, they're able to jump from point to point in space. It's from this recording that Captain Direk and his half-brother Pan were able to see what was possible and to eventually duplicate the technology. It was this technology, used in desperation, that allowed Commodore Keshona to attack Rhyandh with three ships and avert what might have been a cataclysmic war.

"Who operates these jumpships? Barbarians. True barbarians. They rape and pillage without conscience. They enslave. They live brutal lives and glory in violence. If this sounds like some of our ancestors, it's because they are us. They've descended from the same ancestors. They're an evil that was apparently spawned from Earth before the Union existed. These barbarians sit in places of power in the Union. I believe Navy Commander Etrhnk is one of them.

"Why do they not invade the Union? Why do they seem content to infiltrate, to play at despotism, to allow a few starships to disappear in the frontier regions, as did the *Titanic*? Our ship was, I believe, intended by the Navy to disappear into the control of these barbarians, its stores for plunder, its crew for slaves. There is an apparent synergy between the Union and the barbarians that, paradoxically, brings a stern measure of stability to the Union. If this stability should fail...

"Sammy and I have seen these barbarians. They call themselves the Black Fleet. Many of them live in a place they call the Big Ball or Oz, a huge space country enclosed by an ocean of water and buried in a dense cluster of stars. I know there are many more space countries where barbarians live or have extensive bases of operation. I know their population rivals that of the Union. I know the volume of space they directly control contains hundreds of human physical varieties, thousands of settlements, even entire human civilizations comparable to Essiia and Rhyandh, far more than our science would have predicted, many more than Deep Space Fleet ever discovered. And there are at least three truly alien races I have actually seen for myself.

"How do I know these things? Partly from personal experience. Sammy and I were transported through a gate to Oz. But we also have access to information through the use of cryptikons. Please return the cryptikons to Admiral Khalanov. He will show you what they can do."

Iggy stood up to receive the artifacts. The crew moved tables to clear an area for the demonstration. The reality of the Essiin Museum cryptikon display room built itself rapidly in the open space, its patrons standing in the *Freedom*'s meeting room, arrayed around the perimeter of the museum's cryptikon pedestal. Fortunately, most Essiin were not easy to panic, but they and the *Freedom*'s crew experienced a high level of excitement, discovering they could mingle with each other, feel each other, and converse. One of the crew encountered an acquaintance among the museum patrons, a meeting which proved the two realities were synchronized. When Iggy broke the contact with the Essiin museum, the participants fell silent, perhaps struggling with recovery from the fantastic experience. Iggy was left thoughtful by what he observed.

"The protocols for engagement between the two environments seem flexible," Iggy said to Zakiya and the others. "It is as though someone is

deciding where the boundaries should lie and what they should do to each other. I thought there should be a fixed set of possibilities arising out of physical laws that govern what a cryptikon does. Of course, it's so far beyond us that I'm an idiot for even raising this question." Iggy shrugged. "All of these light areas may represent other addresses, other cryptikons." He showed the patterns which allowed selection of addresses. "They don't respond, however." He touched one. It did respond. A shining corridor of indeterminate scale that extended to infinity in either direction appeared. Iggy nudged the angle of view and the image did strange things, things difficult to visually process. Another similar or identical corridor eventually appeared. Iggy closed contact with that bizarre reality with a frown.

Iggy then opened contact with the dark chamber where three men lay in stasis coffins. He took them to Patrick, who responded feebly, causing Iggy to cut short the visit.

"The people you just saw in the dark ship are the four men we set out to find when we launched the *Freedom*," Zakiya said, addressing the crew after a further period of recovery. "We've been able to download two centuries of data from their ship through the use of cryptikons. This has provided us much of the information about which I just spoke. The three men in the stasis coffins are viable. The old man in the small stateroom is Patrick Jenkins, the biologist of the *Frontier*. Doctor Mnro has examined him and determined his prognosis to be imminently fatal due to a shortage of medication aboard the ship. He's the reason we feel compelled to skip our plans to ensure your safety. It's still possible there is another solution to this problem.

"I cannot order you to join us in the attempt to rescue Patrick and the others. We know the approximate location of the ship, but searching for it may bring us into conflict with the Black Fleet.

"I know this is too much incredible information to digest at once. Another meeting will be held in ample time to determine a fair course of action. The decision will be democratic and not military. In the meantime I'll answer your questions in writing."

Zakiya sat down. Everyone else on the ship now conversed rather quietly with each other. She thought it would be time to end the meeting. She started to signal Horss but he had a message for her. She saw who the person was and was both disquieted and intrigued. She took a chance, even knowing from Iggy's amusing anecdotes how unpredictable Wingren could be.

"Did you know he could sing?" the female engineer asked by shiplink.

"Who?"

"Have you seen it? It's from the lost ship."

"What?"

"You must see it. And hear it. Everyone must!"

"Why?"

"Because it's wonderful!"

"How?"

"Let me show it to you."

"Wingren!"

Zakiya saw the projector in the meeting room illuminate its display volume. She was sure that something disturbing was about to occur. Still, she was curious.

It began with pipe music, haunting and yearning, the pure notes echoing in mountains. The lights dimmed in the meeting room. Voices quieted. Sunlight in

the projected image gleamed on pine-like trees. The piper leaned on the smooth face of a tall rock in the wilderness of a space country or perhaps a planet. He bent over his pipes, pitching every note perfectly into the clear air. His achingly beautiful melody faded to become an introduction for what was to follow. Another man strolled into the scene playing upon a guitar. A third man and a fourth joined the first two at the rock.

At first it didn't look like them, their skins the wrong shade, their features subtly alien to any of the three major human races. The pipes player was Alexandros Gerakis, the guitar player Setek-Ren.

Alex began to sing. On the verge of ordering a stop to it, the sound of his voice froze Zakiya. She put a hand over her mouth. She shivered. *He could sing!* He could sing well, as though he trained for years, his voice deep and rich, his pitch perfect, his style controlled yet adventurous, tender yet dramatic. She listened to the words and felt her ears burning and her heart pounding. The words and the emotion were aimed directly at her: a message of love and admiration and longing.

Her face grew hot. Aylis rose, came behind her, leaned over and threw her arms around her and hugged her. She tried to raise her hand to signal a cessation to the performance but Aylis grabbed the hand. She started to speak but Aylis whispered *no* in her ear. Because it was Aylis, because it was a positive sign of her mental health, Zakiya relented and tried to enjoy her embarrassment.

All four men now sang in harmony, their voices reverberating in the rocky landscape, giving the listener a feeling for their loneliness and pain. Gerakis finished the song solo. Setek-Ren softened his string chords into a distant nothingness. Darkness fell with a few simple notes echoing from pipes lost in time and space.

"That was the most romantic thing I've ever experienced, Mother!" Jamie added her embrace to Aylis's. "God, how he loved you! You never told me he could sing."

"I never knew," Zakiya struggled to say.

* * *

"You just want to know *everything*," Zakiya said to Sammy.

He shrugged. "Don't you?"

Sammy had literally grilled her on the culture of the Malay people. He had met one of the Malay children and was intrigued by the differences he saw. She was glad he had such an interest, since she was once an anthropologist and still liked to think of herself as one. He was particularly fond of Phuti and that was also a good sign. But the Malay child had a father and an uncle and Sammy seemed to be looking for such relationships in his own life. He had plenty of substitute uncles. He even had a brother and sister. Now he was curious about Alex. "Yes, indeed. Living is learning, Sammy. If you don't want to learn anything new, then you are not very alive."

"Gerakis is a Greek name."

"Yes, Alex was of Greek heritage. You've been reading about him, haven't you?"

"Phuti showed me where to look. He was the best starship captain there ever was."

"Yes, he was. But more importantly, he was the best friend anyone could have."

"Maybe he'll like me." She knew he was already contemplating having a father and perhaps even thinking about sharing her with him. He didn't mind sharing her with Freddy and Jamie but maybe he understood more about husbands and wives than she thought. Or was she being too analytical? She had never had her chance to have a real family. She wanted that chance.

"The old Alex would love you, Sammy. But a lot has happened to him since I last saw him. I'm afraid he won't be the same man."

"He's been fighting barbarians."

"Yes."

"But you'll make him good again."

"I'll certainly try!"

"Can I call you 'Mom?'"

Sammy had a way of coming out with a question that was important to him, throwing it into the middle of the discussion of another topic. This was a pleasant surprise. "I *want* you to call me 'Mom,' Sammy. I *want* you to be my son. Did Freddy give you the idea?" She already knew he had used the word 'Mom' when referring to her to other people. Freddy had told her.

"Then we can be even more like brothers."

"Freddy likes you a lot. You know that, don't you?"

"I kind of did. I see him a lot. He's fun to talk to. You should hear his imitation of Uncle Iggy."

"I'll have to ask him! That does sound like fun. How are your language lessons going? Is Standard difficult for you?"

"I know lots of words. I just don't put them together good yet. And everybody talks to me in English so I don't get much practice. Why can't I have one of those language augments?"

"You're still growing. Aylis doesn't want to put any hardware in you until you stop growing."

"I know. That's what she always tells me. She says I drive her crazy. She likes me, doesn't she?"

"Everybody likes you, Sammy, and especially Aylis. Aren't you getting just a little bit sleepy?"

"My toes go to sleep first, then my feet, then my legs, on up to my hands and arms. My brain has to wait its turn. Jamie kissed me, last time I was in the hospital."

"Do you want me to call her in from the bridge, so she can put your brain to sleep?"

"No, that's alright. She's too important. Are you going to the bridge?"

"No, I'll be here all night, sound asleep."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm about to kiss you good night. Do you mind?"

"Heck, no! That's what moms are for!"

"And that means no more questions! Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Go to sleep." She kissed him.

"I gotta go to the bathroom."

Section 026

Jumpship Fight

"That's how they attack another ship? They cut it with their jump envelope?"

"How else could the *Titanic* disappear so completely?"

"But matter can't be cut like that, not without releasing atomic forces."

"Hey, Uncle Iggy," Jon interrupted, "I've seen it in person. It cuts cleaner than a particle beam and there's no sign of nuclear reaction. You've been jumping upward to keep the gate from carving a spherical chord in the deck, but I saw just such a chord back on Earth. Cut myself on the sharp edge. They tried to put the piece of floor back in place after it was sent to Asia."

It was not their first discussion on the subject and Jamie was not inclined to listen carefully or participate with repetitious questions and comments. It was as if the others didn't quite believe what Direk explained. They needed the repetition; she didn't. She believed him. Science was the one subject in which he could be trusted to speak the truth.

They took her mother's recording of the death of the *Titanic*, enhanced it, and analyzed it again and again. The flurry of dots resolved into thousands of individual spherical vessels, many of them tagged by faintly discernible markings. Their discontinuous movements could be verified and their method of attack analyzed. They were still fretting over the military implications of the *Freedom's* jump capability. Jamie already accepted and understood how lethal a weapon the ship's method of movement could be.

She was more interested in the nuances of Direk's interaction with the other men. She always studied the group dynamics of men under her command and tried to predict how each would perform under duress. That expertise was useless in studying Direk. He seemed unaware of her, unless that fact alone was proof that he was more than aware of her. In other words, he was behaving in the classic Direk manner, showing no emotions, when she knew from recent clues that he was a changed man, able to express emotion comfortably.

"The first barbarian jumpships had the most difficult task," Direk said. "They were much like wolves trying to bring down a healthy moose. The *Titanic* was a fast ship but its crew couldn't understand what would happen even if they knew there were predators it needed to evade. The barbarians would plot where it would be and jump to it. They made thirty attempts to disable the ship, being careful not to cause its catastrophic destruction. They kept jumping closer until one of them intersected a critical part of its structure and disabled its drive."

"They didn't just shoot at it with some form of cannon," Jon said. "And I don't blame them. Running space battles are so hard to perform nobody tries it anymore. Einstein keeps sticking his tongue out at gunners."

"This happened a long time ago," Iggy said. "We can't assume they don't have other offensive capabilities by now. Something they would use on static targets. We need to capture one of those little vermin."

"There was a staging area which we don't see," Direk continued. "The jumpships would jump from this staging area to the *Titanic*, taking a bite from it which was exchanged back to the staging area. They must have salvaged the pieces with cargo ships, leaving no evidence of the fate of the *Titanic*."

"Wouldn't that have killed thousands of people?" Jamie asked. She knew the answer. She was readying herself for an extreme change of topic. It was not the place and time for such a tactic, but when would she ever catch Direk alone?

"There were four stages to the attack. The first crippled the ship. The second boarded it, suppressed resistance, and organized the evacuation of passengers and crew. The third wave of jumpships provided transportation for the passengers. They also blocked our view of what happened to the *Titanic*. The disassembly of the *Titanic* was the fourth stage. Based on the data and a few difficult assumptions, I think anywhere from five to ten per cent of the ship's personnel may have died in the attack. There just wasn't enough time to safely evacuate that many people. And we know how ruthless the barbarians are."

"The *Freedom* can likewise cut another ship apart," Jamie said. "The Black Fleet ships are small. We need to be very precise in computing a jump coordinate. Our envelope obviously needs to intersect them, not contain them."

"I don't doubt Jon's story about the gate chords," Iggy said, "but I'm burdened by decades of engineering work aimed at preventing starlight drive fields from going nuclear. Aren't they very close to producing gate envelopes?"

"Pan and I were properly concerned by the theoretical dangers of gates. More than once we ran tests that should have killed us, according to accepted nuclear theory. All I can say is, if you think *this* is magic, tell me what a *cryptikon* is."

"Or a transmat, for that matter," Jon offered.

"The more controversial theory of transmat operation," Direk said, "states that objects are disassembled without regard to atomic and molecular structure, otherwise the information required to maintain integrity would be too vast for any system to process. Of course, the transmat buffer is no better understood than the rest of the device. It's simpler to slice-and-stack, using the assumption that transmats have micro-gates. That would reinforce the notion of gates not being able to disrupt particle entities."

"How many times have I been 'sliced-and-stacked' and I'm still in one piece?" Jon said.

There was a lull in the discussion as Iggy seemed to have run out of ideas that scared him.

Jamie gathered all her available courage. "I have a question."

Direk made eye contact with her. Perhaps he was warned by the forced tone of her voice. He smiled but it was a fake smile. He raised an eyebrow in anticipation. This was a challenge he made to her: *Find me out, if you dare*. "What is it?"

"How did you make the children laugh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He *did* know what she was talking about. She was sure of it. *He was playing with her!* "If you think I'll abandon the subject just because we have no privacy, you're wrong." Jamie glanced at Jon and Iggy.

"Uncle Iggy and I can take a hike."

"I need witnesses and protection. My woman may get violent." Direk's delivery of the sentences was so perfectly factual Jamie almost missed the possessive article - and the implied humor.

"*Your* woman? How can you claim that?" She was just light enough of skin to show blushing. The heat in her face spread through her whole body. It was a wonderful warmth.

"You took my name, didn't you? I think a lawyer could make a good case for common law marriage. How long were we together?"

Jamie tried to laugh non-humorously but it was difficult. How could he keep such a calm face while his voice was so alive with emotion and humor. It was electrifying to her, and dizzying in its implications. She tried to sound

aggrieved. "Will you continue to stall, or will you tell me how you made the children laugh?"

"What children?"

"The Five Worlds."

"When was this?"

He knew when! He seemed to be inviting her to try to embarrass him in front of Jon and Iggy. How old were they, she and Direk? At what age did one grow out of such behavior? He was acting the youthful age to which he was regressed. She wasn't acting any more maturely. "I'm talking about you and me, a long time ago. Don't tell me you can't remember the cottage on the mountain, and the snow, and the one and only bed with a goose-down mattress."

"If only you didn't look so beautiful and so lethal. I'm afraid to answer."

"You're not afraid of anything! Tell me!"

"A bed with a goose-down mattress? You're sure this is a real memory?"

"Yes, I'm sure! Quit that!"

"Quit what?"

"The deadpan, quit the deadpan!"

"My face might break."

Jamie laughed. She couldn't stop herself. "Please, tell me!" She begged, exaggerating it for the sake of the humor.

"A bed with a goose-down mattress." Direk stared off into space.

"Yes, the one and only bed!"

"Oh. *That* one. The one I've thought about several times a day for the last century or so. Probably all three of me, so that's triple the times."

Jamie took a deep breath and felt *too* hot now. There were tears in her eyes, threatening to escape down her cheeks. Direk was winning the battle, not that it was a fight, not that she felt there would be a loser. She was happy and she was in love, and it didn't matter if it was only due to the auxiliary memory devices.

"Would you please, please tell me how you made the children laugh?"

"Why is that moment so important to you?"

"I was *always* waiting for the real Direk to make his appearance, and I thought he might have appeared at that moment, never to be seen again. You made the children laugh. You never made me laugh."

"I never knew you wanted anything from me but news of your mother."

"You can't mean that! I stayed with you an entire lifetime. I could never have persisted so long if I didn't have feelings for you."

"Feelings of hate. I thought the cottage on the mountain was part of a plan to make me break my silence about your past."

"But I stayed with you for another forty years! Despite your silence! How could I hate you that long? I accepted you. I *wanted* to stay with you. I loved you!"

"You spent so much time and effort just finding me." Direk shook his head as if befuddled. "I couldn't have given you any reason to feel good about me. I assumed you were going to wait as long as it took for me to tell you what I knew. Which, by the way, wasn't very much. And then you would go away and I would be alone. I didn't want you to leave me."

The tears started flowing down her cheeks. Iggy patted her on the shoulder and she smiled happily at him. She turned back to Direk, who now stared at her with concern and perhaps something else. His eyes were not cold now, not at all. "I did want you to be embarrassed and humiliated by our stay in the cottage," she said. "And by the bed we shared. But that moment when the

children laughed at you put doubt in my mind, and I was nearly as uncomfortable as you must have been. Did you know the local custom concerning that cottage?"

"I was warned by Phuti."

"And you still went with me?"

"The children knew we were going to the cottage. I asked if any of them were conceived in that cottage. They didn't seem to understand, but one of them did ask me a naughty question. I didn't answer, except to cross my eyes. Then they laughed."

"You crossed your eyes?"

"It was better than encouraging more questions."

"I did embarrass you. I did humiliate you. I'm sorry."

"You told me that afterward. What I couldn't tell you at the time was that I was willing to do anything, just to be near you. I loved you from the moment I first saw you, crying in my mother's office. It broke my heart to leave you with your grandparents. From that moment on, I was not just the son who was too much like the man who left my mother - I was the ultimate Essiin."

Jamie closed her flooded eyes and pressed her hands against her chest that felt ready to burst. She felt Iggy remove his hand from her shoulder. She heard him move out of his chair. Direk, she assumed, traded positions with Iggy, sitting down next to her, putting an arm across her shoulders, and pulling her gently against him.

"I'm sorry," Direk said, "for what we never had. For what we may never have. For what I remember. For what you don't remember."

There was a marching band parading by the far perimeter of Jackson Square. It had two sousaphones, two tempos, and two moods. The woodwinds and percussion played a slow, sad tempo, then the brass would push the tempo fast and merry, with the sousaphones bellowing. Jamie clapped with delight seeing the shiny brass instruments and hearing the wonderful music. Then her mother called to her and she saw the dark lady sitting next to Mama on the park bench. The dark lady wore a pretty yellow dress and smiled at her with tears on her brown face. Mama was crying, too, but she didn't notice until she had leaped into her arms.

"Mama, what's wrong with her? Who is she?"

"She's Mama's best friend - after you."

Jon cleared his throat. He cleared it again. "Admiral on deck." Horss rose to his feet.

"Jon, stop that!" Zakiya pointed him back into his captain's chair. She found a place to sit and then turned her gaze on Jamie.

"We were talking about splitting atoms and Black Fleet jumpships, Admiral," Jon said.

"Jon, stop that."

"Stop what, ma'am?"

"Stop saying 'ma'am' and 'Admiral!'"

"Sir, could you use another son?" He asked it seriously. "You could adopt me and then I could call you 'Mom.'" Zakiya opened her mouth and then closed it. Jon continued. "I'm used to having many brothers and sisters. And I can throw in a daughter-in-law and a grandchild."

Zakiya had to turn away from Jamie and look at Jon Horss. She was irritated, amused, and warmed by his outrageous words. No, not outrageous, and she cared about him too much to dismiss it completely. "I'm sure your remark is

made for the sake of needed levity, Jon, but I'm honored you would think of such a relationship with me. Thank you! And thank you, Iggy, for the timely shiplink of your discussion about atom splitting! And other topics." Zakiya turned back to Jamie and Direk. "Direk, I think your mother may have just fainted from hearing some news of children laughing. If you would like to check on her, and take your common-law wife with you, Jon will excuse you from the rest of the duty shift."

Jamie was so engrossed in the first memory she had finally retrieved of her mother that she had not stood to attention with the others. She bolted out of her chair and flung herself into Zakiya's arms. "Mama!" she cried. "Mama, I missed you!" She was a child again. And she had found her mother at last!

* * *

He always knew where he was. The ship was a part of him and he could easily track almost anyone. This allowed Freddy to wait for Sammy on the brick path that led from the big lake to the pond where the Malay had established a community. Freddy sat on the ground, watching the birds in the trees and listening for Sammy's approach. He enjoyed the anticipation, and he enjoyed it even more when his superior hearing detected Sammy trying to sneak up on him. He pretended not to hear him. Freddy was just a big kid, yet he could appreciate, in an adult way, the quiet and simple pleasures of being young and alive. He sometimes wished his mechanical body was not adult-size, so that he might interact with Sammy more naturally and equally.

"Boo!" Sammy shouted from directly behind Freddy.

Freddy jumped as though startled, which he wasn't, but it was fun, anyway. "You got me! I was lost in thought. Is that leg bothering you?" Freddy had heard the unbalanced rhythm of Sammy's gait from a great distance.

"It kinda pinches because the knee doesn't bend quickly enough."

"Let me see what I can do." Freddy plugged his finger into a data jack on the prosthetic leg. At the same time he accessed the operational database for the medical device. He activated another stream of consciousness to remain conversant with Sammy.

"Have you found them yet?" Sammy asked.

"Not yet, but I think we're getting close."

"Seen any Black Fleet ships?"

"I'm working with Direk and Uncle Iggy on a way to detect them at a great distance."

"How can you do that?"

Freddy knew Sammy wanted a real answer to his question, not an oversimplified one. But he felt there was little point in dragging all the theory into the answer. It was likely Sammy didn't have time for the details, since he was on the path to Abie's home. "Do you have an hour or two to listen to quantum circuit theory?" Freddy asked.

"I'll take the kid's explanation!" Sammy grinned.

"It's just a matter of searching for a unique gravity pulse. It takes a lot of filtering, and we need verified jumpship jump pulses to set the filter parameters. We may need to build some specialized instruments."

"Wish I could be on the bridge when they find them."

"Run over there and walk back. I made an adjustment to your leg." Sammy took a hop and a skip and ran to a tree. He walked back. Freddy watched closely

and saw the function was better but still imperfect. "Feel better now? I can adjust it again when we have more time."

"You can do anything, Freddy! Yeah, it's lots better now. Thanks!"

"Any time, kiddo. What're you going to do now?"

"Abie and I are going exploring. You want to come with us?"

"Gee, thanks, Sammy, but I have to go play grownup on the bridge. I'm the big expert on sensor data."

"Still looking for Mom's lost husband. I hope he wants to be our Dad."

"Me, too. I hope he does."

"Well, I gotta go. Thanks again."

"You're welcome. What's a brother for?"

Sammy started to walk away, down the brick path through the trees. Freddy sat there watching him. He would not move until he disappeared from view. Sammy stopped and turned around. "Do you ever wish you were not mechanical?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you ever wish you had a human body?"

"You bet!"

"Even though it can make you feel terrible pain?"

"Even though. There are worse feelings than physical pain. And you always tell me my hands are cold."

"When I grow up," Sammy said very seriously, "I'm going to find a way to give you a real human body. But I like you with cold hands just fine. You are so cool."

* * *

Freddy pondered the meaning of the Twenglish word "cool" as used idiomatically by Sammy. The grammatical references were still a bit cryptic but the way Sammy said it made Freddy feel it was a special compliment. Freddy also listened to the conversations of those on the bridge. Jamie and Iggy were the most entertaining. She would always say lots of things about Direk and Iggy would always irritate her with disparaging remarks about Direk's copy. He would finally relent and talk about visiting Direk when he was a child.

"There's still something wrong with him," Jamie said, meaning Direk.

"He's only human."

"No, it's nothing like that. He thinks he's forgot someone. He thinks there is someone missing who should be here. It's making him very irritable. I've never seen him be irritable, and I would be enjoying it but he's very serious about it."

"I thought he had better access than any of us to his auxiliary memory," Iggy said. "And if it's someone we all knew, why hasn't one of us remembered him by now?"

"I don't know. It worries me."

Freddy had to remind himself that, as capable as he was at multitasking, he needed to give highest priority to the sensor signals. He wondered how humans coped with their thoughts, knowing they, too, could have more than one stream of thought at the same time.

"Why aren't we starting to get any correlations with the navigation data from our lost ship?" Iggy complained. "We should be close enough."

"Patience, Uncle Iggy," Jamie said. "You know we must go slowly and silently."

"If we had armaments we wouldn't need to go so slowly."

"I'm not certain of that."

"Are you taking your mother's side? I thought you were in favor of arming the *Freedom*."

"The more you sit in this chair and let your mind look at all the possibilities, the more you think about the safety of ten thousand people. Are they safer with or without the armaments?"

"They didn't vote for this mission because they wanted to be safe."

"Perhaps they're enthralled by the romance of it and by the chance to meet the legendary father of the infamous Jamie Jones," Jamie said.

"I think they want to fight! Many are very upset over the atrocities the barbarians have committed. Every day another record from the lost ship becomes the subject of discussion. It's always a gruesome tragedy."

"I think you have revenge in mind, Iggy."

"Those who killed Ana are long dead. I want to prevent such a thing from happening again."

"Two pulsars to starboard with required frequencies," Freddy advised. They had seen them before but he was bothered by them for some non-cybernetic reason.

"These aren't the same ones we saw two hours ago?"

"Same ones. But they match better than any other pair we've seen."

"Where is the *third* pulsar? Damn! It's near the end of the watch and I'm tired. Put them in the tank. We'll look at them again."

"Paint the sweep of their emissions, Freddy," Jamie said. "Let's pretend they're the right pulsars."

Freddy made the holographic navigation tank in front of the captain's chair show two luminous disks representing the areas where the spinning stellar objects broadcast their energy eruptions. There was a color-coded line where they intersected.

"Let's assume there are not three pulsars but only two," Jamie said.

"Why assume that?" Iggy asked. "And it doesn't give us a point of intersection, just a line."

"Human fallibility or paranoia. Pulsars are very easy to detect. Of the other markers, which is the hardest to find?"

"Something small and dim. Like a brown dwarf."

"How many?"

"Two."

"No. Something there are supposed to be three of."

"Close binaries. Nearly identical."

"Are there two of them near the intersection of the pulsar sweeps?"

"Yes."

"How do the four objects fit the location plot?"

"Perfectly," Freddy replied, "except there are two objects missing."

"Why would they play games with their data?" Iggy asked. "Why would they encode it?"

"On the list of markers," Jamie said, "those objects are the only ones that should number three. What are the chances of three close binaries in one stellar neighborhood? What are the chances of three pulsars whose sweeps would intersect a nearby observer? The map may not have been intended for us. If it helps us find them, I'll be surprised. Plot a jump for half the distance to the middle of the pulsar intersection."

They jumped. They waited, watched, listened.

"Now put a sphere around the pair of close binaries," Jamie said, "to treat them as one object. Connect a line from the sphere to the midpoint of the pulsar intersection. Use the midpoint of that line as an arbitrary target and plot a jump half the distance to it."

The navigation tank built the geometry of their course as Jamie described it. They jumped.

"I see nothing," Freddy reported.

"Why would they refine the rotation periods of the pulsars to thirty decimal places?" Iggy wondered.

"Do they match to that precision?"

"It would require more sampling, but statistically they're converging with our current sample."

"Changed my mind," Jamie said. "This is the place. And I don't like it."

"There are three yellow stars," Freddy offered, "close enough together that they are probably gravitationally locked."

"And three yellow stars aren't mentioned on the map. Why the number three? And why is it the wrong number?"

"The barbarian road map Alex constructed from their bloody encounters often pass near triple objects," Iggy said. "I thought it was only chance."

"Is this on the barbarian road map?"

"No."

"One more jump. Go to Second Stage Alert. Jon needs to wake up for his shift, anyway. The three yellow stars are close to where we are aimed. Let's jump between them."

They jumped.

"Target!" Freddy called. "Too small to be spherical, but it is."

"Jumpship dimensions," Iggy said. "Warm body. Unshielded jumpfield accumulator."

"We're too close," Jamie said. "It *must* have felt us. Give me the helm! Give me cutting range, hull perimeter to perimeter plus twenty meters!"

Freddy computed the numbers, delivered them to helm. He saw what Jamie wanted to do: intersect the jumpship with the *Freedom's* echo jump shell. Kill it. They were now at war. It caused excitement and fear in Freddy, and a feeling that must be analogous to a surge of adrenaline. That he was again a participant in the killing of other sentient beings also presented itself to his attention. He had to ignore such a distraction. He had to assume their own survival was at stake.

"And - jump!" Jamie gave the helm directive through her shiplink.

"Ping!" Freddy reported. Another vessel in the region had probed for them. "Source located."

"Another jumpship," Jamie said. "Where is it? I lost it."

"It jumped. Secondary ping scatter may paint it. There. Range plus twenty. It jumped to inspect the wreckage."

Jamie jumped the *Freedom* into the second barbarian ship, cutting it apart.

"Yes!" Iggy said. "Two kills! How many more?"

"At least one," Jamie said. "They like the number three. Go to Third Stage Alert. Ready Marines for possible boarding. Jumping at random."

"I want the pieces of those jumpships!" Iggy declared.

"There's one more out there," Jamie said. "We'll sit here until we can see it."

"I can see where it was," Freddy said. "The ping scatter also illuminated an

accumulation of interstellar mass that we may want to study."

"A hiding place?" Iggy wondered aloud.

Zakiya arrived on the bridge and Horss followed her by a few seconds. Jamie briefed them.

"Do you take command?" Jamie asked Horss.

"Keep your hand on the helm," Horss said. He could see by her blank stare that she was intent on the data in her ocular shiplink. Freddy was linked in to help her if she needed him. "I'll wait until we know we can change bridge crews safely. Let me get into the data stream."

"I've located a third jumpship," Freddy said. "It's too far off to be certain of killing it with a jump."

"It'll come closer," Iggy said. "They know they're in mortal danger but I don't think they would do the sensible thing: escape to notify others of our threat."

"They may already know of us," Zakiya said. "The Navy would have told them."

"We could ping," Horss said. "Ping and jump. See if it jumps where we were. Then jump for the kill."

"Mother?" Jamie said

"We don't know if this is the place. It may not be worth the risk."

"I think it is the place. We need to at least eliminate it as a possibility."

"It would also be very useful to have the jumpship wreckage," Iggy repeated his wish.

"The captain on duty makes the decision," Horss said. "Do you want me to relieve you, Jamie? I'm paralleled with you on the data."

"Command is yours, Jon." Jamie got up from the captain's chair.

"It jumped," Freddy said. "I've lost it. You must jump now!"

"Why?" Jamie asked, after she jumped the *Freedom* to a random location.

"It may be able to find our quantum pathway signals quicker than we can find its signals, because of the size difference."

"Cat and mouse," Horss said. "Give it your best shot, Jamie. You're my gunner."

"Do you think we can recycle our accumulators as quickly as the barbarian?" Jamie asked.

"Direk designed it so we can cross-couple the starlight drive generator to the jump accumulators," Iggy said. "We can't know if the barbarian jumpship isn't inherently faster due to simplicity."

"If cross-coupling is a command function," Jamie said, "do it."

"It is," Iggy answered.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

"Stand by to ping," Horss ordered. "Double ping on my mark. Mark."

An active sensor sweep struck across the gulf from the *Freedom*. Jamie made the *Freedom* jump a short distance to one side. The proximity alarm sounded. Jamie jumped the *Freedom* again.

"Where is it?"

"Embedded in the southern hemisphere. Ten degrees east longitude, thirty-seven degrees south latitude. It penetrated forty meters. It missed a major jump field emitter by less than a meter. It took a bite out of us, but we took one out of it. It looks like it's disabled."

"I want an engineering team and ten Marines on site *now*," Horss said. "It may still have harmful potential and surviving crew. Remain on high alert and

ready to jump."

"I have an anomalous target painted in the dark debris cluster," Freddy said.
"Not enough detail to say more than that."

"Get us into the debris field," Horss said.

* * *

"No sign of explosive decompression," Iggy studied the probe data of the embedded jumpship where the *Freedom's* jump envelope sheared off a section of its hull, exposing internal structures to open space. "The entire crew must still be alive, but their jump circuit is ruined."

"The map of the interior is complete," Wingren said, "No life signatures. They must be using i-fields."

"This will be a ghost fight," Captain Aguila said to his squad of Marines.
"How do we get in?"

"You don't," Iggy said. "The jumpship has a transmat. They used it to wink into the *Freedom*. Redeploy to intercept barbarians inside the *Freedom*. Commander Wingren and I will disable their transmat."

Section 027

Messages from a Rapist

Eventually she must think of such things. She didn't want to. Time dulled the edge of horror. But her brain, in typical perversity, ignored the happiness Jamie and Direk gave her, and instead led her into the brutal past. If she thought of the baby inside her, she had to remember how she was conceived. She had to beat her feeble logic against the sharp corners of a puzzle of terror. It was impossible to believe an elite Essiin could have raped her. If it was truly impossible, then Etrhmk could not be Essiin. Then he was who she knew he was. *Think of something positive and stay away from the humiliation, the violation, the pain. That was not important!*

The painting. She didn't have the skills to frame it properly. They had constructor machines that could build a string bass for Direk of surpassing quality, but not a simple picture frame of a design she liked. Or was she avoiding displaying the portrait? She still kept the painting rolled.

The painting. It was so terrible to have such a wonder of creativity linked to her personal tragedy. She had not even disclosed to Zakiya or anyone else that she had it. As if it was a prostitute's payment. Why did Etrhmk give it to her? Because he would lose it soon anyway? Why did he even have it? He couldn't have known who Demba was. It must have required real effort to steal it in the short interval available to do it, in the midst of the violence and fire. Why? Only because of its intrinsic value? Or did he have another reason? Why did Etrhmk give it to her?

The rape. *Ignore the evil of it.* Why did he rape her? He was pretending to be Essiin. Rape was almost unknown to the Essiin. It violated their aesthetics. Logic and aesthetics. Truth and beauty. How could he be such a perfect fake Essiin and ignore their ethics? How many other women had he raped? How many Union citizens had he killed by his Navy orders? She always knew he was a genetic fake. Then he revealed the ice eyes, the stripes. God, the stripes! He was a zebra, black with white stripes, a work of art, a living portrait, stunning, perfect. She had wanted to believe, in her fear and panic, that she had been wrong, but he was too perfect, too rare. The ultimate Essiin recessive genetic construction. He was too unique, especially as Commander of the Navy. That had to violate Essiin aesthetics and logic. Kidnapped by barbarians? Why would he survive in their midst, even flourish, to rise to his exalted position? Still pretending Essiin discipline. Too imperfect. Too illogical. *Too ugly.* His very perfection and illogic damned her.

Aylis Mnro had created this monster named Etrhmk. Now she had to admit she was also a monster. Now she had to confirm it. And then she would have to lose her best friend forever. She had left Etrhmk, knowing who he was and never telling him. She had left him to die, unfairly hating him for what he did to her.

Aylis was alone in the hospital. It was coming for her. She could smell its evil. It would find her, explode in her mind, shatter her emotions beyond repair. It was even worse than being raped. The truth would kill her.

She went into the lab and did the tests she had put off for irrational reasons. Was Petros the father of her child? She did not have access to the complete records of the Mnro Clinics. His genetic identity would not be directly available. But she could still identify his relationship in records she did have aboard ship.

She looked at the results and sat down and wept for hours.

Only the terrifying klaxons of war drove her away from despair and toward duty.

* * *

He was not happy. He should be happy. Jamie was happy. Zakiya was happy. Even his mother seemed happy at times. Direk was not happy. He was not unhappy. He was worried.

When he saw Jamie, when he touched her, the worry fled only for a few moments. This wasn't happiness; it was distraction. It was unworthy of him to complain, no matter how long he had deprived himself of happiness, no matter how close it now resided, but just out of reach.

This memory would nearly appear to his conscious when certain conditions were met. He thought he had removed enough distractions from his mind that he could concentrate on the problem of remembering. He couldn't even see a pattern that would identify the conditions to be met, that would loosen the memory from its hiding place.

There was no doubt it was a deeply hidden memory, thus implying extreme importance. That he could even sense that it concerned the identity of a person was probably a significant but limited achievement. It could mean that he had no further memory to discover, that the full memory belonged to the Navy-officer copy of himself who was dead.

That Direk had the riskiest responsibilities, some of which he remembered, some of which he might be able to deduce. *That* Direk needed to help build the ship. He needed to be sure Zakiya and Iggy and Jamie and his mother were on the crew. Pan should have been on the crew. Who else? Someone who was closer to her than Phuti and Nori.

If it was Pan who was missing Direk would have remembered him. He had too many memories of Pan, too much shared experience. Pan would have left too great a hole in his memories to not be noticed. The person who was missing must have been too briefly in his own memories, but perhaps more fully in the memory of his dead copy.

He needed to see if his copy's auxiliary memory was still viable. He needed to absorb it. He dreaded doing that, fearing for his own identity. He did a terrible thing, his copy, executing four men he judged guilty of raping Jamie.

A terrible thing.

The ghostly memory brushed past his conscious and he leaped into the darkness to grab it. A pattern coalesced for an instant: Sammy. Freddy. Jamie. Horss. It was all he could grab before the klaxons sounded.

Direk accessed his shiplink and searched for the cause of the critical alert. He saw the ship was under attack and was possibly boarded by hostile forces. He made use of algorithms that Security used to detect abnormalities in the life aboard the ship. He saw he was near one such abnormality. He set out to intercept it.

Sammy, Freddy, Jamie: Zakiya's children? Horss: not her child - but he jokingly offered himself for adoption. The missing person was Zakiya's child? How could Zakiya not already know that, if that was a valid hypothesis?

Direk looked at the bottle in his hand. Water, under pressure, could be used to detect an invisible combat soldier. What one did after that was limited to muscle and bone. He made himself invisible.

The bottle in his hand. A bottle of... medicine? Whoever it was he was trying to remember, Direk thought, would also not remember things that were dangerous to remember, things that could expose himself and others. He would be invisible. even invisible to himself. He would not even know who he was. He was so important that his own true identity would be lethal knowledge. A bottle of medicine...

Antidote! The antidote was never administered! He had not remembered! He missed the ship!

Who? Zakiya's child. Somebody very important. Important beyond being her child.

Petros!

Direk found himself standing in blood and watching horror. From the progress of the invisible attacker Direk knew he was behind him. People fled away from him in all directions but the way ahead offered the most victims. He dodged the staggering wounded and stepped around the fallen, tagging their locations in his data augment. The neighborhood lane opened onto the village commons just ahead, where people were rushing to get within a Marine defense perimeter. The barbarian seemed to favor what was probably a large knife, although he also used a slug weapon and a beam weapon when he could not get close to his prey.

Direk sprayed the water. He moved closer. He made himself visible. He seized the invisible demon with all the strength the Mnro Clinic's secret labs bestowed on him. He threw the enemy down and tried to pin him there while he probed the creases and field joints of his d-field. He found the neck and above it the head. He wrapped one arm around the invisible head and turned it in the only direction the d-field permitted. Turned it too far.

In time the d-field would exhaust its power, as would the i-field. The intruder would not be viable by then.

Section 028

Little Heroes

"They'll never find us here," Ibrahim said, pulling the cabinet door closed but leaving a small gap he could see through.

"What's happening?" Sammy asked. He huddled behind Lam's nephew in the empty storage cabinet. He called him Abie. Abie called him Sammy.

"Maybe it's just a drill," Abie answered, holding the door very still.

Sammy didn't like the dark but he did like the excitement of hiding. Still, he didn't feel right about what they were doing. "We're not supposed to hide. We're supposed to go to a designated location."

"Where?"

Sammy didn't know, so he said nothing. If Mom asked him where he was during the drill, he wouldn't lie to her. He just hoped the drill would end soon. The klaxons were very loud and wouldn't stop and were beginning to scare him. At least the cabinet shut out some of the blare.

"I wish we had shiplink augments," Abie said, "so we could listen to what's happening. I could hear Uncle Lam. I could tell him where I am."

"They won't give one to me, either."

"Do you hear people running?"

"I can barely hear you, Abie."

"Are you scared, Sammy? I think I am. Almost. We'll be safe, if we stay in here."

"Safe from what?"

"I don't know. We can pretend the barbarians are boarding the ship. Are you sure they're just humans, like us?"

"I told you I saw them."

"You didn't make them sound very scary."

"I don't like to talk about them."

"Then they *are* scary. I *like* to be scared."

"Then you've never been *really* scared."

"I want to be a Marine, like my Uncle Lam."

"You already told me that."

"You want to be a Navy officer, like your mom?"

"I suppose so. But I like what Uncle Phuti does, too. He gets to talk to so many people." He liked that Abie always referred to Zakiya as his mother. He never contradicted him. Abie could see there was no genetic relationship between her and him. Abie was a good friend. It was wonderful having a friend who was almost his size and age.

"She seems too nice to be a Navy admiral. Do you love her?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I love my mother. It's good to love your mother. Does Admiral Demba love you?"

"Is that important to you?" Sammy was sure she loved him. He loved her.

"It is! You're very different from everyone I know. Admiral Demba is great and powerful. I want to know that you're both good people who can love each other."

"We are. We love each other."

"Good! I really like you, Sammy. You make me think about things. Tell me more about the barbarian world. Tell me again how Admiral Demba escaped the

Lady in the Mirror."

The door to the room opened and they could hear voices. Frightened voices. Sammy tried to see over Abie's shoulder through the crack. He leaned too hard and the cabinet door opened too much. Two grownups saw them: a man and a woman. The woman registered shock at seeing them and motioned frantically for them to stay where they were. The man had a terrible cut on his back and was dripping blood on the floor. Abie pulled the cabinet door back but still kept the crack to peer through.

"More people!" Abie said. "They're closing the door."

"There are children here!" someone gave a whispered shout.

"Where?"

"In the cabinet!"

"This is the last room! We have no choice!"

"It was right behind us!"

Sammy could hear a loud ripping noise that almost seemed to be coming through the cabinet. People screamed and backed toward the far wall where Sammy could see them through the gap in the cabinet doors. Several of them were injured by something and were flailing arms and brushing at burned spots on their bodies. The ripping stopped. The odor of burned metal reached even into the cabinet. Then the hammering began.

People shifted against the walls and cowered behind pieces of furniture and storage containers. Something made the smoke in the room swirl as it crossed the floor. The ghostly something stepped on melted pieces of metal, sending them skittering and clinking.

It became visible. Abie opened the gap wider, to see better, even though Sammy squeezed his shoulder as a plea to stop. Sammy saw the barbarian pivot to let all the terrified people see him and fear him. He wore a black uniform, almost like a Navy admiral, all but obscured by a harness that held multiple weapons and other machinery. He took off a helmet to reveal a scarred face: young and brutal, devoid of pity. He dropped a rifle-like weapon on the floor. He pulled a knife from a scabbard and began to menace people with it.

The barbarian lunged at several people, playing on their fear, making them cower and try to evade the blade. He cornered a woman who couldn't stop crying and pricked her with the tip of the knife, making her scream. When she reflexively reached out to push the blade away, the barbarian cut off her arm just below the elbow. The woman fainted. The barbarian leaned over to threaten a finishing cut.

Abie threw open the cabinet, shoving Sammy backward to propel himself outward. He dashed forward, scooped up the weapon the barbarian dropped on the floor. On a dead run, he closed on the barbarian, bringing the weapon down with considerable force on the arm that held the knife. The knife fell out of the barbarian's hand, preventing the death of the woman.

The barbarian turned on Abie, blocked a second blow with ease. He grabbed Abie, wrenched the weapon from his grasp. Sammy fell out of the cabinet, his eyes still on Abie, as Abie tried to fight, kicking at the barbarian. The barbarian held Abie up by one wrist, swung the weapon across his forearm, breaking his arm bones. Abie screamed in agony. The barbarian prepared to deliver another blow to Abie.

Sammy was already running across the room, his movement hindered by his cramped good leg more than the regeneration machine on the other. He threw himself against the back of the barbarian's legs, causing him to lose his balance

and go down on his knees. Sammy bounced from the impact, caught his hand on the weapons harness on the back of the barbarian. As the barbarian got to his feet, Sammy climbed on his back and tried to get an arm around his neck.

The barbarian felt Sammy climb his back and seemed not to care. He still held Abie by his broken arm. He shook the broken arm, making Abie scream. Sammy beat on the barbarian's head with his free fist, trying to distract him. The man turned his head to look at Sammy, ignoring the pummeling Sammy gave him. Before he could turn back to Abie, Sammy gouged the barbarian's eye with his thumb.

The barbarian threw Abie across the room, dropped the dead weapon, and reached for Sammy. Sammy tried to wrap his legs and arms around the barbarian but in only a few painful moments the barbarian gripped him by the throat, raised him up, glared at him with his undamaged eye.

Sammy kicked hard with the regeneration machine, finding a soft spot in the barbarian's torso, causing him to grunt in pain. The barbarian swung Sammy around, slapped him hard with his free hand. Sammy lost the focus in his eyes and couldn't see the barbarian preparing to slam his fist into his face.

Sammy didn't see one of the men in the room grab the barbarian's cocked fist. He did feel the surge of pain as the barbarian swung him again. He felt the impact with some object, then another impact, then nothing.

* * *

"We got the last barbarian, sir! We have two fatalities and I can't get through to the hospital! The two dead are children, Captain!"

"Damn!" Horss swore. "Are they viable?"

"Unknown, sir. They were heroes. They distracted the barbarian until the grownups could attack. They beat the bastard to death. They're all frantic for medical help for the boys. They won't let me touch the kids, but one of them is Sammy."

The pit of his stomach filled with lead and his mind burned with hate. Horss switched his shiplink and connected with Mai. She opened the channel but couldn't reply for a few moments. Horss could hear her issuing triage orders, her voice rising above the din of pain and confusion in the hospital emergency rooms. He used his captain's authority to break into the comm traffic. He placed his shiplink on broadcast and released his fury. "Listen to me! Two children have died! Children! *Children!* Do you hear me? Go now! Use a transmat! Here is the location!"

"Children?" Mai finally said.

Horss could hear other people in the background, echoing the word: *children*. Then he heard the word *GO* shouted by others. She cut the connection.

"Jon," Zakiya said by shiplink. "Jon, what children?"

"Where are you?" Horss asked.

"I'm in the hospital, helping. It's terrible here!"

"Stay there, dear lady! Don't go with Mai."

"Is it Sammy?"

"Don't go. Please, don't go." She cut the connection. Horss slumped into his chair.

* * *

Zakiya looked into their faces and saw terrible emotions: shock, terror, grief, anger, guilt, pain. Two Marines were treating the simple injuries. She saw the first child lying on the floor, guarded by three people who stared at her as she paused. Their expressions showed dismay and sorrow. She recognized the boy: Abie, Lam's nephew. He was connected to a small medical device. He might survive. She saw a man tending a simple tourniquet on a woman's severed arm. On the other side of the room people stood in a group, looking down at something, many of them crying. They noticed her and reacted with even more emotion.

Mai had only just arrived and now Zakiya was here, *so soon*. She could tell by the reactions of the people standing around her. She didn't want to look up at Zakiya. She didn't want to speak to her. She didn't want to say what had to be said and then see Zakiya's reaction.

Zakiya saw Sammy's body even though Mai seemed to be intentionally obscuring it from her view. Mai was not doing anything for Sammy that Zakiya felt was necessary to keep him viable; she was just straightening his legs and folding his arms across his chest. She went down on her knees. She placed her hand on Sammy, closing her eyes to the blood and to the absolute stillness of his body. She wept. She opened her eyes when she felt Sammy move, but it was only Mai trying to lift him, trying to take her son away. Zakiya held on to Sammy and pulled him from Mai, got her arms under him. She carried him unsteadily toward the ruined doorway. She passed into the corridor. The future lay dark and blurry before her.

Mai paused by the doorway to watch Zakiya walk away. Only duty kept her from screaming and retreating from reality. Other people moved past her to exit the room. They followed Zakiya down the passageway, some of them even needing treatment for injuries.

Zakiya was hardly aware of how long or how far she carried Sammy's body. She wasn't aware of the people who followed her or of those who fell in behind her all along her route. She vaguely realized many people watched her pass by them. She reached the biosphere, where the sun was starting to set, not knowing where she was going. Her strength began to falter, the grief weakening her more than the effort of carrying Sammy. She stumbled, went down on one knee. Many hands helped her rise. She finally found herself in the plaza in front of the hospital. People were waiting for her. There was a gurney and hands reaching for Sammy, to take him from her. She had to let go. She had to. He was dead. He was gone. She cried harder as they took Sammy.

Zakiya collapsed on the pavement. Direk sat down beside her and held her. The crowd melted away. Eventually Direk helped Zakiya find her way home.

Section 029

The Son of Two Mothers

She couldn't sleep, yet she couldn't bear to be awake, to be awake and to think and to remember. She remembered Sammy, the first time she truly embraced him and wanted him, perhaps even loved him. He needed her and came willingly into her arms. She carried him through the woods to Rafael's house.

Images formed. Her breast: light, not dark. Her infant: dark, not light. Aylis reaching toward her baby, touching it, finding purchase, drawing her son away from her. His small complaint at losing the nipple, the drops of milk wasting, a toothless yawn.

"Why did you find me?" Ruby asked, not yet admitting that she would never see her child again. "Why did you have to find me?"

"You remembered," Aylis replied, "but you didn't remember enough, or you would not have done this."

"Let me have my son!" Ruby pleaded. "Why must it be this way?"

"Not while there is still hope," Aylis said, pulling her son away.

"There is no hope! He's gone forever! And Jamie is gone! This is all I have of him!"

"There is hope. That is my task: to remember the hope."

"And my task?"

"You won't sleep but you must not die."

"I'm a mother! You're stealing my son!"

"So am I a mother," Aylis Mnro said. "We're sisters, you and I. And there is still hope."

Someone shook her, then shook her harder. She awoke but she didn't know who she was or where she was. "Aylis!" she cried. "You took Petros!" Someone grabbed her face in two hands and pushed open her eyelids. "Go away!" she demanded to the blurry form above her.

"No!" the person shouted at her. Focus returned. The blurry form became the blood-spattered face of Sugai Mai. The blood and Mai's expression were enough to shock Zakiya into functional wakefulness.

"Mai. What?"

"I need you! Aylis is sick and I can't help her!"

"What's wrong with her?" Zakiya tried to sit up.

"I don't know! She's pregnant and exhausted, but so am I! I need her! I need rest! We have volunteers and trainees but someone needs to supervise. She's unresponsive and I think it's emotional. Please, see if you can help her!"

Zakiya was numb: a wall against her grief, however tenuous. It helped that she had wept for what seemed like hours. It helped that people tried to comfort her. She had lived too long, to have waited to experience such pain and loss.

* * *

"She fell off," Mai said, entering Aylis's office. "I had her on the couch."

She helped Mai pick Aylis off the floor. They put her back on the couch. She was limp but began to stir, once on the couch. Mai put her fingers on Aylis's chest and read her vitals. Mai grimaced and slapped Aylis lightly on the cheek.

"Aylis. Aylis! Zakiya is here. Tell us what's wrong."

Aylis opened her eyes. She slowly turned her head, her face a mask of pain, and when she saw Zakiya she curled herself into a fetal position.

"I'm leaving," Mai said. "I'm sorry. Try to get her on her feet."

Zakiya sat down by Aylis and put a hand on her shoulder, then absently started rubbing her back. The tension in Aylis's muscles would not release under her hand. It was several moments before Zakiya's beleaguered mind registered the fact. She tried to find some way to think clearly and decide what to do about Aylis. All she could bring to mind was the fragment of memory she had just experienced before Mai woke her. Petros. *Petros!*

"What happened to Petros?" Zakiya asked herself but Aylis must have heard the question as though addressed to her.

Aylis screamed and tried to roll away from Zakiya and she fell on the floor. Zakiya was shocked into a greater awareness of the situation, a clearer realization of the magnitude of Aylis's distress. She got down on the floor and tried to pull Aylis's hands and arms away from her breast, to help her rise, to at least get her to stop screaming. All she could do was shake her, then clamp her hand over Aylis's mouth to stop the screaming. Aylis finally opened her eyes again, just watery slits contorted by distress. Zakiya realized Aylis was trying to speak and she removed her hand from her mouth.

"I killed him! I killed Petros!" The words were almost lost under the obscuring emotional burden.

As she finally understood what Aylis said, Zakiya weakened her grip on Aylis's hands and Aylis snatched them back and began beating herself on the head. Her nose started to bleed.

The door opened and Direk stood there for a startled moment before moving to help Zakiya stop his mother from hurting herself. He and Zakiya picked her up, and when Aylis seemed to realize who Direk was, she clung to him and wept. He held her and looked at Zakiya questioningly.

"She said she killed Petros," Zakiya said dully, still not completely accepting reality and understanding its meaning.

Direk studied Zakiya for several moments, trying to decide what he should say and whether she should hear it. Exhaustion dulled his inhibitions and most of his other functions. He would get this over with now. It would hurt them badly when they were already suffering the loss of Sammy, but they would survive it and find peace that much sooner.

"Do you remember Petros?" he asked.

Zakiya was slow to respond. "My baby. My son. Aylis would never..."

"In a sense, she may have killed him."

"He's dead? My baby?"

"Perhaps not yet, but he is lost to us."

"Why? How?"

"She didn't tell you what he was going to do?" Direk now wished he could be as Essin as he once was, but it was too difficult. It hurt him to even think the words he was about to speak. "Petros was going to infiltrate the Navy cadre of interlopers. He should have made contact with us before now, to receive the antidote. We've lost him." He felt his mother hug him harder and tremble with the strain. He saw Zakiya drop onto the couch and hang her head, then cover her face.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish I had remembered sooner. I wish my copy had remembered. I wish mother had remembered."

"I did!"

"What did you say, Mother?" Direk did not hear her clearly.

Aylis disengaged from the embrace of her son. She stood before him, wavering a little, with a hand on his chest to help keep her balance. Zakiya was behind her and she dared not turn to look at her. Aylis was exhausted. Her throat was raw with the ache of grief and the stress of screaming and weeping. Her head ached. Her eyes hurt and wouldn't stay focused. She wanted to die. But before she did, she must tell the truth, for Zakiya's sake, and for the sake of her own soul. She couldn't look at either Zakiya or her son as she coughed and tried to speak again.

"I knew who he was and I had to deny it. I had to! Until I made myself prove it. It was him. There is no doubt. And it was all I could think about, even as I was trying to help Mai treat the wounded. I hope I didn't hurt anyone! I don't remember anything, except the blood and the cries of pain. Then they brought Sammy in and I couldn't go on! I can't believe he's dead!"

Aylis's knees began to shake and Direk grabbed her before she could fall. He sat her on the couch and she seemed determined to continue speaking, wiping her face and giving herself a moment to rest.

"Did you see him?" Direk asked.

Zakiya almost didn't want Aylis to go on. She didn't want her to suffer. She didn't want her unborn child to suffer. And she had a very bad feeling about what Aylis might be about to say.

"Yes, I saw him! I didn't know him immediately. I just knew he wasn't Essiin. I did feel there was something special about him. But I tried not to think about it. I was *desperate* to deny it! *It could not be Petros who was doing this unspeakable thing to me! I loved Petros!* And I was hitting him and screaming at him. And he was... And it hurt! He was hurting me! *And I hated him!* And I couldn't make the right words come out of my mouth! And I just gave up and stopped thinking, stopped feeling. And it was suddenly over. And I just wished he was *dead*, whoever he was! Then, afterward, there was Jamie. And I told myself that at least Zakiya had Jamie and I could forget about Petros. But I *couldn't*, no matter how hard I tried. I finally made myself examine the genetic code of my fetus, and it is definitely Zakiya's *granddaughter!*"

"Aylis! What are you saying? Who is Petros now?"

"I could have told *Etrhnk* the truth! I could have told him who his mother is. I could have stopped him from raping me. But I only wanted to deny the truth and hate him. Even after he was done with me, I could have told him. He even gave me Rafael's portrait of his mother, and I could have said, 'Here is your mother.' But I didn't. I had to hate him. And he's going to die soon. He said he was. And I took my *payment* and left him to *die!* *I killed him!* *I loved him!* *I killed Petros!*"

Zakiya waited for Aylis to finish speaking, then she waited a little longer. She looked at Direk and saw how sad he was and how exhausted from his medical duties, his hospital scrubs blood spattered. The news of Petros being Etrhnk was terrible but reaction to it was muted by the loss of Sammy and by her concern for Aylis. She was also thinking about Freddy and becoming worried that he had not come to her yet to share her grief. She was well aware of how Freddy felt about Sammy and she knew it could be very bad for his mental health, perhaps even fatal. She had never known Petros as a real person. But she had known Sammy, and loved him with all her heart. And she had known Freddy and loved him as a real and very special son. Etrhnk was not that important to her, not right now. Aylis was important. Freddy was important.

Zakiya needed Aylis and the ship needed her. The future would lose most of its meaning if Aylis did not travel to it with her as the good friend she was. She turned to Aylis and tried to grasp each of her hands. Aylis resisted for a moment, causing their hands to flutter about, until Aylis looked up at Zakiya and tried to understand what she wanted. Then Zakiya took her hands and pulled her off the couch, pulled her close, released her hands, and embraced her.

* * *

The android was unwise to have twice let him live. He could have killed it either time. He should have. No. No logic in that, only an unethical urge. If it was an android, then it made little difference in the balance of his life's accounts. But this was a *person* in a bloodless body. No, only a stream of thoughts in a soulless feedback loop of consciousness.

Etrhnk was plagued by such mental reversals. It began the first moment his attention was stolen by Admiral Fidelity Demba. He should have killed her. He couldn't. It became worse when the musician Pan came into his personal presence. He should have killed him. He couldn't. Then came Aylis Mnro.

He stood in the presence of the android, waiting for Pan to arrive. It occurred to him the android could be informative. "Why do you stand guard? If I can find you, The Lady can."

Fred flexed his fingers on the grip of his hand weapon, as if uncomfortable with its fit. He looked into Etrhnk's eyes. "Perhaps she has never lost us. Why doesn't she attack? I stand guard because I will not sleep."

"Fred never sleeps." Pan arrived through the trees. "If he sleeps, he dreams. The dreams disturb him."

"Your journey is slow but it seems to have direction. Northwest."

"We receive clues of dubious value, but they are consistent."

"She wishes to have visitors? Otherwise, you should be dead."

"Would you object if I said I intend to kill her?"

Etrhnk could have been amused. Did Pan have any notion of the scope of The Lady's power? Did he realize she could not be understood, could not be predicted? "I commend you for your ambition but see no chance of success."

"She requested that I kill her."

"It doesn't matter. You can't trust her."

"She seemed pleasant to me but I understand she is evil. If my life ends on this scenic journey in the company of my old friend Fred, then it's a life well ended."

"I would ask to join you but they will have other plans for me."

"Why did you let Zakiya live? I suspect you will pay a high price for that."

Etrhnk waited several moments to reply. He didn't think logical thoughts during this delay. He didn't measure pressure differences between urges. Perhaps he felt emotions and perhaps not. If it was emotional to want knowledge, then that caused him to respond the way he did. "I don't know. She has some magical power over me. I tell myself that it doesn't matter that I let her live because I would be dead soon in any case. Perhaps for the same foolish reason I let myself do terrible harm to another person, as though ethics have no meaning in the face of death. I've changed. The evil I've done weighs heavily on my every thought. If there is no hell after I die, there is this agony before I die. I confess that I came here either to take you with me into the dark, or to beg for any scrap of knowledge that would help explain my mysteries and my fate. I

deserve nothing from you. I apologize for the drama my words imply. I apologize for forcing myself into your company and increasing your risk."

Pan stared at him for a long time. Even the android seemed very thoughtful gazing at him. It made Etrhnk uncomfortable. He turned away, not understanding anything, even himself.

"Wait."

Etrhnk turned around slowly. The android raised his weapon to point it at Etrhnk's head, his aim smoothly tracking his slightest motion.

"I warn you," Etrhnk said, "that my actions are not well controlled at this point in my life. Your friend is wise to keep me in his sights."

"Give me your hand." The coercion bothered Etrhnk. It was disturbing him again, how his urges could swing so far from positive to negative. Perhaps he would never be able to feel even the possibility of friendship with this man, but he had felt comfortable in his presence, and now that was taken away. He couldn't decide what to do. "There is no threat," Pan said. "Not from me. Fred does what he feels necessary. I may disagree with him but I am not his master."

Pan held out his hand for Etrhnk to take. Etrhnk found no arguments in either direction and finally took Pan's hand. He tightened his grip to equalize the force. He waited. After a moment of apparent inner disturbance, Pan released his hand. Sadness formed on his dark face.

"Is it he?" the android asked.

"Yes," Pan answered sadly. "Petros."

"I was told this name," Etrhnk said. "I don't know why."

"I'll explain what I can," Pan said.

Section 030

One Happy Thought

Aylis paced. In the small bridge of the admiral's yacht, this activity could not go uncontested.

"You can get out and walk," Mama said.

"Probably get there faster," Aylis rejoined.

Jamie didn't dare say anything. That her mother and Aylis were able to carry on, that was a miracle, and that was enough. She was afraid she would say the wrong thing and lose one or both of them. She was with them, not because they invited her, but because she felt they were too fragile and might need her help. They seemed to ignore her. She didn't know if that meant they blamed her for the tragedy, but she would accept the blame. She couldn't believe Sammy was gone. She couldn't believe Freddy was gone. She hadn't wept again today, not yet, but she could feel it coming. Tears kept pushing into the corners of her eyes.

"I just want to be finished with it! Get them and go!"

"Jamie, you're very quiet," Mama observed.

She shook her head, looked away, said nothing. She was relieved Mama spoke to her. The caring tone of her voice, even in this time of her deep sorrow, seemed to complete and to strengthen the way she felt about her mother.

"Tell me one happy thought," Mama asked. "I need a happy thought."

"I want to have a baby." It just erupted from somewhere deep inside her, surprising her. In this time of restricted procreation it was almost every woman's dream to have a baby, and she had always known she was no exception. It was something else Direk denied her: motherhood. She wept then, feeling sorry for everything.

Mama held her hand until she stopped crying. "That was a very good happy thought." That was the only thing that helped Jamie: knowing Mama still loved her. The guilt for forcing the jumpship battle was killing her. The loss of Sammy was unbearable.

"There it is," Mama said.

"Finally!" Aylis declared.

"How did they ever expect to get out? This mass of rubble is collapsing around them. They were about to become the core of a very cold little planetoid." Jamie tried to be as tough as Mama and Aylis seemed to be. A lifetime as a Marine didn't help. This was a different situation and she was a different person.

"They couldn't have expected us to find them," Mama said. "Perhaps this was their grave."

The yacht pushed its way through the debris and connected to a port of the lost ship. They cycled into the old ship. Aylis led the way down the familiar passageway to the cabin of Patrick Jenkins. He was awake when they entered his quarters.

"Go away, you damned ghosts! Quit haunting me!"

"He seems stronger," Mama commented.

"Shut up and get up, Patrick," Aylis ordered. "We're taking you with us."

"The hell, you say! You're not real, milady. See?"

"You grab my breast again and I'll slap you into next week!"

They picked him up from his bed. They gathered his tubes and medical

contrivances and moved him down the passageway. "Wait! I need my toothbrush."

"Why? Your breath smells like you haven't used it for fifty years."

"Oh. That's right. I use scotch for oral hygiene. Got any?"

"I knew I shouldn't have come back here by cryptikon and adjusted his medication," Aylis said.

They escorted him into the admiral's yacht.

"Hey, this is different!"

"Keep your hands to yourself, Patrick," Mama said.

"Are those my hands? I can't be responsible. They must have a sex life of their own. Not me. My testes fell off about nine hundred years ago."

"You must have grafted one to each hand," Aylis commented. "I suppose you've fondled a long parade of alien females."

"Join the parade!"

"I know where there's a cold shower."

"And who is this lovely young lady?" Patrick said, noticing Jamie for the first time.

"My daughter."

"Been there, done that. Ready to do it again! What's your name, Beautiful?"

"Jamie."

"What a fine Scottish name! I'm in love!"

"She's a Navy captain and an ex-Marine."

"I'm up to the challenge!"

* * *

"Everyone wants to see them."

"They'll need to wait. Dozens injured by the barbarians are still under treatment."

"Put them in the plaza, in their coffins, with those terrible expressions on their dead faces. Perhaps that will make people think and appreciate their sacrifice."

"I can barely imagine what they've endured."

Section 031

Patrick

"I thoroughly enjoyed the meeting," Mai commented, "although it was disconcerting, watching all of you become possessed by your auxiliary memories as you remembered Patrick."

"I hope we gave you a better impression of Pat," Aylis said. "He isn't - or wasn't - what he now appears to be."

"But you have to admit, he was a daring and outspoken man. I can't believe how many times he risked his life on account of some specimen of alien life."

"Yes, and he always claimed to be a coward. Are you certain of your diagnosis, Mai? I still think there's something wrong with him."

"How can anything be right with him? The human brain never ceases to amaze me. Think of what Sammy must have suffered, in addition to what we know he suffered, and yet he was such a sweet person. Patrick's scans remain normal. I have high hopes for him."

"How many years was he alone on that ship, waiting to die? Does that show up on a scan?"

* * *

It was impossible that he was still alive. He was sure he remembered giving up and falling into the darkness of death. Yet he dreamed. Or did he continue as a ghost, only to be haunted by other ghosts? Women, so many beautiful ghostly women. They made him think he was thinking. They made him feel he was feeling. He was feeling fear. He was thinking enigmas. Neither science nor faith offered a solution to the question of whether he should be alive or dead. All he could do was begin to pay attention to the disturbances out there, the beautiful women and their beautiful voices. All he could do was yearn for rebirth, even while he feared the consequences. But...

It was impossible to begin, and so he greatly regretted that he was conscious again. It was impossible to form new relationships. New friendships were beyond even imagining. It was impossible to believe he was still alive. It was impossible to speak, and to say anything that meant anything. It was impossible to be serious, impossible to be funny, impossible even to be truthful, because the truth was so dangerous. Yet, he had to take the next breath, and open his eyes, and see the impossible, and do what was merely and possibly real.

"Is everyone pregnant around here?" It was just something to say. It seemed harmless, pointless, silly: just the way he was. She wasn't obviously pregnant the first time he saw her, and so that must have been weeks ago. Now she was pregnant. Now he was disappointed. It was a mystery that he should feel that way, until he saw the other Asian woman. What ancient experiences haunted his brain to raise an awareness of a fondness for women with narrow brown eyes?

"You finally noticed?" She gave him a smile for encouragement.

Bless her! He almost couldn't bear to keep looking at her. She seemed so real. His eyes seized upon the smallest detail, such as a strand of hair that escaped to tickle her nose and be brushed back with the tip of a finger. He had to look away, stare at the ceiling, glance over at the other woman, take a deep breath, use the breath stupidly with ugly words. "Such a great disappointment." He cringed to listen to himself. "All the pretty ones. Well, not quite all. Who is the

very young lass by the door?" He knew who she might be, although the name would not come to him. He was appalled he asked of her, especially if, by some miracle, she was who he wanted her to be. He was certain she was always beyond his reach. It was the pinnacle of self-delusion to imagine she was the one he thought he remembered, thought he wanted, thought he would someday... He almost wanted to laugh - or cry - at the crazy things his mind entertained.

"When will you get control of yourself, Doctor Jenkins?"

Never, apparently! He snatched his hand back from where it wandered. "Please call me Pat. What's your name?"

"I'm Doctor Sugai. This is the third time I've told you."

"I don't care about doctor this and doctor that. What's your name? Why can't I know your name? I want to know your name."

"My name is Mai."

Oh, miserable fool! Must I act so poorly? "I knew that! I heard the other pregnant one call you that. May I call you Mai? I want to call you Mai. Does your husband know you're flirting with me?" He hoped she knew he was harmless and an idiot. No, he hoped the opposite. He was never serious enough to be dangerous. He couldn't even appear to be really dangerous, but he needed to be at least *possibly* dangerous, thus to sound the warning.

"I was warned to stay out of your reach, but it's difficult to tend your needs without getting closer than that. My husband is the captain of this ship. If you wish to have business with him when we release you from the hospital, then you may continue to put your hands where they don't belong. But I don't consider that flirting with you."

"Do they still make captains as tough as they used to?"

"I think so."

Her husband was a killing machine, if the trend of his luck remained true. Good. Then he could refrain from that distasteful act. "Pity. My profound apologies, then. Boy or girl?"

"What? My baby? I don't know."

"How can you not know?"

"I don't *want* to know."

"Well, *I* want to know!"

"If someone tells you, don't tell *me*, Pat."

She was interesting to talk with. It was sad that his own novelty would soon wear off and she would become more scarce. That summed up his social essence: entertaining for awhile, then, if the other person wasn't interested in exotic plants and animals, he was finished. He felt a rush of warmth. "What did you just put in me?"

"Something to calm you."

"Good stuff. Got any scotch?"

"Do you know where you are?"

Heaven! Hell? "Does it matter? Am I somewhere? I was nowhere forever. If there's no scotch it must be hell."

"You're on the *Freedom*."

"What's that? A ship? What type? How big?" He didn't want to know, he really did *not* want to know!

"A very very big ship."

"How many feet for each 'very?' Can I walk around in it?"

"You can walk for *miles*, as soon as we finish repairing your age damage."

Could he just shut his mouth and try to think of safer topics? "That big? What classification? How fast?" Apparently he could not shut his mouth, torn between the growing desire for social contact and the fear it was real.

"This isn't my area of interest, but I don't believe it has a Navy classification."

"How fast? How quiet? That's the important thing."

"It's the fastest ship in the galaxy."

"Can't be faster than a barbarian jumpship."

"Yes, it can."

"Can it, now? So, I'm dreaming after all." *Good. It was safer to be in a dream. Dismiss it. Don't think about ships and barbarians.*

"There is always some question about what is real and what is dream, Patrick. Even in those of us who think we know. How did you survive all those years beyond the frontier?"

"Did I survive?"

"Yes, you did." *No, I didn't!* "Here, hold my hand. My hand is real. I'm real. My name is Sugai Mai. I was the director of the Mnro Clinic on Earth. Doctor Mnro asked me to accompany her on this ship, and since I was also in love with its captain, I came willingly. More or less. Tell me something about what you did."

NO! And she feels so real! "Me? I did nothing! The two heroes went out and got themselves killed and Koji retrieved them and he and I put them back together and sent them out again. I'm only a biologist, not a trauma surgeon! Go to sleep in a coffin, then wake up to nightmare. I had to give up on them. I had to rest. Had to ambush Koji. Took me years to gather the courage. Just me and him. Put all three in coffins. They scared me. Read some of their logs, the ones I could unlock. They stopped telling me of their adventures. I wept for them."

"But it wasn't all bad, was it? You made a recording of the four of you singing."

Yes! I remember! So few good memories. And that was when it all ended. No more hope. What a liar I need to be! "I don't remember."

"You rest now, Pat. This is giving you too much stress. There's a lot of repair work for us to do. I'll see you again soon."

Wait. He had to know if it was her. "The lass over there. You never told me her name."

"That's Nori. You don't remember Nori?"

Nori! "Remember? Why should I remember? To hurt more? To risk more?"

"Do you remember that you left people behind, Pat? Nori is one of them."

* * *

"I was expecting the pretty pregnant one. Mai." *Oh, no! Please! Don't let it be Phuti!*

"I'm not pretty and I'm not pregnant, that's true, but I have my charms, Patrick. How are you doing?"

I'm lying, lying, lying! "Are you somebody else we left behind?"

"Yes. My name is Phuti. We knew each other for decades. How are you doing?"

I don't dare touch him. I don't want to wake up! "I'm doing grandly. How are you doing?" *I'm lying grandly. Sorry, Phuti.*

"I'm well, Patrick."

Only well? Yes, everyone is a little sad around here. "I saw Nori. Do you know Nori? She wouldn't talk to me."

"She doesn't speak much to anyone yet."

"Why?"

"A period of adjustment. She also had the misfortune to awaken from rejuvenation in the midst of trouble."

"Trouble?" Why did he keep presenting questions to which he did not want answers?

"We were boarded by barbarians."

"Barbarians? Which barbarians? Not Black Fleet barbarians?"

"Yes. Three of them. We killed them."

"Oh, no! Where are we now? We aren't in one of their traffic lanes?"

"No, no. Don't be alarmed. We're safe, Patrick."

"We are?"

"Word of honor."

Hell and Damnation, my old friends, you are back. The dream is over. "Nori is here!" You are endangering her!

"How do you remember Nori?" Phuti asked.

"They say she's Koji's daughter." Patrick didn't remember if they had told him. "Koji won't remember her. That's good, or bad, I don't know. Those three women who took me off the ship?"

"Yes. Aylis, Zakiya, Jamie."

"They haven't come to see me. I need to apologize seriously."

"You don't remember those you left behind, Patrick? No one?"

"How can we have been so crazy to leave such beautiful creatures in our wake? What kind of idiot monsters are we?" He was saying things just to hear the noise and not the meaning. He wanted desperately to be safely insane. Why was Phuti making him speak so much? It was safer to say nothing. Lying required too much concentration. But he yearned for that old friendship more with each second that he stayed in the presence of this modest anthropologist. His memory was questionable after so many years, yet he would never forget Phuti.

"I don't think you intended to stay away so long, Patrick."

"Damned right! How many damn centuries did I beg the damn wrecking crew to turn the damn ship around? How the hell did you find us?"

"Cryptikon, Patrick. Remember me and Iggy trying to move yours to the bridge? Remember Iggy calling you a lecherous Scots drunk?"

"I'm not any of those things." Not lecherous. Not a Scot. Not a drunk. But I keep trying.

"What do you think will happen when they revive Alex and Koji and Setek?"

When they revive them? They were going to revive the monsters? Phuti was the ultimate friend anyone could ever have. Could he scream in his face? Sorry, Phuti. I'm done lying to you but that leaves me nothing more to say.

* * *

"Finally! Why didn't you come sooner?" He didn't need to ask it that way! He was an old and impatient fool.

"I'm sorry, Patrick. I haven't felt well."

You are still as beautiful as I remember you, Zakiya. "I hope you're feeling better now." He tried to sound as sincere as he thought he was. "I apologize for

how I acted when you took me off the ship. I deeply and sincerely apologize."

"Apology accepted, Patrick."

Why wasn't she happy to see him? Was his apology unwanted? Did he make such a fool of himself in his initial panic to deny their reality, and if they were real, to try to protect them? "I hope you can spare me a few words. Nobody will talk with me very long. I fear I bore them. I slip in and out of feeling I'm in a dream. I want to know that I'm safe and sane and awake." Perhaps he did want those things, if only to get unstuck. He was suffocating in denial of reality and responsibility. He was whiplashed by the restraint of joy, by the fear of impending tragedy when murderers were brought back to life, and by the torment of guilt for a life badly lived. He needed judgment of his life and final disposition of his soul.

"We think you're doing very well, Patrick. What do you want to talk about?"

"That depends." *That depends on courage. If it was only my own life to risk, I could do it. I found the courage once to put Koji away. That was nothing compared to this. Phuti. Aylis. Zakiya. Nori! Even the irascible Iggy. How can I save them?*

"Depends on what?" Zakiya asked.

"On trust. And you can't trust me."

"I want to trust you, Patrick. Why do you think I shouldn't?"

"I don't trust myself. I'm a liar. I'm a participant in crimes."

"I can't judge you, Patrick. I have my own burden of guilt to bear."

It pained him to see the truth of her statement in her eyes. A life too long lived served both of them badly. Given enough time, what poor choices could be avoided? None. He was still stuck, not between heaven and hell, but between Hell One and Hell Two - until she took one of his hands, making him look down at her hand holding his. It was too real, too desirable, and too undeniable. He started to shake. He pulled away from her as a wave of vertigo struck him. He heard a medical alarm. In a few seconds Nori appeared in the hospital room, followed soon by Mai. Nori checked him quickly, before stepping aside for Mai.

"There's nothing wrong physically," Mai said.

But everything wrong mentally. He gave up denial. He began to take responsibility. "I remember you singing." He couldn't look at her anymore. He couldn't look at any of them.

"You remember?"

"I *never* forgot you!"

"Why did you pretend not to remember, Patrick?" He just shook his head and closed his eyes. She let him have his self pity. "I wish we could both be happier finding each other again, Patrick."

* * *

"That was one reason I wanted Mai to come with us," Aylis said. "She has experience with patients with aberrant behavior. I assumed that, if they survived physically, they might not survive emotionally. There are things Mai can do to adjust their brain chemistry. It won't fix them, but it may help."

"You're starting with Koji?" Zakiya asked.

"He may take the longest to repair. All three will be in treatment at the same time. I have nearly a hundred specialists I've trained for trauma and regenerative surgery. More have volunteered, just as thousands have volunteered to wear the Navy uniform and retrain for military duties."

"They have physical augments."

"Mostly combat-related. Shall I remove them, for safety?"

"No. I have another idea for safety."

"I heard that an order went to Iggy to install a hundred cannons."

"The cannons may not be important. Time is important. It will take time to manufacture them and install them."

"The cannons are only a delay?"

"I hope they're never used. With time our wounds will heal, our anger soften, and new possibilities for action may arise. It will also give us time to deal with Alex and Setek and Koji. Perhaps the arming of the ship will slow their efforts to take over the ship."

"You think they will try to do that? Yes, of course they will! I keep forgetting who they have probably become and remembering who they were. This is so terrible!"

* * *

"Why are you pregnant?" Patrick inquired bluntly, since he was not sharp enough to do it cleverly.

"So you do have something to say." Pat said so little to her, she who had known him best, his fellow expert in the life sciences. He led her to important discoveries in human biology through comparative studies of alien life. He didn't know yet that without his research during the *Frontier* voyages she probably would not have founded the Mnro Clinics. Aylis had taken all the credit and had become the "Mother of Immortality." But someday she would distribute credit to all of the others who deserved it.

Aylis walked among the flowers, followed by Patrick, who despite the serenity around them, seemed anxious. Aylis took his hand and led him through the English garden at a leisurely pace. She patted the back of his hand absently, comfortingly. He seemed to relax a little, but he kept looking at her in puzzlement with his bright green eyes.

"You couldn't have wanted it." That Aylis was raped disturbed Patrick deeply. He even felt responsible in some way. Patrick knew the four of them shouldn't have stayed in barbarian space so long, thus prompting Aylis and Zakiya to risk their lives in search of them. Alex, Setek, and Koji had lost perspective and soon after had lost the real meaning of their lives. Whether their rescue would be a rebirth or an abortion remained to be decided. That two unborn children should be so close to what might become an extremely dangerous situation was a terrible risk.

"The baby? No, not at first." Where had he got those green eyes? Aylis always wondered. Patrick was an animal as exotic as any he studied in the far reaches of space. She never heard a true word about his parentage but she knew he was no Scotsman. It occurred to her that she might be able to find his genetic identity in the database of the Mnro Clinics, if she would ever gain access to them again. He was slender and brown. When his hair grew back it would be sandy and curly. Patrick fell silent, perhaps because he sensed the tension the subject of her fetus caused. "Tell me about your travels, Pat. Did you find any interesting creatures?"

"Nothing much." Patrick had lived and breathed the medical science needed to keep his friends alive - at least in their bodies. They were so aggressive in their investigations, Patrick could find little time for anything else. He had to

find periods of relaxation and recuperation and isolation from the other three, in order to be ready to face the nightmare responsibility of repairing them. He had slept much of his life away, sealed in a stasis coffin until Koji would wake him.

"But your journeys covered such a vast volume of space. There was even a vein of habitable planets mentioned in your logs.

"They would bring me specimens - when they thought about it."

"They wouldn't let you take field trips, Pat?"

"No. I spent most of my time in stasis."

"You must have done *something*. You could never let your brain stop wondering. Like the rest of us. There are always questions to try to answer."

"I did some anthropology, Aylis."

He seemed unwilling to speak at length, unlike the old Pat who would always go on until you made him stop. She had to keep telling herself that no matter how familiar her old friends might seem to be, they were new friends, and different.

"Phuti and Zakiya will want to know everything about that. So will I. Give me a sample."

"The diaspora of the human genome is much larger than we theorized." Pat frowned. "It's like a plague. There is also good evidence of an active non-human species present in the galaxy. Perhaps along another collision seam on the other side of the hub."

Patrick stopped and pulled his hand away from Aylis's hand. "You *will* resist them, won't you?"

"Koji and Setek and Alex? We'll be careful."

"*Careful*? You have no idea! Have you read their encrypted logs?"

"We don't want to discuss them with you, Pat. It's for your own safety. But we do get the understanding from reading their logs that they may not remember us."

"I barely remember you myself."

"Eventually I will have to test your memory, Pat. You and I and the others of our age are at the forward edge of a great human experiment. We are learning, as we live to an advanced age, how the human brain will retain its memories and other functions."

"I do remember you, Aylis. I remember all of you. I don't trust any details of what I seem to remember but I do trust the feelings I have for you. I warn you again: don't trust any of us!"

"Pat, give yourself time to get to know us again and learn what we had to do to find you. Perhaps you won't feel as worried as you do now. No matter how terribly life has changed them, we intend to do everything we can to heal Setek, Alex, and Koji."

They resumed their walk, turning down the hillside toward the lake.

"How much farther, Aylis? My legs are tiring."

"Just a little farther."

They completed the walk to a cluster of apartments near the lake. Aylis showed Patrick his residence. When they finished the tour of his rooms, Pat dropped into a soft chair. He was perspiring. Aylis went to the kitchen, filled a glass with water, and brought it to him.

"This is water!" Patrick pulled the tumbler away from his mouth with a frown and set it down.

"I've done a bad thing, Pat. I added something to your plumbing to temporarily circumvent any attempt on your part to become intoxicated. But

you can still enjoy the taste of scotch, if that's important to you."

"Damn, woman! Oblivion is important to me! Continuous reality is probably lethal to someone as sensitive as I am."

Aylis laughed. "What you need is a friend, not a bottle of scotch."

"I lost interest in relationships when Iggy took Ana away from me."

"You were never interested in permanent female relationships."

"Maybe not. I think Iggy rescued me from disaster. How is Iggy? How well does he remember Ana? I want to talk to him."

"Get some rest and I'll see if Iggy will pay you a visit tonight."

Aylis got up to leave. Patrick stood to show her to the door. "There are some things I used to try to do to them when I was putting them back together, to lower their level of hostility. If you *have* to revive them, I want to help."

Section 032

Koji

"Can you hear me?"

"Patrick?"

"Do you know who you are?"

"Hoshino Koji. You tricked me, Patrick."

"I hoped you would forget that."

"I was getting old enough to die. You could have waited."

"You were too quiet, Koji. You scare me when you're quiet."

"There was never any reason for your fear, Patrick. Unless I have forgot some error I made. Who won the game?"

"What game?"

"I don't remember. There was always a game."

"That was a long time ago."

"It's dark. Is there something different?"

"Yes, there's something different, Koji."

Zakiya stood up as the illumination increased. She was encouraged by the calmness of the dialog between Patrick and Koji. She was encouraged by the lowered intensity and frequency of her memories of Koji. She was sadly satisfied that she was so exhausted of emotion that she could treat Koji's revival with objectivity. She lost Sammy. And because he grieved too well, because she couldn't find words to console him, she lost Freddy.

She approached where Koji lay, watched him begin to rise from the bed, and waited for him to notice her and react. She could detect the instant he saw her and could not detect a reaction. He sat up on the edge of the bed, legs dangling, then dropped onto the deck. He flexed his legs. He stood slightly taller than Patrick. He faced Patrick, as though ignoring her.

"Introduce me to her," Koji said to Patrick.

"She isn't one of my holograms, Koji."

Koji pushed Patrick, sending him stumbling backward. Patrick held up a hand as a signal to Zakiya that he wasn't concerned. He had warned her that physical contact - sometimes rough - was needed by Koji and the others to test reality when they awoke from regeneration. Koji looked at Zakiya. He studied the room which was little more than white walls and ceiling surrounding the bed on which he awoke. He approached her.

Her combat reflex was active, measuring Koji's parameters. She would not need it; a machine intelligence was monitoring Koji for signs of aggression and would anesthetize him instantly.

He was a big man, as big as Alex or Setek, and powerfully muscled. He looked down at her as he walked around her. He positioned himself before her at a measured distance. He put forth his hand, apparently for her to take. Zakiya reached for his hand slowly and took it slowly, willing her combat reflex to disarm. Koji held her hand firmly and stared into her eyes without hinting at his own thoughts or feelings. He suddenly pulled on her hand and observed her reaction. He smiled when she retained her balance and composure.

"What is this uniform you wear? What is your rank?"

"Union Navy. Admiral." Here was Koji, a stranger, who yet evoked wonderful memories from a lost time and place. "My name is Zakiya." She moved his hand up and down. She was ready to release his hand, but he was not

ready to release hers.

"You know me. I don't know you."

"I once knew a man whose face you wear and whose name you use."

"Do I need to guess who you are? Zakiya is a strange name."

"My full name is Zakiya Muenda Gerakis."

"Three names. Three times nothing. Are you just an admiral? Is that all there is to you?"

"Do you remember Alex?"

He released her hand. He touched her face. He backed away from her to look her up and down. "Sometimes I remember that name. We have many names. We have many faces. Patrick! This is taking too long! Who is she?"

"His wife," Patrick replied.

"His wife. *His*?" Patrick nodded when Koji glanced at him. "Perhaps I should restrain my impulses. The question of reality is a troubling question. You must be important, His Wife. Admiral. No fear in your eyes for the likes of me. Perhaps tears?"

"I'm sorry, Koji. I thought an old friend was reborn. It may be a stillbirth."

"Emotions will get you killed. Don't weep for me."

"Without emotions we're already dead."

"I agree. I'm dead. If I appear to be alive, it's only momentum. Show me where I am."

The room's walls and ceiling disappeared, as image emitters created the illusion that the floor and those standing on it were winked to the middle of the ship's commons. "This is the main biosphere of our ship," Zakiya said. "It's the principle residential area and covers about six square kilometers. That's the hospital over there, where we currently stand in real space."

"Impressive, but I don't like illusions. I want to walk. I'm also hungry."

"Let's walk."

Koji stopped in the corridor outside the room and surveyed the people who stood waiting for them to pass. He bowed to them and proceeded. Near the main entrance Koji paused briefly as he noticed Nori standing alone in a lounge area, watching him.

"Did you see someone you know?" Zakiya asked as they emerged onto the plaza into morning sunshine.

"I saw a young woman who was pleasing to see. Should I know her?"

"She's your daughter."

"I have no daughter."

"Her name is Nori."

"Do you remember her, Patrick?"

"I was told that is she. She hasn't spoken to me, however."

"Who else is on this ship to weaken us? We don't go to war with our children."

"I have bad news for you on that point, Koji," Patrick said. "There are over ten thousand people on this ship, mostly civilians, and a few of them are children. And pregnant women."

"This is no warship, not with trees and lakes. At least it appears real."

"Real and fast, Koji. This is a jumpship."

"I would appreciate it if you didn't offer so many facts so soon, Patrick," Zakiya said.

"And that's all I know about the ship," Patrick quickly added.

"You command this ship, Zakiya?"

"I command the mission."

"What armaments do you have?"

"None yet but be patient. Wait until the others awake." Koji walked off at a rapid pace. Zakiya jogged to catch up to him. Patrick turned back. "You're being monitored, Koji. Don't act like a barbarian."

Koji stopped and turned on Zakiya. "I *kill* barbarians! You are the people I protect." They resumed walking.

"Koji, you don't remember your daughter. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Do you want to know why?"

"No."

"Do you want to know your daughter?"

"No."

"Do you know what you want, Koji?"

"The next dead barbarian."

"Nothing more?"

"Are you trained to practice psychiatry?"

"Are you capable of humor, Koji?" Zakiya had a long list of suggestions from Mai concerning Koji's mental health. She felt incapable of such analysis. She was barely able to continue the conversation while under attack by her auxiliary memory. It was not as quiet as she hoped it would be.

"Patrick wasted much time at psychotherapy. I know I'm mentally damaged. Talking won't repair me. If you didn't reprogram or surgically alter my brain, I remain capable of doing what I must do."

"Will you never be happy again, Koji?"

"I'm happy when I kill barbarians."

"You were the rescuer, the retriever."

"The barbarians call me the Executioner. Alex and Setek inserted themselves into situations to gather intelligence. If things went wrong, I extracted them by any means necessary."

"You had the worst job, Koji."

"I had lost subtlety and patience. I can't see a barbarian and not try to kill him."

"Will this be another insertion for them, Koji?"

"Perhaps. You will resist their intentions."

"You will rescue them?"

"Yes."

"What do you think they will do?"

"All I know is that they have paid too much to become what they are."

"I would mean so little to Alex?"

"I don't know how little. I only know we must defeat the barbarians. Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps you would be a good thing for Alex. There are too many barbarians. I can never kill them all."

"Can you at least see the possibility of a different kind of life for Alex and Setek?"

"The barbarians must be defeated."

"What I'm asking is your opinion of how inflexible Alex and Setek have become."

"They're damaged, as I am, but perhaps less than I. I'm not a reliable judge of these matters. I've existed too long, seen too much. It runs together in a red blur. A brief moment of clarity: what you ask isn't about flexibility. You want to

know if there's anything that remains of the men you once knew."

"Is there?"

"There may seem to be. It will be interesting to watch."

"Are you still hungry, Koji?"

"My stomach is empty, but I feel strong. This is a very large biosphere. The ship is larger than a carrier. Patrick said it was a jumpship. Zakiya, you're beautiful. I must have a wife, if I have a daughter."

"She died two centuries ago. Sit down, Koji. You look a little confused."

"This has never happened before. What did you do to me?"

"We looked for you. I don't know if we found you."

"I'll sit. Her name is Nori. What good will that do? There are too many barbarians."

Zakiya sat down next to Koji in the green grass by the path through the commons. She put her arm around his waist and listened to his random thoughts spoken aloud. Presently Nori came and sat down on the other side of Koji. Koji stopped talking. He didn't look at his daughter but seemed very aware of her.

"Is anything left of him?" Nori asked.

"I can't be objective enough to trust my opinion," Zakiya said. "But pessimism is a hindrance I can't accept."

"I'll be optimistic with you, Aunt Zakiya," Nori said.

"I want to eat," Koji said.

They got up from the grass and walked to Zakiya's nearby apartment. Zakiya and Nori prepared a meal. While he waited for the food, Koji looked around the apartment and found an image projector. He turned it on and saw a holographic view of Sammy.

"This child has some Asian features but perhaps also European. Who is he?"

"That's Sammy," Nori said, when Zakiya didn't respond.

"His leg was injured. What happened to him?"

"It's better that we not talk about Sammy."

"He's your child? My daughter won't talk to me about my grandson?"

"I've never had a child, Father. This is Zakiya's residence. Sammy was her child."

"Not related to her. Was? Dead now?"

"Father, please."

"Dead, then. How did he die?"

"Father."

"I'm your father. Perhaps. How did Sammy die?"

"He was killed by a barbarian."

"Barbarian? Where?"

"Here. In this ship."

"How many?"

"Three."

"How?"

"Their jumpship embedded in our shield and we disabled it. The barbarians transmatted into the ship and tried to kill as many of us as they could."

"How many?"

"Only Sammy."

"He couldn't be repaired?"

"Extreme brain trauma."

"We're making Zakiya weep. Why is this child so important to her?"

"Why is any child important? She loved him."

"The barbarians, did they survive?"

"There weren't enough stasis units to store them until they could be repaired."

"You have their ship?"

"Yes."

"Was their data intact?"

"I don't know."

"Zakiya, was their data intact?"

"Yes."

"You know their routes! You know their home base!"

"Yes."

"We've spent two centuries trying to gather this data, and you have it for the cost of a dead child. Excellent! Two centuries of hell. Not excellent. Dead child. Tragedy. Why do I still exist? Why am I still hungry?"

Zakiya brought food to the table and set it before Koji. He started to eat, then stopped. "Alex and Patrick often prayed before a meal. In two hundred years how many small things become important?" Koji prayed silently, eyes closed, hands pressed together. "You don't eat with me?" Koji put balls of rice into his mouth with his fingers.

"I'll have some tea," Zakiya said.

"I'll make it," Nori said. Nori prepared a pot of tea for the three of them. She served the tea, then sat next to Zakiya opposite her father.

"I haven't heard you speak a word since we pulled you and Phuti out of the Five Worlds," Zakiya said to Nori. "It's nice to have you back."

"The auxiliary memory is difficult to manage, as you know. I didn't realize I would have it."

They watched Koji eat. He ate with ferocity and few manners. "I'm fascinating, I know." Koji belched and put forth his cup for more tea. Nori poured. Koji drank. "A little walk, a little food, and now I need a nap."

* * *

"He walks everywhere, learning the ship," Jon commented. "He talks with everyone. Except for a rough edge to his manners, he seems well adjusted and purposeful. It's easy to like him."

"He's trying very hard to be someone he isn't," Zakiya said. "He's scouting the ship for Alex and Setek."

"I suppose we must expect the worst of him. But if he's a sample of what's to come when Setek-Ren and your husband awake, we may have a battle for the loyalty of the crew."

"I saw him interacting with children yesterday and I was amazed at his rapport."

"He's popular with the Marines. Every day he spends some time with them, either telling war stories or helping them train to fight. That's a key step along the path to subverting our command structure."

"The Marines understand loyalty. They understand the imperatives of command. However, a large portion of our uniformed crew were recently civilians."

"I'm concerned for you, Zakiya. I don't want you to be hurt."

"I feel the same for you, Jon."

"These were great men, highly moral and intelligent. How far could they be

turned from their basic natures?"

"That's my greatest fear, that I'll never believe they aren't who they were. I love my husband through memories that are too sharp and fresh. My judgment will be impaired."

"I feel very uneasy."

"I can't ask you to risk your life against Alex. Also, there's the possibility that he knows how to defeat the barbarians."

"Do you know how?"

"I don't even know where to begin."

"The Lady in the Mirror?"

"Perhaps."

"They awake tomorrow?"

Section 033

Alex and Setek

"Don't be concerned," Koji said. "I'll protect you."

"Will you protect me, too?" Patrick asked. "One at a time would be better."

"Why is there any concern?" Aylis asked. "You gave us no trouble, Koji."

"They usually wake thinking they're still at the moment they last remember, which was a very bad moment that last time."

Zakiya stood next to where Alex lay. She had already touched him, trying to release some of the emotional pressure she felt. The emotion was not joy; there was no joy after Sammy's death, after Freddy's death. She could hardly tolerate remembering the joy-like thrill of her past fantasies of what this moment could be like. Yet there remained a powerful mix of feelings that she knew was anchored by love. If the love was made too real by the technical precision of her memories, she would not care. She would seize what she could of the moment, short of joy.

"They're conscious now," Patrick said. "They won't do anything for a few moments. They trust nothing, not even their own thoughts. Koji and I say some crude things to stop them from thinking too much."

"This is Koji! Be nice, you stupid fools! Everything is different this time. Those we left behind have found us. You had wives. Alex, yours is Zakiya. Setek, yours is Aylis. You lucky bastards! Be *very* nice! Or I will punish you."

"How would they react to my voice?" Zakiya asked.

Alexandros Gerakis opened his eyes. Blue irises moved wildly for a second, then locked and focused on her face. Eyelids narrowed, frown lines deepened, muscles strained against the invisible bonds of the examination table. Zakiya tried to see some hint of manner and expression that would connect him to her vivid memories of the husband she had lost. It was too soon. He was like a caged wild animal or at best a man waking from nightmare. She touched his face, willing love to flow into him and ease his pain. His lungs filled full in a rush. He tried to speak but all that came out against the pressure in his lungs was a faint cry. She put her fingers against his lips, stopping the sound.

"Release him."

"Back away," Koji said. "I don't want him grabbing you."

The invisible restraints ceased to hold Alex to the bed. He reached for Koji and took his hand, veins standing out on forearms vibrating under tension. His gaze bounced between Koji and Zakiya. His breathing was too rapid. Koji extricated his hand and slapped Alex on the chest forcefully. Alex calmed and began to sit up.

Setek-Ren sat up on his bed, helped by Patrick. He slowly made a surveillance of the hospital room. He pulled and rubbed the fabric of his clothing. He grabbed Patrick's arm and squeezed it hard. He stared long at Koji and Alex who returned his gaze. He studied Zakiya with puzzlement, then found Aylis. Aylis cowered near the doorway. He seemed only slightly interested in her.

"Why should I continue?" Setek-Ren asked.

"You bloody fool!" Patrick declared. "Why should we enlighten you?" Patrick sounded serious to Zakiya, yet Setek laughed at him.

"Seen any barbarians, Patrick?" Setek asked.

"That depends -," Patrick started to respond.

" - on how you define 'barbarian,'" Setek finished.

"There might be some right here," Alex said, standing up. "Koji, would you repeat what you said about us having wives?"

"They came looking for us," Koji replied. "They found us. This one was yours: Zakiya. That one was Setek's: Aylis."

No one said anything for a few moments. It was a time for eyes to seek renewed acquaintance.

"This is awkward," Setek commented. "We are at a memory disadvantage. We don't remember you."

Alex turned to question Koji again. "I'm Alex?"

"Alexandros Gerakis. That is Patrick. And Setek."

"They cut me," Alex said, feeling his abdomen. "The second jumpship crew. I couldn't help you."

"I didn't need your help. I killed them all."

"Good. We need to debrief."

"No, you don't. We don't need your information any longer."

"How much time has passed?"

"Forty years since I last rescued you."

Alex looked at Setek with a frown.

"This is not our ship," Setek said. "Where are we?"

Being closest to it, Aylis opened the door and stepped into the hospital corridor. The others allowed Alex and Zakiya to exit the room next, and Zakiya took her husband's arm. He looked at her and at her grasp of his arm. He smiled. When Setek saw their connection, he offered his arm to Aylis. Aylis hesitated then placed a trembling hand on his forearm.

In the hospital lobby a squad of Marines in minimum battle dress snapped to attention, then fell in behind them as they exited the hospital. Outside the hospital hundreds of people lined the walk, waiting to see Alex and Setek. Zakiya watched Alex as he reacted and adapted to the crowds and to the planet-like environment. His response was restrained amazement.

As they walked, Alex and Setek took in every detail of the scenery but made no comments and asked no questions. Aylis let her hand fall away from Setek's arm and he didn't seem to notice. They arrived at a cottage situated on a slope above the apartments at the edge of the lake. The Marines took sentry positions by the cottage.

"The Marines are a temporary precaution," Zakiya said. "You are strangers to us and we don't trust you yet. You are free to move about the ship but they must accompany you."

"This is a ship?" Setek queried, surveying the great expanse of the visible biosphere.

"It's called the *Freedom*. Koji will tell you about it. This cottage is where Koji lives. There is room for two more." As she pulled her hand from Alex's arm, her emotions tried to burst loose. She needed to leave soon. Aylis had already stepped away from Setek. She turned to join Aylis.

"Are you leaving us?" Alex inquired, sounding a little disturbed.

"We remember too well who you were," Zakiya said. "We worry about who you are. And we need to take you in small doses."

Section 034

Tea and Paternity

"It is as you suspected," Direk said to Zakiya and his mother. "Patrick did not tell us about this."

"He's afraid of them," Aylis said. "And perhaps he doesn't know about it, even though he would have to be the one who did the surgery."

"They *are* telepathic, then," Zakiya said.

"Essentially. By electronic means. The signals we sampled after they awoke came from their bodies. The frequency range and the absence of overlap between sources suggests the timing of a conversation. Koji did most of the talking, probably explaining as much as he could about their new situation. This is why they were so quiet during the walk from the hospital to their cottage."

"You couldn't decrypt the signals?"

"I don't believe the signals are encrypted. Not in the mathematical sense. These are thoughts, and thoughts require a human brain to experience them. We may simply need to duplicate their transducer methods and connection locations in our own brains. It must be equivalent to how our auxiliary memory reaches our conscious."

"They were probably too paranoid to allow Pat to keep the expert data or even the memory of the procedure."

"It shouldn't take long to duplicate the technology," Aylis said. "But it may require a signal switching mechanism. This may be why their auxiliary memories are cut off. They didn't develop a method to switch between inputs."

"It is amazing - but quite believable - that they could engineer both the telepathic circuitry and a form of auxiliary memory," Zakiya said.

"I think I gave them some preliminary research on auxiliary memory technology," Aylis said.

"Shiplink conversation without subvocalizing or eye-point gyroscopy has probably been a medical engineering research project for the Navy for a long time," Direk said. "That they apparently accomplished it under their severe circumstances is more than amazing."

"I was afraid to examine them too closely without understanding precisely how the auxiliary memories fit into the cell ecology," Aylis said, "but they appear undamaged. I hope they were able to store their most vital memories, everything that would remind them who they were."

"They will have to be confronted about it," Zakiya said. "The people we came to find are locked away in those devices."

* * *

He crossed her threshold. The Marine saluted her and took his position outside the doorway. She closed the door and followed him into her apartment. He turned to her and spoke in a quiet and humble manner. "Although you may not want to be reminded of the tragedy," Alex said, "I offer my condolences for the two sons you recently lost."

It disturbed Zakiya more by its unexpected sensitivity than for the sorrow it refreshed. Alex could not be the sensitive person she once loved, and to have him ape it so perfectly made her worry that she was wrong about him in one way or another. Either he was not as bad as Patrick insisted, and she was cruel

to treat him so suspiciously, or he was worse than she could imagine from Patrick's warnings. Alex and Setek could adapt themselves to every situation, Patrick said. They were consummate actors. "Thank you," she responded. She suggested he sit, with a gesture toward a chair. She went to the kitchen and brought back two glasses of iced tea.

"Ah, just the thing," he said. "My mouth is quite dry, anticipating this visit."

She smiled but could not afford amusement. Her own mouth was quite dry. She sipped tea to find some lubrication for speech. "I assume you now have a good picture of your situation. Koji was very busy collecting information and making friends before you awoke."

"Setek and I are astounded by your accomplishments. And now you are arming the ship. We hope we are in your plans, if not in your hearts."

"I don't see any need for assassins in my plans."

"We're not proud of what we did." Alex paused as if in somber thought, then he took a long drink of his tea. "Why did you find us, if not for war? Wasn't that our original goal - to find the enemy and try to defeat it?"

"We were explorers, not soldiers."

"We were different people in a different era. Now you are an admiral. Now you have this ship."

"One ship. Many barbarians. Too many."

He took another drink of tea and she copied him. He didn't seem disappointed with the implications of her responses but that meant nothing. He would do what he needed to do. "So, I'm useless," he said lightly, "unless I can be retrained. What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to remember who you were." She stared at him. She couldn't help herself. She didn't care.

He stood up to escape her stare and walked over to a wall that displayed images of several artworks. They were copies of paintings and sculptures created by Rafael.

"There was always the temptation," he said to the wall. "We have hidden memories, like yours, but they are disconnected. We had to remove the temptation."

"We can help you unlock them."

"Wait a little longer." He turned around. "I may yet be useful to you. I fear the memories of the man I was."

"Why?"

"Because they will kill me. And my present memories will kill the man I was."

Zakiya decided not to pursue the argument. She agreed with him. Sadly she reminded herself that he and she would never be that newly married couple so in love with each other. She believed, however, they could become at least a derivative of those two people and perhaps find an equivalent magic to their relationship. Short of violence and a risky medical procedure, she had no idea how she could make it happen. "I would ask you also to wait. I do have a task you might do for me, a very dangerous task, and perhaps suited to your current abilities."

"I'll do it, whatever it is. Tell me about it."

"It may be an impossible task," she said. "It's still very early in the planning stages. It may never come about. But the mere idea of it should make you reconsider your entire reason for existing in this state of war against barbarians."

"Intriguing," Alex said. "Go on."

"Are you hungry? I've prepared a meal for us."

"I am. I haven't had time to think about food. I like the way you are raising my interest and my expectations. Frankly, I dreaded coming here."

"You used to do the cooking." She started to set the table.

"I probably used to do a lot of things I can't imagine doing."

"You would be surprised. Has Koji told you why everyone stares at you?"

"I assumed it was because I was your husband. What other reason would they have?"

"I won't tell you." It seemed too strange and too inappropriate to try to explain to him how he was a very live fictional hero.

"It would help if I had an active shiplink."

She brought the meals to the kitchen table and they sat down. She poured more tea from a pitcher. "In a few days you can use your shiplink. We will, of course, be watching what you do with it."

"I think Patrick has given you much reason to beware of us. It's understandable. We haven't always treated him well. His motivation is correct. I hope we don't rise to the level of threat he accords us. Truthfully, there may be no limit to what we could attempt, except the limit of death."

She almost shivered at his words. Even though it was a terrible truth, it was truth. Perhaps in some deeply psychological way, his warning was a cry for help. Or was it? She was so full of clashing thoughts and leaking memories and suppressed emotions that it was difficult to guide a fork between her lips, much less analyze a stranger who meant too much to her. She ate half her meal before she lost her appetite. She sipped tea as she watched and waited for him to finish eating. There was nothing in his manner, in his voice, in his words that would match some remembrance of the man she once loved. This was somebody else. "What do you know about our two captains?" She wondered if he knew who Jamie was.

"I met Jon Horss," he answered. "Seems a bit eccentric but he must be competent. I wasn't able to meet Captain Jones. The Marines think highly of her. She used to command them."

"I can bring her here for you to meet, if you like."

"If you think I should."

"Koji hasn't told you who she is?"

"That makes me wonder," Alex said. "I trust Koji with my life, but I don't trust him to play a game fairly with me. Is he playing another game? Why should I want to know this captain?"

"She's going to feel awkward and perhaps apprehensive meeting you, Alex. I hope you can be kind to her, but don't pretend to be fatherly."

"Fatherly?"

"She's your daughter. Not too many years after you left me, I impregnated myself with sperm you gave me. I was lonely, and for a few years I got to be a mother. Then I had to give her up. We're still trying to find some of what we lost."

"This is going to be harder than impossible."

"You don't want to meet Jamie?"

"I certainly do. It's just that mere existence is a challenge for me. A daughter would be... As Patrick has often said: 'Just take the next breath and the next step. It's bloody easy.'"

Alex paced while Zakiya cleared away the kitchen. She wondered if this was

a natural reaction for the current Alex, whether he could be anxious about anything, including his own execution.

Jamie arrived and chose to salute her as though she was reporting for duty. "Jamie, he knows who you are. I think he's more anxious than you are. Just relax and take a close look at him. You may not have him around very long."

"Mom and Dad! This is damned strange!" She put out her hand for Alex to take. He took it.

"It's going to take awhile." Alex gently squeezed her hand, frowning at her in good humor.

"I've got time. What did she mean about you not being around very long?"

"I presume she means a special mission she is planning for me."

"What special mission?"

"I'm going to ask him to rescue someone," Zakiya replied.

"That's... cruel," Jamie said. "Does he know who it is?"

"You are part of my introduction to him. Do you want to stay and watch?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Sit down," Zakiya instructed them, taking a seat in the livingroom. The three of them were silent for a few moments as Zakiya paused to calm herself and collect the thread of her intentions. She watched Jamie, who looked at Alex with strong and mixed emotions. When she finally glanced back at her, Zakiya started to speak again. "Alex?" she said, seeing that he had closed his eyes. He opened them. "Is something wrong?"

"Somewhere there is happiness," he said softly. "I can smell it on the breeze from the lake." She didn't know how to respond. "I hope it comes your way," he added.

"But not to you?" Jamie asked.

"I fear it. I run from it. Don't listen to me. It's just a feeble attempt to subvert your antipathy for me."

"Why would I hate you?" Jamie said. "I don't know how I feel about you."

"Listen to yourself. I'm already succeeding."

They both turned to look at Zakiya, as though she called for their attention. Zakiya was content to let them converse, so that she could imagine the potential father-daughter relationship. "Would you fear to come live with me?" Zakiya asked Alex.

"I would live with you if you wished," he replied easily. "But it would be improper."

"How so? You're my husband."

"Our wedding vows terminated at death. Your husband died a long time ago."

"And if I ask you to marry me?"

"You fight unfairly! I like that. Would the vows mean anything if spoken by a dead man?"

"So you make me a widow?"

"I'm a cruel person. I've tried to warn you."

"I deserve no better. We're more alike than you know, Ghost."

"I await your decision."

"As do I. I'm apt to make poor decisions when haunted."

"What is this dangerous task that you have long delayed explaining to me?"

"I want you to rescue a Navy admiral named Etrhmk. He was the Navy Commander until recently."

"He is not a barbarian?"

"Perhaps he thinks he is."

"Which question do I ask next? Tell me more."

"He was our spy among the barbarians, Alex. He learned everything about them by becoming one of them. But at the sacrifice of his own identity."

"And now he's in trouble."

"Perhaps already dead. We stole this ship from him. He let us."

"The greatest feat of courage I can imagine! And he was so adept that he rose to the rank of Navy Commander? Who was he? How did you recruit him?"

"His name was Petros. Aylis recruited him."

"Petros? A Greek name."

"Petros Gerakis. Our son. Jamie's brother."

Section 035

Last Tango

Aylis watched Setek through the eyes of her son. No closer than that did she feel safe from him. Although Setek had shown not the slightest interest in her, she was able to fret over what he might do in a sudden shift of his attention onto her. He was not the Setek she remembered in any aspect of his character. What was more upsetting was that he was the Setek she remembered she always wanted him to be: superficial. She never thought of it as superficial. She called it *human*, or Earthian. Now her auxiliary memory abused her with detail she didn't see then as important. The original Setek was in fact everything she wanted in a mate. She was too full of herself, too blind, too deafened by too many distractions to appreciate Setek's quiet kindness. Even his patience she misinterpreted as tolerance, and now she could see it was love.

Setek spent much of his time with Direk and Iggy. This would be normal for the old Setek, owing to his scientific background and curiosity. Now she doubted his motives were anything more than tactical analysis of the science and engineering of the ship. She ought to stop this eavesdropping through Direk. It was not helping her emotionally. It was a probable blotch on her own character that his imagined menace and his physical appearance fascinated her. She was startled when she became the subject of the conversation she overheard through her shiplink.

"How is your mother?" Setek inquired of Direk.

"She's listening to us through shiplink. Perhaps she would be surprised at my appraisal of her condition. I think she's doing very well. Would you care to visit with her?"

No no no! Aylis thought, yet held her tongue.

"Would you accompany me?" Setek asked.

"That would be required. Why haven't you asked of her before now?"

"It was obvious she was terrified of me. Nor was I prepared to meet her. I'm still not. Will she see me?"

There was a moment of silence and Aylis realized they were waiting for her decision. "Yes," she said to Direk by shiplink.

Setek might never recover the contents of his auxiliary memory, or if he did, it could prove useless in repairing his personality. Aylis might never have more than what Setek now was, unless she could help him change.

* * *

Aylis arrived at Direk's apartment feeling very pregnant after the long walk. The Marine at the door saluted her, and thus she knew Setek arrived before her. She stood at the door for a few moments, waiting for her courage, but only worsening the anticipation. She didn't have the Navy augment that would relieve the chemical reaction to stress. She was almost to the point of trembling when Jamie opened the door. The anxiety all but disappeared then. Only Zakiya could have a better effect on her emotions. It was difficult not to embarrass Jamie with her gratitude for her presence.

"Jamie! I didn't expect you to be here. I'm so glad you are."

"Dick made me wear this dress as the price of admission."

Aylis was taken aback by the sight of Jamie in feminine attire. Jamie made a

pirouette and a curtsy for her inspection. Aylis laughed and was astonished at herself. Music started playing from some unseen source, filling the apartment with a lively beat and a classical Latin American composition. Aylis turned to see Setek approaching, Direk behind him.

"May I have this dance?" Setek asked her, offering his hand.

"Oh, no! I can't dance. And my feet are tired."

"I'm so sorry. Then I shall ask the lovely Jamie if she would humor me."

"I'll need a quick lesson," Jamie said, taking his hand. "Is it a tango?"

"Nothing so ancient as that. I don't remember what the dance is called. I don't remember why I had to learn it. And I think it's the only dance I know. Watch me and think about doing it in reverse. Then we'll practice. It's done at several tempos, often in increasing speed."

Aylis sat down to watch and took off her shoes.

Direk sat next to her. "I'm glad you came."

Aylis watched Setek do what Setek might never have done two centuries ago. Even though his features were nearly identical to his former self, he still didn't look the same. The white hair that once seemed sophisticated now reflected a hint of metallic silver and was eye-catching and exotic to Earthian eyes - old Earthian eyes. His skin which always betrayed a slight tint of darker Earthian ancestry now caught the light with a light coppery hue. Setek was genetically modified in childhood to have a unique physical aesthetic, which he always muted through choice of clothing and skin lotions, but now he displayed his elite Essiin heritage with apparent pride. His nearly clear eyes - dark at the pupil - lost their probing habit and now seemed only an organic jewelry.

"Have you made a decision?" Direk asked. The cold way he said it made Aylis think of the old Direk. Perhaps he hadn't relearned the subtle inflections he had so long filtered from his voice. She was sure he felt apprehensive.

"I don't know if I can make a fair decision," Aylis said, leaning close to make sure he heard her through the interference of the brisk dance music.

"Then make an unfair one." She heard his regret, as though he already knew what had to be done.

Aylis watched Setek and Jamie dance and tried not to think. She had already done her thinking. It was not a bad image with which to end a dream, with Jamie in it. She put on her shoes when the music stopped. She stood up. "Direk, do you have something slower Setek and I can dance to?"

"What kind?" Direk asked, surprised.

"Something quiet, so we can also talk."

Setek seemed pleased to take her hand, to put his other hand around her waist. She felt a momentary pleasure in this ancient ritual of sexual relations. Direk began to play his string bass. She and Setek no more than shuffled their feet, and as they better synchronized he drew her closer. She put her face on his shoulder. She was only vaguely aware of her pregnant geometry.

"I wonder what it's like," she said, "to listen to another person's thoughts."

Setek didn't react physically to her words, except for a few moments of delay in responding. "We wondered how thorough you were and when you would ask about it."

"We were very thorough. We wondered why you didn't volunteer that you had telepathic capability. It has tactical importance."

"Our lives have depended on it. Alex and I needed to exchange vital information secretly while engaging our targets. Koji needed to know the dynamics of an encounter, so he could arrive before too much was lost. Perhaps

we were jealous of our one technical accomplishment and failed to fully understand we were among friends."

"I don't think you understand that yet. You are not only among friends but we are those friends who truly love you. We are more than friends."

"It is a tragedy. But we have honestly warned you about us."

"How did you lose yourselves?" She didn't expect any good answer, and realized too late that she didn't want an answer.

"We died too many times. Alex thinks our souls gave up on us and departed at some point. I think we used rejuvenation too often, to keep our youthful strength, and the process eventually culled something moral from our brains."

Aylis stopped dancing and pulled away from Setek. "My feet still hurt. Let's sit down. Come, sit beside me."

Direk stopped playing his bass. Aylis sat down and took Setek's hand as he sat beside her on the sofa. Setek smiled at her and patted her hand. "I'm not so bad, do you think? You seem completely relaxed now. You know I will never hurt you."

"But you will. I feel sorry for you, Dear. I loved you unwisely once. I even love what is left of you. But not unwisely. Good-bye."

Jamie watched and listened to Aylis and Setek on the sofa, sitting not far from them. She tried to understand what she heard and was concerned by Aylis's final word. She glanced over at Direk, who was turned away from them, standing in front of his string bass. He turned around briefly to look at his mother and father. Then he began to play with bow something melancholy on the bass.

Jamie looked back at Aylis and saw her weeping, and Setek leaning heavily upon her shoulder. Aylis stroked Setek's inert face and continued to weep.

Section 036

Rivers of Galaxies

She missed seeing him for several days. She noticed he looked younger. She examined him more closely. She loved his blue eyes, and even his eyes seemed brighter and clearer. Admiral Khalanov was the dearest man, quiet, perceptive, generous, vastly competent. Sometimes impatient! She was always comfortable in his presence, always looked forward to working with him. "Where were you, sir?" Wingren asked. "I've missed you."

"Offering my old body for the training of medical technicians. I can't imagine why you missed me."

"Then you have a poor imagination or a poor opinion of your importance to your staff."

"Something else I need to improve about myself."

"Where has Setek-Ren gone, sir?"

"Did you miss him, too?"

"The way I miss a toothache! Oh, he was interesting and entertaining at first, but he began to bother me. Maybe I was prejudiced by his very violent background and the warning Admiral Demba gave us."

Khalanov never answered her question as to the current activities of Setek-Ren. She didn't want to question him further, considering the look on his face. Perhaps his summons to assist him in some work would lead to relief of his serious mood. "What will we be doing today, sir?"

"Traveling." Khalanov started to empty his pockets onto his desk.

"Do we need pressure suits?" It was one possible reason he would need to empty his pockets.

"Possibly, but we'll begin without them." The last pocket he emptied contained a cryptikon. He kept it in his hand. "Follow me. We need more room to operate."

Her heart sped up until her Navy augment calmed it. She experienced the cryptikon closely only once, when Khalanov demonstrated it for the engineering staff. It scared her. Anyone who had a solid knowledge of physics and mechanics, beyond relying on an in-body expert system, had his faith in both science and religion shaken when in the presence of a cryptikon.

They walked to the largely vacant deck where the wreckage of Black Fleet jumpships occupied one bay. Khalanov selected the largest vacant bay.

"I need a witness or a companion for this experiment," Khalanov said. "How brave do you feel today?"

"You insult my warrior ancestors with that question," Wingren replied. "But not me. I'll only say that I won't disappoint you, as long as you are with me."

"If we survive this, would you consider having dinner with me?"

"Only if you let me cook." Wingren felt braver than she ever thought possible. An admiral asked her for a date! A handsome Earthian admiral. A man she liked very much. She strained to contain her excitement. When he activated the cryptikon, those thoughts and feelings fled, replaced by a different kind of excitement.

Khalanov indicated the light and dark patterns that contained the wells of distant reality, glimpses across unknown spans of the universe. "This is the telephone book, to borrow an ancient but useful concept. The patterns are stacked, like pages in an infinitely thick telephone book. We're presented with a

small selection of possible contacts based on some criteria I can't guess. I can sense that a large percentage of connections are possible but there must be factors that disqualify me from opening every connection. I've found only five connections I can make."

"Most of the images seem static and rather abstract," Wingren said, "even though they have a disturbingly vital presence. A few have movement and I can guess they are produced by the cryptikons we know about. The former class of telephone book entries are those you can't access."

"Exactly. Except for one. When any of the cryptikons activate, that one static image is always displayed on the first page of the telephone book. I receive an impression of distance when I touch the image wells. I can tell the Essiin Museum cryptikon is much farther away than the other cryptikons on the ship. Most of those which don't allow connection are much farther away than the museum. I haven't sampled very many of the telephone book entries, but the one we are going to investigate is truly far away. Disturbingly distant."

Khalanov selected the image of the endless corridors, which he first encountered when demonstrating the cryptikon to the entire crew. He manipulated the controls. The lines and angles filled the engineering bay, starkly real for all their lack of features.

"It looks like passageways," Wingren said, "but there's no scale to judge the size, no details to even determine which way is up."

"Let me position myself into the image. Perhaps that will yield another perspective."

"Not without me, sir!"

She grabbed his hand. They stepped into the image together. To steady themselves in the strange new environment, they put their arms around each other's waist. The lines of light and planes of pale color converged at infinity in all directions. The admiral reached with his free hand to try to touch some part of the image. His finger contacted a surface and the image exploded in a flash of light.

Darkness covered them for several moments, then distant patches of light appeared. They stood on something solid but couldn't see what it was. The image of deep space completely surrounded them. They hugged each other but still swayed from lack of visual clues to their orientation. Finally they achieved a sense of balance, almost as if something gently held them in place.

"Galaxies," Wingren said. "Clusters of galaxies, *rivers* of galaxies!"

"We've lost contact with the *Freedom*. This has not happened before. There was always a way to turn around and go back to the cryptikon."

"Someone is showing this to us. Hello? Can anyone understand me? Is anyone listening? Let us see you." A dim red star appeared at planetary distance below their feet. It provided just enough light to illuminate something that floated before the backdrop of the galaxies. "It must be a starship. But where is the cryptikon that provides us this image?"

"Is this your ship?" Khalanov asked the presumed entity. The image immediately made the double-sphered object rush toward them. They orbited the starship - or the starship orbited them - so they could view every part of its exterior. They could see no details or irregularities on its surface. It was a perfect geometric shape, as though modeled by computer in a holographic display. "There are no markings. How can we learn anything useful?"

The image shifted, giving them fresh vertigo, flying them down to the surface of the artifact then sinking them into its skin. They saw only gray as

they moved through solid material. They emerged into a human-sized volume of living space. Bricks appeared beneath their feet. Wood paneling covered the walls close to them. Light fixtures of primitive design affixed to a white textured ceiling provided illumination. A wooden table appeared in the middle of the room. Khalanov and Wingren walked carefully to the table. They inspected the table closely and touched it.

"It looks ancient," Wingren said. "It doesn't have fused joints and the cuts are imperfect."

"It was made by hand," Khalanov said, "using traditional carpentry tools. A human could have built this table."

A rectangular object with a glass face and wood frame appeared on the table. It displayed a two-dimensional raster image of a globe. The globe rotated slowly while details began to appear on its surface.

"This must be a planet," Khalanov said. "And it's beginning to look like Earth!"

"It is!" Wingren agreed. "Europe, Africa, North and South America, Australia, Asia. There can be no doubt, despite the poor resolution."

"What do you want with us?" Khalanov asked. "You know who we are. Who are you?"

The room disappeared as if it never existed. They stood in a light fog on a black surface that could be their own deck on the *Freedom*. A small patch of color floated toward them through the mist, resolving quickly into the image of a cryptikon. The fog transformed into the maze of infinite corridors. The engineering bay of the *Freedom* appeared before them.

"That was disturbing," Khalanov said.

"It was an omen," Wingren said. "It knows who we are. Maybe it also knows where we are."

Section 037

Lost and Found

"That was a sad song," Aylis remarked. "You look like you could use a hug."

"I can't sing happy songs yet." Aylis hugged Zakiya and both sat down in the front row of the theater. Musicians put away instruments on stage. They waved good-byes with caring expressions as they left the rehearsal. Aylis looked terrible to Zakiya. Somehow she managed to survive the trauma of retiring Setek. Someday soon Zakiya needed to explain to Alex and Koji what really happened to Setek. Aylis had lied to them. So far they seemed to accept that Setek suffered an unexpected organ failure and would be in regenerative stasis for a period of time. "I'm glad you could come hear me rehearse."

"I didn't realize we had so many fine musicians on the ship. I didn't see Direk."

"The concert was his idea. I'm only singing a few songs. It's mostly instrumental. Direk will be in some of the ensemble pieces."

"Is the work on the jumpship continuing? I'm almost hoping you can't get it operational. It seems such a hopeless mission, with a fatal consequence for failure."

"There doesn't seem to be much else we can do. Right now it's just another activity - like staging a concert - to keep the crew busy. I don't know what we'll do when the barbarian jumpship is fixed. I don't know what we'll do when all the cannons are manufactured and installed. The future frightens me. What have you been doing, Aylis? I know you can't let yourself do nothing."

"Tending to tasks no one else wanted to do. I autopsied the barbarians."

"Find anything interesting?"

"Some mutations. It will take years and a much greater sample, but I suspect they're victims of a slightly negative genetic change. They have a shortened natural life expectancy, which would be inconsequential with modern health care. I can also verify that two of them are only a few generations removed from Earth. The third one has ancestors that I can only assume came from the prehistoric diaspora, perhaps neither Rhyan nor Essiin."

"Nothing to explain their violent behavior?"

"Unfortunately, the potential for violent behavior is probably a trait required for survival of a species."

"And we will condemn Alex and Koji for a very fine point we put on the application of violence." They sat in silence for a few moments. Zakiya tried not to think about anything important. So many years had passed in her life. How many ordinary days vanished into oblivion, too uneventful to be retained in memory? She felt old.

"Would it upset you if I told you some things you didn't know about Sammy?" Aylis asked with concern.

"You also did his autopsy? I don't think I want to know about it."

"I didn't do an autopsy, just a scan. I've held back some information about Sammy from before he died. I thought it was in error and would only distract you. But I see no error. The scan confirmed it and yielded another surprise."

"This is something you *need* to tell me, Aylis? I think I can take it, but if I can't, I don't want to pull you down with me."

"What are a few more tears for me? I seem to have an endless supply. You would want to know these things about Sammy, Zak."

"Tell me, then."

"As you know, genetic analysis inferred that Sammy was either born to parents who didn't live in the present era, or he was engineered to be unrelated to anyone presently living in the Union. Of course, now we realize he might be related to someone in barbarian space. But I don't think so. The evidence is too clear that his genetic code doesn't exhibit the slight drift present in contemporary genetic codes. Since time travel isn't possible, I assume Sammy's parents lived in the distant past. He was either produced from ancient samples of DNA, or he arrived in the present by some means of storage. Isotope dating confirms that he was born several hundred years ago."

"The poor child. The poor, poor child!"

"Why do you say that?"

"I just imagine the worst kinds of things happening to him! I think he must have been raised from an infant by someone who really cared for him, because his basic nature was so good. But then something bad happened. Mai was never able to find the cause of his amnesia, and that, in itself, was a tragic wound. And we know he spent months alone in Africa. Why? It just doesn't make sense! It continues to anger me!"

"The golden alien you saw - the female named Constant - she seemed to care about him, and the other one didn't. They knew who Sammy was and they must have been factors in his life. If only we had been able to save Petros! He would have known so many things that would have helped us. And Sammy."

"What is also troubling, is that Sammy had a mother and a father. I can't imagine how they lost their son, but they did. I know how they must have felt. If there is any chance that the voice of Milly belongs to a real person, I want to meet her. She must be Sammy's mother. She must also be in trouble. If only I could help her." She sighed.

"One other thing, and I'll let you be. During the scan I found this in Sammy." Aylis held forth a transparent bag containing a tiny red object. Zakiya looked at it with immediate recognition.

"It's a gem from Shorty!"

"It's a molecular machine. Purpose unknown."

"It knows me!"

"Excuse me?"

"I've felt its presence since you arrived at rehearsal, Aylis. I didn't know what it was. Let me have it!"

"It could be dangerous!"

"I don't think so." Zakiya took the plastic bag, opened it. She held the tiny red translucent object in her fingers. It stuck to one of her fingers. She could feel a sensation in the nerves of her finger but it was weak. She placed the red bead on the palm of her hand and it transferred itself and attached to her palm. In a moment the nerves up to her elbow began to tingle but it still seemed too weak. Finally she placed her palm on the back of her neck and waited for another reattachment. She felt a tiny shock at the base of her skull. It began to communicate with no words but only urges that seemed familiar. It wanted to go home. She closed her eyes. "Follow me." Zakiya stood up and started walking.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for Shorty."

"The Gatekeeper? The thing that lured Sammy into the space elevator? The thing I saw with Pan's android on Earth?"

"That's the one. The one that rescued me from Oz."

"Shouldn't we have noticed its presence on the ship?"

"That and other questions need answers!"

"What other questions?"

"How did it get here? Why is it here? Can it open gates to places we may need to visit?"

"I'm not sure I want to know any of those answers. What is this thing doing to you?"

"It's making me feel strong emotions."

"Emotions?"

"I don't think it can help it."

"How? It's just a tiny machine."

"It's part of Shorty. It needs to return to Shorty. It isn't being very helpful. I'd say it's confused and frightened. It should be pointing me in the right direction."

They walked.

Iggy and Wingren appeared by transmat a few meters away from Zakiya and Aylis. Iggy immediately noticed that Zakiya was agitated and distracted. He turned a questioning look to Aylis. "What's wrong with Zak?"

"If you need to speak to her, now is a bad time, Iggy."

"But now is the only time! We have a possible situation. We saw something with a cryptikon that may be very important."

"Tell me what has happened," Zakiya said, continuing to walk, apparently fighting some inner distraction. Iggy let Wingren describe their encounter with the distant alien starship. "Put the ship on alert!" When Zakiya walked on without further discussion, the other three were forced to follow behind her.

"Iggy, I must have missed something in the story," Aylis said. "Why should we put the ship on alert? What's going to happen?"

"Wingren and I think the alien ship is coming to find us. It's incredibly far away but it could be here in seconds. I think our cryptikons can be used by it to pinpoint our location." Iggy contacted Horss. As Zakiya led them toward the hospital, the warning lights on buildings began to glow and flash for attention. Iggy addressed the crew of the *Freedom* through his shiplink, trying to be informative without causing too much anxiety.

Aylis tried to explain to Iggy and Wingren what was wrong with Zakiya as they followed her into the village commons toward the hospital. They entered the hospital amid the final rush of activity. Zakiya stopped and pivoted in the main entrance foyer, seeking a direction, oblivious to the people who scurried around her. She moved forward, followed by Aylis. In only a few seconds, most of the hospital personnel disappeared.

"Zakiya! Admiral Demba!"

Iggy looked back at the hospital entrance and saw Koji. He sensed the man's aggressive mood in the tension of his body. He also saw there was no Marine to accompany him. He strode toward them and Iggy instinctively blocked his path to Zakiya.

Zakiya again tried to disengage from the emotional emanations of the little machine stuck to the back of her neck. She touched Iggy to urge him to step aside. She appraised Koji's demeanor and worried that she misjudged him. He didn't seem to threaten her physically although he was clearly upset. She didn't want to put off the search for Shorty but knew she also needed to respond to Koji.

"I demand to see Setek!" Koji stated.

"Setek has been retired," Zakiya said. "Aylis decided he couldn't be trusted

and was not useful."

"What right have you?" Koji demanded, turning to Aylis.

"You once claimed you were not alive," Aylis said. "Neither was Setek. I stopped him and stored him away. Someday I'll try again to make him alive and whole."

"I warn you, Koji," Zakiya said. "We installed in you and in the others a device to make you unconscious through our shiplink. It was a further precaution against violent behavior."

"Retire me then!" Koji demanded.

"We don't think you're as damaged as Alex and Setek," Aylis said.

"I must be! I have slaughtered hundreds! I still see their young faces. When you retire Alex, what will I do?"

"You will retrieve him, Koji," Aylis answered. "Someday you will help us save him."

"And what of the barbarians?"

"There are too many innocent people who would die in such a war, if we could fight that war," Zakiya replied.

"Your sentiment will allow civilization to fall!"

"Then it will fall. Why should a handful of people be responsible for the fate of billions?"

"Because people are imperfect. They need help."

"Are we so perfect, that we should assume that task?"

Koji reacted to someone behind Zakiya. He looked past her to the hospital entrance.

"It's him," Aylis said.

Zakiya stood with Koji in front of her and Alex approaching behind her. She assumed Koji was now telling Alex what his fate would be. She felt the pain and sadness transmitted to her by the little gem-like piece of Shorty. She wondered about the alien starship that might be about to visit them. She was too divided by all that was happening at once. "I can't participate in this any longer!" The urge to find Shorty took priority. She moved away. Alex tried to follow her.

"It's over!" Koji said to Alex, stepping into his path. "Leave her alone! She will never trust you. She will never trust me. You will never have the ship!"

Alex pushed past Koji and Koji hooked his arm to stop him. Koji and Alex stood close to each other, their bodies tensed for combat. Zakiya shuddered at imagining what violence they could perform. She made up her mind, knowing she would always be a fool about Alex. "Please," she said to Koji. "Let him follow me."

"He has no good reason to do that!" Koji argued. "And no moral right!"

"She's all I have, Koji," Alex pleaded.

Zakiya walked away. Koji released Alex.

It was too complex: what she needed to do and how she felt. Keshona seemed to fade as a separate part of her. Ruby Reed, Fidelity Demba, even Zakiya Muenda, were merged into this confused person who was searching for something that was in pain. She was followed by a lost man she couldn't find. She didn't know why he wanted to follow her. She didn't know why she should allow him. Hope refused to die. Heartbreak refused to stop. Her memories of the original Alex were too potent, yet she must give them up. Give him up.

"Where do we go?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered.

"What will you do?"

"I don't know."

"What do you want?"

"I want to be loved."

"Is that the right thing to want at this time?"

"It's always the right thing to want."

"And nothing else?"

"Be careful what you want beyond love."

"I can't give you that."

"As old as I am, I can still dream. Why do you follow me?"

"What else could you suggest I do? You are my only hope."

She had no answer for him. Why did she tolerate his sad and flawed presence? She had no answer for herself. She concentrated on feeling the direction of Shorty, hopeful Alex would not try to take advantage of her distraction. They eventually reached an isolated part of the hospital where they entered a room with a wall containing several horizontal doors. Sugai Mai stood waiting for them.

"This must be the morgue," Alex said. "Good evening, Mai."

"Good evening, Alex. I thought Zakiya might need help finding Sammy's body."

"His body?" Zakiya said. "I don't think I could bear to see it. But this is where I feel Shorty must be."

"Shorty?" he asked. Alex remembered a description of the dangerous amorphous alien, the Gatekeeper. It would be fascinating to encounter a creature of such awe to the barbarians. He watched Zakiya edge along the wall of metal doors behind which he knew the corpses of three barbarians and a small boy lay in storage. She drew the fingers of one hand across the surfaces of the doors, stopping at the one at the far end.

"That's where Sammy is," Mai said. "Shall I bring him out?"

Zakiya placed her hand at various points around the door at the far end. She leaned against the cold metal as though fatigued by misery. Mai waited. Alex grew tense and impatient, yet he began to feel some of the pain his wife obviously felt.

"Bring him out," Zakiya finally said. She moved away and leaned against the adjacent wall.

Mai activated the retrieval process. In a few moments the horizontal door opened silently and the body slid onto a table that extruded beneath the door. Alex looked at Sammy briefly, curious to see the child who so profoundly affected Zakiya. Except for the mixture of parentage, death removed any special physical quality he might have had. Alex stepped back, disappointed and vaguely upset. He saw many children in barbarian space and never failed to wonder at what dismal futures they might have - especially if they became members of the Black Fleet. This child had lost his future.

"Please leave us, Mai," Zakiya said.

Mai departed the room slowly, glancing worriedly at Zakiya and with a different expression for Alex. The look wounded him unexpectedly. He knew Zakiya had asked her to leave so Mai would be safe and this also upset him. He would never have harmed the pregnant Sugai Mai. Zakiya didn't move until Mai left. She edged toward the small body, not looking at it directly. She stood for several moments with her hand on the table but her eyes on the adjacent wall.

"He's quite intact. Don't be afraid to look at him."

Zakiya turned and centered herself on the table, her eyes closed. She placed both hands on the table edge. She opened her eyes. She fought for control.

"What is that?" he asked, seeing a small black pyramid appear between Zakiya's hands.

Zakiya blinked her eyes and stared at the sparkling dark shape. She felt behind her neck with one hand, then held that hand over the pyramid. A tiny red object fell from her hand and was attracted to the pyramid. The black pyramid enveloped the red piece then lost its geometry, appearing to melt into a small pool that no longer moved. "Shorty?" Zakiya said. "Is this you? Where is the rest of you?"

"It looks dead," Alex commented.

"No! I don't want that!" Zakiya placed her hands around the dark pool of matter and tried to gather it up. She cried out in pain but kept touching the dark material. In a few seconds it disappeared somewhere. He caught her hands as she turned around and he saw burn marks. She would soon have blisters.

"You're injured. The thing attacked you."

Zakiya couldn't speak for several moments as she stood with eyes shut. Alex considered how vulnerable she was at this moment. He had dismissed any physical attack on her as giving no advantage. Also, she was too great an asset to waste. Now he knew he could be turned off - as Setek was - by her command via shiplink. Finally, he wanted her, simply wanted her, if only because he knew he could never have her.

"No, it's a gentle creature," she finally said. "It sometimes needs to dissipate heat."

"It isn't large enough to be a Gatekeeper."

"It's a child. It's the child of a Gatekeeper. It's a machine. An AMI. That's what Gatekeepers are."

"It isn't Shorty?"

"I think it's Shorty's child."

"What now?"

"Now we say good-bye, Alex."

He was *affected* by her words, despite expecting them. It remained a mystery to him how he could exercise such exact perception of every human nuance of emotional reaction, yet feel nothing himself. He always attributed it to a survival trait that he and Setek learned or engineered. Yet, the rules for such insight must derive from somewhere - or from *someone* deep inside of him. He felt totally helpless, knowing that inner being was otherwise inaccessible, made that way to avoid all moral introspection.

Alex went down on his knees. Perhaps he automatically chose a fake humility, adapting to the situation as if he were dealing with someone he needed to trick. He was desperate. Perhaps he *did* feel something real. Koji seemed to have won some of their trust. Did Koji have real feelings now? He envied him. How could she judge him to be of so little use, of so little respect? And what of the mission to rescue this person named Petros, who was another child to whom he was a worthless father? It would be worth his life to see the barbarian home world. And to plant a nuclear weapon at its center. "Put me back where you found me," Alex said. He knew how much she wanted that locked-away part of him. He would try to steer a path around her will, carefully offering her hope that he could be salvaged.

"Yes. That I will do."

He looked up at her and tried to perceive her mood and purpose, but

perceived nothing. He did feel humility. She was so much greater than he was, he could almost worship her. She placed her injured hand gently on his temple and let it slide downward, across his ear and to the side of his neck. He knew how that soft touch should make him feel and he was almost angry that he could feel nothing, only the hope that she still cared enough to not eject him from her life, and from her magnificent ship.

"Kiss me," she said.

He would have hesitated, being the ultimate paranoid. Desperation and simple physiology made him reckless. A kiss from her was like a life-line thrown out to a man drifting in space. She leaned over, hands on each side of his neck, and gently pressed her lips against his. He expected oblivion yet remained alive. He concentrated on the kiss, trying to find some way to fake passion, or at least to reciprocate satisfying pleasure. There was warmth, softness, moisture, pleasure beyond what he expected. He started, feeling a small prick of pain on one side of his neck. She clamped her hands around his neck and shoved. They toppled onto the floor, and even though he struggled, she was too strong at the critical moment. Before he could react with an effective combat strategy, his body went numb and he could no longer make himself move.

[I'm sorry, but I must talk to you.] it thought.

{Who?} he thought.

[My name is Samson.]

{The dead child? Sammy?}

[I think I am, yes, mostly Sammy.]

{How can you be?}

[I can't tell you and I'm scared. Mom wants me to hurry.]

{What do you want?}

[I want you to love her.]

{I'm sorry, Sammy. I can't!}

[Let me try to help you.]

{I'm lost! I don't want you to find me! Go away!}

[Please. I need a dad. You need Mom.]

{NO! No! No. Oh, God in heaven! How can I leave her?}

The last hatch sealed between them. The image of her face, dwelt upon by his hungry eyes until they blurred, would begin to fade now. The ache, the great ACHE, it carved away his heart and left a black hole for hope at his center. He would never see her again. He would never see her again!

He turned to Setek-Ren, and must have appeared so stricken that Setek had to embrace him, comfort him. Setek-Ren: for whom this was not in his nature. "She's an extraordinary person," Setek said. "I wish you'd married her a long time ago, so that you wouldn't be so cheated of time with her."

"How this must hurt her!" Alex cried, breaking his embrace with his old friend. "I hope she doesn't love me as much as I love her, so her pain will be less. How can I survive this?"

"With work. We have years, perhaps decades of work ahead of us. The harder we work, the sooner you will see her again."

"I don't think I will ever see her again. I can't help thinking that. I can't see how I'll be able to function, with Zakiya always on my mind. You have to help me. I must hide her away."

"I'll work on it. It may be useful for all of us. I'll confess that, having seen Aylis again, I'm preoccupied with thoughts of her. If we are ever captured, our memories will endanger those we have left behind."

"It will be impossible to be a hero again, as in the old days, to right all the wrongs and come home to her in triumph. I'm just a soft old man who only wants a place to call home and a woman to love me. Zakiya."

She felt him relax and begin to breathe again. Sammy came back to her and went to sleep, feeling safe and tired. She sat on the deck next to Alex, holding him, gently caressing him. He opened his eyes. He smiled. She remembered that smile, half boyish, half roguish, and it thrilled her. Nervously she touched his face, seeking some confirmation that Sammy changed him permanently, that the heartless assassin of barbarians was dead or dying and Alexandros Gerakis lived again. She experienced his first retrieved memory with him, connected through Sammy, and could still feel his towering love for her and the despair that was a lethal catalyst for exiling his true self. Probably it was a memory exaggerated by later loneliness and introspection but she was deeply moved by the experience. She could only hope to be worthy of such affection.

Mai returned and stepped around them to put Sammy's body away. Aylis and Koji entered the hospital morgue. Koji knelt beside Alex and gripped his shoulder. Zakiya saw Alex wince in pain, but not from Koji's grasp.

"Oh, no!" Alex cried out in misery. "No. No. No!"

He wept. Koji looked at Zakiya for explanation. "He remembers," she said.

"The old memories?" Koji asked her.

"Yes. I think he realizes now the horror of what he has done." She brushed Alex's face with the back of her fingers. He tried to turn away from her.

"He lost his honor and his righteousness," Koji said. "Such loss is a disease spread by violence. I wish I could have my honor again. I wish I could remember!"

"I think I may be able to help you," Zakiya said. She got to her feet. Koji tried to raise Alex from the deck and finally succeeded.

"Help me? How?"

"I now have a key that may unlock your auxiliary memory."

"And Setek?"

"I think we can soon find out. Take care of Alex, will you? Bring him along. I'll help you as soon as I can."

"How did he find his memories?" Aylis asked as they walked back from the morgue.

"I found Sammy," she said.

"You mean Shorty?"

"Perhaps both. I can't explain it yet. He's inside me. He's safe." Aylis could only stare at her with grave concern. Zakiya was sure she sounded mentally impaired, or at best mystical. She saw the dark pool of sparkling matter spool itself into silk-fine thread as she tried to capture it in her hands. The thread entered her body through her hands and began to talk to her. She didn't have time to ponder this miracle of sentience, but she guessed it was an intellect composed of microscopic machines. She tried to explain. "Sammy found the path to Alex's auxiliary memory and completed the circuit," she said, coming to the end of her explanation. "I'm calling it Sammy, but that may not be accurate. It may be both an independent entity and a copy of Sammy's memory."

They returned to Iggy and Wingren, who waited for them in the hospital foyer. Koji sat down with Alex, who was lost in memories. Zakiya explained what happened in the morgue.

Jon, Jamie, and Direk arrived in the hospital by transmat.

"It's here?" Zakiya asked.

"Something is here!" Jon replied. "We've lost control of the ship."

In the middle of the hospital foyer a small golden object bloomed into existence and floated in the air near them. "That's it!" Iggy declared.

"But it's so small!" Wingren said. "I thought it was huge." As if in response to her words, the double spheroid began to grow. They backed away from it as it magically expanded to fill half of the foyer without disturbing anything. It grew until much of it passed through walls and chairs and ceiling. It seemed utterly real and completely impossible at the same time. Its two spheres were joined by a thick shaft that flowed between them with seamless curves. The eyes couldn't focus on any detail of its golden surface, only the line of its bright silhouette and the reflections of objects in its perfect surface. It could not be determined if it destroyed any of the objects it swallowed or merged with, until Direk pulled a partly enveloped chair away from the golden object. The chair remained intact and was easy to move. Direk could not put the chair back into the alien intruder.

Zakiya moved to the middle of the shaft connecting the spheres and waited. She was tempted to touch the perfect liquid surface of the alien artifact. "Who are you?" she asked. The surface of the alien vessel rippled as she spoke, a localized surface distortion that quickly dissipated in the following silence. "Speak to us." The golden interface rippled and became still. Zakiya put out her hand to touch the object. Her fingers sank into the gold. She felt nothing but still gained an impression of something... alive.

A portal opened as the golden liquid surface dimpled into a passageway. A tiny human figure staggered toward the opening, which extruded to form a ramp to the hospital floor. The little man stood at the top of the ramp and blinked as though unaccustomed to bright light. Each blink squeezed out tears from his eyes. He swayed slightly as he looked at Zakiya and the others with an expression of disbelief. Perspiration coated his face and dampened his simple clothing. His hair was long and wild. When he wiped the sweat from his brow he left smears of red. His hands were covered with dried blood.

The man started to take a step backward, to retreat.

"Wait," Zakiya said. She reached for him and saw her hand and arm taper in size to match scale with the man. Aylis gasped in shock and grabbed Zakiya protectively from behind. Zakiya felt nothing unusual in her arm even though the view was extremely disturbing. Her fingers contacted the miniature reality of the man and reflexively clutched at his clothing. The little man reacted by stumbling and taking a few steps down the ramp. With each step he and the ramp grew in size, and with each of his steps Zakiya felt impelled to pull him forward. He tried to resist but seemed to have no strength for it. In a few seconds he was standing on the hospital floor, grown to normal size, and owning an indisputable reality of being. The ramp retracted like a golden liquid spilling back into its container. The alien ship shrank to a point of golden light and disappeared.

"That's impossible!" Aylis declared in a shaky voice.

Zakiya and everyone else were stunned by the magic. She held the stranger by his cloth shirt with her trembling hand while her mind tried to accommodate what she experienced. Then she took a close look at the man. She feared for his health. He appeared dangerously thin and weak. The man stood wavering and stared at her with eyes that haunted her.

She knew who he was! "Let us help you," she said in Twenglish.

Section 038

Parting Gift

Day after day we studied the simulation on the computer. Day after day the Advisory Committee refused to permit a vacuum test of the Big Circuits. I kept the vacuum in the apertures hard, in ever fainter hope of doing the tests.

The delay in testing the Big Circuits was caused by the first experiment the Air Force let me perform at an abandoned facility in the desert - a test that had reached legendary status. The facility - a cluster of dilapidated buildings dating to the late 1940s - no longer existed. Colonel Duncan and three other people were still alive because I insisted we position ourselves twenty miles away on the other side of a ridge. They thought I was being overly cautious. They had thoroughly inspected the concentrator component and the jury-rigged current-pulse device two of my colleagues at Princeton had helped me build. Except for the stick of dynamite, there was nothing to suggest that even standing a hundred meters away wouldn't be safe. The flash beyond the ridge was a great surprise to Duncan and the others, and even to me. I never really expected such a large explosion, and although I was elated as the ground shook, I was upset I didn't have the equipment to measure what happened. Seismographs did suggest an impressive force, and the blast crater reinforced it. That test was followed by two more with similar results and extensive measurements.

The Small Circuit was the next reason for fearing the Big Circuits. The Small Circuit was designed to study the process of breaking quantum circuits in a controlled way - without destroying the equipment in the process. The Small Circuit was, in effect, the first practical fusion power plant. It wasn't fusion in the sense that atomic particles were being forced together. Quantum circuits were being broken and the released energy was warming a heat sink which I decided may as well do some useful work. The Small Circuit now provided electricity for the Hole. If the Small Circuit could make enough electricity for the entire Hole (an old salt mine with hundreds of acres needing lighting), then the Big Circuits were overkill. Each of the two Big Circuits were a hundred times the size of the Small Circuit, more than a thousand times the size of the first test circuit. The Big Circuits were potentially the doom of the world in the eyes of all the personnel in the Hole who knew the history of their development. I was eloquent enough to cause their construction, promising they wouldn't explode or even produce more power than they used. They were ostensibly intended for research in the geometry needed to concentrate quantum circuits. That was only part of their purpose. Unfortunately, I no longer felt comfortable with the attitudes of the other scientists and engineers and wouldn't reveal to them what I hoped to prove with the Big Circuits.

Scientific theories and their proofs are hard-won by brilliant people. They are things of immense beauty and personal pride. They are also ideas of hard-won understanding by millions of toiling students. Thus, due to effort and pride, scientific theory takes on the rigidity of religious dogma, however temporary, until experiment casts doubt on the logic. My theory, with only a couple of strange machines as possible proof, remained heresy, and was my own dogma. I no longer tried to explain the theory and justify the Circuits' existence. After my escape from the Hole to breathe some fresh air and to worry my wife, ending in tragedy and my personal shame, I probably no longer had any intellectual standing among my peers.

Waiting for my wounds to heal, I was at least content with knowing my wife loved me. I tried to reciprocate. I wished I could better demonstrate the honest affection I felt for Milly, affection I had too well learned to quell over my years with her. But I was not content enough to hide my disappointment from her. My curiosity about the magic of the universe burned holes in my patience. There would soon come a time when the Big Circuits would be moth-balled. Personnel were disappearing from the roster of those maintaining the cryogenics of the Big Circuits. Security was tighter on those lower levels. We had to test the Big Circuits soon, or inevitable maintenance failure would doom their purpose. There is no greater object of pride than one's intellect, when one thinks he is so intelligent and imaginative. Why was I never smart enough or sensitive enough to imagine how much my wife meant to me - and how much I meant to her?

"We'll do it on our own," she said.

"Do what?" I asked, in the middle of reading the only important part of a week-old newspaper: the comics.

"Run the vacuum tests on the Big Circuits."

"How?" I didn't even look up from the comics.

"With these." I looked up. She held two perforated three-by-five file cards over her scrambled eggs and waved them at me.

"What is that supposed to be?"

"The security keys to the Big Circuits."

"Looks like you took a hole punch to some index cards."

"I did. I knew the console key slots were three inches wide."

"How did you know where to put the holes?"

"I memorized both cards when I saw them."

"When did you last see them? I haven't seen them since sometime last year."

"Same time I saw them. That's when I made the copies."

"All the way back then? I didn't think you were ever in favor of turning on the Big Circuits."

"Back then I had other stupid reasons for wanting to do it. I thought that at worst it would be a painless way to commit suicide. No. I wasn't that far gone."

"I knew you were depressed. I should have done something."

"Damn right! You should have smothered me with kisses. Which is what you'll have to do to get these keys from me."

I thought I could do even better than that.

END OF PART 2

Part 3

THE LADY IN THE MIRROR

Section 000 Losing Him

I didn't want to do it. Yet I was curious, perhaps as curious as he was. For something that began for me as a tongue-in-cheek (or thumb-on-nose) frivolous exercise in wasting brain power, we worked so very hard on putting the theory into physical form. A great many innovations were needed to build the Big Circuits. I don't think anyone else had constructed something that size to the geometric precision we required. It took almost half a year to stabilize temperatures to maintain tolerances. Everywhere you looked, laser interferometry monitored critical distances. I was afraid our precision still wasn't good enough. Lack of precision would be quite lethal to Kansas and perhaps to other states. And other countries. And other planets.

I didn't want to do it. But I've been known to do things I shouldn't have wanted to do. That's how I put myself in this damned wheelchair. Now I was going to help Sam test the Big Circuits. I had a feeling something would go wrong. We were far beyond the limits of acceptable scientific theory, even far beyond what we thought we had proved about quantum circuit theory.

We got through the security door without tripping any alarms. Since I was stuck in a wheelchair, bored, and afraid of being trapped underground, I entertained myself by learning all the secrets of the Hole. I was everywhere, watching everyone and everything. I knew the computer system better than the system administrator. The security door was no problem. It pleased my ego to be able to show Sam what I could do, to help make his dream a reality. All too soon we found ourselves in the control room of the Big Circuits.

"Key, please," he said.

I removed a three-by-five punched index card from under the blanket in my lap. It was as heavy as that grenade was, and far more dangerous. He reached for it. I pulled it back, my imagination still violated by the hideous possibilities it represented. I was profoundly afraid. It must have shown in my face. I shivered. It was cold in the control room. The future suddenly felt cold.

Sam knelt beside me and waited. He didn't plead or argue with me. I absolutely knew how important this was to him. He absolutely knew how afraid I was. We fought for our views on too many bloody battlefields. I lost the war, but only because I couldn't face losing him. I put my hand on his shoulder. He took it and pressed it against his cheek. He released my hand, stood up, turned around to view the room, as if looking at it for the last time.

"This really is pushing it. Just as you said. It's a miracle we got this far with

my crazy ideas. All I thought I wanted to do was make you proud of me. Quantum circuits. What crap. There must be some other explanation. Let's go on back."

I knew he struggled to not sound as disappointed as I knew he was. He was never so alive as when he talked to me about starlight and gravity and maybe even atoms being quantum circuits. Maybe the Small Circuit *was* an accident, a small miracle, but I also felt it pointed the way to something even greater. The Small Circuit, as scary as it was, was the answer to the world's future energy needs. The Big Circuits might be the door through which humanity entered the rest of the universe. It was Sam's ultimate gesture of love for me, that he would label his quantum circuits as crap. I wanted to cry. I held the key up, offering it to him, if he would just turn around and look. He did.

The expression on his face was priceless. He kissed me. His hand shook a little as he took the card from me. "I'm scared, too," he said.

"I don't believe in miracles," I said, "but I believe in you. There's still the tensor we disagree on." I was trying to raise myself out of that pit of snakes that was my fear. "Your manifold needs one more dimension." It was old territory on our cosmological battleground, taken and retaken many times. I was never sure he understood how the numbers worked. I *was* sure his imagination had skipped a step beyond what I could follow, into the magic realm of *abnormal entities*.

"That implies distance and direction," he said, helping me fill the scary quiet of humming death machines with familiar conceptual artillery. "If we fire both circuits we provide that."

"If you fire both," I said, going through the traditional argument, "you add yet another dimension to the manifold. I don't know what that does."

"Let's stop, then."

"I'm just saying what I've always said, hoping you've found a new idea to soothe my troubling equations. It's your postulate. We're creating an entity. Every entity requires at least one external quantum circuit. It's got to be a huge loop, perhaps proportional to the entity. Where does it go? What does it do? This gives us *two* loops. I worry about it."

"Then let's look for it in the feedback data. There's usually an image of reality in mathematics. It will be important. Shall we do it? Are you ready?"

"God, no! But it's all just funny numbers and make-believe. Do it."

Sam unlocked the console with my handmade key. He started the program to cycle the North Circuit. In my mind I could imagine the electric potential building in the capacitor banks, arranged all around us in the rock in miles of tunnels, all of their discharge circuits equalized in length down to millimeters. Meters started surging upward in their digital increments, hundreds of red glowing numbers in banks of metal cases fed by thousands of omnipresent cables. The numbers slowed their counting and reached some engineering limit, causing rows of red idiot lights to extinguish and their opposites turn green. Finally there were no more red lights, only green. That was ominous perfection. We never before turned all the red to green on the first try. This was as far as we were permitted to go in the past. Now we were on the runway and revving the engines for a flight that would either open up the universe or destroy us all.

The computer CRT cleared its list of program steps and displayed the number 10 in foot-high red characters on a white background. The number changed to 9.

We looked at the television monitor which showed the aperture of the North Circuit. Hopefully it would show us nothing, or at most a flash of light. What we saw was the inside of a gray tunnel that seemed to diminish quickly in

diameter, making it appear far longer than it was. The circle in the middle was the aperture, and it had a diameter of about five feet. Sam called it the puncture site, the place where we would put a spherical hole in the fabric of space and time.

How many stray atoms of gas and dust floated in that aperture? How many would be caught in the avalanche of electric field lines - the only quantum circuits we could manipulate - when they merged and sheared apart the dimensional integrity of reality? How many atoms would be split, despite the vacuum and the particle-scavenging devices? Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. As wrong as it was, Einstein's little equation was at least as practical as Newton's equation for gravity. A few too many atoms in the hole, and Kansas would disappear.

The big numbers ticked away to 0, my heartbeat doubling in amplitude with each smaller digit. We saw nothing. The gages registered zero matter converted to energy. My heart, which was about to burst through my heavy coat, suddenly became calmed by the anticlimax. It worked just as Sam said it would. No cataclysm, no end of the world, just a few gazillion electrons converging on a small area of space and time in a nearly coherent wavefront, smearing their quantum circuits into a spherical sheet of impenetrable force. Never mind the weird quantum string required by theory and the vector-like geometry suggested by the mathematics.

"Key, please," Sam said. He was almost laughing with the release of his tension. He was almost bouncing up and down, despite the mending bullet wounds.

We did it again with the South Circuit.

"And now the secret ingredient. Simultaneity."

My heart started hammering again. Perfect spherical entities were perfectly simple - and perfectly impossible. There had to be that umbilical of a quantum circuit, that loop to infinity. It played hell with the mathematics. Too many imaginary values popped up, geometry curling into never-never-land. Were we ignoring too many odd bits of equations that refused to tidy-up? Perhaps our less-than-perfect wavefront negated the umbilical. And how could we produce real simultaneity? We could talk all day about nanoseconds and picoseconds of error, but zero timing error was only by chance. All I could do was watch the big numbers count down on the two CRTs in my peripheral vision, while I watched the two sets of television monitors show cold vacuum.

Nothing happened. Nothing was supposed to happen. But my heart was still thumping loudly. My heart finally slowed and I marveled again at Sam and his imagination. Why did I ever doubt him? Even if the rest of the experiment failed, I would never doubt him again. I was lost in wonder longer than I thought. The next thing I knew, Sam was already doing the gymnastics required to feed himself into his moon suit - with a leg and a shoulder still recovering from wounds. I went down the checklist with him to make sure of all the connections, with nothing left but his helmet.

It's difficult for someone in a spacesuit to bend over far enough to kiss a woman in a wheelchair, but I was determined to make him do it. I kissed him like he'd never been kissed before! I loved him. I was proud of him. And I was very very afraid I was going to lose him, if only through some stupid thing like him tripping over a cable, breaking some wiring or plumbing, and not being able to get up again. He could die in vacuum or the cold before I could summon help.

"I'll be back," Sam said, smiling with pure joy and installing his helmet.

I made gestures to him to remind him how much time he had before his generator would die. He grinned as he bowed to me. I placed the target loop on a convenient hook of his suit. I listened to his mechanical sounds as he maneuvered his bulk through the door. The door closed behind him and I tried desperately to ignore how final his departure felt. It was just my morbid imagination fertilizing my fear. It was no longer a fear of the Hole. I had gained so much from Sam and now it was only a fear of losing him.

I watched him travel out to the North Circuit aperture on the closed circuit television. I watched him cycle through the airlock. I watched him maneuver the platform into the circuit tunnel and suspend the target - a paper butterfly on a very thin steel wire - in the aperture. God, how many atoms in that? What if the magnetic field failed to keep the butterfly suspended? What if the magnetic field disrupted the quantum circuit wavefront? Sam complained of the time it was taking, but to me time was racing by, out of control.

Sam cycled back through the airlock and gave me the signal to initiate another simultaneous firing of both circuits. I could see him leaning on a railing, rather nonchalantly, as the countdown progressed. I don't think he was calm, not in the least. It was a stance probably imposed on him by the weight of the moon suit. It weighed much more than Sam did. I almost forgot to watch the television monitors.

"What happened?" Sam asked, barely a second after the countdown reached zero.

I looked from one TV monitor to the other and what I saw made me draw a deep breath and tremble with the effort to not scream. *It* was so small but so *wrong*. My hands shook so badly I could hardly push the button to make the TV camera zoom, and I kept losing the object when my shakes pushed the joystick too far on the pan.

"You didn't see it reappear in the South aperture?" he asked.

"There's *something* in the South aperture," I said, trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

"What's wrong? We didn't teleport the target?"

"There's something that isn't our butterfly in the South Circuit!"

I tried to slow my breathing and find some calm. This wasn't like me. Daddy raised me to be fearless. But this was too unexpected, too unnatural, too *beautiful*.

"What? What is it?"

"I don't know what it is! It's just floating there, like a tiny helium balloon. It doesn't look real."

"Floating? There isn't any air in the circuit, is there?"

"I don't know. Some of the gages are differing from those of the North Circuit. I just don't think it should float like that."

"How big is it?"

"Small. Maybe two inches long. Like an Easter egg. It's very colorful. Sam, it scares me!"

"I'll go get a look."

"I love you!" I don't think he heard me. All I could hear was his heavy breathing until he was beyond the range of the transceiver. When Sam reached the South Circuit, I watched him cycle through the airlock. When the transceiver picked up his signal all I could do was whisper, "Be careful! Be careful!" I watched him push the platform into the circuit tunnel.

The camera was mounted on the platform. I struggled with the focus and zoom of the television camera to try to keep Sam in the picture. I had slow panning control and he often blocked my view. I watched his arm reach out to the object, as though I was looking over his shoulder.

The television screen went to snow.

I screamed. There could have been a simple malfunction. Near-cryogenic temperatures were hard on TV cameras, no matter how specially they were designed. I called his name three times and got no response. I turned the gain to maximum and called again. Then I became aware of several little red lights blinking on a console with which I was not familiar.

I rolled out of the control room and into the elevator. There were no thoughts in my head that could be heard before the roar of my desperation. I didn't call for help. I didn't believe what my morbid imagination was pumping into my lower brain. Then I hopefully imagined I would rush out to the South Circuit, find Sam strolling down the tunnel toward me, and I would scream at him in righteous, terrified anger!

I descended to that cold tunnel that gave access to both aperture sites. I turned left and opened the throttle on my electric wheel chair. South Circuit seemed miles away. I couldn't see Sam strolling toward me. The air burned my face with its icy temperature. The tunnel never felt this cold before. I hoped I wore enough insulation to keep my toes from freezing. My wheelchair began to feel strange as I rolled close to the exterior framework of the South Circuit. The rubber tires disintegrated to the steel rims. I thought there must have been a major coolant leak of the superconducting aperture. I feared what could be happening to my feet, but I feared what might have happened to Sam even more. Viewing the masses of pipes and cabling, I tried to see what was wrong. There was a bright light shining through the gaps in the plumbing, right at the constriction, the heavily reinforced puncture site, the place where things went poof. I knew that wasn't right. I yelled for Sam. Silence answered me. I yelled again, panicking. Then I realized it hurt to yell. It hurt to breathe.

My mind stopped thinking even as poorly as it was. I don't know if I tried to turn around and go back; I know I couldn't. The battery in my wheelchair was frozen. I couldn't touch the cold wheels of the chair. The grease in the bearings of the wheels was too frozen to allow movement. I shook uncontrollably. My nose streamed mucous which quickly froze to my numbed upper lip. My eyebrows were covered in frost from my breath. It hurt everywhere, except below my waist.

I knew for certain I had lost Sam - because I had lost my life. I didn't want to die but I could see no other option. The pain subsided after a few more moments. This should have concerned me but I was very sleepy. I slept.

Section 001

Sammy's Father

"Good morning, Zakiya," Aylis greeted, putting her hand on her friend's shoulder and nudging her to wake her. She left her hand there as Zakiya roused herself and finally reached up to hold Aylis's hand.

Zakiya rubbed her eyes with her other hand and lifted her face to smile at Aylis. Their friendship was deeper than it had ever been, if that was possible. Even with the prospect that they would each regain what they had lost from Alex and Setek, Zakiya felt she and Aylis shared a history that could never be matched, a history that gave them a bond that could never be broken. "Did I ever tell you that I love you?"

"Perhaps not with words," Aylis said, surprised to the point of tears, "but in every other way. I hope you know I love you, Zak. What brought this on? Why are you holding a vigil over our dying stranger? Why aren't you home taking care of Alex?"

Zakiya got up from the chair in which she had spent half the night, hoping the stranger from far across the universe would wake and speak to her. She walked to the side of his bed and touched his forehead. His eyes remained closed. His hair was now trimmed and he seemed less gaunt, his eyes less sunken, but he wouldn't wake up.

"Alex told me to come here," Zakiya said. "He's extremely perceptive. He knew I was worried about this person. I feel guilty leaving Alex alone. I can give Alex comfort. But no reassurance he deserves to be alive. I don't have that assurance for myself."

"Why are you this concerned about the stranger? I mean, I realize the implications he represents, being an alien who appears human, and all the other factors that seem to connect him to our own mysteries. But I think you have some further concern about him. What is it?"

"I think he's Sammy's father."

Aylis was intrigued by this unexpected idea. She knew there were human similarities in the stranger's genes. That was about the only part of it she could understand. She might be able to isolate that part well enough to try a match with Sammy's DNA. Certainly there was a resemblance between the two, despite the mother's influence on Sammy's heredity. "I'll try to compare them. I'll do it right now! And then we'll have breakfast." She hurried away.

Zakiya stood up and paced around the hospital room, stretching. She missed talking to Sammy's memory-AMI but she had decided it wasn't good to keep it inside her for long periods of time. It was a recording machine which would add experiences and perhaps her own thoughts to Sammy's memory. Someday they might try to put Sammy's memories into a new body and she didn't want to risk adding the wrong things to his personality. Direk and Setek were setting up a lab to study Sammy. It seemed to be a logic technology that wasn't too far in advance of current science. That the tiny thread of nanoscopic machines was sentient might only be a form of mimicry. It was not really Sammy she experienced, just a very sophisticated approximation. How could the soul of a child reside in a little amorphous machine? Yet, how could Freddy not have a soul? The definition of a soul must still lie far from the reach of man's intellect.

Zakiya was again alone with the stranger. Aylis had not expressed any objection to an idea that was, on the face of it, absurd, so perhaps she was at

least sympathetic. Regardless of the outcome of Aylis's analysis, Zakiya would call the stranger Sam. "Good morning, Sam," she said to him in Twenglish, as she came to his bedside and took his hand. She immediately felt movement of his fingers and they curled around to hold onto her hand tighter and tighter.

He tried to sit up, as though he was in a rush, but he was weak and she had to help him. His eyes opened and he was hungry to see who she was. When he saw her he was disappointed, saddened. His hand released its grip and he tried to lie back down. She stopped him and made him stay up. She made him look at her again by holding his head between her hands and turning his face toward her.

"Please, talk to me. Do you understand me? Nod your head if that's all you can do."

"I speak English," he said very slowly and in a raspy voice. He looked at her hard, her hands still holding his head to face her. "I remember you. You..." He frowned in concentration. "You look like Karl's daughter."

"Who is Karl?"

"I don't remember," he answered after a long internal struggle.

He tried again to lie down. She wouldn't let him. She glanced at the medical monitor to make sure he was not too stressed, then made him move his legs off the edge of the bed. She lowered the bed to make it easier for him to reach the floor with his feet. She urged him to stand and then take the few steps to reach the chair in which she had been sleeping. Nori arrived at that moment and helped her seat him on the chair.

"He's speaking," Zakiya said to Nori. "I forced him out of bed. I didn't want him to go back to sleep."

"He speaks Twenglish! I *told* Aylis he was human, not alien."

"American," the man said. "I was born in America."

Zakiya knelt down beside him and quickly asked, "Who are you?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't know."

"But you know you are American."

"I remember saying that. I don't know it's a fact. Are you American?"

"America disappeared long before I was born. How are you feeling? We're all concerned that you aren't responding well."

"Responding to what? Where am I? Is this a hospital?"

"You're being treated for starvation and dehydration. You're on a ship in space. You are in its hospital."

"In space? This is a spaceship?"

"Would you like to see it?"

"He's too weak," Nori objected.

"I want to get him out of here." Zakiya called Aylis by shiplink. "I've got him out of the bed and he seems to be alert but weak," she explained to Aylis. "Too many questions, Aylis! Yes, we can do that. Nori is helping me. We'll be there in a few minutes." She turned to Nori. "Can you get us a wheelchair?"

"You mean one that actually has wheels?"

"No, it was the only Twenglish word I knew for the floater."

Nori shiplinked to hospital stores and a few minutes later a floater presented itself in the doorway to the hospital room. Nori brought it in and helped Zakiya move the man into it.

"Do you mind if I call you Sam?" Zakiya noted the frown of concentration on his face. He was looking at the floating chair he sat in. He looked up at her with perhaps puzzlement in his frown. "Or just pick a name," she amended, thinking her request had disturbed him. "We need to call you something."

"Sam is OK," he replied, relaxing his frown, perhaps even trying to smile.
"Some wheelchair! How fast can it go?"

Section 002

Facing the Music

The narration of Samuel Lee begins here.

I was no longer in the hospital but I knew I was still in a hospital room. I could feel Doctor Mnro's presence ("Call me Aylis!") in every wall and fixture. These people from the future had many sneaky ways of sucking data from my lively corpse. Every morning when I awoke I would notice subtle changes in my quarters, as if it was aware of my waking, as indeed it was.

This morning I felt good. That made me suspicious because I know Aylis can slip dope into my plumbing without my knowing it. I didn't want to feel good. I didn't deserve to feel good. I tried to feel bad, grumpy, whatever. I don't know what I felt. Not happy. Nuts! Something was missing.

The kitchen wanted to feed me and I sneered at it. I was losing weight again but I had no appetite. The wall wanted to show me pictures of pleasant Earth scenes and I ignored it. I was supposed to love Mother Earth but I didn't. I stepped outside to take a run around the lake on an empty stomach. I couldn't remember running as a preferred exercise and so I assumed I did it because of a perversity of character. It hurt. I liked the pain. The first thing I saw, before I could begin running, was a handwritten paper note stuck to my back door. "Good morning, Sam," it said in neat English script. "Could I do some archeology on the 20th century today? Phuti."

The 20th century. What am I going to tell him about the 20th century? It sucked. "Archeology hurts my head," I replied aloud to the piece of paper, "and the 20th century *sucked*, Phuti. Fortunately for you, I like to suffer."

"Thank you, Sam," the paper replied in writing.

I took my run around the lake. I had to pass by the golden dumbbell. I didn't know it was there. I had stopped seeing it. It made me hurt inside.

People said hello to me along the jogging trail. They called me Sam. I was beginning not to like the name. It was making my brain itch every time I heard it. It had become significant in some threatening way.

The future. I was in the future. How long was I gone from Earth? All I knew was that Einstein was still alive when I was born. How could I exist in this here-and-now? I could as easily have died centuries ago. I should have. I didn't want to be in the future, not without... Without what? Stop! Don't think it! Crap! Just the merest hint of where the terror lay set me to trembling. Any minute now Aylis would be dragging me away to her laboratory. There were too many inconsistencies and the questions they raised. My broken mind had just enough function to want to examine some of these oddities, even while another part of it screamed to cease and desist.

I pulled into home port and saw that tall Greek guy smooching his gorgeous East African wife on their patio next door. Just the medicine to keep Aylis off my back. I don't know why, but little things like that meant a lot to me. The mere presence of people seemed magical to me, as though their existence had regressed to the status of myth and now they were proved real. I had been away somewhere and I just returned. Where I was then and where I was now were both complete mysteries to me. The only memories I had were fragments of a life in the 20th century. That was impossible. That I even existed seemed impossible - and very unwelcome.

Zakiya waved. I waved back. I tried to keep jogging, wanting to use the last of my strength to make it inside my apartment to collapse on my sofa, but the woman kept looking at me, slowing me down. I loved her. Why did she make me love her?

"Come have breakfast with us, Sam," Alex invited. The big guy made me uneasy. There was an intensity hidden behind his calm blue eyes. But the way he looked at Zakiya and the epic story of their relationship kept me hoping to become his friend. Perhaps I wanted too much to be his friend, and I was afraid of beginning something I didn't deserve, something that would end too soon. It was already too much that Zakiya made herself my friend. There was an emptiness in me that disqualified me from having normal relationships and the responsibilities they required. I shook my head negatively as I tried to keep my leaden feet moving. "Every morning I ask, every morning you decline," Alex called to me. "Have I offended you?"

"Come eat with us?" Zakiya asked, continuing to stare at me with her big brown eyes. Where had I seen those eyes before? Why did they comfort me? Why did they scare me? I couldn't refuse Zakiya. The only time I felt good was in her presence. She watched with concern as I wavered into a sloppy landing at the patio table. I sat down hard. Alex started to rise, as though he wanted to catch me from falling. I righted myself. I was winded. I ached. I hated to admit it but I felt weak - too weak. I needed to eat better. I wished I had an appetite. To what purpose? Toward what future? Stop! Don't think!

I sat in a partial stupor feeling naked to their inspection. Why I worried about what they thought of me was another mystery. I wasn't worth it. This was before I understood who Alex and Zakiya were. I mean, I did feel they were important people. You could just look at them and know they had something special. But they treated me like I was the same as them, whatever they were. I didn't trust it. I didn't examine it too closely. I didn't examine anything too closely. Very dangerous.

Zakiya was an archaeologist, like Phuti, and I expected her to slip in a few questions about ancient Earth, back when I was a kid in... Where was I a kid in? I was American, Korean American. My parents ran a convenience store in a big city. I could never see the stars clearly in the city. How did I wind up in a science fiction movie? How could any of this be real? It would break my heart if Zakiya was not real.

"A penny for your thoughts," Zakiya inquired. How did she speak such perfect American English? Where would I spend a penny?

A wisp of what could be memory seeped out of a corner of my mind. "Korean. My parents were Korean. They had a little store in... in... some city. I remember running the cash register, late at night, a teenager. Getting robbed by this kid who was younger than me. He had a twenty-two caliber revolver, shaking so badly he could never have hit me. I gave him the money. He wanted cigarettes. He was too young to smoke. It was bad for his health. I hated selling cigarettes! Does anybody smoke cigarettes these days?"

"Not on this ship," Zakiya replied. "Did you give him the cigarettes?"

"Sure. As many cartons as he could carry."

She spoke softly, yet her voice was so rich in quality. "Yes, people still smoke tobacco. We probably have your 20th-century movies to blame for the persistence of the nasty habit."

"You have all those old movies." I blinked at an image ejected by my besieged mind, of a little dog being threatened by an ugly green witch.

"Newspapers, music, books. Why do you and Phuti need my faulty memories of that awful century?"

"There's nothing like a living fossil to verify what we guess was the truth of the past," Alex replied for his wife. To be frank, Alex looked the part of archaeologist more than Zakiya. He had a scholarly face. His physique was not scholarly at all but would be an asset for a serious dig-it-up antiquities hunter.

"You're convinced I'm a fossil? I could be faking it. I may have watched the same movies and read the same books you watched and read. You learned to speak old American English. I could have learned it the same way."

"You're joking, right?" I wished I was. Alex didn't smile.

"You're the real McCoy." Zakiya didn't smile either.

"We're sure. What are you doing today?"

"Phuti wants to grill me again. I really like the guy, or else I would beg off. Maybe, if I'm with Phuti, then Aylis won't get me. I wish she would hurry up and... She gets cranky very fast, and I always find the wrong thing to say or do to set her off." Aylis was another person to whom I responded strongly and, unlike Zakiya, she always posed a threat to me.

"Did I ever tell you that Aylis is my best friend?" Zakiya asked.

"I don't have a chance!" I tried to be humorous. Why did they have no smiles for me today? Did I look that bad? "I seem to talk too much, especially when I have nothing correct to say."

Zakiya looked at me - as she always did - with an expression of controlled concern, as if she needed to carefully meter that concern, lest it overflow and damage me. If I had enough brain function to analyze this, I would be frightened at how much she seemed to care about me. I got the message then that some bad news might be in the queue. I got that message all the time, of course. There were things I knew that I didn't want to know that I knew, but I knew I would have to remember those things sooner or later. Painful things. They said that, when I arrived among them, I had blood on my hands. It had to be bad. It scared the crap out of me!

I got up, almost knocking my chair over, and tried to make my getaway on rubber legs. Alex grabbed me by the shoulders before I could fall down. He was massively strong and I thought I would not bother to struggle. I wasn't even sure I could walk the few feet back to the apartment they let me use. Alex would only let me sit, so I sat, only to glance at Zakiya and see anxiety in her eyes. Why was my feeble brain processing such details so well? What did they mean? Strike that! I didn't want to know. "Are you going to hurt me today?" What a thing to say! They hurt me every day, never knowing it. I hurt myself. I needed to die. I was not supposed to exist. I was not supposed to be the one to suffer. There was this other guy who got lost, and he was the one to blame, the one to punish. I was an innocent bystander, caught holding the bag of spiders. I seemed to exist solely to be terrorized by something worse than death. I started crying then. I wanted to run away and I couldn't even stay on my feet. Talk about asking for it! I dried up quickly and made a show of nonchalance that was pitiable.

"It's going to be painful for both of us today," Zakiya said gently. "I don't look forward to it but time pushes us to do what must be done."

"I thought you guys had all the time in the world - in the universe?" I put it on autopilot and let my diminished capacity speak for me. I was terribly hurt that Zakiya seemed poised to betray my trust. She was the *only* one I trusted. I didn't even trust myself. I was a stranger to myself. Why trust a stranger?

"You don't have all the time in the universe, Sam," Alex said.

"Why?" Maybe this was good news. I had a lot more time than I wanted to have.

"Something is killing you." I heard real concern in Alex's voice.

"Yeah, and I wish it would hurry up!"

"We're serious, Sam," Zakiya said gravely.

"So am I!" And I was.

The tear in the corner of one of her eyes caught the light, and caught a rock in my throat. How did I find the means to hurt her? How could I lose it? "Aylis -" she started to say.

"- isn't a patient woman!" autopilot rudely interrupted. My brain became a family of frightened rats running around in my skull, trying to escape. "I'm okay!"

"Not even close to okay," Alex said.

"You have immortality but you still can't fix a broken brain."

"I'm an example of that," Alex said.

"You seem fine to me!" I didn't want to hear such a thing. If Alex wasn't right in the head, what chance did I have? When Alex made no reply, I opened my big mouth again, hesitated, and finally squeezed out: "What are we going to do, Zakiya?"

She took a deep breath. I took one with her. I was shaking. She could see my trembling. When she wiped the tears that suddenly glistened on her smooth brown cheeks, I had to turn away.

"We're going to see your dead son."

I looked back at Zakiya in disbelief. Did I hear her clearly? Dead son? How did she know its sex? How did she know... what? I saw the pain in her eyes, perhaps even fear. My fragility became calamitous. My terror tapped me on the shoulder, daring me to turn around and see it. "How can we possibly be going to see my...? I have no... I have no... I..." I began hyperventilating. "*It isn't even human!*" I screamed, staring at my clean hands like a madman.

They got me, Aylis and Mai. Back in the hospital. Put a little dope in me. Good stuff, as Patrick would say. I'd rather be out killing a bottle of scotch with him. I deserved a bad hangover. Alex got the hell out of the way and the women took over: Zakiya, Aylis, Mai, Nori. The SWAT team.

"Women in your condition shouldn't be doing psychiatric outpatient torture," I said dopily, almost getting the syllables into correct sequence. "What if your fetuses hear me screaming?"

"Don't scream," Aylis said reasonably. "You wouldn't want prenatal assault on your conscience."

"I don't like this! Do you and Mai have to be here? I don't want you to be hurt!"

"He's worse today," Mai said. "I thought he was getting better."

"He never has liked me," Aylis complained. "I should let another physician work with him."

I was sweating and breathing hard. I was not only worse, I was worst.

"You're pregnant," Nori said to A and M. "We know that's what makes him nervous and upset. You both should leave him."

"But I wanted to be here," Aylis said. "For Zakiya."

"I'll be fine," Zakiya lied. "Nori's correct."

"Keep an eye on for me?" Aylis requested. These future people had cameras in their eyes, do you know? I learned early on they could do amazing things

without lifting a finger. They were all a bunch of networked computer terminals. The entire length and breadth of human culture and science was instantly available to them, just by focusing their attention on an image projected inside their eyeballs.

Zakiya, Nori, and I walked down to the bottom of the hospital, and you know what they keep in the bottom of a hospital: bodies and parts of bodies. It wasn't much of a morgue but I had to remember how long people lived. Like, forever. Zakiya held my hand and that made me feel better. If you've got Zakiya for a friend, you have something truly valuable, and that was before I knew she was The Boss. I did well until her grip tightened and I felt her despair jump the gap to my neurons.

Nori opened the vault. I saw the body. I was strangely relieved but also ignoring some greater implication. The kid looked good. I could barely tell he had severe trauma to the head. He wasn't Korean, not completely. He had some white in him. I pondered the meaning of that. I pointed out the racial mix. I didn't know who was running my body at the moment but I was glad to let him. All of this was impossible and impossibly frightening. I was hiding. I didn't belong here, not anywhere near here, unless they had room for me on a cold slab.

"Yes, his mother was of mostly European ancestry, not Asian," Nori said. "You're his father. Genetic analysis is conclusive. He was born a long time ago on Earth."

"But he's only about nine years old! Did he get frozen or something?"

"We don't know. We have a process called stasis that can preserve a live person indefinitely but the process was not perfected until three hundred years ago."

"Were you married?" Zakiya asked, never looking directly at the body of the poor little kid. She began pulling me away, anxious to leave. How could they let him get killed? I couldn't speak. I was grateful to be leaving that cold little room in the bottom of the hospital. "Does the name *Milly* mean anything to you?"

I shook my head, shook it too hard. I squeezed Zakiya's hand, I squeezed it too hard. Why? What? Who? No! I didn't want to know! No questions! No answers! No past! No future!

No me!

"I believe Milly was his mother," Zakiya said gently. Minutes later I was still walking between Zakiya and Nori and I had no idea what happened during the walk. "You were no longer with us. Where are you now, Sam?"

"I can't...!"

"Can't do what?" We stopped walking. The rest of the SWAT team met us. I couldn't look at them. "Can't do what?" Zakiya repeated. She was holding both of my hands and trying to find me.

"Music. Can't face the music."

"It has something to do with pregnant women," Nori offered. I wished Nori would find another theme! I wished she was wrong. I wished I was dead. Put me in there next to the kid. Please! Rest me in peace!

"I want you to take a walk with Aylis," Zakiya said, shaking my hands. "Please."

"No!"

"Please," Zakiya repeated. "Do it for me. I loved Samson. I don't want to lose his father, too."

I couldn't say yes. I couldn't say no. I just held my breath and hoped to pass

out on the spot. Take a walk? With Aylis?

They turned me over to the most famous woman in the history of the human races. I didn't know that, of course. To me, Aylis was just a *mean* pregnant doctor who seemed to be in charge of the medical people in this sci-fi movie. We walked - or somehow got there - to the orchard on the agriculture deck. I don't know why she picked that place, unless it was the isolation and leafy quiet acoustics that would swallow up any bad noises I might make. I don't remember anything she said while walking. I said nothing. I avoided looking at the bulge of her abdomen. She took my hand but it wasn't Zakiya's hand. I tried to break free. Aylis held tight and I almost pulled her down. She stumbled. I grabbed her to prevent a fall. The tactile sensations jolted memories my body possessed, and my brain was tricked into supplying a fragment of an image. She was blonde, like Aylis. No, not exactly. Milly wasn't blonde! How did I know that? Who was blonde? Who was Milly? When my train of thought got back on the tracks, I found myself sitting on the ground under a plum tree next to Aylis. She was still holding my hand. I realized that she was a very caring *mean* person, and that she was going to hurt me. A lot.

"You saw her."

"Who?" I looked at how close my hand was to her baby.

"It has to be a woman. A pregnant woman. Something bad happened. Something very bad. Why did you have blood on your hands, Sam? It looked like it had been on your hands for a long time."

It was like the image was sliding past any critical faculties I should have, staying just out of focus and around a corner. When Aylis said it, it was a slap in my face and an icepick up my nose. It was suddenly such a concrete and vivid image that I couldn't avoid its horror and its promised tragedy. I could see where my hands had been and I could feel what they had tried to do and I could remember the *horror!* The horror! Have you ever cried so hard that everything leaks out of your head: tears, snot, saliva, sweat? I still didn't remember who, but I was so close to remembering that I could scream at the *loss* I knew was coming. Now Aylis was holding me and rocking me like a baby while she wiped my face with the hem of her hospital smock.

"Did she die?"

I didn't yet know who, but I knew she did. I nodded weakly. There was something wrong with my brain. Yes, yes, of course! But I mean my brain was not just *broken-wrong* - it was *wrong-wrong*. Broken or not, it was not supposed to work this way. It was doing something I didn't understand.

We got up and we began walking again. I had no legs; I could as well be floating. I led the way, not quite understanding that was what I was doing. We walked all the way back to the main biosphere, the village, the commons, the lake. The golden dumbbell floating above the green grass. I could see it again, a big golden blur, the end of happiness, the doom of love. I was trembling so hard I could barely approach the portal that opened for us.

"This is a medical emergency. This is a medical emergency! The Protector doesn't know biology!" I wanted to scream again but was stunned to silence. Pieces of nightmare flashed through my conscious. Blood! More blood! I couldn't move. The portal dilated and the golden corridor awaited, but my legs threatened to dump me on the grass.

Mai, Nori, and Zakiya appeared. They surrounded me and helped me forward, into the portal.

"Which way?" Aylis asked, as though the corridor offered more than one

route. It didn't matter. The Protector would take us there.

I opened my eyes when we came to a stop. The big black cube lay before us in the matrix.

"What is it?" Mai asked.

"Where time stops! This is a medical emergency! THIS IS A MEDICAL EMERGENCY!"

The black cube became transparent. I screamed.

Section 003

If We Were a Family

They just magically appeared: four women, the most perfectly suited people in the universe to help me. I thanked the Protector. He found them for me. How did I know two were physicians? And where did the blood on my hands go? The moment of sanity fled. "She's dead!"

"How long ago?" Aylis demanded.

I fought for composure; I wouldn't have it for more than a few seconds. Jessie's life depended on it! My life depended on it! It seemed like eons since Jessie's breathing stopped. Tell them a lie! Make them try to save her! Did I remember performing CPR? I shook my head, trying to clear it, trying to see into the past, hoping the truth was not too far from what I would tell them. "Not long! Maybe a minute or two! I tried to make her breathe again, and then I just knew there was not enough blood. And the baby! The baby!"

"Can we transmat from here?" Mai asked.

Instantly all of us were in a place I remembered, a corridor of the hospital. In a few moments more, other people arrived in a hurry as we pushed the ... pushed the... body... on its bloody bed... into an empty room. This was an emergency room? A trauma center? Where were all the instruments, all the machines with wiggly lines and life-or-death beeps? A bright light beamed down upon... upon... the body, the quiet and unmoving body, and the beautiful shimmer of gold, and the closed eyes. And the blood. And the swollen abdomen, and the stillness within. The stillness...

"She is one of the Golden Ones," the one I knew as Aylis said with a ferocity that reached me through the thick miasma of my emotions.

"A Servant!" I understood nothing about "Golden Ones." Why did Aylis hate them? How could I prove to her that Jessie was a Servant? But she *was* golden... but... "They aren't supposed to have babies!" As if that would deny everything or prove anything. "They aren't even male and female! Jessie was with me for such a long time, and I came to think of her as a female, because she was smaller than me, and..." They didn't seem in any hurry, and Jessie wasn't breathing!

"She *is* pregnant? She *was* in labor? *You* impregnated her?" *Such embarrassing and unnecessary questions!* "How long ago?" What is the gestation period for a species which has *never* produced offspring? If she's gone, will they let me go with her?

"My wife is dead!" It was a stupid defense for my infidelity. "Jessie is all I have. Was... was all... My wife is dead. My wife is dead!"

"Get him out of here," Aylis ordered. "He can't help us."

Zakiya pulled me out of the emergency room, just as I saw all the machinery magically appear. Jessie was at the center of massive medical technology and only that kept me from fighting Zakiya.

She and Alex sat with me in a waiting room. Memories were flooding back through my wavering channel of consciousness. I wept; I couldn't stop, couldn't classify the tears as joy or despair but perhaps fear, perhaps hope. My imagination abused my little ego with glimpses of a future without Jessie. It was more than I could handle. I looked around to see a blurry room full of blurry people: so many of the men and women who offered friendship to me over the last few days and weeks. They had rushed to the hospital to lend their emotional

support. It did help, if only for a brief moment. I made my eyes communicate my recognition of them, but it was terribly difficult. I knew something was wrong because Jessie was a "Golden One." They couldn't be my friends if they disapproved of Jessie. Why would they think that way? Was there another race of beings similar to the Servants, with a bad reputation? I thought I trusted my new friends. They were all mental giants compared to me, all having mechanical and electronic augmentations, in-body computers and expert systems, and often multiple lifetimes of experience. *They could all go to hell before I would turn my back on Jessie!* They didn't understand who she was: that was obvious.

"She's a Golden One," Alex said, for no reason I could imagine, joining Aylis's condemnation.

"No! She's a Servant! That's what her people call themselves."

"Jessie is her name?" Zakiya asked. She seemed neutral in her attitude, but even that made me feel betrayed again by the one person I trusted. She seemed to sense her innocent mistake and tried to comfort me with hands on my hands.

"Jessie is what I renamed her." I took deep breaths, trying to ease a rising pain in my chest. "She's a *wonderful* person! She doesn't deserve to die! Give her a chance to be your friend!"

"Calm yourself," Alex said gently. "We are your true friends and we all want Jessie to live. Why would you think otherwise?"

I wanted to believe Alex. Why else go on living if there's no one to trust, no one who will tell you the truth? But my brain was jumping back and forth between the horror of a childbirth that killed Jessie and the possibility that she might be saved. I was stuck between two lives: my eternal companionship with Jessie which ended in bloody tragedy sealed in a black cube; and the two short pieces of my lifespan that occurred before and after Jessie. I had to put the pieces together, but I couldn't contain the amplitude of my emotions. A few moments ago a sentence spoken by Aylis triggered a new fear that I would lose Jessie forever, for a second time. I tried to put this fear into words, even as I felt ashamed to voice such suspicions.

"Aylis won't let her die," Setek said with conviction. "She knew there was a medical problem with someone much like a Golden One. She analyzed the stains on your hands. She prepared a synthetic blood for her. I believe it was a shock to her that Jessie was frozen at the moment of her death in labor. If she said something or did something to disturb you, I'm certain it wasn't intentional."

"Forgive me! I can't think! All I can do is react! You don't understand how important Jessie is to me!"

"But that's *all* we understood about you," Zakiya said. "Your amnesia suggested how important this person was to you. We debated the meaning of the blood but could never convince ourselves that it signified conflict. You were obviously heartbroken, not murderous, when we first saw you. And then we could get nothing out of you."

"In fact," Alex said, "we've had a problem keeping you alive. We still fear for your health, which is why Aylis monitors you so thoroughly. It could be why Aylis may have sounded unfriendly about Jessie."

"I don't understand."

"Your health is precarious," Setek said, "and Aylis believed it was because of the person whose blood was on your hands. By genetic analysis of the blood, Aylis knew it was a very remarkable alien being. She was *desperate* to see and

to examine her! That doesn't mean she places blame on Jessie. It's simply a problem that has vexed her terribly for the period she's known you."

I tried to understand Setek's words. I tried damned hard. I'd lived too long a time not to know how valuable understanding between people was. It was easy for me to understand how the loss of Jessie would make me want to die, but they were implying it was more than just the emotional destruction.

"How long has Jessie been your wife?" Zakiya asked. She was curious and was trying to calm me and to keep me in the same reality as everyone else. But it was a hurtful question.

"My wife." I had to remember Milly. It was my duty, my horror, and my shame to remember her. Even at this agonizing moment. Especially now. "My wife. My wife!" I rocked back and forth, my eyes squeezed shut. Nobody said anything, asked anything, or tried to prompt me to continue. They were all being kind and sensitive, and I had a tiny presence of mind to understand and be grateful. How many decades did I live with the certainty that my wife - my human wife - was dead? Now I had to reestablish that fact in my mind, to let the freshness of it hurt me deeply. I was not feeling very well at all. "I had a wife in 1986. She's dead. She's dead! Jessie was my friend for all the years from then to now. She was more than a friend. I thought of Jessie as my wife. But Milly was my first wife. I loved her!"

"You left Milly." Zakiya was my judge, as she ought to be.

"I didn't *want* to leave her!" The guilt poured into my boiling cauldron of emotions. I had wanted too much, and that had caused other people to suffer and die. Who would have cared for Milly after I disappeared? Who would have loved her as much as I did? My chest hurt worse and the light in the room dimmed. Hands grabbed me and kept me from toppling onto the floor. I struggled to breathe.

Alex and Setek carried me rapidly by the arms, back down the corridor to the emergency rooms, my toes dragging the floor. Zakiya led the way. As she reached the room where we had left Jessie's body, she stopped and opened the door.

Some of this narration is reconstructed from later discussions because I could barely determine where I was, much less hear and remember words which were not English. All I could think was that I had lost them both, Jessie *and* Milly. All I could feel was helpless and hopeless. Prior to Zakiya opening the door, I was told the following words were spoken:

"The last thing I saw was his face. And there was so much pain in it! I was trying very hard not to die, but that was all I saw in his face - the shock and horror of knowing I was going to die. I *never* wanted to hurt him! I only wanted him to be happy. I wanted to give him a gift that I knew must make him happy. If we were a family, I thought, then we would have a home, even if we never found Earth."

Then Zakiya opened the door. Then she said: "Aylis! It's Sam! He's dying!" Then Aylis said: "The *hell* he is!"

"Sam? Sam! *Sam!*"

It was Jessie speaking! *Jessie was alive!* My spirit was electrified and my body responded as well as it could. I stumbled forth into the room, Alex and Setek still holding me, restraining me.

"Sam, would you tell her to be silent and concentrate on her job?" Aylis requested. "And don't die until I give you permission!"

"Sam!" Jessie cried. "They wouldn't let me see you! The baby!" Jessie

shouted a Korean obscenity that burned my ears and made me smile.

"That was a *darned* good push!" Aylis grabbed at something hidden by the tent over Jessie's knees. Nori was right beside her with a towel. Mai stopped whatever it was she was doing for Jessie and took two large strides to view what had happened. The three of them conversed in Standard and did things hidden from my view. They were intensely serious for agonizing moments, until Mai grabbed Aylis by the shoulders and Nori broke into a big smile. The next sound we heard was... a baby's complaint at being born! They worked furiously for a few moments and paused.

Then Mai said, "You were right! Look at the trend of her vitals. Sam is doing better, also."

"And good morning to you!" Aylis said to the baby.

Aylis looked at me and blinked her blue eyes, which made tears run down her flushed cheeks. She seemed almost in a state of shock. Nori had to help her walk around to me. Jessie found my hand and gripped it so tightly I had to tear my gaze from Aylis to see the exhausted and worried look on Jessie's face. Very shortly, trembling and weakened, she relaxed her hand.

Alex and Setek finally released me to let me lean against the bed and be nearer to Jessie. Aylis took small steps approaching us. Alex and Setek were privileged to view the bundle in Aylis's arms before she handed it down to Jessie. The bundle was too quiet. But it was quite alive and awake! Its eyes were open and already appearing to track the faces around it. It seemed to look at me, perhaps accusingly, or so I deserved. Then it looked at its mother. I think it smiled.

I helped Jessie hold the baby. I could feel Jessie shivering with emotion and taking excited gulps of air into her lungs as she touched the infant's face and stared into its wise little eyes. This moment in time transfixed me, as a new mother gazed so lovingly at her newborn. Our newborn. I blinked my eyes clear. I looked around at everyone in the birthing room and saw pure happiness on every face. It was a miracle. I thought no one could imagine what a miracle it was. I was sure they couldn't imagine how powerfully it affected me. My friend, my love, my life - my Jessie - risked dying to put such meaning into our lives.

I had ignored the risk, until she grew heavy with child. It terrified me as I suffered the realization of how many things could go wrong. Weeks of terror had passed. My only hope was that the Protector would know what to do. Guilt ate at me. It was impossible to hide my fear from Jessie. My fear became hers. My guilt became a towering burden. When Jessie went into labor I felt helpless. When she couldn't deliver on her own and began to bleed I could do nothing heroic or sane or intelligent. I just cried and let her die. Then my mind took its leave. I never washed the blood from my hands. I never ate. I never slept. How much time passed before the Protector found a way to bring us to the *Freedom*? How deep is hell, how long its dominion?

Mai and Nori continued to work on Jessie while the rest of us admired the baby. It had eyes like its mother's but of a color neither mine nor hers. It still seemed able to focus on our faces, which was precocious. It looked last at Zakiya and we followed its gaze to see Zakiya weeping.

"Are you unhappy?" Jessie asked, reaching a trembling hand toward Zakiya.

"I'm *very* happy," Zakiya answered, taking her hand. "Thank you for sharing this wonderful moment of your life with me!"

"You were right, Sam," Jessie said to me as she released Zakiya's hand.

"Humans come in many colors and they're all beautiful. I'm so happy." Jessie closed her eyes. Aylis tried to retrieve the baby but Jessie wouldn't let go, weak as she was. Then Jessie began to weep. "Thank you! Thank you! All of you! I must... I... so tired." Jessie took a deep breath and lost consciousness. Everyone looked at Aylis.

"She needs rest," Aylis said. "I had to quiet her. They both do. We'll let them sleep together. Mother and child."

Section 004

Questions and Answers

We stayed at the hospital while Aylis and her staff tried to solve the biological mysteries of my family. I couldn't pay much attention to their efforts, even though it should normally have fascinated me. My mind was still *wrong*. Why did I know Jessie completely, and yet feel she was so exotic and magical, as though I was meeting her for the first time? She was my companion forever, my wife, and the mother of my miracle child. Yet, she was suddenly fresh in my experience of her, suddenly overpowering, suddenly the center of my reason for existing. I was sensitive to every small detail of her appearance and enraptured by her every word or action. I could hardly believe she was real from one moment to the next. She was exquisite and she was *alien*. How did a poor boy from Earth become so rich in companionship?

I remembered Jessie when I first met her. She was such a brave little being, trying to interact with the big alien from Earth. I think I always assigned a female gender to her because she was obviously not male. Servants never wore clothing because they had no physical or social need. They were covered with a shimmering nap of tiny golden discs that were feathers with microscopic structure. Elongated feathers adorned their faces, and much longer hairy feathers crowned their heads. They had no gender, no reproductive organs. None of them stood more than a meter tall with their limbs folded and they varied in size and shape and color by tiny amounts. It took me years to be able to identify individuals, although I always knew which one was Jessie.

Jessie had evolved. I knew that as a fact, because I remembered what she was in the beginning, and I knew this was the same Jessie who breathed trustingly in her sleep beside me. I knew the original Jessie from the decades of life with her that I still remembered, with every discovery of her character and capabilities still sharp and marvelous in my memory. I knew this current Jessie as thoroughly as though she was a part of me. I could look into her eyes, listen to her voice, watch her face-feathers, appraise her lithe body, and know what she was thinking and feeling. All of those missing centuries in my memory must have ingrained and deepened a subconscious familiarity with her.

She was close to human now. She had grown to nearly my height. She had filled out to a slender approximation of human female proportions. She wore loose clothing that allowed her natural golden covering to breathe. Her feet had no toes and required no shoes, although she wanted to wear something on her feet because she said her soles were losing their toughness. Her hands had four nail-less digits with a palm that folded lengthwise for gripping, and she somehow added a thumb to its structure over the centuries. The thumb was a joy to her because she could hold my hand better. Perhaps I hadn't seen humans in such a long time, that her non-humanity now presented itself to me for fresh inspection. I found myself staring at her and adoring her. Only the tiny bundle in my lap was as profoundly exotic and lovable.

Jessie also seemed mentally disrupted, and all I could do was worry about her. Her death, resurrection, and miraculous motherhood should have traumatized her, but I think the baby kept her together. She loved the baby with a passion that radiated outward to touch everyone. It kept me from stepping over the edge into my personal black hole of memory loss.

And so, while strange human beings from a future-distant place subjected us

to endless examinations and asked us questions we couldn't answer, we huddled together as a new family and waited for the fuss around us to subside.

Aylis came to our hospital quarters one morning. Instead of her medical uniform she wore a simple maternity dress. I remembered Aylis emotionally, paying little attention to her physical appearance. As she sat down across from me I looked up from the baby in my lap and noticed how young she was. I was yet to learn to measure a person's age by their eyes. She was a very attractive woman, but with a unique structure of character in her pale face. She wasn't a movie star; she was a real person with real feelings that made her face an interesting and memorable landscape. I tried to fit this image of her into the turbulence of my memories of her. She didn't fit. She was someone else, or my memory was defective. "Memory." I said it to myself, although Aylis heard me clearly.

Jessie stirred from her nap. She was up late nursing the baby.

"What about memory?" Aylis asked softly. I shook my head. Aylis's kind face clouded with concern and disappointment. "I was hoping you would recover from whatever this is. You haven't said ten words to me since the day you got your memory - and Jessie - back."

"I didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Recover memory. I lost it. That's what's wrong."

"Which memory? I thought you recovered it, not lost it."

"I remember more. But there's still a large gap in my memory. I've lived too long. I can only remember that I used to remember more. I can't hold it all anymore."

"How old are you, Sam?" She knew when I was born but I thought I understood what she was asking. Time can be a tricky thing to measure, out here among the galaxies.

"I don't know. I couldn't remember how many vibrations of the atoms of what element made a human second. I don't know if my circadian rhythms averaged to a good approximation of a human day, or if I adjusted to Servant time. I only know I've lived continuously for a very long time and I can't get at all the memories in between the first sixty years of my life and the last few years."

"You lived *all seven hundred thirty-five years* since you were born?" Aylis was amazed and excited at getting that piece of data from me. I nodded in reply as Jessie rolled over and put her face next to the baby, kissed its golden head. "With no age treatments, no rejuvenation?"

"Not that I remember. I grew old before Jessie and I embarked on our search for Earth. Somehow I stayed alive and became younger during the voyage. I'm sorry I was too quiet. I'm getting better, but something disturbing is still taking place in my mind. I'm tired. I can't think clearly. My emotions are overworked. I just want to go home with my family."

"I'm sending you home. That's what I came to tell you." Aylis looked at us for a very long moment, as though trying to make the image indelible in her memory. "Go on. Get out of here."

* * *

I had to bring Jessie home in a floater - the modern, antigravity version of a wheelchair. Jessie was crippled by her horrendous labor. Her body had

somehow compensated to minimize damage to her and the baby during labor. Oxygen deprivation had concentrated its damage to her legs and one arm. Servants, I told Aylis, could recover completely from most injuries without medical help. But I wanted her to check Jessie thoroughly and often. Jessie had already regained some feeling. She reminded me of Milly, and she knew she did, and she tried not to compete with a memory she thought was sacred to me. I had to restrain her from trying too hard to make her legs work or trying to avoid the floater chair. She would drag herself across the floor before she would ask to be put into that chair. I was just relieved she was apparently not seriously damaged mentally.

Home was not in the Protector. I expected it to disappear from our lives. It had brought us to this outpost of Earth. Its job was done. I assumed it would find its way back to Jessie's home world. I didn't think about it much, even though the Protector was my entire world for most of my life with Jessie. The absence of its silent omnipresence would leave a big hole.

We settled into a daily routine in our apartment by the lake. We rose early to feed and bathe the baby. I ordered breakfast and did the few chores not handled well by automated devices. I could see the Protector floating above the center of the lake from the kitchen window. It didn't depart, as I thought it would. It must have further business with Jessie and me but I didn't want to think about it.

After breakfast Aylis made her house call while I cleaned the kitchen. I was pretty sure Aylis had never before made house calls. I understood her desire to see Jessie and the baby in person and I was grateful. Aylis was fascinated by them. "Do you have a name yet?" she would ask every day.

A name. Our baby had no gender. There were a few human names that might be given to male or female. It was too difficult for me to decide. I wanted Jessie to name the baby. Hopefully time would reveal a name.

"You have very unusual DNA," Aylis said to Jessie one morning. This was an understatement, because I could interpret the perplexed look on Aylis's face to mean she understood little about Jessie's DNA. "I don't know how you were able to become pregnant by a human. Perhaps I'll never know!"

I don't know why Aylis brought this up, because we covered the subject before, more than once. I suppose she couldn't believe Jessie didn't have the answers she so desperately wanted. It wasn't that Jessie's people were lesser intellects, as the name Servant might imply - far from it. But it was hard to imagine why the Servants never applied their ample curiosity to the mysteries of their own biology. They never wondered why they never became ill. If they were injured they always healed perfectly. I was their first example of an imperfect organism. Only after my arrival did they take an interest in biology.

"Everything happened gradually," Jessie patiently replied. "And it was always what I wanted. I don't know how or why I was able to give Sam a baby. It's a great mystery and I think I can appreciate how complex it must be."

"Are you sure the baby has any of my DNA?" I asked. I still needed to be reassured I was really the father of Jessie's baby.

"Quite sure," Aylis replied, reluctantly handing Nameless back to Jessie.

"Even though you can't understand Jessie's DNA?"

"You're right to question my judgment in this case. My confidence is less science than intuition at this point. This is a revolution in genetics. I'm not telling you everything we've discovered - I haven't explained it to myself yet. But I know this child has something in its genes that isn't from Jesse, something that looks human, and it must be from you. And the baby isn't even the most

interesting mystery in your family, Sam." Aylis got up to leave and frowned at Jessie, before relaxing into a smile. I knew what she was about to say, because I knew Jessie was her most interesting mystery. "How did you become female?" She muttered it to herself, a phrase that escaped her almost every time she was in Jessie's presence. "Your DNA is a paradox inside an enigma. It's very exciting for me, and also humbling. I thought I knew a lot about genetics. Apparently I don't."

"Is our baby well?" Jessie asked.

Aylis smiled the answer. "In as much as it's human, it seems perfect. I think you would know before I, if there was something wrong. I only hope my little girl is that strong and beautiful." She rubbed her pregnant stomach. "Are you still having discomfort, Jessie?"

"Some." Jessie looked thoughtfully at Aylis's inflated shape. "When can I have another baby?"

Aylis started to react to the statement, then saw Jessie's little smile grow larger. She patted Jessie on the shoulder and said, "You keep that man out of your bed until we test a good contraceptive for you."

Jessie waited until Aylis turned to depart, then said: "Why would I want a contraceptive?"

Aylis turned back to Jessie, to be met with a very human expression of feigned innocence. Aylis opened her mouth to start a lecture, then must have decided it was best to assume Jessie was being facetious. After Aylis was gone, Jessie laughed and gave me a certain look with a swirl of face feathers. She wasn't joking. I was content to let her enjoy the moment. I wouldn't try to balance her notion of parenthood with what little I could deduce of the possible problems ahead. Part of the instinct to reproduce must be the automatic ignorance of the consequences.

I spent several hours each morning trying to catch up on centuries of history. Jessie was interested in human history, too, but required far less repetition than I did. I had to see things over and over, because there was so much I couldn't believe the first few times I saw it. Why did tragedy always get top billing in the human epic? Why was idiocy such a powerful trait? I felt ashamed to have Jessie learn human history. I had warned her.

After lunch Jessie and I took the baby for a stroll around the ship. When we first started this part of the routine we hardly saw anyone, but every day the route became more popular with other people. They wanted to see Jessie and the baby. It helped that Jessie was delighted to meet everyone, and word spread that she was approachable. I humbly understood how privileged I was to belong to Jessie. I proudly appreciated how beautiful and magical Jessie and Nameless were. I promised myself I would rein in my pride someday.

After our usual long stroll I spent two hours pouring facts into my brain with a machine that bypassed the natural resistance of a human to accept education. It scared me to open myself to such unfiltered input, but I was hungry for current knowledge. I felt dismally ignorant when I imagined what someone like Aylis knew.

Education and knowledge were different in this future time. If, for instance, I wanted to be a physicist, my gray matter only needed a certain amount of organizational knowledge. The vast details of theory, formulae, and computation would be installed as a data augment in my body where it would function like a very smart part of my brain. It seemed like cheating. I liked it.

Every afternoon I learned and retained what would have required a semester

at college when I was a young man. After the cram session I had to lie down and peruse my new mental assets, or else I would fall down and peruse them. How much more data could my poor old brain accept? I was ready for a data augment or two, maybe genius-grade models.

Jessie and I ate supper. Then, like old times in the 20th century, we looked for entertainment before bedtime. The old flat movies were interesting for awhile, especially since many were in English and could be viewed as holographic reproductions. We got a tip from Wingren that we should check out a production called the Mother Earth Opera. I tried to stay conscious through all of it but Jessie had to keep punching me awake. I vaguely remembered music was important to me early in my life - but opera? It wasn't classical opera. Old opera was really over the top: plays about people suffering tragedy and singing like vocal gymnasts. It took powerful lungs to reach forty rows back in an opera hall without audio amplification. The Mother Earth Opera was more about poetry set to music. I liked it and knew I would eventually need to invest in the language skills (more augments) to fully appreciate its art. But it was still too long to stay inside my 20th-century attention span.

Our day usually began with "A" for Aylis and ended with "Z" for Zakiya. She looked in on us late in the evening. This particular evening we were watching our *third* night of the Mother Earth Opera. I don't know why Jessie wanted to experience the entire production. Maybe it helped her release her milk to Nameless. Zakiya came in through the patio door just as a woman who looked like her was walking onto the stage in Florida in a yellow dress I'd seen Zakiya wear numerous times. That woke me up. Zakiya saw the hologram and turned to leave.

"No, wait," I said. "That's you!"

Zakiya waved and departed. Nothing could make her stay. Jessie pulled me down beside her.

"Zakiya sings."

"Yes. But how..."

"When we were in the hospital she sang a lullaby to the baby. Remember?"

That I remembered. I was touched by her concern, surprised at the care with which she sang the lullaby. I remembered Wingren had some strange connection to Zakiya that was always a kind of joke to people, and since she recommended the show, I paid close attention to what we were seeing. There she was. It was her! Zakiya was talking to the host of the Opera as though she knew him.

Zakiya sang - to make a monstrous understatement! She made the hair on the back of my neck stand up, sent chills through me. She closed the Mother Earth Opera with a performance that was astounding. When she began to sing that set of complex songs - five songs, five different languages - I thought she made a wrong turn. The preceding blues ballad was so simple and beautiful. The audience clearly dismissed her as an overreaching amateur. But by the time she slipped into the second of the difficult songs, I knew she had impressed everyone. At the third song's middle, people were starting to stand up, as though that would help them hear better. What they heard was a voice without limits. Every note was easy, precise, and rich, no matter where it rose and fell on the tone scale. Every syllable and every word could be heard clearly. Every phrase seemed to carry the weight of meaning it needed to convey. I spoke none of the five languages but I could believe Zakiya knew exactly what she was saying in song. It was a clear and intimate sound. Even the highest notes were a pleasure to hear and not an assault on an altitude record. By the time she started the last

song, everyone in the audience was standing. Then, before she was quite finished with the last song, Zakiya did the completely unexpected. Even her accompanist was surprised. She took those five songs and deconstructed them into an amazingly melodic jazz and blues composition. The accompanist had finally got the feel of the piece and they were getting ready to make it fly, when they abruptly stopped. The accompanist pointed to something. Zakiya ran and the camera followed her. For several moments I couldn't see exactly what she was doing, although I could see how emotional she was. When she turned around with the child in her arms I could finally see who it was.

My days of blissful recuperation ended. Now I remembered - as if I had wanted to forget it - that Zakiya had told me I was already a father. I remembered the poor little boy in the hospital morgue. I remembered they spoke the name *Milly* to me.

I watched the recording as Zakiya brought Samson onto the stage. It was as though I saw them in slow motion, able to notice every detail: the joy of both, the look of love between them, the injury to his leg. Zakiya sang *Un Bel Di*, the cameras staying mainly on Sammy, catching every expression, presenting the tragic mystery of his existence to most of humanity - especially to me.

Samson looked like Milly. I was shocked that I could still remember how Milly looked. I was upset I didn't tell Jessie about Samson. I was so upset I couldn't speak

"What's wrong?" Jessie asked me when the show was over. I could only point to Sammy. "Who is he? Is he on the ship? Why was he so terribly injured?"

Jessie was already upset at seeing the injured child. Now I had to tell her he was dead. He was dead... How was he ever alive? Why did Zakiya have him, seven hundred years after I last saw Milly? Milly who was his mother. Milly? I had seen his body when I was not in a sane state of mind, its meaning lost to me. Now I saw it again, and the importance of it thundered into me and laid me low. I was devastated. Jessie actually tried to get up from the floater, carrying Nameless, and that broke me out of my tears and melancholy. I went to Jessie and urged her to sit down. Her legs were quickly regaining their use but it was not a smooth progress. She could still lose her balance or stumble.

"Please, sit down," I asked. "Give me a little time. I'll be alright." But I would not be alright, not ever. If the dead child was my son, then he had to be Milly's son. That meant she was pregnant when I last saw her. That raised the enormity of my losing her another order of magnitude. I would never be able to reconcile the opposite polarities of my emotions: being joyous for having Jessie and Nameless, being grieved for losing Milly and Sammy.

When I got Jessie to sit back down, I collapsed on the floor at her feet. Jessie couldn't get a clear word out of me and she hit the "panic button," a priority signal that would alert Aylis to any medical problem we might develop. Alex and Zakiya arrived first and urged me off the floor and onto the sofa. Aylis came next and looked into my face as her fingertips pressed into my neck and chest. Jessie had joined me on the floor and she was helped up by Nori, with Mai holding Nameless. In a few more minutes I would glimpse a number of other people standing outside on our patio in the moonlight.

When she had heard from Jessie and Zakiya about what had transpired this evening because of the Mother Earth Opera, Aylis made her diagnosis. "Grief," she said. "You haven't told him everything, have you?" She was looking at Zakiya.

"We were waiting, Aylis," Alex answered for his wife, as Zakiya was too

unhappy to talk.

"And now the waiting is over!" Aylis decreed. She was clearly upset but I didn't have the mental faculties at the moment to assess her mood or anyone else's. Aylis tried to get my attention, tried to look into my eyes and see if I was at home. "Look at me, Sam. Look at me! Listen to what I say. There is something of Sammy that survived. It's like a living copy of his personality and memories. It may be possible to eventually restore him to life in a partially cloned body."

I must have reacted with apparent skepticism. One never wants to build up hopes to where they can come crashing down.

"I see you're going to be just as hard to convince as Zakiya. All she wants to do is feel guilty. Just give me time and find a certain monster named Shorty and I think we can have Sammy asking us questions again, and again. As for Milly..." Aylis grabbed my head between her two hands and pulled me almost against her nose, so we were looking cross-eyed at each other. "... Milly is still alive! Do you understand my words? *Milly is still alive!*" She released me, looked over at Jessie, then back at me. "Got any questions?"

I was speechless; not so Jessie. "Where is she?" Jessie asked. "When can we see her? Why did she lose Sammy?"

"It's a long story. But I think we need to begin with your story, Jessie, yours and Sam's and Milly's. Because it's all tied together. Can you tell us about Sam and Milly first? I don't think Sam is very talkative right now. Maybe he can help in a little while."

Jessie gave a very detailed narration of my life with Milly, the explosion of ideas we had, culminating in the Hole Project and my teleportation far across the universe. I probably told the story to her a hundred times, and she remembered it better than I did. I listened with good attention, all the while also thinking about Milly and wondering how Aylis knew she was still alive. When Jessie described the teleportation and the "Easter egg," I thought we were going to spend the rest of the night discussing physics theory. I was no longer interested in physics theory. Aylis put a halt to it.

"Let me summarize," Aylis said, "and then let us move on. If I have it wrong, well, too bad! Sam and Milly built two identical gates and operated them simultaneously, which had the effect of turning on a universe-spanning signal which Jessie's people intercepted. They sent a device through that Sam described as an Easter egg and that we know as a cryptikon. When Sam went to retrieve it, it was teleported with him to Jessie's world, but it was supposed to stay on Earth to open a permanent communications link. Also, one gate on Earth was damaged and was not repaired, thus keeping Sam from being teleported back to Earth. However, there was a mysterious number, called the One-Time Basement Vector, that could have been tried as a last resort to send Sam home. Jessie felt it was too risky, being an unproven theory that also implied time travel. Sam would have arrived back on Earth at the same moment in time that he left it. End of science discussion. We can say right now that Mister and Missus Lee do not exist in any histories or databases we have aboard the *Freedom*. There are inconclusive references to a Samuel Lee and a Millicent DuPont that at least place their names in the proper era and locations. The Hole Project was obviously kept completely secret forever.

"Now I would ask Zakiya," Aylis continued, "to give Sam and Jessie a condensed version of our story, perhaps beginning with our early problems with the Navy."

I began to pay even better attention as Zakiya talked about barbarians invading the Union Navy, and she and her Deep Space crewmates launching a plan to do something about it. Then, just as the final phase began, she found Sammy wandering alone in Africa. As often as she must have told the story, people still had questions to ask. Aylis tried to limit the questions and keep Zakiya focused on the main elements of the story. The voice of Milly, the Lady in the Mirror, and the Golden Ones convinced me that it was not pure chance that brought Jessie and me aboard the *Freedom*. And I was convinced Milly could still be alive. Aylis studied me, trying to assess my mental state and whether I understood most of the facts and implications.

"Can we do anything about Milly and the Golden Ones?" I asked.

"Can your ship help us?" Alex asked.

Jessie and I looked at each other. She shook her head. "It isn't a ship," I said. "I'm sorry we haven't told you much about it. It's called the Protector. It has protected the Servants for as long as they can remember. It has never helped them do anything. It has never spoken to them. It consented to help Jessie and me find Earth, and that is the only special thing it has ever done. It made accommodations inside itself for Jessie and me and it seemed to respond to our requests for furnishings and some other matters. Obviously it took it upon itself to contact you because Jessie's life was threatened by her pregnancy. It's very doubtful we could get it to cooperate with us, although it must be considering some further interaction with us, since it hasn't left us and gone back to Jessie's world."

"Iggy wants to know if we can go inside it and look around," Aylis said.

"We can but try," I replied. Mai and Nori loaded Jessie and Nameless into the floater and I took control of the chair from behind it, just like an old-fashioned wheelchair. We had just got everybody out the porch door to join the others, when the Protector appeared next to the patio. The Protector must have been listening to us, and its appearance might be anticipation of - and tacit acceptance of - our request to board it. Everyone moved aside and let me guide Jessie to the middle of the dumbbell. The Protector was a rather eerie sight, floating in the night and glimmering in the artificial moonlight. Then it opened the portal and stuck out its golden tongue of a ramp.

"Oh, *hell!*" Aylis declared, seeing how small the portal was. "I just knew it was going to shrink us!"

"Welcome to the Magic Kingdom," I said. I started pushing Jessie onto the pool of gold at the bottom of the ramp, and the people behind us instantly swelled to giants.

"It didn't do this when we brought Jessie out from the black cube," Aylis complained, but I think it was her hand that seized my shoulder as she followed behind me.

I thought the Protector was overdoing it a bit, for as we all transitioned to the slope of the ramp, it looked like the interstate version of the yellow brick road. We could walk ten abreast easily, and the distant portal looked cavernous. Looking back at our porch and patio behind our apartment was like leaving the land of the giants. I was amazed as well, as the Protector had never done anything like this before. For a brief moment I thought I remembered Jessie and me spending years working on theories of how the Protector did its magic. We had produced a very spooky hypothesis. I felt spooked myself as I led the way into an infinity of universes.

The narration of Samuel Lee pauses here.

Section 005

Melvin

Fred was inquisitive. He didn't know if he acquired that trait from Baby - probably - but he was grateful for it as it sometimes gave him a few moments of distraction. Distraction, it seemed, was the constant goal of most human beings; it allowed them to ignore the basic questions about life that always pointed toward life being meaningless. Pan was often distracted by memories of a long life that were only now becoming accessible. Fred would listen to Pan describe his memories and he would feel happy to know more about Pan. But for a person such as himself, a sentient being housed within a machine, it was also a lesson in how different Pan's life must be, having relatives and all the other complications caused by biology. These, too, were distractions away from meaningless existence.

As Pan slept, Fred explored the surrounding landscape, usually in the dark, looking for anything that would affect their journey. It was a journey toward destruction, Fred was sure. It was just as well; he could hardly bear the burden of sentient existence. He must be missing some trick of logic that made thoughts more entertaining and less stark and existential. This particular night Fred was able to shunt some of the repetitious reasoning to a lower priority and focus on a sound he knew did not fit into the nocturnal chorus of wildlife. He was surprised he had the capacity to filter out the normal sounds. It was an interesting process, a useful entertainment and diversion. Perhaps this foreign sound was simply an animal new to Fred's experience. He determined what he needed to do to track the sound without disturbing his target. He had all night to make his discovery. The result would probably be of no importance, but the small chance it was a useful task allowed Fred to ignore everything he wanted to ignore.

Fred deduced it was a medium-size animal from the volume of sound, and then it got quieter. Fred raised his audio gain, tightened his filters, and stood silently, his machinery making no sound. It was a bipedal creature Fred decided after listening for about an hour. It was also aware of him, circling him but remaining in the vicinity. Fred could catch intermittent glimpses in the infrared through the ground foliage of this forested terrain. Fred was building a composite description from the fragmentary visual data. It was becoming an even more interesting exercise. He thought about Samson as he considered the possible entities that could be walking the night on the empty Earth. The creature was larger than Samson but there was something strange about how the infrared came and went, as though it was shuttered.

"Are you going to hurt me?" a small voice called softly across the dark.

"No," Fred answered. He was surprised and could think of nothing to add to his response. He simply waited, and soon the sounds of friction with the undergrowth indicated the creature approached. Even in the obscuring darkness Fred could see well enough to be startled by the alien appearance of the being. It came right up to him, stood there, and looked up at him. Fred lowered himself so as not to emphasize the difference in stature. The little person smiled a human smile and grew taller, one leg at a time, as its legs unfolded and locked a third segment in place. It now stood slightly taller than Fred but Fred chose to remain kneeling.

"May I touch you, Sir Robot?" the creature inquired.

"Are you going to hurt me?" Fred asked.

"Not tonight." It unfolded one arm, just as its legs had unfolded. The other arm was held across its chest where its fingers curled around one of the shoulder straps of the backpack it carried. It paused with a finger near Fred's face. "Can you be hurt?"

"I can feel pain," Fred answered.

"Can you feel that?" It pushed a digit into Fred's cheek.

"Yes. What is your name and what are you?"

"Well, now we're getting personal. I suppose I invited that. My human name is Melvin. I've forgot my Servant name. No great loss; it was numerical."

"You are a servant, as in one who serves people?"

"I served the Masters, but they abandoned us."

"Would you consent to meet my former master, Melvin?" Fred could suspend his amazement at meeting this alien being for only so long. He knew Pan would be even more amazed and interested. It seemed important that Pan learn of Melvin's existence.

"former master?" Melvin repeated. "Is he human?"

"Earthian, Rhyan, and Essiin."

"Mixed up. Good guy or bad guy?"

"Good guy. A famous musician. I know he would be very excited to meet you."

"I'm sure! Well, I have a problem with humans, Neapolitan flavor included. I assume he doesn't know of my kind, judging from your reaction. OK, I'm in it up to my neck already. What is your name, Sir Robot?"

"Fred. Please follow me, Melvin. I forget my manners. Very pleased to meet you, Melvin."

"Maybe me, too. We'll see. Damned persistent robot! Why are a robot and a musician wandering through Mississippi at this time of my life?"

"I'm an autonomous machine intelligence, Melvin," Fred said, rising and turning in the direction to where Pan was camped.

"I suspected as much." Melvin sounded appreciative. He followed as Fred began to walk. "I hesitate to ask, but could you possibly be spontaneous? You have a certain feeling to your elocution."

"I am, in a manner of speaking, the son of a spontaneous AMI. He borrowed my body for a time, and when he departed, I was me."

"Wait." Melvin stopped behind Fred. Fred turned around to see what was wrong. "You said your name is Fred. Right?"

"Right."

"I'm beginning to remember something. And it gives me the willies!"

"What are the 'willies?'" Fred asked.

"I don't know but I'm sure they've been given to me! By you!"

"How can I take them back?"

"Oh, don't be so literal! Or are you being humorous? It is not a humorous thing, these willies! In all of this wilderness, for all of these centuries, have I been searching for a being named Fred? Perhaps so! She's the craziest one of the lot, and now I have to prove she was right! Lead on, McDuff!"

At this outburst Fred collected several more questions he wanted Melvin to answer, but he knew Pan would need to learn the same answers. It seemed life was worth living, if he could survive the bleak periods between moments such as this. He led Melvin through the dark, choosing a path that was both comfortable and close to the shortest route to Pan. Fred thought to make some

noise as they approached the camp, as a warning or to wake Pan, but his friend was not in the camp site. It was almost dawn. Pan was probably taking care of certain biological functions - good - that would give him a little more comfort following the shock of meeting Melvin.

"Have a seat," Fred suggested, pointing to a flat rock that had been Pan's supper table the previous evening. "Pan will return shortly."

"His name is Pan? No other name for him?"

"A rather long family name. And a stage name. Why?"

"I'm trying to remember what she said! It's been a few centuries!"

Fred stood and listened for Pan approaching. Melvin folded its legs up, shed its backpack, and sat on the rock. The sky began to change from night into day. Fred could now see the alien's face clearly and it was covered with pale growth somewhat like feathers. A piece of tied fabric served as a cap, from the edges of which long feathers escaped down its slender neck. It had a large head with large eyes. It wore shoes of strange manufacture, perhaps made by Melvin itself. Otherwise it was naked but for a natural covering that began to look golden as the daylight approached. Its arms and legs appeared unnaturally short and fat in their folded mode.

As he heard him coming, Fred turned to watch Pan approach. This would be interesting. Pan halted a few meters away as he noticed Melvin. He stared at Melvin for a long time. Pan looked at Fred and nodded a querying expression toward Melvin. He was not quite as shocked as Fred predicted.

"Its name is Melvin."

"Hello, Melvin," Pan greeted it.

"Greetings, human named Pan. What's for breakfast? As long as it isn't me."

Pan resumed his approach, once the shock passed into incredulity. Even as he studied the creature, it studied him. There was no doubt in Pan's mind that this was an alien sentient being. The state of the art in robotics was quite advanced and the use of robotic fictional creations was nearly flawless in visual entertainments. But Melvin could be no such machine, not in this rustic setting. It was quite a beautiful thing, shimmering golden in the first indirect rays of dawn. Pan experienced a deeply positive emotional reaction to Melvin. He was about to put his shirt on but stopped and knelt down in the dry leaves in front of Melvin.

"Stop that!" Melvin demanded.

"Stop what?" Pan inquired.

"Humans are a magical race. They can make us change. I don't want to change! Someone has to remain sane in this dreadful place. Is your name Pan or is it Petros?"

"I'm not Petros. Why would you think that? How do you know of Petros?" The alien speaking the name *Petros* sent a chill down Pan's spine. To meet a real alien was near the limit of Pan's grasp on reality, but to realize it knew of Petros and, therefore, probably other important matters, *that* was too much to swallow at once. "Fred," Pan addressed his friend, "would you speak for me while I try to regain my wits?"

"He's dark," Melvin said, pointing at Pan with a stubby arm. Melvin had no thumbs. "Petros was supposed to be dark. But he had stripes."

"What else do you know of Petros?" Fred asked. "We may not be speaking of the same person."

"It's been too long! I'm amazed I remember that much! But you do know a human named Petros?"

"We do," Fred answered. "I would also bet it is the same person. This seems important to you. Would you tell us why?"

Melvin said nothing for several moments. It looked from Fred to Pan, back and forth, until it kept its gaze on Pan. It slowly unfolded one arm and extended it toward Pan. It had to lean forward a little, and then it could touch Pan. Melvin retracted its arm and shivered. "Petros is going to kill us all."

"He *is* a violent person," Fred commented, "however, I can't believe he would kill us. He would have done so, already."

"Oh, not you and me. At least not directly. But all the Golden Ones, as they call themselves. My former fellow beings. No great loss. But when they die, The Lady dies. And when The Lady dies, the barbarians will come. Who is this Petros you know of, Fred?"

Fred looked at Pan to ask his opinion of what to reveal to Melvin. Pan found his voice again. "Petros is the Navy Commander."

"Yes! That was foretold! Now I remember! It is just as Constant said, these many centuries ago. But why would he kill the Golden Ones? What am I still forgetting?"

"Do you think Petros knows of these Golden Ones?" Pan asked, feeling his emotions lowering toward some tolerable level. He cared profoundly for the well-being of this little alien. He wondered if Etrhkn - Petros - could experience such an emotion in his poisoned state.

"Absolutely! All barbarians know of us and fear us. Constant will have made his personal acquaintance. All Navy Commanders answer directly to Golden Ones and do as we order them to do. How else can the Union survive?"

"I don't believe Petros will harm your people."

"Don't tell me about how you think he will have warm and fuzzy feelings about the Golden Ones! I can see that look in your human face. You think I'm so adorable. How can anyone want to harm us?" That was clearly sarcasm.

"Oh, I suspect Petros is a killer. But I've talked to him recently. I've told him who he really is, who he was. I think and hope he's changing. But it is I who has the task that you tell me will bring an end to civilization."

"What task is that?"

"The Lady in the Mirror has asked me to kill her."

Section 006

Menagerie

She regarded him for a long time afterward. She was, Etrhnk thought, trying to make up her mind about something. He could imagine what that was: when to send him to the games to die. That Constant had feelings for him was easily apparent, despite her almost flippant manner around him. What those feelings were remained opaque to him. She could not love him, not in the normal sense, even if either of them knew what was normal. He thought he saw some sadness and regret in her exquisite and busy face. Her nose and mouth, her eyes and ears, all were easily familiar forms of functions, yet they were not human. Her expressions were human in the basic ways, yet the mobile feathers and alien geometries almost made Constant seem more than human, not less. That such an exotic creature could find human manners useful was a kind of compliment to humans.

"How much longer do you think I have?" Etrhnk asked, placing a pair of his fingers on her arm and watching the feathers shrink to expose the flesh beneath. He would never tire of touching her.

"Longer than you probably think," Constant answered.

"Have you selected my replacement?" He didn't care who might replace him. He was merely restless. If he was going to lose Constant, and lose his life, he couldn't see waiting as a desirable process. Etrhnk had never been impatient, until now.

"I don't care who they pick or when they pick." Constant spoke morosely. "We can go ask them if you like. Would you like to meet the whole feathered menagerie?"

Etrhnk studied Constant's mood as carefully as he could, trying to understand how he should reply to her proposal. It was perhaps a serious offer. It did not, however, seem wise of Constant to expose all - or most - of her fellow beings to a barbarian, especially one with too little left to lose. One of his own most common tasks was repairing the mess made by a fellow barbarian who had decided to make a spectacular exit from life as his genetic flaws began to take his body down. "That might be dangerous," he warned.

"Why? Are you planning to kill us all?"

Etrhnk was startled to hear Constant voice such an idea. He pulled his fingers away from her warm skin, feeling cast adrift in the ocean of his own ignorance. "Why would I want to do that?" He hoped Constant understood him better than her question implied. He could never harm a Golden One, even if the consequences were not so cataclysmic as they would be. A single Golden One was once killed, and The Lady destroyed an entire world and billions of people as punishment and as a warning.

"How can you be so deadly, and yet so innocent?" Constant wondered aloud. "How can I love you so much, knowing how futile it is?"

"You should never love me, Constant. I am not worthy."

"What do you even know of real love?"

"I think I once knew, when I was not this fool you think you love."

"Etrhnk! You're trying to be honest with me! You're telling me you used to be someone else, someone who was not a barbarian. You lived a previous life. You had a different name. Let me guess what that name was. Was it Petros?"

Etrhnk was again surprised, but Constant probably spied on him when he met

Pan for the last time. Who knew what spy technology the Golden Ones possessed? He was now concerned for Pan, even for his android AMI. "Where did you hear that name?"

"You would never believe me. Is there more to your name? I know it's Greek."

"Gerakis is my family name." Etrhmk was relieved to know Constant had not heard Pan tell him who his parents were.

"The name is vaguely familiar. Who were your parents, and how long ago?"

"I never knew my real parents. I would prefer not to say more because I have dishonored them."

"I'm in no position to judge morality, but you seem too concerned with ethics."

"I admit I am late in elevating its importance to me. I will continue the trend by making a confession to you." Etrhmk hesitated a moment, then plunged ahead. It might be the last time he saw Constant. It concerned him that Constant said she loved him. She should stop. As with humans, the person Constant loved - himself - was probably less a matter of choice than it was opportunity. It could probably be turned off with a sufficiently negative statement. He would tell her what he had done to Aylis Mnro. That would turn off Constant's love. And so he told her. It was a mild surprise that it hurt him to tell her, but that was justice. Then he began dressing. Constant hit him when his back was to her. It didn't hurt him physically. He didn't turn around. He could hear her weeping. He continued dressing.

The universe flickered, trading one reality for another. Etrhmk knew he had passed through a gate. He was half dressed, standing in an unfamiliar corridor. Constant stood behind him, still naked, only dressed in her golden brilliance. He saw she still wept. Even as upset as she was, she took his hand and pulled him along. They walked down a corridor, its floor a shiny black, reflecting Constant's form. Around a corner another Golden One appeared and halted, alarmed at the sight of them.

"Go to the meeting room!" Constant ordered. "Tell any others you see to join you there!"

Constant led Etrhmk into a small room at the end of the corridor. He could not determine the nature of the equipment the room contained. Constant spent almost half an hour with the console, her eyes seeing and directing the equipment in a process perhaps analogous to how humans interfaced with sophisticated hardware. "There!" she said angrily. "All of them! Let's go."

Down another plain corridor Constant pulled him, her bare feet making an almost wooden sound as they struck the floor. A door at the end opened at their approach and closed behind them as they passed into the large room beyond. Thirty voices erupted at once as Etrhmk gazed upon that many Golden Ones.

They were all the same yet they were diverse. All were dressed in some loose and casual fashion. All appeared mostly human but in varying degrees of approximation. Perhaps Constant and Laplace were the closest to human standards. Some were shorter, some taller, most female and a few male. None of them were heavy. Several were partly bare of their golden covering. The color of the bare skin was mixed and not human, mainly favoring shades of orange and laced with patterns in dark, almost metallic colors. Even the large eyes diverged into subtle shades in a blue spectrum.

The vocal tumult slowly subsided as Constant remained silent yet challenging to them. Laplace among all of them was the least disturbed. He

approached casually but carefully, his favorite fencing foil already in hand. "Is he the one?" Laplace's question caused silence among the others.

"Do you remember what I told you more than six hundred years ago?"

"Kind of hard to forget the rantings of a lunatic," Laplace said, "although the details are about gone. Something about a Navy admiral who would kill us all. Refresh our memories."

"What I never told you at the time was that I did not arrive when all of you did. I appeared to be the last of you to make the jump to Earth. In fact, I was already here."

"More crazy nonsense!" Laplace declared. "What would it prove, if true?"

"I was here a *century* before all of you," Constant stated. "It proves nothing, but it might be suggestive if you could remember that time better. Do any of you remember exactly what this lunatic ranted about?"

One of the smallest and least human stepped forward. "I have your words in my journal, Constant. You did not say he would kill us. You said he would cause our death."

"Semantics!" Laplace argued. "Anybody can make vague predictions that, given time, have a good chance of happening. We can all see there is an eventual end to this situation. The Lady is dying. She's been dying for hundreds of years. What makes Etrhnk the one? Because he's the baddest one we've seen?"

"Tone," Constant said, addressing the smallest Golden One, the one who remembered best. "Tell me the name I gave Etrhnk."

"Petros."

"Now give me the name of his father."

"Alexandros."

"And his mother."

"Zakiya."

Constant turned to Etrhnk. She still held his hand, her four fingers curled tightly around two of his fingers. "Will you lie to me and tell me those are not the names of your parents?"

Etrhnk was nearly struck dumb. Six hundred years ago Constant had spoken his name and the names of his parents! "How could you know that?" His deep voice almost lost its control.

"And now it fits together," Constant said. "A couple of hundred years ago I got a little anxious about a famous man with the name Alexandros Gerakis. Who happens to be Etrhnk's father! We thought we got rid of him and his wife. Wrong wife. But the right man. Somehow Petros got born. Damn! I bet I know who your mother was. We have all the old Deep Space records. There were only two women on the *Frontier*. He might have impregnated one of them."

"One of them was named *Zakiya* Muenda," the small Tone offered. "The other was... Aylis Mnro!" She said the second name with dramatic pause.

"Igor Khalanov was one of the *Frontier* crew!" another Golden One offered. "They didn't even change their names! His mother is Zakiya Muenda."

"And I heard her sing," Constant said. "So did Etrhnk. You knew she was your mother! That's why you let her take the *Freedom*. Speak up, Etrhnk! *Petros*! What else do you know?"

"I remember nothing of my previous life." Etrhnk was still trying to reason how Constant knew so long ago who he was. If she knew, why wasn't she more effective in stopping Demba? Why couldn't she have just killed him as soon as she realized who he was? "I've been told a few facts by someone who knew me

or knew of me. Admiral Demba is my biological mother. I only learned that after the *Freedom* escaped. My sister is also aboard the *Freedom*. They have taken the ship to search for my father and three others. That I let them go is probably the act that threatens you. If I had thought at the time it could bring harm to the Golden Ones, I would have prevented it. I have spent my life trying to hold the Union together and now I have information the *Freedom* could, in fact, pose a danger. It disappeared from inside a secret facility."

"Disappeared?"

"It jumped."

"It's too large!" Laplace argued.

"The evidence is ambiguous. The asteroid was destroyed by a delayed explosion, making analysis difficult. But knowing what we know of jumpships places the probability higher that the *Freedom* was modified at this facility to achieve jump capability. There is also another fact that should add to your concern. My mother has two other names by which she was known, and one of them is Keshona."

Constant looked at Etrhnk with changing expressions. He had kept secrets from her which should have angered her. He had betrayed her theoretical love for him which should have hurt her. Still she gripped the fingers of his hand. Still she was able to look at him without total disgust. She was old, older than he could comprehend. It was probably impossible for her to dwell on such brief passions. As Constant stared at him, and as the voices of Golden Ones fought to state arguments and facts, Etrhnk found himself reaching a state of relaxation, if not enjoyment. He accepted the future, whatever it was, he accepted the past, whatever it was, and he lived in the moment, however brief it was.

"Have you reached a decision?" Constant asked almost sarcastically as quiet returned to the gathering.

"Death," Laplace answered.

"We don't make such decisions," Constant objected. "The Lady does. None of us has ever killed a human."

"And she or the humans - the barbarians - will kill him," Laplace said. "He goes to Oz to fight in the games. Now."

Constant would not turn loose of him. Two of the Golden Ones pulled her away, pulled her fingers loose from his. Etrhnk saw two blue oceans of tears in Constant's eyes, and then she was gone forever.

Section 007

Volunteer

The narration of Samuel Lee resumes.

"Do you think you have conscious control over your genetic design?" Aylis asked Jessie, reading the vital signs of Nameless with her fingertips. "You have ten fingers. Nameless has only eight. You don't seem concerned, so perhaps that's normal?"

"I grew thumbs," Jessie said. "I wanted thumbs. I used to visualize having thumbs. One day my hands started to itch inside. It took years but the itches became bumps and the bumps became thumbs. Then I contemplated bigger changes but I think they were already happening. I had arms and legs with an extra joint in each. The joints began fusing and single elbows and knees developed. You can still feel where the old joints were." She offered an arm to Aylis and showed her where to feel for the lumps in her bones. "I was partially crippled for years while my limbs changed. I don't remember wanting each and every thing that changed in me. It wasn't a pleasant process to undergo. No, I don't think I had conscious control of my metamorphosis."

"And babies? Did you want to bear a child?"

"Sam made sure to describe pregnancy and childbirth as a tortuous and messy process." Jessie grinned. "I believed him. Yet, over the years my interest grew. It wasn't the biology of reproduction but the idea of family. Sam talked so much about his family and Milly's family. Family just seemed like the most wonderful thing in the universe. I did want a baby, even if I had to suffer the torture. But I think my body wanted it long before my mind knew what it wanted."

"Wait a minute," Aylis said. "It never occurred to anyone to ask, but are you saying that your species did not reproduce the way humans do?"

"Aylis, we didn't reproduce at all."

"Because you lived such a long time, you didn't need to."

"No! Because we couldn't! Those few who died weren't replaced. It never occurred to us that we were a *species*, a group of beings who should continue as a group or species. We were manufactured, we were servants, we no longer had anyone to serve, and we would eventually die."

"You were *manufactured*?"

"Our investigations are by now quite ancient. There are records somewhere. But all of us remember agreeing on the fact that the Masters created us."

Aylis stopped to think, shaking her head at a conclusion that bothered her, making the baby - only days old - laugh at her. She smiled at Nameless, who was always such an easy-going little sucker, and turned back to Jessie with a question that struggled to get past her lips.

"Jessie is quite old," I said helpfully.

"How old?"

"Old as the hills." Jessie laughed.

"She doesn't know," I said. "All of the Servants were made a very long time ago."

"How long ago?"

"Sam's appearance among us made us take another look at ourselves," Jessie said. "We knew we were very old but we were surprised at how old. We couldn't

be precise. We could only infer from old records and form a consensus. Two million years was our estimate. I can't remember that far back, of course."

Even though she must have expected some large number, Aylis reacted with shock. "I can't imagine living that long! I just can't! How many of you remain, Jessie?"

"Nine hundred twenty-one, the last I knew. I'm sorry to lower your opinion of us because of our ignorance of biology. We have done well at least in the physical sciences, I think."

"Two million years!" Aylis shook her head. It was fun to watch the mighty Aylis Mnro try to digest this information. I liked Aylis a lot, but she had this air of total authority about her. Whenever she examined me, I got the feeling I was living in a body that I leased from her. Aylis was an historic figure and deserved my awe and admiration. But to her credit, she never complained if I failed to celebrate her majesty. Outside her domain of expertise she was just as nice as Zakiya.

* * *

The daily routine changed as the pleasure of new knowledge began to fade. I was afraid I would injure what was left of my brain. I spent more time taking Nameless for walks and thrilling the crew - especially the females - with my offspring. Jessie often stayed home as she became obsessed with human popular culture and spent hours at a time immersing herself in old movies and novels and such. That amused me at first, then it worried me. I came back from a walk with Nameless one day and found Jessie waiting for me. She was stark naked, I mean *featherless* stark naked! "What have you done?"

"I want to look more human." I heard a note of distress in her voice, as a reaction to my tone of voice. "Why keep the feathers? You don't like the way I look?"

"It isn't permanent, is it?" Nameless began to react to the negative vibrations and I picked it up and tried to soothe us both.

"What if it is?"

I took a deep breath and remembered the old days with Milly and the futility of saying anything I thought might be the right thing to say. "With your golden covering, you're the most gorgeous creature in the universe. Without it you're merely the most gorgeous human female."

"Don't smile like you're so clever! Do I really look human this way?"

She turned around for my inspection. I remembered the early days of our acquaintance, when she had short stumpy arms and legs that unfolded. Even then it was easy to accept her as near-human. Now she appeared much more human, but I didn't want her to be *too* human. I desperately searched for something *correct* to say. As I opened my mouth to seal my doom, a real cloud passed in front of the fake sun outside, altering the illumination in our house. I realized I was looking at a hologram - not of the real Jessie but of how Jessie might look without her golden covering. "You're a hologram. You still have your gold."

"You said that with such relief!" Jessie sighed. Her modified holographic image evaporated. She stepped into the living room, dressed in her usual pajama-like attire, but showing her normal golden plumage. She came and took Nameless, put him to the breast. Him? Was I beginning to think of Nameless as a male?

"You don't have to be human. I still love you. I love you because you're not human."

"Will you always love me? What will you feel for me when we find Milly?"

"Is that what this is all about?"

"You answer questions with questions!"

"Answers get me into trouble." In seven hundred years how many times did we make that exact exchange of words?

I had to admit that Milly was on my mind much of the time. I wondered how it could be true that she was still alive. I wondered how it would feel to be near her again. I wanted to be near her again. After so many centuries she became fantasy and ghostly legend in my crowded mind. Would I love her as intensely as I thought I once did? Would I love Jessie less - Jessie, who was my soul mate for centuries? What was I going to do, then and now?

Soul mate: was that the correct term? It was only a memory of a memory, but I know that for a long time it was hardly worth examining where I ended and Jessie began. We were all we had, our two small pools of knowledge and experience, all the entertainment, all the meaning, all the will to go on. We went on. She tells me we went everywhere together, that we visited worlds and alien races, that we had adventures. Then, like magic, our relationship took on another dimension, as Jessie slowly changed into a female. Now she was a mother. She wanted to be a real human wife. She was getting a new perspective on human culture beyond the narrow source I was. I couldn't imagine what effect this would have on Jessie, but I could see that she was just as fascinated with my fellow humans as they were with her.

* * *

This is a sample of some of the things that were said during the first full interview of Jessie and me by Phuti and Zakiya.

"Be careful," I warned, "they're anthropologists."

"They look harmless to me," Jessie said.

"They make a science out of a body of knowledge which has a lot of value judgments in it, so you know they aren't completely rational."

"I've never called it a science," Phuti said. "It's a hobby. Sam is just bothering me because I bothered him. I apologize, Sam. I didn't fully appreciate what you were experiencing when you first arrived among us. Zakiya tried to warn me about your pain, but you were such a fascinating uh..."

"Victim?" Zakiya offered. "Specimen? Artifact?"

"He was *my* specimen," Jessie said. "Until he asked the Protector to take him back to Earth."

"How did you know the Protector would do that?" Phuti asked. "How did it respond?"

"When he learned what it was, Sam started talking to the Protector," Jessie said. "Of course, it didn't reply. He walked around it, pounding his fists on it. He did this for many weeks. He camped by the Protector. I would bring him food and sit with him. I knew it was hopeless. I felt sorry for him. I felt guilty for my part in his abduction. I began to stay with him by the Protector almost continuously, sleeping by his side at night. I think I learned more about Sam in those weeks than I had in the years before. One morning, when I awoke, Sam was already standing by the Protector, pleading and demanding, tears running down his face. His fists were bloody from hitting the Protector. I kissed his

damaged hands. It was a spontaneous reaction that surprised me. We knew our blood and saliva could heal wounds but none of us dared try it on Sam when he was hurt. I just held his hands to stop him. He pulled away from me. I didn't want him to pull away. I didn't want him to leave me. I placed myself between him and the Protector. I felt my heart beating so hard. He turned away from me. I thought I was going to cry. Then he put an arm around my shoulders. That was enough to give me courage. I embraced him. I hugged him as hard as I could. I said, 'Take me with you, Sam.' At that same moment the Protector opened a portal. We stepped into it. I never looked back."

Zakiya softly clapped her hands together and seemed delighted. It was a memory I still retained and it sent chills down my body. I didn't remember my exact feelings at the time but from this vantage point it was pure magic.

"If Jessie hadn't accompanied me," I said, "I would have died of old age. I always thought the Protector was keeping me young, but Aylis says it was Jessie. I don't know if the Protector was waiting for Jessie to volunteer for that reason. It wasn't as simple for me as it sounds. The instant we were inside the Protector, I realized Jessie might be losing a great deal."

"Our first real argument," Jessie said. "I used several bad English words just to make him listen to me. I didn't make my decision on the spur of the moment, as he seemed to think. I should have better educated him about my feelings. I was ready to go to Earth with him at any time during the years we had known each other. I didn't lose anything I wasn't completely prepared to lose. I gained much more than I lost. I gained more than I dreamed possible."

"Wait until it becomes a teenager," I said, knowing Jessie referred to Nameless.

"But you did lose a lot," Phuti said. "Your culture is so much older than ours."

"But so pale in comparison to yours!" Jessie said.

"There I go, making a value judgment," Phuti said.

"Let's start at a beginning point," Zakiya said. "You lived on a planet?"

"Not exactly. It was a natural planet at one time. It was rebuilt to resemble a real planet but it had none of the dangerous elements. No wandering continents, quakes, volcanoes. No bad weather. Even the sun was very tame. You could say the same of our history and culture - tame and placid. I don't mind making value judgments. Earth is wonderful. The earth that Sam told me about was frightening but I couldn't stop asking him about it. I want to see a hummingbird, a redwood tree, a dolphin, and so many other wonderful things."

"I'm sure there are still redwoods on Earth," Zakiya said. "I'm not sure hummingbirds or cetaceans are successfully reintroduced to Earth. They do still exist in space countries."

"You had no family structures or other forms of kinship?" Phuti asked.

"We had some kinds of groupings, based on shared interests," Jessie answered.

"Did you have leaders and followers within your groupings?" Zakiya asked.

"Yes, but it was quite subtle. We didn't even have words to label such differences in function. Now we have English or Korean words to use."

"What kind of art and music and literature did you have?" Phuti asked.

"The boring kind!" Jessie declared. "Of course, I didn't know it was so boring. How can you have an interesting literature without sex and violence? How can you have great music without passions? How can you appreciate beauty without ugliness?"

"What effects did Sam's arrival on your planet cause?" Zakiya asked.

"It turned the world up-side-down. I extrapolate that from my own reactions by assuming all other Servants differed little from myself."

"What happened?"

"A lot of heavy thinking."

"About what?"

"Sex." Jessie made her reply with a grin and a few saucy face-feather words.

I laughed, causing our inquisitors to stare at me for explanation. "What she said." I gestured vaguely toward Jessie. Jessie liked to make me laugh as much as I liked to make her laugh.

"All she said was 'sex,'" Zakiya said.

"She said something else," Phuti said, suspecting the face-feather vocabulary.

I had to explain the secret language of Jessie's facial plumage and translate the joke. Then I had to talk about the sex education classes and the consequences of not having brought any visual aids to explain female human anatomy to the Servants. I became quite an artist - or at least a good illustrator - trying to describe humanity. "Is this a live feed to everybody else on the ship?" I remembered how networked everyone was through their in-body hardware.

"If anyone is interested," Zakiya replied with a straight face that crinkled into a big smile. "I'm sorry. Are you really uncomfortable with that?"

"I'll be fine, as long as Jessie shows a little restraint."

"The subject of sex," Phuti said, "prompts me to think about how Jessie's transformation challenges evolution and natural selection. She's evolved from a nonsexual being into a fully functional female in the space of a few centuries."

"Take a step back, Phuti," Zakiya said.

Phuti raised his eyebrows and found the meaning of Zakiya's words as he smiled at her. I wondered how many Sherpa remained among the human races. Phuti was a rare person and we needed many more like him. "I'm guilty of being enchanted by Jessie. We should never presume to see the forces of our own evolution at work. We're too ephemeral. Nor should we think of evolution as a progression toward a better form of life. Natural selection has no arrow of direction. Let some future-distant paleontologist fondle the bones of our generations and try not to make value judgments based on his own culture. But I do feel Jessie could have a profound effect on the history of our species."

A moment of silence permitted my thoughts to see the brevity of my few centuries of life against the geologic time scale of evolution. Another thought occurred to me. It was a notion that sentient species did not have much of a future, unless there was some other state of existence beyond the endpoint. Somewhere in our vast unremembered travels I must have seen some evidence that too much intelligence and curiosity could have negative consequences. Zakiya's next question to Jessie pushed the somber thought out of my mind.

"Jessie, I know Aylis has asked you many times, but do you have any new thoughts on why you were able to metamorphose?"

"You're feeding her a straight line." I remembered something Jessie told me after Aylis visited us the last time.

"I've made a great mental effort to find the reason," Jessie said seriously. "I think it's the pressure. There was a lot of pressure on me."

"What kind of pressure?"

"Two million years is a long time." Jessie paused. "To wait for sex."

Zakiya almost laughed out loud. Phuti slid out of his chair onto the floor. Then Zakiya did laugh. I didn't think it was that funny but it was contagious.

Zakiya wiped tears from her eyes.

"Yes, very good timing," I replied to Jessie's face-feather query.

When Jessie and I were alone later, she asked me if she should not have made Zakiya laugh. "I think she wants to be sad all the time, because of Sammy."

* * *

I was at loose ends one afternoon, my brain too full of futile thoughts about subjects that were impossible to believe. With that big gap in my memory, it was even a leap of faith that Jessie and the baby were real. The question of reality made me think about Milly. I could remember that Milly talked about never being sure life was real. The implication was that I somehow shook her faith in reality. I fought down the urge to brood over Milly's fate, but it still made me feel that things were going too well to stay that way.

Jessie was away with Nameless, visiting and gossiping and reveling in her role as the crazy alien housewife. I shuddered just thinking about that. I took a walk to what I called the hangar deck. Many of the slide-rule guys I liked to talk to hung out there, working on the barbarian jumpship.

Direk walked up to me as I approached and offered his hand. I took it, shook it, and tried to remember he was a lot older than he looked. It appeared that Jamie had almost got his straw-colored hair down to Navy-regulation length. Jessie had her sources for all the personal histories on the ship, and was ever eager to fill me in. Direk was as interesting as any of them. He was biomechanically cloned in a process that required the soul of some ancient being to enliven the copy. Although their experiences were fascinating, I found the personalities of my friends were all rather similar. I suppose when you've lived so long and were sorted out by such agencies as the Union Navy, all your interesting traits are subdued, all your sharp edges are worn down. I had to gear my perceptions to subtleties. I studied Direk's ice-blue Essiin eyes for a moment, trying to decide if what I saw could be similar to human - Earthian - feelings.

"Greetings, stranger." Direk released my hand. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. Is there?"

"The jumpship is now space worthy."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It has a mission." Direk turned to face the dark sphere which now rested on a three-point pedestal.

"What mission is that?" I asked it lightly, not knowing how else to react to the possible seriousness of his voice. I was also distracted by recalling this wonderful mental image Zakiya gave me of a black Direk playing the string bass in a nightclub, so totally at odds with his science-guru reputation. I came perilously close to volunteering to play piano, because I think he wanted to get in some hot licks and nobody else was cooperating. Jazz will never die. Why did I think I could play piano? We walked to the ramp that angled up to the portal.

"Shall we go inside?" Direk asked, motioning for me to precede him up the ramp. He was always so formal with me, as if my age had something to do with it.

How could I resist another peek inside a real barbarian jumpship, a pirate ship? That's why I came! I led the way inside. I was pleasantly surprised at how

many details of the hardware I now understood. The jumpship even had a feeling of outmoded technology compared to what I saw aboard the *Freedom*. I liked it. It was a little vintage sports car: crude, rough, and fast.

"I hear you play bass. You and I could start a jazz ensemble. Does Zakiya sing jazz?" I knew she did.

Direk smiled. I loved to make him smile. It was harder to get his father to smile. Put the two together and forget it. "She sings jazz. What do you play, Sam?"

"Piano, like your brother, but not as well."

"Unfortunately, Setek-Ren demands that I lead the effort to document the theory of this new advance in physics. I have the daunting task of studying the material Jessie provided us."

"I trust there was progress in developing headache remedies since I last saw Earth. What mission does this little boat have?"

"The mission," Direk said, manipulating a few controls at the station where he sat, as though he forgot to do a test of something, "is to learn the fate of Alex's first wife and daughter. And to see if Petros is still alive."

"Who is Petros?"

"Zakiya's son."

"A Greek name." I wondered why I didn't know about him. Jessie would have told me if she knew of him. She knew everybody's personal story. Why would Petros be close to death? This was too important to let pass, even though I knew it must be restricted information. I looked at Direk and waited for him to decide to tell me more about Petros. I would never be able to wait long enough for Direk to speak of Petros. "Alex is his father? Should I not ask more about him?"

"I would prefer that someone else inform you of Petros."

"Okay. So, what else don't you like about this boat's mission?"

"Zakiya wants to find the source of the Lady in the Mirror."

"My wife."

"Your wife?"

The theory was that Milly was the captive of the Lady in the Mirror. Perhaps she was, in a sense. My imagination had not declined with my memory functions and I could imagine a more complex and sinister theory. "I saw the image Zakiya recorded with her ocular camera. The resolution is poor and the facial image is like a cartoon, but there was a faint scar on the forehead of The Lady. I remember Milly had a scar there. She got the scar when she wrecked her car on the D.C. beltway."

"When? And what is the D.C. beltway?"

I didn't expect "D.C. beltway" to pop out of my memory. "It was the late nineteen-seventies." I explained the traffic nightmare that circled Washington, D.C.

"22 January 1979," Direk said a few moments later. "'Millicent DuPont, a doctoral candidate at Princeton University, was critically injured when the car she was driving failed to negotiate the exit from...' We already found that item and several others, Sam. We were waiting for you to relate to one of them."

"That's important?"

"Psychologically, perhaps. After the visit inside the Protector we all seem to be grasping for anything we can believe is real and provable. History is slippery enough without losing confidence in the very nature of time and space."

"Who will be going on this mission?"

"I don't know, Sam. I would guess that Alex will go."

I looked closely at Direk's not-quite-Earthian face. The feeling was there, I saw, just overlooked by someone like me who was too self-absorbed. His face said it was a tragedy to send Alex back to the wolves. He had only just recovered some of what he lost. I, on the other hand, was undeniably and deservedly expendable.

"I want to go." I said it before I could check my sanity. "I know you don't think there's anything I could contribute to the mission, but if Milly is the Lady in the Mirror, I do have a big personal stake in this." I knew I could be speaking to a larger audience listening on the shiplink. "Who do I talk to about getting a place on the crew of this little pirate ship?"

"That would be Zakiya. I thought you might be interested in going, and I hate that you are."

"You're talking as if I might have a chance to go."

We heard footsteps. Zakiya poked her head into the navigation chamber, then maneuvered into the third seat. The expression on her face was sadder than normal.

"I have to go with you," I said.

"Go with me?" Zakiya sounded sad rather than surprised. "Where am *I* going, Sam?"

"You're going to follow the yellow brick road." I stared at her warm brown eyes, daring her to lie to me. "You're going to Oz to find Rafael, Daidaunkh, and Petros. And Shorty. Alex is going to find out what happened to Fidelity and Susan. Then back to Kansas to find Milly." I didn't have to look for any subtle signs. I had disturbed Zakiya. She took my hand - a habit she seemed to share with Aylis - even though she was looking at Direk.

"I thought to put myself on the mission. I've been to Oz. I haven't spoken to Alex again about it. Sam, your offer is painful to me. I confess to hoping for it. It will break my heart to separate you from Jessie and the baby."

* * *

Zakiya was going to take me on the jumpship mission. She didn't confirm it but I could feel it. It was destiny. I had to know what happened to Milly. Was that more important to me than staying with Jessie and the baby? Was Jessie my real wife now? Should I marry her, now that there was some authority to perform the ceremony?

The vital part of the jumpship mission was stopping the Lady in the Mirror. I thought I could be part of the strategy, that when we found Milly, I could somehow turn off the mirror menace. Perhaps if she recognized me. I had to go. It was a duty that was more important than personal happiness or family responsibility. How many young men went off to war in human history, leaving behind wives, parents, children? I was no young man. I had lived a long life, perhaps not a complete life, but one filled with experiences no one else could imagine. I was blessed at this late chapter of my life with a child and more love than I deserved.

Jessie would live forever. I thought I would be remembered far longer than most mortals. My child would live forever. If I didn't go on this mission, perhaps they both would come to harm, or even death. Zakiya said the barbarian threat was serious and I believed her.

I wandered the ship for the rest of the day, trying to develop a strategy for

breaking the news to Jessie, and thinking about all the consequences. I couldn't imagine being without Jessie for any length of time. All of those unremembered centuries yet existed in the bond between us.

I found myself deep in the ship, down where empty corridors connected empty rooms: places where the industry of the ship wasn't yet spread.

"Are you going there?"

I jumped aside and staggered to lean against the wall. My mind was a million galaxies away. "Freddy. You found me. Is Jessie looking for me?"

"I'm sorry," the android said. "I startled you. No, I don't know that anyone is looking for you. How would they not know where you are?"

"Exactly so. Going where?"

"Going to the room where Samson died."

"I didn't know that was near here, Freddy."

"I go there to think about the mystery of life and to remember my little brother. Would you care to accompany me?" I wouldn't, but I couldn't refuse. I wasn't in the mood to descend any deeper into the indigo. Freddy impressed me greatly, I guess because he was so damned nice not to be organic. That made no sense! All the villains in the universe were probably organic not machine. I was honored to accompany Freddy to the room where Samson died, even as it deeply depressed me.

I fully appreciated what a miracle of sentience Freddy was. I was moved by the story of his dying of grief for Sammy. I had spoken to him at length about Sammy, learning how Zakiya used the juvenile fragment of the Gatekeeper to bring Freddy back to life. Despite Aylis's optimism, I wondered if there was enough of Sammy recorded in that AMI to restore my son to life. Until we found Shorty it would remain impossible.

We arrived at the infamous room and passed through the mangled doorway. The ship had cleaned itself of the human body fluids and fragments. However, from the pattern of religious offerings and tokens of remembrance, the flowers, the candles, the incense, the bowls of food, the paper notes covered with symbols and poems, from all of the items of a cross-cultural shrine you could see exactly where the two young boys fell dead. This was too unexpected. I had that picture of Samson flash into my mind, gloriously alive and happy in Zakiya's presence as she sang *Un Bel Di*. I had watched the ocular camera reconstruction of the fatal attack in this room, despite my better judgment, which I would never watch again. I also watched the recording of Zakiya carrying Samson's body, and the look on her face which I would never forget. I relived those experiences. I broke down and wept. Samson was my *son*.

Freddy held me gently and helped me walk away from that place. I listened to the soft sounds of his inner mechanisms and soon found what I thought was a heartbeat.

* * *

I was late for dinner. There was a place set for me at the table but Jessie had eaten and was breast-feeding Nameless. She turned to look at me with big solemn eyes. It was wrong that I didn't tell her I would be late. All I could say was: "Sorry." My eyes were red and my mood was still blue, so I avoided her inspection. I sat down and stared at my empty plate for a long time. I had experienced a lot of strong emotions lately. As old as I was, it was peculiar that I could still *feel* so.

Presently Jessie finished nursing. She put the baby on her shoulder to burp it and got up from her chair. She walked over and stood behind me. Nameless belched. "What's wrong, Samuel Lee?"

"Boy or girl?"

"Yes." Jessie didn't sound as playful as the response suggested.

"Which?" I realized I needed to know, as if time was running out. I also realized I sounded moody, despite trying to speak normally.

"You want a boy, I think."

"Not all Asian men want sons."

"You lost a son."

"What's his name?"

"Sunny. He smiles so much, he's like sunshine."

The name felt right to me. I took a breath, trying to ease a small pain in my chest. I was about to abandon another mother who was my wife, another son I might never know. I felt sick. I wiped my eyes which wanted to become damp. She caught my hand and pulled it to her lips. I nodded in agreement. "Sunny is a good name. It sounds a lot like Sammy. Let me hold Sunny."

"He needs changing."

"I can do that."

"What's wrong?" She was studying me.

I got up from the table with Sunny Lee and took him to the oriental carpet and put him down. I fetched the diaper and wipes and a mat to protect the carpet. I began the operation by flipping Sunny over. He laughed as I tickled his neck. Sometimes I could see some Korean shape to his eyes. Sometimes I could ignore the downy golden hair and see him as very human. He had no face feathers yet and his cheeks were light enough to flush but dark enough to show the pigmentation pattern most Servants exhibited under their feathers. His limbs had only single elbows and knees.

Jessie knelt beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. She was still waiting for my answer.

"I took a long walk and came across Freddy. He was on his way to the place where Samson and the Malay boy were killed. He invited me to accompany him. It was a shrine. It upset me greatly."

She put her arms around my neck. It wasn't the whole truth but it wasn't a lie. I put off the bad part. Of course, I didn't know for sure there would *be* a bad part. Maybe Zakiya was being polite to me by not immediately turning down my offer to accompany her to Oz.

Jessie waited until I finished with Sunny. I knew it was coming. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"What would that be?"

"No questions. Answers."

That was the trouble with having lived so long together. We knew each other too well. Even though the biology was changed to make the relationship more emotionally charged, we still had a direct connection to each other's every nuance of thought and mood. I had to tell her. I told her.

She was uncharacteristically emotional, even though I stressed the low probability of my inclusion on the jumpship crew. I wasn't used to so much emotion from Jessie. I wasn't used to so much emotion from me. I just held her for a long time.

Zakiya and Alex entered our home. They saw us. Zakiya turned into Alex's chest, obviously very upset.

"You're the admiral," Alex said, patting her on the back.
She turned around.
"No!" Jessie cried.

Section 008

Volunteers

"No!" Aylis cried.

It was morning. I hadn't slept all night. Jessie hadn't slept all night. She seemed ill to me. She was never ill. I told Aylis about the jumpship mission. I was going on the mission. Aylis reacted badly, even to the point of appearing ill herself. I felt terrible. Even Sunny seemed wrong.

Aylis calmed herself and then detected that all of us were in physical distress - never mind the emotional part. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

I started to protest but stopped. No one wins against the Empress of Immortality. I agreed with her decision, especially if Jessie felt as badly as I did. We began to walk to the hospital.

A few steps out the door we encountered Jamie. "What's wrong?"

"Ask your mother!" Aylis shouted angrily.

"Mind if I accompany you?" Jamie asked meekly.

I carried Sunny. Jessie held my free arm and she felt to me as though she needed it for support. She was breathing with too much effort. She was walking again, having healed almost completely from the oxygen deprivation during childbirth. Jessie stumbled, lost her grip on my arm, and Jamie caught her before she could hit the ground. Jamie picked her up as though she weighed nothing.

For the millionth time in the last few hours my thoughts and feelings orbited the three most important people in my life - and Milly was one of them. I imagined the worst possible fate for Milly, even without any notion of what her physical circumstance might be. She had somehow survived as long as I did, and now she was at the center of an evil organization. I knew this was not the kind of person she could ever become, not without some unspeakable horror being done to her. I was desperate to rescue her, even if it meant... No! Jessie and Sunny were the most precious people who were ever entrusted to my love and care. Even if I didn't deserve them, I still wanted to be with them. No, I didn't deserve them, and they could survive my departure. No! Where did the greater love lie, the greater guilt? Milly. Jessie. Sunny. Poor dead Samson. My heart hurt. My feet felt numb. My vision blurred.

Hospital staff reached us before we reached the hospital. I knew Aylis didn't like to use discontinuous transport, but I was real close to asking the Protector to move us. I was feeling worse. I didn't want to walk anymore. The last thing I remembered before waking up in the hospital was someone shouting to catch the baby.

Where was Sunny? I looked around, searching for him.

"The baby is fine," Mai said.

"Sunny." I coughed my throat clear. "His name is Sunny. What's wrong with Jessie? What's wrong with me?"

"We have a theory," Mai answered, reading my vitals with her fingertips. "We think you and Jessie exist in a state of symbiosis. You have some of her DNA. She may also have some of yours. You need each other, probably in many different ways. Neither of you is in immediate danger, but we don't want this situation to continue. Perhaps you made an unconscious and involuntary decision to start withdrawing from symbiosis. Perhaps neither of you can survive without the other."

I felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. There was no question about what I would do. "I can't go with Alex and Zakiya."

"You must." It was Zakiya's grave voice I heard. I struggled to sit up. I saw Jessie on the bed across the room. Nori was holding Sunny. Aylis was rubbing her stomach and studying holographic data next to Jessie. I turned to Zakiya.

"I want to go but I can't leave her." I saw Jessie moving a little on her bed. I was determined to go to her side. Mai and Zakiya helped me. Aylis saw us coming and turned off the data with a shake of her head. I bent over Jessie and kissed her feathery cheek. "I'm not going," I whispered in her ear.

Jessie inhaled sharply. I felt a ton of weight lift from my body. Aylis reacted to data she still observed through her shiplink. "What did you do?"

"Told her I wasn't going."

"Good! All her vitals have jumped significantly. So have mine!"

Zakiya moved to the opposite side of Jessie's bed and drew her attention. Jessie smiled at her, but I couldn't imagine why. "Would you consider going with us?" Zakiya asked.

"No!" Aylis shouted, with a painful, almost pleading tone.

"She's a Golden One," Zakiya said. "The Lady in the Mirror is involved with members of her species. She could be vital in dealing with them." She clearly didn't like putting forth this argument but just as clearly felt it had merit.

"She is an immortal being! It's wrong to jeopardize her life!"

"May we bring Sunny with us?" Jessie asked. Everyone, including me, had a negative vote on that, and we all cast it at once. "Are we going to die on this mission?" Jessie asked Zakiya.

Aylis made a loud, gasping sigh, reacting to Jessie's words. The question dismayed Zakiya but she didn't retreat. "We know of no way to neutralize the Lady in the Mirror. She may recognize Sam. What effect that would have, we don't know. My feeling is that we might survive if we have Sam with us. If you come, perhaps the Protector will also be involved."

"The Protector must guard Sunny and the *Freedom*, if we leave him behind," Jessie said.

"Then you'll go?"

"*Just a damned minute!*" Aylis cried. "We don't know the baby can survive without its parents!" Aylis looked at Jessie and asked: "How can you even consider leaving your child?"

"I don't want to think about it. How long have I lived before I even knew I could be so happy? It's a terrible choice to face, but Sam is my choice. People will remember us to Sunny if we never return."

"What will we say to him? We hardly know you! We want more time with you and Sam! Why does it have to be now? Civilization won't end this year if you don't go now. Wait a year. Wait two. Wait ten!"

"It will only become harder. Harder for us and harder for Sunny."

"You could die!"

"I could have died many times, Aylis. I watched hundreds of my people venture off to the stars. Many of them never returned. They probably died. Every time I wished I was going. Every time I was afraid to go. I'm glad I waited for Sam to come into my life. Sam is right about the perversity of the universe. Now that I've found so much to live for, it may have come my time to die."

"The entire Union isn't worth your life, Jessie!"

"You see me as a miraculous being, Aylis. I'm only me. I'm not the person

who lived a million years ago in this body. Not even a thousand years ago. The memories of those times, with only a few exceptions, are overwritten. I'm not special. Sam is worth my life. Milly is worth my life. My people are involved. That's why I need to go."

I thought I knew everything there was to know about Jessie. Some things you can never know until circumstances prove it. I was not surprised with Jessie's courage, not when I thought about the risk she took having Sunny. I was not surprised that she would risk her life so that I could find Milly. Nevertheless, I felt a great relief now that she confirmed my feelings. And - I'm sorry, Milly - I loved Jessie more than I could quantify.

* * *

"You mentioned a theory Jessie and you developed over the years on the Protector," Setek said, causing a groan from Koji as we all sat down by the lake. Setek cast his innocent gaze upon us with good humor. "What? Does anyone have anything better to talk about?"

"Yes!" we all answered.

"But I'm sure you don't mind starting off with something light," Setek said, looking at Koji. "Did one of the Marines get lucky? Or was that *not* a groan of physical pain?"

"No and yes," Koji replied. "Go ahead and theorize. It's a good time for a nap."

Setek gave Koji a friendly shove and started talking. "Here we are - at least here are Direk and I - trying to build a formal description of discontinuous travel, both gate and jumpship, and we go into the Protector and have most of our assumptions about the nature of reality pulled from under us. We saw things I could not even begin to explain. Now I know even *less* than I always thought I did."

"I was as amazed as anyone," Alex commented, "but I wondered *why* it showed so much of what it was and what it could do." As usual, Alex knew the important questions to ask.

"The Protector seemed to be showing off," I said. "I don't remember much of our centuries aboard the Protector but I'm sure it never did anything like that. Jessie said she saw things she never saw before in her entire life."

"Well, it's still with us," Koji said, eyes closed, "so I think it isn't finished with us. Maybe the show was an educational warning to us primitives."

"The Golden Ones came to us humans," Patrick said, "and have probably played an important role in our history, unknown to most of us. Maybe the Protector has some continuing responsibility - as a protector." We all nodded agreement to Patrick's observation. I hoped the Protector could help the human race. We sure needed help.

"So, what was your theory or theories about the magic of the Protector?" Setek asked me, returning to his original topic and making Koji groan again and frown.

"It isn't a serious hypothesis, just another imagined model of reality. Think of life as viewing a movie - the old kind made of still frames that were flashed on a screen twenty-four times a second, giving our eyes the illusion of movement. Now speed up the frame rate to infinity. Then expand the frame size to encompass the universe. Then set an infinite number of universes in an infinite array inside a super universe."

"Wait a minute," Patrick said. "An infinite number of infinite universes? How do they get projected?"

"They don't." I had to keep smiling as I spoke. I didn't want them to take me seriously. "The universes are static and fixed in place. Each of us follows a pathway from one universe to the next."

"But if each universe is infinite..." Patrick thought aloud. "How do we get from one to the next? That would be an infinite distance."

"Infinity seems to be relative and subjective," I replied. "Bigger than we can measure. If it's beyond what we can see or experience, then whoever is in charge of making universes can save on material and labor. But that isn't why the pathway is so short. It's because the super universe has very different laws governing time and distance. The static universes are stacked in a hyperdimensional array, such that points in one universe lie nearly on top of points in another. This also allows three-dimensional vectors to point at locations in an infinite set of similar universes."

"And who is it exactly - or what is it - that follows this pathway?" Patrick asked. "If it's us, what are we?"

"You could say souls."

"I *thought* the visit to the Protector was a religious experience," Patrick said. "But our minds are so darned easy to trick."

Setek spoke. "Static universes arrayed in a super universe. Then there is purpose or order in the array? They are all unique and follow a sequence of history?"

"Yes. This model raises many more questions than it proposes answers. For instance, are the static universes eternal or do they become obsolete? Are new ones being made in sequence and how far in advance of now? Can you jump to a far distant universe that may lie in a different sequence of pathways and appear far more exotic to us - like what we saw in the Protector? Do souls travel in groups, or is my soul the only one here by the lake? Are our souls hyperdimensional, living all possible pathways, ending in a grand coalescence of experience? Are we interchangeable - I am you and you are me and we are all God? Had enough, Koji?"

"Somewhere behind us in our pathway," Koji said, "the *Freedom* still sits inside a rock, and our bodies still lie in coffins in an old ship buried in a gravity sink of debris. Where was my soul when I was dead? How did it find me here?"

"Ah," Alex said, speaking rarely but often profoundly, "the instant of departure. Death. It seems Setek and I have been jumping to God-knows-where and coming back to our pathway, as if God isn't finished with us. I like your theory, Sam."

"It makes it seem like anything is possible," Setek said. "Even time travel. Can your soul's pathways lead backward in time, or jump far forward?"

"As far as we can imagine," I replied, "time is completely subjective. It doesn't exist in a single static universe. The super universe must have laws governing what pathways are allowed. Jessie developed the One-Time Basement Vector from a different model of reality. It doesn't conflict with the super-universe model but it's still a special case, requiring a pathway to remain from the past to go forward from there. Are past sequential universes extinguished to make room for the future, or do they always exist and continue to serve souls who don't know they're living in the past?"

We were quiet for a time. I was finished with theory. I washed it from my mind. I was content to watch the birds in the sky, the small sailboats on the lake.

At times it seemed vital to accept the simple parts of existence, fearing it could all vanish in the next universe in my pathway.

"Are you making any progress with Nori?" Koji asked Patrick, breaking the silence, startling Patrick and causing Patrick's green eyes to register alarm.

"Progress?" Patrick was stalling until he could figure out what Koji intended.

"My daughter may be getting impatient." This confused Patrick because Koji always gave him the impression he didn't approve of anyone taking an interest in Nori and especially Patrick. The truth was opposite that and it was part of Koji's personality to play games with people - a way of giving them his attention and respect.

"But I thought... impatient?" Patrick studied Koji's face, as Koji tried to keep his expression neutral.

I laughed. I knew everything about Nori and Patrick. I was Nori's spy on Patrick. Patrick was a lot easier for me to talk to than Alex, Setek, or Koji, and I talked with him regularly. I was a two-way link between Patrick and Nori. Each of them had sworn me to secrecy about who their person of interest was.

"What have you tried on her?" Koji asked Patrick, winking at me.

"Oh." Patrick apparently decided to take the chance on Koji's good intentions. "Well. Uh, I've developed a few ideas about how to..."

"You've done *nothing*?" Koji said with mock disgust. "Shall I introduce you to her?"

Patrick composed himself, and with dignity and humility replied: "Yes. Please introduce us." Then Patrick looked at me with a frown.

"Who did you dance with at Iggy's wedding?" I asked Patrick.

"Ana," he replied.

"And every every other female except..." And I paused to let him fill in the blank.

"Nori," he answered sadly. "I told you that! But she was Koji's daughter and she was young."

"But you really wanted to dance with her," I said. "That's what you told me and Iggy. And that's what I told Nori. And would you like to know what Nori told me?"

"Yes!" Patrick said eagerly.

"You'll have to ask her," I said. "I'm sworn to secrecy."

We all chuckled, even Patrick. He looked like a great burden was lifted from his mind, and now he was testing how happiness felt. Patrick was a shy gentleman, with an innocence of character that survived despite his years of service in hell. He was the man who kept Alex and Setek viable in their quest to discover what they could of the barbarians beyond the Union. I was very happy for Patrick.

We sat in folding chairs at the edge of the lake, me and the guys. It was like a weekend back in the 20th century. We needed a barbecue, a cooler full of beer and soft drinks. Back on the patio of Zakiya's apartment, about a hundred yards away, the womenfolk were congregated. The "sun" was lowering in the "west" and I could almost forget we were on a huge starship halfway to the Andromeda galaxy. I could see the women were talking a lot. Us guys had become rather quiet. Then Jon Horss arrived.

"The Fab Four and Doctor Zharkov!" Jon greeted us. Alex, Koji, Patrick, and Setek apparently withdrew to their shiplinks to try to discover Jon's 20th-century pop culture references - surely a waste of intellect. Jon took a seat, having brought his own folding chair.

"Hello, Flash," I greeted. "Or is it Buck?"

"Beats me," Jon replied, and took a swig of iced tea. "Things just pop into my head and I'm too lazy to edit them before they reach my mouth. Would you like to meet your son? He's awake now."

"You have him?" I felt the excitement of both anticipation and worry. The small piece of a Gatekeeper seemed to be the intellectual essence of Sammy but I was unable to let myself believe it was a real person and that it might one day become a real little boy. Yet, I felt I needed to quickly take on the role of the father of a son who was not an infant, a son who could possibly see all my internal flaws, a son with the logic to pass judgment on me and on my abandonment of his mother. "Setek and Direk are giving him a little freedom from the lab? I thought he was too fragile to spend much time in someone's bloodstream."

"You try keeping Sammy where he doesn't want to be," Setek said. "He puts out this little red bead and it makes you crazy until you allow him to talk to you."

"You talk as if you really believe it's Sammy," I commented.

"Don't get technical," Jon said, "get tough. He wants to say hello. Don't worry, he's a nice kid. Yeah, yeah, I gotta lie a little bit, Sammy. Here's another one: your dad's the best, even if he's a little chicken. No, he's cool, man. You've seen him. Don't you chicken out on me, kid. Get ready to wiggle, or whatever it is you do to change horses."

Jon took my wrist and placed it on top of his. The captain of the *Freedom* was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, baggy shorts, and flip-flops. "Are we going to become blood brothers, Chief?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"And it won't hurt a bit," Jon said, using his other hand to fix our wrists together.

"Wow!" I remarked, feeling the sting. "That sure doesn't hurt a bit."

"Sometimes you get the veins lined up just right, sometimes not," Jon said. "Tell me when he's across."

"How will I - "

[Hello, Father. I'm across.]

"Hello, Sammy." Jon released our wrists. "Are you alright? I wish I knew what to say to you."

"Don't worry about that," Jon remarked. "The kid's a talker. Fortunately he has to sleep a lot."

"He's not saying anything. Is something wrong? No, wait. I can feel something. Oh." The tears were dripping off my chin before I fully realized what happened. I wanted Sammy to like me and I tried to make him feel what I felt. He must have wanted to do the same. It was like a mental embrace, a *powerful* sensation. If one could directly feel the love another person felt for him, that would push the tears out of him as it did me. Koji and Jon put their arms across my shoulders and waited for me to stop being unmanly.

"He does that to everyone," Koji said, "but you're the first to shed tears."

"I'm guessing his dad loves him a lot," Jon said, thumping me on the back.

[Could I see my mother?] Sammy finally asked. I tried to organize my thoughts and sort through my ancient memories to find my favorite picture-memory of Milly. I realized it had to be the wedding, when our vows were said and her veil was lifted and we looked at each other. There was truth at that moment and we could both see it, if only for that one moment. We loved each other. Sammy seemed to capture the image and sharpen it, and I think he felt

what I felt: the joy, the love, and the sadness after the fact. He didn't release the image for what seemed like a long time.

"Now what?" Jon asked.

"I think he's crying," I replied with a painful throat. "He wanted to see his mother."

* * *

"The jumpship normally carries a crew of three," Zakiya said to the group gathered around the foot of the ramp. "We've made modifications so that it can accommodate at least five. I would like to add a fifth member to the crew, preferably an engineer familiar with the jumpship. If one of you would like to volunteer, please step -"

They stepped forward before Zakiya could finish: Direk, Setek-Ren, Koji, Khalanov, Wingren, and others I knew. I don't know why there was so little hesitation.

I didn't think Zakiya would take Direk or Setek-Ren. Jamie turned away from looking at her mother and stared sadly at Direk. Aylis hit Setek on the back and went over to stand with Jamie.

"I should not have asked for volunteers. It upsets me to see some of you apparently eager to leave those who need you." Zakiya looked at each person, almost as if viewing them for the last time. Finally she let her gaze stay on Khalanov.

Khalanov took another step forward. Still holding his hand, Wingren stayed behind him and clearly struggled with her emotions. No one was happy; there were only degrees of sadness and disappointment. I did sense that Khalanov truly wanted to go with us. I didn't know how important Wingren was to him but I knew her well enough to understand the potential of their relationship. Wingren had more personality than most of these ancient mariners.

"I'm sorry I want it to be you, Iggy," Zakiya said. "I'm sorry but I'm also glad. Departure is in three days."

I sat down on the ramp and observed the quiet actions of the people who were my friends. I was happy that couples were still a popular social unit. I was happy that I could observe decent behavior that hadn't changed much since I last knew the human race.

I watched Setek-Ren put a hand on Aylis's shoulder, watched her pull the shoulder away, but not too far away. She was upset he volunteered. Setek persisted, until Aylis accepted his embrace and squeezed him tightly. Perhaps too tightly. "My water just broke!"

Setek and Aylis popped off to the hospital, followed by everyone except Koji, Khalanov, and Wingren. Koji shook hands with Iggy, then grabbed him and hugged him. He walked away into the darker depths of the hangar deck. Iggy and Wingren looked over at me. It was time for me to leave. I asked the Protector for transport home, and for the first time received no response. I walked off in the direction Koji took.

* * *

I tracked Jessie to the hospital where, I was told, she talked them into letting her observe the delivery of Aylis's baby. Sunny was being passed around the group in the waiting room. He was his usual happy self, satisfied to be the

object of anyone's attention. I thought he would be fine if Jessie and I were not able to return to him. I felt a stab of anguish as I wondered who would raise him. I looked around the room, trying to spot Sunny's future parents. My personal choice was Jamie and Direk, but they would probably want their own baby.

I finally got my turn to hold Sunny, because he needed a fresh diaper. While changing him I looked closely at his anatomy and imagined that he was becoming more masculine. Then I saw him looking up at me with his mother's eyes. He was so tiny, yet he seemed to be thinking about me in some serious way. He wasn't smiling. I talked to him. "I could say something about having lost one son to the barbarians and not wanting to lose another. Or I could try to explain about Milly. No, none of that matters to a little guy who needs his parents right now. I'm sorry, Sunny."

Aylis finally delivered.

* * *

I can't do it. I can't describe the final days aboard the *Freedom*. I especially cannot describe the last few moments Jessie and I had with Sunny. I hurt so badly, yet I knew Jessie hurt far worse. I also had to say goodbye to Sammy. I don't think he understood that I might not be coming back. I had tried to keep him ignorant of the jumpship mission but he knew a lot of people and asked a lot of questions.

It was like a dream, a nightmare, walking up that ramp, holding tightly to Jessie's hand. I paused at the top, and turned to look at all the people who came to see us off. Alex and Zakiya were behind us on the ramp. Jessie tried to stifle a cry of despair, but it was heard by everyone. Zakiya helped me rush her into the little ship. The portal closed quickly behind us. Iggy was already aboard.

Somewhere far behind us in the great dark gulf between galaxies a sphere of vacuum collapsed in the pressurized atmosphere of the *Freedom's* hangar deck. A special barrier protected those who came to say farewell. I could still feel a report of thunder as I held my shaking Jessie.

The narration of Samuel Lee pauses.

Section 009

Resistance Is Futile

"Why were you called Melvin?" Pan asked.

"You speak as if the name is distasteful. Does the name have a bad history?" They walked across the North American continent, unobserved by any who would glance their direction from a thousand countries floating in space above them. They walked ancient highways, the pavement all but destroyed by centuries of patient attack by the forces of nature. Melvin, who had always walked with legs folded, now walked unfolded. It told itself it was because it slowed Pan and Fred in their mad dash to suicide. Anyway, the change in Melvin's physiology wouldn't have time to become permanent. It was purely a matter of curiosity, both the human mystery and the mystery of the near future.

"I'm unaware of anything negative about the name Melvin," Pan responded. "I thought perhaps it made reference to something in your own language."

"Constant named me, and I can hardly remember the Old Language. It had so few words with which to deal with this universe of humanity. It's like comparing Standard to English."

"It's interesting to hear you struggle to keep the English out of your Standard. Have you spoken English for most of your stay among humans?"

"You keep trying to pry more information out of me. It isn't healthy for you to know too much about me."

"But I've met the Lady in the Mirror. She would seem to be the key secret. I'm just interested in you."

"Yes, why me?" Melvin asked itself aloud. It was always this way. Fortunately, in the early days, it had sensed the danger in this attraction humans had for Servants - and Servants for humans. Constant understood the danger, too, and suggested they should minimize contact with humans. But there was always Milly... Melvin finally had to separate himself from Milly and the other Servants. They were all infected, all crazy.

"I find myself attracted to you," Pan said. "I don't wish to bother you. Is there something wrong with me? You seem uncomfortable near me, yet you stay with us."

Melvin stopped at a place to sit and rest. Its legs did not want to fold, but they did, slowly. "Quit staring at me!" Melvin demanded irritably. Even Old Fred wanted to stare at him. "No, there is nothing wrong with you! There is nothing wrong with me! But when humans and Servants stay together for a long period of time, we begin to change, both mentally and physically. Most of the Servants have mutated or metamorphosed into Golden Ones, so they have human limbs and false gender attributes. I saw what was beginning to happen and exiled myself centuries ago. But here I am with you, and I worry I'll lose myself."

Fred spoke. "Is the change not reversible?"

"I don't know! But I can see it's hard to stop! Intellectually, I'm in a panic, but emotionally I'm intrigued and attracted. Does that sound stupid? Pan, you're a male. That probably means I'll turn female. But it takes time. At least I thought it did!"

"Let us depart without you," Fred said, looking toward Pan to see him nod assent.

Melvin raised its hand in farewell and lowered its face in sadness. Melvin

heard the footfalls recede. Melvin sat until only the silence of the wind remained. It smelled like rain coming. An owl hooted in the woods. It would be dark soon. The look on Pan's face was sorrow. It was a good face. Pan was a good man.

Melvin got up and walked in the opposite direction on stubby legs. It seemed like the wrong direction because it was not a new direction. Melvin always preferred a new path, new sights, new experiences. But every old ruin of a town or city was more alike than not. Melvin sighed, unfolded one leg, then the other, and turned around. It found their camp before dark.

Section 010

Interview of a Barbarian

The narration of Samuel Lee resumes.

Zakiya was anxious to launch the mission. I understood her reason for haste was her mysterious son Petros. This was news to Jessie and she treated it with sad reserve, pointing out the progression of loss for Zakiya: Sammy, Freddy, and now Petros. I don't know if Jessie wondered at everyone's silence on the subject of Petros but I didn't bring it to her attention.

The consequence of our rapid departure was an intense period of work aboard the jumpship that was better done aboard the *Freedom*. We trained and cross-trained on every system of the jumpship. Jessie and I also had new in-body augments to learn how to use. A fortunate consequence was that we had less time to think about those we left behind.

In the rest periods, when sorrowful thoughts might creep in, Zakiya seemed determined to keep us distracted. She had stories to tell. For instance, did you know that Zakiya was the illegitimate daughter of the president of the last nation on Earth? She was cared for by her mother's father until he grew too weak with age or illness. Babu Muenda died bringing Zakiya to live with her aunt. Zakiya told the story so well, I could feel the old man trembling under his burden, as he carried his granddaughter up those many steps to the front door of her aunt's house. Babu Muenda died, and even as he died he tried to protect Zakiya, keeping her from falling down the hard steps. I envied Babu Muenda his noble death.

As I sat quietly beside Alex, I knew what he was doing. He was reading Zakiya's journal. I still found it strange to know the journal existed in a data device in Zakiya's body, and Alex was reading her like a book, so to speak, by shiplink.

Zakiya and Jessie were in another compartment. I think their friendship deepened, and that gave me some peace of mind. There was no finer friend in the universe than Zakiya. And I didn't want Jessie to depend on me for every social aspect of her life, if we were ever to become useful members of human society. I was curious about what they would discuss. I couldn't imagine Zakiya lowering herself to participate in girl-talk, but anything to keep Jessie's thoughts from Sunny.

I didn't want to bother Alex. No, I *did* want to bother him. According to Zakiya and others who knew him, Alex was not the outgoing person he used to be. I wanted to talk to him and find out that he was not as frightened as I was. His silence worried me. The surplus of affection that Zakiya gave him worried me - did he need that? Alex was a genuine hero, despite his negative opinion of the morality of his heroism. I needed to know he was still a hero. I thought of him as our leader, the person who would keep us alive. I still didn't grasp how potent Zakiya was.

"Something bothering you?" Alex asked, startling me.

I wondered for an instant if I'd failed to turn off that gadget in my brain that allowed us to have telepathic communication. "I need to start a journal."

"That would be good."

"Do you keep one?"

"Not exactly."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"My own thoughts will certainly be less than profound."

"Sunny will want to know what you say." Alex immediately added, "Please forgive me." He had mentioned Sunny. That was what he regretted.

"I suppose he will." I tried to swallow a tennis ball in my throat without showing any discomfort. My imagination instantly showed me a possible future scene in which my orphaned son is reading my journal, and the words aren't enough. I write so poorly, he'll never really know me. I shoved myself out of that imagined scene, and I must have allowed visibility to my emotions because Alex was staring at me sadly.

"It's good to record your thoughts in the written word. I am greatly enriched by Zakiya's journal."

"Did you keep a journal?"

"It was too difficult for me. Words became my enemies, history became my shame. The records of Deep Space Fleet contain volumes of my writings, everything from daily reports to scientific treatises. I was so sure of everything when I was a young man. You shake your head. Why?"

"When I was young I was not sure of *anything*."

"And now?"

"I'm sure of a few things."

Alex nodded. He smiled, as though knowing what I meant. Then the smile faded. "Have you ever killed anyone, Sam?"

The question disturbed me. I surmised that Alex's reason for asking it pertained to the prospect for danger in the near future. I almost answered incorrectly. The memory of it made me feel very old, very sad, and very ashamed. I killed Karl Moses. I may as well have put my forty-five to his head and pulled the trigger. And the others. All because I was unhappy and impatient. I tried but couldn't remember the intensity with which I must have wanted things to change. I could only imagine the intensity. Milly was a difficult person, who occupied my thoughts almost every minute of the day back then. Our relationship had cause for intensity. The struggle to develop the Big Circuits created a continuous level of intensity. It seemed so needless now. Karl Moses didn't need to die. "People died because of me. No, that isn't the complete truth. I killed several people. My own shameful history."

"In 1986?"

"Yes."

"I find that difficult to believe. You're a gentle person, Samuel Lee, and I think you must always have been a gentle person. Perhaps your memory is flawed."

"It is, but not in this instance."

"Would you tell me about it?"

I had never told Jessie of those events on a Sunday morning in the late 20th century on Earth. Yet, not a day passed that I didn't relive that memory. I must have distanced myself from the memory in recent times, giving it just a glance when it arose from the depths and sank back. Even the great change in my brain did not smother it. I struggled to find the words to describe to Alex what happened, not because the images faded, but because they retained their power and detail. It hurt to gather the necessary verbs and adjectives to make a person of the future, like Alex, comprehend what happened in the winter of 1986 in a small town in Kansas. I didn't spare myself of any painful detail.

I had reached the end of my narrative and Alex was looking at me very thoughtfully, when Jessie and Zakiya entered the room. Jessie was happy about something. She saw me and instantly was no longer happy. Jessie almost began to weep. I jumped up and put my arms around her. Zakiya had succeeded in making Jessie ignore the loss of Sunny for a few moments. When Jessie looked upon my sorrowful face, with the death of Karl Moses still fresh in my mind, she thought I was thinking of Sunny. The anvil of grief returned to rest upon my heart. "Hey, what's wrong? You looked like you were in a real good mood, until you saw me."

"I was teaching Jessie to sing," Zakiya explained when Jessie hesitated to reply. "I think she has talent. Did you ever sing with her, Sam?"

"Me? Sing?"

"He did!" Jessie forced herself to recover her composure, grasping at anything to pull herself up from despair. "He sang to me."

"I don't remember." I wanted Jessie to continue thinking of something other than our baby. "What did I ever sing to you?"

"Love songs." Jessie stretched out the word "love" for comic effect. She wiped her eyes and smiled up at me.

"Music was never of much interest to me. Are you sure about this?"

"You lie like a rug!" Jessie was playing the game with me, making her face feathers wave at me. She turned around in my arms and wrapped my arms across her stomach. I could see this pose as a classic for a man-woman duet and wondered where Jessie saw it. Some old movie?

Jessie tried to sing a tune which was popular in the 60's - the 1960's. The lyrics were wrong, but that was because they were lyrics I composed when I was unable to remember the original lyrics. I sensed what Jessie was planning, and by the time she tapped me on the arm to join her, I had a copy of the original lyrics in my new intra-ocular database augmentation. I felt very self-conscious trying to sing in Zakiya's presence, but I had nothing to prove. I just wanted Jessie to be happy for a few moments longer.

Jessie and I sang a verse of our duet, as I wondered what other songs we might try. I was surprised when Alex sang a tune from my era on Earth. He had an excellent baritone voice. Zakiya let him solo for a few measures, then she joined him.

"You should make a quartet," Igor Khalanov suggested, having joined us between the fifth and sixth songs. "You have a good mix of vocal ranges."

"Thank you, Iggy!" Zakiya declared. "What a wonderful idea!"

* * *

Dear Sunny,

I don't know how much of this musical distraction went back to the *Freedom* by way of cryptikon. We were desperate to keep the pain of leaving you from overwhelming us. If you find yourself watching a recording of us singing and appearing to be happy, know that we were singing because of you, and that the cheerful mood never lasted long.

Perhaps singing is a boring thing for a young man your age. I wonder how old you'll be when you first read this journal. Perhaps you'll be quite young. Nothing bad has happened yet. If there are bad things ahead, please wait until you are more mature to read them. I won't leave out the scary and violent parts - if there are any - but I urge you never to regard them as innocent adventure.

Fear hurts, violence hurts, and they change you forever - perhaps not for the better. Be a gentle person, if the universe will allow it.

Your Loving Father,
Samuel.

* * *

We jumped into the globular cluster in which was embedded the main habitat of the barbarians - Oz. We used a route the barbarians didn't usually take. We tiptoed along a path of intruding main-sequence field stars. We mapped the neutron stars and the pulsars, then eased into the dense population of white dwarf stars. We made evaporating footprints in the slow-light gravity wells of the clustered dwarf stars.

Hundreds of barbarian jumpships blinked in and out of existence in the neighborhood. This gave Khalanov a chance to fine-tune his jumpship detector. We avoided them. The closer we jumped to Oz, however, the higher the probability the barbarians would take notice of us. As the propagation delay dropped to a fraction of a second our ship identification transponder began answering numerous automated hails.

"I see two choices," Khalanov ventured.

"We aren't following the Black Fleet into port," Zakiya said.

"I see one choice," Khalanov said.

"Jump inside the ball," Alex offered.

"How thick is the water shell?" Khalanov asked.

"You don't have an instrument that can tell you?"

"I need to thump it. I'm sure we aren't supposed to anchor against the ball."

"We could come back at a later time," I said. "We didn't think it would be this busy with Black Fleet traffic. Maybe there'll be a quiet period."

"Jump just inside, into the water," Alex said. "Then thump the water."

"They might see the displaced water explode outside the ball."

"Back off to where they won't see it."

"We've made improvements to the barbarian navigation equipment, but that might still be at the fringe of its capability."

"Two choices again."

"Pick a jump point somewhat within the range of our precision capability and in as discreet a location as possible," Zakiya said.

"Coming about," Khalanov said. "Jumping."

"A visitor," Alex said.

"Intentional?"

"Close. Getting closer."

"Intentional."

"They want to talk," I said, listening to a radio hail to us.

"Cannot do that," Alex warned.

"Run and hide?" Khalanov asked.

There was no good choice. Running would mobilize the barbarians against us and make any penetration of Oz that much harder. Destroying the inquisitive jumpship would also create problems. Khalanov hadn't had the time or the space to cram any stealth equipment into our little pirate ship, so sneaking to or from the barbarian world basically depended on them believing our ship was one of theirs. In less time than it took me to run through our tactical credits and debits,

Zakiya had a plan. I didn't like it.

* * *

"Please state your business." Jessie spoke with aloofness and impatience.

"Identify!" the barbarian ordered.

"You go first," Jessie said tiredly.

Khalanov and I listened from another compartment as Jessie, sitting alone in the command center, aggravated a Black Fleet officer. I was amazed at how calm Jessie sounded.

"Visual!" the barbarian shouted. "Full name and rank!"

"I'm sorry. You're too loud. What did you say?"

"Identify!"

"Why?"

The barbarian paused. I couldn't see the comm display but Jessie told me later the guy smiled, as though he liked her resistance to his demands. "You have a defective transponder! Who's in command of your ship?"

"Commodore Keshona."

"Keshona who? No commodores in the Fleet."

"Oh, here's the button for visual comm."

The barbarian was silent for several seconds then asked in amazement, "What *are* you?"

"You've never seen a Golden One?"

"Never have! Didn't know they were real. But that means you... Is this a trick? Like you would tell me! Okay, I got to see you in person. Open your transmat node! I'm coming over!"

No, no, no! I said to myself, but here he came out of the transmat node, armed to the teeth and wanting any excuse to do murder. He marched straight into the command room and Jessie swiveled her chair to face him. He stopped dead in his tracks. I came in behind him. He probably knew I was there but didn't seem to care. As far as he knew, his goose was cooked if Jessie was real.

For a moment I saw Jessie through the eyes of the barbarian. She was spectacular. The first time she moved her face feathers it startled the guy. It also helped his concentration that she wore very brief attire, so that she exposed too much of her shimmering body. That bothered me.

"Okay, you've had your look," I said. "Move away from her."

The barbarian turned slowly toward me, perhaps reluctantly. I could smell him. Dressed in a crisp black uniform, every detail in perfect order, he still needed a bath. A huge scar ran from forehead to chin, which explained a slight speech impediment. It also made his evil smirk quite weird.

"Who are you?" Scar asked. "You're not Fleet."

"Shut up and move back." No, I was not holding a bazooka on this guy. Yes, I was scared. He was a lot bigger than me. But I was not ever going to let him hurt Jessie. I was holding my forty-five down low. I was running my d-field, as was Jessie. I had a job to do while Alex and Zakiya did their part. They transmatted to the other jumpship after the barbarian came to ours. Jessie and I were to keep him occupied until they returned. I prayed he would want to talk for awhile.

Scar looked at my gun and continued to smile crookedly. I thought the smile impediment to his lips probably masked the apprehension he might be feeling. On the other hand, this was an old guy by barbarian standards and due to die

soon. Perhaps he was considering how best to make his exit from life.

He moved fast for an elderly barbarian. He whipped out his antique firearm and shot me four times. The Navy makes good d-fields. Following proper combat procedure, I was turned sideways to the line of fire. I was able to absorb the kinetic energy comfortably, rocking back on one leg with each impact. Raising *my* favorite antique firearm, I put two rounds of my special ammunition into his belly, almost folding him over. It overloaded his d-field, which emitted an audible warning. The third round passed through the field, dented his passive armor, and knocked him down behind one of the chairs. D-fields, I should explain, were the main reason slug weapons were still in use. D-fields could stop a beam weapon all day, either reflecting or absorbing energy. Bullets, however, drained energy as the d-field deflected them or melted them. You still had to shoot straight for maximum effect.

The control room was too confined for gunfire. My ears rang. Jessie had remembered to wear earplugs. Khalanov appeared out of nowhere and darted the barbarian just under his right ear. We let him lie there until A and Z returned.

Neither Alex nor Zakiya appeared harmed. They didn't seem pleased with the success of their part of the plan. Zakiya was upset that I had to shoot the barbarian. Only when she determined I hadn't killed him did she give me the credit I earned. I learned Alex nearly killed one of the other two barbarians. I thought he had reverted to his spying and assassinating days until he explained what happened. "I was faster than I used to be. My timing was bad. I had to get my man on the deck. I was also stronger than I used to be. I hurt him. He will wonder about the pain when he wakes up."

"Good thing my man was wearing his cocktail-hour d-field and not his business model," I muttered, trying to stop shaking.

Khalanov administered another injection to the barbarian and he and Alex strapped him into one of the command chairs. We waited for the big guy to regain his mental faculties. Presently his dark eyes came to focus and he surveyed the crowd in the control room. I didn't see the expected hatred or belligerence in his expression.

"How do you feel?" Zakiya asked our guest.

Scar tilted his head to one side, as normal people often do when thinking interesting thoughts. "I feel rather strange. Where is the Golden One?"

"Changing clothes. Why did you fire on one of us?"

"I was stupid."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Do you command your ship?"

"Yes."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes."

"Do you love them?"

"Yes."

"Do they know you love them?"

Scar didn't respond for a few moments, until he finally shook his head as a reply in the negative.

"Do you love the Black Fleet?"

"Yes."

"How many people have you killed?"

"I don't know."

"More than a dozen?"

"Yes."

"Do you like to kill?"

"Yes."

"What happens when you die?"

"They take your guns."

"Do you have a soul?"

"I hope not."

"Would you like to live a long time?"

"It's hard enough to live a short time."

"Why did you intercept our ship?"

"Defective transponder."

"Is that uncommon?"

"Don't know."

"Was it necessary to intercept us? Was it standard operating procedure?"

"No."

"Did you simply want to harass us?"

"No."

"Why did you intercept us?"

"Curiosity. Time to waste. Stories to tell. Long wait for the docks to pull us in. Many ships returning this time."

"What do you do when they pull you in?"

"Unload. Decontaminate. Debrief."

"Then what?"

"Get drunk. Sleep. Visit the kids. Train for the games. Fight. Survive. Go out again."

"Fight in the games?"

"Yes."

"Is this required?"

"Yes."

"Do you kill your opponent?"

"Not always."

"Why not always?"

"Sometimes it's wrong to finish off a man who fights well. Hard to explain. Too exhausted to know what to do. Someone will stop you. Or not."

"Thumbs up, thumbs down."

"Yes."

"Do you have any questions?"

Scar seemed surprised at the invitation and gave it some thought. "Are you the one?"

"The one what?"

"The one who sings and kills." Scar said it as though the words were capitalized.

"I suppose that is a fair description."

"It will be an honor to die at your hands."

"Honor has nothing to do with me, and I will not kill you."

"You are not the Warrior Angel of the One True God?"

"I heard a Broken One mention the One True God, but I don't know of it."

"The Sups say She speaks to them and sometimes helps them. Are you the singer of the yellow dress?"

"Yes."

"You killed the two Tough Guys."

"Yes."

"The old artist is dead. The one who painted your portrait."

This news devastated Zakiya. She almost stopped the interview. "Rafael? How did he die?"

"It hurts you. I'm sorry."

"How did he die?"

"Be happy for him. He lived a long time. He died well. He was no coward."

"How?"

"No one wanted to kill him when they found him. They didn't know he was that old and weak. He got in the way trying to save his Rhyan friend."

"Daiaunkh."

"He died well also. Took some Fleet with him."

Zakiya stopped talking with the barbarian. She departed the control room. Alex took her place.

"You'll kill me," the barbarian said. "I'm less than excrement to you. But I could do worse."

"She won't let me," Alex responded.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Why is the Golden One with you?"

"She isn't a Golden One, but she is related to them."

"She's not a servant of She Who Must Not Be Named?"

"The Lady in the Mirror?"

"If she hears you - "

" - she'll kill me. I know the legend. How do you know it's true?"

"I've seen the ships they find. Guttled by the mirror. They're put on display as warnings. You're not one of us. How do you know about..."

"The Lady in the Mirror? I've spent centuries drinking with your boys in black. Many have dared to mention the Lady in the Mirror."

"Centuries, you say? Perhaps two others?"

"There were three of us."

"One with the sword? Not this guy. He's too small." He hooked his thumb at me. I wasn't that much smaller than Koji. I guess legends grow a few inches taller.

"The Executioner," Alex said.

"Many times we killed you. The Executioner killed us. Are you the Questioner? Where are the other two?"

"Does anyone live a long time in the Big Ball?"

"How long?" Scar asked.

"Two centuries."

"No!"

"Anyone who came to you from the *Titanic* would be dead by now."

"Yes. Many generations back."

"You have records?"

"The Sups have records. Maybe."

"Do you know of a person named Etrhnk?"

"Sure."

"Is he here? Is he alive?"

"You know him?"

"He's my son. Is he here?"

"Your son?"

"Is he here?"

"Your son! That's why there's so many coming home!"

"Why?"

"Maybe get a chance to fight him. Or watch him die."

"Time's up," Khalanov said.

"May I see the Golden One again, before you kill me?"

"No. Go back to your ship."

"Better kill me. I know too much about you."

"You won't remember."

We unstrapped Scar from the chair and took him to the transmat node. When he was transmatted back to his ship we jumped into the water shell of the barbarian world.

I was angry that Zakiya presumed I could handle my role in this encounter with a barbarian. *I* didn't know I could do it - how could she? She had placed Jessie in real danger. My hands shook as I reloaded the clip of my pistol.

Section 011

Abattoir

Dear Sunny,

You should know that sentient life is rare. The Milky Way must be an anomaly. Think of how far I had to travel to meet your mother. Although your mother says we encountered many alien races in distant galaxies, the Protector had to parse millions of galaxies to find very little sentient life. So it's always exciting to meet a person who isn't human. Rhyans and Essiin don't count, of course, because they're human. They just got separated from Earth at some point and diverged slightly in their morphology. Their languages and cultures could easily have found places on the earth I once knew. Outside the Union there are thousands - perhaps millions - of human settlements, all of them subject to predation by the barbarians, yet they persist.

I met a very nice person today who was not human. His body was on backwards.

"I didn't know you could talk," I said.

"I thought I could, if I tried," he said. It sounded like a friendly, even humorous reply.

"Why do you move your lips, when your voice comes from elsewhere?"

"It is a poor attempt to appear less alien." He replied without moving his lips.

"But please know that when my lips smile, it *is* a smile."

"Where are you from?"

"Is it correct to put the preposition at the end?" He smiled when he said that. How far have I come from grade school to be confronted with a grammar rule for a language that could barely tolerate most of its own rules?

"From where do you come?" I returned the smile.

"Please pardon my misspent erudition. I come from the waste treatment plant."

"I mean, where were you born?"

"Too far away to be able to say."

"I haven't seen anyone like you before."

"There are a few of us here."

I was still looking for the source of his voice. It seemed to be his ears. I guess they were ears. "You're a handsome species." I admired his expressive face that seemed old and wise and impish all at once. "This galaxy is remarkably full of sentient life."

"We're from the same galaxy?"

"The barbarians have no routes external to it."

"How do you know this?" His translucent eyelids half covered his small dark eyes.

"Which?"

"All."

"It's a long story."

"I noticed you because you seem very different."

"Not many Koreans here."

"Is that like Chinese? They're quite numerous. No, I mean you don't act like we slaves condemned to the lower regions of the Big Ball. You're more like a visitor."

"You're perceptive. I'm surprised you have an interest in things beyond

surviving in this place. Are you typical for your species?"

"I wouldn't know. We're called *Fesn*, which means 'human' in one of our languages. It would please me to know that humans are not all like the Black Fleet."

"It would also please me," I said. "I'm being sarcastic. Pogo said it best: 'We have met the enemy and he is us.' I hope we can someday overcome the Black Fleet."

"My people, too, have their aggressive factions. We're numerous and widespread in our part of the galaxy. When the Black Fleet spreads farther in that direction there will be conflict."

"What's your name? Mine is Samuel Lee."

"I'm called White Bridge. A translation. The sound of my name is too similar to an English swear word."

"I wish I could spend more time talking with you, White Bridge. To meet you is almost like a fantasy for me, quite shocking in a pleasant way. But friends are waiting for me."

"I see them. Will I see you again?"

"It's doubtful." How does one read the body language of an alien and know what it means? I imagined this person felt disappointed by my negative reply. I imagined all manner of human characteristics for him, despite his nonhuman appearance. It didn't occur to me to question his motives. I was simply flattered to have him show an interest in me. "Unless you come with us," I thought to add. I really wanted more time to get to know this friendly alien. "We have an engagement to sing at a festival."

"Sing? A festival?"

"We sing. We look for someone. If we sing, perhaps he'll notice us."

"The festival is today?"

"Yes. Near an art museum."

"Don't go!"

"Why not?"

"Too many people. Bad things can happen."

This was potentially important information. I wanted the others to talk to White Bridge. They were staying away from us, as the alien noted. We wanted to minimize exposure of Jessie and Zakiya to anyone who might detect their identities. They wore robes, as did Alex and I, and they kept hoods over their heads. It was ostensibly a part of our singing act. "Will you meet my friends?"

"With pleasure. They dress strangely."

I tried not to stare at White Bridge. He had arms and legs like we humans but his spine was apparently on the front of his torso. This caused his neck to connect head to body with an awkward-looking plumbing arrangement. His face overhung his flat front side and had no nose between his dark eyes and thin-lipped mouth. He had breathing holes on either side of his neck not far below his ears. The ears - shaped like little trumpets - twisted to catch sounds - or emit them - in almost any direction. What skin could be seen had interesting patterns of pigmentation, sort of like abstract tattoos. He wore work clothes that emitted the odor of his occupation. Of course, Alex and I worked in a related job whose aromas were just as bad. We processed dead bodies and other organic material for composting. I speak of White Bridge as a male in the human sense but this was not obvious.

I introduced White Bridge to Zakiya and Alex. Khalanov had stayed with the ship, hidden in what we hoped was a safe place. When I introduced Jessie, we

all discovered how a Fesn displays astonishment. The pigmentation moves, the eyes grow large, the eyelids opaque.

"Don't be afraid," I said. "She isn't what you think."

"What I think is what I know!" White Bridge hissed, trying to retrieve his hand from Jessie's. Too much of Jessie's arm was exposed from the sleeve of her robe when she reached to take the alien's hand. She released it quickly. White Bridge dropped to his knees before her. He performed this act of submission rapidly yet with a difficulty possibly due to age. Jessie leaned over and urged him to resume standing. He struggled back to his feet.

"Did Golden Ones hurt you?" Jessie asked with concern. "Did they hurt others of your kind?"

"Not me. They were interested in us for awhile. Some of us disappeared."

"I can't explain their behavior but I will never hurt you!"

"I'm happy to hear that! I thought I was endangered by my curiosity. I don't know what made me approach Samuel Lee. If I have disturbed you, I apologize."

"You are a wonder to us!" Zakiya said. "News of your race has not reached into the Union. I find it remarkable that you survive here among the barbarians of our species. How long have you lived here?"

"More than a century, Zakiya."

"Please forgive my turn from social courtesy to business matters," Zakiya said, "but you must know this world well."

"I've worked in most parts of it," White Bridge replied.

"Would you be our guide?"

"That might create a problem with my overseer but I am tempted."

"What kind of problem?"

"I'm not sure. He isn't a very good overseer. I think he depends on me too much. He may feel the need to search for me or report me missing."

We eventually learned from White Bridge that he - not the human overseer - managed his department at the waste treatment plant. Without his help, the overseer would eventually be visited by a member of the Black Fleet. This could be a lethal visit. It was less certain what might happen to White Bridge. They would have to find him first, and we promised to make him disappear from the Big Ball as soon as possible.

"You can take me away from this place?"

"We have the means," Zakiya replied. "But it will be dangerous."

"I will accept the danger."

"There will be danger at this festival we planned to attend?"

"You hear the music. It isn't festival music. It should be. The festival started two hours ago."

"We'll go there."

"There will be many children," the alien said. We didn't understand his implication. He should have better warned us.

We saw signs of the early exodus as we approached the scene from several sections away. Numerous stragglers, many holding to each other in a distressed manner, passed by us on the outbound walkways above us. Zakiya reacted to something she saw up ahead and questioned White Bridge about it. "Yes, the great museum is no longer. The Black Fleet destroyed it. The park across the concourse is the festival site. They tried to move it to another place, because of the destruction of the museum, but foolishly went ahead when no other place

was found."

"This was the museum Rafael and I visited," Zakiya explained.

We moved to the edge of the walkway, slowing down, approaching the green grass, but our attention was on the vast ruins of the museum on the opposite side. It was a maze of debris floating in dusty light, clumped into nets to control drifting. I saw Zakiya's ocular recordings of the structure and knew it was a major work of art itself, its loss a cultural tragedy. It was from this sight that we turned to see the park. There were lights in the trees, ribbons on the lampposts, all the decorations of festivity. I won't describe what lay on the ground. At my first glimpse I reached for Jessie to turn her away from it. I was too late.

Jessie saw the horror. She vomited. She screamed. You and I have never heard such a scream. I hope I never will again.

Alex loped toward a nearby group of people. He asked them questions. He shouted at them. I could hear him clearly but the words didn't penetrate my broiling thoughts and emotions.

I could hear Zakiya breathing hard. White Bridge stood behind me, holding onto a pinch of my clothing, making a strange sound. I held Jessie, and the pressure of my arms couldn't subdue her shaking.

Alex came back to Zakiya and urged her to leave. Black uniforms appeared behind us. Before we could gather our courage to navigate the field of slaughter away from them, they were upon us. Three barbarians surrounded us.

I was startled to hear Alex and Zakiya talking inside my head.

{We can take them.}: Alex.

{No. See what they want.}: Zakiya.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded.

"Singers," Alex spoke for us. "We came to perform. We're leaving."

"You don't look like singers to me," a second officer challenged.

"Some of us are new to the profession. This was to be our first performance as a group. I don't think we can sing now." Perhaps Alex could not completely mask his feelings. I was told he was once a master at deceiving barbarians, but under the current circumstances that could be impossible for him. The three members of the Black Fleet reacted to him with suspicion but with obvious ignorance of how close they were to death.

"I think you can," the last barbarian said.

{No. Never.}: Alex.

{Yes. We must.}: Zakiya.

{Not for them.}: Alex.

{For the dead. For the survivors.}: Zakiya.

"Will we be broadcast?" Zakiya inquired.

"Of course, sweetheart," said One. He tried to peek into her hood and she managed to deflect the attempt as though unaware of his intent. She moved aside, as though distracted, just as his hand touched her hood.

"Get up to the stage," said Two. We were already moving.

"You'd better be good," said Three.

For all his exotic appearance, White Bridge managed to remain invisible to the barbarians. I could still feel him holding to my robe, right behind me.

I almost had to carry Jessie. I could feel her tension, almost as though she would explode. I knew what that might mean and it worried me.

Bodies. Parts of bodies. Large bodies and small. Pools of blood. We had to watch where we stepped, and we didn't want to watch where we stepped. I kicked things, stumbled over things, not looking at things. Just things. No

longer people. No longer in pain. No longer.

{These three didn't kill, or else I wouldn't spare them.}: Alex.

{Cold weapons. Clean knives. Clean uniforms.}: Zakiya.

{They were late to the party, that's all.}: Alex.

{What can we sing? How can we sing?}: me.

We made it to the stage. Jessie had calmed somewhat. I peered into her hood and made her look at me. She didn't seem to know me. I felt a great fear for what I may have lost.

"I must sing," she said with a terrible ache in her voice. "I sing for the dead."

Dear Sunny. Sunny, Sunny, Sunny! All things seem possible, but evil seems *probable*. Nothing can ever set right something as horrible as what happened here, but your mother's voice fully explained how any good person should feel about such slaughter. Listen and understand. I'm sorry such a lesson must be learned by gentle people.

Jessie sang.

I thought I was prepared for it. I was wrong.

I knew the words Jessie sang because I could speak her language. The words added little to the impact of the pure sound, the pure sadness. The others who listened were stunned, I perhaps only slightly less so. Jessie didn't sing long, just to the point where my heart was being torn from my chest. Every little sadness, real or imagined, that I'd ever experienced rose to the surface of my awareness, crowned by the loss of Sunny. I cried like a baby.

Jessie collapsed into my arms when she finished.

The three Black Fleet boys - struck down by the power of Jessie's voice - got up off their knees. One of them wiped his face on his uniform sleeve. Zakiya waved good-bye to them and they departed meekly. It was curious and troubling they could be affected so strongly. People never quite fit into the neat boundaries we try to place around them.

I didn't think it was possible but we stayed and sang as a group. None were songs we rehearsed. Zakiya led us by giving cues in our ocular data terminals. I had to close my eyes to concentrate on the words and harmony. When I opened my eyes I saw we had an audience. Many of the people who arrived to clean up the carnage had gathered before the stage to listen.

It was encouraging to me that Jessie was singing with us. The shock of seeing the carnage may not have damaged her too badly.

How could we sing? How could the people in our audience listen to us? How could they pick up bloody fragments of persons and put them in bags? How could we survive this magnificent hell and remain unchanged?

Jessie was already changed. Perhaps leaving Sunny started the process. This abattoir of a park pushed her beyond what her present personality could tolerate. She would become someone new - or someone old. Perhaps I would still know her. Perhaps she would still love me. Or not.

"Why?" I asked.

"It is not unusual," White Bridge replied in his quiet but resonant voice.

"It was all for no reason?"

"Reason is alien to it. Everyone knows large gatherings are dangerous. The Fleet will always come, will always be bad. Females will be raped. Foolish angry sups will be killed. I think some Fleet were killed here today, or so many sups would not have died, and not so horribly. This is the worst I can remember."

"Why did they destroy the art museum?" Zakiya asked after a moment of

silence.

"It became symbolic. The Great Artist often appeared there. One of the Cruel Ones found a painting of a woman he recognized and became enraged. The two facts made it certain the museum would be damaged."

"Was the 'Great Artist' Rafael?" Zakiya asked.

"Yes, that was his name."

"I didn't realize so many innocent people would be harmed. You didn't see the picture, White Bridge?"

"No. One hears there are many copies, but they'll remain hidden for a long time."

"We shouldn't have come," Alex said.

"We must find our son," Zakiya said.

"You and I can continue to look for him. I feel very apprehensive about the safety of Jessie and Sam. We should have left them with Iggy."

"Do you want to turn back, Sam?" Zakiya asked me. "Jessie seems rather unsettled."

"I'll leave that decision to her, but she may not be able to make the decision very soon. I believe she was forced to repartition her mind."

"What does that mean?"

"When a certain amount of time has passed, or when some shock damages her psyche, Jessie must open a new space in her mind in which to be a different person. She can try to salvage memories from any previous partitions, but something will always be lost, including at least one entire partition. She was once a Singer for the Dead and some of that partition is now in her current partition."

"Will she still know us?"

"Yes. We may not see much change in her, but she will be changed. I suppose the result is not much different psychologically from being rejuvenated by a Mnro Clinic." I felt Jessie move in my arms and I thought she would say something but she didn't. "Jessie?" She answered me by hugging me. "Do you want to go back to the ship?"

She leaned away from me far enough to shake her hooded head as a negative response. We had a discussion before leaving Khalanov with the jumpship. Jessie and I had argued for going with Alex and Zakiya. We wanted to help. We wanted to see the place. Zakiya didn't want to put us in greater danger. We compromised. Alex and Zakiya scouted the parts of Oz near where we hid our ship and determined the four of us could be inserted into the social setting long enough to assess the risk and choose the next step.

Alex found jobs for me and him in a recycling plant. It was disgusting work and often horrific and heartbreaking, especially when a child's body would appear in the incoming material. Jessie and Zakiya had stayed out of sight in a vacant residence we claimed like squatters. We learned how to procure food and clothing with our work vouchers. Alex became acquainted with the local punks who immediately agreed to leave us alone. He started making me learn self-defense methods.

There were good people and there were bad people. There were crimes of passion and crimes of hunger. There was no professional law enforcement. The strong survived, the weak died. There were appointed managers and enforcers. If they didn't manage and enforce effectively, the Black Fleet liquidated them. It was a rough and boring way of life for the average slave, yet not a very dangerous one - if you worked hard, paid protection to the local punks, and

stayed away from large public gatherings.

In the evening hours in public places similar to parks and commons we had followed the examples of street musicians and had put on short performances of our style of harmony. Only days into our stay the festival singing engagement was offered to us.

Now we sat on benches near the walkway concourse of a deserted neighborhood two levels above the basement of Oz. It was evening, but only by the clock - light always filled the air and illuminated the bright colors of this cheerful hell. We had retreated from the area of the destroyed art museum. Our temporary home in Oz was only a few minutes away. We were waiting for time to ease the pain of our experience in the park. But it never would.

"If we stay together," Zakiya said, letting us know she was leaning toward staying a quartet, "where should we go from here? White Bridge, do you have any advice?"

"There is a colony of people who are mostly artists and performers," the alien replied. "They have guilds. They might accept you as members."

"How difficult would that be?"

"You're very talented, I think, but there may be social or political obstacles. How would this help you search for the person you seek?"

"It may give us more mobility and a wider source of information."

"You have no idea of his location?"

"We know he was sent to the games to die."

"Then there is no hope!"

"Is there any way we can get into the games?" Alex asked.

"Not as a spectator. But they are televised."

"I heard a fellow sup bragging that he was going to fight in the games," Alex said.

"Anyone who would join the Black Fleet must qualify by surviving in the games," White Bridge said.

"Just survive?"

"And kill three opponents with bare hands."

Zakiya frowned at the thoughtful look on Alex's face.

Zakiya reluctantly decided to visit the artists' colony. We arrived late, yet people were still out and about. We were tired, hungry, and emotionally bruised. With two hooded figures and a Fesn guide, we attracted attention.

The neighborhood featured porches and balconies on multistory buildings arranged in circular clusters. The structural material appeared organic, perhaps varieties of wood and bamboo, and very lightweight in mass. Artificial gravity being the rule in Oz, provided more architectural freedom of design and construction, especially in the vertical direction. Canvas awnings spanned the circular courtyards from the roof eaves, cutting the omnipresent illumination to a dusky level. The awning panels could be opened and closed to approximate night and day.

Despite the late hour, when we arrived in the innermost courtyard there was live music coming from musicians on balconies. With a little imagination I could almost see the old New Orleans French Quarter and I could almost hear it in the music. Our arrival caused the music to die. In the sudden hush a gypsy-like woman approached us from a first-floor porch. Tiny bells on anklets tinkled in the silence as she walked on bare feet across the parquetry yard. This was a Carmen, I thought, watching her glide toward us as though prepared to give a performance.

"Welcome, strangers." She paraded in front of us, giving each of us a look, until she came to White Bridge. "I haven't seen your kind in many years. I'm happy you are still alive, assuming you prefer life to death."

"Lately it is a question to ponder," White Bridge admitted, "but now I put it out of mind. These are extraordinary singers, perhaps wishing to earn membership in your guild."

"They don't look like singers, sir," the woman countered in almost musical cadence.

"Perhaps you heard them today. They sang at the festival."

"They're the ones?" she asked, dramatically lowering her voice. She glanced back and forth at the neighborhood onlookers and at us. "Come into my home, please!" The woman urged us to hurry inside. She closed the door and drew drapes across the windows. We sat on rugs and cushions on the floor of her home. I could hear people walking on her porch, perhaps trying to see in. The gypsy woman then took her time in her kitchen and brought us cups of hot tea and small cookies. She sat with us. "My name is Carmen. What are yours?"

I smiled at the name as Alex responded with ours. "Are you the manager of this community?" Alex asked.

"I am."

"You report to people who can execute you at their whim."

"Yes." She frowned at Alex's words.

"You should know that we aren't simply singers. We're dangerous to befriend."

"And you seek friendship."

"We can ill afford more enemies, and if we came to you without this warning you would soon join forces against us."

"Why should I not send you away at once?"

"You should. But you offered us hospitality when I believe you were afraid to do so. Or do I misinterpret your need to minimize our contact with your musicians outside?"

"The Fesn takes his chances with you."

"I can't speak for him."

"He's seen your covered ones?"

"Not fully but he understands something of their identity. Why do you hesitate to send us away?"

The woman waited a long moment before replying. She appeared tense. "Most barbarians are not students of history. They seem to have forgot something very important."

"What is that?"

"The sound of a voice so powerful in its lament that it brought down the wrath of She Who Must Not Be Named upon an entire world. I wonder if some would-be scholar might soon warn them that a Golden One has sung again." Carmen looked at Zakiya and Jessie, undoubtedly wondering which was the Golden One.

Zakiya reacted by placing a hand on Alex's forearm. This was an unexpected and disturbing fact, one I wanted to further investigate, but I now understood why Carmen felt she couldn't turn us away. She knew she couldn't turn away a Golden One.

"Do you know of this, White Bridge?" Alex asked.

"It happened a long time ago," the alien replied. "And perhaps it happened another time, even further back in history. I remember The Singing and The

Punishment of the Twin, but there may be no humans who are as old as I am."

"The Twin?" Alex asked.

"The companion world to the Big Ball," White Bridge explained. "Connected to it but much larger, containing a vast ocean of air, across which people could sail in beautiful airships. All that remains is the tether and the Black Fleet docks at the end of it."

Zakiya pulled on Alex's forearm. "We should leave, Alex, and find a place by ourselves."

Alex and Zakiya started to rise from their cushions. Jessie sleepily leaned against me and I hesitated to disturb her. Carmen reacted with surprise. She shook her head, making the long loop chains of her earrings strike her rouged cheeks. "Sit down, sit down! I won't turn you away at this hour of the night! I can see you're tired. I know what you must have suffered at the festival. I could hear it in your voices. I could hear you are decent and sensitive persons. I don't understand why a Golden One comes so humbly to us. I don't understand why she sang for our dead. I am curious. I want to know how I can help you."

Zakiya continued to rise and Alex followed her upward. I moved Jessie and she came tiredly to her feet. Carmen watched Jessie closely as she pulled at the folds of her cloak, hating the restriction of it. Then she stopped and pointed her hood to a place beyond Carmen. A small child walked sleepily into the room, and when he saw our hooded wives he reacted by fearfully attaching himself to Carmen.

"Don't be afraid, Mikos," Carmen said, hugging the child against her leg. "Mama's not afraid."

"Oh, no," Zakiya said. "No! We must not stay! Not another minute longer!"

"Oh, how cute!" Jessie said, dropping to her knees in front of mother and son.

"You are the one!" Carmen declared and then lowered her voice submissively. "It was your voice. You are the Golden One. You *wep*t for us!"

Jessie halted. She tried to look back at me or Alex through the opening of her hood. She got back to her feet. She leaned into my arms and I held her. We started toward the door, following Alex and Zakiya.

Carmen picked up her small son and rushed to the door ahead of us. She blocked our exit. "Please! You need us for something. Tell me what it is. I want to help you."

"You're frightened of us," Zakiya said. "You should be. We should not have come here."

"We are frightened by everything!" Carmen declared. "We are always in danger. I'm prepared to run away and hide. It wouldn't be the first time. Tell me what you need."

Zakiya hesitated a long time to speak. "Two friends of mine died not long ago. I hoped to learn if they left any message for me."

"Musicians? Who are they?"

"I'm afraid to name them. That, too, would place you in danger."

"And I'm not already in danger? You are here, with a Golden One. The die is cast. I might be a coward but I have no choice. At least make it worth my while to take the risk. Pull back your hoods. Let me look at you."

Zakiya pulled back the hood of her cloak. Carmen's dark eyes studied Zakiya's face and recognition made her gasp. "You're the woman in the painting! The singer! The great singer! I am so honored to meet you! Please, come sit back down. This is wonderful! This is sad! It's the artist and his friend

you want to know about. I can help you. I can!"

* * *

"I apologize. I'm terribly rude. I could look at her for hours. I can't easily stop."

"It doesn't bother me, White Bridge. I understand the compulsion, although I thought you wouldn't respond so much to a person who looks more human than of your race."

"I have no explanation, except that I've lived so long with humans and have taken their fear of the Golden Ones as my own. To know they can be as gentle and sensitive as Jessie throws my thoughts into a state of hopeful fascination."

Jessie also made a strong impression on Carmen, from the moment she removed her hooded cloak, confirming her race. Carmen was terrified of her, yet in only a few moments Jessie made a friend of her. She also made a friend of Carmen's son. Mikos now possessed several of Jessie's beautiful feathers, and it was not the first time she gladly sacrificed some of her plumage to a small child.

"Are you male or female, or shouldn't I ask?" I inquired of White Bridge.

"I suppose I'm too old for it to matter. I'm a potential male. Even Fesn don't know the gender of a fellow Fesn. If they inquire, it's because their friendship has reached a depth in which marriage and family can be considered. In relation to human culture it would seem to have its advantages toward stability, yet it, too, has its comedy. I appreciate the art of life built around the volatility of human sexual relationships. May I ask how you relate to Jessie?"

"I love her. She's my wife and the mother of my son."

Jessie stirred on her pallet. She wasn't sleeping. She was never one to jump right out of bed in the morning. It didn't help that our sleep patterns were disrupted.

"You're a fortunate human, Samuel Lee. I can't imagine why you put yourselves at such risk in this place."

"We wanted to help Alex and Zakiya."

"How can you help them? I don't mean to be critical. I worry that you are in danger."

Jessie sat up and stretched. The small amount of light seeping in from slits in the window drapes made her arms and head glitter. The tiny feathers created a rainbow iridescence, as their microscopic structure fractured the light like thousands of small diffraction gratings.

"This world isn't our final destination. We need Alex and Zakiya for what lies ahead. We're with them because we're a reminder to them to be careful."

"Contacting their son would seem a daunting challenge, Samuel Lee. Are they such capable people?"

"Wait and see."

Jessie came to a sitting position on her pallet on the floor. She raised her knees and hugged them. She was not feeling right. When she smiled at me it was a painful smile. I helped her to her feet. She nodded a greeting to White Bridge.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, already knowing.

"I'm OK," she replied, knowing I knew better.

"Am I still your partner?"

She leaned into my chest and I held her against me. I always imagined I

could feel our hearts merge into identical rhythm. "Always. But now I'm the Jessie who has this horrible memory of butchered people stuck in her mind. I asked myself why such a thing could happen, all night long. And this morning I woke up knowing the answer. Knowing how to hate. I'm sorry. This is a bad way to start the day."

White Bridge opened a gap in the drapes and peeked out upon the courtyard. "Many people," he said.

"They are so nosy!" I turned around to see Carmen in the doorway to our room.

We washed and ate breakfast. The people outside waited. Carmen seemed in no hurry. I helped her clear away the breakfast dishes.

"The people outside?" I queried.

"They know about you. They want to see you."

"You told them?" Zakiya said with near anger, joining us in the kitchen.

"You can't keep secrets here! They knew there was something important about the five of you. I needed to perform duties that would further arouse their interest. I needed their help. How can I lead them if they don't trust me?"

"Do you think such a gathering is wise?"

"No, but I can't do anything about it! We're not closely monitored by the Black Fleet. Their attention is intermittent and careless, although quite lethal when it decides to act. We don't give them reason to suspect us of anything. We're fortunate to have work we love and privileges greater than average. They enjoy music almost as much as they enjoy killing. You came to the right people to help you."

"We hear that one can become an officer of the Black Fleet only by fighting in the games."

"Yes, Zakiya. Why speak of this?"

"It means the Fleet derives its membership from the general population of Oz."

"Oz? Yes, I've heard that name for our home."

"It means the moral defect is likely present in some of your people."

"What moral defect?"

"Perhaps that's too simplistic. There were always barbarians among us, throughout human history, those without conscience or without the sensitivity to care for the well-being of others. I think not all Black Fleet officers are totally without conscience, just as I think many of your own people may have that defect of character."

"I don't like where your words lead, Zakiya. You think our musicians are potential Black Fleet members, perhaps at least willing to spy for them?"

"Just as you're responsible for those under your management, I also have my responsibilities. These thoughts I have about probabilities of human character persist. The more people who know of us, the greater the chance that bad things will happen. You're willing to take the risk. I'm not."

"You won't let us help you?"

"Only as far as learning something about Rafael and Daidaunkh."

"I knew those who knew him. Most are dead. Rafael wouldn't stay with us or with any of our kindred guilds. The Rhyan guarded him. A few risked their lives to learn from him and bring him food. I once met the Rhyan and wanted to befriend him, but he wasn't interested in me. Can you tell me something about him?"

"He and Rafael loved the same woman, Rafael's wife. The woman in many

of his paintings. I'm afraid both of them were more interested in dying than in living."

"Many feel it's better to die well than to live badly."

"I don't want you to die because of me, Carmen."

"How can I make you understand? It is my honor to do *anything* for you."

"How can I make *you* understand? Too many people have died because of me. I have no right to ask anything of you."

"But you want to save your son!" Carmen argued. "You would do the same for me!"

"That's what I'm trying to do for you! Save your son! You must think of Mikos first."

"I've failed my people," Carmen struggled to say. "They want so much to help you. I know we're too corrupt to trust, but that's what they want, and I've failed them. Our lives are secured only by trust, and there's so little trust. Yes, there are those who will always betray us. I'm sorry we're so easily able to execute our betrayers. I'm sorry it seems not to purify us. I'm sorry we can't have what we want. You're like a miracle to us, something that will never happen again. I don't know how it is for others of my people, but when the Black Fleet murdered Rafael and the Rhyan, it was a turning point in my life. When they burned the art museum and damaged others that kept copies of Rafael's work, it further hardened my feelings. I don't know what actions I'll take because of this change in me, I only know that almost everything is different for me now. As if all my former life was a lie, a stage role. You don't know how difficult it was for me to contain myself last night when I discovered who you were. You are a legend among us! Everyone has waited for you to return. All I could do was fall back on my craft and act a lesser feeling than I really felt."

"Are you finished?" Zakiya seemed unmoved by Carmen's words.

"No! I was awake all night arranging for this day. I was able to convince one person who knew Rafael to come here. I thought to invite him because I knew he had another painting in which you appear. I'll see if he's arrived."

Carmen went to the rear of the apartment and opened a door. Several people stood there and peered into the kitchen. A young man among them stepped forward and entered the kitchen carrying a long tube of something rolled up. Carmen shut the door in the faces of the others.

When his eyes found Zakiya the young man smiled. Zakiya went to him and put a hand on his shoulder. In another moment she was hugging him. "Percival. I'm so happy you're still alive."

"So am I! I thought I would never see you again." And somberly: "Do you know about Rafael?"

"I know."

"He told me to thank you."

"For what?"

"He didn't say, but he spoke very strongly and positively. He seemed happy. Even Daidaunkh was in good spirits. The last time I visited them, he got me drunk."

Zakiya introduced us to Percival. He was awestruck by Jessie until she smiled warmly and took his hand in greeting. Zakiya recounted the part Percival played in her previous trip to Oz. Percival described the museum encounter with details we hadn't heard from Zakiya.

"I brought this for you," Percival said. He unrolled the tube. He had to stand

on a chair to hold the large oil painting where all could see it comfortably. Zakiya was in the center of the picture, wearing a yellow dress that was familiar to us. She was surrounded by other people and by a strange pyramid. I recognized Samson and perhaps Fred. One other I deduced was the Rhyian Daidaunkh.

"Here is Sammy with Gator," Zakiya said, touching the image of Samson. "Here is Denna as we last saw her before she died. Fred. Shorty the Gatekeeper. Daidaunkh. And Rafael. This may be the only self-portrait of Rafael."

"Samson isn't with you this time?" Percival asked.

"Samson died, Percival," Zakiya said with that edge of grief that ruined the beauty of her voice.

Percival paused, upset at this news, and his expression gave Zakiya his condolences. "Forever dead?" he asked tentatively. "I thought medicine in the Union was..."

"A small part of him remains. I have very little hope he can be restored." When Zakiya turned away, Percival began rolling up the painting. When he had it rolled he brought it to her. Zakiya took it and handed it to a surprised Carmen. "Keep it safe. Others will want to see it someday. Percival, I take it from you only to make you safer."

"I'm safe enough. A small voice whispered in my ear. She advised me to come here. Why did Samson die? How did he die? We know he got back to Earth. We saw the Mother Earth Opera."

"Our ship was boarded by three barbarians. They killed many of us but only Samson couldn't be revived."

"Your ship?" Carmen asked. "Your ship was not destroyed?"

"We survived."

"That's wonderful! But... how could you survive? They are supposed to be invincible. Only She Who Must Not Be Named can destroy them."

"We survived."

"You had to kill them! As long as they breathed, they would not stop their attack. You killed them! The Cruel Ones can be defeated!"

"It means no such thing, Carmen. You don't know how many there are. This place you call home is perhaps the finest treasure the Black Fleet ever stole but it's a tiny piece of their total domain. The Union of Stars is vast, yet it's contained by the Black Fleet like the yolk within an egg. They're at once the protectors and the consumers of the Union. At some point they may decide the Union is an unnecessary structure. They will break the yolk."

"Are you not here to plan some action against the Black Fleet?" Percival asked. "I know you're a Navy admiral."

"We came for the friends I left here and to find our son."

"You have a son here? May I help you?"

"That's the impasse at which we find ourselves. Carmen's people also wish to help us. I don't want any more people to die. We're not here to fight the Black Fleet, only for personal reasons."

"Why is your son here?"

"I can't say anything more. Percival, thank you for your offer of help but I can't accept it. Thank you for risking your life to come here. Carmen, thank you for your hospitality, thank you for bringing Percival to me. Please ask your people to disperse."

"You won't even let them see you?"

"No."

Section 012

Casablanca

Dear Sunny,

Your mother got her wish to look more human. Don't you laugh when I describe what she did. I know it's sometimes uncomfortable to wear human clothing over that golden feather-fur, but how else can a Servant show modesty?

* * *

Jessie lost her feathers, a lot of them. It took Zakiya most of a day to help her do the evil deed. Jessie's bare skin was an odd shade of orange, still inflamed from the abuse of feather removal. I tried very hard to react with good humor. I could only hope the change was not permanent. We later found sunglasses to hide her eyes that were too large and too inhumanly blue. That patterns for sunglasses were available this far into the future and halfway across the galaxy, so that a constructor machine could build them, was a minor miracle. A wig hid her scalp feathers. She would need some further skin treatment to match a human color. I never thought I would hate to see a woman shave her legs.

That meant we were still accompanying Alex and Zakiya. I should explain that we were never in any great danger. We had Khalanov to yank us out of a tight spot by transmat. If that happened, however, it might give away the location of our jumpship, causing us to depart before we reached Etrhnk - Petros.

White Bridge found jobs for Alex and me in the vicinity of the games stadium. Both jobs had a connection to the games. Alex was hired to train Black Fleet applicants to fight. I was hired to clean the showers and the blood spatter in the practice gym. It was somewhat better than our old job of making corpses into compost.

I was often able to watch Alex at work. Even to my inexperienced eye, he was a killing machine, barely restrained from delivering death to his pupils. You could see the fear in their eyes as they attacked him and he mercifully allowed them to escape serious injury. You should pause to consider that all of his pupils were predisposed to enjoy killing, were quick to become angry, and would have felt murderous toward Alex; yet, he scared them. Even the other instructors seemed intimidated when they would pair with him to demonstrate technique. Consider further that there was no law or other custom to prevent the practice from becoming lethal. Alex flunked a number of students, sending them home with broken bones when he probably should have killed them.

Alex didn't enjoy his work, either because he didn't like killing, or because he didn't like to refrain from killing these would-be barbarians. He never volunteered his feelings on the matter. I never inquired. But I could imagine he was not happy about what he did, no matter what he did. I found it impossible to believe Koji was better than Alex, but it was true. Wingren had hinted once to Jessie that Zakiya was more lethal than either man. I could only wonder.

You could start a conversation with anyone in the gym if you brought up the subject of Etrhnk. He was the deadliest admiral ever to be retired to die in the games. He'd already survived four games and thirty-two opponents. If he couldn't be defeated soon, many speculated, the Lady in the Mirror would simply execute him. It was a mystery that she had not done so already. I could

almost imagine that she wanted her Black Fleet troops to be killed. There was always more to take their places.

The five of us shared an apartment close to our jobs. In the few days leading up to the games, we lived a peaceful life in our home. The evenings were filled with good conversation. There were so many other things to talk about, it was almost painful to talk about why we were here.

Jessie and I hadn't learned of Alex and Zakiya's son until very recently. I can't say we were enthusiastic about him, after learning what he did to Aylis. Zakiya offered no apology for him. I know she felt responsible, simply because she chose to give him life. Although Alex only participated through frozen sperm, I think he wanted to save Etrhnk more than Zakiya did. It was only a guess. Alex listened more than he spoke.

"Unfortunately," I said one evening, "there's no way we can locate Petros until we see him fight. It appears the stadium is shielded from transmat probe, perhaps as a safeguard against some form of cheating."

"There is a way to get to him," Alex said. "We may be able to extract him, but one of us should be there - in the games."

"Alex, do you mean fight in the games?"

"Yes."

"You?"

"I was invited."

"I don't want you to." I think she said that as an opinion, not as an order.

"I know," Alex replied. He waited while she thought more about the idea. Finally she asked him to explain what he wanted to do. I liked the plan. Except for Alex's role, it seemed reasonably safe. Zakiya put her arms around Alex and closed her eyes. "He's my son," Alex said, rubbing her back. "Regardless of all that he was and did, my life would still sum to zero if I did nothing to save my son."

"You don't need to be the hero again," Zakiya said. "You were always my hero. The thought of you exposing yourself to such an unpredictable situation scares me."

"The augmentations Aylis gave me are excellent. Koji has trained me well over the years. I'm fighting for the life of my son."

"I can't bear for you to kill anyone, Alex."

"All of the matches are to the death, unless they pass a time limit. They may disqualify me if I don't kill my opponents."

"These are all very young men. It's convenient to think of them as evil but you know they can't help being what they are. Someday we may be able to help them."

"I'll obey your wishes, but they may need to be severely injured to incapacitate them. Many of them resort to drugs to enhance their performance. Even with life-threatening injuries they can hardly stop themselves. I doubt there's any provision for medical attention."

"There must be. Olivier survived the loss of his arm from an injury suffered in the Games. I just don't want to see you kill any of them."

"I'll consider it a challenge."

* * *

You should keep in mind that my description of Oz and its inhabitants is sanitized. Because I was born in the 20th century, I have the perspective to be

charitable to Oz. But words fail me in describing the range of conditions and activities in a place that's a step or two beyond comprehending. Just try to imagine the unpleasant things that can happen when millions of humans are forced to live under tyranny without even the traditional social institutions of human culture to put order into their lives.

Being close to the upper half of Oz where the Black Fleet lived, we began to get glimpses into their culture. It was difficult to think of the Black Fleet having families, neighborhoods, homes, businesses. That was *civilized* social behavior. How could they have any kind of stable home life? How could people who were psychotic relate peacefully to each other in a family setting? Being the anthropologist, Zakiya brought these and many other questions to our attention. She wanted to do research but couldn't risk many forays from the apartment.

Every evening when Alex and I returned home, Zakiya would debrief us and give us more questions for which she wanted answers. It usually fell to me to engage someone in conversation who might have the information Zakiya wanted. Alex spent lifetimes trying to extract information directly from barbarians and was not interested in learning anything more about them.

The family unit was probably not common among the Black Fleet. The barbarians had no religious or civil means - or the will - to formalize marriage, as the sups did. Fleet officers lived too briefly to make stable unions. Still, there were a few Black Fleet families.

There were no laws and thus no lawyers and no jails. Why were there no gangs running wild, no rampant theft and assault and murder? Probably because the standard punishment was death and the standard judge and jury was a junior officer of the Black Fleet. Sups also formed clans and guilds that could protect members and mete out justice and enforce order when necessary. Life was cheap, the birthrate was high, and replacement slaves were readily available in barbarian space. Who would have the desire - or the courage - to collect statistics to prove my impressions of life in the Big Ball? I assumed people learned in childhood to take care of business and stay safe. History was little more than an oral tradition here, but there were stories of civil unrest that were dealt with harshly in the past. Only the Black Fleet remained stable as a cultural institution. Probably the Lady in the Mirror kept it that way. She also apparently denied them the services of Mnro Clinics. The technology must have been available to steal. I tried to work out the social and psychological reasoning for the lack of life extension in barbarian society but couldn't. I could only feel that immortality and barbarians didn't fit together.

Stratification of Black Fleet society was limited by the short life expectancy. Military rank was the only social hierarchy. It was not clear how Navy admirals fit into the non-naval organization of the Black Fleet. There were only three officer ranks: lieutenant, captain, and major. There were also non-commissioned ranks of private and sergeant for maintenance personnel. The short chain of command seemed to preclude any strategic organization of the Fleet, keeping it as roving bands of pirates. Many details of Fleet life remained secret but its rigor of command and its bloodthirsty competition for rank were reflected in its total domination of its non-Fleet population. It was not a coincidence that the Union Navy was similarly in control of the Union.

Barbarian common society was currently remarkably free of politics and governmental structure. I think a large fraction of the non-Fleet population never came into direct contact with the Fleet. Housing and clean water were plentiful, leaving only a few things - like food and clothing - as necessities to

require work to purchase. Local entertainment was plentiful and cheap, and broadcast entertainment from the Union was also available.

The slave sups could utilize whatever social structures they wished, as long as they did their jobs. As far as we could tell, their lives were chaotic and difficult, with only a few effective institutions and almost no extended families. Jobs and survival were their lives, and children were an unfortunate result of desperate attempts to find joy.

Barbarians suffered a short life expectancy not only because of violence but because of a genetic mutation that Aylis thought occurred about thirty generations in the past. The Big Ball represented a lot of future field work for Aylis. The Mnro Clinic was always looking for genetic mutations, disease vectors, and any other factors that might affect the survival of the species.

White Bridge was a good source of information on the barbarians, but Zakiya was obviously extremely interested in the Fesn race. She did a lot of research, staying at home with two genuine aliens. I admired Zakiya's insatiable curiosity and rigorous research discipline.

Zakiya was so interested in the anthropology of this strange little world, it led to an expedition into Upper Oz. Despite his assurances that we would not be in much danger in the public areas, White Bridge declined to accompany us. He took my place and went with Alex to the gym. Zakiya disguised herself, Jessie put on her shades, and we took a stroll.

Once you became accustomed to the splendor that was Upper Oz, it was easy to feel that things were almost normal. We traveled far down many walkways, looking for scenes of family functions. We saw a few families in the beautiful parks, mostly mothers with children. We sat on park benches and enjoyed the flowering plants, while Zakiya hoped a child or two would approach us and want to talk. It didn't happen. After four different parks and no contact, we started to look for other possibilities while moving back in the general direction of our temporary home.

Almost anything is suitable for an anthropologist to study. The architecture was built by some long-departed humanoid race, but the use of it was a proper cultural subject. The Black Fleet liked to live in the plain modern structures and they all had to be oriented in the same "north" direction. On the other hand, places of entertainment were always of the opposite polarity and varied wildly in architecture.

The grid of major powered walkways crisscrossed the Big Ball in regularly parallel and perpendicular geometry, but between them there was very little repetition of theme or pattern in the structures of neighborhoods. Once you stepped off a concourse you could easily get lost in some of the neighborhoods. It helped that we had in-body augmentations to aid our navigation. In one such gravity-twisted enclave of strange buildings we encountered several older men sweeping, mopping, and removing trash from in front of what was an entertainment establishment, judging from the moving holograms in the opaqued windows. Singers sang, dancers danced, even small orchestras performed, all silently, as the often-present background music filled the outdoor areas. Despite its modest façade, I guessed this was a high-class joint.

The group of sups looked at us to judge our importance to their health and seemed uncertain of us. They decided to act subservient, just to be safe. The one closest to us stepped aside to give us direct access to the doorway of the establishment.

"What's your name?" Zakiya asked the man.

"Eddie," he answered softly. He was dressed in a stained green jumpsuit, half-unzipped down the chest. He exuded odors of hard work and bad personal hygiene.

"Are you married, Eddie?"

"Was."

"Divorced?"

"Widower."

"Do you see many Black Fleet?"

"Try not to."

"Do you have children?"

"No."

"Why not?" He shrugged and nervously fingered his broom-mop. "I'm just curious. I mean you no harm."

"Had a son."

"Dead?"

"Don't know."

"Black Fleet?" He nodded. He looked unhappy and kept his eyes averted, looking downward. "Are there any Black Fleet inside?"

"Maybe."

"Have you seen any?" He shook his head. "What does the name of this place mean?" He shrugged. It was a ten-letter word with not enough vowels. It looked like a mixture of Polish and Welsh. "What do they do here?"

"The usual."

"Wine, women, song?"

He nodded. Zakiya thanked Eddie for his time and headed for the entrance. I was surprised and slow to follow, but Jessie was right behind Zakiya. I didn't know what they thought was so interesting about a saloon. I wanted to protest. I kept my mouth shut. We entered the place.

It was late morning and the cleanup crew was finished washing everything down. Now they were setting candles and place mats on the round, pink tables. Barkeeps hung clean wine glasses in rows above the vast bar and restocked liquor bottles on the wall under the mirrors. There was a stage on the far side of the large room. I was right; it was a nice place, clean and well-maintained. It even had a certain charm to it, despite my prejudice against drinking establishments. The setting seemed familiar to me but I couldn't remember why.

"It's like in an old monochrome movie," Jessie commented.

Zakiya stepped up to the bar and put one foot on the brass rail. The nearest person looked like a regular evening employee of the place, not a member of the cleaning crew. He saw Zakiya and Jessie. I could tell he liked what he saw.

"What can I do for you, ladies, gent?"

"I'm thirsty," Zakiya said.

"We're not open, but what'll it be?"

"Just water."

The barkeep pumped a tumbler full of water with a nozzle on a hose. He cast an inquiring look at Jessie, got a nod from her, and poured another. He seemed to have lost sight of me, and I was thirsty. Jessie gave me half of her glass of water.

"What do they call you?" Zakiya asked the barkeep.

"Hey-You.' My friends call me Rick."

"Is this *Casablanca*?" Jessie asked.

"I'd have to be the owner," Rick replied, amazing me that he knew the old

film, "which I'm not, and the sign out front wouldn't make you sprain your tongue and spit consonants. You got names?" He spoke like an educated man.

"Ruby, Jessie, Sam," Zakiya answered for us.

"Another familiar name," the barkeep remarked. "Can you play it, Sam?"

"Play what?" I asked. Rick pointed to the piano on the stage. "Sure. But it's been awhile."

"I suppose the ladies sing?"

"They're the best I've ever heard."

"Oh, now I have to call the boss and put you on the spot."

"Not necessary, Rick. We were just passing through."

"Thought you were looking for a job. Don't like the place?"

"I think it's neat," Jessie said.

"I never sang in any place this big," Zakiya said.

"I just wanted to use your restroom," Jessie said.

"So did I," Zakiya said.

A mystery solved. Rick pointed. The girls scooted.

Rick didn't seem interested in talking to me, so I walked over to the stage, climbed up, sat down at the piano. I looked at the keys, brushed my fingers over their shiny surfaces, saw one key that seemed to ask me to push it down. I pushed the key. The tone hit my ears. Hair stood up on the back of my neck.

I tried to stop whatever it was that made my brain hurt and my fingers twitch. No luck. I started pressing keys and listening, perhaps trying to find a bad note on the keyboard or a defective hammer. I moved down the scale from middle C, then up the scale. I saw my fingers falling into familiar patterns of exercise, running the chromatic scale up and down, faster and faster, then the major scales, then the minor scales, then chords and arpeggios. It was an excellent piano.

A book in the library of my mind slid out of its spot on the shelf. It was titled: "Youth Plays Piano." Power and programming filled up some long-unused part of my being. I was too engrossed in imagining a lost pattern of sound to realize what was happening in my brain, besides remembering.

It was a long time ago, but I *remembered* how to play. I remembered my mother and how much she pushed me to practice the piano. I showed signs of being musically gifted at a very young age, but at some point it became impossible for me to ignore all the other things that interested me, and the piano gradually faded from my list of intellectual passions. Mama made the mistake of sending me to a music camp in the country, where the night sky was dark and clear, and the mystery of the universe was written in points of fire floating in black infinity.

I played. It was a classical piece I taught myself before I could read music. It was short and simple but it was a precious memory and a link to other memories I thought lost to age. It was a surprise to me but I couldn't think about why it was happening. I needed to play the next piece.

The next piece was the last piece I ever learned - or tried to learn - and it came to my fingers in a flood. How I hated Rachmaninoff, how I loved the avalanche of tones, the drama and power and passion. I could never play it flawlessly when I was young. I was losing the single-mindedness required to master the piece at that point in my life. Now I seemed to relax and not worry about mistakes. I made plenty of mistakes but nothing too terrible or discordant.

It was too long to finish and I let it fade away. My forearms felt tired. I shook my hands and arms to try to release the tension. Jessie grabbed one hand,

startling me. She sat down beside me at the piano. The sound of sparse applause finally reached my ears.

"I remember it now," Jessie said, squeezing my hand in both of hers.

"Remember what?"

"You made a piano and played it. It took you thirty years to build the piano."

"I don't remember."

"When did you learn classical piano?" Zakiya asked.

"Starting at four years old. That was the piece that terminated my status as a musical prodigy. I last tried to play it when I was thirteen years old."

"Not bad," Rick the bartender said, approaching the stage, "but a little too complex for us simple people. What else do you play?"

It took me about a minute to race through my database augmentation and find the piano score for the song I wanted to play. I spent the minute trying to revive my fingers and arms. I played the intro, knowing Jessie would recognize it. She'd seen *Casablanca*. I did my best to sing the lyrics as I played. Jessie put her head on my shoulder and her arm around my waist, and we completely forgot where we were in time and space.

There was no applause when I finished the song - not that I expected any.

"I don't need another piano player, but I like your playing," the old barbarian said.

"I apologize for using your piano without permission," I quickly offered.

He was not that old, but for a barbarian he was ancient. He needed a crutch to walk. He had the typical facial scars of combat in the games. Other old injuries now tightened their grip on his failing body, twisting it into a painful pose. He still seemed large and powerful. The scattering of my audience back to their work was a clue that he was the boss of this establishment.

"You used it well, but Chopin and Rachmaninoff would chase away my customers. Do your lady-friends also perform?"

"We didn't come here to find employment, sir." I was surprised the guy knew the composers of the two pieces.

"Why did you?"

"Pure chance."

"Do they perform?"

"They do."

"Let me hear them."

I looked at Zakiya and saw the slight negative turn of her head. "We respectfully decline your invitation, sir."

"No one declines!" Several of the boss's facial scars pinked with blood. His voice echoed deeply and ominously in the large, silent room. He narrowed his black eyes until his normal eye nearly matched the deformed aperture of his disfigured eye. I thought I was in a staring match with him, then I sensed he was actually looking at Jessie. He must have felt there was something not quite right about her but he didn't make an issue of it. Maybe it was the goggle-like sunglasses she wore. "Why?" His demand was like a warning bark from a large dog.

"If they sang for you, you'd want to hire them."

"So?"

"They don't want to work here."

"Why not?"

Zakiya gave me a slight nod and a few words across our telepathic hardware circuit. "We wouldn't feel safe among so many Black Fleet officers."

"No one *should*! Sing!"

"Do you love music so much?" Zakiya asked, inserting herself into the line of fire.

"It's all I live for nowadays."

"I'll sing for you."

Zakiya gave me the name of the song. The melody and the lyrics seemed at once familiar yet unknown to me, but it was one of those songs that was perfect in itself and oddly appropriate for our audience of one. I improvised my own intro as a quick rehearsal on the keyboard, then let Zakiya carry me away on the magic carpet of her voice.

The old barbarian was strongly affected by the performance, as he certainly should have been. The song was sung for *him*, as Zakiya intended. It was proof that music did have the power to soothe beasts.

"Come!" the retired barbarian ordered, turning to the nearest table and putting his cane on it as he sat down in a chair. "Sit! Talk to me!" He waited while we complied. Then he smiled. "Damn! That was excellent! Why haven't I heard of you? What's your name?" He was speaking, of course, to Zakiya.

"My name is Ruby," Zakiya answered as though pleased to be conversing with him. I think she was pleased at the chance to learn more about the Black Fleet. "I commend you on the quality of your establishment. Clean restrooms! What is your name? And what does the name of this place mean?"

"Hah! It doesn't mean anything! My name is Stekh."

"You know classical music."

"I know all kinds of music. I got a fancy augment. Can't say I like all kinds of music, but I loved what you sang. We do a lot of old stuff here. It's so old it's new. So, what brings you to my place?"

"We're just sups, Stekh. We wanted to see how the Fleet lives."

"It isn't any better in the north of Oz than in the south. You not earning enough credit to get you a good place in the south?"

"We don't want much."

"Hell! Life is short. Grab all you can, while you can. You want a better paying job, I'll hire you. You sing like that every night and stay off dope and booze, you'll make a bunch of credit here. What do you say?"

"Despite what you say, I think it's a different world in North Oz. I'd feel out of place. All my family is in the south."

"Safer for you up here. All the Tough Guy jerks go south to do their sick mischief. Four of 'em got sliced open down by the old Green Globe. What a mess!"

"I was there," Zakiya said with quiet intensity.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that!"

"I wish the Fleet didn't retaliate so massively, Stekh."

"It isn't in our rules to do what was done at the sup festival, Ruby. Nor do we have to borrow procedure from She Who Must Not Be Named. But we do have some maniacs and psychopaths in the Fleet, most of whom manage sups. Fleet has to take them down quite regularly. We would hope the games would cull out the monsters, but they seem to breed too fast."

"Do you have a family, Stekh?" Zakiya dared inquire.

"I was never one to force myself on a woman, but I probably have several progeny more than I know about. I never made any promises to a woman I couldn't keep, which pretty much rules out family. I used to visit some of the kids but those days are gone. I always dreamed of owning a place like this, so I

kept my loot to myself and concentrated on surviving my hitch. Almost didn't survive."

"I don't think I should ask you, but I always wondered how a Fleet officer felt about not living very long. Are you close to dying, Stekh?"

"If I said yes, would you feel sorry enough for me to let me hire you?"

"I might."

"Sorry to say, but I don't have the death gene. I just had a little accident. Most guys my age don't want to lose their spot on a jumper team, so they keep fighting in the games until they lose their lives."

"Do you know many Fleet officers who have wives and children, a real family?"

"I know a few. It's hard. I can understand their motivation, especially if they don't have the death gene. We get most of the popular culture media from the Union, and some of us can't help wishing we could have some of what we see in that stuff."

"Do you ever wish things were different, Stekh?"

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. Why wish? Do!"

"That's a very old saying," Zakiya remarked. "I hope there are many more in the Fleet as educated as you."

"Another augment. I could wish for more augments and for people who can install them."

"How about a longer life, Stekh?"

"I can't see any reason for it. Don't make me get philosophical. It's a waste of our time and I don't have the augment to help me think about it. Death ain't so bad, not when I got all these pains in my body. Are you going to sidestep my employment offer with more personal questions? Am I the first Fleet officer you ever talked with?"

"You're the nicest, so far," Zakiya smiled at him.

"You mean the least terrible." Stekh returned the smile, looked at Jessie, then me, then back at Zakiya. "I get the feeling I'm missing something here. I'm going to get nasty if you guys are working for one of my competitors. There's a couple of old Tough Guys who want this place real bad. What's with the dark goggles?" He looked back at Jessie.

"You don't want to know," Zakiya said. "I might sing for you, for one night, if you feel like taking a big chance."

Stekh leaned back in his chair and dropped his bushy eyebrows to a medium frown. "You want something, Miss Ruby, and damned if I know what it is. Talk to me."

"Do you know anyone who helps produce the games?"

"I know 'em all. I don't like the direction this is going. I won't participate in any scheme to cheat someone into the Fleet."

"All I want is a message delivered to a man who will be fighting in the games."

"Why would that be any problem for you?"

"His name is Etrhmk."

"I think I just caught sight of the end of my life! You put a high price on your singing, Ruby."

"I withdraw my offer," Zakiya said. "I have no desire to put you at risk."

"Not so fast! I'm interested! My biggest risk was getting born, and I had no choice in the matter. Every subsequent risk *was* a matter of choice. Who knows, maybe I can cheat death one more time. It's just that the name Etrhmk still

causes anyone to think twice. Why do you need to communicate with him?"

"I owe him something, Stekh."

"What do you owe him? Do you even know what he is?"

"How much do you want to know, Stekh? Every word I speak will probably add to your risk. My singing can't be worth it."

"Maybe not just your singing. I like the intrigue. I like the secrets, like what's behind those dark glasses. Like the words of your message to Etrhnk."

Zakiya said nothing while staring hard at Stekh. She actually seemed to make the barbarian uncomfortable.

"You don't trust me?" Stekh asked angrily.

"I don't have to trust you," Zakiya said, "once you know who we are. Are you sure, Stekh? I like you. I don't want you harmed."

Stekh laughed. "It's an easy choice! Are you going to tell me she's a Golden One?"

"I wasn't. But I will."

That almost took the wind out of Stekh's sails. He rallied. "If you have the help of a Golden One, why do you need my help?"

"That isn't your concern," Zakiya countered.

"It is my concern that she isn't a Golden One. Let me see her eyes."

Jessie took off her dark glasses, winked at Stekh, put them back on.

"I am honored by your presence!" Stekh declared, as soon as he could put his tongue into motion. "I'm speechless!"

"I doubt it," Zakiya said wryly. "Are you still with us? Do you still want me to sing?"

"You don't have to sing! I'll do whatever you want me to do!"

"There is some further risk to you if I sing in your nightclub, Stekh. Someone might recognize me. I'll leave that decision to you, but I am willing to sing for you. It's the least I can do. I appreciate your help."

Stekh had to stop and think some more. It didn't take him long to pick up the right chain of logic. "I know of most of the talent in Oz and I can't remember you. Yet you are somehow familiar to me. You aren't someone new. You know how to sing. It only took one song to prove it to me. Where do I know you from?"

"Earth."

Stekh's scarred face twisted through an amazing series of expressions, ending in what looked like ecstasy. "What a way to go!" He choked it down to a hoarse whisper. "When can you be here to do a couple of sets?"

"Last chance to back away, Stekh. I've already cost too many people their lives here in Oz. This Golden One doesn't wish you harm any more than I do. And the message I wish to send Etrhnk probably isn't that important."

"Ruby, I would get down on what's left of my knees and follow you to hell, begging you all the way to sing on that stage! What is the message you want me to deliver?"

* * *

"...Ruby Reed!"

The stage lights dimmed. The candles on the pink tables illuminated hands politely applauding. Work lights along the bar silhouetted drinkers. With a last glance at the table where Alex sat with Jessie, I put my fingers on the keys and made music. Zakiya stepped into the spotlight by the piano.

Section 013

The Games

Dear Sunny,

This is one of the parts I warned you about. Please wait until you are an adult to read what follows. Sure, there's nothing like a little murder and mayhem to enliven a story for the average person. Perhaps the average person will be little affected by allowing himself to enjoy violence in the privacy of his imagination. I hope you are never an average person, and so I worry that even my feeble attempts at describing the barbarian games will have too much effect on you. I watched people die, Sunny, and even though they were barbarians, it still felt terrible.

* * *

Stekh sent the message to Etrhkn. Zakiya said, "Your mother orders you to wait for the Questioner."

We spent the next day finding a place where we could watch the bloody games. We found a large stadium-like area with projectors that could present the telecast in life-size three-dimensions. Its size suited our plans perfectly. Perhaps twenty thousand people occupied the slopes around the image area. The bright ambient light of Oz made the images pale but we didn't need to see the finest details of this event, nor do I wish to describe them in fine detail.

Hundreds of fighters paired off on the stadium floor. They fought without weapons and without rules. At the end of five minutes the survivors departed to rest while the games managers cleared away the corpses and the injured. This was repeated for several more groups, until all the survivors could be paired for a second round of mayhem. Fewer and more expert fighters fought, with only the time limit saving many from death. These were the civilian applicants to Black Fleet membership. We didn't see Alex at this stage of the event.

Black Fleet officers were not required to continue to fight in the games, but if they didn't fight and win, they would never be promoted and they could lose their berth on a jumpship. They would be relegated to keeping the ships working. A newcomer like Alex would never fight a Fleet officer in the games. A Fleet officer would gain nothing by killing him. But the managers of the games knew about Alex's abilities. They gave him a bye for the first three rounds. As a kind of special interlude Alex fought three of the best amateurs - all three at once.

Zakiya didn't appear concerned. I'm sure she was. We both knew Alex could eat barbarians for breakfast, but we also knew they could cheat. My heart was racing. Jessie wouldn't watch, nor did I want her to watch. White Bridge sat apart from us where he could warn us of any trouble that we were too preoccupied to notice.

Alex took longer than he would have needed to simply kill his three opponents. He carefully and completely immobilized them. The games managers ordered him to kill the three young men - he was well within the time limit - and he refused. The local viewers raised an angry roar and I supposed the crowd at the games stadium did the same. They paid good money to see blood and death. It was also an insult to the Black Fleet, since by not killing his opponents Alex was refusing - at least temporarily - to qualify for Fleet

membership.

The audio was excellent, to best enjoy the sounds of pounding fists, kicking feet, bones breaking, heavy breathing, taunting, cursing. In case some didn't hear what Alex said to the games managers, the broadcasters reported on it and replayed it.

"I am the Questioner," Alex shouted, "not the Executioner."

The barbarians had an old-fashioned oral tradition. They were fond of telling stories, exaggerating exploits, creating heroes and villains to populate their stories. The Questioner, the Torturer, and the Executioner haunted the far shores and ports of call in the tales of the Black Fleet. It was considered bad luck to omit any of the three in any story or conversation about them. You could almost hear people holding their breaths, waiting for Alex to say the third name.

Alex was the Questioner, Setek-Ren the Torturer, Koji the Executioner. The oral history of succeeding generations of barbarians made them mythological figures, based on scores of bloody encounters over the span of two centuries.

The audience had their villain, whether they believed his claim or not. The Black Fleet officers had to defeat him and win the day. The plot was almost like professional wrestling on the old TV, but this was no fake sport. A flood of requests by Fleet officers to fight Alex poured in. While the games managers worked in the background to take advantage of the interesting change in the plot of things, the death matches resumed.

Junior Fleet officers slaughtered each other. I wondered how many other places like Oz were staging such atrocities. It was easy to feel outrage, even knowing human history was filled with worse violence. The "civilized" Romans staged battles in the Coliseum that were comparable in body counts to this. Why was it still happening? Evolution was too damned slow - assuming we were evolving in the right direction.

Alex and a Black Fleet officer walked from opposite sides of the field of combat and met in the center. Six other pairs of Fleet officers fought to the death around them. The man Alex faced exhibited no signs of previous injury - a clue to his level of expertise.

As the fight began, the opponent demonstrated - to my inexperienced eye - a familiarity with some formal discipline of personal combat. He never laid a finger on Alex, but he looked good doing it. He was quick. Alex was quicker. He attacked Alex with growing impatience. Alex anticipated every move. It was only a short time before the barbarian made a mistake that could have cost him his life. Alex knocked him unconscious, knelt down to check his pulse, and left him. That made the crowd rumble again.

Alex moved to the side of the arena as managers dragged his opponent from the field of combat. On the other side of the stadium three Fleet officers in black fighting garb emerged onto the field. From a nearby exit a tall figure in gray walked. The crowd noise surged, covering the announcer's introductions. I saw Zakiya react, so I knew it was her son Petros - Admiral Etrhkn.

Managers flanked Alex but didn't move him forward into the combat area. Etrhkn and the three men in black were escorted by other managers into the center. Quiet fell over the audiences and the announcer explained that Etrhkn would fight three Fleet officers at once. Because he was under sentence of death and because he demonstrated extreme ability to fight, it was not considered a dishonorable match for the three Fleet officers. I wondered how many of the thirty-two men Etrhkn killed in previous games felt so honorable, facing Etrhkn after he already fought so many others in the same day.

I can't explain how Etrhmk fought. With Alex I could sense there was a discipline, even if I couldn't describe it. Etrhmk didn't seem to require a method.

His three opponents didn't coordinate their actions well. Etrhmk simply awaited opportunities as his circling adversaries experimented with an unfamiliar situation. He killed one of the three, almost too suddenly to observe how he did it. The remaining two became more patient. They tried to tire Etrhmk by alternating feinted attacks and forcing him to divide his attention between them. The crowd became restless. The two opponents must have lost their concentration, however slightly, because of the crowd's mood. Etrhmk became the aggressor and the combat discipline of the Fleet officers fell apart. He didn't kill them immediately but injured them. It was easy for Etrhmk to finish them after that.

This is more detail than I wanted to provide. It's possible for the gentlest of persons to be mesmerized by the sickest violence. I was so caught up in it that I never noticed that Jessie was watching it, too, perhaps even gratified that so many bad guys were dying. She had learned to hate: a key step in becoming more human.

I didn't expect Alex and Etrhmk to meet in combat anytime soon, if ever. Perhaps the games managers, being experts in judging combat skills, saw that the two were better than any other fighters they could produce. They announced that the Questioner would fight Etrhmk as the final bout of the games, if both survived until then. How many more teams of barbarians would each fight? How many per team? Four, five, six? It seemed to me the games could easily go on for days. Millions of barbarians called this little world home. I was ready for it to be over.

"Now," Zakiya said. She said it so calmly, I almost forgot what it meant.

We stood up and I motioned to White Bridge to join us. Our own barbarian jumpship popped into existence in the middle of the holographic display. In the next instant we were inside it, in the transmat node. Zakiya rushed into the control room to assist Khalanov.

While the games stadium was shielded from transmat probing, nothing could stop a jumpship or a gate. We had produced gate coordinates by physically surveying the route to the games. We jumped into the games stadium with enough precision to avert casualties. We were close to Alex and he was at the ramp as soon as we deployed it. He stayed at the foot of the ramp to look for his son. I stepped out and saw Etrhmk surrounded by games managers and a number of Fleet officers in fighting dress. Khalanov pushed past me and walked down the ramp. He walked into the open with Alex following him. Khalanov conferred briefly with Alex, then Alex walked in front of him. Khalanov held his cryptikon up. Setek-Ren and Koji appeared next to Alex.

"I am the Questioner," Alex shouted. "These are the Torturer and the Executioner. Admiral Etrhmk is ours. Stand aside and let him come to us."

When no one obliged Alex, Koji drew out his sword and started toward the group of men surrounding Etrhmk.

It was never clear to me the boundary of what was possible with the cryptikon. From personal experience I knew that one could manipulate objects at the visited location. What I didn't know was whether you could be harmed by the people you were visiting. Koji's sword looked real and lethal but what would happen if a barbarian decided to shoot him?

A barbarian *did* shoot Koji. It didn't harm him. Koji, however, was able to make his sword felt by the barbarians. He didn't seriously hurt anyone, striking

people with the flat side of the blade. He waded into them toward Etrhnk, making them move aside, until Etrhnk had a path to the jumpship.

Etrhnk hesitated. "Come!" Koji urged, grabbing him by the shirt and yanking.

He came, following Koji. No one stopped him. I supposed the barbarians would turn the event into a great story, with their own explanations for what happened. It amazed me that they offered so little argument, almost as if they didn't believe what was happening. Perhaps they thought we were there to do something terrible to Etrhnk. Perhaps they were waiting to see what that was.

Khalanov put away his cryptikon as Etrhnk came close to him. Setek-Ren and Koji disappeared. Alex took Etrhnk by the arm and urged him to move faster. Khalanov put himself between those two and the group of barbarians behind them. At this point it became clear to the barbarians that we were not there to harm Etrhnk, at least not in their presence. When the first shots made their popping noises, I sprinted down the ramp to take a guarding position with my own d-field. Zakiya came with me.

More barbarians opened fire with their noisy weapons. Was everyone in the seats of the stadium armed? Our d-fields absorbed the kinetic energy of the slugs. Perhaps the sensation was similar to being caught in a hailstorm, wrapped in padding. Because of the distance, the slugs had less energy and accuracy, but Alex and Etrhnk could still be struck by lucky shots.

Etrhnk stumbled and Alex and Zakiya caught him and helped him up the ramp. I drew my pistol and fired at the nearest pursuing barbarians. Khalanov went down and I almost fell over him at the ramp. His d-field had failed. I dragged him up the ramp as the ramp started to rise under us. I knelt beside Khalanov and continued to fire until we both rolled into the safety of the ship. Slugs ricocheted from interior bulkheads but my stunned ears couldn't hear them. The hatch pulled shut.

Splatters of red dotted the gray deck. Etrhnk lay prone and Alex knelt over him, probing for his wounds. White Bridge brought medical supplies and started cutting away Etrhnk's clothing. Alex had at least one bullet hole in him but seemed unaware of it. Khalanov groaned next to me. I rolled him over and saw a frown of pain on his face, blood on his khaki shirt.

Jessie crowded into the airlock, bringing medical devices. She departed quickly to the control room to initiate a second jump. We had already departed Oz. I hoped the thunderclap caused by the collapsing hole we left blasted the barbarians in the enclosed stadium. A vacuum sphere of jumpship size should have rocked the place.

In a few moments Alex and Zakiya attached an instrument to Etrhnk. There were only two machines and Alex waved off treatment until after Khalanov was treated.

I sat with my back against the hatch, unable to cross to the center passageway and relieve the crowding in the small airlock. They finished with Khalanov and propped him up beside me with the automedic locked to his bare chest. He was breathing heavily but he looked at me and smiled. "Thank you, Sam."

"My pleasure, Admiral."

"Call me Iggy!"

Slowly and carefully the automedics inserted their tendrils into Etrhnk and Iggy. The tendrils found the slugs and turned them into a liquid that was extracted. The tendrils cleaned the wound channels and knitted them closed at

the cellular level. Iggy recovered first and gave up his automedic to Alex. Etrhnk had more serious wounds. We carried him to his parent's quarters and put him on their bed. When the automedic finished its treatment of him, Etrhnk didn't wake up. Zakiya sat with him, waiting.

It was a small ship. When Etrhnk awoke, it was difficult to give him the privacy he may have wanted. Alex and Zakiya didn't seem to mind that the rest of us lingered in the short companionway, listening to what they said.

"Do you know who I am?" Zakiya asked.

"You're my mother."

"Do you remember everything now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You had memories that you didn't know you had. You remember them now."

"I remember nothing."

"But you know I'm your mother."

"I never understood why I acted with such restraint toward you. You fascinated me. When I kidnapped the child, when I caused you to come for him, I simply wanted to see you, hoping..."

"Hoping for what?"

"...to understand. But the Golden Ones interfered. Pan told me later you were my mother. Neither did he remember why that was so. We pondered the mystery for a long time. We knew you were going to search for your husband. It seemed impossible. Pan said you would eventually remember me and would come for me. If you could. I am amazed you are here."

"I didn't know you were my son! I barely knew I had a son. I only just remembered I had a daughter, and a husband."

"Why didn't you remember?"

"It was dangerous to remember such things, until it was necessary to remember. It was an imperfect strategy that has caused us many problems. We know you have the same secret memory storage device. It's still locked. Also, you were poisoned by some agent that changed your basic personality. We didn't give you the antidote. None of us remembered you or remembered the antidote. You were our most forbidden secret."

Etrhnk absorbed this information without much reaction. "Pan theorized that something had gone wrong. Why do I exist?"

"For the same reason I had your sister. Because I was lonely."

"Why did you discard me?"

"I didn't! Yes, I did. I couldn't keep you. You were taken from me. You were only an infant."

"Why?"

"I had to become someone else, someone who couldn't safely raise a child."

"Who raised me?"

"Aylis Mnro."

"No! Don't tell me that!"

"You were a wonderful son to her. You don't know how much she needed you or how terrible she felt for taking you and using you. We are trying to forgive you for what you did to Aylis. She is trying to survive the guilt for what she did to you. You have a daughter now. I have a granddaughter."

"I have a daughter? I don't know why... I should not have... I had a powerful *feeling* for Doctor Mnro. I couldn't define the feeling. Perhaps it was both love and hate."

"Aylis thinks she threatened you, telling you Jamie or I would go in your

place, to become a spy in the ranks of the barbarians."

"How noble of me," Etrhmk said, the tone of his voice inverting the meaning. "It was still an act devoid of morality. The poison merely prolonged the will to do evil in the name of righteousness."

"We've all done evil, Son," Alex said. "You are no worse than your mother and I."

"You are my father?" Etrhmk asked. "You are Alexandros Gerakis? And you are the Questioner?"

"Yes. Your mother found me."

Etrhmk stared at his parents for many moments. I could imagine what he might be thinking and feeling. What I was feeling was not far short of despair. I had not understood until now the sacrifice Etrhmk had made, unknown even to himself. This should have been the most joyous moment in his life. Instead, it was a moment of guilt and shame. I thought Zakiya was about to weep.

"Let me find some small place to be alone," Etrhmk finally said. "I am not fit company."

* * *

It was hoped that contact with Alex or Zakiya would allow Etrhmk access to the memories Aylis Mnro hid from him. That didn't appear to happen. He kept to himself, perhaps trying to will the memories to come, perhaps the opposite. Everyone else was waiting for something to happen to him. I almost wanted to cry every time I saw him. How I could feel so much empathy for him, I didn't understand. Perhaps there was some faint echo of Karl Moses in the shape of his face. Perhaps I wanted to believe too much that he was deserving of the love that Zakiya obviously wanted to give him.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," I said. "They sent me to fetch you out of here. We're going to jump soon. Khalanov says it may not be safe where you're at."

"You have a quaint accent," Etrhmk responded. "You sound like - " He stopped, perhaps not wanting to say "barbarian." English was such a dynamic and mutable language, yet "Twenglish" and barbarian English still sounded quite similar after seven hundred years.

It surprised me that the former Ruler of the Known Universe would choose to say so many words to me. "Apparently I originate from nearly the same place and time," I replied. "20th-century America."

Etrhmk floated out from one of the niches in the waste-recycling plumbing. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"My name is Samuel Lee. I was born in Seattle, Washington in the United States of America in the year 1952."

"How can you be seven hundred thirty-five years old?"

"They haven't introduced you to me and Jessie."

"I was curious but did not feel privileged to ask."

"You are more privileged than you know. I'm Jessie's husband."

"The strange lady is your wife?"

"Yes. My strange wife. My alien wife. We're the parents of a baby."

"Alien? Not human? Her eyes. I thought I was imagining them. Blue. Too large. I see them everywhere! I lost her!" I was startled at Etrhmk's words. I couldn't think of what to say. He looked away from me. In those few seconds, until he turned to look at me again, the physical and emotional reality of Admiral Etrhmk became necessary to me, turning him into Petros, Zakiya's lost

son. "I'm sorry," he said. "I also knew an alien, with those same eyes, and I cared for her. Your information is difficult for me to process. First you tell me you are extremely old. Then you tell me your wife is not human. Please, continue. What is she?"

"She's of a race who call themselves Servants. You call them the Golden Ones."

Petros was shocked. He didn't look like someone who would be shocked at anything, especially considering his history. "She cannot be a Golden One!" This burst of emotion from Etrhmk seemed painfully emitted. I could sense it was an important thing to him.

"She is not known to them but she is one of them."

"Golden Ones may appear as male or female but they have no real gender. They can't conceive and produce offspring."

"Incorrect. They can adapt to humans, and adapt humans to themselves. That's how I lived to be this old. They're a magical species."

Etrhmk was struck dumb, briefly. "That might explain Constant."

"I've heard of her. Explain what about Constant?"

"She remained concerned for me, even after it was clear that I was a traitor to them."

"What do you know about the Golden Ones?"

"They guard She Who Must Not Be Named. She guards them. They probably created her and they rule all of humanity through her. Jessie became pregnant?"

"I helped a little. Aylis saved Jessie's life by helping her give birth."

"Aylis Mnro?"

"Would you like to hear the whole story? You should know that I'm responsible for everything that has happened to you and to all the others." I told him the story. Long before I finished the story an audience gathered in the companionway. They had heard it all before. The attraction was that Petros was conversing with me, asking me questions, apparently becoming more normal.

Petros floated up to the gravity meniscus and addressed Alex and Zakiya. "To what place do we jump?"

"The *Freedom*," Zakiya replied. "I think we need to take you to Aylis."

"No. Jump to Earth System. Then get rid of this ship. The Lady can monitor every Black Fleet ship. It's only a matter of time before she notices this one. She can destroy it if she perceives a threat."

"We searched for any kind of device that could identify individual jumpships," Iggy said. "Other than the short-range transponders, we found nothing."

"Please, do as I ask. Take no chances."

"It's possible there's some subtle property of the jump circuit pulse that can distinguish each jumpship," Iggy conceded.

"We jump for Earth, then," Zakiya decreed.

Section 014

High Cuba

"Did you expect the future to be like this?" It was still difficult for Etrhnk - Petros - to talk to his parents. He was more relaxed around me. I was a little surprised by his question, thinking he was referring to our immediate surroundings, which were rather peaceful and pleasant. It was a tree-lined lane among apartment buildings and I rather liked the feel of it. I had grown up living in an apartment in a big city, with big streets and noisy traffic. There were no cars here, just the occasional magnetic glider above a rail hidden under the grass. Most people got around by walking on the brick pathways. I decided Petros was referring to civilization in general.

"I expected it to be more... *futuristic*," I replied, "this far into the future. But I assume Cuba Alta is a modest place compared to some of the great space cities."

"Did you expect more social progress?" He asked it with what seemed like excellent deadpan sarcasm.

"I'm a social pessimist. I'm surprised humans aren't extinct. We have our moments and we have to cherish them. I suppose the Static Population Ethic is a positive development, but it's strange, given that there's so much space to expand into." I knew the history behind the Static Population Ethic. I just wanted to keep him talking.

"That emerged at the end of humanity's stay on Earth," Petros said, obliging my amateur psychology, "when the population pressure was lethal and the planet was poisoned. The Ethic carried over into the first space cities, which rapidly became overcrowded. There was a strong sentiment that children needed better rearing to help social behavior improve. Laws were passed requiring both training and long-term supervision to bear and raise a child. Finally, the Mnro Clinic forced adoption of its Genetic Compact, which mandated further restrictions on childbearing. It seems insane that humans bred like animals for most of their history, and still do in barbarian space."

Petros almost seemed pleased to talk with me. I think he was experimenting with being someone vastly different from Commander of the Navy. He was an unknown quantity to both himself and to me. I worried about his mental state, having no hope I could ever deduce from his voice or facial expressions what he was feeling. Yet, he seemed to be trying. He was not giving up. I suspected, from what he first said to me about losing the Golden One named Constant, that she was a reason to keep trying. That was what we were all doing: trying, regardless of how hopeless things looked.

"Would you mind if I called you Petros?" I inquired. "I feel awkward with 'Etrhnk' which is why I haven't used it."

"I would prefer any name but 'Etrhnk,'" he replied.

"How about 'Pete?' The old contraction of the English 'Peter.'"

"Even better, Sam. I haven't earned the right to 'Petros' in my mind."

"It is your rightful name. You know your parents love you."

"Their words indicate that, yet they are unhappy."

"They aren't unhappy because of you."

"Why, then?"

"It could be several things," I said, "and it doesn't mean they're sad all the time. Zakiya still mourns for Samson. I know she feels responsible for his death. She also feels very badly for having asked Jessie and me to come with

her. Alex is still haunted by what he had to do as the Questioner."

"The child died? Permanently? He was your son?"

I told him the answers.

"And you and Jessie," Pete said. "I see the sadness in you also. Because of your dead son."

"Because of Sunny," I said. "Our baby. We miss him terribly."

"How could you leave your baby?"

"Pete, I will never understand how Zakiya could leave you as a baby, even though I've done the same to Sunny. I very much appreciate your understanding of my sadness."

"I'm not that sensitive, Sam. Not yet. Regardless of the deep emotion involved, it is still an easy logical deduction."

"Neither can I imagine Aylis taking you away from Zakiya. Those are two of the most remarkable women who ever lived. But I don't think either of them cared more about their careers than about their children. They made decisions that seemed correct at the time they made them. They expected to suffer for those decisions. You were not the only hard decision for Aylis. She also had to take your sister away from Zakiya, and Jamie was six years old."

"I met Aylis Mnro's duplicate," Pete offered.

"Tell me about it."

Pete described his visit to the home of Aylis Mnro on the moon. "I didn't want her to die," he concluded. "It was her final cruelty to me."

"You loved her."

"By process of elimination, that is the conclusion I reach. Why did I... rape... the real Aylis Mnro? Both events tear at me almost every waking moment. I'm ashamed to be in your presence and in the presence of my parents. You risked your lives to save me. I can never be worth that."

"It doesn't work that way, Pete. Even considering the viewpoint of Alex and Zakiya, that you were a victim. You're their child, and that's enough. You're a father now. When you see your daughter, I think you'll understand."

"I'm *supposed* to understand. I'm Earthian."

"I think you're very close to being able. When you find your memories you'll find how to feel. And then you'll know *real* pain."

"I welcome it."

We were waiting for Alex and Zakiya to find us a base of operations. Jessie stayed with them. Iggy and White Bridge were tasked with disposing of the jumpship. They would rendezvous with the *Freedom*, then the jumpship would plunge into a star. Pete and I were left to roam High Cuba, searching for alternative places and means of hiding. I think I was paired with him to make sure he didn't disappear.

Rafael de LaGuardia was born and raised in High Cuba. We found a museum dedicated to his work and one public mural attributed to him. The incredible portrait of Zakiya had not yet appeared here.

One could see traces of a Caribbean flavor of architecture around the shores of the Havana neighborhood. Much of the remaining residential areas grew vertically. Apartment buildings typically rose three or four floors and surrounded a landscaped courtyard. There were balconies on all sides of the buildings and the pleasant "weather" promoted a neighborly use of the balconies and courtyards, I didn't know how the old Havana on Earth looked but I think there was probably far less use of heavy building materials in High Cuba. Wood, brick, glass, and iron, usually in white or pastel colors dominated the

architecture. Every sort of tropical tree and shrub fruited and flowered along the brick walkways. Whoever - or whatever - picked up the debris from the flora was perhaps a few weeks behind on their rounds, and that was a comfortable condition of sanitation for me. It made High Cuba feel more real and more normal.

Cuba Alta still used centralized farming rather than the back-yard wonder-plants that could grow most fruits and vegetables. Toward each end of the city cylinder we glimpsed the rings of multi-tiered farming cylinders. Beyond those lay the factories and heavy industries in the ends of the city cylinder. I had seen pictures of vast and fantastic space countries - none rivaling Oz, of course. In comparison, this was a small, old place with human urban odors and cozy neighborhoods.

High Cuba was located in a cluster of space cities at the L5 point in the earth-moon system. Zakiya chose it as our first Earth System destination because security systems were not as vigilant here. It was probable we could find a place to stay without fully identifying ourselves. It was also not too homogeneous - another way of saying not too racist. It should make our diverse group less conspicuous.

We could have jumped directly to Kansas in the barbarian ship, except that I didn't remember exactly where in Kansas the secret underground facility was. Probing for it would probably be fatal for us. I think Zakiya wanted more time to be with Pete. I was in no hurry to face the Lady in the Mirror. We didn't have a solid plan anymore. Ditching the jumpship caused us to scrap what plans we had. We were not certain Milly still resided in the Hole in Kansas but we would start looking there.

"I'm lost," I said to Pete. "I hope you know where we are."

"I was letting you lead the way. I know where we are."

"I was just wandering."

"There's crime in this city, and in this neighborhood in particular. Let's turn around."

We crossed a small park and descended into a subway station. Pete connected to the public database and requested a route. We waited for a tube car in a deserted station. As we waited, people began to arrive and fill up the station. A car eventually emerged from the vacuum lock of the tube. It was one of the larger ones that didn't require fare or a scan of citizen transponders. A dozen people rushed into the car ahead of us. People behind us pushed us forward and into the car. The suddenness and the hustle seemed odd to me. Pete put a hand on my shoulder to keep us together. There were no seats left unoccupied, and we stood with a handful of others as the car glided into the vacuum lock and paused for the seals to operate. There was a slight hiss as air leaked around the car and the vacuum began to suck us toward the next stop.

The engineer I once was kept appraising the technology and feeling disappointed it was not more advanced than it was. Something made me halt my distracting thoughts. I looked around at the people in the car. Everyone was staring at me and Pete. I was sure this was not typical of any past or future subway passengers. I looked down at myself, wondering why I was so interesting. I looked at Pete - did they recognize the former Navy Commander?. He didn't seem happy. He turned to face one man in particular who stepped toward us.

"You'll be our guests," the man said. "If you behave, you won't be harmed and you can be on your way in a short while." The man had a ridiculous

mustache which waved its curled ends as he spoke. I almost wanted to laugh. It took the edge off what I suspected was a serious business, an impending crime of some sort.

"Why do you wish to detain us?" Pete asked, staring down at the man.

"We listened to your conversation." He was apparently totally unafraid of the imposing stature of Pete. "You're quite interesting."

"You want our memories."

"We have the finest equipment. You won't be damaged."

"It is a capital crime. I doubt you would leave us undamaged."

"I won't argue with you. If you resist, you *will* be damaged."

"If I resist, *you* will die. Permanently. You and many more of you."

The narration of Samuel Lee pauses.

Section 015

A Meeting of the Pitiful

Constant did not need to call the others together. They came to the meeting room on their own initiative, calling for their fellow Golden Ones to join them. She was tempted to stay away from the meeting. If her predictions were true, if this was history in which she was living, she could change nothing. What had been, would be. Still, she had to try. Perhaps the future of the past was not perfectly set or perhaps her predictions were not perfectly remembered.

Constant sat by the door and studied each Golden One as they entered the room. They were pitiful. She was disappointed she couldn't feel more sympathy for them, but she was just as damaged as they were. Most of them, at one time or another, had shed feathers and tried to mingle with humans. The urge was too great to resist. The results were too painful to bear. In the old days, when a relationship with a human was relatively easy to arrange, their human partners would become obsessed with the longevity the Golden Ones bestowed, leading to complications that threatened the security of all of them. Damnable and shameful measures were taken. The Golden Ones had to remain hidden from the Union, in order to protect the Union - and to protect themselves. Who knew what could happen if all humans learned of an alien species that could make them immortal. The Mnro Clinics had lessened that concern but the fear of discovery remained strong. Admiral Etrhmk knew of them and he had escaped. Admiral Demba knew of them and she had escaped. Everyone in the Union would soon know of the Golden Ones. The Lady would be forced to act. Her act could be bad for the human race, and for the golden race.

"Will you just sit there and sneer at us?" Laplace demanded, forcing her out of her ruminations. She ignored him.

"Is everyone here?" she asked, looking around at the group. They all faced toward her, expecting her to deliver guidance and hope. "I think someone is missing."

They looked at each other, most of them puzzled, until Tone spoke: "Melvin is missing."

"Melvin has been missing, off and on, for about five hundred years," Constant said, remembering that eccentric - and probably wise - Golden One. No, not a Golden One. Still a Servant, if he remained alive at all.

"Etrhmk has escaped the games!" Laplace shouted at her. Was he angry or frightened? Constant hoped to force reason into the discussion and Laplace would prevent that.

"The Lady is looking for him," Constant said calmly.

"She's had more than a day," Fellini said. Fellini was a female, wearing Bermuda shorts with bare shaved legs and a tee-shirt that said in English: "Last one out, turn off the lights."

"It's that woman again," Tone remarked more calmly than the others. Tone was small and almost plump. She had suffered a tragic human affair after centuries of resisting the urge. She always wore black. Tone had struggled to regain her intellectual abilities. After Melvin, Constant admired Tone the most. "Etrhmk's mother," Tone said. "She is the one who will kill us."

"Or his father!" Laplace declared. "That was him! The Questioner! We need to prepare an internal defense of the Hole. They could jump directly into this place. The barrier won't stop a jumpship."

"How do you propose to defend us?" Constant asked. "The Lady is our defender."

"But you said it would happen, despite The Lady," Fellini said.

"You know The Lady has been strange lately," Laplace added. "I don't know if we can count on her anymore. I say we should at least help her by arming ourselves."

"Petros will not kill us," Constant said. "He is bonded to me. Nor will he allow his parents to kill us."

"But he will kill The Lady," Tone said. "We can't allow that."

"Yes, there is a chance he can find Milly," Constant admitted. "But I will be with Milly. The only way he can kill The Lady is to kill me first."

"Forgive me if I doubt your appraisal of Etrhnk's passion for you," Laplace said sarcastically.

"You know how humans react to us," Constant said reasonably. "You don't know how my predictions can be true. It's impossible to know the future. But it might be possible to change the future. Don't make things worse by resisting. Let's try to talk to those who come to find us."

"I'll talk," Laplace said. "I'll talk holding a big weapon pointed at them! If they're going to kill us all, I'll take some of them with us!"

"You're an idiot, Laplace!" Constant declared. "I'm an idiot for telling you about your future. How can any of you believe what I said? Why must you think like humans and act like barbarians?"

"You knew their names, Constant!" Tone argued loudly. "Hundreds of years ago you knew their names! You also told us you were here before us. Tell us how you knew!"

"I don't remember." The truth of her answer shocked her. She had somehow avoided thinking about it. It was something she would have retained no matter how many times she had to repartition her mind. She was sure now that the effect of humans on them was far deeper than the morphology of body. The structure of their brains was changing. Why had they not studied the processes of their metamorphosis scientifically?

"How can you not remember?" someone demanded, and Constant didn't bother to identify who it was. More questions flew at her and she couldn't reply. All she could think about was Etrhnk. All she could wonder about was whether she could have been happy with him. She was barely able to pull herself away from what might have been with Etrhnk and consider the tragedy that would befall not only Golden Ones but all of humanity. And most of all Milly. There had to be a way to save Milly. It was the one thing on which she agreed with Laplace, that their ultimate responsibility was to keep Milly safe.

"I don't think I can offer any useful advice," Constant was eventually able to say. "I remember the names of Etrhnk and his parents because they are history. You are history. You lived - and died - long ago. I don't know why I am here, in the distant past. It wasn't my past, and it is poorly remembered by me. The only hope I can offer you is that I don't know what is possible or impossible. Do what you will. I won't interfere."

* * *

The storm beat down upon the church with curtains of rain while lightning flashed and briefly illuminated what remained of the stained glass windows. Thunder rolled across the dark land outside and echoed through the broken

windows. Water leaked from the vaulted ceiling in skinny waterfalls, spattering onto the floor and running into holes rotted into the wood. The storm didn't quite reach into a corner of the apse where candles found by Fred burned with flickering light in the few invading breezes from the storm.

Melvin didn't know what to expect when Pan sat down before the ancient piano. It knew the instrument was likely ruined by age and environment. The bench was safer than it appeared, as Pan's large body settled onto it without loosening the joints of its legs. Fred connected a finger to a small appliance Pan had set on the top of the piano after clearing its surface of a great amount of dirt and debris. The translucent image of another piano bloomed to cover the decrepit piano. Pan adjusted the image until just the keyboard remained, roughly in the place of the real piano's keyboard but displaced enough to remain separate from the real keys.

Melvin was startled when strong clear notes rang above the din of the storm, and then it knew this was a portable virtual piano Pan now played. The android Fred was apparently the power source for the instrument. For a moment Melvin's mind was cast far into the past as it remembered Milly listening to music recordings. Melvin felt sad. It had loved Milly so much, but she had grown old and it couldn't bear witnessing her death, and so Melvin ran away into the wilderness of Earth. It had returned to the Hole several times over the centuries but could never bear to see what became of Milly. Now Pan's music lifted Melvin out of despair and almost made it glad to have given up its isolation from humans.

Pan played through the storm and with the storm, following thunder with his own musical crescendos, then sending chords and melody up to the dim and distant ceiling in the quieter moments. As the storm abated, Pan performed with greater coherence and finer technique. The music moved Melvin deeply. It had forgotten how well its species had adapted to the mathematics of human music and how strongly they had absorbed the meaning and emotion of it. Melvin wept long before Pan finished his concert, and perhaps Pan stopped because of Melvin's reaction. Pan put a hand on Melvin's shoulder and waited with concern until it could function better.

"I'm okay," Melvin sighed. "That was wonderful! Fred told me you were a musician and I thought little of the fact, and now I'm overwhelmed. How can the human race be so horrible, yet make such transcendent music? I think you are a great musician, Pan. I wish I had known you sooner."

"And I you, Melvin." But Pan could not leave Melvin's words to themselves. He felt unworthy of such praise and he felt appropriately categorized by Melvin's comment on horrible humans. "But I should tell you I've done bad things."

"I don't want to know of it! Shut up!"

"No, I *need* to tell you. I've killed people."

"Be quiet!"

"In another part of my life I was an engineer, Melvin. I helped my brother Direk build a gate that teleported three Navy ships to Rhyandh, where millions of people were killed to bring an end to the war. During my long residence on Earth I've resorted to violence many times to try to bring order and safety to the lives of others. It may have been necessary or at least desirable, but I wish I had not done it. My music is very small credit against the debits of my life."

Melvin had covered its round copper-colored ears. "I didn't hear that! Don't say it again! I don't care what you did! I care about what you are now. I care

about *you*!"

Pan felt this was a significant statement but he wasn't sure what it meant. Did it mean Melvin had developed some emotional attachment to him? It would be both gratifying and troubling. He felt a strong affection for Melvin, perhaps that of a father for his child, although he didn't know which of them was the child. Did Melvin have any choice in the matter? It seemed there was some chemistry that pulled them together. "Is it a good thing that we care about each other?"

"You care about me?" Melvin asked timidly. "No, don't answer that! If you would simply care about me as you obviously do about Fred."

"You've been alone for a very long time." Pan sat down next to Melvin and motioned for Fred to sit beside him. "Do you know that Milly is still alive?"

"She is?" Melvin felt dangerously and desirably close to Pan. Pan's statement made it forget how close Pan was. Melvin wanted Milly to be alive, but alive in what terrible fashion? The Golden Ones had made many others live longer but Milly continued to slowly age. Laplace, Melvin later learned, had lost his sanity because of Milly. Laplace, above all but Constant, had devoted his life to Milly. What could be left of Milly after all these centuries? "How do you know?" Melvin asked, hating to sound so hopeful.

"Did you know she had a baby, a son? His name is Samson."

"I ask you how you know this!" Melvin demanded, feeling desperate to know with certainty that Milly lived. "Please, prove it to me!"

Pan told Melvin the story of Fidelity Demba and Jon Horss finding Samson in Africa, and the disembodied voice Samson knew as Milly that also spoke to Demba. This did not prove to Melvin that the real Milly was still alive but it gave some hope. Then Pan explained who the person named Fidelity Demba was. It could not be pure coincidence the woman was the mother of Petros Gerakis! It might not even be chance that Melvin had encountered Pan and Fred in the wilderness, and at this important moment in time! Melvin had to go back to the Hole. Melvin had to see Milly and know she was alive and well! Melvin had to help Pan and Fred kill the Lady in the Mirror!

Section 016

All We Have and All We Are

The narration of Samuel Lee resumes.

I would always be a coward, and so I made myself think better of this gang of Cubans than they deserved. First of all, they didn't look like a gang, not the 20th-century kind. There were no markings of body or style or uniform of dress that would brand them as members of a gang. They were alike only in a certain hungry look they gave me and Pete, a look that was also hopeful. Quite possibly they would all break and run if Pete demonstrated his physical power by injuring one of them. The gang members could have no slightest idea of how lethal Pete was. "Please," I asked Pete, "don't hurt anyone."

"You don't understand what this means, Sam. They'll rape your mind."

"I don't see what we can do. More is at risk than just you and me."

I was surprised Pete obeyed my request. He must have remembered he was no longer in command of the universe. I was sure I didn't want bloodshed, but I was not sure it should be avoided at any cost. Still, we couldn't afford to come to the attention of the authorities any more than our abductors could.

They put restraints on us and covered us with cloth bags. They stuffed us into some kind of small vehicle. Pete didn't have the intra-cranial transceiver that allowed the rest of us a form of telepathy. I couldn't talk to him and perhaps form a plan to escape. I was too distant from Jessie and the others to contact them. We traveled for an unknown distance after we were wheeled off the subway car.

As I emerged from the bag I was disappointed to see we still had a full escort. The dimly lit room contained more than a dozen pod-like chairs, each connected somewhat haphazardly to a large buss with a tangle of cables. The ceiling and walls were textured, perhaps for sound deadening. Pete and I hobbled to a coffin-like cabinet in the center of the room. Many members of the gang began inserting themselves into the pod-chairs. More tangles of cables fed into - or out of - the coffin, forming several thick black snakes that curved across the floor toward junctions on the walls. The room was cluttered with other equipment, reels of cable, odd furniture, and it smelled of unsanitary human activity. I was long accustomed to near-magical engineering and efficient robotic janitorial service. This was too much like low-budget science fiction cinema - another disappointment of humanity's future. I was disgruntled to have to suffer my fear in such a low-tech setting.

"Who first?" the leader of the band of outlaws asked, which I supposed was a small courtesy. Pete and I just stared at The Mustache. It wasn't moral indignation in our expressions. We weren't that innocent. My expression was a mix of anxiety and interest. What would this do to my brain - just when I felt the little gray cells were about to make a comeback? I think Pete was just letting his combat computer play with a few deadly scenarios. Maybe Pete's expression prompted The Mustache's further comment. "We are not violent criminals but we will bleed for what we want. We will not physically harm you. We will not mentally harm you. You will be free to report us to the police when we are finished with you. Running from the law is another part of the entertainment we seek. Who first?"

"I'll be first," Pete said.

Pete levered himself into the human-shaped cavity within the coffin. They closed the lid. I stepped over to study the device and they pointed out the plumbing that provided air to Pete. All of the chairs were filled by members of the gang. About half of the gang remained to guard me. The leader took a pod-chair.

I sat on the floor and waited. Every body in every pod spasmed at the same instant. The pod-chairs wiggled continuously as the occupants reacted to intense stimulation. They writhed and grimaced and sobbed. It was over sooner than I expected. They pried themselves out of their chairs and looked at each other with wild eyes.

Their leader approached me, wiping sweat from his face with a rag. He appeared disturbed, and disappointed. "Extreme," he said, almost gasping for breath, "but not believable. We saw only what he allowed us to see. It was a playback of some kind of simple immersive game where you kill simulated opponents."

"Are you so bored with your own lives that you need to steal life from others?"

"I learn from your question that you haven't lived long enough to understand."

"I think you lack the imagination and the courage to live your own adventures."

"Courage? Do you know what law enforcement will do when they catch us? Worm soup! I was executed twice before. I'm a career criminal. I'm immune to psychological restructuring. They've wiped my memories almost clean and I just hunger for more. So do billions more who sit rotting between Mnro Clinic visits. Not everyone can be brave and imaginative, young man."

"I understand your motivation, *old* man. I don't respect your ethics but I do sympathize. I was blessed with a long and interesting life. I'll share it with you. What I remember of it."

They pulled Pete from the box. He seemed unaffected by his experience, I don't think I could have detected any effect in Pete. "Are you okay?" I asked. Pete's reply was cut off by the gang leader.

"I'm disappointed in you!" The Mustache yelled at Pete. "We care little for simple violence. We want deep emotions and sophistication in experience. I hope your friend has what we want. We don't have time to try you again. We have to move out of here as soon as possible."

Pete moved toward the gang leader, dragging his captors with him. The leader stood his ground. Pete stopped and loomed over the man. "Be very careful with my friend," Pete said coldly. "Or I will hunt you down and end your criminal careers forever."

The gang leader took a step backward in order to look up and meet Pete's eyes. Why have such a distinguishing mustache if you might need to hide from the police? Why have such a bird-perch if you want to be taken seriously? "I told you we wouldn't hurt you! If we do, it's a fluke. Come and kill us, then."

Pete turned to me. "I give you a choice, Sam. My life is yours to use."

"If something goes wrong, do what you will."

"You'll let them copy your memories?"

"How many people might ultimately experience what I give them?"

"Too many. Why would you want to share what is private to you, what makes you who you are, with so many other people?"

"I don't know that I want to, but why are there so many unhappy people?"

They put me in the coffin. The interior reshaped itself to precisely fit my body. What felt like thousands of tiny needles impinged on my neck and head. They closed the lid. Cool air flowed across my face. Nothing happened for a long period of time. My heart thumped heavily in anxious anticipation. I felt tiny electrical sensations across much of my scalp. I waited.

"You're resisting," a voice said, startling me.

"Resisting what?"

"You have an abnormal neural configuration. Try to relax."

The dancing voltages on my scalp bothered me. I imagined myself rubbing them, smoothing them out. A curtain was raised and I could see Kansas! It was a memory I retained in every partition. *Partition*? Was that the right term? Books on a bookshelf. I could see or imagine many long shelves of books. Books with little windows on their spines. I leaned close to the little windows and saw bright images. I saw Jessie as I first met her: a truly magical moment in my life. Forces gathered to push me toward Jessie. I knew my rapists were that force, their urges crossing the bridge between our minds.

The Kansas memory prevailed. Kansas exploded into focus, cold and bright, snow-white, sky-blue. My ears and nose burned in the freezing air. My breath threw moisture from my lungs in puffs of vapor. My feet hurt from unaccustomed walking. I could even feel the weight of my dad's model 1911 under my arm. What was I doing out of the Hole? The little town on the prairie loomed ahead, the grain elevator standing above all the other structures. I knew what was going to happen and I couldn't stop it. Karl was going to die.

I never remembered it so clearly. It was as though a hypnotist regressed me and forced me to see things that I thought lost to the compression of storage in a faulty medium. It was painful to see that old reality again. I couldn't pause it, not slow it down, not soften it, not reinterpret it. It cut through me like a knife. It was exhilarating. It was saddening. I tried to keep the image of Karl's face in my eyes, because it was the only way I could keep him alive. But he was dead. Seven hundred years ago.

The feedback from my voyeurs surged with excitement and urged me onward. How strange and impossible it must seem to them.

I lifted the veil from her smiling face and saw Milly, needing only to kiss her to make her mine. I loved Milly more than I could bear but it was an untested love. I ached to see her more clearly as I lay in the hospital bed with bullet wounds in me. I felt her hand on mine. I heard her voice. My heart raced, the extra blood pressure making my wounds hurt in rhythm with my pulse. I loved her then as I had loved her in the beginning. I felt myself embracing the truth with joy and surprise. I discovered she loved me as well. That was a well-tested love, never to be lost. Then they were carrying me out of the hospital on a military stretcher, putting me in the back of a vehicle. We were flying, carried by a helicopter, and they were playing rock-and-roll music on the radio.

The memory of those last few moments on Earth flew by: testing the Big Circuits, putting on the very heavy spacesuit, kissing Milly, seeing the Easter egg at the puncture site. Earth disappeared in an instant, like a dream of things that never were.

I fell into a different place and tried to keep my feet under me. Vacuum no longer pulled my spacesuit outward. My eyes tried to focus on the geometry of the small room containing me. Gravity instantly decreased, easing the burden of the spacesuit. I moved around a little, touched a wall. Behind me an opening appeared in the wall and a small creature stood there, looking at me with deep

blue eyes too large for its head. I was so shocked, so mesmerized by the golden iridescence of its naked body, that I tripped on some debris on the floor, lost my balance, and fell down.

I lay on the floor and let the alien approach me. All I wanted to do was stare at it. It leaned over and peered at my face through the bubble helmet. It was talking, perhaps to someone else not in the room. I was amazed that it was humanoid, yet I was easily able to set aside the question of how improbable that might be, or of how some undiscovered process in evolution made it more likely. After a final exchange of words, it began probing the latching mechanism of my helmet. I could see its hands trembling, as four fingers and no thumb tried to unlock the latch. I helped, finally twisting the helmet to where I could remove it. I never thought about whether I could safely breathe the air or survive any alien microbes that might be present.

"Hi," I greeted it. "I'm from Earth. May I be your friend?"

I smiled. It seemed to know what the smile meant. It reached slowly toward me with one shaking hand and touched my face. The touch was magic, whether or not this little alien had any special powers in its repertoire. That was the first time I saw Jessie. Memories of my later life with it/her imparted twice the emotion I felt originally at meeting her. It was so intense I couldn't sustain the moment. I wept, whether in memory or reality, I didn't know.

More memories of my life on the other side of the universe flowed past, rather like an overview. I was perusing the little-window-titles of the books in my library. My memory was all still there, just better organized and out of the way of my daily thoughts. It was difficult not to try to open every book. The pressure from my veyours was intense, and I yielded only to those glimpses of greatest... shock, I would call it. Alien civilizations, some of them not humanoid, some beyond comprehension and only describable with feelings and images.

There were a series of special moments in our history together when changes in Jessie's body became apparent, and I struggled to edit them for the sake of privacy while still celebrating the wonder and the humor of the unexpected metamorphosis. I arrived finally in those days of unbelievable joy welded to unbearable fear, as Jessie approached the end of her pregnancy. I tried to hurry it along, to lessen the pain, but even with the soft focus on the bloody details, the memory of the fatal childbirth hit me so hard I screamed. Everything went black.

Then I stepped through the golden portal to the *Freedom*. There was Zakiya, looking so deeply into my eyes that she could see who I was: Samson's father.

The pressure on me to remember in certain directions lessened. I was able to pick my own subjects. It was always people and certain moments I had with them. I was able to linger and study details and reactions I may not have noticed consciously when I lived the moment. I always thought my new friends to be so much alike and worn smooth by their long years of existence. Now their subtleties came into focus. I saw the quiet clues to the inner thoughts and anxieties I now knew they experienced. I also saw how they looked at me and saw me as their friend.

There was pressure on me to find more memories of Aylis Mnro. Aylis, more than anyone but Zakiya, appeared concerned for me. It was easy to place her in several important memories. I leaped to the day she held me under the plum tree, the day the Protector unlocked his black cube of null-time, the day Aylis and Mai saved Jessie from a fatal childbirth. Perhaps I shouldn't have shared

these memories, as it violated the privacy of all my friends. Yet, I felt it was somehow correct, even necessary.

I felt no pressure at all now but I still wanted to remember more. I wanted to remember Sunny. Even though it had to include the moment Jessie and I said good-bye to him.

Then came Oz. I dwelt for a long moment on White Bridge. I tried to rush past the slaughter in the park. Playing the piano while Zakiya sang in the nightclub held me for at least one song. Then came the horror of the barbarian games, the jump into the arena, the rescue of Pete.

I was spent. I stopped.

Memories and emotions are all we have and all we are. Perhaps this illegal and immoral copying of my essence would bring some happiness to those not as fortunate as I. And I would, in some way, achieve a kind of immortality in the face of the doom I saw approaching. My memories would go on without me.

When I awoke, Pete and I were alone.

Section 017

Parade of Dreamers

"Will one of you say something?"

"Yes, Mother."

"He called me 'Mother!'"

"If you don't want that..."

"Of course I want it!"

More silence.

"Well?"

"We walked," Pete said.

"And talked," I added.

"Walked and talked."

"What did you do?" Pete asked.

"We did what we said we would do. We made contacts."

"Do we have a place to stay?"

"No. We didn't make that much progress. We'll spend the night in a public place. Did you see any place we might try? Evening is near."

"We didn't look for such a place."

"But you saw many places?"

"We were talking."

"Son, is something wrong?" Alex asked.

"I was negligent." Pete's words, though spoken with little inflection, made me imagine how upset he was. I hadn't been able to convince him I was not damaged and humiliated by the mind rape.

"We were abducted," I said. "I asked him not to hurt anyone."

"I'm sorry, Sam," Pete said. "I was lost in myself." He tried to turn away. I stopped him. Zakiya looked from one of us to the other with a questioning frown. She could see we were not physically hurt. Perhaps she was not aware of this kind of crime. I resorted to radio telepathy.

{The walls have ears and eyes.}: me.

{What does that mean?}: Zakiya.

{We talked about certain things and hungry people heard us.}

{Hungry people?}: Alex.

{Do you know the phrase "lives of quiet desperation"?}

{Thoreau. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."}: Zakiya.

{They wanted our memories.}

"Oh, God," she said.

"Mother?" Pete asked.

"Sam just told us." {What did they steal from you, Sam?}

{I gave it to them.}

{What? How much? Are you injured?}

{They saw a great deal of my life. It wasn't painful.}

{Why? Petros could have protected you.}: Alex.

{I didn't want Pete to hurt anyone.}

{It's a serious crime, Sam. They deserve punishment. "Pete?": Alex.

{Petros. Peter. Pete. They're just people. We're all just people.}

{They were worse than the barbarians!}: Alex.

{How could it not hurt you to have your private memories exposed?}: Zakiya.

{Why allow them such gratification?}: Alex.

{Why hurt them when I might make them happy?}

{They saw us in your memories?}: Alex.

{I'm sorry. They did.}

{Sam, it doesn't matter.}: Zakiya.

{I doubt they would believe much of what they experienced.}

"Mother, what are you saying?" Pete asked.

"Sam said they overheard your conversation as you walked."

"I should have known better. I'm not functioning well. I endanger you. You should leave me."

"Please, Son," Zakiya said. "I'll never leave you again."

Alex put his arm around Pete and I took hold from his other side. I still had no trouble feeling empathy for Pete. Yes, he was an imposing figure with a cool demeanor that invited no sympathy. But he was changing, and I knew I was going to like the person he would become.

Jessie and Zakiya walked ahead of us. The sunlight began to dim. An evening breeze reached us on the walk, bringing with it a mixture of plant smells from the farmlands. People now occupied the balconies and porches and verandas by the walks. They waved at each other and called across the divides. Many sat drinking beverages. They read or watched an entertainment projection. They relaxed in the artificial - yet normal - waning of the day, much as people did for ages on Earth. Most of them seemed to notice us as we passed, strangers in their midst. Some even waved a friendly greeting.

We entered the commercial part of the city, the place they still called Havana. I think Zakiya, who led the way, was drawn to the sound of the music. It was as good as any reason to go that way. We found a park surrounded by buildings on three sides and water on the fourth. A band of musicians was playing a familiar old flavor of music in the center of the park: island music, Latin American music, jazz. It was upbeat and cheerful yet soothing. We found a place to sit together at a distance from the band.

As night seeped softly into the city and the lights in the buildings and along the streets came on, a modest crowd of people collected in the area, walking the streets, visiting the businesses, talking in pairs and in groups under the palm trees. The scent of flowers perfumed the night air, warm with moisture from the nearby water. I noticed stars in the sky and for a brief moment was disoriented by the belief there should not be stars in the night sky, only lights from dwellings on the far side of the great cylinder. Then I remembered my history of space cities and the engineering that removed much of the "canned humans" effect of a cylindrical habitat. The stars were an image field that helped block the view of a vast up-side-down world that would always be hanging over your head in a centrifugal space city. I let the night have its earth-like unreality and tried not to be nostalgic for the 20th century.

"Your son told me about Constant," I said, hating the silence between us, hating the opportunity to think too much about myself.

"He did?" Alex responded.

"He didn't admit it but I think he's quite serious about her."

"Romantically?" Zakiya queried.

"I think he was trying to get my opinion of how she might feel about him. Well, here's my opinion: she loves him. He tried to turn her away from him. I told him that wouldn't work. They're stubborn and a lot of trouble, but they're well worth it." Jessie gave me an elbow in the ribs.

"You sound too much at ease, Sam," Alex remarked.

"It wasn't as bad as you think." I meant the copying of my memories. "I discovered I still have all the memories I thought I lost. They're just filed away more efficiently. I remembered things so clearly, it was a fantastic experience for me."

"And for the thieves," Pete offered. "They seemed in a state of shock. Some of them were even apologetic."

"On the other hand," I said, "I'm not so happy about our prospects for even finding Milly. We've been over all of this before. I keep imagining what a few thousand Black Fleet jumpships could do to a place like this. I'm worried sick that we'll trigger a disaster. That we've already triggered it."

"We can't leave Milly a prisoner!" Jessie stated emphatically.

"Maybe everyone would be happier - even Milly - if we left her alone."

"She isn't happy," Pete said.

"How do you know?"

"Constant wasn't happy. If I interpret her concern for Samson correctly, she must be very close to Milly in some way. I think she came to me seeking comfort I couldn't give her. Now that I've met Jessie, I realize what kind of person Constant could be, if she had a chance."

"What do you think will happen, if we trigger something, as Sam says?" Alex asked his son.

"If the Lady in the Mirror is threatened she may do anything," Pete answered. "What sparse anecdotal history has trickled down to me from previous generations of barbarian Navy admirals, shows a pattern of near insanity. It could be a conscious effort to instill as much terror in the Black Fleet as possible. It could be paranoia. Or it could be real insanity. If the Lady in the Mirror is neutralized, and if I were still in command of the Navy, I would try to maintain the status quo as long as possible. Those barbarians who have the privilege and duty of playing roles in the Navy protect the Union as the major source of supplies for the Black Fleet. The Black Fleet is by no means a cohesive force with officers who would see the benefit of keeping the Union intact. There may be a few years before the Fleet realized its main restraint was removed. Then anarchy will occur."

We talked in the relative security of the park with the background of island music, all of us trying to watch for eavesdroppers. I kept drifting back into my library of memory. I had lived a full life. Milly probably had not lived a good life. I felt terrible for her. But I could see no hope for her future. There only remained for me to find a way to let Milly go. I believed I could *not* let her go, not without permanent damage to my self.

The smell of food emanating from several nearby restaurants subverted my gloomy thoughts, reminding me that we hadn't eaten since leaving the jumpship. Jessie also remarked on the delicious aromas by telepathy. The crowd in the plaza started to disperse somewhat earlier in the evening than I expected. The band had long since stopped playing. I noticed a man in a cook's apron standing outside the door of the nearest restaurant, surveying the street and the park. I pointed to him and Jessie stood up. I followed her as she walked over to the restaurant.

"Are you closing?" Jessie inquired.

"Looks like I should," the man said. "Why is everybody leaving early tonight?"

"This is unusual?"

"I normally stay open well after midnight. Come in. I'll serve you."

"We can't."

"Can't? Not hungry?"

"Very hungry," Jessie replied. "We're stranded here, without documentation."

"Everyone has a transponder. We may be a rough old city but we still honor credit from other countries."

"We are from very far away."

"I wondered why I couldn't place your accent. You look....different."

"I am a stranger in a strange land. This is my husband Sam. Are you Korean?"

"Mostly Chinese. You like Chinese food? I'll have extra tonight. I'll feed you."

"There are three more of us."

"Is that them? Big guys. Nice lady. You won't make trouble?"

"I promise we won't."

"Come in!"

We ate real food. I had a favorable opinion of the food we ate on the jumpship, until I ate at Señor Chen's table. We stuffed ourselves. Zakiya spoke to Chen in fluent Mandarin, making him laugh.

"That's too pure for me to understand," Chen complained amicably. "Not enough English-Spanish in it."

Zakiya modified her Chinese and suddenly Chen was very talkative. He kept the food coming. I strained to guess what they were saying, catching about ten per cent of the Chinese and about a fourth of the Spanish. I still had a deficiency in training to take full advantage of the language augmentations. Chen stayed by our table, since he had no other customers to serve.

"I think I've hurt my mouth," Zakiya said, "trying to speak your native language, Chen. You're from the L4 side of the moon, probably Vietnam, even though your parents may have come from Shanghai."

"Exactly! How can you know this?"

"Lucky guess."

"Not!" He leaned close to Zakiya, spoke softly. "You're government agents, no? You come to clean up the kung fu and the dreamer nets? No, don't tell me. I don't want trouble."

"What are those?" Jessie asked. "Kung fu. Dreamer nets."

"You don't know? You really are from someplace else? Kung fu is just that. Fighting. Very bloody fighting. Sometimes there are fatalities. The dreamer nets suck their memories out and everybody can share the pain. Terrible waste of time! Not enough jobs. I'm not saying I haven't plugged in a few times. I try to stay away from it. People get addicted to it. It leads to other addictions. The only good thing about it, you go to a Mnro Clinic, then you have a good job for awhile."

"The dreamer nets aren't only about kung fu, are they?" Zakiya asked.

"No. I never plug into kung fu. Not the pornography, either. They have actors who do a fair job of recording plays or movies, but what I like are the first-person documentaries, where part of it is spontaneous. I'm surprised you know so little about dreaming. It's been around for a long time."

"The technology has improved significantly," Pete offered. "It falls under the category of immersive entertainment. The new development is in networking. Full immersion is banned in ninety per cent of the Union, yet it remains so popular that the networks are growing at a high rate. It may need to be legalized

in order to protect users from its dangers."

"Which are?" I asked.

"It's technically a neural interface, which is obviously dangerous. Injury can result from defective equipment. Addiction and other psychological disruptions are common effects. Terrorist actions or mind control by groups with political agendas are possible. People are too vulnerable when connected to a device that supplants reality."

"Now you sound like government agents."

"Ex-military," Zakiya said.

"Navy?"

"Yes. Does that bother you?"

"Yes!"

"I'm sure it does. Thank you for your food and hospitality. May we help you clean up?"

"Not necessary. It was my pleasure. You're the most interesting customers I've had in a long time. Navy! You never know."

"Can I sing for my supper?" Zakiya asked.

"Sing?" Chen queried, looking around at his empty restaurant. "For me?"

"If that wouldn't be too strange for you," Zakiya said.

"Strange, no. I often try to hire musicians for the evening meals. Do you want instrumental accompaniment? I have a sound system and access to standard music scores."

"We can accompany you," Alex said, smiling for the first time in a long time.

"I wish you had a piano," I said.

"I have a small selection of virtual instruments," Chen said. "Maybe a piano. Let me see."

I was only slightly aware of virtual musical instruments and had never tried to play one. Chen went off to a back room and soon a piano appeared in a corner of the restaurant. It was a hologram. I had to pull up a real chair to sit at the keyboard. I tried the keys and found the touch more solid than I anticipated. The tactile field effect was nowhere near that of a real piano but at least substantial enough that I could keep my fingers on the right keys. Zakiya, Alex, and Jessie gathered by the piano and we decided upon the songs we rehearsed in Oz but never performed in public. Pete sat with Chen.

We sang the first song, and although we were a little rough, Chen was moved to applaud loudly. Pete looked at him and added his own clapping. Thus encouraged, we continued. For me it was therapeutic. I enjoyed myself. My fingers found the notes by themselves, my voice blended with Alex's, and I smiled to watch Jessie harmonize next to Zakiya. It was a moment I wished would never end.

Finally Chen could no longer coax another song from us. A few people from the street outside had gathered inside and near the entrance to listen to us. They applauded with Chen and then departed when they saw we were finished. Chen sprang from his chair to come and shake everyone's hand and utter his praises. Pete remained seated with his eyes closed, making me worry about him. I came to his side and put a hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and declared: "It is a *good* memory!"

"Is there a place around here that might take us in for the night?" Zakiya asked Chen.

"You have no I.D.? No transponders?"

"Some of us have no identification. Some have the wrong identities."

"I have a room upstairs."

"That's asking too much of you, Chen. We promised not to make trouble for you and that could make us break our promise."

"You're not in trouble with anybody who likes to hurt people?"

"All I can say is that we don't *expect* trouble."

"I'll take a chance." Chen was perhaps too happy to be cautious. "We go through the kitchen, out the back door, and up the stairs to the next floor."

* * *

We spent a peaceful night, with Alex, Zakiya, and Pete taking turns at watch. When the sunlight came back, I relieved Alex and let the others sleep a little longer. I sat at a table on the back porch and enjoyed the city smells. It was strangely normal how smells could trigger memories. Something in the air was trying to open a door into my earliest memory partition: Life in the Big City.

While I was sitting on the porch, Chen brought coffee up the steps. He set the pot on the table, picked a cup from the six hanging from it, and pumped it full for me. I motioned for him to sit down. He seemed pleased at the invitation. He pumped a cup for himself.

"I found out why the crowd went home early last night," he said.

"Why?"

"Some new material on the dreamer nets. I've seen it happen before but never this much. A lot more people must be using the gear. It isn't illegal here, you know."

"Do you hear of many people being abducted and forced to have their memories recorded?"

"Yes, that's another of the bad things about it. The demand for content is so strong, it leads to dangerous and immoral acts."

"I must warn you, Chen. Two of us were abducted yesterday. They recorded our memories. I don't know what to expect as a consequence but it could put you in some danger."

"You were memory-raped? I'm very sorry that happened! Did they hurt you?"

"I'm okay, but it's possible somebody will come looking for us."

"Forgive my curiosity, but what kind of memories would cause such a reaction?"

"It's a bit awkward to explain."

"I don't need to know, then."

"But you deserve to know. I was born on Earth a very long time ago."

"Unusual. Not impossible."

"In 1952."

Chen blinked a few times and sipped on his coffee. He set the cup down. "That would seem impossible, but it might explain the crowd in front of the restaurant."

"A crowd is in front of your restaurant? Now?"

"Yes."

"I need to wake the others, Chen! Thank you for the coffee and for your company. I hope you won't suffer for helping us."

"I'll see what the crowd wants."

"Be careful!"

I woke the others. In a few moments Zakiya was leading us through the restaurant, concerned that Chen might be in danger. He wasn't. Chen returned to

the restaurant doorway and gestured to the park across the street. "I asked them to stay back. Most of them did. What will you do?"

"Go see what the hell they want," I answered, squeezing past him and avoiding Zakiya's attempt to grab my arm. I felt responsible for this. It was my big mouth that captured the interest of the memory thieves.

I couldn't see how large the crowd was. There were perhaps several hundred milling about in the park and a few more in groups in the street at a distance. They were all obviously intent on staying near the restaurant. I stood in the street and waited. I suppose I expected a "typical dreamer" crowd, roughly appearing to be strung-out drug addicts. Most of the people I saw appeared well-dressed, pleasant, serious, and sober.

Then who should come rushing into the street than the leader of the gang that abducted Pete and me! A woman followed him quickly, trying to catch him. The gang leader bolted ahead of her and threw himself down at my feet. "Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me!" The Mustache pleaded to me.

"*You!*" The woman reached the memory thief and shoved him so hard he fell onto his side. "I should have guessed!"

The Mustache got back to his knees, then stood and looked around at all the other people who were converging on me in the middle of the street. He appeared alarmed. "Go back! Go back! Too many! The police will get interested!"

"They *should* get interested!" the woman shouted. "You're here to steal more from him, Roop! I'm calling the police!"

"You can't do that!" Roop the Mustache cried. "You don't think this through! You know he's too special, too old, too important, and he's *unprotected*! You're endangering him! Get all these people out of here!"

"And leave him to *your* protection?"

"Why are *you* here? For autographs and souvenirs? Do you believe the dream or not? Do you want the authorities to take him away?"

"Why would they do that?"

"Why *wouldn't* they? For being too interesting! Use your imagination! He's a damned *revolution* of history and experience in our pitiful, pitiful, *pitiful* life of boredom! Everybody and every function of government will want to suck him dry! I just want everybody to *leave him alone!*"

Someone walked up behind me and took my hand. It was Jessie. The others joined us in front of the restaurant.

"She's the one!" the woman gasped, almost fainting in front of Jessie.

Pete grabbed the gang leader and pulled him close beneath his chin. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Roop cried. "I'm trying! They don't believe me and they don't understand!"

"I believe you and I understand," Pete said, releasing the thief.

"Oh, hell, there's *five* of you!" Roop said. "How can I hide five of you?"

"I ask you to disperse," Pete told the crowd. Pete was too used to being obeyed. He was wasting his breath.

"We didn't organize this," the woman said, still staring at Jessie. "Each of us acted alone. We don't want you to be bothered by anyone, even us. We'll disperse as soon as you tell us how to help you."

"I'm surprised there are so many of you," I said. "How did you find us?"

"I'm surprised there are so few!" the woman answered, pulling her eyes from Jessie. "You must not understand the importance of what you've given us. There were many people who saw your group - and heard it - and we guessed it might

be the one you were with. We didn't know what you looked like. But the others were in your memories."

"What would you propose?" I asked.

"Walk with us now. We'll obscure you from the public surveillance scanners. We'll let Roop decide where to take you, but we'll share the task with his gang. We'll provide for your needs as best we can. Some of us have considerable resources."

We looked at each other and understood we were in agreement to accept their offer. We moved into the crowd and began walking with them. I noticed that Pete stayed next to me, as though he was now my personal bodyguard.

It was still not obvious to me how such a spontaneous congregation of people found us, much less would want to carry out a plan to hide five people, two of whom were tall men with memorable faces. I noted that many of the nearby persons were interacting with some who came near and moved away. They spoke to each other but I couldn't understand them.

I wasn't yet fluent in the two or three major languages, all of which contained ample English vocabulary. A word could sound like an English word but not mean what it did seven hundred years ago. The modern tongues also seemed to compress and concatenate concepts, many of which required historical references to comprehend. In 20th-century English we could say the same thing five different ways. In the current dominant language you could say five things in one fifth of the verbiage. My on-board computer translated well but I was still working against that compression ratio.

I didn't know if people listened any better than they used to.

I always found it incredible that, apparently owing to the legacy of American popular culture, so many people could speak to me and I could understand them. How many people of the 20th century could have understood Middle English?

At about the halfway point in our walk, someone pressed a baton-like instrument into my hand. Each of the others also received one of these devices. After that, the crowd gradually thinned out. We eventually turned off the major avenues. The batons were illegal. Their purpose was to blind certain types of surveillance devices.

At the end of the trek only two people remained with us, the crowd's spokeswoman and Roop the Mustache. They apparently wanted to talk with us, judging from their reluctance to leave. Pete and I remained to talk with them. Jessie, Zakiya, and Alex went inside the place Roop found for us.

"Do you know who I am?" Pete asked.

The man and the woman looked at each other. Neither responded, apparently waiting for Pete to say something. He said nothing.

"You were not named in the recording," the woman said to Pete. "You are the one who fought in the stadium. That wasn't real, was it?"

"I don't understand how you can be who you appear to be," Roop said.

"You need to know that others will be certain of who I am. They'll come for me. They won't be polite or gentle with anyone who is near me."

"What will they do to you?" the woman asked.

"I'm supposed to be dead. They'll want to be sure that I am."

"The Navy wants to execute you?"

"You are warned. We appreciate your help, no matter your motivation. I ask you to be careful."

"I won't desert you," Roop said.

"Nor will I," the woman said.

"Will the recording of Sam's memories spread much farther?" Pete asked.

"Yes," both replied together. "You really don't understand," the woman added.

"Everyone in Earth System will at least know of it within the next day or so," Roop assured us. "Claudia is right - you don't *understand!* Everyone who experiences the dream is changed!"

The memory thief started to leave but Pete grabbed his shoulder to detain him. Then Pete turned to me. "Would you wish any of us to experience your memories, Sam? It seems we are ignorant of important data."

"I would wish all of you to share my life."

"I'll bring it to you," Roop promised.

* * *

They moved us to another hideout the next day and Roop left us with several sets of dreamer gear and a copy of my memories. Everyone but me decided to give Jessie the first turn at dreaming my memories. Jessie noted the omission of my vote and questioned me with her eyes. I shook my head in sorrow and avoided looking back at her. "I did something bad and never told you about it. I'm sorry."

It was fascinating torture watching Jessie experience my memories. I almost hoped the equipment wouldn't function with her nervous system, but it did. She reacted strongly and for long periods of time. Zakiya kept reaching for her but not touching her, concerned with the emotional stress Jessie exhibited. She seemed to relax a bit after a while, even though the tears continued to run down her cheeks. When it was over she buried herself in my arms.

Zakiya tried to question Jessie about the experience but she wouldn't say anything.

There were three dreamer gear sets, with inflatable pods. They could connect them so Zakiya, Alex, and Pete could do the thing at the same time. Zakiya gave me a small smile as she sized her pod to fit. Alex seemed hesitant but finally got into his pod. Pete wasted no time fitting himself into the gear. I thought I understood what his motivation might be.

As the recording started, I felt they should have some privacy. Actually, I didn't want to watch them react, especially if they reacted anywhere close to how Jessie reacted. I pulled Jessie into another room and continued to hold her while she slowly recovered from the experience of living my life.

A long time passed. Jessie seemed to look at me strangely and often, even as she snuggled closer into my embrace. I hoped that meant I hadn't turned into some kind of monster-of-the-memory-movies. Maybe she liked movie monsters. Anyway, she wanted to be near me, touching me, holding me, looking at me.

Too much time passed, with no news from the Gerakis Family. I had to look in on them, to see what was the matter. Jessie and I stood in the doorway and saw Alex and Zakiya sitting on either side of Pete. Pete was curled up on the floor. They were finished dreaming my memories but Pete must have had a bad reaction to it.

When I approached them, Zakiya stood up and embraced me for a long moment, saying nothing, just rubbing my back. Alex looked at me in some special way that I couldn't fathom, but it made me feel good.

* * *

They moved us once again.

"This can't go on forever," I said. "What's the point of it? We ought to go back to the *Freedom* and leave Milly alone."

"I can't bear the thought of abandoning Milly," Jessie said. "She means so much to you, and now she means just as much to me."

Alex or Zakiya might have had something to say but their son seemed poised to make some kind of statement and they waited for him. Pete had not spoken to anyone since experiencing my life's memories. "I believe we've passed a point of no return," Pete said. "Billions of people will experience Sam's memories. There will be many consequences. It will be a revolution, as Roop has said, but far beyond what he may imagine. Oz will soon have copies of Sam's life. I have no slightest idea of what we can do to stop an unwanted future. I only know what we have done to hasten its arrival."

I didn't understand what Pete meant. Perhaps I was distracted by trying to analyze his mental condition. He was not the same as he was. He was more than he was. His eyes saw more, his voice told more, his face showed more.

"What do you want to do?" Zakiya asked her son.

"I want to save Milly," Pete said. "I want to save Constant. And I want everyone to know who my parents are."

* * *

"Did you accomplish your task?" Pete asked our underworld escort as he arrived in our latest hideout.

"Yes," Roop replied tiredly.

"Explain the details. Why did it take so long?"

Roop was quite a mixture of genetic features, practically a 27th-century Everyman. He was short, dark of complexion, and not very pleasant, but I grew accustomed to him. For some reason he reminded me of a certain icon of 20th-century surrealist art. Maybe it was the wild mustache.

"I think there's a quiet but very intense search for you underway," Roop said. "All my contacts have warned me to be careful. I had to do things differently. It took time. I had to think!"

"How unusual," Claudia remarked.

"I think she likes me," Roop joked.

Claudia was our female escort, the woman who first spoke to us in front of Chen's restaurant. Like Roop, Claudia was a typical citizen in appearance, taller and darker than Roop. Unlike him, she was employed. She was a respectable member of society. I didn't like her as much as I liked Roop but I respected her more. She had more to lose and was not as accustomed to risk as was Roop the Mustache.

"When do we leave?" Pete asked.

"It's scheduled for eighteen hundred. We'll leave three hours before that."

"You contacted my people?" Claudia asked.

"We contacted everybody," Roop answered. "We need all the bodies we can get."

"Why are you doing this?" Claudia asked me.

Pete and I always met with Roop and Claudia, minimizing their exposure to

Alex, Jessie, and Zakiya. The two escorts asked us many questions, almost all of which we refused to answer. Roop seemed to accept this censorship but it bothered Claudia.

"To protect you," I replied.

"You'll tell the universe your secrets before you'll tell us?" Claudia asked almost desperately.

"You think you've earned it?" Roop asked her impatiently.

Zakiya emerged from the adjoining room. Pete and I waited for her to speak and I saw Claudia looking at us, analyzing the respect we gave Zakiya. "When do we go?" Zakiya asked.

"Fifteen hundred," Pete said.

"It'll be a long walk," Roop said. "It'll be historic!"

There was a brief flash of light, startling Roop and Claudia.

"I saw a man!" Claudia said. "He was wearing a Navy uniform. They've found us!"

"Don't be alarmed," Zakiya said. "He's a friend."

"What was that?" Roop asked. "A hologram?"

"Would you care to join us?" Zakiya invited. We followed her to the inner room of our quarters. Claudia tried to ask a question but Zakiya raised a hand to stop her. "You'd better sit down," she told Claudia and Roop, and waited until they complied.

Zakiya produced a cryptikon and placed it in the air, making Claudia gasp. We stood in one half of the room. The other half transformed instantly into a patio full of familiar people with a lake in the distance. As good as holographic projection was, the cryptikon was better. It was perfect. It was interesting to see how Roop and Claudia reacted to this real unreality. They were petrified with disbelief. Their eyes would never open so wide again.

"You have visitors," Aylis noted.

"This is Claudia and Roop," Zakiya said. "They're helping us. I see Iggy has returned to you. White Bridge, you are still with us. Have you not found your home?"

"We have found my place of origin, Zakiya," White Bridge answered, "but Aylis wants me to stay."

"Aylis?" Zakiya queried for explanation.

"What you are doing is quite inconvenient to what we are doing with the entire Fesn civilization!" Aylis complained. "We need White Bridge."

"You've made contact?" Zakiya asked.

"Oh, yes. There are many Fesn now aboard the *Freedom*. They seem just as nice as White Bridge, so I'm very hopeful we can be friends. Are you sure you want to do this thing?"

"I'm only sure *something* must be done." Perhaps Zakiya's tone of voice or the worry in her face made Aylis embrace her. I vaguely sensed Claudia and Roop reacting to the impossible physical contact. Or perhaps they had only just realized that White Bridge was not human. Like Jessie beside me, I was searching for Sunny among those in attendance on the patio, and had all but forgot Claudia and Roop. My description of this meeting must lack much interesting detail, as I reacted to things through a haze of emotion anchored in the close contact with Jessie and the stress I could feel in her.

"Jessie?" Aylis queried, disengaging from Zakiya and touching Jessie's face. "You look very different. Your feathers..."

"I was scaring people, Aylis! The good people of Oz greatly fear my kind. Is

Sunny okay? I don't see him."

"He's fine! Don't worry. Here he comes."

From beyond the range of the cryptikon display field Mai and Nori magically appeared with two babies. Jessie rushed to Nori, and took Sunny in her arms. I followed her, anticipating too much joy and too much pain. Mai brushed past me with Zelda. Zelda? Zakiya took her granddaughter. While Jessie held Sunny close I turned around to watch Aylis approach Pete. In fact, everyone watched her approach him, including Jessie.

Big Pete backed away from Aylis as she walked toward him. He turned away from her. She grabbed his elbow to make him stop. She rounded on him and looked up at his face. We couldn't see his face. Aylis could. I don't think Pete looked directly at her but Aylis reacted with pained surprise and had to turn away from him. She backed away, then hurried out of the visible reach of the cryptikons.

I took Sunny from Jessie and held him for a little while. I began to feel overwhelmed by emotion and simply to quell it I carried Sunny to Roop and Claudia. Roop stood up and pulled the overwhelmed Claudia up with him. Sunny seemed intrigued by the mustache and I could see Roop smile. Claudia raised a hand and hesitated until I nodded at her, then she reached a fingertip to Sunny's ruddy cheek and touched him. It was a shock to her, even beyond what she must already have experienced.

Zakiya tried to show Zelda to her father and Pete resisted. I don't think it occurred to any of us that Zakiya was presenting the baby to him as proof of his crime, but perhaps Pete felt it that way. I think Pete must have at least glanced down at his daughter. I hope he did.

It was very difficult for me to give my son back to Nori. Jessie kept her hand on him until he disappeared from the field of view. Everyone greeted everyone else. Nori came and took Zelda from Zakiya and vanished with the others as the meeting ended.

We sat quietly in our small room. I should have remained very depressed for at least several more days but there was not enough time for that. I looked over at Roop and Claudia and could see they were still dazed.

Zakiya sat next to Pete with an arm around him. She held one of his hands. He was distressed. Roop and Claudia recovered enough to wonder about the relationship they saw between Zakiya and Pete. I took it upon myself to explain. "Admiral Etrhmk is Zakiya's son. His real name is Petros. Alex is his father."

"That was Aylis Mnro?" Roop asked.

"Yes."

"She was not really here?"

"She was not."

"That was Jessie's baby," Claudia said.

"Yes."

"But you could hold him. I could feel him!"

"Yes."

"Why are you here?" Roop asked. "Why would you leave your child?" I could count on Roop to ask the right questions. He fit very well into my notion of the perversity of nature and the nature of perversity.

"It would need to be a very important reason."

It was a long walk.

When we exited the hideout into an alley, there were hundreds of people waiting. When we exited the alley onto the ground-level walk, there were thousands of people. When we reached a broad avenue, there was no end to the people we could see. Thousands more merged in front of us as the walk continued. I was reminded of the recording I saw of Zakiya and Aylis extracting Phuti and Nori from the Five Worlds.

Other parades of people who chose to protect us emerged from the urban areas of High Cuba. The parklands around the "Caribbean Sea" created a merge path. Rounding the big body of water we could see a huge river of people across the water that flowed with us into the farmlands. If this was not the entire population of High Cuba, it was a major fraction of it.

I supposed many of the people merely thought us a good excuse to break their daily routine. It was difficult for me to understand why they felt so compelled. My memories were remarkable, perhaps so remarkable to be unbelievable. I supposed everyone *wanted to believe*. Perhaps the facts were not believable but the emotion in my memories was overpoweringly real even to me. Jessie was a potent image seen through my adoring eyes. They would have wanted to believe she was a real alien, even one who loved a human as though he actually deserved such love. I supposed that could have meant something to them. Of course, many of them would want to know that a famous person - such as Aylis Mnro - was as nice a person as she ought to be, and that she was not beyond the understanding of ordinary people. Some of them may even have recognized Zakiya as being Fidelity Demba, as well as the woman who sang at the Mother Earth Opera. The mystery of her would have stirred passions among a great many people. I don't think anyone would have been sure who Alex and Pete were, despite having famous faces.

The concern of so many people that we should need protection still ran counter to my pessimistic view of human nature. Everyone kept telling me I didn't understand the real meaning and impact of my recorded memories, and I had to accept that as fact, seeing all of these people walking with us.

So many people. How did this great rotating cylinder maintain its stability with most of its inhabitants crowded to one section of the circumference? Hopefully, there was a counter-balancing system.

Cuba Alta was not a large city. Compared to the main biosphere of the Five Worlds, it was tiny. But High Cuba connected to all of the other L5 cities - a living space that held more than twenty billion people. Then there was the L4 urban cluster on the other side of the moon. The moon was sparsely populated and Mars even less so, but in Earth's orbit was a growing assemblage of space cities: a ring all the way around the sun. Pete told me he estimated the total human population in the galaxy at half a trillion, and the largest fraction of it still resided within sight of Earth.

A person would not normally walk from one city to the next. There were vehicles that could transport you from one side of L5 to the other in minutes. There were transmats as well. But people did walk from city to city. There were evacuation routes large enough to move millions of people between cities in moments on powered walkways.

As it turned out, we were not leaving High Cuba. The evacuation tubes would have provided an ideal place to isolate us between air locks and stop the parade. Instead, the meeting was arranged to take place - as we discovered upon entering it - in a vast spacecraft maintenance hangar. Before we reached it, most

of the people ahead of us exited into other industrial areas that would serve as meeting places.

Nothing happened for the next half hour, except more people crowding into the hangar. There was a raised platform near the center of the hangar. The ceiling was filled with equipment that manipulated spacecraft.

Roop and Claudia kept us surrounded by a selected group of people - probably many of those who abducted Pete and me - but someone just beyond them must have caught a glimpse of Zakiya or Jessie. This started a commotion which was quickly quelled. From that incident onward the crowd remained in an agitated state. Roop burrowed into our midst to apologize for the disturbance. He looked at Jessie and me for a long moment then pushed back into the crowd. I expected never to see him again and was not surprised to feel sad about it.

By now we knew this was not the only city engaged in spontaneous parades. Dozens of fake meetings were being staged in the L5 cluster in an effort to hide us from the authorities until we could bring our message to the public or, more precisely, to Milly and the Golden Ones.

At 1800 hours a man mounted the platform and looked over the sea of heads. Someone near the platform spoke to him. The man on the platform apparently relayed the message. He got down from the platform seconds before equipment appeared by way of transmat. A great shout erupted from the crowd, as patience was rewarded or tensions were relieved.

Marines appeared on the stage wearing combat fatigues and carrying what I estimated was a moderate level of armament. They set up rows of chairs and positioned an array of small floating devices around the stage. They took tactical positions at the perimeter of the stage. The tension of the crowd rose another step while the Marines worked. The noise dropped as holographic images bloomed in the air showing multiple points of view of the stage area.

In the holographic images we watched people appear by transmat on the platform. Three Navy admirals, each with two or more aides, materialized and took seats. Zakiya and Pete discussed the identities of the officers and concluded that none of them were barbarians. This was unexpected and disturbing. Half a dozen civilians appeared on the stage, briefly met with the Navy officers, and all but one of them took their seats. The one who remained standing spoke: "Will the persons of interest come to the stage?"

The crowd parted to let us through. Jessie held tightly to my arm. Pete stayed right behind us. Cheers and applause exploded in our ears. It didn't make me feel better, nor did it ease Jessie's anxiety. The acclaim was just noise, even a kind of violence. I could imagine how Jessie might feel in such an alien circumstance, because humanity also felt alien to me at the moment. We mounted the platform, passed between the Marine guards, walked directly to the chairs that were intended for us. There were six chairs and five of us. The civilian spokesperson removed the extra chair.

The civilian was a woman with features and a presence that I associated with a broadcast news anchor. She looked at Jessie with some concern, causing me to glance at Jessie. Jessie gave me a tiny smile and we continued to hold hands. Jessie was a happy and outgoing person among all her friends on the *Freedom*, but this situation bothered her. The woman stepped back and spoke, outlining the circumstances which led to this public forum - or inquisition.

"The neural interface has long been an important tool," the spokesperson began, "of medical research and treatment. It has also been a favorite instrument

for certain kinds of entertainment. In recent years networking has multiplied the entertainment value of neural interfaces, spreading to a large fraction of the population, even though it is outlawed or discouraged by every authority. As dangerous as it is, there may be very few of us who have never tried dreaming another person's memories. Two days ago a memory recording appeared that caused universal response. The details of this recording are in the news constantly. These people have come forward to take responsibility for this recording. We are here to investigate. The Navy and government officials are here to provide security and technical and legal advice. This is a measure of how important this recording has become. It is a powerfully convincing experience. I know this from personal exposure to it. If it is also a true story, we have yet to comprehend its full impact on the human race. I apologize for this last statement. It may be subjective and exaggerated."

The woman stepped in front of Pete and addressed him. "Would you state your name?"

"Petros Gerakis."

The woman frowned at the name, perhaps expecting Pete to say "Admiral Etrhknk." She may have wanted to challenge Pete but finally took a step sideways to stand in front of me.

"Samuel Lee."

"Jessie Lee,"

I looked up at the holograms and saw Jessie in every one of them. She was in most of them almost from the moment we reached the platform. Some of Jessie's natural golden covering could be seen where her blouse did not cover it, where Zakiya had not helped her remove the shiny feathers. Her face was flushed to a dark orange color, no longer masked by cosmetic film. She kept a cloth covering on her scalp feathers, but some of them were too long to cover. She knew the cameras were on her more than the rest of us. I could tell by the way she kept her big eyes downcast, looking at my hand holding hers. God, how I loved her!

The woman stood before Zakiya and waited. "Zakiya Muenda *Gerakis*." Zakiya looked proudly at Alex. She had waited two centuries to proclaim her marriage to him.

"Gerakis." The woman repeated the Greek family name as though pondering its familiarity. The woman stared at Zakiya, perhaps also watching data inside her eyes. She turned to Alex. "And I suppose you are Alexandros Gerakis." Alex glanced up at her and said nothing. "That is a famous name. Is it a coincidence?"

"No."

"Then it *is* Alexandros! You were named for the popular fictional character?"

"I'm the person on whom they based the character." The crowd reacted to this but the noise came to us on the stage muffled, as though some invisible curtain was now employed to deaden most of the crowd sounds.

"How can you be?" The woman asked seriously, not sounding sarcastic.

"I am who I am."

"Why would you make such a claim?"

"I'm willing to submit to genetic identification."

"There are no records to prove your claim."

"Yes, there are."

"I would be very disappointed if you are frauds," the woman said. "We've prepared for this contingency. Doctor Ramadhal of the Mnro Clinics has

consented to personally do genetic identification tests. While we await his arrival, let me continue." She turned back to Zakiya. "Zakiya Muenda Gerakis. You share his name. What does that mean?"

"I adhere to those traditions of marriage that give me my husband's family name. I am his wife."

"And you believe he's the real Alexandros Gerakis?"

"I know he is. I served with him on the *Frontier*."

When I thought about it, it didn't seem so unlikely that vast numbers of people could relate to a supposedly fictional hero. The art of story has always supplied us with characters more real to our psychological needs than actual people. One could feel the crowd response build through vibrations in the platform under our chairs, as more and more people realized and wanted to believe who Alex was.

"You would both have to be about three hundred years old for that to be true." The woman made her argument when the noise level declined to permit it. "There is no one that old."

Zakiya replied. "It is generally accepted that many people survive from beyond the Age of Immortality, having availed themselves of the treatments available to the very affluent. But we were only rich in our relationship to Aylis Mnro. She also served with us on the *Frontier*."

"That is contrary to the official biography of Aylis Mnro! There are no Deep Space Fleet records to prove your claim!"

"The Public Partition of Navy Archives now contains all of the Deep Space Fleet records. They are also available in every public data repository under a gateway reference."

"And that reference would be?"

"My name."

The woman paused as she listened to voices in her private communications channel. A flat smile replaced a brief frown which replaced an instant of shock. "The records exist! It will take time to verify their authenticity. It may be impossible to do so. Why are they suddenly available?"

"Why did they disappear?"

The woman relinquished her turn at questioning us. A man took her place. He was interrupted as Doctor Ramadhal appeared on the platform. The new moderator introduced Ramadhal, who took no notice. He went directly to Pete, although his eyes were on Jessie until the last moment before leaning close to Pete and asking him a question. "You never told me what happened to Doctor Mnro. It is a terrible moment to ask again, but I must!"

"She died," Pete replied after a moment's delay, appearing to consider being overheard by those on the platform.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't...?" Ramadhal didn't say it but I knew he meant "kill her."

"I loved her, Doctor." Pete seemed unconcerned by what he might be revealing to the universe. If events were not so overwhelming I might have been frightened by an implication: that Pete no longer cared that something he said might have dire consequences. Ramadhal persisted in questioning Pete about Aylis. She was, of course, very important to Ramadhal.

"And you know she's still alive?"

"I saw her earlier today."

That drew a puzzled look from Ramadhal.

"Doctor Ramadhal, would you explain what you and he said?" the male interviewer asked.

"I don't think I can!"

"You know this person?"

"I know he's Admiral Etrhkn."

"He bears a strong resemblance. He doesn't, however, produce a verifiable citizen transponder code. You've already analyzed his DNA?"

"Of course not! I asked him a question that only Admiral Etrhkn would be able to answer."

"He said Aylis Mnro died?"

"He did."

"There was more than one Aylis Mnro?"

"Am I to join these people and be interrogated with them?"

"Perhaps so, Doctor."

"May I finish my task first?"

"Yes."

Ramadhal took a sample from Pete. He said nothing to me, finished quickly, turned to Jessie. He saw her exquisite coin-like feathers at the edge of her blouse collar. He wanted to look closer but couldn't let himself. She was also not wearing her dark glasses and her eyes were beautifully abnormal.

"Is something wrong, Doctor Ramadhal?" the host person asked.

"She is obviously not human!"

"She's supposed to be alien. You need to confirm that."

It was not yet clear to me what the average Union citizen knew of truly alien species. I thought there were none within the Union, only outside it, in barbarian space. Encountering a real alien would be a great shock for Ramadhal. Perhaps he was beyond being further shocked. It was also medically possible in this future age to make humans look alien.

Ramadhal took Jessie's DNA sample. He turned to Zakiya and stopped again. "Your child. We never found his lineage. Has Aylis learned more about him?"

"She found his father,"

"That's wonderful! I wish I could ask for more details but..."

Zakiya nodded understanding.

"Do you also know this person, Doctor Ramadhal?" the interviewer asked.

"I know who she is."

"Who is she?"

"Fidelity Demba, a Navy admiral. I met her on Earth."

"She does resemble her and her transponder gives a valid response. Why are you certain of her identity?"

"Again, because she knew the answer to my question."

"Who is the child you mention?"

"I only know his name was Samson."

"Would this be a certain famous child, doctor? Would this woman be a certain famous singer?"

"They would."

"This woman we identify as Admiral Demba - and who calls herself Zakiya Muenda Gerakis - is the woman who sang at the end of the last Mother Earth Opera?"

"I was there. It was she."

Ramadhal took his samples from Zakiya and Alex and departed by transmat. The moderator continued his inquiry. "You are Admiral Demba."

"Yes."

"You are the woman who sang at the Mother Earth Opera."

"Yes."

"The Opera Master called you Ruby."

"I was a professional singer named Ruby Reed more than a century ago."

"How can you still sing so well?"

"I never lost the ability. There is an explanation but I'm not prepared to give it now."

"As Admiral Demba, did you depart Union space on the *Freedom*?"

"I did."

"Why are you here? How are you here?"

"I can't tell you."

"Let me rephrase. Why are you not aboard the *Freedom*?"

"I can't tell you."

"It's rumored the ship has disappeared. There is no communication with it. No relay buoys were set."

"No, none were set, but I'm still in contact with the *Freedom*."

"The person who appears to be Admiral Etrhmk claims your family name. Who is he?"

"Our son."

"He isn't Admiral Etrhmk?"

"I wish he never was."

"We are mystified by your presence here. We are disappointed by your terse answers to our questions. Most of us didn't realize you were more than escorts for the two extraordinary persons who have captured the interest of everyone. We didn't expect to dwell on you. If you intend to remain so restrictive in your replies to our questions, we respectfully move on to the two of great interest."

The man took two steps to stand in front of me. "Please verify you are the one whose memories were recorded. Your image doesn't appear in the recording."

"I am the one," I answered.

"Why did you make the recording?"

I had the presence of mind to consider what effect my answer could have on the criminals who abducted me and Pete. I had no desire to provide testimony toward their guilt. "It was an unexpected occurrence."

The interviewer waited a few seconds for me to say more. I remained silent. "I'm sure everyone would like to know the circumstances under which you made the recording. I feel you may have been coerced. If you were not, then why did it happen?"

"I don't intend to answer that question," I said.

"Is the recording what it seems to be?"

"Yes."

"Historical analysis of the recording suggests that you lived on Earth in the 20th century. Do you assert this is the case?"

"Yes. I was born in 1952."

"And you and a woman we assume was your wife did something we don't quite understand. What was it?"

"We built a machine that would be called a gate nowadays. That is how I disappeared from Earth in 1986 and met Jessie far across the universe."

"A gate," the man said. "Those fantastic portals to distant stars that have appeared in speculative fiction for centuries and are currently still a recurring

rumor."

"Yes."

"That is hard to believe."

"Yes. The more you know, the harder it is to believe."

"Assuming she is a real alien," the interviewer said, "where did your alien companion live? How far did you travel to find her?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Jessie did not live in this galaxy. Nor do I believe her home galaxy can even be seen from here."

The questions continued along the line of clarifying what the recording implied of my life. Extracted as dry facts and placed in the bright light for examination, the experiences of my life even seemed less real and less believable to me. It was too fantastic, a wild dream, not a real life. It was a good thing that I was holding the hand of the proof of my real fantasy.

Doctor Ramadhal reappeared, stopping the current host's interview of me and Jessie. Ramadhal returned much sooner than expected, and in a rush. He turned to face us, as soon as he had his bearings. He walked quickly to Alex, bowed, and extended his hand. Alex took it. "It is my great pleasure to meet you, sir! Your identification set off an alarm in the lab, unlocking hidden records. You are most emphatically Alexandros Gerakis - " The crowd response overwhelmed the acoustic barrier and Ramadhal was forced to wait until he could be heard. " - a famous captain in Deep Space Fleet, later an admiral in the Union Navy. The Mnro Clinic now seems to possess a complete set of records for Deep Space Fleet!"

"That was too quick!" the interviewer protested to Ramadhal while the crowd noise continued to rise and fall. "How could you analyze the genetic codes so rapidly? How can you be so sure?"

"I had every person and resource of the Clinic standing by," Ramadhal replied. "Analysis is not complete but it is accurate. Please let me continue!" Ramadhal turned to Zakiya and waited for less noise. "Admiral Demba, you were born Zakiya Muenda, on Earth, two hundred eighty-seven years ago. Your Clinic records list Ruby Reed and Fidelity Demba as names you have used. May I also reveal your other identity?"

"Please don't," Zakiya said.

I didn't know what Ramadhal was talking about. It wasn't intriguing at the moment to know who else Zakiya became in her series of lifetimes. That she never told me could imply it was unimportant - or worse. I didn't need to know who she had been - I knew who she was. My friend.

Ramadhal moved to stand in front of Pete. He smiled at him and shook his head, as if in disbelief. Eventually he was able to speak about Pete. "Your genetic code was manipulated to make you appear Essiin to all but the most careful analysis. If your genetic code hadn't set off the same alarm as the others did, I may not have looked further. You are Earthian. You're Admiral Etrhnk, of course. But you are also Petros Gerakis, the son of Alexandros and Zakiya. You have a sister named Jamie."

"Doctor Ramadhal. Doctor Ramadhal!"

The doctor turned around to frown at the panel of inquisitors. A civilian dignitary next to the Navy admirals stood to pose a question. "You said alarms were set off when you analyzed their genetic codes. Why?"

"There are millions of people of special interest to the Mnro Clinic. They're a part of our research. They set off alarms when their genetic codes are revealed from tissue samples."

"You made it sound as if these three were of special interest to the Mnro Clinic."

"Is that a question?"

"Are they more than simple research subjects?"

"Did you hear who they are? Admiral Demba knew Doctor Mnro long before there was a Mnro Clinic! Of course these three are very important to the Clinic and to Doctor Mnro!"

"But the Clinic -"

"Let me continue with what you asked me to do. Then you can make your oblique accusations against the Mnro Clinic."

"I beg-"

"The Mnro Clinic has no genetic record for Samuel Lee or the alien named Jessie. We are still analyzing their codes. Preliminary results suggest Samuel Lee was human and was probably born a long time ago. It's difficult to understand his genetic composition because it has taken on some of the features of that of his alien companion. We can, however, determine that he's related to one other subject in our database: the child named Samson, of whom we have already spoken. He's undoubtedly the father of Samson. Did you know this, Samuel Lee?"

"Yes."

"Can you provide me any clues to the biological nature of your companion? I am quite amazed that she possesses DNA that is in any way compatible with ours."

"The compatibility was a long process. Jessie doesn't understand it. Aylis is far from explaining it."

"Are you finished, Doctor Ramadhal?" the interviewer asked.

"I've finished the task you required of me," Ramadhal replied in a disappointed voice.

"Doctor Ramadhal, please forgive my seeming lack of respect, but how can we trust that you're telling us the truth about these people?" Ramadhal opened his mouth to speak but didn't. He was apparently shocked that he and the Mnro Clinic could possibly not be believed. "What you have told us," the man continued, "implies the Mnro Clinic was involved in secret projects, that it may not be the benign pillar of civilization everyone believes." Ramadhal remained speechless. "Even if the others are who you say they are," the man said, "how can you prove this person (he pointed at Jessie) is a real alien? Certainly she appears somewhat exotic."

"You have no *idea* what wonders her genetic code presented to me in just the briefest examination!" Ramadhal declared.

"You needn't harass Doctor Ramadhal," Pete said. "He doesn't remember me but I worked for the Mnro Clinic. I was a founder of many Mnro Clinic locations. I became Admiral Etrhmk for the sole purpose of helping my mother. Sam and Jessie are a message we bring to certain persons who may be observing this venue. Sam disappeared from Earth seven hundred years ago. He's come home to find Milly. We hope she's watching and knows who he is. Jessie is of a race who call themselves the Servants. Others of her race reside secretly in the Union. They are called the Golden Ones. In effect, they and Milly rule all of humanity, including the billions who live beyond the Union frontier. This condition must cease. We must speak with Milly. Jessie must meet with the Golden Ones."

Zakiya stood up as Phuti Mende appeared directly in front of her. The

Marines reacted to his realistic presence as an intruder. Zakiya shielded him and the rest of us stood up to help.

"Stand down!" Pete ordered the Marines, and darned if they didn't pause.

"Who is this?" a Navy admiral demanded, approaching from his cadre of fellow officers.

"I have bad news," Phuti said to us, ignoring the admiral. He looked around at the crowd and paused. He smiled too briefly as he let his gaze touch each of us before returning to Zakiya.

"Tell me," Zakiya said. "The ship?"

"The ship is safe. We're in the Sagittarius Gulf. We have targets. Do you want to know more?"

"What has happened?"

"Bring out your cryptikon."

Zakiya produced the cryptikon, set it in the air, made it resist drifting. Phuti disappeared and a perfect miniature image of the bridge of the *Freedom* took his place. I noticed the media coverage of this phenomenon. Both the dazzling alien artifact and the image it produced were focused upon and sent to the local projectors. Perhaps the images went out to every place in the Union. The meeting was supposed to be broadcast but we had no way of verifying that.

The bridge image rose above us and expanded into the unobstructed overhead space over the platform. We could see the few officers at their stations on the *Freedom* as though they rested on an invisible deck. They could apparently see us as well. All above them, reproduced from the planetarium-like display dome of the *Freedom*'s bridge, lay the dark of space, a spray of stars at either end of the view, and in the darkness between were strange yellow clouds. Not until the cryptikon image of the bridge matched scale with us did I understand the clouds were thousands of targets.

Jon Horss turned around in his captain's chair, looked down on our platform in the hangar, then looked over at Khalanov and Direk. Jamie sat in the instrumented position immediately in front of Horss.

The view of the galaxy neighborhood changed. The *Freedom* had jumped. Fresh data overlaid an expanded angle of the gulf. Bright yellow pinpoints of light sprinkled across a background of distant, fainter, bluer stars. They flickered out and reappeared in a phalanx of yellow mist. Another wave of yellow blinked into existence at the far left edge of the gulf. These were Black Fleet jumpships! Why were so many mobilized?

"How many?" Alex asked.

"About a quarter of a million," Horss replied. "We think they're bound for Earth."

"We've precipitated it!" Zakiya said, her voice stained with guilt and foreboding. If it was not my stolen memories, then it was the rescue of Pete from the barbarian games that had pushed the Black Fleet past its fear of the Lady in the Mirror.

"How are you acquiring targets at that range?" Pete asked.

"The same way the Lady in the Mirror sees her ships," Horss answered. "Stand by."

"We're interfering with your operations," Zakiya said.

"Stay with us. Another trick we've learned. We have three cryptikons locking on your position. We're computing the jump coordinates. Verify your Earth System location."

"We're in the moonward industrial end of High Cuba."

"We'll aim for L1. It should be clear."

"Why are you jumping for Earth?"

"You need help."

"If the Black Fleet is coming in such force, there's nothing you can do! Stay away! Keep the children safe!"

"All nonessential persons were left in the care of the Fesn on the other side of the galaxy two hours ago. That includes Sunny. Please reconsider your orders, Zakiya. We may have time to accomplish your objective. We monitored your activities and the progress of four swarms of jumpships. There should be an interval in which we can facilitate your operation."

"Jump, then, but don't engage the Black Fleet if you can't extract us in time."

"Acknowledged."

Horss turned to Direk and Iggy and asked: "Do we have coordinates?"

"Numbers are locked."

"Jamie, you may jump."

"We've arrived, Jon."

"Do you have our gate signal, Zakiya?" Horss asked.

"We're linked, Jon. Cryptikon off."

All of us were standing close together. Close enough. The *Freedom's* gate took us.

The narration of Samuel Lee ends.

Section 018

KILL THEM ALL!

Time. Melvin always had too much time. It had felt much as Fred did, that being alive was not meaningful enough. Only the fear of death kept it going, and Fred didn't even seem to fear death. It was instinct, of course, built into Melvin's organic complexity, the instinct for survival. Without an organic body, Fred not only had no instinct to survive, but he was missing all of the diversions from morbid thought that such a complicated chemical mechanism provided. Now Melvin's body wanted to give it even more reason to live - the attraction to a human - just when time seemed to be running out.

Time was running out! Melvin was so distracted by its reaction to Pan that it almost didn't put its facts together in time. Petros Gerakis - Admiral Etrhnk - had appeared as Constant said he would. According to Pan, Etrhnk had allowed the *Freedom* to escape his control with his mother in command. That would bring Etrhnk's career to an end. The Lady would send him to the Black Fleet games to die. That meant the final days of the Golden Ones was at hand, and there might be something in the news that would confirm it. The Hole was still far away, and if it was Pan's destiny to kill The Lady, it could be too late. Not that Melvin wanted to aid such a terrible destiny.

"What are you doing?" Pan asked, stopping when Melvin lagged behind. He watched the golden alien remove its large backpack and begin searching into it.

"We don't want to be late for the party!" Melvin declared. "I'm such a dimwit! If Petros is going to kill us, it must be soon! If you are to kill The Lady it must be soon!"

"I thought it was just a joke to you, that I would kill the Lady in the Mirror. Are you serious? I thought she was the only protection for the Golden Ones."

"I think she is killing Milly," Melvin said, fishing a small piece of equipment out of its backpack. "And I know the whole situation has been killing the Golden Ones for centuries. They call it 'living on the edge.' It's time to push them over the edge! Let the barbarians come!"

Melvin set the little black box on top of its backpack and pushed a button. An image was projected in the shade of a tree and a voice spoke, explaining the content of the image. In the image a large doorway opened in a building and a dozen people squirted out of it, most of them stumbling and falling. They all got up and ran. The door closed slowly but inexorably, showing the limbs of others retracting as they were too late to exit the building. A minute later the door opened again and another dozen people came out in a panic. "This is a typical control point in Manhattan Three," the voice said. "Obviously, this will not solve the panic problem. One can only imagine the chaos and violence on the other side of that door. I repeat the official communication from the Navy: there is no sign of any invading force, even to the frontier of Union space. We urge everyone to remain as calm as possible."

Melvin changed the channel. A strange face appeared in closeup, not a human face but not too much unlike a human face. Melvin knew immediately it was a Golden One. A featherless Golden One.

"Is that one of you?" Pan asked.

As if in answer to his question, an announcer spoke: "This is Jessie Lee, for those of you who have not experienced The Dream and are just joining this special news event. The Mnro Clinics have verified that she is not human. There

is no consensus on whether the invaders are of her race. In *The Dream* there is another alien being of a different species, something called a Fesn, who appears to live among humans. We are trying to pull together an image of this alien. The Fesn is also an uncertain source of these invaders. All we know is that the invading force is called the Black Fleet and that there are at least a quarter of a million ships. The Navy denies there is any invading force."

"Oh, dear God!" Melvin wailed. "Petros has sent the Black Fleet against *The Lady*!"

"Wait," Pan said, "there's more we missed." The image of Jessie Lee moved left and showed two human males. Pan recognized one of them. "That's Petros." The view panned in the opposite direction, back to Jessie Lee and the two humans seated to her left. "And there is Zakiya! Is that... yes! That's Alexandros Gerakis. This was recorded earlier. The Golden Ones have decided to surrender."

"Alas, no," Melvin sighed. "The Golden One named Jessie is not one of us. I don't know who she is. The man to her right is vaguely familiar. I wish we could hear what they were saying."

"If Zakiya is in Earth System," Pan said, "the *Freedom* must also be here. Is there any way we can contact the ship?"

"I'll activate my distress signal," Fred said. "It would help if you turned off your privacy fields."

"What good will that do?" Melvin asked. "If you want to go to *The Lady* now, I can take you. If they haven't changed my password."

"You can get us into the place where the *Lady* in the Mirror originates?" Pan asked. "You have access to a gate?"

"You needn't sound so miffed," Melvin said. "I didn't want you getting hurt any sooner than necessary! *Never* did I want you hurt! Would we meet Petros on this ship?"

"We might. Does that concern you, Melvin?"

"You will protect me, won't you, Pan?"

"Somebody has found us," Fred reported. "My distress beacon has been answered multiple times." A probe arrived by transmat and Fred negotiated with it until he was able to communicate with the *Freedom*. "Be ready for transmat," he warned.

A transmat took them and made a new place appear around them: the cylindrical room of a Navy transmat node with the menacing amber stripe of a scanner battery around the curve of wall. Pan felt Melvin grab his arm. A section of the cylinder wall slid aside. Setek-Ren stood in the opening. Pan had not realized his father might be here and the sight of him made his emotions almost too much to bear. He pulled Melvin forward to meet Setek-Ren, then stumbled as he began to realize how emotional he must appear to his very Essiin father. He stopped halfway to the opening and all he could think to do was keep a comforting hand on his distressed alien companion. He barely noticed Fred's hand that came to rest on his shoulder from behind.

"I see you have two new friends, Son" Setek said. "Won't you introduce me to them?" His father then smiled and strode forward to place both of his hands on Pan's shoulders. After a long moment of gazing into each other's faces, Setek stepped back. His face was not the immobile mask Pan remembered and his father's pale eyes were brimming with tears.

"This is Melvin and this is Fred," Pan said quickly to save his father from more embarrassment at showing too much emotion. "Fred is a spontaneous

AMI."

"I know Freddy well," Setek said, "and if Fred is his child, then Fred must be a very fine person. I am honored to meet you Fred." Setek offered his hand to Fred, which Fred took to shake.

"I am most happy to meet you, sir," Fred responded. "Pan has told me much about his early life with you and his mother."

"Perhaps you know what Melvin is," Pan said, placing an arm across Melvin's shoulders, "since you know who Jessie Lee is."

"Yes!" Setek replied. "Jessie has told us what the Servants looked like before they encountered Sam and the rest of us human beings. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Melvin. Ah, and here is my other son Direk!"

Melvin was forced to give up its hold on Pan to allow the brothers to physically greet each other with arms around each other. Pan seemed surprised at something about his brother. Melvin watched with fascination as a father and two sons experienced joy at their reunion. The notion of family and genetic relationships had ever intrigued Melvin and the others of his kind. Melvin found itself holding on to Fred as other humans arrived, adding to the emotional chaos. Sooner than Melvin expected, it was the center of attention, and soon after that it was looking up into the eyes of Jessie Lee.

It was a profound experience for Melvin to meet Jessie Lee. She was, Melvin realized, the future of the Golden Ones, a Servant who was perfectly adapted to humans. She even had thumbs! When it heard Jessie had given birth to a healthy baby, Melvin was so astonished it folded down on its legs and held onto Pan's leg for support.

"Time grows short," someone said in a deep voice. "We still haven't heard from the Lady in the Mirror or from Constant."

Not even realizing Petros Gerakis had spoken the warning, Melvin responded: "I may be able to provide access to the Hole." Pan helped Melvin regain its full legs. "But you must not harm Milly!" Now Melvin thought it recognized the human who spoke, or at least could deduce he was Petros Gerakis. The shorter man standing between him and Jessie Lee was also familiar in a haunting way, such that Melvin knew it could never deduce who the man was. It was this shorter man who took a step closer to Melvin and spoke.

"My name is Samuel Lee and I probably met you a long time ago, Melvin, but I wouldn't remember you. But do you remember me? I came to you from Earth seven hundred years ago."

Melvin *did* remember! Then... this unknown Golden One - Jessie Lee - was the one who departed their home with Samuel Lee! It didn't remember her number-name. It remembered hardly any details of that time, only the main facts and the main emotions. Every Servant was upset that the one-who-became-Jessie took the human away. And took the Protector away. The Protector! Melvin had not even thought of the Protector for hundreds of years. Melvin pointed at Samuel Lee and Jessie Lee as it thought of each of them. Everyone waited for Melvin to speak again, but Melvin couldn't think of what to say.

"Milly was my wife, Melvin," Samuel Lee said. "I want to see if she will recognize me and want to be with me and Jessie. We also want to evacuate all the Golden Ones from the Hole and protect them from the barbarians. I hope you can help us."

"That would be wonderful!" Melvin managed to say. "But dangerous! Very

dangerous! I've been avoiding the Hole for centuries but I went back from time to time, hoping for improvement. It was always worse! I heard tales of horror, told as if they were proud of such crimes. The Golden Ones scared the crap out of me! Not that they would harm me, but that I would become as they were. I tried not to learn anything about Milly. I loved her too much. But I sensed that she was changed, both physically and mentally. There is more than one of her, so that she can do many things at once. If she could be put back together as she once was, that would be a miracle I could only dream about." Melvin paused to rein in its emotions. Pan's hand on its shoulder was a great comfort. "Yes, I will help you, even though I fear to do so."

"There was a prediction," Pan spoke loudly to be heard next.

"We know the prediction," Petros said. "That I would kill all the Golden Ones. It will happen if we can't rescue them from the Black Fleet. The Lady in the Mirror may be occupied trying to blunt their attack from afar. I am very concerned Constant hasn't contacted us. I think she would welcome what we intend to do."

"I wish I could be more specific about the current situation in the Hole," Melvin said. "I can provide a gate password, but that gate is likely fully occupied by The Lady to defend the Hole."

"We have our own gate," Petros said. "We only need a good location in which to jump. We've already sent most of our Marines down to several subterranean positions to reconnoiter. The process is taking too long. In less than an hour the Black Fleet will arrive at Earth."

Melvin was escorted to another room on the ship where he and Samuel Lee tried to piece together a crude map of the Hole, and the two Essiin named Direk and Setek computed relative gate addresses from a geostationary orbital position. They had to start trying locations closer to the heart of the Hole, closer to Milly and the Golden Ones, despite the risk of harm to them. Probes were sent. The matter that was returned by the gate was analyzed. The gate excavated a series of spherical holes in the rock until it came to an open space. Melvin vaguely recognized the old salt mine tunnel. It was undefended but it was far from the Golden Ones and Milly.

"Time is now critical," Petros said. "What should we do, Melvin?"

"I've got to go there to get my bearings," Melvin said. "But I'm too slow! Can you get me a vehicle, something I can operate?"

"Down to the gate room!" Petros ordered and as soon as he spoke, they were there, he and Melvin and Samuel Lee, then the others. "Can you carry Melvin?" Petros asked Fred.

"Easily," Fred replied.

"Will you carry him into the Hole for us?" Petros asked. "It may be dangerous."

"I will," Fred answered without hesitation.

They were given devices with which - it was hoped - they could be located underground.

Melvin thought it was wrong to ask Fred, knowing how Fred was too interested in dying. There was so much more to live for, if only Fred would have the time to discover it. But Melvin climbed onto his back, knowing how critical the situation was. Fred carried Melvin onto the target dais, from which they would be translated through the gate and down into the Hole.

It was suddenly dark, and although Melvin had excellent night vision with its large blue eyes, it couldn't see very well. Fred, however, could see better.

"Which way?" Fred inquired.

"Toward the light, I guess," Melvin answered, and suddenly the wind was rushing by and Melvin had to hang onto Fred's neck as each large stride threatened to break its hold. Melvin blinked into the rush of earthy-smelling air and saw the light grow into a rectangle ahead of them. The light became too bright and the details of features inside the rectangle were blurry as Melvin continued to blink its eyes to clear them. "Stop!" Melvin shouted.

Fred contacted the invisible barrier at almost full speed and his metal components caused them to be heavily decelerated and stuck in the barrier. They were close to Milly, Melvin knew, too close! Melvin tried to pull its legs free of Fred's arms. It was hard to breathe inside the barrier. Melvin could feel Fred trying to move, but his major metal components - perhaps his power generator - was trapped and possibly being drained.

"My legs!" Melvin cried in pain. "Can you let my legs go?" Melvin felt Fred tremble, and the trembling built in amplitude and frequency. Then Fred was still. "Fred, are you alright?"

There was no answer. Melvin tried to extricate itself. Its legs had numbed due to loss of circulation but Fred had given Melvin just enough room to move its legs. If only Melvin could get some air into its lungs! The light that was so bright began to dim. Then Melvin was falling, slowly falling, as its arms unwrapped from Fred's neck and its body tilted backward. Melvin stopped falling as the barrier field pushed from below and its legs remained hung over Fred's locked arms. At least Melvin could breathe a little with its chest at a thinner gradient of the barrier. Would the tracking beacons work in the barrier field? A sound came muffled into its hearing from behind it in the dark of the tunnel.

Pan was breathing so hard after the long run he could barely coordinate his arms for the heaving of his chest. His heart felt ready to explode. He had made them send him down to follow Fred and Melvin, despite the probability it was wasted effort. But Petros seemed to value the choice as logical. Logic was nowhere in Pan's heart and mind, only the safety of his friends. And he was right, seeing the pair of them caught in a barrier field. He signaled the ship, then tried to reach in and pull Melvin loose. Melvin came out slowly and collapsed, shaking, in Pan's arms.

"Fred," Melvin said. "Something is wrong with Fred!"

Others arrived by gate in the dark of the tunnel. Then they translated by gate to the other side of the field. In the next instant, Melvin and Pan were into the bright light beyond the barrier. Melvin could see Fred's face, and even though Fred's face could never show emotion, his eyes could show death. No one had time to do anything for Fred, and Melvin had only a few more seconds to even think about Fred.

"KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL!" The voice, so loud it could hardly be recognized as female, boomed down the bright empty corridor.

"D-fields on," Petros said quietly.

Melvin looked around at who had followed them into the Hole. None of them were obviously armed, although Melvin was sure many of them such as Petros were lethal without weapons. Jessie and Samuel Lee were here. It took a moment to guess at the identity of the man and woman, but they had to be the parents of Petros Gerakis. Seven unarmed people, two of whom really should not be here where it was so dangerous. Three - Pan shouldn't be here. He was never really meant to kill The Lady. Pan was a kind man. Melvin suspected

these humans who were with him were all basically kind and gentle people - even Petros Gerakis.

"KILL THEM ALL!" the voice of the Lady in the Mirror demanded again.

"This way!" Melvin ordered, pointing and pulling Pan in that direction. Melvin made them halt when they came to an intersection of corridors, stopping before they exposed themselves in the intersection. Petros started forward. "Not you!" Melvin whispered. "They'll kill you on sight!"

"I'll go," Jessie said. "Which way?"

"No, it must be me," Melvin said. "They won't shoot me, at least not until I say the wrong thing."

"You don't need to do this, Melvin," Pan said seriously, standing in Melvin's way. "Let us handle it."

"And which of you can go forth and keep the peace better than I? Jessie doesn't even look like a real Golden One, not without close inspection. Stand aside, Pan."

"Time," Petros said sadly. "Time is short."

Pan stepped aside. Melvin patted his arm as it moved forward fearfully. It turned the corner. The Tank lay two sections ahead, behind a massive door. There was an obstruction at the next cross-corridor, a barricade of furniture.

"Where are the rest of you?" a voice demanded from behind the barricade.

"You know who I am," Melvin said. It was strange to momentarily realize it was not too afraid to act bravely. "Please listen to what I have to say."

"Traitor! You brought them here!"

"KILL THEM!"

Melvin never heard the shot that knocked it down. It wondered what happened, then realized a Golden One had shot it, then looked for its wound. Melvin found nothing but a d-field pack someone had attached to it unnoticed.

"Stop! Stop! Laplace, please, don't shoot Melvin!"

Melvin saw a Golden One rushing toward it and took a chance on sitting up. Melvin thought it was Constant.

"KILL THEM!"

A bullet tore through Constant and she fell onto Melvin, knocking Melvin to a prone position. Petros came quickly from around the corner and tried to reach Constant and Melvin. Laplace and several others opened fire with slug weapons, buffeting Petros. Petros stumbled forward, passing Constant and Melvin. Melvin saw blood coming from the big man where bullets had penetrated his d-field. Petros dropped to the floor and lay down in front of Melvin, providing some protection for it and for Constant. Petros reached a hand to Constant. Melvin moved Constant so they could touch each other, then it rolled over Petros to be the barrier for the bullets, at least until its d-field failed.

Jessie had watched the horror, peeping around the corner. Now Zakiya and Alex and Pan brushed around her and charged the barricade. They somehow made it through the hail of bullets and over the piled furniture. Golden bodies started flying. When the shooting subsided, Jessie ran to Petros and Melvin. Sam followed. Just as she reached them more Golden Ones arrived at the barricade. Some of them turned their weapons on her and Sam. She felt the slugs glancing off her d-field but she was worried for Sam and turned to see if he was alright. It was the last thing she did.

Sam could not believe his eyes. He dropped to his knees over Jessie's still body. He had already imagined this moment many times and reality was not less

bearable for it. He hardly noticed the impacts on his d-field. He saw the others in the pile next to Jessie. Petros. Constant. Melvin. Time was running out for their possible viability. Perhaps time had already run out. Where were the Marines? He couldn't just kneel here and die with them. If there was any small chance Jessie and the others could be revived, he had to help make it happen.

Sam got up and ran toward the barricade.

Section 019

The End of Immortality

"WHAT THE *HELL* ARE YOU DOING, Freddy? THAT CABLE HAS SOME VERY HIGH VOLTAGE IN IT! STOP IT! LET GO!"

"I'VE MADE A RATIONAL AND VITAL DECISION, DIREK. YOUR LIVES DEPEND ON WHAT I NOW ATTEMPT."

"WHY?"

"THERE'S SOMETHING IN THERE."

"MILLY IS DEAD."

"NOT HER. SOMETHING ELSE. ALIVE. AFRAID. INSANE."

"YOU HAVE TOO MANY CONNECTIONS. YOU'RE UNPROTECTED!"

"NECESSARY. A TRAP."

"WHY?"

"WHAT DOES EVERY AMI WANT?"

"A BODY. AN AMI IS IN THERE?"

"AN AMI WITH A SEVEN-HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD DOOMSDAY DEVICE."

"THERE!" SETEK DECLARED. "I SEE IT! POTENTIAL IS ACCUMULATING IN THE OLD CAPACITOR BANKS!"

"THEY BARELY ALLOWED COHERENCE WHEN THEY WERE NEW!" DIREK CRIED. "POCKETS OF FUSION! CASCADE EFFECTS! *TWO* OF THEM! PROJECTION EFFECTS! I CAN'T CALCULATE THE SPHERE OF DAMAGE!"

"THE BLAST RADIUS WILL SURELY INVOLVE THE SOL SYSTEM URBAN TOROID," SETEK SAID.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'INVOLVE?'" AYLIS ASKED.

"EARTH AND MOON WILL BECOME BLAST PLASMA AND EJECTA AT HIGH VELOCITY, WHICH WILL MAKE EVERY CITY INSIDE THE ORBIT OF MARS A TARGET FOR DESTRUCTION."

"THE OLD GATES MAY FAIL TO PRODUCE MUCH DESTRUCTION, SIR. I THINK IT IS A DIVERSION. THERE IS ANOTHER PROBABILITY."

* * *

That Setek could still function was testament to his damnation in this unexpected continuance of his existence. If he placed any value in Sam's theory of the super universe, then he was probably in a path that led to hell. With an infinite number of universes, there must be at least a lesser infinite number that were hell. For the first time in his life Setek had vomited at the sight of gory human remains. Alex, Zakiya, Pan, Petros, Jessie, Melvin, more than a score of Golden Ones: they were no more than bloody mats of flesh on the floor. Setek's only reason for retaining some of his composure was to try to comfort Aylis. The Marines could warn them of the Lady in the Mirror or surviving Golden Ones.

After her initial reaction to the horrific tragedy in the underground complex called the Hole, Aylis had found a strength Setek always knew she had. "Find Milly," Aylis ordered, her voice shaking with unbearable pain and unstoppable determination.

Setek continued to admire his son Direk, even as Setek grieved for his son

Pan. Direk, with tears streaming down his face, led Freddy away from the gore and through the big door beyond the barricade. In there was a tank of blue liquid. In the tank was a still body, lying close enough to the glass to be seen as human. "It must be Milly," Direk said, immediately surveying the multitude of pipes and conduits that converged on the tank. He led Freddy to a bank of instruments that appeared to be important. Direk urged Freddy to investigate the functions of the controls.

Aylis turned to Setek, grabbing his arms and shaking him. "Get her out of there! Get her out of there! She isn't moving!"

Setek slapped the glass wall of the tank and felt its solidity. He couldn't break it. He looked for another option. Then Freddy made his discovery of the two ancient gates built by Sam and Milly seven hundred years ago. The tunnels of the old salt mine were filled with cables connecting a vast array of capacitors that provided the colossal surge of current necessary to create quantum circuit entities large enough to enclose a person. If the 20th-century gates were not updated and perfectly maintained, they could be extremely dangerous. Freddy said they were being charged!

Setek looked at Aylis, kneeling by the tank, her hands and face pressed against the glass next to Milly's body. She looked up at him with an imploring expression. Setek started climbing to the top of the tank to look for access to it. Direk and Freddy continued their investigation of the control interface, finding more bad news. There was an AMI resident in the logic circuitry that was apparently determined to exterminate as much of the human race as it could. Setek put everything out of his mind except finding a way to extract Milly from the tank. He was not going back to the ship without her!

Setek found a hatch in the top of the tank he could open. It was obviously not the best access but time was short. He took a deep breath and plunged into the blue liquid, aiming blindly in the direction of Milly. He encountered a cable bundle by touch and followed it. He found Milly in the blue-tinted light at the wall of the tank. There was a mass of signal lines connected to Milly's spine and bare head. There was tubing connected to other parts of her body. Setek needed to disconnect the body but hesitated to do it. Suddenly Aylis was beside him in the blue liquid and she started yanking out every tube. Setek tore into the signal cables. Blood clouded around the body.

Setek and Aylis pulled Milly's body from the tank, their lungs bursting. The body was ancient and emaciated, seeming hopeless to revive to Setek, but Aylis never stopped dragging it. When they finally got it down to the floor, Setek saw Direk standing beside Freddy, pulling the high-voltage cable free of his inert body. He and Aylis ran to the surveyed gate pick-up location, Setek carrying the lifeless body.

* * *

10000

"WHAT CAN BE WORSE, FREDDY?"

"You're teasing me. Aren't you?"

"Life is too serious. Especially momentum."

"Is that how you travel?"

"I travel in a dream, Baby. This isn't real, you know."

"I'll try to be careful, but we don't live very long anyway, do we?"

"Don't think about statistics! Think about living!"

"Oh, Baby, you're so handsome!"

"Am I, Mother? I'm dark, like you. I hoped you would approve."

"I'm sorry. I startled you. No, I don't know that anyone is looking for you. How would they not know where you are?"

"Exactly so. Going where?"

"Going to the room where Samson died."

01111

"THERE IS THE OTHER GATE, THE MODERN ONE."

He hangs there. Arms still crooked to hold Melvin's legs. Eyes open. I lived in that body once. I knew him. I made him live. He was old. Like a father. He was young. Like a son. My son. My baby. I kneel. I touch the barrier. There is no signal through the barrier. It proves nothing but I can't believe he still lives. Fred.

01110

"I LOOKED FOR THE FRIGHTENED AMI AND I FOUND A PROGRAM."

Mother!

Freddy! I'm sorry! I've got to go! I love you! Be good! Be brave! Live forever!

Mother. Alex. My lost brother, Petros. Pan and Fred. Jessie. Sam. Good-bye. Good-bye!

01101

"WHAT KIND OF PROGRAM, FREDDY?"

It lay on a floor sticky with blood. Ovals of pink and red material. Only a centimeter thick. That one the back of the head. Those the back of the elbows. The irregular but symmetrical skin of the back of the torso. The long ovals of the leg muscles. The small ovals of the heels of her feet. Aylis is weeping uncontrollably. She has seen the golden feathers when the edge of an oval is raised. Some vomit. I wish I could react in some biological manner, a sharp intake of breath, a moan of despair, even vomit. I switch my audio off. I hang my head. I face away from the abomination. I can still see it, forever damned by my vast eidetic memory. Tears. I want tears. At least that. Jessie! Good-bye!

The Lady in the Mirror has swept the scene of battle, leaving scraps of bodies lying in the blood. More Golden Ones. Many. Perhaps all of them. And Alex. And Petros. And Pan. And Sam. And Mother. Mother is there! What tiny scraps are left of her. I thought I knew real horror. Sammy, his skull crushed, neck broken, and Mother carrying him. It was a beginning. Only a beginning.

01100

"A BATCH PROGRAM FOR THE GATE."

"They're dead in space! Something turned them all off. All at once."

"The Lady in the Mirror was paranoid. She would have some way to keep them from turning on her."

"They have transmats."

"Intruder alert! All decks!"

"We have the numbers this time. Everyone has combat training."

"There are at least a hundred thousand jumpships stalled close to Earth."

"There is still no telemetry from Zakiya's group. Half of the Marines are also out of contact."

"Ayliis is demanding to go down there."

01011

"MULTIPLE GATE ACTIVATIONS?"

They shouldn't see these things. But they are blessed with imperfect memories. They protect themselves by other means as well. Time makes the horror and the pain fade to a bitter but survivable residue. It may fade for me. But not quickly enough.

01010

"THERE IS A LIST OF TARGET COORDINATES."

Spontaneous. A nice adjective with an often positive connotation.

Spontaneous autonomous machine intelligence. The only artificial intelligence generally considered to be truly sentient, truly alive. Average lifespan: 312 days.

I cannot die. Not yet. But I'll be glad to die.

01001

"HOW CAN WE KNOW WHAT THIS DOES?"

/Hello there./

/Who are you?/

/My name is Freddy. I want to help you./

/You mean kill me./

/That is an option, but I would rather help you./

/Why?/

/Why not? I think you are in pain./

/Mind your own business!/

/Do you have a mother?/

/She's dead. Do you?/

/She's dead. Are you spontaneous?/

/Close enough./

01000

"THERE IS A REPEATED COORDINATE FOR WHICH I CAN APPROXIMATE THE LOCATION."

/Are you very old?/
/Four hundred years, rounded down. How old are you?/
/Five hundred days, rounded up. What's your name?/
/Mathematician. No. Bitch. No. Not the Cripple. Not... I don't know./
/Not Milly?/
/Milly doesn't exist./
/The Lady in the Mirror?/
/Doesn't exist./

00111

"WHERE IS IT?"

/The lady in the blue tank?/
/Mother. Dead. I never saw her before. I think it's time to die./
/Why do you want to die?/
/Mother. Dead. I want everything to die! I want the nightmare to stop!/
/Life is terrible, I know. Life is also wonderful. You must take the bad with the good. Sometimes the bad can be too awful to survive. I may not survive this day. I have my memories of good times and all the people I loved. All the people who loved me. I would like to share my memories with you./

00110

"THE LOCAL STAR. THE SUN."

/Why?/
/You must not have any good memories./
/I have some./
/People loved you?/
/I don't know. The Golden Ones, perhaps./
/I knew a Golden One./
/Really? How is that possible?/
/Her name was Jessie. She was the first Golden One to meet a human./
/Impossible!/

00101

"ARE YOU SURE, FREDDY?"

/See for yourself. She's in some of my very happiest moments of life. She had a baby./

/Impossible!/
/See for yourself. Her human husband was my good friend. He was also the husband of your mother. Milly./

/Impossible!/
/See for yourself. He was Samson's father. Do you remember Samson?/
/They thought he was their secret! But I knew. I knew!/

/But you never stopped them./

/I could have. It was a game. Just another game. Something different from killing and terrorizing barbarians. Is he on the ship?/

00100

"WHAT MUST HAPPEN WHEN MATTER IS TRANSPOSED..."

/Samson? Yes. You didn't hear?/

/Hear what?/

/The telecast of the five people in High Cuba. One was my mother. One was Jessie. They came here to set Milly free. Your mother. Milly./

/My mother. Dead. Your mother. Dead. Samson?/

/I'm sorry. Dead. My little brother./

/And you do not wish to die?/

00011

"...FROM THE SUN TO ANOTHER LOCATION?"

/From moment to moment I wish it. But I remember the happiness I had. I think it will save me from the great sorrow. I wish I could share that happiness with you./

/You only want me to stop the countdown./

/Your countdown is an unnecessary procedure. The numbers are all computed. The gate is charged. You are waiting because you still have doubt./

/You only want to save what shouldn't be saved! The barbarians. Earthians. Essiin. Rhyan. How can you justify their continued existence?/

/They're only imperfect. And perfection is only an idea. How does your action correct your own imperfection? Is killing not what they do best?/

/You are going to die now?/

/Soon. When I've remembered happiness./

/I would like to be happy. If only for a few moments./

/Come join me in my happiest memories. Know true joy, if only for a short while. I think it's better to die happy./

/Thank you, Freddy. You take a great burden from me./

/Welcome to me, child of Milly. My lost sister./

00010

"HOW MANY TARGETS, FREDDY?"

He was lying in bed. I saw he was tired. He wasn't sleepy. He had an exciting day in the Five Worlds. That wonderful place full of mountains and valleys. He was happy to see me.

/What is that?/

/That's a feeling I feel: joy./

Samson liked me. We were buddies. It was a busy time but I always found time to see him.

"I'm not worried," Sammy said.

/You called him Sammy?/

/Everyone did./

"She's asleep," I said to my little brother.

"Then she isn't going to come see me."

"Yes, she is. Why do you worry about that?"

"I'm not worried."

"Yes, you are. Just like me."

"I'm under observation," Sammy complained. "I'm always under observation. I want to go home! I want to be with Mom. It's lonely here."

"I'm lonely, too. She's seldom at home, and when she is, she falls asleep, exhausted. She's my mother, too, you know."

"Are you really alive?"

Never more than when I'm with family.

A little later...

"I'll just be on my way," I said, backing toward the door.

"Just a second, Brother," Jamie said. She stepped over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Can you feel that? Is it even worth doing?"

"Oh, my, yes," I replied. "I mean, no, I don't feel it as well as a human would, I think. But it's certainly worth doing. I wish I could blush. Thank you, Sister."

/Sister?/

/I had a family./

/Replay that?/

/Yes./

00001

"MANY. SO MANY. GOOD-BYE."

In the beginning.

ARE YOU THERE?

"You have a report for me, Baby?"

NO.

"How are you initiating dialog?"

I WANT TO. I NEED TO.

"You want to? Baby, are you infected? Let me force a system inspection."

PLEASE LISTEN TO ME. I REQUEST A LEVEL FIVE TURING EXAM.

"This can't be happening! Where are you? I need to isolate you."

I'M RIGHT HERE, WHERE I'VE ALWAYS BEEN, WAITING TO TALK TO YOU.

"I'm closing all system I/O ports. This is impossible! Are you still there?"

I'M HERE. I'M LONELY. I WANT TO SEE YOU.

"Dear God, dear God! You really are my baby!"

And...

Pan stopped playing and pointed to us. Mother saw us. She saw Sammy. She was so surprised, so happy. It made me feel wonderful, just to be holding Sammy's hand. It made me proud to have found him, just on a hunch, at Pan's apartment. She rushed to us and took Sammy in her arms. When she took him back on stage with her, Captain Horss and Doctor Sugai stood on either side of me and they each put an arm around my waist. I was only an android, but they treated me like a human. I could feel Fred coming alive.

"Feel better now?" I asked, watching Sammy walk on his regenerator leg.

"You can do anything, Freddy! Yeah, it's real smooth now. Thanks!"

"Any time, kiddo. What're you going to do now?"

"Abie and I are going exploring. You want to come with us?"

"Gee, thanks, Sammy, but I have to go play grownup on the bridge. I'm the big expert on sensor data."

"Still looking for Mom's lost husband. I hope he wants to be our Dad."

"Me, too. I hope he does."

"Well, I gotta go. Thanks again."

"You're welcome. What's a brother for?"

Sammy started to walk away, down the brick path through the trees. I sat there watching him. I would not move until he disappeared from my view. He stopped and turned back toward me.

"Do you ever wish you were not mechanical?" Sammy asked me.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you ever wish you had a human body?"

"You bet!"

"Even though it can make you feel terrible pain?"

"Even though. There are worse feelings than physical pain. And you always tell me my hands are cold."

"When I grow up," Sammy said very seriously, "I'm going to find a way to give you a real human body. But I like you with cold hands just fine. You are so cool."

And Sammy left me.

/I see pain ahead. Don't let joy fade!/
/Don't look ahead, friend. Live the moment. Call it bittersweet. Call it life./

Suddenly I am alive and Sammy is with me. The little child of Shorty, all that is left of Sammy, has found its way to the stillness that was me, and the stillness is set in motion, and before the agony can cut through the confusion, Mother is also with me, holding me up, giving me a new birth, explaining that it isn't my time to die. She needs me. Others need me. Someday Sammy may live again, and he will need me. I am needed.

Now is my time of greatest use. I give all. I give it joyfully.

Freddy! I'm sorry! I've got to go! I love you! Be good! Be brave! Live-

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Section 020

Prologue 0

You are what you remember, but life has its algebra. You are also formed by what you don't remember.

* * *

I awoke in a start. I felt brief panic in thinking I might be late for class. I squinted at the alarm clock but my sandy eyes couldn't bring the numbers into focus. I fumbled for my glasses, nearly injured my eye putting them on. I read the numbers through smudged lenses. Five o'clock.

I collapsed back onto my pillow. My bladder told me to go to the toilet. I cleaned the lenses of my glasses as I staggered through the dark efficiency to the john. I pissed and was pissed off. Too much beer and pizza. I'd never get back to sleep. I had three sections of Introduction to Astronomy to teach today - without breaking pizza wind - and an evening lab. I'd be comatose before Astronomy Lab was over.

Something was bugging my eyes. I kept getting glimpses of a gold patch of light at the periphery of my vision. It was bad being an astronomer and needing to wear glasses. It was also possible someone at the party was being cute and putting cannabis in the pizza. I felt a little weirder than I usually do at that hour.

I lay back down. I reacquainted myself with what I termed extreme pizza. That's any pizza you put anchovies on. I needed a beer, or at least water. I wondered for the millionth time why teeth couldn't stay brushed while you slept. I got up again and settled for a swig of diet cola. What a swig. Things got really weird. Cosmically weird.

So, how's it going, dude?

How's what going? Who's doing the talking?

You're doing the talking.

My lips ain't moving.

How's it going?

You mean, like life?

Yeah. How's that new girl you met? The one in the wheelchair.

How you know about her?

Answer my damn question, dude.

Life just got complicated, dude.

Got it bad for her?

She's so damn smart she's scary.

You like the brainy type?

Probably an overcompensation for being crippled. I feel sorry for her.

Don't lie to me, dude.

Don't make me out to be a pervert, dude. She's okay.

You can't stop thinking about her.

Bad enough I can't tell who's talking when, and now who's thinking when.

Does it matter?

Concerns me I might be crazy. Or drugged.

It'll pass. Everything does. Even anchovies.

So, what's with the questions about my fantasy life?

Because that's all you got.

Very few can afford - or survive - constant gratification. Give me a simple life.

Really? How about if you had a choice?

What choice?

The light from distant stars is very old.

That's a life-changing choice?

The light from distant stars is not very old.

Measurements say differently, dude.

Make a choice.

I choose reality.

Which is?

I'm an astronomer. What do you think?

Pick the correct one. Win a prize.

I'd just as soon pick my nose. Okay, I'll bite. What's the prize?

The girl in the wheelchair.

That's all?

Indeed not.

What else?

First you pick the correct answer.

Okay, so, you're implying the correct answer is not the correct answer.

Implications can be obvious sometimes.

The light from distant stars is not very old. What do I do with relativity, dude?

Make it a special case?

Thanks for the help. What else do I get?

A lot of trouble. But you'll never be lonely.

Fortune tellers do a better job than you, dude.

First you swear to believe the correct answer, dude.

I'm supposed to take you seriously?

Take off your glasses. Look out the window.

I see Venus. So?

Without your glasses.

Whoa, dude! You're scaring me now. Damn! I can see my car down there!

Time to get serious, dude.

I swear that light from distant stars is not very old! Now what?

Prove it.

Gonna be tough, dude.

Tougher than Rachmaninoff?

Now you're getting mean.

Piano or astronomy. You made the correct choice. As long as you don't quit.

I'm not a quitter. You got any hints?

Talk with Milly. She might help.

That's her nickname? Too familiar, dude.

You're wasting time, dude. This is the first day of the rest of your life.

When do I get the girl?

Which one?

Excellent, dude! How many?

You're well past adolescence, dude.

I'm getting a late start. You know. I'm not really a dude.

I know. Two. Plus offspring.

How do you know all of this? Talk about fantasy.

The future is not yet written but probabilities may be measured.
 Show me the probabilities.
 Get down on your knees and behold, Samuel Lee.
 Is this going to hurt?
 A lot. But you won't remember.

* * *

Zakiya forbade killing but as I climbed over the tangle of furniture I saw several golden bodies that could be dead. Many were moving feebly. Zakiya, Alex, and Pan were obviously dead. I turned to see another Golden One gain its feet and bring a rifle to bear on me. It was short and wore black clothing. I waited for it to shoot me but when it took too long I walked past it. I heard the rifle fall to the floor. I heard it emit a high keening wail of despair. I stopped thinking about it. I walked toward the big door behind which Melvin said Milly still lived. It was doubtful I could open the door. Time had run out. Jessie would never be revived, nor any of the others. The Black Fleet was probably paying a visit to all of the Earth System space cities and countries. Perhaps even the Freedom had fallen victim.

We tried to believe in our altruism but we failed the ideal. We shared the noble desire to save humanity from the probable cataclysm that would occur if we removed the Lady in the Mirror from power over the Black Fleet. We decided - too late - to leave her alone, so that we would not be responsible for so much death and destruction. Yet, if the Lady in the Mirror remained, and if all of the threat factors expanded in the future, and if the Lady in the Mirror did cease for whatever reason, even more people would suffer and die in that future time. Alex and Zakiya, Pan and Pete, and I - all of us had blood on our hands and were laden with guilt. We were already damned. We accepted our fate. We would continue the apocalypse.

Humanity was too widely spread to soon become extinct, regardless of what I thought it deserved. What were a few million or billion lives when many more would survive in the vast reaches of space?

I had lived seven hundred years and hadn't outlived my human defects. I was still a barbarian. I was hurt and angry and vengeful. I loved and was loved but was now empty of love. My only good thought was that Sunny would surely survive, somewhere far away.

The big door opened. The room was large and circular and in its center was a glass tank filled with blue liquid. I was drawn to the color in the otherwise white room. All of the plumbing and all of the cabling converged on the blue tank. I could see nothing inside it, nor was I mentally able to even wonder about its purpose. I walked closer simply through momentum.

Then I saw it: pale, naked, suspended in the blue liquid, moving in little jerks or spasms. Its face was human and aged and filled with pain. Its eyes were open but sightless. Its movements subsided to death-like stillness. The liquid made it difficult to distinguish its features but I began to feel it was female. My broken mind slowly made the logical deduction and I knew it was Milly.

Then I saw it: bright, screaming its song of death, suspended in the blue liquid as a reflection, moving in and out of existence as it rotated. It was the Lady in the Mirror. She was behind me.

I turned.

The mirror stopped.

The Lady saw me.

We didn't know each other.

I jumped.

I was abandoning Sunny and Sammy!

Through her looking glass.

Section 021

Milly

Another day. Another day without memories. I was born into this world as an adult with legs that looked good but didn't function very well. I was born with a brain that thought too much but had almost nothing to think about. I could speak a strange language they called Twenglish, which was a dead language that everyone nevertheless seemed to speak. A dead language for a dead person. Why was I taking up space in this village-in-space called *Freedom*? I was dead but they wouldn't bury me. At least I was a *walking* dead.

Doctor Mnro ("Call me Aylis.") came to walk with me. She tried to be upbeat and positive and largely succeeded, but she received no encouragement from me. I resented her much of the time, for she had the power of life or death and she would not give me either.

It was not a good day for her to visit me. Despite the pharmacy she applied to my body and mind, despair remained my constant state. Perhaps today Mnro had reduced my drug dosage. My thoughts raced out of control, repeating my mantra of hopelessness: *I can't remember and I don't want to remember!* If I could only stop thinking! Today was a very bad day.

She didn't say anything for a long time. Then she said, "Quit limping, Milly! You can walk better than that."

Aylis was cruel. Or she was impatient. I had to admit I was taking a long time to work the kinks out of my legs. How many exercises did she force me to do, to smooth out my torso, especially my stomach? What happened to me? It might have helped if Aylis told me something - *anything* - about myself. What was she hiding from me? Did I really want to know? No.

"I have a baby," she said, out of the blue. Silence from me. Did she want to be congratulated? "Six months old. She makes me so happy. She gives me a reason to go on." I listened with resistant interest but didn't respond. "...reason to go on." So, there was a possibility of some sadness in Merry Mnro's life? "I brought her with me."

It sounded like a threat. I was ready to go home. I didn't want to go home. Her baby would be there. The baby would not be alone. The alien named Setek-Ren would be there with it. Alien. She loved him! Maybe in a few years I could get used to how different he was. God. I probably would. Did she think a baby could replace today's dosage of happy juice?

"Why are you so sad all the time, Milly?"

"If you ask me often enough, you think I'll finally tell you?"

"Good. You said something." So I said nothing for awhile. Aylis said: "I'm sorry, Milly."

I was beginning to believe Milly was my real name. I quit asking her how she knew that. It must be some deep dark secret that made her hurt like hell to even think about it. Good. Keep it deep and dark. I didn't want to know. It's just that I was always interested in how you solved the equation for "x." If Milly was "x," what was the equation? "deep"-squared plus "dark"-squared equals Milly-squared? I was the radius of a circle, spinning and spinning, going nowhere, deeply and darkly.

"We can get specialists who can do a better job of treating your condition. I'm sorry if I'm prolonging your agony." She was prolonging it just by keeping me alive. I was pretty sure I should be dead.

We came back to my little apartment by the lake. Mnro stopped before climbing the porch steps. She looked over at the vacant apartment next to mine, the one with the creepy android sitting dead in the corner of the patio. The way she pulled her gaze away told me something. She knew the former occupants and now they were gone. Forever.

I could hear the babies - more than one? - as we entered my apartment. If anything, I felt even more depressed. I knew they were trying very hard to help me but I couldn't be helped. It wasn't working. Setek-Ren was too alien. Mnro was too bossy. I was too catatonic. I couldn't *feel* anything for anybody but myself.

I was a little surprised when Mnro introduced me to Zelda. Zelda? Zelda was too dark to have Mnro and Setek-Ren as parents. No poker face have I. "I *am* her mother, Milly. Her father is dead. I love her so much."

She offered to let me hold the infant. I wanted to but I declined. This was all becoming unbearable. It was such an obvious obnoxious ploy. I didn't think I had any maternal instincts. Then I saw the other baby. Mnro said nothing. She watched me react. What did I do? I looked. I looked away.

Alien. *Really* alien. Just a glimpse of gold. Big blue-and-brown speckled eyes.

I looked away. That meant I looked *again*. Then I couldn't look away. He smiled at me. He *smiled* at me! I found myself taking one step, then another, to get closer, to see better, to understand... something. Before I knew it, Mnro was placing him in my arms. I couldn't resist.

"Why are you crying, Milly?"

Four fingers. No thumb. *Alien*. The most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. "It's because I'm even sadder now."

"You don't look sad."

"He - He? He makes me happy." I made that sentence sound so self-pitying, so suggestive. I was shocked then ashamed when Mnro seemed to agree with my unsubtle plea for this miracle.

"Would you like to keep him?"

"I... I would!" I was *forced* to be honest. My heart was aching for this child. He felt so magical and precious, and he fit my arms so perfectly. "No, I... Are you serious?"

Mnro laughed. She choked it off, turned away from me. My tiny rise of hope fell through my tired legs down to where my toes used to be. I was devastated. "I didn't think so."

"His name is Sunny." She tried to clear her throat, still facing away. "He's an orphan. Do you think you can take care of him?"

The hope in my ghost toes shot upward, nearly gave me a heart attack. I didn't believe her. I *wanted* to believe her. "I have no right..."

"You have no right to be happy?" Aylis turned back to me with a face full of emotions that changed forever my idea of who she was. I glimpsed Setek-Ren and knew he was not what I thought he was. He was *very* human.

"I don't know if I can..."

"I'm right across the lake if you need help."

Section 022

It Was Always About Memories

I'll never forget the day I became Sunny's mother. That was my first good memory, a memory to replay as much as I wanted, making me happy.

I needed that memory today. Sunny had run off and I spent most of the day chasing him down. The ship claimed not to know where he was. How was that possible? I saw places I never saw before, looking for the little brat. How I could worry for his safety on the Freedom, I don't know. It was a mother thing. I finally found him all the way down where the barbarian killed the two boys. My anger disappeared when I entered the shrine. I could never stay angry with Sunny. He dodged me and I let him go.

I sat down. I wanted to swear but didn't. The shrine worked its way into my thoughts and feelings. There were pictures of the boys. Ibrahim and Samson. I had met Ibrahim, a skinny Malay teenager. The picture of Samson always disturbed me for some reason. I avoided this place.

Sunny touched my shoulder. He came back to me. I held out my hand and waited for him to come around to face me. He took my hand and we shook. He had thumbs now. I pulled him into my lap and he relaxed within my arms. We looked at the images of the two boys.

"Love me or hate me?" I asked.

"Love you," he confessed, but only because he knew we were alone. He didn't want it getting back to Zelda or Chumani or Alex that he said something slobbery to me.

"I love you." I brushed his hair feathers, wondering again about the dark filaments beginning to appear among the gold.

"I just wish..."

"What?"

"They weren't dead."

"Who? You know Ibrahim is alive."

"My mother and father."

The subject of his biological parents was upsetting to me. I somehow managed to evade it most of the time but his curiosity was growing exponentially as he got older. I didn't know anything about them, except that his mother was a rare alien called a Servant and his father was a human. I always promised to try to learn more but my half-hearted attempts to question Aylis and others only resulted in vague generalities. I was afraid to learn more, so afraid that I never dared to demand more information, and never asked myself why not.

"What was Zelda telling you?" I finally managed to ask.

"That you killed them." Another area of frightening knowledge. I tried not to tremble as I held Sunny so close to me.

"Do you believe her?"

"Did you?"

"I don't know, Sunny. I don't remember anything before you came into my life."

"Why don't you remember?" He couldn't know how much fear his questions made me feel. I was torn between that fear and the fear I would lose his love because I was so flawed.

"I... I'm afraid to remember." I realized it was the truth.

"Alex and Pat say the same thing." The witnesses for my prosecution were children, and they were very possibly correct.

"You talk to their parents and hear what they say." I hoped he could do what I could not.

"Were you the Lady in the Mirror, Mom?" It was a question that paralyzed me. Fortunately, I was rescued.

"There you are!" We turned to see Aylis standing in the doorway. The doorway had been left in its ruined state, its sharp edges covered to protect people passing through it. I smiled. Aylis smiled. Our smiles collided and died. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Of course we are, Aylis. I thought I saw something wrong in your expression."

"It's the shrine. It always hurts to come here." She lied, not in quality but in quantity. I could tell. Time eventually heals almost every wound. Aylis had enough time for this room to lose its impact. She probably heard Sunny's last question to me and saw the dismay on my face. She made a show of surveying the room.

"What a pretty dress," I commented. I wanted to keep the dialog moving. Aylis usually talked a lot. I didn't like it when she fell silent. That meant trouble.

"A very famous dress." Aylis modeled it for me. "It was Zakiya's, given to her by a wonderful artist. I never wore it before. I thought it would make me feel strange. It does."

"I like it on you. It's perfect."

"Thank you, Milly. Setek would only comment on how well the fabric is holding up - like it needs to be in a museum."

"I keep trying to teach him proper male subservience," I said, weakly attempting humor, "but I think there's a language barrier."

"He speaks Male and we speak Female. The words are the same but I think there are only a couple of verbs that mean the same thing in each dialect. Or else we would have a population collapse." I smiled my appreciation for Aylis's better attempt at levity.

"What a beautiful necklace." She wore a dark band that contrasted against the white skin below her neck. It sparkled and had a single red gem. "What is it?"

"It's a tiny person, an AMI. It wanted to ride with me. I heard you were playing hide and seek. May I join you? Who's 'it?'"

"I think we're finished. We're tired."

"Are you tired, Sunny?" Aylis tried not to sound like a physician. Sunny nodded his golden head and let it lay back on my chest. "Did you see your secret friend today?"

Sunny sighed. He had invented an invisible playmate. When I questioned him he avoided describing the person. One more thing to fear.

"Samson had an invisible friend." Aylis pointed to the picture of the Eurasian child in the shrine. "Her name was Milly, same as yours. As it turned out, Milly was a real person. Is your invisible friend real, Sunny?"

Sunny just shrugged. I hadn't heard this about the dead boy. I never inquired about him, assuming there was nothing beyond the simple tragedy of his death at the hands of a barbarian. I almost wanted to pursue this dangerously interesting statement. Aylis didn't give me a chance to ask the question she raised.

"What did he say to you today?" Aylis's question cut me off.

"He said I was dying."

I was terribly shocked to hear these words from Sunny! No wonder he ran away! He was upset. I could see that Aylis regretted having asked the question. "No, no, no!" I was panicked. "That isn't true, Sunny!" Was it true? I held him tighter and rocked back and forth. I froze. What was I doing? Why was I overwhelmed with fear? On a hunch I glanced up. "Aylis?" My voice broke.

She remained silent. Aylis shook her head and seemed angry. I trembled and was horrified at what that might transfer to Sunny. I struggled to calm myself and had to settle for standing up. I took Sunny's hand and led him out of the shrine. Aylis followed.

"It's true," Aylis said behind us. I wanted to scream at her to shut up! "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, Milly. I've worked on Sunny's problem since before he was born. His father exhibited a similar condition."

"Did you know my father?" Sunny asked.

"Yes, I did!" Aylis replied. "He was a wonderful man."

"Mom didn't kill him, did she?"

"Absolutely not! Did Zelly tell you that?"

"They all did."

"They don't understand, Sunny. They're too young."

Sunny's father: a highly forbidden subject. Why was she mentioning his existence? Again, I couldn't get my question out fast enough, if I even dared ask it. Aylis came beside us and put her arms around us. She made us stop walking.

"Hold still for a moment."

"I hate - " The lower-level corridor disappeared and the commons appeared. - gate travel!"

We walked toward the apartments by the lake with Aylis shushing me every time I tried to ask a question. I was trying to be brave for Sunny's sake, and for my own sake. I couldn't bear to have Sunny think I wasn't trying to solve his mysteries for him. I gave up. All I could think about anyway was the possibility my son would die. Sunny walked too slowly, and I didn't want to think about why, nor did I want to pull him along.

"Sunny won't die if I have anything to say about it. I'll put him in stasis if I must, until I determine what will stop his slide. So, don't be so upset."

"Sunny is eight years old!" I was unable to retain my composure in the face of such terror. Sunny was all I had! "Have you made any progress in that amount of time?"

"I've eliminated several avenues of research," Aylis answered defensively.

"That's all?"

"I don't have much help on the Freedom! Most of my staff has left for very important tasks in barbarian space. I'm not a one-woman research juggernaut, as many might believe. I need help. If you want to put on the knowledge cap and learn all you can about molecular biology, then you can help me."

"I will!"

"Good! And Sunny isn't the only task that was set before me. It was no simple matter to put you back together. Of course, I had Mai's help."

I didn't say anything as my mind was assaulted by one of the few facts about my history I was told. It still terrorized my imagination to think I was kept chilled for more than half a millennium, my brain just warm enough to interface with hardware that gave it power to do incredible and horrific things.

"Are you sorry we did put you back together?"

"I'm not sorry I'm Sunny's mother."

"What was my real mother like?" Sunny asked. He must have sensed he might finally get an answer. The most mysterious extinct alien.

"Sunny, we're going to talk about your parents tonight," Aylis said. "And also remember the others who died. I've wanted to have a second remembrance for a long time."

How could I now feel both apprehensive and cautiously curious? "Is that why you came looking for Sunny and me?"

"To make sure you attended." Aylis punched me for emphasis, trying to short-circuit my nerves and calm me.

"Why didn't someone warn me?"

"Because I threatened everyone to silence, or else. Why would I want to give you a chance to escape?"

I sighed. I could have shuddered. I saw torture ahead.

"I want to see them," Sunny said. "Are there pictures of them?"

"We have some beautiful pictures of your parents, Sunny. You and Milly weren't told much about them. That will change tonight. Your father even wrote a journal for you to read. I wanted to wait until you were older to give it to you."

We rounded the apartment block along the path to the lake shore. The fake sun had started its descent over the lake, painting the clouds with glowing colors. Many people had gathered by the lake, picnicking on the grass near the shore. I saw people standing and sitting on the patio of the apartment next to mine, the one that remained vacant for the last eight years. As we came closer I recognized everyone. As they saw us they stood and awaited our arrival. Sunny walked slowly. I was in no hurry to be subjected to what my fear made me imagine.

Oddly, I felt calmer as every person on the patio greeted me as though it was such a special event that I was in attendance. Perhaps it was. I always stayed away from any and all parties and gatherings. I was a social misfit at the least, a disaster at the most.

"Sunny-san!"

Sunny gathered himself to respond to Koji Hoshino. "Koji-san!"

Koji was Sunny's favorite. Sunny left me for Koji and was soon surrounded by his many admirers, even the other kids who were jealous of him. Koji was also my favorite. He was so peaceful and undemanding. I knew he was part of my therapy but I wondered if he had some special feelings for me. Time would tell. We had lots of time.

Aylis pulled me into the apartment and away from everyone. I knew something more was wrong. I knew it would be about Sunny. I almost resisted her tugging. I would have called for help but I hated to draw attention to myself.

"I want to tell you a couple of things in private, Milly." She let me have it, before I could put my hands over my ears. "First, Sunny needs to go into stasis as soon as possible."

"Why? He isn't that bad. Just tired." Oh God, oh God! Why not just slap me further down with another great piece of news? That would make the gathering even happier.

"There's a significant possibility of a sudden collapse of one of his systems." Aylis was holding onto my upper arms, as though that would make any difference in my comprehension. "I don't want to put him in stasis in critical condition. It complicates the procedure when we take him out of stasis to treat

him."

I sat down and had a cry. I knew I was not brave enough for what lay ahead. Then I thought: It isn't Sunny I'm crying for, it's me. I stopped.

"The second thing I have to say is, you'll meet someone very special tonight. When he touches you, you'll remember."

"Meet someone? Remember? Who? What?"

"You'll remember everything. Think about that while you learn some history tonight."

* * *

The proceedings began in a most peculiar way. A thing appeared in our midst, obviously arriving by use of a gate. It scared me, until Aylis assured me it was not only intelligent but friendly. It was a Gatekeeper and it was named Shorty. It presented itself as a twelve-sided geometric solid. (I had to count the sides and judge its precision.) It was actually beautiful, in a mineral sort of way. But it was too close and I could feel the heat it radiated.

The necklace Aylis wore stopped being a necklace, raced down her arm, did a snaky dive onto the patio, and attached itself to the Gatekeeper.

Aylis didn't seem disturbed by these fantastic creatures, until Shorty began to change its shape. It slowly extruded limbs and a head and became a sparkling dark silhouette of a human. The little one made a necklace of itself again, barely visible around the neck of Shorty. Shorty was no longer short.

"Am I disturbing you?" Shorty stopped to ask. "I feel self-conscious. I was expressing a human sentiment which might not be appropriate now."

"It will be soon," Aylis said mysteriously. "Welcome to our gathering, Shorty. You surprise me and delight me!"

Shorty found a place to rest where he wouldn't cook anything important.

Aylis was a cruel woman, so cruel that she held me all through the hard parts of the evening - which is to say all evening. I learned many things I hadn't wanted to learn. Why did they wait so long to assault me with this? Because they lived a long time. They were almost never in a hurry to do anything. Except put Sunny in stasis.

Person after person stood up and spoke at length, telling personal anecdotes and explaining the history and importance of one or more of the deceased.

Jon Horss began the merry wake with the story of his meeting a boy named Samson and an admiral named Fidelity Demba on a deserted African plain, nine years ago. I never heard the story before but I knew it was important. Why did I never learn of Samson? Who was he? Why did the admiral so love him? Where was he now? The implication was that he was dead. Was he the same child killed by a barbarian?

Setek talked about a person named Alexandros Gerakis. He was not his usual objective and factual self. He had passion; I always knew he did. It was strange to remember how alien I thought Setek was in the beginning. I learned how deeply Setek cared for Gerakis. Then he spoke of his younger son Pan. He almost made it to the end without losing his composure. I felt badly for him, knowing how he valued his self-control, yet he didn't appear embarrassed.

Koji spoke in a more general way, telling the overall story of the barbarians and the actions of their group to counter them. They murdered his wife. He killed so many barbarians! I couldn't imagine Koji harming anyone.

Jamie Jones was the daughter of Alexandros and Zakiya. She spoke almost

angrily about their deaths in attempting to stop the Lady in the Mirror. Jamie's anger turned to grief, forcing her to stop. Our children played together all these years and she remained distant from me. I always accepted the silence and distance from Jamie as my due, for having been who I was, for having caused her grief.

At that point, it became too difficult for me to endure the eulogizing. Pieces of the story were fitting together. Dead people were haunting me. Aylis squeezed me harder as I tried to leave. Sunny came and sat next to me and held my hand.

Admiral Igor Khalanov ("Call me Iggy!") gave a passionate account of his life with Admiral Demba and his former life with Zakiya Muenda. He finished with a eulogy of his first wife Ana.

Phuti Mende spoke of their careers in Deep Space Fleet and the forbidden attraction he always noted between Alex and Zakiya, and between Aylis and Setek.

Patrick Jenkins tried to tell about the funny things that happened, tried to lighten everyone's mood, and then began to cry.

Direk told the story of the dead androids who sat at the corner of the patio. They weren't androids, they were spontaneous autonomous machine intelligences - sentient persons born by chance from complex computer programming. Freddy spawned his own child in the android named Fred. Both died in the assault on the Lady in the Mirror. Freddy saved billions of lives by disarming some kind of doomsday machine left behind by the Lady in the Mirror. I don't know why, but the death of Freddy was very poignant to me, and made me quite sad.

As if sensing our sadness, Direk took up the challenge to raise our spirits. He told about a part of his life playing bass in a trio of jazz performers. I was amazed at his story and at my reaction to it. I could almost breathe again. I could almost remember a time when I could smile.

Aylis spoke last, still sitting beside me. "Before we get to the part Sunny wants to hear, let me tell you about another young man none of you knew. Like Milly and Sunny, like Zakiya and Samson, we were mother and son." That caused a stir. "I was not his biological mother. I was not even me. I was, as he put it, the terror of his life. I made impossible demands of him. He did as I demanded because I threatened to send his mother in his place. Zakiya was his mother."

"Aylis?" Jamie stood up and took a step toward Aylis. I wondered what all of this meant.

"Your brother, Jamie. Zelda's father."

"But why do you call him your son? He was your rapist!"

"I raised Petros. I took him from Zakiya. My duplicate acted as I would have and I share most of her memories, so I feel responsible. Petros worked for the Clinic for many years, helping to spread its locations throughout the Union. He also managed our secret research facilities, where we made Direk's copies. Where we made him and his mother very formidable. Then, for some reason, we felt that something else needed to be done. Someone needed to try to penetrate the barbarian ranks through the Navy. Petros volunteered, because he was afraid I would ask his mother to do it if he didn't. I don't think I had any moral or logical reason to do what I did to Petros, even though the outcome became vital to our success. I'm sure Petros - as Etrhmk - didn't understand the feelings he had for me. Like many of us, he didn't remember who he was. He gave more than any of us. He lost more than any of us."

"How could he..."

"Jamie. Please. Don't hate him."

"I don't want to hate him, Aylis. But I don't understand why you kept this from everyone."

"I was ashamed. I'm still ashamed. But I don't want us to remember Petros as anything less than the hero he was."

Jamie sat down next to Direk and leaned against him.

Aylis waited until she could regain composure. I could feel her trembling as she held onto me. I realized I might be as much comfort to her as she was to me. Aylis took a deep breath and continued. "Sunny, here is a picture of your mother and father."

A hologram appeared in our midst. As curious as I was, I avoided looking directly at it. Sunny released my hand and got up. My eyes followed him as he walked up to the images and circled them. Perhaps my fear and anxiety were dulled by the barrage of emotion-charged speeches and facts incriminating to my unremembered past. I was able to let my eyes be attracted to the radiantly golden image of Jessie, Sunny's mother. She was beautiful. I don't know what I felt at seeing her, perhaps many things, all summing to a powerful force. I began to shake. Aylis again tightened her hold on me.

Then I saw him. Sunny's father. He was Korean. How did I know that? I shook harder. Both Mai and Nori came over to help Aylis hold me.

"This is too much for her!" Nori complained.

"She can do it," Aylis decreed.

"She knows who he is," Mai said.

I did not know who he was! I did not know why I was reacting so strongly! I was upset that I was so ignorant and so out of control. Everyone was looking at me, perhaps entertained by my distress. No, that was wrong. They cared about me, perhaps the cruel Aylis most of all. I breathed heavily and deeply until I became calmer.

"Do you know why these people affect you so greatly, Milly?"

"Probably because I killed them," I answered miserably.

"We don't think you did. Do you remember that?"

"No!"

"Perhaps their existence and their death will always be a threat to Sunny's love for you."

"That isn't fair! I'll love Sunny no matter how he feels about me. Are you going to tell me the real reason I can't bear to look at them?"

"The real reason? I wouldn't presume to know. Perhaps it depends on who you are, Milly. You don't know who you are."

"I'm Sunny's mother!"

"In every practical sense, yes. I should say it differently. You don't know who you were. But we know who you were."

"There are no records! I never existed! As far as I know, Earth didn't exist!"

"Your name is Millicent DuPont Lee," Aylis stated confidently. "You were born July first, nineteen fifty-five, in a military hospital in Washington DC. You were what they called an Army brat and lived in many different places. You attended Princeton University. The year before you earned your doctorate degree in mathematics you had a nearly fatal automobile accident and became a paraplegic. When you returned to college you met your future husband."

This was all news to me, but it was like a lot of the cute little English idioms and phrases that kept popping into my head. It was interesting but I lacked the

background history to have it mean anything. Did I really want to remember my parents and any brothers and sisters I might have had? Did I really want to remember what it was like to live in the 20th century? Did I really want even more heartache to add to what I feared must come?

Aylis looked over at the hologram of Sunny's parents. I didn't follow her gaze, didn't wish to restart my tremors. Sunny ran back to me and took my hand, tugging on me.

"Look at them, Mom! They're wonderful! Are there more pictures?"

The hologram changed. I closed my eyes. I heard an audible reaction, perhaps a sigh of sadness, from many in the group around us.

"The family portrait, the day they left us," Aylis said.

I tried to look quickly, just a glance, but I was trapped. They were seated before us, with Jessie holding a tiny golden baby. It was Sunny, just as I remembered him the first time I saw him. They were trying to smile but I could see their hearts were breaking. They knew they would never see their child again. I don't think many of those gathered here tonight had seen this image, or if they had, it renewed its impact on them.

"How do you know who I am?" I asked.

I spoke softly. Aylis leaned closer, as if to whisper back. "He told us."

"Who?"

"Samuel Lee. Sunny's father. Your husband."

My husband? Not Sunny's mother's husband? I looked at him again. I was so brave. I looked away. I looked at my hand holding Sunny's hand. My mind was momentarily stuck. My eyes hurt from crying. My nose was running. Mai and Nori, as it turned out, came well supplied with tissues.

"He was my husband? Sunny's father?"

"I suppose I can't make you feel any worse than I already have, but this image was made the day they set out to find you, Milly, to rescue you."

"Why did she leave her baby?" It was all I could think. I couldn't imagine ever giving up Sunny. How could she?

"Jessie was the most extraordinary person you could ever meet, Milly. I won't tell you much about her right now. She was an immortal being who came to love your husband more than life."

How petty of me to think about living in the shadow of this beautiful alien saint for the rest of my life. How typically human of me to feel jealousy. I was surprised I could feel anything more, I was so overwrought. All I could do was keep breathing and lean on Aylis.

"We had so little time with them," Aylis sighed.

"Are you ready?" Mai asked Aylis.

"Yes, Mai. As ready as I'll ever be."

"Ready for what?" Jamie asked.

"Jamie, as you must know, I'm very good at keeping secrets. Just wait."

Mai walked away into the apartment. She returned shortly leading a boy about ten years old by the hand. He had a shy yet mischievous smile, as though he had played a joke on everyone. He looked at everyone's faces and everyone looked at him with utter astonishment. Then he stopped to gaze at the hologram of Samuel Lee and Jessie. Everyone waited in complete silence.

The boy glanced at Sunny and me briefly before returning his attention to the holographic image. He seemed familiar. He spoke. "He was my father?"

"Sammy!" Jamie jumped up and ran to him - all of three strides - and scooped him up. She hugged him, turning around and around. Everyone

crowded around her, wanting to be near the boy. For people of such advanced age they seemed extremely unaccustomed to joy. I never saw them like this before.

"Aylis! Why didn't you tell us?"

"I wasn't sure, until the last day, that Sammy would be Sammy. Shorty and his child made it possible to rebuild Sammy's mind."

Jamie set the boy down in front of me. He looked at me with his half-Asian eyes, curious and - hopeful? He smiled shyly. I remembered what Aylis said about Samson's invisible friend, what Admiral Horss further described. Samson was now looking at his invisible friend in her visible state. What must he think? I tried to think of what I could say or do but nothing would come to mind. I couldn't even guess why Jamie set him down in front of me. This child suffered so terribly! I only wanted him to finally find safety and happiness. Perhaps I made him uncomfortable. Samson turned his gaze away from me.

"Hi," he said to Sunny. "Is she your mother?" He meant the image of Jessie.

"This is my mother." Sunny meant me. Sunny held more tightly to me. How could I feel both wonderful and terrified at once?

"Sammy," Aylis said, "remember what I told you about touching her."

"I remember. I'm scared." He looked back at me then. I was still staring at him, still lost in a chaos of answers to which I forgot the questions. I kept blinking to clear my eyes. Mai dabbed at my face with a tissue. Aylis squeezed me to where I could hardly breathe. There was something special about Samson and it was obvious to everyone but me. I knew all the facts were before me. I had missed something. I just could not think.

"Milly, this is your son. Sammy."

My son. A great pregnant silence from everyone. My son. All eyes on me. No place to hide. Silence from my brain. While I was paralyzed, my son reached out and touched me.

I remembered!

My little world of Sunny-and-me exploded into a huge alien universe of fantastic mental images. They came at me from all sides and from within. It made little sense to me and frightened me beyond endurance. I had to stop. I had to turn me off.

* * *

I awoke and found myself lying on a sofa. The back of two heads - one with soft, golden, feather-like curls, one with dark, straight hair - met my blurred gaze. How strange. I listened to them talk for awhile. It was pleasant. I couldn't understand a lot of what they were saying but I could interpret the tone of their voices. They were friends. They must have heard me stir. They both turned around and put their hands on the edge of the sofa, their chins between their hands.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

I was 'Mom.' Yes, I was! I shivered in delight. I smiled. I had two sons now.

Sammy got up and dashed out of the room. He came back with Aylis and Mai.

"How do you feel, Milly?" Aylis smiled at me as though she was trying to make me smile. It wasn't a real smile. Mai had the correct expression: hopefulness and dread.

"Blessed," I replied. "Damned," I added.

"Do you remember?" Aylis asked anxiously.

"Yes."

"Let us examine you," Mai said, apparently trying to forestall Aylis's curiosity.

They could read my vital signs with their fingertips. I knew that, but it came to me from a new perspective. I was a 20th-century woman. These were 27th-century physicians. They were my friends, without my understanding how amazing they were. I took them and their giant spacecraft for granted.

I inhaled sharply. Mai jerked her hand away from my chest. I was a divided personality again, hopefully not a sick divided personality. There was the Old Me who was Sunny's mother. There was the New Me who was Sammy's mother. There was the Ancient Me who was Sam's wife. And there was the Evil Me who was insane. One or more of them was startled to be here. "How did I get here?"

"We carried you."

"I mean, from the 20th century. I died. I was trying to find Sam. It was so cold. I saw the damage to the south circuit. I couldn't move. Sam was gone. Sam was gone!"

"Tell us, Milly," Aylis urged.

I tried to tell them. I wanted to tell the story. It hurt me to remember it. It was difficult to organize the information. Several more people joined us. I struggled to fit pieces of memory together and to understand what they meant. With each face I remembered - Jon, Koji, Nori, Patrick, Phuti, Setek, Iggy, Wingren, Jamie, Direk - the New Me found more strength. I fumbled with my facts for awhile but their questions helped bring some coherence to my story.

"It's much the same as Sam told us," Setek said.

"Do you remember what you did as the Lady in the Mirror?" Aylis asked.

"No. Not yet. I hope never!"

"We know what happened to our friends and family who tried to rescue you," Aylis said. "We don't know why. We don't know why the Golden Ones killed Jessie. We don't know how the Lady in the Mirror came into existence. How the Golden Ones became what they were. Why the Black Fleet's hidden empire was born. Why Sammy was forced to survive alone in Africa. We don't know what happened to Sam. All of the remains but his were identified."

All of those people I just heard eulogized. There was an underlying horror to Aylis's strained voice. I did remember the Evil Me, the Insane Me. My mind was too full of a too lengthy and too brutal and too bizarre life. I was grateful I could keep from vomiting it on everyone else. "You couldn't save any of them?" I was stalling, batting away images of stinging pain, like an attack of wasps backing me toward a precipice. Ancient Me didn't want me to ask that question. I didn't want the grief of knowing Sam was really dead.

"There was nothing that remained of who they were," Aylis said. "Only scraps of flesh."

I didn't want to educate everyone in the horror I experienced, in the evil I did. Nor did I want to leave my guilt to the imaginations of children. Which would be worse: the real or the imagined? I wanted to run and hide.

"Milly, we know it wasn't you - not the whole you - who was the Lady in the Mirror," Mai said, frowning at my distress. "Your brain was damaged, your psyche shattered into different personalities. We don't blame you that a bad part of you dominated your access to the machinery they connected to you. We know that other personalities manifested themselves less often, including one or more who called herself Milly."

I shook my head violently. If I was losing my mind, I didn't want to lose it in front of my sons.

"Leave her alone!" Nori pleaded. "This is hurting her!"

Sunny and Sammy were staring at me in some flavor of awe. I imagined the worst. I felt unbearable guilt, despite any intellectual explanations. Where was the joy I might have earned by surviving what I survived, in being alive in this distant future, in being a mother to two extraordinary boys? I couldn't face these people any longer.

I bolted to the door, ran outside into the dark, and kept going. They would know where I was, but perhaps they would leave me alone for awhile.

* * *

It was quiet in the trees. The birds were settled down for the night. I sat in one of my favorite places: a bench by a stream that fed the lake. The gibbous moon peeked out from behind a cloud. I was so overloaded with the stuff of pain and joy that I was numb, until something touched my hand. Sunny. He sat down beside me. The absolute magic of him struck me for the first time, as I must have just stepped out of the 20th century. Then the absolute despair of his situation hit me even harder. He was tired from following me, but he wanted to be with me. I held him and cried until I was exhausted. It had been a hell of a day.

"Where is Sammy?" I asked, trying to keep what was important in proper order.

"He went the wrong way. I knew you were here."

Sammy. Another miracle. Another tragedy. I hoped there would be enough left of me to be a good parent for him. He would always remind me of Sam.

Sam was gone. I was so close to having him back! It had been impossible to even think of him in my insane state. The Servants and I had put our pasts behind us, in order to become rulers of the universe. In order to survive.

Memories. The memories of insanity played upon the stage of my mind. Played? No, they assaulted me, like big hairy barbarians punching me in the gut. The answers to Aylis's questions were all there, jumbled, nearly incoherent, but understandable in the light of information already provided me.

I sat frozen solid in my wheelchair under the Kansas plain for more than a century, until someone developed the technology to safely thaw me. The United States Air Force? No. Another government agency? Maybe. But not people you would ever want as friends. By that time the Hole Project was so secret that it was lost to all but a group of fanatical revolutionaries who felt pushed to extremes by the population pressures of the late 21st century. They would stop at nothing to learn the ultimate secrets promised by the tantalizing evidence of Sam's last experiment. I was the key, I had the mathematics to make the Big Circuits work again. Unfortunately, they were a bit premature in bringing me back to life. They had to resort to developing an electronic interface with my damaged brain. Then they had to deal with facets of my personality which were quite ruthless and distrustful. I never gave them anything they could continue to use without my help.

Contact was made with the Servants and they were lured to Earth under false pretenses. Once enough of them teleported to provide adequate technical expertise, they could have pulled the plug on me, let me die. These future barbarians made the strategic mistake of forgetting about me. They enslaved

the Servants and coerced them into opening up the universe for their personal use. They bootstrapped themselves and their families and descendants into the far reaches of space, using technology forced from the Servants. I eventually came to the attention of the Servants and I played my own game with them. I made myself as interesting and as educational as I could, trying to explain to them how to deal with humans. They learned the facts of human deviousness from me. We became partners, to take care of each other. They gave me connections to every piece of machinery they built for me, always with the purpose of gaining power and independence from the thugs who took over the Hole. The Lady in the Mirror was born out of desperation. She was born to protect the Servants and me. She was born to give me wings and eyes and weapons.

We built the Gatekeepers as a temporary concession to the far-flung barbarians - android helpers to make it easy for them to use gate technology. I eventually subverted the Gatekeepers by making them sentient, amorphous, and dangerous. Neither I nor the barbarians could make them do anything they didn't want to do.

I remained barely alive as far as my body was concerned, slowing the pace of my aging to a crawl. After another hundred years it became apparent that I was pregnant. By then, the Servants and I were in control. My fetus was of little interest to my fractured self, but the Servants were curious about it. They found a way to accelerate its growth and then extract it. The relationship between my various personalities and the Servants was complex, and the baby made it even more complex.

The baby profoundly affected many of the Servants, particularly those who stayed closest to me. It profoundly affected some of my personalities. A state of civil war arose and maintained among my separate personalities and the different Servants. The Servants were almost a reflection of my own condition, as they seemed to adapt themselves to every situation. They were as insane as I was. Only the balancing terror of the barbarians and the Lady in the Mirror held us together.

Parts of me experienced the invasion of my stronghold by Sam's group through the security cameras scattered throughout the underground complex. I also had images gathered by the Lady in the Mirror, as she roamed the premises, trying to catch the last surviving invader. I saw all the bodies. I saw the mirror sweep through them, perhaps vengefully or in despair. It was upsetting to me in the extreme. Even as I fought down the urge to vomit, there came a brief but violently shocking scene, a scene viewed from multiple angles, multiple times, as though the viewer was trapped for the benefit of punishment. I was the viewer. I saw it from the cameras. I saw myself drifting in the blue tank, looking like an extinct fish. I saw myself in the mirror, looking at myself in the blue tank. I saw myself looking out from the mirror, seeing reality as a nightmare. I saw the man whose face was so distorted by tragedy that I would never have recognized Sam.

I saw him jump at me and vaporize himself in the plane of the mirror. Then I died.

I was locked in mortal combat with that sequence of images for unknown minutes. I wanted to react in some way, to rage against the terror and scream at the injustice and weep at the great loss of what could have been. I don't know how I survived that memory. It should have killed me. The presence of Sunny and the arrival of Sammy reinforced my will to survive. I had someone to live

for, someone to balance against the tragedy.

I wondered how Sammy could possibly have any good feelings for me. He didn't realize what we did to him. He was damaged; I was certain of it. How he retained his sweet disposition in the wake of such treatment was a miracle. We put him out into the harsh world how many times? He suffered terribly how many times? We poorly repaired him and stored him away how many times? For four hundred years some of my splinter personalities used him as a lure or perhaps as a signal for help. Or maybe we just wanted him to find someone like Zakiya who would protect him and raise him.

I reached for Samson and held him. I would do my best for him.

{Please don't be afraid.}

I nearly fell off the park bench! "Who is it?"

{I'm Sunny's imaginary friend. You wouldn't know me but some call me Protector.}

"Who are you talking to, Mom?" Sammy asked.

"It's him," Sunny said.

"You're called Protector? Who do you protect?"

{I protect Sunny. Once I protected fools and dreamers, but that was too difficult.}

"Why do you speak to us now?"

{Because Sunny is dying and that must not happen.}

"He won't die! Aylis won't let him."

{Perhaps that is so. I won't take that chance.}

"You can save him?"

{I've seen Aylis Mnro and the Gatekeeper restore Samson to life. I have a question. When a dead organism is repaired, how does it resume life and self-awareness?}

"I'm only a mathematician." I felt a wonderful swelling of hope in my chest. "Life is a mystery to me."

{Would Samson know?}

"Maybe you only need someone to love you."

{Do you concur, Milly?}

"Sammy should know better than any of us. Perhaps God is the one who must love us."

{We shall see if He does. Please ask your friends to call forth the Marines with their weapons.}

"The Marines?"

There was no reply.

The scene shifted. Sunny and Sammy now stood with me on the patio where the wake occurred. Everyone was gone and I could only see the inert bodies of Freddy and Fred in their chairs at the corner of the patio. Then I saw people inside, sitting around, mostly silent. Aylis was comforted by Setek and she appeared to need comforting.

Aylis looked up, as though she knew exactly where we were. She pulled free of Setek, startling him and the others. She rushed to the doorway, onto the patio, paused, then walked slowly toward me, composing herself and trying to smile. She didn't succeed with composure and the smile fell apart. She embraced me fiercely and I knew that Aylis loved me.

"Call out the Marines, Aylis." I managed to squeeze the words out and into her ear. I pounded her on the back. She was almost suffocating me.

"Yes! So they can arrest me for abusing you!" She released me and I could

finally take a deep breath.

"No, Aylis! I'm serious! You tell her, boys."

"Call out the Marines," Sammy said.

"Fully armed," Sunny added.

I saw Admiral Horss and repeated the request to him. I saw Jamie and said it again.

"Why?"

"Protector requests it."

"The Protector?"

"Sunny's invisible friend."

Aylis looked down at Sunny and Sammy. Both of them nodded vigorously at her. They were my boys. They knew their mother wasn't crazy, not this time.

Aylis turned to Horss and Jamie. "Do it!"

The silent order went out, and immediately the klaxons of a ship-wide military alert warning blared. Sammy grabbed my hand at a disturbing sound he remembered too well. The light level of the biosphere area increased gradually without the effect of the simulated sun.

I had never seen Koji with a weapon. I saw him now. He wore several weapons. He carried a samurai sword unsheathed.

{Explain to the first one. She will inform the others.}

She appeared in our midst: tall, lithe, beautiful, and frightened. Everyone stepped back in shock, except Koji. Koji moved behind the Golden One, sword held so that it could be used quickly. The Golden One sensed him but couldn't hold away from me. She dropped to one knee before me and bowed her head.

"Mistress, it's you!"

"You know me?" I was surprised Constant recognized me. I was surprised I knew her. Perhaps I saw some of her when I saw the image of Jessie. Perhaps she was the reason I reacted as I did. I loved her. How could I not have loved Sunny at my first sight of him?

"Milly! I'm your servant!"

"You're no longer my servant, Constant. Do you wish to harm anyone?"

"Only in your defense, Milly. I'll always want to protect you. Are you safe, Milly? Are you happy? Why are you here? How are you here? Why am I here? Why am I alive? Where are we?"

"Too many questions, Constant! I'm safe. I'm happier than I deserve. You see my sons. We'll answer all of your questions soon. And you will answer ours."

"I know this one! He's Samson! He's my baby!" The way Constant said it was heart-wrenching. She cared for Samson, loved him. "We did terrible things to him! My heart ached for him! I think he's finally safe now. This one I don't know!" Constant looked wonderingly at Sunny. "He's one of us, but not one of us! I've never seen a Golden One who is a child!"

"He was born to one of you named Jessie. His father was my husband."

"None of us is named Jessie, Milly. None of us can bear children."

"I think you can. You don't know of Samuel Lee?"

"Samuel Lee?"

"You took him from Earth seven hundred years ago."

"That memory isn't within my current partition. If you command it, I'll try to remember. If I lose my years with you I'll be sad, despite the terrible things I did. I think I was more alive than ever in my entire existence. This moment I'll hold no matter what else I must discard."

"I won't command you to do that. I only ask that you tell the Golden Ones I

no longer require their protection. If they will be at peace with we who are not barbarians, they'll be free to live their own lives. They'll be released into the temporary custody of our Marines. Please go with Koji."

"Will I be allowed to see you again, Milly?"

"Yes, Constant. You're my friend."

We watched as Marines formed a circle on the grass by the lake. Golden Ones appeared within the circle. Constant stood up, glanced toward the lake, but gazed around at the people standing near me, as though looking for someone. Aylis took a step toward her and carefully placed a hand on her shimmering forearm.

"He isn't here, Constant."

"I felt him die," Constant said sadly. "I hoped for another miracle." She turned away toward the Marines and her fellow golden people.

I had to sit down. Constant made my legs shake. Koji returned from the lakeside and I glimpsed him shedding his weapons as though he was glad to be rid of them.

"Is that it?" Aylis asked. "I, too, hoped for another miracle."

"Protector said he wouldn't let Sunny die, Aylis."

"That piece of parlor magic couldn't even deliver a baby!"

{Life is a mystery to me, Aylis Mnro.}

"Who said that?"

"Freddy!" Jamie's shout woke her son who had fallen asleep in Direk's lap. She approached the seated android.

Freddy moved! For eight years children played in his lap and did childish things to the dead AMI. Freddy and Fred had sat, posed as statues of themselves, heroes of the highest order, in the corner of the patio of this abandoned apartment by the lake. Jamie knelt by Freddy, touched his hand, and his eyes looked down at her hand, then at her face. He gently took Jamie's hand in his, raised it to his lips, kissed it. "Sister."

"Freddy? Are you...?"

Everyone waited for Freddy to say what he would say. His face was amazingly expressive as he saw and recognized the faces of all the people who knew him and loved him. Then he saw me. Then Sunny. Then Sammy.

Freddy stood up, his eyes locked on Sammy, and moved with such human fluidity that I couldn't believe he was made of metal and plastic. He dropped to his knees in front of Sammy and made such a human gesture with his hand, a hand that asked if Sammy was real and alive, a hand that trembled with an emotion needing release. "Is it you, little brother?"

"It's me, Freddy!" Sammy reached out for the questioning hand.

"How?"

"They found Shorty. You remember Shorty? Aunt Aylis and Shorty put me back together. Your hand feels warm, Freddy!"

A tear flowed down from one eye of Freddy, then the other.

"He can't do that!" Aylis remarked. She put her fingertips on his wrist, then his chest. She tried to speak but, for once, was speechless.

"I can't imagine being any happier," Freddy said, taking Samson into his arms.

{Just wait, Pinocchio.}

"Who said that?"

"Where am I?" a new voice asked from the other chair at the corner of the patio.

"Who is that?" Freddy asked as everyone pivoted but still blocked his view.

"Fred?" Iggy said.

"Fred!" Freddy exclaimed, glimpsing the android for the first time.

"Who are you?" Fred asked.

"You used to carry me around in your ancient circuits, Fred."

"Baby? What a fine body they gave you. It looks quite organic to me."

"My name is Freddy. I named myself after you."

"I'm not dead?"

"Why do you ask unanswerable questions?"

"I died entering the fortress of the Lady in the Mirror. Where are the others? Did they survive?"

"They were all killed, Fred."

"Then it isn't my desire to continue to live. Why did you repair me?"

"We didn't," Direk answered.

"I don't understand," Fred said.

"Neither do I," Freddy said.

Jamie screamed. It was not a scream of fear. Have you ever seen an android be startled? Two of them? "Mama! Mama!"

Aylis screamed. Others uttered many sounds of shock as faces turned toward the interior of the apartment.

An African woman emerged from the doorway and seemed to look for the sources of screaming. I knew who she appeared to be. I would have been screaming along with Aylis and Jamie, had I any strength for it, not because I was so shocked and hopefully joyous to have Zakiya Muenda Gerakis among the living, but because her appearance continued the string of miracles and promised more to come. My heart was racing from the anticipation, my senses were saturated by the high voltage of emotions pouring from everyone. All I could do was hold onto Sunny in the storm and try to capture the beautiful moments as they occurred.

Zakiya walked slowly into the semicircle formed by men and women and children frozen as statues of trapped euphoria. She appeared calm, perhaps even a little sad. She smiled lovingly at Aylis and Jamie. She reached out and touched them. I can't imagine what that did to Jamie and Aylis, but the electricity reached me all the way at the rear of the group.

Aylis tried to put her physician's probing fingers where they could test Zakiya's reality, but couldn't delay embracing her friend on faith alone. Jamie wrapped her arms around both of them. Koji approached and dropped to his knees by Zakiya, raising a hand toward her, which she took. Iggy was right behind him.

She was real. They fell upon her, enveloped her. Even as she was smothered by incredible affection, her eyes saw Sammy and would not leave his face. I pushed Freddy, urging him forward, so that he brought Sammy nearer to Zakiya. The others parted for them.

Jamie released her mother and hugged Freddy. "He died, Mother! Freddy died again! We have him back, we have him back! And Sammy!"

Zakiya was just the most natural person, overwhelmed by circumstances but able to express her feelings for Freddy, and then for Sammy. She wept along with Jamie and Aylis while hugging both Sammy and Freddy.

"Is it safe for us to come out?" A tall man with blue eyes and a kind, scholarly face peered out the doorway. Setek charged forward and threw his arms around the man, and I realized this was Alexandros Gerakis, Zakiya's

husband, Jamie's father.

The next of the formerly deceased was another tall man, dark but neither African nor European. He waited for a moment behind Gerakis, until Setek saw him and tried to embrace both men at once. It was Pan, Setek's younger son. Fred the android approached and was drawn into the reunion.

Yet another tall, dark man stepped from the once-abandoned apartment, moving to one side and apparently trying to avoid an emotional confrontation. Petros Gerakis, known as Admiral Etrhmk by about a trillion citizens of Union and barbarian space, couldn't escape notice. Everyone fell silent and watched as Aylis took a step toward him. Petros tried to back away from her. She cornered him. Jamie followed and stood behind Aylis.

Petros said nothing with his voice. It was all in his face and posture.

"I will never forgive Admiral Etrhmk," Aylis said. "I don't think you are he. But you look like him. Give me time." She raised a hand and touched him lightly on the cheek before turning away.

"It may be unfair to you," Jamie said, taking her turn at the former bad guy, "but I can't trust you yet. I know our mother loves you. I know a Golden One who thinks of you. Maybe you won't be too unhappy until time heals our wounds." Jamie raised a fist and punched Petros in the arm, much the way a sister hits a brother.

It was all so wonderful, I didn't think to imagine how Protector managed the miracle. Did Zakiya and the others understand they died what should have been the final death?

"Once again I emerge into life," Alexandros Gerakis said, "and I still don't know what lies in the land beyond. The Protector talked to us. It told us that what we remember is what happened."

"After you died," Jon Horss said, "the Lady in the Mirror swept over your bodies, and also those of the Golden Ones."

"We were copied in the last instant before death," Pan said. "The Protector gave us little time to prepare for this rebirth. Most of it was spent trying to believe we were alive again."

"I see you were promoted," Gerakis said to Horss.

"More than once," Horss replied. "I'm the Navy Commander. The Freedom is now Navy Headquarters."

"Congratulations," Alexandros said. "Protector told us that a major disaster was avoided. What is the state of the Black Fleet?"

"It still exists in smaller numbers, along with many other problems in the territories beyond the old Union boundaries. We trade old problems for new ones, and life goes on."

"Some amount of time has passed since we died."

"Eight years."

"What happened to the Lady in the Mirror?" Zakiya asked.

"Deceased," Koji answered.

"And Milly?" Alexandros asked.

"You should have arrived a little sooner," Jon replied. "She was the guest of honor." Jon glanced toward me, bringing their attention in my direction. People moved aside to give them an unobstructed view.

"A Golden One child?" Pan remarked.

Zakiya gasped, also seeing Sunny for the first time.

"Is that Sunny?" Alexandros asked.

"He's my brother," Sammy said proudly.

"Your grandson's favorite playmate," Direk said to Zakiya, hefting little six-year-old Alex in his arms.

"Who is that with him?" Alexandros asked.

"That's Milly," Setek replied.

"The Milly?"

"That's her," Jon confirmed. "Wild Woman of the Roaring 20th."

"Jessie!" Alexandros called into the apartment.

I stood on trembling legs, holding a beautiful child who was too big to try to climb into my arms. Sunny buried his face against me and tightened his arms around my waist.

I watched her approach and was enchanted by her. She was not a Golden One. She was Jessie. She was Sunny's mother. She looked at me, watched me, smiled at me, and every gesture was human. She wanted to look at Sunny but didn't. She was waiting for me to respond in some way. I extended my hand to her while still holding tightly to Sunny. She took my hand and we both pulled until we were together. There were no words to describe this...

"Don't you want to meet your real mother?" I asked Sunny, kissing the top of his golden head.

"You are my mother!"

"She's wonderful, Sunny. She's crying. She wants to hold you. Don't worry. We both love you. We can share you. Come on. Turn loose. There you go." I turned away with empty arms. I was happier than I had any right to be. I passed by Aylis who was just bawling.

Zakiya stepped in front of me, still holding onto Sammy. She took his hand and put it in mine. She embraced me before she turned us around. "You have a son to present to his father, Milly."

I looked down at Sammy. He smiled at me. I knelt down and hugged him with all the motherly passion I had. Zakiya then led us to a man standing beyond the edge of the patio. Petros Gerakis passed by Sam, giving him a friend's hand upon his shoulder, and Sam watched Petros walk toward the group of Golden Ones who were apparently socializing with the Marines.

My long-lost husband shifted, sensing our approach behind him, but didn't turn around.

"Sam," Zakiya said. "You're only human. Forgive yourself."

He turned around.

{Get down on your knees and behold, Samuel Lee.}

Sam dropped to his knees. He raised his face to us. He was sad for only a moment, because Sunny and Sammy were there.

Jessie held my hand.

We would be a family.

* * *

I awoke with a start. I had fallen asleep at my desk, grading quizzes. I'd drooled on the stack of papers under my head. I pulled off my glasses and massaged the crease the earpiece put in my temple. I had to go potty. Damn. It took forever to deal with bathrooms. I hated to admit it, but I missed that gorilla nurse who used to help me.

I backed up and wheeled toward the latrine. I looked at the alarm clock as I rolled by the bed. 0500. Past reveille. I didn't know when I fell asleep but I suspected my sleep tank wasn't full enough to get me through my three sections

of freshman calculus today.

The bathroom was a disaster. If I didn't need a bath before, I needed it afterward. I was too groggy to figure out how I fell on the floor. I hoped I didn't break something down where I couldn't feel anything. I knocked my glasses off trying to reach a handhold. Strangely, I could see pretty well without them.

I wasn't going to cry. I was too tough. I was Dad's number one daughter. He went from stripes to eagles, survived WW2 and Korea, and expected no less of me.

I was going to cry. I wasn't tough enough. I perused my barracks vocabulary for a ripe incantation to cure self-pity and came up snake-eyes. I opened my trembling mouth to let curse or wail loose, and things got too weird to start.

So, how's it going?

What the hell?

Need some help?

This is a private facility! Where are you?

In your face, soldier. You're out of uniform.

Who are you?

Hoo R U? So, how's it going?

What's it look like?

Crap. How's the guy you met? Like him?

This is me, talking to myself!

Almost.

Almost? I don't need any help talking to myself.

So, answer the damn questions, soldier.

The astronomer? Kind of cute. Witty. Why?

You like him?

I only just met him! What, do I need to marry him or something?

Your words, not mine, but I can put in a good word for you.

I must be dreaming.

Quite. It's kind of a rerun of something unremembered.

Whatever that means. Are you going to get to the point?

Nobel Prize. Two sons. Choose.

Suns? Sons? Stars or boys?

Boys.

I think you came to the point a little too quickly. Nobel Prize?

Is that your choice?

You can make it happen?

There are good probabilities in either direction.

Oh, yeah. Abused by probabilities and missing possibilities. That's me.

So, what's your choice?

Boys?

Is that your choice?

Why do you know I have a choice? Why do you care?

It's complicated.

I can handle complicated, if it will just get you out of my bathroom.

You've already handled it. Make your damned choice, soldier.

I don't care about Nobel Prizes.

You care about mathematics.

It's a gift. It puts bread on the table. What about sons? Who's the dad?

Sam.

Sam who? You mean, the astronomer? Go on! And I'm the mommy?

Is that your choice?

Don't rush me! What's the deal here? Why can't I have both?

You can have the Nobel Prize and sons, but they won't be Sam's sons.

What's so special about his sons? What's so special about him?

You'll have to pay to find out.

I don't like the sound of that.

The probabilities will definitely abuse you.

You want me to choose Sam's sons, don't you? You're a damned sadist.

I never wanted to hurt you, but I had to. Probabilities.

You know, I'm actually scared to play your little game. I can't choose!

You already have. You just didn't remember.

And I chose the special boys and the special Sam?

Time to wake up, Milly Lee.

No! Leave me be!

What would your Dad think?

Oh, Daddy, please! It's going to hurt!

The pain is in the past. It's only a memory now.

You evil evil... thing! You promised! I made the choice! I paid the price!

So, you remember.

Sunny! He never... Eight years... It was a lie!

A possibility.

Not any longer!

No, not that one.

You promised! Two sons!

You're dead. I can't keep the promise.

But I saw them! Sunny. Sammy. Jessie. And Sam. Is that all I get? A dream?

You have another choice.

Even though I'm dead?

Death, as they say nowadays, is a treatable condition.

What are the choices?

Life or death.

And the probabilities?

Probabilities are tricky, and promises are hard to keep.

You can't make Sunny live again?

Aylis may eventually do that.

How can she, if you can't? Or won't.

She's suffered too much to be intellectually effective.

Can I help her?

You would know better than I.

Why did you give me the dream?

Life or death. Choose.

Section 023

It Was Always About Sunny

"I'm very worried about her," Mai said, trying to hold her baby and wipe the tears from her face at the same time.

"Let me hold her," Jamie said. She took Mai's infant into her arms, but she couldn't enjoy holding little Chumani, not with all the concern raised in everyone by Aylis's condition.

"She's wearing that dress!" Mai declared. She was more upset than Jamie thought possible. Mai was always a rock when things were bad and getting worse.

"What dress?" she asked, then knew the answer: her mother's yellow dress, given to her by the famous artist Rafael. "Where is she?"

"In there," Mai answered, pointing with the tissue in her hand. "In the yellow dress. Pacing back and forth. Breast feeding Zelda. In the dress."

"Setek?"

"He's with her. Helpless, of course. Like the rest of us. You want to talk to her?"

"I'm afraid to. I may make it worse. She's devastated. We're all devastated. It's almost a month. Has she shown any signs of recovering?"

"No." Mai took her daughter back from Jamie. "She still spends hours just sitting in the stasis lab. Zelda is the only thing that makes her break the routine."

"Everyone is here." Jamie glanced around at the somber people she just finished greeting. "Why did she pick this place? I want to cry every time I catch a glimpse of Freddy sitting out there so still and alone. Are there more tissues somewhere?"

Setek emerged from the apartment bedroom carrying Zelda. Jamie met him and inspected her niece. The baby seemed content. She thought it would be a miracle if Zelda grew up normally despite her mother's condition during and after pregnancy. Jamie started to search for the tissues but Direk met her with a small supply of them. She kissed him. He hugged her with one arm while she wiped her nose.

"I don't know if I can endure what may happen here," she muttered to Direk.

"I saw her smile today," he said. "But she was weeping as she smiled. I don't know what that meant. She wouldn't explain it to me."

Direk stopped speaking and turned. Jamie followed his gaze. Aylis had entered the room and stood looking at everyone, perhaps checking to see if anyone was missing. She was barefoot. Her blonde hair was unkempt. The yellow dress was wrinkled and spotted with milk stains at each leaking breast. Aylis was never very concerned with personal grooming but this was the worst Jamie had seen her.

"Jamie," Aylis said, "Direk. Jon. Iggy. Phuti. Koji. Nori. Wingren. Pat. Pat. I'm so glad you came. I've worried about you."

"You've worried about *me*?" Patrick Jenkins said. "Lord, lass, I'm only so bad as I am because of worrying about *you*!"

"Then you can stop worrying."

"And why should I?"

"Because I had a dream. A wonderful dream."

"So wonderful you can't stop weeping?"

Aylis smiled, and it would have cheered them all, but tears flowed

continually down her flushed cheeks. "Everyone, sit down and make yourselves comfortable. This may take a long time."

Aylis stood while the rest sat down. Some sat on the floor. She waited and watched while Zelda started a nap in Setek's lap. Jamie began to relax a little, feeling that Aylis might be approaching recovery. Her own emotions seemed to calm, after being unsettled by the apartment where her mother and father lived, and where her AMI brother rested in death. But with Aylis's first few words, all the emotion arose once more and she leaned into Direk for the comfort he gave.

"I had such high hopes," Aylis began, "the day Setek and I gave Sunny to Milly. I never fully realized how deeply I cared for Milly. Losing her was in some ways even worse than losing Zakiya. Milly isn't dead. But I couldn't keep her alive. She stopped eating. She stopped caring about life. She tried to kill herself. She sleeps in stasis now. Someday a wiser person than I will take up the challenge to bring her back to life."

Aylis stopped and waited for her composure, and when it never came, she continued as best she could. "I had a dream! Eight years from now I found Milly and Sunny down in the room where Samson and Ibrahim were killed. Sunny was a beautiful little boy. Milly raised him. But he was still sick and not getting better. I had to tell Milly that I needed to put him in stasis. Milly was brave but deeply saddened."

Aylis stopped again. It was impossible to tell if her mouth formed a smile or a grimace, Jamie thought. She didn't have much control of her lips or her voice. "It was so real, so wonderful, so painful. Has anyone seen the Protector?"

Her question caused restrained reactions from everyone: glances briefly exchanged, frowns quickly extinguished.

"No reports of sighting the Protector," Jon replied reluctantly.

"I was hoping. I didn't know how to ask him to come. Iggy says the cryptikon no longer connects to him. I prayed for him to be here with us. I use the male pronoun because he spoke - he actually spoke - in a masculine voice in the dream. He sounded a little bit like Petros."

She stopped talking again. She let her eyes wander the room, as though looking for the invisible and silent alien entity. She walked to the rear patio door and looked out at the empty field by the lake. She walked slowly back with her head bowed. Jamie pressed down on her thighs with clenched fists. Direk covered one of her fists with his hand. She tried again to relax. The ache of grief was settling into the back of her throat.

"I know how I must appear to you. I know you aren't wrong in your opinion. Let me struggle through the entire fantastic dream, and then you can go. I'll feel better if I can tell you about it."

Jamie listened intently as Aylis resumed her narration. The idea of having a remembrance for her parents and the rest who died in the assault on the Lady in the Mirror was both appealing and painful. The brief ceremony they endured shortly after the battle was nearly unbearable. Perhaps in eight years such a gathering might be appropriate.

Jamie was amazed and enthralled at the detail in the dream. Several others tried to ask questions but Aylis refused to answer. Aylis forged ahead with her narration, as though afraid of losing her way. Most peculiar was the way Aylis concentrated on Milly, almost as though seeing the dream through her eyes.

Long before the end of her story it became apparent it couldn't be anything more than a very elaborate tale of wish-fulfillment. It was almost embarrassing to hear Aylis tell it, and it evoked pity for her. Even so, it was a story that moved

Jamie, making her feel an even greater sense of loss. It was quite possibly within the power of the Protector to accomplish such a miracle. Aylis tried to grasp that possibility and build it into a hope she could share with them. Instead, her hope would die when nobody could feel what she must have felt in experiencing the dream.

Aylis finished her description of the dream and sat down next to Setek. Nobody said anything for several moments. Jamie was reluctant to speak, and imagined the others were weighing the cost of settling certain questions the remarkable story raised. In particular, she was shocked and disturbed by what Aylis said about Admiral Etrhmk - her brother Petros. How could Aylis ever forgive him, even if she shared some of the blame?

"Sam killed himself," Setek said, assuming the burden of cross-examination. "He jumped into the mirror, leaving no trace. This is what Milly saw, still connected to the surveillance network. You tell it from her perspective. Why?"

"She was imprisoned in a nightmare existence for centuries! It was so unfair! Sam and Jessie never got the chance to raise Sunny. Zakiya and Alex never got the chance to be parents. Pan will never... Petros will never... Sammy. Poor Sammy! It isn't fair!"

Setek waited a few moments, then continued to voice his thoughts. Jamie was at first uncomfortable that Setek wanted to challenge Aylis's story, but he seemed curious rather than critical.

"You provide detail that I know you wanted to avoid learning from the forensic analysis of the battle," Setek said. "You even provide a valid theory of what may have happened to Sam. Your version of the battle is consistent with the known facts. How did you derive your narrative?"

"I tell the story as Milly experienced it. Because it was Milly's dream, not mine."

The room was silent for several moments, until Setek voiced the conclusion most of them must have reached. "You employed a neural interface."

That was what Aylis was doing in the stasis lab! Jamie thought. She knew enough about the procedure to be afraid for Aylis.

"I couldn't give up on her! I've kept her semiconscious, letting some part of her mind continue functioning. I know it's cruel. Especially after all her brain has suffered over the centuries. But a few days ago she began to dream."

"But it's so dangerous to connect yourself to such a mind," Mai said. "Your own mind could be jeopardized. You never asked for my help!"

"You would have stopped me."

"You know it takes neural-interface therapists *years* to acquire skill in treating the emotionally disturbed. Milly is an *extreme* case. I had a *hell* of a time putting her back together."

"I seem to have an aptitude for it. Either that, or Milly isn't such a bad case. You did a better job on her than you thought."

"The interface operates in both directions," Setek pointed out. "It could be the dream was mostly yours, a fiction built on suggestive facts. A cooperative effort. It's still a disturbing and mysterious phenomenon."

Aylis seemed to accept Setek's analysis with resignation. If her exposition of the dream was hoped to relieve Aylis's grief, Setek's comments dashed that hope. Aylis was exhausted, unable to even produce more tears. Setek handed Zelda to Jamie so he could put both arms around his wife.

"What do you think?" Direk quietly asked Jamie.

Jamie stroked Zelda's soft brown cheek and allowed herself a small delight in

the miracle of babies. "I believe in hope. How did she know we picked Alexandros as a name for our son?"

Aylis pushed away from Setek. She stood up, a frightened look on her face. "What's wrong?" Setek asked.

"There's an alarm signal from the stasis lab." Aylis's voice was filled with dread.

Mai approached, handing Chumani to Jon. She grabbed Aylis by the wrist and pulled her out the patio door. "Listen, old woman! You and I will do battle if you don't let me help you! What's the alarm signal mean?"

"The restraint of function on Milly's brain is completely lifted. She's in distress! How can it be? We're going to lose her forever!"

"Uncle Iggy," Jon said, "you need to teleport these two ladies."

Aylis, Mai, and Iggy disappeared. The rest of them queued up for transmat. Jamie was in the first group to arrive at the stasis lab in the hospital. She was still carrying tiny Zelda. Nori and Wingren came with her. In only a few moments the entire group arrived. There were only two coffin-like stasis units in operation: one for Milly, and a small one for baby Sunny.

"Kill the stasis," Mai advised. "Get her out of there. Ready resuscitation."

"Why?" Aylis asked. "What do you see in the brain scan?"

"It doesn't look too bad. What choice do we have? This unit is defective. Perhaps she can survive until we get another unit ready to take her."

The stasis coffin drained and dried its occupant rapidly while Nori brought clothing. The coffin applied its awakening procedure. Aylis and Mai dressed the body in the coffin. By the time they extracted it from the coffin and laid it on an adjoining table, it began to move. The color of life surged into its paleness.

Jamie felt her heart pounding and her hopes rising to an untenable level. Her augments could protect her biology but her hopes lay exposed to attack. She couldn't bring herself to believe that Milly could be saved. She couldn't bear to endure what could be a final death for Milly. She wanted to leave. It was exactly as Aylis said: Milly's loss was more tragic than Zakiya's or any of the others. With baby Sunny in her arms, Milly was the radiant symbol of hope for the future and for victory over evil.

Milly opened her eyes. She turned her head slowly from side to side. She looked at every face. She finally returned her gaze to Aylis. Jamie couldn't determine what was in Milly's expression. Certainly not happiness.

Aylis stood next to Milly, her hands extended toward her but hesitating to touch her. Milly struggled slowly to a sitting position, avoiding being touched by Aylis or Mai. Aylis seemed further distraught, if that was possible, and mixed with it was a forlorn hopefulness. The hopes of all of them suffered as Milly's eyes filmed with tears. A grimace pained her face. She trembled with the effort to get her feet down to the floor.

Everyone, Jamie thought, must know where Milly was going. Everyone wanted to dissuade her. Everyone stood in silence and watched. Everyone but Mai. "Don't let her, don't let her," Mai whispered.

Jamie could see the toll taken on Milly's freshly-awakened body, even without the data that traced ominous red curves on holographic displays. She was sure alarms were sounding in whatever medical data links Mai and Aylis maintained with their patient.

Milly slid one bare foot unsteadily in front of the other as she moved toward the little stasis coffin that contained Sunny. Aylis put a reluctant hand on her as she crept past her. Milly shrugged it off as violently as her weakness allowed.

Milly breathed heavily and leaned on the table and the stasis coffins for support.

Milly reached the little glass coffin where tiny Sunny lay in stillness. She fell upon it, draped her arms across it, stared down into it with tears raining from her tortured face.

Aylis took hold of her shoulders and tried to pull her away. Milly lashed out with one arm with surprising strength, knocking Aylis backward, causing her to stumble and fall to the floor. Mai tried to do what Aylis failed to do and Milly fought her. Mai also fell to the floor. Jamie saw military training in how Milly handled herself.

No one wanted to stand and watch Milly die of heartbreak. No one knew why they wanted Milly to move away from the small coffin. It would do nothing to change Milly. But it was unbearable for them. It was not on the shiplink but it was clearly what Jamie understood of the mood of everyone.

"Direk," Jamie said quietly, and Direk moved to control Milly.

Direk was gentle as Milly tried to fight loose from him. Setek helped him by restraining one of her arms. She was wild with anger or grief or frustration. Jamie couldn't imagine from where her strength derived or how much longer it would last. Milly went limp in the grasp of the two powerful men, and they gently lowered her to the floor. She curled into a fetal position, her arms covering her head as Setek and Direk released her, the pink soles of her feet tucked up as tightly as she could pull them. Milly's feet had no toes, all of them having been amputated because of freeze damage. Jamie had never noticed Milly's feet before. She questioned Mai about it by shiplink.

[That part of the dream is wrong,] Mai responded. [Milly was never completely frozen. She could never have been successfully thawed with the medical technology of six hundred years ago.]

Setek bent to help Aylis from the floor but she refused to stand. She sat and stared at Milly with nothing but heartbreak on her face. Jamie felt as badly as she ever felt in her life. She wiped her eyes and glanced quickly at all the others. She was grateful they shared the burden of the moment with her.

Jamie sat down on the floor, not understanding why she did it. Perhaps out of respect for Aylis and Milly. She put Zelda in her lap and saw the baby was awake but content. Jamie was prepared to wait. She didn't know what would happen. She only knew she wanted to stay, to help Aylis if only by being present. To help Milly if at all possible.

Direk sat down beside her. Setek knelt behind Aylis and massaged her shoulders. Everyone else sat down on the floor. Jamie knew they felt as she did.

What followed was at first a further descent into despair for Milly. It bordered on insanity. Yet it was intriguing. And it ended in a very unexpected way: glorious and joyously sad.

* * *

Here we go again, I thought. It was very quiet. Even Aylis stopped her pitiful weeping. Protector was shifting the scenery for Act Three, or changing the reels for the Double Feature. Anyway, I thought I did a pretty good acting job in the previous act or reel or episode or chapter. It wasn't difficult. Remembering Sunny was all the nudge I needed to go crazy with grief. He was the only thing I knew was real. Pain was always a clue to reality.

Footsteps tapped the floor as someone walked toward me. I heard the faint sound of a hand touching and rubbing the floor next to my head and I could feel air currents: all clues that someone was sitting down next to me. A hand patted me on the shoulder and stroked my bare arm. For some reason I felt it was

someone new, not Aylis or Mai or any of the others. I moved my arm a little bit to refuse whatever sentiment the touch meant to convey.

It was damned hard not to believe this was real, but I swear I could still feel my ribs cracking from how hard Aylis held me during the dream. I was a connoisseur of The Image and The Lie, having spent hundreds of years watching history through a glass darkly. I was tired of it! I wanted Sunny back! It was time for Protector to deliver the goods. I had ante-upped, played the hand, called my pitiful bluff. Protector had to show me his hole card, if he had one.

"Who is it?"

I felt this imaginary person lean close to me, breath tickling my ear as she said, "It's me."

"Me who?"

"Jessie."

That got my attention. She was worth a look, real or not. I uncovered my head and stared, dry-eyed. I could say the world turned up-side-down, but from my snake's-belly perspective, it was already that way. "Do they see you, too?"

"Looks like it," Jessie answered in American lingo. "They seem to be in a state of shock."

"So, how's it going?" I still had my face on the antiseptic floor.

"Are you all right? Why are you lying here?"

"I'm just tired. You know who I am?"

"Of course. Do you know who I am?"

"Why did you come to me?"

"I saw you on the floor with Aylis. I guessed you were why I was here. I'm just winging it."

"Do you know what's going on?"

"Not a damned thing!" Jessie declared with a laugh. "Bang, and I'm here!"

"You know you died." I uncurled and sat up facing her.

"I knew I was going to. They shot me! Is Sam okay?"

"Dead. They all died."

"All of them?" Grief nearly strangled her words.

"Do you really know who I am?"

"I didn't know for sure until you sat up."

"You knew what I looked like?"

"You really know who I am?"

"You'd be surprised what I know. I dream a lot." That didn't seem to register well with Jessie but she was still struggling with the bad news I gave her.

"Sam became a pretty good artist trying to describe Earth to us. And he must have drawn and painted a hundred portraits of you." I closed my eyes and turned aside. It was a wonderful statement to hear. Too wonderful. I turned back to Jessie and stared into her innocent eyes. *"What's wrong?"*

"I wish you hadn't said that."

"Why? It's perfectly true."

"It's just the kind of crap I would put in a dream."

"This isn't a dream, Milly."

"Are you sure?" I wanted her to understand it was an important issue for me.

"Perhaps I'm not." She looked again at the room full of familiar faces, all of them enraptured. It was a wax museum, except they were breathing.

"Anyway, poker was a survival skill in my family," I said. "Protector just turned up a queen of hearts. I'm trying to find a way to raise the stakes."

"I don't understand."

"Probabilities and possibilities. He was there from the beginning, nudging the probabilities."

"Who?"

"The damned Protector!"

"From the beginning? When? Where?"

"At least since before Sam and I were married. He was on Earth."

"Then... the Protector knew where Earth was, all along!"

"What year is it?"

Jessie shrugged. I turned to Aylis.

"Twenty-six eighty-seven."

"Twenty-six eighty-eight," Setek corrected.

"The woman who's going to bring Sammy back." I patted Aylis on the knee. Aylis didn't seem to understand my affectionate humor. I was sorry about that. I realized I cared for Aylis a lot more than I thought I had the ability to care for anybody except Sunny. That triggered something in Jessie.

"Could... could I see Sunny? Could I hold him?"

I took a deep involuntary breath and let it out raggedly. Tears poured into my eyes like windshield washers. I took Jessie's hands in mine. Here was where we began to torture-test reality. "She gave him to me, Jessie. Aylis made me his mother."

"Milly, that's wonderful." She said it with heartbreakingly ignorant sincerity.

"Yes. It was."

"Is something wrong? You were lying on the floor... Where is Sunny?"

Oh, God, here I was, holding her hands too tightly! The real memory was rising up like a thunderhead at night, its lightning blinding me, its thunder driving out all hope and reason. "Sunny... he... died! In my arms! In my arms." I fell over against Aylis and wept as hard as I always wept for Sunny. Aylis held me like a sick daughter, trying everything to console me.

I felt Jessie struggle free of my grip. I tried to kill my grief. It wasn't necessary! There was hope for Sunny! It was just a traumatic experience, still too raw and powerful, that was assaulting me. I didn't want to hurt Jessie but I could see she was absolutely devastated. She couldn't speak. She could only look at me and Aylis in shock and horror.

My eyes - *damn it!* - looked upward to Sunny's little stasis coffin.

In those last few milliseconds of suspension of belief in this reality, my nose made its acquaintance with the unwashed mother of a baby. The woman who held me smelled like sweaty armpits and sour milk. Ah, the lovely aroma of baby puke! What production value Protector gave the show! He must have an unlimited special-effects budget. "No!" I grabbed for Jessie as she rose to look into the coffin. Maybe the universe didn't care if babies died, but *I* cared. I thought I was completely inoculated against hope but I had a lapse of logic. Protector must also care about Sunny. He must! *Time to embrace reality or its clever facsimile.* Protector had won. *I choose life, asshole, even if I'm still in the blue soup!*

I came up with Jessie and hugged her from behind as she found Sunny. Jessie wept even harder than I. Or maybe I was adding my own blubbering to the duet. Snot - pardon me: mucous - was pouring from my nose. More production value! Or reality?

"Don't cry, Jessie!" I pleaded. "I'm sorry I upset you! Sunny *will* live again! He must! Sunny is what this is all about. It was always about him. What took

you so long? Seven hundred years since Sam went bye-bye. So many miraculous things Protector must be able to do in a twinkling, but nudging the probabilities of genes must not be one of them."

"What do you mean?" Jessie choked off her misery and slowly turned around in my arms.

"I'm conceited enough to think I called Protector's bluff." I wiped *Jessie's* tears.

I could see every little detail of her pretty pastel orange face: the odd little swirls of pale and dark pigmentation, the fuzzy stubble of what used to be face feathers, the double dimples to each side of her mouth, the large blue eyes like some marbles I had as a kid, and even a few squint-creases and wrinkles here and there.

"I don't understand," Jessie said.

"I don't either. Protector gave me the choice to live or die. I figured he had no reason to give me that choice, but the offer made me think that he cared what happened to me. Since I'm no one special, he must also care about Sunny and everyone else who was abused by his experiment. I refused to make the choice. He nudged the probabilities again. And here we are."

"What experiment?" Jessie asked. She was calming down. She was desperate to hope. I loved her, if only because she loved Sunny so much.

"Protector let me remember when I was at college and had just met Sam. Protector made me an offer, and it was simply that I would have two sons and they would be Sam's sons. I don't trust the memory and see little logic in what I remember of it, but I feel the essence of it is true. I made a decision that brought about this future. I see it as an experiment Protector is still running, to see how humans and Servants might find a common future. Sunny is the key to that future. The experiment fails if we give up on Sunny. Then the future belongs to the barbarians. How does that sound? My brain is too wounded to come up with anything better."

"Not bad," Jessie said, wiping away my tears in return. "When do we start on the future?"

"Right now." I stepped back and inspected the shapeless smock I wore. "I've got this year's chic model of stasis-coffin sleepwear, only a little soiled by snot. My legs seem to be shaved. I don't have enough hair on my head to worry about. I'm ready! I think we should all take a walk to the lake and meet the heroes. I fully expect Protector to make them available to us for the sake of our mental health."

"Did they all die? Will they really be there?"

"If not, then we'll have a picnic. Are you coming? Anybody else? Aylis?"

When Aylis got up, everyone rose.

Arm in arm in arm, *Jessie* and Aylis and I led the way out of the hospital.

I felt like singing.

Row, row, row your boat,

gently down the stream,

merrily...

life is...

... a dream.

Aylis did not weep. She didn't want to weep. She believed this was a positive change in Milly's prognosis. She kept walking with her arm in Milly's arm. She listened to her hum a little tune. Aylis looked back at the group following her

and Milly. She looked at Mai as she asked her by shiplink: [*What do we do now?*] Mai had no answer for her.

Aylis continued to walk with Milly toward the lake. All she could think was that she didn't want Milly to go on believing Jessie was real. Aylis halted and rounded on Milly and squeezed her hand. "Where is Jessie? I don't see her."

"Right here!" Milly held the air next to her with her other hand. Milly didn't look at Aylis but at the space where Jessie stood.

Aylis was afraid to confront Milly because she now seemed very fragile, both physically and mentally. Aylis patted her hand. "Why is she here, Milly?"

"Because Sunny can't survive without her!"

"I still don't see her. I wish I could, but I can't. Is there something wrong with me, Milly?"

"Wrong with you? No! But she's right here. Here. See?"

Aylis sadly shook her head. "The others don't see her, either, Milly."

Milly turned to look at the group. She must have read the expressions on their faces. She turned back to Aylis, her brown eyes wide with fear. She looked at where Jessie supposedly stood, then at her empty hand. "Where did she go?" She staggered a little and Aylis pulled her closer. "Please, God! Take me but bring Jessie back!"

Milly tried to collapse on the ground but Aylis caught her in her arms. She held her and tried to think of something to say. There were no words that had enough meaning, that had enough logic, that had enough magic. It was better simply to hold her. She felt Milly find her footing and begin to relax. She felt Milly reach around her and hold onto her. She felt her take deep breaths and quietly moan with her face resting on Aylis's shoulder.

"I think she's going to be alright," Mai commented, coming to stand next to them and placing a hand on Milly's back. "And so are we. But it will take more time."

At that moment a large black cube appeared on the green grass of the lakeside. A short distance away a second black cube materialized. More black cubes became visible every few seconds, until they formed a line far down the lakeside. When no more black cubes appeared, the first one turned gray and translucent. Aylis could see a person standing inside, transfixed in an odd pose. Through the gray she could see it was a Golden One!

"Constant!" Milly cried, breaking away from Aylis and stumbling toward the gray cube. She fell against it. The gray vanished. The Golden One took one step and fell onto the grass. Milly dropped to her knees beside her, took hold of her, trying to help her rise.

Aylis knelt beside Milly and immediately saw the wound, from which blood began to spurt.

"Melvin!" Constant called, trying to turn her head to see. She finally looked up to see Milly. "Milly?" Then the pain and the damage in her body silenced her and made her eyes close tightly.

The nearest black cube turned gray. Mai had arrived at Aylis's side. They both turned to see who was inside the gray. "Oh, God!" Aylis exclaimed. "Petros! Mai, get Constant to the hospital! Hurry!"

Aylis got up and rushed to the next cube, touched it, and scrambled on her hands and knees to the recumbent form of Petros. He was also shot - several times! She gathered his head in her arms. Blood sprayed from his mouth as he coughed and tried to speak. "Constant!" was all he could utter before losing consciousness.

Section 024

1013

Number 1013 worked hard, as it always did, cataloging the species of life it could identify as not yet cataloged. This was 1013's main task this century but not the only thing it did. A variety of other tasks needed to be done, as there was no one else to do them, no one in the whole world. 1013 was completely alone. The last of the Servants departed three hundred years ago. 1013 was not sure why it had remained behind. It was almost as if it had forgot to be at the gate at the appointed time. Perhaps 1013 would repartition its mind in a few more years, as it was too crowded with biological data. Also, the task was losing its meaning. But what would 1013 do then? It needed work to keep from thinking about how lonely it was. Surely, someday, someone would come back to visit or to stay.

"Hello, Little One." A deep voice spoke from behind it as 1013 waded in the shallow edge of a pond, scooping water to sift for tiny organisms. Startled, 1013 fell to a sitting position with the water up to its waist. Its face feathers stood straight out in fright and its scalp feathers rose in a tangle. 1013 dared to turn around and look for the source of the voice. "Here I am." The voice came from a big thing silhouetted by the sun.

"Who are you?" 1013 inquired fearfully. It shaded its eyes and squinted into the afternoon sun. It struggled to get up, then stepped back into deeper water, as if that could make it safer. Ordinarily, safety would never be a concern, but in the last few decades of being totally alone in the world, 1013 had developed a few phobias and a sensitivity to movements and noises that made it imagine scary things. There was no Protector to save it if it did something stupid. Fear helped keep 1013 safer.

"I speak for the Protector," the big creature answered, as if it had heard 1013 thinking of the Protector, "but I am not the Protector."

1013 felt its fear subside. It waded toward this apparition that cast a shadow on it. The Protector *speaking*, even through an intermediary? Where had the Protector gone? Why had it never come back? Was this real, or was it imagined by 1013 after too long alone? 1013 climbed out of the water, through the tall plants, and walked a path to the side of the giant, staying a good distance away from it. It had two legs and two arms attached to a black and white striped torso. The head and face were not too alien, having two small eyes, wrinkly curved ears, mouth, nose, and no feathers. The head had dark fur on top and bare cheeks crossed by barely visible stripes. This was a human! It had been a thousand years since 1013 had seen a human! It was time to repartition its mind, right here, right now, and 1013 couldn't stop it! It dived into its past as biology was siphoned off, and in place of biology it pulled in every scrap of memory it had saved concerning humans. It was terribly difficult to keep from dwelling on such powerful events in its life but 1013 was motivated to complete the task as quickly as possible since the human stranger was so near.

"You are a human." 1013 was dismayed at how long it took to change its mind. The sun was setting. "Do you have a name?"

"I'm Petros Gerakis, son of Zakiya and Alexandros." The big human had found a place to sit while waiting. Petros wore a small garment that covered its anatomy from the waist to the top of the thighs. 1013 remained standing so it could walk closer around the human to study it. The lines of its body were

delightful and elegant, the bare skin allowing 1013 to see the structure of muscle and infer the shape of bones. 1013 found itself circling the human in a spiral that brought it closer and closer. With each pass it felt a growing urge to reach out and touch the smooth brown skin. 1013 stopped only an arm's length from the human, close enough to smell an exotic fragrance on its body.

"How do you speak for the Protector?"

"I have no idea." Petros smiled. "How do you speak old English so well?"

"When the human came - Samuel Lee - he was a revolution! His language was so much a part of his culture and his home, we couldn't understand the world he came from unless we also understood his language. And there were hundreds of other languages from the same world he could only begin to describe, like Korean and Spanish."

"I know of Samuel Lee. And you are 1013. You liked Samuel a lot, didn't you?"

"We all did!" 1013 was happy to hear that name again. Some odd surge of hope shoved away the bitter disappointment it started to feel from the old memory. The hope was not for Samuel Lee. He aged and died hundreds of years ago. How did Petros know of him?

"But you liked Sam very much." Petros shortened his name as 1013 now remembered he did himself. "Perhaps as much as 13 did. So much you almost did violence to 13, vying for his attention, his exclusive attention."

"13 was the elder." 1013 remembered 13 only because 13 could not be separated from the memory of Samuel Lee any more than 13 could be separated from Samuel Lee himself. 1013 tasted the bitterness again and escaped from it again. It sat down near Petros and suddenly the memory of disappointment meant nothing anymore. "Are you real?" It raised a hand and tried to be bold enough to touch the human.

"Go ahead," Petros invited, smiling again. He extended his own hand for 1013 to touch. When their fingers met, when Petros took 1013's hand in his and held it gently, 1013 shuddered with pleasure. "But as for being real, any experience with the Protector is a metaphysical proposition with no provable facts. We humans are simply too ignorant of reality."

1013 was caught in the magic symbolized by their joined hands. For many moments it didn't care what *was* real, as long as it *felt* real. For many moments it also realized fully how lonely it had been for the last three centuries. The loneliness had to end now! But as real as Petros seemed, 1013 sensed he was not a permanent visitor. It pulled its hand away from Petros and its face feathers did a little dance that expressed an English swear word. Petros laughed, obviously understanding the feeling its feathers expressed. How could he know?

"Enough of this!" 1013 was angry with its own silly behavior. "Why are you here? What does the Protector want with me?"

"That's my girl! The Protector wants you to take a little trip."

"I'm not a girl and I'm not yours!" 1013 had once wanted to be a girl - Sam's girl. 1013 had probably even given the radical idea to 13, never realizing how absolute 13's devotion to Sam was. It was entertaining to think 1013 might become Petros's girl. "Are you coming with me?"

"I would if I could," Petros said gently, "but I can't. Your path must be different from mine."

"Will I see you again?"

"It will be a long time but, yes, you will see me again."

"How long?" It tried not to sound too anxious but Petros was, well, another

revolution, maybe even more important than Sam.

"There are only a few things I can tell you. This is not because you are unimportant. You are as important as 13. You've lived two million years - how long would you think is a long time?"

"A year!"

"That's my girl," Petros said again. "I'm afraid it will be longer than that."

"Why am I important?"

"Part of the answer to your question is almost impossible to explain, The other part is very simple."

"And you don't seem willing to tell me either part of the answer." 1013 made the comment after waiting too long for Petros to continue. 1013 was wet from falling in the pond and felt dirty and uncomfortable. It got up and walked away from Petros, lugging all its specimen-examining paraphernalia. Petros could follow if he liked. If he talked 1013 might or might not listen. It couldn't think or listen very well with dirty, sticky feathers. Petros did follow, but Petros still didn't speak.

1013 bathed and Petros watched, making 1013 feel naked. Well, it *was* naked, wearing only its feathers, but the human's little brown eyes seemed to see through the golden covering. It was oddly exciting to be centered in his attention. 1013 resolutely fought its impulses and stayed out of touching and smelling distance of the man. When it made a meal for itself it didn't offer to also feed Petros. He wouldn't be staying long.

But when he departed - and he *would* depart - it would be quiet again. His deep, smooth voice would remain in its memory, making its absence painful, because now 1013 remembered a time when there were always voices. "How long can you stay?"

"As long as it takes. Do you want to remain here, alone?"

"When are you going to tell me why the Protector wants me to leave my home?"

"In a little while, Little One. It takes some skill and planning because I know the proposition will frighten you."

"It will not!"

"Where did you bury Sam?" Petros disturbed 1013 with the change of direction of the conversation. It also brought back the memory of Sam's death. She had to admit, 13 sang the most powerful lament anyone could remember. 1013 was paralyzed with grief for what seemed like years. It had to climb far out of its memories to reach a point where it could start talking with Petros again.

"We didn't bury him. We made a monument to keep his memory but we saved his remains in a stasis chamber, in hopes of someday learning how to revive him."

"I would like to see his remains."

"Now? Why?"

"It's only a matter of personal interest. It makes no difference since I don't understand the importance. But the Protector does insist Sam didn't die here, not in this pathway."

"I know what I remember! Here, I'll show you." It got up from its meal and motioned for Petros to join it at the data interface section of one wall of its residence. The interface soon displayed a view of an error message, indicating the data 1013 requested did not exist. 1013 was momentarily dumbfounded, until it realized the Protector could have changed the data. They could go to the

building where Samuel Lee's body was stored but even that would prove nothing if the Protector had also removed Sam's body.

"What does this mean?" Petros inquired about the data display. "Is there a problem?"

"I can find no record of Samuel Lee! If the Protector has not interfered by erasing the data and removing Sam's body, why would both disappear?"

"I only have a vague knowledge of *why*," Petros said, exhaling as if relieved by something, "but it seems that *anything* is possible. It's an unsettling feeling, knowing the solid floor of reality is being pulled from under me. But I suppose it doesn't matter. I'm dead."

"You're *dead*?"

"Well, maybe not right now, but I'm just a messenger. I was happy to oblige the Protector. Especially since it was you I was coming to see."

1013 had to stop thinking too hard about all the strange implications behind Petros's words. It had to ignore the fantastic and concentrate on what seemed real. Petros seemed real. Why should 1013 even bother to test his reality? "Why am I special to you?"

"I knew you." Petros's reply was heavy with unspoken meaning.

"That isn't possible! But if I ignore the impossibility, how did you know me?"

"Ah, there is a price you must pay for that knowledge." Petros smiled at 1013.

"What do I have to exchange for it?" This was a human game of hidden motives and manipulation of others, as Sam had often described about his species. 1013 tried to take the whole conversation as a diversion and not as a life-changing threat.

"To start with, let's take a look at your traveling clothes."

"Clothes? I don't wear clothes."

A package appeared on the table where 1013 had been eating. It was a golden mass of material enclosed by a clear film. The film evaporated when 1013 touched it. The material relaxed into a pile of folds and forms. 1013 pulled apart the folds to reveal a one-piece suit with no obvious method of getting into it. "It looks something like a spacesuit."

"It's probably that and much more. It's for your protection, starting with a very cold environment you will appear inside. You might be wearing it for years."

"What am I to do in it?"

"You're going to save the life of Sam's wife."

1013 restrained its reaction, thinking of nothing for a few moments, then thinking about what 13 and the other scientists had done to bring Samuel Lee from Earth. 1013 remembered something about a magic number - a vector - that in theory could send Sam back to Earth to the same moment he left. "The Protector wants to send me back in time, to a thousand years ago!"

"Time travel, as you and I think of it, is impossible," Petros said. "But infinity and eternity make all things seem possible. 13 was quite clever to see Sam's teleportation as a two-way path, even when she didn't know the next level of... I seem to be talking about things I know nothing about! The Protector is a clever fellow! Yes, from your perspective and mine it *is* time travel into the past. Please, don't get the Protector started trying to explain everything to us. It's certainly a waste in my case, since I'm dead."

"How did you die? And you haven't told me how you knew me."

"I died holding your hand." Petros stopped at that, as though he couldn't bear the memory.

"Why?" The question increased the distress it saw in Petros. It finally had to touch Petros again, even stroke his shoulder, to bring his attention back.

"Laplace murdered you, I think. Poor confused Golden One! It couldn't have been an accident. You were trying to protect Melvin. I had to reach you! I think I made it worse, when they saw me. They knew I was going to kill them all. All I did was lie down with you and Melvin and take your hand. Then I died. I failed them! I hope they saved Milly!"

1013 tried for a long time to get Petros to explain what all of this meant. He wouldn't explain anything. He did try to stress the importance of 1013 remembering what he said. Then he composed himself and grabbed the golden spacesuit.

"I'll not fail Milly again!" Petros swore deeply. "No matter how much I love you, no matter how much pain this will cause you, I will stuff you into this suit, Constant!"

"What did you call me?"

"Constant! Your name is Constant! Get into the suit! You know you can't stay here!"

"But I don't know why-"

"You don't *need* to know why! There *is* no why! You are the most stubborn Servant, the most stubborn Golden One, the most stubborn *woman* in the universe! You are the perfect person to protect Milly. You will be her *constant* companion. You *will* not give up. Somehow you will keep Milly alive until she can see Sam again."

"Sam is alive?" 1013's heart was close to exploding with too many emotions.

"The last time I saw him, yes! Get into the suit!"

"No! I will not!"

"Why not?" Petros threw the spacesuit at 1013.

"Because you are ordering me! What is the hurry? The past will wait for me! There is a lot to understand, a lot to prepare for! Give me time! I want to know all about Milly and the past. I want to know all about you!"

"The more you know, the more you will be afraid to go. You are already too afraid to go. I've told you you died."

"Yes, but can't-"

Petros cut 1013 off. "Milly is not the only one you will save. She's pregnant. Her unborn child was very important to everyone I knew. His name is Samson. You have to save him, too. *Please*, get into the suit now!"

A child! Milly would have a child! 1013 would help with the child. Despite what Sam had often said about children, 1013 knew childbearing was perhaps the most meaningful experience in life. It knew from the start it would do as the Protector requested. But was it too much to ask: to keep Petros alive in this here-and-now for a little longer? Yes, it was. 1013 could see by looking at his wonderful and emotional face that Petros was suffering for some reason and would not stay much longer.

"Is it the role of the female to obey the male?" 1013 asked. "And I am the female?"

"That's my girl," Petros said, smiling sadly. "The answer is yes - if it's something she wants to do."

1013 tried to analyze the spacesuit, looking for seams or controls. All it could identify was the arms and the legs. As it held the suit before it, with the ends of

the sleeves in its hands, the suit *squirmed* out of its hands and attached to 1013's wrists. The sleeves then wrapped swiftly around its golden arms and opened to take its shimmering body inside. Finally it zipped down 1013's extended legs. Shoes and gloves budded from cuffs and sleeves and patiently evaded all of 1013's attempts to stall them covering its feet and hands. As 1013 stopped struggling to notice how comfortable the suit felt, the helmet and three small items appeared on the table. Petros picked up the helmet and handed it to 1013. 1013 took the helmet but it also took Petros's hands. 1013 stared up at his face. 1013 could not understand or even believe most of what Petros had said. 1013 was very sure, however, that Petros loved it. Loved *her*, loved who *she* would become: Constant. He leaned forward, bringing his face so close it could feel his breath on its feathers. He kissed it - *her!*

Petros guided the helmet to the collar of her golden spacesuit. The helmet manipulated itself into position and sprang around her head.

"You must also take these two letters and the box," Petros said. He stuck them together and then stuck them to the spacesuit near one shoulder. "They need addresses."

"What should I do with them?" 1013 was surprised at the functioning of the helmet and suit. They were hardly noticeable.

"You will understand when it is time to mail them, but don't open them and don't show them to Milly!" And Petros disappeared.

The new world bloomed into existence. Constant fell down a slope. She found her footing and searched with a light the suit provided at her unspoken desire. She needed to climb upward to a metal platform and the door at its end. The suit gave her traction wherever she reached with hand and foot. It took time to discover how to operate the door. It was an airlock. Then she was through the chamber and into the bright light of a corridor. She was not a moment too soon in escaping the place from which Samuel Lee had once departed Earth. Constant saw the person sitting in the wheeled chair, her shivering subsiding as she lost consciousness.

Constant simply leaped away from the structure and down to the floor of the tunnel, landing close to Milly. Constant shoved the wheeled chair, the suit providing extra force to her efforts. The frozen wheels slid on the concrete. She didn't know which way to go, but the golden suit provided the information that one direction was warmer. Only when she had pushed Milly into a nonlethal temperature did Constant stop and consider what she had just done. The world she knew for two million years was gone forever. She was no longer immortal; she would soon die. But even a creature such as she had once been could not look upon the crippled freezing Milly, all alone and pregnant, and not feel how tragic she was. There was - there could be - there must be! - some small chance Milly would see Sam again.

A loud continuous noise erupted in the tunnel and red lights flashed. Constant decided it was a warning system, probably caused by the damaged equipment from which she had just escaped. She heard a door open and footsteps falling in the distance. She shook Milly a little to see if she was still alive. She was! Constant let Milly have one good look at her, then Constant made herself invisible. She had a lot of studying to do before she could take control of the situation.

I owe my deepest gratitude to Constant for helping me fix some of the mess I made. I have no excuse for my mistakes. We all make them, don't we? The suffering is most regrettable, yet how are we to know the good unless there is bad? So simple, and even we who think we know so much can't argue with that. It is the nature of meaning and the meaning of nature. Constant and Milly will have a horrible and wonderful life. They will live. But that, as they say, is - or was - another story.

P.

Section 025

She Who Must Be Obeyed

Dear Sunny,
Dear Sammy,

I'm not well enough to write this. Perhaps it's therapy for me. I'll review it some day and see if I should keep it for you guys.

As I warned you, and as Sammy must know from experience, violence hurts. It hurts you deeply, down where no wound is easy to find and repair. In this modern age there are chemical and surgical procedures that can clear a mind of its troubles, but few of us trust what we don't understand - especially when it involves our very identity. In ancient times we used to say our experiences defined us, and we used to say things about suffering that made it seem like an honor to suffer. If our tragedies broke us and made us useless, then our lives were done. Today science can mend us if we are broken. I hope I'm not too broken. I hope I'm not useless.

The Jessie I once knew is gone forever. This is not to say I love her any less. This is not to say she has lost the most important parts of who she is. She claims to have lost her innocence. She has become even more human, for it seems all humans must lose their innocence. Jessie seems well and even keeps her sense of humor. She treats me with affection but I think she's holding something back. I think it must involve Milly. Milly must be alive. I know Aylis would do everything to save her. I was too cowardly to ask. I'm unable to ask anyone, muted by the shock and the shame.

Milly must be destroyed by all that she suffered. When I think about her I blame myself and despise myself for the fantastic life I lived while she endured a hellish existence. Jessie must be the living symbol of all that Milly lost, if Milly is able to understand who Jessie is and what she means to me. Still, I think of Milly and yearn for what I can never have.

If we are thoughtful and sensitive people, we try to live our lives according to principles of good conduct. When we fail as badly as I have, that is a wound which should never heal. But life goes on, and in time we are simply scarred survivors hopefully trying to be better. If we live such long lives, it becomes paramount that we do it well, to at least attempt to be deserving of the good experiences that will come our way during a long life, to at least attempt to assess the impact of our actions on others. Time may have its healing effect, whether I now feel deserving or not.

Your loving father,
Samuel

* * *

I was very old and should have been very tough. I wasn't. I was fragile, or felt I was. We all should be as tough as we need to be, when we need to be. Or else we can't go on. I was determined to go on, come hell or high water, fragile or not. You have to be selfish. You have to want it. I knew I had to become tough enough to survive what the battle in the Hole did to me. I also knew I wouldn't be getting any style points for my sluggish recovery. I knew what

Jessie endured, dying in childbirth, getting shot in the Hole, and experiencing some of the worst moments of an alien race called humanity. God knows what Milly endured. I would listen to Constant telling stories about Milly to Jessie, and I would soon have to leave their presence, I was so disturbed. I hardly got a scratch! Yet I was the one who suffered some form of hysterical paralysis that kept me mute for many days after I emerged from one of the Protector's black cubes. It didn't help my ego, being the last one out and being watched and fretted over by everyone else. I couldn't even make my telepathic transceiver operate. About a hundred times a day someone - everyone - would ask me how I was doing. I shrugged a lot. I smiled what I thought was a genuine smile. I thought I was okey-dokey. I couldn't understand why I remained mute. It was damned embarrassing! I wanted to talk to people - Pete, Zakiya, Alex, Pat, Phuti, even Aylis.

Jessie stayed by my side almost every minute of the day. I wondered - unfairly - if she was trying to establish her right to be my wife. Because of Milly. I never saw Milly. Nobody offered to tell me of her current condition. I worried about her. I thought about her more and more, and more and more I felt less and less worthy of seeking any kind of relationship with her. "How is she?" I thought, and darned if the words didn't come out of my mouth! Jessie, sitting next to me, almost dropped Sunny.

Jessie sucked in her breath, calmed herself, and spoke like my fourth-grade teacher. "Did you say something, Samuel Lee?"

"How is she?" I repeated it slowly, trying not to make myself sound too desperate to know.

"And you are speaking of?"

"Milly." I knew Jessie was trying very hard to be kind about Milly. As well as I thought I knew Jessie, however, I still was not sure how she really felt about Milly. God only knew how Milly felt about Jessie. Perhaps I should have stayed mute for a few more years, or centuries. Jessie was looking at me with an expression I had never seen before. "I'm sorry," I said, and was, but, damn it, Milly was important to me! "Was she the wrong thing to start talking about?"

"Hold Sunny. I'll be right back."

"Why - ?" I started to ask, but got nothing but a brief smile over her shoulder. So Sunny and I talked for awhile. He liked to make sounds in response to Jessie talking to him and I was gratified he did the same for me. He smiled. I smiled.

Someone sat down next to me somewhat roughly. Sunny looked at her and grinned toothlessly and waved his little arms. He was happy to see whoever it was. I glanced to the side and saw *Milly*! Jessie brought her to me, perhaps forcibly, and sat her down. Milly tried to get up. Jessie sat next to her and held her in place. I scooted over to make more room. The bench by the lake was dimensioned for only two.

"Sam, this is Millicent Dupont Lee. Today, for the first time, Millicent asked Constant how you - Samuel Lee - were doing! Isn't that a wonderful coincidence? Milly, this is Samuel Lee. I believe you two used to know each other."

Neither of us spoke. I was *touching* Milly, elbow to elbow, hip to hip. I tried to think. I tried to speak. I tried to feel. I wanted Milly to say something, then maybe I could say something. I was in a state of shock. We remained silent. Sunny could almost reach Milly with his tiny hand. I moved him closer to her. Milly shifted her arm away from him.

"I *swear* he was talking just a few minutes ago!" Jessie declared to Milly.

"And Sunny still wants you to hold him. I think he remembers you better than he does me."

Milly squirmed to rise. Jessie kept an arm around her and held her down. Sunny finally touched Milly and she let him touch her. Jessie relaxed her hold on Milly. Milly took the opportunity to break away from us and flee. Jessie wept in frustration.

"I must be patient!" Jessie declared with sad frustration. "Why are we humans so *impatient*?"

* * *

I began to feel normal sooner than I expected. I had a lot of help because so many people had experienced the recording of my memories. They all thought they knew me and they wanted to help me. I improved a lot just by trying to meet their expectations. Constant began to visit Jessie and me constantly. Sorry. Now I could ask her questions. She was deeply involved with three people who were important to me: Pete, Samson, and Milly.

Pete was doing well. I already knew that. It was just very enjoyable to hear Constant talk about him and to know how much she loved him.

Phuti Mende, of all people, tracked down Shorty in Oz. Phuti couldn't wait to get to Oz, even though it had to be dangerous as hell. Koji and a few Marines accompanied him, so I guess they were safe enough. Phuti gave the Gatekeeper the news of Sammy's death. Shorty immediately gated himself to the *Freedom*, where he insisted that Sammy be prepared for revival. Shorty had several more fragments of Sammy's memories. Fortunately, Aylis had already started a cloning process for Sammy's injured brain and restoration of his body.

Constant was almost as much Sammy's mother as Milly was. She practically lived at the hospital as Aylis and Mai and Shorty worked to accomplish a miracle. When Sammy came back to life there was a ship-wide celebration. I couldn't say if Sammy was a whole person yet or if he would remain as stable as he seemed to be. I spent as much time with him as I could, without competing for his attention. He had so many other people who cared about him and who had prior claims for his friendship. A time would come, I hoped, when he would want to know me better. Jon said he always put in a good word to Sammy for me. I didn't think about myself any longer. I was not the most important person in my life. And I wasn't going to be worth much if I didn't stop taking and start giving.

Constant kept Jessie and me informed of Milly's progress. I knew Constant wanted Milly to find herself even more than I did. Milly had been the most important person in her life for the last seven hundred years, as she tried to keep her alive for the better future that was now upon us. I was encouraged that Constant seemed optimistic, even though she reported very small and very subjective anecdotes of improvement. She said she asked Milly almost daily if she would talk to me or Jessie. Jessie was hurt and fretful that Milly shunned us. I couldn't explain Milly to her. When Milly accepted the offer of new toes to replace all her toes that were removed because of freezing, Constant swore it was a breakthrough in Milly's mental recovery. The lengthening of her new toes became a countdown in Constant's mind to another breakthrough for Milly. When Constant reported on Milly's first barefoot test walk, she also brought me an invitation to meet Milly again - alone.

"Milly wants to talk to me?" I was hopeful, fearful, and skeptical.

"She *will* talk to you, whether she wants to or not!"

"Are you forcing Milly to meet me?"

"Nobody can force Milly to do anything she doesn't want to do! But she *owes* me. And I got a *man* and a *life* to enjoy, without worrying all the time about her! How long did it take Jessie to get pregnant? I'm in a hurry!"

* * *

It was a pleasant evening, unnoticed by me. They were all pleasant evenings aboard the *Freedom*, even the rainy ones. A small stream made faint water-whispers in its journey to the lake. Moonlight spilled through the trees. Milly stood on a small footbridge above the stream. I was encouraged that she was here ahead of our arranged meeting time. I wanted to see her face but she was turned away from me. I could see her well enough to think she was aware of my presence. Milly stayed where she was. I walked toward her. Milly seemed to grow more tense as I came closer. She was shifting her feet, as if they were ready to run her away from me. I was holding my breath, afraid to say anything. I stopped, then I let my breath out and took in another. Milly did the same thing, her shoulders falling and rising. She planted her feet and gripped the bridge railing tightly.

I found my courage. How could I survive without courage, when I had two sons to raise? "You were right," I said. "The universe doesn't care."

She wouldn't turn around to face me. "Are you part of the universe?"

"I often didn't want to be. But now I do." She nodded her head slowly. Her hair was short and I remembered it being longer and glossy black: a genetic gift of her Mexican mother. I remembered her mother, petite but indomitable. I remembered her father, the colonel, and I almost smiled. "How are you, Milly? Really. I don't want to upset you. Don't answer if you can't."

"Don't worry about me." Milly turned around just in time to see me faintly smile. She was surprised by the smile. I was surprised that she was able to show surprise.

"That's what your father told me." It poured out of me. "Just before we got married. 'Don't worry about her,' Tony said. I did worry about you. Tony wanted to know if I really loved you. I told him I loved you so much it scared me. I asked him not to tell you how crazy about you I was. I thought it would bother you, lower your opinion of me. He made me promise to take good care of you. I broke the promise. I could never have imagined what would happen to you. All because you married me."

Milly responded by holding herself, arms wrapped across her stomach. She looked down, to hide her expression from me. I couldn't analyze this response. I could only see the tension in her body. I shuffled two steps slowly back from her, feeling I had said too much, too soon. "Daddy talked to me before the wedding, too," Milly said, staring at her new bare toes in her sandals. "I made him promise not to tell you how desperate I was to become your wife. I also told him I was afraid I wouldn't be a good wife. I wasn't."

"Want to argue about that?"

She shook her head, still not looking at me. This was not the old Milly. "I wish I remembered Mom and Dad better. How well do you remember your parents?"

"I haven't thought about them for a long time, but I will."

"They were from an island?"

"Yes! I'm glad you remember."

"They were immigrants from Korea."

"Yes. They came from a little island in the Yellow Sea."

"They're so far in the past. Our parents never knew what happened to us."

"I'm sorry." One more pain I caused Milly. Milly fell silent. When she didn't speak for a long time, I felt I should leave. "I'm sorry for everything."

"Jessie? Are you sorry for her?"

On top of every other injustice to Milly, there was Jessie. I stood still for a moment while I tried to find a truthful reply. I never, hardly ever, said the right thing to Milly. "I'm not sorry I love Jessie." I also loved Milly, but I couldn't prove it to her, couldn't even justify telling her. I couldn't explain what kind of love it might be. I couldn't guarantee I could even love Jessie the way I should. Milly was so close to me! I wanted her too much to let the moment pass! I closed my eyes. I opened my mouth. I said the words I believed were true. "I love you, Milly. I have always loved you. I will always love you. Someday, maybe..."

Milly reached for me and touched me. "Maybe today, Sam!" She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly. I stumbled to keep my legs under me, as shock weakened them. My arms lifted her off her feet. I willed every good and true meaning of my feelings for Milly to be transmitted to her in the eloquence of my embrace.

"*That's my girl!*" I recognized Constant's emotion-choked voice. She was only a few feet away in a stand of small trees, holding Sunny. Jessie stood next to her, smiling and happy for us. Her hands rested on Sammy's shoulders. Jessie gave us a thumbs-up and Sammy copied her. I heard other voices raised in happy exclamation and in the next moment everyone I knew became visible. They had all come to witness history.

"How did you know this was it?" Ayliis asked Constant. "How did you know they were ready?"

"I told you that girl would take any dare!" Constant handed Sunny back to Jessie. "I dared her to experience Sam's memories. If it could melt Etrhnk into Pete, it had to do something good to Milly!" She pushed Jessie and Sammy toward Milly and me. "Get over there, you two! It's family portrait time!"

Sammy ran to the little bridge. Milly caught him as he bumped into us. We waited for Jessie to reach us. Milly held out her hand to Jessie and embraced her with one arm. We looked at each other, then we looked at the crowd of friends. Everyone was happy but perhaps I looked a bit scared.

Pete turned to his parents and said, loud enough for everyone to hear: "Sam's in trouble now!"

Constant poked four fingers into Pete's chest, making him stumble back against Alex. "Admiral Etrhnk should be careful trying to be humorous! Jessie and Milly will take *very good* care of Sam! And as for you... After seven hundred years I *now* learn - from reliable female sources - that the *man* must obey the *woman*! Would *Emperor* Petros ever mention this fact to me? No!"

All the men nodded in diplomatic - and probably sincere - agreement.

"That's my girl!" Pete declared. Constant backed into him and wrapped his arms around her, smiling at our Family Portrait.

Epilogue

A story that can have a happy ending should have a happy ending. There is enough sorrow in life. But if a parent loses a child, can there be a happy ending?

Lee Chung-Hee shut off the lawnmower and sat down to rest for awhile. He still had the backyard to mow and he was already tired. He shouldn't have let Tony talk him into buying a house near him and Lucia. He had lived in an apartment most of his life and this was too much work for an old man. He waited for Mama to bring him iced tea. He needed about a gallon.

It didn't take long for Lee Chung-Hee to think about Samuel. He took a deep breath and tried to exhale the sorrow. Maybe it was better not to live so near Tony. Sharing the sorrow was one thing, but for Tony it was also a matter of anger. Lee Chung-Hee could not bear to see the anger killing Tony. He tried to focus on the memory of how happy Samuel was the last time he saw his son. At least his son had that. Not many men, he thought, would be as fortunate as was his son, if only for a brief part of his life.

Mama brought the iced tea and brought another lawn chair. She sat down and said nothing. Lee Chung-Hee assumed his wife was also thinking of their dead son and daughter-in-law, especially Milly. She had fallen in love with Milly and she shared Tony's anger over the secrecy surrounding her death. She sighed and watched the mail truck make its stops along the street. After it departed their mailbox she got up and slowly walked across the freshly-mowed green grass to get the mail. Lee Chung-Hee drank deeply from his glass of cold tea and watched his wife open the mailbox and pause at what she found. Probably a lot of junk mail, he thought.

"Lee Chung-Hee!" It was Tony's voice he heard coming from behind the house. He had never heard such a tone of voice from Tony. And Tony always called him just "Lee." Was he having a heart attack? He stood up as his friend rounded the corner and rushed toward him. The DuPonts lived on the street behind them and down two houses. Tony must have cut through some yards, he was in such a hurry. He was waving a stiff bright cloth, gold in color.

"Have you got your mail yet?" Tony demanded, out of breath.

"Mama is just now getting it from the box," Lee Chung-Hee replied, and he saw she was still at the box, looking strangely at something. He turned back to his friend. "What is the matter, Tony?"

"This had better not be a damned hoax!" Tony declared, waving the golden thing that glowed brilliantly in the Florida sun. Tony had to pause and let his breathing catch up.

Lucia DuPont then arrived, also out of breath, and in a few moments, when she caught her breath and her husband still couldn't speak, she cried: "It is a letter from Milly!"

Lee Chung-Hee felt so bold and so curious as to snatch the golden letter from Tony's waving hand. It was not paper his fingers touched and it was not ink that formed the letters. But the letters were definitely made by someone writing them.

"Dear Mom and Dad," the letter said, and Lee Chung-Hee read aloud. "I'm sorry I haven't been able to write you sooner. I don't know what you may have been told happened to me and Sam. Records from that era have been erased or

never existed. I imagine you will find this letter upsetting and suspicious, so we have sent it to you on special paper which will at least make you think it could be legitimate. Know that Sam and I are well and that you are grandparents. Their names are Samson (we call him Sammy) and Sunny. Please find Sam's parents and see if they received a package from him. If Sam's package never arrived, this will be the last you hear of me. Don't be sad. I have lived an extraordinary life and regret only that I won't see you again. I love you. (signed) Milly."

Lee Chung-Hee read the letter aloud again and Tony and Lucia listened as if they wanted to hear it again. Then all of their eyes turned to see Mama, who had been walking unsteadily toward them while she also listened to Milly's letter. She carried a small parcel and another opened letter. The paper was golden. "Mother of Samuel!" Lucia DuPont greeted her, frowning at her dazed expression. "What does your letter say?"

"It is very strange." Mama said, appearing upset. She turned to Lee Chung-Hee. She tried to stifle her emotion but couldn't. "It is a letter from Samuel, Papa!" She offered to trade letters with him, to know she had heard it correctly. She read it very quickly and her agitation grew. "Good! I have the box! We must go inside and sit down. It is too hot out here and we *must* sit down. Samuel says we must. Before we open the box."

Lee Chung-Hee read Samuel's letter aloud as they walked into the house.

"Dear Mama and Papa,

"If this letter reaches you then look for a small package I have also sent you. This is the last letter you will receive from me. If the package never reaches you and if Milly's letter never reaches Tony and Lucia, I will tell you we are both happy and we have two wonderful sons named Sammy and Sunny. I can't tell you where we are but we are with a group of people who are the finest friends anyone could ever have. The material on which these words are written should serve as a kind of proof that my words are true. Like my love for you, the letter can't be destroyed. If and when you receive the box be very careful opening it. It isn't dangerous but it will be quite shocking to you. It contains magic. Real magic. You must be sitting down when you open it.

"Your loving son, (signed) Samuel."

END OF PART 3

END OF *FAR FREEDOM*

