



1-- The Proposal

Sukiko stepped into the bedroom in her short robe, brushing her raven hair. She tied it into a ponytail, glanced toward Nyk and slipped off her robe. Standing sideways to him, she ran her hands along her belly. "Three months to go."

"Did I ever tell you how good you look pregnant?" he asked.

"Only about every night." She slid into bed and snuggled to him. "You know, Nykkyo -- I think Mom has fallen in love with you. I can tell by the way you two interact. She's not like that with everyone."

"I'm fond of your mom, too. She's a very attractive woman."

She giggled. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you two had something going on the side."

"Oh, no -- believe me, if we did -- I'd tell you."

She pulled away from him. "You're kidding. I was kidding. Please tell me you're kidding."

"Absolutely not. Our relationship must be built upon trust. I'd never keep anything like that from you."

“No -- that's not it. Nykkyo -- please tell me on your world a ... physical relationship between a man and his partner's mother isn't the norm.”

“It's not.”

“I'm relieved.” She cuddled to him again.

“But, it's not uncommon, either. We think there's nothing wrong with two people who love each other expressing it by sharing the gift.”

She sat up. “You mean it's all right for -- say, a man to have a sexual relationship with his mother-in-law?”

“It happens quite frequently -- also between a woman and her in-laws.”

“Nykkyo -- this is the first time you've told me something about your culture that makes me feel uncomfortable -- a little weird. Do you desire my mother?”

“I told you -- I think she's a very attractive woman.”

“You do desire her!”

“I think she desires me ... the way she looks at me and touches me.”

“Nykkyo! We're talking about my mother! She's ... she's old enough to be YOUR mother! How could you? How could you desire her?”

“The fact she's older doesn't make her less attractive. I'll bet you'll make a beautiful 60-year-old.”

“But -- you'll be 60, too!”

“Trust me, *korlyta* -- I'd never approach her that way. I understand Earth attitudes on such, and I'm sure she wouldn't welcome it. I wouldn't do anything to cause you distress.”

“I'm very happy to hear that.”

“I doubt Yasuko would approach me, either.”

“I would hope not.” She cuddled to him.

“Suki -- do we have any photographs of your mother when she was younger? I'll bet when she was your age, she was as pretty as you.”

“I've never seen any. Can we not talk about my mother?”

“Okay -- let's talk about us. Have you considered what I asked you? My divorce is nearly final, so that's no obstacle.”

“Yes. I'm afraid the answer must be no.”

“Why?”

“Because I can't marry Nykkyo Kyhana. I'd have to marry Nick Kane.”

“Nick Kane is who I am on Earth.”

“Not to me. I don't want to live that fiction. Besides, why give up a name like Kyhana for Kane?”

“Why, indeed?”

“You're not angry?”

“No,” he replied. “Your logic makes perfect sense.”

She pulled herself tighter against him and kissed his cheek. “Besides, we don't need a piece of parchment to prove our love.”

“Do you feel like lovemaking tonight?” he asked.

“I'm too warm already. Don't forget -- I have a little furnace inside me. I will if you want it, Nykkyo.”

He shook his head. “I don't need it tonight.” He turned off the light.

“Oohh!” she exclaimed. “Did you feel that?”

“He nearly kicked me out of bed. If he keeps that up -- it'll be a long night.”

Nyk descended the stairs to the kitchen. He poured himself a cup of coffee. “Good morning, Nick,” Suki's mother said to him. “Are you making any progress on the marriage front?”

“She's still saying no.”

“That girl is nuts to refuse you. If a young man like yourself had asked me -- I'd say yes in an eyeblink.”

“She explained her reasons and I agree with them.”

She set a plate of pancakes before him, stood behind him and massaged his shoulders. He heard Suki's footfalls on the stairs. Yasuko stepped to the stove and began cooking more pancakes.

Suki sat beside Nyk and held his hand. “Mom -- how can you stand it? Jeans and long sleeves in this heat?”

“The heat doesn't bother me. What about what you're wearing?”

“I'm going to an air-conditioned office for the day.”

Suki's father joined them. “I just had a call from my associate Fred. Since it looks like it's going

to be a hot weekend, he's offered us the use of his summer house on Long Island. I'll pick up the keys today, and we'll head out there this evening, after dinner. It's about a two-hour drive, so we should be there before dusk.”

Nyk sat beside Suki in the back seat of George's Lincoln Town Car as it stopped outside a grey house overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. George opened the house and Nyk looked around.

“The master bedroom's there,” George pointed. “This is a guest room you two can use.”

Nyk looked the house over. It had large windows offering a view of the water, and a wide, wrap-around porch. He stepped onto the porch and looked down at the beach.

“Let's open all the windows,” Suki said. “We'll let the breeze through.”

“I'll put our bags in the bedroom,” Nyk said. He stepped into the room and looked around. Suki joined him and embraced his arm. “I know this house.”

“How?”

“From Koichi's journal. He mentions two properties that remained in the Kyhana family for nearly two hundred years. One is the house in Queens. The other is a grey summerhouse on the southern shore of Long Island. I recall his journal entries vividly -- large windows, the wrap-around porch -- the lighthouse visible from the dining room.”

“Koichi owned this house?”

“More correctly -- Koichi's parents will own it. They were the property holders at the time Koichi left on the Centauri mission that resulted in the founding of Floran.”

Suki stretched out on the bed. “It's so romantic -- feeling the breeze waft through the windows and hearing the surf. It's so quiet here.”

“This reminds me of my house on Floran. It's situated on a bluff overlooking the sea. The house has a name -- the locals call it the Residence. There's no other place like it in all of Sudal. It was built for my dad as a reward for his work for the Food Service.”

“Is it like this?” she asked.

“Not at all -- the place is circular, with a domed roof. There are three levels -- the upper two have no outside walls. The rooms are open and look out over the sea. Around the outside are a set of shutters we can drop in case of inclement weather.” He lay on the bed beside her and took her hand. “I loved going to sleep to the sound of the surf, and waking to my world's golden sunrise.”

“I love making love to the sound of the surf,” she said.

He looked at her. “Have you done much of that?”

“Never -- but I know I'm going to love it.”

Nyk carried a basket of towels to the beach. He stretched one out on the sand, slipped off his shirt and lay it.

Suki approached him. "I have some sunscreen. We haven't had much sun exposure this summer, and I think you should use this. Let me put some on your legs." She squirted some of the lotion into her palms and began running her hands up and down his legs. "Mmm..."

"Mmm?" he replied.

"Mmmmmmm! It struck me how pretty your legs are." She began smearing the lotion onto his chest. "I've always liked legs -- I guess I'm a leg girl. Yours would look good on a woman, Nykkyo." She looked up at him. "I meant that as a compliment."

"I'll accept it as such. Don't worry about offending my manhood. A Floran's gender identity isn't nearly as strong as on Earth. Yours are pretty, too."

"I'm happy with them -- they're short, but they look good. When I was in high school, I was on the swim team -- because I liked how I looked in a swimsuit, and I liked showing them off. I also liked being around other girls in swimsuits. That girl I had my first lesbian encounter with was on the swim team from another school."

"I recall you telling me of her."

She capped the bottle of lotion and lay beside him. "Don't you want to go into the water?"

He shook his head. "Florans aren't swimmers. The water on my world has a bad smell, and most of the natives abhor it. I don't mind the smell, but I've never been comfortable in the water."

"The ocean's pretty cold, anyway," she said. "It's warmer on the north shore -- by Long Island Sound. But, it's prettier -- and, cleaner -- here."

"Look at your folks," Nyk said, pointing. George and Yasuko were running and splashing in the surf.

"They look young again," she replied. "Do you think we'll behave like that when we're their age?"

"I hope we behave exactly as we do now."

Nyk sat with Suki in the Town car as Suki's father drove toward Queens. "George -- how would one acquire a property like your friend's beach house?"

"I'm not up on real estate values, but I'd hazard a guess a place like that would go for five hundred thousand -- if it were on the market."

"Five hundred thousand?"

"That's a guesstimate."

Nyk pondered. "Is that a lot?"

George chuckled. "It is -- if you don't have it."

"Does your friend intend to sell?"

"That's a good question, Nick. I know Fred hasn't used the place much since his wife died. He bought it for her -- she loved spending her summers by the sea. Fred never spent too much time there, himself. Maybe he's hanging onto it for nostalgia's sake."

"George -- if he decides he wants to sell -- tell him I'll buy it -- at whatever price he wants."

Suki's father turned and looked at him. "YOU'll buy it? Where will you come up with that sort of money?"

"I guess I'll have to start saving."

"I guess you will."

Suki performed her nightly toilet. Nyk jacked his laptop computer into the broadband data circuit in the apartment. Via the Internet, his computer was connected to one of the clandestine communications uplinks installed by the Floran ExoAgency. The uplink accessed a communications relay station parked above Earth's sun's north pole, outside the heliopause in interstellar space. From his laptop computer, he had full access to his homeworld's communications network. He manipulated the keyboard to access the Floran central database.

Suki stepped from the bathroom with her hairbrush. "It's cooler tonight -- a change in the weather. I'm glad for that." She stepped behind him and massaged his shoulders. "Tell me you weren't serious about buying that summer house."

"I'm dead serious. I think it's my duty to buy it -- and to pass it along to future generations of your family."

"What makes you think that?"

"Look here -- this is Koichi's journal. This'll give you a chance to brush up on your Floran."

She read the passage. "You're right -- it does describe what could be Daddy's friend's house."

"It can be no other. It's logic, *korlyta* -- if I have the opportunity to buy it and pass it on to future generations, then I have an obligation to do so."

"Where will you come up with the money?"

Nyk stood and took a carton from a closet. From the box he withdrew a polymer fiber sack. dipped his hand in, and retrieved a handful of raw diamond crystals. "Maybe I can raise some money by selling some of these. I brought these to help fund ExoAgency operations, but I know Seymor has skimmed some money for himself. I can't imagine anyone getting too upset -- especially for such a worthy cause."

"Providing future generations of Kyhanas with a recreational home is a worthy cause?"

“Certainly. Koichi loved that beach house. It was part of what formed him. Do you remember what the sky looked like from the beach?”

“It was dazzling -- I felt I could touch the stars.”

“The sky doesn't look like that from Queens. As a child, Koichi would take a telescope to the beach and stargaze. Without that house, he might not have pursued his career as an astral navigator -- and without his skills, Floran might not have been founded.”

“So,” she said, “you believe, if you are presented with the opportunity to buy the house and fail to do so -- you'll be guilty of temporal interference?”

“That's right. I must figure out how to begin selling these.” He dumped the crystals into the sack and switched off the computer. “Care for some bed?”

Nyk undressed and stretched out. Suki slipped off her robe, sat on the bed and began caressing his legs. “You're a little pink -- it looks like you did get some sun this weekend.”

“Yes -- I'm grateful for your sunscreen. This world's sun is so much more intense. I imagine without your lotion, I'd be in agony right now.” He caressed her thigh. “You don't appear pink.”

“I never burn,” she replied. “I just get darker. I have tan lines, now.” She guided his hand higher on her thigh. “Like here...” She pressed his hand against her breast. “And, here...”

Nyk awoke to Suki's caressing his face. He opened his eyes and gazed into hers. “*Bon'matina.*”

“*Bon'matina,*” she replied. “Did you notice anything different last night?”

He shook his head. “Notice what?”

“I enjoyed myself.”

“Don't you usually?”

“I'm trying to express this so it comes out sounding right... Nykkyo -- I feel the power of your love. A girl would be nuts not to respond to love such as yours.” She looked into his eyes. “Even a gay one would be. Don't get me wrong, Nykkyo -- I cherish our physical relationship. But, for me -- it begins on an emotional level. Once I get started -- I get into the swing.”

“I feel the same emotional connection toward you. I'll admit, though -- there's another aspect ... something more...”

“More ... animal?”

“An inelegant way of expressing it -- but, yes.”

“I've never felt that way toward you. That doesn't mean I don't find our lovemaking fully satisfying -- I do. But, last night -- I wanted you, Nykkyo. I had a raw, animal attraction to you. I wanted us to get inside each other -- to crawl under each other's skin. Didn't you notice?”

“Come to think of it -- you were more ... eager.”

“It was your legs. I was sitting on the bed, touching you -- looking at your bit of sunburn -- thinking how pretty your legs were. Before last night, I've wanted you -- for you. I've wanted to give myself to you for you -- to please you. Do you understand?”

“Of course I do. What you've described is the Floran approach.” He stroked her cheek. “Are you sure you weren't born there?”

She smiled. “Last night I wanted you for ME.” She took his hand and kissed it. “Just talking about it arouses me.”

“Would you care to dissipate some animal attraction now?”

“We'd better not -- let's save it for tonight.”

He kissed her cheek. She pressed her lips to his, and then covered his face with kisses. “Oh God, Nykkyo -- how I love you! I don't know how I'll keep my mind on my work today.”

“Nick -- can you reach this?” Yasuko handed him a tray and he placed it in a high cabinet.

“Have you seen Suki?”

“She might be upstairs, meditating. She does that after dinner, sometimes.”

Nyk climbed the stairs and peeked into the bedroom. He saw her sitting, cross-legged on the bed, her right hand cradled in her left palm. Her eyes were closed. He stood, leaning on the doorjamb and watched her.

She swung her arms over her head and stretched. “Whoa! You startled me. How long have you been there?”

“Not long. Your mom said you might be meditating. About what?”

“About us. Nick -- help me off the bed.” He gave her a hand. “Nick...” She pressed her finger against his lips. “Hear me out... I had such a wonderful time this weekend with you and my folks at the beach. But, I had to be on guard. Several times I almost called you Nykkyo in front of them. And, today -- I referred to you as Nykkyo in front of Mom -- though I don't think she noticed. I'm afraid I'll slip up and give something away.

“You know I support your activities here on Earth one-hundred percent. I know it's a good and noble thing you're doing. I'd hate to think of some careless act on my part jeopardizing it.

“I came here to meditate on a solution. I was reviewing my options. One would be for me to send you on your way -- to disengage, as you call it -- for the better good of your people. I'm afraid I'm too selfish to give you up for a greater good.”

“Thank goodness for your selfishness,” he replied.

“My other option was to drive Nykkyo Kyhana from my mind, and replace him with ... with

Nick Kane. That is what I have done. It's who you are to Earth people -- and, I'm an Earth person. So, from this point -- you must be Nick Kane to me. Perhaps I'll visit your world again, and then you can be Nykkyo for a while. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"You wanted me to call you by your real name when we're alone. You're not upset if I don't?"

"Not in the least. What's in a name, anyway? One small point -- if I'm now Nick Kane to you ... you have no excuse not to marry me. You can keep your maiden name if you'd like. You can be Dr Sukiko Kyhana -- Mrs Nick Kane."

She looked at him for a long moment and broke into a smile. "Yes, Nick -- I will marry you."

"Let's go tell your folks."

He descended the stairs holding her hand. "I see you found her," Yasuko said. Suki stood by her mother, held her hand and beamed a broad smile. "What are you grinning about?"

"You'll see..."

George was studying patterns on the "go" board. Nyk approached him. "Mr Kyhana -- I would like your permission to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

He looked up at Nyk, his jaw dropped. He smiled. "Permission is granted."

Nyk stepped to Suki and took her hand. "Sukiko -- will you marry me?"

"Yes -- oh, yes, Nick -- I will! I will marry you!"

Yasuko hugged her. "This calls for a celebration."

"I'll call Jonathan," George said. "Maybe we can convince him to keep his shop open tomorrow evening."

"Who's Jonathan?" Nyk asked.

"He's Daddy's brother. He took over the jewelry business from my grandfather... Daddy! I already have the stone. I'll get it."

She ran up to the apartment and returned with a small cardboard box. George removed the stone and examined it with a lens. "This is a very nice diamond. How did you come by this?"

"Nick gave it to me -- for Christmas. We were in Wisconsin. We were just friends, then."

George looked at Nyk. "Isn't this a rather extravagant Christmas present for just friends?"

"Actually not, George. The diamond is synthetic -- my company makes them. We've discovered a technique for making diamonds inexpensively."

"Indeed -- synthetic or natural, this is a very fine stone. It looks to be about two carats."

“That's a second -- it's how I came by it.”

“A second? Then, I would really like to see a first-quality gem.” George continued to eye Nyk. “Is this technology something you'd be willing to license?”

“We think we're better off keeping it a trade secret -- like the alchemists of old making gold from lead. Once the secret is out, the gold becomes worthless.”

Nyk sat with his coffee and a slice of toast, and with Suki beside him.

“I'm so excited,” Yasuko said. “I couldn't sleep.” She looked sideways at them both. “You weren't sleeping, either. It sounded to me like you two were getting a head start on your honeymoon.”

“Mom!”

“If we put our heads together, we can plan a ceremony before the baby comes.”

“Mom -- Nick and I haven't set a date yet. When we do -- I can assure you, it will be AFTER the baby is born.”

“But ... wouldn't you want the baby to be ... legitimate ... have a father?”

“He has a father -- and it's not Nick. You know that.”

“As long as you're married before he's born -- Nick will be the legal father. It won't matter who the biological father is.”

“I understand all that. I'm not going through the humiliation of walking down the aisle with a huge belly. Nick and I are getting married for OUR sake -- not the baby's.”

“But...”

“MOTHER! NO! Not another word on the subject. My mind's made up. Besides -- it would be humiliating for Nick, too -- it would look like a shotgun wedding.” She stood and headed toward the apartment. “I'm going to get dressed.”

Yasuko looked at him. “Now, I've upset her. I know she's upset when she calls me 'Mother.' Nick -- what do you think?”

He shrugged. “It doesn't make any difference to me. After the baby comes is fine.”

George pulled the Town Car up to a shop in a retail section of Queens. The place had seen better days -- the paint was peeling and a rusty security grate was folded back. A faded sign above the door read Jonathan's Jewelry. George opened the door and gestured them all in.

Nyk regarded the man behind the counter. He bore a strong resemblance to George, but was perhaps five years older.

“Come in,” Jonathan said. “What is so important I must keep open?” He spotted Suki's mother. “Yasuko -- my favorite sister-in-law.”

“That's easy to say,” she replied. “I'm the only one.”

“You'd be my favorite out of a hundred. Sukiko -- how are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she replied.

Jonathan's eyes met Nyk's. “I don't think we've been introduced.”

“This is Nick Kane,” George replied. “Sukiko's fiancé.”

“Now I understand what this is all about. I think I can help you.”

“We already have the stone, Uncle Jonathan.” Suki handed him the box.

Jonathan examined the stone under lenses. “Nice -- very nice, indeed. What sort of setting?”

“Gold,” Nyk and Suki said together.

“Let's see -- something to show of the beauty of the stone. Some diamonds are a ... a compromise, but not this one. This one demands to be displayed. Let me measure your finger.”

“I like this one,” Nyk said, pointing at a setting.

“Yes, Uncle Jonathan -- I like it, too.”

“A good choice -- you wait here. I'll be back in a jiff.” Jonathan headed into his back room.

Nyk looked around the shop and into the cases. A photograph of the golden Kyhana crest was pinned above a high case. He slipped his hand into his pocket and fingered his Agency draw account debit card.

“How's business?” George called toward the back room.

“I'm living,” Jonathan replied. “It's getting tougher to compete with the chains in the malls -- even if their merchandise is inferior to what I have.”

Jonathan stepped from his workroom and presented Nyk with a velvet box. “Here, take this,” he whispered. “George told me of how a Nick Kane undoubtedly saved the life of my niece. This is the least I can do in appreciation.”

Nyk bowed and turned to Suki. “Now -- officially. Sukiko, will you marry me?”

“Oh, yes, Nick! I will marry you.”

He slipped the ring onto her finger.

Suki lay beside Nyk and admired her ring. “It is beautiful. I love this stone, Nick. Do you know

why?"

"Because I gave it to you?"

"Yes -- but also because it's from your homeworld."

"That stone originated in our sea. We generate our power by converting sea water into hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen is fuel for our fusion reactors, where it's turned into helium. Then, the helium is turned into carbon -- in the form of diamond crystals. You are wearing a bit of Floran's sea on your finger."

"You love your sea."

"And, I love you. It's a perfect match."

She cuddled to him and ran her hand along his arm. "Shall we disturb my mother again?"

Nyk walked into the FloranCo offices in Tribeca. He stepped into Seymor's office. "I'm on Cloud Nine," he said. "Suki agreed to marry me."

Seymor looked up at him. "I have news to bring you down to Earth in a hurry."

"Not another flare-up of that homeworld potato virus, I hope."

"No -- worse -- much worse. Sit down, lad." Nyk sat. "I have word that Agency Enforcement is looking for you. They've gotten wind of your living with Sukiko."

"How would they know?"

Seymor shook his head. "They didn't hear it from me."

"What do we do?" Nyk asked. "Should I go to Floran and explain the situation?"

"They wouldn't let you back offworld. Nyk -- Agency Enforcement is headed by one Tomyka Wells -- one tough cop with a heart of granite. All she knows are the rules and regs. She will regard your relationship with Sukiko as temporal interference."

"It's not -- I'm with Suki to correct interference that occurred earlier. I must replace the Earth man who was to be in her life."

"I understand all that -- Tomyka won't. It gets worse -- the last time this sort of thing happened, Agency Enforcement took not only the offending ExoAgent, but the Earth girl, too."

"What did they do with her?"

"They kept her confined on Floran. Neutralizing the temporal contamination is what they called it."

"They wouldn't dare do that with Suki -- the child in her womb is a direct ancestor of Koichi Kyhana."

“Such an argument will get little sympathy from the likes of Tomyka Wells.”

Nyk sat and pondered. “Can I hide from them?”

“Not easily -- they can track you through the chip in your wrist. They will locate you, Nyk. I've been in a terrible stew all morning trying to figure out the best way to address this.”

“Maybe I need to go away somewhere -- some place where Agency Enforcement won't be looking.”

2 -- Evidence

Nykkyo sat in the shuttlecar at the rendezvous coordinates. The craft, designed for Earth missions, resembled a minivan. The resemblance stopped at exterior appearances -- it was a spacecraft, capable of a short warpjump to take him from Earth orbit, past the heliopause and into interstellar space. He knew the tender would be along shortly. Nyk glanced at the trunk-sized canister sitting behind his seat.

He saw a flash and the tender materialized from her warp jump. Nyk manipulated the shuttle's navigational display and plotted an intercept course. The tender's cargo bay door opened and he set the car onto her deck. The spacedoor closed, the bay repressurized and a crewman walked toward him. Nyk opened the door.

“This shuttle's due for service,” the crewman said. “Thanks for bringing it up.”

“Not a problem.”

“The repair depot is programmed into the autopilot.” He looked into the shuttlecar. “What's that?” he asked, pointing to the canister.

“Agricultural samples.”

“Ah, yes -- the mission of an ExoAgent -- to bring plant material to keep our food supply healthy.”

Nyk stepped from the shuttle and belted himself into a jumpseat. A blue lamp indicated the upcoming warp jump. The jump jolted the vessel. The blue indicator lit again to signal another jump.

“We're in orbit around Floran,” the crewman said.

Nyk gave the man a two-fingered salute and climbed into the shuttlecar.

The bay depressurized, the spacedoor opened and Nyk backed the shuttlecar into space. Using the craft's inertial sink he descended toward the single continent on his homeworld. Navigational images flashed on the windscreen.

Nyk switched off the craft's communications and transponders. He cancelled the automatic pilot and took the unistick. Under his control, the craft headed toward the southeast corner of the continent and touched down on a rarely-traveled access roadway outside the small city of Sudal. It was Nadir Meridian -- the dead of night.

The shuttle landed near his intended target. He pushed the unistick forward and drove the car to a circular, dome-shaped structure lined with heavy steel shutters. The shutters were down. He climbed from the shuttlecar and approached the building's entrance. A scanpad read the personal ID chip implanted in his wrist and the door opened.

Nyk pressed a control and the shutters swung up. He climbed back into the shuttlecar and eased it into the lower level of the structure; then, he closed the shutters again. A touch on the rear hatch opened it, and he activated the antigrav fields on the canister.

The container slid from the shuttlecar and he eased it to the floor. He snapped open the catches and lifted the cover. A tear formed on his cheek as he looked at its contents. "Oh, *korlyta* ! I never expected it to turn out like this. I'm so sorry."

Nyk knelt, grasped the limp body lying in the canister and gently eased her from the fetal position. With one arm under her shoulder blades, he slipped the other under her knees and lifted. He carried her to an upholstered bench, stretched her out and sat, cross-legged on the floor beside her.

He regarded her face -- her eyes were closed, concealing the feature most intriguing to him -- the epicanthic folds giving her eyes their almond shape.

He kissed her eyelids. Her finger twitched. He took her hand and patted and stroked her forearm, contemplating her yellow-brown skin. "Suki?"

"Mmmph..."

"Suki, are you all right?"

She turned her face toward him and cracked open her eyes. Nyk stroked her raven hair. "I take it we made it," she said and started to sit.

"You lie for a while." He took her hand.

"That stuff you gave me won't hurt the baby, will it?"

"I told you, it's safe for the baby. He's apt to be out of it for a while, too."

"What was it you gave me?"

"Three doses of a euphoriant. Do you remember?"

"I recall the first dose felt pretty good. The second felt really good. I can't remember the third."

"Floran recreational chemicals have a built-in safety mechanism to prevent overdoses. The formulas include a low dose of a quick-acting sedative. Before you can attain a dangerous level of the main ingredient -- the sedative kicks in and knocks you out. Based on your size and build, I figured your limit was three." He squeezed her hand. "Well, you said you wanted to see the homeworld again. These weren't the circumstances I was hoping for."

She began to look around the room. "This is the house you told me about?"

"Yes -- my childhood home."

"The house without walls... Are we safe here?"

"I think so. We're quite isolated. Besides -- where's the best place to hide something? In plain sight. The enforcers are busy scouring Earth for us. Here is the last place they'll think of looking."

"How long can we stay here?"

"Quite a while. The structure is self-sufficient, and we have plenty of prefab meals in storage."

She placed her hand on her abdomen. "He just woke up. I felt him stretch and yawn. I'm going to try to sit." She swung her feet to the floor. "Maybe not." She lay on her back again.

"Relax -- we're in no hurry. I was taking inventory of whom we can trust. There's Andra, of course. She's offworld right now paying a visit to her finishing-school friend and roommate. Janna is the wife and consort to the chancellor of Lexal. You remember her."

"Yes, Nykkyo -- I'll never forget the word Lexal."

"Andra will be back onworld in a few days. She'll be using this house. That's good -- the place will look occupied."

"More hiding in plain sight?"

"Indeed. Andra can take care of you if I need to go out. You'll need to stay hidden. With your Asian features, you'll stand out in a crowd."

"Who else can we trust?"

"Not many others."

"So, what's next?" she asked and attempted again to sit up. Nyk sat on the bench and held her head in his lap.

"We start looking."

"Looking for what?"

"Evidence -- evidence I'm right." He lifted her blouse and caressed her abdomen.

She placed her hand on his and pressed it against her skin. "Feel him move?" Nyk held his hand against her belly. "Why look here?"

"What will be -- already has been. Koichi's birth is two hundred years in Earth's future -- but five thousand years in this world's past. If there's evidence to be found, it's here." He gazed into her dark brown eyes and stroked her face. She brushed a tear from his. "I should never have become involved with you. I couldn't help myself, Suki -- I fell in love with you the moment I laid eyes on you. Now, I'm locked into that temporal paradox. I must replace the man who was to be your husband."

"I never thought I'd have a husband. I don't want any other man. You complete something in me, Nykkyo. When we're apart, there's a piece missing. I'll never raise this child by myself."

"I want you to meet Illya Kronta -- if I can arrange it. He's a member of the oversight committee and a Kyhana scholar. It might help our cause if he could hear it from your own lips."

"Is that why you brought me?"

"No. Seymor told me an enforcement squad was being dispatched to Earth. They would seize me and bring me here." He looked into her eyes. "They'd seize you, too."

"What would they do to me?"

Nyk stood and turned from her. "The enforcers will regard your knowledge of our world as temporal contamination -- that must be neutralized."

"But, Nykkyo -- your people are so sweet and gentle. You said you were incapable of harming Earth's population."

"Nonetheless, they will neutralize the contamination. The survival of more than twenty-four billion is at stake. The last instance of such was ... four generations ago, I believe. The contaminated individuals were removed from Earth and ... quarantined, here -- for the rest of their lives."

"It's like life imprisonment."

"It's intended to be a deterrent. If a Floran falls in love with an Earth person, he realizes he poses a risk to his loved one as well as himself. In your case, though ... Suki, I know you have as much at stake in this as any Floran. I trust you. You're practically an honorary Floran -- you've begun to learn our language. You pose no risk."

"If I'm kept from Earth, how can..." she touched her belly. "How can he fulfill his role?"

"Exactly. In your case, preventing it will in fact cause disastrous temporal interference. That's the case I must make, but I must find evidence to support it."

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. Anything -- I found and translated Koichi Kyhana's journal of the early days of this world. Most of that translation I did before setting foot on Earth, so I had no experience with which to put his words into context. I'll go back over his original journal -- line by line -- and see if I can find anything alluding to his Earth forebears. I'm grasping at straws, Suki. You're a professional historian. Maybe you can help me in my search."

She smiled. "That would be an interesting twist for a historian -- looking for evidence of the future. I'd fear what I might find."

"I must be cautious. Floran Central Admin can track the whereabouts of any citizen through this." He held up his right wrist. "I must scan my wrist to unlock doors and make purchases. I'm counting on our bureaucracy's inefficiency. Central Admin's so big -- one hand doesn't know what the other is doing. Besides, they're looking for us on Earth -- not here."

"We're hiding in plain sight."

"I'm exhausted, and I need sleep. Can you stand?"

"I'll try..." She swung her feet to the floor and sat up. "So far, so good." He helped her to her feet and escorted her up the spiral staircase to the second floor.

"This is my childhood bedroom. My parents' rooms were upstairs -- I've never been comfortable in them. Andra is using my mom's old room. " He stretched out on the mattress.

Suki lay beside him and he slipped his arm around her. "It always feels so good when you hold me. *Bon'noka, Nykkyo* ."

"Try this on," Nyk said as he handed a tunic to Suki.

"What do you wear beneath this?"

"A pair of sandals."

"No -- what sort of underwear?"

"Underwear? What's that?" He kissed her forehead. "You look great in Floran clothing."

"So do you," she replied, stroking his bare arms. "I love seeing you in that tunic. Your legs look so good."

"I'll find some breakfast."

Suki followed Nyk into the house's storage room. He opened a cabinet to find stacks of packaged meals. "There must be a year's supply in there," she said.

"Yes. My mother was head of Food Service product development. Most of these are prototype meals -- some are from when I was a youth."

"Are they still good?"

"Oh, yes. This is a stasis cabinet. The stasis fields will preserve anything indefinitely." He selected a pair of packages and sealed the cabinet door. "Have a seat," he said gesturing toward a table. "I'll heat these."

Nyk slipped his arm around Suki as he stood on the bluff looking out over the sea. “Smell that?”

“How could I miss it? It reminds me of ... an open sewer, I guess.”

“That's the smell of our sea. The native biochemistry has significant sulphur content. Nothing native to this world is edible -- by humans, that is. Ninety-nine percent of our food is derived from Earth plants.”

“Hence the need for Agents on Earth.”

“Exactly. The rest comes from the colonies. The smell of our native life is why most Florans flock to the cities. I grew up with it and it smells like home to me.”

“Why did your family choose to live in such isolation?”

“I have no idea -- but, I'm happy they did. I loved it here as a kid.”

“It's beautiful.”

“Let's get to work on Koichi's journal.” He led her into the house.

Nyk sat before a vidisplay. He picked up a datacel and inserted it. “Our family never threw anything away. My father had Koichi's original data capsules. I arranged to have the data extracted and put onto these cels.”

“Where are the capsules?”

“At the museum in Floran City.” He began scanning the text.

“What language is this?” she asked.

“It's Esperanto. The Centauri mission was multinational, and Esperanto was the official language.” He began translating into English. “Look here -- this was a passage I had difficulty with. He's making Earth references I don't understand. 'I'd like my reader to know a bit about me. My name is Koichi Kyhana, and I am -- or, was -- the astral navigator aboard the starship *Floran*, which departed 3 March, 2201 for the Centauri colony; and, which arrived who-knows-where at who-knows-when. The words in this document are simply those of a man -- this is not the Torah nor the Q'uran, nor the Pentateuch.' I don't understand that last statement.”

“He's advising the reader he's only human -- not a god. Those are references to Earth sacred texts.”

“Oh. 'As testaments go, this is far newer than the new -- although based upon our estimates, which puts our Earthbound contemporaries with square and string planning the Pyramids, it's actually older than the old.” Suki giggled. “What's funny?”

“He was making a pun about the New and Old Testaments of the Bible.”

“I see... There's an example of the Earth context I lack.”

“Koichi must've understood the nature of the temporal paradox.”

“Do you understand it?” he asked.

“I think so.”

“Then, explain it to me, sometime.”

“I thought you were the expert on temporal stuff.”

Nyk laughed. “Not I -- I nearly flunked my temporal theory class. It requires an abstract thinking ability beyond my capacities. All I remember is Quinn's Postulate.”

“Who's Quinn?” she asked. “And, what is his postulate?”

“Bryan Quinn was chief engineer aboard the *Floran*. He postulated that it is impossible to alter the future based on precognizance. To try creates a temporal paradox -- and, if there's one thing Nature abhors more than a vacuum -- it's a paradox.”

She looked at him. “Can you elucidate?”

“You're beginning to sound like my Agency lecturer.”

“I was a lecturer -- remember?”

“Here's how Quinn's Postulate was explained to me. Suppose I am an ExoAgent, on Earth during some significant historic event.”

“What is a significant historic event?”

“Anything important enough to be written down.” He pondered. “Okay -- suppose I'm an ExoAgent on Earth in the middle of the nineteenth century. The assassination of President Lincoln is a significant historic event -- agreed?”

“I would agree with that.”

“Lincoln was assassinated in 1864.”

“1865,” she corrected him.

“Whatever -- let's say now is 1863. Because the assassination is a significant event, I know about it from *Floran* records -- I have precognizance. I decide to change history by stopping the assassination. I hunt down and kill ... the guy who killed Lincoln.”

“John Wilkes Booth.”

“Yes -- I hunt him down and kill him in 1863. As a result, the assassination doesn't happen -- it's no longer a significant historic event.”

“It's no longer any event at all,” she replied.

“Right -- if it's not an event, it's not recorded. I have no reason to hunt and kill Booth -- so he

lives to kill Lincoln. In order to change history, one would need omniscience -- the ability to know ALL the possible futures -- to form a basis for one's actions. Omniscience doesn't exist."

Suki opened her mouth to speak and then paused. She looked at the floor, and then the ceiling. "But -- what about temporal interference?" she finally asked. "According to Quinn's Postulate, there's no such thing."

"Oh, there is. The difference is precognition. If I were the same ExoAgent, blundered upon John Wilkes Booth in 1863 and killed him -- because I didn't like the look of his face -- I would've committed temporal interference. I changed history -- although the future would never know of the change..."

"...Because the new timeline supplanted the old one..."

"Exactly -- I think you've got it."

"But -- HAVE you changed history?" she asked. "If a change can't be detected -- did it occur?"

"Now you're stretching my abstract thinking abilities."

"It's like a *koan*. I'll consider this the next time I meditate."

"*Koan*?" he asked.

"A metaphysical puzzle."

He made a silent O. "This puzzle is why I must be so careful with you, *korlyta* -- since I don't know what the future holds, I must be extra careful not to mess it up. The risk is creating a new timeline in which the Floran hegemony never existed."

"What else does Koichi say?" she asked. "That journal is fascinating. I'm trying to identify my feelings hearing his words, knowing I'm listening to those written by someone who will be my great-great-great-great-grandson."

"Give or take a great." Nyk scrolled the text on the screen. "I won't tire my reader with begats -- Nicky begat Jeremy who begat Jeffery who begat Akira... I'm sure none of the names in that list will have meaning to the eyes reading these words."

She pressed her hand to her stomach. "I was going to name him Nick -- after you. We'd call him Nicky to avoid confusing him with you. Based on Quinn's Postulate, I must name him that, now."

He looked into her eyes. "You must follow your instincts as to what's right. When the time comes, give him the name your heart dictates. Koichi refers to an ancestor named Nicky. We don't have dates, so we have no way to know which ancestor it is."

"But, this is the sort of evidence you seek."

"Yes. The problem is, it's only a passing reference -- and a flippant one at that." He touched the vidisplay screen. "I'll mark the passage. Let's see if we can find any more."

Nyk rubbed his eyes. He felt Suki's hand on his shoulder. "Any luck?"

"Nothing. I'm up to year three after PlanetFall. Koichi makes no references to any Earth Kyhanas other than his own parents..." Nyk locked his fingers behind his head.

"How much more is there?"

"Koichi kept his journal faithfully, every day until his death. It covers nearly fifty Floran years -- almost fourteen thousand entries."

"I'd imagine the early entries would be the most fruitful."

"Not necessarily. Koichi drops into reminiscences throughout the journal. One other thing -- Koichi named his daughter Yasuko."

"After my mother?"

"He doesn't tell us why he chose that name. It may be coincidence."

"These references suggest a link, don't they?"

"Suggest, yes. They don't prove it." He pulled the datacel from the vidisplay. "I'm becoming bleary-eyed. Let's get some sleep."

Suki followed him as he removed a blanket from a closet and headed to the lower level. "Where are we going?"

"To sleep outside under the stars -- something I did often as a youth."

Nyk led her down a slope from the top of the bluff to a bowl-shaped depression lined with black basaltic sand. He spread the blanket. "It's a Floran tradition that bed partners undress each other." He unlaced her sandals and slipped them from her feet. She removed his and ran her hands along his legs. He lifted her tunic from her body and she did the same.

"I like this tradition."

Suki lay on the blanket beside him. "Look up," he said.

"Oh, my God!"

"Ten times the number of stars are visible from the surface of this world, compared to Earth. The night sky is Floran's most beautiful feature." He pointed skyward. "Do you see that bright, white star?"

"Yes..."

"Beneath it are four dimmer companion stars tracing a lopsided rectangle."

"I see it."

"About halfway down the left side of the rectangle and a little to the left is where Earth's sun is -- you can't see it, though sometimes I think I glimpse it out of the corner of my eye."

“Space travel certainly changes your perspective of the universe. I suddenly realize how small my world is, and how fragile we are -- and how insignificant.”

He caressed her belly. “One person can make the difference.” He looked into her eyes. “Would you share the gift?”

“Loving you has been a gift.”

He continued to caress her abdomen. “I wish it could've led to ... Oh, Suki -- if there were one thing about my life I could change it would be that. I wish I could father your child.”

She caressed his face. He took her hand and placed it upon his chest. She guided his fingers on her body. He traded kisses and caresses with her. “I've learned so much from you.”

“What could I have taught you?” he asked.

“You taught me there's at least one man in the galaxy who's sweet and tender...” He felt her hands against his skin. “You taught me to give and to trust. You taught me how to read your body. Let's use the technique.”

Her yellow-brown skin passed beneath his fingers. “Divide your mind,” he said.

“I have been.”

Nyk began the exercise to separate his awareness. Into the back of his mind he forced the immediate sensations of her caresses while meditating on her responses to his touch. The key to the technique was to find a focus -- something about her body he could use as a visual mantra.

As he established the division he concentrated on reading her body's responses, to form a barrier between his back and front minds. He filled his consciousness with HER -- the texture of her skin, her warmth, the curve of her breast. He felt with her -- feeling the cues her body telegraphed to him -- her breathing, her heartbeat, the tone of her muscles.

He knew Suki was doing the same -- confining her awareness of the excitement mounting in her body. The technique was called delayed-release, and it was one favored by experienced Floran lovers. Each partner strove to build tension in the other while denying his or her own arousal. Then, simultaneously they would release the blocks in their consciousnesses and experience an explosive onslaught of shared sensation.

It was something anyone could learn, and Nyk had taught it to Suki. He knew she'd be a natural at it. The most difficult part was learning the mental discipline. Suki was an experienced meditator and Nyk had figured she could apply those skills.

“What's your key?” she asked. “Or, is that an inappropriate question? A meditator never reveals her mantra.”

He smiled. “That birthmark on your neck -- for tonight, at least.”

“I hate that mark.”

“Sometimes I use that vein by your shoulder.”

“I hate that vein.”

“I love them both. I like little imperfections. They're what make you, you. What's your key?”

She traced his lips with her finger.

He lay on his back and she knelt, straddling his hips. She smoothed her palm against his chest. He placed his hands on her six-month pregnant belly. She took his hand, kissed it and held it against her breast. He could feel her heart pounding through her flesh, and he pressed her hand against his chest so she could feel his.

It was their signal each was ready for release. Nyk dissolved the barrier in his mind, permitting the pent-up sensations to implode into his awareness. Suki rolled her eyes skyward, drew in a deep breath through wide-open mouth, gasped and panted. In the ensuing sensual flood, they became one in the ecstasy of union.

Nyk pulled the blanket over them. Suki lay beside him and stroked his arm. “He's always quiet after. I guess he enjoys the hormone rush as much as I do.” She nuzzled Nyk's neck. “Nykkyo, if my future is your past...”

“Yes?”

“Isn't the fact we're here, together -- now -- mean, everything will work out all right?”

“It means nothing has diverted us from Destiny's plan. Nothing -- so far.”

3 -- I Know Where You Can Hide

Nyk opened a package of wheat porridge and set it before Suki. He took his place across from her. “Maybe we can take a walk on the beach later,” he said. “It was one of my favorite activities as a kid.”

Suki scooped some porridge. She paused, spoon in mid-air. “What's that?”

Nyk listened. “It's the outside scanpad. Someone's scanning their way into the house. You'd better go into my room.”

Suki hustled into the second-floor bedroom. Nyk stood at the top of the spiral staircase. He heard the front door open and footsteps on the spiral stairs. A tall woman with oat- straw white hair

climbed the steps. His eyes met hers of palest blue. “Andra!”

“Nykkyo!” She ran to him, embraced and kissed him. “What are you doing here? When did you come in?”

“Two days ago. I heard enforcers were sent to Earth...”

“Senta! She told me she was going to Agency Enforcement. I implored her not to, Nyk. She wouldn't hear it from me.”

“Senta turned me in?” Nyk sat on a kitchen stool. “I knew she was upset about my filing for separation.” He shook his head. “I never imagined she'd be so vindictive.”

“It's a matter of principal with her, Nyk. How did you get here?”

“Seymor arranged it. He called in a favor with someone in the communications corps. One of their relay tenders picked me up.”

“I'm surprised your father-in-law ... your father ... didn't arrange it.”

“Agency enforcers are watching for packet diversions. This way, it looks like a routine communications maintenance operation. Come, I have someone here I want you to meet.”

Nyk led Andra to his bedroom. He rapped on the door and it slid open. Andra's eyes widened. “Sukiko! I happy you meet ... in person,” she exclaimed and rushed to embrace her.

“*Saluti, Andra,*” Suki replied.

“Now we *amfen* be -- yes?”

“Yes -- *ji* . I'd like that.”

“*Ji-ji,*” Andra said. “*Xa mi plak--* that me please.” She stepped back and looked at Suki's abdomen. “*Mi zu ventra senti permes-zi vave?*” Suki looked at Nyk. “Sorry ... umm ... you ... me ... let...” Andra looked toward him.

“She wants your permission to feel your belly,” Nyk said.

“Okay ... *ji* .”

Andra placed her palms against Suki's abdomen and smiled. “Awe ... me give ... you child ... our people.” She threw her arms around Suki again, tears filling her eyes. “*Denke...* Thank you.”

“*Kelke matinmanja ard-zi vave?*” Suki asked and pointed to the breakfast trays.

“*Ji-ji.* I very hungry am.” Andra smiled at Nyk. “She good is. I from Lexal on early packet arrive.” She walked to the house's control panel and touched its screen. The storm shutters flung open. “Let's light have.”

Nyk warmed and opened another meal package. Andra sat beside Suki and scooped a mouthful. “Sukiko -- you no worry. Nyk ... answers will find. You relax and enjoy.” She picked up the

empty breakfast trays and dumped them into the waste reprocessor. "Now I rest -- tired am." Nyk watched Andra head up the spiral staircase to her third-floor room.

Suki approached Nyk as he scanned Koichi's journal. "I have more evidence -- Koichi's family lived in Queens for over two hundred years."

"I suppose by the twenty-third century, many could claim such."

"At the same address -- In the same house?"

"You mean my parents' house?"

"It's more circumstantial evidence."

"Nykkyo, why is Andra here?"

"She's working at the Sudal University sea research center, south of here. I'm letting her live here -- I'd rather the house be used than shuttered. The Agency arranged her position there, as a way of thanking her for helping bring down Zander. That man abused her horribly during their marriage. Suki, I know you were abused. I don't want to trivialize what you went through, but it was a walk in the park compared to what Andra endured. To think Zander was my childhood friend." Nyk stroked a pair of scars on his left wrist and showed them to her. "Zander made these when we were boys in a silly bonding ritual."

"I thought she was beautiful in a vidphone image -- she's nothing short of breathtaking in person."

"Andra has looks that would stop traffic. All her ilk do. She's an *ax'amfin*. Don't use that word in front of her -- it's not polite. She was genetically engineered to look that way. Like all *ax'amfinen*, she was taken from her parents before puberty and sent to a special finishing school. They're trained in carriage, politics, protocol and statecraft. Most become consorts to high government officials -- like her friend Janna. Suki, Andra and I are bonded and friends for life. We trust each other with our lives. You can trust Andra."

"I do like her, Nykkyo."

"Senta's another story. Andra told me Senta's behind our current dilemma. We must be more cautious than I first imagined."

"Why? Senta's in Floran City."

"Senta is opening another set of labs, here in Sudal. As my wife, she has rights to this house, too."

"So, when Senta said you wouldn't get away with it..."

"I had thought I could convince her. It appears I was mistaken. One thing is for sure."

"What's that?"

"I know now beyond doubt Senta doesn't love me nor ever did. If she had, she would've done

as Andra did.” Nyk rubbed his eyes. “I must be getting old -- I can't sit in front of this thing day and night like I used to. Let's see if Andra would join us in a walk along the beach before dinner.”

Nyk walked barefoot on the black sand, holding hands with Suki and Andra. He sat, cross-legged on the sand and gazed at the sea. “How I loved this spot as a boy.”

He glanced toward the women and saw Andra stroking Suki's leg. “Your skin,” she said, “so smooth.”

“It's from shaving my legs.”

Andra looked toward Nyk. “*Ka?*”

“*Lita litu gamben deraz't,*” Nyk explained.

“Why?” Andra asked.

“My hair...” Suki pointed to her head.

“*Hara, ji,*” Andra replied.

“... is so dark ... *malume* . It would be unattractive, otherwise.”

Andra looked at Nyk. “Un...”

“*Malbele,*” he translated. Andra nodded in comprehension.

“You don't shave ... *deraz* ... your legs?” Suki asked.

Andra shook her head. “*Ne...* no ... no need. See...” She swung her legs around.

Suki stroked Andra's shin. “So light and fine -- like baby hair!”

“All Florans like that are,” Andra replied. “*Viren...* men...” She stroked her cheek with the backs of her fingers. “*Fronten...*”

“Faces,” Suki prompted.

“*Ji-ji.* Men faces *deraz* . Women ... *ne* .”

“Not at all?” Suki asked. Andra shook her head. The two compared their arms and legs and stroked each other's skin. “I see why... I knew Nykkyo had light body hair. It must be a racial characteristic...”

“I can't believe it!” Nyk exclaimed. “We come two hundred lightyears and all you can discuss is ... body hair?”

Suki and Andra joined hands. “It's interesting!” they said together.

Nyk shook his head, stood and walked toward the sea. Suki and Andra followed him. He

stopped at the edge of the surf and felt the water wash up to his ankles. "Let's wade," Andra said. She stripped off her tunic, walked into the water to the depth of her knees and turned to face them. "Come!"

"Care to wade?" he asked Suki.

"I ... I guess."

Nyk lifted her tunic from her, and then stripped off his own. "Florans are casual about nudity -- at least among friends." He held her hand and led her into the water.

"Look," Andra said and stooped to pick up something. She held a crustacean-like creature. "Filter-feeder." She returned the animal to the water.

Andra walked further into the sea and lowered herself into the water to her armpits. Suki pulled her hair into a ponytail, coiled it up and held it with one hand as she lowered herself into the sea.

"This is delightful," Suki said, "once you get past the smell. If I had a way to tie up my hair, I'd do some swimming."

"Smell I ... no mind." Andra replied. "I ... accustomed am."

The orange sun made a ruby disk in the western sky as it set.

"This is a lovely world," Suki said.

"We should go back and have some dinner," Nyk replied. "I should be returning to Koichi's journal."

Nyk stretched out on his childhood bed. Suki cuddled beside him. She nuzzled his neck. "I like Andra and I love you, Nykkyo. I enjoyed myself today."

A knock came at the door. "Yes?" Nyk said.

"*Sukiko ky zi dorm-mi niva?*"

"Andra wants to sleep with us?" Suki asked in a whisper.

"Yes -- she wants to share our company."

"Is this a Floran ... thing?"

"Oh, yes. Florans hate sleeping alone. We love the companionship of having friends in bed with us."

"All right, tell her she may."

"*Ji. Zi dev en ziven, Andra.*"

Andra entered the bedroom, slipped off her tunic and placed it on a bench. She lay beside Nyk.

Suki jumped. "Oooh! He just kicked me."

"Can I feel?" Andra asked. Suki guided her hand.

"Do you feel him?"

Andra nodded. "You beautiful woman," Andra said. "She beautiful, Nyk."

"Very."

"Even pregnant?" Suki asked.

"You're very beautiful and sexy pregnant. I love it. Pregnancy's the most..."

"Don't tell me pregnancy is the most important thing a woman can do."

"Oh, no -- it's not the most important. It is one of the most beautiful."

Andra reached across him and held onto Suki. "*Bon'noka, Nykkyo. Bon'noka, Sukiko.*"

Light from Floran's golden dawn flooded into his wallless bedroom and waked Nyk. Suki was asleep to his left and Andra drowsed to his right. He sat, eased himself to the foot of the bed, stood and headed for the shower. A touch on a panel caused the door to swing open. Jets of water sprayed onto his body and he scrubbed himself with a vegetable soap. The shower switched off and a blast of warm air dried his skin.

Nyk walked to the kitchen and brewed some green tea. He carried a cup, a cold breakfast and a pack of snack wafers to his vidisplay and began scanning Koichi's journal.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and saw Suki. "Oh, you're up," he said. "The difference in the lengths of the days can take some adjustment. There's tea in the kitchen."

Suki turned and headed for the kitchen. Nyk heard Andra activate the shower. He picked up the pack of snack wafers, carried them to the kitchen and sat with Suki.

"Would you like a snack wafer?" She avoided eye contact. "*Korlyta*, is something wrong?" A tear formed and rolled down her cheek. "Suki, what's wrong?"

"Oh, Nykkyo -- I'm so sorry! I had no idea Andra was gay! I can usually tell." She looked away from him.

"Suki, did you and Andra make love?" She pressed her fist to her lips. "Did you?" She nodded. "Do you know what this means?"

"I don't know what got into me. Andra is such a beautiful woman. I opened my eyes and she was awake, looking at me. We talked and touched each other's faces and one thing led to another. I didn't mean to be unfaithful, Nykkyo. I have no self-control. Please forgive me."

"You want me to forgive you? For making love with Andra?"

Tears flowed down her face. "Please -- if you can find it in your heart. I know after the Alice incident that I promised you it would never happen again. I feel terrible. I cherish our love, Nykkyo. I don't want to lose you because of a weak moment."

"I can't forgive you." She buried her face in her hands. "You've done nothing wrong. You and Andra were bonding in a Floran way."

"You're not angry?"

"Of course not -- I'm delighted. Andra's quite selective with whom she shares the gift -- that she would with you means she values you as a special friend."

"A special friend?"

"Yes -- consider it a compliment of the highest order. But, you're wrong about one thing -- she's no lesbian. You see, *korlyta* -- gay and straight are Earth notions. The terms are without meaning here."

"You mean everyone..."

"On this world, two people who wish to share the gift of intimacy -- may do so. We don't love each other as men and women. We love each other's personas. It doesn't matter if the other's persona happens to live in a man's or a woman's body. We've talked about this."

"It's one thing to talk about it, but another to live it... Are you sure you're not upset with me?"

"You'll learn Florans have a well-developed touch language. We have no hard rules as to what sorts of touching are appropriate. It's up to the participants to agree on that. Social situations exist in which shaking hands would be considered inappropriate. You and Andra were communicating. Who am I to judge how?"

She threw her arms around him. "Oh, Nykkyo -- I'm so relieved. I felt so guilty -- I was sure you'd be angry with me."

"You might be an Earth woman, but I'm a Floran -- and I hold our relationship to Floran standards. Andra is the second most important person in the universe to me -- after you. You and she bonding couldn't make me happier. It pleases me beyond expression."

Andra stepped, nude, from the shower pulling her fingers through her hair. She approached Suki, held and kissed her. "All right -- are you?"

"I'm fine," Suki said and kissed Andra's cheek. "I'll take my shower, now." Nyk watched her as she walked away.

"I'm delighted you and Suki are getting along," Nyk said to Andra in his native tongue. "You two communicate well."

"Given my grasp of *Anglixa* and hers of *Lingwa* -- yes." She poured a cup of tea. "I feared I made a mistake with her. I sensed she desired intimacy. Afterward, she seemed to feel regret."

"She's learning our ways. You made no mistake. I'm pleased you feel so fond of her."

"I'm in awe of her, Nyk. She's just a woman, but in her womb is the key to our people's existence. I'm beginning to understand."

"Can you love her?" Nyk asked.

"I do already. You and I are bonded as friends-for-life. A love of yours IS a love of mine." Andra sipped her tea. "She's a troubled woman, isn't she?"

"What makes you think that?"

"One of the skills we were taught at the academy was how to evaluate another. It's a useful political skill, and we were being trained for political assignments. I'm amazed I can read an Earth woman so easily -- there are really few differences between our peoples. She is troubled, Nyk."

Nyk nodded. "I never expected the mother of the man who founded my family to be so ... so needy, emotionally."

"Yet, you love her despite her faults."

"I love her because of her virtues and her shortcomings. They're what make her, her."

"Why are you so sure she's your purpose?"

"Destiny traces a path for us. Suki's path is to bear the child who's the root of the Kyhana family tree."

"You can't mean you believe Destiny intended your paths to cross."

"Absolutely not. I believe it's possible for some outside event to interfere with one's destiny. I believe I have so interfered with hers. Destiny intended her to bear the child, no doubt. But Destiny also intended her to have a man in her life. I'm the one guilty of temporal interference -- my friendship with her disrupted Destiny's plan. Now, I must put it right and replace the man who was to be in her life. Her child needs a father."

"And you must never reveal your true nature to that child." Andra shook her head. "It's almost too much to fathom. I think I believe you. Such a load you two are bearing."

"We support each other -- it's why Destiny gave us our love and thrust us together."

"Yes -- I do feel the truth in it. I admire your courage, Nyk. You won't have an easy time." Andra stood. "I'll dress now. I should go to the research center." She headed up the stairs to the third floor.

Nyk turned to his vidisplay and scanned through Koichi's journal. The vidisplay began flashing an incoming call. "Andra," he yelled. "Vidphone call for you."

The call indicator went dark and Nyk scrolled through more of Koichi's writing. "Nyk," Andra shouted. "It was Senta. She's coming to Sudal!"

He stood. "When?"

“She's leaving on the next train. She'll be here mid-afternoon.”

“Suki and I must find another place to hide while she's here. Did she say how long her visit will be?”

“Two days -- she's here to review the progress of the new sequencing labs. Nyk, I know where you can stay -- somewhere Senta can't find you. You and Sukiko must come to the research center with me.”

“It might be a good place to hide the shuttlecar.”

Nyk pulled the shuttlecar into a shed outside the Sudal University sea research center -- a makeshift building on the coast south of the city. He opened the passenger door and helped Suki out. Andra popped open the cowl on her groundcar.

“We hide out here?” Nyk asked.

“No -- I'll take you to the research platform. It's about a half-segment skimmer flight from here. Sudal University is on mid-term hiatus so the place will be deserted. There are sleeping quarters on there -- you'll be safe.”

“You're a skimmer pilot, Andra? Don't tell me that's something else you learned at the academy.”

“No, I learned it here.” She directed Nyk and Suki to a skimmer parked near the research center. Nyk grasped the handle and swung the door up and open.

Andra climbed behind the controls and activated the craft. It lifted off the ground. She manipulated a navigational display and pointed to it. “There's the platform.” With a push on the stick she piloted the skimmer toward the open sea. The craft headed out over breakers turning into swells as the coastline fell behind. “The platform's about a hundred kilometres from Sudal,” she said.

Sudal's tallest buildings fell below the horizon. “This is what most of Floran looks like,” Nyk said. “A larger percentage of the surface is covered with water than is Earth. We know little of the life in our sea. The majority of the population here cares not for the ecology and geology of the planet that's hosted us for five millennia, and I think it's a shame.”

“It's good work you're doing, Andra,” Suki said in Floran.

“*Denke*-- thanks. You well with *Lingwa* do.”

“It's an easy language to learn. I just need some practice.”

Andra pulled back on the control and switched the navigational display to short- range. Nyk could see the platform -- a house-sized structure floating on the surface of the sea. The skimmer hovered over it and set down on the deck.

Andra shifted into her native tongue. “I'll show you around. The platform has its own power plant and inertial sink. Even in rough seas, the platform's stable.” She opened a hatch and led Nyk and Suki inside. “Here's the galley, and here are the cabins. There's no one out here right now, so you'll have the place to yourselves.” Andra opened a hatch. “This is our lab.” On benches were tanks of seawater.

“Watch this...” She passed her hand over a proximity pad and the lights extinguished. A purple glow came from the tanks.

“Bioluminescence,” Nyk said.

“From creatures living near the bottom.”

“I’ve seen patches of them at night -- they come to the surface.”

Andra led the way to another room appointed with upholstered benches. “This is the lounge. Over here is the escape capsule. It has its own power cell and inertial sink. Once activated, it heads for the Sudal coast.”

Nyk followed Andra to the platform deck. He looked toward the east and saw a line of grey clouds hugging the horizon. “It looks like a storm’s brewing. I thought the surf looked rougher than normal.”

“You’ll be safe here,” Andra replied. “We had researchers out here during that category-four storm earlier this year. It didn’t even disrupt their research. No one will bother you. I’ll be back for you after Senta returns to Floran City.” She hugged and kissed Nyk, embraced Suki and climbed into the skimmer. Nyk watched it speed toward the west until it disappeared against the horizon.

4 -- How Far to Sudal?

Nyk climbed down from the deck and secured the hatch. “You’re about to experience another of this planet’s phenomena -- the tropical storm. From the looks of it, it’s only category one or two -- it should blow over in a day or so.”

“I remember being in a hurricane once.”

“We should be safe here -- if what Andra says is true. Some researchers rode out a category-four storm without even feeling it.” A flash of light came through the viewports, followed by a loud boom. “The storm’s here now. In a couple hours it’ll hit Sudal.” He stood by the viewport. “Come look.”

Suki stood beside him. The level of the sea rose and fell, alternately putting the platform under water and leaving it high and dry. “This is giving me vertigo.”

“But, we feel nothing. It’s the inertial sink -- it’s absorbing the movement, as if this platform were on solid rock.” More lightning flashed and thunder boomed. “The storm’s really raging, now. Listen to that thunder.”

“There's an old saying -- it's better to be on land wishing you were at sea than at sea wishing you were on land. I wish I were on land.”

“I think there's something romantic about this. Outside's a primal force of nature. Here we are -- warm, dry and secure.” He sat and slipped his arm around her. “I think we should check out the bunks in the cabins.”

“You can't be serious. You can't be thinking of lovemaking at a time like this!”

“Why not? We're safe ... we're here for the duration ... and, there's not much else to do on this platform -- unless you know something about bioluminescence.” He coaxed her to stand. “Come, let's look in the cabins.”

He led her toward the sleeping quarters and opened a cabin door. “This must be the captain's cabin. Very accommodating.” He sat on the bunk. “Definitely wide enough for two.” He stretched out and patted the mattress. Suki lay beside him and he stroked her face.

“Being with you takes away the hurt and fear. I'm beginning to believe everything will work out.” Nyk leaned toward her and met her lips with his. He felt her fingers caressing the back of his head.

An explosion rocked the platform. It listed, throwing Nyk onto the floor and Suki on top of him. She screamed. “What happened?”

“I think we were struck by lightning. It must've knocked out the inertial sink.” The platform was tossed about by the storm. Nyk struggled to his feet and worked his way to the cabin door. “Hold on -- I'll try to get the inertial sink back on line.”

Holding onto bulkheads and fixed furniture, he edged his way toward the control panel. He began pressing controls to restart the inertial sink. It failed to respond. The platform creaked as it was tossed by the storm. A bulkhead joint split open and seawater began gushing in. “Suki!” he yelled. “The platform's breaking up! Quick -- the escape capsule!”

She struggled to make her way from the cabin. Nyk held open the capsule hatch and looked in. “Take a seat and belt yourself in.”

The platform lurched and Suki fell across the cabin. The bulkhead separated further and more water poured in. Suki climbed to the capsule and held on. Nyk lifted her, pushed her in and climbed in himself. He slammed down the hatch, secured it and belted himself into a seat.

He reached for the trigger and snapped off the safety cover. With his palm he pressed the initiator.

“Nothing happened!” Suki screamed.

Nyk pounded it again. “Maybe I'm doing something wrong.” He unhitched his safety harness and reached for a circuit panel.

With a roar the capsule ejected. Nyk was thrown backward, his head hitting the aft bulkhead. Then, they were still. He sat up and rubbed the lump on the back of his head. “The capsule's inertial sink must've kicked in.”

“Now what?”

“Andra said the capsule will head on its own toward Sudal. At what speed, I don't know. The platform's about one hundred kilometres offshore. It could take half a day to reach land.”

“What if lightning hits us now?”

“This capsule's a much smaller target. Even my luck isn't that bad.” He looked out the capsule's porthole. “Pitch black.” Nyk hoisted himself into a seat and coaxed Suki beside him. He slipped his arm around her.

“Still feeling romantic?”

Blue-grey light began to penetrate the viewports. “How are you doing?” Nyk asked.

“All right under the circumstances. I'm hungry, and my bladder is so full.”

“We might be able to do something about your bladder...” He began opening compartments in the capsule and found a polymer urinal. “Here,” he said handing it to her. “I'll turn my back.”

“Okay, I'm done,” she said and handed it to him.

“Maybe I'll use it too.”

He secured its cover and stowed it in its compartment. “I don't see any rations.”

“This capsule seats eight. Eight people stuffed in here would be cozy.”

“Even by Floran standards,” Nyk replied. He looked out the porthole. “Daylight ... and a clear sky. The storm's passed over us.”

“Can you see land?”

“No. We could be half a kilometre away, or fifty.” A scraping noise came from the floor of the capsule. “Or, closer.”

Nyk activated the hatch release and swung it open. He eased himself from the capsule and helped Suki climb out onto a narrow black sand beach on the edge of a thick forest of palm- like plants. “Where are we?” she asked.

“I'm not quite sure. Maybe I can climb one of those trees and reconnoiter.”

“Be careful.”

Nyk picked a palm growing at an angle. He eased himself into the crown and looked around. “I'd say we're southwest of Sudal. I can see the powerplant.” He climbed down. “We must head that way,” he said and pointed. “We'll follow the beach as far as we can, but when we reach that outcropping, we'll have no choice but to go through the forest.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the Residence. With any luck, Senta will have gone home -- or, at the least she'll be at the labs.”

“I'm so hungry,” she said and patted her stomach. “He's hungry, too.”

“So am I, but there's nothing edible along the way.”

“How far?”

“I'd guess about twenty-five kilometres.” Nyk took Suki's hand and walked along the beach.

“I'm happy I'm not any more pregnant.”

Nyk walked until the beach turned to rocks. He pointed up. “This is where we must start pushing our way through the forest. Let's rest a bit, first.”

“I'm thirsty,” she said and looked at the sea. “Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink...”

“Oh, you can drink this seawater. It tastes terrible, but you can drink it.” Nyk scooped a palmful and poured it into his mouth. “Ugh!”

Suki knelt on a rock and scooped water. “I see what you mean. It lingers in the back of my throat.”

“It's nothing that'll harm you -- just traces of sulphur-containing metabolites from the native sea life.”

Suki sat on the rock and looked toward the forest. “The plant life seems both familiar and alien at the same time. Is all the vegetation purple?”

“Purple is to Floran what green is to Earth. Yes, many of the plants have Earth analogues. Life here is primitive. I'd estimate Floran is about equivalent to Earth during the late Devonian era.” He stood. “Let's be on our way.”

Nyk began pushing his way through the dense forest understory. Leaves and stems of the vegetation brushed against his tunic leaving purple stains. “It's slow going.”

“Is it like this all the way?”

“I'm afraid so. Those rocks are part of the same outcropping that forms the bluff holding the Residence. We might be able to go across the powerplant grounds -- once we get there. From there, we can follow the access roads.”

“It's so hot.”

“The forest blocks the sea breeze.” He wiped his brow. “Let's rest for a moment.” He gestured toward a fallen tree trunk and sat.

“More of that smell -- it's oppressive.”

“It's the decaying vegetation.”

“There's not a sound.”

“The land is devoid of animal life. Only plants and some microbes have colonized the continent. Are you ready to push on?”

She nodded. “Now I'm beyond hungry.”

Nyk stood and led the way. “There may be some vending machines at the powerplant.” He held a branch and she ducked under it.

“Are you sure we're heading in the right direction?”

“Oh, yes. I'm using the sun as a compass.”

Nyk pressed his way through the forest. “This is much tougher going than I imagined. We'll never make it there in daylight, and I don't want to trudge through the forest at night.” Suki sighed. “We'll find a spot where we can bed down. It looks like a clearing up ahead.”

“Bed down and have dreams of food.”

“Come on, just a bit further.” Nyk pushed aside some brush. “Oh, my goodness!”

“What is it?”

“Come look.” Suki stood beside him. “It's an agridome! No doubt, one of my father's prototypes.”

The structure covered ten acres. It had walls about three metres high. There was no roof -- instead; a transparent film undulated in the breeze.

“Such a big structure!”

“No -- this one's tiny. The production agridomes are ten by ten kilometres. This must've been my dad's proof-of-concept dome. It's a Kyhana unidome. My father invented a revolutionary way to construct agridomes. He oversaw their construction -- it was a major element of a program to increase food production. His reward was having the Residence built.”

“What's revolutionary?”

“My dad's idea was to construct a dome pan from polymer concrete. Inside the profile is a shallow dish. Once the pan is in place, a polymer is sprayed on from skimmers. Control channels are laid in place and another layer is applied -- three layers in all. Once the polymer is cured, the dome is pressurized and the film lifts off the pan. It's kept up by air pressure.”

“Air pressure?”

"The polymer is light but tough. Dad postulated a dome of any size could be built with the technique. This dome's been abandoned -- there's no air pressure to keep the dome up, so it's flapping in the breeze. I wonder what test crops were grown inside."

"Crops?"

"Yes, the point is to simulate an Earth environment for the growing of food -- and to isolate the crops from the native biosphere. Remember, most of our food is from plants of Earth origin."

Nyk approached the door and leaned against it. "It's jammed." He looked around the edge of the forest and located a branch. Using it as a lever he pushed open the door. "Come in. This is the airlock -- to prevent losing air pressure." He pushed on the inner door and it opened.

The clear dome film rose and fell with the sea breeze. Nyk looked at hydroponic planting beds, dry and empty. He found a head of wheat and crushed it between his palms to yield a handful of kernels. "Here -- you need this more than I do."

Suki poured the kernels into her mouth and began chewing. "It's stale."

"This dome's been abandoned for decades. I'll see if I can find any more."

Nyk pushed the film aside and walked toward the center of the dome, past dry and empty agribeds. In a few spots some native vegetation had begun to grow in remnants of the nutrient matrix.

He walked past more vacant beds. Some native vines spread in a tangle along the polymer concrete floor. The floor was cracked in places and shoulder-high scrub grew from the fissures. Nyk pushed through the purple vegetation and stopped short.

He encountered growth with green leaves. "Suki," he yelled. "Suki -- come here."

"Where are you?"

"Toward the center of the dome. Over here!" She came to him. "Look -- fruit trees, and they're still alive!"

"These look like Earth dwarf varieties."

"No doubt brought here by an Agency exobotanist. This is our mission on Earth -- to supply plant material for just this purpose." Nyk plucked an apple and bit into it. "It's not quite ripe." He handed it to her.

"This tastes like ambrosia."

"Over here -- pears and plums. The trees don't look too healthy, but they're alive and bearing fruit." He pointed down at cracks in the polymer concrete floor. "Their roots must've broken through the agridome pan and found a water supply beneath. The pan material is thinnest here at the center."

Nyk lifted the hem of his tunic to form a pouch and filled it with apples, pears, peaches and plums. Suki sat on one of the hydroponic beds. He sat beside her and they began eating.

She placed her hand on her stomach. "This feels so good, Nykkyo. I've never want to be so

hungry again.”

“Let's see what we can do for sleeping.” He stood and made his way to the side of the dome. “There's some straw here. It's probably left over from processing the crops.” He picked up armsful of straw and dumped it into a hydroponic bed.

Nyk lay in the straw and held Suki beside him as the Floran dusk gave way to night. “That beautiful sky again,” she said.

“Breakfast,” Nyk said and handed some fruit to Suki.

She bit into a plum. “Juicy -- as tasty as any I've had on Earth.”

“I went out and looked around. We're close to the powerplant, and from there we can follow access roads. I'd guess we still have ten kilometres to walk, but it'll be easy -- once we get to the powerplant. I'd bring some fruit if I could come up with a way to carry it. Fresh fruit is scarce on this world. What we grow gets turned into mixed fruit purees and the like. Are you ready to hit the road?”

“Ready, I guess.”

Nyk led her from the dome and into the forest. He held branches and pushed down underbrush as they traveled. “Look -- ahead, the forest edge.” He held aside a branch and stepped into orange sunlight. “See, just like I said -- the powerplant.”

Three domes sat in the clearing. Beside them was a three-story pile of sparkling crystals. Nyk pointed. “That's the ash pile -- those are diamond crystals. Before an Agent heads to Earth, he picks up a kilogram or so of them.”

She held up her ring. “So, that's where this came from. What do you use them for here?”

“They're crushed into gravel and used as a construction material. We truly pave the streets with them.” He took her hand and followed the access roadway. “There's a fork in the road about three kilometres from here. The right-hand fork leads to the Residence.”

“Listen,” she said.

“A groundcar's coming.” He led her into the brush along the roadway. A groundcar whizzed by. “Let's go.” He led her down the road.

“How much further?” she asked. “My feet are killing me, and my ankles are puffed up like melons.”

“Maybe three kilometres -- a couple of miles. If you'd like I can try carrying you.”

“No. If it's only a couple of miles I can make it.” He led her up a small rise. “Can we rest a moment?” she panted.

Nyk stopped and wiped his forehead. “Let's move on. We're approaching the bluff.” He stopped and lifted his chin. “Feel that? It's the sea breeze.”

“It feels good.”

“We can't be far, now.” He pointed to the right at a fork in the roadway. “That way.” He trudged a bit further. “Here we are. Around the bend is the Residence. I'll scout ahead and see if it looks like Senta's here.” Nyk pushed through some vegetation and regarded the structure. “Suki,” he whispered.

Suki pushed through the growth and stood beside him. “The shutters are up,” she said.

“Someone's home. Let's see how many groundcars.”

Nyk dashed from the brush and through some metre-high purple horsetails to the house. Hugging the wall he worked his way toward the front door. He saw a single groundcar. With a wave he gestured Suki to join him.

“It's the Sudal University car Andra uses,” he said and pointed toward the emblem on its side. “Senta would use either a Food Service car or one of the livery vehicles from town. I think we're safe.”

Nyk approached the front door and pressed his wrist to the scanpad. The door slid open.

“Oh, all I want is a shower and to lie down,” Suki exclaimed.

Andra approached, saw Nyk and ran to him. “You're safe! I knew you were safe!”

“Oh, Andra!” He embraced and kissed her, then noticed a bruise under one eye. “What happened to you?”

“Senta did that -- we had a terrible row.”

“Senta hit you?”

“Yes -- and I threw her out of the house. She went to the labs and is heading home afterward. She took her case and won't be coming here.”

“Then, we're safe,” Suki said.

Andra shook her head. “No -- Senta knows you're onworld.”

“How did she know?” Andra picked up the snack wafer wrapper. “Oh...”

“She spotted your Earth clothes in your bedroom and called Agency Enforcement -- that's what we fought about. Some Internal Affairs officers were here yesterday. They took me into Sudal for interrogation. And, they put an ID trace on me -- in case I try to help you.”

“The interrogated you -- with truth drug?”

Andra nodded. “Senta signed the warrant as witness.”

“I didn't think truth drug was legal on this world.”

“They have a new, approved variety. I'm afraid I must've told them you were on the platform. And, I'm afraid my friendship with Senta is over.”

“Oh, Andra -- I'm so sorry. I hope it wasn't too unpleasant for you.”

“Don't worry about me -- at Vebinad we were trained to deal with truth drug. It's part and parcel of colonial politics. I do feel badly about Senta. I don't know why she has to be so hard-headed.”

“She's always been like that.”

“Internal Affairs sent a skimmer out to the platform and found it wrecked by the storm. The escape capsule was missing, so I assumed you were safe.” Andra looked toward the door. “Did you scan your way in?”

“Yes...”

“I'm sure Internal Affairs has an ID trace on you by now. They're probably on their way here. I can take you somewhere in the groundcar.”

Nyk looked at Suki. “Please -- no more running,” she said. “I'm so tired and sore.”

He stepped into the study and gathered up the datacells. “I suppose we have no choice but to see how the oversight committee reacts to the evidence I've gathered so far.” He held Andra. “Don't fret -- things will work out.”

“I know -- or else we wouldn't be here.”

Nyk stepped from the shower and slipped into a fresh tunic. Andra and Suki sat at the kitchen table. He glanced toward Sudal. “I see a skimmer coming.”

He led Suki out the front door. The Internal Affairs skimmer pulled up to the house and a squad of officers stepped out. “Nykkyo Kyhana?” their leader asked. Nyk nodded.

One of the officers drew his stunner. “You don't need that,” Nyk said.

“ID him.”

Another officer presented a scanpad and Nyk pressed his wrist to it. “Nykkyo Kyhana,” the officer read.

“And, this is Sukiko Kyhana. She won't scan.”

The officer attached a white polymer band around Nyk's neck and another around Suki's. “These are stun collars,” he said. “I'd advise you not to try anything.”

“I won't -- neither of us will. We'll cooperate.”

“Please come with us,” the squad leader said and opened the skimmer door. Nyk sat in the cabin. As the skimmer lifted off he looked back at the Residence. Andra stood on the second floor with her fist pressed to her lips.

5 -- The Hearing

Nyk was led into an interview room. “Nykkyo Kyhana...” A middle-aged woman addressed him. Insignia embroidered on her *lifxarpa* identified her as an ExoService official. Seated beside her was Senta. “I’m Tomyka Wells. You’ve given us quite a chase. Please take a seat.” He shifted his weight to his right foot and stared at Wells. “If you’d rather stand -- suit yourself.”

“Nykkyo,” Senta implored. “Please cooperate. I’ve told Ms Wells you’re a kind and decent man at heart.”

Nyk folded his arms and glared at the two women.

“I just want you home,” Senta continued, “where you won’t get into mischief. I know you didn’t intend to cause trouble -- you just can’t help yourself.”

“Nykkyo ... may I call you that?” Wells asked. Nyk continued to stare at her. “Would you please explain to me what you thought you were doing getting involved with an Earth woman?”

Nyk remained impassive.

“Nykkyo -- I told Tomyka of the time you brought her here for emergency medical treatment.” He closed his eyes, clenched his teeth and modulated his breathing. “Don’t look at me with such hatred, Nyk -- it’s for your own good.”

“You do know what’s going to happen,” Wells said. “You’ll be kept planetbound, here for the rest of your life. You’ll be subjected to economic incarceration. Your career in the ExoAgency is over. And -- the woman ... she’ll be quarantined -- to neutralize the temporal contamination.”

Nyk shook his head. “NO!”

“So, you CAN speak,” Wells sneered.

“You don’t understand -- she’s pregnant with the child who’ll give rise to Koichi Kyhana. If she’s kept here -- you’ll be committing temporal interference of the most dangerous kind. You could doom our entire race!”

“Nykkyo -- the rules are quite specific. No Floran Agent may reveal his true nature to an Earth native.”

“Rules have exceptions,” Nyk replied. “There are some special circumstances surrounding Suki.”

“Nykkyo...” Wells proffered a smile. “These policies were drafted by experts with much greater

understandings of temporal issues than you or I. Do you possess credentials to challenge the best and brightest of our temporal thinkers?"

"I've taken a course in temporal theory..."

"An introductory one -- which you barely passed," Wells said, consulting her vidisplay.

"... and, I have direct, field experience."

"Nykkyo..." Senta said. "Stop deluding yourself."

"I have here a no-contest agreement to settle your case," Wells said. "If you'll please sign this -- I'll agree to probation and on-world confinement. You'll avoid economic incarceration."

"And, Suki?"

"Quarantine."

"Does she have any say in this?"

"As an off-worlder ... no."

"Please, Nyk -- sign it," Senta said.

"No. I demand a hearing before the entire oversight committee."

"Very well." Wells passed her hand over a proximity pad. "We've tried it the easy way." An attendant entered the room and escorted Nyk out.

A shaft of Floran's golden morning light fell across Nyk's eyes. He looked around his cell. The narrow window overlooked the groundcar lot. An attendant opened the door and admitted a pair of Internal Affairs officers. One began attaching a stun collar around his neck. The other took his upper arm and led him down the corridor.

"Where are we going?" Nyk asked.

"Sudal clinic. You are to be interrogated."

He was led to an awaiting skimmer. The craft made a short flight to a squat building, equipped with Sudalese storm shutters. Nyk was led down a corridor and into a treatment room. A middle-aged woman in hospital garb greeted him.

"Nykkyo Kyhana? Please, have a seat."

Nyk sat on the therapeutic pallet. He glanced at a device on a cart. It had a large reservoir of a clear fluid and several smaller vials and bottles. A coiled-up length of polymer tubing was attached to a fitting. "I gather now this stuff is legal again -- they're using it rather liberally."

"Internal Affairs lobbied hard to restore a tool they think they need. This variety has been approved for the past half year. It is safe -- and, effective. Have you ever been interrogated?"

“Never.”

“I’ll explain what to expect.” She began attaching electrodes to his scalp. “These monitor your brainwaves. The interrogator can determine when you have entered a truth state.” She pointed to a control panel. “Two medics will supervise your procedure. One is an Internal Affairs interrogator. The other is a staff doctor, who will serve as your advocate. Both medics must consent before upping the dose of the drug. If either believes you are in danger -- the procedure is aborted and a rescue drug administered. Any questions?”

“What will I feel?”

“You’ll feel -- more precisely, you will remember -- nothing. Some subjects experience various degrees of discomfort afterward -- vertigo, nausea and the like. Those after- effects are short-lived, and are directly related to the dose of the drug.” She connected the last electrode. “When was your last meal?”

“Dinner -- last night.”

“Good -- we want you to have an empty stomach -- for your safety.” She withdrew a device from a drawer. “I’m going to start the IV now. Let me look at your arm.” She inflated a cuff around his upper arm and ran her finger along a vein in the back of his left hand. “This will do -- you’ll feel a prick.” She punctured his vein and taped the catheter into place. “This is only saline for now. Make yourself comfortable.”

Nyk reclined on the pallet. A man wearing an Internal Affairs *xarpa* entered the room. “Nykkyo Kyhana?” He nodded. “Please scan this.”

“What for?”

“Identification.” He pressed his wrist to the scanpad. The officer examined it. “I have here a warrant for your interrogation with truth drug. Would you care to examine it?”

The officer handed a vidisplay to Nyk. He read the document. “Signed by Tomyka Wells.”

“I’ve been authorized to offer you this.” The officer poked the vidisplay and handed it back to Nyk.

“The no-contest agreement. Tomyka is trying to intimidate me into signing it. I won’t.”

“Will you sign a voluntary interrogation consent form?”

“No.”

“Then, we do it the hard way. We will execute the warrant.” He turned to another officer. “Where’s the witness?”

The officer left and returned with Senta. “Nykkyo -- PLEASE cooperate. Sign the no-contest form. I don’t want to see you like this. Sign it and we can be home by evening.” Nyk shook his head.

The officer read the warrant aloud. “The subject has been read the warrant. Witness, please

sign.”

“Don't make me do this, Nyk,” Senta said. Nyk turned his head. He heard the scanpad chirp as Senta pressed her wrist to it.

The officer escorted her from the treatment room. “We'll get started as soon as the staff medic arrives,” the interrogator said.

The nurse sat beside Nyk. “Let me give you some advice...”

“What advice?” Nyk replied. “Have you undergone this?”

“Yes, I have. During training, all attendants are required to experience the procedures they may administer -- to better understand what the subject is enduring. Nykkyo -- don't fight the drug. You can't win -- they'll keep upping the dose. Just the other day we interrogated a young woman. She was such a beautiful girl -- she looked like she belonged in one of the finishing schools. I felt sorry for her -- the poor thing fought the drug, and was so sick. Give yourself to it -- you'll be thankful afterward.”

A medic entered and took his seat at the control panel. “We have no signal on number seven probe,” he said. The nurse replaced the electrode. “That's better. We're ready to begin.”

The nurse sat beside him. “Are you afraid?”

“A little,” he replied.

“Would you like me to hold your hand?” He nodded.

“We're starting the agent,” the interrogator said. “Zero-five...” Nyk began to feel a burning sensation radiating up his left arm. “Zero-seven.” He tightened his grip on the nurse's hand. A roaring filled his ears.

“Relax and give yourself to it,” the nurse said.

“One-zero.”

Nyk closed his eyes. He felt as if he were falling...

“Nykkyo... Nykkyo...” He opened his eyes. The room was spinning. He grabbed the sides of the pallet. Slowly a pair of green eyes came into focus. “Nykkyo -- are you all right?”

“Senta!”

“They told me you gave in and they needed a light dose. I was thankful for that. Oh, Nyk! I do care for you. You probably don't believe it right now, but I do. I want you home -- so I can keep an eye on you.”

“Try to sleep,” the nurse said. “Your brainwaves will return to normal sooner. Would you like a sedative?” Nyk nodded. She lifted the hem of his tunic and jabbed an injector into his thigh. He heard the snap of its discharge. A fog enveloped him.

Nyk stood in his cell. An attendant opened the door. “Nykkyo Kyhana.” A middle- aged man in an official-looking *xarpa* addressed Nyk. “I’ll be representing you at your hearing.”

“Illya,” Nyk replied. “Illya Kronta. Good to see you again.”

“I wish it were under more pleasant circumstances. How are you feeling?”

“No unpleasant after-effects. Where’s Suki?”

“She’s being cared for. I suppose you know what Agency Enforcement is asking.”

“To keep me onworld, and to quarantine her.”

“I’m afraid so. Nyk -- I have the transcript of your interrogation here. I think it helps your cause.”

“How?”

“It proves you acted in good faith based on your beliefs. There was no malice -- no ulterior motives -- you were convinced you were acting in the best interest of the Hegemony. You did the right thing, not signing Tomyka’s no-contest agreement. It was drafted with the assumption of malicious intent.”

“I wasn’t about to admit to something I didn’t do. May I see the transcript?” Kronta handed Nyk a vidisplay. He began scrolling through the document. “I’m glad I don’t recall any of it. Some of this is deeply humiliating.” He handed the vidisplay to Kronta. “Now what?”

“Let’s work together and begin planning your defense.”

“You told me you’re a Kyhana scholar.”

“Yes, Nyk -- I’ve been reading your translation of Koichi’s journal. I found it fascinating.”

“I think there may be evidence in the journal. I’d like access to my datacells.”

“You’ll need a vidisplay, too. I’ll see what I can arrange.”

Nyk paced in the interview room. “You heard the arguments and what Agency Enforcement is asking the committee,” Kronta said.

“Why can’t Suki stand before the committee and hear what they have to say?”

“She’s an offworlder.”

“Her fate’s being debated as if she were ... I don’t know what -- some possession.”

“I had an off-the-record conversation with one of Tomyka’s aides. Tomyka will agree to have the infant returned to Earth -- after she delivers it, of course.”

“And, Suki?”

“Quarantine.”

Nyk looked at Kronta with tears in his eyes. "It's inhumane -- to separate a mother from her child, never to be seen again."

"There's much more at stake than one individual."

"She'd be so unhappy here -- unbearably miserable."

"Tomyka will put forth the proposition if she can't be happy here, it might be a kindness to ... to euthanize her."

"No!" Nyk stood and looked out the narrow window onto the groundcar lot. "I thought we were a civilized people, Illya."

"I'd hate to have it come to that. Nyk, I am on your side in this. I do understand how you feel."

"How could you understand? How could anyone understand who hasn't lived it?"

"What makes you assume I haven't lived it? I started my career as an ExoAgent on Earth. I'm the only one on the committee who has -- the rest have come up through other branches. I was stationed in Paris, using the Earth name of Pierre LaCroix."

"So, you've seen Earth."

"Nyk, sit down and listen to what I have to say." Nyk returned to his seat across from Kronta. "I too, fell in love with an Earth woman. Her name was Daphne, and she was an American student spending some time in Paris. Unfortunately, she learned of my true nature."

"Was she quarantined? Euthanized?"

"No -- my Agent-in-Chief handled the affair with delicacy. I was sent up -- before my tour ended. My record shows the reason was an 'indiscretion' -- Agency jargon for an inappropriate relationship with a member of that planet's population. No mention was made of my true infraction. Daphne promised never to tell another soul."

"Did she keep that promise?"

"I have no idea. I was pulled from the field without ever seeing her again. I don't know if she's dead or alive." He pressed his hand to his eyes. "I love her to this day ... So, you see Nyk -- I do understand what you're going through."

"Is Daphne on the critical path to the Centauri mission?"

"No. Fortunately, there's no link between her line and the members of the *Floran* crew. I've used my authority to go through the family records as far as I can -- but I see no evidence of a link."

"If your superiors discovered..."

"I'm sure they'd push to quarantine her, too. Destiny has a way of punishing us temporal offenders, Nyk. My punishment is to enforce the very rule I violated. If Daphne has kept her promise -- and I believe she has -- then she and Sukiko are the only Earth people who know of our existence and

mission. That's assuming Daphne is still alive."

"How many other Florans know of Daphne?"

"My Agent-in-Chief retired and passed away a number of years ago. Only you and I know, now. I'm telling you this to demonstrate I am sincere when I say I understand what you're going through, and I am on your side. I trust you won't use this information to my disadvantage."

"Of course not, Illya. I harbor no ill will against Daphne. I wouldn't want to see her harmed for what certainly was not her fault."

"You are a good man, Nykkyo -- better than some on the committee who would see me harmed through injury to her."

"Tomyka?"

"I name no names."

"Illya, the lineage between Suki and Koichi Kyhana is nearly beyond doubt. Let's assume she does adjust to quarantine -- let's go so far as to assume she gives up her child willingly. There are still temporal implications. Without my interference, she would have had to play a role in her son's formation. Without her influence, her son might not found the family line -- Koichi might not develop into the man he was -- he might choose another career and not join the Centauri mission. The results are just as disastrous to us."

"That, Nyk, is the strongest argument in favor of returning her to Earth."

"The same can be extended to me. Without my interference, Suki would likely have had a man in her life. Destiny chose me to replace him."

"That is more tenuous, Nyk. Who's to say the circumstances of her pregnancy wouldn't have fallen exactly as they did without your interference? She might very well be waiting for the man who will help her form her son."

"It was evidence for that claim I was searching for before I was ... interrupted," Nyk replied.

"That argument has my sympathies, Nyk. Convincing the committee will be another matter."

Nyk sat in an Internal Affairs meeting room. To his left was Illya and to his right Senta. Across from him sat Tomyka Wells and other oversight committee members. "We've heard the charges and the arguments," Wells said. "Have we any other exhibits?"

Illya stood. "I have a recording of an interview I held with Sukiko Kyhana. The transcript is available, and I would like to enter it as an exhibit. I also would like the committee to view a portion of the interview."

Wells glanced left and right. "I see no objections."

Nyk looked at a vidisplay. He saw Suki sitting at a table. She was wearing an orange confinement tunic.

“What do you know of temporal interference?” Kronta asked in the recording.

“I understand how my descendants play into the forming of your world,” she replied with her responses interpreted into Floran. “I understand the importance of avoiding events that could affect the Centauri mission and alter its outcome. This isn't a role I chose -- it was thrust upon me -- but it's a role I take seriously. Nykkyo has given me a gift -- I know what will come of my child's children's children's children. How many have that privilege?”

“What would be the impact on you, personally, of temporal interference?”

She looked down and closed her eyes. “I would never have met Nykkyo.” Nyk glanced at Senta glowering at him and buried his face in his hands.

“Does he mean that much to you?”

“I owe him my life ... at least twice over. I love him. He promised to help me bear and raise my child.”

“Can you do that without him?”

“I don't want to face that prospect.”

“Face it you must.”

“I don't know. I honestly don't know. I know I could with him.”

“Can you keep knowledge of our world and mission from other members of your population?”

“Oh, yes -- for I fear the outcome of such contamination as much as you. There may be those on my world who'd profit from such knowledge. I'm not one of them -- I have far more to lose than gain from exploiting what I know.”

“Do you have anything to add?”

“Nykkyo has shown me you are a kind, gentle and generous people. I ask you to be generous now -- generous to him. Nykkyo will do your cause far more good on Earth with me than if he stays here. Please, be generous now.” The vidisplays went dark.

Tomyka stood. “We will recess briefly while the committee deliberates.”

Nyk leaned to Kronta. “Aren't you joining them?”

“I recused myself. As your advocate, I represent a conflict of interest.”

“And, it's not a conflict for Tomyka to vote?”

“She'll only cast a tie-breaker.”

“I wasn't aware you planned to show that interview. I wish you had warned me.”

"She carried herself well, Nyk. Sukiko reminds me in ways of my Daphne. I could almost hear Daphne's voice in that interview." He put his hand on Nyk's shoulder. "I knew it would do no harm, and it might sway a vote or two."

"Isn't the outcome a foregone conclusion?"

"If it were, we wouldn't bother holding this hearing. I've canvassed the committee. In the matter of Sukiko's fate, votes are divided. I fear they're much less so in the question of your case."

The committee filed into the room. Tomyka Wells addressed Nyk, "Mr Kyhana, will you please stand?"

Nyk stood. She manipulated a handheld vidisplay. "Nykkyo Kyhana, after due deliberation, we have arrived at the following conclusions. First is in regard to your cohabitation with the Earth woman, in direct violation of Agency rules and regulations. For this act, you are stripped of your Agency credentials and your transit privileges are hereby revoked. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Second is in regard to your unauthorized transit from Earth to Floran, and your unauthorized transport of an Earth person to the homeworld. This is the second time you've transported this individual, and the committee cannot allow such behavior go unanswered. You are sentenced to three years of planetbound economic incarceration, to be followed by five years of probation. Do you understand this?"

"Yes -- I understand."

"We will not mark you as an incorrigible. Needless to say, you must be on your best behavior for the next eight years. Do you have anything to say?"

"What will become of Suki?"

"The committee has weighed the options of quarantine and returning her to Earth. We have considered the transcript of her interview, and we believe there is a greater risk of temporal interference quarantining her here than returning her to Earth. This was a narrow decision. We will make arrangements to have an Agency enforcement team return her to Earth and into the care of her parents."

"Will I be permitted to see Suki before she leaves for Earth? She won't understand."

Wells glared up at him. "You are remanded to the custody of your wife. This case is closed." She stood and left the council room.

Kronta stood. "It was a satisfactory outcome. Sukiko will be returned to Earth. I believe her interview made the difference."

"You call this satisfactory? Three years economic incarceration!"

"You were looking at ten years, Nyk. That's what Tomyka requested. I've made arrangements to speak with Sukiko and to inform her of the committee's decision. You may accompany me."

Nyk followed Kronta to a wing of the Internal Affairs building. Kronta scanned his wrist and spoke to an attendant, who led them to an interview room. Another attendant brought Suki.

Nyk opened his arms and she fell into them. “Have you heard?” he asked.

“No.”

“They're sending you home to Earth. Kronta tells me an enforcement agent will escort you to your house in Queens.”

“What of you?”

“They've revoked my travel privileges and sentenced me to three years of economic incarceration.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means my personal ID code will be marked such that I cannot travel except on foot, use the vidphones or purchase anything except sufficient food to keep from starving. Normally, those sentenced would be turned over to a shelter, but I've been remanded into Senta's care.”

“Oh, Nykkyo!” She fell against him sobbing.

“I will keep my promise,” he whispered into her ear. “This world cannot hold me. I will find a way home to you. The question's not if but when. This time, it may take a while.”

“Three years?”

“Three Floran years -- about two and a half Earth years. You must take care of yourself.”

“I'll try.”

“I'm sorry I won't be there to help you with the birth of your ... of our child, *korlyta* . I'll be in touch as I can.”

“I know you will.”

An attendant entered. Kronta nodded toward the door. “Goodbye, *korlyta* . I'll see you later.”

The attendant escorted Nyk from the room. “Nykkyo! Oh, Nick!” he heard Suki cry as he walked down the corridor.

Nyk sat beside Senta as the monorail train headed north to Floran City. “You'll need to find something to do,” she said.

“I already have something to do. I'm going to continue revising my translation of Koichi's journal.”

“Nyk, you spent years on the first translation.”

“Now I have Earth experience. Much of the original translation lacks that perspective. And, I have Midoro Kyhana's journal to work on, too.”

“You can do that in your spare time.”

“It seems I'll have nothing but spare time.”

“I'm making arrangements for you to work in the sequencing labs.”

“Doing what?”

“You'll be running a DNA sequencing machine. Just because your ID's been marked is no reason you can't be a productive member of society.”

“I'm going to go sit in the nosecone.” Nyk stood and walked through the coaches to the front of the train. He sat in a seat in the front row, buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

6 -- Economic Incarceration

Nyk sat at a vidisplay in Senta's apartment in Floran City. He loaded a datacel and began scanning through text in Esperanto. The doorchime sounded. It sounded again.

“Nyk, can you get that?”

He walked to the front door and pressed the actuator. The door slid open to reveal Illya Kronta. “Come in.”

“Nyk, I wanted to tell you -- I have word Sukiko was safely returned to her parents in New York.”

“Did you take her to her home?”

“Our enforcer delivered her to Seymor and he took her home.”

“Thanks.”

“I also wanted to tell you -- I saw how you and she interacted at the ... in Sudal. I have a debt to pay in that regard, Nyk. I assure you I'll work behind the scenes to try to mitigate, if not reverse, this outcome.”

“Thanks again, Illya.”

Kronta gave Nyk a two-fingered salute and headed out the door.

Senta stepped from the bedroom in a short, sleeveless robe. “Nyk, now we're together again -- I want to work out some living arrangements. You are, of course, welcome to share my bed.”

“I'll use the guest room. I figure I'd end up there three nights out of ten, anyway.”

“Oh, we are being the pouty adolescent, aren't we? Very well -- use the guest room. You can ride the skimmer with me to the labs.”

“What about days you don't go to the labs? It's too far to walk, and I can't take the tubecar.”

“I'm glad you brought that up. I was speaking to Central Admin about this particular difficulty.” She presented him with a crystal cylinder on a chain. “This is a tubecar pass. It will permit transit between the platform servicing this building and the sequencing labs. You may use it on days I'm not headed there.” She faced him and placed her hands on his hips. “Nyk, please -- it is for the best. I know you don't see it so right now, but you will.” She leaned to kiss his cheek but he pulled away. “Fine. I'll be patient.”

He headed into the study and returned to Koichi's writing.

Nyk stood on the balcony. He saw the skimmer approaching. “Senta -- your skimmer's here.” The craft hovered adjacent to the balcony. The door swung up, stairs descended and the pilot stepped out. “Good morning Mr Kyhana. I haven't seen you in a while.”

“You'll be seeing a good deal of me, Rez.”

Senta approached from the living room. “Good day, Rez.”

“The labs this morning, m'am?” Rez helped her into the craft.

“Yes, Rez. Oh, Mr Kyhana will be coming with us.”

“Yes, m'am.” He gestured Nyk into the skimmer. Nyk sat beside Senta and looked down on the city as they flew toward the labs.

The sequencing labs were located on the southern outskirts of Floran City. The skimmer descended onto a lawn of a low-growing native plant. Rez opened the door and helped Senta step out. “Thank you, Rez. Tonight, the regular time. You're free 'til then.”

“Good day, m'am.”

Nyk stepped onto the lawn and headed into the building. “This way, Nyk. I'll turn you over to one of the Arodsu twins to get you started in the lab.”

He followed her to an ante-room. The sequencing labs were visible through a transparent wall. A young woman with dark blond hair sat behind a desk. She stood when Senta entered. “Good morning ... Katha?”

“Ratha, m'am.”

Senta looked at Nyk. "I can never keep them straight. Ratha, Mr Kyhana will be working in the sequencing labs for a while. Perhaps you could get him started?"

"Certainly. Step this way."

"I'll see you tonight, Nyk."

Nyk followed Ratha into an airlock. She handed him clean-room garb. "Here, Mr Kyhana..."

"Call me Nykkyo -- or Nyk."

"You must wear this, Nyk. We can't have contamination of the samples." He slipped into a jumpsuit and a transparent hood. She opened the inner door to the airlock and led him to a machine. "This is a genetic sequencer. This is a tray of samples -- each vial is coded with a lot number. You read the lot number aloud and drop the sample here."

"Isn't there a way to automate this?"

"It is all automated from that point on -- we have to start somewhere. These are lentils from the latest crop. Each container of lentils must be sampled and sequenced."

Nyk picked up a vial, read the label and dumped its contents into the machine. A red indicator flashed. Ratha giggled. "No, not like that. You must wait for a blue signal before dropping the sample." She pressed a control to clear the indicator.

Nyk picked up another vial and read the label. He waited for the blue indicator and dumped the contents into the machine. The red indicator lit again.

"You'll note several lentils in each vial. You must read the label once for each seed and place the samples individually."

"Why can't I read the label once and drop all the lentils at the same time?"

"Because the machine doesn't know how many samples there are."

"I could read the label and say, 'three samples.' That would be so much easier than reading a fifteen-digit number three times."

Ratha rolled her eyes. "The machine's not set up that way."

"Okay, let me try it again." Nyk picked up another vial and read the number. The blue indicator lit. He tapped a lentil out of the vial and placed it in the machine. The indicator went dark.

"Perfect," Ratha said. "Why don't you start on this rack of sample trays? We'll bring more when you're done with those."

"Thank you, Rez," Senta said as she stepped onto the balcony. "That'll be all." He nodded, climbed into the skimmer and it headed from the apartment building. "Nyk, how was your day?"

"Torture! That job is ... torture -- I can't think of another word for it. I hope you didn't make any

commitments for me, because I will not spend my days doing that sort of busy- work.”

“You have to do something, Nyk.”

“Who says I have to do anything? If they had sent me to a shelter, what would I do? Nothing! Maybe panhandle on the street, but nothing other than that. I'd rather do nothing than run a sequencer day in and day out. Do you know how mind-numbing it is? Have you ever done it?”

“I designed those machines.”

“I could give you some ideas for improving them, and I'm sure your staff would appreciate it.”

“Give it a few days -- if you really can't stand it, I can find something else for you to do.”

“All right, Senta. I'll give it a few days.”

Nyk stood before the sequencing machine and fed it samples. “Nykkyo...”

He turned. “Yes, Katha?”

“I'm Katha.”

“Yes, Katha?”

“You'll need to work faster. We'll never get through our daily quota at that rate.”

He picked up a vial, read the number and dropped a seed into the machine. The red indicator lit. “Katha, what did I do wrong this time?” he yelled.

She looked at the machine. “You read an incorrect number.”

“I read what's on the vial.”

“No, you didn't...” She held up the vial and pointed to a status screen. “You transposed the last two digits.” Nyk re-read the label on the vial and the blue indicator lit. “Just be careful.”

Nyk pulled another tray of samples from the rack and began processing them. He felt a tap on his shoulder. “What now, Katha?”

She pointed to the rack of samples he had completed. “Nyk, there are still seeds in some of these vials.”

“Not all the vials have the same number,” he replied. “You said I had to work faster. One way is to use three specimens from each lot.”

“Why do you think there are four, five or six seeds in some?”

“I don't know -- but many have only three. I figure if three is good enough for some, it's good enough for all.”

Katha cradled her forehead in her hand. “No, Nyk. We must use all the samples we're sent.”

“I'll do that tray over.”

“No -- we'll let this one go.” Nyk watched her walk toward her desk.

He pulled another tray of sample vials from a rack and began removing the stoppers. “Nykkyo,” he heard Katha say.

“What now?”

“Why are you taking the stoppers off all the vials?”

“I thought it would be more efficient -- faster.”

“Just make sure the specimens don't get mixed up.”

“Absolutely not,” he replied and began feeding lentils into the sequencer. One of the vials slipped from his fingers and he stooped to retrieve it. His shoulder bumped the tray, turning it over and dumping the samples onto the floor.

“That's enough. Nyk, you're not having a good time. Why don't you take the rest of the day off?”

“If you think so.”

“I do think so.” Katha picked up a vial, read the label and dropped the seed.

Nyk left the sequencing room, slipped from the clean-room garb and headed out of the building to the tubecar platform. With the crystal pass he ordered a car for the apartment building and rode there. He admitted himself into the apartment and stretched out on the guest room bed.

The apartment door opened and Senta stepped in. “Nykkyo! Are you here?” Nyk stepped from the guest room. She glowered at him. “Would you like to explain yourself?”

“Katha said I should go home.”

“Katha told me what happened. She said you were deliberately sabotaging the sequencing.”

He shook his head. “No -- I told you, I can't do that sort of work.”

“She said you were intentionally wasting samples.”

“Senta, if you're looking for reproducible results, wouldn't it make sense to use the same number of specimens for each lot? If you have lot-to-lot variation in your results, it may be due to lot-to-lot differences in the number of specimens.”

“...All right, Nyk -- you have a point... Still, the way you behaved -- you're making me a laughing stock.”

“Katha didn't seem to understand. How can you have people in charge of running the lab if they

don't know statistics? I'm not a statistician, but I know that much. And, I don't understand why you have difficulty telling the twins apart. Katha has a birthmark on her left cheek."

"I never noticed."

"I would've expected a brilliant scientist to be more observant."

"Nyk, don't you see? You can make a contribution, if you'd only want to. If you had given yourself a chance to see how the lab works -- built a rapport with the people there -- maybe you could make suggestions to improve it. Now, I'm afraid you've alienated yourself and nothing you say or do will be taken seriously."

He glared at her. "I know the contribution I want to make -- the one I was making. It was you who pulled me from it."

She rolled her eyes. "If you would really rather do nothing than work in the sequencing lab, then by all means, do nothing."

Nyk sat in the study scanning Koichi's journal. The sound of the skimmer door slamming shut came from the balcony. He stood and watched the craft carry Senta into the distance. With a wristscan he attempted to open a vidphone session. The display responded, denied. Nyk stepped from the apartment and rode the lift to the tubecar platform. The kiosk responded to his wristscan, denied.

He rode the lift to the ground floor and stepped onto the street. The park lay about fifteen blocks from the apartment complex. Nyk headed in that direction, passing residential towers, professional buildings and government offices. Central Admin! He cursed the institution -- how it micro-managed the day-to-day life of each and every Floran. Fully a third of the Floran population had jobs directly relating to Central Admin. A third of the population was employed to ride herd over the other two thirds. Before his ExoAgency tour he hadn't given it a second thought. Now, he had tasted the sort of personal liberty offered on Earth and the Floran way galled him.

His route crossed 257th Street. He stood at the crosswalk and watched ten lanes of groundcars perform their ballet, choreographed by the centralized transit computers. None of the vehicles were privately owned. Most were livery cars hired for personal trips. A few bore emblems of government offices -- Central Admin, the Food Service and the like. No one on Floran carried a driver's license -- or needed to. All transportation, except for the skimmers, was automated and controlled by Central Admin.

He received the walk signal and crossed as the transit computers parted the sea of groundcars for him. The sidewalk ahead was packed with pedestrians, all headed toward him. He pushed and jostled his way through the crowd.

Nyk arrived at the park. The purple lawn was planted with a low, moss-like plant collected from the uplands on the slopes of the volcanic mons. Neatly groomed planting areas displayed specimens from around the planet.

On one side was a prairie of the knee-high horsetail-like vegetation covering most of the lone continent. Beyond was an man-made rise covered with taller vegetation from the hardwood forests on the mons. To the other side was an area planted with palm-like trees from the south.

He walked past a field where co-ed teams of youths played a game derived from soccer. An

artificial lake lay at the center of the park. A sandy beach had been constructed along part of the lakeshore. A small number of sunbathers lay, nude, on the sand. Nyk sat on a bench overlooking the lake. Floran City's skyline reflected in the water. He watched couples -- men with women, men with men and women with women -- holding hands as they strolled along the path near the lake.

He stretched out on the bench and laced his fingers behind his head. Above him was Floran's indigo sky, and he could make out some brighter stars even in daylight. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them he saw the orange sun had disappeared behind the volcanic mons in the west. Nyk headed back toward the apartment. He reached 257th Street, turned right and walked past a line of people waiting to use the groundcar kiosk. Up the street was the Arcade. He passed by the lift to the tubecar station and walked into the mall.

Near the door was one of the around-the-clock sex clubs. A greeter -- a young woman in a tunic cut to expose her left breast -- waved to catch his attention and beckoned him in. Nyk shook his head and made a hand signal that said, no thanks.

He walked past the state-run drugstore with its inventory of intoxicants and recreational chemicals. Ahead lay his destination -- the food store. Nyk picked up a polymer fiber shopping bag and walked past shelves of packaged meals and a small display of raw ingredients -- whole grains and some green vegetables. He placed a package of sweet snack wafers into the sack and headed for the self-service checkout.

Another shelf caught his eye. He grabbed a clear polymer sack filled with translucent blue spheres. They were a hard candy, flavored with a mildly intoxicating herb native to Gamma- 5. He slipped the candies into his shopping bag and set the bag into the checkout well. A scanpad illuminated white and he scanned his wrist.

The scanpad buzzed, glowed red and displayed the message, unauthorized purchase. Nyk looked into the bag, removed the hard candies and set them aside. He scanned his wrist again. The scanpad chirped and glowed blue. He removed the sack and headed out the door.

Nyk pressed his wrist to the doorscan and the apartment door slid open. Senta approached him wearing a short, sleeveless robe. "Where have you been?"

He set the package of snack wafers on the table. "I walked over to the Arcade and used some food credits to buy these. I discovered I'm not allowed to purchase those blue candies I like. I'm surprised I was permitted to buy these." He held up the wafers. "It must be they contain some nutrients."

"I'll buy some for you the next time I go out. I was worried about you. It's almost dark." Senta placed a polymer fiber basket on the table. It was filled with recreational drug inhalers and injector cartridges.

"Ah, you're having company and you want me kept from underfoot. No problem, *korlyta*."

"I'd thank you not to sneer when you use that word. I recall when it meant something tender between us."

"It still means something tender." He picked up a cartridge and examined it -- a sexual performance enhancer. "Who's coming tonight? Someone from the lab? From another branch of the

Food Service?”

“I don't understand why my social life disturbs you so.”

“I don't understand why Suki disturbs YOU so.”

“Florans can't be having love affairs with the Earth population.”

“She's only one woman.”

“She's an Earth woman. Nyk, go out and find a nice Floran girl. Find a dozen and I wouldn't care.”

Nyk grabbed the snack wafers. “I'll be in the study, looking at Koichi's journal.”

The chime rang and Nyk heard Senta open the door.

“Come in -- make yourself at home.” He rolled his eyes and continued to examine the journal, making notes on passages alluding to Koichi's Earth ancestors.

“Try one of these,” he heard Senta say. “Mmm, feels good, doesn't it?” She giggled. “Now, you're tickling me.”

“Are you ready to try one of these?” he heard a man's voice.

“Right there,” she said. Nyk heard the snap of an injector's discharge. “Now, I'll do you ... I'm starting to feel it already.” He heard another snap and more giggling.

Nyk shook his head and inserted another datacel. He could hear heavy breathing coming from the living room. He slid open the study door and peered out. Senta was on the sofa, straddling a man's lap. Her robe was open and pulled back across her shoulders. He picked up an empty tumbler, walked to the kitchen and filled it with water. On his way back to the study he stopped. “Hello, Rez.”

The man looked up. “Hello, Mr Kyhana.” Senta pulled closed her robe.

“Did you park the skimmer outside?” Nyk asked. “Perhaps you'd find a bit more privacy, there. Did that venue occur to you ... *korlyta* ?” He walked to the study and pulled the door closed.

“I'm sorry,” he heard Senta say. “Let's start over ... there ... mmm, that feels good...”

Nyk switched off the vidisplay, picked up the pack of wafers and carried them to the living room. He switched on the wall-sized vidisplay, selected a public-affairs channel, plopped into a chair and propped his feet on a table. The snack wafers crunched as he ate.

“Nykkyo, do you mind?” Senta asked.

“I'm done with the journal tonight. I thought I'd catch up on the news.”

“Let's go into my bedroom,” she whispered.

"I really should go," Rez said. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"There'll be only one to take to the labs."

Rez tied the belt on his robe, slipped into his sandals and left. Senta stood between Nyk and the vidisplay. "Thank you. Rez doesn't get out much. I wanted a quiet evening with him to..."

"To thank him for servicing you ... as skimmer pilot?"

"That was uncalled for!"

"Sending enforcers to abduct me from Earth was uncalled for."

Senta began slapping his face. "You're trying to make me regret turning you in! I'll make YOU regret it!" Nyk shielded his face with his forearms. "If you do anything like that again I'll ... I'll ..."

"Throw me out?" Nyk retreated toward the guest room. "Remember, Senta -- you requested me remanded into your custody."

She pushed him into the guest room. "I don't want to see your face 'til morning!" she said and pulled the door closed.

Nyk heard the skimmer door and headed into the living room. Senta stepped from the balcony. "How was your day?" she asked.

"About as to be expected, since I can't go anywhere or do anything. Waking me before dawn was a nice touch, Senta. It made the day seem ... longer."

"Nyk, I've been struggling with something. I've learned I'm needed for a stint on T-Delta. I've been trying to figure out what to do with you."

"You wouldn't take me there -- would you?"

"I considered it." She eyed him. "I also considered placing you in the custody of Dad."

"Veska's on vacation on Gamma-5."

"Yes -- unfortunately, you've been ordered planetbound, so both T-Delta and Gamma-5 are out of the question." Senta paced the living room. "I'm happy we never had a child. You try my patience enough -- living with one adolescent is plenty." She turned and looked his way. "I don't know what to do with you. I can't take you with me and I dare not leave you here by yourself -- there's no telling what mischief you'd make." She continued her pacing. "Andra has agreed to keep an eye on you."

"I didn't think you and she were on speaking terms."

"She's doing this for you, not for me. Nykkyo, I know you and Andra have something going. I'm thinking I can exploit that fact. Perhaps spending time with her will take some of the sting out of your confinement -- make you a bit more cooperative -- get your mind off the Earth slut. A few nights in the arms of a woman as good-looking as Andra would sweeten anyone's mood."

“Andra and I might sleep together but I won't make love with her.”

“Why in Destiny's name not?”

“When I return to Suki, I want to tell her I've been faithful.”

“That ridiculous Earth notion of sexual fidelity.”

“It's not so ridiculous -- I rather like it. Sharing the gift with every third person tends to cheapen it ... don't you think? Or, have you never considered it in that light?”

“Nykkyo, is this why you refuse to share my bed?”

“It's among the reasons. I will return to her, Senta -- the question isn't if but when.”

“You'll never have your transit privileges restored with that attitude.”

“That's my problem, isn't it?”

“Fine, Nyk -- have it your way. After the past few days, I'm looking forward to some time away from you. Andra has given me her assurances she won't cooperate with any of your schemes. You'd behave yourself, wouldn't you? If you tried anything, it would fall hard on Andra, and I know you wouldn't want that.”

He shook his head. “No. I don't want to make trouble for Andra.”

“Good. We'll go to Sudal tomorrow. I'll leave for T-Delta from there.”

The train pulled into the Sudal monorail station. Nyk stepped out with his travel case. “A Food Service groundcar should be waiting here,” she said. “Over there.”

He popped the cowl and climbed in. “Car, the Residence,” Senta ordered. “Confirmed, car go.” The vehicle rolled from the parking area onto the roadway spur servicing the train station and headed east toward the coast. Senta looked at Nyk. “Now, remember -- behave yourself.”

The car pulled up to the Residence. The shutters were up and Andra's Sudal University groundcar sat outside the structure. Senta popped open the cowl. Nyk stepped out and headed for the structure.

Andra met him at the door. She glowered at Senta.

“Andra -- don't you think this silly argument has gone on long enough?” Senta asked. “I'm willing to put our disagreements behind us and accept your apology.”

“All right, Senta,” Andra replied. “I am sorry... I'm sorry you are so hard-headed you can't see what it is Nyk is trying to do. I'm sorry you're such a selfish, petty and vindictive woman. I'm very sorry you became so frustrated with me your only recourse was to call me names and strike me. I'm sorry...”

“That's enough.” Senta's eyes narrowed. “I can see this conversation is going nowhere.” She turned to Nyk. “I'll be back for you in ten days. Remember -- you promised to behave yourself.”

“I remember.”

“Good.” She turned and headed toward the car.

“Senta,” Andra called to her. “I have your personal belongings.” She set a polymer packing crate onto the ground outside the door.

“I don't want to lug this to T-Delta with me. Give it to me when I return.”

“It'll be sitting right here.” Andra turned and closed the door.

Nyk climbed the stairs to the second level and looked out. Senta was struggling to load the crate into the groundcar. He chuckled and shook his head.

Andra approached and threw her arms around him. “Oh, Nyk, I'm so happy to see you. Are you all right?”

“As right as I can be.”

“How's Sukiko?”

“She was returned to her parents. I don't know anything else.”

“You haven't spoken to her?”

“I can't. My communications have been cut off.” Andra's mouth formed a silent O. “Does Internal Affairs still have an ID trace on you?”

“No,” she replied. “They took that off as soon as they ... captured you.”

“I can't make calls -- but you can.”

Andra smiled and stepped to a vidisplay. She pressed her wrist to the scanpad and Nyk punched in the codes to access the ExoAgency uplink network on Earth. He pressed another code and heard a dial tone. After another code yet he heard ringing. “Hello?”

“Hello, Yasuko. It's Nick Kane.”

“Nick! Oh, my God! Nick! Where are you?”

“I'm out of the country.”

“Oh, Nick -- Sukiko left with you for a short trip. I was surprised to find her on my doorstep the other day. I asked her what happened, but she won't tell me anything. All she said was you and she were traveling, and you were detained. She said she was released but you weren't.”

“I can't add anything to that story.”

“Can you tell me which country? George has some connections -- we can call the State Department -- do something!”

“I'm afraid there's nothing anyone can do.”

“Were you kidnapped? Being held by terrorists? Please, Nick -- tell me what happened.”

“It's really nothing more than a big misunderstanding.”

“Are you being mistreated?”

“No, not at all.”

“Are you in trouble? Do they think you did something?”

“I'm trying to get my ... status sorted out. Visa problems, you know. I called to see how Suki's doing.”

“She's doing well, considering. She's in good spirits.”

“May I speak with her?”

“Oh, Nick, I'm sorry -- she's out for the day. She went to her office at NYU for the morning, and then she was going shopping with Cathy. She'll be upset to know she missed your call.”

“I'll try calling again, later -- when I can. Yasuko, please tell her something...”

“Anything, Nick.”

“Tell her I love her, and I haven't spent a day without thinking of her. Tell her I'm working on resolving this, and I will return to her. I promise I'll return -- or die trying.”

“Please, don't do anything foolish or dangerous, Nick. We can manage 'til you get back.”

“Good bye, Yasuko.” He pressed a control to terminate the call. “Did you catch any of that?” he asked Andra.

“A bit. Her mother's speech sounds -- different.”

“She has a Japanese accent. I love hearing Yasuko speak.”

“It sounds like Sukiko's safe and cared for.”

“I still worry for her. It's a more than a month yet before the baby's due. I must find a way to Earth. It was a mistake bringing Suki here.”

“I'm glad you did. Otherwise I wouldn't have had the chance to get to know her and to make her my friend.”

“I'm more determined than ever to find my own way to Earth and go native -- and thus fulfill my destiny.”

“They'll send more enforcers after you.”

“I’ll take my chances with the enforcers. They’ll have to find me, first. New York is a big place.”

7 -- A Freak Accident

Nyk lay on his childhood bed. The storm shutters were up and the nighttime land breeze wafted through the open house. He could hear the surf washing against the rocks at the base of the bluff.

Andra reached a slender arm across him and pulled herself closer. “Thank you for letting me sleep with you,” she said and kissed his cheek.

“Senta must be safe and sound on T-Delta by now.”

“Yes. Do you know why she goes?”

“To help the Deltans establish a sequencing lab.”

“That’s the official reason. She’s been there four times since you started your Agency tour -- twice since Zander died. I know the real reason she’s drawn there -- Senta doesn’t know I know, but I do.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s a public brothel on T-Delta. The staff are all ex-consorts of colonial ex-officials.”

“You mean they’re all *ax’amfinen* -- I’m sorry, Andra, I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s all right, Nyk. I know I’m an *ax’amfin* .” She kissed his cheek again. “Senta wanted me as her *amfin* . I refused to be bound to her.”

“So, she’s spending her days in meetings and her nights in the arms of *ax’amfinen* . No wonder she didn’t want me tagging along.”

“I feel sorry for her, Nyk.”

“Sorry for Senta? She’s led a charmed life -- her good luck is matched only by my bad.”

“She’s an unhappy woman -- despite her success. She’s searching for something -- for what you and Sukiko have.”

“Are you searching, too?” He caressed her face with the backs of his fingers. “Andra, I’d like it if

you'd find some Sudalese to love you. You're beautiful and a beautiful persona. I'm sure someone in Sudal would love and cherish you. You could have whomever you wanted."

"I have no desire to be a kept woman. You're wrong, Nyk. I can't have the one man I truly want."

"Don't you harbor bitterness for what Zander did? It wasn't just him -- our society had a social contract with you and it was abrogated."

"I don't, Nyk."

"How can you not? You were destined for glamour on a far-away world."

"I was destined for right here. No, Nyk -- I'm not bitter. What's done is done. The past is a rock."

"The past is a rock?"

"Yes," she replied. "It sits there, immutable. We can't change it -- so why dwell on it? I believe each of us has a choice -- to enjoy the beautiful gift of life, or to harbor resentment. I chose the former. I owe it to you."

"To me?"

"When we first met, you told me might-have-beens don't count. You're right -- they don't. I meditated on the truth of it, and I decided then and there to keep the past in the past -- and to get on with enjoying what life offers. I am happy here, working at the sea research center. I'll be happy for a lifetime."

"Don't you wonder? If Destiny's hand had unfolded the universe in a slightly different order -- you might be in a palace on a colony planet right now, hosting a state party."

"Or, I might've been on the staff of that brothel on T-Delta. Remember, might-have-beens don't count. I had my taste of life as a chancellor's consort during our adventure on Lexal. It's not easy -- as you and I discovered."

"What happened on Lexal was hardly typical."

"I am happy, Nyk -- and I owe you thanks for introducing me to Sudal and to the beauty of the sea."

"Are you headed to the university today?" Nyk asked as he sipped his morning tea.

"No. They're still repairing the research platform -- and, installing a redundant inertial sink. I have some reports to finish -- I can do them here."

"I thought as long as I'm stuck here, I'd do some improvements around the house. I thought it would be nice to have a set of steps leading from the bluff to the beach -- so we don't need to climb down the rocks."

"I don't mind climbing the rocks," she said. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was going to use a cutter beam to carve steps into the rock that forms the bluff. It was something my dad wanted to do."

"Carve steps in solid rock with a cutter beam? That'll take ages."

"I have plenty of time." Nyk dumped his cup and tray into the waste reprocessor and headed to the workshop in the house's lower level. He placed the cutter beam and a faceplate onto a levitating pallet, activated the antigrav fields and dragged it to the bluff. He pressed a control on the handle to switch off the antigrav and the pallet settled onto the ground.

After donning the faceplate, Nyk picked up the cutter beam and switched it on. Grasping each handle he pressed both triggers and began cutting an outline into the rock. He looked up and saw Andra, standing on the second level. She waved at him and turned toward the center of the house.

Nyk set down the cutter and picked up a length of polymer fiber cord. He placed the butt of the cutter on the ground and looped the cord over one handle and across one of the triggers. With his right wrist positioned over the instrument's muzzle he pressed the other trigger with his left hand and stepped on the cord.

"Yaahh!" he screamed. "Yaahh!" He ran toward the house, cradling his right arm in his left.

Andra came running toward him. "What happened? Nykkyo, what happened?"

"I was setting down the cutter and it discharged."

"Let me see." She held his arm. A deep, circular hole was burned into his wrist.

"It hurts, it hurts!"

"I'll call Internal Affairs. They'll send a skimmer to take you to the clinic." She helped him into the house and bid him lie on an upholstered bench. "The skimmer will be here shortly," she said.

He looked up into her face. A grey fog filled the periphery of his vision and spread toward the center.

Nyk looked up at the ceiling of a treatment room. He saw a man in hospital garb standing over him and looking down. His right arm was numb. "You're in shock," the medic said. "You'll be all right. It's a nasty burn -- how did you do it?"

"I was using a cutter beam. I set it down and it went off."

"You nearly burned a hole clean through. We're putting a team together to patch you up. You may lose some mobility in that wrist, but you'll be all right. We're putting a neural inducer on your head. It'll induce deep anesthesia until the surgeons are finished. Do you understand?" Nyk nodded. "We're switching on the inducer now..."

"Nykkyo?" He awoke to someone calling his name. Four pale-blue eyes looked down on him and slowly merged into a pair. "Nykkyo, are you all right?"

His right arm was encased from his elbow to his hand in a metallic sleeve. He couldn't feel his fingers. "Andra."

"I'm Dr Vonn." A figure spoke to him from the other side of the therapeutic pallet. "I'll give you the good news first -- you will recover. You will lose some range-of-motion in that wrist. The device on your arm is an osteo growth stimulator, to encourage the formation of new bone tissue. We had to remove your metacarpal bone and replace it with a prosthetic. The stimulator will ensure the natural bone will fuse with it."

"My metacarpal bone?"

"We also repaired the tendons you severed, and we have some synthetic skin covering the entrance wound. You'll need to wear the stimulator for about ten days. We'll discharge you tomorrow, and you can return to have the stimulator removed."

Andra poured some green tea for Nyk. He sat, his right arm in a sling and sipped it with his left hand. "Senta's wrong about you," she said, "except for one thing. You are clumsy. She's right about that."

"Thanks."

She threw her arms around him. "It's one of your more endearing traits." She kissed his cheek. "The research platform has been repaired. I promised I'd collect some more bioluminescence specimens. Maybe you'd like to join me."

"I don't see why not."

"I was planning on spending the night on the platform. You might want to pack a case."

Nyk climbed into the groundcar. Andra closed the house and directed the groundcar to the research building on the coast. The car pulled up to a shed.

"I see the shuttlecar's still here," he said. "I wonder how long it'll take the Agency to realize it's missing."

Andra led him to the skimmer and piloted it toward the research platform. Soon the craft was speeding over open sea.

"It wasn't an accident," he said. "It was intentional."

"What was?"

"The cutter beam. I did it on purpose."

"Whatever for?"

"To destroy my personal ID chip. I don't need one here -- I can't do anything or go anywhere."

"Nyk, I've never heard of someone doing that. Why?"

“Now, I'm invisible to agency enforcers -- they'll never find me. I must find my way to Earth. I promised Suki this planet won't hold me, and I'll return to her or die trying.”

“How will you get to Earth?”

“I don't know. I'm still working on that one.”

Andra set the skimmer onto the deck of the research platform. She led Nyk through the hatch to the lab. “This was all lost and had to be replaced. Tonight, when they come to the surface we'll collect our specimens.”

Nyk stood on the research platform deck with his arm around Andra. Night had fallen -- the Floran sky dazzled with stars and illuminated the platform to full-moon brightness. He looked up and spotted a bright white star with four dimmer companions tracing a lopsided rectangle in the sky. He pointed. “There -- that's where my *korlyta* is. Out here the sky is even more dazzling than at the Residence. The stars look close enough to touch. I think I can even see Earth's sun -- or maybe it's my imagination.”

Andra pointed toward the sea. “Look -- they're coming to the surface.” A patch on the surface was faintly glowing purple. Nyk held Andra with his left arm and watched as the glow intensified. Other patches appeared. “Let's collect samples.”

“How?”

“I'll show you. Come.” She led him below deck and to a bulkhead. Behind a door was an inflatable launch with a box at its center. She placed clear polymer sample containers into the launch. “Come on,” she said.

“I'd better not. I don't want to risk getting this gadget wet.” He patted the device on his arm. “I'll watch from the top.”

Andra secured a foam belt around her waist and climbed into the launch. A press of her hand against a control sent it from its slip into the open sea.

Nyk climbed to the deck and watched. The sea was calm, yet it undulated in metre-high swells. Andra steered the boat to the center of a glowing patch. She attached a container to a pole, poked it into the water and drew in a sample. The boat moved over another bright spot and she retrieved another sample.

She extended the pole, stood and leaned over the side of the boat. “Andra!” Nyk shouted. “Don't lean over so far -- you'll capsize the boat!”

She retrieved the sample and waved to him. “One more...” she said and poked the pole deep into the water. A swell rose athwart her and flipped the boat over.

“Andra!” Nyk yelled. He watched as she struggled in the water. Her flotation belt kept her from sinking, but she was head-down in the water. She righted her self and held onto the launch. Nyk saw her cough and retch as she regained her breath. “Andra! Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she yelled. “But everything went to the bottom.”

“Can you flip the boat over?”

“I don't think so.” She started attempting to kick the launch toward the platform, but a current was carrying her from it.

Nyk popped open the door to the skimmer. He sat behind the controls and powered it up. With his hand on the unistick he lifted it from the deck and toward Andra's location. The craft went into station-keeping above her.

He stood by the open door. “Climb onto the boat. When a swell comes along it might lift you enough so I can reach you.” She clambered onto the launch and stood. Nyk lay on his stomach and reached down with his left arm. A swell lifted the launch. Andra grasped for his hand but couldn't hold on. Another swell and she was just out of reach.

“I'll drop it a little lower.”

“The antigrav fields are repelling the launch,” she shouted. “Next swell I'll try jumping.” Andra watched the sea. A swell built and lifted the launch. She jumped and Nyk grasped her forearm. He began pushing backward. She grasped the sill of the door.

“Hang on!” Nyk shouted. He leaned, grabbed the floatation belt and hauled her into the craft.

Andra removed the belt and sat behind the skimmer controls. “Watch the boat. I'm going to try to push it toward the platform with the antigrav fields.”

He looked out the open door. “To the left. Good -- just a little more.” The boat approached its slip. Andra set the skimmer on the deck and rushed below. With a pole she snagged the launch and pulled it into the platform.

“Help me flop it over.” Nyk lifted and the boat was right-side up.

“I don't like the idea of you going out by yourself. You should always have a partner.”

She smiled. “I always do -- partner. Come, let's get those samples.”

“You're going back out?”

“Of course -- that's why we're here.”

“I have a better idea -- grab that long pole.”

Nyk held the skimmer in station-keeping a fraction of a metre above the sea while Andra probed with the pole and retrieved buckets of dimly glowing water. “I never thought of collecting samples from a skimmer.” She retrieved another sample. “That should be good enough.” He directed the skimmer to the platform. “I didn't know you were qualified to pilot one of these.”

“I'm not -- but, it's not much different than a shuttlecar.”

“Does Senta know? If she did, maybe you two would get along better.”

Nyk followed her to the lab where she dumped the samples into larger containers and topped them up with seawater. She passed her hand over the proximity pad to switch off the ambient lighting. The tanks lit up with a dull, purple glow.

"I think that's enough research for one night," Nyk said. "Don't you?" She nodded and fell against him as he embraced her. "Shall we check out the cabins?"

"I'm the one with a better idea this time." She led Nyk to a compartment, retrieved a rolled-up cushion, carried it to the deck and spread it out. Looking into Nyk's eyes she grasped the hem of his tunic and slipped it from his body. He removed hers and they lay beside each other.

Nyk regarded her face. In the starlight her irises were fully dilated, making her eyes look oddly dark. "Andra -- you're such a beautiful woman."

"I'd rather you not say that."

"It's the truth. You are beautiful."

"I despise my beauty, Nyk."

"Why would you?"

"My life has been defined by my looks. When I was little and would walk with my parents, people would stare at me. Of course, at Vebinad Academy, all the girls looked the same. I wish I had been born a *naturida* and led a normal life."

"You're leading a fairly normal one, now."

"I consider myself one of the fortunate few. But I can't walk the streets of Sudal without someone stopping to stare at me. I didn't ask to have this body, Nyk."

"Your features make no difference to how I feel for you."

"I know. It's one reason I so cherish our friendship. I've learned Florans will react in one of two ways upon seeing an *ax'amfin* -- admiration or revulsion. You're a member of the latter category."

"I'm a member no longer. I saw you as a symbol of a loathsome institution. Then, I met the persona living inside your body."

"That's exactly what I mean. You're the first person who wanted my friendship despite my appearance. Even Senta wanted me because of what I am -- not who. I know you're sincere. You saw me as a vile, abhorrent, disgusting creature..."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far." He stroked her cheek.

"But, you liked me anyway -- and, now we're friends."

"Andra, your persona is even more beautiful than the body she lives in."

She smiled. "I don't mind hearing you say that."

Nyk stroked her face and gazed into her eyes. "Senta's right -- I could be happy here with you. Destiny demands something else of me."

"Believe me, Nyk, when I say I want you to return to Earth -- to your Earth woman. I have a dream. In it, I come to Earth to live with you and Sukiko as your sister lover. We'd live in a house and the three of us would sleep together in a big bed. I'd be an aunt to her child. It cannot be, I know." She took his left hand and placed it upon her body. "Do you think Sukiko would begrudge me one night of pleasure with you before you return to her?"

"Do you think I'll return to her so soon?"

She nodded. "You must return and you shall. But tonight -- I'm desperate to feel your touch, Nyk. Do you think Sukiko would understand?"

"Earth people have a different concept of fidelity."

"I know -- I learned some Earth ways when Zander had me there. Perhaps if we didn't actually..."

"That's a rationalization. If we're intimate -- we're intimate. She is my life, Andra."

"She is your destiny. Nyk -- nothing about us threatens what you and Sukiko share. True love is generous. One day she will understand our ways -- and, she will do so with her heart. Take some of the love we make tonight and share it with her -- let her keep it until I can hold her in my own arms again." She guided his hand to her breast.

Nyk sat in the kitchen of the Residence sipping his breakfast tea. He heard the chirp of the doorscan. Senta approached from the lower level. "I see you've kept yourself out of trouble..." She spotted the gadget on his arm. "...What happened to you?"

"Cutter-beam -- it was a freak accident."

She rolled her eyes. "I swear Nykkyo, you're a menace. Are you ready to return to Floran City?"

"I can't. I must go to the clinic in two days to have this removed."

"I suppose leaving you a few more days in Andra's care won't hurt. To be honest, Nyk -- I've grown accustomed to sleeping alone."

"I can't imagine you ever sleeping alone. Andra will bring me to Floran City once I'm done with the doctors."

"There's no rush -- she can keep you as long as she can stand you. I'm going to the lab and then I'm taking the midday train. You will stay out of trouble, won't you?"

"I promise."

Senta set a polymer box onto the table. "This was among the things Andra so kindly packed for

me. It's not mine.”

“I'll make sure she gets it.”

Andra walked through the front door. “How was your day?” Nyk asked her.

“Nothing extraordinary.”

“Senta came by on her way from T-Delta. She wanted me to go home with her, but I told her I had to stay until this comes off.” He held up his right arm. “She left a box on the table -- she said it was with her personal effects, but it's not hers.”

Andra opened the box and withdrew an object. It was a cylinder, about as long as her palm was wide and twice as thick as her thumb. She turned the object over in her fingers. It was made of a silver-white metal that had developed a mottled grey patina. Nyk's eyes popped. “Let me see that,” he said. She handed it to him. He could see remnants of a label, attached with an adhesive. The lettering was in Roman characters. “Do you know what this is?” he asked.

“No -- I thought it might have something to do with the sequencing labs.”

“Andra -- this looks like a data capsule of the sort used aboard the *Floran* -- like the ones that held Koichi's journal. Where did you find this?”

“It was in the bedroom Senta was using.”

“She was using my dad's old bedroom.” His hand began to tremble. “What's left of the label reads 'K-O-I' -- then there's a gap -- 'O - G - I - A'. If this is what I think it is -- the label would have read KOICHI KYHANA GENEALOGIA. This must be Koichi Kyhana's long-lost genealogy!”

Andra looked into the box again and withdrew a pair of datacels. “These were with it.” She handed them to him.

“This is my father's handwriting,” he said, pointing to the labels on the cels.

“KKGR and KKGf?” Andra asked. What could that mean?”

“Koichi Kyhana Genealogy -- Roman and Koichi Kyhana Genealogy -- Floran. My father must've had the same idea I had -- to have the data extracted and to translate Koichi's records. But -- he never bothered to learn Esperanto or the Roman alphabet -- he was too busy with his career -- he never made it past this one capsule. It's how it became separated from the rest of Koichi's journal... Did you examine these cels?”

“No. Shall we now?”

“NO!” He thrust the box toward her. “Take these -- keep them from my sight!”

“Don't you want to know what's on them?”

“Once, I would've -- I would've given anything to see Koichi's genealogy. Now, I don't want to know of their existence. Take these to Korlo Golmya at the Floran Museum. He's the curator of the

Kyhana section -- he'll know what to do with them.”

“Maybe that's not what it is. Shouldn't we examine them?”

“If you must -- I'll let you look at them. I don't want to see them.”

Andra sat at a vidisplay and he sat across from her. “Let's start with KKGR.” She slipped the cel into the display and shook her head. “Nothing -- the cel is unreadable.”

“Do you see Roman characters?”

“I see a message saying, cel unreadable. I'm going to try the other one.” She slipped it into the display. “The date on the cel is 6602 APF.”

“Three years before I was born.”

“It must be in Esperanto,” Andra said. “I can't understand most of the words.” She squinted at the display. “I wish you'd take a look, Nyk... 'GE - NEA - LOG - IA'...”

“STOP! I don't want to know more!”

“But, Nyk -- aren't you curious? Look! Here's Sukiko's name!”

“Andra! Please take that thing out. NOW!”

“It's out. Why wouldn't you want to know?”

“Did you ever hear of Quinn's Postulate?”

She shook her head. “No -- what's that?”

“They didn't teach you temporal theory at Vebinad?”

“I guess they didn't expect an *ax'amfin* witch to need it.

“Andra, that document must contain dates -- the dates people die -- people I love.” He looked up at her. “Who do you love most in the universe?”

“Why -- you, Nyk.”

“Suppose you were delivered a document from the future -- my death certificate -- and you learned I was to die within two years. What would you do as the day approached?”

“I'd try to save you.”

“You can't. If you could, there would be no death certificate -- thus, no way for you to know I needed saving. Quinn's Postulate states it is impossible to alter the future based on precognizance.”

“Has this been proven?”

“No -- or else it would be Quinn's Law. However, given our experience with temporal

phenomena -- nothing has disproved it. So -- there's nothing you can do but watch as the day of my death approaches. You're helpless to alter it. What would you do?"

"I ... I don't know... The best I could do would be to ... to live every moment with you to its fullest -- to show you my love."

"Why not do that anyway? Is threat of loss the only way we appreciate what it is we have? Don't you see?" He picked up the cel. "This is precognizance of the day Suki dies. I don't want to know -- because there's nothing I could do to change it. Nothing to do but love her until... until the dreaded day."

Nyk dropped the capsule and datacells into the box.

"This information does no one any good," he said. Get these out of my sight -- take them to Korlo. All the *Floran* crew genealogies are classified -- to prevent someone making temporal mischief. He'll lock it away for two hundred years. Let those alive then deal with it. I'm going to forget it exists."

The doctor opened a panel on the device covering Nyk's arm. "There. I've switched off the neural block."

"I have fingers again."

"Try wiggling them... good." Vonn unsnapped the sleeve and slipped it off. "Step over here -- I want to image your bones -- it looks very good. We have one last thing to deal with."

"What's that?"

"Your injury destroyed your personal ID chip. I have a replacement." He held up a clear cylinder containing what looked like a grain of rice. "Give me a moment and we'll implant it."

"You're going to implant it in bone?"

"Oh, no -- we can in an infant, because the bone is still growing. In an adult, we must implant them subcutaneously." He loaded the chip into an injector. "This may sting for a moment -- it's coated with healing salve, so any discomfort will be brief." Nyk winced as Vonn drove the needle under his skin at the base of his palm. "There."

Nyk stroked his wrist. "I can feel it."

"Yes -- you'll have a bump there for the rest of your life, but you'll get used to it. This happens more frequently than you might imagine."

"Really?"

Vonn stroked his own wrist. "I have a replacement ID. My original one was damaged by an electric discharge. Deliberate tampering with personal IDs is severely frowned upon. I had no trouble convincing Central Admin yours was an accident."

"Oh?"

"Yes. No one in their right mind would intentionally inflict such an injury when the chips are so

easy to kill through simpler means.” Vonn looked at Nyk's wrist. “Good as new -- not even a scar.”

“Thanks.” Nyk headed for the waiting area. Andra took his hand and walked with him to the groundcars.

Nyk stood on the second floor of the Residence. He saw a skimmer approaching from the west. The craft settled onto the ground outside the building. Nyk strained to read the insignia emblazoned on its side. It was neither the Food Service emblem nor the one for Internal Affairs. “Andra,” he called. “Were you expecting a skimmer?”

Andra rushed down the stairs and outside. Nyk saw the skimmer door open and a tall woman with oat-straw white hair emerged. Andra threw her arms around her and they kissed. A teen-aged girl descended the stairs holding hands with a young boy. The skimmer lifted off and headed toward Sudal as the entourage entered the house and climbed the stairs. “Nyk,” Andra said. “Look who's here!”

Nyk regarded their guest. She was wearing a Floran tunic and a light blue *lifxarpa*. Her white hair was down and reached past her shoulder blades. She had the same pale-blue eyes and fine features as Andra. His gaze fell upon the deep purple tattoo on her right deltoid. At the center was the Wygann family crest, incorporated into the larger design he had seen on the side of the skimmer -- the Lexal colonial emblem.

“We meet again,” she said.

“Princess...”

“Please, Nyk -- it's Janna.” She opened her arms and embraced him.

“Janna -- How are things on Lexal?”

“Things ... are returning to normal,” Janna replied.

“What brings you to Sudal?”

“Mykko and I are onworld for a High Legislature session on colonial security. My business is done, so I accepted Andra's invitation. Mykko must remain for more sessions. If he's involved they will be contentious ones.” She looked around the Residence. “This is such a lovely house. I enjoyed my stay here during Andra's convalescence.”

“How long will you be staying this time?” Nyk asked.

“Just the one night.”

“You're welcome any time you'd like.”

“Oh, I'm being so impolite.” Janna turned. “This is Sonita -- Mykkoin's nanny.” Sonita nudged the boy to step forward. “And you remember Mykkoin, don't you?”

Nyk knelt down. “I certainly do. Mykkoin -- would you like to take a walk on the beach with me? Maybe we'll find some sea shells.” The boy ducked behind his nanny.

Nyk climbed the rocks leading to the bluff with Mykkoin on his shoulders. Upon reaching the top he set the boy down and ran with him to the house. Janna met him at the door. "What did you find?" Mykkoin showed her some trivalve shells.

"He's a delightful child," Nyk replied.

"You certainly look like a natural with him," Andra said. Sonita took Mykkoin and led him to a low table for his dinner. "Nyk, would you mind it terribly if you and I didn't sleep together tonight?"

"Not at all. If you'd like to renew your friendship with Janna, please do."

8 -- Agent Nemo

The Floran midnight sky dazzled overhead as Nyk lay stretched out on the sand in the bowl-shaped depression down the slope from the bluff. His eyes were fixed on the bright white star and its four dimmer companions. A meteor streaked overhead. He closed his eyes.

Someone's nudge awakened him. "Nykkyo ... Nykkyo..." He looked up.

"Andra?"

"It's Janna," she said. "Come, it's time to go."

"Go where?"

"To Earth. This is the real reason I've come to Sudal -- to take you to Earth in our diplomatic transport."

Nyk sat up. "Of course." In starlight he could see Janna was wearing a long, sleeveless gown. She was wearing her hair up, in a twist and a tiara sparkled on her head.

She handed him his Earth clothing. "Slip into these and come to the skimmer."

"I must say goodbye to Andra."

"No. You mustn't disturb her. I'll explain why -- once we're under way. We can drop you off outside Earth's heliopause. Andra thought you might have a way to the surface."

"Well ... the shuttlecar! I have a shuttlecar parked by the sea research facility on the coast. I don't suppose your diplomatic vessel can accommodate it."

“Our vessel is a converted tender shuttle,” she replied. “We bring our own skimmer. I’m sure we can make room in our cargo bay for your shuttlecar. Here, get dressed and we’ll take you to fetch your craft. You can follow us to the Sudal shuttleport.”

Nyk slipped into jeans and shirt. He followed Janna to the skimmer. The pilot nodded to her as she climbed aboard. Sonita was seated and holding Mykkoin, asleep in her lap. The pilot shut the door, startling the boy. He reached for his mother and Janna took him. “Sit by the pilot,” she said. “You can direct us to the research facility.”

“Head south,” Nyk said. “Follow the access road.” The skimmer lifted off and hovered above the road surface. “Turn here and set down.”

He popped open the door and dashed to the shed. The shuttlecar came to life and he backed it onto the roadway. The skimmer lifted off and traveled a straight line toward the shuttleport. Nyk set the Z vector for lift and followed. A low power advisory flashed on the shuttlecar’s control panel.

The skimmer banked and circled around the rear of the spaceport and Nyk saw the Lexalese craft parked on a corner of the polymer concrete apron. The clamshell door swung open and the skimmer slipped inside. Nyk set the shuttlecar down.

The pilot waved him in. He touched the unistick and the shuttle rolled forward, up an incline and into the cargo bay.

Janna approached him. “Come, sit with me in the cabin. Our pilot must make a preflight check. It’ll be a short while before we can lift off.”

Nyk sank into an overstuffed seat, upholstered in blue velvet. He ran his hand along the fabric. Janna sat in a similar one, reached under to release a catch and swung to face him. “Why couldn’t I say goodbye to Andra?” he asked.

“Andra has spent the entire evening in deep meditation. She’s driving knowledge of what we’re doing into the far corners of her mind.”

“Why?”

“For your protection -- and for hers. Knowledge is a dangerous commodity. If she’s interrogated about your disappearance -- and she fully expects to be -- her memory of this event will be locked away where even truth drug can’t reach it.”

“She can do that?”

“Anyone can do it -- who knows how. Few do. If she’s questioned, she’ll cooperate fully. She’ll even volunteer for truth drug. If she receives the truth agent, she will relinquish her mind to it readily.”

“And, she’ll truthfully say she doesn’t know.” He looked into her eyes. “Is this something you’re taught at the academy?”

“Yes -- although the academy will deny it. When you find yourself in a position to contact her, tell her you’re safe. Don’t tell her how you got there. She is even erasing her knowledge of my visit today.” Janna handed him a green polycard. “This is my personal locator code. The day may come to uncover

the secrets she's burying. When it does, call me -- and I'll unlock her memory.”

“Won't you tell me how?”

Janna smiled. “That, Nyk, is a secret academy sisters share with no one.”

“I hope you or your husband won't feel consequences for what you're about to do.”

“You are now on Lexalese soil. Should Floran authorities insist on bringing charges -- they would need to extradite you first.” She smiled. “Mykko has never shirked from doing what's right, even if his actions make him unpopular. Andra believes this is right.”

“Do you believe?” Nyk asked.

“I don't need to. Andra and I are academy sisters, and sisters come to each other's aid. Andra asked me to help, and her request sounded reasonable and within my powers.”

“Did you make this trip from Lexal just for me?”

“Yes -- don't forget you and I are bonded as friends-for-life, Nyk. After your help in the insurrection, this is the least I could do.”

The pilot stepped into the cabin. “Pardon, Princess...”

“Yes?”

“Preflight check is complete. We're ready to depart -- as soon as I can wake someone in flight control to clear us.”

“If you can't,” she said, “take off without clearance. It's well past nadir meridian -- there's no space traffic to control.”

“Yes, Princess.” He turned to Nyk. “Are there any coordinates near Earth you'd prefer?”

“There's a communications relay station parked above that solar system's north pole. Close to it would be ideal.”

“I'll retrieve the coordinates. We should be in orbit shortly.” The pilot stepped from the cabin and headed for the cockpit.

Janna fastened her seat belt. Nyk took in her appearance. She resembled Andra enough to be her twin sister. “Janna, are you sure you and Andra aren't related?”

“We're from two different lines. Andra is a Ylla, and I'm a Bahndahn. Once we graduated from the academy we became adoptive sisters, sharing the Vebinad line.”

“The resemblance is remarkable.”

“The finishing schools desire specific traits. Given the proper starting points, the genetic counselors can deliver quite reproducible results. All the girls at Vebinad Academy looked very much alike -- Andra and I, especially so.”

“It's no wonder your classmates nicknamed you the Twins.”

“When I met Andra we were both fifteen years old. I needed a roommate, and she needed a room. We've been close friends ever since.”

A chime sounded and the spacecraft lumbered down the runway. She extended a pair of wings, lifted off and traveled a nearly vertical trajectory into orbit.

“I'm enjoying this flight,” Janna said. “I don't often have the pleasure of being an ordinary citizen. It's one reason I enjoy visiting with Andra -- we can talk and laugh like we did at the academy. And, please -- you must visit Lexal again. Mykko and I would enjoy hosting you.”

Nyk glanced out a viewport and saw his indigo world. The shutters closed and a white indicator signaled the impending warp jump. The indicator glowed blue and the subjump jolted the craft as it traveled from orbit to beyond Floran's heliopause in an instant. Another jolt and the vessel hopped to the vicinity of the comm relay station.

The pilot stepped from the cockpit. “We're in station-keeping.”

“I must be on my way,” Nyk said. “I'll recharge the shuttlecar at the relay station and head for Earth. I don't know how to thank you.”

“Thank me by going to your Earth woman and fulfilling your destiny. Good luck, Nykkyo.”

The pilot escorted Nyk to the cargo bay. He climbed into the shuttlecar and powered it up. The control panel gave a blue “go” condition, but with a low-power advisory. Nyk traded the two-finger Floran salute with the pilot, who stepped through the pressure door. The shuttle's door safety catches engaged and Nyk tested the door seals. The cargo bay depressurized and the clamshell doors opened.

Nyk pulled on the unistick and backed the shuttlecar into space. The doors closed and in a flash the Lexalese vessel disappeared into her warp jump. He tuned the shuttlecar's guidance to the relay station transponders and engaged at maximum sublight velocity.

The relay station was the size of a large house -- larger than a standard comm station. The additional space was necessary as it served as a staging point for ExoAgency missions. In addition to communications equipment, it had an oversized shuttle bay, a decontamination chamber, enlarged living quarters, a wardroom, powerplant, labs and a workshop.

The shuttlecar drew toward the station. Nyk pressed a control and the shuttlebay spacedoor opened. He piloted the craft into the bay, closed the spacedoor and began repressurization. The safety catches released with a snap. He stepped out, connected cables to recharge the shuttlecar's power cells and headed through the pressure door.

“Hello, who's there?” Nyk jumped. A young woman with curly, light brown hair walked toward him. “Hi, I'm Zoa,” she said. “I heard the bay pressurize.”

“I ... I'm... Nemo.”

“Hi, Nemo. What're you doing here? Let me guess -- ExoAgency business, no doubt. You look like an ExoAgent -- you're dressed like one.”

“Good guess.” He regarded the uniform she was wearing, a short and sleeveless jumpsuit with the ExoService Communications Corps emblem embroidered on the breast. “I’ll bet you’re here on a tender mission.”

“You guess well, too. I’m here performing routine maintenance on the TachNet equipment. I’ve been here eight days, and the tender’s scheduled to pick me up in two.”

“Well, I have a quick transit to make to Earth, so I won’t get in your way.” Zoa headed back to the communications control room and resumed her maintenance chores. Nyk entered the wardroom and examined the contents of his pocket -- his wallet and keys. He counted about fifty dollars in bills and fingered his Agency debit card.

He returned to the shuttlebay to check on the shuttlecar. The number two power cell still reported low power. He climbed out of the shuttle and examined the power , mom cables. One of them had a defective fitting. He rolled the shuttle into an adjacent stall, attached another set of power cables and began running preflight diagnostics.

Nyk walked to the comm station living quarters and looked for something to eat. Zoa entered. “I thought you were on your way.”

“The shuttlecar needs a recharge. I’m stuck here for the better part of a day.”

“That’s okay -- I’d enjoy some company. You might not believe it, but this is a rather lonely job.”

“I believe it. What’re you doing -- tending the fusion reactors?”

“No, they’re not due for service this tour. I’m upgrading the TachNet transmitters, to increase the range of this station. There’s a new colony due to receive comm service within the next year, and this station will be the primary link. I don’t remember which colony it is -- I’m just here to upgrade the transmitters. Tell me about your mission.”

“I’m afraid my mission’s classified.”

“Oh, I love it. Here I am, performing a routine transmitter upgrade and an ExoAgent walks onto my station -- surrounded by ... mystery!”

“I have a little chore to do, so if you’ll excuse me.” He walked to the workroom, looked through drawers of tools and found a razor knife. From the first-aid kit he retrieved a bottle of healing salve. A glance through the workroom door revealed Zoa busy in the communications control center.

Nyk tested the sharpness of the blade. Holding it in his left hand, he rested his right wrist, palm up on the workbench. With his finger he felt for the new ID chip. He placed the knife blade against the lump it made in his skin, grimaced and drove the blade into his flesh.

With his left thumbnail he pressed against the lump, squeezing out a grain-of-rice sized object. He picked it up and placed it into a stasis capsule. Then, he dropped healing salve onto the wound, wincing from its sting. The cut began to close and he slipped the capsule into his pocket.

A stack of sheet-metal scraps caught his eye. He retrieved a piece of copper, trimmed it and smoothed its edges. Then, he bent it into a broad bracelet, slipped it onto his right wrist and buttoned his

shirt cuff over it.

Nyk walked into the shuttle bay to check on the progress of recharging the shuttlecar. The power level indicator showed no charge in the number two cell. He walked to the station's workshop for the shuttlecar service kit. He used a latch releaser to open an access panel over the power cells.

The compartment was crammed with unfamiliar equipment. He started reading the service manual included in the kit, but it might as well have been written in Greek. He noted a multi-tester service connector on the chassis near the power cells.

He returned to the workshop for the multimeter and wheeled it into the shuttle bay. The tester's cable wouldn't mate with the connector on the chassis. He looked at the tester's instructions -- an adapter was required for this model shuttlecar. He returned to the workshop to fetch the adapter.

The adapter fit into the chassis socket and he connected the multimeter with the shuttlecar. He switched on the tester and looked at the device's display. "Is something wrong with your shuttle?" he heard Zoa ask from near the pressure door.

"Don't help me. I must figure this out myself." He pressed the tester's touch screen and initiated a level one diagnostic. The results returned nominal -- no problems detected. He looked at the control panel in the shuttlecar and saw the low power indicator was still lit.

"What's the problem?" Zoa asked.

"I get a low power warning on the number two power cell. I've been recharging it, but it won't take a charge, and I can't see anything wrong on the multimeter. I don't think we have another cell in the workshop."

"You wouldn't want to change a power cell if we had one -- you'd have to dismantle half the power deck." Zoa walked over to the multimeter. She began manipulating the touch screen to run low level diagnostics. "Your power cell looks like it's good... Yes, full charge." She ran some more tests. "Power is reaching the distribution manifold, no problem..." Her fingers flew over the screen. "I'd suspect the power level sense transducer."

Zoa rummaged through the service kit. "No sense transducers... Let me switch the number one and two sensors. If the warning moves with the transducer, we know we have it." She rummaged through the service kit again. "You don't happen to have a circlip releaser, do you?"

"I wouldn't know one if I stepped on it."

"Hold on," she said and left the shuttle bay. She returned with a toenail clipper and used it to remove the transducers on the power cells. "I swapped them. Check your panel, now."

"Yes -- the low power indicator's now on the number one cell."

"Just ignore the warning. Your power's good. Next chance, have this shuttle taken in for service." She closed the access panel on the shuttlecar and began packing up the tester and service kit.

Nyk sat in the shuttlecar. "I can't get a 'go' panel with that indicator on."

“Let me see...” Zoa sat in the shuttlecar. She popped open another access panel and began moving circuit shunts. The warning indicator extinguished and the panel lit up in a blue “go” condition. “There -- this'll get you to the surface and back, guaranteed. Just have this craft taken in for service when you come back up. So, are you off, now?”

“No. I've lost the darkness. I'll have to wait here until it's night again. Thanks for your help, Zoa. I'm going to turn in.”

“Any time, Nemo,” she replied and returned to the communications control room.

Nyk lay, fingers laced behind his head, on a bunk in one of the relay station cabins. He shut his eyes and relaxed, attempting to will himself to sleep. He napped until awakened by Zoa's voice. “Nemo?”

He sat up, startled, “What?”

“May I come in?”

“Come in.” Zoa opened the cabin door. She had removed her CommCorps jumpsuit and was wearing a tunic, without sash.

“May I nap with you?” Nyk made room on the narrow bunk and she lay next to him. “The Communication Corps is a lonely service. It's a treat to sleep with someone.”

Nyk looked at his watch, set to Earth time. “I'll have to be out of here in about five segments.”

“That's all right.” She looked at him. “Do you have someone at home?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I thought so. Man or woman?”

“Why all the questions?” Nyk asked.

“I want to see if my guess about you is accurate.”

He smiled. “Tell me your guess and I'll tell you how close you are.”

“All right... You're from Sudal...”

“How did you know that?”

“My boyfriend's from there. I recognized it right away -- how you talk, how you carry yourself. You can't hide it, Nemo. You Sudalese men are so sweet -- I much prefer you to City men. I don't care much for Sudalese women, though.”

“You're right about Sudal.”

“You also look like the sort who likes women. I'll bet you're married -- in a love match. I wish I could marry my boyfriend, but he's been promised to a girl who's not even reached the age of consent.

He loves me -- not her. I've agreed to be his *amfin* , once my tour is over.”

“I am married, but it's no love match.”

“Oh... I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe I should stop guessing -- I'm not doing too well.”

“You didn't do badly at all.”

“You're sweet -- just like I said -- Sudalese men are sweet.” She smiled and lay on her back. “I have a cramp in my leg. Would you massage it?”

“Where?”

She pointed to her right knee. “Here.” Nyk massaged her thigh above her knee. “Mmm -- that's better. I've had these since I was a kid. My mom told me I'd grow out of it but I haven't -- yet ... here...” She pointed to a spot higher on her thigh. Nyk moved his hands up a bit. She looked into his eyes. “Higher.”

“Zoa, I don't think we know each other well enough.” He lifted his hands. “You are fortunate you never outgrew these leg-aches.”

“It works about half the time.” She smiled and wrinkled her nose. “This is a lonely assignment, Nemo. You're not cross with me for trying, are you?” He shook his head. “I'm sorry we won't have the opportunity to know each other well enough. I think I'd enjoy you.”

“Will you be returning here for other tender duties?”

“I don't know. There are so many relay stations -- I go where they send me. I'm touring the galaxy, one station at a time. One thing for sure -- once my tour is over, I'm planetbound.” She yawned. “I'm going to try to sleep some, now. I have to be up before you -- for a transmitter linkup test. Good night -- and, good luck on your mission, Nemo.” She extinguished the cabin lighting.

9 -- We Have Another Guest

Nyk walked into the wardroom and opened his personal effects locker. He transferred the stasis capsule from his pocket to the locker and examined his identity documents -- a passport and state-issued photo ID. He returned to the shuttle bay and climbed into the shuttlecar. The door seals checked and the safety catches engaged. The bay began to decompress. The spacedoor slid open and the shuttle rolled into the void.

With his subjump coordinates verified, he triggered the subwarp coil and soon found himself in a

parking orbit around Earth. He activated countermeasures and piloted the craft on a reentry trajectory, touching down in the countryside near the university in Wisconsin. The craft headed toward the house.

He pulled up to the detached garage and opened the door. Then, he drove the vehicle into the structure and covered it with a canvas shroud. He closed the garage door and locked it. He opened the house and walked in, picked up the telephone, ordered a taxi to stop at 6AM and flopped onto his bed.

The cab driver sounded his horn and Nyk stepped from the house. He locked the door and climbed into the taxi. "Mitchell Airport," he instructed the driver.

Nyk watched as the cab pulled onto the freeway and headed for the airport south of Milwaukee. It was mid November, and most of the trees had lost their leaves. The driver dropped him at the curb. Nyk paid him twenty dollars, went into the terminal and stood in line to purchase a one-way ticket to New York.

The ticket agent looked at his photo ID. "How would you like to pay for this, Mr Kane?"

Nyk handed her his Agency debit card. "See if this works."

She processed his transaction. Nyk tried to modulate his breathing. "It came back declined," she said. "Do you have another card?"

Nyk looked into his wallet. "No, sorry."

"Let me try it again," she said and processed the transaction. "It looks okay this time -- it must've been a computer glitch."

Nyk signed the credit slip and took his boarding pass. "Concourse D, gate 38."

He headed up the escalator to the security checkpoint. The metal detector buzzed as he walked through it.

"Empty your pockets." Nyk dug out his keyring and wallet. "Step through again." The detector beeped.

"Please step over here. Hold out your arms." The security agent ran a detector wand over his body. It buzzed as it passed over his right wrist. "Do you have something up your sleeve?"

"No." He unbuttoned his cuff and pulled his sleeve up.

"That bracelet." Nyk slipped off the copper band.

The wand buzzed over his wrist again. "I broke a bone and have a pin in my wrist."

"Okay, go on through." He slipped on the band, buttoned his cuff, headed for the gate and sat to wait for the boarding call.

The flight took off and headed for New York City. Nyk picked up the airphone and ran his debit card through the device. He punched in the phone number for the house in Queens. No answer. He looked out the windows at the cloud cover below as the plane droned on toward New York. Finally it

began its descent over Long Island Sound.

Nyk stepped through the jetway at LaGuardia and stood in a line for a taxi. He gave the driver the address in Queens, and looked at the clock on the taxi dashboard. It read 11:40.

The car pulled up to the house. Nyk gave the driver his last twenty and collected some singles in change. He climbed the steps and pressed the doorbell.

Yasuko opened the door. Nyk's eyes met hers. She broke into a smile and embraced him. "Shhh," she said and beckoned him into the living room. He saw Suki sitting on a sofa, her back to the door. A number of other women were sitting on furniture in the room. "Sukiko... We have another guest."

Suki hoisted herself from the sofa and headed toward the front door. Her eyes met Nyk's and she ran to him. "Nick! Oh, Nick!" He threw his arms around her and kissed her. She began to laugh and cry at the same time, peppering his face with kisses as he kissed tears off hers.

"I see I'm not too late," he said as he caressed her bulging belly.

"Not too late -- two weeks and counting. Come in. Mom is throwing me a surprise baby shower." She looked at her mother. "Was this part of the surprise?"

"I'm as surprised as you are."

"There are some people we want you to meet," Suki said, took his hand and led him into the living room. "You know Cathy."

A slightly built woman with opaque glasses stood and extended her hand. Nyk grasped it and leaned so she could kiss his cheek. "Good to see you again. I'll take good care of Suki's desk while she's on maternity leave."

Yasuko led Nyk to a pair of Asian women. "These are my friends Fumiko Kurosawa and Linda Tsukasa. This is Nick Kane, Sukiko's fiancé." Nyk bowed to them.

Nyk approached another middle-aged woman. "This," Suki said, "is Miss Wallace, my favorite teacher from high school."

She extended her hand, "Pleased to meet you Mr Kane." His eyes met hers. She put her hand over her mouth and gasped. "I'm so sorry," she said. "For a moment, you reminded me of someone I knew years ago... But -- you'd have to be twenty years older -- or, I'd have to be twenty years younger." She shook her head. "Please forgive me -- I must be in my dotage."

"Look at all the great baby stuff," Suki said gesturing toward a pile of gifts in the center of the floor.

"I'll go upstairs and change," Nyk said. "Thanks everyone, for your generosity."

"Oh, no you're not," Suki said. "Sit by me." She laced her fingers with his. "I'm not letting go of you. I'm not letting you out of my sight!"

"Please, enjoy the refreshments," Yasuko said and brought a tray with sushi rolls, sweet bean

curd, biscuits and crackers.

Nyk picked up a sushi roll. "It's so good to be home."

Nyk knelt at the low table in the dining room. Suki assumed the lotus position beside him. Her mother handed him a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. He took a morsel from the bowl and popped it into his mouth.

Suki's father knelt at the head of the table. "So, Nick -- what's your status, now?"

"I've quit FloranCo. I'll have no more of these ... assignments. I'm here to stay -- to help Suki with the baby, just as I promised."

George nodded. "Will you be looking for other work?"

"There's plenty of time for that," Yasuko interjected. "I'm just happy to have him here."

"I'm not trying to pressure him, Yasuko. I was thinking if he'd like... Nick, I perhaps can find you a position at my firm."

"I know nothing about investing."

"You can learn. Wall Street requires balls, not brains. I think you're equipped with a good pair."

"Daddy!"

"They got him out of whatever jam he was in. Your mom's right -- there's no hurry. Let's get that baby born, and you two settled in as parents. Then we can talk about it."

"What sort of a jam were you in?" Yasuko asked.

"Nick and I are sworn not to discuss it," Suki replied.

"Yes -- it's very sensitive. Maybe some day we'll be able to talk about it."

"Tell me what happened on Floran. Was Kronta able to clear you?"

"No. I was smuggled here, and I'd rather not say any more about it."

"I understand."

"I'm not going back, Suki. I don't know how long it'll take before they figure out I'm here. They may send enforcers, but they'll have to find me first. I'll die before returning to that planet."

"Did you spend time with Andra?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep with her?"

“A few times.”

“Did you make love?”

“Once.”

“Only once?”

“I won't lie to you. Andra and I made love once.”

Suki looked at the floor. “I try not to be jealous. I know you're a Floran and I can't hold you to Earth standards -- especially when you're offworld. I try to understand your ways, but it's difficult for me. I mean -- I understand them on an intellectual level, but emotionally...” She shook her head. “I can't quite come to grips.”

“Suki, Andra engineered my escape.” He reached for her but she turned from him. He placed his hands on her shoulders. “You're an experienced meditator...”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“After Andra arranged my escape, she meditated to drive knowledge of her deed from her mind -- to protect me and herself.”

“I ... I suppose that sort of thing is possible.”

“Right now it's likely she's in anguish, wondering where I am or if I'm all right.”

Suki's eyes began to fill. “Oh, Nick! She'd do that for you ... for us. Poor, poor Andra. When you said she's the best sort of friend ... I had no idea just how good a friend she is.” She faced Nyk. “She earned her night with you.”

“As soon as I can figure out how, I must get word to Andra that I'm all right.”

“She won't have closure otherwise.”

“Andra told me she has a dream. She dreams of coming to live with us on Earth as our *amfin* -- our sister lover. She said she'd like to live in our house, to know and to love your child as an aunt. She'd like the three of us to sleep together in a huge bed.”

“Andra is deeply in love with you, Nick. It's obvious.”

“I know, and I feel sorry for her. I wish she'd find someone local to love.”

“Speaking as a woman, I don't think that's likely. She's devoted to you, Nick -- in the same sort of way I am. Do you love her?”

“Yes, I do -- as a kindred spirit and as a friend-for-life.”

“Her love for you is deeper than that.” Suki wiped a tear from her own face and then stroked one from Nyk's. “She gave you up so you could have me. That's not something I can do. The only

greater sacrifice would be for her to give up her own life for you -- and I'm convinced she loves you enough to do it in an instant, should it come to it. I believe your love for her is deeper, too -- you should admit it to yourself. Let the truth free you, Nick. When you get word to Andra, tell her how you truly feel about her. I'm sure it would mean much to her."

Nyk shut his eyes to hold back a tear, then squeezed Suki's hand. "I have been struggling with my feelings for Andra ever since Zander's death. I don't know how to reconcile my love for you and her. I'm as conflicted in this as you, *korlyta*."

"It's as if you, she and I make up a sort of a family in love. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

"If you truly feel that way -- if you truly believe that, then you truly understand our ways."

"I think I do -- and, it's liberating. It means I'm free to love her, too. Andra is the one person in the universe I don't mind sharing you with."

"Then -- you've forgiven us -- me?"

Suki embraced him. "Forgiven you? Under the circumstances, it was the least you could've done."

"Suki, I want to apologize on behalf of my people for how you were treated."

"I was treated well. The entire time, I was shown dignity and respect. I had a very nice conversation with Illya."

"I hope you won't judge all Florans on the basis of Senta and Tomyka Wells."

"No, Nick. If I were to judge all Florans on the basis of two individuals, I'd choose Andra and you. Now, I'm going to get ready for bed."

Nyk lay on the bed with his fingers laced behind his head. Suki stepped into the bathroom. "Tell me about Miss Wallace," he said as she brushed her hair.

"She was my history teacher during my junior year."

"You must be very fond of her."

"I'm more than fond. She's like you -- she's one of my saviors."

"What do you mean?"

"I was pretty wild in high school. I did a lot of drinking and drugs. I had discovered sex and was ... active that way, too. My grades were suffering. Miss Wallace made salvaging me her little project. I connected with her almost right away. She wasn't married, and the boys in her class would snicker behind her back -- they thought she was gay. One day I told her I was a lesbian, and I asked her if she was also."

"How did she respond?"

Suki stood in the doorway and continued brushing her hair. "She said very gently no, she wasn't. I felt terrible. Then, she told me it didn't matter to her if I was gay or straight. She told me she saw good in me, and potential -- that good and bad, and gay and straight were completely disconnected. I had always equated gay with bad -- it's the message I got from my father. After that, I began confiding in Miss Wallace. I could talk to her about things I'd never mention to Mom or Daddy. She told me stories of her life and when she was a student. I cut back on the partying and applied myself to my studies -- and brought my grades up."

"She helped you turn your life around."

"It was an incident in college that did that. I'll tell you about it some other time -- maybe. Miss Wallace put me on the right path. I don't know where I'd be without her." She put her brush away and clipped her hair into a ponytail. "She wrote a nice letter of recommendation that helped me get into college. I became a history major because of her."

Suki entered the bedroom. "There -- now you know a little more of my sordid past. I told you there's much you don't know and much I don't want you to know. I hope it doesn't change your opinion of me."

"Well -- I'm afraid it does." She flashed a glance at him. "I admire you even more."

Suki slipped off her robe. She stood sideways to him and smoothed her hands along her stomach. "I can't believe how huge I am. I don't look like I'm about to have a baby -- I look like I'm about to deliver a Porsche!"

She slid into the bed and lay with her back to him. He slipped his arm around her and caressed her abdomen. "Has he been busy today?"

"Not too." She placed her hand on his. "I think I understand why pregnancies last so long. After nine months of this, a woman will endure anything to have it over."

Nyk stroked her belly. "I can't wait to meet him." He nuzzled the base of her neck and kissed her shoulder. She guided his hand to a spot where the baby was kicking. Then she picked up his hand, kissed it and cupped it over her breast. He could feel her heart pounding through her flesh. "Nick, I want you so much!"

"Is this wise? You're so close to your due date."

"I don't care. We've been separated for two months. We won't be able to after the baby comes -- not for a while. Let's tonight."

"What if it..."

"What if I go into labor? I hope I do. I can't think of a more beautiful way to start our boy's journey into this world. Can you?"

Nyk sat in bed leaning against the headboard. He coaxed Suki into leaning against him. He slipped his arms around her and caressed her belly. She guided his hands.

"Divide your mind."

"No, Nick. I don't want to use the technique tonight. I'm starved for your touch. I want to feel it all. I want to feel your hands -- I want to savor. Is that all right for tonight?"

"Certainly."

She led his fingers across her body and he caressed her. "Oh Nick ... mmm ... I'm not made of glass ... don't -- don't be too gentle..."

"*Bon'matina.*" Nyk awoke to her kiss on his cheek.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. I'm having a few cramps -- a small price to pay.

"Do you want to go to the hospital?"

"No -- I've been having false labor for about a week. They're probably more of the same. I felt something else, though -- something I hadn't felt."

"What was that?"

"A warm glow." She kissed his cheek again. "I'm going to take my shower."

Nyk descended the stairs from the apartment to the kitchen. George was sitting at the table reading a newspaper. Nyk helped himself to a cup of coffee.

"Is Sukiko all right?" Yasuko asked him.

"Oh yes -- why wouldn't she be?"

"After what I thought I heard going on in the bedroom above ours last night -- I'm surprised she's not in the maternity ward this morning." Nyk smiled. "Nick, believe me I'm delighted she has a man like you in her life. I know your physical relationship is a big part of it. Please use some prudence -- that's all." She set a bowl of oatmeal before him.

Suki entered the kitchen. "Good morning, Mom..."

"I was just speaking to Nick about last night. I think you two should exercise a little caution..."

"Yasuko, give them a rest," George said from behind his paper. He looked at his daughter. "She's only saying that because it's how you were launched into this world."

"Really, Mom?"

Yasuko blushed. "You didn't have to tell them that."

Suki brushed her hair in the apartment's bathroom. She walked into the bedroom carrying her hairbrush and holding a clip in her teeth. Nyk looked up from a box on the floor. In the box was a polymer fiber sack. He dipped into the sack and withdrew a handful of clear crystals.

“What are you going to do with those?”

“We're going to need some money -- and not just to put away for that summer house. Do you think your uncle would know how to go about finding a market for raw diamonds?”

She clipped her hair into a ponytail. “He's more likely to know than I.”

“What's the best way to get to Jonathan's shop?”

“City bus, I imagine. I don't know what route, but you can check the MTA website.”

“I'll do that in the morning.” Nyk returned the box to its hiding place in the closet. He hopped onto the bed. Suki slipped off her robe and lay beside him. He rolled against her back and slipped his hand around her belly. She stroked it and guided it so he could feel the baby kick. He kissed her shoulder. “*Bon'noka, korlyta.*”

Nyk stepped off the city bus and walked a block and a half to Jonathan's shop. He stepped through the door and saw Suki's uncle sitting behind a counter. “Nick Kane -- I didn't expect to see you again so soon. I hope nothing's wrong with that setting.”

“The setting's fine. I came because I thought you might help me.”

“I'll do my best.”

Nyk slipped a carton from his pocket. “I have some items I'd like to sell and I hoped you might have some ideas on how to find a buyer.” He handed the box to Jonathan.

“What have we here?” He opened the box and his eyes popped. “My goodness...” He picked up a crystal and held it up to the daylight. “I've been in this business for ... well, for longer than I care to admit. I've never held an uncut diamond.” He looked at the crystal through a lens. “I'm no judge of raw stones, but I can't see a flaw! How did you come by these?”

“I'd rather not say. I assure you they're not stolen -- they're mine, free and clear.”

Jonathan picked up another crystal. “This one's nearly as nice.”

“There are more where those came from.”

“More?” Jonathan looked up at him. “Nick, I run a small retail shop. I’m not a cutter or lapidarist -- my trade is in finished gems. I’m in no position to buy these from you.”

“I’m not asking you to buy them. I was hoping you’d have some ideas.”

Jonathan picked up a third stone. “Look at this -- a perfect crystal.” He replaced the cover on the box. “If you’d be willing to let me hold onto these for a while, I’d like to show them to my supplier when he comes by. He might have some ideas.”

“Keep them as long as you like.”

“Nick... Nick...” Nyk felt Suki shaking him. He opened his eyes. “Nick -- I think I’m in labor.”

“Are you sure?”

“No -- I’ve never been in labor before. It started with a cramping feeling in my lower back.” She grimaced. “There it is again.”

“How often?”

“About twenty minutes.”

“Put your bag together. I’ll wake your folks.” Nyk slipped into a pair of jogging pants and a shirt and headed down the stairs. He rapped on Suki’s parents’ bedroom door. “Yasuko... Yasuko...” Suki’s mother opened the door a crack. “Yasuko, Suki thinks she’s in labor.”

“I’ll wake George and he’ll bring the car around -- then I’ll be up.”

Nyk climbed the stairs. Suki was brushing her hair. “Do I look all right?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“You look great. I’ll help you downstairs. Your father’s getting the car.”

Nyk escorted her out the front door and into the car. He helped her into the back seat and sat beside her. She held his hand and leaned against him.

Suki lay on her back in the hospital bed. A nurse entered. “I want to start an IV.”

“Is that necessary?” Suki asked.

“It’s a precaution. If we need to give you any meds in a hurry, it’ll be there.” The nurse began preparing an IV. catheter. “You’ll feel a prick.” She inserted it into a vein on the back of her left hand. “You say you don’t want an epidural?”

“I don’t.”

"I hope you'll let the doctor administer a cervical block." The nurse jotted some notes on a chart and left the room.

Nyk looked at the fetal monitor display. Suki grabbed his hand. "Another one..."

He stroked her arm and looked at her face. She was breathing slowly and deeply, her eyes closed. Nyk could see the contraction build, peak and recede on the fetal monitor. She opened her eyes.

"I thought you were supposed to be panting and blowing."

"When it's your body, you can deal with it your way. I'm using meditation techniques." She reached up and hooked her arm around his neck, drew his face near hers and kissed his cheek. "I'm also using what I learned from our Floran lovemaking technique -- to divide my mind and force the sensations to the back." She kissed his cheek again. "It works for this, too," she said and gripped his hand. "Another."

"They're coming fast, now."

She nodded and closed her eyes. Nyk could see her body relaxing -- the only tension her clenched jaw and her grip on his hand.

"It's amazing," he said as he caressed her abdomen. "I can see him moving down."

The nurse returned and felt under Suki's drape. "About six centimetres. She's doing well -- most moms-to-be are begging for an epidural by now."

Suki's obstetrician, an older woman with grey hair, entered her room. "Sorry to get you out of bed," Suki said.

"It's not the first time."

Suki closed her eyes for another contraction. She let out a moan as it peaked, then gasped and panted. "That was a good one. The worst part is resisting the urge to push."

The doctor nodded. "You'll have your chances to push." She checked her. "Eight centimetres. Almost party time -- I'll go put on my scrubs."

Nyk walked into the waiting room. Yasuko was pacing and George was reading a six-month-old Readers' Digest. "Shouldn't you be in there?" she asked.

"Her doctor is administering a cervical block. She brandished the biggest needle I've ever seen. I got a bit lightheaded and the nurse thought a change of scenery would do me some good. So far, it's been textbook."

"Nick -- She couldn't have done this without you." Yasuko smiled. "I'm looking forward to being a grandmother."

"I'd better get back in there." He returned to Suki's room. The doctor was sitting at the foot of her bed.

"She's almost there," the nurse said. "She just hit nine."

Nyk looked into Suki's face. She was panting. "I want to push so badly."

"A couple more and we'll have you push," the doctor said.

Suki took a deep breath and clenched Nyk's hand. He watched the monitor and felt her relax as the contraction passed.

"Push on the next one," the doctor said. Suki closed her eyes and grimaced. Her face reddened and veins in her neck protruded. "I see a crown." Suki gasped and panted. "Another push like that and you'll shoot the little sucker across the room." Suki grimaced again. The doctor took a pair of forceps, gave a tug and held the newborn infant. Nyk heard the baby cry. "It's a boy."

Suki held her son as Nyk sat beside her. Her parents entered her room. "How do you feel?" Yasuko asked.

"Tired and sore. The block is wearing off. I plan to nurse him. They'll get us started on that shortly."

"Six pounds thirteen ounces," her mother said. "Not a bad size. Have you thought about a name?"

"I've known from the start what I'd name him. I'm naming him after Nick. We'll call him Nicky -- until he's a little older."

"Sukiko..."

"Yes, Daddy?"

George handed her a flat box. "This is yours." She slipped the cover from the box and removed a layer of cotton wool. Inside was the golden Kyhana crest. "I know we haven't always seen eye-to-eye. Today, I'm proud of you. You stood your ground, did what you thought was right and damned conventional wisdom. And it was right -- you turned adversity -- something terrible -- into something very good." He brushed a tear from his face. "He's an adorable little boy. I'm proud to be his grandfather," he said as he took her hand. "I'm proud to be your father."

She reached with her free arm and hugged him. "Thank you, Daddy." She handed the box to Nyk. "You'll keep this safe until we can find a proper home for it?"

"You can trust me." He regarded the object and traced the three *katakana* characters with his finger.

"Your dad and I are heading back to the house," her mother said. "I'll finish getting the nursery ready."

"Mom ... Daddy -- thanks for being here."

"Do you need a ride?" George asked.

"I'll find my own way home," Nyk replied. George nodded, slipped his arm around Yasuko and headed down the corridor.

A nurse entered with a clipboard. "Here's the paperwork for the birth certificate. I need the spellings of the names. Mother is Sukiko Kyhana?"

"Yes."

"Father?"

"Unknown." The nurse looked at Nyk. "He's not the father. The child was conceived in a rape."

"And you carried him anyway," the nurse replied. "God bless you. I need the child's name."

"I'll fill it in," Suki said and handed the infant to Nyk. "Where?"

"There," the nurse pointed. Suki jotted the name on the document and handed the clipboard to the nurse. "An unusual spelling."

Nyk handed the child to Suki. "May I see?" He looked at the document and saw she had written the name Nykkyo Nicholas Kane Kyhana. He looked at Suki, his vision blurred with tears.

The nurse took the clipboard. "One of the pediatric nurses will be by to help you start feeding ..." she looked at the document.

"Nicky," Suki said. "We'll call him Nicky."

Nyk looked at her. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted someone on this planet to use that beautiful name." She stroked his face. "You told me, when the time came, I must follow my heart. The time came, and so I did."

Nyk rapped on the door to Suki's hospital room. "Howdy, stranger," he said. She opened her arms and embraced him. "How are you feeling today?"

"I'm feeling okay. We go home tomorrow."

A nurse entered pushing a bassinet. "Feeding time. If you'll excuse us..."

"He can stay," Suki said. She opened her gown. The nurse handed Nicky to her and Suki offered him her breast. "Thank you -- we'll be fine for a while."

"He really latches on," Nyk said.

"Yes. I think we're getting the hang of this." She stroked the baby's hair and back.

"He has your color."

"He's a little jaundiced -- not that you'd know. I doubt you'd know if I were jaundiced."

“Is that normal?”

“Normal enough.”

Nyk heard a rap on the door. He cracked it open and saw Yasuko. “It's your mom.”

“Come in, Mom.”

Yasuko stood in the room. “I'm sorry to interrupt.”

“It's okay. Giving birth is a great way to lose your modesty.”

Yasuko looked at the tag on the bassinet. “Nik...”

“It's Nee-KEE-Yo. For now, we'll call him Nicky.”

“Where on Earth did you come up with that name?”

“It came to me...” she said looking into Nyk's eyes. “... from outer space.”

“I thought you were naming him after Nick.”

“I did. Nick's name inspired me.”

“I hope you're not starting a family tradition of oddball names.”

“Oh, no. That tradition's already established.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yasuko ... Sukiko ... Nykkyo -- they're all odd names.”

“My name and yours are not odd.”

“Not in Japan -- but they are unusual here.”

“What do you think of all this?” Yasuko asked Nyk.

“It's Suki's choice. I think it's a fine name.”

Nyk cradled Nicky in his arms. “Okay, little buddy. I'll take you on a tour of your new home. Here's your room -- your bed. I know it looks big, but you'll grow into it. This is the kitchen. It's probably not too important to you right now. When you're ready, here it is. Over here's the bathroom -- we'll spend a little time in here every day. Now, this is Mommy and Nick's room. You're welcome here, too. There's just one rule. If the door's closed, knock first.” He heard Suki giggling from the living room.

“What do you think?” she asked, holding the golden pendant against the wall.

Nyk shrugged. “It's up to you. I have no taste when it comes to such.”

"I think it needs something to balance it. Daddy had the dagger hanging with it." She looked up. "I don't want that."

"What if it were in a frame? It might protect it -- for the many generations to come."

"That's a good idea. I'll look for a frame -- I'll bet Mom has some in the basement." She set the crest on the table and put her arms around Nyk. "I never imagined I'd have the pendant."

"Through the generations, the passing of the crest will become our family's most cherished tradition."

"You said Koichi's first child was born in transit. How did he have the crest?"

"Koichi's wife was about six months pregnant when they boarded the *Floran*. They expected a quick warp-jump to the Centauri colony world. Koichi's father had given them the crest, provisionally, until their child was born. Koichi wanted his child to be the first native-born Centaurian."

"Instead, they became lost in space." She shuddered. "I can't imagine the fear -- the despair those people must've felt. Imagine giving birth under those circumstances! Something very good came from that tragedy."

"Tragedies can be like that," he said, stroking Nicky's cheek.

Nyk sat across from George at the table holding the go board, trading turns with him placing black and white stones on the gridded board. Yasuko sat in a chair reading a magazine. Suki sat on the sofa with her feet up, nursing Nicky.

"This is so wonderful," Nyk said. "I love feeling part of a family."

"How would you like to ride into the City with me? You could spend a day looking over the firm. You might find a niche where you'd fit in."

"I ... I guess I could do that. I do plan on looking for work. I wanted to spend a few weeks helping Suki."

"It's quite all right, Nick. I wasn't trying to put pressure on you."

"I do understand there's another mouth to feed, and Suki will be away from her job for several months. I am eager to contribute to the family resources."

George smiled. "Please, don't worry."

"George is right, Nick," Yasuko said. "We're delighted to have the three of you under our roof." She looked up from her magazine. "Too many young people try to start families on their own without a support structure. Take your time."

Suki pulled closed her gown and stood. She carried Nicky to Nyk. "I'm a bit tired. I think I'll go upstairs and lie down."

Nyk cradled Nicky in his left arm, with the infant's head in the crook of his elbow. He continued

to place stones with his right.

“How easily you hold him,” Yasuko said. She arose, stood by Nyk and stroked his shoulder. “Nick, I’m sorry I was such a naysayer about her pregnancy. Now that I know my grandson -- I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Let’s tally,” George said. “A very respectable showing for a neophyte.”

“I’ll put Nicky upstairs and spend some time with his mother.”

“Of course, Nick. We’ll see you for breakfast.”

Nyk climbed the stairs to the apartment. He changed Nicky and laid him on his back in the crib. “Good night, buddy. I’m sure we’ll hear from you in a while.” He turned the lamp low.

Suki was lying in her gown on the bed. Nyk sat beside her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m still having cramps -- they said it’s normal. I’m so tired.”

“You did lose some blood. I don’t mind saying, I’m glad I was stationed at the head of the bed. I saw them cleaning up and I was a bit queasy.”

“You don’t care for the sight of blood, do you?”

“Especially if it belongs to someone I love.”

Nyk prepared himself for bed, turned down the bedcovers and climbed in. Suki completed her nightly toilet and stood by the bedroom door brushing her hair. “Maybe I should cut my hair. Long hair and little fingers are a bad combination.” She made a scissors of her first and second fingers. “How would I look with my hair cut like this?” She pinched her hair above her shoulder.

“You’d look like your mom.”

“Oh.” She gathered her hair, brought it up and clipped it into place. “Nick, I don’t know how a Floran girl would take it, but unless her mother’s a real knockout, an Earth girl doesn’t like being told she looks like her.”

“Your mother is a very attractive woman.”

Suki smiled and slipped off her robe. “Let’s not go into that.” She stood sideways to him and ran her hand down her stomach. “I feel like a balloon with the air let out -- flaccid.”

“Everything will go back into place in time.” She climbed into bed and cuddled to him. Nyk reached and switched off the light. “Let’s talk about getting married -- setting a date. Have you thought about it?”

“I’d like your divorce from Senta to be finalized, first.”

“Senta’s not an obstacle.”

“I must feel good about it, Nick.”

“I may need to go to the homeworld for that to happen. If I did -- I might not return.”

“Please don't be angry with me.”

“I'm not. I'm frustrated we can't have all this resolved.”

“I know you're committed to me, Nick. We don't need a piece of parchment to prove our love.” She snuggled to him. “Mmm, this does feel good. *Bon'noka* , Nykkyo.”

Nyk held her and stroked her back until she began to drowse. He was roused by a sound coming from the other side of the apartment. He sat up, stood and walked into the nursery. Nicky was crying. Nyk picked him up, changed him and carried him into the bedroom. “Suki ... Suki ... *korlyta* ?”

“Mmmph...”

“Nicky's hungry. Can you let down some milk and feed him?”

“I was sleeping. I haven't slept well in weeks.” She sat up and held Nicky to her right breast. “I can't keep my eyes open.”

“Lie down,” he said, taking the baby. “No, on your back.” Nyk placed Nicky face down on her stomach and she guided his face to her breast.

“Maybe you can sleep. I'll switch him in a few minutes.” Suki closed her eyes. Her breathing became deep and regular.

Nyk stroked Nicky's back as he nursed. He picked him up and held him upright, then lay him onto Suki's stomach. She jerked and fell back asleep. Nyk directed the infant to her left breast and stroked his back until his nursing became unenthusiastic. He picked Nicky up, carried him to the nursery and laid him in the crib.

Dawn's light roused Nyk. He went to the nursery and saw Nicky lying on his back, his eyes half-open. He changed the baby and brought him to the bedroom. “Good morning, Mom. Someone's looking for breakfast.”

Suki rubbed her eyes and sat against the headboard. Nyk handed her Nicky and she held the infant to her breast. She winced. “I'm getting sore. He sucks so hard...”

“Do you think you have enough milk to start expressing some for him? If you could do that, I'd feed him at night, and you can take the day shift.”

“I suppose we could try. I don't want to give him formula.” She stroked his hair. “Do mothers on your world nurse their babies?”

“Of course they do -- most do.”

“What of those who can't?”

“We have wet nurses.”

“Wet nurses? That sounds so archaic -- so primitive to me.”

“It's an important profession. Some women will spend ten or fifteen years of their lives as a wet nurse. They'll live with a family until the kid is weaned and move on. They use artificial hormones to start and maintain their milk production. Maternity hospitals always have wet nurses on staff, and most maintain milk banks. If a caregiver needs milk for an infant, it can be procured from there.”

“Don't you have formula?”

“We have nothing to make it from. Remember, there are no cows on Floran. We have no dairy products. We make a soy product that's considered satisfactory for older children, but infants deserve mothers' milk.”

She shifted Nicky to her other breast. “All right, we have a deal. I'll express and you feed him at night.” She handed the baby to Nyk.

“I'll take him down to visit with Grandma. Are you coming for breakfast?”

“Eventually.”

Nyk carried Nicky to the kitchen and set him in an infant seat on the table. “Yasuko, did you nurse Suki?”

She looked at him agape. “No ... yes ... for a short while. Why?”

“I'm not sure Suki's having the best time nursing Nicky. It's still early, though. I imagine it's like learning any new activity -- you get better at it with practice.”

“Nick, if she's having trouble nursing him, please tell her it's okay to use formula. She doesn't have to make a point or prove anything.”

“She wants to do the right thing, and she thinks that means nursing him. I was hoping you could give her some advice.”

“I'm not the one to advise on that topic, I'm afraid.”

Crying woke Nyk. He glanced at Suki, asleep beside him. He arose, headed for the nursery and changed Nicky. With the infant cradled in his left arm, he went to the apartment's kitchen, opened the refrigerator and grasped a nursing bottle three-fourths full. A blast in the microwave oven warmed it and he sat in a chair.

“Here you go, buddy. Mommy made this for you.” Nicky squirmed and pushed the nipple out of his mouth with his tongue. “I know, it's not the same. I'm sorry to spring this on you at such short notice...” Nyk traced Nicky's lips with the nipple and he grasped it and began nursing. “See? This way, Mommy will get her sleep and be in better shape to take care of you during the day.”

Nicky drained the bottle. Nyk held him against his shoulder and stroked his back, then cradled him in his arms until the baby began to drowse. He kissed Nicky's forehead and set him in the crib. Nyk walked into the bedroom, lay beside Suki and slipped his arm around her waist.

Nykkyo carried Nicky to the lower level kitchen and plopped him in the infant seat. "Good morning," Yasuko said. "Has he been fed?"

"Yes -- Suki fed him. She said she will be down later."

"Nick, do you think Sukiko's all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"She doesn't seem to be getting into the swing. I'm concerned for her."

"It seems to me delivering a baby is at least as exhausting on someone as surgery. She's still sore, and her breasts ache from nursing him. I wouldn't expect her to be terribly chirpy yet."

"If you say so. Where are you headed today?"

"George invited me to tag along to his office and see if there's anything I could do as a job. I'm not enthusiastic about it, but he seems to be keen."

"George is delighted to have a young man in the house. He wanted a son, Nick -- someone to follow in his footsteps."

"Sometimes sons have no desire to do so -- I had none to follow in my father's."

George stepped into the kitchen. He sat and began reading his copy of the Wall Street Journal. Yasuko set a cup of coffee before him.

"Will you and Suki be all right today?" Nyk asked.

"Yes, we'll do fine."

George gulped his coffee. "Come along, Nick."

Nyk followed George out the door to the bus stop. The bus dropped him at the subway station. From there, he rode a train to downtown Manhattan.

"By the way, Nick -- My friend Fred told me he wishes to put that property on the market. His asking price is \$750,000."

Nyk pondered. "You thought it would be \$500,000."

"I'm not an expert in real estate -- that figure was a guess. He is including all the furnishings. Frankly -- I think the number is high."

"Can I have some time to think about it?"

"I imagine -- Fred doesn't seem to be in a real hurry to move on this. Here's our stop."

He followed George into an elevator. "Here we are," George said, "88th floor." He escorted Nyk into his office and introduced him to a number of associates.

A woman rapped on his door. "Excuse me, but this just came in." She handed a piece of paper to him.

George looked at it. "Shit! We've been subpoenaed by the SEC. Marla, get to work putting together a list of all the deals in which we were lead underwriters -- and a list of subscribers for each one."

"Counsel has a copy and they're studying it right now. There's a meeting at ten."

"Ten. Start putting together that list -- I'd like to have it by then."

"Including subscribers?"

"No, that can wait." She turned and left his office. "I'm sorry, Nick, but we're under the microscope. I won't be able to give you much attention today."

"I understand."

George pressed an intercom button. "Marla, what's the name of our new intern?"

"Heather."

"Could you ask Heather to take Nick to the trading department? Thanks." He turned to Nyk. "Perhaps you'd enjoy seeing our trading area -- it's where the action is."

A young woman stepped into George's office. Nyk followed her to an elevator.

Nyk used his house key to open the front door. "It's Nick, Yasuko," he called out.

Suki's mother stepped from the rear of the house. "How was your day?"

"I didn't get much out of it. George was distracted by some sort of request from some regulators. I think his firm might be in some hot water."

"George's firm is always in hot water with the regulators."

"His office has a great view, though. How's our mom?"

"She spent most of the day upstairs, in bed. I hope the rest is doing her some good. I was holding dinner until you got home. I suppose it doesn't make sense to wait for George."

"No -- he'll be late."

"I fixed a tray for Sukiko. You and I can have a romantic dinner together."

11 -- Baby Blues

"Here you go buddy." Nyk handed Nicky to Suki. "Breakfast time." She held the baby to her breast as Nyk sat beside her.

"I wasn't ready for the rigors of parenthood. I knew a baby needed attention, but I never expected so much. I can't get anything done, because if I start something he interrupts me for food or a change or just some attention."

"He's a newborn. As he gets older, he'll be more independent."

"In twenty years."

"Not twenty years." Suki switched him to her other breast. "Are you still sore?"

"Yes..." She handed the infant to Nyk. "That should hold him 'til ... ten or so."

"Are you coming down?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want me to bring up a tray?"

"I don't care."

Nyk carried Nicky down the stairs and plunked him into the infant seat. He felt Yasuko's hand on his shoulder. "There's something very appealing about seeing you cradle him so tenderly in your strong arms. Are you sure you haven't done this before? You look like a natural with him to me. Is Sukiko coming down?"

"I thought I'd take a tray up to her."

"She's starting to worry me, Nick. I think she may have a case of the baby blues."

"Baby blues?"

"Post-partum depression. As the days progress she seems less and less connected. She spends too much time upstairs, alone."

"I think she needs more time to recover."

"I know something about this condition, Nick. I hope you're right." The telephone rang and Yasuko answered. "Yes, he's here. Nick -- it's for you."

“For me?” He took the handset. “Hello?”

“Nykkyo Kyhana!”

Nyk rolled his eyes. “Hello Seymor.”

“Nyk, the agency oversight committee has been in a panic looking for you. The smart money says you're in hiding onworld looking for a way off. Then, I received a statement from your draw account and saw a one-way flight from Milwaukee to New York was charged. I wondered if you might already be offworld. It appears you are.”

“I'll pay back the charge.”

“Don't worry about it. Nyk, I'd like it if you'd come to the office tomorrow.”

“I'd rather not. I'm not having anything else to do with ... FloranCo, Seymor.”

“I'd like to talk with you. I take it you're not in a position to talk now.”

“That's right, Seymor.”

“Please come by to talk -- as friends, Nyk. No one else knows you're here.”

“Can we keep it that way?”

“They won't hear of it from me. I promise.”

“All right. I'll be there.”

Suki handed Nicky to Nyk. “Do you want me to bring you a tray again?”

“If you'd like.”

“Your mom's offered to care for him today -- to give you a break. She'll only bother you for feeding.”

“Where are you going?”

“Seymor wants to see me.”

“You're not going back to them.”

“No, *korlyta* . I am not.”

Nyk carried the infant to the kitchen. “How's she doing today?” Yasuko asked.

“About the same. I think you're right. There's more wrong with her than simple exhaustion. Something's changed -- she's lost the sparkle in her eyes. She's not the same Suki I came home to.”

Yasuko peered from the kitchen toward the living room. "I suffered terrible post- partum depression when Sukiko was born. Nick, I'm going to tell you something no one other than George knows -- not even Sukiko. I spent three months in an institution recovering from it."

"You did recover."

"I was so miserable. I'm worried, Nick. If her condition progresses like mine -- she'll get a lot worse before she gets better."

George stepped into the kitchen and unfolded his copy of the Wall Street Journal. "How are the regulators?" Nyk asked him.

"It's in the hands of the legal eagles, now." George glanced up and his eyes fell on Nyk's necktie. "Where are you going today?"

"To the FloranCo offices."

"I thought you were done with them," Yasuko said.

"I am. My boss -- ex-boss asked me to stop by to talk -- as friends."

"Excellent," George said. "You have something he wants. Stand your ground, Nick and make them pay for it. God knows, they've made you pay enough." He gulped his coffee, stood, placed his hand on Nyk's shoulder and squeezed. "I mean it, son. Stick it to 'em."

Nyk climbed to the surface at the Canal Street subway station and walked the ten blocks to the Tribeca building where Seymour kept his office. He ascended the stairs and opened the door. "Hi, Jaquie."

"Mr Kane. I thought we'd never see you again."

"Is the big guy in?"

"Hold on..." she picked up the phone and punched a number. "Sir? Mr Kane... Go right on in."

Nyk headed into Seymour's office and closed the door. Seymour looked at him and shook his head. "Lad, I was right about you. I had you pegged from the moment you first set foot onto this rock. 'That boy gets stuff done,' I said to myself. You sure do. How did you do it?"

"I found my own way offworld."

"Not willing to say? I don't blame you. You know, sooner or later they'll discover you're here -- or assume it -- and send enforcers after you."

"They'll have to find me first."

"That shouldn't be too hard."

"Oh no? Do you have a scanpad?" Seymour removed a ring of keys from his pocket, unlocked a cabinet and removed a device the size of a credit card. "Does it work?" The gadget chirped as Seymour

pressed his wrist against it. Nyk took it and held it to his wrist.

“How?” Nyk unbuttoned his sleeve and showed Seymor the copper bracelet. “Do you wear that thing twenty-four by seven?” Nyk smiled. “You think you can game them. They will find you.”

“It's a chance I'm willing to take.”

“I spoke to Kronta this morning. He said, if our paths crossed to give you a message. He'd like you to call him.”

“That's rather difficult, since my communications have been disabled.”

Seymor gestured toward the computer on his desk. “Any time, Nyk.”

“I have nothing to say to Kronta.”

“He's on your side. I'm on your side. Your conversation will be off-the-record.” Nyk handed back the scanpad. How are things on the home front, lad? Has Sukiko delivered her baby?”

“About two weeks ago.”

“How's she doing?” Nyk made a hand gesture to indicate so-so. “The enforcers who returned her to Earth left her in my care. It's my policy to disseminate knowledge of my agents' home addresses on a need-to-know basis, and those goons had no need to know. I'll admit I was skeptical about you and her, but the time I spent with her convinced me I was wrong.”

“I'm happy to hear that. I wish I could convince Tomyka Wells of it.”

“Tomyka... She came up through Internal Affairs. She knows only one thing -- what the rules and regs say. No compromises, no exceptions for Tomyka. I'm surprised she let Sukiko free.”

“I thank Kronta for that.”

“Nyk, if you and Sukiko are trying to raise that child together -- I know there will be bills to pay. I have an idea how I can help you -- we can help each other. Are you agreeable?”

“I'm listening.”

“You know this whole ruckus has disrupted our ability to supply the plant breeders with the Earth material they want. We've closed the lab in Wisconsin, and our other lab in Scottsdale is swamped -- and, manned by a botanist who couldn't locate his ass with both hands and a flashlight. I'd like it if you'd consider coming back to us as an exobotanist.”

“Out of the question. I'm not setting foot on Floran territory or a Floran vessel.”

“Not as a FloranCo associate -- as an outside contractor. I'll forward the requests to you, and you can pass the cultures to me. I'll handle interfacing with the homeworld and delivering the specimens.”

Nyk nodded. “Where would I do this work?”

“Where would you like? We can lease some space in an under-utilized warehouse or factory.

We already rent a warehouse in the Bronx with some space you could convert to a lab.”

“I’d rather it were in Queens -- it’s closer to home.”

“Queens, then.”

“What would you pay me?”

“Name your price, Nyk. We’re desperate for some help.”

Nyk looked at Seymor. “How would one hundred dollars an hour sound?”

Seymor smiled. “It would sound cheap at twice that price.”

“Can you get away with this?”

“Of course -- I work with outside contractors all the time. Who do you think does our diamond cutting?” He took Nyk’s hand and shook it. “Glad to have you back on board. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Seymor, Suki has agreed to marry me.”

“I recall. Have you set a date?”

“Not yet. When we do ... Seymor, I’d like you to be best man.”

“I’m honored, Nyk ... but, I must refuse. If the oversight committee discovered I participated in the wedding of a Floran to an Earth person -- I’d be drawn and quartered.”

“I understand. We’ll manage.”

“I’ll get started scouting out some real estate. Anything else?”

“There is someone on the homeworld I’d like to speak with.”

Seymor gestured toward his chair. “Be my guest -- I’ll be in the outer office.”

Nyk sat behind Seymor’s desk and entered Andra’s locator code. The call initiated and Andra answered. “Nykkyo! Where are you?”

“On Earth. I wanted you to know I was safe.”

“How? How did you?”

“I’d rather not say -- you should appreciate why.”

“Of course. I’m so happy to see you safe. I woke up the other day and you were gone! I thought maybe you had fallen off the bluff -- for days I walked the beach looking for...” She brushed away tears. “Internal Affairs thought I had something to do with it. I told them I didn’t and volunteered for truth drug...”

"They interrogated you -- with truth drug -- again? Oh, Andra..."

"I'm all right -- no adverse effects. How's Sukiko?"

"She had her baby. It's a big adjustment."

"I can imagine. Give her my love. Nyk -- about the genealogy..."

"Please, Andra -- I don't want to be reminded of it. Didn't you give it to Korlo?"

"Not yet..."

"Give it to him. He'll know what to do with it."

"But, Nyk -- There may be something in it -- something that can help..."

"I don't want to know what's in it. I made it to Earth. My identity here is iron-clad -- I can slip into the population, find work... go native. I'm finished, Andra -- with the Agency and with Floran. My one regret is having to leave you behind. If I could've brought you here with me, I would've."

"I know you would've. I do worry for you -- suppose Agency Enforcement..."

"They'll have to find me, first -- and prove who I am. They're going to find that difficult. I don't know when I'll be able to call again. Take care of yourself."

"No, Nyk -- you take care of yourself -- and Sukiko and that baby." The vidphone went dark.

"Nyk, pass the rice," George said. He picked up the rice bowl and passed it. George scooped some and looked toward Suki. "Rice?"

"Have some," Yasuko said. "You've hardly eaten all day."

"Don't you think I'm fat enough already? No, thanks."

"Nick, how was your meeting at your old firm?" George asked.

"It went well. I've been asked to contribute as an independent contractor. The firm will find space for me to work and I can set my own hours."

George nodded. "How much are they paying you?"

"One hundred an hour."

George nodded again. "How did you arrive at that figure?"

"I tossed it out and they jumped at it."

"You started too low."

"I realized it right away. I should've started at five hundred and let them work me down."

"You're catching on."

Wakefulness seeped into Nykkyo's consciousness. He became aware of a sound coming from the nursery. Beside him in the dim light he could discern Suki, lying on her stomach and holding her pillow over her head.

"Nicky's crying," he said. Suki gripped the pillow tighter. "I think he's hungry."

She rolled over and glowered at him. "Then, go feed him," she said. "You wanted this baby, you stick to your part of our deal and take care of him." She flipped onto her stomach and pulled the pillow over her head again.

Nyk arose, went into the nursery and picked up the baby. He noticed dampness and changed his diaper. "Come on, little buddy," he said and carried Nicky into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and looked in. After rummaging through its contents he closed the door.

He walked into the bedroom. "Suki, we don't have any milk for him. Didn't you express some this evening?" She lay still. "Suki?" He touched her shoulder. "You should be expressing milk for him -- it'll keep your supply fresh."

She looked out from under the pillow. "Are you an expert on breastfeeding all of a sudden?"

"I don't need to be an expert to know he's hungry and we have no milk. Can't you feed him?"

"Go away."

Nyk set Nicky into his crib, returned to the bedroom and pulled on a pair of trousers. He picked up the baby, carried him downstairs into Suki's parents' kitchen and began a survey of their refrigerator.

"Oh, it's you," he heard Suki's father say. "Yasuko said she heard a noise."

"Nicky's hungry and we have no milk upstairs."

George turned and left the kitchen. "Well, buddy," Nyk said, "I don't know what we're going to do." He found a nursing bottle with about an inch of white fluid in its bottom. Nyk slipped it into the microwave oven and set it for a brief warming blast. He removed the bottle from the oven, touched the glass to his lips and presented it to the infant. Nicky began to nurse.

"That's hardly a meal's worth." Nyk looked up and saw Yasuko standing in the doorway.

"We have none upstairs. I thought maybe you had some left over from today."

Yasuko opened a cabinet and reached toward the back. She withdrew a can of formula concentrate, popped it open with a can opener and half-filled a nursing bottle. She topped it with water from a plastic jug and began warming it in the microwave oven.

Nicky finished the first bottle and Yasuko handed Nyk the second. "Don't tell her I have this."

"Have you been sneaking him formula during the day?"

She nodded. "She's not making enough milk, and she's not expressing enough to stimulate production." She sat beside Nyk, placed her hand on his bare back, stroked his shoulder blade and then withdrew her hand. "I'm worried, Nick. Her depression seems to be deepening."

Nicky consumed about half the second bottle. Nyk felt his body relaxing -- his nursing becoming less vigorous as his stomach filled. The infant's eyes closed. His lips parted and Nyk withdrew the nipple. He held the baby and stroked his black hair. Nyk held him against his shoulder and rubbed his back. Nicky released a belch.

"You're a brave man doing that without a towel."

"It washes off." He sat, held Nicky and stroked him.

"I mean it, Nick. I'm very worried. She spends her days upstairs, moping. They have ... treatment these days that wasn't available years ago. Please, Nick, implore her to call her doctor and get a prescription. And, tell her if she's not having a good time nursing him, it's okay to use formula. Nicky's welfare is paramount, and no one's going to think her a poor mother if she can't nurse him."

"I'll try. She needs love and encouragement. I'm standing by her and helping her through this."

"Nick, if anyone's love were strong enough to cure her, yours is." She shook her head. "Love alone won't fix this. It's a medical condition and she needs medicine."

"She'll recover in time."

"Perhaps, in time, it will resolve itself. What if it doesn't? What if some medication can help her recover faster?"

"It must be her decision. Dragging her there will make it worse." Nyk stroked Nicky's abdomen. "His belly's good and full. Let's see if this holds him 'til morning. Good night, Yasuko." He headed up the stairs.

Dawn's first light roused Nyk. Beside him Suki was sitting, holding Nicky to her left breast. "Good morning," he said.

She eyed him. "I'm sticking to our bargain. You feed him at night, and I'll do it in daylight." She picked up a washcloth, placed it on her shoulder and held Nicky to it. Then, she offered him her right breast.

Nyk slipped his arm around her and leaned to kiss her cheek. She pulled away. "I'm going to take my shower," he said.

He returned from the bathroom. Suki was holding Nicky. "He has your dark, dark eyes."

Suki glanced up at him. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I wonder what I'm doing with this ... thing."

"I'll give him his bath and take him down to your mom," Nyk said and took Nicky from her. She lay on her side and pulled the bedcovers up to her chin.

Nyk retrieved a plastic tub, set it in the bathtub and filled it. He propped Nicky in the tub, sponged him off, dried him, applied a fresh diaper and slipped him into clean clothes. "I'm on my way to see Seymor," he said to Suki as she lay in bed. "I'll see you tonight."

She wiped tears from her face. "You must hate me, now. I'm such a miserable parent."

"I don't hate you. It tears me apart to see you suffering. Suki, there's no shame in asking for some help. If I make an appointment for you to see your doctor, will you come?" She looked away from him. "This isn't your fault, and I'm sure this isn't how you want to be. Think about it." Nyk headed down the stairs and could hear her sobbing in the bedroom.

"How is she?" Yasuko asked as she took the infant from him.

"About the same. She fed him a while ago."

"He'll probably need more mid-morning. Oh, Nick -- Jonathan called and asked if you'd stop by the shop."

He hopped on a city bus and rode to the block holding Jonathan's shop. The place was closed and the security grates were shut. He paced back and forth on the sidewalk until he spotted Jonathan walking toward him.

"Good morning, Nick." Suki's uncle unlocked the grates and folded them back. "I have something to show you." He gestured Nyk inside the shop.

"I hope you're not upset with me," Jonathan said and stepped into a back room. He returned with a small box. "I took the liberty of letting my supplier take one of your stones. He showed it to his cutter." He opened the box and removed a finished gem. "Look at this! His cutter was so excited when he saw it he worked through the weekend to finish it."

Jonathan held it under a magnifying glass. "It's just over three and three-quarters carats, perfect white. Not a flaw -- no cracks, voids or inclusions. And, what a fine cut. Do you know how much a stone like this is worth?"

Nyk shook his head. "I haven't a clue."

"When you appraise a diamond, you look at the four C's -- Carat, Color, Clarity and Cut. This stone has them all. Nick -- the appraised value could easily top fifty thousand."

"Fifty ... thousand ... dollars?"

Jonathan smirked. "Not fifty thousand clamshells. Stones normally trade below their appraised value, but still -- this is by far the finest diamond I've had in my shop. It's truly world class. I could never sell it here."

"Jonathan, the stone you made into Suki's engagement ring -- what's it worth?"

He looked toward the ceiling. "I didn't look at it too closely. It was between one and a half and two carats, if I recall -- a very pretty stone. I sell two-carat diamonds for five thousand that aren't as nice as that one." Jonathan looked into Nyk's eyes. "You tell me you have more raw crystals like these?"

“Yes -- some larger in fact.”

“Larger! How many more?”

“How many can you use?”

“You're cagey for a young man. All right, let's try it this way -- What I'd like to do is to work with my supplier to have these cut. We'd pay him in kind for his efforts. If we give him ten raw stones, we'd let him keep three. I'd take the remaining seven and rotate the smaller ones into my stock. You and I could split the profits from any I sell --according to some formula we agree upon.”

“And the larger ones?”

“Those I'd try to move into some more upscale shops.”

“What sort of formula?”

“I was thinking along the lines of ... fifty-fifty.”

“Do you think that's fair?”

“I do, or I wouldn't have suggested it. Do you want time to think it over?”

“No, Jonathan. Your proposal sounds acceptable to me.”

“Good. I'll start with the rest of the stones you brought in last week. We'll see how it goes from here.” Jonathan extended his hand. “My supplier said he showed this stone to the buyers at Tiffany's and Cartier's. They've expressed some serious interest.”

Seymor inserted the key into the door of an office building and escorted Nyk inside. “Here, lad. What do you think?”

“It's within walking distance to the house. I'll need a couple of benches. We have running water. A high-speed data circuit would be nice, but not essential. It'll serve, Seymor.”

“It's quite some distance from the nearest farm.”

“When I did my initial exobotany tour, I could obtain everything the plant breeders asked for from seed catalogues and online sources. I never had to set foot in the field.”

“What about wild plants?”

“There's the botanical gardens and Central Park. This'll do fine -- besides, it's winter.”

“The lab furniture can be here this afternoon. I have stasis equipment in the trunk of my car. We can hook up the phone in a couple of days. A data circuit will take a bit longer.”

“I can order material from the apartment in the meantime.” He looked at the windows. “Southern light for the sprouting beds -- we won't need grow lights.”

"That's just as well," Seymor replied. "I wouldn't want the local constabulary imagining we're growing dope in here."

"What's the top priority?"

"What has been the top priority -- the potato crisis." He handed Nyk a diskette. "Here's a list of what the plant breeders are looking for. I'll call and arrange for the furniture delivery." Seymor headed out the door to use his car phone.

Nyk pocketed the diskette. He poked his head into Seymor's car. "Would you care to take me to the hardware store?"

His laptop computer connected to the data line, Nyk scanned online seed catalogues for material to satisfy the plant breeders. He placed orders using his Agency debit card. Suki emerged from the bedroom in a long robe. Her hair was stringy and unkempt. "What are you doing?"

"I'm ordering some seeds."

"You're not doing work for ... them, are you?"

"Yes -- as a contractor and I'm being paid a pretty for doing so."

Suki stepped from the nursery holding Nicky. She sat on the sofa and opened her robe. "I am getting so tired of this."

"Suki, if you're not having a good time nursing him -- stop. No one's going to think you a poorer mother."

"Of course they won't -- how much poorer can I be?" She looked up at him. "I can't do this, Nick," she said shaking her head. "I can't..."

"Let's see if we can get you some help."

"What would help would be getting rid of this smelly, disgusting ... thing."

Nyk looked at her with tears in his eyes. "How can you say that about your own child?"

"I wish one of us were dead."

"Don't say such things."

"I mean it. He'd be better off without me and so would I." She began to cry. "I don't know what's wrong with me. Oh, Nick! I'm so unhappy!"

Nyk sat beside her. "Suki, no matter what happens -- I'm here, and I'll be here. Doesn't that help?"

"Help ... yes it helps."

"Your mom said she'd keep him downstairs any night we wanted a break. Do you want a break tonight?"

"I suppose."

"I'll change him and give him his bath -- then, I'll take him to your mom." Nyk took Nicky from her and carried him into the bathroom. Holding him in one arm, Nyk filled the plastic basin. He stripped off Nicky's clothes and sat him in the water, supporting his head and shoulders, and sponged him off.

"Here he is, Grandma," Nyk said as he handed the infant to Yasuko. "All fresh, clean and sweet-smelling."

"How's she doing?"

Nyk shook his head. "I don't think she's showered all week. She'll break into tears and sleep."

"I think her milk's drying up. Don't tell her I'm giving him formula. Nick -- I can take care of Nicky while you try to deal with his mom."

Nyk nodded and headed up the stairs. He looked around the apartment and found Suki lying on her stomach on the bed, sobbing. He touched her back. "Don't do that. It doesn't feel good."

"Suki -- Do you remember after the Lexal incident? I was suffering from a post-trauma depression. I know how you feel. It tears me apart to see you like this." He stroked her cheek and she turned her face away. "You and Seymour intervened so I could get treatment. Now YOU need treatment. It's not your fault. My condition was partly my own fault for getting involved with the Lexalese in the first place. Your's isn't -- your body chemistry is having difficulty adjusting, now that Nicky's born. It's affecting your brain. Suki -- I know you don't want to be like this. Let's go to the doctor and get it fixed."

"I won't take drugs."

"Maybe your doctor should decide that."

"I said I'm not taking drugs. Now, go away and leave me alone."

Nyk returned to the lower level. "It kills me to see her that way."

"I was worse. I'd hear voices -- voices telling me I was evil -- taunting voices." She looked away. "Voices imploring me to kill myself or run away. I remember as if it were yesterday."

"Do you think she's hearing voices?"

"I don't think so -- yet. I hope she can get treatment before she gets that bad. I do think it's better for Nicky to be out of that environment."

"Do you think she'd harm him?"

"Through neglect, perhaps. I don't think she'd deliberately hurt him."

"She doesn't want to see the doctor. I want it to be her decision -- I'm afraid if we intervene she'll resist even more. We'll have to wait until something snaps and she sees the need herself."

“Or until something snaps and she has no choice.” Yasuko nodded. “That's what I'm afraid of, Nick. I'm happy to care for Nicky. I wish someone had been here to care for Sukiko when she was his age.”

Nyk carried a cardboard carton up the steps to the Tribeca office building. Seymor greeted him at the door. “Your first set of cultures.”

“I'll take care of the rendezvous with the packet.”

Nyk handed Seymor a slip of paper. “My first set of hours.”

Seymor scanned the sheet. “How many?”

“Thirty.”

“I'll write you a check.” He beckoned Nyk to his desk and withdrew a ledger-sized checkbook.

“Make it out to Nick Kane.” Seymor glared up at him. “Sorry.”

Seymor tore the check from the book. “Here, lad. It's a bargain. Have a seat.” Nyk sat. “Kronta suspects you're offworld. He's trying to figure out how you did it. He told me if he finds Service people helped you, they'd regret it. They'll spend the rest of their careers swabbing the decks of slow freighters.”

“No one in the Service helped me.”

“They've located a rather hapless comm technician who recalls helping an unknown ExoAgent named Nemo repair a shuttlecar. Nemo, Nyk?” Seymor squinted. “Nemo?”

“I hope they don't punish Zoa. She didn't know.”

“Zoa's been interrogated...”

“With truth drug? She's innocent, Seymor.”

“They know that, now. I hope for your sake you never need to make a transit through that relay station when she's on board. Kronta called again yesterday afternoon. He'd like to speak to you -- off the record.”

“Would it help?”

“I can't see how it would hurt, Nyk. I'll place the call.”

“All right, see if Kronta's available.”

Seymor sat behind his computer. He said a few words and beckoned Nyk behind his desk.

“Nykkyo,” Kronta said. “I thought you were offworld. How did you get there?”

“I found my own way.”

“We must know how you did it. You seemingly vanished from the face of Floran.”

Nyk shook his head. “Sorry, Illya.”

“Someone had to have helped you. Who was it?” Nyk shook his head again. “At least tell me if it involved Service people.”

“Maybe it did and maybe it didn’t.”

“Nyk, believe me when I tell you I was making some progress with your case. I’m afraid your action has set back your cause.”

“It’s done my cause fine. I arrived here in time to be with Suki when she delivered her baby.”

“You know Tomyka will send enforcers after you.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Nyk, I’d like you to consider returning here and working with me to clear your name. It can’t happen so long as you’re a fugitive. Turning yourself in would mitigate the damage you’ve done.”

“The status of my name on that world means little to me, Illya. I don’t think we have any more to discuss.” The vidphone session went dark.

“I see that conversation was leading nowhere,” Seymor said.

“Maybe speaking with him was a mistake.”

“He is on your side, lad. I trust him. Please, Nyk...”

“What, Seymor? Turn myself in?”

Seymor shook his head. “Be careful. Are you still wearing that bracelet?” Nyk held up his arm and pulled back his cuff. “Watch your back, lad.”

“I’ll be careful. I must be on my way.”

“Wait, lad...” Seymor handed him a package wrapped in colorful paper. “For the baby.”

Nyk sat at the kitchen table cradling Nicky in his arm. He stroked the infant’s hair. “Look -- he’s tracking my finger.” Nyk brought his finger to Nicky’s face and touched his lips. Nicky opened his mouth and began sucking Nyk’s finger.

“Here, give him this,” Yasuko said and handed Nyk a bottle of formula. “Did a night to herself help her at all?”

“I don’t think so.” He stroked Nicky’s cheek as he nursed. “Look how fast he goes.” The boy reached and gripped the bottle. “I’ve never seen him nurse so vigorously.” Nyk smiled. “Listen to him.”

“I’m surprised he’s gaining weight. Like I said, her milk’s drying up. He’s hungry.”

“It must be the formula you’re sneaking him.” Nyk kissed his forehead. “Okay, buddy, time for a lie-down in your luxury chair.” He set Nicky into the infant seat. “What do you think, Yasuko? Is it time to intervene?”

“I think it might be past time.”

“Maybe I should call and make an appointment for her.” Yasuko nodded. “Well, off to the lab.”

Yasuko opened her arms to him and he embraced her. “I’ll see you tonight.” He headed out the front door. His eyes fell upon two men standing on the sidewalk. One held a green card and the other was pointing at the house. Nyk made eye contact for an instant and headed for the corner.

Nyk opened an incubator, looked at the potato cultures and decided they were ready for transport to the homeworld. He set up a wire rack, loaded it with empty polymer stasis capsules and began transferring the cultures. When all the capsules were filled he loaded them into a stasis canister. The lid went on, he switched it to an internal power cell and packed it into a cardboard carton addressed to the FloranCo operative in Kansas City.

He picked up the phone and ordered pickup service from an overnight delivery company. His laptop computer signaled an incoming message from Seymor listing more requests from the plant breeders. Nyk sat and began looking for suppliers for the material.

A knock came at the door. Nyk turned the package over to the express driver. He looked at the clock, noted his hours and began packing up the laptop computer. It was a five block walk to the Kyhana household. He slipped on a jacket, locked the lab and trudged down the street.

12 -- I Feel Like I've Been Through a War

“Yasuko, it’s Nick,” he called as he walked into the house. He saw George sitting in the living room.

“She stepped out. How’s the consultation going?”

“It’s going well. Did Suki go out, too?”

“No, she’s upstairs.”

“Did Yasuko take Nicky?”

“He's upstairs also.”

Nyk trotted up the steps to the apartment. He opened the door and saw Suki sleeping in a ball on the sofa. He opened the door to the nursery and looked in. The crib was empty.

He went to Suki and shook her. “Suki ... *korlyta* ... wake up.”

She opened her eyes. “Nick? Oh, Nick, you're home.” He held her.

“Where's Nicky?” Suki gave him a blank look. “Suki, where is Nicky?”

“The bathtub!”

Nyk ran into the bathroom. Nicky was lying in the plastic tub that served to bathe him. He was on his back in about two inches of water. Nyk picked him up.

“He's cold -- his lips are blue!” Nyk listened to his chest. “He's alive.” He grabbed a towel and wrapped the infant. “George! George!” Nyk called down the stairs.

“Yes, Nick?”

“Do we have a heating pad?”

“I'll bring one up.”

Nyk turned to Suki. “How long was he in there?” She stared at the floor. “Suki, how long was he in there?”

“I ... I don't know. I was bathing him ... the phone rang ... I must've forgotten about him.”

George walked into the apartment with the heating pad. Nyk plugged it in and wrapped it around Nicky.

George shook his head. “I'll send Yasuko up when she comes in.”

“Didn't he cry?” Nyk asked.

“I ... I ... Nick, I can't hear him cry! I tune him out. Do you see what a basket case I am?” She collapsed on the sofa, sobbing.

Nicky's color began to return. He started shivering and attempted to cry. “Here. Take him.”

“No! I can't.”

“Take him. I'm going to check downstairs for a bottle.”

“I'll feed him.” She started to open her gown.

“No.” Nyk returned with a half-filled bottle. He took Nicky and began feeding him. “This is warmer than body temperature -- to get some heat into him from the inside.” He held and stroked Nicky

as he began to nurse enthusiastically. "He's starting to warm up. I think he'll be all right." Nyk looked at Suki. "Now are you ready to see your doctor?"

"I don't want to take any drugs. They scare me."

"This scared ME!"

"I'm afraid of psychoactive drugs. They change things in your brain."

"You have things wrong in your brain. Changing them is the whole point!"

"Oh, Nick. I'm trying ... Please give me just a little more time."

Nyk stepped into the kitchen and saw Yasuko. "George told me what happened. We're so lucky you came home when you did." She looked into his eyes. "Nick, what happened today ... was exactly what happened to me. Sukiko must've been about three months old and I left her in the tub." Tears ran down her face. "George had me committed the next day."

"No one's going to commit Suki. I'll talk to her about seeing her doctor. If she thinks putting her into a hospital is the right thing, we'll do it."

"You have more patience than George." Nyk held her and kissed her forehead. "I still have mixed feelings about what he did. On the one hand, it was what I needed to heal." She sobbed. "But, I felt so abandoned!"

"I'm not abandoning Suki," he said as he stroked her hair. "I'm not leaving her side."

"Are you having dinner with us?"

"I'll take a tray upstairs, if that's okay."

"Fine, Nick." She placed some bowls on a bamboo tray and handed it to him.

Nyk carried it upstairs. He found Suki in their bedroom nursing Nicky. "Just finishing up," she said. He took the baby from her and propped him with pillows between himself and Suki. Nicky smiled at him. He handed her a bowl and chopsticks.

"I am feeling better. I only cried once today."

Nyk shook his head. "Please don't deny it. You need to see your doctor."

"I said I'm feeling better."

"Suki, after what I came home to -- I must insist you make an appointment to see your doctor. You don't have to see a psychotherapist -- I'm sure your obstetrician can help you."

"Give me a chance, will you?"

"What harm is it to talk to your doctor? Tell her what you're going through. It's not your fault, Suki. There's something wrong with your brain chemistry."

"I'll make a deal with you. If I'm not better in a couple of days, I'll make the appointment. Okay?"

Nyk looked at her. "Okay." He set the bowls on the tray and carried it to the living room. "I'll change him and put him downstairs," he said as he picked up Nicky.

Nyk returned to the bedroom and stretched out on the bed. He slipped his arm around Suki. "It's sweet of your mom to care for him until you're feeling better."

"It's sweet of her to care for you, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. You should be proud of me -- I'm holding our relationship to Floran standards, too."

"What are you talking about?"

"I hope Daddy doesn't figure it out, though. He has a vicious temper."

"Suki, you're not making sense."

"Don't try to deny it. You told me you and Mom desire each other."

"I also told you we'd never approach each other that way. We haven't."

"I don't believe you."

"Suki -- I've slept downstairs because you needed time by yourself. I'd never lie to you. How can you think Yasuko and I..."

"I see the way she looks at you -- and how you look at her -- how she always has her hands on you..." She pulled away from him and Nyk could see anger building in her eyes. "No ... I'm not going to let myself be jealous." He slipped his arm around her again. "Don't touch me!" She glowered at him. "How could you, Nick? How could you with my mother?"

"I haven't -- we haven't -- I swear, Suki."

"You're lying!"

"Why do you think I'd lie to you?"

"Because of what I've become -- I'm gross and disgusting -- a horrible parent. You'd say anything not to upset me."

"Suki, this is ludicrous. I can't believe you're jealous of something you imagine I did."

"I'm not imagining."

"Then, you're hallucinating."

"Now, you're trying to goad me. You want me to lose it so you can call in the men in the white coats." She clenched her fist and glared at him.

"No, Suki. I want you the way you were. That's why I think you should see your doctor."

She slapped his face. "I don't want to hear you say the word doctor again!"

Nyk hopped off the bed. "Suki!"

"Get out of here!" Nyk backed up against the bedroom wall. "I said, get out!" She grabbed the alarm clock from the nightstand and threw it in his direction. Nyk ducked, but the clock hit him above the temple. He felt his injury and saw blood on his fingers.

He opened the closet, took down a cardboard carton and removed a Floran first-aid kit. He opened it and took out a clear bottle with a dropper.

"Such drama," she sneered.

"Look," he said and showed her the gash on his head. "I'm going to put some salve on it. He stepped into the bathroom and applied healing salve to the cut.

Nyk returned to the bedroom to replace the kit. He looked at her with tears in his eyes. "If you can't see something's wrong ... I've turned my back on the Agency, I'm up to my neck in trouble with homeworld authorities. My transit here may incite an interplanetary colonial incident. I've left my wife, quit my job -- I've done all this for one purpose, and that's to be with you and to help you raise Nicky. You're sick, Suki -- and when you're sick, you go to the doctor to help yourself get better. If you want to get better, call for an appointment -- or I'll call for you. If you don't want to get better ... I'll talk to your folks about what we can do with Nicky. Now, I'm going to ask your mother if it's okay to use the guest room." He headed for the door.

"Wait, Nick. Okay, make the appointment. They'll probably want to lock me up. I hope they do -- I deserve it, and it'll get me out of here." She flopped on the bed and sobbed.

Nyk stepped off the city bus and walked into the medical arts building. "Now, tell the doctor the truth. Tell her what you've been going through. Don't hold anything back. We all need you, Suki. I'll promise you this -- we're not going to lock you up or abandon you."

"What if she thinks I need to be locked up?"

"I don't think you're that bad. If she thinks you could benefit from time away, we'll see what we need to do. Promise me you'll be straight with her."

"I promise."

Nyk sat beside Suki in the waiting room. He heard the nurse call her name and watched her head toward an examining room. He picked up a magazine and flipped through it. Suki returned and slapped a slip of paper onto his lap. "Anti-depressants. I hope you're happy."

"I'm not."

“She wants to speak with you.”

Nyk accompanied her into the doctor's private office. “Mr Kane. Please sit down. I understand you and Sukiko are engaged.” Nyk nodded. “She's suffering from about as severe a case of post-partum depression as I can recall. Is someone at home to help care for her baby?”

“Yes. We live in the apartment above her parents' house. Her mother can help her with Nicky, and I'm working part-time. There'll be someone with her around the clock.”

“Good. I won't bother to pass this case on to Social Services, then. I am tempted to refer her to a psychotherapist, but we'll try the anti-depressants first.”

“We were afraid she'd need to go to an institution.”

“I'll be frank -- it may come to that, yet. I have had good luck with this preparation, and I'm reluctant to remove her from her support network unless there's no other way.”

“I'm relieved to hear it.”

“I'm speaking to you because this drug has some risk. It's rather more toxic than some other preparations, but I use it because I get the best results with it.”

“What sort of risk?”

“It has a high overdose potential. Sukiko told me she isn't suicidal, and I believe her. Trust me -- if I thought she were, we'd be doing something else.”

“I understand.”

“I'm warning you to keep an eye on her and make sure she takes the medication as prescribed -- at least at first. I'm confident, after a few days, she'll realize how it's helping her and she'll be more cooperative. If she should become despondent -- well, keep watch for that, too -- and call me right away.”

“How long will she have to be on this?”

“We'll evaluate her after eight weeks. If she's doing well, we'll start stepping down the dose. There is the chance she'll need it long-term.”

“Thanks, doctor.” She dismissed him with a nod of her head.

Nyk sat beside Suki on the bus. “If I'm on that stuff, I can't nurse him. That'll make Mom happy -- I know she's been sneaking him formula.”

“None of this makes any of us happy, Suki.” He stepped off the bus and walked with her to the house. “I spoke to your mom and she'll take care of Nicky while we give this medication a try.” He reached the front door to the house. Nyk opened it and gestured Suki inside. “I'm going to walk to the pharmacy and get the prescription filled.”

He headed down the street, handed the slip to the pharmacist and wandered the aisles. The

druggist called him over. "This'll make her groggy for the first couple of days, until she gets used to it." Nyk nodded. "You know about the overdose potential?"

"Yes -- we'll keep an eye on her."

"That'll be one hundred thirty-five dollars."

Nyk pulled out his wallet and saw a twenty and two singles. He removed his Agency debit card. "See if this works."

The druggist ran the transaction through and Nyk signed the slip. He headed back to the apartment. Suki was lying on her back in the bedroom. He walked in holding a capsule and a glass of water. "Twice a day." She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Suki, this was an expensive prescription. I had to use my Agency debit card, because I didn't have enough cash. I'm not even an Agent any more."

"So, now it's about money."

"No -- it's about all of us doing what we have to do for you to get better. I want you to do your part and take your medication." He handed her the capsule. She swallowed it with a sip of water, and then showed him her open mouth. "Now, take this as the doctor ordered. Promise?"

"I promise. Leave me alone."

Nyk descended the stairs and sat on the living room sofa beside Yasuko. "Well, at least you got her to the doctor. That was more than I could do."

"I feel like I've been through a war."

Nyk stepped into the kitchen cradling Nicky in his arms. "Good morning, Grandma," he said.

"I have his bottle." Nyk sat and began feeding the baby. "How did Sukiko do last night?"

"The druggist said those pills would make her groggy. It knocked her out. She slept like a log."

"If she's asleep, her demons can't pester her."

"She was still sleeping when I checked on her."

"Are you going to your lab today?"

"Yes -- I have a huge backlog of work to do. I'm sorry, Yasuko, but I promised..."

"Do what you must, Nick. Nicky and I will be fine. He's a delight." She stroked the baby's hair. "I didn't have an opportunity to enjoy Sukiko when she was this small. It's like having another chance."

Suki walked into the kitchen in her short robe, pulled out a chair and sat. She folded her arms on the table and rested her head on them. "Well, good morning," Yasuko said. "I didn't expect to see you."

"Did you take your pill this morning?" Nyk asked. She nodded.

"How are you feeling?" Yasuko inquired.

"So sleepy."

Nyk touched Suki's back. "I'm going to the lab. See you tonight." He bent and kissed the top of her head.

"Don't kiss my hair, it's so disgusting."

He headed to the front door, opened it and looked around at the pedestrians on the sidewalk. The two men he had seen earlier were nowhere in sight. Nyk headed down the steps to the street, locking the front door behind him.

Nyk opened the front door with his key. "It's Nick, Yasuko."

"Nick, come in. We're having dinner in the kitchen tonight since it's only you and me."

"Where's George?"

"He's entertaining clients."

"How's Suki doing?"

"She spent the day in bed, sleeping." Nyk sat to a bowl of rice and another of a clear broth and vegetables. He picked up a pair of chopsticks. "How did you become so fond of Japanese food, Nick? I don't know too many westerners who enjoy it."

"Maybe I have Japanese roots -- way back." Nyk finished his meal. "I'll see how Suki's feeling."

"Take this tray to her."

Nyk grasped the bamboo and lacquer tray and carried it up the stairs. Suki was asleep on the bed. He nudged her. "Suki ... *korlyta* ?" She cracked her eyes open. "Would you like some dinner?"

She hoisted herself into a sitting position and Nyk set the tray on her lap. She picked up the chopsticks and ate a clump of rice. A tear ran down her face and she brushed it away. "This is such a simple pleasure. Oh, Nick! I'm such a mess."

"It's time for your medication."

"No, not another pill. They make me feel so odd."

"The doctor said you'll get used to them." He opened the pill bottle and shook out a capsule. "Here."

She hesitated and swallowed the pill. "I'm done with dinner." Nyk picked up the tray and Suki rolled onto her side.

He carried the tray to Yasuko. "Well?"

"It's not a miracle drug, that's for sure," he replied and picked Nicky out of the infant seat. He carried the boy into the living room and sat cradling him. "He needs the contact."

Yasuko sat beside him and took his hand. "My daughter is so fortunate. How you care for him -- how you care for her. Where did you get such patience?"

Nyk stroked Nicky's hair and the baby smiled at him. "He wants interaction, now. He wants to learn." Yasuko handed the baby a toy -- a set of colored plastic disks on a ring. Nicky attempted to put the ring into his mouth. "He has Suki's color -- and her dark, dark eyes. I can see her features in his face already." Nicky became drowsy. "I'll change him and put him down. Does he get you up at night?"

"It's all right -- I'm a light sleeper. He's been good the past few days."

Nyk stepped from the guest room. "He's down and asleep. I read a book to him. My reading would put anyone to sleep. Good night, Yasuko." She stepped to him and embraced him. Nyk kissed the top of her head and headed up the stairs.

Suki was curled up on the sofa. He undressed and turned down the bedcovers. Then, he scooped her from the sofa and carried her into the bedroom. She slipped off her robe. He helped her into bed and lay beside her. "Oh, Nick ... I am trying. I'm making an effort."

He stroked her face. "I know you are. Do you think the pills are helping?"

"They're helping eliminate my sleep deficit," she said and smiled. "I'm building a sleep surplus."

"They must be helping. I haven't seen you smile in weeks."

"Nick, I was looking at the crest today. I was thinking about what you said -- how it'll be passed from generation to generation. Nicky will grow and have a family. I'll be a grandma."

"You've been a grandma. Remember, your future is my past. Destiny has given you a gift, *korlyta* -- a glimpse into your future. How many have that privilege?"

"I'll never have another child."

"Why do you think not?"

"There's only one man in the universe I'd want to father my child -- you. You tell me you're sterile. It's left to Nicky to carry on, and I know he will."

"He will so long as we do our part and help him walk his path."

"So much is riding on his little shoulders. I feel badly he won't have siblings to lighten his load."

"The Kyhana clan were never a particularly fecund bunch."

"Nick, I love you. I know you haven't felt much love from me since Nicky was born."

"It's not your fault. None of this was your fault."

"I wanted you to know -- you're what keeps me going. I couldn't have without you."

“Have you been thinking of suicide?”

“The thought is never far from my mind.”

“I hate hearing you talk like that.”

“But, it's the truth. After I slit my wrists you had me promise I'd think of you. Over the past two months there were a few times I came close -- then, I thought of you. I'd be dead without you, Nick. I'd have been long dead.”

“That's not your destiny, Suki.”

“How do you know? My duties toward Destiny have been discharged. I've given birth to Koichi's forebear. Destiny has no more need of me.”

“Not true. Nicky must be loved and nurtured so he'll grow into the man who'll father the next generation. Suki, I need your help with Nicky as much as you need mine.” He lay on his back. “Destiny needs both of us.” She reached across to hold him. He felt her body relax and her arms and legs twitch as she drifted into sleep. “I need you.”

Nyk sat holding Nicky. “How's the patient this morning?” Yasuko asked.

“Sleeping. She was pretty groggy last night, but we had a chance to talk -- the first good talk we've had since Nicky was born. I'm cautiously optimistic.”

“What are your plans today?”

“Back to the grind at the lab.”

13 -- Daphne Wallace

Nyk locked up the lab. He headed down a street lined with shops and storefronts, crossed an intersection and proceeded into his neighborhood. Footsteps approached him from behind. He ducked into the doorway of a corner diner and glanced in the window. He saw the reflection of two men who had stopped and were loitering by a lamppost.

He headed down the street again. The footfalls followed him. An MTA bus was closing its door. Nyk pushed his way onto it and slipped his transit card into the fare box. He took a seat in the middle and saw the two men standing on the sidewalk as the bus pulled into traffic. They were the two, he

thought, whom he had encountered outside the Kyhana household.

The bus took him past the house. He pressed the stop request, stepped to the street and headed to the house from the opposite direction. Nyk let himself into the front door and saw Yasuko sitting in the living room with Nicky on her lap. He walked to her and took the baby. Nicky smiled and reached toward him. Nyk let the boy grab his finger. "How's our mom doing?" he asked.

"I think she's much better. She came down around mid-morning. She was alert. We talked, and she held Nicky. She even gave him some lunch."

"Were her spirits better?"

"I'd say so. She didn't mope around. She seemed a bit subdued, but I attributed that to the medication."

Nyk returned Nicky to her. "She seemed better last night, too. Where is she now?"

"She went upstairs for a while. She seemed calm and at peace."

"Calm and at peace? Yasuko, that's how she gets when she's..."

Nyk sprinted up the stairs and into the apartment. "Suki?" He looked in the bedroom. She was lying on her back on the bed. Nyk looked at the nightstand. A glass half-full of water sat beside an empty pill bottle. Nyk picked it up and recognized it as the prescription he had filled earlier in the week.

He put his ear to her breast and listened for her heart. With his finger he probed her temple and found a strong pulse. Her breathing seemed deep and regular. He leaned close and looked at her face. Then, he pried up one of her eyelids.

"Nick! What are you doing?"

"Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I was just trying to take a little nap."

He showed her the pill bottle. "Your mother said you were calm and at peace. I came up here and found this. I was worried..."

"You thought I was suicidal."

"I feared you might be."

Suki sat up, pulled open the nightstand drawer and withdrew a glass spice bottle filled with capsules. "I dumped them in here because I kept breaking my fingernails on the child-proof cap. Nicky has a few months before he'll start getting into things, so I thought it was safe enough." Nyk took the bottle from her and examined it. "They're all there -- except for the eight I've taken over the past four days."

He returned the bottle to the drawer and flopped on the bed beside her. She stroked his face and he kissed her forehead, then her lips. "I had forgotten how good kissing you feels," she said.

"I hadn't." He kissed her again and stroked her cheek. "We have some time before dinner. I know something else that feels good."

"Maybe after dinner. I think I'll use the time to take a shower. I need one, and I'll bet you'd appreciate it, too."

"Shall I have your mom set a place for you?"

She nodded. "Nick, a boulder's been lifted from me."

"Welcome home, *korlyta*."

Nyk lay on his back in bed. Suki stepped from the bathroom holding her hairbrush and with a hairclip in her teeth. She brushed her hair and fastened it into a ponytail. With a smile she slipped off her robe, stood sideways to him and ran her hand along her stomach.

"I see you have your figure back."

"My figure and then some." She pinched the skin on her abdomen and shook it. "Baby fat -- I'd like to lose twenty pounds."

"Maybe we should start going to the 'Y' on weekends."

"You'd come with me?"

"I'd do anything to help you."

"Deal." She slid into bed beside him. Nyk lay beside her, stroking her face. He looked into her eyes, leaned to her and kissed her eyelids. "*Suki, mi z'am*. I love you."

"*Nick, mi z'am*," she replied. "*Ni niva n'amor*."

"*Niva*." He traced her eyebrows and caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. He took her hand and placed it on his chest.

"I'm ready," she said and guided his hands onto her body. "Share with me the gift."

"Show me."

"Like this," she said, guiding his fingers. "And, like this ... you have such a nice touch." She drew in a deep breath, closed her eyes and released it slowly. "Now, you show me."

He took her hand and guided it. "Like this ... and like this." She stroked a tear from his cheek. "I was so afraid," he said. "Afraid we'd never have this again."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He kissed salty moistness from her cheeks. "I was afraid, too. Oh, Nick -- I never want to be that close to insanity again!" She kissed his shoulders and arms and guided his fingers. "Now, like this -- just like that -- your touch is just right -- I feel your strength and your tenderness -- you're strong but gentle -- so sweet -- and, so patient with me. No one's ever been patient with me -- like you are."

“Maybe no one's ever loved you as I do.”

“That's for sure, Nick. ...Mmm ... this feels so good ... so good...”

“Divide your mind.”

“Divide yours.”

He traded kisses and caresses with her. “What's your key this time?” she asked.

“You don't want to know,” he said with a smile. “I'll just say every time we make love I discover something about your body.”

“There's a Japanese proverb about two men -- a rich one and a poor one. The rich one took a trip to explore the world. The poor one explored his garden.”

“I can explore your body for a lifetime and not see everything.” He placed her hand against his chest. She pressed his against her breast and he could feel her heart racing.

Nyk rolled onto his back and opened his arms. “Over here,” she said, lying on her back. He lay atop her, gazed into her eyes and felt her hands gripping his shoulder blades. She closed her eyes. “Nick ... Nick,” she panted.

He held her shoulders, caressed the back of her head and kissed her. “Oh, Suki.” She kissed his tears from his cheeks. “I'm sorry. I didn't want to cry...”

“Don't ever feel shy about crying in front of me,” she replied.

He held her and wept, his body shaking with sobs. “I'm so happy to have you back.”

She looked into his face with tears streaming down hers. “It is me you love. I felt it -- I felt the truth to it -- the absolute truth to it.” She sobbed with him.

“I told you -- I'd love you the same way even if Destiny hadn't chosen you for your role. I love Nicky and I love your parents. I love Andra. But, YOU are my life, *korlyta*. *Zinta mu viva es* . You are my life.”

He began to regain his composure and he stroked tears from her face. “Crying felt pretty good, didn't it?” she asked.

“It was a release -- after all we've been through.”

“Now you know good I feel after crying on your shoulder.” She leaned toward him and he kissed her lips.

Nyk held her and stroked her arm. He felt her body relax as she drifted to sleep. A knock came at the door. “Sukiko? Nick?”

“Yes, Yasuko,” he said, pulling the covers up to his chin.

"Is everything all right?"

"Come in -- it's not locked." He heard the door open. "We're in the bedroom. It's okay."

Suki's mother poked her head through the door. "I thought I heard crying. I was concerned."

"We're fine." He brushed some of Suki's hair from her face and kissed her forehead. She cracked her eyes open. "We're fine, aren't we, *korlyta*?"

"Mmm," she said and pulled herself against him.

Dawn's light roused Nyk. Suki still clutched him as she lay alongside. He kissed her cheek. "Good morning, *korlyta*. How did you sleep?"

"Deliciously. Did we sleep holding each other all night?"

"You wouldn't budge. If I tried to roll over, you held on tighter."

"I'm not letting go of you. Nick, did my mother come into our bedroom last night?"

"Yes -- she heard us crying and was worried."

She rolled her eyes. "Maybe we should start looking for someplace else to live. We'll never have any privacy here."

"I like it here," he replied. "I love feeling part of a family. It's sweet how your mom cares for you -- I could see a Floran mom behaving the same way. I love being close to your parents."

"Even my father?"

"Even George. I'll bring you some breakfast."

Nyk started to rise but Suki restrained him. "Nick -- last night..."

"Yes?"

"I enjoyed last night. I haven't enjoyed anything in weeks." She leaned toward him and he met her lips with his.

Nyk sat down to a bowl of oatmeal. Yasuko smiled at him. "I'm happy to see you and Sukiko are getting back on track."

"She's a long way from cured."

"It looked like last night was a big step in the right direction -- don't you agree?"

Nyk nodded. "Yes, the Suki I fell in love with is emerging."

"I'm pleased no end to see the happiness you bring her. To see her in your arms again..." Yasuko

brushed away a tear. "I was so afraid for her, Nick."

"I was afraid for both of us. Yasuko, I think we may be ready to take Nicky off your hands tonight."

"Are you sure?"

"We must become a family. We've already lost three months."

"Of course, you're right. He's been a delight, Nick."

Suki stepped into the kitchen in her short robe. "I was going to bring up a tray," Nyk said.

"I need to get out of that apartment." She opened her arms to her mother and embraced her.

"I must go to the market today," Yasuko said. "Maybe you'd like to come with me."

Suki sipped from a cup of coffee. "I'd love to. Nick, would you come too?"

"I can't -- I have other commitments."

"Oh, someone needs a change," Yasuko said and picked up Nicky. She headed for the makeshift nursery in the guest room."

"What are your plans?" Suki asked. "The lab again?"

"Yes -- and Jonathan wants to see me."

"About the diamonds?"

"Yes -- we're trying to come up with a way to move some into the market." Nyk refilled his coffee cup. "He told me how much diamonds are worth on this world. I hadn't a clue. No wonder Seymour can afford that penthouse on Park Avenue." He took Suki's hand. "He also told me how much that stone you're wearing is worth."

"Now do you understand why I was reluctant to accept it?"

"Yes -- I feel a little foolish."

Yasuko returned with Nicky and set him in the infant seat. "I'll get dressed," Suki said, "-- if I remember how." She kissed Nyk. "See you tonight."

Nyk walked into the jewelry shop. Jonathan gestured him into a back room. He opened a safe, withdrew a flat case and opened it. Inside were two rows of glittering gems. "These are our share of the first set of stones we sent to be cut. Aren't they beautiful?"

"They're breathtaking."

"Most of these are far too rich for my clientele. I'll try to interest some more upscale shops in them." He looked into Nyk's eyes. "Nick, I love gems. I love running this shop. The diamond trade is a

closed community. I could never break into it -- because of my origins. I've had to satisfy myself with a small neighborhood shop. It's been tough. With gems of this quality -- I -- we'll be able to break into it in a big way. A big, big way, Nick." He brushed a tear from his face. "It might take some time, but these stones will attract attention. The diamond community ignored me when I knocked on their door. Soon they'll be knocking on mine."

"I'll bring some more raw stones," Nyk said.

"Let's start moving these into the market first."

"I'll bring some and you can have them on hand when you're ready for them."

"He's down and asleep," Nyk called to Suki. He undressed and slid into bed. She hopped on the bed, kissed him and cuddled under his arm.

Her eyes met his. "What?"

"I just like looking at your face."

"Nick -- you are being careful, aren't you?"

"Yes -- so careful I think I'm becoming paranoid."

"I had a phone call today -- from Illya Kronta."

"Illya called you?"

"He was looking for you. We had a nice conversation -- he tried to convince me he was trying to help us. I swear -- though we spoke in English, he had a noticeable French accent."

"Illya was an ExoAgent, about twenty years ago. He was stationed in Paris. It shows the Agency's attention to detail -- Illya's Earth name was Pierre LaCroix. They taught him French, and English with a French accent." Nyk caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "He told me a bit of his story. He fell in love with an Earth woman -- an American student spending some time in Paris. They lived together for a while."

"What happened to them?"

"He was discovered and sent up. He never had the opportunity to say goodbye."

"How sad."

"He said he loves her to this day. She had an odd name -- Daphne, I think. Yes... Daphne. It strikes me as an odd name."

"It's not so odd. Do you remember Miss Wallace from my shower? Her name is Daphne."

"And, I suppose she spent time in Paris when she was a student."

"As a matter of fact, she did."

“She reacted oddly when we met... I wonder...”

“I’ll call her tomorrow.”

Suki led Nyk to the street in Brooklyn and pointed to an apartment building. “That’s it.” Nyk followed her to the entrance and pressed the button marked D Wallace. The door unlocked with a buzz.

“Sukiko -- you’re looking good,” her old teacher said. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better.”

Daphne glanced at Nyk. “Mr Kane...” She returned to Suki. “Let me look at you -- you still are my favorite student. What did you want to see me about?”

“Miss Wallace -- you spent time in Paris, right?”

“Yes -- many American students do. It was nearly twenty years ago. I was an art major, and I went there to study the old masters.”

“But, you changed your major.”

“Many students do that, too. What is this about?”

“Have you ever heard the name Pierre LaCroix?” Nyk asked.

Daphne stood and turned from them. “That’s a name I haven’t heard in many years. Yes, I knew Pierre LaCroix.” She looked at Suki. “What is this about?”

“Would you like to explain?” Suki asked.

“Okay,” Nyk replied. “Daphne, *vir Illya Kronta nom’t kont’t-zi* ?”

Her jaw dropped. “*Ji. Mi li-kont’t.*” She turned to Suki. “I knew it! I knew he was one of them! I didn’t know if you knew.”

Suki showed her the ring. “I’m engaged to one of them. How did you know?”

“By his Floran racial characteristics. They pass for Caucasians, but if you know what to look for -- the shape of the eyes, a hint of epicanthic fold, the outer corner slants up ... the blond hair, sparse beard, light body hair... It’s mainly the eyes...”

“And, how they look into yours.”

Daphne nodded. “Have you seen images of their world?”

Suki shook her head. “I’ve been there.”

“Oh! I’m so envious...” She turned toward Nyk. “What’s your real name, Nick?”

"It's Nykkyo. Tell us about Illya."

"I met him at the Louvre. We kept bumping into each other, and we started seeing each other. At first, I thought he was a Frenchman. As I got to know him, I realized he wasn't like any other man I had ever met. He was..."

"He was the kindest, gentlest, sweetest person you had ever known," Suki interrupted. "I know -- it's another characteristic."

"Yes -- I fell in love with him, and he with me. He asked me to move into his apartment. As an impoverished student, I accepted right away."

"How did you discover he was a Floran?"

"It was an accident. One morning in his apartment I was awakened by an odd noise. Illya was sleeping like a log -- he had overindulged in a local vintage. I located the source of the noise. It was a communications device about the size of a paperback book. It had odd lettering, and I realized right away it was an advanced technology -- far beyond that of Earth of that day -- even of today. I woke him and confronted him. He told me his real name -- about his world -- why he was here. He began to teach me the language. It became our private way to communicate."

"How do you feel about our mission?" Nyk asked.

"Nykkyo -- I believe sustaining yours is our world's best and perhaps only hope. Some day -- after the Centauri mission and you can reveal yourselves to us -- our world may face a global catastrophe. I cannot believe a people as gentle and benevolent as yours would stand by and watch billions of their fellow beings perish."

"Was Illya responsible for you switching your major?" Suki asked.

"Yes. He told me he was an amateur historian with a fascination for the early days of his world. We would sit overlooking the Seine, drink coffee or wine and have long talks about the nature of history and the future. I had never thought much about history before."

"Then, what happened?"

"He disappeared. I came home to the apartment and all his effects were gone. I never heard from him again. He told me it might happen. I had to leave Paris. I changed my major to history and decided on a career in teaching -- to pass on some of what I learned from Illya." She looked at Suki. "Things must be different, today -- if you two can be engaged."

"I'm afraid not. I chose to leave the Agency and go native."

"It appears Illya made a different choice."

"No, Daphne -- I'm sure the choice was imposed on him. Suki and I still risk his fate. You still love him, don't you?"

"Yes... Illya was the reason I never married. After loving him -- I could never love another man. I don't know if he's alive or dead."

"He's on the homeworld, very much alive. Would you like to speak to him?"

"Is that possible?"

Nyk wrote an address on a slip of paper. "Meet me tomorrow at nine. I can't make any promises."

"I'll call in sick -- I'll be there."

Suki led Nyk toward the subway station. "What do you think your life would've been like if you hadn't met Miss Wallace?" he asked.

"It would've been horrible. I was out of control."

"Yet -- you would've met a man and had a child." He pondered. "Suki, all those times you told me, without my help -- you'd be dead... I told you it wasn't likely. Now, I think you were right."

Nyk stood, leaning against the office building. A clock on a bank down the street read 9:08. A yellow taxi stopped at the curb and Daphne Wallace stepped out. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "I almost chickened out."

"This way." He led her into the building and up the stairs to the FloranCo offices.

"Good morning, Mr Kane," said Jaquie. "We see nearly as much of you now as when you worked here."

He spotted Seymour in his office and beckoned Daphne to follow. "Good morning, Nick," Seymour said. "To what do we owe this honor?"

Nyk closed the door. "*Bon'matina, Seymour. Xe damta Daphne Wallace es. Ni nu vidfon utili ard. Mi dev vidfon-voka fet.*" He gestured Daphne behind the desk and brought up a vidphone screen.

"Nykkyo!" Seymour sputtered. "Have you lost your mind?"

Kronta's image appeared. "*Bon'taka, Illya. Xe damta zidiri ard.*"

Daphne stepped behind the camera. "*Pierre! C'est tres bon de tu voir!*"

Nyk took Seymour's arm and led him to the spare office. "Come -- they need time together. I'll fill you in."

"I can't believe it," Seymour said. "To imagine our friend Illya involved in such."

A rap came on the door and Daphne entered. Her eyes were red and she clutched a handkerchief. "He wants to speak with you."

He sat behind Seymour's desk. "Nykkyo -- What you did today was either an extreme cruelty or an extreme kindness -- I don't know which. How did you find her?"

“Daphne Wallace was Sukiko's history teacher. She was the one who turned Suki onto a career as a historian. If Suki never had met Daphne, I never would have met her. Don't you see Illya? I had thought I was responsible for her temporal interference. I wasn't -- it started with you.”

“Yes -- I do see it. I was so smug thinking Daphne was safe. My interference crossed over to Sukiko. I shudder to think of the potential outcome of my foolish, selfish indiscretion. I shall immediately tender my resignation and turn myself in as a temporal criminal.”

“No, Illya. Don't you understand? The very act of placing Floran agents on Earth is temporal interference. Any of us could be crossing the street. A taxi swerves to miss us but hits and kills an Earth person -- someone with future connections to the Centauri mission. Temporal interference may be a force of nature -- like the butterfly, the turbulence from whose wings ignites a storm that spawns a tornado that destroys a village. The only way to stop it is to shut down the Agency and pull all Florans off the face of this world -- until after the warp jump accident.”

“We need the Agency to survive. What can we do?”

“Rather than adhere to rules and regulations drafted by planetbound temporal theorists, we must give those in the field the prerogative to do what they believe is right. I'm the one living it, Illya -- and I have as much to lose from temporal contamination as anyone -- maybe more. And, we must have faith.”

“Faith? In what?”

“That the future unfolds as Destiny intends. She has invested more than five thousand Earth years in our creation. I can't believe She'd let it go to waste. I thought I was to blame for Suki's situation. Now I believe Destiny sent me to Earth and into her arms for a specific purpose -- to neutralize the damage you caused.”

“I'm in shock, Nyk. I'll require some time to think this through.”

“Illya -- Daphne still loves you, and I know you still love her. You two might as well resume contact. It's much easier today than twenty years ago.”

“I'll think about that, too. Good day, Nykkyo.” The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk stepped into the other office. Daphne and Seymour were finishing a conversation. “Jaquie has called a cab,” he said.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” she replied. “I promised Illya and I have kept it.” She turned to Nyk. “Thank you so much -- now I have closure.”

Nyk opened the mail delivered to the lab in Queens. Seeds he had ordered from online suppliers arrived. He opened the packets and began planting them in sprouting beds. The phone rang and he picked it up.

“Nykkyo,” he heard Seymor say. “Illya Kronta is in a panic to speak with you. He tells me he's restored your communications and he wants you to call.”

“Restored my communications?”

“That's right -- I think it's in your best interest to call him.”

“All right -- since I don't have a data line here, yet, I'll call from the apartment tonight.”

“He said it's urgent. He's called me twice today already.”

Nyk hung up the phone. He looked at the clock, locked the door and headed for the house. The front door swung open and he saw Suki sitting on the living room sofa holding Nicky.

“Hello,” she said. “Do you want some lunch?”

“Sure.”

“Mom's out shopping.” She handed Nicky to him. “We have some instant *miso* soup. Would you like that?”

“I'd love it.” Nyk carried Nicky into the kitchen. Suki measured some water into a pan and began warming it. “What're you doing home? I thought you'd be at NYU.”

“I quit.”

“Why? I thought you loved your job there.”

“I wanted some time to bond with Nicky before I move on to the next thing.”

“Next thing?”

“I've been offered the post of assistant professor at Pace University -- starting April. I thought it would be nice to have the rest of February and March free.”

Nyk hugged her with his right arm and kissed her. “That's wonderful news. We must celebrate tonight.”

“I can't have any alcohol -- because of the anti-depressants.”

“We'll come up with something.”

“I'm starting to enjoy this, Nick.”

“Enjoy what?”

“Motherhood -- I feel like a real mom, instead of some grotesque, distorted, mutant mom.”

She tore open two packs of soup mix and dumped them into the water. “I’ll get some rice. Mom always has rice going.” She scooped some from an automatic steamer. Nyk took two pairs of chopsticks from a drawer.

He sat across from her, holding Nicky in his left arm and using the chopsticks with his right hand. “I like this arrangement. The lab is within walking distance, so I can come home for lunch. It reminds me of our time together in Wisconsin. I have happy memories of those times.”

“Those were dark times for me. I have happy memories of you.”

“You just came through a dark time.”

“You’re my light at the end of the dark.”

Nicky began to doze in his arms. Nyk stroked his hair. “He’s adorable, Suki. I love him so much.”

Nyk sat across from George at the go board and exchanged turns with him placing the stones. “You’re becoming quite good. I must bring you around to the Queens go club and give you a chance to play a true master.”

He glanced at the wall where the crest had hung. The *tanto* had been joined by another object -- a *samurai* short sword. “That’s new, George.”

“It’s quite old,” George replied. “From the early *Edo* era. The blade is as keen as the day it was made. How do you like it?” Nyk nodded.

“He never asked me my opinion,” Yasuko said. “I’d rather not have those ... things in the house.”

Nyk looked at the board. “Shall we tally? I have some work to do.”

“Certainly.” George counted the stones. “A very good showing, Nick.”

Nyk headed up the stairs. “Are you going to bed?” Suki asked.

“No. I’ll put Nicky down and then do some work.”

“I’ll be up after I help Mom clear up the kitchen.”

Nyk unpacked the laptop computer and jacked it into the data circuit. He activated a vidphone window and entered Kronta’s locator code. “Nykkyo -- I re-enabled your communications.”

“So I see. Seymor said you were in a panic to speak to me.”

“Nyk -- I’m still reeling from our conversation the other day. There’s a battle royal going on within Agency Oversight. It’s me against Tomyka, and for once our side has the ammunition. I’d like it if

you'd consider traveling to the homeworld and appearing before the committee. We can clear your name."

"My name is clear here."

"We're talking full reinstatement, Nyk -- your Agency credentials, your transit privileges, canceling the economic incarceration -- the whole package. You could come and go to Earth as you please and resume your post as Seymor's assistant."

"I was under the impression my case was hopeless."

"Some new developments have split this thing wide open. But -- there's more... Tomyka's getting desperate. I fear she may do something foolish. Bringing this out in the open would defuse it."

"I'm sorry, Illya -- I made a promise to Sukiko and I plan to keep it. Can't you clear my name in abstentia?"

"No, Nyk. You must stand before the committee."

"Is this a trap -- to lure me into a false sense of security so I'll set foot on Floran territory?"

"Not at all, Nyk."

"What sort of ... foolish thing could Tomyka do?"

"She can send enforcers for you and order your detention dead or alive -- with the emphasis on dead."

"Even she wouldn't dare do that. Would she?"

"She's already done much I didn't think her foolish enough to do. She smells her defeat, Nyk, and it's driving her to desperation. She's never lost a battle before. Please consider returning here -- I can make the arrangements and guarantee you safe passage."

"Can you guarantee my return?"

"I can give you everything except a guarantee. It's nearly a certainty."

"Unless it is a certainty -- I must decline."

Suki stepped into the apartment. "Oh, I'm sorry -- I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Is that Sukiko?" Kronta asked. "I'd like to speak with her."

Nyk gestured Suki to the laptop. "I'll help your mom finish up downstairs." Suki nodded and sat before the computer.

Nyk descended the stairs and stepped into the kitchen. "Need any help?"

"Nick -- maybe you can reach this." Yasuko handed him a tray to store in a high cabinet.

"I think we're out of the woods with Suki."

"I'm proud of how you handled her, Nick. I wish George had treated me the way you treated her. I can't complain, though. George did what he thought was right." She faced Nyk and stroked his shoulders and arms. "You're such a fine young man. Oh, Nick -- I wish I were thirty years younger. If a man like you had come into my life then -- George would be history!" She looked down. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that -- I don't wish you to believe I've been unhappy with George. I haven't."

"You needn't answer if you're uncomfortable, but I've surmised you and George have enjoyed a satisfactory physical relationship."

"Satisfactory for my tastes. George has been a good husband. It's been my dream for my daughter to find someone who's at least as good for her as George has been for me. I'm seeing that dream come true."

"How did you and George meet?"

"Sit. You and I can finish the tea from dinner -- I hate to toss it away." She poured a couple bowls. "I was born in Hiroshima, Japan in 1943. Of course, that was in the middle of World War II. When I was a year old, my mother sent me to live with her aunt and uncle in Nagano, in the mountains. I never knew my family -- I never saw them again. They all perished a year later in the atomic bombing."

"Oh, Yasuko -- I'm so sorry. Do you harbor ill will toward Americans for that action?"

"Of course not. It was wartime. If Japan had possessed such a weapon, it certainly would've been used." She sipped her tea. "My uncle had contracted tuberculosis, and as his illness progressed my aunt had greater difficulty caring for him and me. When I was about ten, I was sent to live with my only other living relatives -- a cousin on my father's side living here in New York."

"That's how you made your way here."

"I was little more than an indentured servant to them. They kept me in their household until I was twenty-two. Then, questions about my immigration status came to light. I had grown fond of the American lifestyle -- of what I lived of it -- and I had no desire to be returned to Japan. My cousin knew of a friend whose son was starting a career as a stock trader. He was looking for a companion -- a housekeeper."

"George Kyhana."

Yasuko nodded. "I married George in order to stay in the country. I envy my daughter, Nick. The love you have for her is so strong as to be palpable. George and I didn't start out in love. We learned to love each other -- well enough, I believe. Don't get me wrong. George has been a good provider and a faithful husband. We started out living in the very apartment you and Sukiko now occupy. George's father, and Jonathan, lived in the lower level of the house. George's mother had left them years before. She wasn't Japanese -- she was Thai. That's where George gets his coloring."

"And, Suki."

"I spent most of our first years as a housekeeper to George's father. He started the jewelry business. He was a second-generation American and Japanese by heritage only -- but he had a strange attraction to the old country."

“Suki told me some of that story.”

“He liked having a true Japanese living in the house. I had to wear the *kimono* ... I think he desired me physically, but he never acted on those desires. After about five years, Sukiko came along and I had my breakdown.” She sipped again from her tea bowl. “I did recover, but to this day I have pangs of guilt.”

“It wasn't your fault, Yasuko. What Suki went through wasn't her fault. She did not desire it -- neither did you.”

“I feel guilt for something else. Not even George knows this. During my confinement, I had my tubes tied -- so I'd never endure it again.”

“They would do such a thing?”

“I requested it and they were more than happy to oblige -- to prevent a crazy woman from bearing more children. It's why Sukiko is an only child.” She closed her eyes and pursed her lips. “George wanted a son, Nick -- he wanted one so badly. I couldn't -- it's why he insisted Sukiko marry the first time. I'm pleased you and she are engaged. With you and Nicky in his life, now ... perhaps George... Oh, Nick!” She exploded into tears. “My daughter has given him what I never could...”

Nyk held her as she sobbed. “We're all following the paths Destiny traces for us, Yasuko.” She embraced him. He pressed his lips to the top of her head and stroked her short, salt- and-pepper hair. She released him and fetched a facial tissue. “Tell me what happened next.”

She dabbed her eyes. “Jonathan and his father had a falling-out and Jonathan went elsewhere. We've talked about my suspicions regarding Sukiko and her grandfather... When Sukiko was about nine, he lost his business. He had over-extended himself and those chickens came home to roost. He committed suicide with a dagger like the one hanging on the wall.”

“Not the same one?”

“Lord, no -- I wouldn't have it in the house. I found him, barely alive and in great agony. By the time the ambulance arrived, he was dead. George felt obligated to honor his father's debts. He used all our savings and borrowed more to do so. For a couple of years, I tried to help. George paid every penny, but it wiped him out and he had to start over.

“George ended up with what was left of the jewelry business, but he had no interest in running a retail shop. He sold the business to Jonathan for a pittance -- ten dollars or so.”

Nyk stood, picked up the tea bowls and carried them to the sink. “I don't know what to say, Yasuko.”

“I'll say it, then. Thank you, Nick, for entering our daughter's life -- for entering all our lives. I'm beginning to believe this will work out. Sukiko believes she's had a difficult time, particularly during her teen years. She doesn't know what a hard life is, and I've hoped to God she'd never have to learn.

“Since you brought her home from Wisconsin -- especially since you've been with us -- have been the best months we've had with her since before she entered puberty. There were plenty of times I despaired having anything like what we have together now.”

“Yasuko, I love being part of your family.”

“You really are like a son to us.”

He hugged her, kissed her forehead and gazed into her eyes. “Suki has your eyes...”

“Am I interrupting something?” Suki walked into the kitchen.

Yasuko pulled away from him. “Would you like some tea? There's a bit left.”

“I came to fetch Nick -- if you're done with him.”

“Good night, Yasuko. Thanks for the conversation.” Nyk held Suki's hand and ascended the stairs. “How did your call with Kronta go?”

“Very interesting.”

“What did you talk about?”

“About Daphne and me -- how she influenced my life.” She headed into the bedroom and began undressing. “Nick -- What's going on?”

“Some powerful forces are battling it out on the homeworld.”

“Battling what out?”

“My fate. I think our conversation with Daphne has given Illya the ammunition he needs. He said I can go to Floran and clear my name.”

“Are you going?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because Illya can't guarantee the outcome. Until he can -- I'm staying right here.”

“You don't trust him?”

“Him I trust. It's Tomyka Wells I don't. Illya thinks she's sent enforcers to abduct me.”

“Oh, Nick! It would be like what happened to Daphne and Illya.”

“I won't go peacefully -- and they'll have to find me first.” Nyk stretched out on the bed and Suki joined him. “I need to know one thing -- now that you've ... emerged from your tunnel. I need to know if you think you could manage Nicky on your own -- without me.”

“I don't want to have to face that. I faced it once, I don't want to face it again.”

“I need to know. I need to know how hard to push on this.”

“Illya asked me the same question. I don't know the answer. I know I can with you.”

Nyk closed up the lab. He had developed the habit of varying his route home. This time he walked in the wrong direction from the house and awaited a city bus. He rode the bus several blocks, stepped off it and walked around the block. Then, he awaited another bus headed the other way.

He walked up the steps and unlocked the front door. “It's Nick,” he called to the rear of the house.

Suki ran toward him and threw her arms around him. “Dinner's ready.” She kissed his lips.

He knelt beside her at the low dining table and sipped broth from a bowl. “Nick, a pair of young men called today while you were at the lab,” Yasuko said.

“Oh? What did they look like?”

“Blond, blue-eyed, clean-cut -- rather nondescript, I'd say.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them you weren't in.”

“Did you give them the lab address?”

“No.”

“Good -- if they come back, please don't.”

“As you wish, Nick.”

“And, Yasuko -- don't let them into the house.”

Nyk lay holding Suki. “I'm worried about those men who showed up,” she said.

“The other day I thought a pair fitting your mom's description might've been tailing me. I hopped a bus and lost them.”

“Oh, Nick!”

“I'll call Kronta in the morning and see if he knows anything about it. I'm being careful, *korlyta* .” He switched off the light, closed his eyes and attempted to will himself to sleep.

Suki shaking him awakened him. “Nick -- Nick,” she whispered. “I heard a noise.” Nyk sat up in bed. “It sounded like footsteps on the stairs.” She stood and slipped into her robe.

Nyk heard the apartment door open. He reached and touched the switch for the lamp on the bed stand. The bedroom door opened and Nyk turned on the light. Two young men stood in the doorway.

“*Nykkyo Kyhana -- zi dev kun ni ziven*,” one of them said.

“What? What did you say?”

“*Zi dev kun ni ziven*.”

“What language is that? Who are you?”

Suki screamed, threw herself at one of the men and began pounding him with her fists. “No! No! You're not taking him!”

The other man withdrew a short staff and touched her with it. She fell to the floor, unconscious.

“Suki!” Nyk jumped to her. “What did you do to her?”

The enforcer approached Nyk with the stunner. Nyk brought his fist down on the man's forearm and the stunner flew from his grasp and lodged under the bed.

“*Zi dev litir*,” the first enforcer said to the second. “*Zi dev lu brakebanda forig*.” He pointed to the band on Nyk's forearm.

Nyk lowered his head and jumped toward the first enforcer, butting him in the abdomen and knocking him to the floor. The second enforcer grabbed Nyk's arm and slipped his fingernails under the copper bracelet. Nyk broke free and jumped over the bed. He looked around the room for something to use as a weapon.

The first enforcer regained his breath and leapt at Nyk, grabbing his forearm and bending it behind his back.

“*Zi dev liten*,” the enforcer said. “*Lu brakebanda...*”

The second enforcer pried the copper bracelet from Nyk's wrist and it fell to the floor. “*Mi va xi scanfa util...*”

The enforcer slipped a credit-card sized device from his pocket and approached. Nyk struggled. The intruder grabbed Nyk's forearm and pressed the scanpad against it. He looked at it, pressed a control and held it to his own wrist. It chirped as it read the ID chip in his bone.

The enforcer pressed it to Nyk's wrist again. “*Li xi vir ni niserxi n'est. Zi dev li liberiv!*” Nyk found himself free of the enforcers' grasp.

He ran to Suki. She was beginning to regain consciousness. “She'll be all right,” the first enforcer said. “The effect is temporary.”

“What is the meaning of this? Who are you? What language were you using?”

“We -- we must've made a mistake,” the second enforcer said. “We're terribly sorry -- we'll be on our way.” He slipped the scanpad into his pocket. The two men headed for the door and were met by George. He was in a martial-arts crouch and brandishing the antique *samurai* short sword.

“No one's leaving. You make one move toward this door, and I'll cut you. I'll slit your throats.”

Nyk heard a siren approach and more footsteps climbing the steps. A pair of NYPD officers entered the apartment.

Suki sat on the floor holding her head. "All right, what happened?" one cop asked.

"These men broke into our house and assaulted my daughter and her fiancé," George said.

"It was a mistake," one of the enforcers replied. "We had the wrong address -- we're terribly sorry."

The other cop looked at George. "Do you wish to file a complaint?"

"This is my house. Yes, I'll file a complaint."

"We'll take 'em to the station. You can follow us."

Nyk saw one enforcer give the other a hand signal, then reach into his pocket and retrieve something. He popped it into his mouth, bit down and swallowed. "Oh, no you don't!" one cop said and headed to him. The enforcer's eyes rolled back in his head, he collapsed on the floor and began convulsing. The other cop ran to him. He became still.

"He's dead," the first cop said.

The remaining enforcer dashed down the stairs and out the front door. "Stop! Halt!" the first cop shouted and started after him with his service pistol pulled.

"I'll call for support," the second cop said. "Whoever they were, they must be plenty hot for one to put himself down so the other could escape." He placed a call on his radio.

The first cop returned. "He got away." More sirens sounded in the background.

Nyk sat in the living room conferring with a NYPD detective. "No -- I've never seen them before. My fiancée's mother thinks they came to the house earlier, asking for me -- but I have no idea what they wanted."

"The medical examiner is looking over the body," the detective said. "He swallowed some sort of poison, but nothing we can identify. We're sending samples to the state crime lab. So far -- no identification. He had nothing on him. He doesn't fit the description of any known subjects. We're running prints right now. The guy had no dental work. Not even a filling." He showed a sketch to Nyk. "The only mark was a small tattoo on the right deltoid. Does this ring a bell?"

"I'm sorry, lieutenant -- I can't help you."

"Do you know what they used to disable your fiancée?"

"It must've been a stun-gun of some sort. It happened so fast..."

"Thank you, Mr Kane." He handed Nyk a business card. "If anything else comes up, feel free to contact me."

Nyk climbed the stairs to the apartment. "That was too close," Suki said.

He nodded, knelt to fetch the stunner from under the bed and concealed it in the cardboard carton on the top shelf of the closet. Nyk switched on the laptop computer. Soon he was looking at Kronta's image. "Illya -- a pair of enforcer goons came tonight."

"I told you Tomyka's desperate. What happened?"

"They weren't successful."

"Obviously."

"One's dead -- he had a pill or something."

"Enforcers always travel in pairs. Before an assignment they draw lots -- one carries the technology and the other carries the poison pill. In the event they're discovered the one with the pill sacrifices himself so the other can get away."

"He left in such a hurry he forgot his stunner."

Kronta's eyes widened. "Where is it now?"

"I have it."

"If he had permitted our technology to fall into the hands of Earth authorities -- I don't know what we'd do." Kronta shook his head.

"Tell Tomyka the stunner is secure."

Kronta smiled. "It's not my role to help my opposition. I'll let her worry about it for a while. That enforcer will pay for botching the job -- and Tomyka will pay with him."

"Will he return?"

"No. He's headed here, and he'll never return to Earth. The death of an enforcer won't be welcome news to the oversight committee. They'll be hard on Tomyka for engaging in such a dangerous gambit. I wish, though, you had considered my suggestion and returned here. This might have been avoided."

"How did they find me?"

"Koichi's journal. He wrote his family has lived in the same house for over two hundred Earth years."

"Tomyka read the address in the journal and sent them here."

Kronta nodded. "Tomyka will use Koichi's records as they suit her. She's taking a fall, Nyk, and she'll fall hard. Please -- come to the homeworld and put an end to this madness." The vidphone session went dark.

Suki put her hand on his shoulder and he jumped. "I'm sorry. This has me rattled."

“Me, too.”

“The one who died was married and might've had a family.” Nyk shuddered. “Kronta said Tomyka would do foolish things. I had no idea how foolish.”

“What will you do?”

“Kronta wants me to return home and stand before the committee to clear my name.”

“Must you in person?”

“Yes -- under Floran law, a default is by definition an admission of guilt. I can stay here, but I'd worry -- not so much for me, but for you and Nicky.”

“If you go, for how long?”

“Kronta can't give me a guarantee. He says it's a near certainty I'd be reinstated with full privileges, but he can't guarantee it.”

“What do you think you should do?”

“I don't know...”

“I do. You must go. Nick -- you love your people and you love the Agency. You won't be whole or happy doing anything else. Besides -- if you're reinstated, perhaps I'd have a chance to see your beautiful world again.”

He nodded. “I'll call Kronta and make arrangements. I'd have to fly to Milwaukee and take the shuttlecar. What'll we tell your folks?”

15 -- Cursed With Knowledge

Nyk sat at the breakfast table. “That was quite the excitement last night,” George said.

“Nick, what was it all about?” Yasuko asked.

“I don't know how to tell you. I don't know where to begin. I do know what those men wanted -- me.”

“Whatever for?”

“When I was detained before Nicky was born -- I was out of the country and charged with a crime -- one I did not commit.”

“You? What crime?”

“Espionage -- interfering with a government agency. I escaped. Those were alien agents attempting to abduct me.”

“I thought it must've been something like that,” Yasuko replied. “It's like that fellow who was detained by the Russians!”

“Yes,” George added. “You try to expand your business into a foreign country and these are the thanks you get.”

“It's all terribly sensitive,” Nyk continued. “Those agents hadn't counted on George's fortitude.” Nyk looked toward Suki's father. “When I first met you, I told your daughter I thought, two hundred years ago, you would have made a good *samurai* .”

George grinned. “I would've cut them, too. A man's home is his castle.”

“My God!” Yasuko gasped. “I had no idea such could happen in this day and age.”

“I've been in contact with the advocate who helped me during my captivity. He tells me if I return there, voluntarily, I can clear my name. I was willing to remain here, figuring I was safe. But, after last night, I worry for your safety -- and for Suki's and Nicky's. She and I have talked about it. I'm making travel arrangements now and will leave in two days.”

“Will you be back?” Yasuko asked.

“I've been told it's nearly a certainty, but I haven't been given a guarantee. Even if this isn't on the level -- I will return. Nothing can keep me from Suki -- or you -- forever. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when.”

Yasuko looked toward Suki. “Are you in agreement?”

“I'm not happy about it, but I agree. Nicky and I will be fine until Nick's return.”

Nyk held Suki against him. “Tomorrow I make transit. If I believe Kronta, I leave Earth a fugitive and return free and with my privileges restored.”

“Will you see Andra?”

“I don't know. I hope so. I may spend a day or two in Sudal while my affairs are sorted out.”

“If you see her -- share with her some of the love we've made. And Nick -- tell her how you love her.”

Nyk pulled the shuttlecar into the relay station shuttlebay. The bay repressurized and the pressure

door opened. He stepped into the workroom. “Hello?” The station was deserted. He headed for decontamination and then to the wardroom where he placed his personal effects into his locker. His eye caught sight of the stasis capsule containing his ID chip. He carried it to the workshop and took a razor knife. With its point he penetrated the skin at the base of his thumb and slid the chip into the cut. Healing salve closed the wound and he tested the chip on a station vidisplay's scanpad.

A vessel docked with a thud. A young man in tunic and *xarpa* stepped through the docking tunnel. He was wearing insignia identifying him as an Internal Affairs agent. Nyk recognized him as the enforcer who had run from the house.

“Nykkyo Kyhana?” Nyk nodded. He held out a scanpad. “Please identify yourself,” he said with narrowed eyes. Nyk pressed his wrist to the scanpad and it chirped. The enforcer looked at it. “We’ll be underway shortly.”

A pair of technicians stepped through the tunnel and into the shuttlebay. “What’re they doing?” Nyk asked.

“The shuttlecar is overdue for service. We’re taking it in. Please follow me.” He gestured toward the docking tunnel.

“Wait a moment.” Nyk headed to the wardroom and removed a device from his effects locker. “Here,” he said as he handed it to the enforcer. “You left your stunner on Earth.”

The agent tucked the device into his *xarpa*. Nyk followed him into a tender shuttle. The agent folded down a pair of seats along the rear bulkhead. Nyk sat in one and fastened a safety harness. “I’m sorry about your partner.”

The officer glanced at him. “We accept the risks.”

The spacecraft undocked and the viewport shutters closed. A white indicator signaled the upcoming warp jumps. A pair of jolts rocked the vessel and the viewports opened. Nyk looked down upon his indigo homeworld. He felt the forces of re-entry and saw an orange glow through the viewports as the shuttle plowed into Floran's upper atmosphere. The craft extended wings and began flying toward Floran City.

Nyk watched as the spacecraft lost altitude and made a final approach to the shuttleport. It taxied to a maintenance terminal. Nyk unbuckled his safety belt. “Please wait here,” the agent told him.

Illya Kronta boarded the craft and conferred with the agent. He approached Nyk. “Welcome home. We have someone eager to see you. Follow me.”

Nyk followed Kronta into the maintenance hanger and through corridors and tunnels to the arrivals terminal. He spied a tall woman with oat-straw white hair. His eyes met hers of the palest blue. “Andra!”

“Nykkyo!” She ran to embrace him and peppered his face with kisses. “I was so worried about you.”

“Let me fill you in,” Kronta said. “Agency Enforcement is being disbanded. Authority to deal with Agents' behavior is being transitioned to the Agents-in-Chief. Tomyka Wells has been relieved of her duties and is in custody.”

“On what charges?”

“Attempted willful and malicious temporal interference. Your wife is in custody, also.”

“Senta?”

“She is scheduled to undergo interrogation this afternoon. She'd like to see you.”

“Illya -- Senta meant no harm. She's not evil -- just headstrong and accustomed to having things go her way.”

“That's what I expect to come out of the interrogation. She volunteered for it -- to clear her name.”

“Let's go see her.”

“Follow me.”

Illya led Nyk and Andra into a detention cell within the ExoService complex at Government Center. Senta was sitting on a bunk in a confinement tunic and with a stun collar around her neck.

“Senta,” Nyk said and chuckled.

“That's right -- laugh it up. I've never been so humiliated.”

“I'm sorry,” Nyk replied. “I'm not laughing at your situation. It's -- that tunic matches your hair.”

“I suppose I'm getting what I deserve. You were right -- you were right all along.” She looked at Andra. “How did you know? How were you so sure what he was doing was right?”

“I wasn't,” she replied. “Nyk and I are bonded and friends for life. We trust each other with our lives. I had faith he knew what he was doing.”

“How will you ever forgive me?”

“I have already forgiven you,” Nyk said.

“You have? After all the trouble I made for you and Sukiko?”

“Senta -- I've been forgiving you for years. This is no different.”

Her jaw dropped. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You were just being you.”

“If Nyk forgives you -- so do I,” Andra added.

An attendant entered the cell. “Dr Kyhana?”

“Yes?” Senta replied.

"It's time for your interrogation." Senta sat on the bunk and stared at her feet. "Come along." A tear formed and rolled down her cheek. The attendant grasped her upper arm and began to lift her. "You don't want me to have to stun you and carry you there."

"Can they come?" she asked. "Can they be with me?"

"Until they start the procedure -- yes."

"Will you come with me? Please? You two are my only true friends. I hope you're still my friends."

"Fine, Senta," Nyk replied. "We'll come with you."

Nyk and Andra followed Senta and the attendant down the corridor to the interrogation room. The equipment was the same as he had experienced in Sudal. Another attendant began attaching electrodes to Senta's scalp. Her green eyes darted around the room.

Andra sat beside her. "Don't worry -- both of us have been through this and we survived -- right, Nyk?"

"Just relax and it'll be over with."

"I'm frightened," Senta whimpered. "I've never had a medical procedure -- I've never set foot in a hospital."

The attendant examined Senta's arms. "Hmm... no likely veins." She touched one on her ankle. "We'll use this one." She started to insert the IV in the vein in her leg. "Please keep still -- I don't want to have to poke you more than once."

Nyk knelt, held Senta's foot and caressed the top of it. "Ow!" she exclaimed as the nurse punctured a vein in her ankle.

A medic entered the room. "We're ready to start."

"You'll have to go, now," the attendant said to Nyk and Andra.

"NO!" Senta exclaimed. "Can't they stay until ... until I'm under?"

The attendant looked toward the medic. He nodded. Nyk took a seat on Senta's left and Andra on her right. Each held one of her hands.

"Start the agent," the interrogator said.

"Nyk -- I'm frightened!" Senta exclaimed.

"Just relax," Andra replied.

"Zero-five," the medic said.

"I feel it in my leg!" Senta gasped. "I'm afraid!" She clenched Nyk's hand in a white-knuckled

grip.

“Zero-seven ... One-zero ... One-five ... One-seven...”

“Relax and give yourself to it.” Andra spoke soothingly and caressed her forearm. “You'll be all right.”

“I can't,” she shrieked. “I'M SCARED!”

“Two-zero ... two-two ... two-five...” Senta's grip relaxed and her eyes glazed. “She's under -- finally,” the medic said.

Nyk nodded toward the door and Andra followed him. “I felt sorry for her,” Nyk said. “I saw real terror in her eyes.”

“I think they used a lot of drug,” Andra replied. “She's apt to suffer from it, later.”

“Let's go to the commissary and get something to eat. We'll check on her once she's in recovery.”

Nyk and Andra approached Senta's pallet. She was lying on her back with her eyes closed. Kronta was reviewing a vidisplay. “She's still under,” he said. “We'll release her -- as soon as we have medical clearance.”

“What did you learn?”

“No malice -- she was acting on good faith. We can't charge someone for being mistaken. If we did -- we'd all be under arrest. Would you like to see her interrogation transcript?” He held the vidisplay toward Nyk.

“No, Illya. I learned from my own experience that truth drug is nothing less than the rape of a mind. I don't wish to be party to it.” He pushed the display aside. “What about Tomyka?”

“She signed a no-contest agreement, and will be given early retirement on Gamma-5.”

“It sounds like she's getting off light.”

“Not so light -- she'll be under house arrest for five years. She didn't fight the charges, Nyk -- though she professes to have done no wrong. Tomyka has made enemies -- many within these walls. She knows how eager are some to see how she fares under truth drug.” Kronta set down the vidisplay. “Your wife is apt to be under the weather for a while. I'll see you at the hearing.”

Nyk approached Senta. Andra stroked her cheek. “Senta?” She cracked her eyes open and gripped the sides of the pallet.

“The room's spinning so fast you need to hold on,” Nyk said. “I recall feeling that way.”

“I feel if I sit up, I'll be sick.”

“Then -- don't sit up.”

"I'm going to be sick, anyway..." She leaned over the side of the pallet. The attendant rushed to her and held a polymer tub under her face. Senta lay on her back. "False alarm."

The attendant produced a tumbler and drinking tube. "Try to drink this, dear." She slipped the tube between her lips and Senta sipped some. "Your stomach will feel better with something in it."

Senta emptied the tumbler and lay on her back. Andra sat beside her and held her hand. "I don't think I've ever seen you that color," Nyk said. "Your lips are white."

"This time I AM going to be sick," Senta gasped and leaned over the pallet. Andra held the basin under her face. "Don't watch!"

The attendant approached her. "Don't be shy, dear. Relax and let it up."

Nyk caressed Senta's shoulders as she vomited into the tub. She lay on her back. "Now my stomach feels better," she panted.

"Your color looks better, too."

"My heart! It's skipping beats!"

"It's another side effect," the attendant replied. "We're watching it. We won't let you go into arrest. All these after-effects will fade as your body rids itself of the drug. You should try to sleep. Would you like a sedative?"

"Sleep will help more than anything," Andra said.

"All right..." The attendant jabbed Senta's deltoid with an injector.

"Now -- try to sleep," Nyk said.

"Nyk..."

"Shh... sleep."

"Where are you staying?"

"We have a room at the hostel by Government Center," Andra replied.

"You can use the apartment."

"We already have the room. You sleep."

"Nyk... You can have the divorce ... I'll call my solicitor tomorrow and retract my objections." Her eyelids drooped. "You're a ... free ... man..." She closed her eyes.

"They gave her so much drug -- we'll need to keep her overnight," the attendant said.

Andra kissed Senta's forehead. "I'll check on her in the morning," she replied. "Come on, Nyk -- we might as well go to our room." She led him out of the building toward the tubecar platform.

“Look at the line!” Nyk exclaimed as they approached the platform.

“It's quitting time,” Andra replied. “It'll take forever to get a car.”

Nyk pointed down. “And, twice as long for a groundcar. This town needs something like the New York City subway. Every time I think New York's crowds are big, I think about the ones here.”

Andra pressed her palm against Nyk's and he laced fingers with her. “Have you really forgiven Senta?” she asked.

“Yes. Have you?”

“She hurt me deeply, Nyk. When we fought in Sudal, she called me the worst names -- accused me of the worst deeds.”

“You told me the past is a rock.” She smiled and squeezed his hand. “Senta helped me through difficult times right after my parents were killed. For that, I'm eternally grateful. I was a mess then, Andra -- as big a mess as Suki in her darkest days. I wouldn't have survived.”

“Then, I'll be grateful to her for that, too.”

“Senta and I were happy, once. We lost our virginities together. We had quite a lusty physical relationship in those days.”

“What happened?”

“She outgrew me. After the Ricin affair she became a celebrity for a while, and the Food Service courted her to start the sequencing labs. As her power grew, so did her promiscuity. It was like a drug and she became addicted.”

“She's an unhappy woman, Nyk. She doesn't know what true love is.”

“Neither did I.”

“You had to go to Earth to find it.”

“I found it here, too.” They approached the tubecar kiosk and Nyk reached to scan his wrist -- then stopped. “I won't have my privileges restored until after the hearing tomorrow.”

“I'll order the car,” Andra replied and scanned her wrist. She specified the hostel as their destination. Nyk stood with his arm around her waist and awaited their car.

Nyk lay on his back on the narrow mattress. Andra knelt, straddling his hips and rocking hers. She ran her hands across his skin. He gripped her thighs and watched her ribs and abdomen heave with her breathing.

“Release?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I'm not ready. Can you maintain?”

He nodded. "Suki wanted me to tell you," he panted. "Some of this ... is from her."

She smiled. "I know," she gasped. "I can feel it."

"How?"

"No guilt," she replied. "I told you -- one day ... she would understand our ways ... with her heart."

"She told me ... you and she ... sister lovers ... and we three a ... family in love."

"I'm so happy... I do love her, Nyk."

"She wanted me to ... tell you something else ... Andra, I love you."

"I know you do."

"I love you deeply ... you and Suki -- together ... the ones I love most ... in the whole universe."

"I know," she panted. "Hearing it means so much."

Nyk read the cues in her body. Her skin glistened and a pink flush formed on her cheeks and upper chest. He could see her pulse pounding in her neck. "Release, now?" he asked. She nodded, closed her eyes and lifted her face. Her lips parted and she drew in a deep breath, then released it as a long, low moan.

Nyk held his release for a moment, then smashed the barrier he had built in his mind. Sensations surged into his awareness. "Oh, Andra!" he grunted, grasped her hips and pressed himself against her.

He lay beside her. She pulled herself against him. "Nyk -- I don't think I've ever felt so loved," she said and kissed his cheek. "I've been reluctant to let myself feel the depth of your love. I've distanced myself."

"I've been denying my own feelings for you. I'm sorry for that, Andra."

"I understand."

"I'm denying them no longer. Andra, I love you as deeply as I love Suki. Leaving you behind was the hardest thing I've had to do. I hope I never again have to choose between the two of you. You're a sister in our love-family."

"I know -- I felt it. I love you just as deeply. You've changed my life, Nyk."

"One person can make the difference." Nyk took her hand and held it to his chest. "You're a hero, Andra. The entire hegemony owes its existence to you."

"How could that be?"

"You engineered my escape."

“I? How?”

“You'll know the details soon enough. You did, so I could be with Suki and Nicky. She has just emerged from some dark days. But, I was there to help her through them. She told me she'd be dead, otherwise -- perhaps Nicky, too. I believe her. I was there for her. Your sacrifice -- your love made it possible. I owe it to you -- we owe it to you.”

Nyk sat beside Kronta in the committee hearing room. He looked around. “Who's the new chair with Tomyka out of the way?” he whispered to Illya.

Kronta tapped his chest. “I am, but the vice-chair will conduct the hearing. I wanted to be the one to represent you. Please don't worry, Nyk. The outcome is a foregone conclusion. This is merely a formality.”

Nyk stood as the committee members filed in and took their seats. The vice chair stood. “We're re-opening the case of Nykkyo Kyhana, charged with fraternization with the Earth population, unauthorized transit and unauthorized transport of an Earth woman. What is your petition?”

Kronta stood. “We petition dismissal of the charges based on mitigating factors.”

The vice-chair nodded. “You will present evidence of such factors?”

“Yes,” Kronta said. “Each of you will find on your vidisplay a document. Please take a moment to examine it.”

Nyk looked at the vidisplay before him. His eye caught a line of Esperanto rendered in Floran characters:

... Sukiko Kyhana: naskigi New York, New York 27 agosto 1974; morti New York, New York 1 septembro 2001 ...

His jaw dropped and he buried his face in his hands. “This is Koichi's genealogy!” he whispered to Kronta.

“Yes, Nyk, yes!”

“I don't want to see it!”

“Please explain the evidence,” the vice-chair said.

“This document shows the family line from Sukiko Kyhana to Koichi Kyhana. Two items are of interest -- first, the name of Sukiko Kyhana's only child is Nykkyo Kyhana. She named her son after this man.” Kronta patted Nyk on the shoulder. “She did so out of love for him.”

“And the second item?”

"After the birth of Sukiko's child, the record shows she married a man named Nick Kane, who became the child's step-father." He put his hand on Nyk's shoulder again. "Nykkyo, would you please tell the committee your Earth identity?"

"It's Nick Kane," he replied, his face buried.

"Can you repeat it so the entire committee can hear?"

Nyk stood, his eyes closed. "It's Nick Kane."

"The relationship of Nykkyo Kyhana, otherwise known as Nick Kane, to Koichi Kyhana's forebear is documented in this genealogy. It is a matter of historic fact. What we have here is a unique case. Despite our regulations against temporal interference and fraternizing with the Earth population, Nykkyo found himself thrust into contact with someone on the critical path to the Centauri mission. Temporal interference did occur. Sukiko was diverted from her rightful path -- onto another one requiring Nykkyo's participation. This committee, in punishing Nykkyo Kyhana was in fact itself causing temporal interference that, if left unchecked, could have had catastrophic -- disastrous consequences."

"What evidence have you of the authenticity of this document?" the chair asked.

"We are presenting a transcript of the document created in the year 6602APF. This is three years before the birth of the petitioner. The format and content of the document is consistent with genealogies of other *Floran* crewmembers."

"Are there any questions?" The vice chair looked up and down the committee. "Hearing none, would the petitioner care to make a statement?"

"Just tell me when that document is down. I don't want to see it."

"It's down," Kronta said. "You can take it." He handed Nyk the datacel.

"We will recess to deliberate." The committee filed from the room.

"Illya, where did you obtain that genealogy?"

"Your friend Andra brought it to my attention."

"I didn't want to see it."

"Why not?" Illya replied. "It's an important historic document."

"Then, give it to future generations. I don't want to see it -- I don't want to know about it. That document contains dates, Illya -- it lists Suki's death as 1 September, 2001. That's less than a year away!"

"Nyk -- I'm so sorry -- I had no idea. I'm not familiar with the Earth calendar."

"How can you not be? You're a Kyhana scholar!"

"My specialty is the early days of THIS world. This must be very upsetting to you."

“Upsetting! I know -- I saw -- and I can't un-see it! Suki will die within the year -- and I'm powerless to do anything about it!”

“The committee is returning. You'd better stand.”

Nyk stood as the committee resumed their seats. The vice-chair stood. “It is the decision of this committee to dispose of the charges as follows. In the charge of inappropriate contact with a member of the Earth population, Nykkyo Kyhana will be given an official reprimand, to be placed in his Agency personal file.

“In the charge of unauthorized transit and transport, Mr Kyhana will receive another reprimand. Otherwise, the charges are dropped. The sentence of economic incarceration is abrogated, and he is returned to full ExoAgency status and privileges. The case is closed.”

“Congratulations, Nyk,” Kronta said. “Don't worry about those reprimands. I doubt this committee will second-guess anything you do, now.”

Nyk headed with Andra toward the tubecar platform. “You gave Kronta the genealogy.”

“Yes -- I did. I was so distraught after you disappeared -- I looked in the genealogy. I looked for your name, and knew you must've made it safely back to Earth. It dawned on me, it would also exonerate you. I hope you're not too angry with me.”

“No -- I'm not angry. I just wish I had some warning. You didn't take it to Korlo?”

“He was too busy to meet with me.”

“Too ... busy?” Nyk shook his head. “That doesn't make sense.”

“I took the transcript to Tomyka Wells. She didn't want to know about it -- so I took it to Kronta. It's why Wells is in custody -- she should've closed the case then and there. Instead, she tried to suppress the evidence. She let her emotional involvement overrule her civic responsibility.”

The tubecar arrived at the hostel. Nyk escorted Andra to their room. “Did Kronta tell you what was in the datacel?” Nyk asked.

“Yes -- proof you marry Sukiko. You can return to Earth and the two of you can live happily ever after.”

“No. Andra -- that document lists Suki's death as 1-September 2001. It's less than a year away!”

Andra gaped at him. “NO! Oh, Nyk -- you must do something!”

“I can't -- I can't do anything. It's Quinn's Postulate -- I have precognizance! I can't change history.”

“What will you do?”

“There's only one thing I can do -- I must live each remaining day to its fullest. And on that dreaded day -- I'll stick to her like glue -- and hope when the moment comes -- she'll die in my arms.

Oh, Andra!” He collapsed against her and wept.

Andra held him and stroked his hair, weeping along with him. She began kissing the tears from his cheeks. “Drink my tears,” she said. He kissed away hers. “We’ve cried over the same hurt and tasted each other’s tears -- we’re bonded...”

“We’re already bonded, Andra.”

“...Stronger than ever -- the deeper the hurt the stronger the bond, and I can’t imagine a deeper hurt. Nyk -- I’ll do anything you ask -- anything you need -- to help you through this. If there’s a way...”

“Let me look at this.” He took the datacel and slipped it into a handheld vidisplay. “You were right -- I AM better off knowing this... I can’t believe it -- not only does Suki die on September first, so does her father!” He flicked through the document. “It starts with her great- great-grandfather -- the one who emigrated from Japan. It goes straight through to Koichi and his children. They’re all here -- George, Yasuko, Suki, Nicky... Nykkyo Nicholas Kane Kyhana, born 5 December, 2000... I don’t want to know when he dies.” He scrolled through the document backwards. “Nicky married Jenna, who gave birth to Jeremy...”

“What does it say about you?”

“Nothing -- except that Suki married Nick Kane after Nicky’s birth. No dates, no other family references -- nothing. It’s the story of my life, Andra -- I’m nothing. Everyone around me is something. My dad, my mother, Senta... I’m not even a real Kyhana, and I’m not important enough to be in this document except as a footnote.”

He showed her the display. “George and Suki die together on 1 September. I don’t know why or how...” He buried his face in his hands -- then looked up. “Maybe something happened on that date -- some historic event. Come with me -- we’re going to the museum.”

Nyk sat at a vidisplay in the library of the Floran Museum. “It’s no use! The Encyclopedia only shows dates through 1979.”

“What are these documents?” Andra asked.

“It’s the contents of the database aboard the *Floran* -- they intended to build schools on the Centauri colony, and they needed an encyclopedia. It contains all significant historic events up through the launch of the mission.”

“But, the mission was launched in 2201.”

“In order to discourage temporal mischief, the entries for events in Earth’s future are classified. Every twenty to thirty years or so, they declassify recent entries -- after they’re safely in Earth’s past.”

“If, according to Quinn’s postulate, no one can change history -- then, why the top-secrecy?” Andra asked.

“No one can alter a historic event -- but, with precognizance, one could do plenty of temporal damage -- or, use the knowledge for personal gain.”

A young man approached them. “Nykkyo -- good to see you.”

“Korlo -- this is Andra Baxa.”

“Andra Baxa...” he mused. “I remember -- you sent me a telemessage stating you had an object of interest you wanted examined.”

She produced the datacel. “It's this.”

Golmya took it. “This is an ordinary datacel.”

“It's what's on the cel that's of interest. It contains Koichi Kyhana's lost genealogy.”

The color drained from Golmya's face. “The genealogy? Why ... why didn't you say so? We've been looking for that for ... for generations. I apologize for dismissing you -- so many people come in here claiming to have found this artifact or that, and they end up being two- hundred-year-old pieces of construction debris. If I had only known ... I'm undone by my own arrogance ... you have humbled me today... Come -- come upstairs and let's have a look.”

Golmya led them into his office, slipped the cel into his vidisplay and read it. “This looks like a transcript of the genealogy -- it's written in Esperanto, but in Floran characters. It is not original.”

“I have the original data capsule,” Andra replied. Golmya's eyes popped. “Well, I think it's the original. In addition, I have another datacel -- one I couldn't read.”

“Where are these?”

“At the Residence, in Sudal.”

“I would hope you'd consider donating that capsule to the museum -- it's an important artifact... When you said you couldn't read the other cel -- did you mean it was unreadable -- or, you couldn't understand what was there.”

“It was unreadable -- or maybe not.”

Golmya brought up a page from Koichi's journal. “Did it look like this?”

“It might have,” she replied. “Now, I can't recall.”

“If it did -- what you had might've been the raw contents in Roman characters.” He picked up her cel. “This would be the transcript.”

“Is it genuine?” Nyk asked.

“That's hard to know without seeing the original. On the face of it -- it does have the same format as other genealogies I've seen. Since those genealogies are classified...”

“Classified?” Andra asked.

“For the same reason as the *Floran* Encyclopedia entries,” Nyk interjected. Andra nodded.

"Since those genealogies are classified," Golmya continued, "It would be unlikely someone could produce such a convincing forgery. I would very much like to examine the original, however."

"Korlo," Nyk said while attempting to maintain a dispassionate composure, "the genealogy lists a pair of deaths on 1 September, 2001. Would it be possible to see the corresponding entry in the Encyclopedia?"

"What is the current Earth date?"

"April 5, 2001."

"I'm afraid not -- that material is classified."

"Are there any assurances I could give?" Nyk asked.

"It wouldn't help, Nykkyo. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't give you that information. You see -- even I don't have access to it."

Nyk lay on his back on his childhood bed. The storm shutters were open and the nighttime land breeze wafted through the open structure of the Residence. He could hear the surf washing against the rocks at the base of the bluff.

Andra pulled herself against him. She kissed his cheek. He stroked her arm and shoulder. "Oh, Andra -- I still don't know what I'll do."

"I'm in anguish, too, Nyk."

"I have to get over it. This is Destiny's plan. What a cruel plan -- to give us this love and then take her from me. To take Nicky's mother..."

"She's enriched me, Nyk. We'll always keep a place for her in our hearts."

"Listen to us -- we're talking as if she's already dead. She's not -- not yet. I don't think she'd approve our grieving like this -- do you?"

Andra shook her head.

"Then, let's carry on with life. That is what I'll do -- I'll return to Earth and pretend I know nothing of September 1."

"Let's -- we can celebrate your exoneration -- and, the fact you're returning to her in two days."

"My shuttle leaves in two segments," Nyk said to Andra. "I don't know how I'll function, cursed as I am with this knowledge."

"You are better off knowing."

"According to that genealogy -- I marry her. I must do it quickly -- before September 1. You're right -- I am better off knowing. I must marry her and become Nicky's legal stepfather."

“Remember, Nyk -- anything you need of me -- I'll do. Without hesitation, I'll do anything to help.”

He reached into his *xarpa* and withdrew a green polycard. “I almost forgot...” He stepped into his study and placed a vidphone call.

“Janna -- the day we discussed has arrived.”

“Then, by now you must be exonerated. Congratulations.”

“It's a bittersweet victory -- with more bitter than sweet. I'll let Andra explain.”

“Let me speak with her.”

Nyk stepped from the study. “Andra -- someone to speak with you on the vidphone. Take it in my study.”

“For me?” She stepped into the study and closed the door.

Andra emerged, her eyes red from crying. “Janna told me. I asked for her help and she didn't shirk.”

“It was the least she could do after you helped her.”

“I told her of you and Sukiko -- she's deeply troubled and offers any help she can.”

“I knew she would. Not even the powers of a princess can help me, I'm afraid. Well -- I'm off. I must be on the packet that's being diverted to Earth for me.”

“Stay in touch, Nyk.”

Nyk lay, holding Suki under his arm. She brushed tears from his face. “I'm happy to see you, too.” She kissed his cheek. “It was quite a reunion we just had.”

“Suki -- let's make love every night -- without fail -- no excuses, no too tired or headaches.” She kissed his cheek again. “And another thing -- let's plan the ceremony. My divorce with Senta is final. She withdrew her objections -- there's nothing in our way.”

“We have plenty of time,” she replied. “We don't need a piece of...”

“No -- you and I don't need that piece of parchment. But -- Nicky does. Suki -- What am I?”

“You're my Nick -- my fiancé.”

“I'm nothing -- in the eyes of Earth law, I am nothing. I'm your live-in boyfriend. If ... anything were to happen to you -- what would become of Nicky? I have no claim on him. Suki -- I came here to replace the man who was to be in your life. It would all be for nothing if...”

She caressed his face. “I never thought of it that way.”

“If I were your husband and his legal stepfather -- I might have a stronger argument for custody if...”

“All right -- we'll set a date and plan a wedding. I think a fall wedding would be pretty -- with the leaves on the trees turning colors. Maybe the second week of October.”

“No -- it has to be sooner -- right away, if possible -- mid August at the latest.”

“Mid August? Nick -- it takes time to organize.”

“I'm sure you and your mother can put your heads together and come up with something.”

She ran her hand along his arm. “What are weddings like on your world?”

“Remember -- marriage on Floran is more about family alignment. There are love matches, but most are for furthering family politics. There's no religion on Floran. The services are civil -- performed by a magistrate. They're usually done in the home, with a handful of guests -- close relatives and friends.”

“That sounds nice,” she replied. “I had the big, overblown event for my first wedding. I swore I'd never go through that again.” She closed her eyes. “Yes -- I can begin to visualize it. I'll talk to Mom tomorrow. She'll be over the moon.”

Nykkyo carried his briefcase to the lower level. Yasuko handed him an envelope. “For you -- it was in yesterday's mail. It looks like it's from Jonathan.”

“Thanks.” He slipped the envelope into his pocket.

Suki took his hand and headed with him out the door. “Commuting to this job at Pace is almost like the one at NYU,” she said. “Just a few stops further downtown. What did you get from Uncle Jonathan?”

“An installment from selling the gems.” He slit open the envelope and showed her the check inside.

Suki whistled. “You and he must be doing all right.”

Nyk sat on the desk in Seymour's office. “Seymour, I need a personal favor.”

“What's that?”

“I need to borrow five hundred thousand dollars.”

Seymour stared at him. “A half-million? Whatever for?”

“There's some property on Long Island I want to buy -- a summer house. The seller is asking three-quarters of a million. I have about a quarter-million put away.”

“A quarter million dollars -- where on Earth would you get that sort of money?”

"I've brought some Floran diamonds of my own, and Suki's uncle is moving them into the market."

"So -- you're the one responsible. Lev told me some Chinaman in Queens was starting to eat our breakfast."

"He's Japanese... I don't want to hurt the Agency's business, Seymor. We're sticking to gems under four carats. So far, we've sold a few dozen. I'm sorry -- I should've told you sooner."

"Don't worry about it, lad -- it's nothing Earthbound agents haven't been doing for hundreds of years. Consider it a perk of being stationed here. Besides ... Lev will be retiring soon. It's good to have another pipeline into the market."

"I think I can pay you back within a year or two -- it's just the owner wants to close in the next couple of weeks. Suki's dad has offered to loan me the money -- but I don't wish to be beholden to him."

"I trust you, Nyk. I'll draw up a promissory note and I can have a check cut this afternoon. Are you sure a half million is enough? You'll have some expenses."

"Add any contingency you think I need. I appreciate it, Seymor."

"By the way, lad... If, by chance, you haven't filled the position of best man..."

"I'd be honored, Seymor."

"No, Nyk. The honor is mine."

16 -- I'll Never Forget This

Nyk stood on a chair adjusting an object atop a tall cabinet in the living room. Suki approached him. "What are you doing?"

"This is a wireless video camera. I'm going to videotape the rehearsal to make sure we have good coverage."

"Are you going to videotape the ceremony?"

"If you'd like. I'm setting up this camera so Andra can see the wedding. I'll feed the signal into the laptop computer. Before the ceremony, I'll start a vidphone session and she can watch the whole thing."

It'll be the middle of the night on Floran, but she said she'll stay up to watch, and to be with us as best she can."

Nyk stepped off the chair and returned it to the row from which he had taken it. The living room had been transformed. Furniture had been moved or removed, folding chairs to accommodate the twenty-odd guests had been placed in rows, and a podium for the presiding judge had been set up. A folding table for the catered reception was set against a wall.

Suki's mother walked into the room. "This all looks delightful," Nyk said to her. "You've gone to so much effort for us. It's gift, Yasuko -- an expression of love. How much more needs to be done?"

"The florist is delivering the flowers tomorrow. Our participants should be here any moment for the rehearsal. It will be a unique ceremony, with elements of a Japanese and a western wedding."

The doorbell rang and Yasuko answered it. A Japanese woman lugging a log-shaped device entered. She and Yasuko bowed and greeted each other in Japanese. Yasuko turned to Nyk and Suki, "This is Yuriko Sakai, and she'll be providing the music."

Nyk and Suki bowed to her. "Pleased to meet you," he said.

"The pleasure's mine," Yuriko replied in accented English. Yasuko pointed to the platform they used for meals and Yuriko looked it over. "This will do fine," she said and she began setting up and tuning her *koto*. She played a traditional Japanese tune.

Nyk whispered to Suki, "That music affects me the same way as *miso* soup. I feel it, resonating deep inside me."

Suki's father walked in the front door accompanied by a large, stocky man. "Greetings, all. This is Donald Hassinger, the judge who'll be presiding over your ceremony." Nyk and Suki approached him. "You know my daughter Sukiko. This is her fiancé, Nick Kane."

"It's been years since I last saw Sukiko. Mr Kane, nice to meet you."

"Thank you, your Honor for taking the time to preside over our ceremony."

"Please -- we're not in my courtroom. Call me Don. And, the pleasure's mine. I don't get too many opportunities to perform these. In recent years the trend has been for church weddings -- even for non-believers. It has cut down on my trade."

The doorbell rang again. A young man escorted a slightly-built woman into the house. She wore opaque glasses and carried a white cane. Suki approached her and took her hand. "Thank you for coming."

"This is my brother Joe," Cathy replied. "Thanks, Joe. I'll be all right. Where's Nick?"

"Over here."

Cathy stepped to him and he embraced her.

The doorbell rang and Nyk opened the door. Seymor stepped inside, looked around the room and spotted the judge. "Don!"

“Phil,” the judge replied and they shook hands. “What do you have to do with this auspicious event?”

“I’m the best man. Nick’s my assistant -- one of my finest associates. He is my finest associate, truth be known.”

“How do you two know each other?” Nyk asked.

“Phil took one of my classes when I was teaching law at Queens College. I taught a night-school class there.”

“It’s a small universe, isn’t it?” Nyk remarked to Seymour. “Suki’s dad knows Don from his undergraduate days.”

Don consulted his watch. “George, how much time do we have?”

“The limo will be here at seven to take us to dinner.”

“We have time to run through this two or three times, to make sure everyone knows their cues. Yasuko, where’s the staging point?”

“The kitchen.”

Don reviewed a sheet of paper. “Let’s line up ... first down the aisle is the lucky groom. Then it’s Mom and Dad. Nick, you have no family?”

“No, sir,” he said. “I was orphaned as a teenager.”

“You have my condolences. You have no one to sit on your side of the aisle?”

“Some friends, but family-wise, I’m alone in the universe.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He returned to the sheet of paper. “Next is best man escorting maid of honor... that’s a bit different.”

“I didn’t want to tap my way down the aisle,” Cathy replied.

Seymour stood beside Cathy and took her hand. “Finally, Sukiko. Let’s hear the musical cues.” He turned to the *koto* player, “I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name...”

“Yuriko.”

“Yuriko, what will you be playing?”

“I’m playing some traditional Japanese music as a prelude. Sukiko asked for Pachelbel’s Canon in D as the processional. I’ll give you a long broken chord.” She strummed the *koto*. “... right before the processional. ‘I’ll play through Canon until everyone’s in place; then, it’s ‘*Jesu*...”

“‘*Jesu*’ on a *koto* ? That’s a new one for me. OK, places everyone.” Don stood behind the podium. “Yuriko, give me a bit of your prelude.”

Yuriko played part of a traditional tune. Don motioned to her and she strummed her chord. "Okay, Nick down the aisle." Nyk began to walk toward the podium. "Not too fast -- a wedding is a little drama. Build some tension." Nyk reached the podium. "Now turn and face the crowd. Okay, now Mom and Dad ... good. Next Phil and Cathy..." Yuriko strummed a chord. "Sukiko, you're up."

Suki reached the podium. "George, are you giving away the bride?"

"Mom and Daddy are," Suki replied.

"Okay, fine -- now Mom and Dad take your seats. I'll make a short speech ... blah, blah... next it's vows. Are you rehearsing your vows tonight?"

"We're keeping them private until the ceremony," Nick said.

"We do the vows -- two rings, right?"

"Right."

"Now, it's the recessional ... looking good. Shall we run through it again?"

"Thank you for a lovely dinner, Mr Kyhana," Cathy said to George. "I've always loved Tavern on the Green."

"I'll have the driver drop you off in SoHo."

"I'll come by around eleven to help get ready. Toodles, Suki -- see you tomorrow."

"What time do you want me here?" Seymour asked.

"Any time after noon -- and before two," Nyk replied. "How are you getting back to your penthouse?"

"I'll hail a cab on the corner."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," George said. "Our limo driver can take you -- his home base is in Manhattan, anyway."

Seymour gave Nyk the two-finger Floran salute and assisted Cathy into the limousine.

Nyk embraced Suki and kissed her. Yasuko grabbed their shoulders. "Break it up you two. You can't see each other from now until the ceremony -- bad luck otherwise."

"I'll see you tomorrow, *korlyta*," Nyk said. He headed to the guest room and stretched out on the bed.

Seymour sat on the sofa in the apartment as Nyk paced. "What do we do, sit and wait?"

"Yes, until we get the signal to come downstairs and take our places. Yasuko's getting Suki

ready and neither of us -- especially me -- are welcome down there.” Nyk walked over to the laptop computer. He switched it on and connected it to the data line. “Do you need to speak with anyone on the homeworld?”

“Gads, lad, what time must it be there? Nadir meridian?”

“Nadir one,” Nyk replied. “Here's a telemesssage from the homeworld. 'Congratulations to you and Sukiko, and best wishes on your marriage. Signed, Illya Kronta.'”

“Lad I never thought I'd see the day a Floran would wed an Earth person -- and be congratulated by the oversight chair himself. I hope we don't have a crush of other Agents who'll want to follow in your footsteps. I don't know what we'll do if another one asks to marry an Earth girl.”

“I can't see an Agent on a normal tour wanting to do this. You're the only other Earthbound Agent, and you don't strike me as the marrying type.”

“Grynnya Quinn's an Earthbound agent,” Seymor replied.

“I believe she's attending the wedding. I invited all the Agents who report to me. Do you think she'd want to marry an Earth man?”

“Not Grynnya.” Seymor chuckled. “She's hardly a one-guy gal.”

Nyk opened a vidphone window and saw Andra. “Sorry to keep you up so late.”

“I wouldn't miss it.” She gestured behind her. “Neither would they.” Nyk saw Senta and Kronta.

“I'm about to switch over to the remote camera so you can watch the festivities.”

“We can hardly wait,” Senta replied.

“You look so handsome,” Andra said. “Step back so we can see the costume you're wearing.” Nyk stepped back from the camera. “Very handsome. What do you call that?”

“It's called a Tux. Suki will be wearing a traditional Japanese costume called a *kimono* . I believe her mother will be wearing a *kimono* also. I'm switching over, now.” He unplugged the camera and switched to the wireless one. “There, do you have a picture?”

“It's beautiful,” Andra said. “Look at all the blossoms.”

“The flowers are done in a traditional Japanese *ichibana* style. The guests will start arriving momentarily.”

“These are the first images I've seen of Earth,” Senta said, “except for your face.”

“I'm going to close up the laptop, now. I'll keep the connection up, and speak with you after the ceremony.” He closed the computer's cover.

Nyk paced around the apartment. “George asked a couple of his junior analysts to serve as greeters. I'm amazed with how much went into this modest ceremony, and Suki assures me it's miniscule by modern Earth standards.”

“I can vouch for that. I've been to a few Earth weddings.”

“You, Seymor?”

“Yes, I've become friendly with a number of Earth people, many of whom have had children and family members who've been married. I think your ceremony will be very nice -- low key, but nice and tasteful. I'm impressed with the musician your in-laws-to-be hired.”

A knock sounded on the apartment door. Nyk opened it and saw one of George's analysts. “They're ready for you downstairs.”

Nyk gestured to Seymor and they descended the stairs to the kitchen. Yasuko had set up a folding screen. “No peeking,” he heard her say from behind it.

“Suki are you there?”

“Yes, Nick.”

“Knock it off, you two. You're tempting fate.”

“You said we couldn't see each other. I don't remember you saying anything about not talking.”

Nyk heard whispers and giggles from behind the screen. Cathy emerged in a pale yellow *kimono* . He approached her and took her hand. “You look lovely, Cathy.”

“Suki asked me to give you this.” She handed him Suki's engagement ring. “And this.” She slipped her hand behind Nyk's head, embraced him and gave him a lengthy kiss on his lips. “You are one lucky gal,” she called back toward the screen.

Nyk slipped the ring into his jacket pocket. “Do you have the ring?” Nyk asked Cathy.

“Certainly. How about you?”

Seymor rummaged through his pockets and produced the ring. “We're looking good in the ring department.”

Suki's father entered the kitchen. “Yuriko's started the prelude,” he said. “Don's taking his post. Places, everyone.”

Yasuko emerged from behind the screen wearing a sky-blue *kimono* . She paused to embrace Nyk. He looked into her eyes and they began to fill. “You've made me very happy, Nick -- to know my child has someone who loves her and cares for her.”

He kissed her forehead. “You've all made me happy, too.”

She and George stood behind Nyk. Traditional Japanese music came from Yuriko's *koto* .

“That music is so beautiful,” Seymor said. “How can she play both traditional and contemporary western music on that thing?”

"It's a custom instrument," Yasuko whispered. "It has extra strings. Some are white and others red. The white ones sound the traditional scale, and the red strings let her play western melodies."

Nyk heard the long chord and the opening bars of Pachelbel's Canon in D. He stepped out of the kitchen and headed down the aisle. Judge Hassinger stood behind the podium in his judicial robes. Nyk reached the podium and turned to face the guests.

George and Yasuko started down the aisle. Nyk looked at the two dozen guests. Nicky dozed in Jonathan's arms. Jaquie sat with a handkerchief in her hand. He recognized Marla from George's office.

Suki's parents reached the podium. Seymor escorted Cathy down the aisle, guided her to her spot and stood beside Nyk. Yuriko found a convenient stopping point in the Canon and improvised a short coda. The room sat in silence. Yuriko strummed another chord and began Bach's *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*. The wedding party turned and watched Suki as she started down the aisle.

She was wearing an orange-red *kimono* embroidered with cranes in gold. Yasuko had braided Suki's hair in a traditional treatment, and she wore a garland of blossoms.

"Gads, lad," Seymor whispered. "She is gorgeous." Suki walked down the aisle and stopped between her parents and Cathy.

"Who supports this woman in marriage?" the judge asked.

"We do," replied George and Yasuko. They stepped backwards. Nyk and Suki bowed to them and they returned the bows. Then, they took seats in the front row next to Jonathan.

Nyk and Suki turned to face the judge, who asked the traditional question if anyone should know reason why the marriage should not proceed.

"Nothing heard. Friends and family, we are gathered here to celebrate the marriage of Nick Kane and Sukiko Kyhana. They have chosen to be married in a civil ceremony. This choice derives from their own personal beliefs.

"We are a nation founded on the principle that everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, and the benefits of legal matrimony are available to everyone, without regard to religious belief or affiliation..."

He spoke for several minutes on the legal rights and responsibilities of marriage. Then he gave Yuriko a cue and she began playing a traditional Japanese love ballad.

Don nodded to Seymor. He handed Nyk the ring. Nyk faced Suki and gazed into her eyes. He took her left hand. "Sukiko ... *yin* ... Earth ... mother ... woman ... I take you as my lawful wife. I pledge to be your friend, your lover, your companion and your confidant. I vow to be father to Nicky and to love him as if he were my own. I love you more than life itself. I will stand by you and cherish you in sickness or health and in poverty or wealth. Come share my path and walk with me ... until..." He choked back tears and bit his lower lip. "Until death parts us. Sukiko, with this ring I thee wed." He slipped the ring onto her finger.

She took his left hand. "Nick ... *yang* ... sky and sun ... my light and my savior. I take you as my lawful husband. I pledge to be your friend, your lover, and your companion. My child will grow with you as the only father he'll ever know. Together, you and I shall raise him to be as you are -- kind and tolerant -- strong yet gentle. I will walk with you as your path is my path. I will love you and cherish you

in sickness or health and in poverty or wealth ... until death us parts. Nick, with this ring I thee wed.” She placed the ring onto his finger.

“By the authority vested in me by the State of New York, I pronounce you husband and wife.” He paused and smiled. “You may kiss.”

Nyk embraced Suki. “Careful of the *obi*,” she whispered. He caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers and kissed her.

The judge cued Yuriko to play a recessional. The wedding party walked up the aisle and stood at the rear of the room. The judge spoke again, “I’ve been asked to make a few announcements. We will enjoy a catered buffet reception right here, as soon as the catering crew can set it up. They’ll be bringing in tables and rearranging the chairs, so please bear with us. Nick and Sukiko are heading to the Botanical Gardens for some photos. They’ll be back shortly. Yuriko, our *koto* ist will take requests, for both traditional and contemporary tunes. After hearing her play *Jesu*, I’m sure she’s up to anything.” He cued Yuriko again, and she began playing a postlude of traditional tunes.

Nyk excused himself and sprinted up to the apartment. He opened the computer and saw Andra. “I’m back,” he said, “I’m switching to the other camera... I can’t talk for long, we’re off to the park for some photos.”

“It was lovely,” Senta said.

“Sukiko was so beautiful,” Andra added. “That was a beautiful costume she was wearing. And, the blossoms in her hair! She looked so happy.” Andra wiped a tear from her face.

“I’ll call in a few days and we can talk longer. Knowing you were with us, even if it was by vidphone, meant much to me, to both of us.”

“Good bye, Nykkyo,” Andra said. He terminated the vidphone session.

He ran down the stairs and stood next to Suki. “Did Andra see all right?” she asked in a whisper.

“Yes. Senta was with her, along with Illya.” He reached into his pocket. “Before I forget.” He placed the engagement ring onto her finger. “Have you relaxed?”

“Not quite yet.”

Judge Hassinger worked his way toward them. He handed Nyk an envelope. “Here’s your copy of your marriage license. I’ll take care of filing the official copy. Congratulations.” He shook their hands.

“Now, I can relax.”

Nyk escorted Suki into the house to a round of applause. He glanced at the buffet. It included both Japanese and western items. He saw sushi rolls and sweets moulded into elaborate shapes, as well as western sweets and savories. In the center of the buffet table was a modest wedding cake. Yuriko was playing *Proud Mary*.

Nyk held Suki’s chair as she sat at the table of honor beside Cathy, Seymour and her parents. “We’ll be served,” George said. “The other guests have been informed they may partake of the buffet as

they wish.” He picked up a bottle of Champagne, poured a round for the table and offered a private toast. “Nick, you are without a doubt the best thing to happen to Sukiko -- the best thing to happen to our family. Here's to happiness and long life.”

“To long life... Thanks, George.” He lifted his glass.

George leaned toward Nyk. “Beautiful vows, kids. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.”

“We should mingle with the guests, while the caterers are preparing our plates,” Suki said. She introduced Nyk to acquaintances from NYU and chatted with her professor and mentor. Nyk introduced Suki to Jaquie and some Agents.

He approached a middle-aged woman with long, greying blond hair. “Grynnya -- thank you for coming.”

“Yes,” Suki added. “It's great seeing you again. Thank you so much for helping Nick.”

“Who's your friend?” Nyk asked.

A late-middle-aged man with a bushy moustache and long grey hair tied in a ponytail stood and shook Nyk's hand. “This is Leo. He and I work at the same hospital.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Leo said with a Missouri accent. “It was a lovely ceremony -- very personal.”

“Is this your first time in the City?” Suki asked.

“Yes -- for me at least,” Leo replied.

“Your ceremony provided us a good excuse for a short vacation together,” Grynnya added.

Nyk led Suki toward the head table. He held Suki's chair as she sat. “Many guests have complimented us on the ceremony,” Nyk said to his mother-in-law. “You and Suki did an excellent job of putting this together -- on such short notice. It was just right.”

“Do you miss a traditional reception, with a master of ceremonies, dancing, and all?”

“Not in the least. That wouldn't be us.”

“I had the big, overblown event for my first wedding,” Suki added. “Look how that turned out.” She took Nyk's hand and laced fingers with him.

Nyk sat beside Suki in the limousine as it headed for Manhattan. “I wish we could take a real honeymoon,” she said. “With my new responsibilities at Pace, I just couldn't take the time now. Do you have honeymoons on Floran?”

“Well, we don't have anything named after the moon since there is none. It is customary for a new husband and wife to take a few days' sabbatical leave to establish their household.”

“No wedding trip?”

“No -- we're a pragmatic people. I'd love to take a honeymoon trip with you, *korlyta* , if that's the Earth custom.”

“Where would you like to go?”

“Myataxya -- but, we wouldn't be able to show anyone our photos. How about you?”

“Somewhere near the sea -- maybe Hawaii. Daddy said he'd arrange a trip for us, as soon as our schedules permit. Where are we headed now?”

“To the Millennium Hotel near Time Square. I know it's not Myataxya or Hawaii, but a couple nights away to decompress will do us both some good.”

The limousine stopped at the hotel. Nyk signed the check-in forms. He took her hand and stood, waiting for an elevator. “Nick -- I told you I didn't think it mattered if we had that piece of parchment or the ceremony. I was wrong.” She squeezed his hand. “I'll never forget this day.”

He led her to the room and unlocked the door with the pass card. “I see our bags are already here.” He faced her. “I want to gaze at you in that *kimono* . I want to feast my eyes. You're nothing short of dazzling in it.”

She stood for him as he regarded her. She began dismantling the *kimono* and removing the *obi* wrapped around her waist and forming the ornate bow at her back. She slipped into her short robe and retired to the bathroom.

Nyk undressed, turned down the bed and slid between the sheets. Suki emerged, slipped off her robe and lay beside him. “Nick, I'm scared.”

“You can't be frightened of making love. We must've done it a hundred times.”

“Two hundred seventeen times.”

“Two hundred seventeen? You kept count?”

“Yes -- I made an estimate of how many times you and Andra... Once I started counting, I kept it up. No, I'm not afraid of that.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Of the future -- ours and Nicky's. I'm afraid of what horrible ordeals Destiny may have in store for us.”

Nyk kissed her forehead. “Let's have no fears tonight.”

“Agreed.”

“Would you care to make it number two hundred eighteen?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“No?”

“No.” She kissed him. “Let's make it number one. Let's make it the first time, all over again. Tonight -- I'm a virgin. Please be gentle with me.” He kissed her again. “... But, not too gentle.”

17 -- The Dreaded Day

Nyk lay on his back, staring at the ceiling as Suki drowsed beside him. He glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand. 12:01 -- 12:01 AM, 1 September, 2001. The day he dreaded was upon him. How would it happen? When would it happen? It was a Saturday -- Labor Day weekend. Whatever it was, it would claim George, too. An auto accident? He glanced at the clock -- 12:20. It wouldn't be an illness -- both George and Suki appeared in perfect health. A crime? The house was in a quiet and safe part of Queens. He looked again -- 12:51... and, again...

Dawn's twilight seeped through the windows. He lay quietly in bed, pretending to sleep. Suki roused, kissed his cheek and went to get Nicky. Nyk slipped out of bed and sat at the dinette in the apartment's kitchen. “Do we have any plans today?” he asked.

“I don't have any -- except maybe to tag along with my folks. You?”

“No -- nothing.”

“I'll take him downstairs and then take my shower.”

“I'll take him -- don't start your shower without me.”

“Why not?”

“I'd like to take one with you.”

“Nick!” She smiled. “Well -- okay -- it's cramped in there, but I think we'll both fit.”

Nyk carried Nicky downstairs to let him crawl on the living room floor. “Suki and I are going to take our showers,” he called to his mother-in-law. “Then, we'll be down.”

“Okay, Nick. I'll watch Nicky.”

He climbed the stairs and joined Suki in the bathroom. She adjusted the water temperature, slipped off her robe and stepped into the shower stall. Nyk stepped beside her. He picked up a bar of soap and it slipped from his fingers. “I'll get that...” He stooped to pick it up.

“Ooof,” she said. “You poked me in the stomach.”

“Sorry... let me lather you...” He rubbed the bar on her skin and spread the suds with his hands.

“I’ll take that,” she said, grabbed the soap and began lathering him. “This is kind of fun.” She ran her hands along his legs.

“I’m sorry we didn’t do this more often,” he replied.

She looked at him. “What’s stopping us? I must do my hair -- I’ll have to bend over. There isn’t enough room...”

“Okay...” He stepped out and sat on the toilet seat lid.

“Do Florans shower together?” she shouted over the sound of the water.

“You saw the showers on my world -- they’re for a single occupant, only.”

Suki shut off the water and Nyk rushed toward her with a towel. He helped her out of the stall and began patting her body.

“Nick... such attention ... not that I’m complaining, mind you. It’s just ... you never had much interest in showering together, before.”

“It just came into my head.”

She stepped into the bedroom and pulled on a pair of cutoff jeans and a tee shirt. Nyk slipped into a polo shirt and shorts. He took her hand and headed for the stairs.

“Careful on the steps.”

“I’ve only lived here my entire life,” she replied. “I’m not an invalid.” He escorted her to the kitchen and poured coffee for her.

“How are you this morning?” her mother asked.

“I feel like I won Queen-For-a-Day,” she replied. “Nick’s been super-attentive, and he won’t tell me why.”

“Whenever George gets super-attentive, it usually means he’s about to spring some sort of disappointment -- like a business trip to Honolulu, and I can’t come along. Isn’t that right, George?”

Suki’s father looked up from his newspaper. “I don’t recall any business trips to Honolulu.”

“No upcoming business trips,” Nyk replied. “George, were we planning on going anywhere in the car today?”

“I hadn’t planned anything.” George folded his paper. “I’ve just come off a difficult day of a difficult week. I can think of no better way to spend a three day weekend than sitting and doing ... nothing at all.”

"Maybe Nick would like you to drive him somewhere," Yasuko suggested.

"Did you want to go to that summer property you bought on the Island?"

Nyk pondered. "It's a holiday weekend -- the traffic would be dangerous. No -- we don't have to do that."

"Maybe next weekend, then," George replied. "You have that nice property, now -- it would be a shame not to put it to use."

"Next weekend..." Nyk cradled his head in his hand. "Yes, let's plan for next weekend."

Yasuko cleared the breakfast dishes. "Let's take a walk in the park," she suggested.

"Yes," Suki replied. "I'll get the stroller."

"Are you coming?" Suki's mother asked her father.

"No -- I'm going to spend this weekend sitting in my easy chair and doing nothing -- and, savoring every second of it. You go ahead."

Nyk held Suki's hand as they walked toward the park. "He likes the fresh air," Suki said to Nyk and gestured toward the stroller.

"Huh? Oh, yes -- fresh air."

"Nick -- why are you so distracted today?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm okay now, aren't I?"

"I guess -- you don't seem too cranked at the moment."

"It's because your dad isn't with us."

"Daddy? Nick -- I thought you and Daddy got along fine."

"We do... it's just ... that ... he's home ... sitting in his chair."

"Yes? Go on."

"That's it."

Suki shrugged and pushed the stroller through the intersection. Nyk saw a yellow taxi heading down the street. He grabbed Suki's arm and hustled her along the crosswalk. The cab made an abrupt right turn and headed down the other street.

"Ow!" Suki exclaimed. "You pinched me -- I'll be black-and-blue. What was that about?"

"Didn't you see that taxi?"

"Of course I did -- didn't YOU see? He had his blinker on and was making a turn."

“It didn't look like it to me...”

“Nick -- I've been crossing the streets of this city for twenty-eight years. I think I know how it's done.”

“You're right -- I'm sorry, *korlyta* .”

They arrived at the park. Yasuko pointed toward a swing set. “They have a kiddie swing. I'm going to push Nicky over there.”

Nyk sat on a park bench. Suki lay on the bench with her head in his lap. He watched Yasuko take Nicky from the stroller and put him into the swing; then, he looked down at Suki's face. A shaft of sunlight fell across her eyes. He contemplated her yellow-brown complexion and her shiny, black hair. Her full lips turned up in a smile. She hooked her arm around his neck, hoisted her face to his and kissed his lips.

He stroked her cheek and gazed into her eyes. In the sunlight he could see the structure and color of her irises. “You have such beautiful eyes,” he said.

“Yes -- we've gone over that,” she replied.

“No -- what I mean is -- normally, your eyes just look dark. In this light -- I can see the subtlety of the color. They're beautiful. You're beautiful.”

She smiled, looked up into his face and touched his cheek. “Now what?”

“What -- now what?”

“Nick -- you look as if you're about to bust out crying.”

“No -- it's just ... I was thinking ... if something were to happen ... to either of us ... well, to you ... I was taking inventory of all the things about you that are special. I think we should live each day as if it may be the last.” He brushed a tear from his cheek.

“Nick -- now you're maudlin.” She shook her head. “I'm sorry -- you're right. We should cherish the moment because in the next -- one of us might be dead.” She kissed his cheek. “But, let's not start mourning until it actually happens -- okay?”

“Okay.”

Yasuko pushed the stroller toward the bench. “Shall we look at the flower beds?” she asked.

“Sure,” Suki replied and stood. Nyk took her hand and walked with her mother.

Suki pushed the stroller up to the front steps and lifted Nicky from it. Nyk folded it and carried it into the house. He glanced into the living room. George was lying in the reclining chair. His head was turned to one side and his eyes were closed.

“George!” Nyk exclaimed, dropped the stroller and ran to him.

George jumped. “What the hell?”

“Oh, I'm so sorry, George -- I thought...”

“Thought what?”

“Never mind... I'm sorry.”

Suki came down the stairs from the apartment. “Nicky's down for his nap. What's the commotion?”

“It's nothing,” Nyk replied.

“Nothing except I think he startled ten years off my life.”

“I am sorry, George. Really.”

“I'll get over it.” He settled back into the recliner and folded his hands in his lap.

“I have to go to the market for some supplies,” Yasuko said. “Care to join me?”

“Sure,” Suki replied.

“I'll come, too,” Nyk said.

“You?” Suki looked at him, her head tilted. “You've never shown interest in going to market.”

“Why not? I have nothing better to do.”

Suki shrugged.

“I'll get my bag,” Yasuko said and headed for the closet.

“What was it with Daddy?” Suki asked Nyk.

“I walked in the house and saw him in the recliner. For a moment it looked as if...”

“As if what?”

“As if he wasn't breathing.”

Suki rolled her eyes. “Come on, let's go.”

Nyk accompanied Suki and her mother toward an Asian market a couple blocks from the house. Nyk walked in, inhaled the aroma of the place and regarded the shelves of noodles and canned goods. Yasuko stepped to a vegetable counter and began examining produce.

Suki selected a cellophane bag of hard candies. “I like these.”

“They're so big -- you could choke on one.”

She giggled. "If I were three, perhaps." She dropped the sack into Yasuko's shopping basket and began looking at the selection of noodles.

Yasuko approached him. "Nick -- since you're with us -- would you mind grabbing that 25-pound bag of Calrose rice?"

He picked it up and headed to the checkout. Yasuko exchanged some words in Japanese with the clerk. Nyk hoisted the sack of rice onto his shoulder and headed toward the house.

Nyk watched Yasuko cut chicken breasts into cubes. Suki gestured to him. "My mom knows how to cook," she whispered, "she's been doing it since before I was born. You are underfoot."

He accompanied her to the living room. She sat on the sofa and patted the adjacent seat. "Sit here and be a good boy until dinner's ready." He held her hand. "I swear, Nick -- if you had exhibited this sort of ... of obsessive-compulsive behavior before we were married -- we wouldn't BE married."

"I'm sorry -- I'm having a bad day."

"Is that what it is? As the day grows on -- you seem to get ... I don't know ... more antsy."

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry -- I have some free-floating anxiety today. Haven't you ever had that?"

"Not to your degree." She kissed his cheek. "Try not to creep Mom and Daddy out at dinner too badly? Okay? Come on -- dinner's served."

Nyk knelt at the dining table. "*Sake?*" George asked.

"A small one," Suki replied.

"Same here," said her mother.

"Nick?"

"I'm sorry -- what?"

"*Sake?*"

"Oh, no thanks."

"Thanks for carrying the rice, Nick," Yasuko said.

"Huh? Oh, no problem ... any time."

Nyk lay in bed, his hands locked behind his head. Suki entered in her robe, brushing her hair. She tied it into a ponytail, slipped off her robe and slid in beside him. "Okay, Nick -- I want answers."

"To what?"

“To your bizarre behavior today.”

“Bizarre?”

“All day you were so ... twitchy -- you were Mister Clean in the shower -- the weepy stuff at the park -- scaring my father -- telling my mother how to prepare *donburi* . What is going on?”

“It's nothing.”

“It's not nothing. I want to know -- and I won't give you peace until you tell me.”

He drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. “When I was on Floran...”

“Why is it every time you go to that world, you come home with a story that starts with, 'when I was on Floran...?' What is it about that place?”

“When I was there -- I came across a document -- some ... family records that ... suggested something bad happened today.”

“Bad? What sort of bad?”

“That somebody in this household ... might've ... you know... died.”

Suki gaped at him. “Why didn't you say something?”

“I couldn't -- because of Quinn's Postulate and because of temporal interference. I must tread around you with great care, *korlyta* -- for your safety as well as that of my people.”

“Well -- that, at least, explains it.” She rolled her eyes. “I don't know what to tell my folks about your antics.” She looked at the clock. “It's a few minutes after ten. If you really mean today, then we have about two hours left. We're all safe in our beds. Short of a ... a satellite crashing through the roof, I think we're home free -- don't you?”

“It would appear so.”

“Care to make love?” she asked.

“I'm too overwrought.”

“What happened to 'let's make love every night -- no excuses?’” She looked into his eyes. “I see how it is -- you thought I was going to die today, didn't you?” He nodded. “The whole thing with the wedding -- mid August -- live each day -- all part of this notion about today.” He nodded again. “And you really believed it.”

“I've been dreading this day ever since I traveled there for the hearing. I wanted to be near you so ... so you could die in my arms. I must've made a fool of myself -- I'm so sorry.”

“Nick -- I forgive you. I probably would've acted the same way.”

He turned to her, grabbed her and held on. “I couldn't bear the thought of losing you.” He wept.

“I’m so happy that document was wrong.”

“Records can be wrong,” she said as she stroked his face. “I know this as a historian -- all it takes is to transpose a couple of digits or misread something.” She held his face to her shoulder and caressed his hair. “It’s all right -- we made it and nobody died.”

“I am happy we’re married,” he said between sobs. “I wanted that a long time before.”

“I know. I know you did.” She held him until he grew drowsy.

“I don’t know what happened,” Nyk said to Andra. “Either the genealogy is wrong -- or, we stumbled across an instance that disproves Quinn’s Postulate.”

“Whatever did happen -- I’m delighted.”

“Do you have the transcript?”

“Yes -- right here.”

“Slip it into your vidisplay -- I want another look.” He scanned through the document. “Yes, it still says 1 September, 2001.”

“The good news is, Sukiko and her dad are safe.”

“But, for how long?” He shook his head. “I have to believe -- based on all our temporal studies -- the likely explanation is an error in the genealogy. The Roman cel is unreadable.” He slammed his fist into his palm.

“I still have the original data capsule,” she replied. “I could make arrangements with Korlo to have the data extracted. Do you want me to do that?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. Part of me says we’re better off not knowing these things -- the rest of me wants to know.”

“You’re better off knowing. Besides, there’s no guarantee Korlo can read this capsule -- and, no guarantee what’s in the capsule is what’s on that transcript.”

“If you get a chance to go to Floran City -- drop the data capsule off with Korlo and let’s see what he comes up with.”

Nyk jacked his laptop into the data circuit and opened his email. An urgent message from Andra awaited him. He opened his vidphone window and placed a call.

“Nyk -- what does *dek unu* mean in Esperanto?”

“Eleven, why?”

“That's what we thought. Nyk -- the date in the genealogy -- for George and Sukiko -- it's September eleven, not September one. Whoever transcribed the Roman characters made a mistake.”

“*Unu septembro* versus *dek unu septembro*. I can see that happening. I assume the same error was made transcribing the year.”

“No, Nykkyo. Sukiko and her father died on September 11, 2001.”

He sat in his chair, slack-jawed, then buried his face in his hands. “I have to go through it again! Are you sure -- are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes -- I met with Korlo. I took the original data capsule to him and he converted it.” She poked her touchscreen. “Here is the original genealogy in Roman characters.”

Nyk watched the material scroll on his screen. He shook his head and attempted to speak.

“There's more. I have the Encyclopedia entry for September eleven.”

“YOU have it? How did you get it?”

“From Korlo.”

“He told me even he had no access to the material.”

“Nykkyo -- he's in charge of the material. How can he not have access?”

“How did you get it?”

“I used my power of persuasion -- and, some guiles I learned at Vebinad Academy.”

“Andra -- you didn't...”

“Of course not -- do you think they taught us to be whores? No -- they taught us how to deal with people, and Korlo is one. I told him if he wanted the original data capsule for his collection, he needed to give me the entry for September 11. I swore to him I wouldn't divulge the contents until after that date. By the way, what's today?”

“September nine.”

“You know, the time and date conversion is SO confusing... Oh, well -- he swore to you he had no access to the material, so I guess fair is fair.” She leaned close to the camera. “Nyk -- on the morning of September 11, a band of terrorists commandeered four airliners. One crashed in Pennsylvania. One

was flown into a government building in Washington, and two were crashed into the World Trade Center in New York.”

“The World Trade Center?”

“You know the place?”

“How could I not -- the Twin Towers -- it's the premier landmark in New York -- like the Quad Towers of Government Center in Floran City. Suki's dad has his office there.”

“Nyk -- the attack demolished the structure. There were nearly three thousand casualties. I have the transcript here -- I'll transmit it to you.”

He reviewed the encyclopedia entry -- the description of the attack -- the images of the burning towers. His mouth became dry. “Did ... did Korlo give you the statistics pack to go with the Encyclopedia entry?”

“Yes -- it's here.”

“Transmit it.” He watched the file grow as it was received. A tap on the keyboard opened the new file. “List of casualties...” He scrolled down. “Here they are -- George Kyhana and Sukiko Kyhana -- missing, presumed dead. A confirmation from an independent source -- September 11 is the day.”

“Oh, Nyk -- you must keep them away.”

“I can't -- I have no choice. Quinn's Postulate applies -- I can't change history.”

“Suppose it doesn't work like that.”

“Do you want to take the risk to find out?”

“Keep Sukiko away. You must! Maybe you can't stop the disaster, but you can keep them away.”

“You don't understand -- If I kept them away, then the genealogy would be different. We wouldn't be having this discussion, because September 11 would no longer be significant.”

“Not significant?” Andra replied. “It was one of the defining moments of Earth's 21st Century!”

“To Earth's history, yes. To Floran's ... I'm afraid not. It's only significant to us because of Suki and George. And -- consider the temporal interference implications. Destiny wants Suki dead -- for whatever reason. Suppose she were to live and ... and object to the woman Nicky wants to marry. Suppose Nicky doesn't marry Jenna, but someone else, and this marriage is childless -- the Kyhana line stops, and there's no Koichi...”

“And, thus, no Floran. I'm beginning to comprehend your dilemma, Nykkyo. But, you must do something.”

“I dare not. I can not alter history -- I must stand by and watch it unfold. What will be -- has already been. I must do nothing to change it.” Nyk heard Suki coming from the nursery. “I must go.”

"Call me again."

Nyk nodded. He shut the lid on the laptop.

"Talking to Andra?" Suki asked.

"Yes."

"How is she? My God, Nick -- you look like you've seen a ghost! Is everything all right with her?"

"Fine with Andra."

"Well, I got Nicky settled. Do you want to watch a movie -- or, spend time with my folks?"

"Let's go to bed."

Nyk lay on his back, his eyes wide open. He felt Suki relax and drift toward sleep. The words he had read played over and over in his mind.

Destiny plans to take George and Suki. They will die in the attack. The wisdom of concealing the encyclopedia crystallized. No one could change history, but what damage could one do with such knowledge! Destiny had given him precognizance. He knew not only when but where and how. Why? Why would Destiny tell him what was to happen? Was he to prevent the tragedy? How?

What if he notified the authorities -- placed phone calls to security at Logan and Dulles? Would he be considered a crackpot? How would he explain his knowledge? George and Suki -- and thousands more would be spared. But at what cost? Would disrupting the timeline cause the Floran hegemony to cease to exist? Were three thousand lives the price to pay for twenty-four billion?

Then there was Quinn's Postulate -- if he stopped the attack, there would be no record of an event to stop. He couldn't stop something that didn't happen. If he didn't stop it, the attack would proceed. Destiny already had decided the outcome. The attack will happen -- it has already happened -- and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He turned his attention to George and Suki. Could he spare them? He could fabricate some excuse to keep them from the towers. But, what then? The paradox -- the damnable temporal paradox.

Destiny plans to take George and Suki -- She has already taken them -- from the face of the Earth, and nothing could stop Her.

Could he cheat Destiny?

And then, with crystal clarity -- he knew. He could visualize the events unfolding, one by one -- and he knew what it was he must do.

The subway pulled into Grand Central. Nyk looked at his watch.

"See you here tonight," Suki said.

"I'll ride with you to Pace."

"Why?"

"I've never done it -- I want to see the place. I have plenty of time today."

"Okay." He took her hand and she smiled. "This is a pleasant surprise."

Nyk walked with her to the downtown platform. He looked at the system map on the wall.
"Which stop?"

"Brooklyn Bridge." Nyk nodded. He counted the stops from Grand Central.

The train pulled up to the platform and they boarded. Nyk stood, holding the overhead rail. Suki held onto him as the train lurched through the tunnel.

"Here's our stop."

He escorted her to the street and held her hand as they walked past City Hall. Nyk pointed toward the World Trade Center. "I didn't realize it's so close."

"It looks closer than it is, but it is within walking distance -- about a fifteen or twenty minute walk. Daddy and I have had lunch at Top of the World." They reached the Pace University building holding her office. She kissed his cheek. "Thanks -- this was different."

"See you at Grand Central tonight." He glanced at his watch, turned and headed back to the subway station.

Nyk lay holding her and caressing her arm. She looked into his eyes. "Mmm... that was the best ever."

"Ever?"

"Best EVER!" She kissed his cheek.

"Suki? Can I ask a personal question?"

"Certainly."

"You once told me you don't believe in a personal god."

"I don't."

"Do you believe it possible for circumstances to put you in the position of God?"

"Well -- not exactly. I suppose we all have the power to take a life -- but not to give one."

"Suppose someone takes your life. Suppose at that very moment you are given a choice -- you could go straight to heaven -- or, you could spend the remainder of your natural life as a spirit."

“Some cultures believe that's what does happen -- when someone is murdered, for example -- his spirit haunts the living until ... until revenged, the moment of his natural death -- or, until a proper burial.”

“If you could choose, which would you want?”

“I suppose the chance to live out my natural life.”

“Even as a spirit?”

“I suppose so.”

“Even if you could never make your presence known to any of the living?”

“This is beginning to sound like the stuff of a Greek myth... Yes, I suppose...”

“You'd prefer that to heaven?”

She giggled. “Of course -- especially since I don't believe there is any such thing as heaven or hell. Or, an afterlife for that matter. I'm surprised to hear such talk of God and heaven coming from you.” She touched his nose with her forefinger and kissed his cheek. “*Bon'noka*, Nick.”

Nyk sat at the kitchen table. Yasuko placed a cup of coffee before him. “You're not finishing your breakfast?”

“No appetite this morning. I see George was out the door early.”

“Yes -- he has a big underwriting meeting today.”

Suki walked into the kitchen, stood behind Nyk and caressed his shoulders. He jumped. “Boy -- you're tense today.”

“I suppose we'd better get going.”

Suki picked Nicky out of his highchair. “You be a good boy today.”

“Give him a big hug,” Nyk said. “You'll never know which one might be the last.”

Suki looked at him, kissed Nicky on his cheek and handed him to her mother. Yasuko kissed her daughter. Nyk held Suki's hand and headed out the front door.

He had walked about half a block when he heard someone calling his name. He turned and saw Yasuko waving some papers at him. “Nick -- Sukiko!” she shouted. She approached them. “George just called from his office. He left this behind and would like it if you'd take it to him.”

Suki took the papers. “Sure -- no problem.”

“What are they?”

She giggled. "His underwriting proposal. He'll be S-O-L without this. I'll take it over first thing -- as soon as I drop off these exams." She slipped the papers into her case.

Nyk stood with her on the platform awaiting the inbound train. The car stopped. He escorted Suki and took a seat by the door. The train accelerated and headed under the East River toward Manhattan.

"You're so quiet this morning," Suki said to him.

He glanced at his watch. "I've a lot on my mind."

The train approached Grand Central. "See you tonight," Suki said and kissed his cheek. She stood and held a rail as the train slowed. The doors opened, she stepped out and headed in the direction of the downtown trains.

Nyk stood. The doors began to close. He pushed them open and stepped onto the platform. He could see Suki ahead of him as he followed her toward the downtown trains.

A train approached the platform, stopped and opened its doors. Nyk saw Suki board one of the middle coaches. He broke into a run and headed for the tail car. He was about two and a half steps away when the chime sounded and the doors began to slide shut. He attempted to work his fingernails under the gasket of the door, but the train began to accelerate.

He stepped back from the edge of the platform and slammed his fist into his palm. He realized he hadn't ascertained how often trains on this line ran. His eye caught sight of a young Black man who had been watching him. The man smiled and shrugged.

Nyk paced the platform checking his watch. He stood near the edge, leaned over and peered down the tracks; then paced some more. He checked his watch again. A crowd was beginning to form.

A glint on the rails from oncoming headlamps alerted him that the next downtown train was approaching. He stood near the edge of the platform. The tail coach whizzed past him and stopped a train length and a half further up the platform. Nyk ran toward the car. The chime sounded as he reached the door. He blocked the door with his hands and hopped aboard.

Nyk held an overhead rail as the car lurched through the tunnel. He counted the stops and leaned to look out the windows as the train made its way downtown. Finally, it halted at the Brooklyn Bridge station. He jumped onto the platform and headed for the surface.

Once on the street he half-walked and half-ran toward Pace University. He passed City Hall and sprinted past the Pace bookstore. Once in the lobby of Suki's building he bent over, rested his forearms on his thighs and panted to regain his breath. The guard in the booth glanced at him through the glass and returned to reading a newspaper.

Nyk checked his watch -- 8:10. He picked up the courtesy phone and punched in Suki's number. It rang. He heard her voicemail greeting advising her caller to leave a message or press zero for the department secretary.

He pressed zero and heard another ring signal. "History department," a voice answered.

"Is Dr Kyhana in?"

“Who's calling?”

“It's her husband.”

“Oh -- hello, Mr Kyhana...”

“It's Mr Kane,” he interrupted.

“Mr Kane -- you just missed her. She dropped off some exams to be duplicated and then left to meet with her father.”

“How long...”

“Ten or fifteen minutes ago. She shouldn't be more than an hour or so -- she has a 9:30 class. I'll tell her you called.”

“Thanks.” Nyk hung up the phone. He felt his heart sink. She'd be nearly there by now, he thought, and there was no way he could catch up with her. He poked his head out the door and looked up the street toward the World Trade Center.

Nyk stepped to the guard booth. “Excuse me, did you see Dr Kyhana leave?”

The guard looked up. “I dunno -- I don't pay attention to who goes out -- only to who comes in.”

Nyk turned and took some steps into the lobby. Images from the Encyclopedia entry swirled in his mind. He bit his lip, turned to face the wall, leaned against it and began sobbing softly. So close, so close, he thought. If only he hadn't missed her train...

“Nick?” He heard her voice. “Is that you? Are you all right?”

He clamped his eyes shut, took a deep breath and wiped the tears from his face. “Your secretary told me you left ten minutes ago.”

“I was on my way but the dean buttonholed me to discuss one of my students.” She held up a manilla folder. “I'm going over there, now. I must hurry or I'll miss my class. What're you doing here?”

He took her hand and headed out the door. “I'll walk with you -- we can talk on the way.”

When he reached the street he turned and headed toward Brooklyn Bridge.

“Nick -- Daddy's office is this way...”

“You must come with me.”

“What about Daddy's proposal?”

“We'll deal with it later.”

“But, Nick -- he needs it and I have a busy morning.”

“This is more important.” He continued to lead her toward the Brooklyn Bridge subway station.

She stopped. “Nick! I’m not taking another step until you tell me what this is about.”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“No... You’ve omitted some things, but you’ve never out-and-out lied to me.”

“Trust me -- this is vitally important. I don’t have time to explain. Come on!”

She shrugged. “All right -- but, this had better be important. Daddy will be upset with me if he doesn’t have this proposal by nine, and I have a nine-thirty class.”

“You will know everything within half an hour.” He stood on the uptown platform. The train pulled into the station and he escorted her aboard. He glanced at his watch -- 8:25.

The train began to slow. Nyk gestured to her to stand. “Grand Central? Are we going back to Queens?” Her eyes widened and she put her hand over her mouth. “Does this have to do with Nicky or Mom?”

“No -- not to Queens.” He led her to the street and headed toward Park Avenue, half-walking and half-running. Suki lagged behind. “Hurry!”

“Nick,” she panted. “What is going on?”

“You’ll know soon. We’re almost there!”

He reached a high-rise of co-op apartments, showed a key to the doorman and called an elevator. “What’s this place?” she asked. “I’ve never been here. Why do you have that key?”

“It’s to Seymour’s apartment. He gave it to me in case I needed to use any of the homeworld equipment he has stashed there.” Nyk inserted the key and pressed the button for the penthouse. “Or, in case I needed to sanitize the place in the event anything happened to him.” The door opened and he stepped into the apartment. “Seymor! Seymor!” he yelled.

Seymour appeared in a pair of suit pants and a white shirt. “Nykkyo... Sukiko... This is a surprise.”

“Quick -- I need the bubble shuttle.”

“What’s going on?”

“I have no idea,” Suki replied.

“No time to explain.” Nyk dashed through the sliding doors to the roof and began unhooking the tethers restraining the bubble shuttle. He opened the door and helped Suki inside.

The shuttle came alive, its power cells spinning up. He tested doorseals and received a blue “go” panel. The safety latches engaged with a snap. Nyk deployed the sham rotors. They began to spin and he pulled back on the unistick to lift the shuttle off. He activated electronic countermeasures to make the

craft invisible to radar. When he reached an altitude of 5,000 feet he put the shuttle into station-keeping and pointed toward lower Manhattan. He checked his watch -- 8:44.

"Now can you tell me what this is about?" Suki asked.

"Watch..."

A fireball engulfed the top floors of the North Tower as the first plane struck.

"Oh, my God!" Suki shrieked. "That's about where Daddy's office is..."

"Yes," Nyk replied, his voice cracking. "No doubt -- George is dead."

She wailed. "I would've been there, too! Why would you save me and not Daddy?"

He looked into her face, his vision blurred. "I didn't save you, *korlyta* -- you're dead, too." He gave her a handheld vidisplay. "It's all here..."

"What is this?"

"Koichi Kyhana's genealogy. Look at it."

"More Esperanto?" she asked.

"Here is the Kyhana family line from your great-great grandfather up to Koichi." He pointed. "Here's Nicky ... his son Jeremy ... Jeremy's son ... and so on... Nicky's entry reads, 'Nykkyo Nicholas Kane Kyhana -- mother Sukiko, father unknown... Your entry -- Sukiko Kyhana, born New York, August 27, 1974... died September 11, 2001. Your father, George Kyhana -- born July 16, 1938 ... died September 11, 2001. Your mother, Yasuko Kyhana nee Tanaka, born...'"

She put her hands over her ears. "Stop! I don't want to hear any more!"

Tears ran down his face. "Your future is my past. What will be ... has already been. As concerns Earth history -- you are dead. You perished when that aircraft hit. But -- I couldn't stand by and let you die."

"You -- you saved me. You've changed history."

"No -- I can't change history. It's Quinn's Postulate."

"But, you have..."

"Any attempt to return you to a normal life on Earth will have the same result -- you will be dead. If I were to take you to your home in Queens -- you'd still be dead. I can't take you there. How I wish I could."

"Where are you taking me, then?"

"To Floran. Andra will care for you, there." He pointed toward the towers again. "Look!" The second aircraft struck the South tower. "Within three hours, both towers will be gone and nearly three thousand will be dead. You're among them. You were destined to depart the face of Earth today." He

grasped the unistick, pulled back and the shuttle shot into a parking orbit. "But -- you need not die to leave." He began computing the warp jump coordinates.

He pointed toward the blue sphere below. "Take one last look, *korlyta* . I'm about to trigger the jump."

Nyk pressed the warp coil trigger. The bubble became opaque and the coil discharge shook the shuttle. Transparency returned and he began homing onto the relay station transponders. He approached the shuttle bay, parked the craft and began bay repressurization.

Suki stood in the workroom, trembling. "You knew... you knew... How long have you known? This thing the other week -- Labor day Saturday -- that was a dry run!"

"That was an error in the transcript. I learned of the genealogy when I went for the hearing. Andra forwarded the encyclopedia entry the day before yesterday."

"Last night -- we talked of death and spirits -- this was what you meant, wasn't it? I'll never see Mom or Nicky again." She began weeping.

"*Korlyta*-- the choices were ... to let you die ... or to let you live -- on another world. There was no third choice. You say you don't believe in an afterlife. Well -- you're in it. Call it heaven, hell or purgatory -- this is your afterlife."

"No... no... oh, God, Nykkyo -- oh, God, I don't know what to do..."

"Go to Floran. Live out your natural life. Andra will be there for you. I'll call you -- I'll call every day. I'll send you photos and tell you of Nicky's progress. You'll see his first step and hear his first words. I'll visit -- as often as I can. And -- when my work here is done ... I'll return to Floran and we'll be together again forever -- and die in each other's arms."

"It's like prison -- to be kept forever from the people and places and things I love. To be kept from my baby -- my family. It's cruel, Nykkyo. You shouldn't have interfered!"

"Destiny is cruel and She's singled us out for exceptional cruelty. But -- you will be with your family. Somewhere between one in a hundred and one in a thousand Florans have Kyhana blood in their veins -- your blood, *korlyta* . You're their mother -- a couple hundred times removed. You will be with your progeny -- on the world THEY built."

"I'd rather be dead ... I'd rather die, Nykkyo!"

"If you'd really rather die -- I can arrange it."

"How?"

He opened the door on a man-sized transparent tube. "Your afterlife has an escape hatch. This is an emergency stasis chamber. Once I put you into stasis -- you're dead. It's quick and painless. It would destroy me, but I would do it for you."

She poked her head into the chamber.

"Normally, patients are kept in stasis until reanimated. I used it to save you when you cut your

wrists. Please don't make me use it now.”

Suki stood with her hand on the stasis chamber hatch. “Quick and painless?”

“One moment you're conscious -- the next you're not. If you really wish death, you may have it. The choice is yours. I was sure you'd prefer life.”

“What will you do with my body?”

He put up his hands. “Eject it into space.”

“If I died today, then I die today. How do I get into this?”

“Don't make me do this, Suki.”

“How?”

Nyk pressed a control and a table extended from the chamber. “Lie on this.”

She sat on the table and stretched out, her feet pointing into the tube. Nyk pressed a control and the table slid into the chamber. “You're sure?”

She nodded. “Just don't tell me when.”

He closed and latched the chamber hatch. Suki closed her eyes and clenched her fists. A touch of the master control brought the stasis field generator into standby. He looked into her face through the transparent tube, tears streaming down his. Then, he took a deep breath and placed his finger on the actuator. “Goodbye, *korlyta* .”

“Wait, Nick!” she yelled. “Stop! NYKKYO -- STOP!” He opened the hatch. “I changed my mind. You're giving me a gift -- a wonderful gift -- I'd be horribly foolish to refuse. I choose life -- I'd rather be two hundred lightyears away than nowhere at all. I'll go to Floran. Now, get me out of this thing.”

Nyk pressed the control to extend the table. Suki swung her feet to the floor and stood. He threw his arms around her and held her. “I knew you would,” he said. “I knew you would.”

“If this is heaven -- then you must be some sort of an angel -- flitting between here and Earth. There were times I was convinced you were heaven-sent.” She held him. “To do all this for me...”

“I'd do more if I could. I'd have saved George, too -- if I had known how...” He embraced her and wept.

“It's okay,” she said, “it's okay...” She held him and stroked the back of his head until he calmed. He looked into her face and she smiled. “So, what's next?”

“You know the drill -- decontamination and wait for the packet.”

Suki adjusted a *lifxarpa* . “When you visit -- bring me some bras. I know your people aren't big on underwear.”

“I’ll bring whatever you want.”

“You had this ... rescue planned. How did you know...”

“I didn’t. Mine was a contingency plan -- and then, everything fell into place. I figured if you were in the tower, you’d have to be there first thing in the morning. You couldn’t have arrived after the attack was in progress -- you’d have been turned away. You said it’s a twenty-minute walk from Pace.”

“You timed it all out.”

“I walked with you yesterday to estimate the timing of the train, and how far to Pace. The only snag was when I followed you from Grand Central. I missed your train and was convinced I had lost you. You owe your life to your conversation with your dean.”

“Maybe not. If he hadn’t delayed me, I might have been in and out of Daddy’s office before the attack.”

“Might-haves...”

“...don’t count,” she said, completing his sentence.

“I spent the rest of yesterday arranging details...” Nyk heard and felt a thud reverberate through the relay station. “...like the packet diversion. Come, *korlyta* -- the moment of our parting draws near. Remember -- even if we’re apart, we’re together. I’ll never stop loving you. Love is communication -- we’ll always have each other so long as we can communicate. Will you remember?”

“How could I forget?”

“Take care of yourself.”

“You take care of yourself. I’m getting off easy -- YOU have to raise Nicky as a single dad.” A tear ran down her face. “Take care of Mom -- okay?”

He nodded. “I feel sorriest for your mother. It’ll be hard for her.”

The docking tunnel door opened and Andra emerged. She opened her arms to Suki and embraced her. “Sukiko -- I sorry am -- but happy too.”

Nyk embraced Andra and kissed her. “You said you’d do whatever I needed. I need you to love and care for my *korlyta* .”

“I do and I shall. This request is no burden, Nyk.”

He held Suki. “Til we meet again.”

Suki followed Andra into the docking tunnel. The airlock door closed. Nyk watched the packet pull away and vanish into her warp jump.

Nyk piloted the bubble shuttle to a rooftop landing. He climbed out and began hooking the safety

tethers. Seymor approached from the sliding doors.

"I'm in shock," Seymor said. "The whole city -- the whole country is. It'll be days before we can get into the office -- maybe weeks. I'm glad my office faces north."

Nyk headed into the penthouse. "I'm numb."

Seymor put his arm around him. "Once the plane hit -- I realized what your game was. It was a gutsy thing you did."

"I couldn't bear the thought of her dying -- especially that way."

"If I were in your position, I'd have done the same -- assuming I'd have thought of it. With that sort of thinking and execution -- you'll make a first-rate Agent-in-Chief, Nyk -- a better one than me."

"I wish I could've saved her father, too."

"You did all you could. Lad ... I'm sure there will be legal issues. If I can help in any way..."

"Well -- they're probably both intestate. George's estate will go to Yasuko and Suki's -- what there is of it -- will go to me as her husband. My big concern is Nicky. Now, I wish I had married her before he was born -- then, there'd be no question."

"I'll look into it. My gut tells me you have little to worry about."

Nyk looked at his watch. "It's one in the morning. I wonder if I can get a cab to Queens."

Seymor shook his head. "I'll drive you." Nyk followed him to the elevator.

The car pulled up to the house in Queens. "I'm dreading this," Nyk said.

"Good luck and good courage, lad. Take as long as you need." He nodded and stepped from the car.

Nyk climbed the steps. He gave Seymor the two-fingered Floran salute, then unlocked the door. Yasuko was pacing and holding a tissue. He opened his arms to her.

"Nick! Oh, Nick -- I'm so happy to see you. Do you know?" He nodded. "I fear the worst for George and Sukiko. As soon as I heard ... I tried calling George's office but couldn't get through. Then, I called Pace. They told me Sukiko had dropped off some exams and was headed over there -- she never returned. Oh, God, Nick!"

Nyk held her as she sobbed against him. He stroked the back of her head. Her sobbing became weeping -- then wailing. "It's my fault!" she blubbered. "I sent her there with that damned paper. Oh, Nick! I killed my own daughter! How can you forgive me?"

"You did nothing of the sort," he replied. She continued to wail. "Please, Yasuko -- I don't think either George or Suki would want to see you grieve so."

"My grief is my own," she replied between sobs. "I feel like the bottom of my heart has been

blown away.”

“It could be days before we know...”

“I already know... George's office was two floors above where the plane hit. No one could've survived...” She wailed again. “Why? Why would anyone want to harm George or my baby? They never hurt anyone!”

“I don't understand it. There's such a wealth of diversity on this world. Why can't the inhabitants of this rock enrich each other through friendship and understanding? Why is it easier to hate and destroy? If I grow old here, I'll never understand.”

Yasuko clutched him as he held her. “How can you take things so calmly, Nick?”

“Everything happens for a reason. We're all following the paths Destiny traces for us -- paths we have no choice but to follow. She may not reveal Her reasons in our lifetimes -- but there IS a purpose for everything.”

“Do you really believe there's some master plan for the universe?”

“I don't believe in God -- I have to believe in something.”

“And, your belief makes it easier for you.”

“It makes it easier not to feel guilt. I know I did all I could do.” He looked into her eyes and his began to brim over. “Oh, Yasuko,” he sobbed, “I'll miss them so much!”

She embraced him again and kissed his cheek. “So will I.”

Nyk began to regain his composure. “I'm exhausted,” he said. “I know it's pointless, but I'm going to try to get some sleep. You should, too.”

She nodded. “Good night, Nick.”

Nyk brought Nicky into the kitchen and plopped him into his high chair. “He's all changed and washed -- ready for his breakfast.”

Yasuko produced some strained baby food and began feeding him. “Nick ...”

“Yes, Yasuko?”

“I know now there's nothing keeping you here, but I hope...”

“Yasuko -- this is my home.”

“I was thinking -- if, at some point ... you'd like to bring a ... a companion into the house ... another woman...” She brushed away tears. “I'd be willing to love her like a daughter.”

“It won't happen. Suki is the one true love of my life. I'd never replace her.”

“But -- Nicky needs a woman's touch.”

“He has yours.”

“I might not be here forever. Nothing's forever -- as yesterday demonstrated.”

Nyk poured a cup of coffee for himself. “Did you sleep at all?”

She shook her head. “Not anything worth the name sleep.”

“Me neither,” he replied.

“Going to bed alone will be the hardest thing. All my demons come out at night.”

Nyk stood and caressed her back. “Yasuko -- if there are nights in which you need someone -- I'm here.”

She looked at him agape. “Nick -- I'd never...”

“I don't mean anything physical. If you need someone to hold you -- to keep the demons at bay -- or a shoulder to cry upon...” He tapped his chest. “I'm here for you.”

She shook her head. “It wouldn't be proper.”

“Not proper for two people who love each other to comfort each other in their hour of distress? Yasuko -- trust me -- I'd never do anything improper with you.”

“I do trust you, Nick. It's myself I don't trust.” She cleared away Nicky's breakfast bowl and gave him a set of plastic discs on a ring. “So, what do we do, today?”

“I doubt I can get to my office. I guess we sit and wait -- and play with Nicky.”

Nyk lay on his bed with the laptop computer propped on a pillow. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“I'm adjusting well,” Suki replied, “so far, at least. I like this portable vidisplay. This is almost like having you in bed with me.”

“There will be a few days every month in which the Floran and Earth nights are in sync. We can sleep together those nights.”

“We'll need to be more careful as Nicky grows older,” she replied.

He nodded. “How are you and Andra getting along?”

“Wonderfully. We arrived at the house and I broke down. She held me and we both cried for the longest time. She kissed the tears from my face and bade me to do the same. Then, she said something I didn't quite understand -- about us bonding.”

“You cried over the same hurt and tasted each other's tears. It's the Ritual of Shared Pain from

Vebinad Academy. You and she are now friends-for-life. She'll lay her life down for you."

"I do love her, Nykkyo. I'm so sorry I doubted her. She has the most beautiful persona."

"Spoken like a true Floran. I know how you feel -- I was an absolute idiot about her. I spoke to Illya Kronta today and told him of your situation..."

"Yes -- I know. He called. He thinks he can pull some strings with Central Admin and get me registered as a Floran resident."

"I don't know of a precedent for such."

"He said there was -- a number of years ago, a Floran ExoAgent let his true nature slip to an Earth woman. Agency Enforcement sent the guy up, and they snatched the girl, too. They didn't trust her to keep the secret, so they offered her exile here -- and a chance to live with her lover. She was assimilated."

"I've heard that story. I didn't know she was offered Floran citizenship."

"The Agency is happier with me here and you there than the other way around. Illya says he has an ulterior motive -- to set a precedent in the event he can convince Daphne to join us. He told me I'll need a contraceptive implant capsule and a personal ID chip."

"Those are no biggies."

"Nykkyo -- Andra told me about the contraceptive implant. It's easy for a man to say. Having an object the size of a pencil stub driven under your skin sounds a bit like a biggie to me."

"Every Floran girl goes through it and survives."

"In a way, I am looking forward to it. I realize it's one of the reasons the women on this planet all look so good, even well past middle age. Their bodies are bathed from puberty to death in benevolent, synthetic hormones."

"Those hormone implants have driven the incidence of some cancers -- some that are quite a problem on Earth -- almost to the vanishing point. It's a *quid pro quo*. Floran women gain improved health in exchange for having the state manage their fertility."

"Since I'm not planning any more children, it sounds like a good deal to me."

"What do you have planned for tomorrow?"

"Andra thinks I'd be happier if I had something to do. Tomorrow, she's taking me with her to Sudal University to talk with the assistant dean. She thinks I can create a course on Earth history the university can offer, with me as a guest lecturer."

"It sounds like a good idea. Are you game for that?"

"I am -- and, it will give me an opportunity to polish my *Lingwa*."

"Have you seen Senta?"

“She's stopped by a few times. She has her own place in Sudal -- and, she has a new lover.”

“Only one?”

Suki smiled. “I still have much to learn of the nuances of the language here. Senta said something that led me to believe she was propositioning me.”

“She probably was. She craves you.”

“Senta? Craves ME? How can you say that -- after all the trouble she made for us -- after I stole you from her?”

“She never gave a rip about me, *korlyta*. She didn't care that you had ME. What bothered her was that I had YOU and she wanted you for herself. You must realize -- Senta collects lovers the way Earth kids collect butterflies. Granted, she doesn't dry them and pin them onto boards. I know she pursued Andra in order to have an *ax'amfin* in her collection.”

“She wants me because I'm from Earth?”

“And, because you're an Asian -- and, because you're a known ancestor to Koichi. What rarer specimen could she find?”

Suki rested her chin on her fist. “I can see assimilating into this culture might not be as easy as I first imagined. Should I take her up on her offer?”

“That's up to you. Senta is an important and powerful woman. Friendship with her could be quite useful to you.”

“So, you're recommending I prostitute myself.”

“On the contrary. I'm recommending you follow your feelings. Senta isn't evil, Suki. She'd make a good friend. How you two might express such friendship is not my affair.”

“I'll think about it. How's Mom doing?”

“Better today. She wants to visit Ground Zero. I'd rather stay away from it. The stench -- sometimes you can smell it here in Queens.”

“If I were her -- I'd want to go.”

“With the City shut down, there's not much to do but hang around and play with Nicky. Yasuko seemed calmer today.”

“Nykkyo -- please watch her for the next few days. She is Japanese.”

“So are you.”

“No -- she's a real Japanese. She may decide she'd rather join me and Daddy. I couldn't live with myself if that happened.”

"I've been wrestling with whether or not to take her into our confidence. It might be easier for her if she knew you were all right. But, I don't know if I can take the risk. We are absolutely forbidden to reveal our true nature to the native population. I wouldn't have told you if I hadn't been forced by circumstances."

"I understand. I'll leave that decision to you. In the meantime -- please watch her. If she seems suddenly calmer -- it could be a sign she's reconciled herself to the deed. I know what I'm talking about, Nykkyo."

"All right, I'll keep an eye on her."

"Thanks." Suki yawned. "I'm getting sleepy, so maybe I'll switch this thing off."

"I'll call again tomorrow, *korlyta* ." He kissed his fingers and pressed them to the camera. Suki responded with the same. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too. *Bon'noka* , Nykkyo."

"*Bon'noka*." The screen went dark.

Nyk closed up the laptop and set it on the table. He looked in on Nicky and then returned to his bed and listened to the night sounds of the city. Thoughts intruded, and the image of the aircraft crashing into the buildings was burned into the backs of his eyes. These he tried to turn away.

He heard the sound of movement in the house below. Nyk slipped into his robe and crept down the stairs. In the dim light he saw Yasuko in her sky-blue *kimono* , kneeling on the living room carpet. Before her was the *tanto* unsheathed. She lifted her face and with her left hand, felt her neck. Then, she picked up the dagger.

"Yasuko -- what are you doing?" She jumped and dropped the knife. Nyk walked around to face her. Tears began to flow down her cheeks. "What is the matter with you people?" he asked. "First Suki tried to kill herself -- twice, no less -- and now you."

"Oh, Nick -- I can't go on like this. They were my whole world -- my whole life. I can't go on without them."

"But you have them," he replied. He touched his breast. "They're here."

"When that airplane hit, my heart turned to stone."

"Yasuko -- they're with us in this house. Nicky is half Suki -- and a quarter George. They both live on in him -- and he needs you." He knelt and held her. "I need you."

She held onto him as she sobbed. He kissed the top of her head and she relaxed her grip. Nyk picked up the *tanto* and slipped it into its sheath.

"Help me up," she said. He grasped her upper arm and lifted her. As she stood he saw she had tied her *kimono* belt around her knees. "This is the traditional way for a woman." She untied the belt. "She binds her legs so she isn't found in an undignified posture." Nyk held her again, caressing the back of her head as she wept. "Nick -- please sleep with me tonight."

Nykkyo carried Nicky into the living room. Yasuko was working on something on a table. "Good morning, Grandma," he said. She looked up. Nicky reached for her and she took him.

Nyk examined the objects on the table -- a pair of frames. He turned them over and saw photo portraits of Suki and George. "It's a beautiful one of Suki," he said. "When was this taken?"

"It was her high school senior picture."

"She hasn't changed much." He looked at her. "I'll bet you were as pretty as she when you were this age."

"I'm afraid not, Nick." She handed Nicky to him. "I was prettier," she said and smiled.

"I'm glad to see you smile again, Yasuko."

She picked up the photographs. "I knew I had some frames in the basement." She carried them to the wall where the crest had hung. "I think they'd look good here -- in place of that damned knife. Here, Nick -- give me a hand hanging them."

Nyk took down the *tanto* and short sword and pulled their hooks out of the wall. He picked up nails and a hammer, measured the spots and pounded them in. "There -- oops, I think George's is a little low."

"It's fine, Nick." He picked up the dagger and sword. "Where are you going with those?"

"I'm going to put them away -- in a safe place. Yasuko?"

"Yes?"

"Will you be all right?"

"I think so."

Epilogue -- Just You and Me

"Ok, buddy -- blow them all out," Nyk said to Nicky. He cut the cake and served pieces to the children seated around the kitchen table.

"He's turning into a fine little man," Yasuko said. "You do such a good job with him. You're either a natural -- or -- you've done this before."

“Neither. It's all strictly OJT.”

The book of matches she used to ignite the candles fell from her hands. “Nick -- could you pick that up? My back is bothering me.”

“Certainly...” He picked up the object and handed it to her.

“Thanks... OJT? I don't know that expression.”

“On-the-job training. There are many times I find myself asking, “What would Suki do?”

Nyk lay on his back, his head propped on pillows and his laptop computer on his stomach.

“...So, what would you do?”

“I don't know,” Suki replied. “That's the trouble with kids -- they don't come with instruction manuals. I think he's too young for camp.”

“If it were overnight, I'd agree -- but this is a day camp. The bus will pick him up in the morning and drop him off in the afternoon.”

“I don't agree with parents who attempt to raise superkids -- pushing them into these activities before they're ready.”

“He'll be competing against superkids.”

“He'll compete his whole life against others who are smarter or stronger -- or, just more aggressive.”

“I was a dumber, weaker, less aggressive kid who could've benefited from day camp at his age.”

“I'm even less patient with parents who feel the need to live vicariously through their children.”

He gazed at her for a moment. “Of course -- you're right. On the other hand, if he goes to camp, it'll give your mom a break during the day. She's doing a yeoman's job with him, Suki -- but I believe she's tired. And, she has paid her dues in this regard, already. It's only for two weeks...”

“Do what you think is best,” she replied.

“If we send him, now's the time to pick a camp and get him enrolled.” He slipped a disk into his laptop computer. “I have some more photos -- here's another of Nicky blowing out the candles.” He pressed some keys.

“Six candles,” Suki replied. “I can't believe it. If I were on Earth, I'd print these and stick them on the refrigerator.”

“Print them and stick them on the door to the stasis cabinet, then.”

“Nykkyo -- it means so much that you keep me in the loop regarding Nicky -- more than I can

express.” She kissed her fingers, pressed them to the camera and Nyk reciprocated.

“I promised you.”

“I know you did. It still means a lot to me that you ask my advice -- and listen to it.”

“You have an advantage -- you've been an Earth kid and I haven't.”

“No -- you have the advantage -- you've been a boy and I haven't. You and Nicky have more in common being male than he and I ever could.”

“I'll keep my other promise -- once Nicky is grown and on his own, I will join you -- and never leave.”

“I know you will -- Destiny permitting.”

He lay gazing at her image. “How do you like my new laptop?”

“What's different?”

“This one has a built-in high-speed wireless network. I can take it anywhere -- to the park or the cafe -- and be in touch with you. It also has a built-in camera -- no more clunky clip-on.”

“I thought it was a better picture of you. You're looking good.”

“You're looking good, too,” he said.

“I am good. I'm happy -- happier than I thought I would be. I must tell you about my position at the university -- I've been offered the department chair.”

“Chairman?”

“Yes, Nykkyo -- Chair of the History Department! I couldn't believe it -- I could never have made chair at an Earth college so quickly and at my age.”

“Congratulations. I wonder -- why are the women in my life so much more successful than I am?”

“Agent-in-Chief is nothing to sneeze at,” she replied. “I was so proud of you when you told me.”

“What does this mean for your department?”

“I can't believe how our program has taken off. Once word got around about my course -- applications to Sudal University doubled -- the school could afford to admit better students. Then, the better students began to attract better professors. Now, the school is admitting only the very best students. We're no longer a second-rate backwater. The students here are wonderful -- I've made lifelong friends of some. And, I'm being courted by the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Floran City.”

Nyk whistled. “The Academy... Are you going to take it?”

“And leave Andra? Not on your life. I love her so much, Nykkyo. We truly are sister lovers.”

“Make Andra part of the package.”

“There's no sea research program in Floran City.”

“She could start one.”

“She's too loyal to the one here. She's staying put, and so am I. I love Sudal, and I love the people here.”

“Sudal University doesn't need to know that.”

Suki smiled. “No, they don't.”

“Do you feel assimilated?” he asked.

“I am becoming accustomed to the stares.”

“No one resembling you has walked the face of that world in thousands of years.”

“Andra and I were in Sudal the other day. It's a good thing the groundcars are all automated.” She giggled. “I think we would've caused a pileup, otherwise.”

“An Asian and an *ax'amfin* walking the streets of Sudal. You must've looked like *yin* and *yang*.”

“Oh, Nykkyo -- when can you visit again? I live for those days we can be in each other's arms. So does Andra.”

“There's an Agency Oversight Committee meeting coming up in a few weeks. Now that I'm Agent-in-Chief I can pick and choose which ones to attend. There was a time I wouldn't attend any. Now, I'll choose to go to them all -- so we can be together.”

“I'll tell Andra. You know this means we'll have another argument over which of us gets to sleep with you first. Last time we drew lots. Andra won.”

“But, you slept with me the first night.”

“She insisted.”

He chuckled. “That's an argument Floran-style.” He gazed at her image more.

“I don't want to hang up,” she said, “but I should be getting some sleep. I must go to Floran City in the morning.”

“To the Academy?”

“No -- to the ExoAgency. They want to talk to me about revamping their training program. I really should go.”

Nyk nodded. “Care for some phone sex?”

Yasuko stepped into the kitchen and sat across from Nyk. "Nicky's on the bus," she said.

"Having him in kindergarten frees up your mornings, Yasuko. You can start to relax and enjoy your golden years."

"Nick -- there's something I must tell you. I was going to yesterday, but I didn't want to put a damper on Nicky's birthday."

"What is it?"

"You know my back has been bothering me."

"Yes..."

"I went to the doctor yesterday morning. He wants me to go in for some tests. I'm sorry, Nick -- I didn't want to interfere with your work schedule, but I'll be in the hospital for a few days."

"Don't worry about it -- my office can run without me for a few days."

Nyk sat in a waiting area. The door to Yasuko's hospital room was closed. He kept one eye on the room and the other on Nicky as he flipped through picture books. Some hospital staff stepped from Yasuko's room.

Nyk picked up Nicky and sat him in a chair. "You sit here and look at your books. I must have a word with Grandma. Okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

He patted the boy on the head and stepped into Yasuko's room. "Well?"

"It's not good news, Nick. It's cancer."

"Cancer?"

"Yes -- it started in my colon. Now it's spread. The pain in my back is caused by tumors in my muscles and bones."

"Can they do anything for you?"

She shook her head. "The prognosis is terminal. With surgery, chemo and radiation therapy, they think they can slow it down so I'll last a couple of years."

"Without treatment?"

"Six months -- maybe eight. It's an aggressive case."

He moved a chair close to her. "What are you going to do?"

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“No -- why put myself through the agony of surgery and chemotherapy when the end result is the same? Why prolong the inevitable?”

“Because every extra day is another you're with us.”

“But -- at what cost? A life must be worth living, Nick. To be cut up and crippled -- to have my insides burned by chemicals and radiation -- isn't a life I wish to live.”

“I was being selfish, Yasuko. Of course -- you must deal with this however you feel best.”

“Someone from the hospice will be coming by later to speak with me about palliative care. They can do wonders with pain management these days. I should be able to be productive until ... until six weeks or so from the end.” A tear ran down her face. “I am sorry, Nick. I shouldn't be leaving you. You have your hands full with your work and your travel and all, and Nicky needs a woman's influence.”

“It's not your fault.”

“It is -- I neglected my own health, and now I'm paying the penalty.”

“No -- don't blame yourself, Yasuko. You've been following the path Destiny traced for you. From here it gets rocky.”

“What will you tell Nicky?”

“I don't know.”

“Don't keep it from him, Nick -- don't sugar coat it. He needs to learn something about life and death from this.”

“Is he old enough to comprehend?”

“No -- but that shouldn't stop him.” She grasped his hand. “Birth and death have become so clinical in this country. I don't want to die in a place like this. I want to be in my home, surrounded by the people and things I love.”

“Nicky has learned much from you -- as have I. How you want your illness managed is up to you. I'll make sure your desires are accommodated.”

Nyk sat at his laptop computer and accessed his private data store. Koichi's genealogy appeared on the screen. He scrolled through it. *Yasuko Kyhana nee Tanaka. Born, Hiroshima Japan, November 20, 1943. Died New York, New York, June 7, 2007* . He placed a vidphone call.

“Nykkyo!”

“Hello, *korlyta* . We're home from the hospital.”

"I'm still reeling from the news. How's she doing?"

"They gave her some pain medication and she's back to her chipper self."

"Did they say how long?"

"The doctors think six to eight months -- but I know from..."

"Don't you dare recite any of that damned genealogy to me, Nykkyo. You once told me a glimpse into the future was a gift. Now, I know it's a curse. There are things in life we're better off not knowing."

"Whatever you wish, *korlyta* ." He heard the doorbell. "That must be the hospice nurse. I'll talk to you later." The vidphone session went dark.

A thirty-something woman stepped into the living room. "I'm Janet. I'm with the hospice program at the hospital."

"I'm Nick Kane -- Mrs Kyhana's son-in-law. Pleased to meet you."

"When people think of hospice, they think of a building -- like a hospital. Our program is different."

"I have no preconceptions," he replied. "I hadn't heard the word before now."

She smiled. "Mrs Kyhana has drafted a living will instructing no resuscitation or extraordinary treatment." Nyk nodded. "The goal of our program is to make the patient as comfortable as possible -- both physically and emotionally -- as their disease progresses to its ultimate conclusion. It is our approach to regard the whole family as patients in the process."

Nyk nodded again.

"Mrs Kyhana's treatment will be a progressively aggressive pain management regimen. We'll start with some mild oral medication and ramp up as needed. We began the treatment during her confinement, and so far she has responded well."

"She has seemed more herself the past few days."

"I will be coming around on a regular basis to check on her progress. When we reach the end stages, I may find myself here all day."

"She wishes to die in her own home," Nyk said.

"We will do everything possible to honor that wish."

Yasuko sat in a reclining chair in the living room. "I'm getting weaker," she said to Nyk. "I can feel my stamina ebbing."

"Janet will be here shortly. I've also asked Seymor to come by. He has the final draft of your will. He and Janet can witness it."

“He's your old boss, isn't he?”

“Yes -- and a licensed attorney. He's more than happy to do this for you.”

The doorbell rang and Nyk admitted Janet. He paced around the kitchen as Janet conferred with Yasuko.

The doorbell rang again. He opened the door, saw Seymor and stepped outside. “How are you bearing up, lad?”

“As well as to be expected.”

“I can't imagine this -- first Sukiko and her dad -- now her mom.”

“Suki's alive and well, Seymor.”

“Oh ... yes, I keep forgetting... Tell me, how are you going to handle the boy once she's gone?”

“I haven't thought that far ahead. I'm thinking of closing the Tribeca office and working out of the house.”

“What about Jaquie?”

“I love Jaquie, Seymor -- but I'm accustomed to typing my own memoranda. There's really not enough work to keep her busy.”

“You can't let her go -- she's part of the organization.”

“Maybe I don't have to. Nothing says I can't put her into a room here and keep her on. Maybe we could mix some housekeeping chores with her secretarial duties. How do you think she'd react to that notion?”

“I don't know, Nyk -- it'll test your skills at diplomacy to suggest it to her. What about your assistant?”

“What assistant, Seymor?”

“You haven't hired one?”

“Actually, Dyppa is doing such a good job in Wisconsin -- she's practically my assistant already. Besides her exobotany, she's handling most of the day-to-day liaison with the plant breeders. There's no reason to keep that office in Manhattan, and we could save the Agency some money.”

“Do what you think is right, lad. You're in charge, now.”

“Come inside and let's get our business transacted.” Nyk opened the door and gestured Seymor in.

He approached Yasuko. “Mrs Kyhana -- I have the final draft of your will.” He opened his case and withdrew a pair of envelopes. “Nick Kane is named as the executor of your estate. I've made all the

changes you requested. If you'd like to read it over..."

She waved her hand. "I trust you."

"Then, sign here." He handed the pen to Yasuko, who signed her name with a pair of *kanji* characters. Seymor picked up the paper and squinted at it.

"That is my legal signature," Yasuko said.

"I'm not doubting it -- I never saw one like it before." He handed another copy to her. "Once again, if you please."

Seymor turned to Janet. "If you please..." She signed. Seymor added his signatures, folded the documents and slipped them into envelopes. "Here." He handed one to Yasuko. "I'll keep the other copy on file."

Nyk opened the door to the house and walked in. "Hello, Janet."

"Mr Kane."

"How's she doing?"

Janet lowered her voice. "I think we're very near the end."

"How much longer?"

"Within a week, most likely -- though I've seen some hang on much longer than I expected. She's comfortable -- and lucid. I just started a fresh bag of saline for her IV. It should last until I can arrive in the morning." She picked up her case. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mr Kane."

Nicky ran to him. "Hey, Nick!"

"Hey, Nick!" Nyk slapped his palm against Nicky's. "What do you feel like for dinner?"

"Burger!"

"Again? Let's see what we can put together. I want to check on Grandma, first."

Nyk rapped on the door to Yasuko's bedroom and poked his head in. "Come in, Nick." She was lying in a hospital bed. An IV line was inserted into a vein on the back of her left hand. Nyk saw the bag of saline dripping into the line. She pointed to a box on the end of a wire. "See the button? I press it for a dose of morphine. I can press it as often as I want, but I get the morphine only once every fifteen minutes. Nicky was here this afternoon, pressing the button so I could get some rest."

"Is the pain very bad?"

"If I keep my mind off it, no. Sukiko began to teach me to meditate. I'm using some of what she taught me to wall off the pain." Nyk sat beside her and held her free hand. "The problem is, when I want to sleep, I must relax my concentration and that's when the pain starts to intrude. I'm ready to let go, Nick. I've reconciled it in my mind. It's been a good life. I thank you for bringing Sukiko back into it. I

only wish I hadn't out-lived her. It's the child's duty to bury the parent -- not the other way around."

Nyk stroked her cheek. "Yasuko -- you rest now. You and I have some things to discuss after Nicky's in bed. Save your strength for then." He kissed her forehead.

He opened the freezer and grabbed a couple of frozen burger patties. "Okay, buddy," he said to Nicky. "Let's put together some dinner."

Nyk descended from the apartment with his laptop computer. He stepped into Yasuko's bedroom. She opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"Nicky's asleep," he said. "We can talk."

"Nick, what is on your mind?"

"I don't quite know how to start." He thought for a moment. "I guess the best way is the direct way. Yasuko -- Suki is alive."

"She can't be -- no one in George's office survived."

"She wasn't in George's office. She was with me."

"Where is she now?"

"She's on another world. I'm going to reveal something about me. It's something I've wanted to tell you -- I should have told you years ago. Yasuko -- I'm from another planet. My world was founded two hundred years in your future. An accident in time has made your future and my history one and the same. I knew about the World Trade Center attack before it happened. The event was recorded in our history." He held her hand. "Are you following me?"

She nodded. "Barely."

"I can prove everything I say. Yasuko -- no one can change history. I knew Suki was destined to leave Earth on September 11. But, she needn't to die in order to depart this world -- if I could take her to another. That is what I have done, and she's there now -- alive, and successful, and doing what she loves -- teaching -- teaching the youth of my world about yours."

Yasuko looked at him with her jaw dropped. She smiled. "You're telling me this ... story so I can go to my death in peace."

"No, Yasuko -- it's no story -- as you'll see. I'm going to raise your head a bit." He pressed the control to lift the bed and swung a dining tray before her. He flipped open the laptop computer and set it on the tray. "Suki is alive and well on my planet of origin. And, she's waiting to talk to you." He turned the laptop toward her.

"Mom? Mom! It's me!" Suki's image was on the screen.

"Sukiko? Is it really you?"

"I'll leave you two to talk and catch up," Nyk said, left the room and closed the door. He sat in

the reclining chair in the living room and shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, it was two hours later. He cracked open the door to Yasuko's room. Her eyes were closed. The vidphone screen was blank. He switched off the laptop.

Yasuko stirred. "Oh ... Nick -- or should I call you ... Nykkyo?"

"I answer to either."

"She named her son after you." She reached for him and took his hand. "She told me everything."

"I'm so sorry, Yasuko -- I should've told you from the start. I apologize for the needless heartache I caused."

She shook her head. "No need, Nykkyo. I understand why you did what you did. You saved my baby's life." A tear rolled down her cheek. "You can't possibly understand the comfort you've given me tonight."

"I'm a parent, too. I do understand, and it's why I broke my people's number one directive to tell you."

"She is so happy and so successful, and she revels in learning about Nicky. It's a miracle. I'm so proud of her -- and of you."

"If I could've saved George, too -- I would've, Yasuko."

"It wouldn't have worked. He wouldn't have been happy on your world the way my Sukiko is. And to think you can talk to her on that computer -- and see her face. It's no wonder you spend so much time with that thing."

"It's more than that, Yasuko. By the way my people reckon it, the Kyhana family -- the Floran branch -- starts with Nicky. Suki really is a mother to us. We all are her children. That makes us your grandchildren. I wanted you to know of the glorious achievement of your progeny."

"It's a gift," she replied. "Few have an opportunity to glimpse the future."

"I never wanted to deceive you. I was sent here on a nine-month assignment to gather some plants. I never anticipated such involvement with an Earth family."

She took his hand. "You were God-sent. Without you, my baby would be dead."

"I wish I could tell Nicky the truth about his mom. You do understand why I can't."

"Of course -- I can't fault any of your decision-making, Nykkyo. At least he was young enough not to remember her -- so he doesn't feel the loss."

"Nor does he feel enriched from knowing her."

"I suppose you're right about that. Now I understand why you were so adamant about not bringing another woman into the household. It will be difficult for you without me to help -- not that I've

been much help the past two months. What do you plan to do?"

"Maybe I'll hire a housekeeper. I can afford one." He kissed her forehead. "This must've been tiring for you."

"No -- invigorating. Thank you. Good night, Nykkyo."

"*Bon'noka.*" He switched off the lamp and closed the door.

Nyk opened the door and peered in. "Good morning, Nykkyo," Yasuko said to him.

"How did you sleep?"

"Better than in years."

"Nicky's on the bus -- last day of school. He can't wait for summer to begin."

"Will you take him to the beach house?"

"We haven't made plans, yet."

"Nykkyo -- on your world -- how do you bury your dead?"

"We don't." He pulled a chair close to her and sat. "It's been our tradition -- ever since PlanetFall -- not to put our dead into the ground. We never regarded Floran as our home, but as a waystation, until we could be reunited with our true home."

"That didn't happen."

"It can't -- until after the Centauri mission. I won't see it in my lifetime. That's not to say it will never happen. I hope it does. I hope our worlds can unite in peace and friendship. Maybe it will help the natives of this rock realize how petty and insignificant are their national squabbles."

"Maybe -- just maybe -- it will put an end to this insane tribal mentality that took George and so many other innocent lives."

"Not even my people are completely immune from that insanity." He squeezed her hand. "We cremate our dead. Some scatter ashes and others keep them."

"Then, do that for me. It seems a sensible solution. No sense cluttering up this world with discarded shells." She pinched the back of her hand. "I'll be done with this one, soon enough. I don't fear death -- I'm a Buddhist. We believe souls are eternal, repeating the cycle of life, death and rebirth. I would say, Nykkyo -- you must be a very old soul."

"There are about two hundred generations between you and me, Yasuko. The Centauri mission might be two hundred years in your future, but it's five thousand years in my past."

"Two hundred generations? So many rebirths! I knew something was special about you, Nykkyo. Perhaps this explains it."

The doorbell rang. "I'll get that," Nyk said and went to answer the door. "Come in, Janet."

"How is she this morning?"

"I think she's doing well."

Nyk followed Janet into the bedroom and watched her change the IV pouch. He kissed Yasuko's forehead. "I'll be on my way. I'll see you tonight."

Nyk sat at his desk reviewing his inbox. He checked his to-do list. He was overdue setting up a meeting with Lev to review the diamond inventory. The head of Plant Breeding was due next week to discuss the upcoming year's strategy.

He glanced at the calendar -- June 7. He felt his heart sink. The intercom signaled him. "Mr Kane -- Janet on two."

He closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath and reached for the phone. "Yes, Janet?"

"Mr Kane -- she's gone."

"How long..."

"I checked on her half an hour ago, and she was alert and watching TV. I just checked her again and..."

"She was at peace," Nyk said.

"This happens often -- they don't want to let go when family are close by. The doctor is on his way over."

"I'll be there as soon as possible."

Nyk walked into the bedroom. The bed was flat and the IV tubes and catheters were gone. Yasuko lay, covered with a sheet. He uncovered her face, kissed her forehead and replaced the sheet.

Janet walked into the room. "I have the death certificate here. There's no need for an autopsy --unless you want one." He shook his head. "I can help make arrangements. Have you chosen a funeral home?"

"Yes -- but there's been a change in plan. I'll phone them." He looked at his watch. "Nicky will be home shortly. I want him to see her." He carried his laptop computer upstairs to the apartment. A vidphone window came up and he saw Suki's image.

"She's gone, isn't she? I can tell by the look on your face."

He nodded. "She was at peace. I wish I were. I should've told her sooner about you and me. I might have spared her some heartache."

"Might-haves don't count," Suki replied. "I'm at peace. The conversation we had yesterday

helped us both come to terms. Thank you for doing that.”

“I wish I had done more.”

“She told me she could die happy, and now so can I.”

“You're not planning on...”

“Of course not -- I left my suicidal tendencies back on Earth. I have too much work to do here, and I pray I have enough years left to achieve it.”

“Pray? You? To whom?”

“To Destiny -- don't all Florans?”

“I'm at a loss to know what to do about a memorial service. I'm not very solid on what are the practices on this world.”

“My mother's life was her family,” Suki replied. “She had little else -- she led a simple life with few friends. Memorial services are for the living. Nothing you do will benefit her, now. She'd best be remembered by carrying on with life.”

“Hey buddy -- hand me the hammer,” Nyk said. Nicky picked up the hammer and gave it to him. He tapped the nail into the wall and hung the frame. “I had to hunt high and low for a picture of your grandma, but I found one. There -- Grandpa, Grandma and Mommy.”

He hung the crest with the photographs and placed an urn on a stand. Nyk picked up Nicky and held him. “Well, buddy -- I guess it's just you and me, now.”

THE END