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JOB'S PARTNER

There were three of them -- a tall one, and two shorter ones -- and they appeared to Judith in the Day Room, where she was gazing through the barred windows, trying to figure out how to cajole Diana, the 8-4 nurse, into returning her knitting needles so she could finish the sweater for Baby.

When she saw them, her veins ran ice and her bile bubbled up, burning her throat, like those early days of empty-bellied morning sickness.

"Go away," she hissed. "You've gotten me into enough trouble already."

"Not until you say yes," the Tall One said -- or radiated. Mouthless, faceless, he couldn't speak, perhaps, but his words entered her consciousness effortlessly, automatically. She, on the other hand, had to speak aloud, as if talking to ordinary human beings.

"I'll never do it." Her skin was goosebumpy, and she clutched the window bars.

"Let's discuss it reasonably." One of the Short Ones glided forward until it was almost touching her knee.

She flinched and jumped back, glancing around nervously. Joan and Nicole were squabbling over the television as usual, Francis holding court with Queen Elizabeth and Samantha dancing for an imaginary audience.

"Not here." She motioned to them. "Let's go into the Quiet Room."

The Quiet Room was where you could go to be alone -- voluntarily, not like Seclusion. It was carpeted, padded, soundproof. She lumbered down the hall, the Beings gliding noiselessly behind her.

"Okay." She lowered herself to the floor gracefully, easing her swollen belly along. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

"We want the baby." The vibrations were stronger and she was shaking from them, the infant within tossed in the whirlwind of amniotic fluid.

"No!" she shouted, backing into a corner, huddling into it, as in womb.

"What's going on in here?" It was blonde Diana, passing in the hall, crisp and starched in her white uniform.

"N-nothing," she called back, her voice an assemblage of artificial breeze and cheer.

She turned back to them. "What are you trying to do? Get me sent to seclusion?"

"We're not trying to do anything to you." The Tall One spoke with assurance and authority, the calm of one clearly used to being in charge. "Except we want you to agree to give us the baby after he's born."

"He? How do you know?" She gazed at her belly, moving with the movements of the baby.

"We see through solidity, unlike you humans. We pass through solidity --that's how we got in here. We aren't limited by your physical laws."

"Or our emotional ones."

The Tall One's movements resembled a shrug. "True. But we are not devoid of compassion either."

"Compassion?" She laughed bitterly. "And you persecute me like this? Get me sent to a nuthouse because no one will believe me about you?"

"We'll leave you alone when you promise us the baby."

Baby. Crowing and capering and bouncing around her belly, regaling her with little internal kicks. Baby -- soon to appear (next month), its pudgy fists dimpling as they closed over her finger, tiny lips pulling eagerly on her breast, amid tiny contentment noises. She cradled her belly.

"What do you need a baby for?"

A trio of sighs. Why, she wondered, did all visitations come in threes? Angels to Abraham, shepherds to Mary, Trinity to Paul? Three wishes. Three Wise Men.

"We've been through all this already," the Tall One said, ripples of trembling light cascading toward her.

"No we haven't."

"All right." Another sigh as the Tall One seemed to settle back on formless haunches. "Your people are destroying the Earth. Holes in ozone, poisons on plants, smog hugging your cities. Your race will not survive. Your planet will be annihilated. So -- the baby. We will raise Baby. Teach him all we know. Return him to Earth when he's grown. As long as there is one among you who possesses our secrets, your planet will survive."

"I don't get it." She hid her face in her hands, tears scalding her fingers.

"It's no reflection on you," said one of the Short Ones kindly. "Your race is significantly lower in intelligence than most of the others in the galaxy."

She glanced up quickly. "How do you know?"

The Tall One laughed -- droplets of mirthful light bouncing off walls and floor. "We are the Doers of Giving on our Planet. It is our sacred task to travel to distant galaxies, rescuing inhabitants from their own follies."

"Sort of like interstellar Boy Scouts? Or Social Workers?"

"Something like that."

The tears winked in the light, casting little splotches of rainbow across the diabolically green floor. "But why my baby? There's a nursery in Building B -- across the hall, down the elevator, through the courtyard, up to second floor, I had my other kids there -- and you'll see lots of babies. Rows and rows of babies, all snug and neat in their little plastic cribs. Just help yourselves and leave me alone."

"And leave some bereaved mother to go to pieces when she finds out her child has been abducted?"

"What about me?" The cry burst forth, as the waters would burst forth from her womb next month -- but foul, stinking waters, prelude to stillbirth and death.

"You'll never worry, where is my child? You'll know."

"No!" She rocked back and forth, balancing her belly awkwardly between her legs. "Why? Why choose me? There are millions of other women in the world who are pregnant!"

The Tall One cocked his head (or the top of him anyway, that kind of resembled a head). "Oh come, now, you mean you don't know?"

"She shook her head violently.

"Your openness," said one of the Short Ones. "To ideas, possibilities, flights of heart and spirit."

"Your vision," said the other Short One. "For a world where humanity shall dwell in peace and none shall make him afraid."

"Your dreams," said the Tall One. "To be the mother of the Messiah."

She closed her eyes. Old Mrs. Martex loomed before her--sixth grade. Iron hair, steel eyes, red X's dripping as blood from her pen. "Judith, daydreaming again, eh? Always off on some other planet, aren't you." A sharp jab with the pointer, still chalky from the geography assignment on the blackboard. "Wouldn't you like to share your dream with the rest of us?" Hot cheeks, wet eyes, stammers, amid the giggles and titters of the others. "I was thinking about -- I mean wishing for --" How to open the golden chest, locked in her heart, lined with velvet, limned with light, refuge and vision? To spill its secrets before the icy words and dark laughter of Mrs. Martex and the others? The golden fields through which

her winged feet carried her to the glowing Baby, surrounded by angels and shepherds and Beings of Light, proclaiming, "behold our Lord," and whispering, pointing, "behold His mother."

"I saw -- saw -- "

No! Never to tell! She tore herself from the room. Down, down the hall, to the bathroom, the buzzing laughter pursuing her like an army of wasps. Flushing, flushing, till Janie Edwards -- Teacher's Pet and Goody Two Shoes of the First Order -- came to fetch her with her smirk and her swishing skirts.

"This is what you always wanted, isn't it?" the Tall One was saying.

She closed her eyes again.

Grandmother on the couch, the giant photo album spread across her lap like an ancient shawl, the numbers glowing darkly on her wrinkled white arm. "See? That young girl?" A smiling face, little crinkles of merriment around the eyes, arm lifted in greeting to a joyous future. "That was me, before." And the tears, watering the picture, blurring and obliterating the face of hope and promise that was soon to be scarred by coals and ashes, the arm uplifted, soon to be stamped, branded with the eternal pain. "I held on because someday, there would be you -- Judith. The Future."

And what was the Future? If the past ended in the charting heat of the oven, the future must begin in the warmth of the womb. Her womb.

And so the dream. Of conception, birth, growth -- a passage of everlasting safety: Redemption.

A vision locked away, still. Locked through girlhood, through the little games and prattles of the others in the playground; through budding womanhood, the mysterious and wondrous preparations her body was making for inviting and welcoming that Ultimate Child into the world; through courtship with Al. Dear Al. Nice enough, to be sure. He stopped the car to take a hurt puppy to the animal hospital; he diligently wrote checks to the American Cancer Society and to the U.J.A. He climbed on top of her twice a week, whispering kind words in her ear. But once -- only once -- did she dare, timidly, with trepidation and prayer, to ask -- Is this enough? Isn't there more, a Final and Ultimate purpose? And Al's blankness. "We're here. Isn't that enough?"

Only once, that is, until the arrival of the Beings. "Don't you see them, Al?" she pleaded. "Three. There. Over there. The Tall One's in the middle, he's sort of flanked by two shorter ones." First blank-faced stares, a mild suggestion to get more sleep, maybe the pregnancy? --Then That Look. Gazing at the floor, shifting of feet, twitching of lips, eyes half-mast. Then recoil, horror. Then the trek, the endless trek to doctors, the mutterings and deliberations about medications and dosages, the inane questions ("When were you toilet trained?" "How did you relate to your peer group?"). The talk of shock treatment, how it would affect a growing fetus. The decision, finally, as she held firm to her

Vision: maybe a few days here, safely locked away, would be enough to bring her to her senses. If not -- then afterwards -- well, the medicines, the shock, think of all the avenues available.

And now Al, walled behind breeziness and false cheer, stopping on his way from work, bringing her tidbits of office gossip and asking where he could find a pot to steam beans, and whether to wash underwear on hot or cold. Al, inhabiting another world, a world of ads and ad blanks, synagogue once a year and whisperings in the night twice a week.

A vision of Purpose -- hers -- which transcended anyone else's. To bring Him into the World. To be the Mother of the Messiah.

And now, here were these Beings -- Angels? Aliens? -- to bring it all to fruition. And she was thrashing about in her mind, resisting. Why?

"I -- I don't want to lose my baby." Her voice was tiny, wavering. "Maybe, maybe just let the Earth go its own way. Die. Whatever. But don't take my child away from me."

A tsk-tsk from the trio. "Sacrifice all to save one?" A shake of the headlike parts. "Is this the Judith whose life dreams have been devoted to saving the world?"

She sighed and sank back, her face seeking refuge in her cupped hands. Then a thought, a tiny splash of harmony amid the dissonance. "Why can't I come too?"

"We don't have accommodations for two. Just one."

"So build more!"

The three surrounded her, engulfing in their dripping kindness. "We have so many planets -- so many universes -- so many galaxies. All in serious trouble. We can only save one from each, or we'd be overrun, you see, and then we couldn't help anyone. Could we?"

A prison. A prison of words, arguments, logic. A prison of her own dreams, the milk of childhood fantasies soured by this trio of warmth which was to bring it to fruition. To voluntarily turn the tiny particle of her which was growing and kicking inside her over to Others to raise --

Then her eyes widened, her heartbeat quickened, hands, icily moist, clutched her belly. The baby would be taken from her anyway. These people -- Al, the doctors -- who wouldn't believe her, who thought the Beings were simply shadowy actors on some demented mental stage -- they would start pouring their poisons into her body as soon as Baby would be born, would deem her an unfit mother and wrench Baby from her anyway.

She looked up. The Tall One was looming over her.

"Yes!" It came out in a rush, a burst of sorrow, joy and relief. "Yes. Yes. You'll take the Baby when it's born."

She was suffused by Light as the Trio surrounded and submerged her, transmutative, embracing, complete. "We will come back then," the Tall One proclaimed. They filed out in a solemn procession of dwindling light trickling behind them as tears.

Beings gone.

Home again. Al rushing about. "Can I get you some water? A sweater? Would you like to go out to dinner?" Al, brimful of flowers and solicitude.

"Are you sure you should go out? I can also do the shopping, you know."

Al, like a puppy sniffing a forbidden room. "Do you still -- you know --are those Things still -- do you still think those Things you saw are real?"

"They've gone now," she said flatly. And hid her face from Al's capers of delight.

Labor.

A midnight ride through star-studded silence, ripped openly by the jagged shards of pain-streaked screams.

Heaving, contracting, hurting, heaving, pushing --

Al's voice reaching across the red chasm. "A boy!"

A boy. "For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and in my flesh shall I see God."

She clutched the baby to her chest, its matted wisps of hair washed by her tears.

"You want to name him what?"

Weak, willow-kneed, she struggled to sit.

"That's not a Jewish name. You can't get more Christian than that!"

"Okay." Weakly she turned to face the wall. "Okay, then. Samuel."

"At least that's Jewish." A pause, then Al timidly touched her arm. "Why Samuel?"

"Read the Bible," she said and she slept.

* * *

Home again.

They would come to claim him soon, she knew. Reverently she bathed his soft little body, reveling in its magic pudginess. Greedily she nibbled his padded toes. She closed her eyes as he suckled, immersing herself in the ocean of his gurgles.

They came when he was eight days old. She was changing his diaper, the cloth traveling expertly through the hills and valleys of infant terrain.

"No!" She clutched him and started to cry. "You promised." The Tall One stepped forward.

"And isn't this what you've always wanted? Dreamed about?" one of the others put in.

"Yes, but --"

But -- but to sacrifice her son to save humanity? To forestall and prevent a repetition of lines of other children, skeletal children, hollow-eyed and bloat-bellied, marching to a gas chamber? To wrench the Baby Messiah from his mother to prevent other children from being wrenched away from theirs?

"What about his circumcision?" she asked suddenly. "It's scheduled for today, and the whole family is supposed to come."

"He is circumcised of heart," the Tall One said, "And needs no ritual to prove it."

"Can't I have some more time with him?" she pleaded. "Please?"

The three huddled, a massive conclave of moving light. "Three days," the Tall One said finally. "At midnight of the third night, we will meet you in the garden, and you will give him to us."

Three days. Seventy-two hours. Four thousand, three hundred and twenty-two minutes. Two hundred fifty-nine thousand, two hundred seconds. To savor the baby skin and baby sounds, to love and laugh and pray and cry. To greet family (all carefully polite, studiedly casual, prepped to show that Judith was As Normal As Anyone Else although she'd done time in --oh God -- a mental institution) with plastic smiles and rote inquiries concerning health, job, children, new homes; to graciously accept baby gifts, generating artificial excitement over stretch suits and teddy bears. To watch her son's grimace, hear his shriek as the knife deftly did its work, and know it wasn't necessary to pain him, but that she was helpless to prevent it, and to hear the lusty shouts of joy as the blood was drawn, the ritual complete. To hold him and hold him and hold him, and not let go. To tuck him next to her in bed, rest his downy head on her chest, as the minutes and seconds ticked by.

Midnight of the third day.

Al, snoring beside her in blissful ignorance, the oblivion of sleep blanketing his soul. Al, muttering and grumbling, opening his eyes as he heard the bedroom door open, with Judith's murmured soothings, reassuring him back to sleep.

Nighttime silence punctured by the occasional chit of a cricket, or hoot of an owl on a lonely forage for tiny, furred sustenance.

Judith crept down, Baby Samuel swaddled in her arms, a bag slung across her shoulder, filled with bottles, formula, diapers, stretch suits. The scraping of a key in the door. Tiptoeing across the garden, the light lush, then fading, little strobes of light wickering as she carried Samuel through the tangles of foliage, that small and improvident desert in the back and toward that place of sudden and cascading light where they were to stand and coming upon that place then, the riotous little cartoon ship lurking in the background and not the three but just the Tall One this time, the Tall One alone looking at her with considered gaze as she came toward him. Not so much judgmental this time she thought as inquiring, the gaze of the rabbis looking down upon the crowds in the cloister. The Tall One reached for Samuel. "You have come," he said, "and now the baby."

Samuel writhed against her, one small peep, then subsided in her grasp. "Wait," she said, "one moment --"

"We are on time control," the Tall One said. "It is impossible to wait. All is arranged. Please pass the baby."

"You are alone," Judith said, "Where are the others?"

"They are not with me. They are waiting in orbit beyond. I have come alone." The Tall One leaned toward her, extended his arms. "I cannot wait any longer," he said, "We have arranged this within a very fragile loop, if we lose this -- "

"I don't know," she said, "Something is wrong. Where are the others? This doesn't feel right? Perhaps I should -- "

"No time," the Tall One said, "there is no time for this," and reached for Samuel, his grasp suddenly urgent and demanding, tremendous in the clenching light and Judith felt the shuddering from deep within her, the stabs of revulsion which she had felt so long ago whenever she had thought of it. Oh, that act of actually yielding, the shocking, gratuitous encounter with the Messiah which somehow she had never been able to properly frame.

And oh, oh Lord: it was not so much a shuddering but a kind of denial so deep within that she reeled in its grasp, hurtled back a step, then another step, Samuel convulsing in her arms and then crying. A priestly bellow here and the Tall One muttered something which she could not hear, could not quite assess and came toward her in a pose of perfect urgency, absolute necessity and laid a hand -- a talon -- upon the baby and "No!" Judith said, and "No!" again more loudly, urgently, the tug of the Tall One at the infant enormous, her own desperate

squeal and trying to hold onto the infant and behind her, somewhere within the house Al's voice: "Judith? Where are you? What is going on? Where have you gone, Judith?" and the sound of windows smashing, doors abutting, deep and terrible struggle in the carved silence in the garden and it was at that moment, not one moment sooner, perhaps in fact a little later than that, that Judith grasped the nature of visitation early and late, judgment masked and unmasked. The enormity of that judgment. The bellowing and stampeding of the cattle in Job's enclosure as burning and burning His fire came to take them all.

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