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LANTERN ROAD

a science fiction novella by

John Argo

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SYNOPSIS OF LANTERN ROAD: In the distant future, some of the scattered remnants of mankind are slaves on the world Shur, where it is always night. All traffic on Shur travels on the Obayyo, or Lantern Road, where grim fortresses are spaced and police stations at every turn. Tonight, Jory O'Call is on the run for his life. He committed the crime of falling in love with a Shurian warlord's daughter. The police are looking for him everywhere. The lady Ramy herself is preparing to commit duello in the palace. All appears lost. Then a strange man in rags accosts the breathless and terrified Jory on the Obayyo. Will Jory accompany

him to the Kusi-O, the great space port forbidden to humans and Shurians alike, and the only road offworld into the galaxy? Jory sees no other choice but to leave this night world behind and journey into the dangers and infinite possibilities of High Space.

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The Obayyo ran a thousand miles in perpetual night around the island of Oba like a glowing ring of myriad lanterns. Anything could happen on the Obayyo, so hardly anyone noticed a disheveled and breathless young man stumbling along the cobblestones where the road ran up into black mountains, with the sea glittering in fog to one side, and the damp wind cold and cutting. The Obayyo, or Lantern Road, crawled with an endless traffic of souls both human and Shurian, high born and low born, from lowly cargo bearers to traveling ladies and lords, and no shortage of knaves and thieves and murderers, clowns and fools and pilgrims, spies and merchants and priests

Every ten miles was a police station manned by Shurians in brown armor with swords and shields. Every hundred miles the Obayyo passed through the gates and walls of an imperial district prefecture -- a vast and grim fortress with dark towers and curving roofs. Dotting the mountainous countryside were villages where smoke curled from chimneys and wan light made tiny windows glow. Even less accessible were the castles of local princes and lords, not to mention the distant haunts of robber barons. Life on Oba might center on the imperial palace, but all life circulated on the Obayyo

The long ago sage had said: "If you tire of the Obayyo, once having breathed its air, you are tired of living and must either commit duello, or else resign yourself to a monastery."

Shur was the single large moon of a gas giant that sent up a greenish luminous tinge in Shur's lower sky. The high road had never seen daylight because, as Shur orbited the gas giant, it turned synchronously with relation to the star, so that Oba Island was always twilit, while on the opposite side of Shur a steaming sea pushed clouds and winds with rain and humidity toward Oba.

Also visible in the sky, on this bustling night when the disheveled and breathless young man stumbled along the road, were Shur's twelve tiny moons, the largest blood red and big as one's thumb held at arm's length, the smallest a series of specks like swollen silver-blue stars. The night sky was black in one direction, carpeted with stars like the lanterns on the Obayyo, but glowed like milky green jade in the other direction. The Shurian natives called it their eternal daylight, while their human slaves called it perpetual twilight

The young human, Jory O'Call, often looked back in a whirl of emotions that seemed timed with his sharp, ragged sobs for breath -- terror because the Lord Ramyon's soldiers were hot on his trail, regret that he had been betrayed and would never see the lady Ramy Ramyon again, worry at what might happen to her, and shock that one's life could be so drastically altered in one ill-fated moment

Jory O'Call dodged right and left, earning angry shouts from hurrying cargo bearers, and the occasional glancing blow of a walking stick from a puffy gentleman. Eya! they called after him, 'filth!', or nah!, 'rat!'

Jory's mind was a muddle of flashing images: the last moments of sweet enjoyment -- then the door's breaking under ax blows, the retainers' shouts as they burst in waving

swords, Ramy's screaming as she covered her face with trembling fists and realized her own end was near. Jory knew he would relive those moments forever, but nothing could bring her back. He would likewise remember, with dread, the looming third gender in Ramy's marriage, whom the Shurians called their baba, but whom humans distastefully called a wasp. Jory had caught a brief glimpse of Ramy's baba - a hulking copper colored shape who was actually Ramy's sister -- capable of the most terrible vengeance

Something more had happened, Jory guessed as he tried to figure out why he was still free and on the run. His lungs made sawing sounds, and the thick, moist, plant-scented air scraped over his open mouth and throat. Not just the betrayal. Something more that caused the Lord Ramyon's retainers not to kill Jory and Ramy instantly. The retainers, as they were called, were petty nobles without land, who dwelt in a lord's castle and acted as officers for the ordinary Shurian soldiery, those being peasants and riffraff not far above the despised human slaves.

For some reason Lord Ramyon's men had let him escape. Were they expecting him to lead them somewhere? Ah! It came to him in a flash of insight. A conspiracy! They were always looking for a plot, a conspiracy, a plan to topple the lawful lord and replace him with some senior warrior. Oba was a closed society ruled with an iron fist, more by the cruel rigidity of its laws and customs than by a weak emperor or hundreds of petty quarreling warlords. "Disunity is strength," said the long ago sage. That sage, however, had lived centuries ago before the arrival of space travel

In the foothills of the Oba Range, on the other side of the island from the Emperor's throne room, sprawled the Kusi-O, the space port. Oba might be a backwater, but it had one extremely valuable commodity. Oba was a fungal treasure house. More than a million species of all sorts of fungi flourished in the hothouse atmosphere of the water world -- some medicinal, others with manufacturing value, others for warfare, still others that glowed in colorfully. The lights on the Obayyo, carried in pretty paper lanterns slung on a pole over each journeyer's back, were fungal, bioluminescent.

Inevitably, despite Shur's isolation, visits had come from various interstellar trading organizations, bringing curiosity and commerce. That lure had been greater for the feudal lords than its perceived danger to their way of life. Meeting at the imperial palace a century ago, the lords had induced the emperor to sign a set of decrees establishing Kusi-O while limiting its effects on Oba. The space port would be surrounded by a high concrete wall. Inside was bathed in light, outside in the gloom of Oba. Aliens must never set foot on Oba proper under threat of decapitation. Shurians and humans must stay out of Kusi-O, or face a gruesome death

The Space Transport League and the emperor's lords conducted commerce through a bureaucracy that filtered through the drum wall that surrounded Kusi-O, a tall concrete structure guarded on both sides. All through the gloomy night, gravless barges rose and descended between Kusi-O and STL's orbiting starport. The light beaming like a torch heavenward easily led Jory toward Kusi-O.

Tonight, there was no conspiracy, whatever Ramyon's men thought. Jory simply had no place else to run. Either way, he faced death. At least he had some place to run to, however briefly. How, he asked himself as his leather shoes began wearing out and the rough cobblestones pounded the bones in his feet, can I have come down to this? And what of Ramy? His heart ached for her, knowing that she was probably facing her father at his most terrifying

Heart pounding, Jory jogged unsteadily along the Obayyo. Cargo-carriers, both Shurian and human, trudged by in pairs or quartets, with various sizes of fungiport urns hanging by knotted ropes from poles slung over the carriers' shoulders. Passing pilgrims and mountebanks blended with the vast majority of ordinary Shurian peasants hurrying to market. The Oba lowlands smelled tank-like of the sea

Now one of the frequent fogs rolled in suddenly, making ghosts of passers-by. The fog smelled like sea weed. It blotted out the many wooden hawkers' stands on either side of

the road. The many lanterns look like cotton glowing from within. Jory remembered delicate ancient Oba poems, of which he was a specialist. One liners. Two liners. Three liners. Each a sacred tradition practiced in the rice paper walled courts. To compose a successful three liner over cups of shw after dinner was to honor one's host beyond all measure. To house a poet, even if it were a human pedagogue, was to display ineffable social grace

All gone now, finished forever, in one mad moment, Jory thought. His rear hurt from a tiny cut where he'd barely escaped a cutting weapon, as he jumped through a window on the high castle ramparts just hours ago. He could almost feel the prick of the first sword point in his back as Ramyon's soldiers caught up with him, or the Obayyo police in the brown and brass armor with elk-horn helmets. He could foresee the way he would tumble on the cobblestones, captured in a hard fishing net, and dragged behind a horse to the castle, where his head would wind up on one parapet, his torso on another with his mingled arms, legs, and inner organs suspended in a net basket for all the world to see. The long ago sage had said: "When an Obaman does something wrong, that is a crime. When a human does something wrong, that is a crime. When Obamen and humans do things wrong together, that is an abomination."

Jory heard a voice at his side -- a rough man's voice, human -- "That's quite a pair of horns you have there, nah."

Startled, then angry, Jory veered from his course and nearly bumped into an elderly baba lugging heavy sacks in each arm. She hissed at him, exposing the long, thin tongue-spike that was her sex organ. Her normally mud-brown eyes flared with a dim greenish glow, a sign that she was high on a fungal opiate that many peasants used to dull the darkness of their existence

Jory dodged past her. The speaker was a very thin human man of medium height, extremely thin. He must not have shaved in a week, for a gray-brown stubble populated the pasty wrinkles of his face. His hard eyes suggested mingled climates of dishonesty, greed, cruelty, and occasional flashes of kindness or mercy in the "inner land," as the Shurians called it. "Go away, bandit. I have no time for you."

The man, who wore a plain hempen cloak and hood, and carried a thin wooden walking stick, fell in beside him. "Oho! The fugitive is gutsy!"

Jory stopped. He reached over, bunched his fist in the other's cloak at the neck, and pulled him close. "I don't have time for this. What do you know about me? What do you want?"

The man's strength was surprising, despite his light frame. He captured Jory's hands in his and twisted them against his chest, while pressing the point of his stick against Jory's ribs. Jory, however, had studied with the castle retainers. He had traded lines of poetry for the calligraphy of parries and chops. He had learned from the bored and sometimes laughing warriors the alternative tensions between the soft, circular movements and the harsh, angular movements.

In an instant, Jory stepped behind the man while his hands were still trapped under the man's back-turned wrists. Jory dropped into a spread-leg stance that made his center of gravity lower than the other's. By leaning forward and subtly shifting his hip, Jory threw the man, and the man landed with a thud on his side. Jory stepped on the stick so it couldn't be lifted against him. "What other tricks can you show me, you oaf, before I make you into fish food?"

"All right! Let go!"

"You have one instant to tell me why I should. Or I should break your neck and move on." Jory was still panting from his run, and he looked nervously from side to side

"I can save you, Master!" To call a human Master was mockery, but this bandit was sincerely trying to curry favor

"I don't believe you."

"Let's head for Kusi-O."

"You must be crazy." But that was where he was headed anyway, to die, impaled on

the space port's locked and steel-studded wooden gate. Driven by the need to move on, Jory let him up

The man gathered his stick and fell in again. "I'm sorry, Master, I'm a simple sort, and my mouth gets me in trouble."

"You are a fool, and here I am beside you."

"Who is the greater fool, Master?"

"You have a point there." Jory could close his eyes and still inhale the fragrance of Ramy's berry perfume. He remembered the silky feel of her skin, and the aroused pungence of her tongue

The man whispered: "My name is Yedy. I come from Anamo, outside Kusi-O."

A territory of ruffians, Jory thought, reputed around the island of Oba. The interstice between Oba and the universe. The sluice of evil

"There is a price on your head, Master. Lord Ramyon has sent runners in both directions on the Great Road."

"Thank you for information I already know."

"I must ask a favor of you before I go any further with you, Master. Will you stop a moment?"

"Oh what is this!" Jory said, stomping his feet impatiently, while Yedy felt around Jory's head with nimble fingertips until he found the hard round plates at each temple. "Ah! Just as the gate mouse said. You have the unborn horns."

Jory shoved him away and resumed a fast walk. "I have always had them."

Yedy walked beside him, pressing against his side, so that Jory had to keep pushing him away. "Master, it is something that makes you desirable to somebody in the Kusi-O and may save your life."

"You are delivering me to the Kusi-O?"

"Only by your leave, Master."

"You risk your life by even speaking with me. The price must be great."

Yedy's smile was sly, his eyes closing briefly in cagey admission. "It is so. But I cannot drag you there against your will."

Jory calculated desperately. What kind of trap was this? "Who wants these unborn horns of mine, and why?" He rubbed his hands on the rough, ringed surfaces that occupied a half a palm's width circle before and slightly above each ear. They were like fingernails or toenails. Even hair was reputed to be similar. It was part of him, but without feeling. A sharp blow to the head during stick practice with the retainers had once made the cuticle around these giant thumbnail things bleed, but other than that they were simply always there and he hardly ever thought of them, anymore than he thought of his toenails. Human girls had made fun of him and, though he'd bedded some over the years, refused to stay with him

Could this be a ruse? Was Yedy a procurer for some criminal element? But they would want young boys, not men nearing 240 female menses. Menses were the tool by which human women subversively kept track of time during the centuries since humans had been reduced from conquerors to being hunted and killed throughout the Galaxy

Yedy replied: "Both things are secrets I don't know and therefore regretfully cannot reveal, though you should esteem my honesty."

"All right, I'll grant you that much."

"I was a teacher before I fell on hard times."

"A teacher of what?"

"History."

Jory's interest perked. He remembered a night of murder and riot, but also of high discussion and noble words. "Do you know anything of a certain society, ruffian?"

Yedy nodded slowly, breaking into a triumphant grin. "The Twelve Moon Society, perhaps?"

"Yes!" Jory almost yelled and grabbed the man by the shoulder. "Does it still exist?"

"Ohh...there are rumors. Then again, it may be swamp gas to assert such things. Or

else, if true, they would not advertise, not after their heads decorated the Obayyo from Ramyo to Menshu, your uncle's among them."

"Stop riddling me, you fool, or I'll turn my impatience into a dragon that blows fire down your collar." Why was the man so infuriatingly vague?

Yedy spoke soberly: "There are beings from many worlds in the Kusi-O. I have seen them. Great hairy beings who captain starships. They come down with their barges to collect cargo. Sometimes they want something special. They don't say why. It is deadly dangerous for a human to be in Kusi-O, and I do not ask questions. I keep my mouth shut. And so will you?"

"Will you come then? And how will we get in?"

"Yes, I will be by your side. How we get in is for those who specialize in that thing, who can hoodwink the emperor's road police and the constables in Anamo, not to mention the Fril cops on the other side."

The Fril, Jory knew, were of a race not more dissimilar than humans and Shurians. Jory had only seen Fril one time -- they were not permitted outside Kusi-O -- and that had been at the imperial court. Fril were humanoid, bipedal, two-armed, but they were more reptilian. They had fine shimmering scales all over their bodies. Their body color was silver, stippled with small and large yellow welts. Jory remembered admiring their bright, almost faint coloring as they stood to one side in long purple robes while Lord Ramyon made audience with the emperor. The Fril, who were the officials and doers of all things in Kusi-O, came from another planet in this system. They were peaceful and honest, but fiercely devoted to their gods, which kept them pure. They were ideal keepers for the sluice of evil that could easily poison the Oba society, which had swallowed Kusi-O into its belly as a Shurian swallowed the proverbial mushroom. This saying referred to eating a tiny mushroom of one kind, thinking it to be tasty and filling, only to discover one had swallowed its sister type, which contained a poison so deadly that feudal retainers tipped their arrow heads and sword blades with it. Many a disgraced official had used that very mushroom to cut his bowels out in duello. By the time one realized the mistake, one was half dead. The Oba feudal system trusted the Fril to maintain an unchanging status quo. The Fril cops, if they caught a human or a Shurian inside Kusi-O, would turn them over to the Obayyo police at the Anamo gate inside the great concrete drum wall. The gate was said to be called Return of Property to Rightful Owner.

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<P> Just hours ago, Jory had waited on the high walls above the women's quarters at Castle Ramyon

The area around Castle Ramyon always had a certain unique smell, a floral-like scent of the tywix fungus. In fact it was the time of the tywix festival in the villages around Ramyon, for the fabled mushroom was in the beginning of its annual throe season, when it had soaked up just enough water to suddenly proliferate across the landscape in a myriad of dimly glowing saucer shapes big as a man's hand. And they had a certain smell -- sweet as honey, musky as river flowers, mild as oats. They were prized among the finest of Oba's fungal wealth, and ships carried them all over the local galaxy

The night always had a certain charm and magic, Jory O'Call thought as he leaned on the parapets high above Lord Ramyon's castle, which itself overlooked a series of wildly plunging gorges above a forest, a lake, a small town, and, of course, the flow of lights five miles away on the Obayyo

While he waited for the baba to leave Lady Ramy's suite and retire to her own unknowable dark hole, Jory must have patience and wait. Ramy would be waiting for him, eager to share the latest poem, the silliest joke or gossip about the castle, and, of late, embraces that led to ever greater risk

Jory had grown up at the castle and knew the limits. He could get away with things no other human could. He was at the Lord Ramyon's pleasure, though the old warrior would have little to do with him. As long as Jory guided youngest daughter Ramy in matters of

ancient Oba poetry and song, and did not transgress too badly, he was tolerated with a certain wink, a laugh, the patient air with which one treated a pet. After all, to see a human dressed in Oba court robes -- moss-green silk coat, broad mint-white silk sash and camis, ankle-length moss-green kilt, sturdy wooden sandals -- was like seeing an animal dressed like a person. Ramyon had reason to be complacent. He was getting older. All three of his sons were married and in the field, keeping Ramyon's enemies at bay and the retainers in line. His house babas were strong in commerce and dark arts. All four of his daughters were married off and the matter of dowries finished. Only his youngest, Ramy, lived at home half the time, the other half at Dumonhi when her husband was home from the wars. Lord Ramyon, still fierce looking with his black robes and swords, could stride about the palace gardens picking moon roses, listening to Ramy's tinkling voice singsong ancient riddles and poems, and smiling at Jory as if the latter were a lap dog

Although human, Jory was wallpaper, as the retainers said. Early in his childhood, Jory had been chosen for his talents at art and music to become a child pedagogue to the Ramyon children. Whatever their lowly status, the humans could sometimes produce prodigious talent. Every generation, of 1,000,000 humans living amid ten times as many Shurians, a few humans made their way to each of the larger castles as prodigies, as wonders, as teachers, as oddities who could singsong Shurian epics and short poems with the deeper, stronger voices of humans. Likewise, a few bull-strong human men always found their way into each warlord's army. It was said that the robber barons at the far haunted reaches had more than one human among their gangs

The Shurians took human children early, on the theory that they could be totally domesticated and would not bring any hostile ideas, such as stabbing the lord in his bed or throwing his children off a high wall -- things that had happened in previous centuries, and were hideously punished, with entire human villages razed, and rows of chopped off heads strung for miles along the Obayyo as a warning to those humans carrying cargo on their shoulders

But Jory carried in him an ember of pride, a spark of rebellion. As a little boy of about 3, his uncle had taken him to a meeting of the Twelve Moon Society. That was a forbidden group of Shurian and human thinkers who schemed to liberate Oba from the warlords and give humans equality under the law. Jory had not fully understood the lofty words spoken at length around a warm fire in a dark underground warehouse while some 20 shadowy figures clapped and nodded assent. But he remembered the feeling he'd had, the infectious sense of freedom, the exhilaration of strutting about and speaking one's mind, even though he experienced those things through the mouths and animated expressions of others. Toward the end of the meeting there had been sudden chaos -- the fire put out, smoke filling the room, men whispering in panic, feet thrashing this way and that, while Lord Ramyon's men beat the doors down with iron axes and tramped in waving their swords. His uncle had half dragged, half carried Jory to a window and handed him out to a passing cargo woman, a human who spirited him into the woods and then into a mountain hideout. When Jory was returned to his parents days later, he'd seen the rows of staves in the human settlement, in the main square. The men's eyes were gone, birds were busy about their lips, and their skin had turned black, but Jory could still recognize his uncle. His mother had let him see, as a warning, but briefly, before yanking him away. Up on the Obayyo, another row of heads on staves -- the Shurian element of the Twelve Moon Society. The Lord Ramyon must have been satisfied that his informers had rooted out the entire nest, and his torturers put their skills to good use

Jory had gone to the House of Ramyon at age 7 with a little human girl named Minda who was said by the babas to possess a healing touch. Minda had first come to the castle officials' notice because of her unusual hair and skin. She was that very rare human, at least in this population, who had carrot-red hair, pale skin, and lots of orange freckles. That alone made her an oddity worth showing at the castle

However, Minda was said to have sickened a baba through witchcraft, and was sent

home with her eyes put out. Supposedly, the deed was done by the babas of the castle at night, and the unfortunate girl sent out a back gate to the arms of her terrified parents after midnight. That was the story he learned years later. At the moment all he knew was that in the morning, when he woke up, her bed was stripped and her things were missing. She was gone, and nobody would talk about her. Life on Oba was hard, even cruel, but the Shurians rarely went out of their way to be cruel. They could be serene or warlike or cruel, only because their laws and customs were unbending, and their warlords desperate to keep all foreign customs out, even the evil spirit that was natural to humans

Jory had been terrified of the dark, groaning castle with its blackened stone exterior and its whispering, creaking wooden corridors of which there seemed to be miles. Jory had been terrified to live among aliens who bred in three genders -- the male warrior who was lord of his house; the baba who was egg bearer, birth mother, and nurturer, and ran much of society to boot; and the female, who was sex object to both other genders, and egg source

The Shurian males and females were very human-like, while the babas struck little Jory as nightmare figures. The males and females had pale, almost translucent outer skin that covered a milky inner skin. Older men and women had visible blue or black veins just under the milky skin. Both genders shared a tendency to have a fuzzy globe of reddish-gold hair like cotton candy. Because they were nearly nocturnal, they had eyes half again as large as human eyes to gather light. Other than that, they might have passed for humans -- although the very thought might have turned their stomachs. Some of the finer ladies, Jory came to feel, were actually rather slender and attractive. Especially Ramy

The babas, however, were the horror of Jory's childhood, and he often ran away to his parents' house. Later, he would discover his parents, though they loved him, had accepted a handsome stipend for their son's services at the court. They always returned him, and he began to hate them. Later he just felt distant to them -- he was court-educated, while they were ignorant laborers who could not read or write, and who had never left their village. Jory, by contrast, had traveled much of the Obayyo with Lord Ramyon's entourage, once even visiting the imperial palace. Jory had been 9 and had slept through large parts of that brief visit during which Ramyon had pledged obeisance while receiving the emperor's vow of eternal favor. Like so many things on Oba that were the opposite of what they seemed, this was a fiction, Jory would eventually learn, in which Lord Ramyon took 1,200 of his warriors and threatened to depose the emperor and murder his family if anything happened to the status quo. Hundreds of high lords did the same thing in revolving order

As he grew up at court, Jory found that the dark, shadowy babas went out of their way to tame his fear. They were larger than the males and human-like females. They wore obscuring gowns over their round, bloated bodies. They moved clumsily like boats, on their swollen and aching feet. More than once, child Jory had nightmares in which babas chased him who had multiple arms, like insects, though each only had two very human-like pudgy arms with small hands. Their skin was dark, like a beetle's carapace, but soft as Jory's own. Their features were not as crisp and clear, or to Jory's eyes human-like, as the other Shurians'. Over the years, he got used to them. They did him favors, though babas rarely spoke, and communicated in glances and signs; or had their female sisters communicate for them, which was more often

As he grew up, Jory developed a bond with his mistress, Lady Ramy. She as tall as he, with fine milky skin. Her skin was so full of microscopic healthy young capillaries that in places, in a certain light, parts of her had a faint bluish tinge. Her hair was a full ball of tawny fuzz, always fluffed out.

Her tongue was deep blue, and twice as long as Jory's. As children, they had giggled and pulled each other's tongues. No matter how he tried, he could not stick his out as far as she could hers. Later they learned that sticking the tongue out was a raw sexual invitation among Shurians, and they never played that game again. Not until recently

Ramy's face was well-shaped and as pretty as any human girl's, though by Shurian standards she was considered average. Shurians had a higher regard for a female whose

face was slitty like an insect's. So why did they not qif their babas, teenaged Jory wondered derisively

Nobody, not even Ramy and Jory, ever suspected what would develop between the two. Like a kitten and a puppy, they romped and played innocently, laughing and wearing themselves out so they slept soundly after Story. For years, until Jory began his own natural changes, the two slept together in the same bed in the women's quarters, under the watchful eyes of Ramy's father's old baba. Ramy's own baba slept in the mothers' quarters, though Ramy often went there to sleep with her. Then Jory slept alone. He wouldn't go near the babas' place, which was in a separate round tower of the castle, and had no windows, and had a coppery glow inside, and smelled somehow faintly of honey and ammonia

Between the Ramyon family -- the retainers and their families, the soldiers whose families however lived outside the walls, and the servants and slaves -- some 500 persons lived in Castle Ramyon. In those close quarters, Jory could not help but learn the intimate details of Shurian reproduction. Although the men were often away fighting wars, it was their duty to come live as husbands for at least a few months of each year. Usually, that was in the Lissom Season, when Shur was inclined slightly more toward its star, and the gas giant glowed more aqua than usual, and spirits were said to mellow as the gods and demons relaxed from their fighting to loll on the meadows of heaven. Then the male would come to the female's bedroom and court her before weeks of frequent love play. The younger, attractive females were usually slender and sensuous in their movements. They walked with a swaying step, each finger sending a signal, each cock of the hip or stride of the thigh an invitation to the Shurian male. Since they did not give milk, the Shurian females had no breasts -- that was one of the functions of the baba -- but they had vestigial nipples, like the males, that helped arouse. The baba stayed out of sight during the Lissom Season, busy with last season's offspring

The Shurians mated much like humans, though the yoni thing was higher up rather than part of the pissing area, and the male's organ was correspondingly half way to the navel, so that the motions and amount of effort were comparable to those of humans -- as were the passions, the sounds, the promises, the endearments. Jory and Ramy secretly whispered about these matters as their changes began, but neither thought of the other in such a light

At 13, Ramy was married in a great ceremony to a warrior prince, aged 15, of the Dumonhi family a day's journey up the Obayyo. They were a wealthy, powerful family, and the marriage was considered auspicious by both sides. The new husband ignored Jory all of the time, and Ramy most of the time, for he was a favorite son, and his father was training him to be a great general

Everything about the babas was disgusting to Jory, no matter how they tried to placate him with gifts of human candy and shining fungal balls called honeyed sea foam that tasted subtly like caramel. At least once each rotation of Shur around the gas giant, Ramy went to the quarters of her baba sister. There -- Jory had never been to those quarters, and didn't want to -- the two females did something where they lay down together -- with much the same passions and sounds, and endearments and so forth -- and the baba thrust a long, thin quill from her mouth deep into Ramy's neck. As Ramy lay paralyzed and enraptured, the baba slowly sucked out the fruits of Ramy's lovemaking with Dumonhi

The baba would eat liberally -- she was the favored recipient of the castle kitchen's stocks -- and her babies would grow. After a gestation of nine menses, she would lie down while other babas tended to her. The newborns would slip out, encased in a transparent protein membrane. In more primitive times, the mother baba licked the membrane off and swallowed it -- anything to feed her offspring. Nowadays, the attending babas would place the membrane on a ceramic plate and place it in a wall shrine with votive candles to Baba-Oba, the goddess of the world and of birth and of women. Ba meant 'sister,' and even the great island of life on Shur was named Oba

If the birth was male, it might be one or two twin boys. If, on the other hand, the

offspring were female, it was always one girl and one baba, not twins exactly, but very closely interwoven females, the baba being about twice the size of the egg-carrying baby. Thus, Ramy and her baba had been born. Every Shurian woman had her baba. In olden times, if the baba died, the sister was put to death. Nowadays it meant she would simply never marry, and she would have no status, but her life was respected nonetheless -- and at least nah filth like humans were beneath her status. The system caused sisters to take excellent care of each other. This was why Jory and Ramy never thought that, even if she discovered their actions, Ramy's baba would betray them

The men of Shurian society respected their babas as mothers, nurturers, witches, cooks, and so forth, but hardly ever went near them as adults. Men never slept with babas -- that was the domain of their sisters. Shurians were amazed that humans could give birth to mixed male and female litters -- further proof of their disgustingly low animal natures. Shurians were also disgusted that human sex organs mingled physiologically with excretory organs. All three Shurian genders used the anus, situated like the human anus, for all excretion. The long ago sage had said: "To qif a snake is to tenderize good meat for tomorrow's dinner. To qif a human is to qif what a snake qifs."

* * *

Going to Kusi-O was the only way for him to stay alive, Jory could see. No matter how many ways he factored the equation, the outcome was always the same. Die here for sure, or risk dying there, but take a chance of living. Maybe escaping to the stars? Could one hope?

"Master, let's stop here for food and drink." Yedy leaned on his stick and pointed to a row of multicolored balls that glowed with fungal light -- paper lanterns above a road shop

"In my haste, I forgot to bring money," Jory said. The truth was, he was famished, and he must either die of hunger by the road side, or steal a cloak start begging

"My master has provided," Yedy said with a wink. "What is your taste? No expensive castle fare here."

"Any of the usual foods will do. You know what not to buy." Humans and Shurians could eat certain foods -- the white tubers that were staple; the rice that grew in moon pools; many vegetables and pale night fruits; the meat of most quadrupeds on the island, which included dogs, cats, monkeys, and horses (so called by humans based on mythological animals of the supposed ancient Earth that had most likely never existed and was a fiction of groups like the Twelve Moon Society). Humans could die or get sick from certain things the Shurians ate with gusto -- small legged fishes with saw beaks that hid under rocks, spiders that pulsated and hummed to draw their victims in; batbirds that flew at night and sucked blood; these were just some of the most deadly poisonous animals that Shurians ate raw. There were many dangerous fungi dishes also

"Sit down and rest, Master. I will be back in a moment."

As the stranger walked with billowing robes toward the stand, Jory gauged the situation carefully. If Yedy planned to turn him in for a reward, he could already have done so. If he did not trust this brigand from the sewers of Anamo, what other way was there? Yedy disappeared like a phantom into the swirling mist. Jory watched his dark figure before the glowing stand as Shurians contemptuously slammed his purchases on the counter and took his coins as if they were dirty. Minutes later, Yedy returned holding a stiffened, folded paper tray with fragrant noodles and cooked white worms and some shreds of steamed meat in dried-rice wrappers. He also carried paper shells of soup, and from his wrist by a round holder hung a disposable water jug

"Thank you," Jory said sincerely

"I thank you," Yedy said. "We must get you fixed up so that you will be safe and well. Here, Master, drink."

Jory drank deeply, noting a pleasant spicy taste, for the roadside inns often added a complementary taste to cover the staleness of water that had sat for a while. Jory, as the warmth and satisfaction began to fill his stomach, felt the lightheadedness going away. For

the first time in hours, he wasn't panting breathlessly. He began to notice that Yedy kept looking furtively over his shoulders, and had there been time, he would have asked him why. But Jory's thoughts were on Ramy, with grave concern. She boiled in his stomach, as the Shurians said

The fog drifted by, and figures passed silently leaning on sticks. The colored lamps of a roadside stand hang-in-no-breeze (one-liner from 1,000 years ago). Yedy rose

"What is it?" Jory asked, noticing his voice sounded funny -- distant

Yedy ignored him, stepping away as if expecting someone

Jory knocked his tray of his lap in an effort to rise quickly, but he was paralyzed. He could not even speak in his anger and betrayal. He sat as if glued on the rock, and watched as several shadowy figures stepped out of the darkness

Through blurry eyes, he saw the cloaked and hooded Yedy extend his hand. He saw a hand come out of another's cloak and place a bundle of imperial road money in Yedy's hand -- the rustling paper notes tied with a string were unmistakeable. Jory could not distinguish who the several big, cloaked figures were but he did notice two things -- they all carried swords hidden by their cloaks, and the sleeve of the arm that had paid off Yedy was dark velvety brown, with silver Obayyo police officer's cuff-buttons indicating the Imperial service

If Lord Ramyon's agents suspected a conspiracy, Jory thought as the light in his head faded, they had been right. But they had been wrong about the nature of the conspiracy -- it wasn't about Jory escaping to Kusi-O or meeting with the Twelve Moon Society. If this involved the road police, it surely involved the Imperial palace

No matter anymore to me, Jory thought dimly as he slipped helplessly sideways, landing on the damp gravel that smelled of horse droppings and rotting vegetables. No matter anymore to me or Ramy, he thought as her pale face shimmered in his memory, never again to be approached. The last things he was aware of were the bottoms of Yedy's feet as the latter ran away, having done his work, and a stick being roughly pushed into Jory's ribs. The Imperial police would treat him no better than would Lord Ramyon's soldiers, had they caught him first. He slipped into darkness, welcoming death if it should choose this moment to take him.

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<P> Lord Ramyon felt sick. He paced up and down at the window, ignoring the lovely distant vista. Only a distant foggy glow was visible of the Obayyo. Ramyon felt devastated, beyond anger, beyond betrayal. First, he despaired of his poor judgment in keeping this overgrown lap monkey of a human. He should have castrated him and tossed him from the highest wall at the first sign of buckdom. Worst, he wondered how he could bring himself to tell his son in law of the defilement. Or would word of ridicule sweep through all of Oba, bringing Lord Dumonhi the Elder down upon Castle Ramyon with his retainers and horde of barefoot warriors? Ramyon was a proud man, and he would suffer the stings and snickers that would henceforth surround him even in his own castle. But the flower of his garden was now defiled, Ramy, his youngest. Had he erred with her somehow in her upbringing? Of course, by bringing the monkey to his court. That was the price of fad and fashion, he thought bitterly, he being a hard, leathery warrior who had often slept in the saddle and fought in the same saddle, having barely gotten off to squat. These women and their courtiers, he raged, pulling his sword. Hal'ya! he cried, whacking off the upper half of a woven basket. The steel sliced through as if the basket were made of air. Ramyon made a figure-eight twirling motion that snapped over his head like a pair of firecrackers, making the air hum briefly; in the same motion, he returned the sword to its scabbard

Fingers tapped at the bottom of the rice paper screen separating his antechamber from the corridor. He could see the white fingertips, low down, of a servant groveling on all fours

"What is it?" He snapped. He'd meant to bellow, but his voice grew small at the thought that his flower was on her way, along with her baba. If there was any joy left in his

soul, it now shriveled in the acids of his stomachs

"Lord, the sisters."

It was a trusted male servant, and Ramyon remembered the leader's duty to cultivate loyalty through the four virtues -- kindness, rightness, honesty, and unbendingness. "Wait one minute, then bring them in and leave us alone." Ramyon went to his raised dais and sat crosslegged on the huge pillow there

"Thank you, Master," breathed the servant in relief, probably glad not to have his eardrums played, nor to witness what might happen in this room

The door slid aside, and two tearful figures hopped in, prostrating themselves before the dais. Ramy-ba and Ramy-baba wailed and raised their arms beseechingly. Their faces were contorted with weeping and moaning

Ramyon fumbled with the wooden gavel at his side and swung blindly, just catching the Call to Order gong. Several servants in the corridor scrambled like rats being flushed out. "Privacy!" Ramyon bellowed. Then to the two females: "Silence!"

Ramy stayed on his knees, face pressed to the carpeted wooden floor in her hands so that her fingers dripped with tears and snot. She sobbed continuously and convulsively, trembling in fear all the while. The baba sat upright like a monolith, holding her hands over her face in shame and mortification, for it was she who had reported the trysts to the Mistress baba, sister of Ramyon's wife. They had taken charge, the babas, as unfortunately was their right, before he could intervene, and the result was this bleak chaos

The ancient sage had lamented: "Winter comes again instead of Spring, , when my heart is betrayed, and the shoots of life wither. Nature is thrown out of Harmony. It rains in Heaven."

As he stared at his daughters, Ramyon became speechless. He boiled with suffering and anger, until he bit down on his protruding tongue. It was a Shurian's way of expressing the specific anguish upon betrayal by a loved one. He would bite his tongue until the pain equaled that in his heart. Then he would say what he had to say before the tongue swelled his mouth shut, so that he could not speak for a week.

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<P> "You fools," Father choked at last in the gloomy room

Ramy looked up startled, as if someone had poked her with a sharp object

"You," Father said to the baba, "what jealousy possessed you? Did you want the monkey's mouth on yours also?"

"No, Father!" the baba wailed in her syrup-thick, almost masculine voice

Ramy sighed as Father yelled at her sister. All three of them knew that she loved her baba, and that the baba was as much her lover as was young Lord Dumonhi. Ramy blamed herself as the First Cause. She had seduced her loyal, gentle companion, Jory, out of some inner anger at Dumonhi, not so much because he was mostly away, but because when he made love he was callous as if he were milking cattle. Now she had brought the wrath of the Universe down. She understood the outcome. Best case, and least likely, she would have her tongue cut off and be sent into exile at a far monastery, to live out her years silently in a cell alone. Worst case, her father would kill both her and the baba any moment now. Judging by the way his scabbarded sword lay loosely by his side, and by the condition of the large linen-storage basket, the latter was likely

"And you, Cause of Celestial Disharmony!"

She felt the hurt inside his anger, and sat up on her knees, buttocks resting on her heels. She wiped her face with the ends of her plain linen robe and said: "Whatever my fate, I accept it, Father. I only have the wish to tell you once more that I love you and I am sorry I caused this hurt."

As she spoke, she stared at his fearsome face, his huge eyes like a dragon's, his rippling jaws -- and only understood his gesture when dark blood flowed freely from both corners of his mouth. His eyes were wild holes while the blood darkly spiderwebbed on his clothing

The baba threw her hands up and wailed anew

Ramy jumped up and ran to wipe his mouth with the hem of her long robe. But he rose. The sword flashed in the air. He froze in a gesture as if to slice her in half down the middle, which he easily could have, as he had once slain his enemies in battle -- and some of them in leather or wooden armor!

She knelt on the floor directly before the dais, opened her robe at the chest, and pulled it back to expose her neck. She inclined her head deeply, until her forehead touched the floor, and waited for the sound of the wind

Instead, he threw himself back on his pillow, groaning with pain, and tossed the sword aside. "What have you done to us, you garden weed?"

"I have brought disgrace to our family and to my husband's."

"Ah well you know it, Viper." He pulled the decapitated basket close and took out a linen towel to staunch his blood. "I could throw you both out that window and claim you fell. But you, foolish wasp" -- he used the human word to wound the baba -- you useless spider, because you could not be discreet in your insect-like spitefulness, this matter will be the laughing stock of the Obayyo for the next thousand years. Dumonhi will not fall for it for a moment. Ah dammit, a pox on you both. If he were here, he could honorably wound his shame by killing you with his bare hands or any way he chooses, as is his right. I probably must pen you up like animals until he returns from the campaign on the Far Tomi Shore. Your fate will be most unpleasant, for he may turn you both over to the Dumonhi family babas, and I cannot even imagine what they will invent by way of torturing you to death."

Ramy spoke in a high, even voice, for everything was very clear suddenly. Even the pain, the loneliness, the abandonment Dumonhi's callousness had caused her had evaporated. She felt sorry for Jory, and wished him life, perhaps as a bandit if he escaped. He was the only male she had ever loved as a lover, though her father thought of him as a monkey. "Father, we will commit duello this very night just before dawn."

The silence in the room was as profound as the black shadows that flooded the corners and the floor around her knees. Her sister was a dark mound in the darkness

Father rose, wiping his mouth with the spattered linen. Leaving his sword thrown aside, he stepped shakily from the dais and bent close to look at Ramy for the last time. His expression was a mixture of fury and pain. A trail of tears ran down the creases in each cheek. He held the towel before his mouth and could no longer speak. But he touched her cheek lightly with the backs of two fingers. She touched herself there and found blood on her fingertips. She licked her fingers and tasted his forgiveness, which filled her like a Spring breeze. He touched baba similarly, forgiving her vindictiveness as much as he forgave, by his gesture, Ramy's transgression that had led to baba's. He stomped out of the room to his private chambers. Servants slid the doors shut, leaving the two sisters in moonlit isolation.

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<P> Ramy-baba's mind was awl with horror. She had betrayed her lover and sister, and condemned herself and Ramy to death. She had brought mockery and war upon Ramyon. Had it been worth this to hurt her sibling over a romantic jealousy? Ramy-baba was deeply ashamed, and she sat waiting for her sister's sharp words

There was silence. The audience chamber was like the antechamber of death. Moonlight glowed on lacquer surfaces. The room smelled of wax and flowers

"Forgive me, sister," Ramy-baba at last said

She heard the sigh. "What have you done?"

"I wish I could undo it, but now I can't."

After a long silence, Ramy said: "We must prepare for death." She rose. "I have to go to my room and tidy things up."

Ramy-baba shifted her bulk erect. "Will I see you again?"

"I will come to your chamber when I have composed myself."

"I pray that you do."

Ramy walked with small steps. She slid the door open, let herself out, and slid the

door almost closed, leaving Ramy-baba the option to leave the room if she chose. What did anything really matter now? What would anything matter in a few hours when they were in the Celestial Hall? Ramy-baba thought she might just sit here the rest of her time. Then, ashamed in the face of her sister's courage and determination, she walked down dark corridors, over the creaking wooden bridge-floor, and into the babas' tower. There, the doors were closed as the other babas slept. She went to her room, which was large and had a window view, since she was an important baba despite her youth. Sobbing, she straightened her possessions -- her amulets; small clay figurines including some cute ones and some frightening ones for warding off evil spirits; jewelry, perfumes, fungi preparations for her skin and her egg-pipette. When there was nothing left to do, she lay down on the bed and pondered the incredible reversal of her fate. She thought about the other babas. There were terrible jealousies among the wasps. Many hated Ramy-baba because she domineered them as was her right by caste order. They would deal with her harshly if she lived into the coming days; better to go now, quietly, to have been without going or saying goodbye, just to have been and then not to be

Long before the first milky green fingers of dawn pointed over the horizon, there was a rustle of silk as Ramy hurried into the room. She wore her best gown from the wedding ceremonies, and Ramy-baba assumed Ramy would want her husband to see her for the last time like this before they buried her

Ramy-baba turned away and hung her head. "Will you forgive me?"

She felt Ramy's arms steal around her from behind. "Who else can I turn to, foolish baba?"

Ramy-baba turned and gave back an embrace, so that they were entwined, the one sister much larger than the other. "We have so little time."

"By dawn, the others will be awake. We will be at their mercy," Ramy said

"We will be quick and merciful," Ramy-baba said. With longing, she ran her pudgy fingers and droopy arms up and down Ramy's slender back

Ramy waited passively, her hands on her sister's shoulders, her breathing coming quicker. Ramy-baba groaned with desire as her palms burned on the smooth waist and oval buttocks, the sharp hipbones and long shapely thighs of her sister

"Go make the bed," Ramy-baba whispered, sending her sister off with a lingering palm on one buttock. She watched as Ramy walked away loosening her wedding dress with two hands on a button behind her back. Ramy cleared a pewter jug and some cups from the fruit table by the window. Ramy opened the bay windows and arched back her back with two pressuring hands while staring into the predawn of Shur

The red moon hung like a distant lantern over the sea. Fog swirled like milk far below on the Obayyo, the Lantern Road. Already, birds twittered and thrashed in the highest tree crowns. Dew dripped like a steady heartbeat on a tin barrel cover out on the stone balconies

While Ramy pulled a mattress from the benchbox under the windows, and unrolled it on the table, Ramy-baba at the other end of the long room took a velvet bundle from a secret drawer, careful lest Ramy see. She unrolled the bundle, exposing two special knives. Each knife had a long handle of intricately carved ivory, suitable for a woman to hold with both hands and sweep slowly sideways pushing with all the strength of one forearm. The blade was extremely pointed for a quick puncture, and very sharp, but wide to pressure the organs and keep them apart

Engraved on the hilt of each was a poem from the Ancient Poet, in archaic language, carved in elegant Oba High Period calligraphy, a poem was fit for the occasion of a double departure from life. Invoking with thick irony an innocent nursery tale, fit for the beginning of life rather than its end, the first sword said:

"Two moons embrace above the koh tree. The celestial dome turns, hiding them behind the koh trunk. Rabbit-in-the-Grass catches his breath -- when will they appear again?"

The other sword said:

"The celestial dome turns, revealing what hid behind the koh. Not a single moon in sight, alas. Rabbit-in-the-Grass sighs and hops away."

Loosely bundling the knives in their blue velvet cloth, Ramy-baba trundled over to the table

Ramy had dropped her clothes on the floor and lay naked in the dim light. The slender curves of her youthful body glowed with a faint milky-blue light. She lay on her left side facing away, the curving shadow between her buttocks a mysterious valley. Her long right leg was pulled up slightly, laying a curved knee upon one nearly straight

Ramy-baba stared long. She was not a poetess, but she wanted to capture this last divine vision in every detail. She wanted to remember it like a long poem well told as the knife made its journey from west to east

Ramy's arms extended over her head, elbows in her orange hair that was fluffed out to accept the full scent and breeze of the night. On each side of her chest was a dark wrinkled spot, a nipple useless as that of a man, but exquisitely tender to the touch

Ramy-baba took great care to lay her bundle down without making a sound. Then she advanced upon her sister like a shadow. She noticed that Ramy lay with her face toward the moonlight, and her blue tongue was slightly extended in pleasure

Ramy-baba touched a nipple with her own blue tongue, and Ramy's tongue slid further out. The two sisters lay together, the larger spooning the smaller, who writhed while the other alternately ran her palms and fingertips over and over the same hills and valleys until Ramy turned, and from there it was a language of tongues, of roving fingers, until finally, when the foam-sea could no longer be denied, Ramy-baba mounted one brown leg over her sister's waist and held Ramy's head in her fingertips. The pipette extended from baba's upper palate. It was long as a finger when fully extended, and stained in various shades of brown and gray. It was hollow, and sheathed in a thin layer of skin and nerve endings that made a glow of passion and desire in Ramy-baba's head as she closed her eyes and sought the tiny bony protrusions on either side of Ramy's neck. Ramy groaned with anticipation, flailing her wrists passionately against her sister's massive shoulders as the beak found its way into the protrusion, parting a sphincter there, and sinking down into the spongy tissue that contained Dumonhi's fluids. As the shaft entered, it released a fungal poison that acted as a powerful stimulant. Ramy uttered a series of high, choking moans while struggling to breathe at the same time. Her body, held tenderly by her sister, convulsed in erotic spasms. Ramy-baba, too, was utterly aroused. The same fungal release made her blind with desire as she tensed her normally flaccid body for the receipt of fertilized eggs. The eggs would fall together into the womb near baba's center, where over nine months the next son or pair of sisters would form

While she was still high from their shared orgasm -- in fact, while the beak was still in Ramy's pleasure hole, and Ramy was near-comatose -- the baba whispered "I love you" and began strangling her sister to death. "This is the best way, my beloved," she whispered as she made her fingers ever tighter, until at last she felt Ramy go limp

Ramy-baba dismounted and threw her robe loosely over her body. She did not want to be found naked -- men and non-sisters would be revulsed at her appearance. If the woman-sister was beautiful and light as a star in her man's eyes, the baba was massive and dark like the earth

The Ancient Sage had written: "The baba earth is dark, a soil of unpleasant appearance, but she mothers flowers that rival heaven for beauty."

Still weak and in shock, Ramy-baba staggered around the table for a last look at her sister. Ramy's hands lay limp together. Her legs would never run again. Her eyes stared sightlessly into the sky, whose first tendril of light made her eyes glitter. Her face had a vacant, perhaps slightly shocked expression. Her tongue had turned from blue to black and hung fully extended from her red lips; the tongue's limp mass curled onto the marble tabletop where the mattress had slid aside during their love-making

Ramy-baba arranged the body, which was still warm, but cooling rapidly. She worked

it back into the wedding dress. She laid it on its back. She folded Ramy's hands on her chest and straightened Ramy's legs, and put tiny white slippers on the bare feet. She wept softly all the while

Then she sat down and composed herself. She tried to listen to the sound of her heart, but there was too much rushing in her ears. She chose the knife with the two moons because it spelled hope. Still composing herself, she held the knife before her and stared at it in an effort to make it enter her torso more easily. She stared at it long and thoughtfully, weighing her sins and praying to the gods and goddesses who waited for her, most of all Ramy. The entire castle was silent as the bottom of a pond. They would give her as long as she needed, presumably on order of Lord Ramyon. She was a non-person, half dead already. She sat for a time, testing the knife's heft, balancing it in one hand, then the other. Slowly, she brought the point to her belly.

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<P> The fungal poison had sickened Jory O'Call to the verge of death, not a whit closer. He recognized the dark touch of the babas as he lay vomiting watery soup laced with twirling bits of vegetal matter into a bucket. For a while, he was too sick to care where he was, or even that the place smelled bad like rancid butter. Fire inside and outside tormented him as he brought up what mean gruel or rabbit food was brought to him

After what seemed like an eternity, probably a few days, a Fril woman came with a warm, wet towel. She knelt by his bedside and wiped his cheeks, showing him the white fungal deposits that covered the area around his mouth. "You will be feeling better now," she said in a curious snapping voice. She spoke Human fair enough, but strangely. Jory glimpsed the inside of her mouth as she spoke -- toothless mustard-colored gums; a narrow, longish tongue split at the tip; and a round throat hole that he suspected she liked to distend of an evening now and then while she enjoyed a large river rat or two. Indeed, her skin was snake-like -- dry, flaking here and there, colored in equal sized patches of white, dull silver, and light yellow. Her nostrils were a pair of slits, her eyes black buttons over which gray nictitating membranes slid horizontally from either corner. Her manner was kind, however, and Jory had lived with worse in the babas. Her hands -- same colors, same scaly raspy skin, and an opposing thumb plus three flat-tipped fingers -- were gentle in their touch. "You must not give yourself away," she said in her thick accent, "nor us, or we will all die on Oba Island."

"Believe me, I don't want that. Am I safe here?"

"You are as safe as a human can be under these circumstances."

"But I am in Kusi-O?" His chest constricted at the thought he might not be

"You are. This is Kusi-O. My husband and I keep an inn here. We have been paid well to keep you safe."

"Who pays you?" He must know. Why would anyone want a court poet so badly?

She chuckled. "You find out soon enough. Now you rest and get better."

"How did you get me in through the gates?" The thick concrete drum surrounding Kusi-O was actually a five story building with walls so smooth even a lizard could not climb them. The building had no windows at all. It had several gates that acted in analogy to airlocks -- if the Oba side was open, the Kusi-O side was shut, and vice versa. Goods coming from either side were left in the open corridor between the two worlds. Both gates were shut. Then the receiving gate opened and a flock of cargo slaves rushed in, supervised by armed warriors -- Imperial road police on the Oba side, Fril cops on the Kusi-O side. The system had worked for centuries, bringing wealth in and Shurian goods out, while keeping the status at quo and the wealthy in power

"That is a secret," the snake woman said. "Rest. It will be days before you are able to walk without getting dizzy. Oba grannies' poison is very potent but works well." She emitted what passed for a giggle and fled toward the wooden door. The Fril wore little in the way of clothing. She wore a loincloth and nothing else. No breasts -- he wondered if she carried her eggs inside until they hatched. Frankly, he did not care. As long as he was still alive... then

he thought of Ramy, and burst into tears.

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<P> The innkeeper was Girex, his wife Giru. They were quiet, kind people whose only child was severely disabled in a special clinic on their home planet. They welcomed a little gaxba, 'so-so money,' on the side to send home. Each time they did, it meant their child could receive special medicine and be released home a time with a nurse. Jory did not ask -- he did not want to pry. What if they sold him back to the Oba road police for a higher price after they finished receiving payments from the unknown parties in Kusi-O? He kept an eye out for treachery, but they must be good actors indeed if they meant to betray him. No, as long as he was in their inn, he could say they harbored him, and they would be delivered to the Obayyo officials in wooden clapboards, ready for the chopping block

He stayed in what once had been a giant chimney. His bed and a few items of furniture were on a sandy floor. Whatever had burned here, years ago, still faintly clung to the walls like a decaying cheese. The walls appeared dry, except for the ubiquitous Oba fungi. Jory recognized a dozen kinds amid cracks in the white plaster, on blunt rock surfaces where plaster had fallen off, and in the interstices where heavy wooden structural beams poked through. Where the thick, low wooden door now hung, which Girex and Giru had to bow to walk through, had once been a steel furnace door

As the fire in his gut healed, Jory became aware of the source of what, in his sickness, he had thought of as fire surrounding him with pain: Light. The light at the bottom of the chimney had a bluish cast. When he peered upward in fascination, the chimney's top disappeared into what looked like a vortex of blue-white light

"We on Fril enjoy direct sunlight," Girex told Jory one afternoon. Girex was bigger than his wife, and more powerfully built, but just as gentle. Both seemed to have a faint deviousness about them that made Jory wonder if it was an invention of his mind, or a property of persons who looked like snakes. But it was open, not hidden, and maybe it was just their sense of shame and guilt about deceiving the authorities and risking death for a sum of money

Girex helped Jory climb up within the old chimney. A wide, sturdy ladder stretched some forty feet upward. Jory climbed ahead, while Girex followed, coaxing him on. "Hold on tight," he admonished

"Ah!" Jory gasped with pain and averted his face. The blue-white light burned his eyes like a searing sun

"You'll have to go slowly," Girex said, "bour eyes were made to enjoy the beautiful light."

Yes, Jory thought bitterly, not to be enslaved by people who live in perpetual night. There was an expression on Oba: 'Blind as a crx,' or, roughly, a mole. Shurians were just as likely to say "blind as a human," for human night blindness was one of the prime factors in his people's not being able to escape from their enslavement -- the other factor being that they could be hunted like animals elsewhere in the galaxy

"You will become accustomed to the beautiful light," Girex said as they climbed back down. "There are spy holes up there where you can look without being seen. They will be your only glimpse of this place before you leave for deep space."

"Deep space," Jory said slowly. "I have heard that ships travel from star to star."

Girex waved his arm contemptuously. "It is a dark age on the other side of the wall. Ships do not travel to stars -- they would burn up. They travel to moons, like Shur, or planets, like Fril. You will learn all these things soon enough."

"So who has paid you for me, and what do they want from me?"

Girex raised his hands, empty. "I don't know. I don't care. I think you are different from the other humans. They say you have horns." He gingerly reached for one of Jory's temples. "Are they broken off?"

"I have never had horns," Jory said. "This is something else." The other humans had laughed at him and shied away from him because of them. Now even this snake was acting

as if there were something wrong with him. He brushed Girex's hand away

"It must be something expensive else," Girex said with lewd nervousness

Jory would soon learn the source of Girex's strange behavior. In the meantime, he ate well. He exercised as best he could to build up his strength -- the heavy poison had left him strangely weak for a young man, but he felt his energy rebounding. Every few hours, he practiced climbing up the ladder. His eye muscles had grown completely slack in 20 years of trying to absorb the scant light of Oba. Now squeezed the aperture shut, each day a little more, so that the light no longer hurt

Girex watched him and laughed. "That's not even real daylight. Wait until you step onto a real planet with two or three suns in a white sky."

The intense light in Kusi-O was caused by an imported power unit that sat in the center of the mile-diameter circle wall. Girex explained that the hydrogen powered helium chewer, as he called it, glowed through a thick, milky wall of glass two palms thick. Still there was enough energy left to pipe light through glass cables, out to the wall on all sides, up the wall, where it shone down from hundreds of spotlights. The substitute sunlight was evenly distributed and could burn for ages

Jory spent many hours staring from the narrow slits on all sides of the old chimney, which had provided energy centuries ago before Kusi-O had received the benefit of nuclear lighting. He had to keep from sneezing half the time, and often brushed cobwebs from his head. He had to keep an eye out for the silently crawling red and black striped spiders whose sting was venomous; the others were merely annoying. From his vantage point, Jory saw in all directions

He saw the looming drum wall, its surfaces soiled with long stains of dampness and moss. Several times a day, the great gate closest to him would open on the Obayyo. In the gloom of the inner wall, he could see the gleam of the Imperial police armor and swords while the Fril cops with their modern weapons stood near-naked on this side. Pallet upon pallet of urns of various sizes and shapes arrived from points all over Oba, to be shipped to the worlds serviced by the Space Transport League

Toward the center of Kusi-O, Jory made out the dimly glowing milky-glass dome of the light generator. Around that on all sides were the landing pads for antigrav shuttles. The shuttles, mostly of a rectangular design tapering from top to bottom, were boxy, beat-up, mostly gray, but streaked with all manner of chemicals and burn marks. Their experienced and probably bored pilots flew them in fast take-offs and snappy landings

Around the ring of pads was a ring of warehouses. Through the warehouses moved tons of material, mostly the thousands of varieties of fungal extracts, but also some fine swords and other cultural oddities

In a ring around the inside of the Wall, and inside a wide circumferential dirt road, were the houses of Kusi-O's permanent residents. There must be as many as 5,000, Jory thought, and they not only lived in homes but sent their children to schools, and went to parks, and frequented libraries and public-houses like the one where Jory hid

As Jory's eyes became used to the light, he was amazed that he'd ever tolerated the gloom that seemed to pour in when the gate was open. Once he saw a captured human -- a wild man with long hair, dirty skin, and tattered clothes -- dragged to the gate in chains by Fril police and handed over to the Imperial police, who immediately placed wooden blocks around the unfortunate's neck. Jory might be next

Jory saw all sorts of beings from the far reaches of space. He saw things stranger than the Fril -- floating orbs that bore sentient life; tall yellow things with dangling appendages, that he'd swear could only live in the sea; four legged and even six legged mammals covered with fur or feathers; traders who looked almost like giant humans covered with fur; a slug-like thing that took all day to move its glistening brown sausage shape along the road from one warehouse to another

Girex and Giru's behavior became stranger and stranger, and Jory became alarmed. At times the house remained shuttered, with drunken customers pounding on the front door

in the middle of the night demanding food and liquor. At other times, the pub seemed to be open long past the customary hour, and carousing customers kept Jory awake all night

Jory, locked in his chimney around the clock, became jumpy. He'd cling to the door for hours at a time, listening for a certain type of footfall. Even when it was only Giru with his meals, he ran up the ladder like a frantic animal, though he had no hope of fighting a group of Fril police if they came for him with weapons that could pick a man off from a distance.

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<P> Then, one night, Jory's fears seemed to come true. He heard heavy leather boots tread in the corridor. He heard the murmur of men's voices, none too pleasant, and the clink of metal objects -- keys? He jumped up from his cot and, in the faint moonlight-like glow of the generator outside, ran to the ladder and up several steps, thinking maybe he could jump down on them

The door opened, and several men stepped inside. "There he is," said a Fril holding a black gun, pointing with his free hand. There were five, two of them naked Fril, the other three wearing voluminous dark cloaks that just about reached the floor. These swept back baggy hoods to reveal Fril-like heads. All five wore the tokens of immunity -- flat name tags suspended against the chest by a thin chain that ran around the neck -- promising freedom from police search or detention as long as they stayed within the port and did not wander out somehow into dark Oba

Jory was paralyzed with fear. He could almost feel the Obayyo cops' heavy wooden tablets around his neck, with the legend "Runaway -- Sentence Is Death" carved on them

"Are you Jory O'Call?" asked one of the three in cloaks

Jory climbed up another rung and did not answer

"We won't hurt you," said another. "You are the reason we are here."

"We?" Jory asked. "Where's Girex? Giru?"

"Look, son, we don't have time..." The leader swept off his imitation Fril head, revealing a human, a young adult with short brown hair and pale skin. The other two cloaked men pulled their disguises off. One was dark and had short, kinky black hair -- Jory had seen a few like him around other villages, not his own. The third was of medium color, with slanted eyes and short black hair cut in such a fashion that it stood straight up. They looked strong and well-fed -- no slaves, these, ever, from their self-confident demeanor. "I'm Jerzy." Jerzy introduced the black one as Hans, and the hair-up as Don

Jerzy said: "Come on down; we've got to get you out of here."

At the sight of his fellow humans, Jory bounded down and shook their hands. They whisked a cloak and a Fril mask over him, threw the hood over his head, and hurried him into the dark halls. Guns drawn and shielding him on three sides, they moved in a mass

"Where are Girex and Giru?" Jory asked

"Ah, those scum..." Don said

"Look briefly," Jerzy said, pointing into a room from which yellow light fell

Hans said: "They were well-paid, all right. A little too well."

Jory looked inside, heart beating in horror, and saw his hosts. Girex was sprawled in one corner, white powder strewn over his head and brightening his hands. Giru lay on her back, sprawled and staring emptily at the ceiling. She too had streaks of powder all over.

"Are they -- ?"

"Dead. Yes," Jerzy said. "They were drug addicts. That's how the local goons paid them to take care of you. Paid them with so much of that stuff that they overdosed until their hearts stopped. They must have been crawling on the floor throwing it in the air in their last moments."

Jory could think of at least twelve drugs it could be, all made in Oba by the babas, and capable of addicting half a galaxy

"Maybe someone wanted them out of the way," Don ventured

"Nah," said one of the Fril, "too valuable. Must be suicide. Too much overdose. Kill. Stupid ones. Find other, but these trustworthy."

Jerzy pushed on. "We weren't planning to pull you out so soon, but the Dora Mora is in orbit, and several of her rafts have set down. With these two gone, it's only a matter of hours before the cops start poking around. They are required to file a report with the other side. Come along, the ship's master is eager to pick you up."

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<P> The five figures spirited Jory away in a car that smelled of fish or snakes or something. One of the real Fril drove, and both Fril took off with the car and their payment as soon as Jory and the three humans got out before a sea of lights: the grav-assist barge that would take him to space

Jory was amazed at the dimensions and bustle of the cargo barge. It was easily four stories tall, and several times the size of Girex and Giru's public house. He entered with his companions and stood on a dirty steel floor in a low-ceilinged corner crammed with bio-electronic devices and displays. Jory stared in fascination at all this wonderful machinery that had been locked out of Oba for centuries

Jory saw that the cargo bay occupied most of the barge's interior. Broad bulkheads were open, and Fril and other alien laborers worked around the clock loading the boat for its trip into orbit to join the Dora Mora. The noise of generators and voices and rattling little loader engines was deafening. The interior bay was 200 arm spans long, 100 arm spans wide, and 40 arm spans high. The ceiling was slightly curved outward and reinforced on the inside with steel beams that had circles cut out for lightness. Bright strips of biolescent lighting streaked the ceiling and the walls, so bright in some places that they appeared to be outlined in blue. Jory was adapting fast to the presence of light, and he wished every human suffering on Oba could have the same liberation

In that moment, a small worm of determination settled in Jory's soul. If he were ever able, he would come back and smash those gates. He would tear down that concrete drum wall. He would free not only the humans on Oba, but the Shurians from themselves

"This way," Jerzy said, grabbing a handful of Jory's cloak. He pulled, and Jory and the other two men followed. They bolted up a narrow, claustrophobic metal stairwell that rang with their footsteps. On the second floor, they entered a doorway that led to a series of narrow rooms or cabins set into the barge's walls, whose windows overlooked the loading bay. Jerzy locked the door behind them, while Don pulled the dark blue curtains on the windows closed. There was one exterior window to see space once they took off. The room was carpeted in dark red, and had a kitchen built into the other end from where Jory stood. A door at the other end led, he supposed, to more rooms like this one, places for the crew or maybe the officers to rest while the barge was under way

"About ten hours," Jerzy said, "and she'll be lifting off."

They pulled off their disguises and threw them over a set of couches set in one corner. The three spacemen wore the ubiquitous uniform of the bipedals -- a loose fitting cotton jumpsuit that opened down the front and had many small pockets to keep things when gravity was at a premium. Jerzy's was a faded khaki, Don's a new dark blue, Hans's a dim light blue. Hans and Don threw themselves back on the worn but comfortable looking brown couches along the outer wall. Jerzy headed for the corner sink. Jory stared at the soft lighting, and the smooth waves it made on the creamy, plastic-coated ceilings. He welcomed a host of clean, human smells. These men took everything for granted while, for him, every moment meant a new sensation

He hardly noticed the door that opened or the woman who walked into the room

She had to speak his name twice before he looked at her, startled

She was pretty, that he could see. Her skin was dusky brown. Her hair was puffy like the Shurians, 'but black and thick, with many fine curls, and cropped just beyond the ears so it made a fluffy helmet. Her eyes were serious, light blue and playful. Her jumpsuit was new and clean, brown like a tree trunk. Jory liked the way her hips moved in the suit, and her unassuming breasts were high and firm. She moved with style and authority. "I'm happy to see you, Jory O'Call." She extended a small hand whose nails she'd painted glossy rouge.

Her grip was light but firm. Official. "I'm Josenda Kellahi. I'll be your official guardian until you join the crew of Dora Mora."

Jory nodded, enjoying her warmth and light smile. He noted the light pink lipstick, the several tiny gold rings in her cheeks, the small pink bow attached to her high forehead (by a magnet set in the skin, he assumed). He also noted with surprise that she packed a huge black gun in a dark green holster on a wide web belt with small military-looking pouches. On the left chest surface of her overalls were a number of insignia suggesting she could shoot, run, wrestle, and fight with the best of them

"We'll be taking off in six bells," she said. "They are loading the heavy cargo bottom first. Ten tons of top soil for a royal pleasure garden on Rorath IV." She grinned. "Where there's a need, we go. You'll probably enjoy the Service." Seeing his confused, numb look, she added: "Of course you're entitled to quit if you wish. Just -- don't before Captain Aptath has had a chance to present you with a proposal." She had a crisp, athletically attractive, almost handsome face. The softness of her skin, the curvature of her cheeks, and the twinkle of her lipstick made her look pretty and feminine. He liked looking at her, in this wealth of wonderful light, as her features kept pulling between the athletically hard and feminine soft

Jory sat on the couch while she stepped beside Jerzy at the sink to prepare steaming hot cups of something for them -- kjabas, they called the bitter but savory black brew whose steel-keen edge could be blunted with sugar, milk, and other condiments too strange for Jory to name. He didn't care about the confusion of this wonderful new world whirling around his head -- he was just glad to be alive. Then, as always, the thought of Ramy followed, and he felt a wrenching sadness

That, in turn, reminded him of Girex and Giru. "Josenda, there is one thing," he said as she walked carefully juggling two small, white ceramic cups on tiny plates

"Yes?" she asked attentively, since apparently it was her job to hover around him like a mother, a friend, and a police officer. She handed him his cup and they sat down. "Careful, it's hot," she said. He took his first sip of kjabas and spit it out. Not only was it hot, but it was sheer black hell

"Ah!" he cried, handing her the cup and running to the sink. He heard clouds of laughter all around him as he rinsed his mouth out and, for good measure, let water run over his thick brown hair. "Oba Sacred Mountain, that stuff will kill you."

"You'll grow to like it," Josenda said

Minutes later, sipping gingerly at a cup doused in condiments, he began to appreciate the musky, sweet, cloying but robust way this drug entered his senses of smell and taste and made his blood run faster

"There is one thing." He pictured Girex and Giru sprawled in their sad and dishonored deaths. "I had two friends here in Kusi-O. They were very gentle and took good care of me. I wish we could take them with us for burial. They have a child who will wonder what happened to them."

The three men howled with derision, and Jory almost hated them. He could see why the galaxy had rebelled against their human overlords thousands of menses ago -- if the legends were even true -- and turned them from masters into the lowest of slaves

Josenda seemed poised as ever, and he sensed resistance from her also. "Jory, it's impossible. The risks... the timing... the laws... we'd have to negotiate with the local authorities, and one thing would lead to another. Don't you realize you'd be marked for death?" She set her cup aside and spoke firmly. "Maybe you don't understand. It's illegal for the five of us to exist on this planet. Or for that matter to run free in most of the galaxy. We have for centuries been under a shoot to kill edict. We don't own these ships or run this cargo. We have proxies and overlords like Captain Aptath."

"Captain Aptath isn't human?"

"Well... he is of our kind," she said slowly. "You'll learn more about this ship soon enough. The officers and the crew of the ship are Ruandap." She continued: "For us to make arrangements like this would involve Captain Aptath's officers contacting the Fril

police and somehow explaining... no, it can't be done, I'm sorry."

Jerzy and company still laughed. "A couple of snake drug addicts, ho ho!"

Don slapped his sides. "Hope they don't clog up the incinerator."

Jory rose and walked close. "Gentlemen, if you amuse yourselves further, this will become very personal, very quickly. I warn you."

Their smiles faded into looks of disbelief and joshing. "Oh come on, man, we're just having a laugh."

"The Fril couple were kind to me. I would like to bury them with honor. Where I come from, we honor those who have died."

"But these are reptiles."

"No, they were people. They treated me like a person."

Hans rose huffily to refill his kjabas at the sink, and he brushed past Jory. He was a big man who moved in hulking movements, and Jory heard him mutter in his thick patois, "give it to its peace, rectum."

"You saved my life," Jory said after him in a clear firm voice, "and I will honor you by not quarreling with you. In turn, you should honor yourself by respecting my point of view." As Hans stopped and turned to stare with mixed anger and surprise, Jory said: "If you were sick, they would have tended you."

"They were paid with quiffin' drugs," Hans boomed

"But their touch was gentle, and their manner sincere."

"I can see why they would kill you on the other side," Hans said, shaking his cup out on the floor and walking to the kjabas urn. "If I don't take you back there and toss you over the wall myself."

At this, Josenda rose. "Hans, this man is worth a million of you to Captain Aptath. I will throw you over the wall if you even say another word."

"Keep your beans in the bag," Hans muttered, but he acted as much cowed as he acted brutish

Jory turned to her. "I insist that we make an effort."

"All right," she said, snapping open a com pad. "Dora Mora, this is Josenda. Patch me through to the O.D." She walked out of the room, slamming the door shut, leaving Jory with the men

Jory stood his ground and looked at them

Jerzy waved his arm. "It's not worth the sizzle. Ease up, O'Call. You made your quiffin' point and I respect you for it. Don't push it by being a rectum."

"I'm not pushing anything. I'm prepared to answer any further questions."

Hans scoffed to himself, but appeared to be thinking that the price of pursuing this wasn't worth it. They were human, on a hostile planet, and subject to execution if someone slipped up

Don apologized. "Sorry, man. We all have buried dead. We know the feeling."

Jory slowly turned away from the confrontation, thinking, yes, and half of them you probably killed, being mercenaries

Josenda re-entered the room. "Captain Aptath will send an officer to the Fril boss. He'll say that he was contacted by the child's guardians to retrieve his parents' bodies." She appeared somewhat surprised. "You will have your way around here." She remained friendly enough, but something had changed. Jory figured it out soon enough. He wasn't one of them. He was a special person whose any word to the Captain (whom he hadn't met yet, nor whose purpose he knew) could affect them in unknown ways. Suddenly it was the woman and the three mercenaries on one side of a wall, and Jory alone on the other

When the bodies of Girex and Giru were brought to the barge hours later by Fril mortuary workers, Jory looked down from the secrecy of the curtained office. He was alone in the room. Josenda had gone to freshen up after making sure the doors were securely locked, and the three mercenaries had gone to catch up on their sleep

Jory felt sad, seeing naked Fril laborers carelessly handling the two white ceramic

tubes on which black calligraphy had been painted. It was then he spotted his first Ruandap. There were three of them, big men in uniforms similar to Josenda's, with side arms. One appeared to be a ship's officer, for he wore a colorful sash around his neck, and a gold medal on his chest. He had powerful, blunt features. The Ruandap officer and a Fril representative nodded and shook hands. Fril workers carried the coffins to a safe spot in the ship.

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<P> The barge lifted on time with a powerful whine of all four grav-assist engines, while Jory, Josenda, the mercenaries sat strapped into high-backed chairs in a special passenger transit bay on the third floor. Rosenda explained that the engines still had to push the barge upward, but somehow the engines fooled the atmosphere into thinking it was more like water and the ship more like a block of wood

They rose into the night sky. The stars grew bigger and stiller. Their number seemed to increase as the atmosphere thinned and his field of vision deepened. The red moon was clearly visible -- it had valleys and rilles, which no Shurian knew!

The barge burned upward, and they seemed to move in several directions all at once, and always in shifting combinations, that made his stomach feel like a balloon full of air. Josenda slipped him a small bag just in time, and he expelled the last of Giru's vegetable soup, bless her soul

They slowed to a crawl before a huge black shape with myriad tiny squares of light in its many surfaces. They slowly bumped to a stop inside a featureless cage just big enough to hold the barge, and she was bolted to the floor and ceiling. Only then were the humans allowed to leave the barge. Jory followed Josenda on shaky legs

As they walked down the metal ramp, Jory looked around in amazement

Josenda laughed at his expression. "It's big all right. But it's average. STL runs hundreds of freighters up and down the Third Arm. Some of them are so big the Dora Mora could fit into a single cargo bay."

Jory could not imagine that. He craned his neck as he walked. This was a noisy, industrial environment. There was room for four or five barges; at the moment, only one was out and he assumed still on the ground here or on Fril. The ceilings receded into darkness, and he could not see how high they went -- he was blinded by round factory lights that floated on cross-stabilizing cables. The ship had its own gravity, he noted, though he felt a little bit different, just a fraction -- he couldn't tell if it was more or less gravity than on Shur

They passed knots of humans in overalls. All were busy -- some driving cargo around on small motor-driven wagons, others welding metal on metal so sparks flew before their black safety lenses, others trooping to the water cooler or carrying electric data tablets around

Josenda took him up in a lift. "You'll stay in your own quarters on the Officers' Deck. What a lucky guy. I'll get to see you most of your waking hours though."

"When do I begin to find out why he brought me here?"

"When he's ready." She spoke deferently of the Ruandap

"I will be patient." He waited in the dim light as the lift hummed

When the lift stopped, they stepped into a pleasantly gloomy, wide corridor with carpeted floors and electronic lighting. The walls and doors were paneled in wood, and all the doors were closed, their heavy brass handles ornate

"This is where you will stay for the time being," she said, throwing open a door. Jory stepped into an oppressively close, musty smelling room with no flavor or personality. "Like a tomb," she said lightly, "let's freshen it up." She flicked switches, and the lighting closed in -- brighter wherever he walked, dimmer the farther away. A faint sigh of machinery caused delightful cool, fresh air to waft around Jory. A wall flickered into life, showing a panoramic sunset over some sea. The air, wherever it was, seemed to be on fire. "If you want music, entertainment, you have everything." She flicked some more switches, and music blared over him, and the wall changed to a scene of naked women strutting with feathered fans.

She turned off the music, and the sunset returned. "I'll let you blast your senses numb after I'm gone if you wish."

"Thank you, I like the quiet."

She stood awkwardly and squeezed her hands together. "Maybe I should be direct, Jory. I am married, so don't get any ideas."

He felt his cheeks burn red. He'd already had some ideas, albeit dim and unrealized. He wanted to say something clever, but couldn't think of anything

She showed him a refrigerator and a kitchen. He had a bathroom, whose workings she explained to him. "You know how to flush, yes?"

"How to what?"

"Flush." She pushed a button, and water swirled away, replaced by transparent fresh water colored blue like a mountain stream. "After you go. And always wash thoroughly afterward. It's important, because we're in confined quarters, and we have to keep clean."

After she bid him goodnight and left, he turned and looked into a mirror. He saw how different he looked. He tried cupping his palms over the huge horn plates on his temples, but he still looked different. What human woman would want him?

He ate a few prepared foods with a spoon, not knowing how to hold them or what to put on them. He learned quickly that, no matter how a thing tasted, if in doubt, there was a small bottle of red liquid that would cover the food's smell and taste with a blanket of fire as potent as those flaming sunsets roiling on the walls

After eating, he lay on the bed and watched the wall. After a while, he figured out that there were controls under the bed. He simply had to hold his hand under there and march his fingers up and down the edge of the bed. As he did so, the pictures changed. He was fascinated by markets and beaches and roads and waving life forms on various worlds. Before falling asleep, however, he browsed back to the scene of the woman. Now they all wore tiny two-piece bathing suits and lingered around a square pool of greenish-blue water whose surface rippled in a hot white noon sun.

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<P> In the next few days, Jory received a thorough medical exam and was pronounced fit. He must eat more fruits and vegetables, he was told, and from then on, every day a new basket of such food arrived in his room

Wearing undistinguished second-hand -- but clean; around Josenda, always clean -- overalls, he strolled the length and breadth of the ship, just on the two decks reserved for humans, and sampled its pleasures -- restaurants, 3-d film houses, wine houses. She took him to a viewing blister upside, where the unwavering stars seemed to spread out in motionless disarray

After a few days, someone knocked at the door, and Jory yelled "Come!" thinking it was Josenda. But, as the door drifted open, in the hall stood three persons like himself. Jory jumped up from his bed, startled. One was a tall, broad-shouldered older man with white wavy hair and a handsome if florid face wrinkled with too many years -- Malinu

The second was a shorter, slighter man, much younger, with the slitted eyes Jory had seen in Don -- Kinkidai

The third was a woman -- skinny, small, cold -- Nolani. She too had the slitted eyes, but less noticeably. Her skin was white and waxy, and Jory didn't like her

All three wore plush brown overalls that had no marks of wear on them. Also, all three had keratin plates on the sides of their heads as Jory did

"May we come in?" Malinu asked after introducing the three. He had a pleasant, modulated voice

"Of course," Jory said. He showed them to the corner table, which had four chairs

Malinu said: "We are astropaths. I take it you are one of us, or will be shortly."

"That's the first I've heard. Sorry I have nothing to serve you."

"It's all right. We can order something later. Maybe a hot kjabo?"

"With lots of condiments," Jory replied, trying to soften their initial meeting with a little

self-deprecating humor. Malinu appeared charmed, Kinkidai calmly nodded with a certain reservation, and Nolani merely opened her dark eyes wider as if he'd said something shocking. Nolani puzzled Jory. He studied the black makeup around her eyes, the perfect little silver bowtie in her forehead, the rings in her cheeks, the way her long black hair was wound in braids to make a crown atop her head

While Kinkidai raised a wrist gadget to his ear and spoke softly to the ship's galley, Malinu said: "The Captain will meet with you this evening, and he wanted us to explain the rudiments of our work to you. Have you ever traveled in space before?"

Jory shook his head

"I can see we must start at the beginning. Have you seen the observation deck?"

"Yes. Josenda took me there and I had a long look. It's boring in a way, and yet very impressive."

"It will be more impressive when I tell you some numbers related to what you are looking at. We'll go there later."

"Are you the only three Astropaths on this ship?" Jory asked Kinkidai

"Yes."

"Are we fairly rare then?" Kinkidai had answered the real question already. For whatever reason, neither Malinu nor Kinkidai appeared to be possible partners for Nolani. Was it expected, then, that she pair with Jory? Such a rash assumption would explain why the woman looked so -- scared, he could see now

"We are one in ten million," Malinu said. "Millions of humans died when the aliens revolted against our kind centuries ago. Millions of us were shipped off into slavery. Your branch of the family wound up as slaves on Shur, with the Obans. Judging by the size of your keratoi, you may prove to have some prodigious talent. We'll know soon enough."

"So what is it, exactly, that I have a talent for?"

Malinu described their work. "Have you ever skipped a stone on a pond?"

Jory frowned. His childhood had been dark and without much play. His parents had not been very warm people, though they had fed him and comforted him when he was sick. A memory teased up, of playing by the river with several other human boys. "You mean, tossing a flat pebble with spin, like so" -- he imitated -- "so that the pebble jumps out of the water several times before it falls in?"

"Exactly!" the other three said all at once

Malinu continued: "That's how we get through long stretches of space. Plain ordinary motion at the speed of light becomes impossible, but we manage to skip outside of space, using a special hyperlight drive, and return, like the pebble, or like a frog hopping from stone to stone. The more closely we aim the pebble, and are able to plan its trajectory, the more efficient our travel becomes. That's where we come in. A sentient brain is still the most complex and finely honed tool in the universe. The old humans dickered around with their own genetic material. They did things you and I and most people alive today would not dare. But they were sure they were invincible, and that's what brought them down. They did many daring things, and one of them was to introduce a strain of genes into the race that would enable us astropaths to sharpen the trajectory of a ship through hyperspace by finer and finer degrees."

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<P> Under the observation blister, Kinkidai explained while Malinu and Nolani leaned against the brass railing on either side. "We are in the Third Arm of our galaxy, which is an average size galaxy that has two smaller companion galaxies, one of them twice the size of the other. According to legend, somewhere in this Arm or maybe the next lies a planet called Earth, which was our original home as a kind, but most people nowadays think Earth is a myth. The aliens scoff at us and say we invented Earth to make ourselves feel important. They say we are a kind of roach that grows naturally in any dark place."

"Do you believe in Earth?" Jory asked

The three remained silent. Kinkidai cleared his throat. "Let the Captain speak about

that this evening." He told Jory how far away things were. He pointed to a star that seemed just two rooms away and said: "If you travel at half the speed of light, it will take you a million years -- twelve million menses -- to get there."

Jory grew quiet as they squashed him with statistical monstrosities, one more absurd than the other.

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<P> Next, they went to their place of work in a protruding nodule in the lower human deck.

Jory noticed that, as they approached the busier, more peopled parts of the ship, people parted the way for them. People nodded distantly, but did not tarry. They got many strange stares. Malinu said: "We are freaks to them. They can consort with all sorts of aliens much stranger looking than we are, but they are revolted at the sight of one of their own with plates on the head like a lizard."

They passed through the industrial areas and into quiet, plushly carpeted corridors that were indirectly lit. Malinu said: "They do treat us well, even if at arms' length. They know we need to concentrate, so they carpet our halls and keep the lights dim. This is our part of the ship, Jory. This is Astropathy. I'm the First Astropath, which is like a ship's first officer, only a hair's rank below. Kinkidai is Second Astropath, and Nolani is Third Astropath."

"Would I theoretically be Fourth Astropath?" Jory almost laughed. "I'd have nobody to give orders to below me."

"On the contrary," Kinkidai said, "we rank above all but the top officers. We just have no chain of command. Their lives depend on us, because we can get them where they want to go in half the time, but if we make a mistake, we can all land in the heart of some sun. You can imagine how long we'd last. They may not like our looks but they have deep respect for us, and even fear."

They passed a quartet of spacious offices revolving on a central reception desk, all unmanned and dark. They entered a huge bubble further on, whose ceiling was glassix like the blister on the ob deck, and again Jory saw the fields upon fields of stars

Six comfortable captain's chairs occupied the central area of the floor. Though there were instrument panels around the periphery of this room that looked as though it could hold twenty people, the chairs were unadorned

"Sit here," Malinu ordered. As Jory sat back in the comfortable chair, Kinkidai said: "Relax. We're going to hook you up and you'll get your first feel of this."

"We're between jumps right now," Malinu explained, "or all three of us would be strapped in here, working together. It will be a wonderful addition to have your power, if it is as considerable as we think it may be."

Nolani strapped a kind of well-padded, comfortable cotton helmet on. It had flex straps to tighten it around his head vertically and horizontally, and further anchor it tightly with a chin strap and a strap around the base of his skull. As he lay looking up, Jory saw the array of cables and fasteners hanging on retractable trapezes over each of the six chairs. Nolani lowered his trapeze. She and Kinkidai began doing thing to his keratoi, and he squirmed. He'd never had any use for the things, and wished he could pull them out of his head

"I'm going to power up," Malinu said. "Let me know when you see or feel anything."

Kinkidai placed a pair of black goggles over Jory's eyes that made him blinder than a human on Oba Island. Jory felt a hum of power, and then saw tiny red and amber lights wink on in the goggles. "I see little red lights."

"Good. That's the beginning of the metaphor. Keep looking, and relax. This is a live run, but there's nothing you can do to alter course or cause any harm."

"Tomorrow we will begin a live session as we prepare for the next jump," Malinu said. "See anything more?"

Jory's field of vision expanded as a host of white and red lines started to appear. The lines raced across the field, vertically and horizontally, chasing each other and blurry

speeds, while tiny yellow and blue globes slid along the lines this way and that. Jory cried out and tore the goggles off

"Blink next time," Kinkidai said. "Close your eyes and will it under control. You must find that on your own. You must bring it under control or your gift isn't much use."

"Relax," Nolani said. It was the first word she had uttered to him. She stood with her arms crossed around herself, as if she wanted to be an island from him

He put his goggles back on and lay back. The lines appeared, and he squinted. They appeared to break up, crumble into dust, disappear -- then they appeared again. He practiced making them go away by squinting. "I still have no idea what this is all about," he noted. "But the squinting helps."

"They go away and reappear?" Malinu asked. audibly anxious

"Yes."

"Then you have a powerful case of the gift," Kinkidai said. Malinu grapped Jory's shoulder and shook it in congratulations.

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<P> Freshly barbered, and dressed in a plush brown astropath's overalls, Jory appeared at the Captain's door, escorted by Josenda. She knocked, and, when a small light winked above, pushed the door open for him. "Good luck, Jory. I'll be on call when you're done."

Jory stepped into a sprawling, low-ceilinged, carpeted space that reeked of luxury. Josenda pulled the door shut behind him

"This way!" a voice boomed

Jory, noting the paintings and sculptures all around, abstract and mute, followed the sound of the voice around a wallpapered corner. A wide flight of stairs, three shallow steps deep, brought him down into a lower dining room. Carpeted stairs cascaded up in three directions to more carpeted acreage -- one a library, another a working office with desk laden with electronic tablets, the third a casual lounge

"Welcome," boomed the huge man who sat at the central place of honor. He had a dark mane of hair, and short black hair fairly bursting from his white blouse. He appeared to have taken off his leather uniform, for he swaggered about in cloth breeches that reached just below the knee. "I'm Captain Aptath N'Ruandap. You recognize my other guest?" Aptath nodded to a man who stepped out of the shadows

A bald man of indeterminate age, he wore a black uniform with fine silver piping. "Colonel Jstraki at your service, Astropath." He bowed slightly. "We met before."

Jory suddenly recognized him. "Yedy of Anamo, outside Kusi-O!" Jory was too surprised to be angry at the scoundrel who'd handed him to the Imperial road police

Aptath, as he filled two glasses from a bottle, said: "Colonel Jstraki is a skilled agent of Ruandap Intelligence. When I headed for the Shur system, rumor of your existence floated by me. I couldn't resist the temptation to find you and enlist you. It took an agent of Jstraki's caliber a year to worm his way in, invent a local personality -- ."

"-- In that infernal dampness and gloom! -- ." Jstraki said to laughter

"-- Find you, and bring you out."

Jory remembered nothing between the time he saw Yedi receiving payment from the Obayyo police official until he woke up sick as a dog in Girex and Giru's chimney hiding place. "How did you manage to smuggle me through the drum wall?"

Jstraki grinned coldly, evidencing ferocious intelligence and efficiency. "We have an old saying on Ruandap -- gravity is heavy no matter where you are in the universe. I found the cracks in the system very easily. The penetrating power of money is like the ease with which water finds its way through a crack. I paid the right people, and, I'm afraid to admit, killed a few others. We wrapped you up in a membrane with state of the art AIC breathing apparatus, knocked out colder than a cooked noodle, and secreted you in a vat of fungus."

"I thought I was poisoned by the babas," Jory said

"No," Jstraki said, "I didn't need to rely on native crafts. The drug was JF-VII, and I

almost feared we lost you at one point. I think Giru's soup brought you back to life."

"They were good people," Jory said stubbornly

Jstraki laughed and shook Jory's hand. "A man of principle. I leave you now."

Aptath handed Jory a glass and raised his own in a toast. "I celebrate the arrival of a promising astropath."

Jory stared into his glass. "No more kjabas surprises?"

Aptath laughed. "It's wine, a drink they used to make on Earth from a fruit called the grape."

Jory sipped. The liquid was dry, and made him sweat. Its taste had a strangely robust, rubbed quality, like something overripe and too sweet, but also severe. It had many lingering after tastes like broken music notes that he found interesting

"Have a seat," Aptath boomed

Jory chose the casual lounge, walking up to a circle of C-shaped couches around a central glass table at knee height. Surrounding them was a bubble, and outside that, the stars of outer space

Aptath sat down opposite. "Welcome aboard. How do you like it so far?"

"I could be dead in an Oba latrine."

"So it's upward of that?" Aptath said patiently as he refilled the two plain, transparent glasses that had narrow glass stems and a wider glass foot

"I must measure all things from there, Sir; forgive me, I didn't mean to seem rude."

"No offense taken, young man." He handed Jory the now-empty bottle with a paper label on it. "Recognize that?"

Jory stared at the label, at the bottom of the bottle, into the neck. He sniffed the liquid, which was yellowish and smelled musty-sweet

"That's white wine," Aptath said. "Of course, I forget your people on Shur have been cut off for centuries." He sat back and sipped his wine. He put his bare feet up on the glass table. His feet were much like Jory's, except hairier on top. Jory counted five toes, including one large oval one similar to his own. "We're only beginning, Jory. We haven't even started to turn the tide. But we'll win the galaxy back."

"We, Captain?"

"We -- yes." He slipped into near-reverie. "We from Earth."

"You believe in those legends?"

Aptath smiled. "Oh yes." His eyes glowed as if he were looking directly at the mythical planet. "I have seen it with my own eyes, so close and so pretty that it seemed I could reach out and hold it in my two hands." He held up his hands and looked from one hand to the other. "But our ship could go no closer. No closer than Earth's single stony, battered moon. A big moon it is, that shines greenish, with an odd sort of pattern in the light, like a man singing."

Jory listened to this recitation and wondered if the man were mad, or drunk. But his voice wasn't slurry, and his manner was steady

"It was the most glorious run of my life, and one day I must do it again, not once but a thousand times. You should stay with us, Jory O'Call, you have the gift of planets and stars in your blood. We can make a run there again. She's round, and blue as ice, with white clouds around her like angel dust. She is a fine confection, mostly ocean, but with deep swatches of green forest and mountain ranges that sing in the wind, I'm told."

Jory spoke slowly, "you say you've been to -- Earth?"

"Yes." Aptath's eyes still glowed. "It's a secret only a few of us know. Only a few of us on this ship, including the Astropaths."

"Where is it?"

"That's the rub, Jory. I don't know. It's a secret. We'll have to look for her. When the old Earth empire fell, the last imperial guards hid her in a well of time. They were powerful people, your race. Our kind. They did many things. Why do you think you carry those horn plates in your skull?"

"They cultured some of their own kind to specialize -- ?"

"Yes. They had no regard for the individual."

Jory was silent, thinking about the cruelties of Oba and now, apparently, the whole galaxy

"Do you know," Aptath said thickly, "at one time your race hunted my race?"

Jory shook his head slowly. "The old women who count menses don't tell such stories. Much is lost."

"Ah, not lost, just misplaced, like Earth herself."

Jory said: "Why do you say 'your race' in one breath and 'our kind' in the next?"

"Because both our races come from Earth. Any living thing from Earth is our kind, Jory, though we may be a million races and species. Even those of us who were altered, like you and I."

Jory frowned. "You are -- ?"

Aptath set his wine glass aside and rose. "Let's see if you have any racial memory at all." He reared up to his full height. "Does this strike any chords in you?" He took off his shirt, revealing a brawny, furry body twice the size of the largest human man's. He held his arms out as far as he could, as if extending something flexible. Then he curled his hands inward, leaned forward stiff-backed, and, touching his fists to the table top, leaned massively on his knuckles. "My legs are longer than they should be, and my arms are a bit shorter so that I can walk more like you. Before they altered us a bit, they came to hunt us. Some of your race protected us, but many of my race were killed for their hands and feet, which some of your race ignorantly believed could be made into medicine. For that alone, I should kill all of you. But then, you gave us some of the spark from the fire of your own intelligence. I like to think we have used it more wisely. Do you recognize me, Jory boy?"

Jory shook his head slowly, as if the Captain's words had made him drunk with their heaviness

"I am a gorilla."

The room steeped in silence for a moment, while they stood frozen -- the man, an underling, sitting uncomfortably on the edge of his couch, while the gorilla, a space captain, demonstrated a posture that was but a memory

Aptath broke the spell by walking quickly to a small book case and bringing back two pictures. Each showed a hairy creature whose face resembled Aptath's, in a posture much like the one Aptath had just demonstrated. "One is my ancestor long ago. The other is yours."

While Jory studied the picture, Aptath poured the rest of the wine

"Is this somewhere on Earth then," Jory asked

"Yes. It's on the savannah in a place called Africa. A place called Rwanda, to be specific, in a rain forest where my race lived for millions of years before -- all hell broke loose." He held up the bottle. "This wine, Jory, is from Earth. I was very young, and our captain was an alien, a scoundrel. He was accepted for the secret trade route, but he tried to sell the secret, and their spies killed him in the next port before he could pry the first word through his teeth. Our spies, I should say. We are still a dangerous people."

Jory said: "I never had a choice about being born on Oba of Shur. I never had a chance to decide when my parents sold me to the palace. I never did choose my way out. But here I am, and I could say no?"

"Most assuredly," Aptath said darkly

"Then I freely say yes."

"Good!" Aptath boomed, reaching for Jory's hand. "Welcome to my crew. I make you Astropath Four, but I think you will rise to the top of your profession. Let those three teach you what you need to know. You'll be safe with me. I've been sailing for fifty years, and I've never once lost a single human crewmember to the alien terror. The Inversion of Man, I should say. And of you I will take special care, for you will be the sail that takes me down the well of time and to that wonderful blue vision once more." He held up his glass. "It was one of

my last bottles. I managed to buy a case of them, shipped up from a place called San Francisco."

They clinked glasses

Aptath spoke softly. "You know what decided me on you? You know what made me want to trust you with this information? It was the way you insisted on a proper burial for those two Fril people. The child will be very sad, but it is expected he will live despite his sickness, and at least he will be able to visit their grave. You are an honorable man, Jory O'Call. You are a fine human. I will enjoy working with you."

Jory said "Thank you." He waggled his near-empty glass. "Time to go back for more." He sipped the last few mouthfuls tenderly, savoring every molecule. "I think I can taste Earth. I can taste real sunshine."

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<P> Jory threw himself into his work, and the menses went by

He learned the trade of an Astropath. Soon enough, as they prepared for the next skip on the surface of space and time, Malinu and Kinkidai and Nolani invited him for the first time to help. Together, they steered through the critical interstices that could either throw them into some forever loop where they would die, or skip them through a tight, efficient course to the next point on the invisible surface. In their virtual world, the black goggles made their path a rounded quadrille tunnel. Everything was a metaphor -- the ship, the surface, the contact point, the trajectory. At first, everything happened too quickly for Jory to comprehend. He gripped the arm rests and hung on as he seemed to flash at breakneck speed toward the uniformly charcoal-gray surface. As he drew near, the surface took on characteristics -- bumps, ripples, hooks, holes, all mathematical artifacts that said, essentially, 'if you touch here, you blow up.' Each type of characteristic had its own meaning, which the astropaths instantly recognized and for which they knew how to compensate

The ship was a red quadrille that fled over this landscape. What looked like a red grid-echo rippling over the surface distortions was not a shadow thrown behind, but a projection moving ahead -- 'if you go near here, sense or calculate what will happen.' Vertical blue lines converged with horizontal green lines at rapid speed, often faster than the eye could follow. The astropaths were able to take all these variables and, by sheer mind power, arrange them, tighter and tighter as the ship approached the critical Skip Step, until the ship was once again headed out on a new trajectory. Malinu told Jory: "It's like running a race. You have to bring a ball to the other end, but you may not carry the ball. You have to keep hitting the ball with a paddle so it arcs up, then down again, where you hit it back up. That's very difficult to do, say for several miles. Imagine how easy it would be to hit the ball on a wrong trajectory. If it drops once, you lose. The rules are kind of like that here, only the price of losing is death for all of us."

While he learned astropathy, Jory also began to understand how far his intellectual and social skills were removed from those of his fellow humans on the ship. Nobody here was interested in the court game of putting together strings of two or three line poems in ancient Oban. These humans conversed on a level far above his, and he felt belittled, isolated. He didn't understand a thousand of their nuances, glances, small gestures, grunted syllables for this or that

In his isolation, he fit in (reluctantly) with the other three astropaths. All three were unmarried. Malinu and Kinkidai were friends who liked to play casta, an ancient game with a 64-square board and two opposing armies of little wooden pieces including a king and a queen. They sometimes also played a 512-square variation that had 8 levels instead of one. For social life, the two men would visit Long Street, a pleasure district in any ship. The Dora Mora's Long Street was a block long and had six places to take a limited variety of mild recreational drugs, like alcohol. One place was for women only, another for men only, and the rest for both genders

Several times, Jory accompanied Malinu and Kinkidai to these bars. Jory enjoyed the drinks, and the women were delightful to look at, but astropaths were hardly sex

symbols, and the women shrugged them off. After a while, Jory grew tired of these places. He began to long for the journey to be over so he could set foot on planetary soil somewhere, and he knew that was a bad attitude for an astropath. Given his deformity, that was really the life he'd been designed for. Maybe someplace a surgeon could be found who'd cut these things out of his skull and repair his brain. Malinu shook his head when Jory voiced the thought one night, and Malinu said: "You can't escape it. It's you, and it would kill you if they took this gift from your brain. Our ancestors were pretty ruthless."

Then Jory had an affair with Nolani. It began one night when they were walking home from work, and the men wanted to go to Long Street. Jory thanked them and said he'd rather not

"Bring Nolani," Malinu shouted genially from a distance on manufacturing floor

"No thanks," she called back. "Not to sit in those men's bars of yours."

"Why don't we just take a walk then?" Jory suggested to her

"Sounds like a good idea." She was his height, but thin, with shiny black hair. Her skin was pale as a riverbank mushroom on Oba. He was lonely, and he suspected she was too. There was a special glow about her skin as they walked slowly, talking about everything and nothing, about music and space and small pets. He kept looking at the skin on her arms, seeing every tiny hair, every spot and blemish. He noticed for the first time that she affected a bracelet made of several colored threads twined into one. Suddenly he became aware that, under those loose overalls, walked a female form with soft spots and swaying parts that were designed to arouse him

They walked on the long alley on the outer side of the human work deck until they had gone all the way around the ship. Then they climbed up a deck and walked around the ship a second time. Here and there they passed pseudo-windows that picked up light on the outer skin of the ship and transmitted the light through the ship's hull, to be reassembled as a picture on the inner surface. At other times, they passed small shops with glowing neon signs. They passed one or two bars where men's raucous laughter poured out

Then, because there was really no place else to go, they came to her quarters and she let him in. She aired the place out and served icy beer. They sat in her sunken living room and watched a funny motion picture in which the hero and heroine kissed often. The hero had to rescue the heroine from her silly attraction to a handsome charmer who was actually after her money

Somewhere during the second half of the picture, Jory slid closer on the couch to Nolani. She did not move away. He put his arm around the area behind her back, and she stayed put. He could see the frozen way she held herself, the way her eyes grew wide and her mouth dry as she stared at the big screen. He settled back and lightly pulled her by the shoulders. She settled against his side, her hands and head on his chest. She was surprisingly light and dainty. After a time, he grasped her shoulders with the lightest of touches and guided her to him so that they kissed. Her tongue was surprisingly firm and hungry. She rose and dropped the overalls around her feet so that she wore only flimsy panties and an undershirt; her breasts were small and needed no support. He touched her legs, admiring the sheen of her skin in the flickering colored lights of the movie. She turned slightly, and he found himself looking toward the flickering light source through her legs, just under the puffy mound of her panties. Thoroughly aroused, he took her hips, gently, and pulled her toward him. She knelt down and undid his overalls and pulled them off, down his legs. Then she explored him with her fingers and lips. The screen went dead except for a silent and unending stream of reddish light particles, not unlike on a journey through space, while Jory and Nolani had sex on the couch. She was slight but strong. She was passionate, but in a noncommittal way that lessened his pleasure slightly. He felt relieved and pleased and at ease afterward, and would have fallen asleep, but she insisted he go to his quarters. This baffled him a bit, but he staggered home and fell asleep alone in his bed

They spent several evenings together, always with that long walk, and then the movie ritual, followed by sex, and then his return home alone. While he enjoyed her in a limited way,

Jory began to sense an emptiness about his affair with her. It was going nowhere, and neither of them really wanted it to. He supposed she must see him as a rude ex-slave from the island of Oba on the moon Shur. In his turn, he simply did not see in her the qualities that would attract him -- as Ramy, for instance, had

Jory busied himself as much as possible with catching up on the school learning he'd missed -- and it was frustrating because he had almost no foundation. Had he been a mere riverbank nah on Oba, there would be no hope for him. Because he did live in a castle, and could recite from memory the entire canon of Oban literature in Classic, Middle Period, and Modern forms, he did have a foundation of discipline and memorizing. Gradually, as the menses flashed by, he surpassed Nolani at astropathy than. His school learning began to grow close in some areas to the learning of the humans raised on Ruandap

Jory found a cap he could wear, a wool cap designed for cold planet air, and its ear flaps coincidentally also covered his keratinoi. He began to visit the library and any social events he could find himself invited to. Gradually, he built a small, loose circle of acquaintances around a club whose members did strenuous cycling and jogging in the Dora Mora's inner gravity mill. He found it very difficult to penetrate their social sphere. The men were distant, the women generally cold. This began to change as one of the more attractive women invited herself along with Jory on a group walk. The woman's name was Ohella, and she was a slim, perky brunette with a blunt freckled nose and a sassy mouth. She was an apprentice machinist on the factory floor, and had rough hands to show for it. She introduced him to the ship's human swimming pool, which was a revelation to Jory. He loved the water. She taught him swimming, and, after a light supper and a glass of wine at her place, how to do "go around the world."

While he was seeing Ohella, Jory fortuitously learned that Nolani was involved in a long-term affair with Malinu, who, because he was much older, let her play around on the side. Just as Jory turned off to Nolani, Ohella stopped seeing him

Another young woman appeared in Ohella's place -- Katjina, a blonde with limp, straight hair that gleamed like gold foil. She had strong thighs and a flat stomach. Her small, round breasts, slightly pendulous, were the only soft spots on her limbs or torso -- except of course her wet place that she took him to explore

After a while, Katjina seemed to find a boyfriend -- who, oddly, had been there all along -- and it was Moryah's turn. She was small and darkskinned, like Josena, and had a full figure that did not display much energy. She quickly went away, replaced by another, and another

This life became more and more empty for Jory. He could not seem to go below the surface with any of these people. The women would have sex for a few weeks and drift on. For a long time, he thought that was how they lived. Then he began to notice that one or another of the women took up with the same boyfriends they'd had before. The men tended to be cold toward him, and gradually he dropped out of his clubs one by one, until the library was his only social life. Even there, he found women to take to bed. In his heart, he only wished to find one he could love with the same deep affection he'd had for his Ramy. But there would never be another Ramy, nor for that matter another Oba, or Shur, or childhood as a castle pet

One day, as he lay in his quarters reading, came a knock on the door. He rose, slipped on his wool cap, and opened. Josena stood outside, wearing a dark blue off-duty jump suit. "Hello," she said with a smile as startled as his, "I haven't seen you in a while, so I thought I would check up on you." She seemed nervous or something

"Come in." He let her in and closed the door

"This is a nice place." Something was wrong

"Thank you." He wondered what it was

"Can I sit down?"

"Sure." He folded up the unmade bed so it became a couch. He went into the kitchen to heat water for tea. "How have you been?"

"Oh fine." She sat down on the couch and rubbed her hands together as if creating sparks for a fire. "So! What's going on in your life?"

It took but a minim for the water to boil. "Lemon or kiwi?"

"Plain."

"How unexciting." He brought two teas -- both plain -- and handed her one. Then he sat down in an easy chair nearby. "Are you well?" The conversation seemed to go in circles

"Well," she said biting her lower lip, "yes. I'm going to be changing ships. We're going to arrive at Kandor 3c in another month, and I -- well, I'll be leaving the ship."

"For another ship?"

"Yes. I will be on another ship."

"And your husband?"

"He'll -- he'll be on another ship. Tell me, how's the astropath game?"

"I've learned many remarkable things," he said. He felt sad that she seemed to have broken up with her husband. He felt at ease with her, like an old friend. He took the cap off and laid it aside. "I've become more and more like you people, and yet these big ugly callouses will always make me different."

"Is there a woman in your life yet?"

"There have been some, but they seem to leave soon. Am I rude somehow?" He leaned forward anxiously. "Josena, tell me honestly. What is it? I sense the men hate me, and the women seem to want me for a time, but then -- well, I can't quite figure it out. Maybe you'll help me."

She rose and walked toward him. "Sure. I'll help you, but there's really nothing to help. You're fine the way you are. Maybe you are just too sensitive."

"That might be it," Jory said dubiously

She took his hands in hers and pulled him up. "Why don't we just go out and have a drink and loosen up? It seems depressing in here."

"Oh, all right," he said cheerfully

At the door, she turned ironically. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

He followed her gaze to the bed, and there lay his cap. "Oh, the cap! Yes!" He put it on. "With you, I'm so relaxed I forgot about it. Don't want strangers to stare, do we?"

They walked to the lift, rode down to the human work deck, and found a tiny corner snack stand. It was always right here in the factory womb of the ship, where workers toiled to keep the ship's parts repaired, and made manufactured goods from raw materials picked up along the ship's travels

"I don't have much time," Josena said, using traditional wooden sticks to slurp down noodles. She grabbed quick sips of her white wine. Jory nursed a dark beer. For the first time, she was being really friendly, and yet somehow it didn't wash with him

They made small talk, and he found her steering him back to his place. As they entered, she said: "I'll bet you never guessed that I'm a trained masseuse."

"I would not have guessed."

"I'm going to run the hot water for a bath. Go get undressed and come when I tell you to."

He watched her walk away into his bathroom. He waited, motionlessly

"Okay!" she called

He walked slowly into the bathroom. For a moment, he was blinded by steam

She had stripped off her clothing and left it on a chair. She wore a white terry towel that covered her breasts and torso. Her black curly hair glistened with swarms of tiny water droplets. She looked surprised. "I t said to drop your clothes."

"Josena," he said, advancing on her, "you're not separating from your husband, are you?"

"What do you mean, Jory. Don't look at me that way."

"I'm not looking at you any way. I have no argument with you. I am being treated like some sort of -- of -- farm animal by all of you." He saw himself as a fuzzy outline in a foggy

mirror, but that alone was enough. He tore the wool cap off. "I'm a fool. People are laughing behind my back. The women want my sperm -- why?"

"Darling."

"Don't -- ."

She held up her hands in a stop-motion. "All right. Jory, we're coming into port, and some of us are moving on. Do you know what it's worth to have a child like you? Captain Aptath would pay a fortune. He would raise you in the best of care, educate you, feed you -- ."

"That's already been done to me once, Josena. I was sold by my parents. I lived in a castle. You would have been a river rat or worse, but I would have ridden by in a carriage with my mistress. I can recite the hundred lays of Moti-Nolo, a thousand year old series of children's stories, but I myself never had a childhood. Is that what you want for your child?"

She hung her head. "I was hoping you would understand. Meikol and I -- my husband -- we would raise the child ourselves. It's not like you think. Here the parents stay with a special child. Your child would get everything in the world, including our love and devotion."

Jory picked up her clothes and threw them into her arms. "Get out of here. You people make me sick. I am a freak, but you want a child by me who will be equally a freak. You lie in my face. Maybe you lie to yourself too, but how could you love a child who looks like me?"

"Please."

"No. Get out. Go be ashamed if you have the capacity to."

In his anger, he didn't wait for her to leave, but went out to his kitchen. His fingers shook as he tore off a piece of bread to chew nervously. He heard her rustling in the livingroom. He did not want to see her naked, for fear he would weaken

"Goodbye, Jory." She seemed to wait

"Go away."

He heard her rustle into her clothing. Then he heard the door open and shut. She'd left the towel thrown on the living room floor. He rushed and locked the door. This was worse than being on Oba, he thought as he sagged against the door. Only these were not Shurians -- these were his own people. Or his own kind. Perhaps they were no more his people than were the Ruandap, though they were all one kind -- from Earth.

<P align="center">* * *

<P> Jory worked harder than ever. He came to accept the detente between Malinu and Nolani, but he did not sleep with her again. That kept Malinu cordial, and put Nolani at ease, because she had tired of Jory and did not want to juggle more than one relationship. Jory guessed she'd gone through a similar gyration with Kinkidai, but didn't ask

Jory was now almost as good as Kinkidai, who was still a journeyman. The three of them fed off the experience and enormous talent of Malinu. Malinu, however, predicted that in ten years, nobody would be able to match Jory

Landfall came and went. Josena and her husband disappeared. Kinkidai left the crew for another ship, and was replaced by a quiet, hard, dark-skinned man with narrow eyes, named Kawlin. Kawlin was thoroughly professional, but kept to himself otherwise, and Malinu said he missed Kinkidai's youthful company. Jory took up visits to the bars with Malinu to console him

Jory began to have dreams of Oba

He would wake up in the middle of the night and pace the ship's corridors. He had to force himself to be attentive at work. He quarreled with Malinu and Nolani, then with the new astrophath

And he dreamed of Ramy

After Lord Dumonhi had struck her, and stormed out of her bedroom days ago, Jory happened to meet Dumonhi and his drunken retainers in the corridors. These were strangers who were not so tolerant of a castle human, and two drew their swords to part Jory with his head. Their senior man restrained them, saying: "We must not shed blood in the

Lord Ramyon's house, even if it is a monkey." So they strode off, and Jory, who had been waiting on the roof, and had not expected the confrontation, breathed a sigh of relief

Hearing the sound of hooves galloping away into the night, Jory crept quiet as a melting candle up the familiar stairs, and, from the middle landing, heard her sobs. She cried continuously and heartbrokenly, each attack followed immediately by the next

Pure instinct based on a lifetime of intimacy, trust, and affection made Jory knock on her door. He'd had many human girls, but they always soon left him because of the disfiguring horn plates inset in his temples. Ramy was the one female who'd been in his life since childhood, whom he could almost say he loved in a pure manner

Ramy sat on the hard floor and cried bitterly. The door was ajar, and Jory let himself in, then slipped the lock shut

She sat on the floor, where Dumonhi had left her. Her mouth and nose bled slightly, and she hardly gave Jory any notice as he went to wet a cloth. Returning to her, he gently brushed the drying blood from her chin, her lips, her nostrils. She sniffled residually, with an occasional hiccup. Then she embraced him, as one would a stuffed animal. He was her comfort. He still held the wet cloth, which he dropped on the floor as he embraced her in turn. They held each other, enjoying the gentle pleasure. He helped her up and walked her to her bed. It was a large bed, with four posts and an overhanging cloth. They had slept together like child and pet many years ago. He helped her up and, as she lay back sighing, with one forearm draped over her forehead, he pulled the coverlet up over her fully clad form. She took his hand and pulled him to a seated position beside her. He sat on the bed for a long time, holding her hand, neither saying anything until he was sure she had fallen asleep. He admired the beauty of her features; in the half-light, she seemed more human than many women of Jory's kind. The reddish hair floated above the lovely mask of her face. When he grew tired and cramped, Jory sought to rise. As he began to gently disengage her hand from hers, she tightened her grip and pulled. She was not as strong as he, but he felt tender toward her. She opened the coverlet for him, as she might have ten years earlier, and he slipped in beside her, still fully clothed

They lay together, basking in one another's warmth. They nuzzled cheek to cheek, nose against neck, the arm of one around the chest of the other, and prepared to fall asleep. Yet the warmth and the scent of her hair and the feeling of her firm thighs caused something else. He heard the hard, deep breaths that signaled arousal. The whole world fell away -- what the humans might say, what the Shurians might say -- and they were two souls contained in a world of their own. They were on the brink of the unthinkable, even in their own thoughts -- but those thoughts were gone now, in the throes of ardor

To better touch each other, they stripped their clothes off, one stroke of the hand at a time, wriggling and breathing deeply. Pretty soon, their mouths met. From his life at the castle, Jory knew what would happen next. The Shurians' tongues were not only organs of taste, but of sexuality far greater than among humans, and of self-expression. First, Jory kissed her lips, which grew moist. Like a Shurian male, he lightly licked her lips, and their moistness grew. Soon, the tip of her blue tongue appeared. She lay on her back, eyes closed, breath splashing in and out of her extended nostrils. Jory licked her tongue and felt it gradually extend out, one finger's thickness at a time. He was aroused himself, and he was happy to please her, so he continued. He put his mouth on her tongue, containing what he could of it (it would not all fit into his mouth), and sucked gently, moving his head up and down. She began to moan. She pulled at him until he swung on top of her. He was afraid to put his weight on her, but she pulled him down with surprisingly strong arms. All the while, he continued to suck on her tongue, which grew as stiff as it was slippery. The Shurians' single excretory organ was where the humans had their anus. The Shurians' male/female reproductive organs were midway on their bellies. Jory's member was erect and hard. He let her little fumbling fingers guide her to the indentation in her belly that was already soak with her lubricants. He slipped inside easily. Her hands fell away to lie on the bed -- she was on her way to climax, and outwardly helpless. As he continued to suck up and down on her

tongue, her gasps and moans increased in frequency. Her entire body was a field of tiny quivers. He did not need to move much in his awkward position, for she had muscles inside that acted like strong massaging hands around his member. At the height of her fervor, her limbs jerked slightly, and her entire body was an electric field of quivering. Jory rose toward climax about the same time, and they cried out together, squeezed each other, thrashed, and finally collapsed in a spent tangle of limbs

"What have we done?" she whispered thickly, the tip of her tongue still visible

"We've done something we shouldn't," Jory whispered. He kissed her lips, and she thrust the tip of her still firm tongue between his lips. "But I truly love you," he added

"And I love you, my darling. You are the only one who really loves me, and I love you."

"We can't do it again," Jory said, wanting to make love a thousand times that night for there must not be a second time. By Shurian standards, she had committed bestiality. She had fornicated with an animal. The human standard was not any more forgiving

"No, we cannot. But the laws are wrong. You are no more an --" (she couldn't say the word to his face) "-- than I am. You have a soul, don't you? When you die, don't you go to Mount Ola and stand in the fog?"

"Yes, my lady, my love. And we will stand together."

"You suggest -- duello?" She asked the question with feigned casualness

He laughed despite the grimness of their situation. "No, you silly one. I mean when we are old and die, we will be able to love each other forever where nobody can reach us."

"Maybe we'll run away," she thought, and immediately contradicted that thought. "No, because I would die without my baba."

It was true, Jory thought. That was the part of her culture he could never understand, not even after living with them for years. The female and her birth sister, or baba, shared an entirely separate sexual liaison through which the male's seed was mixed with the female's, gestated inside the baba, and born by her. The female was the child's seed mother, while the baba was its birth mother. Female and baba actually shared entirely different sex organs than those with which the female and the male communed. Without the love of her sister, Ramy would wither and die. He could not take her from here -- the mere thought was ludicrous. So was the thought of maintaining this affair

Jory and Ramy spent the next several days in a delirious half-life, much like the trance-like existence under the blanket. Each night, he stole to her bed and they passionately made love -- real love, they both believed, not like the proprietary and violent seed-scattering performed by her husband before he returned to his skilled and inexhaustible concubines at Castle Dumonhi, or to his battles

They were the most delirious and passionate nights of Jory's life. He would always carry with him his memories of lost treasure -- the pleasure of entering her, the pleasure of taking her tongue in his mouth and feeling the quivers fly through her body while he pressed his weight on her and she held him tightly down, welcoming the pressure. When he did it push-up style, with his legs stretched straight behind, she would wrap her pale, smooth legs around his and squeeze. Her inner wet, smooth gripping muscles would massage him wildly, while her legs imprisoned him. It was a courtly love, full of tiny battles, conquests, taking of prisoners, sharing of captivity -- but the baba saw them one night

They were actually done in bed, and walking to the window to look over the night. The Obayyo glowed far away. It was a clear night, and the oaty, musky, sweet tywix was in full bloom so that the hills around the castle not only were fragrant, but glowed faintly

Ramy had a bottle of last year's tywix wine, and she poured them each half a glassful. The glasses were round, open on top, and lay in the palm like a ball. In each glass she had dropped a candle wick that burned for a few minutes before going out. They each held a flickering ball of light representing the true love they felt for one another. For a seeming eternity they walked slowly, nakedly, arms around each other, to the window, while holding their glowing tywix balls close

The spell was shattered when axes and swords ripped through the door. Shurian

warriors and babas with bioluminescent torches poured in yelling and pointing. No use trying to cover their nakedness. In her shame, Ramy tore from Jory's grasp and ran for the bed, to cover herself with a sheet. There, already, Jory glimpsed Ramy's baba holding the damp, love-soiled sheet up with a look of crazed triumph. Ramy regarded her sister with a dull shocked look of betrayal. She would have given her life for her sister. Jory tried to pull Ramy with him, but she screamed and ran to tear her baba's hair

Jory grabbed what clothing he could and dove out the window. He ran as fast as he could, and several retainers after him. They had better night vision, but they were slightly drunk. He knew the hidden paths and nooks better than anyone in the palace. He made his way to the Obayyo with only the clothes on his back. A million times, he would curse himself for not making a stand and dying with her. He could not imagine ever loving another person as much as he loved her, even though his love had cost her life.

* * *

<P> One night, as Jory walked to his quarters after work, he thought he detected a familiar smell near the elevator shaft in his quiet corridor, but he could not place it. Later that night, as he lay studying astrogation and advanced mathematics, he received a vid from Aptath. He looked agitated. "We've got a situation, Jory. Need you down here right away."

Minutes later, with an escort, and still pulling his jumpsuit shut, Jory strode down the halls in Deck 38, a cargo deck near the ship's bottom. The smell was more noticeable now, and Jory could almost place it as he hurried along plain, utilitarian corridors with black steel floors and ceilings. Every two man-lengths a round bioluminescent in mid-ceiling cast its island of cold light

Captain Aptath met him at an intersection. He took Jory by the arm and roughly pulled him around a corner. "You are the only person who can possibly know what this means."

Storage unit doors made a line down the corridor. One door had bulged open, and a wheat-colored mass flowed out like dry foam. "Do you know anything about this? Is this some sort of deception?"

"Sir, I don't know what you are talking about."

Aptath grunted and let go. "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but we seem to be losing part of our cargo here, and if you have anything to do with it, you'll be astropathing without the benefit of a ship."

Jory brushed his arm off, and stumbled through the material. Now he recognized it -- the smell was of tywix! "Is this a shipment from Oba? from Shur?"

"Damn right it is! Look what's inside."

Jory waded through the tywix foam, knee deep in places. The storage room was about twenty body-lengths to a side and ten lengths tall. Its walls were wood-paneled. This was delicate cargo -- containers of fungi, some large, some small. Racks of small urns sat on pallets in a corner. Large aluminum containers like coffins stood stacked to the ceiling against the back wall. Stacks of smaller containers were piled here and there -- enough wealth here for a kingdom, Jory thought

In the center of the mess stood a man in a biotechnician's white overalls. He was a tall, relatively slender Ruandap with a mussy mane, and he shook his head as he waved an instrument around. "Do you know anything of this?" the biotech asked Jory

"No. I've never seen the tywix behave this way." Jory slogged toward him, Aptath and one or two security guards trailing. "My God." Shock overwhelmed Jory. He was staring into the face of a baba -- or what was left of her. Slowly, he recognized her -- Ramy-baba!

Somehow, instead of killing herself, the baba had bribed cargo carriers to bring her to Kusi-O. But why? She must have killed Ramy, then, to prevent any worse harm coming to her. Then why did she not die with her? With all the clout the babas had, even in shady areas, this one had gotten herself smuggled on board somewhat as Jory had been smuggled. But she'd stayed in the aluminum container. Perhaps she'd suffocated. For some reason, the tywix in her container had begun to froth up, as if it were sporing time. It had

forced the container to split apart, and the fungus had kept increasing its size over and over until it filled the room and pushed the door out. Then it must have begun to die. By now it was dry and lifeless, and only a knee deep

At Jory's feet, on the surface of the wheat-colored tywix, was a much darker stain about the size of an open blanket. At one end was a smaller stain the size of a smashed melon -- Jory recognized the baba's face

"It is still alive," the biotech said waving his gadget. "But it is near death."

"Is is a female," Jory said, "from my birth world. She is the sister of my mistress." He could not believe his great fortune -- even to see only the sister-baba of the woman he'd loved. "Ramy-baba," he whispered, afraid to touch her, for fear her dessicated body might fall apart. There was almost nothing left of her -- she'd become part of the foam, and as her face slowly vanished, she would cease to be. Why had she done this? "Ramy-baba," he repeated over and over

Her eye slits trembled. Jory wondered if she could see him at all. Her remaining shreds of skin looked like rotten black-brown fruit atop the foam. Her mouth was a raw gash, part foam, part rotting skin. Her nose was an indistinct feature passing no air. Her last exhalation had left a tiny mound of brown foam. Now she breathed only shallow breaths with her mouth. As her inner organs shut down and turned to foam one by one, that too would cease. "Why?" Jory asked. "Why?" He murmured: "Ramy-baba!"

Her mouth struggled to form a word: "Jory" or did she say "Sorry?"

He gave the Shurian sign of forgiveness by touching two fingertips to her cheeks. He felt a little bit of sharp bone under the scrap of skin. "I love you," he told the baba. It was the first time he'd ever said that to a baba

Her eyes closed briefly in acknowledgment. "Gyen." Thank you

Then she opened her eyes, and, looking down, guided his gaze. "Take," she croaked. All he could see was one hand, or what was left of it, looking like shreds of a brown glove. She would never lift that hand again. Maybe it wasn't even connected to her anymore. "Your hand?" he asked

She had no strength left. She closed her eyes in assent

He poked warily, and the skin that had been her hand fell apart in slimy flakes. He pushed the flakes aside, feeling something hard. Poking some more, he felt a handle. He grasped it and pulled

"She is dying," the biotech said, looking at his instrument rather than at her

Jory pulled out a duello knife. So Ramy had committed suicide, and her sister had brought the knife to Jory? Why? It made no sense

"She is gone," said the biotech. "Wait!"

Jory stared at the knife, blinking back tears. He recognized the Oban calligraphy on its handle. He read the poem:

"Two moons embrace above the koh tree. The celestial dome turns, hiding them behind the koh trunk. Rabbit-in-the-Grass catches his breath -- when will they appear again?"

"The celestial dome turns, revealing what hid behind the koh. Not a single moon in sight, alas. Rabbit-in-the-Grass sighs and hops away."

He smiled at the memory. He'd seen those very knives in the Great Hall on a shelf. He remembered what the other sword said:

"The celestial dome turns, revealing what hid behind the koh. Not a single moon in sight, alas. Rabbit-in-the-Grass sighs and hops away."

The Biotech said: "Something else is alive under there. Something new."

Jory used the knife to carefully cut through the foam until he came to a rubbery surface. He dug the foam away with his hands, and the biotech helped. In places where body parts still hung together, Jory carved them apart

Together, they exposed a long birth-sac -- not the tiny birth-sac of a Shurian infant, but one large enough to hold a fully grown person

"Easy," the biotech said. "There is a heart beating, but irregularly." He yelled:

"Captain! we need to get this individual to the hospital immediately."

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<P> Jory rode in the ambulance to the Alienology Clinic of Dora Mora's onboard hospital. With advice from encyclopedic expert systems, the ship's surgeons worked on the sac. Jory stood behind an observation window and watched the slow, careful cutting. He watched the flood of reddish-brown liquid into a drainage pan. A surgeon cut the thick membrane away while other techs applied oxygen and chest massage

"She's alive," someone said. Jory slumped into a chair with relief.

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<P> Malinu excused Jory from work. Jory stayed as close as he could. They moved her to the intensive care unit, and Jory sat outside, sleeping or reading

A doctor came out -- a human doctor, an intelligent looking woman with yellow skin and high-cornered eyes. "I'm Doctor Pren. How are you?" They shook hands. "Is she a relative of yours?"

Jory almost laughed. "What do you mean?" He'd almost blurted that she was an alien

"She asked for two persons -- you, and someone named Baba."

Jory explained: "They are trisexual. There's a male, a female, and a baba..."

"Sir, what are you talking about? That is a human being in there, same as you and I."

"What?"

Dr. Pren put a finger over her lips. "Sh! Come and peek, only for a minute."

Jory followed her into the sick bay, where instruments flowed on the walls, monitors hummed, and intravenous fluids dripped above a sterile white bed. On the bed lay a naked human woman. Instead of a russet ball of fuzz, she had red hair that glowed like wet copper. She had horn-like plates like Jory, he saw with a sinking feeling, but smaller than his. They would not detract from her beauty -- actually, they seemed to add something that Naloni's had not added. Ramy's skin was not transparent, but pale pink. Parts of her slender body had galaxies of tiny orange freckles. She was hooked up with tubes at every orifice, and wires ran to skin patches over much of her torso and on the major arteries of her limbs. A net-cap performed an ongoing brain scan. She had small, firm breasts, a bushy venus-mound covered with orange curls, and a distinctly human yoni. Jory looked closely at her fingertips -- the fingernails were like his own

And yet, standing back, he recognized her shape as belonging to Ramy

"Is she -- ?"

"She is perfectly normal," Dr. Pern said. "I've never actually seen anything like it. She's newborn, but has mature brain wave function. What was that entity who gave birth to her?"

Jory explained all about life on Oba Island and about the babas

Dr. Pern took a speculative breath and nodded slowly as she ushered Jory out of the room. They spoke outside in the waiting room. Jory explained about their love affair

"My guess," said Dr. Pern, "is that she will enjoy full human body and brain function. She asked for people by name -- that's a sure sign. One thing puzzles me. These babas may be natural wizards of fungi and genetics and finance back there on Shur, but there is no way the baba could have obtained genes for the female from you. You see, the female genetic material can only come from a human woman's egg. And there was no human female involved."

"Oh yes there was." Jory put his hands over his face in horror, remembering Minda. What else had they taken from the child before blinding her and thrusting her into the night into the arms of her terrified parents? "The babas collect things, Doctor. They have thousands of years of baba-craft behind them. Who knows how many human females they collected eggs from, who knows for what purpose?"

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<P> Ramy woke a few days later. Jory stayed outside for the first few hours while Ramy was taken to Human Less Acute, where human nurses fussed over her. They had not

told her about her sister's death, or about Jory. Ramy was still on i.v. fluids, and very confused, but she received her first cup of citrus juice

Dr. Pern met Jory in the hall. "Our young lady is doing fine. Now would be a good time to gently appear and take her hand. We'll monitor her respiration and other vital signs."

Jory stepped inside. Ramy did not see him yet. He heard her speak in Oban, asking for her sister. She sounded dazed

Jory rounded the corner and stood before her bed. Ramy seemed not to recognize him. She wore a plain white smock that barely covered her torso. She was Ramy in a human incarnation -- her sister's immense gift of atonement

Ramy stared at Jory and her face betrayed a distant recognition, a horror. She reached up with both hands and touched the astropath plates. She made an unpleasant face. She reached anxiously around the side of her neck, on both sides, looking for the sex hole that wasn't there any more. She must have realized the full story just then, for she let out a long wail of grief that rose up and down like a siren, like an animal keening for the loss of its mate. She threw herself on her back, then on her front, pounding the bed with her fists. Nurses came running. Dr. Pern stepped in with a look of concern, of speculation, weighing one plan against another

"Leave her alone," Jory told them all. "She is grieving for her sister. There is nothing we can do until she is ready to receive our comfort."

Ramy screamed and threw herself on her back. She felt her mouth with both hands. She stuck her fingers in her mouth and screamed again -- hoarse, anguished screams of rage and denial -- she'd died in her natural body, and now awakened as an alien. She grew silent with shock as she probed her belly with both hands, looking for the male-taking hole that wasn't there. Her fingers didn't dally over her new navel, for Shurians had that too

Then she discovered that, before everyone, she'd let her new bladder and her bowels go, and she held up her hands which were smeared with blood and feces. She swayed from side to side, uttering a distressed animal's groaning

Dr. Pern clapped a curtain shut, cutting Jory out. "She wouldn't want you to see her like this." She added: "Not the scene we'd hoped for, is it? But she's alive, and she's got normal function. And she has spoken. I suspect she is in total shock, and it will take time. Will you work with us?"

"Of course."

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<P> Jory went to see Captain Aptath and said: "Captain, we must ensure that the baba's remains are enurned to give to her sister

"You always know the honorable way," Aptath mouthed a Ruandap saying in a respectful tone

Ramy-baba's remains were gathered, cremated, and sealed into a small container -- an empty wine bottle from the mythological Earth -- and further wrapped in an Oban-style burial tube with black calligraphy on a white background. Jory took the burial tube to the hospital. Ramy accepted the tube, thanked him, and placed it by her pillow. She wore a plain, rumpled hospital gown, and pushed an i.v. pole as she walked slowly, but the mouth and nose tubes were gone, and she could eat nearly solid food now. "My organs are new, and they are helping me to train myself. I have to get used to this person I now am. I am human." She wrapped her free arm through his. She glanced at the burial tube. "That is all I have left of who I was, and of her. She was the love of my life."

"I know she was."

"Can you accept who I was?"

"I accepted you then, when we nearly died for each other."

"I was right when I said you were not an animal." She embraced him and rested her cheek against his chest. "I can hear your heart beating. I used to listen to it after you fell asleep, when we were children."

"I never knew that."

She grinned. "You didn't have to know everything."

They kissed, rubbing the tips of their tongues together in circles. They broke up laughing. "Not the same, is it?" she asked

"No, but I think we'll like it."

"Hmmm, it is sort of fun this way."

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<P> The very next day, she was released from the hospital. Jory took her home, and she set up her nest as any human woman would, putting this here and that there, standing back, shaking her head, and reversing where the things sat. They made love in the human manner, and she learned not to pee for excitement. Day by day, she learned to become more human. Soon, she would begin training as an astropath. Aptath wrung his hands in delight every day. Malinu cast covetous glances, but he saw from Ramy's expression she would share herself with nobody but Jory. Malinu needed to glance at Jory only once. The day came when Jory explained the nature of his gift, and took her to his place of work. She gasped as they entered the small theater where the six astropath chairs stood in a row under a huge glass bubble beyond which stretched the eternity of the universe

As she stared into space, her eyes wide at the sight of so many stars, so many swirling galaxies, she gasped: "The Obayyo!"

He looked at fields upon fields of stars. "Yes, the Lantern Road. It will be good to travel." He squeezed her close to him and added: "Together."