

EDGES

By Gregg Keizer

From the corner of my eye I watch Marart's death. I have my own rigging to work, meters to keep in sight; so all I can do is watch him from the corner of my eye. I think I see a line fluttering where one should be taut, and he is off balance as he leans over the deck of his clipper. I feel little for him. My heart pounds wildly and I cannot forget that he tried to force me onto a cairn of rocks moments before.

My clipper is functioning perfectly, coming abeam of his again, and though my sight is drawn to the smoothness of the salt that streams beneath me, I *have* to look and watch Marart. There is nothing else I can do, even if I wished, for it would take kilometers to slow and stop my clipper. By then he would be a dwindling speck on the horizon of the Flats.

I look up to starboard and see the shifting and dancing image we chase. I try to focus on it, but it remains blurred, a yellow stain that flickers in the heat waves. Although it is only half a kilometer away, it is on the other side of the Edge, the blackened land that seems to swallow the very light that refracts and bounces off the Flats. I cannot see an end to the darkened salt that was fused into a sort of chipped glass by the megaton bombs centuries ago. No one sails on the Edge; no one crosses the line between shimmering white and light-sucking dark. Yet an image floats above the Edge; it seems impervious. There is a pool of white underneath and around it, an oasis of contrast that moves as it moves. The image could be a simple mirage, but a mirage does not carry its own unmarked ground with it. And then I heard an odd, throaty rumble coming back to me. Mirages do not make sounds. Both Marart and I know that.

Marart has regained his balance and is hanging on to an unbroken line, which bends dangerously. But it is too late, for the blades of the fans beneath the clipper's skirting gently nick the salt. Marart's misplaced weight throws the clipper off-center and the fans dig into the crystals, leaving a worm's trail. The caresses of the fans cause the clipper to heel further and gravity tugs at him.

There is nothing Marart can do. If he falls, perhaps his suit will protect him from scraping wounds.

For a moment I think I see his face behind the thin visor of his helmet and I even imagine that he is smiling. Another mirage, perhaps, and I

glance quickly to reassure myself that my clipper is sailing smoothly and the yellow blur still weaves in the distance. It paces us as we run along the Edge, half a kilometer to the east —another heat vision, like all the illusions that make up the Flats. But when I look back at Marart and his craft, several meters behind me now, the deck of his clipper is empty.

His clipper slowly drags to starboard and tips over onto its side. He is still hanging on. Then his mast reaches for the salt, brushes it, and the clipper is cartwheeling. Its plastic shell disintegrates, and the wreckage is a tangle of rigging lines, mast, and sail, all wrapped around shattered motors. And over the whine of the fans beneath my clipper and the snap of the sails above me, I imagine his screams. They are not loud, only forever, and they do not end even when my imagination's Dopplering has deepened their sounds to a low hum.

I stare past the whiteness of the Flats into the blackness of the Edge, and the mirage is still out there, flickering in the heat. I crowd on more sail, let out the jib lines, and feel the lurch as my speed increases. My clipper is close to instability, but I know I must go this fast to catch the mirage and slip into the oasis of the past that surrounds it. Marart's crumpled clipper falls farther and farther behind.

I think then of the Timing Race last year, when Marart and I watched Dannelle meet a mirage along the Edge. Her clipper flew behind the wavering image, then seemed to touch it before both flickered in the heat waves and slowly disappeared over the horizon. She had been transported into the past, the time of the machined mirages. Marart and I knew that, because we both had chased the mirages until they vanished. And when we stopped our clippers and walked from them, we knelt and touched the tracks the mirage had made in the salt. Illusions do not make tracks.

We walked in the shallow grooves of the thing's tracks until we came upon its skeleton, still glowing as the scorched metal cooled. A hundred-meter trail of scattered debris led to its huge tail, where the pilot sat. He was burned horribly, only his face unmarked beneath the helmet we lifted.

Marart and I buried the man from the past beside his machine and said little to each other as we walked back to our clippers. The machine was fueled by a sweet-smelling liquid we lifted to our nostrils. It was huge and made of metal. There was nothing like it in all the world. There had been nothing like it for centuries. Perhaps it was jolted out of its true time when Dannelle's clipper closed on it, Marart said as we walked. Perhaps Dannelle had taken its place in the far past, he whispered. A new machine

joins the past, an old one must fall out. I said nothing. Dannelle had been my lover and now she was gone— gone farther than mere death.

The search groups never found Dannelle or her clipper. Missing, the groups concluded. Marart and I knew better; we knew the mirages were real—visions of the past —and pathways into that time.

We told no one and, instead, raced to touch a mirage so that we could sail into the past. Marart had tried to kill me today to reach the mirage first.

As I blink my eyes, forcing my mind to the present, I try to focus on the mirage. But it vanishes, leaving me alone. I do not slacken my sails, though I am in the lead. Marart's death has given me this heat and thus the right to race Henna in the finals.

I adjust the rigging lines, steering for the finish banner, which vibrates vaguely in the distance. The clipper shifts slightly. The fans' whine becomes louder for a second as the skirting lifts on the high side and then I am sailing smoothly again.

There are small hillocks here and there on the Flats, as well as long ditches that cross the expanse, going and coming from nowhere. I must watch for those, because there is no way I can beat into the wind, not in a clipper. I can run only before the wind, making sure it is constantly near my back. I can sail a beam reach, perhaps ninety degrees to the wind, but that is all. If I try to come closer to the wind, I will heel over and suffer Marart's fate. There is no keel on my clipper, as there would be on a true sailboat, no resistance from the water to keep me upright. That is why we sail here, where the land is level and relatively free of obstructions.

The power for the fans that keep the deck centimeters from the salt bed is within acceptable limits and the reserve battery is fully charged. My visor snaps up and out of the way at the touch of my fingers and I let the wind tear at my eyes.

A gust of wind to starboard touches my sails as I cross the finish banner, and the frictionless clipper skitters meters to port before I can regain control. In that instant I think of Marart and I wonder who will look for his body. It will not be me. Only lovers and friends go to reclaim the dead in the caldron of the Flats. I am neither.

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We crouched around the heater in the tent, watching our breath billow and rubbing our palms together in front of the red coils. I finished one beer and reached into the kitbag behind me for another.

“The front is supposed to pass tonight and a high move in tomorrow,” Henna said. “Lots of southerlies for the next three days.” No one spoke. “That’s what the meteorologist said. What’s his name, the thin one?”

“Withers,” someone answered from the other side of the heater. I couldn’t see a face to connect with the voice. It didn’t matter; I wasn’t familiar with more than a handful of the pilots this year. Henna was one of the few I knew.

“Yes, Withers. On-the-mark forecast,” Henna said, an edge to her voice. “He said straight winds today, no gusts.”

Someone cleared his throat and I glanced up to see Marart’s brother looking at me, his dark eyes making me uncomfortable. His name came to me slowly. Dallin, I remembered. “You were there, weren’t you?” I gulped more beer and looked at my breath hanging in the air.

“Yes.”

“What happened?” He was still flushed from going out to retrieve his brother’s body.

“A line broke. He should have jumped, but he hung on instead,” I said quickly.

“No gusts? No sudden gusts abeam?” Dallin asked.

I shook my head. I glanced up and Henna met my gaze. I shook my head again.

“I saw what made his clipper heel,” Dallin said, looking over at Henna for a moment. I drained the last of my beer and reached for another. Bottles clinked together as I lengthened the row of empties. “I was behind you today, a kilometer or so back,” he said, looking at me again.

Had he seen the mirage, too? Had his brother told him what they really were?

“It was the wind. You know what the Flats are like. Wind comes from nowhere. You’ve seen the white devils out there. One got Marart,” I said, my

voice too loud for the tent. If he'd been that far behind us, he might believe I was the cause of Marart's death. From that distance, it might appear that I rammed Marart.

"Maybe," Dallin said, his eyes hating me.

Again I wondered if Dallin knew the truth. His brother had been obsessed with speed. He had believed the machines that had raced these Flats centuries ago moved hundreds of kilometers each hour. Joining the past would allow him to race in one of those machines, he had thought. He would not have let someone else beat him to that, not even his own brother. Dallin could *not* know the truth.

It was almost silent in the tent, only the ticking of the heater coils audible as they switched on again. "Say what you're thinking," I whispered.

Dallin went on slowly, his eyes looking at me all the while. "Maybe you ran against Marart out there today. Maybe that's what made him lose control. You've said often enough how badly you want the Timing Race. Maybe enough to foul someone's clipper to take the heat."

His words hung in the chilled air. I set the beer bottle beside me, wanting to smash a jagged neck free and cut him, afraid I would if I held it a moment longer.

"Are you accusing me of murder?" He shook his head. He knew he had no proof. "File a fouling charge, then."

"No one else saw it. It would be just your word against mine."

"Why are you doing this?" I asked, the bitterness welling up in me. "I didn't harm your brother," I said, my voice tight in my throat. I could not tell him what had happened, that his brother had tried to kill *me*. Not without telling the truth of the mirages.

"I saw you out there, Paul. I saw you—"

"You saw nothing. Nothing that you could ever prove."

"You killed him, just as if you'd thrown him off his clipper yourself," Dallin said, his face reddening even more. "If you hadn't been so eager to—"

"You're more a fool than I thought," I said. "Keep your lies to yourself

from now on.” I pulled two beers from the kitbag and stood up. Dallin said something, but I didn’t listen. Instead, I swept aside the tent flap and walked into the night.

The stars were outrageous. Every one seemed a pin through fabric, and no matter how many times I blinked, I could not make them sparkle. The air was cold and it hurt as I breathed it in.

As searingly hot as the days were here, the nights were just as bitterly cold. I hoped the water ballast in my clipper’s tanks would not freeze again tonight.

Laughter reached me from somewhere far away. I turned and looked at the rows of white, bell-shaped tents that stretched into the darkness, each one lit from within. Shadows moved inside the canvas as the spectators played through the evening. The nearest spectator tent was two hundred meters away, separated from the pilots’ tents by our encircling clippers.

I made it a practice never to walk into spectator territory during a Timing Race, for once they found out you were a pilot, they would pester you far into the dawn.

Timing Race. We ran our clippers across the Flats for sport and the spectators flocked to watch. If they were fortunate, they would see one of us die. I thought mildly of Marart, then of Dannelle, and I wished to be out there, running along the Edge, searching for her.

The dull noise from the tent behind me rose lightly, then fell again. I didn’t turn, for I knew who was standing there.

“He was only saying what first came into his mind, Paul,” Henna said, shivering in the cold as she moved beside me. “He and his brother were very close. He didn’t mean what he said to you.”

“Yes, he did.”

“I’ve heard stories about mirages on the Flats, Paul,” Henna said. I almost said something. Did she know? “It seems every year someone sees something odd out there. Maybe Dallin saw a heat mirage,” she said. I breathed easier, but her words left me uncomfortable.

“Remember three years ago? That pilot from Oregon who swore he’d seen wagons crossing the Flats?” She paused and I could hear her

rhythmic breathing. “And then Dannelle last year. She said she saw a blue blur that slid across the salt, trailing pieces of itself.” Henna’s voice was lost in the night. “I’m sorry, Paul. I didn’t mean to say her name, it’s—”

“Don’t worry. I don’t mind.”

“You still believe she’s alive, don’t you, Paul?” She paused and I nodded, though I was sure she couldn’t see the gesture. “Are you tired? Thinking of Marart?”

“He must have made a mistake.” I desperately wanted to tell her the truth, that he had tried to kill me, but I couldn’t.

“And you won’t? Never?” There was something akin to laughter in her tone, something I didn’t like.

“Perhaps I *am* tired,” I said, rubbing my hands together, hearing the sound of rough skin over calluses. It sounded so much like the noise of handling rigging lines that for a moment I thought I saw Marart’s visored smile in the dark.

“The moon will be up in half an hour,” Henna said, sliding her hands between mine. Her hands were warmer, but just as weathered from sailing clippers. “I know, let’s go to the Edge. We haven’t been there in years. Let’s watch it against the moon. It’ll be fun. Paul?”

I looked at her face, but in the dim light I couldn’t read it. We hadn’t been lovers for two years now, not since I’d met Dannelle and walked away from Henna. Then I realized her reasons didn’t matter; being alone tonight was not something I wanted. “Why not?” I laughed, suddenly hugging her, feeling her warmth through the coveralls we both wore. “Race you there. Last one sets up the recharge panels.” I tugged at her sleeve. “Come on, Henna.”

I walked to my clipper, reached it, and touched the smooth plastic deck, straightened the rubberized skirting so that it touched the ground. My clipper was long, six meters, and narrow through the bow and stern; it only vaguely looked like the bulbous hovercrafts that lumbered along the waterways. Amidships, where the controls were clustered, it was barely wide enough to sit, perhaps kneel. The mast was up and the bright-green sail furled along the boom. Near the bow lay the spinnaker, ready to balloon when the clipper reached forty knots. The fan switches were under my fingers, and if I turned them on, the deck would lift its three centimeters.

I heard Henna behind me and she touched my arm. “No. No racing. Not tonight. Let’s take the water truck instead.” The electric truck was so slow, I thought; hauling our water from the mountains was all it could do. But the wind was out of the south by now, and would be again tomorrow. If we took our clippers, there would be no easy way to return, since it was difficult to beat upwind. So I nodded my head and whispered yes.

We took turns running the steering levers, giggling and shouting back and forth as we crawled across the Flats toward the Edge. For a moment I thought I saw a shape shift in the dark, but the crunch of the truck’s balloon tires on the salt shattered the dream.

While Henna set up the heater and opened the food pouches she’d squirreled away in her coverall pockets, I set up the solar panel and pointed it toward the Cedar Mountains, where the sun would first show itself in the morning. With the main battery drained, we would have to wait until it was recharged before we could head back. Luckily, the final race was not until the day after next.

We sat, huddled beside the heater, eating crackers and fruit, drinking beer I’d taken from the tent. The moon was over the mountaintops to the east and was just beginning to lose its yellowness. But we paid more attention to the blackness that swallowed the salt flats a half kilometer ahead. We sat on a small rise, dirt somewhere beneath the ever-present layer of white salt, and looked down into the Edge. The line of black marked the bombs’ blast radii. What targets the bombs had searched for were long lost, but there was a stump of a city a hundred thirty kilometers to the east, the sailplane pilots said. The blackness stretched all the way to it; only the mountaintops were spared.

Though the Edge was black, there were brief shimmers of light along the border—short bursts of color, like the waves of the northern lights. At times there seemed to be only one; other times the glimmers came in pairs. But they always appeared along the border, never deep within the Edge.

I decided they were glimpses of the past, the oases I chased. If it were daytime, the oases would look like bursts of color and light. I wondered whether I would see details if we were closer. Perhaps somewhere in those gleams was Dannelle.

“You’re thinking about her again, Paul?” When I said nothing, she continued, her voice quiet. “I hated her, and you. Did you know that? When she disappeared last year I was glad it happened. Not now, not

anymore—but I was bitter then.”

“She’s out there,” I said, holding Henna’s hand, feeling her warmth. She shook her head. “I’ve told no one what we really saw ...” I continued, letting my voice trail off into the dark.

“Today, you mean?”

“No, when Dannelle vanished.” Henna shook her head again. “The destruction out there,” I said, pointing to the Edge, “was unimaginable. The bombs were stronger than the sun itself. You’ve heard the stories. Thousands of them fell here, each one warping reality a small bit, until even space and time were changed. They fell for days. Even time rips eventually. Now there are ways into the past. Perhaps to the future, too.” I said the words I’d often thought but never spoken, not even to Marart. I couldn’t stop. “The strange lights on the Edge, the mirages we’ve all seen, are only oases of the past that are somehow visible. Imagine the power of the destruction and tell me it’s not possible.”

“You’re insane, Paul,” she said deliberately, but her accusation only made me more sure of myself. “Hallucinations, Paul. We see mirages because of the heat waves. That’s all it is, the heat.”

“I’ve touched a dead man from the past, from the time before the wars,” I said. “Marart has, too. We found him in his machine after Dannelle disappeared through one of the time oases. Her presence jarred him loose, we thought.”

“You believe she’s down there somewhere, waiting for you? Is that why you killed Marart? To reach her before he did?” Her voice accused me of more than murder.

“He tried to keep me from the mirage and its oasis. He tried to force me onto some rocks, but he lost control. I swear it,” I said, squeezing her hand tightly. “I can find her if I can catch one of the images and slip into its time oasis, just as she did. I know I can.”

“You’re obsessed with her, Paul. That’s all.” She did not believe me. I would have to take her to the dead man’s strange machine and that was impossible tonight. It was too far for the truck’s worn batteries.

The blackness of the fused salt, the constant flickers of color, and the moonlight contrasted with one another. I could hear Henna exhale loudly. She touched me, her fingers light on my temples, as if she were trying to

rub away the insanity that she thought was there.

“Dear Paul, don’t torment yourself. Forget her and live your life.” I didn’t push away her hands, even though I saw Dannelle’s face in my mind. I needed someone. That was why I’d told Henna all this. Dannelle would understand, I thought.

We made love three times that night, caressing each other with callused hands while we waited for our interest to return. I laid aside my memories for a while. Neither of us spoke, perhaps each afraid that more words would widen the gap between us. Even so, I couldn’t keep my mind on what my body was doing.

Each time she cried out, each time I shouted with pleasure, I heard the faraway sound of Marart’s agonized last cries as his clipper pulled him over the salt. But in the nightmare of my passion, the salt was fused, not jagged as it was on the Flats, and it seemed to take him forever to fall silent. Sliding on a sheet of glass, forever.

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I sat at the table, shielded from the others by cloudlike curtains, and drank quickly from the glass. Voices from the rest of the huge tent reached me now and again. They were spectator voices. The woman at the bar had given me a bottle and a glass and found me this table in a corner. She’d once been a pilot, she said, and understood I wanted privacy. I had smiled and tried to thank her, but she’d slipped back into the crush of spectators.

I needed to be away from the other pilots, to think; so I’d walked between the encircling clippers to spectator ground, their tents silver and noisy. A few had noticed me, but I hadn’t stopped at their calls, instead pushing into this tent crowded with spectators and alcohol. As I drank to the bottom of the glass and refilled it, I kept imagining that I felt Henna’s fingers on my back. It was difficult to push that image away and pull Dannelle’s face into focus, but I did, and then drank again.

“They said you were here.”

I looked up and saw Dallin standing beside the drifting cloth curtains. I didn’t take my eyes from his, but I could tell spectators were watching.

“I didn’t kill Marart. I told you what happened during the race.”

“He told me everything,” Dallin said, his voice dropping low. “The

mirages. Dannelle. Even the man you buried out there on the Flats. I'm going to the Association, and I'm going to take them to that machine. Marart told me where it is."

"Listen to me," I said, gripping the glass tighter, feeling its solidness against my palm. "Marart tried to run me against some rocks. We were chasing a mirage and he tried to kill me. He wanted to reach it first. I didn't kill him. I told you that." Dallin reached inside his jacket and pulled out a long, thin knife.

"They'll know you were a murderer when they dig up that man out there," Dallin said. He moved to one side, brushing against the curtains, the knife pointed at my face.

I threw the heavy glass at his eyes and when he jumped to the side, I leaped over the table and pushed him to the floor. He grunted as the breath went out of him and I had my hand wrapped in his hair, trying to pull his head back too far. But then he squirmed under me and I caught a glimpse of a freed hand, the knife still in its grasp.

Its blade slashed my shirt and the skin under it, but the pain didn't come. Then I had my hand around his wrist, and still kneeling astride his chest, I pushed his arm down, the knife with it. I noticed its edge was dark with my blood.

The noise in the back of his throat grew louder, then quieted, and I looked down at my hands, both twisted around his one. His wrist was at a strange angle and the knife's haft was still in his fingers. The blade was in his chest and froth welled up around its edges.

I felt the presence of spectators behind me and heard the movement of someone's feet on the wood floor and the quiet cough of someone in a far corner. Dallin's final, gentle exhalation seemed much louder.

He was dead, but somehow I was relieved. Now no one knew the truth of the mirages except myself and Henna. Yet as I took my hands from the still-warm one of Dallin, I felt a chill in the heat of the crowded tent and heard Henna's voice in my mind. She had warned me of insanity, told me to forget my obsession, and I had paid her no mind. A man was dead because I would not forget, and Henna could accuse me of one more thing: murder.

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“We cannot race tomorrow. We’ll have to call it off, Paul. You see that, don’t you?”

I looked up at Henna, glanced down at my beer, and shook my head. There had been silence in the tent since I walked in. No one bothered to ask me about the Association’s inquiry, not that it mattered. I would lie to the pilots, just as I had lied to the Association. I don’t know why he attacked me, I had said, unable to tell them I was glad Dallin was dead.

“Two pilots dead, Paul. The spectators love you, did you know that? You give them exactly what they want,” Henna said when I didn’t answer.

“The Association cleared me.”

“They know everything, do they?” she asked, staring at me.

“The Timing Race isn’t canceled,” I said, louder now.

“What did Dallin say to you?” she asked. “What did you and Dallin talk about?”

She knew without my having to say it. She believed my theories of the Edge now, that was plain.

“You buried a man out there, you’re sure of it?” People stared at Henna, but no one spoke, not even to ask questions. “It wasn’t a woman you two buried to hide an accident? You said Marart wanted speed. Could that really have been you, Paul? Perhaps Dannelle isn’t what you’re searching for. Perhaps you *know* where she is.”

Everyone waited for an answer to her confusing questions and it was hard not to explode in denial. I stood and slipped through the tent flap, leaving it open behind me as I walked into the night.

I made my way to the clippers, found mine in the darkness, and touched it with one hand. The spectator tents glowed in the near distance.

“Paul, I’m sorry.” It was Henna. I’d known she’d follow me. I moved my hand to indicate a place by the clipper’s deck and she leaned against it.

“I didn’t kill Dannelle,” I said. “She’s still alive somewhere, somewhen. Both Marart and I believed that.”

“I was just frightened of what you’d become, Paul,” she said, taking

the beer from my hand and drinking deeply.

“I killed Dallin to keep him from telling the Association of the mirages.”

“I know, Paul.”

“You don’t hate me? You must. I’m a murderer, Henna.”

“I want to believe what you say about time and the Edge, but I can’t,” Henna said softly. “Not completely.”

“It’s true, Henna. Tomorrow you’ll see that it’s true. We can both touch the mirage and slip into the past. We can both go back.”

“So we can both be with her, Paul? You left me for her, don’t you remember?” She paused, drank beer again. My mouth was dry, but I wanted to stay clear. “Would you chase mirages for me, Paul? If it was I who vanished, would you be so obsessed?”

I thought of Dannelle and for the first time in a year, I could not see her face. I inhaled quickly and heard my breath rattle in my throat. I looked up and saw Henna smile, her teeth points in the light. Dannelle’s clipper, its sails dark-blue, I could see, but not her face. Henna’s kept coming into focus.

“You loved me once, Paul. In the past,” she said and smiled again. “You can love me again. I’m here now. Dannelle’s not.”

The temptation was strong—so strong. I remembered Henna’s touch as we’d lain under the night sky beside the Edge, the time oases gleaming in the distance. She was alive and warm; Dannelle was only that centuries down the line of time.

“Let’s go to the Edge again tonight,” she said. “We can forget all this.” It was as if she wanted to make love to me in front of Dannelle’s memory—or ghost. It depended on what she believed.

I wanted Henna then, more than I’d ever wanted anyone. Her touch, her warmth, her soft words, even her call used hands. But somehow I managed to stand and push myself away from my clipper.

“No, Henna. I’m going out on the Flats tomorrow to find another mirage.”

My rejection showed on her face. “You’ll not forget her. You’ll not call off the race. Tomorrow, then. And Paul,” she said, so softly that I thought for a moment it was only the wind on my clipper’s sail, “stay away from me—now, and in the race. I want the past now, too, Paul. Keep out of my way. Understand?”

She stood and walked into the darkness and I could think only of her face where Dannelle’s was supposed to be.

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I crouched next to my clipper, rolling the skirting down so that it touched the ground, making sure there were no gaps where the air could push through. The mast was already up and the rigging lines snapped into place. Fabric rippled above me as the bright-green sails moved in the wind. When I turned on the fans and the deck lifted three centimeters, I would let the sail fill with wind and the clock would start.

I looked at the salt beneath my knees. It was smashed flat here from the constant footsteps, but if one went out into the caldron of the Flats, where there were no prints, it would crunch marvelously, sounding like shells underfoot. And it would glitter. It was difficult to see that when the clipper was reaching for sixty-five knots, but impossible to miss now. It was painful to look at.

“Are you set?” a voice behind me asked as I stood and stretched my legs. My coverall was white from the salt. I turned and saw Harmon, the Association timer. He held his timepiece close to his stomach, in both hands, as if it would leap from his grasp.

“Almost. Two more lines to check.”

“Whenever you’re ready, board your car and give me the signal.” I nodded slightly. Like everyone from the Association, he called my clipper a car. Habit from long ago, I suppose.

I squinted into the sun and saw Henna’s clipper fifty meters away, its sails a deep rust. Even that short distance away, it seemed suspended in midair, the shimmering heat waves below it, the hazy sky above. She was sitting in her cockpit, ready to start.

Gently, slowly, I crawled upon the deck of my clipper, careful not to snag any of the rigging lines with my feet. I maneuvered around the

fan-intake vent and settled into the shallow cockpit. As soon as I had flipped the switches that engaged the fans, I pulled the mainsheet lines and heard the snap of the sail's fabric. The battery meters went down and I could hear the whine of the blades as the deck rose. The wind shoved the clipper aside, but I pulled the boom over and corrected. Harmon had started his timepiece by now, I knew, and I set course for the mirage of the Edge, seeing Henna's clipper from the corner of my eye, moving as I moved.

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I kneel on the deck of my clipper, yanking desperately on the mainsheet lines, trying to pull them and spill the sails. In the distance, beyond the sails I so achingly stare at, I think I see the finish banner, its length distorted by the heat waves. Another kilometer and I will be safe.

Henna is still bearing down on me, her course pointed to an imaginary spot of collision. She, too, is pulling on rigging lines, readjusting hers as I readjust mine. It is as if there is a band between us that allows us to separate only so far and that tugs us together when it wants.

It has been a tight race. Several times we ran alongside each other, our decks only meters apart. I did not brush against her speeding clipper, nor did I see one of the mirages.

But now Henna is trying to kill me with her clipper. I cannot be sure, of course, but I think my rejection hurt her deeper than she would admit to me. She has not spoken to me since she walked away from my clipper and me last night. She must have planned this then. I glance toward her and see that she is still aiming her clipper at me. It cannot be accidental, this course. Why now, I wonder as I try to steer to starboard and toward the Edge? Why not in the middle of the Flats, where there were no witnesses?

Against the mountains in the far distance of the Edge. I see a blur that is different from the perpetual line of ground mirage. It dances and floats on the breeze at my back, though it is coming toward me, I realize, running directly into the wind. Every time I blink, it shifts shape and position. I rub my fingers at the corners of my eyes, but the blur remains. I realize that Henna is not trying to kill me. She only saw the mirage before I did and is heading for it.

I cannot take my eyes from it, not even to watch my instruments, because as I look, it grows larger. Then, all in one long moment, I can make it out. It is yellow, only a shade or two darker than the salt it carries beneath

it as it crosses the blackened Edge. Long nosed, with dark wheels that rise half the height of the machine, its snout points toward me. No, toward Henna. It heads for her. As it becomes clearer in the hazy reflection from the salt, I hear its engine roaring and spitting sound in all directions. Then I see the pilot. He is all but invisible, hidden by the bulk of the machine so that only his head and neck can be seen. His machine is across the Edge now and on white salt, covering the kilometer between the Edge and us quickly.

I release the rigging lines to cover my ears against the sounds. How can he stand it? He must be insane from the pounding.

I hesitate, not knowing what to do. Do I force Henna to one side, as Marart tried to do to me, causing her to disappear in shards of plastic as Marart did? Or do I let her live, and lose my chance to join Dannelle's time? I cannot make up my mind, for although I've wanted Dannelle for so long, I cannot recall her face. Instead I seem to feel in the warm air that tears at my lips Henna's even warmer hands on my naked back as we lie on the salt at the Edge.

My thoughts are fused, just as the salt lies fused to the east. I do nothing, and that becomes my decision.

The mirage flickers one last time to the side and seems to touch her clipper, the distortion of its lines merging with her sails for a fraction of a second.

My hands are still off the rigging lines and Henna is pulling away from me, her course altered, the hard shape of her clipper shimmering in the reflected heat. She does not disappear, but I am sure she has slipped through the oasis of time and is even now in the past. I can still see her, of course, as I can see all the images from the past here on the Flats.

I try to follow her clipper, but as we near the Edge, my batteries register zero and I coast to a stop, my deck grinding in the salt as the sails still pull with the wind. She continues, the line of blue reflection widening beneath her keel. As I blink away the sweat from my eyes, her image flickers and finally vanishes in the heat waves rising from the blackened salt of the Edge.

The ground crews come toward me in the electric trucks. They will want to know what happened to Henna and I will have to tell them the truth. I know they will not believe me, just as Henna at first refused to listen. She is in the past now, but I am no closer to the face I cannot recall.

* * * *

I sit in the darkness and wait for dawn. The sail moves above me, the boom slides back and forth in its peculiar way, and I imagine I can hear my own heart beating.

Everyone from the Timing Race—the pilots, the spectators, even the Association—has long since left the Flats.

But I've stayed, living in a tent near this mountain spring, using the long days to sail my clipper along the Edge.

I tried to tell them what had happened, but they only looked at me quietly and said they'd consider banning me from the Timing Race next season. I don't care, really, for I can search as well on my own.

I believe I know why Henna had tried for the mirage and the past. I first thought it was because she wanted to see if I'd look for her, as I'd looked for Dannelle. But then I remembered her last words to me. She'd wanted to join the past, too, she'd said. Now I believe she went down the line of time to find Dannelle. Perhaps to kill her, as I'd killed Dallin. Perhaps to tell her that it was Henna I loved, to shatter her memories of me.

I sail the Edge every day, searching for both of them and the past. In my mind, they have merged into one; Henna's face flickers in my dreams, but I still remember Dannelle's name. It doesn't really matter which one I find first. They are simply two particles of the same desire.

The sun slips over the mountain behind me and I feel its warmth drive away the chill of the desert night. As soon as the batteries are recharged, I will switch on the fans and pull the sails tight.

Perhaps today I will see one of their full-rigged clippers soaring above the fused ground of the Edge.

And when I find one of their mirages, I will sail alongside it to join its oasis of time. I will slip into the past, cross my own edge of desire, and relive my love. I will find one of them eventually. And in the blooming heat of the early morning, I shudder, feel the chill of anticipation, and smile as I look down into the mirage-haven of the Edge. Such destruction, and yet such beauty, she'd said, and she had been right.